

that selectively embraces only those aspects of other people's culture and way of life that it finds palatable and easily contained.

While coming from different disciplinary perspectives and focusing on different cultures within India, we hope that these articles represent a new wave of scholarship that presents fuller, more truthful descriptions of the beliefs and practices surrounding sacralized nature, or the naturalized sacred. Today, environmental issues truly are of urgent, world-wide concern, and the ways humans have conceptualized the natural world and structured our relationships with it deserve careful attention. Surely, the consumption patterns of cosmopolitan intellectuals have a greater impact on the global environment than do the religious cosmologies and customs of the mostly rural folk that we find so fascinating. Nonetheless, we hope that these glimpses into the diverse ways that people (including ourselves) have imagined the relationship between gods, humans and the natural world will prove instructive, even inspiring. Many thanks are due to M.D. Muthukumaraswamy, editor-in-chief of *Indian*

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# Darubrahma:

## The Continuing Story of Wood, Trees, and Forests in the Ritual Fabric of Jagannath

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Recently, in mid-2006, a new Bhaktivedanta Ashram temple was opened in the village of Kuansh, Bhadrak district, Orissa.<sup>1</sup> Although it was especially the new temple's policy of welcoming all devotees, including foreign devotees and people from tribal and *adivasi* communities, which drew attention to their America-born priest, the most amazing aspect of his venture was that he emphatically claimed that the new wooden statues of the four main deities of Lord Jagannatha, Baladeva, Subhadra, and Sudarshana, were made "strictly according to the Puri tradition and the scriptures." As their website boldly stated,

For more than one year, work on these deities has been carrying on under the guidance of Puri temple priests so that every detail of the process was done strictly according to the Puri tradition and the scriptures. The deities were made as exact replicas of the original deities in Puri, incorporating the traditional procedures undertaken for the Navakalevara festival (the change of Lord Jagannatha's body held every 12 years in Puri).<sup>2</sup>

Familiar with the highly secret procedures of the Navakalevara from research I had conducted for my

book on rituals around sacred trees in India, I became intrigued by these statements.<sup>3</sup> If indeed they had followed exactly the same procedure the Puri temple uses when periodically renewing the four wooden deities, this would provide a chance to research certain aspects of this procedure from which all but the most intimate functionaries are barred, especially the highly mysterious transfer of the life essence (*brahmapadartha*) from the old statue to the new one. I frantically tried to contact the authorities of the newly established temple but did not succeed in finding the right spokesperson knowledgeable enough to answer my rather prodding and intense questions.

What I intend to do in this article, therefore, may not be satisfactory in the sense of disclosing the ultimate secrets of the wooden statues, alas, but may well serve as a report on a work-in-progress. This will, I hope, derive part of its merit from formulating relevant questions for further research in Bhadrak itself.

From these introductory words we can distill our major themes and connect them with the subject of this special issue. In Part One, I describe the ritual procedures through which these wooden Bhadrak statues were reportedly produced. These claims which will be put into comparative perspective by references to the Navakalevara procedure in Puri, which the Bhadrak temple seeks to mirror. In Part Two, I chart the salience of wood, trees, and forests in the

continuing story surrounding the Jagannath cult in Orissa.

### I. The ritual procedures

There is an obvious necessity to occasionally renew wooden statues. Those people, mostly tribal, who still have wooden statues in their shrines or in the open air, know that every thirty years or so, such a wooden object will have to be replaced, as termites will probably have eaten their way through the wood, and humidity (from rain, libations, and ritual baths) will have taken its toll on both the paint and the wood itself. As far as I know, such replacement is a relatively simple affair. The elaborate Navakalevara ceremony stands in striking contrast. In a period of about three months' time the four sacred trees have to be found (involving a directive in a dream or by other divine methods), then placated and worshipped, and subsequently transported, carved and finally installed. We immediately see that there is much more to it than the most obvious function of producing new wooden statues. Not only are the statues still made of the same perishable material, the way their bodies are carved and their faces are painted is also not typical of any tribal group in the area, at least not as they are found now. The reason the deliberately crude yet highly ornamented style of the figures is maintained might be that the temple acted as a conservatory or museum.

