
YATRAS IN THE MEDIEVAL INDIAN TEMPLES: A VISUAL STORY OF RUKUNAYATRA IN ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

Yatras are ritualistic processions of Gods and Goddesses and are connected with their movement outward from the inner sanctum of their respective temples. In this scenario, the deity becomes accessible to nearby awaiting residents and pilgrims to have the privilege of the “sight” (darshan) of their God and Goddesses. These ceremonial processions were embedded in the local peoples’ social norms and values and have survived through time. This essay documents the traditional Rukunayatra of God Shiva, known by the name Lingaraja, the presiding deity of the Lingaraja temple in Odisha, India, through still photographs. God Lingaraja is also known as Tribhuvaneshwara, meaning 'the lord of the three worlds' as Hinduism believes. Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Odisha, derives its name as a mark of respect to this deity.

KEYWORDS

Eastern India, Hinduism, Rituals, Lingaraja temple, God Shiva, Rukunayatra, Journey festival

BIO

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Introduction

Temple festivals and religious processions are the most prevalent cultural forms in Hinduism, which are performative mechanisms and are defended as significant recurring occasions through which cultural logics manifest themselves. According to Chau (2004), they can be specific and emically meaningful event production. A Hindu deity is usually sequestered in the innermost quarters of the temple and is being taken care of by the priests; only major patrons and donors of the temple can worship inside the temple. However, devotees may also see and feel the deity's presence during the festival when the deity makes a journey out of the temple. So, for a brief but intense period during the festival, the deity is treated as an honored guest. The festival crowds feed the deity with offerings and praise the deity with chants and rejoice (Younger 2002).

The journey festivals of Gods and Goddesses have traditionally been an integral part of religious life and are often seen as the most visible religious activities in public spaces in Hinduism. These festivals are some of the most visually striking displays representing the "art, sacred narratives, social hierarchies and competition, communities and identities of this religion. They are signals to social change and preservers of the past" (Jacobsen, 2008). These processions are parades of groups who move towards an altar to perform a ritual act, and such festivities are marked by dance, music, and incense (Kubatzki 2018). Religious processions are central not only in Hinduism but also in Islam, Christianity, Jainism, and Sikhism, which have large procession rituals. Processions highlight pluralism in religion, leading to competition in public space, economic prosperity, and a revival of religious identities. According to Jacobsen (2008), processions often bring together religion and politics since they are about public space, domination, and contestation.

In religious processions, the devotees experience an enlargement of the sacred environment, which reinforces their belief in the omnipresence of the deity, reassuring the idea that their very existence is under the protection of the transcendence. Hence, processions systematically involve the movement of the sacred into secular space through a process of ongoing actions disrupting the symbolic frontier that liturgy creates between the sacred and the profane. (Leone 2014). As Kong (2005) writes, processions by their very visibility foreground the relationship between the secular and the sacred while contributing to the community's construction and simultaneously surfacing fractures therein. According to Jacobsen (2008), a central role in religious processions is the physical landscape and how the procession maneuvers through it. In some cases, there are pilgrimage processions moving towards sacred spaces, while in other cases, the procession makes space sacred as they move through it. It is done by transporting the deities so that their physical presence makes the place sacred or having chariots and musicians belonging to the Gods, leading the procession marking the areas sacred (Jacobsen, 2008). He further writes that religious procession confirms social structures and creates boundaries and a sense of belonging, distinguishing 'us' from 'them.' However, religious processions can, at times, challenge such social structures and identities. The symbolic reversal of social status reaffirms the permanence of the social hierarchy and is a social leveler allowing for a harmless release of tension and force for social integration (Jackson 1988).

