

History, Heritage, and Myth: Local Historical Imagination in the Fight to Preserve Chamundi Hill in Mysore City¹

Abstract:

This essay examines popular and public discourse surrounding the broad, amorphous, and largely grassroots campaign to "Save Chamundi Hill" in Mysore City. The focus of this study is in the develop of the language of "heritage" relating to the Hill starting in the mid-2000s that implicitly connected its heritage to the mythic events of the slaying of the buffalo-demon. This essay argues that the connection between the Hill and "heritage" grows from an assumption that the landscape is historically important because of its role in the myth of the goddess and the buffalo-demon, which is interwoven into the city's history. It demonstrates that this assumption is rooted within a local historical consciousness that places mythic events within the chronology of human history that arose as a negotiation of Indian and colonial understandings of historiography.

Keywords:

Hinduism; Goddess; India; Myth; History; Mysore; Chamundi Hills; Heritage

1. Introduction

The landscape of India plays a crucial role for religious life in the subcontinent as its topography plays an integral part in the collective mythic imagination with cities, villages, mountains, rivers, and regions serving as the stage upon which mythic events of the epics and Purāṇas unfolded. The physical landscape, therefore, serves a dual role in the lives of devotees as the space in which everyday life occurs and as sites of cosmic consequence where the power of deities remains present. Upon these sites, temples, like the Cāmuṇḍēśvari Temple located on top of Chamundi Hill in Mysore City, are often erected to commemorate these mythic deeds and to give devotees access to the power that immates from the deity who continues to reside in the space.² As one might expect, these temples often become important for local, regional, and national pilgrimage. Because of Chamundi Hill's connection with the popular pan-Indian myth

¹ I wish to give special thanks to the anonymous reviewers of this article. Their comments on the initial draft of this essay were extremely helpful in helping me to refine the essay's overall argument and structure.

² Throughout this essay I refer to the city of Mysore as "Mysore City." I recognize the redundancy in this usage since *ūru* which makes up the last part of Maisūru (anglicized as Mysore) literally translates to "city." I make this distinction, however, to avoid confusion between the city of Mysore and the larger region also referred to as "Mysore." Therefore, throughout this essay "Mysore City" refers to the city of Mysore and "Mysore" references the broader region and/or the territories that formerly belonged to the Mysore kingdom.

of the goddess slaying the buffalo-demon and the excellent climate in Mysore City, the Cāmuṇḍeśvarī Temple on top of the Hill has become an increasingly popular destination for religious tourism. According to Mysore government documents, over 700,000 people made their way to the temple in 2005 making it one of the largest pilgrimage sites in all of India, and the steady stream of devotees and tourists continues to rise every year (CDP, 16). With this increase in visitors, the natural landscape that surrounds the popular pilgrimage site bears the burden of the temple's popularity, is often covered with trash discarded by the devotees, and gives rise to a number of vendors, shops, and hotels that seek to capitalize on the increasing number of visitors.³ This trend, however, has been combated by various groups, who have attempted to curb development on top of Chamundi Hill.

In this essay, I am interested in the popular and public discourse surrounding the broad, amorphous, and largely grassroots movement collectively called the “Save Chamundi Hill Campaign” that aims to protect the landscape of Chamundi Hill in Mysore City.⁴ Particularly, the focus of my study is in the develop of the language of “heritage” relating to the Hill starting in the mid-2000s that implicitly connected the heritage of the Hill and the city to the mythic

³ Today, Mysore City and Chamundi Hill are more connected than ever. There is now a paved road to the top of the Hill that has regular bus service that floods the Hill and its temples with pilgrims and tourists with fewer and fewer devotees choosing to walk up the 1,000 steps. Due to the increasing number of pilgrims, there has been an increase in commerce on the Hill. There are three primary spaces for business on the Hill. The largest is at the top, which is home to dozens of shops, a government guesthouse, and a post office. The second largest is at the base of the Hill, which primarily serves the needs of pilgrims, who are in need of offerings for the Goddess. At the 600th step, there is a large sculpture of Nandi, Śiva's bull attendant, that also draws many tourists for whom small souvenir and snack shops are set up. This problem is not unique to Mysore City or to India. Pilgrimage and devotional sites around the world are experiencing increased traffic that is accompanied by the deterioration of natural landscape and built heritage sites (for example, see Kristensen 2015).

⁴ It is unclear where this title originated, nor is there one particular organization or group to which it is applied. It seems to have stemmed from the Mysore Amateur Naturalist Campaign to “Save Chamundi Betta” (see below). Now the “Save the Chamundi Hill Campaign” refers to broad anti-development movement that has a regular presence in popular and social media; however, as of December 2017 Dr. Bhamy Shenoy of the Mysore Grahakara Parishat is the most prominent advocate for non-development on Chamundi Hill. The “Save Chamundi Hill Campaign” has, however, remained a local movement that is not supported by larger trusts like INTACH, which has aided local conservation efforts of built heritage, such as the Oriental Research Institute in Mysore or the steps leading to the Yoga Narasiṃhasvāmi Temple in Melukōṭe.

events of the slaying of the buffalo-demon. I argue that while the public discourse for the preservation of the Hill has for the most part avoided explicitly religious language, upon closer examination the movement to preserve Chamundi Hill is rooted in the rhetoric of “history” and “heritage” that develops from a clear association between the Hill and the myth of the goddess. I argue that the connection between the Hill and “heritage” grows from an assumption that the landscape is historically important because of its role in the myth of the goddess and the buffalo-demon, which is interwoven into the city’s history. In order to build my case, I show that this is rooted within a historical consciousness that places mythic events within the chronology of human history that arose from a negotiation of Indian and colonial understandings of historiography. Therefore, while the rhetoric of the campaign to save Chamundi Hill appears to draw upon the concepts of “history” and “heritage,” its foundations are built upon the landscape’s association with myth. By using the rhetoric of “history,” the movement effectively draws upon pervasive popular sentiments regarding the Hill to mobilize community action but grounds that discussion in a discourse of heritage preservation, which continues to this day.

