

Structural Remains at the Early Medieval Fort at Raibania, Orissa

Dr. Bratati Sen
Kolkata

*This paper is dedicated to **Late Dr. Asok Dutta**, retd. Reader, Dept. of Archaeology, University of Calcutta, under whose supervision the work was carried out and who passed away during the project.*

Abstract

The fortifications of mediaeval India occupy an eminent position in the history of military architecture. The present paper deals with the study of the structural remains at the early mediaeval fort at **Raibania** in the district of Balasore in Orissa. The fort was built of stone very loosely kept together. The three-walled fortification interspersed by two consecutive moats, a feature evidenced at Raibania, which is unparallel in the history of ancient and mediaeval forts and fortifications in India. Several other structures like the Jay-Chandi Temple Complex, a huge well, numerous tanks and remains of an ancient bridge add to the uniqueness of the Fort in the entire eastern region.

Introduction

The importance of fort and fortifications realized by the rulers and were raised around the important cities and the capitals at most strategic locations under the patronage of the contemporary kings. Early Sanskrit literature mentions the terms '*Durga*' and '*Pur*' to denote the fortified-city or village. The Sanskrit texts also mention different types of *Durgas*, viz. *Giridurga* or *Parvatadurga* (Mountain fort), *Jaladurga* (Water fort), *Dhanvadurga* (Marudurga), *Dhanudurga* (Desert fort), etc (Singh 1993). The Vedic literature may be regarded as earliest literary records with focus on the construction of stone and iron forts. The detailed descriptions of different types of forts and fortifications have been mentioned in the Vedic texts. The forts were built by earth, brick, and stone masonry in square, rectangular, hexagonal, octagonal, polygonal, circular and irregular shapes.

Raibania

The fort at Raibania (21°55'26.12" N; 87°11'36.83" E) is one of the largest of the group of four mediaeval forts. The mud fort is located at the north-west angle of Raibania village located nine miles north of Jaleshwar and two miles from the right bank of the river Subarnarekha, in the district of Balasore in Orissa (Behuria 1994) (Fig. 1). The area was

encircled by the river Subarnarekha from three sides and only in the western side it is linked to land which was full of dense forests. The fort of Raibania was a very large one, bigger than that of Barabati and one of the greatest in India (Mahtab 1959). John Beams, the then

