



HORIZONTAL LEADERSHIP AND THE GENESIS OF UDUPI JILLE

A career in the Indian Administrative Service throws up many opportunities for Leadership. Yet, for me, the unique, once-in-a-lifetime experience is the role I played in the establishment of the new district of Udupi. Yes, the temple town which was home to the famous Lord Krishna temple.



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In 1997, the Government of Karnataka took a policy decision to bifurcate certain large districts to create seven new districts for administrative efficiency and convenience. Udupi was one of them. The posting happened innocuously, with the Chief Secretary calling for me and informing me, in his usual understated style, that I had been posted as District Collector (called Deputy Commissioner in Karnataka), and could I please leave as quickly as possible? "The MLA's are getting quite restless, you know. They feel the government is not serious about launching the new districts. Your going there will reassure them."

I landed in Udupi the next afternoon, to a warm welcome. I was an acceptable choice as a lady officer, for the region shared the matriarchal influence of Kerala. It was my first posting as a Deputy Commissioner, and I was also Udupi's first Deputy Commissioner. I was anxious to prove myself. Expectations were high, but infrastructure, funds, staff all were lacking.

Normally, District Collectors are inheritors of a hoary tradition dating back to British rule, and the accompanying paraphernalia of pomp and creature comforts. But a new district is different. The local officers could not immediately shake off the mindset that they belonged to the 'parent' district Mangalore. And the administration and finances were still with the District Collector, Mangalore.

I decided then and there that my first task would be to create an identity for my district. In government, one is running in different directions at the same time! But I had a good idea what I wanted, and proceeded as systematically as circumstances allowed.



I wanted to try and take the citizenry along with me, as Udupi had a literate and aware populace. Together we launched the process of district building. My first priority was to locate suitable accommodation for government offices. An action plan was chalked out for the development of the district without disturbing the rich ecology of the district. Industrialization in the Western Ghats area is fraught with tension, owing to the presence of activist NGO groups. So from the beginning Non-Governmental Organizations were inducted, and the agenda drawn for the district attempted to be in tune with its educational, pilgrimage and tourist potential.

The beautification of Udupi town was another initiative I took up. Udupi had a then little known but lovely beach called Malpe. We started the campaign with a March for a Clean Malpe by schoolchildren. This was followed by a *Shramdaan* for garbage clearance. Certain prominent businessmen contributed to the erection of boards, dustbins and lighting. More difficult was the relocation of the fisherman’s families along the coast. This was achieved by distributing alternative free sites slightly away from the main beach area.

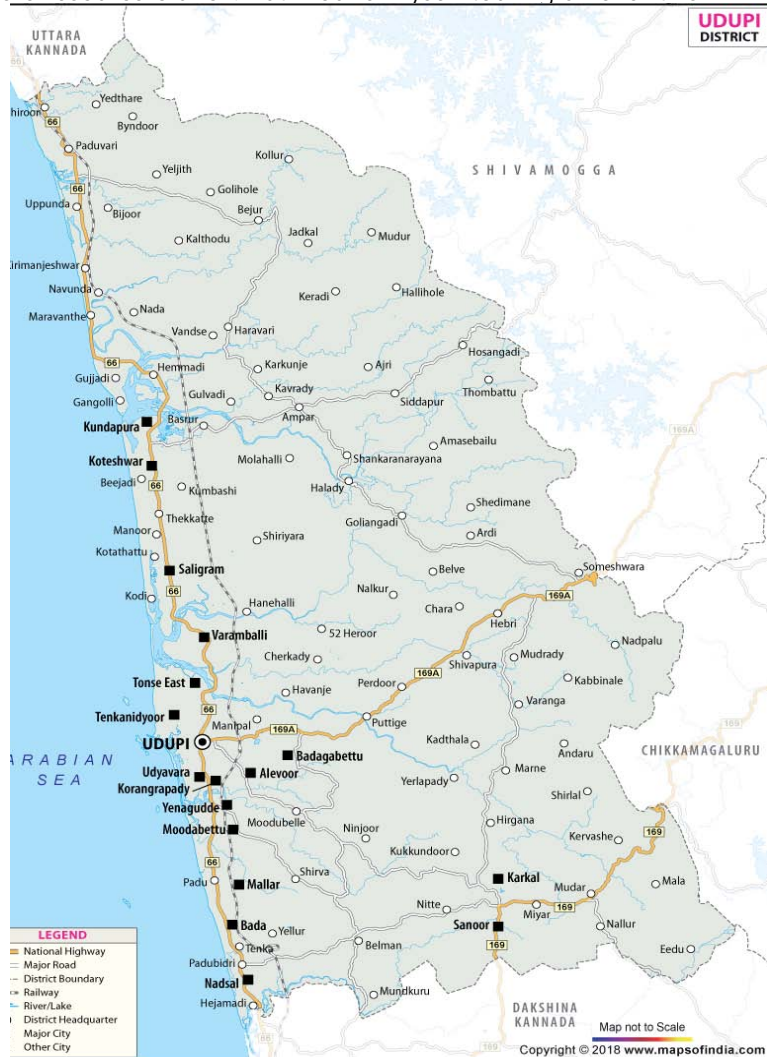
I touched base with my superiors regularly, especially with the Secretary to Government in the Revenue Department and the Divisional Commissioner who became valuable and appreciative allies. Simultaneously I began to work on the process of carving out the new district in close coordination with my counterpart in Mangalore. This was a Herculean task, complicated by the feeling of being ‘divested of authority’ which he felt. But we got over it, and I had a staff, vehicles, funds, and a ‘treasure’ of 2000 files in record time. Since prior willingness of the officials and officers was taken to post them in the new district, they were willing to work hard.

