Chapter-IV

HISTORY OF
VAIŚNAVISM
The origin of Vaiṣṇavism in Orissa is shrouded in mystery. It is very difficult to say how and when Vaiṣṇavism entered into Orissa. Epigraphic sources show that Vaiṣṇavism was in a flourishing condition in Orissa during the Māthara rule in 5th century A.D. However, there are evidences to believe that Vaiṣṇavism had its existence during the pre-Māthara period. Rock Edict XIII of Ashoka informs us that Brāhmanism and Buddhism flourished side by side in Kaliṅga in 3rd century B.C. The Hātigumpha Inscription of Kharabela of 1st century B.C informs us that though a Jaina Kharabela patronised other faiths and repaired the places of worship of all Brāhmanical deities. (sarbadėyatana sanskara kāraka). The Bhadrak Stone Inscription of Mahārāja Gaṇa of 3rd century A.D refers to the establishment of icons of the three Brāhmanical deities. Viṣṇu being one of the prominent vedic god was possibly enshrined along with two other deities by Mahārāja Gaṇa. But it was only after Samudragupta's invasion of Orissa in 4th century A.D that Vaiṣṇavism received a great fillip under the royal patronage. Soon after the South Indian Campaign of Samudragupta, the Mātharas in Kaliṅga and Nalas in South Kosala came to power. Fortunately both the dynasties patronised Vaiṣṇavism in Orissa.

We learn from the Ningondi Capper Plate grant that Pravanjana Verma of the Māthara dynasty was a worshipper of Nārāyana. Nanda Pravanjana Varma and Chandravarma of the same dynasty also declared themselves as Parama Bhāgabata and Parama Vaiṣṇava respectively in the Charters.

The Nalas and Saravapuriyas of South Kosala who were contemporaries of Mātharas were also patrons of Vaiṣṇavism. We learn from the Podāgada Stone Inscription of Skanda Varman of the Nala dynasty, that he constructed the foot prints of Viṣṇu. Similarly the Sarvapuriyas also embraced Vaiṣṇavism. They describe themselves as
Parama Bhāgabata in their Plates. The Saravapūrya rulers also issued coins which bear Vaiśṇavite symbols like Garuda, Sankha and Chakra. The Saravapūryas were ousted from South Kosala, by the Pāṇḍuvaṁśis who were the predecessors of the Somavaṁśis. The Pāṇḍuvaṁśis were staunch devotees of Visnu. They ruled from the capital city of Sripura or Sirpur.

The Pāṇḍuvaṁśis not only inherited the territories of Saravapūryas but also their religious faith. The 1st great king of this dynasty was Tivaradeva who embraced Vaiśṇavism and called himself a Parama Vaiśṇava in his Bonda Plates and Rājim Plates and Baloda Plates. The seals of Tivaradeva contains Vaiśṇavite figures of Garuda, Chakra, Sankha and a flower device. We learn from Adhavāra Copper Plate grant that Tivaradeva and his son Mahānannarāja, who were also followers of Vaiśṇavism were known to have received the blessings of Bhāgavat Nārāyaṇa Bhattāraka. Vaiśṇavism seem to have received royal patronage from Mahānannarāja, Chandragupta and Harsagupta, who were the successors of Tivaradeva. In the Sirpur Stone Inscription, the king Bālārjuna has been compared with Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa. In the same record it is mentioned that Harsagupta after his death went to the external abode of Lord Hari where he lived worshiping lord Achyuta or Viṣṇu. After Harsagupta his widow queen Vāsatā ruled for some time on behalf of her minor son Bālārjuna. Her reign period is important in the history of Vaiśṇavism in South Kosala. The Sirpur Stone Inscription of queen Vāsatā opens with the invocations “Om Namoh Puruṣottamāya”. The doorjam of the Lakṣmana temple at Sirpur contains figures of Daśabatāra Pantheon. The famous Rājibalochana temple at Rājim (Viṣṇu) is a notable contribution of Pāṇḍuvaṁśis along with Lakṣmana temple of Sirpur.
By this time Vaiṣṇavism could not establish its strong hold in central Orissa as the ruling dynasties like Sailodbhavas and Bhaumakars were great patrons of Śaivism and Buddhism respectively. No record of these dynasties refer to any king as the follower of Viṣṇu. But two queens of Bhaumakara ruling family are known from their records as devotees of Viṣṇu. Tribhuvana Mahādevi21, wife of Sāntikaradeva and Prithvimahādevi alias Tribhuvana Mahādevi II22, wife of Śubhakaradeva IV have declared in their Copper Plates as "Parama Vaiṣṇavis". Further the Angul Copper Plate Inscription of Bhauma king Sāntikaradeva-II of circa 9th century A.D mentions Varāha-Tirtha 23 which has been identified with Viraja or modern Jajpur. The Inscription24 of the Bhaṇja kings of Khiṃjali Maṇḍala also reveal that some members of the dynasty embraced the cult of Viṣṇu.

