

The Ratha: A Pull of Faith

DISCOVER INDIA PROGRAM

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Certificate

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report entitled “**The Ratha: A Pull Of Faith**” submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

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Abstract

A *ratha* is an intricately structured temple chariot that serves as a mobile beacon of faith for several devotees, especially across South India. These larger than life chariots are emblematic of a deity's holiness and have carved for themselves a significance in the lives of artisans, devotees, priests and heritage preservationists. This research project seeks to comprehend the various stages the *ratha* making process as well as the practice of *rathotsavams* or chariot processions. In a way, the report hopes to trace the entire journey of a *ratha* as it is in South Western Karnataka today.

The report explores the relationship between the *ratha* and its makers, where it will delve into the multiple traditions and procedures of a *ratha's* construction and the impact of technological and socio-economic influences upon these processes. As the temple car is of religious significance, we also study the symbolism of the *ratha* and its use in the custom of *rathotsavams*. Ceremonies of pomp and revelry, these festivals unite devotees from across regions to participate in the pulling of these mammoth *rathas*, which carry a temple's deity.

This report also focuses on concepts such as *sevas* that are paid processions conducted in certain kinds of temples. Further, the processes of the maintenance and storage of *rathas* will also be focussed upon.

While the primary interest of our study is to situate the significance of the *ratha* in present times, the title is intended to throw some light upon the existing magnitude of the ancient *ratha* tradition and the imperishable 'pull' of faith that has sustained this reverent art form across many centuries. Through our study we have come to equate the journey of a *ratha* to that of a man - from its birth and growth till its time of glory and its final lap.

Preface

At the beginning of our journey into the exploration of the ancient *rathas*, we had hoped to make our study a comparative one, between the Western coast of Udupi, and Eastern coast of Tamil Nadu. However, an unfortunate flood hit Chennai and surrounding regions in late November and early December in 2015, and there was no choice but to remove Tamil Nadu as an area of study. Thus our study became modified, changing into a more focussed piece of work in Udupi, rather than a comparative one.

While this was quite a blow, we were fortunate to find in Udupi a storehouse of useful information and more learning than what we could have hoped for. In fact, had it not been for this change in itinerary, we would not have been able to witness the magnificent *rathotsavam* at Dharamasthala, which was a once in a lifetime experience. At the same time, it must be noted that much of the report does draw from secondary sources pertaining to chariots in Tamil Nadu, that happen to enhance the numerous aspects we have elaborated upon.

Due to the hospitality and helpfulness of the various people we met, we did not dwell too much on the loss an entire area of study, reaching the realisation that perhaps a focussed approach was better suited to understanding the *rathas* and their significance.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

They may not fully understand my relationship with the divine, but everyone can appreciate my majesty, and the work that went into building me. For most of the year I reside in sheds and temple compounds - but on the nights that I am taken out, I am the centre of everyone's attention. Car streets are built specially for me and the festivities celebrating me go on throughout the night. Everyone mills around to tug the ropes that tether me to the crowds; to pull me and the God I carry. These festivals celebrate not only the power of God, but also the power of devotion, the notion of faith, and the ways in which people feel connected to the divine.

*

Faith is larger than life, as is the culture surrounding it. Religious faith includes non-material aspects of culture, such as theology, philosophy, myths, and devotion; and it also includes the material aspects such as iconography, statues and the construction of temples, the way in which rituals are conducted and festivals are celebrated. In Hinduism, the material and non-material become interdependent - festive celebrations are linked to the genesis of the festival itself, abstract concepts are concretized in art and sculpture and material gifts can be offered while praying for immaterial boons.

One such idea, which synthesizes a material object with faith, is the *ratha*, or temple car; while it is an immense physical object, it is symbolic of the divinity of a deity and is often integrated into temple economies and the collective identities of communities and families. The culture surrounding *ratha*-building has its own teaching practices and economic practices, traditional significance. It is sometimes married to religion, sometimes separated from it. It is this amalgamation of ideas, practices, devotion, iconography, craftsmanship, and engineering of *rathas* that 'The *Ratha* - A Pull of Faith' explores in Udupi and its surrounding regions in the Discover India Program 2015-2016.

A *Ratha* (See Figure 1), also known as a temple car, is a chariot of religious significance.

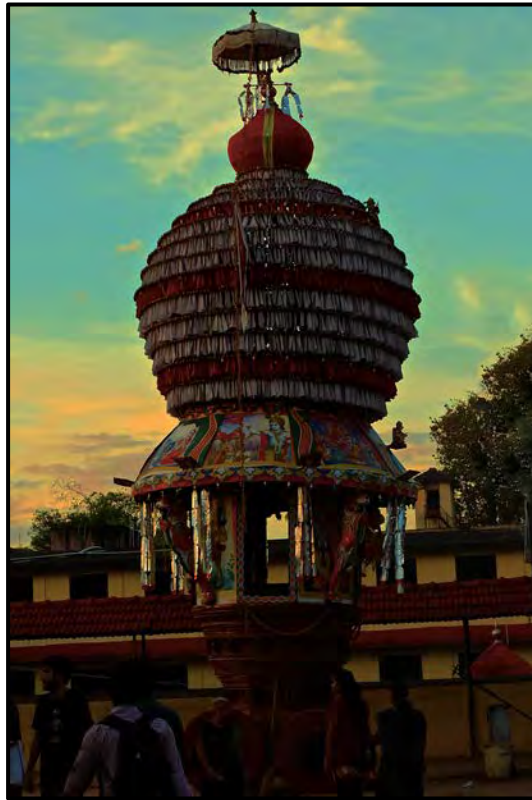


Figure 1: *Sanna Ratha* at Sri Krishna Matha

Believed to have originated in the 2nd century B.C.E., chariots have been used for trade and transport, in battles, in races, and for leisure. Chariots belong to a family of wood-based pre-industrial animal-drawn vehicles and have been documented in the early Persian, Egyptian and Hittite civilizations (Plubins, “Chariots”). With the prevalence of automobiles today, one might still see the remains of chariot-building practices in *tangas* (horse-drawn carriages) or *bail-gaadis* (bullock carts). Trade and transport were likely the chief functions of other ‘ordinary’ chariots the world over - however, in the Hindu context, when referred to with the Sanskrit term *rathas*, they are structures customarily used as ‘vahanas’ or vehicles for the Gods (Kalidos, “Stone Cars and Rathamandapas”). In earlier times, their glory came from war, in which they were ridden by Hindu deities who fiercely battled with one another. The mythological and cultic role of these chariots drawn by horses or bulls (for example the flying chariot used by Yudhishtira in the *Mahabharata*) has been reflected in numerous texts over time.

The divine roots of *rathas* have contributed greatly to their importance today. Built with great expertise and strenuous efforts, *rathas* are used for *yatras* - processions where idols of deities are taken through the streets. In these processions, *rathas* are pulled by devotees in the areas surrounding temples in car-streets or *ratha-beedis*, or sometimes all over the town, depending on their size and the deity they are carrying. These processions can either be considered *rathotsavams* – *ratha* festivals – on their own, or be a part of a larger festival celebration like that of *Brahmotsavam* or *Makar Sankranti*. Etymologically, the term “*rathotsavam*” is the compound of the “*ratha*” and “*ustavam*” where the term *ustavam* can either be defined as a ‘joyous occasion’ or the removal of anguish and pain. According to the *Shastras* the festival is carried out to eradicate all negativity that dwells in the universe (Guy, 103). Though the purpose, importance, time and grandeur of all the festivals may vary, none can deny their importance. Behind the success of these festivities lies the hard work and devotion of communities engaged in *ratha* making as a profession and/or an act of devotion. As a result, *rathas* have a unique place in religion, economy, and the community in which they are made.

The significance of the *ratha*, however, is an aspect that has unfortunately not been extensively documented previously. Multiple documentations of temples mention *rathas*, and similar references appear in discussions on wood-carved handicrafts. There are ancient texts that prescribe regulations for the construction of *rathas*, and even *ratha* festivals have received some scholarly attention. However, ancient texts do not refer to the devotional aspect of *rathas* and scholarly works delve into *rathas* in association with temples and not as independent study. With the exception of works like *Temple Treasures, Part III: Chariots* by Dr Choodamani Nandagopal and Mrs Vatsala Iyengar, not many secondary sources have paid attention to the *ratha* as an outcome of sincere faith, or as an inspiration for it.

The interest our group displayed towards understanding the significance of the *ratha*, and the rituals associated with it, led to the formation of the research question:

What is the tradition of *ratha* making in the Udupi region in Karnataka, and what is its cultural significance to the communities associated with it?

A *ratha* culture exists in various states in the country that include Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. The Jagannatha *Ratha yatra* in Puri and the procession of the Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple in Madurai are among the most quoted examples for these processions in which the idols of Jagannatha with Subhadra and Balabhadra are paraded (Poorvaja, “Thousands witness Madurai Car Festival”). Despite the immense popularity of the Jagannatha festival, it is a solely annual occurrence unlike in South Indian states where *rathotsavams* are celebrated a number of times a year at varying scales: from gigantic multi-tier *rathas* attracting thousands of worshippers to small metal-based chariots available for processions after the deposition of a fee.

Therefore, the *ratha* culture engrained in the South of India stands distinctly apart from that in other parts of the country in terms of its prevalence, derivations and contribution to the lives of the common man. This led us to narrow the scope of this study to the state of Karnataka, and South-Western Karnataka in particular.



Map 1: Map of India



Map 2: Map Of Karnataka

Source: “India”. *D-Maps.com*, 2016. Web.
<http://dmaps.com/carte.php?num_car=24853&lang=en>

Settled on the Southern coast of Karnataka, Udupi is a temple town, which is also the headquarters of the Udupi district. The fact that one of the hypothesized etymologies of its very name comes from Sanskrit *udu* and *pa* meaning ‘stars’ and ‘lord’, which is another name for Lord Shiva, is proof of the deeply embedded temple

culture of this town. This culture is largely due to Udupi's famous Sri Krishna Matha, a 13th century temple ("Welcome to Udupi") that is home to six different types of *rathas*, a fact that made it an indispensable location for our study ("History" and "Udupi Temple gets..."). While it was one of the chief locations of our study, Udupi is in close proximity to towns like Manipal, Koteswar, Honnavar, Hiriadka, Perdoor, Ellare, Dharmasthala, Kumta and Gokarna, where we visited scholars, experts and various temples.

In our study, we seek to understand the tradition of *ratha* making and exhibition, its cultural aspects and resultant religious significance, to situate the *ratha* and its tradition in temple culture in contemporary society.

To address our research question, our objectives are three-pronged:

- **To observe and document the traditional *ratha* making practices in Udupi and surrounding regions**
- **To study the unique cultural aspects of this custom with respect to artists and makers**
- **To understand the religious significance of the *ratha* tradition**

Firstly, the 'tradition' of *ratha* making includes all material aspects of a *ratha*, referring primarily to the physical act of constructing the *ratha* itself. As was learnt from secondary sources, the process of *ratha* making is a lengthy and elaborate one (See Figure 2). While Vedic rules and regulations for building a chariot have survived today in some forms like the manuscript *Visvakarmiya Rathalaksanam* (Kulkarni, 18-22), not much is known about the extent to which the process of chariot making today conforms to these ancient norms. Our objective is to study the structure of the *ratha* and understand the changes over time,



Figure 2: A *ratha* under construction

if any. We explore the rules followed and the possibility of artistic freedom with specific focus on the iconographic traditions of the *rathas* of this region. We also explore the issue of patronage to understand how the *rathas* are commissioned.

Secondly, as important as *rathas* are to temples, one cannot ignore the important role they play in the lives of artisans and those involved in its construction. While some secondary sources discuss these communities, there is no detailed information available about which communities participate in the *ratha* making process, what their role is, and how they associate themselves with *rathas* and *rathotsavams*. In fact, the contribution of tribal groups has been omitted from contemporary records almost entirely.

The state of Karnataka is home to the Gudigars and the Vishwakarma Kula, two communities of artists, artisans and craftspeople, that have been traditionally working with the *ratha*. Historically, within both communities, the practice of making *rathas*, i.e., *ratham taksan* (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, 631) has had hierarchies, lineages and rituals that the creators had to adhere to. Not only did we get a chance to meet these two communities, but we also interacted with a tribe known as the Hallaki who have an important role in the creation of the *ratha*.

Through our study we intend to grasp the significance of the *ratha* in the lives of these communities and people - whether this is their sole livelihood, their mutual relations with respect to social status, the tasks they are expected to perform, etc, along with the various economic aspects surrounding *ratha* making.



Figure 3: Aerial view of Sri Krishna Matha

Thirdly, while *rathas* serve an economic purpose for the communities that make them, their socio-cultural significance, and especially religious significance, extends to the lives of the community at large. This includes the role played by *rathas* in the life of people from different walks of life: devotees and priests, temple trustees and ordinary temple-goers. While artisans exhibit their faith through their tireless handiwork and patient precision, devotees do the same through the physical feat of pulling these momentous structures or by pouring in large strengths for a *darshan*. Therefore, we also tried to understand the varied perceptions of the *ratha* and *rathotsavam*. Further, the iconography on each *ratha* also carries its religious symbolism and significance. Here, we attempt to survey this iconography and study whether different schools or states follow different practices. We aim to also explore the *ratha* related myths, legends and beliefs in this primarily Vaishnavaitic region.

Although these three objectives represent different perspectives from which the study will be conducted, one cannot refute that they are inherently all related. The *ratha* in essence is a religious object; therefore there are religious undertones in all its stages, from procurement of raw material and creation to display and usage. In order to ensure the report is best understood, it is necessary to present it in two relevant stages pertaining to the journey of the *ratha*, namely its birth and construction, seen in chapter 3, and the *utsavam* or *yatra* in chapter 4.

Research Methodology

With these objectives in mind, the study is descriptive and exploratory in nature. While the primary step of research was a survey of secondary sources (See Chapter 2), primary research was done on field between 3 December and 12 December 2015

The methods used for the latter part of research relied primarily on field visits, which were comprised of observations and personal



Figure 4: Interview of Mr. Upadhyaya, a trustee of Sri Krishna Matha

interviews. Data was collected through audio-visual and written documentation. We also conducted snowball sampling and secondary research to identify the various scholars and experts in this field.

Accordingly, we collected photographic, audio and video data of our observations in the cities of Udupi, Koteswar, Perdoor, Ellare, Hiriadka, Honnavar and Gokarna. At these locations, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with priests and other officials like trustees, who represented temple managements. We further documented the different types of *rathas* we saw over the course of our journey (See Table 1)

Table 1: Different *rathas* we surveyed

City	Location	<i>Rathas</i>
Udupi	Sri Krishna Matha	<i>Brahma ratha</i> (1), <i>Navratna ratha</i> (1), <i>Chinna ratha</i> (1), <i>Sanna Rathas</i> (2), <i>Chandramandala ratha</i> (1)
Perdoor	Anantpadmanabha Temple	<i>Sanna Rathas</i> (2), <i>Chandramandala ratha</i> (1), <i>Brahma ratha</i> (1)
Ellare	Lakshmijanardhan Temple	<i>Brahma ratha</i> (1), <i>Pushpa ratha</i> (1)
Hiriadka	Virabhadra Temple	<i>Sanna Ratha</i> (1), <i>Brahma ratha</i> (1)
Gokarna	Sri Mahabaleshwara Deva temple	<i>Brahma ratha</i> (1)
Kotteshwar	Kottelingshwara temple	<i>Brahma ratha</i> (1), <i>Sanna Ratha</i> (1)

Honnavar	Shri Ganesh Mandir, Lakshmi Venkateshwar Temple	<i>Brahma ratha</i> (1)
Dharmasthala	Manjunath Temple	<i>Belli ratha</i> (1)
	Manjusha Museum	5 restored <i>ratha</i> bases
Mavin Kurve	Mavin Kurve Temple	<i>Vijay ratha</i> (1)
Manipal	Heritage Village	3 restored <i>ratha</i> bases
Total number of <i>rathas</i>		28

In the town of Dharmasthala, we also witnessed and documented a *rathotsavam* that takes place as part of the *Lakshadeepotsavam*, the annual festival of One Lakh Lamps at the famous Manjunath Temple. We also observed elaborate processions being conducted in the Sri Krishna Matha at Udupi. At both of these locations, we interviewed devotees and others directly or indirectly involved with the *ratha* tradition. Some of us also joined these processions, pulling the *ratha* along on its journey to experience this pull of faith.

Further, we went to the workshops of various *ratha* makers from the *Vishwakarma* and *Gudigara* communities. We visited the Vishwakarma Institute of Art in Koteswar to meet Mr. Laxminarayan Acharya and his son-in-law Mr. Rajagopal Acharya, both reputed *ratha* makers. We also visited Mr Balkur Gopal Acharya, another renowned Vishwakarma wood carver and sculptor who resides in Manipal. In the town of Kumta, we also visited Mr. Praveen and Mr. Chetan Shet, artists from the *Gudigara* community that specialize in making *rathas* among other wooden handicrafts.

The documentation of the process of making the *ratha*, was supplemented by personal interviews with master-craftsmen, artists and employees. We also obtained some practical experience with carving techniques by getting an opportunity to learn some rudimentary woodwork. To further support our claims, we conducted telephonic interviews with *ratha* maker Mr. K Arul from Chennai.

During our fieldwork we discovered other tribal communities such as the Hallaki and Mogaveera tribes are also an integral part of any *ratha* and *rathotsavam*, and interacted with a Hallaki tribe settlement on the outskirts of Honnavar, where we interacted with and interviewed members of the Hallaki.

Our interactions with scholars were direct as well as telephonic. To better understand and appreciate how *rathas* were restored and preserved, we met Mr. Harish Pai and Mr. Vijaynath Shenoy founders of the Heritage Village in Manipal and also paid a visit to Mr. Puspadanta, the Manager of the Manjusha Museum in Dharmasthala. At both these centres, we studied *rathas* preserved and exhibited as artifacts. Other forms of interaction included a panel discussion organized by Mr. S.A. Krishnaiah on behalf of the Prachayasanchaya Samshodhan Kendra, or Oriental Research Institute, Udupi. The panel consisted of Mr. Rajesh Acharya, a metal sculptor, Professor T. Murugeshi, a historian and archaeologist, scientist Dr. K.P. Rao, and K.L. Kundantaya, a researcher of temple traditions and rituals. We were also fortunate to get an interview with the renowned Dr. Raju Kalidos, who has conducted extensive research on *rathas* in Tamil Nadu.

While we believe our project was a largely fruitful endeavour, we too had our share of limitations. The first of these was the language barrier we faced in our area of study- with only two group members proficient in Kannada, many of us were unable to converse with our respondents directly or read certain texts that many *ratha* makers referred to. Further, since our sample population was chosen on the basis of convenience and was fairly small in size, we regret that our inferences may not accurately reflect certain socio-economic aspects of the communities associated with the *ratha*. While we completed the major portion of our secondary research before venturing to the field, we discovered certain sources only upon our return. Had we

studied these sources earlier, we believe that would have helped us probe more deeply into many aspects we studied. Additionally, amongst our secondary sources, many pertain to the state of Tamil Nadu whereas only one has been written with special reference to Karnataka, owing to which the terms and processes described herein have been influenced by those used in different states. Iconography is a significant part of what gives the *ratha* its artistic and religious value. Despite this, we were unable to obtain extensive information about it through primary data collection. This could have possibly been because sometimes, the individuals we interacted with had no knowledge about the iconography themselves, although they were well versed in the other aspects of the *ratha*. We also noticed that terms used to refer to the icons were used interchangeably and the names of the icons sometimes differed from person to person; this led to slight confusion while transcribing interviews and better understanding iconography. Another major limitation we had was the short time spent on field. Given the vastness of the *ratha* and *ratha* culture as an area of study, we believe that more days on field would have increased the quality of our work, since any in-depth study requires extensive primary interaction.

Nevertheless, we attempted to make the best of all our opportunities. All the information we gathered from these personal interviews, as well as the audio-visual documentation of *rathas* and the building process supplemented by secondary information, will form the backbone of our research. We hope to understand not only the permanent, material aspects of our study – the temples and temple cars in their compounds – but also the dynamic ones, in the form of all the relationships forged by and around temple culture, linking people from all walks of life to God.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

“*Ratham devamayam vipra sarvadevamayam tatha Sarvayajnamayam..*”

“The temple car is an embodiment of the God, an embodiment of all gods, an embodiment of sacrifices...”

(quote in the *Visnutattvasamhita*) (as cited in Rajarajan and Ganeshram, 49)

The communities that make and use the *ratha* consider it more than just an object that enhances the mobility of a deity. Grand in its size, complex in structure and detailed in its ornamentation, it gains appreciation from multiple points of view. While a priest or devotee may revere it, experts in architecture and engineering may marvel at its construction. Similarly, from an anthropologist’s perspective, it is a tool used ('to' was cut off) to encourage certain kinds of human interaction and transactions and could aid a theologian in comprehending the historical attributes of Hinduism.

A similar spectrum of perspectives is seen in the scholarly dissertations that study *rathas* in order to determine their historical, religious, technical, artistic, iconographic and anthropocentric worth. While not all of these works are comprehensive, some of them with only brief mentions of *rathas*, they all contribute to the appreciation of the *ratha* as a multidimensional object.

2.1 In The Pages of History

Linguists like Thomas Gamkrelidze and Vjaceslav Ivanov make a brief mention of chariots in their book that reconstructs and analyses Proto-Indo-European, the language from which all Indo-European languages are derived from. Providing terminologies in Sanskrit, Greek, Hittite, etc., the authors focus on horses and horse drawn vehicles from various cultures, using their fundamentality as a common ground for comparison. While discussing the semantics of economic activity and crafts in Asia, the authors discuss the mythological and cultic place of a *ratha* with respect to the *Atharvaveda* and *Rigveda* and also provide some insights into how these vehicles

were ridden after being rudimentarily bound together. (*Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans...*, 631)

These texts aid in the delineation of a *ratha* as an instrument of war as opposed to its 'temple-car' attributes that are seen today. One infers that given its mythological associations, the *ratha*, presently symbolic of faith was previously symbolic of superior knowledge, prowess or accomplishment.

The works that study the history of the *ratha* explain the literal meaning of the vehicle and also refer to metaphorical understandings in some instances, give the reader an impression of the changing uses and worth of the *ratha*. Taking a historical perspective on chariots, M. Sparreboom in his work *Chariots in the Veda* talks of the imagery of a chariot and its ritualistic implementations. Quoting the *Rigveda*, he states that a chariot ridden by Gods often shared 'the qualities of its riders' hence itself becoming divine. The book discusses how chariot races, which in ancient India were documented only in the Vedas, were allegorical allusions to verbal contests for obtaining the favour of Gods. Therefore, one imagery of the *ratha* emerged for it being the hymn or praise uttered for the appeasement of a deity (Sparreboom, 13). Further, since chariots were instrumental in winning such prestigious contests, they themselves became praiseworthy and holy. Other instances that evidenced the worth of chariots were mentions of how chariot owners were the 'most respected' guests and how a chariot, ageless and almost indestructible, was a token of an armed force (Sparreboom, 15).

