

KARNATAKA

In an antique land

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K. Bhagya Prakash

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If history is a palimpsest with generations adding layers, context and meaning to the continuum of civilisation, Aratipura is its best example. About 110 km from Bangalore, in Mandya district of Karnataka, the village shows how modernity sometimes shrinks in shame before the grandeur of the past. Archaeologists here are artists, unravelling layer by layer the splendours of dynasties whose writ ran here in ancient times. Or why would they camp on this parched land, from where farmers have been escaping a harsh drought?

Between the ninth and 14th centuries, the ancient site of Tipruru, now Aratipura, surrounded by the Kanakagiri hills, had been one of the most important Jain religious complexes in this part of Karnataka and even the whole of South India. Twelve Jain Basadis (temples), Maths (monasteries), edicts, idols of Tirthankaras and Lanchanas, and sculptures of Kubera, Ambika, Chamara bearers and Dwarapalakas have revealed themselves here – the artefacts of the Ganga and Hoysala dynasties that ruled this region. On the hilltop is a tank designed to supply water for drinking and rituals – perhaps a lesson in water conservation in these times of drought. The masonry wall of the tank has now been restored. Every piece of Jain architecture of South India is here, dazzling the connoisseur, archaeologists say.

The Archaeological Survey of India started scientific clearance in a portion of the Kanakagiri hills here in 2014, a follow-up to the discovery of an inscription on a stone slab found among a heap of bricks. The script and language of the inscription were in the Kannada of the Hoysala period of the 13th century. Done at the instance of the poet Balachandradeva, the inscription is about the existence of a temple complex built of bricks and how the Hoysalas rebuilt it with stone. Even the bas-relief works of the Ganga period get the granite veneering of the Hoysalas. A palimpsest indeed.

Over 80% of the scientific clearance is complete and restoration work will follow, says Arun Raju, superintending archaeologist, who has been camping here since 2014.

A 2.2-metre sculpture of Bahubali stands on Shravana Betta just a kilometre from the Kanakagiri hills. The statue predates the statuesque Bahubali at Sravanabelagola. Another beauty is a sculpture of Parsvanatha, the 23rd Tirthankara in the Jain pantheon, standing on a lotus pedestal under the hood of a snake.

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