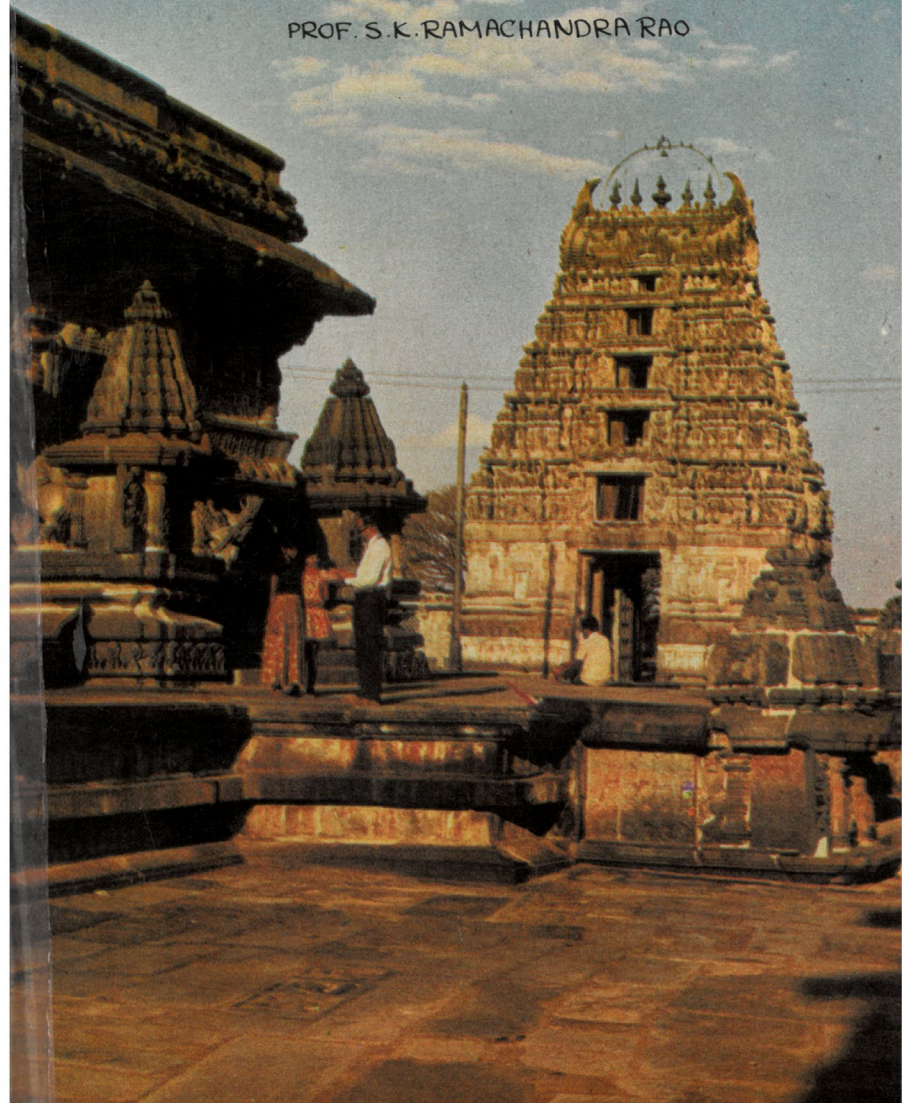


BELUR

PROF. S.K. RAMACHANDRA RAO



BELUR

Vidyalankara

Prof. S. K. Ramachandra Rao



IBH PRAKASHANA

5th Main Road, Gandhinagar,
Bangalore-560 009.

BELUR—a monograph on Belur, the seat of Hoysala dynasty renowned for its architectural grandeur, written in English by Vidyalankara Prof. S. K. Ramachandra Rao and published by G. K. Ananthram for IBH Prakashana, Gandhinagar, Bangalore-560 009.

© 1983 by the publisher

First Edition : 1983

Price : Rs. 4-00

Photographs : B. Kesarsingh

Printed by H. S. N. Rao, IBH Prakashana Printery,
Bangalore-560 054.

BELUR

A Peep into Early History

The antiquity of this area (Hassan district in Karnataka State) in which Belur is situated goes back to the early centuries of the modern era. A persistent account pushes it back to a more distant past. It is said that the great Mauryan King of Magadha, Chandragupta, visited this region as early as 298 B.C., coming all the way from Ujjayini in the North. The Jaina community that came with him, along with his teacher Bhadrabahu, settled down on a hillock in this region (Sravanabelagola), and the prevalence of Jainism in Karnataka dates back to this visit and settlement.

The recorded history of the area, described in a book *Kavi-kantha-hara* by Suryanka about 1650 as "the hand-mirror to Kashmir", commences with the Eastern branch of the Kadamba Kings who ruled over this region from their capital at Banavasi. This was in the early centuries of the Christian era. Later the Gangas, with their capital at Talakadu, occupied this area and ruled it for over five hundred years

(from the fifth century to the eleventh). They were patrons of Jainism, and were builders of temples and monuments. The next hundred and odd years saw the sovereignty of the Kongalvas (feudatories of the Chola Kings) over the region bounded on one side by the river Kaveri and on the other by Hemavathi.

The most important rulers who contributed to the greatness of this area were the Hoysalas, who rose to power in the tenth century and continued till the fourteenth. Unlike the previous rulers, the Hoysalas had their twin capitals in the very heart of their Kingdom, Belur and Dvarasamudra (the present-day Halebidu, about 11 miles from Belur). The early kings of this dynasty were Jains by persuasion, but were tolerant in their policy. The later kings, however, became devotees of Vishnu and Siva. Of these kings, the most celebrated was Bittideva, also called Vishnu-varadhana (1113-1141 A.D.): a bold warrior, an able administrator and above all a great builder. His father was Ereyanga who bore the title "Right Arm of the Chalukyan Monarch".

There is a persistent legend (the historicity of which is however uncertain) that he was converted to Vaishnavism by the great reformer-saint Ramanuja who, when persecuted by the fanatic Saiva ruler of Tamil Nadu, had to seek

refuge in this king's territory for several years. The king and the saint are said to have met in Tonnur (Tondanur) near Melkote in the present-day Mandya district in Karnataka. It is said that it was Ramanuja who prompted him to build five Vishnu shrines (*panca-Narayana*) in the region over which he ruled. Among these five shrines, the Kirti-narayana temple at Talakadu, the Vijaya-narayana temple at Belur and the Vira-narayana temple of Gadag are well known. And among them, the Belur shrine has justly been celebrated all over the world as an exquisite work of art.

