

GREATEST POPULAR MONUMENTS OF SENJI FORT IN AND AROUND ITS OTHER PLACES

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Abstract

Gingee the famous Nayaka capital immortalized by the ballads of Raja Desingh is a Taluk Headquarters in Villupuram, Tamilnadu. The lofty fortifications connecting the precipitous hills called Krishnagiri; Chandragiri and Rajagiri show a triangular disposition. The fortified area is about 9km in circuit, marked by two main entrances, the eastern one known as the Pondicherry gate and the Northern one called the Arcot gate. According to tradition the name Gingee or Senji is derived from Senji Amman a Virgin Goddess. The original fort at Rajagiri was founded by Ababda Kon I the chief in A.D. 1200 and the Krishnagiri was fortified by his successor Krishna Kon A.D. 1240. Other buildings and structures were raised by the successive rulers of Gingee belonging to the Nayaks, Marathas, Mughals, Carnatic, Nawab the French and British families during the period from A.D. 1383 to 1780.¹

Keywords: *Nayaka capital, Arcot gate, Virgin Goddess, Vijayanagar Emperor, Krishnadeva Raya, Mughal emperor*

The Vijayanagar Emperor, Krishnadeva Raya posted Krishnappa as Viceroy who later became the founder of the Nayaka line of Gingee. In A.D. 1677 Chhatrapati Shivaji the great Maratha ruler had captured Gingee. It remained under the Maratha rule till about A.D. 1691 when the generals under the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb captured the Fort. Raja Desingh A.D. 1714 who was a subordinate ruler under the Nawab of Arcot became famous for his heroic refusal to pay tax to the overlords. On the Rajagiri hill are two granaries with vaulted chambers, a magazine, the flag staff, the audience hall and the treasury in the Indo-Islamic style. The Ranganatha Temples here belong to the Vijayanagar period. A big cannon front of the Mandapa of this temple adds merit to the strategic position of the fort. The shrine of Goddess Kamalakanni Amman lies on the way up the hill. Near the western gate of the inner fort is the Venugopalswami Temple. Besides granary, gymnasium, barracks, royal harem, mosque of Mahabul Khan, ramparts, inner fort, palace complex, Pattabhirama temple, Hawa Mahal, Draw Bridge and Kalyana Mahal is the most impressive multi-storied with a pyramidal roof.

Another historic building is the mosque of Saadat-ullah-khan with Persian inscriptions which record that the mosque was built in A.D. 1717-18. The Venkataramana temple, which is the largest edifice within the fortified town, was built by Muthyalu Nayaka A.D. 1540 to 1550. It contains a number of Tamil inscriptions. Quite a few monolithic ornamental pillars were taken away from this temple to Pondicherry and set up around the statue of Dupleix, the Governor, during the French occupation of Gingee in A.D. 1761. On the Krishnagiri hill there are also two large granaries, stepped wells, an audience hall, two temples and a unique structure known as Home Mahal. The forts of Tamilnadu played an important role in the defense of the Tamil country in the medieval period, particularly in the wars of Haider and Tipu with the British. There are several such forts, imputed with history, political conspiracy and heroic achievements under the care of Chennai Circle. They include the fort at Gingee with its 9km long fortification encompassing several structures like the audience hall, Kalyana Mahal, granaries, etc the fort at Vellore with its deep moat, the fort at Dindigul, from where Haider launched his attack upon the British, Forts, George, from where British colonialism started and Dutch forts at Pulicat (Tiruvallur) and Sadras (Kanchipuram).²

It stands on three hills steep, rocky and covered with such enormous boulders that they are almost unclimbable arranged in the form of a triangle. Each of the three is fortified on all sides with lieu above line of store walls which are thickened with bastions, fitted with embrasures for guns, loop-holed for musketry, and pierced only by narrow and strong gateways; and from each to the next, connected with these defenses, runs a great stone-faced rampart nearly 60 feet thick with a ditch over 80 feet wide outside it. The lower fort is entered by two gates—one on the north, called the Arcot (or Vellore) gate, and another on the east, known as the Pondicherry gate. East of this last, and just outside the walls of the lower fort, was formerly a pettah (or small town) which was defended by a weaker wall with bastions. Up each of the three citadels leads, from the lower fort, a steep flight of steps of hewn granite built with much skill on and among the great boulders with which the sides of the hills are strewn.

