



Exploring the Abandoned Historical Monuments: An Ethnographic Study of Flagstaff Tower

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Abstract:

This paper examines the abandoned historical monument, Flagstaff Tower, located in Delhi. It explores various perspectives, including its architectural structure, historical context, and insights from the prominent historians. In addition, the paper address general questions and presents personal account related to the Flagstaff Tower. The study provides a comprehensive historical overview of the Tower, highlighting its significance during the Indian mutiny, a pivotal event in the struggle for independence. As a key site in colonial history, the Flagstaff Tower holds considerable historical importance. During the mutiny, the British army of the Delhi cantonment sought refuge there. The paper also delves into the historical context of the construction of the tower. As part of ethnographic research, this study provides a detailed account of the army officials of that time, along with various observations. Ethnography, in general, involves the documentation of culture and is defined as a methodology that typically relies on personal experiences and face-to-face interaction. Although traditionally practiced by anthropologists, it has now become a widely used research tool across various disciplines.

Being situated in close proximity to one of the India's premier institutes, Flagstaff Tower continues to attract numerous students and researchers. The researcher was also drawn to the site as part of academic curriculum, conducting both official and personal visits. During these visits, the researcher collected personal accounts from regular visitors and engaged in conversations about the Tower's history, associated horrors, and lingering rumours. The paper thus aims to



examine one of the significant monuments of the colonial era, which, despite being maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India, remains largely abandoned today.

Key Words: Flagstaff Tower, Mutiny, Ethnography, Monument, Delhi

Introduction:

The present paper explores one of the abandoned Historical monuments—Flagstaff Tower situated in Delhi. The paper shall explore various perspectives such as structure, historical context, and leading historians' perspective. Apart from these the paper shall also explore general questions and a few personal accounts on the Flagstaff Tower. The tower was built during colonial period in 1828 by the British Indian Army. There are three important marks in the history of this tower namely—1828, 1857 and 1910. It was a part of the British Cantonment and had been used as a signal tower by the British Army since the height of the tower higher than the surrounding areas; therefore the signal could be noticed from the nearby surroundings. Presently it is situated in the close vicinity of the University of Delhi, more particularly opposite to the Vice Chancellor office.

The tower has a round structure, and situated on a higher ground at the Barren Ridge area. It is an 18 feet round building appears like a mini fort with capacity to hold around one hundred people at a time, nonetheless as safe as a fort. In the close vicinity to the tower, a lake named—*Khooni Jheel* is also situated and its history is also liked with this tower. The tower is presently under the supervision of Archaeological Survey of India. In the year 1857—the first mutiny of Indian independence, it came into the notice of the people. A number of European officers and their families took refuge in the Tower. In the year 1910, its surroundings were forested. Presently the ridge is known as *Kamla Nehru Ridge* and *Bonta Park*. It lies in the northern Aravali range—in the national capital territory. From the centre point of the tower, there are four roads and are easily accessible to reach the tower. It now falls in the *Bonta Park*, it has a large area and a number of historical monuments namely—*Khooni Jheel*, *Ashokan Pillar*, *Chaubarji*



Mosque, Cemetery, and Mutiny Memorial. The structure of the tower is a single interior room an with 18 feet in diameter, windowless and stuffy. This room has a capacity to hold hundred people at a time. It is looks like a mini fort but with the point of view it is not a safe place. In the recent times some parts of the tower have been ruined due to people having scribbled on its walls.

Historical Context of the Flagstaff Tower

The flagstaff tower was constructed in the year of 1828, and came to be known as a significant place in the year of the 1857. The first struggle of Indian independence started on the morning of May 11th, 1857. During the mutiny the sepoys started hunting for and killing Europeans personnel’ and Christian Indians in the cantonment, civil line, and the walled city of Delhi. Out of fear, in order to save their lives, the survivors have started fleeing towards the tower in order to take refuges from the rebellions. The European officers with their families came to the flagstaff tower to take refuge. A month later the company army returned to capture Delhi, which was now with the sepoys. On the June 7th, June they faced stiff resistance from the sepoys at the flagstaff tower. A fierce battle followed which led to the killing and wounding of large number of soldiers. However, in the evening 5 ‘o’ clock the ridge had been recaptured and was now under the control of British Army.

