

## **Maritime and Overseas Trade in Odisha during Ancient Time: A Critical Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

*The present paper seeks to draw attention about the maritime and overseas trade in Odisha during ancient time. In the maritime history, Odisha (Kalinga) played a significant role in spreading her culture not only in India but also other parts of the world, including Africa, Rome and Southeast Asia. Archaeological findings, literary records and foreign accounts, enabled the reconstruction of the maritime history of Odisha. In this paper an attempt has been made to trace the expansion of trade and cultural contacts between Odisha and other countries during Ancient times. After a deep analysis it was found that the festivals, traditions and rituals like Ta'apoi, Bali Yatra, Khudarukuni Osha also reminds us the maritime glory of ancient Odisha.*

**Key Words:** *Maritime, Overseas, Odisha, Ta'apoi, Bali Yatra, Khudurukuni, Kalinga, trade, Culture.*

### **Introduction**

From ancient times, Odisha carried on her trade and commerce, both inland and maritime, keeping her touch with the outside world. Her control over land routes and sea routes gave her adequate opportunity to carry on her trade and commerce smoothly.<sup>1</sup> Odisha, popularly known as Kalinga, during the ancient period had her territory almost extended from the delta of the Ganges in the north to the estuary of the Godavari in the south and from the Amarakantaka hill in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the east played a pivotal role in India's maritime history. The people of Kalinga in the past were brave sailors and navigators. They had a distinct personality of their own and have fascination for sea. They were intrepid and inquisitive to explore new things. Commercial zeal and adventurous spirit were perhaps the only force to stimulate the Kalingans to initiate maritime activities.<sup>2</sup> So in Indonesia the people of this land were known as '*Kalinga Sahasika*'. The coastline of Odisha was scattered with several sea ports, which were main centers of life of the people in commercial, cultural and political fields. With these rich ports and well equipped ships, Kalinga dominated in the sphere of maritime trade. Thus, Odisha became very prosperous because of these maritime activities.<sup>3</sup> Similarly Asoka's Kalinga war clearly indicates that one of the most important cause of the Kalinga war was Asoka's desire not only to gain control over Odisha but also to capture the Odishan ports along with its maritime routes through which the people of Kalinga carried on extensive maritime trade and made Kalinga prosperous.<sup>4</sup> They not only carried trade and commerce but also their religion, culture, and civilisation to far off eastern countries like Java, Bali,

Sumatra, Borneo, and Combodia. From the available literary, archaeological findings and foreign accounts it is feasible to locate the ancient ports and reconstruct a picture of the maritime history of Odisha.

### **Literary Sources:**

In the days of yore, the people of Kalinga have established the suzerainty in the overseas trade and continued their links to far off countries since the remote past. It was so prominent in maritime trade that Kalidasa referred in the *Raghuvamsa* to the king of Kalinga as *Mahodadhipati* (Lord of the Ocean). Further, the *Aryamanjusrimulakalpa* narrates to "all islands of the Kalinga Sea" (*Kalingodresu*) from which appears that in the past the present Bay of Bengal was known as the "Kalinga Sea" being dominated by the ships of Kalinga. The *Mahavamsa* mentions that Asoka sent his missionaries to Sri Lanka from Tamralipti. The *Vassentara Jataka* mentions Kalinga as a great commercial and industrial country, from which rice, fine cloth, ivory, diamonds and other goods were exported even to foreign countries. The Buddhist texts mention the contact of ancient Odisha with Sri Lanka from about the 5th century B.C. onwards. Trade between Odisha and Sri Lanka must have continued in the later period which resulted in the strong political and cultural links between two countries.<sup>5</sup>

### **Archaeological findings:**

The archaeological remains unearthed by excavations at various sites of Odisha throw valuable light on its overseas contact and maritime activities of Odisha during ancient times. The excavations of *Tamralipti*, *Khalkattapatna* and *Manikpatna* have not only established these sites as contemporary international trading ports but also bear testimony of the maritime glory of ancient Odisha. The commercial and cultural contact of Odisha with far off countries been irrevocably proved through these excavations. The discovery of Roman gold coins, roulette Roman ware, Chinese pottery and Chinese celadon ware from these sites are enough to justify foreign trade in ancient Odisha. The excavations at *Sisupalagarh* in particular, *Jaugada*, *Manmunda* and *Asurgad* in general testify to the fact that by 2nd century B.C. Odisha had a well developed civilisation and a number of trade centres.<sup>6</sup>

