

POETRY IN STONE

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‘Let’s race the sun’. I remarked airily, pointing as the dawning glow took over the cobalt sky across Ashrafi Mahal. ‘Ji ... Ji’ Sherkhan replied sleepily as he pushed on the accelerator speeding along the village square towards the Pavilion. A lazy glance through the morning chill hid rather than reveal the kitsch glory the village square would endure as the sun turned into its daytime sternness. The ‘*chaiwala*’ was stirring out of his winter slumber, prying open the shutters of his cart. Everything else slept.

As the sun labored into its rebirth for the day, I was chasing my long morning shadows through the medieval arches of the Rupmati pavilion. The itinerary was planned the previous evening pouring over not-to-scale maps. The ruins of Mandu, the erstwhile capital of the Malwa sultans are divided in three groups; the southernmost Rewa Kund group, the Central Village group and the picturesque Royal Enclave. The Rupmati Pavilion, located at the edge of the plateau high up over the Narmada valley was built by Baz Bahadur, the last independent ruler of Malwa for his bride-to-be Rupmati, a Hindu singer. The pavilion is a one-storey structure at the southern end of the fortifications capped over with domed cupolas at corners. It laid silently soaked in romantic reverie with the golden hue of the morning sun. As I ran my fingers over the ageless textures of its sloping masonry, every stone acknowledged in egotist pride with which the beautiful Rupmati had once caressed them. Their love story had a tragic end, I recalled. Hearing of her beauty, the envious Emperor Akbar dispatched his forces to capture Rupmati. Baz Bahadur, a lover of fine music and arts, being no match for the invading army, fled and the distressed Rupmati poisoned herself rather than be confined to the enemy. At one end of the pavilion an arch frames the sheer drop plunging into the valley, overlooking the Nimar plains, to where the beautiful Rupmati belonged, stilling my senses into a heartfelt melancholy.

Nearby, Baz Bahadur’s palace is built around two courtyards, the smaller one containing a bathing tank. To enter is a climb of forty steps flanked on one side with tall stone arches. The other way, it overlooks the Rewa Kund, a dammed reservoir dotted with scattered bits of smaller architecture. Moving through the ruins, I am treated with vistas of finer nuances like the stepped tank and plaster motifs. The palace is dispossessed of its sheerness, a feature seen in the other structures of Mandu, but makes up in many ways with its proportioned pointed arches neatly punctured into its single-storey walls. These are capped with sloping stone chajjas supported on decorative brackets. With crumbling walls and peeled plasters, the palace is a harmony in muted ruins.

The plateau of Mandu covering about 23 square kms is separated to the north from the body of hills by a deep ravine called the ‘*Kakra Khoh*’. A narrow causeway forms a

natural bridge across the gorge and the present road running all the way to the groups of famous ruins is lined with the stately Baobabs. These bulbous bottom trees, native to Africa were introduced by the Arab traders and are now widely used by the locals for their medicinal properties.

Mention should be made that being keen on architectural history; I had delved into the guide books, not to mention the chronic browsing to help me fathom the ruins. The monuments of Mandu are distinct in its unique style of Islamic Architecture, which flourished here between 1401 and 1526. Each hazed in conspiratorial history under the rulers of their time, is devoid of exterior ornamentation unlike those seen in Agra or Ahmedabad, but are rather colossal in scale.

It was sometime in the early sixth century that evidence of some sort of fortification were found. The inscriptions mentioned of a hill fort by the name of *Mandapa-Durga* (Durga's hall of worship). The name was later altered to Mandava or Mandu. Again later in tenth century, the site finds mention as it gained in strategic importance when the *Paramaras* rose to power in Malwa, with their capital first at Ujjain and later at Dhar about 35 kms from Mandu. The fortified area was unable to withhold persistent attacks and in 1305 the fort was captured by the Mughal Sultans of Delhi. The history of Mandu was uneventful till the fifteenth century, after which began its golden age of architecture, first under the rule of Dilawar Khan Ghuri and later under Hoshang Shah Ghuri, who had shifted his capital to Mandu. Under these Ghuri rulers elaborate fortifications were carried out. Some of the finest architectural monuments like the Jami Masjid and Delhi Gate were built during Hoshang Shah's illustrious 27 years of ruling.

