

Garhwal Himalayas –The State Of Garhs (Forts)

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Abstract

This paper talks about the establishment of 52 garhs by the Katyuri ruler Narsingh Dev (1050 to 1100 AD). He divided his state Garhwal (Kedarbhoomi) into 52 parts because of the problems like those of transportation in this mountainous region. So that the internal administration of his state was efficient. And for the security of these 52 parts he appointed 52 warriors and established garhs (forts) in each part. Later when the Katyuri rule became weak then external attackers started ruling in Garhwal. But they could not rule for a long time. As a result, due to lack of a central rule, the leaders of the garhs became independent. But later in the 15th century A.D Ajay Pal won and united these garhs into a single kingdom.

Introduction

According to the Kedarkhand part of Skandpuran the present –day Garhwal in Uttarakhand state was called Kedarkhand then. Its boundaries have been defined from Nanda Hill to Kaashtgiri or from Boddhachal in the east to Tamsa (Tons) river in the west and Gangadwar in the south to Shwet Hill in the north. At present the area is divided into 6 districts which are Pauri Garhwal, Tehri Garhwal, Uttarkashi, Dehradun, Chamoli and Rudraprayag. Before the 15th century A.D this area was divided into 52 garhs. This paper provides evidences and information about these garhs.

The Katyuri ruler, Narsingh Dev (1050 to 1100 AD) divided his state Kedarbhumi (Garhwal) into 52 garh(fort)s for administrative purposes because of the difficulties of mountainous region. He appointed 52 powerful men in these garhs. He also created sub-garhs in these. In 1191 AD the Nepalese conqueror Ashok Chall conquered the Katyuri state and ruled here till 1209 AD. One decade after this in 1223 AD another Nepalese conqueror Krachall Dev defeated the Katyuri rulers and established his right over Garhwal and Kumaon¹ (presently Uttarakhand state). Like the Katyuri rulers and his predecessor Ashok Chall, he also stated ruling here through his feuds (samants), commissioners (maandliks) or garhpatis. But he could not rule for a long time. As a result, due to weaknesses in a central rule, these

garhpatis became independent and Kedarbhoomi got divided into small thakurayis by the mid of the 13th century AD. So in this way, before the Panwar ruler Ajay Pal (1500 to 1529 AD), entire Kedarbhoomi was divided into small thakurayis. The rulers of these thakurayis were always fighting with each other. The Panwar ruler Ajay Pal conquered all the thakurayis between 1500 to 1525 AD and united these to establish a single state which he named Garhwal due to the unification of so many garhs(fort)s. At present this region is a commission ary (mandal) of Uttarakhand state and it includes the districts Pauri Garhwal, Tehri Garhwal, Uttarkashi, Dehradun, Chamoli and Rudra-Prayag.

In the 15th century AD, Ajay Pal conquered the following 52² or 64³ garhs and included them in his state -

1. Garhpatis of Northern Frontier (Tangad Pradesh) –

Present –day Taknaur, Penkhanda and Dashauli parganas were under them. Their names were Garhtang, Penkhanda, khaad and Dashauli. The garhpatis of Tangad Pradesh were called sugad or Budhere. Their rule was probably like the rule of tribes. The decisions on political, social and economic problems were taken according to the will of the elderly of the ruling family. The garhpatis and locals of this place considered themselves as different and superior to other Garhwalis⁴. Those garhpatis of Tangad Pradesh who

were powerful used to do loot and dacoity of the garhpatis southern to them in winters⁵.

2. Garhpatis of Mandakini Valley –

Present-day Nagpur came under them. Here there were 2 garhs, namely, Nagpur and Kandara. These places were excellent for their natural beauty, health and fertility of soil. Under the stable rule of the Mandakini Valley rulers, there was peace and a good organization. Many temples were built here by them. It is said that the last garhpati of Nagpur garh was Sajan Singh⁶ and the Kandara garh was established in the later half of the 13th century of Vikrama era.

3. Garhpatis of the eastern Frontier –

Present –day Badhand, Chandpur and Malla Saland came under them. Here there were 11 garh(fort)s. These were called Badhand, Chandpur, Chaur, Tope, Ranigarh, Lohwa, Dhauna, Bangarh, Kanda, Gujdu and Saawli. In the Kumaon region situated next to this place there were Bajinath, Katyur, Dwarhaat and Baramandal thakurayis then. The garhpatis of these place in the eastern frontier were always fighting with each other. In the 16th century of the Vikrama era when the Chand rulers of Champawat won the thakurayis of Kumaon they also tried repeatedly to conquer the eastern frontier of Garh State. So the people of this place faced a lot of difficulties. Among the garhpatis of Lohwagarh Dilewar Singh and Pramod Singh have been called great leaders⁷. Amongst all the garhpatis of the state – Chaundal of Chaurgarh, Topal of Topegarh and Chahman of Chandpur garh have been known to be powerful.

4. Garhpatis of the eastern plateau (pathaar)–

Present –day Dewalgarh, Barhasyun and Chandkot came under them. Here there were 9 garh(fort)s. Their names were – Ulka, Aedasu, Dewal, Nayal, Kolli, Dhauna, Ban, Kaandaa and Chaundkot.

We do not have any information about any of them except Dewal garh. The powerful rulers of Chaur, Tope or Chandpur garhs had quite early established their right over a large part of this area and subjugated the garhpatis of this place. According to Legends, a ruler of Kangra named Dewal had established the Dewalgarh garh(fort)⁸. After getting defeated by Kumaon ruler, Ajay Pal had to leave the Chandpur garh(fort). He established his capital first in Dewalgarh and then in Srinagar. The rule of the garhpatis of the eastern plateau was relatively more stable. So they got a chance to do progress and good governance.

