Ports and Maritime Activities of Orissa
(16th to 19th Centuries)

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With the royal patronage of independent Hindu kingdoms, the marine traders and seafarers of Orissa (ancient Kalinga) were able to establish colonies in the Indian Archipelago in ancient times. In 1568 the Muslim invasion of Orissa not only changed the political condition of the state but also put a check on the economic progress. During the rule of Akbar the ports of southern Orissa lost their significance. Subsequently, Orissa was included in the province of Bengal and the ports of northern Orissa such as Balasore, Pipili, Chandbali and others came to much more prominence than before.

Being situated on the shore of Bay of Bengal and the rivers such as Burabalganga, Suvarnarekha, Baitarani, Rishikulya and others, the ports of Orissa attracted the European countries to set up the trade centres. The ports such as Balasore, Saratha, Chhauna, Laichanpur, Churamani, Dhamra, Pipili, Chandbali, Harishpur, Puri, False point and Ganjam had contacts with the British, Dutch, Danes, French and Portuguese. Of these ports, some were prominent and continued the trade for several years while others lost their significance very soon and remained as minor ports. Balasore, Pipili, Dhamra and Chandbali were important ship-building centres and maintained contacts with the interior ports of Orissa.

This paper deals with the maritime contacts of Orissa with European countries during the 16th to 19th century. Relevant material has been collected from the European factory records, accounts and diaries of European travellers, contemporary Indian accounts and exploration report for the study of ports and maritime activities of Orissa. An attempt has been made here to describe the ports and their contact with European countries, trade in goods and economic condition of Orissa.
Balasore

The discovery of sea-route to India by Vasco da Gama in 1498 opened a new vista for the European trade in India. Portuguese set up their first trade settlement on the eastern coast at San Thome but due to the hostility of the native people, they shifted towards northward and established themselves on the Orissa coast. Being situated on the mouth of the Burabalanga river, Balasore had all the facilities to develop as a port town. Around 1625 the Portuguese established their trade centre at Balasore. In the 17th century the sea-trade and commerce of Orissa were carried out mainly through the Balasore port.

At the time of British acquisition of Orissa in 1803, it possessed seven ports. Those were Suvarnarekha, Saratha, Chhanua, Balasore, Laichanpur, Churamani and Dhamra. The first English factory was established by Ralph Cartwright in 1633. Bruton mentions that many ships and other vessels were built at Balasore. The English factory was set up on the bank of Burabalanga and a village known as Barabati was also established. It is known from the scattered official reports that initially some efforts were made to improve the Balasore port. A flag staff was built at the entrance of the Burabalanga and a permanent crew was kept attached to the establishment of the port. Boat-building industry was encouraged by the government agencies to build jolly and decked boats. The office of the master attendant was created under the Committee for the Control and Superintendent of Marine Establishment on the coast of Cuttack and two deputy master attendants were appointed at Balasore and Dhamra in 1820. The factory was protected on one side by the river and the other three sides by a moat and a village where artisans and weavers were working for the company. Subsequently, the Danes established their factory in 1636 followed by the Dutch. The French established their factory in 1673–94. Among all the European countries, the English, Dutch and Danes had a great share in the maritime trade of Balasore. In 1851, fifty-six vessels were in use at Balasore and in 1853 the number had increased to one hundred sixty-seven in spite of a loss of forty-four ships in a cyclone in 1851. Balasore had a master attendant of its own. Ships from the Madras coast, Ceylon and the Lakshadweep and Maldives islands were coming to Balasore port in large numbers annually for cargoes of rice. The Lakshadweep and Maldives islands depended mainly upon Balasore districts for their annual supply of grain. Those sloops brought but little cargo, occasionally a few coconuts, coir and mattering.

Fakir Mohan Senapat describes in his autobiography the ports of
Orissa during the 18th century together with the maritime activities, Balasore was popularly known as Bandara Balasore. The tributary of river Burivalanga in Balasore is known as the Olanda Nala, because the Olandaz (Dutch) ship first entered into the tributary. He further describes that, until fifty years ago this river was full of ships. Now that river is almost extinct owing to silting. Many ship repairing centres like Bankashala and dockyards of Godi were there on the bank of the Olanda Nala, but now there is no trace of their previous existence. Olanda Sahi village is on the south of Olanda Nala and was the market place for the Portuguese merchants. Dinamar Dinga or Dingomar Dinga village is on the west of Olanda Sahi which was the centre of the Danish traders. Farashi Dinga is on the east of Balasore which was a centre of the French traders and is still under the control of the French.

