

The Gajashala

AMBLING THROUGH THE CITY OF VICTORY

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Travel back to the bygone days of the Vijayanagara dynasty. The ruin of the ancient city of Hampi today stands amidst gargantuan boulders. Climb up the 575 steps to the Anjaneya temple to view the sunset and hike atop the Matanga hill for a sublime sunrise, or take a coracle ride across the Tungabhadra river during the wee hours, the only sound breaking the silence being the swish-swash of the oar dipping in the water. Nature and history at their best—barren mountains, lush coconut trees, serene water of the Tungabhadra, a string of historical monuments—this UNESCO World Heritage Site is slowly getting featured on the traveller's map.

Vijayanagara (literally, 'the city of victory') was founded in 1336 in the Deccan region of the Indian subcontinent by two brothers, Hakka and Bukka. The city of about sixteen square miles with over a thousand monuments was built on the banks of the Tungabhadra, a confluence of Tunga and Bhadra rivers. Islamic invasion loomed large as the Delhi Sultanate began to expand its dominion. To ward off invasion, two new states—the Bahman Sultanate, based in Gulbarga, northern Karnataka, and the Vijayanagara empire based at Vijayanagara, with its capital at Hampi, central Karnataka—were formed. While the former disintegrated due to internal strife, the latter flourished, albeit for a short period. The year 1565 saw the downfall of the Vijayanagara dynasty at the battle of Talikota: it fell at the hands of the Deccan Sultanate. The city was pillaged for months and later abandoned. This short dominance lasting a little over two centuries was marked by the building of a grand city which stands today in a restored state; further excavations are underway to unearth hidden gems of the period.

Across the southern bank of the Tungabhadra lies the sacred centre, the complex that houses the most number of temples. Shaivite shrines are situated primarily to the west and Vaishnavite shrines to the east of the Kodanda Rama temple. The Virupaksha temple, dedicated to Shiva, was built in 1510 by King Krishnadevaraya, marking his accession to the throne. The double-walled compound is accessed through towered *gopuras* (gateways) and leads to the grand courtyard studded with intricately carved pillared halls. The inner sanctum houses the sanctuary of Virupaksha and his consort Pampa. This is the only active temple in Hampi today and attracts enormous crowds during festivals—especially, the marriage festivities of



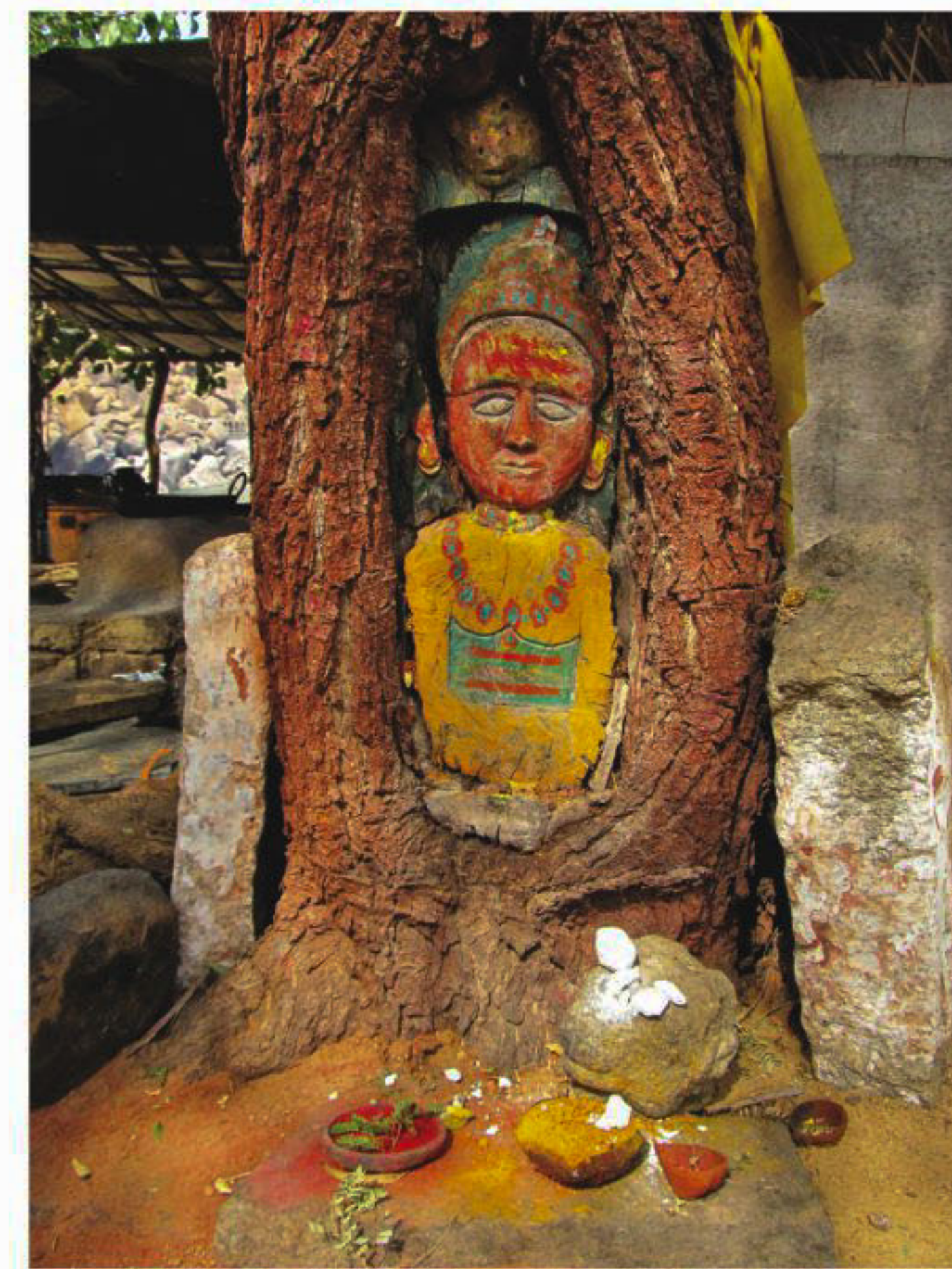
Ruins from the top of the Matanga hill.

