

CULTURE OF ODISHA

Pancha Sakhas of Medieval Odisha

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • April 15, 2018 • 8 min read

Pancha Sakhas were the collective name for the famous five Saints or five Friends of mediaeval Odisha. Balarama Das, Jagannatha Das, Achyutananda Das, Yasobanta Das, and Sisu Ananta Das were among those present. They established their own Sampradaya by preaching Bhakti for Radha and Krishna in Odisha prior to Chaitanya's arrival, carrying on a tradition established by Jayadeva's Gita Govinda. Due to Gita Govinda's popularity, king Purushottama Deva wrote his own imitation, called Abhinava Gita Govinda, in the hope of establishing it as the new devotional success storey of his time. Numerous other Oriya poets, including Dinakrishna, Abhimanyu, Bhakta Charan, Baladeva, and Gopala Krishna, wrote poems about Krishna's romantic stories, which are referred to as Valis. The Pancha Sakha have had a significant impact on Odisha's religious and sociocultural history. Balaram Das, Jagannath Das, Achyutananda Das, Ananta Das, and Jasobanta Das were five poets who emerged in the sixteenth century. Although their activities spanned a century, they are collectively referred to as "Panchasakhas" because they all adhered to the same school of thought, namely Utkaliya Vaishnavism.

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Balarama Das

He was born in Erabanga village, Gop, between 1472 and 1482. (near Konarak). Somanatha Mahapatra was his father, and Mahamaya Devi was his mother. According to some, he was born in the village of Chandrapur, where he met Chaitanya as well. Balarama Das served as a minister to King Prataparudra Dev, but after meeting Chaitanya, he left the government service and used his prior knowledge of Kundalini yoga, vaidhi bhakti in the mood of Ramanuja Acharya, and jnana to spread the chanting of the Holy Name. He is occasionally referred to as Matta Balarama due to his disdain for social conventions in favour of ecstatic Bhakti. He used to participate in Vedanta discussions in the Mukti Mandapa of the Jagannatha temple (despite the Brahmins' resentment), and it is said that anyone who touched his head instantly became able to explain Vedanta philosophy. One day, a beggar (who was deaf and dumb) approached him and touched his head; he was not only cured and regained his ability to speak, but he also immediately began discussing philosophy. This beggar then became the foremost disciple of Balarama, taking the name Hari Das.

The mula mantra that Balarama Das chanted and taught was the Krishna mantra. Gandharva Matha is the name of his Puri residence. Balarama Das authored the well-known Jagamohana or Dandi Ramayana, as well as a number of other works, including Gita Abakasa, Bhava Samudra, Gupta Gita, Vedanta Sara, Mriguni Stuti, Saptanga yogasara tika, Vedanta sara or Brahma tika, Baula gai gita, Kamala locana chot (which is very popular in Odisha).

According to his Bata Abakasa, Lord Jagannatha is served by 64 yoginis. In his Virata Gita, he refers to Krishna's nirakara form as Sunya. However, his conception of Sunya is quite specific, as it encompasses both form and relationships. He was also a social worker and reformer, as well as an accomplished astrologer. He vanished in 1540.

Achyutananda Das

He was born in 1485 in Tilakana near Nemala, Cuttack, to Dinabandhu Khuntia and Padmavati. His grandfather, Gopinath Mohanty, served in the Gajapati King's army. Agani was his given name as a child. He had a mystic dream as a child in which the Lord taught him the Gita, the Upanishads, and the Tantra. He immediately went on pilgrimage and met Chaitanya, from whom he is said to have received Harinaminitiation. According to some, he went to meet Chaitanya with his father when he was 18 years old.

At the time of Achyutananda's initiation, Chaitanya entrusted Sanatana Gosvami with his care and spiritual education. Achyutananda married Raghurana Champati Rai's daughter and settled in Dhauligram. He had twelve primary disciples, the most prominent of whom was Ramachandra Das. He was given some land in Banki Mohana by the King. He chanted and taught the Radha mantra using the mula mantra. Achyutananda is best known for the 13-chapter prophecy book Achyutananda Malika, which describes the future destruction of Puri after Jagannatha leaves and the appearance of Kalki avatara, who will annihilate all evildoers beginning in Odisha. Several summaries of studies have been published in Oriya. Achyutananda also translated and commented on Harivamsa, Tattva bodhini, Sunya samhita, Jyoti samhita, Gopala Ujjvala, Baranasi Gita, Anakara Brahma Samhita, Abhayada Kavacha, Astagujari, Sarana panjara stotra, Vipra chalaka, and Mana mahima into Oriya.

He wrote a book about the Pancha sakhas' (five friends) preaching mission and organised a travelling Rahasankirtana party for which he also composed several bhajan songs. According to legend, he was once attacked by some envious Brahmins and manifested his laghima yoga siddhi by becoming extremely light and soaring through the air. Achyutananda's teachings combine Saguna and Nirguna worship, bringing together Dvaita and Advaita doctrines, as well as knowledge from the Upanishads and Kundalini yoga. He committed suicide on Jyestha sukla Ekadasi.

