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Published by Anonymous on Jul. 01, 2003

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No one knows exactly when Orissa's legendary Jagannath Ratha Yatra began, but saving, growing and guarding trees may determine whether it continues

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Only the hardest of hearts could lack compassion for an environmental conservation program like the Sri Jagannath Banaprakalpa Plantation Project of Orissa. Founded for the sole purpose of providing timber each year to construct the three giant chariots featured in the annual Ratha Yatra (car festival) of Lord Jagannath at Puri in the state of Orissa, this program gains special distinction because its motive is solely religious.

Building these three, giant, rolling, temple-like edifices new every twelve months is no small task. Nearly 14,000 cubic feet of wood—about what it would take to build six medium-size houses—must be harvested and milled from at least ten different species of 40-year-old trees. Today, these trees are getting scarce.

Old timers tell tales of days when the hills around Puri were so lush with dense forests that making a fuss about saving, growing or guarding trees for any reason would have seemed ludicrous. But times have changed. Nowadays, Jagannath's

lumberjacks desperately comb and recomb the land's dwindling greenery for enough trees to "just get through one more festival." Year by year, the search is growing more difficult.

Orissa's ballooning urbanization is not only decreasing forest acreage, it is also destroying nature's delicate ecological balance, making even the state's remaining forest space less productive. Saving Orissa's trees is a complicated problem, requiring not only money, but meticulous planning and long-term project management.

By August, 2000, 685 acres of trees for chariot construction were planted in twelve different locations around Puri. This was the first great accomplishment of the Jagannath Plantation Project, which is currently monitored by a ten-member steering committee overseen by Gajapati Maharaja, the king of Puri. One of the most significant achievements of this initial endeavor was gaining the participation of local villagers who are still actively involved in the continued care and protection of these sacred groves. There is, however, much more to be done.

It takes 30 to 40 years for trees to grow big enough to provide the large, long planks required for the construction of the lumbering yatra chariots. One challenge for the future will be managing the timing of tree planting so that enough mature timber is available each and every year. Another challenge will be developing a long-term, tree-farming plan that includes continued motivation and involvement of local residents, much needed for the ongoing work. All of this must be designed to

last as long as the Yatra continues— which, it must be assumed, will be forever.

Because the continued success of Puri's Ratha Yatra is so fundamentally important to Orissa, local government has proclaimed the Yatra a "state festival" and decreed that wood for the chariots should be supplied free of charge. This involvement of the public has helped spread a sense of state-wide pride and responsibility for the continuation of this great religious practice.

The Festival

The Ratha Yatra of Lord Jagannath is a Vaishnava festival that occurs during India's rainy season in the months of June and July. Jagannath is another name for Lord Krishna. Puri, the town in which the Ratha Yatra occurs, is an abbreviation for Jagannathpuri, which means "the home of the Lord of the Universe."

The most impressive part of the festival is the chariot procession, which starts in Puri at the Temple of Jagannath. This temple, where the Jagannath Deity is enshrined year-round, is so ancient, no one really knows when it was built. According to legend, it has existed forever. According to the Mahabharata, an epic poem revered both as scripture and historical record, it was built 200 years after a great war occurred in India,

14 centuries bce. According to inconclusive archeological accounts, it was constructed 800 to 1,000 years ago.

Although the chariots for the Ratha Yatra are recreated every year, the Deities that ride within them—Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshan—are newly carved out of wood only once in twelve years. The main chariot for Jagannath is called Nandighosha. It is 60 feet tall, 35 feet square, rides on 16 wheels and requires at least 4,200 devotees to pull it. The other two chariots are not quite as large. Balabhadra's is called Taladhvaja. It is 55 feet tall with 14 wheels. The smallest one, Deviratha, belongs to Subhadra, although it also carries Sudarshan. It is 50 feet tall and has 12 wheels.

The Legend of the Carpenter

The four Deities of Jagannath are internationally famous for their unusual appearance. They have no feet, their hands are but stubs and their round, saucer eyes stare forward as if in shock. They are crudely rendered in wood and are purposely left unfinished. An ancient myth, often told by mothers to their babies at bedtime, best conveys why they look the way they do. That story has many versions. Here is one:

The famous Mahabharata war of India, which took place approximately 3,500 years ago, ended with the death of Lord Krishna. Two hundred years after that, Krishna began appearing to King Indradyumna of Puri in his dreams. In those dreams he ordered the king to have a murti (statue) carved of him in a form that could be worshiped during the Kali Yuga, the dark age of man. He also made it clear that he wanted this murti to be "unlike any other."

The King gave the unusual assignment to a reputable local carpenter. The carpenter, who was actually Lord Krishna in disguise, told the king confidently and conclusively that he would complete the job all by himself, on one condition: that he be sealed in a room and allowed to work in isolation. He was very specific that no one should enter the room during his work. The king agreed. The craftsman was sealed in a chamber, and the carving began.

After a few days, the clatter and banging of carpenter's tools stopped. The king wanted to enter the room but, remembering his promise, restrained himself. His queen, however, could not resist and had her guards break down the door. Inside the chamber, there were four icons, but no carpenter. Everyone was aghast. The Deities were certainly "unlike any other," but no one had anticipated exactly how "unlike any other" they

would be. Had the carving been interrupted and therefore left incomplete? Or was this the way that they were intended to look? No one will ever know for sure. What is certain, however, is that they have been worshiped according to this design, both within the Jagannath Temple and during the Ratha Yatra, for hundreds of years.

The Ritual of Creation: The sanctified creation of Jagannath's four Deities is a great deal more than four wooden logs whittled into shape. Practiced today as it was more than a thousand years ago, it is a highly ritualized and detailed procedure starting long before the carvers ever lift their blades. First, 28 priests from the Jagannath temple pray before sleep for dreams giving instructions on where to find just the right wood. Amazingly, these dreams always occur. The following morning, the priests set out upon a search for the wood of their dreams. When they finally locate what they feel is the designated grove, they assess the validity of their discovery according to strict stipulation: the trees they have chosen must be of the neem variety (*azadirachta indica*). They should have certain symbols incised on or about them. There should be a cobra nearby. And there should be no birds living within the trees. If all these qualifications can be met, the trees are cut—but only with a golden ax. It can then be transported to Puri, but only in carts built just for this journey.

All the way to Puri, the freshly cut timber is worshipped by devotees along the road. When the wood finally arrives at the Jagannath Temple, trained carvers immediately begin their work. When they are "finished" the images are decoratively painted by chtrakars, a group of hereditary artists trained just for this task. Finally the eldest priest of the Jagannath Temple ceremoniously transfers the temple's spiritual power from the old deities into the new ones, and the freshly reincarnated Gods are installed upon their rightful thrones. Once a year they are taken in procession during Puri's Ratha Yatra.

It is the hope of the Jagannatha Plantation Project that such worship might continue for many years to come. This, it seems, would depend on wood.