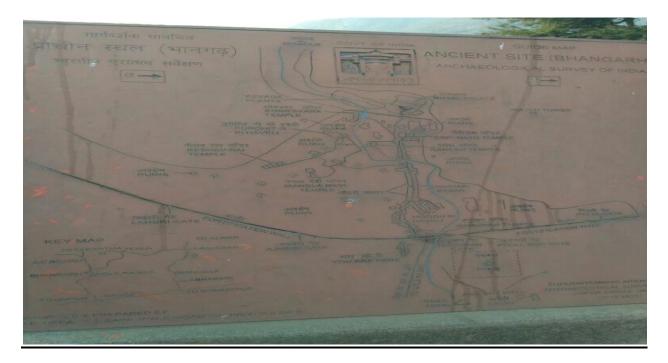
BHANGARH: A NARRATIVE OF SPOOK, SORCERY AND SOCIETY

Dr. Sunita Jakhar, Associate for March 2018, IIAS, Shimla, Email: <u>sunitm4@gmail.com</u>

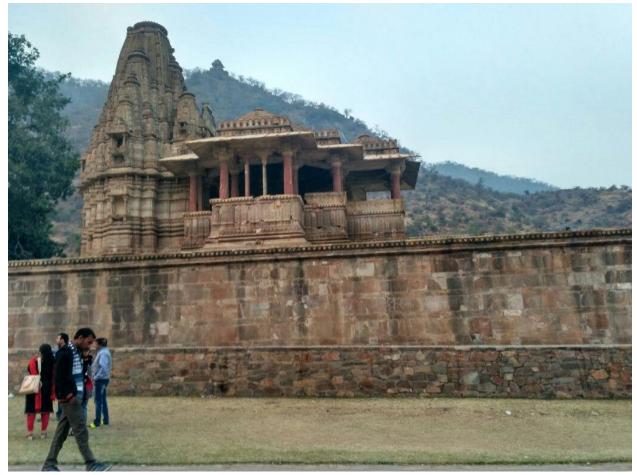
The paper is divided into three parts, part 1 is about the location and an overview about the site of Bhangarh. Second part is about instances of spook and sorcery associated with the place, which are available as texts and some shared experiences by the local people. The last part is on the present day society, their outlook on this site and the perception of the local people as to what it is living around Bhangarh. In order to collect material for the paper I searched the database and also visited the Bhangarh ruins with some pre-reading of the available literature , collected responses from the visitors and locals to jot down this narrative of spook and sorcery of what was available and what the people said.

(1) Bhangarh : Location and an Overview:



(Fig.1 : Map prepared by ASI, showing the complete spread of the fort city of Bhangarh)

Bhangarh is a village in Rajgarh municipality of Alwar district, located in eastern Rajasthan, approximately 27degree N latitude and 76 degree E longitude. Famed for historical ruins, elevated at 380 m or 1250 ft above sea level, with a population of 1250 according to 2001 survey is one of India's most haunted places. Surprisingly, the Bhangarh city fort harbors old Hindu temples of Gopinath, Shiva, Hanuman, Ganesh, Vishal Devta, Lavina Devi and Keshav Rai yet it remains haunted.



(Fig.2 : Gopinath temple inside the Bhangarh fort premises)

Due to its location at the edge of Sariska Tiger Reserve and proximity to the capital city Delhi, lately it has become a tourist spot. Habitation is in the nearby village, namely Gola ka Baas but the site is uninhabited by homo sapiens. There is a signboard from the Archaelogical Survey of India, which is a Government of India organization prohibiting trespass in the area between sunset and sunrise. The locals say that the spirits visit the site during this place and whoever dared to stayback in the area during prohibition hours died. Animals and birds are no exception. So the caretakers vacates the borders of Bhangarh at 5 pm. There are

shops and dhabas on the main road leading to Bhangarh but in this village there are no paan or tea shops to fend one's needs. One can find the local men as tourist guides. Bhangarh fort is separated from nearby plains by a rampart (as shown in figure 3 below)

