

# Greater Houston Ratha Yatra witnessed by Huge Crowd of Houstonians



**Report by Sujata Srikantheswaran, Houston:** Over 4000 Houstonians witnessed the grand Chariot Festival of the Lord of the Universe, "Jagannath Ratha Yatra", on Saturday, July 13, 2013 at the Discovery Green Park in Houston. The wide eyed and beautifully smiling siblings - Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra cast Their cooling and soothing Divine glances on the Houstonians, offering them respite from the hot summer weather.



The Chariot festival traces its roots back to a long standing tradition of 'Sri Kshetra' - Puri, in Eastern India, where the Annual Ratha Yatra Festival at Jagannath Puri commemorates the summer vacation of Lord Jagannath, with His elder brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra, from the main Sri Jagannath Temple in Puri, India to a neighboring temple, Gundicha Mandir.

To make the glories of Jagannath known to everybody on this planet Earth, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder Acarya of ISKCON, made Lord Jagannath's mercy accessible to people outside India by introducing the tradition of celebrating Lord Jagannath's Ratha Yatra outside India. Following the same spirit and tradition, ISKCON has been celebrating Ratha Yatra for more than 35 years, across India and in all major cities of the world to fulfill one of its core purposes to systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all people in the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imbalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world.



The International Society for Krishna Consciousness - ISKCON, Houston and Char Dham organized an unprecedented three Chariot parade through the streets of downtown

Houston, with hundreds of Houstonians chanting and dancing in devotional fervor for the pleasure of the Lorships . The Chariots, that are replicas of the Jagannath Puri Rathas, were designed in Puri and assembled locally. Special 2.5 feet tall deities, carved out of wood, replicas of the original Puri Deities were also brought from Puri. Similar to Jagannath Puri deities, these deity forms are also adorned with seven layers between wood and paint signifying the living form of the Deities.



A glimpse of Lord Jagannatha on the chariot is considered to be very auspicious and scriptures have repeatedly glorified the sanctity of this special festival. Devotees from Austin, San Antonio, Dallas and other places in the US came to participate in the festival. The chariots and ropes

used to pull the chariots were thronged by enthusiastic devotees, as even a touch of the Chariot or the ropes is considered enough to confer the results of pious deeds or penance for ages.



Several booths including Books/CDs, Henna, Food and Face painting were set up in the arena, to educate people about the rich Indian culture, food, Vedic philosophy and spirituality.



The cultural programs kicked off with a sweet Odiya Bhajan rendition by Mrs. Kabita Sahoo and Sonali Mohanty. This was followed by an impressive Dance Drama featuring Lord Krishna and Jagannath pastimes, organized by Natya Lila COPA Dance School with children from Hare Krishna Dham. The Mayapuris, renowned kirtan band from Florida took the event to yet another level with their energetic chanting of the Holy Names and Mrdanga (Indian drum) presentation. On a more meditative tone, was the Yoga Presentation by Yoga Master Robert Bousany. HG Varsana Devi Dasi regaled the audience with nectarean Vaishnava Bhajans. There were several dance performances from the Royal Scottish Country Dance Group, Nrtya school of Dance, Laksmi Dance Company, Polish Dance Group of Greater Houston, Bharathadarsana School of Dance, Masala Bhangra Works, making it a truly International cultural event in honor of the Lord of the Universe, Jagannath. The MC's for the evening HG Nityananda Dasa, President, ISKCON Dallas and HG Kalasudha Devi Dasi did wonderfully at keeping the audience informed about the festivities and happenings throughout the event.



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Councilwoman, Mrs. Helena Brown was the Guest of Honor and Congresswoman Hon. Sheila Jackson-Lee the Chief Guest appreciated the Houston Community for putting together a grand festival and urged the need for many such festivals in the future to showcase the diverse but unified Houston culture. Proclamations from United States Congress and City of Houston conferring this day as Festival of Chariots day were presented. HG Saranga Thakur Dasa delivered vote of thanks and honored Dr. Surya Sahoo and Kabita Sahoo of Char Dham Temple.



Such a grand festival would not have been possible without the untiring services of volunteers from Hare Krishna Dham Houston and Char Dham Temple in The Woodlands, the generous sponsorship of SKAI foundation, and of course the Divine mercy of the Lord of the Universe, "Jagannatha".

Photos: Thejas KR -



<http://skaifoundation.org>  
Email: [contact@skaifoundation.org](mailto:contact@skaifoundation.org)  
Phone: (281)-788-9580

