

The Destructive Myth of the Juggernaut: Exploring Representations of the Rath Jatra Festival in Early Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature

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This article compares two near-contemporary depictions of the cart transporting the Hindu god Jagannatha (or Jaga-Nath, Juggernaut) during the Rath Jatra festival in Puri, in the state of Orissa, India. In comparing the anonymous Company painting 'The Idol Juggernaut on his car during the Rath Jatra' (c.a.1820-22) and 'The Curse of Kehama', a poem by a British Romantic poet Robert Southey (1810), I argue that representations of the god and his cart can be used as vehicles to explore British colonial representations of India in this period. Prior to military occupation, the festival was depicted negatively with reports of lascivious excess and ritual suicide, justifying the need for conquest and conversion. Southey's poem therefore exemplifies Romantic Orientalism, particularly through Southey's use of epic narrative and sensationalism. In contrast, commissioned by British East India Company representatives but executed by an unknown Indian artist, the painting is dated to a time just after the military occupation of the state of Orissa by the British and depicts a calm, smiling congregation of worshippers gathered with British representatives around the cart. This article thus explores the ways in which such artefacts capture the zeitgeist as the British gaze moved from the 18th-century focus on China and Japan, to a 19th-century orientalisating culture around India as the British empire expanded its territory to engulf the country.

Romantic poet Robert Southey's 1810 epic poem *The Curse of Kehama* and the anonymous 1820-22 Colonial Company painting 'The Idol Juggernaut on his car during the Rath Jatra' (Figure 1) are examples of early nineteenth-century representations of the Rath Jatra festival in the city of Puri, Orissa state, India. During this event, three carts are drawn through the streets of Puri (and other cities across India) with the largest cart carrying an idol of Hindu deity Jagannatha, an avatar of Krishna and the source of particular worship during the festival. The festival had been an object of sensationalised and morbid

fascination for British travellers, writers and artists for some time prior to the creation of these works, following vastly exaggerated accounts of self-immolation under the wheels of the great carts used to pull idols through the streets of the city.¹ As Partha Mitter describes, early Western portrayals of India and especially Hindu culture focused largely on events such as the Rath Jatra: 'most of [the] pages were taken up by sensational items, like the *sati*, hook swinging and ritual suicide under the wheels of the car of Jagannatha'.² As result of these accounts, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries the Anglicised

¹ Sources include: William Bruton, *Newes from the East-Indies*. Imprinted at London: By I. Okes, and are to be sold by Humphrey Blunden at his shop in Corne-hill at the signe of the Castle neere the Royall Exchange, 1638; Claudius Buchanan, *The Works of the Rev. Claudius Buchanan, L. L. D., Comprising His Christian Researches in Asia, His Memoir on the Expediency of an Ecclesiastical Establishment for British India, and His Star in the East, with Three New Sermons*. 1812.; Awnsham Churchill, *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 1732.

² Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters : A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*. Chicago, University Of Chicago Press, 1992. p. 49



The Idol Juggernaut on his Car taken during the Rath Jatra in 1823

Figure 1: Unknown artist, *The Idol Juggernaut on his car during the Rath Jatra*, c.1820-22, watercolour on paper, 46.5 x 67.5cm. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Indian Company Paintings Collection, IM.193-1920. (Photo: Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum)

'juggernaut' enters the English lexicon—commonly used in a pejorative sense even today to suggest a destructive and unthinking force which crushes all in its wake.³ It is not a difficult further step to consider the juggernaut of the English imagination as a metaphor for an unwieldy India as the British attempted to assert control. Carol Bolton writes that by 1815 'A contemporary estimate was that 40 million Indian people were by then living under the [East India] Company's rules. The question of how the native population of these territories should be governed became of increasing concern to Britons'.⁴ Mitter observes for the British colonisers Hindu idols such as that of Jagannatha represented 'the earliest and most extreme example of uncontrolled imagination in art and thought'.⁵ These two artefacts can be seen as attempts to 'cope' with what the Rath Jatra represents by controlling the narrative surrounding Jagannatha and his cart, be this through depictions of virginal sacrifice and religious fanaticism to justify the need for colonialist conversion on the part of Southey, or the turning of 'idol to artefact' and festival into spectacle on the part of the painter/commissioner.⁶ Both can be considered as conforming to Said's definition of Orientalism as examples of the 'Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient'.⁷ This essay will consider the ways in which the two pieces conform to this definition by considering their contexts of production, narrative positioning, and choice of form and medium.

