Pilgrimage: Visiting Lord Jagannath
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Pilgrimage

Visiting Lord Jagannath

Join our family's devotional trek to the sacred town of Puri in Odisha and its famous Vaishnava temple

By Deepti R. Paikray, New Jersey

Our annual trips to India are incomplete without worshiping our beloved family Deity--Lord Jagannath, Ruler of the Universe. In March, 2010, we headed for Bhubaneswar, Odisha's capital city. Home to almost 600 temples, Bhubaneswar is the jumping-off place for pilgrims to Puri, sixty kilometers to the north. Buses and taxis regularly ply between the two cities, especially during the months from August to February, when the weather is the most pleasant. Eminent artists and writers have brought glory to their home state of Odisha, and everyday life here is a natural affirmation of its rich cultural tapestry. Although Odia is the spoken language, many people here can also converse in English and Hindi.

The road to Puri is fringed with graceful coconut and other palm trees. A low sun in the sky rides alongside our car over unremitting patches of lush paddy fields. We pass Pipli Village, famous for its prismatic applique work, wishing we had enough time for a side trip to Konark, the famed Sun Temple. Halfway to Puri, we do stop at Dakshineswar Kali, a powerful temple to the Goddess; and later at Sakhi Gopal, a revered Krishna temple. On the outskirts of Puri, we offer the prayers at Batamangala Temple, where all devotees offer prayers before and after worshiping Lord Jagannath.

The Jagannath temple is now easily visible, towering above the ancient city of Puri sprawling at its feet. The main road to the temple is a scene of happy chaos. Cyclists, rickshaws and minibuses spouting black smoke dodge the omnipresent pedestrians, while vendors pursue harried tourists.

The temple, fortified by two walls built in the fifteenth century, has four entry gates: Simhadwara, Lion Gate; Ashwadwara, Horse Gate, Vyaghradwara, Tiger Gate; and Hastidwara, Elephant Gate. The gates denote dharma, artha, kama and moksha, the four goals of human life. The animals signify the four emotions of lust, love, attachment and jealousy, which are to be conquered for reaching the divine. Kings enter through the Lion Gate and saints through the Horse Gate. We enter through the Lion gate and climb the 22 steps to the temple's inner compound, carefully skirting an iron tile--a harbinger of misfortune if stepped upon.

The morning activity fills the temple. Families surround chanting brahmins, priests in cotton dhotis scuttle around, hawkers sell garlands of marigold and basil. All the while, fearless monkeys scamper wherever they please. Roars of adoration from a sea of devotees emanate intermittently from the temple's innermost shrine.

A sense of awe and happiness descends upon us as we breathe in the fragrance of camphor and ghee lamps. These are hallowed grounds earlier traversed by Lord's illustrious devotees from diverse religious faiths and stratas of society--Guru Nanak, Salabega, Kabir, Tulsidas, Chaitanya.

We soon emerge into the cobbled temple compound, sprawling 400,000 square feet, that in days of yore provided shelter to civilians during Muslim invasions. The main structure housing the Deities, completed in the 12th century, looms 214 feet above us. The interior walls of this great compound are covered with pattachitra paintings, the folk art of Odisha, displaying images from epics, fables, myths, royal processions, court ladies, animals and birds. Most of the rest of the temple, however, has been covered in a thick coat of plaster to protect the structure from the ravages of sea air. Restoration efforts removing this plaster have revealed detailed carvings of remarkable beauty.

We offer ghee lamps to the Deities of each of the 43 shrines encircling the main temple, including the major shrines of Ganesha, Ananta Vasudev, Vimala, Shakti, Sri Rama and the Navagraha. We ladies are most charmed when offered red bangles and kumkum by the priest at the Goddess Lakshmi temple. Just before leaving this outer area, we worship at the sacred banyan tree, making a wish while tying a stone to a branch.

We purchase our sacred offering at the government stand and, accompanied by a priest, enter the temple itself. As we stand behind the famed Garuda pillar, we catch our first glimpse of our Lord. We embrace the Garuda pillar, as doing so heals one of all ailments and sins. The crowds are overcome with devotion, and cries of "Jai Jagannatha" rend the air.

