



The Famous Car Festival of Puri

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The historic Car Festival of Puri in Odisha is an important facet of Hindu civilisation in Indian Peninsula since ages. It is important because it annually registers global brotherhood and offers an unprecedented access to the humanity at large to come closer to the divinity. Man and God and God and Man become one in the Ratha Jatra. No distinction in whatever form exists.

The Car Festival of Lord Jagannath, Puri is a popular Festival celebrated all over the world. Even in Communist country like Russia, a city has been named as 'Purusottam Kshetra' and festival is observed with intense enthusiasm by the mass. The ISKCON devotees have spread the message of the Lord all over the world and by the year 1997, in 62 foreign countries this festival is observed.

S o m e historians ascribe the origin of the Car Festival to Buddhist Convention.

Fa-hien, the Chinese traveller in 4th century have described the Car Festival in Khotan, a city in West China, where the image of Buddha was installed in chariot, and the king of Khotan used to sprinkle water and sweep the chariot in broomstick. It was observed in the month of June, which synchronizes with the period of Car Festival at Puri. He has also seen the Car Festival at Pataliputra on the birth day of Buddha. From such historical evidences this scholar infer that Car Festival at Puri have its source from Buddhism.





The Rig Vedic sloka runs thus:

*'A Krushnena Rajasubartamano
Nibartayam mamrutam Martyam cha
Hiranmayena Sabita Rathena
Debo Jati Bhubanani Pashyan'*

In Ramayana and Mahabharat there is mention of Ratha in number of times. Ratha or Chariot was in an insignia of aristocracy used by royal order. Artha Sashtra of Kautilya (4th century B.C.) mentions about the cars used by Gods. In Odisha Car Festival of Lord Lingaraj is observed in Bhubaneswar, in the month the Chaitra (April-May) on Ashokastami day. During the said month the Car Festival of goddess Minakshi is also observed in Madurai (Tamilnadu). In case of Goddess Biraja in Jajpur, the Car Festival is also celebrated in the month of Ashwin (September – October).

The Puranic and Scriptural references on Ratha or Chariot lead to inescapable conclusion that 'Ratha' is basically Hindu concept, which has been adopted by different religious communities with regional variations in different parts of India, traceable from a remote antiquity. In the early Christian era of 2nd Century, the chariots are depicted in sculptural art at Amaravati, Buddha Gaya and Kerala, as the seated Sun God is drawn in Chariot.

During the period of Eastern Ganga king Chodaganga Deva, the builder of Jagannath Temple and his illustrious successor Anangabhimu III(1211-1238 A.D). Lord Jagannath was given the status of State Deity and entire temple was dedicated as Purosottam Samrajya. The sculptural description of Ratha or Chariot, with twenty four-wheels at Konark, as has been said earlier, suggests the popular and religious acceptance of Ratha or movement of deities on Ratha ceremonially. Many foreign and non-Hindu

scholars have described the Car Festival in their own way as far as back 1321 A.D.

The Muslim historian Abul Fazl describes about Jagannath Temple in the following manner:

“In the town of Purusottam on the bank of the Sea, stands the temple of Jagannath, where the three images of Lord Krishna. His brother and sister are installed. They are washed six times every day and freshly clothed; fifty or sixty Brahmin Priests are used to be on their feet in their service and each time they are washed and made to new garments. They are made an offering of large dishes of food, the leavings of which are taken by twenty thousand people. The Brahmins at certain times carry the image in procession upon a carriage of sixteen wheels, which in the Hindu Language is called Ratha, and they believe that whoever assists in drawing it along obtains remission of all his sins.”

Alexander Hamilton who visited Puri in 1708 A.D. has furnished a second-hand report on the Car Festival and has mentioned: Jagarynat's effigy is carried abroad in procession, mounted on a coach four storeyed high and people fell flat on the ground to have the honour to be crushed to pieces by each wheel.'

After the British occupation of Orissa, Harcourt visited Puri and witnessed the car festival in 1805. According to him the Festival was witnessed by at least five lakhs of people. He says: “I was astonished at the order and regularity preserved. There was not the least tumult or disposition to violence.”

James Fergusson witnessed the Car Festival in 1837 A.D. He published his impressions in his book 'picturesque illustrations of Ancient Architecture in Hindustan' in 1847 A.D. as follows: I was most agreeably disappointed to find



the pilgrims hurrying to the spot talking and laughing, like people going to a fair in England, which in fact, it is."He saw no victims crushed under the wheels of the Chariot.

