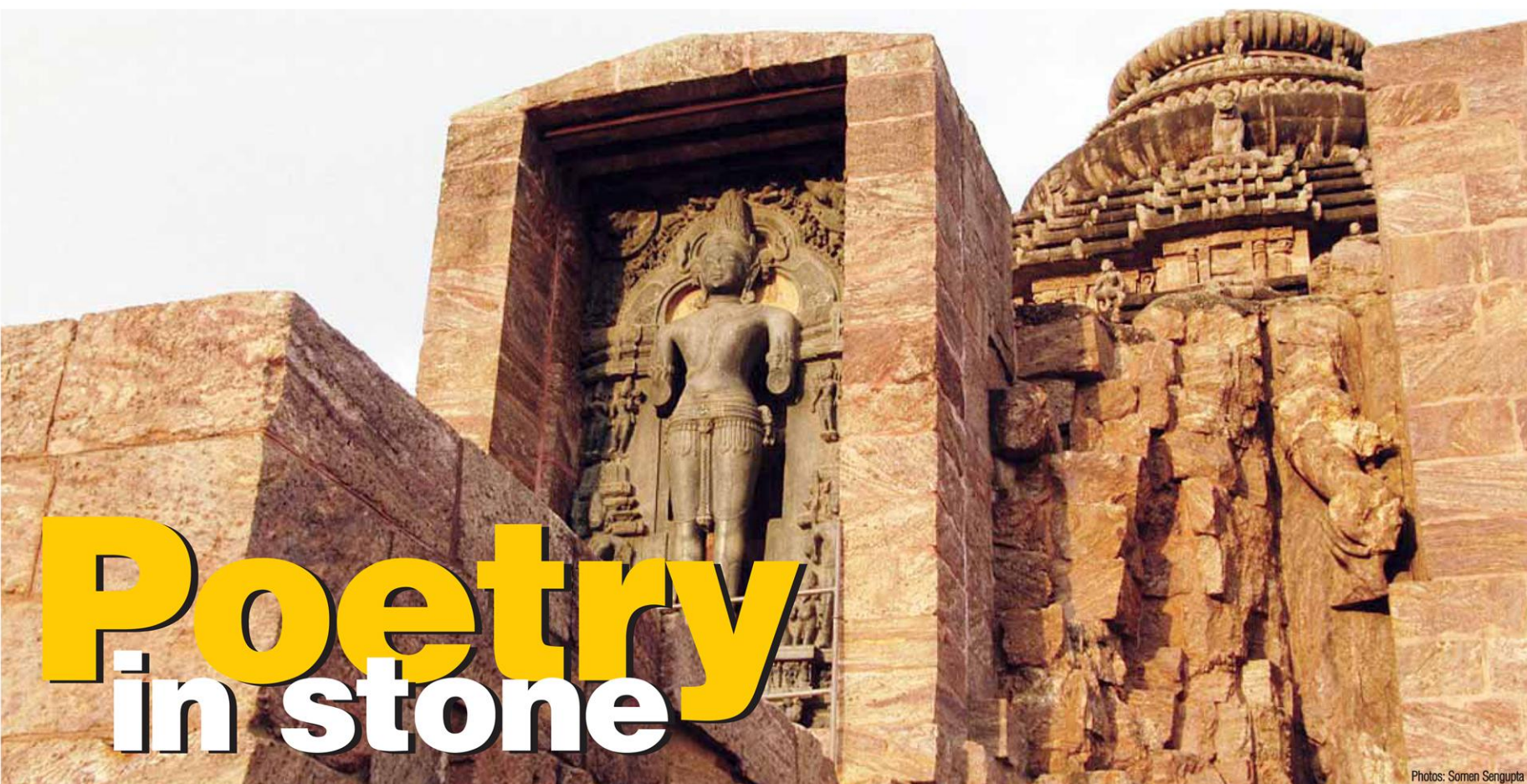




THE VILLAIN OF THE PARTITION OF BENGAL IN 1905, LORD CURZON REFORMED THE POLICE AND EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND PROMOTED THE RESTORATION OF INDIA'S ANCIENT MONUMENTS. IT WAS HE WHO RESTORED THE TAJ MAHAL



Poetry in stone

Photos: Somen Sengupta

Odisha's Konark temple may not be even the shadow of what it actually was when it was constructed during the 13th century, but it still is a work where the 'language of stone surpasses the language of man', writes SOMEN SENGUPTA

Not even a drive of two hours from Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha, will take you to the ruins of a sun temple built in 1200 AD. Despite being in a state of dilapidation, it remains a *magnum opus* of architecture. More than hundred years ago when Rabindranath Tagore visited this site it was still lying in debris beneath wild bush and vegetation. Still its magical composition of stone made him so captivated that Tagore wrote: "Here the language of stone surpasses the language of man."

