



# International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: [www.ijrpr.com](http://www.ijrpr.com) ISSN 2582-7421

## Fortified Power: The Political History of Raibania Fort

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### ABSTRACT:

This paper delves into the historical and military relevance of Raibania Fort, a significant structure situated on the northern frontier of Orissa, India. The fort's origins are debated, with proposed builders ranging from the legendary king Birata to Mukunda Deva, the last independent ruler of Kalinga. Raibania Fort's striking architecture, constructed from laterite blocks and featuring distinctive gateways, distinguishes it as an exceptional example of military design in eastern India. The article explores the fort's historical role in defense, including its resistance against Muslim invasions, and its lasting influence on the region's history.

Keywords: Raibania Fort, Ganga, Suryavamshi Gajapati, Military architecture

### Introduction

Forts, as defensive structures, have a long history in ancient India, possibly dating back to before the third millennium BCE, during the time of the flourishing Indus Valley civilization in the north-western part of the Indian subcontinent. While this may seem ancient to us, forts were constructed even earlier in other parts of the world. For instance, Jericho had a fortress as early as 7000 BCE, featuring a 21-foot-high wall enclosing an area of 10 acres and a 15-foot-wide, 9-foot-deep outer moat for protection. The Great Wall of China, built to deter nomadic tribe incursions, was constructed by Emperor Shih Huang Ti in the 3rd century BCE, making it much older in comparison to the forts of the Indus Valley civilization. References to fortifications can be found in ancient Indian epics. The Ramayana, for instance, describes the fortifications of Ayodhya. The Mahabharata, particularly in the Shanti Parva, categorizes forts as Dhava, Mahi, Giri, Manushya, Mru, Vana, and Tani. Capital cities received special attention in terms of defense, with Hastinapur being particularly well fortified. The earliest literary records focusing on the construction of stone and iron forts can be traced back to Vedic literature. Vedic texts provide detailed descriptions of various types of forts and fortifications, constructed using earth, brick, and stone masonry, in shapes ranging from square and rectangular to hexagonal, octagonal, polygonal, circular, and irregular. In the Arthashastra, forts are considered one of the seven elements of sovereignty. According to Dr. Thomas, "Indian forts were systematically designed with ditches, ramparts, battlements, covered ways, portcullises, and water gates. In assaults, various tactics were employed, including mining, countermining, and flooding mines, in addition to diplomatic strategies." It is known from the details of the historians that in the 4th century BC, Shishupalgarh, Jaugarh and Asurgarh were established. These forts were used as the main center of state defense at that time. In particular, many forts were fortified like forests and hilly mountains. Raibania fort which is considered as the biggest military citadel of the medieval period in Eastern India has negligible sources regarding the origin of establishment. This fort needs the attention of History, whose past is shrouded in mystery in present.

### Locating Raibania Fort

Northern Orissa is, considering its situation, within 150 miles of Calcutta. One hundred and fifteen miles SouthWest of Calcutta, at the town of Jaleswar the road crosses the river Subarnarekha. The river here winds so as to run for about five miles nearly parallel to the road on the northern side. Crossing the river we come into the isolated pargana of Pottitahab, one of the so-called Jungle Mehals, which is now included in the district of Baleswar. Nine miles north of Jaleswar, and about two from the right bank of the river, amidst dense grass and tree jungle, which is here and there in course of being brought into cultivation, stands the group of forts. The forts are distant from the sea at the mouth of the Subarnarekha, twenty-six miles as the crow flies. Amongst those forts the location of Raibania fort is mentioned by John Beams.

### Situating Raibania Fort

It is challenging to date the Raibania fort precisely in the lack of any written records. However, several oblique sources of knowledge about the fort's creation date may be given. The traditional view regarding the date of the fort goes back to the Puranic age when king Virata was ruling in this part. According to local tradition, the heroes of the Mahabharata, Yudhisthira and his brothers, took shelter during their exile. While they were in the fort, Kichaka, a general under Birat, tried to seduce Draupadi, the wife of Pancha-Pandavas and was killed for his presumption by Bhima. King Virata is said to have enshrined goddess Kichakeswari in this fort which was later on removed by a Bhanja ruler of Mayurbhanj to Baripada. Ruins of this fort still indicate to the shrine of Kichakeswari. The present village Hathigarh located near Raibania was a stable for elephants and the Virata tank of

Gobaraghata near Lakshananatha palace are said to be the handiworks of king Virata. We have a similar place called Viratagarh in the neighbourhood of the present Khiching temple of Mayurbhanj district. The presiding deity Kichakesvari or Khichingesvari of this temple can be assigned a date in the A.D. 10th-A.D. 11th century. If this view can be relied upon then the ruins of Raibania can be dated back at least to that period.

