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NEELACHAKRA: A SACRED FAITH ON LORD JAGANNĀTH

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Abstract

This article aims to throw light on the significance of the Crown of the temple of Lord Jagannāth, the Lord of the Universe and the strong faith in Him. Vaishnavism is one of the major traditions within the broader Vedic or Hindu spiritual culture. Jagannāth culture is also a part of Vaishnavism and it bears a special gravity on Vaishnavite culture. Jagannāth culture is explored very vastly but Neelachakra which is a prominent part of Jagannāth culture and temple rarely gets attention. So here is my attempt to explore the most indispensable part of Jagannāth Temple and faith which is Neelachakra the first thing one will notice while stepping at Puridhām.

Keywords: Jagannāth cult, Kalingan style of temple architecture, Significance of Temple

The Neelachakra is the sacred iconic symbol for the Jagannāth in culture and for the devotees. The engineering of the chakra is very beautiful. As known from the name Neelachakra the chakra or the sacred wheel is blue. The amalak silā (fluted final) that crowns the top of Sri Jagannāth temple at Puri is intended to serve as a balance to keep the heavy structure properly centred over which the dadhinauti (Kalasa) and one with Patākā (flag) are seen from a distance while pilgrims are entering into the holy city. This wheel is called Neelachakra (Blue wheel) and the flag on it is called Patitapāban bānā. As per custom every day a different flag is waved on the Neelachakra.

The Neelachakra is fixed on the top of the main temple at a height of sixty-five metres and ninety centimetres from Bada dānda (Grand Road Level) with a staff of four and a half metres long to hold the Patitapāban bānā (flag). The Neelachakra is made of eight metals comprising fifty per cent iron, twenty-five per cent copper and the remaining twenty-five percent zinc, mercury, lead, brass, silver and gold¹. The dimension of the Neelachakra is circular with an outer diameter of three metres and fifty centimetres, and having outer perimeter of eleven metres. The inner perimeter is about 7.92 metres. Eight ribs of 56 cm. each are connected with the centre. The thickness of the Neelachakra is fifty mm. with designs on the outer circumference. The weight of the Chakra is above one hundred and fifty kilograms².

The wheel is the symbol of motion. It is nothing but the replica of Lord Vishnu's powerful weapon Sri Sudarsan Chakra which all the divine powers are attributed. As such it is customary to put a chakra, atop Vaishnavite temples. Renowned archaeologist Vidya Dehijia opined in her book Early Stone Temples of Orissa except for the Gandharadi temple of Boudh district in Odisha that "The crowning Chakra of Neela Mādhava temple and the crowning linga on the top of the Siddhesvar temple are carved of fine-grained chlorite. Siva temples are normally crowned with a trident and as we know, this appears to be the only example in India of a crowning linga³.

Though a wheel is fixed atop the Jagannāth temple, this is the ayudha (weapon) of Lord Vishnu, Lord Vāsudeva and Lord Jagannāth. This ayudha known as Sudarsan chakra is a pillar carved out of wood and is worshipped in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple along with the trinity – Balabhadra, Jagannāth and Subhadra and the pillar-shaped Lord Sudarshan is seated on the left side of lord Jagannāth on the Ratna Singhasan (jewel throne) inside the main temple.

The Neelachakra is the ayudha of Nilambaradhara Vishnu. It is also a symbolic representation of Sri Jagannāth's wheel of administration of Visva Brahmānda(Universe). If any ruler moves the wheel of administration during his reign (sasanakāla) properly, good governance is ensured. Sri Jagannāth operates the divine wheel for bestowing peace and blessings on mankind. So it is said – "Chakra Sevyam Nrupasevyam Na Sevayam Nrupa kevalam."The engineering skill of Neelachakra is also a mystery. The devotee always sees the Neelachakra from the front side in every direction. The Neelachakra has no shadow from any direction at any time and is also dust and rust-free.

So everyone should bow down before the Neelachakra so that Lord Sudarshan will protect him from all danger and give him salvation. The Neelachakra is also called Uhada or Raksha Kavacha (shield) for the mankind⁴.

Above the Neelachakra there flies a triangular flag (7.6 meters) called Patitapābana bānā fastened on a fixed bamboo mast 4.5 metres high over the Neelachakra. The flag is either deep red or yellow. Over the middle part of the flag, there is a symbol of a crescent moon and the sun painted in white. Besides the main Patitapābana bānā, there are other similar small triangular flags fastened which the devotees donate. Devotees have to pay the concerned sevayat some amount of their labour according to the length of the flag they donate.

If on any occasion Patitapābana bānā is slipped out of the mast of the Neelachakra, Prasada (sanctified food) is not offered to Lords until the flag is restored. In busy hours when dry Prasad (bhoga) cannot be offered to Sri Jagannatha inside the temple the Sevaks offer it from the inner courtyard of the temple by exalting to the Neelachakra. This bhoga (Prasad) is called Chakra Monohi considered as Prasad given to devotees⁵.

There are some special traditions Sevaks known as Chunnara nijogi or Garuda Sevaks⁶ to perform the seva of fastening patitapabana bana on the mast of the Neelachakra. They also render service to Garudastambha in the Natamandir. Garuda sevakas are very expert in climbing the steep temple wall within a few minutes up to the Neelachakra because they climb daily at sunset to change the Patitapāban bānā and other adjoining flags. On each Ekadashi (eleventh day of the lunar month) the Garuda Sevaks lift the Mahadeepa (the great lamp filled with ghee and lighted wick) to Neelachakra and place it on the side of it. Before climbing the temple, the concerned Sevayat wears patabastra, silk cloth and ties flags on his waist for easy climbing. They climb from the side of Jagamohan up to the Neelachakra. They first unfasten all flags and tie new flags and then climb down slowly. Many devotees lay prostrate before the Garuda Sevaka with reverence. If they desire to have a token of the old flags, they get it from him in case the sevak so pleases.

The Neelachakra also serves as earthing from a practical and scientific point of view to protect the temple from thunderstorms. A metallic alloy of Neelachakra has the capacity of earthing as a good conductor. It is a metal plate of ninety meters in length and one hundred mm. in width that leads to the bottom soil of the well situated on the southern side of the main temple and in front of the Vimala temple⁷.

According to Madalapanji (Palmleaf chronicle) and other sources of the original Neelachakra was welded during the reign of Anangabhima Dev III (1211-1238 AD). It was replaced twice, once by Ramachandra Dev I (1568-1605 AD) of Bhoi dynasty is 1595 AD⁸ after the invasion of Kalāpāhad⁹ and for the second time in 1703A.D.by Divyasingha Dev-1(1688-1716A.D.) after it was broken by the onslaught of a great cyclone in 1694 AD. This mighty cyclone threw the Neelachakra near the Vata Ganesh on the southern side of the temple¹⁰.

The Neelachakra was also bent by a heavy cyclone during Bhanu Dev IV (1414-1435 AD)¹¹ and was made straight by him.

So many devotional songs were composed by the poets singing the glory of the Neelachakra, The devotees disclosed their heartfelt grief and anguish to the Neelachakra if they could not reach the Lord residing in the temple. This represents that the Neelachakra is as sacred as the Lord.

Thus Neelachakra is the most revered iconic symbol in the Jagannāth cult. It is the only physical object whose markings are used as a sacrament and considered sacred in Jagannāth worship. It symbolises protection by Lord Jagannāth.

NOTES

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