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Sri Jagannath Rath Yatra

This spectacular chariot festival celebrated for 8 days is held at the famous Jagannath Temple at Puri (Orissa). Thousands of devotees flock to Puri during the occasion, as they believe that a glimpse of Lord Jagannath in his chariot gives salvation. Images of Lord Jagannath - the Lord of the Universe, his sister Subhadra and brother Balabhadra are taken out in a procession in three immense chariots. The main chariot is 14 meters high and 10 meters square with 16 wheels.



Thousands of devotees pull these chariots to Gundicha Mandir, a temple 3 km away. After a week, on 'Ashadha Sukla Dasami', the 10th day of the bright fortnight of Ashadha (June-July), return journey or 'Bahuda Yatra' of the deities commences in the same manner from Gundicha temple to the main temple like Rath Yatra. When two months of Ashadha fall in one year, Rath Yatra is observed as the festival of 'Nabakalebar' the old deities are buried within the temple premises ('Koilibaikuntha') and are replaced by new deities, carved out of Margosa trees for which there are set procedures. Double Ashadha occurs at intervals of 8 to 19 years. Construction of the chariots begin as early as April.

Jagannath Rath Yatra or the 'chariot journey of Lord Jagannatha', observed in the month of Ashadha (June-July), is a festival that celebrates the annual visit of the God to his birthplace. Images of Jagannath, as Lord Krishna is known, his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra, are taken in giant chariots to Gundicha Ghar. They stay there for a week and then return to the temple. On their journeys they are accompanied by a huge procession of people, singing and celebrating. On their way to the Gundicha Temple, the three Lords are believed to stop for a while near the Mausima Temple (Aunt's Abode) and have an offering of the Poda Pitha, which is a special type of pancake supposed to be the Lord's favourite.

The Legends behind the Yatra:



Lord Jagannatha, Lord Balabhadra and Mother Subhadra

The festival has been celebrated since ancient times. According to a legend about its origin, Jagannatha is said to have expressed his desire to visit his birthplace every year for a week. Accordingly, the deities are taken to the Gundicha Mandir every year.

According to another legend, Subhadra wanted to visit Dwarka, her parent's home, and her brothers took her there on this day. The Yatra is a commemoration of that visit.

According to the Bhagavad Purana, it is believed that it was on this day that Krishna and Balarama went to Mathura to participate in a wrestling competition, at Kansa's invitation.

Some Hindus believe that Jagannatha is an incarnation of Vishnu. Since Vishnu has four arms, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshana represent Vishnu's four arms. Each deity has its own massive chariot, which are replicas of the temple. Jagannatha's chariot, Nandighosha, is yellow in color, 45 ft high and has 16 wheels, each one seven feet in diameter. About 4,200 devotees draw the chariot. Balabhadra's chariot is called Taladhvaja, is blue in color and has 14 wheels. Subhadra's chariot is the smallest, with 12 wheels and is called Deviratha.

Origin of the chariot ride:

According to a legend, when a poisonous arrow accidentally killed Krishna, his body was left under a tree. Later, someone cremated him and placed the ashes in a box. Directed by Vishnu, Indradyumna requested the divine artisan Vishvakarma to mould an image from the holy relics. Vishvakarma agreed to undertake the task, provided that he was left undisturbed till its completion. When several years passed, Indradyumna became impatient and went to see how work was progressing. Enraged, Vishvakarma left the image incomplete. Indradyumna had ordered the construction of a temple to house the statue. So he ordered his chariot to transport the statue, as it was, to the temple. There, Brahma breathed life into the image.

The Rituals:

On the day of the journey, people get up early and offer prayers to Jagannatha. The chariots are lined up in front of the Puri temple. The King of Puri with great pomp and ceremony then brings the deities to their respective chariots. Devotees offer prayers to the deities. Descendants of the King, heralded by gaily-caparisoned elephants sweep the chariot platforms with a gold-handled broom and sprinkle scented water to demonstrate that in the eyes of God, all men are equal. Only the King of Puri and the King of Nepal are

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allowed to touch the idols as they belong to the Chandravanshi dynasty, the same as Krishna. Then the teeming pilgrims line up and pull the chariot.

When the chariots reach the summerhouse, the idols are installed. The journey back, a week later, consists of another ritual, known as Phera Rath Yatra. Every year, the chariots are broken down, its wood sold as relics and a replica made. However the images of the deities are preserved. It is only when two Ashadha months occur one after the other that the images are changed. This happens once in 12 or 24 years. The ceremony, Naba Kalebar, consists of burying the old images inside the temple. Then new images are created. This practice stems from the belief that in such a year, everything in the universe changes form, and therefore Jagannatha receives the same treatment.

The Chariots:

The three chariots of Balarama, Subhadra and Jagannatha are newly constructed every year with wood of specified trees like phassi, dhausa, etc. customarily brought from the ex-princely state of Dasapalla, by a specialist team of carpenters who have hereditary rights and privilege for the same. The logs are traditionally set afloat as rafts in the river Mahanadi. These are collected near Puri and then transported by road.



Construction of the chariots in progress

The three chariots, newly constructed every year and decorated as per the unique scheme prescribed and followed for centuries stand on the Bada Danda, the Grand Avenue. Covered with a bright canopies made of stripes of red cloth combined with those of black, yellow and blue colours, the huge chariots are lined across the wide avenue right in front of the majestic temple close to its eastern entrance, also known as the Sinhadwara or the Lion's Gate.