The contexts of production for Southey's 1810 poem and the 1822 Company painting are highly significant when comparing their very different depictions of the procession. Both are produced after the British gained control of the region of Orissa (initially by political means). Mildred Archer posits that 'it was not until the British took over administration of the area in 1803 that the myth of self-sacrifice became discredited'.⁸ However, Southey's poem is clear evidence that this is not the case, as within stanza five of the 'Jaga-Naut' chapter we read:

*On Jaga-Naut they call,
The ponderous Car rolls on, and crushes all.
Through blood and bones it ploughs its dreadful path.
Groans rise unheard; the dying cry,
And death and agony.
(Stanza 3, Lines 66-70)*

Clearly, the work exhibits a Romantic Gothicisation of the festival, contrary to Archer's claim. One explanation for this is that during the twelve year span between Southey's poem and the 1822 painting there was an uprising in the region which temporarily saw Puri fall out of British control in 1817, before being swiftly recaptured following military action in the same year.⁹ If the British hold on Orissa in 1810 felt tenuous because of a political rather than martial colonisation process, continuing to portray the people of the region as religious fanatics suggests and supports the necessity of British dominance and validates the military operation of 1817. 'The Idol Juggernaut on his car during the Rath Jatra' was completed

³ 'Juggernaut | Jagannāth, n.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2022. Web. 22 February 2023.

⁴ Carol Bolton, *Writing the Empire*. Routledge, 30 Sept. 2015. P. 198

⁵ Mitter, p.xv

⁶ Balachandra Rajan, 'Monstrous Mythologies: Southey and the Curse of Kehama.' *European Romantic Review*, vol. 9, no. 2, p. 211

⁷ Edward Said, *W. Orientalism*. Brantford, Ont., W. Ross Macdonald School, Resource Services Library, 1978. pp 2-3

⁸ Mildred Archer, and Graham Parlett. *Company Paintings: Indian Paintings of the British Period*. London, Victoria and Albert Museum In Association With Mapin Publishing, 1992. P. iv

⁹ Sanjaya Kumar Mahapatra. *Social History of Orissa in 19th Century*. Gurgaon, Shubhi Publications, 2017.

after the uprising and the Victoria and Albert Museum, where it is now held, suggests that it depicts ‘British Commissioner Andrew Stirling’ alongside an anonymous woman riding an elephant above the crowds.¹⁰ This deduction likely made because in 1822 – the same year the painting was commissioned – Stirling produced a detailed account of the region of Orissa in *Asiatick Researches*, including an account of the Rath Jatra.¹¹ Stirling’s very presence in Puri is linked to the British response to the events of 1817. Bhabani C. Ray writes that ‘Stirling’s work...was merely a report after investigation into the causes of the Orissa Rebellion of 1817... it was principally meant to serve as a guide book to the British Administration of Orissa in later period’.¹² As such, it might be considered that the positioning of ‘Stirling’ above the masses and dressed in military garb, the calm crowd and the almost architectural detail of the cart illustration are suggestive of a controlled event presided over by an established British elite: the festival has been ‘tamed’. The depictions of Jagganatha himself go to support these historical explanations. Southey’s cacophonous poem is disturbing as Kailyal, a virginal female victim, is captured as a bride for the god who ‘Spreads his seven hideous heads, and wide/Extends their snaky necks on every side’ before a screaming crowd in a ‘swarming city’ (Stanza 18, line 5). The anonymous painting however portrays a rather endearing anthropomorphised figure in Jagganatha (much closer to the idols seen in

modern day Rath Jatra), the surrounding crowds are calm and beatific, still a multitude but one very much under control. No pilgrims are depicted as crushed under the cart wheels, and the only female present is a European in Georgian dress, smiling at the spectacle from a ‘safe’ distance atop an elephant as it follows the crowd.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that Southey was strongly influenced by Baptist narratives surrounding the necessity of the conversion of the people of India.¹³ In his supporting notes for the Jaga-Naut stanzas in *The Curse of Kehama*, Southey regularly references the Baptist Reverend Claudius Buchanan, whose *Christian Researches in Asia* portrays graphically hyperbolised depictions of the state of the Indian people, as well as William Bruton’s essay in *Churchill’s Collection* – both highly critical of Hindu religious practices.¹⁴ There is also considerable evidence that while studying in Bristol, Southey was a regular visitor of the Baptist College, and was there exposed to several objects of Hindu worship.¹⁵ We can find evidence of Southey’s agenda in writing this poem in his prefaces to the first and second editions (1810 and 1837), as well as in his own correspondence. The opening lines of the first preface clearly inform the reader of how we should respond to spectacles like that of the Rath Jatra and idols such as ‘Juga-Naut’, instructing us that: ‘the religion of the Hindoos,

¹⁰ Unknown artist, *The Idol Juggernaut on his car during the Rath Jatra*, c.1820-22, watercolour on paper, 46.5 x 67.5cm. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Indian Company Paintings Collection, IM.193-1920.

