



## HIGH ABOVE THE LITTLE GOD

Thursday, January 12, 2017 – Udupi (India) Sri Krishna Matha

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He stands above the temple roofs in perfect equilibrium – quite as if he's ensconced on firm ground. The wall of the dome, the crown on which he's king, consists of thousands of scraps of cloth fluttering in the mild breeze that blows all the time from the ocean through the city of Udupi. The spherical crest itself is bare and, as such, reminiscent of a globe bearing latitudinal and longitudinal lines. I am reminded of Atlas, the most tragic figure in Greek mythology, the personification of bondage – and I smile at the fanciful thought that he could, at long last, have shrugged off the weight of the celestial heavens and taken rebirth in the form of the nubile Indian youth standing up there.

The dome stands on a temple cart, a wooden wagon, which is four or five metres tall and decorated all over with figures. I especially like the dif-

ferent fruits dangling like earrings on this unique wagon: banana-trees, jackfruit, pineapple and cashew. Four workers are busy cleaning the wooden facade of the cart with paintbrushes and compressed air guns, others are smearing grease into the spokes of its mammoth wheels studded with heavy metal, tightening screws on the chassis, and polishing its brass fittings.

Three such temple carts stand in the square, towering over the other buildings here in the sacred heart of the city. They remind me of fantastic montgolfiers, and how they might have flown away from a fairy tale or a dreamy manga. The domes also contain life-sized wooden figures, whose heads are carefully covered with jute sacks. They will probably not show their faces until evening, when hundreds of people will pull



the towering, multiple-tonne wagons with thick ropes through the streets.

Probably hiding behind the bags are figures who are related, in one way or another, to Lord Krishna, the deity to which this grand temple is dedicated. In Udupi everything revolves around this image (*murti*) of Lord Krishna in his infant avatar (Balakrishna). The image is believed to have been found and consecrated at this spot by the Vaishnavite saint, Shri Madhavacharya, in the 13th century – during the time of the January full moon (which, by coincidence, happens to be lighting up the skies right now). Ever since then, the annual temple cart festival (*rath yatra*) has been celebrated

at this time of year with pomp. Just after sunset this evening there will be a solemn procession, powered by drums (*tavil*), oboes (*nadaswaram*), firecrackers including flaming rockets. With his depositing of the image of Balakrishna in this temple precinct, Madhavacharya established not only one of India's most important pilgrimage sites, but also the famous cuisine of Udupi. Because Balakrishna, according to his devotees, has got to be spoiled with all sorts of culinary delicacies, otherwise the temple might just bite the dust. Eight monasteries, the Ashta Mathas, take care, by turn, of the physical well-being of the boy-god – by giving him daily offerings of food (*prasad*) and service (*seva*).

Whatever the godling leaves on his plate after his meals is given to the believers. Pilgrims, who have come from far and near to see the deity, are served, free of charge, in the temple at noon and in the evening. Of course, Balakrishna is a spoiled brat who wants to be pampered with new treats time and again. The monastery cooks have taken pains over the centuries to develop a diverse food plan – which is purely vegetarian and devoid of onion and garlic (taboo as they are believed to boost sensual pleasure). Over the years, the pilgrims have taken the Udupi kitchen to their homelands and



