



Nandi Hills near Bengaluru

## Exploring Navadurga hill fortresses around Bengaluru

**Richa Shreebalaji**

**3**.5 billion years - that's how old the majestic Navadurga hills are believed to be. These granite monoliths are part of the "Dharwar Craton" which was formed along with the Indian Sub Continental crust.

These nine hill-forts around Bangalore have stood as silent witnesses to the rise and fall of empires over the centuries. Temples have been looted, forts abandoned, and much of their rich history forgotten.

The earliest record of inhabitation in these hills dates back 3,000 years to the Iron Age Burial site. This was uncovered at Hutridurga along with pots and weapons made of iron. Fast forward to 900 BCE when the Ganga Dynasty ruled the lands. They were a patron of the Jain community who migrated from north to south India. The rulers provided them a sanctuary in "Anandhagiri" or Nandi Hills and Kabbaladurga. Steps were carved into the steep boulders for their ease, which can be seen to date in Kabbaladurga.

Many of the ancient south Indian kingdoms have left their mark in temples built on these durgas and with valuable inscriptions. Hoysala's unique architecture style can be gleaned in the temples at Nandi Hills, Devarayanadurga, Savandurga and Kabbaladurga. This Dravidian style is marvelled by historians and artisans alike for their intricate carvings on solid granite rocks. In the 1300s, The Vijayanagara empire commonly added marriage halls and compounds to the Hoysala temples. A chieftain during the Vijayanagara empire went on to be renowned as the founder of Bangalore, Nadaprabhu Kempegowda. He and his sons built forts on three out of the nine hills in the 1500s- Huliurdurga, Hutridurga & Bhairava durga.

Following the rise of the Mysore Kingdom, temples and forts of the Navadurgas saw further development. In 1732, Chamaraja Wodeyar VII ascended to the throne. However, his reign was cut short after two years by his corrupt financial administrator, Devarajayya Dalavayi. With assistance from military commander Hyder Ali, he turned the army against the king and imprisoned him in the forts of Kabbaladurga. Having experience from the previ-

ous coup, Hyder Ali went on to usurp the throne in 1761.

Kabbaladurga continued to serve as a prison under Hyder Ali, where traitors sentenced to death were hurled to deaths at the 600 ft drop ledge. His son Tipu Sultan followed in his father's footsteps and point came to be known as 'Tipu Drop' at Nandi Hills.

The two kings further expanded and fortified the nine hill-forts and many others, making the most of their strategic high elevation to stay one step ahead of the British. The Channarayana Durga fort was more than just a defensive bastion. It was a hub of military innovation, where iron ore was smelted and gunpowder was produced, fuelling resistance efforts. The remnants of the Third Mysore-Anglo War can be seen in the valleys of Nandi Hills, where the cemetery

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of fallen British soldiers lie. British cannon scars can be identified on the fort walls at Bhairava Durga.

After Tipu Sultan died in 1799, Britishers destroyed and abandoned the forts, deeming them worthless. Treasure Hunters have scavenged every rock in the forts upside down in search of wealth. The locals at Bhairava Durga mentioned that they watched police carry away trunks of gold. Currently, the hills are scaled by avid trekkers, village locals and pilgrims. The forts no longer serve their original purpose, and have become relics of the past.

The hills have watched everything that has happened and they will continue to watch everything that does. While the true story of the hills is known only to hills themselves, their story isn't over.

*(Richa Shreebalaji is a student intern at Azim Premji University. This work was conducted as part of Mountains of Life, a large climate change festival being organized by the University.)*



Main entrance of the hill station