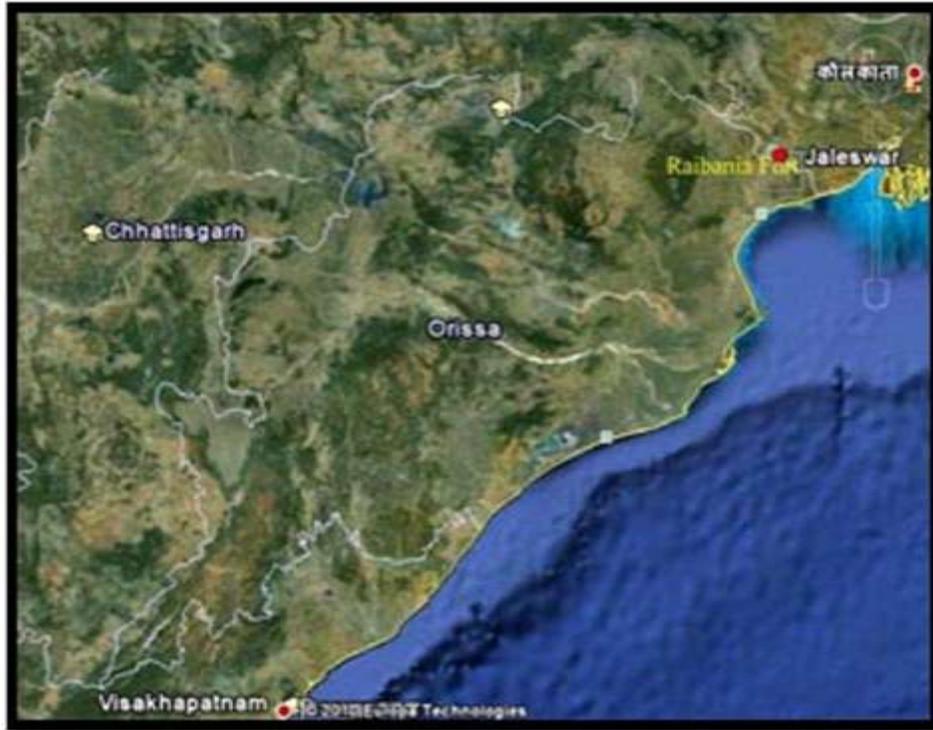


Fig. 1: Location of Raibania Fort in Orissa

Magistrate of Balasore and an archaeologist had made a survey of the area in the nineteenth century and narrated about the fort. There are no mention of the size and area of the fort anywhere no stone or copper inscriptions have yet been discovered. Beams (1872) could find the ruins of four forts in the southern side of the river Subarnarekha, although two forts out of them are situated on the eastern bank of the river. Out of the group of four forts, the two larger ones are close to the village Raibania and the two smaller ones at the village of Phulta (Phulahatta). Of these two small forts nothing now remains except the outline of mud walls, with scattered debris of laterite stones and is thus completely demolished. (Figs. 2A & 2B)

The district of Balasore acquired military significance in the history of Orissa during the mediaeval period because of its strategic location in the north-eastern border of Orissa. As a part of Kalinga, the district was included within the empires of Nandas, Mauryas and the Mahameghavahanas. In the later centuries various major ruling dynasties of Orissa like the Bhanjas, the Bhaumakaras, the Somavamsis, the Ganges and the Gajapatis included the areas of the district within their kingdom. During the period of the Ganges and the Gajapatis all the military marches to Bengal were undertaken through the district. The Muslims led down in the coastal tracts of this district. Also the great fight between the Afghan army and the Mughal soldiers was held at Mogalmari (excavated by

Dept. of Archaeology, University of Calcutta, 2003-'07 & 2008-'12) is geographically closer to the town of Jaleswar, also on the bank of Subanrarekha River. The fort at **Raibania** played a noteworthy role in the political and military activities of the rulers of the Ganga dynasty. From the reign of Chodaganaga the Gangas ruled in Orissa for fifteen generations covering a total period of 325 years. They transferred their capital from Mukhalingam to Kataka (Cuttack), which they called Varanasi Kataka and settled down here permanently. Several Oriya scholars observe that the Gangas of Orissa imbibed Oriya customs and even adopted the Oriya language for all practical purposes, and even became patrons of Oriya literature. Raibania finds mention in the Ain-i-Akbari written by Abul Fazl in the 16th Century BCE. It has been mentioned as "Rayn" and the situation of the place "on the borders of Orissa" leaves no doubt that the correct reading is 'Raiban' (Beams 1872). Ain-i-Akbari also mentions the existence of "three forts" at 'Rayn', which however, was found to be four when John Beams (1872) explored the area. In absence of any written documents it is difficult to assign any specific date to the Raibania fort. However several indirect sources of information regarding the date of this fort may be mentioned.

