

Lord Jagannath a Tribal Deity: Exploring the Folklores, Myths and Legends

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Abstract: The temple of Lord Jagannath (the Lord of the Universe) is famous as a Hindu temple the world over and the city of Puri is its abode. Though established today as a Hindu deity, legends has it that it was originally a tribal deity that once resided in the thickly wooded hill and was worshipped by the Saravas, pre-Aryan and pre-Dravidian tribes of the Austric linguistic family. Chodaganga Dev, the illustrious ruler of the Ganga dynasty, built the present Jagannath Temple in the twelfth century A.D. Kapilendra Dev, Purusottam Dev and Prataprudra Dev, all rulers of the Surya dynasty, left their distinctive marks on the history, art and culture of Puri. Worship of Lord Jagannath flourished even during the Mughal and Maratha periods. The British occupied Puri in 1803 and soon took over the administration of the temple which was later handed over to a governing body after India became independent.

Using folklore as an anthropological tool for research, herein this article an attempt has been made to take into account the narrations of my friends from the field (borrowed from Prof V.K. Srivastava who was critical about the use of the term few key informants) on the origin of Lord Jagannath as a tribal deity. These accounts were recorded during the researcher's multi-sited fieldwork in Puri, Konark, Berhampur and Bhubaneswar. These narrations have been supplemented with the available records as found in the Bengal and Orissa (Odisha) District Gazetteers. A humble attempt has been made via this article to explore the various myths and legends that revolve around the origin of the worship of Lord Jagannath.

Introduction

Oral tradition that speaks about the experiences, life and people of a community that has been handed down over the generations is referred to as folklore. Folklore means "folk learning"; it takes into account all "knowledge that is transmitted by word of mouth and all crafts and other techniques that

are learned by imitation or example, as well as the products of these crafts. Folklore includes folk art, folk crafts, folk tools, folk costume, folk custom, folk belief, folk medicine, folk recipes, folk music, folk dance, folk games, folk gestures, and folk speech, as well as those verbal forms of expression which have been called folk literature but which are better described as verbal art” (Bascom 1953:4 the said definition was later included in International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences, Vol, V, 1972).

In anthropological discourses, data collection on folklore, myths and legends is an integral part of a fieldwork. Claude Lévi-Strauss was one of the earliest anthropologists to use myths and mythology. In Lévi-Strauss’s work, his approach to myths and their role in kinship, magic, religion etc. have been explored via linguistics. Using structural analysis, Lévi-Strauss traced the myths through language and tried to establish that myths have similar tales and stories across cultures (Zaman 2021: 6). Lévi-Strauss while referring to myths stated “a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago. But what gives the myths operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future” (1979: 208-209, cited in Datta 2012). Thus, his work remains one of the major works on myths and legends in anthropology

Malinowski in his work *Myths in Psychology* (1926) reflected on the proper and improper ways of studying myths. This work is influential as his observations have been the guiding principles for folklorists too. In an anthropological analysis of folklores, the emphasis is not on the folklores itself, but on situating it within the context of meanings that come from the understanding of the people and their culture, best described by Malinowski as, “The text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless”. The oral traditions, among many of the earlier pre-literate societies, had been the main source of data. Some of the early works on folklores were by scholars like Cole’s *Santal Folklore in Indian Antiquary* (1875), A. Campbell’s *Santal Folk Tales* (1891), J.D. Anderson’s *A Collection of Kachari Folk Tales and Rhymes* (1895), Bodding’s studies in *Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore* (1925), and many more. Anthropologist Verrier Elwin’s (1902- 1964) contribution too needs to be accounted for herein as a large section of tribal oral traditions has come from his work.

Folklores are rooted in the everyday lives of the people. Mostly, people give vent to their emotions through the folktales. Many a times women explore and negotiate oppression or domestic violence about which she is not able to express freely and thus, find a voice in the songs and tales. Taking cues from the various works on folklore, herein, the researcher explores the various myths and legends that revolve around the origin of the worship of Lord Jagannath using narrations of my friends from the field and the works published in the Gazetteers¹.

Jagannath as Daru

Puri, Purushottama or Sri Khetra, as the place has been known for centuries is an important centre of Hindu worship. Jagannath is regarded as *Daru Brahma* i.e., (godhead manifested in a wooden image). The worship of *Daru* as Brahma could be traced to the Vedic sources, and to the Bhagawat Geeta. There is a *sloka* (verse) in *Rig Veda* (cited from Gazetteer 1977)

“*Ado yaddaru plavate sindhoh pare apurusam,
Tada rabhasva durhano tena gaccha parastaram*”

The Vaishnavite commentator Sayanacharya (1300-1380) had interpreted these lines as, “There exists on the sea shore in a far-off place the image of a deity of the name Puruottama which is made of wood, floating as it were, in the sea. O, ye by worshipping that wood indestructible, attains the

supreme place of the Vaisnavite". (Mishra, n.d). The earliest mention of Jagannath or *Daru* worship in Puri has been traced to the Saravas in prehistoric times (Padhi, 1992)².

