

Covid-19 and Puri Rath Yatra: Socio-Cultural & Legal Implications

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Abstract

The paper discusses the conduct of the Puri Rath Yatra amidst the Covid19 pandemic, and the legal complicity that followed in the Hon'ble Supreme Court. Probably, during the pandemic period, this Rath Yatra was the only matter that was allowed by the Apex Court under strict vigilance of the Odisha Government and with the minimum number of servitors required for the performance of the ritual. The paper analyses the cultural and historical issues associated with the Puri Rath Yatra, and the significance it holds to the cultural traditions of the Hindu religion. It examines how an emotive issue of the Puri Rath Yatra was finally given the green signal by the Apex Court after an initial injunction of not allowing it. It examines the various religious bodies associated with the tradition of Lord Jaganath, and their significance to the adherence of the religious practice of Rath Yatra.

Key words: Jaganath Rath Yatra, Supreme Court, Gajapati Maharaja, Government, Chhatisha Nijog

Introduction

The Covid19 pandemic has brought many pains and compulsions for the people of the world. There are restrictions and controls by the government that has created mental trauma. No doubt these restrictions are for the betterment of the people and to secure their life from the dreaded novel Corona virus, but restrictions like lockdown, social distancing, imposition of face-mask, no mass gatherings, isolation, quarantine, are compelling the people to shed away part of their freedom that were earlier enjoyed uninterruptedly. It is understood that these restrictions are very much necessary for the very survival of human society, else there will be innumerable loss of human life. However, when these restrictions are imposed on the religious practices of the people, then it unnecessarily creates an agitation in mind, as religion is a very personal and emotive matter to humankind. Sentiments can easily be flared up using religion, and for which also religion is attributed both as a binding and divisive force. Aslan (2018) examines "how the idea of god arose in human evolution, was gradually personalized, endowed with human traits and emotions, and eventually transformed into a single Divine Personality".

First Injunction

Rath Yatra is otherwise called Car Festival where the three deities Lord Jaganath, elder brother Lord Balabhadra, and sister Goddess Subhadra come out of the sanctum sanctorum and go to Gundicha temple on the chariots. Sri Sundarananda (2017) writes, "Lord Jaganath showers His mercy upon everyone when He comes out yearly from His temple and travels to Gundicha with His brother Baladeva and sister Subhadra on a beautiful chariot. Devotees and spiritualists from all over the world come to behold the mesmerizing glimpse of Lord Jaganatha". Lord Jaganath never entered into a legal battle earlier, but this year, due to Covid19 restrictions, the holding of Rath Yatra on 23 June 2020 in Puri had to be decided by Hon'ble Supreme Court at the eleventh hour on 22 June 2020 at 2.30 pm in virtual Vacation Court. Earlier the Hon'ble Supreme Court delivered a judgment on 18 June 2020 disallowing the holding of Rath Yatra "in the interests of public health and safety of citizens". The bench headed by Hon'ble Chief Justice of India (CJI) said, "Lord Jaganath won't forgive us if we allow it" (www.firstpost.com). The other Judges were Hon'ble Justice Dinesh Maheswari, and Hon'ble Justice S. A. Bopanna. The Hon'ble Court held that Art. 25(1) of the Constitution of India itself confers the right to freely profess and propagate religion subject to health. The Solicitor General (SG) Tushar Mehta pleaded that the ritual may be allowed under certain restrictions of the Covid19 rules. Senior Advocate Harish Salve, representing State of Odisha, stated that there is possibility of around 10-12 lakhs people congregating for the event that will be held for 10-12 days. This was sufficient for the Hon'ble Court to take a dissenting view of holding the Rath Yatra, as the State Government retainer did not mention any modus operandi to hold amidst Covid19 restrictions. The Hon'ble CJI agreeing to the contention said, "We have

