

JHANSI

A Historic Land



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— INTRODUCTION —

Just beyond the Jhansi city, are a string of fortresses which tell the story of the shifting political powers in the 18th and the 19th century. The most splendid among them is the fort of Samthar that was a seat of a powerful princely state till 1947. Near Samthar, lies the fort of Ammargarh, once the stronghold of the Naga Sanyasi Warrior Mahants, who controlled vast swathes of Bundelkhand, before their power was curtailed by Mahadji Scindia. Just beyond Samthar lies the Lohagarh Fort, that is immortalized in folksongs for its resistance to the British in 1857-58. Towards the east of Jhansi city, lie the two Bundela fortresses of Barua Sagar and Tahrauli, which are remnants of the numerous Bundela principalities that once dotted the region. To the south of Jhansi, is the British era Sukma Dukma Dam, built between 1905-1909, which is an engineering marvel due to a mile-long tunnel that lies underneath the dam. A special mention must be made of the Talbehat Fort, a stronghold of Rani Laxmibai's chief ally, Raja Mardan Singh of Banpur and the forbidding fort of Garh Kunder, infamous for its legends of ghosts and dacoits.

— SAMTHAR FORT —

Where Bundelkhandi & European Architecture Meet

Once the seat of a powerful princely state, Samthar – 60 km north of Jhansi – is best known for its magnificent fort, a spectacular amalgamation of Bundelkhandi and French architecture.

Samthar gets its name from 'Samtal' or 'flat land' in Hindi.

The origins of the fortification here can be traced to the 16th century, when Samsheer Khan, a Subedar or Governor of Mughal Emperor Babur (r. 1526 – 1530 CE), was stationed at nearby Erach (23 km away). He is said to have built a small fort or garhi and named it 'Shamshergarh', after himself. The fort was used as a small check-post of the Mughals and later became part of the Bundela kingdom of Datia.

During the 18th century, as the Mughal Empire declined, regional powers began to rise. When Datia's ruler Ramchandra Singh (r. 1733 – 1762 CE) was killed in battle, a war of succession broke out for the Bundela throne. Ramchandra's great-grandson Indrajeet Singh managed to take control of the kingdom with the assistance of a loyal officer named Naune Shah Gurjar. Naune Shah was then granted the title of Rajdhar, along with a jagir or land grant of five villages. Naune Shah's son Madan Singh rose to a position of importance and obtained governorship of Samthar Fort.



By 1760 CE, more Gurjars had settled in Samthar. The kingdom now stretched across Northern Bundelkhand, in the region between the Betwa and Pahuj rivers. Taking advantage of a series of wars between the Scindias of Gwalior and the Bundelas of Datia, Samthar declared its independence in 1785 CE. Due to an existing alliance with the Marathas, Samthar's independence was recognised by them, with Ranjit Singh Rajdhar I (r. 1800 – 1815 CE), a descendant of Madan Singh, being granted the title of 'Raja'.

