

RATH YATRA: JAGANNATH ON THE MOVE

Jawhar Sircar

Ananda Bazar Patrika, 26th July 2015
(English Version)

There was a hue and cry in 1948 when Harekrishna Mahtab declared that the Jagannath cult originated from Buddhism. Rajendralal Mitra had said so earlier and British scholars and historians like Hunter, Cunningham, Monier-Williams had also advocated this theory. But historians on the other side had equally strong arguments and issue was finally settled, stating that the “cult did not originate from Buddhism but was subjected to profound Buddhist influence later”. Historian Kedar Nath Mahapatra added that the Jaina Tri Ratna had influenced the three gods in Puri, while the Triguna chapter of the Gita is said to be personified through Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra.

This is not the first time that Jagannath had excited speculation. In 1633, Willion Bruton, the first Englishman to visit Puri, declared that it was “the mirror of wickedness and idolatry”, thus beginning the European tirade against the deity. Even in 1900, W.J. Wilkins condemned Ratha Yatra as a “disgusting and demoralizing exhibition” and in English, the word ‘juggernaut’ means merciless, unstoppable, destructive force. Some foolish Europeans mistook the scramble of huge crowds to touch the chariot’s holy rope to be “mass-scale suicide” under the wheels. In the 1970s and 1980s, Heidelberg University dedicated several German scholars to study the cult and published interesting works on this tradition, which explains it better.

This worship attracts extreme attention because it is one of the most vibrant ones in India, with countless passionate followers. It represents a rare instance of a tribal deity being directly and consciously elevated to the highest echelons of the

Hindu pantheon, rather than enter it through the usual long stage-by-stage absorption. It is generally accepted that this cult arose from the Savara or Saura tribes who worshiped wooden stumps with no human features (manab-akriti), though some say the Konds are actually the original worshippers. Even today, one comes across special non-Brahman priests of Jagannath called Daita and Soaro, who claim to be the descendants of the Savaras. Several fascinating origin tales speak of Raja Indradyumna, the blue mountains Nilakandar and Lord Nilamadhaba.

The idols do not pretend to be ‘ageless antiquities’ like many others do, because everyone knows that the neem stumps are changed every 10 to 20 years, through the ornate Nabakalebara ritual. It literally means leaving the old body and consecration of new one and this is a special year of the ‘double Ashadh months’ for Nabakalebara to be celebrated. The elaborate ritual of searching for the ‘holy tree’ started quite early and was conducted by a large team consisting of different types of priests and 30 police officers led by 2 inspectors. The tree was located and a yagna performed, after which it was 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 worship gods in both human form and through non-human representations like the Shiva-linga, but Jagannath stands somewhere half way. Though tribal worshipers did not insist on it, later Hindu traditions carved two outstretched arms so as to lend some human touch and the huge eyes, are of course, painted on the logs.

One of the reasons for the immense popularity of the cult is its democratic nature as it is a rare exception, as temples do not permit the original deities to be taken out of the sanctum-sanctorum (garbha-griha). Most temples therefore carry only iconic representations called the utsavamurti in public processions. The idols

of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are, however, mounted on extravagantly decorated chariots and taken out on the second day in the bright fortnight of Ashadh. They go some two kilometres away to the Gundicha temple, stopping on the way at their 'aunt' for Jagannath's favourite Poda Pithaa. Most religious acts and rituals re-enact historic agreements between different socio-economic groups and these halts and the return journey a week later appear very interesting to researchers. Jagannath's open procession strengthens mass participation, irrespective of caste and class right from the medieval period, making it rather unusual for inegalitarian Hinduism. The three Rathas are constructed afresh every year from the wood of special trees brought all the way from Dasapalla, a former kingdom, where the logs set afloat on the Mahanadi 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 believed that Adi Sankaracharya set up the four centres or Dhams of Hinduism, among which one was in Puri, while the Vaishnavite saint Acharya Ramanuja set up a Matha there in the 12th century. 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 state that Yayati I started the temple even one century before this, which heightens the mystery. 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. The exact dates in history notwithstanding, there is no doubt that the Jagannath cult was responsible in uniting the Odiya people of all classes to one common worship, right from the 13th century. This hardly happened anywhere else in India, as caste and class still dominate and it explains why Odisha could offer united resistance to successive invasions by Turkis and Pathans for almost four centuries after Bengal's Sen rulers had collapsed.

In Bengal there were many like Sri Chaitanya who looked up to Jagannath as a fountain of inspiration. Priests from Puri visited several homes here for centuries singing praises of Puri Dham and successive generations of Bengalis made this pilgrimage a must. Ratha Yatras were copied in south Bengal and the one at Mahesh is said to be six centuries old, while those at Guptipara and Jangipara are really crowded and colourful. The ratha at Mahisadal is welcomed with gunshots and innumerable places in this state have their own Ratha-talas, where towering wooden platforms are parked throughout the year. Ratha Yatras and colourful Ratha Melas go together, as piety and commerce combine with a lot of fun and oily papads and piyajees to lift the spirits, even as heavens pour on us.

At the end, we must remember that it is neither wood nor stone that determines 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.