The Pāṇḍuvarūpīs were succeeded by the Somavaṃśis, who belonged to the same family. Their first ruler Mahābhābha Bagupta Janamejeya-I 25 established his capital city at Suvarnpura in western Orissa in the last quarter of 9th Century A.D.. In subsequent period the rulers occupied the coastal Orissa in the tenth century A.D and made rich contributions to the cultural heritage of Orissa. Though the Somavaṃśis were all devout worshippers of Śiva as known from their records, yet they had equal respect for other Brāhmaṇical religious faith. They expressed their reverence to lord Viṣṇu along with Āditya, Varuna, Soma, Hutāśana and Sulapāṇi etc26. Their royal seals bear the emblem of Gajalaksmin27. Most of the rulers of this dynasty compare themselves with Viṣṇu or with any of His incarnations. In the Narasimhapur Plates of Mahābhāvagupta, king Yayāti-II is described as the representative of Madhusudana Viṣṇu28. The Patna Museum Plates29 of Mahāśivagupta Yayāti-I refer to the prince, who was born like Viṣṇu30. The Brahmesvāsa Temple Inscription31 of the time of Udyota Keśari gives a beautiful description of the birth of full
moon and Sri (Lakṣhmī) from the midst of the ocean of milk being churned by Brahmā, Upendra (Viṣṇu), Mahēśvara and Vāli. It says:

"Om Brahmā"-Upendra Mahēśvarechandra Valī(bhi) rajjuṛtahiścaraibhrar Myanmandāraparvaten of (mathitatksirodadher madhyath)

(Brahmā, Mahēśvara, Upendra (Viṣṇu), Indra and Vāli pulled Vāsuki as rope and the Mandara mountain as churning stick to churn the ocean)

Further Sonpur Plate of Mahābhāvagupta Janamejaya records the grant of a village to a merchants association and the immediate transfer of the same village to the temple of Āditya and Keśava. The Gopal temple of Rānipur-Jharial stylistically regarded as the prototype of Lakṣmāna temple is also assigned to this period. However during the period of Pāṇḍuvāṁśis some traces of Vaiśṇava aspect are found in their temples. One of the chief characteristic features of the Viṣṇu temples built by the Pāṇḍuvāṁśis of Daksina Kosala is the representation of Viṣṇu Anantaśayin in the centre of the door lintel. This aspect is present in Lakṣmāna temple at Sirpur and in the massive entrance to the compound of Rājivalocahana temple of Rājim. Similarly in the lintels of the two ancient temples- the Svarnameru and the Rāmeśvara at Sonpur we notice Viṣṇu in the Anantasaśayi pose.

The Mādalāpāṇji and traditions give the credit to Yayāti for building of a temple for Puruṣottama at Puri. In this connection it may be suggested that the tradition may have been based on truth but the
Somavamsis records are silent about this construction. On the other hand the Dasgoba Copper Plate grant of Rajarajadeva III credits Anantavarman Chodagaṅgadeva for the construction of the neglected Jagannath temple. The Maihār Stone Inscription from Madhya Pradesh narrates the story of a pilgrimage to Puruṣottama in the Odra country by a Brāhmaṇa boy. The record has been assigned to the middle of the 10th century A.D. by which time god Puruṣottama was enjoying the celebrity. Under above circumstances the existence of a temple in 10th Century A.D. for Jagannath can not be denied. As per the Dasgoba Copper Plate grant of Rājarāja III, the grandson of Chodagaṅgadeva the present Jagannath temple of Puri was built by Chodagaṅgadeva. The Copper Plate further reveals that the construction of the temple had been neglected by the previous kings. This lead us to believe that there existed an old temple which was dilapidated and on the ruins of the old temple, a new temple was constructed. The undated Pujāripāli Inscription of Gopaladeva records the name Puruṣottama along with other holy places. The Bormode temple Inscription recorded in the Kalachuri era 840 corresponding to A.D. 1088 was issued by a Gopaladeva. Considering the two Gopaladevas as identical, the Pujāripāli Inscription could be dated in the last part of the eleventh century A.D.