We inch closer to the Deities until parallel with the guardrail, beyond which only priests are allowed. The massive Deities are in their tribal forms, with huge eyes, attired in gold and decorated with jewels and flowers. Some say the triad of Deities represents the synthesis of major cults of Hinduism: Siva, Shakti and Vishnu; thus Lord Jagannath is the amalgamation of all Gods.

His gigantic eyes pierced my innermost subtle thoughts. As a scholar aptly said, "The sacred does not simply present itself to our gaze: it reaches out to seize us in its searing grasp." Abruptly, I am bought back to ordinary consciousness by the sound of clashing cymbals, announcing the offerings of cakes made from rice and bananas.

Our worship complete, the volunteers urge us back into the courtyard. The divine spell breaks as we emerge into the bright sunlight. We sit down to savor the prasadam while the priest summarizes the temple's routine. The day begins, he explains, by offering lamps to the Deities, followed by bathing and dressing. The daily bathing is done symbolically, in front of three mirrors reflecting the Deities' images--their wooden forms are not suitable for frequent immersion. Actual bathing is just once a year, on the full moon of Jyeshta, May/June.

The daily worship, in which the Deity is treated in a very human way, combines the divine adventures of Krishna's boyhood home of Vrindavan and his adult reign as king in Dwarka. There are 36 ceremonial attires for the Deities, ranging from those appropriate for a child, the madhurya lila, to those for a king, aishwarya lila. A popular one is suna vesa when the Gods are adorned in gold upon their return from the annual car festival. The Deities are offered food six times a day, and at night they are lulled to sleep through renderings of Gita Govinda, songs of the 11th-century poet Jayadeva, along with offerings of coconut and betel. During the scalding summer months, the Deities are covered in cool sandalwood and symbolically taken for boating excursions. During Kartika months (October/November), they enjoy afternoon siesta to compensate for rising earlier in the morning.

We make our final salutations to the Nilachakra, Lord Vishnu's discus, made of eight metals. The twelve-foot diameter disk, mounted on top of the temple, was repaired last year by the Archeological Department of India. Our last stop before leaving the temple grounds is Koili Baikuntha, the "burial ground." Every 12 or 19 years when the Deities are replaced, the old ones are ceremoniously buried here. The new Deities are prepared at this same site from auspicious neem logs found after an elaborate search in the distant forests. These logs are carried to the temple in carts pulled by devotees. As the Deities are installed, the Brahma Padartha must be transferred from the old ones to the new ones. This mysterious object, said to be a sacred Saligrama stone, is moved at midnight by the senior priest. He is blindfolded and his hands padded, so that even he does not see or touch the powerful Brahma Padartha.

We are off to Anand Bazaar, said to be the world's largest feeding area, whose kitchen serves at least 10,000 devotees a day with mounds of pearly rice, sunny lentils, piquant curries and robust sauces ladled onto banana leaves. Fifty-six types of food offerings (bhoga) are prepared here daily and offered to the Lord. There are some 750 wood stoves in the kitchen, operated by 500 cooks with 1,500 helpers. Every day, 7,200 kilos of rice and a proportionate quantity of pulses and vegetables are cooked in earthen pots, nine per stove.

After our meal and a brief rest, we set out to shop for souvenirs in the vast marketplace adjacent to the temple. We complete our visit with a brisk walk along Puri's famous beach.

Perhaps next time we will come for the most famous event of all, the great chariot festival held in June/July, when the actual Deities are taken in procession to Gundica Temple, three kilometers away. These are not the "parade Deities" used in all other temples, but the actual Deities--a practice unique to this temple in all of India.

These massive chariots--the source of our English word juggernaut, meaning a huge and overwhelming force--are built anew each year. They are made from 1,072 logs by 125 carpenters. The largest, that of Jagannath, stands 70 feet tall and rolls on 18 huge wooden wheels. The chariots are pulled by devotees, using thick ropes each more than a hundred feet long. Thousands vie for a chance to help pull these chariots--all under the watchful eye of the security forces (see a video at

http://bit.ly/rath-yatra). After nine days, the Deities return to the main temple. This Rath Yatra festival is duplicated at temples across India and around the world.

Tired but gratified, we return to our car for the journey back to Bhubaneswar. I cast one last look at the proud Nilachakra crowning the temple with its fluttering flags. Jayadeva's Gita Govinda songs resonate from the walkway shops, beseeching the Lord not for fame or material gains, but only for His love and grace. PIpi

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