

## The Tradition of Lord Jagannatha

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**S**hri Purusottama-kshetra Puri—the holy abode of Shri Purusottama Jagannatha—is one of the four major 'dhāmas' of India. *Skanda-Purana*, the most voluminous of the eighteen Maha-Puranas, mentions the sanctity and glory of this most ancient and sacred *kshetra* in the following words:

‘यद्यप्येष जगन्नाथः सर्वगः सर्वभावनः ॥  
सन्ति क्षेत्राणि चान्यानि सर्वमापहराणि वै ॥ ८ ॥  
एतत्क्षेत्रं परं चास्य वपुर्भूतं महात्मनः ॥  
स्वयं वपुष्मां स्तत्रास्ते स्वनाम्ना ख्यापितं हि तत् ॥ ९ ॥’

*“Although Lord Jagannatha is all pervading and is the source of all, and there are also other holy places which destroy all sins, yet this holy place is superior as it has become the body of this Supreme Being. He Himself is present there assuming a form and has indeed made that place known by His own name.”*

—Adhyaya I – 8/9

Originating in Puri in the dim distant past, worship of Lord Jagannatha has gradually spread during the past few centuries to different parts of Orissa and India; and, more recently, to several countries around the world. Over the last several decades, there has been substantial study, research and publications concerning various aspects of the tradition of Lord Jagannatha, but several ‘grey’ areas nevertheless remain. In my brief exposition of the tradition of Lord Jagannatha, I wish to focus on two aspects of the tradition, namely, (1) origin and antiquity

of the tradition and (2) its esoteric and religious significance.

### (1) Origin and antiquity

Some scholars have opined that a verse in the Rig Veda (which is the earliest Vedic scripture dating beyond three thousand BC)<sup>1</sup> refers to Lord Jagannatha in Purusottama-kshetra. The verse ‘—ado yad daru plavate sindhoh pare apurusam’ (X-155-3) has been interpreted by Sayanacharya (1315-1387 AD), one of the most well-known commentators of Rig Veda, to refer to ‘darumayam Purusottamakhyam devata-sariram’ “(Purusottama) floating on the sea”. This interpretation has been accepted by Raghunandana Bhattacharya (sixteenth century Dharmashastra scholar of Bengal) who, in his *Purusottama-kshetra tattvam*, while endorsing the view of Sayanacharya, has stated that a similar verse is found in the *Paippalada sakha* of Atharva Veda (VI – 8/7).

Some other scholars are of the view that the *Mahabharata* contains references to the worship of Lord Jagannatha in Purusottama-kshetra. The section dealing with ‘Tirtha-yatra’ in the ‘Vana-Parva’ of the *Mahabharata* (III-114, 17 to 24) mentions that the Pandavas, during their visit to Kalinga, took holy bath in the sea and climbed a sacred *vedi* to seek blessings. This *vedi* has been identified by scholars with the temple of Lord Jagannatha in Puri.

Many scholars today are, however, of

the opinion that the aforesaid references in the Rig Veda and the *Mahabharata* cannot conclusively be held to refer to Lord Jagannatha in Purusottama-kshetra. The earliest literary references to Lord Jagannatha, according to them, is found in the Puranas. The most elaborate account of the origin of the tradition of Lord Jagannatha is found in over three thousand slokas in the section entitled '*Purusottama-kshetra mahatmya*' (or *Utkal Khanda*) in 'Vaishnava Khanda' of *Skanda-Purana*. Briefly stated, the Purana narrates that the Supreme Lord was originally worshiped as 'Neelamādhava' on top of Nilachala Hill in Purusottama-kshetra, ie, at the very location where the present temple stands. The image of Lord Neelamadhava, standing under the *Kalpa Banyan Tree*, was made of *nilamani* (sapphire gem-stone) and the Lord was holding *sankha*, *chakra*, *gada* and *padma* in His four hands. Devi Mahalaxmi was to the left of the Lord with Lord Sesha (Ananta) behind and Shri Garuḍa and Shri Sudarshana Chakra (having assumed human form) in the front.

