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The Pilgrim Routes and the Practices of Pilgrimage in Nineteenth Century North India

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Abstract:

Through case studies of three pilgrim tours of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this article tries to understand the changing features of pilgrimage practices in early colonial north India. The gradual penetration of the British into the sacred geography deeply affected the cultural and economic equilibriums of the pilgrimages. The colonial ambition for gaining profit from all sectors came to be very prominent in the pilgrimage sites. Pilgrim taxes were imposed and pilgrimage routes were cordoned by various restrictions. In the later part of the nineteenth century pilgrim sites were seen by the colonial rulers as suspicious gatherings and sources of epidemics and pestilences. This article deals with the early part of the colonial rule when both the rulers and the ruled were negotiating at the sacred sites and were interacting with each other to produce a new pilgrimage culture.

Keywords: pilgrims, routes, pilgrim tax, Benares, Puri

1. Introduction

This article examines the fast-changing pilgrimage practices in nineteenth century north India through the case studies of three pilgrims. The colonial rule changed the perceptions on sacred geographies. The non-detachable categories of sacred and profane now suffered major blows. While for many Indians the pilgrimages were still sacred sites, for the British rulers they were sources of epidemics, diseases and spots of suspicious gatherings. This article discusses the historiography on pilgrimage in India, followed by a detailed discussion of the experiences of three pilgrims who ventured to travel through the territories of northern and eastern India.

2. Historiography on Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage practices were never 'pure' spiritual practices. The combined picture of the trader and the pilgrim in Indian history we get in the well-worked thesis of Ashin Dasgupta on the pious hajj passengers of the western coast who used to set out from the port of Surat and headed towards the holy city of Mecca. Dasgupta's thesis goes to the extreme to show that merchandize and *not* pilgrimage was the priority of the hajj passengers. The mundane triumphed over the profane.¹ M. N. Pearson shifted from this extreme stand and showed that traders and pilgrims in the hajj traffic could never be overlapped because they relied on different calendars (solar and lunar calendars respectively, economic role of the latter was nominal).² As the seasons of their journey were different, so Dasgupta's thesis cannot be fully accepted.

Traders and pilgrims often converged at the sites of bustling marketplaces and religious fairs which were almost equivalent to markets. Anand Yang³ and Sudipta Sen⁴ have authenticated the image of this trader-pilgrim roaming in the thriving and busy bazaars of northern India. The Marwari traders, often pious devotees of ancient pilgrimage sites like Benares, Gaya or Deoghar, used to conduct business on a regular basis at these places. In Sudipta Sen's work, merchandizing and pilgrim tours merge not only at market spots but all along their routes to these places, confusing customs officers, making their task of fiscal surveillance difficult. The merchant pretending as pilgrim to escape the custom dues is a recurrent picture of this study.

The classic theories of pilgrimage and pilgrim tours have stressed the religious part of it, detaching it from the material world of trade and merchandize. Though in practice the most common picture of the pilgrim is always combined with that of the trader, in the masterpieces of Victor Turner the pilgrim has been considered as a 'pious passenger', moving towards the sacred, setting out from this world of vices and sins.⁵ Turner has stressed on the *itinerary* of the pilgrim, contrasting it to the sedentary nature of everyday life.

¹ Ashin Dasgupta, *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat. c. 1700-1750* Manohar, 1994 (originally published 1979)

² Michael Naylor Pearson, *Pious Passengers: The Hajj in Earlier Times*, Sterling Publishers, 1994

³ Anand A. Yang, *Bazaar India: Markets, Society and the Colonial State in Bihar*, University of California Press, 1998

⁴ Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998

⁵ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969; *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell University Press, 1974; *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological*

Drawing heavily in his earlier theories from the writings of Arnold van Gennep⁶, Turner has adopted a view that pilgrim journey represents the 'communitas' in contrast to the 'structure' of regular life. This binary of 'structure' and 'communitas', standing for settlement and journey, connotes that pilgrimage is a "temporary involution of the social rule which encourages travel". In his later research, Turner, had shifted his stand from defining pilgrimage as 'liminal' to 'liminoid'. The difference is that the 'liminal' period of the *rite of passage* is always initiatory and obligatory, while pilgrimage is voluntary and for variety of purposes.

