

Romance and dreams from mythical times came alive, as the chariot of Lord Jagannath began to roll on the 'badadanda'—the road sublime—on July 13

personality, but because he at once symbolised a past as remote as the horizon, and a romance as inviting as a rain-bow.

The romance involves the very genesis of Jagannath.

In mythical times, King Indradyumna, a devotee of Vishnu, intuitively felt that somewhere around Puri lay hidden the presence of the Lord in a tangible form and that it was time for it to be revealed. Indeed, so strong was his conviction that he built a magnificent temple—the like of which had never been seen—atop a blue hill known as Nilagiri, at Puri.

The king despatched four mystics in four different directions to discover the hidden splendour. One of them, the young Vidyapati, lost his way in the forest—or should we say found his way—to the abode of Visvvasu, a tribal chieftain. Falling sick, Vidyapati was nursed back to health by the chieftain's beautiful daughter, Lolita. They fell in love and were married.

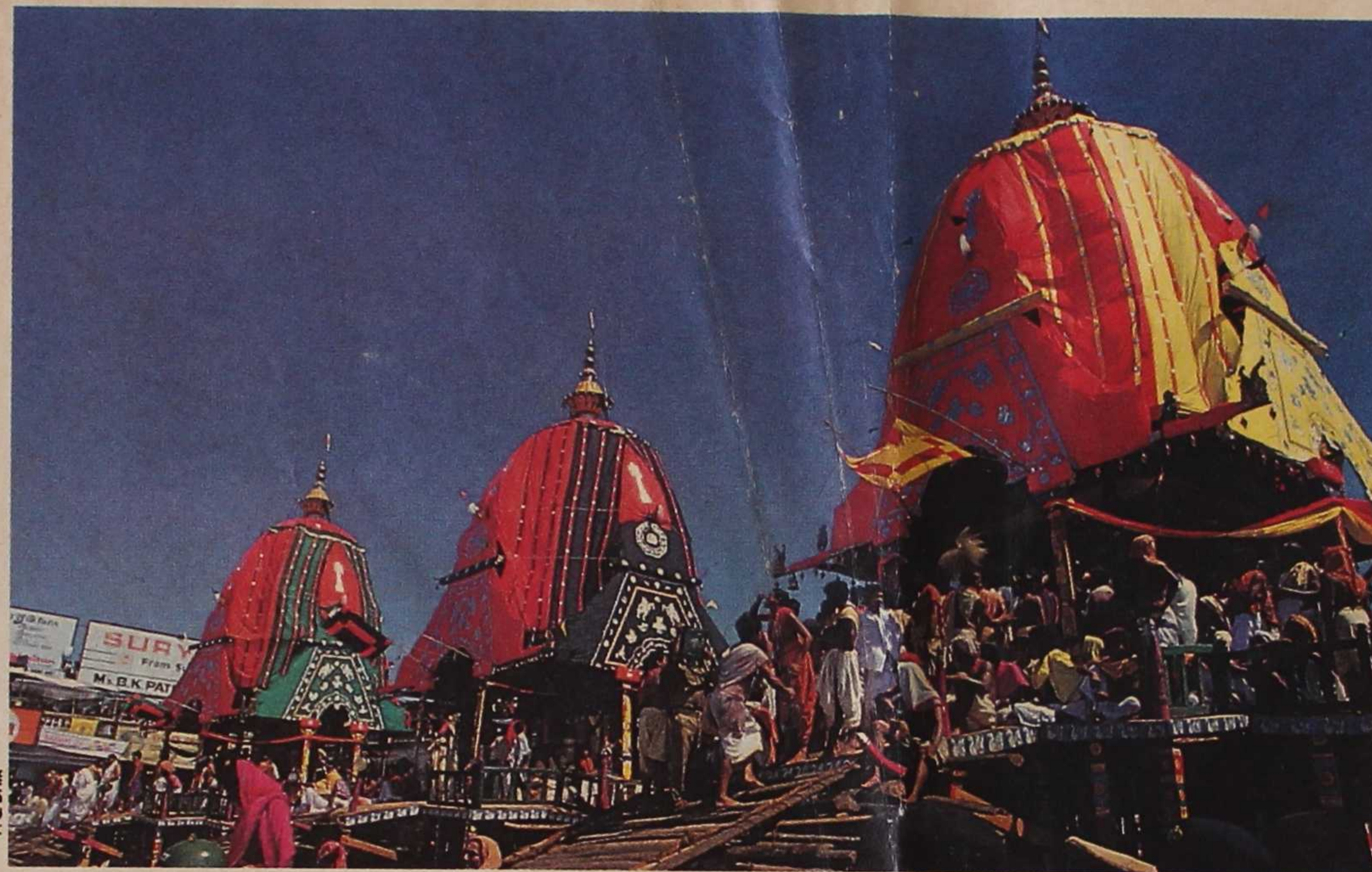
As he continued to live there, he observed that every day, before sunrise, Visvvasu, flowers in hands, disappeared into the woods for an hour or so, even if a storm lashed the region. "What is your father's destination at dawn?" Vidyapati asked Lolita.