Though smaller in scale than pilgrimages, religious processions encapsulate many of the issues confronted in pilgrimage analysis and are not unlike the experience of the secular processions like pageants, parades, and carnivals (Kong 2005). For Graham and Murray (1997), a religious procession is a "social construction, and inevitably, a cultural product" in a similar manner that the sacred is imagined and articulated within the cultural practice. For Turner (1974), pilgrimages associate significant numbers of people, however transiently, at a certain level of social life, who would otherwise never have come into contact. Similarly, Eade and Sallnow (1991) write that pilgrimages are occasions in which a sense of the union of the deity with the devotees is experienced and seen as a healing and renewal source. Processions also serve to focus peoples' attention on their collective life and the values they believe therein. Their performance in public streets turns into a sacred space that effectively exploits through special ritual performances for communicating, legitimating, and politicizing values. These

rituals also stress shared values and reinforce group cohesion by emphasizing belongingness (Goheen, 1993).

The temple city of Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha, is dotted with ancient temples, sacred groves, and water bodies. The Lingaraja temple is a towering structure, 180 feet high, where God Shiva, the city's presiding deity, resides. Bhubaneswar derives its name from Tribhuvaneshwara, the "Lord of the Three Worlds," namely, heaven, earth, and the netherworld. It is mentioned in ancient Sanskrit literature as *Ekamra kshetra*, meaning the mango groves surrounding the *Swamyambhu linga* (self-originated), a phallus made out of natural stone (Lal, 1970). A natural line found in the Linga is generally pointed out as the line demarcating Shiva and Vishnu portions of the same deity. Hence, Lingaraja is also invoked as *Harihara*, which is corroborated by the use of *tulsi* (holy basil) and *bael* (*Vilva*) leaves in the daily worship of the Lingaraja, both favourite of Vishnu and Shiva, respectively. The Lingaraja temple was built over a period of forty-three years spanning the reigns of three *Keshari* kings of the *Somavamsi* dynasty and was probably completed around the end of the 11th century during the reign of *Jajati Keshari* (Panigrahi, 1961). It was built with sandstone and laterite and faced the east. Standing within a spacious laterite compound measuring 350 feet by 465 feet, it has two gates on the north and south of this compound. The temple has four chambers running west to east in the common axial alignment consisting of the *deula* (sanctum), *Jagamohana* (audience hall), *Matamandira* (dancing hall), and *bhojmandapa* (dining hall). The sanctum has a *shikhara* (spire), giving an optical impression of one continuous line, while the other three are *pidha* (pyramidal) structures and are open halls. The *Shivalinga* (representative idol of God Shiva) in the sanctum is made of granite stone and is eight inches above the floor level measuring eight feet in diameter. It is bathed daily with water, milk, and *bhang* (*marijuana*). All four chambers open into the spacious courtyard, which comprises fifty small shrines dedicated to several Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. A massive compound wall fortifies the temple. The temple's main entrance, known as *Simhadwara* (Lions-gate), has two lions trampling elephants under their feet on both sides of massive doors made of sandalwood (Kalia, 1994).

The journey festival of God Lingaraja is observed on *Chaitra Shukla paksha Ashtami* (the eighth day during the moon's waxing phase in March – April). This day is known as '*Ashokastami*,' which is a day preceding 'Ramanavami' (birthday of God Ramachandra). According to a legend, *God Ramachandra* (a manifestation of *God Vishnu*), after killing *Raavana* (a king of present-day Srilanka), a learned Brahmin, was full of remorse and sat in penance in *Ekamra kshetra* to repent for the sin he had committed. Being satisfied with his penance, God Lingaraja came out of the temple in a chariot to bless Ramachandra. This journey of God Lingaraja on a chariot known as *Rukunayatra* is celebrated every year during *Ashokastami*. Another legend speaks of the special chariot-making by the celestial carpenter Vishwakarma for Lord Shiva to kill the demon *Tripurasura*, creating a nuisance on earth. It may be mentioned that God Lingaraja's *Rukunayatra* (11th century) is older than the *Rathayatra* of God Jagannath (12th century) of Puri in Odisha. As Lingaraja is *Harihara*, a fusion of God Vishnu (*Hari*) and God Shiva (*Hara*), *Rukunayatra* is symbolically celebrated to match *Jagannath's RathaYatra* (chariot festival).

