

A Brief History of the Pilgrim Tax in Puri

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The Pilgrim Tax, apparently introduced in the seventeenth century, was a major source of revenue to the Puri temple for nearly two centuries. Under this system, pilgrims visiting the Jagannatha temple were expected to pay a stipulated amount and obtain passes in order to enter the town and perform worship and rituals in the temple. The income generated by the Pilgrim Tax was large enough to take care of the administrative and religious expenses of the temple. The British discontinued the practice in 1803 after they conquered Odisha, but introduced it again in 1806. In the next two decades, the Pilgrim Tax became a subject of severe debate among the English, in which missionaries, British administrators, the press and other groups participated. As a result, the tax was finally abolished in 1840.

The history of the Pilgrim Tax is interesting in many ways. It reveals a number of intricate dimensions involved in the relationship between religious institutions, political power, economy and society. It also tells us about the hegemonic roles played by some classes and social groups and how others challenge these roles to their own advantage. An elaborate study of all these aspects will occupy a full-length monograph. This is beyond the scope of the present paper. This paper only tries to trace a brief history of the tax in Puri

and understand why the British finally abolished it.

There are no records which tell us when the system of Pilgrim Tax was introduced in Puri. It is well known that Muslim rulers introduced it in India. It continued under the early Mughal rulers, Babur and Humayun, and also under Sher Shah Suri in various parts of the country that fell under their rule. There were three advantages with this system. The first was that the management of the temple could be carried out with the revenue generated by this tax. The second was that the orthodox Muslim nobility who adhered to the Islamic law and opposed state support for idolatry were appeased by the imposition of a tax on pilgrimage. The third was that it favoured the economic interests of the Hindu temple functionaries and middlemen who benefitted from this additional revenue.

The Mughal ruler Akbar (r. 1556-1605) abolished the Pilgrim Tax in 1563 as a part of his larger policy of religious harmony.¹ At this time, Odisha was ruled by Mukunda (r. 1560-1568), a general who had usurped the throne from the Bhoi ruler of Khurda, Raghurama Chhotaraya (r. 1558-1560). Raghurama Chhotaraya was the son of Chakrapratapa (r. 1549-1557) and grandson of Govinda Vidyadhara (r. 1542-1549), who had put an end to the rule of the Suryavamshi Gajapatis

in 1542 by killing Kaluadeva, who had succeeded his father Prataparudra (r.1496-1540) in 1540. Odisha was not yet under Muslim influence at this time. In 1568 Sulaiman Karrani, the Afghan ruler of Bengal, sent an army under two generals, Sikandar Uzbek and Kalapahad. In the battle that followed, Kalapahad killed Mukunda, attacked Puri and apparently burned the images of Jagannatha, Subhadra and Balabhadra. The throne of Khurda then went to Ramachandra (r.1568-1607), the son of Danai Vidyadhara, a general under Prataparudra and Chakrapratapa. He reinstated the images of the trinity at Khurda in 1587 and took it to Puri in 1589, where they were then put back in their former place. This earned him the title Second Indradyumna.²

Between 1568 and 1590, Ramachandra remained a subordinate of the Afghan rulers of Bengal. In 1590, the Mughal General Mansingh took control of Odisha after signing a treaty with the Afghans. Thus Odisha became a part of *Mughalbandi*. However, Ramachandra remained hostile to Mansingh and supported the Afghans, due to which he faced the wrath of Mansingh. In 1592, Akbar intervened into the matter and forced Mansingh to maintain healthy relationship with Ramachandra. Ramachandra was recognized as a ruler and awarded a 500 *mansabdari*. He also became a leading *zamindar* holding thirty-one *zamindaris* for the Mughals, which included all the petty chiefdoms of coastal Odisha.³

Thus, it is unlikely that the Pilgrim Tax was collected at the Puri temple during this period as Akbar had already abolished it before Odisha came under Muslim rule. There was no Pilgrim Tax under Akbar's successor Jahangir (r. 1605-1628). Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658) introduced it briefly, but it was soon withdrawn. The Pilgrim Tax came into effect once again during the reign of Aurangzeb (1658-1707), who revived it in

about 1665.⁴ We can therefore safely conclude that the Pilgrim Tax was introduced in Puri in or after 1665.