This study is divided into three sections. In the first section, I begin by providing a very brief historical overview of the Hill in order to contextualize it with regional political and devotional practice. This overview focuses on references to deities and mythic events that shape the Hill’s identity that are found in courtly literature from the region beginning with a twelfth-century CE Hoysala inscription through the emergence of the Mysore Kingdom in the late sixteenth century CE to the colonial period and finally in the contemporary popular historical imagination. After this brief historical overview, I transition to the campaign to save the Chamundi Hill and examine the history of the movement to preserve its natural landscape focusing on its status as a “heritage site.” The core of my analysis for this section centers on the

Mysore *City Development Plan* (CDP) of 2006 that was the first major attempt by the local government to regulate development within the city in order to concretize its status as a “Heritage City.” Focusing on the CDP, I highlight how the rhetoric of “heritage” within the document is constructed through the language of history and avoids the use of any overtly religious language or reference to lived religious practice at Chamundi Hill (except for revenue potentials based on the increasing number of visitors). In the CDP, however, the history of the city and the Hill begins with the mythic deeds of the goddess and buffalo-demon. I argue that this mythic history is central in the valuation of the Hill and legitimates its distinction as a protected heritage site. The analysis of the CDP is further supplemented with materials from public discourse, primarily found in editorials written in the *Star of Mysore*, in which conservation efforts continued to be grounded upon claims of “history” and “heritage” and not through devotional or pilgrim perspectives. In the third and final section, I contextualize the connection between myth, history, and heritage by reflecting on the historicization of myth and its role in the valuation of Chamundi Hill as a heritage site.

2. Brief Historical Overview of Chamundi Hill

Chamundi Hill is a network of small hills that come together to form one large hill located just outside of Mysore City in the South Indian state of Karnataka. The Hill is largely unpopulated except for small enclaves, which are predominately inhabited by small groups of religious professionals and agriculturalists. The Hill is covered with vegetation and for most of its history the apex, where early medieval temples to Śiva and Cāmuṇḍi are located, was extremely hard to access until Dēvarāja Woḍeyar (r. 1659-1673 CE) commissioned the installation of one thousand steps leading up the Hill through its dense jungle foliage. Prior to

this intervention, the Hill had been an important site of royal power and devotional practice but only after an arduous and dangerous pilgrimage. The first extant reference to the Hill as a site of pilgrimage comes from a twelfth-century inscription commissioned by the Hoysala king Viṣṇuwardhana (r. 1108-1152) in which he refers to the deity at its apex as the sacred site of a local manifestation of Śiva (Śrī Mahābala or the “Auspicious One of Great Power”) (*EC III.1.My 16:9-10*). It is unclear the extent of the site’s popularity at this time, but it unmistakably had a place in royal Śaiva devotion that continued to be sporadically cited in inscriptions in the region through the sixteenth century.

Over time, however, the Hill’s core identity was reconfigured around the powerful goddess Cāmuṇḍi, which had most likely been a small subsidiary shrine of the main Śaiva temple. This transition seems to have occurred when the Hill and the temple became associated with local royal power when king Bōḷu Cāmarāja Woḍeyar IV (r. 1572-1576 CE) installed his capital in Puraguṛri (“City of Purpose/Aim”), which was eventually renamed Mysore City. According to many later sources from the Mysore court, the king ascended the Hill, which was still known as “Mahābalācala” (the hill of Mahābala), and was struck by lightning that left the top of his head bald (*bōḷu*). The king, however, survived “by the grace of the goddess of the Hill,” and as a result, she became his lineage’s tutelary deity. Mysore City continued to serve as the capital of the Woḍeyar Mysore kingdom from the founding of the city in 1572 CE until 1610 CE when Rāja Woḍeyar seized Śrīraṅgapaṭṭaṇa (approximately 40 miles away from Mysore on the same route as Bangalore) from the Vijayanagara viceroy and established his family as regional political powers; however, Cāmuṇḍi remained the Woḍeyar tutelary deity and the Hill continued to be the center of their devotional practice.

By 1648 CE, the Hill was primarily identified with its goddess who was called Cāmuṇḍi of the Hill (*beṭṭada cāmuṇḍi*), and the goddess had been connected with the mythology of the royal goddess Durgā through her role as the slayer of the buffalo-demon (*KNV* I.10; *EC* III.Nj 198).⁵ From this point onward, the history of the city and the Hill has been interwoven with epic and Purāṇic narratives, making both increasingly important for pan-Indian mythology. Indeed, the mythic history of the city is even memorialized in its name: Mysore (an Anglicization of Kannada *Maisūru* or one of its variations: *Maisūru*, *Mahisūru*, etc.) that translates to English as the “city of the buffalo” and is a reference to Mahiṣāsura (buffalo-demon), the mythic *asura* (demon) from Purāṇic lore, who is killed by the Goddess in the *Devīmahātmya* of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* and the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

