

SriKrishna Jagannatha: Translation of Mushali Parva from Sarala Dasa's Oriya Mahabharata

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1. Translator's Introduction

On the eastern coast of India, on the shores of Bay of Bengal, in the town of Puri in the state of Orissa, stands the magnificent temple of Jagannatha, whom the local people worship as the "Lord of the Universe". The massive structure (214 feet high) and many smaller structures in the complex occupy a space of about 42,000 square feet, surrounded by a 20-foot wall. The *nagara*ⁱⁱ style temple, called the '*badadeula*' (Big Temple) in the local Oriya language, is about a thousand years old, constructed between 8th and 12th centuries. Together with the large temple complex at Bhubaneswar and the *black pagoda*ⁱⁱⁱ of Konarka, the temple at Puri is among the finest specimens of Orissan art and architecture in post-Guptan India. The temple and many other pilgrim sites in town have made Puri a major destination for Hindu pilgrims since 800 AD. The *Ratha Jatra*^{iv} (Car Festival) at Puri is world famous for its pageantry, faith and devotional ecstasy of the attendees.

1.1 The Deities

The genesis of the deities in the temple at Puri has been a topic of speculation. There are four wooden deities about four feet high on the main pedestal. The simple lines and curves of the sculptures attest to the antiquity of their shape and construction. Vibrant earth-tone colors made from vegetable dyes accent the facial curves and the eyes of the images and lend them beauty and majesty. The four images, from the left to right, are: (i) white colored Balabhadra, (ii) yellow colored Subhadra, (iii) black colored Jagannatha and (iv) red colored Sudarsana. The Sudarsana image, hidden from direct public view, is nondescript and is installed behind the

image of Jagannatha. The four colors have at times been interpreted as representing the colors of humanity on the planet. Every twelve to forty years (varying with astronomical calculations), the images are 'buried' and new images are made out of a specially recognized margosa tree. During this rebirth, called *nabakalebara* (new body), a wrapped package of *brahma*^v is removed from the old deity and placed in the new Jagannatha deity. Besides the four images, metal images of *Madhava*^{vi}, *Sridevi* and *Bhudevi*^{vii} are installed at the front of the pedestal. During all rituals and the daily routines, the Jagannatha deity is treated as the King of Orissa, whom the rest of the people, including the past kings of the region and the present royal family, attend as servants.

Unlike most Hindu deities, who are worshipped using images made of stone or metals, Jagannatha, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarsana are unique in that they are the only deities worshipped using images made of wood. Amongst the four images, the image of Jagannatha is considered the most primitive, and the sanctity and faith associated with its worship is most peculiar. The rituals for all four deities follow tantric^{viii}, *vedic*^{ix} and *pauranic*^x prescriptions. From the *tantric* point of view, Jagannatha is *Bhairava*^{xi}, from the *vedic* point of view he is *Purushottama*^{xii} and from the *pauranic* point of view he is *Narayana*^{xiii}. That these main currents of Indian tradition accept his importance enhances his mystique and lends complexity to his metaphysics.

The tantric rites of Jagannatha - especially the preparation of food offerings and the construction and painting of new images - are connected to the tribal culture of Orissa. It's claimed that the tribal *sabaras*^{xiv} first discovered ('saw') the deity of Jagannatha (before he was installed in the temple) and 'owned' him. They continue to have the right of 'seeing' the new image first. Jagannatha liked to 'accept' their food offerings while in the forest and 'continues to like' them in his new abode in the temple. A particular group of devotees called *daitas*, who are the progeny of the earlier *sabaras*, have the exclusive privilege of carrying the principal meals to the deities and caring for them during their 'sickness' following the 'bathing' festival in mid-summer.

1.2 Interpretation

The vedic invocation '-*Ado yaddaaru plavate sindhoh paare apuurusham tadaa rabhasva durhaNo tena gachha parastaram*'^{xv} is interpreted by Sayana as "There exists on sea-shore in a far-off place the image of a deity of the name Purushottama (*apuurusham*) which is made of

wood floating as it were, on the sea. By worshipping that wood indestructible, attain the supreme place (of the Vaishnavite).^{xvi} Natives of Puri recognize Jagannatha as Purushottama and it is likely that the wooden image of Jagannatha predates the entry of *vedic* religion into Orissa. Because all solid objects originated from ‘water’, the legend may point to mysterious driftwood in the ocean as the precursor of the images.