Virupaksha—Pampa in December and the chariot festival in February. The temple elephant Lakshmi stands here to bless devotees with a gentle trunk-bump on the head when offered a ten-rupee-note treat. The temple has other smaller shrines such as the Nandi shrine, a water tank, and a pathway that leads straight to the river.

South of Virupaksha temple lie the Balakrishna temple, a ten-feet tall Shiva linga, and the twenty-two-feet high enormous Narasimha monolith. The Achyutaraya temple complex, dedicated to Vishnu and one of the largest in Hampi, lies east of the Virupaksha and at the

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TRAVEL



The stone chariot

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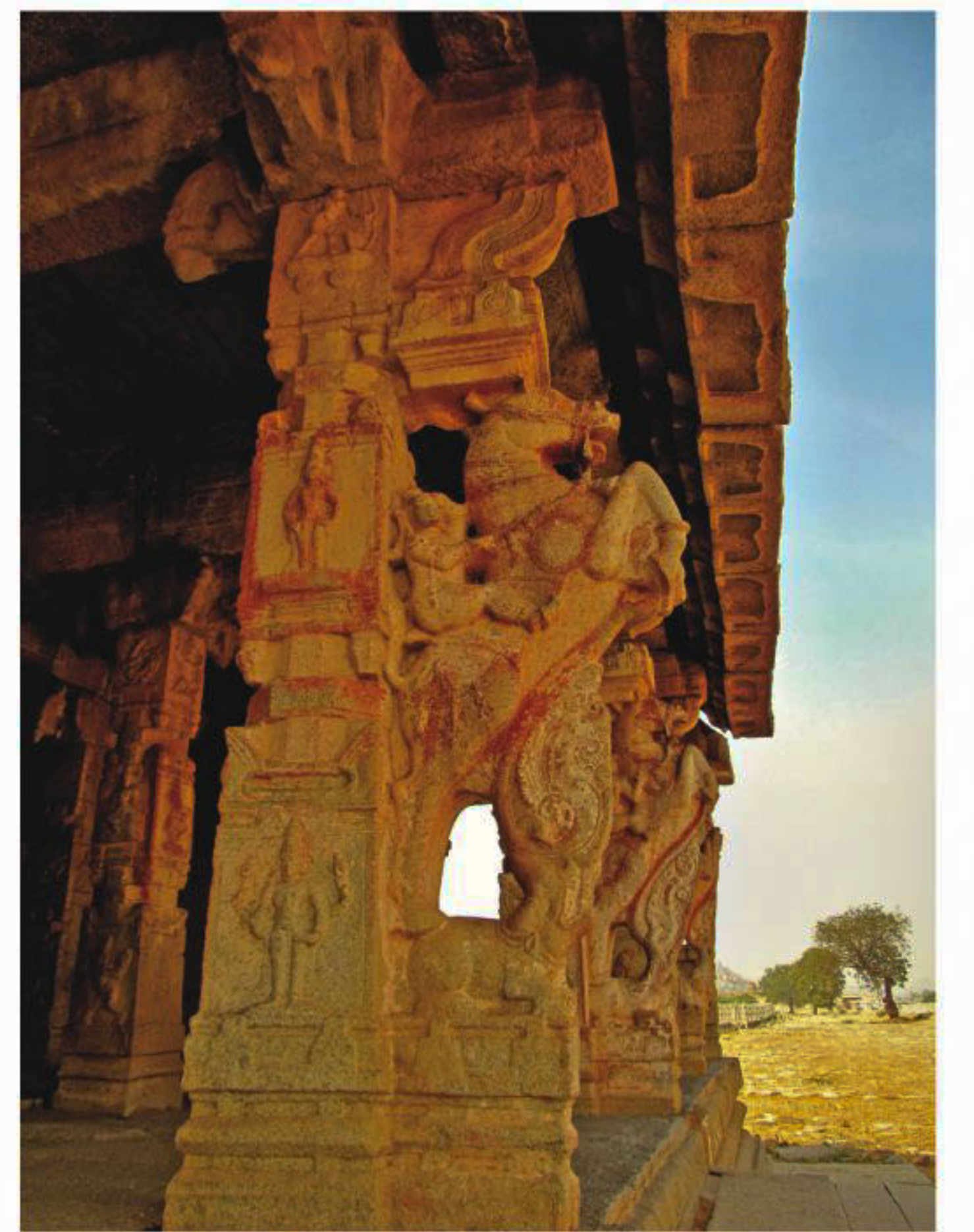
foot of the Matanga hill. The temple was built in 1534 during the reign of King Achyutaraya. The pillars of the hall are carved with reliefs of Vishnu and other deities, and scenes from daily life.

