



Lord Buddha in the Cult of Lord Jagannath



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The Buddhist origin of Lord Jagannath was first propounded by General A. Cunningham which was later on followed by a number of scholars like W.W.Hunter, W.J.Wilkins, R.L.Mitra, H.K. Mahatab, M. Mansingh, N. K. Sahu etc. Since Buddhism was a predominant religion of Odisha from the time of Asoka after the Kalinga War, it had its impact on the life, religion and literature of Odisha. Scholars have made attempt to show the similarity of Jagannath cult with Buddhism on the basis of literary and archaeological sources. They have put forth the following arguments to justify the Buddhist origin of Lord Jagannath.

(1) In their opinion the worship of three symbols of Buddhism, Tri-Ratna such as the Buddha, the Dhamma (Dharma) and the Sangha denotes to the worship of Trimurti of the Jagannath cult, i.e. Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra.

(2) The old Pali literature refers to Lord Jagannath.

(3) In Buddhism, Dharma is considered as female and in Tri-Ratna, She is regarded as sister which is very similar to the worship of Subhadra as the sister of Jagannath.

(4) At present an image of Buddha at Ellora is called Jagannath which proves Jagannath and Buddha are identical.

(5) The Buddhist celebration of the Car Festival which had its origin at Khotan is similar with the famous Car Festival of the Jagannath cult.

(6) Indrabhuti in his 'Jnana Siddhi' has referred to Buddha as Jagannath.

(7) There are similar traditions in Buddhism as well as in the Jagannath cult. Buddhism was first to discard caste distinctions. So also there is no caste distinction in the Jagannath temple at the time of taking Mahaprasad. This has come from the Buddhist tradition.

(8) On the basis of the legend mentioned in the 'Dathavamsa' of Dharmakirti of Singhala, scholars say that a tooth of Buddha is kept in the body of Jagannath. The image of Jagannath which contains a mysterious substance thickly padded in silk and replaced in the new image at the time of Navakalevara is taken as the tooth relic of Buddha.

(9) There is a legend centering round the incomplete figure of Buddha at Bodhagaya which has similarity with the incomplete image of Jagannath.

(10) In Odia literature Lord Buddha has been accepted as an incarnation of Vishnu instead of



Jagannath. Jayadeva, an Odia poet of 12th century has described Buddha as the incarnation of Lord Jagannath. Later on, Sarala Das, Achyutananda Das, Divakara Das, Balaram Das, Jagannath Das and Sikhara Das have accepted Buddha instead of Jagannath as the ninth incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

On the basis of the above arguments it will be difficult to conclude that the cult of Jagannath originated from Buddhism. The following counter arguments can be taken as the basic points to reject the cult of Jagannath originated from Buddhism.

(1) The identification of three images of the Jagannath temple, Puri with Buddhist Trinity or Tri-Ratna is not acceptable because the actual number of images in the temple are not three but four namely Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarsana described in the Agni Purana, Padma Purana, Brahma Purana, Narada Purana and Skanda Purana as 'Chaturddhamurti'. Further, if the number of images are actually three instead of four that can not constitute an argument worth the name in support of the thesis that the emblems are Buddhistic. In the Hindu or Brahmanical traditions there are several groups of three such as Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesvara; Rama, Lakshmana, Sita; Krishna, Balarama and Subhadra. So, there can not be any valid reasons as to why the three incomplete images are to be taken Buddha, Dharma (Dhamma) and Sangha or the Tri-Ratna of Buddhism.

In addition to these, the Buddhists do not refer about the images of Lakshmi, Goddess Earth, Madhava etc. which are a part of the seven images besides the four. Thus all the deities worshipped in Ratna Simhasana of the Jagannath temple, Puri are seven instead of Tri-Ratna of Buddhism.

(2) The word Jagannath has different connotations in the Pali literature of Buddhism in

ancient time which may not necessarily allude to the image of Jagannath at Puri. Further, Jagannath has also been variantly used as an adjective to suggest the higher status of any God or even a king. As such, the word Jagannath in this context in no way justifiably be associated with the Jagannath of Puri.

(3) Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha are Tri-Ratnas of Buddhism. Dhamma is considered as female. Tri-Ratna emblems of Buddhism are found at Sanchi. General A. Cunningham has identified Dhamma with Subhadra of Jagannath triad. But there is no similarity of Dhamma symbol of Sanchi with Subhadra of Jagannath temple at Puri. Dhamma of Sanchi has hands whereas Subhadra has no hands. So it is difficult to identify Dhamma of Buddhism with Subhadra of Jagannathism.

(4) Calling the image of Buddha as Jagannath at Ellora does not mean Buddha and Jagannath are identical. The sculptures at Ellora flourished during the rule of the Guptas. Though Guptas revived Brahminical Hinduism yet they respected the deities of other religions like Jainism and Buddhism. At Ellora one finds coexistence of sculptures relating to Buddhism and Hinduism. This assimilation of cults and coexistence of sculptures might have led the people to mistakenly call the image of Buddha as Jagannath at Ellora. It is not a matter of surprise to link one image of a cult with that of the other. For example, the image of Mahavir Jaina of Jainism at the Beherana Dwara (gate) of the Jagamohan of the Jagannath temple of Puri is very often called as Mahavir Hanuman of Hinduism by some people. In similar way the image of Buddha at Ellora might be called as Jagannath.