Here, a distinction is made between a wagon, which would ordinarily convey goods, and a chariot or *ratha* used in warfare, which would convey 'victory', victorious drivers and actions (Sparreboom, 24). The most common identification of a *ratha* is made with Agni, who was the 'charioteer of the Gods' since he fulfilled the function of being a 'charioteer of rites' (Sparreboom, 16). Along similar lines, a sacrificial ritual is also metaphorically equated with the chariot of the Gods since it is a means of conveyance for offerings. Chariots and their associated terms were also a widely used poetic device:

“The man who has knowledge as his charioteer and thought as the bridle, reaches the far end of the road, the ultimate step of Visnu” (Sparreboom, 18)

In hymns such as the one above, a human body is related to a chariot that could consequently transport one to the abode of Vishnu, which is further described as the ‘world of heaven’ (Sparreboom, 18). Chronicled here from the most basic two wheeled or four wheeled structures to more complex forms, *rathas* in the Vedas are metaphorically linked to speed and swift motion with races, and not processions (Sparreboom, 119).

2.2 Temple and Festival Perspective

‘India is a land of temples’, as is opined by many including scholar Dr. K.V Raman who discusses the role played by a temple in people’s everyday lives (Raman, “The Role of Temple...”, 102 in *Temple India*). With the temple and temple rituals fundamental to identities, a plethora of literature discusses the institution of the temple with respect to its architecture, artwork, festivals and other features. While many works discuss an array of temples, some focus on particular ones forming case studies of sort. Very often the mention of *rathas* and *ratha* festivities is brief yet highly informative. For instance, in his book on *Temple Culture of South India*, scholar V.R Parameswaran Pillai studies the practice of temple going and the various traditions and festivities associated with it, especially focusing on the state of Kerala.

While discussing the artistic and architectural techniques employed in these temples, the author talks of the *Manasara*, a treatise on architecture dated to 10th century CE, that preserved the technical instructions of forming a temple car in a chapter entitled *Rathalaksana Vidhana* (Pillai, 65). Pillai quotes the *Manasara* to discuss the themes and narratives expressed on the *ratha*, for example excerpts from the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and the *Krsnalila*, depictions of the *Dashavatara*, etc. He regards wood based temple cars as the most ornate and intricate examples of woodcarving on the southern West Coast of the country (Pillai, 65). The author also opines that despite their being rigid canons of execution in the *Silpasastras*, the artists were able to make their figures come alive through a religious fervour and

‘communion with the Supreme Being’ (Pillai, 69). The author also throws some light on the Car Festival which he believes is of a Buddhist importation from the east coast (Pillai, 77). With reference to the procession of the car festival of the Sucindram Temple located in the Kanniyakumari district of Kerala, the author describes the details of how a procession is ritualistically carried out (Pillai, 78).

What can be observed here is that, the excerpts on *rathas* are predominantly with respect to Kerala, which provides a different cultural background as compared to that of Tamil Nadu or Odisha, which is commonly focused upon in other texts. However, while the book provides the reader with apt insight into Malayali temple culture, the focus on South India in general, as suggested by the title, is missing. The author also comments upon how the religious ‘fervour’ and ‘devotional ecstasy’ found in sculptors in the past is ‘nowhere to be found in the present society’. This statement that concludes the chapter of “Temple Festivals” comes across as a generalization without relevant backing and subtly reveals a possible bias held by the author.

While discussing the Sucindram Temple, Pillai refers to a book called *The Sucindram Temple* in which the author, K.K. Pillay describes the *Margazhi masam* festival of the Sucindram temple - a ten day festival, of which the ninth is the ‘car festival’ or *terottam* dedicated to taking the main deities of the temple on a procession through the city (Pillay, 276). This day is said to attract huge crowds of devotees and the social aspect of the entire festival is seen at its peak. The book sheds light upon a specific historical association with conducting the *terottam*, where pulling the temple’s four ornamented *rathas* was an obligatory service called *Uliyam* (Pillay, 225). This meant that everyone in the city had to render assistance in pulling the car and municipal records show fines being imposed on those who refused. However despite this, *Uliyam* was not categorised as forced labour; as analysed in the text, it was instead an action of enthusiasm that displayed a combination of respect citizens held for the temple and the cooperative spirit that was expected from them (Pillay, 276). While this work does not focus upon the general concept of temple cars, their manufacture or religious context in relation to all of Hinduism, it does focus upon a unique tradition that displayed the cultural relevance of the *ratha* amongst a community.

Curator and historian John Guy's work *Indian Temple Sculpture* is an extensive study into the Indian temple art as an instrument of worship. While the theme of the discussion is the iconographic, aesthetic and traditional *shastric* significance of various reliefs and statues in the temples of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the *ratha* comes into focus when the concept of '*utsava*', or an event to 'drive away sorrow', is introduced (Guy, 103).

The author briefly discusses the significance of the procession itself, the role of a temple car in the procession and the prevalence of symbolic iconography on a typical *ratha* in Tamil Nadu (Guy, 105). However, the description of woodcarving in general is lacking given how wood is the most popular medium for *ratha* construction and how the book promises to study the sculptural attributes of temples and temple goods. This may further come across as a shortcoming given the views of authors like M. Arunachalam, who in his article *Temples of Tamilnadu* (published in the collection *Temple India*, a Vivekananda Kendra Prakashan publication in 1981) refers to the woodwork on temple cars as an example of 'the finest workmanship of the human hand on timber' (Arunachalam, 45 in *Temple India*).

Focusing on the celebratory aspect of taking a *ratha* out in a procession, *Religious Festivals in South India and Sri Lanka* by Guy R. Welbon and Glenn E Yocum provides the reader a first-person perspective of a *ratha* and a *rathotsavam*. With reference to the Pancaratra, and the Citra festival, the work describes how the *rathotsavam* is celebrated on the 7th or 10th day of other bigger festivals (Welbon and Yocum, 59). Carrying Gods like *Siva*, *Sakti* and *Minaksi*, the temple car is described as it would be by a layperson - "an upside down mountain that was decorated with woodwork and cloth". Welbon and Yocum elaborately describe the procedures with which an idol is readied for its procession and with which it is ritualistically placed on its throne at the most auspicious moment. In festivals that last longer than the common duration of a few hours, at night-time, the temple car would be made stationary while devotees slept or performed personal devotional activities to the *rathas* and their deities. Calling the *ratha* a cosmos in itself, the authors discuss some peculiarities in its movement that was accompanied by cheers and loud firecrackers: the way it sways from side to side and rushes momentarily only to stop suddenly and

shake precariously as if it were going to fall apart (Welbon and Yocum, 60). They also comment upon how big a feat it was to make the *ratha* turn a corner given how its axles could not rotate and how one had to resort to the use of wedges to make the structure slide at different angles.

While some offered prayers, others peered from balconies and sidewalks as several hundred men pulled the car forward. The authors also bring to light how prior to a tradition brought about during British rule, where pulling the car was mandatory for a minimum number of men, it was a voluntary act of devotion (Welbon and Yocum, 117).

Personalized excerpts such as these are important in giving an added dimension to the other more conventional literary sources discussing *rathas*.

2.3 Technique and Technical Aspects

A small number of scholarly dissertations/translations discuss the technical aspects of a *ratha*. One such source concerning the *ratha*'s technical information is the paper "Stone Cars and Rathamaṇḍapas", in which as explained by Professor Raju Kalidos, the term *ratha* comes with two connotations; one referring to *rathas* as components of temple architecture and the other introducing them as temple cars. The former remains confined to predominantly stone-based monolithic structures dedicated to Gods and Goddesses - nine examples of which can be found in the town of Mahabalipuram, in Tamil Nadu (Kalidos, "Stone Cars and Rathamaṇḍapas"). The second connotation comprises of *rathas* constructed for the purpose of deity worship carried out in a mobile manner. These movable *rathas* are decorated with sculptures of Gods and Demigods etc., and are referred to in texts like the *Manasara* and other *Silpasastras* (Kalidos, "Stone Cars and Rathamaṇḍapas"). In his work, Kalidos stresses upon the need to compare the architectural designs of both these kinds of *rathas* in order to comprehend the distinction. Kalidos states that while some scholars attributed the design of the monolithic *rathas* to temple cars, others believed that the term *ratha* for the stone structures is a misnomer. Going by the architectural variances in both these types of *rathas*, Kalidos opines that they must not be put under the same

category. He further elaborates upon the *rathamandapa*, which is a chariot shaped temple or pavilion. While the Sun Temple in Puri was one kind of *rathamandapa*, others were either adjuncts to the main temple or only replicated certain parts of certain kinds of *rathas* (Kalidos, “Stone Cars and Rathamaṇḍapas”).

While it provides the reader with some in-essential technical information, this article throws some light on the crucial aspect of understanding the use of the term *ratha*.

2.4 Appreciation for the Craft

Woodcarving is one of the main skills involved in the creation of the *ratha*. Tirelessly worked upon for weeks and months, the woodcarvings on temple cars need precision and training on one hand, and creativity and devotion on the other.

A small collection of works highlights the artistic perspective towards *rathas*, one of these being the *Arts and Crafts of India*, a book that focuses on many intricate arts and handicrafts practiced in different parts of the country. In its section on stone and woodwork, the authors Ilay Cooper and John Gillow talk of the specialized carving done on the huge processional chariots in Southern India. Discussing the various forms sculpted on these chariots, the passage refers to the states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and especially Odisha - where the famous *Jagannatha* Temple is located (Cooper and Gillow, 37). While this description is far from detailed, it is from a viewpoint unlike that of many other literary sources.

2.5 Iconographic Perspective

Iconography serves as a vital element of temple chariots; it has been seen that the analysis of carvings on temple cars reveals a multitude of motivations that give the carvings their connotation and identity. By studying the icons carved on *rathas*, practised iconographers are mostly able to gauge the time period of their formation and the influences seen then. Many scholars, including historian Raju Kalidos, see

temple cars as a “potential zone for research in Hindu iconography” that offers a large scope for further study (Rajarajan and Ganeshram, 52).

Edited and compiled by scholars R.K.K. Rajarajan and S. Ganeshram, *Studies in Art History of India* is a compilation of the essays on the art history of India, written by Raju Kalidos over the 25 years of his academic research. Discussing the great global contributions made by Indian traditional art, Kalidos weaves temple chariots into this, stating that they are “the wonder world of Hindu art” primarily because of their “structural elegance and iconographic decoration” (ed. Rajarajan and Ganeshan, 49). By incorporating the views of other scholars here, such as K.V Raman, who feels that chariots are “temples on wheels” and Professor Mario Bussalagi, who calls *rathas* “car temples” (ed. Rajarajan and Ganeshan, 49), Kalidos is able to portray many different opinions that give a broader understanding of how temple cars are perceived by scholars.

Marvelling at temple cars for their superb exhibition of structural details and engineering skills, Kalidos further talks of how *rathas* are the “paradise for the study of Hindu iconography (ed. Rajarajan and Ganeshan, 25). He further discusses how, when studied, temple cars are also anthropological insights into Hindu society.

Focusing on Indian dance forms, Kalidos mentions that these dances serve as themes upon which many *rathas* in Tamil Nadu have been modelled, each dancing theme with its own “sociological or spiritual connotation” (ed. Rajarajan and Ganeshan, 32). With the help of the two case studies of the Tiruvarur and Vatapatrasyi temple cars, Kalidos discusses the sculptural panels of a *ratha* in detail. He describes how the influences like the *Vijayanagra-Nayaka* ideologies affect how various themes like the *Puranas*, pan Indian and local myths are exhibited on these chariots.

The importance of this book lies in how comprehensively Raju Kalidos’s essays have touched on temple cars; he traces their progress from the very beginning, clearly giving examples of changes that have occurred on the way due to different influences, and particularly focuses on the iconography and its significance. By using studies and articles by different authors, he adds greater depth to his work, and makes it more

authentic. Furthermore, his focus on the two temple cars gives greater insight and more examples when it comes to the varying iconography seen throughout the ages.

More insights into temple car iconography are provided in “The Wood Carvings of Tamil Nadu: An Iconographical Survey”, another paper by Kalidos, in which he studies the themes depicted in *rathas* in Tamil Nadu. Taking a sample of a few hundred *rathas*, Kalidos studies wood based Tamil sculpture, the bulk of which is in temple cars, and uses this paper to comment upon how, are an unexplored paradise for iconographic research (Kalidos, “The Wood Carvings of Tamil Nadu: An Iconographical Survey”). Referring to texts like the *Manasara*, *Visvakarmavastusastra*, *Isvarasamhita*, *Sruprasnasamhita* and *Kumaratantra*, Kalidos gives an overview the different kinds of rules and regulations prescribed for carvings on *rathas* (Kalidos, “The Wood Carvings of Tamil Nadu: An Iconographical Survey”).

He then elaborates upon the popularity of and influences behind various themes like the *Puranic* themes, erotic themes, *raudra* or fierce themes, theriomorphic, zoomorphic forms and numerous others (Kalidos, “The Wood Carvings of Tamil Nadu: An Iconographical Survey”). While some of these require a sculptor’s creativity, others, like forms of deities, are accompanied by a canonical mandate, as they need to be portrayed systematically (Kalidos, “The Wood Carvings of Tamil Nadu: An Iconographical Survey”). Reiterating the potential of the *ratha* as an area of research, he concludes his work by discussing how the temple car can help one comprehend the anthropological and sociological aspects, religious traditions, mythology, customs and manners, etc., of a society (Kalidos, “The Wood Carvings of Tamil Nadu: An Iconographical Survey”).

While this work mentions aspects not discussed by other studies, all the inferences made are solely with respect to the Tamil society. Further, although the author makes references to the anthropological inferences that can be drawn from temple car icons, he does not explain as to how these inferences can be derived. Despite, such facts though, this work by Kalidos very convincingly advocates the need for the iconographic survey of *rathas* for a complete understanding of their true worth.

Along the same lines, in his work “Iconographic Programme in Temple Cars”, historian R.K.K Rajarajan conducts a thorough study on the iconographic representations present in the temple cars of South India, which he believes have not received as much attention as they deserve. Focusing on the Kutal Alakar Temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, Rajarajan provides the reader with a description of the *ratha* and a detailed understanding of the different iconographic carvings on its three tiers. The various forms range from that of a seated Ganapati, Sri Rama as a warrior, a gypsy and a warrior to a mother delivering a child, a clown, erotica and a bearded Brahma (Rajarajan, “Iconographic Programme in Temple Cars”). The most interesting aspect of these carvings, of which there are a total of 288, is the interplay of *Shaivait*e and *Vaishnavait*e influences. The temple car studied here was constructed in the Vijayanagara period, a time referred to by scholars like Raju Kalidos as ‘the golden age of temple cars’ (Rajarajan, “Iconographic Programme in Temple Cars”). Due to the possible interaction of Vijayanagara rulers with ideas from the Central and Eastern parts of the country, the *ratha* at the Kutal Alakar temple indicates the existence of new trends and is called a ‘masterpiece of Vijaynagara wood-carving’ (Rajarajan, “Iconographic Programme in Temple Cars”). While their narrowed down focus gives one limited insights, articles such as this by Rajarajan highlight how iconographic depictions are highly dependent on the cultural influences of the time as well as on the authority that commissions a *ratha* to be made.

2.6 Anthropocentric Works

Of the various stakeholders affected by the *ratha* and the rituals surrounding it, devotees, priests and temple artisans and carpenters are some prominent groups. While numerous works focus on the *ratha* itself, there is a dearth of works that talk of the communities being impacted by the *ratha*. Although scholars have brought up the participants of *rathotsavams*, they have mostly done so to provide an idea of the scale of the festivities. Similarly, the devotion that drives people to volunteer to pull a chariot, the motivations that impel an artisan to *ratham taksan*, or the relations between the patrons and makers of a *ratha* have not yet received adequate scholarly attention.

One of the few sources that take an anthropocentric approach to *rathas* is “Vishwakarma Craftsmen in Early Medieval Peninsular India” by reputed historian, Vijaya Ramaswamy. The paper focuses on the community of *Vishwakarma* craftsmen and their socio-economic situation of medieval India. It also takes a look into the dynamics of social change within the spectrum of temple building and temple-centric urbanism in the Chola-Pallava period.

It states the history of the Vishwakarma Kula who were given the title of *Rathakarar* (meaning ‘the makers of chariots’) or the *Kammala-Rathakarar* in their Chola period (Ramaswamy, “Vishwakarma Craftsmen in Early Medieval Peninsular India”). While certain 12th century inscriptions in Tamil Nadu describe the *Vishwakarma* as an *anuloma* mixed caste (i.e., born of a high-born father and *Sudra* mother) sources like the *Vaikansa Dharmasutra* define them to be *pratiloma* (i.e., born of a high-caste *Vaisya* mother and a low-caste *Sudra* father), whereas others like the *Uyyakondan* inscriptions make clear distinctions between the *anuloma Rathakarar* and the *pratiloma* smiths (Ramaswamy, “Vishwakarma Craftsmen in Early Medieval Peninsular India”). Therefore, the sources tracing caste based links of the *Vishwakarma* provide many conflicting and ambiguous insights, following which the author concludes that caste identities were more likely to depend on the socio-economic nature of the job performed (Ramaswamy, “Vishwakarma Craftsmen in Early Medieval Peninsular India”).

While they were engaged in other forms of skilled labour, a primary activity that the *Vishwakarma* carried out was the manufacture of chariots, as it suggested by the title ‘Rathakarar’. However, these chariots were not exclusive to temples or their ritualistic purposes and were produced for warfare and domestic use (Ramaswamy, “Vishwakarma Craftsmen in Early Medieval Peninsular India”). The paper also states how, despite the *ratha* being crucial to temple rituals and activities, the *Rathakarar*s fell in the lower strata of a hierarchical structure that constituted the agrarian subsistence economy (Ramaswamy, “Vishwakarma Craftsmen in Early Medieval Peninsular India”). The paper attributes the fairly low status of the *Rathakarar*s to urbanisation and change in technology, where importance shifted to stonemasons, weavers and oilmen, who all participated in the growing emergence of temple towns. Based on the inscriptions of their names found craft items like copper plates, another

piece of evidence the author infers is that a majority of the *Rathakars* were literate and had an elaborate knowledge of *Vastushastra* (Ramaswamy, “Vishwakarma Craftsmen in Early Medieval Peninsular India”).

Although this paper is one of the much-needed sources that talks of the people engaged with the *ratha* and its creation, it provides information pertaining only to a specific period of time. Therefore, it helps one in comprehending the origins and historical position of *Vishwakarma*, but it does not comment upon how this community maintains its identity in the face of great socio-economic and cultural change against contemporary times.

2.7 From multiple perspectives

While the *ratha* has been focussed upon from various perspectives, a few works like *Temple Treasures, Vol. III Chariots* by Dr Choodamani Nandagopal and Mrs Vatsala Iyengar look at the *ratha* in a way to form a more comprehensive understanding of it. Another relevant work is *Temple Cars of Medieval Tamilham* by Professor Raju Kalidos and *Visvakarmiya Rathalaksanam: A Study of Ancient Indian Chariots* by Dr R.P Kulkarni.

Temple Treasures

Published by the Crafts Council of Karnataka in 2009, *Temple Treasures, Vol. III Chariots*, is a work that looks at all aspects of the *ratha*- its history, creation, creators, use in processions and storage as well as maintenance. Beginning with a description of celestial chariots from Greek, German, Yugoslavian and Chinese mythology, the authors move on to roughly trace the history of the terrestrial chariot from 3000 B.C.E. The authors then discuss the significance of the *ratha* in Hindu mythology, focussing on diverse accounts from various ancient texts. Explaining the structure of the *ratha* in detail, the authors give the architectural and historical significance of the physical form of the *ratha*. The authors also focus upon the communities that make the *ratha* and provide information about the *ratha*'s decoration and subsequent procession, giving examples from some famous *rathostavas* like the Jagannath *Rathayatra* in Puri and the Sri Krishna Matha in

Udupi. Supplemented with photographs and illustrations, this book attempts to pay homage to the culture and tradition that surrounds the *ratha* as an object of 'splendour, praise and exaltation' (Nandagopal and Iyengar, Inside Front Cover).

Temple Cars of Medieval Tamilaham

The other text that was generously given to us by the author himself, is the *Temple Cars of Medieval Tamilaham* by Raju Kalidos. Written as a research thesis, the book was published in the year 1989. The two-pronged approach of the book focuses on the historical followed by the structural and iconographic significance of the *rathas* of Tamil Nadu. Accordingly, after explaining some influences that formed the rich history of the *ratha*, Raju Kalidos moves on to explain the key features of their structure. He supplements this information with his primary data, taken from more than 200 *rathas* from all over the state. A majority of his work then proceeds to focus on the various icons depicted in these *rathas* where themes have been divided as per the Gods that have been depicted. Giving details of how a car festival is conducted, Kalidos then concludes his book by analysing the overall significance of the *ratha* in the Tamil society. Despite the period of its publishing, Kalidos's work provides the reader with invaluable information, not to be found elsewhere. This work also aided us in understanding some distinctions between *rathas* found in Tamil Nadu as opposed to those in Karnataka - which was our region of study.

Visvakarmiya Rathalaksanam

The *Visvakarmiya Rathalaksanam: A Study of Ancient Indian Chariots* is a translated work by researcher Dr. R.P Kulkarni, that provides the most detailed information on the *ratha*. Originally an ancient treatise, the Sanskrit version of this book is said to be written with information compiled from the work of Vishwakarma, the great architect of the Gods, and the manuscript *Vijaya Tantra* (Kulkarni, 157). Comprehensive in its technical information, this book is a workbook of sorts that can actually be employed to create a *ratha*. Commencing with Kulkarni's own findings, the book traces the archaeological antiquity of the *ratha* with Mesopotamian and Harappan references. Discussing the proceedings of the *rathotsavam*, the book also focuses of the characteristic features of chariots in the different states of Tamil Nadu,

Kerala, Odisha and Maharashtra. The book mentions texts like the *Brahmanas*, *Silpasastras*, *Kalpasutras*, *Panini's Astadhyayi*, *Pali* literature and the epics and *Puranas* to provide elaborate descriptions of the chariots used by different Gods. It discusses the expansive mythology associated with *rathas* talking of the *Rbhus*, the artisan-priests that created both *rathas* and the horses that would pull them (Kulkarni, 23). Along the lines of *Chariots in the Vedas*, it addresses the different metaphorical references made to *rathas*. While a large portion of the book is in *shloka* or hymn form, Kulkarni provides further translations of other parts in the form of chapters.