After the fall of Ṭīpū Sultān in 1799 CE, Mysore City was eventually reestablished as the capital when the Wodeyars were reinstated by the British as the kings of Mysore. During this period, the British undertook major building projects in the city in order to shift the regional political focus from Ṭīpū Sultān’s fallen capital of Śrīraṅgaṭṭaṇa toward Mysore City, which had remained more closely associated with the Wodeyar dynasty even during their deposition from power (1783-1799). Over the course of the colonial period, the Mysore kingdom became the jewel of the British Rāj, earning the moniker the “model princely state.” The elaborate

⁵ The Purāṇic narrative elaborates that from his capital the *asura* grew in power due to an ill-advised boon from Brahmā and was able to acquire the throne of heaven and dispel the gods (*deva*) to earth. The gods were filled with rage but were impotent to defend themselves. Consumed with rage, they let their energies (*śaktī*) emerge from their foreheads, which united to form the Goddess (Devī). The Goddess, formed from combined powers of the displaced deities, immediately began destroying the armies of Mahiṣāsura with great ease. After defeating many of his generals, an epic battle ensued between the Goddess and Mahiṣāsura. Despite Mahiṣāsura’s ability to shape-shift and his haughty antagonism, the Goddess was victorious and returned the gods to their abodes. At the close of the episode, she offered a boon to return whenever she is remembered by devotees. The epic battle is one of the most popular in the Indian imaginary and can be seen in Mysore at almost every turn represented in the iconography of “slayer of the buffalo” (*Mahiṣāsuramardīnī*) in which the Goddess drives her trident into the flesh of the buffalo-demon. Throughout India, this battle is commemorated during the ten-day festival of Dasara (a.k.a. Durgā Pūjā, Dasain, Vijayadaśami, etc.), a festival which had special significance for the establishment of kingly authority in South India especially since the Vijayanagara dynasty, which the Mysore Wodeyars attempted to emulate.

palaces and government structures that were built during the colonial period of princely rule now serve as major tourist attractions for Indian and international visitors, and, as a result of the New Delhi Ancient and Archaeological Site and Remains Act of 2004, led to Mysore City being declared a “Heritage City” in 2006 (Rao 2006).⁶ During this same period, however, the Wodeyar connection to their tutelary goddess Cāmuṇḍi only grew with the reinstated king Kṛṣṇarāja Wodeyar III (r. 1799-1868). Kṛṣṇarāja Wodeyar III attributed his reinstatement to the goddess, who became known almost exclusively by the title Cāmuṇḍēśvari (“Queen Cāmuṇḍi”), and built the large pyramidal entrance (*gōpura*) at her temple and a summer palace (Rajendra Vilāsa) on top of the Hill.⁷ Additionally, Kṛṣṇarāja Wodeyar III initiated the famous Mysore Dasara procession that has and continues to connect the goddess Cāmuṇḍēśvari and the royal family in devotional practice and the Hill and the city through procession.

The matter of use and ownership of the lands surrounding Chamundi Hill has been a contentious and public debate between the Wodeyar family and the national and state governments since the dissolution of the princely states and their privy purses as part of 26th Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1971. These debates have only intensified and become more complicated as the members of the royal family, particularly Śrīkanthadatta Narasiṃharāja Wodeyar (1953-2013) and his wife Pramoda Devi (b. 1954) have sought the lands around Chamundi Hill, claiming that they belong to them as portions of the royal holdings afforded

⁶ The particular aim of the New Delhi Ancient and Archaeological Site and Remains Act of 2004 was to protect buildings that were over 100 years old that had previously not been covered by India’s Ancient Monuments and Ancient Site and Remains Act of 1959 (Department of Law 2005). This, of course, was largely focused on the large and impressive structures built during the British period, as is evidenced by the list provided of preservation work since the bill was passed by Director General of the Central Public Works Department: “President Estate, Hyderabad House New Delhi, Parliament House New Delhi, Victoria Memorial Kolkatta, Mayo College Ajmer, etc.” (*Handbook of Conservation* 2013, 3).

⁷ The Rājendra Vilās Palace, which was originally built in 1822 by Kṛṣṇarāja Wodeyar III, was rebuilt during the reign of his grandson, Kṛṣṇarāja Wodeyar IV.

them as part of the Indian national integration process. The state, however, claims ownership because the land had been earmarked for public use.

Because of the association of the goddess of the Hill with the myth of the slaying of the buffalo demon, the city and its landscape have become part of the myth itself. Mysore and Chamundi Hill are, therefore, considered sacred landscapes that are integral in the way people of the region understand the myth, their city, and their own connection to divinity. Moreover, according to the popular narrative of the city's origins, in ancient times Mysore had been the physical location of the buffalo-demon's mythical kingdom, which he lost when Cāmuṇḍi defeated him in battle on Chamundi Hill. This is not only engrained in the historical consciousness of the city, but it is set in the stone landscape itself. On the side of the hill near the colossal Nandi statue several hundred yards down the Hill there is an interesting geological formation in the rocks that is known locally as "Buffalo Point" (*kōṇa mule*). This area is believed to be the exact location where the goddess killed the buffalo-demon (**Fig. 1**). The exposed granite of the formation reveals indentions and grooves that resemble larger-than-life foot, hoof, and paw prints of the goddess, the buffalo-demon, and the goddess's lion mount.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

3. Preserving Chamundi Hill as a Site of Mysore's Heritage

Building upon the historical overview above, in this section I examine conservation efforts to preserve the natural landscape of Chamundi Hill beginning with the roots of the movement to preserve the Hill in legislation from the mid-twentieth century that aimed to protect the Hill from development. The primary focus, however, is on the *City Development Plan* of 2006, which was the first organized effort by the city's government and civic leaders to articulate

the need to preserve the natural landscape of Chamundi Hill. Of particular importance is the connection between myth, heritage, and history that is assumed within these efforts. I argue that this landmark document in the movement to protect the Hill draws upon the collective historical imagination that incorporates the battle between the goddess and the buffalo-demon that places these events within the city's history and marks the Hill as a site in need of preservation.