The decline of Somavamshis or Panduvamshis around the early 12th century A.D. and rise of Imperial Gangas paved the history of Kalinga to a glorious epoch. The accession of Anantavarman Vajrahasta V in 1038 A.D. till the time of Bhanudeva IV with whom ended the three hundred and fifty years of Ganga rule in 1434 A.D. there the military achievements went beyond preceding dynastic achievements. From the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* we learn that the muslim attempt to invade Odisha was made during the reign of Rajaraja III (C. 1198-1211 A.D.) by Khalji Amir brothers viz. Muhammad-i-Sheran and Ahmad-i-Sheran on behalf of Bakhtiyar Khalji. According to H.G. Raverty the attempted invasion of Odisha took place in or about A.H. 601, which is equal to 1205 A.D. From this point of time from early medieval Odisha history to British Occupation of Odisha the northern frontier of Odisha that ties boundary with Bengal has witnessed periodical ravages of war with the attacks of foreign forces. It is to be noted that the strategic location of Raibania Fort is Nine miles north of Jalesore, two miles from the right bank of the river Suvarnarekha and 1.72 miles from border of West Bengal in present. Historical records document the victories of rulers such as Raja Raja III, Ananga Bhima III, Bhanu II, Narasimha I, Kapilendra Deva, and Purusottama Deva in decisive battles against Islamic rulers. These rulers exhibited remarkable leadership and military prowess as they successfully defended their territories and emerged victorious in significant confrontations with Islamic adversaries. It is plausible to consider that during conflicts against Islamic rulers, the Raibania fort, situated on the Northern Frontier of the region, could have served as a critical defender for Hindu militia and a strategic checkpoint. This fort likely played a dual role, providing a secure haven for soldiers and also serving as a storage facility for granaries and military equipment.

At the time of Narasimha Deva I (1238-1264 A.D.) accession to the throne in 1238 A.D. the situation in the northern borders of the Ganga Kingdom was quite alarming. He launched an offensive attack against the muslim nawab Malik Izzuddin Tughril-i-Tughan Khan. Minhaj-i-Siraj, the author of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* who accompanied Bengal nawab to the battlefield mentioned in his account that on reaching Katsin "on Saturday the 6th of the month of zi-ak-dah, 641 A.H. (15th April, 1244 A.D.) Malik Tughril-i-Tughan Khan made his troops mount and an engagement commenced." Opinion is divided among scholars in regard to the situation of Katsin. N. N. Vasu's suggestion-for its identification with Raibaniagarh on the border of Balasore district has been rejected by R. D. Banerjee. J. C. Basu seems to have accepted the views of N. N. Vasu.

The historical importance of the reign of Narasimha Deva II (1279-1306) is known through a number of inscriptions. It is known from the Kendupatana copper plate grant issued by Narasimha II in A.D. 1296 that the king granted two villages to Kumar Mahāpātra Bhimadeva Sarman while he was 'out on a campaign on the banks of the Ganges on the occasion of a lunar eclipse'. This copper plate was issued from a place called Remunā which is still situated in Balasore district of Modern Orissa. The situation and construction of the forts at Remunā will lead us to believe that the Ganga kings of Orissa used to station forces in the northern frontier with a view to check the Muslim inroads of Bengal and to run the administration of that part of land smoothly. Thus, the presence of Ganga Monarch Narasimha II at the fort of Remunā at intervals to supervise the state affairs was but natural. Remuna may be the same as Revana or Raibaniya. Similar depiction of granting lands is mentioned in Alalpur Plates of Narasimhadeva II that the grant was made when the king was staying at Remuna-kataka (*remuna-katakesri-caranena-vijaya-samaye*). From Kendupatana (Set I) Plates of Narasimhadeva II, Anka 21, the grant was made when the king was in the *paniya-cchaya-mandapa* (possibly a shaded hall cooled by water) at the kataka (residence, city or secondary capital) called Remuna.

Sir John Beams has assigned the construction of the Raibania fort to Mukunda Deva (1559-68 A.D.) the last independent monarch of Kalinga who is also credited with the building up of a temple and bathing ghat known as Triveni ghat on the river Hooghly. To check the constant inroads of Sulaiman Karrani, the Afgan Sultan of Bengal, Mukundadeva built a strong fort in a commanding position in the northern frontier. Another fact to be remembered here is that during Bhoi rule, Govinda Vidyadhara appointed him as the Governor of Cuttack and the commandant of the fort of Barabati and he served in that capacity also in the reign of Chakra Pratap. Mukundadev met his tragic end when his own commander betrayed and killed him, an event that unfolded on the banks of the Gohirastream situated to the west of the Raibania Fort. Concurrently, during this tumultuous period, word spread about the capture or downfall of the Raibania Fort.