Situated amidst dense forest, the presence of the Lord was unknown to the world except for a few fortunate Savara tribals living in the tribal village nearby who kept the Lord's presence a closely guarded secret. It was only when Vidyapati, the emissary of King Indradyumna of Malwa (Central India), visited Purusottama-kshetra; and, having won the trust and friendship of Savara chief Visvavasu, obtained *darshana* of Lord Neelamadhava, that the presence of the Lord came to be known to the world outside. King Indradyumna, upon hearing the good news from Vidyapati and ardently seeking the Lord's darshana, immediately set forth from his capital Avanti (modern Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh) towards Purusottama-kshetra. But, before Indradyumna could reach his destina-

tion a great sand-storm completely covered the abode of the Lord and Lord Neelamadhava was seen no more. Utterly dejected and grief-stricken at being deprived of the Lord's darshana, Indradyumna decided to fast unto death. Devarshi Narada (who had accompanied Indradyumna from Avanti) however consoled Indradyumna and advised him to perform one thousand Ashvamedha Yajñas for re-appearance of the Lord in wooden form, as this had been predicted by none other than Lord Brahma.

The King duly performed the Ashvamedha Yajña as advised by Sage Narada and, upon its conclusion, a Celestial Tree was seen floating on the sea. The King then heard a Divine Voice and, in obedience to its command, permitted an old carpenter to carve the image of the Lord from out of the Celestial Tree. The Purana here states that the carpenter was none other than the Lord Himself. The Divine Carpenter worked in a closed chamber (at the site of the present Sri Gundicha Temple). When the door of the chamber was opened on the fifteenth day, the old Carpenter was not seen; and Sage Narada, King Indradyumna and the assembled gathering obtained their first darshana of the Lord in the *Chaturdha-Vigraha* wooden forms, namely, as Lord Jagannatha, Lord Balabhadra, Devi Subhadra and Chakra Sudarshana. The Divine Voice once again commanded the King to cover the bare wooden forms with specific layers of coverings and the Lords thereafter finally assumed the forms in which they are seen today.

King Indradyumna then constructed a magnificent temple for the Lord 1000 cubits (ie 1500 feet) high and, at Indradyumna's behest, Lord Brahma came from Brahmaloka and consecrated the *Chaturdha-Vigrahas* as well as the temple. Having



accomplished his cherished mission, Indradyumna ascended to Brahmaloaka after entrusting the charge of the temple and worship of the Lord to King Gala who was then the ruler of Utkal (Orissa).

This then is, in brief, the narration in the *Skanda Purana* regarding the manifestation of Lord Jagannatha as *Chaturdha-vigraha daru murtis* in Purusottama-kshetra Puri. But the question remains as to when this auspicious event took place. According to *Skanda Purana* (Adhyayas XXIII-55-58 and XXIX-16), the manifestation of the Celestial Tree and carving of the *Chaturdha Vighraha* wooden images occurred in the Satya Yuga of the second Chatur-yuga of Swayambhuva Manu (the first Manu) in the present Kalpa (Svetvaraha Kalpa). We are now in the Kali Yuga of the twenty-eighth Chatur-yuga of Vaivasvata Manu (the seventh Manu). Thus, a period of more than six Manvantaras and twenty-seven Chatur-yugas has elapsed since the first manifestation of the *Chaturdha-Vighrahas*. Having regard to Vedic time-period calculation as stated in *jyotish shastra* and *Srimad Bhagavat* and other Puranas, wherein one Chatur-Yuga is equal to 43,20,000 human years and one Manvantara is equal to 30,67,20,000 human years (or seventy-one Chatur-Yugas) the dating of the first manifestation of *Chaturdha-Vighrahas* will go back to a mind-boggling figure of 2588 crore years or more.<sup>2</sup>

In recent times, there has been considerable debate concerning the antiquity of this account in the *Skanda Purana*. The orthodox viewpoint that the *Skanda Purana* including 'Purusottama-kshetra mahatmya' was compiled by Maharshi Vedavyasa is not accepted by many modern historians. Pargiter in his *Ancient Indian Historical Traditions* dates Puranic literature to the fifth century BC.

However, modern scholars on the subject have variously dated the composition of 'Purusottama-kshetra mahatmya' from as early as the seventh century AD to as late as the seventeenth century AD. Without entering into this controversy, it may however suffice to state here that, irrespective of the date when the Puranic account may have been actually written, the episode quite definitely is an ancient one which assumed legendary proportions, having come down by word of mouth from generation to generation since time immemorial even before being written down in the Purana.