The citadel on the north is called Kishnagiri, that on the south Chandrayan Drug, and that on the west, the highest and most inaccessible of the three, is named Rajagiri or the king of hills.³ Rajagiri the most invulnerable part of this almost impregnable fortress, consists of a long and high ridge, covered for the most part with gigantic boulders, which at its northern end rises suddenly into a great rocky eminence with almost sheer sides, the top of which stands 968 feet above the sea, some 800 feet above the plain below it and probably 400 feet above the rest of the ridge of which it forms the highest part. This was the chief citadel of the fortes. The portion of the triangular lower fort which lies immediately below it is occupied by an inner fort surrounded by a high wall protected by bastions fitted for guns and a deep ditch, and the only path to Rajagiri leads through this and up the ridge. The ridge through which the only way of ascent runs upward to a small level plain right under the sheer sides of Rajagiri whence begins the path up Rajagiri itself.

Even before any fortifications were ever constructed on this spot, this last hill must, from its precipitous nature, have been utterly inaccessible (except to birds and monkeys) on all sides but one the south west. Here a steep and narrow way leads to difficulty up it from the little plain. This way builders of the fortress rendered almost impregnable by constructing across it, one above the other, three lines of walls about 25 feet high, the loopholes in which command almost every point of it. The path passes up the hill through three gates in these walls, turns round to the north side of it, and at length scales a mass of rock the top of which is nearly level, with the summit of the citadel. But at this point a great natural chasm, some 24 feet wide and 60 feet deep, lies between this mass of rock and the citadel itself. This chasm the engineers artificially lengthened and widened and they made the only entrance to the citadel pass across a narrow bridge thrown over it, the further end of which leads to a stone gate commanded by more embrasures and loop holes.

Such is the general nature of the fort, and before proceeding to a description of the ruins of it as they stand today we turn to a glance at the events which have taken place within it and rendered it so famous. The early history of the spot is buried in obscurity. Regarding its origin; but these have unfortunately been carried off to the India office and are not available for reference.⁴ Consequently little can be recounted of the fort until the sixteenth century, when it appears as the chief stronghold of the kings of Vijayanagar in this part of the country. There can be little doubt that though their successors had also some share in the matter it was the rulers of this line who constructed the greater part of its wonderful fortifications. They had ample experience of such matters, for their own capital at Hampi in the Bellary district was defended by very similar works constructed on very similar hills; they were the only dynasty which held the place in peace and quiet for a period sufficient for the carrying out of such a vast undertaking; the general similarity of the fortifications shows that they were mostly constructed at about the same time; the inscriptions in the temple to Venkataramana mentioned later prove that it was in existence in Vijayanagar days; and as will be seen below, the place had clearly been rendered exceedingly

strong before the Vijayanagar kings were overthrown. That some of the buildings in the fort are built in the Musalman style does not show that they were erected when the fort was in Musalman occupation. The same style is common at Hampi, which was never held by Muhammadans and was clearly a fashion of the time.

Gingee was considered worthy to be the residence of provincial viceroy of the Vijayanagar kings who was powerful enough to rank as an equal of the similar governors of Madurai and Tanjore. After the Vijayanagar Empire had been overthrown in 1565 of the battle of Talaikotta by a coalition of the Sultan of Bijapur and Golkonda other Musalman king of the Deccan, these three viceroys threw off their allegiance to their sovereign and assumed independence. About 1644 the king of Golkonda, having demolished almost the last fragments of the power of the Vijayanagar Dynasty, set himself to capture the territories of these local governors who had declared themselves independent. He began with Gingee. The viceroy of Madurai, the famousness Tirumala Nayak, hastened to his almost to assist his comrade in the threatened fortress and took advantage of the well known jealousy between Bijapur to persuade the latter to help him. Bijapur sent him a large body of cavalry and with these and his own foot-soldiers Tirumala set out to relieve Gingee. He had hardly reached the place, however, when the whole of the Bijapur troops deserted him, joined their co-religionists of Golkonda, and aided in besieging the fortress they had been sent to deliver.⁵

But the Golkonda king was soon afterwards recalled by trouble in other parts of his new conquests, and Tirumala seized the opportunity to throw his troops into the beleaguered fort. His men, however, were of different castes to those of the garrison, daily quarrels consequently occurred, and at last a general riot took place. During the confusion which resulted the forces of Bijapur gained possession of the fort almost without a blow and proceeded to pillage it of all the enormous wealth it contained. They seem to have held uninterruptedly for the next thirty years. In 1677, however, the famous Maratha chief Sivaji captured it by a trick. He was nominally in the service of the Bijapur kings and drew pay from them, but in secret he nursed the ambition of driving the Musalmans from the Carnatic and seizing that country, for an officer sent to communicate with him killed one of the fort, Ambar Khan that he like the killed, was serving the Bijapur king, he prevailed upon the old man to pay him a visit of friendship, accompanied by his sons and relations at his tents. There they were all treacherously seized and the great fortress fell into Sivaji's hands without a blow.

