

Etiquette in Taking Jagannath-prasada



Nowhere in the world is there a culture with as elaborate a worship of *prasāda* as in *anna-kṣetra*, Jagannath Puri, famous as the place of *prasāda* grains. In honoring *mahāprasāda*, the residents of Puri have special traditions which are not found anywhere else. In Puri, it is considered that accepting Jagannath's *prasāda* is the same as having direct *darśana* of him. In his purport to *Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta* (2.1.162), Srila Sanatan Goswami describes: *yathā viṣṇus tathaiva tat* — “The food that Lord Purushottam Jagannath eats is the same as the Lord himself.”

In speaking about the glories of Jagannath *mahāprasāda*, the *Skanda Purāṇa* (*vaiṣṇava-khaṇḍa* 38.7-8) warns:

*daridraḥ kṛpaṇo vā 'pi gṛhasthaḥ prabhur eva vā
sva-deśyāḥ para-deśyā vā sarve tatra samāgatāḥ
nābhimānaṁ prakurvīran viṣṇor-nirmālya bhakṣaṇe*

All those assembled in Jagannath Puri, whether a poor man, a miser, or a rich householder, or whether a resident or a foreigner, should not exhibit any pride in partaking of Jagannath *mahāprasāda*.

The tradition in Puri when taking *mahāprasāda* is to humble oneself by sitting on the ground without an *āsana* or even a cloth. When taking Jagannath *prasāda*, everyone, whether a Brahmin, a demigod, or a lowly dog, are considered to be equal. It is considered that when Indra, the king of the demigods, takes Jagannath *prasāda*, even he sits on the ground. Sitting on any kind of a seat or mat is considered to be an offense to *prasāda*.

ISKCON's Sacinandan Swami recalls:

Once I was invited to take Jagannath *mahāprasāda* with the king of Puri. I went to his residence and

found a number of members of the royal family also present. When we all sat down to honor *prasāda*, as usual I put my *chadar* down to use as a seat.

Everyone sat down and plates were put out and the *prasāda* served to everyone. Wanting to be careful to observe proper etiquette, I waited to take *prasāda* until the others began. For several minutes, everyone simply sat there without taking. Unsure of what was going on, I leaned over to the king and asked, “Is everything okay?”

The king replied, “We are just waiting for you to get off your *āsana*, and then we will take *prasāda*.”

In Puri, everything revolves around Jagannath *mahāprasāda*. At any auspicious function, whether it is a wedding, a funeral, the birth of a child, the opening of a new house or shop, a traditional *saṁskāra* such

as a name-giving ceremony, first hair-cutting, or Brahmin initiation, etc., serving the guests *mahāprasāda* is a mandatory part of the event. The local people consider that the most important part of the marriage ceremony is when the bride and groom take *mahāprasāda* together.

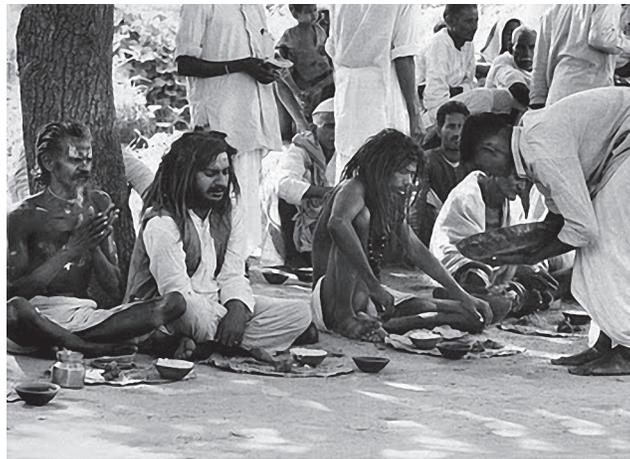
Sometimes persons in Puri will refuse to accept

prasāda directly from some-

one else's hand. Placing *mahāprasāda* in someone's hand is held to be such a sacred act that having once accepted *prasāda* in this way, it would be considered an offense if you ever quarreled with that person in the future.

Before taking *mahāprasāda*, the residents of Orissa commonly chant the following prayer:

*nilācala-nivāsāya nityāya paramātmāne
balabhadra-subhadrābhyāṁ jagannāthāya te namaḥ*



Sadhus taking prasada

Photo from Life Magazine 1962



In Jagannath Puri, everyone appreciates mahaprasada

I offer obeisances to the eternal supreme soul of everything, Lord Jagannath, who resides in Nilachala with his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra.

Other traditions regarding *mahāprasāda* that the residents of Puri consider important to follow include:

- ❁ One should not allow *mahāprasāda* to touch the ground.
- ❁ One should not touch *mahāprasāda* with the left hand, which is considered unclean.
- ❁ One should be careful not to spit out *mahaprasāda* left in one's mouth when washing at the conclusion of the meal. Devotees often drink the first mouthful of while washing.
- ❁ While traveling with *mahāprasāda*, one should be careful to store it in a higher place than one's seat and not put one's feet near it.
- ❁ One should not mix *mahāprasāda* with ordinary food or even with *prasāda* from other deities, such as Tota Gopinath, etc. If devotees are honoring *prasāda* of another deity and someone gives them Jagannath *mahāprasāda*, they will first take the Jagannath *prasāda* before resuming.
- ❁ One should not refuse Jagannath *mahāprasāda*. When devotees have had enough, rather than refuse more portions they say "pūrṇa" (complete), to indicate that they have had sufficient.

❁ The tradition in Puri is that while you are taking *mahāprasāda*, if someone comes and reaches out their hand asking you for some *prasāda*, you have to give them, even if it's from your own plate.

❁ One should not step over *mahāprasāda*. According to the local tradition in Jagannath Puri, if one steps over Lord Jagannath's *prasāda*, that offender will suffer from the disease known as *elephantiasis*, a chronic disease, endemic in Odisha, characterized by the enlargement of the legs. For this and other reasons, after taking *prasāda* they carefully clean the floor. The *pandās* in Puri say that this rule does not apply inside the Meghanada Pacheri, the walls of the Jagannath Mandir. There, in Ananda Bazar, where *prasāda* is sold, as well as in front of Jagannath's altar, there is much *prasāda* on the ground and it is not possible to avoid stepping on it.

As in other *vaiṣṇava-saṅgas* of *kīrtana* and *hari-kathā*, when taking Jagannath *prasāda* one should consider everyone equal. In Puri it is acceptable for a low-class *caṇḍāla* (dog eater), a dog, and a high-class Brahmin to honor *mahāprasāda* together.

As in other places in India, when taking *prasāda* in a group there is a certain etiquette that is followed: Prayers, or chanting of the *hare kṛṣṇa mahā-mantra*, are recited until all the participants have *prasāda* on their plates. Then, everyone waits to begin until two or more senior devotees have started taking *prasāda*. Devotees don't get up until everyone is finished with *prasāda*. Seeing that everyone is finished, devotees call out "Haribol!" and everyone gets up at the same time.

In the *Nīlādri-samhitā*, a local *sthala-purāṇa* of Puri, it is said that if someone commits an offense to *mahāprasāda* then the remedy is to take bath in the sacred tank of Sweta Ganga. ❁

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