Padhi, during my fieldwork recounted from his research works on *Daru Devata* (The wooden God) and accounted that according to tradition Puri, which is also known as *Niladri* (the blue mountain), was once a richly wooded hill inhabited by the Saravas, a Pre-Aryan and Pre-Dravidian tribe of the Austric linguistic family, which was a totemic clan. The Saravas worshipped their tribal deity on the Blue Hill which was a tree, a log of wood, or some wooden image. Till today the Saravas or Sauras of Ganjam and Koraput district worship the tree as their '*Kitung*' which in Saura language means God. They believe that their *Kitung* dwells in a tree outside their village. They never cut a tree they call '*Jaganata*' (a special name of *Kitung*), nor cut any tree near the area where it stands. This belief leads to the understanding of the concept of sacred groove. They also believe that their *Kitung* has ten incarnations which is exactly similar to the concept of ten incarnations of Vishnu. The word Jagannath is not Sanskrit or Pali; presumably, it is the sanskritised form of the austric word '*Jaganata*'. Among the Saravas also the (hu)man-nature-spirit complex is seen. The groove of trees where their *Kitung* resides is not cut and that helps in maintaining the balance in nature. This groove considered as sacred leads to abundant growth of the trees which help in soil conservation and growth in the forest area.

Finding Vishnu: Folklores, Myths and Legends

The story of finding Vishnu with the Saravas appears in different forms in Oriya folklore, medieval Oriya literature and the *puranas*. A comparison of two similar versions as stated by Sri Nilamani Senapati and Sri Durga Charan Kuanr (1977: 800-803) in the Orissa District and by L.S.S O' Malley (1984: 89-90) Gazetteers Bengal District Gazetteers is quoted below.

King Indradyumna of the Solar dynasty who ruled in Avanti during the *satyayuga* (time preceding the present age) had been told by a wandering *sanyasin* (hermit) about Lord Jagannath being worshipped in Odra desa. The King thus, sent Vidyapati, the brother of his family priest to Odra desa to look for the shrine. Vidyapati went to Odra desa and settled in a Sarava village and after befriending Viswvasu a fowler told him about his mission and how the King had promised not to par take food till he worshipped Lord Jagannath. Out of compassion for the King, Viswvasu took Vidyapati to the blue hills where Lord Jagannath was being worshipped in the heart of the forest. After seeing the Lord, Vidyapati returned to report to King Indradyumna.

But when the King accompanied by Narada set out with a vast army and reached the borders of the Kingdom of Utkala its King informed him about the disappearance of *Nilamadhaha* (Lord Jagannath was worshipped as *Nilamadhaha* by the Saravas). Indradyumna was completely disheartened with the news, but Narada assured him that God would appear in the form of *daru*. Thus, being consoled Indradyumna visited Blue Hill and offered a thousand *aswamedha* (sacrifice of horse performed by the Vedic kings) sacrifices.

On the closing day of the *aswamedha* sacrifice *Nilamadhaha* appeared to Indradyumna in a vision, and at his bathing time the attendants came and informed him that a *daru* with four branches was floating on the sea. The King with due ceremony brought the *daru* and placed it on the *mahavedi* (altar). While discussing with Narada about fashioning the log into an image, the King heard a voice from heaven saying, "God Himself will make His own image". The aged carpenter with his tools should be shut up in a room for fifteen days and utmost secrecy should be maintained about the construction of the image. Things were arranged and at the end of the allotted time, Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra

appeared on the *mahavedi*. Being directed by a voice from heaven the King adorned the images with silken cloth and painted them with their respective colours of black, white and yellow.

In L.S.S O' Malley's version it was stated that after finding the *daru* floating in the river the king had gathered together all the carpenters in his country, and ordered them to fashion the log into an image of Jagannath. But when they put their chisels on the wood, the iron lost its edge, and when they struck with their mallets, the mallets missed and crushed their hands. At last *Vishwakarma* (the divine architect) came in the guise of an old carpenter and offered to undertake the carving of the image on condition that nobody should see what he was doing and the doors should remain closed for fifteen days. But Gundicha, the queen of Indradyumna became curious and had the doors opened and found that the old carpenter had vanished and there were only incomplete images of the gods, (Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and their sister Subhadra) fashioned from the waist upwards, Jagannath and his brother having only stumps for arms, while their sister had none at all.

Indradyumna built a temple 100 cubits in height for their reception, and then, as Brahma (the creator) alone could consecrate the image and shrine went to heaven to invite Brahma to come down to earth. Brahma was listening to music, and the time that intervened amounted to many ages of mortal life. In the mean time a King named Gala had taken possession of the temple. King Gala learning that Indradyumna claimed the temple, prepared to resist him with armed forces but soon reconciled when Indradyumna assured him of his peaceful purpose. The images were then brought down in *rath* (cars) to the temple, placed on the throne and consecrated by Brahma. The celestial dancers Rambha and Urvashi who had accompanied Brahma from heaven, had danced when the images were being consecrated.

