



Sacred Geography in Motion: Rath Yatra and the Jagannath Tradition

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Abstract

The Rath Yatra of Puri is generally interpreted as an annual chariot festival, which is a journey of the Rathes of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Devi Subhadra from the Jagannath Temple to the Gundicha Temple. But such a descriptive understanding is merely part of the story of the festival's spatial, theological, and social meaning. This paper is an interpretation of Rath Yatra as a practice of 'moving sacred geography', and in this practice, the divine presence that is normally focused in the temple is extended to the streets of Puri. The paper discusses the *Pahandi* procession, the three chariots as mobile temples, the *Bada Danda* as a ritual corridor, collective chariot pulling, and the *Chhera Pahanra* ceremony performed by the Gajapati king. It claims that the festival inverts the usual order of pilgrimage: the pilgrims go towards the god, but the god comes towards the pilgrims and is available to the public for viewing. In this movement, a temporary devotional *communitas* is created, but social or institutional hierarchy is not completely destroyed. This festival is therefore inclusive. The Rath Yatra is a mobile temple, reflecting that sacredness may be based in space but is also contextually mobile.

Keywords: Lord Jagannath, Rath Yatra, sacred geography, Puri.

1. Introduction

The Jagannath Temple at Puri stands out as a unique place in the religious, historical, and cultural development of India. The temple is devoted to Lord Jagannath and is believed to be a sacred place for Hindus, who worship him along with his brother, Balabhadra, and his sister, Subhadra. It is also a symbol of Odia culture and is considered one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the Hindu world. The Jagannath Temple at Puri was made by King Anantavarman Chodaganga Deva of the Eastern Ganga dynasty in the twelfth century CE, with subsequent expansions and ritual additions completed by his successor, King Anangabhimha Deva III (Patra 29; Tripathy 124). Constructed by the Eastern Ganga rulers in the 12th century, the monumental temple served as the hub of a religious movement which brought together a range of theological, ritual, regional and political influences. Jagannath has therefore been read as more than just the manifestation of Vishnu or Krishna; he is a result of the confluence of tribal religious traditions, Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, Tantra, popular piety, and local kingship. It is most evident in the annual Rath Yatra celebration. On this occasion, Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra, Devi Subhadra, and Sudarshana are brought out of the temple in a ceremonial procession (*Pahandi*) and placed on three big wooden chariots (Ghadai 27; "Festivals in Shri Jagannath Temple" 20) during the festival. The chariots are drawn on the *Bada Danda* (Grand Avenue) from the main Jagannath Temple to the Gundicha Temple. The deities then stay there for the nine-day festival (Ghadai 27; "Festivals in Shri Jagannath Temple" 21) and then come to the principal temple in the *Bahuda Yatra*.



Popular descriptions of the event often describe it as celebrating equality, as the deities are visible outside the temple and devotees of various castes, regions, religions, and social backgrounds come together along the processional route. While this is a good capture of the inclusive symbolism of the festival, more analytical precision is needed. The Rath Yatra continues to be subject to a complex ritual sequence of hereditary servitors, temple officials, craftsmen, priests, the kings, and non-identical rights to perform the ceremonies. The festival does not destroy structure; it is simply a temporary reconfiguration of the linkage between sacred authority, social hierarchy, and public participation.

This paper examines the Rath Yatra as a “moving sacred geography”. It is a ritual process whereby sacred presence extends beyond a defined architectural centre and becomes a part of roads, chariots, crowds, public spaces, and so on, creating an expanded religious landscape. The main rationale behind the Rath Yatra is that the city of Puri becomes an extended temple for a period of time. The three chariots serve as mobile shrines, the *Bada Danda* creates a ritualized space, and the congregation as a whole becomes a co-actor in the spatialization of divinity.

The deities also take the normal pilgrimage route. Typically for a pilgrimage, it is the human devotee who must travel toward a sacred centre. But during Rath Yatra, the deity steps outside the sanctum and moves to a public area. Jagannath is both a pilgrimage and a divine pilgrim. This is a reversion to the meaning of *darśana*, a change of movement into a gesture of grace, and a temporary community of devotionism is formed around the publicly visible deity.

Thus, this is a qualitative and interpretive study based on the literature on the Jagannath tradition, which uses theories of ritual, as well as sacred geography and landscape, to explore how the recorded rituals of the Rath Yatra create, expand, and move sacred space. The study mainly uses secondary sources and textual analysis. Therefore, the ritual, spatial, and symbolic meanings of Rath Yatra as depicted in the selected sources are the focus of the study.

