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A Festival of Chariots: How Music and the Arts Take the Hindu Temple Experience to the Streets

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Abstract: Among the most prominent Hindu festivals is the Rath Yatra, or Festival of Chariots, which is celebrated by parading three brightly decorated chariots containing statues of the deities Jagganath, Subhadra, and Balaram through the streets of a city on brilliantly decorated chariots. Rath Yatra is celebrated throughout India and increasingly throughout the world through such efforts as the Festival of India sponsored by the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), which stops in several prominent locations throughout North America. Within Krishna Consciousness, temple worship is an aesthetically vivid sensory experience in which the various art forms—music, dance, theater, and the visual arts—serve to attach the devotee's senses to the Divine through worship practices, including *darshan*—the exchange of gazes, *kirtan*—the singing of sacred mantras, and *lila*—the re-creation of the pastimes of divine characters. The festival experience—and the Festival of Chariots in particular—can serve to bring the practices typically associated with temple worship to the public. This article draws on several Rath Yatra events, giving special attention to the annual Rath Yatra parade held in New York City, where devotees parade their deities down Manhattan's Fifth Avenue, and that held in Los Angeles on Venice Beach. These prominent American Rath Yatras serve as a study of the spiritual necessity of beauty and the spiritual necessity of joy, which are both addressed by the festival experience, as music and vivid visual imagery serve to transform urban space into sacred space by allowing bypassers as well as devotees to come into sensory contact with sacred imagery and sacred sound.

Keywords: Hinduism; festivals; Hare Krishna; kirtan; darshan; sacred music; sacred art

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1. Introduction

On a June afternoon in Manhattan, the New York Police Department shuts down Northbound traffic on Fifth Avenue for one of a handful of annual parades that merit closing that crucial trafficway. There are only three floats at this parade: three richly decorated chariots carrying large statues of Hindu deities that are notable for how different they look from figures like Krishna, the all-attractive, who is generally shown with elegant features and richly detailed clothing and iconography. These deities, by contrast, have a look commonly described as "rough", or "unfinished", with big eyes and big smiles painted onto simple carved figures. The three chariots are accompanied by a crowd of several thousand people led by groups of musicians in the singing of sacred chant. The crowd is a noticeably multi-ethnic group with significant South Asian representation, though it is notable that even the non-South Asian members of the procession are predominantly dressed in saris, kurtas, and various forms of Indian formal wear. A tight wedge of NYPD motorcycles guides the crowd down Fifth Avenue while formally dressed volunteers with megaphones intersperse praises to Krishna and traditional politenesses with attempts to control the foot traffic: "Haribol, please use the sidewalk. Hare Krishna, please go to the front of the cart".

Several weeks later, a similar set of three chariots, carrying three similar statues, is likewise led by hundreds of singing, dancing people onto the Oceanfront boardwalk of

California's Venice Beach, where the vibrant colors, loud and exuberant music, and slightly humorous effects—cartoon-style cow balloons, occasional puppeteers—blend into the carnivalesque atmosphere of Venice Beach. Here, the music and dancing of exuberant Hindu devotees adds a particularly vibrant layer of activity to a space already populated by street performers, vendors, and the occasional beachgoer in costume.

These two processions represent different North American versions of a traditional Hindu festival with a centuries-long history, the Rath Yatra. The two events have a noticeably different character by virtue of their different locations—New York City's Fifth Avenue and Los Angeles's Venice Beach—but they are unified not only by the fundamental setup of chariots used to parade the Hindu deity Jagganath and his siblings through the streets, but by the vivid sensory quality of the parades—i.e., the music, the imagery, and the overpowering exuberance of spiritual devotion on display. During Rath Yatra, the disruption of prominent urban spaces is a feature, not a bug, as devotees of Jagganath use the festival event as an opportunity to interrupt the day-to-day lives of passersby with a spontaneous sensory experience of the sacred. These festivals provide an opportunity to take the aesthetically rich practices of Vaishnava temple devotion to the streets. This essay will explore the spiritual priorities of beauty and joy as they play out in Rath Yatra festival events and their disruption of urban spaces, as well as the ways in which festival participation models an ideal form of social life, using the annual North American Rath Yatras held in New York City and Los Angeles as case studies.[1]

2. Rath Yatra

Rath Yatra, or the Festival of Chariots, is an annual celebration referred to in scriptural texts dating back at least as far as the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, although many practitioners believe that the festival's history goes back thousands of years. Rath Yatra is historically connected with the Jagganath Temple at Puri in the Indian state of Odisha. The name Jagganath translates as Lord (Nat) of the Universe (Jaggat), and while he is most popular among Vaishnavas who regard him as an incarnation of Krishna, other branches of Hinduism have claimed Jagganath as well.

Jagganath cuts an idiosyncratic figure within the Hindu pantheon. While the imagery associated with many Hindu deities is often focused on refinement and beauty—the name Krishna means "the all-attractive", for example—Jagganath has a distinctly unrefined look sometimes described as "tribal" and "unfinished". He is made of wood and carved in the most basic of shapes—a cylindrical trunk, arms without hands, and a face with features painted in brilliant colors and basic shapes: circular eyes and a wide red curve of a mouth. When he is worshipped alongside Krishna's siblings Subhadra and Balaram, they take forms similar to Jagganath's.

