

Ranthambore Fort: History, Political Changes and Architecture Across Time

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Abstract:

Ranthambore Fort is one of the important historical monuments of Rajasthan. Located in the Sawai Madhopur district, the fort has played an important role in the political and military history of Rajasthan and northern India because of its strategic location and natural surroundings. The present article discusses the historical development of Ranthambore Fort, with special focus on the early Chauhan rulers and the rule of Hammir Deo. It also examines the major conflicts between Hammir and Alauddin Khalji, which finally resulted in the capture of the fort in 1301 CE. The article further discusses the changing political control of Ranthambore fort under Mewar, Malwa, the Mughals and finally the Jaipur state. The article also discusses the important monuments within the fort complex, including Navlakha Pol, Hammir Mahal, Hammir's Kachahri, Battis Khambha Chhatra, Jain Temple, Ganesa Temple, Shiva Temple and Jogi Mahal. The study focuses on the historical importance of Ranthambore Fort, its political history, and the main architectural features of the fort complex.

Keywords: Ranthambore Fort; Chauhans; Hammir Deo; Rajput Architecture; Medieval Rajasthan.

Introduction:

The fort of Ranthambore was an important part of the Chahamana kingdom of Sakambhari. It is currently located in the Sawai Madhopur District and represents the rich Rajput heritage of Rajasthan, highlighting their valor, resilience, spirit of sacrifice, and architectural achievements. Ranthambore Fort is believed to have derived its name from the two nearby hills, Ran and Thambor.¹ It was earlier known as Ranastambhapura, as mentioned in the Manglana stone inscription,² which provides important epigraphic evidence for its history. It was located on an important trade and military route that connected North India with Central and Southern India. Because of its location, the fort was important for controlling the movement of traders, goods, and armies towards Malwa and the Deccan. It was also surrounded by hills and dense forests, which made it naturally strong and difficult to attack. Due to these strategic advantages, many rulers tried to gain control over Ranthambore, including Iltutmish, Balban, Alauddin Khilji and Mughal emperor Akbar. The fort was also controlled by three major Rajput principalities of Rajasthan; the Chauhans, Sisodiyas, and Kachhawahas at different times in its history.

There are different theories regarding the origin and construction of the fort. According to one theory, the fort is believed to have been constructed by Maharaja Jayanatha in the 5th century C.E.³ Another one states that it was built in 1110 C.E. by King Jayant at the instance and with the blessings of Padma

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Rishi.⁴ The fort is also said to have been constructed by Rao Jat in 1046 C.E. on Saturday during the Teej festival.⁵ The *Hammir Mahakavya* and *Hammir Raso* mention that Bhairu Sen Panwar (Parmar) ruled the area before Rao Jat and it is also suggested that the fort was probably built by the Parmars.⁶ Thus, the exact origin and construction of the fort remain uncertain.

Due to its historical and architectural importance, the fort is now a protected monument of National Importance under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of 1958 and was included among the six Hill Forts of Rajasthan in the UNESCO World Heritage List.⁷

Ranthambore under the Early Chauhans: Rulers, Conquests and Conflicts:

Detailed historical information about the fort begins with its association with the Chauhans. Various literary and epigraphical sources provide useful information about this period. These include *Taj-ul-Maasir* by Hasan Nizami, the earliest historical account of the Delhi Sultanate; *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* by Minhaj-us-Siraj; *Khazain-ul-Futuh* by Amir Khusrau, which describes Alauddin Khalji's invasion of Ranthambore and his conflict with Hammir Deo; *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* by Ziauddin Barani; and *Hammir Mahakavya* by Nayachandra Suri. These sources provide information about the political history of Ranthambore during the period of Chauhan rule. Inscriptional evidence, such as the Manglana Stone Inscription from the time of Valhana, ruler of Ranthambore, and the Balvan inscription from the time of Hammir, also provides information about the genealogy and political activities of the early Chauhan rulers, as well as aspects of local administration during their rule.

