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# Jagamohana Ramayana

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The Epic of Balarama Dasa



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**Bahinipati, Priyadarshi: Jagamohana Ramayana. The Epic of Balarama Dasa, Hamburg, Anchor Academic Publishing 2017**

PDF-eBook-ISBN: 978-3-96067-624-9

Druck/Herstellung: Anchor Academic Publishing, Hamburg, 2017

Covermotiv: © pixabay.de

**Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:**

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

**Bibliographical Information of the German National Library:**

The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography. Detailed bibliographic data can be found at: <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

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Hermannstal 119k, 22119 Hamburg  
<http://www.diplomica-verlag.de>, Hamburg 2017  
Printed in Germany

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## **PREFATORY NOTE**

One of the main subsistence of the ancient Sanskrit literatures and Medieval literatures of different parts of India are Rama and Krishna oriented themes. Form Valmiki Ramayana in Sanskrit to Ramayana in different vernacular languages of Tamil, Telgu, Malayalam, Kannada, Assamese, Gujarati, Bengali, Odishi, Marathi, Hindi all have proceeded from the rudimentary stage of local language literatures to become Mahakavyas in their respective areas and reached every nook and corners of the region, galvanizing the mind and hearts of the populace. Although they have been composed in different periods and the poets and composers have a different style of presentation of their own they acquired the status of original spokesperson of Ramayana in their respective regions. It is a fact that Indian languages and literatures are enriched by the form, content, ideas and ideologies of the epics of yesteryears.

Rama after being accepted as an incarnation of Vishnu and after the popularization of devotion of Rama in the fourteenth century, all the literatures were intertwined in the current of a feeling of love and devotion. This trend has been manifested in the work of Balarama Dasa, one of the doyens of litterateurs of medieval Odisha. He equated Rama with Lord Jagannath and named his version of Ramayana as Jagamohana Ramayana itself. He belonged to a group of litterateurs who were famous in the history of Odisha as Panchasakhas and were known for their sublimity, egalitarianism and intellectualism.

For generation together Ramayana has not only remained as a part and parcel of poetry or epic rather it evolves through ages as a source of inspiration for living an ideal life. Rama and Sita has become a symbol of an epitomized idealistic character of the Indian culture, which continued to provide paths to get higher ends of life.

It is therefore essential to discuss the vernacular literatures which provided salubrity to the culture of Odisha and how they were penned with a view to enrich the valued tradition of the society as morality, ethics, healthy beliefs and practices are always ageless. It is always important to revisit the works of literatures in different periods to find out the state of mind of those writers and composers who generated their literary marvels to establish their views emphatically with a reformative approach. In Odisha, the Panchasakhas were the champions of liberty, fraternity and equality for which it is all the more important to analyse their works time and again to escalate the idea of free thought and expression and rescue the gamut of their opinions and ideas from intellectual hibernation.

Tripura

01.02.2017

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## **THE PROLOGUE**

Ramayana is the first great epic in Indian literature. From the point of thought, expression, metre, mode of composition, flavor of composition it acquired a sublime status in primeval literatures of the world.

It is an inherent part of life of the Indians as it is not only a repertoire of religious and moral ideals but also important from the point of humanity oriented social scripture where the inherent meaning of life can be found. It is a mirror of the heritage of India, of the thoughts, perception, hopes and aspiration of the people hitherto. Its popularity is not because of the personification of the God rather it is famous because it revolves around the characters of an ideal father, ideal son, ideal mother, ideal brother, ideal husband, ideal wife, ideal friend, ideal servant, etc.

Sage Valmiki had given utmost importance to idealism because he envisioned that morality and idealism would provide an ethical and value based society. Much importance has given to the behavioural aspects of human being, which revolves around the character, honour, reputation between relationships, and these are the essence on which a social fabric rests. The ideals and morality, which were preached and practiced during that period, are still relevant today which is evident from the popularity Ramayana enjoys even now.

It has become possible to compose Ramayana in different local and vernacular languages only after tenth century A.D. During the fifteenth to sixteenth century A.D. Balarama Dasa had composed Ramayana in Odia which became famous as Jagamohana Ramayana. Even a number of compositions have been made afterwards but its popularity has not been surpassed until today. Although, Ramayana has been written in many Indian languages, however these are not the exact translation of the Valmiki Ramayana and there are regional variations. They have their own regional specialty and contemporaneity where different socio-political religious issues of the time have been incorporated. However, the fact remains that all the Ramayana's are thematically same and their soul is one.

Jagamohana Ramayana is the first Ramayana composed in Odia language. Balarama Dasa's exposition was the reflection of the spirit of the age particularly in Odisha when the manifestation of the popular sentiment through lucid compositions was initiated by a group of

illustrious personalities famous in the annals of Odishan history as the Panchasakhas of which Balarama Dasa himself was a camaraderie. They epitomized certain elements in the society in the medieval age like rationalism, reason and conscience which revolutionised the process of thinking. They had given prominence to subaltern concepts and ideology and through their writings enriched the cultural and literary heritage of Odisha.

In ancient time, Odisha was mainly divided into three parts such as- Udra/Odra, Utkala and Kalinga. In the opinion of Cunningham the extent of these three regions were as- Udra constituted the region of west Midnapore and possibly Manbhum or east Singhbhum and south Bankura; Utkala constituted the area from the south of Kapisa river to northern part of Baitarani river and from the coastal Balasore to Lohardaga near Ranchi and Sirguja of Madhaya Pradesh; Kalinga constituted the area from the south of Baitarani river to Langulya of Visakhapatanam and from the east-coast to Amarkantak region of Madhaya Pradesh.

