

The Cult of Lord Jagannatha: An Arena of Conflict

Anandita Biswas*

Submitted: 19.02.2022.

Revised: 23.03.2022.

Accepted: 01.04.2022.

Abstract: Religion undoubtedly is associated with the spiritual upliftment of human kind yet it has always been utilized for attaining 'this- worldly' interest in the form of power, privilege, authority, influence, social status and domination. Temples are systematically built up as an institution, an innovative focus for all human activities- social, economic and cultural and as a symbol of power by the ruling authority. The place where the deity is enshrined becomes a major concern for all aspirants to power. Temple is a platform where intense power- play is carried out under the garb of divine spiritualism. Shri Jagannath Temple is a domain of complex ritualistic observations and manipulations. The recognition and significance of Lord Jagannath as the supreme ruler or the "Lord" of the Universe rested on the inextricable link between religion and politics, ritual and power, domination and consent. Jagannatha figures are the typical outcome of a process of humanization and Hinduization where uniconical symbols of aboriginal religion as posts and stones are combined in their iconography. Some problems relating to the interplay of power politics has been discussed in the present article. This refers to how political life in Orissa has been indomitably influenced by the Jagannatha cult. Establishing monopoly over the Jagannatha cult became the main motive of different power groups, be it the numerous religious sect, royal power, priestly class, the Afghans, Mughals, Marathas, the British government and even the aboriginals. It was around this cult that the whole gamut of power and authority revolved.

Keywords: Religion, Ritual, Power, Domination, Authority.

*Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Diamond Harbour Women's University.
e-mail: ananditabiswas.polsc@gmail.com

Introduction

Religion is an almost universal and pervasive institution in human society. It is a set of beliefs, symbols and practices which is based on the idea of the sacred and unites the believers into a socio- religious community. Belief systems gain momentum (and hence power) as more people come to accept the particular views associated with that belief system as *common knowledge* (hegemony). Such belief systems define their figures of authority, such as priests in a religious organization. Within such a belief system—or discourse—ideas crystallize as to what is *right* and what is *wrong*, what is *normal* and what is *deviant*. Within a particular belief system certain views, thoughts or actions become unthinkable. These ideas, being considered undeniable ‘truths’, come to define a particular way of seeing the world, and the particular way of life associated with such ‘truths’ becomes normalized. Here, the form of power is subtle. Antonio Gramsci, for instance, looked at the Roman Catholic Church as a powerful force in Italian society and was amazed by its ability to influence the hearts and minds of men. By its very nature, people are willing to believe what comes from the pulpit, as being objectively good.

The uncouth yet the majestic and enigmatic idols have mesmerized the scholarly world, have attracted devotees and aroused curiosity even among the iconoclasts. The temple which I want to study is the famous Jagannatha Temple at Puri in Orissa.

Religion may be tied to mundane ends- success, health, security. These are “existential issues”, but they are formulated at the level of practical actions. Religion was a creation of human being. God did not create humans rather humans created their Gods for serving their own interests. The origin and the cult of the mysterious deities of Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra have engaged the minds of scholars for centuries. Religion in its essence is limitless and open; it is like an open sky. But when it assumes the form of an institution it gets transformed into a dogmatic, sectarian and archaic belief- system. Sectarian religion implies a closed society. Instead of being beneficial it does more harm to humanity. Religion gradually turns into an institutionalized set of beliefs. Beliefs are formalized and regularized. Appropriate rituals get established and special leaders/ priests are trained. In this way, the religious complex develops and affects financial, educational and political activity.

Power exercised by religious institution is immense and subtle. It is able to put an indelible imprint on the minds of people without any direct or overt manifestation. The key issues discussed in this article are as follows:

How power is being played subtly in and around the cult of Jagannatha?

Who are the major contenders in claiming monopolization over the cult?

Why a section of tribal savaras have been given authority to serve the Lord along with the Brahmin priests? Does it reflect a balance of power?

How the nabakalebara (Consecration) ceremony does clearly highlights the social stratification in a ritual hierarchy?

Why a deity of tribal origin was transformed into the most important Hindu deity in

Eastern India through a process of Brahmanization?