So busy was I with my work, I had so far not paid much attention to the local politicians, except preliminary courtesies. My Assistant Commissioner, a seasoned and diplomatic officer, sensed that they were feeling left out. All my self-congratulation vanished when a local newspaper blamed the new lady Deputy Commissioner (who had spent hardly a few months in the district) for the district’s poverty and other longstanding ills!

The demands were many, and I was facing severe resource crunch. But I found myself touring all over this supremely beautiful district, which I felt, was my own. I became competitive and battled with department after department for a share to my district. My district had to be the best, and soon the District Minister and others were happy. In fact, the District Minister became my strongest ally whenever I needed to skirmish with the state government for Udupi’s needs. But political support could become embarrassing, and when an opposition MLA openly criticized the government for not supporting and “helping out” the Deputy Commissioner, the Chief Minister was quite irritated with me! But it worked out, and soon Udupi was the only new district to have an office, staff, and a functional district administration.

Flash forward twenty-five years. On 25 August 2022, Udupi district celebrated her Silver Jubilee. On that occasion, I was invited to participate in the celebrations, and was felicitated by His Excellency the Governor of Karnataka on the dais, before the polity and bureaucracy, and most importantly, the citizenry of Udupi. Only those who have an experience of public service will realise how rare an honour it is, that an officer is remembered for her service after 25 years! I thanked the present District Collector, my junior colleague, for remembering me. His reply was: “Madam, I did nothing. The demand for your presence and recognition came spontaneously from the people of Udupi!” What a heart-warming moment it was!

In hindsight, I think I did well in places and badly in others. My enthusiasm and commitment I would repeat, and it was my good luck that Udupi had





an aware populace, which recognized my efforts. Today I would recognize that a team of non-officials and citizenry has greater potential to support me. I hesitated to relocate my Assistant Commissioner (whose sub-divisional headquarters was the neighbouring town of Kundapur) because I did not want to make too many administrative changes at one go; but thereby I failed to benefit on a daily basis from his experience. I got too involved, the district became my 'baby' and sometimes I was bogged down in trivialities. Though there was no serious negative fallout I would probably be more objective today. I was uncomfortable with the discomfiture of my counterpart in Mangalore; but my way of coping with it was to ignore personalities and concentrate only on the task. If I had, on the other hand, shown sympathy non-verbally at least, he could have helped me much more because of his greater resources. On the other hand, it is also heart-warming that some of the initiatives I took up have sustained until today. The Clean Malpe campaign I began was continued by the Udupi Municipal Council, and Malpe is a popular tourist destination today. I was happy to sanction a mechanical beach cleaner to Malpe many years later under the challenge fund.

