

Exploring the Cultural and Educational Significance of Nabakalebara Festival

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Abstract: The paper analyses the complex cultural and religious importance of the *Lord Jagannath Cult*, emphasising its origins, the persistence of its ancient traditions, including the distinctive *Nabakalebara* ceremony and its inclusive aspects. The Jagannath tradition exemplifies a confluence of tribal beliefs and mainstream Hinduism, with the *Jagannath Temple* in Puri as a pivotal sacred site. The temple's daily and periodic rituals, conducted by the *Sevayats* under the oversight of the King of Puri, involve treating the deities akin to living beings, receiving care and attention comparable to that afforded to humans, which is both intriguing and indicative of religious devotion. The tale of *Kanchi Vijaya* is emphasised as an important folk legend, utilised by students in Odia medium schools to foster children's awareness and instil faith in God—an endeavour that traces back to the initiatives of freedom fighter Gopabandhu Das during the colonial era. Particular emphasis is placed on *Nabakalebara* in relation to its folk beliefs, rites, and rituals, specifically the ritualistic renewal of wooden idols that occurs periodically. This practice is derived from ancient Indian texts and is understood by scholars to represent the transmigration of the soul—the philosophical concept that, akin to the human soul's transition between bodies, deities also assume new forms. The paper contends the importance of educating children about the necessity of documenting and disseminating our rich cultural heritage, enabling them to comprehend the depth of our culture, which encompasses science, literature, folk beliefs, and coexistence.

Keywords: Nabakalebara, Brahmamaru, Lord Jagannath, Puri, Odisha.

I. INTRODUCTION

India is a large country with diverse cultures and religions. Religion plays an important role in the life of most of the communities and interaction of members from different communities plays a significant role in the socio-religious life of the people. Society has a role to shape the personality of its members. In the traditional days each community played an important role in socialising its members. Today with the influence of mass media, westernization, break up of joint family, shifting from traditional occupation to modern job opportunity and chase for money economy, traditional culture is losing its importance leading to ignorance of ageold tradition among the younger children. *Nabakalebara* ceremony of *Lord Jagannath* at Puri in Odisha is one such important event which is both interesting and educative.

The Government of Odisha has introduced the popular folk story of *Kanchi Vijaya* at primary level. One of the reasons that could be related to such a narrative is the fact that popular folktales of a nation need proper sensitization and can help in the boosting up of personality of youth of the region. It also gives the message that *Lord* can be with his disciples whenever there is a crisis. Since *Lord Jagannath* is like any other human being the story states that the *Lord Jagannath* and *Balabhadra* proceed to *Kanchi* like any other soldier in a black and another white horse. They deliberately leave behind the unique ring of *Lord Jagannath* as a symbol of their march ahead of the king so that the king and the soldiers feel morally high as their dear *Lord* is with them. During the colonial era freedom fighter Gopabandhu Das through his writings popularised the same. Today there is a need to know more about this tradition as it is an amalgamation of science, folk beliefs, literature, strong network of different communities.

Lord Jagannath Cult is a unique tradition where we see the tribal religion is entering into the mainstream of Hindu life and occupying one of the most sacred centres for the Hindus. *Lord Jagannath* temple of Puri is considered as one of the four sacred *Dhams* of Hindus as advocated by *Adi Shankaracharya*. The etymological meaning of *Jagannath* is the lord of the universe. *Lord Jagannath* is also referred to as *Purushottam*, i.e. supreme being. The foremost important and

interesting facets of *Jagannath* culture are the daily and periodic rituals performed by the *Sevayats* (servitors) under the supervision of the King of Puri. Upon observation, it is found that the age old traditions are just like serving a human being.