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enough experience of such cases. Once we allow anything, people with their religious fervor will gather in huge numbers. So we won't allow anything. Nothing for this year". (The New Indian Express, 19 June 2020, Sambalpur). The matter was referred to the Hon'ble Supreme Court on a PIL filed by a NGO named Odisha Vikas Parishad that cited a total of 10 lakh people attended in Rath Yatra 2019, and if it is allowed this year then "results will be catastrophic". Senior Advocate Mukul Rohtagi appeared on behalf of the NGO and said that even the Olympic Games have been postponed this year. With all this, the Hon'ble Court directed, "There shall be no Rath Yatra anywhere in the temple town of Odisha or in any other part of the state". With this direction, the State government, in a Cabinet meeting on the same day evening resolved to comply with the directions of the Hon'ble Supreme Court. Puri Gajapati Maharaja Dibyasingha Deb also said that it is the responsibility of all to honour the direction of Hon'ble Supreme Court. This also brought an end to all the preparation that was taking place for the last one month for the Rath Yatra.

It will not be for the first time in history that Rath Yatra was stopped. Earlier, on different occasions, the Rath Yatra could not be held for 155 years, out of which, for 144 years, the deities remained underground or Patali. For 8 years, the Rath Yatra was held in another district Sonpur, where the deities were worshipped. From 1568 to 1771, at different periods, Rath Yatra could not be held for 32 times due to external enemy attack on the temple. As per customs, if Rath Yatra is not held, then it has to be stopped for the coming 12 years.

Responses to First Injunction

Lord Jaganath being the symbol of emotions and feelings among all the people of Odisha, as expected, displeasure was quite evident among the people due to the decision of not holding the Rath Yatra. Lord Jaganath is said to be the 'living deity' and every Odia consider Lord Jaganath to be the spirit of the Odia race and culture. "Immense popularity of the cult is its democratic nature and the historic practice of taking the deities out of their sanctum sanctorum, and directly to the masses. The Puri temple is one of rarest among the major Hindu temples that takes the original deities out of the sanctum-sanctorum, as other temples usually bring out in public processions only iconic representations of their deities called Utsava-murtis" (Sircar, 2018). On 19 June 2020, three numbers of petitions were filed seeking modifications of the order dated 18 June 2020, and allowing the annual ritual of Rath Yatra with the adherence of Covid19 guidelines. The Daitapati Nijog, the chief body of servitors of Sri Jaganath temple filed a petition for recall of the order, stating, "the traditions and practices of the temple falls outside the scope of the Government's purview, given that a religious practice is not a secular activity". It included certain alternative measures to facilitate the holding of the Rath Yatra, like, imposition of total curfew in Puri town for two days before the festival and sealing of its borders to prevent entry of outsiders, for smooth conduct and avoiding spread of corona virus. Further, the State government is already imposing shut-down of Puri district for two days on week-ends.

Another petition was filed by Saroj Kumar Sahu, Secretary of Jaganath Sanskritika Jana Jagaran Manch, stated that the State government did not place the real facts. It stated that as per the Hon'ble Orissa High Court and decision of the State government, the Snana Purnima ritual was held on 5 June 2020 with 800 3 servitors, who had undergone Covid19 test and are in isolation for more than one month as on 19 June 2020. Further, 320 carpenters, black-smiths, and rupakars, are doing the construction work of the chariots for more than one and half months, with the Covid19 rules and guidelines. It stated that a total of 1034 persons, including 132 Jaganath Temple Police personnel, are in isolation for more than one and half months for conduct of Rath Yatra. Interestingly, it also included that on 30 May 2020, thousands of people gathered in the road from Jaganath temple to Gundicha temple to sing 'Vande Utkal Janani...' maintaining social distance to honour the Covid19 warriors as per a call given by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik. Hence, the petition submitted that with a total of 500-600 persons required to pull the chariots, for a distance of 3 kms from Jaganath Temple to Gundicha temple, the Rath Yatra can be held with the help of 500-600 servitors by maintaining social distance and imposition of human restrictions under Sec 144 of CrPC.

Aftab Hussein, another petitioner, also sought modification of the Hon'ble Supreme Court order by holding the Rath Yatra by the servitors only. It submitted that Puri is in green zone, and any positive case in Puri was due to migrants coming to Puri. If Puri town is completely shut-down on Rath Yatra day, the festival can be conducted smoothly by servitors (sevayats) and no infection will happen to general public and that will meet the ends of justice.