### **Foreign accounts:**

The accounts of the foreign travellers, pilgrims and sailors help us in many ways in reconstructing the maritime history of Odisha. The unknown author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* is so far the earliest foreigner to have referred to the Odishan coast in the first century A.D. In Second century A.D., *Ptolemy* during his journey of the east coast has referred to the port of *Palur* which acted as the base for

the preparation of his map. In Fifth century A.D., Fa-Hien has elaborately described the port to Tamralipti where from he embarked upon a direct voyage to Ceylon. In Seventh century A.D., Hiuen Tsang visited Odisha and left his accounts. He has described *Che-li-ta-lo* as a resting place for the sea going traders.<sup>7</sup>

### **Objectives of the study:**

The present study addressed with the following objectives

1. To make an analysis on the important ports of Odisha during ancient times.
2. To highlight overseas contacts with other countries.
3. To address some festivals, rituals and traditions in Odisha during this period.

### **Ports of Odisha:**

Odisha and its unremitting coastline has galvanised Odias for to establish maritime trade and the coastline of Odisha was scattered with several sea ports. Ports were a prerequisite for overseas trade and commerce and as such attracted the attention of the mariners and traders. Odishan coast in ancient times flourished with many ports and anchorages which naturally grew up at strategic points. Around the ports, towns developed as a result of brisk trade. In fact, the ports were the centres of life of the people in commercial, cultural and political fields. They served as the medium of export of not only trading articles but also of the culture and civilisation.<sup>8</sup> *Tamralipti, Che-li-ta-lo, Manikpatna, Palur, Khalkattapatna, Kalingapatnam, Pithunda* etc., are some of the ports and port-towns of ancient Odisha.

### **Tamralipti:**

Among the ports of Odisha, *Tamralipti(modern Tamluk in the Midanpur district of West Bengal)* was very famous during the ancient and medieval times.<sup>9</sup> This port was the gateway for the daring sailors, traders and missionaries of ancient Odisha. Sailing ships laden with fine cloth, silk and copper went out from this port in large numbers to distant countries like Ceylon, the coast of Africa and the ports on the Arabian Sea. A probable reason for the Ashokan invasion of Kalinga (ancient Odisha) was to gain control over the sea ports of Kalinga, particularly the port of Tamralipti.<sup>10</sup> It was one of the greatest sea ports of India which was connected both by land and water with different parts of India and many other countries in the 6th century B.C. It was the first important port in the East Coast of India from where regular sailing to Burma, Malaya-Peninsula, Indo-China and beyond was possible.<sup>11</sup> It was linked by roads with ancient towns like Rajagriha, Sravasti, Varanasi and Kalinganagara.<sup>12</sup> This port town finds mention in ancient Indian, Chinese, Ceylonese and Graeco-Roman accounts as a great international emporium of trade. The

*Arthashastra* contains profuse references to *Tamralipti* as an important centre of maritime trade. King *Tisa* of Ceylon had sent four envoys to the court of Emperor Ashoka who came and went through this port and *Sanghamitra* (the daughter of Ashoka) sailed from this port to Ceylon with the sacred *Bodhi* tree. Here at this port, Fa-Hien, the Chinese pilgrim boarded a large merchant vessel and reached Ceylon after fourteen days on his return to China. I-Tsing, another Chinese pilgrim reached the port of *Tamralipti* in 671 A.D. after returning from Sumatra. It was the most famous port in the Bay of Bengal from which people travelled to China, Ceylon and South-East Asia.<sup>13</sup>

### **Palur & Dantapura:**

Palur was another important port which finds mention as 'Paloura' in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (1st century A.D.) and Ptolemy's description during 2nd century A.D. It has been identified with the modern village of Palur on the coast of the Bay of Bengal in Ganjam district.<sup>14</sup> It acted as the only port of departure to the east on the Coromandal Coast. This port city is very nearer to Samapa.<sup>15</sup> Dantapura, mentioned in the Buddhist and Jaina texts, and is perhaps same as Palur, since *Pallu* and *Ur*, the two terms in Tamil indicate the meaning tooth (danta) city (pura). It was a prosperous town.<sup>16</sup> According to Sylvain Levi the port town of Paloura was associated with a port which exported elephant tusks, as an important item of export. The earliest reference to Dantapura is seen in *Mahagobinda Suttanta of Dighanikaya*. *Dathavamsa* describes Dantapur as the capital of Kalinga upto Buddha's time. Some scholars have also identified it with Gopalpur. Alexander Chunningham has identified it with *Rajmahendri* and W.W. Hunter has identified it with *Puri*. But some scholars have identified it with Radhanagar in Dharmasala area of Jajpur district of Odisha.