From the earliest interest in the preservation of Mysore's historical heritage, Chamundi Hill has been earmarked because of their historical importance, a designation that is usually only reserved for important structures or monuments. The original leader in the movement to preserve the sacred landscape of Chamundi Hill was the politician and member of the extended royal family, Devaraj Urs. Urs was born in Mysore City in 1915. He was formally trained as a teacher and educator; however, because of his family's important status within the local community he quickly emerged as a political leader in the region. Early in his political career he joined the regional wing of the Congress party that was commonly called "The Syndicate." His influence grew quickly, and by 1953 he was the Chief Minister of Education of Karnataka. After becoming a major force within the political sphere, he became interested in the environment and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage of his home. Thus, in 1966 in conjunction with his wife, Subramanya Raje Urs, a novelist, he devised the Nehru Loka Project. This Project was to secure land for farmers and laborers and to set aside large tracts of uncultivated land for "parks and open spaces" in Mysore City and its surrounding areas. Under Nehru Loka, 12,355 acres (5,000 hectares) of land were earmarked against urbanization and industry to remain uncultivated for recreational and aesthetic purposes. A major portion of this project included the preservation the Cāmuṇḍeśvarī Temple at the top of Chamundi Hill but also restricted development of the natural landscape of the entire landscape. The justification for including Chamundi Hill in the

legislation was that the Hill provided a link between land and the cultural heritage of the city.

The project never became official nor was it ever passed into law because of national politics and the introduction of nationally recognized land reform legislation, but it was implemented locally in Mysore as the Nehru Loka Project of 1966.

In 1971, Urs successfully won the election for Chief Minister in the State of Karnataka for Indira Gandhi's Congress Party, where he immediately surrounded himself with scientists and academics and began a push for national land reform. In 1976, a year before Indira Gandhi's President's Rule was enacted, Urs convinced Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Orissa, Punjab, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal (later joined by Assam, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Rajasthan) to adopt the Urban Land (Ceiling and Regulation) Act. The goal of the Act was to distribute land equally so that farmers were able to retain the lands that they had been farming against the constant push of urbanization. The Urban Land Act also implemented many of the same reforms that were in the Nehru Loka Project, limiting the encroachment of urban development into cultural sites, which included Chamundi Hill.

In 1999, the Urban Land Act of 1976 was repealed by Karnataka among other states. However, the city of Mysore was not affected because of the implementation of the Nehru Loka Project of 1966 that protected these spaces. In the following years, there was an onslaught of criticism over the land reforms imposed by the Nehru Loka Project. The "antiquated" Nehru Loka reforms were said to be a "hurdle to the modernisation process" because they prohibited the sale of part or all of the land to industrial farmers or developers thereby limiting the production and revenue for the state (Ramoo 2001). Under such criticism, the land that had been protected by the Nehru Loka Project, including Chamundi Hill, was de-notified in 2002 by the

Government of Karnataka. By 2005, the city was facing a rampant wave of unrestricted urbanization. At this same time, a land grabbing scandal was unfolding over the entire country when it was discovered that the same government officials who had repealed the Urban Land Reform Act of 1976 had been taking land from farmers that had been protected by the Act and selling it to corporations for development projects.⁸ In order to combat overdevelopment in Mysore City and to implement the new Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) that had replaced the Urban Land Act, the city government formed the Mysore Agenda Heritage Task Force (MAHTF). The major impetus for the creation of MAHTF was the recent designation of Mysore City as a “Heritage City” by the government of Karnataka in the Karnataka Town and Country Planning (Amendment) Act of 2004 (CDP, 23).⁹ MAHTF was charged with the task of assessing the overall situation regarding development and to create a City Development Plan (CDP). The CDP was the city’s first ever attempt to create a comprehensive plan for development and the preservation of its “heritage.” The Development plan had no real power but could suggest measures by which the city could regulate its development.

The CDP seeks to set in place the directions and principles, rather than aim at being a definitive and conclusive document. Primary emphasis is on principles, directions and reform, rather than on specific projects that the City

⁸ In April of 2007, Mukhyamanthri Chandru from the Joint Legislature Committee that had been established to investigate the land grabbing scam from the early 1990s submitted a report on the encroachment of the Chamundi Hill’ buffer zone. This document cited an earlier report from 2005 that was given to the head of the Heritage branch of the MAHTF. However, that was never made public or even addressed prior to the CDP. The original report exposed a high level of encroachment by developers into the buffer region of Chamundi Hill. The findings from the 2007 report showed that nearly 500 acres (202 ha) of the 680 acres (275 ha) designated by the Mysore CDP to remain open and free of all development had been developed. This has led to a renewal of the controversy and many citizens and environmentalist calling for a revival of Devaraj Urs’s Nehru Loka.

⁹ The Karnataka Town and Country Planning (Amendment) Act of 2004 official reworked the Karnataka Town and Country Planning of 1961.

needs to develop. Given the complex and consensual nature of the exercise, it is clear that while such a consultative process gives room for all the views to be articulated, it is certainly not possible to adopt every viewpoint. The final vision will therefore reflect a preponderance of opinion, rather than be a unanimous view. A two-phased approach has been adopted to chart the direction of the City's development. A consultative, normative approach to envision the future, complemented by a bottom-up approach of specific interventions in the City (*City Development Plan 2006*).