The most well-known version of Jagganath's story involves a devout king, Indradyuma, who was instructed in a dream to retrieve a particular log from the seashore and have it carved into a deity. However, every mortal to attempt the job had his chisels blunted upon first contact with the wood. A divine being in the form of an old man volunteered to carve the deity on condition of being left completely alone until the job was finished. When the sounds of work ceased after ten days, Indradyuma entered the workshop to find the deity only half-carved, and the carver disappeared. A remorseful Indradyuma berated himself for interrupting the work until a voice from heaven informed him that this, too, was a valid form for the Lord to inhabit (Vedic Knowledge Online n.d.). Krishna devotees have explained this story to me as an example of Krishna's compassion, evident in his willingness to appear in multiple forms so that devotees may be attracted to one form or another of the Supreme Lord (Puri Jagganath 2024).

The Rath Yatra parade held in Jagganath's honor is associated with a journey undertaken by Krishna to visit his loved ones. According to the Mahabharata, Krishna's birth and childhood took place in the region of Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh, but he left Vrindavan at some point to go to Matur and Dwarka and did not return. However, when Krishna, along with his brother Balaram and sister Subhadra, visited Kurukshetra near Vrindavan,

the family and friends of Krishna came out to meet him, and the Rath Yatra commemorates that journey (Vedic Knowledge Online n.d.).

The celebrations surrounding the Rath Yatra are notable for acts of service offered to the sculpted deities as proxies and metaphors for service to God. In the weeks before the festival, wooden sculptures of Jagganath, Subhadra, and Balaram are given *abhisheka*, a ceremony in which they are bathed with auspicious liquids as an expression of love and devotion. Traditionally, the devotees, because of their great affection, bathe the deities so thoroughly that Jagganath catches a cold. The wooden statues are then put to bed for a week or two and treated with the utmost care and devotion until Jagganath and his siblings are brought out of their sickbeds and placed on their chariots to be paraded through town.

The Jagganath temple in Puri, which was built in the 12th century, hosts the world's largest Jagganath festival. In the 19th century, British observers overwhelmed by the size of the processions coined the word "juggernaut" as a bastardization of the name Jagganath to describe a massive, unstoppable force. Today, it is claimed that millions of people from around the world attend Rath Yatra in Puri. Rath Yatra celebrations are held throughout India, however, and in more recent decades, throughout the world. ISKCON founder Srila Prabhupada made the organization of Rath Yatra in the West a major priority upon arriving in the United States, and the first American Rath Yatra was held in San Francisco in 1967. Since 1979, the Festival of India organization has organized a touring festival in North America composed of performances and displays related to the principles of Krishna Consciousness. While the Festival of India takes on a variety of events, approximately half of the stops on that tour are Rath Yatra celebrations in cities including New York City, Los Angeles, Boston, Toronto, Vancouver, and Atlanta, among others (Hare Krishna Festival Tour 2024).

3. Temple Worship—The Spiritual Necessity of Beauty

The Gaudiya Vaishnava Hindu tradition of Bhakti Yoga—i.e., the "yoga of love and devotion"—is strongly focused on personal experience and emotional attachment to God. Because Krishna theology distinguishes between a material world that is filled with suffering and a spiritual world that is filled with bliss, many of the worship practices performed at Krishna temples are heavily concerned with salvation—specifically, with actions believed to create a personal interaction with the divine and thus produce an immediate and dramatic effect on the state of the soul. These fall into a couple of broad categories. Many of the actions performed in the temple serve to attach the senses of the worshipper to Krishna and, therefore, effect a cleansing of the soul. A second broad category of worshipful action involves performing some sort of service for the deities, as represented symbolically by the sculpted figures enshrined on the temple altars. These services may include ritual offerings such as *arati*, cleaning the temple room, dressing the deities, or circumambulating a *tulsi* plant. These actions are accepted as service to God and an expression of humility and affection—acts that develop a relationship with the divine that results in salvation.

The various elements of temple worship address all of the physical senses in some manner. Burning incense occupies the sense of smell, while the practice of sharing *prasadam*, or sacred foods offered to the deities and then the congregation, occupies the sense of taste. Devotees teach that when prasadam has been offered before the altar, Krishna has tasted it—meaning all of the food prepared in the kitchen and included in the prayer, not just the portion placed on the altar. By virtue of his touch, it has become sacred, a form of Krishna that provides a physical reality with which a person can have sensory contact and thus achieve spiritual purification through direct experience with God.

The sensory nature of temple worship is most immediately and obviously apparent in the visual decoration of temples and temple rooms. At the Sri Sri Radha Govinda Mandir in Brooklyn, for example, the walls of the temple room are lined with framed paintings of scenes from the *Bhagavad Gita* and tales of a young Krishna as detailed in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, portraits of Vishnu displaying his divine attributes, Caitanya Mahaprabhu leading kirtan, various saintly characters overcoming beasts and demons with their faith, and above all, the youthful God Krishna, draped in lavish robes and flowers, playing

his flute and accompanied by his beloved Radha. A life-size statue of Srila Prabhupada watches over all proceedings from a throne lavished with a profusion of flowers while the eagle god Garuda perches on a pillar near the back of the room. The altar area is framed by a gate with beautiful metalwork, while painted screens on either side show roughly life-size portraits of women drawn in Rajasthani style who stand as devotees offering perpetual obeisance to the deities. All in all, the temple room is an almost dizzying, multifaceted collection of images carrying volumes of encoded information about the heritage, practices, and promises of the Krishna movement.

