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A Reassessment of Spirituality Attached with the Chariot Carrying Lord Jagannath during the Car Festival at Puri

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ABSTRACT

Realisation of soul is the real crown and glory of life. Its glow enhances epistemological vision of humankind, enables him to surmount mundane melancholia and widens the prospect of liberation. This aspiration is well demonstrated in the campus of Lord Jagannath at Puri. In the name of ritualistic celebrations Jagannath consciousness inspires spirituality and encourages the enlightenment of 'self'. Of all the great festivals associated with the cult of Lord Jagannath, the celebration of the Car festival is both important and interesting for its explicit synonymy with Indian philosophy and spirituality.

Keywords: Nandighosa, Taladhwaaja, Debadalana, Brahma, Atma, Ananda, Vamana

INTRODUCTION

Built in the 12th century A.D., the majestic, magnificent and monumental temple of Lord Jagannath is situated at Puri in Odisha (an eastern state of India). Located on the shores of the Bay of Bengal, Puri is one of India's four *Dhamas* or places of pilgrimage. It is also known as *Shri Kshetra* or *Jagannath Dhama*. The Gods Jagannath, Balabhadra and the Goddess Subhadra constitute the main trinity of deities worshipped in the temple. Some researchers attribute that Lord Jagannath was initially worshipped by the tribal people. Subsequently through the

process of cultural evolution Lord Jagannath accepted reverences of different sects of Hinduism. Lord Jagannath is Vishnu, the principal deity for the Vaishnavites, Lord Balabhadra is Shiva, the chief deity of the Shaivites and Goddess Subhadra is *Sakti*, presiding deity of the *Saktas*; Lord Sudarsan is Sun, the chief deity of *sauras*. We know that tradition is a set of ritualistic practice which has root in the past, continuum in the present. Although Lord Jagannath is regarded as the God of the masses, in His tradition all categories of people beginning from the king to the commoners are engaged to perform different rituals as sober servitors. The essence of Jagannath culture is '*Basudhaiva Kutumbakam*' which means the whole world is one family and all the human beings are His children. It stands for universal brotherhood, love, tolerance, equality and fraternity. His tradition, image, rites, rituals and festivals are uniquely unique.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CAR FESTIVAL

Festivals have significant values. The periodic celebration of festivals not only break the melancholy of vulnerable life but also reflects cultural excellence and traditional vigour of a specific society. The Car festival of Lord Jagannath is one of the historically remarkable religious festival celebrated enthusiastically in accordance with the scriptural prescriptions at Puri since antiquity. Innumerable pilgrims and visitors congregate at this cultural capital of Odisha to witness the presidential celebration of the Lord's journey with His associates to Sri Gundicha temple for long seven days in the name of *Ratha Yatra* or Car festival.

It is said that movement or journey from the sanctum to any other place is an inseparable part of worship in Hindu pantheons. Although the representative deities of temple, (popularly dubbed as *Utsava Murti* in South India and *Chalanti Pratima* or *Bije Pratima* in Odisha), partake in these journeys, the uniqueness of the Car festival lies in the participation of the

presiding deities together with their representatives. "For the devotees and believers, it is considered as the most auspicious occasion. *Rathe tu Vamanam drustva punarjanmam na vidyate*. A glimpse of *Vamana* that is Lord Jagannath, referred here as one manifest in the dwarf form, is sure to ensure emancipation from the cycle of birth and death" (Pani 129).

To materialise this magnificent celebration, three prodigious wooden cars (*ratha*) are constructed and placed before the 'lions gate' (the eastern entrance) of the Grand Temple to accept the presiding deities as well as their siblings on the second day of *asadha* (June-July) which marks the beginning of the rainy season in Indian peninsula. With the proper ritualistic procedure, Lord Jagannath and His associates ascend the respective chariots. Enthusiastic devotees and excited mortals drag the chariots along the main road (*Badadanda*) from the Grand Temple to the Gundicha Temple which is installed at the north end of the main road. After sojourning there for about seven days, the Lords return to Their usual sanctum in the same respective cars. This return journey is christened as *Bahuda Yatra*.

