

FORTRESS CHRONICLES: EUROPEAN ACCOUNTS OF GINGEE'S NAYAK ERA**S.Vaishnavi**Ph.D Research Scholar,
Department of History,
Annamalai University, Chidambaram.
vaishnavisriyapathi06@gmail.com**Dr.S.Sridhar**(On Deputation)
Research supervisor,
Assistant Professor
Arignar Anna Government Arts College, Villupuram.
sridharphd12@gmail.com**Abstract**

Gingee Fort is one such uninhibiting example of India's architectural and historical heritage, located at Villupuram region in Tamil Nadu. Constructed initially by the Cholas and fortified by the Vijayanagar Empire, the fort underwent significant enhancements during the Nayak era, as chronicled by European visitors. The accounts of Samuel Kindt and Father Nicholas Pimenta provide vivid descriptions of the fort's formidable structure, strategic layout, and cultural significance. Over the centuries, Gingee Fort endured multiple conquests, from the Marathas to the French and British, each leaving an indelible mark on its architecture and governance. However, it was during the Nayak period that the fort reached its zenith, showcasing exemplary military engineering and cultural amalgamation. This article synthesizes historical records, archaeological findings, and European narratives to present a comprehensive view of Gingee Fort's significance during the Nayak era. It explores how its architectural prowess and cultural richness mirrored the complexities of its time, solidifying its place as a pivotal icon in India's fortification history.

Keywords: Gingee Fort, Nayak Era, Vijayanagar Empire, European Accounts, Architectural Heritage

Introduction

A fort is a castle with walls and other defensive structures that has been designed to withstand attacks from enemies. Forts have always played significant roles in history, usually having strong defense mechanisms such as bastions, walls, moats and towers. Primarily they were built as protective barriers for people living within them while repelling trespassers. They also served as military camps where campaigns would be organized, soldiers would receive training and arms and supplies would be kept. Many forts had courts, offices and often acted as local government seats. Additionally, forts could offer protection for noblemen in time of sieges or serve as royal residences during sieges. Economically speaking they ensured businesses thrived by creating security through stability in markets hence boosting trade activities that took place within the area occupied by the fortresses. Symbolically they highlighted the dominance of their rulership; hence forte were used to mean strength or control of an

empire. The Gingee Fort, one of the few surviving forts in India, stands as a testament to the region's historical significance. It is situated on a hill amidst historic mountains and serves as the headquarters of the Gingee Taluk, located in Villupuram district, Tamil Nadu. Being 150 kilometers away from Chennai it is well connected by road: lies 38 kilometers north of Villupuram itself; 27 kilometers west Tindivanam; east Thiruvannamalai distance between both towns being 38 kilometers. The Shankarabarani River flows along the town's eastern border, while Singavaram Village to the west, Nellakalvai to the north, and Appamputtur to the south form its additional boundaries. Understanding the observations and records of European travelers is crucial for comprehending the history of the Gingee Nayaks, as these external perspectives complement indigenous narratives, shedding light on the fort's global interactions and the broader historical context.

Methodology

In describing and examining the European accounts of Gingee fort during the Nayak era, this article will use Descriptive and Historical Methodologies. Through this methodological framework, the article aims to offer readers a rich, detailed, and contextually grounded understanding of Gingee Fort during the Nayak era, as seen through the eyes of European observers.

Research Gap

Despite extensive research on Gingee Fort and its architectural marvels there is noticeable gap in historical accounts detailing European perspectives on the fort during the Nayak era. Most studies focus primarily on local and regional sources. They leave out rich observations by European travelers like Samuel Kindt and Father Nicholas Pimenta. Existing literature often lacks comparative analysis between local historical narratives and European accounts. Furthermore, there is a dearth of interpretation on how European travelers perceived the cultural heritage of the fort. Additionally many works rely heavily on either archaeological evidence or literary sources. This neglects the integration of diverse sources. There is also a lack of emphasis on European observations. A detailed temporal analysis of the fort's evolution is missing as well. This article aims to fill these gaps. It will synthesize various sources. It will also highlight European accounts. Ultimately, it will provide a comprehensive narrative of Gingee Fort's significance during the Nayak period.

Objectives

- ❖ To investigate Gingee Fort's architectural and strategic characteristics from reports made by European travelers.
- ❖ To study culture and society in Gingee during the era of Nayak dynasty.
- ❖ To explore in detail how Europeans viewed Gingee Fort.