MAHTF was chaired by one of Mysore's leading industrialists, R. Guru of Rangsons along with several other well-known engineers and architects. Therefore, it was no surprise that the plan that they offered further reduced the amount of land to be reserved for parks and open spaces in Mysore City and its surrounding areas. According to the CDP, the land designated for parks and open spaces was to be further lowered to 8.9 percent, down from the 18.05 percent protected by the Nehru Loka Project. The CDP also suggested that the city construct a railway system that traveled 13 km/8 mi from the heart of Mysore City to the base of Chamundi Hill in order to tap into the "revenue potential" of the site.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the CDP did emphasize the value of preservation and conservation in relation to the heritage of Mysore City and its surrounding areas. Like many early conservation and development plans the CDP focused on "built heritage" (Silva and Sinha 2016, vxii).

Amongst the various premodern and colonial built structures that were marked for their value to

¹⁰ Along with recognizing Chamundi Hill as a cultural heritage site, the CDP allotted a 680 acre/275 ha buffer zone around the Hill. But many still feared that the introduction of the railway system would irreparably harm the site, both physically and aesthetically and that the emissions of the gas-powered railcars would cause greater air and noise pollution in the area and the loss of the beautiful natural landscape. There was also a fear that the advent of the rail system would encourage developers to pursue the land. Throughout the debates and protests, the conversation either revolved around tourist income, environmental concerns, or its heritage, always evoking the historical significance of the natural landscape.

the heritage of the city, MAHTF distinguished the landscape of Chamundi Hill as a “Grade 1” heritage site, their highest classification. Given the outlying nature of Chamundi Hill among the sites marked for preservation within the CDP—Chamundi Hill is the only “environmental” site in the list of designated heritage sites—, one might expect to find an explanation of the significance of Chamundi Hill for the heritage of the city and the region due to the community's history with the Hill as a site of pilgrimage or even to the build heritage that dots its landscape (cf. Silva and Sinha 2016, xvii–xviii). The only description in the CDP that might even allude to its inclusion as a heritage site, however, does not even explicitly mention the Hill and is included in the middle of a section titled “Heritage Characteristics of Mysore” between the history and construction projects of Mysore’s kings and several pages that describe what constitutes a “heritage monument.” This brief definition of what constitutes a “heritage site” is framed in very vague terms:¹¹

Historical significance, architectural style, design, technology and material usage and/or aesthetics are the main parameters to identify Heritage buildings/precincts. *Heritage can be environmental, architectural, and archaeological or culture and crafts related.* It is not restricted to monuments alone: a) the study of heritage property begins with the clear understanding that it may be built or inbuilt, urban or rural, old or recent, exceptional or ordinary, dense or dispersed, homogeneous or heterogeneous. b) *It may or may not comprise a historical monument. The identification of heritage is carried out by exploration, field survey and historical analysis of the area.* c) An appreciation of the spatial relations between buildings, public space, and private court yards, gardens, perspectives, views, surrounding

¹¹ In later reports, like *MUDA Mysore-Nanjangud Local Planning Area Master Plan-2031*, reframes the preservation of Chamundi Hill because of its natural beauty and scenic importance.

landscapes etc., and the study of their inter-relationship is another important yard scale of measurement (CDP, 22; emphasis added)

Even within this very broad definition of heritage sites, it is unclear which of these criteria, if any, pertain to Chamundi Hill's heritage status.

While it is possible given the criteria above that MAHTF singled out Chamundi Hill to be preserved for its aesthetic or scenic value, the overall document instead frames the heritage of the city and the conversation efforts of Chamundi Hill through appeals to its historical significance. Indeed, historical significance is the primary factor that distinguishes a "Grade 1" heritage site, which the CDP defines by following parameters: "buildings and precincts of *national or historic importance*, embodying excellence in architectural style, design, technology and material, usage and/or aesthetics; they may be associated with a *great historic event*, personality, movement or institution. They have been and are the prime landmark of the region" (CDP, 27; emphasis added). While Chamundi Hill is certainly a landmark of the region, the preservation of Chamundi Hill is not justified through its relationship to other build structures on the Hill, which all have their own distinction as heritage sites within in the plan; instead there is no explicit explanation for why a natural landscape, like Chamundi Hill, receives this designation.

The only time the Hill is explicitly discussed outside of the list of protected sites, however, reveals the historical assumptions underlying the task force's valuation of Chamundi Hill. Here we see that Chamundi Hill is not connected to its dominating presence in the topography of the region or in its importance for regional or royal devotional history; instead the Hill is explicitly connected to the myth of the goddess and Mysore's ancient history. In the chapter titled "Background of Mysore Urban Region," that gives the history of the city, MAHTF

connects Mysore City and Chamundi Hill to the demon-king Mahiṣāsura and his battle with the goddess:

According to Hindu legend, the area around Mysore city was once the domain of the demon king Mahishasura, who grew almost invincible and wreaked havoc on the world. The Goddess Chamundeshwari vanquished the demon in a humungous struggle waged over a period of 10 days. Goddess Chamundeshwari is also known by the name Mahishasura Mardhini (Slayer of Mahisha). The battle became a festive event, which the annual 10-day Dasara festival commemorates to this day. The name Mysore is the anglicized version of Mahisūru which is derived from Mahisha. This legend, important in Hindu mythology, renders the temple of the Goddess Chamundeshwari, located atop Chamundi Hills in Mysore, an important place of pilgrimage (CDP, 13).

