

# Interlinking Ponds

## Water Conservation at Bellary Fort

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*History records Tipu Sultan as one of the finest generals in South India. Yet it is a little known fact that the well-being of his soldiers was of prime importance to Tipu. His focussed efforts to conserve water at the top of the 50 foot tall hill of Bellary bear testimony to the measures that he took to ensure that his soldiers and the royal family were not effected by shortage of water.*

The district of Bellary in Karnataka has a harsh climate. The area is dotted with rocky terrain and low hills. Tipu Sultan, also known as the Tiger of Mysore fought many battles in this area in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Water had to be provided for the thousands of soldiers who were on the move and who fought in these battles. Yet there was no source of water supply in the area nor was there any known method to harvest and manage whatever little water was available.

Tipu realised that in order to enable his soldiers to do their responsibility efficiently, it was essential to provide for their well-being. Much of this depended on adequate water supply. Much of his efforts was spent in understanding the local water management systems and to devise an ingenious method of water conservation.

Located in the centre of the district is a huge 50-foot high hill where Tipu built a fort which spread over five acres. Within this area, there were 40 structures resembling ponds which were open to the skies. Rainwater was allowed to collect in these ponds. Though each pond was independent, yet these were interlinked by man-made canals. The water collected in these ponds was sufficient to meet the water needs of over 1000 people. Even if a battle lasted for months or even years, the water was sufficient for the soldiers and members of the royal family.

Once the ponds were full, the excess water was allowed to flow downhill, through specially laid man-made canals. These canals led into a big pond located at the foot of the hill. Apart from this, the water that flowed downhill was also allowed to collect in a well in the soldier's camp in Devi Nagar called Basavana Kunte. Located near the then district headquarters, this well also met the water needs of the city.

So skilled was the technology used for construction, that even today the canals which were designed for the outflow from the interlinked ponds can be found along the ramparts of the fort.

## Why did the system fall into disuse?

However the outstanding example for water conservation on top of the hill at Bellary was not used by Tipu for long. Being an astute general, Tipu was aware of the need to keep his movements stealthy. He chose another hill near the Bellary fort hill which had a lower altitude. However, this provided a vantage point for the enemy's soldier's to spy on the movements of Tipu's army. Tipu realised that that the number of soldiers, stocks of arms and ammunition, food and water supply could all be monitored from the higher attitude nearby.

In order to ensure that his movements were kept secret, Tipu was forced to abandon this fort and moved camp once again to Gutti, a hill located at a distance of 80 km from Bellary. Tipu built a fort on top of the hill, which was interestingly on the same lines of the fort at Bellary fort.

As a result of this relocation, the enemy's army too moved out of the Bellary fort. The 40 water bodies on top of Bellary fort subsequently fell into disuse. The canals that interlinked the ponds were not maintained and became neglected.

Over the last hundred years, the conditions of the ponds has deteriorated and today the ponds are choking with filth and garbage. No water collects in these ponds and outflow too has stopped.

## Endeavours for revival

Mr. Harsh Gupta, Chief Executive Officer of the Bellary District Panchayat, visited the area and realized the value of the pond-like structures atop Bellary Fort. He



drew up a detailed plan to revive the ponds and sought the participation of several organizations to partner in the effort.

He sanctioned Rs.1,00,000 on behalf of the District Panchayat for this Food-for-Work project. The work of dredging was taken



up to remove the garbage from the ponds. Cement bags, sand, bricks and other construction material was transported on mule back to the top of the fort.

As many as 38 of the 40 ponds were dredged and stonewalls were erected, wherever necessary. Canal repair was carried out systematically. The two larger ponds entailed considerable expense so the Tourism Department and Archeological Survey of India were requested to support the project.

There were plans to develop a garden in the fort to attract tourists to this historical spot. Mr. Harsh Gupta adds, “For us, water harnessing is not the only goal. Our aim is to educate people, especially students who visit the fort about the significance of water conservation and how it was implemented even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.”

Unfortunately, Mr. Harsh Gupta was transferred and the project was shelved!

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