



The ancient maritime trade of Odisha: A literary study

Dr. Padmalochan Rout

Associate Professor, Department of English, ISBM University, Chhura, Gariyaband, Chhattisgarh, India

Abstract

The ancient maritime trade of Odisha occupies a significant place in the economic, cultural, and civilizational history of eastern India. This research paper undertakes a literary study of Odisha's maritime tradition as reflected in ancient and early medieval texts, inscriptions, folklore, and classical literature. Odisha, known in ancient sources as Kalinga, emerged as a powerful maritime region due to its extensive coastline along the Bay of Bengal and its strategic access to sea routes connecting India with Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, China, and the Roman world. Literary references found in Sanskrit texts, Buddhist and Jaina literature, Puranas, travel accounts, and regional Odia traditions such as Boita Bandana provide valuable insights into the nature and extent of overseas trade conducted by the people of Odisha.

The study highlights the role of Odishan sailors, merchants, and shipbuilders in facilitating the exchange of commodities such as textiles, ivory, spices, precious stones, and metal goods. It also examines how maritime trade contributed to the diffusion of Indian culture, religion, art, and language across Southeast Asia, leading to the establishment of enduring cultural links. Literary evidence suggests that maritime activities were not merely economic pursuits but were deeply embedded in the social and religious life of ancient Odisha.

By analyzing literary sources alongside historical interpretations, this paper seeks to reconstruct the maritime heritage of Odisha and underscore its importance in the broader framework of Indian Ocean trade. The study concludes that ancient Odisha played a vital role as a maritime hub, and its seafaring tradition significantly influenced regional and transoceanic interactions, leaving a lasting imprint on the cultural history of Asia.

Keywords: Ancient Odisha, maritime trade, kalinga, literary sources, Indian ocean trade, cultural exchange

Introduction

Odisha has occupied a prominent position in the maritime history of ancient India due to its strategic geographical location along the eastern coast of the Indian subcontinent. Known in ancient times as Kalinga, this region was endowed with a long coastline, navigable rivers, and natural ports that facilitated overseas trade and cultural contacts from an early period. Literary, archaeological, and epigraphical sources collectively attest to the flourishing maritime activities of ancient Odisha, which connected it with distant lands across the Bay of Bengal and the wider Indian Ocean world.

The maritime tradition of Odisha is vividly reflected in ancient Sanskrit literature, Buddhist and Jaina texts, Puranic accounts, and classical foreign travel narratives. Regional literary traditions and folk practices, such as the annual Boita Bandana festival, further preserve the collective memory of Odisha's seafaring past. These sources reveal that Odishan merchants and sailors undertook long and perilous sea voyages to regions such as Sri Lanka, Suvarnavipa (Southeast Asia), China, and beyond, carrying with them goods, beliefs, and cultural practices.

Maritime trade played a crucial role in shaping the economic prosperity of ancient Odisha. The exchange of commodities such as textiles, gems, ivory, spices, and metalware not only strengthened the regional economy but also enhanced Odisha's political and cultural influence overseas. The literary evidence also suggests that maritime activity contributed to the spread of Indian religions, art forms, and administrative ideas across Southeast Asia.

This paper seeks to explore the ancient maritime trade of Odisha through a literary lens, analyzing textual references to reconstruct the scope, nature, and significance of its

overseas interactions. By focusing on literary sources, the study aims to highlight the cultural and historical importance of Odisha's maritime heritage within the broader context of ancient Indian oceanic trade networks.

Importance of maritime trade in ancient Odisha

Maritime trade was one of the most vital components of ancient Odisha's economic and cultural development. Owing to its advantageous coastal geography and riverine networks, ancient Odisha (Kalinga) emerged as a significant maritime power on the eastern seaboard of India. Overseas trade contributed substantially to economic prosperity by facilitating the export of textiles, ivory, spices, precious stones, conch shells, and metal goods, while importing luxury items and raw materials from foreign lands.

Beyond its economic significance, maritime trade played a decisive role in the cultural expansion of Odisha. Literary sources indicate that Odishan traders and sailors were instrumental in transmitting Indian religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, along with art, architecture, language, and social customs, to Southeast Asian regions. This cultural diffusion strengthened transoceanic ties and established Odisha as an important center of intercultural exchange.