The Lingaraja temple, built by the *Somvamshi* kings in the 11th century, were *Shaivites* (Hindus worshipping God Shiva). They were followed by the Ganga kings in the early 12th century, who were *Vaishnavites* (Hindus worshipping God Vishnu) and initiated the synthesis of Vaishnavism with Saivism. Hence, certain new images like *dwarapalas* (guardian deities of gatekeepers of the temple entrance), namely *Jaya* and *Prachanda*, *Jagannath*, *Lakshmi Narayan*, and *Garuda*, were installed in the temple premises. Its flag was fixed to a *Pinaka* bow-shaped flag post instead of a trident-shaped one usually found in Shiva temples. The Gangas also introduced certain fairs like *Swing festival*, *Sun worship*, and *mock quarrel* between the priests after the chariot festival, similar to the practices in Puri *Jagannath* temple.



PHOTOGRAPHS1-2: The Lingaraj temple, 55m high, was built with red sandstone and laterite, along with smaller temples and shrines in its courtyard. During the colonial period, a watch platform was built outside the south side of the compound wall so that non-Hindu devotees could view the temple's interiors. It was originally erected for the visit of British Viceroy Lord Curzon, who wanted to see the architectural splendour of the temple.





PHOTOGRAPHS 3-5: According to *Shiva Purana* (one of the eighteen Sanskrit texts in Hinduism), the cosmic chariot of *Shiva* built by *Visvakarma* (divine architect) was golden in colour and was known as *Rukna Ratha* (golden chariot). The wooden chariot construction for *Ruknayatra* is an annual event and is constructed every year and is disposed of after the festival is over. Traditionally, the chariot's timber includes 34 pieces of logs of seven species of trees, viz., *Moi* (Indian ash), *simili* (red cotton), *kumbhi* (wild guava), *sal*, *bandhan* (*Ujjaindesmodium*), *bael*, and *tamarind*. All these were provided free of cost by the king of *Daspalla* (feudatory state of *Odisha*). The specific dimensions of the different logwoods include *moi* - 5 pieces of 15*5 ft, *simili* - 5 pieces of 15*5 ft, *kumbhi* - 5 pieces of 15*5 ft, *sal* - 3 pieces of 18* 2'6" and 2 pieces 12*4ft, *bandhan* - 4 pieces 8*5ft and 6 pieces 6*4, *bael* - 2 pieces 7*6 ft and *tamarind* - 2 pieces 28*5 ft. After the merger of *Daspalla* with *Odisha*, the Government of *Odisha* continued to support this commitment and asked the divisional forest officer of *Nayagarh* district to supply the same. However, the choice timber species is now being substituted by mango logs and used logwoods because of deforestation and the nonavailability of traditional timber species. On *Basanta Panchami* (*Saraswati Puja* - a Hindu festival), the *Utsava Vighraha* (proxy icons used during festivals) of *God Lingaraja* is taken in a procession known as *Banajagayatra* (expedition to select the holy trees) by the priests to ritually mark the trees by making a cut on them so that these would be felled for the chariot's construction.

The felled logs are then brought in a procession to the *Mahakala* (a place where the chariot is to be constructed). Red flags are tied on the logs to sanctify them, after which various rituals are performed.

A team of carpenters, painters, and other artisans begin constructing the chariot on *Magha Saptami* (seventh day in January-February) as per specifications given by the priest of *Bhaskareswar* temple, another Shiva temple in *Ekamrakshetra*, which is ceremonially brought to the *Mahakala*. It is essential to have sixteen *karamandalas* (an oblong water pot with the handle and spout), four *torana* (ornamental arched gateway), a golden-colored *kalasa* (earthen pot), a scented *pataka* (flag), *trishul* (trident), four *ghodas* (horses), and *Dibyasinghasana* (celestial throne).