We do not know what the exact nature of the inspiration was that made him build temples. But the Hoysala style of temple architecture found its maturity and perfection during his days. Perhaps the Mahalakshmi temple at Doddagaddavalli (in Hassan district) provided him the inspiration to build the Belur shrine. This temple was built in the year 1113 A.D., the year Bittideva (Vishnu-varadhana) ascended the Hoysala throne. This is a fine example of the early phase of Hoysala architecture, which was an adaptation of the Chalukyan model with an emphasis on sculptural profusion. This temple where architecture still overshadowed sculpture, has four cells (*garbha-grhas*) contained in a rectangular plan. But three of these cells (in

the Southern portion) have been structurally integrated with a common hall (*navaranga*). We have another temple in the same region which was evidently built on the model of the Doddagaddavalli shrine. This temple in the village Hariharapura has only three cells. The characteristic feature of the Hoysala style is the coalescence of three cells integrated with the main hall (*navaranga*), leading to a porch (*mukhamandapa*), the entire structure being raised on a high plinth (*jagati*). This is known as the 'triad of cells constituting a hill' (*trikutachala*).

It is probable therefore that it was the Mahalakshmi temple at Doddagaddavalli that gave the impetus to the Hoysala temples. We have an inscriptional record of the name of the architect who built this temple : Muniyoja whose skill is likened to that of the divine architect Visvakarma. And it is interesting to note that this temple was built not by a king but by a merchant and his wife. Bittideva, the Hoysala king, got the Vishnu temple built in the capital city about four years later. In subsequent years, as many as eighty temples were constructed in the region, all answering to the description of Hoysala style, during the reigns of eight kings. This temple-building activity covered a period of over two centuries, between 1111 and 1343 A.D.

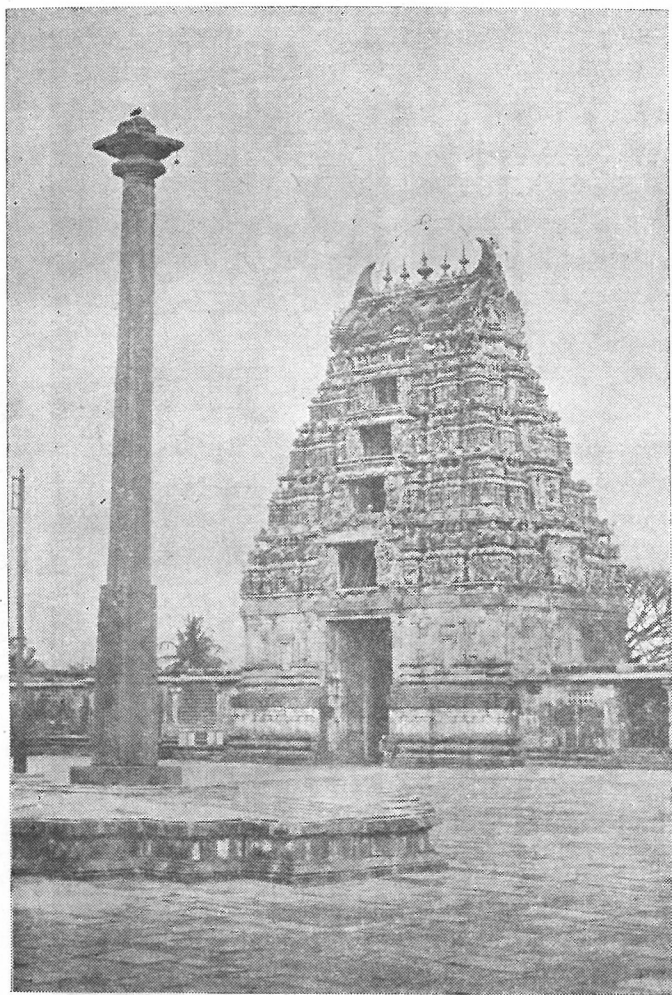
The Hoysala power broke down, when Mohammedans overran this territory in 1326 and destroyed the capital, Dvarasamudra. Ballala III (1291-1342) who was the Hoysala King at that time left the region and lived the rest of his life in different places like Tondanur (in Mandya district), Hosavida (in Kolar district), and Tiru-vannamalai (in South Arcot district).

The Vijayanagar empire, which was founded in 1336, extended its sway and impact over this region, a portion of which (known as Balam or the tract around Belur, the present-day Manjarabad) was entrusted to the care of the Nayak chieftains, Singappa (1397-1404) and his descendents. Belur was now looked upon as a kingdom in its own right. The 'lords of Belur' were vassals of the Vijayanagar kings; the first 'lord', Ere-Krishnappa, was originally a carrier of the silver-box containing the betel leaves, waiting constantly on the king (*hadapa*). These lords continued their hold over the town and its suburbs for a considerable length of time.

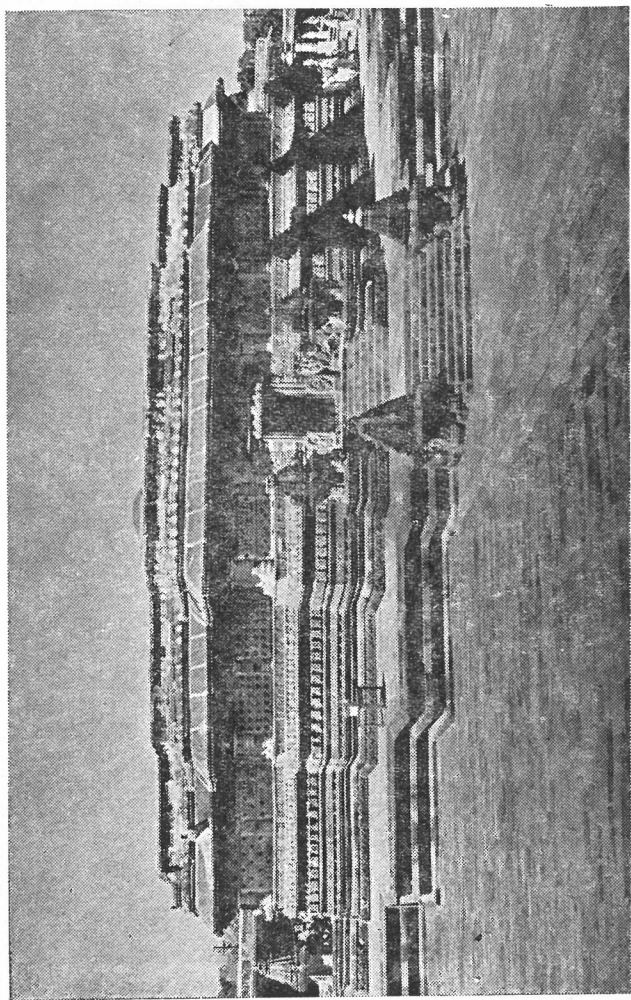
In 1645, Sivappa-nayaka the powerful chieftain of Bedanuru (Nagar) attacked Belur and held it for nearly forty years. By then the Vijayanagar kings had fallen on evil days, and one of the kings, Sriranga-raya, had to seek

refuge under Sivappa-nayaka, his erstwhile vassal. Sivappa bestowed Belur on this monarch. Belur thus had the dubious distinction of becoming the capital of the Vijayanagar kings in their decadent days.

