

JAGANNATH & RATHA YATRA AS METAPHORS: ACCOMMODATIVE HINDUISM AT ITS BEST

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This year, the 14th to 22nd July period is dedicated to Jagannath and to his annual Ratha Yatra — that has been described somewhat inadequately as the ‘Chariot Festival’. We will soon recall the rites associated with the journey of Jagannath and his two companions from the great temple and their return nine days later, but here our plea to look beyond the trappings and festivities of this annual ritual of the Hindus — to grasp the essence of eternal Indian tradition of accommodation. Once we succeed in extricating ourselves from the ‘hold’ of these very attractive tourist and television properties and packages, both the deity and his festival then reveal themselves as what they actually represent — the real plural nature of Hinduism. This accommodative aspect of Hinduism needs to reassert itself, without further loss of time, and overrule the strange intolerant brand that is currently marketed by some terribly locked minds — primarily and shamelessly for votes.

To begin with, let us note how the roughly chiseled stump of wood called Jagannath keeps flaunting a historic right to differ — by remaining proudly an-iconic in the midst of a Brahmanically-approved pantheon of anthropometric deities. No hands, no feet — the deity reminds us that the religion of our forefathers was not a closed club, but that it was forever open to all forms of gods, cults, beliefs, rites and even remarkable oddities. It is remarkable how millions jostle each year just to get a touch of the holy cables that tug the impossibly-heavy ‘wooden buildings on wheels’ of Jagannath and his two companions. This act of piety was deliberately misinterpreted by the white colonists as ‘mass suicide’ by pagan Hindus who threw themselves under their murderous heathen god, the unstoppable Juggernaut. It is sad but true that such grotesque imageries, conjured by the ill-informed, usually reaches people faster and goes deeper into unsuspecting believers — whether in the past or at present — and they continue to stoke the desired repulsion and dread.

Let us, therefore, travel together through the mythology of Jagannath, to try to grasp what exactly constitutes Hinduism, by examining how Jagannath unified the lowest and the highest strata in medieval Odisha. We can surely trace the core of this cult and the deity to the Savara or Saura tribes of Odisha that worshiped wooden stumps with no human features — the *sthambeshwar* or *khambeshwari*. More so, after Heidelberg university’s impartial research led to the same conclusion, though there are some who claim that it were the Khonds, not the Savaras, who were actually the original worshippers. But even today, we come across a special class of non-Brahman priests of Jagannath in Puri, called Daita and Soaro, who claim to be the descendants of the original Savara ritual practitioners who were absorbed into the

expanded version of the ancient cult. The moot point is that by accepting the deified wooden stump of tribal Odisha and elevating it to the regal pantheon of 'high Hinduism', sometime around the 12th century — as Jagannath or the lord of the universe — India's classic tradition of assimilation scored a historic victory over those who sought to confront the 'other' and to crush 'adversaries'. Like other major Hindu rites, festivals and pilgrimages, Puri's Ratha Yatra also reveals both the adroit skills and the subtle mechanics of how divergent demands on the idea of India were harmonised.

Unlike in most other famous religious sites, Puri never claimed that the idols of Jagannath and his two companions are 'ageless antiquities' — because everyone knows that the stumps of neem trees are changed every 10 to 20 years. There is a rather ornate ritual called *Nabakalebara* ritual, which literally means leaving the old body and consecration of new one. It begins with an elaborate search for the 'holy tree' that is conducted by a large team consisting of different types of priests. In olden days, it was led by two inspectors and some 30 police officers and even now, police and other government officials consider it an honour to be of some service to Jagannath. Once the right tree is located and a *yagna* is performed, the tree is felled and carted to the temple. Traditional hereditary sculptors work in secret for 21 days and nights and the old idols are buried in secret again. Hindus deities come in both human form and in non-human representations like the Shiva-linga. Jagannath stands somewhere half-way between this anthropomorphic and an-iconic forms. Though tribal worshipers did not insist on it, later Hindu traditions carved two outstretched arms so as to lend some human touch. The huge eyes that stand out in the three divinities are, of course, painted on the logs.

