

Jagannatha's British "Guardian"



Paradoxically, the formal policy of the Jagannath temple to not allow foreigners or outcaste people originated with a law enacted by British "foreigners". For ages prior to this, low caste people, Muslims, visitors from other countries, and non-Hindus were not allowed. However, the temple policy to ban certain people was unofficial social custom based on the caste system. The official regulation began in 1803 while Orissa was under Maratha rule. While preparing their campaign against the Marathas, the British were very conscious of the vital role of the temple of Jagannath in the affairs of Orissa.¹ On the day the British declared war on the Marathas, Lord Wellesley, the Governor General of the East India Company, sent a dispatch to Lieutenant Colonel Campbell, the commanding officer of the British forces in Orissa. The order was astonishing, considering that the author was a staunch Christian:

On your arrival at Juggernaut you will employ every possible precaution to preserve the respect due to the pagoda [temple], and to the religious prejudices of the brahmins and pilgrims. You will furnish the brahmins with such guards as shall afford perfect security to their persons, rites and ceremonies, and to the sanctity of the religious edifices, and you will strictly enjoin those under your command to observe your orders on this important subject with the utmost degree of accuracy and vigilance.

The British forces conquered Orissa in fourteen days. Afterwards, while they were camping by the village of Pipli, near Puri, a delegation of *paṇḍās* from the Jagannath temple in Puri came to see Campbell. They informed him:

"The brahmins at the holy temple had consulted and applied to Juggernaut to inform them what power was now to have his temple under its protection, and that he [Jagannath] had given a decided answer that the English Government was in future to be his guardian."²

When the British troops entered Puri on the 18th of September, they found no resistance. A day later, John Melville, the commissioner of Orissa, wrote to Wellesley that he had used "Jagannath's answer" as a device to win over the local kings. Realizing that possession of the Jagannath temple and the favor of the local people in Puri were



crucial for controlling Orissa, Wellesley further instructed Campbell not to disturb the priests in Puri in any way. He said that the property of Jagannath should be properly used with respect for the customs and prejudices of the Hindus. And, significantly, he told Campbell, "No person should enter into the pagoda without the desire of the brahmins."³

The British continued their policy of respect to Jagannath's temple and the priests there. In 1809 they enacted into law Section 7 of Regulation IV. This rule barred entry for sixteen different castes to the temple of Jagannath:

Kusbee (prostitutes), cullal (liquor sellers), machoowa (fishermen), numosooder (boatmen), ghoskee (private bad women), gazur (labourers who carry burdens on their heads), baugdee (fishers, laborers), joogee (weavers), kahar bawry (bearers), raujbunsee (different cast of boatmen), chamar (shoe-makers), dhomee (washermen), paun (basket-makers), teor (another cast of boatmen), bhoinmalee (makers of garlands, &c., for marriages), haddec (maters). These sixteen casts are not suffered to enter the temple to worship Juggernaut.

This policy of temple admittance established by the British continued until Indian independence in 1947. Just prior to Indian independence, Mahatma Gandhi and others began pushing for the lower castes of India to be allowed inside the Jagannath Mandir and other temples of India. In 1948, lower castes were first admitted to the Jagannath temple.⁵ However, the practice of barring various other people continued. ☯

Notes

1 As W. W. Hunter said nearly seventy years later, "The possession of the god [Jagannath] had always given the dominion of Orissa."

2 Melville to Gov. Gen., 11 September 1803 (Parliamentary Papers, 1845/664, p. 77. The revelation from Jagannath may have been influenced by a letter sent just after the British army crossed the border of Orissa, from the Secretary of the Governor General to the Puri *paṇḍās*. Written by a prominent Bengali Pandit, the letter assured the *paṇḍās* that in religious matters the British were very tolerant and kind to their subjects.

3 M. Martins (Edited) *Despatches etc. of Marquis Wellesley*, Vol. III, p. 270.

4 Cited by Peggs p. 217.

5 See the box on the next page, "The Rule Today".

Famously Refused



If one examines the history of the temple of Jagannath over the last few hundred years, they may be surprised to see who has been denied entrance, who has refused to go in, and who has been allowed: — Kabir, the mystic poet and saint of India was born in 1389. When he came to Puri he was wearing a *tagiyah*, a Muslim cap. Seeing this, the *paṇḍās* would not allow him entry in the temple. That night Jagannath came to them in a dream and told them that they should allow him inside of the temple, and furthermore they should help him and respect him. The priests then went to find Kabir and personally brought him into the temple for *darśana* of Jagannath.



