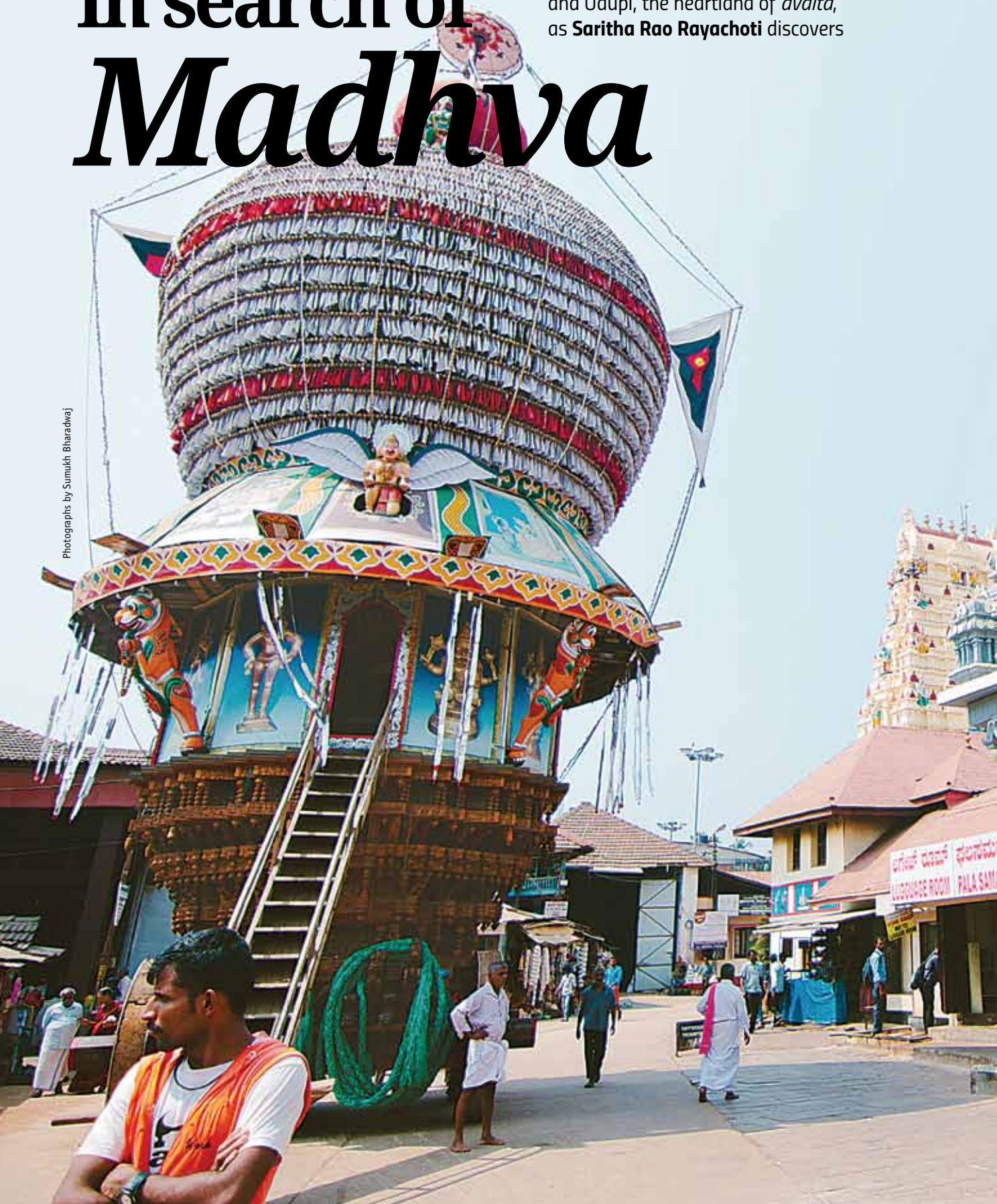


# In search of *Madhva*

Spiritual legends abound in Malpe and Udupi, the heartland of *dvaita*, as **Saritha Rao Rayachoti** discovers

Photographs by Sumukh Bhargadwaj





**I**t is the 13th century. A ship from Dwarka sets sails along the western coast of India, crosses the coast of Goa and navigates further south. A storm descends upon the sea rendering visibility poor along a particularly treacherous stretch. In the haze, the crew spots a blur of orange in the distance, on what seems to be land. In the absence of any other navigational device, they use it to steer the ship to safety.

