



JAGANNATH CULTURE: AN EPITOME OF INTEGRATION AND ODIA NATIONALISM

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The Jagannath Culture is a synthesis of various religions of the world and can be rightly ascribed as epitome of integration. The culture of Odisha can also by and large, be termed as culture of Lord Jagannath. In fact from prehistoric age till modern age the Odishan Civilization (Kalinga, Kangoda, Utkal, Kosala, Udra) or the name by which it is called) have built up an ethno-religious society with Jagannatha as the principal deity. The belief in the Jagannath, the people devotion and the loyalties have been so deeply embedded in the minds of the people that Lord Jagannath has been called 'Ganadevta' (God of the common people) and the cult has become 'Ganadharmā' or people's religion by combining the diverse and divergent faiths, cultures, creeds and ideologies.

The origin of the sacred deity goes to the pre-vedic period and from that period till date the Lord and it's heresies contributed immensely for development of Odia nationalism. It has integrated the diverse and centrifugal forces of Tribals, Non-tribals, Brahmins, Non-Brahmins and various Linguistic, as well as ethnical sects. The integration trends has outlived the cruel vicissitudes of history and ultimately contributed for emergence and ultimate strengthening of Odia nationalism.

This discussion will throw some light on the topics which inter alia include the meaning, the background various tenets of Jagannath cult and its universal aspect which has relevance to present day. It deals with the modern concept of secularism, in light of Jagannath cult, religious tolerance. The concepts of equality, unity, work culture and national as well as international integration do form essential ingredients of Jagannath cult. It also deals with environmental consciousness as emphasized at in the Jagannath cult, especially in tradition of tree protection and tree worship as well as method of cooking in Jagannath temple. It will not be out of context to deal with human element in the cult and human activities attributed to the Lord.

The spirit of integration and oneness developed when the image of Lord were hidden at various places of state to save them from the aggression of outsiders. This contributed to the Odia nationalism (according to Rajbhog section of Madalapanji as many as 18 raids were conducted against the Lord when the idols were transferred to different hidden places) deals with the stages and factors of history that have contributed to development of Odia nationalism and integration. During the course of discussion attempts have been made to explain the name of Jagannath, the colours of His body etc. Also details have been given on the caste and creed tec of more than hundred servitors, who worship the Lord in various capacities at different times. The investigator has dealt with great saints of different faiths and beliefs (such as Sankara, Nanak, Ramananda, Ramanuja, Kabir, Chaitanya, Ganapati Bhatta, Salbeg, Tukaram etc.). These great saints have left their impact on the Jagannath cult and established various monasteries at Puri. Even Haridas – a Muslim, Captain Albert Bitto – a Christian sailor, Jaydev – a Sanskrit poet and devotee have left behind traces of moments which even run after their names.

The types of food offered at the temple are of fifty six varieties which consist of South Indian food like Sakar, Adanga, West Indian food like Khechudi, Desi Alubhaja, Kadali Bhaja, Alapacheni, Gheelabanga etc., Eastern Indian food like Pakhala, Mughtiana, Leutia, Kosala, Mahurlalita, Saga etc.

The cult is an experiment in religion. The elementary concept of Saivism, Saktism, and Vaishnavism were combined to a composite whole during Ganga Dynasty. Though the movement of Jagannathism aimed at making a synthesis of various cults and sects found in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and tribals but in the process it did not exclusively represent any one of them. Thus it is a religion that has reduced the heterogeneous elements to a homogeneous form. In a way, it is a *sarvadharmā samanwaya* (balancing all religions).

The concept of nationalism is the force, a psychological condition of mind, a way of feeling thinking and living. It is an emotional tie that can integrate the otherwise divided people. Even though it is treated as a second religion, the emotional force is often stronger than the religion itself.

The Odia nationalism was based on certain important factors such as common religion with Lord Jagannath as the pivot or the Jagannathism and common language i.e. Odias. Even though other factors (like geographical contiguity and historical prominence) had some role, the other factors were overshadowed by versatility of the cult which during course of history evoked national sentiments and political aspirations. The sufferings of the people of Odisha during Muslim and British rule also forged unity among them centering around Lord Jagannath who had touched the political social and spiritual life of every individual. It is not the geography or the nationhood but strong inbuilt feeling about the role of the secular Lord in governing the life of individual as well as the state that contributed immensely for integrating the Odias development of



nationhood. Further, the liberal and secular ethos of Jagannath cult that assimilates the important postulates of almost all religions were additional factors that promote unity and nationhood.