Atibadi Jagannatha Das

He was born on the day of Radhastami 1487 in Kapilesvarapur or Kapilesvar grama (one of the 16 traditional Sasana villages) 14 kilometres from Puri in the direction of Brahmagiri (some say in 1490). He is considered to have a close relationship with Srimati Radhika due to his birth on Radhastami. Padmavati Devi was his mother, and Bhagavan Das, of the Kaushiki Gotra, was his father. He used to recite the Bhagavata Purana at Lord Jagannatha's temple, and his explanations were so enticing that King Prataparudra bestowed upon him the title "Purana Panda." Jagannatha Das, the Purana Panda's son, used to sit beside his father and study the Bhagavata. Chaitanya noticed the 18-year-old boy sitting near the Bata Ganesha Deity in Sri Mandira, reciting the Brahma stuti from Gopa lila's tenth canto, and honoured him by offering him a cloth and the title of Atibadi ("very great"). Jagannatha Das also used to visit people's homes to recite the Bhagavatam and made no distinctions on the basis of bodily identification, befriending men and women equally. A well-known incident involved such private exchanges with Medha and Sumedha, two ladies endowed with great spiritual strength who were said to be using their mystic powers to visit Jagannatha in the temple after it was closed. Envious men complained to King Prataparudra, accusing Jagannatha Das of immoral behaviour (illicit relationships with women), and the King summoned him for interrogation. Jagannatha Das responded that he saw no distinction between men and women; in fact, he stated that when he associated with ladies, he considered himself to be a woman as well.

The King did not believe him, but when Jagannatha Das was imprisoned, he manifested himself as a woman, and the impressed guards summoned the King to witness this extraordinary feat. King Prataparudra recognised that he had wronged a great devotee and therefore not only released him/her from prison, but also requested that s/he initiate his chief Queen into Bhakti yoga. Jagannatha Das was invited to the royal palace, where he could open his own Matha, Bada Odiya Matha.

According to legend, Jagannatha Das translated Srimad Bhagavatam into Oriya on the order of Narada Muni. This work established him as the best spiritual teacher in Odisha during his lifetime and continues to be extremely popular today, being worshipped and recited in every

household. Indeed, in Odisha, this text is ranked alongside Tulasi Das Rama charita manasa.

Jagannatha Das also wrote the Gupta Bhagavat, Tula vina, Sola chapadi, Chari chapadi, Tola bena, Daru brahma gita, Diksa samyad, Artha koili, Muguni stuti, Annamaya kundali, Goloka sarodhara, Bhakti chandrika, Kali malika, Indra mal He chanted and taught the Rama mantra as a mula mantra. In Puri, he founded two Mathas: the Bada Odiya Matha and the Satalahari Matha. Baliga Das was his primary disciple. Jagannatha Das died in 1557 on Sukla Magha saptami (the day of Konarak's Chandrabhaga Mela), and his Samadhi Mandira is located on the beach.

Uddhava, Ramachandra, Gopinatha, Hari Das, Nandani Acharya, Vamani Mahapatra, Srimati Gaura, Gopala Das, Akhandala Mekapa, Janardana Pati, Krishna Das, Vanamali Das, Govardhana Das, Kanai Khuntia, Jagannatha Das, and Madhusudana Das were some of his most important disciples.

Yasobanta Das

He was born in 1482 in a kshatriya family near Aranga Nandi village in the Cuttack district. Balabhadra Mala was his father, and Rekha Devi was his mother. He wed Anjana Devi, the sister of Aranga's king Raghunath Champatti. He later took sannyasa and travelled to numerous holy places throughout India, where he attained mystic powers and gained the ability to change his form at will. He chanted and taught the Shyama mula mantra.

Govinda chandra, Shiva sarodaya, Sasti mala, Prema bhakti, Brahma gita, Atma pariche gita, a Malika, and several bhajans were among his works. Govinda chandra became extremely popular in Assam, Bengal, and northern India; it is primarily associated with traditional dance and dance instruction, both of which are associated with the Vaishnava tradition. Lohi Das was his most devoted disciple. It is also said that he was a disciple of the famous saint Salabega. He dismembered himself on Margasira sukla Sasti.

Sisu Ananta Das

He was born in 1488 in the village of Balipatna, near Bhubaneswara. Kapila was his father's name, and Gaura Devi was his mother. He received the order to go and meet Chaitanya in a dream from Surya Narayana in Konarak, and so he approached the party and received diksha initiation from Nityananda Prabhu. Sisu Ananta Das lived in Khandagiri, in what is now known as Gadi Tapovana Ashram; he attained mystic powers and was able to change his form at will through his Sadhana. Typically, he assumed the form of a small child, hence his name Sisu. He became the adopted son of king Prataparudra's wife, who nursed him in this form. He discovered a Patita pavana (Jagannatha) murti in the Balia patana Matha. Barang Das, Hamsa Das, and Sisu Das were his primary disciples. He authored the Bhakti mukti daya gita, one of Odisha's most ancient and influential popular scriptures, as well as other works such as the Sisu Deva gita, Artha tarani, Udebhakara, Tirabhakana, a Malika, and several bhajan songs. He refers to Lord Jagannatha as the combined form of Radha and Krishna in Udaya Bhagavata. However, these books are currently undervalued due to a general lack of interest.

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Tag: Achyutananda Das, Atibadi Jagannatha Das, Balarama Das, Pancha Sakhas, Sisu Ananta Das, Yasobanta Das

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