

# THE RATHA YATRA RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL PARADES IN THE PUBLIC SPACE OF “INTERCULTURAL LISBON”<sup>1</sup>

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1. This article is based on my doctoral thesis entitled “Spiritual and expressive practices in a migratory context: an ethnography of the Hare Krishna Movement in the city of Lisbon”, at the New University of Lisbon, 2017, funded by Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (Capes, 11871-20); and an unfolding project focused on the Ratha Yatra Festival I developed independently at CRIA-FCSH/UNL. Thanks to Inigo Sanchez, Guilherme Tosetto and Fraser Newell for the suggestions. E-mail: [imaginarydebor@gmail.com](mailto:imaginarydebor@gmail.com) and website: <http://www.imaginarydebor.com>.

This photo essay presents the second edition of the Ratha Yatra religious festival in Lisbon which has been organised by ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness)<sup>2</sup>, since 2016. Ratha Yatra, also known as the Chariot Festival, was initially celebrated in the city of Jagannatha Puri in India. The Hare Krishna Movement has been organising this same festival for decades in several cities, including London, Paris and New York. It is the activity that gives the most recognition to the Hare Krishna Movement nowadays.

The Ratha Yatra Lisbon proposes to unite different groups, entities and communities of immigrants in a collective performance through the streets of the city centre, performing what could be called a “citizenship parade”. In Lisbon, the festival parades through some of the main streets of the city centre, starting from the recently gentrified Largo do Intendente, passing by some of the main tourist attractions, such as the recently renovated Praça do Comércio, towards Ribeira da Naus, located on the banks of the Tagus River. Along with its path, the Hare Krishna mantra is sung and, just like in a carnival group, its lyrics and melody are repeated by most who follow the parade, thus providing feelings of integration among those who participate. The Ratha Yatra festival can also be seen as a result of the Hare Krishna devotees’ efforts to participate in the city’s expressive practices as a vehicle for its growth as a movement. They follow the notions of “diversity” and “multiculturalism”, which have been proposed by the Lisbon City Hall.

The Hare Krishna Movement has sought to integrate itself into the everyday and festive practices of the city of Lisbon, organising activities that, despite being of a religious nature, are presented as cultural events of the city. The Hare Krishna Movement’s activities are aligned with the change of the city’s dynamics, focusing on promoting the image of Lisbon as a multicultural and cosmopolitan city, which has been changing the services, activities, and events which it offers, including those that have a religious aspect. The Hare Krishna Movement is increasingly occupying the city’s festive space by treating spiritual practice as a public spectacle (Rasmussen 2010: 125). Devotees and participants in the activities of the Hare Krishna Movement, mostly immigrants, appropriate the public space to express themselves as citizens in the city where they live.

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2. Although the Hare Krishna Movement (ISKCON) is a branch of Hinduism, it was not developed in India. In fact, when the ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) was registered in the United States in 1966, its founder Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada described the practice as a “spiritual movement.” In Lisbon, there is a coexistence agreement between devotees of Krishna and Hindu families who are not devotees of Krishna. ISKCON and Hindu communities have become more collaborative recently, as the Hare Krishna Movement has been helping these communities to gain visibility in the city with the Ratha Yatra Festival.

The parade's warm-up happens in Largo do Intendente. Hare Krishna devotees and members of various Hindu communities play instruments such as the mridangam (Indian drum) and sing mantras to keep the public engaged.



FIGURE 1  
Devotees play mridangam, which is the main instrument of the parade.



FIGURE 2  
A devotee blows a shell, known as shankha, which reproduces the Ohm sound. The sound of the shell is also used to draw attention to the ceremony from those present, even helping people to focus on the mantras.

The parade begins with carriages at the front, where deities are found. Among the deities (religious statues), the founder of the Hare Krishna Movement, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, leads the group of small carriages.



