Insight
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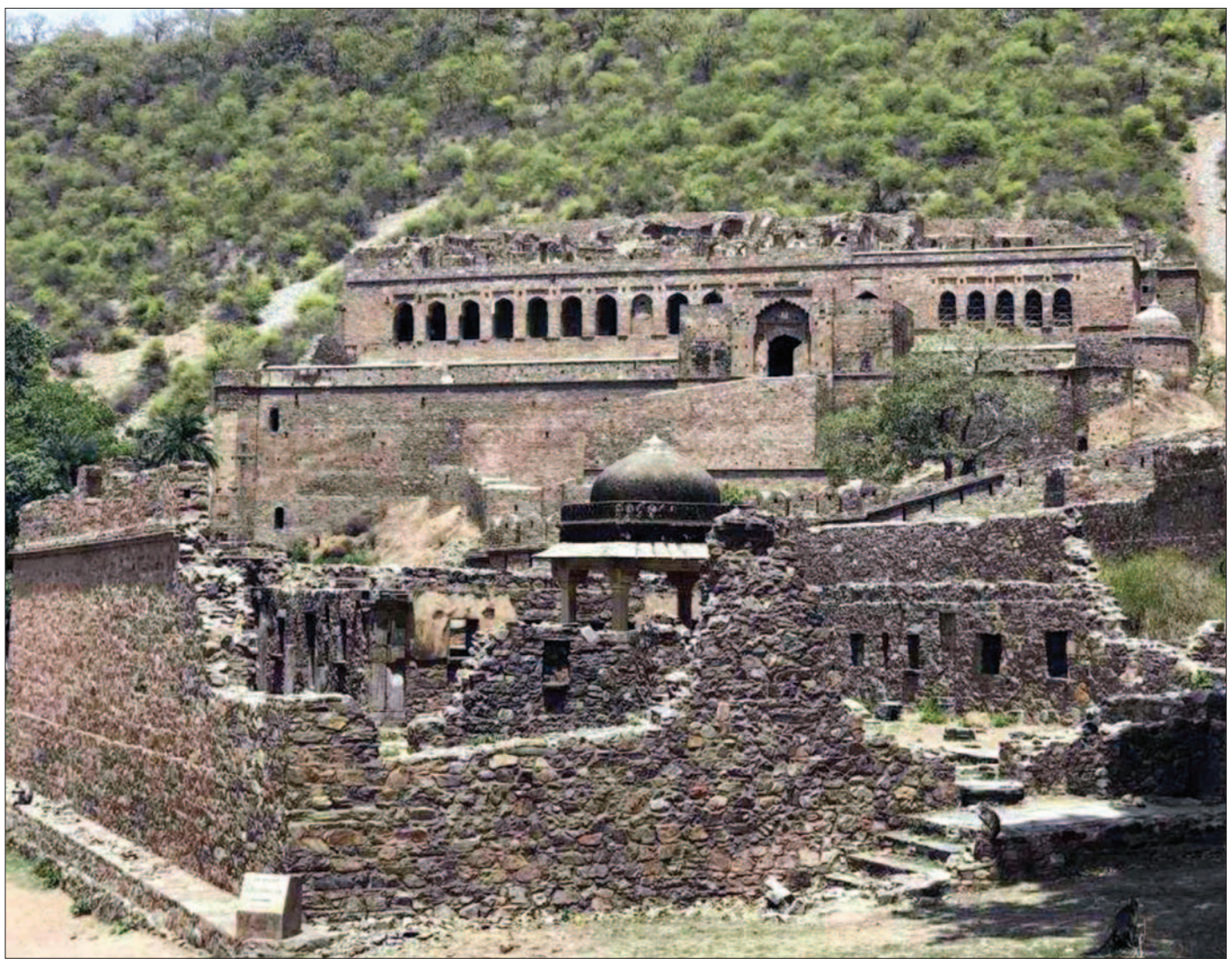
Bhangarh Fort: India's most haunted!



