

Monsoon mystique

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Aa laut ke aaja mere meet, tujhe mere geet bulate hain...this soulful song from the hit Hindi movie of the 1950s, Rani Roopmati, reverberates in the rain-heavy air of Mandu.



Local balladeers walk around the ruins of this city singing of the love of the Muslim ruler, Baz

Bahadur, for his Hindu queen, Roopmati. Monsoon brings memories of Mandu — the ancient City of Joy where Mughal emperors including Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan retreated during the rains to enjoy its scenic beauty. In the words of Emperor Jehangir, “I know of no place so pleasant in climate and so pretty in scenery as Mandu during the rains.” This fort city is touched by magic and its ruins seem to come alive during the rains. At an altitude of 2,000 feet, Mandu receives heavy rainfall and displays the glory of a long-lost world in a lush green landscape dotted with ruins silhouetted against the canopy of floating clouds. The overcast skies, the foliage heavy with raindrops, and the glassy lakes and ponds that mirror the majestic monuments elude an irresistible charm.

Situated at such an altitude, with ravines on three sides, Mandu offered impregnable natural defences besides unparalleled scenic beauty to become a coveted possession of emperors and generals. It moved from the hands of the Parmaras, to the Ghauris and the Mughals to finally rest with the Marathas of Dhar.

Archaeological evidence suggests that Mandu was first fortified around the sixth century AD but it was in the 10th century when Raja Bhoj, the most prominent of the Parmara rulers and the founder of Bhopal, moved his capital from Ujjain to Dhar, 35 km from Mandu, that it gained prominence.

In 1305, it was conquered by Alauddin Khilji of the Delhi Sultanate who appointed Dilawar Khan Ghauri as the governor to rule Malwa. Dilawar Khan Ghauri declared his independence in 1401. Hoshang Shah, son of Dilawar Khan, was the most eminent ruler of Mandu. He ruled Mandu for almost three decades (1405-1435) and built some of the finest monuments that stand today. Mandu remained with the Sultans of Malwa till 1469 who renamed it ‘Shadiabad’, the City of Joy, and built palaces, mosques, gardens and lakes within its walls. Sultan Mohammed Khilji, who ruled Mandu between 1436 and 1469, is said to have had a harem of 10,000 women housed there.

After the fall of the Malwa Sultanate, Daulat Khan ruled Mandu as Sultan Baz Bahadur from 1555-1561. In 1562, Mughal Emperor Akbar captured Malwa and Mandu became a pleasure resort. When the Marathas assumed power in 1732, they shifted the capital of Malwa back to Dhar and Mandu was abandoned.

Legend has it that Baz Bahadur, the last independent ruler of Mandu, was so besotted by Roopmati, a shepherdess with a mellifluous voice and unparalleled beauty that he wanted to marry her. But Roopmati was reluctant to leave her home close to the holy River Narmada. So, Baz Bahadur had a reservoir built with a water lift that supplied water from the Narmada to it. This, the Rewa (another name for River Narmada) Kund, can still be seen at Roopmati Pavilion. Set at a vantage point, the Roopmati Pavilion commands an expansive view of the Narmada valley hundreds of miles away. The Narmada can be seen meandering through the plains like a streak of silver. The Pavilion also proffers a view of Baz Bahadur's palace.

Like all legendary love stories, this one too ended in tragedy. It is believed that when the account of Roopmati's beauty reached Mughal Emperor Akbar, he invaded Mandu. Baz Bahadur fled to Chittorgarh to seek help while Roopmati in true Rajput tradition, consumed poison to save her honour.

A beautiful blend of the Indo-Islamic architectural style, the ruins offer a peek into the past grandeur of Mandu. Most of the structures that survive today were built between 1401 and 1531. Mosques, madrasas and pleasure palaces dot the entire city enclosed within a 35 km wall. It has 12 gateways. The Dilli Darwaza, the main entrance to the city, was built by Hoshang Shah. The monuments are grouped into three according to their locations.

The Royal Enclave: Two of the most admired structures here are the Jahaz Mahal and the Hindola Mahal. The Jahaz Mahal (ship palace), constructed by Ghiyath Shah, is 120-metre-long and is built between two artificial lakes. This four-domed structure is the most recognised monument of Mandu. The double-storeyed palace has open pavilions, balconies and terraces overlooking the lakes. Walking through it, one cannot help being drawn into the dream of the opulent pleasure resort it once was. The Hindola Mahal (swing palace) is called so due to its sloping walls that appear as if swaying in the wind. Dilawar Khan's Mosque, Taveli Mahal, the three baolis (step wells) — Champa, Ujali, and Andheri — are few of the hundreds of structures strewn around the city.

Cool subterranean rooms and wide-arched corridors provided respite from the summer heat. But the most striking architectural feature is that of the ingenious bath pools and baolis. The painstaking detail of the drains running hot and cold water to the bath pools is amazing.

The Central Monuments: These are a set of well-preserved monuments in the centre of the city. The majestic Jami Masjid in pink sandstone is believed to be modelled after the Omayyad Mosque or the Great Mosque in Damascus. Hoshang Shah's tomb in white marble with its ornamental facade and fine latticed jharokhas is said to have been studied

by Shah Jahan's architects before they built the Taj Mahal. The imposing Ashrafi Mahal (palace of gold coins) opposite the Jami Masjid with a marble mausoleum used to be a madrasa.

The Rewa Kund Complex: This group of monuments to the south include the Rewa Kund, the stoned-lined reservoir; the Roopmati Pavilion with its magnificent views; and the imposing structure of Baz Bahadur's Palace.

The culture of Malwa is influenced by Gujarati and Rajasthani culture because of their geographic proximity. The Maratha rule has also left its influence. This is evident in the local cuisine. When in Mandu, do not miss a taste of the local speciality — baati or bafla — with dal; imli-ni-kadhi, a sour kadhi made from the fruit of the Baobab tree; and mawa baati, a large, gooey gulab jamoon stuffed with dry fruit.

Leaving Mandu is not easy, a wistful longing, a sense of loss, tugs at the heartstrings and lines of the same song from Rani Roopmati emerge more meaningful and poignant — Ek pal hai milna, ek pal bichadna, duniya hai do din ka mela...