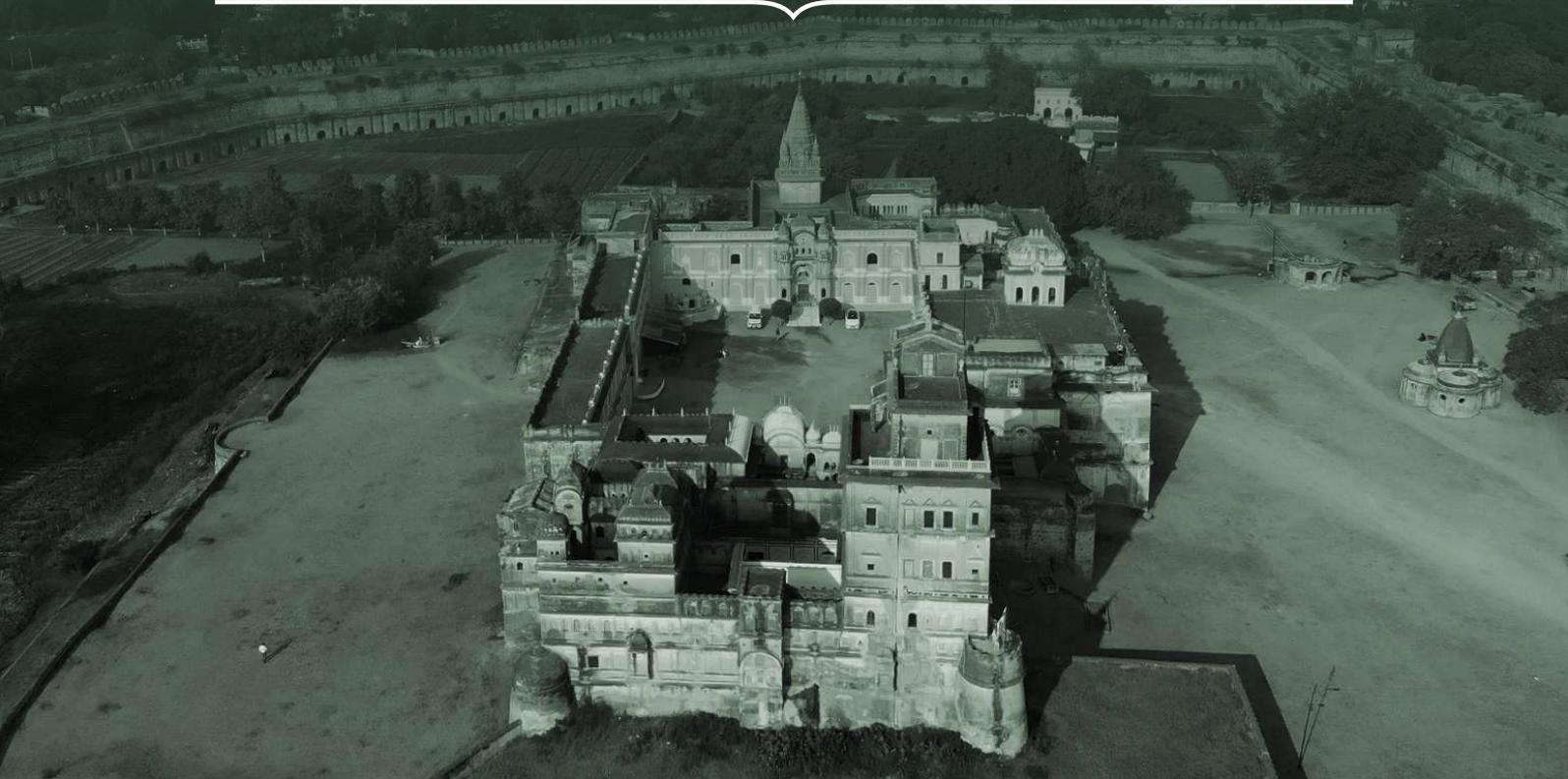
In 1817, as the Maratha Empire disintegrated, Raja Ranjit Singh Rajdhar II (r. 1815 – 1827) signed a treaty of friendship with the British. During the Revolt of 1857, the Regent Queen of Samthar, Rani Lallan Ju, helped Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi, following the fall of Jhansi to British forces. Once the Revolt had been quelled, Samthar – which had remained neutral during the revolt and had even helped shelter British civilians – was granted a sanad on behalf of Queen Victoria, in 1862.

Raja Chhatar Singh's rule (r. 1864 – 1896 CE) saw modern developments in Samthar, such as the construction of the Betwa canal and the establishment of a railway line. He was given the title of 'His Highness' during the 1877 Delhi Durbar. Peace and progress continued during the rule of Bir Singh Dev (r.1896-1935). In 1947, the then Maharaja Radha Charan Singh (r. 1935 – 1949 CE) signed the act of accession with the Government of India.

Even today, Samthar Fort is surrounded by a moat. Behind it are three-tiered battlements and gun emplacements, and almost three concentric layers of walls. The residential section in the centre of the fort features elements of European architecture. This section was built in the late 18th century, by an Italian adventurer known locally as 'Tonton Sahib', perhaps a corruption of the word 'Antoine'. In addition to the fort, Samthar boasts several beautiful temples and a splendid baoli or stepwell that was recently restored.

Even today, the Samthar Fort retains its grandeur, a stunning reminder of a time when powerful warriors ruled the region.

