
MARITIME TRADE OF ODISHA: A LOOK INTO THE FOLKLORE AND CELEBRATION OF THE AGE OLD FESTIVAL BALI JATRA AND THE PRESENCE OF ODIYA DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

This article tries to highlight on how historical maritime trade of Odisha achieved compelling and impressive socio-economic complexity during the ancient time. The impact of this can be seen in places like Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Apart from trading in goods there were also trading in relations, thereby leading to the spread of culture or acculturation. The significance of Bali Jatra can be seen as a pompous fair that is celebrated as a tribute to ancient maritime trade. Bali Jatra the name itself signifies the journey of Odisha's sea traders to Bali. Folklores related to maritime history of Odisha also showcase the existence of Odiya sea traders from time immemorial.

Keywords: Maritime Trade, Folklore, Ancient Diaspora, Odisha, Bali Jatra

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history the ocean played a significant role to people around the world as a means of transportation and communication. However 20th century witnessed ships started carrying goods more extensively rather than people. Maritime trade is as ancient as global trade and historically the scope and extent of long distance trade came commensurable with developments in maritime transportation technology. Long distance trades played a pivotal role in the cultural, religious and artistic exchanges that took place between the major centres of civilization. Maritime trade transportation facilities depended a lot on the regular itineraries, better known as maritime routes. Some trade routes have been in use for centuries and some areas had a monopoly on certain material or goods. For example, China supplied silk to West Asia and the Mediterranean world, South Asia principally supplied spices. One of the most enduring trade route in human history has been the Silk and Spice route. The spices and silk were sought after because of their exotic origin. It has been functioning for about 1500 years and the name has been derived from

the Chinese textile that flowed from Asia to the Middle East and Europe. Initially this basin linked with the Mediterranean basin and India during the Roman era (Rodrigue et al. 2012).

As the markets globalized there was rise in the shipping of goods. Cargos between countries without common borders had to be carried through the sea. Growth of world trade remained as one of the main reason behind the massive increase in shipping. Apart from this, institutional and technological factors also played a major role. Therefore one cannot deny the fact that oceans were the highways of economic development in which the merchant shipping has played a major role.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Oceans are the economic interface of the world, with 90% of the global trade passing through them (Pandya et. al. 2011). The maritime sector played an important role in the growth of modern Odisha. However, it was hardly taken the attention of scholars for its role as an essential element in terms of social and economic development.

OBJECTIVES

The article tries to focus on the sole objective:

- To understand the culture of trade networks in the formation of the Odiya diaspora.

METHODOLOGY

Secondary sources have been used to the collect the data for this study. Purposive and random samplings have been used for the collection of the primary data. The secondary data were collected from published books, journal articles, internet and archival sources.

Maritime and Development of Economy

Shipping opens a more extensive market to every kind of industry. An industry subdivides and improves itself on the banks of navigable rivers and sea-coasts. It does not take much time for these improvements to seep into the inland parts. Due to this reason, the ancient civilized nations were gathered around the coasts of Mediterranean Sea. Similarly the chief cause for early improvements in Egypt was because of the extent and easiness of its inland navigation.

Adam Smith (2005) in his book “The Wealth of Nations” largely discusses about the mercantile system which prevailed during the 18th century. He was critical about the mercantile trading because it mixes value and wealth with precious metals. According to him, the stream of goods and services that the nation creates is in real measure the wealth of a nation. He further discovers

the term Gross Domestic Product (GDP), wherein it is not by the hoarding metals rather the increase in the productive capacity by increasing the markets (by increasing trade) that the wealth of a nation is increased. He considers that division of labor is the main cause of improvement in productiveness of labor. As the productivity increases and business produce more goods than they can sell locally, they need access to wider markets. Once the division of labor is well established every man becomes in some measure a merchant and the society becomes a commercial society. This continual process of exchange leads inevitably to the origin of money. Factors that motivated Adam Smith to chalk out theories like division of labor and wealth of the nation were because of the maritime activities.

Shipping was generally more efficient in the primitive economies as it allowed trade to get started earlier. Adam Smith painted a graphic picture of 18th century sea-transportation and the benefits offered through this. He said that a huge wagon carrying four tons weight of good which is attended by two men and drawn by eight horses took about six week to move to and fro between London to Edinburgh. Similarly a ship navigated with six to eight men who carried two hundred ton weight of goods took the same amount of time to sail between the ports of London and Leith. Thus, there was a labor productivity benefit of fifteen times (Stopford 2009:3). Therefore one cannot deny the fact that oceans were the highways of economic development in which the merchant shipping has played a major role. Apart from this, the maritime tradition, political alignments, ports and even the economic wealth of different regions are the product of this economic evolution.

Maritime History of Odisha

Ancient Odisha, then known as Kalinga had an autocratic position in the maritime activities of India. The state was studded with ports and harbours when the marine activities were rampant in the region. The Buddhist literature, Siuki, exhibits the interest in maritime tradition in the eastern region of India and also talks about the number of sea ports that coast of Kalinga adorned. Whereas in the Jatakas there has been reference given to the eastern sea ports Champa and Tamralipti from where traders sailed to Ceylon¹ and Suvarnabhumi². The state had its geographical advantages with a network of large and navigable rivers which helped the people of Odisha to acquire nautical skills and enterprises. This gave existence to the ports and harbors in Kalinga coastline like the Tamralipti, Adamus, Kosambia, Dosarene, Manada, Pakura, Konnagar, Nanigain, Kakadaram, Kalinganagar and Dantapuram (Mahalik 2004).