FIGURE 3

The following two pictures show the group walking behind the carriages and performing choreographies to engage participants. In the background, you can still see Largo do Intendente, where the parade began, and also one of the most critical points of the gentrification of Lisbon.



FIGURE 4

FIGURE 5  
Musicians  
interacting  
with the people  
participating in  
the parade, at  
Rua da Palma.



In the photo below, you can see a group of Bangladeshi immigrants in t-shirts with the festival's self-created logo, parading effusively as they pass by the Hotel Mundial, in Martim Moniz, on the way to Praça da Figueira.



FIGURE 6

Since the Hare Krishna Movement doesn't have a significant number of devotees to make a large-scale parade, the Ratha Yatra festival cannot happen in Lisbon without the support of the Hindu's communities. The festival was ISKCON's first attempt to create a dialogue with Lisbon City Hall. It focused on showing the Ratha Yatra and the Hare Krishna Movement as a Hindu tradition which has a good dialogue with other Hindu communities such as Hindu Community of Portugal, Shiva

Temple, Gurdwara Sikh Sangat Sahib (Sikh temple), BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Bangladesh Community in Portugal and Durga temple, all collaborators of the festival. Although most Hindu communities are not interested in an in-depth dialogue with the Hare Krishnas, the Ratha Yatra create a possibility for Hindu representation and occupation of the public city space.

FIGURE 7  
A group of women with different backgrounds make choreographies at Rua Aurea, walking just behind a group carrying the Hindu Community of Portugal's flag.



In the 2017 edition, the ties between the hare krishna movement and the Hindu communities became stronger and more recognized by City Hall. The reflection of this was a protocol of support and co-organization was signed with the Lisbon City Council, which included the festival as part of the CML's activities focused on "interculturality", which defines Ratha Yatra as: "a universal festival made by all and for all."

FIGURE 8  
In Praça da Figueira, a group of tourists watches the parade through their balcony.



FIGURE 9  
 In this picture, you can see two representatives of the Lisbon City Council (wearing orange), but not actually participating, just passing by the large group of tourists who watch the parade, while waiting their turn to go on Santa Justa Lift.



The cosmopolitan character of Lisbon, along with the process of *touristification* of the city, has changed the cultural activities of the city, which has also influenced the way spiritual/religious practices work and function in the public space. This cosmopolitan characteristic allows religious/spiritual practices like the Hare Krishnas to broaden their dialogue with cultural associations of immigrants, such as those related to South Asian countries, which seek greater visibility as immigrants in the city. The cultural policy of the Lisbon City Hall aims to respond to the needs of its inhabitants and visitors, making the public space a stage for all kind of celebrations, including religious ones. These are presented as the city's cultural activities and expressive practices participating in the process of *festivalization* of religion.

FIGURE 10  
 Musicians are walking together with participants already halfway through the end of the parade.



FIGURE 11  
To the right,  
Param Gati  
Prabhu, leader  
of the Hare  
Krishna temple in  
Lisbon, Brazilian,  
dancing alongside  
an Indian Hare  
Krishna devotee,  
ahead of a  
large, diverse  
group of people  
from different  
backgrounds  
and origins.



This photo below highlights the flag of the Hindu Community of Portugal arriving at the final destination of the parade, where presentations take place in the “Interculturality Stage”, set up by the Lisbon City Council.



FIGURE 12

Through these images, I have emphasised the importance of musical performance, dance and other expressive practices as forms of individuals, articulating collective identities which are fundamental for the formation and sustenance of social groups and indispensable for survival (Turino 2008: 2). I have also sought to emphasise the importance of performances associated with music and dance in public spaces to the understanding of transnational experiences (Trovão & Rosales 2010). Its influence is interspersed with understanding self-identification at their place of origin and migratory integration “(2010: 11), represented in this essay by the congregation of immigrant devotees of various religious groups at the Ratha Yatra festival in Lisbon.

**TRANSLATION**  
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## ABSTRACT

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### KEYWORDS

Religion; festival;  
immigration; tourism;  
public space.

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