By **SOMEN SENGUPTA**

Visiting an ancient fort in India can sometimes be an uncommon experience for a tourist. At the gate you might have seen a guide negotiating hard with a group of tourists or a picture post card vendor trying to push his products to the visitors or may be a service man bothering your driver for parking your car in right way. But here at the entry gate of Bhangarh fort, you will find an exceptional group of people offering you an unique service which has no match with any other fort in India.

"Do you want to hear the ghost story of this haunted place" or " do you want to get scared inside" is the offer that comes from local self- educated guides at the gate of 16th century fortified ruins of Bhangarh situated in the Alwar district of Rajasthan.

500 years old magnificent Bhangarh Qilla popularised as the only officially declared haunted fort of India has much more of history to explore than some century old legends of haunting saga often exaggerated to an extreme limit of baseless surmises.

Thanks to its extraordinary location that falls at the border line of deep woods of Sariska Tiger Reserve on the slope of mighty Aravalli hills, the stone built deserted human settlement walled by massive fortification is a perfect back ground to create a shivering climax if presented with perfect voice articulation.

Rajasthan, the land of royals, is decorated with innumerable century old edifices and every single of those has its own story to tell. In that grand list of forts dotted from Marwar to Rajputana, Bhangarh stands with a notorious reputation of being the most haunted fort India, though till now there is no substantial evidence of any supernormal thing found inside this ruin.

With its picture postcard background of rough terrain of dry and difficult surface, fort Bhangarh houses temples, pavilions, palaces, market places, watch tower and many more, but all in extreme dilapidation as it was abandoned more than 300 years ago, and it was abandoned overnight. Once a bustling fortified human settlement Bhangarh saw series of devastation and its fast depopulation perhaps was the reason of all extra superficial surmises that includes necromancy, curse, prejudices and political conflicts.

It was Bhagwant Das, the king of Amer, who first acquired this place to build a fort for his younger son Madho Singh, younger brother of Man Singh –I one of the important members of Akbar's team. Madho Singh himself became a diwan of Akbar later on and showed his unconditional loyalty to Mughal court.

In 1631Madho Singh then an important figure in Mughal court moved his capital in Bhangarh and real expansion of this fort was started. The mystic story of Bhangarh started from that point of time. It is believed that this place was occupied by a local God man named Guru Balunath who used the area for his meditation and penance. Madho Singh negotiated with the God man that his construction of fort will be a humble one and shadow of its structure will never fall on the hut of Balunath .

Legend has it that this commitment was not kept by next generation and they increased the wall height of the fort, the result of which was that its shadow fell on Balunath's hut. A curse was given to the royal family by Balunath that this fort will be turned into a necropolis. Thus a thriving city with more than 9000 houses became a city of dead from 1720 and the entire fort was reduced into rubble that we get to see now.

In all the villages around the fort there is another story that has been in circulation for many centuries now, and till today village elders love to share this with the younger generation. This legend says there was one beautiful princess of the royal family named Ratnavati daughter of one Chatr Singh. Ratnavati's peerless beauty mesmerized one man who used to practice black magic. With his power of necromancy the man got closer to Ratnavati when she was visiting market to buy perfume. Ratnavati on realizing the evil design of the man pushed a boulder that killed the man. Before his last breath the man uttered the curse that the entire habitation will be hushed up and the place will become a ghost city. A few years later a gory war between Bhangarh and Ajabgah resulted in slaughtering of many citizens of the fort and soon last batch of survivors also left it overnight – Thus the legend of Bhangarh was born and cemented its position in people's mind.

The stunning architecture of Bhangarh is replete with history and heritage rather than entertaining ghost hunters and thrill seekers.

The three successive layers of fortification to protect the habitation of the fort is an extraordinary engineering plan and the outermost fortification is designed with five massive gates viz Lahori, Ajmeri, Phulbari, Delhi and Hanuman gate.

Just after entering into the fort a long sketch of stone made road goes towards the main palaces. This walk of around 10 minutes is perhaps the best part of this fort visit.

This part is called jauhari bazar that was the market place.