Outside the judicial ambit, Sameer Mohanty, the State President of the opposition BJP in Odisha said that everybody is bound to obey the directions of Hon'ble Court on Rath Yatra, however painful it may be, in view of the reality that the pandemic is at its high during this month. Senior BJP leader Bijay Mohapatra opined that the State government's role is suspicious in the cancellation of the biggest festival of Lord Jaganath, though all are bound to abide by the Hon'ble Court's order. He alleged that there was lack of will on the part of the State government to hold the Rath Yatra. The Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee President Niranjana Patnaik said that government should take steps to conduct Rath Yatra, like the Snana Purnima was held on 5 June, and this will stop some experts giving different suggestions during debates in news channel and media. He suggested imposing shutdown in Puri for holding Rath Yatra. The State Congress MLA Suresh Kumar Routray, in choked voice and tears in his eyes, completely held the State government responsible for the cancellation of the Rath Yatra. The BJD leader and Government Chief Whip Pramila Mallick, while replying to these allegations, said that there is no conspiracy, and that the spread of the disease is so fast that there is every possibility of high spike in mass congregation like Rath Yatra. She also said that Snana Yatra is held within the Temple premises, while Rath Yatra will be held in Grand Road outside Temple.

Puri Shankaracharya Swami Nischalananda Saraswati while welcoming the order of Hon'ble Court said Rath Yatra should be allowed by following the traditions/norms laid in the sacred texts and with fewer numbers of servitors. Hence, he was in favour of the modification of the order of Hon'ble Court. The Shankaracharya of Puri, on 21 June 2020 alleged that there was a well-orchestrated plan to stall Lord Jaganath's Rath Yatra this year amidst the COVID19 pandemic. In a video message, the Puri seer said, "On June 20, the Supreme Court could have accepted the review petitions seeking modification of its June 18 stay order. There are precedents of the apex court taking up important cases even during vacations".

Puri King Gajapati Dibyasingha Deb while welcoming the order of Hon'ble Court observed that this unprecedented situation has necessitated reforms in the Record of Rights (RoR). While addressing to the media, he said, "Since there is no precedent of Rath Yatra being cancelled when the deities are in Anasara Ghar (Sick Room), it remains unclear how the nitees (rituals) will be performed in these extraordinary circumstances. A new set of nitees will have to be chalked out for holding Rath Yatra inside the 12th century shrine premises. The new nitees should be included in the RoR for future reference during emergencies like the Covid19 pandemic. These will then become precedent and ensure that tradition of Rath Yatra is not broken" (The New Indian Express, 20 June 2020). He was also of the view that the State government seems to have not taken notice of the resolution passed in the Sri Jaganath Temple Managing Committee meeting on Rath Yatra on 30 May 2020, where it was suggested to hold Rath Yatra with minimum number of servitors within Covid19 guidelines.

Daitapati (Servitors) were totally against the performance of Rath Yatra rituals inside the Temple premises. Senior Daitapati Binayak Dasmahapatra, on 19 June, said since all the Daitas are now busy in taking care of the three deities in Anasara Ghar, they will hold a meeting to arrive at a conclusion. The Daitas, known as body protectors of the deities, play a vital role in the annual festival from Snana Purnima to Niladri Bije (entry of the deities to Temple after completion of Rath Yatra).

Shri Jaganath Temple Managing Committee

The Shri Jaganath Temple Managing Committee had an urgent meeting with the Chhatisa Nijoga (Chief Servitors body) on 20 June 2020, and after the meeting, the Chairman of the Committee Puri Gajapati Shri Dibyasingha Deb wrote a letter to the Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik urging him to file petition for modification of the order of Hon'ble Court delivered on 18 June. The following are the verbatim contents of the letter:

After considerable discussion upon all relevant aspects of the matter, the Managing Committee and the Chhatisa Nijoga unanimously decided to appeal to the State Government to immediately move the Supreme Court for a modification of the Court's Order of June 18 so as to allow the world-famous Rath Yatra in Puri for the following reasons (www.ommcomnews.com):

1. Performance of the annual Rath Yatra in Puri is sanctioned and mandated by sacred scriptures, such as, Skanda Purana, Brahma Purana, Neeladri Mahodaya, Bamadeba Samhita, etc. These scriptures clearly state that Shree Shree Jagannatha Mahaprabhu (also referred to in the scriptures as Shree Purushottama)

is the Supreme Lord. He is not an Avatara. He is the Avatari and Shree Jagannatha-dhama Puri is His Eternal Abode on this planet Earth.