Several other Puranas, particularly *Brahma Purana*, *Padma Purana* and *Agni Purana*, also contain narrations about the manifestation of Lord Jagannatha in Purusottama-kshetra in more or less the same manner as *Skanda Purana*. Various literary works in Orissa in post-fourteenth century, such as, *Mahabharata* of Sarala Das, *Deula Tola* of Nilambar Das, *Deula Tola* of Sisukrushna Das and *Niladrimahodaya* of Loknath Panda by and large reiterate the legend contained in the *Skanda Purana*.

Apart from the Puranic literature mentioned above, other historical evidence regarding worship of Lord Jagannatha in Puri is found (according to historians) only from the eighth century AD onwards. The chronicle of Shri Jagannatha Temple (*Madala Panji*) mentions that the Lords were taken to Sonepur in central Orissa due to the invasion of one Raktabahu and that they were re-installed in Puri around the tenth century by Somavamsi King Yayati Keshari who constructed a new temple for the Lord in Puri. Worship of the Lord in Puri by the eighth century AD is moreover established beyond doubt by several other literary works including *Sankaravijaya-vilasa* of Chidvilasa Muni (ninth c. AD), *Anarghara-*

*ghava-natakam* of Murari Mishra (ninth c. AD) and *Prabodha-chandrodaya natakam* of Krishna Murari (eleventh c. AD). Epigraphic evidence, such as, Maihar Sarada Devi Temple Inscription in Satna, Madhya Pradesh (tenth c. AD) and Kalindi Grant of Eastern Chalukya King Rajaraja I (eleventh c. AD) also point in the same direction. With the construction of the present Shri Jagannatha Temple in the beginning of the twelfth century AD by Ganga King Chodaganga Deb (on the very site of the earlier temple), we find plenty of references relating to the worship of the earlier temple), we find plenty of references relating to the worship of Lord Jagannatha in Puri.

From the above it will be clear that, according to modern historians, the antiquity of the tradition of Lord Jagannatha (based on historical evidence other than Puranic literature) cannot be pushed back beyond the eighth century AD. In reaching the aforesaid conclusion the historians have however not taken into account certain published works relating to the visit of Jesus Christ to India and Puri in the first century AD. In 1887, noted Russian journalist Nicholas Notovich found ancient Tibetan manuscripts in Hemis Monastery in Leh (Ladakh) which mentioned that :

‘...in his fourteenth year young Issa... came this side of Sindh... and went to Djagguernat, in the country of Orsis, where repose the mortal remains of Vyassa-Krishna, and where the white priests of Brahma welcomed him joyfully... they taught him to read and to understand the Vedas, to cure physical ills by means of prayers, to teach and to expound the sacred Scriptures, to drive out evil desires from man and make him again in the likeness of God. He spent six years in Djagguernat, in Radjagriha, in Benaras and in other holy cit-

ies...’ (*The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, 1894, p. 85).

In 1922, Swami Abhedananda (then Vice-President of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission), having read Notovich’s book travelled to Hemis Monastery ‘to verify’ Notovich’s account. At Hemis, Swamiji interrogated the Lamas, physically examined the manuscripts and himself took down notes which were later published in a Bengali book entitled *Kashmir-O-Tibbate* (1929) and which fully confirmed the averments made by Notovich about Jesus’ visit to India.

It is interesting to note that another book *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* published on this subject in 1907 by a Christian pastor of America, named Levi H. Dowling, specifically mentions that young Jesus travelled to India and Puri upon the invitation of a Prince of Orissa who had gone to Jerusalem and Nazareth. Dowling further writes that ‘Jesus was accepted as a pupil in the Temple of Jagannatha; and here learned the Vedas and the Manic laws’ (p. 40).

Renowned Russian painter Professor Nicholas Roerich in his books *Himalaya* (1926), *Heart of Asia* (1929) and *Altai Himalaya* (1929) wrote extensively on Jesus’ visit to India on the basis of evidence gathered during his Central Asia and Himalayan expeditions between 1924-1928. More recently, American scholar Elizabeth Claire Prophet in her book *The Lost Years of Jesus* (1984) and German scholar Holger Kersten in his book *Jesus lived in India* (1986), after evaluating available evidence on the subject, came to the conclusion that the above accounts of Jesus’ visit to India are true and authentic.

