
Lord Jagannath and Odia Nationalism

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The culture of Lord Jagannath has been inextricably linked with history of Odisha, its people, religion and geography. There has been repeated raids and incursions by outsiders like Afgans, Marathas, Muslims & Britishers but Lord Jagannath & its culture has withstood all inroads & Vicissitudes of history. In other words, the contribution of Jagannath culture in various ways have developed Odia Nationalism which, has withstood the revages of time and integrated the Odisha society into a pluralistic & homogenous body politic.

The concept of Odia nationalism owes its origin to basically two important factors i.e. Odia language's development and Lord Jagannath's supremacy over the King & kingdom of Odisha. Even the language centered nationalism was closely linked with the Jagannath- centered Nationalism.

The factors that hindered the smooth and systematic development of language based nationalism was that some of the monarchs of medieval period were also Telugu Speakers and the higher caste persons like Brahmins who used Sanskrit as their language for which they felt proud of. "Even the caste ridden society did not overwhelmingly appreciate the translation of Bhagabat by Jagannath Das ascribing as Teli-Bhagbat. So also Mahabharat of Sarala Das, Ramayan of Balaram Das & Hari Vamsa by Achutananda Das has not well appreciated by higher caste people. This was another hindrance against language centered nationalism.

In fact the Death of King Mukunda Deb, the advent of Srichaitanya, the recovery of relics of Sri Jagannath and installation of Jagannath at Puri, and taking over administration by Afgans & Moguls later are some of the factors that heralded the formative period of development of Odia nationalism. As per researcher G.N. Das year 1568 heralded the era of such development.

In 1522 A.D the Shah of Golkonda won and acquired the areas between river Krishna & Godavari which were under occupation Utkal. This heralded fall and gradual decline of territory of Utkal. Further Mukund Dev Who adorned the throne of Utkal in 1559, had to face Golkonda Sultan in south and Banga Sultan in North. The treaty of Mukund Dev with Akbar in 1564 could not last beyond 1567-68. Both the Sultans attacked the Utkal Desh. From West & North sides. Unfortunately the Bengal sultan sent another Senapati namely Kalapahad who entered through Mayurbhanj and defeated Mukund Dev's army chief (Senapati). In 1568 after death of Mukund Dev, Odisha's independence was lost forever.

After 1568 there was a lot of instability prevailing in Odisha. The geography of the State changed from time to time. The people of Odia speaking tracts however developed a feeling of unity among themselves not related to administrative or religious sects. Here the episode of attack of Kalapahad instead of demoralising strengthened the unity & aspiration of Odia speaking people. Kalapahad's vandalism in carrying & burning the idol & throwing to Ganges

was watched by the follower Bisar Mohanty who brought the Brahma and kept carefully at Kujang & then the Bhoi King Ramei Routray brought it to Utkal.

In the mean time King Rama Chandra Deb who most probably introduced Madalapanji invariably mentioned 'Anka' in the almanacs provided materials form for glorification of Brahma which is indestructible.

As per the almanacs Lord Jagannath is the 'King' of the Kingdom of Odisha or the Lord of the Kingdom of Odisha. As per Kanchi Kaberi a narrative poem the author Purosottam Das describes Lord as King of Odisha though Odisha is attributed to Odia speaking tracts in and around Odisha with Lord Jagannath as its symbol or pivot. During this period, the Odia speaking tracts were scattered and ruled partly by Mughals, sultan of Golkonda and; Raja of Khurda was not fully sovereign King.

The almanacs used the 'Anka year' of the Kings of Khurda. This Anka was used in the horoscope of newly born child, sanandas and other official works. Even some writers not belonging to geographical unit of the then Odisha mentioned Anka of the kings administration in their books. Of course they belonged to odia speaking tract. For example G.N.Das mentions about book "Dardhyata bhakti Rasambruta" which was complete in 42nd Anka of King Birakeshari Dev. The author of book Rama Dash belongs to Mahuri State. Thus the feeling of Odia nationhood was not confined to the boundary of Odisha State.

To take another example Krishna Chandra Rajendra Dev, the King of Chikiti granted some land to S. Bhattalu in the 55th Anka of Birakeshore Dev as per the charter Chikiti was not inside the territory of Khurda. Despite that the Anka year of Khurda King was accepted in the sananda, which attributes to Jagannath's influence for formation of nationalism. Further, Jagannath Das, a Vaishnab, in his book Jagannath Charitamruta makes an attempt to define Vaishnab sect in terms of language of adherents i.e. Odia's. Odia Vaishnabs believe Jagannath as Avatari whereas Bengali Vaishnab's believe Krishna as Avatari.

Rama Chandra Dev who was converted to Islam was allowed to perform ritual services of the Lord i.e. Gajapati Maharaja Seva as per Madalapanji. He tried to protect Lord falling into the hands of invading Subedar's of Bengal, Bihar & Odisha. This speaks about development of spirit of nationalism.