Lord Jagannatha's Chariot is called Nandighosa. It is forty-five feet high and forty-five feet square at the wheel level. It has sixteen wheels, each of seven feet diameters, and is decked with a cover made of red and yellow cloth. Lord Jagannatha is identified with Krishna who is also known as Pitambara, the one attired in golden yellow robes and hence the distinguishing yellow stripes on the canopy of this chariot.

The Chariot of Lord Balarama, called the Taladhwaaja, the one with the Palm Tree on its flag, has fourteen wheels, each of seven feet diameters and is covered with red and blue cloth. Its height is forty-four feet. The Chariot of Subhadra, known as Dwarpadalana, literally trampler of pride, is forty-three feet high with twelve wheels, each of seven feet diameters. This Chariot is decked with a covering of red and black cloth, black being traditionally associated with Shakti and the Mother goddess.

Around each of the chariots are nine Parsva devatas, painted wooden images representing different deities on the chariots' sides. Each of the chariots is attached with four horses. These are of different colours - white ones for Balarama, dark ones for Jagannatha and red ones for Subhadra. Each chariot has a charioteer called Sarathi. The three charioteers attached to the chariots of Jagannatha, Balarama and Subhadra respectively are Matali, Daruka and Arjuna.

The construction of the chariots starts on Akshaya Tertiya, the third day of the bright fortnight of Vaisakha, with ritual fire worship. This takes place in front of the palace of the King of Puri and opposite the main office of the Puri temple. On this day, the new agricultural season starts and farmers start ploughing their fields. This day also marks the beginning of the summer festival of the deities, also known as the sandalwood festival or Chandan Yatra, which lasts for three weeks. In this festival, the representative images of the presiding deities are taken out in colourful processions and given a ceremonial boat ride in the Narendra tank everyday. In an interesting demonstration of the assimilative character of the Jagannatha cult, Madanmohana and Rama Krishna, representing Jagannatha & Balarama partake in the festival with the representatives' images of the presiding deities of five main Shiva temples of Puri. These are curiously known as Pancha Pandava, the five brothers of the Mahabharata story. Later the deities have a ritual bath in a small temple in the middle of the tank, in stone tubs filled with water, sandalwood paste, scents and flowers.

This sandalwood festival culminates in the Snana Yatra, the Bathing Festival on the full moon day of the month of Jestha. On this day, the presiding deities descend from their seats on an elevated platform in the sanctum sanctorum, the bejewelled throne. They are bathed in 108 pots of water brought from the suna kua, the golden well and assume the elephant form on the special bathing platform, close to the Eastern boundary wall of the temple. From that day the deities remain in symbolic and ritual convalescence for about two weeks. They are barred from view of the ordinary devotees. Only three special patta chitras, traditional Orissan paintings of natural colours on cloth stiffened with starch, known as Anasara Pattis, are strung on a bamboo screen hiding the deities from public view. During this period, the deities are given only roots, leaves, berries and fruits to cure them from their indisposition. This ritual is a reminder of the strong tribal elements in the genesis and evolution of the Jagannatha cult. The progeny of Lalita, daughter of the original tribal worshipper Biswabasu, chieftain of hunters, and the Brahmin priest Vidyapati, are known as daitapatis or daitas. They have almost exclusive privilege of serving the Lord during the convalescence and through the entire period of Ratha Yatra or the Festival of Chariots.

Importance:

Rath Yatra being unique among all Yatras is the grandest festival of the supreme divinity who has

manifested himself in the Kali Yuga to emancipate humanity and to relieve them from their sufferings. Lord Jagannatha is identified fully with Krishna. In his original manifestation as Nilamadhaba, he was worshipped in a sacred Nyagrodha Briksha or banyan tree. The branches of the tree had spread for several miles and any one entering this area was instantly emancipated and was relieved of the travails of the birth and re-birth. In fact, the influence of Yama, the God of Death, is supposed to have been curtailed in the sacred city of Puri - Srikshetra on account of the presence of Lord Jagannatha and therefore it is also called the Yamanika Tirtha.

A glimpse of Lord Jagannatha on the chariot is considered to be very auspicious and saints, poets and scriptures have repeatedly glorified the sanctity of this special festival. The sanctity of the festival is such that even a touch of the chariot or even the ropes with which these are pulled is considered enough to confer the results of several pious deeds or penance for ages.

The concept of the chariot has been explained in the **Kathopanishad** in the following words-

"Atmanam rathinam viddhi sareeram rathamevatu Buddhim tu saarathim viddhi marah pragrahameva cha." The body is the Chariot and the soul is the deity installed in the chariot. The wisdom acts as the charioteer to control the mind and thoughts.

The **Skanda Purana** glorifies the sanctity of the Rath Yatra in the following words-

"Gundicha mandapam namam jatrahamajanam pura Ashwamedha sahasrasya mahabedi tadadvabat."

Those who are fortunate to see the deities of the Srimandira in the Gundicha Temple, the final destination of the procession of the chariots, derive the benefits of a thousand horse sacrifices, an immensely pious deed. Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanja in his famous Vaidehisa Vilasa mentions that the Lord comes out from his sanctum for participating in the Gundicha Yatra, another name of the Festival of Chariots, only for redeeming the fallen, the patita jana who get the opportunity to behold their dearest god at close quarters on this occasion. Similarly, saint poet Salabega waxes eloquent in praise of the dark Lord Jagannath and says that the Lord swaying and moving like a wild elephant arrives at the Grand Avenue and rides his chariot and destroys in a flash all the sins of his devotees, even if these may be grave or unpardonable.



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