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PROVOKE

LIFESTYLE

Music meets fashion

THE FIRST EVER FASHION SHOW OF ITS KIND IN SOUTH INDIA, IN WHICH VARIOUS APPAREL AND JEWELLERY DESIGNERS SHOWCASED THEIR CREATIONS WITH MUSICIANS PERFORMING LIVE ALONG SIDE THE RAMP



AT PEPPER QUEEN'S FORTRESS



Portuguese invaders, after biting the dust, hailed her as the Pepper Queen, who reigned over the Mirjan Fort. **Sandy and Vyjay** discover the charms of the forgotten seat of power of Chennabhaira Devi, through sheer serendipity, during a visit to Gokarna in pursuit of spirituality and sandy beaches

Her eyes seemed to blaze fire. Her countenance on the other hand looked icy. She looked fierce and majestic astride a magnificent steed. We stood in front of the Pepper Queen at the entrance to the Mirjan Fort over which she presided with queenly disdain.

This was our imagination running wild as we huddled into an auto rickshaw and headed out of Gokarna in quest of what one could call a forgotten fort of India called Mirjan, which once upon a time in history was the epicentre of the power, the life and times of a brave woman who has gone down in history as the "Rainha de Pimenta," or Pepper Queen. That was the title given to her by the Portuguese whom she had defeated in battle.

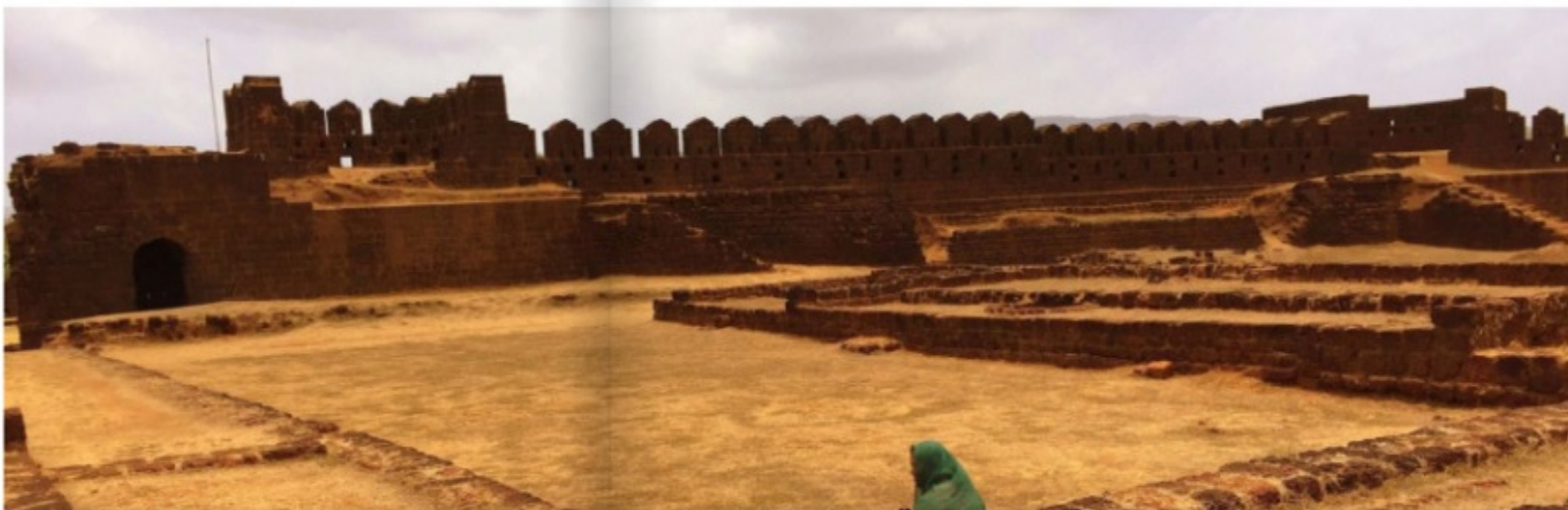
We were in Gokarna, a place known as a secluded alternative to Goa on the Karnataka coast. Most people are drawn to Gokarna by its bewitching beaches or its spirituality. Some come to enjoy a parallel hippie culture in the hidden beaches of Gokarna while others come to worship at the famous Mahabaleshwar temple.

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We too were there to worship at the temple and lounge on the beaches combined with some trekking. But a combination of the weather Gods, the serendipity of travel, and karma had something else in store for us. A conversation with some locals, a helpful auto rickshaw driver and a storm in the Arabian Sea saw us abandon our beach hopping plans and instead set off on a 22 kilometre drive to a place called Mirjan.

