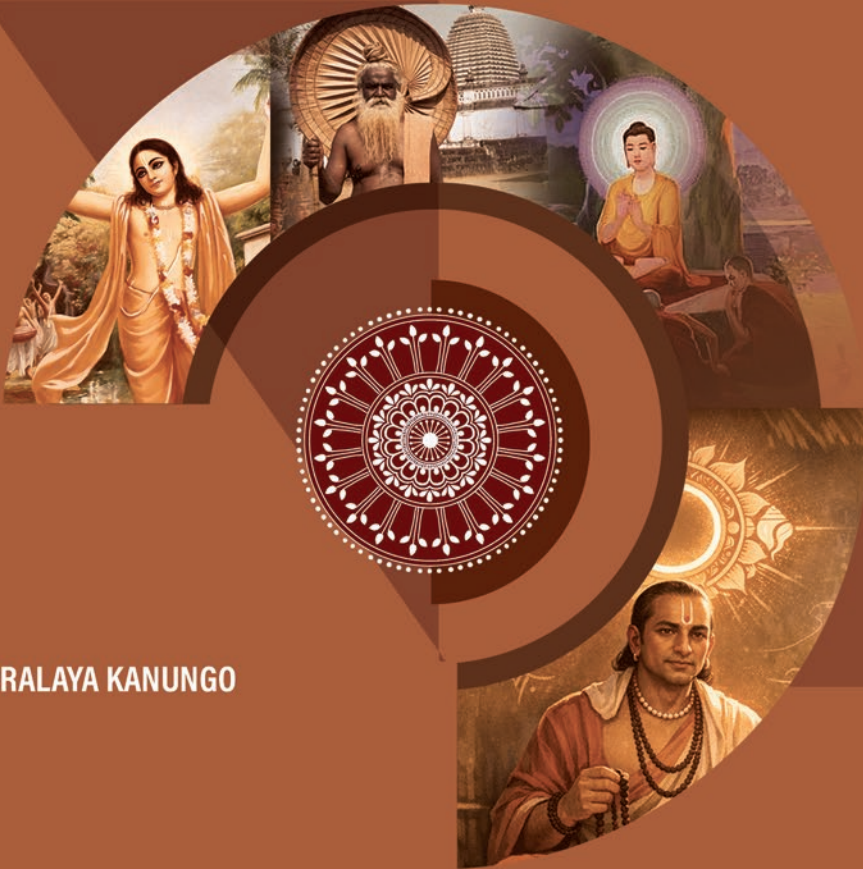


MOMENTS AND VOICES OF BHAKTI IN ODISHA CONFIRMATION, CONTESTATION AND RESISTANCE



PRALAYA KANUNGO



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MOMENTS AND VOICES OF BHAKTI IN ODISHA

Confirmation, Contestation and Resistance

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MOMENTS AND VOICES OF BHAKTI IN ODISHA: CONFIRMATION, CONTESTATION AND RESISTANCE

Pralaya Kanungo

[Note: The text constructed on the version of this Lecture is a work in progress. Hence, some arguments may be tentative and are in the process of development and refinement. I would also like to clarify that although references used in this lecture/text are presented in Endnote, they have not been properly cited/quoted in the text. All works used in this text will be duly acknowledged and systematically cited in the final version of the paper.]



I thank the Director of the ORC for inviting me to deliver this Special Lecture.

Today I will speak on 'Moments and Voices of Bhakti in Odisha: Confirmation, Contestation and Resistance'. In this Lecture, I attempt to capture the complex multi-faceted Bhakti universe of Odisha by focusing on select voices of Bhakti at three different historical moments over a millennium. Highlighting three genres of Bhakti proponents, Bhakti discourses and Bhakti publics, I would present how they evolved responding/relating to the Jagannath cult/Sanskriti and impacted the social, religious and cultural landscape of Odisha. First,

Jayadeva's Sanskrit invocation Gita Govinda (twelfth century) and association with ritualistic and performative devotion in temple and royal court, a Dalit Dasia Bauri's rustic Bhakti and legendary coconut offering to Jagannath, and Chaitanya's dissemination of Krishna ecstasy among middle and lower castes, confirmed and consolidated Jagannath Bhakti in Odisha in multiple forms and ways. Second, the Panchasakhas (five friends), despite their devotion to Jagannath and having a close connection with Chaitanya (sixteenth century), creatively offered a syncretic confirmation-contestation paradigm, combining Jagannath Bhakti with Buddhist idea of Sunya, which had a great appeal among the vernacular Bhakti public of Odisha. Third, Mahima Gosain and his follower, a blind saint-poet Bhima Bhoi from a marginalized community (late nineteenth century), expanding the contestation dimension of the Panchasakhas, constructed an alternate paradigm which challenged and resisted the hegemony of the Jagannath cult and taught new Bhakti idioms and vocabulary to the exploited and excluded outcastes. Contemporary Odisha manifests/represents all the three genres of Bhakti—proponents, discourses and publics—although with varying proportions, objectives and accomplishments.

What is Bhakti?