The Bhagavata purana teaches a modified Samkhya theistic hierarchy, whereby Mahavishnu enters the manifested creation as Narayana in the form of *kaala* (time), the twenty-fifth element. The Supreme Being, by virtue of His Divine Power, pervades everything, internally as an indwelling spirit and externally as time. *Kaala* is abstract and dark, and Jagannatha has been interpreted as *kaala* in Narayana. Other aspects of Mahavishnu are manifest in three other deities of Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarsana, who represent *jnana*(knowledge), *shakti* (energy) and *chaitanya*^{xvii}(consciousness).

The triad of Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra has been connected to the Buddhist troika and the belief persists among some historians that the shrine at Puri contains mortal remains, possibly a tooth, of Gautama Buddha. This line of thinking emphasizes the legend of the *brahma* that Hindus believe to be encased in the deity. The car festival most likely is rooted in Mahayana Buddhism. It is worth noting that the Bhagavata Purana incorporates Gautama Buddha into Hindu theology as an incarnation of Vishnu. Jagannatha is viewed as a symbol of the Buddha by many Oriya mystics.

1.3 Sarala Dasa’s Mahabharata

The connection between Jagannatha of Puri and SriKrishna of Dvaraka is thought to have originated in the 15th century with the version of Mahabharata written by the Oriya poet Sarala Dasa^{xviii}. The exact dates for the poet are not established and it is only known that he was a contemporary of King Kapilendra Deva, who reigned 1435-1467 AD in Orissa. Sarala Dasa was born as Siddheswara Parida in a farming family, in a village about forty miles from Puri. His Oriya version of the monumental epic is the first complete retelling of the original in any of the regional languages of India. While Sarala Dasa followed the themes and plot of the original story, he added local stories, colloquialisms, and depictions of everyday Oriya life. Set in the rustic *daandi*^{xix} meter of bardic poetry, the characters speak in the voices of ordinary people. The composition highlights the poet’s exceptional narrative and creative abilities.

Sarala Dasa created the story of Jagannatha in the retelling of the Mausala (Mushali in Oriya) parva (book 16) of Mahabharata. *“With the advent of the kali^{xx} age, SriKrishna decided to relinquish his earthly incarnation. All his kinsmen, the Yadavas perished through fratricidal fighting and SriKrishna was slain by an arrow from hunter Jara, who mistook his feet for the ears of a deer.”* From this point on, the story departs from the original. *“Arjuna came and tried but failed to cremate SriKrishna’s body. He was advised by a voice from the sky to float SriKrishna’s remains (pinda^{xxi}) in the ocean. Meanwhile with the advent of kali, Naryana hid in the forest and incarnated himself as madhava^{xxii} among the sabararas. The sabararas worshipped his image as sabarinarayana. The Vaishnavite King Galamadhava sent messengers to discover this image. When his messenger Brahmin Vasu succeeded in discovering its location, it disappeared from view and the Kings received celestial instructions to install a stone deity in Yamanika (Puri). Thus Puri became a place of pilgrimage for all the faithful.*

“Many centuries later, an expedition of another king Indradyumna reached Puri and learned of the local legend of the installation of Jagannatha and SriKrishna’s pinda. Indradyumna built a big temple at Puri (Nilagiri) and searched for the pinda to install. The king was advised in a dream to meet the sabara Biswabasu. The latter received the celestial message that SriKrishna’s pinda would appear as a wooden log in a well, the Rohini Kunda at Puri. The Brahmin Vasu and the Sabara Biswabasu retrieved the log. The Lord commanded Biswabasu to construct the deities. Biswabasu was helped by the timely arrival of an old Brahmin man, who disappeared after the images were created. The Brahmin Vasu identified Jagannatha as Vishnu, Balabhadra as Siva and Subhadra as Brahma. The curse on Brahma to be invisible in Kaliyuga was confirmed.^{xxiii} By the order of the king, the families of the Brahmin Vasu and the Sabara Biswabasu remained as custodians of the deities.”