¹ Srilanka was known as Ceylon till 1972.

² Suvarna means gold and Bhumi (bhoomi) means land or world (depending on context.) So Suvarnabhumi means GoldenLand or land of gold. It has its origin from Sanskrit. The term was used for Southeast Asia during the ancient times.

The most heeded maritime story in Odisha has been that of the Kartika Purnima's *Danga Bhasani*³. The story speaks about the maritime trade activities which were carried out by the merchants to far off countries through sea-routes. Due to this the old idea that the sea voyages and overseas trade brought wealth to the family still persists and women until now make their obeisance to the painted images of sailing ships in their own courtyard. The belief behind this festival is that it brings wealth and prosperity to the family. This observance is carried out from a long time as a recollection of the maritime activities of the Odiya merchants in the past.

It was during the medieval period that there existed a split between the glorious history of Odisha and the gloomy times. Though the Mauryan rule over Kalinga did not last long, but Ashoka reign which fought the bloodiest war, The Kalinga war was also witness to one of India's most illustrious rulers. Ashoka's interest in spreading Buddhism can be seen from the voyages that he made in order to spread the religion. He started establishing contacts with the Hellenistic world by sending diplomatic-cum-religious missions to the rulers of Syria, Macedonia and Epirus. Ashoka's inscriptions were commonly associated with the Persian rulers. Ashoka's Greek and Aramaic inscriptions that were found in Kandahar in Afghanistan revealed his desire to maintain ties with people outside India⁴.

Similarly, during the British period, Odisha was deformed and reduced in size left with only the three coastal districts of Baleshwar, Cuttack and Puri. Ports were neglected that directly affected the economy of the state. This imbalance was also felt in the maritime trading of Odisha. The exploitations carried out on the people were rampant and so was the discrimination meted out towards them. Now, the traditional maritime culture of Odisha becomes the history, the sea traders Boita⁵ are no more existence, the offerings prayers and worship by women are still preserved of the past tradition as a frozen frame in the form of the annual celebration of Boitabandan and Bali Jatra in the eve of Kartika Purnima every year.

³ It means the sail of boats where different kind of paper boats, bark of banyan tree boats, etc are made and sailed in the river at Cuttack.

⁴ India-The Mauryan Empire Kingdoms and Empires, http://www.mongabay.com/history/india/india_the_mauryan_empire_kingdoms_and_empires.html, (accessed on 4 th February 2013)

⁵ Boat is known as Boita in the colloquial term.



Source: <http://www.bhubaneswarbuzz.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/patta-chitra-boita-bandana.jpg>

Above is the image of the story of Khudurkuni Osha where the brothers return from a trade voyage to Bali. This festival at present is celebrated with great pomp and shower in the name of Bali Jatra. The present fair gives this festival a new shape though the age old practise might have lost its significance but it has left back the essence of maritime trade. One can notice that the return migration in Odisha is celebrated instead of mourned at the loss of tradition, culture and identity.



Source: <http://www.indiatravelspot.com/indian-festivals-and-events/bali-yatra-cuttack-odisha>

Above is the present day Bali Jatra that is celebrated with a twist in taste and shape in the story.

Although a close study of the art and architectural remains provide a close linkage of the people of India in early medieval phase. It is at times difficult to know who traded the goods, why they traded, how they were traded, how much they cost, and how many middlemen they went through before reaching their final destinations (Dash 2011). Lack of sufficient historical records makes it difficult to estimate the exact numbers of these ancient Indian overseas populations or to reconstruct their day-to-day lives, however, the evidence of their existence is irrefutable and must at least be acknowledged in a full account of the Indian oikumene (Rangaswamy et. al. 2005). The prevalence of the Tapoi⁶ or Khudurkuni story throughout Odisha and its incorporation in the worship of unmarried girls show that sea-voyages were at one time a common aspect in the land. This story is customary in every household in Odisha. The worship was well known in the medieval era. Its observance in Odisha continuously is a definite proof of the maritime activity of the Odiyas in past decades. The term Odiya Diaspora may not be as popular in comparison to other Diasporas from India but their presence in a foreign land since ages cannot be negated either.

CONCLUSION

Maritime history of India has been influenced largely by the geographical location and economy and etc of the state and has been really imperative in the development of trade uplifting the economy of the country. Odiya which is rich in ports and historically was well connected to foreign land via sea its contribution to the Indian subcontinent cannot be neglected. There is a small but growing number of Odiyas who have begun to produce written maritime travel narratives, which vary in genre, content and history. The term Odiya Diaspora maybe contested in the field of Indian Diaspora but their presence cannot be ignored from the age old migration that had taken place ages ago. The core problem of Odiya Diaspora is the total absence of a comprehensive perspective on the subject, which is desperately needed as we move into the 21st century.

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⁶It is the name of the sister in the folklore story of Khudurkuni.

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