(5) The evidence of the Car Festival to prove that the Car Festival of Puri is an imitation of the Car Festival of Lord Buddha at Khotan has no base at all because the chariots were in use since



the time of Vedic and Upanishadic periods. In Atharva Veda, there are references as to how the Gods were coming down by chariots. Attempt has been made by some scholars to link Ratha Yatra of Puri with the Buddhist Car Festival held at Khotan which is described by Fahien.

The Car Festival is the source of amusement of all over the world. It would therefore, be erroneous to link the festival of one place with that of the other. For instance, Bhubaneswar celebrates Ratha Yatra (Rukuna Ratha) festival in honour of Lord Lingaraj. Likewise a Car Festival is performed in Konark. Undoubtedly, each Ratha Yatra has its own individuality and origin. It thus logically follows that the Ratha Yatra of Jagannath at Puri should not be considered to have Buddhist origin.

(6) The Dhauli region of Odisha was once a Buddhist centre particularly after the Kalinga War of Ashoka. It is therefore, likely that Buddhism might have exercised some influence over the cult of Jagannath. Possibly, there arose a conflict between the Buddhists and the Hindus in the 7th or 8th century as a result of which Indrabhuti, a Buddhist of Sambalpur region effected a compromise by using the epithet Jagannath as a synonym of Buddha in his work 'Jnana Siddhi'. This religious conflict between Hinduism and Buddhism is evident in the Bhaskaresvar temple in Bhubaneswar where a huge Buddhist Ashokan pillar is converted into Sivalinga which is still worshipped today. So Indrabhuti might have made a compromise between Buddhism and Hinduism through his writing which seems to be an influence of Buddhism over Jagannath cult.

(7) Buddhism is sectless or castelessness appears to be wrong. Lord Buddha, desired to be born in a higher caste family as is cited in the 'Lalitavistara'. Further, Jagannath does not accept caste barrier is an original idea of Hinduism. Such references have found place in several Hindu

Puranas. Buddhist might have been influenced by such a catholic Hindu practice rather than Buddhism influencing the cult of Jagannath. The practice of taking Mahaprasada regardless of caste distinctions can not prove the Buddhist origin of Jagannath cult. It is mentioned in the Puranas and the Tantric texts that Mahaprasada is to be taken regardless of caste or sex. Those Puranas are Padma Purana, Visnu Purana, Bhavisya Purana, Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Varaha Purana, Garuda Purana and the Tantric texts like the Brahmamala and Rudrayamala.

(8) The Buddhist legend suggesting that a tooth of Buddha was kept inside the body of Jagannath has no basis. That a Buddhist monk named Ksematthera presented a tooth of Buddha to the king of Kalinga who built a *stupa* for its worship has also no historical basis and is not supported by any other evidence. Even H.K.Mahatab, a staunch supporter of the Buddhist origin theory does not even accept the story since it has no historical base. Further, the Buddhist tradition also prescribes that no symbol of Sakya Muni is to be worshipped secretly. Apparently, there is no relation of this story with the development of the cult of Jagannath. Moreover, the Nabhi Brahma of Jagannath, rescued by Bisara Mohanty from the attack of Kala Pahada is not to be confused with tooth. This Nabhi Brahma transferred by the Daitas on the occasion of the Nava Kalevara festival is never called a tooth.

Again, some of the temple ministrants are of the opinion that the sacred objects inside the Vighnas are not bones but Tantric *yantras* with the Salagramasila. It will be too hazardous to take them as tooth relics of Buddha. In the Hindu Dharma Sastras, the worship of bone is not permitted. But wherever a Buddhist relic either of Buddha Himself or of His disciples could be found, *stupas* were built and the places remained



continuously Buddhist sanctuaries with the Viharas all round the holy places. The temple of Lord Jagannath does not have any such tradition and all the Mathas old and new are Hindu Mathas. It is true that Hiuen Tsang mentions five Buddhist Viharas in the town of Che-li-ta-lo, identified by a few scholars with the present Puri. This identification, however, is not universally accepted and it is not at all safe to come to any conclusion on the basis of this uncertain data. So the legend mentioned in the 'Dathavamsa' of Dharmakirti of Simhala is difficult to accept. Rather, Che-li-ta-lo is not Puri but Buddhist Viharas of Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, Lalitagiri, Langudi hills and their adjacent areas of Jajpur district of Odisha out of which two teeth of Lord Buddha were collected from Ratnagiri Vihara and kept in State Museum, Bhubaneswar in 2013. These teeth of Buddha were worshipped by Buddhist monks in ancient days and not in the body of the Jagannath triad of Puri.

