

Cultural Contributions of Chieftains of Yelahanka

Author

Dr. Uma Kumar

Visiting Faculty,

Dept of Performing Arts(Music),

Jain university, Bengaluru

Abstract

This article delves into the contributions of the Yelahanka Chieftains, who ruled the region in the 15th century, focusing on their construction of temples that served as centres of culture and art. These chieftains, including Kempe Gowda I, played a role in shaping the cultural landscape of the region. The article explores how the temples they built facilitated the flourishing of music, dance, and other art forms, enriching the lives of the local populace. Notably, the Yelahanka Chieftains were not only builders but also patrons of learning and art. The article highlights their enduring legacy and emphasises their influence on the cultural heritage of Bangalore and its surrounding areas. Through historical accounts, inscriptions, and expert analysis, the article offers a glimpse into the cultural tapestry woven by these chieftains and underscores their impact on the region's history.

Keywords: Kempe Gowda I, Yakshagana Bayalata tradition, Ganga Gowri Vilasamu

Introduction

Until the society is given good culture, there can be no permanence in the raised condition of the masses, was the declaration made by Swami Vivekananda, the Hindu monk and philosopher who introduced the Shad Darshanas, Vedanta and Yoga of our country to the western world during the late 19th century. “*We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give* ” is the famous quote by Sir Winston Churchill, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Culture is a means of expressing creativity. Participation in culture helps

develop thinking skills, builds self-esteem, and improves resilience, all of which enhance education outcomes. The farsightedness of the Chieftains of Yelahanka in this direction is highly commendable. The current case study deals with the contributions of some of the important Yelahanka Chieftains through the construction of Temples, that are centres of art and culture. The construction of temples by Chieftains facilitated artists of different genres to visualise their creativity as these divine places of worship provided a stage for artistry in the field of music, dance and theatre. It was this envision of Kempe Gowda that today we have with us the compendium ‘Ganga-Gouri Vilasamu’ in Telugu, composed in the yakshagāna Bayalāta tradition and a treasure house of classical music adapted by veteran musicians of 20th century. In this study, an attempt is made to understand the compositions authored by Kempe Gowda in view of the musical scenario of his times and its contemporary relevance. The Chieftains were forethoughtful in their duties and responsibilities, that the city of Bangalore owes its glamour to these rulers, in terms of sophistication, serenity and secularism to the culture that was given an ignition by them way back in 15th century. .

Chieftains as Temple builders

In the nondescript hamlet called Avathi, in the present day Devanahalli Taluk, around 45 kilometres from City central Bangalore, the bust of an earlier ruler named Rana Bhaire gowda catches one’s attention. The epitaph mentions that he ruled somewhere during the middle of the 14th century. He was an inhabitant of Yedaganji Putturu near present day kāncheevaram. He lived a simple life as a farmer during the 13th century. Due to personal rivalry between him and another local chieftain, he was forced to leave this place and settle in Avathi. Soon after his settlement in Avathi, he once found a cauldron filled with gold along with a statue of Chenna Keshava, a form of Lord Vishnu. He built a temple in Avathi as a mark of gratitude to the Lord, which is today the most visited temple, referred as Sri Lakshmi Timmaraya Swamy Temple. It

is here that we witness the benevolence of the first chieftain, Ranabhaire gowda¹. The chivalrous conduct of Ranabhaire gowda reached the Vijayanagar emperors who in appreciation of his good work entrusted him and later his son Jayagowda with the responsibility of ensuring safety of the southern part of Karnataka². From 1418 AD, Jaya Gowda established his rule and extended his territory considerably and ruled for nearly 25 years. This lineage of Rana Bhaire Gowda continued with Gidde Gowda, Kempananje Gowda and then his illustrious son Hiriya Kempe Gowda, the true founder of Bangalore as it is remembered even to this day.

Kempe Gowda I or Hiriya Kempe Gowda ruled for 46 years commencing his reign from 1513 AD. Founding of Bangalore in 1537 AD was an epic achievement of Kempe Gowda I. He made many conquests and expanded his kingdom within a short span of time. War invasions and conquests no doubt show humanity at its worst – bloodshed and brutality. But according to Stanford scholar Ian Morris, “war has also exhibited the world with its positive side of peace and prosperity”. The paradox of War is that the winning society absorbs the losing. The increased size of the new society formed after the war, forces its new rulers to preserve social order³. Perhaps, this was exactly the scenario that would have existed during the period of chieftains of Yelahanka which led to all the developmental works like forts, temples, tanks and cultural upliftment.