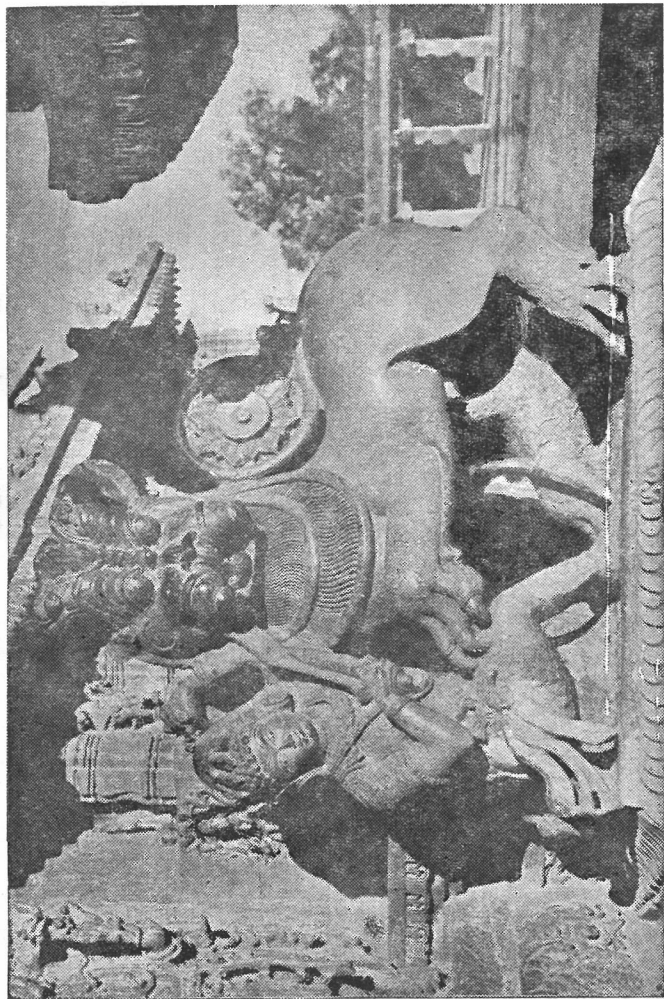
At the instance of the fugitive Vijayanagar monarch, the Bedanuru chieftain invaded Mysore around 1654. According to the treaty that was concluded in 1694, the entire territory barring Balam (the tract around Belur) was ceded to the Mysore rulers. In 1762, the Mysore army under Hyder-ali subjugated Balam (around Belur) also. When Hyder's son Tipu Sultan fell in the Srirangapatna battle in 1799, there was an unsuccessful attempt on the part of the Belur chieftains to recover their independence. The region came under the Manjarabad-Faujdari and later under the Ashtagrama division. In 1882 it was included in a subdivision under Kadur district; four years later, however, Hassan was made into an administrative district with Belur as one of the chief towns.



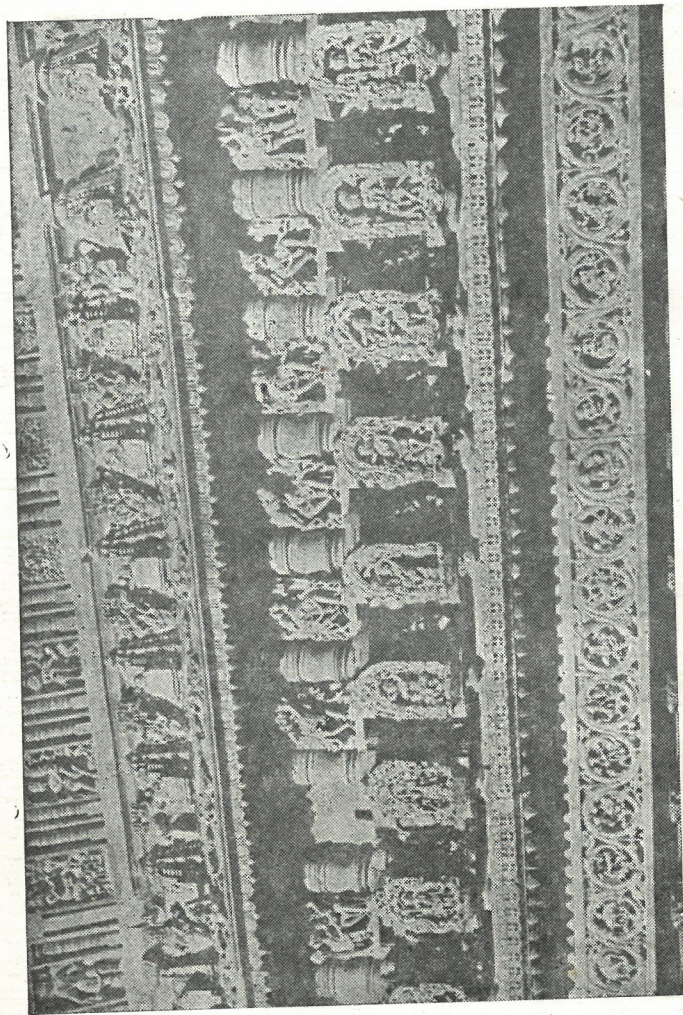
The front Gopuram of Chennakeshava Temple



