

Socio-Cultural Movement in Medieval Odisha (AD 1500-1600) : Achyutananda Das – A Case Study

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The socio-cultural life of medieval Odisha is a significant study from various stand-points. The Bhakti movement which gained momentum during this period in almost every region, had a great influence on society, culture, religion and literature. In north as well as in the south, in the east and west, all over the country, a large number of Saint poets took to reform the society. Almost all of them were wanderers, wanderers in the name of God and in the service of the mankind. They were against the establishment, against all monastic order, against all sectarian zealotry and the caste discriminations in the society.¹ The medieval Odia saint poets also hailed from the lower order of society, and most of them preferred to identify themselves to be Sudramunis. They propagated the ideas of Bhakti, Sunya and Nirguna using the popular dialects of the region. They also raised their voice against the social evils of the contemporary society.²

The age that immediately followed Sarala Das is famous as the '**Age of Panchasakha**' in Odia literature. The age has been so called after the name of five celebrities like Balaram Das, Jagannath Das, Achyutananda Das, Yasovanta Das and Ananta Das who flourished during the reign period of Prataprudradev (16th Century). The creations of these five luminaries along with the poets and writers of the later part of the age

form a vast treasure in Odia literature. Sri Chaitanya, the Vaishnav saint of Bengal who came to Odisha in 1510A.D. had a great influence on these contemporary Panchasakha group of poets. Their writings are mainly based on common characteristics of social reforms. They all hated professional priests, preached against caste system and claimed the right of the Sudras to read and write the Vedas and Puranas. The main object of their protest was the establishment of a society based on equality and justice. The common tenor of their assertion was that one could be high or low according to his quality or merit but never on the basis of birth or social origins.³ It is an attempt to evaluate the contributions of the saint-poet Achyutananda Das in the fields of social reforms, creation of regional literature, spread of spiritual knowledge among the common men and his insistence on building an egalitarian social order.

Achyutananda Das was also one of the distinguished figures of the Panchasakha movement. He was born in 1482 A.D. in a Karana family of village Tilakana on the river bank of Chitrotpala in Cuttack district. His father was Dinabandhu Khuntia and mother, Padmavati.⁴ Folk tale says that for a long time Dinabandhu and Padmavati were issueless. They worshipped God Jagannath and were told by Him that when they would visit Puri and see a boy in front of

him, they would get that boy as their son and thus born Achyutananda. In childhood Achyutananda had no interest for reading and a monk who came to his village initiated him in a faith. After that Achyutananda remained absent minded and so his parents took him to Puri where he accepted Vaishnavism by Sri Chaitanya. There is a controversy regarding the birth or caste of Achyuta. Dr. Ratnakar Chaini attributes that Agani Achyuta, Gopal (milkman) Achyuta, Kaivarta (fisherman) Achyuta, Kamar (blacksmith) Achyuta and dina (poor) Achyuta are one person.⁵

Achyutananda was a contemporary of the king Prataprudradev. His grand father was one of the Private Secretaries (Chhamu Karan) of the king. His father Dinabandhu was honoured with the title Khuntia by the king. But the poet recognizes himself as a Sudra as is known from various of his works. Achyutananda was also recognized as a Gopal (milkman) and Kaivarta (fisherman or boatman) for his writings i.e. **Gopalanka Ogala** and **Kaivarta Gita**. His family was very poor when he was born. He has described the poor plight at his home and because of his poverty he called himself dina (poor) Achyuta.⁶ Through his works Achyutananda tried his level best to bring about a radical change in the society. He exceeded all the 'Sakhas' in his creation. According to his **Anakara Samhita** he claims that he was the author of thirty-six **Samhitas**, seventy-eight '**Gita's**', twenty-seven **Vansanucharitas**, twenty-two **Upavansanucharitas**, one hundred **Bhavisya Malikas**, seven volumes of **Harivamsas**, some **Koilliks**, some **Chautisas**, **Tikas**, **Vilasas**, **Nirnayas**, **Ogalas**, **Gujjaris** and **Bhajanas**. Many of his works are still unpublished.⁷ Only recently, the Achyutananda Smruti Sansad, an organization devoted to propagate

Achyutananda's excellence and glory, has published a number of his books.

