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...Says Dr Prakash Kamaraj, co-founder of DeCharge, a company that blends technology, sustainability & local engagement to power city's EV future. [Page 4](#)



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FOR ALL THE RIGHT MOTIFS

Bangalore's artisans revive timeless motifs in silk textiles, blending heritage, craftsmanship, and contemporary design. [Page 9](#)



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DOLLS OF DASARA

BOMBE HABBA BEGINS ON SEPT 22, BRINGING FAMILIES TOGETHER TO CELEBRATE HERITAGE, DOLLS & TIMELESS FESTIVE STORIES



COVER STORY

by

BINDU GOPAL RAO

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DOLLS OF DASARA

Bindu Gopal Rao

Although there is no documentary evidence tracing the origins of *Bombe Habba*, several theories continue to circulate among practitioners. One popular belief links the tradition to the Mysore Maharaja, who ascends the golden throne—Karnataka *Ratna Simhasana*—only during the ten days of Navaratri, performing ritual worship to it.

Art historian Raghu Dharmendra of Ramsons Kala Pratishthana in Mysore explains that every Mysorean wished to invite the Maharaja home and honour him through Pada Puja. But as the king was ritually bound by his Navaratri vow, he could not leave the palace.

“So, the *Pattada Bombe*, a pair of royal dolls representing the king and queen, crafted from wood, clay, cloth, metal or even ivory, came to symbolise the Maharaja and Maharani, and were worshipped during Navaratri in many households,” he notes.

Another interpretation, he adds, suggests that the dolls represent ancestors. Since *Sharan Navaratri* begins right after *Pitru Paksha*, a fortnight when ancestors are believed to descend from *Pitru Loka*, families arrange dolls on stepped platforms and wor-

ship them as symbolic offerings to their forebears.

A third theory takes the story further back, to the fabled golden throne of Mysore. Believed to have originated with the *Pandavas*, the throne was later rediscovered by Raja Vikramaditya of Ujjain under a mound of earth.

Dharmendra recounts the tale of Singhasan Battisi: the throne, adorned with thirty-two dolls, challenged Vikramaditya's worthiness. Each time he tried to ascend, a doll came alive, narrated the virtues of a former ruler, and, finding him unworthy, flew away to heaven. One by one, all thirty-two dolls departed, leaving behind the legend still tied to the Mysore throne.

Doll Display

In many southern states, households celebrate the festival with *Bombe* or *Golu*—thematic displays of dolls and figurines arranged on stepped platforms. These often include legendary characters from sacred Hindu texts, idols of gods and goddesses, and always a pair of *Raja Rani* (king and queen) or *Dampati* (married couple) dolls.

For some families, the practice is also a way of preserving heirlooms. Advocate Gomati Srinivas from Basavanagudi, who treasures dolls more than 80

years old passed down from her grandmother and mother, says she looks each year for pieces that tell lesser-known stories from the culture. “Last year, I found a doll of Hanuman playing the veena,” she recalls.

Curious, she later learnt from her husband's grandfather that this was drawn from a folk tale. Hanuman, after watching Narada play the *Mahathi Veena*, became so enthralled that he too picked up the instrument. As he played with such devotion, the rock he sat on is believed to have melted and fused with him. “It's not in the Puranas, but how many of us know this story?” she notes.

The craftsmanship of the dolls

carries symbolic meaning as well. Traditionally, they are fashioned to represent the five elements—earth, fire, water, air, and ether—reminding devotees that the festival is also about honouring and respecting nature.

Culture meets society

For many families, the festival is about more than tradition—it is a celebration of togetherness, storytelling, and community. Manjuu Rangarajan, CEO of Brandit Communications, says Navratri *Golu* has always been central to her family's festive spirit. “Every year, we look forward to curating the doll display, blending mythological themes, cultural stories, and elements of everyday life,” she explains.

While the base always features the classic steps with gods and goddesses, her family introduces a new theme each year. “Last year it was the *Ramayana*, and this year we plan to focus on Lord Venkateswara's *Kumbha Abhishekam*,” she adds.

For Smita Prashanth, a resident of Malleswaram, the festival is one of the most significant occasions of the year. She describes it as a time when “the dolls come to life, and homes open their doors to friends and family.”

A passionate collector, she picks up dolls wherever she

travels—her recent trip to Japan brought home a traditional figurine. Since she has a young son, she prefers to keep the stories simple, ensuring they remain engaging and easy for children to understand.

Carrying tradition forward

Vyshnavi, an educator whose family has celebrated *Golu* for generations, points out that the display is traditionally arranged in odd-numbered steps and showcases classic sets of dolls. In the past, these were made of mud or clay, and later plaster of Paris.

Over time, she and her husband began collecting wooden dolls instead, building a collection that now includes traditional *Kondapalli* and *Channapatna* pieces as well as unique sets from Indonesia and Vietnam.

“As an educator, I see every experience as an opportunity to learn,” she says, adding that arranging dolls naturally becomes an interactive activity for children. Her daughter and friends often explore the display, asking about the stories behind each doll and even inventing their own narratives.

For her, *Bombe Habba* is not just about preservation but about keeping traditions alive in ways that adapt, inspire, and endure across generations.

PATTADA GOMBE

At the heart of every collection is the *Pattada Gomba*, the most important pair of dolls. Traditionally crafted from red sandalwood or rosewood, their reddish hue is considered a symbol of fertility. In south, these dolls are gifted to brides by their parents as part of the wedding trousseau, initiating the tradition of Navaratri *Bombe Habba* in the bride's new household. Dressed in wedding attire, the couple symbolises prosperity, fertility, and the beginning of the bride's own *Golu* collection—an heirloom to be cherished and carried forward.