Odisha, famous in the name of Kalinga, is endowed and bestowed with a chivalric history of sea-voyages and rich maritime culture. The Kalingans were great seafarers and exuded tremendous expertise in navigation and chivalry. Their gallantry, particularly on sea route, has inspired many writers to write some of the memorable tales, legends and folklores. The daring and adventurous sailors undertook innumerable voyages to far-off countries and islands. Such maritime activities empowered them to integrate the socio-cultural ethos of the far-off places with their own local community. The cultural activities and social interactions are substantiated through literature, art, architecture and sculpture. Stories like Tapoi, Sadananda Saudagar Pala, Kethuria Pala, Madan Sundar Pala, Khulana Sundari and Prastava Sindhu etc. remind us of overseas trade and commerce of past Odisha: “…descriptions of the sea voyage are also found in the works of celebrated Odia poets… The story of adventures on the sea by the brave Odia sailors has been narrated in a popular poem “Tapoi” of the 18th century, A.D. which reminds our sea-trade tradition till today” (Behera, 2007:24-25).

Over the centuries, Odisha was known by different names: Utkal, Kalinga and Odradesh. The Northern and Central Odisha were known as Odra and Utkal whereas Kalinga included costal districts of Andhra Pradesh. Earlier Toshali and Kalinganagara (presently Sisupalgarh at Bhubaneswar) were historically important centers of Kalinga. However, Kalinga was dotted with a number of ports and harbours. The Kalingans dominated the sea route and developed close contacts with South-east Asian countries, especially Indonesia. This helped them to expand trade and commerce over different and far places: “The ancient kingdom of Orissa (Odra-desa, whence Oresa), strictly speaking, extended from the Kansbans river in the north to the Rusikulya river near Ganjam in the south; and from the Bay of Bengal on the east far into the tangled mass of low hills in the west. But the kings of Orissa were not satisfied with these boundaries. Both literature and monuments glorify the rules and empire of different kings that stretched from the little to the great Ganges, from the Bhagirathi (called by Europeans the Hugli or “Hooghly”) to the Godavari” (Mohapatra, 2007:202).

The Kalingans possessed distinct personality of their own. They were known for their daring ventures and dynamic spirit. The new Encyclopaedia Britannica (Micropaedia) Vol.8 describes: “Kalinga was a thriving kingdom at the
time of Buddha, in the 3rd century B.C. It was the scene of a great war involving the renowned Ashok. Kalinga became a maritime power in the early centuries of the modern era, enjoying a golden age under the Ganga dynasty, which lasted from 1078 to 1264” (Britannica, 2007:1000). However, located in the Eastern Coast of India, the ancient state of Kalinga extended from the Ganges to the Godavari river stretching nearly 1,465kms (910 miles). The navigable rivers such as the Ganges, the Mahanadi, and the Godavari etc. provided access to the interior lands and their deltas to natural harbours.

There are anecdotes and evidences to assume that coastal Orissa had rich trade communications with Burma, Indonesia and Thailand. The great poet Kalidasa has described the kingdom of Kalinga as "Mahodadhipati" or the ruler of the seas (Das, 1982:18).

The maritime activity of Kalinga was quite popular and widespread and hence the Bay of Bengal was called the ‘Sea of Kalinga’. Odia folklores contextualize and explore the communication by water that became important route contact and created links with different kingdoms and countries: “In the early Christian era port towns and their maritime links with Roman and Indian Ocean countries are proverbial. It is well documented in the literary as well as maritime traditions of the concerning countries. The Kalingan (ancient Orissan) ports were Viz. Tamralipti, Palour, Chelitalo, Dantapura, Dosarani, Kalingapatanam and so on dotted on coastal Kalinga (Roy, 2004:47).

The story of Ta-Poi is an important literary text that explores and examines the maritime activities of the ancient Odishans. The narrative traces the story of Shadhava (wealthy trading merchant), named Tanayabanta who was living with his wife Shakuntala in Asthagiri under the dynasty of Tiladhwaja. They had seven sons and one daughter, named Ta-Poi. All the sons were married and lived together. Their family was an appropriate example of joint family system. After the death of their parents, the seven brothers sailed their seven ships in the Bay of Bengal for merchandising. Before their voyage, they asked their wives to take proper care of their sister Ta-Poi. They loaded the ships with the merchandise of different types of spices and other things. Their wives asked them to bring ornaments and jewellery for them at the return journey:

Jebe jauchha banijyare ||
Anithibati alankare ||
Ke bole mora suņa chudi ||
Anithibati rattan jhadi ||
Ke bole hirar basani ||
Mohar pa-ein thiba ani ...(6).

This evidences the fact that the Odia merchants were importing several types of precious and costly metals and jewellery through the mercantile activity. Such navigation was stretched from the different ports to far off eastern lands of Sinhala (Singhala), Java, Bali, Sumatra, Indo-China and Brahmandesh: “During the period under review, Orissa’s maritime trade was no less prosperous and extensive. This is inferred from the existence of a number of ports, which were the channels through which Orissa carried on her trade with the outside world” (Mishra, 1993: 93).

