



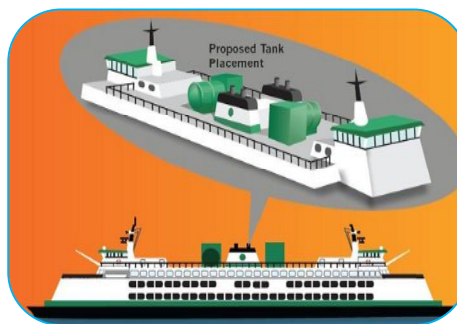
RIVERINE TRANSPORT AND FERRY SYSTEM IN COASTAL ORISSA (CE1866-1905)-A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Dr. Gokulananda Patro

Head, Department of History, K.M Science College, Narendrapur, Ganjam (Odisha).

ABSTRACT

The Coastal Odisha comprised of four undivided districts of cuttack, Puri, Balasore and Ganjam were the worst victims of the Great Orissa famine of 1866. East India Company's government was very callous and apathetic of the development of research. It had no roads, no railways, no navigable canals till the 70's of 19th century. Regarding the deplorable condition of communications, the Famine Commission in 1866 reported "The people were shut up in a narrow province between pathless jungles and an impracticable sea". About one-third population of Orissa perished in this famine. Therefore the people mainly depended on riverine transport and ferry system for their livelihood. This paper highlights how the riverine transport and ferry system helped the common people for the transportation of food grains from other regions.



KEYWORDS : Amazon; Work; boi-bumbá.

INTRODUCTION :

Orissa lagged much behind in matter of transport and communication during the early British period. There was not a single road in the modern sense of the term in existence when the British took possession of Orissa in 1803. G. Tombe writes - "When we took the province in 1803, there was not a road in the modern sense of the word, in existence. What were then called roads were mere fair-weather cart-tracks without bridges and without proper ferry arrangements for crossing the numerous water-courses which they intercepted".¹

A number of causes can be attributed to the backwardness in transport and communication system. Firstly the East India Company's government was very callous and apathetic of the development of research. It had no roads, no railways, no navigable canals till the 70's of 19th century. Regarding the deplorable condition of communications, the Famine Commission in 1866 reported "The people were shut up in a narrow province between pathless jungles and an impracticable sea".²

Secondly the number of roads were very few that was because as A.J.M. Mills reported, "The Rajas were afraid of opening roads as they wanted impenetrable jungles around their residences".³

Throughout the rains, the roads of the Coastal Odisha, were on the whole, impassable for wheel traffic, being muddy and unabridged. In summer also the traffic was very dull dreaded by the out-siders for notorious unhealthy climate, ferocious wild beast and the way side robbers.⁴

Therefore the common people heavily depended on rivers for trade transportation and communication.

RIVERINE TRANSPORT

The rivers in coastal Orissa were used as arteries of transport and communication. All the principal rivers formed the broad waterways during half of the year especially the rainy season.⁵ When the roads of Orissa were impassable and when traffic being muddy and unbridged, the great rivers namely Mahanadi, Brahmani, Baitarani, Budhabalanga, Rushikulya, Bahuda and Bansadhara supplied an easy means of communication for import and export of commodities.⁶

All these rivers were navigable, when the roads of Orissa were impassable for wheel traffic being muddy and unbridged, these rivers supplied an easy means of communication during the rains. River Mahanadi was the chief water route between Cuttack and Sambalpur through the Princely States of Orissa like Athagarh, Athamallik, Banki, Baramba, Baud, Daspalla, Khandapara and Narasingpur. River Brahmani was another highway of communication by water. It was the broad water-ways for the people of Talcher and Dhenkanal for nearly 8 months in a year. River Baitarani was of great use for the people of Keonjhar and Jajpur. In dry season also, it was navigable as far as Anandapur. Navigation through these rivers were conducted by country boats and rafts. Transportation through these water routes was extensive because it was less expensive and there was no fear of way-side robbers and wild animals as in land routes. Therefore, a considerable trade was carried on through these rivers.⁴

The river Mahanadi was the main out-let of trade of the district till the opening of railways.⁷ Boats could ascent the Mahanadi as far as the range of Madhya Pradesh. During floods, boats take five days to reach Cuttack from Sambalpur, while the Journey to Sonepur lasts for one day, and to Binka six hours. But, the duration of the return journey was much longer. In July, it took laden boats 25 days to reach Sambalpur from Cuttack.⁶

River Brahmani was the broad water-way for the people of Deogarh Sub-division of Sambalpur and the Talcher and Dhenkanal state for barely 8 months in a year. River Baitarani was an important artery of communication for the people of Jaipur Sub-Division and Keonjhar state. In dry season also it was navigable by small boats as far as Anandapur. A considerable trade was carried on at this place. During the rainy season bamboo trade was carried on through the river Rushikulya. The timbers from the Sorada forest were transported by this river as far as Ganjamtown. Bamboo's were also transported on the river Bahunda extensively during the rains. The only water-borne trade of Koraput District was the transport of the bamboo of Malkangiri by the Saleru and Saberi rivers to the Godavari river on the Rajahmundry.⁸

The three great rivers of Puri District, the Kushbhaddra, Bhargavi and Daya were navigable throughout for several months of the year. Even in the hot weather, country boats could be seen along their banks for at least ten miles above the point where these rivers enter the Chilika. The boats belonged chiefly to Ganjam Traders, who brought loads of bamboos and other goods and in return carried the surplus rice of the Chilikalake, which was available for boat traffic throughout the year.⁹

River Rushikulya, Bahuda, Badanadi and Ghadahada were the chief rivers used by the people of Ganjam for trade and communication.

