

All Glory to Sri Sri Guru & Gauranga

Temple of Jagannath at Puri



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Overview

An English essay written in 1871 (The Temple of Jagannath at Puri) describes the history of the establishment of the great temple in Puri, Orissa. This piece also addresses the hypocrisy of temple priests as opposed to sincere devotional worship in pure love of God.

Temple of Jagannath at Puri

There is not a Hindu who has not heard the name of this temple. The old and the young, the male and the female, the Rajah and the ryot, and the weak and the stout, all visit this temple out of a religious curiosity. Three hundred and one miles south-west of the Vice-Regal palace at Calcutta, stands this famous temple close to the seashore affording an object for a telescopic observation to the new-comer on board the ship bound for Bengal. It stands on a platform measuring 20 cubits in height from the level of water. The platform itself is 375 cubits by 400 cubits made of huge stone cemented with a mortar composed of lime and sand. The temple itself is 92 cubits in height of a structure purely Indian. The pilgrim sees its towering head from the distance of 7 miles where the shrewd Panda takes a rupee from him by showing him the holy Chakra.

This temple was erected by Raja Ananga Bhimdeb about 800 years ago in place of another one, then in state of dilapidation. In old accounts we find this temple styled Niladri or the blue hill. From this it appears that the former temple which was probably raised by the emigrating Rajah Indradyumna

was a blue or dark coloured one. Otherwise we cannot account for the name Nilachala unless we take it for granted that the name was after the Nilgiri Hills, a small range which runs through this Province from one end to the other.

The Utkalakhanda in the Puranas, the Niladri Mahodadhi, and the Matla Panjee (an account regularly kept by the temple officers) declare that Jagannath is a very ancient institution amongst the Hindus. Whatever may be the value of the authorities quoted, we are inclined to believe that Puri was considered sacred even at the time when the Puranas were written, because we find in Wilson's copy of the Vishnu Purana that one Kandu Rishi resorted to a place called Purushottama for the purpose of divine contemplation. At all events Rajah Indradyumna, to whom the whole affair is generally ascribed, lived a long time before Rajah Vikramaditya, the contemporary of Augustus Caesar of Rome. We are sure, that Puri is not so old as Benares and Gaya, of which repeated mention is made in all the Puranas and the Mahabharata, yet it is not a place of recent origin created after the commencement of the Christian Era. We cannot believe that the institution originated in pure stupidity of the religious sentiment; for we cannot but observe a great deal of wisdom in the man with whom the idea of Jagannath first originated. We do not profess to belong to any of the sects of religion under the sun, we believe the absolute Faith, founded upon instinctive love of God, natural in all human souls.

There are two great sects of religion all over the world who fight with each other without any advantage whatever. One of them holds that it is absolutely necessary to believe that God is without any form whatever and believers in the form are but, idolatrous. The other class maintains that God has out of kindness shown His form to the pious in order to be worshipped by them. Both of them are wrong, because both of them fight on a purely material point. The most unsectarian view of the point is, that God is neither a form nor a formless object but is purely spiritual. Matter alone can embrace the idea of form; consequently, all positive and negative assertions with regard to it must naturally be material. Those who worship the form and those who describe God as formless, are both idolatrous and superstitious, and consequently can never form an idea of the spiritual Deity. Sectarians of the same class are expected to hate each other, but those, who have nothing in common with them, have no reason for hatred. We therefore cannot, like the fanatics of the formless class consider all idols as unsacred and hold the worship of a formless Deity (identifying Him with something like space and eternity) to be the natural worship of God. We go so far as to maintain that the worshipper of the spiritual God in an idol is infinitely superior to a mere believer in a formless existence who considers that formlessness is one of the attributes of the Spirit.

Spirit is not exactly the opposite of matter, but it is certainly something different from it.

it is difficult indeed to decide what is the exact relation of the Spirit to matter, space and time, and it is not given to us to know. It would indeed be the height error to conceive that all the opposite qualities of matter, space and time are in Spirit. Hence we must look to some other attributes for Spirit.

Love and wisdom are certainly spiritual attributes which are not opposite qualities of matter. Man must be wise and love God. This is the religion of the soul. All debates about the essence of God (e.g. God is formless or with a form) are but sectarian. Now we allow men to love God wisely, i.e. spiritually while their eyes are on idol as well as while they contemplating an Infinite thing like the space. When the soul worships, the mind also finds an employment. The mind can never conceive of anything that is not material. It is therefore exceedingly difficult for man in his present state to separate himself from idolatry. What man is obliged to do, is his lot and hence we must put off the meaning of idolatry to some other process. We therefore conclude that he that worships the idol as God (whether the idol be formless or form) is idolatrous, but he that worships the spirit in wise love (however near he may be to an idol of form or of no form) is a worshipper of Spirit. But we go further to tolerate all these classes if they be sincere.