Historical work on pilgrimage in India is limited. Alan Morinis has done a case study of three pilgrimages of West Bengal, one *shakta*, one *shaiva* and one *vaisnava* sacred places.⁷ Agehananda Bharati has studied the different contours and features of the pilgrimage sites in India, while the works of Makhan Jha, S. M. Bharadwaj contributed to the various aspects of pilgrimage studies. Most of the scholarly works on pilgrimage have an anthropological approach, containing only cursory discussions of its historical backdrop. The limited number of researches that enriches the historian includes Mahesh Sharma's article in the volume edited by Joseph O'connell which contains a valuable discussion on the theme of 'alternative' pilgrimage sites.⁸

Pilgrimage sites and pilgrim tours in colonial eastern India is an almost untouched topic. Sudipta Sen's work has dealt with the moving pilgrims in the context of markets since the pilgrimage sites were in most cases flourishing market spots as well.⁹ Work has been done on pilgrim tax. Nancy Gardner Cassels has written about the fatal effects of the series of pilgrim taxes that were imposed on the Jagannatha temple in Puri.¹⁰ Here I would refrain myself from the wandering monks, *sadhus*, mendicants and ascetic groups whose lives were revolving round the pilgrimage sites. My research will focus on the common householder pilgrims who used to conduct their journeys in certain seasons of festivals and fairs.

3. Shifting Away from Old Sites

The negative effects of British demands from pilgrimages can be understood from the following story. This story is unearthed from the account of Bengal by W. W. Hunter who made a thorough historical and ethnographic enquiry into the regions of Birbhum and Bishenpore.¹¹ The earlier Muslim dynasty used to collect tax from the pilgrims of Deoghar. The Rajahs of Birbhum negotiated with the chief priest of the temple who used to pay a fixed rent to them out of his extractions from the devotees. The early English Collectors decided to manage the temple business themselves in order to make more profit out of it. In 1788 Mr. Hesilrigge, the Head Assistant, organized numerous establishments of priests, money-takers and watchmen at the expense of the State.¹² As soon as the temple came under Government speculation, it started to affect the liberty of the devotees adversely. As much the Government aimed to make profit, as much they had to rely on the priests, and as much corrupt they appeared. As an obvious result, the revenue declined sharply. Additional officers were entertained to watch over those who were already appointed. But the Collector still complained that the chief priest frustrated his vigilance by besetting every avenue to the temple with emissaries, who induced pilgrims to make offerings before approaching the shrine! Keating, the Collector, decided to visit the temple to exert personal influence and to check the arrogance of the priest. With a guard of 35 soldiers, the Collector started on 21st February 1791 and reached there a week later. Keating appointed 120 armed policemen with 15 officers to guard the site mainly for the purpose of curbing the influence of the chief priest though no protection was provided for the pilgrims.

The highways and pathways to the Deoghar pilgrimage were generally infested with wild beasts, bandits, *thugees*. But in spite of all odds the popularity and legends of the pilgrimage used to attract huge pilgrim traffic every year. But now over all these was added the demands of the Collector and his party who aimed to extract as much possible from the wretched pilgrims. Under the system of non-interference by the Muslim rulers of Birbhum, around 40 to 100 thousand pilgrims used to visit the site every day. The temple tax was fixed in a moderate sum. In 1789, in the first year of office of Keating, 50000 pilgrims yielded only 430 pounds. In 1790 his improved system produced 900 pounds. In 1791 he determined to increase the temple tax, but only 15000 pilgrims visited that year. Thus, gradually the number of pilgrims decreased in Deoghar which was later reduced to a mart. The nearby *shaiva* site of Tarakeshwar located in the Hooghly district gained more popularity among the local inhabitants.