Construction of Temples - The abode of Music and Dance

Professor Ramanujam Srinivasan, in his book Facets of Indian Culture, mentions about temples as “*We may look upon these temples as some kind of occult laboratories. Certain*

¹ Avathi’s many Legends, Deccan Herald dated Nov 20th, 2012, BV Prakash
<https://www.deccanherald.com/content/292969/avathis-many-legends.html>

² Dance drama brings back to life founder Kempegowda, Indian express, dated 10th August 2019, G Ulaganathan,

³ Stanford News, Positive side of War, May 12th, 2014, Nate Sloan

physical adjustment coupled with certain systematised sounds (Mantras or Music) gives rise to certain results as a matter of course.” The purpose of temples is to satisfy the inner hunger of man for the realisation of a larger self, that is the Divine. Temples in the olden days were centres of beautiful sculptures, musical pillars, architectural wonders, engineering marvels and unsolved mysteries. They have thousands of inscriptions in the form of copper plates that give account of the historical incidents that have taken place in different periods. It supported artists like dancers, sculptors and musicians and priests acclaimed for their prowess in different subjects. The construction of temples by these chieftains paved way for such positive aura and ambience for common people to seek higher truths of life.

Temples of South India in particular have played a significant role in preserving and developing music and dance. It is apt to mention here that Indian music and dance have never been conceived or even perceived to be mere activities for entertainment. These fine arts have had strong ties with our mythology and religion whose basis stands on the strong foundation of higher values of life. They are serious disciplines which have been pursued in a solemn demeanour. It has been practised, in order to understand something of the Infinite. Music and Dance Performances were a part of Temple rituals. It was planned and rendered in a spirit of offering to the Deity. From the 15th century onwards, Bhajana Tradition took shape as a form of temple worship. The Bhakti movement that was started by the Haridasas gave great impetus to bhajana singing and this form of worship was patronised by the rulers as well. Vēdapārāyana, Bhajana Goshti, Gāyaka brindās, nāgaswaram renditions, Kavuttwams, other Gīta - Vādya - Nrithya, the triple aspect of music was extensively encouraged and given a prominent place in the Temple rituals. The maṅṭapa or the portico constructed in the temples served as a platform for Dynamic music and Dynamic dance that comprised of actual concerts and recitals at the Temple premises. The musical pillars that were not seen during the Chola period, started to

appear during the later mediaeval period especially during the time of the Vijayanagar Kings⁴. The chieftains of Yelahanka who were feudatory rulers under the Vijayanagara kings, were highly influenced by the Hampi architecture and many temples were constructed that closely resembled those structures.

In Spite of Kempe Gowda's passion to develop the regions that he ruled, due to his selfless nature, he grew overzealous and minted his own coins to invest it in other developmental works. For this, however, he was summoned to appear before the Imperial court for having taken the initiative without the permission of the Vijayanagar Emperor. He was imprisoned for 5 years and later his territories were confiscated. He did not lose his courage and cool. Instead, after observing his altruistic nature, he was released and all his territories were restored by Rāmarāya, the king of Vijayanagar⁵. It is often said that an optimist sees opportunity in every difficult situation. Kempe Gowda I seemed to have nurtured this attitude, which is why he is remembered for his remarkable contributions even to this day. During his stay in the prison, Kempe Gowda watched many new things like the magnificent temples, forts, palaces, fine buildings, lakes and tanks. These architectural styles provided him with inspiration to raise similar structures at Bangalore which he had left behind⁶. He also learnt a great deal about the Hindu way of life, especially the belief of Shaivism. It broadened his religious faith and social outlook. He vowed to build the Gangadhareshwara temple in Bangalore on his release. The erection of so many temples dedicated to Lord Shiva stands as a testimony to his conviction on Saivism.

Some of the important temples constructed by the Kempe Gowda dynasty were:

⁴ South Indian Music, Vol 5 P Sambamoorthy, Pg 211,212,219,224

⁵ Vokkaligas since the Time of Kempe Gowda, Dr. R Narayana

⁶ Bangalore through the centuries, Fazlul Hasan, pg 16

- Basava Temple at Bangalore - The temple is estimated to have been built in the year 1537. The architecture of the temple is heavily influenced by the Vijayanagara style, prevalent during the 1500's. The Vijayanagar architecture exhibits certain unique features like horizontal elaboration of temples, ornamentation of pillars, construction of high compound walls, construction of maṅṭapa or open pavilions. It introduced a new tradition of using hard stones compared to the earlier soft stones.
- Gavi Gangādhārēshwara Temple at Gavipura - The entire temple is carved out from a monolithic rock. Believed to have been built during the 9th century CE, it was Kempe Gowda I who revamped it. This beautiful cave temple harnesses the natural phenomenon of the sun changing its course. It's a perfect example of science confluence with religion. While Kempe Gowda is largely credited with the building of this temple, Suresh Moona, a well-known historian, and chronicler states that probably Kempe Gowda I would have rejuvenated the temple. The four imposing monolithic structures in the courtyard - the trishūla, damaru, two large discs - the sūryapāna and chandrapāna, and a stone umbrella on a neighbouring hill, while may be of religious significance to Lord Shiva, were erected to study time and planetary movements. It can be called as the Jantar mantar of Bangalore⁷.