Pipli

Pipli is situated on the bank of Suvarnarekha river in Balasore district. It was the place where Europeans set up their factories for the first time. In 1514 the Portuguese established their first trade centre at Pipli. The Portuguese trade continued for more than hundred years from Pipli port, which is described by William Bruton (1633) as a port town of the Portuguese where they were the residents. Again in the year 1636 the Portuguese obtained permission from Mutagad Khan, the Nawab of Orissa to establish an additional residency at Pipli. The Portuguese even turned the Pipli port into a slave market where the Arakanese pirates brought their prisoners. Monopoly of the Portuguese continued on the coast of Orissa on trade and subsequently the Dutch, the French and English came to Pipli for trade. In the beginning of the 17th century, the Portuguese settlement at Pipli was deserted.

In 1611 the first English boat reached the port of Pipli and in 1634 Azim Khan, the ruler of Bengal, ordered the British to use Pipli port only but not others. The British set up their first trade centre at Pipli that was retained up to 1723. The Dutch established their trade centre in Pipli around 1625–27 and subsequently shifted their whole trade from Hugli to Pipli because of the impediments by the Muslims. The Pipli factory was stable and profitable for the Dutch. John Marshall 1668–72 has described the Pipli factory of the Dutch as a ‘handsome’ one. In the middle of 17th century, Hamilton describes that Pipli was the great centre of European trade from where the Dutch shipped 2,000 tons of salt annually. In 1676 the Dutch demolished their factory at Pipli.
The devastating famine of 1866 turned the history of Orissa. The enquiry committee recommended to the Government for breaking the isolation of the province by developing other ports of Orissa such as Dhamra, Chandbali, Puri and False Point including Balasore for better communication patterns. During the visit of T.E. Ravenshaw to Orissa in 1874, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal was happy with the trade systems of Orissa and sanctioned Rs. 2,89,000 to False Point, Rs. 30,000 to Balasore, Rs. 1,00,000 to Dhamra and Chandbali and Rs. 20,000 to Puri for further development of the ports of Orissa.

Dhamra

In 1858 Dhamra was declared as a port situated on the banks of estuaries of the Baitarani and the Brahmani rivers. It was a great salt emporium. As a natural port, Dhamra afforded complete protection from monsoon.

The English were attracted to Dhamra as it afforded greater facilities. During the British conquest of Orissa in 1803, rice and salt were exported to Bengal from Dhamra. The Government notification no. 877 dated 8th May 1858 declared Dhamra as an important port. Hunter also describes “Dhamra, as a suitable port for native shippers ranking next to Balasore in importance.”

Chandbali

The maritime activities at Chandbali port commenced in 1872 that continued for long. The commissioner of Orissa, T.E. Ravenshaw contributed to the development of Chandbali port on the bank of Baitarani river. The port was also known as the ‘Ravenshaw Port’. Throughout the 19th century, Chandbali was used as a port for the export of salt which was manufactured in Orissa in the eighties. Almost 60% of the total trade and commerce between Orissa and Calcutta were carried out from the port of Chandbali. Until 1885 Chandbali continued to be a flourishing port. With the inauguration of False Point port in 1868, the traders of Calcutta established trade for cotton piece and consumer goods with Orissa through Dhamra and Chandbali ports and in return, forest products, oil seeds, and rice used to come from Calcutta.

Puri

Upto 1860 Puri continued to be an important port for embarkation of ships carrying food grains. But owing to shortage of labour and
loading and unloading difficulties besides lack of storage facilities it
could not compete with other ports of Orissa. It was also not safe for
vessels during Southwest monsoon.19

