

Ratha Yatra at Durga Bari: Southern Sun Can't Stop an Eastern Tradition



Ratha yatra celebrations at the Houston Durga Bari on Saturday, July 13. Photos: Parth Dwivedi

BY PARTH DWIVEDI

HOUSTON: The Ratha Yatra, or Chariot Festival, was celebrated at the Houston Durga Bari in Houston on Saturday, July 13. The event was organized to bring the festivities of the original Ratha Yatra held in Puri, Orissa every year closer to home. Traditionally, the festival is celebrated on the second day of the waxing cycle of the moon in the third lunar month, *Ashad Maas*.

In Puri, the festival is a momentous event and is celebrated with great fervor. It commemorates a journey undertaken by Lord Jagannath to his maternal aunt's house, the Gundicha Temple, on his birthday. Along with him, Subhadra and Balabhadra are also honored in the trip.

Transporting the deities from their homes into their rathas is called the *Pohandi*, and is considered an important part of the Ratha Yatra, as even the *Sudarshana Chakra* is taken out of the Jagannath Temple to go with the deities.

In Puri, the return trip would also carry much significance, as a seven-day stop to the Mausī Ma Temple is made along with way. During this stop, *Poda Pithas*

would be made and shared, as they are said to be Lord Jagannath's favorite food.

Traditionally, a ceremonial king is also chosen, whose role is to sweep the ground in front of the ratha, a symbolic undertaking performed by coordinator, Dr. Raghu Dass this year. Dr. Dass described the main points of the Ratha Yatra to be "divinity and humanity," beaming with happiness at the growing popularity of the festival as he spoke about the other Ratha Yatras in the Greater Houston Area, "This festival is a great way for people of all backgrounds to pull together."

Durga Bari and SKAI Foundation collaborated to organize and

promote this year's Ratha Yatra. Partha Mohanty, coordinator, explained that since the Jagannath Temple is traditionally only accessible to upper-caste Hindus, the Ratha Yatra carries significance in addition to the belief that seeing Lord Jagannath bestows good luck and auspices upon the viewer—the festival also represents a chance for interfaith dialogue and tolerance, since Lord Jagannath is readily accessible by those of any faith, caste, or creed when he leaves his temple. Anyone can actually touch the *murti* of Lord Jagannath, thus making the opportunity of interactive worship a very personal event for those who partake.

The day started with a *pooja* at nine a.m. At noon the *Aarti* was sung, followed by the long-awaited *Pohandi*. 86-degree heat did not hinder the enthusiastic devotees as the pulling of the *ratha* began smoothly. *Prasad* and a finely catered lunch were a welcome follow-up to the morning portion of the two-part event.

Rae Kim, a 19-year-old Korean American, made the trip down from The Woodlands, saying that the literal representation of Lord Jagannath's story made the message easier to understand for an outsider. **For further information visit skaifoundation.org.**



Tradition of *Pohandi*, transporting the deities from their homes into their rathas.

Greater Houston Ratha Yatra Witnessed by Huge Crowd of Houstonians



Grand Chariot Festival of the Lord of the Universe, "Jagannath Ratha Yatra", was held on Saturday, July 13 at the Discovery Green Park in Houston. Above is the procession of chariots through Houston Downtown with large crowd of devotees. Photos: Thejas KR

BY SUJATA SRIKANTESWARAN

HOUSTON: Over 4000 Houstonians witnessed the grand Chariot Festival of the Lord of the Universe, "Jagannath Ratha Yatra", on Saturday, July 13 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 Yatras 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 Lordships.

The Chariots, that are replicas of the Jagannath Puri Rathas, were

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



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