Historians’ Perspective on the Flagstaff Tower

William Dalrymple—leading historians in his work *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty Delhi, 1857* narrates the entire incident. He includes some of the popular accounts of British soldiers who has witnessed the mutiny and took shelter at the tower. Robert Christopher Tytler, was a British soldier, naturalist and a photographer. In 1857 at the beginning of the Indian rebellion, Tytler was present when his own unit mutinied against their British officers at Delhi. Tytler joined his commander at the tower in the centre of Ridge and overseeing the fortified city. He further narrates “The Flagstaff Tower was a scene of great confusion when Tytler finally reached there. In the course of the day, the short, isolated round tower situated on the summit of



the barren Ridge had become the place of refuge for all the remaining British families from the cantonment and the Civil Lines, as well as those (a few) who had managed to escape from the walled city” (Dalrymple, 2008, p. 170). Among them was his wife Harriet, who was well known for her work in photography and documenting the monuments of Delhi, and for her notes at the time of 1857 revolt in India. At that time Tytler was recounting the entire incident, Dalrymple chronicles the each and every minute details as he further puts:

“A single bullock cart appeared at the foot of the slope and slowly creaked up the incline of the Ridge from the Kashmiri Gate. Inside the cart, under a thin covering of women’s dresses stained with blood, lay the mangled and mutilated bodies of all the British officers, murdered as they entered the city earlier in the morning. The sister of one of the victims, Miss Burrowe, stood perspiring inside the tower. The cart had in fact been sent up by Edward Vibart to the cantonment, and by mistake found its way to the Flagstaff Tower” (Dalrymple, 2008, p. 172).

Meanwhile, Robert and Harriet Tytler were travelling up the road to Karnal in an overcrowded carriage. Furthermore, as with all British efforts to manage events that day, the departure from the Flagstaff Tower began poorly and quickly delved into utter chaos. Dalrymple recounts the entire incident from Harriet Tytler’s work *An English Women in India: The Memoirs of Harriet Tytler, 1828-1858*, The Tytlers spent the entire day awaiting the arrival of their friends and colleagues. By that evening, out of the entire group that had departed from the Flagstaff Tower, only six refugees from Delhi had successfully made it through. At four ‘o’clock on the day of the outbreak, Charles Todd’s two assistant telegraph operators, Brendish and Pilkington, closed up their office and set off to flee to safety, first to the Flagstaff Tower, and then on to Meerut. Passing the battlefield, Robert Tytler saw his old orderly, Thakur Singh, who had begged to come in the carriage with the Tytler when they were escaping from the Flagstaff Tower, and had been turned down as there was no room; The only serious resistance the British met was at the Flagstaff Tower, the scene of such confusion a month earlier. Here alone the sepoys held their ground and met the Europeans with a withering volley which killed many and



wounded a great number. Late in the afternoon there was also a belated attempt to counter-attack up through the Sabzi Mandi. This was driven off by the *Gurkhas* with the unsheathed *Kukhri* knives. By 5 'o' clock in the evening the entire Ridge was in British hands.

Soon afterwards, the British found that the bullock cart full of bodies were the first British casualties of the outbreak, and were still standing near the Flagstaff Tower. All that remained now were the victims' skeletons remains and their uniforms, with the regimental buttons still shining. Captain Willock visited us in the evening. At sunset, a shell flew over the Flagstaff Tower, whistling through the air before landing within the mud walls of our sepoys. The beauty of the area surrounding the tower was eloquently described in Lieutenant Charles Henry's letters, which, Dalrymple references in his work as he discusses the landscape around the tower. As he puts "behind is a glowing bank of clouds, a green undulating horizon, a white broad streak of tumble-down lines, fallen pillars and blackened bungalows. The ridge is on the right and left, at your feet a level plain, exquisitely green and in places thickly planted, stretches to the City walls" (Dalrymple, 2008, p. 290). At 3 a.m. the four assault columns marched first to the Flagstaff Tower and then down in silence from the Ridge, using Zafar's fruit trees in the once lovely Mughal Garden of Qudsia Bagh as cover. All this time the siege artillery and breaching batteries had been firing as rapidly as they had been for the last ten days and, according to Barter, 'the darkness before day was illuminated by constant flashes, while the air seemed alive with shells.'

