



## The Cult of the All-Merciful Lord

*Durgamadhhab Dash*

Puri is the abode of Lord Jagannath. It is adored as one of the four pilgrim centres in Hindu religion. It is known as *Punya Dham* in the Jagannath cult. There is a belief among the Hindus that when one dies at Puri, one has a straight march from this place to heaven and the *Jivatma* attains *Mokhya*, emancipated from the bondage of life after death. In the holy scriptures of *Sanatana Dharma*, Puri is also described as *Neelachal Dham* and *Niladri Purusottam Khestra*. It is also known as *Sri Khestra*, the abode of Mahalaxmi, the consort of Lord Vishnu. Puri thus boasts for its highly rich spiritual history and cultural heritage.

Sri Jagannath temple is hailed as a gigantic religious organisation. It is the centre of myriad spiritual doctrines and diverse religious faiths. The presiding Deities of the temple - the Jagannath, the Balabhadra and the Subhadra - are worshipped in several ways in different religious ideals. The spiritual surrounding of the temple is enriched with many other peripheral deities. All of them are religiously linked with the spiritual Triad. The peripheral deities are separately worshipped in a spirit of ideological reverence. They have their own *Nitis* and customary rituals.

Many religious festivals are celebrated in the temple on different auspicious occasions along with varied rituals and conventional sacraments. The servitors of the temple do *Havan*, recite the

*Vedas*, worship the Sun- god and the Fire-god and perform such other religious practices as the pre-requisite ancillaries of the regular *Nitis* of the religious Triad. All these practices are the routine disciplines of the temple. All these are known as common place traditional followings of multitudes of Hindu devotees who visit the Temple of Lord Jagannath urged by the mystic longing of their ever groaping hearts.

Srikhebhtra is further adored as the seat of Vaishnavism. Chaitanya Mahaprabu, the messiah of the fallen humanity, visited this place and embellished Vaishnavism in a more glorious form. The Lord is worshipped in the Vaishnav cult as *Purusottama* in the line of myriad theological expositions in *Sankhya* Philosophy. In literal sense, Lord Jagannath is known as *Purusottama* as He is the Supreme Lord being the combination and culmination all gods, all faiths and all doctrines in the Hindu pantheon. This is the central theme of the Jagannath cult.

The mystery of the Triad has varied significance in the context of its far reaching ideology and metaphysical convictions. In the opinion of spiritual preachers, the Triad represents the philosophy of *Jnana Yoga*, *Karma Yoga* and *Bhakti Yoga*. Balabhadra is said to be the replica of *Jnana Yoga* ; Subhadra is said to be the manifestation of *Karma Yoga* and Jagannath the



Supreme Master of *Bhakti Yoga*. We worship the three images for the harmonious uplift of the *Jivatma* to the level of the *Brahman*, by simultaneously following all the three *Yogas* in spiritual practice. Practice of one *Yoga* with the abandonment of the other two is not conducive to the elevation of the *Jivatma* to salvation in life.

In the opinion of Sarala Das, the three deities - Balabhadra, Subhadra Jagannath and are embodiments of Hara, Brahma and Hari respectively. In *Jagannath Charitamruta* by Dibakar Das, Jagannath is portrayed as *Shree Bija*, Subhadra as *Hling Bija* and Jagannath as *Kling Bija*.

The three Lords also exemplify the inhabitants of the world who are mostly having three varied complexions. In this respect, the three idols are the marks of unity and solidarity among the mankind as a whole. The colour of Jagannath being black, He represents the dark skinned inhabitants of Africa and Asia. As Patitapaban, He stands for the downtrodden in these areas. Balabhadra is white in colour. He represents the white skinned inhabitants of Europe. Subhadra, being yellow in colour, represents the inhabitants of China, Tibet and the Red Indians of America.

In *Durga Saptasati*, the Triad have a *Tantrika* eulogization. According to Tantrik devotees, Balabhadra is none other than Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge. Subhadra is worshipped as the divine expression of Mahalaxmi, the Goddess of Wealth. Jagannath is the divine expression of Lord Vishnu, the creator and preserver of the Universe. Not only this. The Tantrik devotees also worship Balabhadra as Ugratara, Subhadra as Bhubaneswari and Jagannath as Dakshinakali.

When Sankaracharya visited Puri and went to the Jagannath Temple, he worshipped Balabhadra as Kamapala, Subhadra as Yogamaya

and Jagannath as Lord Vishnu. He asserted in a spiritual statement that Subhadra as *Mayashakti* is installed between Balabhadra and Jagannath to unify *Sivashakti* and *Vishnushakti* as a spectacular divine force. This signified the truth that Siva is no different from Vishnu. Sankara's spiritual averment on the subject pacified many conflicting speculations of the Saivites and the Vaishnavites of his time. The Saivites, the Vaishnavites and the *Saktas* saw in the sacred forms of Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath one divine combination. This again is the wonderous empiricism of the Jagannath Cult.

