

Śrī R̥ṣyaśṛṅgeśvara and Malahānikareśvara (The Lesser Known Temples of Sringeri)

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The area now called Karnataka, from about 345 CE to 1947 has seen various dynasties and powers ruling it. The Gangas, the Kadambas, the Chalukyas of Badami, the Rashtrakutas, the Chalukyas of Kalyana, the Hoysalas, the Vijayanagara Empire consisting of the Sangamas, Saluvas, the Tuluvas and the Aravidus, the Nayakas of Keladi, Adilshahis, Mysore Wodeyars, Hyder Ali, Tipu Sultan and the British have left their imprints on this hallowed land. It was in 1956 that these areas under the States Reorganisation Committee report became the united modern day state of Karnataka. All these dynasties have left behind their deep imprints on this beautiful state in the form of art, architecture, languages, faiths and administration.

In the field of temple building, Karnataka is a showcase of the rich varieties of styles and experimentation. Dotted all over the state are such exquisite examples of temples that a lifetime is not enough for a serious and detailed study. However, while the larger or grander ones get a lot of attention, the smaller ones are steeped in.

This paper is an attempt to shed light on two small temples in the temple town of Sringeri in Karnataka and the legends associated with them.

Picturesquely set among the green mountain top of the Sahyadri Mountains on the Western Ghats is the small sleepy town of Sringeri. It is in the Chikmagalur district of Karnataka, about three hundred and thirty four kilometres from Bangalore. The Tuṅga River, along with Bhadra and Netravati emerging from Gangamoola on the *Varāha Parvata* flows down the mountain in various directions. Tuṅga enriches Sringeri, Bhadra flows eastwards flowing past the towns of Kalasa, Hornadu and Balehonnur and Netravati flows past

the well-known pilgrimage centre – Dharmasthala. Tuṅga and Bhadra later come together at a place called Koodli, a small town near Shimoga and flow together taking on the name Tuṅgabhadrā. The area in which Sringeri is located is also known as Malnad. The combination of the words *male* (hill) and *nadu* (land) in Kannada makes this word. Malnad though not a mapped place; is quite an accepted name.

Sringeri Sharada Pitha is one of the four *Āmnāya Maṭhas* (monastic orders) established by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya to teach and spread the Advaita philosophy. The other three *maṭhas* are Kalika Pitha at Dwaraka, Govardhana Pitha at Puri and Jyotirpitha at Badari. Ādi Śaṅkarācārya is supposed to have anointed four of his *śiṣyas* (students) to head each one of these *maṭhas*. Śrī Sureśvarācārya was the first head of the Sringeri *maṭha*. His successors till the fourteenth century, were supposed to have lived with their disciples in the hermitages at Sringeri, Simhapura, Vaśiṣṭhāśrama, Kigga and Kalasa, situated at a distance of few kilometres from each other. Their *āśramas*, legend tells us, were often amidst Jaina and Pāśupata Śaiva centres.

The legend of Sringeri and the emergence of its name go back to ancient times. It is traced back to Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, son of Vibhāṇḍaka and the grandson of Kaśyapa. Originally called Ṛṣyaśṛṅgagiri, it was later shortened to Śṛṅgagiri and finally Sringeri. Sringeri is hallowed for all times by the ancient legend of the sage Śrī Ṛṣyaśṛṅga.

Sage Vibhāṇḍaka, by a curious combination of circumstances, became the father of a child, born of a deer. He found himself responsible for the proper upbringing of the child, whom he named Ṛṣyaśṛṅga. This child had a small horn on his forehead owing to the fact that his mother was a deer. Sage Vibhāṇḍaka brought up his son very strictly and in isolation in the forest as he was convinced that it was the easiest way to keep his son innocent of the worldly ways, away from temptation to which he had succumbed. He succeeded to such an extent that when the boy matured into manhood, he had never set eyes on any human being other than his own father. He was even unaware of sexual distinction.