Charles Grome, the collector of Jagannath (Puri) in 1805 and George Webb, the collector of Cuttack in 1807 at the behest of Governor General in council made exhaustive probe in respect of the management of the temple of Lord Jagannath which included various modes of ritual worship, temple revenues, the role of Mathas, the inflow of pilgrims to Puri, the structure of the prevailing pilgrim tax etc in a rational manner. No disrespect was shown by them. The British even honoured the Raja of Puri as the Superintendent of the Temple and as the first servitor of Lord Jagannath by 1809, the practice which was said to have been discontinued since 1760 A.D. during the Marahatta rule.

The Ratha Yatra of Puri is to be historically analysed to trace its origin. Eminent historians like Dr. S.N. Rajguru, Prof. K.S. Behera, Dr. Herman Kulke and many others tender divergent views. Many other Odia, Sanskrit and Hindi literary works contain descriptions of Car Festivals. Out of such huge number of Literary works, a few can be cited as very popular work, 'Basantotsava Kavyam' of Haladhar Mishra (17th Century), 'Gundicha Champu' of Bakravak Chakrapani Pattanaik, 'Gundichautsava Vernanam' of Bhaguveta Brahma and Gundicha Vije, of the 18th century by poet Brajanath Bada Jena, Pandit Narahari composed a commentary on the Meghadutam of Kalidas, entitled Brahma Prakasika Tika, in which he interpreted the text in the light of the Car-Festival of Lord Jagannath. In the Ganga-Vamsanucharitam by Vasudev Rath (18th Century) an interesting description of the festival is given. The Odia poet-philosophers of Mediaeval Orissa, including Salabega, a Muslim

devotee, have expressed through poetry, their poignant visions of Lord Jagannath and the glory of the Car-Festival.

Many other foreign travellers like Mohammad-Bin-Amirwala (1626), W. Brutton (1633), Sebastian Menrique (1636), Bernier (1667), and Thomas Bowery (1669-79) have written about Lord Jagannath.

Ratha Yatra

The world famous Car-Festival of Lord Jagannath held on 'Ashadha Sukla Dwitiya' i.e the 2nd day of the bright fortnight of Ashadha (June-July) every year. This festival is popularly known as Ratha Yatra, Gundicha Yatra and also Ghosha Yatra. On the Car Festival day, the deities are carried to the Chariots in a traditional ceremonial manner first Sudarshana, then followed by Balabhadra Subhadra and Jagannath are made to swing forward and backward in a manner called 'Pahandi'.

The Chariot of Lord Jagannath is known as Nandighosha. It has 16 (sixteen) wheels and the colour of the fabrics that cover the roof of the Chariot are red and yellow. The Chariot of Lord Balabhadra is known as Taladhawaja. It has 14 (fourteen) wheels and the colour of the fabrics are red and green. Subhadra's chariot 'Devadalan' has 12 (twelve) wheels and fabrics are red and black. Sudarshana is seated by the side of the Subhadra in her Chariot. Madanmohan, a representative deity of Jagannath sits in the chariot of Lord Jagannath. So also two other small idols-Rama and Krishna take their seats in the chariot of Balabhadra. These small idols are made of metal. Thus actually seven deities namely Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra, Sudarshana, Madanmohan, Rama and Krishna are seated on three chariots and moved to a temple known as 'Gundicha Ghar' which is



at a distance of about 3 kms away from Jagannath temple. The chariot of Balabhadra is dragged first, followed by those of Subhadra and Jagannath.

On the first day if any chariot cannot reach the Gundicha Ghar, it is dragged on the next day. On the Return Car Festival day, the deities are brought to the Simhadwar area of the Jagannath Temple. A ritual performed on the 5th day (starting from and including the day of Car Festival) is known as 'Hera Panchami' when Goddess Laxmi proceeds to Gundicha. In the evening of the 10th day (i.e. the 11th day of the bright fortnight of Asadha) the deities are adorned with gold ornaments and dressed gorgeously in their respective chariots parked in the Simhadwar area. On the same day another ritual called 'Hari Sayan Ekadasi' is performed. On the following day i.e. the 12th day of the bright fortnight, another important ceremony known as 'Adharapana Bhog' is performed. A sweet drink is offered to the deities. On the evening of the following day, the deities are taken to the temple in a traditional procession amidst gathering of thousands of devotees.

The most distinctive feature of Ratha Yatra of Puri is the close and peculiar religious linkage of the Gajapati king of Odisha with Lord Jagannath. Sweeping of the Cars by the king before the multitude of devotees standing below is the height of religious humility in comparable and unconceivable. Besides, such a grand function suggests equality of human beings before the God who carries the entire humanity with Him in a festival.

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