The four wooden horses signify the four *Vedas* (oldest Sanskrit texts), and *God Brahma* serves as the "sarathi" (charioteer). The chariot gets draped in yellow, red, white, and blue clothes. The height of the chariot is thirty-five feet, and it takes nearly two months to complete. The wooden images, along with flags, umbrellas, garlands, flowers, etc., are decorated on the chariot on *Chaitra Saptami* (seventh day in the month of March- April) night itself. A makeshift stair of wooden logs is also attached to the chariot for easy climbing onto the top.







PHOTOGRAPHS 6-9: The entire stretch of the *Ratha* road from Lingaraja temple via *Badhei Banka* to Rameswaror *Mausima* temple, a distance of around two kilometers from the Lingaraja temple, get sanitized a day before on *Chaitra Saptami* (the seventh day of the fortnight). On *Chaitra Ashtami* (the eighth day of the fortnight), the entrance of the Lingaraja temple entrance gets decorated with flowers, garlands, and lights. A *Pratisthamandapa* (consecrated ritual space) is constructed on the northern side of the chariot for its consecration rituals. This *mandapa* has a *havan-kunda* (pit for performing fire ritual) in the center with four *Purnakumbas* (water vessels filled with the holy water) on the four sides. At dawn, four women take a bath and collect water from *Bindhusagar*, a sacred and natural underground spring that forms a lake. All the rituals of God Lingaraja are closely associated with this lake. The four *Purnakumbas* are placed on the four sides of the *Pratisthamandapa*. The puja starts with the chanting of mantras by Brahmin priests, who conduct the *fire ritual* to propitiate various Gods and Goddesses. After its completion and performance of *purna- ahuti* (oblation), the *Vigrahas* (idols), Mahakala (attendant of God Shiva), Ganesh and Kartikeya (sons of God Shiva), Ananta (God Vishnu), Rudra (thoreroar deity associated with *Vayu*, the God of wind), *Trimurti* (a triad of the three Gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva), God Krishna, and *Shikhandi* (a character in the epic *Mahabharata*) are ceremonially taken to the chariot. Traditionally, the two right wheels represent *Surya Deva* (the Sun God), and the two left wheels represent *Chandra Deva* (the Moon God), with each wheel having sixteen spokes. More rituals are performed to worship the four wheels and four horses to get their blessings. According to the priests, the horse representing *Rig Veda* (oldest Sanskrit hymns text) would move the chariot with wind force, while the horse representing *Yajur Veda* (melody collections and verse books) will bestow the fruits of *Bhakti* (devotion). Similarly, the horse representing *Sam Veda* (books containing the mantras in prose) would try to accomplish the proper completion of the rituals of Lingaraja, and the fourth horse representing *Atharva Veda* (knowledge storehouse of the procedure of everyday life) would punish the wrongdoers.







PHOTOGRAPHS 10-15: After the completion of the above rituals, the *Chalantipratimas* (portable idols) of God Lingaraja, *Rukmini* (God Krishna's consort), and *Vasudeva* (God Krishna) are taken in a procession known as 'PahandiBije' to the chariot amidst the beating of gong, blowing of conch shell and chanting of hymns. The procession consists of the drummers, the gong bearers, the conch blowers, the *Devadasis* (temple dancers), the flag and umbrella bearers, along with priests and devotees. The *Chalantipratimas* are bronze idols, which move three times around the chariot before ascending to the *Dibyasinghasana* kept inside the chariot. The idol of Lingaraja for the purpose has four arms with two arms in *abhaya* posture (mudras symbolizing protection, peace, and dispelling fear), the third holding a *Parashu* (axe), and the fourth holding a *Mruga* (deer). The idol of *Vasudeva* is a four-armed Vishnu holding *Sankha* (conch), *Chakra* (wheel), *Gada* (mace), and *Padma* (lotus). The idol of *Rukmini* is also a four-armed Durgaholding *Sankha* and *Chakra* in two hands and *sula* (trident) in the other two hands. *Rukmini* sits in the middle, with *Chandra Shekhar* (idol of God Lingaraja) to her right and *Vasudeva* to her left in the *Dibyasinghasana*. An idol of *Brushava* (a big wooden image of Brahma), the charioteer, takes a seat in the front of the chariot. The proxy icon of *Shuladhari Nandi* (anthropomorphic form a chief attendant of Shiva) is kept at the lower portion of the chariot.