5. The garhpatis of the western plateau –

Present –day Udaipur, Kirtinagar, Chandrabadni and Bhilang came under them. Here there were 6 garhs(forts). These were named - Upu, Maulya, Rainka, Bangar, Bhardar and Sangela. The western plateau part was covered by forests. According to legends, the Ghirwar Khasis ruled over Bagargarh. Some Naagvanshi ruler had made this his capital⁹. The famous Kafu Chauhan ruled over Upu garh whom Ajay Pal had defeated¹⁰. According to legends, before the rule of the Panwar kings over Bhilang Valley, Sompal ruled here.

6. The garhpatis of western frontier –

Present –day Jaunpur, Rawai, Mahasu and Shimla parganas came under them. Here there were 8 garhs. These were called – Jor, Biralta, Silgarh, Mungra, Sankri, Badkot, Dodrakanwaara and Rami. There is now no information about Jaunpur Ranwai areas located near Himachal Pradesh.

7. Garhpatis of the southern frontier –

Present –day Tallaslaand, Gaya Saland, Bhabar, Narendranagar and Dehradun came under them. Here there were 24 Garhs. They were called- Mahab, Bagh, Ajmer, Shri Guru, Mawakot, Garhkot, Bhairav, Ghughuti, Dhangu, Baadalpur,

Laldhaang, Chandi, Saantor, Kola, Sher, Naror, Nala, Virbhadra, Mordwaj, Pathergarh, Kujdi, Ratan, Kuili and Bharpur. The sufficiency of garh(fort)s in southern frontier proves that the attackers attacked the southern part of Garh State through Saharanpur and Ruhelkhand again and again. That is why these people needed strong garh(fort)s on the southern frontier for the protection. We get information about the above mentioned garh(fort)s from the writings of Muslim historians also. In these writings Suntorgarh¹¹, Kolagarh¹², Shergarh¹³, Kanigarh¹⁴, Nanoragarh¹⁵ and Laldhaang¹⁶ are mainly mentioned. We cannot say that every garh(fort) of the southern frontier had an independent garhpati only on the basis of the long list. It is more probable that every garhpati established more than one garh (fort) in his state.

The information or proof we have of the above described 6 garh(fort)s is limited because very little remains of them are left. Due to external attacks (mainly Gorkha attack of 1803), these garh(fort)s and the related records were destroyed. Not only this, whatever little remains were left were also destroyed due to lack of maintenance. Apart from this, literature also does not give us much information about them. So whatever information we have comes from the study of ruins of these garh(fort)s or legends.

The word garh symbolizes those mountainous garh(fort)s which are found in abundance in the rocks of mountains. The lords of thakurayis established garhs (durgs) at important places from the point of view of overall security and governance and kept war equipment and their families in these. They were constructed with stones and bricks at high mountains where it was hard to go or see them. The garh(fort) were made the thakurayi headquarters and the villages in nearby valleys and those on the slopes of mountains were ruled upon. All the routes to the garh(fort) were sealed except one. A sharp eye was kept on the people going on this route. In this way all precautions were taken for the

protection of these garh(fort)s. The garh(fort) was covered with high walls. To go inside were stairs of stones. These mountainous garh(fort)s were not very huge but made very skillfully. Deep valleys were cut on three sides of the garh(fort)s. Checkposts were built on all four sides of the garh(fort)s for surveillance. Big stones were collected in these garh(fort)s and used against enemies in wars. The garh(fort)s were divided in two parts – in one part temples were there and in second part were situated residence of king, queen, council of ministers, storehouse and seat of throne, etc. The queens were not allowed to come out of their residences (Raniwaas). The Palace was a beautiful, huge single or multi-storeyed building on whose walls were beautiful designs. In this way the Palace was decorated in various ways and was graceful to look at.

In Puraans, the land protected by mountains and water has been called durg. In Matsya puran the durgs found on high mountains were called mahadurgs. The mountain durgs fall in this category. Because they are not only located on high mountains but they also have the collection of the necessary items like food, water, etc. In the garhs which did not have a source of water, the rainwater was collected in vessels of mud, wood or stones. If there was some source of water nearby, then stairs were made to reach it and naula was made which was decorated in various ways. Outside the naula was a place for the garhpati or queen to bathe. There was a tradition to built a tunnel in the garh(fort). This tunnel was used not only to bring food and water in emergency but also for the king and his family to escape to secure places when need arrived in war times. There were ventilators and check posts in these tunnels and it was easy for a person to go through them.

So we see that these garh(fort)s were important from the social point of view. They were also important when the foreign invaders started invading the Garhwal Himalayas. We also see that there was mutual jealousy among the rulers of the thakurayis and each considered himself superior to the others.

They were busy in putting each other down and capturing each others areas. Kumaon and Garhwal rulers fought amongst each other. Not only this the Garhwal rulers fought amongst themselves. In such a situation where battles were so common every garhpati became serious about the security of his thakurayi. So in those times, the importance of garhs was great. At that time there was no central force which could unite these garhpatis. So such a situation was inevitable.

One point should be especially mentioned that most of the garhpatis were not from royal

families. They were known by various names like- veer bhad, morta, bhatt ghangal, yoddha, jodha, aal and paiga, etc. Due to lack of stableness they could not encourage art but they were successful in preserving the art and culture of Garhwal. They proved to be true protectors of the culture and land of their people . That is why even today the folk songs, sayings and legends of Garhwal contain their praise. They are worshipped in villages even now as protectors and guards of the citizens.

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