



# Press Release

## Food for the gods – a resource for millions

**Tübingen researchers investigate the world's biggest kitchen as part of the collaborative research center ResourceCultures**

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The city of Puri in India's state of Odisha recently hosted millions of pilgrims to the biggest festival for the god Jagannatha in 19 years. The ceremonies extended over many months, as new figures of Jagannatha and his siblings were created. They were presented to millions of devotees during the Chariot Festival (Rath Yatra) in July. As part of the collaborative research center 1070 ResourceCultures, University of Tübingen cultural anthropologists headed by Professor Roland Hardenberg followed the events in an around the Jagannath temple in Puri.

A major part of the festivities is the sale of the temple's holy food – known as Mahaprasad, Sanskrit for “great favor” - to the faithful. Tübingen PhD student Lisa Züfle researches the production, distribution and consumption of this religious resource. The Chariot Festival takes the statues of the gods to their summer residence, the nearby Gundicha Ghar temple. The meals prepared at the summer temple are considered particularly lucky, because Gundicha Ghar is said to be the birthplace of Jagannatha. After their “holiday,” the gods ride back to the main temple in their chariots. The holy food is prepared along the route to the summer residence and in the main Jagannatha temple.

Both the temple and its food production fulfill an important social and economic function in the region. Lisa Züfle stresses the significance of the holy food for both the city and the surrounding countryside. “The temple is the biggest buyer of foodstuffs in the entire region. Holy food is eaten at all the important rituals in a person's life – at weddings, births, funerals, and even at the founding of companies and clubs. At mass public events Mahaprasad is distributed directly to the crowds. But there are also daily feedings for the poor.”

Every single day in the biggest kitchen in the world, holy food is cooked and sold to thousands of Jagannatha devotees – a logistical feat involving

more than 30,000 workers including cooks, priests, and delivery men. This daily mass feeding has important roots in the local beliefs. In the eyes of the faithful, the god Jagannatha and his brother and sister have very human needs. For this reason, their images are put to bed at night; during the day, their clothes are changed several times; and every day, they receive a set menu.

In fact, the holy food is made for the enjoyment of the gods; but the “leftovers” from the divine meal are distributed to humans. To Jagannatha’s followers, they are full of his grace. These meals are considered so holy that people of different castes can eat them from the same pot – a unique situation in India. By eating the gods’ food, the faithful feel they are receiving a divine blessing. For instance, Mahaprasad is believed to take away bad karma. Eating it at the moment of death is even thought to lead to liberate the soul from the cycle of rebirth. Mahaprasad is sold and eaten around the temple, or delivered on foot, by bike, or on trucks to customers.

The meals have been prepared to the same recipes for centuries. They are vegetarian, are made from fresh local ingredients, and are slow-cooked in clay pots over wood fires. But this ancient resource is open to modern options. The food of the gods can now be ordered online via startups such as [onlineprasad.com](http://onlineprasad.com). Tübingen ethnologists will be observing changes to the use of this resource and what effects it may have on the ritual feeding of millions of pilgrims.

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Selling holy food at the Ananta Basudeva temple, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India Photo: Lisa Züfle



Why not order your holy food online? Source: <http://onlineprasad.com>



The 2015 Chariot Festival Photo: Lisa Züfle



PhD student Lisa Züfle (left) carrying out field work at a temple kitchen Photo: Maximilian Priester-Lasch



A guru distributes holy food to the crowd at this year's festival. Photo: Lisa Züfle