False Point

The importance of Puri port declined after the False Point port came
up in 1860. Later, another port known as the Batighara light house, 70
miles away from Cuttack was popularly called Phalsapenth in Oriya
for its original English name False Point. The reason for this was that
in 1828 a light house was built at Palmyrus, to direct the ships to the
coast. False Point derived its name from the fact that initially ships
running northward frequently mistook it for point Palmyrus a degree
further up to the coast. Later, the whole coastal area was surveyed and
re-examined and False Point was found to be the best.20 Engineer
Colonel Rundall insisted for development. The False Point was de-
clared to be a port under Act XXII of 1855 in the Calcutta Gazette of
23rd May 1860. This port was recognised as the best harbour on the
whole of Indian coast between Calcutta and Bombay.21 False Point
brought a great change in the field of maritime trade by breaking the sea
borne trade with Madras, Bombay, and the foreign countries like
Ceylon, Burma, Maldive island, Mauritius and London. It heard its
own death knell at the end of the 19th century.22 A harbour master and
a superintendent of customs have been appointed at False Point. The
British Indian General Steam Navigation Company made the place a
regular port of call. The Port was devastated by the storm wave of 22nd
September 1885, until then False Point was an important port of Orissa
in the later part of the 19th century.23

Ganjam

Ganjam is situated on the mouth of river Rishikulya. The river was
deep and navigable for country boats for some distance inland. The
English attempted to set up a factory at Ganjam at the end of 17th
century. In 1747–48 John Andrews was the President of Ganjam factory
and this factory was a great commercial settlement of the English having
a resident, a council, artillery and troops.24 By the end of the 17th
century Ganjam was famous for the export of rice to Madras and other
regions of the Coromandel Coast. The traffic between these two ports
was controlled by both native (Telugu and Muslim) and private English
traders. Earlier the bulk of rice was exported from Bimlipattinam,
Visakhapatnam and Manikapartry. With the increase of population
and failure of harvests, the whole of Southern Coromandel region depended upon Ganjam for food grains. It is also very well known that by the close of the 17th century Ganjam became a very important supplier of rice to Madras. Alexander Hamilton mentions about the rice and sugarcane of the Ganjam region. The other exports from this port were beeswax, iron, cloth and forest products like sticklac and timber. About timber, Hamilton mentions that those were meant for building purposes and were the strongest he had ever seen. The port was known for its cloth and rice. The famous cloths were the Salampore and long cloth of coarser variety which the Dutch called Guinea or Negro cloth. These cloths were exported to west Africa.

Export and import
In the later medieval period Orissa carried out her internal and foreign trade with surplus agricultural and industrial products. With the rise of ports and European settlements on the coastal Orissa the commercial relationship of Orissa with Europe assumed a new dimension. Orissa emerged as a textile and rice producing area. The cotton and textile products of Orissa had a wide market in foreign countries. Other articles of export from Orissa were iron, stone dishes, brass plates, sugar, salt, ginger, rice, butter, cloth to Bengal, Bihar and Machilipatnam. Saltpetre was produced largely in Bihar and was exported to foreign countries from Orissa ports. Lead, quicksilver, vermillion, alum, cloves, camphor, silk, coral and various luxury articles were imported from Malacca, Borneo, Ceylon and China. These commodities fetched such fabulous prices that gold, silver and jewels abounded in Portuguese houses at Goa. The records of the English company indicate that the Portuguese traders took full advantage of the low price of export and import items that got enormous profit never dreamt of in the course of their trade. References indicate that merchants imported elephants to Orissa. The ships of the Nawab of Bengal and the merchants of Balasore, Pipili and Hugli went to Tenassarim every year to bring elephants. The king of Siam had a trading unit at Balasore and traded in elephants and lead. He brought two ships loaded with elephants to Balasore from Tenassarim in 1679. Orissa used to import sea-shells (cowries) from Maldivian and cowries were used in Orissa as the medium of exchange.

The Portuguese imported spices, woollen cloth, tin, lead and vermilion to Orissa and exported varieties of white cotton, cloth, muslin, butter, rice, gingelly seed and other goods from the Pipili port.
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Further the Portuguese (Arakanese) pirates carried out slave trade on the Orissa coast and sold their prisoners at Pipli.20

The Dutch carried on extensive trade in Orissa. Textile goods, silk, saltpetre, wax, rice, sugar, butter and other goods were exported from Orissa to other Asian countries and Europe.31 In the mid-17th century, the Dutch shipped 2,000,000 sterling annually and in 1654 purchased goods to provide cargo for seven to eight ships.32

The main exports of the English were cotton, silk products, rice, sugar, butter, iron, pepper, salt and saltpetre. The imports were brocadel of various colours, quick-silver, lead, vermilion and other luxury items.33