God accepts the worship of all those who worship their highest ideal, whether it is form, formless or Spirit, and it is under some regular processes that the idea of God becomes purer and purer in every soul and not by fits

and starts. That man has no heart for his brother and consequently for God also, who sneer at the highest ideal of another behind him, is idolatrous. A war against the idol worshippers either in words or action is not a crusade but a fit of rash, loveless and ambitious fanaticism of a very unphilanthropic character. We therefore, with all our due attempts at the spiritual reformation of our erring brothers, tolerate all classes of idolatry from the worshippers of formlessness to the worshippers of man, or matter as God.

We are opposed to the atheists alone who live and enjoy for themselves. Those who are anxious for the blessing of God are our brothers in faith, whatever error there may be in their ideas and forms of worship. Love of God, however misdirected it may be, does by force of its own natural strength, rise higher and higher in the scale of spiritual progress. Its want is the degradation of the soul alone. Those who do not love God have an opposite course from us and are objects of pity with all classes of theists. God save them. We were led to these remarks by a desire to show that we are candid examiners of the institution of Jagannath without that hatred to the idolatrous (who are not prepared to understand the philosophy of Purushottam Tatwa) which is perceivable in the short sighted and rash reformers of our country.

The system of Jagannath is viewed in two different ways. The superstitious and the ignorant take it as a system of idolatry by worshipping the idols in the temple as God Almighty appearing in the shape of a

carved wood for the salvation of the Urias. But the Saragrahi Vaishnavas find the idols as emblems of some eternal truth which has been explained in the Vedanta Sutras of Vyasa. Within the temples in which are to be found the idols of Bimala, Shiva, Ganesha and Surya, the big, towering temple of Jagannath stands in the middle of the compound. Those who examined the system of Hindu Theology with a philosophic eye, are well aware that there are five different forms of faith comprised therein.

The first form of faith is Shaktatism or the worship of nature as God. The second is the worship of Surya or the sun which is identified with heat; the only active element in lifeless matter. The third teaches one to worship the Spirit in its most unsatisfactory form of development in the lower animals. In this form, the elephant-man or Ganesha is the object of worship. Man is the object of worship in fourth stage of Hinduism. The soul, well developed as it is in the man, is worshipped in Shiva in whom the human souls is said to be observed after salvation. In the fifth stage alone, the Infinite God distinct from the human soul, is perceived and worshipped. Here commences Vaishnavism. In these five stage are shown the whole history of Hindu Theology, nay, the whole history of Theology in general. All sorts of creeds that have come to existence since the creation of man, are included in these five stages. Name any system of faith that man has discovered and we will find no difficulty in classing it with any one of the five, viz.

Materialism, Elementalism, Fetishism, Man worship and God worship.

This is summing up of all systems of faith philosophically and not instructing people to believe in any one of them except the last. The visitor of the temple of Jagannath will find a similar display of these systems in their proper places. Consequently, we find the temple of Jagannath in the middle of the compound, and our remarks will now relate to Jagannath exclusively.

We have several times entered the shrine of Jagannath, and, approaching the sandal bolts, have observed in the middle room an elevated seat on which stand four different forms viz. Jagannath, Balaram, Subhadra and Sudarsana. According to the Vedanta, God is without a second, but He has infinite energies and attributes which are not fully known to man. But then man perceives only three energies in God, because he has no other corresponding sides to understand the other powers. From one of the energies proceeds matter in all its different forms and properties and this energy is styled Maya Shakti of God. From the second energy proceeds all spiritual creation, in all its relations and phases. This power is entitled the Jiva Shakti of God. The third energy perceivable by man is the energy of Will, which is called Cit Shakti. God moving in creation is what is meant by this infinite energy. Jagannath is the emblem of God having no other form than the eyes and the hands. They mean to show that God sees and knows and creates. Balaram is the source of Jiva Shakti

of God; Subhadra, the Maya Shakti; and Sudarsana is the energy of Will. We cannot form any ideas of these energies and hence it is worship of Jagannath that depends upon the collection of these four forms on the same platform. Here we see God analysed in the shape of forms for the sake of those who want to conceive of Him. It is the same thing to see Jagannath as to study the Vedanta in all its Branches. The temple and its institution appear to me to be a book for those who can read it, to the foolish the institution is useless except as a means of reminding them of the Deity who created the world.

There is one more thing in the temple which explains the philosophical superiority of Jagannath over all other Hindu institutions. We mean the Mahaprasad system. Rice dedicated to Jagannath is sold in the Bazaar to all pilgrims. Brahmins and the Khettries, Vaishnavas and Shaktas, the Sanyasis and the Grihasthas, all accept it without any hesitation whatever. Brahminical aristocracy has no rule in the temple. This shows that when people get wise, they need not obey the foolish dictates of the Brahmins which are mainly intended for those who are unable to chalk out ways for themselves. When man admits the superiority of Love to God to all other systems of rule and ethics, he is not bound to work according to the Shastras intended for lower order of men. The common bonds of the inferior Dharma Shastras of Manu and Jagnyabalkya have no influence on the free Vaishnavas who are God's own soldiers in the crusade against evil.