Achyutananda Das was not only a saint poet, but also a critic of the contemporary society. Using his imaginativeness and foresight he had predicted what the future would turn out to be. He composed a lot of prophetic poems called **Malikas**, which reflected his extraordinary vision of future. The contemporary social condition is reflected in his writings although he has written about future. A general note which runs through all these **Malikas** appears to be rather striking. It states that the time will come when (I) the Brahmins will deteriorate to the level of Sudras, (II) there shall be no castes, all being equal in status, and (III) after many catastrophes there shall be a revival of spirituality under the guidance of a new prophet. He witnessed the socio-political instability and peaceless condition during his lifetime (sixteenth century) which led him to compose his own prophetic poems. His writings allude to the major Muslim invasions of Odisha during the period of Gajapati Prataprudradev (A.D. 1518) and Mukundadev (A.D. 1568). In A.D. 1510 Hussain Saha, Sultan of Bengal, attacked the temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri and destroyed some idols. But the idol of Lord Jagannath was safely protected. In A.D. 1568 Kalapahad, a commander of Sulaiman Karrani of Bengal, attacked the Jagannath temple of Puri. He burnt the idol of Lord Jagannath on the sea beach of Puri which terrorised the people of Odisha and made the contemporary *bhakta-kavis* like Achyutananda Das to give warnings to the people through their devotional songs. Apart from this, an examination of his personal life and his literary activities reveals that Achyutananda was a social rebel. He believed in casteless and classless society and his **Varan Charita Gita** was written in keeping with this outlook.⁸

The Harivamsa of Achyutananda, like **the Mahabharata** of Sarala Das and **the Ramayana** of Balam Das, is an original work, retaining only the frame work of the Sanskrit model. This is not the exact reproduction of its Sanskrit counterpart. The characters and places are also changed according to the situation. It starts with the birth of Nanda, Kamsa, Srikrishna, the boyhood of Lord Krishna, the birth of Meru-mountain, the killing of different demons like Aghasura, Bakasura and Yamalasura etc. It also includes the episodes like 'Kaliya Dalana', 'Kubuja Mokshaprapti', 'Rukmini Harana', the marriage of Sri Krishna with Satyavati, Kamala and Tulasi, the sending of Uddhava by Srikrishna for the Gopis, 'Subhadra Parinaya', 'Kokuabhaya' to destroy the Yadu clan and at last the death of Lord Krishna by Yara the hunter etc. This book described the life-story of Krishna, the Lord of the Gopal class, probably to bolster up the social status and social consciousness of the milkmen community in Odisha. This book is placed next to the Bhagavata of Jagannath Das among Odisha masses as a sacred book. Pious rural folk arrange the full recitation of all its seven volumes as fulfilment of vows to gods and goddesses, after their prayers have been granted.⁹ Its simple and lucid description enchants the people now.

Of all the five associates, Achyutananda, the youngest was the most active social reformer. His contribution to develop different neglected and deprived communities of Odisha shall long be cherished. He was the spiritual patron of million of Kaivartas (fishermen), Gopals (cowherds) and Kamaras (blacksmiths). He actually lived among them and for the first time in their social history imparted to them the *mantras* and *sastras*. He wrote **Kaivarta Gita** and **Gopalanka Ogala** to elevate the status of Kaivarta and Gopala respectively. In **Kaivarta Gita**, Achyutananda has

