

The abodes of Lord Bahubali

Srikumar M Menon Nov 7 2017, 1:50 IST



A view of the Gommateshwara statue in Shravanabelagola. PHOTO BY AUTHOR

On the summit of a tall, rocky outcrop, studded with monuments of various kinds, is a large, walled compound, towering over the ramparts of which is the head and upper torso of a gigantic human figure. Toiling ant-like, up the hundreds of rock-cut steps leading to the top, is a steady stream of devotees, who will arrive at the sanctuary at the summit, to gaze in awe at the 57 feet (17.7m) high statue of Bahubali - the "largest consecrated granite monolith anywhere in the world."

Unperturbed by the hubbub of the crowd and the attentions of the devout, Bahubali stands erect, his powerful arms hanging loose by his sides, gazing ahead through half-closed eyes, a gentle smile playing on his lips, "verily the personification of tranquillity" according to the celebrated Jain poet Hemachandra. This image - the tallest statue of Bahubali, or Gommata as he is also known, is at Shravanabelagola, in Hassan district of Karnataka. There are several other equally impressive statues of Bahubali at other places in Karnataka.

Monolithic wonders

The second tallest statue of Gommata is at Karkala, in Udupi District, standing all of 41 feet and 5 inches

high on a granitic hill. Yet another Gommata statue is at Venur, in Dakshina Kannada district, rising 35 feet above the pedestal it stands on. Another exquisitely carved monolithic image of Gommata stands atop a small outcrop at Gommatagiri in Mysuru district. At only 16 feet high, it is the shortest among the monolithic images of Bahubali, but the fine workmanship and beautiful location makes it one of the spectacular seats of Gommateshwara.

But who is Bahubali, also called Gommata, whose images are built on such colossal scales at so many places in Karnataka? One who could have had it all - empire, power and wealth, all within his grasp, but who chose to throw it away in the moment of his triumph, realising the futility of it all. That in essence is Bahubali, the young prince turned renunciate, celebrated by these colossal images.

Bahubali was one of the sons of Rishabhanatha, or Adinatha, the first tirthankara of the Jain religion. Tradition has it that when Rishabhanatha, ruler of Ayodhya, took to the life of a recluse, he divided up the kingdom among his hundred sons. The eldest, Bharata, was ambitious, and coveted the territories of his brothers, in addition to what he had annexed by conquest. In response to his challenge, all his brothers gave up their kingdoms and took up monkhood, except Bahubali.

To prevent war and unnecessary bloodshed, it was decided that the two brothers would engage in battle with each other. After two rounds of man-to-man contests, both of which ended in favour of Bahubali, the final round was a wrestling match between the two. Easily the stronger of the two, Bahubali lifted up Bharata effortlessly and was about to dash him to the ground, when the futility of defeating his own brother for material gain struck him. He gently lowered his elder brother to the ground. Bharata, however, was smarting from the insult of defeat in front of his subjects and hurled his discus at Bahubali. Miraculously, the discus circumambulated Bahubali and came to rest at his feet. Bahubali embraced his elder brother and joyfully gave up all that he had conquered to retire to forest, seeking enlightenment.

He stood erect, his arms hanging loosely beside him, for a year. Termite mounds grew at his feet and poisonous serpents crawled about on him. Creepers entwined his body and arms. Unmindful of all this, he persevered in his quest for enlightenment, which however eluded him despite the practice of such austerities for a whole year. The poet Jinasena relates how the sorrow of having humiliated his elder brother held Bahubali back from the attainment of full enlightenment. A repentant Bharata visits Bahubali at the site of his penance to pay him homage, and this removes the final obstacle, paving the way for Bahubali's enlightenment.

It is believed that Bharata erected an image of Bahubali at Paudanapura, the capital from which Bahubali had ruled his share of the kingdom bequeathed by Rishabha. In course of time, this image got covered by creepers and anthills and gradually even Paudanapura disappeared from this world of humans. Centuries later, Chavundaraya, the illustrious minister of the Western Ganga King Rachamalla IV hit upon the idea of creating an image at Shravanabelagola, for his pious mother Kalala Devi. It is believed that the sculptors of the image fashioned it from an erect granite tor, which stood at the summit of the hill, for consecration in 981 CE.

The Bahubali statue at Karkala was installed in 1432 CE by King Virapandya of the Kalasa-Karkala kingdom, and the image at Venur, by the Ajila chieftain Vira-Timmaraja in 1604 CE. The date of installation of the image at Gommatagiri is not known, though local legend attributes it to one Changaalva - a descendant of Chavundaraya, in the 12th century.

Favourite theme

However, the Shravanabelagola colossus was not the earliest image of Gommata to be carved. Earlier images, though not freestanding, were sculpted at Cave 4 of the 6th century Jain rock-cut temple in Badami and the Jain cave on Meguti Hill in Aihole, under the patronage of the Early Chalukyas. The tableau of Homage to Bahubali appears to be a favourite sculptural theme in Jain art, often juxtaposed with Parshvanatha, a tirthankara, as in Badami and several instances in Ellora.

Interestingly, these early images depict Bahubali with long locks of hair falling over his shoulders. Some of the early metal images of Bahubali too depict him similarly. It is from Shravanabelagola onwards that we see depictions of Bahubali with tight curls of hair. The 10-feet high image of Bahubali in Artapura, which pre-dated the one in Shravanabelagola by a few decades, also has tight curls of hair.

Bahubali was an arhat, not a tirthankara; however, he was the first being to attain moksha in this Avasarpini Kala - the descending half-cycle of the cosmic wheel of time, according to Jain cosmology. It is the alluring theme of his great renunciation which has inspired its celebration as the tallest monolithic statue of the world, and lesser colossi on several hilltops.

As one takes in the sight of any of these colossi standing erect and proud under the skies, unmindful of the onslaught of the elements, one cannot help marvelling at that quality of these statues which mirror the serenity of the ascetic in the forest, unperturbed by the anthills that cover his body, or the creepers that engulf him, or the serpents which crawl about on him.

(The author is with National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru)

