

Boita Bandana - A Tribute to Utkaliya Maritime Glory

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ABSTRACT

In the culture of Utkal, BOITA means the present day ships. Once upon a time, Utkal was as the main center of sea route trading, commerce and navy on the east coast of India. We can easily find the historical connection and evidences of Indian culture in the eastern Indian ocean countries - and Utkal was the main gateway to export our culture and products. In the course of time, due to various reasons - such as outside invasion, lack of promotion, blending of local culture, etc. - Utkal gradually lost its dominance in sea route trading. Just as our festivals tell our history, Kartika Purnima tells the glorious sea route trading. It is not just a festival, it is also an inspiration and courage that shows Odisha's contribution to shipping in today's time.

KEYWORDS: *Boita bandana, boitaalu, sadhava, kartika purnima, haribola, balijatra*

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Odra (now Odisha) had four region i.e. Toshali, Kalinga, Kangoda, Koshala. These were various braviuous kingdom. They were strong for their landmaster. These region lands were tremendous & under the Kshyatriyas. But in seashore areas Sadhaba's were tremendous success in commercial communication. Some called them 'Sahukar'. They were Head & leader of water transports. In different region there were settled Kaibrata caste. Some recognise them 'Dhiwar' or 'Majhi' or 'Keut'. They were built different types of boats, boitas. In technical purpose the name changed 'Zahaz' (Ship). Today Odisha celebrated 'Boita Bandaana' (Balijatra) in month of Kartika (November). According to criticism it is the greatest open festival of World. In otherhand Khudurukuni Osha, Shanimela, Mangala Osha related with Boita trading tradition.

Discussion:

That day, my mother was in deep thought, worried about what to cook. It was the month of Kartika, and the sacred period of Panchuka was underway, marked by austerity and reverence. Father remarked, "Regardless of anything, 'Boitaalu' must be included in the curry." By listening the word 'Boitaalu' my mind wandered to the traditional ritual of 'Boita

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Bandana'. In recent times, it appears that our language is gradually losing many of its distinctive words. Upon closer reflection, I realized that the term boita (boat) bears a striking resemblance to boitaalu(a type of edible vegetable). This linguistic affinity, referred to as shabda sadruśya in Odia, is grounded in their physical similarity. While boitaaloo remains a staple in rural areas, its usage is more prevalent in villages than in urban settings. Father declared, "Tomorrow at dawn, we shall release the boita into the river. Prepare yourselves early." In anticipation of the event, Grandmother fashioned a small boat from a banana stem, urging us to hurry so as not to miss the sacred ritual. However, I hesitated to embrace her handcrafted offering. Overcome with shyness, I visited the market, purchased a vibrant paper and thermocol boat. A beautiful quote was inscribed on that:

"**ଝା-କା-ମ୍ବା-ବ଼ି, ପାନ୍ଦ ଗୁଆ ଶୌ
ପାନ୍ଦ ଗୁଆ ତୋର ମାସକା ଦିବସକୁ ମୁରା.**"

The morning dawned, and I emerged, poised to launch the boat I had purchased from the market, carefully adorned with a lit incense stick. In contrast, Grandmother's preparation was a vision of reverence and tradition. Cloaked in a timeworn white manda-

style saree, her hair intricately woven with flowers, and a sacred tilak marking her forehead, she radiated a tranquil and dignified grace. Within a delicately crafted banana-stem vessel, she meticulously arranged a sacred assortment of offerings—raw rice, green gram, boitaalu, taro root, and other traditional elements—imbued with symbolic significance. With this humble yet profound creation in hand, she stepped forward to carry out the revered ritual. As Grandmother's resonant huluhuli cries echoed through the air, blending harmoniously with Father's solemn chants of Haribol, the diminutive boat was gently released into the river's embrace. In that moment of spiritual profundity, Grandmother intoned an ancient hymn, encapsulating the ritual's timeless sanctity and cultural essence.

**" Ա-ԿԱ-ՊԱ-ԲՈՒ, ԲԱՌԵ ԳՍԱ ԹՈՒ
ԲԱՌԵ ԳՍԱ ԽՐԵ ՊԱՏՅԿԵ ԺԻՅՐԵՊԵ ՊՅՐԵ."**

She meticulously arranged the betel leaves and nuts in the boat and set it float. I wondered if Grandmother had sung a different song. Curiously, I asked, "What did you say, 'Dei'? What is written on my boat as 'Thoi'?" Grandmother responded, "In our time, we sang 'Dei'." I asked, "What does that mean?" Grandmother explained, "It is a lesson you must understand. In the past, in our Utkal region, boats were launched from the homes of the devout. These boats would travel from house to house, carrying precious offerings, symbolizing wealth and prosperity. Their prosperity was essential to the nation's well-being. I have heard that, in ancient times, during the month of Ashadha, they would launch their boats, attuned to the arrival of the monsoon rains and favorable winds. These boats would journey across vast expanses, reaching distant lands such as China, Madras, Rangoon, Cambodia, the Bali Islands, Java, Borneo, Vishakhapatnam, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Lakshadweep, and Sumatra. By the month of Kartika, they would return to their homeland. Coastal regions, abundant in betel leaf cultivation, actively participated in these voyages, thereby fostering bonds of friendship and enhancing trade relations. Once again, the entire world acknowledged the profound heritage and significance of Utkal's traditions. To this day, the custom of offering betel leaves and nuts as part of worship during our festivals and gatherings continues unabated. Likewise, the tradition of presenting betel leaves when seeking the companionship of friends persists. Meanwhile, in the months of Kartika and Margashira, the Hemanta season arrives, signaling the ripening of crops—a period of abundance for the people.