Madan Sundar Pala narrates the maritime activity of three merchant brothers named Sananda, Binod and Madan Sundar. They lived at Kanchan Nagar near the Ganga. The king Ratnakar asks Sananda and Binod to go on trade for Agaru (sweet scented oil from wood), Chandan (sandal wood) and Kasturi (musk):
Puja drabya nahin boli tahanku kahile ||
Lanka deshe naba nei chalijao bhale (Satapathy, 2015:63).

The two brothers sailed for Lanka on the full moon day of the month Kartik to carry out their commerce. On the other hand, in such a story, the princess Kuntala who was the only daughter of the king Chitrasen, sailed her boat in deep sea and found her husband, Madan Sundar, who was supposed to have been lost at Sapra village. This lore possibly acknowledges the skill of womenfolk at rowing the boat.

Sadananda Saudagar Pala is yet another form of Madan Sundar Pala. Sadananda is the only son of Madan Sundar and Kuntala who sails his boat to find out and rescue his father, Madan and also his uncles, Sananda and Binod. These three were imprisoned in the palace of Surasen at Rangani Patana. Similarly, Kethuria Pala relates the maritime activities and religious practices of some wood-cutters and the voyage of a merchant named Lakshapati and his young son-in-law, Shankhadutta. These folktails portray the living tradition of trade and shipping activities of ancient Odisha.

Besides these folktails, Khulana Sundari discusses the sea-voyages and belief in religious practices of worshipping Goddess Mangala. It was thought and believed that Goddess Mangala would save the sailors from any type of obstacles and hurdles in navigation. This credo lasts till today. The text dramatizes Khulana’s pain and suffering in the absence of her husband, Dhaneswar, who undertook the voyage to Anga, Banga and Kalinga:

Manohari boli ek boita ||
Tatakshane saja kala naranath

Anek drabya ta bhitar bhar ||
Suntu pipali je pan mahu ||
Anga Banga adi Kalinga desh ||
Kahin na rahn chale naresh (18).

Here, it could be seen and observed that the merchants of ancient Odisha more or less traded and exported spices and forest products to distant lands. Dhaneswar loaded his boat with dry ginger, long pepper, aniseed, musk, resin, camphor, nutmeg, cumin, asafoetida, clove, caraway seed, cardamom, fenugreek, garlic, bay leaf, orrisroot, coriander seed and black cumin seed etc. In relation to such overseas activities and maritime trade, the folktails retrieve the glorification of tradition in the mind of the readers.

Merchandising was the family profession. After the demise of Ta-poi’s father, Tanayabanta, her seven brothers followed the route. Sadananda Saudagar kept the tradition of his father, Madan Sundar and his two elder brothers, Sananda and Binod for sailing in deep sea. Sridhar, the only son of Dhaneswar, against all odds and hurdles, sailed his boat to bring back his father to their own kingdom. According to early sources, such maritime culture in Odisha started before 350 BC. But the inheritors of ancient seafarers have changed their vocation over the years: “The people of this region of eastern India along the coast of the Bay of Bengal sailed up and down the Indian coast, and travelled to Indo-China and throughout Maritime Southeast Asia, introducing elements of their culture to the people with whom they traded. By 400AD. Odisha was the hub of a trade network that stretched from the Roman Empire to China” (The Maritime History of Odisha, Wikipedia, Google).

Besides, the boat erected on Bhoga Mandap of Jagannath Temple, Puri and the boat
containing a giraffe in the Sun Temple of Konark etc. bear ample testimony of maritime culture in Odisha. Presumably the maritime trade establishes the important link with religious practices as is asserted by the folklores. But the overseas trading was not without risks. The natural calamities, treacherous currents, the silting of the sands at the river mouths and loss of spirit etc. posed threats to maritime activities. Moreover, pirates and sea plunderers caused problems for the merchants and voyagers.

On the other hand, from 1568 A.D., Odisha underwent many political upheavals and troubles due to different rulers: Afghans, Moguls, Marathas and the British. The political subjugation was conceivably a formidable force for the sea trade: “Orissa’s loss of independence in 1568, and thereafter the continuous occupation by outside powers-the Muslims, the Moguls, the Marathas, the British, was finally redeemed in 1947, when Odisha got back its independence along with Independence for India as a whole” (Mohanty, Jatindra, 2006:xix). In the 17th century Odisha’s sea-borne trade passed into the hands of the European merchants as they enjoyed the patronage of the Muslim rulers. However, the construction of roads and railways were the significant factors for the decline of maritime trade in Odisha.

The construction of railways in 1896 and subsequent extension of the same undermined the maritime culture. After 1900, much of Odisha’s exports were sent to important cities and ports of India by railway communication. Thus, the railways considerably paralyzed the entire maritime activities of Odisha. It could be stated that during the British imperialism, the maritime activities in Odisha came to an impending doom. As the maritime trade has been a rare view, the Odias revive their memory by observing Boita Vandana Utsav. To glorify such tradition of maritime activities, Boita Vandana Utsav is commonly accepted as a national festival. This festival is celebrated throughout Odisha at the hours of full moon, on the month of Kartika as this month was important for merchants. Bali Yatra at Cuttack, particularly at the belt of the Mahanadi, is a unique instance.

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