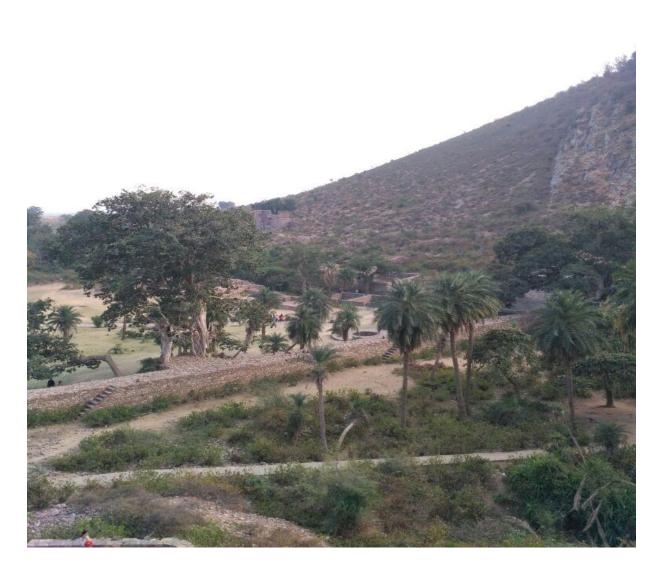


Fig.3: Rampart separating Bhangarh with adjoining plains

<u>History of Bhangarh :</u>

भारत मरकार
प्राचीन स्थल, भानगढ़
भानमढ़ के प्राचीन कसबे की स्थापना आमेर के शासक राजा भगवन्त दास ने 16 वीं शती के उत्तरार्द्ध में की, जिसे बाद में राजा मान सिंह के भाई माधासिंह की पियासत की राजधानी बनन दिया गया। माधासिंह मान समाद भारत (1556-1605 ई.) के दरवार में दीवान था। आनमढ़ के मुख्य अवशेषों में प्राचीर, दार, वाजग, होतियां, गरिर, शाही महल. छतरियाँ, मकजदरा आदि है। मुख्य मंदिरों में गोपीनाथ, सोमेश्वर, केशव राव है। मुख्य मंदिरों में गोपीनाथ, सोमेश्वर, केशव हुए है। शाही महल सात मजिला माना जाता है, परन्तु अव इसकी वार मंग्रेकों ही शेष ववी हैं। पूरी कर्सी एक के बाद एक तोन प्राचीरों से सुरक्षित की गयी थी। बाह्य प्राचीर में अंग क्रमश्रः अजमेरी, लाहोरी, हनुमान, फूतजर्हा राव दिल्ली दार के नाम से जाना जाता है।

Fig.4: History of Bhangarh as maintained by the ASI, at the site

Bhangarh is said to be established in 1573, during the rule of the Kachwaha Rajput, Bhagwant Das of Jaipur. He set up the residence of his second son Madho Singh, who was the younger brother of Emperor Akbar's general Man Singh I. His successor Chhatra Singh became the next ruler of Bhangarh after whose death in 1630, Bhangarh slowly declined. With the death of Aurangzeb the Mughal empire became weaker and Bhangarh was annexed by Jai Singh II in 1720. After it, Bhangarh population dwindled and due to famine of 1783 the town folk and villagers began to seek new avenues and subsequently the town got uninhabited.

(2) Spook and sorcery associated with Bhangarh:

As one enters the present day ruined fort city of Bhangarh, one sees temples, the palace and havellies. In addition there are four more points of entry – the Lahori gate, Ajmeri gate, Phulbari gate and the Delhi gate according to the directions of these gates. As one enters the premises, there are signs of destruction everywhere, the old shopping centre with shops subdivided into distinct well-demarcated separate compartments, within them the steps leading upward. (as shown in the figure below) But it seems that the destructive force unleashed its fury in a systematic manner, amputating the lane roughly at the same level. There is nothing to suggest gradual or natural crumbling down.



