On Two Lakshmi-Centred Discourses in Odia

Bibudhendra Narayan Patnaik
ON TWO LAKSHMI-CENTRED DISCOURSES IN ODIA

B.N. Patnaik

Retired Faculty of English and Linguistics, IIT Kanpur

There are quite a few tales and practices in Odia associated with goddess Lakshmi, which are independent of one another. Here we discuss two of these, one being *Lakshmi Puran*, a tale that celebrates the greatness, power and glory of the goddess, and the other, our narration, in the lack of any authentic, published narration, of the Hera Panchami ritual, which is part of the Rath Yatra rituals, and which shows the embarrassment and the humiliation that the goddess suffered on a certain occasion in a rather matter of fact manner. Of the Lakshmi tales and practices prevalent in Odisha, these seem to be the only ones directly connected with Jagannath.

*Lakshmi Puran* is a brata katha composed by the eminent sixteenth century Odia poet, Balarama Dasa. As a brata katha (a tale that celebrates a goddess or a god, and is associated with the observance of a ritual fasting, mostly by women; it is recited during the worship of the goddess or god associated with that ritual) it invites attention in many ways. It is the only brata katha that drags Jagannath Himself into its ambit, which makes it as much a Lakshmi tale as a Jagannath katha. It is immaterial that Jagannath is shown in some poor light; His very presence in the tale makes it Jagannath katha. In fact, His is a very dominating presence and He is the centre of the narrative. After all, Balarama was a devotee of Jagannath, and of Lakshmi only derivatively. As the legend goes, he was cursed by her. As for the bhakta showing Bhagavan in an unflattering light, it is neither new nor surprising in the bhakti literature. For the bhakta, abusing Bhagavan is also a form of prayer, and Bhagavan’s suffering is as much His lila as His supreme magnificence. There are indeed other folk narratives in Odia, such as the tale about the milkmaid Manika, that do bring in Jagannath, but these are not brata kathas in the sense that the same are not associated with any religious ritual. *Lakshmi Puran* is certainly not the best but is unquestionably the most popular composition of Balarama Dasa, and I suspect, its popularity is significantly due to its being Jagannath Katha. Containing around five hundred fifty couplets, it is somewhat longer than a typical brata katha and unlike typical brata kathas, it deals with not merely how a ritual has to be performed, and what benefits come to the one who performs the ritual and the hardships that await the one who does not do so, it is also concerned with the nature of virtuous life. Intended for the educationally limited, often illiterate and largely female audience, it does not philosophize on ethical living, but lists what please the goddess Lakshmi and what do not, thus, what a virtuous person must do and what she or he must not. The code of conduct articulated here is for the most part, if not entirely, woman-oriented, the reason being that the woman is projected here as the very foundation of a family. Thus when Lakshmi leaves, her consort Jagannath’s family collapses and His brother and He suffer hunger and thirst for twelve years, and when she returns to Him, normalcy returns to His household. The husband suffering hunger in his wife’s leaving him is an ancient idea. In one version of the goddess Annapurna story, Shiva once told Parvati that he had no need for a woman at home; she was hurt and
left home. The hungry Shiva then begged food from door to door, but no one could give him as much as he needed, so he remained hungry. He could have his fill only when Parvati in the form of Annapurna in Kashi gave him food. Shiva acknowledged her greatness and his dependence on her and implored her to return home. She did so. The story of Lakshmi Puran is essentially the same. Now, Balarama Dasa is not the first Odia poet who wrote out an ethical code in terms of don’ts and do’s. About four decades ago, Sarala Dasa, celebrated as the aadi kavi (first poet) of Odia literature, had given a similar, although not as detailed, code in his less known and minor work, Lakshmi Narayena Bachanika. In Lakshmi Puran, Lakshmi is portrayed as the goddess who, when not cooking for her family, visits her devotees’ houses to accept their worship. Her most sincere devotee turns out to be low in social status, poor and a woman. This is also more or less Sarala Dasa’s idea of her devotees, as his short prose piece, Nityani Gurubara Katha shows. In the same piece, Sarala conceptualizes the goddess as the provider of food to all of the living, whether human or worm. Lakshmi Puran embodies the same view of the goddess.