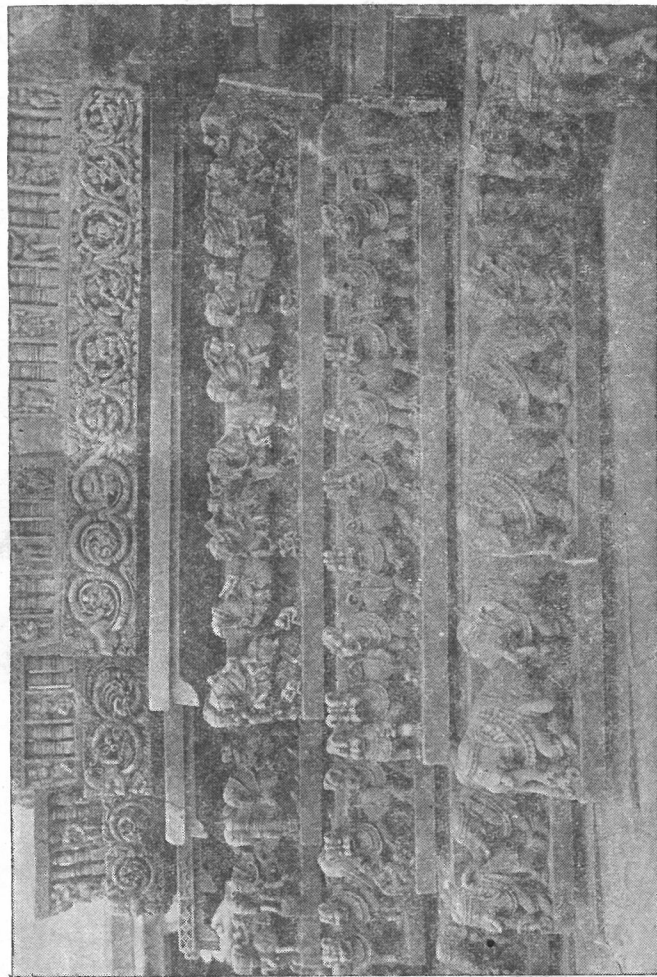
Chennakeshava Temple



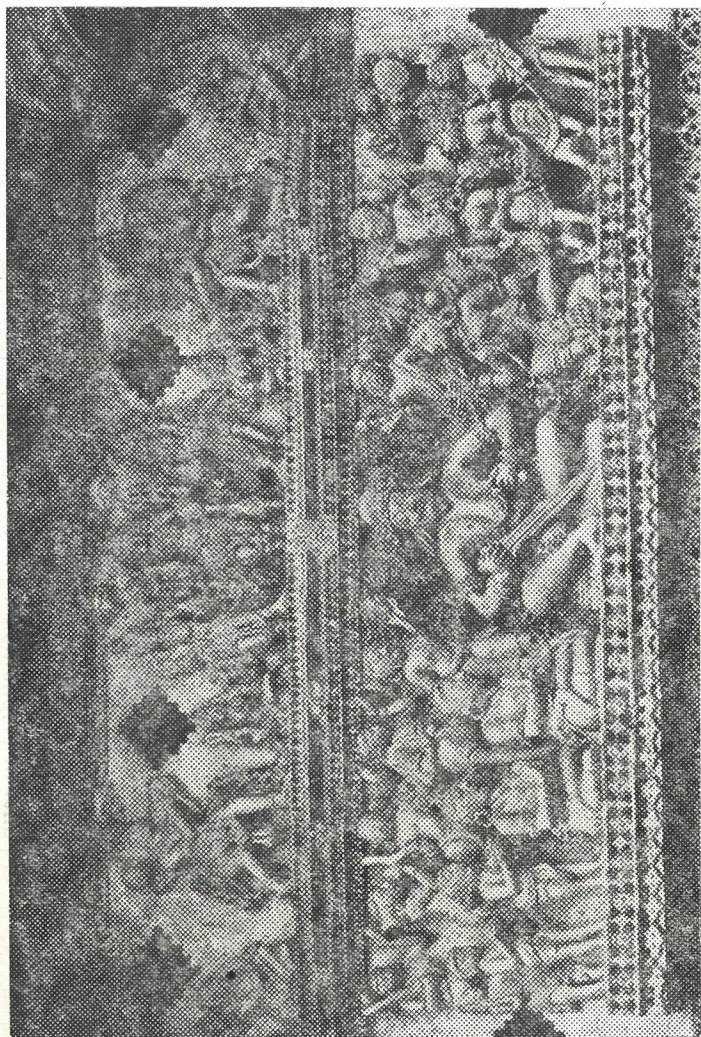
The Crest of Hoysala : Sala fighting with a tiger—Chennakeshava Temple



A panel on the wall of Chennakeshava Temple



A panel of elephants on the wall of Chennakeshava Temple



Panel depicting Vishnuvardhana's Court



Battle Scene



A Madanike—Chennakeshava Temple



Madanike

Belur the Temple-Town

Belur, which is celebrated in legends as Velapura and as Southern Banaras, is at present a town 24 miles north-west of Hassan. It lies in a highland area, 3,150 feet above sea level, adjoining the north-west of Coorg. There are hillocks alround, and the river Yagachi flows in the neighbourhood.

It would appear that the old name for the town was Beluhur, Sanskritized as Velapura. That it was a well-known town as early as 1103 is suggested by an inscription that relates the marriage of the Hoysala King Ballala I, elder brother of Bittideva-Vishnuvardhana in this town. But the town's subsequent celebrity rests chiefly upon the Kesava temple that his successor Bittideva got constructed in 1117 A.D. There are two inscriptions, one on the temple-wall (*Belur* 58) and another a copper-plate preserved in the temple (*Belur* 71), which record this event. The legend inscribed on the pedestal of the principal image, Kesava, also suggests that Vishnu-var dhana it was that got the deity installed. The name of the deity given in this legend is Vijaya-narayana.

The construction of the temple is said to commemorate the King's assumption of the Vaishnava faith, at the behest of the great teacher Ramanuja. It is also said that the chief disciple of the Acharya, Mudaliandan, was present during the consecration ceremony. But there is little inscriptional or literary evidence that firmly establishes the fact of the King's conversion or the role of Ramanuja in the construction of the temple or the consecration of the main deity. However, Belur is undoubtedly a Vaishnava stronghold since the days of Bittideva.

One of the ten sculptured screens (perforated) in the Belur temple depicts the court-scene of this king. It is the first screen to the right of the eastern entrance of the assembly hall (navaranga). This screen is in three panels and the middle panel contains the court-scene. The king, holding a sword in one hand and a flower in the other, is seated with his queen to his left, and two teachers to his right. The queen is seen with a lady-in-waiting, and each of the two teachers has an attendant disciple. The monarch's retinue is also there. The sword and the flower in the hands of the king suggest that he was a great warrior as well as a patron of arts. In the top panel of the screen is seen the icon of Kesava, the main deity of the temple built by the king. There are also representations of Hanuman and

Garuda in this panel. The bottom panel contains some fine depictions of the lion-motif.

The king is also depicted in another stone panel, found in front of the Kappe-Chenniga temple. Here he is standing in an attitude of great devotion, along with his queen Santale, who was responsible for this shrine.

The Turkish ambassador, Abdur Razaak, visited the Belur temple in 1433 A.D. and he wrote that he "dared not attempt any description of the wonder and beauty of the temple lest he should be accused of exaggeration." And over four hundred years later there was another visitor, who attempted to describe. Mrs. Bowring has recorded in a letter written on the 15th December, 1868 her impression of this temple-town:

"I shall never forget the view on entering Belur. It was most lovely. Green rice-crops, sloping down to the edge of the tank, a fine sheet of blue water, surrounded by large trees, above which appeared the grey walls of the fortress, and the white dome and towers of the famous temple; beyond, the Baba-budan mountains looking purple and blue; in the foreground,..... It was, altogether, as beautiful a sight as anything I have seen."