The spot of orange, as the story goes, was the saffron upper cloth that the philosopher Madhvacharya waved from the shore at Malpe to guide the ship. Legend has it that the grateful crew offer him two logs of wood used as ballast to balance the ship, as tokens of gratitude. Madhvacharya discovers that these are not logs, but mounds of *gopichandana*, considered sacred among worshippers of Krishna. *Gopichandana* is a variety of caked mud from a pond in Vrindavan that is presumed to be scented by the emollients and perfumes of the Gopis who bathed there during the time of Krishna.



Here at Malpe, we hear about the miracle—that Madhvacharya calmed the ocean with a powerful swish of his upper cloth. It is compelling enough to convince one of the near divinity of Madhvacharya. I begin to wonder about this marked shift in our group's collective beliefs, from the rationalists that we are in our daily lives, to seekers of miracles in spiritual narratives

Imagine Madhvacharya's delight when he discovers that these mounds also encased idols of Krishna and Balarama. He installs the Balarama idol at a temple in Malpe and brings the Krishna idol to Udupi, which eventually becomes an important pilgrimage centre for Vaishnavism.

In the fierce midday sun, Malpe beach is a blinding expanse of white sand. I realise for the first time that day that the above version of the *gopichandana* story is solely mine in the way it is narrated. But here at Malpe, shielding ourselves from the afternoon glare, we hear about the miracle—that Madhvacharya calmed the ocean with a powerful swish of his upper cloth. It is compelling enough to convince one of the near divinity of Madhvacharya. I begin to wonder about this marked shift in our group's collective beliefs, from the rationalists that we are in our daily lives, to seekers of miracles in spiritual narratives.

We are on a day trip to Udupi, a small town in Karnataka, also known in days of yore as Rajathapeetha and Shivalli. At the heart of Udupi stands the Krishna Temple with its idol installed by Madhvacharya (1238-1317), a Hindu philosopher who propounded the philosophy of *dvaita* or dualism, that the *jeevatma* (the self or individual soul) and *paramatma* (God or the Supreme Soul) are separate. The temple is surrounded by eight *matha* or monastic orders: Pejavara, Palimaru, Adamaru, Puttige, Sodhe, Kaniyooru, Shiroor and Krishnapura. They oversee the administration of the temple by rotation, every two years.

We began our visit with the pertinent question as to why devotees are required to visit a Shiva temple before the Krishna Temple. Chandramouliswara is considered the *graamaddevta*—presiding deity of the region—and devotees pay their respects to him before proceeding any further. The shrine is a squat humble structure, typical of the temple architecture in these parts, with no lofty *vimana* or *gopura*. Drawings of *dwarapala* flank the doorway to the sanctum.

At the Anantheshwara shrine next door, Madhvacharya's parents prayed for a child for 12 years. And it was here, almost 80 years later, that he is said to have been last seen. The story of Madhvacharya began and ended here. The word *anantha*, however, means just the opposite—endless, with neither beginning nor end.

At the Kanakana Kindi, or Kanaka's Window, we hear the story of Kanakadasa (1508-1606), a poet-composer from a shepherding community who wished to see the deity of Krishna. Social restrictions of those times did not permit him entry the temple. One day, the wall that blocked his line of sight crumbled and the deity turned on its base towards the west to grant the ardent devotee his wish.

The window is small, with three vertical slots, and every visitor stands in the place of Kanakadasa for the twice-removed first glimpse of Krishna's idol. How many of us are aware of this moment of empathy with Kanakadasa, so evocatively set up as a ritual? To stand where he stood, and yearn for a glimpse of the deity as he did!