Power is a basic element in all social relations that takes on a plurality of forms. It is not just state centered. Power has no specific locus, holder, class or groups. It is all pervasive. Everyone has power in himself and everyone possesses the capacity to do or affect something¹. With this conception of power in mind, this article delves into the problem of power play by different groups revolving around the cult of Jagannatha. In Orissa, there was never just one political center but numerous centers which formed a network with the changing structure of dominance.

Contestation

Major contestation of dominance has been going on among different religious sects for appropriating Lord Jagannatha as their deity, through manufacturing different myths, legends and stories. However, among the various religious groups, the Vaisnavites became successful to a large extent in monopolizing Jagannatha cult mainly through massive propaganda and manipulating history and establishing legends- the most important and popular being the 'Indrayumna legend'. Another arena of conflict was between the Brahmins and the aboriginal savaras and an attempt by the former to Brahmanize the entire Jagannatha Cult. There had also been a contest for supremacy between the royal power on the one hand and the priestly power on the other.

The temple of Lord Jagannatha and the essence of Jagannatha culture are absolutely different. The temple, besides serving as center of worship has become the symbol of authority, status, political power and social influence. Jagannatha culture represents a cosmopolitan and eclectic philosophy which has assimilated in its fold, the influences of many religious creed and sect and does not stand for any kind of sectarianism. The ironical part in the study of the Jagannatha cult is that the Jagannatha temple and the Jagannatha culture represent two contradictory themes. In fact, the basic idea of Jagannatha culture is being challenged by its own institution represented by the temple.

In order to understand the Jagannatha cult, its social and cultural roots are to be critically examined without being guided by the dominant Brahminical or textual model. The Jagannatha culture has a much more fascinating, flexible, varying, diverse yet all-embracing character. But in most of the literary documents, the character of Lord Jagannatha is just a mirror reflection of what dominant groups of adherents, namely the Puri priests and the Gajapatis have transmitted throughout centuries. Most writings on Lord Jagannatha are guided by the *metamorphic dominant view* hardly uncovering the facts lying at the bottom level, or reaching the root. Most of them irrespective of their scholarly orientation cannot deny the tribal origin of the cult of Jagannatha yet recognizing that fact has been a difficult task for the dominant view holders. This is very hard to entertain in their mind, because they cannot imagine such a seemingly 'low' origin of the God (the tribal are considered low in brahminical Hindu culture).

The Jagannatha iconography represents a high level of flexibility with an all- inclusive

phenomenon. Though the Vaisnavite interpretation of Lord Jagannatha being the manifestation of Krishna has been widely publicized nevertheless other religious sects too identify Him to be their deity.

The Jaina and Buddhist Claims

Late Nilakantha Das is the chief exponent of the Jaina origin of Jagannatha. According to him, Jagannatha is primarily a Jaina institution². He identified the famous Kalinga Jeena image of the Jainas with Lord Jagannath. The Buddhist also did not lag behind. The advocates of the Buddhist origin of Jagannatha believe that Puri was an ancient seat of Buddhism and the holy substance of (Brahmapadartha) inside Lord Jagannath is nothing but a tooth relic of Buddha.

Sakta and Saiva Claims

Till date, the female deity Subhadra, holds the central position in the Jagannatha triad. Subhadra like Bimala (a tantric goddess) is a form of Katyayani Durga and she is worshipped with Bhuvanewari mantra. It is Bimala who is called pitheswari till date. She is the first who is offered the prasada consecrated by Jagannatha. Only then it turns into Mahaprasada and distributed to the devotees. On some occasions even animals were sacrificed inside the temple precinct. Many authors have expressed their doubt that how animal sacrifice is held inside a Vaisnavite temple when the presiding deity Himself is vegetarian! In reality, by way of allowing certain concession, the tantric faction is being pacified. In tantric literature, Bimala is considered to be the Sakti of Puri and Jagannatha is her Bhairava. Adapting herself to the changing conditions, the female deity retained her central position and maintained her supremacy in the whole area. Her original partner was Shiva (Bhairava). In order to adjust to the intruding God Visnu, she later had to assume the name of Subhadra and had to become the sister of Vasudeva- Krishna. But a separate shrine for her original aspect as Bimala was raised within the temple precincts.

