

Hyderabad's tales of love and war

Hyderabad, January 20: Centuries of war, peace and love stories, of a single dynasty that once ruled Hyderabad, lies to rest in a necropolis - the Quli Qutub Shahi Tombs.

The road to the Quli Qutub Shahi Tombs is a road to ruins, silence and forgotten history. Yet there are enough stories etched on the decaying stones to remind you of its former glory. The lives of the mighty kings of the Qutub Shahi Dynasty were full of romance and mystique.

In Arabian Night-esque episodes, these kings laughed, lived, waged wars and loved like no other. But when Aurangzeb defeated Abul Hasan Qutub Shah, the eighth and last ruler of the Qutub Shahi dynasty of Golconda, the old kingdom fell. And as a memento lies this necropolis that houses the tombs of all the Qutub Shahi kings (except Abul Hasan's, who was a prisoner in the fortress of Daulatabad, near Aurangabad, when he died) who ruled Golconda for 170-odd years.

Life at the catacombs

When you visit the tombs complex, which houses around 30 tombs of not just the rulers, but also eminent courtiers, courtesans and saints, you can feel a sense of nostalgia in the air. Centuries of war and life come to eternal rest under the beautiful tombs, surrounded by the landscaped gardens of Ibrahim Bagh.

A blend of Persian, Pathan and Hindu styles, the seven tombs together form a picturesque sight. According to "A guide to Golconda Fort and Tombs" by Sha Rocco, some of the tombs, mostly made with grey granite, embellished with stucco and encaustic glaze, cost `150,000! Originally there was a mosque to each tomb, which provided a free meal a day to the needy.

French traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier in his book, "Travels in India" says food was distributed at the tombs every evening at 4 pm. "When you wish to see something really beautiful, you should go to these tombs on the day of a festival, for then from morning to evening, they are covered with rich carpets," he wrote. The tomb-garden was also known as Lagar-e-Faiz Athar (a place for bountiful entertainment) - songs, dances and even an occasional play was staged here free of cost.

Resting in peace

You can't help but sigh at the haunting beauty of the tombs. In fact, legend has it that the tombs offered so much solace to anyone who laid eyes on it that wandering princes and travellers of the "Thousand and One Nights" often took rest in these tombs. The burial place of the seventh king, Abdulla Qutub Shah, has seven arches on each side of the corridor.

Sultan Muhammad Quli Qutub Shah's mausoleum is the grandest of the tombs with entrances on the Southern and Eastern sides. Opposite lies a mortuary bath, where the ritual bathing of the bodies of the kings and royal members took place, before they were laid to rest. The twin-tombs of Premamati and Taramati, favourite courtesans of Sultan Abdullah Shah are among the few Qutub Shahi tombs that are not of royalty. Another twin pair is that of two favourite hakims of Sultan Abdullah-Nizamuddin. Each king took care to build his own tomb in his lifetime. But only the last Qutub Shah, Abul Hasan could not finish his

since he was taken into Aurangzeb's captivity and died at Aurangabad.

Woman power

According to Sha Rocco's account, Hayat Baksh Begum, the daughter of a king (Mahomed Quli Qutub Shah, 5th king), the wife of a king (Muhammad Qutub Shah, 6th king), and the mother of a king (Abdullah Qutub Shah, 7th king) rests under a monument, which is equal in size and grandeur to the tombs of the kings. Popularly known as the great masjid of the Golkonda tombs, it was built in 1666 A.D. Fifteen cupolas decorate the roof and the prayer-hall is flanked by two lofty minarets. The inscriptions in the masjid are master-pieces of calligraphic art - all these honors rare for a woman. But then, historians say she was no ordinary woman.

Word has it

The tomb of the sixth king, Mohammed Qutub Shah houses six other graves of his sons and daughters inside. This is the tomb said described by French traveller, Jean de Thevenot during his visit to Golconda. The floor was said to have been covered with a costly carpets, chandeliers, velvet canopies and on the tomb was a rich satin pall trailing on the ground. The interior was lighted by many lamps. All the king's books were inside, placed on folding seats. The whole of the dome was enamelled green and was surmounted by a large crescent pinnacle. This was a symbol of royalty to distinguish the tombs of kings from those of princes and retainers.

The tomb of Ibrahim Qutub Shah, fourth king, is the only one that retains traces of the coloured enamels that once adorned these monuments. Near his tomb is also the grave of his commander-in-chief, has an inscription that the revenues of the village of Mangalwaram near Golconda have been assigned to maintain lights at the grave and provide support for the attendants and reciters of the Koran.

A thug at the tombs

Philip Meadows Taylor, an Anglo-Indian administrator and novelist, who worked in the service of the Nizam of Hyderabad, wrote a novel, "Confessions of a Thug", who based the story on a real thug called Syeed Ameer Ali (or Feringhea), whom he was acquainted with. The protagonist, Ameer Ali plans to elope with his lady love Amina and the two plan a meeting at a dargah (The dargah of Hussain Shah Wali, the Sufi Saint, who built the Hussain Sagar) in the tomb garden.

While he waits for Amina, he observes the tombs - "...the whole of the large tombs were seen at a glance - each by itself a noble and striking object; but rendered still more so when grouped with others of smaller size, whose contrast increased their massiveness. Not a creature was to be seen; the old fort itself, its grey mouldering walls covering the face of a huge pile of rocks, seemed tenantless, and was in unison with the abodes of the illustrious dead who had built it. The silence and desolation were oppressive, and we scarcely made a remark to each other, as we traversed one by one the interiors of the noble edifices,- some of them dark and gloomy and filled with bats and wild pigeons, whose cooing re-echoed within the lofty domes - and others whose wide arches admitted the light of day, and were more cheerful in appearance..." Today, we can still see what Ameer Ali saw as he waited for his lover - silent reminders of a proud and majestic dynasty.

By: Priya Ramachandran

priya.ramachandran@timesgroup.com ^[1]

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[1] <mailto:priya.ramachandran@timesgroup.com>