

Literary Heritage of India

Renunciation, Liberation and Compassion

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Along with many other important elements, the ancient literature of India helps us to understand the culture, philosophy and spirituality of this country. Epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavat constitute an integral part of Indian civilization. These epics have influenced our dance, music, art, poetry and literature. The contribution of these texts is immeasurable, not only in building a literary tradition, but also in holding together the social fabric of India and enriching national integration. If the story of the Ramayana played the role of a word-bridge in bridging the geographical distance between Ajodhya and Rameswaram, the story of the Mahabharata connected eastern states like Manipur with Gujarat in the west. Everyone knows the close association of Himalayas, Ganga and Kanyakumari with Shiva Purana.

In this context, I would like to discuss three lesser known books of Odisha that are not publicized outside like Mahabharat of Sarala Das or Bhagavat of Jagannath Das. But these books stand as epitomes of Indian values, which teach us the importance of renunciation, the aspiration of emancipation and the value of compassion. These are 'The Deulatola' (Construction of the temple) by Bipra Nilambar Das, 'The Lakshmi-purana' by Balaram Das and 'The Stuti Chintamani' by Bhima Bhoi.

Before proceeding further, let me mention a few words about salient features of Odisha. Even a cursory glance at ways in which Odishan history and culture have evolved over the centuries makes one aware of its defining and enduring aspects. It has developed an accommodative, tolerant culture which has remained consistently averse to violent conflict, communal discord and caste rivalries. Its people have crafted unique strategies for actively promoting harmonious co-existence and peaceful assimilation. In a world torn by strife, bitterness and division, Odisha strikes one as an oasis of relative tranquility and interfaith harmony. Radical social and political changes have left its peace-loving people largely untouched. Even in the midst of a relentless pursuit of material prosperity, Odias seem to not to have joined the race wholeheartedly and are often looked upon as a lazy, stoical and unambitious. (Balasore 1907 by L.S.S. O'Malley, P-58, Pub: Prafulla, Jagatsinghpur, India) However, closer scrutiny of historical and cultural processes shaping the world-view of Odias reveals certain profound influences at work. The most prominent among these is Buddhism, which sustained the religious life in Odisha for over a thousand years. As Dr. Mayadhar Manasinha insightfully observes, "In spite of all religious changes

through the centuries, Orissa's national consciousness, however, remained basically Buddhist. From the psalms of Buddhism written in the 7th-9th centuries down to modern times, the main tenets of Mahayana Buddhism plus the pinda-brahmanda theory of Nath-Yogis have come again and again to the surface. Whatever the dominant cult, the Buddhist influence has never been lost in the religious feeling of the people of Orissa." (Mayadhar Mansinha-A History of Odia Literature, P-83, Pub: Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi). Against this background, it is not surprising that Buddhist themes such as compassion, renunciation and liberation influenced classic literature.

The slim book 'Deulatola', which teaches the glorious mantra of renunciation, is a memorable work of Bipra Nilambar Das. Unfortunately, the details about this poet as his year and place of birth remain elusive till date. The subject of King Indradyumna's renunciation, which is specially discussed in this book 'Deulatola', was discussed earlier in the 'Mushaliparva' of Mahabharata by Sarala Das, but it was not so clear there. Bipra Nilambar Das has described this aspect in a touching manner in his book. For this reason, "this little poem appears to be the only "literature" in the whole of the metaphysical and religious writings of this period." (Mayadhar Manasingh)

Indradyumna, king of Malava, sent messengers in search of deity Vishnu all around for Vishnu-worship. He, who came to the east, was Vidyapati. He was a Brahmin by caste. Traversing through the dense forests of eastern India, he finally reached the eastern coast and found that Vishnu was being worshiped in the form of a **blue slab of rock** by Viswabasu in a hidden place in a hill. Seeing Vidyapati as a very handsome man, Vaswabasu forced him to marry his daughter. Vidyapati stayed there for some time and returned Malava only after being able to find the whereabouts of the deity hidden in a mountain by the help of his wife.