### **Khalkattapatna**

It is situated on the left bank of river Kushabhadra, where it joins the Bay of Bengal. A brick floor has been found which might have served as loading and unloading platform. Many potteries of foreign origin have been also discovered from here. So it seems that the Kalingan merchants proceeded to South East Asia and China from here in 11th-12th century A.D., during the reign of Somavamsi and Ganga dynasty.<sup>17</sup>

### **Che-li-ta-lo**

*Che-li-ta-lo* (Charitra), as described by Hiuen Tsang, was another port town situated on the sea-coast of Odradesa (North Odisha). From his account, it is known that *Che-li-ta-lo* was not only a prosperous port but also a centre of Buddhism and it contained four Buddhist stupas.<sup>18</sup> The city was naturally strong and contained many rare commodities. It was a main thoroughfare and resting place for sea going traders and

strangers from distant lands. Nearby the city there were five Buddhist monasteries close together with lofty constructions and very artistic images.<sup>19</sup> Hiuen Tsang himself had visited the city and has described it to be a place from where the glowing light emanating from the tooth relic of Buddha located in Ceylon at a distance of about 20,000 *li* (5000 miles) could be seen by him.<sup>20</sup> Alexander Cunningham has identified it with the town of Puri. Some scholars have identified it with a spot around *Konark or Chandrabhaga*, which is situated on the sea-shore and has a number of Buddhist Viharas around.

### **Manikapatna**

Manikapatna was another flourishing sea port of Kalinga. Located in the Puri district, it is quite close to the mouth of the Chilika Lake. The excavated trade materials clearly show that it was a prosperous port in the past, which continued up to the Mughul period. It is also described in various literary sources like *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Madala Panji*. Captain Hamilton has also described about it as, "*A Great Inlet from Sea*", in 1739 A.D. The Maratha accounts mention about a war which took place at Manikpatana in 1803 A.D.

### **Kalingapatnam**

Kalingapatnam was one more significant port of Kalinga or ancient Odisha. It was situated at the mouth of the river *Vamsadhara* in the modern Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh. The name Kalingapatnam itself means the city of the Kalingans, who earned reputation for their activity on the east coast. Besides being a port for quite some time, it was the capital city of Kalinga.<sup>21</sup>

### **Pithunda**

Pithunda was a flourishing sea port of Kalinga in ancient times. The Hathigumpha Inscription mentions Pithunda as a metropolis which Kharavela conquered in his 11th regnal year.<sup>22</sup> Ptolemy refers to a metropolis named Pithunda and locates it in the country of *Moisolia* between the mouths of Godavari and Mahanadi. Some scholars identify it with Machilipatnam of Andhra Pradesh. The city of Pithunda besides being a port has also been described as a famous seat of Jainism. The seafaring merchants were said to have travelled by boat from Champa (*present Kampuchea*) to Pithunda even in the days of Mahavira.<sup>23</sup>

It is clearly palpable that the coast of Odisha played a conspicuous role in the maritime history of India due to its suitability for establishments of ports. From the aforesaid analysis it reveals that some ports were active from very ancient times and continued to be so for a long period while some became prominent for a particular period and lost their significance after a short span of time. With the passage of time the magnificent maritime activities of the ports, however, had declined and succumbed due to

several factors like political dismemberment, administrative instability and internal disturbances, the kings withdrew their patronage to the adventurous activities across the sea, and this served as the principal factor for the decline of this glory.

### **Overseas Trade relation with outside countries**

With their inquisitive propensity to scale new heights in overseas trade, the Kalingans began to touch countries like Ceylon, Burma, China, Rome, Africa and Indonesia.

