

THE BUNDELA RAJPUTS

The Quest for Power and Dignity



Chhataries beside the river Betwa

The **Bundels** gave their names to dialect of **Hindi** & an entire **geo-cultural** region and left behind a legacy of **art, architecture & folklore** – and yet their living story was one of constant turbulence as they struggled to hold on to their '**Rajput**' identity.

Walking the dusty streets of **Orchha Town** in the **Tikamgarh** District of **North West Madhya Pradesh**, one is overwhelmed by the sheer scale & expanse of the architectural remnants of the past. **Temples, Palaces, Forts, Cenotaphs, Shrines & Royal Homes**, now in **semi ruin**, make their presence felt with aesthetic force.

Orchha is located on the border between **Madhya Pradesh & Uttar Pradesh**, hardly **16 Km.** away from the historic city of **Jhansi**. Set in a hollow encircled by scrub jungle, it lies along the left bank of the river **Betwa**. The area forms part of the extensive region that has been culturally & historically known as **Bundelkhand** [meaning 'the domain of the Bundela's']. In fact, **Bundeli**, a derivative of the name, is linguistically given to the dialect of Hindi spoken by people of the region which includes **eight northern districts** of Madhya Pradesh. Of course this linguistic region is far more expansive than the actual **Bundela Territories**.



A depiction of Bundela Rajputs establishing their royal

Their origins reach far back into the misty past to a place where folklore holds centre stage. It is said that **Virbhadra**, the ruler of **Kasi** [present day Varanasi] had **two wives**. The elder had **3 sons** & the younger just one – **Jagdas** [also known as **Hemkaran**]. When the king died, the sons of his elder queen refused the young prince his share of the kingdom & instead sent him into exile. As a wanderer, he traveled into the mountains of the **Vindhyas** to worship **Vindhyavasini Devi** [the Goddess who dwells in the Vindhyas]. Extreme penance brought no response from the Devi, so in desperation, the prince drew out his **sword** to behead himself. When the steel drew the first drop of blood from his **throat**, the Devi appeared & said that she was so well pleased with his courage & devotion that she blessed the sword that he carried and turned the drop of blood into a boy who she said would be destined to become the founder of a warrior people known as the '**Bundelas**' – [the givers of the drop – of blood].

There are of course, many other versions of the same story, all stressing on the fact that the Bundelas are a heroic people who were willing to sacrifice their lives for a cause. It would be useful to note here that **Vindhyavasini Devi** continued to be worshipped by all royal Bundelas as a clan Goddess.

Enhancing these folkloric claims are those that assert that the royal line of Bundelas can be traced all the way back to **Lord Vishnu**. Their origins from the stem of the divine **lotus flower** legitimately entitles them to be rulers – of **royal & spiritual** descent. This empowered them to protect, rule and guide their territories and their subjects.



Chaturbhuj Mandir

The Bundelas were a subsidiary or lesser Rajput clan of **Military employers** who gave their name to the soldiers that they employed to help the **Mughal Empire**. In fact, being both service providers and land holders gave them a strong position in the region. This position proved to be both a source of support as well as a challenge to the Mughals because as time moved on, the Bundela Rajputs began to build a subsidiary state.

Several unsuccessful attempts were made by the **Muslim** Rulers to dislodge them as middle – men from the region. However, they held fast because they were deeply entrenched in the region as landowners & had also established a '**Bundelkhandi**' ethos which had a strong **geo-cultural & linguistic** base.

It was quite early in the **13TH Century** that they developed a firm footing in the area on the borders of present day **Jhansi & Tikamgarh**. Apparently, they uprooted the **Khangar Chiefs** in **Garh Kundar** and brought together the Bundelas, **Dhanderas & Panwar** families in the area into a broader Bundela Rajput group. Even though the group was a mixed bag so to say, a concerted effort was made to popularize the nation that they had in fact all the aspects that made them both royal & special enough for them to be considered as **Rajputs**. However the Rajputs themselves did not recognize them as one of their clans & turned down all attempts at marriage alliances. It was the Mughals instead who acknowledge this identity.

