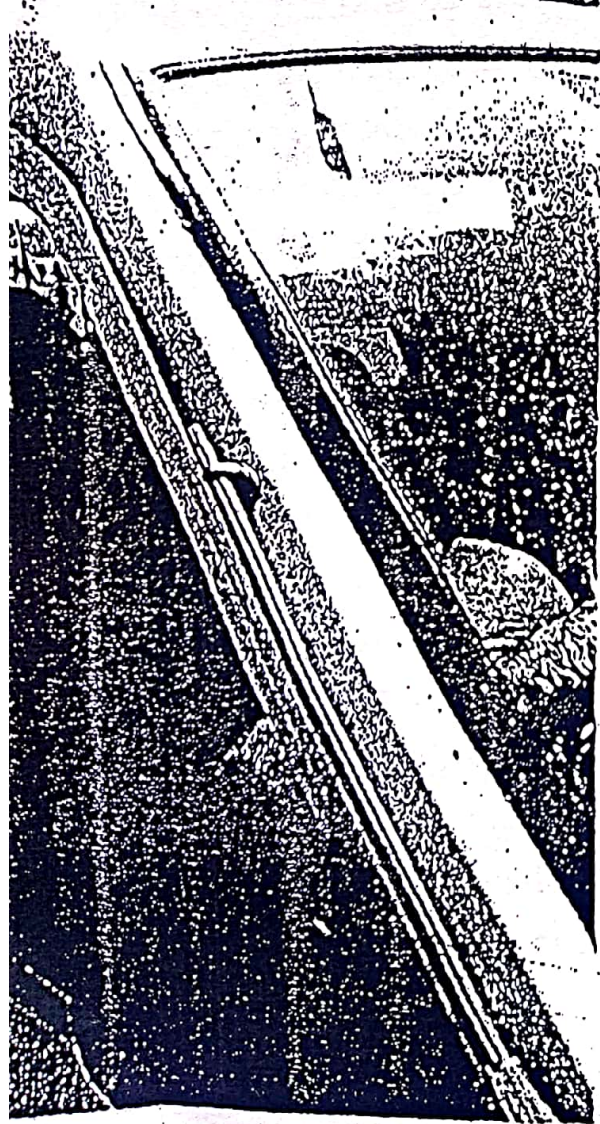




## Kumbh Mela

In 1978, two million people from all corners of India and some from other countries took the holy dip at the confluence of the three sacred rivers at Prayag (Allahabad), now also known as, the famous Ganga, the Yamuna and the now subterranean Saraswati all three of which form the substance of mythological lore. A dip at their *sangam* (confluence) is considered a route to salvation and lucky are those who travel wide and are able to make it. In 1990, exactly 12 years later in the time cycle stipulated for the holy dip, the figure rose to millions of lucky or plucky ones! Though Prayag is the holiest of spots because it is the meeting point of three rivers, there are three other towns which have also earned the holy status for this 12-year cycle. They are Haridwar in the north, Ujjain in central India and Nasik in the west, all home to the Ganga, but also lucky recipients of holy nectar in a mythological story which gave them an alternate status. Here too, the Kumbh Mela or fair is held in a 12-year cycle, and all because they became incidental beneficiaries of a war between the demons and the gods!

In India, historical facts are clothed in mythology. Mythology carries the mantle of belief, and belief carries the weight of both. Perhaps, in a very fundamental sense this would be true of all nations with a teeming past and with memories carried forward through thousands of years. In addition, if you have a multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-geographical cauldron in which are brewed ancient memories and future hopes, you have an unbelievable diversity which can be, and is, mind-boggling. It is this diversity which is revealed in its multifarious forms at the Kumbh



Mela in Prayag. Not only do you have masses congregating in an unbelievable kaleidoscope of humanity, but you have the flag waving, insignia-holders of saintly orders in a variety that is breathtaking. Amongst these, you have even foreigners from various countries who have adopted some saintly order or the other, and are clothed in the mandatory saffron robes, even to carrying the wooden bowl as the only worldly possession. But it is the Naga *sadhus*, with their naked bodies smeared with ash which fascinates the onlookers, and are accepted with near equanimity by the vast majority who understand that it is a symbol of total renunciation. There is the belief, for instance, that when Lord Mahavira, the Jain saint, attained enlightenment, he became totally naked. That is when a white robe came wafting down the skies and slid over him. The Naga *sadhus* prefer to have ash as cover, yet it is amazing how coolly the crowd accepts this nudity as the ultimate in the renunciation of all worldly encumbrances.

