

## Research Article

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# Buddhist Remains of Boudh District: A Historical Study

<https://doi.org/10.2478/irsr-2019-0009>

Received: June 7, 2019; Accepted: June 10, 2019

**Abstract:** The present paper focuses on the Buddhist vestiges of Boudh District of Central Odisha. Emphasis has been laid on aspects like historical background, location of sites, literary references, colonial records pertaining to Buddhist sites of the locality, local tradition, rituals and other facets of the sites. Besides, an attempt is made to locate the sites along the Buddhist trail which even continued during the British regime. Besides, detailed study of the sites with cultural remains and sporadic findings of Buddhist sculptures have been cited to draw a holistic picture of Buddhist remains in the district.

**Keywords:** hinterland, craftsmanship, communities, chiefdom, remnants

The Buddhist remains during the late phase of development, the Mahayana and Vajrayana (Tantric form) are also plenty in Odisha, and it is an established fact that Vajrayana or Tantric fold of Buddhism had its origin in Odisha, at Vajragiri and ultimately spread to far-off territories up to Outer Mongolia (Ulaanbaatar) through Tibet, China, Japan and other Central Asian countries. It is an amazing factor that so much of Buddhist sites in the State must have some deep footing, right from its inception. It is also surprising that a considerable population, confined to a particular geographic horizon, in Baramba-Narsinghpur-Athgarh and Banki-Kantilo-Padmavati pockets still practice Buddhism and are the only Buddhist population of the State. It might have happened that during the religious persecution by the ruling dynasties after the Bhaumakaras, the Buddhist population fled away or rehabilitated in those pockets. The Buddhist population of these areas comprises several

communities like Agarias, Kultas, Jharias, Dumbalas, Suddhas, Kharias etc. who are not the local inhabitants as a whole. They might have migrated from other Buddhist pockets of Odisha due to severe religious persecution and suppression.

The region of Boudh in Central Odisha, located in between the royal route of Toshali to Pataliputra contributed a lot to the flourishing of the religion through the ages. The following is a succinct account of the Buddhist remains in the area and their significance:

## The Area

The district of Boudh is located in the centre of Odisha between 20° 21' & 20° 54' N Latitude and 83° 34' & 84° 34' E Longitudes and covers an area of 3450 sq km. It forms a part of the northernmost extremity of the Eastern Ghats (Basu *et al.* 1995: 367-369). It is bordered by the river Mahanadi and Angul district in the east, Nayagarh district on the south, Suvarnapur district in the north and Khondmal district on the west. Geographically, the district consists of two regions, 1. riverine alluvial plain stretching across northeastern parts drained by the Mahanadi and its tributaries and 2. hilly zones occupying the northwestern part, which are covered with dense deciduous forests and shelter rich wild life (Sinha 1971). The area has an average elevation of 130 to 150 m above Mean Sea Level. Geologically, the area is characterized by the presence of khondalite, charnokite, gneiss and intrusive veins like chert, quartz, jasper etc., which form in shales and patches. The Gondwana formation also occurs at some places, particularly to the north of the district (Wadia 1961). Besides, the region is also quite rich in gemstone deposits and so far more than 28 gem belts (Khuntia *n.d.*; Das 1997:18) containing diamond, ruby, sapphire, aquamarine, topaz, zircon etc. have been located which were also traded as far as the Roman world as evident from the descriptions of Ptolemy (Majumdar 1927). The region is well-fed by a number of major rivers like the Mahanadi, Tel, Bagh and Salunki and formed the backbone of trading activities during the early periods as most of these rivers

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were perennial in nature and were navigable. There is a long history of trading activities through these rivers which has been corroborated by geographical as well as ethnographic correlates, particularly of the Colonial period. Surprisingly, trade through the Mahanadi as also along the land route located on the bank of Mahanadi is still in practice and the materials exchanged remains almost the same. The route also played a very important role in the diffusion of urbanization and state formation in this hinterland part of Odisha (Tripathy 2000: 60-67, 2002a, 2007a: 46-71).

