

Ports in Ancient Odisha : Historical Perspective

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Ancient Odisha or Kalinga being situated on the coast of the Bay of Bengal in ancient times played an important role in the maritime history of India. Its long coast line was studded with a number of excellent ports and port-towns which are not only referred to in texts but are also corroborated by archaeological excavations and explorations. Ports were a prerequisite for overseas trade and commerce and as such attracted the attention of the mariners and traders. Odishan coast in ancient times flourished with many ports and anchorages which naturally grew up at strategic points. Around the ports, towns developed as a consequence of brisk trade. In fact, the ports were the centres of life of the people in commercial, cultural and political fields. They served as the medium of export of not only trading articles but also of the culture and civilization. Tamralipti, *Che-li-ta-lo/* Manikpatna, Khalkattapatna, Palur, Dosarene, Barua, Kalingapatnam, Pithunda etc., are some of the ports and port-towns of early Odisha, and in the present paper, an attempt has been made to analyse and identify them in the light of data as reflected in texts and archaeology.

According to the *Shilpashastra*, there are two types of sea ports namely, *pattana* and *dronimukha*. This categorization is made on the basis of the nature of the location of ports. *Pattanas* were situated on the sea coast where

cargos were loaded and unloaded while *dronimukhas* were situated near the confluence of the river and sea. Early Odisha had both types of ports. It is believed that people from different parts used to come by land and river route to the nearest port, then made a coastal voyage to different big ports, and thence made voyage to different foreign countries, especially to the countries of South-East Asia.

Tamralipti

Of all the ports of ancient Odisha, beginning from the north, the first and foremost was the port of Tamralipti. From this port there was a regular sailing of vessels which either proceeded along the coasts of Bengal and Burma (Myanmar), or crossed the Bay of Bengal and made a direct voyage to Malaya Peninsula and to the East Indies and Indo-China and beyond.¹ This port was the gateway for the daring sailors, traders and missionaries of ancient Odisha. Sailing ships laden with fine cloth, silk and copper went out from this port in large numbers to distant countries like Ceylon, the coast of Africa and the ports on the Arabian Sea. A plausible reason for the Ashokan invasion of Kalinga (ancient Odisha) was to gain control over the sea ports of Kalinga, particularly the port of Tamralipti.

Tamralipti is identified with the modern Tamluk in the Midnapore district of West Bengal

which formed a part of Odishan kingdom till the seventeenth century CE. It was located at the confluence of the river Rupnarayana and the Bay of Bengal (Lat. 22° 17' N and Long. 87° 57' E)² and as such in nature was a *dronimukha* port.³ The present name Tamluk is believed to have been derived from Tamalika.⁴

The port of Tamralipti has been referred to in different sources. The *Mahabharata* speaks of Bhima's victory over Tamralipti.⁵ Tamralipti has been also mentioned in the *Markandeya Purana*, the *Vayu-Purana*, the *Natyasastra* of Bharata and the *Brihat-Samhita* of Varahamihira. The Jain and Buddhist texts also speak of this port city. The *Jatakas* make frequent references to the voyages from Tamralipti to *suvarnabhumi* (Burma/Myanmar) in connection with trade and missionary activities. The *Arthashastra* contains profuse references to Tamralipti as an important centre of maritime trade. Ptolemy, the Greek Geographer during c. 2nd century CE has referred to it as Tamalities.⁶ The Chinese pilgrims like Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang, I-Tsing and others have referred to Tamralipti as a port situated on the broad bay, a place suitable for embarkation bound for China. It is recorded in the Dudhapani Rock Inscription⁷ of Udayamana (palaeographically assigned to c. 8th century CE) that merchants from such distant places as Ayodhya (Oudh) used to frequent this port city for the purpose of trade. The poet Dandin in his *Dasakumara Charita* has referred to the coming of the Greeks to this port.⁸ According to the *Kathasaritasagara*,⁹ Tamralipti was a maritime port and an emporium of commerce from the 4th century CE. Besides textual references, the antiquities recovered from Tamluk, especially the discovery of a gold coin bearing Graeco-Roman motif together with pottery fragments and terracotta figurines of the Roman origin clearly testify to its international character. The discovery of rouletted ware and other objects like sprinkler etc., indicate the

overseas contact of Tamralipti with the Romans. Tamralipti was linked by roads with the major towns of that time, i.e. Rajagriha, Shravasti, Pataliputra, Varanasi, Champa, Kaushambi and even Taxila.

