



Rise and Growth of Vaishnavism in Medieval Odisha: A Study

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ABSTRACT

Pulsating with the spirit of *pan* Indian culture, the literary evidences available in Odisha up to the 16th century A.D. lead us to support the view that the element of *bhakti* in the form of *Vaishnavism* had become an integral part of early religious effloresces. This is quite unique but it should be remembered that such an intellectual development was part of the *bhakti* movement in *Hinduism*. During this period as indicated by the cult of Vasudeva Krishna culminating in the emergence of *Bhagavatism*. Viewed in this context Odisha's association with *Vaishnavism* and Vaishnava tourism in terms of its evolution, genesis, characteristics and growth all become an interesting reading. The study of the Vaishnavism is very scanty in context to Odisha. More aspects of the tenets of Vaishnavism yet not explore with due care. Therefore the author has tried to trace out the very pertinent areas of Vaishnavism. The research paper has been developed under the prime objectives. The very first objective is to trace out the background of Vaishnavism in Odisha. The second one deals with how the royal dynasties of Odisha were responsible for the growth and development of Vaishnavism. The third area of discussion is the emergence of Radha concept in the tenets of Vaishnavism.

Key words: pulsating, culminating, pertinent, bhagavatism, emergence, genesis

Modern Odisha is the land marked by so many religious pursuits. Each and every religion starts from its cradle to imbibe under the royal patronages. There are so many religions like Jainism, Buddhism, Saivism, Saktism, Vaishnavism, Ganapatya Cult, Natha cult, Madhava Cult and many more evolved at a point of time and reached its prominence getting the healthy climate. Before the emergence of *Vaishnavism* in Odishaa it was developed in South India by the popular saint poets called Alvars,¹ who belonged to a cross section of the society. Among them were the king of

Malabar, and a famous woman Andal, for whom a magnificent temple was later built at latter's birth place, Srivilli Puttur, by a low caste man who happened to be a repentant sinner. After Alvares, the Acharyas by uniting devotion with *karma* represented the rise of *Vaishnavism* through collective songs called *prabandhas*.² It led to a momentum better shaped after the 10th century, when as a philosophical and ideological movement it was led by the *Acharyas*³ like Ramanujam and others. For the first time they put emphasis on purity of heart and mind, humanism, complete devotion through *bhajanas* and various personal efforts. The *bhajanas* were later on more propounded by Sri Krishna Chaitanya in the form of *Nama Sankirtan*⁴ with his Vaishnava consorts by uttering

Hare Krishna Hare Krishna

Krishna Krishna Hare Hare

Hare Rama Hare Rama

Rama Rama Hare Hare.

The evolution of *Vaishnavism* in Odisha happens to be the earliest manifestation of the word Vishnu, which relates to the worship of Nilamadhav at Nilachala, before the emergence of the Jagannath trinity⁵ in the form of *Darubrahma* during the period of Indradyumna, the mythical king of the *puranas*. To corroborate the earliest manifestation of Vishnu, it is evident that Madhav carved out of black chlorite stone in the posture of holding *Vamshi* (Flute), is still found in different parts of Prachi valley in Odisha. It is the fact, when *Vaishnavism* got its strong footing in the soil of Odisha. As such, almost all the Krishna images in Odisha can be dated to 10th century A.D.⁶ But the evolution of *Vaishnavism* in Odisha is found in the form of a legend which is mentioned in the *Purusottama Kshetra Mahatmya*, *Skandapurana*,⁷ *Musaliparva* of *Sarala Mahabharata*,⁸ *Deulatola*⁹ of Sisu Krishna Das and Nilambar Das. K. C. Das in his work, *Legend, History and Culture of India*, quotes both the accounts *Purusottam Kshetra Mahatmya* of *Skandapurana* and *Musaliparva* of *Sarala Mahabharat* identifying Nilagiri as the place of evolution of *Vaishnavism*. In the initial stage it happened to be a part of the Savar land under the tutelage of Viswavasu. A tribal religious centre was converted into a centre of Vishnu worship and *Vaishnavism* became an institutionalized religion as a living faith among most of the communities of Orissa. It supports this notion that before the advent of Sri Chaitanya, his movement and the new found *Gaudiya-Vaishnavism*, *Vaishnavism* in Orissa was assimilated with the cult of Jagannath worship.¹⁰ The sources like, the *Silpa texts*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Manusmriti*, and the

