

Orccha Fort and The Bundelas

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Ravi Rikhye

War, fire, sacrifice, death, and destruction: this was the fate of most Indian forts, but not the lot of the Bundela fort at Orccha.

Orccha: the name is said to mean "hidden", and it was so for most of the four centuries the fort has existed. It has come down to us in modern times in surprisingly good condition, and has been fortunate in the need for only limited preservation and reconstruction.

Orccha's survival owes primarily to the thick forests that surrounded it. It is off the beaten track, and the village even today numbers just 6000 at last census. It stands at no strategic crossroads like Ranthambhor, and attracts no invader. Next, the Bundelas sought to peacefully coexist with the ruling power at Delhi, first the Moguls, and then the British. There was danger twice: when a Bundela defied Aurungzeb and was overthrown, and again in the build up to the First War of Independence, called the Indian Mutiny by the British. Both times, however, Orccha escaped invasion and sack.

Ironically, the great fort at Jhansi, which together with the fort at Gwalior controlled Bundelkhand and therefore Central India, was built to protect Orccha, about 18 kilometers away. Always attention was on Jhansi, Orccha remained protected by its quality of being hidden.

But then what was the purpose of Orccha, if it was not war?

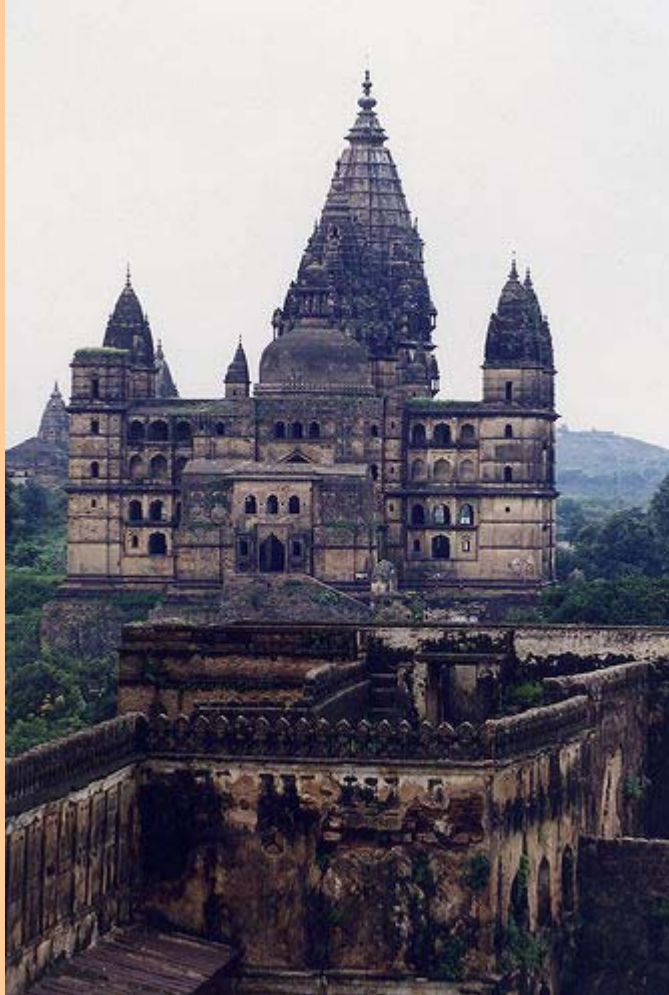
The best answer we can give at this time, considering the parlous state of our scholarship, is that Orccha was a retreat, even during the period it was capital of a major kingdom in the 16th and 17th Centuries. It was a place of serenity and beauty and – this is important – of worship. Till today it remains a pilgrim destination for Hindus.



Orccha, by Dey Alexander
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/dey/3934224/>

The best photographs of Orccha we have seen are those of the Australian Dey Alexander. Unlike other forts, Orccha's stone masonry was covered by a light-colored plaster, which gives it a magical glow at sunset. Alexander has used the light to best effect to produce matchless images.

While we are no experts in fort construction, we believe a case can be made for our assertion Orccha was a retreat rather than a military fort by looking at the easily-scaled surrounding wall



Orcha, by Dey Alexander
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/dey/3934226/>

The Bundela Kings

Sources

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orchha>
- <http://members.tripod.com/~TSingh/Ts/tree.htm>

The First 300 Years: 1048-1375

Pancham Singh Bundela of Kashi: 1048-1071(A.D)

Virbhadra Singh | 1071-1087

Karanpal Singh | 1087-1112

Kinnar Shah | 1112-1130

Shaukan Dev | 1130-1152

Nanak Dev	1152-1159
Mohanpal Singh	1159-1197
Abhaybhupati Singh	1197-1215
Arjunpal Singh	1215-1231
Virpal Singh	1231-1251
Sohanpal Singh	1251-1259
Sahjendra Singh	1259-1283
Nanak Dev II	1283-1307
Prithviraj Singh	1307-1339
Ram Singh	1339-1375

The Rise of the Bundelas

Around this time, the Chandelas, rulers of the area that encompasses Orcha, weakened, giving rise to the Bundelas. The Bundelas appear to have been feudatories of the Chandelas.

Ramchandra Singh	1375-1384	
Mednepal Singh	1384-1437	
Dev	1437-1468	Arjun
Malkhan Singh	1468-1501	

The Rajas of Orcha

- Raja Rudrapratap: 1501-31
(Starts fort at Orcha; previously the capital has been at Gadhkunar; becomes first Raja of Orcha)
- Bhartichandra 1531-1544
- Madhukarshah 1554-1592
(Trouble with the expanding Mughul empire began during Madhukarshah's rule.)
- Ramsingh (?1592-1605?)
- Birsingh Deo (also called Dev) (1605-1626)
- Jujhar Singh (1626-1635)
(Killed in Aurangzeb's time, ending the direct line)

- Champat Rai: 1635-1641)
(Also called Mahewa; a great-great grandson of Orccha's first ruler
- Maharajadhiraja Chhatrasal: 1649-1731
- Jagatraj
- Pahar Singh(1758-1765)
(Nephew of Jagatraj)

In 1783 the capital of Orccha State shifted to modern-day Tikamgarh, 65 km south.

It is important to note dates of the 16th Century are disputed. For example, gwalior.nic.in/HSTRY.htm, a site on Gwalior hosted by the government's National Infomatics Center, gives the murder of Abul Fazal (see below) as taking place in the year 1602

Proof perhaps, of the soundness of the decision to locate Orccha off the beaten path is the story of Salim, the son of Emperor Akbar later known as Jehangir. Salim was in dispute with his august father, and sought refuge in Bundelkhand, at the fort of Jhansi. To protect his guest as required by the honor code of those days, in 1607 Raja Birsingh Deo ended up killing a senior minister of Akbar's, Abul Fazal. An irate Akbar razed Jhansi Fort in retaliation, but somehow left Orccha alone.

Then Aurangzeb got into trouble with his sire, Shahjehan. Virsingh Dev, king of Orccha, supported the errant son, incurring the wrath of the father. But again Orccha escaped reprisals, though Shahjehan occupied the fort and destroyed the main temple.

That old debt did not stop Emperor Aurangzeb from killing his benefactor's son, Jujhar Singh, in 1635. For a third time Orccha escaped reprisal, all the more remarkable because Aurangzeb was second to no Mogul in his destruction of Hindu temples.

Clearly there is more to the story than we know. Perhaps others, better informed, will add details to our slim outline.



www.orlingrabbe.com/archive169.htm