One approaches the main temple from a side entrance. The sanctum does not have a doorway, only a window with nine holes, called the Navadwara Kindi, through which one can see the idol. It perhaps alludes to the intricate allegorical tale of King Puranjana in the *Bhagavata Purana* where the *navadwara*, literally, nine gates, denote the nine apertures of the human body through which we experience the world. Surprisingly, there are numerous references to this window as the Navagraha Kindi, although there are no symbols of the *navagraha* carved on the window frame.

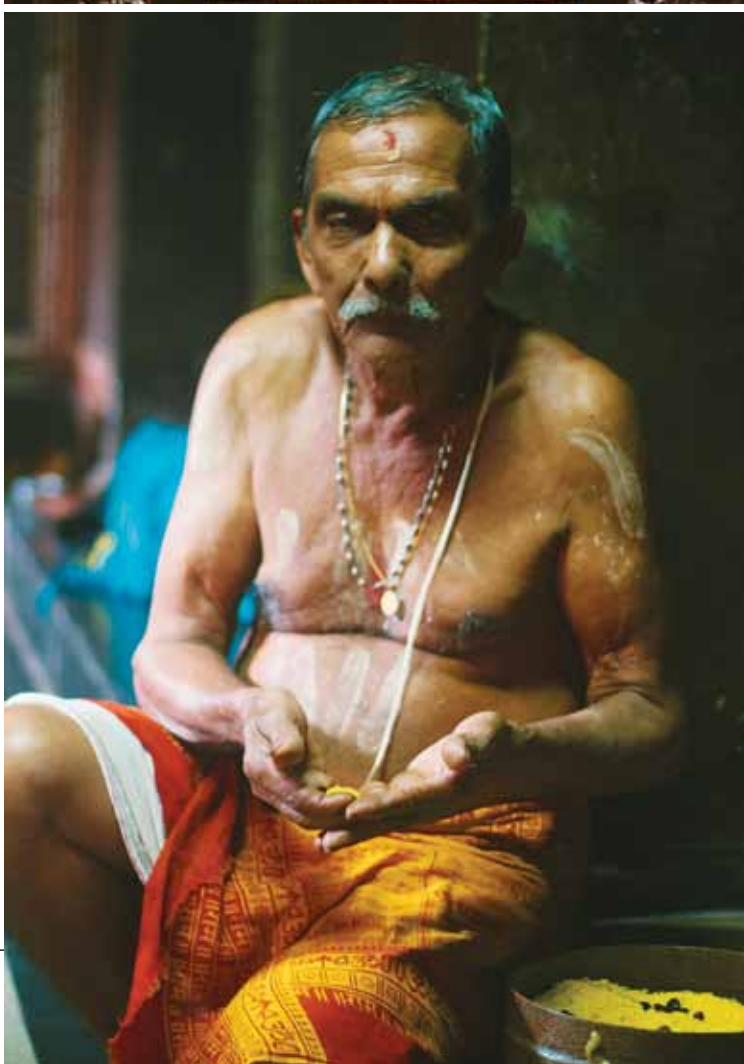
The deity itself is striking, depicting Bala-Krishna, little Krishna, whose hands clutch a butter churner and its rope, mirroring not only his fondness for milk, curd and butter, but also, as some devotees tell me later, the churning of the human mind through worship to gain realisation.

We are now ushered to a shrine for Mukhya Prana or Main Life Force, as Hanuman is also known. Mukhya Prana is a title usually attributed to Vayu, the wind god, for his vital role in the functioning of the human body. Hanuman from the *Ramayana* and Bheema from the *Mahabharata* are considered incarnations of Vayu, as is Madhvacharya.

