

Making Heritage Tourism Attractive: A Study of the Salient Features of the Beluru Keshava Temple, a 12th-Century Indian Monument

Vanishree Mahesh and M. G. Sreekumar

Abstract—In a world with an increased emphasis on travel for leisure, people are always looking for exciting destinations. While beaches and hill stations are still the most popular vacation destinations, heritage centres, especially monuments, are gaining popularity. Yet, only the well-known monuments get visitors, and the rest go unnoticed.

Taking India as an example, the most visited monuments are the Taj Mahal, the palaces of Rajasthan, and a few famous temples such as the Sun Temple of Odisha and the Vishwanath temple of Varanasi. However, India is home to thousands of architecturally and artistically rich temples that have survived for centuries.

The present paper focuses on one such magnificent ancient temple, the Chennakeshava temple of Beluru, constructed in 1117 under the patronage of rulers belonging to the Hoysala dynasty. Situated in Karnataka, India, the Beluru temple is a perfect example of India's rich cultural heritage. The highly ornate sculptures and wall reliefs at this monument are a visual treat and give an insight into ancient India's socio-cultural and religious life. The government of India now nominates this temple for the UNESCO world heritage tag.

Knowing and understanding the key architectural features of a monument will enable visitors to appreciate and value it better. Hence, this study highlights and explains features unique to the Beluru temple in an easy-to-comprehend manner.

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Index Terms—Ancient India, heritage tourism, Hoysala dynasty, Indian history, culture, heritage, temple art and architecture.

I. INTRODUCTION

The popular misconception is that visiting Indian temples is only for religious and spiritual purposes, which is far from true. A visit to an ancient Indian temple makes a very enriching experience given its fine art, sound architecture, and grandiosity.

In their research, Todt, Horst & Dabija, and Dan-Cristian state that monuments are scarce objects that are allotted value by public opinion. Thus for the government and other organisations to expend resources to maintain these ancient monuments, the general public must value them. Also, generating interest in heritage centres promotes cultural preservation and inter-cultural understanding. In domestic

circuits, cultural heritage stimulates national pride in one's history. In international tourism, cultural heritage enables respect and appreciation of other cultures and, as a consequence, promotes peace and harmony.

A significant part of any local population feels that something is outstanding about monuments near them [1]. How do we extend this interest to a majority of the people? To generate interest in any concept, some prior knowledge of it helps. Prior knowledge promotes curiosity, which in turn results in a desire to learn more [2]. Though this concept of prior knowledge leading to increased interest in a topic is proposed for academic learning, we can apply this to any form of education.

Preliminary information about a monument's history and its exciting features will rouse a tourist's interest in the place. Most often, documentation available for areas of historical importance is either informal blogs or highly academic research papers. Original research made available in an accessible manner, accompanied by meaningful and visually-pleasing images, will result in the popularity of cultural travel.

The Chennakeshava temple situated in the southern Indian state of Karnataka is a 1000-year-old temple built over a hundred years. This temple is significant in a cluster of temples constructed between the 11th and 14th centuries A.D. Traversing a 100-kilometre distance to visit these ancient temples will provide a rich cultural experience. Also, with parts of this heritage place already suffering from the dangers of encroachment, it is of utmost importance to draw people's attention to this magnificent monument [3].

II. HISTORY

The monarchs of the Hoysala Kingdom ruled the southern Indian state of Karnataka from 1000 to 1346 A.D for nearly 350 years. The most important contribution of the Hoysalas is in the field of art and architecture. During their rule of 350 years, they are known to have built at least 250 temples. Perhaps in the entire history of south India, no dynasty had produced as many temples as the Hoysalas. The Hoysalas have left behind a rich legacy of monuments of art. Their minute carvings have become proverbially famous in Indian art [4].

Quoting from Iconography of Hoysala period temples by Nangia [5]: "The Hoysala dynasty symbolised the cultural achievement of Kamataka. In the realm of art, this dynasty remains difficult to surpass or even equal in its exquisite beauty, the divine conception of soul-stirring themes, and its perfect execution of the most delicate delineations of abstract

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ideas. Art lovers from all over the world consider the temples of Belur, Halebid and Somnathpur as places of pilgrimage."

