

UNLIKE Rajasthan or Maharashtra, Bengal's landscape is bereft of majestic forts built by royal rulers of bygone centuries. Most of such structures have been destroyed, either by invaders or the strokes of time. Surprisingly, all is not lost. One structure which was initially a temple complex and later converted into a fort, has somehow survived, though it may not have a huge physical presence. This is the Kurumbera fort in the small village of Gaganeshwar in west Midnapore district of Bengal, from where the Orissa border is barely a few kms away.

A nondescript village in the Bengal-Orissa border, it is just 27 km from Kharagpur railway station. The village of Gaganeshwar has nothing significant to attract outsiders. It is a typical poverty-ridden village of west Midnapore with clay huts and ill maintained roads where your car needs skillful manoeuvring to move. Still Gaganeshwar is frequented by footloosers and serious pupils of architecture alike. The place is so charming that students of IIT Kharagpur often visit the place with academic interest.

In local language, 'Kurum' means stone and 'bera' means fence. So it is easy to understand that the name contains a meaning of an arena fenced by stone. The stone used here is *Makra*, or red laterite. The boundary wall is nearly 12 feet in height and 3 feet in width. The main gate faces north and the



Ruins of a mystical era

somen sengupta visits Kurubera in Midnapore where a 1,000-year-old fort lies in oblivion

entire arena is circled by an 8 feet wide pillared balcony. The area covers 67500 sq ft.

Unfortunately, history is silent on its past. The only saving grace is an inscription written in Oriya. The inscription is badly defaced and legibility is almost lost except for two words: *Budbbar* and *Mabadebanka Mandir*. According to folklore, this fort was built overnight in the honour of Lord Ram and his consort Sita when they visited the place during their 'vanavas' (exile).

Legend has it that this temple was built by one Kapileshwar Deb of Devaraja family of Orissa during the period 1438 to 1469. The *Shiva* installed inside of the temple was known as *Kapileshwar shiva*. The place was originally a temple complex which was later on expanded to provide shelter to pilgrims.

Later, it was converted into a military cantonment by the Mughals and Maratha soldiers who invaded Bengal.

That was when this temple complex was known as fort. Modern era British documents describe it as a fort.

Another inscription written in Oriya found in the compound says it had many new structures built by one Mohammed Tahir during the period of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb that include a three domed mosque built in 1699.

It is assumed the Hindu temple was demolished during this period and it was converted into a military cantonment. Later on, in the 18th century when Marathas from the west stormed Orissa and Bengal under the command of Bhaskar Rao Holkar and Raghuji Bhonsle, it was wrested from the Muslims but the temple was never rebuilt.

The fort later came under the control of the Dutta family of Keshiari. However, no authentic record about its past is available even with them.

The main entrance is on the north

side. There is a small water body in front of the gate known as *Yageswar kund*.

The stepping stone structure of the gate clearly indicates an Orissa school of architectural style known as 'pida'. Although the massive iron gate is no more, the mark of its movement on the stone floor is still visible. Inside, you find the vast corridor filled with pillars. Every pillar of the corridor is built in an equi-distance of 6 feet 9 inches. The upper roof is built in a stone locking system and at centre are designs of lotus and other flora.

Pillars found on the east and north side of the complex have close similarities with 17th century 'cbala' temple of Bengal while pillars found on the western side are built in an entirely different style. The southern part has collapsed. So the architectural characteristics of that part remain unknown. The red laterite stones on the roof which has various floral designs and Hindu motifs like the lotus, are protected from collapsing by the insertion of lime mortar and cement. The pillars are also protected in a similar way.

The temple which was once the main landmark now has only the foundation



remaining. The stone well which now prevails in the middle of the compound was actually the base of the temple which was later razed. Tarapada Satra also opined that there was a temple here.

Scholars have come to the conclusion that it was a west facing temple of Orissa school. It was a 'Saptarath Shikbar Deul' with *Jagmoban* which means a passage chamber in front of the main *garva griha* of the temple.

Archaeologists have calculated that the temple would have been a minimum 50 to 60 feet in height and the *Jagmoban* at least 30 feet high. Inside the fort is a broken *nandipith* where the *shiva linga* is missing.

The fortunate bit is that Fort Kurumbera is not abandoned. The Archeological Survey of India (ASI) has undertaken its preservation and restoration quite some back and their presence is manifest. Today the major part of the fort is in ruins but whatever remains is being perfectly preserved by the ASI.

ACCESS

Kurumbera is just 27 km from Kharagpur town and the nearest town is Keshiari. The village is Gaganeshwar. Catch any train to Kharagpur early morning. From Kharagpur station take a hired car; non AC Ambassador will cost Rs 6.5/km. Photography is allowed.

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