How much revenue did the Pilgrim Tax bring? We cannot answer this question easily due to lack of evidence from contemporary records. In the eighteenth century, there was a conflict between Ramachandra II (r. 1727-1736) and Taqi Khan, the Nawab of Bengal. Taqi Khan's successor Murshid Quli Khan continued the fight on behalf of his predecessor and appointed Virakesari to the Gajapati throne. During this conflict, the images of the Puri temple were removed by the priests to a safer location. As a result, no pilgrim arrived during that year, which led to a loss of revenue of nine lakh rupees.⁵ In the early nineteenth century, James Peggs observed that the revenue which the Mughals earned by way of Pilgrim Tax was nine lakh rupees.⁶ Based on these two bits of evidence, we may tentatively suggest that nine lakh rupees were earned every year as Pilgrim Tax. This state of affair might have continued under the Marathas as well.

During the Mughal and the Maratha periods, there was no centralized mechanism for collecting the Pilgrim Tax. Pilgrims who passed through the territory of Mayurbhanj and Nilgiri were taxed by the local Rajas. Under the Marathas, tax collection posts were set up at various points on the northern route to Puri from Khunta Ghat on the border of Mayurbhanj to the Athara Nala bridge in Puri. The tax was collected by the *tahsildars*. Pilgrims were given a pass which indicated their number and rank, as well as the amount paid by them. Once a pilgrim was given a pass at one post, he or she was exempted from paying at the other posts. The rates were fixed by the government. But it is likely that the *tahsildar* harassed the pilgrims and collected a higher amount from them. The *kangals*, or poor

and destitute, were in principle exempted from payment. But in all probability, they were detained and checked to ensure that they were indeed *kangals*, and allowed to go ahead only after they paid a small amount as bribe.⁷ The corruption of *tahsildars* might have increased the amount collected as tax, but the illegally collected amount is sure to have gone to their own pockets, adversely affected the revenue being remitted.

This was the state of affairs when the British East India Company took over the administration of Odisha in 1803. Colonel Harcourt occupied Puri on 18 September 1803 after which the Pilgrim Tax was immediately withdrawn. Lord Wellesley, the Governor General, was opposed to the collection of this tax. He underlined the need for maintaining cordial relationship with the priests of the temple and securing their good will. His enthusiasm for protecting and developing the Puri temple was widely appreciated. The Puri priests reciprocated by showering praise on Wellesley with a poetic eulogy composed in Sanskrit.⁸

In March 1805, Charles Groeme, the Collector of the Puri Sub-division was asked to submit a report on the affairs of the Jagannatha temple. In his report submitted on 10 June 1805, Groeme recommended the imposition of the Pilgrim Tax. Accordingly, Regulation XII was passed on 5 September 1805, and James Hunter appointed as the Collector of Pilgrim Tax at Puri. Collection of Pilgrim Tax took place at Athara Nala for pilgrims coming from the north and Loknath Ghat for those coming from the south. The system was formally inaugurated on 22 January 1806. On the first day, no tax was collected. As many as ninety-six pilgrims were allowed to enter the temple without any payment. On the second day, Rs.10/- was collected as Pilgrim Tax from five pilgrims at the

rate of Rs.2/-per head. Gradually, the practice gained momentum and by the end of 30 April 1806, Rs.72,688 had been collected. The amount raised between 1806-07 and 1825-26 was Rs.21,97,680 giving an average annual revenue of Rs.1,09,884.⁹