Upon His Divine Manifestation in “Chaturdha-Daru Vighraha” Form during the 2nd Satya-yuga of the First Manvantara, He himself commanded the Sovereign Ruler (Maharaja Indradyumna) to perform the Rath Yatra every year on the specific day (Asadha Shukla-paksha Dwitiya) as He desired to visit the sacred place of His First Manifestation (now Gundicha Temple) and spend 7 days there (vide: Skanada Purana, Purushottama-kshetra Mahatmya, Chapter 29, shlokas 30-40). This command of the Lord Himself has been faithfully observed since time immemorial by succeeding Rulers of Odisha.

2. In the course of Odisha’s long history, Rath Yatra has not been held only when conduct of the Yatra has become impossible, as for instance, during attacks by Mughal forces during the 16th, 17th, 18th centuries, when the Lords had to be hidden in remote places. The Yatra, however, has not been stopped for any other reason whatsoever and has been faithfully performed even in the midst of the worst natural disasters and epidemics.

The present grave crisis caused by COVID pandemic, it is respectfully submitted, is not a situation which renders impossible conduct of Rath Yatra in Puri since, as suggested by the Temple Managing Committee at its meeting of 30th May 2020, the Yatra in Puri can be held without any congregation of general public and with the State Government taking appropriate steps to prevent spread of COVID.

3. If Rath Yatra is not held this year in Puri, it will hurt the religious sentiments of countless devotees around the world who watch the sacred Yatra live every year on electronic media. As His very name indicates, Lord Jagannatha is the Lord of the Universe and during this sacred festival He himself comes out of the Temple and rides on the Rath so that all beings not only on this planet but in the entire Universe can be blessed by His darshan and obtain His Grace.

It is an established tradition of Sanatana Vaidika Dharma that the Presiding Deities do not at all leave Their Throne/Sanctum-sanctorum. But Lord Jagannatha Himself created an exception to this general rule by coming out of the Temple to bless all beings in the whole universe — as He is the Lord of the Universe.

In-fact this is one of the main objectives of the Rath Yatra in Puri, as mentioned in the sacred scriptures (vide: Skanada Purana, Purushottama-kshetra Mahatmya, Chapter 33, shlokas 94-97, Neeladri Mahodaya, Chapter 16, shloka 171).

4. The conduct of the annual Rath Yatra on the prescribed day is statutorily mandated by Record-of-Rights (Part II, pages 69-81) framed under The Puri Shri Jagannath Temple (Administration) Act, 1952. Under Sec 15 (2) of Shri Jagannath Temple Act, 1955, the Managing Committee of the Temple is statutorily bound to ensure conduct of Rath Yatra in accordance with the Record-of-Rights.
5. For the above reasons, the Rath Yatra in Puri is of special significance and importance and should not be stopped, even if Rath Yatra and other religious functions are not permitted elsewhere under COVID Lockdown Guidelines.

A Constitutional Bench of Supreme Court in *Raja Birakishore Deb v. State of Orissa* (AIR 1964 SC 1501) has acknowledged the unique and special importance of Shri Jagannath Temple in Puri which “requires special treatment” by the State Government.

The Government may therefore stop conduct of Rath Yatra throughout the State; but the Rath Yatra in Puri should be permitted, as a special case, by the State Government undertaking at the same time effective measures to ensure that there is no spread of COVID by conduct of the Yatra.

6. Param Pujiyapad Shreemad Jagadguru Shankaracharya Swami Nischalananda Saraswati Maharaj, who is revered as the supreme religious authority in the religious affairs of Shreemandira, has expressed his learned view in favour of Supreme Court reconsidering and modifying its Order of 18th June so as to enable conduct of Rath Yatra in Puri.

The Gajapati Maharaj attached a copy of the opinion of Shankaracharya to his letter.