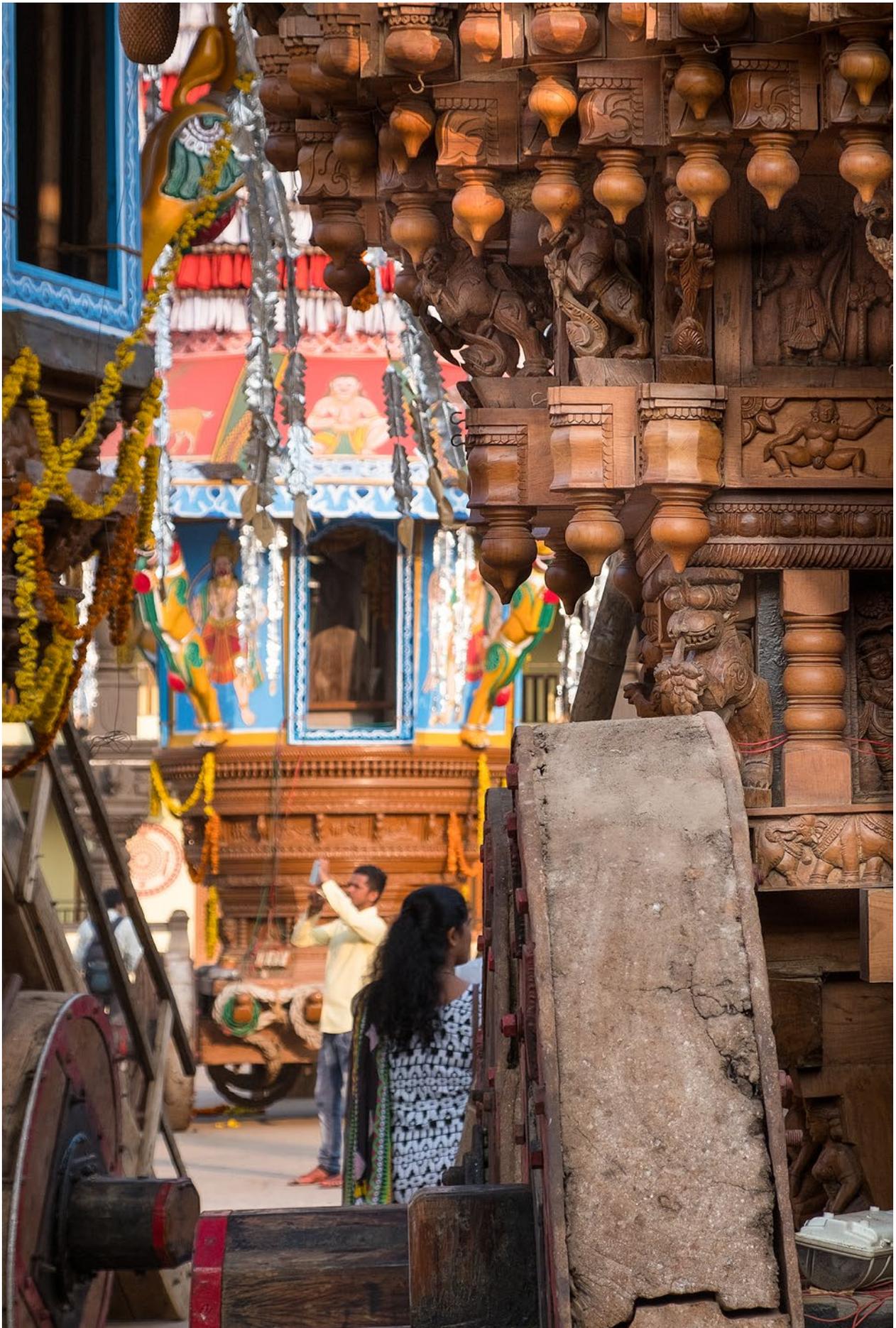
canny local businessmen have taken the cuisine to the rest of India and in recent decades to the world. Today, there is hardly an Indian city which does not boast of at least one Udupi restaurant.

This morning, much too early, the voice of a child singing roused me from my slumber -- the bright and clear and pure voice of a young boy (whose voice has not yet broken) singing had resounded through loudspeakers over the rooftops of the temple district. The voice and the subsequent litany (which may well have emanated from a tape-recorder) probably held the believers in thrall for an hour. Unwelcome though the singing was at that hour to slumbrous non-pilgrims like me, the notes impacted me in a strange way. As soon as I woke up, I wobbled off, as if I were remote-controlled, to the Mitra Samaja – a restaurant in the temple complex that has been run for generations by the same Bramahn family. There, I ordered an infinitely sweet, ghee-soaked pineapple ksheera with cashew nuts, which I proceeded to spoon hungrily into my mouth. Those who know that I never have breakfast – and definitely never eat something that is fatty and sugary – may be quick to believe that the sweet-toothed Krishna had seduced me with his honeyed songs. But it can well



be that my somewhat emaciated body (weakened by a serious bout of diarrhoea a few days earlier) needed a whole new calorie intake. I must say it was an moment of unexpected happiness, which I cannot describe, really, and which I will probably never repeat.

The young man in heaven is now trying, together with a colleague on the ground and another halfway up, to bring a garland into position. Their endeavours do not succeed, the rope gets tangled up over and over again, then gets torn and goes into free fall three-four times through the air before finally collapsing like a cobra whose head has been cut off. As if that were an omen, all the workers





descend from the Montgolfiere. It is almost lunch-time and the sun is bouncing bright and hot. The men push their tools under the wagon and leave.

Only Atlas does not wish to leave his place. With his legs outstretched he stands there proudly, looking intently into the Krishna Temple, where pilgrims are gathering in the large hall on the first floor for the first round of luncheon: rice, sambar, rasam, and two laddus per person; a very modest variant of the rich Udupi diet. But special enough, given that it is served by brahmins wearing the sacred thread (*yajnopavita*) around their chests – and what the highest caste serves, all the lower castes can eat. From his position, the young man certainly also looks down into the temple-owned cowshed, where the animals obviously suffer at the hands of

their brutal guards. Even the roof of the holiest of sanctums, where the tiny figure of baby Krishna poses inside a dim and musty shrine awaiting his devotees, lies directly at his feet. Suddenly, something seems to electrify him, and his still, upright body begins to curl into a curve. He stares spellbound at the temple. Has he seen something? Has he heard something? Or has he just realised that he has risen far above the little god? Atlas recovers from his momentary trance, straightens, puts his hands together in front of his chest, bows deeply, and lingers for a few moments. Then he hops off his ball like a monkey, dives boldly into the dome, and is gone.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.