Further from the literary sources we also get reference to the Puruṣottama Kṣetra. The Prabodha Chandrodaya written between A.D. 1073 and A.D. 1076, refers to the temple of Puruṣottama on the sea shore in Utkala. In Satananda’s Bhasyati it is stated that, the author was a resident of Puri and finished the work in Kaliyuga year 4200 or AD 1100 at this sacred place of Puruṣottama. Thus it seems that Puruṣottama Kṣetra or Puri a known Vaiṣṇava Centre was existing by this time. The names of Purusottama and Balabhadra are found in the Inscriptions of pre–Somavarnāśi period. This fact along with the above evidence from the
epigraphic sources had led some scholars to believe that Vaiṣṇavism, which developed through the mingling of the Buddhist Tāntric Cult and Sri sect was associated with the symbolized images of Puruṣottama Balabhadra and Subhadrā. According to some other scholars, Nṛsimha was perhaps worshipped as Puruṣottama during the Somavamsi period. These scholars further held the view that the special feature of the Nṛsimha worship as introduced from the west, was that it could be absorbed by, or combined with, tribal religion in western Orissa and, thus was partly instrumental in Hinduization of one of the tribal. According to these scholars the combination of Vaiṣṇava traditions along with the efforts of the Gaṅga Kings during the thirteenth/fourteenth century A.D. to unite the conflicting religious cultures resulted in synthesis called Jagannath Cult. Thus, it may be presumed that the genesis of the Jagannath cult lies in the worship of Puruṣottama Nṛsimha of the Somavamaṇḍi period.

Moreover, many archaeological remains of Vaiṣṇava character of this period are also found in different parts of Orissa. Large numbers of Mādhava images found in different places in Prāchi valley indicate the existence of Vaṣṇavism in this period. The existence of ten incarnations of Viṣṇu on the outer wall of Manibhadreshvara temple at Bhubaneswar is considered to be the earliest Dāsśvatāra sculptures found in Orissa. These finding indicates the prevalence of the incarnation theory of Viṣṇu during the Somavamaṇḍi rule in Orissa.

Further the beautiful monolithic pillar of Jajpur, popularly known as Subhastambha (Fig. No-18) near the Chandesvara temple is identified by the scholars as a Garudastambha. Its architectural similarity with Mukteswara temple at Bhubaneswar places its antiquity to the 10th century A.D. Garudastambha is definitely a Vaiṣṇavite sculpture, Dr. R.
P. Mohapatra⁴⁴ suggests that possibly this Subhastambha was erected by Yayāti I of the Somavaihsī dynasty to commemorate his victory over this land. Further, one image of Viṣṇu located in front the Trilochaneswar temple at Jajpur holding Śankha and Chakra in upper left and right hands respectively is assigned by scholars to the Somavaihsī period⁵³. Similarly, a Viṣṇu temple known as Panchupāṇḍava (Fig. No.-8) at Ganeswarpur near Chhatia with four subsidiary structures is found and the presiding god is a life-size and four-armed figure of the god Viṣṇu (Fig. No.-42) with all his attributes. The shrines in the subsidiary temple are empty. On artistic ground, the temple is attributed to the Somavamśi period⁵⁴. However, many other sculptures of Viṣṇu character of this period are found in different parts of Orissa. With the fall of Somavaihsī rule in 1112 A.D., Anantavarma Chodagangadeva conquered Utkal. The fate of Vaiṣṇavism took a new shape in Orissa and it became a very popular cult with active royal support of the Gaṅgas.
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