Maritime Activities of Early Odisha: An Archaeological Perspective

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Maritime archaeology opens up new vista in the field of research on the early Odishan maritime history. It, however, is not confined to the study of archaeological remains under water, rather it includes the study of various aspects such as identification of landing places, harbours, the nature of wood work, sea routes, cargo items etc. It is the archaeological excavation that has unearthed a number of ports like Che-li-ta-lo/Manikpatna, Khalkattapatna, Palur/Dantapura, Dosarene etc., which confirm early Odisha’s maritime activities on a firm footing. It also proved ancient Odishan interaction with the countries of South-East Asia and the western world. Archaeological excavation, indeed, has tremendous contribution towards unearthing the glorious maritime activities of early Odisha or Kalinga. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to reconstruct and analyze the maritime heritage of Odisha on the basis of excavated and explored materials along with epigraphic records, numismatics, art, architecture and sculptural evidences. It is also intended to deal with the problems and prospects of maritime archaeology in Odisha.

Odisha is veritably an El Dorado of archaeological remains lying scattered throughout the state. The recovery of some pre-historic tools during the second half of the 19th century by V. Ball and exploration of some other pre-historic sites, for the first time, gave us an idea regarding the progress of society in Odisha from hunters to breeders and food production and settled life. The excavations at Kuliana, Kuchai and Baiyapur in the Mayurbhanja district of Odisha have yielded the evidences of the use of polished shouldered tools, rice and cord-impressed pottery belonging to the Neolithic age. In view of the technological affinities of shouldered adzes with those of the South-East Asian countries it is believed that Odisha’s maritime connections with the South-East Asia probably began from the Neolithic period. However, the possibility of introduction of shouldered adzes into India through land-route via north east India cannot be ruled out.

At Sankarjung (Lat.20° 51’ 113” N and Long.84° 59’ 483” E), in the Angul district of Odisha, the initial spade work by the Department of Archaeology, the initial spade work by the Department of Archaeology, unearthed the cultural stratum of Chalcolithic period. On the basis of the bar-celts, discovered from Sankarjung it can be argued that they were the earliest musical instruments in India and in structure were similar to those in Vietnam, which reinforces our conviction that early Odisha had cultural link with Vietnam in ancient times.

The recent excavations conducted at Golabai Sasan (Lat.20° 22’ 103” N and Long.
85° 342 363 E) in the Khurdha district by the Excavation Branch, ASI under B.K. Sinha has provided us evidences of “Copper Age” along with a sequence from the Neolithic period to the Iron Age. On the basis of materials, obtained from the excavation, the sequence of culture though can be divided into three phases, i.e. period I-Neolithic (c. 1600 BCE), period II A-Chalcolithic (evidence of copper, c. 1400 BCE to c. 900 BCE) and period II B Iron Age (c. 900 BCE to c. 800 BCE) the latest determination of dates by carbon 14 traced the earliest level of Golabai to c. 2300 BCE. A large number of material remains, tools of stone, bone and copper have been discovered from this site. The polished tools include celts, adzes, shouldered celt, chisel, etc. The bone tools, made of antler and semi-mineralised bone comprised digging tools, points, burin, chisel, long points (27 cm), arrow heads and harpoon. The copper objects obtained from the site include bangle, rings, chisel and a fishing hook. Of these discoveries, the bone implements, harpoons and polished stone adzes which indicate a culture where people possibly lived mainly on fishing, and probably building boats is most noteworthy. Especially, the recovery of a sizable number of adzes for wood working gives the positive indication that Golabai was a boat building centre.

The systematic excavation at Shishupalgarh (Lat. 20° 132 303 N and Long. 85° 512 303 E) near Bhubaneswar by B.B. Lal revealed one integral culture throughout different stages and brought into light rouletted ware, knobbed ware, glass beads, semi-precious stone beads, clay bulla resembling Silenus’s head imitated from those of Roman coins, a unique gold medallion showing “Kushana type of standing king and a Brahmi legend in character of third century A.D. [CE] on the obverse and Roman head with a Roman legend on the reverse.” One of the most concrete data obtained from the excavation is that it proves ancient Odisha’s maritime contact with the Roman world on firm footing. The discovery of rouletted ware which is regarded as an important evidence for Indo-Roman trade from Shishupalgarh, Manikpatna and Radhanagar in Orissa, Chandraketugarh, Tamluk in West Bengal, Salihundam, Dharanikota in Andhra Pradesh, Kaveripatnam, Urai and Arikamedu in Tamilnadu and from Buni complex in north Java, from Sembiran on the north coast of Bali, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh etc., implied the Roman trade network among these places. It also suggests a trade route connecting the eastern coast of India with the South-East Asia.

