

Rediscovering the Jagannath Sadak

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The Jagannath Sadak was the old pilgrim road from Calcutta to Puri. It took form sometime in late 1700's and was the lifeline for all pilgrims who came to the Lord's abode at Puri. It was, from 1825, known as the Orissa Trunk Road, but for the devotees who descended on this path and made the slow way to Puri, it had always been the Jagannath Sadak. The road wound its way touching Belda, Dantan, Midnapore, Jaleswar, Basta, Balasore, Nilgiri, Bhadrak, Jajpur, Dharamshala, Chhatia, Cuttack, Bhubaneswar and Pipili. The travellers covered the distances by bullock carts, hackneys, palanquins, horses, camels and elephants, but most of them trudged on foot.

The road was a well-travelled one with many amenities for the pilgrims and travellers. There were Serais, Dharamshalas, wells, tanks, culverts, bridges, temples, rest sheds, Ghats, orchards etc. Many remnants of these are still visible on the isolated stretches of this once grand road.

The Jagannath Sadak was the road that was taken by Sri Chaitanya, Nanak and Kabir when they visited Puri. There are various travellers' accounts, from the French, English, Dutch and Persian, travellers. This was the road which the conquering armies of the Mughals, Marathas, Afghans and later on the East India Company



took to conquer Odisha. In fact, during their tenures, the Marahattas and the Englishmen had implemented a system of collecting toll tax for the maintenance of the road.

With the advent of the railways in 1898, the Jagannath Sadak fell into disuse and over the next few years was lost forever. The railways shortened the travel time from three weeks to fifteen hours. Many stretches of the road just vanished with time, it was encroached upon by villages and some lengths now form the NH-5. Today, only 168 km out of the original 510 km of the old road still exists.

The circulation of travellers and the production of travel accounts in the late 1700s and early 1800 was limited to that those of the missionaries and the East India Company officials,



and there was a marked asymmetry of relations and the perceptions that they had obtained and recorded. Most of the early accounts were missionary reports, and were typical stereotyped accounts of idolatry, pagan worship, moral degeneracy, hellish characters etc. and revealed the broad spectrum of opinions and views and were remarkably parallel.

The significance and importance of this road can be gauged by the following which is an extract from a letter of 27th February 1877, written by Father G. de Clercx, a French priest of The Company of Jesus. This letter was written from Balasore where the French had a mission where Jesuit missionaries used to be stationed. He gives a vivid account of the road and pilgrims.

“It is at Jaggernaut, towards the south of Orissa, that one finds the place of pilgrimage the most visited in the whole of India. People come here from hundreds of miles away and even from the districts located on the foothills of the Himalayas. Balasore, which is situated on the route of the pilgrims coming from the north-east of the peninsula, is continuously crossed by a crowd of pagans of all ages; of both the sexes and of all social levels, who visit or return to this place. The largest number comes on foot; some come on horsebacks, on the backs of camels or of elephants, or in carts of all types. When, in January last, I was on the route from Midnapore to

Balasore, the number of pilgrims was so -large that it looked like a procession as far as the eye could see. Most of them were full of tiredness; they moved forward painfully; quite a few had blood on their feet.”

“During the month of February about 3,000 pilgrims stay at Balasore each day. In the eyes of the pagans, even the route going to Jaggernaut is sacred; often the indigenous people taking this route touch the earth with hands and kiss it with respect before putting their feet on that route.”

My favourite traveller account was that of Yenugula Veeraswamy whose KasiYarta Charitra is a detailed history of the Sadak. Veeraswamy was a scholar who had joined the board of trade under the East India Company and was the head interpreter and translator in the Supreme Court of Madras. With a party of hundred, he had set out from Madras on the 18 May 1830 and for the next one year three months and five days travelled with his entourage on a circuitous pilgrimage passing through Rayalseema, Hyderabad, Nagpur, Jabalpur, Banaras, Calcutta and Odisha. In Odisha he went to places such as Balasore, Bhadrak, Jajpur, Cuttack, Puri, Chilka, Ganjam, Chatrapur and Berhampur.

Veeraswamy maintained a journal in which he recorded his experience. He was a keen



observer of even minute and common place things. His travelogue ranks high in the literally historical account of any traveller who visited this part of India. The Telugu edition was translated by the Andhra Pradesh Government Oriental Manuscripts Research Institute in 1973 and has been published as "Enugula Veeraswamy's Journal".