Orissan history is full of wars that were fought on its soil, and the involvement of the Orissan kings with the Puri temple cult is based on a partly legendary, partly historical connection between kings, allies, state deities, and the sacred geography of ancient Puri. Whereas the legendary king Indradyumna is said to have established the wooden figure of Nilamadhava-Jagannath at the top of the Blue Hill of Purushottamakshetra, it is the historical figure of Raja Ramachandradeva I who is called the second Indradyumna, by virtue of his act of re-establishing new wooden statues after the old ones had been burned by a Muslim general. The relevance of this story for the Navakalevara ceremony in its present form is that, indeed, there was something to be transferred from the old statues to the new ones, be it the charred remains of those statues burnt in 1568, or some substance (a relic, ashes, *shalagramas*) that had been kept inside the statues since long before 1568. The story is valuable for the claim that the Puri tradition of the wooden images was, essentially, uninterrupted. From the charred remains of the statues the *brahmapadartha* was recovered and kept hidden in a far-off village. It was this very essence that is thought to be transferred to the navel cavity of newly made statues, thus guaranteeing an unbroken line. To what extent this is history or temple legend, and as such probably a reconstruction *ex post facto*, cannot be recovered, but the historical facts of repeated Muslim raids in Orissa, combined with the ancient narrative motifs of lost-and-recovered deities, make it a plausible tale.

That the procurement of the raw material for the statues is bound by numerous rules and regulations is not

surprising when one knows about the ancient Vedic ways of procuring a tree for a *yupa* or *Indra-dhvaja*, or for procuring wood meant for specific religious purposes. Similarly, the elaborate ways of the Navakalevara tradition can be better understood in the light of shastric prescriptions found in manuals that were traditionally used when houses and especially temples were to be built or statues consecrated. Yet one cannot help wondering in what way such Vedic and shastric traditions found their way into the Puri temple. The Jagannath temple cult seems to be not only a museum where ancient forms were walled in against external changes, there even seem to have been several reversal processes in the form of reinvented traditions. Since certain details of the whole procedure are kept confidential, and since some of the relevant manuscripts, kept in the temple archives, are unique and forbidden to any outsider, it is impossible to have a complete or consistent picture. Moreover, the selected few who belong to the groups actively involved, are often not informed about the role of others. Even the official publications issued by the Orissa government respect the secrecy surrounding the ritual preparation of the murtis.

It is all the more amazing, therefore, that the Bhaktivedanta Ashram in Bhadrak claimed to have proceeded "strictly according to the Puri tradition and the scriptures" when producing the four statues for their new temple. On closer scrutiny one finds just enough detail to satisfy the devotee eager to believe that finally he or she will have close access to the beloved deities, deities on exactly the same par as in the highly prestigious Puri temple from whom he or she had been barred because of social, religious, or ethnic background. I quote:

The first stage was to locate proper trees for the carving of the deities. According to the traditional system, only those trees bearing the necessary symbols of Vishnu can be used for sculpting the deities of Lord Jagannatha. In Orissa no one will cut down neem trees or use them for mundane things (such as cooking or building) as they hope that one day their neem trees may be used for making deities of Jagannatha. As such, you can find many large neem trees in the countryside that are hundreds of years old. But still it was a very difficult task to locate trees that were large enough to make the deities (who are over 7 feet tall), and which also contained the necessary auspicious symbols of the Lord. After an extended search, properly matching trees were located, but due to the age of the trees government approval was needed before the trees could be cut. (...)

Worship was performed to the sacred trees and then they were cut with a special axe, which could be the only tool allowed to be used in the carving of the deities, from beginning till completion. After the trees were cut, the logs were taken to the Matha of Sri Jagannatha Das, next to the Puri temple, where work went on for the last year.