Why *Nabakalebara* (new embodiment): *Naba* means new in Odia and *Kalebara* means new body. This is a ceremony of periodic renewal of wooden images of *Lord Jagannath* temple. This includes the idols of *Lord Jagannath*, *Balabhadra*, *Mata Subhadra* and *Sudarshan*. The story is not as simple as it appears. Different scriptures prescribe eight types of images to be worshipped. It is a narrative of age old tradition with unique cultural and socio religious tradition. Indian shastras state that printed images are replaced in one year, wooden images after 12 years, metallic images are replaced after thousand years while stone idols are replaced after 10000 years (Dash, 2015). But then the important part is the images are made out of wood. Only neem (*Azadiracta Indica*) is used for Lord Jagannath and other deities of Jagannath temple. The *Bhavishya Purana* narrates different plants species to have their association for making of different images as given below (Mahapatra, 2015).

- 1) *Suradaru*, *Sami*, *Madhuka*, *Chandan*: auspicious for the Brahmin.
- 2) *Arista*, *Tinduka*, *Aavastha*: auspicious for Kshatriya.
- 3) *Kesara*, *Amra*, *Sala*, *Sarjaka*: auspicious for Sudras.
- 4) *Nimba*, *Sriparma*, *Panasa*, *Arjuna*: auspicious for all classes.

Mahalik (2015) mentions that the human body after the death gets decayed but not its *Atma* (soul). Similarly *Purushottam Jagannath* relinquishes his old body and assumes it in a new body. There are various hypotheses regarding lord Jagannath. Since there are no folk stories from Sabar community reflecting about *Lord Jagannath* the only hypothesis being narrated needs elaboration. It is believed that *Lord Krishna* while taking rest in his old age under a tree in a forest at *Dwaraka* was killed by a hunter named *Jarasandha*. He had shot an arrow at *Lord Krishna* thinking that it was a deer. Realising his mistake he prayed to *Lord Krishna* to forgive him as he did not expect him in the forest.

II. NABAKALEBARA FESTIVAL

This festival is celebrated in a year having two *Ashadha* months as per the Hindu almanac. Double *Ashadha* occurs at a long interval which varies from 8 to 19 years. From the first day of odia (*Sankranti*) of the *Ashadha* to the first day of the next month (*Sankranti*). This duration varies from 29 days to 32 days with an average of 30 days 10 hours 30 min. 16.4 sec as per solar month. In the lunar month type i.e. in the full moon day to the next full moon day spanning over 29 days 12 hours 44 min 2.9 sec on an average. So we find that in every 32 and half solar months one lunar month is extra. To bridge this gap one extra lunar month referred to as *mala masa* is created having no *Sankranti* day. In the local dialect it is also called *Domasee* (joint month). Of the two the 1st month is called the *mala masa*. And when *mala masa* or joint month fall in *ashadha* then the *nabakalebara* festival of lord Jagannath is celebrated covering 4 fortnight of *Ashadha*. The 1st three fortnight (45 days) from *Snana Purnima* is called *Maha Anasara*. During this period the 1st two fortnight are utilised for construction of the new deities and *Patalikarana* of old deities. The 3rd fortnight as usual remains for *anasara* days of Lord. Certain sacred rituals are conducted from the first day of *Ashadha* i.e new moon day which is the 1st *Amabasya* of *Ashada*.

The state of Odisha has a unique style of observing lunar month which starts from the next day of full moon day up to the end of next full moon day. Where as in other parts of our country the month starts from the next day of *Amabasya* (new moon) till the end of next *Amabasya*. Nabakalebara rituals can be broadly divided into 8 stages. The first stage is popularly known as *Banayaga Yatra* (search for Daru), the second stage is called the *Daru Nirnaya* (selection of wood). The third stage is popularly known as *Savarpalli Nirman* (construction of a temporary shed for *Sebaks*). *Daru Chhedan* or cutting of a suitable tree for the deities is the fourth stage. Carrying of the appropriate *Daru* from the site to the temple is the fifth stage known as *Maha Daru Yatra*. In the sixth stage construction of deities take place which is known as *Karusala Paddhatee*. *Brahmoshab Lila* is an important step in which the storing of *Brahma Padartha* take place. Finally in the 8th stage, *Koili Baikuntha* activities take place which are secret rituals related to the deities in *Koili Baikuntha*.