Jeremiah Zimmerman's "The God Juggernaut and Hinduism in India" written in 1890 gave a vivid travellers account on a journey on the road, albeit through a westerner's eyes. He writes: "Day and night throughout every month of the year, troops of devotees arrive at Puri, and for 300 miles along the great Orissa road every village has its pilgrim encampment. The parties consist of from 20 to 300 persons. At the time of the great festivals these bands follow so close as to touch each other; and a continuous train of pilgrims, many miles long, may often be seen on the Puri high road."

"They march in orderly procession, each party under its spiritual leader. At least five-sixths, and often nine-tenths of them, are females. Now a straggling band of slender, diminutive women, clothed in white muslin, and limping sadly along, announces a pilgrim company from Lower Bengal; then a joyous retinue with flowing garments of bright red or blue, trudging stoutly forward, their noses pierced with elaborate rings, their faces freely tattooed, and their hands encumbered with bundles of very dirty cloth, proclaims the stalwart female peasantry of Northern Hindustan. Ninety-five out of a hundred are on foot."

"Mixed with the throng are devotees of various sorts, some covered with ashes, some almost naked, some with matted, yellow-stained hair, and almost all with their foreheads streaked

with red or white, a string of beads round their necks, and a stout staff in their hands."

"Every now and then, covered wagons drawn by the high-humped bullocks of upper India, or by the smaller breed of Bengal, according to the nationality of the owner, creak past on their wooden wheels. Those from the Northern Provinces still bear traces of the licentious Mussalman rule, by being jealously shut up. The Bengali husband, on the other hand, keeps his women good-tempered, and renders pilgrimage pleasant, by piercing holes in the wagon-hood, through which dark female eyes constantly peep out."

"Then a lady in coloured trousers, from some village near Delhi, ambles past on a tiny pony, her husband submissively walking by her side, and a female domestic, with a hamper of Ganges water and a bundle of dirty cloth, bringing up the rear. Next a great train of palanquins, carrying a Calcutta banker and his ladies, sweeps past. I met one consisting of forty palanquins, with 320 bearers and about fifty luggage-carriers, whose monotonous chant made itself heard far off in the silent night."

"But the greatest spectacle is a north country Raja with his caravan of elephants, camels, led horses, and swordsmen, looking resigned and very helpless in his sedan of state, followed by all the indescribable confusion, dirt, and noises of Indian royalty."

It was sometime in late 2010 that I did my first recce of the Jagannath Sadak. I traversed the distance from Jaleswar to Balasore, spending time in each village on the way, exploring the remnants of the old road. I met the villagers and was greeted with amused curiosity, many of the people I spoke to just did not know anything about the road at all. Some of the old folk recollected the early memories of the Sadak and

others literally put me on the road by directing me to persons who would have more knowledge. The two weeks that I spent in the area, I gathered that searching the road would be no easy task, there were very few of the old generation left who had recollections of the road.

The oral history of the Jagannath Sadak is still rich and varied. There are many tales, fables and episodes which are still prevalent in the villages that were on the path of the old road. Popular ditties and limericks (called *dhagas*) are still sung. The Jagannath Sadak, the ancient travellers and pilgrims, the invading armies, all find mention in the songs, *bhajans* and religious texts of coastal Odisha.

The road was still called the Jagannath Sadak but few knew of its ancient history. Jaleswar was a sleepy town, more influenced by the neighboring Bengal than Odisha. However the 70 kilometers patch that I had picked up for my first recce of the road was the original road, and in places had remained unchanged since the last two centuries. I made notes on all that I had gathered and while spending the nights in the Old Dak Bungalows and the Circuit houses, I would go over these notes, unraveling the mysterious road that had disappeared with time.

In the next few months I covered other patches between Jajpur and Dharamshala, Chhatia to Cuttack and nearer home in Bhubaneswar itself. The old Jagannath Sadak just gave the ancient old town of Bhubaneswar a pass and skirted on the eastern side of the town. However there were two good roads which branched off it and ended at the Lingaraj temple. I had gathered from the old accounts that the travellers inevitably made their way to the old temples that encircled the Bindusagar pond.

