



The Sabar Tradition in Shri Jagannath Culture

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Lord Jagannath, supreme God of the universe, has taken his abode at Puri, the chief religious centre among the four celebrated religious centre of Hindus. Various Sanskrit works, such as *Padma Puran*, *Narada Puran*, *Skanda Purana*, *Niladrimahodaya*, *Bamadeva Samhita* etc. have described about the sacred abode of Lord Jagannath at *Purusottam Khetra*, Puri. Different scholars in different times have also left no stone unturned to trace out the origin and antiquity of Purosottam Jagannath; but no satisfactory, positive and commonly acceptable evidence have come to light so far to unveil as to how and when this concept has come into existence in Puri. The *Niladrimahodaya* provides in detail all the festivals of Lord Jagannath and the mode of their worship alongwith the deities. Out of twelve months of the year, worshipping of deities for eleven months are performed on *Aryan* tradition basis and rest one month i.e. from *Jestha Purnima* (Snan Purnima) till the entry of deities into the temple, worshipping is performed in non-Aryan basis i.e. in *Sabar* fashion. It is, therefore, not clear to understand whether Lord Jagannath originally is a Hindu Aryan deity or tribal deity. Mystery is still wrapped behind the cult of lord Jagannath. Prevalent legend and traditions, however, throw some light for which it is necessary to turn to pages of *Vedic* and *Puranic* literatures for the purpose.

Sabar tradition in the Culture of Lord Jagannath has its connection with the legend of *Raja Indradyumna*. He was the king of solar dynasty in *Satya Yuga* and was ruling the city of *Avanti* in *Malaya*. He was a devotee of Lord Vishnu. One day, he came to know that Vishnu in flesh and blood was present at Blue Mountain (*Nilakandar*) in *Odra Desha*. The story goes in this manner. It is mentioned in the *Skanda Purana* (Uttar Khanda) that *Rohini Kunda* is situated near *Kalpabata* tree on the Blue Mountain of the country of Odra. To the North of Rohini Kunda, there is a place where a Sabar Chief named *Viswabasu* was worshipping *Nilamadhava*. The *Devatas* used to come at night to worship Lord Nilamadhava everyday. This news tempted the king Indradyumna to see Nilamadhava. The king deputed his Brahmin priest *Vidyapati* to Odra Desha to collect information of Lord Vishnu. Coming to Odra Desha, Vidyapati took shelter in Sabar village and made friendship with the family of Sabar Chief concealing his identity and motive of coming to that place. Then he fell in love with a Sabar maiden called Lalita, the only beautiful daughter of Viswabashu and got married her. On his repeated request through *Lalita*, *Viswabasu*, being motivated, one day took his son-in-law (*Vidhyapati*) covering his eyes throw a narrow



track to a cave where Nilamadhava was worshipped. On seeing Nilamadhava, his eyes were glittered. Vidyapati was very intelligent. He secretly dropped mustard seeds on the ground on his way to see Nilamadhava. After some days, plants from germinated seeds paved the way to the cave where Nilamadhava was worshipped. No body except Vidyapati could know this. Locating the route, he then returned to Avanti and informed the king (Indradyumna) about Nilamadhava. The king with his forces, accompanied by *Narada*, set out his journey to Odra Desha. No sooner the king reached the boundary of Odra country, than he received the news about the disappearance of Nilamadhava. The king became extremely sad.

Narad, however, assured him that the lord would appear in the form of Daru (sacred wood). The king then went to Nilagiri and there he performed a Yagyan. Lord Nilamadhava made his appearance in a dream to the king and instructed him that Lord would appear in the form of Daru (sacred wood) on the seashore. On the next day, the king got the information about the floating of

Daru on the seashore with four branches. Then the king brought it and placed it on *Maha Vedi* with supreme care. At the time of discussion with Narada about the construction of deities, a voice from above announced- "The Lord himself will construct His own image and will appear on Mahavedi after a fixed number of days, during which the door of the said room with Daru should be shut up". While the king was thinking about this announcement, an old carpenter with his instrument came and agreed to take up the work with the condition that he would be allowed to remain isolated and un-disturbed for a period of 21 days inside the temple. The king agreed to his condition. After 15 days when no sound of construction of images came from the room, the king and queen, being impatient and doubtful, opened the door of the room and found that the images remained unfinished and the carpenter had disappeared. In the meantime, a heavenly voice declared, "Oh king ! Dress these four deities with silken garments and establish the images on Mahavedi." Accordingly, the king worshipped the Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarsan uttering three *suktas* of the *Rig Veda*, which are symbol of brahman. From that day, tradition has associated with the worship of deities at Purusottam kshetra with the name of Indradyumna. After installation of images, Lord Jagannath was very much pleased on the king and offered him boons. Indradyumna sought from the Lord four boons. The first was that descendants of Viswabasu would decorate and do their services especially during *Anavasara* and *Ratha Yatra*. The second was the children of Lalita and their descendants to be designated as *Suar* (Supakars) or the cooks; the third was the descendants of Vidyapati would be priests of Jagannath designated as *Patimohapatra*. On being asked as to what boon he wanted for himself, Indradyumna prayed for no servitors in



his family, as they might claim with a sense of vanity that the temple was built by his ancestors. For this tremendous sacrifice of Indradyumna, Lord was very much pleased and granted the last boon. This has been given in much detail in "*Deaula Tola*" by Nilamber Das.

The Sevaks or servitors called Daitapatis are of Sabar origin and they are engaged in worship and services of main deities especially at the time of *Nabakalebar* and Car festival. During Nabakalebara, on the day of transfer of Brahma from old images to new images, Daitapatis perform the burial of old images at *Koili Baikuntha* in the precinct of the temple and observed the funeral rites like Hindus in traditional manner; because they think themselves that they are *Gyanti-Sahodar* (family member of Lord). They use to shave their head and take bath in *Markandeswar* Tank with their family on the final day of funeral rites and they put on new clothes and take *Mahaprasad* as observed on funeral day. They therefore treat themselves as related to the family of Lord Jagannath.

Daita means "the most beloved one of Lord." After bathing festival on full moon day of Jyestha, the deities are worshipped in a secret chamber (Anavsara) for full two weeks by the Daitas. Except Daitas and Patimahapatra, none are allowed to see and do the worship of Lord during Anavasara, car festival and Nabakalebar. Anavasara means engagement without rest. The worship is so engaging and continuous that Daitas do not get time to relax. Hence, this period of two weeks has been correctly named as Anavasara. During this period, they offer fruits and Anavasara - pana (water mixed with sugar, milk cream etc.) to the deities and they take that as Prasad there. It is believed that the deities are in sickness. Normally one likes to see his close relatives at the time of sickness. With that belief,

as Daitas are treated as close relatives of lord's family, they are only allowed to sit with him during this period and sing different hymns in a very low voice to please the deities. From the way of their worship and engagement it appears that they have devoted themselves most affectionately, closely and heartily to the deities. During Car festival, they decorate the Deities in the chariot in tribal costumes. At the time of *pahandi*, they use to sing a type of song called *malasree* which has a traditional belief that such songs and wordings would protect and safeguard the Deities. Besides, just before pahandi they use to tie up charms and talismans made up of roots and leaves on the arms of deities in order to protect their bodies. This is characteristically a sabar mode of belief and indicates their affection for deities.

It may be observed that Daitas have no privilege to participate in all other festivals of Deities, which are celebrated according to Aryan tradition. Thus in Sri Jagannath culture there is a fusion of celebration of Aryan and non Aryan worshipping without any conflict. Tradition and practices followed in the Jagannath temple indicate that Lord Jagannath is of tribal origin.

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