

Idol Worship Culture of Odisha and Dalit Poet Śāralādāsa

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Abstract:

This research paper is a keen observation of Odia Mahabharat which is commonly known as Saralamahabharata. It is a very interesting fact that a vast monograph with several novelties, this Mahabharat was authored by a Dalit poet of Odisha. He has depicted Jagannatha the Mass deity of Odisha as lord Krishna and tried to establish the inseparability within. His in-depth study and understanding of the mythologies indiscriminately establish the accessibility of each caste to the spectrum of knowledge and knowledge systems as well. His association with Jagannatyha Culture as well as with the Vaisnavite system and the famous Sanskrit epic Mahabharat confirms the association of each segment of Indian Social Order in each aspect of social and cultural life.

Keywords:

Śāralādāsa, Grāmadevī, Grāmadevatā, Gaṇadevatā, Nilagiri etc

I. Introduction

Lord Śrījagannātha of Śrīkṣetra Puri, is the epicenter of Odishan Art, Architecture, Culture as well as the Odiā literature. This land is fortunate enough that every social aspect of this land is moving around this deity. He is the center of Odishan life and represents Odishan culture religion as amicable to Buddhism, Jainism, Tantrism, Saktism. Similarly, some historical stories and folk tales related to Him also compel us to associate Him with Christianity and Islam as well. Jagannāth is a priceless gem of cultural integration and racial amalgamation as well. Jagannātha is not only a unique synthesis of Sanātana religious beliefs of India but forms a basis for the cultural identity of different social caste and classes in our society. It is made of wood, which is an exception to common Sanātana iconographic deities of stone. The origin and evolution of Jagannātha worship, as well as iconography, are unclear and have been subject to intense academic debate and discussion. Some scholars have suggested that the word is a Sanskritisation of a tribal word. They have presented arguments concerning the Jagannātha's tribal origins. In the villages of the Saurā (Sorā) tribe in Odisha, they worship a deity called "Jaganaelo", meaning "made of wood" which has immense resemblance with dārudevātā a well-known epithet of Lord Jagannātha. Jagannātha is described as an Avatārī i.e. the cause of the Avatāras, and not merely an Avatāra. The incarnations emanate from Jagannātha, who is the cause of all material creation. Therefore, Jagannātha does not have any life stories, and Lilā, in contrast to Avatāras like Parśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, etc.

In Prataparudradeva's time Oriya poets accepted Śāralādāsa's ideas and expressed them in their literary works as all the Avatāras of Viṣṇu (Jagannātha) manifest from him and after their cosmic play dissolute (bilaya) in him (Jagannātha). According to them, Jagannātha is Śūnya Puruṣa, Nirākāra, and Niranjana who is ever-present in Nilāchala to do cosmic play.... The five Vaisnavite Śākhās of Odisha during Prataparudradeva's time expounded in their works the idea that Jagannātha (Purushottam) is Pūrṇa Brahma (i.e. god in Toto) from whom

other Avatāras like Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, etc., took their birth for lilās in this universe and at the end would merge in the self of Pūrṇa Brahma. The Indradymna episode suggests its origin in a blue hill or (Nīlakandara). Narasiṃha was the primordial deity of this cult. Later on, we worship Lord Jagannātha not as a solitary deity but in the form of a Triad. Credit goes to Chodagangadeva of the Anga dynasty who popularized this cult. The Patalesvara temple inscription describes for the first time the name of Jagannātha, Balabhadra, and Subhadra. The epigraphs dated 1237 A.D. of the time of Anangabhimadeva mention the names of three deities as Halin (Balabhadra) Cakrin (Puruṣottama) and Subhadrī (Subhadrā), the great triad consisting of Lord Jagannātha, the principal deity with His two companion deities, Lord Balabhadra and Subhadrā. The popular Jagannātha culture is a mysterious concept. Many distinguished scholars from different parts of the country have attempted to solve the mystery of the origin and evolution of Lord Jagannātha. It is agreed by many scholars that the Jagannātha cult is in fact mystery and unfathomable. Even some scholars established Lord Jagannātha is not an idol, though it is accepted by many as an idol or Vighraha. But He is accepted as a symbol. With all these beauties, dilemmas, and obscurities Jagannātha prompted Odisha as well as India to develop a good number of creative writings. One of such creative writers was poet Śāralādāsa, who is certainly a revolution in Oḍiā literature and culture