I had managed to get facsimiles of good maps from the British Library at London that

showed in detail the road as it was in the year 1845. Other maps which figures in reports of the Famine Commission too made mention of the Jagannath Sadak. I also got many old maps of the areas through which the Sadak passed from the Asiatic Society, National Archives, Government Record rooms at Cuttack and Calcutta and a few from private collections.

My earlier trips of these places had by now generated some levels of curiosity amongst the villagers who stayed on the route of the Sadak. Many school teachers and college lecturers whom I had met in my reconnaissance surveys were now giving me tidbits and snippets of what they had gathered about the road. In six months, I had collected enough material and decided to make a trip to retrace the Jagannath Sadak.

In 2011, I undertook a Bullock Cart Journey on the old road, trying to retrace it. The journey was undertaken to highlight the deplorable condition of this once great and now forgotten road. It was a humble attempt to revisit and revive the lost glory of Kalinga, and to relocate and retrace the road with the help of modern scientific survey equipment.

We took a Bullock Cart, canopied it in the traditional style and put the three Lords on it. We had with us a two pairs of bullocks, a cart man, a farrier (to nail on the horseshoes), students from the history, archeology and geography departments from the Utkal University and a group of 25 *bhaktas*. We started one morning from the Jagannath Ghat at Kolkata and for the next two weeks walked the entire distance. We would walk the whole day, stopping to meet the villagers who were drawn to the bullock cart by sheer curiosity, and at night would camp at the small temples that dotted the road.

During the journey I discovered many remnants of the great road. I interacted with the

villagers on the way and visited the ruins that dotted the terrain of the route of the Jagannath Sadak. I have located more than two hundred archaeological remains of this road. Most of what remains is in ruins, but nevertheless they still resonate with what the ancient pilgrims underwent while on their way to Puri. Many of the old structures are still upright and can be restored. Most of them have fallen into disuse and decay or have been converted into Government offices, police stations, Dak bungalows etc. We also discovered marker stones, survey pillars, remnants of British era factories, encampments and mutts etc. which were scattered all along the old road.

I and my team spent two weeks in the villages on the route. We met scores of villagers, farmers, herders, traders, housewives, way side temple priests, holy men, revenue officials, government land record section employees etc. and gathered valuable information of the ancient road. We took photographs and interviewed many of the old folk who had recollections of the old road. The culmination of the journey was a soul stirring experience for all of us. I shall never be able to relate or pen down all that I gathered on the pilgrimage. The ghosts of the old travellers still haunt the road, many villagers told me that they still hear the tinkling of the bells of the bullock carts, the chanting songs of the palanquin bearers and the cries of 'Jai Jagannath' which the pilgrims broke into on seeing others.

After completing the journey, I was left with a huge amount of materials in the forms of papers, books, photographs, maps etc. Compiling them and assimilation of the information was a herculean task for me. It was then that the Convener of the State Chapter of INTACH, Shri A.B. Tripathy, proposed that I should compile a

complete list of the Monuments that we found on the road. The project was sponsored by INTACH's head office at Delhi, and I hit the road once again, this time for a scientific listing of all the remnants. Initially, I was told to document the remnants of the road in Odisha only.

The project "Documenting the Monuments of the Jagannath Sadak in Odisha" was launched on the 4th of June 2014. I was told to cover the distance of the road in Odisha and to complete it before the Nabakalebar. As the Project Head, I made forty trips on the road between Jaleswar and Puri, and then I stopped counting. Every inch of the old road has been traversed. It took me nearly one year to complete the trip. The sheer richness of the history of the road can be still gauged by whatever remains. The final report contains a listing of 200 monuments which besides temples and mutts, also has listing of 5 Churches, 8 Mosques and three Gurudwaras, which all have associational significance with the old Sadak. There are listing of 21 bridges, 20 wells, 15 tanks and scores of old Dharamshalas, rest houses, buildings etc.

The listing of the Bengal stretch of the Sadak too has been sanctioned and will be completed soon. INTACH has appealed to the governments of Odisha and West Bengal to ensure that the remnants of the old road are preserved for posterity. Further the pilgrim trail should be opened once again and the Kolkata Puri stretch of the National Highway should be renamed as the Jagannath Sadak.

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