Overall, apart from providing some essential information on the techniques needed to make a *ratha*, the book also provides insights that have not been previously discussed, which gives the reader an impression of how *ratha* making, with reference to the original *Visvakarmiya Rathalaksanam*, can almost be equated with a science.

*

While a wide variety of scholarly works focus on the *ratha*, in most cases, these works are not entirely comprehensive: more often than not, the view taken from one perspective overpowers the other. With the exception of *Temple Treasures, Vol. III Chariots*, no scholarly work studied for this project provided information on the current status and importance of the *ratha* makers. Even this work does not discuss the efforts of the tribal communities that work on the *ratha* on a seasonal basis.

Another piece of information not provided by these works concerns the process of how a commission for a *ratha* is given and how the various icons to be depicted on the same are decided. Further, the sense of the devotion felt towards the *ratha* in everyday life, has not been expressed.

Therefore, while we intend to use secondary data to our advantage, our approach to this topic will differ from other forms of previously conducted research. The aims and objectives of this study firstly seek to cover the *ratha* tradition, which would include all stages from its formation to processions in the contemporary as well as ancient times. Taking a socio-economic perspective of temples cars, we attempt to inculcate the anthropological standpoint into our study by understanding how people-

artisans, priests and devotees are impacted by them, if at all. Further, we will focus on *rathas* as objects of religious and iconographic worth by studying them in the context of a temple and along with the various myths and connotations related to them. Integrating an array of standpoints, we hope to form a wider and more complete impression of the *ratha* and its significance today.

Chapter 3

Behind the Scenes

I've heard tales of my ancestors, welcomed with the same kind of revelry and joy that my family and I receive today. My forefathers have carried forward generations of religious and artistic significance, with stories of the deities they carried still engraved on the walls of their body. And as I look at myself now, I can see the effects of time upon my structure, I can see the traditions slowly transition as the years go by and the generations progress.

*

This chapter will briefly explore the history of the *ratha* and the *rathotsavam*, and document its making process focusing on its structure and features including the iconography depicted on it, its makers and making, its maintenance, and the changes seen in the beliefs and processes that surround it. Through this chapter, we aim to utilize and add to existing secondary data, most of which does not pay sufficient attention to the socio-cultural aspects surrounding the making process in the present day.

3.1 Rathas and Rathotsavams- A Brief History

Myths, religious tales and historical accounts in multiple cultures worldwide have references to ancient chariots- celestial, religious and secular. Famous celestial chariots from mythology include the chariots drawn by the Greek Gods Helios, Selene and Eos who ride across the sky at different times to fulfill their roles as the Sun, the Moon and Dawn respectively. One can find similar references in Chinese mythology, according to which multiple Suns traverse across the oceans in chariots drawn by six horse-dragons (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 4,6). Here, one must note that the term 'chariot', on its own, is mostly secular and does not share the theological connotation with '*ratha*'; for instance some of our most popular notions of chariots include the chariot races of Rome in antiquity or toy chariots as archaeological findings in Harappa, that would not be normally associated with religion (Plubins, "Chariots").

From the worldwide perspective, historians like Dr Choodamani Nandagopal and Mrs. Vatsala Iyengar trace the history of the secular chariot from its most

primitive form prevalent in Mesopotamia as early as 3000 B.C.E (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 8). In India these chariots, used as instruments of travel, transport and warfare, have existed since ancient times. Here, the earliest phase of their utilization can be traced as far back as 2500 B.C.E., soon after which their military functionality was discovered (Kulkarni, 15 and Kalidos, 5). Following this, chariots, referred to as *rathas*, have been mentioned in the *Rig* and the *Atharva* Veda, which described them as divine objects, with the help of imagery and metaphor (Kulkarni, 17). While these Vedic descriptions did not provide much clarity about architectural details of the *ratha*, scholars understand these details with help of the multiple allusions to the same (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 34).

During the Vedic period, the Aryans became known for their superior use of chariots in battles (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 34) and according to Professor Raju Kalidos, around this time *rathas* were also occasionally used for honorary and religious purposes (Kalidos, 7). Other sources state that it was in the Mauryan period that emperors began to appear before their subjects in royal processions that in turn formed a part of religious festivals (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 35). This aligns with the likely belief of how the God came to be equated with a King and this led to the idol being provided with all the appendages of a royal court including attendants, chambers and a *ratha* for conveyance (Kalidos, 18). The military use of the *ratha* slowly became obsolete and ceremonial *rathas* for the Gods attained a new dimension (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 35). With the popularization of religious processions that were carried out using these *rathas*, the concept of the temple chariots emerged from that of secular chariots. Therefore, in religion, the history of the *ratha* is closely associated with the history of its procession that is the *rathotsavam*.

Through our primary and secondary research, we identified four explanations for the origin of the *ratha* and the *rathotsavam* as they are seen presently.

In his work *Visvakarmiya Rathalaksanam*, author R.P. Kulkarni attributes the origin of the chariot procession to the members of the Mahayana sect of Buddhism. The people from the Mahayana sect began worshipping Buddha in his idol form and became the first to take an image of Buddha in a festive procession through the city.

Therefore, Kulkarni states that the practice of the festive religious procession spread with the spread of the Mahayana sect (Kulkarni, 56).

Another theory we came across was through Mr Vijaynath Shenoy, founder of the Heritage Village in Manipal who asserts that the idea of *ratha* processions along with other *utsavas* emerged from 7th century C.E onwards to popularise Hinduism. Mr Shenoy believes that given the increasing following of Buddhism in that time, there was a need for a festival like the *rathotsavam*. Since it did not impose any caste, class, etc. barriers, the *rathotsavam* would unite people and show them that their God could come to their doorstep, in a way reinstating their belief in him (Shenoy, Personal Interview). This explanation contrasts with the one offered by historians like Nandagopal and Iyengar who state that the *ratha* was formed around the 7th century C.E. to accommodate a growing number of Hindu devotees (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 64, 128). Since these devotees could not all be physically accommodated within the temple, there was a need for a mobile temple or the temple car.

The fourth explanation refers to the *Bandi Habba*, a folk festival in which deities are placed on a *bandi* or cart with four wheels, and are taken on a procession in and around the village (Habbu, “Unique festival of Uttara Kannada”). Scholars like Mr. Krishnaiah, the Director of the Prachayasanchaya (Oriental) Samshodhan Kendra in Udupi, link the culture of the *ratha* in Karnataka to this folk festival (Krishnaiah, Panel Discussion). Similar views are held by Mr K. Arul, an expert *ratha* maker from Mahabalipuram who emphasises the folk origins of the *ratha* culture. As per folk customs, the *Bandi* or cart is designed in the form of the animal that represents the *vahana* or vehicle of the deity being taken on the procession. Referred to as the Car Festival of the village, the *Bandi Habba* is celebrated with exuberance and merriment (Habbu, “Unique festival of Uttara Kannada”). While the size and form of the cart varies greatly from that of the *ratha*, the concept of a procession that unites people is similar between the two.

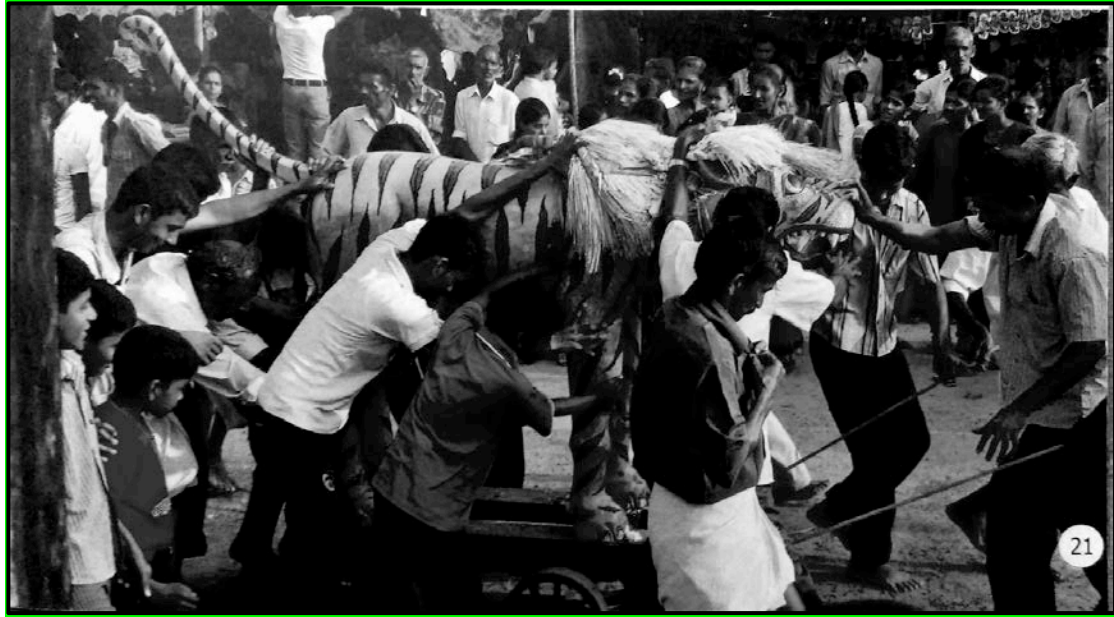


Figure 5: *Bandi* or cart

Source: S. Krishnaiah, Personal Archive

The differences in the various origin theories have not taken away from the unifying quality of the *ratha* culture in Hinduism. As Professor Kalidos opines, in general the *ratha* is revered like a Godly object that is believed to be a link between the earthly and the heavenly realms. Temples considered it meritorious to have a *ratha* for which kings and other noblemen would then make contributions. This was because any donation towards *ratha* and *rathotsavam* brought well-being and was something that promised admission to the heavenly abode of Lord Vishnu (Kalidos, 18).

Over the years, the historicity of the *ratha* and the *rathotsavam* has been recorded in various ways.

Many texts refer to the *rathotsavam* and the activities surrounding it. For instance, the *Atharvaveda* discusses *rathotsavams* with respect to the concept of atonement and expiation from sins (Kalidos, 18). Kautilya also differentiated between the three types of chariots meant for domestic, military and religious uses in the *Arthashastra* (4th century B.C.E.) and this became another factor that gave religious chariots some recognition (Kalidos, 7). Further, texts like the *Agamashastras* give detailed specifications regarding *rathotsavams* - what time the deity is taken out, which direction the *ratha* takes, etc. (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 128). Other texts that

speaks of the *rathotsavam* include the Puranas, Kannada texts like the *Yashodara Charithe* and *Punyasrava* and *Cilappadikaram* (*Silappadikaram*) and *Manimekalai*, the Tamil twin verse-epics. Written during the Pallava period (4th to 9th centuries C.E.), these texts describe how even reputed citizens were honoured with a ceremonial car procession (Kalidos, 9-10). The *Cilappadikaram*, as interpreted by some scholars, also narrates the tale of the car festival of a Buddhist God and that of Muruga, the son of Shiva (Kalidos, 10).

Many epigraphs and inscriptions also give us an idea of the antiquity of *rathas* and *rathotsavams*. Some examples of inscriptions include the account of the car festival held by Chedi King Kharavela for the Jain God *Ketubhadra* in 2nd century B.C.E. (Kalidos, 8).

Another example is that of the Kannada inscription from 1513 C.E. that describes how the king Tuluva Maharaya donated an entire village for the regular celebration of car festivals in honour of Lord Vithala (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 127-128). One more instance is the record from Kanchipuram in 1517 C.E. that narrates how the emperor Krishnadevaraya had constructed two small *rathas* for Lord Vinayaka and Lord Krishna and had himself specified the routes to be taken during their processions (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 127-128). Numerous other examples exist and the list of such accounts is seemingly endless.

Based on these sources, scholars believe that it was in the Pallava period that wooden cars with sculptures gained widespread popularity (Kalidos, 29). After undergoing a number of changes in design, demand and patronage, *rathas* went on to reach their pinnacle under the Vijaynagara Empire in 15th century C.E. (Kalidos, 5).

Therefore, not one but many instances and stories come together to narrate the story of the *ratha*, as is expected with any object with such a wide and expansive historical and current relevance.

3.2 Physical Form - More than what meets the eye

3.2.1 'Temple on Wheels'

The architecture of a temple reflects the cultural activities that take place in it, and its visual appearance reflects the transcendence that takes place in and around it (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 63). The *Shilpas*, which are significant canonical texts for both functional and non-functional art forms, are the source of the architectural designs of temples. Identifying the structural similarities, experts have inferred that these texts have inspired the structure of *rathas* as well (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 64).

As explained by Raju Kalidos, the structure of the *ratha* is a scaled-down temple, designed on the model of the temple itself (Kalidos, 49-50). Nandagopal and Iyengar describe the design of *rathas* as a wood-based miniature form of the shapes, symbolism, iconographic representations and sculptural panels found in temple architecture (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 64). For instance, the ground plan of temples that was drawn from the basic geometrical shapes of squares, rectangles, octagons, hexagons, circles and ellipses was elucidated in the *Shilpa* and later in the *Vastu* texts - and these shapes constitute corresponding forms found in the *rathas* structure also (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 65). The following image (See Figure 6) from the *Rathashilpa*, a Kannada treatise on *rathas*, highlights the structural similarities between the form of the temple and the *ratha*.

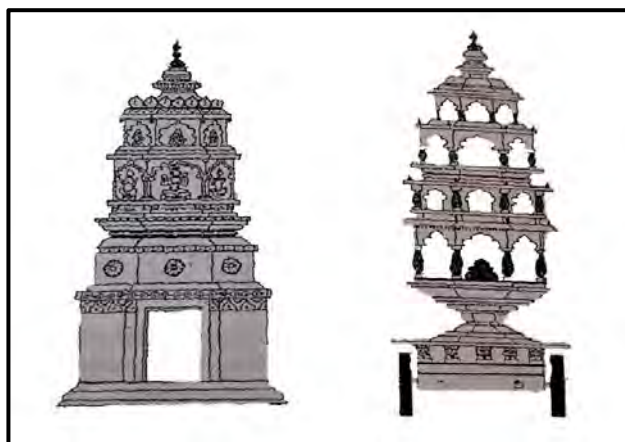


Figure 6: Structures compared: Temple (L) and Ratha (R)

Source: *Degula Rathashilpa*. Kannada University, Hampi. 1999, Print.

While scholars agree upon how temple architecture helped shape the *ratha* as we know it, they differ upon which part of the temple setup the influence comes from. According to Nandagopal and Iyengar, originally the *Mukhamandapa* (main entrance hall) of the temple was a model for the framework of a chariot. Equipped with wheels, axles, spokes etc., a previously immovable temple structure was transformed into a mobile one (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 64). Professor Kalidos, on the other hand, states that the structure of the *ratha* is a replication of the *garbha griha* of the temple. The most sacred part of the temple, the *garbha griha* is the shrine for the principle deity around which the entire temple complex is created (Kalidos, 41-42, 47). As per this theory, the 'Temple On Wheels' was subsequently used more often to bring the God outside the shrine and the temple hall, which could not accommodate the large number of devotees that came to offer worship (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 64).

Additionally, Kalidos believes that the divine power of the *ratha* is supplemented by its resemblance to Buddhist worship halls that symbolize the five cosmic elements of earth, water, fire, sky and space (Kalidos, 17). Hence a chariot is referred to as a moving temple not just for architectural reasons, but for spiritual reasons as well.

Some structures that are popularly attributed to be the inspiration behind the design of chariots include the *Pandava Rathas* currently in Mahabalipuram (erstwhile Mamalapuram) (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 74), Tamil Nadu and the stone chariot at the Vithala temple (See Figure 7) in Hampi, Karnataka (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 80). While the influence of the Mahabalipuram monolithic shrines is debated amongst various experts (Kalidos, "Stone Cars and *Rathamandapas*"), the granite-based form at Hampi is believed to have served as a model for the *rathakaras*

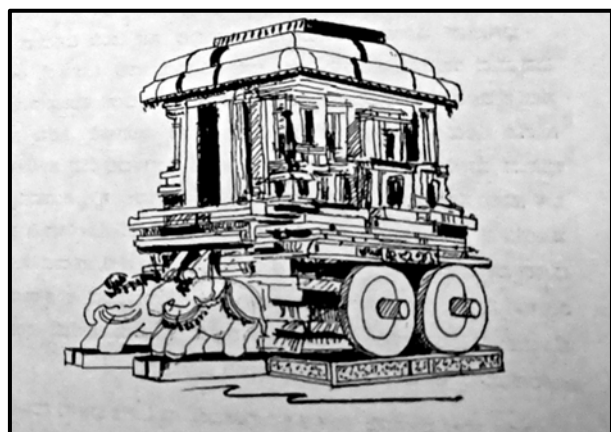


Figure 7: Stone chariot at the Vithala temple, Hampi

Source: Degula Rathashilpa. Kannada University, Hampi. 1999, Print.

or *ratha*-makers of the Vijaynagara period (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 80).

3.2.2 The Body that Says it all

The *ratha* has a very grand structural design that has withstood hundreds of years. The conventional method of *ratha* making in Karnataka is to have one



Figure 8: Semi-finished *ratha* at the Kottelingshwara temple

permanent lower section made of wood, and one temporary upper section made of bamboo. The upper dome-like structure made of bamboo is specially constructed anew every year in the week leading up to the major festival of the region, and is dismantled soon afterwards. However the lower mobile bases need no modification once they have been constructed, and temples still use *rathas* that are centuries old.

From our interviews and secondary readings, we learnt that this architectural division of a *ratha* into two parts was not a common feature found across all regions in South

India. This was because of the existence of distinct clans of artisans present in specific states. There were initially three primary clans involved in the temple architecture, namely the *Dravidapani*, *Vesarapani* and the *Nagarapani*, whose styles and aesthetics varied drastically. The *rathas* found in Udupi and the regions surrounding it, all fall under the *Vesarapani* art style. This classification provides an explanation to the dome shaped and detachable *shikharas* found in these areas that contrast sharply with the conical shapes found in most regions of Tamil Nadu (K. Arul, Personal Interview).

Aside from this common design, there are also certain types of *rathas* that are made up of only permanent structures with both the top and the bottom carved out of wood (See Figure 9). The *Pushpa Rathas* is a popular example. Here, both the portions of the *ratha* are done up in wood-based carvings.



Figure 9: *Pushpa Ratha* constructed by Rajagopal Acharya

In the *rathas* with two halves, the lower halves are composed of tiers of images of Gods and Goddesses, carved painstakingly and embellished with floral and geometric patterns. The upper layers are made of painted panels of deities, decorated with flags and banners. The grandeur of *rathas* seems to be emphasized by this kind of juxtaposition.

The structure of the *ratha* can be horizontally divided into roughly three sections: the plinth, *pada* and the *shikhara* (See Figure 10) (Kalidos, 489).

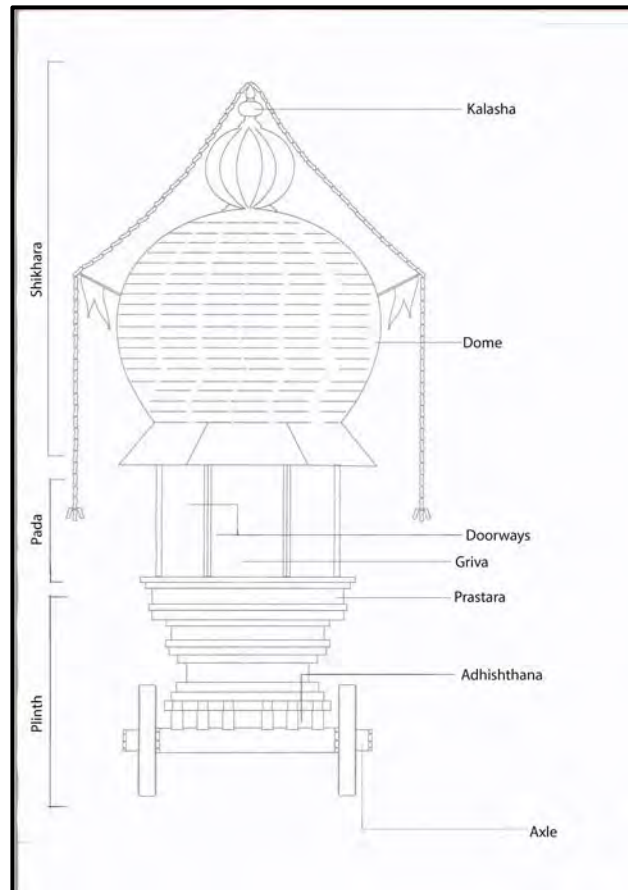


Figure 10: Parts of a ratha

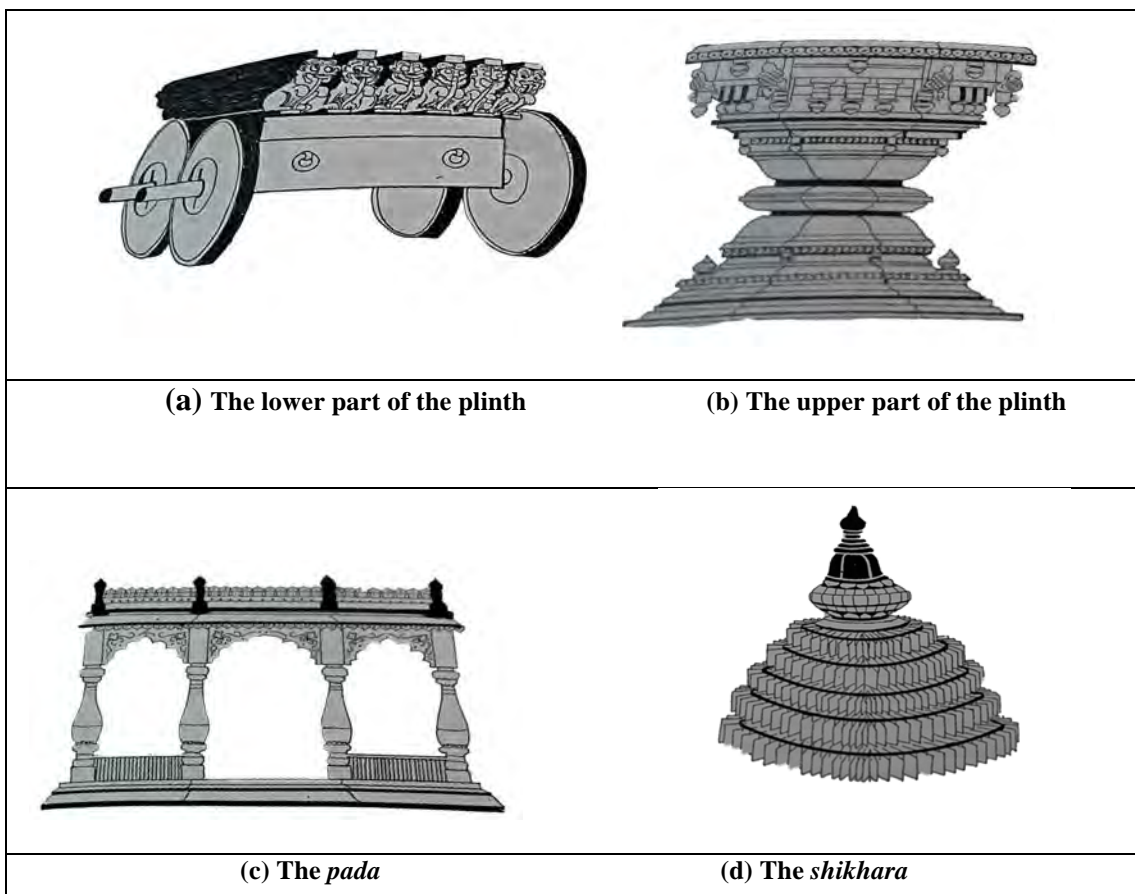
Source: R. Acharya, Personal Archive

- In the plinth, wheels are installed on the axle at the bottom (Kalidos, 58). This is followed by the *upitha* or *upapitha*, which is a structural base for higher extension (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 88). The next part is the *adhishthana*, which makes the *ratha* taper inwards after which it widens (Kalidos, 59) (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 88). The plinth of the *ratha* is the most elaborately carved, and its multiple tiers are geometrically designed.
- The following portion is the *pada* that is the walled entablature that marks the start of the upper half of the *ratha* (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 88). Here, the widened part of the structure called the *prastara* is followed by the *griva* where the idol of the deity is placed during a procession. Most *padas* have doorways in the four cardinal directions with the intention of allowing devotees to have a view from all four directions (Kalidos, 47).
- The crowning part of the *ratha*, formed by lighter materials, is mostly dome shaped, but could also be conical (R. Acharya, Personal Interview). A hollow metal sphere

called the *kalasha* is the finial that mounts a bigger mostly cloth-covered sphere (See Figure 11). A small bell shaped structure tops the entire *ratha* (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 88).