The Chauhan kingdom of Ranthambore was founded by Govinda, the son of Prithviraja III. After the second battle of Tarain, Govinda left Ajmer and established his rule at Ranthambore. In order to protect his newly established kingdom from Muslim invasions, he accepted the authority of Qutub-ud-din Aibak. Govinda was later succeeded by his son Valhana who continued to acknowledge the supremacy of the Delhi Sultanate which is known from the Manglana stone inscription of 1215 C.E. (V.S. 1272).⁸

The inscription records the construction of a step-well in Manglana village by Valhana's feudatory, Jaitrasimha of the Dadhicha family.⁹ At the beginning, the inscription refers to Shams-ud-din Iltutmish, the ruler of Delhi at that time.¹⁰ It mentions Vallanadeva as the lord of Ranastambhpura (Ranthambore), and his authority was extended from Ranthambore to Manglana in Marwar.¹¹ The inscription provides valuable evidence of the political control and administrative activities associated with Ranthambore during the early thirteenth century.

Valhana's grandson Viranrayana was said to have been poisoned to death by Sultan Iltutmish during former's visit to Delhi.¹² Afterwards, the Ranthambore fort came under the direct control of Delhi Sultanate until Vagbhata, the uncle of Viranarayan, captured the fort again soon after Iltutmish's death.

During the reign of Vagbhata, Ulugh Khan (Balban) attacked the region twice, first in 1248 C.E., and second in 1253 C.E. Both these invasions were not very successful as Vagbhata was also became very

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powerful at that time and faced Balban with a well-equipped army.¹³ Minhaj calls Vagbhata the “*Greatest Rais of the Hindustan*” and according to *Hammir Mahakavya*, Vagbhata ruled Ranthambore for twelve years.¹⁴ Vagbhata was also credited with the construction of Bahar Deo temple at Ranthambore fort which was razed to the ground during the invasion of Alauddin Khalji.¹⁵

Vagbhata was succeeded by Jaitrasimha, who, as per the Balvan inscription of the time period of his son and successor Hammira, had extended the dominion of his empire and came into conflicts with various important contemporary rulers, including Jayasimha of Mandapa (Malwa), a Kurma king who was identified as a Kachchwaha ruler of Amber, and a ruler of Karkaralagiri.¹⁶ He also faced Muslim invasions as Nasiruddin, the then ruler of Delhi, sent forces under Malik-un-Nawab against Ranthambore but the invasion seems to have been unsuccessful.¹⁷ Jaitrasimha was succeeded by his younger son, Hammir, the most important Chauhan ruler in the History of Ranthambore.

Hammir and his conflict with Alauddin Khalji:

It is believed that Hammir’s early successes led Jaitrasimha to voluntarily hand over his throne to him during his lifetime.¹⁸ Hammir ascended the throne in Vikrama Samvat 1339. Soon after becoming ruler, according to the *Hammir Mahakavya*, he undertook a campaign to conquer different regions. He first defeated Arjuna, the ruler of Bhimarasa, and then received tribute from Mandalgarh, followed by the movement towards Ujjain and Dhara, where he defeated the Paramara ruler Bhoja, and returned to Ranthambore after passing through several regions.¹⁹ After returning to Ranthambore, Hammir performed a Koti-Yajna under the guidance of his priest Vishvarupa.²⁰ The Balvan inscription (V.S. 1345), during the time period of Hammir mentions two koti-yajnas.²¹

The rise of the Khaljis to the throne of Delhi marked a new and more active phase in the military policy of the Sultanate. Jalal-ud-din Khalji led two campaigns against Ranthambore, first in 1290 and again in 1292. On both occasions, he achieved some initial success, including the capture of Jhain, but soon withdrew towards Delhi as he realised that capturing the main fort would require greater effort. After his withdrawal, Hammir recaptured Jhain.

After the accession of Alauddin Khalji to the throne in 1296 A.D., he began expanding the territory under his rule. Apart from the reasons discussed in the introduction for the strategic importance of Ranthambore Fort and the attempts of various rulers to conquer it, the fort and its ruler Hammir had gained a strong reputation by the time of Alauddin Khalji. It was known for its strong defense and was considered a difficult fort to conquer. Another important factor was that the ruler of Ranthambore provided shelter to the Mongol rebels Mohammad Shah and Kehbru, who had rebelled against Sultan Alauddin Khalji near Jalore. These reasons were enough for the Khalji ruler to plan a strong invasion of Ranthambore. He launched two campaigns against the fort, the first under his generals Ulugh Khan and Nusrat Khan. The first invasion was unsuccessful and resulted in the death of Nusrat Khan, one of Alauddin’s important generals, near the Navlakha Gate of the fort. However, the invasion had a serious impact on the economy of Ranthambore.