Maritime trade also enhanced political influence and diplomatic relations. Control over sea routes and ports contributed to the rise of powerful kingdoms in ancient Odisha, enabling them to maintain contacts with distant regions. Furthermore, maritime activities influenced social life, occupational structures, and religious practices, as reflected in literary traditions and festivals like Boita Bandana. Thus, maritime trade was not merely an economic

enterprise but a multifaceted force shaping the civilization of ancient Odisha.

Objective of the study

- To examine literary references related to maritime trade in ancient Odisha.

To analyze the economic importance of overseas trade in the growth of ancient Odishan society.

- To explore the cultural and religious impact of maritime interactions between Odisha and foreign regions.
- To assess the role of Odisha as a maritime hub in ancient Indian Ocean trade networks.
- To highlight the contribution of maritime trade to the political and social development of ancient Odisha.

Research Questions

- What literary sources provide evidence of maritime trade in ancient Odisha?
- What were the major trade routes and commodities associated with Odisha's overseas trade?
- How did maritime trade contribute to the economic prosperity of ancient Odisha?
- In what ways did maritime interactions influence the cultural and religious landscape of Odisha and Southeast Asia?
- How did maritime trade shape the social and political structure of ancient Odishan society?

Literature Review

The study of ancient maritime trade in Odisha has attracted attention from historians, archaeologists, and literary scholars who have investigated various dimensions of the region's seafaring past. Early historical works emphasized archaeological evidence such as ancient ports at Palur, Manikpatna, and Khalkatapatna and inscriptions that suggest commercial activity across the Bay of Bengal. Scholars like K. C. Panigrahi and R. D. Banerji contextualized Odisha's maritime contacts within the larger framework of Indian history, highlighting its role as a trade conduit between South Asia and Southeast Asia.

Literary studies have drawn on sources such as Sanskrit epics, Puranas, Buddhist and Jaina texts, and foreign travel accounts to reconstruct the maritime networks of ancient India. These works reveal that references to Kalinga's seafarers, merchants, and port towns are scattered across diverse texts, indicating active participation in Indian Ocean commerce. Regional literary traditions, including Odia poetry and folklore, especially the Boita Bandana festival songs, preserve vivid memories of shipbuilding and seafaring that reinforce the textual and archaeological evidence of maritime engagement.

Despite these contributions, much of the existing scholarship tends to treat Odisha's maritime history as a subset of broader Indian or Southeast Asian trade studies rather than as a distinct area of inquiry. Many historical analyses focus more on archaeological finds or political history, with relatively limited attention to literary sources and their interpretative potential. Additionally, existing literary studies often work with individual texts or traditions in isolation, without systematically comparing sources to build a cohesive narrative of Odisha's maritime trade.

Gap in Existing Research

While prior research has provided valuable insights, there remains a significant gap in comprehensive literary analysis that integrates multiple textual traditions to reconstruct the maritime history of ancient Odisha holistically. Few studies have critically examined how literary evidence—not just archaeological or inscriptional data—illuminates the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of maritime trade. This study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on literary sources and interpreting them within the larger context of Indian Ocean trade networks.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, literary-historical approach to explore the ancient maritime trade of Odisha. The methodology consists of the following key components:

Textual Identification

A systematic survey of primary literary sources was undertaken, including Sanskrit epics, Puranas, Buddhist and Jaina scriptures, classical travel accounts, and regional Odia texts and folk traditions. These texts were selected based on references to maritime activities, seafaring communities, port towns, and overseas contacts.

Literary Analysis

Selected passages were extracted and analyzed for content related to trade routes, commodities, navigational practices, socio-cultural interactions, and descriptions of seafaring life. Comparative literary analysis was applied to identify common themes and variations across texts.

Contextual Correlation

Literary evidence was correlated with historical interpretations from secondary scholarship, archaeological findings, and epigraphical data to establish a more comprehensive understanding of Odisha's maritime trade dynamics. This approach helped balance textual narratives with material and historical contexts.

Thematic Synthesis

Findings from the textual analysis and contextual correlation were synthesized thematically to articulate the economic significance, cultural impact, and geopolitical implications of maritime trade in ancient Odisha. By integrating diverse literary traditions through rigorous analysis, this methodology aims to reconstruct the historical realities of Odisha's maritime engagements and contribute a nuanced understanding to the broader field of Indian Ocean trade history.