At that time Mukti Mandap was the head quarters of 16 Brahmin villages which was controlling the social activities concerning the Lord Jagannath. Thus, they stood united under King of Khurda. Besides, the King Mukund Dev during his confinement in 1805 A.D. appealed Jagannath to destroy enemies with sword in his hand. Thus, Odishan empire was a nation with Lord at its apex.

Then the Odisha empire was not a specific territory but can be attributed to different heterogeneous elements of the region who were Oriya speaking. The Oriya nationalism was language centered and Lord Jagannath was the link between the language centered nationalism and the people of the area.

The attack by Afgan General Kalapahad in 1568 and others was very very damaging and demoralizing to Oriya's who had immense love & devotion for Lord Jagannath even more than their love for the State. The attacks by Taqi Khan, Kalyan Malla, Makram Khan Mirza Khurum etc. were factors that caused deep agony among the Oriyas so much so that they spared no attempt to hide the idols of their reversed deity in different places of Odisha & even outside. For example Chikiti which was not within territory of Odisha king provided shelter to the Lord. Fortunately for Oriyas in all their attempts to hide the Lord they were successful. This strengthened their confidence & belief on the occult and imperishable power of the Lord Jagannath. This established close link between Sri Jagannath & repeatedly hurt Odiya's. That also strengthened the Odia nationalism during medieval period.

The most important factor that contributed for development of odia nationalism was development of Literature which glorified the State and unseen power of supreme Lord. Even many literatures were written which described stories where Lord protected the State from foreign powers.

In various Bhajana's, Janan's & narrative poems & drammas the Lord was given the pivotal place. The famous play Kanchi Kaberi was written by Ram Sankar Ray a Lawyer & Asst. Editor of Utkal Deepika during 1880-81. This play assigned a prominent place to Lord Jagannath who championed the cause of nationalism by helping the devotee-King for victory over Kingdom of Kanchi. The story became extremely popular among Oriya's and strengthened the link between Odia nationalism and Lord Jagannath.

Sri Radhanath Ray, another exponent of modern Oriya poetry also glorified the State in his modern poems. But in most of his famous lyrics/Poems he gave a prominent place to Lord Jagannath. In his famous poetry Chandra bhaga written during 1886 Lord Jagannath was described as the presiding deity of Odisha region. The poetry Starts with coronation ceremony of Lord Jagannath to which a number of other deities come & honour Jagannath on the occasion. Even in his epic 'Mahajatra' written during 1892 he describes Puri as holiest of holy places which has been chosen by God for his earthly leela.

There was no dearth of literature glorifying Odia nationalism during 20th century. In the Utkal Sammelan meeting at Cuttack held on 30th Dec, 1903, Madhusudan Das the founder of modern Odisha recited a poem at Town hall. Where he appealed all the odias to chant in unison on and pray Lord Jagannath so that darkness will be removed & the Land will see the path of progress. This conference was powerful body at least for two decades. Volumes of literature were written by founders, of Satyabadi School such as Nilakanth Das, Gopabandhu Das, Godabarish Mishra, Acharya Harihar and krupasindhu Mishra. Gopabandhu das in his Poems –Dharmapada, Bandir, Atma Katha, Kara Kabita & Rail Upare chilika Darsan glorified the State with Lord Jagannath as the sovereign ruler. Nilakantha Das in his Kabya Konark (1919) Godabarish in his anthology of poems like Alekhika, mukund Dev, Purusottam Dev (1991) provided a lot of impetus to odia nationalism. Aswin Kumar Ghose wrote two plays namely Kalapahad (1922) and Gobind Bidyadhar (1921) which are historical facts centering round Lord Jagannath. Late writers like Bhima Bhoi Mayadhar Mansing, Kalicharan Pattanaik and Radhamohan Gadanayak contributed immensely to Jagannath centered Oriya nationalism through lucid but powerful writings.

It is worthwhile to mention here that the odia nationalism was not contradictory to Indian nationalism as evident from the writings of Gopabandhu Das & Radhanath Ray. For an example, Gopabandhu Das in his book 'Bandir Atmakatha' describes Nilachal to be the filament in the Lotus like Odisha in the tank i.e. India. Radhanath in his Kabya Mahayatra describes that God has selected this land as holiest in the world (2nd sarga, mahayatra)

Apart from this the devotional songs by King Rama Chandra Dev who was exiled at Cuttack, the priest cum fighter Chakhi Khuntia established close links between odia nationalism and Lord Jagannath. The poets like Dinakrishna, Upendra Bhanja, Bhim Bhoi, Birakishore Deb, Baladev Rath composed songs of rare quality in Honour of Lord Jagannath that played catalytic role in converging nationalistic forces of Odia speaking people with Lord Jagannath.

According to G.N. Das a renowned research scholar the Oriya nationalism got its memorandum with upsurge of paik rebellion but came to an abrupt collapse with suppression of paik Rebellion during 1817.

