

Role Of Chilka Lake In The Maritime History Of Orissa

A.K. PATTANAYAK

Dept. of History
Berhampur University

SILA TRIPATI

Marine Archaeology Centre
National Institute of Oceanography, Goa

Abstract

Chilka is the largest brackish water lake in India. Brahmanda Purana of 10th century A.D. mentions ports in Chilka lake. Ships used to ply to Southeast Asian Countries from Chilka. The local traditions and Indian and foreign records indicate the prime role of Chilka in the Maritime history of Orissa.

Archaeological explorations and excavations around the Chilka lake region have brought to light the remains of early historical period. The two important ports such as Manikapatna on Chilka coast and Palur on the extreme south had trade contacts with Africa, Ceylon, China and Southeast Asian Countries. Soran, Nairi and Pathara, the villages around the lake, have glorious navigational tradition.

An attempt has been made in this paper to describe the ports located around Chilka and their role in spreading Indian culture in other countries. The causes of decline of the Chilka are also briefly described.

In ancient times Orissa was known as Kalinga, Odra and Utakal which covered a major part of the east coast of India. Geographically ancient Orissa extended from the Ganges to the Godavari estuaries, giving opportunity for maritime trade and spread of Indian culture in foreign countries. The ports developed along coastal Orissa because of the sheltered bays and creeks.

Along with the other ancient ports of Orissa namely Kalingapatna, Dantapura, Pithunda, Khalkatapatna, etc., ports in Chilka also played a predominant role in the maritime history of Orissa. But little is known about Chilka as the centre of seafaring activities of Orissa.

The paper is the outcome of the explorations and excavations carried out around Chilka and adjoining regions. The causes of decline of Chilka's role and its impact on the navigational techniques of the region are discussed.

DESCRIPTION OF THE LAKE

Chilka, the biggest water lagoon of India, is situated on the east coast of India and is connected to the Bay of Bengal through a narrow mouth. The lake about 64 Km long and 13.5 Km wide extends from the southeast corner of the Puri district into the adjoining district of Ganjam, (Fig.1).

According to tradition the Chilka lake was formed by an entry of the sea. A legend says that a group of Yavanas

under the leadership of Raktabahu attacked Lord Jagannath temple. The priests managed to escape along with the idol of Lord Jagannath and wealth towards the shore. Raktabahu was disappointed and ventured to punish the sea. The sea receded deceitfully for a couple of miles and then suddenly surged upon the presumptuous foreigners and swallowed them. At this time it flooded a large part of the land and the Chilka lake.

Chilka lake dates back to the Pleistocene period. It is an established fact that originally Chilka was a part of the Bay of Bengal. In due course it was separated from the Bay of Bengal through a barrier spit which grew near Palur. The sand ridges adjacent to the spit have been built in part by constrictive waves, tidal currents, storm waves and wind (Kumar & et al :1989).

MARITIME ACTIVITIES OF CHILKA

In maritime trade Kalinga was so prominent that Kalidas in his *Raghuvamsa* referred to the king of Kalinga as Mahodadhipati, the lord of ocean, (Nandargikar:1948) which suggests that Orissa dominated the Mahodadhi (Eastern Sea) and played a leading role in transoceanic trade and commerce of India. The *Arya Manjusri Mulakalpa*, a Mahayana text refers to the bay of Bengal as the Kalinga Sea (Sastri:1925).

Chilka lake was an important port with excellent anchoring facility for the ships bound for Southeast Asian

countries in ancient times. The lake was very deep and through a wide opening mouth it was connected with the Sea. It provided easy berthing for the sea going boats and ships (Mookerji: 1912).

Ptolemy, the Greek Geographer refers to the Palur port. Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim, refers to the che-li-ta-lo port. These two ports were located on the banks of Chilka but the lake is not referred to by Ptolemy and Hiuen Tsang- although they have given the description of ports, cities, towns and religious centres of Orissa. Probably during the 8th century A.D. the lake was part of sea or the mouth was so wide that travellers could not consider Chilka as a lake.

The **Brahmanda Purana** describes that Chilka was an important centre of trade and commerce with thousands of ships having a number of masts and sails sheltered in the lake. Some of the ships had curvilinear towers with three to five stories. Ships used to go to Java, Malaya and Ceylon from Chilka (Singh: 1982). It is said that the hillock on the shore of Chilka referred to as **Deepa-Adia Pahad** (Hill of Light) had a stone built light house to guide the mariners during night navigation (Bhatt: 1993). The people of Orissa had established their colonies in Java and Bali island and ships sailed to those far off places from Tamralipti and Chilka port. In the centuries past, people from south India used to travel to Puri by ships which were anchored in Chilka. There was a **Samudrakara bandha** on the bank of Chilka where taxes were collected from the sea traders. The people of Orissa changed their surnames and followed the Southeast Asian country surnames like Rana Tunge, Singha Naik and Bandar Naik. People with similar surnames are living around the Chilka even at present and this can be attributed to trade. The Oriya poets like Radhanath Rath, Pandit Gopabandhu Das and Pandit Godabarish Mishra have written poems about the lake which reverberate in every oriya home.