"Although I am not supposed to reveal it, how can I hide anything from you? Inside a cave forbidden to others remains our ancestral object of worship, Nilamadhav. Father alone is entitled to go there and perform the daily ritual."

Vidyapati insisted on visiting the cave. Lolita pleaded with her indulgent father. Willy-nilly Visvvasu led Vidyapati to the cave after the latter had agreed to walk blindfolded. But unknown to his guide, Vidyapati carried a handful of mustard seeds, strewing them along his path.

Inside the cave, as soon as his eyes were uncovered, the vision of Vishnu flashed before him, although the object of Visvvasu's worship itself had perhaps no traditional form and was kept sealed.

Vidyapati let a few days pass. One morning he took leave of



CHARIOTS OF THE GODS

By Manoj Das

Visvvasu and Lolita, promising to return soon. The monsoon had set in; the mustard seeds had sprouted, indicating the way to the cave. He picked up the sacred stuff and headed for Puri.

King Indradyumna intuitively knew that he had at last got what he was so ardently aspiring to have.

Indradyumna found that it would be difficult to worship the relics in their existing form. They must be interned in an idol. What should be the idol's shape and of what stuff was it to be made?

Wood it should be—the king was instructed in a dream—and the log ordained for it had already come near the coast, borne by the waves.

But however the king's men tried, the log refused to be drawn ashore. The surprised king, in his meditation, was shown a vision of Visvvasu—in a state of anguish after dis-

covering his loss. The king himself proceeded to the forest forthwith and apologised to Visvvasu and convinced him that only the Lord's will had been done.

With Visvvasu lending a hand, the log came ashore willingly.

The king was now confronted with the next question: what shape was to be carved of the wood? He received no indication about it either in his dream or in his vision, but when a haggard-looking stranger, stooping with age, but not without mystery in his eyes, arrived from nowhere and offered to undertake the task, the king knew that the destined carpenter had come.

The stranger would work only under the condition that none should disturb him until he was done with his job.

The curious consort of Indradyumna, Queen Gundicha, would press her ear to the door

to listen to the sound of the carpenter's hammer and chisel, day after day. But one morning all was quiet. As the silence continued till the next day, the queen thought it rather ominous and wondered if the old man had kicked the bucket! She pushed open the doors. The stranger looked askance and disappeared, leaving his work incomplete. It was not difficult to understand that he was none other than Viswakarma, the architect-sculptor of the gods.

The king decided to install the image in whatever shape it was. The relics Vidyapati had brought were lodged in *Navipadma*, the navel of the image. Nilamadhav came to be known as Purushottam and later as Sri Jagannath.

To this day, at an average interval of 12 years, the old image is buried and a fresh replica is installed. In a ceremony known as the *Navakalevara* or Renewed Embodiment, the *Navipadma* is

transferred from the old image to the new amidst strict secrecy. Even the priest performing the transfer does so with his eyes shut.