Jagannath is thus the One Supreme Spiritual Force in the diverse religious forms of the Hindu pantheon. Yosabanta Das, in his *Premabhakti Brahma Gita*, portrayed *Nilachal Dham* as the sacred confluence of all the holy places of the world. Yosabanta Das affirms in this spiritual treatise that a devotee can have religious benefits of Gokula, Mathura, Vrindaban, Dwarika, Kashi and all other holy places in Neelachal Puri. In his *Sunya Samhita*, Achutananda Das has said that all the ten incarnations of the Lord have emanated from *Darubrahma* Jagannath and all the incarnations are also merged in this resplendent self. The Vaishnavites of Utkal say that Jagannath in *Daru* form is none other than Lord Krishna. In *Jagannath Charitamrita*, Jagannath is not only described as the Supreme Lord; He is also eulogized as *Purna Brahma* adorned with the sixteen forms of the Divine Glory.

Pandit Nilakantha Das writes that all gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon have found place in the premises of Jagannath Temple. All the deities of the Temple are known by the spiritual presence of Lord Jagannath. The Lord in this way has overwhelmed all gods; He is overwhelmed by none. Thus the Lord is Himself in every peripheral deity of the Temple. By worshipping the Lord in temple, we worship all gods of the



Hindu Pantheon. Lord Jagannath is not simply the Lord of the Indians or the Hindus alone. He is the Lord of the suffering humanity as the deliverer and redeemer of the entire human civilization. The Temple is said to be the *Vaikuntha* where the religious Triad are worshipped as the symbols of equality, fraternity and the progress of mankind.

In the eclectic system of idolatry veneration, Jagannath is never worshipped as a sectarian deity. The Triad has its own philosophy which is all embracing of all other religions of the world like Buddhism and Jainism. Buddhists believe the Lord as the manifestation of the Buddha. "*Jnana Siddhi*", a Buddhist scripture, describes Lord Jagannath as the Jagannath Buddha. Its author, Indrabhuti, the king of Sambala and the founder of *Vajrayana* System of Buddhism, eulogises the Lord as the indweller of all beings on this earth. The universe, the author says, is *Sarva Budhamayam*. According to other scholars of Buddhism, Puri was an ancient seat of Buddhism. They have said at length that Puri, at one point of time, was known as Dantapura and the Tooth Relic of Buddha was worshipped in a temple at this place. The sacred relic was at a later period surreptitiously transported to Srilanka. Even today, the said relic is worshipped in pomp and ceremony in Srilanka. According to an English scholar, the figures of the Jagannath Triad are derived from the Buddhist symbol of the Triple - Gem, signified as Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Not only this. Buddha was also considered as the *Avatar* of Lord Vishnu. Thus, there was considerable affinity between Jagannath Dharma and Buddhism and, as time rolled on, Buddhism was merged in Vaishnavism and the Buddha was reflected in the Jagannath Triad and worshipped by Hindus as an *Avatar* of the Supreme Lord.

Jainism is also reflected in the Jagannath Cult. The images of the Jagannath Triad are associated with concept of the Trinity, as divinely

conceived by the Jains. The Trinity of the Jains is consisted of *Samyak Jnana*, *Samyak Charitra* and *Samyak Drusti* of life. There is a popular argument among the scholars of Jainism, that the *Triratna* concept of Jainism is spiritually akin to the monosyllable symbol of OM which is the combination of the ethereal letters of A U & MA representing the unique expression of the *Satwa*, *Rajah* and *Tama* forms of life in the cosmic creation. Pandit Nilakantha Das remarked that Nilamadhav of the Jagannath legends was none other than the famous Kalinga Jina, a symbol of cosmic omnipresence imbued with the creative energy of the spiritual universe. The Jagannath Triad have thus evolved from the esoteric analysis of Kalinga Jina which was at a later period merged in the Jagannath Dharma.

Thus in the process of spiritual evolution, the Cult of Jagannath has been formulated as a unique esoteric assimilation of several historic forces which conveyed to its devotees a form of religious worship where the Lord is venerated as *Daru Brahma Purusa*, the One who has neither hands nor legs and yet He is omnipotent and omnipresent; the One who has no eyes but sees everything, no ears but hears everything and the One, though unknowable knows everything in this universe. This concept of the Lord conforms to the description of *Purusa* as contemplated in the *Kaivalya Upanishad*. The *Daru* manifestation of the Lords as we see them on the *Ratnavedi*, have no distinct forms. This depicts the *Purusa Tatwa* of the *Brahman* and His all-embracing divine attribute.

In the *Purusottama Mahatmya* of the *Skanda Purana*, there is mention of *Daru Brahma Jagannath* in four manifested forms. Besides Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath, there is another image known as Sudarshana added to this divine assembly. Sudarshana is installed on the *Ratnavedi* on the left side of Lord



Jagannath in the form of a meaningful staff. Sudarshana is described in the *Puranas* as the divine disc of Lord Vishnu. According to Vaishnavites, the Lord holds this cosmic missile in the second finger of His right-hand and uses it, when necessary, to annihilate the demonic forces on the earth.

