



The Cult of Lord Jagannath

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Puri is the holy seat of Lord Jagannath, the Lord of the Universe "The sanctity of the place exists from pre-historic period where tradition can not reach", remarks Manomohan Ganguly in his book, 'Orissa and Her Remains'. The origin and the antiquity of Jagannath Cult has so far baffled almost all scholars. Anybody studying the Jagannath Cult can easily notice that various castes and creeds, customs and traditions, communities and sects are found to have been assimilated into this cult. Whatever may be the genesis of this cult, it has been admitted both by the scholars as well as persons belonging to different religious traditions that the culture is the center around which in course of time divergent currents and cross-currents have revolved.

Eminent historian Dr. Harekrushna Mahtab has pointed out that Lord Jagannath was originally the embodiment of Buddha. It is known from history that Buddhism had a strong foothold in Orissa from the pre-Christian era. After the conquest of Kalinga by Ashok in 261 B.C., Buddhism must have got an extra impetus under royal patronage. It is known from the Travel Accounts of the famous Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang that Mahayana form of Buddhism flourished in Orissa in the 7th century A.D. The 'Brahman' which is believed to be inside the wooden body of Lord Jagannath is nothing but the tooth of Buddha. Sir Alexander Cunningham advocated the theory that the figures of Jagannath, Subhadra and Balabhadra had been derived from

the Buddhist *Triratna* signifying Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. According to Dr. Mahtab the *Savaras* of Orissa were converted to Buddhism during the reign of Ashoka and worshipped the *Triratna* symbol. Buddha is considered as an *Avatara* of Vishnu. Jagannath is also considered to be an *Avatara* of Vishnu. Gradually Buddhism lost itself in Vaishnavism.

The absence of caste distinction in the temple of Jagannath especially in partaking the *Mahaprasad*, the Car Festival and bathing festival (*Snanayatra*) of the Lord are ascribed to Buddhist influence.

Pandit Nilakantha Das thinks that the three images of Jagannath, Subhadra and Balabhadra represent the Jaina Trinity. Kedarnath Mohapatra and Pandit Binayak Mishra have tried to identify Indradyumna, the legendary propounder of the Jagannath Worship at Puri, with Kharavela, the great Jaina emperor of Kalinga. Sudarsan is the Jaina symbol of *Dharmachakra* and *Kaivalya* (liberation), a term so exclusively common in Jagannath has been derived from Jaina sources. Some scholars regard Jagannath as *Daru Brahma*, godhead manifested in a wooden image. Pandit Nilakantha Das is of the opinion that in the Vedic literature of *Rigveda* (x-81-4) the word 'wood' (*Daru*) is used to indicate the material of which the universe (*Jagat*) is made of. Scholar M.M. Ganguly points out that Buddhism is an off-



shoot of the Hindu religion and the idea of the *Triratna* has been taken from the parent stock.

It is maintained by some scholars that Jagannath, Subhadra and Balabhadra were originally worshipped by the primitive *Savaras*. Oriya texts like *Darubrahma Gita* of Jagannath Das and *Deulatola* of Nilambar Das suggest the tribal origin of the Cult. The *Daitapatis* (custodians of the deity) claim that they are the descendents from the Brahmin Vidyapati through the *Savara* mother Lalita and the deities are left to their sole care during the *Snana Yatra* and the car festival. They also observe the funeral rites of Jagannath during *Nabakalebara*.

Puri, otherwise known as Purusottam Khetra is not only a sacred place for the Vaishnavas but is also equally sacred for the *Saivas*, *Sauras*, *Saktas*, *Ganapatyas* and even for the Buddhists and the Jains. It is interesting to be noted that Jagannath Cult is responsible to combine people of different faiths, castes and creeds under one common bond of unity.

For *Sakta Tantriks* Jagannath is Bhairava and Vimala is Bhairavi. In the month of Asvina, during the Durga Puja, animal sacrifice is made before goddess Vimala which is the only of its kind in the otherwise bloodless rituals performed in the temple. The food offerings made to Jagannath can only be considered *Mahaprasad* after they are re-offered to goddess Vimala.

The propagation of Vaishnavism by Ramanuja in the early part of the 12th century A.D. gave a fresh impetus to Vaishnavism in Orissa. The Ganga monarch Chodaganga Deva seems to have come under the influence of Ramanuja. Chodaganga was a Saiva and but was called as both *Parama Maheswara* and *Parama Vaishnava*. He was also a devotee of Vishnu. The Ganga period witnessed the recognition of Jagannath as the patron deity of the royal family. But the Vaishnavism in Orissa reached its climax in the 16th century. Purusottam Deva, the son and successor of the Suryavamsi

monarch Kapilendra Deva was greatly devoted to Lord Jagannath for singing whose glory he wrote *Abhinava Gitagovindam*. According to *Madalapanji*, Lord Jagannath helped Purusottam Deva to conquer Kanchi and marry Padmavati, the daughter of Saluva Narasimha, the ruler of Kanchi.

Gajapati Prataprudra's reign was marked with the visit of Sri Chaitanya to Puri. Prataprudra became an ardent devotee of Sri Chaitanya and the name of Radha-Krishna was a panacea to his maladies. Sri Chaitanya popularized Radha Krishna Cult through *kirtan* in the nook and corner of Orissa and Jagannath came to be regarded primarily as a Vaishnavite deity. During this period the *Panchasakha*, namely Balaram Das, Jagannath Das, Ananta Das, Achyutananda Das and Yasobanta Das, through their immortal creations popularized Vaishnavism in Orissa. In spite of their individual predilection with *Sunya Yoga* or the Cult of *Bhakti*, these poets sing the songs of Jagannath in one voice and are mainly responsible for making the Cult of Jagannath the mass religion of Orissa.

In 1822 Stirling wrote that the three images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra respectively represent Vishnu, Siva and Durga. The Jagannath religion in its final phase thus sought to synthesise the three main cults of Hinduisim, viz. Vaishnavism, Saivism and Saktism, but at the same time it also retained some practices of other cults and religions to which it owed its origin.

Thus, the cult of Jagannath is an epitome of divergent religious creeds and schools of philosophy that prevailed in India at different periods of her long cultural history. In the historic process of adjustment, Jagannath has assimilated strange contradictions in a manner that is most amazing in the history of religious thoughts.

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