What, then, are new in Balarama Dasa’s narrative? These are the following: (a) the caste factor is brought into the narrative, (b) the woman’s asking for her own space in the family is strongly supported and the denial of the same to her is rejected as totally wrong, and (c) an account is offered for a certain unique practice in Jagannath worship, namely that no considerations of caste, or things similar must matter in the least at the time of the partaking of the food cooked by Lakshmi and offered to Jagannath (called “Mahaprasad”, “great prasad”). Nothing ritualistically prevents one from taking mahaprasad from another’s leaf, and there is no pollution associated at all with the left-over mahaprasad.

Lakshmi Puran reflects the poet’s social concerns and his reformist zeal. This short tale is very probably the first most articulate statement of social protest in Odia literature. Balarama was a bhakta in the most compassionate Vaishnavite tradition, and he was bold and unconventional in his ways as well, openly visiting prostitutes, for example. Censured by the powerful, this humane thinker stood up for the marginalized in the society, among whom were low-caste people and women. Women were taken for granted in their family and were often harshly treated. The poet advocated that the maltreated woman has a duty to protest and fight. He advocated that everyone, irrespective of caste, has the right to worship, that sincere worship is always accepted, and that there must be no differentiation of any sort whatsoever when one partakes of mahaprasad, which very special in that it is cooked by Lakshmi herself and offered to her consort. Balarama appropriated this ancient practice and situated it so elegantly in the myth that he created. However, one might read an underlying materialistic meaning in these, namely that everyone has the right to work for wealth, and possession of wealth must not be denied to anyone on the basis of caste.

Balarama Dasa’s Lakshmi visited the house of Shriya, a low-caste woman to receive worship, which her family considered unacceptable, and at His brother’s instance, her husband, Jagannath asked her to leave the temple. Hurt and humiliated, she left the temple, but pronounced a curse on the brothers that for twelve years they would suffer hunger and thirst and their agony would end only when they took food cooked by her, whom they had called low caste. This was what eventually happened. Lakshmi kept her father’s family out of it all. She knew that after some three or four days Jagannath would arrive at her father’s house to take her back, and her father would readily and happily oblige. Her curse would
never materialize. She had to work for it, and she got help from others: gods and goddesses – Saraswati, Agni, Pawana, etc. – and vetals too. She persuaded them that if Jagannath and Balabhadra (also called “Balarama”) did not suffer, men would treat their women as disposable. The brothers underwent hunger and thirst and humiliation. They realized that Lakshmi’s curse had materialized. In the guise of brahmins they begged for food, and were sometimes given food too, but they could not eat it because something or the other happened, like the wind blowing away the food. So people concluded that they were rejected by Lakshmi and drove them away fearing that association with them would displease the goddess and bring them misery. Finally, the brothers reached Lakshmi’s palace, not knowing it was hers, and begged food. They were told by her attendants that it was the house of a low caste woman. To cut a long story short, they finally conveyed to her that they were totally famished and had no compunctions about accepting cooked food from her. She served them not only the food they liked, but also in the manner in which various items were served to them by her in the temple. The brothers realized that it has to be the food cooked by Lakshmi. Directed to do so by His brother Balabhadra, Jagannath apologized to her and requested her to return to the temple, now that her curse has materialized and her greatness established. She sought assurance from her lord on two counts before agreeing to return to the temple: she would not be constrained from visiting her devotees, and mahaprasad must be partaken of in the manner mentioned above. He gave her His word and she happily returned home.

With regard to Balarama’s story, one would feel tempted to ask the following question since the context is so clearly the Puri temple, where Subhadra and Sudarshan are worshipped along with Jagannath and Balabhadra: as her brothers were suffering, where was Subhadra? And where was Sudarshan? Were they silent witnesses? Lakshmi Puran does not even mention them. But let us not ask such logical questions. Which puran, which brata katha, and which mahatmya does not contain such inconsistencies? Besides, let us suspend our entirely justified skepticism for the moment and quietly submit to the power of narrative imagination.