In the devoted practices of the devout and the Odia household, offerings are made to ensure prosperity, and prayers are offered for the well-being of the land and its harvests. The month of Baisakh holds particular significance, as it was during this time that the sages would focus on the nation's economic prosperity while embarking on journeys in Ashadha. As a result, the months of Kartika and Baisakh were revered as sacred periods, earning great respect. When one observes the course of the year—Baisakh, Jyestha, Ashadha, Shravana, Bhadra, Ashwina, Kartika, Margashira, Pousha, Magha, Phalguna, and Chaitra—it becomes clear that Baisakh, Ashadha, Kartika, and Margashira stand apart, as they are less affected by the seasonal changes in the climate. The month of Kartika holds a unique position as the sole period identified as Andira Masa—a time of deliberate inactivity—in the cultural consciousness. During this interval, no auspicious events or ceremonies are performed. Yet, it stands apart as a time of profound spiritual harmony, symbolizing the confluence of Shiva and Vishnu worship. This duality imbues the month with a distinct sanctity, making it a period devoted to deep religious observances. It also marks the return of the pious merchants, or Sadhavas, to their homeland. They congregated along the riverbanks, reconnecting and engaging in trade, a practice commemorated through the grand festival of Bali Jatra. These bustling hubs of exchange, known as Yani Yatra Sthanas, served as vibrant centers of trade and social interaction.

The coastal regions, where the Sadhavas moored their vessels, transformed into flourishing marketplaces, showcasing a variety of imported goods. Over time, the Bali Jatra celebration has been symbolically linked with Bali Island, with some traditions substituting the month of Margashira for Magha in the festival's historical narrative. It remains an indisputable fact that civilizations thriving near rivers have consistently demonstrated exceptional prosperity and fertility. Among the ancient states of eastern India, Odisha—or Utkala—distinguished itself through its vast cultural heritage and historical prominence. Even in the pre-Christian era, Odisha's valor, strategic geographical position, and rich diversity fostered robust trade networks with nations far and wide. With a sense of reverence and nostalgia, Grandmother reflected emotionally on the enduring contributions of the Kaibartta (fisherfolk) community, who, across countless generations, have safeguarded and perpetuated these traditions, ensuring their resilience in the face of changing times. The navigation of Sadhava ships heavily relied on the

expertise and collaboration of various sub-communities within the Kaibartta (fisherfolk) clan. Key contributors included the Majhi (master helmsman), the Tandel (principal assistant), and the Khalasi (laborers tasked with unloading cargo). Their collective skills were indispensable to the seamless functioning of maritime endeavors. The mention of “Akamabai” subtly alludes to the Majhis, who were traditionally accorded great respect for their vital role in steering and commanding the vessels. During this period, Odisha was actively involved in both internal and external trade. Unlike modern times, the distinction between domestic and international trade was not as clearly defined. However, the region constantly faced threats from pirates, including the infamous Bomwatiyas. Ancient Utkala was home to several strategically positioned ports along its coastline, which played a crucial role in facilitating maritime trade.

By the mid-19th century, Fakir Mohan Senapati, a distinguished Odia writer, brought attention to Odisha's maritime history. He observed, “Three hundred years ago, long before Bengal rose to prominence, merchants from Holland, France, Denmark, and England had already established trade posts at Balasore Port” (Galpaswalpa, Part II, p. 32, Friends Publishers, Cuttack, 7th Edition, 2006). He reiterated this point in a different context, stating, “Long before Bengal gained recognition, Western traders such as the Danes, Dutch, French, and English had already made their mark at Balasore Port” (Tataiba, p. 84). During this period, three types of ships operated at Balasore Port: Khorap (large ships), Sulup (medium-sized ships), and Douni (small ships). The Khorap vessels, built for long-distance journeys, facilitated trade between Odisha and distant regions such as Lakshadweep and Colombo. Among the prominent exports were Odisha's renowned Matihandi (earthen cooking pots), which were highly sought after in Lakshadweep. These pots were exchanged in a barter system for Nariyal (coconuts). At its peak, shipbuilding and maritime trade thrived in Odisha, supported by a significant number of shipowners. Historical records indicate that the state's coastline, as depicted in modern maps, was instrumental in shaping its maritime heritage, with a substantial portion of Odisha bordering the sea.

Similarly, the expertise and craftsmanship of the Odias in boatbuilding were of the highest caliber. Ships, laden with heavy cargo, sailed across the seas. The dimensions of the hull and the number of compartments, typically ranging from six to twelve, were determined by the size of the ship. A hull that was too large posed the danger of the ship capsizing in strong winds, while one that was too small could impede the ship's ability to navigate the seas effectively. The hulls were known by various names, including Kalami, Daria, Pela, Tavar, Sabar, and Karaju, among others. Prior to the arrival of the British, Upendra Bhanja had referred to the boatmen (Kayberts) as 'scientific boatmen.' The poet Fakir Mohan Senapati affirmed the accuracy of this claim. Moreover, from the month of Kartika to Chaitra, the ships were carefully prepared. However, when the southern winds blew, the ships were unable to sail out of the river mouth.

Conclusion:

The decline of the port also led to the deterioration of traditional trade practices. Three main factors contributed to this decline: firstly, the closure of salt pans and the imposition of taxes by foreign governments; secondly, the arrival of steamships and railways during the colonial era; and thirdly, the commercial interests of foreign powers, which disrupted the functioning of the river ports, leading to the collapse of Odisha's traditional maritime and trading activities. Today, we continue to preserve this heritage, honoring it through our festivals and rituals, keeping its memory alive as an integral part of our cultural legacy.

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