narrated the life story of Dasaraja, the mythical king of the Kaivartas through the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna. To bring pride and honour to the broken heart of the Kaivartas, he narrated that Dasaraja was born from the ear of Krishna and Krishna Himself had offered him a boat and a horse for his livelihood through trade. The poet clearly has got everything described by Lord Krishna to elevate the status of the fishermen in society. As a whole, **the Kaivarta Gita** is considered to be a remarkable social document which represents the social resurgence of the Sudras in medieval Odisha. It not only links the age-old tradition, customs, occupation and festivals of the Kaivarta Community with religious justification but also propagates *bhakti* to Lord Jagannath, goddess Vasuli and also to Ananta Vasuki (Nagacult). It gives, besides the message of the eradication of untouchability, a description of the naval and maritime trade activities of the Kaivartas and the commercial relations between Kalinga and Sri Lanka.¹⁰ **Gopalanka Ogala** is a very popular creation of Achyutananda. It has been composed in a very chit-chat manner. In it the theory of Radha-Krishna, flute, stick, and rope, Vrindavan, the horn of buffalo, the feathers of peacock, plucking of flower etc. is described. During the period of Dola Purnima the milkmen of the villages of Odisha chant these simple theories in the form of songs while filling up their pitchers with water. This **Gopalanka Ogala** has been a source of entertainment and consolation for the Gopal communities.¹¹

Achyutananda moved over many parts of Odisha for the propagation of his faith and outlook. Because of his profound experience of the wretched plight of the poor and the exploitation of the subjects by the State machinery, he criticized authoritarianism. His writings protest against injustice and exploitation. He compared

the subjects with dead bodies and the kings with vultures. To him it was a curse for the subjects to undergo such suffering. Again he postulated that the king would snatch away the properties of the subjects and the subjects would flee away to the forest. He also desired not to live to see the sorrowful condition of the people. A strong anti-feudal feeling has been clearly expressed in his writings.

Achyutananda also visited outside of Odisha to a number of pilgrim centres like Magadha, Gaya, Mathura, Ayodhya, Kasi, Vrindaban, Mithila, Madurai, Dwaraka, Mayapuri, Dhanuskoti, and Kamaksha. He came in contact with some fraudulent *sanyasis* and criticizing them he said that nobody could be a meditator only because he has a beard and long hair. To him determination, meditation, honesty and truthfulness were the essential characteristics of a *sanyasi*. He protested against the exploitative nature of priesthood and vehemently challenged the validity of the authority of Brahmins and the philosophical basis of *godan* (taking of cows in donation) by them. He asked a number of metaphysical questions relating to cow, the mother goddess and wanted to know from the priests whether they were Brahmins or Sudras? How did they emerge? Which god did they worship everyday and whether *dharma* is a result of *karma* or *karma* is a result of *dharma*.¹³ The king and the Brahmins of the Jagannath temple, Puri, were, in fact, surprised and had to perforce acknowledge his greatness.

Sunya Samhita is another creation of Achyutananda. It speaks about the worship of formless Almighty. In the first part, he attaches importance in chanting the 'Nama' of God. Then he speaks the importance of 'Guru' by which true knowledge can be obtained and salvation can be achieved. He has taken the *mantra* 'Hare Rama

Krishna' as 'Maha Mantra' and describes its meanings which are very difficult on the part of common men to follow. The book mainly depicts the importance of Sunyavada, Sunya-Sadhana and we find the use of such words like Alekha, Niranjana, Sunya, Mahasunya etc. Achyutananda believed in *jnana*, *bhakti* and *yoga*. To him, the *pundits* did not understand the hidden meaning of the Gita and *brahma-jnana*. They understood only the literal meaning of it. He believed that *bhakti* was essential to understand the inner meaning of the Gita.¹⁴

