

THERE'S THIS OLD story of how the mythological demon Rahu, furious with Surya and Chandra for helping his godly foe Vishnu find the nectar of eternal youth, reached to the sky and grabbed the sun and the moon with his ugly hands. The story which scientists tell us is the earth moves around the sun, the moon around the earth, and when the moon comes between the sun and the earth, the sun is eclipsed. Two ways of explaining a solar eclipse, as popular and different as religion is from science. But surely, both schools of thought are

agreed about one thing — the splendour of a solar eclipse.

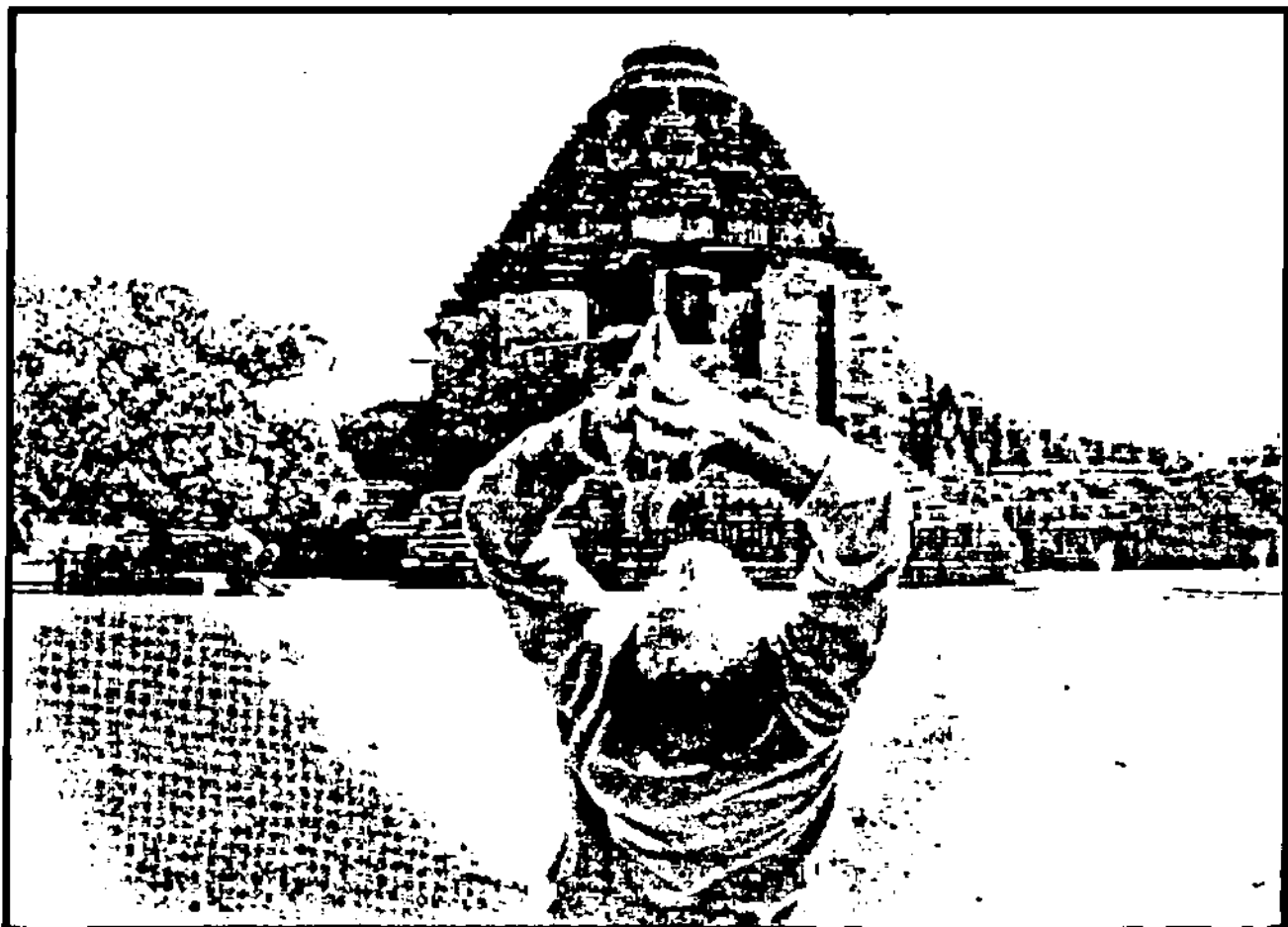
For the 300-odd people watching the February 16 total solar eclipse from Koparak's ancient Sun Temple, such was the consensus. The brilliant solar corona, a magnificent orange halo in what seemed a night sky flashed forth and remained in view for a total of 92 seconds. The flash came as a surprise as most people were still straining to look at the sun's waning crescent through sun masks of all descriptions. Many even chose not to look at the sun, duly warned by umpteen radio and newspaper warnings, and stretched out lazily under the trees. At the end of the 92 seconds, the halo disappeared in another blinding flash, as though some heavenly magician was playing a mighty trick. Such was the beauty of the halo—which many call the diamond ring—that many thought there was nothing to watch after it had gone. Few saw the rest of the eclipse with the same interest as they saw the first half and totality.

