Maritime Contact of Ancient Orissa with the Western World

Dr. Benudhar Patra

In ancient times, Orissa known as Kalinga had brisk overseas contact with different parts of the world. She had her glorious days when her brave and adventurous sailors made daring voyages to different far-off lands. These voyages were followed by peaceful commercial intercourse which contributed not only to the material prosperity of Kalinga but also to the dissemination of her religion and culture in the foreign soils resulting in the development of mutual close relationship. The spread of Kalinga's religion and culture was further accelerated by the growth of political power. Hence, the Oriya culture, customs, beliefs, ideas, language, script and manners were popularised in those lands where settlements were established by Oriya merchants, missionaries and political adventurers. Kalinga had maritime contact with the Roman Empire, Africa, Persian coast and Arabian countries in the west and China, Japan, Siam, Champa, Burma, Ceylon etc. in the east. Besides, the countries with whom the people of Kalinga maintained enduring commercial and cultural relationship were the islands of Java, Sumatra, Bali and Borneo, collectively known (classically) as Suvarnadvipa or the modern Indonesia. The link between Kalinga and other countries was prolific. The maritime trade of Kalinga brought in vast amount of wealth and glory and the prosperity of Kalinga beyond doubt was largely due to her overseas trade with distant lands. The people of Kalinga, infact, played a leading role in the Indian overseas activities. Referring to the discovery of a Babylonian ivory seal from the precincts of Barunighat temple at Baripada (a news published in English daily Hindustan Standard dated 13th October, 1953, Calcutta with caption, "Babylonian seal unearthed") J.P.Singh Deo¹ assume that there was trade and commercial link between Baripada area (Mayurbhanj) and Babylonia. This supposition, however, has to be confirmed with more archaeological data.

Contact With Rome and the Western World

In the early centuries of the Christian Era Orissa had active trade contact with the western world, especially with the Roman Empire. The western trade flourished because of the demand for luxury articles of Kalinga in the Roman Empire. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea² (1st century AD) of an unknown author besides mentioning the Kalingan port of Dosarene, has referred to the trade relation between Kalinga and the Roman world. He mentions Dosarene as producing the best type of ivory known as Dosarenic. Ptolemy,³ the Greek geographer during the second century A.D. has referred to another famous port of Kalinga named Palur from where ships disembarked directly across

¹ J.P. Singh Deo.
² Periplus of the Erythraean Sea.
³ Ptolemy.
the Bay of Bengal to the South-East Asian countries. The discovery of rouletted ware from Sisupalgarh near Bhubaneswar and Tamluk in the Midnapore district of modern West Bengal is very significant in this regard. The rouletted ware was first identified and dated by Wheeler at Arikamedu. These were probably brought into Orissa by the Roman merchants. It may be mentioned that Roman bullas have been discovered at Sisupalgarh and Roman coins at Biratgarh and Bambanghati in the Mayurbhanj district, which suggests trade link of Kalinga with the Roman empire. Besides, a gold coin bearing Graeco-Roman motif together with pottery fragments and terracotta figures of the Roman origin have been also discovered from Tamluk (the site of ancient Orissan Tamralipti port). A terracotta Greek tablet containing the thanks-giving of an unknown Greek sailor to the East wind has been discovered at Tilda, situated between Tamluk and Bambanghati. The poet Dandi in his Dasakumara Charita has referred to the coming of the Greeks to the port of Tamralipti. Apart from this, the recent archaeological excavations at Manikpatna in the northern tip of the Chilka lake which has brought to light the Roman rouletted pottery and fragments of an amphora substantiate the clue of Orissa's contact with the far off Roman Empire. Further, to corroborate Orissa's contact with the western world, another valuable archaeological evidence has been reported from the Khalkatapatana port excavation. The discovery of a thin egg-white glazed chocolate pottery and thick chocolate glazed pottery of the Arabian origin are worth mentioning. The former has mainly bowls and the latter are the fragments of storage jars. These were first noticed in the excavations at Khalkatapatana.

It is difficult to determine the volume of trade between Kalinga and the Roman Empire. But it is certain that much of the gold of the Roman Empire had been drained-out to India by the third century of the Christian era. The acute shortage of gold coins led to the circulation of copper coins in the Roman Empire during the early centuries of the Christian era. It is said that the financial instability resulting mainly from the adverse trade relations with India must have become a potent factor for the fall of Roman Empire. The merchants of Kalinga in a sense were instrumental in bringing economic ruin to the Roman Empire and consequent economic prosperity to the Indian sub-continent.