That the Bijapur kings during their tenure of the place had done something towards the strengthening of its defences is proved by two inscriptions in Persian on the south wall of the inner fort (already mentioned) which stands under Rajagiri. One of these dated in Hijra 1063 (which began on November 22nd 1652) says that the Husan bastion was built in that year, and the other, though not dated, refers to improvements effected by the killadar Ambar Khan. A letter of 1678 by the Jesuit priest Audre Frere mentioned of above and printed in mission mature also says that Sivaji constructed new ramparts round Gingee, ditches raised towers and bastions, and carried out all these works with a perfection of which European skill would not have been ashamed. In 1683 the emperor Aurangzeb of Delhi marched to reduce the South of India to his rule, and having blotted out Bijapur and Golkonda turned his arms against the Marathas. Rama Raja, this one of Sivaji, fled to Gingee; and that place became a rallying point for the broken Maratha forces. Aurangabad accordingly resolved to capture it, hoping thereby not only to crush the Marathas once for all, but to obtain a stronger entrée for the government of his conquests in the south.⁸ In 1691 he dispatched against it his general Zulfikar Khan and his son Khan Baksh. Both of these, however, secretly hoped that if the place were taken they would be able to establish an independent kingdom there, and neither of them made the slightest real effort to reduce it. Walks says. The attack and defense were equally a theatrical exhibition, in which the chief actors performed their concerted part; but the stage effect was occasionally marred by a drunken

manager or insinuated performer. The prince, apprised of the serest of the seine, wrote an explanatory letter to his farther, the emperor Aurangzeb. Znltilray Khan duly informed by his spies seized the prince he fore the latter was dispatched, and anthem in silver letters to his father, which a letter full of regret at having discovered the bass and undutiful design of the of the prince, to throw off his allegiance and to subvert the emperor's authority. It was the chief object of the general in prostrating the siege to keep the army together, in order that he might profit by events on the death of Aurangzeb, which was daily expected. But to preserve appearances it was necessary to report frequent attacked and repulses. Rama, the son of Sivaji, who commanded at Gingee, was constantly intoxicated by the habitual use of ganja and opium; and his officers, finding his arrangements insufficient to guard against the danger even of a sham at tale held consultations todelibberat regarding his decision; hot on resection, tier perfect indrstading with Zulfikar Khan new distribution of the subordinate cannonades seem to afford inadequate security. On the other side, Daud Khan second in command of the mughal army, drank largely of the best European liquors, and when full of the god would perpetually voluntear the extirpation of the infidels. The prince at eight arrived as court; his tale, which unfolded the truth, but not the whole truth, was believed; and Zulfikar Khan received secret intimation from his friends that nothing but the immediate capture of Gingee could save him from disgrace and dishonor. Rama, apprised of this necessity, retired to Vellore which was still in the possession of the Marathas, and Zulfikar was adjusting with him a double negotiation for the capture of Gingee, and the relapse of Rama's wives and family, who had been surprised at an early period of the senji, when one of Daud Khan's drunken frolics actually carried the place early in 1698, and Rama proceeded in haste to the western coast.⁶

The fortress however, turned out to be so unhealthy that in 1716 the head-quarters of the Musalman forces in the south were definitely removed to Arcot. A great part of the troops had already been cantoned there for some time, and Gingee was ruled by a local governor whom Zulfikar Khan had appointed a Rajput from the north named Syrup Singh. The troubles which arose between him and the English at Fort St. Devid in 1710.⁷ He was succeeded by his son Tej Singh, who declined to acknowledge the authority of the Nawab of Arcot or to pay him any tribute. Sadat Ulla Khan, who had been made Nawab in 1718 accordingly, marched against him in the same year to bring him to his senses. The story of the fight which occurred is a great favorite with the ballad mongers of the southern districts thongs, furiously enough it is in kiss demands in the immediate neighborhood of Gingee itself than further a field and, adorned with many poetical ember acted on embellishments, is sung or acted on many a with age holiday. The take relates how Desing, as he is called in the south invoked the blessing of the god at Singavarma and set out to meet the Nawab with all his force. His parting with his maiden bride is pathetically told; though the eyrir which separated them she thrust one bracelet village holiday hand him the parting aim super and bade him do his gallant one of Rajput blood the battle was from Gingee. At Desing, who with unassisted by his friend Muhabat Khan, was successful and it was very near killing the Nawab, having cut the harness of his elephant with his own hands. But the Nawab, men rallied, desing's horse was hamstrung, and he and Muhabat Khan were at over length were and salian. His body was burnt, it is said, on the little masonry platform which still stands on the northern bank of the fort by the head of the tight of step which leads, past a little shrine to Ganapati, down to the water were. His girl wife committed sati on his paeen Sadat Ulla Khan easy so struck with animation at her fortitude that on his retune to arc the founded of the in memory the town which is still known by the name Ranipettai which he gave it on the wall of the Gingee fort near the Pondicherry gate is an inscription in Persian Commemorating Sadat Ulla vivacity over the Hindus and his capture of the fort, and giving the date as Hijra 1125, which began on January 17th 1713.⁸ Inscription in Persian on the Mosque in the lower fort and on the water tower adjoining it show that these were erected by Sadat Ulla in A.D. 1717-18. In 1750 Gingee was

captured from the Musalmans by a detachment of French under the gallant Bussy, Auteuil being second in command. It was an almost incredibly daring exploit, and is much to establish in the minds of the native troops of the south that terror of the French arms which stood Dupleix in such good stead in his long struggle with the English. Orem gives the following graphic account of the affair.⁹