PORTS AROUND CHILKA LAKE:

On the bank of Chilka there were three major ports namely Palur, Che-li-ta-lo and Manikapatna. Ptolemy has described modern Palur of Ganjam district as Paloura. Palur was the point of departure (apheterion) for ships bound for khryse (island of Southeast Asia). It lies immediately to the south of Paloura on the Gangetic Gulf (Gerini: 1974). Palur seems to have been the only port for ships proceeding from India to the east coast of Bay of Bengal and Malay region (Warmington:1974). Paloura has been identified by Oldham with a village named Puluru-Palur at the northern extreme of Ganjam district

(Das:1977). Scholars have identified Palur with Dantapura near Srikakulam of Andhra Pradesh which has been described in Buddhist literature. Subba Rai has noted that Dantapura was situated on the southern bank of Vamsadhara, three miles from Srikakulam. Dantapura has been again identified by Ramdas with a place called Dantavakra which is enroute to Sidhantam from Chicacole (Srikakulam). Evidently Palur and Dantapura were two separate ports of Kalinga.

The archaeological explorations at Palur and the adjacent areas in 1993 yielded red ware with flaring rim, bowl having ledge on the exterior and a fragmentary terracotta dabber. Over an area of half a square kilometer sherds of red ware were found in sand dunes. On the basis of a comparative study, the pottery was assigned to 12th-14th century A.D (I.A.R: 1984-85). Besides, there are some early medieval temples in the region which are buried upto the plinth. While digging for foundation of a house a huge quantity of pottery of various types was encountered here. Early period habitation may come to light if one undertakes a proper excavation.

Ptolemy has described the Nanigainar as a port on coastal Orissa. The village Niminagainada near Kuhudi on the bank of Chilka can be identified with Ptolemy's Nanigainar. At present, Nimina and Gainada are two separate villages. It is also said that Balia and Amaravati villages on Chilka bank had contacts with Bali island and Amaravati of south India (Patnaik:1993).

Hiuen tsang who visited Orissa about 638 A.D. has described that " in the southeastern shore of this country was the che-li-ta-lo, about 20 Li in circuit a thorough fare and resting place for sea traders and ships" (Watters:1908). It was a major port of Orissa during 7th century A.d.However, regarding the identification of Che-li-ta-lo scholars have different opinions. Cunningham (1963) has identified it with modern Puri, whereas Mr. Waddel considered Che-le-ta-lo as situated near Nendra on the bank of Chitrotapala, a distributary of river Mahanadi in Cuttack district (Banerji:1931), Chandrabhaga near Konark was considered as Che-li-ta-lo by Oriya *Sarala Mahabharata*. Behera has tentatively identified Che-li-ta-lo with Chhatragada in the vicinity of Chilka lake (Behera:1992). No systematic exploration has been carried out so far to find the exact location of Che-li-ta-lo.

Manikapatna was also a flourishing port and an important trade centre. It is situated in Brahmagiri taluka of Puri district on the bank of Chilka. Abul Fazal says that Manikapatna was a sea port where taxes on salt were

collected. In later period the British also used this port for trade and commerce.

The Orissan Institute of Maritime and Southeast Asian Studies, Bhubaneswar carried out trial excavations in 1989-1993 and revealed remains of early historical period such as Indian Rouletted ware, fragments of amphora, red-glazed ware Puri-Kushana coins and a Kharoshti inscription on a potsherd. In the upper levels Chinese Celadon ware made of jade green celadon occurs in huge quantities. A broken Chinese copper coin with a square perforation in the centre is another find. These finds indicate that Manikapatna had close interaction with Ceylon and China (Debraj Pradhan: personal communication).

During our explorations terracotta ringwells were noticed on the shore of Chilka. They are submerged in high tide and exposed in low tide. Huge quantities Chinese ceramics are also found on the bank of Chilka. A number of historical mounds are noticed in the neighbourhood of Manikapatna.

PRESENT STATE OF CHILKA

Scientific investigations have revealed changes in the width of the mouth of Chilka. Bathymetric studies indicated a maximum depth of 5m in the south and 0.50m in the north. In 1780 the mouth of the lake was more than 1km wide facilitating easy access to boats. In 1803 the mouth near Manikapatna was deep, broad and dangerous. The British army took a lot of trouble to cross the channel. In 1938 the mouth became so narrow and choked that one could walk across during low tide. The survey of 1968 showed that the mouth shifted its position to the northeast with a continuously growing sand bar (Misra:1970).

