

It is long believed that Melkote in Karnataka, India, is the place of origin for Mandyam Iyengars. The place has gained importance in our community due to its 1000 year history and also mythological connections. This hence necessitated us to research these links and summarise them in the following paragraphs.

Melkote (Thirunarayanapuram)



Melkote is located in the Mandya district, Karanataka State in South India. It is around 30 kms from Pandavapura, 25 kms from Mandya and 160 kms from Bangalore. It is at an altitude of about 900 metres above the sea level. The place has a very long history, dating back to "Kriitha" Yuga, when it was called "Vedadri". In "Thretha" Yuga it was called "Narayanadri" and in "Dwapara" Yuga was called "Yadavadri". The main deity Cheluvanarayana, is known to have been worshipped by Sri Krishna and Balarama in Dwapara Yuga. In "Kali" Yuga, Acharya Sri Ramanuja, reinstalled the deity and the place came to be known as "Yathisaila". Melkote is equated to the famous Badarinath, and is called Dakshina Badari Kshetra. (South Badari)

Mythological link:

Brahma requested Lord Narayana (Vishnu) to provide him an idol, to perform daily prayers. Vishnu in turn gifted an idol to Brahma, which was created from his Atma Kalasha. Brahma who was using it for regular prayers, presented it to his son (Manasika Putra) Sanathkumara, for his daily prayers when he came down to Earth. Sanathkumara brought this idol of Narayana to south India and installed it in the present day Melkote. Hence this place gained the name "Narayanadri".

Now, in the absence of a Vishnu's idol for offering prayers, Brahma once again approached Vishnu with the request. Vishnu gifted him another small idol along with the idols of both his consorts, "Bhudevi" (Earth) and "Sridevi" (Laksmi).

In Thretha Yuga, Rama required an idol for his prayers because he himself was the human incarnation of Vishnu. Thus Lord Rama looked towards Brahma for an idol of Vishnu. Brahma gifted these precious idols to Lord Rama. Lord Rama was greatly attached and deeply devoted

to these idols. In view of Rama's deepest love and reverence to this Thirunaryana's idol, it gained the name "Ramapriya".

Kusha, Lord Rama's son inherited Ramapriya's idol which he gifted to his daughter Kanakamalini during her wedding to a Yadava king. Sri Krishna and Balarama of the Yadava family, inherited this idol in Dwapara Yuga. Balarama during his travel, observed the exact similarities of the main deity of Cheluvanarayana in Narayanadri, with the Ramapriya's idol in his procession. Balarama and Sri Krishna brought Ramapriya's idol to Narayandri, installed it in the temple as the "Utsavamurthy" and offered their prayers. Thus the place gained the name "Yadavadri".

## History

The famous Yadavadri, including the temple, became a ruin over the years, due to incessant wars between native Hindu kings and invading Muslims. The main deity Cheluvanarayana got buried under the ruins. The Utsavamurthy was however taken away to Delhi, along with the other riches of the temple, by the king Mohammed Badshah.

Sri Ramanuja (born in 1017AD) was camping in Thondanur for propogating **Srivaishnavism** due to the strong influence of Jainism in the region then. He brought many people into the folds of Srivaishnavism including King Vishnuvardhana. One night, Ramanuja dreamt of Lord Cheluvanarayana beckoning him to unearth the Vishnu idol from the ruins, in a nearby place. With the help of King Vishnuvardhana and his army, Ramanuja arrived in Yadavadri in 1099, and dug up the idol of Cheluvanarayana and reinstalled the Lord in a newly constructed temple. He also established regular prayers and processes for the Lord. From then, the place gained the name "Yathishaila" (Saint Hill).

Once the main deity was established, Ramanuja felt the need for a utsavamurthy in the temple. Again Lord Cheluvanarayana informed in a dream that the temple's utsavamurthy was available in Delhi in the palace of the king. In spite of his old age, Ramanuja immediately travelled to Delhi and approached the king with all his radiance and charm. He requested the king for the return of the idol of his dreams. The muslim king, who was highly impressed by Ramanuja's power and devotion agreed to return the idol. The idol however was in possession of the young princess who was deeply attached to its beauty. The princess agreed to hand over the idol to Ramanuja with great difficulty. Ramanuja accepted the idol and started on his return journey to Melkote. The princess who could not bear the separation followed the idol with Ramanuja to Melkote. Even today, there is a small idol of the princess at the feet of Ramapriya in her memory and is identified as "Bibi Nacchiar" (Muslim Angel).



Today, Melkote (known as Thirunarayanapuram among Srivaishnavas) is one of the four most sacred centres of Srivaishnavism in South India, the others being Srirangam, Thirumalai and Kanchipuram. Ramanujacharya composed the following chant (shloka) in recognition of the places,

*"Sriranga mangala manim karunanivasam*

*Srivenkatadri shikharalaya kalamegham*

*Srihastishaila shikharojwala parijatam*

*Srisham namami shirasa yadushaila deepam".*

The main deity in Srirangam is in a sleeping posture and hence the place is called "Bhoga Mantapam" (House of relaxation). Thirumalai is called "Pushpa Mantapam" (House of flowers) as the deity is always decorated with flowers. Kanchipuram is known as "Thyaga Mantapam" (House of relinquishment) as the main deity bestows the devotees. Thirunarayanapuram is known as "Gnana Mantapam" (House of Knowledge) as the main deity radiates knowledge.