Fig.5: Left side is the dilapidated market place and the broken path leading to the entrance of the city



Fig.6 : Picture showing clear demarcation of living quarters of the 4 classes

Historians and researchers have found evidence of unique compartmentalization in this organisation of the city on the basis of hierarchy of castes (fig.6)—*Shudras* on the periphery, the *Vaishyas* along the market lane, the *Kshatriyas*, and the *Brahmins* around the temples and the royal household in the palace at a higher elevation. This demarcation in the premises has disappeared, too with time. But the ruins of the Priest's house called Purohitji ki haveli is located in the precincts of the temple complex. The royal palace is at the extereme end of the fort's limit almost touching the hills in the back.

The main lane ends at the Shiva temple with a water tank fed with a perennial stream of water (Fig. 7) that originates in the magical snake-infested kevra woods, that is what the local country folk still affirm. (fig . 8)The other temple has some fine segments. (fig .9 and 10) While on the outer surface, the figures of Mahishasuramardini and Varaha avatara of Vishnu are distinctly carved, the more unusual figures are on the door jambs and the lintel of the garbha-griha that include Shiva-Parvati on the camel-back—a typical Rajasthani variant.



Figure 7: Shiva temple besides perennial water pond



Figure 8: Kevra forests of Bhangarh



Figure 9 : A temple of Bhangarh



Figure 10: Nandi in the temple premises of the Shiva temple

There is a legend relating how the city came to be destroyed. Even evident from the ruins that it is not a pure fable. While talking to the locals, it was clear that the boundary between history and legend have got so mixed up, at places, it seems too badly, and one does not know what is what. In the first half of the 17th century, Madho Singh of Amber built his capital here with the sanction of an ascetic Baba Balanath, who meditated there, but not without his word of caution, "The moment the shadows of your palaces touch me, you are undone. The city shall be no more!" In ignorance, Ajab Singh, one of the later descendants in the dynasty, raised the palace to such a height that the shadow reached the forbidden place. The palace was raised to seven storeys. Hence the devastation that one sees today, and only three storeys are seen in the ruins now. (fig. 11, 12)



Figure 11: Side view of the 3 storeys, the top 4 have collapsed

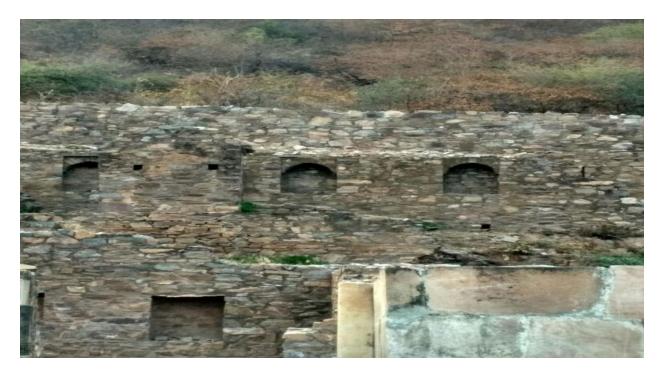


Fig.12 : Front view of the palace showing the 3 storeys, rest 4 have collapsed

A second legend tells of a *tantric* battle waged between the lovely queen Ratnavali and that wicked sorcerer Singha Sevra, whose *chhatri* can be seen on the top of the hill. (fig.13) Desperately, he tried to trap her in his magical web, and failed every time, as the queen herself was a past-mistress in the *tantric* art.



Fig.13: The cenotaph of the tantric on hill top.

The last battle took place on the day when the queen losing eventually her temper, transformed a glass bottle containing the massaging oil into a big rock and hurled it towards the hill-top, where sat the devil. In vain he tried to stop this rock missile. It was too late. Sensing his imminent death, concentrating all his powers, he spat his dying curse: "I die! But thou too, thou Ratnavali shall not live here anymore. Neither thou, nor thine kin, nor these walls of the city. None shall see the morning sun!" I suspect, it was after all, the demon who had the last laugh! The night was spent in hastily trying to transfer the palace treasures to a new site.

