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**Interpreting Satya-Pir Worship
As A Symbol of Hindu-Muslim Unity**

Abstract

Satya Pir worship is one of the popular religious beliefs and practices that crept into the fold of both Hindu and Muslim religions. Satyanarayana of Hindus and Pir of Muslims combinedly gave birth to a new cult known as Satya Pir cult for the welfare of both the communities. Satya means Vishnu in Sanskrit; and Pir means a preceptor or Fakir who has founded a religious sect in Persia. Muslim Fakirs like Bishops of Europe exercised great influence on Odishan culture since the Muslim conquest of Odisha in 1568 CE. From linguistic point of view, this worship is famous because mixed songs and dialects (Persian, Bengali and Odia) are used in Pala and Pir worship. The worship of Satya-Pir is prevalent in Bengal, Punjab, Mysore, Madras, Central Province and other parts of India. But, it is prominent in Orissa. There are nearly 40 Satya-Pir shrines in the length and breadth of Odisha.

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founded a religious sect in Persia. It now means a monk in Odisha. Muslim Fakirs like Bishops of Europe exercised great influence on Odishan culture since the Muslim conquest of Odisha in 1568 CE. We get proof of this from book *Sek Subhodaya* written in the 18th century. There are three songs of mixed dialect (Persian, Bengali and Odia) which are the oldest examples of Pir worship.¹

Satya-Pir has been described as a new incarnation in *Madala Panji*. After Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Nrusingh, Vaman, Parsuram, Ram, God incarnated Himself as Buddha in Puri, as Sri Chaitanya in Nadia and lastly as Fakir. The name of Satyanarayana is also mentioned in the *Skanda-Purana*. During the reign Suja-Uddin-Mohammed, the Subedar of Odisha an attempt was made by some Odia Hindus to introduce Pala to bridge the difference between the Hindus and the Muslims. It was preached among the sponsors of Satya-Pir cult that Satya-Pir deserves as much reverence as Lord Jagannath. There was no difference between the two.

We find in the South- East corner of the temple of Lord Jagannath of Puri the image of Vishnu who holds the conch, wheel, mace and a lotus, but is being worshipped as Satyanarayana. The main motive behind it is to attract the people of other religions especially the Muslims who were not allowed to enter into the temple of Lord Jagannath.

Satya-Pir is worshipped throughout the province of Odisha. The famous cultural institution of Odisha- Pala owed its origin from the worship of Satyanarayana. There are twenty-six versions of Satya-Pir Palas in Odisha. Of them sixteen are composed by Kavikarna in a mixed Odia-Bengali and Persian dialect.

The worship of Satya-Pir is also prevalent in Bengal, Punjab, Mysore, Madras, Central Province and other parts of India. There are nearly 40 Satya-Pir shrines in the length and breadth of Odisha. But, some of the Satya-Pir shrines of Odisha have some distinct features. Devotees from all over the country and even abroad visit these shrines to offer their

reverence to Satya-Pir. Gajapati Ramachandra Deva-II, the Maharaja of Odisha was a great patron of the Satya-Pir cult. He not only donated lands for the establishment of Satya-Pir shrines but also gave legitimacy to harmonize the relationship between the Hindu and Muslim communities of Odisha.²

Satya-Pir is added to the number of hundreds and hundreds of Gods in Odishan villages. He was created to liquidate the differences between the Hindus and Muslims. There is now no difference between these two communities. They live like brothers. Many literary works have been produced in Orissa highlighting Satya-Pir worship and mention may be made of Pala, which derived its origin from the Hindu-Muslim unity. Pala signifies the worship of Satyanarayana or Pir.

Satyanarayan Pala popularly known as Pala is the most popular Folk dance of North Odisha. It is closely associated with worship of Satyapir which was created for Hindu-Muslim unity.³

Scholars believe that the origin of Satyanarayan pala can be traced back to 16th century C.E. i.e. the advent of the Muslims in Orissa. The blending of Muslim's Pir and Hindu's Satya turned to Satya-pir and there emerged a new cult of Satya-pir.⁴

The Pala party consists of 6 persons. After the Satyanarayana puja, a Pala is sung by a band of singers and musicians. Among the party the most important is the Gayaka or singer who holds a Chamara (fly-whisk). Sri palia is the chief assistant to the Gayak who is also known as Bayak. The Bayaka is the drummer who plays on the earthen drum (Mridanga) and the rest are the Palias or the chorus singers who play on big brass cymbala.

In the beginning of the performance the bayaka and the palias buildup an atmosphere with a prelude of loud beating of the mridanga and the big brass cymbals. Then the gayaka enters into the stage and after praying to Saraswati, starts singing an episode from an epic.

The Bayak and other Palias play on the cymbals, dance and help the chief singer to sing and explain the meaning of the song to the audience. The common objective in the Pala is to get the blessings of Satya-pir, like jatra, sahi-jatra of Puri Pala is a folk play in which the characters used the dress and cosmetics of Islamic origin. Due to the advent of Islam, a number of shrines or pir-sthanas have been established by Hindus and Muslims. The chief singer's dress differs from others. He decorates his hands with golden armlets and bangles, his waist with silver chain, his forehead with vermilion and his eye with collyrium. His dress is dogmatic having no tinge of affinity with the modern fashion. He puts on a blue or red shirt, silk chadar, a turban on his head with silver embroidery. In course of his singing, he plays on a pair of small cymbals in between his right fingers. He has a 'Chamara' made out of the hair of 'Chamari' cow which he moves slowly in his prayer to Satyanarayan or singing other songs and violently when he mocks at the opponent party.