Three Wooden Murtis

As per the system for Navakalevara, after carving the wood into the proper shape the deities are then wrapped in layers of cloth. Each layer is treated with a paste of medicinal herbs consisting primarily of sandalwood paste and neem powder. After completing the first layer of cloth, the deities were transported from Puri to our Ashram in Bhadrak, Orissa, where the remaining layers of cloth will be applied. The day after the deities arrived at our Ashram in Bhadrak, a large white cobra around 7 feet in length was seen next to the temple where the deities were staying, and in subsequent days two other cobras were seen around the same area. In 20 years we have never found cobras in this area, but due to the arrival of the Lord, the Nagas have come for the Lord's darshan.

Given my research into the details of the Puri Navakalevara, I would be interested to know how exactly the proper trees were found. But the detail about needing to gain government permission sounds strikingly contemporary, and the solution is one of all times: one of the devotees, while purchasing supplies in the bazaar, had accidentally met the nephew of the Minister of Environment and Forests, and had the matter arranged smoothly. The detail about the auspicious cobras was matched by what happened later, during the first bathing ceremony, May 2006. Rain began to pour down at the exact moment when the deities were to have their first bath, - an extremely auspicious sign since such rain is seen as coming from Indra who is the first to bathe the Lord by showering rain -, and then "a rare bird" (looking like a pigeon to me, judging from the photographs) flew into the *garbhagriha* and landed just inches above Balarama/Balabhadra's head. It sat there during the entire *abhisheka* ceremony and even refused to leave for the night. Next morning, when the priests opened the door to offer *naivedyam* to the Lord, the bird immediately flew out on its own, never to be seen again.

Many other wondrous events are related, including the fabulously swift growth of trees around the temple:

Within the first month of the deities arriving, many sacred trees spontaneously started growing around the temple, even though they were not growing anywhere nearby. One Peepal tree, three Banyan trees, three Kadamba trees, two Bilva trees, three Champaka trees and many Neem trees sprouted up around the temple, and are now all growing between 10 to 15 feet tall.

Let us return to the *pranapratishta* ceremony, to be conducted in February-March 2006 by "54 priests from the Puri Jagannatha temple, in the presence of Sri Gajapati Maharaj (the King of Puri) and many other devotees." Here the exact procedure becomes unclear. The only information given is in advance, but not about the actual event:

During the prana pratistha ceremony, the Nabhi Brahma [lit. "the essence behind the navel"] will be placed inside a special compartment in the deities' chest. Several secret items will be installed within the deity, accompanied by special shalagrama shilas covered in gold. Earlier this year, devotees from the Ashram had gone to Muktinath in Nepal to search for the necessary shalagrama shilas on the banks of the Gandaki river.

The installation and inauguration ceremonies, which actually began on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, were headed by Sri Nanda Sharma from the Puri temple, and lasted three days.

On the first day, akhanda nama kirtan was inaugurated, and devotees went in procession to the Salandi river to collect holy water for the Kalashas and for the abhisheka of the deities. Five hundred years ago, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu visited Bhadrak and took bath at the same spot where the devotees collected water from. As such, this water is very sacred to Gaudiya Vaishnavas.

About the actual 'birth' of the deities the information is fuzzy. As there is no old statue here from which the essence could be transferred, there are some lines on the mysteries of Puri, but no particulars are given about the actual life-giving ceremony. As it is, the Bhadrak report on this begins after the birth is a *fait accompli*. I quote:

The installation was done according to the Puri pantha, where the Lord is seen to perform the lilas of being "born" and then "dying" every 12 years in the Navakalevara festival. Every detail of the birth ceremony is performed for Lord Jagannatha, including the tying of the umbilical cord and the burying of the embryonic sack.

