

The literal meaning of **Baliyatra** is “**Voyage to Bali.**” Bali is an island of Indonesia and the Baliyatra festival is generally celebrated in the coastal Odisha on the day of “Kartika Purnima” which falls in the month of November every year. It is a unique socio-cultural event with glorious history which commemorates the past association of the people of Odisha with Bali and the glorious maritime tradition of trans-oceanic voyages they undertook to South East Asian Countries.

and economic glory. Bali Jatra festival is also associated with legend ‘Taapoi’ and rituals like ‘Bhalukuni Osha’ or ‘Khudurukuni Osha’ and



## Baliyatra : A Festival of Odisha's Ancient Maritime Trade

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The celebration of Baliyatra on the Bank of river Mahanadi takes us back to remember our ancestral cultural heritage and maritime legacy. During this period the traders of Odisha (Sadhava Puas) were undertaking voyages, along the sea trade route, on huge boats called “Boita” from this place on full moon day in the month of November. So Kartika Purnima is an auspicious day for the people of Odisha as the Sailors used to start their voyage to the places like Bali, Java Borneo, Sumatra in Indonesia and Srilanka for a successful trade. Baliyatra is not only a ritual of sailing of boats on Kartika Purnima day but it also represents the ancient maritime tradition of Odisha

‘Bada Osha’. ‘Taapoi’ is deeply associated with Bali Jatra festival, which reminds the traditional memories of a young maiden waiting for the return of her sailor brothers. To commemorate this glorious past of commercial Journey, this festival is celebrated every year from the day of Kartika Purnima according to Odia Calendar.

Baliyatra festival of Odisha has some parallel with ‘Masakan Ke Tukad’ festival of Bali where similar floating of toy boats in memory of maritime ancestors is made. Likewise ‘Loikrathong or LOY Brah Prahdip’ festival of Thaliand consisting of ritualistic floating of boats

in the month of December has similarity with Odishan custom. On Baliyatra festival of Kartika Purnima an Odia lyric is usually recited i.e. 'Aa-Ka-Ma-Bai, Pana-Gua- Thoi'. Aa-Ka-Ma-Bai connotes the month of Asadha, Kartika, Margasira and Baisakha of Odia calendar. While the period from Asadha to Kartika (July- September) was the season of outgoing voyage and Magha to Baisakha was considered to be the season of return voyage. Apart from other places of Odisha, Baliyatra is celebrated with much pomp and grandeur in the historic city of Cuttack for seven days from Kartika Purnima. Some opine, Odia Sadhabas (sea traders) were sailing off to Bali on this monsoon season for which it is named as such. Others say, Sri Chaitanya, the great Vaishnavite Bengali Saint, first landed on the soil of Cuttack after crossing the sand-bed (Bali) of Mahanadi River on his way to Puri on this auspicious day. Lakhs of people congregate on the famous Baliyatra festival of Cuttack city where innumerable varieties of goods are bought and sold. People also enjoy boating on the river Mahanadi with friends and relatives in the moonlit night during this festival.

Odisha province, known as Kalinga in ancient times, was commanding a very high position in the maritime activities of India in the past. Brave and adventurous Kalinga sailors were making daring voyages to different far-off lands of the world and had maritime contacts with Roman Empire, Africa, Persian coast, Arabian countries in the west and China, Japan, Siam, Champa, Burma, Ceylon, etc in the East. Besides, the countries with which the people of Kalinga maintained enduring commercial and cultural relationship were the islands of Java, Sumatra, Bali and Borneo collectively known as Suvarnadvipa or modern Indonesia. Odisha's

glorious maritime past has been proved from the excavated materials like Roman coins, Kushan coins, Chinese ceramic sherds found from different parts of Odisha in the recent past. Great was the fame of Kalinga as a maritime power in ancient times that "**Kalidas**" in his Raghuvamsa referred to king of Kalinga as the "**Lord of Sea**".

Kartika Purnima which falls on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the Sukla Paksha (Waxing moon) of the Karttika month (November), is a day of reminiscence of Odisha's ancient overseas trade with far off South-eastern parts. The people of Odisha float small boats made of banana peels and Sola in nearby ponds and rivers to recall the glories of daring Sea Voyages of ancient Kalinga.

Sarala Das in the Mahabharata, Narasimha Sena in his Parimala Kavya, Yasowant Das in Tika Govinda Chandra mentioned maritime terms like Botia, Naha, Sadhava, Sadhavani, Manga, Nabika etc. and islands like Srilanka, Java, Bali, Suvarna Dvipa, Bramhadesh etc.

