

Exploring common maritime history and culture along the North and Southwest Bay of Bengal – Odisha, Bengal and Sri Lanka

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Indo-Sri Lankan historical ties have commonly been viewed through the prism of various interactions of the Tamil States with either the Tamils in Sri Lanka or the Sinhalese. However, this does injustice to the deep and varied relations, various Indian and Sinhalese Kingdoms have had with each other through the millennia. According to the Mahavamsa or the historical genealogy of the Sinhalese people, the origins of the Sinhalese lie with the princess Suppadevi from “Vanga” (modern coastal Bengal and parts of adjoining Odisha) who married a King in Sinhala island and gave birth to Sinhabahu, the supposed founder of the Sinhala Kingdoms. Further through history, there have been frequent political interactions, intermarriages and interventions between the Tamil Indian States, Sinhala, the various Deccan Empires, Kalinga and Bengal. The customs and traditions amongst the Sinhalese on many occasions mirror or resemble customs and traditions amongst coastal communities on the eastern coast of the subcontinent mainly the Godavari districts, Odisha and southeastern Bengal. Many Sinhalese have a pet name that their relatives especially elders call them similar to that seen in Bengal or Odisha. Bali Jatra is a festival celebrated in Odisha even today commemorating the difficulties faced by the ancient mariners on their trips to Sinhala and South East Asia. Then there was the invasion of “Magha Kalinga” in the 13th Century and his ruthless occupation of north Sinhala. This warrior was supposed to be Kalinga origin or a Tamil from Kalinga who led an army of Tamil and Malayali warriors into Sinhalese. The famous Queen of Chittor, Padmavati was supposed to be from the island of Sinhala. From a close look at history as well as many prevailing customs, from available genealogies, it could be argued that these coastal kingdoms and cultures represented neighboring settled populations interacting with each other across bodies of water just as a few villages today interact with each across a riverbank.

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