The *Musali Parva* of the Mahabharata written by the great 15th century Oriya poet Sarala Das gives a slightly different version of the story and herein, I am referring to the edited version by Dr Artaballava Mohanty as cited in Orissa District Gazetters Puri, (1977: 802-803).

According to Sarala Das, Narayana or Savarinarayana was being worshipped by the Saravas in the forest and after being informed about it, King Galamadhava of Kanchi proceeded to the Savara village to take possession of the deity. But the deity had disappeared in the meanwhile. King Galamadhava was angry with the Saravas thinking that they had hidden the deity, and waged a war against them. He killed all the Saravas, except one, when a voice of Vishnu from heaven asked him to desist from the holocaust as the Saravas were His great devotees. Lord Vishnu also cursed Galamadhava that his entire line would become extinct. The story of Indradyumna begins after this. Lord Krishna was killed by the arrow of a Jara, a fowler, Arjun consigned the body of Lord Krishna to flames, but the flames could not consume it. Being directed by a voice from heaven Arjun threw the body of Lord Krishna into the sea, and at length it floated in the form of a *daru* to Nilasundara on the shores of the sea. Jara had followed the body of Lord Krishna along the sea coast. King Indradyumna, knowing that Vishnu will appear at the *Nilagiri* (the Blue Hills), had constructed a temple there with the help of the Brahmin Viswabasu. Krishna informed Jara in a dream that He would appear in Rohini Kunda in the shape of a *daru*. Indradyumna got the information from Jara and sent his men to lift the *daru* from the Rohini Kunda, but all his efforts failed. Then being directed by the Lord in a vision Indradyumna employed the services of Jara, the fowler, and Vasu, the Brahmin who jointly lifted the *daru* from the Rohini Kunda. Jara and Vishwakarma, the divine architects together fashioned the log into the three images of Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath who, according to poet Sarala's version stood for Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu respectively (Mohanty, n.d). The incompleteness of the images is ascribed to the opening of the door before the allotted time.

The present Daitas, who are hereditary servitors in the temple of Jagannath at Puri, claim their descent to the Saravas and the deities are left in their sole care during the *snana yatra* (bathing festival) and the *rath yatra* (car festival). They also observe the funeral rites of Lord Jagannath during the *Navakelaraba* when the deities being made of wood, change their body every 12-18 years.

Lord Jagannath a Tribal Deity: Summing up

All the four versions of the story deal with Lord Jagannath being worshipped as a tribal deity in the olden days who was later found by Lord Indradyumna floating in the sea in the form of a log and consecrated in the temple of Puri by Brahma. In Sarala Das's version, the lifting of the *daru* by Jara, a fowler and Vasu, a Brahmin reflects the unique worship of Lord Jagannath devoid of caste differentiation and the status accorded to the tribal population in Orissa. The temple of Lord Jagannath is also a unique space where the tribal people have rights as *sebayats* (temple functionaries engaged in different activities right from lighting the lamps to chanting hymns) called *daitas* from *daitapati* from the age-old *Neelamadhab* cult of tribal King Biswabasu (cited from Zaman 2013:170). The half-finished images of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra can be attributed to the fact that they were being worshipped by the tribal people who were not craftsmen of the finer quality thus, affirming to the fact that Lord Jagannath is a tribal deity. To date the image of the three deities is made of wood thus, bringing forth the relationship between (hu)man-nature-spirit. The sacred complex of the Jagannath temple where the idols of the deities are still made of wood confirms the importance of nature in our lives in the current age of globalization where instead of forest land, we have concrete jungles. There are other versions too that has spoken about the Buddha avatar of Lord Jagannath. However, for this article the emphasis was on Jagannath and his tribal origin. To understand the concept of Buddha avatar the researcher would attempt to present the same in a different scholarship.

End Note

1. The narrations from my friends in the field (key informants) have been supplemented with the available records as found in the Bengal and Orissa (Odisha) District Gazetteers. Some of the accounts mentioned in the Gazetteers have also been re-published by various authors in the journal like Orissa Review as per the need in their article context. The recorded version in the Gazetteers has been rephrased for this article (as much as possible) without losing the meaning and the context. This was necessary as the article aim is to explore the various myths and legends that revolve around the origin of the worship of Lord Jagannath.
2. Padhi, Beni Madhab one of the friends from the field (key informant) during my fieldwork had also authored the books *Puratana Kalinga Ra Samajika Itibrutta* (1998) and *Krusti O drusti* (1992). During my fieldwork I visited him in Berhampur to understand the origin, myths and legends related to the Temple of Lord Jagannath and also the *Maharis (female dancers in the temple of Lord Jagannath)*. The information was gathered over a series of informal face-to-face interviews.

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