The excavations at Bamanghati in the Mayurbhanja district of Odisha and Tamluk in the Midnapur district of West Bengal (Tamluk known as Tamralipti in ancient times was in the geographical limits of Odisha) also testify to the flourishing maritime trade of ancient Odisha. A large number of rouletted wares have been discovered from the ancient port site of Tamralipti (modern Tamluk) They were probably brought to Odisha by the Roman merchants. A horde of fine gold coins of the Roman origin have also been discovered from Bamanghati area of the Mayurbhanja district. These findings suggest trade relations of ancient Odisha with the Roman Empire. Beglar who has reported about this for the first time speculated that those gold coins came to Mayurbhanja in the early part of the Common Era through the sea-port of Tamralipti. The availability of these coins at Bamanghati shows that it lay on the road from the sea port of Tamralipti to the interior, for it is more probable that they came in via Tamluk than overland from the Roman empire. A terracotta tablet containing the thanks giving of an unknown Greek sailor to the East wind has been discovered at Tilda, situated between Tamluk and Bamanghati.
excavation at Barabati fort (Lat. 20°292 N and Long. 85°522 E) situated on the right bank of the river Mahanadi at Cuttack also provide us welcome light on the maritime trade and overseas activities of the people of ancient Odisha. A few shreds of Chinese ceramics have been discovered from Barabati.

The excavations at Lalitagiri, Udayagiri and Ratnagiri, the three great Buddhist sites, have established sculptural link of Odisha with the South-East Asia and China. The discovery of relic caskets from a stupa at Lalitagiri has been the most significant one in this connection. The system of preserving of these relics is unique. These caskets cover four-in-one and kept systematically one inside the other. It is a feature alien in the soil of Odisha but common in China which indicates that there was good interaction between ancient Odisha and China.

The material evidences from the recent archaeological excavations at Manikpatna (Lat. 19°12 433 N and Long. 85°12 363 E), in the northern tip of the Chilika Lake and Khalkattapatna (Lat. 19°01 2 523 N and Long. 86°02 023 E) on the left bank of the river Kushabhadra near Konarak supply us sufficient clue of Odisha’s overseas contact with far off countries. The excavated material remains prove that they were international ports having contact with many countries. The discovery of Chinese celadon ware, Chinese coin, white porcelain, blue, white and brown glazed porcelain shreds, Roman rouletted potteries and fragments of amphora, knobbled ware, Burmese potteries, Ceylonese coins, Siamese potteries, Indonesian terracotta, egg white Arabian pottery, moulded ware, stamped ware, decorated ware, kaolin ware etc., at Manikpatna testify to its trade link with far off countries like Rome, China, Burma (Myanmar), Sri Lanka, Arabian countries, Indonesia etc. The excavation at Khalkattapatna has revealed the existence of a brick jelly floor which might have served as a loading and unloading platform. The pottery recovered from here consists of Chinese celadon ware; Chinese porcelain with blue floral design on white background, egg white glazed ware and glazed chocolate ware, all of foreign origin.

The recent archaeological discoveries in Sri Lanka, Indonesian Islands, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma etc., also have thrown new light on Odisha’s maritime connections with those countries. Archaeological excavations at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka prove the introduction of Indian cultural elements including Buddhism into Sri Lanka even before the days of Ashoka. The material remains brought to light from Don Ta Phet in Thailand in the forms of semi-precious stone and glass beads, knobbled base, bronze vessels etc., tangibly indicate the brisk commercial contact of Odisha with Thailand. The knobbled ware pottery for the first time was identified at Shishupalgarh and subsequently at several sites of Eastern India and the Ganga Valley. In view of the knowledge of knobbled ware technique and rich deposits of semi-precious stones in western Odisha, in Kalahandi, Bolangir, Boud and Sambalpur areas we assume that Odisha had intimate relationship with Thailand. It has been also mentioned that the discovered bronze bowls, some of those with a central knob have much similarity in form with the so called ‘knobbed ware’ found in several sites of the coastal Odisha and Bengal. I.C. Glover says that these knobbled base vessels were associated with Buddhist rituals.

