

Bhangarh: An unsolved mystery

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The haunted ruins of Bhangarh are still a mystery...



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Who doesn't love a good ghost story? We have all listened to them spellbound during the ubiquitous load-shedding or on journeys after which any trip down the dark corridor to the toilet became impossibility. But what happens when terror meets travel? Same experience you can have with a visit to a ghost town that is one of India's spookiest places. At the edge of the Sariska forest in Rajasthan lies the town of Bhangarh whose haunted status is attracting scores of tourists these days. Definitely day, mind you, since the town is out of bounds after dark. A signboard displayed prominently by the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) warns visitors: "Entering the borders of Bhangarh after sunset is strictly prohibited".

Such is the town's reputation that even the ASI doesn't have an office here though government rules state that every historical site must have an office of the ASI. The nearest one is a kilometre away enough distance between officials and the spooks.

So how did the ghosts get here? The story goes that this sixteenth century town, 80 km from Alwar in eastern Rajasthan, was home to a tantrik (a magician well-versed in the occult) named Singhia. The tantrik fell desperately in love with the kingdom's beautiful princess, Rani Ratnawati. Knowing that he would never be allowed to go near her, Singhia decided to use his dark powers to seduce her. He spotted the princess's maid buying oil and cast a spell on the oil. If the spell worked, on touching the oil, the princess would surrender herself to him.

Locals say that the princess, who was proficient in the occult herself, soon sensed his evil plan and foiled it. She threw the flagon of oil away, whereupon it fell on a stone. As soon as the oil touched the stone, it started rolling towards the tantrik and crushed him. But before dying, Singhia cursed the palace with the death of all who dwelt in it, without the possibility of rebirth.

According to K L Saini, who was the director of the Sariska Tiger Reserve for 18 years, this entire belt used to be a thick forest.

According to the locals, the town, protected by two inner fortifications and separated from the plains by ramparts, came to life only at night. There were bustling bazaars where beautifully adorned women ran shops. Besides the royals, common citizens could also eat, drink and make merry here.

That might be more legend than fact, but Bhangarh is still a charming ruin to visit. Bhangarh was also a well-laid out town and could serve as an excellent model for present-day town planners.

Each shop along the route still has a vacant space for an idol. But what is strange is that there are no roofs on the houses, shops and even the palace. Locals say that whenever a house is built in the vicinity, its roof collapses! And in the village closest to Bhangarh, people have made roofs over their heads but only those made of straw!

Large banyan trees and several temples dot the landscape. The beautifully carved temples of Gopinath, Shiva (Someshwar), Mangla Devi and Keshava Rai have survived the passage of time and are a must-see for visitors. There is also the dancer's fort, the ruins of homes and scattered boulders with carvings. On a nearby hilltop stands an umbrella that is believed to have been inhabited by the tantrik.

Despite the passage of time, the Rani Ratnawati myth continues to fascinate everyone. Many claim to have witnessed paranormal activities in the area; some have "heard" sounds of music and the tinkling of anklets. Saini maintains that many tourists who take photographs inside the ruins find weird colour spots in the

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pictures. Is all this imagined or a ploy to draw in tourists? Whatever the truth, a visit to Bhangarh isn't for the faint-hearted.

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