Quoted in Lewin Bowring's *Eastern Experiences*, this passage has been preserved in Mysore

Gazetteer, vol. v, p. 965 (Ed. by C. Hayavadana Rao, 1930). The sight of the present-day Belur is unfortunately not as impressive as it was during the days of Mrs. Bowring, a century ago. It is now a straggling little town, the only tourist attraction of which is the temple. Unlike in Halebid and Somnathpur, where worship has altogether been abandoned, the temple in Belur continues to be in popular currency; worship within the temple has gone on since its consecration except for brief spells. During April every year there will be a five-day festival in the temple, for which several thousands of devotees gather.

The Main Deity, Kesava

The temple for which Belur has become celebrated is dedicated to a form of Vishnu, known popularly as Kesava. On account of the exceedingly beautiful form of this icon, it usually goes by the name of Chenna-kesava, the Kannada prefix meaning 'lovely'. This image, which represents Vishnu in a standing posture, is undoubtedly very charming; the sculptor has poured out all his skill and devotion on this image. The original name of the image, however, was Vijaya-narayana, which perhaps was one of the titles of Bittideva (Vishnu-varadhana), the Hoysala monarch. Although it is an image of Vishnu, the face is full of feminine grace, and the legend explains this anomaly by describing the deity as Mohini, a form that Vishnu assumed in order to confound the demons on the occasion of the distribution of ambrosia.

The icon, sculpted splendidly out of black stone, stands six foot tall on a pedestal which is three foot high. It bears the usual insignia of Vishnu, the conch, discus, mace and lotus. The Kesava form bears the conch and discus in the two upper hands (right and left respectively), and lotus and mace in the two normal hands.

(right and left respectively). The lotus in the normal right hand is accompanied by the characteristic *abhaya* ('Fear not') pose. There is an elaborate, intricate auriole (*prabhavali*) around the head, illustrating a conventional pattern artistically stylized. On the body of the deity are carved different ornaments exquisitely shaped.

The legs of the deity are flanked by two consorts, the goddesses of wealth (Sri-devi) and earth (Bhu-devi), modelled in tiny proportions. The figure of Garuda (the conventional vehicle of Vishnu) is carved on the pedestal, which also bears the inscription that "Vishnu (-vardhana), the protector of the world, caused this image of Vijaya-narayana, the god of gods, to be erected."

It is said that this grand icon was originally on the Baba-budan Hills, along with that of his consort Lakshmi. It was brought to Belur to be installed in the temple that Vishnuvardhana built. But, owing to some reason, the Vishnu image alone was brought at the time of consecration. The legends narrate that the later attempts to bring also the image of Lakshmi proved futile: the lady was offended and would not relent! It is further said that Vijaya-narayana himself chivalrously makes a periodical visit to the Baba-budan Hills to look up his consort.

To help him make this long and arduous journey from Belur to the Baba-budan Hills, a pair of large leather slippers were fashioned by the cobbler-devotees! This story explains the unusual presence of a pair of oversize leather slippers in front of the Kesava image. It is said that when the slippers get worn out by the journey, the cobbler-devotees of Belur residing in Chenna-giri and Basava-pattana in Shimoga district get the message in a dream to set about preparing a new pair. The cobblers are on this occasion allowed to enter the temple and present the slippers. They know the Belur deity as 'Chennappa', and regard him as their tutelary god.

Whatever the import of the story, the main image appears to have been meant to be the sole deity in the Belur shrine, consorts being structurally provided. But the temple now has a separate shrine for Soma-nayaki (also called Saumya-nayaki), reputed to be a form of Lakshmi, to the south-west of the Vijaya-narayana cell.

The Temple, Sculptors and Maidens

The temple, which probably was meant to be a work of art, stands as a perfect monument in a spacious courtyard, 443 feet long and 396 feet wide. The temple proper, 178 feet long and 156 feet wide, is perched on a plinth which is three feet high and ninety feet wide. The courtyard is surrounded by a high wall, the main entrance to which has a *gopura* as a superstructure with five storeys, in the typical South Indian style.

The temple which was consecrated in 1117 A.D. is said to have suffered considerably during the Muhammedan invasion of 1310. During the early years of the rule of Harihara I, Vijayanagar emperor (1336-1350), the temple had been closed. But he ordered repairs to be carried out at the temple, and the endowments were restored ; the shrine was reconstructed. It would appear that around 1381 the roof of the shrine had begun to sink, and the then Vijayanagar king Harihara II got the roof propped up by four main pillars through his prime minister Kampana.

The tower over the main entrance which was probably built by Ballala III is said to have

been dismantled and burnt by Ganga Salar of Gulbarga. The main entrance was repaired and the tower over it rebuilt by the general (*dandadhīpa*) of the Vijayanagar army, Gunda, in 1397. The shrine has been in continuous service since those days.

It is unfortunate that we do not know who the chief architect of this splendid temple was. This is also remarkable, for we do have inscriptional mention of the architects of some of the other Hoysala temples in the same region (as, for instance, of the Mahalakshmi temple at Doddagaddavalli). The regional legends concerning the chief architect of the Belur temple being Jakanachari are little more than myths. It is unlikely that any architect or sculptor with this name ever really existed: the expression may signify nothing more than 'the southern style'.

The custom of inscribing the sculptor's name on the pedestal of the sculpture-piece that he was responsible for was already in vogue among Hoysala artists. We find in the Belur temple as many as eighteen pieces with such inscriptions, giving invariably the sculptor's name, sometimes also mentioning his hometown, parentage and titles.

Among the names preserved are: Dasoja of Balligame (in Kuntala country), bearing the

title 'Ruvari-gondala-badiva' ("the suppressor of the contending claims of sculptors"); his son Chavana, Malliyanna; Machari, who was in the court of the Hoysala monarch; Mayana, who bore the title 'Ruvari-giri-vajradanda' ("the thunderbolt to the mountain of sculptors"); Kenchi-Malliyanna; Chikka-hampa, son of Inoja, who was also in Bittideva's court; and Nagoja, son of Dasoja of Gadag, who was known as 'Sujana-janamano-ranjana' ("the delighter of minds of excellent folk") and 'Sarasvati-padambhoja' ("the feet-lotus of the goddess of art"). Of these sculptors, who must have been celebrities during those days, Dasoja of Balligame and his son Chavana appear in these inscriptions frequently.

These sculpture-pieces intended to support the eaves, standing upon the capitals answered the description of 'bracket-figures' (*Salabhanjika*, Kannada *salabandike*). The inscriptions call them so, and they also use another expression, 'doll-figure' (*putthali*). The nomenclature that has of late come into vogue is 'madanike', which means a lovely maiden erotically active. These pieces are without doubt exquisite dance-postures and in diverse situational moods. They are all of them, without an exception, full of lyrical grace, passionate charm and idyllic power.