If the above findings regarding Jesus’



visit to India and Puri are accepted as authentic and correct then the antiquity of the tradition of Lord Jagannatha will date back into the pre-Christian era (even if Puranic literature is not taken into account) as these findings clearly establish that Jagannatha-Puri was already an established and well-known centre of religious pilgrimage and Vedic learning by the time of Christ. However, as to the actual time of commencement of the tradition, if we are to exclude the Puranic calculations, then due to non-availability of historical evidence we have to agree with the historians that the origin of the tradition is 'lost in antiquity'.

## (2) Esoteric and religious significance

According to the Puranas, as mentioned above, the Lord originally manifested in Purusottama-kshetra as *nilamani* (sapphire gem-stone) *vigraha* Neelamadhava. After the disappearance of Neelamadhava, the Lord re-manifested in His present *Chaturdha-vigraha-daru* form. The significance of the Lord's manifestation in wooden form is revealed by Lord Brahma. At the time of consecration of the *Chaturdha vigrahas*, Lord Brahma proclaimed that the wooden images are '*parama brahmakriti*' (the form of the Supreme Being) and He instructed King Indradyumna in the following manner:

‘दारवी मूर्तिरिषेति प्रतिमाबुद्धिरत्र वै ॥  
मा भूते नृपशार्दूल परं ब्रह्माकृतिस्त्विद्यम् ॥ ३९ ॥  
खंडनात्सर्व-दुःखानामखंडानंददानतः ॥  
स्वभावाहास्रेषो हि परं ब्रह्माभिधीयते ॥ ४० ॥  
इत्थं दारुमयो देवश्चतुर्वेदानुसारतः ॥  
स्रष्टा स जगतां तस्मादात्मानं चापि सृष्टवान् ॥ ४१ ॥’

“Thinking it is a wooden image, O pre-eminent King, let there not be the idea in you that this is a mere image; this is verily the form of Supreme Brahman. As Parama Brahman (the Supreme Lord) takes away all

sorrows and confers eternal bliss, He is known as Daru. According to the four Vedas, therefore, the Lord is manifest in the form of daru (sacred wood). He is the Creator of the entire Universe. He has also created Himself.”

—Adhyaya XXVIII–39-41

It may be pertinent to mention here some of the unique and distinctive aspects of the tradition in so far as the *vigrahas* are concerned. Neem (Margosa) wood is used for making the images.<sup>3</sup> Scriptures, such as *Bhavishya-Purana* and *Vaikhyanasagama*, mention that neem wood is the best and most auspicious material for Vishnu image. However, the injunction in the scripture ('Purusottama-kshetra mahatmya', Adhyaya XIX–19 to 27) strictly lays down that the wooden form must not be seen by any one and should be covered by silk cloth, resin, sandal-paste, perfumed oil etc.; and these coverings are to be changed from year to year. Accordingly, every year during the fifteen days commencing from Jyestha-Purnima tithi (which falls in the month of June or July and which is the auspicious tithi when the Lord first manifested in *Chaturdha-Vigraha* form) the Lords are kept in a closed chamber and the outer coverings are changed by *Daita-pati sevakas* who are the descendants of the original *Savara* (tribal) worshippers of Lord Neelamadhava. This special ritual is known as *Anasara-vidhi*.

Another distinctive feature of the tradition is *Navakalevara* which involves elaborate rites and rituals spread over nearly three and half months during which period the *Chaturdha-vigraha-murtis* undergo a complete renewal. This extraordinary event takes place whenever there is an extra month (*mala-māsa*) in the month of *Asādhā* (called *Purusottama-masa*) which can occur in

eight years, eleven years or nineteen years depending upon astrological configurations.<sup>4</sup> According to prescribed rituals, the old images are buried in a specific location within the temple premises (named *Koili-Vaikuntha*) and identical new images are made, consecrated and installed on the sacred altar (*Ratnasinghāsana*). It is, however, significant to note here that while the wooden forms along with all the outer coverings are buried, the Holy Divine Object (*Brahma-vastu*) placed in the heart cavity of each Image is removed from the old Image and installed in the new image; and this secret ritual is performed by a *Daita sevaka* with his eyes blind-folded and hands padded so that he does not perceive the *Brahma-vastu*.

