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Eloquence in stone

TRAVEL

The star-shaped Hoysala temple at Somnathpur is a favourite with tourists. Hema Narayanan is spellbound by the architectural wonder that the Keshava temple here is.



There must be a reason why Karnataka is called the cradle of stone architecture. Perhaps it's because of the peerless stone wonders seen here, eloquent reminders of a fertile heritage. It is said that there are three forms of visual art: Painting is art to look at, sculpture is art you can walk around, and architecture is art you can walk through.

I am sure you have looked at art, and walked around art, but have you walked through art in the form of architecture? Well you can, by walking the corridors of the temple of Somnathpur by the Cauvery.

Just one step into the temple courtyard, and the first glance of this fine illustration of style and perfection stunned me – it can emerge only out of deep devotion for architecture, I thought.

How else would they carry on their mastery at making stones speak, for generations? And it is true; this temple is the third exquisite creation of the Hoysala dynasty, after the renowned temples at Belur and Halebidu. Known as the Keshava (or Chennakeshava) temple of Somnathpur, it was built in 1268 AD by architect Somnath, under the reign of King Narasimha III.

Thankfully, it did not undergo destruction like the other two temples did and has been well preserved till date. I have heard bedtime stories of the great Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharatha from my grandparents, but witnessing these scenes narrated via stone carvings at Somnathpur was incredible and unexpected. It is one thing to possess power and time and another to use them in a way that the Hoysalas did.

They pursued architecture when they were a major power in South India and their reign was noted for its peace and a leisurely life; hence encouraging talent of all kinds. The artisans were encouraged to have a healthy competition and were allowed to sign their names below their creations as an incentive, something unheard of before their times. Result? They have left behind wonders made of stone, for many generations to witness.

Representative of its age

Though lesser known among the Hoysala temples, the Somnathpur temple has much superior architecture. It is representative of the age as it showcases an unbroken view of the period's style. Western tourists and Indian visitors throng Somnathpur making it is widely admired.



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The sight of the temple is spellbinding; it is located in the middle of a large courtyard surrounded by an open verandah, which contains 64 cells. Celebrated army commander Somnath who designed this temple has adhered to the typical Hoysala style architecture – it has a mini cosmos with scenes carved on the walls. The guide pointed to the gods, goddesses, dancing girls, musicians, gurus and a variety of animal depictions.

Perhaps the Hoysalas have a deep liking for star-shaped structures – this temple is three-celled and star-shaped, with the main cell facing the east. Three distinctly carved towers identical in design and execution surmount all three cells. How could they make them identical, when there were no moulds or tools available then?

I slowly took in the architectural marvel of the outer walls. And why not, when these walls were an art connoisseur's delight? Standing on a three-feet-high raised platform, the temple is supported at angles by figures of elephants facing outwards. Many railed parapets run the whole way round the shrine. Starting from the bottom, there are friezes of beautiful sculptures of swans, caparisoned elephants, charging horsemen, mythological beasts and scrolls.

Turreted niches with small images of lions separate them. Themes from the Indian epics and the Bhagavata had me captivated. As many as 194 idols have been carved: Lord Vishnu and his incarnations, Brahma, Shiva and Indra adorn the walls as powerful gods; while the goddesses took the rest of the place. Beautiful carvings of Saraswathi and Durga depicted as the goddess of learning and Mahishasuramardini (slayer of the demon Mahisha) respectively can make you believe that stone walls here can speak if you listen carefully.

Striking features

For one, this temple is perfectly symmetrical and some of its special features include:

Seven animals sculpted into one figure; one of the layers has a palm-sized figure depicting seven animals - body of a pig, trunk of an elephant, mouth of a crocodile, eyes of a monkey, ears of a cow, tail of a peacock and paws of a lion.

A paper could slide underneath a pillar – one of the temple's pillars allowed a piece of paper to slide from underneath, one side to the other. Rare carving of Lord Brahma – not many temples in India have an idol of Brahma (part of the cosmic Trinity) in the form of a carving; and Somnathpur temple is one of them.

Signature of sculptors carved on the outer walls and pedestals. Close to 40 carvings had the name of Mallitamma – must have been the master craftsman!

Finally, the missing idol – the temple has three sanctums, which once housed carved idols of Keshava, Janardhana and Venugopala. But today, the idol of Lord Keshava is missing, while the other two adorn the sanctums in their original form.

Think of what it would have taken the architects of that period to carve 16 different ceilings in stone, each ceiling depicting different stages of a blooming plantain. Or the outer walls of Somnathpur, which contain elaborately carved sculptures of the deities of the Hindu pantheon? And if one is keen to know the history of this temple, an inscribed black stone slab, in old Kannada script at the entrance, says it all.

All my day was spent gazing in rapt attention at this stone sanctuary. Pt Jawaharlal Nehru in his book 'Discovery of India' wrote, "there is a stillness and everlastingness about the past, it changes not and has a touch of eternity." And to me, it seemed as if Somnathpur was saying that eternity grows here.

How to get there...

By air: Bangalore is the nearest to Somnathpur (140 km)

By rail: Mysore is the nearest station (40km)

By road: Buses from Mysore (60 km), Bangalore (130 km) and Srirangapatna.

Where to stay...

It is best to stay at Mysore and travel to Somnathpur.

Other information

There are very few good restaurants in Somnathpur. Carry food along. Nearby places to see: Srirangapatna and Talakad.

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