MYTH VS HISTORY

Yes we are talking about Konark, which is derived from two words: *Kona* means corner and *Arka* stands for Sun. So, the term literally means the corner of Sun beam.

Konark is more about myth than history. Mythology says that more than 5,000 years ago, Shambha was cursed by his father Krishna to suffer from leprosy. His crime was that he once entered into the pleasure chamber of his father while he was enjoying a bath with his consorts. With Shambha's entry, young consorts were attracted to him and they all rushed towards him, leaving his aged father alone. This made Krishna angry and he cursed his son. Shambha reached the banks of Chandrabhaga and entered into a 12-year-long penance in a jungle called Mitravana to please the Sun God. Satisfied by his hardship and sacrifice, the God set him free from the curse. A day after he was cured from leprosy, while taking bath in Chandrabhaga, Shambha found an image of the Sun God made by Vishwakarma. This inspired Shambha to set up what is today known as the Konark temple.

If Abul Fazl is to be believed, the temple was built by a king belonging to the Kesri dynasty in the ninth century. Most historical documents, however, support the case of Narshima Dev I of the Ganga dynasty who built this temple between 1243 and 1260 AD as mark of his victory over Bengal. At least 12,000 craftsmen worked incessantly for 12 years to give the temple its shape. One Sibai Samantaray's name is recorded as a chief engineer of this architectural marvel. Another name, Bishu Maharana, too emerges as chief engineer.

Even after 12 years of hard work when the temple work showed no sign of getting over, the king became agitated. He issued a stipulated period of time to complete it. History says that chief architect Bishu Maharana was in deep trouble because placing of the final coping stone atop of the temple was a gargantuan

task. At that time his 12-year-old son Dharmapada, who was there by chance, offered a solution. No wonder, people began talking about Dharmapada for his superior engineering skills and Bishu Maharana's reputation came under cloud. Soon, the dead body of the young boy was found on the banks of Chandrabhaga. It is believed that he committed suicide by jumping from the top of the temple to save his father's reputation.

The temple, however, was not destined to exist in all its grandeur for long. Soon it was lost into oblivion after a series of Muslim invasions ravaged the region. This remained the case till the beginning of the 20th century when archaeologists, backed by Lord Curzon, salvaged the temple.

REAL WONDER

The present day Konark temple is not even a shadow of its past. The original temple was gigantic. Built in accordance with the Kalinga school of Architecture, it has three parts: The Natmandir or Nritya Mandir was the first complex; the Jagmohan was the middle complex; and, the Biman or *garbhagriha* was the place where the deity resided. The Jagmohan of Konark, which is the only signature left today, is 120 ft tall. The Biman, which no longer exists, was no less than 227 ft tall. It was taller than the illustrious Jagannath temple in Puri.

Yet Konark remains matchless. First, constructing a gargantuan temple in the shape of a colossal chariot with 24 wheels and pulled by seven horses is a breakthrough idea. We have seen many Sun temples in various places but nowhere such an epoch-making creativity was showcased.

Again, the 24 wheels and seven horses were related to the Sun God. The seven horses are nothing but the seven days of a week while 24 wheels represent 24 hours of a day. Each of the stone wheels has one hub and eight spokes which are eight *prahar* of a single day. Even on each spoke various human activities are soulfully depicted — from showcasing a royal woman waking up from bed at the break of dawn to her aggressive sexual activity with her lover in the midnight.

There are nearly 2,000 figures of elephants decorating the entire Jagmohan. The incalculable numbers of humans, horses, elephants, birds and geometrical designs reflect the carnival of life. Once no less than 22 subsidiary temples existed around the main temple. Of these, only two are still remaining —



TRAVEL LOGISTICS

- Konark falls in the golden triangle of Odisha with Puri and Bhubaneswar. So you can go to Konark both from Puri and Bhubaneswar.
- Too many private and government buses ply from both the places. Private cars are also available. It takes around two hours from Bhubaneswar.
- To see the temple vividly you need at least four hours. You can take guide to know more about this temple. Be very careful as most of them are ignorant. Do hard bargaining.
- Photography is allowed.
- Last bus to Bhubaneswar and Puri leaves at 7 pm and 7:30 pm respectively from Konark. Adjust your time accordingly.
- Too many good restaurants are here. You can also get the best of the State's handicraft here.
- You can have an overnight stay at Konark. The best choice is Panthaniwas. For lesser budget there is Yatriniwas. Both are owned by the Odisha Tourism Development Corporation Ltd.