Bhakti scholars trace the genealogy of Bhakti, a Sanskrit Noun, to the verb bhaj, which means to share, to distribute or to possess. Bhakti is commonly understood as "personal devotion to a god or saintly person." This fundamental idea of Bhakti has been amplified to include multiple meanings, such as "to

participate", "to immerse", "to experience", "to feel", "to honor," "to adore", etc.; Bhakti exemplifies participation, involvement, belonging, loyalty and loving. While a devotee's personal involvement with the Divine constitutes the essence of Bhakti, the inherent idea of sharing often brings people together to constitute a participatory community with a deep bonding.

These characteristics of Bhakti make it different from Vedic ritual traditions and the differential social distinctions which constituted the core of Hinduism. Even though the ancient roots of bhakti are difficult to ascertain, it would be erroneous to conclude that bhakti is a more recent phenomenon. Early Buddhist and Jain texts demonstrate that many elements of bhakti were present in non-Vedic religions as well.

Bhakti is often identified with intense interior emotion. Such genre of Bhakti perhaps originated in early Tamil culture (ca. sixth to tenth century) and spread into different geographical areas in the form of singing of devotional songs composed in vernacular language by 'poet-saints'. Emotion-filled devotional songs attracted both sexes and all social strata as potential devotees, propelling the cultivation of personal experience. As John Stratton Hawley observes, bhakti is effectively a "mediator" between castes, between North and South, Sanskrit and vernacular, intellect and emotion, and other pairs of opposites. Bhakti connects people from different times, places, castes, communities, and religious traditions.

Bhakti may be an interior religion of devotion defined by emotions associated with the "heart," but it may also relate to external forms of religion and more worldly aspects of

“power.” As Bhakti operates in sociopolitical realms and that power and protest function in opposition to one another, then bhakti represents either power or resistance to power (Tracy Coleman). Thus, interior–exterior contestation manifested in all geographical and historical stages of what is being referred to as the ‘bhakti movement’. Some scholars often ask this question: Is Bhakti a language of power or language of protest? Perhaps, Bhakti needs a more complex understanding and explanation than such simple binaries. This lecture will attempt to capture these complexities in the context of Odisha.

ODISHA: A Bhakti Site

I choose Odisha as a Bhakti site for the following reasons. First and foremost, while Bhakti traditions of other Indian regions—from North to South, and from Maharashtra to Bengal—are frequently debated and highlighted in national and global scholarly arena, Odisha remains an outlier, despite having a glorious Bhakti tradition. Second, even though my scholarly engagement with Bhakti is limited, two inherent advantages enable me to comprehend and reflect on Bhakti with some confidence: First, my familiarity and intellectual engagement with Odisha’s social, religious and cultural landscape; second, participatory and experiential knowledge of Bhakti which I received during my childhood. Thus, the objective of today’s lecture is clear: to explore and share Odisha’s rich, complex and yet largely unexplored Bhakti traditions.

I have picked three historical moments for three reasons: First, Kenduli village, Jayadeva’s birthplace, is seven kilometers

away from my village and the origins of Radha Madhav, our family Kuldevta, is perhaps rooted in Jaydeva's reinvention and re-positioning of Radha in Gita Govinda; Second, our family observed my grandmother's death anniversary for twelve years by organizing Asta Prahara Nama Sankirtana in which Shri Krishna-Chaitanya Nama Sankirtana was recited/performed for 24 hours uninterruptedly and I had been an active participant-performer. Along with emotion-filled (bhava bihwala) nama sankirtan experience, my childhood memories, though little scary, also resonates around popular Malika (prophecy) of Achutyananda, one of the Panchasakhas, which has predicted an apocalypse a violent end of Kali Yuga. The third moment is the memory of the visits of Nath Yogis/Chakulia Pandas to my village during summer holidays, holding a large palm-leaf umbrella and singing lyrically and loudly some bhakti songs, and also occasional sights of saffron-clad Mahima Babas chanting Alekh Alekh and worshipping the setting Sun.

Moment I: Jayadeva's Bhakti and Consolidation of the Jagannath Culture

Jayadeva's Gita Govinda, a 12th century literary masterpiece written in Sanskrit, dedicated to the devotion of Lord Krishna, focuses on Krishna's love with Radha. Jayadev was from a Brahman Shashan (village) called Kendubilwa in Prachi Valley, close to Puri. Coincidentally, he shares the name with Krishna. Once a wandering mendicant, he married to Padmavati, a temple dancer in Jagannath temple built by

Chodagangadeva in the 12th century. Jayadeva composed and Padmavati danced to the tunes of Gita Govinda.

As popular narrative goes, while composing Gita Govinda, the poet reached a climax when Krishna commanded Radha to place her foot on his head in a symbolic gesture of victory. But Jayadeva was obviously hesitant to complete the couplet, in deference to his Lord, Krishna. Being unable to resolve this dilemma, he went out to bathe in Prachi River. Then Krishna came in his Jayadeva's guise, entered the house and completed the couplet.

“समर-गरल-खन्दनम्, मम सिरासि मन्दनम्, देहि पद-पल्लव मुदारम्”

“Smar-garala-Khandanam, mama sirasi mandanam, dehi pada-pallava mudaram

“Sri Krishna was approaching Radha to be gracious to remove the poison of separation by placing her feet liberally like a lotus on his head.”

Krishna also ate the food Padmavati had cooked for Jayadeva and then left. After his return, Jayadeva realized that he had received divine grace in exalting Krishna's loving relations with Radha.