It so chanced that a neighbouring kingdom, which was then ruled by a king named Romapāda, suffered from a severe drought. The king was advised by his ministers that there would be rains if sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga blessed his

kingdom with the touch of his holy feet. Romapāda sent a number of fair damsels to the forest to bring the sage. They were however afraid of sage Vibhāṇḍaka, and so approached the hermitage when he was absent. Enticing the young Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, they lured him away from the hermitage.

King Romapāda, on learning that the boy-sage had started from his hermitage, waited to receive him at the frontiers of his kingdom. Instantly the holy sage stepped on the soil, the heavens opened up and poured-down life giving showers. The king, thankful for the favour conferred on him, showed his gratitude by offering the hand of his daughter, Śāntā, in marriage to the sage. Ṛṣyaśṛṅga accepted her as his wife and remained in the king's palace as an honoured guest for some time. Sage Vibhāṇḍaka, though very agitated on the change in the course of his son's life, calmed down on seeing that his son was following *dharma* and ruling wisely. Legend tells us that soon after, Vibhāṇḍaka went on a pilgrimage and finally settled down on the banks of the Tuṅga and meditated at the Malahānikareśvara *līṅga*.

It was also during this period that Daśaratha, King of Ayodhya, invited Ṛṣyaśṛṅga to officiate in the *yāga* (sacrifice) named *Putrakāmeṣṭi*, by which he was blessed with four sons, Śrī Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata and Śatrughna. Thus, Ṛṣyaśṛṅga is one of the rare sages who appear both in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*.

In this essay two temples, Malahānikareśvara in which Ṛṣi Vibhāṇḍaka is said to have merged and Kilaṅgeśvara into which his son Ṛṣyaśṛṅga merged are presented. These temples are situated about seven miles from one another.

Malahānikareśvara Temple, Sringeri (Figs.1-4)

In the heart of the town of Sringeri is the temple of Śrī Malahānikareśvara situated on the top of a hillock called Mallikārjuna hill.



Fig.1: General View of Malahānikareśvara Temple, Sringeri

This hill is about a hundred feet in height and can be reached by a flight of about hundred and seventy steps.

A middle sized temple with two *prākāras* appears to have been constructed at about the same time as the temple at Kiggā, which depicts the early Vijayanagara period – fourteenth century style. The stone structure must have been raised early in the Vijayanagara period, replacing the older one in wood.

The *liṅga* that was worshipped by the ṛṣi Vibhāṇḍaka, son of Kaśyapa, is known as Śrī Malahānikareśvara (destroyer of the impurities of the soul) and is worshipped even today.

Ṛṣi Vibhāṇḍaka is supposed to have practiced penance here, had the



Fig.2: First *Prākāra* of Malahānikareśvara Temple



Fig.3: View of Kṛṣṇa Temple from Malahānikareśvara

vision of the Lord and uniting with the Lord in the *liṅga*, disappeared from the mortal world.

The temple structure is a fine piece of architecture, consisting of a *navaraṅga*, an *antarāla* and a

garbhagr̥ha. The *garbhagr̥ha* is fifteen feet by fifteen feet, the *antarāla* fifteen by seven feet and the *navaraṅga* thirty feet by thirty feet. The door to the *garbhagr̥ha* has Śaiva *dvārapālas* and *caurī* bearers. The central ceiling of the *navaraṅga* has a well carved Bhuvaneśvarī in granite. During a reconstruction by the Śaṅkarācārya of Sringeri Saṁsthāna, His Holiness Śrī Narasiṁha Bhāratī (1663-1765), a spacious *navaraṅga* was added. The *navaraṅga* has four beautiful pillars of the Vijayanagara type. The pillars in the *navaraṅga* and the *mukhamaṇḍapa* are sixteen sided with a base which is four sided having high relief sculptures of various gods and goddesses, such as Narasiṁha, Vīrabhadra, Śrī Rāma, Subrahmaṇya, Veṅugopāla, Hanumanta, Kāliya-*mardana* and Durgā, following the tenets of the Smārta Advaita propounded by Ādi Śaṅkara which worshipped all gods and discouraged sectarianism.



