



## Jagannath Cult and its Linkage with Tribal Culture

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The origin and antiquity of Lord Purusottama-Jagannath, the Lord of the universe, are shrouded in considerable to know how and when the God came to be worshipped at Puri and became one of the prominent deities of Hindu pantheon. It is also difficult to know whether the God was originally an Aryan deity or a tribal deity later on Aryanised due to the mingling of the Aryan and non-Aryan cultures.

According to the tradition recorded in the “Utkal Khanda”<sup>1</sup> of the Skanda Purana, Indradyumna, the ruler of Avanti in the Satya Yuga and a great votary of Lord Visnu, sent Vidyapati, the brother of his family priests, to Odradesa to locate the exact place where Lord Nilamadhava (Visnu) was worshipped secretly. Coming to Odradesa Vidyapati took shelter in a Sabara village, very near to the Blue-Mountain (Nilasaila).



Winning over the friendship of the Sabara chief Visvavasu and marrying his daughter Lalita, Vidyapati was able to see Lord Nilamadhava. After tracing the route to the shrine of Nilamadhava Vidyapati went back to Avanti to inform his sovereign Lord Indradyumna the whereabouts of Nilamadhava. The King, accompanied by Narada, set-out for Odradesa to pay homage to the Lord. But at the border of the country he came to know about the miraculous disappearance of the Lord. He became extremely sad. Narada consoled him saying that the Lord would appear in the form of a Daru (Sacred

Wood). A few days after, Lord Nilamadhava Himself appeared in a dream to Indradyumna. The next day the king and his attendants brought the “Daru” from the sea-shore and placed it on the Mahavedi with respect.



As directed by the Lord in the dream, Indradyumna ordered for fashioning beautiful images out of the sacred “Daru”. But strangely no carpenter was available. At last Visvakarma, the Divine Builder appeared in the guise of an old carpenter and agreed to build the images on the condition that he be allowed to remain undisturbed inside the temple for twenty one days. As days passed on the sound of the carpenter’s tools became thinner and thinner and when no sound was heard, queen Gundicha became impatient and curious. On her insistence, when the doors of the temple were opened no carpenter was found inside and the images of Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra were found incomplete.

This legend, with slight variations, is also mentioned in the Brahma Purana<sup>2</sup> as well as in the Odia Mahabharat<sup>3</sup> of Sarala Das. Very interestingly Indradyumna legend associating the Sabaras with Lord Nilamadhaba (Jagannath) is also supported by epigraphic and historical evidences. The Sabaras, who belonged to the Proto- Austroloid tribe, were the worshippers of tree in the Vindhya range and Mahendragiri from the earliest times. They were the worshippers of the Sthanumurti<sup>4</sup> (a branchless trunk) which in course of time replaced the primitive tree worship. Later on this worship of the Sthanumurti seems to have mingled with the worship of the God Purusottam Visnu. In the Rig Veda<sup>5</sup>, there is a passage which refers to the Lord of Daru (Adojad Daru Plavate Sindhohpare a Purusam). According to the fourteenth century Vedic commentator Sayana<sup>6</sup> (1300-1380 A.D.) this Daru represents the image of Purusottama – Vishnu. This view is also supported by a fifteenth century tradition as recorded in the Kondavidu copper plate grant<sup>7</sup> of Gandeva of the time of Gajapati Kapilendradeva. According to the tradition

Jagannath resembles the log of wood as spoken of in the Sruti (Sa bhagavan srutyukta Daru akrtih). The Sabaras worshipped a deity named Kitung who had ten synonyms. One of those familiar synonyms was Jaganta or Jaganaelo.<sup>8</sup> The Sabaras who were the worshippers of Jaganta made of wood, were also devout worshippers of Madhava, the predecessor of Lord Jagannath according to another tradition recorded in the Skanda Purana<sup>9</sup>. This leads us to believe that Lord Jaganta of the Sabaras in course of time was converted into the Aryan god Jagannath, who is no other than Madhava or Krishna. With gradual Aryanisation the Sabaras were influenced by the Brahmanical form of Hinduism and incorporate the principles of Brahmanism in their socio-religious life.