The reins of power fell upon Mahmud Shah Ghuri, after the untimely death of his father, Hoshang Shah. Mahmud Shah's reign was short-lived as he was administered poison by his confidante Mahmud Khan who later ascended the throne. With this the Ghuri dynasty in Malwa came to an end, and thus began another golden chapter under the new Khalji ruler, Mahmud Khan. He built the *madarsa*, now Ashrafi mahal, and completed the works of his predecessor, Hoshang Shah. His buildings, being lofty in elevation and built in a hurry, soon transformed into the imposing present day ruins. Later after the death of Mahmud Khan in 1469, his son Ghiyath-ud-din continued the peaceful pursuits and is attributed to building one of the finest buildings in the Royal enclave, the Jahaz Mahal. From AD 1500 to 1542, Mandu, dogged by feuds and threats of rebellion was repeatedly invaded and fell in glory. The last independent ruler Baz Bahadur took over the reins in 1542, and the Rewa Kund groups of buildings are associated with him. He fled as he could not withhold the invasion by Emperor Akbar in 1561. This spelled the end of the fortunes of Mandu, as the later successors showed waning interest in these fortified structures.

The change in style of architecture between dynasties is evident in the monuments. Jahaz Mahal or Ship palace is a major tourist draw within the royal enclave, reflecting the spirit of romantic beauty. Built along a narrow strip of land between the water tanks of Munja

and Kapur, it is said that the Queen Noor-Jahan had graced this structure during her stay in Mandu. Apart from the imposing arches and halls, the ornate cistern at the southern side has water channels flowing down in a maze from the upper levels. Next to Jahaz Mahal is the Hindola Mahal, or 'swinging palace', so named due to its distinctive sloping walls, making it look as if they are swaying from side to side. This design is purely functional, intended to buttress the heavy stone arches that support the roof. Other structures not to be missed are Gada Shah's shop, from where the adviser to Hoshang Shah dispensed his services and Champa Baodi, an ingenious and complex water supply system.

Some of Mandu's best preserved buildings are clustered around the village square, and this is where the village gathers during its weekly bazaar. Colorful sun shades are pulled over the brisk market against the quaint backdrop of Jami Masjid and the Ashrafi Mahal. I had pedaled my way, hiring a bicycle from the market, and ventured through the crowded stalls, soaking in the local smells of this medieval feel. Later I turned up at the *chaiwalla*, across the Jami Masjid for yet another glassful of the sweetened beverage, before strolling back in time.

The Jami Masjid, commenced during the reign of Hoshang Shah, is modeled on the great mosque of Damascus. Resting on a high plinth, the mosque is lined with arched cells, which were once used by the visiting clerics. The prayer hall at the other end houses a small pulpit and finely carved inscriptions of the Koran. Built in pink sandstone it also houses a raised seat for the emperor to attend to his audience. Across the great Jami Masjid is the Ashrafi Mahal, the palace of coins. This was a *madarasa*, a theological college later converted to a tomb by Muhammad Shah. Hoshang Shah's Tomb is located behind the Jami Masjid. Made of white marble, its squat central dome and four corner cupolas are said to have influenced the architecture of Taj Mahal. An inscription upholding this fact is set at the entrance of the tomb.

The glory that Mandu exemplified is unsurpassed and even today the ruins hold the visitors in spellbind awe. The Malwa sultans had christened their capital *Shadiabad* or 'city of joy', and it reasons well when in the heights of the monsoon the rocky fort plateau wears a carpet of green grass. And in the night when the clouds disperse, the sky is a promenade of small brilliant stars in the haze less space. Twinkling, perhaps these are the bygone sultans looking down upon their little impressions left on the face of this earth.