

The Saint Who Bathes Once Every 12 Years



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

Shravanabelagola is a long name, but it is actually just a tiny village in the state of Karnataka in southern India, approximately 48km south-east of the nearest sizeable town, Hassan.

My wife and I came to this village with our travel buddies at about 11 in the morning on 10 February, 2006, to find the erstwhile quiet streets full of people. A grand religious ceremony, the 86th Mahamastaka Abhisheka, was being celebrated here and in the surrounding areas over 12 days (8-19 February) and we had come specifically to take part in the celebration which happens only once in 12 years.

There are two hills in the village: Vindiyagiri and Chandragiri. After obtaining a pass from an office near the bus station, we joined the queue of devotees and tourists and climbed up Vindiyagiri.

At the top of the hill, the colossal statue of a stark naked man in a standing posture immediately caught my attention. In front of the statue was a huge platform erected for the occasion and many people had already taken up positions on it to wait for the ceremony to commence. My wife settled down in a strategic spot while I walked around with my camera, scouting for photography opportunities.

Scaffolding had been erected behind the statue and many devotees were climbing up this to pour pails of water over the head and shoulders of the statue. I went up to take some snapshots of the actions and the congregation, but did not join in to

pour water over the statue because I was required to remove my belt before doing so.

The 18m-tall statue, carved from a single block of granite in the year 981 AD, is reputedly the tallest monolithic statue in the world. The image is that of a saint, Gomateshvara or Bahubali, the son of King Rishabdev of Ayodhya and the first Tirthankara of Jainism.

Jainism is a very old religion founded in 6th Century BC, about the same time as Buddhism. It is similar to Buddhism in several aspects, including the belief in the cycle of life, death and rebirth. A Tirthankara is believed to be able to guide devotees to break away from that cycle and attain complete enlightenment.

Unlike Buddhism, however, Jainism had not been able to spread its influence overseas and become a world religion. It remains a minor religion confined mainly to some parts of India. Shrvanabelagola is one of the most important pilgrimage sites of Jainism.

According to legend, King Rishabdev had two wives. The first wife gave birth to 99 sons and a daughter, while the second wife had only one son, Bahubali. When the children had grown up, the king decided to abdicate and go into the jungle to meditate. He divided his kingdom equally among his children to ensure they would live together peacefully but alas, his eldest son harboured the ambition to control all the land so he forced all his siblings, except for Bahubali, to surrender their little kingdoms to him.



A fierce fight ensued between the two brothers, ending with Bahubali lifting his sibling high above his head. But just when he was about to throw his brother down, he became overcome with a profound sense of remorse and despair. He gently put his brother down and disappeared into the jungle to meditate. He eventually became the first person in Jainism to achieve full enlightenment.

The official anointing ceremony began at 2.30 p.m. Pails of water were poured over the statue, followed by tamarind, milk, turmeric, sandalwood and pulverised sugar, turning the statue into one colour after another. There was music, singing and dancing after every round of anointment. The atmosphere was more like that of a festival than a solemn religious ritual. ■