

Rathayatra Pastimes by Lokanath Swami

Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu spent His later years in Jagannatha Puri, Orissa, immersed in love of Godhead and absorbed in wonderful pastimes with His intimate associates and with the Deity of Krsna in Puri, known as Jagannatha, “the Lord of the universe.” This was nearly five hundred years ago.

One of the most attractive of Lord Caitanya’s pastimes was His role in the yearly Rathayatra, the Festival of the Chariots, in which Lord Jagannatha parades through the main street of the city on a huge decorated cart pulled by devotees. Year after year for eighteen years altogether Lord Caitanya took part in the Rathayatra festival in Puri.

Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu was Krsna Himself in the mood of Srimati Radharani. So during the festival He used to chant and dance in front of Lord Jagannatha’s cart, acting out a drama. Srila Prabhupada, commenting on the Caitanya-caritamṛta, where these pastimes are described, says that the two Lords Lord Caitanya and Lord Jagannatha were reenacting a conjugal pastime, or madhurya-lila. Lord Caitanya, absorbed in transcendental emotions, would play the role of Srimati Radharani, Lord Jagannatha’s eternal consort. Sometimes Lord Caitanya would fall behind Lord Jagannatha’s cart. The cart would then stop as Jagannatha tried to catch sight of Caitanya Mahaprabhu, attracted by His graceful and enchanting dancing.

The two Lords were reenacting the pastimes performed five thousand years ago in the holy place of Kuruksetra when Sri Sri Radha and Krsna met after many years of separation. They had last seen each other in Vrndavana, when Akrura had come to take Krsna and Balarama to nearby Mathura. That day had been the worst day for Radharani, the gopis (cowherd girls), and all the Vrajavasis (residents of Vrndavana). As Krsna left, He

promised that after killing the demons outside Vrndavana He would return.

Krsna, the life of the Vrajavasis, stayed in Mathura for some time and then moved to Dvaraka, where He continued His wondrous pastimes. During these many years, Radha and the Vrajavasis intensely, almost unbearably felt separation from Krsna's lotus feet.

The Meeting at Kuruksetra- When Nanda Maharaja (Krsna's father) and Srimati Radharani and the other residents of Vrndavana learned of Krsna's plan to visit Kuruksetra, not far away, they at once decided to go there. The long-awaited meeting of Krsna with these devotees from Vrndavana took place in Kuruksetra on the occasion of a solar eclipse, when the residents of Dvaraka came to bathe in Kurukshetra's holy lakes.

The residents of Dvaraka, members of the Yadu dynasty, erected their royal camp, and nearby the cowherd Vrajavasis parked their simple carts. Krsna and His brother Balarama, Their sister Subhadra, and the residents of Dvaraka and Vrndavana like Vasudeva, Devaki, Nanda Maharaja, Yasoda Mayi, Rohini, Radharani, the gopis all met together, mingling and sharing one another's company.

The Vrajavasis and the gopis were especially pleased to meet Krsna, the Lord of their life. Yet they felt that meeting Him at Kuruksetra was different from meeting Him in Vrndavana. They were accustomed to see Him as a simple cowherd boy, not as a royal prince. The Kuruksetra setting left them unsatisfied. They wanted Krsna to come back to Vrndavana.

When Radha and Krsna met, Radharani, unable to hide Her desire, expressed Her feelings in this way (Caitanya-caritamṛta, Madhya-līla 13.126-131):

You are the same Krsna, and I am the same Radharani. We are meeting again the same way that We met in the beginning of Our

lives. Although We are both the same, My mind is still attracted to Vrndavana-dhama. I wish that You please again appear with Your lotus feet in Vrndavana.

Kuruksetra is crowded with people, their elephants and horses, and the rattling of chariots. In Vrndavana, however, there are flower gardens where the humming of the bees and chirping of the birds can be heard. Here at Kuruksetra You are dressed like a royal prince, accompanied by great warriors, but in Vrndavana You appeared just like an ordinary cowherd boy, accompanied only by Your beautiful flute.

Here there is not even a drop of the ocean of transcendental happiness that I enjoyed with You in Vrndavana. I therefore request You to come to Vrndavana and enjoy pastimes with Me. If You do so, My ambition will be fulfilled.

