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## Reflections on Defense Structures in South India – The Historicity of Fort of Srirangapattana through the Ages

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### Abstract

This paper analyses the historicity of Srirangapattana, an island fort city through the ages. The place was subjugated by several dynasties. It owns the perfect boundary disposition. It had a river running through the area, a strategic balance of elevation for forming a jaladurga as evinced in Kautilya's Arthashastra. It was the most planned & designed forts of India being known for its inaccessibility. It served as a military bastion. It defended the enemy marches successfully. It was built, renovated, rebuilt & restructured from time to time. But each time the fort was strengthened. The fort has a double wall defense system, which is what makes it impenetrable. The legendary Tipu Sultan's residence was inside this fort. Hence, it is also known as Tipu Sultan Fort. The changing fortunes of this island fortress found a champion in Tipu Sultan who made it one of the strongest forts in south India, and secured for it a treasured place in the history of Indo-British wars. Major Dioram of the designing British army in 1792 exclaimed this insulted metropol must have been the richest, most convenient and beautiful spot possessed in the present age by any native prince in India.

**Key words:** Fortress, Strategy, Planning, Military Safeguards, Bastion.

### Introduction:

The fort city of Srirangapattana was subjugated by

several dynasties which lead to its growth as a fortress city. It owns the perfect boundary disposition. It has a river running through the area, a



strategic balance of elevation for forming a jaladurga as evinced in Kautilya's Arthashastra. It was one of the most planned & strategically designed forts of India being known for its inaccessibility. It served as a military bastion for rulers of dynasties ranging from Hoysalas to Tipu sultan. It was operated as a frontrunner security center. It had defended the enemy marches successfully since centuries. It was built, renovated, rebuilt & restructured from time to time. But each time the fort was strengthened to defend the territorial possessions with manifest dignity. But today the fort has become a remote desolated region with people vandalling it without even knowing the invaluable historicity of the fort.

### **The Historic Background**

Srirangapattana is located in Mandya district of Karnataka state in the course of River Cauvery. The island measures approximately 5 kilometers east to west and 1.5 kilometers south to north. Near this town, river Cauvery divides into two branches called North and South Cauvery creating the central land mass as an Island. This Island is

called Srirangapattana after the presiding deity of the place Sriranganatha. A little upstream, the river Cauvery deviates to west before it creates the island and called Pashchimavahini. It is a well-known place of pilgrimage and the people of Southern Karnataka visit the place to perform the final rites of the deceased. There is a check dam in the dividing part of this river which was built by Ranadhira Kanthirava Narasaraja and excavated a channel called Bangaradoddi Nale. For a short distance it runs along the South bank and irrigates the southern part of the island right up to Sangam or Lalbagh. The fort is situated in the western part of the island. Except Dariya Daulat Bagh, Gumbaz and a few other monuments constructed after 1799 are situated outside the fort; the major monuments are within the fort area.

### **Traditional Background**

According to the Mythological tradition, the great sage Gautama lived here and worshipped Lord Sri Ranganatha Swamy. Even today, a small island to the west of the main island is called Gautama Kshetra in commemoration of this visit. The



local tradition associate this place with a natural cave where Gautama did the penance was also here. According to another tradition the principal deity of Sri Ranganatha Swamy temple of Srirangapattana was built by one Devadasi namely Hambi. This is referred in one of the works of Timmakavi, namely Pashchima Rangakshetra Mahatyamam. Hence this place has mythological legend linked with it.

### **Literary Evidences**

The history of Srirangapattana commences from the 9th Century A D as revealed in the record of a Ganga chief namely, Tirumalaiah. The record is dated 894 AD which credits the Ganga chieftain namely Tirumalaiah, founded two temples - one dedicated to Sri Ranganatha Swamy and the other to his sanctified deity Tirumala Deva, and named the place as Srirangapura which was later identified as Srirangapattana. A record of Sri Ranganatha Swamy temple states that grant was given by the Hoysala king Ballala II to the Brahmans who formed an agrahara or an educational center here called as Tiruvaranga Narayana Chaturvedi Mangala at

Srirangapattana. There are references to state that Udayaditya, the brother of Vishnuvardhana, built the town in 1120 AD.