This may be mythical, but there is no doubt that Jayadeva reinvented and repositioned Radha as Krishna's consort and made her a heroine in Indian devotional tradition. Earlier, Bhagavat authors had referred to Radha as well, but they rejected her relationship with Krishna as an ideal model for devotee. Jayadev elevated her as Nayika being indulged in an

intensely earthly love with playful Nayaka Krishna—aesthetic, passionate, erotic—expressing different bhavas like a foolish (mugdha), a fiercely angry (candi), proud (manini) emotional (Bhabini). Gita Govinda blurs human and divine love. Krishna's Erotic mood (Sringararasa) and Radha's passion (Rati) manifests in a rite of spring. (Miller, 1977).

How do we interpret Gita Govinda? Secular or religious? Human or Divine? Lee Siegel observes that to assume it either sacred or profane, obscures the essence of the poem – its ambiguity . . . [which] is achieved largely through the ambiguities inherent in the vocabulary of love, a vocabulary equally suggestive of sensual passion and religious devotion" (pp. 29–30).

Thus, Gita Govinda is essentially a double-layered love poem: just as Radha and Krishna constantly pine for each other, the Bhakta, too, has a deep longing for the Lord. The amorous feelings may have been sometimes painted with darker emotions like envy and anger, but never there has been any dilution of the intensity of their love; finally, the poem ends in a joyous reunion of the two. Lyrically, Gita Govinda maintains a playful mood all through, and Jayadeva conveys the reader that his narrative is of an extraordinary love. Since its composition in the twelfth century CE, Jayadeva's poem has continued to be popular among the devotees of Krishna. It has been translated into a multitude of languages, inspiring artists in different parts of the country from Kerala to Rajasthan to re-create the scenes of Radha and Krishna's eternal love. Gita Govinda later became an important source of inspirations for medieval and contemporary Vaishnavism.

Jayadeva's Jagannath: A manifestation of Vishnu and Krishna

During the early twelfth century, Jagannath, a local deity of tribal origin was elevated to the status of "state deity" by the Ganga kings, who built the magnificent temple in Puri for the Lord. Around the same period, Jayadeva wrote Gita Govinda as a dedication to Jagannath. It starts with a description of Lord Vishnu in his ten incarnations in the prelude as 'Dasaavatara'. Lord Vishnu is addressed as 'Jagadisha' which translates to 'Lord of the Universe'. In Jagannath Sanskruti, Krishna and Vishnu are identified as Jagannath – Lord of the Universe. (Eschman, Kulke and Tripathi, 1978).

Gita Govinda and Performative Bhakti: Odishi

Jaidev's Jagannath Bhakti got intimately connected to the emerging Jagannath cult being manifested in bhajans and dances. The King and the priests, in order to please the Lord, not only offered regular ritual service, but also took care of his leisure and entertainment playing music, songs and performing dance. Thus, Natamandir was constructed where dance rituals performed by the devadasis daily in front of Jagannath as part of temple rituals. Gitagovinda was performed in the songs and dances of the devadasis. This practice led to the origins of the Odishi dance – a form of devotion dedicated to Jagannath, a manifestation of Krishna-Vishnu. The dance finds a mention in a 12th century a classical Sanskrit text the Abhinayadarpana. The 15th century Sanskrit text Abhinaya Chandrika provides detailed descriptions of

the postures called chauka, tribhanga and abhanga, and the Gitagovinda being the basis for many Odissi choreographies, especially dealing with the lila of Radha and Krishna. The Odishi dance establishes a relationship between the god the performer; for some dancers, practicing Odissi even means that the god is embodied in the dancer. While the dancer performs before the Lord, both dancer as well as audience exhibit bhakti, devotion or loving surrender to Jagannath. Such immersion and experience are physical, mental and spiritual. Invoking Jagannath and feeling his presence give a 'somatic experience' in which the senses are involved, both for the dancers as well as the audience. (Schnepel 2009).

Gita Govinda was performed in the nightly worship of the deity of Jagannath. An inscription 1499AD prescribes its performance in temple from evening meal to bedtime and proscribes any other song. Maharis/Devdasis danced before Jagannath. During the sixteenth century, the dance was moved out of the temple of Jagannath and the palace, and was performed in other common venues by the gotipuas, young boys dressed up as girls.

Jayadeva's Gita Govinda is written in Sanskrit. But when Jayadeva wrote the era of Sanskrit was coming to an end and Apabhramsa was about to begin (Yuga Sandhi). Hence, Gita Govinda as a text was last of the ancient and first of the modern. Thus, a new era of Bhakti was also opening up. In this turning point, Jagannath came out of the temple once a year during Rathayatra to become accessible to all Bhakts, particularly those who were not allowed to enter the temple

to have a Darshan of their beloved God. Seeing the God is crucial to Bhakti as Bhakti and Visuality are intertwined. Jaganath's annual outing made him Patitpavan (Lord of the downtrodden); such new inclusive idioms of Bhakti confirmed his hegemony.

