

Belekeri as Traditional Boat Building Centre in North Kanara District, Karnataka, India

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Abstract

Belekeri served not only as a manganese export centre but also as a traditional boat-building centre. This paper presents details of local fishing boats used in Goa and North Kanara areas. The size and purpose of the boats and the local names of different parts of the boat as well as the material used for the boats are given. Sometimes the boat builders go for building a boat in the areas wherever they are called. The study includes extensive field work and interviews with local fishermen.

INTRODUCTION

The earliest reference to small fishing boat is made in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (datable to 1st century AD). The author of the *Periplus* says that Ausanitic coast (East African coast) people are using sewed boats and canoes for fishing and catching tortoise. Along this coast they were fishing in a peculiar way, in wicker baskets, which they fasten across the channel opening between the breakers. (Schoff, 1912); Further he mentions that in Pandian kingdom there was a place called Cottanara from where people used to transport pepper to Barace through boats hollowed out of a single tree (Schoff, 1912).

Gasparo Balbi, a foreign traveller of 16th century, describes the traditional boat of Goa as follows : "here, in Goa, we saw boats of one yard breadth and four yard length being used for fishing purpose. These boats will never turn upside-down. This is because on one of the sides of the boat two wooden planks are fixed and on the other side also a big square wooden plank is fixed. These wooden planks float on the water and prevent the boat from capsizing. The wooden planks on one side and the square wooden plank on the other side

balance the boat so fantastically that the boat never turns upside-down" (Sivashanmugam & Rajamanickam, 1988).

Some traditional folk songs of Goa frequently mention the word *Vodem* meaning canoe. The following stanza from a Goan folk song is one such example:

*Pandu gabtyachem Vodem
Tujya poltichem tantun yeta
Moden go Lutzin
Rodon Naka
Lutzin, rodon Naka*

Translation:

Fisherman Pandu is bringing the dead body of your husband in the canoe Oh ! Lutzin; do not weep Oh ! Lutzin (Sukhthanker, V.S., 1974, p. 94).

Belekeri is situated about 30 km. South of Karwar in North Kanara District, Karnataka on the west coast of India. It is a well sheltered natural harbour (Fig. 1). Belekeri is a centre not only famous for manganese export but also for traditional boat building, particularly fishing boat locally known as Hoodi and *Vodem* in Goa. The minor coast streams originating in the north are the Belekeri, Ankola, Kumta,

Badgani, Venktapur and Bhatkal rivers. They are tidal rivers being a hundred yards to two miles broad and at high water they are navigable for small craft (of one half to two tons) from two to ten miles inland (Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Kanara District, 1883 pp. 7).

The Belekeri river is sufficiently deep at all tides and navigable for three miles by canoes carrying bamboos, timber and other local produce.

Parts of a boat:

Hull: The hull consists primarily of a long dug-out. Upon its gunwale edges on each side is sewn a deep vertical washstrake (Plank) finished off with a gunwale beading, tied on at intervals. At both ends of the canoe the washstrakes project about 2 ft. as overhanging parts triangular in elevation. Neither stem, nor stern is distinguishable.

Oars: Two rowing oars with long blades sewn to the poles are used, one is kept at portside near the conventional fore end and the other at the aft on the starboard side. The blade of starboard side is bigger than the portside one. In local term it is called Vallhi.

Mast: The builder erects permanently a wooden mast in the centre of the canoe, but sometimes the mast is also seen on the starboard side tied with a rope. The mast is held upright by means of four stays running down from a lashing about half a metre below its head.

Outrigger: Locally it is known as Hulani. The outrigger frame is towards starboard side and consists of two booms. Stout spars, which are outside the hull, at first curve slightly upwards over a metre or more and then gently downward at their outer ends. These are lashed to the canoe-shaped cylindrical float. To allow attachment, two square slots are cut transversely

in the upper part of the float, each about one quarter of the float's length from its respective end.

Anchor: In Konkani the word nangar is used for anchor. The anchors are very simple as they use a stone of any shape tied with a rope from all sides and the main rope is connected with the canoe.

Material for boat building :

Mostly the canoes are made of amba (mango) trees. The timber comes either from the Government forests or from timber merchants. Coconut rope is used for stitching two planks together and afterwards cashewnut oil is applied over the canoe. Generally bamboo is used for the mast and from any strong small plank an oar is prepared. Hulani or outrigger is also made of mango wood.

Sizes of the boat

Boats at Belekeri can be broadly divided into three categories on the basis of their size

1. **The Big boat** is atleast 25 to 35 ft. long and $3\frac{1}{3}$ ft. high. To the main dugout two additional planks are added for increasing height as well as breadth. There is also a provision for outrigger (for balancing) which is locally known as Hulani. This is approximately 10 to 12 ft. long (Pl. 1). In this category there is a system for sail. The mast is fixed at the centre and the sail is tied with a rope to the mast and boat itself. This type of boat is taken in the open sea about 10 miles offshore with at least 4-5 crew members and the canoes go in groups of 4-5.

2. **The Medium Size** boat has a length of 20 to 25 ft. and height of $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. Only one additional plank is used in this type. The breadth at the top of the boat is about 2 ft. In this type also there is provision for outrigger as well as sail.

3. Small boat: This type of boat is the smallest in size with less than 20 ft. in length and not more than 1 1/2 ft. in height, being purely a dug-out made of a single log (Pl. 2). There is no provision for additional planks. An outrigger is used in this category also, but there is no provision for sail. This type of boat is used for fishing in the upstream of rivers as well as in the Belekeri bay.