The blend of Bundelkhandi and European architecture seen at Samthar fort is due to the influence of a late 18th century Italian adventurer locally known as 'Tonton Sahib'.



AMMARGARH

Seat Of The Warrior Sanyasis

The Fort of Ammargarh, once the stronghold of the powerful Naga Sanyasis who dominated North India in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, sits just 48 km north of Jhansi.

Ammargarh is located in a region known as Moth, actually a corruption of the word 'Math', a religious institution, in this case linked to the Naga Sanyasis. In the 8th century, Adi Shankaracharya set up numerous monastic orders of monks, among which was the Dasnami Naga Sampradaya. During the 18th century, these monastic orders had become extremely powerful, establishing semi-independent principalities. Known to be fierce warriors, rulers of kingdoms such as Jaipur, Jodhpur, Awadh, Bharatpur and even the Marathas used to patronise them in exchange for their support.

Among the most powerful of the Naga Sanyasi Mahants or Chiefs was Raja Rajendra Giri Gossain. Taking advantage of the decline of the Mughal Empire, he supported the Marathas and their Subedar of Jhansi, Naro Shankar Motiwale (1730 – 50 CE). In 1745, Rajendra Giri also seized the Pargana of Moth and got possession of 114 villages there. But this brought him in conflict with the Marathas.

After Rajendra Giri, his successors Anup Giri, Umrao Giri & Anand Giri became involved in a series of conflicts with Mahadji Scindia. Along with his allies the Rajas of Samthar, Mahadji Scindia ousted the Mahants from Moth and captured Ammargarh. The fort and the surrounding pargana were granted to the Samthar Rajas, and it remained a part of Samthar state till 1947.

Today, the fort consists of large walls and a palace of the Samthar Rajas. A shrine inside the Ammargarh Fort, dedicated to the Naga Sanyasi Mahants, is the only reminder of the time when powerful warrior sages held sway here.