The *Anasara* and *Navakalevara* rituals of the Lord are indeed His *Leelas* manifesting certain fundamental spiritual truths about human existence. The very form of the *Chaturdha-Vigrahas* consisting of seven distinct sheaths or coverings (*'saptavarana'*) ie, from the innermost wooden form to the cloth covering on the exterior, correspond to the *sapta-dhātus* (ie bone, flesh, blood, skin etc) of the human body, as indicated in the *Madala Panji* (temple chronicle). The *Anasara* ritual every year, during which the outer coverings of the *Vigrahas* are changed, reminds us of the changes constantly taking place in the human body. On the other hand, the complete change of the *'saptavarana'* bodies of the *Vigrahas* and transfer of the *Brahma-vastu* during *Navakalevara* symbolize the death of the human body and transmigration of the immortal *ātmā* (soul) from the old body to the new. Just as the *atma*, being subtler than the subtlest, cannot be perceived by the senses and the mind, so also the *Brahma-vastu* remains unknown even to the *sevaka* who transfers the

*Brahma-vastu* from the old *Vigraha* to the new.

Perhaps, however, the most significant aspect of the tradition of Lord Jagannatha is its all-encompassing universality. This becomes evident when we see the many ways in which the Lord is invoked. According to '*Purusottama-kshetra mahatmya*' of *Skanda Purana*, the Supreme Lord, as mentioned earlier, was originally worshipped as Neelamadhava or Vishnu along with Mahalakshmi, Ananta Sesha and Sudarshana. The same text mentions further that a hair fallen from the body of Vishnu had taken the shape of the 'Celestial Tree'—*Daru-Vriksha* (*tad anga skhalitam roma taru tvam upapadyate*—Adhyaya XVIII-13) out of which the *Chaturdha-Vigrahas* were made; and that the one Vishnu had assumed the four-fold form (*Chaturdha Vishishtam Vishnu*). From this viewpoint, Lord Jagannatha is Vishnu, Lord Balabhadra is Sesha Ananta, Devi Subhadra is Mahalakshmi and Sudarshana is Sudarshana Chakra.

In certain other scriptures, such as the *Brahma-Purana*, Lord Jagannatha has been identified with Shri Krishna. The *Sankaravijayavilāsa* of Chidvilasa Muni (ninth c. AD) and the *Mahabharata* of Oriya Bhaktakavi Sarala Das (fifteenth c. AD) state that the *Daru-Vriksha* was verily the mortal remains of Shri Krishna after His *Dwapara Leela* came to an end. Further, the daily worship in Shri Jagannatha Temple is based on the *Gopalarchana-vidhi* and Lord Jagannatha is invoked as Shri Krishna with the *ashtadasa Gopala mantra*. Even the annual festivals of the temple are based mostly on the *Leelas* of Lord Krishna and Lord Balarama as narrated in *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana*. The *utsava-vigraha* of Lord Jagannatha is *Madana-Mohana*, a beautiful



golden image of Lord Krishna. Seen in the above light, Lord Jagannatha is Shri Krishna who is worshipped on the *Ratnasinghasana* along with His elder brother Shri Balarama (Balabhadra), sister Subhadra and His Chakra Sudarshana. Similarly, during festivals connected with Lord Rama, such as *Shri Ramanavami*, Lord Jagannatha is adorned and worshipped as Lord Rama, Balabhadra as Shri Lakshmana and Subhadra as Devi Sita.

In Adhyaya XXVIII of 'Purusottama-kshetra mahatmya', it is stated that after the holy consecration and installation of the *Chaturdha-Vigrahas* in the temple built by King Indradyumna, the *Vigrahas*, for some time, assumed the form of Lord Nrisimha. Further, in all rituals during each *Navakalevara* including the *prāna-pratisthā*, the Lord is invoked with the thirty-two syllabic '*mantraraja Nrisimha mantra*'.

According to Saiva tradition, on the other hand, Lord Jagannatha is worshipped as *Siva-Bhairava-Ekapada*, Lord Balabhadra as *Ananta Naga* or *Sesha Naga* and Devi Subhadra as *Shakti*. We also find elements of *Shakta* and *Tantra* worship in the tradition of Lord Jagannatha wherein Lord Jagannatha is identified with *Mahabhairava*, Lord Balabhadra with *Rudra* and Devi Subhadra with *Durga*. In the daily worship, Devi Subhadra is invoked with *Bhuvanesvari mantra*. The *panchamakāra puja*, which is an integral part of *tantra-upasana*, is performed daily in the sanctum-sanctorum of the temple, though in a *sattvika* form. The shrine of Goddess Vimala located within the inner compound of Shri Jagannatha Temple is regarded as one of the most sacred *Tantra-Shakti peethas* of India; and during sixteen days of *Sharadiya Durga Puja* in the month of October, full-fledged *tantra upasana* is per-

formed in this *peetha*. Devi Vimala is regarded as *bhairavi* and Lord Jagannatha as *bhairava* in Tantrika texts ("*Vimala Bhairavi yatra Jagannathastu Bhairava*"); and Lord Jagannatha is himself referred to also as *Dakshinakali*.