“Under the aforesaid circumstances and in the interest of countless devotees around the world, I request you re-consider this sensitive issue of stopping Rath Yatra in Puri and to direct appropriate steps to be

immediately taken by the State government for approaching Supreme Court for a partial modification of its aforesaid Order dated 18 June 2020 so as to permit performance of Rath Yatra only at Puri — the Moola-peetha of Lord Jagannath,” the letter reads.

This letter of the Gajapati Maharaj is self-explanatory of the significance and gravity of the situation, and the relevance of the sacred tradition according to Holy Scriptures. It expresses the anxiety and sentiments while urging the Chief Minister to consider the matter with all divinity and urgency.

Specific Nitees

The Servitors representative in the Temple Committee Ramachandra Dasmahapatra and Madhab Mohapatra said on 21 June 2020 that like there is no alternative to the Hon’ble Supreme Court order, the Rath Yatra has no alternative after the Agyanmala is received on 22 June. The Agyanmala is the order of the deities to ready the chariots for their journey. If the chariots are not there at the Singhadwar (Lion Gate) of Temple, it would mean breaking the Lord’s tradition. And if the chariots are there means, Rath Yatra has to be conducted. Hence, they stated that either the State government should move for a modification of the Hon’ble Court order, or bring an Ordinance to conduct Rath Yatra.

The Chhatisha Nijog Chief Janardhan Pattajoshi said on 21 June that there is no alternative location to conduct rituals of Lord. As per the records in the Madala Panji (Ancient Almanac), there are four places where the deities can be placed and offered bhog (food-offerings). These are Ratnasimhasan of the sanctum sanctorum, Snana Bedi (bathing altar), both inside Temple; the sanctum sanctorum of Gundicha Temple; and on the chariots. In no other places can the rituals be held. Jaganath Swain Mahapatra, the Chief servitor of Lord Jaganath said that once the Lord emerges from Anasar Ghar, after 14 days quarantine, the Nabajouban Besha is held and the deities are taken to the chariots.

Modification of Injunction

In a positive note, the Law Department of Odisha government released a press-note on the evening of 21 June announcing that the State government will take a favourable action as legally permissible during the Hon’ble Supreme Court’s hearing on petitions seeking modification of 18 June order. It stated that the earlier stand of State government was primarily due to thousands of Rath Yatras taking place all over Odisha, involving lakhs of people, and thereby fears of spread of Covid19. The months of June and July will see the peak of Covid19 spread in Odisha, and so the government was more cautious.

However, with regard to the legal formalities of the Hon’ble Court, there were certain procedural difficulties. The matter was not listed in the main list of the Supreme Court on 22 June. Again, since the order of 18 June was delivered by a three Judge Bench, a single Judge bench cannot consider the earlier modification application that were not taken up by the Bench. In such a case, the Hon’ble CJI has to constitute a three Judge Bench. For all this, the time factor was very important, as the date of Rath Yatra was on 23 June.

The Solicitor General (SG) Tushar Mehta on 22 June 2020 morning mentioned the case for urgent hearing before Justice Arun Mishra. He pleaded, “It is a matter of faith for crores, a tradition of centuries. If Lord Jaganath will not come out on 23 June, then Lord cannot come out for 12 years as per tradition”. The Principal Resident Commissioner of Odisha filed an affidavit, requesting to allow the event in a limited way, without public attendance, as proposed by Gajapati Maharaja of Puri.

In a virtual Vacation Court on 22 June at 2.30 pm, headed by Hon’ble CJI, the three Judge Bench modified its earlier order of 18 June and allowed Rath Yatra with certain conditions. The Bench took note of the affidavit filed by Odisha government, and Central governments appeal, and ruled, “if it is possible to ensure that there is no public attendance, we see no reason why the Rath Yatra cannot be conducted safely along its usual route from temple to temple”. The Hon’ble Court added certain safeguards to its order that are, (a) closure of all entry points to the city of Puri during Rath Yatra, (b) State government to impose curfew during the Rath yatra procession, and on such other days as and when necessary, (c) each chariot to be pulled by not more than 500 persons, who must be Covid19 negative, (d) interval of one hour between chariots, (e) social distancing to be maintained while pulling chariots, (f) primary responsibility for conducting the Rath Yatra in accordance to the conditions shall be of the Shri Jaganath Temple Administration Committee, (g) the entire ritual to be covered and telecast by TV camera, (h) bare 7 minimum number of people to be utilized, (i) State

government can take assistance of Union government whenever necessary, (j) records to be maintained of all participants with health reports.