One of the reasons for the immense popularity of the cult is its democratic nature and the historic practice of taking the deities out of their sanctum sanctorum — directly among the masses. Puri temple is one of rarest among the major Hindu temples that takes the original deities out of the sanctum-sanctorum, as other temples usually bring out in public processions only iconic representations of their deities called *Utsava-murtis*. As is well known, the three idols are mounted on extravagantly decorated chariots and taken out in the bright fortnight of Ashadh. They travel some two kilometres away to the Gundicha temple, stopping on the way at their 'aunt' for Jagannath's favourite *Poda Pithaa*. It is interesting to note how religious rituals like these re-enact historic agreements between different socio-economic groups and these halts and the return journey a week later appear fascinating to researchers. Jagannath's open public procession strengthens mass participation, irrespective of caste and class, and this is right from the medieval period — marking it rather unusual in a hierarchical religion like Hinduism. Incidentally, the three *rathas* are constructed afresh every year from the wood of some special trees that are brought all the way from Dasapalla, a former kingdom. The heavy logs were then set afloat on the Mahanadi river and collected at Puri — to be crafted by hereditary carpenters. Every part of the exercise is planned and executed in such an elaborate manner that it defies the normal ad hoc nature of Indians. It is clear that the apportionment of rights,

duties and privileges in such religious festivals represent critical aspects of the great and complex treaty among so many sets of people and profession — a social treaty called Hinduism

Incidentally, though numerous tribal worships were absorbed all over India throughout history, we hardly ever come across any direct record — as Brahmanism obliterates the trail of evidence and is careful enough not to be caught with the ‘smoking gun’. In Jagannath, however, we have a rare but irrefutable record or proof of what Anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose had described as ‘the Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption’. This is how ethnic and linguistic groups actually rose above their own inherited beliefs, deities and worships and ‘accommodated’ the other, by accepting what they treasured the most, namely, their gods. After all, without these ‘local treaties’ and ‘acceptances’, divergent groups could hardly share the common water and till the same earth — or live in harmony under the same sky. This inexorable process of getting together oceans of humanity was basically the task of a religion that was stamped as Hinduism — much, much later. The crux is that this religion essentially offered a common platform to different and often conflicting sets of values and beliefs. There is no doubt that the cult of Jagannath combined practices, beliefs and contributions from Buddhism, Jainism, tribal religion, Tantric worship, residues from Saiva and Sakthi cults — within the paramountcy of Vaishnavism.

The tale of Jagannath has always attracted a lot of attention — as his metamorphosis and his gradual assimilation of several religious traditions has been far better documented than other major cults and pilgrimages. Amorphous myth and hard history do meet at frequent intervals as inscriptions and recorded narratives substantiate quite a lot of the claimed timeline — which accords considerable comfort to the scientific researcher, who is otherwise so ill at ease in other worships. Several fascinating origin tales abound — like the Skanda Purana that mentions about one King Indrayumna of Avanti who dreamt of the great deity called Nila Madhava or the blue Krishna who was worshipped at the Nilachal or blue mountain. Many of us who are distressed with the dominant trend of obliterating borders between fact and fiction in India can surely do more than just bemoan the unscientific temper and tone down our acquired abhorrence for messing around with nebulous religious subjects — because after all, it is we who left the domain wide open to fanciful speculators like PN Oak and to those who made a fantastic living from selling untruths. We need to take a relook at the unofficial academic taboo observed mainly by anthropologists and historians against delving seriously into those subjects that matter the most to Indians — epics, *puranas*, myths, gods, heroes, heroines and other characters. Too long have disciplines like philosophy, literature and ‘oriental studies’ dealt with them and too long have they we heard the raptures of those who are more religiously-inclined as they discover and re-discover gems from their ‘real’ or ‘hidden’ meanings — as they reinforce the unreal with so much passion. We need value-free researchers to connect the many hazy dots that lie all over the landscape — to link and refute or accept the assertions of myths with their plausible historical interpretations — as we do in the case of Puri.

We can surely now transcend the western view that Hindu festivals like Puri's Ratha Yatra were too heathen to be considered — for these are positions that are used by the present Hindu Right to inflame passions. We may recall, for instance, that William Bruton, the first Englishman to visit Puri in 1633 declared it as “the mirror of wickedness and idolatry”. Thus began the European tirade against the deity and even in 1900, we come across W.J. Wilkins condemning Ratha Yatra as a “disgusting and demoralising exhibition”. At the same time, we must commend the serious studies scientific made by Heidelberg University's Sud Asian Institut in the 1970s and 1980s under its ‘Orissa Research Project’. It involved field studies conducted by several German scholars that examined the cult — quite scientifically but with empathy — that came up with very interesting evidence and interpretation of this syncretic tradition. The point is that these historical and anthropological models of research could very well be done by Indians — or else we would be forever captive to ‘pride and prejudice’.