British Italian photographer Felice Beato, a pioneer in war photography and ethnographic portraits in his album *Flag Staff Battery 1858* which is part of a collective album *Delhi-The Indian Mutiny* had captured the tower beautifully. Trisha Gupta in her article in *Time Out Delhi* explores the photography of the tower. It is difficult to imagine that this enclosed park, with its unusual mix of lush greenery, paved pathways, families of monkeys, and evening walkers, exists as it does....is the same stretch of the Delhi Ridge which Historian Percival Spear described as "bare, a stony furnace in the hot weather, and a mirror of heat for civilians and soldiers on either side" (qtd in Trisha Gupta). Historian Luck Peak stated that, in the nineteenth century, the ridge



was covered with low scrub before it underwent afforestation. This remote tower was entirely indefensible, and concentrating women and children in such a location risked provoking an even greater massacre than the one that had already occurred within the city walls. The British returned to the ridge a month later, after defeating the rebel troops at the Battle of Badli on June 8th. By 5 pm that evening, the ridge was firmly under British control. In addition to the bombardment from the city, conditions on the ridge were dire; water was scarce, sewage facilities were minimal, and the decaying corpses of men and animal contributed to an epidemic of flies. Charles John Griffiths wrote about the absence of shelter from the relentless heat, which resulted in the death of many troops. As one surveys Flagstaff Tower today, with its orderly rows of trees in every direction, it is only natural to contemplate whether the 1912 Town Planning Committee's decision to cultivate the Ridge was influenced by the traumatic four months the British spent encamped in the inhospitable, treeless expanse that it once was. Apart from this, there are a number general queries and questions by the common people and everyday visitors to the tower and the Ridge. Since much has not been known about the tower and only a few historical accounts are available, which increased the curiosity of the visitors and students of history. More particularly students of Delhi University since it is situated at the close vicinity of the University.

While we (people) visit the Flagstaff tower, a number of questions arise in our (people's) mind. There are certain general questions to be answered, these are—who built it? The year of its construction, the purpose behind its construction, the structural changes it has witnessed from past to the contemporary period, did it serve the purpose of its construction, the major changes taken place till date, the question regarding preserving it safely and , the advantages and disadvantages of the tower at the time of 1857 mutiny. The grounds of its appearance in the period of 1828-1856, or reasons behind its existence as the minor historical site are questions worth to be answered. Apart from these there more common question/ queries such as, regarding the reconstruction and major structural changes in the tower, its availability for public use, or as a tourist place. After the forestation in 1910, did the surrounding area change the tower's image



from the past barren land to a forest in present? The historical significance, the presents controlling authority and ways and, the means of reaching out to the tower were other minor curiosities from the visitors.

As of the available sources about the Flagstaff tower and with the formal visit, the researcher tried to find answer to the above mentioned questions. It was built by the British Indian army. Delhi was under the rule of Mughal emperor Akbar II when this tower was constructed, and Lord William Bentick was the Governor General of India. It was constructed in 1828. The sparse, low-level vegetation was also a contributing factor, and this was high point of the Ridge. It was an ideal location for establishing a signal tower —Flagstaff. Apart from high visibility, Spears argues that the Flagstaff Tower firmly planted at the most of difficult terrain in the region, and was a concrete symbol of the British determination to maintain control over Delhi. Another reason was to install the British army troops who rested there for security reason since it was the highest elevated platform surrounding with little shrubs, from there the troopers could see far away.

As the available information about the Flagstaff tower, it was constructed as a signal tower but during the rebellion of 1857 it was used as a shelter for refugee by the European officers and their families. In the year 1910 the forestation had taken Place, and the barren land of ridge with shrubs changed into a forest area. At present this forest area is known as a *Kamla Nehru Ridge* and *Bonta Park*. Presently the Flagstaff tower is not in actual form of the 1828, because it was scribbled by children and monkeys. Nowadays the flagstaff tower is locked and nobody can entre in it, but in the front area the place is used by the senior citizens as a sitting area for performing their Yoga and other exercises; and sports enthusiasts also pays visit for their exercise.

