

# Kalinga Bali Yatra and the Maritime Trade of Odisha

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*“Aa ka Ma Boi, Pana Gua Thoi  
Pana Gua Tora,  
Masaka Dharama Mora”*

The present state of Odisha previously known as Kalinga lies on the east coast of India and is known for its maritime trade with the South East Asian countries. The recent archaeological explorations at Manikapatna, Palur, Radhanagar and Sishupalgarh in Odisha have brought to light terracotta Roman Bullion, lamps and roulette ware which suggest that Odisha had contacts with the Roman world since the early historical period. One of the most important and unique aspects of Odisha's Cultural Heritage is that, we Odias preserve our traditions and customs through our ages without breaking the sanctity till the present day. The customs, traditions and the systems of our ancient period have invited scholars from far and wide. We feel proud in our rich cultural heritage, with the actual glory of our past. We give due regards to the cultural identity, historical continuity and significance to many of our long standing cultural traditions and the lasting impressions they left on our lives. The Early Historical Period saw Odisha's trade relations with Thailand, Malaysia and islands of Java and Bali (Indonesia). Suvarnabhumi and Suvarnadweepa (Sumatra) have many references in our ancient culture, literature and scriptures,

which refers to the present day “South East Asia” and “Indonesia”, respectively. Some ancient scriptures also said that an important role was played by Brahmanas (called by the then local rulers) in spreading our Cultural Heritage in Suvarnabhumi. These seafarers, Brahmins, merchants and traders, who went on sea voyages were the actual propagators of our age old culture and traditions in Suvarnabhumi.

## BALIYATRA

**Baliyatra** or as it is popularly known as the Boita Bandana Yatra, means *A oceanic Voyage to Bali* in its literary sense. This festival is held in the city of Cuttack at *Gadagadia Ghata* of the Mahanadi river. It is being celebrated to mark the day, when the ancient mariners named as Sadhabas in Odia (Odia mariners) would go in sailing to distant lands like Bali, Java (known as “Yawadweepa”), Sumatra, Borneo (presently Indonesia), and Sri Lanka (formerly known as Ceylon) for trade and commerce as well as cultural expansion. To celebrate this, the festival is organised every year from the day of Kartika Purnima (full moon day of the month of Kartika) as per the Odia Calendar, which comes around the end of October and early November as per the English Calendar.

The people of Odisha gather near the banks of Mahanadi, Brahmani river, and in other river banks, ponds, water tanks and sea shores to float miniature toy boats, made of coloured papers, dried banana tree barks, and cork, as a symbol of their ancestors' sea journey to distant places. These handmade toy boats, usually sailed early in the morning and it contains with Paan, Gua (Betel leaf and betel nuts) and a small oil lamps or cotton oil sticks, which are lit and placed inside them, to provide an attractive sight during the early morning time in the wee hours of the day of the festival. This early morning time is little darker and not so lighted by the morning. People usually the women folk sing a song as “*Aa ka ma boi, pan gua thoi, Paana Gua Tora Masaka Dharam Mora*”, to remember the early maritime trade history of Odisha. The song tells about four months (Aa for Aswina, Kaa for Kartika, Maa for Margashira and Boi for Baisakha) that are important for marine merchants of Kalinga (the earlier name of Odisha). The meaning of this song is the time period of sea journey to South East island countries during Asweena and Kartika and the return journey during Margasira to Baisakha. This festival is also celebrated with equal pride and great fanfare in Paradeep. Bali Jatra bears testimony to the rich maritime trade legacy of ancient Odisha. This is the actual time that was considered auspicious by the Sadhabas to start their sea voyage in indigenous vessels called Boitas. The voyage is started on *Kartika Purnima* to take advantage of the favourable wind blowing during this time. *Ajhala* or Pala means the big fabric cotton sails, were used to utilise the favourable wind power to move the *Boitas*.

Men and women dress in traditional costumes, light lamps in the boats and launch them in the nearest water body. The Vaishnavite saint

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is believed to have set foot in Odisha after crossing the Mahanadi River on the day of Karttik Purnima and the day is celebrated in memory of the saint. The day is observed by singing devotional songs and group prayers.