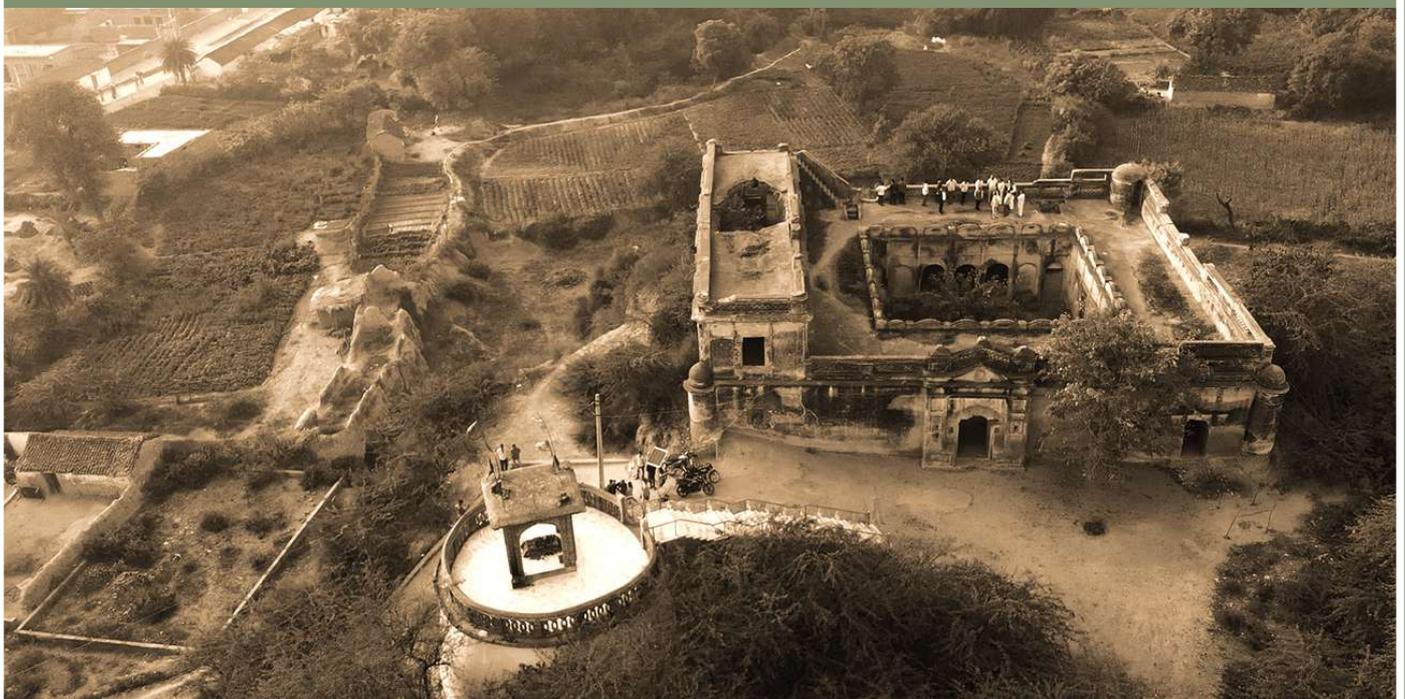
LOHAGARH & The Revolt of 1857

Lohagarh is a forgotten yet vital site of the Revolt of 1857. It was here that a pitched battle was fought between soldiers of the British East India Company and the Indian revolutionaries, and it is because of the bravery of the latter that Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi was able to pass through and get to Kalpi.

Lohagarh Fort, about 89 km north of Jhansi, was built as a military garrison by the Rajas of Samthar in the late 18th century. At the time of the Revolt of 1857, the princely state was ruled by the Regent Rani Lallan Ju. As the principalities around it rose in revolt against the British East India Company, the state of Samthar adopted a position of strict neutrality. British civilians fleeing the Revolt were given refuge at Samthar Fort.

On 23rd March 1858, British forces under General Hugh Rose attacked Jhansi and by 2nd April, the city's walls had been breached. Rani Laxmibai and her entourage left Jhansi for Kalpi to the north, passing through territory of the Samthar kingdom. Located on her route was the small Lohagarh Fort, then under the charge of a Pathan Subedar Rajjab Khan.

Samthar's Rani Lallan Ju instructed Rajjab Khan to help Rani Laxmibai and her entourage escape. As the Rani passed through Lohagarh on 4th April 1858, with British forces in hot pursuit, even the villagers of the region staged a resistance. It is estimated that more than 500 Lohagarh residents, including Rajjab Khan, died fighting so that the Rani could escape.



There are many folk songs and poems that tell of this brave feat. One folk poem goes like this:

लोहागढ़ कठनि मवास
फरिगी, झांसी भरोसे ना रहयिो
जहँ तोप चलें, गोला चलें, भालन की है मार | फरिगी |
जहँ सीस हथेली लै चले , जमराज के सरिदार |
फरिगी, झांसी भरोसे ना रहयिो |



*Lohagarh is a Mighty Fort
So go not there to fight, O Foreigner!
Where canons, cannonballs, spears strike!
Where warriors fight the enemy, as messengers of death!
So go not there to fight, O Foreigner!*



BARUA SAGAR

A Fort By A Manmade Lake

The beautiful fort complex of Barua Sagar was built as a summer retreat for the Rajas of Orchha, and has been witness to some historic events. Barua Sagar, 22 km south-east of Jhansi, was built by the Bundela Raja Udit Singh of Orchha between 1705 and 1707 CE. He also built the large lake adjacent to it. Inside the fort complex were palaces and several small temples.

When the Maratha army and the Rajas of Orchha faced of in 1744, it was at this fort that part of the battle was waged. When the Newalkars, once Subedars or Governors of the Maratha Peshwa, declared Jhansi a quasi-independent state during the last years of the Maratha Empire, the Barua Sagar fort complex and its surrounding areas came under their control too. And during the battle over the Jhansi throne in the 1830s, seeking safety and refuge from palace intrigue, Gangadharrao Newalkar – who would eventually get the throne and later marry the girl who would become Rani Laxmibai – lived at this fort complex for a considerable time.

The fort saw action during 1857, when the Orchha Diwan or Prime Minister, Nathe Khan, took advantage of the political instability of Jhansi caused by the death of the Jhansi King Gangadharrao, captured the fort and laid siege to Jhansi despite protests by the British on 10th August, 1857.