During prehistoric age the people of Odisha then called as the state of Kalinga had carved out a powerful empire. There the people offered vehement resistance to King Ashok who after the historic battle, adopted Buddhism. The Buddhism prevailed there for centuries together and Lord Jagannath was treated as incarnation of Lord Buddha. In the epic Mahabharat Sudramuni Sarala Das an Odia poet described how a misdirected arrow of Jara killed Srikrishna and later recovered the unburnt Bhrahma of the Lord from waves of sea shore and worshipped it inside the jungle as Nilamadhab. The story itself acted as factor to unite the then caste ridden society (i.e. integration of Aryans with Nonaryans that too in the tribal dominated state of Odisha.) The conqueror King Kharabela who ruled during 1st century B.C. was a Jain by religion. During his period the term Jinanatha or Jagannath might have evolved. When Solar Dynasty King Kapilendra Dev declared Lord Jagannath as Rastradebata and himself His nominee or Rauta he in fact built an ethno-religious polity with irrevocable allegiance to the Lord Jagannath. This was followed by successor King Purusottam dev, Narasingh Dev and Prataprudra Dev. This continued safely upto 8th century A.D.

Even though Sanskrit was the language of elites, the writers like Jagannath Das, Sarala Das, Balam Das and Achyutananda Das who were great devotees of the Lord either translated into the Sanskrit scripts into Odia language. Some of them chose to rewrite them in Odia. This helped in popularization of Jagannaath and growth of nationalism. The books like Kanchi Kaveri (written by Ramsankar) and Jagannath Charitamruta (by Jagannath Das) were the sources of dissemination of Odia nationalism. Even the neighbouring small states accepted Jagannath as their deity and mentioned the ANKA* or the year of administration of Khuda King in the horoscope of newly born children. For example the Raja of Chikiti and the poet Ramdas of village Dura in Mahuri state mentioned the Anka* of King of Khurda.

This covertly admitted Jagannath to be a regional deity, a symbol of Odia Empire in the region and not a specific territory. Further several attempt to destroy the images of the Lord Jagannath by series of invaders strengthened the national spirit by converging Odia nationalism with Hindu nationalism. To cite another incident the King of Paralakhemundi attacked Khurda in 1760 A.d. when Bikram Dev the raja of Khurda did not agree to drive out Marathas from Orissa on account of Odia integration. Again during 1817, when Buxi Jagabandhu spearheaded the Paik rebellion, the induced King Mukunda Dev to take the lead. This rebellion was supported by the priests of temple with a public declaration that the British rule would end in Orissa.¹

* The Anka cycle of 591 uni-solar years used in Orissa when a prince dies in middle of an Anka Year his successor's first Anka which commences with his accession to the throne does not run its full term of a year but ends on the eleventh day of Bhadrpada-Suddha following Sewl and Diksit (1896) Indian calendar, p.38.

The Bengal famine provided flesh and blood to Odia nationalism which was lying dormant till then. The establishment of Cuttack Printing Company and publication of Utkal Deepika strengthened the same. The arrest and life long imprisonment in exile to King Dibyasingha Dev in 1878 and hesitation to confer the title of Raja (King) to his minor son caused deep resentment among Odias. Even the trial in Puri temple case (where the intention was to transfer the temple management to a committee) which was pleaded by Madhusudan Das generated heavy protest. As John Beams writes in his memories 'Immense excitement was aroused all over Orissa and crowds assembled around Judges court every day.'² This in fact established the lasting link between Odia nationalism and Lord Jagannath. The development of Mahaprasad brotherhood in due course promoted Britishers to abolish Odia language from Sambalpur court and other offices which could not materialize on account of strong protest.

With the dawn of 20th century the establishment of Utkal Sammilani and (Utkal Deepika) role played by the magazine, the Odia nationalism got further impetus. It was always integrated with various heterogeneous factors like language, ethnicity, religion of the community and ancestral origin etc. But almost all the prominent writers whether of Satyabadi School or not medieval or modern they invoked the spirit of nationalism of Jagannath Desh or Odisha with Lord as its head. Even the Indian Nationalism or Hindus nationalism was over shadowed by the spirit of Odia nationalism as would be evident from the role played by non Hindus like Madhusudan Das, or evn Gourisankar, Ramasankar or Radhanath Ray whose ancestors were Non-Odias. In fact the unbreakable knot of the Lord has hindered all hindrances and integrated all disintegrating forces.

References

1. G. Toynbee (1961), Sketch of History of Orissa cited in Herman Kulke (1974), Page-204.
2. Memories of a Bengal Civilian, John Beams, quoted in S. Mohanty (1970), p.221.