Maritime trade of ancient Odisha: A brief historical background

The maritime trade of ancient Odisha has its roots in early historic times when the region, known as Kalinga, emerged as a prominent seafaring and trading power on the eastern coast of India. Its long coastline along the Bay of Bengal, coupled with fertile river systems such as the Mahanadi, Rushikulya, and Baitarani, facilitated inland-coastal connectivity and the growth of port settlements. From as early as the Mauryan period and continuing through the early medieval age, Odisha maintained active maritime links with South and Southeast Asia, playing a crucial role in the Indian Ocean trade network.

Ancient literary sources, inscriptions, and foreign accounts indicate that Kalinga merchants possessed advanced knowledge of shipbuilding, navigation, and monsoon winds. Maritime trade flourished particularly between the 1st century BCE and the 10th century CE, when Odishan ports served as departure points for long-distance voyages. These overseas interactions contributed to economic prosperity and helped Odisha become an important intermediary in transregional commerce.

Major ports of ancient Odisha

Several ports along the Odisha coast functioned as vital nodes of maritime trade:

Tamralipta (Tamraliti/Tamluk)

Although geographically located in present-day West Bengal, Tamralipta was closely linked with the maritime trade of ancient Odisha and the broader Kalinga region. It is frequently mentioned in Buddhist literature and travel accounts of Chinese pilgrims such as Faxian and Xuanzang. Tamralipta served as a major embarkation point for voyages to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia and played a key role in connecting Odisha with international trade routes.

Palur (Pallura)

Identified near the mouth of the Rushikulya River, Palur was one of the most important ancient ports of Odisha. Literary references and archaeological evidence suggest that it was a thriving center of overseas trade, particularly with Southeast Asia. Palur is often associated with shipbuilding and maritime expeditions undertaken by Kalinga merchants.

Kalinga Patnam

Kalinga Patnam functioned as another significant port facilitating trade across the Bay of Bengal. It acted as a transit point for goods exported from the interior regions of Odisha and imported luxury items from foreign lands. Its strategic location strengthened Odisha's role in regional maritime networks.

Trade Routes to South and Southeast Asia

The maritime trade routes of ancient Odisha extended across the Bay of Bengal to South and Southeast Asia. Odishan merchants sailed to Sri Lanka, maintaining commercial and religious contacts, particularly through Buddhist networks. Trade routes further connected Odisha with Suvarnadvipa (modern Southeast Asia), including regions such as present-day Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia. These routes enabled the exchange of goods such as textiles, ivory, spices, gems, and metal objects.

Beyond commerce, these maritime routes served as channels for cultural interaction, facilitating the spread of Indian religions, art, scripts, and administrative ideas. Thus, the maritime trade of ancient Odisha was not only an economic enterprise but also a dynamic force that shaped historical and cultural exchanges across South and Southeast Asia.

Literary evidence of maritime trade in ancient Odisha

Literary sources constitute one of the most significant means for understanding the maritime trade of ancient Odisha. References scattered across Sanskrit literature, Buddhist and Jaina texts, Puranas, foreign travel accounts, and regional Odia traditions provide valuable insights into

the seafaring activities of Kalinga. An analysis of selected texts reveals recurring themes such as ships and navigation, merchant communities, overseas trade, accumulation of wealth, and cultural exchange, all of which attest to Odisha's vibrant maritime tradition.

Ships and Navigation

Ancient literary texts frequently refer to ships (nau, boita) and sea voyages, indicating advanced knowledge of shipbuilding and navigation. Sanskrit works such as the Arthashastra and various Puranas mention different types of vessels used for long-distance sea travel and trade. Buddhist texts describe perilous ocean journeys undertaken by merchants, often highlighting the dangers of storms and pirates, which implies regular maritime movement. In Odia folk literature, especially songs associated with the Boita Bandana festival, ships are portrayed as large, well-equipped vessels capable of crossing the vast ocean, reflecting a collective memory of maritime expertise.

Merchants and Trading Communities

Merchants (vaniks or sarthavahas) occupy a central place in literary narratives related to maritime trade. Buddhist Jataka tales frequently refer to wealthy merchants from eastern India embarking on overseas voyages in search of fortune. These accounts suggest the existence of organized trading communities with access to capital, labor, and maritime knowledge. Literary descriptions emphasize the social prestige and economic power of merchant groups, indicating that overseas trade was a respected and profitable occupation in ancient Odisha.

