

## Jagannath cult : Equalizer of social distinction

**Nityananda kar**

Lecturer in History, Cgm Telkoi, Keonjhora

### ABSTRACT

Lord Jagannath has always remained as mysterious to the knowledge of mankind. The origin of Jagannath cult is shrouded in obscurity. The veil of darkness that pervades over this cult has not been lifted till today. However, God Jagannath has been accepted as the representative of the Oriya people, an embodiment of love, a guiding force behind the cultural heritage of this land, a synthesis of all the Hindu faiths and finally, as the God. of the universe . The most interesting and important socialistic aspect based upon principles of equality is the Mahaprasad of Lord Jagannath. It transcends all barriers of communal divisions in Hindu society, particularly where a conservative Brahmin does not hesitate, rather takes it as a privilege, to partake Mahaprasad with a person of lowest social ladder.

**Kew Words: Jaganntha cult, Puri, Social identification, Odisha, Mahaprasad.**

### Introduction :

Jagannath, the Lord of the Universe is one of the most revered and ancient deities of the Hindu pantheon. His origin and worship has been

shrouded with myths, legends and traditions. The earliest references of the Lord are found in the Puranas and ancient literature. As His origin being traced to the king Indradyumna of Upanishad period, a hoary antiquity has been assigned to him in Puranic and local traditions. From the legendary sources it is stated that Lord Jagannath was originally worshipped by tribals and Savaras. In the Buddhist records we find that Oddiyana was one of the centres of Buddhism and Tantricism. This Oddiyana is identified with the Gopalpur (Ganjam) on sea coast which is contiguous with the split formed by Chilika-Puri island during the time of Taranatha.<sup>1</sup> The Savaras and Patara Savaras mentioned in the tantric literature used to live there along with the fishermen. Important evidence of this belief is the existence of those who are believed to be Jagannath,

The Lord of Universe His Origin and Evolution .Be of tribal origin and play a major role in performing different sevās to Lord Jagannath. In the remote corners of Orissa, tribals of Koraput district are performing Daru (wood) worship from the primitive period. Such type of worship was seen at Bata-Kuhudi, a village in Koraput district. Adored along with Siva. Narayana cult changed into cult of Madhaba in 7th century A.D. The earliest king of Sailodbhava dynasty was Madhavaraja. From 7<sup>th</sup> to 9th century A.D, the Madhava cult was popular in Kangoda under Sailodbhava when their dominion was extended from Mahendragiri in the south upto Mahanadi in the north.<sup>8</sup>

Narayana cult and Madhava cult again changed to Buddhism by Bhaumakara king who invaded Tosali and Kangoda after 736 A.D. During this period the great philosopher Sankaracharya (788 A.D to 820 A.D) visited Puri .To save the Hindu religion and culture from decay ,he protected the Purusottam kshetra by making it one of the four important religious centres of Hindu

tirthas and established Govardhan Matha at Puri to propagate the Advaitavada. The entire world consisting of different communities have been broadly classified on the basis of their colours into three categories White for Aryans Black Negrit, Yellow for Mongoloids. Sri Jagannath Trinity exhibits these three colours that is Balabhadra- White, Jagannath-Black, and Subhadra - Yellow. Such colour combination is unique in the whole pantheon of Gods and Goddesses worshipped in the whole world. There can not be a more convincing symbolic representation of the world except the holiness of Jagannath on the basis of colour combination. Every god-head in the world religion has its own distinction in features, in ritual system and in the mode of worship. The gods are either shaped as super-human beings and when shapeless god like Gurugranthasaheb of Sikh community is worshipped, the devotees always bear the shape of their guru in their minds while worshipping. But paradoxically and peculiarly the Jagannath trio does not conform to any anthropomorphic model. Jagannath and Balabhadra are legless and armless and appear to be only a wooden stump. They lack proper representation of mouth, nose and ears. Goddess Subhadra is also legless and armless and appear to be only a wooden stump. Sudarsana, the fourth image is just a small log of wood or stump. Such peculiar features of the god baffle any academic Scholars say that this conception of god has integrated the conflicting religious trends with their presiding deities like Vishnu, Rudra and Shakti. Such integration and religious synthesis is nowhere available. All divergent communities subscribing to different beliefs and philosophies have been inextricably blended into one. No other religious mechanism could have achieved so much of socio-religious cohesion and socialistic approach to sectarian community.