Even though these are temples dedicated to deities from Hinduism, one need not be religious to appreciate these marvellous structures. In the ancient Hindu temples, architecture and art go together. Hoysala temples are full of highly ornate sculptures and relief structures on the outer walls. The numerous inscriptions on the walls and stand-alone stone structures provide authentic historical information about the era, rulers, and artists. Hoysalas developed a unique style of architecture, and their temples were built on sound engineering techniques. The artistic elements in these temples, namely the carved pillars, decorative eaves, embellished relief sculptures, and elaborate entrance towers, show exemplary craftsmanship [6] [7].

III. A NOTE ON THE PRESIDING DEITIES AT THE HOYSALA TEMPLES

The Hoysala rulers worshipped God Vishnu, and hence most of their temples are dedicated to him. However, during the reign of the Hoysalas, other faiths such as Shaivism (worshippers of God Shiva) and Jainism also flourished, indicating the religious tolerance that existed during the 12th and 13th Century A.D. in India [8]. There are many significant temples dedicated to Shaivism and Jainism.

IV. BELURU CHENNAKESHAVA TEMPLE

The Chenna Keshava temple is situated in an area measuring 443' 6" by 396' and enclosed by a high wall, surrounded by several temples, minor shrines, halls, and subsidiary buildings [4]. From the inscriptions on the temple premises, we learn that the temple was constructed in 1117 A.D. by the illustrious King Vishnuvardhana.

V. SALIENT FEATURES OF THE TEMPLE

A. The Entrance Tower

The temples in ancient India were built according to the standards prescribed in a text called Vastu Shastra, and the entrance towers are no exception to the rule [9]. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the Gopura, highly ornate, tall, and tapering towers at the entrance are a feature common to southern Indian temples. While the ancient temples (built before the 6th Century A.D.) possess small Gopuras, those constructed in the medieval period (between the 6th and 16th Century A.D.) have mighty ones. Gopura, a monumental gate to a temple, has a rectangular base and tapering, pyramidal superstructure. The top of the tower houses odd-numbered brass pots flanked by elements that resemble the horns of a cow on either side. Sculptures of deities from Hindu scriptures are carved all through the superstructure.

At the Beluru Chennakeshava temple, the Gopura is five-storied and is built of brick and mortar. The base of the tower is made of granite stone, which is the entryway to the temple. The original Gopura was destroyed in an invasion and was rebuilt by the later rulers in the 15th Century.



Fig. 1. Beluru Chennakeshava temple Gopura.

B. The Hoysala Emblem

Hoysalas had as their emblem a statue of a man slaying a tiger. All their temples showcase at least one life-size sculpture of this emblem (Fig. 2). In Beluru, every entryway to the temple has this figurine next to the steps. The legend is that the founder of the Hoysala dynasty, a man named Sala, killed a tiger when his Guru shouted "Hoy Sala" in terror when a tiger attacked him. 'Hoy' in the regional language translates to 'slay' [10]. There is another theory behind the emblem. King Vishnuvardhana defeated a king belonging to the Chola dynasty who ruled the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu but had occupied parts of the state of Karnataka. The Cholas had a lion as their emblem, and symbolically the Hoysala emblem depicts Vishnuvardhana defeating the Cholas.

The emblem is carved beautifully, elaborately, and proportionately in the Beluru temple. The lion's mane, its stare, and the determination on the face of the man slaying it looks very natural and convincing. Even the dagger used to kill the lion is carved with finesse.



Fig. 2. Hoysala Emblem.

C. Doorway to the Temple

Entering the temple complex through the Gopura, one comes to a flight of stairs and a door that faces east (Fig. 3). The doorway and the lintel exhibit some highly decorative carvings. Most Hindu temples have their main entrance facing east so that the early morning sun brightens the temple's interiors, and the Chennakeshava temple is no

exception. Though there are three doors to enter the temple, the deity faces the eastern door.

The work on the lintel is highly detailed. It depicts the court of King Vishnuvardhana, the ruler who funded the construction of this magnificent temple (See Fig. 4).



Fig. 3. Entryway to the temple.



Fig. 4. Carvings on the door lintel

D. Pillard Hall

Visitors enter the Hoysala temples through an open hall with nine bays called Navaranga ('Nava' meaning nine). Four pillars in the middle of the gallery create these nine bays with nine decorated ceilings [7].