The visual presentation of the deities is particularly important. On the first day that I visited the Brooklyn temple, Radha and Krishna were dressed in extravagant purple robes lined in gold and detailed with patterns of flowers, leaves, and peacocks. They wore flower garlands in shades of white, lilac, and coral, and at their feet rested an array of smaller figures and framed portraits of saints, gurus, and demigods. Dressing the deities in fresh clothes daily is one of the acts of service performed as a form of worship. But more importantly, the lavish presentation of the gods enhances the practice of *darshan.*

Darshan is one of the core practices of Hinduism. Darshan means, literally, "looking", and at its most basic level, the practice of darshan is exactly that: a person comes face to face with divinity, and man and God exchange gazes.

If Darshan is seeing, however, it is seeing with a difference. Diane Eck specifies that "darshan is sometimes translated as the *'auspicious sight'* of the divine" (Eck 1998, p. 3, emphasis added) because "beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes, one gains the blessings of the divine" (Ibid.). It is a moment intended to develop a relationship, even affection, between man and God.

Simple as it may seem, this moment of encounter—and the central act of looking—resonates throughout Hinduism. Temples throughout the world have different approaches to the moment of darshan and the presentation of the deities. In some temples, the altar deities are nearly always visible. In others, the altar is open for darshan during certain hours of the day—perhaps a couple of hours in the morning, in the middle of the day, and again in the evening. Devotees famously line up at certain prominent temples in India and wait in great anticipation for hours at a time, or even full days, to enter the temple, have the curtains lifted, and experience a brief, intense moment of darshan before the curtain drops again 20 to 30 s later. Building anticipation and focusing the gaze within a certain limited time frame may intensify the feeling of sudden and intense encounters generated at the moment of darshan.

Hearing, as well as sight, can be a means of binding the soul to the divine, according to a Hindu worldview. According to Harold Coward and David Goa, "In India, all sound is perceived as being divine in origin since it all arises from one sacred source" (Coward and Goa 2004, p. 2). Just as "there is a special exchange of vision that is itself a form of 'touching'. . .so also the act of hearing and speaking [sacred words] is an act in which the consciousness of the individual may experience a tuning into the divine sound of the cosmos." (Ibid. p. 6).

In Caitanyite Vaishnavism, as in many spiritual practices originating in India, a central act of worship is the performance of *kirtan.* Kirtan is a call-and-response musical exchange of sacred chants and mantras, with an emphasis on chanting the names of deities as a means of drawing the sacred presence is drawn to the singer. Kirtan is led by a *kirtaniya*, accompanied by a group of instrumentalists playing harmonium, drums, and a variety of hand percussion, along with any other instruments that come to hand. As observed in ISKCON temples, Kirtan is less a performance of known pieces of music and more a process of spontaneous musical creation: the kirtaniya strings together a series of chants and melodies internalized over years of practice, which the congregation sings back to them. The most prominent text used in Krishna temples is the Maha Mantra:

Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna

Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare

Hare Rama, Hare Rama

Rama Rama, Hare Hare

Devotees may sing the Maha Mantra for literally hours at a time, stringing together dozens of melodies sung anywhere from four to twenty times each before the kirtaniya introduces the next tune. In recent years, *kirtan mela* festivals have offered 24 h, 48 h, and even 96 h kirtans (with rotating groups of musicians, of course), and the Krishna Balaram Mandir temple in Vrindavan, India, has hosted a continuous 24-h kirtan since 1986 (24 Hour Kirtan n.d.).

While kirtan occupies the sense of hearing, the practice also occupies the kinesthetic senses, as devotees clap their hands, sway, and often dance. A famous line from the *Bhagavata Purana* states that in the spiritual world, "every word is a song, every step is a dance". The mythology surrounding Krishna's life places great emphasis on his skills as a dancer—in one story, he even divides himself into hundreds of versions of himself so that he can dance with each *gopi,* and they can all feel the bliss of dancing with Krishna as an individual. While kirtan often begins with kirtaniya, instrumentalists, and congregants alike sitting and singing in a manner of intense focus, the kirtan frequently progresses through mounting energy until many, if not most, participants are on their feet dancing, whether in organized steps, a generalized sway from side to side, or simply jumping up and down. At times, a good kirtan comes across as a spiritually consecrated mosh pit.

The objective of kirtan, like the objective of darshan, is to bind the worshipper to the divine presence in a powerful, visceral fashion. Within the cosmology of Hinduism, musical sound is fundamentally sacred, "the creative, vital force by which the entire universe is animated", according to Lewis Rowell (Rowell 1992, p. 36). Larry Shinn explains that in the context of Vedic cosmology, "Sounds have spiritual significance. They can function not merely as metaphors but as direct links with the sacred realm" (Gelberg 1983, p. 84). Edwin Bryant describes the holy names, as recited in kirtan, as belonging to "an elaborate theology wherein Krishna's names are seen as perpetually accessible sonic *avatara*" or "Krishna in vibratory form". The name of Krishna is considered a form of Krishna himself, so that speaking the name of a god causes that God to be literally and immediately present. (Bryant 2007, p. 15).