Theoretical Contexts

Studies on the Jagannath tradition have been approached in several ways, including historical, anthropological, theological, architectural, political, and cultural. The book, *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, edited by Anncharlott Eschmann, Hermann Kulke, and Gaya Charan Tripathi, is one of the basic contributions. The essays in this collection explore the history of the Jagannath tradition, the influence of neighbouring religious traditions and its importance in the creation of political and cultural identity in Odisha. The volume illustrates that there was no single religious tradition from which it can be traced. It came about by a complicated assimilation, reinterpretation, institutionalization, and royal patronage. Hermann Kulke's study of Jagannath and kingship has proved that the deity played a key role in the political legitimation of the rulers in medieval Odisha. The Eastern Ganga & later the Gajapati kings claimed to be the servants and representatives of Jagannath. The god was the actual ruler, and the rulers' political power was based on the power of submission to the sacred centre. This bond is still publicly displayed in the ceremony of *Chhera Pahanra* that is celebrated every year during Rath Yatra.

O. M. Starza, *The Jagannatha Temple at Puri: Its Architecture, Art and Cult*, offers a thorough analysis of the development of the temple architecture, iconography, ritual use, and history. In the case of Starza, it is the symbolism of the temple as a symbol of religious (and political) authority. The temple is not only the repository of the sacred images, but it is also a system of space, a spatial system that governs the movement, sightings, ritual rights, and access to the divine.

In the *Sacred Geography of Puri*, Nityananda Patnaik delves beyond the main temple to other places. Patnaik discusses the city of Puri as a sacred city, a sacred territory, or a sacred space made of sacred temples, sacred tanks, sacred shrines, sacred pilgrimages, the protecting deities, the ritual, and the stories that flow around it. His work shows that the religious significance of Puri extends beyond the confines of the Jagannath Temple and is spread across an interrelated territory.

Spaces and networks that can be called sacred geography can be seen in a broader context in *India: A Sacred Geography* by Diana Eck. Eck says that Indian cultural traditions are embedded in geography, mythology, and pilgrimage, and that



they embody the presence of the divine. The significance of sacred places is brought about by narratives and ritual relationships, and pilgrimage binds together locations that otherwise would be unconnected in a religious world.

The theories of Victor Turner on the Liminal and Communitas have also had an influence on the research on pilgrimage and public ritual (Turner 95). Ritual movement could be a partial way to liberate participants from their usual social structure and create a greater sense of common humanity. Pilgrimage and processional festivals can contribute to creating communitas in which the traditional boundaries are broken down as a shared communal experience of a sacred event. They are basic research studies that can provide insights into the nature of Jagannath's composite tradition, the temples, kingship, pilgrimage, and sacred space.

But mostly, the Rath Yatra is discussed in a descriptive manner (as a series of ceremonies) or in a symbolic manner (as a festival of universal equality). Less attention has been paid to “how” exactly the festival enacts sacredness in the city center, and brings the deity into the urban space. In this sense, the present paper tries to address this topic by addressing the concept of 'mobility' as a generator of 'sacred' space. While the historical development, syncretic character, political significance, and pilgrimage traditions of Jagannath have been well researched, much less has been focused on the evolution of Rath Yatra as a spatial process. The festival is not only located in a pre-existing sacred space, but it is also a cosmology builder. In the course of the procession, the *Bada Danda* turns into a ritual way, the chariots are mobile temples, and the crowd is devotional.

Breaking Enclosure: *Pahandi*

The transformation of space starts with the ceremonial procession of bringing the deities from the temple to their chariots, called *Pahandi*. Sudarshana is carried out first, followed by Balabhadra, Subhadra, and Jagannath. The images move in rhythm, swaying to the rhythm, from right to left with specific servitors, and with drums, gongs, trumpets, chants, and devotional cries. *Pahandi* isn't just the moving of heavy wood icons. It is a well-organized manifestation of God's coming. The deities' transference as physical movement is a manifestation of the transition from the enclosed area of the temple to the public area. The Lion Gate is a threshold, a transitional space between two orders of space: controlled space within the temple and the uncontrolled space of the processional area in the city.

This relates to Turner's idea of liminality. The deities are temporarily placed between their normal abode in the main temple and the temporary abode of the Gundicha Temple. The travel time is a transitory state in which the normal spatial organization is rearranged. The gods are not in their permanent holy precinct, but are still equally holy. They are mobile, and it is evident that immobility is not a prerequisite to the presence of God.

This significance is accentuated by the unusual form of the images of Jagannath in which they are presented. Wooden embodied deities: Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra are ritual beings which live their lives according to the rules of bathing, dressing, eating, illness, sleep, travel, and periodic renewal of their bodies during *Navakalevara* (Dash Giridhari 23). They embody their ritual personalities in their practices. *Pahandi* makes this embodied theology “public”. Human beings try to make it move, but ritual discourse implies that the deities themselves move due to their own will. The servitors are not only a vehicle for an object, but they are also involved in the god's choice of coming forth. There is in this way a human and Divine element to it. Through seva, the body becomes mobile; the body becomes the divine.