Fig. 5. Turned pillars in the Navaranga

In the Chennakeshava temple, the open hall has 48 carved and sculpted pillars, including the four pillars in the centre. These pillars remain a mystery since they look turned lathe-turned (Fig. 5). The type of lathes used by the ancient sculptors is still under research. Each of these carved pillars is of a different design. The central four are the most attractive

and intricate of them all. One of the main pillars that house the figure of a dancing maiden is said to have been inspired by the Hoysala Queen Shantala Devi, an accomplished dancer (See Fig. 6). Another highly ornate pillar in the open hall is called the Narasimha pillar (Fig. 7).

The other vital pillars are the Narasimha Pillar and the Mohini Pillar, famous for their intricate carvings.

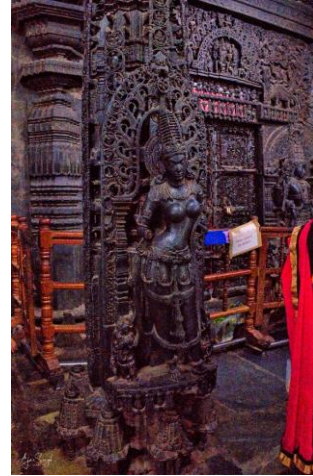


Fig. 6. Mohini pillar



Fig. 7. Narasimha pillar.

E. Sanctum

Beyond this open hall are a closed hall and a vestibule that connects one to the sanctum. The entrance to the shrine is again highly ornate, and the noteworthy feature here are the two mythical creatures called the Yalis carved on either side of the lintel. These Yalis are found in every Hoysala temple. On either side of the entrance, below the Yalis, are the sculptures of doorkeepers called Jaya and Vijaya. Again a common feature in most temples dedicated to God Vishnu.

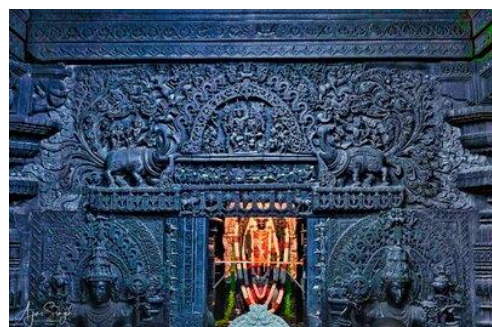


Fig. 8. Sanctum sanctorum with the deity Vishnu.

The sanctum houses a sculpture of Vishnu with his four signature objects in each of the four hands. Iconographically, Vishnu has four hands, with each hand holding four primary artefacts. These are Shankha (conch), Chakra (discus), Gada (mace), Padma (lotus.) The finely sculpted deity stands on a 3-feet high pedestal and is about 6-feet tall. All of these features can be seen in Fig. 8.

F. Tower over the Sanctum

A tower over the sanctum, called Vimana or Shikhara, is a feature common to all Indian temples. The Shikhara is also a tapering structure, and in Hoysala temples, it is star-shaped. In contrast, the Gopura, the entrance tower, is a feature of only the southern Indian temples.

G. Stellate Design

An architectural feature common in Hoysala temples is the stellate or star-shaped design of the walls [11]. The stellate design is a unique feature of the Hoysala architecture, not emulated by anyone else (See Fig. 9). As can be noticed in Fig. 9, in this design, the walls follow the shape of a star allowing more creative space than a plain wall [12]. Also following the same star contour of the walls is a 3-foot high platform called Jagati. The Jagati, walls, roof, and the shikhara are all parallel.

The Beluru temple is a 16-pointed star design. The star does get interrupted in between to accommodate the mini shrines. The Jagati provides a path to walk around the temple, which helps both the devotees and the art lovers. In the Hindu tradition, it is customary to go around the deity in a clockwise direction. While certain temples provide a path around the God inside the temple, the Hoysala temples have provided a broad, raised platform for this outside. Some of the wall relief structures are so minute that Jagati proves highly useful in studying and appreciating the carvings.



Fig.9. Stellate design of the walls and the roof

H. Carvings on the External Walls

The external wall relief sculptures are varied and diverse in the Beluru temple. The best way to systematically watch these sculptures is to go around the temple on the raised platform. Carvings around the open porch area differ from those around the vestibule and the sanctum.

A very noteworthy feature of the Beluru temple is the bracket figures of maidens placed at 10-feet on the eaves around the open porch area [13]. These maidens, called by various names such as Madanikas, Apsaras, Shilabalikas, are perfectly proportioned females to indicate that they are

celestial dancers [14] (See Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Mounted bracket figures on the eaves.