The fact that three other subsidiary Kumbh *melas* are held at Haridwar, Nasik and Ujjain relates to yet another

## Kumbh Mela

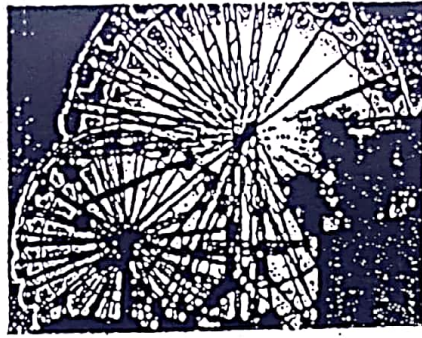
mythological legend. There was apparently an unending fight between the gods and demons, which is really only another way of saying between good and evil, and nobody could win over the other. On discovering that a pitcher or *kumbha* which lay at the bottom of the ocean contained nectar and a sip of which ensured immortality, another fight took place when the pitcher was snatched away by God Indra's son to give to his father, with the demons running in pursuit. The drops, which fell from the pitcher during the flight at Prayag, Haridwar, Nasik and Ujjain, gave these towns the sanctity to hold the *Kumbh Mela* (Fair of the Pitcher). The *melas* do not involve only a gathering of believers. You must take a dip in the holy waters. Prayag holds the ultimate promise because it is the town at the holy confluence of three venerated rivers, and above all, where the River Ganga flows.

PAGE 66

Devotion in forward  
gear

PAGE 67

At Prayag — the  
holiest of holy  
confluences



## Pushkar Mela

The idea of a religious fair in India is only a little different from a religious festival which, by and large, is confined to a religion or a religious sect. The town of Pushkar, only a short distance away from Ajmer in the north-western state of Rajasthan, has become a popular destination for two kinds of visitors: one, for the Hindus it is, yet again, a place for holy pilgrimage, and two, for tourists from all corners of the world who come to see its famous cattle fair, partake of the revelry that surrounds the event, and then, feel with the devotion that makes millions of believers go there every year to relive its ancient devotional lore. In recent years, Pushkar has become a particularly fascinating destination for foreign tourists because of the liveliness, the frenzy, the colour that is ingrained in the legends and topography of Rajasthan. Pushkar is so haloed a religious place for the Hindus that it draws devotees from all corners of India; and with each devotee or group of devotees comes an individual code of beliefs, dress and style that could entrance anyone — from the French fashion designer to a rural innocent from Bihar. Pushkar seems to have become really the international hub for those curious about the cult of the ash-smeared naked *sadhus* or religious mendicants who have forsaken all, or for those who want to see India in its most intriguing religious colours.

For behind the obvious rivalries of colour, pageantry and ritual, there is the origin of Pushkar. There are four acknowledged centres of Hindu belief; Badrinath, Puri, Rameshwaram and Dwarka. Pushkar, it is said, is the fifth. If you have not taken the mandatory bath in Pushkar's famed lake, you will not be able to visit the four other

places mandated by religious belief. There is as usual a mythological-cum-legend-cum-historical hint with reference to the *Padama Purana*, about how the great Brahma himself performed a *yajna* at Pushkar, hence its halloed air. But the *yajna* has, as usual, a symbolical-cum-mythological legend woven around it. And, as usual, with India's multifarious history, and its 5,000 years of past, one does not know where legend ends and history begins or where legend takes over and where history gets lost in time.