Types of boat and ship

Thomas Bowery has given a vivid description of the types of ships and boats which were used in Orissa coast namely patellas, flat bottomed vessel, oloako for the riverine traffic, budgaroo, a pleasure boat, and bazer, a large boat. The purgoos which were seen at Pipli, Balasore and other places were used for loading and unloading of cargo from the mother vessel.34 Booras was a floaty and light boat rowed by 20 to 30 oars carrying salt, pepper and other cargo.35 F.M. Senapati mentions in his autobiography that the vessels (jabaja) were propelled by wind with the help of sails (ajhala). The number and size of sails used depended upon the size of the vessel. The sails were rectangular, triangular and pentagonal in shape.36 Further ships have been classified into three types namely gopara the large ships, duni the medium type and sulupa the small type ships. The sulupa and duni were used for carrying cargo in between Calcutta and Orissa. The goparas were used in overseas trade. It seems that the names of the ships have been derived from the Arabic or English versions. Gopara is derived from Arabic gurab, the English version of Grab which means an Eastern-Coasting vessel. Similarly sulupa or slopa has been derived from English term sloop and slope in Dutch which means a light boat with one mast and outer rigger. Duni is synonymous to dhoni and dhow of English and daw of Arabic vessel with a lateen sail.37

The Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, English and French factories of 16th to 18th centuries are no longer in existence on the coast of Orissa but some remains are found buried on the bank of Suvarnarekha river. Two Dutch cemeteries were found to be in the Barabati Girls High School. The Department of Archaeology, Government of Orissa,
carried out explorations and excavations on the bank of river Burabalanga and noticed a big boat of 10m × 4m. The flag of the boat was not known. The excavations revealed Dutch coins, drinking water jar and semi-precious materials. The people say that the Dutch dockyards were near the Olandaz Sahi (Personal communication, K.S. Behera).

Hamilton mentioned that floods of the Suvarnarekha river washed out a great part of Pipili and formed a bar in the river. In course of time George Minchin, was appointed to survey the coastal area of Orissa for the progressive maritime trade. The master attendant of Puri, George Minchin reported about the unsuitability of the Orissan ports to harbour big vessels. So the Government decided against the expansion of coastal trade in Orissa. On the basis of the report of Minchin on 25th February 1892 the Commissioner of Cuttack Thomas Pakenham nullified all kinds of improvement plans of the ports of Orissa. The deposition of sand at the mouth of river Burabalanga proved difficult for navigation. No steps were taken to protect the port. False Point port declined as the sea became shallower and in September 1885 a cyclone destroyed the port. The Danes in India could not get adequate support from the home country, though their settlements in India were under the direct control of the crown. The Anglo-French war and Napoleon’s attack on Denmark shattered their economic and political power. The English occupation of India was a great blow to the Danish trade. The English seized all the Danish stations one after another in India. After the fall of Napoleon in 1815 the Danes got back their settlements in India but failed to reorganize their trade again. In 1845 they sold their Indian settlements to the English and ended their Indian adventure. The construction of railway line undermined the importance of maritime trade from Orissa to Calcutta. Lastly, the British people concentrated on Hugli port for their trade. Their negligent attitude for improvement and protection of the ports caused the downfall of the ports and maritime trade of Orissa.

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Local terms of various parts of ship

Babuti Kunda: The pillar (mast) at the back of the ship for the purpose of hoisting the flag
Safaradari Rasi: The rope bound from the bow to the mast of the vessel
Nabara Daudi: The ladder like ropes tied on both the sides of the ship
Chaski: Pulley like rope chairs, used as a seat for the members of the crew
Ganada: The event of the creation of a hole in the deck, forcing the water to enter into the ship
Pagada: The rope with which the vessel is tied
Perachcha: The parapet of the ship
Chapadara: The cabins meant for the the people to live in, during the voyage
Kadabin: Small and stout guns
Kbola: The place for the cargo
Mirdba: Chief of the labourers/Khalasees, in charge of the godown
Majbi: The captain of the ship
Tandel: The vice-captain of the ship
Bombatia: Pirates
Gudi: Dockyard
Batali: Life-boat
Langara: Anchor
Heria: The serpentine movement of the ship in sea
Hadu Babaru: Harbour
Phatua Gai: Portuguese
Gola: Godown for the preservation of salt

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12. L.N. Raut, op. cit.
34. T. Bowery, op. cit., p. 4.