The said order of the Hon'ble Court gave a very positive note to Odisha government that reads, "We take note of the fact that the state of Odisha has a good record of having controlled the pandemic with very little loss of life. We see no reason why the same attitude of care and caution should not be supplied to the Rath Yatra".

Holding of Yatra

With very little time at hand, the State government immediately started the preparations. The CM reviewed the preparations at a high level meeting, and said that the world will be watching us. We will have to show the world how such mega events are held adhering to social distancing and other guidelines with discipline. Earlier the CM in a tweet on 22 June thanked Hon'ble Supreme Court for giving permission to hold #RathaYatra in Puri & GOI for cooperation for the same. CM said #Odisha Govt & SJTA (Shri Jaganath Temple Administration) have done all arrangement including chariot preparation & rituals. CM also thanked servitors for their cooperation.

The Chief Secretary and the Director General of Police rushed to Puri on 22 June evening to oversee the arrangements. The CM also entrusted responsibility to three Cabinet Ministers, viz: Pratap Jena (Law Minister), Naba Kishore Das (Health Minister), Sameer Ranjan Dash (School & Mass Education Minister), and Sanjay Dasburma (Deputy Chairman of State Planning Board), to camp in Puri till the end of the process of Rath Yatra with Niladri Bije (entry of the Deities to the sanctum sanctorum). Shutdown was imposed from 8 pm on 22 June and was partially lifted in Puri after 6 pm on 23 June.

The Union Home Minister Amit Shah in a series of twitter message disclosed how Prime Minister Modi's intervention facilitated the entire process. Shah in tweet messages on 22 June said, "Last evening (21 June evening), as per the instructions of PM @narendramodi, I spoke to Gajapati Maharaj ji and the respected Shankaracharya ji of Puri and sought their views on the Yatra. This morning, on PM's instructions, I also spoke to SG". In another tweet, he followed, "It makes me, as well as crores of devotees across India happy that PM not only understood the sentiment of the devotees but also initiated consultations which ensured that the great traditions of our land are observed".

The Rath Yatra was held as per the usual rituals, and more importantly adhering to the Hon'ble Supreme Court's conditions and also strictly adhering to the Covid19 guidelines. The different rituals of the Rath Yatra process were also held on time, and all the three chariots reached Gundicha temple in the evening of 23 June. Panda (2019) writes, "Jagannath is not only an ancient deity for worship across communities, sects and religions but also a veritable fulcrum around which regional, sub-national, national and even global mainstreams of knowledge, philosophy, religion, arts and culture and contemporary socio-political discourses have evolved over the millennia. So the Jagannath Cult can be truly conceived as the culmination of human cultural evolution".

Socio-Cultural Implications

Rath Yatra is a holy festival that brings together people of all religions, caste, language, and culture together to pay their obeisance before Lord Jaganath on the Grand Road, locally called Bada Danda, in Odia. Jaganath cult is unique in its form and magnificence, and embraces people throughout the globe. The artificial man-made barriers have no significance before Jaganath cult. So great is the love and devotion for Lord Jaganath that it compels the Lord to come out of his sanctum sanctorum once in every year and the devotees get mesmerized with the presence of their beloved Lord at such a close distance. The wave of humanism while pulling the chariots of the three deities is a feeling to have been experienced by each and every person. The traditional Mahari dance, and the lines of Geet Govinda by Poet Jayadev, has great influence of Jaganath cult.

One of the rituals of Rath Yatra is the cherra pahanra performed by the King of Puri on the chariot after the deities' seat on the chariot. The King sweeps the three Rathes and cleans the floor of the Rath with a golden-handle broom for the Lords. This ritual conveys the message that even the King is just like any other devotee before the Lords. "Needless to say, this vidhi or practice is symbolic of the highest form of social justice,

equality and unity that has remained an objective to be realized by humanity in all walks of life. It is, no doubt maintains unique culture of unity in diversity through rendering services to Lord Jagannath” (Kanungo, 2013; 61). This is the essence of humanism that may not be observed in any other socio-cultural phenomenon.

