In Orissa, the Jagannath temple at Puri is one of the most well known Hindu temples in India. It is considered to be the abode of two brothers: Balrama (Balbhadra) and Krishna and their only sister Subhadra. The most revered festival associated with this temple is the Rath Yatra. Each year, during the month of Ashad (June-July), the holy trinity leaves the temple in three beautifully ornate chariots for a nine-day journey to their Aunt’s abode in the Gundicha temple. The devotees consider the pulling of these chariots as their good fortune. This particular folk story is connected with this ceremony.

Once upon a time, there was a king called Purushottam Deva, of Sun dynasty. He was a brave and kind ruler. He was a great devotee of Lord Jagannath. Every year during the Rath Yatra, he used to sweep the floors of three chariots wherein the images of the divine trinity will be seated. The ritual known as *chera pahara* was the King’s humble way to spread the message of dignity of labour. He was loved by one and all. One day he got to know about Kingdom of Kanchi Princess Padmvati’s opulent beauty from his ministers. He immediately sent for his ambassador to the royal court of Kanchi. The king of Kanchi when learnt about this proposal, felt very proud to be able to be considered as worthy of such king’s relative. He readily agreed to give her daughter’s
hand to the King Purushottam. But when he got to know from his prime minister that the King of Orissa every year sweeps the floor of the chariots during the Rath Yatra, he refused to formalize the alliance, considering such ritual as unworthy of a King. He in fact cursed the ambassador on the audacity to put a proposal like that.

Back home when the King got to know about the incident. He felt humiliated and vowed to get Padmavati married to a sweeper. He ordered his army to march against the proud king of Kanchi. He wanted to teach him a lesson for insulting his faith for Lord Jagannath. But the attack was a failure. He waited for an year and this time before the conquest visited the Jagannath temple and prayed for the blessings to vanquish the proud king. On his conquest towards Kanchi, a milkmaid called Manika stopped Purushottam on the middle of the way and asked him for the money for the curd she gave two men who went the same way towards Kanchi. The king got curious and asked who they were. The woman replied that one was dark and one was fair on one white and one black horse each. When asked for money, the dark one gave me a diamond ring and told her to take the money from you when you cross this path. Learning that the two men were no one other than Lord Balram and Krishna themselves, the king’s joy had no bounds. He happily gave the required money to the woman and even named the entire village after her name, Manikapanta. Upon defeat, the King Purushottam Deva captured the princess and brought to his kingdom. Remembering the rebuke of the King of Kanch, Purushottam Deva ordered his prime minister to get the princess married to the city’s best sweeper. But the minister was wise enough to understand his King’s momentary anger and his undying love for the princess. He politely agreed and took the princess to his house and cared for her as his own daughter. Year passed and again the Rath Yatra was being celebrated. As per ritual,
the king was found sweeping the floors of the three chariots. After the ritual, he saw his minister coming towards him with the princess behind. But before he could say anything, the minister with his folded hands gently said that he searched for an entire year to get the princess married to the best sweeper in the kingdom and his search has ended upon him. He could not find a more suitable sweeper than the king so he must now honour his words and marry the princess. The king who was really in love with the Princess brushed aside his anger and pride and accepted her as his consort and they lived happily ever after. The tradition of sweeping the floor continues till today and the Raja of Puri even now follows the ritual of chera pahara and sweeps the floors of the chariots reinforcing dignity of labour to all.

ACTIVITY

1. What do you think the story here trying to tell us? Write a summary in your own words.

2. Imagine yourself to be a storyteller and write a story about any legend associated with Lord Jagannath.

3. Make a sketch of the Rath Yatra in the space given below. You could give an interesting caption to it as well.