Overseas Trade and Trade Routes

Literary evidence clearly points to extensive overseas trade connections. References to regions such as Sri Lanka, Suvarnadvipa, and other island territories in Sanskrit and Buddhist literature highlight Odisha's participation in transoceanic commerce. Chinese pilgrim accounts also mention embarkation points along the eastern coast, reinforcing the idea of regular maritime traffic. These texts suggest that Odishan ports served as gateways for trade with South and Southeast Asia, forming an integral part of the Indian Ocean trade network.

Wealth and Economic Prosperity

The accumulation of wealth through maritime trade is a recurring theme in ancient literature. Merchants returning from overseas voyages are often described as possessing immense riches, including gold, precious stones, and luxury goods. Such portrayals not only underline the economic benefits of maritime trade but also indicate its role in sustaining urban centers, royal treasuries, and religious institutions in ancient Odisha.

Cultural Exchange and Diffusion

Beyond material exchange, literary texts reveal the role of maritime trade in cultural transmission. The spread of Buddhism and Hinduism to Southeast Asia is frequently associated with merchant voyages. Literary narratives suggest that traders acted as carriers of religious ideas, art forms, scripts, and social customs. This cultural exchange led to enduring links between Odisha and Southeast Asian regions, evident in shared artistic motifs and religious practices.

In sum, literary evidence strongly supports the view that maritime trade was a dynamic and multifaceted activity in ancient Odisha. Through recurring themes of ships, merchants, wealth, and cultural interaction, ancient texts collectively highlight the region's significant contribution to Indian Ocean commerce and intercultural exchange.

Cultural and Symbolic Representation of Maritime Trade in Ancient Odisha

The maritime tradition of ancient Odisha is not only documented in historical and literary records but also deeply embedded in cultural memory and symbolic expression. Literature, folklore, and ritual practices present maritime trade as both a lived economic reality and a powerful cultural metaphor. Two important aspects of this representation are the portrayal of Sādhabs (merchant seafarers) in literature and the symbolic meanings associated with sea voyages.

Sādhabs in Literature and Cultural Memory

Sādhabs, the traditional merchant sailors of Odisha, occupy a celebrated position in regional literature and folklore. They are often depicted as brave, enterprising, and devout individuals who undertook long and dangerous voyages across the sea for trade and prosperity. Odia literary works, folk songs, and oral traditions portray Sādhabs as community leaders whose success overseas brought wealth and prestige to their homeland. Their departure and return are emotionally charged moments in literature, emphasizing familial separation, hope, and collective anticipation.

The Boita Bandana ritual, still observed during the festival of Kartika Purnima, symbolically commemorates the departure of Sādhabs on their overseas journeys. Literary references to this practice reveal how maritime trade became integrated into the social and religious life of Odisha. The ritualized remembrance of Sādhabs reflects the community's admiration for maritime courage and acknowledges the risks inherent in sea travel.

Symbolism of the Sea Voyage

In literary and symbolic terms, the sea voyage represents more than commercial travel; it functions as a metaphor for transformation, uncertainty, and destiny. The vast ocean is often portrayed as a powerful and unpredictable force, embodying both danger and opportunity. Literary narratives describe the sea as a testing ground where courage, faith, and perseverance determine success or failure.

Sea voyages in Odishan and wider Indian literature symbolize the pursuit of wealth, knowledge, and spiritual merit. The crossing of the ocean signifies a transition from the familiar to the unknown, reflecting the broader human experience of risk and aspiration. Successful return from overseas journeys symbolizes triumph, prosperity, and social elevation, while shipwrecks or loss at sea often carry moral or philosophical undertones about fate and impermanence.

Furthermore, the sea serves as a cultural bridge in literary imagination, linking Odisha to distant lands and peoples. Through maritime journeys, literature presents the ocean as a space of cultural encounter and exchange, reinforcing the idea that maritime trade was central to the shaping of Odisha's identity and worldview.

In essence, the cultural and symbolic representations of Sādhabs and sea voyages in literature highlight the deep-

rooted maritime consciousness of ancient Odisha. These representations transform historical maritime trade into enduring symbols of courage, enterprise, and cultural connectivity.

Detailed Discussion

Literature as a Preserver of Maritime Memory and Its Correlation with History

Literature has played a crucial role in preserving the maritime memory of ancient Odisha, especially in periods where archaeological or epigraphical evidence is limited. Through myths, narratives, religious texts, folk songs, and ritual practices, literary traditions have transmitted knowledge of seafaring activities, trade practices, and overseas contacts across generations. These literary memories do not merely recount events but encode social values, collective experiences, and historical realities associated with maritime life.