Ananta Goi or Agata Bhavisya is another work of Achyuta full of philosophical teachings. It speaks different perverted aspects of 'Kali Yuga'.¹⁵ Achyutananda's Anakara Samhita is an important work on the valuable doctrines on Anakara Tattva, theory of 'Nama' and its sublimity.¹⁶ Tattvabodhini is another philosophical treatise of Achyutananda. Here different theories relating to 'Sunya', 'Omkaara', 'Ardhamatra', 'Panchaveda', 'Panchabhuta' etc. find place. Here he further discusses that human life is not permanent. It is just like the bubble of the water. It is too difficult to attain salvation by Yoga. So it is indispensable on the part of human beings to chant the 'Name' and obtain salvation.¹⁷ His *Gurubhakti Gita* is a master-piece of his creations. Here he discusses the traditions relating to the relationship between teacher and student. He also discusses how he is the milkmen, how he has sixteen thousand disciples (who were sixteen thousand milk-maids in the past). Here he also discusses about Sri Chaitanya, Ramananda, Vishnusvami, Madhavacharya and Nimbarka.¹⁸ Among his other creations, *Astagujari*, *Brahmasankuli*, *Anakara Samhita*, *Akalita Samhita*, *Amara-Jamara Samhita*, *Sabdabrahma Samhita*, *Manivarana Gita*, *Manibandha Gita*, *Garuda Gita*, *Janapradipa Gita*, *Sunya Gita*, *Kaliyuga Gita*, *Kali Kalpa*

Gita, Adilila Gita, Avada Samhita, Dasa Patala, Udaya Kahani, Nirghanta Sabda, Nitya Rahasa, Varuna Charita, Sarasvata Malika etc. are important.¹⁹ Through these creations he wanted to bring about a radical change in the socio-cultural life of the people.

Achyutananda was critical of the rituals and pilgrimage, idol worship, caste, and authority of the Vedas. In his **Charikhani** or **Sabdabrahma Samhita** he has bitterly criticized the traditional social structure and has aimed at a new social order. He sang that fasting, pilgrimage and rituals were nothing, but the ways of inflicting pain to one's body in a different manner. He raised his voice against idol-worship and criticized different rituals which were material arrangements performed before the deity only for personal enjoyment and nothing else. Rejecting the notion of sacredness of rituals, Achyutananda argued that there was no need of *asana*, *suddhi* and *anganyasa* (decoration of body by use of sandal, etc.), in performance of worship. Recitation of the name of void (*sunya*) with deep love and devotion was the method of worship that he preached. King Prataprudradev was pleased to see the method of *sunya* worship of Achyutananda and granted him a place at Banki Muhan for his *matha* which subsequently named as Gopal Matha.²⁰

Conclusion :

Poet Achyutananda Das thus insisted upon a change in socio-cultural life of the people. He tried to arouse consciousness against the social injustice, religious exploitation and educational deprivation. He established himself as a revolutionary poet, a *bhakta* and *sadhaka* as well. He was a patriot and humanist. He loved Utkal very much. His writings in Odia enlightened the rural mass. It is remarkable that he was very

much sympathetic towards the depressed section of the society. He enlightened the path of salvation for the poor and sufferers through his **Sunyapurana** and **Mahamantra**. However, Achyutananda Dasa's contribution to revamp society and literature and his noble endeavour for building an egalitarian social order will be long cherished by the posterity. Thus he was the greatest social reformer in medieval Odisha.

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Sri Dineswar Sahu was born in an agrarian family in the village Purenna at the foot hills of famous Gandhamardan Mountain. The stressed financial condition of his family and love for Agricultural land attracted him towards farming.

He divided all his Agricultural land into different category depending on the crop suitability. He engaged himself in growing groundnut, mung, blackgram, mustard (Torika), maize and tomato. He has also acquired the modern Agricultural Machineries like tractor, power tiller, rotavator, leveller, puddler and power sprayer for timely agricultural operation.



He has also special interest in Dairy farming and mushroom cultivation. He is making compost, vermicompost out of the farm waste products. He never forgets to use green manure.

His annual net income is around 4.50 lakh rupees from crop husbandry, dairy, horticultural crops during the current Rabi Season in 2012 and hiring charges collected from his fellow farmers for using his Agri-machineries.

He is really a path-finder for the whole of farmers community.