### **Fort during Hoysalas**

The fort at Srirangapattana was built by Hoysala Udayaditya brother of Hoysala Vishnuvardhana around 1120 AD After the fall of Talakadu, it was necessary to build strong military reinforcement to stop the recapturing of this region by the Chola military forces. Hence Hoysala kings oriented towards fortification of their southern territorial boundaries & this fort was the result of such a political vision. The fort was held as a strategic strongpoint till the Hoysala rule which ended in 1346 A D.

### **Fort during Vijayanagara Empire**

After the fall of Hoysalas this region came under the sway of the ambitious Vijayanagara Empire. The literary references on the history of Mysore, states that Timmanna Hebbar ,a descendant of Nagmangala chiefs, visiting the court of Vijayanagara King Devaraya , obtained a royal order to build the fort at Srirangapattana. Then, he was



designated as Dandanayaka and ruled the region as feudatory of the Vijayanagara Empire. Later on the Vijayanagara king Krishnadevaraya attacked this fort to subdue the rebellious chiefs of Ummattur. His attack on this region concluded between 21st January 1511 and 3rd November 1511. He also appointed a governor at Srirangapattana province. After the attack it became the seat of the Viceroy of Vijayanagara kingdom. From then on, the fort was ruled by the viceroys of Vijayanagara kingdom up to 1610 CE, when Raja Wodeyar took over its possession.

#### **Fort during Nagamangala Chiefs**

The descendants of the Hebbar family of Nagamangala seems to have continued to rule the region until the Ummattur chiefs rose to power and annexed it to their territory.

#### **Fort during Ummattur Chiefs**

The Srirangapattana city along with its adjacent region was captured by the chiefs of Ummattur and they further strengthened the fortresses. During the reign of Immadi Raya of Ummattur his sons divided their ancestral estate. The

elder kept the family seat Ummattur with independent territory and the younger was ruling from Srirangapattana and its neighborhood. Srirangapattana was attacked by Salva Narasimha Nayaka (1485-1503 A.D.) the king of Vijayanagara who defeated the Ummattur chiefs and subjugated the Srirangapattana fort.

#### **Fort during Wodeyar Kings**

In 1610 AD when Thirumala Raya, was the viceroy at Srirangapattana, the ruler of Mysore, Raja Wodeyar, invaded the fort and captured it. Some sources say that the capture of Srirangapattana by Raja Wodeyar was without military action. According to some reliable sources Raja Wodeyar had an official royal order Rajanirupa to occupy the vice regal seat at Srirangapattana. In 1610 CE Raja Wodeyar started his rule as a subordinate king of the Vijayanagara kingdom. An inscription of Raja Wodeyar states this fact. Since then, Srirangapattana continued as the capital of Mysore & the fort remained as prized possessions of the Wodeyar kings until Hyderali seized the throne from Wodeyars. Between 1610 and 1799



CE, Srirangapattana was busy with political activities, especially during the period of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan, i.e., between 1761 and 1799 CE, it was the centre of South Indian political activity. Then early ruler of the Wodeyar family and in 1654 CE, Kanthirava Narasaraja had strengthened the fort and made provisions within the fort to store the fundamental items for the public and stationed an army for political emergency.

#### **The Fort under Tipu Sultan**

Tipu Sultan being very ambitious in his fight against the mighty British East India Company turned his attention to the strategic defense of the country. He renovated the fort and constructed gateways with the help of French engineers.

#### **The Fort**

Srirangapattana fort was probably a mud fort at the beginning which was later turned to inaccessible water forts with the escalation in political activity in this region. The region Srirangapattana could house this fort because the region was well-protected by the river Cauvery on all sides. The fort is now confined to the

Western part of the island and it has an area of about 5 square kms. Since, it is surrounded by the river Cauvery the fort may be classified under Jaladurga class of forts. There are square or rectangular or oblong bastions, guarded by batteries. Each bastion is named after important persons, e.g., the bastion above the dungeon was called Sultan Bateri and a bastion in the South-East corner of the fort, is called Kaalegaudana Bateri. In the absence of epigraphical evidences, it is very difficult to identify the names of other bastions.