No wonder that the Brahmin Vidyapati became an important attendant of the Lord. But what is significant is, sons born to him and the tribal princess Lolita also became priests. They are called the Daitapatis—the line that began from the legendary inter-community wedding.

It is difficult to say when the two other images, that of Sri Krishna's elder brother Balabhadra and their younger sister Subhadra were added to the main deity.

However, perfectly identified with the Krishna legend as the deities are, the great Rath Yatra, the annual Car Festival, is believed to represent Krishna's travel from Gokul to the place of Kamsa, his maternal uncle, at Mathura. There is no record to establish the time of the earliest shrine for the deity (the present temple, 58 metres high, was built by the Ganga Kings, especially by Choda Ganga Dev, in the 12th century) nor has any inscription been found to help scholars trace the beginning of the Car Festival which draws at least a couple of lakh of devotees from all over India and abroad.

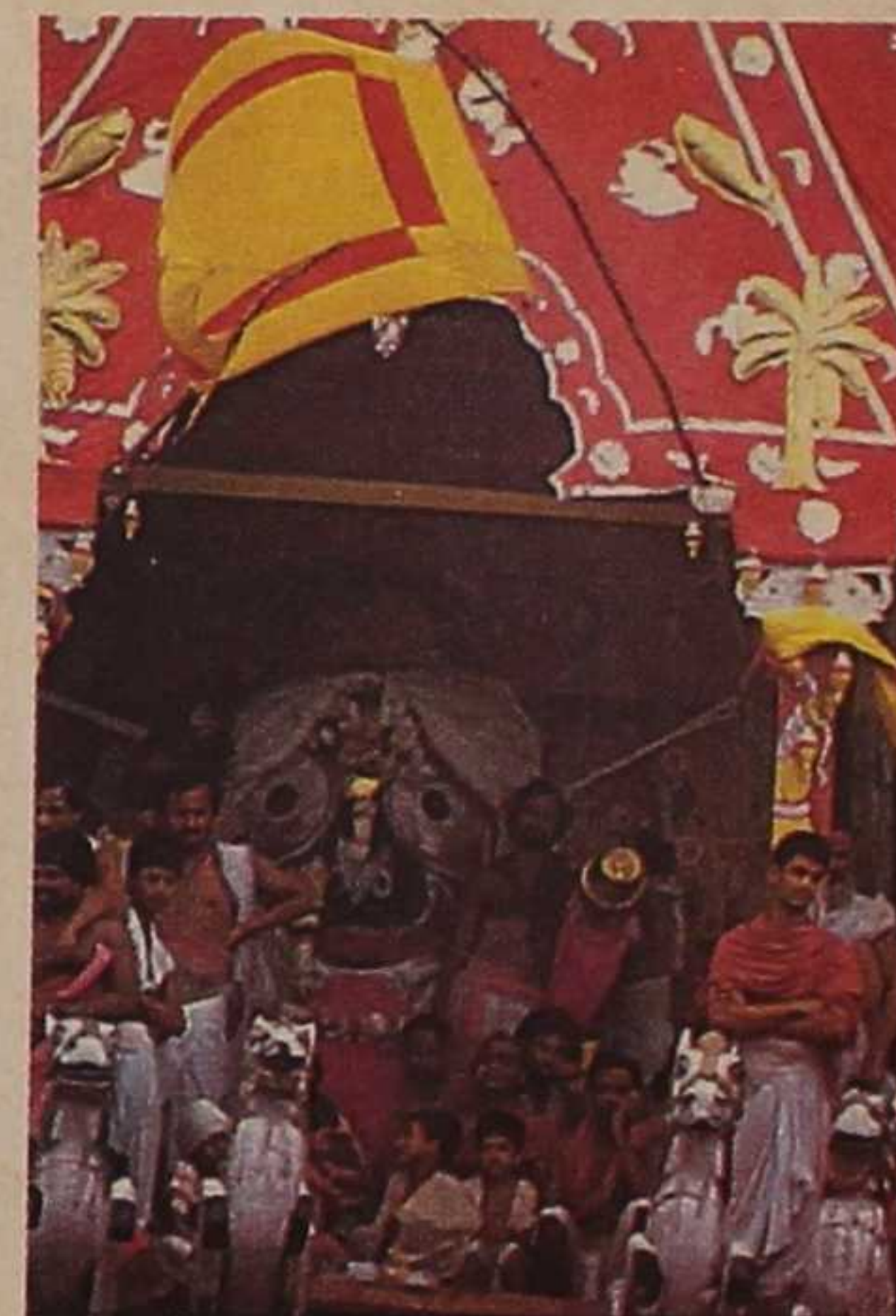
The items offered to the deities as *bhog* make an excellent reference material for the study of ancient cuisine, for they have remained unaltered for a thousand years if not more. On an average, 10,000 people eat the *Mahaprasad*, unique for its flavour. In days gone by some devotees would throw themselves before the chariots. To be crushed to death under some of the 16 gigantic wheels meant a sure ascent to heaven. Hence the term juggernaut, a moving force which crushes everything before it.