CAUSES OF DECLINE

During the Muslim and Mughal rule, Orissa was included in the province of Bengal and more care seem to have been taken of ports in north Orissa namely Balasore and Pipli than of Chilka. This was due to the long distance from headquarters that made it difficult to repair and maintain these ports. In later period robbery and piracy became rampant in coastal Orissa and hence the local people lost their interest in marine trade (Ray:1981). The distributaries of Mahanadi such as Daya, Bhargavi and Nuna bring a huge quantity of sediment and it gets deposited in the lake. In due course the lake got silted. This is because of the formation of a spit under the influence of longshore drift of sediment (Anand &

Chandamohan:1992). The siltation process of the spit and ridge started during the last sea level rise, before 3750 ± 200 years B.P. (Venkatarathnam:1970). The lake became unsuitable for the ships to get inside and so the navigational importance of the ports declined. The marine activities slowly disappeared and the sea voyage and ship-building industries in the surrounding region vanished. The traditional builders changed their technology by constructing flat bottom boats called Nauka for local transport and fishing, (Raut & Sila:1993).

CONCLUSION

In the not so distant past when Chilka had a wide mouth the hinterland trade centres of Orissa depended on the lake for maritime trade. The coastal land route of the eastern India passed along the Chilka. The strategic location of lake helped to establish a number of small and big historical settlements around the lake. Konark, Puri and Bhubaneswar are not far from the Chilka lake and possess numerous temples and monuments were which constructed by the people of Orissa who were economically prosperous due to maritime activities. In the lexicon *Trikandasesha* of Purushottama, it is mentioned that nine types of boats were in use in coastal Orissa (Sah:1976). The surrounding villages of the lake namely Soran, Pathara and Nairi have a number of temples justifying their glorious past. Till today the people of this region are known for navigational skill. Even though foreign travellers have said that ports such as Palur, Che-li-ta-lo and Manikapatna had contacts with foreign countries the means of trade and handling of cargo at these ports are not known.

CONCLUSION

A proper archaeological survey of coastal Orissa will help in locating the unidentified ports such as Che-li-ta-lo and coastal structures meant for cargo handling. The natural processes like siltation, tectonic activity, coastal erosion and natural hazards have destroyed some ports of Orissa and these can be brought to light by Marine Archaeological explorations at strategic places.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors are thankful to Director, National Institute of Oceanography for providing the facilities to carry out the work and to Dr.S.R.Rao for permitting to present and publish the paper. Thanks are also due to Shri K.H.Vora and Dr.Dileep kumar for their suggestion in writing and improvement of the paper.

REFERENCES:

- Anand, N.M. & Chandramohan, P 1992 *Studies on waves and Longshore Sediment Transport Along the Coastline of Chilka Lake*, NIO, Goa, 1-4.
- Banerji, R.D. 1930 *History of Orissa*, Calcutta, Vol.1, P.138/
- Behera, K.S. 1992 Glimpses of the Maritime Activities of Kalinga, *Orissa Review*, Vol. XLIX (4), 1-5.
- Bhatt, K.S. 1993 Chilka Anchalare Matyajibi Manankar Jivandhara (Oriya) *Sagar O Sahitya* (Ed) K.S.Behera, Cuttack, 222-242.
- Cunningham, A. 1963 *The Ancient Geography of India*, Varanasi, (reprint) P.430.
- Das, D.N. 1977 *Early History of Kalinga*, Calcutta, 247-262.
- Gerini, G.E. 1974 *Researches on Ptolemy's Geography of Eastern Asia*, Delhi, p.743.
- Kumar, P. et al 1989 Remote sensing study on the coastal process of Orissa coast in *Proceedings of Third National Conference on Dock & Harbour Engineering*, Suratkal, 673-679.
- Misra, P. 1970 *The Chilka Lake*, Govt. of Orissa, Cuttack, p.10.
- Mookerji, R. 1912 *Indian Shipping*, Bombay, 142-47.
- Nandargikar, G.R. 1948 (Ed) *Raghuvamsa*, Bombay, p.38
- Patnaik, P. 1993 Odisara Loka Kathare Samudra Yatra (Oriya) *Sagar O Sahitya* (Ed) K.S.Behera, Cuttack, 66-84.
- Raut, L.N. & Sila Tripathi 1993 Traditional Boat-building Centres around Chilika Lake of Orissa, *Jr. of Marine Archaeology*, Vol.4, NIO, Goa, 51-55.
- Ray, B.C. 1981 *Orissa under the Mughals*, Calcutta, 138-142.
- Sah, A.P. 1976 *Life in Medieval Orissa*, Varanasi, p.106.
- Sastri, G. 1925 (Ed) *Arya Manjusri Mulakalpa*, Trivandrum, p.53 Singh, J. 1982 *Prachin Utkal* (Oriya) Bhubaneswar, Vol.2, 137 - 151.
- Venkatathnam, K. 1970 Formation of the Barrier spit and other sand ridges near Chilka lake on the East coast of India. *Marine Geology*, Amsterdam, 9(2), 101-116.
- Warmington, E.H. 1974 *The Commerce between Roman Empire and India*, Delhi, p.126.
- Watters, T. 1908 *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, London, Vol. II, P.195.
- 1984-85 *Indian Archaeology- A review*, Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi, P.57.
- Epigraphia Indica*, Archaeological survey of India, Delhi, Vol. XIV, p.361.