



## Oldest Jagannath Temple of Puri The Buddhist and Somavamsi Connections



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Through ages Puri is famous as the efflorescent seat of Lord Jagannath. As a religious centre, it finds mention in the *vedic* literature and *Mahabharat*. The sanctity and historicity of the place, thus goes to remote past. The origin and the antiquity of Jagannath worship is still shrouded in mystery. But although the cult of Jagannath has been of eclectic typology assimilating in its fold divergent and varied religious creeds and systems.

In the *Vana parva* of *Mahabharat* there is a mention of one *vedi* (platform) near the Kalingan sea. Man Mohan Ganguly identifies this *vedi* to be the raised platform of Puri where the present Jagannath temple is built. In the "*Jnanasiddhi*" of Indrabhuti written in the 8th century A.D. Jagannath has been mentioned as the manifestation of Buddha. He has started his famous work with an invocation to Jagannath as Buddha.

*Pranipatya Jagannatham,  
Sarvajina Vararchitam  
Sarva Buddha Mayam  
Siddhi Vyapinogagonopamam.*

Sankarcharya visited Puri in 9th century A.D. in course of his spiritual conquest and established Govardhan Math at Puri. The above references amply indicate that by 8th/9th century, Puri was famous as a Buddhist and Hindu religious centre.

The antiquity of Jagannath is also corroborated by other literary and epigraphic

references. The *Anargharaghava Natakam* of Murari Misra assigned to 9th / 10th century A.D. refers to Purusottama as being worshipped on sea shore. The *Prabodha Chandrika Natakam* of Krusna Misra written about 1078 A.D. speaks of a '*Devayatana*' of Lord Purusottama in Puri. The Sarada Devi temple inscription of Maihar (Satna district, M.P.) mentions Purusottama in Odra country. It is assigned to circa 10th century A.D. Reference to Purusottama *kshetra* is also found in the Baramdeo temple inscription (1088 A.D.) and in the Nagpur stone inscription of the rulers of the Malava country dated to 1104 A.D.

The glory and greatness of Jagannath find mention in *Puranas* like *Matsya*, *Brahma*, *Narada*, *Padma*, *Kapila Samhita*, *Niladri Mahodaya* and *Skanda Purana*. He has been mentioned as the lord of Utkal or Odra in the famous *tantra* works like *Kalika Purana*, *Rudrayamala*, *Brahmayamala* and *Tantrajamala* written about 950 A.D. Attempts have also been made by various scholars to connect the origin and evolution of Jagannath to Buddhist, Jaina, Savara, Vedic and Brahmanical sources. But interestingly all sources agree that an abode or temple of Lord Jagannath existed in Puri about 950 A.D. prior to construction of the present colossal Jagannath temple by Ganga Emperor Chodaganga Deva in 12th century A.D. Now in the light of the above discussion we have to identify the builder of the oldest temple of Puri and establish his dynastic connection and



chronological horizon in proper archaeological and historical perspective.

As hinted earlier by 8th century A.D. Buddhist *siddha* Indrabhuti had referred to Jagannath which most scholars believed to be the Purusottama Jagannath of Puri. Since the days of Asoka in 3rd century B.C. Puri district as a whole became the cradle of Buddhism. A Buddhist establishment, perhaps a stupa containing Buddhist relics was known to have been stationed there which ultimately evolved as Jagannath cult icon and assimilated itself in the fold of Vaisnavism. The '*vedi*' referred by M.M. Ganguli was very probably the place of the Buddhist establishment. In fact Puri town area is a plain area. There is no hill or hillock near by. So the elevated platform where the present Jagannath temple stands was a man made platform. It is very probable that the Buddhists have made this platform to build a stupa to house the sacred Buddhist relics which is still believed to be the *Brahmadhatu* put into the wooden deity at the time of *Navakalevara*.

In this regard it is important to mention that recently the Archaeological Survey of India under the guidance of Dr.T. Satyamurty made some repair work in the base of the Garuda pillar inside the Natamandira area and found the remnant of an Asokan pillar with typical Mauryan polish. The pillar goes deep into the platform. The author alongwith his colleague Sri D.R. Pradhan visited the spot at the time of renovation and observed that the entire Jagannath temple complex platform area was man-made, resembling a platform of Buddhist establishment like a stupa. Many scholars believe the Buddhist origin of Jagannath and opine that Puri was an ancient seat of Buddhist cult. The reference to Buddha's Tooth Relics of Orissa, theory of Buddha's birth in Orissa, conversion of Asoka to Buddhism in Puri district lend support to this contention.

Fergusson is of the opinion that "there can be little doubt but that the temple (of Jagannath at Puri) now occupies the site where formerly stood the *Dagoba* containing the celebrated Tooth Relics. Alexander Cunningham has reported that in a Sanchi stupa-sculpture he has noticed Buddha, Dharma and Sangha representation which can be identified as the Jagannath triad of Puri. He further says that the 2nd Dharma aspect of Buddhist trinity is taken as a female form and can be identified with Subhadra.