Ramayana provide a long and colourful evidence in the above critic interpretation on the evolution of *Vaishnavism* and its manifold actions like how various beliefs and thoughts have contributed to its growth. The synthesis finally emerged in the religious system which was destined to play a dominant role in the socio-religious and cultural life of the people of Eastern India in general and Orissa in particular.¹¹

The historiography of *Vaishnavism* and the *Vaishnava* centres in Odisha begin with the rise of the Mathara's in Kalinga (Odisha) in and around 4th – 5th century A.D.,¹² which marked the beginning of a the contemporaries of Guptas culturally influenced the Matharas. The Gupta monarchs, Samudragupta, Chandragupta-I, Chandragupta-II (Vikramaditya), and the Mathara kings were the worshippers of either Narayan or Vasudeva Krishna.¹³ In all their Copper Plate Charters glorious epoch in the history of *Vaishnavism*. The Gupta heritage and also they adopted the Vaishnavite titles like *Parama Bhagavata*, *Param-Daivata*, *Bhagavata Swami*, *Narayan Padanyudhata*, *Vishnuvarman*, *Keshab Dev*, *Haridutta*, *Vasudeva* which indicate the growing popularity of *Vaishnavism* during this period. But *Vaishnavism* as an idea and philosophy and its origin in India can be traced back roughly to the *Rigvedic* period.¹⁴ The *X mandal* of the *Rigveda* highlights the concept of Vishnu as the ublime creator and one of the manifestations of Sun.¹⁵ It was much later that *Vaisnavism* became a culmination of the rigid monotheism of Ramanujam, the monastic system of Ramananda and the luxurious love worship of Vallavacharya, all rolled into one.¹⁶

It forms one of the eight religious treatises which under the title of the *Puranas* are devoted to the mythology of the Hindus. Rightly it can be said that, the origin of *Vaishnavism* in Orissa is shrouded in obscurity. It is certainly difficult to access as to when and how *Vaishnavism* entered Orissa. As believed, the Pulindas and the Savaras, two ancient inhabitants of Orissa known as the aboriginal were directly or indirectly responsible for the existence of *Saivism* and *Vaishnavism* in Orissa respectively.¹⁷ The non-Aryans and the aboriginals like Gond, Kandha, Oran, Koya communities etc., speak the Dravidian language and Savaras, speak the Mundari language and they are described as Pulindas in Sanskrit literature. Most of the anthropologists have tried to establish the fact that the tribals in the name of Pulindas of Orissa are *proto-Austroloid*, with the *Mediterranean* strain, who concentrated in the Vindhya ranges and Mahendragiri.¹⁸ Sir Robert an anthropologist prefers to call them Monglo-Dravidian. Simultaneously it is difficult to say that the Mongoloid racial elements, identified among the *Kirats* of ancient India by Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, are entirely absent in Orissa. In the first instance, the system of tree-worship was prevalent among the tribes, as tree-worshippers. The *Deulatola* of both Sisu Krishna Das and Nilambar Das also referred to the Pulindas and Savaras of Eastern India who were deeply motivated

by the Brahminical form of *Hinduism* and its principles, faiths and beliefs. The Savaras being influenced by the acculturation of the Aryans began to worship the *Sthanu-Murti*¹⁹ (a log of God) in lieu of tree-worship. The Blue God in the form of Nilamadhab became known as the Purusottam-Vishnu.²⁰ Legend has it that Jara Savar salvaged the mortal remains of Lord Krishna from the ocean. There is also a legend referred to Savari-Narayan. The *Skanda Purana*, *Brahma Purana*, *Narada Purana* and *Padma Purana* are replete with the above accounts.²¹ The Savaras who worshipped the log of wood named this object as *Jaganta* or *Jaganallo*. It is believed that the non-Aryan Savaras who worshipped the wooden deity *Jaganta* in course of time accepted Purusottam-Vishnu as their god and began to worship Him. At present Lord Jagannath generates a matrix of inter-group relation. The syncreticism is exemplary and can be perceived in multifarious ways, whether in philosophy or rituals.