On the following day of *Bahuda Yatra*, the deities are attired in golden components in the name of *Sunabesha*. The ritual of *Adharapana* (offering of delicious drink) is also done on the chariot on the next day of *Sunabesha*. The deities go back to the sacred shrine (*Ratna Simhasana*) on the 13th day of the bright fortnight of *asadha*, which is commonly known as *Niladri Bije* (or return to sanctum). Thus the celebration comes to an end leaving behind a remarkable influence upon society and spiritual impression on humanity.

SPIRITUALITY AND LORD JAGANNATH

The cult and consciousness of Lord Jagannath is sublime synthesis of different doctrines and praiseworthy practices. For this reason, it may be erroneous to devalue its rituality as mere celebrations and fictitious exhibitions. Rather without any

obstinacy we should accept its spiritual symbology which draws metaphysical energy and inspiration from the essence of monistic world view and which is sporadically expressed in the Vedas and explicitly explained in the Upanishads. The ecclesiastical denominations associated with the cultic ritualism of Jagannath consciousness invite the devotees not to enjoy the festivity only. It inspires the sensible to realise the immortal 'self' beyond the worship of images and traditional inclinations.

The macroscopic practices affixed to the great car festival is appallingly appealing. But, its ingrained beauty lies in paving an in-depth understanding of inner subjectivity. On the surface, the celebration seems supreme, when Lord Jagannath amid a huge congregation of devotees astride on His chariot called '*Nandighosha*' which literally means 'the Call of Bliss', and rolls towards the temple of Shree Gundicha. Lord Balabhadra ascends his chariot called '*Taladwaja*' which means 'the glory of completeness'. Goddess Subhadra scales on her '*Darpadalana*', which means 'elimination of vanity'. Although the Trinity with Lord Sudarshan (who settles in '*Darpadalan*') participate in the grand Car Festival, Lord Jagannath is presupposed as the principality of institution. Hence the Car Festival is also entitled as '*Ghosa Yatra*' after the Lord's chariot that is *Nandighosa*, which proclaims *Ananda* or eternal bliss. "Ananda refers to the state of infinite unalloyed pleasure which one experiences on attaining *Brahmanhood*" (Mohanty 14). This is confirmed in the Bhagavad Gita (18.54): "*Brahma-bhuta prasannatma na socati na kankshati* – when one is self-realised, he immediately becomes happy, joyful (*Prasannatma*)" (Prabhupada10). The Chandogya Upanishad (Ch.U.VI. II) also asserts Brahman to be the Ultimate Reality, and to realise Brahma is the secret of bliss. *Brahma* is beyond time, space. As per the Swetaswetara Upanishad (6.16 & 6.5), "He is the maker of all, the knower of all, the self-caused, the knower, the author of time". He is to be seen beyond the three kinds of time. He is the beginning, the source of the causes which unite

the soul with the body. This indemonstrable and invariable being can be realised as one only.

“*Bhrahma*, in its unmanifested (*avyakta*) state is non-attributional (*nirguna*) and its manifested stance attributional (*saguna*)” (Mohanty 15). Again, in the non-attribution state, *Brahma* is absolutely indeterminable and defies any prediction. In the attribution stance, *Brahma* can be ideated upon, prayed and loved. His realisation is possible with the reorganisation of divinity and the divine nature of a human beings. The Upanishads encourage an ulterior mode of knowing. The Mundak Upanishad speaks about knowing by becoming – “He who knows the Supreme *Brahman* becomes *Brahman* himself” (II. 1.15).

The inquiry into the existence of *Brahma* and the ways to realise Him has been a quest, continuing since time immemorial. Several saints and seers have made their sincere efforts to encounter a solution to this problem by using their steadfastness and scholarship. At this juncture the symbology of *Nandighosa*, the holy chariot of Lord Jagannath, demonstrates it as ease. A general awareness of the Indian Vedic philosophy is necessitated for an understanding of spiritual symbology associated with Jagannath consciousness. It is emphasized many a times in different scriptures that the highest duty of man is to care for his soul, that is to cultivate that healthy state of soul which is true knowledge, the attainment of the good. When a man becomes fixed in such knowledge he will as a matter of course act correctly in all affairs, he will be beyond the dictates of the passions and he will remain peaceful and undisturbed in every circumstances. The cultivation of divinity, enlightenment of understanding and possibility of divine realization would be simple at the *Darsan* (vision) of Lord Jagannath on the chariot. “The vision of God brings infallibly the adoration and passionate seeking of the Divine – a passion for the Divine in his self-existent being, but also for the Divine in ourselves and for the

