



THE STONE SANCTUARY

Replete with rare and unique carvings, the architectural marvels created by the

Hoysala rulers at Somnathpur is evidence of the patronage architecture received during those times. **Hema Narayanan** takes a leisurely walk through the magnificent temple

Power and time can be used in different ways – and the Hoysalas chose to pursue architecture when they were the major power in south India and had time on hand. Not having quenched their hunger for creating architectural marvels in the form of the temples at Belur and Halebidu, the Hoysalas created the third marvel at Somnathpur. This was my first reaction as I stepped into this temple, on a recent visit here. 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. As a result, they have left behind wonders made of stone, for our generations to witness.

The Keshava temple at Somnathpur is one such fine illustration of their style and

devotion. Built in 1268 AD under king Narasimha III, the temple was designed by an architect, named Somnath. Thankfully, it is well-preserved even today, as it did not undergo destruction like the other two.

I have heard bedtime stories of the great Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata from my grandparents, and have read comic books telling me the morals from these epics. But witnessing scenes from the same epic being narrated in stone at Somnathpur was fascinating.

There must be a reason why Karnataka is called the cradle of stone architecture. Perhaps it's the peerless stone wonders seen here, which are eloquent reminders of a fertile heritage. As I reached Somnathpur, a quaint village on the banks of river Cauvery, I felt the eternal stillness and freshness in the air. Even enroute, there are farms and lush-green agricultural lands in the surrounding villages

ROYAL SPLENDOUR:
(facing page) The front courtyard of the Keshava temple at Somnathpur; (below) a young visitor walks by one of the intricately sculpted walls



PHOTOGRAPHS: HEMANARAYANAN

Though lesser known among the Hoysala temples, the Somnathpur temple has much superior

architecture and flaunts the typical Hoysala style — that of a mini cosmos with scenes carved on the walls, and features their favourite star-shaped structures — this temple is a three-celled one, with the main cell facing the east



adding to the fervour. Created 742 years ago, this place boasts of possessing the last and grandest temple of the Hoysalas, standing amidst the lasting rural serenity.

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. The sight of the temple is spellbinding; it is located in the middle of a large courtyard surrounded by an open verandah, containing 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.

Standing on a three-feet high raised platform, the temple is supported at angles by figures of elephants facing outwards. Perhaps the Hoysalas have a deep liking for star-shaped structures – this temple is a three-celled and star-shaped, with the main cell facing the east. All three cells are surmounted by three distinctly carved towers identical in design and execution.

My pace of absorbing the outer walls turned tortoisal gradually. And why not, when all of them are an art connoisseur's delight? A number of 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. The themes from the Indian epics and Bhagavata Puranas had me captivated.

As many as 194 idols have been carved; of which 114 of them are female figures. Lord Vishnu and his incarnations, Brahma, Shiva and Indra adorn the walls as the powerful Gods; while the goddesses of the Hindu culture occupy the rest of the place. Beautiful carvings of Saraswati and Durga depicted as

the goddess of learning and as Mahishasurmardini can make you believe that stone walls here can speak if you listen carefully. And mid-way, if one wants to know the history of this fully-evolved temple, an inscribed black stone slab, in old Kannada script, at the entrance says it all.

The uniqueness of this temple lies in the fact that it is perfectly symmetrical and some of its special features tickled my sensations. Seven animals sculpted into one figure – one of the layers hosts 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 the paws of a lion. It was hard to move away from this astounding piece. As I

progressed, I found signature of sculptors – images on the outer walls were signed by the sculptors who carved them on their pedestals – a never-before heard feature among all Hoysala temples. Close to 40 carvings had the name of Mallitamma and I gathered he must have been the master craftsman.

Somnathpur also has the rare carving of Brahma, and is unique because very few temples in the world have an idol of Brahma in the form of a carving or a deity. And finally, I came to 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.

As I was walking my final time around the temple, I noticed every inch of the wall filled with beautiful carvings, which reminded me of a line: 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. To be able to walk through architectural art, head to Somnathpur. ■

SIGNATURE STYLES:
(facing page, clockwise from top) The three-celled star-shaped temple; the Nandi at the Amritheshwara temple; Brahma sculpture – Brahma idols are rarely seen at temples

NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

By air: Bangalore is the nearest airport to Somnathpur, around 140 km away

By rail: The nearest rail head is Mysore, around 40 km away and is well-connected to all other parts of India

By road: Somnathpur has buses plying from Mysore, 60 km away, and Bangalore, 130 km

WHERE TO STAY
Since there aren't too many good places to stay in at Somnathpur, it is best that you put up at Mysore and travel to Somnathpur. While in Mysore, you can choose to stay at The Lalitha Mahal Palace Hotel, Tel: 0821 2470444, Tariff: Rs 8,000 onwards; Ginger Hotel, Tel: 6633333, Tariff: Rs 2,999 onwards; Hotel Royale Heritage, Mob: 9916656888, Tariff: Rs 1,000 onwards

