The fort that withstood 52 attacks

Jahangir finally conquered Kangra fort. Nature then destroyed it

I had read many times about the oldest documented fort of India and its near impregnable nature, but it was only on a recent trip to McLeod Ganj that I was able to visit it.

Located on a steep hill which accords a sweeping view, about 20 km from Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh, the Kangra fort occupies a narrow strip of land between the the Banganga and Majhi rivers. Its unique position gave it many advantages, as the vertiginous cliffs made the fort mostly inaccessible — the only way in was from the land side of the town. The Shash Fat'h-i-Kangra, which was written in the 17th century, says of the fort: “It is very lofty and stands on a very high hill. Its buildings are very beautiful. It is so old that no one can tell at what period it was built. This fort is very strong, insomuch that no king was ever able to take it. And it is unanimously declared by all persons acquainted with the history of the ancient Rajas that from the beginning up to this time, it has always remained in possession of one and the same family.”

The story behind the name

The kot (fort), which was earlier called Nagarkot or fort of the city or Kot Kangra, was ruled by a clan called the Katoch. This Rajput family traces its origins to the ancient Trigarta kingdom, mentioned in the Mahabharata. It is believed that Maharaja Susharma Chandra, who had fought for the Kauravas in the Mahabharata, built the fort after the battle.

There are very interesting stories about why the place is called Kangra. The original name, according to legend, was Kangarh (‘kan’ means ear and ‘garh’ means fort) as it is built on the ear of the demon giant Jalandhara who was slain by Lord Shiva and buried in a mass of mountains. Asoka Jerath, in Forts and Palaces of the Western Himalaya, says the demon’s body was so huge that he occupied 104 km of land. Thus, the demon’s head lies buried in the Kangra valley, his ear under the fort, his mouth at Jawalamukhi, his back under the town of Jalandhar, and his feet at Multan.

Various attacks

The much-revered idol in the fort has received rich offerings. Given Kangra’s wealth plus the belief that whoever controlled the fort controlled the hills, it was attacked 52 times, first by the Raja of Kashmir, Shreshta, in 470 A.D. Later, Mahmud of Ghazni (in 1009 A.D.) and Timur attacked it and looted it. However, all the rulers who attacked it, including Firoz Shah Tughlaq in the 14th century and Akbar in the 16th century, failed to conquer it. It was only Jahangir who was successful in 1620 after a long-drawn siege. He visited the fort in 1622 with Noor Jahan and ordered a palace to be built for him, which, however, was left incomplete.

In 1783, the Sikhs captured the fort, but in 1786, Maharaja Sansar Chand was successful in wresting it from them. Thus, once more it was in Katoch hands. In 1828, after Maharaja Sansar Chand’s death, the fort fell into the hands of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. It was annexed by the British after the Anglo-Sikh war in 1846. In 1905, the fort, which had withstood so many determined attacks by so many kings, finally lost to nature when most of its buildings were destroyed in an earthquake.

Inside the fort

As I entered the wooden Ranjit gate of the fort through a low wicket gate, the guide told me about an interesting legend. Visitors should enter with their foot, not their head, he said, for if an enemy was lurking inside, it was wiser to lose one’s foot rather than one’s head!

Written in the 18th century, the Ma’asir al-Umara describes the fort in glowing terms and says that it has 23 bastions and seven doorways. The Jahangiri darwaza has an inscription that gives details of Akbar’s son’s conquest. Once you enter the door, you climb a flight of steep stairs and reach the Darshani darwaza. This leads to the palace area of the Katoch rulers. The Darshani darwaza is flanked by two sculptures, now damaged, of Goddesses Ganga and Yamuna. It leads to a courtyard where the exquisite shrines of Lakshmi-Narayana and Ambika Devi stand. The Katoch still worship their family deity, Ambika Devi, at the temple. These are beautifully carved and one can just imagine how splendid the rest of the palace must have been before the earthquake.

Though the original Jain temple was destroyed in the earthquake, the statue of Tirthankara Adinath miraculously survived and is kept in a small room. It is a popular pilgrimage place. As I stood in the mahal area, the fort’s highest point, looking at the river below with my back to the ruins, I closed my eyes and imagined the fort’s grandeur before nature took control. I turned around and faced old, mute rocks – the only spectators to all the events of the past.