Hail to the Sun Of Konark
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TEMPLES

Hail to the Sun Of Konark

The world's finest Hindu Sun temple is also one of India's most innovative architectural masterpieces. Though weathered by time, it continues to shine.

Mangala Prasad Mohanty, Orissa

Near the huge 700-year-old sun temple of Konark on the Bay of Bengal in Orissa, a small lake called the Chandrabhaga gently flows toward the sea some 50 meters away. I can understand how tourists visiting this place during non-festival times might consider it unspectacular. How could they know that long ago it was a raging river where yogis became sages as they prayed, performed extreme penance and worshiped the rising Sun?

Those holy men of yore left behind a portion of the peace they earned. It can be felt strongly even today, lingering in the air like sweet perfume. Although the Konark temple now lies in ruins and the geography of the holy sites surrounding it has changed drastically with time, this magical place still pulls pilgrims from all over Orissa, India and around the world--literally thousands of them every year--to rise up in reverent prayer for the Sun God that ever shines, now as in ancient times.

As I am standing here with my small son, Nirvan, on the banks of the Chandrabhaga, I click to turn on the blue light of my digital wrist watch to check the time. It is 3:46 in the morning on February 8, 2003. We have been up all night, but we are not tired. We have lots of company. There are, I am told, nearly a half-million people standing here with me. We are all crowded together, waiting in the dark. A

group to my right is quietly reciting Sanskrit slokas. To my left some young fellows are singing bhajanas (devotional songs). It's pitch black and we can't see a thing. Still, I snap a few blind shots with my camera, and the flash captures a glance upon the carefree and unselfconscious pilgrims. Today begins a week of celebrations called the Magha Saptami Mela. We are all here gladly, shivering through a cold night, immersed in benign devotion, waiting to worship the Sun.

Saptami Mela starts every year on the seventh day (saptami) after the full moon in January/February. It is Konark's most popular religious festival. Though the mela is an annual event, the one in progress this year is unique for astrological reasons and occurs only once every 34 years.

Suddenly there is quite a bit of noise wafting from a distance. The crowd around me is beginning to shift back and forth. I grasp my son's hand tightly. Occasionally, we are lifted off our feet and moved some distance to the left, than back to the right. It is a bit disconcerting, but panicking will not help. This I know. It is becoming apparent that the events we have all long awaited will soon come to pass.

A grand and colorful procession which commenced at midnight some miles from here has been slowly making its way through many small and large villages of Orissa and is finally arriving here. Three icons, representing Lord Siva as Triveniswar, Dakshineswar and Ayisaneswar, are being carefully brought down from their palanquins to be placed upon their respective seats of honor. A special homa (fire ceremony) and abhishekam (water ceremony) will soon be performed for them by priests from the Konark temple.

When these oblations are concluded, we will all flood the lake or the nearby ocean for our holy dip in the sanctified waters. This could be dangerous with so many people. The possible peril, however, has not gone unanticipated. Many special arrangements have been made. The lake has been dug larger to accommodate more people. Special facilities have been constructed for women. Electricity was installed. Two watch towers have been erected for crowd observation, and hundreds of police are on hand. Eight temporary medical camps have been set up on the mela site, and a mobile ambulance is on patrol. Special retail shops have been opened by the government to supply food at reasonable prices. And good drinking water is being made available everywhere. Still, I'm a bit worried. Ah, but it's a festival. What can really go wrong?

At dawn, my son and I will join a sea of wet and shivering devotees to gaze upon the brightening horizon of the Bay of Bengal. Together, we will greet the rising Sun with prayer. Such worship is considered highly meritorious and will officially constitute the culmination of our night's austerity. In truth, however, the larger celebration of the Magha Saptami Mela will have only just begun. The Chandrabhaga Fair is yet to come.

After the dawn worship of the Sun, most of the pilgrims will casually move toward the Konark temple, stopping along the way to make offerings at local shrines on the beach and at the thakurbari (home of the local head priest). Some small groups, usually families, will gather around waiting for pandas (village priests), to request them to perform personal pujas (worship ceremonies).

The pandas will accommodate these requests by drawing outlines of temples in the sand, placing earthen lamps upon them and ceremoniously offering fruits and flowers while chanting the family's names. These pujas, intended to bring prosperity, usually last from 15 to 30 minutes. As the morning stretches on, such activities will slowly come to an end, and local fishermen with their catamarans will gradually reclaim possession of the beach.