People, first in tens and then scores, began streaming into the Sun Temple's lawns from midday on February 16. A boy in half pants ran about trying to sell exposed negative films for Rs two each. The eclipse was on everyone's mind, and many were keen to

THE ECLIPSE

RAGHURAJ went to the Sun Temple at Konarak to photograph the eclipse.

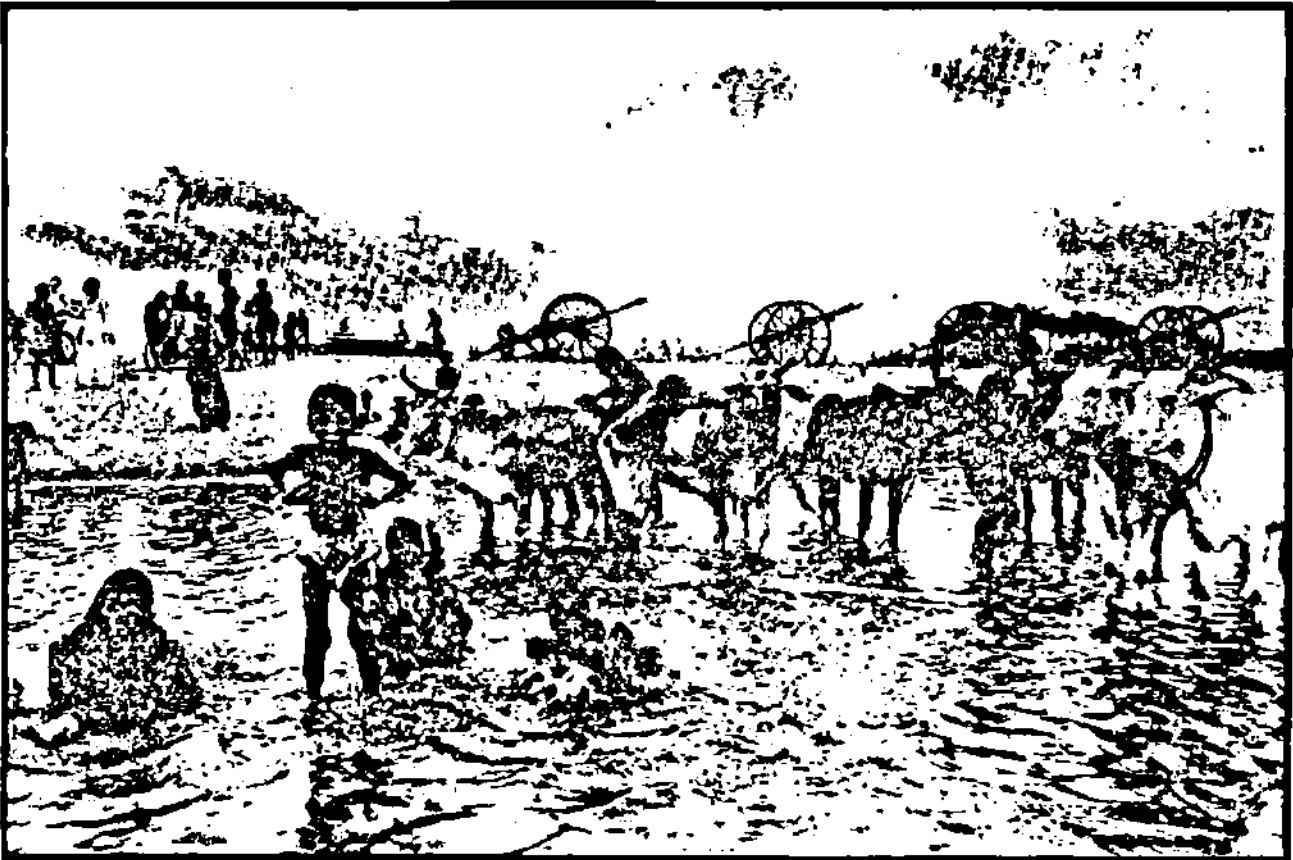
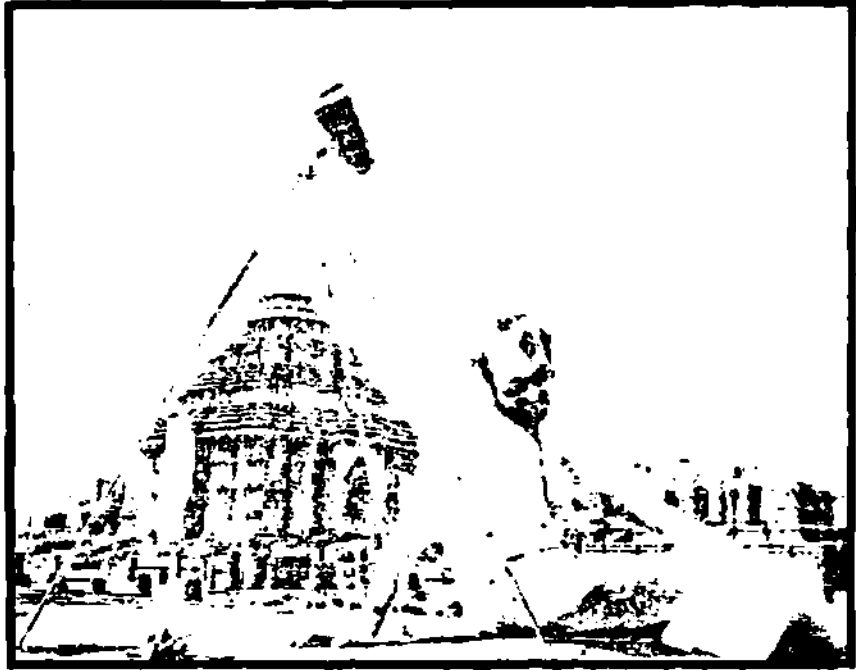
Text by NIRMAL MITRA



