



Sunken, due to a curse ...

That is the story of the temples, situated in a small town, Talakad in Karnataka. Or, that is what the history has to say about the temples here. Heard of buildings, getting washed out or sinking below the ground due to natural calamities, But temples sinking due to a curse?

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Until a recent trip, I was unaware that Talakad possessed treasures of this magnitude, buried under centuries of sand. Reading about Talakad in travel guides and books and visualizing how it could look like had seeded abundant curiosity which took me to this town. It is a miracle how curiosity survives formal education or one's knowledge; and what I witnessed "above the ground" was nothing short of a miracle!

And why not ...? In the first glance, it is evident that the Temples were submerged below ground. These very monuments that have been under layers and centuries of sand have been excavated now part by part, pillar by pillar, and acre by acre, and re-assembled bit-by-bit to recreate the temples. Stone pillars, square at the base and made to fit into a wheel below the abacus, lie scattered all over. It's

interesting, how they must have held on to the design or the architectural layout of the original temples that stood thousands of years ago. The excavations seemed so thorough that it had removed most of the blemishes of these sunken historical monuments. Talakad once-upon-a-time had more than 30 temples, and now has merely 3-4 temples that have been painstakingly put-back together.

Merely 45 kilometers from Mysore, this place today is a big spiritual pilgrimage center and a tourist attraction. It is situated on the left bank of river Cauvery at the very spot where the river gracefully makes a sharp bend to change course. Another very unique characteristic of this place is the sand dunes spreading over a wide area of nearly ten square kilometers. This land is filled with the sea-shore like sand, smooth, slippery and molding a shape

around my feet as I walked - walking on it seemed like walking-on-a-beach. Not many know how this town came to have sea-shore sand all through the town it has intrigued historians and common man for years.

It seems the excavation work began few years back by the Archeological Survey of India (ASI). They have stumbled upon interesting finds, including three to four temples architected in Dravidian style; which stand above the ground with grace and elegance today. Not able to wait to hear out the story of the curse, I approached two elderly women who have been living there for more than fifty years. One of them, Chandramma was willing to talk about it - it seems the "Curse of Talakad" was given by a pious lady Alamelamma on the Wodeyar dynasty of Mysore.



The Power of a Curse - "Let Talakad become sand. Let Malingi become a whirlpool. Let the Mysore king fail to beget heirs" these three curses were uttered by Alamelamma, before she drowned herself in the river. The story goes: In 1610, a vassal of Vijayanagara Empire of Karnataka named Tirumala II was overpowered by Raja Wodeyar of Mysore. This forced Tirumala and his wife Alamelamma to retreat to a village near Talakad, called Malingi, on the banks of Cauvery River. She had a small collection of jewels which she lent out to the temple priest each week to decorate the deity in that temple. Unfortunately, Raja Wodeyar ordered that the jewels be confiscated as he suspected that the jewels belonged to the temple. Unable to handle this humiliation, Alamelamma decided that she rather die than part with her jewels. And she did exactly that: she drowned herself in the river along with the jewels, but not before cursing the King of Mysore, the village of Malingi and the town of Talakad.

Fable stories - that is the only place I had heard of such things like, "curse going live". But to witness something in reality with the older generation people there vouching for it, can overwhelm and stun any traveler visiting Talakad. Lady Alamelamma's curse was so powerful that it sunk all the temples

in Talakad under the sand dunes several meters deep and history has it that, the Mysore royal family had not had male heirs for several generations after this incident since 1600s. I have seen the ruins in Rome and in Hampi and the destructions there were of a different nature. The destruction here seemed so wholesome it was neither due to an invasion by an enemy ruler nor due to the long passage of time. It was due to a curse of a woman! This famed "Talakad (aka Thalakaadu) curse" is known in the folklore as a miracle since the early part of the 16th century due to these unique events that occurred that can be witnessed even today.

Hard Myth to believe, for some - Not all believe in this story believers in the power of Science seldom believe in the power of myth, miracles and curses. Such was a study done by K.N. Ganeshiah, a geologist, based on data from diverse sources and field studies. He reconstructed the possible chronology of events of the Talakad acclaimed miracle and debates that this phenomenon is a natural one. That it represents an ecological disaster that perhaps has unintentionally wrought on to this vibrant town. And he argues that the communities have intelligently woven this story or a sense of curse as an overlay to this place. Ganeshiah could be right or

the myth could be right the chances are only half, each way. The beauty however is that, this sense of curse has survived folklore for over four hundred years in this society, and the miracle still is believed.