An enlightened chief minister like Harekrishna Mahtab did open a debate by declaring in 1948 that the Jagannath cult had really originated from Buddhism. There was a hue and cry but light followed heat. Historian and Odisha specialist, Rajendralal Mitra, had said the same thing much earlier as did British scholars and historians like WW Hunter, Alexander Cunningham and Monier Monier-Williams. Faxien, the Chinese pilgrim, had mentioned in the early 5th century that Odisha and the Puri region were strong bastions of Buddhism and that there was a famous festival in Dantapur where a relic — a tooth of Lord Buddha — was carried in a great public procession every year. There are not only strong Buddhist links but Jain influences as well and historian Kedar Nath Mahapatra declared that the Jaina Tri-Ratna tradition had influenced the worship of three deities in Puri — Jagannath, Balabhadrananda or Balram and Subhadra. But there were historians on the other side who had equally powerful arguments against giving too much credit to Buddhism and Jainism. The issue was finally settled, stating that the cult was not fully Buddhist in its origins, but that it was surely subjected to profound Buddhist influence. The three deities, they claimed, actually embodied the Triguna of the Gita — *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

Puri features as one of the four legendary *Dhams* or Centres of Hinduism that are believed to have been set up by Adi Sankaracharya. It also has an iconic *Mutt* or monastery constructed in the 12th century by the Vaishnavite saint, Acharya Ramanuja. The temple chronicles of Puri, the *Madala-panji*, say that Raja Ananga Bhima of the Eastern Gangas constructed the existing temple in the first half of the 13th century. But the Dasgopas inscription mentions that it was Choda-ganga who set it up two centuries before. The German scholars, on the other hand, mention that Yayati the First started building the temple a hundred years before this. The early inscriptions refer to the deity as Purushottam and he must have taken at least a couple of centuries to get fully absorbed into Hinduism and bring his two companions into the temple. The *Purushotham-Kshetra Mahatmya* has interesting stories of Vidyapati

meeting the chief of the Savaras for a glimpse of the original deity, Neelamadhava. Though we are not sure about the exact historical dates, there is no doubt that the Jagannath cult was responsible in uniting the Odiya people of all classes and castes under one common worship, at least from the 13th century. This hardly happened anywhere else in India, as caste and class still dominate and it explains why Odisha offered united resistance to successive invasions by the Turks and Pathans, for almost four hundred years after the 12th century. Neighbouring Bengal has a different history altogether — as the 12th century Sena dynasty of Kannada Brahmins suddenly tried to turn a rather flexible society towards orthodox casteism and other forms of religious rigidity. This was resented and two thirds of the Bengali speaking people who reside currently in West Bengal, Bangladesh, Tripura and Assam. Their forefathers forsook this closed, hierarchical version of Hinduism — for a more accommodative Sufi-led Islam.

In the 16th century, we see how Sri Chaitanya left Bengal for good and moved to Puri as he believed that Jagannath was the real fountain of all inspiration. Not too many modern Indians remember that for several centuries, priests and propagators from Puri visited homes all over India to sing praises of Jagannath and to exhort people to make a pilgrimage to Puri. Ratha Yatras were copied in many states, and in south Bengal, the one at Mahesh is said to be six centuries old. Local variations abound — and the ratha of Mahisadal in West Bengal is welcomed with gunshots. But behind religion stands economics — it is essential in all religions everywhere. Ratha Yatras usually come with colourful fairs — the Ratha Melas — where piety and commerce combine with a lot of fun, frolic and food.

At the end, we must remember that it is neither wood nor stone that determine the phenomenal popularity of any worship, but it is its universal appeal and exceptional traits that really stand the test of several millennia and thrive. It is accommodation that characterises Hinduism and we need to remind this repeatedly to fanatics who are trying to hold it captive and are exhorting Hindus to be intolerant. Authentic Hinduism can, after all, never seek to bludgeon others into submission — to some imagined ‘Indian culture’ — nor does it legitimise xenophobia. Puri’s Jagannath proves, for instance, that Hinduism excels in the wondrous management of contradictions and is a vibrant example of how the religion reaffirms through ritual the essential plurality and accommodative character of Hinduism.