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## Bricks of glory

August 5, 2012

**Hema narayanan visits the Kumbalgarh Fort in Rajasthan and finds stories of honour, chivalry and sacrifice behind the walls that guard its legacy.**

Long and serpentine, the walls of the fort of Kumbalgarh are the second longest after the Great Wall of China. Extending for over 36 km, the walls of this fort are impenetrable.

It was a stunning surprise to realise that this is the world's second

man-made structure that can be seen from space. My first glimpse of the fortress left me wanting for more. Our guide, dressed in typical orthodox Rajasthani attire, took us to this elevated place, from where the winding fortification could be seen for kilometres. It seemed so unconquerable that I wondered how enemies would even plan a battle against this kingdom, let alone enter this massive fortress. My contemplation was spot on when our guide endorsed that Kumbalgarh Fort is one of the most inaccessible fortifications ever built by man.

Dating back to the 15th century, this fort was the creation of Maharana Rana Kumbha, the great emperor of the Mewars. The fort, in fact, derived its name from its creator, Kumbha, and is representative of the past glory of Rajput rulers. Walking inside the huge fort complex that has several palaces, impressive ramparts, temples and gardens, the panoramic view of the countryside from its turrets were magical. And it only got better as we climbed higher.

Even today, centuries later, the fort looks so impregnable. Surely, in its heyday, it must have been an enemy's envy! Touching some of the brick and mortar on the walls, it was clear that neither weather nor passage of time had eroded them. A true example of defensive architectural marvel, this fort in Rajasthan was built in 1443 AD. It snakes along 13 mountain peaks, has seven fortified gateways, with seven ramparts folded with one another, huge watchtowers and 15-foot-thick frontal walls. As if this was not enough, Rana Kumbha chose to build this fort on an unassailable hill as well, which is 1914 m above sea level. No wonder this fort, which also has the natural advantage of the surrounding Aravalli Range, is called 'The Mountain Fortress'. It's an admirable fact in the Indian history of great battles that this fort was captured only once, when Mughal Emperor Akbar had its water

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supply poisoned. Residents of the fort faced acute shortage of water and succumbed to attacks.

'Pol' was a word I stumbled upon many times in the fort — at every arch and entrance. Bagga Pol, Chaugan Pol, Ram Pol, Aaret Pol, Halla Pol, Pagda Pol, to name a few. 'Pol', in those days, meant 'gate'. Each 'pol' opened up to one part of the fort and had a particular significance associated with it. For instance, Aaret Pol had the watch tower, Halla Pol expected people to maintain silence, while at Pagda Pol, one was supposed to remove one's pagda as a mark of respect to the king, as this gate led to the king's arena.

### Palace of dreams

Not only is this fort renowned for its walls, but also for its fairytale appearance — perhaps due to the gorgeous palaces atop the hills, the palace of Rana Kumbha and the 'Palace of Clouds' (Badal Mahal). Badal Mahal is so called as the clouds are just a jump away to touch, especially during the monsoons. Marking the birthplace of Maharana Pratap, the great king of Mewars, this palace is a favourite among visitors. The Rajputani style used to build this palace is exquisite and thorough in its creation. Its rooms have a beautiful choice of colours — green, white, turquoise and blue — offering a delightful contrast to the earthy colours of the fort. Do not miss peeping out through the wooden windows for a breathtaking view of the Aravalli Range. In fact, this palace underwent a remarkable makeover when Rana Fateh Singh, who reigned in the late 19th century, rebuilt it, thus bringing in more character and grandeur to this place of royalty. Shrine of sacrifice

I would not doubt the immense belief that the Rajputs had in their gods — they had 360-odd temples built inside the fort — with 300 ancient Jain temples and the rest belonging to Hindu gods. One of the temples of Shiva I went into had a huge white Shivalinga. The pinkish-red rays of sunlight was so directional that it accentuated the features of this linga beautifully.

Every evening, at sunset, there is a 'Light & Sound' show inside the fort, where historical stories of the Mewar period are narrated. According to one, Rana Kumbha had many unsuccessful attempts at building the fort wall, which is when, a spiritual preceptor stepped in and advised that a human sacrifice would solve whatever was causing the impediment. He said that if a temple was built at the place where the head fell and the walls of the fort were built where the rest of the body lay, then, the fort wall would surely stand tall! After a long wait, a pilgrim (some say, he was a soldier) volunteered for the cause and was ritually beheaded. Magical it would seem, but, this time around, Rana Kumbha succeeded in completing the fort wall. In honour of this great sacrifice, the main gate of the fortress, Hanuman Pol, has a shrine in honour of the pilgrim.

Truly, that was a glorious era of Rajasthan, wherein the ideals, honour, sacrifice and chivalry ruled supreme.

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