A board in Kannada and English white block letters with an arrow indicated that we were near Fort Mirjan. It also indicated that the fort was a national monument and was ostensibly under the care of the Archaeological Survey of India.

The fort itself looked elegant and imposing



as we got off the auto rickshaw. Bar a small shop beneath a fruit laden mango tree with a yawning shopkeeper, there seemed to be no soul in sight. A few cows grazed besides the ramparts of the fort, oblivious and impervious to the fact that they were at a place where history had weaved its magic.

A big iron gate which was half closed led to the inside of the fort. Due to the absence of any human presence the pathway that led inside looked eerie. No queen stood there with blazing eyes as we had imagined, and why should she? She was long gone, relegated to an obscure chapter of history.

Chennabhaira Devi belonged to the Tuluva-Saluva clan and belonged to a place called Gersoppa which lay about 90 kilometres from the Mirjan Fort. Today the famous Jog Falls cascades in mighty splendour very near the ruins of Gersoppa. Gersoppa was a buzzing hive of activity in the 16th century and a centre of spice trade of the region which encompassed what is today Honnavar, Bhatkal, and Mirjan. As these were strategic seaports from which spice trade boomed, they attracted the Portuguese when they landed on the Indian shores.

Queen Chennabhaira Devi who presided over this region, ascending the throne under the matriarchal

system held sway over the region. The establishment of the Mirjan Fort has been credited to her and it is said that she herself stayed in the fort for 54 long years. However, some versions say that she only renovated the fort and started using it in the 16th century and it dates to early 13th century when it was built by the rulers of the Nawayath Sultanate.

Whatever be the origins of the Mirjan Fort its history is inextricably linked with the Pepper Queen, who spent her life fighting off local chieftains and kings who eyed the spice trade that she controlled. She was a constant thorn in the plans of the Portuguese with whom she fought, negotiated, and many times resorted to subterfuge. The Portuguese were so wary of her that a 16th century Portuguese official record reads: "We must deal with her, most carefully and diplomatically. We must be courteous, polite and diplomatic to win her to our side." These were the thoughts of the Portuguese, who had christened her "Rainha de Pimenta" or Pepper Queen.

The Pepper Queen apart from being known for her prowess in military operations as well as statesmanship was also a just and tolerant ruler who did much for the welfare of her kingdom. She herself was a follower of the Jainism religion but encouraged and helped other religions and was

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instrumental in giving grants to Shalva, Vaishnava and other temples in the region. She also encouraged art and architecture with the result that many beautiful temples came up during her reign.

The Pepper Queen finally met her nemesis when local rulers of the Nayaka clan and Bilgi chieftains of the region all joined hands and attacked her kingdom. She fought on with all her might but the aging queen was defeated and taken prisoner. She breathed her last in a prison in the kingdom of Keladi, but not before she had left her mark on the sands of time as probably one of the longest reigning woman in Indian history.

The Mirjan fort, though in ruins today, seems to resonate with the energy of the Pepper Queen. As you walk amidst the ramparts of the fort you can almost feel brave and take after the resolute spirit of the woman who blazed a trail of her own.

The Mirjan fort stretches over a massive area of 10 acres. The fort is totally untouched by commercialization. No hawkers, no photographers pestering you to pose, no tourists. In fact, except for a board that bears the timings of the fort there is no signage inside the Fort, where you can wander as you please. We understood that the fort was taken over to be under the auspices of the Archaeological Survey of India a couple of years ago and they had cleared the dense vegetation that had overgrown across the fort.

The Mirjan Fort is beautiful and a silent ode in stone to the engineering and architectural skills of its builders. The fort is built with red laterite and has four gates. A double wall encloses the fort and a moat surrounded it in its heyday along with a drawbridge. There are visible signs of the moat though there is no sign of a drawbridge. A striking feature of the fort were deep interconnected wells which supplied water to the moat. The ruins of a Darbar Hall and Market place give credence to the fact that there was a thriving and full fledged settlement here. There exist secret passages too which formed a contingency plan for evacuation in case of enemy attacks. A tower with a flag pole dominated the fort and also afforded some splendid views of the farms around the fort.

A big tree stands amidst the sprawling and barren fort, its branches rising to the sky in flamboyant defiance. Some idols of Hindu Gods and Goddesses excavated from the ruins lie beneath this tree.

The fort was silent as barring us and a couple of curious Russian tourists, there was no soul around. The wind blew across the ramparts of the fort, the same wind that must have once carried the resonant commands of the Pepper Queen as she commandeered her forces and fought valiantly to defend her kingdom. **FE**

(The writers blog at invoyager.com and they can be reached at invoyager18@gmail.com)



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