King Indradyumna got the news from Vidyapati and travelled to the east coast. But he did not find that blue stone in the hidden place of the mountain. The king besieged Shabarpalli and imprisoned Viswasvasu. But this Shabar expressed his innocence. The king heard the voice from heaven that the god Nilamadhav (the name of the blue rock) had disappeared because of the king's arrogance. If the king built a suitable temple for him, he would appear again. King Indradyumna came back and built a great temple for Jagannath; but who would inaugurate it. The king thought that Brahma was the only worthy one to inaugurate the temple he had built. So the king went to invite Brahma. At that time Brahma was sitting in meditation. The king waited for some time. After meditation, Brahma agreed to meet the king's request and come down to earth to perform the inaugural ceremony.

But during that one hour of Indradyumna's waiting in Brahmaloaka, several eons passed by on the earth. The great temple built by Indradyumna was buried under sand. A new king named Galamadhava was riding a horse

on the seashore and his horse tripped at one place. He came down and saw that a wheel was visible from the sand. He excavated the place and the entire Indradyumna-built temple came out. As Galamadhav went to inaugurate the temple, Indradyumna appeared with Brahma and both of them started claiming the temple as theirs. The huge Kurmas (the Tortoises) of the Indradyumna pond in Puri finally testified that King Indradyumna had built the temple.

Indradyumna returned; ready to arrange the inaugural ceremony. But where was the god? King Indradyumna fell asleep and was told in his dream that the next day Lord would appear as a floating piece of wood at the mouth of a nearby river. In the morning, pieces of wood were seen floating; but the king and his army could not move the wood. The king was told that there was no need for so much effort; Let him call the Shabar Viswabasu and the Brahmin Vidyapati. Both of them dragged Him by both sides. It was the divine design to integrate Arya and Anarya of India.

Indradyumna's queen Gundicha, instead of deifying a piece of wood, proposed to make an idol out of that wood. So the king **gave a tent** for a good carpenter. Many came; but the wood was so strong that none of them succeeded to work on it. At the end of the day, an old man appeared. He said, He would make that image; but he had one condition - no one should open the door of the temple until twenty-one days had passed.

For some days, the sound of construction work could be heard from inside the temple; then there was complete silence. The queen suspected that the old man might have died inside the temple, and despite the king's reluctance, she opened the temple door; but it turned out that there were, only three half-sized statues. Those three idols are Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra in Puri temple.

What is important for our discussion comes after this. Lord Jagannath, pleased with the devotion of King Indradyumna offered him a boon. But the great royal devotee said, "My Lord, grant me this boon! May my family become completely extinct so that there shall be no descendant of mine to proudly claim that this temple was built by his ancestor."

The Lord accepted that generous prayer of the devotee Indradyumna. As there was no successor left in his clan to pay annual oblation or Sraddha, then who performs this rites of offering oblation every year? Lord Sri jagannath himself offers Shraddha to King Indradyumna on the occasion of Diwali. Many must be knowing that every year on Margashira month Krishnavatsha Chaturdashi, Amavasya and Shukla Pratipada, Lord Sri jagannath offers this Shraddha to his parents Aditi-Kashyapa, Dasaratha-Kaushlya, Vasudeva-Devaki and Yashodana-Nandaraja and King Indradyumna and Queen Gundicha of Kali Yuga. King Indradyumna's sacrifice is as significant as the offering of Shraddha to the deity Sri jagannath to a king who is remarkable.

This teaches that sacrifice never goes in vain; even the gods themselves come down to acknowledge it.

The 15th century poet Balaram Das is known in Odisha as the author of the Odia Ramayana. He has many major achievements. But among these, the book 'Lakshmi Purana', a slim one, is an important work in Indian literary tradition. People outside Odisha cannot imagine the impact of this book, which is read every Thursday in the month of Margashir in every Odia family. This book is an integral part of the social life and collective consciousness of entire Oriya community.

