

**Aṣṭaprahari Tradition of Odisha****Dr. Manoranjan Senapaty**

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**Abstract:**

Indian traditional values and its cultural heritage is beyond imagination. In India, we used to celebrate some of the national festivals and accordingly we have also some regional celebrations. Among the regional celebrations, we have some festivities those might not have come to the intuitive knowledge of the public. Among the India's traditional and religious festivals, we have some devotional, cultural and harvest related celebrations. Each and every celebration in India has some traditional and cultural value. India in general and Odisha in particular have their identity across the world due to its richness in witnessing the cultural activities.

Odisha is a state, where most of the celebrations are traditional, devotional and cultural. Here all most all people believe in the path of action, knowledge and devotion and accordingly the festivals arise. The famous car festival of lord Jagannath in Puri is the concrete example for it. Among the devotional festivals in Odisha **Aṣṭaprahari** is one of them and it is considered as most ancient one. Even though we celebrate this devotional programme everywhere in Odisha, still the intension of this devotional programme has to be understood in a better manner otherwise the efforts will be meaningless. Hence an attempt is made here to bring out the hidden significance, meaning and glory of **aṣṭaprahari** to the public being the greatest devotional institution in the highest order.

**Key Words:** Puruṣottama Jagannātha, Sanātan dharma, aṣṭaprahari, kirtana, bhakti yoga, chaitanya mahaprabhu, nāma yajña, Prahara, nagar bhramaṇa, puruṣa and prakṛti, mandapa.

**Introduction:**

**O**disha has a rich cultural heritage, which is a harmonious blending of art, religion and philosophy interwoven around **Lord Puruṣottama Jagannātha**, the internationally famous vaṣṇavite God at Puri. The state has splendid historical monuments depicting glamorous heroic deeds and cultural upheavals, Puri, popularly known as **Jagannāth Dhām**, because of sacred shrine of Lord Jagannāth has a special place in the cultural history of the country. It is one of the four dhāmas of India i.e. place of principal preceptor of **Sanātan dharma** and a cultural nerve centre. Both Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism flourished in the state. The golden triangle of Bhubaneswar, Puri and Konark has many magnificent and massive temples as examples of superb artistic, sculptural, cultural, spiritual and architectural skill of the people of Odisha. Up to my knowledge the name of Odisha popularly known as Utkal is proud enough due to its glory and significance in art and cultural (**Kalāyāh Utkarṣatwāt Utkal iti Ucyate**).

There is a proverb in Odia **Bāramāsare Teraparva** means there are thirteen festivals in twelve months. Hence it implies the number of festivals in Odisha those are uncountable. Some of them are harvest related such as raja, makarasamkrānti, nuākḥāi, etc. some are traditional such as prathamāṣṭami, holi, deepavali, car festival, pālā, dāskāthiā, dolapurnimā, akṣyayatṛtiya, etc. some of them are spiritual like durgā puja, lakṣmi puja, gaṇeśa puja, saraswati puja, khudurukuṇi, etc. some of them are devotional like aṣṭaprahari. Concept of kirtana is the main aspect of aṣṭaprahari.

**Importance of Kirtana:**

**Kirtana** is the congregational chanting of God's holy names. Usually there is a leader who sings solo the name or phrase, then the participants repeat in unison. The most traditional form of kirtana is done with just the mṛdanga, clapping and the harmonium. A gift of the bhakti yoga and **Śri Chaitanya Mahāprabhu** in particular, kirtana is a daily affair in the life of most people in Odisha. It is done with the purpose of worshipping Lord Śiva or

Viṣṇu. The practice involves devotees congregating at the place of worship. The leader of the group or singer begins the song with a line of the song. The entire group follows next repeating the same with uninterrupted precision followed by the beats of mṛdāṅga and cymbals. The songs are repetitive and lyrical.

Practiced in most of the temples and villages along with the coastal Odisha, kirtanas are more of a spiritual practice that opens the devotees or the performers to the highest state of his being with singing as the medium. It is basically an ecstatic meditation in which the participants or singer celebrate the divine qualities of existence by chanting Lord's name. out of these traditional forms of spiritual and traditional celebration, **Aṣṭaprahari** is one of them, where we notice twenty four hours of celebration of God's name chanting in a continuous process without any break. Such institution has been prevalent in Odisha since time immemorial, still sometimes it notices a sense of identity with **Chaitanya Mahāprabhu's** sense of **Bhakti Yoga**. And this process of celebration is not only noticed in rural area but also in urban area.