In the twelfth century AD, Shri Ramanujacharya (the founder of *Shri Sampradaya* and *Vishistadvaita* school) visited Puri and invoked Lord Jagannatha as *Shri Krishna*, Lord Balabhadra as *Siva*, Devi Subhadra as *Ekanamsa Durga* and Chakra Sudarshana as *Nrisimha*, as per the *pancharatra* tradition. According to the *pancha-devata upasana*, on the other hand, Lord Jagannatha himself assumes the five distinct forms, namely, that of Narayana when on the *Ratnasinghasana*, Rudra during *Navakalevara*, Gajanana during *Snana-yatra*, Surya-Narayana during *Ratha-yatra* and Durga during *Sayana-yatra*. The *Chaturdha-Vigrahas*, as mentioned in the *Skanda Purana*, also symbolize the four parts of the *Pranava (Omka)* and represent the four Vedas: Lord Balabhadra symbolizing Rigveda, Devi Subhadra Yajurveda, Lord Jagannatha Samaveda and Chakra Sudarshana Atharva Veda.

The great Acharyas and founders of the different Vedic *sampradayas*, namely, Bhagvatpada Adi Shankaracharya, Shri Ramanujacharya, Shri Madhvacharya, Shri Nimbarkacharya, Shri Vishnu Swami and Shri Chaitanya—all of them visited Puri and invoked Lord Jagannatha according to the tradition of their own *sampradayas*. We thus find here a confluence of the various schools of Vedanta, namely, *Advaita*, *Vishishtadvaita*, *Dvaita*, *Shuddhadvaita*, *Dvaitadvaita* and *Achintyabhedabheda*. The *Chaturdha-Vigrahas* are invoked as *Saguna Sākāra* or *Nirguna Sakara* or even as *Nirguna Nirākāra* depending upon the

religious inclination of the devotee. The founder of the Sikh religion, Guru Nanak, and Sufi Saint Kabir also visited Puri and invoked Lord Jagannatha in their own tradition.

Furthermore, the tradition of Lord Jagannatha (as we have seen earlier) extends beyond the Vedic fold to include tribal traditions in ample measure. The Puranas have stated that the Savara tribals were the original worshippers of Lord Jagannatha in His earlier manifestation as Lord Neelamadhava. Even today, as per ancient custom, descendants of this tribal community, namely, *Daita-pati sevakas* have a special place in the Temple's ritual system; and during *Anasara* and *Nabakalevara* they directly worship and make offerings to the Lord according to tribal traditions and perform secret *seva* which no other person is authorized to perform.

Lord Jagannatha is also worshipped by Buddhists and Jains. Some scholars have identified the *Chaturdha-Vigrahas* with the Buddhist *Tri-ratna*, namely, Lord Jagannatha as *Buddha*, Lord Balabhadra as *Dharma* and Devi Subhadra as *Sangha*. It is pertinent to mention here that from the time of Emperor Ashoka (third century BC) till the fourth century AD, ie, for nearly seven hundred years, Buddhism was a prominent religion of Orissa. There is also a view that the sacred tooth-relic of Buddha was kept in Puri before being taken to Ceylon in the fourth century AD. In eighth century AD, King Indrabhuti of Oddiyan (Orissa), proponent of Vajrayana Buddhism, invoked 'Jagannatha' in his famous work *Jnana-siddhi* (seven hundred seventeen AD). In *Dharma puja vidhana*, a text of Dharma School of Buddhism by Ramai Pandit, Lord Jagannatha is identified with Buddha. Renowned saints of Orissa in the fifteenth-sixteenth AD, such as Sarala Das, and the fa-

mous *pancha-shakhas* of Shri Chaitanya, namely, Jagannatha Das, Balarama Das, Ananta Das, Yasovanta Das and Achyutananda Das, in their various writings have invoked Lord Jagannatha as *Adi-Buddha*. Moreover, in the *Dasāvatara* panel inside the *Jagamohan* of Shri Jagannatha Temple, Buddha is depicted as the ninth incarnation of the Lord.

