

Sisandra

A watering hole for travellers

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Built in stone and located on the sides of roads and highways, sisandras can be commonly seen in selected areas of Karnataka. These intriguing tub-like structures were constructed to provide water to the weary traveller. Built by the rich and the poor alike, the sisandras are a unique practice that has sadly, faded away.

A mofussil bus comes to a halt near a stone structure about 5 - 6 feet high. The bus conductor and helper stand on the stone structures to load sacks containing vegetables and other produce onto the top of the bus.

Were these structures built to make bus loading easy? The answer is an emphatic, "No!" These structures, which were once meant for a different reason have, unfortunately been reduced to the status of bus loading platforms!

Built many hundreds of years ago, these stone structures called *sisandras* were actually tubs which looked like cradles. Constructed at the junction of two or three roads, the *sisandra* contained drinking water to quench the thirst of weary travellers.

Going on pilgrimages to holy places was an age-old tradition. Many of the pilgrim centers travelled from remote places. It was also believed that travelling on foot would invoke the blessings of the deity or religious leader. Rest houses all along the routes offered food and shelter. But what if a pilgrim felt thirsty enroute? Carrying water was onerous especially while treading long distances. To provide relief to such travellers, *sisandras* were built on the roadside.

Sisandras are found on the rural roads of Kolar, Tumkur, Chitradurga and certain parts of Bangalore district. At the entrance to Chitradurga fort, there is a well preserved *sisandra*. One *sisandra* was recently found while digging a foundation for a house in Kolar area. It is presently housed in the office of the District Armed Forces. Similar structures are also found in Dakshin Kannada, though these are smaller in size and are earmarked for animals.

Who built these *sisandras*?

While kings and emperors provided tanks, wells and rest houses, the rich traders of major towns built *sisandras* for the common man. Inscriptions dating as far as

600 years back in Kolar district give evidence of a *sisandra* built by a trader, who founded the town of Madamangala. Providing water in Hindu mythology was considered “*dharma*”. People from the scheduled caste community were employed to fill water in these *sisandras*. In the words of Sri V.S.S. Shastry of Kolar, “Even upper caste pilgrims drank water from the *sisandra* thus proving that caste differences were washed away by the water in the *sisandras*!”

Feudal chiefs were instrumental in building small townships as well as the roadside *sisandras*. People were employed not only to erect the structures but also to fill water in these *sisandras*. Employment was thus generated not only through the construction of *sisandras* but also for ensuring that there was always enough water in them. The king’s officials made the payment to the people who carried the water from the tanks and wells to the *sisandras*. Unfortunately very little documentation is available about this unique system.

How is it constructed?

Sisandras are water tanks built with four stone slabs, generally made of granite. The measurements of the tank varied, though the height was generally of 5–6 feet. The capacity of the *sisandras* varied according to its usage. If it was meant for the pilgrims, the size would be enough to contain about 30 pots of water. If the *sisandras* were meant to cater to traders and merchants who assembled for the village fair, massive structures to hold hundreds of pots of water, would be constructed.

Very old *sisandras* were carved out of rocks. More recent ones have four flat slabs mounted on a base slab to resemble a box. The edges are sealed with concrete. The top is also covered with a slab, which has a circular opening to facilitate the filling of water. The cover also prevented dust and leaves from contaminating the water, thus keeping it fit for human consumption. A hole on one side of the structure served as a tap and when not in use, it was sealed with a thick wooden stick. Whenever water was needed, the stick had to be pulled out and water would flow out. *Sisandras*, which catered to the general public were placed on four stone pillars and the height was convenient to drink water from the hole.

Special *sisandras* were also built for animals. These were at the ground level, but were constructed using



the same technique. Thus the needs of man and beast were both met by the donors of these *sisandras*.

From the pages of history

In 1792, when the British army was passing through Kolar, an artist named Daniel accompanied the infantry. He used to draw scenes of soldiers resting and in the background along with hills and woods, would be *sisandras*! About



200 years later, an Italian researcher called Anthony came to India to visit the places featured in the paintings of Daniel. He used photography to capture these places but there was a total transformation everywhere. Towns had come up where forests once existed and the hills were denuded. Anthony carried two paintings of Daniel with him - one was the stone pillar at the Gavi Gangadhar temple at Bangalore and the other was of a *sisandra* on the Mulbagal-Kolar road. Anthony was able to locate the stone pillar easily but the *sisandra* was nowhere to be seen. At this stage, Chandra Prakash, an employee of Bharat Earth Movers Ltd., joined Anthony in his search but it was in vain. A very disappointed Anthony returned to Italy. Chandra Prakash persisted in his search and finally found the *sisandra* in the neighbouring village.

How did it get relocated? Many travellers rested at a rest house in this village so Madhav Rao, a government official shifted it as he believed it would serve a better purpose in this new location. This happened in the beginning of the 20th century and Chandra Prakash promptly sent a photograph and all other details to the Italian researcher!

Kautilya's Arthashastra states that land routes must be equipped with water and shade- giving trees. In fact quenching thirst is considered even more important than giving alms. One of the first gestures of *Athithi sevo bhava* is to offer water. Kings and rich men as well as the poorest of families honoured this tenet since time memorial. Each act of giving water rendered a great service to weary people. The *sisandras* continued this practice in the same spirit.

The *sisandras* is a simple practice which can easily be revived – and which will then provide relief and earn goodwill from the ordinary traveller.

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