Having come back from Talakad stunned, I read more about this town and realized that a few other legends hover over Talakad strange, yet interesting. One of them is around the two hunters, Tala and Kada, who struck one of the trees with an axe only to find blood gushing out. Jilted by what they saw and upon the bidding of a heavenly voice, they dressed up the wound of the tree with its fruits and leaves. In due course the tree healed and the hunters became immortal and since it was Lord Shiva who healed himself in this incident, he is referred to as "Vaidyeshwara", here in Talakad. The famed Panchalingams (meaning five Lingas) are associated with this legend.

Once in twelve years - As a state, Karnataka is already known for its legacy in magnificent architecture, all left behind by the rulers over the years. Talakad today is known for its well architected fourth century temple of Lord Kirti Narayana, known as Vaidyeshwara temple. The excavation and restoration of this sunken temple is what has led it to the present state and form.



According to Chandramma and the travel guide, Talakad is usually deserted and comes to life once every 12 years during the great festival that happens here. With Talakad being known by more travelers, today, more and more tourists and locals are visiting this treasure-town. The festival, called Panchalinga darshana is a holy festival held once in 12 years on the banks of the Cauvery in Talakad attracting millions of pilgrims and travelers. It seems there are five temples in Talakad that are special in the hearts of the religious and the devoted these are believed to be Panchalingas and have become reputed. With excavations ongoing, most among these five temples have been restored.

The local's portrayed enthusiasm when they talked about how the festival ideally would have been held at these five temples of Lord Shiva; but today perhaps would happen in the restored temples. The last one held in 2006 was done in the restored portions of the temples. Elaborate preparations were made for the millions of pilgrims to take part in the ceremonies over a five day period. It is unique since the worship (poojas) start at the same time in all five temples following the ancient tradition, by which they can obtain blessings for rulers and devotees. It seems the festival is held on a new moon day in the month of Karthika when two stars conjoin, and there is certain "pattern" in which the devotees should bathe in a stretch of a river and then worship in one

temple and this pattern repeats for covering all the five temples. A land with a promise - ASI has to be lauded for its efforts on excavation and restoration. At the pace with which work is being carried out here, its only certain that when it's time for the next festival in 2018, Talakad will see more structures of grandeur standing tall, above the ground. When ASI started off few years ago, a few interesting finds of objects from underneath is what enthused both the ASI and the museum department to start work in full force and also at in many places in parallel. Today, as visitors, one can see ongoing excavation efforts through the expanse, making for a unbelievable sight.

Excavating does not seem a simple task by any means: firstly the tons of sand piled up needs to be shifted to a different place. After this, the weeds and other wild growth have to be removed, place is cleaned before the actual act of excavation begins. The guide was indicating how many trucks from nearby places like Bangalore and Mysore come here to take sand for their construction work; and that is one of the best ways of letting go of all the excavated sand. Further, after restoration, walls need to be built around the temples, lest the sand caves-in again it seems it happened a couple of times before ASI had their learning in the hard way.

As I headed back, I admired the effort being put in by the state officials to bring

life back to this town of Talakad that was lost in time. For the first time, the state efforts are on to use satellite for excavation purposes bringing in hi-tech into use. Technology journals and scientists indicate that until now, satellite has never been used for research purposes or excavation. And it's truly a step in the right direction with such an effort in Talakad from 2008. The reason perhaps is that, with the help of the satellite, information can be gathered about what lies buried underneath the sand.

Talakad is a land of promises tourists must see this place to believe it; and to feel the aura. Certainly, not a town that deserves to be referred to as a "sleeping town". Nevertheless, witnessing the true magnificence of this place when it awakes to festivities and fairs must be very rewarding. State run and private buses and taxis are available to take any of us to this beautiful place. So, I have virtually decided to hop on to one of the transports and be a part of the 2018 Panchalinga Darshana festival!

Getting to and around Talakad - Nearest Airport: Bangalore and Mangalore, however Bangalore is closer to Talakad. Route: From Bangalore or Mysore, take a taxi, to reach Talakad. Distance: Situated 45 km from Mysore and 185 km from Bangalore. It is a day's trip from either Bangalore or Mysore. Food: Very good Udupi and Brahmin food messes offer sumptuous and hot South Indian food.