



SOMNATHAPURA

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Introduction

The Somanathapura town was found in the 13th century by a general named Samantha. He was working for the Hoysala King Narasimha III. The last great temple of the Hoysalas was built in the village originally called Vidyanidhi Prasanna Somnathapura, nowadays known simply as Somnathapura. It is now a small village. Standing on the left bank of the Kaveri, about 32 km from Mysore, it contains a Hoysala temple which has a splendid history and is, in addition, a triumph of art.

A slab at the entrance to the temple, set up prominently, contains four epigraphs, incised one below the other on each of the two sides. The first, dated 1269, inscribed after the temple had been consecrated, gives an account, such as is rare in ancient and mediaeval Indian history, of what occurred one day at the Hoysala court. The king, Narasimha III (1254-1291), was seated in the council chamber in his capital, Dwarasamudra. The reader, who may like a little whiff of the air of early mediaeval India, must be told of the honorifics of the king, as given in this epigraph.

Sri Vishnuvardhana Pratapa Chakravarthi Hoysala Bhujabala Sri Vira Narasimha Devarasa was "the refuge of all the world, favourite of earth and fortune, maharajadhiraja, Raja Paramesvara, lord of the excellent city of Dvaravati, the sun in the sky of the Yadava family, the crest jewel of the all-knowing king of the hill chiefs, the champion against the Malpas, terrible to Terroirs, fierce in war, sole warrior, firm in the field of battle, Sanivarasiddhi, Widuragamalla, a Rama in firmness of character, a lion to the elephants his Gincas, a Kandarpa of unprecedented beauty, the re-establisher of the Chola Kingdom, the raiser up of the Pandya kingdom, the uprooter of the Magara Kingdom, the setter-up of pillars of victory at Setu and in the Vindhya mountains, profusely munificent in giving wealth and land".

When one day King Narasimha was seated in his council chamber, the minister, Soma, rose up from his seat along with his nephews, Mallideva and Chikka Ketaya, and made obeisance to the monarch. Thereupon the king understood what he wanted and gave him all he wished, adding an annual grant of three thousand gold pieces for worship of the images of Lord Vishnu set up in the village that he had founded. Soma made a worthy distribution of the grant

Temple Construction

Soma, or Somanatha, had established the village, naming it Somanathapura after himself. He built the Kesava temple there in 1268. He was a magnate of the realm. He was, among other things, "a great minister, champion against proud territorial officials, a Devendra among



army commanders, a Svayambhu with his good sword, a Trinetra in wielding the sword, a Revanta in riding the most vicious horse, a Kritanta to the hostile army".

The temple stands in a large prakara, about 65.5 m by 54 m. There are sixty-four cells in an open verandah which runs around the prakara. This feature recalls the Kailasanatha in Kanchipuram (see below). The temple stands on a basement, about 0.9 m high, running round. It has three shrines, each with a lovely vimana, identical in design. A sukhanasi stands in front of each shrine, and there is a large common navaranga.

The main shrine, that directly opposite to the entrance, used to contain an image of Lord Kesava, which gave its name to the temple. This image is not to be found there now. In the northern shrine there is an image of Lord Janardhana about 1.8 m high and standing on a pedestal about 0.5 m high. This elegant image attracts attention. In the southern shrine opposite stands an image of Lord Venugopala, of about the same height. The haloes of both the images contain reliefs of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. There are miniature representations of these two and also of Lord Kesava, enshrined in the central sanctum, at the top of the inscribed slab standing in the front porch.

The outside walls blaze with sculpture, big and small. It seems that the force of sculpture could go no farther than in this, the last of the great Hoysala temples, where decorative sculpture is an important element of the art. The subjects are from the puranas, from animal life and from nature, and from imagination and fancy. There are no less than 194 large images on the outer walls. Over all these stand the three vimanas, the last word in architectural beauty.

The sixty-four cells in the prakara are now empty. But each contained a divine image. So an inscription in the temple states. A pretty story is told of the flagstaff, which, instead of standing exactly opposite to the entrance, is found a little to the north-east. Jakanachari, the architect, had created such a lovely building that the Gods, thinking that it was too good for the world, wished to take it away to Indra's heaven. As the structure was rising, Jakanáchar mutilated some of the images on the outer walls. The temple ceased to be perfect and returned to the earth, the flagstaff a little out of place.

Inscriptions

As in the Belur Kesava, so in the Somnathapura Kesava, there are many label inscriptions of the sculptors who made the images. The most active was Mallitamma, who sculpted no less than forty. Then followed Baleya, Chaudeya, Camaya, Masanitamma, Bharmaya, Nanjaya and Yalamasaya. While these great artists were real men enough, unfortunately Jakanachari who, in popular fancy, built all the Hoysala temples, is merely a product of imagination. No inscription ever mentions him. The fact is that the name is a corruption of the Sanskrit phrase, "Dakshinacharya", or a sculptor of the southern school.

Great in history, the Kesava is great in another respect. It is only about 9.14 m high, not good enough for a grand building. But no percipient visitor can fail to notice that, in fact, it is a grand building. How has this effect been achieved? Fergusson says, by placing it at the centre of an enclosed court and by avoiding any taller structure to contrast with it. A critic of the early twentieth century writes, "To construct a building of less than 10 min height, load it



from bottom to top with carving and produce the effect not only of beauty and perfect symmetry but also of impressiveness, shows supreme talent on the part of the architects".

With that as the last word on the Hoysala religious achievement, we leave one of the supreme glories of the Hindu genius down the centuries.

Conclusion

The Keshava temple is one of some 1500 Hindu and Jain Temples built by The Hoysala empire kings in different parts of their kingdom.

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