While this history of the city is framed through the phrase “according to Hindu legend,” the mythic narrative takes up nearly half of document’s history of the urban region and explicitly places Chamundi Hill and its attendant temples and practices within its frame of reference. Thus, given the description of the role of the Hill in Mysore’s history as the site of the mythic battle and the parameters stated for Grade 1 heritage status, it is fair to conclude that the members of MAHTF viewed the entire landscape of Chamundi Hill to be of historical value for the heritage of Mysore because of its mythic history.

The release of the MAHTF’s report spurred a great interest in the preservation of Chamundi Hill in the media and in public discourse, and, like the CDP, the conservation efforts focused on the “heritage” of Chamundi Hill. In particular, this movement aimed for more local and measured action, including the creation of a “green belt” around the Hill and regulation of

the use of non-biodegradable products at the top of the Hill in order to maintain the natural environment of the landscape. In fact, by 10 June 2005 Mysore's Urban Development Authority had proposed 6-8 new development layouts between Mysore and Chamundi Hill (Revival 2005). These concerns led to the involvement of the Mysore Amateur Naturalists (MAN), a grassroots youth and academic organization aimed to prevent unbridled urbanization and unregulated development. MAN began the "Save the Chamundi Hill Campaign," which enumerated an eleven-point objective aimed at protecting the ecosystem of the Chamundi Hill.¹² The plan entailed introducing solid waste management, promoting research on eco-tourism, and educating the villagers who live on top of the Hill about measures to keep the Dēvikere tank near the Cāmuṇḍēśvari temple clean. The group also pushed for a 500 meter/1640 feet buffer zone for any development including the railway proposed in the CDP. They were joined by many other NGOs and environmentalists in their push to preserve the Hill. Even MAHTF eventually joined their side of the debate arguing for the importance of the "green belt" region that encompasses Cāmuṇḍī Hills for lung safety and tree cover (Kumar 2005). Additionally, by October 2005 legislation was enacted that declared Chamundi Hill a plastic-free zone by law.

One of the most prominent voices involved in the movement was K.B. Ganapathy, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Star of Mysore*, and in May 2005, he wrote a vehement article calling for personal responsibility of tourists to respect "tourist sites" like Chamundi Hill regardless of the presence or absence of a law prohibiting the use of plastic. In his article, which is both representative of the broader public discourse at the time and exceptional in its frankness, Ganapathy frames his call to action, not through any religious sentiments, but, like the CDP, he frames his argument in a "secular" appeal to the democratic responsibilities of citizenry,

¹² Mysore Amateur Naturalists was established in 1980 and registered in 1984. It is active in Mysore and Mandya Districts of Karnataka and has an operating budget of less than one hundred thousand Rupees annually. Their mission is "to promote traditional medicines and to create awareness on environment."

connecting the natural environment of the Hill to other popular and protected “tourist sites” in South India. He wrote, “I think that this kind of irresponsible *citizen* should be mercilessly dealt with and heavily fined, if not jailed, for their irreverence to *nature* and for vandalizing the environment” (Ganapathy 2005). In Ganapathy’s piece, it is clear that the rhetorical strategy to clean the Hill does not rest in spiritual or religious overtures, but he uses overtly non-religious rhetoric of “citizen” and “nature” to call people to action for the preservation of Chamundi Hill as a “tourist site.”

Ganapathy returned to the topic of development and Chamundi Hill in a later editorial in which he uses more explicit language about the heritage of Chamundi Hill, titled “May Chamundeshwari Save Chamundi Hill and Her Abode” (Ganapathy 2009). The impetus for Ganapathy’s editorial was a speech in which the Chief Minister spoke about the development of Chamundi Hill based on the recommendations of the 2005 CDP and modeled upon the famous temple at Tirupati. Ganapathy argues throughout the essay that Chamundi Hill is not simply a place of religious practice and pilgrimage like Tirupati, but that it is an important site of Mysore’s heritage that should be preserved for the betterment of “tourists and pilgrims alike”. Again, the author’s language constructs the Hill as a tourist site, but here Ganapathy connects the economics of tourism with the heritage of the Hill more directly. Interestingly, despite claiming to have never read the CDP, Ganapathy’s language seems to have overlapping assumptions regarding the relationship between the goddess, the hill, and heritage of the city in which the myth of the goddess lies in the background. While the title of the piece—“May Chamundeshwari Save Chamundi Hill and Her Abode”—might seemingly evoke the language of religious intervention, the argument of the piece is that Chamundi Hill is a site to be protected, preserved, and visited because of its heritage value. Given this context, it seems unlikely that Ganapathy’s

title is making a devotional appeal to the goddess for salvation. Instead, the title, much like the history within the CDP, frames the author's rhetoric through mythic allusion, implicitly referencing Cāmuṇḍēśvari and how she saved the Hill when she defeated the evil ruler Mahiṣāsura. Indeed, this reading of the title is confirmed in the first lines of the article in which Ganapathy sustains the mythic rhetoric equating the Chief Minister (at the time) B.S. Yeddyurappa to the god of wealth, Kubēra.