II. Research Method

Odia version of Mahabharata is not a translation work of original Mahabharat composed in Sanskrit. It is altogether a reproduction Mahabharat with tremendous additions and alterations in original Mahabharat. Here this paper adopts analytical methodology to trace a social problem of Odishan society and vision of the author of this regional Mahabharat.

III. Result and Discussion

As this research is an independent and less analysed study it is a hard task to trace related study in English, however we can trace several research articles on sociological aspects of this text which are in Odia language only. The text has been translated to Hindi by Prof. Harischandra Mishra and Prof. Niladribhusan Harichandan. Some papers in Odia mainly authored by Prof. Manoranjan Pradhan, Dr. Rabinarayan Das, Dr. Debashis Mahapatra are commendable and well analysed, however, association with Jagannatha and social culture of Odisha are less studied aspects.

2.1 Pūjā Culture of Odisha: An Overview

In Odishan society, we can observe the worship of three types of deities i.e. the home deity, the village deity, and the mass deity.

I. The Home Deity- The home deity of Oḍiā house is of various names and characteristics. He/She may be worshiped by a Brahmin priest or by the householder himself. If the home deity is Śālagrāma (substitute of *Vīṣṇu*) then, has to be offered the *pūjā* by the priest or the Brahmin householder. No women are allowed to offer *pūjā* to Śālagrāma (Brahmin or of any other caste) whereas, almost all lady deities of the household, irrespective of any caste are to be offered *pūjā* by the women members of the household. Hence home deity is an amalgamation or synthesis of *Sāstras* and practice as well as an epicenter of belief and faith.

II. The Village Deity – Similarly the village deity in Odisha is an institution of interesting entities. Village deities can also be grouped into three in general i.e.

- a) *Grāmadevī* - the protector of the village from pandemics and all sorrows.
- b) *Grāmadevatā* - mostly *Śiva* temples, which may be considered as a place of gathering and a center for mass as well as individual worship. In most cases, these two deities are being offered *Pūjā* by a non-Brahmin priest or lower-graded Brahmin priests.
- c) One more type of *Grāmadevatā* found in Odishan villages is *Vaiṣṇava* icons. Where Lord *Kṛṣṇa*, *Rādhākṛṣṇa*, *Viṣṇu*, *Nṛsiṃha*, etc. (mostly the Puranic Deities) are being worshiped. In most cases, the Brahmin priest is only authorized to offer *Pūjā* to this type of village deities. However, minor variations can also be observed.

III. The Mass Deity - Then we can come to a discussion of the Mass deity who is also known as *Gaṇadevatā*. He is also called as *Raṣṭradevatā* or the God of Nation. He is worshiped by the mass or by the entire people of the nation irrespective of caste. But the authority to offer the *pūjā* to this deity is limited to the specific Brahmin priest who is normally a permanent worshiper of the deity by the virtue of inheritance. Interestingly *Jagannātha* worship encompassed all these three characters, predominantly it is well accepted as the God of Nation.

2.2 Jagannātha Worship

Worship of lord *Jagannātha* probably continues since Vedic period. Almost all Purāṇas have sufficient source materials regarding the worship of lord *Jagannātha*. Some important epics and *Purāṇas* embodied lord *Jagannātha*, Mahābhārata of Vyāsadev, Śāralā Mahābhārata of Śāralādāsa, Viṣṇupurāṇa, Matsyapurāṇa, Agnipurāṇa, Padmapurāṇa, Skandapurāṇa, Kālikapurāṇa, Kūrmapurāṇa, Vāmanapurāṇa and etc. *Kālikapurāṇa*