This extent of Odisha was continued to change over the subsequent periods. The kingdom of Utkala while extended up to the river Mahanadi, the kingdom of Kalinga was extended up to river Godavari. Therefore, in ancient time it was known that Udra constituted the northern part, Utkala, the central part and Kalinga the southern part of Odisha.

During the reign of the Suryavamsi Gajapatis the extent of Odisha was from Ganga in the north to Godavari in the south. In different periods several smaller kingdoms like Kangoda, Kosala, Trikalanga etc. rose and were dissolved with these three large constituents. There is historical evidence that during the reign of Anantavarman Chodoganga Deva of Ganga Dynasty (11<sup>th</sup>- 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) these three kingdoms were united to form an empire called Udra. Since then the region was known as Udra or Utkala. During the Marathas and the British the term Odisha and Orissa has been in use instead of Utkala.

Towards the end of the eleventh century A.D., there was the rule of the Gangas in Odisha who ruled until the middle of the fifteenth century A.D. There were in toto fifteen rulers who ruled for three hundred fifty seven years (1078-1435A.D.). The founder of this dynasty, Anantavarman Chodoganga Deva ruled from 1078 to 1147 A.D. united the whole of Odisha and during his reign the extent of his empire was from Ganga to Godavari which proves his prowess and strength.

By the time of the accession of the third ruler of the dynasty, Rajaraja Deva-III (1188-1211 A.D.) there occurred a big political transformation in northern India. Due to the absence of any powerful empire in India, the Muslims successfully established themselves as the rulers by defeating the disjunctive forces that were in operation in India one by one in tandem. Their victory was emphatic after the defeat of Prithiviraj Chouhan which was the *coup d' grace* that led to the beginning of a new era in the political arena. The Muslims were not content with their initial victories rather they started to consolidate and expand their empire by conquering new territories. Eventually they marched towards the east and captured Lakhnauti, the capital of Gauda. The Sena ruler Lakshman Sena fled without fighting which led to the establishment of first Muslim rule in Bengal under Ikhtiyar-ud-din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji who became the first Nawab of Bengal.

Ikhtiyar Khilji was not content with his occupation of Bengal but tried to expand his empire in the east to Assam and Odisha. However, he did not get any immediate success in Odisha because of the powerful rule of the Gangas. Ikhtiyar Khilji sent his faithful commanders Muhammad-i-Seran and Ahmad-i-Seran to occupy Lakhnor and Jajnagar in 1205 A.D.

However, due to the demise of Ikhtiyar-ud-din during the exploits of Kamrup these two commanders returned to Bengal. Though it has not been mentioned, in *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* that the two commanders were defeated but this has been known from other sources.

The Muslims attacked Odisha during the reign of Rajaraja Dev-III, which has been considered by many historians as the first and foremost attack of Odisha by the Muslims. From 1205A.D. to 1568 A.D., the Muslims attacked Odisha again and again but in vain and Odisha succeeded to maintain its identity as an independent Hindu kingdom. The other great kings of the Ganga dynasty like Anangabhimha Deva-III (1211A.D.-1238A.D.), Narasimha Deva-I (1238A.D.-1264A.D.) and the king of Suryavamsi dynasty like Gajapati Kapilendra Deva (1435A.D.-1468A.D.), Purusottama Deva (1468A.D.-1497A.D.) not only protected Odisha from Muslim invasions but also attacked their territories time and again in order to expand their own empire.

It was during the reign of Prataparudra Deva (1497A.D.-1533A.D.) turmoil in Odisha started. During his reign, the boundary of his empire started to contract and towards the end of

his reign the extent of empire remains from Ganga to Krishna river. Up to thirty-five years after the death of Prataparudra Deva, Odisha was able to maintain its independence. According to Akbarnamah after the death of the last Hindu ruler Mukunda Deva, Odisha lost its independent identity in 1568A.D. and the Muslim rule was started in Odisha.

Poet Balarama Dasa was born during the reign of Gajapati Purusottama Deva (1468A.D.-1497A.D.). Due to the peace, tranquility and prosperity in that period a lot of cultural development took place, which reached its zenith after the establishment of Suryavamsa in Odisha. As is evident from ancient times that cultural atmosphere was created on the basis of religion, in Odisha also it is found that its cultural edifice was erected on the Jagannath Dharma. The mention of Srikhetra can be found in Mahabharata (Vanaparva) from which it is established that from very early times worship of Jagannath was prevailed in Odisha. Because in different periods Odisha was the meeting ground of different religions like, Buddhism, Jainism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism, Saivism etc. there prevailed a syncretic atmosphere.

In the ninth century A.D. during the reign of Kesari dynasty, the visit of Adi Sankaracharya to Srikhetra led to the resurrection of Brahmanism in Odisha.

After the Kesaris, came the Gangas and the founder of this dynasty Chodoganga Deva though a Saivite after the conquest of Utkala became a Vaishnava follower. During his reign his contemporary the famous religious preacher Ramanujacharya (1056-1137A.D.) visited Srikhetra and beatified and initiated him into Vaishnavism. Along with this process, Brahmanism and Vaishnavism started in Odisha. Ramanujacharya's disciple Govinda established the Emar Math in Srikhetra. After that the followers of Madhavacharya, Ramananda visited Srikhetra and established their respective *mathas* there. In the reign of the greatest rulers of the Ganga and Surya dynasty, Brahmanism and Vaishnavism had assumed the status of a royal religion and as such in the religious consciousness of Odisha, Vaishnavism and Vaishnava thoughts and sentiment had acquired a niche for itself.

By the time of composition of Balarama Dasa's Jagamohana Ramayana i.e., last decade of fifteenth century A.D., Buddhism, Jainism, Brahmanism, Nath religion, Tantric Buddhism and Vaishnavism with its branches has established themselves firmly on the soil of Odisha.