Confirming the Hegemony: Transcending Caste, Creed and Distance

Dasia Bauri: Long Distance Bhakti

Dasia Bauri was born in an 'untouchable' weaver's family in Baligaon near Puri, perhaps around 14th century. He visited Puri during the Rathayatra and had a Darshan of Lord Jagannath. After returning home he started feeling God's presence around and started dancing with joy; he had a dream in which he was requesting the God to accept his offering. Next day morning he procured a fresh coconut from a Brahmin in exchange of a hand-woven towel. He handed over this coconut to the Brahmin villagers who were leaving for Puri for Jagannath Darshan. Dasia requested them to offer his coconut to the Lord but put a condition: "You will offer the coconut to my Lord. If he receives it from your hand then only you give it to Him, otherwise, bring the coconut back." The Brahmins made a fun of Dasia but took the coconut from him. Somehow, they forgot to offer Dasia's coconut inside the temple. On their return they suddenly remembered near the temple gate.

Holding the coconut in his hand and closing his eyes, Brahinana, one of the villagers, "O Daru Brahma! Baligram

Dasia has sent his coconut for you. Please accept it extending your Lotus hand, otherwise I will take it back.” Suddenly, the Lord extended his long arm from the altar and took the coconut from Brahinana’s hand. Brahinana started to cry in ecstasy. He said, “Oh Baligram Dasia, your life is blessed! Your father and mother are blessed! All glories to them! Your village is blessed. Lord Pitavas is so pleased with you!”

Dasia legend spread a message across Odisha, that Bhakti transcends caste, creed, community and distance. Jagannath shows no favour to Brahmins just because of they are born upper caste. He is patitpavan, who shows special favour to the downtrodden. No shastric knowledge or rich ritual is as powerful as pure, unalloyed Bhakti. An ‘untouchable’ can communicate with the lord directly and the Lord would respond to his genuine devotion. This legend consolidated a conformist tradition with the message that salvation for the lower caste devotees remains outside the temple and they should be satisfied with long-distance devotion. A memorial has been erected for Dasia Bauri in his village with a Tulsi-garden and a Lotus-pond. Tulsi leaves and lotus flowers are supplied to the Puri temple on regular basis as they are favourite of Lord Jagannath. Thus, exclusion is normalised under the hegemony of Jagannath culture.

It is claimed that the Jagannath cult is inclusive and integrationist which provides space for every sect, caste and creed without any discrimination. It is true that the origins of cult itself had passed through a series of accommodation. First, Shaivite Chodaganga went for a magnificent Vishnu

temple. Second, installation of Vishnu-Laxmi yugala murti was altered on to appease the Vaishnavite saint Ramanuja. Third, in the Jagannath triad, Jagannath's wife Laxmi was represented as his sister Subhadra; Shiva was represented by adding Balabhadra as his brother. Finally, Jagannath's iconography was wooden black painted and tribal servitors (daitas) were engaged in temple ritual service. Thus, due to this accommodation, the Jagannath cult appeared less Brahminical and more inclusive. As the cult was a systematic construction for legitimation, Hindu rulers of Odisha made conscious attempts to make it appear inclusive. Despite these efforts, Jagannath cult could not liberate itself from Brahminical domination and retained exclusionary and discriminatory practices.

Moment II: Confirmation and Contestation: Chaitanya and Panchasakha

Chaitanya (1486–1533) took Krishna Bhakti beyond Bengal—to Vrindavan and to Puri. In 1509 Visambhara in Navadipa experienced spiritual ecstasy and decided to surrender fully to Krishna. After being initiated from a monk called Kesava he was renamed as Krishna Chaitanya. On his mother's advice he came to Puri on pilgrimage. Reaching the temple he saw Krishna in Jagannath, became ecstatic and rushed to embrace the God. Krishnadas Kaviraj describes various physiological symptoms of Chaitanya's Bhakti during the 1512 Rathayātra:

"His whole body seemed to be joyous and the hairs on his head stood on their ends. There was a copious flow of water from his eyes which was followed by the foaming of his mouth and a running nose. He shouted Manima (O Lord) with hands raised above his head. He danced and roared in a paroxysm of delight while constantly gazing at the face of Jagannath". (Chaitanya Caritamrta).

Chaitanya settled in Puri; 66 leading Vaishnavas of Bengal acknowledged the divinity of Chaitanya at the Rath Yatra of Puri (Murari Gupta's Kadcha and the Chaitanya Bhagavata). Finally, he passed away before the image of Jagannath or absorbed into Jagannath.

Jayadeva had already created a strong base for Krishna bhakti in Odisha, and Gita Govinda got canonized within the Vaishnava Sahajiya cult. Chaitanya did not establish any sect or sampradaya. He simply asked the followers to chant the name of Krishna; his Bhakti was known as Bhaba-Mishrita Naama Marga (the path of chanting the holy name with proper feelings and faith). This emphasizes that realization of God can be achieved by simpler method of pure devotion without undergoing hard austerities. Chaitanya's bhakti advocated devotional surrender of the Bhakta to Krishna as his loving (female) servant. This gave impetus to Odisha's gotipua tradition (performed by young male dancers in female attire). Thus, Chaitanya and his followers went beyond Jayadev's Great tradition of classical Sanskrit texts, temple dance performances by the Devadasis. Bhakti public

thus expanded using performative tradition of the gotipua and spreading simple messages of devotion. 'Love and Surrender' still remained the core of Chaitanya's Bhakti. Achyutananda's Sunya Samhita noted that Chaitanya had about 12,000 followers in Odisha.