The long road holds an array of ruined stone made houses and small establishments on both the sides and it is astonishing to notice that every single structure is roofless. Many of the remaining plinth of the structure has staircases giving a clear indications that these houses were multi storied but now except the ground floor there remains nothing. The dilapidation state is so stunning and so mind blowing that it is bound to create a thrill of suspense in any visitors mind. The silence in the milieu, the eye catching texture of the stone and shape of the ruins all put together really create a mystic world much good for an atmosphere of dark tourism. In this mysterious rows of ruined stone houses, light and shadows play hide and sick. The design of the blocks are so perplexing that while walking side by side one may hide himself behind any wall easily and such conduct strongly establishes the saga of paranormal associated with this fort.

The mystic rows of ruined roofless stone houses ends at gate after crossing of which one lands on a huge plain field dotted with few temples and an Islamic dome kind structure.

It is really a matter of surprise that though every single house in the market sections are ruined all temples of the forts are in very good condition thanks to careful supervision of Archaeological Society of India. There are temples dedicated to Hanuman, Gopinath, Someswar, Kesav Rai, Mangala Devi, Ganesh etc and out of all these Gopinath and Someswar temples are two excellent piece of architecture. Both built in splendid Nagara style of North Indian school of architecture, these yellow and pink soft sand stone temples, have huge pinnacle circulated by votive towers on top, and over the plinth the roof is supported on many heavily ornamented decorative pillars with extraordinary stone carving that features many Hindu motifs like floral designs, blooming lotus, musicians playing instruments, dancing girls and many animals. The inclusion of camel rider apart from horse and elephant motifs in temple carving clearly shows the local influence.

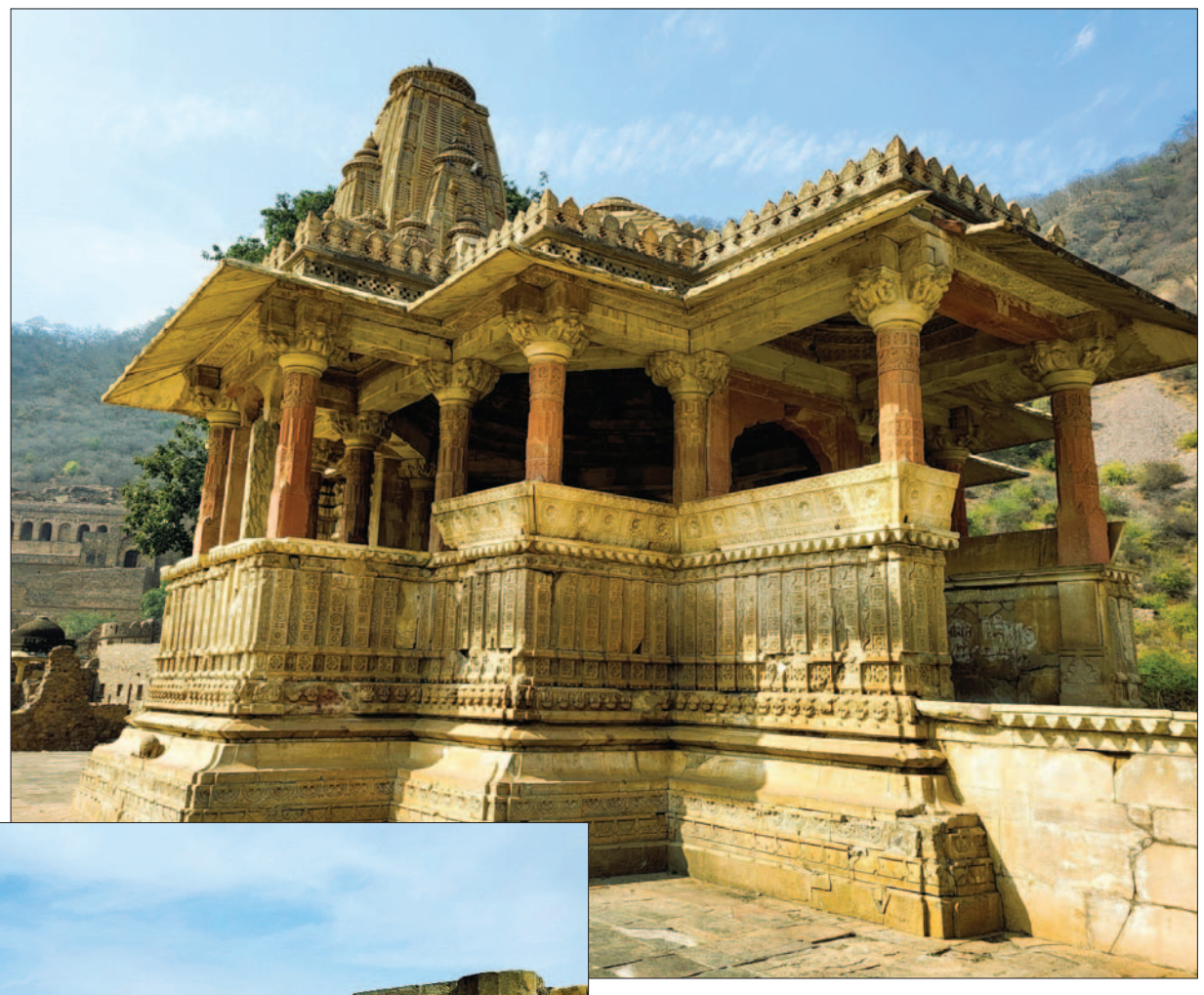
The image of Ganesha and some other Hindu Gods are also erected on the stone wall. The most eye catching figures are of some human on the apex of every pillars. Those are carved in such a way to give a look that they are holding the roof of the temple. Near the temple lie purohit *ki haveli* - the house of the priest.