Odisha has a long maritime history. Traders known as “Sadhabas” used to set off in huge boats called “Boitas” from the ports of Odisha to the distant ports of Bali, Sumatra, Borneo and Sri Lanka. The traders would take advantage of favourable winds and sea currents in the winters to ply their trade with distant lands. The expeditions would traditionally set off on the day of Karttik Purnima, which usually corresponds to the full moon day in the month of November. The boats were given a hearty send off by the womenfolk with prayers for their well-being and safe passage. The memory of these expeditions is kept alive in the festival of Boita Bandana, where replicas of the sea faring boats of yore are set afloat in ponds and water bodies. It is commonly observed that devotees take holy bath in Puri Sea Beach and worship Lord Jagannath on this holy day. This festival is celebrated with lot of respect by each and every individual of Odisha.

In Cuttack, this Bali Jatra is celebrated annually as a large open fair near the Barabati Fort area and inside the available land area of the Mahanadi River near the Barabati Fort and Gadgadia Ghata. It is said as one of the largest fairs of Asia. Apart from a trade fair Bali Jatra also provides a lot of cultural programmes. Every year millions of people from all over the nation come to experience and enjoy this fair.

It is also interesting to state that a big similarity has been found between “Boita Bandana” events celebrated in Odisha with the celebration of “Masakapana Tukud” festival of

Bali where similar floating of toy boats bring the memories of ancient maritime activities of both the places. The “Loykrathong” or “Loy” festival organised by Thailand in the month of December represents ritualistic floating of boats which has an adequate similarities with Odishan customs.

### **MARITIME TRADE OF ODISHA**

The ancient voyages from Kalinga, merchants and traders of Kalinga were influential in spreading the Odia Culture in Suvarnabhumi. The cultural interactions regain the lost glory from the prism of rich ancient Maritime Trade of Kalinga (ancient Odisha). Maritime activities of Kalinga form one of the interesting facets of the Odisha History. Because of this trade activities cultural heritage, customs, beliefs, language, ideas, scriptures, Sanatana Dharma’s finer aspects of Kalinga got popularized and accepted in those habitations in other countries where settlements were established by Kalinga’s merchants, traders and political voyagers.

The sailors used to complete their trip in 180 days from Cuttack (Mahanadi’s mouth place) to Bali and back covering a distance of 14,000 km during mid November to Mid May. The sailing period was 120 days and the rest 60 days were used for trade. The onward journey to Bali would be completed by mid January and the return journey started in mid March. Thus the climatic conditions in Bali and other South Asian Countries favoured traders during January to March and free from heavy equatorial showers.

### **KALINGA’S ROLE IN SOUTH EAST ASIA**

Kalinga was instrumental in shaping the history and culture of South East Asia especially in the Malayo or Malabya-Indonesia. As per some of the scholars of history, the Kalingan’s were mostly settled in Malaya and Java whereas

Indians from lower Krishna valley (the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Malayalese, and Kannadigas) were settled in Sumatra. Apart from this people of Kalinga also played a greater role in Java as compared to other regions of South East Asia from 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. onwards. The author refers modern Java seas as Kalinga seas and it can be implied that he refers the most important part of Java as Kalinga.

Kalinga was instrumental in shaping the history and culture of Indonesia especially in the island of Bali. The maritime trade of Kalinga brought prosperity to the kingdom which could largely be attributed to her overseas trade with distant lands like Indonesia. The people of Kalinga maintained lasting commercial and cultural relationship with the Indonesian islands of Java, Sumatra, Bali and Borneo collectively sometime referred by some scholars as “Suvarnavdipa”. The island of Bali formed the most attractive destination for the merchants of Kalinga. In this process, Odia culture, customs, religious beliefs, ideas, language, script and manners were popularised in this island.

Kalinga had close links with the Hindu kingdom of Bali. The island of Bali was known to the sailors of Kalinga as Narikela dweepa. Many Balinese inscriptions refer to Bali as the island of coconut. The sailors of Kalinga made frequent voyages to the island of Bali and had their settlements in the island that consequently spread various aspects of Odia culture. This glorious past has been preserved in a festival of Odisha known as Bali Yatra, celebrated throughout the length and breadth of Odisha.

Kalinga and the island of Bali have influenced each other’s culture very extensively. I.G.P. Phalgunadi, an Indonesian scholar who visited Odisha and did some field work in

connection of his research was surprised by seeing the similarity between the culture and life styles of the people of both the places. There are many cultural elements that are similar between Odisha and Bali, e. g. religious activities, dance forms, art and crafts, temples and monuments, textile designs, even food habits, manners and the vocabulary. Temples as socio-cultural centres are common both to Bali and Odisha. The discovery of similar type of roulette ware seen at Sembiran, located in north eastern Bali and from the sites like Shishupalagarh, Manikpatna, Tamluk etc., of Odisha. It suggests deep ancient trade contacts between Odisha and the island of Bali. The most interesting fact is that in Bali, there is an inscription of the fourteenth century CE written in Odia language and script. Also an interesting aspect came to light i.e. the scripts used in Bali in the tenth century CE were also used in Kalinga.