*udrākhyam̐ prathamam̐ pītham̐ dvitīyam̐ jālaśailakam̐/
trītyam̐ pūrṇapītham̐ tu kāmārupam̐ caturthakam̐//
odrapītham̐ paścime tu tathaivodeśvarim̐ śivām̐/
kātyāyīnim̐ jagannāthamodreśam̐ ca prapūjayet//Kalika Purana Ch 64.43-44*

Identified *Udradeśa* or modern Odisha with an epithet of *Jagannātha* as *Oḍreśa* and nicely combined the land with *Jagannātha*. The focal point of this verse is “*Jagannāthamodreśa*”. This compound establishes lord *Jagannātha* as *Oḍreśa*, (*Oḍra+īśa*) the king or master of the *Oḍa* or *Odra* land which is subsequently known as *Oḍishā*.

This paper shall focus on *Śāralāmahābhārata* and otherwise known as *Oḍīamahābhārata*. In continuation to *Jagannātha* and *Puruṣottama* episodes in the original Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (*Śāntiparva*), Dalit Kavi Śāralādāsa of Odisha has introduced many new episodes in his famous *Oḍīamahābhārata*. Poet Śāralādāsa of 15th century AD (belongs to Kapilendradeva regime) has included many new things to the original Mahabharata. The inclusion of hundreds of *Jagannātha/Kṛṣṇa* related episodes in his *Mahābhārata* made the literature more impressive and more original. With the inclusion of many other episodes, Śāralādāsa crossed the limit of imitation of Sanskrit Mahabharata and popularised this famous literature among the common man of Odisha, Bengal, and Asham as well. Some questions come to our mind that-
-Whether a poet has a caste?

- In a so-called Brahmanic system whether Saraladasa's Mahabharat has been refuted?
- This poet is not an instance of cultural coexistence?
- Is it not a fact that in Odishan religious culture, there was no caste-based discrimination?

2.3 Śāralā Mahābhārata and Śrījagannātha

I. One of the important heroes of *Mahābhārata* lord *Kṛṣṇa* has been replaced by lord *Jagannātha*. The Inseparableness of both is the central point of *Śāralā* philosophy, probably heavily influenced by Odishan Vaisnavism.

II. *Navagunjara* episode of *Śāralādāsa* may be considered a tremendous inclusion and unbeatable thought process of poet *Śāralādāsa*.

III. *Śāralādāsa* prayed lord *Jagannātha*
se jagannātha je saṁsāra-uddharaṇa
mlecca-jana uddharaṇa vaudha rupeṇa//
kaliyuga lokaṅka anitibhāva jāṇi
teṇu pādapāṇi navahile cakrapāṇi//
nāsā śravaṇa ye adhara sahite
lucaiṇa mauna hoile jagannāthe//
jemantarupe kṣetre vijaye nārāyaṇa
dārubrahma rupare āpaṇe nirivāṇa//

Very lucidly and narrates several statements. In these poems, lord *Jagannātha* has been analyzed as the cause of salvation, equalized with *Nārāyaṇa* or *Viṣṇu*, *Buddha*, and narrated as the cause of *Mokṣa* to a human being. It is also noticeable that with the description of the physical appearance of *ŚrīJagannātha*, poet *Śāralādāsa* tried to establish Him (*Kṛṣṇa*) as *nirvikāra Brahma*.

IV. In *Sabhāparva* of *Śāralā Mahābhārata* (*Śāralā Mahābhārata* P-72) *Sabadeva* prays lord *Kṛṣṇa* or *Jagannātha* as *Parameśvara*, *Jagamohana*, *Janārddana*, *Dadhivāmana* and *Puruṣottama*.

V. In connection to *Rājasuya* sacrifice (*Śāralā Mahābhārata* P-140) *Bhisma* narrates *Kṛṣṇa* (*Jagannātha* as *Jagamohana*, *Nīranjana*, *Keśava* etc).

VI. In connection to *the Navagunjara* episode, (*Śāralā Mahābhārata*, *Madhya parva* P-45) he has been narrated as *avyaya*, *nirākāra*, *anādi*, *ananta puruṣa*, etc.