Vaishnavism like *Saivism* and other religions might have existed in Orissa from early times, but it can be connected to the archaeological monuments which came to light from the early medieval period as reflected on the temple walls belonging to 7th-8th centuries located at Bhubaneswar and other parts of Orissa.²² The different manifestations of Lord Vishnu like the four armed image posture holding *sankha*, *chakra*, *gada* and *padma*; the worship of Rama regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu; the worship of Surya Narayan holding a vase with two hands and a conch shell with the other two, the group of sapta-matrikas, where *Vaishnavism* makes its appearance with the distinctive attribute *Garuda* on the pedestal; Vishnu with folded hands paying homage to Siva all point to one thing i.e., the existence of *Vaishnavism*. The *Brahmeswara Inscription* reveals an architectural fragment showing the child Krishna with *Kaliyadalana* scene. Besides Nanda, a bearded figure, sitting opposite to Yasoda, who is engaged in churning curd and the child Krishna as shown by the side of the vessel containing curd;²³ he beautifully carved figure of *Garuda*; *Godhana-Harana*²⁴ of Sri Krishna with the Gopis, in attendance the images of Rama, Laxman, Sita and Hanuman; the images of Lakshmi, and Saraswati, Buddha and Kalki, the last two incarnations of Vishnu, the image of Sun God known as Viranchi-Narayan appearing in the following temples of Orissa, i.e., Swarnajaleswar, Bharateswar, Parsurameswar, Vaital and Mukteswar temples located at Bhubaneswar; Sri Jagannath temple at Puri, Viraja temple at Jajpur, Vishnu temple at Gandharadi located ten miles from Boudh in Phulbani district, Markandeswar temple, southern face of the *Vimana* of the Lingaraj temple, the temple at Jakula near Chhatia in Cuttack district, Megheswar temple, Ananta-Vasudeva temple, situated on the eastern bank of the *Vindusarobara*, Laskhmi-Nrushingh temple, Sun temple at Konark in Puri district, and at Palia in Balesore district, Buguda in Ganjam district point to the prevalence of Vishnu and Saura monuments in Orissa. The colossal images of Padmanabha or Seshasayi Vishnu temple at Talcher in Dhenkanal district also point to a similar situation obtaining in Orissa.²⁵

Vaishnavism appeared with a new lease of life under the royal patronage of the Gangas and Suryavamsis. During the reign of Chodaganga Dev in 11th century A.D. *Vaishnavism* was not only predominated over the land but also it absorbed certain ideas from the existing schools of religious faiths in Orissa. However, the catholicity of spirit was a distinguishing feature of medieval *Vaishnavism* which decayed with the advent of Sri Chaitanya and his critic interpretation of *Gaudiya* philosophy.²⁶ This is the sporadic identification of *Vaishnavism* with *Kambukshetra* and the Prachi valley in Orissa with the cult of *Laxmi-Narayan*, *Durga Madhav*, *Krishna-Vishnu* assigned to circa 9th-10th century before Chaitanya's coming to Orissa.

The historiography of *Vaishnavism* and the miraculous activities of Sri Chaitanya can be found in both the Bengali and Oriya literatures. The scholars like M. Gupta and B. B. Majumdar provide a glimpse of the Chaitanya movement in medieval Orissa. The rise and development of *Vaishnavism* and the Vaishnava institutions called *mathas* can be reconstructed with the knowledge of primary sources (epigraphic evidences) consisting of inscriptions, in the form of copper plate grants issued by the royal dynasties and their feudatories beginning from the Mathara rule in 4th – 5th century A.D. onwards composed in Sanskrit, Telgu and Oriya. The *Bhadrak Stone Inscription*²⁷ of Maharaja Gana of 3rd century A.D. provides ample information about the state of activities and the progress of *Vaishnavism* in Orissa. With the passage of time *Vaishnavism* received its momentum under the royal patronage, only after Samudra-gupta's invasion of Orissa specially treated the southern campaign. We form an idea from the *Nigodi Copper Plate Grant* that Prabhanjan Varma was the worshipper of Lord Narayan²⁸ (*Bhagavataswami Narayan padanyadhata*), the *Chicakole Copper Plate* highlights Nanda Prabhanjan Varma declares himself as *Param Bhagabata*. And Chandra Varma describes himself as a staunch devotee of Lord Vishnu holding up *Sankha*, *Chakra*, *Gada* and *Padma* in his *Bobil Charter*.²⁹ The *Amarkosh Geeta* describes thirtynine name of Vishnu, which is rightly supported to the four handed Vishnu image concept in a meaningful manner. This is the pragmatic derivation of Vishnu, as the symbol of sound because of *Sankha* identifies with sound. That was prompted in the historic battle of *Mahabrata* by Sri Krishna with the help of *Panchajanya Sankha*; *Chakra* means *Kalachakra* (the wheel of time) so that Vishnu is to be considered as the Lord of time and space, *Gada* symbolizes the power and strength. So that Vishnu is to be admitted as an epitome of power and strength of all the creatures, last one is the *Padma*, symbolizes a kind heart. So it may be stated that Lord Vishnu is considered as omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent in the heart of the millions. In the first instance Orissan epigraph credits the frequent use of the term *Madhav*, indicates the popularity of *Madhav* cult in the region with full boom. The *Bhagavat* cult of *Vaishnavism* was initially concerned with the *Bhagavatas*,³⁰ worshipping the deified Vrishni or hero Vasudev.³¹ This is a theist cult which has been originated in several centuries before the