Khalkattapatna

The excavation at Khalkattapatna (Lat. 19° 51' 13" N and Long. 86° 02' 40" E) in the Puri district by the Excavation Branch IV of the ASI (1984-1985) has uncovered an important port of the early medieval Odisha.¹⁰ It is situated 11 km east of Konarak on the left bank of the river Kushabhadra which joins the Bay of Bengal about 3 km north-east of it. The excavated material remains assigned to c. 12th to c. 14th century CE. The excavation reveals a single cultural deposit which conspicuously suggests that the site was under occupation for two or three hundred years only.¹¹

Khalkattapatna on the basis of the archaeological data is safely established as an international port having connection with many countries. The excavation at Khalkattapatna has revealed the existence of a brick jelly floor which might have served as a loading and unloading platform.¹² 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. Besides the Chinese celadon ware and Chinese porcelain, the most important finds of the Chinese origin from excavations are two Chinese copper coins, one complete and the other fragmentary, datable to c. 14th century CE.¹³ The egg-white glazed pottery obtained from the site is supposed to be from the Arab countries and suggests the sea trade of Odisha with the countries on the west. The associated indigenous potteries consist of dark gray and red striped wares. The shapes met with ware bowls, basins, *handis*, vases, miniature pots,

all wheel turned.¹⁴ The pottery with stamped geometrical designs, confined to neck and waist have also been found. All these establish Khalkattapatna as one of the ports of Odisha between 12th and 14th century CE from where merchants and traders proceeded to South-East Asia, China and even to the countries on the west.

***Che-li-ta-lo* – Manikpatna**

Che-li-ta-lo was another important sea-port of ancient Odisha. The reference of *Che-li-ta-lo* for the first time appears in the accounts of Hiuen-Tsang in the 7th century CE. Hiuen Tsang¹⁵ says that it was situated to the south-east of the Wu-Tu (Odra) country. That it was near the shore of the ocean and was above twenty *li* (5 miles) in circuit. The city was naturally strong and contained many rare commodities. It was a thoroughfare and resting place for sea going traders and strangers from distant lands. Nearby the city were five Buddhist monasteries close together with lofty structures and very artistic images. *Seng-ka-lo* (Ceylon or Sri Lanka) was at a distance of 20,000 *li* (5000 miles) from this place. On calm nights one could see the brilliant light emanating from the pearl on the top of the tope over Buddha's tooth relic in Sri Lanka from this place.

Notwithstanding this information, its identification unfortunately is a subject of dispute among the scholars. A.Cunningham,¹⁶ a famous archaeologist has identified *Che-li-ta-lo* as Charitrapura and has identified it again with modern Puri, the seat of Lord Jagannath. But Puri of Cunningham although is on the sea shore and almost projected to the sea, yet does not have any Buddhist monuments around. M.Julien¹⁷ has identified *Che-li-ta-lo* with Charitra. Waddel¹⁸ while agreeing with Julien's identification has gone one step forward to locate it in the Mahanadi delta, at Nendara. Nendara, however, is neither on the sea shore nor is projected to the sea. On the basis of poet Sarala Das's *Mahabharata* (c. 15th

century CE), scholars have identified *Che-li-ta-lo* with Chandrabhaga near Konarak. But all these interpretations and speculations are based on feeble grounds and seem to be unacceptable and tenuous.

However, on account of the description given by Hiuen Tsang, the most probable spot for the identification of *Che-li-ta-lo* could be the modern Manikpatna. The recent excavation at Manikpatna (Lat.19° 43' 54" N and Long. 85° 33' 14" E) in the northern tip of the Chilika Lake in the Brahmagiri Tahsil of Puri district, has archaeologically established Manikpatna as an international port. The discovery of rouletted ware, fragments of amphora etc., indicate its contact with the Roman Empire in the early centuries CE. Contact with China is established through the discovery of Chinese celadon ware, Chinese porcelain and Chinese copper coins datable to different centuries. The trade link with Burma (Myanmar) is proved by the discovery of a brown glazed ware, known as Maratuan ware after the name of the place located in Burma.¹⁹ The discovery of two imported wares, i.e., a thin egg white glazed pottery and a thick chocolate glazed ware indicate its contact with the Arabian countries. The discovery of Shahasamalla's coin from Manikpatna in Odisha, Polonaruva in Sri Lanka and Kotchina in Indonesia testify to a maritime network linking coastal Odisha, Sri Lanka and Sumatra. Among other notable findings from Manikpatna are a large number of beads of terracotta, agate, soft stone and bone, iron implements such as harpoon, spearhead, sickle, fishhooks, boat nails, iron slags, varieties of bangles in terracotta faience, glass and conch-shell. Thus, from the above analysis it is evident that Manikpatna was an important port -cum-trading centre for the indigenous and foreign sailors and merchants. It was an important urban centre of ancient Odisha. Situated on the bank of the water channel which connects the Chilika Lake

with the Bay of Bengal, it is almost on the sea shore. It was the place from where Hiuen Tsang could see the brilliant light emanating from the pearl on the top of the tope over the Buddha's tooth relic in Ceylon on a calm night. The discovery of Puri-Kushana coins from the vicinity of Manikpatna gives it an ancient touch.