The ancient texts mention "Kalingah Sahasikah" while referring to the brave sons of Kalinga. The geographical position of Kalinga, with several rivers, sheltered ports and the ocean by its sides, provided an ideal environment for sea voyages (Samudra Yatra). The famous ports of Kalinga were Tamralipti, Palur, Pithunda, Chelitalo, Manikpatna etc. which were famous for sea voyage from India to South-East Asian countries. Among the ports of Odisha, Tamralipti (Modern Tamluk in the Midnapore district of West Bengal) served as the main gateway for ancient Kalingan innumerable sea-going traders, travellers and missionaries where the Royal household was of Kaibarta caste. Ptolemy in the second century A.D. called it as Tamalitis. King Tissa of Ceylon had sent for envoys to the

court of emperor Ashoka who came and went through this port. Ashoka arrived at the island of Ceylon and converted Tissa into Buddhism. Sanghamitra, the daughter of Ashoka sailed from this port to Ceylon with the sacred 'Bodhitree'.

Fa - Hien in the fifth century A.D. saw it a strong maritime settlement of the Buddhists and left for Ceylon from this port. He saw their 24 monasteries with rich libraries that he stayed there for two years copying out *sastras*. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Hiuen - Tsang visited the place and saw about 50 Hindu temples and a few Buddhist monasteries. Though on the declining stage Tamralipti counted to be Buddhist centre till I-Tsing reached the port in 671 A.D. Thus Tamralipti was an important sea port on the east coast of ancient India from which people travelled to China, Ceylon and South East Asia. Another important port was Palur which is identified with modern village of Palur on the coast of Bay of Bengal in Ganjam district. The Greek author Ptolemy in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. refers to Palur as a flourishing port of Kalinga.

Dantrapura, mentioned in the Buddhist and Jaina text, is perhaps same as Palur since 'Palla' and 'Ur' the two terms in Tamil indicate the meaning tooth (Danta) and city (Pura). Gerini, the researcher on Ptolemy's geography further refers to a port, from where ships sailed to 'Suvarnabhumi' (Burma) and 'Suvarnadipa'. This port has been identified by scholars with Gopalpur, a sea resort in Ganjam District.

Pithunda was the next important port of Kalinga. The Jaina text Uttaradhyana Sutra mentions that being a famous centre during the day of Mahavir, merchants from Champa used to come to this place for trade. Kharavela's Hatigumpha inscription mentions Pithunda as

metropolis of Kalinga. Sylvain Levi located Pithunda to south of Pallur near Chicacola and Kalingapatanam. Che-li-ta-lo (Chhatra) as described by famous Chinese Pilgrim Hiuen - Tsang was another port town situated on the sea-coast of Odradesha (North Odisha). Manikapatna, located close to the present mouth of Chilika is regarded as a sheltered port of ancient Odisha. The discovery of celadonware and a coin of Sahasamalla, king of Srilanka shows trade relation with China and Srilanka in the early medieval period. Undoubtedly Manikapatna had an important role in the east-west maritime trade. Abul Fazl, the court historian of Akbar, mentions Manikapatnam as a large port where salt dues were collected during his time.

From the ancient times the people of Kalinga had commercial, colonial and cultural relations with islands like Bali, Java, Sumatra, Borneo and Malaya. During the period from 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. both Brahmanic Hinduism and Buddhism were two flourishing religions of Suvarnadvipa. The Kalinga influence in Suvarnadvipa reached its zenith in 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The Sailendra empire sprang up during this period which included Java, Sumatra, Malayan Peninsula, Borneo and Bali.

The contact between Kalinga and Simhala dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Kalinga seems to have maintained contacts with Burma through sea routes. The ancient name of Pegu was Ussa. Most probably this name was derived from the word Odisha. The Chinese sources reveal that there existed close commercial and cultural relations between Kalinga and China. The sea-route from Kalinga to China passed through Simhala and Java. According to the Chinese sources a famous Kalingan scholar

named Subhakara visited the Court of the Chinese Emperor Husan-Tsung and translated the Buddhist text Mahavirochana Sutra into Chinese language. The discovery of Roman coins at Bamanghati in Mayurbhanj district and Vizagapatnam district which were within the boundaries of ancient Odisha, prove that Kalinga exported her goods to Rome and brought the Roman coins in return. Also in the body of the Sun temple of Konark, the picture of a giraffe is seen in sculpture. The giraffe being an African animal, it is believed that the Odishan merchants brought that animal from Africa.

Thus, Kalinga's contribution to the cultures of countries abroad and particularly to South-East Asia, is quite significant. Thus Odisha, now remembers its past maritime trade glory which also throws light on the history of maritime trade activities of the world.

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