Dr. H.K. Mahtab has reported about a piece of stone of Asokan polish with the symbols of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha at the top of it, to have been discovered in Bhubaneswar area and now housed in Asutosh Museum, Calcutta. The symbols are a little different from those found at Sanchi and other places, but the Bhubaneswar symbols are almost akin to the images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra. The Bhubaneswar discovery proves that the worship of the symbols was prevalent since the Asokan period "Dr. Mahatab further states that the *savaras* of Orissa were converted to Buddhism by Asoka. They worshipped the *Tri-ratna* symbol placed on a stupa at Puri." We believe this stupa to have been built on the present platform of Jagannath temple on the strength of the recent discovery of Archaeological Survey of India. By 7th/8th century A.D. Buddha was taken as an *avatara* of Visnu and Jagannath was also simultaneously considered to be an *avatara* of Visnu and gradually Buddhism thus lost itself in Vaisnavism. This period was a cataclysmic period in the religious history of India. The rising Saivism and Vaisnavism devoured Buddhism usurping later's religious structures and system.

A trend of juxtaposition of Purusottama and Narasimha was noticed in Orissa by 9th century A.D. Purusottam represented Visnu and



Narasimha stood for Siva. From western Orissa or Kosal tract, this trend entered into Orissa during the rule of the Somavamsis who occupied Utkal under Yajati I. The title Jagannath has been applied to Buddha, Siva and Visnu, in the sense of 'Lord of the World'. It was also synonymous for Lokanatha and Lokeswara, which were used for Siva, Visnu and Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. After the decline of Buddhism in India and the absorption of its Mahayana elements into Saivism, Siva exclusively became Lokeswar and Jagannath denoted Visnu alone, because of the influence of *Devi Mahatmya* that was composed in early mediaeval period. The presiding deity of Puri with the specific title of Jagannath became popular from 14th century A.D. onwards as evident from the Inscription of Bhanudeva II. Prior to that Puri was popular as the seat of Purusottama for whom the Somavamsi king had built a temple on the very Buddhist *Vedi* or platform. There was no protest for this from any quarter because by that time Buddhism has been fully assimilated into Vaisnavism and Buddha has been accepted as an *avatara* of Jagannatha.

During early Somavamsi rule under Jajati I Vaisnavism advanced greatly to coastal Orissa and became very popular particularly in Parchi valley. At that point of time Yajati I was known to have built a temple of Purusottama at Puri as evident from archaeological references. The Bhaumakaras were conquered by the Somavamsis by 950 A.D. To mark this great victory Jajati I built the Purusottama temple of Puri. According to legend a temple built by Indradyumna in Puri disappeared in the sand. *Madala panji* states that Jajati Kesari built a temple and consecrated it. It measures 38 *hastas* in height. It was in dilapidated condition when the present Jagannath temple was built.

Jajati I was famous as a builder of temples. The reference to height of the temple

constructed by him at Puri as reflected in the temple chronicle, cannot be taken as vague. Its height was more than Mukteswar temple which indicates that it was built after the construction of Mukteswar temple. According to Stietencron there exists the remnants of a temple of Mukteswar style in the Markandeswar temple complex of Puri which indicates simultaneous temple building activities of Somavamsis in Bhubaneswar and Puri.

As per the temple chronicle, the images installed by Yajati in the Puri temple were of wood. The account further states that 144 years before Yayati an invader named Raktabahu invaded Puri. K.C. Panigrahi identifies Raktabahu with Rastrakuta king Govinda III (805 to 815 A.D.). If we add 144 years the date of erection of the Jagannath temple at Puri by Jajati comes to 945/950 A.D. The Indradyumna episode according to Stietencron comprise activities of three rulers combined into one mythical person. "He conquers Orissa and builds a temple in Puri about 950 A.D. The conquerer is identified as Yajati-I, the next ruler settles with his ministers and subjects. He is identified as Yajati II. The temple decays in the late Somavamsi regime. The 3rd ruler conquered Orissa, finds the temple ruined and image gone and builds a new temple. he is identified as Chodaganga Deva." This interpretation of Stietencron seems quite plausible. This theory also finds support in Murari Misra's *Anargharaghavam* which states that a temple existed at Puri by 950 A.D.

Now we have to discuss about the presiding deity that adorned the Purusottama temple of Puri to have been built by Somavamsi Jajati I. In all probability the image was made of stone. It was a four armed standing Vasudeva image called Nilamadhava according to one school of scholars. The other school opines that the presiding deity was a seated image of Laxmi Narayana or Kamala - Purusottama. The



pre-Ganga inscriptions describe Purusottama without referring to its form. The Kalidini Grant of Rajaraja I narrates that Brahma originated from the lotus which rose from naval of Purusottama at Sridhama. Here also Puri finds mention as Sridham but the shape of presiding deity is un-specified. However most of the scholars including Stietoncron believe that a single standing four-armed stone image of Vasudeva / Purusottama was installed in the oldest temple of Puri by Somavamsi king Yajati I. Interestingly it was not their state deity. As the Somavamsis were worshippers of Siva, Saivism was their state religion. For this they constructed a series of Siva temples in Bhubaneswar including the famous Lingaraj temple.

Vaisnavism had great sway in Raipur and Sirpur area of Chhatisgarh during the post-Gupta era. Under the Panduvamsis and Somavamsis it moved eastward and reached central Orissa. The mention of Purusottama as Nrusingha in the Sirpur Temple Inscription has special significance as Vaisnavism accepted Siva in its religious fold which finally found fuller efflorescence in Jagannath Triad. Trends of this cultural traits are now found in many monuments of western Orissa i.e. ancient South Kosala region. The reference of the temple chronicle about foreign invasion of Puri and shifting of the deity to Sonapur where it was buried for 144 years and the subsequent discovery of the same on the direction and endeavour of Somavamsi king Jajati I who ruled over Sonapur region and reinstalled the new idols of deities with the help of Sabara tribe amply reflect that the Somavamsis have built the earliest temple of Jagannath in Puri.

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