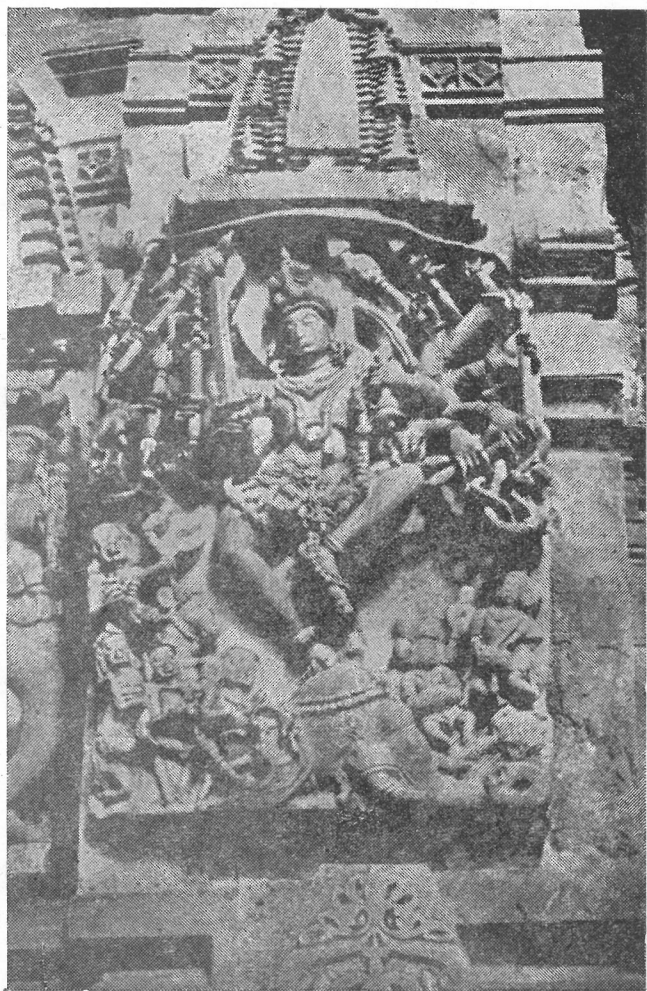
Of the forty such 'bracket-figures' that are installed along the outer walls of the temple (two are missing), only three depict men; the rest are feminine representations. Inside the main hall (*navaranga*) are four more, nestling atop the four main pillars. These four, which probably were especially commissioned, are the work of Dasoja and his son Chavana. And they are master-pieces by any standard. One of these is said to portray the Hoysala queen Santala, who herself was a great exponent of dance and music.

The Madanike figures have justly become celebrated. Indeed, they steal the show in Belur. They have almost been uniquely associated with Belur, although we do find similar figures in many other temples. Two of them are exquisite representations of the Mother-goddess, Durga, in her usual posture of slaying the Buffalo-demon. There are, among these figures three portrayals of huntresses, a rather unusual theme. One of these delightful damsels holds a bow, and two others are caught in the act of letting the arrow go. Other figures illustrate lovely maidens engaged in typical feminine occupations: dressing up, playing on musical instruments, and dancing. These sculptures are remarkable for the fine display of moods and sentiments.

Of equally great interest are the twenty perforated screens of excellent workmanship that we find in this temple. Ten of them are sculptured, and are arranged on either side of the eastern entrance to the assembly hall (*navaranga*), five to the right and five to the left. The screen representing King Bittideva-Vishnuvardhana has already been mentioned. The screens to the right include Puranic themes such as the story of Bali and Trivikrama, the legend of the vanquishing of Hiranyakasipu by Narasimha, and the episode of Kamsa's death at the hands of Krishna. One of the screens to the left is said to depict the court-scene of Narasimha I, son of the great Bittideva-Vishnuvardhana. This panel is surmounted by an icon of Yoga-narasimha, accompanied by Hanuman and Garuda. The other panels on this side include the depiction of the story of the churning of the ocean of milk by gods and demons, of the exploits of Krishna (such as the slaying of Kamsa, fight with the wrestler Chanura, and the subduing of the wild elephant Kuvalayapida), and the combat between Hanuman and Garuda. There are also scenes from *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The *Mahabharata* story has been narrated with remarkable skill and brevity, but stops at Salya-parvan. These epic narrative sculptures are to be found in the railing to the right of the same entrance.



Ugra Narasimha—Chennakeshava Temple



Gajasurasamhara—Chennakeshava Temple



Venugopala—Chennakeshava Temple



Garuda – Chennakeshava Temple



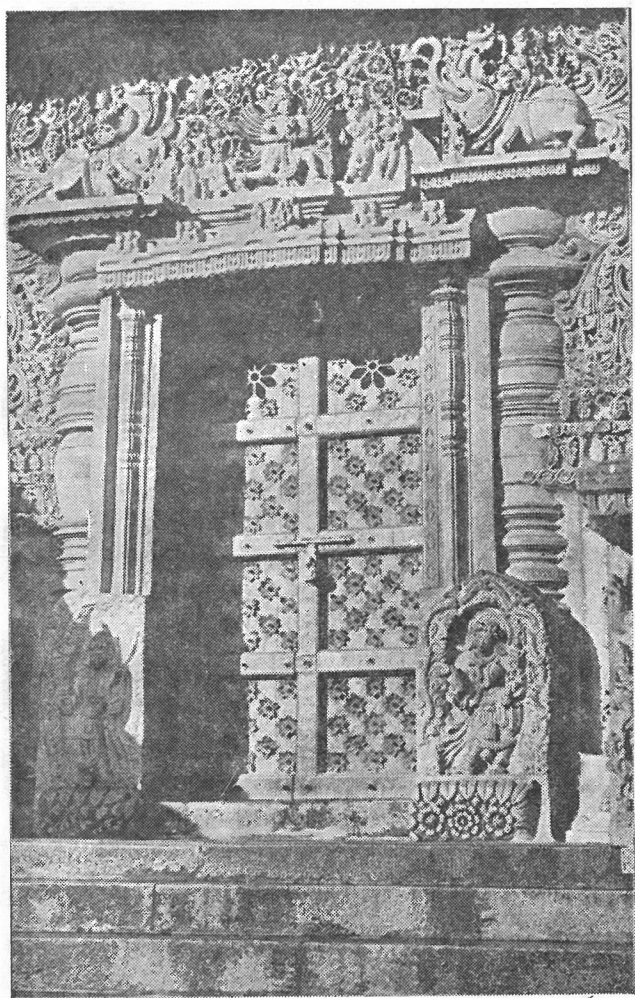
Another madanike in the interior of
Chennakeshava Temple



