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Unwinding ‘Jagannath Culture’: A Journey through Niranjana Mohanty’s

Prayers to Lord Jagannath

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Abstract:

Orissa is identified as a unique land. Its geographical location, vegetation, food habits, agriculture and overall Orissan Culture, an offshoot of ancient Indian Culture is an outcome of the long tradition in the ancient land speaking the same language (Odia). The Sun Temple at Konark, Lord Jagannath Temple in Puri with all other Gods worshiped in the land have a major role in shaping religious, spiritual, social and literary mind of the people of Orissa. Like every region has some or the other deity governing the psyche of its devotees; and we experience a bent of mind developed. In Maharashtra we have ‘Vitthal’ of ‘Pandharpur’, ‘Sant Dnyaneshwar’ of ‘Alandi’ shaping the sub-conscious of people, their ideas about morality through “The Bhagwat Dharma”, and many other Gods and Goddesses having control over the minds of devotees. Among these all, Lord Jagannath an incarnation of Lord Vishnu after Lord Krishna is the deity worshipped by many states of eastern India. The deity has devotees Buddhists as well as Hindus. A new culture and faith is seen, different from any other in the name ‘Jagannath Culture’. It is one such culture, developed having deep faith in the deity, in the mind of every Orissan. This culture and the God behind has been a popular subject of poetry. Many poets in Oriya and other languages have written poems on this subject. Mohanty’s long poem “Prayers to Lord Jagannath” deeply rooted in the philosophy and reality of this culture, reveals the riches and talks of the manifestations of the same. The dynamic deity no longer remains the deity, but turns a companion, guide, mother, father, saviour, enemy (not in the routine sense), and all together a responsible figure for everything is the faith in this land. Jagannath Puri is considered as one of the ‘Char Dhams’ (four pious pilgrim places) in India. This paper attempts to excavate the cultural resonances, roots and describes the life patterns and social practices through the famous poem “Prayers to Lord Jagannath” by Mohanty.

Keywords: Culture, Indian/Orissan culture, Jagannath culture and faith from Orissan belief

About the Poet:

Niranjana Mohanty, a bilingual poet from the mystic land of Orissa was a poet-critic and professor at the famous Visva-Bharti, Santiniketan. He passed away recently contributing to the body of Indian English Poetry. As a devoted teacher, an established poet and a sensitive

human being published seven volumes of poems. His *Prayers to Lord Jagannath* published in the year 1994, is an epitome of what it is known famously the 'Jagannath Culture'. Lord Jagannath has become an identity of the people of Orissa. The Jagannath Temple in the coastal city of Puri has been a source of attraction to devotees from various religions, castes and creeds across the world. The annual Car Festival of Lord Jagannath is a subject of curiosity for many.

The term 'Culture' is defined and used to represent belief of a particular group of people in understanding some universal truth evolved (at least for the group) on the basis of tradition, faith and affection with a dire need over a longer period. It is a complex term representing the way of life of a group of people. It is not one soul culture, available in the country India but, there are various shades within one very large Indian Culture. These shades in various regions of this vast country determine the faith, food, clothing, rituals and many things in daily life (Arora, 2011: 15). It takes hundreds of years to shape a way of life, and hundreds more to accept change in the present tradition. 'Jagannath Culture' is one such culture, developed having deep faith about the deity in the mind of every Orissan. This culture and the God behind has been a popular subject of poetry. Many poets in Oriya and other languages have written poems on this subject. Mohanty's long poem *Prayers to Lord Jagannath* deeply rooted in this culture reveals the riches and talks of the manifestations of the same. The deity no longer remains the deity, but turns a companion, guide, mother, father, saviour, enemy (not in the routine sense), and all together a responsible figure for everything. Let's see what this culture is and how it appears through the famous poem.

Jagannath Culture in *Prayers to Lord Jagannath*:

Prayers to Lord Jagannath, a long poem by Mohanty is written in fifteen parts. Every part, in an average has fifty stanzas of three lines each. Last three parts; exceptionally have more than fifty stanzas of three lines each. Except this, the poem has got complete structural and thematic unity to its core. The poet, in the introduction itself, sharpens the reader's spiritual consciousness, by letting him know the place of this crippled deity in the life of an ordinary Orissan. Every human being needs, someone else to accompany, guide, love, share and even to blame at, or be thankful for anything/something in life. This someone else can be- parents, brother, sister, beloved, wife, children, friends, or either of them, or all of them together in the form of some God. Exactly, herein one enters into the world of spirituality and true religion, and expresses his inner being, his world of faith, his sense and sensibilities, his pathos, grievances, his crushed and destroyed dreams and finally his hope.....Prayers! This poem of Mohanty is the manifestation of these all and many other things, that govern the life of human beings, through *Prayers to Lord Jagannath*. His provocation in the introduction itself in the words-