Local Fishermen :

Boat building activities are generally carried out by Khande Khurvis who form a majority in this village. A medium size canoe is made in 10 days by one man. Some of the tools used by him are *tasani* (axes), *virur* (chisel), *kisuli* (plane), *kudati* (hammer), *rum* (borer) and *kharvat* (saw).

Ambigs and Gabits of this village are mainly the fishermen who go to the sea in a group of 4-5 small canoes. They also do fishing in moonlight with the rising of moon and return when it sets. During the rainy months and in rough weather they fish in rivers.

Conclusion:

In conclusion it can be said that the indigenous boat particularly the fishing boat, which is designed according to the need of a particular region or season on the sea, is still in use here. It is also understood that the type and size of all traditional boats are the results of several hundred years of experience gained by the coastal people of this country. Belekeri is one of the finest examples for this type of traditional boat building centre.

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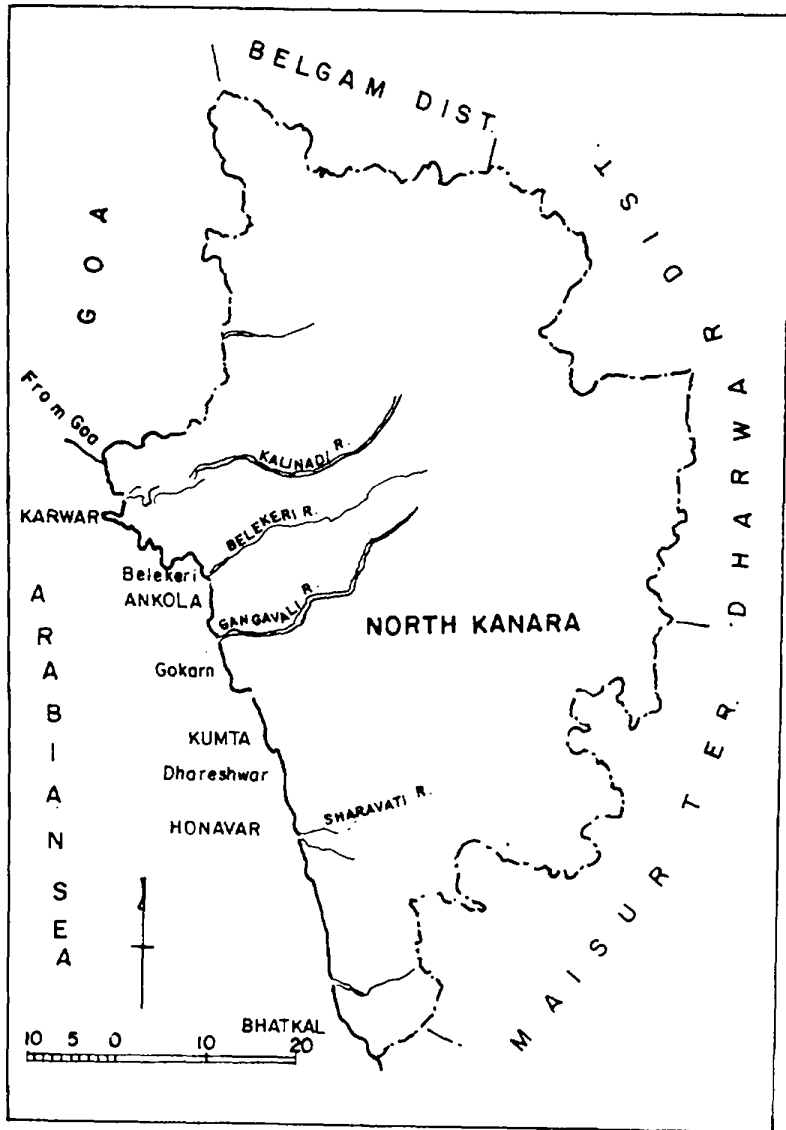


Fig. 1 : Belekert



Plate 1 : Outrigger on starboard side of a canoe, Belekeri

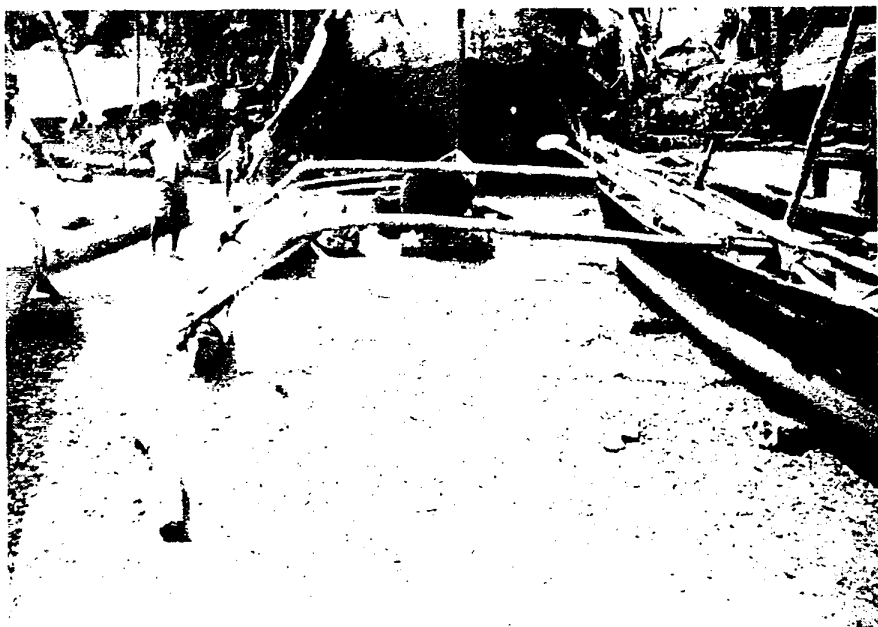


Plate 2 : A dugout made of a single log