In the eleventh chapter of *Matsya Purana*, it is said that the evolution of Sudarshana has a religious background. One day the Sun-god approached Lord Vishnu and prayed to Him for shrinking his resplendent energy. Lord Vishnu, pleased with his prayer, shed a portion of his cosmic energy and apportioned it into three fractions. With one fraction, he created *Sudarshana Chakra* and placed it on the second finger of His right-hand. With the other two fractions, He created *Trishula* (trident) for Lord Siva, and *Vajra*, the weapon of thunderbolt for Lord Indra. This is how Sudarshana was evolved as a divine weapon of Lord Vishnu.

In the *Brahma Purana*, there is a different description. In the nineteenth chapter of the *Brahma Purana*, it is said that when Lord Vishnu needed a distinctive and unequalled weapon to annihilate the demonic forces on the earth, He appealed to the *Devas* to mediate in His divine mission. The *Devas*, realising the implication of the Lord's mission, parted with portions of their divine energy and created the disc of Sudarshana for use by Lord Vishnu in His sacred mission.

Sudarshana is thus described in the Hindu scriptures as a unique weapon streaked with matchless divine energy of countless suns. It is believed that, worshipped with unflinching devotion, Sudarshana can lead a devotee to divine salvation.

A question arises, if Sudarshana is the divine disc of the Lord, why is it not worshipped in its circular form on the right-hand of Lord

Jagannath ? Why is it installed on the left side of the Lord in a staff-like form ? This has been well explained in a symbolic manner in *Tapaswi Hanuman* by Pandit Sadasiva Rathasarma. The illustration given here runs like this.

Sudarshana is personified in this scripture as a god, and the close acolyte of Lord Jagannath. As the narrative goes, one day Sudarshana thought that He was invincible in the cosmic creation of the Lord. But for him, the Lord could not have done anything in His divine mission. This was too much of an abrasive pride. The Lord tolerates everything but not one's pride or ego. Sudarshana, the Lord thought, was going the wrong way. So He decided to teach him a lesson. He contrived a special plan whereby his pride could be vanquished. He called Sudarshana to His side and said, Sudarshana I want Hanuman's presence right now in the Temple. He is presently engaged in meditation in *Abhayaranya* (deep forest) far away from this place. You please go and inform him to meet Me immediately. Sudarshana, wasting no time, arrived at the place where Hanuman was engaged in meditation. He conveyed the message of the Lord to Hanuman and left the place. Hanuman in meditation could come to know the purpose of Sudarshana's mission. He too wasted no time and rushed to the Temple. After sometime, he reached the main entrance of the Temple. To his surprise, he found that all the gates of the Temple had been blocked by Sudarshana. Dazzling discs were found revolving at the entrance of every gate. Probably, Sudarshan wanted Hanuman to fight with him so that he could crush the latter and display his strength before the Lord. Hanuman could know everything by closing his eyes. He prayed to the Lord seeking His mercy to cross over the obstacles. With the blessings of the Lord, Hanuman now assumed his colossal divine form, blessed with eight hands. With four hands, he





captured the four revolving discs putting those under his armpits. With two hands folded, he paid obeisance to the Lords on the *Ratnavedi*. With the remaining two hands, he did *Kirtan* singing the glory of the Lord's name and moved forward towards *Ratnavedi*. When he reached the Lord, he released the four forms of Sudarshana from his armpits and prostrated before the Supreme Self. By then, Sudarshana had already known the Lord's reaction to his pride. With folded hands, he begged for atonement of his sin. Nevertheless, the Lord ruled that, Sudarshana for his sin, would lose his disc form in *Kaliyug* and be seen on the left side of the Lord in a staff-like form. That is why, Sudarshana is seen on the left side of Lord Jagannath in a staff like form on the *Ratnavedi*.

The implication of this religious narrative brings home the fact that the Lord can tolerate everything, even the hard kicks of one's feet onto His celestial body but not one's pride and ego.

In the words of Swami Chidananda Saraswati Maharaj, if one worships Lord

Jagannath, he gets the benefit of worshipping all gods of the Hindu pantheon. Jagannath is the Lord of the humanity. He is not bound by the mundane restrictions of the world. He receives everything that is offered to him in a spirit of love and affection. His *Prasad* is known as *Mahaprasad*. It has the sanctity of impeccability and purity in usual dispensation. It is the symbol of equality and fraternity. It is no offal even if it is shared together irrespective of caste, creed and religion. The Car Festival of the Lord is an all-embracing annual ritual of the Temple. This is in a nut-shell the Cult of Jagannath, the Cult of the All-merciful Lord.

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Durgamadhab Dash lives at C-80, Palasapalli, Bhubaneswar.