Records dealing with the early life of the '**Royal bundela Rajputs**' are predominantly folkloric. Mention is made if the '**Royal Bundelas of Garkundhar**' with a listing of the 'Kings who ruled' from **1252 AD** to **1501 AD**. These included **Sohan Pal, Sahjendra, Naunak Deo, Prithvi Raj, Ram Singh, Ram Chandra, Medni Pal, Arjun Deo & Malkhan Singh**. However, recorded history starts from the time when Rudra Pratap emerged from his impregnable fort of **Kundar** & established **Orchha**, his new capital on the left bank of the **Betwa River**.



Inside Raj Mahal

This city rapidly became the epicenter of Bundela supremacy in the region & symbolically represented the quest for position, dignity and a slice of **pan-Indian power** of a scattered people who had spent their early years in the social back woods as **soldiers & ploughmen**.

Rudra Pratap, it is said, began planning the city and the fortifications of the **citadel**. However, it appears his '**Rajput**' qualities got the better of him & he was **martyred** when he single handedly rescued an unfortunate **cow** from a **ferocious tiger**. Though the cow was a saved. Rudra Pratap **died** for his **injuries**, leaving the throne of Orchha to his **Son Bharati Chand I** who continued to work on developing the capital. He is said to have complete the construction of the **fortified wall** & the main **fortifications** on a nearby island. With the exception of a new battle – encounters, history has not much to report on **Bharati Chand's** contribution. His **Brother Madhukar Shah** succeeded him & brought Bundela presence into focus with his skills in **diplomacy**, **military adroitness**, **religious actions** & **declarations, consolidation efforts & city building vision**.

The new King is reported to have been a very religious person, and along with his queen was seen by their subjects to be **pious & courageous**, following the path of **Kshatriya – dharm**. In fact it was during the reign of **Madhukar Shah** that the Mughals reinforced their approval of the Rajput legitimacy of the Bundelas. The court **Poet Kesav Das** dramatically tells his version of the story of how the King challenged **Akbar's ban** on **Hindu** sect marks and the wearing of sacred beads in his court & gained the Emperor's admiration & a share in the profits of campaigns. Numerous other accounts highlight the manner in which the King diplomatically blended **spiritual devotion** & military support to the Mughals into an ethos of 'service' that became the hallmark of his reign.

Among his contribution to the building of the **Capital, Madhukar Shah** is said to have initiated and seen to the finish the **Ram Raja Temple** & the **Phul Bagh & Palace**. Today, the **Ram Raja Temple** may be of religious significance but in **Madhukar's** time it had been designed as a Palace for the Queen & as such has a large square courtyard which is surrounded by **verandas**. The corners & centers are capped with exposed rib domes. Nearby is **Phul Bagh, "The Garden of Flowers"**. Structurally, this was inspired by the Mughal Style. A significant feature which embellished the special experience was a network of underground pipes which were used to keep alive cascading sheets of water which cooled the garden and palace. Two nearby towers '**caught wind**' & circulated it through the basements of the Palace.

With all his numerous capabilities, **Madhukar Shah** did not add up to much as the sort of ruler that the **Bundela Rajputs** really needed. His growing **indecision & ineffectualness** in State affairs drove the territories to divisions. Finally, even his balancing act with the Mughals gave way. He lost his **Son Horal Deo** in a terrible battle resisting the Mughals onslaught on **Orchha** in **1577** & finally he himself was forced to flee his Capital & died in the nearby jungles in **1592**. His second Son, **Ram Shah (1592 – 1604)** managed to occupy the throne of Orchha only after he affected a peace treaty. However, he inherited a divided kingdom with his brothers & other chieftains pulling in different directions. Finally, controls passed over to his **Brother Bir Singh Deo**.