Divine in all that is. To know with the intellect is simply to understand and may be an effective starting point. It may not be and it will not be if there is no sincerity in the knowledge, no urge towards inner realization in the will, no power upon the soul, no call in the spirit: for that would mean that the brain has externally understood, but inwardly the soul has seen nothing. True knowledge is to know with the inner being, and when the inner being is touched by the light, then it arises to embrace that which is seen, it yearns to possess, it struggles to shape that in itself and itself to it, it labours to become one with the glory of its vision" (Aurobindo 324-325).

While standing before the Lord (on the sanctum of Nandighosa), an intellectual investigates the metaphoric materials mingled with the infrastructure of the chariot and significance of Lord in it. The verses in the Katha Upanisad (1:3:3:4) provides certain clues for the understanding.

*atmanam rathinam viddhi sariram rathameva tu
buddhim tu sarathim viddhi manh pragrahameva cha
indrayani hayarmahur visayam stenu gocharan
atmendriaya monoyuktam bhoktetyahur manasinah.*

Body is considered to be the chariot and soul as the charioteer. Senses are horses. Mind is the bridle. All the sensory objects constitute the root for the horses. The co-ordination among the soul, senses and mind brings supernatural bliss. "Brahman, the macro-cosmic consciousness, having created the world, resides as the very essence of every particular and conceals Himself within, as the inner self" (Mohanty 19-20).

*esa sarvesu bhutesu gudhatma na prakasate
drusyate twagraya buddhaya sukhmaya sukhmadarsivih*
(Katha Upanishad 1.3.12)

The Self does not shine on surface, though it is hidden in all beings. The subtle seers having sharp intelligence can see it only.

Hindu cosmogony, by and large, rests on three fundamental visions, namely 'one' evolves into 'many', the 'many' evolve into 'one' and the beginning and end of the evolution is one and the same. Evolution is a passage from 'unity' to 'unity', in and through diversity. The perceived diversities are phenomenal. At the core, there is one selfsame consciousness. That, which is 'one' appears as 'many', just as air which is formless, assumes different forms, depending on the nature of the bubble in which it resides.

*bayujryathaiko bhabanam prabisto
rupam rupam praturupo babhuba
akastatha sarbobhutantaratma
rupam rupam praturupo bahischa.*

(The Katha Upanisad, II, 2.10)

(As air accepts different shapes according to the container it enters, the 'Self' or Brahman within all living beings in varied in and out of all)

There is no antithesis between animate and inanimate. The so-called inanimate is nothing but the crudified state of consciousness. The same consciousness throbs in all in the name of soul or Brahman. Our experience of the world is always characterised by consciousness of diversities. When we evaluate the world as relative, contingent, momentary and subject to sublation, it seems unreal. When an individual realises the *Brahman* as the singular continuum in and all around, the gains a new horizon of bliss. He moves God-ward. The world becomes a reality in his approach. Such a person addresses the exigencies of the practical world with reason and circumspection, keeping the ultimate goal in mind. He cannot be satisfied with the discovery of 'whys' and 'hows' of the creation. Rather, he will engage himself in the attempt to attain the ultimate destiny, variously named as *Mokshaya*, *Mukt*, *Nirbana*, *Paramartha* that are the terms synonymic with emancipation from worldly bondage.

In the discipline of Indian philosophy the bondage of the individual is explained by twin concepts namely *maya* and

avidya. *Maya* is the creativity of Brahman by which He takes different incarnations and keeps His reality veiled from outer view. *Avidya* (nescience) refers to the limitation of individuals for which they fail to explore the 'eternal' behind the 'ephemeral', 'celestial' behind the 'terrestrial'. Form is misinterpreted as the essence. Because of *avidya*, an individual imposes the 'unreal' on the real. Brahman by His *maya* conjures the world of forms and identity. The individual, on account of his illusion (*avidya*) misinterprets the form as reality. Above the influence of *maya* and *avidya*, there is the inspiration of *vidya* which is liberative. It encourages irresistible desire in man to attain the eternal state of bliss, while *avidya* drags one to the world of degradation and darkness. Again the benevolent *vidya* is categorised in two terms that is *Apara vidya* and *para vidya*. *Apara vidya* refers to the intellectual enlightenment with socio-moral integrity which helps one to maintain a meaningful existence. *Paravidya* is self effulgence with the manifestation of consciousness which is the immanent principle of every-existent and is explicitly manifested in man. It liberates the individual from the bondage of phenomenality.