Fig.4: Inscription at the Malahānikareśvara Temple

The deity inside the temple is a four feet high *liṅga* called Malahānikareśvara, also known as Mallikārjuna flanked by Gaṇapati to the right and Durgā Mahiṣāsuramardinī to the left. Śrī Sacchidananda Bharati built and consecrated the Goddess Bhavānī shrine within the temple of Śrī Malahānikareśvara. A stone *dīpastambha* in the second *prākāra* has a Gaṇapati on it. The figure of this Gaṇapati was said to have been drawn by Abhinava Narasiṁha Bharati (1599-1622), the 24th Ācārya of Sringeri Sharada Pitha. Noticing the absence of any Gaṇapati image in the temple, he drew a figure of Gaṇapati with a piece of turmeric on one of the front pillars and worshipped it. Ever since, the outlines of Gaṇeśa is said to have been gradually bulging out,

presenting a bas-relief and the granite stone behind it sounds hollow inside, while over the rest of the pillar is solid. This is known as the *Stambha* Gaṇapati or Kambadha Gaṇapati shrine. The reconstruction of the temple, and renovation was done by Puttayappā, a disciple of Abhinava Narasimha Bharati in the year 1621. The Gaṇapati idol next to the *liṅga* must have been consecrated at this time.

Repairs were undertaken by Śrī Narasimha Bharati (1663-1765), the 26th *Ācārya*, with great assistance from Somaśekhara Nāyaka, the ruler of Keladi. The handsome Nandī was installed by Janganna Mallinātha, during Somaśekhara Nāyaka's regime (1664-1675). The *prākāra*, the walls were constructed in 1685 by Sitammāji, daughter of Revanna Nāyaka of Keladi.

Outside the temple there are small shrines of Mīnākṣī Saccidānandeśvara, Kṣetrapāla and Bindu Mādhava.

Bindu Mādhava is flanked by his consorts Śrīdevī and Bhūdevī on both sides and at the base a saint sitting in *Yogāsana* flanked by two disciples on both sides can be seen.

The Malahānikareśvara *Rathotsava* (chariot festival) spans from Māgha Kṛṣṇa Daśamī to Phālguna Śukla Dvitiyā and is celebrated on Māgha Amāvasyā day after Mahā Śivarātri. On Mahā Śivarātri, His Holiness the Śaṅkarācārya of Sringeri performs special *pūjā* to the Lord during the day for several hours.

Śrī Ṛṣyaśṛṅga Temple (Figs.5-9)

Śṛṅgeśvara temple at Kigga, also called Marukalu, is situated on the river

Nandinī, a tributary of the Tuṅga. It is a renowned temple, which stands on the site where Ṛṣyaśṛṅga was absorbed in the celestial light. It is a pretty large Dravidian structure. The



Fig.5: General View of Ṛṣyaśṛṅga Temple, Kigga

antiquity of the place is attested by inscriptions of the seventh century which refer to the deity here as Kilganeśvara or Kilganadeva or the lord of Kilga. It is about six miles from Sringeri.

The Ṛṣyaśṛṅgeśvara temple at this place has two *prākāras*, the inner one which has near its door two stones containing five inscriptions (E.C.5 Koppa-37). In the southwest corner of the same *prākāra* and in front of a modern substitute for the old Mallikārjuna *liṅga* is a bull brought from an old temple situated about twenty yards east of the big temple. This bull has no ornaments and looks natural one. It is said to date back to the Pallava times.