¹¹ William Stirling, *Asiatick Researches, or, Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal, for Inquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia*. The Society. 1788.

¹² Bhabani Charan Ray, *The British Conquest and Administration of Orissa, 1803-1819*. 1956, eprints.soas.ac.uk/33605/. Accessed 18 Feb. 2023. <https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00033605>

¹³ Rajan.

¹⁴ William Bruton, *Newes from the East-Indies*. Imprinted at London: By I. Okes, and are to be sold by Humphrey Blunden at his shop in Corne-hill at the signe of the Castle neere the Royall Exchange, 1638; Buchanan, Claudius. *The Works of the Rev. Claudius Buchanan, L. L. D., Comprising His Christian Researches in Asia, His Memoir on the Expediency of an Ecclesiastical Establishment for British India, and His Star in the East, with Three New Sermons*. 1812.

¹⁵ Daniel E White, ‘“A Little God Whom They Had Just Sent Over”: Robert Southey’s *The Curse of Kehama* and the Museum of the Bristol Baptist College’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 32, no. 2, June 2010, pp. 99–120.

which of all false religions is the most monstrous in its fables, and the most fatal in its effects'. Perhaps because of numerous conflicts and rebellions in the in-between 'the new preface [Southey] published in the ten volume 1837-38 edition of his poems is at war with the Indian misadventure even more aggressively than the old dismissal'.¹⁶ The idea of fatal incompatibility between Christianity and Hinduism is core to Southey's perception that 'there are but two methods of extending civilization—conquest and conversion'. Southey does not shrink from the necessity of violence and conquest should conversion fail, ominously recording that when it came to 'the Hindu system of caste...there are diseases where arsenic becomes the medicine'.¹⁷ In this extract from *The Curse of Kehama* we find the groundwork for explaining the perceived necessity of the arsenical 'medicine' through Southey's alarmingly uncontrollable scenes. While the narrative provides a Gothic Romanticism of the Orientalised tale, allowing Southey to produce a work similar in its exoticism to his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, this provides clear evidence of a political and evangelical agenda to this poem, as well of course as a commercial one. A letter to Southey from his friend William Taylor, advises the sagacity of his subject choice in reading the national mood: 'Take the Hindoo superstition for your machinery, and your country here and your readers there have both an interest in its celebrity, which must grow with the national power and extend with the national empire'.¹⁸ Taylor cynically advises here that the poem will only gather more interest as British dominance in India intensifies.

The 1822 painting demonstrates a similar agenda in suggesting the necessity of conquest, but it does not contain the same message about the necessity of conversion. The painting is perhaps reliant on the viewer having prior knowledge of the cart of the 'Juggernaut' through narratives such as Southey's in order to present a newly civilised affair; a depiction of the benefit of colonial rule for not only the British, but also the people of India. Here we can see what Mitter has argued is a 'reconstruction' of Indian culture under British Colonial rule, 'in an effort to cope with the complexities of the conquered territories', whereby the desirable image to convey is one of a tolerant and munificent British ruler overseeing festivities, rather than a threatened and horrified bystander, conforming again to Said's definition of Orientalism.¹⁹ Mitter observes that as colonial rule became more established 'the British in India began to regard ancient spots like Elephanta or Kanheri as an ideal setting for picnics', and this attitude is conveyed in the image through the confident and relaxed attitudes of the two white figures, observing the Rath Jatra is portrayed as an interesting leisure pursuit, positioning the Hindu masses in the role as quaint cultural artefacts.²⁰ The painting is a prime example of a movement known as Colonial painting. This is best defined as a hybridisation of British and Indian artistic styles, wherein images are commissioned by outsiders but completed by Indian artists for the Occidental gaze. Colonial paintings catered for the tastes of Western audiences during 'the second Renaissance, 'la

¹⁶ Rajan. p. 211

¹⁷ Robert Southey, (Letters and Correspondence III, 281) [in] Rajan, Balachandra. 'Monstrous Mythologies: Southey And the Curse of Kehama.' *European Romantic Review*, vol. 9, no. 2, Mar. 1998, pp. 201–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509589808570047>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2021.pg 205, 206].