According to many scholars, the icon of Lord Balabhadra was a later addition. The Ratnasimhasana became a reconciliatory platform pacifying three dominant ideologies- Sri Balabhadra as Siva; Sri Subhadra as Sakti and Sri Jagannatha as Visnu.

Vaisnavite Claims

According to legendary sources, Lord Jagannatha was originally worshipped in the form of "Neelmadhav" by a tribal (Sabara) known as Biswabasu. This sabara tradition in the culture of Lord Jagannath has its connection with the legend of Raja Indradyumna. This legend was the handiwork of the Vaisnavites. They felt the necessity to explain to themselves and to others the strange form and wooden character of their deity, they naturally thought first of Neelmadhava which was the most common form of Visnu in those days. Neelmadhava was worshipped by the chief of the Sabara race. But when a Brahmin emissary of the King Indradyumna, wanted to have a darsana of the Lord, he discovered Him. He vanished and a celestial voice instructed the King to understand that

He would no more be visible to the people in his Neelmadhav form but would instead assume a new shape to be worshipped as a deity made of wood.

The Vaisnavite interpretation had attained so much success that even now it is their version of the story that prevails. This version is so firmly rooted in the minds of the people that they are not ready to accept any other interpretation. Hindus consider the Indradyumna story as fact and divine. The story centers round a king of Malava. But no trace of such a king named 'Indradyumna' is available in history. Indradyumna was an imagined name and a mythical king. However, historians have recognized 'Yayati Kesari' as Indradyumna. Yayati Kesari has been given a place in the temple chronicle *Madala Panji* only because he was able to build up the foundation of Hinduism on a solid basis in Orissa, after halting the forward movement of Jainism and Buddhism. By accepting the aboriginal deity as his God, Yayati Kesari could also bring in the Sabaras into the Hindu fold. From all accounts and legends it is surmised that Yayati Kesari was the King who was termed as Indradyumna mainly because Yayati Kesari was a devout Shaivite and the popular legends were written by Vaisnavite and during that time Vaisnavism was not prevalent in Central Orissa³.

Even after the total integration of the Jagannatha figures into Hinduism their iconography persistently reminded the people of their origin. In fact, the tribal origin of the deities could not be suppressed or overlooked, because of its being too obvious and prominent.

Nabakalebara

It is a ceremony of the renewal of the wooden images of Balabhadra, Subhadra, Jagannatha and Sudarshana, generally after every nineteen years. The last *Nabakalebara* was celebrated in the year 2015. This ceremony is unique in its manifold aspect. My intention here is however, to concentrate only into that area where subtle manipulation of dominance and authority by two actors- the Brahmins and the aboriginal sabara is carried out.

The first part begins when a group of priest and temple servants leave Puri to search for neem trees. The second part of the festival takes place at two different loci- 1) a garden where a group of carpenters build the basic wooden structures of the idols and a place where Brahmins perform an elaborate higher sacrifice. 2) The inside chamber of the main shrine where a certain group of specialists enter to transfer the secret substance from the old idols to the new one⁴.

The king divest the responsibility for successfully holding the *nabakalebara* festival on two ritual expert-

- One of them belong to the lineage of vedic Brahmins. Vedic Brahmins of different lineages live on tax- free land granted to them by former kings of Orissa. They played an important role in the continuous process of indoctrination and partially integrating the tribals. They defined and codified the duties of the tribes. The vedic

Brahmins emerged as the elite group of the administrative and ritual functionaries. It was solely due to their effort that local areas gradually merged into the all- Indian sphere of Sanskrit learning. They were traditionally involved in state affairs, like revenue, religious law, temple administration, rituals of consecration. Till today, they are the constituent part of the 'muktimandapa' the socio- juridical platform of the temple. Sixteen representatives from their villages assemble on an open platform inside the Jagannatha temple and administer justice in religious affairs. In the nabakalebara festival, the vedic Brahmin are required to be proficient in scriptural knowledge particularly with regard to the worship of Lion God- Narasimha. The head of this group is known as Achariya. In 1996, six vedic Brahmins accompanied the achariyas. During the great sacrifice at the end of the nabakalebara an auspicious number of one hundred and eight vedic Brahmin were invited to perform different services. This practice clearly reveals the process of *brahmanisation of the Jagannatha cult*.