History of Gingee Fort

Gingee Fort dates back to around 1190 AD when it was first built by Ananta Konar of the Konar dynasty. These years were between 1190 and 1330 AD, during which Gingee was dominantly under Konar dynasty. The fort thereafter came under one clan ancestor from Kobilingan, the land ruled by Kurumba caste and tributary state of Cholas. At the outset this site had a small fortress built by the

Cholas in ninth century AD. The castle has however transformed greatly over time since Kurumbas and later Vijayanagara Empire in thirteenth century made significant modifications to its strategic defenses against external aggression. After Vijayanagar, Nayak of Gingee laid strong foundation for a stronger fort. In 1677 Shivaji strengthened Gingee after recapturing it from Bijapur sultans. This fort played an important role in Chhatrapati Rajaram's war against Mughals that continued for a very long time hence he used it throughout his reign as his base. Consequently, the Mughals finally captured Gingee after it had withstood siege for seven years until 1698 AD. Thereafter, control of the fort shifted through various hands including the Carnatic Nawabs, the French in 1750, and eventually the British in 1761, with a brief interlude under Hyder Ali's rule. In the eighteenth century, Raja Desinghu governed Gingee, adding to its rich tapestry of historical transitions.

Architecture of Gingee Fort

Gingee Fort is located among hills: Rajagiri, Krishnagiri and Chandrayandurg. The fort covers an estimated circumference of 13 kilometers. At the top of Rajagiri, which stands at a height of 800 feet above sea level, there lies a dungeon with a wooden drawbridge across it made out of black granite and saffron colored rock. The walled citadel houses numerous structures such as seven gates, royal residences, pavilions, stables, granaries, assembly halls, mosques and shrines built in the Indo-Islamic architectural style. Notable among them are Venugopalaswami Temple; Ranganath Temple; Kalyana Mahal; Sadatulla Khan's Masjid; Mahabbat Khan's Masjid along with a big gun; ever-filled bathtubs and Kamalakanni Amman Temple on top of Rajagiri hills.

Significant Structures of Gingee Fort

One of the prominent structures within it is the Kalyana Mahal, which has an Indo-Islamic design and consists of a central tower with eight floors surrounded by compartments, as well as Venkataramana Temple that was built in 16th century by Muthialu Nayakan. The Elephant Tank, to the South of the Kalyana Mandapam, facilitates easy access to elephants by means of steps. The Granary near Rajagiri's entrance was meant for storage purposes and hence made of granite walls and had a roof shaped into an arch while explosives were kept in the Magazine, which featured a square stage and a deep pit. The Royal Palace comprised of granite rooms with arched roofs allocated for kings, queens as well as servants who lived in quarters situated below them whereby stables were kept. At once noticeable are Mohammed Khan Mosque named after Desing's adopted brother and also Watch Tower or Bell Tower made from granite; together they have bronze bells that can be heard at distance. Ranganathar Temple that stands on top a 900 feet high hill epitomizes artistic and architectural skills during Nayak period.

Draw-Bridge is another significant attribute of the Rajagiri. It now stands like a permanent structure for the visitors. Hardly far from it, Cannon with inscriptions of Tamil language and numbers has been playing crucial roles in history. In Rajgiri's lower part, there is Senjiamman Temple dedicated to Kamalakanniamman while Venugopala Swami Temple lies to the west of the granary. Notably, Mosque of Sad-ullah Khan is found right outside the entrance to the fort while Anjaneya temple houses rock sculpture within its mandapam-adorned precincts. The Prisoner's Well on the other hand is a deep reservoir where capital criminals were thrown into reminding everyone about Gingee fort's bitter past. Finally, Krishnagiri and Chamar Tikri are additional hills around Gingee and thus it has three such hills including Chakkiliya Durg (Fortified Hill).

History of Gingee Nayak

The Nayaks took over in Tamil Nadu after the Vijayanagara Empire fell. They were mostly of Telugu origin and were appointed as governors for different areas by the Vijayanagara rulers. However, with a declining central authority, they began to assert their independence gradually. One important dynasty among them was the Gingee Nayaks or Senji Nayaks. The Fort of Gingee came under their control on the decline of the Vijayanagar empire as a strategically important point where it served as their capital and stronghold. However, debates concerning its origin persist despite exhaustive studies into history and chronology of these nayakship. Their rule was extended over a large area of land that included major portions extending from Palar River on the northern side to Coleroon River in southwards. Their lordship's territory covered a vast region chiefly along the coast which helped them in consolidating their hold on it.

Gingee Fort, a significant stronghold under the Nayak rule, has long fascinated historians and travelers alike. The fort's strategic importance and architectural grandeur are well documented through the eyes of European observers who visited the region during its peak. Notable among these observers are Samuel Kindt, a Dutch representative of the Dutch East India Company, and Father Nicholas Pimenta, a Jesuit priest. Their detailed descriptions offer valuable insights into the fort's economic and strategic conditions during the Nayak period.

European Accounts on Gingee Fort

Samuel Kindt's Observations

In the early 17th century, Samuel Kindt, a Dutch representative of the East India Company, spent three weeks in the city of Gingee, marveling at the grandeur of Gingee Fort. One thing that stood out for him was the greatness of Gingee Fort. He described it as "*as big as Amsterdam if not bigger,*" which indicated its magnitudes and intimidation on the environment.