Radharani also pleaded on behalf of the Vrajavasis: “Why is it that You are simply keeping them alive in a state of suffering? The inhabitants of Vrndavana do not want You dressed like a prince, nor do they want You to associate with great warriors in a different country. They cannot leave the land of Vrndavana, and without Your presence they are all dying. What is their condition to be?” (Cc. Madhya 13.145-146)

Hearing Srimati Radharani’s pleas further stirred Lord Krsna’s love for the residents of Vrndavana and perturbed His body and mind.

“My dearest Radharani,” the Lord said, **“Please hear Me.** I am speaking the truth. I cry day and night simply remembering all of You inhabitants of Vrndavana. No one knows how unhappy this makes Me.

“All the inhabitants of Vrndavana-dhama My mother, father, cowherd boyfriends, and everyone else are like My life and soul.... I am always subservient to the loving affairs of all of You. I am under Your control only. My separation from You and residence in distant places have occurred due to My strong

misfortune" (Cc. Madhya 13.149-151).

Full with the desire to take Krsna back to Vrndavana, the gopis tried to convince Him and pull His chariot. And again, just as when He had left Vrndavana on Akrura's chariot, the Lord promised Radharani He would return. "Your loving qualities always attract Me to Vrndavana," Krsna said. "Indeed, they will bring Me back within ten or twenty days, and when I return I shall enjoy both day and night with You and all the damsels of Vrajabhumi" (Cc. Madhya 13.158).

The Secret Behind Lord Caitanya's Dancing- In this meeting of Sri Sri Radha and Krsna lies the secret behind Lord Caitanya's drama at the Jagannatha Puri Rathayatra. Only a few of Lord Caitanya's intimate associates could understand it. Srila Prabhupada comments that the whole mood of the Rathayatra festival is that of bringing Krsna back from Kuruksetra to Vrndavana. The imposing temple of Lord Jagannatha in Puri is taken to represent the kingdom of Dvaraka, the place where Krsna enjoys supreme opulence, and the temple of Gundica, to which the Lord is brought, stands for Vrndavana, the realm of His sweetest pastimes.

Assuming the part of Srimati Radharani, Lord Caitanya felt the ecstasy of this most exalted of the gopis. By falling behind the Rathayatra cart, He was testing Lord Jagannatha, seeking His reciprocation: "Is Krsna remembering us? I want to see. Does He really care for us? If He does care, then He will wait and try to find out where we are."

Amazingly, every time Lord Caitanya would go behind the Rathayatra cart, it would stop. Lord Jagannatha was waiting, trying to see, "Where is Radha? Where are the Vrajavasis?" Lord Jagannatha, who is Krsna Himself, was trying to convey that transcendental feeling to Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. "Even though I was away from Vrndavana, I have not forgotten You, My dear devotees, especially You, Radharani."

The Deities' Unusual Forms— Anyone who sees the forms of Lord Jagannatha, Lord Baladeva, and Subhadra as They are worshiped in Jagannatha Puri may wonder why They look the way They do. Usually Krsna is worshiped in His humanlike form of Syamsundara, playing the flute. Why would Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu choose to worship Lord Jagannatha, this crude, strange-looking form of the Lord? And why has such a form appeared in Puri in the first place? To discover the reason, let us go back to Kuruksetra.

During the visit by the Vrajavasis, a confidential pastime took place. Rohini, Lord Balarama's mother, met in a big tent a group of residents of Dvaraka. She had been staying in Vrndavana and now wanted to tell the residents of Dvaraka how much suffering the Vrajavasis were going through because of separation from Krsna. Before beginning her narration, she posted Subhadra at the entrance of the tent. "If Krsna and Balarama come this way," Rohini told her, "don't let Them in." She didn't want the Lords to hear her report, which would certainly agonize Them.

When Krsna and Balarama did happen to come by, Subhadra dutifully stopped Them from getting in. But They managed to listen from outside the tent. As They began hearing, Krsna, Balarama, and even Subhadra, who stood between Them, became motionless. They were completely dumbfounded, immersed in intense thoughts of Radha, the gopis, and all the Vrajavasis.

Krsna, Balarama, and Subhadra had heard of the Vrajavasis' feelings of separation, but never directly from a Vrajavasi like Rohini. As a result, Krsna, Balarama, and Subhadra became simply astounded. Their eyes grew bigger and bigger in amazement, and other parts of Their bodies arms, legs, and neck withdrew into Their bodies, until Krsna, Balarama, and Subhadra exactly resembled the Deities now worshiped at Puri.