This book liberates women from age-old stereotypes, establishes their values and points the way to overcome prejudices like racism. Every Thursday in the month of Margashir is the day of Lakshmi Puja in every household of Odisha. On that day, women folk of the family are expected to cleanse and decorate their houses and worship Laxmi in the shape of newly harvested paddy and the paddy-measures. On the eve of such a Thursday, Lakshmi Thakurani, the housekeeper of Puri Jagannath temple, sought permission from her husband to venture out of the temple the next day and look around the city of Puri to see how people are celebrating holy Thursday. On that day while Laxmi devi would be out of the temple, the two brothers Jagannath and Balaram also decided to spend that day outside. On Thursday morning Lakshmi left the temple in her misson and Jagannath and Balaram also left the temple, but separately. Lakshmi devi went around the houses of famous merchants, ministers and the chief priest of the city and was annoyed by the fact that the house masters and housewives were sleeping and snoring in late morning hours while their houses remaining unswept and in a disorderly manner.

Finally, Lakshmi Devi came to the outskirts of the city and was surprised and happy to see Shriya Chandaluhoni, who had cleaned the house early in the morning and was making preparation to celebrate Holy Thursday puja. She also noticed that Shriya's poor cottage was not only clean, but its walls and doorways were decorated with murals. Shriya has painted Lakshmi's feet and hundred lotuses in front of her cottage. Lakshmi Thakurani herself, impressed by the purity, devotion and determination of a Chandala woman, entered her cottage and blessed her. Lo and behold, the humble cottage turned into a magnificent palace and her family was blessed with wealth. Exactly at this moment the two brothers, Jagannath and Balabhadra were passing that way. They saw Lakshmi in the house of a chandal, an untouchable. Angered by this, Balabhadra reprimanded his younger brother Jagannath as follows:

"Look at your wife. She is very freckle. She is a disgrace to our family. She lacks dignity of a highborn woman. See with your own eyes, she is now in a Chandal's house. And soon she will return to the temple and enter our

kitchen and defile the sanctity of our holy precincts. I certainly cannot tolerate such irreligious conduct. She must not enter the temple again. If you are so fond of your wife, that you cannot leave her, then may you also go and live with her in the Chandala's colony." Poor Jagannath mildly protested. He said that it would be difficult to get another wife like Laxmi. But nothing could calm the irate brother. They returned to the temple where they thought that they could live peacefully without women.

Lakshmi returned in time to the temple and found Jagannatha Himself guarding the main door. When the great lady wanted to enter, she was prevented by her own husband. A very interesting war of words followed. Lakshmi protested and asserted that she had not done anything wrong by visiting the home of a Chandala. But, Jagannatha accused her of breaking and making home in accordance with her flitting wish and such a capricious woman was not to be accepted any longer in His home and so He was going to divorce her forthwith. In such a circumstance Lakshmi, the great lady, rose to the occasion and behaved in a 'manfull' manner, rebuking her husband loudly for listening to his brother against his own devoted wife. She said that, He, Jagannatha, was no better than a cowherd while she was no other than the daughter of the King of Seas. She would not brook being lectured to by a cowherd on the dignity of caste. When Jagannatha told her to take with her all the precious jewellery she was wearing and return to her ever-howling, salty, asthmatic father, the ocean king, his lady replied that she would rather leave all her jewellery behind for His new and more worthy wife, and that she need not return to her father's place as a helpless, divorced woman but could manage on her own for herself. She went to the limits of the city, and summoned Viswakarma to build her a home. She lived there in all magnificence with her retinue of women attendants. And she engaged Vetalas to bring away stealthily all the food, the entire wherewithal from the temple so that the two brothers would wander like beggars until they realised her importance in their life. She divined that if the two brothers were to live comfortably without her, no man in the world would care for a woman and she was determined to see to it that such a thing never came to pass. The brothers woke up next morning to find that the whole temple was empty. They felt hungry and went to the kitchen, but there was nothing to eat. Impelled by increasing hunger they came out on the streets to beg food in the guise of old Brahmins, but from each and every door they were driven off as tramps. After many pathetic and frustrating experiences the two unfortunate brothers came to Lakshmi's new home beyond the city limits. There at last they could manage to have a nice bath after so many days and were given food, the way they were served at the Jagannatha temple, in Lakshmi's presence. The brothers now recognised Lakshmi's grace and repent for their follies. Thus it led to reconciliation. Lakshmi, however, agreed to return to