The chief singer though has no regular high education is certainly a learned and talented man. He acquires his knowledge by his own effort amidst his hard work for livelihood. He is a master of Purans and Kavyas, and is expected to know anything and everything of the ancient and the modern literature. Depth of knowledge, sharpness of intelligence, oratory, keen memory power are brought to a severe test when two equal opponent parties challenge each other in a Pala competition. Nothing but unreserved admiration is due to the singers for their inexhaustible energy to continue the competition for one month or more.

A melodious voice, a smiling face, handsome appearance, sweet humble and courteous behaviour, capacity to create humour are the great assets to the Chief Singer. The drummer sometimes displays the skill of his fingers, tells humorous stories to please the audience for the sake of diversion in between the long speeches of the chief singer. The

Gayak's chief helper is called sripalia who assists him in singing and reminds him of lines forgotten.⁵

He sings as well as explains elaborately in simple prose. It becomes necessary as the medieval Odiya poetry is most ornamental and very difficult for the common men to understand. While narrating a scene, he departs from the main subject and takes up a new chapter of a Sanskrit or Odiya text to make it more colourful. For example while narrating the feminine beauty, he brings quotations from Kumarsambhavam of Kalidas or from Baidehisa-bilasa of Odiya poet Kavisamrat Upendra Bhanja. The narrative performance of the Gayak covers the theme from the famous works of Upendra Bhanja, Dinakrushna Das, Abhimanyu Samanta Singhar, Kavisurya Baladev Rath, Jadumani Mohapatra, Radhanath Ray, Gangadhar Meher, Gopalkrushna etc. The Gayak describes an incident of the theme by reciting parallel couplets from the works of many famous writers including those from the Sanskrit literature simultaneously. The Palawalas have made these gems of literature a treasure of Orissa.⁶

Pala songs are the composition of village poets who are well-versed in Amarkosa. Everyline of the poem demands an explanation from the Gayak. The meaning is written by the poet himself. The Gayak gets it by-heart along with the poem. The process seems extremely artificial. The singer's ingenuity lies in making his song and explanation interesting to the audience. The Gayak is not always a 'His Master's Voice'. He shows great tact in lip compositions (without faltering) when such necessity arises.⁷

Competitions between the two parties of Pala is very interesting. The discourses are almost as in a literary conference, but in a more interesting way. There is less prose more poetry, less criticism more rasa, less dry wisdom, more humour, music and dance. A Pala competition is not only a poet to another. The poets' skill in composition is brought to test here. Every pala singer has a poet of his own. He pays from Rs. 10/- to Rs. 50/- for every song. That is the poet's chief income. The Gayak preaches the name of the poet throughout

the country. Still the poet cannot be immortalised. The songs disappear with the death of the chief singer. He never hands over his songs to any other singer during his life time (except his son or trustworthy disciple; for he may stand against him sometimes somewhere). Pala is also popular among the Muslims.⁸

A pala singer is required to be a man well-versed in sanskrit as well as old Odiya literature. The most important thing he is to possess is a sharp and clear voice, with erudite knowledge in music. Pala is not confined to any specific community. A man having proficiency on the line can be a Pala Gayak. He has a wonderful memory and he explains complicated meaning of the verses in simple intelligible language.

At present more than 200 pala troupes are presenting their performance almost in all parts of Odisha. Among the prominent Pala Gayaks of Cuttack and Kendrapara district, the names of Niranjana Kar, Arjun Dash, Jagannath Behera, Paramananda Saran Baishnab Charan Pradhan of Kendu Patna; Jagannath Behera(Padmakesari) of Katiranga, Erasama; Kulmani Satpathy of Sikharpur, Cuttack; Arjuna Das of Kantigadia; Nishakar Sarangi of Taladanda; Shri Khetrabasi Misra of Ranipada, Jajpur, Lakshmidhar Rout of Charpada, Niranjana Panda of Chandol, Dharmananda Dixit of Bedapur, and Ananta Charan Rana of Ratagada may be mentioned.⁹

Pala is the binding force for the Hindu Muslim unity. The different Pala performances played vital role for the further improvisation of the Satya-pir cult in Odisha. The distinctive form of religious synthesis of these two major religions of Orissa very often moved all along jointly towards progress on the ideals of coexistence. Nowhere in India these ideals of harmonization are better illustrated than in the state of Odisha.

But Pala is disappearing fast from the society due to the lack of patronage and onslaught of radio, cinema and T.V. The irony of the fate is that, Pala which provided recreation, entertainment and subsistence to thousand and thousands of the rural people and

spread the ideas of morality, universal brotherhood, truthfulness, honesty and victory of righteous over evil forces are declining fast. These folklore traditions which are the valuable wealth of our society are not given the due recognition that they deserve.¹⁰

One of the distinct features of this cult in Odisha from medieval period till today was the perfect harmony and cooperation among the Hindus and Muslims. The origin and spread of Satya-Pir worship form the basis of this peaceful coexistence between the two communities. It is the only festival in Odisha where both the communities participate freely. Nowhere in India, the principle of understanding goodwill, amity and cooperation between Hindus and Muslims and their simultaneous march towards progress and enrichment was better illustrated than in the province of Odisha. Satya-Pir worship is the key factor behind this unity.

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