Chaitanya and Utkaliya/Odia Vaisnavism: The Panchasakhas

Vaishnavism had already taken roots in Odisha before Chaitanya's arrival. Utkaliya/Odia Vaisnavism, which was centred around Jagannath, was eclectic as it had integrated many heterogenous elements such as the worship of the Void (Sunya). In this context, it is important to discuss the Bhakti philosophy of the Panchasakhas (five friends). Five poets emerged in Odisha between mid-15th to mid-16th century: Balaram Das, Jagannath Das, Achyutananda Das, Ananta Das and Jasobanta Das—known as "Panchasakhas". It is believed that the origin of Panchasakha relates to the Mahabharata and they were reincarnations of Krishna's five companions Dama, Sudama, Srivatsa, Subala, and Subahu, who came again in Kali-Yuga to serve Him.

These five friends made two major contributions: First, they translated Hindu Sanskrit texts into Odia for the access of common people. Sarala Dasa (not part of Panchasakha) was the pioneer who translated the Mahabharata in the mid-15th century, followed by Balarama Dasa's Jagamohan Ramayana, Jagannath Dasa's Bhagabat Purana, and Acyutananda Dasa's Harivamsa. Achyutananda was the most prolific writer among the Panchasakhas and has written numerous books (Pothi's),

malikas/prophecies. Second, they propagated Odia (Utkaliya) Vaisnavism, which identified God as 'Shunya Purusha' and believed that the soul would merge into the Absolute, thereby suggesting similarities between the Panchasakha philosophy of Sunyata and Buddhism. Utkaliya Vaisnavism developed by the Panchasakhas describes Lord Jagannath as 'Purna-Brahma', and all the Avatars of Vishnu emanate from Him, and also enter into Him at the end. For Panchasakhas, a Bhakta should be faithful, humble, learned, selfless, active, benevolent and affectionate.

Differences between Chaitanya and Panchasakhas:

Chaitanya propagated Raganuga Bhakti Marga (spontaneous), which emphasizes that all that you need is love (devotion) to get God. The Panchasakhas propagated Jnana-mishrita Bhakti-marga, which means that one needs a combination of love (bhakti) and knowledge (Jnana) to reach God. With our knowledge if we show our pure love (bhakti), we can definitely get the sunyatma (GOD). This philosophy is seen closer to Vajrayan Buddhism.

Panchasakha's Sunya Purusha has no shape, no colour; it is invisible and ideal, without a name. Shunya Samhita observes: Everything in this universe is manifested in the Shunya, everything arises out of Shunya and everything flourishes in the Shunya Brahman. The philosophy is not the Shunya of the Buddhists, as it is not empty but full, sometimes even called the Purna Shunya (complete void). For the Panchasakhas, Jagannath is the embodiment of the Shunya Purusha.

Achyutananda uses classical concept of Vaishnavism that treats both form (Saguna), and formless (Nirguna) as attributes of God. As he explains: A bird can only fly with both wings. It can have a perfect vision with both the eyes. In the absence of one, it becomes one-eyed, and in the absence of both, it is totally blind. Thus, like two eyes, Nirguna (formless) and Saguna (form) are chained together.

Achyutananda further emphasizes that the formless Krishna dwells in the eternal Goloka, his celestial abode, and is superior to Krishna of Dwarka. Some Odia followers of Chaitanya even started worshipping the formless Krishna even though the concept of Void is abhorrent to the Chaitanyite Vaisnavas; Chaitanya himself condemned it. Achyutananda's concept of Pinda-Brahmanda Tattva underlines that the body (pinda) is a replica of the Universe (Brahmanda), or microcosm is a reflection of the macrocosm. Much of the yogic teachings of Achyutananda are based on this core concept. His concept of Sabda Brahman unravels that God has created the universe as sound, and that all things have sound vibration as their essence. The writings of Achyutananda are filled with Mantras and esoteric concepts about sounds and their effects on consciousness. Let's have an example of an esoteric verse from his Shunya Rahasa, which may be contrasted with Chaitanya's Bhakti paradigm:

One is not a servant of the Lord just because they have a rosary
 Unless he utters the name of Krishna in his inner heart;
 The Name is the seed, rosary its robe
 Rosary is of no use if God's name is mindlessly uttered

The three cords are the three triadic streams

Make your oblations there Ayudhya, Dwarika, and the city
of Gopa

This knowledge is memorized by every soul

In Odisha, before Chaitanya, Krishna did not receive exclusive devotion. With Chaitanya's followers, Krishna or Bhagavat constituted the complete manifestation of personal godhead. Chaitanya faith gave highest place to Radha, next to Krishna. Though the Gita Govinda made the story of erotic sports of Radha and Krishna popular in Odisha, in popular imagination, Radha did not eclipse other consorts of Krishna, such as Rukmini, Satyabhama and Vrindavati.