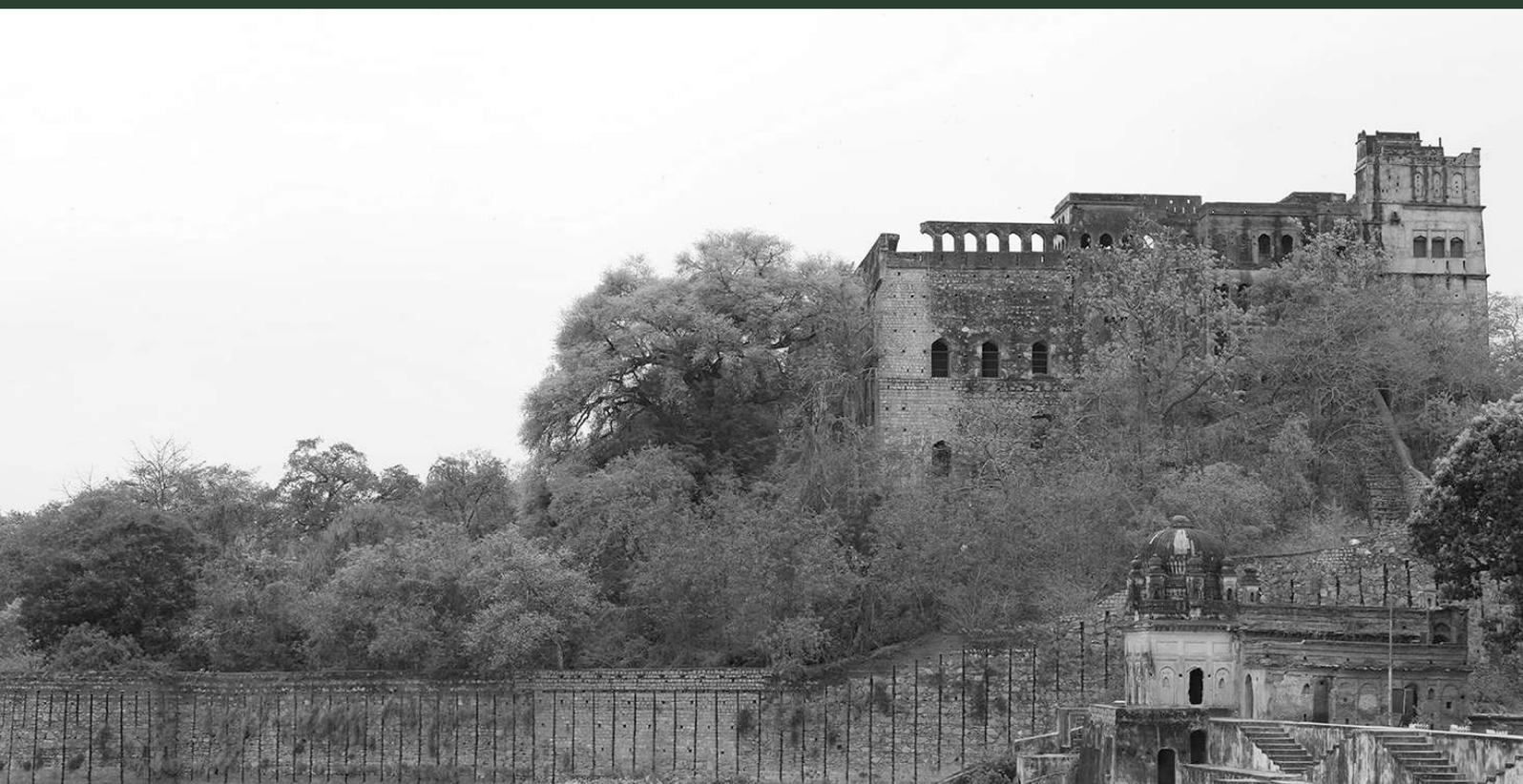
Rani Laxmibai took her 4,000 troops, under the command of her father Moropant Tambe, and with the help of the Raja of Banpur, Mardan Singh, recaptured the fort from Orchha. During this period, they went on to cut down the flag staff, pulled down government buildings and burnt the surrounding village and the supplies collected for the British camp were captured.

