

## **Critical Appraisal of Panchasakha Age in Odia Literature**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

In the holy land of Kalinga (Orissa) many saints, mystics, and devotional souls have taken birth, from time to time, and have fortified the culture and the spiritualism. The land is witness to most of the important Hindu traditions and spiritual movements. Jewelled by sacred Buddhist monuments to temples of Shakti (the supreme female power), Shiva (the supreme male power), and Jagannāth Vishnu (Lord of the Universe), the state is unique in itself.

Most important spiritual rituals have been extensively practised here by several seers - including Buddhist ceremonies, Devi Tantra (tantric rituals involving worship of Shakti), Shaiva Mārg (the path followed by devotees of Lord Shiva), and Vaishnava Mārg (the path followed by devotees of Lord Vishnu). Hardly there is any Sādhak who would not pay a visit to the Shri Jagannāth temple, at least once in her or his lifetime. Among the various great souls, the most prominent (in the domain of the known History) are the Panchasakha (=Five friends) who have deeply influenced both the Oriya Spiritualism and the Literature. These five friends lived between 1450 to 1570 AD and enriched the spiritualism in a way that normal man can also understand and benefit out of that. These great souls are: Achyutānanda Das, Ananta Das, Jasovanta Das, Jagannātha Das, and Balarāma Das. They popularly were called as Panchasakhā (Fivefriends). Pancha means five and Sakhā means friends -The great spiritual leader and Nāmayogi Avatār Chaitanya Mahāprabhu has referred to these five of his disciples as Panchasakhā and stated that the Panchasakhā are like his Pancha Ātma, *i.e.*, five souls (Atma-Tattva) and are in no way lesser than some of the Avatārs of Shri Vishnu. Shri Chaitanya was the first to establish the Bhāba-Mishrita Nāma Mārga (the path of chanting the holy name with proper feelings and faith); before him this method was not so popular or well-known even if the path is partly described in the ancient Vedas. He first introduced this method for all the simple-minded people and made many realize that God-realization can also be achieved by simpler method of pure devotion without undergoing difficult method of austerities. It is he who first disclosed the importance of the HareKrusna MahāMantra.

The Panchasakha converted ancient Hindu texts into prose (of simple language) easily understood by the people of Udra Desha (Orissa or Odisha). Shri Achyutānanda Das was the most prolific writer of the Panchasakhās and has written numerous books classified under categories such as Pothi, Mālīka, Tikā, Gitā etc., believed not in one life but in many successive lives. He is known as the Mahapurusha, which means - a great man. Mahapurusha Achyutānanda was a Shunya Sādhak and had acquired immense knowledge about almost every aspect, *i.e.* Spiritualism, Ayurveda (Indian healing medical science that uses only natural resources and herbs), various other sciences, and social regulations.

The Bhakti literature in Oriya flourished during 16th Century. Oriya literature was largely enriched by the contributions of the five saint-poets (Panchasakha) who however did not emerge at a time. They were Jagannath Das, Balaram Das, Achyutanda Das, Yasovanta Das and Ananta Das. Jagannath Das and Shri Chaitanya were contemporaries. Shri Chaitanya propagated Goudiya Baishnav religion (Raganuga Prema Bhakti) whereas others were exponents of Utkaliya Baisanav Tatwa (Gyana Bhakti). The Panchasakhas were held in high esteem and formed a unique group holding forth Bhakti as the best path to realize God. They popularized religious and spiritual literature in Oriya which were formerly in Sanskrit language and had a close preserve of ballads, prayers and stories in verse which have a moral, cultural and religious bearing and were intelligible to Oriya laymen.

Jagannath Das (1492-1552) was the most famous of the Panchasakhas and famous for his immensely popular Oriya Bhagabat. It is not a mere translation of the Sanskrit Bhagabat. Oriya Bhagabat was easily intelligible and could be memorized by the devotees, mainly rural masses. Almost every village had a place

called Bhagabat Tungi where religious discourses based on Bhagabat were held. Jagannath Das had adopted a style in his Oriya Bhagbat which was at once chaste, elegant, dignified, beautiful, simple and intelligible to all classes of people and hence it's abiding popularity down the ages to the present day.

The Pancha Sakhaa are the direct disciples of Shri Chaitanya. Along with another great seer Shri Arakhsita Das, they are called also as sada-goswami (six Lords). These five saints believed in Vaishnavism and also cultured and developed other beliefs about the body, the mind, the soul, and the "Parambrahman" (the supreme Soul). They have composed numerous manuscripts, maalikas, devotional poems, sadhana descriptions, and other religious scriptures for the welfare of the mankind. Additionally, many prophecies about the yuga karma, the devotees, and the disciples are described by these seers in their numerous literature. Most of the literature were written in hand on palm-leaves using the Devanagari or the Oriya script.