The detail about Jagannath's birth, complete with umbilical cord and placenta, seems to refer to Bhadrak rather than to Puri, whereas all the other remarks concern the Puri traditions. What this may imply is that there has been a ritual birth (which, as far as I know, is not part of the Puri *brahmapadartha* transference rite) as well as a stashing away of what they call *nabhi*



Abhisheka at birth

*brahma* in a cavity inside the statues. Although historical facts tell us otherwise, and point at invented traditions and multiple reversal processes in the great temple, there obviously is an uneasy gap between what is perceived as ancient unbroken traditions in Puri and the establishment of a new temple with new deities in Bhadrak. Yet, from the moment of birth onwards, the details of which are fittingly kept away from public gaze and all-too-inquisitive website readers, things are explicitly linked with tradition:

As per the tradition, the Lord was first invoked in a “delivery room” for His birth. The birth of the Lord occurred on ekadashi day, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, at which time devotees were allowed a brief darshan of the Lord without ornaments or alankaras, having just been born with no clothes. Following His birth, the priests were to bathe him with pancha gavya and panchamrita. Just as the doors were opening for the devotees to have their first glimpse of Lord Jagannatha at His birth, rain began to pour down. (...)

On the 24<sup>th</sup> the Lord prepared to offer His first alankara darshana to His devotees. Over the previous two days, the devotees were only able to view the Lord for 30 minutes during His birth and abhisheka, so they were very anxious to see the Lord. Finally at 4 pm, following the completion of the installation rituals and purnahuti, the Lord was dressed in Badashringar Vesha, and garlanded with lotus malas consisting of over 2,000 lotuses.

The doors opened with all the devotees singing and dancing, filled with joy to finally be able to see the Lord. The auspicious sounds of conch shells, drums and bells filled the air, along with the chanting of the devotees. Every evening there was Bhagavat Katha by sannyasis from ISKCON and Gaudiya Matha, followed by bhajans by the two most famous singers in Orissa.

From these shreds of information it appears to me that what was introduced as “incorporating the traditional procedures undertaken for the Navakalevara festival”



Dressed and Ornamented Murtis

referred mainly to the search party in the forest and the carving of the statues, and only in an adapted way to the next stages: instead of a transference ritual there must have been a birth ritual, but at what point the wooden statues were considered to have come to life, is obscure. Since beforehand mention was made of the ‘*nabhi brahma*’ as consisting of various secret items along with *shalagrama shilas* covered in gold, there must have been a ritual of storing away those items behind a wooden lid, be it somewhere around the navel or in the deities’ chest, as was reported in the Bhadrak case. This implies that newly born deities do have a navel, just as they were reported to have an umbilical cord and a placenta, but it leaves undisclosed what the substance is that gives unbroken life to the Puri statues. The new statues do contain sacred contents but have no claim to an unbroken life chain. For a historian of religion it is intriguing to see history written directly before one’s eyes. And in another twelve years or so, we may well see tradition being firmly established in Bhadrak also, when a full-blown Navakalevara possibly takes place there as well.

## II. The continuing story

While the scope of this article does not allow me to go into the details of the Navakalevara in Puri, it would be interesting for further research to make an intensive comparison between the procedures of Puri and of Bhadrak, especially of the discrepancies between claims to tradition and what is actually done today. What is intriguing in the Puri cult is that elements of tree worship, tribal wooden pillar-deities, royal power politics, Vedic, epic, and shastric traditions, popular Shaivite and Vaishnavite cults, and Orissan state history are all blended to form an intrareligious whole that is both strikingly archaic and very much alive.

In the Navakalevara ceremonies we find a fascinating example of continued sacrality. Although there are numerous sacred trees both in the Puri temple compound and outside, the focus is on the *daru*, the log of wood with which the present era of *kaliyuga* is supposed to have begun. As such, it is a story more of human imaginations and machinations than of nature. At the same time, the basic material which the *murtis*

are made of is not man-made, but naturally and spontaneously grown (*svayambhu*). The link between forests, rivers, ocean, temple, and statues remains unbroken. More specifically, several strands of the narrative are, in one way or another, connected with the forest:

- (1) In one of the versions explaining the wooden form of the deities, it is said that Krishna, when resting in the forest, was shot at by the tribal hunter Jara ("Old Age"), who mistook the soft pink soles of Krishna's feet, dangling from the tree in which he liked to perch, for the ears of a deer. For some reason his body (or the middle part of it) could not be burnt, and turned into a fossil. In the form of a fossilised log this body came floating down the Mahanadi river, and stranded by the Puri beach.
- (2) The legendary king Indradyumna had been searching for the great god Nilamadhava in the form of a dark blue (*nila*) stone deity. Finally one of his ministers found it while it was being worshipped by the tribal chief Vishvasu in the heart of the forest. As it was meant for divine eyes only, it disappeared without a trace. Later on, the king, directed by a dream, found the fossilised wooden log on the beach, and had it carved into a statue by Vishvakarman himself. As, against all regulations, he was interrupted in the process of carving, the statue remained unfinished. This would explain the typical form of the Jagannath statues.
- (3) The event that most probably caused the Navakalevara to take its present, periodical form, is the burning of the Puri statues by the Muslim general Kalapahar (or Kalapahad) in 1568. This is supposed to have taken place in a forest, near a river. A "tribal" temple servant named Bishar Mohanti (or Vishar Mahanti) is said to have retrieved either the charred remains or the sacred contents hidden inside the statues, and to have brought them back to Puri, where they were installed in newly made statues by king Ramachandradeva I.
- (4) Since the deities appear to originate in or emerge from the forest in all the lost-and-found stories, the prescription that the sacred neem trees destined to become the *murtis* should be searched in the forest, makes good sense.

Connected with specific trees, we have various other narratives, of which the most relevant for the Navakalevara are:

- (1) The original stone statue of Nilamadhava was worshipped under a tree on top of the Blue Mountain (*niladri*), most probably a sand ridge forming the ancient centre of Purushottamakshetra where the great temple of Puri now stands.
- (2) The main *banyan* in the temple compound, popularly called *kalpavata* or *kalpavriksha*, is supposed to mark that very spot.

- (3) For a variety of reasons, such as political turmoil, sectarian shifts of power, and the risk of looting, the statues were occasionally hidden on a small island in Chilka lake, buried beneath a *banyan* tree, or installed in a deep tract of forest. When, once upon a time, the statues had been buried beneath a *banyan* tree for several generations, there appeared to be no one to remember the exact place, until the moment when the search party found an elderly woman paying reverence to a particularly grand *banyan* tree. When questioned about this, the old lady revealed that her grandfather had once told her that beneath this very tree the Jagannath statues lay hidden. When the members of the search party started to dig deeply they indeed found the buried statues and triumphantly carried them back to Puri.
- (4) The priests involved in the quest for the sacred neem trees know what specific signs to look for. While a tree that exhibits more of the prescribed signs and characteristics is considered more auspicious, what all agree on is that it should be a neem tree. But why a neem tree? It makes little sense from either the perspective of tree symbolism or ritual re-enactment of events (whether legendary or historical). Woven in the Puri fabric are *banyan* trees, but no neem trees. *Ashvatthas* are connected with Vishnu, and *kadambas* or *tamal*as with Krishna, but neem is not part of the story. That it has become settled that a neem tree should be used for the statue of the Puri deities may be an entirely practical matter, since neem is considered highly durable and resistant to vermin.

### Conclusion

Research executed in Orissa by Hermann Kulke, among others, illustrates that the major narrative connected with the Navakalevara originates only in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when king Ramachandra of Khurda had established himself as the successor to the Gajapati kings of Orissa after the Afghan general Kalapahar had conquered Orissa and burned the wooden statues.<sup>4</sup> "Invented traditions" in India are usually associated with modern history and nationalism, but it is clear from the Jagannath cult that perception and re-construction of the past played a similar role in pre-modern times. In the recent Bhadrak claims to tradition and authenticity we see that such history is being written before our own eyes.

