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Odia Bhāgabat by Jagannath Dāsa: An Odia Literary Classic with Universal Knowledge

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Abstract

Odia Bhāgabat by Atibadi Jagannath Dasa is no doubt a classic treatise and a perfect translational localization as well as summarization of the original Srimad Bhagabat Mahapurana composed by Veda Vyasa. Since its date of composition in the form of palm leaf and copper plate engraving, it is invaluable in the nook and corner of Odisha. Many of its rhymed and simple lines motivate people of all sects and categories to deal with the critical moments of life. In this context, the present paper attempts at an appreciation of the book in focusing on its contents and contexts appropriately taken from the Vedas, Vedantas, Upanishadas, and the eighteen Puranas. Additionally, it epitomizes Srikrnsna bhakti tradition as outlined in Vaishnavism which is characterized by spiritual exaltation and the devotion for lord Jagannath. What's more, through its chronicling of mythological, spiritual anecdotes, it emphasizes on the moral and spiritual path to be adopted in day to day life; to plan and live a life with the best of intentions proving the worth of the much-valued human life. While telling stories poetically in couplets of nine letters in each line uniformly, it highlights how to distinguish between illusion and reality; true and false; believe in karma and its effects; how to revere parents and treat with the best of intentions to the gurus, women and guests; to become a mystic and a rationalist to strongly believe in the presence of the creator in all beings; and accept death as the inevitable and universal phenomena. This sort of classics could be placed as one that can ignite the human cognition and equals all other world-famous classics like The Odyssey, The Divine Comedy and The Paradise Lost. The tenets of mysticism, pantheism and transcendentalism could also be traced recurrently in its epical structure.

Keywords: mythological, bhakti tradition, spiritual path, karma, human cognition.

1. Introduction: Jagannatha Dāsa (1490–1550) known by the honorific Atibadi, meaning "very great" is an Odia poet and litterateur. He was one of the five great poets (along with Ananta Dasa, Jasobanta Dasa, Balarama Dasa and Achyutananda Dasa) in Odia literature, known as the Panchasakhā. He wrote the *Odia Bhāgabata* which had a great influence in standardizing of the Odia language. The popularity of Odia Bhagabat in Odisha reached to the level of it being worshiped in many homes. The villages in Odisha used to have a small house or room known as the Bhāgabata Tungi, where villagers would gather to listen to recitations of Dasa's Bhāgabata. Many of its verses have become proverbs and are cited by people throughout Odisha. The work includes 12 volumes and each volume has 10–30 chapters. Each chapter has 50 to 300 stanzas. According to J.B. Pattanaik in it is "...a venerable literary work which has immensely inspired the people of Odisha over centuries and is still read by people of Odisha with utmost devotion. The Bhāgabata contains messages of high import for the mankind." (Pattanaik, 12).

Odia Bhāgabata has influenced the socio-cultural life in Odisha and is looked upon as a book of scriptural-social jurisprudence and people often refer to it while settling many a dispute. Saint poet Jagannath Das was himself a poet of high order dedicated to lord Jagannath and he composed this work in Gujjari Raga and Nabakshari Britta which he used to recite in his melodious voice near Bata Ganesh in the Jagannath Temple premises for the benefit of the illiterate masses. The language is too simple to the comprehension of the people and has an enviable style." (Das, p.9). Jagannath Das had read all the 18 Mahapuranas of Bhagaban Vyasa Dev to compose *Odia Bhāgabata*. He is said to adopt Bhaktibada.

As a matter of fact, *Odia Bhāgabata*, one hand written or engraved in palm leaves or copper plates is worshipped in every household in Hindus of Odisha just like *The Bhagabat Gita*. Since the ancient times, in almost all the villages of Odisha, there is a Bhagabat Tungi which stands as the central place of cultural, intellectual, religious and moral point for the villagers. It is sung at the death-bed of persons with a thought that they would die with equanimity. What's more, it is evidently the sum and substance of the great Hindu books like *Vedas, Vedantas, Upanishadas, The Gita* and the 18 well-known Puranas. He is the unique scholar rendering these efforts by translating and simplifying the Sanskrit textual contents of the writings of Vyasa which was difficult for many in Odisha to read and understand. It guides human being in the line of the Bhakti cult all the way to shape the personality; distinguish illusion from reality; realize the subtle existence of *jivatma* in the corporeal frame that aims at salvation; maintain balance in the social, personal and spiritual life; believe in true work just like work is worship; do and don'ts in daily life ;help generously the needy; devote profoundly to the lord of this world; speak the truth and live a simple and honest life; believe in transformation through the realization of manifestation; take care of the surrounding nature including the animals and the non-living; and inculcate the value of piece and discipline. Not only this, this book helps keeping cultural harmony; make people think and behave with essence of true knowledge; understand what love is; and the most important is the delineation; versification and diction establishes the record of

Odia as one of oldest Indian languages, and using this it altogether provides aesthetic relish in terms of presenting the sum and substance of the four Vedas.