Mobile Temples

The three vehicles are the most apparent tangible elements of the festival. Nandighosha is the vehicle of Jagannath, Taladhawaja is the vehicle of Balabhadra, and Devadalana, or Darpadalana, is the vehicle of Subhadra. Every chariot is given a specific design, a name, colour scheme, number of wheels, emblem, figures to protect it, horses, a chariot driver and other subordinate deities (Patnaik 54-56).



Each year, the chariots are built from the types of wood indicated by the artisans of the same family. This is the annual reconstruction, and it is an important model of continuity. The ritual form is considered lasting; the structure is only temporary. The sacred design lives on in the wood, which changes. Thus, in the view of continuity, material permanency is not necessary. The artisans' knowledge is also important. Chariot construction is a living knowledge system that is passed on via practice, passed on as a responsibility, remembered and measured through communal labor. In fact, the ritual process in which they are able to carry the divine presence is also part of their construction. After the deities are placed in the chariots, they become portable temples. The priests conduct the religious orientation like a shrine or sanctum. The elevated platforms make the deities accessible to the public, and their motion brings sacredness throughout the city.

The chariot thus brings a more holistic concept of sacred space into question, in opposition to being purely architectural. Permanent stone structures are not the only things that are sacred. When the construction is a temporary wooden building, and when the deity occupies it, it can become a sacred centre on the basis of the authorized ritual knowledge. The chariot is not only a temple; it serves the role of a temple through the journey. The transience of the chariots also helps to keep the presence of the sacred from being solely correlated with monumental duration. The yearly act of rebuilding indicates that tradition lives on via renewal. Its ritual identity continues through repetition, whereas the physical form must be recreated.

Reversing Pilgrimage

Rath Yatra is very closely related to the religious significance of *darśana* (the sacred act of seeing and being seen by the deity). In regular pilgrimage, the pilgrim goes to the temple, goes to the inner sanctum sanctorum, goes to the deity, and then he gets the privilege of seeing the deity. The flow of this movement is reversed during Rath Yatra. Today, the devotees walk to Puri, and Lord Jagannath also comes towards them.

The appearance of the deity in the outside space makes *darśana* public. Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are displayed on raised chariots before throngs of people. The people who can't enter the temple can see the deities during the festival. It is the accessibility that is at the heart of the festival's inclusive reputation. Jagannath is often referred to as the purifier or redeemer of the "fallen" or "outcasts," *Patita Pavana* ("Redeemer of the Fallen"). His public appearance is a sign of divine grace that is beyond the institutional boundaries.

But *darśana* does not imply total elimination of all distinction; it is theological, that is, open. The festival goes on giving specific rites to specific communities. The hereditary servitors have specific responsibilities, the movement of the procession is under the control of the administrators, and royal authority has a special ceremonial function.

The inclusion by Rath Yatra is hence a relational one and not an absolute one. They are not made one, but are placed into a common area for the vision of the Holy. They have different stations, but all look towards the same visible god(s). The festival seems to be more demonstrative of the democratization of proximity than of that of the office of ritual.

This public nature of *darśana* also has an impact on the visual order of the city. Typically, the temple is large and prominent, and includes the main religious icons. The Rath Yatra is a time at which the chariots are moving visual centres. The audience continually moves in relation to the sites. The centrality of the sacred is thus conveyed on the *Bada Danda*.

Chhera Pahanra

Chhera Pahanra is done by the Gajapati king before the chariots start their journey. He ceremoniously sweeps and sprinkles fragrant water on the decks of the three chariots. This ceremony is generally interpreted as the giving up of temporal power to spiritual power. The rite comes out of the political theology of Jagannath. Historically, the rulers of Odisha portrayed themselves as the 'servants' (*rautas*) and as ministers of the deity. The king was considered Jagannath's



representative, and Jagannath was considered the real king. Therefore, the right to rule rested only on the sacred authority of Jagannath.

This is a principle that's clearly embodied in the work of *Chhera Pahanra*. The king comes in with the regal insignia of kingship, but performs an action that is associated with cleaning and service. The king does the sweeping, but he does it in "royally different" fashion. The ceremony thus does not create a total social sameness, however. It rather brings in hierarchy as a devotional order. The king is King till Jagannath, then his kingship becomes service.

The rite is a way of making specific claims, which the festival is an end to; all distinctions are simplistic claims. *Chhera Pahanra* does not abrogate the king's special right; it is only the king who is allowed to do this special act. But the symbolic power of the act is still powerfully felt. It makes the claim that there exists a higher authority than man - the deity (Dash Abhimanyu 28-30). The ceremony thus sets up a fruitful relationship between structure and *communitas*. Equality is not necessarily institutionalized, but it does exist in devotional subordination.

