



By Madhavananda Das

Part two: THE SWEET ANSWER

In part one of this presentation we addressed a question that many devotees have: “How are we to understand the return *Ratha-yātrā* in Jagannath Puri?” In the previous article we addressed the first, or opulent answer to that question, which is that Jagannath has to return to his newly married wife Lakshmi.

However, considering that Gaudiya Vaishnavas deem the *Ratha-yātrā* to represent the ecstatic emotions of the residents of Vrindavan taking Krishna home from Kuruksetra, there is also a sweet, and more internal answer to the question. How do we understand the return *Ratha-yātrā* from that perspective? Is it a festival celebrating taking Krishna away from Vrindavan?

We will also address a second important doubt in this final installment: “Did Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu take part in the return *Ratha-yātrā*, and if so, how did he participate?”

It might be helpful if we first contemplate something about the profound mood and emotions experienced by the Vrajavasis at Kurukshetra. They were going through a whirlpool of conflicting ecstatic feelings. On one hand there was the sweet bliss of finally meeting with Krishna again after such a long time — a meeting that they were not even sure was going to ever happen. At the same time, there was some sulkiness, especially amongst the *vraja-gopīs*: “You left us! You promised you would return, and you didn’t!”



Krishna leaves Vrindavan and plunges the gopīs into an ocean of separation

Although they were experiencing the highest happiness of again meeting with their beloved Krishna. They also couldn't forget the fact that he had left them.

Other emotions they were poignantly experiencing include the fact that although they were so, very, very happy to be reunited with Krishna, they were unhappy with the opulent regal atmosphere present there at Kuruksetra.

They wanted him to come home to Vrindavan.

Aside from this, there was yet another conflicting feeling churning the waves of their ocean-like hearts: They were painfully aware that soon, Krishna was going to leave them again to return to Dwarka. And after his departure, they didn't know if they would ever see him again or not.

The atmosphere in Jagannath Puri is a kind of emotional mirror of the mood at Kuruksetra when Krishna met the Vrajavasis there.

These seemingly opposite emotions work together to help create an inconceivable atmosphere in Puri that Sri Srimad Gour Govinda Maharaja called, "*aiśvarya-mādhurya yugala-milana* — a simultaneous combination of opulence and sweetness", and the place of "Two opposites in one container — union and separation." As the Vrajavasis experienced in Kuruksetra, there is union in Puri. Having *darśan* of Jagannath Krishna provides



Photo by Bhakta Charles

Sri Jagannath on his cart

unlimited pleasure for Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Yet at the same time, in Jagannath Puri, as in Kuruksetra there are also the pangs of separation.

So then what about our above question: “Did Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu take part in Lord Jagannath’s Bahudha or return *Ratha-yātrā*, and if so what was his mood?”

Srila Krishnadas Kaviraj Goswami describes in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (*madhya* 15.16), that during the four month period of *cātur māsyā*, the associates of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu took part in all of the festivals of Lord Jagannath in Puri. When I first came across that statement I remember thinking to myself:

“ALL of the festivals? And if so then what about the return *Ratha-yātrā*?”

Moreover, after contemplating further on the matter, it seemed obvious to me, that the devotees of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu never would have attended the return *Ratha-yātrā* if Mahaprabhu didn’t observe it. Kaviraj Goswami says that those devotees were more attached to his association than even having *darśana* of Lord Jagannath. So it seemed to me that Mahaprabhu must have attended the festival.

If so, what was Mahaprabhu’s mood at that time? Can we accept that he was helping to take Krishna away from the Vrindavan like Gundicha temple to return him to the Dwarka like atmosphere of the Sri or Jagannath Mandir?



Jagannath, Baladev, and Subhadra

With these thoughts in mind, I began further research on the subject. As part of that research, I inquired from many sadhus and learned persons in Puri, including the King of Puri and many of the mahunts, or spiritual leaders of various groups there.

