

# Architectural Legacy of Chamarajanagar Temples

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## Abstract

Chamarajanagar, a culturally rich district carved out of the historic Mysore region in southern Karnataka, is home to numerous ancient temples and sacred sites that reflect the spiritual and architectural legacy of the region. With taluks such as Chamarajanagar, Yelandur, Gundlupet, Kollegala, and the newly formed Hanur, the district is dotted with revered pilgrimage centers, most notably the Male Mahadeshwara Hills. These temples not only serve as places of worship but also as markers of regional identity and heritage. Additionally, Chamarajanagar's temple landscape is complemented by its stunning natural surroundings, including the Biligiri Rangana Hills and Himavad Gopaldaswamy Betta, making the region a confluence of devotion, history, and biodiversity. This study seeks to highlight the religious significance and architectural narratives of key temples in the region while situating them within the larger cultural and ecological context of Chamarajanagar.

*Keywords: Chamarajanagara temples, Male Mahadeshwara Hills, Karnataka heritage, temple architecture, pilgrimage centers, Biligiri Rangana Hills, Himavad Gopaldaswamy Betta, South Indian temples, religious tourism, cultural landscape.*

## The Biligiri Ranganatha Hills

Biligiri Ranganatha Hills, often referred to as B.R. Hills, are among Karnataka's most revered and scenic spiritual sites. Nestled at the confluence of the Eastern and Western Ghats in Chamarajanagar district, these hills not only possess great ecological significance but also hold immense religious value. Towering at approximately 1,800 meters above sea level, the B.R. Hills are wrapped in thick forests and mist-laden skies, creating an atmosphere that has long drawn saints, pilgrims, and nature lovers. Named after the presiding deity, Lord Ranganatha, the hills derive their name "Biligiri" (white hill) from the striking pale rock cliffs that dominate the region. The Ranganatha Swamy Temple that crowns the hilltop is the spiritual heart of the region and continues to inspire devotion, folklore, and historical research.

The origins of the Ranganatha Swamy Temple on B.R. Hills trace back several centuries. While precise dating is elusive due to limited inscriptions, local lore and historical documentation suggest that the temple's earliest iterations may have existed since the Ganga or early Hoysala period. One of the most important historical records associated with the temple is a copper plate inscription that details the donation of two villages by Diwan Purnayya, a celebrated minister of the Wodeyar dynasty of Mysore, for temple services. This grant solidified the temple's role as not just a religious center, but also as a socio-economic hub in the region.

The deity enshrined in the temple is Lord Ranganatha, a form of Vishnu, depicted in a rare standing posture. This contrasts with the reclining posture traditionally associated with Ranganatha temples such as those in Srirangam and Srirangapatna. Legends speak of the deity Thiru Venkatanatha manifesting here amidst white rock formations, hence the names "Shwetadri" and "Biligiri." Oral traditions also connect the hill to episodes from the Ramayana and Puranic literature, enhancing its spiritual aura.

Constructed in classic Dravidian architectural style, the temple complex on B.R. Hills features a gopuram (tower), Navarangamantapa (pillared hall), garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum), and prakaras (corridors). The materials used are primarily granite and white stone, integrating naturally with the surrounding landscape. Inside the sanctum, a two-foot idol of Lord Ranganatha stands majestically, flanked by figures of Alamelu Mangamma, Ramanujacharya, Nammalwar, Hanuman, and Vedanta Desika. The Navaranga serves as a central congregation area for rituals and houses sacred brass sculptures and engraved pillars. The temple is known for its serene alignment with nature, facing east to greet the sunrise each day. One notable architectural feature is the absence of large walls enclosing the sanctum, which allows the mist and wind from the surrounding hills to drift into the temple naturally. This aspect of open sanctity symbolizes the seamless unity between divinity and nature.

The Ranganatha Swamy Temple celebrates several annual festivals, the most prominent being the Vaisakha Jatra held during the month of April or May. During this event, thousands of devotees converge on the hill to participate in the rathotsava (chariot festival), where a grand wooden chariot with wheels measuring over 1.3 meters is pulled in procession. This chariot festival is not just a religious event but also a cultural gathering that brings together people from all castes, especially the Madiga community, who traditionally take part in pulling the chariot.

Daily rituals include morning and evening aartis, special pujas on ekadashi, and annadana (free meal offerings) for pilgrims. Devotees also perform pradakshina (circumambulation) around the temple and offer tulsi leaves, butter, and fruits to the deity. Folk traditions include devotional songs sung by local bards who narrate tales of the deity's miracles, and the temple often resounds with recitations of the Vishnu Sahasranama and Alvar hymns.