Sacred Labour and Communitas

The chariot pulling is the final public event of the outward journey. Devotees take hold of the huge ropes that are tied to the chariots and give their bodies to the movement of deities. The act gives expression to a direct correlation between labour and devotion. A person cannot pull a chariot by himself or herself. Collective effort, coordination and direction are all necessary for movement. The physical form of the activity thus creates a "community" in a temporary sense. Those who might not have known each other are together in the same act of *seva*.

Communitas, as a term coined by Turner, can be used to understand the emotionality of this involvement. The crowd is more than a group of onlookers. The people are now made partners in the god's journey. Chanting, exertion, waiting, uncertainty, and collective movement (i.e., movement in groups) establish a shared ritual experience that can temporarily overcome the traditional social distance.

Communitas should, however, not be romanticized. There continues to be administrative control and social segregation on large-scale at religious gatherings. The participants come from various economic, regional, caste, gender, institutional backgrounds to the ritual. Access to the chariots is not equal and structures of authority are necessary to organise the festival. Reality is neither to be denied nor eliminated, but rather the devotional orientation to be produced is to be shared. During the course of the ritual, people regard themselves mostly in the context of Jagannath. Collective labour as a means of religious affiliation. The metaphor of pulling a chariot is bigger, too, as a moral one. Social movement is not made of individuals; it is a coordinated effort. The sacred journey is realized by the work of artisans, servants, administrators, musicians, guards, pilgrims, and the local people. Collective responsibility thus becomes a prerequisite condition for sacred performance at the festival.

Memory and Regional Performance

Rath Yatra is an annual event which acts as a performance of the memory of Odia culture. It combines the practice of temple rituals, woodcraft making, textile manufacturing, music, poetry, eating habits, pilgrimages, public administration, kingship, and oral history. These are not exhibited as museum objects but rather repeated; they become meaningful.

The fact that the memory of culture is translated into labor is not insignificant, especially in the reconstruction of the chariots every year. The sacred forms and knowledge are carried on by artisans. The deities pass through the processional route, and this imparts a memorable quality to it. Songs get rejuvenated as they continue to be sung during the festival by the devotees.



The poet Salabega voiced the public availability of Jagannath, in particular. Salabega, as remembered, was the son of a Muslim father and a Hindu mother and one of the most renowned devotees of Jagannath (Mishra 1). As per popular belief, the Chariot of Lord Jagannath came to a halt for Salabega until he arrived for *darśana*. The story is viewed as a history, a devotional legend, or a cultural memory, and as a faith that there are no barriers or divisions in society that cannot be overcome through true devotion.

The festival also helps expand the religious field with a sense of regional identity. Jagannath is very much at home in Odisha, but his name represents the “Lord of the World.” Rath Yatra puts a voice to the tradition of the area in a universal religious expression. The local is not different from the universal: the universal is realized in the specifically Odia ritual forms. There is a wider public presence of the festival, as a result of modern technologies. It can be seen on television, digital media, on the internet, through sighting of various tour networks and mass transportation much beyond Puri through Rath Yatra. But mediated visibility is not just a lack of physical. Space is still very much the focus of the ritual, as the road, the chariot, the crowd, and the body.

Conclusion

This analysis yields four key findings. Firstly, sacred space is not set. Through Rath Yatra, the divine presence of the Jagannath Temple comes out from its boundaries to the city. Secondly, the chariots serve as “temporary mobile temples.” They are sacred because they are traditionally constructed, ritually prepared, and where the deities are present. Thirdly, Rath Yatra is the exact opposite of the traditional way of pilgrimage. The deity comes out to meet the devotees, and *darśana* is made public rather than the devotees going towards the deity. Fourthly, a temporary unity of devotion is created at the festival. But it is not a total abolition of social and ritual hierarchy, as each group still plays its respective role. This study does not discuss the effects of tourism, digital media, and government administration on tradition. Future research could include an investigation into the dynamics of “moving sacred geography” in the era of livestreaming and global communication, especially how sacredness is felt by being physically present, but also felt by being virtually present.

As a result of these findings, the idea of “moving sacred geography” is born. Not only are Puri's ancient temples sacred, but the relationships that are recreated through the festival are also sacred. Rath Yatra is a festival that brings the Jagannath Temple, the *Bada Danda*, the Gundicha Temple, the chariots, and the public together every year. The divine is made visible in the streets through the movement of the chariots, the public *darśana* and the collective labour through *Pahandi*. The road turns into a route of pilgrimage, and the city becomes a temple. The unique theology of Rath Yatra holds that not only is the sacred space mobile, but Lord Jagannath himself is also moved from the sanctum sanctorum to be seen by the people.

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