

### Where a Tamil Ballad immortalised a Rajput hero

Pages from India's history abound in astoundingly unexpected twists, unthinkable associations and in narratives of affinity and adulation that can transcend seemingly unbridgeable cultural divides. Quite interestingly these true life tales from the past are capable of inspiring even the present in strange ways. One such tale of hero worship is enshrined in the Tamil ballad of Desingu Raja which eulogises the heroism and martyrdom of a young Rajput king within the ramparts of the famous Gingee fort in October 1714. In fact Desingu Raja's name and Gingee have become synonymous. Desingu was perhaps how the Tamil tongue could call Tej Singh, for that was his name. The saga sings praise of the resolve and dedication of his young wife who gives up her life on hearing the news of her hero's death. If the Ballad glorified the devotion of a wife it also celebrated the loyalty of a friend who died fighting by the young king's side. Mohabat Khan was Raja Tej Singh's boyhood buddy and bosom friend who gladly embraces death for the sake of his undying friendship. Like in all such renderings on heroes, valour, loyalty, courage and death are described in their superlatives for it usually deeply moved the singers and listeners of this ballad. Thus the ballad of Raja Desingu came to occupy a fond and special place of significance in the vast body of Tamil Folk literature. This ballad is of course based on true life happenings and has a singular historic significance.

During the ascendancy of Vijayanagara rule in Tamil Nadu there came into existence a system of administrative units that were governed with reasonable autonomy under the overlordship of the reigning Vijayanagara emperors. These were ruled by Nayaka chiefs. There were three of them. The Nayakas of Madura, the Nayakas of Tanjore and the Nayakas of Gingee. By 1611 we have records from European Jesuits who talk of these three Nayaka dominions. The years that followed were tumultuous with the South Indian Sultanates, Marathas, Mughals and European armies fighting with one another and vying for power and influence in the region. After a period of occupation by Golconda and Bijapur forces following the ouster of the Nayakas, Gingee fort fell into the hands of the Marathas by 1677. Shivaji wrested it from Bijapur control and Gingee became a great strategic and symbolic spot for Marathas. After the capture and execution of Shivaji's son Sambhaji by Aurangzeb, Sambhaji's half brother Raja Ram moved to Gingee. And under Raja Ram it came to be hailed as the headquarters of Maratha state, by about 1690. The Mughals were continuing their relentless pursuit of the Marathas. Following a prolonged siege, treachery and intrigue that lasted nearly seven years Gingee finally fell into Mughal hands in Feb 1698, though Raja Ram mysteriously escaped.

Now begins the strange twist that led to a train of events that would bring the hero in our Ballad to Gingee. After the ouster of the Marathas, Aurangzeb seems to have vetted with a Rajput chieftan from Bundela, named Swaroop Singh, the rank of a *Mansab*, a *jaghir* and the *killedari* of Gingee as reward for his loyal services. Thus a Rajput came to assume charge of the historic fort of Gingee. With Aurangzeb's *farman* in hand he arrived in Gingee and reported to Aurangzeb's general Zulfiqar Khan to take over the fort in 1700. Swaroop Singh seems to have exhibited a combination of sagacity and guts. He conducted parleys with the British confronting them fearlessly. He imprisoned two English officers of the Fort St David Garrison near Cuddalore until a peace deal was brokered between him and the British by the French Governor of Pondicherry M Herbert around 1711. When Aurangzeb died, taking advantage of the confusion in Delhi and the hassled status of Emperor Bahadur Shah, Swaroop Singh failed to remit his dues. By now it was running to Rs 70 lakhs or so and Sadathullah Khan as Nawab of Carnatic and representative of the Mughal throne threatened action

against Swaroop singh. Sorrow stricken and with debts unpaid, Swaroop singh died around the end of 1713.

And now our hero Tej Singh is said to have left Bundelkhand with his newlywed wife a few attendants and horses and reached Gingee, according to Narayana Pillai's chronicle. Narayana Pillai is believed to have lived near Gingee at the time of Swaroop singh's death. But according to historian CS Srinivasachari, Tej Singh may have arrived from Bednur (near Mangalore) where he was aiding its troubled Raja in his campaigns. The legendary horse of Raja Desingh may have been a gift from the Raja of Bednur. Upon reaching Gingee, Desingh performed the obsequies of his father and took up the Governance of Gingee. With his father's debt still unsettled, Nawab Sadathullah Khan was not pleased and insisted that a new *farman* was needed from the reigning emperor for Desingh to be in possession of Gingee. Desingh categorically dismissed such suggestions and claimed the *farman* of Alamgir (Aurangzeb) gives all the legitimacy needed. Thus the stage was set for the confrontation from the start of his brief 10 month rule. When the Mughal and Nawab's officials started pressing for the tribute in arrears, the hot headed Desingh is said to have shown scant respect by flinging the official parchment to the ground. From now on the man and the legend mingle with one another. Sadathullah Khan decided to punish the recalcitrant Raja. The Nawab amassed nearly 80,000 horsemen and 10,000 foot soldiers and Desingh's army had a cavalry of mere 350 and another 500 troopers. Doomed from the beginning Desingh bid adieu to his wife and rode to his death on his wonder steed. Mohabat Khan, his childhood friend, rushed to be by his side in this hopeless battle. The Heroism of Raja Desingu from then on becomes the stuff of the legends. The 22 year old fought with a rare gallantry that moved his friends and foes alike. Desingu, Mohabat Khan and the great horse all died in the battle. Desingh's wife too gave up her life as a proud Rajput wife would, to follow her fallen king. They may have all perished in a battle but came to live forever in the hearts of the Tamil people as their own very folk. The ballad composed in his honour were sung all over Tamil Nadu and even found its way through dramas to the movies, twice. Once 1936 and in 1960 again, the latter had the late MG Ramachandran starring in the lead.

So moved was even Sadathullah Khan that he is supposed to have named present day Ranipet in honour of the queen of Desingh.