

BOITA BANDANA UTSHAVA AND BALI YATRA IN ODISHA

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Boita bandana utshava and Bali yatra are two important annual events held on the Kartika purnima. They mark the conclusion of all religious activities of Kartika month which is considered as the most holy month of the lunar year. Both are the reminiscent of maritime trade that once flourished in the State.



Boita bandana utshava is a socio-religious festival whereas, Bali yatra is a large trade fair.

Boita bandana utshava: -*Boita* in local language is an argosy or a large sail boat and *bandana* is worshipping with lighted lamp (*dipa*). Thus, Boita bandana utshava symbolises the festival of worship of sail boats with lighted lamps. *It is to commemorate the maritime trade of the people of ancient Odisha (Kalinga).*

Centuries back, the *sadabha* (maritime traders) of the State used to sail off to distant Indonesian archipelagos (Java, Sumatra, Borneo and Bali) for trade and cultural exchange in *boitas*. Those days, the marine engineering had not developed as it is now. The *boitas* used to navigate with the manipulations of *ajhala* (large fabric sails) fixed on their masts in the direction of the wind. During the lunar months Aswina to Margasira (October to December), the sea was generally tranquil and the wind blew in the north-easterly direction. Again from lunar months Pausa to Baisakha (January to March) the wind blew in the reverse direction and those were the times for their return voyage. Thereafter, the sea became turbulent due to the onset of south eastern monsoon and the voyages were suspended.

As the Kartika purnimais an auspicious day, the *sadhabas* chose it for starting their onward voyages. Then the *sadhaba bohus* (wives and womenfolk of the *sadhabas*) gathered on the sea shore to give emotional send-offs to their husbands for safe and pleasant voyage. They articulated the folk limerick "*Aa-Ka-Ma-Bai* which is the abbreviation of the four lunar months (*Aa* for Aswina, *Ka* for Kartika, *Ma* for Margasira and *Bai* for Baisakah) signifying that those months were safe for their voyages. The sea shore reverberated with the sounds from *sankha* (conch), *ghanta* (bell), *hulahuli* (an auspicious sound made with rolling of tongue) and lights from *dipa* (lamp).

The maritime trade by the *sadhabas* is now a bygone history. But the past tradition is still alive in a symbolic form as Boita bandana utshava. After early morning bath on the Kartika purnima, people (old, young and children), sail miniature replicas of *boitas* made of banana barks or *solo* (pith) in nearby rivers, ponds or water bodies placing on them a little grain, beetle leaves and nuts (symbolic of merchandise) and a tiny oil/ghee lamp as nostalgic reminder of ancient tradition uttering the limerick "*Aa, Ka, Ma, Bai. Pana gua thoi. Pana gua tora. Masaka dharma mora*". They are joined by the womenfolk who break their *Kartika brata*. The water bodies are illuminated with the lights from the tiny lamps in the miniature boats and give a spectacular sight.

In some traditional Odiya homes in rural areas, a figure of a large *boita* is drawn on the courtyards with *muruja* (rice or coloured powder) and paddy and other merchandises are placed on it on the eve of Kartika purnima. It is worshipped by the members of the family as reminiscent of past maritime legacy. This has now died out and not observed.

Bali yatra: - The other event of the day is Bali yatra. There are several explanations why it is called Bali yatra. *Yatra* in local language is a journey. Thus, Bali yatra means journey



Entrance gate, Bali yatra

to Bali island that was undertaken by the ancient *sadhabasas* described before. Another explanation seems to be associated with the 15th century saint Chaitnya Mahaprabhu. While *bali* means sand, *yatra* also refers to a religious festivity. It is said that Chaitnya Mahaprabhu on his way to Jagannatha Puri arrived at Cuttack on the Kartika purnima and organised *sankirtana* (mass religious prayer) on the sandy bed (*bali*) of the river Mahanadi at Gadgadia ghat. The residents of the city continued it in his memory and named it Bali yatra since it was held on the sandy bed of the river. Further, *Yatra* also means a large fair or festival. As the trade fair is held on the sandy bed of the river, it is named Bali yatra. No matter whatever may be the origin of its name, it is a time honoured trade fair of Odisha once held at Cuttack only. It has a great historical importance and reminds of trade relations with Indonesian archipelagos. Recounting the episode of Chaitnya Mahaprabhu, its origin can be traced to 15th century CE or an earlier period when the maritime trade was flourishing.