Chaitanya's followers, later called Gaudiya, perceived themselves superior to the Utkaliya Vaishnavas. Being aware of this tension, Chaitanya tried to resolve the differences amicably. Hence, he respectfully addressed these five friends as Panchasakha and stated that they are like Pancha Atma, i.e., five souls (Atma-Tattva) and also conferred the title of 'Atibadi' (the great) on Jagannatha Das to acknowledge the dignity of the Utkaliya Vaisnavas. But the differences still remained; it is evident as Achutyananda in the Basana Charita Gita explains to his disciples the attributes of a devotee:

"There are Bhaktas that go on chattering the name of the Lord, there are Bhaktas who will take food from any home. There are Bhaktas who perform occult acts and Bhaktas who make false offerings. There are wandering Bhaktas who carry flags to parade their devotion, and there are Bhaktas who are

smeared all over there body. He who has attained the right understanding of the Divine is the real Bhakta, he is the best because he has an inward eye, sees God within him, and in every person”—An obvious reference to Chaitanya’s followers.

Despite these differences, Chaitanya’s extraordinary religious personality impressed all Vaisnavas irrespective of sectarian distinctions. His devotional fervour at the sight of Jagannath impressed Odia Vaisnavas who took him to be the living embodiment of Jagannath. Achyutananda acknowledges: “Chaitanya is the Lord Himself” (Sunya Samhita). In Chaitanya’s congregation all Vaishnavas participated in the group singing in front of the temple of Jagannath, including the Panchasakhas. Being non-brahmins and ill-treated by Brahmins for their spiritual knowledge, Panchasakhas were drawn to the Chaitanya movement as it treated Brahmins and Non-Brahmins equal. Some Orthodox Odia Vaishnavas like Rai Ramanada also accepted the Chaitanya faith and believed Chaitanya to be the incarnation of Krishna. In fact, Chaitanya was seen as ‘double’ incarnate—Krishna incarnate and Jaganath incarnate.

Chaitanya’s relationship with the Gajapati King of Puri often raises questions about his role. It is believed that his devoted disciple Pratap Rudra, being immersed in Chaitanya Bhakti, lost his vigour and was defeated in the war with Krishnadeva Raya; Chaitana is also accused of advising Pratap Rudra not to attack Bengal. All these accusations against Chaitanya may not be true and may be seen as part of a campaign by

Brahmins, who did not like the Sudra-dominated Chaitanya Movement. W.W. Hunter aptly observes: “Chaitanya is the apostle of the common people in Orissa.... In every Brahmin village the communal shrine is dedicated to Siva, but in the villages of ordinary husbandman, it is Visnu (Krishna), who is worshipped and Chaitanya is remembered as the great teacher of proletarian faith.” Hunter’s reference was appropriate in the context of coastal Odisha.

Chaitanya made an immense contribution in turning and consolidating Odisha as significant Bhakti site by enlarging the Bhakti sphere and expanding the Bhakti public by adopting innovative methods. His Movement popularized Nagara Kirtan (street singing) with Hari Nam and dancing, in which people from different social strata participated and created a Bhakti public. The medium was Nadia Kirtan, which used both Odia and Bengali language. Devotion to Lord and community participation dismantled linguistic and social barriers. Chaitanya’s greatest impact was his imagery (Bhavamurti). His teachings brought radical change in popular imagination and made Radha-Krishna cult more popular, thus maintaining a continuity with the traditions initiated by Jayadeva.

Chaitanya must have been an inspiration to Achyutananda and Jagannath Dasa, who wrote *Rasa* or the sport of Krishna with Radha and Gopis and *Rasa Krida* respectively. He popularised the conception of Jagannath’s identity with Krishna’s. To a large population of Odisha, Chaitanya became a God. Odisha became a stronghold of Chaitanya, where he was more revered and worshipped than in Bengal. However, his

movement did not spread throughout Odisha and remained restricted mostly to coastal and adjacent areas. Chaitna made Bhakti a living faith (Amiya Sen), expanded the Bhakti public in Odisha by attracting diverse classes and castes to the Bhakti public sphere: from Kings to Peasantry (cultivating caste). Despite Chaitanya's religion opening up new social spaces for a wide variety of marginalized men and women, the movement still remained under the domination by a collective of upper castes.

Moment III: MAHIMA DHARMA and BHIMA BHOI

While the first moment was the moment of construction and consolidation and the second moment symbolized confirmation and contestation, the third moment represents compassion and resistance.

In the 19th century the hegemony of Jagannath was challenged by an 'autochthonous' movement (Eschman 1978) popularly known as Mahima (Alekh) Dharma, which was founded by Mahima Swami (died in 1875) in the 1860s when Odisha was severely devastated by a famine. Mukunda Das, the founder, preached his teachings in the far-flung territories of former feudatory states of central and Western Orissa, the spaces settled and simultaneously liminal (kshetra and Vana). Very quickly he attracted a large number of disciples who were mostly lower caste, untouchables, indigenous peoples and illiterate, 'double subaltern'. (Banerjee-Dube, 2007)

For this new Dharma, Alekha (literally means unwritten), the 'Creator' of the universe or Mahima (viz., glorious), manifested a complex cosmology. Alekha/Mahima, the 'supreme being', was 'timeless', 'formless', 'omnipresent' and 'omniscient'. Mahima Dharma advocated devotion to an all-pervasive, formless Absolute, who will be accessible to all. Mahima Swami's message seriously questioned idol worship, including of Jagannath, challenged caste hierarchies, and the role of the Brahmins as the mediators between God and devotees. The primary targets of Mahima Dharma were the kings and Brahmins.