THE RULE TODAY



The Puri temple still strictly prohibits entry for “non-Hindus”, meaning persons of other faiths, foreigners, atheists, or those who want to visit out of curiosity. This is practically enforced based on one’s appearance, such as the color of one’s skin or if one is wearing clothing typically used by non-Hindus, or if somehow the *paṇḍās* know that a person belongs to another religion. If it so happens that any such person enters the temple unseen by those who guard the entrances then there is a massive ceremonial cleansing. Whatever foodstuffs had been prepared for the deity and not yet offered are discarded, and Lord Jagannath is given a *mahā-snāna*, elaborate bathing.

Today, the only official temple rule on denying entrance to non-Hindus is found in a brief statement in the Shri Jagannath Temple Act, 1955, (30-A.4.b and c):

Whoever forcibly enters into any place within the temple when such entrance is prohibited under any law or custom or under any lawful order issued by the committee or by the administration shall, on conviction, be punishable with imprisonment which may extend to two months, or with fine which may extend to fifty rupees, or with both.

YAVANA



Yavana was the name of the son of Maharaja Yayati who was given the part of the world known as Turkey to rule. Therefore the Turks are *yavanas* due to being descendants of Maharaja Yavana. The *yavanas* were therefore *kṣatriyas*, and later on, by giving up the brahminical culture, they became *mleccha-yavanas*. Descriptions of the *yavanas* are in the *Mahābhārata* (*ādi-parva* 85.34). (Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada’s commentary on *Bhāg* 2.4.18)

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tathāpi te taj-jātītvena yad ākhyāyante tad-vya-vahārata eva, na tu tat paramārthata iti jñeyam

[After having purified oneself by accepting a Vaishnava guru,] if those born in lower castes like *mleccha* and *yavana* are addressed and treated like *mlecchas* and *yavanas* it should only be for extrinsic behavioral purposes and never for intrinsic spiritual purposes. (Viswanath Chakravarti Thakur’s commentary on *Bhāg*. 2.4.18)

— Guru Nanak came to Puri in 1508 with his Muslim disciple Mardana. When they went to Jagannath’s temple, seeing Mardana the *paṇḍās* would not allow the disciple or the guru inside. The local tradition describes that Guru Nanak then went to the ocean at the place known as Swargadwar, where he sat down and prayed. Meanwhile, Mardana was hungry, and blamed Nanak for bringing him to a place where they were unable to enter the temple to get *prasādam*. In the evening, someone mysteriously appeared and offered them opulent food and drink in golden utensils. That same night the king of Puri had a dream that Jagannath had personally taken *prasādam* to a *sādhū* on the beach. The next morning when the priests went to wake Jagannath they found that his golden plate and cups were gone. This created an uproar, and the king of Puri was informed of the apparent theft. The *rāja* just smiled and set off in a procession to the beach. Arriving there, the king offered obeisances to Guru Nanak, who at that time is said to have told the *rāja*, “Jagannath is not only the Lord of the Hindus and Puri. He is the Lord of everyone.” The king then welcomed Guru Nanak and his followers to have *darśana* of Jagannath inside of the temple. From that day, on Guru Nanak’s followers, the Sikhs, have been allowed entry into the temple.

— Lord Curzon was the British Viceroy of India from 1889 to 1905. Although famous for being one of the first Britishers interested in Indian geography, history and archeology, ¹



Jagannath temple in Puri circa 1870

when he visited Puri in December 1900, he was denied entry into the temple of Jagannath.²

— When Mahatma Gandhi and his disciple Vinoba Bhave visited Puri in 1934 accompanied by an entourage of Muslims, Christians, and Dalits,³ the Puri temple authorities refused to allow them entry. Protesting this, Gandhi organized a march which he called the “*harijana-padayātrā*” from the temple’s Singhadwar gate. Gandhiji asked them, “Why should there be any difference between men in a temple of God?”⁴

— Biswanath Das (1889-1984) was one of the authors of the constitution of India, and he also served as Chief Minister of Orissa in 1971-72. He was a follower of Mahatma Gandhi as well as a great supporter of the poor and oppressed. It is said that Biswanath refused to visit the Puri temple of Jagannath, protesting against the denial of admission to non-Hindus.