Figure 11: (L-R) (a) Top of the *Shikhara* of *Sanna Ratha* at Sri Krishna Matha (b) Frame of the sphere



(a) The lower part of the plinth

(b) The upper part of the plinth

(c) The *pada*

(d) The *shikhara*

Figure 12: Parts of a *ratha*

Source: *Degula Rathashilpa*. Kannada University, Hampi. 1999, Print.

Based on their components, *rathas* can be classified into different types, of which there are about a hundred spoken of in the *shastras* (B. Acharya, Personal Interview). The most common types include *Brahma Ratha*, *Pushpa Ratha*, *Sanna Ratha*, *Chandramandala Ratha*, *Navaratna Ratha*, *Hoovina Ratha*, *Chinna*, *Navagraha*, *Belli*, *Viyaja* and *Madhyamma Ratha* amongst many others (B. Acharya, Personal Interview) (R.Acharya, Personal Interview).

We found a few examples of certain types in our primary data collection. Of the types of *rathas* we saw, the *Brahma Ratha* (See Figure 13, 14) is the largest and most well known. It is characterised by its six wheels and grand size whereas the *Chandramandala* (See Figure 15) is known for its four-sided, fully-formed structure. The *Belli Ratha* (See Figure 16), ‘belli’ meaning ‘silver’ in Kannada, is characterised by its coating of pure silver and ‘chinna’ meaning ‘gold’ *ratha* (See Figure 17) is gold plated. Similarly, ‘sanna’ meaning ‘small’, is a relatively small, slim *ratha* (See Figure 18), while *Pushpa Ratha* (See Figure 19) is six or eight sided with both its top and bottom halves made of wood. The *Navaratna Ratha* (See Figure 20), as the name suggests, is a jewel-encrusted *ratha*, which factors as one of the most expensive. For instance, despite it being relatively small in size, its making charges may go as high as Rs. 9 to 10 crore (B. Acharya, Personal Interview). Another very different looking type is the *Vijaya Ratha* that is dedicated mostly to female deities. As we observed on the island-town of Mavin Kurve, the *Vijay Ratha* (See Figure 21) is unlike all others we saw, since it is shaped like a chariot typically used in war- complete with the figures of a charioteer and two lions to pull the *ratha*. Interestingly, it is only used to honour female deities like Durga (Nayak, Personal Interview).

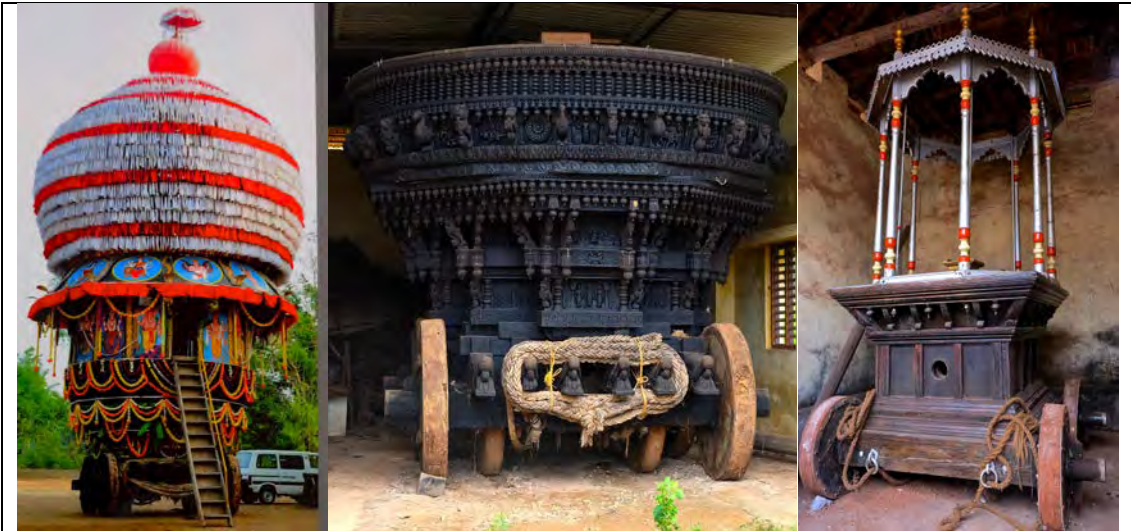


Fig 13: *Brahma Ratha*, Hiriadka Fig 14: *Brahma Ratha* base, Ellare Fig 15: *Chandramandala Ratha*, Hiriadka



Fig 16: *Belli Ratha* Fig 17: *Chinna Ratha*, Udupi Fig 18: *Sanna Ratha*, Kotteshwar

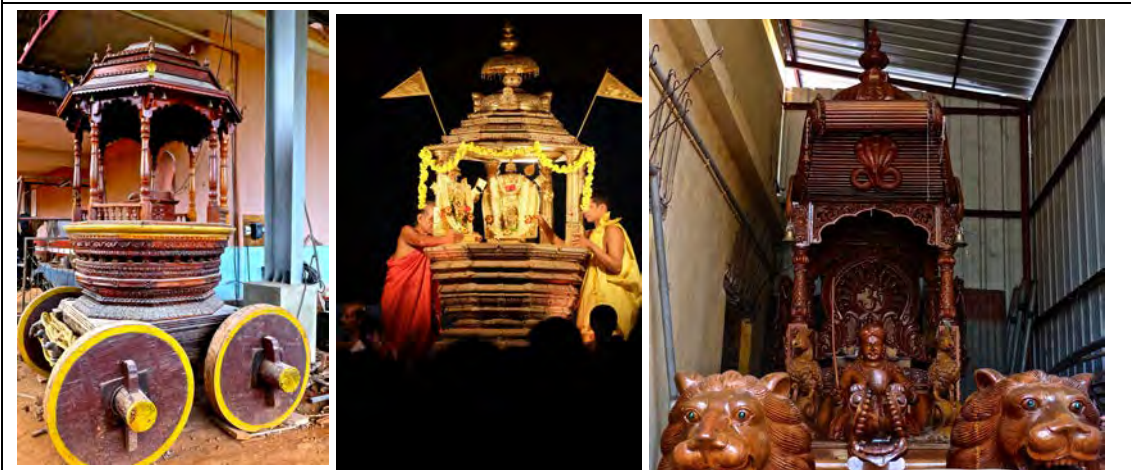


Fig 19: *Pushpa Ratha*, Ellare Fig 20: *Navaratna Ratha*, Udupi Fig 21: *Vijaya Ratha*, Marvin Kurve

The underlying structure in many of these types is similar; the variation lies in the shape of the plinth, dome, etc. and their relative sizes (B. Acharya, Personal Interview). The type of *ratha* made depends on the demands and financial status of the commissioning temple (B. Acharya, Personal Interview).

This was also apparent in our primary observations and interviews with members of the temple administration. For instance, while the *Brahma Ratha* possessed by the Sri Mahabaleshwara Deva temple in Gokarna was the most massive one we saw, there was a relatively much smaller *Brahma Ratha* in Lakshmijanardhan Temple in Perdoor. While the Sri Krishna Matha possesses six *rathas*, the Shri Ganesh Mandir in Honnavar has only one *ratha*. Both Sri Krishna Matha and the Sri Mahabaleshwara Deva temple are important religious sites, with thousands visiting the temple everyday. On the contrary, the temples in the small towns of Perdoor, Hiriadka and Ellare are visited by fewer devotees on a daily basis. Further, during our visit to the Heritage Village, we saw a fairly simple *ratha* decorated with only floral

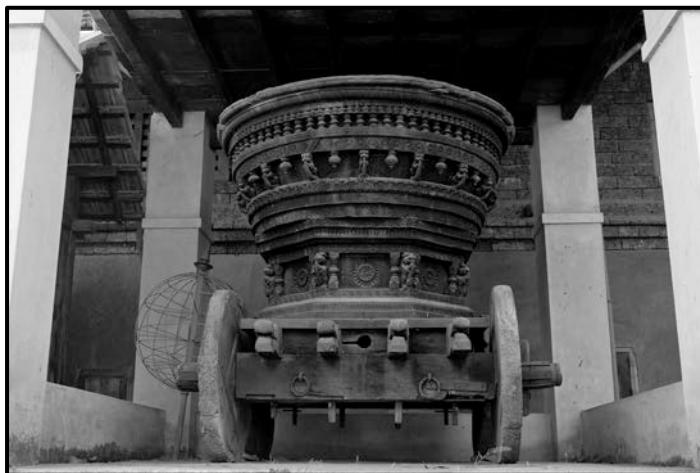


Figure 22: Modest carvings on a *ratha* at Heritage Village, Manipal

carvings and no religious iconography (See Figure 22). Scholar Harish Pai explained how this simplicity could be attributed to the weak financial condition of the temple that commissioned it (Pai, Personal Interview). These factors helped us form a link between the financial condition and popularity of a

temple, and the type and size of the *ratha* commissioned by it.

Apart from the different types of *rathas* prescribed in the *shastras*, secondary sources such as *Viswakarmiya Rathalaksanam*, *Kumaratantra*, *Manasara* and *Silpasastras* provide other classifications (See Tables 2-4). These varieties are classified on the basis of different criteria. While the *Viswakarmiya Rathalaksanam* differentiates some features of *rathas* dedicated to deities of the male, female and neutral genders, it also provides various names for different *rathas* on the basis of the

number of wheels they have, as does the *Kumaratantra*. Similarly, as quoted in different sources, the *Samaranganasutradhara*, *Manasara* and *Silpasastras* provide types of *rathas* on the basis of the geometrical shape they are influenced by. While these varieties are described in secondary sources, we found that such variations are not actively used in the present day.

Types of rathas

Table 2: On the basis of Gender

Gender of Deity	Number of sides	Deity it may be dedicated to	Carvings
Male	four, eight or sixteen	Mahadeva, Mahavishnu, Mahasena, Ganesha, Brahma, Virabhadra and Bhairava	goose, eagle, bull, elephant, horse and lion
Female	three, four or five	Manonmoni, Chandi, Kali, Gauri and Lakshmi	-
Neuter	-	-	Kailasha mountain, yakshas, oceans, vyalis, she-anteloped, lions and big lotuses

Source: *Viswakarmiya Rathalakshanam* (Kulkarni, 187)

Table 3: On the basis of the Number of Wheels

Number of Wheels	Name of the Chariot	
		<i>Vishvakarmiya Rathalakshanam</i> (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 93)
Three	-	<i>Vijaya</i>

Four	<i>Abhasa</i>	<i>Kanta</i>
Five	<i>Vikalpa</i>	<i>Srikara</i>
Six	<i>Chanda</i>	<i>Visala</i>
Seven	<i>Chanda</i>	<i>Nibhadra</i>
Eight	-	<i>Srivisala</i>
Nine	<i>Jati</i>	<i>Bhadra</i>
Ten	-	<i>Bhadravishalaka</i>

Table 4: On the basis of the Geometrical Shapes

Geometrical Shapes of the base	Name of the Chariot	
		<i>Manasara and Silpasastra</i> (quoted in Kalidos, 53)
Circle	<i>Vesara</i>	<i>Vesara</i>
Oval	<i>Kalingaka</i>	<i>Vesara</i>
Square	<i>Nagara</i>	<i>Nagara</i>
Rectangle	-	<i>Nagara</i>
Hexagon	<i>Andhra</i>	<i>Dravida</i>
Octagon	<i>Dravida</i>	<i>Dravida</i>

3.2.3 Icons With Many Tales

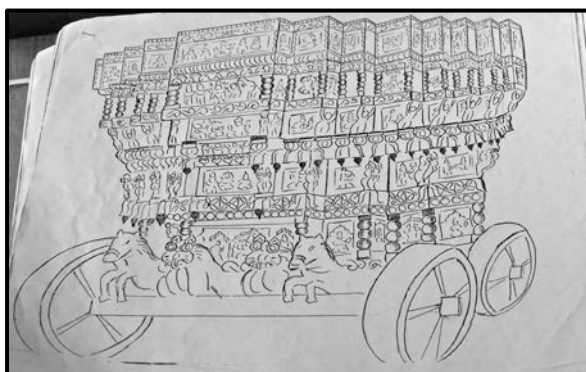


Figure 23: Blueprint of carvings by Balkur Acharya

The most striking feature about the wooden part of the *ratha* is the intricate iconography that covers almost each surface, the pattern changing with each horizontal tier. Of the 28 *rathas* we saw, 21 were with the structure of one permanent, one

non-permanent section while the others were simply one permanent structure from top to bottom. While the former kind carried floral decorations as well as deities (See Figure 23), only patterns of flowers and other geometric designs were to be found on the second kind (See Figure 24).

The *prastara*, *upitha* and the *adhithana*, in the lower half of the *ratha* are replete with detailed carvings that are placed in a horizontal series without leaving any empty space between them. Kalidos discusses the architectural reasoning for why the top half of the *ratha* i.e. the *shikhara*, unlike the plinth, must not be carved upon; this is to ensure a balance in weights and stability (Kalidos, “The Wood Carvings of Tamil Nadu: An Iconographical Survey”). Accordingly, on the plinth and *pada*, floral and geometric patterns and motifs are alternated with *chitras* or images of Gods in the horizontal direction (R. Acharya, Personal Interview). Commonly, carvings cover every surface of this part of the *ratha* and only in rare cases are sculptures arranged sparsely (Kalidos, 65).

Among the simplistic patterns, the most noticeable are floral compositions, leaves, scrolls, bud-like wooden bulbs, stylised lotuses, arches and embellished pillars along with hung bell-shaped and spherical ornaments (See Figure 25, 26) (Kalidos, 66). Icons of animals include projected lion heads and hooded



Fig 24: Blueprint of carvings by Rajagopal Acharya
Source: R. Acharya, Personal Archive



Figure 25: Floral carvings and patterns on a Pushpa Ratha, Ellare



Figure 26: Heart shaped patterns on Sanna Ratha, Perdoor

serpents or *nagas*. Considered the guardians of prosperity, security and fertility (Kalidos, 202), *nagas* are shown in a series of carvings in which

very often, the same motif of a hooded serpent is repeated (See Figure 27). Images

and idols of rearing lions, elephants, horses (See Figure 28), the bull *Nandi* (in the case of a Shiva *ratha*) (See Figure 29) and most commonly crocodiles, were also on



Figure 27: Bells and Nagas on a Sanna Ratha, Perdoor

Personal Interview) (See Figure 30).

Among animals, we also observed the depiction of a deer (See Figure 32). These sculptures occupy a major portion of the carved area, with motifs changing with



Figure 28: Horse and elephants on a ratha in Dharmasthala

each tier. Another ever-present aspect of the iconography is the image of a rearing *vyaali*, a mythical dragon with a leonine face and elephantine proboscis (Kalidos, 65).



Figure 29: Idol of Nandi on the Brahma Ratha, Gokarna

edges and corners, *vyaalis* along with the frequent motif of parrots (See Figure 33) and elephants symbolize the spirit of locomotion and movement (Kalidos, 64).

We observed that the *vyaali* is a popular image even on the walls of temples themselves, substantiating how direct influence is taken from temples' designs (See Figure 31). Ordinarily placed on the



Figure 30: Crocodiles on the Pushpa Ratha, Kotteshwar



Figure 31: (a) *Vyaali* on a *Brahma Ratha*, Honnavar (b) *Vyaali* on the temple roof, Perdoor



Figure 32: Deer on the *Brahma Ratha*, Perdoor



Figure 33: Parrot on a *Sanna Ratha*, Udipi

The *chitra* or images of deities are some of the most exquisite embellishments on the *ratha*. Framed with ornamented arches and pillars, these images may cover anything from two tiers to over ten tiers, depending on the size of the *ratha*. Historically, the varying tiers are used to indicate the three different levels of existence. The lowermost layer depicts the earth-level occupied by the *nagas*, *yakshas*, demons, humans etc. The next layer is the atmosphere where *rishis* and *yoginis* can be found and the uppermost layer serves as the abode for the Gods, who actually have the freedom to float through all the layers (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 102).

Texts like the *Manasara*, *Visvakarmavastusastra*, *Sripasnasamhita*, *Kumaratantra* and *Silpasastra* provide instructions like these, and various others, ordaining temple cars as religious abodes of iconography (Kalidos, 63). While prescribed norms are literal, some injunctions also make metaphorical statements; for instance while the pillars of the *ratha* must not contain figure carvings, the deities

associated with them inhabit those regions ‘without form’ (Kalidos, “The Wood Carvings of Tamil Nadu: An Iconographical Survey”). Many *ratha* makers like Mr Rajagopal Acharya and Mr Laxminarayan Acharya take pride in following these instructions in all their works (R. Acharya, Personal Interview).

Among the *chitra*, carvings of the *Dashavtara* (depictions of the ten avatars of Vishnu), *Shivaleela*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* scenes are common. As we learnt from *ratha* makers, while popular icons vary from region to region, careful attention is paid to the instructions provided in the *shastras* in all regions (R. Acharya, Personal Interview).

Along these lines, *rathas* are known for their depictions of beloved kings,



Figure 34: Dancers on the Brahma Ratha, Perdoor

chiefs and priests, *Brahmanas*, *Garuda*, *bhaktas*, *dvarapalakas* or gate keepers, musicians, nude demi-Goddesses, and *kinnaras* among many others (Kalidos, 63). While we found an elaborate carving of dancers on a *ratha* in Perdoor (See Figure 34), on the *ratha* in Gokarna, we also noticed the exquisite depiction

of a *rathotsavam* itself - with the image of a temple, a palanquin, crowds of devotees and the

ratha in procession (See Figure 35). This particular carving piqued our interest more than others because apart from being a rare depiction, in the space of one panel it successfully displayed a major part of the journey of the *ratha*.

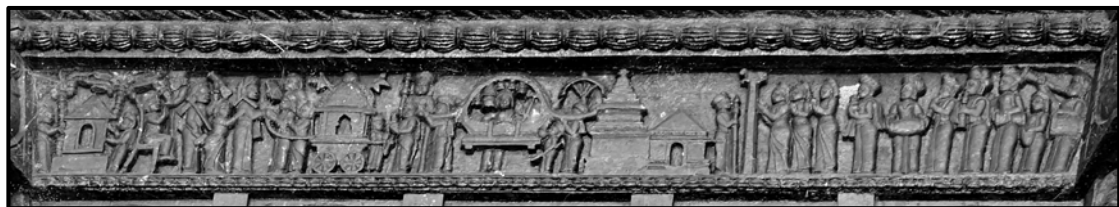


Figure 35: Scene of rathotsavam on the Brahma Ratha, Gokarna

With respect to carvings of deities, many images we saw were related to how the area of Western Karnataka is primarily Vaishnavite, since *rathas* most commonly carried icons of the *Dashavtara* (Pai, Personal Interview). As Kalidos expounds, the series of the *Dashavatara* is one of the most popular carvings on



Fig 36 (a): Dashavatara (Matsya & Kurma)

(See Figure 36 (b)), *Vamana* (dwarf avatar), *Parsurama* (Rama with a battle-axe), *Dasarathi* Rama, *Balarama* (Rama with a plough), *Krishna* and *Kalki* (See Figure 36 (c)), the ten avatars are presented using



Figure 36 (c): Dashavatara (Kalki)

preparing for war (See Figure 37 (a), (b)). Other avatars of Vishnu that we saw include the *Sheshasayi*, Vishnu in his reclining posture on a serpent (See Figure 38). Among the depictions of Shaivaites, in Gokarna we saw the image of *Sadashiva* a bearded, five-headed Shiva, which is a rare and unconventional way of portraying Shiva (See Figure 39). The *ratha* also carried the unique depictions of other deities like *Brahma*, and *Ganesha* with multiple heads (See Figure 40).

rathas. Consisting of *Matsya* (fish avatar), *Kurma* (tortoise avatar) (See Figure 36), *Varaha* (boar avatar), *Narsimha* (half-man-half-lion)



Figure 36 (b): Dashavatara (Narsimha)

different weapons and instruments and are conventionally in a standing posture in a single row that covers all sides of the *ratha* (Kalidos, 153). From the *Ramayana*, carvings depicted different significant scenes like the abduction of Sita and Rama



Fig 37: Scenes from Ramayana: (a) Abduction of Sita



(L) Fig 37: Scenes from *Ramayana*: (b) Rama and Lakshmana

(R) Figure 38: Sheshasayi Vishnu, Dharmasthala



(L) Figure 39: Icon of Sadashiva, Gokarna

(R) Figure 40: Icon of five headed Ganeshha on the *Brahma Ratha*, Gokarna



One would assume that a *ratha* dedicated to a God of a particular sect would carry carvings of the same sect. In fact, Kalidos has attributed some of the development of medieval Hindu iconography to such sectarian divisions. For instance because of the conflict between *Saivism* and *Vaishnavism*, varying icons were sculpted to outdo one another (Kalidos, “The Wood Carvings of Tamil Nadu: An Iconographical Survey”).