PHOTOGRAPHS 16-18: The ropes used to pull *RukunaRatha* are the same as Goddess *Subhadra's* (God *Jagannath's* sister) chariot during *JagannathRathayatra*. It is brought from the Puri temple administration and returned after the completion of *Rukunayatra*. The axels of the wheels are oiled to lubricate them so that the chariot can roll smoothly when pulled by the devotees. The priests place coconuts under the wheels to break them when the wheels start to roll out, indicating the auspiciousness of the event. Then, the make-shift stairs are taken out, and sanctified water is sprinkled all around the chariot by the priests. The 35 ft wooden chariot rolls from the *Lingaraja* temple to *Rameshwara's Mausima* temple (*Lingaraj's* saunt's place) that is situated at a distance of nearly two kilometers from the *Lingaraj* temple on the *Ratharoad*. Thousands of devotees, waiting since dawn, get an opportunity to pull the chariot westward up to *Badhei Banka* (a junction point in *Ekamrakshetra*) and from there northward to the *Mausima / Gundicha* temple where the deities alight from the chariot and are ceremonially taken inside the temple. The womenfolk do not pull the chariot but get satisfaction in touching the ropes. The deities stay at the *Gundicha* temple for the next five days. *Parvati*, the consort of *Shiva*, comes on the third day to express her indignation as she was not made to accompany her husband in the chariot. She breaks a portion of the chariot (*the priests of Parvati enact this act*) and then goes back to the temple.



PHOTOGRAPHS 19-20: On the fifth day of *Chaitra*, in *Dwadashi Tithi* (twelfth lunar day of Hindu calendar), the three *Chalantipratimas* of *Chandra shekhar*, *Rukmini*, and *Vasudev* come back to the chariot for the return journey (*BahudaYatra*) to the *Lingaraja* temple. *RukmaRatha* is also called an ‘*Analeuta*’ chariot as it does not take any turn during the entire journey. During the return journey, the chariot does not take any turn as the direction of the altars of the Gods and Goddesses gets changed, and the chariot is pulled from the backside. As the chariot has four portals on four sides so, instead of turning the chariot's face, the ropes, horses, and *Dibyasinghasana* of the *Chalantipratimas* are placed on the opposite side of the chariot. The return procession to the *Lingaraja* temple is known as “*SwarnadriBije*.” Nowadays, the chariot sometimes halts mid-way in the evening and continues the journey the next day, entering the temple on *Chaturdashi tithi* (the 14th day of the waxing phase of the moon). If the *Chaturdashi tithi* and *Purnimatithi* (full moon day) falls on the same day in any year, the *Chalantipratimas* stay in the *Ratha* up to

Purnimatithi and enter to the temple on *Pratipadatithi* (the first day in the lunar fortnight of the Hindu calendar) of *Krushnapakhsya* (dark lunar fortnight). When the chariot reaches near *Badu Nijogachhaka* (the settlement junction where the non-Brahmin servant of the temple reside), a drink called *NabataPan* prepared from banana, coconut, bel, cottage cheese, and curd is served to the deities in earthen pots. On reaching the temple, Goddess Parvati closes the entrance door of the temple to prevent the deities from going inside as she did not accompany God Lingaraja in the chariot to the *Mausima temple*. A mock quarrel takes place between the two groups of priests on behalf of Lingaraja and Parvati, a ritual known as *Daanachorividdhi*. Ultimately, God Lingaraja pacifies Goddess Parvati by telling her that she would accompany him during *Chandanyatra* (ritual cruise in Bindhusagar) for 22 days. Then, she allows the deities to enter the temple by opening the doors.

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