For the next six days, the famous Chandrabhaga Fair, which takes place right next to the Konark temple, will entertain thousands. Although the fair will essentially be the joyful overflow of serious devotion, lively entertainment--provided by a throng of songsters, dancers and drama troupes performing jatra (folk theatre)--will make it a joyous, social affair. The closest town to Konark is Bhubaneswar, the capital of Orissa. Because the fair both attracts fun-lovers from Bhubaneswar and religious pilgrims from Konark, it is--especially this year--one of Orissa's most popular and colorful events. There are toys to charm children and delicious foods of all sorts for young and old alike. Makeshift shops everywhere sell everything imaginable, including keepsakes, souvenirs and religious mementos. For tourists, there is an abundance of fresh coconut milk and soft drinks.

The Temple

The Sun temple of Konark represents the culmination of Orissian sacred architecture. Even in its present state of disrepair, it is one the world's most

stunning examples of religious art. Speaking of Konark, the poet Rabindranath Tagore said, "Here the language of stone surpasses the language of man."

Built by King Narasimhadeva in the thirteenth century, the entire Konark temple was carved as a colossal chariot for Surya, the Sun God. Surya was a very popular Deity in India during the Vedic period (approximately 6-8,000 bce) and was depicted then in art and sculpture as a dynamically handsome, superhuman entity traversing the heavens in a resplendent chariot drawn by seven horses, representing the seven days of the week. Yet even with the popularity of this particular image in painted art, the concept of building an entire temple in the shape and form of such an unsymmetrical scene was breathtakingly original, especially during the 13th century when temple building protocol was very strict. To this day it is not clearly understood why King Narasimhadeva was so inspired to build such an untraditional structure with such extravagance.

Construction of the huge edifice is said to have taken twelve years. Its main tower was 227 feet high before it crumbled--much taller than those of the Lingaraja and Jagannath temples, two other famous Orissian temples built around the same time.

Accentuating its massive size and height, the temple structure was built on top of high platforms meant to represent the base of the huge chariot. Twenty-four gigantic stone wheels were built along the sides of these platforms, although only one remains fully intact today (see photo below). Each of these intricately sculpted wheels was twelve feet in diameter.

The rising tiers of the roof, many still existing today, were embellished with larger-than-life musicians and dancers celebrating the rising of the Sun God, and with sensuous, and famous, erotic sculptings.

On either side of the main entrance, mammoth sculptures of elephants and horses were constructed as symbols of distinguished royalty and honor. Of the 22 subsidiary temples that once stood within the compound, only the Vaishnava and Mayadevi shrines remain. An important part of the temple is the nrityamandira (dance stage), which still exists today (see photo).

No one knows for sure why the Konark temple disintegrated so rapidly in such a relatively short period of time. Some experts assert that a natural catastrophe like an earthquake was responsible. Others contend that the temple was built on "shifting sands" so to speak, marshy, unstable terrain that eventually toppled most of the temple by fragmenting its foundation. Although there are currently no plans to reconstruct the temple, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), a central government organization responsible for the protection of monuments, has instigated restoration efforts for the sculptures, which are constantly exposed to the saline air from the nearby sea.

The History

The Vedas, which are the world's oldest scripture, extol the Sun God as Surya or Aditi, especially in the Rig Veda (the first of the four Vedas). The Upanishads, a set of deeply philosophical works comprising the final portion of the Veda, place great emphasis on Sun worship. The Chandogya Upanishad focuses on the worship of Surya exclusively. The Mahabharata, an important Hindu literary epic and Indian historical account, gives the Sun God such sovereign status that he was considered, at that time, more significant than many other Gods in the Hindu pantheon. Certainly, the magnificence of the Konark temple testifies to the great respect Surya once commanded.

Orissa is one place in India where Sun worship has been practiced continuously since Vedic times without a break in continuity. The solar symbols on ancient punch-marked coins discovered in Orissa prove the prevalence of Sun worship in its remote past. At both the Lingaraja temple of Bhubaneswar and the Jagannath temple of Puri, the worship of Surya is part of the daily routine. Even though Sun worship does not exist as a distinct sect in modern-day Hinduism, honoring the Sun is very prevalent. In the Smarta sect, Surya is worshiped as a major Deity, along with Ganesha, Vishnu, Siva, Sakti and Skanda. Certainly, it it could be argued that formal Surya worship is not readily apparent, since of the thousands of Hindu temples in India today, only seven are dedicated to Surya (see map). Yet, who could deny that, at this very moment, the Sun God is as unquestionably present, essential and adored in our lives as he ever was? A day cannot begin without Him, nor can it end. We could not exist at all but for the grace of this bright light of life in our lives. May He continue to smile upon us through the dawn of each new morning, and may we never take Him for granted. Praise Surya! Hail to the Sun God of Konark.