The trade on Chilikalake was carried on boats. Ferry services were in existence for transport of passenger and goods in almost all the big rivers of Orissa. The Kendrapada-Marshaghai canal and the Taladanda canal were also used as other arteries of the trade.

Navigation through these rivers were conducted by the country boats and rafts. Regarding the boats Thomas Motte writes, "These boats were light, the plank being only a inch thick and a timbers small in proportion could carry from 600 to 700 mounds. "The largest boat he saw was 40 feet long and four feet wide. But, Hunter has described these boats as flat-bottomed and were able to carry about 25 tons of burden".¹⁰ The boats used in Chilika lake were quite peculiar. They were made of planks without ribs or keels and were quite peculiarly flat-bottomed with perpendicular sides. This for was necessary in the unimproved state of the landing places as the lake in very shallow at the edges, except where a

rocky knoll formed the bank; and in such position goods could not be landed safely from the breaking of the waves. Produce was brought through the Chilikalake to Rambha, Parikud and Malud.¹¹

On the Chilikalake people use boats called *patwa*. There were flat bottomed boats and were specially made for shallow water. On the sea the fishermen use *masulaboats*. The *masulaboats* were large, flabby, flat-bottomed crafts of plants sewn together with cane strips. They were used close to the beach and were not fit for going out to sea.¹² Transportation through these water routes especially during the rains was extensive because it was less expensive and there was no fear of wayside robbers and wild animals as in land routes. But since the opening of railway, the construction of bridges over the rivers and metalled roads, the river-borne trade has greatly diminished.

WATERWAYS

Regarding waterways in Puri district, Mansfield states, "The sea along the coast is fairly deep and vessels can go close to the shore; but there is no place where a vessel, even of small draught, can take refuge in bad weather and during the greater portion of the year there is a heavy surf through which only *masula* or surf boats can pass."¹³

In the interior there is a considerable amount of traffic along the rivers during the rains, but in the hot weather they all cease to be navigable for more than a few miles above their mouths, except the Devi, by which rice finds its way by boat to the Taladanda canal and Cuttack. The Kushbhadra was the first to dry up in its upper reaches, but in its lower reaches it is navigable by small country boats the whole year round. The Daya and the Bhargavi are usually navigable throughout till about the month of January; even in the hot weather country boats may be seen along their banks for at least ten miles above the point where they enter the Chilika. The boats belong chiefly to Ganjam traders, who bring loads of bamboos and other goods and in return carry off the surplus rice of the Southern *paraganas*. They come via the Ganjam canal and the Chilikalake, which is available for boat traffic the whole year round".¹⁴

FERRY SERVICES

Personals of royal houses used horses, elephants and horse- driven carts (chariots) as the means of conveyance. The palanquins being carried by four to six persons were used for conveyance of nobles and rich people of the society. Pack-horses were used extensively for going from one place to another whereas bullocks were used for carrying merchandise. But for the commoners during the rainy seasons ferry services were run on the rivers, nalas and the Chilikalake for the transport of passengers and goods. There were quite a good number of ferries in the coastal Odisha. They mainly transport a few persons and light vehicles only from one bank to the other bank of a river. Mechanised ferries with facilities to ferry across heavy vehicles like truck, buses, etc. were of course absent.¹⁵

Rushikulya is the only major river of the Ganjam district. The course of the river is about 160 km. Besides, there are Ghodahada, a tributary of the Rushikulya, the Bahuda and the Mahendratanayariver flowing in the district. None of the rivers are navigable, though during the rains Rushikulya is navigable as far as Asika. Wooden rafts and bamboos are occasionally floated downstream in rainy season. There is little boat traffic on other rivers. However, dugouts are used at a number of points for crossing the rivers.¹⁶

The ports Orissa were not developed and become worst as the rivers had silted up. The canals were also not developed for a long time for navigation. The Colonial Government didn't take much interest for Orissa as it was more concern with Calcutta, Madras and the other region close to it. Thus, most of the people depended on riverine trade and transport during the period under review. That was the main cause of poverty and backwardness of the people of Orissa.

REFERECES:

1. Orissa District Gazetteers-Mayurbhanj,Cuttack,1967,P-272
2. Report of the Commissioners appointed to enquire into the Famines in Bengal and Orissa, vol.I, 1866, Calcutta, p.21.

3. A.J.M. Mills to Secretary to Government of Bengal, December 31, 1842.), (Board of Revenue Proceeding (Orissa State Archives Acsn. No. 166).
4. Bhagaban Sahu, Princely States of Orissa Under the British Crown 1858-1905, Cuttack, 1993 p.85.
5. P.W.D./Civil Works Communication Prog. 1865.
6. Report of the Commissioners appointed to enquire into the Famines in Bengal and Orissa, vol.I, 1866, Calcutta, p.21.
7. A Report on the Imperial and District Roads in Bengal Presidency, Calcutta, 1866, p.192.
8. Annual Report on the Administration of Orissa Division, 1868, p.98.
9. T.J.Maltby, Ganjam District Manual, 1892, p.2005.
10. W.W.Hunter, Statical Account of Bengal, Puri, vol.II, London, 1877, p.65
11. Ibid.
12. Odisha General Administration Report, 1872, p.141.
13. N.Senapati (ed.), Odisha District Gazatteers, Puri, Bhubaneswar, 1977, p.298
14. P.T.Mansfield, Bihar and Odisha District Gazatteers, Puri, 1929, p.221-22.
15. N.C.Behuria, Odisha District Gazatteers-Ganjam, 1992, p.410
16. Ibid, p.431