The Vitthala temple, dedicated to Krishna, spans over three kilometres and is situated northeast of the Virupaksha temple. The stone chariot, a Garuda shrine, within the temple complex is the most photographed structure in Hampi and features on the newly issued fifty-rupee note. Modelled on the Konarak Sun temple of Odisha the chariot represents the beauty and artistic perfection of the Vijayanagara empire. Also within the complex are a large *pushkarani* (stepped well or tank) and several *mandapams* (pavilions), among which is the *sangeet mandapam*, where the pillars produce sonorous sounds when struck gently with a stick. Many more temples and structures dot the sacred centre of Hampi. The wide streets leading up to the temple complex with rows of pillars flanked on each side acted as the path taken by chariots during chariot festivals.

Further away, the royal centre houses the Queen's Bath, Mahanavami Dibba, another pushkarani, Hazara Rama temple, Lotus Mahal (which acted as the council hall), and the majestic elephant stables or *gajashala*. This part of the city boasts of Indo-Islamic architecture. One of the best preserved structures, the *gajashala* is a long one-storey building with rows of eleven domed chambers used to house the royal elephants. The hooks to which the elephants were tied can still be seen on the inside roof of the domes. Multiple tanks, wells, and



Virupaksha temple from Hemkunta hill



Ornate pillars



Holy men dotting the many temples

cisterns reveal the well-established water infrastructure of the empire. Most of the structures in and around the city are made from granite, lime mortar, stones at times of an irregular cut, and bricks.

Anjaneyadri, located in the Anegondi region, is believed to be the birthplace of Hanuman. The strenuous climb pays off in the end with views of paddy fields and cool breeze. The Anjaneya temple at the top is dedicated to Hanuman (son of Anjana) and is flocked by devotees—humans and monkeys alike. The inner chamber of the temple reveals the idol of Hanuman carved on a rock, as also a Rama–Sita shrine.

Redolent with history and architecture, Hampi speaks volumes of the flourishing Vijayanagara empire. It is slowly gaining popularity as an off-beat tourist destination for travellers, first, outside Karnataka, and then spilling over to those outside the country. Hampi

has no direct connectivity of flights or trains. The nearest airport is Hubli (although the international airport at Bengaluru [350 km/7 hours] is more accessible). The nearest railroad is at Hospet (13 km/30 mins). Taxis and buses are available from the airport and station. Direct overnight bus from Bengaluru is also a popular and cost-saving option. Within Hampi, cycles and bikes are available on rent; autorickshaws are also available to take you to the points of interest. However, nothing beats exploring on foot, at your own pace. With Hampi slowly gaining popularity, a lot of homestays, guest houses, and resorts are emerging. A few heritage houses even offer a traditional, close-to-nature experience in terms of stay as well as cuisine.

Madhula Banerji has been a publishing professional for a decade. Presently, she is a freelance editor and writer based in New Delhi. All photographs have been taken by her.