#### **Back ground of Aṣṭaprahari:**

Everybody is conscious about ancient system of yajña where there will be a **yajña mandapa** and around it the four priests technically known as **Ṛtwik** will be seated bearing their own responsibility. Similarly in the system of Aṣṭaprahari also the **aṣṭaprahari mandapa** will be made in the central place where all the devotees will be either seated or stood or roamed all around the **aṣṭaprahari mandapa**. Hence this system of aṣṭaprahari also corresponds the vedic system of yajña. And the presiding Deity will be either Lord Viṣṇu or Śiva. In this way the system of aṣṭaprahari sometimes becomes identical with the process of ancient system of yajña. But the only difference is that in yajña the sacrificial objects become the sense of subject where as in aṣṭaprahari the devotional chanting of God becomes the subjects. As the **yajña** is a continuous process so also the **aṣṭaprahari** is a continuous process without any break. And such system is particularly developed by **Chaitanya Mahāprabhu** as symbol of devotional renaissance.

#### **Meaning of Aṣṭaprahari:**

The spiritual goals of the Bhakti movement are self-realization by complete devotion and love to the God. Bhakti movement teaches dwaita Brahman, God and the self present two different forms divinity. Hari nāma samkirtana is popularly known as **nāma yajña**, the ritual ideally takes place during the month between November to April every year. It is popular among the folks of rural India as aṣṭaprahari. It is named so because the ritual continues for eight prahara (**Aṣṭa Prahara**) without interruption. **Prahara** is a Sanskrit name for a unit of time, one prahara is about three hours duration, so eight prahara is twenty four hours time. The Hari nama samkirtana is performed continuously for twenty four hours followed by **nagar bhramaṇa** or **nagara kirtana**.

**Nagar bhramaṇa** is the end part of the ceremony, when the lord Kṛṣṇa, Chaitanya Mahāprabhu, Nitāi-Gourāṅga, Guru Rādhāramaṇa, and Panca Tattva take a procession, amid hari nāma chanting by devotees praising the lords presence amongst people, through the lanes of villages around and meeting members of each house hold.

In Kali Yuga, Hari Nāma is the greatest devotional chants (**Mahāmantra**), praising Hari, the most beautiful mode of spiriyual engagement in India. The ritual rapidly it's ethos and values in India, gaining popularly in rest of the world.

#### **Main theme of Aṣṭaprahari:**

"**Bhaja Nitāi Gour Rādhe Śyām-Japa Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Rām**" is the main aspect of aṣṭaprahari, where the devotees by sitting or standing around the aṣṭaprahari mandapa have to chant the only mantra from the starting of the programme up to the end of it for twenty four hours without any break. In other devotional programme we can sometimes notice a break for few minutes but in such spiritual and devotional institution not a single break is noticed which is the basic significance of **aṣṭaprahari**. Yes obviously a question can be raised in our mind that twenty four hours of chanting makes a person tired enough. That's why in such programme this is not the work of a particular group. Many groups are engaged in this work of chanting Hari nāma. Before the ending of one group, another group of chanting already might have entered into



the **aṣṭaprahari mandapa** and they will enter into the opposite direction of the entrance, where the previous group will have to exit through the other side of the entrance. In the chanting we can notice two lines where it is said in the first line **Bhaja Nitāi Goura Rādhe Śyām**, here **bhaja** means chanting, **nitāi**, the modified form of **nitya** in Sanskrit that is eternal, **gour**, the modified form of Sanskrit term **goura** means bright that represents the goodness or the quality **sattwa**, and **rādhe syam** represent the undividable symbol of **puruṣa** and **prakṛti**. The second line **Japa Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Rām**, here **japa** means also chanting, **hare** represents the destruction of all evils, **Kṛṣṇa** and **Rām** represent the ultimate one. So the entire meaning of the chanting, we can tell in this way that oh my dear sisters and brothers of the world please chant the name of lord **Kṛṣṇa** or **Rām** who is **eternal, pure, omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient**.

**Conclusion:**

A land of rich and diverse artistic achievements, Odisha's art and culture are the products of a long historical process in which the spiritual, philosophical, devotional, cultural and the humane dimensions have merged to yield the finest effects of cultured and civilized life. Odisha is known for its respect and mutual tolerance towards other religions. It is owing to this fact that, the culture of Odisha people reflects some aspects of all the major religion of India, like Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Śaivism. Such an example is the system of **aṣṭaprahari** which is developed later by **Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada** and it becomes a system of devotional chanting worldwide and which becomes the main theme of **ISKON** centres around the globe.

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