



FROM MID-16TH CENTURY, ODISHA WAS RULED SUCCESSIVELY BY FIVE MUSLIM KINGS TILL 1592, WHEN AKBAR ANNEXED IT INTO THE MUGHAL EMPIRE

PICS: SOMEN SENGUPTA



BARABATI FORT

WHERE THE STONES SPEAK

The Barabati Fort speaks volumes about the past of Odisha in particular and our country in general. There is an urgent need for us to start appreciating it, writes SOMEN SENGUPTA

The significance of architectural heritage is often lost on the people of our country. In New Delhi, if you ask someone what is Feroz Shah Kotla, nine out of 10 people will tell you that it is a cricket stadium. Most of them have forgotten that it is also an excellent archaeological site. It is a fortress which was built by Sultan Feroz Shah Tughlaq to house his version of Delhi city called Ferozabad in the year 1354. Similarly, in Cuttack, Odisha, when you ask people about the Barabati Fort, you will find that to the general public, its importance has been reduced to that of a sports complex.

The congested streets and poorly maintained heritage buildings of Cuttack city are enough to disillusion and disappoint anybody who comes here in the search for a pristine setting or learn about Odisha's history. It's tragic that the city has become oblivious to the rich heritage which practically stares them in the face. Only about 8 km from the centre of the messy city, at the apex of a delta formed by the river Mahanadi on the north and its distributary, the Kathajodi on the south, stands the medieval structure of the Barabati Fort. This fort might be in ruins today but it is an asset nonetheless as it speaks volumes about a hidden aspect of our shared history. It has seen the rise and fall of various dynasties — Afghan, Mughal, Maratha and later, even the British empire. Even the remains of the fort in this small archeological park offer invaluable insights into what Cuttack has been through.

The remains suggest that the fortress was built of khondalite stone. The area has a citadel wall built with laterite blocks. Remains of a temple, too, have been found here. Upon excavation, 32 pillars were also built of laterite blocks were found standing in the area like sentinels. The 102 acres of area that this rectangular fort covers is still guarded with several stone gates, bastions and ramparts.

It's believed that this fort was quite small in size. It is just 2,150 ft in length and hardly about 1,899 ft in breadth. Another theory sug-

gests that Barabati may have been a part of a bigger fortification which was reduced later to a small one. Stories begin to unfold the moment one enters the fortress area and starts to look around.

Odisha is thought of as the sacred land of Hindus as it boasts of the Jagannath and Lingaraja temples. It has a glorious past which does not deserve to be forgotten.

According to the description of this land offered by Chinese traveller Xuanzang, it was a booming centre of Buddhism in the 6th century. It housed several stupas, monasteries and related learning schools. From the 7th century onwards, Hindu kings overpowered the crown and dynasties like Kesari, Ganga and Chalukya brought a golden era of temple architecture here giving India some of its best display of cultural heritage.

Our mythology, too, contains references to this land. While one version says that this land was ruled by the third son of Bali, the demon king, another version in the *Mahabharata* says that Duryadhana was married to a daughter of Angada, who was the ruler king of this land.

The political unification of Odisha was done between 1118 and 1134 when king Chodagangadeb of Ganga dynasty defeated the last Somavamsi king Karnakeshari. It was the time when victorious king Chodagangadeb built several forts to protect his kingdom and also shifted his capital from Kalinganagar to Katak. Legend has it that he also built a fort near Cuttack but whether that is Barabati or not is not clear in history.

Madala Panji, a chronicle of the Puri Jagannath Temple, covers various periods of history. It gives the strong hint that another ruler named Anangabhima Deva III built a new capital near Barabati village. He named it Varanasi Katak. It was at this time that the royal family shifted from Chauwdar and started living here. Thus, the idea of establishing a fort at Barabati village between the fertile land of two rivers named Mahanadi and Kathajori was logical. Also, a recent discovery of a copper plate from this area suggests that a donation of land was made by Anangabhima Deva III.