In this connection there is a very interesting tradition recorded in the Vizagapatnam plates<sup>10</sup> of Anantavarman Chodagangdeva of the year 1119 A.D. This tradition says that Kamarnava conquered the Mahendragiri region towards the close of the fifth century A.D., acknowledged a tribal deity of the Sabara tribe as Siva-Gokarnesvara and worshipped it as the tutelary deity (ista devata) of the family. Bestowed with grace by the Lord, Kamarnava climbed down the mountain, killed the chief of the sabar tribe and conquered Kaling. This tradition speaks of the Aryanisation of a tribal deity. This process of Aryanisation started due to the migration of Vedic Brahmins from North to other parts of India and the spread of the Aryan culture. A verse in the Bhagavata Purana<sup>11</sup> informs us that the Kiratas, the Hunas, the Pulindas, the Abhiras and other tribal people were influenced by the worship of Lord Visnu. This process of intermingling of the Aryan and non-Aryan cultures led to the Aryanisation of many tribal deities.



It is very interesting to note a lot of similarities between the tribal ritual of renewal of the “Post” representing Stambhesvari or Khambesvari and the Navakalevara ritual of Lord Jagannath at Puri. According to the tradition followed in the Jagannath temple, during Navakalevara the Patimahapatra<sup>12</sup> (head of the half-Sabara Brahmins who were the descendents of Brahmin Vidyapati and Sabari Lalita) who leads the party of the Daitas (Sabaras who were the descendents of Visavvasu) to find out the Daru for the four Deities (Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarsana) and goes Kakatpur and told in a dream by Goddess Mangala the exact location and the appearance of the Darus. In case of the renewal of the tribal deity Stambhesvari the Goddess Herself appears in a dream to the Bhejini<sup>13</sup> (medium) and indicates the spot where the tree is to be found. The tree to be selected must display certain features which are similar in both the cases. In case of the tribal custom the new tree, before being cut off, is worshipped with the sacrifice of a sheep or a goat and the first stroke on the tree is always performed by the Dehury (chief priest of the tribal deity). In case of the Daru of Lord Jagannath the sacrificial ritual is symbolically performed and the first stroke is performed by the chief priest called Acharya. In both the cases the tree should fall to the east and should not touch the ground in any case. The tradition that the logs should be carried in a special cart exclusively pulled by human hands and should not touch the ground is followed in both the cases. The carvings of the images of the Puri temple is done by carpenters in a closed room and nobody except the Daitas and Pati Mahapatra are allowed to enter the place where the figures are being carved. The carpenters are to lead a pure life and observe certain rituals during this period. In case of the tribal custom the carpenter is to abstain

from drinks and drugs and to lead a pure life<sup>15</sup>. Just as the sacred Daru is inserted into the images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra before their consecration, five metals (gold, silver, iron, copper and brass) are inserted into the ‘post’ (Stambha) of the tribals before it is consecrated.

Moreover, the images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are crude and have” a tribal look”<sup>16</sup>. The ‘post’ representing stambhesvari is also crude and sometimes the figure of Nrusimha (an aspect of Jagannath-Vishnu) is carved on the ‘post’ in a very crude form. Wooden image of any Hindu deity is not found anywhere in India except at the Puri temple. All these similarities between the Puri Navakalevara ritual and that of the tribal deity Stambhesvari lead us to suggest a close link between the Hindu god Jagannath and the tribal deity Stambhesvari. The marriage of Brahmin Vidyapati with Sabari Lalita is an important step towards the assimilation of Aryan and non-Aryan cultures.

The Sabaras also play a distinct role in the daily worship of Lord Jagannath at Puri. A special group of priests, the Daitas (descendents of the Sabara chief Visvvasu, the first worshipper of Lord Jagannath in the hoary past), who are called the relatives of Lord Jagannath, is entrusted with many important services. During the anavasara<sup>17</sup> (sickness of the deities) ceremony of the deities, it is not the Brahmins but the Daitas who take up the worship. During this period the Vedic offerings and rituals are stopped.

