

## **History and narratives of the chariot festival in the Serampore subdivision of West Bengal**

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### **Abstract**

Serampore is an old tract or region of Hooghly between the dry bed of the river Saraswati and Hooghly. Serampore and its adjacent areas were under the administrative control of Saptagram Government and were under the jurisdiction of 'Chakla Bhursut' and 'Boro Paragana'. Later in 1753 A.D., Raja Manohar Chandra Roy, the Zaminder of Sheoraphuly, took possession of Sreepur, Mohanpur and Gopinathpur and uniting the three villages named the entire area 'Srirampore' after Shri Ramchandra, the Avataar of Vishnu, being worshipped by the landlords of Sheoraphuly. Mahesh, near Srerampore in Hooghly district, hosts a magnificent *Rathayatra* festival complete with a towering *Ratha* with Jagannath as one of the *avatars* of Vishnu. *Ratha Yatra* and *Snan Yatra* are celebrated at Mahesh every year. This worship of Vishnu in the form of Jagannath attracts teeming attention because it is one of the most vibrant ones in India, with countless passionate followers. It represents a rare instance of a tribal deity being directly and consciously elevated to the highest echelons of the Hindu pantheon, rather than enter it through the usual long stage-by-stage absorption. Jagannath's open procession strengthens mass participation, irrespective of caste and class right from the medieval period, making it an extremely popular ritual in Bengal, only after Puri. The present paper attempts to understand the history and discuss the narratives associated with the ritual. The discussion also aims to go beyond the historical narratives and draw a comparative analogy with the chariot festival in Puri. The presentation would also take into account the ethnographic documentations in order to have a more realistic view of the legends and rituals associated with the festival.

**Key Words:** *Narratives, Chariot festival, Bengal*

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