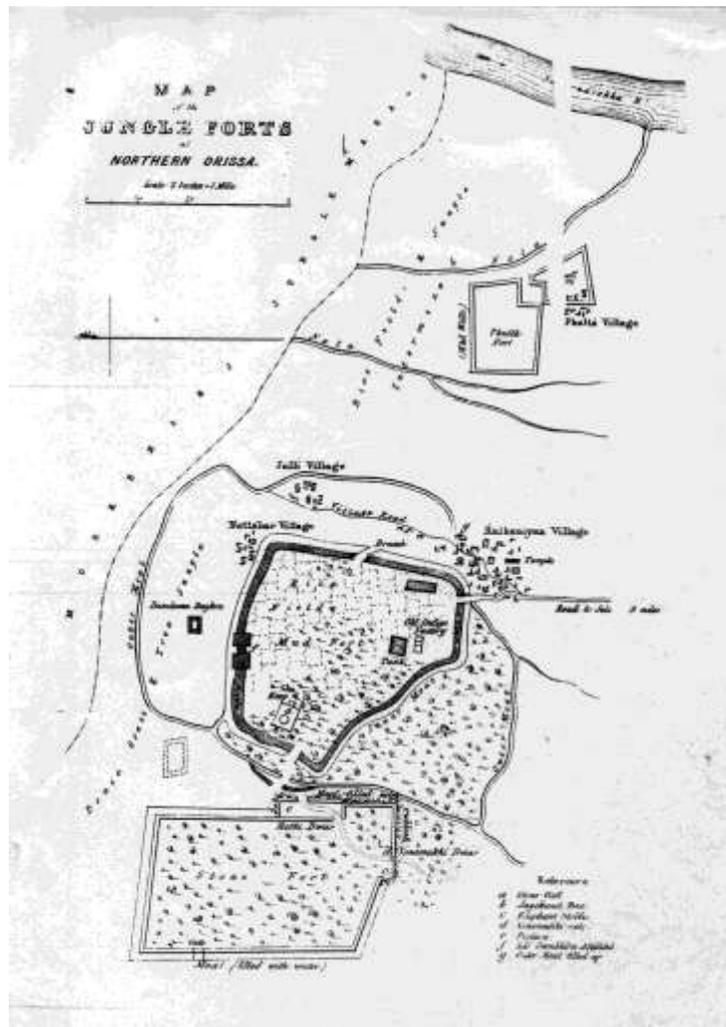


Fig. 2A: Map by Beams (Beams 1872)

Firstly, according to a legend Raibania was the capital of King Virata of Mahabharata, where the Pandavas hid themselves during the last year of their exile in *incognito* in the forest. The presiding deity of King Virata was *Khichakeshwari Devi* or *Garh Chandi* or *Jaychandi* was worshipped in the fort. It has been mentioned that an unknown later king of Mayurbhanj forcibly took away the deity and consecrated in a temple at Khiching. Thus if the construction of Khiching Temple dates back to 10/11th century, the antiquity of Raibania fort can be stated to be much earlier. But this cannot be accepted in the absence of substantial archaeological evidence. Moreover a fort built during the age of Mahabharata is unlikely to survive after such a long period of time.

