

Jagannath Consciousness and the literary interpretation of the Play

Bandiśālāre Biśwapati

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Lord Jagannath is the soul of Odisha and of the people of Odisha. Mythologically, He is the essence and the Lord among the 33 Crores Hindu deities. The Odia has created a literature of innumerable pages of the infusion of Sabar culture into the Odia culture. For thousands of years Lord Jagannath and the religion centered around him has been instrumental in regulating the history, culture, literature and its social life. His greatness is not only confined to Odisha rather he has embraced devotees from all over India and the world. For the devotees from Western, Southern and Northern India, the *Nilāñcala, Puri* is the holiest of places. He is the illumination and the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Time and again he has incarnated upon earth to safeguard virtue whenever there is a threat to its existence.

The moment an Odia poet takes up his pen to compose, he invokes Lord Jagannath for proper completion of his literary creation.

*“śrī jagannāthankara ājñā śire dhari
grantha bakhāṇi bi mū ādya prānta kari.”*

--Balaram Dash.

The poet Achyutananda Das who had visualized the sovereign form of lord Jagannath sings:

*“jagannātha pāde sarbe kale pujā
garuḍa piṭhire bije se debādhirājā
jaya jaya jagannātha ārata bhañjana
patita pābana swāmi śrī madhusūdana.”*

--Harivansha.

Achutyananda Dash, the poet of Pañcasakha age, had given form to a noble poetic consciousness, addressing Lord Jagannath. In it he has proved that Lord Jagannath and His temple is universal, his doors are open for all, irrespective of class, and religion. He is the savior of all. Lord Jagannath is of all and all are his, irrespective of class, creed and religion.

In the past, he had represented the human race keeping himself above all geographical and social differences. Historical evidence says that many preachers of various religions, attracted by this Lord of *Nilāñcaḷa* (*Puri*) refined their religious sensibilities by coming and staying in this holy place. People from all over India have regarded Puri as the holiest of places till the late 20th century. But today it seems that the greatness and grandeur of both Lord Jagannath and his abode Puri is in shatters. Greed, inhumanity, selfishness, and cunningness have taken the place of the past greatness and noble thoughts. Nationwide it has become a matter of discussion and criticism in the media. The administration and priests are supposed to be responsible for it. For the last few years these indisciplines were visible in special festivals (Car Festival, Naba kaḷebara etc.) and rituals of Lord Jagannath. Because during these periods devotees, from all over the world come to see Lord Jagannath and fulfill their wishes. The love and adoration of the devotees towards the Lord make them vulnerable to the mental, economical and physical exploitation during their religious practices. This has not only damaged the reputation of the Lord but has caused the loss of love and faith of devotees from other states of India towards Lord Jagannath. Today Jagannath consciousness has sunk into a very distressed condition.

If we analyse the different ages of Odia literature like the Early age, Middle age, and Modern age, we can see the deep liking and interest with which the literary multitude has depicted the grandeur of Lord Jagannath in their works. He has taken incarnation for safeguarding Truth, Virtue, Justice, humanity and most importantly for the liberation of mankind. Such literary creation on Lord Jagannath has added to the prosperity of odia literature. In literary works like fictions, plays, poetry and prose, the topic of Lord Jagannath remains an integral context even in the modern age. Here too the literary discourse renders importance to the generosity and magnanimity of Lord Jagannath. One such literary creation is the play, “Bandiśāḷāre Biśwapati” (the Lord of Universe in the prison cell) (Pub. 2012) by Niladri Bhusan Harichandan (1946-). In this work he has presented the many problems of the devotees facing in the premises of the temple. At the same time through this short play the playwright has portrayed how the temple administrators and the greedy priests are concerned only with self gain without any regard for the Lord, his all embracing consciousness and the *Sanātana dharma*. This ten act play is based upon the racial discrimination. In this play it is shown that for this degradation, not only the priests and a particular kind of Brahmins, the Tuḷasipatriā Brahmins are the culprits but also the weak government administration is equally

responsible. Most often problems related to the entry of devotees into the temple arise. Again the priests charged huge amount from devotees for the purpose of worship. Also it is found that during the famous festival and rituals the devotees from abroad are deprived of having even a glance of their beloved Lord. During the famous Car festival the harassment of the devotees is so acute that they become the limelight of national news channels.

The playwright Harichandan is well aware of the fame and name of this noble God. He has shared his discontentment over the degrading and defamation of such a great culture for a few greedy and gullible priests and politicians. He wants discipline, peace, brotherhood and humility. Puri is the place of all these noble thoughts and it is the harbinger of all these lofty thoughts. Everyone should think about the establishment of the culture and tradition leaving all the meanness. For thousands of years this wooden idol and arya God is adored and admired by the kings of Odisha. Śaṅkarāchārya himself have tried for the patronage of this noble tradition and custom. But today the God, the devotees and the religion are the victim of this meanness. “*Bandiśālāre Biśwapati*” is a dramatic display of how Lord Jagannath wants to mingle and merge himself with the devotees.