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After hearing about the situation from Ulugh Khan, Alauddin decided to personally lead a strong army against Hammir and capture the fort of Ranthambore. He reached Ranthambore and continued the siege. The long siege gradually made the situation difficult for the defenders, while Alauddin's army also faced difficulties because of continuous failures and the rainy season. During the siege, Alauddin's forces tried different ways to enter the fort. they constructed a *pashib* by filling sacks with sand and placing them one over another to reach the fort wall.²² They also started constructing a mine but the Chauhans resisted these attempts.²³ However, the shortage of food and the long siege weakened the defenders.

The situation became worse when two of Hammir's commanders, Ratipala and Ranamalla, joined Alauddin's side. Their betrayal further weakened the defense of the fort. With the situation becoming difficult and the possibility of defeat increasing, Hammir decided to perform Saka. His queens and daughter Deval Devi entered the funeral pyre. Hammir then prepared for the final battle.

Hammir and his followers fought against Alauddin's army. His brother Virama died fighting, while Hammir continued to fight. Rather than allowing himself to fall into the hands of the enemy, Hammir chose to end his own life. According to a tradition, it is said that he took his life by cutting his head in the Mahadeva temple at Ranthambore fort. Jaja, who was chosen as successor of Ranthambore by Hammir, continued the resistance in the fort for some more time, but Ranthambore was finally captured by Alauddin Khalji in 1301 CE. With the fall of Ranthambore, the Chauhan kingdom in the region also came to an end.

Despite his defeat, Hammir is remembered for his courage and determination to defend his kingdom. His resistance against Alauddin Khalji became an important part of his legacy. The famous couplet associated with Hammir reflects this image of his strong determination:

*सिंह-सवन सत्पुरुष वचन कदलन फलत इक बार।
तिरिया-तेल हम्मीर-हठ चढ़े न दूजी बार॥*

The couplet expresses the idea that Hammir's determination, once made, could not be turned back.²⁴

Ranthambore under the later powers: Mewar, Mughals and Kachchwahas:

The fall of Ranthambore in 1301 in the hands of the Khalji ruler was an important turning point in the history of the fort. For some time, Ranthambore remained under the Delhi Sultanate. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the fort became part of the political struggles between Mewar, Malwa and the Delhi Sultanate. In the later Mewar traditions, the fort of Ranthambore became associated with Rana Hammir of Mewar, that he brought it under Mewar's control. Ranthambore later came under Rana Kumbha. The Ranakpur Inscription of 1439 mentions Ranthambore among the territories annexed by Kumbha.²⁵ However, Sultan Mahmud Khalji of Malwa occupied Ranthambore in 1446 during his conflict with Mewar.²⁶

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In the early sixteenth century, Ranthambore was again associated with Mewar under Rana Sanga. Sanga expanded Mewar's power during this period.²⁷ Babur's memoirs also mention Ranthambore among Sanga's possessions.²⁸ Before his death, Sanga gave Ranthambore and a large jagir to his sons Vikramaditya and Udai Singh. Their mother, Rani Karnawati, was given responsibility for the two princes.²⁹ After Sanga's death, Rana Ratan Singh confirmed Vikramaditya's possession of Ranthambore, and Karnawati stayed there with her sons.³⁰

In 1569, Akbar besieged Ranthambore. After negotiations, Rao Surjan surrendered the fort to Akbar. Ranthambore was then incorporated into the Mughal Empire, and Akbar appointed Prince Jagannath Kachchwaha to administer the fort.³¹ Ranthambore remained under the Mughal Empire until 1753. In that year, Mughal emperor Ahmad Shah granted the district of Ranthambore, along with the fort, to Sawai Madho Singh I of Jaipur as a reward for his assistance at the Mughal court.³²

Thus, from the fall of the fort in 1301 to its transfer to Jaipur in 1753, Ranthambore passed through several phases of political control involving the Delhi Sultanate, Mewar, Malwa, the Sur rulers, the Hadas and finally the Mughal Empire before becoming part of the Jaipur state.