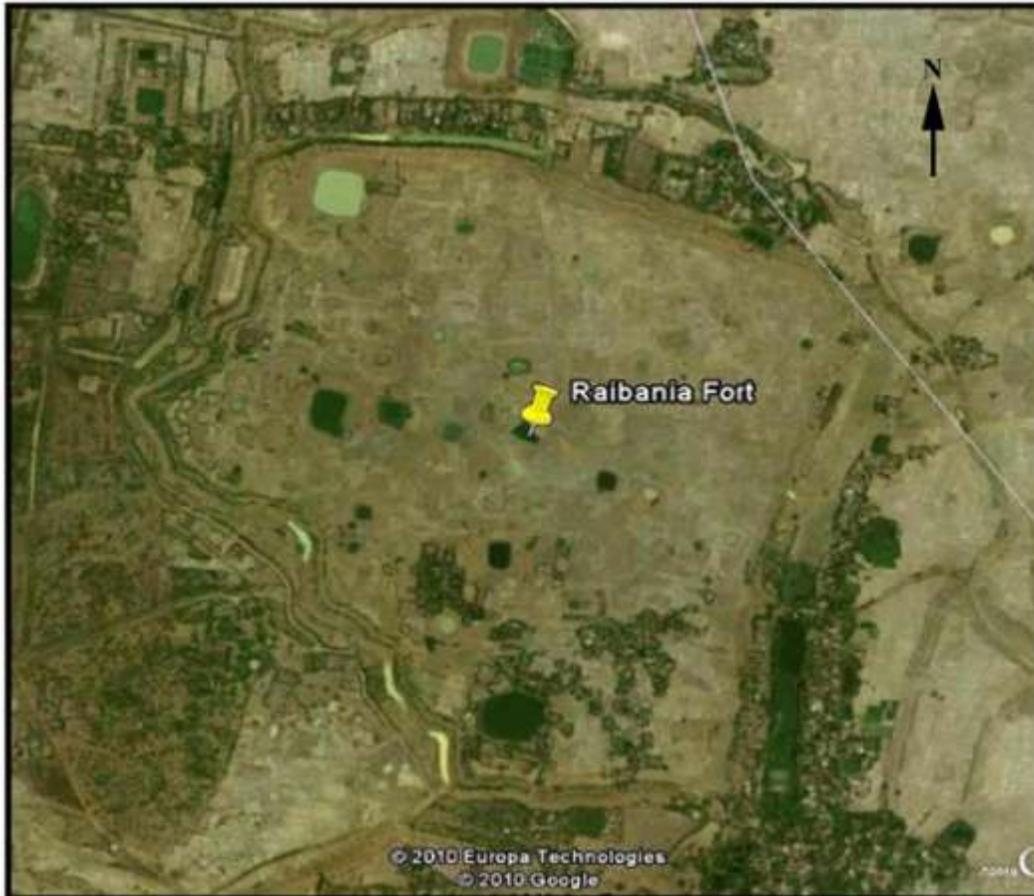


Fig. 2B: Satellite Map of the Raibania Fort

Secondly, Beams speculates, the fort to have been built by Mukundadeva, the last Hindu ruler of Orissa. He was also responsible for the renovation of the great historic fort of Barabati and the numerous tanks and *ghats* (*meaning a broad flight of steps leading down to the bank of a river or tank in India, used on the far off border especially by bathers*) on the far off border areas. But the short reign of this monarch covering a series of Muslim incursions may not have given him sufficient time and resources to undertake construction of formidable strongholds. It may therefore reasonable to assign a date to this edifice sometime during the imperial Gangas whose illustrious rulers like Chodagangadeva, Anagabhimadeva and Narasimhadeva are credited with establishing

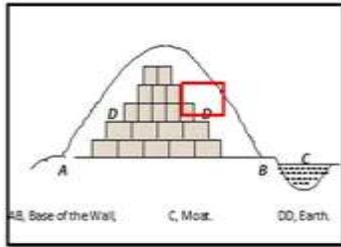
several *Katakas* ((term derived from Sanskrit meaning a military base or establishment)) in different localities for efficient administration and successful fight with foreign aggressors. There is no doubt to the fact that the fort originally built for military purposes was subsequently strengthened by a series of rulers even after the fall of the imperial Ganga dynasty.

A third proposition regarding the date of the Raibania fort is the association of Narasimhadeva II (A.D. 1278-1306 A.D.) with the fort at Raibania and Remuna. Two sets of Copper Plate land grants – Alalpur (1215 saka) and Kendupatna (1217 saka) (Vasu 1896) were issued while Narasimhadeva was camping at Remuna Katak. The Kendupatna Copper Plate mentions of the fort at Raibania. H. K. Mahtab (1959) opines that Remuna Katak was therefore an important fort during 12/13th century and the Utkal kings very often camped here in order to supervise the security measures in the northern border. He further states that Remuna perhaps in the later days was called *Revana* and then *Raivania*. However these statements do not directly point to the possibility of building of the fort at Raibania during the reign of Narasimhadeva II. S. C. Patra has stated that king Narasimhadeva II did not feel the necessity of constructing a fort because no major war took place between him and the Afghan rulers of Bengal except a few minor conflicts. All these facts clearly reveal that Raibania fort was famous when he ascended the throne in 1278 A.D. after his father Bhanudev I ruled over Orissa from 1264 A.D. to 1278 A.D. As no outward incident occurred during his tenure, he too did not feel the necessity of constructing a fort.

In the background of the above mentioned facts, a fourth possibility may also be stated regarding the erection of the fort at Raibania by Narasimhadeva I (1238-1264 A.D.). Thus it is necessary to take into consideration the conditions prevailing during that time and the military compulsions which might have led the king to construct such a massive and invincible fort there. Narasimhadeva I annexed to his empire of Orissa some portions of Bengal which had been occupied by Muhammadans. He himself took up an aggressive role against the Muhammadans and invaded Bengal more than once. He thus came into conflict with Tughril Tughan Khan and later with Malik Ikhtiyaruddin Yuzbak, the Governors of Bengal under the Delhi Sultanate rulers. The result was the annexation of the southern districts of West Bengal – Midnapur, Howrah and Hooghly, to the kingdom of Orissa. (Das 1935, 1986; Mahtab 1959).

