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FESTIVALS

Chariot of the Gods

Join in the amazing, frenzied, tumultuous Ratha festival of Kapaleeswara temple in Chennai, India

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The crowd's energy builds as the priest begins the recitation of sacred mantras. Large reed-trumpets blare and the raw staccato clacking of temple drums rolls through the streets. All is made ready; then there is a hush. Devotees await the signal to pull the two huge ten-inch-thick ropes stretching 200 feet down the street. Each man wraps one arm around the rope; the signal is given. With a deafening roar, the magnificent 20-ton structure lurches forward with Siva, the Mahadeva (the Great Lord), safely enshrined.

For the chariot to turn, it must be levered sideways by large wooden wedges placed beneath the eight-foot-tall, iron-trim wheels. In addition, men with long poles and wooden blocks for pivots pry the wheels sideways. In the process the wedges smoke and char from the friction. The whole system of moving the ratha is fraught with danger. The police hold a rope as a protective perimeter to keep the crowd away.

The entire circuit around the temple will take four to five hours. It is the hot season, and by noon the temperature is well above 100 degrees. People fill buckets of water and throw them from the roofs of buildings to cool participants as the ratha passes. There is also free distribution of water and buttermilk. Getting as close as I can, an officer sees me and helps me inside the rope barrier. Quickly the ratha moves. Then in the rush someone steps on my ankle and I fall. Luckily, I am holding onto the rope, but still I am dragged 20 feet on my knees.

As the chariot rounds the last of the four corners and approaches the end of the journey, the crowd grows more raucous. A roar goes up as the ratha rocks to a final rest in the wheel chocks in front of the temple. We feel blessed to witness this most auspicious of festivals--and to survive.

The Kapaleeswara temple runs an orphanage providing shelter, meals and basic religious training, and the Hindu Heritage Endowment manages a grant for its general support. Contact HHE (USA): Tel: 808.822.3012 ext. 244; Fax: 808.822.4351; hhe@hindu.org or www.hheonline.org