Vaishnava temple and Mayadevi temple. Mayadevi is one of the wives of the Sun God as per Hindu mythology. On the main entrance just before of the Natmandir exist two huge lion statues along with dead elephants. It symbolises the dominance of Hinduism over Buddhism as lion and elephants are the symbols of Hinduism and Buddhism respectively. The entrance gates of the Natmandir was built in such a way that the first ray of Sun at the break of dawn passes through its gate and hits a diamond placed in central complex. This way the idol placed there used to get illuminated every morning. The impact used to last for a few moments.

LOST AND FOUND

In 1806, the Marine Board first suggested salvaging this temple from complete destruction. The suggestion was not taken seriously by the East India Company considering huge cost involved in it. However, the Magistrate of Cuttack put a ban on the removal of stone from the site. But the loot continued. At that point of time the king of Khurda took away many slabs and statues from its wall to decorate his own palace. His laborers used to throw slabs from the top of the temple and many masterpieces were destroyed forever. The stupid king destroyed three gates of this temple.

Historical records tell us that the height of the main tower started reducing with each passing year. The height of the main tower recorded in 1837 by historian James Fergusson is lesser than the one recorded in 1825. It again got reduced by 1838 and a storm in 1848 did an immense harm to it. Except the middle part, known as Jagmohan, the entire temple with its 227-ft Biman was destroyed by 1869.

In 1901, the Bengal circle of the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) took a project to salvage Konark. It was none other than Lord Curzon who took personal initiative to save this wonder. By the end of 1905 Mukhshashala and Natmandir were repaired. In 1906 plantation of trees towards the sea was completed to minimise the impact of sea wind. By removing sand the Mayadevi temple was unearthed in 1909. Till 1939 the restoration work was done by PWD under the supervision of ASI. From 1939 onwards ASI undertook complete responsibility of the temple.

The temple is now a part of UNESCO's world heritage site. Although ASI has done an outstanding job to protect this temple, nature is taking its toll on it. Sea winds are gradually causing erosion on its oxidised sandstones. So before it is too late let your eyes witness the wonder called Konark.

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A FORENSIC MIND

Feroze scrutinised lazy ministerial pronouncements with a fine tooth comb and caught them when they spoke without applying their minds to the issue at hand. For example, the Railway Minister had informed the House that poor punctuality of trains was because the tracks got breached during the monsoons. Feroze pulled out railways' statistics and showed that in July when there were 38 breaches of tracks, punctuality was 78 per cent but in December, when there were no breaches, punctuality dropped to 75.7 per cent. So, the reality was just the opposite of what the Minister had said!

Such was his commitment that often the Opposition looked redundant. Time and again, Feroze would lead the charge and the Opposition would follow in his

The forgotten Gandhi

footsteps. They would often begin their speeches by paying him a tribute. He was like the Head Boy or Prefect in a school. The only job assigned to the rest was to just fall in line. Over the last 50 years, there is not a single MP in the Lok Sabha's treasury benches who has made the Opposition look superfluous like Feroze did.

THE FORGOTTEN LEGACY

The Gandhi family (Sonia *et al*) has forgotten the Gandhi who gave them their identity. If only they had remained loyal



to the core values that this brand originally promised — abiding commitment to democracy, public good over personal gain, country above party and phenomenal grit to pursue truth — one would not have seen the terrible erosion in brand equity. The vote-pulling capacity of Brand Gandhi has slumped from around 45 per cent in national elections during the Indira Gandhi era to around 25 per cent or less at this juncture. As Tarun Kumar Mukhopadhyaya, who has done a brilliant parliamentary biography of Feroze Gandhi, has said:

"He (Feroze) was completely free from malice and successfully avoided all pettiness. Indeed, Feroze's tenure in Parliament, brief though it was, engendered and encouraged public esteem for democratic institutions and faith in the integrity of public men." One can imagine how critical Feroze's contribution was because in the 1950s India was a fledgling democracy. But all these eulogies are nothing compared to the tribute the greatest Gandhi paid to him when he was a young man. "If I could get seven boys like Feroze to work for me, I (would) get *swaraj* in seven days," Mahatma Gandhi is said to have told Feroze's mother Rattimai in Allahabad in 1931, according to Katherine Frank, Indira Gandhi's biographer. Should we say more? The writer, a political commentator, is expert on parliamentary affairs