In the debris of colonialism, the Oriya nationalism emerged valiantly during Paik Revolution of 1817. Spearheaded by Mukund Dev III & Buxi Jagabandhu. Jayi Rajguru an ardent devotee of Lord Jagannath believed in the transhumanism in Jagannath cult. He did not agree to the proposal of kind of Khurda to surrender. His appeal turned to a mass movement not only in Khurda but also neighboring states. His soldiers fought bravely and finally he surrendered. But his brutal murder binding in two dividing branches of a banyan tree created heroic spirit beyond imagination and he became first martyr of India in 1806 A.D.

Chakhi Khuntia another devotee and Sevayat of Lord Jagannath was a hero of Sepoy mutiny. He composed many devotional songs and took active part in Sepoy mutiny.

Ram Chandra Dev I, The King in a desperate attempt to save Lord Jagannath and his position as king left his religion and got married to Razia. This was not appreciated by his family members and orthodox Hindus. Finally he committed suicide. This was a shocking incident affecting the sentiment of Odias.

During 1866 The Bengal Famine in which almost one third of Odia population died exposed the inefficiency of British administration. That was followed by establishment of Cuttack printing press by Bichitra nanda Das and publication of Utkal dipika from same press by Gourisankar Ray. The Utkal Dipika championed the cause of language based Odia nationalism when there was a claim that oriya is not a separate language.

In 1878 A.D. the reversed King Dibyasing Deb was arrested, tried & sentenced with imprisonment for life on the ground of murdering a sadhu. People of Odisha never believed that he was guilty of the crime. There was immense excitement over the issue. John Beams writes that when the case of King was tried immense excitement was around all over Orissa & crowds assembled in huge numbers round the judge's court. Utkal Dipika supported the king along with other poets. Godavarish Mishra in his novel 'Nirbasit' described the chain of events which proved his innocence. Later conferring the Raja title to his minor son was appreciated by people though British Govt. was hesitant for such conferment.

The British Govt. designed to take over the right of management of Jagannath Temple from Raja family and vest it in a committee. A receiver was appointed too. The grand mother of the minor prince namely Suryamani Patamahadei was the defendant in the case. On the advice of advocate Madhusudan Das the Rani filed a writ in Calcutta High Court which set aside the order of Appointment of receiver. Whereas there was deep felt resentment among the Odia people against the British Govt's. Action to take over, the matter was deeply resented by the people. Later the victory of Rani in this case was hailed overwhelmingly by the people. What was relevant here was, Madhusudan's role as one odia nationalist though he was not a Hindu by religion. The intimate relationship between Lord Jagannath & Odia nationalism guided him to take personal interest in the case he also conducted a meeting at Gopaljew Matha of Cuttack protesting against activity of British Govt. in which 5000 people gathered (Utkal Dipika 1st Jan, 1887). In the Court and outside M.S.Das argued that Jagannath is not a Hindu deity but embodiment of Odia nation. The role of Lord Jagannath as a secular deity would be evident from the fact that no visible protest was made by the people when Lingaraj Temple, Baladevjew Temple & Sarala Temples were taken over. It is relevant here to mention that the language issue affected the sentiments of elite & educated sections of society where as the temple issue around sentiments of common people.

The history around Lord Jagannath with special reference to the act of desecration by different invaders and the protection & hiding by devotees has strengthened the popular sentiments & belief. Kalyanmalla who attacked in 1617 and Kalapahada who attacked during 1568, got severe punishment causing their death which was believed to be act of the diving. Heavy lightening at Pipili that compelled Khan-i-Dauran in 1776 to stop temple destruction is believed as act of divine. The burning of idols in 1568 also evolved Oriya sentiments causing resentment. There were minimum of 18 aggressions and Lord was carried from one end of state to other end and made Patali or underground. At times the lord was hidden behind Bimala Temple, or inside the floating boat or inside deep forest. But every time the Lord escaped the desecration. Lord Narasingh Dev the King offered his head to protect the God & Brahmins & was killed (B.C. Ray, Orissa under Moguls Page 68). This was an epoch making incident that aroused Odiya nationalism.

The Language issue of Sambalpur collectorate & other office exposed the design of British Govt. and further strengthened the Jagannath cult based Oriya nationalism. As per the belief of British officials mahaprasad brotherhood that exists among oriya speaking employees of offices of Sambalpur was a barrier against divide & rule principle. Hence in a resolution they substituted Hindi language as official language of Sambalpur so that Hindi speaking employees of central province can be posted in Sambalpur by way of transfer. There was tremendous protest from the people of Sambalpur & other areas after which the resolution was withdrawn & Odiya continued to be official language of Sambalpur area. In view of predominantly Hindu population of Odisha, the Odia nationalism was corollary of Hindu nationalism. Even the eminent Hindu nationalists like Ramsankar, Radhanath, Baikunthnath Dey etc. transferred themselves from Hindu nationalist to Jagannath centered Oriya nationalists.

With the down of 20th century, the Utkal Samilani & Satyabadi School Played very prominent role in spread of oriya nationalism through multifarious activities and literary creations.

Jagannath Culture being a liberal and more or less secular culture did not antagonize Indian nationalism. Even Mahatma Gandhi started his padayatra from Puri. Gopabandhu & Madhubabu believed in the divine power of the Lord and prayed him to bless oriyas for freedom & Progress.

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