After slowly dying down after 2009, the controversy over the development of Chamundi Hill was reignited in 2016 when a series of development projects that include a multistoried parking complex began on top of the Hill near the Cāmuṇḍēśvari Temple. The Mysore Grahakara Parishat (MGP; literally: "Mysore Consumer Council") led by Dr. Bhamy V. Shenoy have heavily criticized the development and led protests and candle-light vigils to gain governmental intervention to preserve the "enchanted history" of the Hill (Shenoy 2016a). While preparing documents to submit to the Chennai Branch of the National Green Tribunal, the MGP discovered that the construction projects were not an undertaking of the government or local businesses; instead, the Cāmuṇḍēśvari Temple was funding the development initiatives (Shenoy 2016b). Interestingly, the battle for the preservation of the natural landscape of the Hill became a battle between activists who wanted to preserve the "history" and "heritage" of the Hill and the temple of Cāmuṇḍēśvari that sought to accommodate more devotees and pilgrims. Thus, the current position for conservation of Chamundi Hill is primarily divided between those that wish to preserve the heritage of the Hill and the temple agencies that seek to make the temple more accessible to contemporary pilgrims and devotees. The situation in Mysore, therefore, stands in marked contrast to preservation projects (e.g. the rock-fort temple in Tiruccirāpaḷli) that have undertaken an "integrative conservation approach" to sacred landscapes that recognizes the

role of the landscape in the “ritual movements” of contemporary pilgrims to be of primary importance (Rangunathan and Sinha 2012).

The public advocates of ecological responsibility on Chamundi Hill discussed here argue their cause using rhetoric like “restoring the heritage status of Mysore” and “enchanted history” intentionally avoiding framing the preservation of the Hill through environmental awareness and ecological issues (Ganapathy 2009; Shenoy 2016a).¹³ They, however, never provide any justification for why the landscape itself is historically significant. At times, nonetheless, it becomes evident that their position seemingly collapses the mythic deeds of the goddess into the history of city and the Hill that they are striving to preserve. Therefore, despite preferring heritage over the lived religious practice of the Hill, the rhetoric of heritage and preservation is intertwined with similar concerns that includes the mythology of the goddess.

3. Myth as History and Heritage

The connection that is drawn between the physical space of Chamundi Hill and the mythic narrative of the slaying of the buffalo-demon that is assumed in the movement to save Chamundi Hill is part of a larger tendency in popular historiography within Mysore (and perhaps Hindu India more broadly) that popular understandings of space, geography, and ecology in India. In this section, I reflect on the relationship between historical orientation, myth, and its role in environmental efforts.

One’s conceptualization of history has profound implications for our perception of the world around us. For many of us that are educated in the Euro-American tradition, our

¹³ Ganapathy goes as far as to say, “These are the days of wildlife-freaks and environmental-freaks among numerous other freaks speaking a tongue difficult for a common man to understand. Their logic, sometimes, goes to such extremes that you feel like either caging them or running away from them for good. Unfortunately, we cannot do either of the two. Therefore, it is a case of what can not [sic] be cured must be endured. So be it” (2005).

understanding of time is relatively linear—what Trautmann has called “Biblical time”—in which we focus on chronological continuity of “factual” events that were observed by human sources that we trust to be neutral or objective and who focus on mappable territory and the deeds of men (and, unfortunately, only focusing on women when convenient) (Trautmann 2012). Armed with this “scientific” understanding of history, many colonial historians of India, were struck by the lack of chronological histories in Indian society, especially in light of the vast amount of writing that were produced on other topics in the subcontinent. Therefore, many of these scholars reported back to their home institutions and published findings that concluded that India “had no history” (Sharma 2003; Ali 2000). Instead, Indian culture was labeled “mystical,” “spiritual” or “other worldly” (Halbfass 1988; Inden 1990; King 1999)

India, however, certainly had histories—just different kinds of histories. The Indian perspective of history was viewed through a wider lens that recognized the importance of human actors and physical territory, both of which were chronicled quite extensively in epigraphic form. But, they also conceptualized history more broadly as a much more grand system of macro- and micro-cycles of existence through various stages (*yuga*) of continual degradation that ultimately leads to destruction and recreation. This extremely *longue durée* historical perspective simultaneously creates longing for a golden age—the perfection of the first age of perfection, the *krta yuga*—and the hope for a brighter future. This long view of history was central in the construction of the mythic imagination of the subcontinent and in the epic and Purāṇic traditions.

Due to the colonial pressure to conform to the Euro-American understanding of history, interesting negotiations of historical consciousness emerged in which the linear perspective of the West combined with the cyclic perspective of India (see also Irschick 1994). Building upon the presentation of Indian history in James Mills’s *The History of British India* published in

1806, which created the illusion of a golden-age of India that was united under Hinduism, many tales of the epics and Purāṇas were mined in search of an indigenous, positivist ancient Indian history (See Inden 2000 for a thorough discussion of Mills’s reconstructionist history).

Ultimately, this led to a popular understanding of India’s history in which the mythic deeds of deities were placed within a linear description of human history (Trautmann 2012, Goldman 2011 and Pinney 2004; cf. Pariti 2015 and Novetske 2008,). For some, the deeds of deities and sages were re-conceptualized as historical descriptions of factual events that had taken place on this earth, which has very real implications for how devotees view the sites associated with myths.¹⁴

That is not to say that physical space was not considered sacred prior to colonial intrusion. There exists an entire genre of literature (written, visual, and oral) devoted to describing the sacrality of cities and holy sites called *sthalapurāṇas* (sacred site-histories); however, these too became even more popular during the colonial period leading to the proliferation of new *sthalapurāṇas*. In these texts, however, there is often an ambiguous separation between the actual space and a divine space that mirrors the physical world in the abode of the gods (for example, the Vārāṇāsī narrative found in the *Kāśī Khanda* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in which Śiva is able to remove the cosmic city from the earthly equivalent). These two worlds, the divine and the earthly, were considered coterminous yet remained distinct at these sacred sites. There was no vocabulary for understanding this overlapping relationship between physical and divine space within the colonial historical imagination. Sites, like stories, had to be either divine or natural, myth or reality. Therefore, in the negotiated linear “either/or” history that was emerging, the mythic narratives and their associated sacred sites often lost their

¹⁴ Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the supposed birthplace of Rāma in Āyodhyā, which was the site of communal riots over the Babri Masjid in 1992.