### **Equalizer of social distinction:- Mahaprasad**

The most interesting and important socialistic aspect based upon principles of equality is the Mahaprasad of Lord Jagannath. It transcends all barriers of communal divisions in Hindu society, particularly where a conservative

Brahmin does not hesitate, rather takes it as a privilege, to partake Mahaprasad with a

person of lowest social ladder. There can not be more demonstrative symptom of socialism than Mahaprasad. The next most noteworthy feature is the famous Car Festival of Lord Jagannath. The temple entry is restricted to the persons of other religions and many communities are deprived of the personal appearances. It is unique that the peculiar God Lord Jagannath, the epitome of socialism, comes to the mass, crushing all barriers of communal distinctions. The individual identity gets merged in such collective and mass consciousness which is being experienced by everybody regardless of caste, creed and colour that, virtually Car festival is going to be the international festival sooner or later.

### **Symbol of Universal Humanism-Purushottama :**

The greatest perceivable aspect of the holy trio is their humanization. Those humanised Deities entail the elaborate rituals of getting up in the

morning till going to the bed. They suffer from fever, attend various festivals like human being of taking bath (Chandan Jatra) during summer days, swinging ceremony (Jhulana Jatra) and even go for hunting (Paradhi) to their pleasure garden Jagannath Ballava on Basanta Panchami Day. These religious activities depict the life and style of a royal human being, in the eyes of which everybody is equal without discrimination. He became the directive force of the entire community instead of keeping away, as only god to be worshipped Lord Jagannath bears the name of Purushottama, which means 'Finest Man'. Here the 'Man' (Purusha) is without any distinctive racial and communal complexion. He has rightly being praised by a great devotee Bilwamangala in the following words - *Nilachalendra nilayaya nira kulaya, Nityodayaya Nikhilagha Nivaranaya, Nisseshashoka somanaya niranjanaya, Tasmaye namah bhagabata purushattamaya*. This invocatory verse signifies that Lord Purushottama sanctifies the sins, sorrows and sufferings of the whole universe. This total humanistic approach makes Lord Jagannath the symbol of universal

humanism, i.e., Purushottama Shree Shree Jagannath Mahaprabhu is the frame of reference for any form of greatness throughout the country. He is the Bada Thakura, the Chief among the Gods. His Temple is named as Bada Deula, the main Temple among the Temples and the Path in front of His temple is the Bada Danda, the grand Pathway. The sea washing the shores of His Kshetra is called Mahodadhi or the great ocean. Even the cremation ground here is named Swargadwara or gateway to the heaven. In worshipping Him, all the deities are worshipped and in visiting His Seat or Kshetra all pilgrimages are made. He is conceived as the king, the cosubject, the father, the brother and the son in One. All religious practices, social customs and cultural activities get their sanction by reference to what is followed in His temple and the deviations, if any one also made humble supplication of His sanction. The Lord of the Lords is the ideal of ideals for the people. Lord Shree Shree Jagannath has been conceived as the emperor and the temple itself as his empire. The kings who were ruling over the state of Orissa from long past were considering themselves as the servants of the great Lord. The paraphernalia as is found in a royal household, is also discernible in the temple of Jagannath. The three deities have different colours and symbols. As such Subhadra, the symbol of Prakrti or Sakti has yellow colour. Prakrti is the source of all living things and forms, which assumes various colours as they grow and develop, but at the origin are characterised by yellow colour. Balabhadra who is the symbol of pure being or pure indeterminate spirit, has white colour, which is at the same time the synthesis and negation of all spectral, the veil of mystery which surrounds the Supreme Lord. Black is no colour in itself, nor it is a synthesis of colours. It is the negation of all colours as well as the colourlessness Lord Shree Jagannath is all pervading and he combines in Himself all the main five Hindu deities namely Shree Narayana, Shree Rudra, Shree Ganesh, Shree Surya and Shree Durga. When on the Ratna Simhasan of His temple, He is Shree Narayana; during the Nabakalebara ceremony, He is considered as Shree Rudra; during the Snana Yatra, He is conceived as Gajanaana, (Shree Ganesh); at the time of car festival, He