The Fortification Wall and the Gateway

The fort is in the shape of an irregular pentagon having the following dimensions: Eastern wall- 4950ft; Northern wall-4950ft; North-eastern wall – 2640ft; South-western wall – 4650ft and Southern wall – 2640ft. The walls of the fort consist of layers of stone gradually tapering to a point and covered entirely with earth rammed closely the breadth at the base is 112ft and the height is 50ft (Das 1986). However the extant height of the wall at present is only 30-35ft. (Fig. 3)



(Courtesy: Drawing by Beams, 1872)



Photograph during present survey

Figure 3: Fortification Wall of the Raibania Fort

There were three gateways or entrances to the fort – on the **east** was the Ghuntadwar/Ghantadwar/Singhadwar; on the **west** was the Hathidwar/ Hathi Bandhadwar; on the **south** was the Sunamukhidwar, which is completely destroyed at present. The northern side of the fort is covered with thick prickly cane forest. The gateways were built of large laterite blocks. The fort wall touches the boundaries of several villages on all sides- Jamyirapal, Chudamanipur, Ulmara, Gopal-prasad, Ariya-Shahi, Hathigarh & Raibania as well as the banks of the river Subarnarekha (Samal 2006). In between the two fortification walls, evidence of a moat close to the wall is visible. At present the Eastern Gateway stands on the route of Raibania-Olmara villages (Fig. 4). On its two sides stand the remnants of high ramparts. Crossing these two fortification walls another wall with gateway similar to the other two was found and between the second and the third walls, there existed another moat. This defensive mechanism showing the existence of three consecutive fortification walls on



EASTERN GATEWAY



WESTERN GATEWAY

Fig. 4 Gateways or Entrances to the Fort

the all sides of the fort makes it quite unique architecturally in the whole of eastern India. There are examples of the presence of a double moat system at some forts, but the three-

walled fortification is a feature evidenced as at Raibania, is unparalleled in the history of ancient and mediaeval forts and fortifications in India. (Fig. 5 A, B & C)



A) INNERMOST WALL



A) MOAT



B) SECOND WALL



B) SECOND MOAT



C) THIRD/OUTERMOST WALL



C)OUTERMOST WALL ON ANOTHER SIDE

Fig. 5: A) & B) Walls and Consecutive Moats & C) Outermost Wall

The Jay Chandi Temple Complex

The temple complex was partly cleared and restored by the ASI in 1979, however vegetative growth inside the temple still makes it difficult to explore the entire temple complex and prepare a sketch plan (Fig. 6). This structure had been described initially by Beams in his report as a palace, but he himself later described it as a Shiva temple.



Fig.6: The Jay Chandi Temple Complex

Despite difficulties of movement measurements of the temple were taken as far as possible and a rough sketch plan of the temple has been prepared. Besides, measurements of different components within the area were also taken. According to the local belief the temple was dedicated to Lord Jagannath. However, the present survey reveals that the presiding deity of the temple in all probability is Shiva. This is evidenced by the presence of a passage from the *garbagriha* or sanctum cell for passing out of excess water being poured on the deity. This is a common practice followed by the devotees as pouring water or milk in the *Shiva-linga*.

Hence this is a feature peculiar to the Shiva Temples. Such feature is found in all the Shiva temples. The present preliminary survey revealed that the temple is located within a huge rectangular area measuring 57x49 sq m and the outer wall appears to have been originally plastered with lime. Inside the rectangular enclosure, the temple was raised on a 4ft plinth from the ground level. The plinth was decorated with miniature sculptures in relief resembling *Rekha deul* type temples crowned by even the usual *Amalaka Silas* (Fig. 7A). The temple is also rectangular in shape measuring 42.6x11.8 sq m with two *ratha* like projections on both sides. There is a well in the eastern side of the temple complex which has steps and tapers down forming a tunnel towards the base. The exact description and measurements of the well could not be taken due to excessive vegetation growth near its entrance (Fig. 7B).



Fig. 7A: Plinth of the Temple



Fig. 7B: Well on the eastern side of the from the *Garbagriha*

Outside the southern wall of this large temple-complex is a small temple of Devi Jaychandi, which is presently worshipped by the locals. Since the base of the statue is broken the idol has been kept in a slanting position. The idol is completely smeared with vermilion and hence proper description of the iconographic features of the sculpture is difficult to ascertain. (Fig. 8) The sculpture has been described by some as belonging to Chamunda or as Mahishasuramardini.