B.R. Hills lie within a protected forest zone known as the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary, declared a tiger reserve under Project Tiger. The sanctuary serves as a critical wildlife corridor connecting the Eastern and Western Ghats, home to elephants, leopards, tigers, deer, and hundreds of bird species. The area is also rich in flora, including medicinal herbs, sandalwood trees, and dense bamboo groves. The coexistence of the temple and the wildlife sanctuary is a rare and delicate balance. The Forest Department and temple authorities work in coordination to ensure that religious tourism does not negatively impact the biodiversity.

Noise levels are regulated, vehicular access is controlled, and no plastics or non-vegetarian food is permitted near the temple premises. Solar lighting, rainwater harvesting, and waste management systems have also been introduced in recent years. The indigenous Soliga tribe, who have lived in the B.R. Hills region for generations, play a central role in the temple's daily life and rituals. Traditionally forest dwellers, the Soligas worship Lord Ranganatha as their kula devata (family deity) and maintain a deep spiritual relationship with the land and its resources. Many Soliga families are involved in crafting flower garlands, collecting forest produce for temple offerings, and assisting in festival logistics.

In addition to their spiritual involvement, the Soligas are also engaged in eco-tourism and forest conservation programs. Their oral traditions, songs, and rituals are passed down through generations and are now being documented as part of cultural preservation efforts. The temple, therefore, is not just a place of worship but a cultural nucleus for the Soliga community, affirming their identity and way of life. The Biligiri Ranganatha Hills represent a unique blend of natural beauty, spiritual heritage, and cultural integrity.

The temple dedicated to Lord Ranganatha stands not merely as a religious monument but as a living symbol of ecological harmony and social unity. The confluence of tribal customs, historical records, sacred architecture, and biodiverse landscapes makes B.R. Hills an unparalleled destination for pilgrims, scholars, and conservationists alike. Its legacy continues to thrive, sustained by the faith of devotees, the resilience of the Soliga tribe, and the protection of its natural surroundings.

### **Male Mahadeshwara Hills**

Male Mahadeshwara Hills, also known as M.M. Hills, are one of the most significant spiritual destinations in southern Karnataka, situated in Hanur Taluk of Chamarajanagar district. Perched at an altitude of over 3,000 feet, these forest-clad hills form part of the Eastern Ghats and are nestled near the Karnataka-Tamil Nadu border. Rich in mythology, oral history, and folklore, the region is named after Lord Mahadeshwara, a manifestation of Lord Shiva. Millions of devotees visit the Male Mahadeshwara Temple each year, drawn by faith, tradition, and the serenity of its natural surroundings. The temple complex, sacred legends, tribal associations, and the cultural festivals together make this hill a composite of the divine and the natural. The origin of the Male Mahadeshwara Hills is deeply rooted in regional folklore and religious tradition. According to legend, Lord Mahadeshwara was born to a couple named Chandrasekhar Murthy and Uttarajamma from the Madiga community. He is believed to have traveled from Srisailam to this region, accompanied by tigers, and chose the dense forests of M.M. Hills to carry out his spiritual penance. His arrival heralded the transformation of the place into a sacred site, as he began subduing evil forces that disturbed sages meditating in the area. One of the most notorious asuras (demons), Shravanasura, who possessed dark magical powers and disrupted the sanctity of the region, was defeated by Mahadeshwara in a symbolic conquest of good over evil.

The temple is considered to house a self-manifested (Swayambhu) Shiva Linga, and Mahadeshwara is revered as a living Siddhar—an enlightened being—whose spiritual energy still permeates the sanctum sanctorum. Oral traditions strongly assert that he continues his penance inside the shrine, making the site even more sacred for worshippers. The current temple structure is believed to have been built by Sri Junjgowda, a local chieftain from the Kurubagowda community, whose faith in Mahadeshwara led him to construct a shrine that could serve as a focal point for worshippers from both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

The Mahadeshwara temple complex spans about five acres and is located amidst dense forests and mountainous terrain. The main temple houses the Shiva Linga and is surrounded by shrines for other deities including Nandi, Parvati, and Ganapathi. The sanctum sanctorum is constructed using traditional stone masonry, and its plain yet powerful architecture reflects the local building styles. Several halls and open courtyards facilitate large gatherings

during religious events. Unlike many urban temples, M.M. Hills have retained a rustic charm that harmonizes with the surrounding forested landscapes.

