

Chilika – the Wonder Lake of Orissa
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The wonderful lagoon Chilika in Orissa, India, happens to be one of the fascinating places we always wanted to visit. The Orissa province in India is unique in many ways. It boasts of a geographical diversity from mountain peaks to the beaches of the Bay of Bengal, a grand historical legacy that can be traced back to antiquity, a rich tradition of culture and performing arts, a modern civilization and above all, many temples with a great treasure of sculptures and architecture. Orissa is indeed a great place to visit. It attracts thousands of visitors from within India and from many other countries of the world.

In the beginning of this year (2009), we travelled through Orissa for about ten days. One day was programmed for a tour of the famous lake Chilika. Our journey for this tour started from Puri after the visit of the Jagannath Temple. The extensive tour for the last few days exhausted us. So a day's rest in the guest house was more than welcome. The tour would start early in the morning the next day.

The night ended and a beautiful dawn bloomed. The daybreak in Puri instilled a heavenly feeling in our mind. After breakfast, everybody gathered around the car and Baikuntha, our driver, saluted in his traditional manner. The road to Chilika from Puri is not a regular highway. It's rather narrow and follows windingly through rural Orissa. The car was not going at a high speed, but that was not desired either. The actual speed of the car made the ride very relaxing and enjoyable. "It may take more than an hour to reach the destination," said Baikuntha. "Let it take two, I wouldn't mind," I said reassuringly. The scenery on both sides of the road could be better enjoyed when travelling at a moderate speed. There were thick bushes, tall trees and, every now and then, some stretches of barren land. Baikuntha pointed out the orchards of cardamom, cashew and fig, which are plentiful in this part of Orissa. This is the usual flora of this part of the country. Amidst this rural beauty live the simple, rural people of Orissa. Most of the dwellings are rundown shacks where the daily activities of life go on oblivious to the rest of the world. They don't need expensive drapes or decorations. They eat, they play, they laugh, and merrily they go on living. Mother Nature has made them a lively part of herself.

The month of January is the perfect time to visit Orissa or any other province of India. The temperature during the day hovers within the comfort zone and the sky is normally clear and sunny. After a joyful ride for about an hour, we reached the Satpada tourist

booth. We booked our motorboat for a 3 to 4 hour cruise that could cover the major tourist attraction points such as the bird sanctuary, dolphins, and the mouth of Chilika. Visiting the islands, though interesting, would require a much longer circuit of a full-day or even a two-day trip.

From the tourist booth, Baikuntha drove us through the village Banamalipur and the village town Saptakuda or Satkuda to the boat harbour. It was another 10 km drive and an equally enjoyable one. After a walk of about 50 m from the car park, the vast lagoon came to sight. It's like a sea with clear pale blue water, gentle and calm, surrounded by hills and punctuated by emerald green islands. The serene beauty of the vast panorama touches the heart. This is the beauty that held the legendary poet-philosopher, Utkalmani (Gem of Orissa) Gopabandhu Das spell-bound. He ordered the speeding train he was riding in to stop so that he could enjoy the magical beauty of Chilika. This is the beauty that inspired the famous poet of Orissa, Kabibar Radhanath Roy, to write a classical *kavya* (long poem) on Chilika, giving a vivid description of the sunset in the backdrop of a hill. Pundit Godavarish Mishra was also highly impressed by the beauty of Chilika, especially by its influence on the cultural and spiritual life of the Orya people. We stood in awe for a few moments.



Boat harbour

Chilika is the largest brackish water lagoon in Asia, probably the second largest in the world. It spreads over 1100 sq km. The lagoon is a unique combination of fresh water, brackish and marine eco-systems. Its ecological richness sustains a high degree of biodiversity that supports the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of fishermen living in and around it. Apart from its beauty and rich eco-systems, Chilika has some historical importance too. When the British invaded Orissa in 1803, they were helped by a traitor,

Fateh Muhammed, who met them on the shores of Chilika and showed them the safe passage to their destination, Puri.

A 4th century legend explains how the lake Chilika was formed. A notorious pirate king named Raktabahu (literally meaning one with bloody arms), planned to invade Puri. But the residents fled before the pirate king could attack. The disappointed pirate became angry and blamed the sea for warning the people by floating refuse from his ships to them that a pirate ship was nearby. The sea, in order to take revenge, parted and let his army march in. When they did, the sea surged back and drowned the whole army. This parting of the sea formed the Lake.

We used a small country boat with crude arrangements for embarkation and disembarkation, but equipped with a powerful motor. There were seats for about a dozen people in the boat. Overall look of the boat on the background of the lake could be best described as a gondola on the sea – simply beautiful. We have enjoyed Gondola rides in Venice, but that was in canals bordered by concrete buildings within a city. A *Shikara* in Dahl Lake in Kashmir is also beautiful and romantic. But amidst the vast natural expanse of the Chilika Lake, a similar ride is a totally different experience. Larger and more glamorous boats were also available.