Lord Jagannath, a name that consecrates every heart, a name that brings in the nectar of salvation, a name that rings infinitely the bells of love within, a name that endears us to the ecstatic aspects of our existence, a name that redeems us from pain and penury, a name that helps us measure the invisible dimension of our blood's flow, a name that sanctifies our dialogue and speech, a name that emboldens and

ennobles us in the midst of asphyxiating problems, a name that guards our hearth and home. (Mohanty, 1994: Intro)

makes it very much clear, that the deity has grabbed every core of their existence. The temple of the lord is the place where lies the heaven. It is the belief of the people, that salvation can be achieved only with the blessings of Lord Jagannath.

The poet begins his prayer with an invocation, as an epic begins. Here he asks his God-

Oh Lord of the universe,

burn my breath before I pray;

tear out my tongue before I bray. (ibid: 01)

The speaker, a devotee here is begging with his God, for so many things. He has questions in his mind, about the inability of his saviour. He wonders about, who would have made him God. He also calls him a coward, but at the same time whenever shaken by grief, by the end of the day, lights incense-sticks and stands still closing his eyes. This, though is a proclamation by the poet here, but he is just a representative of all the devotees of Lord Jagannath, and others knowing Lord Jagannath with other names (incarnations) throughout the country. Every individual has a feeling of remorse, doubt, hatred, respect, love, affection for the deity he believes in. So we see this monologue by the poet with respect to his God.

This relationship between the devotee and God is unique one. On the one hand he complains and on the other loves and respects his deity. Even in ordinary life, one can be angry with very close people only. So does the speaker, while addressing the Lord. He asks-

Do you really mind such frankness?

I wear no mask. I'm open to the bone.

Little do I care for your mercuric wrath (ibid, 11).

There is the freedom and frankness he shares with the deity expressed in his tone unknowingly. Further, he goes to the extent of saying that, even if he objects, he doesn't care facing curse also. This attitude of the speaker (devotee) reveals a deep bonding between the two, based on mutual faith and affection.

Though the entire poem is addressed using first person singular pronoun 'I', the poem has an appeal for all those who have faith in Lord Jagannath. It deals with personal things like teasing friends, some theft in the life of the speaker, but the emotions expressed have universal appeal. When we go through the lines-

Weren't you there

when my friends beguiled

with lies, wild and corruptible?
Weren't you there in the bazar
when the thieves stole
my sacred month's salary? (ibid, 15)

The reader can have a feeling of his own experience while reading these lines. It is a fact, though not been voiced publically, that a common man remembers God when in problem, and more often blames Him for not being behind him, whenever faces problem or loss. The poet here voices the same emotions. Further he puts his unreasonable demand also, saying-

Did you ever caution the thieves?
that I was a salaried man
in the teaching line, without any bribe? (ibid, 15)

Though, it appears foolish but, these kinds of grievances are often witnessed by people. God is the only entity we can place these grievances before. He gives a touch of professional piety, by mentioning his profession in the age of corruption.

The poet not always speaks about his self. He too has that social consciousness. He blames God, for not paying attention towards his devotees. While addressing the issue of farmer's suicides in the region, he uses harsh words, we often hear cursed by rural folk in our country. He says-

Where did you hide yourself, Oh Lord,
where did you shelter with fear
like a coward and knave? (ibid, 17)

Here, one can experience the social consciousness and genuine feelings for fellow human beings. Though a salaried man, the speaker has a deep bonding for his brothers. This is what Jagannath culture is. This unusual faith holds the social nerve of the people of Orissa. This deity and the pious *bhakti* he has for the same in the mind of the poet does a magic. His devotees have the same world with ideas of morality and brotherhood that entrusts sensitivity for one another. They share joys and sorrows and accompany the needy fellow human beings as and when time demands. His concern for the victims of suicide in villages, his mourning the loss of future of the family, whose head 'Gopi' committed suicide could be seen through the lines-

my villagers donated rice, rupees
for the funeral. His children clean utensils in the hotel now
while rats scamper on their books.