The Daitas also play important roles at the outset of the Car festival. During this period the Deities are worshipped not in Vedic lines but in tribal lines. Even the Deities are dressed in Sabara costume. Moreover, Dr. K.C. Mishra<sup>18</sup> points out very rightly “The Deities move towards



the cars in north-west (isana) direction whereas in Aryan process the procession moves towards eastern direction. Hence, the north-west movement of the deities towards the cars obviously points to the impact of the Sabara convention on the festival”.

Since the Daitas (Sabaras) claim Jagannath as a member of their family, they sit together with the Lords and take the “Gyantisara” (the dishes taken by the members of the same family together). As descendents of Lord Jagannath the Daitas claim on the articles used by the deceased Jagannath after Navakalevara. After disposing of the old figures the Daitas take both and observe mourning because of the death of one of their clan members. They weep on the death of Lord Jagannath and for ten days they remain in a state of impurity, observing all sorts of obsequies prescribed in the Hindu Dharmasastra. On the tenth day they cut their nails, shave and take a purificatory bath in the Markandey tank.

The very fact that the Daitas even today consider Lord Jagannath as a member of their clan and observe all sorts of obsequies, is a clear proof of a strong and definite link between Lord Jagannath and the Sabaras. This process of Aryanisation of Hinduization began with the migration of Brahmins from north-west to other parts of India, the supremacy established by the Aryans and the rise of the Hindu kingship.

Anthropologists talk about ‘Great Traditions’ and ‘Little Traditions’. The little traditions of the rural society or tribal communities are plentifully observed in the Indian society. Jagannath cult is derived from the little traditions of worship by the Savara tribal has been sanskritised by Brahman priests and Rajas at Puri. The new seat for worship is located here. But this ritual has undergone universalisation by being

elevated the supreme godhead of the Hindu life. Jagannath has been identified as Vishnu, the Supreme Lord of the Universe. He is the penultimate incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Professor L.K. Mohapatra, the noted Anthropologist observes : If this is a process of Universalisation, in Odisha the cult itself has undergone the process of parochialisation too, as in Western Odisha, where each village celebrates Ratha Yatra of Lord Jagannath in its own ways in emulation of the world famous Car Festival of Lord at Puri. Similarly, if the supreme godheads of holy trinity Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma belong to great tradition, their worship has been parochialised in the little traditions for the last two hundred years or so in Odisha by holding Trinath Mela.

Integration of little and great tradition is exemplified in Jagannath Cult. This cult has evolved as the magnetic central cult of Odisha with all aspects of regional cultural development. The associated values of tribal heritage in this cult the basic fraternity and equality of all men as devotees of the Lord, the absence of commercial taboos among castes while partaking of the sanctified food offered to the Lord, the folk medicine administered to the god at the time of illness and the divine directions in dreams visions and miracles are all integrated into the cult system. Here, the ‘Little traditions’ associated with the Lord co-exist and are valued along with elements of ‘great traditions’ rituals and institutions introduced and mediated by the Brahman priests and Rajas. (Mohapatra)

### **Lord Jagannath – The Tribal Deity**

The sacred temple of Lord Jagannath stands on the hillock “Blue Mountain” in the heart of Puri. It represents a lovely picturesque panorama of great Odishan Architecture. It’s a monument of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. with all the



richness and novelty of the Kalingan style of architecture known as “Sikhara”, which is mainly predominant in Eastern India. The temple of Jagannath Puri was built by Ananta Barman Chodaganga Dev during 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and was completed by Ananga Bhima Dev, and this temple is one of the tallest monuments in the country; height is about 65 metres i.e. 214 feet 8 inches from the ground level. It stands on an elevated platform of stone measuring about 10 acres, which is located in the heart of the town and presents an imposing sight.

The temple is bounded by two enclosures. The inner enclosure is 400' x 278' size and known as Kurma Bedha. The outer enclosure is of 665' x 644' size with the height varying from 20' to 24' and popularly known as Meghanad Prachir. The temple has four gates at the eastern, southern, western and northern midpoints of the Meghanad Prachir. They are called Lions gate, Horse Gate Tiger Gate and the Elephant Gate.