About half a century back, there were not many avenues for enjoyment and social get-together for the residents of the city and nearby areas. Bali yatra was then a great attraction and provided relief from their humdrum routine life. It also provided opportunities to the local artisans and craftsmen to display their products. Varieties of household goods and daily need items like *kulas* (winnows), *pachias* (bamboo or cane baskets), *handis* (earthen pots) and toys of sorts made from cotton, clay and papier-mache that were not generally available during other times of the year were sold and purchased. There were also open air entertainments like display of martial arts, folk dances and folk songs and other variety programmes - all by amateur artists. For the children, there were the magic shows, snake/monkey/bear charmers displaying the acrobatic tricks of their tamed animals and merry-go-rounds. Besides shopping, people enjoyed these.

The speciality of *yatra* were the eateries and food stalls. The freshly fried *thunkapuris* (puffed *puris*) and the hot *chena tarkari* (cottage cheese curry) were the favourites. After sailing the miniature boats and taking bath (*Kartika snana or buda*) people rushed to the food stalls for these mouth-watering savouries. Along with the *thunkapuris* and *chena tarkari*, there were the also the giant size sweets. One could buy a *rosogolla* or a *gulab-jamun* as big as a tennis ball or a *laddu* as big as a football respectively.

Till mid-sixties, the *yatra* was held for a day in the afternoon and continued till late night. People visited in numbers and enjoyed the pre-winter evening in the moon lit night. With popular demand, it was increased to three days. Now it is held for a week. With time, it has undergone many changes. An imposing gate paying tribute to the cultural heritage of the State has been constructed. The arena has increased manifold. So also is the number of shops. Varieties of article right from a needle to an automobile are available. In short, it is now mega open air market. Visitors flock not only for the sale/purchase but also for the various cultural programmes - some on payment and others free.

With modernisation, the Bali *yatra* has lost much of its earlier charms. No longer has one found the *thunkapuris* and *chena tarkari* with their traditional taste. So are the large size *rosogollas* and *gulab-jamun*. Their places have been taken over by the fast foods like mutton or chicken curries, *roomali rotis*, *biriyanis* and junk foods like pizzas, noodles and rolls. The places of magicians and snake charmers are taken over by video games. The traditional earthen, papier mache and cotton toys skilfully made by the local artisans are no longer available. Many of the traditional household items which were exclusive to this *yatra* are replaced by electrical and electronic gadgets signifying rural-urban continuum.

To revive the legacies of the maritime glory, the State government launched an expedition to Bali islands on the Kartika purnima day in 1992. History was

recreated when the seven member crew on board of a thirteen meter long naval yacht INSV Samudra sailed for the islands from Paradeep port amidst much fanfare to retrace the ancient trade route. The then Chief Minister Biju Patnaik and several Indonesian diplomats were present during the flag-off. A ballet evocative of the ancient Boita bandana utshava was enacted. Thousands of people gathered to witness and cheer the crew. The yacht covered a distance of 5,810 nautical miles over a period of seventeen weeks and berthed at Bali islands. A grand reception was accorded by the local government and the citizen. The H.E Governor of Bali was personally present. Seminars and exhibition of cultural arts and crafts of Odisha were the highlights of the function.

Bali yatra, once exclusive to Cuttack, is now held at Paradip and Gopalpur ports. However, the charm at Cuttack is something unique.

The author is a retired Colonel from the Indian Army and author of "Saga of Jagannatha and Badadeula at Puri". It is published by Vij Books (India) P Ltd. The book is all about the established god Jagannatha and his temple.