Interestingly however, a *ratha* need not necessarily carry carvings of the specific deity it is dedicated to. For instance, as we observed in Gokarna and as is also explained by experts Nandagopal and Iyengar, iconography on *rathas* may represent a unity of the Shaiva and Vaishnava philosophy. While a *ratha* like this one for Shiva may have carvings of the *Dashavtara*, similarly, Vaishnava *rathas* have the carvings of the family of Shiva especially Ganapati and Muruga, Shiva’s sons who are said to

be the guardians of the axles (Kalidos, 64) (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 103). According to Kalidos, while the presence of the Ganapati is common, other Shaivaite themes are rarely expressed in *rathas* dedicated to Vishnu (Kalidos, 68).

Placed centrally in the lower part of the plinth, the auspicious image or idol of Ganapati has an exclusive space for itself since *ratha* makers believe that no other deity should be carved alongside it. Since ancient times, the theriomorphic form of Ganapati has been displayed in three styles - standing, dancing and seated (Kalidos, 114) (See Figure 41). While the former two are rare, we saw the seated version most commonly during our field research.



Figure 41: Idol of Ganesha on the *Brahma Ratha*, Gokarna



Figure 42: Icons of Saraswati, Shiva and Parvati, Dharmasthala

In our primary observations, depictions of female deities included Goddess Saraswati playing her veena, Maheshasura Mardini, an avatar of Goddess Durga and Gajalakshmi, an avatar of Goddess Lakshmi (See Figures 42, 43, 44)



Figure 44: Gajalakshmi on a panel, Manipal



Figure 43: Icon of Mahishasura Mardini Durga, Heritage Village, Manipal

In our study we also found the forms of *Dikpalas* or *Ashtadikpalas* – the eight Gods of the directions, carved on the appropriate side of *rathas* (See Figure 45). Each *Dikpala* carries its own features and iconographic attributes. For instance, Indra, the king of Gods is put in the East and is depicted with four hands and numerous jewels on his body. Agni is shown with two heads and sometimes like an old man with a beard. Kubera is depicted like a bulky person with a big belly, and Yama is shown carrying a skull, trident and a noose (Kalidos, 204).



Figure 45: Varuna, the 5th Dikpala

Erotic Images



Figure 46 (a)

On two of the *rathas* we saw in the Kottelingeshwar temple in Kotteshwar and the Virabhadra temple in Hiriadka there were a number of erotic panels (See Figure 46 (a), (b) and (c)). This included the image of the Goddess Lajjagowri during childbirth (See Figure 47). These images covered two or three tiers whereas in other *rathas* they may also cover all the *chitra* panels. As secondary sources state, these erotic depictions are in fact a common occurrence, with dalliances between men and women and even the occasional animal, Gods and Goddesses, and sages and seers being shown in a bewildering variety (Kalidos, 211). Through the depictions of amorous couples and groups, these images cover the themes of seduction, adultery, *kama* or pleasure/desire, fertility, childbirth and bestiality.



Figures 46 (b) and (c): Erotic Images



Figure 47: Lajjagowri during childbirth

The presence of erotic images on *rathas* has been an enigmatic feature that has multiple possible explanations. One explanation relates these images with fertility cults that were supposed to have been closely connected with festive processions or *yatras* and the themes and narratives present in the temple itself (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 110). Certain *rathotsavams* like the one in the Lingaraja temple in Bhubaneswar, take place on days associated with fertility rites (Desai, 105) that consist of rituals that promise an improved fertility and gifted progeny to anyone who pulls the *ratha* (Rao, Panel Discussion) (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 142). Accordingly, these *rathas* would be covered with ‘obscene’ sculpture that was believed to ‘stimulate the generative powers of nature’ (Desai, 105). Another explanation concerns the ability of erotic images to ward off the evil eye and promote auspiciousness and well-being. This is also compared with the acceptable lascivious behaviour commonly seen during festivals like Holi, Vasantotsava, etc. (Desai, 105). These attributes of auspiciousness are also said to protect the temple from being destroyed by forces like lightning and thunder (Kalidos, 215).

Erotic images are also linked with the spirit of revelry and ‘indecent’ behaviour seen during *rathayatras*. For instance, travellers like Abbe Dubois have

recounted the tales of dancing girls that accompanied processions and delighted spectators with their dances and 'obscene songs'. Similarly, the Jagannatha *rathayatra* was at one point attended by a hundred and twenty *devadasis* who were dancers and sacred prostitutes who performed for the deity. In ancient times, even the *Arthasastra* was known to grant freedom for the consumption of liquor on the days of such *yatras* (Desai, 105).

Further, Kalidos opines that erotic images may also be considered educative and may serve as attractions that would make the masses more interested in visiting the temples (Kalidos, 215). Scholar S. Kramrisch in *The Hindu Temple* associated erotic images with the ritual union or mingling of human beings or *jivatma* and Gods or *paramatma*. In *The Cult of Desire*, author Kanwar Lal associates these images with the ritualistic orgies of the Tantric cult popularized in India post 7th century C.E (Kalidos, 215). The influence of the tantric cult is substantiated by the fact that many of the acts depicted, like oral congress and childbirth, are not endorsed by the *Kamasutra*, but they are still present on *rathas* in abundance (Kalidos, 216).

All images carved on *rathas* make them the iconographic 'paradise' (Kalidos, "The Wood Carvings of Tamil Nadu: An Iconographical Survey"). While patterns of objects add a special intricacy to the skill exhibited by sculptors, the *chitra* or images provide us with invaluable mythological insights. The *chitra* are also indicative of the social life of the land where the *ratha* is made (Kalidos, 209). Kalidos uses the example of erotic themes to stress upon the anthropological and sociological value of temple car sculptures. While many ancient sculptural themes are kept alive today solely in temple cars, erotic themes possibly depict the activities and sexual behaviour of people which are not exhibited adequately in any other part of Dravidian temples except in temple cars (Kalidos, "The Wood Carvings of Tamil Nadu: An Iconographical Survey").

By representing the trends, dress, ornaments, habits etc. of the people depicted in the carvings, the iconography on the *ratha* mirrors the social life of the era in which it was made (Kalidos, 209). Overall, skillfully put together, the various types of images found on *rathas* create an exceptionally meticulous and aesthetically pleasing profile of the *ratha*.

3.3 Its Making and Makers

The plans in store for me are elaborate. There is a long and rigorous process of transformation I must endure, before I am equipped to fulfill duties. While I may be unpolished and raw now, I trust my masters to sculpt me into the grand vehicle that I am destined to become. I know that I will be carved with care and elegance. There will be cuts and there will be parts of me that I will lose. But by the end of it all, I will be carrying centuries of meaning. By the end of it, I will be prepared for my purpose.

3.3.1 Constructing beauty, creating faith

The attention to given aesthetics, detail and iconography is indicative of not only of the importance and reverence given to *rathas*, but also of the skill and expertise of *ratha*-makers. Two distinct parts of the *ratha*, the lower wooden base and the upper *shikhara*, are constructed separately and by different sets of people.

Vishwakarma Kula and Gudigara Community

Before the *ratha* is taken to the *devasthanana*, only its wooden base is created. This bottom structure is the permanent part of the temple car that requires a relatively greater amount of planning, investment and time, in comparison to the temporarily installed upper portion. The lower base needs to be durable and sturdy, as it functions as the mobile structure that essentially holds together the weight of the entire vehicle. Since a large portion of the iconography is carved on this section, it often takes months to finish.

During our field study, we met ‘rathashilpis’ or sculptors, who belong to the Vishwakarma and Gudigara communities. Interviewing them in depth, we came to learn that although both the communities engage in sculpting and creating the base of the *ratha*, they have very prominent individual identities.

The Vishwakarmas take their name from “Vishwakarma”, meaning ‘the architect of the Gods’, and historically the community has been reputed for its refined

woodcraft and carpentry. Loosely divided into five groups - stonemasons, goldsmiths, metal casters, blacksmiths and carpenters - in present day Karnataka, this community has many members engaged in *ratham taksan* (or ratha-making) as a profession (Ramaswamy, 2) and Vishwakarma master-craftsmen have come to associate themselves with the surname 'acharya' meaning a knowledgeable person, or someone who teaches - a name derived from 'achaar' which in Kannada refers to a carpenter (Harish Pai, Personal Interview).

The Gudigaras on the other hand, take their name from "Gudigar", which literally translates to 'temple artisan' as 'gudi' is the term for 'temple' in Kannada (Kamat, "The Gudigars of Kanara"). The Gudigaras too have historically been engaged with artwork, however, not only for religious purposes, but for commercial ends as well. The *ratha* is one of the many creations made by this community of expert sculptors whose carving work is believed to have a distinct characteristic finesse.

Over the course of our study, we met people who mentioned that these communities overlap and may actually be the same in their identities and beliefs (Nayak, Personal Interview). In fact, in their book, Nandagopal and Iyengar discuss how master craftsmen earn the title of 'gudigara' owing to their profession, even if they come from the Vishwakarma community (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 123). Yet, members of these communities disagree and advocate that these groups are actually quite dissimilar, and for good reason too. It is seen that while the Vishwakarma are wood workers and carpenters that also happen to make temple objects, Gudigaras as their name suggests, are artists customarily associated with the temple (Pai, Personal Interview).

Both these communities run workshops that need not be solely dedicated to *ratha* making; owners choose to specialize in various objects (See Figure 48). In the field of *ratha* making, their tasks include creation, repair and renovation works. Most workshops have been passed over at least two generations and owners may choose whether or not to employ people based on strict caste hierarchy.



Figure 48: Vishwakarma Institute of Art, Kotteshwar

Other tribes

Before a *rathotsavam* actually takes place, the *ratha* must be prepared for the procession. This preparation involves the decoration of the upper portion of the *ratha* by the tribes, usually by adorning it with colourful wooden props, strips of cloth, flags and garlands of flowers. This work is done on a voluntary basis by different

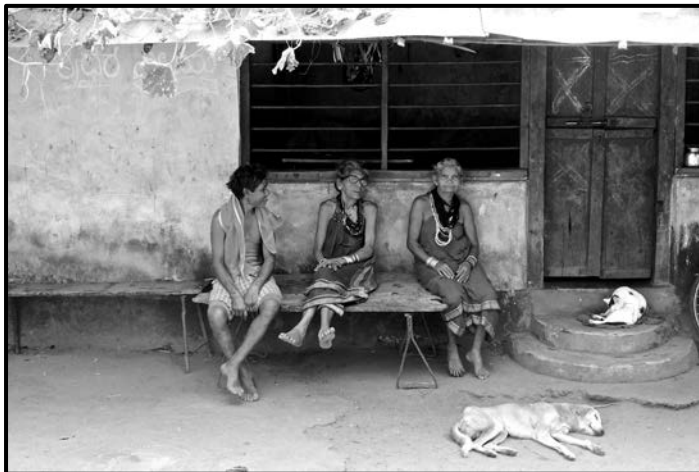


Fig 49: Members of the Hallaki Vakkala family, Honnavar

communities, most of which are tribal. These tribes include the Hallaki Vakkala, the Kharvi, the Mogera, the Mogaveera and the Thandela. Though the geographical habitat of the tribes might vary, most of them are fisher folk (Hegde, Personal

Interview). While there is a hierarchy of status and roles

within the Vishwakarma and Gudigaras, no such hierarchy exists within the tribes that construct and decorate the upper portion of the *ratha*. Though the work of the

rathashilpi communities is paramount, it is imperative to understand that the tribes who help build the dome are equally necessary when it comes to the creation of a *ratha*.

The community we had the opportunity to interact with was the Hallaki Vakkala (See Figure 49), a tribe in the North Cannara or Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka. The Hallaki are believed to draw their name from the word 'Pallaki' meaning 'palanquin' ("A Profile of Study Area") and they reside in seven main regions in Karnataka: Chandaavara, Gokarna, Kadavaada, Ankola, Nushi Kote, Kumbaara Gadde and Haritte Seemey (Balaji, "A Vanishing Tribe..."). The primary language of the Hallaki people is known as 'Achchagannada', and the most members of the tribe are believed to be devotees of the Thirupathi Thimmappa. It is interesting to note, that although this deity is usually worshipped in the eastern coast, the Hallaki on the west coast worship this deity as well. Scholars suggest that perhaps the Hallaki, Gondas, Gamokkalus and Kare Vokkaligas used to previously worship Gods like Byate Beera, Masthi and Chowdi, but somehow came under the influence of Vaishnavism, and due to this influence, they began worshipping Thirupathi Thimmappa ("A Profile of Study Area"). Sri Venkata, a form of Vishnu, is the *kuladeva* or family deity of the group we interacted with (Gowda, Personal Interview).

For the Hallaki community, the tradition and technique of working on the *ratha* is passed on from generation to generation. The skill is passed orally and taught practically by a father to a son, since women are barred from this work. Interestingly enough, the Hallaki tribe members claimed to know nothing about the other half of the *ratha* and how it is made. As Ganpuliya Gowda, a member of the tribe expressed, in the *ratha* is their God, and they want to do this service for their God. Working without any supervision, external help or protective equipment, Hallaki tribesmen climb to the top of the *ratha*, risking their lives to fulfill their duty (*kartavya*) and *dharma*. Children as young as the age of 12 may also join the team as long as they are willing, however it is mandatory for at least one man to represent each family. While the workers ask for nothing in return for their work, they are usually paid a nominal amount by the temple authorities, who also supply them with the materials they need. Their *ratha* related jobs do not offer a lot of monetary compensation and on other

days of the year the Hallaki are farmers and daily wage labourers. From the family we interviewed, we learnt that they are sometimes financially supported by the temple authorities also through the means of small landholdings, on which they may cultivate some crops (Gowda, Personal Interview).

Hallaki Hunting Ritual

Meeting the Hallaki tribe in Honnavar was perhaps one of the most rewarding and pleasing experiences of our entire journey. We were escorted by one of the tribesmen into a small hut and there stood 6 members of his family, all awaiting our arrival. They welcomed us with immense hospitality and a sort of glow on their faces. During our interview with them, we learnt of the fascinating aspect of a ritual that they had before the auspicious day of the *rathotsavam*.

What came to be known amongst our group as the 'Hallaki Hunting Ritual', goes something like this: The night before the *rathotsavam*, the Hallaki invite 5 other tribes to participate in a kind of hunting ritual called 'Mrigabete', which translates into 'deer-hunt' from Kannada but here, a coconut substitutes the deer as the 'kill'. After the arrival of the other tribes, an arrow made by the Bidri tribe is used to hunt, which should be made official by the 'stabbing' of the coconut. The Hallaki members provide the hunting tools to the other communities in a certain order; the Gaud Saraswat Brahmin community is the first to receive them, the Mogera community of fishermen is second, the third chance is given to the Bandari community, the fourth to the Mallari community and the fifth turn is kept for the Hallakis. The arrow and coconut are like gifts that are given in a fairly simple manner, with the Hallaki calling the chief of the guest tribe by his name and then him collecting them with honour.

This ritual is extremely dear to the members of the Hallaki tribe, who consider it inauspicious to begin the *rathotsavam* without it.

Apart from building the *ratha*, the Hallaki Vakkala are also involved in the *rathotsavam* as at least two members are required to control the braking mechanism of the *ratha*. While in the Honnavar region, the Hallaki tribe performs this function, the Kharvi and the Thandela are associated mainly with mechanisms to pull the chariot, so as to make it move in a specific direction (Hegde, Personal Interview).

Secondary sources revealed that the Mogaveera, another tribe from the Udupi region, has the crucial job of maneuvering the chariot at the time of the *rathotsavam* (Uchila, 54). After the procession is over, the Hallaki tribe members are further required to dismantle the structure they had created. While the creation takes up to 7 days of work, the dismantling takes only one day. Nevertheless, all these tribe considers this decoration responsibility as theirs, and carry out the work based on love and devotion they have towards the deity (Gowda, Personal Interview).

Very often referred to as ‘helper’ communities, these groups do not enjoy the prestige and status that is associated with other *rathashilpis*. Among scholars and even among locals, there is very little recognition for the work of many of these communities, which is disproportionate to the amount of effort and skill displayed by the tribe (Gowda, Personal Interview). We inferred that this could be attributed to the relatively less practical and theoretical expertise needed for the Hallaki communities task, as compared to that of the Vishwakarma and Gudigara communities.

3.3.2 A *ratha* is born

The process of a *ratha*'s formation commences in the temple, where its administration decides to procure a *ratha*. Apart from adding to the aesthetic and religious merit of the temple, *rathas* are also believed to be indicative of a status symbol of the temple in question.

The choice of which *rathashilpi* to employ is at the discretion of these authorities. These decisions are often based upon the lineage and family name of the *rathashilpi* and his past association with the concerned temple (Hegde, Personal Interview). The *rathashilpis* must receive the order for the *ratha* within a particular

auspicious time of certain mathematical and astrological significance, or *mahurat*, failing which the order is rejected (L. Acharya, Personal Interview). Once the order is placed, the shape of the *ratha* is decided based on the shape of the temple - which itself had been constructed along the lines of detailed canons provided in religious texts.

Customarily, *rathashilpis* use strong wood like jackfruit, *ranja* or Spanish Cherry and teak wood sourced from local markets (See Figure 50). Other types of wood include *matti* or Indian-laurel, *rakthahonne* or Malabar Kino, sandalwood and *nandi* wood amongst many others (R. Acharya, Personal Interview). According to Mr Rajagopal Acharya, while the *shastra* recommends the use of



Figure 50: Wood as raw material

jackfruit wood for its white colour, no specifications exist about particular woods for particular Gods. Further, metals like brass and steel are used for nuts and bolts (B. Acharya, Personal Interview). Once the size and dimensions of the *ratha* has been calculated, the construction proceeds chronologically in stages: starting with the wheels and the cross-section of the *ratha's* base and finishing with the *kalasha* at the very top. The axles are measured and fitted in accordance to the size of the wheels, which subsequently determine the construction of the *ratha's* lower body. This main body consists multiple tiers and each layer is built in an outward incline, where a cross section is made for each storey to ensure firmness and solidity. This section is mostly a hollow core (Pai, Personal Interview), hence allowing for ease in building as well as pulling it.

Different kinds of wood are said to be used for different parts of the *ratha*, to suffice the different functions and requirements of various components. For instance, since they carry most of the *ratha's* weight, the wheels must be made with a stronger type of wood (B. Acharya, Personal Interview). An array of tools and equipment is used to carve the *ratha* to its finest form (See Figure 51). There are around twenty-

five types of chisels that are used, under which each category has many variations in terms of blade size, sharpness, curvature, etc. Interestingly enough, we also learnt that carpenters have a separate set of tools, aside from those used by artisans. The use of machinery was also common across the workshops we visited, where they were used for numerous tasks such as cutting wood, polishing panels and carving basic designs (K. Arul, personal interview).

The ratios and other regulations to be followed are strictly carried out as prescribed in ancient texts like the *Agama* and *Vastu Shastra* along with regional texts like *Ratha Shilpa* and many others that have been compiled to form manuscripts for the creation of *rathas* (L. Acharya, Personal Interview) (Krishnaiah, Panel Discussion).

While these age-old rules and regulations help in the formation of a sturdy and enduring *ratha*, they are also essential for the appropriate spiritual attributes of a *ratha*. A fascinating rule here is about how the wood must be kept upright, i.e. in the direction in which it would grow in a tree (L. Acharya and B. Acharya, Personal Interview). If this crucial rule is not observed the *tripti* or spiritual worth of the *ratha* will be disturbed (B. Acharya, Personal Interview). Similarly, we were told by Rajagopal Acharya that the eyes of each figurine are installed only at the very end of the *ratham taksan* so as to harness the energy of the *ratha* correctly and hence, auspiciously (R. Acharya, Personal Interview).

After the internal structure has been put together with beams, the details for the surface are carved out of solid wood (See Figure 52). This is done tracing patterns on pieces of paper that are pasted on top of the wood for guidance (See Figure 53). At the Vishwakarma Institute of Art, we had the exciting opportunity to try our hand at this type of carving (See Figure 54).



Fig 51: Tools used by the artisans, Kotteshwar Fig 52: Dome carved by Vishwakarma workers, Kotteshwar



Fig 53: A Vishwakarma artisan carving, Kotteshwar Fig 54: Group members learning wood carving, Kotteshwar

Once carved, these panels are attached to the exterior of the *ratha*. If the exterior of the *ratha* is to be left wooden, and covered only with varnish, then it is thoroughly polished and made weather resistant. In the case of a silver or gold coating, sheets of the metal are heated and then delicately forged into shape so as to coat the carvings on the wood (See Figure 55).



(a) Panel of carved wood



(b) Solid block of silver



(c) A malleable sheet of silver



(d) Impression of the design



(e) Detailing



(f) Soldering



(g) Final detailing



(h) Final step

Figure 55: Process of silver coating

Images and iconography are intrinsically linked to the aesthetic and religious merit of the value. While erotic iconography may not be wide practice anymore, other images of Gods, most notably Ganesha and the *Dikpalas* have been incorporated into carvings on rathas. When asked about the creative freedom that they can use as master craftsmen, Mr Laxminarayana Acharya and Mr Rajagopal Acharya answered that the designs they used were a combination of mythology, what was written in the Shastras, and what the temple demanded. While they have the power to decide what is carved on the ratha, they are bound by convention and tradition, and do not have the freedom to deviate from tradition entirely. Most of the artisans in their employ agreed with them, and respected the conditions laid out by the temples and Shastras. However, the artist who worked on the panels involving floral decoration answered differently, saying that he had the agency to make and carve his own designs into the panels. While the people working on the rathas do not possess “artistic freedom” as we know it, they do have a say in the parts of the ratha that are more about embellishment or safety (see section 3.4).

The entire process of making the base of the *ratha* may take varying amounts of time depending on the type of *ratha* and the manpower employed. In this context, Mr Balkur Acharya (See Figure 56) explained how for his commission to renovate the

prestigious *Brahma Ratha* at the Sri Krishna Matha, he and his team of 60 carpenters took 3 months to finish 1500 carvings that would ordinarily need 1 to 2 years to complete (B. Acharya, Personal



Figure 56: Interview with Balkur Acharya

Interview). As most of the *rathashilpis* explained, a majority of the work is done by hand, with each section being allocated to different groups of workers. The contribution of machines therefore, remains limited only to cut the wood and also to computerize the images that are to be carved.

