
Village Defenses in South India

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Defense is an inherently reactive process. Given perceived threats to some valued entity or resource, one assesses the strength, technology, and probable tactics of these threats and then works to counter them. In the defense of premodern villages, the whole gamut of human, animal, and spiritual forces that acted on a village's well-being may be reflected in the built environment and the patterns by which the village arranged itself on the ground.

History shows that the simplest defense for the inhabitants of many small communities was to run away. Often effective, it left little, if any, trace in the archaeological record. The most enduring and visible archaeological evidence of village defense typically rests in walls, gates, towers, and ditches that protected a community from other people. The scale of such works tended to be proportional to the size and wealth of the community that built them. However, no village possessed the necessary means – weapons, training, manpower, leadership, and stores – to deal with extraordinary threats such as invading armies or regional famine. Faced with extreme dangers to its well-being, villagers could only submit or flee.

In South India, thousands of villages endured chronic threats to their peace and safety during the Early Modern period, or roughly between CE 1500–1800. The Vijayanagara Empire, which controlled most of India south of the Krishna River, began to collapse in the mid-sixteenth century. The ensuing political instability created an opportunity for other Indian and foreign powers to compete for control of the South. Local rulers and chiefs declared their independence from greater kings and contested similar claims made by their neighbors. Winners and losers alike often turned to plunder and they, along with marauder bands, laid waste to towns and villages in their path.

General patterns of Early Modern village defense in South India can be reconstructed from a wealth of archaeological and historical evidence. These patterns differ across South India's three major geographical divisions: the central plateau or *maidan*, much of which is semiarid scrub jungle; the rainy, forested mountains or *malnad* that flank the *maidan* to the west; and the coastal lowlands that border the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal.

Maidan

Maidan villages were among the most consistently fortified small communities of Early Modern South India. Although hill ranges covered in dry forest break its relief, much of the region is good country for cavalry. Throughout history, invading armies often chose it as a natural line of advance into the South. Robber bands also appreciated its many opportunities for looting, cattle lifting, and the relative ease of a getaway.

Each village typically comprised two main parts, a settlement core and the outlying fields and pastures. The settlement core contained homes, the temple of the main village deity, threshing ground, and storage facilities for grain, firewood, and animal fodder. Fields and pasture lands lay between the settlement core and the village's outer limits. The latter were defined by marker stones and posts, as well as by the shrines of lesser gods who guarded the village's ritual boundary. Beyond this boundary, and effectively beyond the village, lay the ritually unclean space that contained the village cemetery or cremation ground. Out there, one also found evil spirits, diseases, and ill fortune, all of which had been driven away by the village gods.

A thick bound hedge fence often surrounded the settlement core and acted as a village's first, if sometimes its only, line of defense. The bound hedge was a densely planted barrier of bamboo, prickly pear, and other plants selected for their thorns and other unpleasant characteristics. It was cheap, fast growing, easy to maintain, and effective against many animal and human threats. Gates guarded by village watchmen covered

roads into the village where they pierced the fence.

The main drawback to bound hedges was that they were inadequate to stop a large and determined attack. To supplement bound hedges, some small villages also chose to defend a strategic point, typically a tower or *hude*, within or near the settlement core, from which villagers threw stones and other missiles at their attackers. Often combined with a bound hedge, the *hude* gave village defenders the tactical advantage of high ground at relatively low cost. Nevertheless, the *hude* defense worked best, or perhaps only worked at all, if one's attackers were simply marauders for whom success was a quick raid and few casualties.

Larger or wealthier villages would defend a perimeter, either drawn around the oldest residential area and village deity temple compound in the settlement core or constructed adjacent to the village's living area. They fortified this perimeter with walls, bastions, and covered gateways made with mud, rubble, and locally quarried stone. Approaches to the village walls were protected by deep, wide ditches and, farther out, by bound hedge fences. Some villages worked the *hude* into their fortification plan. Other villages achieved the *hude*'s advantages of elevation by incorporating nearby isolated hills into their defensive works.

Malnad

In the rainy, forested mountains and deep valleys of the Western Ghats, which separate the central plateau from the coastal lowlands that border the Arabian Sea, village defenses differed fundamentally from those of the maidan. *Malnad* villages were commonly collections of neighborhoods scattered over a large area. Village ritual boundaries were similarly dispersed.

Many malnad villages depended for security on their relative isolation and the natural defensive strengths of the region's rugged terrain and dense forest cover. Rather than attempt to enclose one's village within walls dotted with bastions

and towers, malnad defenses focused on the lines of communication that led to the village. The reasoning appears to have been that if an attacking force could not reach the village, then it could not harm it.

Exploiting the malnad terrain as a potential force multiplier, the passes, roads, and trails that led to a village were defended in depth by earthworks, barriers, and breastworks collectively called *kadangas*. Many of these works were further protected by deep ditches, often filled with thorn bushes. Potential village threats would be confronted along the lines of communication and the village to which these lines led might appear to be essentially undefended. Should the defenses fail, the final option was always to scatter into the forest and return after the threat had passed.

Coast

Most of the rivers that drain South India's central plateau flow east and empty into the Bay of Bengal. The geographical transition from the maidan down to the coastal lowlands is through the Eastern Hills, broken ranges of low hills sparsely covered in patches of dry forest. Villages in the valleys, passes, and lower slopes of the Eastern Hills were laid out like those of the maidan region and were defended by bound hedge fences, walls, towers, gates, and ditches.

Beyond the Eastern Hills, the villages on the broad coastal plain and river deltas were as compact as found in the maidan, but they typically lacked defensive features. The East Coast villages were laid out in an open plan with houses aligned along regular streets. For the inhabitants of these villages, defense often meant scattering into the countryside or seeking the protection of nearby fortified towns.

On the other side of the peninsula, the high mountains of the Western Ghats reach nearly to the Arabian Sea. The lush, wet, coastal lowlands occupy a narrow strip of shore that reaches its maximum extent in the far south. Throughout this region, villages were dispersed entities – groups

of households in a loosely circumscribed locality – that more closely resembled malnad villages than the clustered communities of the maidan and East Coast.

West coast villages also took a different approach to defense. No attempt was made to defend the village per se or its lines of communication. Here, defense centered on individual household compounds, each of which was hedged around by mud or stone walls or a fence of bamboo and thorns. Gateways through these walls were also sometimes reinforced with guardhouses.

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