4. The Pilgrim and the Changing World Around

The main two pilgrimages taken up by the Hindu pilgrims were the journey to Benares and to Puri. There were some underlying differences between the pilgrimages to these two places. The pilgrimage to Benares was considered as an ideal pilgrimage, it was believed that people travelled to Benares to regain their health, while the pilgrimage to the Jagannath temple in Puri was a pilgrimage of death. The path towards Puri was a dangerous trail for pilgrims, many pilgrims succumbed to cholera and plague and were often taken away by dangerous beasts guarding the route.

Perspectives, Columbia University Press, 1978; *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology*, Concept Publishing Company, 1979

⁶ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960 (first published in 1908)

⁷ E. Alan Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: A Case Study of West Bengal*, Oxford University Press, 1984

⁸ Mahesh Sharma, "Dimensions of Pilgrimage: A Case Study of Jalandhara Pitha", Joseph T. O'connell (ed.), *Organizational and Institutional Aspects of Indian Religious Movements*, Manohar, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1999

⁹ Sudipta Sen, op. cit.

¹⁰ Nancy Gardner Cassels, *Religion and Pilgrim Tax under the Company Raj*, Riverdale Company, 1988

¹¹ W. W. Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, Smith, Elder & Co., 1868

¹² Report of the Collector to the Honourable Charles Stuart, President and Member of the Board of Revenue, 30 May 1790, Bengal Revenue Records.

In 1843 the Bengali newspaper *Samachar Chandrika* published a series of reports on the pilgrim traffic to Puri, on the stream of pilgrims who accompanied Baboo Ashutosh Deb of Calcutta.¹³ Contradictory information reached the newspapers. Some glorified the pilgrims' trail and provided a positive picture, while others depicted horrifying pictures of the pilgrim tour.¹⁴ The letters giving a negative picture of the pilgrimage, talked of dearth of dwelling places, lack of water supply, high prices of food and frequent attacks of cholera that exhausted the pilgrims. Some of the letters juxtaposed Srikshetra (Puri) with Kurukshetra! It was reported that a large number of pilgrims to Puri perished on the way for want of food and treatment.¹⁵

In contrast to the Puri pilgrimage, the pilgrim tours to Benares were considered as safer and less dangerous, "the pilgrimage to Juggernaut a very serious waste of life and of morality. The up-country pilgrimages are a source of health."¹⁶ In the accounts of Bijoyram Sen, Yadunath Sarbidhakari and of the Zamindar of Calcutta it was very explicit that the pilgrims were quite aware of the changing features of the colonial rule. The pilgrim routes were no more described as sacred paths leading to ultimate renunciation, but the pilgrims preferred long and enthusiastic descriptions of their ways, detailing each event and various encounters with the colonial categories. The Zamindar of Calcutta sent his long petition requesting the colonial government to arrange for a safe and secured *dak* for his pilgrimage to Benares. Most of the places described by the pilgrims were spaces created by colonial history. Though in many places the descriptions tended to merge with the Hindu *puranas* and the places were inevitably identified with the sacred geography found in the ancient texts, the presence of the colonial is evidently conspicuous. Here we will examine some such trends in the pilgrim accounts of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

5. The Route along the Ganges, from 'Time Immemorial'

Tirthamangal, a verse written by Bijoyram Sen was completed in 1771.¹⁷ It was a chronological account of the sequence of the events on the pilgrimage route from Calcutta to Benares on the river Ganges. The pilgrimage tour was conducted by Krishna Chandra Ghoshal of the famous Ghoshal family of Bhukailash, one of the most influential landlords of Calcutta. Bijoyram accompanied him as a *vaidya* or doctor though the principal demand from him was the production of a tour diary that would work as a reliable eulogy of Krishna Chandra. Bijoyram devotedly performed the task, talking about a series of chiefs and zamindars on their way eager to show their allegiance to Ghoshal. From another viewpoint, it could be seen as a political trip by Ghoshal. The pious route to Benares, traversed by streams of pilgrims, turned out to be a space where Ghoshal exercised his diplomatic agenda.