How Jagannatha Came to Puri- How then did these forms come to be worshiped? A few thousand years ago, Visvakarma, the

architect of the demigods, agreed to carve Deities of Lord Jagannatha, Baladeva, and Subhadra, at the request of a great devotee king named Indradyumna. The king promised to let Visvakarma carve in seclusion until the work was finished. But the impatient king broke into the room early, and Visvakarma disappeared, leaving behind the set of unfinished Deities. As the king began lamenting for what would be the use of unfinished Deities? Lord Jagannatha revealed His identity.

The Lord told the king that He had appeared in this form to fulfill the Vedic statement that although He is without hands and feet He accepts the offerings of His devotees and walks about to bestow His blessings upon the people of the earth. He added that the devotees who have achieved love of Godhead see Him as Syamasundara, Krsna, the original Lord, holding a flute.

Then the sage Narada came on the scene. He disclosed that Lord Krsna had appeared in this particular form once before in Kuruksetra. Narada himself had had the good fortune to see this. Hearing these statements, the king accepted Lord Jagannatha as his worshipable Lord. He understood that the form of the Deities was not an accidental creation: because he had been feeling intense separation from Krsna, the Lord had appeared in this form. This was also a sign that the Lord had felt similar separation from the king. Overwhelmed with ecstasy, King Indradyumna began his worship. Since then these forms of Jagannatha, Baladeva, and Subhadra have been worshiped in Puri.

The Ideal Place for Caitanya Mahaprabhu

It is not by chance that Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu lived in Puri and there worshiped the Deity of Lord Jagannatha. Lord Caitanya, during His final pastimes, showed more and more the mood of Radharani. Day and night He lamented His separation from the Lord with intense feeling. Lord Jagannatha is the form Krsna assumes as He thinks intensely and solely of the

Vrajavasis, the gopis, and Radharani. Therefore the most appropriate Deity for Lord Caitanya, who had assumed the mood of Radharani, was Lord Jagannatha.

The Meaning of the Rathayatra Festival

Externally, Rathayatra is spectacular colorful and entertaining. Yet the Gaudiya Vaisnavas, the followers of Lord Caitanya, see in the Festival of the Chariots much more than just a happy event. The pulling of the cart by the Lord's devotees symbolizes the attempt of the Vrajavasis, especially Radharani and the gopis, to bring Krsna, Balarama, and Subhadra back to Vrndavana.

Vrndavana can also represent the heart of Krsna's devotee. Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu prayed to Lord Krsna, "For most people the mind and heart are one, but because My mind is never separated from Vrndavana, I consider My mind and Vrndavana to be one. My mind is already Vrndavana, and since You like Vrndavana, will You please place Your lotus feet there? I would deem that Your full mercy" (Cc. Madhya 13.137). For the devotees of Lord Jagannatha who follow in the footsteps of Lord Caitanya, pulling the Rathayatra cart is like pulling their worshipable Lord, Jagannatha or Krsna, into their heart.

Festivals Around the World

The Lord of the universe now parades in major cities all over the world, increasing His mercy unlimitedly, responding to the desire of His pure devotee Srila Prabhupada, who brought the Rathayatra to the West. The first Rathayatra outside India was held on July 9, 1967, in San Francisco. That year the Deities rode on a flatbed truck borrowed from a group of hippies. In later years the Deities were placed on a more traditional chariot, a large wooden structure decorated with canopies and flags and pulled through the streets by the festival-goers.

As years passed, the chariots were made taller, and more beautiful, and soon ISKCON began holding Rathayatras in many

cities: New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Rome, Zurich, Sydney, Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Guadalajara, Rio de Janeiro, Moscow. Srila Prabhupada happily acknowledged, "In 1973 there was a gorgeous Rathayatra festival in London, England, and the car was brought to Trafalgar Square. The daily newspaper The Guardian published a front-page photo caption: 'ISKCON Rathayatra is rival to the Nelson Column in Trafalgar Square.' "

People everywhere are becoming attracted to the joyful and colorful Rathayatra festival. Thousands of pleasure-seekers throng to behold the giant chariots, chant and dance a bit, enjoy tasty prasadam given free to all, or take part in a full festival of music, dance, exhibits, and spiritual entertainment. And because Lord Jagannatha is a most merciful form of the Lord, even those who hardly understand the philosophy behind Rathayatra benefit just by seeing the festival or taking part in it.