### Legends of the Lord

Legendary account as found in the Skanda-Purana, Brahma Purana and other Puranas and later works in Odia state the Lord Jagannath was originally worshipped as Neela Madhab by a Savar king (tribal chief) named Viswvasu. Lord Nilamadhaba (formerly worshipped as Kitung) appeared in a dream of Indradyumna, the legendary king of Malawa, and told him to bring back the Lord to “Malawa. Then the King sent “Bidyapati” to trace out the deity who was worshipped secretly in a dense forest by Viswvasu. Vidyapati tried his best, but could not locate the place. But at last, he managed to marry Viswvasu’s daughter Lalita. At repeated request of Vidyapati, Viswvasu took his son-in-law blindfolded to a cave where Neelamadhab was worshipped.

Vidyapati was very intelligent. He dropped mustard seeds on the ground in the route. The seeds germinated after a few days, which enabled him to find out the cave later on. On hearing from him, king Indradyumna proceeded immediately to Odra desha (Odisha) on a pilgrimage to see and worship the Deity. But, the deity had disappeared. The king was disappointed. The Deity was hidden in the sand. By seeing this, Indradyumna made his mind that without having a *darshan* of the deity he would not return to his palace. Then he observed fast unto death at Mount Neela. Then a celestial voice cried-thou shall see him. Afterwards the king performed a horse sacrifice and built a magnificent temple for Vishnu. Narasingha Murti brought by Narada was installed in the temple. During sleep, the king had a vision of Lord Jagannath. Also an astral voice directed him to receive the fragrant tree on the seashore and make idols out of it. Accordingly the king got the image of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra Subhadra and Chakra Sudarshan made out of the wood of the said tree and installed them in the temple.

### History of Jagannath Cult

The Hindu devotee believes that Lord Jagannath is eternal. Thus, we have two versions of the origins. One is the popular legends based on Puranas and Folklore. The other is the statements of the scholars who have tried to collate evidences from known history, archaeology and ancient literature to drag surmises about the history and the origins. Eminent writers and poets like Sarala Das, Jagannath Das, Balaram Das, Achyutananda Das propagated the cult of Jagannath. After the visit of Shri Chaitanya in A.D. 1501 this cult of devotional love predominated in Odishan religious life and literature. Odisha came under the Muslims in 1586,



after which profound changes took place in the social and religious life of the Odia People, the impact of which fell on the worship of Lord Jagannath. Under the Maratha Rule, Odisha got no patronage and religious place, but the institution of Jagannath flourished, because of the zeal of the Maratha nobles. Not only architectural additions were made by way construction of “Meghanada Pachery of 20 feet height but an all-round architectural and religious development was made in this sacred Temple. Brahmachari Gosain, a Maratha Saint who had political influence got the dilapidated temple of Jagannath decorated with these relics. The famous work of this saint was the removal of one Aruna Pillar from Konark to the Singhadwar of Puri Temple where it is found today.

### **Tribal Deity- Legendary and Historical Views**

Although scholars differ on the origin and evolution of Lord Jagannath, all of them agree that Lord Jagannath is basically a tribal deity from legendary as well as from historical evidences. According to some, this evolution has started with the appearance of the primitive man and has undergone the process of evolution till ultimately worshipped as Rastra Devata, Jagannath. From legendary point, it can be stated clearly that Biswabasu belonged to Savara tribe, who worshipped the Lord Jagannath. Apart from the above mentioned faiths, all historians agree that Vindhya region in the west constituted the habitat of the Savaras. Savaras speak Mundari dialect. The Mundari dialect is the primitive form of modern Odia and Purva Magadhi language. Though the tribals speaking Mundari language were divided into different tribes like Savar, Kandha, Munda and Gonda etc., they primarily belonged to a larger community. The descendants of these primitive people still inhabit the hilly regions and forest lands of Odisha. Some of them