I inaugurated a restored heritage house in Udupi in 1997, today heritage restoration and heritage tourism is a thriving activity in which initiatives like Hasta Shilpa Trust are engaged on a continuing basis.

Today, as I look back 25 years, I want to share with you why Udupi is so important to me, both professionally and personally. After all, as an IAS officer, I have worked in many locations, experienced unique opportunities, met so many interesting people. But despite this diverse experience that so many IAS officers have, you will not even a handful who have had the opportunity to actually set up, to create, a new district. Today, we are very familiar with start-up culture...swiggy, zomato etc. Well, Udupi was our very own start-up experiment in the public sector, something that the then government went ahead bravely and created. I remember one senior officer telling me as he sent me off... "Kalpana, wherever you stand, that is the district!" It was treading into the unknown, and I just went and did it. That is what we were in those days- brave in our innocence and our faith.

And that brings me to the second reason why Udupi is so special, not only among the new districts, but among all districts. Because the start-up of 1997 is today a unicorn of 2022. Just walk or drive the roads of Udupi, it has the look, feel and spirit of an international city. Whether as an education hub, a health sector nerve centre, or a tourist destination, Udupi has tremendous potential and in has outstripped not just the new districts, but also many of the older district headquarters. This in 25 years, and there is so much more to come!

What is the reason for this? The primary reason is the constructive, creative, peaceful and law-abiding nature





of the people of Udupi. I remember that when I was Deputy Commissioner, there was a strike notice by private transporters of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi. I, along with the police and the transport department, called for a meeting immediately and came to an understanding that there would be no untoward disruption. And they kept their word. Even though the strike took a serious turn in Mangalore, Udupi remained quiet and life went on as usual. In fact, our colleagues in Dakshina Kannada were quite irritated with us, but this was to the credit of Udupi's ecosystem, not just government or us.

The people of Udupi are also very critical and questioning. In this context I recall the late Shri. V.S. Acharya, who too contributed so much to this district. Mr. Acharya's nature was, like so many of Udupi's people, that he would never accept anything just like that. He would ask questions about everything until he was satisfied. One day, Shri. Acharya came with his followers and colleagues to my office. I had ordered new furniture for the DCs office, and it had been delivered. My staff had neatly cleaned and arranged it so well, the furniture was very good quality, looked very nice, Mr. Acharya could not find anything to question. But he had to, so he asked me "DC Avare, neevu yaake blue colour furniture tagondideere?" ("DC Madam, why have you purchased blue upholstered furniture?") The furniture was upholstered in blue, so he asked me why I had chosen blue upholstered furniture! Fortunately, I had some presence of mind, so I told him "Sir, blue Udupi Krishnana colour allava, Neela Megha Shyamalanallava Sir, adakke neela colour tagondideene Sir". (Sir, isn't blue the colour of Udupi Krishna? After all, isn't he known as dark as the dark cloud! That is why I have bought blue furniture". And thus Acharya Sir, being personally and politically a devout Hindu, was satisfied!

I gained valuable lessons in Udupi, and it has a permanent place in my heart. Today I take pride in the smooth functioning of the district administration, and glow when I am recognized when I travel in Udupi, even after a gap of almost two decades. I would like to close this walk down memory lane with one final anecdote of Udupiya Shreshtathe (Udupi's fame), which highlights another quality of the people of Udupi. However, questioning and critical they may be, they recognise and acknowledge honesty and hard work. In my last visit, an advocate approached and introduced himself. He had been practising in my court Deputy Commissioner's court. These are his words: "Madam", he said, "When Udupi was formed, so were several other new districts. Udupi eshtu beledide nodi, eshtu pragatiyaagide. But Udupi has developed into such a vibrant city, it has outstripped not only all the other new districts, but so many older district headquarters ... Do you know why? Yaakandare, neevu olleya manasininda ii Jillege adipaayahaakidiri. It is because you laid its foundation with a good, honest heart!".

I, along with all of you, look forward to the golden jubilee of Udupi Jille, when it will have its place on the map of the world.■