Fig.6: Gopura of Ṛṣyaśṛṅga Temple

The temple has a *garbhagr̥ha* about 12'x12', a *śukanāsa* 10'x8' and a *pradakṣiṇā*. On either side of the *garbhagr̥ha* are two smaller shrines. The one on the right houses a two-handed Gaṇapati and the one on the left a Mahiṣāsura-mardini. The *liṅga* in the sanctum is 5' in height and pillar-like. The



Fig.7: Śikhara of Ṛṣyaśṛṅga Temple

liṅga has three projections – one on the top is shaped like a horn giving rise to the legend that Ṛṣyaśṛṅga became one with the *liṅga*, another projection is to the left and the local sentiment is that it represents Śāntā, Ṛṣyaśṛṅga's wife and the third in front represents Nandī. The *liṅga* is not made of smooth stone but is said to be



Fig.8: Inner Prākāra of Ṛṣyaśṛṅga Temple

textured like a *rudrākṣa* bead. There is a common belief that when the *liṅga* is properly worshipped, famine will be averted in the land to a distance of twelve *yojanas* (a Vedic measure of distance roughly estimated to be 8 miles) all round. This reminds us of the story of Sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga whose entry into Aṅga removed the acute drought in king Romapāda's kingdom.



Fig.9: Inscription in the Ṛṣyaśṛṅga Temple

The *navaraṅga* which measures 30'x30' is approached by three entrances and has four sculptured pillars, which have octagonal shafts with square mouldings below and round ones above. The panels on these mouldings are in low relief and are many in numbers which include *Kāliya-mardana*, *Rāma-Lakṣmaṇa-Sītā* group and three *harīśas* forming a *cakra*, *Hanumāna*, ornamental designs and many more. In one particular panel, the

graceful contours of the charming fair danseuses (*nārikuñjara*) are so arranged as to present the shape of a palanquin supported by antelopes, which is supposed to represent the vehicle in which Ṛṣyaśṛṅga was borne to King Romapāda's capital.

Within the inner courtyard is a superb Nandī sculpture. After seeing similar ones at many temples I can say that they are all of standard posture. If there is a variation and room for artistic creativity, it is only in the details of decoration upon the Nandī. This particular Nandī wears a round bell which when struck with a finger emits a distinct sound. The Nandī stands in front of the main temple which has three parts – the front *maṇḍapa*, the inner vestibule and the inner sanctum.

The temple compound is a relatively big structure and has been designed in the Malnad style of temple architecture. The temple is situated at the centre of a courtyard-like structure.

It is said that after Ṛṣyaśṛṅga felt he had lived enough in the material world along with his wife Śāntā, went searching for his father Sage Vibhāṇḍaka, who had earlier left Aṅga on a long pilgrimage. Legend says that Sage Vibhāṇḍaka was finally located on the banks of the Tuṅga at Sringeri; immersed in deep meditation. The pious couple decided to settle in Sringeri too and serve their revered father with great affection. On Vibhāṇḍaka attaining *samādhi*, they shifted to Kigga and spent the remainder of their days in deep prayer and meditation. Legend has it that Ṛṣyaśṛṅga became one with the *liṅga* at Kigga.

Indian mythology is one of the richest elements of Indian Culture from times immemorial; stories in Indian mythology have been passed from generation to generation either by word of mouth or through carefully stored scriptures. It is inseparable from Indian religion. The myths, because of the strong religious aspects, are thought to be more reliable.

Every religious place claims that at some period of time, protagonists of ancient religious texts have sanctified their area. Their connection to *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Purāṇas* is somehow established. Devadutt Pattanaik says, "The *Purāṇas* are full of stories that speak of movements from the North to the South. It is never clear if these movements from North to South are physical or metaphysical."

Interestingly, about 60 km. from Kullu is Banjar valley, wherein Śṛṅgī Ṛṣi Temple is located. Śṛṅgī Ṛṣi is the ruling deity of Banjar valley. In fact, before Lord Rāma's advent into Kullu valley from Ayodhyā, Lord Śṛṅgī was the ruling deity of Kullu. Śṛṅgī Ṛṣi is one among the 'attharakardoo' (eighteen chief deities) of the Kullu valley. The sculptures of Śṛṅgī Ṛṣi and Śāntādevī are consecrated here. It is fascinating to read that Aṅga *deśa* in the *purāṇic* times was situated in west Bihar. It would be a very rewarding experience to trace the route of these migrations as the name Sringeri itself springs from the name Ṛṣyaśṛṅga.