- The second ritual expert, who is invited by the king to move into the forest, is called Biswabasu- who according to legend was the original worshipper of Neelmadhava i.e Jagannatha. He represents the group of temple servants called the daita, the descendent of the tribals.

On the day of Nabakalebara, another hierarchical relationship is being created through gifts of flowers garlands and turbans.

- A Brahmin temple servant hands over the 'garlands of order' of Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra to three ritual chiefs of the Daita group.
- The Brahmin himself takes the flower garland of Visnu's weapon Sudarana. On the Ratnasimhasana, the Sudarsana is a 'pole' bearing the identity of its tribal origin.
- The Brahmin and other daitas then go to outer sanctum, where the other Daita and Pati. (Pati are Brahmin temple servants. They are responsible for many auspicious rituals and festivals inside the Jagannatha temple. Their title, Patis probably derived from the name of a legendary priest called Bidyapati. Daita and Pati do not have marriage relations, but on the occasion of Nabakalebara, they join into one group called Daitapati.)

The Daita and Pati wait to receive pieces of cloth (sadhi) that formerly covered the bodies of the idols. The red pieces of cloth are tied by a Brahmin around their heads like a turban.

- The Chiefs receive a long turban
- Other servants receive a smaller one
- The temple scribe then authorizes the carpenters and one 'low' status temple servant Lenka to carry Visnu's discus by tying turban of 'lower' values.

The length of the turban indicates the position of the functionaries in the ritual hierarchy. It also shows the interdependence of Brahmins and the tribal descendants.

In the palace, the king orders his spiritual preceptors or Rajguru to hand over the responsibility to a Brahmin, who supervises the religious order of the Hindu kingdom and the tribal chief Biswabasu who is the master of the forces of wilderness.

The *Nabakalebara* ceremony requires the search for trees in the wilderness and then they are incorporated into Hindu ritualistic system. The workers who carry on these acts must belong to the 'bana' as well as 'kshetra'. *Nabakalebara* ceremony thus assigns the highest ritual authority to the association of daitapati. It becomes the reconciliatory platform that amalgamates the 'pure' and 'auspicious' temple Brahmins called the 'Pati' with the 'impure' and 'inauspicious' tribal descendents called the Daita. Thus, the services of Daitas are required only on those occasions which according to vedic rules are considered to be 'impure'. During the annual Car Festival, when the gods are 'sick' or during Nabakalebara when the gods 'die' the daitas are called for performing the purificatory function.

Nabakalebara stress the hierarchical encompassment between the order of the 'civilized' realm represented by vedic Brahmin and the order of the wilderness, associated with tribal king. The integration of the tribal population into the religious and political order is exemplified through the incorporation of an object of wilderness, the tree, into an image of the Hindu cosmos- the temple.

The Achariya and the Pati Mahapatra are of the same category in relation to other participants but they are divided among themselves. The vedic Brahmins have a higher social status from the Pati who belong to the lower sub caste of temple Brahmins. In the same way, the Biswabasu and the Daita, who receive the 'garland of order', belong to the same category, but the former stands in relation to the latter like the head of a clan to the eldest of a lineage. The Biswabasu transcends all divisions, while the three other chiefs of the daita are divided according to the gods, whose garlands they receive.

In 1996, the procession of priest consisted of seven vedic Brahmins, three Pati, approximately fifty daita, four carpenters, one discus bearer and one temple scribe. This list reflects the basic division of the temple society. The most important distinction is the one between the Brahmins and the non Brahmins. Amongst the former we find a further division between the vedic and the temple Brahmins. The vedic Brahmins traditionally live and marry outside Puri, own tax- free and, perform vedic sacrifices (Yajna), manage temple and state affairs as judges and ministers and act as spiritual advisors for the royal family, while the temple Brahmins live and marry inside Puri, receive a fixed share of the holy temple food, worship Gods (puja and performs specialized hereditary services inside the temple.)