Odia Bhāgabat is a book of maxims having complete dedication to living the best of life as a human being. It is the best translanguagel summary of the morals of all the best scriptures like Vedas, Vedantas, Upanisads, 18 Puranas including Vyasa's Bhagabat Mahapurana and The Gita. Thus, it talks about spirituality, different types of bhakti like sadhana bhakti, sadhyabhakti, satjnana, detachment and formation of an ideal society. Identified as one of the readers of Puranas in the temple of Lord jagannth during the time of King Kapilendra Dev, Jagannath Dasa is no doubt like Goswami Tulasi Das, Sant Sur Das, Sant Gyaneswar and Namdev. Although it is said that he wrote it in Odia for his mother, he had a greater interest in serving the humanity and create the best literature in Odia. He was so committed to write this book engraving in palm leaves.

The book gives the profile of the four great epochs, each of which is a complete cycle of cosmic creation and destruction. This belief is based on the theory that creation moves in cycles and that each cycle has four great yugas, or epochs, of time which adopts a never-ending system that "begins to end and ends to begin." Metaphorically, the four Yuga ages may symbolize the four phases of involution during which the human gradually lost the awareness of his or her inner self and subtle body. Hinduism believes that human beings have five kinds of bodies, known as annamayakosa, pranamayakosa, manomayakosa, vignanamayakosa, and anandamayakosa, which respectively mean the "gross body," the "breath body," the "psychic body," the "intelligence body," and the "bliss body."

2. The Contents of *Odia Bhāgabat*: Like *Bhagabat Mahapurana*, it is the sum and substance of 18 Mahapuranas. Those are: Matshya Purana, Markandeya Purana, Bhabisiya and Bhagabat Purana; Brahama Purana, Brhmabaibarta Purana and Bramhanda Purana; Bishnu, Bayu, Bamana and Baraha Purana, Narada Purana, Linga Purana, Padma Purana, Agni Purana, Kurma Purana, Skanda Purana, and Garuda Purana. Canto-I starts with invocation to the supreme lord and Saraswati, the knowledge-giver the creator of this universe before whom the poet promises to adopt the path of truth, enlightenment and morality (Satyam param dhimahi). The first part (19 chapters) focuses on the incarnations of god. This includes the accounts of birth history of king Parikihit; the killing of the sons of Draupadi; the safety of Parikshit from Bramhastra; the prayer of Kunti and Yudhisthir to god; the visit of Yudhisthir to Bhisma and the death of Pitamaha; the handover of the kingdom of Pandavas to Prikshita; the return of Srikrishna to Dwaraka; the repression of Prikshit to Kali; and Sutamuni to Saint Shaunakadi about Brahmasutra for which he clarifies how Sukamani made it listen to Maharaja Parikshit. In the second part is based on the description of the creation; the lilavatars of the lord; and the ten symptoms of Bhagabat. In the third part, it says about the pilgrimage of Bidura and his meeting with Uddhab; Bidura's meeting Maitreya and his narration of the story of the origin of Brahma; the description of the ten commandments; the story of Hiranyakashipu and Hiranyakshya; the tapasya of Kardama and obtaining blessings; marriage of Kardama with Debahuti; birth of Kapila muni; the power of Bhaktiyoga; the origin and development of human body;