use Mundari dialect as means of communication. Besides language, close similarity is noticeable in their religious thought and worship, and in the form of their presiding deities. Among these tribals who spoke Mundari dialects, tree or Khamba (pillar or post) worship was in vogue. In trying to give a human shape to the tree or Khamba (post) they in fact gave it strange shapes. Perhaps that might have originated the shape of Lord Jagannath. We see a unique combination of shape and shapeless in this tree of Khamba deity. This structure is their own original creation. That, Lord Jagannath is being worshipped in Shreeksheetra Puri from time immemorial is based on Puranic evidences given by scholars. However, there is no historical evidence of worship of Jagannath at Puri prior to, the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. when Yayati Kesari was the ruler. But we come to know from the Indrabhuti's Jnanasiddhi about the place of Jagannath. Pt. Neelakantha Das has mentioned that the Savaras were worshipping the image of Jagannath made of neem wood in a place called Sambal (Samal, now in Talcher of Angul District) in Uddiyan, the kingdom of Indrabhuti. We can say that Jagannath was worshipped in some part of Uddiyan prior to the rule of Yayati-I. Indrabhuti has described Jagannath as Buddhist deity in Jnanasiddhi. In the opinion of Indrabhuti Jagannath was worshipped by the Savaras in one of the Buddha Viharas.

The Puspagiri Vihar which has been mentioned in Hieun-tsang's travelogue has not yet been discovered. Possibly it has been completely destroyed. Although history is completely silent over this issue, it may be said that it was destroyed due to anti-Buddhist activities of king Sasanka and his feudatory chief Madhav Raj-II in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Prior to its destruction Jagannath was shifted to a place in Sonapur in Uddiyan and kept hidden under the earth. Jagannath was shifted before the arrival of



Hieun-Tsang and Puspagiri Vihar was destroyed after his departure. But by that time Jagannath was accepted and recognized as the most popular deity. Therefore, after 80 years from the rule of Sasanka and Madhav Raj-II, we see Indrabhuti as a worshipper of Jagannath in 717 A.D. There are various opinions about the place where the image of Jagannath was lying buried. Madalapanji (the temple Chronicles) identifies this place with the village Gopali of Sonepur. The Madalapanji records legend of king Yayati recovering the wooden images of Jagannath from the Sonepur region where it was lying buried for over 144 years. Since, the images were damaged, new images were made out of the trees brought from Sonepur. Even now in the forest of Kakdein and Kotsamalai of Sonepur lives a Savar tribe that knows the technique and art of making Jagannath images out of neem wood. A good number of them in the past were settled at Puri as tribal priests through the patronage of Yayati-I for worshipping Jagannath. The Odra kingdom inhabited mostly by primitive Savaras was famous even from the time of Mahabharat. We find the mention of Odras in the Dharma Sastra of Manu. The name of an Odra king is found in the Mahabharat. From the ancient time, the primitive Savaras were the worshipper of Khamba.

Whether the Khamba tradition came to Odisha through the practice of Vedic religion or through primitive tribal worshipping is not very clear. It has to be noted that the concept of Lord Jagannath has a tribal history behind it. Sabaras, the earliest tribal inhabitants of Odisha, were tree worshippers, and all their rituals involved dancing and singing before the 'Kitung' or 'Jaganta' or God. It is believed that when the Vedic people occupied Odisha, they adopted many of the local tribal traditions, which included the transformation of Jagannath from 'Jaganta'. The Origin of Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of the holy city of

Puri, around whom the religious life of Odisha has evolved from hoary past has been shrouded in myths and legends. Analysing the legendary association of Jagannath with a class of aborigines, called Sabaras, the peculiar nature of the wooden icon of the deity and association of a class of non-Brahmin priests, called Daita, who are presumed to be of tribal origin with the worship of the deity, some scholars hold that Jagannath was originally a tribal deity. Anncharlott Eschmann holds that the Navakalevar ritual, i.e. the ceremony of periodical renewal of the deity is a tribal custom. Such practices of renewal of wooden deity are found among the primitive tribes like Saoras and Khonds. If Lord Jagannath was tribal in origin, at what stage and how was he metamorphosed into a Hindu deity ?