Though the tantric was crushed under the trajectory of heavy stone, his curse remained. The next year, a battle was fought between the armies of Bhangarh and Ajabgarh, that led to Ratnavati's death along with her army. As told by the guide, perhaps it is the curse that lingers, "If any villager tries to build a roof, it apparently mysteriously collapses. No one in the village and fort could be reborn. It is forever condemned and destined to be inhabited by ghosts"

Enter the fort (as told by the locals):

As one passes through the dilapidated market place, the 'Nachni ki Haveli' or the 'Nartaki Mahal' where mushairas would frequently take place. The demolished haveli of the dancing girls speaks volumes about the past glory of the place. The locals had heard dancing bells in the haveli and the dilapidated market place coming to life at midnight. But only a hearsay. There were some magnificent Banyan trees. (fig. 14) As one enters the gates of the place , at the left is a Hanuman temple, where the idol used to speak (the locals call it muh bolti murti) . One of the temples had a pillar with pictoral inscription, the locals call it script of the ancient times. (fig.15)



Figure 14 : Ancient Bunyan tree, the roots of which have destroyed the rampart



Fig.15: script of the ancient times.

The Bhangarh fort stands against the backdrop of Aravalli foothills that still remain a popular destination for trekkers and adventure lovers (pic.16). There is an impressive gateway to the fort. (pic. 17). All over the premises one sees cynotaphs of kings, local diety shrines/ temples such as neelkanth temple, Jind baba to whom people go with a manuhar also known as beseeching (pic. 18, 19) cigarettes are tucked as a token of offering along with joss sticks, flowers, grains etc. and it continues to be smoked till the end on its own. Inside the long corridors of the palace (pic. 20) there are many chambers which are vacant and in one such room I found a man performing some kind of pooja he did not let me enter the chamber and there was eeriness. (pic.21) What surprised me was in broad day light one needed a torch to see inside the chamber.



Fig. 16: popular destination for trekkers and adventure lovers



Fig. 17: an impressive gateway to the fort.



Fig. 18: Jind baba to whom devotees offer cigarettes that is smoked on its own



Fig.19: Smoked cigarettes of Jind baba

I witnessed after revisiting the place that the cigarettes had been smoked on its own and only the ends were visible after an hour or so



Fig. 20: Inside the long corridors of the palace



Fig.21: Chamber connected to well lighted corridors in the daytime but this chamber needed a torch

The steps and the top of the fort are littered with broken stone columns, but some of the columns still had the carving visible. (pic. 22). These carved columns perhaps supported Ratnavati's bathing place akin to a mini pool (pic. 23). It had the rain water harvesting system.



Fig. 22: palace architecture showing columns still retaining carving



Fig. 23: Ratnavati's bathing place akin to a mini pool

Locals also say that about 500 years back there were two cities Taranagar and Paranagar. Bhangarh was in Taranagar, famous for Kewda trees and Taranagar was famous for Taalvraksh (cohune trees). The locals have noticed paranormal activities in the premises.(pic.24) A tale justifying the deserted state of the fort city maintains that in order to avoid the heavy attack of the locusts the queen approached Sanjay Nath who was blessed with miraculous powers. As per his instructions the whole city had to be vacated. Unknowingly a pair of cows were slaughtered in the exercise and Sanjay Nath cursed the city, an earthquake followed destroying the city.



Fig. 24: evidence of paranormal activities in the premises

(3) Society : Some views and reviews:

- This site displays Government apathy and negligence of Rajasthan Tourism department, façade has crumbled down and it needs immediate restoration otherwise entire fort will soon disappear. (pic. 25)
- Great architecture which showcases the glory of rulers of Rajasthan, it has historical and architectural significance. (pic. 26)
- It has the flavor of haunted tales of its time.
- For the one's adventurous in spirit, it is a heaven for tracking and photography.
- For some locals it has become a means of livelihood.
- Though the site remains crowded yet it could not elevate the living standard of the locals.



Fig.25: Site needs immediate restoration otherwise entire fort will soon disappear.



Fig.26: Great architecture showcasing the glory of Rajasthan

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I interviewed the local people to get oral stories about the place which have been incorporated in the paper