

Research Paper

Lakshmi Purana: A voice of feminism, devotion and sociocultural norms of Odisha with a vision of Sociology

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Abstract: Focusing on the 15th century Odia Lakshmi purana by Balaram Das, this article shows how some societal norms and traditions are being explored and elaborated in this sacred text. This paper aims to show how a rice ritual was recounted and intertwined with Jagannath sankruti (tradition) and reinterpreted the position of caste. It's a claim that because of Lakshmi purana, all people regardless of caste were allowed to enter Jagannath temple. Thus it played a significant role in Odisha's socio-cultural change. So here we can say that there is a glimpse of M.N.Srinivas's concept of sanskritization in Lakshmi purana.

Key Words: Goddess Lakshmi, Feminism, Religious text, Balaram Das, Patriarchy, Shriya chandaluni

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I. Introduction:

Lakshmi purana is a traditional Odia religious text composed in 15th century by Balaram Das, one of the pancha sakhas of Odisha. The role of panchasakhas in Odisha (between 15th - 16th century) was to propagate Utkaliya Vaishnavism and spiritual revolution by simplifying scriptures and promoting a blend of devotion (Bhakti) and knowledge (Jnana). They wanted to place religion on an equal footing where everyone could access it. That's why they translated the sacred scriptures in Odia, the people's language so that all could understand spiritual teachings. On the one hand they promoted devotion to God (especially Lord Jagannath) as the path to salvation, on the other hand the promotion was about equality and moral values through the Odia language and literature in the time of Sanskrit domination.

Who are the panchasakhas:

The panchasakhas were five friends: Jagannath Das, Balaram Das, Achyutananda Das, Jasobanta Das, Sisu Ananta Das.

1. Balaram Das, A renowned poet best known for his Odia translation of the Ramayana known as Dandi Ramayana. He is considered the eldest of the group.

Krupasiddha Balaram Das was born in 1472 to a minister named Somanatha Mahapatra in Puri district, growing up in a deeply religious environment. His works made philosophical and theological texts understandable in the common Odia language. He translated the Bhagvad Gita and wrote other works like The Baramasa Koili, Hanuman Chautisa and Bhaba Samudra. He wrote the Lakshmi Purana which is an important text for the ritual of manabasa gurubara, which is observed by Odia women on Thursdays in the month of margashira.

Balaram Das wrote the sacred text at a time when several radical Bhakti saint poets of Odisha challenged the varna system and the stratification of human society on the basis of caste.

2. Jagannath Das is most famous for his Odia translation of the Bhagavata Purana. For this he was given the title of Atibadi by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.
3. Achyutananda Das, A prolific writer and mystic, he is celebrated for his prophetic works, known as Malikas, which foretell the future.
4. Yasobanta Das, A poet and litterateur who authored the treatise Premabhakti Brahmagita. He was also known for his humility and deep devotional compositions.
5. Sisu Ananta Das, is renowned for his philosophical works, including his magnum opus, the hetu Udaya Bhagabata and Bhakti Mukti daya gita.

The conversation between Narada and Parashara Muni:

- The conversation serves as the framing device of entire Lakshmi Purana. Narada in his travels come across the festival of Manabasa Gurubara, an auspicious Lakshmi Puja performed by all caste women with same devotion by cutting the caste hierarchy. Mystified by this sight, he asked Parasara Muni to explain it's origin. In response, Parasara Muni tried to satisfy the quest of Narada and began to narrate the legendary tale of Lakshmi Puja celebrated during the month of margasira that how the Goddess Lakshmi transformed society.
- Narada Muni (immortal, one of the twelve Chiranjivi's) is a celestial sage, a divine messenger in hindu traditions, known for travelling across worlds to spread wisdom and devotion, particularly to Lord vishnu. He (mind son of Brahma) carries news, wisdom and messages between Gods, demons and humans.
- Parashara was a maharishi and the author of many ancient hindu texts. He is accredited as the author of the first Purina, the Vishnu purina, before his son Vyasa wrote it in it's present form. He is the grandson of the sage Vasishta and the son of the sage Shakti.

Sociocultural aspects of Lakshmi Purana:

Lakshmi Purana is an important Odia religious text that narrates the story of Goddess Lakshmi's protest against caste discrimination, gender inequality and patriarchy. Beyond it's religious value, it holds immense sociological and cultural significance, reflecting Odia society's moral values and norms, social relationship and reformist ideals.

Caste restrictions:

The Lakshmi Purana mirrors the caste based hierarchy prevalent in medieval Odisha. The central conflict- Goddess Lakshmi visiting a Low caste woman, Shriya Chandaluni highlights the deep rooted untouchability and exclusion practiced in society. In a revelation - Laden journey, Maa Lakshmi traverses through city disheartened by the lack of cleanliness and devotion in opulent households. However her path leads to a humble dwelling, belonging to Shriya, a woman from the Chandal caste. By witnessing Shriya's unwavering devotion, her humble puja preparations and the pristine cleanliness of her home Maa Lakshmi blesses her with boundless wealth and promises her a place in Vaikunthapuram, a divine realm beside Lakshmi and Vishnu after her mortal life. This act of Maa Lakshmi triggers an unforeseen chain of events within the divine realm. Upon learning of Maa Lakshmi's actions, Lord Balabhadra declares her defiled and refuses to let her re-enter the temple, believing her visit has compromised her purity. Then putting her words Maa Lakshmi reminds Mahaprabhu about eating Jaara Shabar's half-eaten berries. This shows that devotion to God is above the caste system.