Palur/Dantapura

Palur was another important port on the coast of ancient Odisha. The earliest reference to this port appears in the work of the Greek sailor Ptolemy²⁰ during the 2nd century CE who has named it as Paloura. Ptolemy has mentioned it as one of the bases for the preparation of his map. He has fixed Paloura at the beginning of the Gangetic Gulf at Long. 136° 40' and Lat. 11° 20'.²¹ Palur has been referred to in the Nagarjunikonda inscription of Virapurushadatta (regnal year 14) as an internationally important maritime emporium the script of which belonged to the second half of the third century CE.²²

G.E. Gerini,²³ the researcher of Ptolemy's geography has identified Paloura of Ptolemy with modern Palur, a village situated in the Chatrapur sub-division of the Ganjam district of Odisha. He placed it at Lat. 19° 27' N and Long. 85° 11' E, just above the mouth of Rushikulya and close by Palur Bluff, better known to navigators of the Bay of Bengal. This identification of Gerini seems to be accurate and convincing, and certainly the present village of Palur in the ancient times could have acted as the site of the famous port of Palur. The recent archaeological exploration around Palur (Kantigarh area) which unearthed fragments of the Chinese celadon ware, the Roman rouletted ware, amphora pieces etc., substantially testify the port of Palur having international reputation. A careful scrutiny of the geographical location of the village also indicates its suitability to be a port.

Palur has often been identified to be the same as the Dantapura of the Buddhist *Jatakas*,

²⁴ Dantakura of the *Mahabharata*²⁵ and Dandagula of Pliny²⁶. According to the Pali *Dathavamsa*,²⁷ a sacred tooth relic of the Buddha was presented by Thera Kshema to king Brahmadata of Kalinga who deposited it within a magnificent *stupa* at Dantapura. On linguistic grounds, S. Levi²⁸ identifies Dantapura of the Buddhist literatures, and Dandagula of Pliny with Paloura of Ptolemy. This identification by S. Levi is rested on the philology of the word Paloura. J. Przyluski²⁹ has opined that the name Palura was a mixture of the two Dravidian words, such as *pal* meaning tooth and *ura* meaning city i.e., the tooth city. According to him, the name as an Austro-Asiatic word could be associated with the term meaning 'elephant tusks' which was probably one of the important items of export. In this connection, it can be presumed that the port town of Palur was associated with export of elephant tusks as an important item, and that from *danta* (tooth) of the elephant, the name Dantapura has been derived. As such, the Kongoda region in which Palur was situated has been referred to as a place of breeding good elephants, by the anonymous author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*³⁰ as well as by Hiuen Tsang.³¹ S. Levi, thus believes that Palur and Dantapura were one and the same.

Apheterion

Ptolemy³² refers to an *apheterion* (point of departure), immediately to the south of Paloura (Palur), where ships bound for *Khryse* (the Malaya Peninsula) ceased to follow the littoral and entered the high seas. Gerini³³ has identified the *apheterion* of Ptolemy with the modern Gopalpur, just a little below the mouth of the river Rushikulya in the Ganjam district of Odisha. The *apheterion* of Ptolemy, however, evidently could be none other than Mansurkota near Gopalpur. Gopalpur in ancient times was known as Mansurkota.³⁴ Like Palur the geographical

location of the present village Mansurkota indicates its suitability to be a port.

Dosarene

Dosarene was another important port of ancient Odisha. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*³⁵ describes that the sailors from Masalia proceeded eastward across a neighbouring Bay to reach Dosarene which had the good breed of elephants called *bosare*. The ivory yielded in Dosarene was known as *dosarenic*.³⁶ The place Masalia has been generally identified with the Maisolia of Ptolemy³⁷ or the modern Machhilipatnam in Andhra Pradesh. To the east of this place was Dosarene near a Bay.

Moti Chandra³⁸ has identified Dosarene of *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* with Toshali. But on account of the geographical description of the author of the *Periplus* it can not be identified with Toshali. B.Srivastava³⁹ refers to *Dosarene* as the name of a *Janapada* of which Palur/Dantapura was the capital. This view is also not free from criticism as *Periplus* refers to *Dosarene* nearby a Bay, and *Dosarene* as a kingdom is not mentioned anywhere in the historical geography of ancient Odisha. However, the Bay described by *Periplus* could be none other than the Chilika Lake, whose mouth was probably wide enough to make it a Bay. In the 7th century CE, Hiuen Tsang⁴⁰ has described Kongoda as being famous for production of large dark coloured elephants which were capable of long journeys. So Dosarene of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* could be in the same region as *Kung-Yu-to* (Kongoda) of Hiuen Tsang, and the port of Dosarene, like Palur and Manikpatna, could be somewhere on the Chilika coast.

