



Remembering the Great Barabati Fort

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Ganga king of Kalinga, Chodagangadeb defeated Karnakeshari, the last Somavamshi ruler and annexed Utkal either in 1118 or in 1134 A.D. By this act of conquest he accomplished the task of political unification of Odisha to a great extent. With the emergence of a great Ganga empire the humble and traditional capital of Kalinganagar (Mukhalingam in Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh) lost its relevance and Chodagangadeb shifted his capital to Katak, a place centrally located and well protected by mighty rivers. He built forts around his capital city and made it highly inaccessible. One such fort was built towards the north of the river Kathajuri named Sarangagada (near Baranga). He also built a fort at Chudangagarh (near Chaudwar) and most probably resided there. On the outskirts of Chudangagarh he built forts at Amarabati Kataka (Chhatia) and Jajpur. It is said that he built a fort at Cuttack, but the trace of it is not to be found.

In fact another ruler of the Ganga dynasty Anangabhimadev III (1211-1238 A.D.) built a new city in the village Barabati and named it as Baranasi Katak. He, with the royal family, left Chaudwar and started residing in Abhinav Baranasi Katak. He must have fortified his capital city and for this it is naturally assumed that the Barabati fort was erected by Anangabhimadev III. That he erected a fort at Abhinav Baranasi

Katak is also corroborated by the Nagari plate of Anangabhimadev III.¹

That the Barabati Fort was situated at the bifurcation of the rivers, Mahanadi and Kathajori was mentioned in the *Ain-i-Akbari* of Abul Fazl, compiled in 1594-95. From the accounts of *Ain-i-Akbari* it is evidenced that Raja Mukunda Deva of Chalukya dynasty had built a palace in the Barabati fort. This palace had nine 'asianas'. Later on this Persian word 'asiana' was misunderstood and it was misinformed that Mukundadev had built a nine storied palace there. But in fact it was not a nine storied building as understood now a days.

Fergusson saw the fort in 1837. In his book he wrote "Abul Fazl's description of this palace, however, has been misunderstood by the translators, who have represented it as consisting of nine storeys instead of nine courts or enclosures."² M.M. Ganguly has also given the same view in his article in the *Orissa Review*³. Two British merchants named Bruton and Cartwright attended the Mughal governor in the Barabati fort in 1633 A.D. They never mentioned about the nine-storied building. Rather they said that they were conducted to the court of public audience through a labyrinth of buildings.⁴

However from the description of *Ain-i-Akbari* it is clear that nine-inter connected

enclosures were present at different heights in the structure. The first floor was used to keep elephants, the second for artillery, guards and quarters for attendants, the third for the gatekeepers and patrols, fourth for the workshop and the fifth for the kitchen. The sixth floor was used as reception rooms; the seventh for private apartment, the eighth for women's apartment and the ninth was the sleeping chamber of the governor.⁵

We are unfortunate to prove anything beyond doubt as the whole area was excavated in 1856-57 for stones and nothing substantial is left to inform about the exact nature of the structure. But from the writings and accounts of contemporary writers and travellers we came to a conclusion that there was no nine-storey building in the fort complex. The '*Nabatal* palace was in fact a structure having nine courts standing on platform of increasing heights, the ninth one being at the highest level. The built up area went on decreasing as one ascend to next higher enclosure.

Even now a days one can see the remains of the deep moat (*Gadakhai*) excavated around the fort to make it more and more inaccessible. The soil excavated for construction of the moat was probably spread on the ground inside in such a way as to form platforms of different heights, one upon another in an ascending order. On each of the platform stood one court. The courts were probably in form of concentric circles, outermost being the largest and lavest and the innermost being the smallest and highest in area and altitude respectively.⁶

From the military point of view the fort was erected in an ideal location. But this was too small a fort to withstand a longer siege. The Barabati fort has a length of 2150 feet and breadth

of 1800 feet. Considering its humble dimension and strength, in 1766 T. Mootee had revealed that the fort was however too small to make a long defence against the European army⁷. So it is assumed that Barabati fort was a part of bigger fortification, the inner ring of defence and also a safe loyal residence. It is very likely that the revetment along the two rivers of Mahanadi and Kathajori with watchtower and bastions at intervals probably formed the out ring of fortification.

From the above discussion, however, it is clear that Anangabhimadev III of Ganga dynasty erected the fort of Barabati. Chalukya king Mukundadev constructed a structure with nine enclosures at various altitudes. And in all probability it was the inner ring of defence being a part of bigger fortification. In between the reigns of the above two rulers this Barabati fort had witnessed the glorious days of Odisha under the great Ganga king Narasinghadev. It had also seen the conquests of the Suryavamshi kings like Kapilendradev and Purusottamadev. It had also witnessed the plight of Prataparudradev and the end of the Gajapati rule. With mute helplessness it had to tolerate the murder of the last Suryavamshi king in the hands of treacherous Govinda Bidyadhar. After murdering his master's son Govinda Bidyadhar established the Bhoi dynasty in Odisha. His death ushered an era of political instability stained with regicides and conspiracies. During the reigns of these Bhoi rulers off and on Mukundadev was the guardian of this Barabati fort. He also established his own Chalukya dynasty by murdering his royal master. But very soon he proved his worth and demonstrated that he could revive the pride of Odia race. In fact Barabati fort was very dear to him. After Mukundadev Odisha was occupied by the Afghans in 1568. Kalapahad, the Army

General of Bengal Sultan Sulainian Karanni had broken certain portion of the fort. But the fort was habitable. It became the headquarters of the Mughal and Maratha governors for Odisha.