#### **Ceylon (Sri Lanka)**

The relation between Ceylon (*Simhala*) and Kalinga are found in the Buddhists texts like the *Mahavamsa* and *Dipavamsa* which reveal the establishment of the first kingdom in Ceylon by *Vijaya* whose grandmother was the daughter of the king of Kalinga. Asoka's sending of *Bodhi* tree, matrimonial relation between the two countries, the summoning of *Vijayabahu II* (1186-87 A.D.) from Kalinga by Ceylonese king *Parakramabahu*, proclamation of the descendants of the Eastern Gangas of Kalinga by some Ceylonese kings reveal that since there existed political and cultural contacts between the two countries, the sailor of Kalinga would have certainly taken voyage to Ceylon.<sup>24</sup> From Ceylonese point of view Kalinga was famous for elephants. From the account of *Cosmas* who belonged to Sixth century A.D., it is known that Ceylon used to purchase elephants from Kalinga. Kalinga in its turn imported pearl and silver from Ceylon and exported precious stones, ivory, peeper and fine textile products to foreign countries in general and Ceylon in particular. Emperor Ashoka sent his son to Ceylon to establish Buddhism, and later sent his daughter Sanghamitra to organise the nuns. The *Samantapasadika* says that she was accompanied by eight families from Kalinga. The *Dathavamsa* talks of the friendship between king *Guhasiva* of *Kalinga* and king *Mahasena of Ceylon* (277 – 304 AD). It also talks of the king of Kalinga giving the tooth relic of Gautama Buddha as a dowry to *Dantakumara* on his marriage to the king's daughter. *Dantakumara* took the relic to Ceylon where it was enshrined in a stupa.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Burma:**

Suvarnabhumi or Burma was another country with which Odisha maintained her maritime contact. From the Burmese tradition it is known that the people of Kalinga had established their colonies in Burma. The naming of Pegu coast as *Ussa (Odra)*, the name of *Prome* as *Srikset*, i.e. *Srikshetra (Puri)*, the name of lower Burma known as *Talainga* even now, coming of *Tappasu and Bhallika*, the two merchant brothers from Burma who went to Rajagriha after arriving at Tamralipti, the trace of coins with Hindu symbols found at Pegu indicates that the mighty people of Kalinga had established an empire in Burma long before

Asoka led his victorious soldiers into Kalinga.<sup>26</sup> The Buddhagat, the sacred scripture of Burma, describes trade with the Buddhist merchants of Kalinga, leading to missionaries coming to propagate the faith, and then to political domination of parts of coastal Burma by Kalinga during the 4th to 7th centuries AD.<sup>27</sup>

#### **China:**

The ancient Odisha had intimate political, cultural and commercial contact with China. The visit of Chinese pilgrims likes *Fa-hien*, *Hiuen-tsang* and *I-tsing* to India in general and Odisha in particular is a clear testimony of this contact. The commercial relation between Odisha and China through sea can be traced from Fa-hien's account (399-411 A.D.) who returned to China from the port Tamralipti in a merchant ship. During the Bhauma-Kara rule, *Sivakara I* with *Prajna* (*Buddhist philosopher*) went to China for the propagation of Buddhism.

#### **Africa:**

Odisha also had overseas trade links with Africa. The commercial relation between Odisha and Africa as some scholars suggest on the basis of the sculptural representation of a Giraffe on the walls of Konark temple is certainly unsustainable. It is possible that the Arab traders would have brought this animal as a wonder presentation to the Ganga Monarch.<sup>28</sup>

#### **Rome:**

In the early centuries of the Christian era, Odisha had active trade relationship with Roman Empire. The western trade flourished because of the demand for luxury articles of Kalinga in the Roman Empire. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a Roman text of the First century A.D., besides mentioning the Kalingan port of Tamralipti, has referred to the trade relation between these two.

#### **Indonesia:**

The islands of Indonesia formed the most attractive destination for the Kalingan merchants. These were so popular and the trade was so flourishing that the islands of Java, Bali, Sumatra, Borneo etc. have often been referred to, as Suvarnadwipa or the island of gold.<sup>29</sup> There was a strong maritime trade between Suvarnadwipa and India in general and Kalinga in particular. The legends of Java relate that Kalinga took a leading part in establishing political relationship with Java. The alphabets used in inscriptions of Java are very similar to those of the inscriptions of Odisha.<sup>30</sup> Trade with Bali appears to have started before the Christian era. Bali had many products that were attractive to Kalinga's traders, including cinnamon, long pepper, white pepper and cardamom, pearls and gems, silk, camphor, bees wax and sandalwood. Traders

from Kalinga brought muslin and other fine cloths, rugs, brocade, armour, gold and jewellery. The festival of "Bali Yatra", or "Journey to Bali", is still celebrated throughout coastal Odisha in memory of the ancient trading links with much fervor and gaiety.<sup>31</sup>