christian era. The *Bhagavat Geeta*, *Bhagavat Purana* and the *Vishnu Purana* considered as the main sources of *Bhagabata* cult of *Vaishnavism* in Orissa. The *Bhagavat* cult reached its climax during the 2nd century A.D. when it came to be generally known as the *Pancharatra Agama*;³² means 'five nights', the adherence of the Rajput kings to *Bhagavatism*, further spread to the whole India. Its impact was more predominated in south India mostly in Tamil land largely by twelve *Alvars* (who had intuitive knowledge of God) in 8th and 9th century that cult of *Vaishnavism* in Eastern India, mostly in Orissa at South Kosal during the reign of Sarvapuriyas, regarded as the trade mark in the history of *Vaishnavism* in Orissa. All the kings of Sarbhapuriyas were the ardent champion of *Vaishnavism* and adopted Vaishnavite epithet *Parama Bhagabata* in their *Copper Plate Charter*,³³ while discarding the Matharas views *Bhagavata Swami Narayan Padanyudhata*. Some scholar of Orissa have pointed out that *Vaishnavism* was passing through silently under the royal patronage of the Sailodbhavas, the Bhaumakaras and the Suryavamsis. But the historians like K.C. Panigrahi, through his monumental work the *History of Orissa* has rejected the above opinions, and presented a very clear and an outstanding picture on the rapid development of *Vaishnavism* on the temple walls. Example lies, the Ananta-Vasudev temple situated at the eastern bank of the *Vindusarovar*, is a Vaishnava shrine, which had a commemorative inscription, now preserved in the hall of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain, Ireland and London. It is stated in the epigraph, the temple was built for Sri Krishna and Vala-vesa (Valaram) on the bank of *Vindusarovara* by Chandrika Devi daughter of Anangabhima Deva III, in the saka year 1200, corresponding to A.D. 1275.³⁴ We have references that the Bhauma queen Tribhubana-Mahadevi-I, was greatly devoted to Vishnu which has already mentioned in her *Copper Plate Grant*.³⁵ The other sculptures of the Ananta-Vasudeva temple clearly show that ten incarnations of Vishnu were well known to the people of Orissa and all the incarnations identical with *Bhagavan* Vishnu. The historian like M. N. Das points out in this regard that *Saivism* thrived in Orissa alongside *Vaishnavism*. Jayadeva's *Geetagovinda*³⁶ composed in the 12th century, appears to have been responsible for popularizing the ten incarnations or *Bhagavat* schools of Vishnu. Jayadeva's innovations to them are the most melodious and beautiful songs and they have become classic and highly popular throughout the villages in Orissa. With this mission, before the advent of Sri Krishna Chaitanya, the *Bhagavat Tungis* and *Bhagavata Purana* (the religious discursion) has reached at prominence. Since the mode of Vishnu worshiping has been continuing by the village.

From the aforesaid discussion it is concluded that vaishnavism is one of the major religious bent of thought which is based on bhakti as predominated in the land of Odisha. It is because of its simplicity and mode of worship. Some scholars have been pointed out that it was not merely a religion but a crusade against Brahmanism and ritualistic order of the medieval Odisha.

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