#### **The Fort Walls**

The fort walls of Srirangapattana are built robustly. The first and second enclosure walls from the outer side were protected by tight stone casing. These walls are very thick which is measured in meters. The third or innermost wall is designed differently like a right angle triangle. The outer face is protected by stone wall and in the inside mud ramping is done. It has a considerable slope to move loaded cannons to the top. At the top of the inside fort wall there is a 2 to 3 m. wide platform made of natural pebbles and lime mortar and a



parapet wall with provision to employ cannons and long rifles. These portions of the fort walls were built of brick and lime mortar.

### **Defense Features**

The fort of Srirangapattana exhibits the best defense features like fort design, bastions and fortification method. It is very interesting to note that the fort has three man-made moats in the southern and eastern directions, whereas in the North and West, it has only two man-made and one natural moat. In other words the river Cauvery functions as the third moat in the North and West. The first fortification in the North and West was erected just on the bank of river Cauvery, and damaged due to floods and human defacement. The fort was one of the unconquerable forts of India. It was considered as the second strongest fort in India.

### **Fort Gateways**

The fort has six gateways and among them two gates are very important, namely Aneya Bagilu or Anekote Bagilu which means Elephant Gate. It is situated in the Southern walls of the fort and the Bangalore or Ganjam Gate is situated

in the Eastern enclosure walls of the fort. The relevance as well as a brief reference to Gateways is emphasized. The Mysore Gate or Elephant Gate- It is known as Anekote Bagilu in the local tongue. It was constructed in 1791 CE, by Tipu Sultan to enter the city on the back of elephant, sitting in the howdah. Actually the entrance had three Gates, each one in three enclosure walls. All the three gates had proper links to pass through. These gates were made of stone, brick and lime mortar. They measure 5.50 m in height, 3.75 m in width and 14.75 m. in length. The gateway in the central fort wall which was badly damaged was repaired in the recent past by the then Government, providing small key- stone arches.

The Bangalore Gate- The Bangalore Gate, formerly known as Ganjam Gate, is also designated as the Elephant Gate. All the three fort walls have a gate, with a considerable height to pass through, sitting on the back of an elephant in a howdah. It is built of stone, brick and lime mortar. Now it is used as the main entrance to the town.



## Dungeons

Apart from the Gates, the fort wall is also known for the creation of dungeon in those days to keep the most wanted war captives. In the Northern and North-eastern side of the fort wall, there are dungeons named after Col. Bailey and Inman respectively.

### Colonel Bailey's Dungeon

On the Northern side of the Srirangapattana temple, in the fort wall, there is an oblong bastion in which heavy battery was kept and it is called Sultan Bateri. Below the bastion, there is a dungeon which is not visible to any passerby. It measures about 30 meters in length and 12 meters in width. It is designed with vaulted roof and constructed using brick and lime mortar. In the Eastern, Northern and Western walls there are fixed stone slabs with holes, to which the chains of the prisoners were tied. Several English war prisoners like Col. Bailey, Captain Baird, Col. Braithwaite, Sampson, Frazer, Lindsay and Captain Rulay were imprisoned by Tipu Sultan. Since Col. Bailey died on 13th November 1782 in the dungeon after

a prolonged illness, it is named after him.

Like this the city of Srirangapattana developed as a small township outside the fort. Economy of the East India Company, non-availability of trained engineers and use of local materials and artisans resulted in the simple design and construction initially. The vulnerability of the earlier construction, hostilities with the French and the growing might of the Company resulted in stronger and more complex designs for the second round of construction which made it an impenetrable fort in India.

### Conclusion

The kings who ruled this region emphatically comprehended the strategic utility of this fort & showed interest in strengthening it. Though, the fortification of Srirangapattana started at the time of the Hoysalas it gained military prominence at the time of the Vijayanagara Empire. Later dynasties furthering its voluminous strategic boundary line amplified its inner precincts as a bastion & made it inaccessible. The escalation of military activities in this



region after Ummattur chiefs declined to hold this region, was a turning point in the history of this fort city & later on fort became a strategic stipulation. Several forts were built in south India but this fort stands exclusive because the fort records unsurpassed historicity. It surpasses all other forts of this stature.

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