John Beams writes,

*"This fort or chain of forts, apprehend to have been those we are discussing. No more commanding situation could well be found than Raibania on its laterites overlooking the passage of the Subarnarekha and backed by the impenetrable forest. This position too is on the edge of the country inhabited by the Oriya speaking race. The situation of the main entrance and much greater strength of the fortification on the northern side seem to show that it was from that direction that the danger came."*

In the *Ain-i-Akbari*, a text authored by Abul Fazl in the 16th century BCE (translated by H S Jarrett in 1949), Raibania is mentioned. There is no question that the proper reading is "Raiban" because it has been referred to as "Rayn" and the location is "on the borders of Orissa". In addition, *Ain-i-Akbari* lists "three forts" at "Rayn," though John Beams discovered there to be four (during the reign of Emperor Akbar, his advisor Abul Fazal had visited Raibania and 13 other forts in Orissa). In his travelogues, Abul Fazl had made reference to the forts' architectural styles.

Lachhama, a historical novel written by Vyasa Kabi Fakir Mohan Senapati narrates the historical romance of Lachhama and her husband Badal Singh, in the backdrop of the political disturbances between the Mughals and Marathas to gain supremacy in Odisha set in the period of first half of 18th Century. Fakir Mohan says about Raibania that the founder of this fort is Rai Baliar Singh. Ray Baliya has become Raibania over time. It is heard from the mouths of the local people that the name of the fort may have been Raibania because the queen's name was 'Raibani'. While many others argue that 'rai'(ragi) was produced in huge quantity in the area and thus it was named as Raibania.

The Raibania fort which came under the suzerainty of Maratha Forces from 1751 AD to 1803 A.D. But the transfer of power to the British happened around 1803 A.D when the treaty of Deogaon, concluded on 17 December 1803, Raghujibhonsla ceded to the East India Company in perpetual sovereignty, the province of Cuttack, including the port and district of Balasore. The Raibania fort has been declared as State Protected as per the Orissa Ancient Monument Preservation Act, 1956.

### *Opinions Regarding Origin of Raibania Fort*

One of the propositions that come from an Odia article of Shri Jadunath Dash published in "Sahakara" that, the fort was built in the Puranic age assignable to the king of Birata who enshrined Kichakeswari as the presiding deity of the fort. Later on, a king of Mayurbhanj, shifted this image which is now being worshipped at Khiching. Another thing to note down here is that in 1815 as per report of Historian Arnold Toynbee published in the same year, an Englishman named Willikinson stayed in Raibania fort seven kms from Jaleswar for cultivation of Neel (indigo). But he left the place as there was a quarrel with the Raja of Mayurbhanj which suggests the idea that Raibania Fort was under Mayurbhanj King although it was under the suzerainty of British. Another thing to mention here is that, The Naga family of Mayurbhanja was known by the name of Vairata Bhujanga or simply the Vairat or Virata family. Evidences of serpent worship by the Vairat dynasty are also found in many places of Mayurbhanja as far as Raibania.

H.C Das further explains that the fort of Raibania, was built by the Gangas on the route from Orissa to Bengal near the present boundary line between the two States, had as its presiding deity goddess Jayachandi, represented by a rectangular piece of stone. This circumstance suggests that the goddess of Raibania was originally a folk goddess subsequently accepted as the protectress of the fort on account of her fame among the local people. Another goddess represented in aniconic form, called Gadachandi, was worshipped in bygone days as the tutelary deity of the fort of Amarda in Baleswar district. In the same district other goddesses, called Chandī, Durgā, Vana-Durgā, Kanaka Durgā, etc., acted in the past as the presiding deities of different forts.

Dr.Harekrushna Mahatab, including copper plates from Alalpur and Kendupatna near Bhubaneswar, suggest that Remuna Katak rose to prominence during the reign of Narasimha Deva II (1278-1306 AD) and Raibania Durg (fort) was responsible for the protection of Remuna Cuttack. According to him, it is possible that Raibania fort was destroyed, destroyed and abandoned after the fall of Mukunda Dev in 1568 AD. Also, according to people of Raibania, Mukundadev died in Gohira Tikiri, under Dhamnagar police station of Baleswar district. This is also proven from the writings of the poet Radhanath Ray. Mukundadev was killed by Ramachandra Deva on the banks of the Gohira stream which flowed on the west side of Raibania fort. At that time, the news of the fall of Raibania Fort was heard. This opinion is supported by Dr. Mahatab without hesitation. Regarding the naming of Raibania Fort, Dr.Harekrushna Mahatab says that from Ramaniya to Remuna, from Remuna to Rebana and Rebana, people are getting known as Raibania. He further clarifies that Raibania fort is way bigger than Barabati fort.