Architectural Marvels: The fortress according to Kindt had "*powerful double-strength walls of blue granite,*" which showed that it had strong defenses. Its plan was explained by him in terms of four rocky ledges, one of which was a stronghold. Three castles with numerous walls and monumental gateways made from blue granite were built on this rocks. The fourth one had an exquisite pagoda.

Strategic Layout: Fort's strategic design fascinated Kindt. Granite steps chiseled into the rock formation were the only means to reach castle summits whose height is stated as "*terrifying.*" Gingee Nayaks showed their sagacity in forming an impregnable fortress within such layout.

Outer Defenses: Apart from primary defences, there existed another fortification located at top of larger earthly elevation inside town, which controlled important passages leading to other sections. This reinforcement proved just how vital Gingee constituted in this area's defense system.

Nayaka's residence: Kindt said that the Nayaka lived in a "*strong fort by itself.*" The place had beautiful tanks and fountains in rocks from which they could get fresh water. It was all made more appealing by the neighbouring gardens with pleasure houses surrounded by guns.

Fr. Nicholas Pimenta Perspective

Pimenta visited Gingee Fort two decades earlier in 1597 during his stay at the court of Muttu Krishnappa Nayaka.

Cityscape and Structures: Father Pimenta stood amazed at Gingee, labeling it as "*the biggest city we*"

have seen so far in India” comparing it to Lisbon. In this, he described how fort had been built encircling Rajagiri at its base with many zigzag curtain walls climbing up the hill. Among these walls contained a castle-like structure defended by high walls made of stones and moat around it filled with water.

Palaces and Administrative Center: Within the confines of the fort, Pimenta noticed a number of structures including houses and palaces. These were not equally attractive but included grand palaces provided with halls, towers, galleries. On one part there is an enclosed court surrounded by arcades forming part of Nayaka’s palace which represented splendor as well as practicality through design.

Defensive Features: He again commented that the bulwarks and turrets had been constructed naturally as part of rock formation, which made the fortress almost impregnable. He spoke about some of the buildings within the fort where arms, powder and provisions were kept.

Comparative Analysis

Gingee’s Nayak majesty was well recognized in both Kindt’s account as well as Pimenta’s one with their focus on fortifications and strategic importance of Gingee Fort. Each also points out about its intricate nature, key buildings within it and presence of basic supplies like water or food. While Kindt concentrated more on Nayaka palace details and luxurious elements, Pimenta viewed the entire urban patterns encompassing economic infrastructure.

Urban Centers

Beyond its military role, Gingee Fort was transformed into a pulsating urban center during the Nayak rule. The fort complex contained several buildings such as the temple, palace for the king, granary and market place. These architecturally stunning structures represented a unique blend of Vijayanagar’s grandeur and local Dravidian influences that characterized the period of Nayak rule. They were Fascinating to travelers like Father Nicholas Pimenta, who admired Venu Gopalaswami Temple’s religious sanctity, the splendor of Kalyana Mahal and usefulness of administrative block and assembly halls. While these edifices served various functions, they also stood as embodiment of cultural patronage by Nayaks in Gingee.

Cultural and Religious Significance

Beyond its military or administrative purposes, Gingee Fort had cultural relevance that touched on both religious as well as social aspects. Pilgrims and devotees flocked to it because of temples honoring Hindu gods including Venugopalaswami or Ranganath which demonstrated religious fervor in the region. Festivals like markets, community meetings flourished within the environment created by this fortress hence providing an opportunity for people dwelling around it to live together as one family. It thus became a link between cultures when Europeans explained how it was not only multicultural but also multi religious given that it supposedly represented miniature South Indian society under Nayak patronage.

Conclusion

In the accounts of Europeans, the Gingee Fort, during Nayak rule emerges as an imposing fortress and a veritable cultural potpourri emphasizing its importance in India’s architectural and historical landscape. Samuel Kindt and Father Nicholas Pimenta were some of the European observers who described a picture of a fortress that was not only military but also an energetic city. Advanced

military foresight and architectural brilliance are shown by the fort's strategical design, impregnable defenses and sophisticated layout.

Gingee Fort culturally epitomized a blending between Vijayanagar grandeur and local Dravidian influences which resulted into religiously tolerant place. The various temples, royal houses and managerial offices within the fort complex served to underline manifest the Nayaks' sponsorship of art and culture. The establishment of these structures alongside social-religious activities in the fort made Gingee a melting pot for intercultural relationships leading to intellectual pursuits. What has therefore made Gingee Fort on account of Nayak era is that it was both a military fortress and the hub for social cultural activities. Scholars, historians, as well as tourists still find attractive among other reasons its magnificent architecture as well strategic significance even though time have passed cementing its position among few important forts which are still existing in India today. The European accounts of its grandeur and cultural richness provide invaluable insights into the fort's historical importance and enduring legacy.

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