
Swarup Bhattacharyya

After James Hornell (1946), and Basil Greenhill (1971), Boats of South Asia is the first attempt to study the traditional watercrafts of South Asia. Also, it is the first systematic study of the ethnographic aspects of South Asian boats. Being valuable for ethnographers, maritime archaeologists and historians, this book sets the boats in their geographical environment and technological and social context.

The book describes selected boats (their building and use) of South Asia as they were at the end of the twentieth century. The Bankata (the reverse clinker boat) of Bangladesh; the Patia (the reverse clinker boat) of Orissa and West Bengal; the hulk fashioned boat of Bangladesh; the Masula (the sewn boat) of South India; the Madel Paruwa (the sewn boat) of Sri Lanka; the Vattai (frame first vessel) of Tamil Nadu; and the hide boats of river Kaveri of South India are the seven types of watercraft that are documented in the book with care. Despite the lack of time, difficulties in language and the use of interpreters, the author has produced a most comprehensive study on boats. Besides the technological aspect of boat building, the ritual aspects are also covered in the book. And, importantly, the terms for the parts of boats are given with their English equivalents in the glossary section.

One realises the implications of this research in South Asia from the increasing awareness of how the documentation of traditional boats can lead to a greater understanding not only of the South Asia’s maritime past but also of the aspects of European maritime archaeology and history. There is an example in the seventh chapter that is concerned with Tamil frame-first boats and ships and the possible European origin of the methods used to design them. There is also the European aspect in the second and third chapters that deals with the reverse-clinker boats of Bangladesh and Orissa/West Bengal. In this case, a direct link between South Asia
and Europe is not proposed here, rather reverse-clinker planking and/or hulk planking patterns are recognised anthropologically. The European aspects of this topic are discussed in the appendix.

The documentation of today’s traditional working boats and rafts could be undertaken with relatively little capital outlay. Although a number of works have been done earlier in the twentieth century about indigenous boats in certain regions of South Asia, there has been no serious and systematic attempt to investigate the water transport of vast regions of the subcontinent.

All the chapters in the book are ordered geographically — from Bangladesh in the northeast to Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu in the south. A naval architectural assessment of key boat types is given after seven chapters, along with an evaluation of project and future lines of research in the concluding section. The primary aim of the book is to document traditional South Asian boats — those propelled by wind and/or muscle power — in two complementary ways: a) in their own right as a record of a way of life which was fast disappearing as engines were fitted, and as metal and plastic replaced wood; and b) to throw light on South Asia’s maritime past and, whenever possible, on the maritime affairs elsewhere and at other times.

Some specific traditional boat types from this region were selected for documentation in this project because they constitute an important regional tradition on one hand and on the other hand, they had features that were unusual and they appeared likely to illuminate studies in maritime history and archaeology of boats within and outside South Asia.

Ethnography, formally a sub-discipline of anthropology, is defined as ‘the description and analysis of the material and social aspects of recent and present-day, non-industrial, small-scale societies’; as such recording of boats was once within its domain. It was during the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, that European explorers, traders, missionaries, and seafarers published brief descriptions about boats and rafts of South Asia.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the accounts and drawings of South Asian vessels were compiled by a number of well-informed observers including John Edye, F.E. Paris, and James Hornell. By the time Hornell’s major work, *Water Transport*, was published in 1946, the study of material aspects of the twentieth century societies was already becoming unfashionable in anthropological circles and attention was increasingly focused on the social relationships. Towards the end of this century, however, the ethnography began to reappear in universities under the guise of ‘material anthropology’ or as ‘ethno-archaeology’.

In South Asia, boats were little documented during the mid-twentieth century. But in recent times, Greenhill, and Kentley (1985) have made notable contributions to water transport studies of the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, Deloche (1994) has published a concise historical account of the boats and rafts of India’s coastal regions, together with geo-morphological and
environmental descriptions of coastal and estuarine waters. The ethnographic accounts from the sixteenth to the twentieth century have certainly increased our knowledge of water transport. For example, looking at the broad categories of vessels still in use in South Asia and other forms of available evidence, one can trace them back in time:

- Log rafts to the late 17th century (they were first noted in the 1st century Periplus);
- Log boats to the early 17th century;
- Hide boats to the late 14th century;
- Sewn plank boats to the 16th century;
- Boats with reverse-clinker planking to the late 18th century; and
- Frame-first vessels to the early 20th century.

The evidence on which this summary is based is very sparse, and in many cases structural details have not been recorded. Clearly, there is much work to be done on documents, inscriptions and representations to learn more about South Asia’s maritime past. There is also an urgent need for today’s water transport to be recorded in detail. Deloche (1994) has published a map based on the sketch by Sopher, which shows the mid-twentieth century distribution of certain boat categories of water transport. This is very informative especially when studied in conjunction with Deloche’s descriptions of the appropriate coastal waters. However, since there have been no systematic surveys of South Asia’s water transport, such a map has to be based on a very few reports of varying standard. Inevitably, therefore, the map is a generalisation. The detailed distribution of various categories of water transport appears to be more complex. A systematic and extensive documentation of all traditional boats and rafts will have to be undertaken before a detailed distribution can be plotted.

Swarup Bhattacharyya
18-D, Bagbazar Street
Kolkata
West Bengal
saranga_nao@yahoo.com