the temple on two conditions: that she would now be free to visit anyone's house irrespective of his caste and her prasada would be enjoyed together by people belonging to all castes. This is in fact followed even today.

This is the text of the 15th century 'Lakshmi Purana'. For the last four hundred years it has enchanted and educated the Oriya race. This book has firmly positioned women in a respectable place in oriya household and society at large, and broken the barrier of caste division.

The third important book that teaches kindness and compassion is 'Stuti Chintamani' by poet Bhima Bhoi. Bhima Bhoi was a Khond- a tribe once notorious for human sacrifices in their turmeric fields. He is said to have lost his eyesight in childhood due to smallpox. Bhima, a blind boy, probably went around begging and did not get any chance of education. As a young man, Bhima seems to have come in contact with another remarkable personality, a prophet who preached a new religion caled "Mahima Dharma". Now, the followers of this sect must be in thousands, both in and outside Odisha. This heretical faith inspired the blind, unlettered, homeless Khond youth to burst into poetry. Throughout his life, Bhima continued to preach with a missionary zeal, singing bhajans and writing chautishas. To understand the poet in Bhima Bhoi better, one has to understand his guru and his religious beliefs. His views expressed in his writings strongly opposed casteism and idolatry. This dharma speaks of worshipping the invisible Master of this visible creation. There is no tradition in this religion. This religion instructs its followers to observe only a few principles such as truth, righteousness, and spirituality. While asceticism was established as a way of life in countless sects of Hinduism, ironically, **it is this majesty of Odisha that sees the virtuously nurtured home life itself as a generous source of regeneration.** Apart from the belief in only one personified God, this religion has a lot in common with Buddhism. According to many scholars, this writing is only a new form of Buddhism in Odisha.

His critical attitude to idolatry finds vivid expression in his works. He believed that it was utter ignorance to worship idols of gods and goddesses. In his views Instead of surrendering themselves to the One who created them, ignorant people are bewildered by Maya.

The unlettered, blind, poverty-stricken wandering Adivasi poet had no pretension to any kind of scholarship. He just spontaneously poured out the feelings that are bubbling inside him, in a language that he used in his daily life. What stands out in his innumerable bhajans is the his deep empathy for human sufferings. In a magnificent couplet he says: Who indeed can bear to see infinite miseries among the creatures? Let me stay in hell forever, if the world can thereby be saved.

"Praninka Arata Dukha Apramita dekhu dekhu ke ba sahu
Mo Jibana pachhe narke padithau jagata uddhara heu."

These lines are immortalised as the finer expression of human compassion.

Sadly Bhima Bhoi was taunted as a Christian during his life time and humiliated. But he spoke to people of the religion of truth. He had strong conviction that the sinful times would be soon cut short and the Kingdom of Heaven would be established.

India's literary tradition has played an important role in holding India firmly together. Not only that, these texts have underlined the fact that without sacrifice, compassion and liberation, the human race cannot make full use of its inherent possibilities and the divine dream of building a harmonious society and nation will be thwarted. 'Deulatola' sings of renunciation, 'Lakshmi Purana' of aspiration for liberation and 'Stuti Chintamani' of compassion. It is only through reinterpretation and analysis of the values expressed in these texts, the rediscovery of Indian culture and heritage is possible.