see what it looked like despite repeated public warnings. The choice of the Sun Temple was an obvious one ; it was actually built by King Narasimha Dev I to serve as a solar observatory of sorts. It faces east, and has standing images of the holy trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva facing south,

west and north respectively. The statues are placed in such positions that the sun, when it is morning is directly ahead of Brahma, at midday above Vishnu and while setting faces Shiva.

The temple has a close association with the solar eclipse, which is even symbolised by a devilish



grinning image of the planet Rahu, in a small room for worship at one corner of the compound. With the moon's crescent in his right hand and the sun in his left, Rahu's rage is said to have an evil influence on the fortunes of men and nations, hence also the eclipse. A priest at Puri's Jagannath Temple said the February 16 eclipse, like all lunar and solar eclipses, was a result of earthly sin accumulated for years. It was hence important to guard oneself adequately against Rahu's bad influence.

The ritual for observance varies from caste to caste. A brahmin is said to be polluted by an eclipse exactly the same way as he is by the touch of a lowly chandal (harijan). He is thus required to avoid eating — the food will not be digested by a polluted constitution—during the course of the eclipse. While the actual eclipse started at Konarak from about 2.20 pm, the religious almanac said it would start at 2.36 in the morning! No one should touch food from then till the eclipse ended in the evening, around 5.30 pm, the almanac said. As for brahmins, they should sing kirtans, and recite from the Puranas to atone for their sins and those of others. At the end of it all they should bathe, offer worship and then eat. With the puja, the brahmins should distribute food — first among the lowly and then, only later, among brahmins. For brahmins had a

responsibility to the other castes. Other castes were to avoid eating, except the sick and old, who could be given sweets and water during the evil spell, but all should make it a point to offer puja to atone for their sins.

At the Jagannath temple special all-night kirtans, and bonfires of sticks, called akhanda weep, to scare away Rahu and his evil friends, were arranged, while the temple was itself closed to public. Buses stopped plying from 11 am between Puri and Bhubaneswar. Thanks to the distorted word of mouth, most people were given to understand that the total eclipse should not be seen. Two visiting astronomers from America, Bob Berman and Alan Friedman, dismissed these fears: "A lot of people here believe that the corona (the sun's outermost layer) is harmful to look at. This is incorrect. In fact, astronomers everywhere use magnifying equipment to watch it. It is absolutely safe to look at the corona, visible at totality. In fact, it is something that should be seen. But it is harmful to look at the partial eclipse, because of ultra violet rays. For this, it is best to look through folded exposed negative, for not more than a few seconds at a stretch. The ultra violet rays can damage the retina and cause a disease retinitis. Unfortunately, many believe they should not look at the totality. It is a pity so many people would be missing such a beautiful sight".