Jahangir_Mahal

With the ascension of the new ruler, the **Bundela Rajputs** now had an aggressive presence to lead them and help consolidate their divided ranks. His initial focus on manipulating the Mughals & forgoing new alliances drove him to attempt attracting the goodwill of the rebellious young **Prince Salim (Jehangir)** by murdering **Abul Fazal**, the famous historian in Akbar's court. This infuriated the Emperor who sent an **Army** into Orchha & ousted **Bir Singh Deo**. The Bundela ruler fled into the nearby forests & remained there until **Jehangir** came to the Mughal throne & reinstalled him in **Orchha** in **1605**.

Bir Singh Deo picked up where he had left off and continued to bring back to his subjects the '**lost glory**' of the Bundelas. His friendship with the young **Mughal Emperor Jehangir** paid off and radically improved the potential of getting back the fragments that had fallen away from his dismembered Kingdom. He succeeded rapidly in acquiring immense wealth & expanded the borders of his territories.

With renewed vigor, he went about enriching Orchha, commissioning some of the most spectacular structures of his times. The forfeited structure on the island, adjoin the town were embellished by him. The Raja Mahal was further developed & a magnificent palace was built nearby especially for the Mugal Emperor & came to be known as the **Jehangir Mahal**. This was constructed for the visit of the **Monarch** from **Delhi**. According to accounts; it was used only for one night. However the structure is nevertheless an exquisite fusion of **Bundela** & **Persian** features.

Other contribution to Orchha during his reign includes the remarkable bridge that connects the fort area to the town, the stylishly improvised **Chatturbhuj Temple** & the amazing **Laxmi Narayan Temple** with its **triangular courtyards** & **diagonal entrance**. He brought to the capital his unusual stamp of originality.

But however forceful & original, he was still unable to adequately consolidate his kingdom & far flung territories. Often suspicious of his own countries & generals, he left little to individual initiative, limiting the possibility of future stability & new leadership.



Bundela rajputs preparing for war



The weak & ineffectual **Jujhar Singh (1627 – 1635)** succeeded him & came to be known, more of his impetuosity than his statesmanship. He is ironically instrumental in immortalizing his own brother. As the story goes, when Jujhar Singh returned from his prolonged **campaign** in the **Deccan**, he suspected his **Brother Hardol** of having an affair with his wife. He forced his **wife Heeta Devi** to poison his brother to prove her innocence.

During his life **Hardol** was considered to be the embodiment of compassion, bravery & the truth (all interestingly, so called **Rajput Qualities**). His charismatic public image had, during his life, drawn innumerable followers around him. When he died, they immortalized him through stories, songs & musical performances. **Gardens & Shrines** were established in his name & he quickly became the **Hero-saint** protector of women, one whose blessings fructified marriages & protected households. In fact, till today, the power & blessings of **Lala Hardol** is sought throughout the region of Bundelkhand & beyond even as far as **southern Rajasthan & Southwards** through **Bhil Tribal** lands where he also becomes the protector of **cattle, crops & households**.

Returning the fate of **Jujhar Singh** – his impetuosity drove him into open rebellion against the Mughals & they ousted him from Orchha & left him to die in the wilderness. The Kingdom was reduced to **chaos** from **1635** to **1641** until the **Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan** installed **Pahar Singh (1641 – 1653)**, one of **Bir Singh Deo's Sons**, on the throne of Orchha. Even though the King of Orchha was still regarded by the Mughals as the head of the Bundela clan, the state's powers had been radically depleted & **Pahar Singh's** position was predominantly titular. In spite of his efforts to keep alive the Bundela Rajput identity, a rapid dissolution had been set in motion. His reign was virtually without note & was followed by **Sujan Singh (1675 – 1684)** & **Bhagwat Singh (1684 – 1699)** who managed to remain in power by kowtowing to the Mughals.