A *ratha*, made with proper technique, commonly lives to see a few hundred years. While the temple priests in Gokarna and Hiriadka say this age may go up to 600, scholars approximated this to be around 150 to 200 (Kalidos, “The Wood Carvings of Tamil Nadu: An Iconographical Survey”).

The task of the Hallakis begins a few days before the *rathotsavam* when the temple authorities send a message to the representative of the Hallaki tribe, who then comes with his team to work on the *ratha* (Hegde, Personal Interview). The upper segment of the *ratha* that the tribes construct is generally a dome or conical structure and is made from fastening strips of bamboo together. At the end of these strips, a brass finial or *kalasha* is positioned. Each *ratha* may have a certain number of finials, depending on its shape - ranging from one to five finials per chariot (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 115).

After forming the base, the workers put colourful flags in the bamboo



structure, ensuring that no part of the framework is visible from the outside. In the Honnavar region, these flags are prepared by a few men and women from the Mogera tribe, another local community of fishermen. At grave risk to their safety, the Hallaki climb to great heights to perform the task of draping and tying the cloth to the top and the attaching the painted panels that line the sides of the *pada* and therefore completing the entire embellishment process (See Figure 57). Closer to the festival, fresh leaves, flowers and even electric lights are used to

Figure 57: Workers working under risky conditions, Hiriadka
Source: Harish Pai, Personal Archive

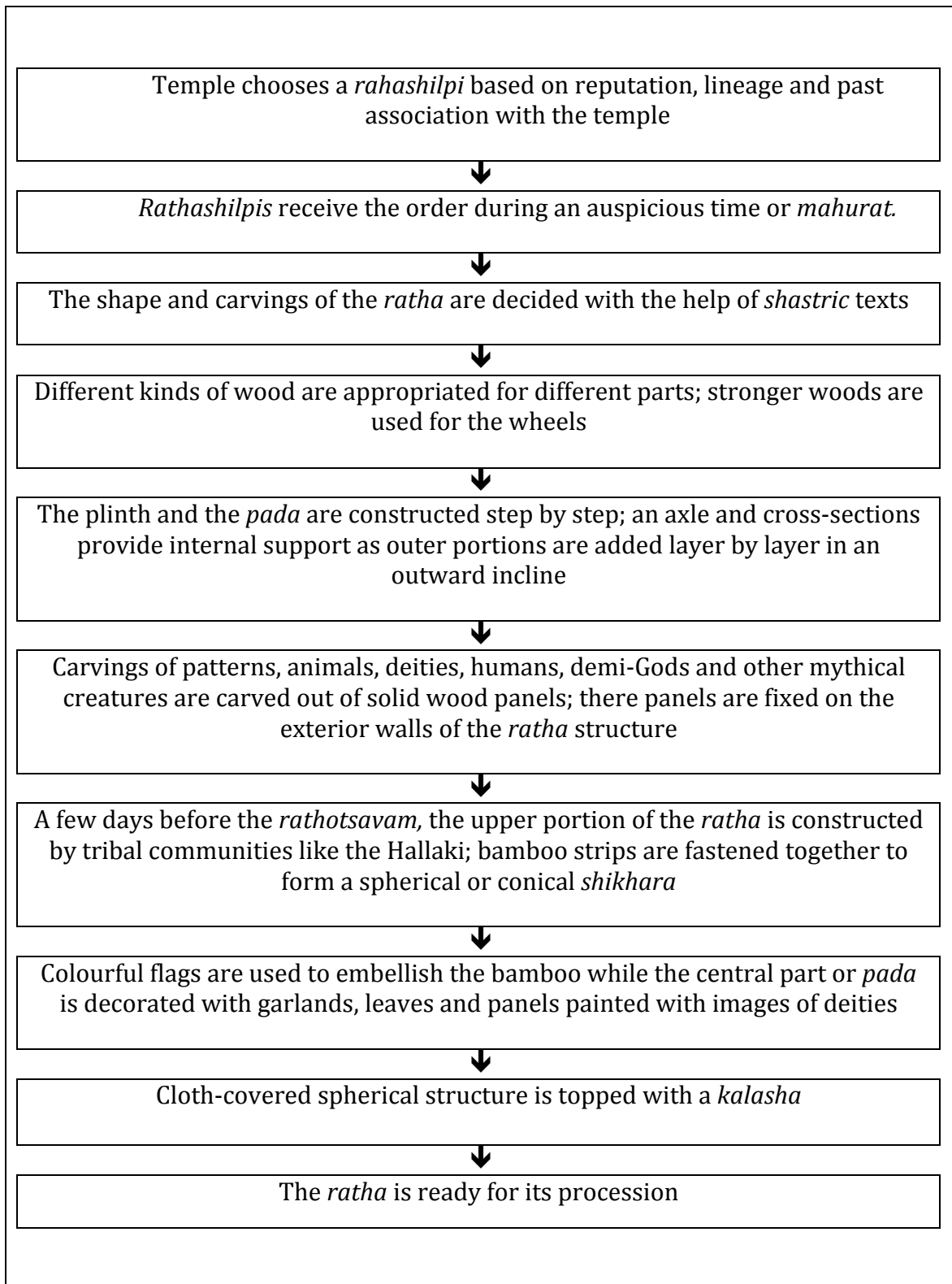
decorate the *ratha*. The Hallaki do not have the freedom to change the pattern or form of their work, since the lower portion of the *ratha* has specific dimensions that the upper portion must complement. Typically, materials like bamboo poles and strips of wood are dismantled and re-used every year (Gowda, Personal Interview).

After decoration, the *ratha* is cleaned and the wheels are meticulously oiled. The ropes used for pulling the *ratha* (See Figure 58) are coated with a layer of turmeric (*haldi*) and vermilion (*kumkum*) powder. This is done as a form of worship, where every element of the *ratha*, including the steering mechanism that controls the *ratha*'s speed and direction, is considered holy (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 133). Following this, the *kalasha* is ceremoniously mounted on top of the structure at an auspicious hour, marking the final step of the decoration of the *ratha*.



Figure 58: Rope used to pull the *ratha*

Finally, the *ratha* is ready for its procession.



Making Process of the Ratha

3.3.3 Varied Beliefs

Based on the different workshops we visited, we can identify some factors upon which the different *rathashilpis* have differed, primarily about their adherence to tradition. These include the communities from which they would or would not employ people, what work these people would do, and how strictly the master craftsman would adhere to tradition. However, given the brevity of our study and fieldwork, it must be stressed that these conclusions apply only to particular workshops and artisans, and must not be used to make generalizations about the communities to which they belong.

A significant part of this research objective was to determine the religious beliefs held by artisans with respect to the *ratha*. Hallaki and other tribesmen do not ask for much money to carry out their tasks of building and decorating the top half of the *ratha*, since they consider it their privilege to be able to build a vehicle of God. They consider the act of building the *ratha* itself as an act of devotion, and they may gain religious contentment through this act alone (Gowda, Personal Interview). Similarly, Mr Rajagopal Acharya from the Vishwakarma kula told us that because *ratha* making is an act for his God, he associates a sense of privilege with it, and uses it as motivation during particularly challenging orders (R. Acharya, Personal Interview). Similar views are also held by Mr Balkur Acharya, who spoke to us about how he experiences *tripti*, or religious and spiritual satisfaction, on seeing the deity decked up in a *ratha*. He felt that this *tripti* is essential in ensuring good quality workmanship. In his experience, only the Vishwakarma community executes the *ratha*-making process with precision and respect, which is why he is a proponent of only certain communities practicing this work (B. Acharya, Personal Interview).

When questioned about his beliefs towards making the *ratha*, Mr. Chetan Shet, from the Gudigar community, expressed a sense of pride at having made something as grand as the *ratha*. However, he seemed to address it as a business achievement more than a devotional act. Talking further about this, Mr. Shet explained how since their company generally caters to any woodwork related commission, ranging from *rathas* and palanquins to coffee tables and swing-sets, perfection in every order was as important (Shet, Personal Interview).

These varying beliefs help us understand the employment policies followed in these workshops. The Vishwakarma Institute of Art employs people from all backgrounds and provides them with specializations within the *ratha* making process. Often however, the main tasks are not allocated to those from different religions since the Institute religiously follows the *shastras* (L. Acharya, Personal Interview). This is stricter in the institute run by Mr Balkur Acharya, who employs only those from the Vishwakarma community for the main carving while allowing other communities to help in other tasks. No such specific restrictions are followed in the Gudigara workshop we visited in Kumta.

General rules for *ratha* construction prescribe how artisans should not have consumed any non-vegetarian food and should be clean and bathed. Both the Vishwakarma workshops we visited followed these rules, but in the workshop run by the Shets, such rules do not apply. As Mr. Chetan explained, although these rules exist, owing to the need to deliver on their promised product, they do not concentrate overly the imposition (Shet, Personal Interview). Mr Balkur Gopal Acharya also discourages artisans from listening to music while working since he believes it to be a sign of disrespect. Particular artisans from both these communities spoke of how women may learn carving, but they also acknowledged that they do not actively practice *ratha* making - not in their workshops at least.

Overall, our primary data indicates that there is no singular belief system that is held with respect to the creation of the *ratha*. While certain individuals associate stricter and more theological views with the process, for others the process may be more commercial. Since different workshops specialized in different general or specific type of woodwork, the level of financial dependence of the *ratha* also varies. However, owing to a very small sample size, as mentioned before, these individual distinctions cannot accurately be used for the communities at large.

3.4 Maintenance, Storage and Restoration

... And now all that's left to do is wait. I rest here, immense and immobile, in anticipation of the year to pass. Months go by, with nothing but a few streams of daylight seeping through the thatched roof of my shed. I feel the cobwebs entangle over the faces on my panels - their features corroding away as the seasons pass. And all I can do is wait. I habituate to my solitariness, the walls around me become my world as time loses its essence. And then one day, this state of stillness is rattled. The doors creak open, the screeches of the rusted gates against the ground wake me up. And before I know it, a huddle of twelve young people pour inside my shed, filling the air with their voices of charm and wonder. Their eyes glistened with curiosity and fascination...

*

The maintenance and preservation of a *ratha* is essential to make sure it remains in good condition. Any *ratha* of a substantial size is not utilised more than 2 or 3 times a year and while it may be the centre of attraction for those few events, other times it is often left in a shed which protects it from the excesses of sunlight, rainfall and other harsh elements. In many cases, while the towering *Brahma Ratha* stays indoors without the upper superstructure, the other smaller *rathas* are parked outside. We learnt that earlier, temples had no sheds to park the chariots, and resorted to erecting four pillars, upon which a temporary thatch to be placed. Yet, this was not adequate to keep the chariots in good condition (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 121).

When proper sheds are usually not provided or used, the *rathas* are left looking worn and old. In the traditional method of preservation, oils like castor and teak oil would be religiously applied to the wooden parts of the chariot. As Nandagopal and Iyengar have observed, nowadays due to improper application of these oils and a build-up of grime over the years, many chariots are not displayed in all the splendour that they deserve (See Figure 59) (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 121). They further mention how beautiful carvings and skillfully crafted sculpted figures are seen caked with dirt, barely even recognizable. While temple authorities are aware of the various steps that must be undertaken for the upkeep of *rathas*, not many authorities actually act on this knowledge as *rathas* become rusted, numerous

components go missing, panels are askew, creating quite a dismal picture overall (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 121). Even during the collection of our primary data, we went into many sheds and were faced with spider webs, grime and mud (See Figure 60). Most *rathas* we saw were laden with dust and did not seem in the best of shape. Once used, *rathas* are either kept uselessly in temple compounds, or even sold to those willing to purchase them. Apart from being decommissioned, on some occasions *rathas* are also left abandoned in fields (See Figure 61) (Pai, Personal Interview).



Figure 59: A layer of dirt on a *ratha*, Perdoor



Figure 60: An abandoned *ratha*, Manjuguni

Source: Harish Pai, Personal Archive



Figure 61: *Ratha* at Chidambaram

Source: Harish Pai, Personal Archive

However, many have taken it upon themselves to initiate the restoration of these “cultural remains” (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 121). One instance of this is found in the Heritage Village, a culture preservation site set up by Mr. Vijaynath Shenoy in Manipal. As Mr. Harish Pai, member of the Heritage Village trust explained, a few of the *rathas* now kept in the Village were actually found abandoned in a dilapidated condition. At this stage, the Heritage Village stepped in to restore these *rathas* and other procured *rathas* in order to give them “a new lease of life” (See Figure 62). Treating them as objects of religious and artistic worth, initiatives like the Heritage Village perform the imperative task of making sure these temple treasures are not disrespectfully cast-off once their use is complete. By using more effective metallic sheets instead of the thatch to make sheds, as well as constructing a traditional wooden balcony, the authorities of this Village attempt to replicate features previously seen in good quality *ratha* enclosures (Pai, Personal Interview).



Figure 62: Harish Pai showing us a restored *ratha*

Similar beliefs are held by Sri Veerendra Hegde, the founder of the Manjusha Museum at Dharmasthala. The museum is the host to five *rathas* (See Figure 63), each at least 100 years old, and efforts have been taken by the management to maintain their conditions



Figure 63: The five *rathas* at Manjusha museum, Dharmasthala

(Nandagopal and Iyengar, 121). However, inferring from our primary observations collected from our visit to the museum, we noticed that the *rathas* appeared to be neglected and in unkempt conditions. The wood seemed to be chipping off (See Figure 65) and there were an array of vendors who had set up their stalls around - and even on - the *ratha* (See Figure 64). Our observations did not coincide with the claims of Dr Choodamani and Mrs Iyengar, but we assumed that the states of the *rathas* were probably so as an aftermath of the previous night's *rathotsavam*. Overall, the general lack of maintenance we observed seemed to be in sharp contrast with the reverence we had seen associated with the *ratha*.

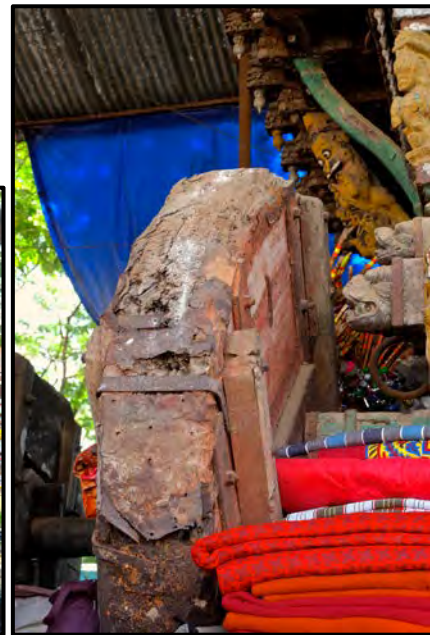


Figure 64: Stalls set up on the *ratha*, Dharmasthala

Figure 65: Dilapidated wheel of *ratha*

For all their beauty and religious significance, *rathas* seem to lose their importance once they are put out of use. Even though they are “moving temples” of a sort, they retain their power only in conjunction with other temples, *rathas*, festivals and *rathotsavams*. Although the *rathas* are often kept dismally, there have been attempts made towards restoration that are slowly gaining momentum, and spreading awareness that in order to be used for years, *rathas* must be maintained properly and with respect.

3.5 How times are changing

The form of the *ratha* has been mandated by the *shastras* and consequently, the traditional manner of making it has not overly changed with time. But as is the case with every object conceived in a bygone age, there have been some modifications to equip the *ratha* with modern technology. Examples of this include steering systems behind the *ratha*, which help maintain its direction and rubber tyres (See Figure 66) (for relatively smaller *rathas*) in place of solid wood wheels.

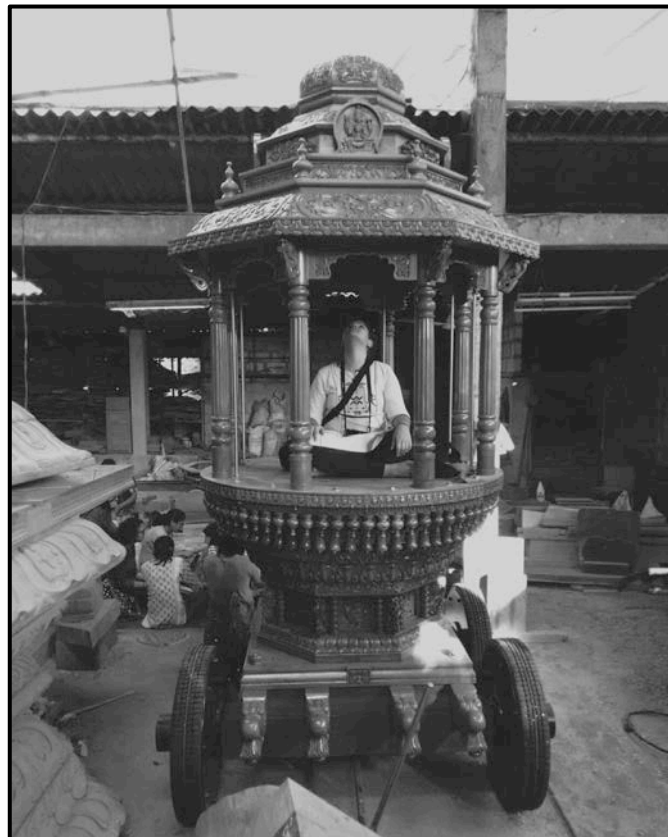


Figure 66: *Ratha* with rubber tyres, Kotteshwar

These changes are introduced in order to increase the efficiency of *rathas* in the procession, prevent injuries, and ensure a longer life for the *ratha* structure itself. All the *rathashilpis* we visited have incorporated these changes into their works. In fact, Mr Lakshminarayan Acharya himself has pioneered braking and steering mechanisms in the lower half of the *ratha*. His son-in-law, Mr Rajagopal Acharya, also builds *rathas* that carry forward his father-in-law's innovations. While they agree that these do not strictly follow the *shastras*, they also believe that a large, unwieldy

structure such as a traditional *ratha* should be made safe especially since hundreds of people surround it when it is in motion. Additionally, the concrete roads of today ruin the wooden wheels mandated by the *shastras*, and adding rubber simply enhances their longevity (R. Acharya, Personal Interview). While Mr Balkur Gopalacharya, is not too keen on structural changes that deviate from the *shastras* so radically, he agrees that such changes in the wheels would protect the delicate *utsava murthi*, or idol being drawn around in the *ratha*. But then again, while steering wheels are common to most *rathas*, only smaller ones are installed with rubber tyres and that too at the request on the temple administration (B. Acharya, Personal Interview).

The form of the *ratha* also undergoes change according to those that make it. According to some *rathashilpis*, many different communities and individuals engaged in the process do not follow all the required norms. For instance, some use plywood, and some do not keep the wood upright, which is inadvisable. Scholar Harish Pai also believes that many present day *rathas* suffer from a dilution of sculptural treatment, which may be a result of a result of the artistic insensitivity of commissioning authorities and the monetary and temporal restrictions imposed upon artisans. Stating a personal observation, he talked of how figures in *rathas* appear disproportionate and stunted as compared to previous forms. He added that this could also be a result of an increased commerciality of the craft with both temples and artisans competing to exhibit better *rathas*. To elucidate, Mr Pai spoke of how initially there would be one workshop with multiple trainees learning and subsequently working there, and how in the present day, trainees chose to set up businesses of their own after their apprenticeships (Pai, Personal Interview).

Although certain aspects of the structure and making processes of the *ratha* have changed over time, there is an apparent and strong link with what has been prescribed in the *shastras*. Structural alterations have been made for the purpose of convenience and *rathashilpis* often carry on with such changes to improve technological standards and also because the *shastras* neither explicitly encourage or disallow these practices. Other changes in the ways of working hint towards a dilution in normative beliefs and a possible commercialization of the *ratham taksan* process. Just like one may expect in other professions, different practitioners have different

values and work ethics. At large however, most practitioners adhere to ancient beliefs and the *ratha* is still very much perceived with a respect and reverence.

At this point one may conclude that although it is primarily showcased in the *rathotsavam*, the *ratha* has already lived an eventful life before it reaches the premises of the same. After being carefully created and carved upon with icons that convey many myths and legends, it gains a special kind of veneration. While many features have undergone some changes, the *ratha* continues to take inspiration from its ancient roots. Further, while the communities working upon its form carry varying perspectives and beliefs towards it but are bound with a similar sense of awe towards the marvel that is the *ratha*.

Chapter 4

Let the Utsavam Begin!

The air is filled with the sounds of instruments and chants, the eyes in the crowd shift towards the palanquin that comes towards me, carrying the celestial idol of the deity. The chief priest carefully places the deity on its throne, and the roar of the devotees below echoes around me. They begin to recite hymns and the sea of people thrusts me forward in celebration. The streets I'm guided through are brightly lit against the ebony sky and enthusiastic musicians lead the way. Several push their way through the crowd to get a chance to pull me or to simply walk beside me. The splendour of the festivities is overwhelming, as I journey on the path set for me...

*

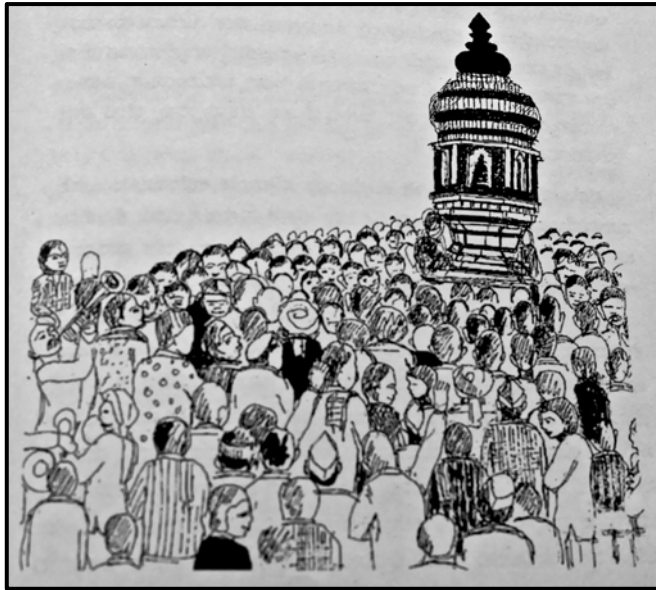


Figure 67: Animated representation of a rathotsavam

**Gadagakara, Dhruvaraja. *Degula Rathashilpa*,
Kannada University, Hampi. 1999. Print**

Once it has been brought to the temple or *devasthanana* - its final home - the *ratha* commonly finds a home in a shed specially constructed for its storage and protection. It is taken out of this shed only at the time of its procession, before which it is decorated for its time of glory. After it has been cleaned and crowned with the *shikhara*, it is ready for the *rathotsavam*.