On 6th March 1858, Hugh Rose had a decisive victory at this very fort against the 20,000 troops of Taty Tope, one of the leaders of the Revolt.

After the Revolt, the Barua Sagar Fort was used as a rest house for touring British officers, surveyors and picnickers. The fort finds mention in the chronicles of many British officials and French residents of the region, with some likening it to the castles along the Rhine River in Germany.

During the Indian freedom struggle, the fort was used as a secret office, where handwritten bulletins were created and dispatched at night.

Today, Barua Sagar is a popular gateway for residents of Jhansi and is protected by the State Archaeological department of Uttar Pradesh.



European visitors likened the Barua Sagar Fort to the castles along the Rhine river in Germany.

The Lost Glory of

TAHRAULI FORT

The little village of Tahrauli sits 50 km from Jhansi. Looming over it is the enormous Tahrauli Fort, spread over 5 acres, still holding with it the remains of large palaces, stepwells, temples and other once-grand buildings.

The reign of the Bundela King Raja Bir Singh Ju Deo (r. 1605 – 1627CE) is considered to be the Golden Age of Bundelkhandi architecture. He built many forts and palaces, including those at Jhansi, Orchha, Datia and this one at Tahrauli. After his death, the fort passed to his son Raja Bagh Rai. The fort remained the seat of Bagh Rai's descendants until the mid-18th-century, when Lakshman Singh, Bagh Rai's descendant became the ruler of Tahrauli.

It was during Laxman Singh's rule that many palaces and buildings were added within the fort. He was a great patron of literature, music and art. The last ruler of Tahrauli was Nirpat Singh, who was poisoned amid palace intrigue. Following his death, Tahrauli was captured by the Maratha Rajas of Jhansi and leased to the Orchha kings. Tahrauli, no longer the heart of a kingdom, was neglected. Its fort, deserted, fell into disrepair. Reminiscing about their past glory, there is still a local folk song in Tahrauli that goes:



*Kahaan gayi ve Kudar ki baithakein, kahaan gaye ve Dangaai ke raj?
Kahaan gaye Raaja Nripat Singh, jin raakhi Tahrauli laaj?*



*Where has the glory of the Kudar Fort gone, where is the Kingdom of Dangaai?
Where is Raja Nripat Singh, who protected the honour of Tahrauli?*



— S U K M A D U K M A D A M —

and its Underwater Tunnel

Drive 40 km from the historic town of Jhansi in Uttar Pradesh and you will be greeted by a scenic, old dam. Known as the Dhukwan Dam, or the Sukma Dukma Dam, this British-era dam is built on the Betwa River, a tributary of Yamuna.

Taking its name from the village of Dhukwan, the dam was built between 1905 and 1909, as a secondary dam to another dam on the same river. This one is the Parichha Dam, 25 km from Jhansi, near the village of Parichha. It was built between 1881 and 1885.

The Parichha and Sukma Dukma dams were the lifelines of the region back in the day and are still in use today. They supplied drinking water, water for irrigation and also for the generation of electricity. An interesting feature of the Sukma Dukma Dam is its inspection tunnel underneath. It is said that the tunnel was used in emergencies to cross the river. Visit the dam today, especially during the monsoon, and you will be spellbound by its size and the picturesque greenery that envelopes it.



TALBEHAT FORT

Seat of Raja Mardan Singh

Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi is immortalised in history for her fight against the British in 1857-58, but there were many great commanders and warriors who fought alongside her. One such hero was Raja Mardan Singh of Banpur, whose seat of power, Talbehat Fort, is 60 km south of Jhansi, in Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh.

Located beside a large lake and spread across 500 acres, Talbehat Fort takes its name from 'tal' (lake) and 'behat' (local village). In the 9th century CE, the Chandelas ruled over Talbehat, evidence of which remains in the form of three temples in the fort's vicinity. By the 13th century, the region came under the Bundela kings of Garh Kundar and Orchha.