The communion thus created in the act of singing mantras composed of the holy name is seen as powerfully transformative. Guy Beck recognizes, in devotional music, sounds that "represent and express the close and delicate bonds between the divine word and ritual action that serves to keep hope and faith alive" (Beck 2006, p. 21). One devotee I met in Brooklyn described a period of spiritual struggle and searching that followed his release from the army and ended with an unexpected encounter with kirtan in Seattle. He describes the realization that

> . . . these people [were] experiencing joy! I didn't know any of these people. I was a stranger, but . . .I felt myself just getting caught up with it, carried away with it. . .I just remember feeling transformed by the kirtan, an internal transformation. I remember arriving [home] at maybe ten o'clock, and [my wife] was with her sister and her sister's husband. They looked at me and they said, 'What's happened to you? You look different. You look different.' And I told them, 'Well, I feel different.'

In an interview at the Los Angeles Rath Yatra, author and ISKCON guru Hridayananda das Goswami elaborates:

> *Yoga* means connect, link. So when you chant or sing or hear the names of God—kirtan—you are immediately in a state of yoga. . ..Prabhupada used to give the example that if you put iron in fire, the iron becomes fire, [it] takes on the quality of fire. So when you put your consciousness in or immerse your consciousness in God by kirtan, you become divinized, or you become spiritualized, or you become Godly.

The extreme care given to the presentation of art, altar deities, incense, prasadam, and kirtan all bear witness to the spiritual necessity of beauty, especially in Krishna worship, where one of the attributes ascribed to the deity is "the all-attractive". The emphasis on beauty and beautiful things is a profound revelation about the nature of the spirit and the spiritual world. "Krishna should occupy, as many of a devotee's senses as possible", writes J. Stillson Judah (Judah 1984, p. 91). Francine Daner further explains that through the music, the art, the incense, and the food present at a Krishna temple, "the senses of the individual become dovetailed with the supreme senses of Krishna, and the living being attains the pleasure and happiness that is otherwise impossible to find" (Daner 1976, pp. 34–35).

4. Festival Worship—The Spiritual Necessity of Joy

Beck explains several specific functions of music in a sacred context, including *epiclesis,* the "tonal invitation of any deity or spirit to a . . .worship occasion"; *koinonia*, "communion between the human and divine world", and one that is closely related within traditions of religious mysticism: *exstasis*, when "music is employed to achieve particular states of ecstasy and bliss" (Beck 2006, p. 17).

I have long been intrigued by the celebratory nature of Krishna worship, both in the annual cycle of festivals and in the simple fact that singing, dancing, and feasting are considered means to salvation. As one devotee casually told me, "Our process is said to be a joyful process". In one particularly incisive interview with a Brooklyn devotee named Kurma Rupadasa, he explains that while, at the most straightforward level, festivals serve "to honor different pastimes of Krishna or the activities of our saints", at a deeper level,

> The process of worshipping God is joyfully performed. In other words, we understand the God—Krishna. One of his characteristics is that he's full of bliss, and so as one practices yoga then one should experience happiness. Bliss is of course a spiritual state. If one is practicing bhakti yoga properly then he will experience—if not happiness, at least he will experience peace. Or at least he will experience a cessation of suffering.

These effects should ideally be felt while taking part in any ritual or celebration, whether at home or as part of a formal celebration at a temple. But Rath Yatra is distinct from celebrations like Diwali and Holi, which are generally held in a chosen location where participants choose to attend. Rath Yatra comes to those who experience it by virtue of leading a parade through often crowded public spaces where it might catch people by surprise, introducing an element of the extraordinary to their day. Rath Yatra is not only a celebration for the benefit of those who are already devotees but also an offering or invitation to those who are not. Kurma explains:

> It's not actually a process about trying to make more devotees or more followers, but it's actually about how to diminish the suffering of people in the material world. Because everyone is. Even the richest people who are not engaged in any kind of spiritual activity their lives are—we can understand they are suffering, and so these festivals do a substantial amount to reduce the suffering of the world. And that's something to celebrate.

According to Kurma, celebration can even be seen as a type of service:

> There's a saying, if you row someone across the ocean you also get to the other side. If you help someone progress spiritually, you also progress. And in fact, if you help someone else progress spiritually, that's when you actually experience your own progress. That is when you actually experience happiness. Bhakti Yoga is about giving, not about taking. It's about giving to others. It's a practice for love, and love is expressed by giving not by taking. That is the basis of why we celebrate: it should be joyful, and if it's not joyful—if our spiritual practices are not joyful—it means that we're doing something wrong.

Conversation with devotees at the Los Angeles Rath Yatra yields an agreement that an invitation to bliss through public celebrations of a spiritual nature is not an attempt to

impose an unnatural thing but rather an attempt to awaken what is already within the self. Hridayananda explains that:

> The soul just naturally dances, it sings. We are not ultimately or originally impersonal. . .we are eternally persons. The experience that we have now of ourselves, "I am a unique individual person"—that's eternal. We are eternally unique persons and it is our nature to rejoice to sing to dance. . .It's the very nature of the soul.