Gingee remained in French possession until after the fall of Pondicherry to Eyro Ooze's force 1761. While the sinji of that town was progressing, it was blockaded by a force under Captain Simth to prevent it from sending in provisions to the beleaguered garrison and as soon as Pondicherry had surrendered Simth summoned the officer of the French at Gingee, who was mantel Macgregor to capitulate. Macgregor answered that even it Smith had a hundred thousand men it would take him three years to reduce the place, and the siege went on. Smith was encamped to the east of the fort somewhere about where the present villages of Gingee stand. On the rocky knoll north of the Pondicherry gate which leads into the fort from this eastern side. The French had constructed during their occupation at work which they called the Royal Battery. On the night of the and February, smith with a small force, scaled the wall of the fort between this battery and Kishnagiri, crept in perceived through a pet tab which then occupied the ground just east of the royal battery, and gained the road which leads from the Pondicherry gate up in Saadat Ulla's mosque already referred to, which in those days was fringed with an avenue of trees.¹⁰

Here his men were perceived by the guard at the Pondicherry gate, which at once raised an alarm. Smooth, drye them from their post at the point of the bayonet and opened the gate to let in another body of his men, which brought his total strength up to 600. With this force he captured the royal battery. Waiting for daylight, he next drove French out of the eastern portion of the lower fort. Some fled for refuge to Kishnagiri, but the Majority took up a position in the inner lower fort under Rajagiri. From the ramparts of this they fired throughout the next day upon the English, who were also subjected though without much loss to a plunging fire from the cannon on the hills above them. That night the French retreated to the higher defenses on Rajagiri and the other two hills. Next day a of the enemy's spays who had deserted offered to lead a party, by a path he knew, to surprise the fortifications on Chandryan Drug. He was trusted, and at nightfall 200 spays marched under his guidance, apparently long the rampart which runs up the south of the drug and scaled the defenses before they were perceived. They seized eight Europeans, but the rest escaped to the lower defenses and in the morning surrendered union additionally. No prospect of surprising much less assaulting Kishnagiri or Rajagiri appearing, it was resolved to see what a blockade would effect.¹¹

On the top of Rajagiri is a fairly level space covered with rough hill grass on which is a temple to Ranganatha, a Mantapam, two big granaries, a masonry flag-staff, a building of unusual design which is supposed to have been a magazine and another with a deep chamber under its floor which is called the treasury. Under some of the boulders are two hollows in the rock in which there is always water, even in the driest season. These have been slated to be fed from springs of mysterious origin; but in reality they are only deep clefts in which the rain collects, and which always contain water for the reason that their shape and shaded situation result in the annual evaporation being less than the annual supply. A little lower down the hill, in a small mantapam on its southern side, is big cannon eleven feet long and some save feet in circumference at the breech, which must have cost no small effort to carry to this elevated position. On the breech end is some lettering in English and Grantham characters.¹²The lower fort, as has been said, is surrounded by a wall and ditch and includes within it an inner fort lying close under Rajagiri. The ditch still contains water, is used by the adjoining riots for irrigating their crops.

Outside and east of the eastern (Pondicherry) gate in the wall, stood in former days the pettah of Gingee. The plan of the place given in Orme's historic shows that this ran from the foot

of Chandrayan Drug to beyond the gate that it was crowded with houses and was surrounded by a wall with bastions. Not a vestige of it now remains and much of the site is cultivated. The habitations must have once run much further south than this. If one follows the forest line which runs under the eastern flank of Chandrayan Drug one passes the remains of many mosques, tanks and temples, and in about a mile reaches the ruins of the temple of Pattabhi Ramaswami mentioned below, which must have once been one of the Gingee Temple.¹³

The development of the defense system at Gingee was adapted to the requirements of time like the progress of weapons simultaneously giving due importance to the existing structures. The buildings throughout the fort are now on the list of ancient remains conserved by Government and are in charge of the Department of Public Works. Some of the more notable of them have recently been repaired. Sculptures have been classified into major classifications, as bas-reliefs, sculptures which is scooped out of rock, stone, wood or any other materials. One portion of the images is visible while the other portion is attached to the material where it is carved generally called bas-relief sculptures or relics.

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