On our way out, we notice numerous gaily painted chariots, with small flags and sparkly streamers flapping in

**Clockwise from top left:**  
devotees at Kanakana Kindi;  
the idol of Goddess Durga at  
Kunjarugiri; a priest offers  
*akshata* of tamarind seeds and  
rice at Pajaka Kshetra; butter  
churners at a local shop









## factfile

### GETTING THERE

**By air:** Mangalore is the nearest airport, about 60 km away.

**By rail:** Udupi is the nearest railhead but Mangalore City or Mangalore Junction may be more convenient.

**By road:** Udupi is 60 km away from Mangalore on the Kochi-Panvel Highway.

### ACCOMMODATION

On a pilgrimage, there are many options to stay in Udupi itself, as part of the eight *matha* or in one of the hotels. This would be a convenient base to explore the place. Else, Mangalore has options for every budget.

### WHAT TO BUY

*Gopichandana*, idols of Udupi Krishna, butter churners, other religious essentials.

the light breeze. On one of them, I spot a poster of Parashurama, who looks imposing, his steely gaze cast over the rooftops, and across the land, to perhaps his *kshetra* that we are to visit later that afternoon. We are handed out small pellets of *gopichandana* and this comes as a timely reminder for us to be on our way to Malpe, the site where the mounds were gifted to Madhvacharya and where I begin to wonder about the nature of spiritual narratives.

After regarding the hot sands of Malpe beach with some circumspection, we hear that the temple is about to close and we must make haste. This is the temple that houses the idol of Balarama that Madhvacharya also received in the mound of *gopichandana*. It is a rushed visit, and I am barely able to make out the deity in the dim light of the sanctum. The temple itself is small and serene, with the sanctum in the middle of a courtyard.

We press on and make our way to Pajaka Kshetra, often mispronounced as Paduka Kshetra. After praying at the Anantheshwara Temple in Udupi for an offspring, Madhvacharya's parents Madhyageha Bhatta and Vedavati moved to Pajaka Kshetra where, on Vijayadashami day in 1238, Madhvacharya was born. He was named Vasudeva.

Vasudeva went on to be initiated into *sanyasa* as a teenager and named Purnaprajna when he became the head of the monastery. He went on to refute Adi Shankara's *advaita* philosophy and became renowned as Ananda Tirtha and Madhvacharya. His debates in favour of *dvaita*, or dualism, earned him many followers, collectively known as *madhva*. The name of Madhvacharya commands such reverence

that it is hard to imagine him as a little boy, however precocious he might appear in the stories we hear.

There is a modest shrine for Anantapadmanabha in the courtyard. In the corridor surrounding the courtyard, large baskets of the sort used for harvesting or carrying coconuts or chillies dry in the sun. A young woman sits on the floor preparing garlands of sweet smelling *bakula*. A small copper container holds what looks like the fossil of a mollusc, with a few *parijatha* flowers strewn over it. A resident tells us that it is a Sudarshana *Saligrama*, and is kept as part of the *puja* in the sanctum here as a *pratika* (representation) of Krishna's *sudarshana chakra*.

Later, I come across a reference that said that the statues of Krishna and Balarama Madhvacharya received were also made of *saligrama*, ammonite fossils found only in the Gandak river basin in present-day Nepal. It is here in this courtyard that little Vasudeva had his *aksharabhyasa*, his first lesson in the written word. Even today, parents bring their children here for their first inculcation. When Madhyageha held his son's hand and traced a letter on a surface of rice grains, I wonder if he realised the role of the written word in his son's life.

Soon enough, we are led to a tank outside, Vasudeva Tirtha, with a small shrine for Parashurama. On the steps of the tank, halved coconuts and red chillies dry in the sun while the resident cat is sprawled in the shade. It is an unassuming place, one I would love to return to, whether it held any special significance or not. But as we discovered, it did.

What if every miracle held the kernel of a metaphor? Madhvacharya's calming the ocean personified his role as a guide to those floundering in search of a spiritual identity. The metaphor of the sprouted twig is obvious, that Madhvacharya would go on to revive Vaishnavism. Were these narratives meant to be dual and layered...?