Gender inequality and dominance of patriarchy:

The text portrays the women independence in society. Maa Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity is represented as an independent woman who challenges male authority (Lord Jagannath and Balabhadra). Where Maa Lakshmi leaves the temple she also leaves her jewellery as a sign of protest after being insulted by two Lords. This action is a powerful message that wealth and material things are no value without the presence of the Goddess herself.

Symbol of social justice:

The episode where Maa Lakshmi leaves the temple Lord Jagannath and Balabhadra face hunger and poverty forcing them to wander as beggars for years. The Gods only regain their prosperity after they repent and accept that devotion is not defined by caste/social standing.

Discipline Life (Restrictions in lifestyle):

The Manabasa Gurubara festival, primarily followed in Odisha outlines some restrictions and practices, which are observed in daily life, especially during the month of Margasira on Thursdays. There are some rules and regulations to avoid poverty.

Do's

- Wake up early (before sunrise) and make your bed straight and clean.
- Wash your face after waking up.
- Bath before sunrise.
- Sprinkle a solution of cow dung, turmeric water (Gandha haldi) in and around the home.
- Decorate the home for Goddess's arrival (decorate the floors with white rice paste designs called Jhoti chita with lotus flower and Maa Lakshmi's foot prints).
- Decorate home with gendu fula (Marigold / Keli Kusuma), duba ghasa, barakoli patra, poka sungha patra)
- Perform a dedicated puja (worship ceremony) involving a pot (mana) filled with newly harvested grain as a symbol of Lakshmi.
- Wear shukla luga.
- Offer various traditional Odia home made cakes, sweets and dishes like Manda pitha, kakara, khiri (sweet pudding) and seasonal fruits to Maa.
- Be obedient to husband and place high importance on his happiness. In this sacred text it is written that a woman gain no religious merit if her husband is displeased with her.

Don'ts

- It is forbidden to wash hair and clean the house on Thursdays as it is believed to sweep away the incoming prosperity. All intense cleaning must be done the day before.
- No hair cutting, shaving, nail trimming because it invites bad luck.
- Avoid fight within the home, as Maa Lakshmi doesn't reside in a chaotic environment.
- Don't disrespect women and elderly.
- Don't beat children on Thursday.
- Intimate relationship is restricted on Thursdays, during women's menstrual cycle and on other inauspicious days.
- Showing disrespect towards guest is not tolerated.
- Allowing dirty vessels to stay unwashed overnight is considered inauspicious.
- Avoid some food items like non-veg, onion, garlic, lau (bottle gourd) on Thursdays. Also curd and rice during night time.

Marital life Maintenance:

Despite of conflict, the sacred text teaches the balance in marriage.

When Maa Lakshmi returned from a low caste (Chandala) devotee to Jagannath temple, Lord Balaram ordered her banishment, arguing that her contact with an untouchable has made her impure. At this Lord Jagannath was greatly flabbergasted. Feeling abandon he had to carry out the instructions of his elder brother and expelled Maa Lakshmi from the temple.

Insulted and infuriated Maa Lakshmi proposed divorce. By responding Maa Lakshmi, Prabhu Jagannath stated that "there is no system of divorce in our tradition". To keep the balance in marriage he had offered a daily allowance in marriage he had offered a daily allowance and suggested he might be able to bring her back after appeasing his elder brother.

And by leaving, Maa Lakshmi demonstrated that a devoted wife is not a servant, her identity and individuality must be recognised and respected. In the last episode of the Purana both brothers realised the absence and significance of Lakshmi. At last reunion of Jagannath and Lakshmi took place and a new era of spiritual egalitarianism was established in Puri, where everyone is treated equally in the eyes of the divine.

This shows that a balanced marriage requires mutual respect, equality and compassion.

Sibling bond and affection:

In the Lakshmi Purana, the sibling love between lord Jagannath and Balabhadra is profoundly shown through a cautionary tale.

Out of immense respect for his elder brother, Lord Jagannath followed Lord Balabhadra's command and barred Maa Lakshmi from reentering the temple. This action highlighted his powerful loyalty and obedience to his elder brother's wish even at the cost of offending his own wife. Even after defaming Maa Lakshmi, ensuring hardship they endured together reveals the true strength and depth of their fraternal bond.

Economic aspects of Lakshmi Purana:

There are some teaching from the Lakshmi purana regarding how to handle one's income.

