

Thousands Gather at Golden Gate Park for ISKCON's 52nd Annual Festival of Chariots

SUNITA SOHRABJI, India-West Staff Reporter Aug 23, 2018

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SAN FRANCISCO, Calif., — Colorfully-dressed men and women, dancing and chanting to the beat of dhol drums while pulling equally-festive chariots bearing replicas of Hindu deities down John F. Kennedy Drive, pierced through the gloom of a fog-shrouded morning Aug. 19 at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park.

Thousands of men and women of all faiths, including a sizeable contingent of Indian Americans, joined the 52nd annual Rath Yatra – Festival of Chariots – to spread the ideal of a peaceful, more joyous world, achieved through faith. The event was organized by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, founded by the late Srila Prabhupada.

The Rath Yatra festival originated in Puri. As a child, Srila Prabhupada would create the festival each year for his neighborhood in Kolkata.

“Srila Prabhupada believed we are not our bodies; we are our souls. But people today tend to identify with their bodies – ‘I’m American,’ ‘I’m white,’ and so on – which has created so much turmoil, disharmony, and racial prejudice around the world,” Jagannatha Swami Das, president of the ISKCON temple in nearby Berkeley, Calif., told **India-West**.

“Srila Prabhupada’s message was simple: treat everyone you know or meet with respect and dignity. Everybody is somebody; every body’s spirit is old,” he said, noting that the festival’s signature undertaking – feeding lunch to thousands of people who attend – is “one of the greatest things you can do.”

“We feed them prashadam – food that is blessed – with the hope that they achieve a higher plane in the world,” said Swami Das, who has organized the festival since 1974. In the past two years, ISKCON has served up more than three billion plates of free food, according to Swami Das. “Food, not bombs, that’s our philosophy,” said the East Coast transplant jovially.

India-West met with a group of Indian American women who had travelled more than 100 miles from Folsom, Calif., with their families to cook the food for the festival. The women spent two days at the Berkeley temple preparing the vegetarian feast, and – on the day of the event – woke up at 3:30 a.m. to attend to last-minute details.

“We have been coming for 14 years, and cooking the feast for four years,” Madhuri Goyal, whose husband Ajay Goyal is a leader with ISKCON’s chapter in Folsom, told **India-West**. She noted that the group had been making preparations for several months ahead of the big day.

Vrushali Pakhale, another member of the Folsom group, told **India-West**: “Krishna’s philosophy from 5,000 years ago is still relevant today. He is everywhere but we often don’t have the eyes to see him.”

Rajashri Kiduri told **India-West**: “Our children are going off to college now. We want to make sure they are good citizens by teaching them the values of Krishna.” Along the parade route, volunteers handed out copies of the Bhagavad Gita and a guide to vegetarianism to curious passers-by, some of whom spontaneously joined in the festivities.

The chariots ended their journey at Golden Gate Park’s Sharon Meadows, which hosted a merry mela amid the unceasing fog and chill. As musicians performed onstage, festival-goers quickly queued up for a free vegetarian lunch, while others availed of food stalls offering bhel puri, coconut water, and samosas.

As the deities came off the chariots, groups of devotees prostrated before the gods, often offering up fruit or flower garlands.

Other festival goers gathered around spiritual teachers, who answered a multitude of questions related to religion and day-to-day living.

Pragnya Karke, a Pune native who came with the Folsom group, told **India-West**: “Everything is related to peace. It is as simple as that.”

52nd Annual-Festival Of The Chariots

Founder Acharya His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada
Held First Jagannatha Rathayatra in 1967 in San Francisco

Golden Gate Park, San Francisco Sunday, August 19, 2018

Parade begins at 11 a.m. at Transverse Dr. & John F. Kennedy Dr.
Festival begins at 12 noon at Sharon Meadows by Children's Park

Get Lord Jagannatha's Blessings!

- Pull Chariots
- Music/Dance
- Cultural Programs
- Exhibits
- Free Vegetarian Feast

Everyone Welcome!

P Free street parking available along Fulton Street, Transverse Drive, Stanyon Street, and on many streets inside the park.
Paid parking outside the park: ABC Parking, 801 Stanyon Street; and Kezar Parking, 811 Stanyon Street.

Map details:
Entrance at 25th Ave
Parade starts at 11 AM
Parade passes here at 11:30
Parade passes here at 12:00
Parade End
Festival Site 12 Noon-Evening

Organized by: **ISKCON Temple**, 2334 Stuart Street, Berkeley; www.iskconberkeley.net; 510-540-9215
Temple President, Jagannatha Swami Das, 707-426-4672