Los Angeles kirtan drummer Banabhatta adds that as people, "we are by nature full of spiritual happiness in relationship with God. That is a very joyful thing that carries with us [through] whatever we're doing".

5. Music to Model Social Healing

Given the way that kirtan shapes the Rath Yatra experience, both for those who walk the parade route and those who encounter the procession along the way, a theoretical understanding of the festival experience must refer to the work of Thomas Turino on the nature of music designed for participatory experience, in contrast to presentational music prepared by performance specialists to present before an audience. Turino's description of the participatory musical experience as one that is "fully focused on an activity that emphasizes our *sameness*" (Turino 2008, p. 18) resonates with Edward O. Henry's observation, in relation to his work on Bhojpuri devotional music, that "group singing and dancing are unique in the repertoire of human behavior in the way they join individuals in social relation through individual, psycho-physiological gratification (Henry 1998, pp. 116–17)". The driving, almost hypnotic character of kirtan drumming, along with the call-and-response format of the singing, reflect the fact that, according to Henry, "the phenomena of rhythm and the mutual coordination of voices are keys to the process of the individual-group relationship" (Ibid.). Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi describes this "state of merged awareness and action" using the term "flow", (Csikszentmihalyi 1971, p. 46), which Turino then interprets in terms of "both a temporary transcendence and a cumulative expansion of the self" (Turino 2008, p. 233) that can become "so intense that we feel, for those best moments, as if our selves had merged" (Ibid., pp. 18–19).

Milton Singer, writing about Indian kirtan in 1966 (i.e., around the same time that ISKCON was popularizing the practice in the United States), observed that because of kirtan's roots in the populist *bhakti* movement, "reducing the consciousness of caste, sect, and regional differences and the tensions generated by this consciousness" is one of the major purposes of kirtan practice, alongside the stated goal of spiritual realization. (Singer 1966, p. 121).

This socially unifying effect of kirtan is significant to the festival experience for multiple reasons. The social relationships present among the various groups that take part in Rath Yatra constitute an intricate web of sometimes tense inter- and intra-group dynamics—religiously, culturally, and in terms of immigrant and non-immigrant populations. The International Society of Krishna Consciousness, which sponsors both the New York City and Los Angeles Rath Yatras, has long walked a delicate tightrope between American and Indian identities and between Hinduism and a devotional philosophy initially identified by its adherents as not necessarily Hindu.

When Srila Prabhupada founded ISKCON at the height of the American counterculture in 1966, he intended the movement as a non-Hindu devotional movement focused on a unique philosophy separate from practices he saw as having become overly secularized. In Prabhupada's mind, Vedic spirituality, need not be tethered to the specific practices of Indian Hinduism. Thomas Hopkins writes that "it is intriguing when you look at the twentieth century A.D. and see which movements have successfully moved into the West". These are traditions that "historically have been to a very large extent culture-free, in the sense that they have not depended upon a particular cultural setting to make them work"(quoted in Gelberg 1983, p. 115). Certainly, in the case of ISKCON, many American youth disillusioned with a society guilty of assassinating its Civil Rights leaders

and ramping up involvement in the Vietnam War latched onto Krishna Consciousness in an effort to find a belief system and a practice with a more compassionate philosophy. Thomas J. Hopkins, speaking of this yearning for a personal relationship with a compassionate deity, says that "the kind of universal accessibility and attractiveness that we see in Vaishnava devotionalism owes much to the fact that it does speak to very basic human needs, and it speaks to those needs in terms that are both powerful enough and simple enough that people can connect with it at a variety of different levels" (Gelberg 1983, p. 116).

However, as the movement entered the 1980s and 1990s after scandals and anti-cult movements led to an economic and sociological decline, ISKCON began to consciously recruit Indian Hindus, who revitalized both the movement's numbers and economic prospects. Even so, as the movement made the turn into the 21st century, tensions remained between largely American-born temple residents who held themselves to a strict standard of what they perceived as ideological purity and Indian immigrants who were often less interested in a focused relationship with Krishna than an Indian cultural space and a site for the worship of Hindu deities, including Krishna, but not exclusive to Krishna (see Chapter 8 of Rochford 2007). ISKCON scholar E. Burke Rochford describes the initial pairing of ISKCON with America's counterculture as a "frame alignment" that "[allowed] individuals to meaningfully organize experience and thereby provide a basis for social interaction" (Rochford 2018, p. 36). This alignment, out of necessity, gave way to realignment as a process of Hinduization took place in the name of allowing ISKCON to thrive.

The necessarily intricate processes of frame alignment and realignment have, in some circumstances, led to disagreement over what is and is not authentic Vedic culture and to whom that Vedic culture rightfully belongs. Amanda Lucia, in writing about "guru" movements of the late 20th to 21st centuries, describes a process of retraditionalization in which gurus "actively reinvent the wheels of tradition" for the modern world, allowing "nostalgia for the pristine premodern" to drive an embrace of Vedic "messages as solutions to the disenchantment of modernity, and audiences eager for reenchantment actively promote a nostalgia-based return to imagined forms of tradition" (Lucia 2014, pp. 222–23).