III. NABAKALEBARA VERSUS SIMILAR TRIBAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

A exploratory study conducted by Eschman (1978) in different parts of Odisha to find more about the prototypes of *Nabakalebara* and the origin of *Lord Jagannath* made him to search for the tribal communities who practiced the ritual of renewal. Eschman identified a typical shrine in a Kondh village where an open mud house with a thatched roof and an enclosure fenced by posts of *Sal* wood and within the enclosure there is always a stout post of *Rohini* wood. The shrine is normally empty but may contain another post of *Mahula* wood. The priest in such places are referred to as *Dehuri* belonging to the Kondh community. The renewal of the post takes place whenever there is a sacrificial feast. The worship of Mother Goddess *Khambeshwari* and the worship of *Narasimha* are all found in Western Odisha. Even

the *Madalpanji* directly states a connection between *Puri Nabakalebara* and the practices of renewal in Western Odisha. It may be noted that apart from Puri, Sonepur is the only instance where the ritual of renewal takes place at the temple level. While the semi-brahmin *Pati Mahapatra* conducts the rituals of Puri, the *Thandapathi* conducts similar rituals in Sonepur. These vestigial socio-religious practices in different parts of Odisha, especially in Western Odisha, we find the simile that exists about the unique style of *Lord Jagannath* in many rural and tribal milieu.

IV. CONCLUSION

Formal education is an important step in socializing the children with a scientific approach for creating a better citizen. The State has the mission of giving free primary education to one and all without any prejudice. The current National Democratic Alliance government has introduced the new National Education Policy (NEP) to identify our cultural heritage to usher a new era rich with our unique civilizational traits so that we can feel not only proud of our heritage but can also explore the possibility of finding out any new discovery that can help mankind. The inclusive nature of Jagannath cult is an important aspect in the contemporary society where communities are divided along religious lines. Great Muslim devotees like *Salabega* whose mortal remains are buried on the holy grand road of Puri highlights the inclusive nature of *Jagannath Cult*. The tradition in Jagannath cult can be compared with Buddhism where such traditions like the car festival and discarding caste distinction in receiving *Mahaprasad* are similar. Tribal culture that is worshipping the Lord in a wooden log has similarity with Lord Jagannath. We find *Saivism, Shaktism and Jainism* are amalgamated in this faith along with Buddhism, tribal tradition and Vaishnavism.

The selection of *Daru* trees or the sacred wood of neem tree for making up of new images for *Lord Jagannath*, *Balabhadra*, *Subhadra*, *Sudarshan* are interesting not just from religious point of view but identifying specific physical characteristics in each of the trees (like the bark of the tree, colour of the wood, external signs and symbols) is beyond the spiritual aspect. Children in contemporary society should explore the scientific aspect of different rituals involved in the above rituals as it is an approach towards sustainable environment management. Students should know about the astrological and astronomical timing in our tradition. Both lunar and solar calendar calculation should be popularised in the appropriate educational platforms among students so that they can learn more. Researchers should try to link the different festivals at different times of the year and their significance from a scientific point of view should also be explored. Finally the selection of neem tree which has natural antiseptic and insect repelling properties as *Daru* or sacred wood is to be explored by young researchers. Efforts should be taken to find out whether this natural resistance in neem plant is helpful in protecting the sacred elements which is referred as *Brahmapadartha* is of utmost importance. We also learn from the field experiences *Nabakalebara* takes place with the traditional ecological knowledge in identifying water bodies near the Neem plant, lack of bird nests and the absence of any type of parasitic plants reflect the richness of our observation of nature in order to identify the best quality of wood. The folk stories narrated by the sacred specialists need to be documented and disseminated. Rich emotional narratives by the local people and their activities are equally important for understanding the psyche of the people. The philosophical ideas at various stages of *Nabakalebara* provide us the rich holistic approach for better understanding of this age old tradition.

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