Tirthamangal was written at the juncture of the Nawabi rule and the British rule in Bengal. The presence of the British was still not very conspicuous in the landscape of the vast northern Indian plains though the places notified and described in the text often referred to recent political incidents. The remnants of the post-Plassey and post-Buxar era were evident in the verse. Sailing through Moorshedabad, Mungher, Patna, Gaya, Sasseram, places of historical importance and prominent for the recent interference by the British, the author mainly congested his account with the political importance of the regions rather than identifying them with the ancient Hindu *puranas*. Though he balanced his account with the detailed portrayal of the holy water of the river Punpun, of the inauspicious water of the river Karamnassa, and of the numerous sacred sites they came across at Gaya, Patna and other places, his text repeatedly reverted back to the political.

The pilgrimage was a huge and important affair. Hundreds of people joined the party of Ghoshal. From the villages, they passed through streams of people joined them. They sailed on boats – Sen counted 21 boats, some of them special varieties of large boats like *bajra*, *mayurpankhi*, *toshakhan* – commanded over by Krishna Chandra. The pilgrims included the relatives of the Ghoshals, large number of householders, mendicants, beggars, destitutes. There were people from various sects of Hinduism, Brahmins, Vaishnavites. At every river *ghat* new groups of pilgrims joined the party. A number of them perished on the way or returned back, unable to continue with the exhausting travel. Women like Krishna Chandra's aunt travelled in special canopied boats.

Sen recorded the names of a number of influential people who showed allegiance to Ghoshal. The pilgrims were generously treated and given shelter by these chiefs. Rajkishore Roy, the Dewan of Hooghly, Manohar Mukherjee of Mungher, BishnuSimha of Patna, DewanMadhabram of Tikari met Ghoshal and cordially received him, as has been recorded by Sen. Sitab Roy, the *subadar* of Patna, gifted him watches, horses, shawls, and the chief of the Chuhar tribe in Rajmahal paid 1 rupee *nazrana*. In this journey, Sen mentioned the compulsory extraction of customs dues at 26 places from Patna to Gaya, a pre-colonial practice gradually taken over by the colonial masters. The total amount paid was 8/9 rupees to meet these demands.

The pilgrims passed through a landscape thick with the memories of recent historical events. The narration of Bijoyram tried to grasp the changing historical landscape of contemporary northern India, identifying the spots that came to prominence with the penetration of the East India Company. Near Mungher the pilgrims crossed the place of Danesha Fakir, in whose home NawabSiraj-ud-Daula was caught by the British.¹⁸ The author's account merged with older histories or mythical accounts. He freely moved within a large span of temporal scale, citing the early medieval just after a long narration of contemporary events. Near Bateshwar Mountain he identified a

¹³*Samachar Chandrika*, 5 June 1843, Monday.

¹⁴*Samachar Chandrika*, 19 June 1843, Monday.

¹⁵*Samachar Chandrika*, 22 June 1843, Thursday.

¹⁶ General: Sanitation, April 1869, No. 26, Letter from R. B. Chapman, Officiating Commissioner of the Presidency Division, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal. West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), Kolkata.

¹⁷BijoyramSen, *Tirthamangal*, edited by Nagendranath Basu Prachya bidyamaharnab, BangiyaSahityaParishad, 1322 BS, originally completed in 1177 BS or 1771 AD.

¹⁸Siraj-udDaula, the Nawab of Bengal escaped from the Mango Grove of Plassey where the Battle of Plassey took place in 1757, took shelter in the abovementioned place, then got caught and was killed.

very old place near Kahalgaon in Bhagalpore. The mythical story circulated around was that the Kayastha Bateśwar Mitra married his daughter to the Vaidya Ballal Sen, an act that enraged his relatives. But Ballal Sen regained the honour to his father-in-law by placing him on the throne of the newly conquered Magadh where Mitra established the huge Bateśwarnath Shiva temple.