Talbehat was built by Raja Bharat Shah (r. 1612-1630) in 1618 CE. Bharat Shah was the nephew and rival of the famous Bundela ruler Bir Singh Ju Deo, who had displaced his own brother, Bharat Shah's father, Ram Shah from the Orchha throne. In the 19th century, Talbehat Fort along with Banpur and Chanderi came under the rule of Raja Morprahlad (r.1802-42), Bharat Shah's descendant. In 1811-1812, a large army of the Maratha ruler of Gwalior, Daulatrao Scindia captured Morprahlad's kingdom, including the forts of Talbehat, Chanderi and Banpur. Morprahlad asked the British for help. Hoping to balance Maratha power against that of the Bundelas, the British pressurised Daulat Rao Scindia to reach a settlement with Morprahlad. According to the settlement, signed in 1838, Morprahlad was granted 31 villages in the area around Banpur and Talbehat along with the title of 'Raja of Banpur'.

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Following Morpralhad's death in 1842, his son Mardan Singh ascended the throne. A fierce warrior, Mardan Singh was an able administrator but he also wanted to reclaim the territories his family had lost to the Scindias.

In 1844, he helped capture 140 dacoits at Chanderi and handed them over to the British Commissioner at Lalitpur, in the hope of securing his ancestral place, Chanderi. The same year, after the death of Jankouji Rao Scindia, internal troubles were brewing in Gwalior, and Mardan Singh seized the opportunity to secure Chanderi along with Talbehat and other areas. But the British intervened and Chanderi was restored to the Scindias. With this, Mardan felt cheated.

During the Revolt of 1857, Talbehat Fort became a rallying point for Indian revolutionaries, with Mardan Singh proclaiming his support for Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi. He took up residence in Talbehat and commanded the operations there. But, by 1858, the British forces had returned under the command of Sir Hugh Rose. Talbehat Fort fell to the British army on 14th March 1858 and was extensively damaged.

Following the British victory, Mardan Singh surrendered himself to the British on 5th July 1858, was taken to Gwalior, and from there to the Lahore Jail. He was then transferred to Vrindavan, where he was under house arrest till his death in 1863.

While little remains of Banpur Fort, the ruins of Talbehat Fort still stand tall in memory of the famous Mardan Singh of Banpur, who fought for freedom.



— G A R H K U N D A R —

The 'Haunted' Fort

In 1288 CE, the fort of Garh Kundar was the venue of lavish festivities as the son of the region's Khangar ruler, King Hurmat Singh, was getting married to Hemvati, the daughter of Sohanpal Bundela. At the wedding feast, wine was served only to the Khangar royals and soldiers. Rebuffed, Bundela soldiers swooped in and massacred everyone on the groom's side. Khangar rule was replaced with that of the Bundelas. This infamous, 'bloody' wedding was immortalised by Hindi writer Vrindavan Lal Verma in his novel Garh Kundar (1954).

It is not hard to imagine why the Garh Kundar Fort has a reputation for being 'haunted'. Situated in rugged terrain, it is a forbidding sight. There are other ominous stories associated with Garh Kundar, the most famous one being that of 'Bouna Daku' or the 'Dwarf Dacoit', who made the fort his lair; and that of a wedding party, which entered the fort at night, never to be seen alive again! We will probably never know how much is fact and how much is fiction, but as late as the 1980s, the fort was a hideout for local dacoits.

Today, it is a tourist attraction and local picnickers throng the beautiful gardens around the fort.



Garh Kunder is one of the most historic fortresses in Bundelkhand. It was built by the Chandelas of Jejakabhukti in the 10th century CE, as their provincial capital. Following the decline in Chandela power, a local ruler Khet Singh Khangar declared himself independent in 1092 CE. This was the beginning of Khangar rule in the region. It was in 1288 CE that Sohanpal Bundela took control of Garh Kunder and established the Bundela kingdom, which would rule the region till 1947. In the 16th century, the capital was shifted to Orchha and Garh Kunder was abandoned.

Garh Kunder continued to house a temple dedicated to Goddess Giddhahani, the patron goddess of the Khangars and the Bundelas.

Towers, battlements and underground chambers of the great fort have been preserved by the Madhya Pradesh Archaeology Department, and can be explored visited by tourists.