Sonapur

Sonapur was another important sea port of ancient Odisha. It lies in Lat. 19° 6' N and Long. 84° 47' E on the sea coast in the Ganjam

district of Odisha where river Bahuda enters into the Bay of Bengal 20 km away from Berhampur.⁴¹ At one point of time it was the principal shipping centre for the navigators. The Bahuda River subsequently formed sand bars which offered obstruction to shipping and the port lost its importance. Excellent qualities of edible oysters were found here which constituted one of the principal items of export from this port.

Barua

Barua or Barwah, another important seaport of ancient Odisha lies in Lat. 18° 51' N and Long. 84° 35' E on the sea coast, and is about 33 miles south of Berhampur town (Ganjam district) by road.⁴² It is now in Andhra Pradesh, 6 km from Sompeta and about 15 miles to the east of the Mahendra Mountain. The holy river Mahendratanya which originates from the Mahendragiri (Mahendra mountain) flowing to the east falls in the Bay of Bengal near Barua. From the accounts of Ptolemy, it seems that the port-town of Barua was one of the important trade centres in the east coast during the ancient period.

Kalingapatnam

Kalingapatnam (Lat. 18° 0' 20" N and Long. 84° 0' 7" E) was also a very important port of Kalinga or ancient Odisha. It was situated at the mouth of the river Vamsadhara in the modern Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh. The name Kalingapatnam itself means the city of the Kalingans, who earned reputation for their activity on the east coast. Besides being a port for quite sometime, it was the capital city of Kalinga. With the passage of time the port has been silted up. The discovery of pottery, large-sized brick walls, glazed tiles etc., through archaeological excavation conducted here (in 1928), proved beyond doubt that the site was a fortified city or a capital right from c. 2nd century BCE up to the early medieval times. The subsequent excavations by the

Archaeological Survey of India from 1977-79 in the *stupa* mound (supposed to have existed opposite to the old port) revealed that the settlement in this area must have taken place in 300 BCE.⁴³ The findings of Roman coins from the excavated site suggests that Kalingapatnam had contact with the ancient Rome.

Pithunda

Pithunda was another significant port of ancient Odisha. The Hathigumpha Inscription⁴⁴ mentions Pithumdam/Pithunda as a metropolis which Kharavela conquered in his 11th regnal year. Ptolemy⁴⁵ refers to a metropolis named Pityndra and locates it on the sea coast in between the mouths of the Maisolos (the Godavari) and the Manada (the Mahanadi) and as equidistant from both. The Jain *Uttaradhyayana Sutra*⁴⁶ mentions Pihumda/Pithunda as a sea coast port town. Sylvain Levi⁴⁷ has identified Pithumdam/Pithunda of Hathigumpha Inscription, Pityndra of Ptolemy and Pihumda/Pithunda of *Uttaradhyayana Sutra* to be one and the same. Taking this into consideration, the ancient Pithunda port could be located somewhere near Chicacole region of modern Andhra Pradesh. The city of Pithunda besides being a port has also been described as a famous seat of Jainism.⁴⁸ The seafaring merchants were said to have travelled by boat from Champa (present Kampuchea) to Pithunda even in the days of Mahavira.

To conclude we can say that the ports which were prerequisite for maritime activities played a vital role in the glorious maritime history of ancient Odisha. From the aforementioned analysis it reveals that some ports were active from very ancient times and continued to be so for a long period while some became prominent for a particular period and perished or lost their significance after a short span of time. With the passage of time the glorious maritime activities of

the ports, however, had declined and succumbed due to several factors. With the political dismemberment, administrative instability and internal disturbances, the kings withdrew their patronage to the adventurous activities across the sea, and this served as the principal factor for the decline of this glory. The activities of the sea pirates, loss of profitability of the trade together with the complexity of the society where crossing of the sea was considered as sinful by the higher castes supplemented to this decline. The factors like tectonic movement, coastal sedimentation, development of sand dunes in the navigational channels, change of river courses, floods, cyclones, sea level fluctuations etc., also played significant roles in the destruction of the ports and port towns. As a result, a number of ports were being deserted and buried amidst the sand dunes. Through archaeological excavation some of them like Tamralipti, Khalkattapatna, Manikpatna, and Kalingapatna have surfaced while others are awaiting the attention of the archaeologists. Without adequate excavation, the glorious maritime heritage of ancient Odisha or Kalinga will remain incomplete. Hence, scientific survey, exploration and archaeological excavation of the probable sites of coastal Odisha are highly essential to have a clear picture of the ports of early Odisha.

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