Some other scholars have identified the *Chaturdha-Vigrahas* with the Jain *Tri-ratna*, namely, *Samyakgyana*, *Samyakcharitra* and *Samyakdrishti*. *Abhidhana Chintamani*, a Jain work by Hemachandra refers to Lord Neelamadhava and Lord Purusottama as *Tirthankara*.

We thus find that Lord Jagannatha is invoked and worshiped by virtually all the diverse religious *sampradayas*; each in their own way. This universal all-inclusive dimension of the tradition of Lord Jagannatha is a salutary reiteration of the famous declaration of Rigveda—*Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti* (Truth is one, the wise speak of it in various names). In the 'Purusottama-kshetra mahatmya' of *Skanda Purana*, Lord Brahma at the time of the consecration of *Chaturdha-Vigrahas* reveals to King Indradyumna the real identity of the Lord in the following words:

‘भेदाभेदौ तथा ख्यातौ जगन्नाथस्य ते नृप ॥  
येन ते मनसस्तुष्टिस्तेन भक्त्या समाचर ॥ ४७ ॥  
सर्वरूपमयो ह्येष सर्वमंत्रमयः प्रभुः ॥  
आराध्यते यथा येन तथा तस्य फलप्रदः ॥ ४८ ॥  
यथा सुशुद्धं कनकं स्वेच्छया घटितं नृप ॥  
तत्तत्संज्ञामवाप्येह तत्तत्संतोषकारकम् ॥ ४९ ॥  
एवं महिम्ना भगवानत्राविरभवन्नृप ॥  
यस्य यावांस्तु विश्वासस्तस्य सिद्धिस्तु तावती ॥ ५० ॥’

“Thus, O King, the division and non-difference of Lord Jagannatha have been told to you. Whichever way your mind is pleased, with devotion act according to that. This Lord pervades all forms and permeates all mantras. In whatever way He is worshiped



by anyone, accordingly does He confer fruits on him, O King, just as well-purified gold when shaped according to one's choice gets this or that name in this world and brings about this or that satisfaction. O King, with such glory the Lord has become manifest here."

... Adhyaya XXVIII – 47 to 50

These words are reminiscent of the famous proclamation of Lord Krishna in *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*—*ye yatha mam prapadyante* etc (Adhyaya IV – 2). It will be relevant to note here that Lord Jagannatha is also known as *Purusottama*. As explained in *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* (Adhyaya XIV – 17, 18) by the Lord Himself, He is called *Purusottama* (the Supreme Purusha) as He transcends *kshara* (the perishable) as well as *Akshara* (the Imperishable); and this *Purusottama* is called as *Paramātmā* (Supreme Self) and *Ayayah Isvaraḥ* (the Indestructible Lord) and He pervades and sustains the three worlds. Some scholars also point out that the rather unusual form of Lord Jagannatha (viz, that He is without hands, legs, ears, etc) is a manifestation of the Vedic conception of the Supreme Being (*purusam mahantam*) as revealed in *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* (*apānīpādo-javanogrihitā* etc—Adhyaya III – 19).<sup>5</sup>

From the above, it is evident that the tradition of Lord Jagannatha is a wonderful manifestation of *Sanatana Dharma*, the ancient and glorious heritage of our sacred Bharatavarsha.<sup>6</sup> Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, through his own direct spiritual experiences, reiterated the fundamental tenets of *Sanatana-Dharma*, viz, that although the Ultimate Reality is One, it manifests in many forms and can be attained through many paths. This essential truth is vividly demonstrated in the tradition of Lord Jagannatha.

Swami Vivekananda, speaking on 'The ideal of Universal Religion', said:

'We must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes. We must learn that the same thing can be viewed from a hundred different standpoints and yet be the same thing' (*Complete Works*, Vol. 2, p. 383).

On another occasion, speaking at a club in Pasadena (California) on 3 February 1900, Swami Vivekananda aptly stated as follows:

'Man has an idea that there can be only one religion, that there can be only one Prophet, and that there can be only one Incarnation; but that idea is not true. By studying the lives of all these great Messengers we find that each, as it were, was destined to play a part, and a part only, that the harmony consists in the sum total and not in one note. . . . The sum total is the great harmony' (*Complete Works*, Vol. 4, p. 120-121).