The social tensions inherent in these processes of frame alignment, realignment, and retraditionalization are a lingering source of discontent among practitioners of ISKCON. The festival experience, then—and more specifically, the act of unified musical participation—can, at least temporarily, model the type of unification that may sometimes elude not only ISKCON practitioners but also members of the larger communities through which the Rath Yatra passes on a day-to-day basis. In 1966, Singer described kirtan as "a kind of acting out in dramatic form and bodily gestures of an ideal, for the purpose of evoking in men's minds the sentiments and attitudes that may eventually bring their behavior closer to the ideal" (Singer 1966, p. 127). Turino writes that "art is not really an 'imitation of life'; it would be more accurate to say that artistic processes crystallize the very essence of a good life by dramatically emphasizing the interplay of future possibilities with experiences and things we already know from the past—all within a specially framed and engrossing present." (Turino 2008, p. 18) Christopher Small, who famously theorized "musicking" as a verb or a process (in contrast to considering "music" a noun), writes that "a musical performance, while it lasts, brings into existence relationships that model in metaphoric form those which [participants] would like to see in the wider society of their everyday lives" (Small 1998, p. 46). Regardless of what tensions might exist within and without the religious community, the Rath Yatra parade represents an important moment to consciously set aside those tensions and model a possible ideal.

6. The Spiritual Disruption of Urban Space

At the initial moment when the Manhattan Rath Yatra turns onto Fifth Avenue at 45th Street, there is a great crush of people between the massive cart ropes that pull the deities' chariots and a great push-and-pull between those who are dancing along with the kirtan and those who simply walk the parade route but end up packed into the space in front of the cart. A tight line of NYPD motorcycles contains the crowd on the Northbound side of

the street, even as a stream of yellow taxis continues to honk its way down the other side, and pedestrians on either sidewalk stop to point, gawk at the parade, and pull out their cameras to capture the spectacle. The whole scene gives a strong impression of a river of color and sounds rushing through the canyon-like spaces between skyscrapers—what one devotee referred to as the "grandeur of Fifth Avenue".

There is a moment when the press is such that I, wielding cameras in both of my hands, find myself wedged between enthusiastic dancers and police motorcycles in a chaotic moment that brings to mind a conversation with a friend at the Alachua Hare Krishna community who told me that when he attended the main Rath Yatra in Puri, he was so overwhelmed in the face of the massive, energetic crowd that he thought, momentarily, that he was going to die. I think of the experiences that led the British to coin the term "juggernaut". It was, for my friend, a moment of clarity, a moment of awe in the face of the vast sublime that included a sudden awareness of his own fragility—and it seems that that moment of being temporarily overwhelmed by awe and an awareness of mortality is part of the Rath Yatra experience. It adds a poignant quality to the notion of taking darshan.

Like the altar of the temple, the Rath Yatra chariots are an explosion of colorful decoration. Each is a wooden cart painted brightly in red and yellow with animal designs—elephants between the spokes of the wheels, swans along the bed of the cart. Each is topped with an arch-shaped canopy made of red, blue, and yellow fabric. The many, many yards of garland stitched together by devotees over the last week are draped liberally around the carts. Each is effusively decorated with greenery, ribbons, tulle, fabric lanterns, and an abundance of star-shaped balloons. The passengers themselves— the sculptures of Jagganath, Subhadra, and Balaram—each sit in splendor at the front of their own chariot. Each member of the divine trio is accompanied by two or three devotees who fan them with peacock feather fans and otherwise attend to their comfort.

Taking the Rath Yatra through a public space may be considered a particularly significant religious act because, as the procession passes through a prominent and heavily populated location, those actions of temple worship that are believed to have a direct and immediate impact on the state of the soul are offered to the general public. The Rath Yatra may be seen as a traveling darshan, for example, taking a temple deity into the street and passing through the center of the city. Among devotees of Krishna, great significance is attached to an encounter with Jagganath on the street. According to Kurma,

> It's explained in the scriptures that if anyone sees the deity Lord Jagganath riding on the cart—let's just say some street bum happens to be walking in the street and he happens to see Lord Jagganath on the cart—it has tremendous spiritual importance for him. It has a very purifying effect. Spiritual progress means that your negative karma is dissipated. In order to progress in spiritual life one has to eradicate good and bad karma, so most of these festivals have that effect on anyone who participates knowingly and unknowingly. And if someone participates unknowingly just by seeing the cart or by seeing the enthusiasm. . . their spiritual life has begun.