Mohapatra & Samantray (2017) write that orientalist like A. Cunningham & W. W. Hunter appreciated the cult and tried to link it with Buddhism. They also cite O' Malley's Puri Gazetter where the Buddhist link is emphasized with the tribal origin of Lord Jaganath. Jaganath cult is also linked with Jainism, Saivism, Shaktism, and Vaishnavism. Lord Jaganath has been a forum for free exchange of philosophical, secular and intellectual curiosities and consequences of synthetic values too (2017; 174). It is thus found that Sri Jagannath Culture has a great impact on the socio-religious and economic life of Oriya people in particular and Hindu community in general (Mohanty, 2010; 23). The principle of secularism is long practiced in Jaganath cult, and may be prior to the western conceptualization of the term. The socio-cultural implications emphasizes upon the synthesis and harmonization of the universal fraternity and the spirit of humanism, that the whole world assimilates with Jaganath cult.

Conclusion

The Chief Secretary in a tweet on 23 June 2020, said, “Approximately 2000 Sevayats were tested for the Covid19 and only those who were found negative were selected from whom the ones who drew the Chariots in the holy Rath Yatra were drawn with compulsory mask wearing. They did a great job. Grateful to them”! Baijayant Jay Panda, the national Vice-President of BJP, in a tweet on 23 June 2020 said, “Unfortunate that some are trying to justify & compare the #TablighiJamaat to SC-permitted #Jaganath RathaJatra which had: *No hiding, spitting, attacks on police,*All committed to abiding by Govt/SC guidelines; *Advance preparations & #Covid tests for all participants; *No public.

The Puri Gajapati Maharaj Dibyasingha Deb, later in an interview to OTV on 26 June 2020 alleged the role of the Odisha government in conspiring not to hold Rath Yatra, through fixing by a specific NGO. He said that State government did not disclose the contentions of Temple Committee and Chhatisha Nijog to Hon'ble Supreme Court when the first order was delivered on 18 June 2020. As per the Shri Jaganath Temple Act, 1955, the decision of Puri Maharaj is final, but the State government did not reply to any of the three letters. In another interview to Doordarshan on 28 June 2020, the Maharaj said that he wrote letters on 6 April 2020 to Administrator of Sjri Jaganath Temple with a copy to the Puri Collector, 26 April 2020 to the Law Minister with copy to Chief Secretary to Odisha Government and on 30 May 2020 regarding conduct of Rath Yatra following Covid19 guidelines. The Maharaj thanked Hon'ble Supreme Court and both State and Union governments for granting permission and holding Rath Yatra smoothly in the pandemic.

Dharmendra Pradhan, Union Minister, tweeted on 23 June, “The essence of Jaganath culture stands for universalism and not sectarianism. Lord Jaganath is about integration of faith and learning, integration of beliefs and boundaries. Posted a photo of the wonderful scenes from New Zealand. In response to Iskcon Rath Yatra in New Zealand”. Rath Yatra is the most democratic and secular divine phenomenon cutting across the socio-cultural and religious distinctions. This is the only Hindu festival that debunk the caste & class theory, and believes in assimilation and universalisation.

This is the essence and faith of Lord Jaganath who is regarded as the Lord of the Universe. “Jagannath’s open public procession strengthens mass participation, irrespective of caste and class, and this is right from the medieval period – marking it rather unusual in a hierarchical religion like Hinduism..... Puri’s Jagannath proves, for instance, that Hinduism excels in the wondrous management of contradictions and is a vibrant example of how the religion reaffirms through ritual the essential plurality and accommodative character of Hinduism” (Sircar, 2018). Lord Jaganath is the presiding deity of Odisha, and people of Odisha are thoroughly immersed in the Lord’s devotion and consider Him as a family-member. In every Odia family, Lord Jaganath is given the first invitation to attend marriage ceremony/thread ceremony, and then others are invited. The successful holding of the Rath Yatra 2020 sans devotees has certainly satisfied the emotions of the Odia people, even though they saw the virtual live image in television.

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