The inscriptions and epigraphic records of Odisha and of abroad also shed some authentic light on the maritime enterprises of the people of ancient Odisha. The Hathigumpha Inscription (c. first century BCE) of Kharavela refers to the
existence of a navy. It also indicates that Magadhan emperor invaded Kalinga to acquire the sea ports of Kalinga as Magadha did not have any sea port of its own. The very location of the Ashokan Edicts at Jaugada, a place far away from the actual scene of the war i.e. Dhauli is an indication of its association with the port of Palur, a well known ancient port of Odisha. An inscription of the Bhaumakara period refers to an ocean related tax called *samudrakarabandha*. The Tugu Rock Inscription\(^{13}\) of western Java (c. fifth century CE) says that a river named Chandrabhaga, probably named after the Chandrabhaga river of Odisha was regulated by a canal. The Kuki Copper Plate (c. 840 CE)\(^ {14}\) of Java speaks of potters and all sorts of servants of inner apartments hailing from *Kling* meaning Kalinga.

The numismatic evidences also throw a plenty of light on the overseas trade and commercial activities of ancient Odisha. The silver punch-marked coins, Kushana and Puri-Kushana coins, the Andhra-Satavahana coins and a horde of Gupta coins have been discovered from different parts of Odisha.\(^ {15}\) These coins have supplied enough information regarding the trade routes and trade centres of ancient Odisha. A large number of Kushana and Puri-Kushana coins which have been discovered from different parts of Odisha\(^ {16}\) suggest, that the Kushanas had close commercial contact with Odisha, and might have used ports of Odisha as an outlet for the overseas trade contacts abroad. Finding of the Roman gold coins from Shishupalgarh, Bamanghati, Tamralipti, and the depiction of ships on a few Andhra Satavahana coins\(^ {17}\) of second and third centuries CE corroborate to the fact that the east coast, especially the Odishan coast had brisk maritime trade with the foreign countries. Recently, the discovery of the Roman coins are also reported from two other places in Odisha i.e., Gumuda and Koraput in the Koraput district which will throw some new light on the Odisha - Roman trade contacts.

Representation of boats, in the temple art of Odisha similarly testifies the importance attached to the transoceanic activities of the people of Odisha. The maritime pride of ancient Odisha inspired artists to depict boats in their sculptures and paintings. The earliest representation of ships is noticed in a sculptured frieze collected from the vicinity of the Brahmeswar temple, Bhubaneswar, now, preserved in the Odisha State Museum. The frieze depicts two ships, one is fully represented and in the second one only the frontal part is shown. In the first ship, it can be noticed that there is a standing elephant in the front part of the ship. In the centre of the ship, two persons are represented being seated, and two sailors are shown with oars in the rear end steering the ship. The second ship which is not completely shown depicts a standing elephant on its frontal portion. From this depiction it may be inferred that probably the sculptural panel depicts the transportation of elephants from Odisha by ship to other countries. Further, the sculpture justify at least two points that the ships of ancient Odisha were well built and were big and strong enough to carry elephants, and that elephant was an item of export among many other items. The panel may be dated back to c. ninth century CE. Near the same Brahmeswara temple, another interesting slab containing an eight armed image of *Mahishamardini* Durga is lying under a banyan tree having representation of a boat below the pedestal of the goddess. The goddess is supposed to have been engaged in a fierce sea-battle with the ferocious demon Mahishasura (named so as revealed out of the trunk of a buffalo). The scenes represent a naval fight and such naval fight between the goddess and the demon are extremely rare in the Hindu art. The image on
archaeological ground is also datable to c. ninth century CE.

In Bhubaneswar, there is a temple on the western side of the Bindusagara tank worth mentioning in this connection. The temple is called Vaital deul after the peculiar form of its roof resembling a ship or boat capsized\(^{18}\). The term Vaita is probably a contraction of the Sanskrit word va\(h\)itra which means a sea-going vessel or ship. Another magnificent representation of a boat can be noticed in the Lingaraja temple of Bhubaneswar (c. 11th century CE). The scene represents a woman steering a boat with an oar.\(^{19}\) The depiction of a woman steering a boat is a unique specimen in the history of the Indian art tradition. It indicates that maritime activities were so popular in those days among the people of Odisha that even women were associated with the steering of the boat.