is taken to be Shree Suryanarayana; while enjoying the divine slumber (Sayana Yatra), He becomes Shree Durga. Thus all the main deities of Hinduism are considered to have been merged in Him. Thus, He is represented as the Supreme God to Saivas, Saktas, Ganapatyas, Sauras and Vaisnavas. The eyes of Lord glisten with divine grace (Krupa) and the Supreme Lord is connected with the world of things and beings by Bhakti and Prema. Devotion (Bhakti) or absolute self surrender constitutes the most dominant note in the religious tradition of Shree Jagannath and before the Lord of the Universe all are deemed as equals and co-sharers of Mahaprasada. The famous Jagannath cult enjoins upon the acceptance of

Mahaprasad by members of all castes and creeds together. The greatness of Mahaprasad has been loudly acclaimed in the Holy Puranas. This custom was prevalent in the Vedic Age. So, especially we will never find in famous Jagannath cult the caste or creed feelings for taking Mahaprasad. Nabadha Bhakti (Bhakti of nine types) is found specially on the occasion of famous Rath Yatra or the Car Festival which is observed on Asadha Sukla Dwitiya i.e. second day of the bright fortnight of the month of Asadha. The celebration of the Rath Yatra during the rainy season is significant. The car of Lord Jagannatha which is named as Nandighosa has another name called the "Garudadhwaaja". The car of Lord Balabhadra is named as "Taladhwaaja". The mystery behind the formation of this car is still unsolved. Baladeva is the incarnation of "Sesa", the holy infinite serpent on whom Lord Visnu takes rest. It is said that Lord Balabhadra functions as mirror of wisdom and receives a view of the entire universe through that. As the mirror is placed below (tala) it is called tala. Besides, pure and transparent qualities of the mirror are symbolically observed in Lord Balabhadra Himself, who is therefore designated as "Talanka". In this way His car is named as "Taladhwaaja." The outline of a mirror is perpetually found in the banner of his car. The car of goddess 'Subhadra' is called both 'Devadalana' and 'Padmadhwaja'. Goddess Laksmi who is identified with Subhadra is again called Padma. Subhadra represents wealth, prosperity and grace (Sree.) Hence

there is the lotus profile in the banner of Her car and it is called “Padmadhwaja”.

## **The Lord is the Sovereign and the king, his Deputy**

The community control of the organization which is the fundamental of socialism is being demonstrated by the management pattern of the Lords. There are 36 *niyogas* consisting of various categories of religious functionaries. In case of failure or default of service to the Lord the *niyoga* along with the defaulting individual becomes answerable. Over all the *niyogas* there is one ‘Chatisaniyoga Nayaka’ or Head of 36 *Niyogas* designated as ‘Pattajoshi Mahapatra’. Such well knit division of labour and community control of the *seva* system of the Lord is unparalleled. The king is the first *sebayat* or the servitor. Before the multitude of devotees he performs the job of a scavenger and sweeps the cars. This job belongs to the lowest man of the Hindu social order. But the king doing the same, it speaks of the highest religious humility nowhere comparable. There is no-body big and small in the eyes of the Lord. This particular activity is definitely a perceivable socialistic trait. Orissan kingship manifested itself the monumental imperial temple of Puri and the recognition of its deity as the ‘King of Orissan Empire’. As His earthly deputies and rulers of ‘New Benaras’, the kings of Orissa thus claimed an imperial status among the Hindu Rajas of India. In a time when Orissa was encircled by several mighty enemies and when the feudatory *Gadajat* States seriously endangered the central power, Raja Govinda Vidyadhar had recourse to the State Deity and His Priests. In order to secure their support-most probably-reconfirmed their rights to the gifts offered by the pilgrims. In front of ‘The Lord of the Universe,’ Raja Govinda then demanded obedience of his rebellious

