

The shifting sands of Talakadu

A curse is believed to hold sway over a dynasty and this town near Mysuru

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After an hour-long drive east from Mysuru, we reach the riverbank of the Kaveri near Talakadu, a sandy expanse of land that is home to several temples. Resident monkeys raucously greet mini-trucks being set up as makeshift food stalls. Going by the number of stalls, it seems as though Talakadu is quite the thriving religious destination and riverside picnic spot. But how many visitors know of the curse that befell Talakadu?

I first heard about it from my mother-in-law. Then came a documentary and a slim volume by Sashi Sivaramakrishna that approached the subject from different perspectives. But it was still the narration of an enduring legend — involving a renowned person from relatively recent history, an act of violence, a cryptic curse and the catastrophic aftermath — that stoked our interest.

A version of the story goes that in 1610, Srirangaraya, a *palegar* or chieftain of the Vijayanagar kingdom, passed away after a long illness in Talakadu. The custody of the temple jewels of Srirangapatna passed on to his wife Alamelamma. The Maharaja of Mysuru at the time, Raja Wadiyar I (1552-1617) sent his men to Talakadu to get the jewels from the widow by any means necessary. Alamelamma gathered the jewels in the folds of her sari and uttered a curse before plunging into the Kaveri river to avoid capture. The curse ran, "*Talakadu maralagali, Malangi maduvagali, Mysuru dhorege makkalilladhe hogali*", translating to 'May Talakadu be submerged in sand, may Malangi become a whirlpool, and may the king of Mysuru be childless'.

The significance of the curse varies depending on whom you speak to. Some believe the jewels were Alamelamma's own which she lent the temple to bedeck the deity on auspicious days. Some speculate it was Alamelamma, not the jewels, the Maharaja coveted. Some see it as rivalry between the Vijayanagar and Mysuru kingdoms. A few doubt Alamelamma's existence, although in the Srirangapatna temple, there is said to be a small statue of her as a patron-devotee. Also, a pearl nose ring that rolled out of her grasp just before she plunged to her death is rumoured to adorn the deity of Sriranganayaki at Srirangapatna. However, the whirlpools in the river and the shifting sands are real and did originate around the time of Alamelamma's curse.

Today, the bend in the Kaveri, known locally as Malangi, looks nothing like a vicious whirlpool. A boatman even offers us a coracle ride as though it was routine activity for tourists there. We decide to risk being called cowards and live to ride the coracle another day.

Talakadu, we learn, owes its name to a folk tale about two hunters Tala and Kada who struck a tree not realising that Lord Shiva had taken that form. When the bark began to bleed, they ministered to the wounds using the fruits and leaves from the same tree. Shiva as the tree with power to heal itself is worshipped here as Vaidyanatheshwara.

In addition to the Vaidyanatheshwara Temple, built by the Cholas in the Dravidian style, the Shivalingas worshipped here as part of the Panchalinga Darshan are of Maraleshwara, Arkeshwara, Mallikarjuna and even one fittingly called Pathaleshwara or Lord of the Netherworld. It is these shrines that are submerged in sand.

At first glance, all we see is a grove of eucalyptus trees with a covered path that leads into it. The earth is indeed sandy. Some of the shrines are accessed by walking down stairs to the 'temple-pits' that are level with the roots of nearby trees.

We walk past cashew trees, sausage trees with striking maroon flowers, and lofty eucalyptus trees that were all planted perhaps to arrest the accretion of sand. As we stumble across sand dunes to visit shrine after shrine, we come upon a large clearing where the Keertinarayana Temple stands. The sole Vishnu temple here, it was built by the Hoysala king, Vishnu Vardhan (1108–1152). To describe the temple as rising from a subterranean island in a still lake of sand, one would think it belonged in a post-apocalyptic setting. There are sandbags and walls, but they seem to wage a losing battle against the steady flow of sand.

We return to firm ground and I revise my opinion about Talakadu being little more than the hype surrounding the curse. It is a pretty village with winding streets, a well-maintained temple pond and a primary school with pillars painted in the colours of the Indian flag. There is even a small Udupi eatery that we hear serves a sumptuous lunch.

Going by the topography and the lack of sand here, this village must have evolved much after the curse and there must still be an old settlement under all that sand. Or perhaps the curse had a geographical limit.

Then there is the curse on the Wadiyar dynasty. There is a belief that a remorseful Raja Wadiyar, who lost his son in the first year following the curse, built a shrine for Alamelamma at the palace in Mysuru where a secret *puja* is held every year during Dussehra to appease her spirit even today. Since the year of the curse, every alternate generation of the Wadiyar royal family has had to adopt. Those of a more scientific bent of mind dismiss it as the result of generations of consanguineous marriages among royal families, and that it also didn't help that adoptions were also from within the family.

In 2013, the head of the dynasty, Srikantadatta Narasimharaja Wadiyar, died without a biological heir. His wife, Pramoda Devi, adopted their grand-nephew, Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar who was crowned in a modest ceremony in 2015. One certainly hopes, for the sake

of the dapper young scion and his winsome bride Trishikha Devi — who celebrated their first Dussehra together this year — that Alamelamma's curse not only had a geographical limit, but also an expiry date.