

IAF SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)
Space Culture: New Processes of Public Engagement in Space through Culture and Art (9)

Author: Mr. Arko Datto
India, arkodatto@yahoo.co.in

THE INDIAN SPACE PROGRAM AND ITS MYRIAD REPRESENTATIONS: AN EXCEPTION IN
CONTEMPORARY TIMES

Abstract

‘Space, he suggested, constitutes a new religion. Through its exploration, people can come together and find a common future.’

- Space in the Tropics by Peter Redfield

Since the success of the Chandrayaan-3 space mission in August 2023, the country has witnessed nationalistic frenzy and pride. Pandals (i.e. temporary installations housing Hindu gods) have been overwhelmingly space themed: featuring rockets, the Moon, astronauts, Indian flags, satellites and landers.

Pandals serve multiple functions: showcasing artistic prowess and traditional craftsmanship, oftentimes they are thematic installations displaying socially conscious imagery. Inspirational themes are aimed at educating the general populace, specifically children. Recently, they have been used as platforms for furthering political and divisive agendas.

The Indian space program has been co-opted by the dominant BJP-RSS ecosystem, This paper argues that the Indian space program and its myriad representations form an exception in the pantheon of contemporary right-wing hate-driven BJP/Hindutva projects that essentially work via othering and exclusion.

Anti-technology anti-science beliefs and practices ensconced in the Hindutva worldview such as pushpak vimaan (flying chariot) are at odds with the cutting edge progressive research being done in the space program.

Contrary to other Hindutva projects that clearly incorporate Othering as modus operandi, the Space Mission does not inherently create/imply the presence of an enemy. In fact, the space program’s success brings ALL Indians together. In that sense, it is a failure of the divisive Hindutva project.

An exceptionally high number of rocket pandals are found in refugee colonies which house Hindu families displaced from Bangladesh by Partition. We propose that in these exclusionary times where the very notion of citizenship is moot in India, rocket pandals present an effective way to showcase nationalism and bring people and neighbourhoods together.

This paper proposes that for the first time a unique cohesive overarching theme is being presented across wide swathes of India, across various religious festivities, moving beyond the diverse array of themes usually on display. Through the phenomenon of the rocket pandals, mutually contradictory subjects ranging from nationalism to science to religion fuse together.

In contemporary Indian cities where myriad forms of ghettoisation and social stratification are the norm, this paper will show how ‘space’ as created and conjured by the rocket pandals cuts across these existing divisions.

The author of this paper is a theoretical physicist by training and a visual artist by profession. This paper will include photographs and videoworks to corroborate this thesis.