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.

According to Fakir Mohan, the renowned novelist, it is believed that the founder of Raibania fort was Rai Baliar Singh. Over time, the name "Rai Baliar" gradually transformed into "Raibania." Local folklore suggests that the fort might have been named Raibania because of the queen, whose name was 'Raibani.' The oral accounts passed down by the inhabitants of the region attest to this speculation. While many others argue that 'rai' (ragi) was produced in huge quantity in the area and thus it was named as Raibania.

John Beams speculates that the fort was possibly constructed by Mukundadeva, the last Hindu ruler of Orissa. Mukunda Deva is also known for his restoration work on the historic Barabati fort and the construction of numerous tanks and ghats along the distant border areas. However, due to the frequent Muslim invasions during his short reign, it is uncertain if he had enough time and resources to build formidable fortresses. It is therefore reasonable to attribute the construction of this edifice to the imperial Gangas, a dynasty renowned for its illustrious rulers such as Chodagangadeva, Anagabhimadeva, and Narasimhadeva. These rulers were credited with establishing various military bases (referred to as Katakas) in different regions to ensure efficient administration and successful defense against foreign aggressors. The fort, originally constructed for military purposes, underwent subsequent strengthening by a series of rulers even after the downfall of the imperial Ganga dynasty.

S.N Roy holds a different view that there was once a big fort at Raibania in Fatiabad. It was owned by a petty Hindu chieftain. It had two forts called Fulāṭṭa and Bardihā. Fulāṭṭā is a corruption of Fulhata (compound with flower plants). Bardihā is a fort with big homesteads. The chief dwelt in Raibania fort. The remains of his palace can still be seen there. The forts of Fulatta and Bardihā, no doubt, served as outer fortifications, but they had also quite another use. During raids by the enemy the civil population of this petty kingdom took shelter inside these outer forts where extensive granaries used to be stored with paddy and rice. The remains of these granaries can still be seen. The chief of Raibania was called a Bhunya. The Raibania chiefs enjoyed a semi-independent existence and was a terror to the locality. The last chief was defeated and killed after British occupation. (G. Toynbee's History of Midnapur) The fort of Raibania is bigger in area than Fort William in Calcutta. It had mud and stone walls round it. It was also protected by a deep moat and had a drawbridge leading on to it. It is really a wonder how a petty chief like the Bhunya of Raibania could build so costly a fort with two outer fortifications at Fulāṭṭa and Bardihā. It may be that the Bhunyas only came to occupy the fort which has been built by a mighty chief long ago, or they might have gained in wealth by their frequent raids on the plains.

Prithwindra Mukherjee in his book "Bagha Jatin (Life in Bengal and Death in Orissa 1879-1915)" says "*The fact that Bagha Jatin gave up his life in this historic province has a great deal of cultural and spiritual significance. The tragic event brings to our mind the battle fought by Mukunda Dev, the last independent king of Orissa in Gohara Tikiri at Bhadrak, in Balasore, just as the Raibania Fort in the frontiers of Balasore has always acted as a buffer against foreign invasions.*"

The debate surrounding the establishment of the fort can be conclusively settled by acknowledging its potential status as one of the oldest forts in Odisha, possibly dating back to ancient times. The Raibania fort, once larger than the Barabati fort in Cuttack, likely predates the Imperial Ganga dynasty in terms of architectural sophistication, urban planning, and overall settlement design compared to other forts established by the Gangas. During the era of the Imperial Gangas, it likely served as a key frontier fort, guarding against foreign invasions.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the Raibania Fort stands as a significant historical landmark in the context of Orissa's military strength during the Ganga dynasty's rule. This fort's strategic location played a pivotal role in safeguarding against external threats and provided a secure space for military training and operations. Surrounded by natural defenses like the Subarnarekha River and dense bamboo forests, the Raibania Fort emerged as a formidable defensive stronghold. To bolster their defenses on the north-eastern frontier, the Orissan kings constructed numerous forts in all directions, with Raibania Fort at the center. While many of these forts now fall within the boundaries of the Midnapore district in West Bengal, Raibania remained a crucial military outpost under various Orissan rulers until the reign of Mukunda Deva, the last Hindu ruler in the region. What sets Raibania Fort apart are its distinctive architectural features. It was constructed using laterite blocks, forming a pyramid-like structure covered in mud with a triangular cross-section. The fort boasts three robust fortification walls, separated by moats, and features unique gateways, making it a standout example of military architecture in eastern India.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Sunil Kumar Pattnaik (Director, OIMSEAS, Bhubaneswar)

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