How could you bear such sights, Oh Lord,
when stones in your temples melt away? (ibid, 40)

The belongingness of the poet with the prevailing problems could be sensed by these words. God is the only responsible being here. The devotee can put all his grievances before him. The prevalent problem of farmer's suicide has created havoc in the Indian society. The one who quits, attains relief from the everyday deaths but what about the survived. They have to suffer a lot. Children from well-to-do families work in hotels leaving their school. Thus, their generations get ruined due to the problem of poverty. Ordinary people cannot blame the politicians for their failure to curb this menace. There is always this Lord of the universe, Jagannath, to be blamed at for any wrong. When becomes helpless, due to the utter disregard by the Government, its ministers, he complains, he also complains the religious men indulging in corruption, in the words-

The priest in the temple smells of
garlic and gin. The minister crows
on mountains of money.
The doctor goes tipsy on his table
where the etherized patient
dreams of meeting angles;
children in Kalahandi chew
paper scraps. Flood in Asks
drinks blood. Tigress gets stuffed. (ibid, 43)

This is a common picture in our country. The poet here, voices the problem of corruption in the field of Administration, Medicine and Religion. Poverty in Kalahandi destroys the future of small children is a matter of great concern for the poet. Flood situation in Aska killed many, People are helpless. No one cares for this from the Government. Even the priests are busy in enjoying sexual pleasures. He puts this before God, becomes nervous and blames him in agony-

What use this prayer?
What use is this obsolete coin?
What profit in this anomalous devotion
to a snake-bellied, thick-skinned
stone-oriented Lord, who seeing sees not,

listening listens not, touching touches not? (ibid, 43)

As if he turns panic and sees no redemption to this situation. This is not the only thing but there are many like drought, migration of village people to cities, their pitiful habitats in cities, moistened eyes of cows due to drought and then he pleads for the safety of his countrymen. Perhaps, this is what the tradition has taught him. Here ends his one side of complaints against the Almighty. He contemplates and turns wise learning the problems of his God, only to appreciate and be thankful to him.

The poet in this mood of concern for his deity performs the role of parents. People engrossed in *bhakti* cross the fragile boundaries in-between the Deity and the devotees. They stand on equal platform. Perhaps, this is the ideal situation in any faith across the globe. The reader in the following lines witnesses their relationship full of care and concern for one another.

Who would weep for you, O Lord,

when your scope to die is sealed?

Descend to us, leaving your throne! (ibid, 57)

He feels himself at ease compared to the oddities before the deity. Lord Jagannath stands responsible to many in trouble. The devotee (the Poet) here understands that, his misery is nothing before the misery of God. And God's misery is not for his own reasons, but for his devotees. This approach of the speaker invokes the famous philosophy of Christianity with the sacrifice of Lord Jesus for his people. This underlines the greatness of sacrifice and the feelings about sacrifice become more intense in him.

Take away my eyes and give them

to the born blind, at least one to each,

so that they can see how the mother looks. (ibid, 58)

These are not just words. They have a very deep sense when uttered. When he sees that his prayer too is uncertain like the fate of the children in our country, yet they go to schools and colleges with hope. Perhaps, being hopeful is the essence of human life. This hope only can play some role in continuing this tradition. He puts his desire further in the words-

We water the plant of hope in our hearts

... so that in my winter years, when the sight

fails I shall see through their eyes

the round eyes of my Lord, through

their ears I would listen to the prayers

of others, and thus listening, I would

consecrate the images of my grief and delight. (ibid, 117)

Thus, the poet is hopeful, that being hopeful only we can survive is the principle of mysterious life. And, in this battle of survival, Lord Jagannath has a leading role to play. He is a model of sacrifice and patience before human beings; challenging and urging them to adept their lives as his own.

Thus, the entire poem is set in the shifting tone from being remorseful to understanding and in the end growing wise enough to appreciate life as it is. At times, he rebels and attacks God. Complains for not being careful, prays for the well being of people, comments on various contemporary issues like, corruption, rape, murder, poverty, politics, natural disasters, epidemics, personal issues and what not. Perhaps, for the poet, Lord Jagannath is the ultimate solution for these and many more problems prevalent in our time. In fact, we are helpless, is the crux of this discourse. The village folk are alive with this hope in the deity. Some may call it blind faith or superstition, but it is a truth indispensable. This culture has kept people intact in the land of Orissa. So, we see people dancing, singing, playing, laughing, and eating blissfully during the annual car festival. They wait throughout the year for that day, to pull the chariot of their loved God, where they experience the heavenly bliss. They taste the true nectar and become immortal continuing the tradition.

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