Whatever hoary pasts may have been invented in the Puri cult, it is the four sacred trees growing in the forest, and the four wooden logs inside the temple which continue to take centre stage.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Bhaktivedanta Ashram was established in 1991 by disciples of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Founder-Acharya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), for the purpose of

propagating the teachings of Sanatana Dharma as taught by Lord Krishna. The Ashram has its headquarters in Bhadrak, Orissa, but conducts programs throughout India.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations are from [www.bvashram.org/categories/Ashram-News](http://www.bvashram.org/categories/Ashram-News), especially those news items published 17-11-2005 ("Largest Jagannatha Deities in the World Arrive at the Bhaktivedanta Ashram") and 04-06-2006 ("Installation of Sri Jagannatha at Bhaktivedanta Ashram"), accessed 20 June 2007.

<sup>3</sup> *Belief, Bounty, and Beauty. Rituals around Sacred Trees in India* (Brill, Leiden/Boston 2005), especially Chapter IV ("Gods of wood, gods of stone: The ritual renewal of the wooden statues at Puri").

<sup>4</sup> See esp. H. Kulke, H., 'Kings without a kingdom: the Rajas of Khurda and the Jagannatha Cult', in *South Asia* 4 (1974): 60-77; and "Jagannatha as the state deity under the Gajapatis of Orissa," in A. Eschmann, H. Kulke, and G.C. Tripathi (eds.), *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa* (New Delhi: Manohar 1978), 199-208.

# Malaji's Hill: Divine Sanction, Community Action

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## Background

In the winter months of 2003 we embarked on a project focused on regional shrines in Ajmer and Bhilwara districts, and the narrative traditions which flourish around them together with trees.<sup>1</sup> During these months we visited and recorded both origin stories and miracle stories at some twenty deities' places. About three-quarters of these shrines were surrounded by small wooded areas – oases in a severely deforested landscape. In this part of Rajasthan, such bounded wooded spaces attached to temples are called *bani* (derived from Sanskrit *van* for woods). There exist a plethora of terms for wooded areas associated with shrines in diverse linguistic regions of India, including *oran* in other parts of Rajasthan. However, in our research area people consistently used *bani*.

As we planned our routes for a fieldwork project investigating the intersection of regional shrine pilgrimage with enduring groves as well as with healing and miracle tales, we would ask about a particular site, "does it have *bani*?" or "does it have good *bani*?" Thus we could learn in advance whether or not to expect to find religiously protected trees in the environs of a particular sacred place. At many shrines dedicated to regional goddesses or hero-gods we found these small groves still intact. Only one, the smallest and least significant, showed signs of severe deterioration due to excessive lopping. This was more extraordinary in that the context for our research was the driest winter ever in Rajasthan; the words for drought and famine were on everyone's lips; a fodder shortage was causing great hardship and loss in communities dependent on livestock for cash income, nutrition, fuel and agricultural labor. Hence the temptation to gather

fodder no matter what the obstacles was extremely strong. Nonetheless, almost all the *bani* we visited had remained untouched.

During these preliminary excursions we learned that complicated, flexible, and interesting transformations may be tracked when examining the surprising resiliency of many if not all groves in central Rajasthan. We gathered in multiple spots straightforward accounts of frightening miraculous punishments: persons purloining wood are struck blind, struck dead, or have their houses inexplicably collapse on top of them. However, at other wooded temple grounds different forms of protection have entered the picture, coexisting and perpetuating no particular dissonance with underlying religious perspectives. On the edge of the rapidly growing town of Jahazpur, the Mautis Mina community has protected their hero-god Malaji's sacred hill from wood thieves for the past twenty years. Tree-protection on Malaji's hill is no longer left to miraculous intervention; rather a well organized committee of devotees musters guards to patrol the terrain twenty-four hours a day and administer fines to violators.



Malaji's temple and hill viewed from the roofs of Jahazpur

Considerable debate, both academic and political, swirls around the efficacy of sacred groves in preserving biodiversity or exemplifying community-based ecological wisdom (Jeffrey, ed; Nanda 248; Ramakrishnan, Saxena and Chandrashekara, eds). We