This Lakshmi and Jagannath story has attracted the attention of the people for centuries, for different reasons, and has not been a closed story. Lakshmi Puran of course has a closure but not the Lakshmi-Jagannath story. Of course nobody ever claimed to have retold Lakshmi Puran probably because it had become an extremely popular text and an important sacred text as well, but at least one creative film maker, Sabyasachi Mohapatra, who recently made a film on this composition, significantly modified the story by changing its ending, thereby making Lakshmi-Jagannath story an open-ended story. And the novelist Surendra Mohanty saw a new meaning in the “Adhara Pana” ritual performed on the rathas of the Deities the day before the twelve day long Ratha Yatra comes to its end. On each ratha, the Deity is offered a pana, a sweet drink, in a big and tall earthen pot that is filled to the brim. Immediately after the ritual offering, the pot is broken on the ratha itself, and the pana flows out. It is believed to be intended for the gods and the goddesses and other celestials, who attend the Deities during their Rath Yatra, and also for the unredeemed existences hovering around. Inspired by Lakshmi Puan, Mohanty found a new meaning in this ritual. In his classic Neela Saila, he observed that Jagannath’s twelve year long thirst was finally quenched with this pana, prepared by Lakshmi. This is a very imaginative interpretation of the Adhara Pana ritual. In Mohapatra’s film, Jai Jagannath, at the goddess’s moment of
triumph, Narada appeared, and with that Narada-like mischievous smile, extolled the glory of Jagannath’s lila. A surprised Lakshmi asked Narada whether all that had happened was in the knowledge of Jagannath and whether He was party to His own suffering. She should have expected Narada’s answer! She now realized that the drama had been enacted for the elimination of the caste-based prejudices and since His suffering was necessary for this, He willingly underwent suffering. Lakshmi did not feel let down after knowing that she had achieved no victory. And then there is that other perspective, so clearly articulated in the following couplet of Srimad Bhagabata, composed in Odia in the sixteenth century by Jagannatha Dasa:

\[ kari karauthai muhi / mo binu ana gati nahi. \]

In some rough rendering into English, it would read like this: I am the doer and I am the causer (of all things) / there is no alternative to Me. Now, does this twist to the story rob it of the empowerment-of-the-woman aspect? Not really, since whatever Lakshmi wanted she got; it is just that there was no empowerment of anybody. In fact, this question of empowerment becomes hardly meaningful now, with the goddess realizing that she had mistakenly thought that she had been the agent of all that had happened, whereas the truth was that she was only the agent/instrument of the Causer: agent in appearance and instrument in reality.

We now turn to the Hera Panchami ritual. If we give it the form of a narrative, it would essentially, although somewhat crudely, look like the following: Jagannath goes with brother Balaram and sister Subhadra, and Sudarshan, around whom there is no discourse yet in Odia, for Rath Yatra and leaves Lakshmi behind in the temple. He seems to have left for the Yatra festival in a hurry, because He did not make proper arrangements for her. So the provider of resources to every living thing has to depend on what the pilgrims give her as offering. Lakshmi feels humiliated. Two days before the Snan Yatra (“bathing festival”) Lakshmi is separated from Jagannath, and on the day of Snan Yatra the Deities fall sick. During their sickness and recovery, Lakshmi is not with her consort. The Deities are taken care of by a category of servitors, known as daita, who are considered to be His traditional and very dear worshippers. No one but them have access to the Deities during those fifteen days. And the day after they recover, their Rath Yatra starts. They go to a small temple, called Gundicha Mandir, some three kilometers away from the Great Temple (“Bada Deula’). There they stay for a week and then start their journey back to the Great Temple. During their return journey they stay in their rathas for about four days.