### **Festivals, Rituals and Traditions of Ancient Odisha:**

The glorious tradition of maritime activities on the high seas is interwoven with some of her religious practices and national festivals. Some socio-religious festivals prevalent in coastal Odisha also provide vital information about Kalinga's glorious maritime heritage. The maritime traditions of the Odias have been preserved in the legends and cultural institutions of the present day Odisha. The *Ta'apoi* festival and the *Bali Yatra*, *Khudarkuni Osha* and *Boita Bandana of Kartika Purnima* are commemorative traditions of ancient Kalingan maritime heritage. The episode of "*Ta'apoi*" is a legendary account of the sufferings and success of a *Sadhab* (Sea trader) girl. It also reminds us of the maritime glory of ancient Odisha. The *Sadhabas* of Odisha were a prosperous community who had trade links with many countries. The *khudurikuni Osha* associated with the *Ta'apoi* legend is celebrated during the month of August and September. This was meant to welcome back the *Sadhavas*. During the *khudurukuni osha* the young unmarried girls, or the newly married ones worship goddess *Mangala* as a gesture of gratitude for the safe return of their family members.<sup>32</sup> The *Kartika Purnima* and the *Akashadipa* are celebrated in the months of October and November. It is an occasion to commemorate the glorious prosperity of Odisha in the olden days when the *Sadhabas* (maritime traders) practised maritime trade in far off countries. They were traditionally sailing off into the sea every year on the day of *Kartik Purnima* while their spouses used to see them off by conducting *aarti*. As a token remembrance of the past glory, this day Odia women sail off small toy-like boats in the rivers and perform *puja* early in the morning.<sup>33</sup> *Baliyatra* literally means a '*Voyage to Bali*'. And it also suggests a festival connected with Bali. To commemorate this, the festival is celebrated every year from the day of *Kartika Purnima* according to the Odia Calendar. During *Bali Yatra*, men, women and children float toy boats made of coloured paper, dried banana tree barks, and cork in the river, seas and water tanks, etc., to celebrate the voyage of their ancestors to Indonesia. These toy boats usually launched after sunset contains small oil lamps, which are lit and placed inside them, to provide an attractive sight during the festival. People sing a song *Aa Ka Ma Boi*, *Pan Gua Thoi*, *Pan Gua Tora*, *Masaka Dharma Mora* to remember the early maritime history of Odisha. *Aa-Ka-Ma-Boi* connotes the month of *Asadha*, *Kartika*, *Margasira* and *Baisakha* of Odia calendar. While the period from *Asadha* to *Kartika* (July - September) was the season of outgoing voyage and *Magha* to *Baisakha* was considered to be the season of return voyage. *Bada Osha* and *Dalkhai Osha* are also observed in Western Odisha which are associated with boat making tradition. These festivals are even now celebrated throughout



Odisha with great pomp and devotion.<sup>34</sup> Thus, festivals, rituals and traditions celebrated in different parts of Odisha contain the living proof of the glorious maritime history of the past.

### Conclusion:

Therefore, we can say that in ancient times, Kalinga played a domineering role in the maritime history of India. The maritime traders played a heroic role in disseminating the Indian and Odishan culture in South-East Asia through ages. But this popular trade and maritime relation began to decline with the changing political scenario, changing attitude of the rulers, constant wars, plundering the wealth of Odisha by the Afghans, the Mughals and the Marathas and monopolies of the Muslim Subedars. *Kalingan Sadhabas (sea-traders)* were a prosperous community having trade and commercial link with many countries of the world. The festivals like *Baliyatra*, rituals such as '*Khudurukuni Osha*', '*Bada Osha*' and legend '*Ta'apoi*' remind us the maritime glory of ancient Odisha. Those glorious and halcyon days are now gone but the memory is still fresh and vibrant.

