

MARITIME TRADITIONS OF ORISSA

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The people of Orissa had great expertise in sea voyage in ancient and medieval times. From the folklores, folksongs, traditions, customs and literature, it is found that the Oriyas had commercial as well as cultural relationship across the seas. It is said that the people of Kalinga were the pioneers in colonising the far-off lands of Sumatra, Java, Indonesia, Burma, Siam and other countries.¹ They had also social relationship with the people of Srilanka. They had acquired wealth and power through this maritime trade and colonial expansion. So in the history of India, the people of Orissa had also contributed considerably.

Numerous stories speak of the Kalingan merchants who went on sea voyages with their boats called 'Boitas'. The story of Tapoi, the girl of a merchant, is well known in Orissa. Other stories like 'Bole Hun Ti' (I agree with you), 'Kuhuka Mandala' (the Kingdom of Magic), 'Chadhei Katha' (the story of a bird), 'Sadhav Jhia' (the merchant's daughter), 'Kuhuka Karat' (the magic box), 'Saudagar Charipua' (the four sons of a merchant) are such stories which reflect the glorious role of the Oriya maritimers.² Many festivals in Orissa are being observed to commemorate the oversea glories of Kalingans in by-gone days. The festivals are Khudurukuni (every Sunday of Bhadrav), Kartika Purnima (full-moon night of Kartika), Bhodei Osha (the day of full-moon of Bhadrav), Karma Puja, Chaiti Parba of Kaivartas (fishermen caste) etc.³ In Kartika Purnima, the populace of Orissa float small boats made of banana peels and 'sola' (thermocole) to recall the glories of daring sea voyagers of Orissa. There are also other modes of worshipping in Orissa in which certain booklets are read out on specific occasions. In these stories the role of maritime merchants, their fabulous wealth, their style of life are being highlighted. Such stories are connected with the worship of Sani (the Saturn), Trinath (the Trinity-Brahma, Vishnu and Siva), Dutia Osha (the Dyutivahan or Sun), Sari Subanathi Brata (of Kharsuan under present Bihar province).⁴

Kalidas in his *Raghuvamsa* has mentioned the king of Kalinga as 'Mahodadhipati', or the king of oceans. During the time of Ascharya Charya Chaya, the work of Sidhacharyas of Buddhist faith in eastern India of early medieval phase, Kahnupa,⁵ one of the Sidhacharyas had indicated about the maritime commerce of entire Eastern India.

During the medieval period, it is found from the literature that overseas trade was in a flourishing condition. Sarala Das in Mahabharat, Narasimha Sena in his Parimala Kavya and Yasowant Das in Tika Govinda Chandra and Kaivarta Gita, Upendra Bhanja in Lavanyavati and Dinakrushna Das in Rasa Kallola⁶ have used the terms related to maritime commerce like 'Boita', 'Naba', 'Sadhav', 'Sadhavani', 'Manga', 'Nabika' etc. and islands like Srilanka, Java, Bali, Suvama Dvipa, Brahmadesh etc. Even Mallik Mahammed Jayashi in his Padmavat has written about the king of Kalinga, who built a flotilla for Ratnakar, the hero of the book, to reach Srilanka.⁷

Noted historian R.C. Majumdar⁸ has opined that the great kings of Sailendras of Java belonged to a branch of Sailodbhavas, who were ruling in Orissa around seventh century A.D. in Ganjam and

Puri districts. A Javanese folktale says a king of Kalinga with 20,000 followers came to Java to settle permanently.⁹ It could be that the Kalingans became fascinated with the new islands and it is possible that some of them even settled there. The spirit of adventure and the will to establish colonial empires might have induced the brave Kalingans to take such step. It may be a fact that due to the growth of population or to avoid a genocide by a powerful invader, the people and the king migrated to Java. In the island, the *Klings¹⁰ (Kalingas) were known as powerful maritimers alongwith Aryans, Simhalese, Dravidas and Pandikaras. From an inscription of Madhav Verma,¹¹ a king of Sailodbhava dynasty, the role of the people of ancient Orissa in far off places can be seen.

From different sources and customs, nomenclatures, many typical Kalingan terms are available in the Javanese island even today. A river in Java was named as Kali Kelinga.¹² A part of the kingdom of Srivijay King Jayanash was known as 'Srikshetra'. A green leaf 'Sajana' (Drumstick) is also a popular food in Java. The sweet rice cakes of Orissa known as 'pitha' is also prepared in the island. In the island, a goddess is worshipped as the deity of corn and yield exactly how the Oriyas worship Srilaxmi. In Orissa the women prepare a symbolic image of sand called Astabhuja Durga like the women of Java. Besides, even in the realm of language there are many words which are of similar pronounce and meaning.