Lakshmi is confused and worried when Jagannath leaves; she does not understand why she was left behind. As Rukmini, she had married Him only three days (on ekadasi) before the Snan (“bathing”) Yatra (on purnima – the full moon day). A day after the wedding, daitas take charge, and she could no more be with her lord. She now apprehends that her spouse may not be interested in her, and must have gone out for others’ company. And He has taken His sister with Him; so the sister and not the wife, then, is His preferred companion. She is assailed by jealousy. She consults the other goddesses who are in the temple and receives their sympathy and support. Goddess Bimala, a form of Shakti, advises her to go to Him, carrying with her a charmed powder to use on her consort to bring Him back to her. Thus on the fifth day of the nine-day Rath Yatra festival, in the late hours of the night, Lakshmi sets out in regal style
to meet her consort. She takes the same road on which the rathas had rolled just three days ago: Bada Danda ("Grand Road"), the main road of the town. She comes to the hall of the Gundicha temple and from there sees Jagannath at a little distance: in the sanctum sanctorum. At that time, the ritual of food offering is taking place. Now as soon as the eyes of Lakshmi and Jagannath meet, and before she is able to have an eye-fill of Him, the doors of the sanctum sanctorum close. Lakshmi feels the doors have banged on her; she feels utterly unwelcome. And her humiliation has taken place in the presence of outsiders - thousands of devotees witnessing the ritual of food offering. In frustration, embarrassment, anger and humiliation, she leaves the hall, and as she returns to the temple, the angry goddess breaks a piece from Jagannath’s ratha. She returns to the temple like an ordinary woman, without her regal style.

She does not take the Grand Road, but a by lane of the locality called “Hera Gohiri Sahi”. As a woman who has felt unwanted by her spouse, she has fallen in her own self-esteem; so she could no more feel at ease with the regal style.

Now, as for the closing of the doors of the sanctum sanctorum, the ritual of food offering reaches a stage when those doors close for the last part of the ritual to be performed inside. Thus there was nothing unusual about it. It was just that the goddess arrived when the offering had reached that stage. But in the uncomprehending and the disturbed state of mind she was in at that point of time, she thought, quite understandably, that the closing of the door indicated her lord’s unhappiness at her presence in the Gundicha temple. The tatwiks may say what they want; say, for example, that Bhagawan was in the company of those dearest to Him, namely, His bhaktas, and at such times nothing else matters to either Bhagawan or the bhaktas. But at the laukik (“mundane”) level, the wife feels neglected and humiliated at her spouse’s indifference. And those who would see both Lakshmi Puran and this narrative together would find in the former the story of empowerment of woman, and in the latter, a reflection of the social reality in which the sensitivities of the woman are generally not taken note of by her man.

The Hera Panchami narrative is not the end of the Lakshmi- Jagannath story based on the Rath Yatra rituals; it is continued in the ritual called Niladri Bije (roughly, “return to the temple”). Part of it constitutes the ritual in which Lakshmi avenges herself during her lord’s return to the temple at the end of Rath Yatra. After Sudarshan, Balabhada and Subhadra enter the sanctum sanctorum, Lakshmi closes the doors of the temple on Jagannath. The hurt woman can think of punishing only her husband. She cannot offend her elder brother-in-law or sister-in-law and bring disgrace to herself. The temple doors close twice; first close the doors of the Lion’s Gate, which is the main entrance to the temple, and then do the doors to the inner hall, known as “Jaya Bijaya dwara”. Skipping many details of this fascinating engagement, we would only say here that after much argument between Lakshmi and Jagannath, much persuasion, much appeal to the goddess to see reason and much pleading by her lord, Lakshmi relents and allows Him to enter, and she is happy as Jagannath feeds her delicious sweets at that moment of reconciliation. As far as we know, the Hera Panchami part of the Rath Yatra story has not attracted as much attention of the poets and story tellers as the one concerning Lakshmi’s closing of the entry doors to her spouse during Niladri Bije. “Lakshmi Narayana Kali” (quarrel between Lakshmi and Narayan) is a popular narrative. Lakshmi is not a powerless goddess, but as wife she is, in relation to her husband, and
resistance by the powerless against the powerful and the victory of the former over the latter is a theme that has inspired the imagination of the poets ever since, at least, the bhakti period in our literatures.

Acknowledgement

This article has benefited from the comments of Sanjay Kumar of the faculty of English of BHU on an earlier version of it. I am grateful to him.

Bibliography