The Festival of Rath Yatra specifically introduces, along with darshan and kirtan, an element of *lila*. The entwined spiritual and artistic traditions of India include the practice of lila, or "divine play", a kind of sacred theater that re-enacts the pastimes and biographies of gods and goddesses as a divinely ordained means of comprehending them. Suzanne Schwartz writes that "the world as we know it, according to Hindu philosophy, is a dream, a play, an artful construction devised by the divine realm. It is both comedy and tragedy, often simultaneously, and it is ultimately unreal". However, the gods provide

> a variety of paths to true knowledge of what is ultimately real for those who choose to follow them. One of those paths is to study and practice lila, and, in so doing, participate in this divine form of creation. The end result may include enlightenment, that is, understanding of the ultimate reality, however fleeting. (Schwartz 2004, p. 11)

Re-enacting Jagganath, Balaram, and Subhadra's journey past Vrindavan by parading them through the streets is a form of lila. And while many of the forms of service to the deities associated with temple worship would be impractical in a processional context, on the parade route, an appointed form of service is pulling the cart ropes attached to each chariot. I have often heard devotees assert that any person who takes hold of the cart ropes during Rath Yatra performs an act of service for Jagganath and thus receives forgiveness of sins, whether that person be a devotee or a passerby. According to ISKCON guru Romapada Swami, time spent in Puri, the city sacred to Lord Jagganath, will purify the soul of its sinful impulses. The presence of a Rath Yatra parade makes that opportunity available to all in proximity because the presence of Jagganath on his cart causes the space that he inhabits to become, however temporarily, Puri (Nilesh Moghe (2008), HH Romapada Swami, entry posted 2008).

Like the temple practices of darshan and lila, kirtan is a defining element of the Rath Yatra procession. The style of kirtan promoted by Caitanya Mahaprabhu in the 15th century and propagated by Krishna devotees around the world today lends itself to movement through public spaces. The drum most commonly used in kirtan, the mridanga (not to be confused with the mridangam commonly used in Carnatic classical music), is specifically designed to be lightweight and easily carried while dancing. Harmoniums are sold not only in the floor models commonly used in temples but also in smaller, lightweight models that can be carried on a strap around the neck. The driving, hypnotic rhythms that lend themselves to dancing in temple rooms also offer a propulsive accompaniment to a procession.

The kirtans performed during Rath Yatra are, like the darshan offered by carrying Jagganath into the street, a disruption of public space that, according to Vaishnava belief, may bring the bypasser into sensory contact with Krishna himself. I have discussed the belief that the sound vibrations created by singing the names of Krishna have a purifying, salvific effect because of the notion that the names of God carry his literal presence. While the greatest spiritual benefit, within the purview of temple worship, is to be gained by actually singing the sacred words oneself, the act of hearing them can also, according to Hindu believers, "[purify] and [transform] one's life until it vibrates in harmony with the divine, which is in itself pure sound" (Coward and Goa 2004, pp. 5–6).

The powerful changes that ISKCON converts ascribe to hearing their first kirtans are important evidence of the transformative power ascribed to the presence of "Krishna in vibratory form" (Bryant 2007, pp. 15–16). The chanting of kirtan is believed to have a purifying effect not only on those who chant but also on those who listen. Neal Delmonico writes, "Chanting to oneself, in one's mind or in a whisper, is beneficial for oneself, but chanting loudly is beneficial for oneself and for all those who hear. Loud chanting is thus said to be a hundred times more beneficial than silent chanting" (Delmonico 2007, p. 552).

Devotees' faith in the transformative power of kirtan extends from the bodies of active listeners to the physical environments touched by the sacred sound vibrations of Krishna's name. In his important work on devotional singing in India, Stephen Slawek refers to "sound's mystical potency to promote auspiciousness" as singers "imbue the environment with divine vibrations". Slawek quotes one of his informants in asserting that "a kirtan is like a laboratory through which we spread the verbal form of Brahman . . . by uttering good words, the pollution in the air is counteracted. So, the farther are broadcast our kirtan, the better. We believe that our kirtan benefits the welfare of the whole world" (Slawek 1998, p. 84).

For this reason, there is powerful significance to not only taking the Rath Yatra into the streets where it can be seen, heard, and experienced by many but also taking it through a central location—like Manhattan's famed Fifth Avenue—in a city that is among the world's most important cultural centers. Krishna devotees might hope to have a purifying impact on this famous location in such a prominent city through their kirtan and thus have their influence radiate outward in the various ways that New York City influences the world. Along with the central core group of kirtaniya, instrumentalists, and dancers in front of

every cart, a few devotees with each group carry loudspeakers over their shoulders, thus bathing their environment with the purifying sounds of kirtan.

Banabhatta refers to texts on the life of Lord Caitanya that describe the ecstasies of his devotees in kirtan: "The experience from chanting [for] one who is actually doing it himself is almost like diving deep within an ocean of nectar. . .one sometimes loses his external awareness of where he even is". Specifically, the kirtan singers "would have tears flowing out of their eyes out of intense ecstasy, and they would experience quivering in their body and laughing uncontrollably". Banabhatta's key point in relation to the Rath Yatra is this:

> Even people who were outside hearing it would experience. . .these types of symptoms. It's explained that even though they weren't diving the ocean of ecstasy, they were floating on top of it. Especially when we pull the beautiful carts down the street and all the devotees are dancing and chanting, it's such a colorful and beautiful performance and celebration on so many different levels. So when people are walking down the street with their babies and their friends, it's such an out of place thing and such a joyous celebration that you can see people spontaneously get caught up in the euphoria and the blissfulness of it. And you can see that on their expressions.