Lord Jagannath while sitting on the sanctum of *Nandighosa* spells out the prerequisites of an ideal devotee: '*Rathe the Vamanam drstva punarjanma na vidyate*' which means beholding *Vamana* in the chariot of Lord Jagannath, one is liberated from the phenomenal cycle of birth and death. In the scriptures of Hinduism *vamana* is portrayed as one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu. He is in form of a dwarf Brahmin youth. But, the expression '*Vaman* in the chariot' indicates the unique manifestation of the Divinity in our body chariot.

asariram sarireswanabasteswabastitam
mahantam vibhumatmanam matwa dhiro no sochati

(KathaUpanishad 1:2:20)

(The formless divinity who is the stable among the unstable, the great and all-pervading, resides in physic. By knowing and realising Him, wise men became blissful)

In all physical forms, the divinity exists as the disembodied super consciousness. Realising the omnipresent sovereign soul, the sanctimonious saints gain spiritual equilibrium and pious solace.

Though Lord Jagannath seems huge in His structure, in scriptures He is *Vamana* or dwarf.

*angusthamatrah puruso madhya atmanitisthati
isano bhutabhovyasya na tato vijugupsate*

(Katha Upanisad 2:1:2)

(The divinity in its transcendental form measuring the size of a thumb resides in the essence of physic that is *atma*. He is imperishable and beyond the effect of time)

It is further corroborated in the Svetaswetara Upanishad (3: 13):

*angasthamatrah purusontaratma
sada jananam hrudaye samnivistha
hruda manveso manasavi klrupto
ja etadviduramriutaste vabanti.*

(He, who is the size of figure, resides in the heart of individuals as the inner self. By realising Him, a devotee becomes immortal in the paradise of bliss).

God manifests Himself as the soul in all the animates. The body may be taken as a chariot and Lord Jagannath appears as *Vamana* (miniature form) in it. "He is the eye of all eyes, the nose of all noses, the ear of all ears – He is the Lord of ever-changing cosmos. The Lord of the universe or *jagat*, is Jagannath. In the body chariot, realisation and the *darshan* of the soul as *Vaman* – Lord Jagannath will lead to liberation, to freedom from the cycle of birth and death, and to freedom from all forms of sorrow. Without this realisation, this human life chariot will be driven astray by the extroverted sense horses. The mind without a bridle will surely be afflicted with sorrows, sufferings, adversities and despondency (Prajnananananda 172). In every human being, Lord Jagannath is every abiding. He is like the *Prana* or life force of every living being the yogic texts say:

*prano he bhagavanisah prano visnuh pitamahah
pranena dharyate lokah sarvam pranamayam jagat*

(*Prana* is God: Lord Shiva, the destroyer; Vishnu, the sustainer; and Brahma, the creator. *Prana* sustains the creation and everything in the Universe is *Prana*).

CONCLUSION

In every human being we should perceive the chariot and experience the presence of the Lord as *Vamana* who is the only doer. After this espy there will be a great transfiguration of life with simplicity, austerity, beauty and divinity. The celebration of the car festival induces us to concentrate over body, mind and soul on the supreme *purusha* (life force) Purusottama, Lord Jagannath. "Anchoring in Him (Lord Jagannath) if we sweep away all of our weakness, mistakes and animal propensities, then our life will be a fulfilled and perfect one. This is the path of freedom and emancipation" (Prajnananananda 174). But to earn the precious perfection in life the seeker must have amalgamation with Jagannath consciousness through *Sadhana*, which is exemplified by the movement of chariots on the Grand Road towards the Gundicha Temple. As human body is a precious channel to expedite the God-ward-journey, the symbolic inspiration of chariot encourages an aspiring devotee to make his heart a hermitage of God.

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