Hinduization of Tribal Deity

In the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses peculiar characteristics are found in the imagery of Jagannatha. The best way to make such an unnatural image acceptable in society was through extensive propaganda. As the idol of Jagannatha was not originally a Hindu conception, the Hindu rulers and the priestly class, for maintaining their vested

interest felt the necessity of sanctifying it by fabricating and propagating extensive myths and legendary stories about it. The Hindu of the upper class who had now taken to worship of these deities, never felt quite comfortable about admitting the fact that they just took them over from the aboriginals and transformed the whole into the worship of Visnu in His aspect of Jagannatha. A necessity was felt to justify the adoption of these tribal figures into the greater Hinduistic tradition. Suddenly an effort by many authors was made to prove the identity of the wooden God with the Hindu god Krishna. They refer to the shape of the God as actually seen by the pilgrim and trace its origin either to an earlier stone image which has disappeared and on top of which the divine tree has grown or, by recognizing in the wooden log the body of Krishna who was killed by Jara (a sabara- the hunter) and thrown into the sea. The main motivation behind manufacturing such stories was to bridge the gap between the expectation of Hindu pilgrims and the reality of the crude image of Lord Jagannatha. Moreover, most of the literary descriptions are based entirely on the creative freedom of poets whose imaginative power transformed the rough wooden post enshrined in the temple into a brahmanic idol of ideal shape.

Major attempts have been made not only to Hinduise but also to 'Brahmanise' the whole Jagannatha tradition. It was Ramanuja, the celebrated South Indian Vaisnava saint who attempted to reform both the mode of worship and the lives of the priests. Ramanuja with the support of the then ruling monarch tried to introduce Brahmanic mode of worship at the shrine of Lord Jagannath in Puri. but the priests who were not adept at Brahmanic rights- mainly because they themselves were to a larger part were non- Brahmins and therefore were unable to adapt it.

However, royal patronage enhanced the popularity and influence of the Jagannatha cult rapidly. With it, the prestige, position and power of the priest of Lord Jagannatha- who were originally non- Brahmins grew. At the same time, the growing popularity and influence of the Jagannatha cult ironically enough threatened to undermine the position of these priests. As the name and fame of Lord Jagannatha spread beyond the border of the Ganga empire, pilgrims from all over India started visiting Puri and they expected a Brahmanical shrine, i.e a Brahmanic deity worshipped by the Brahmin priests in accordance with the Brahmanical mode of worship.

To satisfy the feelings of these pilgrims it became imperative to strengthen the Brahmanical elements in the cult. It may be mentioned here that a group of scholars led by Sayanchariya while commenting on Rg Veda (Circa 1370 AD) made a reference to Purusottam Jagannatha of Puri who is quite significant, because it suggested all India Brahmanic recognition of Lord Jagannatha. The Brahmanic version of the Indradyumna legend as found in the different Sanskrit Puranas written between 1312- 1370 AD suggests the process of Brahmanisation; with its corollary appointment of new Brahmin priests.

The appointment of new Brahmin priests gradually threatened to undermine the position of the non- Brahmin priests and they were in affix. Neither they could resist the appointment of the Brahmin priests (for the fear of losing all- India Brahmanical acceptance of their cult and consequently their position and power) nor could they welcome the

Brahmin priests in the affairs of the cult. Therefore, they unwillingly recognized the priestly status of the Brahmin priests in the cult of Jagannatha.

The earliest vedic Brahmin wave of immigration occurred under the legendary king 'Yayati Kesari'. It is said that Yayati, the first performed more than one Aswamedha Yajna (horse- sacrifice rite) at Jajpur and on these occasions he invited ten thousand Brahmins to Kalinga from Kanauj. In fact, it was Yayati I who was real initiator of Brahmanism in Orissa. In Orissa, the rajas organized their sub- regional power according to the Hindu raja and his court. This centre of the nuclear area was encircled by a number of tax- free 'Sasana' villages which had been donated by the rajas to Brahmins who formed the elite of the administrative and ritual functionaries.

Although the relationship between the Hindu society and the tribal was never without tension, its generally peaceful character was certainly one of the greatest achievements of Indian history. In Orissa, it was more a continuous process of indoctrination and partial integration than a process of sustained displacement. During this gradual development the Brahmins played an eminent role. They defined and codified the duties of the tribes. The inclusion of tribal groups into the Hindu caste system initiated a process of Hinduisation of their deities.