— Due to his caste as a *pirali* brahmin, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the Bengali Nobel Prize-winning poet, novelist, musician, and playwright was barred entrance from the temple of Jagannath in Puri.⁵

— The famous scholar, champion of the lower castes, and chief architect of the Indian Constitution, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, was refused entry to the Jagannath temple in Puri when he visited there in July of 1945.

— Although she was the Prime Minister of India and born in a Hindu brahmin family as the daughter of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi was turned away from Puri’s Jagannath temple in 1984 because she had married a Parsi, Feroze Gandhi. She had to suffice with a view of the temple from the roof of the Raghunandan Library across the street.⁶

— When Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the Crown Princess of Thailand, came to Orissa in 2005 she was denied permission to enter the temple of Jagannath in Puri due to being born in a Buddhist family.

— In May of 2006, the Swiss citizen Elizabeth Ziggler donated Rs 1.78 crore (nearly US \$400,000.00 at the time) to the temple of Jagannath in Puri. Although this was the largest single donation ever given in the history of the



THE PATITA PAVANA FLAG

A famous poem in Oriya states:

*nilachakra ho! dekha udūchi bānā, patita-pāvana nāmaṭi yā'ra nān
āsa āsa bolī pātakī-mānaku ḍāku-achi parā saṅgāta anā*

O Nilachakra, Sudarshan! ¹ Just see the fluttering flag of Lord Jagannath next to you. Being non-different from Lord Jagannath, that flag is also known as *patita-pāvana*, since those who are not allowed inside the temple can get the benefit of seeing the Lord by its *darśana*. In fact, by its fluttering it seems to be calling all fallen people to come together and get the mercy of Lord Jagannath.

¹ The Sudarshan Chakra on the roof of the Puri temple is called Nilachakra.

temple, the priests denied her entrance into the *mandir* because Ms. Ziggler was born in a Christian family.

— On a brighter note, in 1958 American-born Faye Wright was allowed entry to the temple of Jagannath. Born in Salt Lake City in a Mormon family, she was later initiated by Paramahansa Yogananda and received the name Daya Mata.⁷ When she came to Puri in 1958, desirous of going inside

the temple, she met with the then Shankaracharya of Puri,⁸ Bharat Krishna Tirtha, who, impressed with her “Hindu qualities”, recommended to the members of the Mukti Mandap that she be allowed inside.⁹ Daya Mata is considered to be the first “non-Hindu” to have officially been allowed entrance to the temple. However, in 1964 the Mukti Mandap went back to their traditional position when they denied entrance to several American members of the Ramakrishna Society.

— His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada visited Puri in January of 1977. At that time he refused to enter the Jagannath temple unless his disciples were allowed entrance. He was invited to speak there before an assembly of *paṇḍās* and scholars. See the box titled “Remove this Restriction”, for his address.

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A number of modern leaders of Orissa have been supportive of foreign devotees being allowed entrance into the Jagannath temple. Harekrushna Mahatab (1899 - 1987) served twice as Chief Minister of Orissa.¹⁰ Popularly known as Utkal Keshari, “the lion of Orissa”, in 1948 Mahatab used police force to let Dalits enter the Jagannath temple premises. He was also favorable to ISKCON, and after the disappearance of Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, he tried for many years to help foreign devotees gain entrance into the Jagannath temple, but was unsuccessful.

The current king of Puri and chairman of the Puri Jagannath Temple Management Committee, Gajapati Dibyasingha commented in 2007, “The tradition will continue. But we are ready for a debate. Debates yield consensus and then only changes take place.” ¹¹

Another Chief Minister of Orissa,¹² Janaki Ballabh Patnaik,¹³ initiated a debate over the issue in 1996 that was also without success. Mr

Patnaik recently said,¹⁴ “It is unbearable that although we call the deity Jagannath, “Lord of the Universe”, we bar the majority of the people, even Hindus not of Indian origin, from entering his abode in Puri. I wait to see the day when people of all ethnicity enter Sri Jagannath temple hand in hand.” 🍌