This chapter will focus on the *utsavam* or the festivities that surround the *ratha* during its *yatra*. Emphasizing the origins and symbolic significance of *ratha* processions and the beliefs that guide it, we aim to discuss the tradition of the *rathotsavam* and one of its variations i.e. the *seva*. By exploring the faith that people feel toward the *ratha*, we also aim to add to existing literature by giving a more experiential take on how the *ratha* is perceived and celebrated.

4.1 The Regal *Rathotsavam*



Figure 68: *Rathotsavam* at Dharmasthala



Figure 69: Musicians at the Lakshadeepotsavam

In practice, a *rathotsavam* (See Figure 68) is a celebration on a mammoth scale, where a temple's deity is taken outside the temple premises, on ornated *ratha* that is pulled by devotees through the main streets of the town, attracting thousands of people to witness and participate (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 127). With

their joyous atmosphere and grandeur, *rathotsavams* provide a very novel platform for people to socialize and come together for faith and festivities, as crowds gather, and musicians and dancers perform before the deity as the chariot is pulled (See Figure 69). A *rathotsavam* as a religious festival is considered to be more desirable than a *yagna* and it is believed that the observance of *rathotsavam* is equivalent to conducting a thousand *Asvamedha yagnas* (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 127).

Initially, *rathotsavams* were believed to have been conducted to celebrate and commemorate many kinds of events - the founding of a temple, a *puja* for the merit of the king or the birth of a prince, royal weddings, etc. In the present day, different temples have different ritualistic timings and dates for holding the *utsavams*. Vishnu temples may follow their *Sthalapuranas* i.e. their legendary history; Shiva temples may conduct yearly events on *Shivaratri* and monthly *utsavams* on either *amavasyas* or *pournamis* (new and full moon nights); and other temples may hold them to celebrate certain planetary conjunctions and events of astrological importance (Pai, Personal Interview). For instance, the *Brahmotsavam*, one of the most luminous festivals hosted by Hindu temples in Southern India, is an important event for the celebration of a *rathotsavam*. As per the *Sthalapurana* of many South Indian temples, the *Brahmotsavam* is a cleansing festival that was instituted by Brahma himself as a festival that would expiate him from all the sins he had accrued over his lifetime (Kalidos, 222). While the festivities span over many days and events, it is on the day of the *rathotsavam* that the *utsavam*'s full splendour is exhibited. However, the festive spirit that is at its pinnacle during the *rathotsavam* subsides once the procession is over (Kalidos, 223).

The *rathotsavam* has seen as long and colourful history in India. Although historically it flourished under royal patronage and donations (Kalidos, 18), in the recent past the prevalence of the *rathotsavam* has seen some fluctuation. Veteran *rathashilpi* Laxminarayan Acharya explained that soon after India's independence, many traditional *ratha* makers of the Kannara region experienced a shortage of labour, and the demand for the number of commissions for *rathas* had dropped drastically. This was because temples could no longer fund the costs of construction, renovation, and the expenses of repairing and maintaining their *ratha*. For this reason, *rathotsavams* faced a brief period of decline, until the late 1980s (Pai and L.Acharya, Personal Interview; Nandagopal & Iyengar, 127). However, this period of decline was followed by a new spread of temples, an increase in population and a widely shared sentiment of pride, where preserving religious traditions regardless of circumstances

became important (L. Acharya, Interview). As a result, several *rathas* were restored and *rathotsavams* began to generate higher levels of popularity. Encouraged by this trend, several temples began to contend with each other over commissioning extensively embellished *rathas* and organizing *utsavams* of massive scales. Car streets or *ratha beedis* were assigned for pulling the *rathas* and *rathashilpis* regained their lost status (L. Acharya, Personal Interview). This rejuvenation and prevalence of the *ratha* culture has been carried on into the 21st century.

A Chance Encounter



Harry Peronius (L) and a photograph clicked by him (R)

Source: Peronius, Harry. Chariot. *India Photo*. Web. 20 February 2016.

As we reached Gokarna we were greeted by an abundance of foreign tourists. During our long walk to the temple, we saw many shops that were selling clothes and ornaments. As we were approaching the temple with our entire luggage in tow, we saw a middle-aged Caucasian man putting up photos on the outer wall of a shop. As we got closer we realized they were all very well shot, beautiful photos of a *ratha* under construction. Assuming he was a tourist, we struck up a conversation with this man, Harry. He told us about how many years back, he had come to India as a photography student looking for a subject. Since his trip was right before the *rathotsavam*, he saw the upper structure of the momentous *ratha* being created. Mesmerized by the *ratha* and fascinated by the risky activities that people would carry out in the name of religion, he chose to do his thesis on chariots. He told us about how he had to wait for days before the workers finally warmed up to him,

allowing him to climb to the top as they worked. His experience with the *ratha* had been exhilarating to say the least.

As the conversation carried on, we told him about the project we were on. A flash of recollection passed through him when he heard the name 'FLAME'. He pulled out his iPad to open the DIP report of a previous project called 'Gokarna ki Goonjh'. What a coincidence it was!

Turned out, Harry had been reading this report since his friend had passed it on to him only recently. Arranging to meet Harry later for an interview we continued towards the temple, still unable to believe the odds of what had just happened.

4.1.1 Symbolic Significance

The *Visvakarmavastusastra* states that within Hinduism, the highest form of propitiation or service to a God is through taking the deity on a spectacular and festive procession (Kalidos, 217). The ideology behind this religious procession is that *rathas* are moving temples that allow the God to travel outside the vicinity of the temple and bless all of his or her devotees, regardless of their caste, gender and even religion. This is based on the idea of "bringing God to his devotees", especially to those unable to see the deity within the shrine or temple. These traditional processions draw a gush of devotion, which is witnessed when hundreds of devotees gather to pull the *ratha* through the streets of their town.

The *rathotsavams* hold an underlying principle of indiscriminating faith, which correlates with ideas of the *Bhakti* movement. *Bhakti* refers to the "spontaneous" expression of a devotee's faith and love for their deity (Madan, 104) and historically, the movement provided an alternative to the formal Vedic venerations like *yagnas*, or larger rituals and sacrifices - which only permitted the participation of male *brahmins*. The movement held widespread appeal from its initial stages as it validated a sentimental approach to God that overcame the 'status quo' features of the traditional methods of worship (Klostermaier, 184).

These religious processions fulfill a critical form of religious practice called *seva* or service offered to God. This concept of religious service became a part of regular temple activity (Elgood, 36) and the idea of appeasing God was considered the highest form of affection to him, wherein one could ultimately gain religious merit (Klostermaier, 182). The notion of merit within Hinduism is multifaceted. There are various ways through which one can gain it and they include the *Vedic* concept of *apurva* (merit received from performing sacrifices) and the *Puranic* ideas of chanting a deity's name, performing *pujas* and going on religious pilgrimages (Klostermaier, 137). *Rathotsavams*, therefore, provide devotees a chance to acquire religious merit by actively allowing them to engage with the deity by taking it on a procession.

Another symbolic significance of performing processions or *yatras* lies with the theory of *tantra*, *mantra* and *yantra* that together can be related to the concept of the *utsavam*. This philosophy states that the deity is brought out in procession to absorb all the negativity and diseases present in the area (Pai, Personal Interview). The three primary points of focus under this principle would be *tantra*, *mantra* and *yantra*. *Mantra* refers to the energy created from the sound of the chants said during the *utsavam*, *yantra* is the circuit taken by the deity and *tantra* is the mechanism that binds the two together (Pai, Personal Interview).

Therefore, the land where the *ratha* was manufactured and paraded was said to be a prosperous one; it was hoped that agriculture would flourish, good health would prevail and all children would be born healthy as well. *Rathotsavams* were celebrated for days together and a seven day festival in particular was believed to eradicate the seven *mayas* or illusions that haunted human life (Kalidos, 217).

Purpose to The Pull

The *rathotsavams* act as a space for a multitude of devotees to come together in celebration of their beloved deity. People stay in temples until dawn, to catch a glimpse of the idol on its regal chariot. But we were more interested in the personal significance people gave to their participation in the festivities. We spoke to a large number of devotees on-field and when asked why they pulled the *ratha*, they said that it was “because the god was inside” and that “it was extremely beautiful”.

Many devotees spoke of pulling the *ratha* with palpable joy, their faces breaking into wide-toothed smiles. Even though they had to face hazardous conditions of the processions (where one could easily get trampled on at any time), they wished to be a part of “something bigger”, to feel a sense of “belongingness” by immersing themselves in the revelry. “It helps me be more in connection with myself” one of the devotees at Sri Krishna said animatedly, “I belong, I feel loved by my god”. These devotees share an unyielding devotion to their deities, often waiting for long periods to just get a chance to hold onto those ropes and pull with all their might, finally experiencing the release of being one with their god. They might lack scholarly expertise and knowledge, but they certainly seem to make up for it with the faith they share. Even with the faith, devotion and love, however, there are always exceptions: not everyone expressed exuberance and fervour when talking about the *rathotsavam*. A few of the people present at the procession told us that they simply pulled the *ratha* because everyone around them did so, but they got caught up in the whirlpool of religious fervour nonetheless.

Through our interaction and viewing of the processions we felt energized and excited, understanding why many people flocked to the temples on days the *ratha* was taken out. After seeing the content faces of the devotees, but quite intimidated by the huge crowds, we were left with one question: to pull, or not to pull?

4.2. Taking Centre Stage

Before a *rathotsavam* actually takes place, the *ratha* must be prepared for its grand walk of fame. One of the first steps for this is the construction and decoration of the upper half of the wooden structure. Each tier to this portion is adorned with colourful wooden props, strips of cloth, flags and garlands of flowers (See Figure 70).



Figure 70: A decorated *Brahma Ratha*, Hiriadka . Source: Harish Pai Personal Archive

An array of rituals and requirements have to be attended to before the *ratha* is taken out on procession. The sequence of these events - as well as those of the entire festival with respect to the total number of days of that festival are specified by the texts like the *Kumaratantra*, *Isvarasamhita* and *Sriprasnasamhita* among many others (Kalidos, 223). For example, if a festival begins with *Ankurarpana* (sowing of seeds),



Figure 71: *Utsava murti* in the *Navaratna Ratha*, Udupi

it's believed to be beneficial for the welfare of the community. If it commences with *Dhvajarohana* (hoisting of the banner in honour of Indra and Garuda), then "all living beings are reassured" of their happiness (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 130). There are multiple *pujas*, *yagnas* and *homas* or fire offerings that are carried out prior to the day of the *rathotsavam*. Devotees give *bali* or offerings to the temple deity and the magnificently decorated *ratha* (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 132). As far back as in the 16th century, animal and even human sacrifices were offered as oblations before the *rathotsavam*. Popular since the Vedic age, sacrifices are considered to be a remedial measure for one's sins and offenses (Kalidos, 229).

The idol taken out on procession is referred to as the *utsava murti* (See Figure 71). This idol is separate from the main idol and is usually kept inside the *garbha gudi* of the temple beside the main idol. This *utsava murti* is mostly smaller in size so that it can be taken outside the premises of the temple to see the devotees that do not receive an opportunity to witness the primary idol. Prior to placing the *utsava murti* on the *ratha*, an elaborate sequence of *pujas* and *homas* are carried out to commemorate it. The atmosphere is energised, as the *mantras* sound for several hours before the *murti* is ready to be taken out. Once these rituals conclude, the *utsava murti* is placed on a regal palanquin or *pallaki* and is taken on a small procession outside the temple grounds in a custom called the *pallaki utsavam*. However, this practice is not prevalent across all temples (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 133). During the *rathotsavam* in the Manjunath temple in Dharmasthala, we observed that the chief priest himself carried out the idol on his head, dancing gracefully as he proceeded towards the *ratha*. Following this, the *murti* is placed onto the *ratha* upon a small throne located above the *griva*.

The Teller's Tales

On our trip, we were pleasantly intrigued by the stories and so called "miracles" that occurred during the time of *rathotsavams*. One of our interviewees in Honnavar recounted an incident that happened during their annual *rathotsavam*, where thousands of devotees who waited in a congested atmosphere decked up in their finest attire were not aware that they were being robbed of their valuable possessions by stealthy burglars lurking amongst the crowd. However, on witnessing the divine deity sitting on the massive chariot, the burglars were filled with shame and reverence and immediately dropped the valuables at the temple and left the premises as changed men.

For most priests and other temple authorities, the *ratha* procession wouldn't probably be as interesting or exciting as it is for the common person, experiencing it the first few times. However, a few of them spoke about always looking forward to peculiar miracles, situations and myths that accompany such a procession.

When we visited a Vaishnavait temple in Perdoor, one of the head priests ecstatically informed us that on the day of every *ratha* procession and just before the chariot was to be pulled, two massive eagles would circle the *ratha*. The people of this city believe these birds to be *Garuda*, the *vahana* (celestial vehicle) of Vishnu, who would appear to welcome its God.

The Shaivaite temple in Gokarna has a similar occurrence where bulls would appear during a procession. The devotees believe this to be *Nandi*, the *vahana* of Lord Shiva, who is said to accompany him on his way around the temple premises. They also discussed how the *rathotsavam* becomes more tedious and challenging as they'd have to maneuver their way around the large bulls that would assembled on the streets.

And thus the journey begins, as the *ratha* is pulled through the streets bordering the temple. Prayers are offered to the idol and also to the carvings on the *ratha*'s wooden panel. The following verse by the seventh-century hymn by Shaivaite bhakti poet Campantar describes a *rathotsavam* very aptly as it reads:

*The Lord of Citticcaram shrine in Naraiyur
Who has the river in his hair
the poison stain on his throat
and the Veda on his tongue,
goes resplendent in ceremonial dress,
as his devotees and perfected sages
sing and dance his widespread fame
and the sound of festival drums
beaten on the streets where the temple-car is pulled
spreads on every side.
(quoted in Guy, 109)*

Traditionally, the *ratha* is to be manually pulled by the devotees with the idea of showing the deity around the town, thereby gaining merit for carrying forward their 'duty' as

a devotee. But technological developments today, along with the physical constraints of pulling a gigantic chariot through narrow streets, have allowed for steering mechanisms to be incorporated into these functions (See Section 3.4). Once the *ratha* is pulled into motion, a surge of people follow the chariot through the main streets of the town, as musicians lead the procession with devotional music, and everyone participating in the procession is required to be barefoot (See Figure 72). The parade travels through the streets of the town, along the circumference of the temple, with devotees flooding the *ratha beedi* or the car street, in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the deity seated on top. Often, people throw flowers, fruits and coins at the *ratha* in the hopes of their offerings falling near the idol's feet (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 133).



Figure 72: Devotees pulling a *ratha*
Source: Rajagopal Acharya, Personal Archive

Look, Aim and Shoot!

Walking through the scorching and humid streets of Gokarna, we met Harry and Christer, two interesting men from Sweden. Having visited Gokarna before, they've experienced the *rathostavam* on multiple occasions. In a very eager tone,



Christer.

Christer narrated the story of how, during one of the *rathotsavams* in Gokarna, he came across one very peculiar practice followed by the devotees. As the crowd was pulling the *ratha*, he found that many people were buying and frantically throwing bananas at the moving structure. Turns out that throwing them into the *ratha* made the fruit holy. Once the *rathotsavam* concluded, people queued and waited to go up to the chariot to collect their auspicious fruit from the priest as *prasad*. Amused, Christer began throwing bananas as well, and his first banana landed in the flags. He then got to know that it was good luck if he threw the banana into the window of the *ratha*. Aimed for the window this time, his second banana missed by inches. Fascinated by his good aim, the crowd around him gave him more bananas and encouraged him to try again. Determined this time, he threw the third banana straight into the window and the crowd began to cheer for him. He then threw another banana, and another, and got three consecutively into the window. The crowd went absolutely crazy and lifted him into the air. While narrating to us, Christer grew quite ecstatic - as though he was reliving the moment when the crowd had exclaimed "Three bananas! You have to wish, you have to wish!"

Who could ever imagine that throwing bananas at a priest would ever be an auspicious tradition?

Our secondary sources, like the works of Professor Kalidos and that by Dr. Nandagopal and Mrs. Iyengar, discuss mostly of how *ratha beedis* or *prakarams* are cyclical paths that went around all four sides of temples (See Figure 73). However interestingly, on field it was brought to our attention that not every *rathotsavam* follows this specific route. For instance, the Sri Mahabaleshwara temple in Gokarna is not encompassed by any path, but is instead located adjacent to a long and narrow street. In such scenarios, the *ratha* is pulled up and down this single lane. Since it cannot be reversed, at the end of the street, the *ratha* is pulled from the opposite direction taking it back towards the *devasthanam*. Accordingly, the face idol is also turned to face this direction (Hegde, Personal Interview). The same was the case with the Virabhadra temple in Hiriadka, where the *ratha* is taken in a straight line and back during *rathotsavams*.

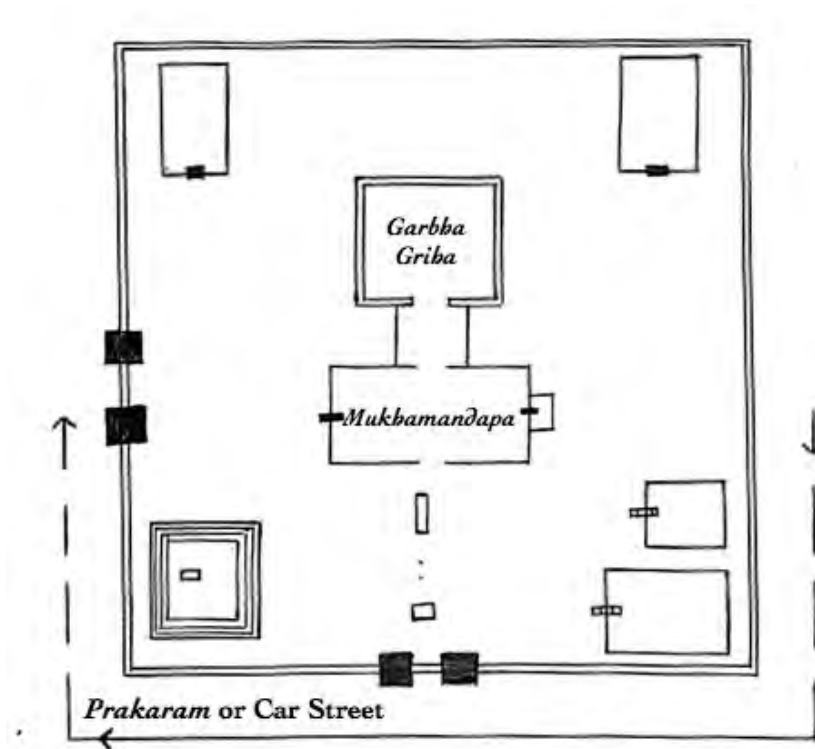


Image 73: Prakaram around the temple

Source: Kalidos, Raju. *Temple Cars of Medieval Tamilaham*. Madurai: Vijaya Publications. 1989. Print.

According to all our secondary sources, and also going by what we observed in the temple town of Dharmasthala (See Figure 74), the enthusiasm with which devotees participate in the *utsavams* is a phenomenon on its own. Townsfolk are seen decorating their streets and households, temples invite performing artists from other towns to commemorate

the festivities and vendors flock by the hundreds in getting a good sale from the thousands of people that attend the *utsavam*.

Figure 74: Lakshadeepotsavam, Dharmasthala



(a) Main entrance decorated



(b) Streets bustling with people in the night



(c) Shops and stalls



(d) Street performer

In Dharmasthala, the air was abuzz with the anticipation as people waited to see their god Manjunath. We learnt more of this element of devotion from our interviews with several devotees at the Sri Krishna Matha, in Udupi, from where it became clearer that several of them equated the act of pulling the *ratha* with that of pulling a sense of divinity into their lives. It gave everyone an opportunity to offer servitude to the deity without this being hampered by their various socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. Many said these *utsavams* helped them gain “spiritual nourishment” and satisfaction by worshipping the deity (Reddy, personal interview).

The Jagannatha *ratha yatra* is another kind of *rathotsavam* that is a display of such devotion. Since it is one of the most well-known Hindu festivals in the country, finding contrasts between popular notions of *ratha yatras* and our findings on field seemed

inevitable. This particular *ratha yatra* that originated in the small temple town Puri in Odisha, is conducted annually and witnessed by lakhs of people (Mohanty, 24). The primary difference between this, and the *rathotsavams* of Karnataka was that the *utsavam* at the Jagannatha *ratha yatra* was used to take the deity Lord Jagannatha, along with his brother Lord Balabhadra and sister Devi Subhadra, on a symbolic procession to meet their aunt at the Gundicha temple. This idea of one deity visiting the other is quite different from that in Udupi and the regions surrounding it, where the *ratha* serves as a moving temple, to bring the deity to his devotees. Structurally the design of the *rathas* employed in these processions is influenced by different styles of temple architecture prevalent in the different states: the Jagannatha *ratha* is based on the *Nagara* style, and the Udupi *rathas* on the *Vesara* style. It's also interesting to note that for the Jagannatha *yatra*, new *rathas* are built every year (Pai, persona interview and Nault, 211), whereas in our regions of study, certain parts of the *ratha* such as the lower body are used for centuries. Across the temples we visited, we also noticed that unlike the Jagannatha *ratha yatra*, processions are conducted relatively quite frequently. For instance, the Sri Krishna Matha in Udupi hosts *sevas* fairly often, almost everyday, apart from its annual *rathotsavam* during Makara Sankranti.