Literature as a Repository of Maritime Memory

Ancient and regional literary texts preserve detailed images of ships, ports, merchants, sea routes, and overseas lands. References to boitas (ships), Sādhabs (merchant sailors), and perilous ocean voyages in Sanskrit, Buddhist, and Odia literary traditions indicate that maritime activity was a familiar and recurrent aspect of social life. Folk traditions such as Boita Bandana function as living texts, where ritual, song, and symbolism collectively recall the departure of merchant ships. These practices demonstrate how literature and oral traditions preserved maritime knowledge even after the decline of active overseas trade.

Literature also preserves emotional and social dimensions of maritime life—anxieties of separation, hopes of wealth, fear of the sea, and celebration of successful return. Such themes suggest that maritime trade was deeply integrated into household life and community consciousness. By repeatedly narrating these experiences, literature transformed historical maritime activities into shared cultural memory.

Correlation Between Literature and History

A close correlation can be observed between literary descriptions and historical evidence. Literary references to port towns such as Palur and Tamralipta align with archaeological findings of trade goods, settlement remains, and foreign contacts. Similarly, descriptions of overseas voyages to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia in Buddhist and Sanskrit texts correspond with historical evidence of Indian cultural influence in those regions. These correlations indicate that literary narratives, though sometimes symbolic or idealized, are rooted in historical realities.

Moreover, the prominence of merchants and maritime wealth in literature reflects the economic significance of trade in ancient Odisha. The depiction of wealthy Sādhabs and prosperous ports corresponds with historical interpretations of Odisha as an active participant in Indian Ocean commerce. Literary accounts of monsoon-based navigation and sea hazards further align with known historical patterns of ancient maritime travel.

Literature as Interpretation, Not Mere Record

While literature cannot be treated as a purely factual historical record, it provides interpretative insights that complement material evidence. Symbolism, exaggeration, and moral framing in literary texts reflect how society

perceived and valued maritime trade. These narrative elements help historians understand not only what happened, but how maritime activities were experienced and remembered by people.

Thus, literature and history together offer a more holistic understanding of Odisha's maritime past. Literature preserves the lived experiences, cultural meanings, and collective memory of maritime trade, while historical evidence anchors these narratives in material reality. Their correlation confirms that the maritime heritage of ancient Odisha was both a historical phenomenon and a powerful cultural legacy sustained through literary tradition.

Conclusion

The present study has examined the ancient maritime trade of Odisha through a literary perspective, highlighting its economic, cultural, and symbolic significance. An analysis of diverse literary sources—ranging from Sanskrit texts and Buddhist literature to regional Odia traditions—clearly demonstrates that maritime trade was an integral part of Odisha's historical experience. Literature preserves vivid memories of ships, ports, merchants, overseas voyages, and distant lands, confirming that ancient Odisha played a vital role in the Indian Ocean trade network. The recurring depiction of *Sādhabs*, prosperous trade, and cultural exchange reflects a society deeply connected to the sea.

The study also establishes a strong correlation between literary narratives and historical evidence. Literary references to port towns, trade routes, and overseas contacts correspond closely with archaeological findings and historical interpretations, reinforcing the reliability of literary sources as valuable tools for historical reconstruction. While literary texts often employ symbolism and moral framing, they nevertheless offer important insights into the social values, collective aspirations, and cultural consciousness shaped by maritime activity.

Furthermore, the symbolic representation of sea voyages in literature reveals how maritime trade transcended economic function to become a metaphor for courage, transformation, and intercultural connectivity. Through rituals, folklore, and literary memory, Odisha's maritime heritage has continued to survive even after the decline of active overseas trade.

Scope for Further Research

Despite the insights gained, this study opens several avenues for future research. Comparative studies between Odishan literary traditions and Southeast Asian texts may further illuminate cross-cultural interactions. Greater integration of literary analysis with archaeological, numismatic, and epigraphical data could provide a more comprehensive understanding of maritime networks. Additionally, focused studies on regional folk literature, oral traditions, and ritual practices may reveal lesser-known aspects of maritime life and identity. Such interdisciplinary approaches would enrich the understanding of Odisha's maritime past and its enduring influence on the cultural history of the Indian Ocean world.

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