Pearls and diamonds probably constituted two principal articles of export of Kalinga to the Western World. The manufacture of best type of diamonds in ancient Orissa have been referred to by the classical writers. The Hirakud region of Sambalpur on the banks of the river Mahanadi was famous for the production of diamond. The diamond of this region was sold as an attractive item in the markets of Rome, Persia, Egypt and Greece. Gibbon in his 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' has said that the diamond of Sambalpur was much prized in Rome and was sold at a high price in the Roman markets. Pepper was another important item of export to Greece and Rome. Its export was in such abundant quantity that it was called Yavanapriya in the Indian literature. Pliny refers to the pepper and ginger of India and their great demand in Rome where they were sold by weight like gold and silver. Besides, Indian spices like cinnamon, malabathrum, perfumes, precious stones, pearls, silk, muslins and cotton were in great demand in the Graeco-Roman world. Silk, muslin and cotton were sold at fabulously high prices in Rome. Medicinal herbs and ivory were also exported to the western countries from India. Kalinga seems to have supplied all the above articles
in considerable quantities. In turn among the articles of import from the western world mention may be made of gold, aromatic, ware, glass etc. B.S. Das\textsuperscript{17} says that commodities were exported from Orissa to earn the Roman gold. He also says that with the shrinkage in gold supply from the Roman markets during the post-Kushana period the Orissan merchants looked towards the Far East.\textsuperscript{18}

Kalinga also had overseas trade links with Africa. The representation of a giraffe, purely an African animal, not seen anywhere else, in the sculpture of Konark only proves that Kalinga had commercial relations with Africa. The depiction of a giraffe in the Konark temple suggests that in ancient days either some people of Kalinga might have gone to Africa and seen the giraffe or one live giraffe must have been brought to Orissa by some merchants enabling many to see it. However, the sculpture of giraffe on the wall of the Sun temple is so accurate that the sculptor must have actually seen a live giraffe. It is hardly likely that the sculptor would have travelled to Africa. So a giraffe was actually brought alive by sea from East Africa to Orissa.\textsuperscript{19} Probably the Ganga emperor Narasimhadeva-I (A.D. 1238-1264) heard of the existence of this strange animal from Arab traders who carried on most of the trade with Africa and commissioned them to fetch him a specimen.\textsuperscript{20} In fact, the sculptured panel of the Konark temple depicts the Ganga emperor being presented with the African animal. The problem of bringing a live giraffe (which normally lives on the green leaves of trees) on such a long sea-voyage in a small boat must have been considerable, but evidently they succeeded in their mission. A Chinese Admiral named Cheng Ho\textsuperscript{21} who visited East Africa in the fifteenth century A.D. is known to have brought back a live giraffe to the Ming Court in China. Therefore, we can see no reason why a giraffe could not have been actually brought as a curiosity to Eastern India in the 13th century A.D.

Besides, some of the art specimens also testify to the relation of Kalinga with the western world. A study of the art of the Khandagiri-Udayagiri caves (gumphas) reveals the use of West Asian decorative elements. They are honeysuckle, acanthus, stepped merlons, winged animals etc. Some of the pilasters facing the doorways of the Ananta-gumpha have ghata bases, ornamented in the Hellenistic fashion. A Yavana (Graeco-Roman) guard is shown on the left pilaster of the cave in the upper-storey of the Ranigumpha. The kilted foreigner is in boots and wears a fillet on the forehead, while a sheathed sword hangs from the left side.\textsuperscript{22} Even the huge Bell Capital from Bhubaneswar imitated from Asokan columns, also shows West Asian motifs in its ornamentation.\textsuperscript{23} However, K.S. Behera\textsuperscript{24} from an analysis of the source materials says, "coastal Orissa was somewhat indirectly connected with the early trade between India and the western world". He also mentions that goods from Orissa could have reached the southern and western India through coastal voyages taking advantage of the changing cycle of monsoon and ultimately despatched to the Roman world with which Kalinga had no direct maritime connection.\textsuperscript{25} Nevertheless, from the geographical narration of the author of the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea and Ptolemy and on the basis of the discovery of Roman objects from various sites of Orissa such as Sisupalgarh, Tamluk, Bamanghati etc. it can be positively assumed that Kalinga had close maritime contact with the western world, especially with the Roman empire.

The people of Kalinga had also contact with the distant lands of Peru and Mexico. R.D. Banerjee\textsuperscript{26} observed that the people of Kalinga, who have been proved to be the pioneer
colonists of India, Indonesia and Oceania, are probably the very same people whom the modern barbarians of the Pacific and Indian Oceans regard with awe and wonder as people from the sky who civilized them and taught them the rudiments of culture”. According to D.R. Bhandarkar, the people of Kalinga monopolised trade on the Arabian Sea. Crossing the Arabian Sea, the Kalingans had trade relations with the East Coast of Africa and with the far off island of Madagaskar. Scholars also believe that the Maya civilization of America was a result of commercial enterprise of Kalinga or of India with that continent. It is, thus, gleaned from the above analysis that ancient Orissa had close maritime contact with the countries of the western world.

References
18. Ibid, p.35
21. Ibid, p.120.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
28. A.C. Das, op. cit, p.10

Dr. Benudhar Patra is a Lecturer in the Department of History, Government College (GCM), Sector 11, Chandigarh (U.T.)-160011, India.