When **Udait Singh (1689 – 1735)** came to the throne in Orchha, the **Marathas** had already entered the region of **Bundelkhand** & had begun to make inroads into strongholds that were once controlled by the Bundelas. His Son **Prithvi Singh (1735 – 1752)** was unable to hold on to the territories that he inherited and lost them to the invaders. All that remained within his control was Orchha. His successors **Hatey Singh (1765 – 1768)**, **Man Singh (1768 – 1775)**, **Bharti Chand II (1775 – 1776)** & **Vikramjit (1776 – 1817)** found themselves without a vestige of past significance. When **Vikramjit** shifted his capital from Orchha to **Tehri (Tikamgarh)** in **1783**, all that remained of the Bundela Rajput quest for power & dignity were the remains of their stone **edifices, poems, songs, stories, musical memories** & whirls of dust that an unforgiving wind kicked up along the **Betwa**.



Rai parveen mahal

For the descendants of Bundela Rajput Royalty & the numerous individuals & families that still remain, the '**Rajput**' issue still is a significant one, and rightly so. However, in the wider context of history, what is significant is not the battles that were fought, nor the heroes who spent their while upon the stage and then were seen and heard no more, nor the power of the Kingdom and the extent of the territories but instead the rich legacy of the written & performed **word, art, architecture & folklore** that the Bundela Rajputs left behind.

CELEBRATING THE BELOVED

Nearly **400** years ago the besotted Bundela Rajput **Inramani** built **Praveen Mahal** for the woman he loved. As a **courtesan**, she could not be part of the royal household so she was given a separate space within which she could remain who she truly wanted to be, a creative spirit in the **truest sense**, and not be **burdened** with the **paraphernalia** of royal formality. It is said that here she spent her time in the company of her **three Dasis** [female attendants] who tutored her in the arts of **poetry, singing & dancing**. If you enter her Mahal & ascend to the upper floor you will see her represented on the walls along with her three attendants preparing her for her **evening performances**.

Every evening before sunset, it is said that **Indramani** would visit her, sitting out in the shade of a nearby tree, waiting. She would emerge from the Mahal & walking on to the stone platform that jutted out from the building, perform for him – singing her new compositions. The birds, they say, would fall silent & even the wind was held transfixed by the notes that flowed from her lips. The sun, it seems, was lulled to sleep by her voice & sank into the soft cushion of green beyond the rippling **Betwa**.

When it was dark, the oil lamps were lit & the **musicians** tuned their instruments. She emerged once more; this time to dance, and Indramani watched her adoringly. Her feet beat intricate patterns on the stone as her body sinuously moved to the music. They say there was a time when storm clouds held back from raining until she had completed her performances & retired indoors with her lover.

The room for love was down below in a **basement**, cooled by air vents just above the water trough outside. The summer breeze would wash over the surface of the water & stream into the room, filling it with mist. A **pool** in the center of the room was filled with **flowers** that breathed out a soft bouquet of fragrances.

Every sunrise, she had walk with her attendant out into the **Anand Mandal Garden**, savouring the peaceful perfume flowing from flowering shrubs & delight in the grove of **fruit trees**. Among the many fruit trees that abounded there were **custard apple** & **pomegranate**. The fruits swollen on the boughs were left for birds that flocked in through the day. When the ring doves cooed it was time to move indoors & spend the day in creative preparation.

There was a time; they said when the **Mughal Emperor in Delhi** was so enamoured by her beauty & her art that he commanded her to present herself at his court in the Capital. She did...and when he wooed her with gifts & praise and asked her to remain, she replied that she was like **half-eaten food** fit only to be eaten by creatures of the **wild** & **outcasts**. Did the Emperor qualify?

Realizing he had been outwitted, he permitted her to return to Indramani her beloved.

Memory is hazy now. Some say her lover's name was not **Inramani** but **Indrajit**, others that it was this date & not that. But who cares about these needless facts...one truth is certain **Rai Praveen** existed once, her art of words & voice and movements bewitched her times...then she passed on.