“both/and” complexity. This flattening of the Indian historical imagination gave birth to two emerging trends in Hinduism. The first trend was to dismiss the mythic narratives along with their attendant iconography and rituals as a degradation of a “pure” religion of the Vedas, as groups like the Arya Samāj and Brahmo Samāj did. The other was to view the actions and deeds of the deities contained in the narratives as divine truth and as records of the ancient past of human history. This led to the pursuit to verify the lives of the deities on earth through a variety of means ranging from literary and archaeological investigations or within visions and dreams. This second trend has possibly had the most visible impact, especially as the foundation of the Rāmraj movement that led to the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 (see Pollock 1993).

This same process of placing deities in the events of human history can be seen as an emerging trend in Mysore’s royal histories. From the time that the Mysore Wodeyars developed their kingdom into a region power, they connected their own history to mythic history by recreating the Purāṇic practice of linking kings and kingdoms to those of the epic heroes of the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyāṇa traditions and to the proliferation of gods and celestial beings starting at the time of creation through classical genealogical tree of the Yādava line (*yaduvamśa*) (Simmons 2014). During the colonial period, however, the standard genealogy of the Wodeyars was expanded to include intervention by and interactions with the deities Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, and Cāmuṇḍi, culminating with the goddess anointing the legendary founder of the lineage Yadurāja Wodeyar king over her city and granting him and his brother Kṛṣṇarāja Wodeyar the power to defeat its previous ruler (Row 1916, 1-12). From this time forward, the myths of the deities were intimately interwoven into the city’s history and identity of its rulers.

We can see this same sentiment carried over into the demarcation of Chamundi Hill as a heritage site in the CDP and in public discourse that argued for its preservation. In the list of heritage sites created by the CDP, Chamundi Hill is the only protected site that does not meet any standards of historical significance. While certain structures on the Hill might meet those standards, there are no criteria under which the entire Hill formation would be eligible for protection. Furthermore, the Hill system itself is largely uncultivated and relatively devoid of any link to Indian, Kannadiga, or Mysorean human history. The only significant elements are those contained along the thousand-step path, which makes up a very small percentage of the protected area. However, if one considers the mythic events of the Purāṇic narrative of the goddess slaying the buffalo-demon during which the goddess and demon's fight raged over the vast majority of the Hill to be within the frame of historical events, then the entire landscape of the Hill becomes historically significant, a heritage site like those commemorating significant battles, royal inaugurations, and political summits in human history. Indeed, this seems to be the case in popular understanding of the history of Mysore City. Almost any popular account of the city's history, like the CDP, begins with Mysore's "history" as the kingdom of Mahiṣa and his mythic battle with Cāmuṇḍi. Therefore, the argument for the preservation of Chamundi Hill—despite the lack of an overt religious justification—appears to rest on the implicit assumption that the entire landscape is historically significant because of the mythic events that took place on the Hill a long time ago. The conflation of the mythic narratives with a linear history of Mysore provides the vocabulary of history and heritage and aided in the movement to preserve the Hill.

5. Conclusion

The city of Mysore and Chamundi Hill present an interesting case study in the field of Hinduism and Ecology (or perhaps more aptly Indian Heritage and Preservation). The city and its citizens have maintained a public discourse of history and heritage in its approach to environmental issues dealing with an important religious site. Not only does this case show another strategy that can be employed to preserve sacred space (cf. Raghunathan and Sinha 2006; Haberman 2006; Alley 2002; and Agarwal 2000), but it also shows how our ways of conceptualizing history shape our understanding of the world around us and gives us the vocabulary through which we are able to make sense of larger issues within the natural world.

The activists in Mysore City, who have fought to maintain Chamundi Hill, have proven that there are multiple ways to articulate the need for preservation of sites that are important because of their role in mythic narratives in India. Their emphasis on heritage, instead of “religion” or environmental activism, avoided many of the pitfalls that have befallen other such movements in India.¹⁵ Similarly, the focus on the heritage of the site as part of the history of the city side-steps the divisive politics associated with religious communalism that segregates causes as either Hindu or Muslim. By employing heritage terminology, the movement to save Chamundi Hill removed the issue from one that might be fraught with political peril into an issue of civic pride and the cultural wealth of the city. Through its innovative discourse, the movement has provided an effective model that other environmental organizations in India can emulate even when navigating the hazardous terrain of important pilgrimage sites.

Additionally, this case allows us to see how a historical worldview shapes the way we view the world around us. This includes the way gods and goddesses fit into the scope of history. In our case, when the deeds and actions of the goddess were situated within the landscape of Mysore’s Chamundi Hill, the epic battle between the goddess and the buffalo-demon king

¹⁵ For examples of some of the potential pitfalls, see Alley 2002.

became part of the history of the city and its site part of its shared heritage. As such, the people of Mysore and their elected officials had the obligation to protect and preserve that landscape like it would any other extraordinary site within India's historical heritage. Thus, it seems to be that in the case of Mysore and the preservation of Chamundi Hill the concentric spheres of history, heritage and myth, like the mythological narratives and history they assume, are largely overlapping.

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List of Figures



Fig. 1- The temple workers, who accompanied me to the *kōṇa mule*, used the divots and trenches to narrate the battle scene following the steps in the stone recreating the entire battle, blow-by-blow. Photo by Author.