6. And the Road, along the Signs of the Colony

Bijoyram's sense of history and description of the pilgrimage route vastly differed from that of Yadunath Sarbadhikari who wrote his diary on the way of his pilgrimage to Benares between 1259 Magh to 9th Agrayayan 1264 (1853 to 1858 AD).¹⁹ Yadunath's travel account was published in the early 1920s and was considered as one of the unique instances of Bengali literature as the accounts of the pilgrims was rare here.²⁰ Yadunath was in habit of reading it aloud to his kins who listened to it devotedly as a religious text. But in the long descriptions of his way from Calcutta to Benares, he consistently deviated from the paths of the sacred and provided a vivid description of the 'mundane' experiences on the roads, a feature that characterized it as a colonial text. The presence of the British was conspicuous everywhere. The various measures adopted by the Government for the shelter of the pilgrims and for their daily conveniences were very much evident in the accounts of Yadunath. The major significance of this travelogue lay in the fact that Yadunath's tour was conducted by road and it was probably one of the last instances of pilgrim tours by road as railways began to dominate the route since early 1860s.

Unlike the large group of Krishna Chandra Ghoshal, Yadunath began his journey with a few companions, some of whom returned home after getting sick on the way. They were guided by Ishwar Chandra Kowri, an experienced pilgrim escort of the village Radhaballabhore and were accompanied by Nakur Chandra Basu and Ramdhan Singh and the porter Biswanath Tanti. Biswanath died on the way while Ramdhan had to be escorted back after he survived serious illness. The terms like 'metalled road' (*bnadhanorasta* in Bengali), *serai*, *chati* have been recurred in Yadunath's account, giving glimpses of the regular presence of the colonial categories on the way. They generally took shelter in the grocery shops or *serais* in various places following the common custom. Yadunath and his companions walked the whole way to Benares, an act considered as deep sign of devotion and religiosity though his narration of the dwelling places, of the rules and regulations in the *serais* help us to get an almost lay picture of the famous route.

From Gopalpore near Burdwan he got hold of the metalled road that reached till Delhi. He gave a vivid description of the numerous *serais*, shops, huts on both sides of the road, especially made for the shelter of the travellers and of the pilgrims. In most of the rooms no rent was charged, only a meager donation of 1 paisa was to be made. The travellers compulsorily had to register their names in the places they stayed and had to provide their identity details in the nearest *thanahs*. The places of Hindu pilgrimage had gained importance in the account of Yadunath though his narration is rich with the sketches of the natural beauty of the way, the picturesque seen through the eyes of the indigenous traveller.²¹ The danger of deep forests and dacoits had been apprehended for several times though generally a generosity of the colonial government in providing means for the pilgrims had been recognized.

Yadunath too, elaborated the historical accounts of many of the places he traversed through. Near Dubrigrām the travel party stayed in a *serai* that was known as the *serai* of Lal Khan Bahadur, a famous fighter of the Sepoy Revolt of 1857. He found the villages connected by village paths passable for the palanquins though the dearth of metalled roads in many places caused obstacles to the journey. As the author reached near Benares or Kashi, the landscape appeared more and more sacred to him. The long descriptions of the series of temples on the way and in Kashi occupied the pages of his diary. The Hindu sacred geography made its way through the colonial signs and symbols, through the 'metalled road', the *serais* and bungalows, thus giving the text its unique character of a tour diary of a pilgrim, highlighting its differences from the travelogues produced by lay people.

7. Pilgrimage, a Joint Venture, at Last

While in the diary of Yadunath Sarbadhikari we can check the prominent presence of the colonial rule, in the letter sent by the Zamindar of Calastry of the northern division of Arcot in southern India, it was evident that pilgrimage was gradually becoming subjected to a joint governance conducted by the indigenous pilgrims and the colonial government. In 1824 the Zamindar requested the Secretary to the Government of Fort St. George for the arrangement of necessary measures and for negotiating with the Collectors of the respective districts through which he was supposed to pass on his way to Benares as some stages on the route were under the Madras Government while some of the stages were under the Government of Bengal.²² The Zamindar expected to be received with proper honour on his route.²³

¹⁹ Yadunath Sarbadhikari, *Tirtha Bhraman*, edited by Nagendranath Basu Prachyabidyamaharnab, Sahitya Parishad 1322 BS.