As a strategy, this new Dharma gave primacy neither to textual nor to scriptural, but to the Oral, as it transcended the logic of time and space. By emphasizing the 'time-less' and 'form-less' attributes of the 'supreme being', it aimed to delegitimise Brahminical Hinduism. Focussing on monotheism and devotion and arguing for obliterating intermediaries between God and human beings, the crux of its drive was anti-Brahminical. Mahima Dharma clearly rejected caste hierarchy and norms of commensality. As sharing of cooked food with people of all castes was an anathema to Brahminical Hinduism, Mahima Swami accepted cooked rice as alms and ate it together with his disciples from the same pot. In comparison, Jagannath's Mahaprasad, despite having similar inclusionary objective, had limited achievement. Interestingly, while Mahima Swami accepted cooked rice from all including the 'untouchables', he refused to take it from the Brahmins, who were considered ritually the purest. Thus, Mahima Swami gave a clear message that

he was absorbing the so-called pollution of the lower castes and making them pure; on the contrary, by not accepting cooked food from Brahmins he was obviously demonstrating the inferiority of the upper caste Brahmins. (Banerjee-Dube, 2001, 2007; Banerjee-Dube and Beltz 2008).

Mahima Swami's continuous mobility and extreme detachment signaled that this egalitarian religion rejected authority and establishment. Although followed distinct practices of asceticism in his own life, he initiated both renouncers and householders into his faith, opening for them the way to salvation through pure devotion. All this made Mahima Dharma attractive particularly to marginalized men and women, belonging to lower castes and tribes, who find a new meaning in their lives and hope for salvation as a follower of Mahima Dharma.

Bhima Bhoi: A Pioneer of Mahima Bhakti

Bhima Bhoi (1855–95), the great saint-poet, was the most prominent disciple of Mahima Swami and the Alekh Dharma. Born blind in a tribal (Kandh) family, he spent his childhood in the forest, having no access to any formal education. However, as Bhima was gifted with vision, knowledge and literary skill, and he became a prolific writer. Besides his magnum opus Stuti Chintamani (2000 cantos, 100 Bolis), he authored Chautisa, Bhjanamala, Bramha Nirupana Gita, Nirvedhasadhana. Bhima Bhoi's powerful Bhakti verses challenged the priestly and intellectual class. He pronounced that his poetry was not the

outcome of mastery of scriptural knowledge, but of his own experiences as a tribal Kandh:

"It is a jest of my Guru that my eyes cannot see. I mastered no Vedas or Sastras. I compose my verse with my mind, through my experience, peering into the Void" (Baumer and Beltz 2010: 175).

Bhīma Bhoi exalted Mahima Bhakti, emphasizing total surrender to Mahima Swami, his guru, the embodiment of the divine. Guru became a key figure in his Bhakti paradigm and he built an Ashram at Khaliapali. Bhima's Mahima Bhakti also drew on the influence of the Panchasakhas, the medieval bhakti poets of Odisha. Bhima Bhoi took uncompromising position on idolatry, and questioned sacred hierarchies and temple rituals. His Stuti Chintamani, Bhajan Mala, and other Bhakti verse collections, resonated regional intellectual and vernacular traditions, already disseminated by the panchasakha. In some sense, he reinvented the non-Brahminical legacy of Sarala Dasa, the Sudra Muni (low caste sage), who produced vernacular Oriya versions of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Scholars argue that Bhīma Bhoi's conceptualization of brahman as Alekha (the "unwritten"), as well as his philosophy of sunya ("the void") might have been inspired by the Nagarjuna Buddhism and Tantrism, which influenced the social and cultural landscape of rural and tribal Orissa culture for centuries.

Bhīma's devotional verses were recited in a ritual called dhuni (burning ritual fire), being accompanied by local/tribal musical instruments and playing popular and local melodious

tunes. Despite containing highly complex metaphysical and mystical ideas, Bhima's verses penetrated deep into popular psyche and his hymns were fervently sung by poor and illiterate devotees. Bhīma's poems, carrying the message of social equality, were composed quite systematically, "with due regard to metre, rhythm and musicality" and used the "twilight language" (the *sandhya bhasa*) resembling the mystical, paradoxical language of the Buddhist Siddhas and Nath yogis. (Baumer and Beltz 2010; Mangharam 2011).

In March 1881 a group of Mahimapanthis (12 men and 3 women), who were devotees of Bhima Bhoi, forcibly entered the Puri temple with a mission to burn the Jagannath triad. They came to Puri being motivated by one of their co-religionists, Dasharam, who claimed that he had been commanded by Alekh Svami to destroy the idols. The intruders, almost in a state of nudity, were shouting 'alekh', 'alekh'. They reached the main hall of the temple in front of the shrine, but finding the Jaivijay dwar (inner door to the sanctum) shut, they were madly trying to find an entrance to the shrine. They faced resistance from the temple priests and pilgrims and during the clash, Dasharam, their leader fell on the stone pavement, and he died being trampled. Other intruders were soon arrested by the police. (Resolution no 42091 (judicial), dated Calcutta, October 21, 1831, JTC (Part VI, 1880-84).