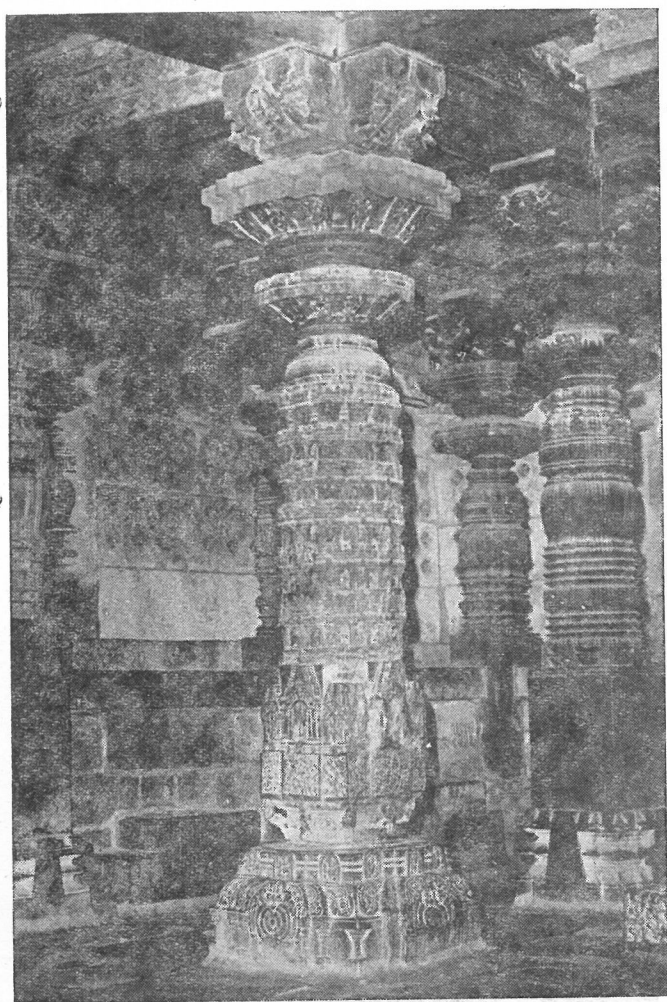
Mohini—mutilated



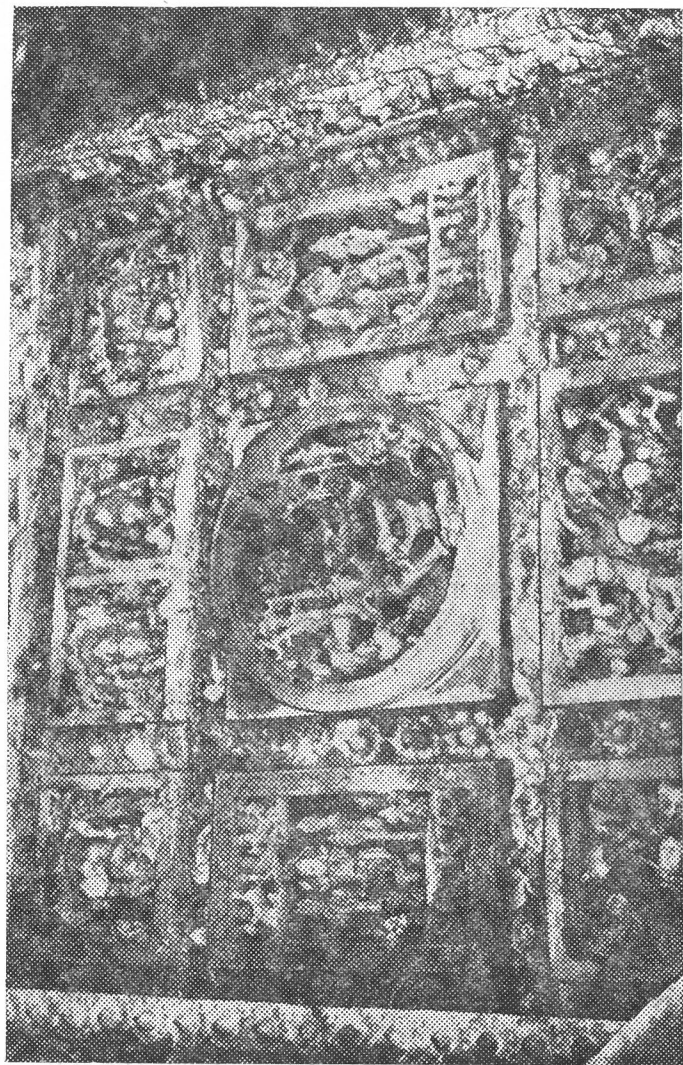
Shiva-Parvati



The artistic work on the door of Chennakeshava Temple



Narasimha Pillar - Inside the Chennakeshava Temple



Ceiling panel of Chennakeshava Temple

Other Shrines in the Complex

Although the main deity is Vijaya-narayana there are several other shrines within the temple-complex. The most important among them is the one dedicated to Kappe-Chenniga-rayana (Chenna-Kesava with a frog inside), seen to the left of the central shrine. It is a two-cell shrine measuring $124' \times 105'$, one of the cells (facing east) housing the Kappe-Chenniga-rayana and the other (facing north) Venugopala (Krishna as cowherd, playing on flute). Kappe-Chenniga-rayana in the main cell is so called because a legend relates that a frog was found in the cavity of this stone image after it was completed. The legend insists that this was the original icon, meant to occupy the central shrine. Because the stone employed was defective (as it contained sand and water inside a cavity in it, explaining the presence of a frog), it was abandoned ; and the main deity was brought from Baba-buden Hills.

There is an inscription on the pedestal of this image which relates the queen of the Hoysala monarch Bittideva, Santale, got this icon made and installed. Santale was the senior

queen (*piriyarasi*) and crown-consort (*patta-maha-devi*). She was accomplished in all arts, and was learned. Although she was personally inclined towards Jaina religion, she honoured Vishnu, who was the State God. She herself records in another inscription: "Vishnu is the God, but I am fond of Lord Jina (Mahavira) also" (*Vishnu daivam, Jina-natham tanagendu aptam*). She had studied Jainism under the celebrated master Prabha-chandra Siddhanta-deva of the Pustaka-gaccha sect of the Desi-gana branch of Sri-mula-Samgha. She died in Sivaganga (near Bangalore) in 1131.

Alongside this shrine, got built by Santale around 1117 A.D., is the shrine dedicated to Soma-nayaki (or Saumya-nayaki). This shrine is distinguished by a tower over it. The front portion of the shrine was built by *dalavayi* from Mysore. To the west of the central shrine is another, dedicated to another form of Vishnu, Vira-narayana. This is a smaller shrine than the other two, but there is here a sculptural profusion on the outer wall, with rows of large images, about sixty in number. The divinities represented here include Vishnu, Siva, Brahma, Bhairava, Saraswati, and Parvati. There are shrines in this temple-complex which reveal a strong Sri-vaishnava influence. There are

shrines dedicated not only to Ramanuja the master who is said to have converted the Hoysala King, but to the Tamil Vaishnava poet-saints anterior to him, viz., the Alvars. There is a separate shrine to one of these saints, viz., Andal (also called Goda-devi or Sudi-kuduttanacchiyar), the lady-devotee who was spiritually wedded to the god Ranganatha at Srirangam, the holiest of places for a Sri-vaishnava. There are two more minor shrines, one dedicated to the memory of Vedanta-desika, greatest of Sri-vaishnava teachers after Ramanuja, and another to Manavala-ma-muni, another celebrated Sri-vaishnava saint.