The Lakshadeepotsavam

A personal account by one of our group members

The annual *Lakshadeepotsavam* is a six day long festival, where devotees from all over the state go on a pilgrimage to the Manjunath Temple in Dharmasthala, where the fourth night is dedicated to taking the temple's *utsava murti* on a grand procession. When we arrived at the temple grounds, the entire place was beaming with the anticipation of tens of thousands of people and their wishes to pull the auspicious silver chariot that would carry the deity. I was chosen from my team to be one of the few, privileged people to pull this grand temple car. The crowd was large and scattered, all waiting to begin the procession of the idol around the temple. I mentally prepared myself for the enormity of this festival. Scanning through the vast crowd, my only hope was to return from the *utsavam* in one piece. Judging from the faces surrounding me, everyone was preparing themselves for the even bigger crowd that would soon pour in. Remembering all the tales I had heard as a child, pulling a *ratha* was believed to cleanse one's mind, body and soul. It was a catalyst to achieving a certain sense of purity and it was crucial for most of the pilgrims who came to

Dharmasthala. The town was paying homage to Lord Shiva and because this deity is associated darkness and rhythm, the procession was to only begin a little past midnight. The festivities roared with loud music along with the thunderous drumbeats that were accompanied by the tapping of more than 100,000 pairs of energetic feet. As anxious and excited I was, it was a long and rather exhausting wait. Nervous and agitated, I contemplated leaving and heading out to a relatively safer spot. But before I could act, a booming roar filled the air and I spotted the chief *pujari* approach the *ratha* with the idol on his head. The crowd grew increasingly impatient and broke through the metal barriers that separated them from the chariot. The silver *ratha*, brought out in an elaborate fashion with reverence and festivity was placed strategically close to the premises of the temple. To add to the celebrations, two elephants, were brought out, all decked in finery. As the idol was placed onto the *ratha*, a few selected people were asked to take the reins and pull. Before I knew it, I felt a giant push and was quickly devoured by the crowd. The instruments blared over the cacophonous chants of the swarm of devotees around me, and the explosion of fireworks overhead ended up agitating the elephants. And then out of nowhere, an adorned bull joined them, looking equally confused and frustrated. I felt bad for the poor animals having to be in the midst of all the chaos, I also had a slight sense of apprehension over the possibility of stampede or a wild animal chase. Before I knew it, we had completed one rotation around the temple and the procession had concluded - nowhere justifying the solid hour I'd stood amongst the pandemonium preceding the *utsavam*. Even though it may not have the most pleasant experience, this *utsavam* illustrated the lengths that people will go to, to be one with their god in a festive atmosphere.

Interestingly, car festivals have also influenced other religions, within Karnataka. For example, an annual chariot festival is held in the Shishunala village of the Haveri district in North Kannara, where hundreds of Hindu and Muslim devotees take part in the festivities. Similarly, the chariot festivals in Bappanadu village of South Kannara are patronised by the Muslim residents of the area (Nandagopal and Iyengar, 143).

Yet, we noted that not all who visit the temple are equally enamoured by and aware of the *ratha*. During our primary data collection at the Sri Krishna Matha, some devotees admitted to knowing nothing about the *ratha* since it was the deity that was the object of their devotion. We realized that while this could be the case with devotees from outside the Udupi region, those from inside the region were familiar with the *ratha*, possibly owing to the

extravagant *rathotsavams* celebrated here annually. A similar sense of familiarity could be seen in some people that worked within the temple premises. While some of these expressed great regard for the *ratha*, others were not as fascinated since they would see it on a daily basis. Nevertheless, in all their festive spirit, *rathotsavams* mark the essence of what a *ratha* is most known for - not only a sense of community, but also harmony with god.

4.3 Sevas: A Change in Direction

During the course of interviews conducted, we learnt that the terms like *rathotsavam*, *seva* and *utsavams* are often used interchangeably in the colloquial. However, *sevas* are recognised more as a being a “service to the Lord, by paying a fee to the temple” (Pai, Personal Interview). Unlike *rathotsavams* which are held annually and for the general public, *sevas* are done under the name of individuals who make a certain payment to the temple. Families and individuals seek to gain a sense of religious merit and fulfillment for themselves, by sponsoring *sevas* (Kalidos, personal interview).

A Bhakt of Many Talents

Weary and slightly nervous about our first field visit, we entered Sri Krishna Matha unaware of what to expect. That day was the day that we were to witness our first *seva*. A large crowd was huddle in front of the main shrine, with their cameras



Mr Maheshrao's rangoli outside the shrine

out and flashing, awestruck with what was happening. Once we broke through the crowd, we saw a muscular young man dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, wearing a turban and covered in tattoos, meticulously drawing his *rangoli*. He slowly completed each circle, making it larger and larger. In the next two hours, his work turned into a

detailed and elaborate conch. However, a few minutes after he was done, the *seva* began. Our hearts sank as because before we knew it, the time consuming *rangoli*

was wiped away by the feet of the hundred people who pulled the chariot.

To please the god and welcome him into the *seva*, Mr Maheshrao, a current MBA student of Manipal University, has voluntarily been making *rangolis* in the Sri Krishna Matha for the past three years, completely free of charge. He starts on most evenings at around five thirty to ensure that he finishes in time for the *seva*. From his artwork, it is apparent that he is very deserving of the many medals he has said to have won at national *rangoli*-making competitions. He is passionate about his talent and teaches *rangoli* making to children in his free time. Being self-taught, he loves to experiment with new and creative *rangoli* designs at the temple every day and treats it as a *seva* to the god. Interestingly, he is a contemporary and hip-hop dancer.

When we asked him whether he felt bad when his hard work was destroyed after the procession, he replied enthusiastically: “Nothing, I be very happy for that. Because god will come. And the chariot will be on the *rangoli*. So I feel really very blessed and very happy for that.”

In terms of the process followed, *sevas* are a replication of *rathotsavams*, complete with prayers, a *pallaki* and performing artists. The only difference between the two is that while for *rathotsavams* the *shikhara* of the *ratha* is specially prepared, this is not done for *sevas*. Therefore, *sevas* generally use *Sanna* or small *rathas* that are left with the *shikhara* in place or *Pushpa*, *Belli* (Silver) etc. *rathas* that have a permanent construction.



Figure 75: Fire offerings at a *seva*, Sri Krishna Matha

The *sevas* we saw in the Sri Krishna Matha (See Figure 75) were conducted multiple times a week. As the procession walked in the *prakaram* or the cyclical path inside the temple premises, devotees made offerings with fire and firecrackers, which in the night sky appeared nothing short of spectacular. While processions are a sight to behold, they also serve the feature of uniting all the devotees present in the temple premises, since although only one group of people donate for the *seva*, all devotees are welcome to help in pulling the *ratha*.

Sevas are a common feature only in temples that are financially well off and very well established. Therefore, many large temples, such as the Sri Krishna Matha in Udupi, the Manjunath temple in Dharmasthala and the Sri Mahabaleshwara temple in Gokarna allocate their smaller *ratha* simply for *sevas* (Pai, Personal Interview). Examples for this are the Chinna *ratha*, the *Belli ratha*, and the *Navratna ratha* present at the Sri Krishna Matha. On the other hand, temples that are not as established or do not have as many visitors, do not possess such embellished *rathas* since they do not need and generally cannot afford them. The temples in the small towns of Ellare, Honnavar and Hiriadka are testimony to this. For instance, although the Lakshmijanardhan temple in Ellare possessed a small *ratha*, the temple was itself quite empty, and the *ratha* was in dismal condition, indicating that the *sevas* were not a usual occurrence here.

Over the years, the divide between *rathotsavams* and *sevas* has blurred. While the *rathotsavam* marks the zenith of the celebratory aspect of the *ratha*, *sevas* have developed as a smaller counterpart of the same, where both these forms of processions have various customs that give them their colourful identity, yet bear resemblances to each other. For instance, while we were at the *rathotsavam* at the Manjunath temple in Dharmasthala, we were informed of how only the families of those who have given substantial donations towards the *ratha* are allowed to pull the same (Sooryanarayan, Personal Interview). Here, the concept of donation, which is a feature of the *seva* was clearly exhibited in the context of the *rathotsavam*.

The practice of a *sevas* has become equivalent to that of a monetary contribution made to the temple. The commodification of *sevas* has evolved to an extent where temples offer

various prices for respective *rathas* to be taken out on procession (Kalidos, Personal Interview).

The concept of merit has also gained a monetary connotation to it where it is believed that the more expensive the *seva* is, the more value one's devotion holds. While some approve of *sevas* and the service that they do towards the deity, others are left pondering over their significance. In our interview with Professor Raju Kalidos, author of *Temple Cars of Medieval Tamilaham*, he expressed his views on the *rathotsavam's* ability to unite the masses, and the counterproductive effect of the *seva* which he believes leads to social segregation in a place where religion, caste, class should be of no consequence. He pointed out how this segregation is due to differences in people's ability to afford such 'services', and how these religious processions are slowly losing their fundamental concept of equality (Kalidos, Personal Interview).



Figure 76: Interview with Harish Pai

Mr. Harish Pai, from the Heritage Village, Manipal, commenting on the current practice of *sevas* opined that the amounts of money used for *sevas* are often unnecessary “displays of wealth” by the devotee. He feels that the essence of worship/bhakti is lost in this manner. He also discussed how any remarks on the

subject are usually looked down upon because of the taboo over doubting one's religion - where “questioning *sevas* is like questioning faith” (Pai, Personal Interview). The continuation of donations and payments in the name of service to one's deity is seen to be strongly tied to one's religious beliefs; the current conceptual practice of *sevas* are a critical example of undoubted faith.

Processions have existed since ancient times, as have chariots, but it is the amalgamation of the two that have turned *rathas* and *rathotsavams* into the cultural phenomena they are today. While pulling the *ratha* during a *rathotsavam* used to be one of

the few ways by which a devotee could gain religious merit, today this merit can be procured by just sponsoring a *seva*, which is a smaller kind of *rathotsavam*, and making a monetary endowment to the temple. This is not to say that there is a dichotomy between people who pull the *ratha* and people who sponsor a *seva* - rather, it is this evolution of practices and philosophy that make it unique and interesting.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Having journeyed with the *ratha* in the Udupi region of Karnataka, we came to learn of how this ritualistic vehicle was not only a result of skilled craftsmanship but also of earnest devotion. Its celebration in the *rathotsavam*, where the icon of a deity is taken out in a religious procession in the *ratha* pulled by people from all walks of life, is an event that has united people from near and far since ancient times.

Although chariots used for secular, military and subsequently processional purposes have been frequently mentioned in historical texts and epigraphs, the origins of the religious *ratha* have not been clearly traced. While some experts attribute them to the Mahayana Sect of Buddhism, others trace them to the attempt of Brahmanism to over-shadow Buddhism in the time of its growing popularity. Other scholars link the emergence of *rathas* with the measure, to help cater to the increasing number of Hindu followers. Folk festivals like the *Bandi Habba*, in which carts are used to take the deity around on processions, are also linked to the genesis of *rathas* as we know them.

In terms of their physical structure, *rathas* mimic the architecture of temples themselves. While scholarly opinions differ upon how exactly temple and *ratha* structures reflect each other, they agree that both temple and *ratha* architecture stem from the same treatises. Temple architecture is divided into three broad categories - *Dravidapani*, *Nagarapani* and *Vesarapani* - which are prevalent in southern, northern and Deccan regions, respectively in India. Therefore, the resultant *rathas* found in specific regions are distinct from one another. For instance, while the *rathas* we observed were fairly spherical or dome-shaped, in a state like Tamil Nadu, conical forms are more common (K. Arul, Personal Interview).

Structurally, *rathas* are of various types. While the *shastras* provide a list of hundreds of types of *rathas*, one basic distinction that can be made is between the fully permanent *ratha* (that has both its top and bottom part made of solid wood) and that of which the bottom half is permanent while the top portion is made of lighter, temporary material. The first type of *ratha* primarily carries floral motifs and patterns of inanimate objects. Constructed in two

distinct stages (permanent part followed by temporary part) by different communities, the second kind of *ratha* is replete with iconographic representations of motifs, mythical animals, humans, demi-Gods and Gods. These depictions are displays of great skill and at the same time, carry religious symbolism. While being exquisite exhibits of sculpting, these images also provide insights into the mythical influences prevalent in the region of around Udupi. For instance, through the numerous depictions of the *Dashavatara* and the relatively less frequent depictions of Shiva, we learnt about the prevalence of both Vaishnavite and Shaivite ideologies in the regions of study. The depictions of human figures, such as those in erotic images, were also interesting insights into the actual social life of the people portrayed in the representations. These images can be considered especially relevant, given the lack of such depictions on temples themselves.

This wide variety of icons carved on the *rathas* is the work of artisans from the Vishwakarma kula and the Gudigara community - who are responsible for constructing the lower half of the *ratha*. Replete with intricate carvings, this part takes months to construct. Within these groups, *shastric* and practical knowledge is passed down from generation to generation and for the *ratha* to be 'authentic', it must be constructed as per these instructions. Therefore we did not find any scope for "artistic freedom" in the common sense of the word, except in cases of floral-geometric designs. Each workshop has its own rules and work ethic and culture; accordingly we observed how *ratha* making was treated more religiously in some places than others.

The upper temporary part of the *ratha* is assembled by members of various tribal communities, of which the Hallaki tribe is a prominent example. Primarily fishermen, agriculturists and wage-labourers, these tribes are involved in *ratha* making as an act of devotion and service towards their God. While they are often provided with token amounts as payment for their work, their relationship with the *ratha* is more faith based than professional.

While drawing a comparison between the different communities involved, we inferred a sort of hierarchy, which can possibly be based on the amount of theoretical and practical expertise needed in constructing a specific part of the *ratha*. For instance, while the Vishwakarma and Gudigara build the *ratha* from scratch, other tribal communities mostly reuse the material put aside in previous years or build upon existing structures.

The making process of the *ratha* as a whole is long and elaborate. While most follow the norms and rules provided in the *shastras*, recent years have seen more structural moderations - such as the incorporation of steering mechanisms, rubber tyres and braking systems that have facilitated and eased the tedious exercise of navigating the *ratha*.

When it is not in use, the *ratha* is mostly stored inside sheds that have been specially constructed for it. However, in the absence of proper sheds and even while inside them, there is a lack of maintenance, and *rathas* are generally left in very worn-out conditions. This seemed to indicate that although the *ratha* is a revered object during the *rathotsavam*, this reverence is not apparent at other times. This has led to few government/private initiatives, such as the Heritage Village in Manipal and the Manjusha Museum in Dharmasthala, that aim to preserve the *ratha* in its original form. Although this objective is implemented variously by different organizations, these are attempts to restore and retain the value of *rathas* as a treasure of artistic and religious expression.

The real essence/purpose of *ratha* is evident in *rathotsavam* - a grand and festive procession of immense scale. Since a *rathotsavam* is said to appease a deity, it ties to the Hindu concept of *bhakti* or service to one's God that led to the collection of merit. The *rathotsavam* was also linked to the idea of *tantra*, *mantra* and *yantra*, all of which put together gave the *ratha* a mystical energy that is believed to absorb all negative aspects that tormented those around it. The *rathotsavam* has also long been thought of as a source of prosperity and auspiciousness.

We learnt through our primary interactions and observations that processions could take place in two forms; *rathotsavams* and *sevas*. *Rathotsavams* are events celebrated to mark other festivals on specific or auspicious days, whereas *sevas* are small processions a devotee can arrange by giving a donation to the temple at any time of the year. Celebrated with immense pomp and glee, with colourful performers, priests, devotees and onlookers adding to the festivities, *rathotsavams* are indeed spectacles to behold. Every temple has its own regulations concerning the celebrations of *rathotsavams* - while some *rathotsavams* are celebrated as parts of larger festivals, like the Lakshadeepotsavam or Makara Sankranti, other temples celebrate *rathotsavams* at other times like *amavasya*, or the new moon. Smaller in scale than a *rathotsavam*, *sevas* also have similar features that make them a very vibrant commemoration. *Sevas* are believed to please the deity and earn merit for the devotee.

Historically associated with indiscriminating inclusiveness, the *rathotsavam* does not bar participation from people of any caste, creed, class, colour, gender, etc. Thousands of devotees arrive from different parts of the world, just for a chance to hold onto the thick ropes and pull the *ratha*. Sometimes there are even certain traditions considered auspicious during a *rathotsavam* that are carried out. For example, on our visit to Gokarna, we learnt about a peculiar tradition of throwing bananas into the window of the *ratha*, which was believed to bring about good luck. These festivals bring about a ‘fervour of faith’ that is a critical element to these ritualistic celebrations.

Although there is no segregation seen within *rathotsavams*, we found that this factor seems to be changing given the fact that one can now sponsor a *seva* and hence gain merit - based on financial capabilities. As scholars Raju Kalidos and Harish Pai shared with us, the economic disparity manifested in *sevas* has diluted the original essence of *rathotsavams*. Further, as we observed in Dharmasthala, despite the presence of lakhs of devotees, who were eager to have any contact with the *ratha*, only those who had endowed the temple were permitted to pull the *ratha*. From this, we can recognise how the monetary connotation prevalent in *sevas* has in a way influenced the underlying principle and practice of *rathotsavams*.

We were also able to recognise comparative differences between the *rathotsavams* in Karnataka and of the famous *ratha yatra*, in Puri, Odisha. There are variations in the motives behind the processions, the scale at which they are conducted and the structural symbolism and characteristics of the *rathas* used. For instance, in the Jagannatha *ratha yatra*, the deity Lord Jagannatha, along with his brother Lord Balabhadra and sister Devi Subhadra, is taken on a procession to symbolically meet his aunt at the Gundicha temple. This concept of one deity paying a visit to another is very distinct from that in the Udupi region, as here, no deities meet one another. Across the temples we visited we also noticed that unlike that of the Jagannatha *ratha yatra*, the *ratha* processions here are not restricted to an annual timing, and are instead conducted over various occasions. For instance, the Sri Krishna Matha in Udupi boasts of its annual *rathotsavam* on the day of *Makara Sankranti* and at the same times the temple frequently conducts *sevas* as well.

From our interviews with different devotees at the Sri Krishna Matha and the

Manjunath Temple, we identified a deep sense of veneration for the *ratha* and the deity it carried. Many temple goers who had experienced a *ratha* procession provided accounts of how it gave them a sense of belonging and divinity. However, this was not always the case since many devotees also admitted to not being very aware of what the *ratha* and the *utsavam* stood for - where we received responses from those who said that they simply pulled the *ratha* because other people did it. Some groups of people like those employed within temple premises, were already more than familiar with the *ratha*. So, while they enjoyed sharing the vast knowledge that they had gained over years of working with the *ratha*, they spoke of how they did not feel any extraordinary devotion towards it.

The week that we spent on field was incredibly eye-opening for us, not only as students but also as teammates, devotees and travellers. While we had conducted a considerable amount of secondary research before our field visits, nothing could have prepared us for coming face-to-face with this divine phenomenon. We learned that the faith that drives the *ratha* as a phenomenon manifests itself differently in different people. While *ratha* makers exhibit this in their work, this does not necessarily define the nature of their entire work. The varied nature of this faith is displayed in how temple authorities possess and commission *rathas* to gain prosperity and also benefit from a kind of status symbol. Devotees too displayed their faith in different ways, such as pulling the *ratha*, walking with it, trying to decorate it, performing in the *rathotsavam* or cleaning and decorating the car street.

The *ratha* and *rathotsavam* are not the result of the hard work of one person or community, but of numerous people who come from vastly different backgrounds, and it is something that has cemented its position in popular imagination as a religious experience that not only brings people closer to their god, but also to each other. And though the *ratha* is a complex work of art, artisanry and carpentry, painstakingly created over months, it embodies the simple devotion people hold for their Gods. Even though there will always be changes over time in how people practice religion, *rathas* and *rathotsavams* will endure as testaments to reverence, divinity, and the faith of people.

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GLOSSARY

Adhishthana: The part that of the plinth of the pavilion, on the *ratha* which serves to increase the height; consists of numerous tiers

Adiptana: The plinth

Anuloma: A person born of a upper caste father and lower-caste (*shudra*) mother

Bail Gaadis: Bullock carts

Bandi: The primitive cart with four wheels

Bandi Habba: The folk festival where deities are taken on a procession on a *bandi*

Belli Ratha: Silver temple car

Bhakti: The expression of a devotee's faith and love for their God

Brahma Ratha: The largest temple car, characterised by its enormity and shape

Brahmotsavam: Thee biggest festival of a temple

Chandramandala Ratha: The type temple car characterised by its four sided structure

Chitras: Images of deities

Dashavatara: The ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu

Devasthana: Temple; literally translated into 'home of the Gods'

Dikpalas: Also known as *Ashtadikpalas*; the eight deities representing the eight directions

Garbha Griha: The shrine dedicated to the main deity around which the entire temple complex is created

Griva: The seat in which the idol of the deity is placed on the temple car, during a procession

Jivatma: The ritual union or mingling of human beings

Kalasha: The finial that mounts a bigger and mostly cloth-covered sphere, at the very top of the temple car

Kammala-Rathakarar: Refer to *Rathakarar*

Kuladeva: The family deity of a group or community

Lakshadeepotsavam: The annual festival of a lakh lamps at the famous Manjunath Temple, Dharmasthala

Mahurat: An auspicious time of certain mathematical and astrological significance

Makar Sankranthi: An annual harvest festival

Mantra: The energy created from the sound of hymns chanted during an *utsavam*

Margazhi Masam: The time on the Tamil calendar, that usually falls between the months of December and January

Mukhamantapa: The main entrance hall of the temple

Navaratna Ratha: A type of temple car that is encrusted with nine kinds of jewels

Pada: The walled entablature that marks the start of the upper half of the temple car

Pallaki: The palanquin used to carry the idol out of its shrine, to the *ratha*

Paramatma: Supreme deity

Prakaram: The cyclical path inside the temple premises

Prastara: The widened part of the *pada*

Pratiloma: A person born of a upper caste mother and lower caste (*shudra*) father

Pushpa Ratha: A type of temple car which has both its top and bottom halves made of wood

Ratha: The temple car

Rathabeedi: The street designated for the *ratha* procession

Rathakarar: The name given to the *Vishwakarma Kula*, meaning ‘makers of chariots’

Ratham Taksan: The profession of making *rathas*

Rathamandapa: A chariot or *ratha* shaped temple pavilion

Rathashilpis: Those employed in the making of *rathas*

Rathotsavam: The social and religious festival, in which an idol is placed on a *ratha* and taken on a procession outside the temple premises

Ratnavedi: The stone pedestal on which the idols are placed

Raudra: The fierce theme found in iconographic representations of deities

Sanna Ratha: A type of temple car that is characteristically and relatively smaller than the other kinds of *rathas*

Sevas: Smaller than annual *rathotsavams*; processions commissioned and sponsored by devotees

Shikhara: The top half of the *ratha*

Tangas: Horse drawn carriages

Tantra: The mechanism that binds *mantra* and *yantra* together

Terottam: Tamil and Kannada translation for *rathotsavam*,

Uliyam: An obligatory service which involves participating in *rathotsavams*; seen on the ninth day of the *Margazhi masam* festival

Upitha: Also known as *upapitha*; the structural base that follows the plinth, necessary for higher extension of the *ratha*

Utsava Murthi: The idol used for *rathotsavams* and *sevas*

Vijay Ratha: The type of chariot dedicated to female deities

Vyaali: A mythical dragon with a leonine face and elephantine proboscis

Yagnas: *Vedic* sacrifices

Yantra: Material aspect of *rathotsavam*; the circuit taken by the deity

These definitions have been taken from the works of Raju Kalidos and Choodamani Nandogopal, amongst others, along with the interviews and other information gathered on field.

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