A notable aspect of the temple is its continued association with folk and tribal cultures. Worship practices blend Vedic rituals with local traditions, making the temple a bridge between classical Hindu worship and regional belief systems. Oil-lighting rituals, performed especially by the Uppara community, are of particular importance and believed to be highly auspicious. These lamps are lit as acts of devotion and spiritual cleansing.

The Male Mahadeshwara Hills host several grand festivals throughout the year, the most significant being the Deepotsava (festival of lights) and Maha Shivaratri. During Deepotsava, thousands of oil lamps are lit, illuminating the entire hill temple, signifying the triumph of light over darkness and spiritual awakening. Pilgrims from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu make a barefoot journey up the hills, often chanting folk devotional songs dedicated to Mahadeshwara. These songs, known as "MahadeshwaraHaadu," are an essential part of Karnataka's folk literature and convey themes of divine intervention, moral righteousness, and social justice.

The Teru (chariot) festival, held annually, sees a large wooden chariot being drawn by thousands of devotees in a grand procession. This event not only attracts pilgrims but also fosters a community feeling as multiple caste groups—Dalits, Lingayats, Kurubas, and tribals—come together to participate. Food offerings (annadana) are distributed freely, and musical performances, bhajans, and traditional dances add vibrancy to the event. The Mahadeshwara Hills are more than just a pilgrimage site; they are a cultural epicenter for many communities in the region. The local Soliga and Lingayat communities regard Mahadeshwara as their kula devata (family deity). The tribal folklore surrounding the hills is preserved in oral traditions, and every ritual, festival, and even architecture reflects the syncretism of mainstream and indigenous cultures.

Mahadeshwara is seen as a symbol of justice and protector of the oppressed. As a divine figure who emerged from the marginalized Madiga community, he represents inclusiveness in Hindu worship. The temple has played a pivotal role in socially uniting different groups and offering them a common spiritual space. Pilgrims believe that sincere prayers at the Mahadeshwara temple can cure illnesses, remove obstacles, and bring prosperity.

The temple is situated in a richly forested zone that is now part of the Male Mahadeshwara Wildlife Sanctuary. This sanctuary is home to a diverse range of flora and fauna, including elephants, leopards, sloth bears, and a variety of birds. The presence of the temple within such an ecologically sensitive area necessitates a balance between religious tourism and environmental conservation. The Forest Department has put in place regulations such as controlled vehicle access, no plastic zones, and awareness programs to minimize ecological impact.

Eco-tourism is being promoted in the region, providing livelihood opportunities for local communities while encouraging responsible tourism. Guided nature walks, bird-watching trails, and forest awareness camps are conducted periodically. The sacredness of the landscape plays a dual role—preserving spiritual heritage and protecting biodiversity. Traditional practices like oil-lighting and organic offerings align well with the eco-conscious ethos of the sanctuary.

Male Mahadeshwara Hills embody a unique confluence of spirituality, folklore, nature, and social unity. The temple dedicated to Lord Mahadeshwara stands as a testament to faith, resilience, and community harmony. The intertwining of tribal lore, historical reverence, and ecological sanctity make M.M. Hills a sacred ecosystem in every sense. For devotees, the journey to the hill is both a physical pilgrimage and a spiritual ascent. For scholars and conservationists, it offers a living model of how traditional beliefs can coexist with modern ecological awareness. Ultimately, M.M. Hills continue to echo with chants, stories, and silent prayers—resonating through the hills, forests, and hearts of the faithful.

### **Himavad Gopalaswamy Betta**

Himavad Gopalaswamy Betta, nestled in the southernmost tip of Karnataka, is a jewel of natural beauty and spiritual tranquility. Rising to an elevation of approximately 1,454 meters above sea level, this mist-covered hill lies in the Chamarajanagar district and forms a part of the Western Ghats. Located near Gundlupet and about 75 kilometers from Mysuru, the hill is famed for its year-round cool climate, picturesque landscapes, and the ancient temple dedicated to Lord Krishna, known here as Gopalaswamy. "Himavad" translates to "misty" in Kannada, and this name is apt, for the hill is nearly always enveloped in fog, giving the entire area an ethereal ambiance. As a part of the Bandipur National Park, Himavad Gopalaswamy Betta also holds environmental significance, making it a rare fusion of ecological preservation and spiritual reverence.

The temple atop Himavad Gopalaswamy Betta is believed to have been constructed during the Hoysala era, around the 13th century. Later additions and renovations were made under the patronage of the Wodeyars of Mysore. The temple is built in the traditional Dravidian architectural style, with intricate carvings and a sanctum that enshrines the idol of Lord Krishna playing the flute. Local lore connects this place to the mythological tales from the Dwapara Yuga, where Krishna, the cowherd god, is believed to have drawn his divine cattle to this serene and secluded hill. The legend explains why Krishna is venerated here as Gopalaswamy, the Lord of the Cowherds.

