

## Madison Hindu Community Celebrates Chariot Festival

(Report by Akash Pattnaik, 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Middleton High School, Wisconsin)

In the seaside city of Puri, Odisha, India one million people gather every year to witness a grand spectacle, the Rath Yatra. The Chariot Festival begins when the three gods—Lord Jagannath, his elder brother Lord Balabhadra, and younger sister Lord Subhadra—board three magnificent, forty-five feet chariots and pay a visit to their “garden house”, the Gundicha Temple, two miles from their home. During the procession, the gods are brought to their vehicles and pulled across the Grand Avenue by devotees from around the world of all religions. It is considered very pious to even catch a glimpse of the gods while they are in their chariots. This event is broadcasted live across India and on international



networks abroad.

To keep connections with some of the biggest festivals in Hinduism and raise awareness of the Chariot Festival abroad, the American Hindu Association held the second annual Rath Yatra at the Hindu Temple and Cultural Center (HTCC) in Fitchburg on the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2013. The festivities mirrored those occurring 8000 miles away in Puri with the procession of the chariot around the HTCC's 7 acre property. The 400 attendees took part in the festivities which closely matched those occurring in Puri, India. The priest Pt. Raghuchandra Bhatt from Milwaukee conducted the ceremony and the lords were offered more than 40 Indian delicacies.

Devotees returned from pulling the chariots to a fun-filled Indian fair. The American Hindu Association and Taj Indian Restaurant sold mouth-watering Indian snacks. Also present were Indian clothing and jewelry vendors from the Chicago Area, a local robotics program, and games for children. All proceeds from the festival went towards the construction of a new temple on the property. Guests were also entertained with a cultural program featuring Bharatnatyam (students from the local Kalaanjali School of Dance and Music), Odissi (Akshita Pattnaik), professional flutist Pawan Benjamin

from the Manhattan School of Music, Hindusthani flute (Akash Pattnaik) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Indian Classical music group, SAAZ.

The festival culminated with the return of deities to the main temple through a grand celebration again on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July, 2013. The event, highlighting the presence of Hinduism in Madison, also made many devotees nostalgic as they remembered the colorful festivals they eagerly awaited as children. This is an early event in the month of June-July to be continued at the HTCC every year.