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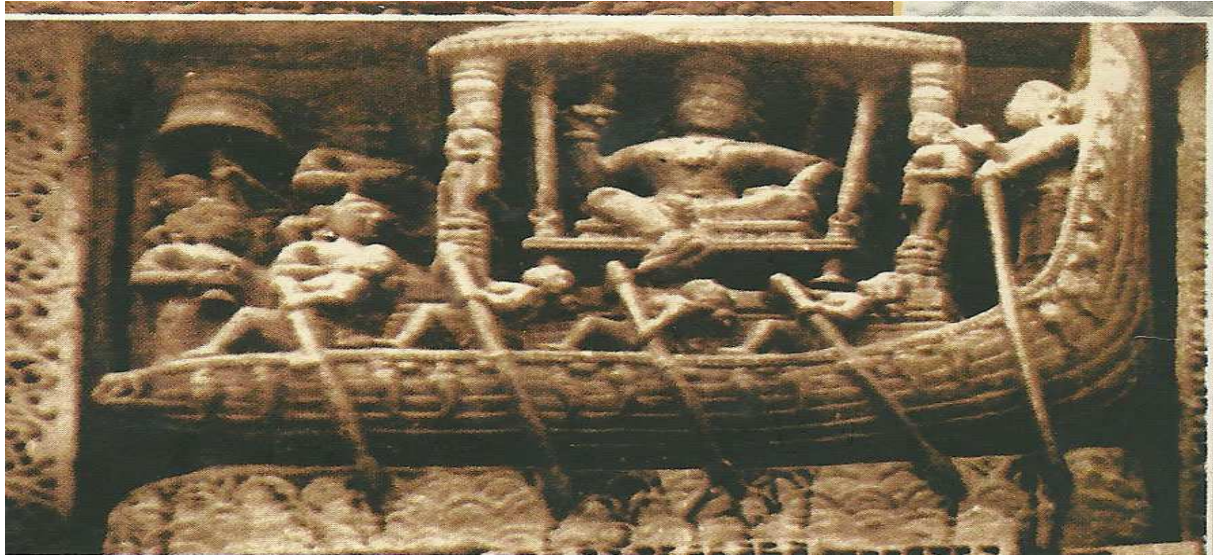


FIGURE-1



FIGURE-2



FIGURE-3



FIGURE-4

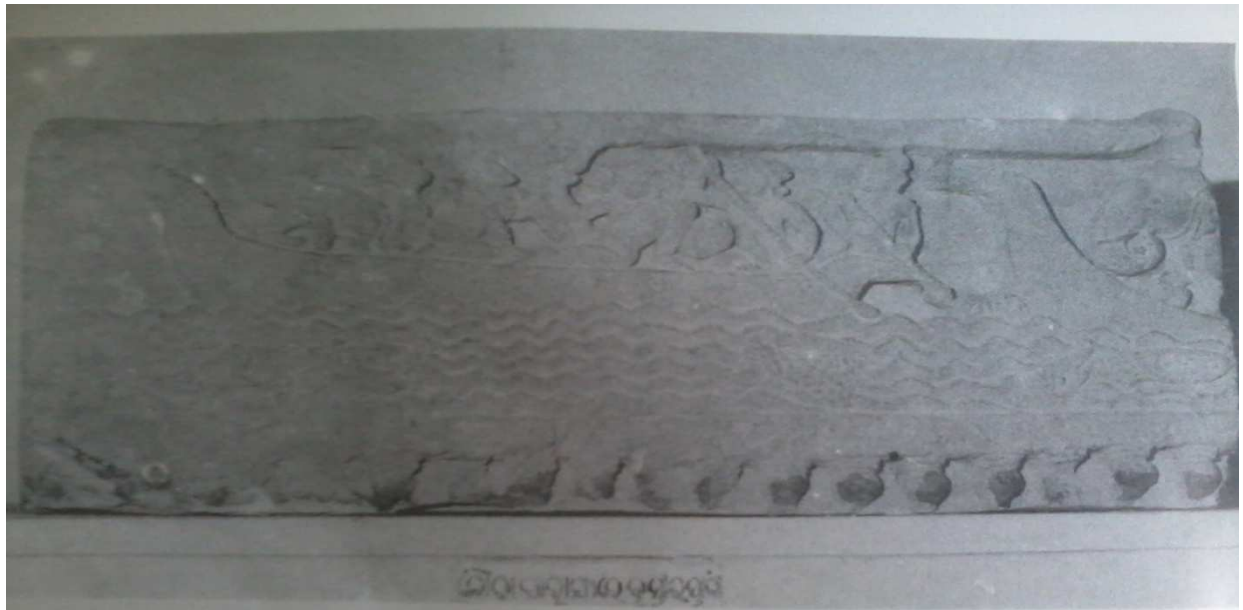


FIGURE-5