Religious pilgrims revere the temple for its spiritual atmosphere and divine presence. The idol of Gopalaswamy is carved from dark granite and stands gracefully, symbolizing divine love and tranquility. Pilgrims visiting the temple often speak of a unique calmness that descends upon them, believed to be the blessing of the deity. The sanctum is said to emit a mystical aura, particularly on misty mornings when the clouds drift into the temple premises.

Himavad Gopalaswamy Betta lies within the core zone of the Bandipur Tiger Reserve, a protected national park known for its rich biodiversity. The lush green hills, dense forests, and rolling meadows make the region a haven for flora and fauna. The hill is often blanketed in mist even during summer months, which contributes to its year-round pleasant climate. This unique microclimate supports a variety of medicinal plants, wildflowers, and rare species of trees.

Wildlife sightings are common, with herds of deer, elephants, peacocks, and occasionally even tigers being spotted by visitors. Due to the ecological sensitivity of the area, the Karnataka Forest Department has implemented strict regulations. Private vehicles are not permitted on the hill. Instead, visitors must board designated forest department

buses from the base to reach the summit. This not only helps in controlling pollution but also preserves the sanctity and serenity of the environment.

Tourists are expected to follow eco-friendly practices, such as refraining from littering, avoiding loud noises, and not carrying food items that could attract wildlife. The area is declared a no-plastic and no-smoking zone. Furthermore, visitors are allowed only between dawn and early afternoon, typically from 6:30 AM to 1:00 PM, ensuring minimal human disturbance to the local fauna. Beyond its religious significance, Himavad Gopaldaswamy Betta offers a deeply spiritual experience for all who visit. The combination of rolling mist, silent surroundings, and the gentle flute-playing form of Krishna conjures a transcendental aura.

It is not uncommon for visitors to describe their journey as a form of meditation. The sight of the temple emerging through the fog is almost poetic, leaving an indelible impression on the minds of devotees and nature lovers alike. According to local beliefs, there are five sacred water bodies or 'tirthas' on the hill, each considered holy and used for ritual purification. These are said to have originated from the footsteps of Lord Krishna and are visited by devotees seeking blessings. Interestingly, one legend claims that crows do not fly over this hill due to a curse, and indeed, visitors often report an eerie absence of these birds, further adding to the mystique.

The annual Gopaldaswamy fair attracts a large number of pilgrims and rural devotees from surrounding regions. Special poojas and bhajans are performed, and the entire temple is decorated with flowers. Though the temple does not organize grand chariot festivals like some other temples in the region, its quiet elegance and deeply spiritual rituals make it unique.

The temple structure is modest yet aesthetically compelling. It consists of a garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum), a sukhanasi (vestibule), and a navaranga (pillared hall). The main idol of Gopaldaswamy is flanked by sculptures of Rukmini and Satyabhama, Lord Krishna's consorts, although these are found in separate sanctums. The outer walls bear minimal carvings, preserving the temple's simple but dignified look. Despite its relatively small size, the temple's elevated location gives it a grand presence. It faces east and is positioned such that the rising sun lights up the sanctum every morning, adding to the sacred atmosphere. The maintenance of the temple is overseen by the Muzrai Department of Karnataka, with support from the Forest Department to ensure that all activities remain eco-sensitive.

Himavad Gopaldaswamy Betta is accessible via the Bangalore-Mysore-Gundlupet highway. From Gundlupet, it is about 22 kilometers to the forest gate. Entry fees and forest bus charges are modest, typically ranging between Rs. 50 to Rs. 70 per person. Photography is restricted to mobile phones, and professional cameras are generally not allowed to avoid disturbance to the wildlife. Visitors are not allowed to remain on the hill after 1:00 PM. This restriction ensures the safety of tourists and the protection of wildlife, as animals begin to emerge in the cooler parts of the day. The forest department has posted guards and guides to monitor tourist activities, provide information, and assist in emergencies. There are no accommodation facilities atop the hill, and overnight stays are prohibited.

However, nearby towns like Gundlupet and Bandipur offer a range of lodging options, from budget hotels to eco-resorts. Many pilgrims choose to combine their visit to Himavad Gopaldaswamy with trips to nearby attractions like

Bandipur National Park or the temples of Nanjangud.Himavad Gopaldaswamy Betta is more than just a temple on a hill. It is a spiritual sanctuary, a natural wonder, and a testament to the harmony between devotion and ecology.

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