

Sri Chaitanya & Puri's Ratha Yatra

Jawhar Sircar

Online, 01-07-22

Puri's Ratha Yatra reminds Bengalis about Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who was known for his extreme demonstrations of piety and love for Jagannath. When he reached Puri after he took Sannyas in 1510, he was so overwhelmed with emotions that he rushed in a trance to embrace the image of Jagannath — and got roughed up by the priests who took him to be crazy. Sri Chaitanya however chose to spend 24 long years in Puri, though in the first 6 years he used it as his base to visit Vrindavan and extensive areas in Uttar, Dakshin and Pashchim Bharat. As we know, he died under mysterious circumstances in Puri in 1533.

Many historians feel that Chaitanya selected Jagannath Dham as his base because it was undoubtedly the thriving capital of Vaishnavism in eastern India and far better known than Bengal, which was under Muslim rule. Puri's king, Pratapa Rudra Deva was his strong patron. We come across many vivid descriptions of Chaitanya's participation during Rathayatra in the Madhya Leela of Krishnadas Kaviraj's popular Chaitanya Charitamrita.

He mentions how Pratapa Rudra personally stood with his entourage to ensure that Mahaprabhu and his band could join the ceremony freely. Kaviraj expresses the sentiments of the Gaudiya Vaishnavas when he describes the indigenous (originally non Brahman) Daita guardians of Jagannatha "as powerful as drunken elephants". The Gaudiya Vaishnavas must have been at their receiving end more than once.

We also note how the colossal deities were bound at the waist by thick silk ropes with which the muscular Daitas tugged them out of the temple. They transferred them over a series of thick cotton mats that were spread all the way and placed them on the rathas. Chaitanya was very impressed to see how the king himself swept the path for Jagannath with his golden-handled broom and how he sprinkled sandalwood scented water all over.

The Charitamrita describes the tall rathas that "appeared to be made of gold and were as high as Mount Sumeru". One can practically witness the entire proceedings exactly five hundred years ago, through Krishnadasa's wonderful narratives. Numerous shiny brass bells and gongs rang on the rathas as they moved along. They were covered all over with multi coloured silken cloth and had bright mirrors fixed on them that dazzled the crowds. Vaishnava sakhis and kirtanias marvelled at the sparkling white sand strewn all over the route that looked like the banks of the holy Yamuna. This practical arrangement made it easier to pull the gigantic rathas over muddy, slippery and uneven medieval roads and prevented skidding.

Krishnadas narrates how Sri Chaitanya got his followers together and decorated them himself with flower garlands and sandalwood paste. While Advaita Acharya and Nityananda Prabhu were in raptures at this gesture, Mahaprabhu walked over to the sankirtana performers led by Swarup Damodara and Srivastava Thakur and put the garlands and paste on them as well. Chaitanya personally supervised the formation of different sankirtan groups and decided how Nityananda, Advaita, Haridasa and Vakreswara were to lead the dance. He personally directed his supporters on their specific role in group dancing. A leader of Chaitanya's stature could hardly afford to be other-worldly all the time. We get close glimpses of his management style and his meticulous planning and monitoring.

When he saw that a sankirtana party had come from Kulingram, he advised Ramanda and Satyaraja to lead and guide them, so that nothing was out of tune. He repeated this formula for another group from Srikhanda, that Narahari and Raghunatha were to lead. Naturally, Puri was in total awe as Chaitanya ensured that his small groups take up every visible position in the procession, including the prized location in front of Jagannatha's chariot: where he himself leapt high into the air at periodic intervals, while Advaita kept chanting 'Hori-bol, Hori-bol !' He fell down once in a while, but he kept rolling on the ground and then sprang back into action. His event management was very detailed.

Most of Chaitanya's top local comrades, namely, Ramanada, Shyamanda and Baladeva Vidyabhuasana were not Brahmins and thus branded as Shudras. The ruling priesthood of Puri was clearly against this constant Shudra-led democratisation of worship. But by operating under these hostile circumstances in Puri, Sri Chaitanya's caste-less Gaudiya Vaishnavism made its mark in the world of religion and contesting paths that it would secure elsewhere.