

Sacred Heritage of Jagannath: Tribal and Regional Cultural Interface

From ancient time, the primitive aboriginal people have been intimately connected with the natural world. They worshipped nature not only out of fear and curiosity, but also with love, faith and gratitude. In course of time, the veneration for nature has gradually turned into religious worship. The main purposes of nature worship by the tribal communities are self defense, protection and fulfilling of wish or desire. In order to preserve the pristine nature the rites and rituals are continued by the local tribal communities for generations. In Indian philosophy some trees like Bilwa, Tulasi, Neem, Peepul, Aswatha, Mahua, Deodar, Neem, Sriparna, Arjuna and Rakta-chandan (Red Sandal) are considered as sacred and are worshipped with great reverence. The Buddha attained enlightenment (bodhi) while meditating under Bodhi tree (Peepal tree). The world is depicted as Olota Brikshya (inverted tree) in which the root is the brain with its branches as limbs of the tree.

The Jagannath Culture is the most ancient natural heritages of India. Lord Jagannath as a deity of tribal origin is evident from the legends, folklores and historical records of Odisha. The worship of Sri Jagannath by the Sabaras tribes might have later adopted in the Hindu rituals. The regional traditions of Odisha represent a tribe-caste continuum. The state has as many as 62 tribal communities constituting a substantial proportion (23 per cent) of the state population. The presence of sizable tribal population in the state might have prompted amalgamation of the Hindu and tribal culture out of which Sri Jagannath Culture might have evolved. Jagannath Culture lays much emphasis upon nature worship. The different rituals of Sri Jagannath Temples are eco sensitive which directly or indirectly promote protection of environment and bear immense significance in promoting Intangible Natural Heritage of India.

The worship of nature which interconnects Jagannath Culture with tribal ritual practices is as follows:

1. Sri Jagannath is worshipped as Daru Brahma (Brahma infused in wooden idol) is applicable to Lord Jagannatha only and not to any other deity in India. This peculiar wooden iconography of Jagannatha Trio displays "tribal or exotic look" which are unique, mysterious and unparalleled to any other Hindu shrine in India or abroad.
2. The worship of Jagannath Trio is similar to the sibling worship of Saura and other tribal communities in Odisha.
3. The tree worship of Aruna Stamba, Garuda Stamba and Kalpabata (Banyan Tree) are similar to the wooden pillar worship among the tribal communities of Odisha.
4. The presence of the non-Brahmin priests (daitas) in Jagannath Temple who are said to be the inheritors of Viśwāvāsu, the Savara devotee of Jagannath are entrusted with the secret rituals in the Puri temple during the Anasara and arrange the Car Festival every year.
5. The worship of the Anasarapatti (traditional Patta painting) of the deities and offerings of new fruits, flowers and herbs as medicines to the deities during the Anasara signifies the similarities with the tribal ritual practices.
6. The daily offering of Mahaprasad prepared by the Suaras through steaming in earthen pots preserving nutritious values and vitamins is offered to the deities and then accepted by all. Besides, the wide varieties of food prepared by the tribes in Odisha are included in the Chappan Bhoga (fifty-six varieties of offerings) to the Lord Jagannatha in Puri Temple.

7. The festivals observed in the Puri Temple are quite similar with the festivals observed by the tribal communities of Odisha.
8. The Nabakalebara Ritual is a bigger replica of the tribal ritual practices observed by the Sauras, Gond, Kondh and other tribal communities in Odisha who claim Jagannath as their original deity. The rituals like Ankuraropana (germination of seeds) followed by Yajna (fire sacrifices), burial of the wooden deities (increasing soil fertility) and other such practices during the Nabakalebara Ceremony are very important from scientific, spiritual and ethical perspectives.

The different rituals observed in the Jagannatha Temple uphold preservation of the distinct traditional knowledge, oral traditions and ritual practices observed by the different tribal communities of Odisha like Saura, Gond, Kondh, Santal and many others. These best practices need to be essentially preserved, documented in the context of intangible natural and cultural heritage as well through conducting empirical field based research and visual documentation which has not been initiated in this field as yet.