## Historical Background

The political history of the region is not certain up to the early medieval period as there is no historical record available to us. Most probably the region was under a tribal chieftdom society. During the early medieval period, the region of Boudh was known as Khinjali Mandala and a powerful regional dynasty known as 'Bhanjas' were ruling over the territory spreading modern Sonapur, Dasapalla and Athmallik regions of Central Odisha. Sometimes in the early part of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Bhanjas were subjugated by the powerful Bhauma-Karas of Uttara Toshali who were devout Buddhists by religious pantheon as evident from their royal epithets like *Paramatathagata*, *Paramaupasaka*, *Paramasaugata* etc. and as a result Buddhism penetrated into the hinterland with main centres at Boudh, Pragalpur and Symsundarpur (Sahu 1997). In the absence of any solid evidence like copper plate charters or stone inscriptions, it is generally believed that the Bhauma-Karas were responsible for the construction of the monastic complexes in the region. After the occupation of Khinjali Mandala by the Somavamsis under Janmejaya I, Buddhism literally evaporated from the region as a practicing religion and confined to some rituals (secular) only. It is also presumed that most of the Buddhist places were destroyed in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries by the Somavamsis as reflected in the Star-Shaped temple of Boudh and in this context several Buddhist establishments lost their identity in the region (Sahu 1958). Recent archaeological exploration work in Odisha has also yielded several Buddhist sites which have been interpreted in a diachronic manner to understand the overall growth and spread of Buddhism (Patnaik 2015).

## Literary and Colonial Records

There are plenty of literary and colonial records pertaining to Buddhism in the area. There is a reference to

Bodhisattva's association with the region, especially river Tel, a tributary of the Mahanadi, in the Serivannijja Jataka, a Jataka story (Cowell 1957). The story is about two traders (*Serivan*), one being the Bodhisattva himself of the kingdom of Sri, who came across the Telavaha (Present-day Tel) to the city of Anandapura, to sell their wares. Mention may be made here that Ananda was a famous disciple of Lord Buddha and the name of the city might have derived from his name. The Bodhisattva is depicted here as a person dealing in pots and pans. The story ends with Bodhisattva crossing back the river in a boat, and urging the boatmen not to pick up his fellow trader, who is standing on the riverside calling out of the boatman to take him along, as he turns out to be a cheat. The story deserves mention for three important reasons; 1. Buddhist affiliation to the region like other parts of Central Odisha mentioned in Chulakalinga Jataka is confirmed, 2. boats plied across the river ferrying people as well as goods and 3. traders from distant lands followed this route, 4. the river served as an important water route even before 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (Rangarajan 1994) and 5. there were important cities (for example Anandapura, which is yet to be identified) along the banks of this river. This is supported by the discovery of fortified early Historic settlements at Manamunda-Asurgarh, Kharligarh, Budhigarh, Narla Asurgarh, and Nehena on the banks of the Tel.

The Arthasashtra (c. 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) also mentions about the river Tel as Telavaha. This itself signifies the importance of this river in the Early Historic Odisha and the Mauryan's were well-aware about the small but important river. The river played a major role in shaping the trade route running from Toshali to Ujjain, as it takes a turn at Manamunda-Asurgarh and follows the river bank of Tel and reaches Vidisha and Ujjain through the Chottanagpur plateau region. The work also refers to the rich gem deposits of the region *Indravana*, which has been identified with the region between the rivers Tel and Indravati (Kangle 1965).