A hillock in Kunjarugiri is closely linked to the story of Parashurama who is said to have established a temple for Goddess Durga here. Around the hill he is also said to have created four tanks named after his weapons: Dhanushtirtha (bow), Banatirtha (arrow), Gadatirtha (mace) and Parashutirtha (battle axe). As a little boy, Vasudeva had his ritual bath here.

There is a sun-dappled leafy enclosure with a path around a banyan tree. The legend to this is, little Vasudeva was playing in the yard, when his father asked about the twig in his hand. The boy replied that it was Vaishnava Dharma. His father pointed out that the twig was dry. The boy planted it and it is said to have sprouted. This may be the site, and not the very tree that grew from that sapling, but we are grateful for the large canopy that we sit under. When we return to the shrine from another entrance, the stories continue in the vein of the fantastic. Two large stone slabs are displayed here as the ones Vasudeva is said to have covered vessels of milk and curd with—a little farfetched, even if Vasudeva was nicknamed Bhima for his strength!

Before we return to Mangalore, we decide to sit awhile near the Vasudeva Tirtha near a tamarind tree that is unremarkable, except for the heart-warming story behind it. When a moneylender arrived to collect his debt from Madhyageha, little Vasudeva is said to have offered the lender tamarind seeds as repayment. This is a story I love, about a child who assumed responsibility for his father's debts, and that of a moneylender who had the grace to not only humour the child but absolve the debt. I like the fact that the signboard describes the incident without a miracle, but even as I bask in this moment of discovery, I overhear a narration that the tamarind seeds turned to gold. The miracle takes the magic out of the moment for me because it is competitively similar to the one about Adi Shankara and the story of the golden gooseberries.

Slowly, the realisation dawns on me. Miracles are the lifeblood of the spiritual narrative. Here I was, approaching this abundance of miracles as a rationalist would, by breaking down a miracle to its bare components and reassembling it, supported by plausible, scientific explanations. But who am I to refute a miracle when it inspires *bhakti*?

On my return from Udupi, I am drawn to another possibility. What if every miracle held the kernel of a metaphor?

#### HOW UDUPI GOT ITS NAME

*Udupa* is the name for stars and *Udupa Pathi* is the name given to the moon or Chandra, who was married to the stars. When Chandra became particularly besotted with one star, Rohini, the other sisters complained to Daksha, their father, whose curse rendered Chandra without lustre. Chandra undertook a penance presumably in the place we now call Udupi, to seek the help of Shiva to regain his lustre. Shiva tucked him in a matted lock of his hair so he could recharge his *soma* even as he waned and waned because of the curse. Hence, Shiva is also called Chandramouliswara, Chandrashekhar or Chandrachoodeshwara.

Madhvacharya's calming the ocean personified his role as a guide to those floundering in search of a spiritual identity. The metaphor of the sprouted twig is obvious, that Madhvacharya would go on to revive Vaishnavism. I found a reference to the hefty stone slabs where it was likened to the two commentaries Madhvacharya authored, *Gitaabhyasa* and *Gitatatparya*.

A rationalist would explain away the Kanakadasa miracle thus—that the idol always faced the same direction and when a powerful tremor hit the region, the wall collapsed and Kanakadasa had his *darshan*. But for seekers of metaphor, the wall itself could represent social restriction. If I took the metaphor further, it could also mean that although there is a window for the masses, and it has been built into the framework, the social restriction still stands.

Were these narratives meant to be dual and layered; miracles for those seeking the literal, metaphors for those seeking the figurative? What about the tamarind seed? Was it about humble acts that would clear karmic debts? Or did it personify little Vasudeva, so small, yet with intrinsic potential as the harbinger of transformation?

At Pajaka Kshetra, I receive the *akshata*, blessings in the form of a few grains of rice. Unlike other places of worship, the rice on my palm also has a few tamarind seeds nestled amid the grains. I pass these seeds on to those in our group who believe that placing it in the *puja* room will grow one's wealth. For me, it is enriching enough that a simple pilgrimage grew into a journey through metaphor. 🌸