²⁰ This was the opinion of Pundit Krishna Kamal Bhattacharya, cited by Nagendranath Basu.

²¹ There are good number of works elaborating the idea of the 'picturesque'. The Indian landscape appeared as picturesque to the European travellers. Scholars have juxtaposed this trend with the contemporary wrath in Europe against the Industrial Revolution and identified the origin of the 'picturesque' in the tendencies to revert back to the natural. See Indira Ghose, *Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

²² Board of Revenue: Miscellaneous, 7 December 1824, Nos.78-83, Letter from J. Stokes, Secretary to the Government of Fort St. George, to W. B. Bayley, Chief Secretary to the Government of India. WBSA, Kolkata.

²³ This kind of narration of pilgrim tour was common. The zamindars and wealthy travellers expected the chiefs on their way to welcome them and attend them with pomp. See the description of the pilgrimage tour of Enugula Veeraswamy in 1830, from Madras to Benares, in Anand A. Yang, *Bazaar India: Markets, Society, and the Colonial State in Gangetic Bihar*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1998, 2000.

The Zamindar simultaneously made request and imposed orders to make his journey successful. He asked for permission to carry arms and for necessary provisions to be supplied at reasonable prices. He expected positive response from the local rulers and asked the Government to negotiate with them regarding his journey, "order the people of Religious Institutions to come forward with Holy Water and Rice to receive me, to allow me to pay my visit to the Images of God and to treat me with attention."²⁴ For the convenience of the district collectors he enclosed three lists detailing the particulars of his journey. These lists specified the expected halting places, the amount of grocery required at each halting place and the particulars of the conveyances, furniture, arms etc.

The Zamindar provided a long list of the stations at which he would be halting and devoted several columns to enlist the numerous villages, towns, rivers and temples that would come on his way. The main pilgrimage centres he wished to visit were Jagannath, Shakshigopalram, Shree Calahastee, Shree Gaya, Shree Causee (Benares) and Shree Prayaga. His journey route was still a chain of holy places, a network of sacred spaces, but to cope up with the colonial rule and with the changing ideas of geography the route of the pilgrim was now stripped off from the 'sacred'. The Zamindar had political agenda as well similar to Krishna Chandra Ghoshal who too asserted allegiance and cordiality of the chiefs along his route.

The British authority was very much aware of such pilgrim tours and they kept strict vigil over the travellers. The Collector of each district was informed about the Zamindar's journey, Packinson in Orissa, Barwell in Midnapore, and W. Smith in Gaya. In several places dues were collected from the pilgrims, in some places like Jagannath it amounted to even Rs. 2 to 6. Stokes communicated with the Collectors of Nellore, Guntoor, Rajahmundry, Vizagapatnam and Ganjam, all of whom found the Zamindar's demands unobjectionable and hence granted the resources and security asked by him. Stokes arranged for peons to be placed in several places for his attendance. It was decided that a *gomastah* and two peons within the limits of each *talook* would be sufficient. The Collectors of Midnapore, Burdwan, Hidgellee and Bancoorah on the Bengal side of Ganjam were given similar instructions.

8. Conclusion

This article attempted to examine some of the pilgrimage accounts of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and checked the slow penetration of the colonial categories in the space that was previously represented as sacred. Pilgrimage tours both on land and river routes were now a joint project conducted by the British and the pilgrims themselves. The entry of the colonial categories changed the nature of pilgrimage tours. Against Victor Turner's assumption that pilgrimage is an anti-thesis of the mundane and of the daily household activities, it can be said that the new age pilgrimage turned out to be a hybrid venture inviting participation from both the Indians and the British, it was a way of inhabiting the mundane within the sacred, combining the two, experiencing the two in new ways.

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²⁴ Board of Revenue: Miscellaneous, 7 December 1824, Nos. 78-83, Letter from C. Rungiah, the Interpreter. WBSA, Kolkata.