



BIRSA MUNDA, AN INDIAN TRIBAL FREEDOM FIGHTER, LED A MOVEMENT AGAINST THE BRITISH RAJ IN BIHAR IN THE 19TH CENTURY

PALAMU FORTS: A FADING HERITAGE

Jharkhand's Palamu Forts might have been forgotten by the people of India, but even today, the twin forts — that have seen various rulers — speak volumes about our shared past, writes SOMEN SENGUPTA

In a nutshell, the story of the twin forts of Palamu is the story of a tribal kingdom that was once powerful enough to have the Mughal empire and the East India Company threatened by its military might. It is intertwined with an incredible saga of bravery and sacrifice for the sake of one's dignity. But sadly, it is also a pathetic example of how we have failed as a society in protecting our heritage. Today, these once celebrated forts are in a pitiable state which is in stark contrast with the glorious chapter of Indian history that they are a part of. The massive structure with a unique design is gradually being reduced to rubble. And what's worse is that no serious efforts have been made to prevent that from happening.

Even the very name Palamu comes with a whole bag full of complex theories and ideas. According to one school of thinkers, it is a distortion of the Dravidian word 'pall-aam-u' which means 'tooth of water'. The fact that the forts are close to Auranga River goes in favour of this theory. Moreover, when flooded, the rocky surface of river bed looks like jagged teeth. According to another group of people, the name of these forts has been derived from the Hindi word 'Palana' which can refer to either the act of fleeing or a place of refuge. Yet another group argues that Palamu comes from combining the words 'Pala' which means frost and 'Mu' which means death. So, Palamu stands for death by frost.

Today, Palamu is known for two things. One is its famous tiger reserve and the other is that the twin forts are 500 years old. Out of the two forts, the older one is situated in plains while the newer one is situated on a hill stop. Though there is no reliable evidence to know with certainty when the old forts were established, it is believed that they were built by Rajput king Raksel in 1562 and were invaded by the Mughals in the year 1574.

But when Akbar died, Mughals started to lose their grip over the area. In the year 1613, Anata Rai, who was a tribal chief of the Chero community, conquered the fort. That was the beginning of a new era. Around the year 1619, the kingdom came under Medini Rai, who was considered as the greatest Chero ruler. At this time, the fortification got several additional features and was under military vigilance.

The old fort was built over an area of three square kilometres. It has three gates, each of them seven feet in width. The fort has been constructed with lime and surkhi mortar. The external boundary walls of the fort have been built with flat and long bricks. The central gate is the largest of three gates and is known as Singh Dwar.

On the south-western part of the fort, which is surrounded by hills on three sides, there is a small stream called the Kamadah Jheel which was used by the women of the royal family for their daily ablutions. Between this stream and the fort there are two watch towers (dom kilas) located on the hill top which were used to track any enemy intrusions. Of these two towers, one tower houses a small temple of a goddess called Devi Mandir.

It is believed that even after getting defeated by the Mughals, Chero king Medini Rai did not give up in spirit. This is evident from the fact that in 1673, just two years before his death, he had started building an even bigger fort for his son Pratap Rai. The new fort was built at an enviable location which covered all aspects of a well-protected citadel inside a jungle. It was an ideal hub for a tribal kingdom. However, the fort, popularly known as the new fort of Palamu, is believed to have been left incomplete.

The greatest attraction of this fort is that its massive royal gate, known as Nagpuri Darwaza, has been built in white



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and yellow sand stones. This special door was meant for the entry of royals into the fort. It has been built in typical Mughal style. The gates, in particular, remind one of the designs popular in the period of Jahangir. There is an 'Islamic arch' at this fort which boasts of various kinds of floral designs. The craftsmanship of those designs is so perfect and well executed that its measurement and presentation seems fabulous. The upper and middle surface of the arch and the borders running all across the gate have also been decorated with floral designs. The crown of the gate depicts two elephant figures which hang like an extended part of the gate. These figures have been embellished with exotic floral design. The gate is a unique blend of Indo-Islamic architecture.

The next gate is made of stone and is

smaller in size. This gate has been partly destroyed over time. On the slate-coloured pillars, one can find writings in Persian and Sanskrit. While some of these are still legible, some have been badly defaced in some places. The edict clearly mentions name of one Banamali Mishra, the court poet of Raja Medini Rai. It also declares that this fort was built by Medini Rai in 1673. The Persian inscription was recently damaged by some vandals. This gate is the biggest archaeological attraction of this fort.

The fort is believed to have had several other stone gates and inscriptions. Today, all that remains is a plethora of broken pieces. The fort also has remains of what must have been several big and small chambers. It gives some idea about how soldiers must have been placed in each chamber to protect the fort. In the South-

West side of the of the fort lies a bathing place named Kamal Jheel. The area also houses the remains of a small temple. This fort has several open and secret exits. Many of those are still accessible but are in bad shape. A shadow of human negligence prevails in all parts of this massive structure

Coming back to the history of Palamu, its story did not end in the Mughal era. It remained a significant point of conflict even when the East India Company was trying to gain control over India. The glory of the Chero kingdom started fading with the death of Medini Rai. Pratap Rai did not enjoy the old Chero dominance. After Pratap Rai, kings like Rudra Rai, Dikpal Rai, Shaeb Rai, Ranjit Rai, Devi Bateh and Jai Kisan Rai attempted to regain complete control, but sadly, they failed. In year 1770, king Chiranjit Rai tried to make the situation bet-

ter. But his cousin Gopal Rai tried to negotiate with the East India Company and overtake Palamu fort. In 1771, the Patna Council of the British East India company issued a summons to the Chero king to handover the forts on account of misrule.

A 10-day ultimatum was issued to them. When that was not honoured, a gory war took place on January 28, 1771. Under the leadership of Colonel Camac, a member of British council of the East India Company of Patna, the fort was attacked. The Chero put a brave fight before the East India Company. Due to water scarcity at the new fort, all of them had moved to old fort. This gave Captain Camac a chance to capture the new fort almost unopposed and its geographical positioning gave the British an edge against the tribals.

Realising the degree of efficiency of the common Chero warriors and the superb fortification of the structure, Captain Camac was forced to call for more support from Patna. It was answered with supply of more powerful canons like 12 pound canons and ammunition. Powered by such additional infrastructure and equipment, the East India Company finally vanquished the Chero king and conquered both the forts on March 19, 1771. On March 21, 1771 after destroying all circles of resistance, the East India Company finally entered the old fort and with that an era came to an end in that part of the country. In April 1772, during the time of great mutiny in 1857, these forts were captured by local rebellions and it became a centre of strategy. However, as soon as colonial rulers took over charge and ruthlessly crushed every single man who had participated in the mutiny, these two forts were also targeted and vandalised.

Today a big signboard of Jharkhand Tourism is planted near the entry gate of the Betla National Park. It directs the visitors towards Palamu Fort. However, reaching the fort is nothing less than a challenge. Although the roads are wide and well maintained, a zigzag stream running inside the forest is both tempting and dangerous. In several places, the signboards planted by forest department remind you that you are navigating in an elephant corridor and an encounter with a herd of wild elephants is likely. This is not a notice to ignore while going to Palamu Fort. After all, the dilapidated fort inside a jungle is often frequented by wild animals.

But if one manages to brave through all of these hurdles and reach the fort, even the remains of what Palamu once must have been are enough to leave one mesmerised. It shows what modern-day Jharkhand has been through in our glorious, collective past.