A small walk after this takes on to the steep upwards sloping stone path way which ends at the landing of the first floor of the main palace. It houses all royal chambers and a dance hall as assumed.

The main palace which was once seven stories high, now after gradual dilapidation is reduced to three only, and every floor is designed with several chambers with large arched windows facing the front gate of the fort. The top floors still have a part with many standing and fallen stone pillars and some of those are having floral designs.

Local guides take liberty to shape up history as per their own wish to entertain tourists.

Once you are at the top of the palace, the entire Bhangarh fort is visible and the dark jungle that runs on its one of the wall can be seen clearly. From here all structures including the wooded kewda is also visible. The huge amount of rubble, broken pillars, big sized stones all scattered in a messy state on the top clearly gives an indication of roof collapsing many, many years ago.



As the fort is almost adjacent to Sariska Tiger Reserve wild animals frequent the fort and in day time peacocks, Neel gai, deers etc can be spotted. At night out of many mysterious sound, roar of tigers and leopards are also heard to add steam on it's so called "most haunted place" tag.

The ghost story of Bhangarh is many centuries old. People say that at night they have seen shadows moving in rooms, suddenly temperature comes down to freezing cold, weird sounds, screaming and stone displacement from top occurs. Some of the stories talk of young friends who tried to be adventurous and dared to stay in the fort in the night only to be banished into oblivion and those who managed to escape the horror inside die as soon as they came out.

All these stories have been passed on for for centuries. Whether these all are really the curse of the black magician or a sheer hoax is still a big question. Sometimes back a group of rational science loving team spent a night inside the fort and as per them some sounds of stone falling may with the sound of wild animals moving inside the fort at night, might have given rise to these tales.

ASI has issued strict restrictions for not entering the fort after 6 pm and foreign tourists are not sold any entry ticket unless a special permission is obtained.

Haunted or not, the ruined fort of Bhangarh is a gem of edifice in the landscape of Rajasthan. The increasing number of visitors to this fort clearly shows that interest and curiosity of history will attract more people to Bhangarh who will equally enjoy the magic of exploring heritage and the throb of visiting a so called "most haunted place of India." ■

Travel Logistics :
Bhangarh is just 88 km from Jaipur.
It takes nearly 2 hours to reach from Jaipur.
Night stay is not needed .
One can plan it with visit of Sariska Tiger Reserve – In that case night stay is needed.
Guide can be taken for understanding history and archaeology but paying someone to hear ghost stories will not be prudent.