The Temple

There are three main entrances to the Vijaya-narayana (Kesava) temple : on the east, south and north. Originally, they were plain doorways. Later, the grandson of Bittideva-Vishnuvardhana, Ballala II got the door-frames and lintels fixed ; the perforated screens facilitating better ventilation were also his idea. The jambs of the doorways were adorned with pairs of images : the eastern doorway with Eros, the god of love (Madana) and his consort Delight (Rati) ; the southern doorway with Hanuman and Garuda, two model-deities of devotion ; and the northern doorway with two women bearing conventional fly-whisks (*chauri*). The southern entrance is locally called 'the Friday doorway' (*Sukravarada bagilu*), and the northern entrance 'the doorway to heaven' (*svargada bagilu*). The Hoysala crest (the youth Sala fighting with a leogriff, *sarabha*) is to be found in the proximity of these doorways. The eastern entrance directly faces the main gateway to the enclosure. It is when we enter through this doorway that we find the lovely bracket-figures on side pillars. We also find here the pierced stone-windows, ten on each side, depicting

scenes from two Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*.

Around the temple runs a railed parapet (called *jagati*) composed of eight sculptured friezes, arranged one above the other. The bottom-most row consists of elephants. Above it is the cornice with bead-work associated with leogriff motif or lion's head (*simha-lalata*) at intervals. The row above it is composed of scroll work with images in every convolution. The fourth frieze is again a cornice with bead-work, above which is a row of ornamental niches with little images of nymphs and heavenly musicians carved in bold relief. The row above this is a pilaster series, presenting the portrayal of feminine postures inbetween. The seventh frieze comprises of eaves with bead-work, continuous creeper treatment, delicate human and animal figurines and miniature turrets. The top-most frieze (the eighth) is a rail, accommodating panels of tiny sculpted images within enclosures made by double-columns, surmounted by an ornamental band.

Above this splendid railed parapet are to be seen artistically perforated screens (*jalandra*) with eaves on top. On the walls are portrayed various divinities of the Hindu pantheon, in finely carved sculpture-work, of considerably

large proportions. There are about eighty of them, and they include the incarnations of Vishnu (like Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana and Balarama), the modal variations of Vishnu (like Lakshmi-narayana and Ranganatha), sportive forms of Siva (like Harihara, Gajasura-samhara, Andhakasura-samhara and Bhairava), forms of the mother goddess (like Parvati, Durga, Saraswati and Mahishasura-mardini), minor divinities (like Ganesa, Madana and Rati, Garuda and Brahma) and epic heroes (like Arjuna, Daksha, Bali, Sukra and Ravana).

It is commonly said, and justifiably too, that the interior of the Belur temple is better executed than the exterior, while the exterior of the Halebid temple is better than its interior. The pillars of the main hall would amply bear this out, especially the pillar known as the Narasimha-pillar.

The pillars are splendid works of art. Designed differently they reveal a clever plan to enhance the aesthetic effect of the entire structure. One of the most beautiful pillars in the country is to be found here: the so called Mohini pillar. Located in front of the southern door-guard (*dvara-pala*), it contains a lovely damsel, charming like the celestial Mohini (who was an aspect of Vishnu himself, and whose

presence is to be found in the main deity in the sanctum). It is a remarkable piece of excellent filligree work in stone. Another pillar, known as the Narasimha pillar, was originally designed to rotate. The entire face of the pillar in every direction is filled from top to bottom with miniature sculptures of exceeding beauty. One of these tiny sculptured details is the bull which is no bigger than a seed of Bengal-gram (*kadalekalu-basava*). The artists who worked on this pillar were so full of confidence in the excellence of their accomplishment that they have thrown a challenge for all artists in the ensuing generations. A tiny area has been deliberately left unfilled, thus inviting any artist who may dare to fill up this space with work that can be in keeping with the standard of their own work.

The central ceiling panel (*bhuvanesvari*) in the main-hall is another marvellous conception of unsurpassed beauty. The inspired skill of the sculptor has made this square block of 19' × 19' a rich gallery of Indian iconography.

It is interesting that this beautiful and otherwise complete shrine does not possess the conventional *vimana* (domical tower) over the principal sanctum (or the cell housing Vijayanarayana). We do not know if this superstructure was constructed when Bittideva got the image consecrated in 1117 A.D. It is sometimes claimed

that it was only his grandson Ballala II got it built around 1180. We are told that by about 1298 the wood-work of the *vimana* was in very bad shape and the superstructure was about to collapse. It was in 1736 that Venkatadri-nayaka IV not only got the *vimana* constructed but mounted also a *kalasa* (finial) on top of it. In 1774, the *vimana* was again crumbling, and Nanjayarya got it re-built; that was when Haider-Ali was ruling over the Mysore state. It is recorded that the *vimana* finally disappeared about 88 years ago, and no attempt has subsequently been made to set it up again.

The altar-pavilion (*bali-mandapa*) located opposite the main cell housing the image of Vijaya-narayana was built by a local chieftain Naga-nayaka. It is now known after him as "Naga-nayaka-mandapa". We do not know more about him. The 'marriage-pavilion' (*kalyana-mandapa*, also called here *Suvarna-mandapa* or 'Golden pavilion') was got constructed by the Mysore ruler Kanthirava-narasa-raja-Wodeyar about 1650.

To the north-east of the shrine is the customary tank, here known as *Vasudeva-saras*. The entrance to this delightful spot is flanked by beautifully carved elephants. There are also two pavilions here which add considerably to the charm of the tank.

There are two entrances to the temple enclosure: the chief one (*mahadvara*) over which stands a lofty *gopura* in five storeys, and another called 'the elephant entrance' (*ane-bagilu*), probably meant for processional elephants to enter on festive occasions.

The Belur temple has become a by-word in Indian art for decorative sculpture. The entire temple is planned as a composition, in which sculptural profusion plays a predominant role. The figures, human and divine, enter into this composition only to intensify the total effect; no individual piece has been designed to stand out as an independent item. The decorative art that has been deliberately employed here will not tire the eye nor jar the mind, because it occurs in a minor key. Elaborate ornamentation, fanciful filigree work, and rich jewellery do not distract our attention. What the master architect aimed at and achieved here is monumental grace.