The tax-paying pilgrims were divided into four classes, *laljatri*, *neemlaljatri*, *bhurrangjatri* and *panchatirthi*. The first group was called *laljatri* because they were issued a red pass, which was considered as pass for the privileged classes. The *laljatri*s coming from Athara Nala paid Rs.10/- for a pass and those arriving from Loknath Ghat paid Rs.6/-. They were allowed to visit the temple at any time when it was open, but they had to be attended by their Panda. The pass was valid for thirty days. In case they wanted to visit the temple without a Panda, they had to pay an additional amount of Rs.10/- to the Collector. The *neemlaljatri*s paid Rs.5/- at Athara Nala and Rs.3/- at Loknath Ghat. They were allowed to visit the temple for ten days during the Rath Yatra and for seven days on all other occasions, apparently accompanied by their Panda. The amount charged for *bhurrangjatri* and *panchatirthi* pilgrims was Rs.2/- at both Atharanala and Loknath Ghat. The *bhurrangjatri*s were allowed to enter the temple for five days during Rath Yatra and four days in other seasons. The *panchatirthis* were not allowed into the temple, but permitted to worship from outside for a period extending up to sixteen days.¹⁰

There were six other groups who were allowed into the town without paying the Pilgrim Tax. One was the group of religious people identified as *bairagi*, *sanyasi*, *dandi*, *brahmachari*, *mahant*, *gosain*, *khomarti*, *naga* and *gangajali*. However, the *gangajali*, i.e. people who carried the water of the river Gange

for the worship of Jagannatha, had to be accompanied by a Panda. The second group comprised of those who came to Puri for trade. This group was not allowed into the town during the RathYatra. The third group was of the *kangals*, who were in a state of poverty and therefore could not pay any tax. The fourth group included the native military officers and sepoy in the British army. They, however, had to obtain a permission from the commanding officer of the station in order to enter the temple. The fifth group was that of the servants of Europeans. The sixth group comprised of *desis* or people who lived between the river Baitarani and Ganjam. It appears that all these people were allowed into the town at any time in the year without restrictions. But during the RathYatra and the Dol Yatra, only the people from Pipli in the north and Manickpatna in the south were allowed freely from the group of *desis*. Other *desis* had to pay at the rate of Re.1/- for *laljatri*, eight annas for *nimlal jatri* and four annas for *bhurrang jatri*. Those who wished to stay in Puri for the rest of their lives but were unable to make any payment were exempted from it.¹¹

The pilgrims had to obtain a certificate after paying the Pilgrim Tax to enter into the town. The certificate was in the following format.

A.B., inhabitant of _____ in the district of _____, having this day paid into this office the sum of sicca rupees, _____ is entitled to pass through the _____ Ghaut without further interruption, as a lauljattree to the cutchery of the Collector of the tax at Juggernaut. On producing this certificate to the said Collector, he is further entitled to receive a pass, and to have access to the temple thirty days.

<i>Names, or Designation of attendants.</i>	<i>Amount of tax paid respectively</i>	<i>Period for which to visit the temple</i>
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Similarly, the Collector issued a license to the pilgrims to enter into the temple, which was in the following format.

A.B., inhabitant of _____ in the district of _____, is entitled to perform the customary ceremonies, under charge of _____ for _____ days, that is to say, from the _____ day of the month of _____ until the _____ day of the month of _____ ; and for that period you will afford to the holders hereof free access to the temple of Juggernaut. At the expiration of the period granted you will return the license into the office of the Collector of tax.¹²

Table – 1
Classification of Pilgrims in Puri¹³

Class of Pilgrims	Amount Payable if Entering from Athara Nala	Amount Payable in Entering from Loknath Ghat	Number of Days Allowed
<i>Lal Jatri</i>	Rs.10/-	Rs.6/-	30
<i>NimLal Jatri</i>	Rs.5/-	Rs.3/-	7 (10 during Rath Yatra)
<i>Bhurrang Jatri</i>	Rs.2/-	Rs.2/-	4 (5 during Rath Yatra)