The Panchasakhas were significant not only because of their poetry but also for their spiritual legacy. In the holy land of Kalinga (Odisha) several saints, mystics, and devotional souls have been born throughout history, fortifying its culture and spiritualism. The area uniquely includes temples of Shakti, Shiva and Jagannātha Vishnu. Several rituals and traditions have been extensively practised here by various seers - including Buddhist ceremonies, Devi "Tantra" (tantric rituals for Shakti), Shaiva Marg and Vaishnava Marg. There is hardly any "Sadhak" who did not pay a visit to the Shri Jagannāth temple.

As per his narration, towards the end of Mahabharat when Lord Krishna was leaving his mortal body, Nilakantheswara Mahadeva appeared & revealed to him that the Lord's companions Dama, Sudama, Srivatsa, Subala, and Subahu would reincarnate in the Kali-yuga & be known as Ananta, Acyutananda, Jagannatha, Balarama and Yasovanta, respectively. Thus, believers in the Panchasakha consider them the most intimate friends of Lord Krishna in Dwapara-yuga, who came again in Kali-yuga to serve him. They are also instrumental in performing the crucial & much-awaited Yuga-Karma where they destroy the sinners and save the saints, according to Sanatana-Hindu beliefs.

Mahapurusha Achyutānanda is believed to have been born with special mercy or divine intervention from , which is symbolic for Lord Jagannāth himself (chapter on Vibhuti Yoga, Shrimad Bhagavat Geetā). Hence the name of Mahapurusha is Achyuta ("A + chyuta": A= Shri Visnu; Chyuta = created from). Occasionally, Mahapurusha Achyutānanda is also referred to as Achyuti, which literally means "who has no fall" ("chyuti nahin jāhāra" in Oriya language)". Sri Achyuta Das was born to Dinabandhu Khuntia and Padma devi in a village called Tilakona in Orissa in about 1510 AD on a "Māgha Sukla Ekādashi" (a specific time described in Oriya calendar). His parents were childless for a long time and were praying to Lord Jagannāth for a child. One night his father had a vision that Garuda (the bird of Vishnu, an Eagle) gave him a child. Next morning he rushed to the temple and prayed at the Garuda Khamba (a pillar in front of the Jagannāth temple) thanking the Lord for his mercy. At this point there are two different beliefs: some are of the opinion that he (Dinabandhu Khuntia) found a newborn divine child there and he is Achyuta ("A + Chyuta").

Mahapurusha Achyutānanda had established various spiritual energetic centers called Gādi distributed throughout east India (former states known as Anga, Banga, Kalinga, Magadha) and some in Nepal. These Gādis were host to most of the spiritual actions, discourses, penance, and provided various services to the seekers. Examples are, Nemāl, Kākatpur, Gāroi, Jobra Ghāt (a river bank in Cuttack) etc. For Sri Achyuta's literary work, while we refer our readers to the Literature Pancha-Sakha, below is a sample extract from

one of his Mālīka works:

During this brilliant era of Panchasakhā, another seer His holiness Arakhsita Das (the presiding seer of Olasuni near Paradweep) who was not among the Panchasakhā but was a revered saint, once found a divine child and handed over the newborn child to Mahapurusha Achyutānanda. This child was known as Ram Das who is the disciple of Mahapurusha Achyutananda, Panchasakhā, and Arakhsita Das together. The PanchaSakhā were called as Pancha Guru (five Gurus) and together with Shri Arakhsita Das they were known as Sada-Goswāmi (six Lords). Shriguru Arakhsita Das, a great Shunya Sādhak, is the patron saint and seer in the Olāsuni hills. Olāsuni hill is located near the border of Cuttack and Jajpur district, adjacent to the Daitari- Paradip Express Highway near the Ratnagiri and Laitgiri hills. The Gobari river also flows nearby. Olāsuni hill was the place of Sadhana where Shri Arakhsita Das performed austerities in a cave (Olasuni gumphaa) before attaining salvation. The annual nine day Gumphaa festival of Olāsuni is very famous. There is also the temple of Goddess Olāsuni, near the tomb of Saint Arakhit Das. Baba Buddhanath Das sings in a song that Goddess Olasuni is the mother of Shri Arakhsita Das, one of the greatest ShunyaVādi Sādhakas. He is extremely merciful and accepts every offer, irrespective of any other factor, when they are offered with feelings.

Subsequently the Pancha Sakhaa and Arakhsita Das, in Samādhi, could know that in the 13th birth (also the last birth) of this child (Ram Das), all their souls (Atma-Tattva) will remain in Ram Das and he will perform Yuga Karma on behalf of his Gurus during the transition from Kaliyuga to Satyayuga. The devotees and followers believe that His holiness Baba Shri Buddhanāth Das is the last incarnation of Yogi Ram Das and is enlightened by the conscious of his six Gurus.

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