Dhumamarga, Architadimarga and the destiny of human soul. In the fourth part, the description of Manu dynasty; story relating to quarrel between Shiva and Dakshaprajapati; the sacrifice of body of Sati in fire; the killing of Daksha; the visit of gods and goddesses; visit of Dhruva to forest for meditation and returning home after success; the story of king Pruthu; and Puranjana upakhyana. The fifth part says the story of Priyabrata, Rushabha, Bharata and Jadabharat; the dynasty of King Bharat. The sixth part says about Ajamila; the dynasty of Daksha; Narayana kabacha; Brutrasura killing; and Chitraketu upakshyana. In the seventh part, the story moves to the story of Hiranyakashipu and Prahallada; the origin of Nrushingha; and the laws of grihasthashrama. The eighth part talks about the dynasty of Manu; the rules of work division by Manu; the story of the elephant and crocodile; Samudra manthan; the tortoise incarnation of the lord; the fighting between gods and demons; and the brith of Bamana and the death of Bali. The ninth part consists of stories of Manu's son, Sudumna's marriage; the story of Maharshi Chyvana; Nabhaga Charita and the Ambarisha-Durbasa Upakhyana; Ikhwaku dynasty details; about Saubhari Rushi; stories of King Trishanku, Harishchandra, Sagara, Bhagiratha, Srirama; quarrel between King Nimi and Basishtha; the evolution of the Chandra dynasty; the story of Parshuram; The dynasty of Jajati's son, Puru; the dynasty of Anu, Huhu, Turbasu, and Jadu; Bidarbha dynasty; stories relating to Krusna and Balaram. The tenth part focuses on Gopalila; the prayer of Brahma and other gods and goddesses to lord Vishnu; the story of Krushna-Balaram till Rasalila and Dwrakalila; and the killing of Kansa. The 11th part includes: the curse of the rushis to Jadu dynasty; Bhagabat Q-A between Nimi and Nabajogeswar relating to karma; Barnasrama dharma; jnana, bhakti and karma yoga; the destruction of Jadu dynasty and Krishna's departure for swadham. The 12th part narrates Kaliyug; description of the four types of pralayas; importance namasankirtana; Sukadev's final say and death of Parikshit; the tapasya of Markandeya. This comprehensive knowledge regarding the time periods, the incarnation, the eminent persons, their dynasties, the story of the sages, the rise and fall of kings and emperors; the peculiarities of actions and reactions of different situations make us constantly aware of the life to lead ahead and contribute to the sustenance of the world. In addition, it also makes us realize the scopes and limitations of human being.

3. The Moral Contents of *Odia Bhāgabat*: The book reflects on the best attributes of human being in a simple and convincing manner. There is repetition and emphasis on purity of thought and action throughout life. Thus, it speaks of the following things.

i. Nama samkirtan and devotion:

- a) Lord Krishna is the creator II Uttering his name is the best work II
- b) Devotion and prayer to the Lord II Will never fail in yielding good result II
- c) I am intertwined in the Samsar II Only a devotee of me can trace me II
- d) If you devote your work to Srikrusna II It removes your confusion II
- e) If you take me as a Nirguna Brahma II Invest your mind with utmost purity II

The poet continuously advocates the essence of strong belief and self-surrender to the lord. This has a perpetual value in refining one's self and realization of the presence of the

lord with you makes you work with utmost devotion, sincerity and satisfaction. Ultimately, this results in achievement of eternal reward if not worldly most of the times.

ii. Mind is the most powerful physical entity:

- a) Your mind is your guru II Uddhaba, you need not look for it elsewhere II
- b) Whatever this mind meditates over II It is obtained at one point of time. II

While talking about knowledge, performance, belief, strengths and weaknesses, he mostly emphasizes on mind. Like Swami Vivekananda and other great spiritual leaders, he also emphasizes on the control and concentration of mind.

iii. Companion of honest people

- a) Strong companion of honest people II Glorifies the name of the lord II
- b) Companion of honest people enhances knowledge II It helps freeing from attachments II

Since our surrounding and our companions always influence us in some cases, they determine our personality as well. Thus, the best companion of dutybound, honest, kind and spiritual people certainly help design one's life in much better way.

iv. Character as a priceless possession:

- a) Although you have thousands of good qualities II If you do not have good character, then all useless. II

This adage holds great value at present because people have become material wealth-bound forgetting all morals and conscience. They go to the worst level to stifle others in order to get wealth and money in unfair means.

v. Value of human life:

- a) The virtuosity of countless lives II Results in the birth of human on the earth. II
- b) This life is worthy II Only when it establishes bhav with the supreme lord II
- c) Person who has power to punish II Must be benevolent enough to forgive too II

He values human life greatly and talks of valuing it with dutifulness, kindness, services to the lord and realization that we are all the children of the almighty. This echoes: "Shrinwantu Vishwe Amritasya Putra" is a work that translates to "Listen, O The Children Of Immortality The World Over."

vi. Value of guests and visitors:

- a) If a guest arrives at your home II treat him with the purest heart II
- b) Try to make him relished II speak good words to him II
- c) If guests do not visit a home II and do not have feet washed II
- d) The people of that home are worthless II they have no credit in being popular or being healthy II