The play “*Bandiśālāre Biśwapati*” is based on the issue of the entrance to the temple. While pilgrims from every corner of the world arrive here for visiting Lord Jagannath, the priests allow there on the basis of caste system. Many of them return disappointed of not being allowed. But according to the custom, Jagannath is of all. He is the Lord of the king and the beggars, the rich and the poor. He is the Lord of the brahmins and śudras (untouchables). He is the Lord of the Hindus and Christians. It is there in the history that whoever and whenever has recalled him, he has appeared there. We have instances, like the Elephant, Drupati, Dāsiā Bāuri, King Purussottam, Sālabega all of whom are graced by the Supreme Lord. He has taken fermented rice (pakhaḷa), leaf fry (sāga) and coconut to grace them. The so called holy and humble Brahmins are playing politics of discriminating in the name of Him. They have not only discriminated rather have insulted, kicked and used slangs for the devotees. They consider themselves as the live Gods or the incarnations of Lord Jagannath. They say that if the untouchables enter the temple then it will get impure. The idol would get impure and so as the food. When the legacy of Dasa Bhoi aware us about the entrance to the temple, the temple administration and Govt. have taken all favor of the gullible Brahmins. That is what the playwright has mentioned in his play. The complexities

that the play reflects are the inactiveness of Govt, and the superstitious incivility of the priests. Strong willpower, strict implementation of the laws/rules by the government and the humbleness of the worshipers are needed for preventing such nuisance. It is there in the *Laxmi Purāṇa*, that Goddess Laxmi had taken rice in the house of an untouchable. Instead of respecting and promoting the ideals of our great Lords they are displaying their mean thinking. They have been doing all these for their self satisfaction and dominance. In actuality it should not happen. For their indecency both Jagannath culture and Odia culture are blamed. Jagannath is the symbol of the Aryans and Non-Aryans getting one. The God of a sovereign religion. This tradition and custom is in practice since time immemorial. For a few selfish priests and politicians, a great religion and its God have become mean. A reformation should be brought to this tradition. As a whole the playwright Niladri Bhusan has felt such complexity for the last few years. The news and criticism about the conflict between the priests, the devotees and the administration has been witnessed. The intensity of these conflicts touches its peak during the Car festival. The priests and other servants, (worshipers) try to take advantage of earning for the whole year during this festival. The politicians and administrators also support them. That's the reason they show such indecency both inside the temple and over the Car (Ratha). Very often it is seen that the High Court and Puri Śāṅkarāchārya needed to interfere and express their view to sort out such shameless issues.

The plot of the play "*Bandiśālāre Biśwapati*" is very much based upon the contemporary issue. He has reflected in it the shattered glory of a great culture and this inhuman behavior of the priests. The prejudiced priests have opposed Nira Dash and a foreign researcher of this great culture. At the next level the promoter of the humble Jagannath consciousness, Dasa Bhoi is assassinated by the assassins. Even after much effort from the C.M. and the Mediator Professor there is no change in the scenario. At last, the Great Lord himself is stranded, and not spared of such bestialities. The priests have locked him in the temple. They have made him vulnerable. He is insulted with the rubbish behavior of the priests. His heart is crying, seeing the insanity of them towards his devotees. He is stranded alone on the stage in the last scene of the play. The Lord of the Universe is in the prison cell. The dialogue he has articulated displays the insanity/cruelty of the priest and the gratitude of the devotees. The playwright has depicted at last the relation between the God and the devotees. The vision of the Lord of this Universe is the solution to the play. If the priest can realize the same then all the conflict in between the God and devotees will come to

an end. He is watching his devotees. He has said “I have become restless, let my devotees come to me. They will hold me with all their deeper feelings and emotion. A stream will be created out of streaming team tears of their eyes. I will glow like anything getting a dip in that water.” (P. 51)

In the play Dasa Bhoi has advocated for the entrance of all into the temple irrespective of class, creed and religion. He has called conference and meetings to free the temple from the clutches of the priests. According to Bhoi, the priests are exploiting the devotees with their created superstitions. On the basis of it a huge mob has gathered in front of the temple to rebels against these unlawful priests. To handle such sensitive situation the act 144 is in action. At last the situation comes under control. 218 of the rebels are killed and another 927 are injured by the attack from the alliance of priests and police. Dasa Bhoi is arrested for leading the mob. World renowned writer Nira Dash has informed the C.M. about the indiscipline and irresponsible acts of the temple authorities. She knows that the C.M is valuable to the vote politics and helpless. Still she has braved to Gove the proposal to the C.M. that “She wants to be given the foothills of the Green Mauntain, just: - 1 K.M away from the temple. I am trying to build a temple with the help of the Indians residing abroad and some foreign Jagannath lovers. They have promised me of huge donations.... The temple of sovereignty, whose length, bredth and height would be more than the existing temple. Its (existing temple) art and architecture would be very much followed in building the new temple. A priest would be chosen of the highly knowledgeable, wise men irrespective of caste, creed and religion. The doors of the temple will remain wide open for everybody.” (P.34)

Dasa Bhoi and Neera Dash have given up after long struggles with the temple administration and the priests. The supporter assassins of the priests have kidnapped and murdered Dasa Bhoi. The priests have dominated both the public and the authority. They are regulating the temple rituals as usually. Lord has never expressed His wills. He has looked blank since ages, the temple has remained their empire, such is their perception. They have given ultimatum to the authority that if they do not support them then they will lock up temple. All the rituals would be stopped. The idol will remain in darkness. The professor who tried to prevail and promote the humble and sovereignty of the Great Lord, is threatened and they have maintained their supremacy.

If we look into the past, since mythological age, the notion of untouchability and caste system is very much prevalent in the Indian Society. Such practices centering around God, become horrible at times. In 21st century such discriminations are illogical. Religious reformations are desirable in age of scientific reformations. Unless such conflicts will crop up, both God and his devotees would be insulted. The politicians and administrators would try to take advantage of it. But in reality nobody is paying attention to the great interest of the nation, the God and the culture. Both Puri and Odisha come under harsh criticism due to the conflict between the devotees and the priests. If it continues then never can this land and the culture get liberated and prosper. The play, full of conflict and suspense is well composed from the dramatic point of view. The playwright has been successful in portraying the land of Puri. The Jagannath consciousness is in deprivation in this deprived time. The playwright has done his duty and played his part by attempting to bring a change to the system and a solution to the perennial conflict through this play.

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