VII. In *vanaparva* *Karṇa* also prays *Kṛṣṇa/Jagannātha* as *Paramabrahma*, *akāla*, *akāma*, *acyuta* etc. Again in *Vanaparva*

svāmi mohara lalāte vasu tohara padma- pāda goṭi
nīlasundara bheṭili // jagannātha rupa goṭi (P-273)

Karṇa prayed for the blissful feet of *Kṛṣṇa* on his head and have used two epithets of *Kṛṣṇa* i.e. *Nīlasundara* and *Jagannātha*.

VIII. In the beginning *Śāralādāsa*
vijaya rāmakṛṣṇa subhadrā nāme brahma
cārilakṣa cavisa sahasraku uddhava rupe mahātāmā// *Adiparva*

In another poem very lucidly equalized *Kṛṣṇa*, *Jagannātha*, and *Uddhava*.

IX. In *Madhyaparva* of *Śāralā Mahābhārata*
saṁsāra janaṅku tārivā nimante
bauddha rupe vije jagannāthe // *Maddhyaparva*

We can see the word *Jagannātha* has been narrated as Buddha and the poet has characterized *Jagannātha* as the protector of the common man who is deprived. The inseparability of Buddha and *Jagannātha* is a debatable fact for a long period, whereas, it is noticeable that during the 15th century *Śāralādāsa* boldly placed this theory in his *Mahābhārata*.

X. In *Vanaparva*

*balabhadra subhadra kṛṣṇa tinirupa
buddhanārāyaṇa ehā kariva svarupa// Vanaparva*

Again one can trace a similar stanza. *Śāralādāsa* narrated the three idols of *Jagannātha* temple, wherein the place of *Jagannātha* he has placed *Kṛṣṇa* and again it was replaced with Buddha. An interesting fact here is *Kṛṣṇa* has replaced the word *Jagannātha* and Krishna, Buddha and *Nārāyaṇa* being equalized.

XI. Sameness in *Jagannātha* and *Uddhava* is also an important implementation of *Śāralādāsa*. In this connection out of many examples, we can consider a verse from *Madhyaparva*

*vandai jagannātha nīlagirivāsi
uddhava rupe nīlakandare chantivasi// Madhyaparva*

Where *Jagannātha* has been narrated as the dwell of *Nīlagiri*, In this poem again *Jagannātha* has been equalized with *Uddhava*.

XII. Episode of *Jaduvamśa* is a vital imposition of *Śāralādāsa*.

*tumbhe kimpā vimukha hua he saoyasāci
ye khaṇḍa agnidevatā na pāriva bhakṣi/
e khaṇḍa vije kariva nīlasundara paravate
tanhire pūjā pāibe dasa sahasra varṣa parijante// Musali Parva*

Here the story elements of Sanskrit Mahabharata have been extended afar and as a consequence, we can see the cremation of the body of lord *Kṛṣṇa*. The last part of the cremated body of lord Krishna becomes a log-like article and was thrown into the ocean. In this connection, *Kṛṣṇa* advised *Arjuna* not to be worried and suggested that the remaining part which shall not be consumed by fire, shall be arrived at *Nīlasundara Parvata (Nīlācala)* and shall be worshiped till ten thousand years. A similar interpretation can also be traced from the interpretation of Sayana to explain the Vedic Mantra 10.155.3. He explains the text as – *yaddāru dārumayam purusotamākṣamdevatā śarīram....//*

XIII. *Śāralā Mahābhārata*

*sundaragiri upare nīlakalpataru
baudharupe āmbhe bijaye karithibu
āmbhe cinhibu thāi nīlasundara parvate
lankagaḍe drsya hoibu jāna tote// Sabhaparva*

Has one more interesting story that *Bibhisana* of *Lanka* placed his desire to see *Śrīrāma* and *Śrīrāma* fulfills his desire with the words of *Śāralāmahābhārata*. Here *Śrīrāma* says to *Bibhisana* – that I shall be at *Sundaragiri (Nīlādri)* with *Nīlakalpastaru (Kalpataru)*. There I shall be as *Buddha* and I shall see you from the top of the *Nīlaparvata* and please remember that I shall be visible to you from *Lankāgaḍa*. Here equalization of *Rāma*, *Jagannātha*, and *Buddha* has immense importance in the study of the cultural history of Odisha. Again this phase may have some

importance regarding the geographical aspects. This episode shows a hazy idea of the geographic position of *Nīlācala* and *Lankāgaḍa*. Probably it was the common idea of the Odishan sea merchants' that after the *pūrvasāgara Lankāgaḍa* is present and that generalized idea has been nicely presented in Śāralā literature.