Historians argue this is enough to conclude that this fort was built by Anangabhima Deva III sometime between 1229 to 1238.

The Afghan invasion of Bengal in 1568 saw the fall of the last Hindu king Mukundadeva. That was the beginning of a dark era in Odisha. Like many other invasions in India, this one too entailed brutal treatment of people and destruction of temples and other Hindu architecture. Kalapahad, a muslim who was earlier a Hindu Brahmin named Kalachand Roy, came from Bengal as the commander of Sultan Sulainian Karanni and destroyed several great archaeological edifices of Odisha. Konark Temple and Barabati Fort both were victims of his zealotry as they suffered large-scale vandalism.

The game changed again in 1592 when Barabati was conquered by Mughals. Abu'l-Fazl ibn Mubarak, the court historian of Akbar, mentions it in his book *Ain-i-Akbari* written between 1594 to 1595. He says that the fort represented great architecture and it has a palace with nine *asianas*. *Asianas* is a Persian word which means courtyard. It has often wrongly been translated as a multi-storeyed palace. This was very clearly explained by James Fergusson, the Scottish historian who came to India as a businessman but ended up spending his time in exploring India's lost history. He visited the fort in 1837 and upon examining the structure, he concluded that there was never a nine-storeyed palace here. Instead, there were several inter-connected courts in concentric circles at different surface levels with decreasing floor size. Much before Fergusson's visit, two British traders named Bruton and Cartwright visited this fort in 1633. They also never talked about any multi-storeyed palace.

In Abul Fazal's description itself, use of each section was detailed as sections for elephants, artillery, cooking, women, etc.

The Maratha connection with Barabati is an important chapter in history. It is known that after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the entire central administration of the



Mughals started to crumble and created space for local governors who became almost independent till the time British East India Company crushed them. The Eastern part of India was also not an exception where Murshid Quli Khan, the governor of Bengal became an indirect ruler of Odisha. It was during his time that inside the fort, a mosque was built in 1719. The mosque still stands there.

In the western part of India, the Maratha kingdom was also getting weaker because of internal conflict between several groups of Pune, Baroda, Gwalior and Nagpur.

The Nagpur region was dominated by Raghujhi Bhosale who tried to expand his area in the east and in that process entered Odisha. They conquered Cuttack along with Barabati fort on April 19, 1742.

Though it was again recaptured by Alivardi Khan of Bengal, Marathas regained it through Raghujhi Bhosale's commander

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Pandit Bhaskar Rao Holkar on May 12, 1743. The era of Bhaskar Holkar in Odisha was a saga of extreme plunder and loot that in brutality may cross many earlier invasions.

In 1765, the British East India Company gained the right of tax collection in Bengal, Bihar and a part of Odisha from the Mughal empire. The imperial power of London never looked back after this as Bengal, the richest province of India, was under them. It then spread across today's Bangladesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, a part of Odisha and the Indian part of Western Bengal. Cuttack and Ganjam were still under Marathas.

After Robert Clive, Warren Hastings tried to capture Cuttack but failed. In 1799, with the conquest of Mysore, the East India Company further spread its tentacles. Meanwhile, China was becoming a big exporter of tea to Europe. Thus there was a need to expand territory for opium and indigo and

capturing Cuttack was the need of the hour. In 1803, Colonel Harcourt landed at Ganjam and defeated the Marathas. By October, Cuttack was also taken over after Battle of Laswari. By December 17, 1803, Barabati Fort was under a new ruler. Within the next 30 years, the fall of Barabati started and from 1856-57 when Cuttack city was in expansion and railway tracks were under installation in Odisha, random stone slabs were relocated from here.

It is said that most of the bridges and roads of Cuttack city were made with the stone slabs of Barabati. Naturally, it did not take a long time for the structure to start getting diminished to a mere plinth foundation. In a letter dated May 31, 1856, a strong request was made to save this historical monument. Over time, the ASI (Archaeological Survey of India) took it over. However, one needs a pair of special eyes and ears to understand its importance.