The Oriya merchants were dealing with the articles like coconut, earthen utensils, sandalwood, cloth, lime, rice, spices, salt, clove, pumpkin,* silk sarees, betel leaves and nuts, elephants, precious stones etc.¹⁴ The merchants were known as 'Sadhav' in Orissa. They generally used the title 'Sahu'. The word 'Sadhav' means 'honest' as the maritimers were very honest so far as their profession was concerned. The word 'Sahu' is derived from the 'Sadhav' in the course of time. It is found that the title 'Sahu' is used by Brahmins, Kshyatriyas or locally known as Khandayats, Vaishyas like oilmen (teli), grain merchant (Thodia), Putuli Bania, Kumutis, sweet-makers (Gudia). So the Sadhavas were a group of merchants of different castes. The Khandayats like Mangaraj, Boital and Mahanayaks were security officers and the common Khandayats (peasants) and Kaivartas (Fishermen and traditional boatmen) were the boatmen. Construction of big boats was made which took a lot of time. Expert craftsmen were engaged who were from traditional household of boat-makers. Boats were prepared of different nature and of different size.

In coastal Orissa, there were many villages which were known as Patna, i.e., the bustee of craftsmen and merchants. Particularly in either banks of the river Prachi, such villages are found. Even there are many sand mounds on the banks of this river, and those mounds known as the 'Boitakuda', and a field is called 'Jahaja-Pariya' (ship field).¹⁵ There were ports like Tamralipti, Palur, Chelitalo, Chilika, Kakatpur, Balipatna, Birudipatna, etc., of international repute.¹⁶ They were busy throughout the year. Merchants were coming from different parts of the world. The Kalingans had trade relationship not only with Java, known as Balidvipa then, but also with Srilanka, Barma, China, Malaya in the east and Persia, Greece and Egypt in the west. Even women¹⁷ were also allowed to travel different foreign countries on the Boitas which can be found from a stone art of Bhubaneswar.

It is a fact that during ancient and early medieval time, entire Southern India was busy with overseas trade. But the Kalingans were predominant among them. It is well-known that the people of Kalinga were great fighters, empire builders and patron of art and culture in the annals of world history. But they were also daring and the ships were of primitive nature. With the downfall of Gajapatis in the 16th century A.D. alongwith their political dominance, their maritime trade also declined rapidly. Afterwards, the daring activities of the brave sailors and empire builders in overseas areas became

only a subject of history.

* Even in Berma, they were known as Klings.

* Known as Boitalu in Orissa i.e., the vegetable brought by Boita or boat.

Footnotes :

1. R.D. Banerjee, *History of Orissa*, Vol.I, Cuttack, 1930, p.98.
2. K.B. Das, *Loka Galpa Sanchayan (O)*, Orissa Sahitya Academy, Bhubaneswar, pp.417-18.
3. A. Pattnaik, *Brata Sahitya*, Orissa Sahitya Academy, Bhubaneswar, pp.25-62.
4. As quoted in A. Pattnaik, "Smruti O Bismrutira Ketoti Chhinnasutra", in Sagar O Sahitya, (ed) K.S. Behera, Cuttack, 1993, pp.85-107.
5. As quoted by S.C. Pradhan, Odia Sahityare Samudra Chetana O Samudra Prati Abhimukhya, in Sagar O Sahitya, op.cit., p.48.
6. See K.S. Behera (ed.), Sagar O Sahitya, op.cit., pp.42-45.
7. Sarala Das Mahabharata (O) Adiparva, p.131; Upendra Bhanja Lavanyavati, Part-II, 17th Stanza; 1953; M.M. Jayashi, Padmavat, Bohita Khand, pp.1-5.
8. R.C. Majumdar, Suvarnavipa; as cited in S.N. Rajguru, "Prachina Abhilekhare Samudra Jatrara Suchana" in Sagar O Sahitya, op.cit., p.56
9. B.K. Tripathy, "Dakshina Purva Asiara Samaj O Sahityare Kalingara Prabhava" (o) in Sagar O Sahitya, op.cit, p.60; S.N. Sathpathy, Jatak Stories, p.42.
10. As quoted in K.C. Panigrahi, History of Orissa, Cuttack, 1981, p.462.
11. S.N. Rajguru, op.cit., p.55.
12. B.K. Tripathy, op.cit., pp.62-63.
13. Ibid.
14. N.C. Panda, Sagar... op.cit., p.159; K.C. Panigrahi, op.cit., p.466.
15. P.K. Ray (ed); Archaeological Survey Report, 1974-75; Prachi Valley Orissa State Archaeology, Bhubaneswar, 1975, pp.43-44.
16. A. Pattnaik, "Prachina Kalingara Bilupta Bandara", *Utkal Prasanga*.
17. *Journal of Asiatic Society Letters*, Vol.XVII, No.2, 1951, pp.114.