(9) R.L. Mitra has matched the story behind the incomplete image of Lord Buddha of Buddhagaya with the incomplete image of Lord Jagannath of Puri. He relates the legend of image making of Buddha at Buddhagaya as described in the accounts of Chinese Pilgrim Hiuen Tsang of 7th century A.D. with that of the legend of image making of Jagannath at Puri. As per Hiuen Tsang's account no sculptor was willing to make an image of Buddha but a Brahmin came forward to do it. The sculptor proposed that the door of Buddha Vihar would not be opened before a stipulated period of six months that was required to complete the image. But before the stipulated period was over the Buddhist monks violated the fixed time of image making and opened the door of Buddha Vihar and found the incomplete image of Dhyan Buddha and disappearance of the sculptor. R.L. Mitra relates this legend with the legend Jagannath, Puri. But in the opinion of S.N.

Dash the Buddha legend of Buddhagaya is an imitation of the legend of Jagannath of Puri. Further, in Buddhism, a Brahmin sculptor made Buddha's image of Buddhagaya whereas in the Jagannath cult, the legend expressed that the Brahma prepared the image of the Jagannath triad. So the incomplete image of Buddha at Buddhagaya is not the same as the incomplete image of the Jagannath triad.

(10) The Jagannath trinity is made of wood and called as 'Daru Devata' whereas the image of Lord Buddha is made of either stone or any metal and not of wood. Further, the tradition of image making of Buddha began since the time of the Kushan rule but image making of Jagannath trinity goes back to the hoary past. Hence, there cannot be any similarity between these two religions.

(11) In spite of above counter arguments which disallow the similarities between Buddha and Jagannath yet there are some points to argue the influence of Buddhism on the cult of Lord Jagannath. Much before the origin of Buddhism in 6th C.B.C. there was worship of Lord Jagannath at Puri. In 3rd C.B.C. Ashok conquered Kalinga (Odisha) and spread Buddhism in India and abroad. Undoubtedly, Puri was a part to that. This caused influence of Buddhism on Jagannath cult. The people of Kalinga originally aboriginals, accepted Buddhism as their religion but not remained aloof from worshipping Lord Jagannath. Gradually, Buddhist way of worship influenced over Jagannath cult.

In 318 A.D. Raktabahu attacked the Jagannath temple (not present structure). The priests took away Jagannath trinity to Sonapur (Sonpur) and hid underground for safety. In 9th century A.D. Adi Sankaracharya came to Puri and found no Jagannath trinity in the then dilapidated small Jagannath temple. Simultaneously Yayati-I, the Somavamsi King was



in search of Lord Jagannath during the holy bath of the day of Govinda Dwadasi in the Mahodadhi at Puri. Both the King and Adi Sankarcharya took a mission of searching for Jagannath and proceeded to Sonapur. With much difficulty they unearthed the Jagannath trinity and brought them back to Puri for worship. After arriving at Puri Sankaracharya helped the King to reinstall the Lords on Ratnasimhasan. A new temple of Jagannath was reconstructed for the reinstallation of the new deities.

During his stay at Puri Sankaracharya defeated Buddhist intellectuals and a compromise took place. Jagannath cult revived and Buddhism assimilated in this cult. Gradually Buddhism became a part and parcel of Jagannath religion.

In 12th C.A.D. Jayadev, a great devotee of Lord Jagannath wrote his famous 'Gitagovinda' in which he described Buddha as an incarnation of Jagannath. Possibly from that time onwards Buddha got a place in the Jagannath temple. Dasavatar concept began from the time of Jayadev. Buddha was considered as an Avatar (incarnation). Even Jayadev stayed most of his time in the Dasavatar Matha of Puri located near Gundicha temple which is another proof of origin of Dasavatar concept.

In Odia literature Buddha has been accepted as an incarnation of Vishnu instead of Jagannath. Sarala Das in his Odia 'Mahabharat' of 15th century, Achyutananda Das in his 'Garuda Gita' and 'Sunya Samhita', Divakar Das, Balaram Das, Jagannath Das, Sikhar Das and Nilambar Das in his 'Deula Tola' have accepted Buddha instead of Jagannath as the ninth incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

In addition to literary evidences, sculptural evidences are more vital to focus Buddha as ninth incarnation in the Jagannath temple itself. On the outerwall of the Jagannath temple, Puri, in both

north west and south west side of the Parsvadevata temple of Nrusimha, images relating to Dasavatara are exhibited, among them Buddha is included as ninth incarnation. Undoubtedly one must be clear that Buddha had been accepted as an Avatar in the temple of Jagannath in centuries past which came to knowledge of ASI after deplastering of the main sanctuary.

In spite of all above arguments in favour and against the position of Lord Buddha in the cult of Jagannath one must be clear that the temple of Lord Jagannath originally is neither a Buddhist sanctuary nor its presiding trinity is Buddhist symbols. Only Buddhism had once upon a time great influence over Jagannath cult like Jainism. In Jainism it is also seen that an image of Lord Mahavir Jaina is fixed near the threshold of Beherana Dwara like that of Lord Buddha in the outer western wall of the Jagannath temple, very adjacent to the Parsvadevata temple of Lord Nrusimha.

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