The great Sinhalese Chronicle, Mahavamsa (Geiger 1912) ascribed to the later half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., records the events associated with the travels of Vijaya, a king of Ceylon, and his consecration. It is stated in the text that Vijaya camped at the port of Supparaka on his homeward voyage from Bengal, but was compelled to move on because of the lawlessness of his followers. On logical grounds, this Supparaka cannot be equated with Sopara, the famous ancient port city on the west coast of India. Sterling (1925) takes the view that 'Sopara was a prominent place of Buddhism even much before Mahavamsa's time. Hence, it appears that the author of the Mahavamsa was not aware of the geography of India properly'. In

all probability, it was a port city situated on the eastern coast (Gupta 1998; Tripathy 2002b:81-97). Burgess (1882: 236-237), in the course of his argument for the existence of 'Eastern Sopara' comments, "One hardly believes that king Vijaya landed on the west coast". However, it is a matter of further research. Ptolemy (Majumdar 1927) also locates Sipara in the catchment area of the Mahanadi, especially between the river Manada (Mahanadi) and Tyndis (Brahmani). It is unfortunate to delineate that no serious work has been conducted to find out the cultural and historical potential of the region during the medieval period, especially the trading patterns and trade routes located in the area joining different parts of Coastal Odisha and Central India. The records of the British Colonial Ethnographers like Thomas Motte (Acharya 1955), James Rennel (1783) and W.W. Hunter (1872) suggest that there was a briskly trade network operated by the merchants from Nagpur to coastal Odisha and the region of Boudh played a very significant role and proved as a 'key position' to enter into mainland Odisha.

## The Route or Buddhist Trail

Odisha was well-connected with different parts of the Sub-continent as also with Sri Lanka, South and Southeast Asian islands and as far as the Far Eastern regions through its briskly maritime enterprises. We have positive evidences of trade and trade routes dating to the 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. as per the archaeological, numismatic, literary, ethno-historic and historic correlates. From the Dhauli Edict of Ashoka Maurya (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.) it is clear that the capital city of Kalinga, Toshalinagara was directly connected to Pataliputra via Ujjain, Vidisha, Sanchi and as far as Taxila in the Northwestern Frontier Province. It is also clearly evident from the Edict that there was regular and non-stop communication between Pataliputra (imperial capital) with Ujjain and Toshalinagara (provincial headquarters) as the Mauryan emperor was concerned about the people of the war-ravaged Kalinga and was sending regular convoys of officials like Dharmamahamatras to Toshalinagar for better administration and reformation. Toshalinagara was also connected with its second provincial capital located at Khapingala hill areas at Jaugada (where another Ashokan Edict has been located). All these areas were well connected with the seacoast and other parts of the Continent.

The region of Boudh played a bridge between the north and the south as evident from the archaeological

records of the area, especially pottery of distance places which has been scientifically proved. The royal route from Toshali via Suvarnapura to Ujjain passed through the region enroute several important places like Radhanagar, Dhauli, Aragada, Banki, Badamula, Dholpur, Sakusinga, Syamsundarpur, Pragalpur, Kardi, Boudh, Manamunda Asurgarh, Ganiapali, Budhigarh, Narla-Asurgarh, Nehena, Sripura, Vidisha, Ujjain. A route which bifurcates at Seonath also touched Pataliputra. This route is littered with archaeological evidences and the route has been established not only with archaeological but also historic and ethno-historic records. In this context a riverine route from Kantilo-Padmavati to Manamunda-Asurgarh was flourishing through out the Early Historic, Medieval and Colonial periods. The route, popularly known as Old Jagannath Road still exists up to a stretch of about 50 kms from Boudh to Banki region and passes through the dangerous Badmul Pass. The road is still in use during dry seasons.

There were also several routes near Bhubaneswar-Aragada-Naraj areas (the place is known as Trisulia) connecting the seacoast as ancient Odisha was having a thriving overseas trade network with the South and Southeast Asia in which Buddhism played a leading role and subsequently migrated to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. One such route was passing through Bhubaneswar and Dhauli and reached the seacoast (Konark, Khalkatapatana and ports of the Chilka Lake) through the famous Lembai region comprising Bhubaneswar-Jatani localities.