XIV. The importance Vasnavite movement can also be traced directly from the chants of Śāralā *Mahābhārata* .

*jaya jaya jagannātha nilādri bihāri
jagannātha sumara nare saṁsāru jiba tari
jagannātha sumara nare na daṇḍiva yama
jagannātha sumara nare naraka khaṇḍi pāiva uttama//*

Śāralādāsa here even in these stanzas used the word *Jagannātha* instead of using *Kṛṣṇa*. He lauds *Jagannātha* the dweller of *Nīlādri*, he suggests to the common man that if somebody keeps him in his heart shall pass this sorrowful earth. According to him if a man becomes devotional to Him, he shall not be punished by even *Yama* and if a man becomes devotional to *Jagannātha* shall get the *Naraka* (*Narka/hail*) which is not full of sorrow but rather a stock of happiness. These famous Vasnavite words become the philosophy of Śāralādāsa.

XV. Again inseparableness with *Jagannātha* and *Śrīkṛṣṇa*
*tu deva mātā pitā tuhi se guru devatā
tu deva sakhā sodara tu deva sarva dātā//
svāmī yāvata candra divākara thāu
śrījagannātha goṭi hṛdayare mora thāu//*

Can also be traced from the words of *Vidūra* where it is mentioned that *Jagannātha* or *Kṛṣṇa* is simultaneously mother and father like the Supreme Almighty. And also He (*Jagannātha*) has been addressed as a friend of all and giver of anything we beg. Poet also expects the presence of Lord *Jagannātha* in the heart till the existence of the Sun and Moon in the sky.

IV. Conclusion

Based on many untouched and touched references of Śāralā *Mahābhārata* it is well understood that he has tried to establish lord *Jagannāth* as a holistic icon of Odishan Philosophical thought process which is more or less closely associated with the Vedantic thought and philosophy. The imposition of the word *Jagannātha* in place of *Kṛṣṇa* may be traced to the poetic talent of the poet. Lord *Jagannātha* if not identical, is very much applicable to *Kṛṣṇa* the master of the universe (*jagataḥ + nāthaḥ*). It may be accepted as the use of an epithet of *Kṛṣṇa* instead. However, some other identifying marks forced us to understand *Jagannātha* (an epithet of *Kṛṣṇa*) as *Jagannātha* of *Nīlaparvata* (*Nīlācala*) Most commendable concept is the poetic talent of the poet. It is also observable how lucidly and cunningly the poet imposed the imagination or respected the inner mind of his readers. Probably by the use of the word *Jagannātha*, he has shown his poetic talent and replaced *Kṛṣṇa* with *Jagannātha* from the heart of the reader as well as from the religio-cultural philosophy of Odisha. Cleverly poet Śāralādāsa equalised *Jagannātha* with *Viṣṇu*, *Kṛṣṇa*, *Nārāyaṇa*, *Uddhava*, *Puruṣottama*, *Buddha* etc. In this process regional god *Jagannātha* has been placed at the place of national godhood and *Sanātan* religious life as well. From all these tremendous approaches the Dalit Poet gets a good place in the heart of each devotee of *Jagannātha*. He has never been refuted by Brahmins or by any other upper caste people. His creation rather becomes the most popular Odia epic after *Ramayana*. Probably under

the pressure of this Odia Mahabharata, the Odia Ramayana lost its identity. A Poet, a more profound of knowledge can not be a Dalit or a Brahmin, a poet is always a Poet.

References

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