

Rath route to boost Vaishnava site tourism

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Calcutta: The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Iskcon) is trying to raise awareness about the sites in and around Calcutta associated with Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, his companions and its founder Srila Prabhupada. It has chosen Lord Jagannath's chariot festival to carry the message.

"Our Rathayatra this year has the theme 'Hidden Treasures of Calcutta'," said Ananga Mohan Das, co-director of Iskcon's Radha Govinda Temple in Calcutta, on Thursday.

"We will highlight the *sripadas* (sites blessed with footsteps of figures revered by the Vaishnavas) through an exhibition at the Brigade Parade Ground where the Lord's chariots will stay from July 15 to 21. A book, containing information on the sites, will be put up for sale. Discussions will take place on the subject," he added.

Sri Chaitanya, he pointed out, stayed in Calcutta for a week in the house of Bhagabat Acharya in Baranagar, now

known as Pathbari, on the way to Puri. "It is a Vaishnava museum now. His *khadam* (wooden slippers) is there, so is his handwriting, as also those of Nityananda *prabhu* and Sanatan Goswami on palm leaf manuscripts."

Among Sri Chaitanya's companions, Nityananda, who was empowered by him to spread the *sankirtan* movement in Bengal circa 1534, started preaching from Khardah. The houses of other important figures, Gadadhar Das and Anantacharya, are in Ariadaha and Baruipur, respectively.

There is a tradition associated with the house of Raghav Pandit in Panihati, where Mahaprabhu stayed on his return from Puri to meet his mother before setting off for Vrindavan. "During the period of Mahaprabhu's stay in Puri, over eight months in a year, Raghav Pandit's sister Damayanti Devi would prepare dry snacks like *aamchur*, *aamsatwa*, *aachar* and *mowa* which Sibananda Sen used to carry to Puri. It took Sen two months to walk the distance to and fro.



Radharaman Das, general manager and spokesperson, Iskcon, Calcutta, inspects one of the Boeing 777 tyres that carry Lord Jagannath's iron chariot. The authorities are trying to replace the tyres after 41 years; (right) finishing touches being put on the wheels



The tableau that would accompany the chariots on Saturday. Pictures by Ankit Datta

The tradition of sending Raghav-er *jhali* to Puri continues to this date."

Near Beadon Street is the house of Bhaktivinod Thakur, the most influential Gaudiya Vaishnava leader in the late

19th-early 20th century, who died there. His son and spiritual heir Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati built the first of the 64 Gaudiya Maths he founded in Bagbazar.

Sites associated with

Iskcon founder Srila Prabhupada, Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati's most famous disciple, include his birthplace in Tollygunge, his school (Muttu Lall Seal's Free School), college (Scottish Church) and the

Kidderpore dock from where he set sail for the West.

"We want more people to know about these places, which we are also trying to preserve," Ananga Mohan said.

Change of tyres

Lord Jagannath's chariot Nandighosha is a 98 per cent iron structure and weighs about 45,000 kg. "When Prabhupada started our Rathayatra in 1971, it took place on a truck. From 1972, we had a single, smaller chariot. An American disciple built the three chariots, which have been in service since 1978," said Radharaman Das, general manager, Iskcon, Calcutta.

But the axle of the chariot's wheels broke under the weight of the iron structure. "Then he thought of using Boeing 777 tyres which used to be made by Dunlop. Each of these can withstand a load of 18,000kg and can run at a speed of 425km per hour," he said, pointing to the tyres.

After four decades' use, some wear and tear has been spotted on them and need is being felt for replacements. "Dunlop no longer makes tyres. So we have approached MRF which produces tyres for the Sukhoi-30 range of aircraft. The parameters are similar."

The authorities are hope-

ful of a positive response. "We can do the replacement in a few hours if they send us the tyres," he said.

Rath route

On Saturday, the day of the Rathayatra, chief minister Mamata Banerjee will do the inauguration around 2.30pm. The chariots will take the following route: Iskcon temple (Albert Road)-Hungerford Street-AJC Bose Road-Sarat Bose Road-Hazra Road-Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Road-Asutosh Mukherjee Road-Chowringhee Road-Exide crossing-Jawaharlal Nehru Road-Outram Road-Brigade Parade Ground.

"People can come for *darsan* in the evening that day and from 3pm to 9pm on the subsequent days. We are expecting 13-14 lakh visitors.

"Spiritual programmes will be held from 11am to 2pm, while cultural programmes will be held from 4pm to 9pm. We will also hold motivation sessions for children, corporates and married couples," said Acharya Ratna Das, a co-director of Iskcon, Calcutta.