In Los Angeles, the Rath Yatra proceeds through the city of Santa Monica and onto the famous Oceanfront Walk on Venice Beach. Venice Beach ranks among Los Angeles' most popular tourist destinations and sites for social gatherings and public celebration; it is also a place that seems devoted to the celebration of the weird, the wild, and the uninhibitedly individualistic. One side of the Oceanfront Walk is lined with permanent stores, the other with tents and booths occupied by vendors, street musicians, pedestrians costumed in outfits ranging from a marijuana leaf to the literal devil strolling through the parade, freak shows, tattoo and piercing parlors, sidewalk cafes, head shops, and arts and handicraft booths offering henna tattoos, Bob Marley merchandise, handmade jewelry, caricatures, and Dia de los Muertos sugar skulls. When I asked devotees to explain what makes this Rath Yatra of all Rath Yatras distinctive, I was amused by the number of times that they would simply wave an arm to take in the whole surroundings and stammer something along the lines of, "It is just—all of this".

The entire Venice Beach area resembles nothing so much as a theater of the carnivalesque, and in its context, the colorful, exuberant character of the Rath Yatra and its accompanying kirtan play into this theater of the carnivalesque. Many residents of Los Angeles have rich memories of the first decades after the establishment of ISKCON when, in the 1970s and early 1980s, devotees used to take an elephant down the street as part of the parade. Civic ordinances shut down the elephant rides decades ago, but temple devotees laugh about the number of people who still visit the restaurant at the New Dwaraka temple complex during the weeks leading up to Rath Yatra and eagerly ask if the elephants will be back. Longtime Los Angeles devotee Nam Kirtan acknowledges that most people who pass through the kirtan know next to nothing about what it is really about, but "it is a festive mood; everyone's having a good time. People who do not know a thing [regarding] what it is about or understand it [still find that it] looks like fun [because] we are throwing flowers and dancing and singing. So even people who do not have a clue that it is about a spiritual thing. . .can enjoy it because it is a good time".

Many beachgoers, including those who come in costume and dance in idiosyncratic ways, throw themselves fully into the kirtan, as well as the Festival of India that follows on the beach. It is not surprising to me that people who perhaps come to Venice to work out some sort of internal energy and, as they say, let their freak flag fly, find a venue at the Rath Yatra and a vehicle for unbridled self-expression and the exploration of internal impulses through kirtan. It is an impulse commonly credited to Americans with an individualistic countercultural bent—"misfit consciousness is a very American state of mind", proclaims a writer on counterculture fixtures, the Grateful Dead (Brightman 1998). But it is also not out of place in Vaishnava devotionalism. Stephen Slawek quotes an Indian kirtan singer explaining that "as long as we are doing kirtan. . .we will not think in favor of or against

anybody, not about anyone's qualities or defects; we will just concentrate and think that we are singing kirtan" (Slawek 1998, p. 84). The free-spirited dancing by beachgoers may occasionally be irreverent, but it is not inappropriate to the intentions of the devotees who put on this festival. As many of them have reminded me so often, the invitation to participate in Krishna consciousness in some manner—be that food, philosophy, or erratic and uninhibited dance—is very open-ended. Devotees are eager to meet people where they are and offer Krishna consciousness as a proposed answer to their individual needs. According to J. Stillson Judah, the doctrines of Krishna Consciousness afforded American youth a "continuation of [their] accepted countercultural values now arranged in a more meaningful context" (Judah 1984, p. 11). In other words, the festival atmosphere of kirtan offers meaning and structure to such unbridled self-exploration.

7. Conclusions: Taking the Temple to the Streets

The Rath Yatra Festival of Chariots is considered genuinely unique within Hinduism as the only time when, after the installation of deities in a temple, those deities are taken outside and paraded through public streets. Many of the activities associated with Bhakti Yoga—the yoga of love and devotion, the yoga of emotional attachment to the Divine—involve flooding oneself with sacred beauty and purifying the self in the process. During Rath Yatra, Jagganath's chariots essentially act as a mobile temple, offering the salvific effects of temple worship to unaffiliated bypassers and even their entire environment by virtue of a surprise confrontation with the purifying influence of divine beauty. The disruptive nature of celebration facilitates this spiritual disruption of public spaces while inviting all who encounter the festival to share in a unifying experience of collective joy. Kirtan drummer Banabhatta sums up the ultimate realization behind the performance of Rath Yatra, with all of its attendant activities, thus: "Everything that we do is a celebration, because [our] whole life is a celebration [when] we realize the real purpose behind it".

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Note

[1] The research presented here is based on several years of fieldwork primarily conducted at temples in the United States affiliated with ISKCON, or the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, colloquially known as the Hare Krishna movement, as founded in the United States by Bengali guru Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada in 1966, and which has since taken on a broad international identity. Members of ISKCON identify with the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition descended from Caitanya Mahaprabhu in the Fifteenth Century. Given the extraordinary diversity of doctrines and practices gathered under the broad umbrella of Hinduism, both inside India and as part of the Indian cultural diaspora, it should be noted that while the principles discussed in this article are based on ancient texts and traditions, there are many differences and disagreements of doctrine and practice to be found among those who celebrate Rath Yatra around the world, and the specifics given in this article relate to the particular practices of ISKCON in American temples.

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