The legend that has a delightful association with the Car Festival concerns Purushottam Dev (15th century). Travelling through south India, the young king of Kalinga happened to meet Princess Padmavati of Kanchi who charmed him. He sent his emissary to her father proposing marriage. The

proposal was welcomed and the minister of Kanchi proceeded to Puri to finalise the arrangements.

That was the time of the Car Festival. It began with the king sweeping the passage to the upper stage of the chariot where the deity was to be placed, signifying the royalty's humbleness in relation to God. (The custom continues, the scion of the Raj family of Puri performing the rite.) Unfortunately, the Kanchi minister saw it as an act unworthy of a king. "We cannot make a sweeper-king our son-in-law!" he observed to his master. Kanchi called off its consent to the marital proposal.

The infuriated Purushottam Dev marched against Kanchi,



but returned defeated. He lay before Jagannath for days, praying for victory or death! The Lord assured him in his dream that he would win on a second expedition.

The king won the battle and took Princess Padmavati prisoner to Puri. But that was not compensation enough for his earlier humiliation. He ordered his minister to give the princess away in marriage to a sweeper!

But the wise minister knew his business well. He let some time pass, until the month of the Car Festival. As the King climbed the chariot and stooped to sweep its platform, two tender hands put a garland round his neck. Behind the damsel stood the minister. "My lord," he said, "where could I find a more eligible sweeper to

win the hand of Princess Padmavati?" Thus the princess of Kanchi became the queen of Kalinga.

There are historians who believe that the deities were originally Buddhist symbols, representing *Buddha*, *Dharma* and *Samgha*. Puri, according to them, was Dantapuri, housing the tooth of the Buddha (which the *Navipadma* contains). Buddhism, no doubt, held wide sway over the region after the great Kalinga War that changed Chandashoka into Dharmashoka. But Tantra and Jainism too had periods of influence before and after the Buddhist era, respectively. It is possible that the temple, at different times, had served as a centre for different theological pursuits, but it had absorbed everything and has developed a unique personality of its own.

Great mystics like Shankaracharya, Ramanuja (both founded their monasteries at Puri) Nanak and Tulsidas have seen in the strange deity the divinity of their own concepts. Chaitanya Dev is believed to have disappeared while gazing at Jagannath. While to some the figures of the deities are specimens of primitive tribal art, to some others they are the very last word (design?) in modern art. But do they contain some hidden splendour which only mystics can behold? For the poets among them have left lyrics attributing stunning beauty to the images.

Perhaps Jagannath represents not only time past and time present, but also the future. One of the last rituals at night in the temple is the musical recitation of the *Gita Govinda* by Jayadev, containing a narration of the 10 incarnations of Vishnu, the last one being Kalki, the avatar of the future, who will destroy all that is barbaric in man, paving the way for the emergence of a perfect species. Maybe, the present 'incomplete' form of Jagannath, a legacy of humanity's lack of trust and impatience represented by Queen Gundicha, awaits fulfilment, not in the hands, but in the consciousness of the man of tomorrow.