Nor it has served the same purpose as it has served in the past since it was constructed for the basic purpose to be used as a signal tower and at the time of 1857 mutiny it was used as a refugee shelter, and now a days it is a place for yoga and exercise, therefore from time to time the purpose of the tower has been changing accordingly. At present the *Kamla Nehru Ridge*



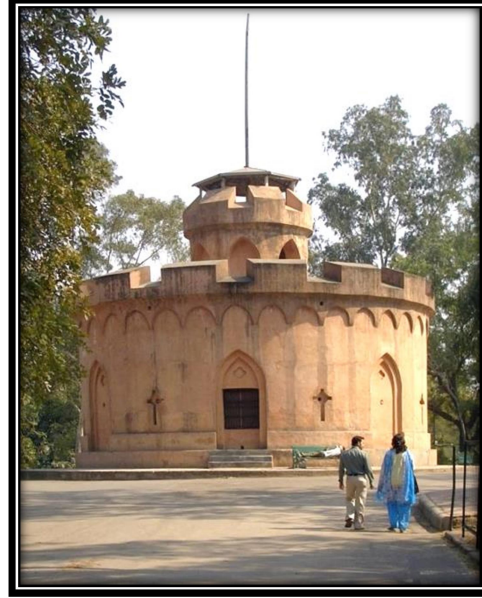
where the Flagstaff tower is located is used as a park and a picnic spot. The tower is centrally located from where four pathways attached. It is still in the good condition and preserved under the Archaeological Survey of India.

At the time of mutiny on the May 11th, 1857 when the rebel sepoys plundering all over the Delhi, the Europeans officers took shelter in order to save their lives from rebels. The major disadvantage of the flagstaff tower was that many of women messed inside were sent up to a suffocating interior staircase and several fainted partly from the lack of the air, and it had only a capacity to hold hundred people at a time therefore, when a large number of refugees came there to take shelter the environment of the tower became hot in the time of scorching summer. Apart from that there is no extra available space in order to store water and food supplies. It is still unknown to us that why the tower was unknown to us between the period of 1826-56. It is required to locate the anonymous reason behind the lack of information about the tower during its initial phase. No decision is taken for the reconstruction of the tower, and the flagstaff is preserved as it was constructed, little damage have taken place like scribbled walls, and some chairs installed there for sitting purpose. It is situated in the *Bonta Park* thus the park opens in the early morning, and anyone can reach through its four pathways available at different direction. Now it has become a tourist place as well, a number people from the city and outsider, and the Europeans visit the site to know about tower, and for picnic. The scenario has changed after the forestation in 1910 because as we see in old pictures it was a single highest tower in the barren ridge but after the plants and tress grown there, the greenery come out all over the surrounding and many tress are now taller than the tower. The historical significance of the tower is that it was a safe place at the time of mutiny. Many times the unsafe and uncomfortable places can be used as safe and comfortable places as per the situation therefore the tower most significantly used as a refuge shelter where Europeans waited for help from the company army. The Flagstaff tower did not get much attention by the historians of the modern time. We can only get information about the Flagstaff tower from a few sources authored by foreign writers. Not even a single historian wrote about it but in the previous year an archaeologist Vikramjit Singh



Rooprai took some of his student for a visit to the Flagstaff tower, and named this trip as Mutiny Trial. Rooprai told his students that as we do not know that the soldiers of the Nepal army has helped the British at the time of the rebellion of 1857 vis-à-vis, and also we do not know about the significant value of the Flagstaff tower. It is under the control of the Archaeological Survey of India. They are preserving it in good condition.

Apart from this, the researcher paid a personal visit to the tower and park, and had a conversation with local people, and everyday visitors. The researcher had a conversation with the Bonta Park security personnel about the Flagstaff Tower, and got an exotic and unexpected answer, as he said that it was built at the time of Plassey War, and it also has an underground tunnel inside the tower, the tunnel must have been used by the army of the emperor. There were people walking and a group among them were UPSC aspirants, they knew about the tower, and the entire story of mutiny and the important role of Flagstaff Tower. On the other hand there were a number of senior citizens walking and doing Yoga, quite unaware of the historical context of the tower. There were some rumours about the *Khooni Jheel* which is situated near the tower, that it was used to dump bodies of British soldiers and civilians. Still much has not been available on the historical context of the tower. Therefore, the future researchers may delve into more details. The tower has played a significant role yet it has not received much attention. Therefore, historians and ASI can play a significant to take up further research.



Flagstaff Tower photo, Source: Victor

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