(4th Skandha, 22nd Chapter)

There is a Vedic saying, “Atithi Debo Bhaba” which comes in line with the writings of the author as he says that serving the guests with food and good behavior which results in a better atmosphere. This trend gives satisfaction to all and faith and relationship becomes stronger.

vii. Importance of Women:

- a) Misusing the female race II Leads to the hatred of learned people II (4th Skandha, first Chapter)

He values women to be the backbone of a society. So, he convinces people not to treat women in ill manner and never to degrade them in the family as well as in society.

viii. Guru-Sishya Tradition:

- a) Do not consider gurus as humans II They are like gods II
- b) Gurus represent every religion II God himself is present in him II
- c) A guru is an incarnation of God II He or she cannot be equal to any human being II

In traditional Indian system, the guru-shishya tradition is highly valued. There are great examples of Valmiki, Vyasa, Sandipani, and Dronacharya. In the same way, the poet says that the knowledge-giver is synonymous to God. They must be respected, revered and provided the best services.

ix. Helping others:

- a) The person who donates and helps others II He is considered one among the knowledgeable II
- b) Whoever helps you to rid of plight II Help people get out of criticalities II
- c) Anyone who is kind to others II His or her stay is blissful in this world II

Since all our knowledge and skills are based on providing services to others and there is a belief that service to mankind is service to God, that has to be followed unconditionally. The services are proven to be beneficial in a mathematical proportion.

x. Kindness to animals:

- a) Those who kill animals II He or she goes on moving in the animal joni for a long time II (4th Skandha, 25th chapter)
- b) There is no pleasure in killing animals II This only leads to hell II (10th Skandhas, 3rd chapter)

Not only humans but also animals, plants and trees need our kindness. This is how we can inculcate the value of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. This kind of anthropogenic as well as anthropomorphic make us survive in a better world developing mutual adaptability and interdependence.

xi. Leading honest and truthful life:

- a) If you have to enjoy some falsehood II Never do that II (11th Skandha, 8th Chapter)
- b) The person having immoral friendship II Obtains a valueless body II (5th Skandha, 24th Chapter)

- c) He who has no ego II have both tolerance and kindness (18)
- d) Have no deceptive nature II In nature, he is saintly. (19)
- e) Seeing the divine knowledge II God becomes happy. II (12th Skandha 10th chapter)

Honesty is the best policy. Anybody living dishonest life is subjected to suffering. As a matter of fact, living life attuned to nature help us to become enjoy life confidently. Shedding ego will help people to become simple and honest, and help develop tolerance. This ultimately makes you achieve sainthood.

xii. Greatness of *karma*:

- a) The works performed earlier II sadness or happiness comes (79)
- b) People come under their deeds II That leads to punishment II
- c) Thus, the sinners carry this with them II Get cursed birth instead of virtuous one II
- d) But, those who perform virtuous works II They enjoy its best result II
- e) Those who are rid of evil deeds II He or she cannot enjoy the result of his or her work II
(6th Skandha, 1st Chapter)

In all the scriptures and religious books, karma has been highlighted. It is the sum and substance of The Gita too. Karma according to *Sankhyayoga* is mathematically set and carry forward to the determine the destiny in this life and even in after life.

xiii. Qualities of human being:

Here, it talks about the three attributes of human being viz. *satwa*, *raja*, and *tama* (virtuosity, passion and apathy). The virtuous attributes help achieve morality and leads to the liberation of soul. People having passion and apathy or ignorance resort to ego or individuality and become self-centred. These people cannot achieve peace, prosperity and liberation of soul.

- a) All the learned people II Accomplish all your deeds as per might II
- b) Until you have self-knowledge II You will be attached to karma II
- c) The service with based on the theory of rational attitude II Makes personality improve continuously II
- d) If you become sick out of comfort II no medicine can cure it. II (140)

xiv. Revering parents:

- a) The help and care of parents II No child can repay II

In the increasing changes in lifestyle, the lines of the poet bear much importance. Since nobody can equal to the services and sacrifice rendered by parents to bring up their children, it is the most important responsibility of children to take of their parents. Amongst the gurus, parents are the primary gurus.

xv. The pantheistic, mystic and rationalist ideology:

- a) The supreme soul is present in everybody II It is the incarnation of souls II
- b) The devotion of the living beings II It does not discriminate anybody as nearer or farther from god. II

Like many other well-known poets, Dasa also believe in the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent concept of the creator. This is he believes in realizing the presence of the supreme soul in very living as well as non-living beings. Once it is realized, then the whole attitude and personality of a human will be changed.