Monuments within the Ranthambore Fort Complex:

In terms of fort architecture and the examples of remarkable and well-designed forts in India, the state of Rajasthan occupies an important place. The forts were built by following the rules and techniques of fort construction, mentioned in various ancient texts and included many defensive features like 'Kavsees' and 'Jeev Rakha'.³³ These structures helped soldiers keep an eye on the surroundings and also attack enemies through small openings in the walls.³⁴

Among the noteworthy hill fortresses of Rajasthan, the fort of Ranthambore, is a significant example of forest hill fort. It is situated on a rocky plateau, 1578 ft above sea level.³⁵ It is an important example of medieval military architecture, where the natural landscape played a major role in its defense. The fort has a combination of strong fortifications, gateways, palace structures and water bodies, which shows the skill of Rajput fort planning on a hilly terrain.³⁶

The fort complex consists of several important historical and architectural structures. Some of the major monuments are discussed below:

- **Navlakha Pol:** Navlakha Pol is the first gateway of the fort and faces east. It has an arched entrance with a width of about 3.20 meters and the gateway also has guard rooms and openings for firing weapons.³⁷ The important commander of Alauddin Khalji, Nusrat Khan is believed to have died near this gate during the first campaign of Khalji rulers against Ranthambore. A copper plate inscription on the gateway mentions that the present wooden doors were installed during the reign of Sawai Jagat Singh of Jaipur.³⁸
- **Hammir Mahal:** Hammir Mahal is a royal palace named after Hammir, one of the most powerful rulers of Ranthambore Fort. The palace can be entered from the northern side through an

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arched gateway.³⁹ The construction of the palace is generally attributed to Hammir, who ruled from 1283 to 1301 CE and at present, it is the oldest surviving structure in the fort complex.

- **Hammir's Kachahri:** Hammir's Kachahri is located in the north-western part of the fort, near the Delhi Gate.⁴⁰ This building is also believed to have been constructed during the reign of Hammir Deo.
- **Battis Khambha Chhatri:** Battis Khambha Chhatri is located near Hammir Mahal. It is a three-level structure that can be reached from the northern side through a flight of steps.⁴¹ The chhatri is believed to have been built in memory of Jaitrasimha, the father of King Hammir Deo, who is said to have ruled for 32 years. However, its architectural features suggest that the structure may have been constructed at a later period, possibly around the eighteenth-century CE.⁴²
- **Jain Mandir:** Jain Mandir is considered one of the oldest temples within the fort. The original design of the temple included an open pavilion and a shrine.⁴³ Two idols were stolen from the temple and now, a modern idol of Sambhavanatha, shown seated in the padmasana position, is enshrined in the temple.⁴⁴
- **Ganesa Mandir:** It is one of the oldest temples in the fort, where Lord Ganesa is worshipped as a Svayambhu deity carved from a rock.⁴⁵ Locally known as "Ranat Bhanvar,"⁴⁶ the temple is highly respected, and a fair is held here every year on Ganesa Chaturthi.
- **Siva Mandir:** It is an important temple within the fort. According to local beliefs, Hammir Deo offered his head to Lord Siva at this place.
- **Jogi Mahal:** Jogi Mahal is located near the edge of Padam Talav, at the foot of the fort, and now falls within the Ranthambore Tiger Reserve. It was once used as a royal hunting lodge by the Maharajas of Jaipur before the area was declared a tiger reserve.

Apart from these structures, other important monuments located within the fort are Rani Mahal, Supari Mahal, Badal Mahal, Dulha Mahal, Pachauri Mahal, Qazi Peer Sadruddin Dargah, and Raghunath Temple.

Conclusion:

Ranthambore Fort holds an important place in the history and architectural heritage of Rajasthan. Its strategic location, surrounded by hills and forests, made it a naturally strong defensive center and played an important role in the political and military conflicts of medieval India. The Chauhan rulers, especially Hammir Deo, gave the fort a significant place in the history of Rajput resistance. His conflict with Alauddin Khalji and the fall of the fort in 1301 CE remain important events in its history.

After the decline of the Chauhans, Ranthambore fort continued to pass through different phases of political control under Mewar, Malwa, and the Mughals before becoming part of the Jaipur state in the eighteenth century. The monuments within the fort, such as its gateways, palaces, chhatris and

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temples, reflect its long historical development. Ranthambore Fort is not only an important example of Rajput military architecture but also represents the changing political and cultural history of Rajasthan.

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