The power, prestige and influence of the priests of Lord Jagannatha got ample opportunities to increase considerably during the reign of Kapilendra and reached the culmination during the reign of Purusottama. This was because both of them were not rightful heirs to the throne and so some extent depended on the priests for their legitimization. The practice of "*Cherapahamra*" (ceremonial sweeping of the cars) and the "Kanchi- Kaveri" tradition amply prove the rising dominance of the priestly power. But with the accession of Prataprudra, the priests though under increasing stress and strain, put on a bold front and were successful for the time being. But with the advent of Sri Gauranga Mahaprabhu, and the increasing popularity of the Chaitanya cult, the outcome was decided, if not in favour of the kings certainly against the priests. This internal dissension seems to have contributed to some extent to Prataprudra's defeat and the subsequent political decline of Orissa⁵.

It was around the cult of Jagannatha that the whole gamut of power and authority revolved. Jagannatha admits all explanations advocated by different power groups be it Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Vaisnavism, Saktism or the claims made by the aboriginals, the royal and the priestly power. The recognition of Lord Jagannatha as the 'Lord of the Universe' rested on the inextricable links between religion and politics, ritual and power, domination and consent⁶.

The Marginalized Voice

The last protest against the hierarchical structure of Sri Jagannatha Temple was made by Mahima Dharmis on 1st March 1881 when a handful of this sect desecrated the sanctity and sought to destroy Lord Jagannath's idol. The Mahima Dharma was formed by a sanyasi who lived on the Kapilas hill in Dhenkanal. He openly challenged the patterns of hierarchy

and authority embedded in the structure of dominant Hinduism. He questioned the close connection between the divine, ritual and social hierarchies. He openly challenged the norms of caste and rituals of commensality governed by purity and pollution. The Svami had given precedence to the 'vana' (wilderness) over the Ksetra (palace) by selecting remote corners of the Garhjats inhabited by tribal and low caste as his main arena of activity

As a reconciliatory and pacifying process, the concept of 'Patitapabana' was introduced into the cult of Jagannath. Patitapabana literally means (one who rescues the neglected and down-trodden). Dr. Kailash Chandra Das has cited in his paper titled Patitapabana-Jagannatha in Phalguni that the Brahmins did not support the fact of considering Jagannatha as Patitabana which refers to a low-order designation. At the time of inception, the Jagannatha cult reflected an inclusive, all-embracing universal character. But gradually, with the process of institutionalization, it got confounded by archaic, orthodox and superstitious beliefs.

The close association of Lord Jagannath with privileged section of the society coupled with the prevalence of caste discrimination has made Him appear as an exclusive and distant Lord- a monopoly of Brahmins and rulers. He is gradually getting identified with those who wield power and authority. The religious space has been appropriated by political power and privilege, domination and subjugation where the marginalized voice has been strangled. When will the gates of the temple be opened to 'all' is a million dollar question! Instead of being a religious institution, Jagannatha Temple has become the repository of sectarianism and dogmatism and a breeding ground for archaic beliefs and thoughts.

References:

1. Das, Dipak Kumar, (2005). 'Power: An Outline of Key Theories' in S. Chakraborty (Ed.). *Sociology*, Macmillan, pp. 65-74.
2. Das, R.K. (1981). *Legends of Jagannath Puri*, Bhadrak, Pragati Udyog, pp. 18-20.
3. Dash, G.N. (1978). 'The Evolution of the Priestly Power: The Gangavamsa Period' in Eschmann, Kulkee and Tripathi (Eds.). *The Cult of Jagannatha and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, Manohar, pp. 157-168.
4. Dasa, Dhruva Maharaja, (2007). *Jaya Jagannatha*, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, pp. 109-147.
5. K.C, Mishra, (1984). *The Cult of Lord Jagannath*, Calcutta, Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd., pp. 120-131.
6. Carlos Gomes da Silva, Jose, (2010). *The Cult of Jagannatha: Myths and Rituals*, Motilal Banarasi Dass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., pp. 49-65.