- **Invest and save a portion:** A part of income should be invested wisely for future. Hoarding wealth is discouraged as it stagnates the flow of prosperity. Instead, put money into circulation through investments that can grow and support others.
- **Be a part of moral economy:** To get true prosperity, take a part in moral economy which focuses on community rights and social responsibilities in economic matters. Maa Lakshmi resides with those who are generous, compassionate and share their wealth.
- **Use money for righteous and constructive purpose:** The purana says the wealth is lost when it is misused / squandered on unrighteous (adharmic) activities. The use of wealth for ethical and constructive purposes is what sustains it.
- **Support your family and society:** As the consort of Lord Vishnu, Lakshmi's energy supports the pursuit of all four goals of human life (purusharthas), which includes Artha (wealth) for supporting one's family and the larger society.

Agricultural aspect of Lakshmi purana:

The Lakshmi purana of Odisha is not only a religious and moral text but also there is a glimpse of agriculture in it. The purana connects religion and agriculture by portraying the Goddess Lakshmi as the embodiment of rice grain and agricultural bounty, explaining rituals for her worship during the rice cultivation cycle. As we know Odisha is a major rice producing state, the purana is recited during agricultural festivals like Manabasa gurubar to ensure a good harvest by seeking her favour for a successful harvesting. Newly harvested paddy grains are placed in the bamboo (mana) pot. The mana is filled until the paddy overflows. In addition to the pot of grains, a fresh ripe bundle of paddy stock is often hung above the mana as a further symbol of agricultural abundance.

The Lakshmi purana Vrat usually occurs during / after the harvest period when granaries are full and people express gratitude for agricultural abundance. That's why we utter Maa Annapurna to Maa Lakshmi.

Health and sanitation aspects in Lakshmi purana:

Through the story and rituals associated with Goddess Lakshmi, the purana gives some hygienic messages like health, hygiene and cleanliness are sacred duties that lead to prosperity and happiness.

- **Cleanliness as a divine virtue:** Goddess Lakshmi, the symbol of purity and prosperity is believed to reside only in clean and well maintained homes. So it is compulsory to do regular cleaning, washing and keeping one's surrounding tidy.
- **Women's role in Domestic hygiene:** During vrata, Odia women clean their homes, courtyards, utensils and worship places early in the morning. This practices promote domestic sanitation, waste management, food hygiene and household health.
- **Food and health discipline:** The observance of fasting (grata) during Lakshmi purana teaches self control, dietary discipline and detoxification. The avoidance of Tamasik food and eating simple and Satwik food reflects a balanced lifestyle.

Sociological perspective of Lakshmi Purana:

Being a part of sociological family, we must understand the great sacred text through the lens of sociology by explaining it's various functions, goals and social dynamics. As a humble devotee at the feet of Maa Lakshmi we can do a little try to make understandable the purana in the perspectives of sociology.

Functional perspectives of Lakshmi purana: Here's a sociological explanation off the functional perspective of Lakshmi purana- connecting it with ideas from functionalist thinkers like Emile Durkheim, Talcott parsons.

- According to Durkheim social life is impossible without the shared values and moral beliefs which forms the collective conscience. In their absence, there would be no social order, social control and social solidarity. The shared values like purity, devotion and discipline strengthen collective conscience and bring families and communities together. During the ritual, individuals transcend their everyday selves and feel

part of something large. This collective effervescence (as coined by Emile Durkheim) strengthens social bonds and reaffirms the group's moral order. Women's collective fasting generates social cohesion among female groups.

This sacred text acts as a moral education tool, discouraging caste discrimination and promoting equality and respect for all.

- If we put Talcott Parson's concept of socialisation and internalisation of values here we can say that the sacred text (Lakshmi Purana) is a treasure of values that we socialise and internalise values like devotion, austerity and management pass down through generations. The story reverberates / demonstrates how performing rituals is presented as a desirable and important behaviour that contributes to the family's prosperity.

Again if we take Parson's (collectivity vs self-orientation) from the concept of pattern variables the Purana often emphasises the collectivity orientation. There is a prioritisation of the welfare of the family / community over immediate personal gain, which is framed as a pathway to achieve greater, long term blessings.

Interactionist and Feminist perspectives:

- Symbolic interactionism focuses on how individuals create and interpret the world through their daily interactions using shared language and symbols. Through the lens of symbolic interactionism we can see that how the Purana uses symbolic actions, divine characters and their interactions to challenge and ultimately reconstruct the prevailing social meaning of caste and gender, advocating for a more egalitarian society.
- Lakshmi Purana stands as a pioneering feminist scripture in Odia literature- a text where Maa Lakshmi asserts agency, questions discrimination, elevates marginalised women and reforms society through moral force. In celebrating Maa Lakshmi's courage and Shriya's dignity, we are reminded that true prosperity - material and moral - can only emerge in a society that respects its women.

II. Conclusion:

The legend of Lakshmi Purana beyond its mythical essence, encapsulates profound messages of equality, mutual respect and the eradication of social biases. It stands as a guiding beacon, resonating across Odisha's homes, imparting lessons of devotion, cleanliness and love, transcending generations.

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