The system of Mahaprasada is not only emblematic of the superior life of the Vaishnavas, but it is a part of the worship which ordinary theists cannot fully understand. The ordinary men are very much inclined to preserve the superiority of Reason over intuitive feelings of man towards the God of Love. We must now proceed to show with healthy arguments that our intuitive feelings want us to offer everything we eat to the God of our heart.

We must first examine the arguments of the antagonist. The Rationalists holds that God is infinite and without wants, and consequently it is foolish to offer eatables to such Being. It is sacrilege to offer created things to the Creator and thereby degrade the Divinity of God into humanity. These are reasonable arguments indeed, and one who has heard them will certainly be inclined to declare to others, "Down with the Mahaprasad." These conclusions, however reasonable, are dry and destructive. They tend to separate us from all connections with God in the form of worship. When you say that the infinite want nothing, you forbid all contemplation and prayer. The Infinite does not want your grateful expressions or, in other words, flattery. Utter a word to the Unconditioned and you are sure to degrade Him into a conditioned Being. Hymns, prayers and sermons are all over! Shut your temple door and the church gates, because our Rationalist has advised you to do so. Believe a creating principle and you have done your duty! Oh! What a shame! What a dreadful fall! Theists, beware of these degrading principles!

Now the Rationalists appears in another shape and admits prayers, sermons, psalms and church going, saying that these things are wanted for the improvement of the soul, but God does not want them at all. We are glad that the Rationalists has come towards us and will make further approaches in course of time. Yes, the progressive Rationalists has admitted a very broad principle in Theology, viz. whatever we do towards God is for our own benefit and not for the benefit of God, who is not in want of any such thing. But the Rationalists is a Rationalists still and will continue to be so, as long as he will seek self-interest. We know for certain that religion promises to give eternal felicity to man and it is impossible to conceive of any religion which has not at its bottom self-interest. This view however, smells of Utilitarianism and can never claim to be theistic. We must love God for God's sake however unreasonable our action may be. Our love must be without any object whatever that concerns ourselves. This must be a natural emotion to the Deity as our Lover without inference or experience. Salvation, dear as it is, should not be the object of this love: what then about other shapes of felicity? "Love of God" is its own reward. Salvation as a concomitant consequence, must be a hard-maid of Love, but we must not look on it as its main object.

If Rationalist be prepared to believe this, he becomes a Theist of the Vaishnava class; but the mere assuming of the name is of no consequence. Though fully aware that the unconditioned has no conditions whatever, yet our

holy and sweet principle of love take a quite different view of the matter. Reason says one thing but Love prescribes its contrary. Reason tell me that God has no sorrow, but Love sees God in tears for those of His sons that are misled to evil. Reason tells me that the strict laws of God reward and punish me in a cold manner, but Love reveals that God slackens His laws to the repentant soul! Reason tells me that with all his improvements, man will never touch the Absolute God; but Love preaches that on the conversion of the soul into state of spiritual womanhood, God, the unconditioned as He is, accepts an eternal marriage with the conditioned soul of man! Reason tells me that God is in infinite space and time, but Love describes that the all-beautiful God is sitting before us like a respected relative and enjoying all the pleasures of society. As a father in his amusements with his young children, God is spreading all sorts of delicious food all over the earth and expecting that His sons should gather all the scattered blessings and, without the exercise of reason in consequence of a strong feeling of love, offer all the blessing to the Father whom they love more than their lives. The Father again, in reply to their kind feelings, gives back the blessings to the children and tells them these kindlier words, "O! My children! These blessings intended for you! Out of your natural love you bring them to me for my enjoyment; but I have naturally no wants to supply. But then I have accepted that part of your offering which corresponds with me, viz. your unmixed love and disinterested

affections for which alone I am exceedingly anxious. Take back these sweet things and enjoy them.” This process of disinterested love, which dry reason can never brook, sanctifies the food we take, and leaves us to harmless enjoyment for all the days of our natural life! This is the system of sincere worship which theists of a higher class alone can act upon. We cannot express the joy we often felt when we took the holy Mahaprasada in the temple! The holiness we attach to it is its sweetness and often pray that all men may enjoy it.