The rays of the setting Sun enter the 'Mukha Maṅṭapa' (doorway to main pavilion) through the Western window, pass between the horns of the 'Nandi' (Bull) and reach the 'Shiva Linga' located in the sanctum of the cave⁸. Further to this, in 2008, a team of 3 scientists namely Jayanth Vyasanakere, K Sudeesh and B S Shylaja of the Jawaharlal Nehru Planetarium, Bengaluru, published a paper, 'Astronomical Significance of the Gavi Gangadhreshwara Temple in Bangalore'. According to it, this

⁷ Deccan Herald, dated Jan 08,2018, Bhumika K

⁸ <https://www.myvpa.org/about2.htm>, Dr. R Narayana

is one of the unique temples in India which records both the solstices. Solstice is either of the two moments in the year when the Sun's apparent path is farthest north or south from Earth's Equator⁹. During the period when the modern-day calendars were not available, certain sections of the society meticulously watched the movement of sun and stars and prepared calendars. This helped common man to understand the occurrence of festivals and also agriculturists to determine the sowing and harvesting cycles¹⁰. This justifies the claim made in the earlier lines of this study that the chieftains of Yelahanka had a great virtue of farsightedness.

- Ranganatha Swamy Temple - Though this temple was built during the period of Immadi Kempe Gauṇayya, the inner sanctum housing the principal deity was perhaps consecrated during the Chola period¹¹. A telugu inscription dated 1628 AD in the temple premises throws light on early Bangalore. From this inscription, it is quite obvious that the restored Hindu culture by the efforts of Vidyaranya the *Jagadguru* (preceptor of the universe) of Shringeri Sharada Pītha and the founder of Vijayanagar Empire, proliferated with the passage of time¹².
- Halasūru Sōmēshwara Temple – This dates back to the Chola period. Many modifications and additions were made during the Vijayanagara empire period under the rule of Kempegowda I. According to Michell, the temple plan resembles many of the basic elements of Vijayanagara architecture¹³.

Though the construction of most of these temples have been attributed to senior most (*Hiriya*) Kempe gowda, it is still debatable, as some inscriptions give credit to Kempe gowda II.

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/science/solstice>

¹⁰ Deccan Herald, dated Jan 08,2018, Bhumika K

¹¹ Bangalore mirror, A world within, - dated May 10th, 2014, ALiyeh Rizvi

¹² Bangalore through the centuries –Fazlul Hasan, pg 19, 20

¹³ The New Cambridge History of India, George Michell, pg 69

Kempe Gowda-I as a composer

Kempe Gowda I was a patron of fine art and authored ‘Gaṅga-Gauri Vilāsamu’ in Telugu which conforms to the yakshagāna Bayalāta tradition¹⁴. Yakshagāna Bayalāta is an exquisite folk dance-drama played mostly in the South and North Kanara Districts of Mysore State. Bayalāta generally means open air play or street play. This art is generally found in the Telugu, Tamil and Kannada languages of South India. It resembles kathakali of Kerala, Bhāgavatha Mela of Tamilnadu and Vīdhinātakamu of Andhra Pradesh. In Yakshagāna Bayalāta there is music, dance and also dialogue all embedded in a fine blend. As the name itself suggests, it is a play staged in open fields of paddy after the monsoon and the harvest has been done. Infact, Yakshagāna Bayalāta is the only dance drama which is still observing almost all the details given for poorvanga abhinaya by Bharata in his Natyashastra¹⁵. However, there has been an exceptional presentation, an attempt in the style of Kuchipudi Yakshagāna by world renowned danseuse Vid. Dr. Veena Vijay Murthy and her troupe. Indian writer and music critic Dr. BVK Shastry for the first time threw light on this phenomenal literary work composed by Kempe Gowda I. The music for this production was done by veteran Late.Vid. Voleti Venkateswarulu. This unique production was very well received, and it witnessed many shows across the country. Later, under the patronage of Kempa Vīrappa Gowda, “Vīrabhadra Vijayam” was composed by Èkambara Dikshit in Sanskrit. This gives details about the chariot festival of Vīrabhadra temple.

Conclusion

Thus, the achievements of chieftains of Yelahanka are worth mentioning. They were outstanding rulers with great vision, exceptional builders and patrons of learning. Their devotion to God and taste for aesthetics has left a great number of monuments and temples for

¹⁴ History of Karnataka, Muthana, pg 291

¹⁵ Yakshagana Bayalatta, K.S. Upadhyaya, pg 37-49

future generations to witness. In the history of Bangalore, even after many centuries and decline of the dynasty of chieftains, their achievements and rule continue to sustain interest and remain an enigma.

References

1. Hasan, Fazlul. "*Bangalore through the centuries*", Fazlul Hasan, pp 16-20
2. Prof. Sambamoorthy. P, "*South Indian Music*" Vol 5, pp 211- 224
3. Muthana, "*History of Karnataka*", pg 291
4. K.S. Upadhyay, "*Yakshagana Bayalatta*", pp 37-49
5. Michell George, "*The New Cambridge History of India*", pp 69
6. Dr. R Narayana, "*Vokkaligas since the time of Kempe Gowda*"
7. Newspaper articles and online sources