

A fortress in the wilderness

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Hidden beauty



Even the drive up to the destination from Mangaluru is nothing short of spectacular. First there are the tortuous switchbacks of the scenic Agumbe Ghat, dappled with patches of sunlight filtering through the dense canopy overhead, ascending what had looked like an insurmountable wall of forested hill back at the base village of Someshwara. Once past Agumbe, the narrow road hurries towards Thirthahalli, passing fields of ripening grain alternating with stands of rainforest.

As the road snakes through patches of field and forest, one is traversing Malnad – the beautiful hill country that forms the setting for some of the most evocative literary offerings from Kuvempu. Before Thirthahalli, a deviation to the north leads to even more scenic landscapes past quaint bridges of bamboo and vine-spanning tumbling streams. A short drive thence brings one to the roadhead, where an uneven patch of land acts as an informal parking lot.

A stream gushes out of an apparently ancient aqueduct, promising of more wondrous things to come. Even so close to the destination, there is hardly any sign of the fortress one has come to see. Only the sharpest of discerning eyes can spot the odd bastion or length of fortification that peek out of the thickly forested slopes above. The way ahead goes over rocky patches past mud houses roofed with thatch and tile, and through paddy fields.

The swampy ground beyond the fields, where cattle graze and egrets and ibises forage, is bordered by crumbling walls of large blocks of stone, reminiscent of the Vijayanagar style of construction. Maybe this swamp was once a great moat that encircled the base of the fortified hill. The path crosses a stile of bamboo poles and enters the rainforest. Scrunching over the leaf litter and skirting a small ravine past a great fallen tree, one is suddenly confronted by two great bastions looming up ahead, built of great blocks of granite and festooned with ferns and tropical vegetation – gifts of the monsoon and the surrounding rainforest. Despite the best efforts of the caretakers, it is difficult to keep the forest at bay. Ensnared between the massive bastions is an entryway flanked by guard rooms – the first of three such gateways in the three lines of fortifications that the fort boasts of.

Reliving history

This is Kavaledurga – the ‘Sentinel Fort’, also known as Bhuvanagiri Durga – the forest fortress of the Keladi Nayaka Dynasty. The Keladi Nayakas were the vassals of the Vijayanagar Empire who administered this region since 1499 CE. They became independent rulers after the fall of Vijayanagar in 1565. Ruling till 1763, when Hyder Ali captured their territory and annexed it to the erstwhile Mysore Kingdom, the Keladi Nayakas’ dominions extended from north of Karwar to Valapattanam (in present-day Kerala) along the west coast and as far east as Chikkanayakanahalli.

Kavaledurga played a pivotal role in many a battle waged by the Keladi Nayakas. Though the fort is believed to have been constructed as early as 9th century, it changed hands several times before being acquired by the Keladi King Hiriya Venkatappa Nayaka in the 16th century. In 1677, when the Bijapur army attacked the Nayaka capital Bidanur (modern Nagara), Queen Chennamma who had just taken over the reins of the kingdom following the murder of her husband Somashekhara Nayaka, found it prudent to retreat to this impregnable forest fortress of Bhuvanagiri. Biding her time, she recouped and raised an army that won back the Bidanur Fort, routing the army of the Bijapur Sultan.

However, it is another incident during the reign of Queen Chennamma that led to her name being inextricably entwined with that of Kavaledurga — the fortress that gave refuge to a famous asylum-seeker. In 1689, the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb killed the Maratha King Sambhaji, son of the Chhatrapati Shivaji. Prince Rajaram, the younger son of Shivaji, while fleeing from the Mughal army, arrived at Rani Chennamma's court seeking safe passage to the fort at Gingee, where he expected to be safe from Aurangzeb. While several rulers of kingdoms mightier than Keladi had refused to shelter the young prince, fearing Mughal retribution, Chennamma extended her support to Rajaram without hesitation.

The Mughal army expectedly turned their attentions on the brave Queen, though Rajaram had by then pressed on towards Gingee. However, the Keladi army, striking from the forested fastnesses around Bhuvanagiri Durga, and aided by the relentless monsoon rains which lash Malnad, held off the mighty Mughal army for long. Eventually, weakened by months of warfare in tricky terrain and hostile climate, the Mughal army negotiated a truce with Chennamma and focused on Gingee. The mighty Mughals had been humbled by the resoluteness of a tiny kingdom in Malnad!

Today, as one treks up the wide path through gateways in the lines of fortifications, the historic stones appear to silently ruminate on these dramatic episodes they had witnessed. Just beyond the third gateway is a well-preserved temple in a walled compound — the Shikhareshwara Temple. Built in typical Keladi Nayaka style, with merlon-like parapet decorations, the small shrine in the compound houses a linga and Nandi within. North of the temple, perched picturesquely on a large rocky outcrop, is the Lakshminarayana shrine.

Extensive palace

Moving beyond these temples, one reaches the remains of an extensive palace, the plinth and numerous stone columns of which are all that remain now. Of interest are a stone toilet and a firewood stove, also of stone, found among the ruins, and a trough fashioned out of a single block of stone. A T-shaped stepped tank is sited near the palace.

The path presses uphill, beyond which is a stone stairway that leads up to a small gateway in the inner fortifications which leads to the wall at the western limit of the fort. The view from here is magnificent — tier upon tier of thickly forested hills rolling away into the distance, and the waters of the Varahi Dam glinting to the south-west. There are remains of other buildings nearby — a ruined oblong with thick walls that might have been an armoury and, in continuation of the builders' obsession to place structures on impossible perches, a small linga-shrine which sits cheekily on another rocky outcrop.

Kavaledurga is a marvel of site-planning and engineering, its several levels built cleverly following the contours of the hill, fortifications tucked away cunningly into the folds, incorporating large boulders and outcrops in their scheme, camouflaged by lush foliage that is the bounty of the monsoon. And it is in the monsoon that this hill fortress is at its alluring best, every surface wearing a coat of verdant green and floating tendrils of mist obscuring parts of the structure, much like the hoary mists of time that cover the history of a small, but proud kingdom that once graced this lovely land.