The Coastal-hinterland relationship began prior to the early Historic period (c. 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. onwards) in terms of resource exploitation and trade and communication mechanism that operated between coastal Odisha and the hinterland. The early Historic archaeological settlements like Kardi, Marjakud, Manamunda-Asurgarh, Deuli, Kharligarh, Budhigarh, Asurgarh and Nehena were well-connected with each other both by land and river routes. The trade during the Early Historic period was carried on through the Mahanadi by the *Shrsthis* (businessmen) who were Buddhists. The evidence of Buddhist connection mainly comes from the ceramic findings. Knobbed Ware, a typical pottery type, closely associated with Buddhist cosmology during the Hinayana phase have been noticed in all most all Early Historic sites in the hinterland Odisha which suggest a briskly trade network between coastal and hinterland Odisha in which the Central part of Odisha played the role of a bridge (Tripathy 2005: 169-179; 2007b: 1-19; 2007c).

## Boudh (20o 541 N & 83o 341 E)

A huge Buddhist monastery is located just near the royal palace of Boudh proper which has been severely disturbed by constructional activities and a Children's Park has emerged just on the core area of the monastery. A colossal image of Lord Buddha in Bhumisparsa mudra is enshrined in a single-roomed structure and has been protected by the State Archaeology, Odisha. An excavation in a small-scale was carried out at the site as early as 1924 by R. D. Banerji (1929: 64-86), who stayed for a long time in the region and had surveyed other sites like Manamunda-Asurgarh and the Star-Shaped Temple of Boudh. He also witnessed several Buddhist images near the colossal Buddha which includes a standing figure of Lokanatha as also a votive stupa. The site is littered with ancient pillars, bricks and brick bats suggesting the existence of a flourishing monastery. The image of Buddha measuring about 4 ft and 6 inches and has three parts, shoulder, waist and knees are being flanked by flying Gandharvas. The associate deities like Avalokiteswara, Samkhanath Lokeswara, Tara etc. made of bronze were also noticed inside the shrine (Sahu 1958). If excavated near the shrine, in the open space left, the site would yield valuable information on the site and the monastery would come to lime light.

## Syamsundarpur (20o 43I N & 84o 25I 15II)

The village of Syamsundarpur is 25 km to the southeast of Boudh district headquarters. The Buddhist remnants are witnessed at a distance of 1 km to the north of the present settlement and occupy an area of 35 m X 28 m<sup>2</sup>. The central part of the mound has a deposit of 2.5 m. A major portion of the monastic complex has already been destroyed by the local people in stretching their agricultural fields. A number of antiquities in the form of tiny sculptures have been taken away from the site. The site is located to a close proximity to the trade route running along left bank of the Mahanadi. Recently, a two-roomed sculpture-shed has been constructed by the Paschim Odisha Vikash Parishad which enshrined the colossal image of Lord Buddha in Bhumisparsa Mudra, seated on a lotus panel. Its height is 5 ft. and just below the lotus throne carved images of two each of Elephants and Yakshas and a Lion. The images have been carved using Khondalite stone. The surface of the colossal image of Lord Buddha is badly worn due to the poor quality of the stone. Varala motifs are visible on the sides of his throne and a tree spreads its branches

along His halo. The back slab tapers inward towards the top. The plinth of the image was earlier under debris but after clearance a number of associated deities were noticed. From and around the sites, a number of structural remains like stone pillars, bricks (12" x 7" x 6") and brick-bats were observed. There are no instances of female divinities with Buddha here as is observed presently. But the falling brick-bats and stones give the indication of a medieval monastery. The site has been badly damaged and lost its entity due to agricultural activities and a very small portion containing the shrine with the Buddha image is left for posterity.