A Small Boat in Lake Chilika

The boat pierced through the tranquil water with roaring sound from the driving motor. The ride was wonderful. Everybody seemed to be awash with joy. All the faces brightened up with subdued laughter that sounded like the quacks of a flock of Canada geese flying by. But the shrieks of the motor and the diesel fumes stood in the way of this

great feeling. Pollution caused by the tourism bonanza hit the heart like a poisonous arrow.

The beautiful boat cruise on the lake amidst its diverse flora and fauna may rank as the main attraction of Chilika tour. There are many islands in the lagoon and each one of them excels in natural beauty that attracts tourists. There are folklores and legends about all these islands that one can hear from the local people, the fishermen and the boatmen. Some islands have interesting names like Breakfast Island, Honeymoon Island and Rajhansa (means swan) Island. The bird sanctuary in the Nalban Island is a popular tourist attraction.



Bird sanctuary

The lagoon is the winter habitat for more than one million migratory birds. Many species such as Osprey, Herons, Cranes, Flamingos, Egrets, Storks, Kingfishers and Pintails could be seen flying around, sitting on marshy lands or diving for a catch. Migratory avifauna come here from many parts of the world such as Siberia, Iran, Afghanistan, the Himalayas and many more. Another interesting island is Kalijai, a beautiful rocky island surrounded by blue water. It's locally well known for its temple where the deity is called Devi-Kalijai. According to folklore, a poor girl named Kalijai was being taken to an island by her father by boat against her wish for marriage. A severe storm hit the boat on the way and Kalijai vanished in water. After the storm, nobody could find the girl. The local folks attributed this miraculous disappearance to some miraculous divine power of the girl and venerated her as a goddess. The temple is dedicated to her memory. All boatmen and fishermen pay homage, even today, to Devi-Kalijai while passing by the island, to seek her blessings for safe passage and success in their mission.

Roaming on the islands would take time and energy and some toughness as well. We opted for cruising by them in the comfort of the boat. We were considering visiting Nalban Island, but the boatman said that it would need a special permit. Watching the birds and clicking on the camera button from a distance kept the tourists busy. The Zoological Survey of India identified 800 species of fauna in the lagoon in their 1985-87 survey.

Watching dolphins in the wild is another tourist attraction. Irrawaddy dolphin is the flagship species of the Chilika fauna. This lagoon is home to the only known population of Irrawaddy dolphins in India. Some bottlenose dolphins also migrate into the lagoon from the sea. As we were cruising on, the boatman announced that we were in the dolphin territory and should be watchful for spotting them. One of us suddenly pointed out a couple of dolphins whirling around in the water. All the faces turned to this wonderful show. Not two, there were more dolphins playing around our boat in this rare natural spectacle. The boatman said we were lucky, as many tourists could not see any dolphin even after waiting for over half an hour.

The boat took a turn for going towards the *Mohana* which is a channel connecting the lagoon to the sea. At a certain point, the boat slowed down and a man suddenly jumped out of water on the boat with a basket full of oysters. He gave an impression that he had just picked the oysters from the sea bottom. The tourists were pleasantly convinced. The man opened the oyster shells one by one and, to everybody's surprise, each and every one of them contained a precious pearl – some were big, some were small. Most of the pearls were white, some were light pink and a very few were black. The bewildered tourists bought them in numbers and felt happy getting a good bargain for the fresh genuine pearls, especially the rare black ones that were most expensive. The man said good bye to everyone with a winning smile and plunged back into water and disappeared.

The boat finally reached the *Mohana* or the Mouth which is a sand spit about one kilometre wide between the Lake and the sea. The boat anchored and we got down on the shore, a virgin sandy beach, a beautiful, unexplored one. Soon after we walked up the beach, we were surrounded by a few young men offering us a chance to enjoy a unique culinary triumph. They had the fresh catch from the Lake, mainly prawns and crabs, which they would cook before us and serve in about 20 minutes. There were a few stalls where one could sit, relax and enjoy a tasty hot meal in that gorgeous natural environment. We walked through the sand spit to have a glimpse of the sea, the Bay of Bengal. When we reached the other end of the beach on the sea shore, we were flabbergasted. The beauty of the clear greenish blue water of the Bay of Bengal was simply amazing. We stood there for a while and enjoyed the rolling of the sea waves and the sweet sound that filled the air. The Mother Nature has many wonders for us.



Bay of Bengal at the Mohana

Note: All photos were taken by the author