<i>PanchaTirthi</i>	Rs.2/-	Rs.2/-	16 (but not allowed inside the temple)
Religious Persons	Exempted	Exempted	Perhaps throughout the year
Traders	Exempted	Exempted	Perhaps throughout the year
<i>Kangal</i>	Exempted	Exempted	Perhaps throughout the year
Native Military Officers and Sepoys	Exempted	Exempted	Perhaps throughout the year
Servants of Europeans	Exempted	Exempted	Perhaps throughout the year
<i>Desis</i>	Exempted	Exempted	Perhaps throughout the year

The above arrangements are likely to have undergone changes from time to time. Based on records preserved in the Odisha State Archives in Bhubaneswar, Ishita Banerjee Dube has stated that the *laljattris* were allowed permission for sixteen days with or without a Panda and that the *kangals* were allowed for only one day with their Panda.¹⁴

When the Pilgrim Tax was abolished in 1840, it was yielding an annual revenue of Rs.9,00,000.¹⁵ This figure is equal to the amount collected under the Mughals and the Marathas. However, the amount collected as Pilgrim Tax varied from year to year, which may be inferred from Table – 2.

Table – 2
Pilgrim Tax Collection¹⁶

Period	Amount Collected
23.01.1806 to 30.04.1806	Rs. 72,688
1807-08	Rs. 40,500
1812-13	Rs. 35,026
1807-08 to 1813-14	Rs. 68,350 (average per year)

1813-14	Rs. 1,23,118
1814-15	Rs. 2,08,519

Until 1840, the expenses of the Puri temple was largely taken care of by the Pilgrim Tax. The expenses amounted to about Rs.53,000 per year.¹⁷

Opposition to the reintroduction of Pilgrim Tax commenced in the year 1806, when Reverend Claudius Buchanan, Chaplin of the East India Company, visited Puri during the Rath Yatra and expressed his strong reservations against the Pilgrim Tax. According to him, the tax associated the British with idolatrous practices and amounted to ‘official sanction of superstition’. Buchanan made his views known through the letters he wrote to George Udney, a member of the Governor General’s Council and also to the senior Chaplin of Bengal.¹⁸ He was critical of the British policy “to support the natives in the undisturbed exercise of their religious rites and ceremonies and to preserve their places of worship inviolate.”¹⁹ Two decades later, his views were echoed by John Poynder, who stated that “the raising a surplus revenue by a pilgrim tax must, in many ways, lead

to the promotion and encouragement of the superstition out of which the tax is derived.”²⁰ Another opponent of the Pilgrim Tax was the missionary, William Carey. He believed that the tax represented an evil tendency.²¹

Others who opposed the Pilgrim Tax included William Kayes, Reverend Smith, Reverend Green and William Bampton.²² Opposition to the Pilgrim Tax was not always based on the charge that it amounted to official support of idolatry and superstitious beliefs held by the heathens. John Richardson, the Commissioner, recommended the abolition of the tax on the basis of economic considerations. He held that the tax had produced a net gain of only Rs.2500 in seven years. It was therefore not worthwhile to continue it any longer. But his suggestions were refused by the Governor General in Council.²³ The Sadar Board of Revenue also recommended the abolition of the tax in 1832, but it was not accepted.²⁴

William Bentinck, who became Governor General in 1828, rejected the views of the missionaries and others against the Pilgrim Tax. He felt “that a tax against pilgrims is just and expedient” and that it was an act of providing “special care” to the pilgrims.²⁵

In spite of the views of Bentinck, opposition to the tax continued. The most important voice against the Pilgrim Tax came from James Peggs. In his writings, Peggs argued that idolatry would suffer a serious setback if the Pilgrim Tax was abolished. He was able to influence men like Poynder and John Hobhouse. His writings became deeply influential in shaping the British government’s policy towards the Pilgrim Tax. Charles Grant, who was the President of the Board of Control in the Government of Lord Grey, caused a despatch to be sent to the Court

of Directors, opposing the tax. The explicit reason for the despatch was to dissociate the East India Company administration from the support they extended to heathen religious beliefs by way of the Pilgrim Tax. The Court of Directors signed the despatch on 20 February 1833 and sent a set of instructions to the Company Government in India. One of the seven points in this set of instructions was the abolition of the Pilgrim Tax.²⁶