¹⁸ Bolton, Carol. *Writing the Empire*. Routledge, 30 Sept. 2015. Pg. 198.

¹⁹ Mitter, p. xiv.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 131.

renaissance orientale”²¹. As such, Company paintings offered a tasteful exoticism in what were essentially souvenirs for colonial visitors to different regions across India: ‘People from upper middle-class backgrounds replaced the earlier adventurers who had come. India fascinated them, fitting into the popular cult in England at the time, known as ‘the picturesque and the sublime’²². Archer, the leading researcher in this field, quotes Captain Mundy of the British Army in the early 19th Century: ‘Every hut, equipage, utensil and beast of India is picturesque’²³. This runs counter to Southey’s own description of Brahminism ‘anti picturesque’ in his notes to *The Curse of Kehama*, again indicative of a change in gaze and perception from Southey’s writing in the first decade of the nineteenth century and the portrayal of the Rath Jatra in the later artwork.²⁴

It is important to consider the metaphorical significance of the 1822 image of a subdued Juggernaut being (most likely) painted by an Indian artist. Not only is the event stylised for the Western gaze, so is the style and the view of the creator in their own portrayal of the Rath Jatra. While Archer writes that: ‘Indian artists for their part were only too-willing to receive patronage in this way and ready to adjust their style and subject matter to please the new enthusiastic patrons’, Balachandra Rajan writes of Southey’s poem in a way equally applicable to the nature of Company art; ‘England’s appropriation of India was not a matter of restyling it but of placing its economy in a state of dependence which included cultural accomplishments as well as physical

resources’.^{25,26} Archer suggests that the development of Company art offers Indian artists economic prosperity if they were entrepreneurial enough to take advantage of the opportunity the new British audience offered, but Rajan suggests that there is a detrimental and insidious influence- an intellectual colonialism - involved in the process. This is supported by Mitter’s assertion that ‘above all, nineteenth century Western notions of artistic progress and the superiority of mimesis in art transformed Indian taste during the colonial era, with the consequent loss of indigenous values’, conforming again to Said’s definition of Orientalism.²⁷ It is notable that Archer’s most extensive work on Company painting consists of an archive analysis of the Victoria and Albert museum collection from 1992 which acknowledges funding from the British East India company in its opening pages; a relative contemporary, Rajan is an Indian novelist writing the above in 1996. This demonstrates that discourses surrounding representations of India in artistic mediums are just as pertinent and just as unresolved in 20th and 21st-century discussion as they were in the time of creation in the 19th century.

The form and compositions of the two artefacts are further suggestive of the different agendas of Southey and the artist/commissioner. *The Curse of Kehama* is an epic tale of gods of heaven and hell, corrupted kings, enchantresses and curses, the dead and the undead. Southey’s work therefore suggests fantastic and Miltonian influences, there are echoes of Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan* as well as

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 107.

²² Seeme Qasim, ‘Wall Art of Kachchh.’ India International Centre Quarterly, vol. 24, no. 4, 1997, p. 126.

²³ Archer, Pg. 16.

²⁴ Rajan.

²⁵ Archer, and Parlett. p. 17.

²⁶ Rajan, p. 212.

²⁷ Mitter, Pg. xiii.

Hindu epics such as the *Ramayana*- recently translated for English readers.²⁸ The Jaga-Naut chapter is ‘structurally gratuitous’ as what Kailyal experiences in this episode has no bearing on the wider narrative.²⁹ It is as if Southey cannot resist the opportunity to depict an event which has already captured the European imagination. Indeed, Rajan argues that Southey becomes so caught up in his sensual epic that he at times loses sight of the colonialist agenda of conversion and conquest, thus ‘The juggernaut episode may be the only part of the poem which fully satisfies the requirements of this discourse’.³⁰ Similarly, Daniel White observes that these stanzas in particular ‘offer a negative and straightforward challenge to Brahmanism as naked deception for the sake of power and pleasure, and this gothic part of the work was most memorable for readers such as Heber, Ward, and others’.³¹ In the same way that the ‘sensational episodes’ or ‘ritual suicide’ mentioned by Mitter capture the imaginations of writers like Southey, for their readers these climactic moment are also powerfully resonant.