Odisha played a significant role in the evolution of Hindu culture in Bali. A section of Brahmanas in the Karangasam district of Bali styled themselves as Brahmana-Bouddha-Kalinga. It seems very likely that their ancestors were immigrants from Kalinga. Some words and usages with regard to vocabulary, crafts, religious practices, and form of worship, food habits and manners prevalent in Bali are of Odia in origin. For example, in the coastal districts of Odisha, mother is addressed as BOU and father as BABA and in Bali the former is called BU (BOU) and the latter as BAPA. In some places of Odisha, father is also called as BAPA.

### **TRADE WITH SINGHALA**

After finishing their purchases and sales, most ships would have used the counter current to Sri Lanka and then return to Odisha. Kalinga had close maritime contacts with ancient Sinhala (modern day SriLanka) since 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. The Ceylonese Chronicles “Mahavamsa”,

“Dipavamsa”, “Dathavamsa”, “Chulavamsa” mention of travellers like Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang, the discovery of coins of Ceylon from Kalinga and various inscriptions and art specimens of that era. The Kalingan traders travelled maximum to the Ceylon as compared to voyagers from Indian sub-continent.

### **1992 Expedition of INS V-Samudra to commemorate ancient maritime trade by State Govt. of Odisha**

To revive and refresh the memories of Kalinga’s glory in general and to promote tourism in particular, the Government of Odisha led by the legendary Chief Minister Biju Patnaik made a humble effort for an expedition by Boat to “Bali” on the day of “Kartika Purnima” of 1992. History was recreated when the seven member crew on board of a thirteen meter long naval yacht INS V-Samudra sailed for the islands from Paradeep Port amidst much fanfare to retrace the ancient trade route. On 10<sup>th</sup> Nov, 1992, the Kalinga Bali Yatra began the retracing of the old trade route taken by the ancient Kalingas of Orissa to Bali, Java and Sumatra after the traditional ceremony of ‘Boita Bandana’. The then Chief Minister Late Biju Patnaik and several Indonesian diplomats were present during the flag-off. Thousands of people gathered to witness and cheer the crew. The yacht covered a distance of 5,810 nautical miles over a period of seventeen weeks and reached Bali islands (following this route Paradeep to Campbell Bay and finally reached Bali via Padang and Jakarta).

A grand reception was accorded by the local government and the citizen. The H.E Governor of Bali was personally present. Seminars and exhibition of cultural arts and crafts of Odisha were the highlights of the function. The voyage culminated in a three day festival comprising a seminar on Indonesian cultural ties,

an exhibition of Odisha handicrafts and classical arts performances of classical (Odissi dance), martial dance (Chhau dance) and folk dance (Sambalpuri dance) traditions of Odisha. This amalgamation of culture in the form of cultural exchange between two - Odisha and Indonesia helped to promote the influx of South-East-Asian tourists to India and Odisha.

The cultural heritage of each nation limits the real value of cultural formation process, the positive expression of the historical tradition and national characteristics. Ancient Odisha, popularly known as Kalinga was the epicentre of the inland and foreign trade and played a leading role in the diffusion of their culture and civilization in the Indonesian islands and there is a need to ensure that these cultural practices and traditions borne out of lasting commercial and cultural relationship live on and its meaning, symbolism and significance is not obliterated from social awareness with the passage of time and conflict with modern lifestyles.

The merchants (Sadhavas) of Kalinga, who were busy in overseas trade, had been overvalued by the Indonesians as '*Kalingah Sahasikah*', the Brave Kalingas. Maritime trade has been a part of the socio-cultural and religious life of Odisha for centuries. The festivals like Kartika Purnima, and Bali Yatra are clear indication of Odisha's glorious maritime heritage. Interaction of Kalinga with the islands of Java, Bali, Sumatra, and Borneo began with trade and slowly expanded to cultural, political, and religious performance. The diffusion of Kalingan Culture to distant parts of Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, and other places is a testimony to the great achievements of the people of Kalinga.

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