The Concept of Guruvāda in Indian Tradition: A Study on Medieval Odisha

Binodni Das

The present paper attempts to highlight the relevance and importance of guru tradition in India. Since the Vedic period, the cult of guru worship is continuing and is being practised by the people. The word guru is comprised of two syllables, i.e. gu (shadow, or darkness) and ru (he who disperses darkness). Due to the power to disperse darkness, the guru is thus named. In addition, other meanings of guru are also described; i.e. “imparter of knowledge”, “heavy with knowledge”, a spiritual master, one who is heavy with knowledge of Absolute and who removes nescience with the light of Divine”, “heavy with spiritual wisdom”, “heavy with the good qualities of scriptures and realization”, and “heavy with a wealth of knowledge”, etc. In Indian faith and belief, the guru is considered as a Supreme Divine Power who awakens mankind from the state of ignorance and darkness, by illuminating knowledge and wisdom to distinguish between right and wrong. Manusmriti describe a guru as a second parent who conceives the disciple in his wisdom like womb and impregnates him with profound knowledge and wisdom and then delivers him with illuminated vision and broadness of mind. So the initiated disciple is called as dvijān (twice born). It is explained in the form of dialogue between Lord Śiva and mother Pārvatī in Guru Gitā:

"Gurū Brihān guru r Vīṣṇu guruṇe devo Maheśvarah,

Guruḥ sākāt Paraḥ Vāna maṁ Śrī Guru’ve namah".

(Guru is Brahmā, Guru is Viṣṇu, and Guru is Mehaśvara. Guru alone is verily the Supreme Brahma. Therefore, sublime prostration to Him-the Guru.)

The guru is the embodiment of the Supreme Divine. In Indian tradition, the gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Mehaśvara symbolize creation, preservation, and destruction. Following the age-old tradition, even in present Odisha, a child’s learning commences on an auspicious day by drawing three circles either on the slate, or on the ground by a piece of chalk. It is initiated by one of the senior members of the family, or by a Brahmin priest and this occasion is called as Vidyāraṇābha. While drawing the first circle, the child is instructed to utter the name of Brahmā and then to bow down his head to touch the ground in honour of the respective god. This process is followed while drawing two other circles in honour of Viṣṇu and Mehaśvara. In analysing the concept behind the tradition, it may be interpreted that the child is expected to grow with blessings of the three Supreme Divine Powers inheriting all potential energies ingrained in them; i.e., the child must bear creative energy like Brahmā “to innovate new ideas” for the progress of the society; the blessings of Viṣṇu must energise him for protecting, preserving and administering the newly created innovative ideas, existing moral, ethical and social values, if that would not contradict the interest of mankind; he must possess the power of Mehaśvara to destroy all restraints and obstacles coming in the path of moral, material and spiritual progress of the society.

Guru is further described in the Guru Gitā:

1Reader and Head (Retired), Department of History, B.I.B.Jr. College, Odisha, India.