It is indeed this 'great harmony' which the tradition of Lord Jagannatha so clearly represents; and this is the vital wisdom message the world humanity is in dire need of today. When much of the strife and conflict around the world is prompted by communal or religious differences, the underlying principles of the tradition of Lord Jagannatha, (nay, of *Sanatana-Dharma*) that God is One and that He can be invoked in myriad, infinite ways and that (irrespective of differences in caste, colour, religion, nationality etc) we are all children of the One Divine Father (*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*) and co-travellers on the path to Divinity—these verily are the eternal and fundamental truths that have to be well understood and imbibed by mankind today, if peace, harmony and prosperity is to reign on this beautiful planet of ours.

*Loka samasta sukhinau bhavantu.  
Om shanti shanti shanti.* ■

## THE TRADITION OF LORD JAGANNATHA

### NOTES

- 1 Balgangadhar Tilak dates Rigveda to around 6000 BC while some other scholars are of the view that the scripture was composed much earlier.
- 2 According to *Jyotish Shastra*, *Srimad Bhagavata* and other Puranas, the Vedic time-period calculation is as follows :-  
Kali-yuga = 4,32,000 human years or 1200 *Divya-varshas* ie  
360 human years = one *Divya-varsha* or Celestial year  
Dwapar-yuga = 8,64,000 human years or 2400 *Divya-varshas*  
Treta-yuga = 12,96,000 human years or 3600 *Divya-varshas*  
Satya-yuga = 17,28,000 human years or 4800 *Divya-varshas*  
One Chatur-yuga = 43,20,000 human years or 12,000 *Divya-varshas*  
71 Chatur-yugas = 30,67,20,000 human years = one Manvantara  
14 Manvantaras = 429,40,80,000 human years = one Kalpa  
One Kalpa = one day of Brahma (which is followed by one night of Brahma when there is complete dissolution)  
100 days of Brahma = Life Time of one Brahma  
The 14 Manus ruling each Manvantara in a Kalpa appear in the following order:  
(1) Swayambhuva (2) Swarochisha (3) Uttama (4) Tamasa (5) Raivata (6) Chakshusha (7) Vaivasvata (8) Savarni (9) Daksha Savarni (10) Brahma Savarni (11) Dharma Savarni (12) Rudra Savarni (13) Roucha Savarni and (14) Indra Savarni.
- 3 According to *Srimad Bhagavat Mahapurana* (11<sup>th</sup> Skanda – XXVII Adhyaya) *Pratimās* (images) are of eight types—'*pratimashavidhasmrita*':  
(1) *sailamayi*—stone image (2) *darumayi*—wooden image (3) *louhi*—metallic image (4) *lepya*—wall painted image (5) *lekhyā*—brush painted image (6) *saikati / mrimmayi*—clay image (7) *manimayi*—precious stone image and (8) *manomayi*—mental image.
- 4 According to *Bhuvanaprakasha*, clay *pratima* should be renewed every month, painted *pratima* every year, wooden *pratima* every twelve years, metallic *pratima* every one thousand years and stone/precious stone *pratima* every ten thousand years.
- 5 Verse 19 in Adhyaya III of *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* declares that—'He (the Supreme Being) is without hands, feet (and yet) moves and grasps; He sees (though) without eyes; He hears (though) without ears. He knows whatever is to be known; and of Him there is no knower. They speak of Him as the First, the Purusa and the Great.'
- 6 Unfortunately and quite erroneously, many scholars both Indian and foreign in their various publications on the subject, have dubbed the tradition of Lord Jagannatha as a 'cult'. While the etymological meaning of the word 'cult' (derived from the Latin *cultus* and French *culte*) means 'worship', the term has assumed a rather unsavoury meaning in modern parlance. Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* (1986) defines 'cult' as 'a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious'. *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (10<sup>th</sup> ed., 2001) states that 'cult' denotes 'a relatively small religious group regarded by others as strange or imposing excessive control over members—something popular or fashionable among a particular section of society.' In recent years, fanatic groups like *Aum Shinri Kyo* (convicted for genocide in Tokyo) are branded as 'cults'. Surely, the glorious tradition of Lord Jagannatha does not deserve this ignominy!

Gajapati Maharaja Dibyasingha Deb, Chairman, Sri Jagannatha Temple Managing Committee, delivered this Swami Sankarananda Memorial Lecture at the Institute on 22 May 2004.