## Pragalpur (20o 43I N & 84o 25I 40II)

The site is named after the Buddhist deity Pragalva. Locally known as Jharasahi, the site of Pragalpur is 26 km to the south-east of Boudh district headquarters and is about one and half km from Syamsundarpur Buddhist monastery. The monastic complex, of whose only a very small portion (31 X 18 m<sup>2</sup>) has survived for posterity, that also under a two-roomed shrine. Two badly images of Tara and Janguli are also located inside the shrine. It is very difficult to identify them except their postures. A Tara image is found, seated in lalitasana with the right hand in varada and the left hand holding a lotus. Another image represents the serpent goddess, either Manasa or Janguli. She is seated in lalitasana with a canopy of serpent hoods framing her head. The right hand appears to be in *varada* while the left arm is broken off. The site once upon a time extended up to a considerable stretch of about half a kilometer and was located just on the bank of river Mahanadi whose remnants are also seen today. The central elevation portion shows a deposit of 3.5 m from the surface level. The site has a long occupational history, which starts from the Early Historic and extends up to the Early Medieval period. A modern temple having some sculptures along with the seated image of Lord Buddha in Bhumisparsa *mudra* is noticed.

The sculpture of Buddha is carved out on khondolite stone seated on lotus petals in Bhumisparsamudra facing east. Its height is 3 and 1/2 feet. But, half of the image is exposed due to the construction of a shrine in 1978. The upper parts from head to the waist and from shoulder to elbows (left and right) are visible. Most probably the lotus petals and the rest parts of hands and legs are still under the earth. The most significant aspect of the monastery is of the female divinities i.e. Tara with an inscription on its backside. The inscription is yet to be deciphered.

## Buddhist remnants in Ramesvara temple of Boudh

Ramesvara temple complex (otherwise popular as Star-Shaped Temple) occupies a significant role in the transformation and modification of Buddhist monasteries into temple complexes. The temples, particularly facing west were centres of Tantrayana during the medieval period. This shrine symbolizes the amalgamation of Hindu deities with Buddha in Bhumisparśamudra. Even the Buddhist icons are depicted on the wall of the shrine and are worshipped as Hindu deities. Banerjee (1929: 64-86) mentions an image of Mahattari Tara being worshipped as Ugra Tara, with the Buddhist creed (Dhārenī) inscribed on the back, and a broken image of Lokeshwara lying in the sanctum. The best preserved image in the compound is of Buddha in Bhūmiśpārśa mudra. A *vajra* is placed on the front edges of his seat. His facial features are badly worn. Nearby are two fragments of a standing Avalokiteśwara with one containing his head while the other has his pedestal, feet and four flanking companions. The latter also standing are Sudhanakumara, Tara, Bhṛukūti and Hayagrīva usually associated with the forms of Lokeshwara, while Suchimukha (?) kneels on the right corner of the pedestal and vajrasattva is seated on the left corner. The ruins of the area also clearly suggest the existence of a Buddhist monastery as evident from the scattered bricks, brick bats, pillars and stone slabs in the precinct of the temple complex.

## Local Traditions

The local traditions associated to Buddhism are also interesting. Here, mention may be made of the very name of the township as Boudh, derived after the name of Lord Buddha. Even the name finds a mention in the Colonial records as Baud, Bod, Boad, Budh, etc. The name might have been given by the Marathas, Mughals and the Britishers as they witnessed colossal images and other Buddhist ruins along their journey in a close proximity.

One of the local traditions which is rather secular in nature and not at all related to the religious aspects, is that during marriage ceremonies, women, especially girls, numbering five (the number is mandatory) offer turmeric, rice and vermilion on the entire body of Lord Buddha for a better living of the newly-wedded couples. It is a matter of further research to find out the significance of such rituals of the Hindu population. In no other occasion, religious or secular, Buddha is worshipped and is unique to the region only. Besides, a sword under the name of 'Pragala'

is worshipped inside a natural cave at Nayakpara and a similar one is also located in the Athgarh region which have carry influences of Buddhism. It is also believed that Danda Yatra, a Tantric folk festival of the region has its inception from the region (Tripathy 2016).

The Buddhist heritage of Boudh district is significant in more than one aspect. Firstly, the monasteries are located in the hinterland suggesting the popularity of the religion. Secondly, these three monasteries with colossal images of Lord Buddha are located along the trade route signifying the flourishing trade by the Buddhist population and thirdly they show the amalgamation of *Tantric* Buddhism and Saivism. Lastly, the legends and popular traditions also support the existing of the religion in the core mind of the local people.

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