For instance, there are three temples which do actually exist in Pushkar. These are dedicated to God Brahma himself, to Savitri, his wife and to Gayatri. According to the *Padma Purana* again, as quoted by scholar and historian, Dr B. N. Sharma, when Lord Brahma decided to perform the *yajna* on *Kartika Purnima* and invited all sages, savants and gods, his wife did not turn up in time — it seems times do not change that much — and, as practical that our gods were and the ceremonial necessity for a wife very mandatory, Brahma married a Gujar girl, Gayatri, right on the spot. And lo and behold, a bedecked and bejewelled Savitri appeared on the scene and on seeing what had happened, cursed the whole congregation. As a way out then, **the**

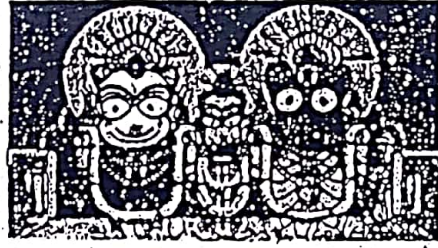
LEFT  
From the mists of the  
past. —



harassed Brahma created Shap-Mohini, on seeing whom the curse would be lifted. But in practical terms, the circumstances led to the creation of three temples in Pushkar, which are now hallowed spots. Two temples, dedicated to Savitri and Gayatri, rest above a hill-top below which is a lake. It has 52 steps down which people descend to take a dip in the belief that this would wash them of their sins.

With devotion allied to one of the most picturesque landscapes of Rajasthan and with legend giving fairytale resonance to religious belief, and as a tourist centre which draws more and more visitors to it every year, Pushkar has become a most favoured town for those who want to sample India's tryst with the past.

ABOVE  
From the past — a  
fairytale resonance.



## Rath Yatra

Every festival celebrated in India, even in the folk tradition, is woven round some mythological story which has been handed down the ages through word of mouth, from generation to generation, in village after village. If anything binds India into one, with its vast range of official and non-official languages, dialects and religions, it is its mythological treasure-trove of stories and anecdotes. This has become so embedded in the subconscious culture of the land that they tend to become almost like reference points in defining what is wrong, what is right, what is good and what is bad. There is so much rooted in so many lost centuries, that the culture carries with it a load of primeval memories.

The Jagannath-temple at Puri in Orissa embodies this merging of the past with the present in all the stories that abound about the origin of the statue of Lord Jagannath. But the festival in which devotees pull three massive chariots with the idols of Jagannath, his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra, over 3 kilometres followed by, now over the years, a gathering of half a million devotees, has become the festival of all festivals! It is held in the months of June-July, again in relation to the Indian calendar in the lunar fortnight, on the second day. The deities are rested for 15 days at *gundicha ghara*, and then returned back to the temple. So everywhere in Orissa where the festival takes place on a smaller scale, the place where they are placed for 15 days is also called *gundicha ghara*. In modern parlance, it has begun to be called the 'car yatra'!

The antecedents of this festival to commemorate the placing of Lord Jagannath in the temple at Puri go back to at least 1,000 years. And again it is the all-embracing God Vishnu who plays with his many manifestations. It makes a lovely, intriguing story. King Indradyumna had a premonition that the presence of God Vishnu lay embedded in a hidden statue somewhere. He wanted that statue, and in anticipation, it was he who built the great Jagannath temple, now such a well-known pilgrim centre. But the temple kept lying in wait for the idol. It was one of the four scholars that the king sent to far off corners, the young Vidyapati, who followed his father-in-law to a hidden cave, found the statue and took it to the king. It was small. The great Vishwakarma, master craftsman in disguise, promised to make a bigger one, but in wood. On being disturbed against his instructions, he left it incomplete. So it has come to rest in Puri as the cynosure of all eyes — in its incomplete form but the object of never-ending devotion. It is one of the rarest examples in Indian architecture of an idol in wood.

So fervent was the devotion that people even believed, according to an account by Manoj Das, that they would achieve *moksha* or eternity if they got crushed under the 16 wheels of the Jagannath chariot! Like most religious festivals, there are anecdotes galore and stories symbolic of the narrative richness of Indian mythology — where truth and fiction, fact and interpretation, romance and theology, play hide and seek with historical facts and mythological references. Despite the change in the nomenclature of the *rath* or old-time chariot, the 'car yatra' in modern parlance of the Jagannath phenomenon continues to live and celebrate its hidden truths. In the last ritual of the Rath Yatra celebrations, the temple inside resounds to the verses of Jayadev's literary masterpiece, the *Geet Govinda*. Manoj Das has gone to extensive lengths to paint the drama of this happening and in writing about the 10 incarnations of Vishnu mentioned by Jayadev, J. P. Das, the well-known poet, translates Jayadev's verse about the last one, Kalki, who is supposed to be the *avatar* of the future:

RIGHT  
The 'car yatra' —  
celebrating hidden  
truths