Researchers have shown that the sculptors who worked on these bracket figures must have known Natya-Shastra – a treatise on classical dance. There are 42 of these sculptures in total. Thirty-eight of them are mounted on the outside walls, and the other four are inside the temple.



Fig. 11. Woman looking in a mirror.

As can be seen from Fig. 11, 12, and 13, these exquisitely carved sculptures are of maidens in various poses – dancing, singing, hunting, doing makeup, gathering fruit, etc. Also, these sculptures exhibit very varied emotions, from angry, melancholy, and happy to stoic.



Fig. 12. Maiden talking to a parrot



Fig. 13. Maiden talking to a singer.

I. Carvings on the Bottom Friezes

The Chennakeshava temple has minutely carved bottom friezes comprising elephants in the bottom row, followed by lions, horses, and mini turrets. All along the external walls, these horizontal bands continue [9] (Fig. 14). Some of the friezes are also of miniature Shilabalikas, creepers, and flower motifs [5]. Circumambulation around the temple will open up a new world of intricate carvings that occupy every inch of the walls.



Fig.14. Horizontal friezes

J. Carvings on the External Wall Surrounding the Sanctum

While the carvings around the open porch area are that of maidens, animals, flowers, marching bands, etc., the carvings change when they are on the outside walls of the sanctum. Around the shrine, the sculptures are of deities from the Hindu pantheon. Belief is that this shift in theme is to divert devotees' mood from a material world to a spiritual world when closer to God.

Though Beluru is a temple dedicated to Vishnu, there are quite a few sculptures of God Shiva, an example of which is shown in Fig. 15. The important ones are – Shiva killing the demon Gajasura, Shiva with his consort Parvathi, Bhairava – a fierce form of Shiva. There is also a very elaborate scene where the ten-headed demon Ravana is shaking off the Kailasha mountain, which houses Shiva and Parvathi. All

these are fabulous sequences sifted from Hindu mythologies.

The other deities sculpted beautifully are Brahma with three of his four heads visible, Mahishasura Mardini (Goddess who slew the demon Mahisha who had taken the form of a buffalo), Kamadeva and Rathi – God and Goddess of love.

The sculptors, along with their artistic skills, must have had a fair understanding of the scriptures to sculpt the deities and mythological events accurately.



Fig. 15. Shiva and Parvathi.

There are also many sculptures in a row where Vishnu is shown with his four signature objects held in different hands. Depending on which hand is holding the artefact, the form of Vishnu changes [5], [15]. Some of the popular names for these various forms of Vishnu are Keshava, Janardana, Venkatesha, etc.



Fig. 16. Vishnu.

Many of these sculptures are of Vishnu and his forms. Please refer to Fig. 14, 15, and 16. According to Hindu mythology, Vishnu has incarnated on earth nine times in various forms, and his tenth incarnation is due. The Beluru temple has multiple representations of these incarnations:

- 1) Varaha – the form of a bore (Fig. 17)
- 2) Vamana – a dwarf who grows in stature
- 3) Narasimha – half-man, half-lion form,
- 4) Krishna - the most renowned incarnation of Vishnu. (Fig. 17)



Fig. 17. Varaha and Krishna.

VI. CONCLUSION

Contrary to popular belief, the temples of India are not only places of worship. They are artistic and engineering marvels but unfortunately, awareness about them is low. A visit to a monument is often only a weekend getaway for people who live nearby. These century-old monuments deserve to be better known and appreciated. It is also of utmost importance to generate interest in these ancient structures so that both the government bodies and the general public preserve them.

Despite their magnificence, not many know how to appreciate an ancient temple for its artistry, and hence it never makes it to their list of attractions. Shockingly, many find a visit to an ancient temple even dull. One way to change this mindset is to provide easy-to-understand information about the history and architecture of these places.

Every Hoysala temple in Karnataka exhibits certain standard features. If these monuments are to gain popularity, information about them should become accessible to the general public and not just remain in books and with scholars. When visitors come equipped with this information, they will undoubtedly be more enthusiastic about exploring the temples. The only way to honour the sculptors, artists, and benevolent rulers who have left this cultural and artistic legacy for us is to develop a deep understanding and appreciation of them.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Vanishree Mahesh conceptualized and designed the study on the Hoysala Temple Architecture, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript.

Dr. M.G.Sreekumar participated in the management and coordination of the study and helped in structuring and editing the manuscript.

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