Tanks inside the Fortification

There are numerous tanks of different sizes inside the fortified area, perhaps to maintain proper supply of water to the soldiers as well as their animals who lived close to these tanks in camps in all probability. Dr. H. C. Das in 1964 (Das 1986) had identified as many as twenty six tanks and mentioned their names. These are Nandika, Deula, Bhunya, Sirsa, Hilarani, Kaushalya, Bazarghanta, Biria, China, Mangaraja, Dhipkipara, Gandaguda, Matha Kaumari, Pandasaro, Mahisi, Gadakhai (Kaliadahana), Dhanuphata, Tendagadia, Silapata, Pallababeharagadia, Balipaka Pokhari, Dhanagada, Chinakunda, Netakunda and Jalayantra pokhari. The names of most of the tanks suggest that these



Fig. 8: Broken Image of Devi Jaychandi (?)

excavated by the army generals and some appear to have been dedicated to the queens and princesses. Legends are also associated with some of the tanks. The Jalayantra pokhari situated in the north-western corner outside the main fort but within the fortified area is believed to have a secret chamber inside it where the soldiers hid their weapons used in wars. (Fig. 9A&B)



A) KAUSHALYA POKHARI



B) JALAJANTRA POKHARI

Fig. 9: Tanks Inside the Fortified Area

Joda Halia Kuan – A Well

On the western side of the Raibania- Kabat Ghati road within the fortified area is a massive and huge well almost 8.5m in diameter having steps arranged in a circular manner wide enough for two bullocks yoked together to go down to drink water. The well receives water from a nearby spring. Laterite blocks were used for the construction of the well (Fig. 10).



TOP VIEW



VIEW INSIDE THE WELL

Fig. 10: Well-Joda Halia Kuan

The Dum Dumi Bridge

An ancient **bridge**, now in ruins, constructed over a rivulet passing through the fort was also noticed (Fig. 11). This bridge has not been mentioned by Beams. The antiquity of the bridge perhaps dates back to the time period of the fort. This is evident from the use of iron clamps for holding the laterite blocks used in the construction of the bridge. It has been mentioned in the Copper Plate Inscriptions of Narasimhadeva II issued during his stay at Remuna from 1295-1303 A.D. that a bridge existed on the Subarnarekha during the reign of the Ganga Dynasty Kings.



Fig. 11: Remains of Dum Dumi Bridge and Platform

Other Structures

The literature as well as the records of John Beams mentions several other important structures inside the fortified area. However due levelling of most parts by the villagers for cultivation and lack of preservation, the remains of these structures could not be identified in the preliminary survey. The largest and most conspicuous building was the *Sat Gambhira Attalika*, assumed to be the palace or the royal residence inside the fort. Besides, there were other smaller palaces or official buildings and temples dedicated to different Gods and Goddesses. Large blocks of dressed laterite stones must have been used in the construction of these buildings as several of these were found scattered all around the area.

Conclusion

The military strength of Orissa was at its zenith under the Gangas. The muslims in spite of the repeated attacks on the frontiers could not break through the powerful army barricades. The role of Raibania under the authority of the Gangas was therefore very significant from the point of view of its strategic location in preventing external attacks

and also provided shelter to the army for their drills. Raibania is very strategically located. The river Subarnarekha forms a natural barrier on three sides and the fourth side is protected by thick bushes of bamboo and other thorny shrubs. A large number of big and small forts were built in all directions – North, South, East and West – centring Raibania Fort in order to further strengthen the defence mechanism of the Orissa kings on the north-eastern frontier. Most of these forts, however, now fall under the jurisdiction of Midnapore district, West Bengal. Raibania continued to be a significant military outpost under all the rulers of Orissa up to the rule of Mukundadeva, the last Hindu ruler of Orissa. The importance of Raibania fort is quite apparent from its architectural features, which are unique to this fort. The technique of construction of the wall is quite different in using laterite blocks forming a pyramidal skeleton covered by mud in a triangular cross-section. Besides the presence of three consecutive massive fortification walls, each interspersed by a moat and the gateways are definitely peculiar to this fort in the whole of eastern India. Thus these features together with the massive construction and spread of the Raibania fort proclaim of the credence that was given to this fort. It is thus very clear that this fort was prized for its strategic location and definitely played a significant role in the protection and defence of the frontiers of the Orissan Empire of the Ganga dynasty.

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Dr. Bratati Sen, Kolkata. Email: bratimsu@gmail.com