The Company Government took no action on the instructions of the Court of Directors for the next five years. As a result, the matter came up before the British Parliament again in 1838. Hobhouse, who was then President of the Board of Control assured the House of Commons on 26 July 1838 that the tax will be abolished soon. Accordingly, the Court of Directors sent a despatch to the Governor General, Lord Auckland, on 8 August 1838, seeking the abolition of the tax. Measures were taken by the Governor General’s office immediately. Mill, the Commissioner of Odisha, wrote to the Collector of Puri seeking his opinion on the matter. The Collector reported in favour of the continuation of the tax. The Pratiharis of the temple were also keen on continuing the tax, and therefore sent a representation. However, these were ignored, and on 20 April 1840, the famous Act X of 1840 was passed, which finally abolished the Pilgrim Tax, not only in Puri, but also in Gaya and Allahabad.²⁷

In her study of the Pilgrim Tax in Puri, Nancy Gardner Cassels has argued that the abolition of the tax was motivated by the British Government’s policy of non-interference into the affairs of the Hindus and their religious establishments and not due to the demands for abolition put forth by the missionaries.²⁸ We cannot agree with this position. Studies have shown that the British continued to interfere into the affairs of the Puri temple even after 1840.²⁹ These

interventions led to great changes in the administration of the affairs of the temple.

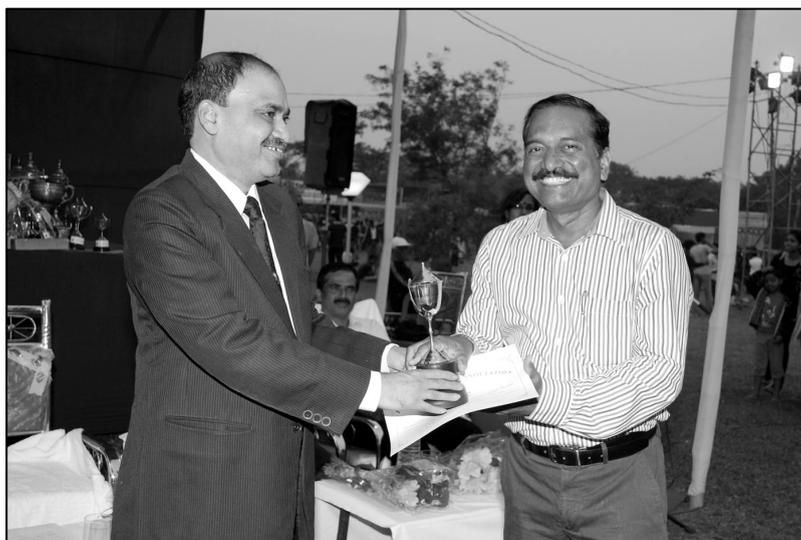
The history of the Pilgrim Tax traced by us is brief. It only highlights the broad outlines. Yet, the records examined by us prove beyond doubt that it was the moral challenge put forward by the missionaries and on the issue of supporting idolatry and heathen superstitions which finally led to the abolition of the Pilgrim Tax.³⁰ Now, if the introduction of the Pilgrim Tax by the Muslim rulers was also the outcome of a moral challenge thrown up by the orthodox Islamic nobility on the question of supporting idolatry, we can say that history came full circle with the abolition of the Pilgrim Tax in 1840.

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Shri R.K. Sharma, Principal Secretary, Forest and Environment handing over the prize to Shri Ashok Kumar Mishra, ACF and In-charge, Ekamravan which has been adjudged as the "Best Public Garden maintained by any organisation" on the occasion of State level Flower Show.