To the Saragrahi Vaishnava, the temple has such thrilling charms which the ordinary Rationalist can never understand. We do not mean to say that Reason is a foolish principle. On the contrary we do not find better admirers of Reason than our humble selves. We hold that man’s superiority amongst all created beings consist in man’s possessing the noble gift of Reason. What we maintain in this, that independent of this noble principle there is another higher gift in man which goes by the name of Love. Reason helps Love to maintain its proper bounds in the Spiritual world. Love often tends to degrade itself by exercising its functions on objects other than God and converts itself into lust for woman, wine, meat and gold. Here Reason advises her to rise higher till she reaches her proper sphere above. Thus we find that the object of Reason is to help Love and not to create it. Reason may be properly styled as the servant of Love and must always be subject to her in all her hopes, aspirations and holy works. The Rationalist on the contrary considers Reason as all in all.

This is degradation of humanity. The progressive Rationalist, on the other hand, believes in the principle of love, but attempts to make her the maid-servant of Reason.

This is another error. He makes spiritual love sometimes a prisoner in the Jails of Reason. Love want to soar on her spiritual wings to a realm where the Jailer (Reason) cannot go and the latter is sure to tie up her wings for fear lest she goes to an unworthy place. Love utters sounds of a spiritual character peculiar to herself, but Reason, having no previous experience of it, mistakes it for a disease and administers medicines for her cure. Thus it is that the natural strength of the Queen of our Soul is crippled by artificial administrations of the dry principle of Reason and she rests in us as if a bird taken in a cage. Oh. What a havoc doth Reason commit by abuse of his power. Oh. Shame to the Rationalist. God, help the man. Theists take care of those amongst you who mix with you only by assuming the name of Theist but are in fact Rationalists of very dry character. They are divisible into two classes viz. the designing and the dupe. The designing Theist is he who is in fact a Rationalist but by assuming the name of a Theist want to degrade the sincere by his bad influence. He that calls himself a Theist in order to get rid of the name of a Rationalist but still holds Love in subjection to Reason is a dupe because he is unable to find out his own position. The sincere theist should however take care of both of them and preserve the sovereignty of Love over Reason and his comrades. We will now show that others,

who have allowed their Love to degrade without caring for the proper instructions of Reason on the other hand, have gone down to a gross idolatry and superstition.

The Temple of Jagannath is under the superintendence of the local Rajah of Puri whom the foolish men worship as an incarnation of the Deity. Under his superintendence there are 36 classes of servants at the temple who are styled the Chhatrishya Niyoga. There are six hundred families of Suars (Soopakars) or cooks in the temple. It is needless here to enumerate all these classes of servants. Several Pandas, Pariharis, Pashupals and Suars send their servants to different parts of India to collect pilgrims to the temple. These agents or Gomasthas (as they are called) visit the gentleman of the places they go to and give some sweetmeat Mahaprasad proposing that they are ready to take pilgrims to Puri under their care. By this means, the agents collect a large number of souls (amongst whom the greatest number are woman of an advanced age) and march on with the sound of Haribol. We must admit that the Pandas and their Gomasthas (generally of the Kayastha class) take a great deal of trouble for the sake of their pilgrims and sometimes advance money for their expenses on the road. The Bengal Jattris generally visit Puri at the Snana Jattri and the Ratha Jattri festivals but the upcountry men come to Puri at all times in the year. When the pilgrims arrive at Puri, the Panda, whose agent brought them, visit them with some Mahaprasad near the Narendra Tank at the approach of the town. The pilgrims see Jagannath on the very day that they arrive

and perform the ceremony of Pancha Tirtha on the following day or the day after that. By Pancha Tirtha is meant the business of bathing in the Tanks of Markandeya and Indradyoomna and in the sea and, after performing Sradha in those three places, seeing the emblems of Jagannath and Balaram in the temple. The Panda all along keeps silent, but on the last day he is sure to take everything that the pilgrim has and sometimes to take a bond for an amount according to the circumstances of the pilgrim. That day the Panda with all his usual gravity takes the pilgrim to an elevated roof in the northern part of the temple called Koila Baikoontha and there utters his Mahabakya and Shufala in order to persuade the pilgrim to pay whatever he or she has with him or her. Thus the pilgrim returns to his native place without anything but a patara of sweetmeat Mahaprasada and a few slips of Jagannath's likeness in rude paintings!

In fact, the temple servants, one, and all, are not a bit better than Brahminical priests who deal with the next world as a means of gain. They are rude in the extreme and quite ignorant of Hindu Theology. They never attempt to teach or learn, but often rove in quest of money. Most of them are fond of drinking a liquor prepared from Bhang and hence they have (nearly all of them) a swelling of their legs sometimes coming up to the stage of disease called elephantiasis. With all their gains, the temple servants can never store wealth because they are very careless. Besides the temple they generally keep a place called an Akhra where they meet

together for the purpose of drinking Bhang and seeing the dance of young boys clad in the dress of females! We will try to give you an account of all the Akhras in Puri in my next paper, and as this paper has become much longer than we at first intended, we take leave of you for the present.

(The Temple of Jagannath at Puri was an English essay written by Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura in 1871)