Melkote (25 Kms from Pandavapura, 30 Kms from Mandya)

Melkote or 'high fort' 25 Kms from Pandavapura is an important religious centre. The 12th century

Srivaishnava saint Sri Ramanujacharya is believed to have lived here for 14 years. The Chaluvaryaswami Temple in Melukote came under the special patronage' of the Mysore Rajas and holds a valuable collection of royal jewels. The idol of Chaluvaryaswami is adored with these jewels, once a year during March-April. This occasion is called 'Vairamudi'. There is also an inscription here dated 1785, stating that Tipu Sultan gave some elephants to the temple. Built on the rocky hills of Yadugiri, the town also attracts visitors for its breathtaking scenic beauty and its bracing climate.



Situated 50 Kms.north of Mysore, Melkote is a sacred pilgrim centre, known for its Vairamundi festival in March-April. More than one lakh devotees congregate here for the festival.Melkote is also famous for its hand looms. Ramanujacharya,the Srivaishnava saint-philosopher, took shelter here from his persecutors.

VEDANTA DESHIKAR



Melkote

Melkote is also known as Tirunarayanapura since it is the abode of Lord Tirunarayana.

Sri Ramanujacharya was a great saint of the eleventh century. It was he who spread the message of Srivaishnava religion. Those who propitiate the Lord through Mother Lakshmi, Narayana's Consort, -are called Srivaishnavas. From the days of Ramanuja, Melkote became a major center of Srivaishnava faith. Ramanuja lived there for eighteen years. It was he who built the shrine and installed the deity Chelvanarayana there. Who was this Vedanta - deshikar that had received such spontaneous honors from the young and old alike?

I visit Melkote a few times every year, as Yoga Narasimha is our family Deity. Yet, we had never ventured to witness the world famous Vairmudi festival held around March-April. The thought of the many people kept us at bay. After joining the Hinduism Today team, I decided to brave the surging crowds and feature this festival. I arrived at Melkote town in Karnataka, India, with my children and parents in the late afternoon. Already, over 200,000 people had converged on this not-so-easily-accessible town. As the sun slid below the horizon, Melkote burst at its seams--all I could see was a sea of human heads.

Built on the rocky hills of Yadavagiri, 90 miles from Bangalore, Melkote is a picturesque temple town. It is the abode of Cheluvanarayana, "Handsome Narayana" and Yoga Narasimha, two forms of Vishnu. To many, Melkote is considered the holy Badrinath of South India. Yadavagiri is one of Vishnu's 108 sacred abodes. Legends associate Melkote's existence to the Krita Yuga, the age of Gods, and the diamond crown, Vairmudi, with Lord Vishnu himself.

The Vairmudi procession takes place on the fourth day of a six-day festival. For the entire year the diamond-studded gold crown remains in safe custody at the Government Treasury in Mandya, 17 miles from Melkote. It is only brought out on this auspicious day under armed escort.

The convoy commences its holy sojourn in the afternoon and stops at every village on the way to Melkote. The villagers worship the sealed Vairmudi crown. They believe that the passage of this celestial crown brings prosperity to their village.

The crown arrives at Melkote by dusk and returns to the Government Treasury duly sealed the next morning. Many years ago, the Vairmudi was kept in safe custody at the Royal Treasury in Mysore and brought under the king's soldier's watchful eyes by foot and later by horse-drawn carriage.

The parade Deity, Cheluvanarayana, dons the Vairmudi, the crown of diamonds, only at this annual extravaganza. He wears His gem-packed crown for just a few hours, from midnight to dawn. Perched majestically on His vehicular palanquin, Cheluvanarayana proceeds down the streets.

On this day, as we waited with anticipation, the Vairmudi crown arrived by sunset, bringing along with it a much-needed cool breeze. State officials and priests accompanied the diamond crown, which was sealed and wrapped in an antiquated deep blue-velvet bag. Traditional tunes of *nadaswaram* and temple bells filled the air. Men and women danced to local folk songs about the historic town. On entering Melkote, *pujas* were performed for the Vairmudi at the Anjaneyaswamy temple at the entrance of the town. The crown is then taken in procession to the main Cheluvanarayanaswamy temple.

Eighty-year-old Vaishnavite priest Kargam Sesha Iyengar, sitting unperturbed by the crowd and confusion inside, makes an inventory of the ornaments without opening their coverings. He then puts his signature on the official records affirming that everything is there. According to the religious practice mentioned in the temple records, Iyengar's family is the only one entitled to touch the Vairmudi crown. Saint Ramanuja himself, who lived in and supported Melkote some 900 years ago, is said to have assigned the temple duties to various families who have continued their service to this day.

The sealed Vairmudi is taken to the icon of Cheluvanarayana waiting to be crowned behind the privacy of a screen near the shrine of Saint Ramanuja. The lights are switched off and the idol is crowned in darkness. The Vairmudi crown is thought to be of divine origin, and according to legend, anyone who dares look at it while not on the deity risks losing his eyesight. "I close my

eyes so I do not see the crown until it is placed on the idol. I can place it correctly on the idol without difficulty," said the old priest, Iyengar.

Wearing the diamond-studded crown, Cheluvanarayana, accompanied by His consorts, descends from the platform elegantly seated on His royal chariot, Garuda Vahana. It's close to midnight, and the Deity and crown begin their sojourn along the narrow streets of Melkote.

As the Deity passed us, I had expected to see a crown of blinding brilliance, but found the Vairmudi a rather simple crown. The diamonds cut centuries ago only glowed when lights fell on them. It is the mystique of the legends that go way back in time that makes the Vairmudi a divine sight. Nothing else matters for the crowds who come long distances and wait for hours only to get a brief glimpse of the Deity. For them, it is the sight of the Lord's crown crafted in heaven and placed on His head that will remain etched in their memory forever.