During the Mughals some additions and alternations were effected to the fort so that it would suit to the Mughal taste and style. The Mughals also built a mosque inside the fort complex. The Marathas, who ruled Odisha after the Mughals, also made some constructional changes in the fort. T. Motee visited Cuttack in 1766, when the Bhonsle of Nagpur ruled Odisha. Motee recorded that the moat around the fort was 7 feet deep and 20 feet wide. There were two clusters of walls, outer and inner. The outer wall was five feet higher than the inner wall.

The English force reached Cuttack on 13 September 1803 and stormed the fort on 14th. Major Harcourt was in charge of the operation. The artillery weapon the Britishers used for this operation were a 12 pound battery, two howitzers and two 6 pounders. Harcourt described the fort as one of considerable strength and with the exception of only bridge it was inaccessible. After silencing the Maratha guns the gates of the fort was forced open in the face of heavy fire and the fort was captured. When Sterling visited Odisha this fort was standing intact.⁸

After the British occupation of Odisha for sometime this fort was used for confinement of the state prisoners. But later on it fell into disuse and government sponsored vandalism started to eliminate this relic of Odia pride from its very existence. This fort was subjected to excavation for its stones producing an unsightly picture of ruin and devastations. As if stones and metals were not available otherwise, the stones were excavated out of this great heritage site of Odisha and used for the construction of roads and embankment in

and around Cuttack city. The mindless British authority in Odisha did not hesitate to dismantle this historic fort of Barabati, the stones and earth of which was made from the blood and flesh of the Odia heroes.

From the records available in the Odisha State Archives it is evident that the stones of the fort was used for the construction of buildings, roads and embankments at Cuttack. One Mr. Shore, the Magistrate of Cuttack tried his best to stop this vandalism and as a result of his effort the Governor of Bengal in their Letter No.1701 dated 31.5.1856 stopped the demolition of the fort of Barabati. But by that time a lot of damage was already done and a little was left for preservation. But that was also not possible. Later on excavation of stones from the fort complex continued till nothing was left except the dilapidated main gate. The fort was systematically converted into a mound of debris consisting of earth, broken stones and bricks.

The Barabati fort, which was once creating sensation in the body and mind of the Odia militia, which was once a nightmare for the enemies of Odia race, is now in a sorry state of helpless ruins. But the moat, the main gate still exists to narrate the stories of heroism and bravery of the great Odia race.

After independence the historian-chief minister of Odisha, Harekrishna Mahtab conceived altogether a novel idea to convert this Barabati into a great memorial for Odia martyrs. He was contemplating to convert the entire area around the fort in to a great sports complex. It was the month of August 1948, a football match was to be played at Cuttack between Bhawanipur Football Club and Orissa XI. Harekrishna Mahtab was to inaugurate this event. There was heavy rush of the spectators and the field was too small

to accommodate the sports-loving enthusiastic spectators. Mahtab was shocked. Then and there he announced that very soon Cuttack should have a big stadium and sports complex. Without delay 20 acres of land towards the east of the Barabati fort was earmarked for the stadium. A sum of Rs.1 Lakh was also sanctioned for the spadework of the stadium. In 1950 the foundation stone of the Barabati stadium was laid and the construction work started. Bhairab Ch. Mohanty, a deputy minister of Odisha remained in charge of the construction of the stadium. Subsequently Sri Mohanty became emotionally attached to the project.

This was in fact a big project in which provisions for a big field, clubhouse, pavilion, clock tower, architecturally rich main gate were made. Side by side facilities for the recreation for the sportsmen, provision for their stay, courts for certain sporting events was to be made. The main field was to be surrounded by the huge spectators galleries. Such a big project was necessarily very much expensive and the poor government of Odisha could not afford it. In this juncture of financial exigencies the idea of Barabati Raffle (Lottery) was conceived and after its implementation the lottery proved highly rewarding. The profit of this lottery was used for the ongoing construction work of this dream project and this dream became a reality. Big sport events started to be organized in this stadium from the early 60s. In this stadium hockey and football matches of national standard were organized. This was also the venue of a number of one-day international cricket matches as well as a recognized Test Cricket Centre. The recently installed floodlight has made the stadium more attractive and useful.

In the Barabati fort area itself two other sports complex have been established to lessen

the burden on the Barabati stadium. They are Satyabrat Stadium and Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium. The area around the fort is promising as well as inspiring for upcoming sportsmen. The local children and youths are using the Balijatra ground in front of the main gate of the fort for sports practice and exercises. One can see youth and enthusiasm around the fort in the morning and afternoon. As now a days the venue of Balijatra has been shifted to the riverbed of Mahanadi, the Balijatra ground can be leveled and made more suitable for sports practice. The river Mahanadi at the northside of the fort can be suitably developed for a water-sports complex of international standard. The fort, the stadium and the area around it can be well developed and the whole integrated complex can be the sports capital of Odisha. It has all the infrastructure and natural suitability. Only will power is needed to accomplish such a goal. That shall be the greatest tribute for the martyrs nurtured in the great Barabati fort.

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