

Devotees Pack the Breezy Discovery Green Grounds During Rath Yatra

By SANDHYA THAKKAR

HOUSTON: Lord Jagannath (Lord of the Universe) is carried on his Divine Journey, or Yatra, on a massive Chariot, or Rath, every year since ancient times in the city of Puri, is the origin of the English word Juggernaut, or unstoppable force. Indeed, despite hourly brisk showers, the three massive wooden chariots, crafted by SKAI Foundation and hand pulled by hundreds of devotees from all corners of Texas, seemed unstoppable as they journeyed through 10 Downtown Houston city blocks, "just as they go through the Downtown streets of Puri," insisted SKAI Founder Dr. Surya Sahoo. His motivation as the driving force for the Greater Houston Rath Yatra at Discovery Green stems from his wife's miraculous complete recovery from a paralyzing stroke, a recovery that happened only after Kabita Sahoo climbed on the Jagannath Puri Rath. Sons Amlan and Ishan also share their parents devotion to the Rath Yatra, alongside thousands of Houstonians who sang, danced, and pulled the chariot ropes to receive Divine Blessings.

Lord Jagannath is considered a form of Vishnu, or of his Avatar Krishna, and is worshipped in a



Lord Jagannath being carried on his Divine Journey, crafted by SKAI Foundation and hand pulled by hundreds of devotees from all corners of Texas, through 10 Downtown Houston city blocks on Saturday, June 28.

triad with his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra. Every year on Ashad Shukla Dwitiya, they come out of Shree Mandira and travel to their aunt's place on three massive chariots, one for each of the deities. Hence the three chariots in the Greater Houston Rath Yatra. Mahamahopadhyay Dr. Bishnupada Goswami, Head Priest, Houston Durga Bari Society, Sri SriKiran Narayanam from India Cultural Center and Temple, Memphis, Tennessee and Sri Kamala Mukha Prabhu from ISKCON led the pre-event Pooja, Samuhik Aarti, and

the Pahandi ritual of carrying the deities to the Chariots. Sarvahauma Prabhu Ji, the most senior disciple of ISKCON's Srila Gurudev, played the role of King, who humbly sweeps the path before the entire procession, showing that all are equal before the Lord. Hailing from ISKCON Centers in the Latin Americas, Chief Guest H.H. Bhakti Sundar Goswami Maharaj Ji, Syrian born and initiated by ISKCON founder Srila Prabhupada, gave a brief pravachan on the meaning of the ritual, and then whole heartedly danced with the

devotees throughout the procession, propagating the general feeling of devotional celebration.

The Chariot Parade ended with a Maha Arti sung by Nishi Munshi of LA, followed by a variety of popular bhajans. The LED illuminated stage, managed by Emcee Sunil Thakkar of Masala Radio, featured non-stop variety stage entertainment that began with Tablatronics, and modern presentation of Devotional House and Bollywood Beats by DJ Nish with classic Tabla by Rishabh Nayak. Infused throughout the evening were classical devotional dance performances, such as by the illustrious Jyostna Sahoo of Odisha, Houston's Supriya Trilok of the Avantica Academy of Odissi Dance, Bharatha Darshana School of Indian Classical Dance And Music; and a deftly coordinated group from Kalaangan School of Odissi. The sweetly dramatic eye expressions and crisp movements of Krishnaya, the youngest Caucasian member of Bharatha Darshana, stole hearts as she was invited by emcee Thakkar to give a few impromptu dance lessons to children from the audience. Kar-

namrita Devi Dasi from New York completed the devotional portion of the stage show with soul-stirring bhajans accompanied by Violin and Mardanga Drums. The last hour culminated with a heart-stopping open air dandia raas by Nishi Munshi, and the Heartbeats Band, featuring Nadeem on keyboard, Amir on Drums, and Rishabh Nayak on Dhol. Thakkar said, "It was a completely different program from the bang on Bollywood I produce for Holi or Diwali, but I liked the fast paced yet devotional programming we put together, but the audience packed the breezy Discovery Green grounds during the rare-in-Houston open air dandia raas, it was amazing!"

Festival goers enjoyed non-stop activities at every corner of the Greater Houston Rath Yatra, including the 30' train moonwalk combo, water play fountains, balloon artist, Henna artist, Indian clothing and jewelry bazaar, and ZeeTV's Wheel of Fortune. Tara Energy provided several thousand free water bottles, especially to those returning from the parade. Mercedes Benz provided some eye candy with the display of its latest GL350. ISKCON provided delightful fusion peanut butter barfi prasad, while Banke Bihari Parivar offered thirst-quenching chaas (salty yoghurt drink) and panda prasad. Crowds flocked to the chat patta chaat varieties by Madhuran Mirch Masala, spicy sabjis and biryanis of Hyderabad House, and ISKCON's Nila Madhava's with its traditional samosas and papdi chaat, and the not-so-traditional chocolate covered strawberries!

Photos: Nilo Aranzamendez, Meedu Photography, and Sukessh. For upcoming videos and photos visit www.greaterhoustonrathyatra.org

SKAI Foundation is constructing the CHAR DHAM TEMPLE slated to open with grand celebration in 2015. Masala Radio, who managed and marketed the Greater Houston Rath Yatra event, is reachable at www.masalaradio.com or 281-277-6874.