xvi. Notions of Mortality:

- a) Whoever takes birth on this earth II Even gods and goddesses must die one day II (11th Skandha, 9th Chapter)

In all the scriptures, moral and spiritual guides, it has been clearly said that “Jatasya Dhruvo Mrutyu.” Or “Dust though art to dust returnest.” This is not for the imperishable soul, but for the body that constitutes the five elements of this world.

xvii. Acquisition of wealth:

- a) Those who hoard only money ad wealth II They are subject to suffering. II (22)
- b) Money and wealth cannot provide salvation II It is only greediness. II (23)
- c) Those who have love with sensual pleasure II only are they subject to greed and desire. II (23)
- d) The wealth acquired in hardship II Never helps when you look for happiness II
- e) People having greediness for wealth II want the help of ghosts and spirits. II (77)

Material prosperity, greed and selfishness in the acquisition of wealth have been always prohibited in the scriptures. In order to get peace and intellectual fertility, one has to be truthful, honest and hardworking. This has been envisaged in this book too. It has been proven that the path to salvation can be only obtained by getting rid of the material illusion.

xviii. Distinguishing between illusion and reality:

- a) Only for physical pleasure II People go on doing many works II
- b) We may consider high and low class II But, all possess the body of the five elements II
- c) The living being gets attached to body II This leads to illusion. II

So far, human being although or uneducated mostly fail to distinguish between illusion and reality, and go on doing certain works passionately which are inappropriate. As a consequence, he or she suffers and cries to get rid of the evil effects. He or she exhausts time only in making efforts to be in the comfort of body and safety of self.

xviv. *Sthitaprajna* or steady wisdom:

- a) Considering both sadness and happiness alike II Without any hesitation internally can only succeed. II

The mind of human being has enough of potential to think and work. It can make a hell of heaven and vice versa. However, it gets disturbed like the rippling of water or at times, this rippling leads to tornado. This is definitely subversive. Therefore, the presence of steady wisdom can lead to firm judgement and enhances personality.

Poet Jagannath Dasa uses lots of simple and effective similes and metaphors to present his views regarding different moral and spiritual matters. According to him, God is like the precious stone present in water, like rain in mirage. Human condition in the Kaliyug is like we all are in the infinite sea of troubled water. The lord is the sailor in the sea, (1st skandha, 1st chapter) and all our deeds are like reflection in water whereas the appearances are illusory II (11th Skandha, 1st chapter). Human body puts up with the pains of duty like a python in the forest. So, it is high time for us to consider God as a kalpa tree and meditate over me with truthful heart. Such literary devices have been deeply rooted in the mind of each and every Odia leading to formation of a conceptual metaphor (theory proposed by George Lakoff and his colleagues) as a matter of interest to cognitive scientists. As a matter of fact, these metaphorical lines of the *Odia Bhagabata* have been immersed in the socio-cultural constructs of the people of Odisha that work as guiding principles of life.

Jagannath Dasa was greatly inspired by Vaishnavism, a Hindu tradition that reveres Vishnu and is a popular religious and philosophical tradition in India that has a blend of practical living with philosophical thinking. This tradition is historically most associated with Vaishnavism. In addition, he was a great devotee of lord Srikrnsna and lord Jagannath. As a result, his writings in the lines of Vaishnavism also blends Krisna consciousness and Jagannathism, the established cult of Hindus in Odisha.

4. Conclusion: As an epic, *Odia Bhagabat* can be compared with any of the world classical epics such as *The Odyssey*, *The Divine Comedy* and *The Paradise Lost*. The main purpose of *The Odyssey* is to explore the human capacity to overcome great obstacles, particularly those presented by the gods. The poem suggests that there is a natural order to human existence, and that certain actions produce certain consequences. Similarly, the main idea in Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is essentially how people learn to attain salvation. It gives a long narration of how Dante's pilgrim goes through hell in Inferno and gives such a figurative picture of how sinners suffer without any hope of redemption. The main theme of John Milton's *The Paradise Lost* is the question of free will versus predestination, or whether humans make their own choices or are fated. The philosophical sparking of the book comes at par with the Western beliefs based on mysticism, pantheism and transcendentalism. Not only this, amidst the fear of utter destruction of our civilization, this classic spread the essence of culture and tradition, and work as lamp post that could best build a bond among the creatures of the world leading to a practice of mutual belief and faith leading to natural, interdependent and long-lasting coexistence.

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