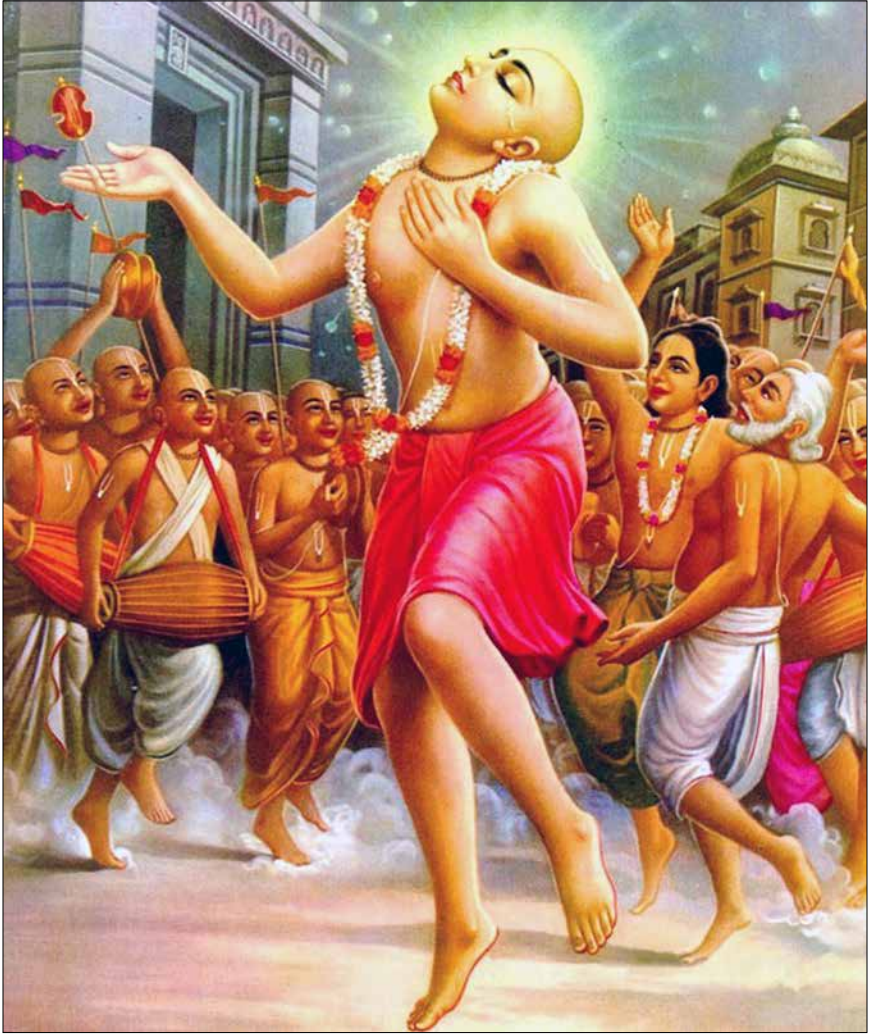
Basically the reply I got was, “No. He didn’t observe that festival.”

Srila Murari Gupta was one of the personal associates of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Nabadwip. He wrote

in Sanskrit, one of the first biographies of Lord Chaitanya, entitled, “*Śrī Kṛṣṇa-caitanya-caritāmṛtam*”. Therein he speaks about Mahaprabhu’s attendance at the return *Ratha-yātrā*. He elaborates slightly on it saying, *gaura-candro ratham anugata* — “Moonlike Gauranga followed *behind* the cart of Lord Jagannath.” (text 4.21.2)

Finally I had an answer that I found satisfying! In the same way that Radharani and the *gopīs* followed behind the chariot of Akrura when he was taking Krishna away from Vrindavan, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu followed behind the cart of Lord Jagannath in Puri when he was leaving the Vrindavan like Gundicha Mandir. Neither, the *gopīs*, nor Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu pulled the Lord’s cart to Mathura, or the Puri Sri Mandir. Rather, they were following behind (*anugata*); crying and pleading, “Don’t go! Don’t go!”

Jagannath Puri Dham has many names. It is called Purushottam Kshetra (the place of the Supreme Lord), Sri Kshetra (the place of Lakshmi Devi), Anna Kshetra (the place of prasadam rice), and Durlabha Kshetra (a



difficult place to enter). Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati also addressed it as Vipralambha Kshetra, or the place of separation. Yet another name is Gupta Dham, a hidden mysterious place. I hope from this humble presentation that the Vaishnavas may have a deeper understanding of this festival and this very deep, mysterious abode of separation.

Vaiṣṇava-kṛpā-prārthī (praying for the blessings of the devotees),
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