Should we call this incident a 'subaltern revolt' against the Jagannath cult? May or may not. But it was undoubtedly an onslaught by a section of radical Mahimapanthis on the

hegemony of Jagannath. As reported, the Mahima followers believed that they were acting under the command of Alekh Swami; since there was no 'brahma' in the Jagannath triad, these iconoclasts were convinced that it was useless to retain the idols in the temple (Utkal Deepika, Cuttack, March 26, 1881). The command of Alekh Swami was a symbolic divine approval to demolish the extreme orthodoxies, rituals and externalities practiced in the Jagannath temple in the late 19th century. Perhaps, the radical Mahimapanthis, being devotees of a formless Supreme Being, thought that by demolishing Lord Jagannath they would end all orthodoxies, hierarchies and discrimination. The contemporary British government reports, however, dubbed the Mahimapanthis as Hindu 'dissenters', 'fanatics' and 'rioters'.

This description, may be ill-informed, and perhaps a deliberate misrepresentation, overlooking the core concerns and genuine aspirations of the Mahimapanthis: Compassion and liberation. Liberation from idolatry, ritualism, inequality, caste hierarchy, discrimination and violence. Bhima Bhoi's Mantra was Jagata Udhara—Liberation of Mankind—was nothing but compassion. His most popular verse is a prayer for liberation and compassion for the mankind:

*Praninka aarata dukkha apramita dekhu dekhu keba sahu;
Mo jibana pachhe narke padithau jagata Uddhara heu (SC).*

Who can bear to see the immeasurable misery of mankind?
Hurl me to Hell, but save the universe.

CONCLUSION

This lecture attempts to comprehend three distinct historical moments of evolution of Jagannath-centric Bhakti sphere in Odisha—traversing through diverse social contexts and literary texts, religious and cultural milieu, discourses and practices—from Jayadeva to Chaitanya and Panchasakha, to Mahima Dharma and Bhima Bhoi. Despite having a continuity, each moment represents a distinct ethos of Bhakti—Aesthetic-Erotic, Ecstatic-Esoteric, and Compassionate—Liberating.

Aesthetic-Erotic: While depicting Radha and Krishna's aesthetic-erotic love in Gita Govinda, which was human and divine at the same time, Jayadeva laid the foundation of Jagannath-centric Bhakti traditions in Odisha making a fusion of Krishna, Vishnu and Jagannath. An emerging Jagannath cult, which had elevated its status from a little tradition to a great tradition, was in search for a classic text and performative ritual for constructing Jagannath-centric Bhakti traditions for legitimation and claiming superiority vis-a-vis local cults and Southern competitors. Gita Govinda became an ideal performative text. Temple dancers, from Devadasis/Maharis to Gotipuas, and subsequently to Odishi dancers performed to the tune of Gita Govinda disseminating Bhakti for Jagannath and creating a small Bhakti Public. The cult expanded beyond Puri as Jagannath temples sprang up in other princely state capitals; Gita Govinda went there too

along with dance rituals and Odisha's Bhakti public expanded. But its nature of composition remained same—King—nobility—priests—servitors—extended temple community (mostly upper bracket castes). However, as Jagannath cult's popularity grew with institutionalization of the annual Rathayatra and adoption of some inclusionary myths and practices, it opened possibility of further expansion of the Bhakti public.

Ecstatic—Esoteric: After Jayadeva, Chaitanya became a strong pillar of Jagannath-centric Bhakti traditions. While confirming Jayadeva, he introduced innovative devotional methods. Through simple Nama Sankirtana he took Bhakti from temple to street and city to village, upper caste to middle caste. Emotion, spontaneity and ecstasy became the bedrock of his devotion (Bhava Misrita Bhakti) which attracted a large public from diverse social strata, thus enlarging Odisha's Bhakti public sphere. Yet, it was mostly limited to coastal Odisha and adjacent areas; moreover, the 'untouchables' by and large were excluded.

Interestingly, Panchasakhas, who were contemporaries and fellow-travelers of Chaitanya, confirmed as well as contested Jagannath centric Bhakti paradigm. Their Jagannath, unlike Jayadeva's and Chaitanya's, epitomized Saguna as well as Nirguna. They reached out to common Odias beyond coastal Odisha through vernacular medium, thereby further enlarging Odisha's Bhakti public sphere. More importantly, their idioms of Bhakti were interrogative and esoteric. Their esoteric

philosophy of Sunya gave birth to the 19th century radical Mahima Dharma.

Compassionate-Liberating: Mahima Swami and his disciple Bhima Bhoi interrogated the Bhakti paradigm of Jayadev and Chaitanya as they thought this notion and practice of devotion had become an instrument of oppression by the King-Brahmin-Upper caste ruling class, who used Jagannath cult for legitimization and domination. Bhakti, in Mahima-Bhima Bhoi discourse, being driven by compassion for mankind in general and the downtrodden in particular, was more human centric than God centric. The daring attempt to burn down Jagannath was a symbolic expression of liberation from oppression and attaining a compassionate world.

Thank You!

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In this essay, those wider concerns return through a distinct regional archive. Bringing together literary, devotional, social, and intellectual histories, Kanungo approaches Odisha's Bhakti traditions not as a closed sacred inheritance but as a historically shifting field of confirmation, contestation, and resistance. The result is a study that is at once regionally grounded and intellectually expansive.





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