The legends regarding the origin of Jagannath, which have been recorded in various sources such as Mahabharat of Sarala Das, Deula Tola of Nilambar Das, Skanda Purana, Brahma Purana, Narada Purana, Padma Purana, Kapila Samhita etc., suggest the tribal as well as Brahmanical links of the deity in the initial stage. According to Sarala Das's Mahabharat, the deadbody of Lord Krishna, transformed into wooden form, landed at the Puri seashore; Jara Sabara, an aborigine, picked it up and worshipped it; subsequently, Indradyumna, the king of Somavamsa, got three wooden images made out of the log and built a temple for the deities. According to Deula Tola, Indradyumna, the king of Malava, got piece of sacred wood which was the metamorphosed shape of God Nilamadhava from the Sabara chief, named Visvavasu, and out of the wood he carved three images. Both the stories suggest the Vaishnavite origin of Jagannath, but Indradyumna remains a legendary figure, and his historicity cannot be established on any safe ground. Some have identified him with the Indradyumna of original Mahabharat and



considered him to be quite an ancient figure of pre-Christian era. If we accept the version of Sarala Dasa's Mahabharat, we may feel inclined to identify him with Indraratha, the Somavamsi king of tenth century A.D. But identification of Indradymna with Indraratha, built the Jagannath temple at Puri.

Regarding tribal origin of Lord Jagannath, it is said that Nilamadhava was worshipped by Savara King Viswabasu inside the dense forest of Nilagiri (the Blue Mountain). Subsequently Nilamadhava disappeared and reincarnated in the forms of three deities Lord Jagannath, Subhadra and Balabhadra. These three deities together symbolize Nilamadhava (Nila-Ma-Dhaba). Nila (Blue) represents Lord Jagannath, Ma (Mother) represents Goddess Subhadra and Dhaba (White) which represents Balabhadra who are worshipped at Puri. The Savaras became known as Daitas who are the hereditary servitors of Lord Jagannath. They observed the funeral rites of Lord Jagannath during Navakalevara (when the deities change their body and the sole responsibilities of Snana Jatra and Sri Gundicha Jatra are bestowed upon these Daitas. The worship of Lord Jagannath by Savara is also mentioned in Darubrahma Gita written by Jagannath Das in 16th Century AD and in Deula Tola written by Nilambara Das in 17th Century AD. Regarding origin of Lord Jagannath, historian William Hunter also remarked that the aboriginal people worshipped a Blue Stone inside dense forests as Nilamadhava the Dravidian God, who was offered *kacha* (Raw) food by the primitive tribes and with the passage of time as the Aryan elements introduced Jagannath into Hinduism he is worshipped as God of Aryan (a more civilized race) who is offered *pakka* (cooked) food. At present these two fold worship coexist side by side. Till today the Savaras or Savaras worship trees "the Nature God" known as "Kitung" which means God. They do not cut

trees because they believe that Kitung dwells inside the tree. Kitung is otherwise known as Jagant and according to them Jagant is the 10th incarnation of Vishnu. As it is said the word Jagannath is not a Sanskrit word nor it is a Pali word but a derivation of Austric word Jagant.

#### References:

1. Skanda Purana, chs-6,7,9, and 15
2. Brahma Puran ch. 45, slokes 71-76
3. Mahabharat (III), ch. 198, sloke 1
4. See line 7 of the Buguds plates of Madhavaraja II, vide I.O. vol-,Pt-II, p.167
5. Rig Veda(x), 155.3
6. Rig Veda with Sayana's commentary edicated by vaidikas samsodgana mandala,poona, Vol-IV, p.841.
7. I.A. vol- xx, p.391.
8. Mishra, Dr. K.C. The cult of Jagannath, Calcutta(1971), p.18
9. Skanda Purana, Visnu Khanda(Purusottama Mahatmya), ch.VII,Vrs. 85,97
10. Rajguru, Dr.S.N. History of the Gangas, Vol-II, p.14
11. Bhagavata Purana, II. 4,18
12. Tripathy G.C "Navakalevara" in "The cult of Jagannath and the regional Traditions of Odisha", Eschmann, Kulke and Tripathy (Eds) pp.231-232
13. Eschmann, A "Prototypes of Navakalevara" Ibid, p. 268.
14. Ibid, p.270
15. Ibid, p.269-270
16. Eschmann, A "The Vaisnava Typology of Hinduization and the Origin of Jagannath" Ibid, p.99.
17. Tripathy, G.C "Navakalevara", Ibid, p.224
18. Mishra, Dr.K.C. The cult of Jagannath, Calcutta (1971)p.96

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