At Konarak, on the bek\(i\) (parapet) of the Jagamohana (audience hall or hall in front of the sanctum) of the Sun temple, the martanda-bhairavas are shown as dancing on boats. Another interesting stone sculpture of a full-fledged boat of Odisha, supposed to have been collected from Konarak (c. 12th century) and now preserved in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, depicts a boat being rowed by four persons. It is observed from this sculpture that in the middle of the boat there is a cabin with an upraised platform inside, and a man probably of a royal personage is sitting with a bow and arrow. This type of boat on the basis of the location of cabin is called madhya-mandira type of royal pleasure boat as described and categorised in the Yuktikalpataru of king Bhoja.\(^{20}\) The depiction of a giraffe, exclusively an African animal in the sculpture of the sun temple, Konarak positively indicates that Kalinga had overseas commercial link with Africa.

There is also a magnificent representation of a boat in chlorite stone on the bhogamandapa (hall of offering) of Lord Jagannath temple at Puri. The represented scene is of the nava keli utsava (rowing festival) of Lord Jagannath. From the analysis of this depicted boat, it can be presumed that the king and his attendants are shown preparing for the rowing festival.\(^{21}\) The boat represented here is also of madhyamandira type.

A close study of the art of Khandagiri-Udayagiri caves reveals the use of West Asian decorative elements such as honey suckle, acanthus, stepped melons, winged animals etc. Some of the pilasters facing the doorways of the caves of Anantagumpha have gh\(a\)ta bases, ornamented in the Hellenistic fashion. The huge Bell capital at Bhubaneswar imitated from Ashokan columns also shows west Asian motifs in its ornamentation.

Whatever may be the reason for the depiction of boats in the sculptures and paintings of Odisha they are indicative of the fact that, the association of the people of Odisha in the overseas activities was quite intimate. There is also no doubt about the fact that the design of those Odishan monuments and sculptures must have come to the minds of their artists, not out of complete imagination, but from the memory of the scenes of the ships of those times, which they might have witnessed in the locality during their life times.

Outside Odisha, in the far off countries, especially in the South-East Asian countries, art pieces, sculptures and monuments also reflect the maritime contact of those countries with ancient Odisha. From an analysis, it is gleaned that many of them were byproduct of the Odishan architecture through overseas contact. In some of the sculptures of the Shwezayan Pagoda at Thaton in Burma, remarkable similarities with the Odishan art are found. The dressing and hair style
of some of the females are of the Odishan varieties. Some of the bas-reliefs, in high technical as well as artistic efficiency, show affinity with early medieval sculptures of Odisha. The similarities of a Siva image seated with Parvati from this Pagoda with Hara-Parvati on the outer wall of Vaital temple of Bhubaneswar is the most striking one. In the Ananda temple, constructed during the reign period of Kyanzittha (c. 12th century CE), the Pagan king of Burma, the Odishan influence is evident in the architectural and decorative programmes. The cave temple of Ananta in the Khandagiri hills (near Bhubaneswar in Odisha) inspired the builders to build up the Ananda temple in imitation of Ananta. The sikharas (spire or tower) of the monuments of Prome have remarkable similarities with that of Bhubaneswar temples.

The Buddhist art of Odisha, particularly, the standing Buddha images of Lalitagiri, had a profound influence on the stylistic Buddha images of Thailand. I.C. Glover, the excavator of Dan-Ta-Phet site gives credit for such sculptural transactions between Odisha and Thailand to the Buddhist missionaries. The tower or sikhara of the 12th century CE temple of Maha-Tat at Sawank’a-lok shows an affinity with Bhubaneswar temples in detailed treatment.

Further, the discovery of an ivory comb from Chansen in the central Thailand suggests that the comb was exported from India, especially from Odisha because Odisha was famous for the export of elephants and ivory tusk to the overseas countries. It is also significant to mention that the srivasta motif of the Hathigumpha Inscription of emperor Kharavela became later on enormously common in coins of Oc Eo in Vietnam to Arakon.

There are also some resemblance between Indonesia and Odisha in the domain of art and architecture. Some of the statues of the Buddha at Borobudur (Java) show resemblance with the Buddha images of Odisha. The Dhyani Buddhas of Borobudur remind us of massive heads of the Buddha at Ratnagiri, one on the slope and another at the top of the hills. The stepped tiers of Candi Bima (c. eighth century CE) in the Dieng plateau in Central Java resembled the sikharas of the temples of Orissa. The holding of a Javanese kris by the door-keeper of the Parasurameswar temple of Bhubaneswar, amply testifies to the wide spread interaction between the regions on firm footing. Thus, it can emphatically be said that archaeological explorations and excavations along with the discovery of coins, inscriptions, monuments and sculptures have substantially contributed to reconstruct the maritime history of early Odisha.

References:

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