Sarala Dasa’s tale has become a folk tradition in Orissa and has made Puri a prime center of SriVaishnava faith. SriChaitanya’s residence in Puri in early sixteenth century added a final touch to the story of SriKrishna. The three words: ‘Hare’, ‘Rama’ and ‘Krishna’ in the Vaishnava mahamantra^{xxiv} represent the three deities in the temple. While the *gaudiya* Vaishnavas emphasize SriKrishna as a spiritual entity, the *sabararas* in Puri go through a period of mourning, penance and purification, when Jagannatha leaves his body and new deities are constructed. This complex synthesis of pre-Aryan Indian culture and the Aryan theology has still not been fully explored.

No other temple rivals Puri in offering a paradigmatic celebration of the family of SriKrishna. Service is first offered to SriKrishna's older brother Balabhadra, then to his sister Subhadra. SriKrishna Jagannatha is only served at the end. The Car Festival of the deities may well have a Buddhist origin^{xxv}, but could also be connected to the *Srimadbhagavatam* story of Balarama and SriKrishna leaving Vraja^{xxvi}. The non-brahmin aspects of services at Puri are much akin to non-brahmin practices in services in SriKrishna Temple at Dvaraka. Finally the personal services offered at Puri resemble those in Dvaraka and have made Jagannatha a household deity in the state of Orissa.

I have used the critically edited version of Sarala's Mahabharata compiled by late Artaballabha Mohanty. The Mushali parva in the compilation has thirteen chapters, ten of which are linked with the SriKrishna Jagannatha story. These ten chapters are included in the translation below. Sarala's story of Yadava women in Dvaraka (chapter 7), his description of the holy places of interest in Puri (chapter 10) and their mythological significance (chapter 13) are omitted in this translation keeping only the stories that are directly related. Occasional diversions from the main story in the other chapters are also omitted in favor of compactness.

Oriya^{xxvii}, a language derived from Prakrit and ultimately Sanskrit, has a lyrical tone. Sarala's Oriya metaphors are often hard to render into English. Extending the style of the original Mahabharata stories, Sarala goes into an intricate web of fables, legends and storytelling, one embedded in the other. The translator hopes that the flavor and the contents of this rich story will be of interest for further research. We will try to offer translations of other Sarala literature^{xxviii} at a later time.

Endnotes :

- ⁱ Faculty and Consultant, Harvard University, 180 Bedford Road, Lincoln, MA
- ⁱⁱ The architecture presenting a progressive elevation from the entrance to the main shrine
- ⁱⁱⁱ The entrance of the temple at Konarak only remains and appears like a pagoda. The main temple has been destroyed.
- ^{iv} The deities are carried in massive wooden chariots in the month of July.
- ^v A mysterious packet and its tradition of offering "life" to the deity has continued.
- ^{vi} The image of SriVishnu
- ^{vii} Two wives of SriVishnu
- ^{viii} Rituals following tantra, using symbols and gestures
- ^{ix} Rituals prescribed by the Vedas, using fire sacrifice
- ^x Rituals following the later scriptures, using flowers and fruits
- ^{xi} The male counterpart to tantric yogini.
- ^{xii} The manifestation of the cosmic consciousness. Bhagavadgita, Chapter 15.
- ^{xiii} The life force of all existence in the creation. Srimadbhagavatam, Canto 3, Ch 26.

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- ^{xiv} The primitive hunting tribe living in the hills of India.
- ^{xv} RgVeda, 10.155.3
- ^{xvi} K.C.Mishra, The Cult of Jagannatha, 1984.
- ^{xvii} Ibid.
- ^{xviii} Considered as the father of modern Oriya language
- ^{xix} A meter used in Orissa for folk singing. The two lines of the stanza can be of uneven length, but rhyme together.
- ^{xx} The last of the four hindu eras: satya, treta, dvapara, kali.
- ^{xxi} The body residue, symbolizing the conscious spirit of life.
- ^{xxii} Hindus believe that the cosmic forces become deities in the age of *kali*.
- ^{xxiii} There is a folklore through the scriptures that Brahma was cursed by Vishnu not to get worship on the earth because he had played pranks on Vishnu.
- ^{xxiv} Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare, Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare.
- ^{xxv} There is historical evidence that Puri was a Buddhist center and Buddha's relics were carried in a procession on the Festival days
- ^{xxvi} Srimadbhagavatam, Canto X, Ch 39
- ^{xxvii} Is a part of the Indo-European family, brached with Bengali and Assamese.
- ^{xxviii} Sarala also wrote a version of Ramayana and Chandi Purana in Oriya.