feudatories and threatened all his opponents with the wrath of Lord Jagannatha. During the most dangerous decades of the history of Orissa, after the dynastic links had broken down, the state cult with its powerful priesthood- besides

the standing army-had thus seems to have become the most important central authority of the empire. In various inscriptional evidences, the successive Gajapati Kings have accepted Jagannath as the state deity and they produced themselves as His ‘Lowest Servant or Rauta’. They ruled the kingdom on behalf of the state deity ‘Jagannath’ as His Deputies. There can not be a more demonstrable socialism when the godhead is conferred with the power of a sovereign who is perfect, just, fair and extends equal treatment to everybody. Nilachal, Sri-Khetra or Purusottama Puri has been famous for thousands of years as the seat of Lord Jagannath, historicity of which is as mysterious as the life of the earth. Nobody knows how, when and why it originated. Most probably Jagannath was a tribal deity in the Prehistoric Period. Buddhism had its influence on Jagannath to such an extent that Jagannath in ancient times is described as incarnation of Buddha who has been accepted as an Avatara of Vishnu by Jayadeva. Shankaracharya and Ramanuja established their religious centres at Puri and have their influences on the worship of Lord Jagannath. But Jagannath fame has not only contained to India, but also in the western countries and some communist countries. The goal of thousands, the year round is to go to Puri to honour and pray to Lord Jagannath, the Lord of the Universe. The temple of Jagannath at Puri is a magnificent example of architecture and carving but what is curious is that the deities, the three images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra sit and stare unblinkingly. Their appearance is unfinished and frightful in the eyes of the modern aesthetics. But a true devotee sees in the hideous figure the bewitching and lovely figure of Krishna.

The Gajapati Maharaja of Puri, traditionally first and the foremost *Sevak* of the Lord still enjoys suzerainty over a million hearts and fills them with a nostalgia for the glorious past when Orissa stood at the zenith of its power. The Maharaja sweeps the floor-boards of the chariots at the beginning of the Lord’s Journey creating emotion among the spectators. The Brahmin Priests chant hymns so on and so forth. In the age of the Vedas, Lord Jagannath was called Purusottama (Supreme Person) and that evidence is in ‘Yajurveda Rudrastadhyayi’. There is also

similarity between the description of Paramapurusa in Yajur Veda and the shape of

Lord Jagannath. Shree Jagannath is Vedic Purusa because he accepts all these things and wanders around all places without having hands and legs. He can see all the things of the universe having two rounded eyes and he can hear the sacred prayers of the devotees having no ears. He knows all the things of the universe. Sri Jagannath is actually the Lord of the Universe. He is the apostle of humanism, a cult of universal brotherhood, love, tolerance, equality and fraternity. The cult of Jagannath is not a sectarian religion but a cosmopolitan philosophy. The Jagannath cult has embraced all types of spiritual thought starting from primitive Savara tribal to ultra modern Krishna consciousness. It has given solace to all devotees hailing from the so called untouchable low caste, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism and even Christianity. Jagannath Cult is a pleasant synthesis of Vaishnavism, Saktism, Saivism and other sects of Hinduism. The high pedestal of the inner sanctum is shared by three deities Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra, which is an unique phenomenon as in most of the temples there is usually one presiding

deity who sits in the inner sanctum only. Others are relegated to inferior position, but in temple of Lord Jagannath, all deities particularly Jagannath Balabhadra and Subhadra are given equal respect and reception in all rituals. The Almighty is worshipped daily as Balarama in the image of Balabhadra, as Bhubaneswari in the image of Subhadra and as Purusottama in the image of Jagannath.

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Dr. Nityananda Kar Lecturer in History,Charigarh Mahavidyalaya Telkoi,keonjhar