Southey manipulates the language of his poem to concoct a cacophonous and febrile scene in the ‘Juga-Naut’ stanzas- we find him self-counselling in his epistles: ‘there must be quicker, wilder movements; there must be a gorgeousness of ornament also—eastern gemwork and sometimes rhyme must be rattled upon rhyme till the reader is half dizzy with the thundering echo’.³² In the Jaga-Naut stanzas we find a repeated exclamative refrain mimetic of the shouts of the imagined crowd:

*Joy in the city of great Jaga-Naut!
Joy in the seven-headed Idol’s shrine!
(Stanza 1, lines 1-2)*

Stanza lengths and rhyme patterns in this chapter are irregular to maintain the illusion of confusion and chaos, simple rhyme is used with increased frequency to heighten the pace to create momentum, as in the second stanza:

*Joy in the city of great Jaga-Naut!
Joy in the seven-headed Idol’s shrine!
The fairest Maid his Yoguees sought,
A fairer than the fairest have they brought,
A maid of charms surpassing human thought,
A maid divine.
(Stanza 1 lines 14-19)*

Exclamatives and rhyme combine with present tense verbs and adverbs in order to place the reader in the midst of the action as an appalled and helpless bystander: ‘Now bring ye forth the Chariot of the God! .../The ponderous Car rolls on, and crushes all./Through blood and bones it ploughs its dreadful path’ (Stanza 2, lines 20-24). Amidst all of the chaos however, there is evidence of what Michael O’Neill refers to as ‘a sturdily Anglo-Saxon Protestant assurance at work’ in aspects of the form of *Kehama*, citing examples of triple rhyme throughout the poem.³³ Furthermore, as seen in the previous quotation, sections of the poem contain iambic pentameter, allowing Southey to exert his authorial control over the frenzied scene, an Occidental form framing an Oriental tale. We find the inverse method to reach the same ends in ‘The Idol

²⁸ Andrew Rudd, ‘Oriental’ and ‘Orientalist’ Poetry: The Debate in Literary Criticism in the Romantic Period.’ *Romanticism*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2007, pg. 53 <https://doi.org/10.1353/rom.2007.0019>. Accessed 11 Dec. 2020.

²⁹ Rajan, pg. 208.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ White, p. 110.

³² Southey, Robert (L and C HI, 145) [in] Rajan, Balachandra. ‘Monstrous Mythologies: Southey And the Curse of Kehama.’ *European Romantic Review*, vol. 9, no. 2, Mar. 1998, pp. 201–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509589808570047>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2021. pg 203.

³³ Michael O’Neill *Shelleyan Reimaginings and Influence*. (Oxford University Press, 14 Feb. 2019).

Juggernaut on his car during the Rath Jatra', with an Oriental frame used to portray an Occidental narrative. As discussed, Company painting appealed to a Western fascination for the Orient during this 'second Renaissance', and as such the painting appears ancient and exotic in its two-dimensional composition, subject matter and ornate decoration. Like Southey, the artist captures the 'gorgeousness of ornament' in the cart itself, with elaborate tapestries and inlaid carved woodwork. Further similarity lies in the hybridisation of mediums and an underlying Western influence in the painting. Archer describes that Company painters 'began to work in watercolour rather than gouache; they often modified their colour range, discarding the brilliant hues of Indian miniature painting for the more muted colours of the European engravings, which they saw clearly appealed to the British: soft blues, greens and sepia wash'.³⁴ This muted palette is evident in the 1822 painting, with largely sepia hues juxtaposed with occasional exotic splashes of gold to draw the eye to archetypally exotic elements such as the elephants and the cart canopy.

These early nineteenth century pieces portray the Rath Jatra festival in different ways but exhibit the same ultimate sense of 'restructuring' the event for and through a colonial British gaze, fitting Said's description of Western Orientalist traditions in art and literature. Therefore, both works can be said to demonstrate the significance of art in shaping Western narratives of India to facilitate colonialism. While both are informed by eyewitness accounts they also inform further encounters with the festival and Jagganatha. White records several instances of British travellers describing experiences in India by referencing similarities to *Kehama* and for

audiences back in Britain the likely implication of 'The Idol Juggernaut on his car during the Rath Jatra' is that India is under secure rule.³⁵ This suggests that the artistic gaze informs the way in which the public views the Rath Jatra as much as public perception informs the artistic depiction, illustrating the idea that the two symbiotically create narratives which best suit the agendas of the British colonisers. In concluding, it should be acknowledged that these works are not only products of their time, but as we have seen in later discourses, continue to inform critical discussion surrounding colonialist artworks.

³⁴ Archer, and Parlett, p. 18.

³⁵ White, p. 109.

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