

## PEARL TRADE IN THOOTHUKUDI REGION - A STUDY

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**Abstract:** Pearl is a valuable natural product. Large and perfectly shaped pearls rank in value with the most precious stones. Pearls are formed in the sea inside the shells of oysters. From 4 B.C. the pearl is called as 'Muthu' in tamil language.

**Keyword:** Thoothukudi Region , Pearl Trade , perfectly , polluting occupation.

### INTRODUCTION:

The sea situated between Srilanka and Thoothukudi, Rameshwaram areas in India called Gulf of Mannar. South India, particularly ancient Tamilakam, attracted foreign merchants and travellers for pearls, teak, peacock feathers, ivory, spices and incenses. When the Greek, Egyptian, Chinese and Roman merchants and travellers visited Korkai, the ancient seat of the pearl fishery, they found the industry fully developed and carried on in a scientific way.

The Paravas or Paratavar, people from the fishing community, were engaged in pearl fishing about 20-30 day during the month of March. Diving for pearls and chank as well as fishing were thought of as being 'low and ritually' polluting occupation. When Pandyan Nedunchezian of the Sangam Age was ruling over the Pandyan Kingdom, he subdued the war like Paravas and extended his authority over the pearl fishing.

In the beginning of the first century A.D. the Cholas began to develop their own pearl fisheries in the Palk Bay. They had already conquered Ceylon and the great Karikala Chola conquered the Pandyas too. When the Pandyas regained their former position under Pandyan Nedunchezian, the Cholas had already established their control over pearl fisheries in the Palk Bay. Hence the monopoly in the pearl trade was no more to exist with the Pandyas. Yet the largest quantity of pearl was continued to be exported to the Mediterranean countries from the Pandyan ports.

In the ninth century, conflicts between the Pallava and the Pandya Kingdoms gave opportunities for the revival of the Cholas into a formidable power and had the control over Gulf of Mannar. 1 There are inscriptional evidences showing the donation of the pearl ornaments to the temples by the imperial Cholas.2 Rajendra Chola (1012 - 1044 A.D), the successor of Raja Raja made a triumphant march through the Pandya and Kerala countries. He appointed one of his sons as viceroy with the title Chola-Pandya since Madurai was the head quarter of a new viceroyalty. 3

Imperial Chola rulers had developed cordial relations with the Arabs who had settled on the Fishery

Coast. The Arab traders and navigators helped them to carry out trade in textiles between South India and West Asia and the Indonesian Archipelago. The Cholas utilized fully the maritime skill of the Arabs. The local merchants and Arabs usually controlled trade through guilds.4 The inscriptional evidences refer to the pearl fishing places won by Kulotunga I in 1120 A.D.

Navigation in the Indian Ocean was pioneered by the Arabs. Muslims held a major share of the maritime trade of the far south and were moving to exploit the rich pearl beds of the Gulf of Mannar which had previously been worked by the Paravas. After the first Muslim invasion of South India in the fourteenth century, clusters of Muslim settlers and seafarers appeared all along the southern coast where they monopolised all the trade of the two coasts and became uncontested masters of the sea. The Paravas who had always considered the Muslims as intruders and usurpers now rose in arms against them finally the Muslims gained an upper hand over the Paravas.5

The fate of the Paravas was not unique. Prior to the Portuguese intervention, Hindu rulers on the Fishery Coast controlled the activities of fishermen and pearl divers as a means of raising revenue. In addition, the Hindu rulers on the Malabar Coast encouraged the conversion of fisherfolk by the foreign Muslim merchants to build a solid local breed of seafaring skills and mercantile expertise, linked to the prosperous and expanding Muslim trading world.6

The problem for the Paravas was associated with the rise of Muslim mercantile and other seafaring groups which dominated sea lanes from the Arabian Sea to the Strait of Malacca on the Tirunelveli coast, the Kayalar - Parava converts to Islam and other Muslim groups like Navayats and Marakkayars were rapidly undermining the economic base of Paravas by intruding into their pearling and other maritime activities. The positions of local Muslim group was further strengthened by their links with Gujarati Muslim merchants and sea farers, which gave them access to a wide range of commodities eagerly sought by land based powers such as the Hindu rulers of Madurai in Tamil Nadu and Venad, part of present Kerala State. There were a number of local rulers vying with one another to control the fisher folk who were

scattered over three kingdoms (Chera, Chola and Pandya). These local rulers also took the side of the Muslims since they had already become economically powerful. The Parava - Muslim conflict had reached its climax at the arrival of the Portuguese.

In the fourteenth century the Muslims asserted their superiority over the Paravas and thus the fate of the fishery coast underwent a change. When Islamic rule was introduced in the extreme south all the Muslim merchant communities were united under one umbrella which strengthened their economy. Their consideration rendered the Paravas helpless before them and they were desperately looking for a saviour to deliver them from their adversaries.

When the Portuguese arrived on the fishery coast, the Vijayanagar Empire was the only Hindu empire left in India. to promote their trade and colonial interests the Portuguese did nothing that would change the status quo of the Hindu power. Therefore the Vijayanagar rulers, their Viceroy the Nayaks and Poligars extracted their share of revenue from the Paravas and left them to the mercy of their various oppressors.

The Portuguese arrived at Kozhikodu in 1498 and within a decade they set their foot on the fishery coast. They located the important sea-ports and the pearl fisheries in the same coast. These areas were under the influence of the Muslim merchants with whom the Portuguese made several agreements until the Portuguese established their hold firmly they made use of the Muslim local sailors. After the mass conversion in 1536 the Portuguese found in the Parava community annually, excelling in maritime skill and labour and with the help of the same community the Portuguese accomplished their maritime activities at least for about a hundred years.<sup>7</sup>

The Nayaks who were the rulers of the region had an agreement with the Portuguese to allow the Muslim community to dive freely in this region with limited number of divers. In return, the traders of Portuguese were allowed to move inland by the Nayaks. According to the letter of Francis Xavier, dated 14th August 1548, addressed to Francis Mansithas about the political conditions of the Fishery Coast, he wrote that the Portuguese had absolute monopoly over the pearl fishery to have a smooth trade.

The economic conditions of the Paravas had considerably worsened under the- Dutch rule. Under the Portuguese patronage, together with the entire, Fishery Coast, the Parava community enjoyed official protection both for its corporate economy and social organization. The Dutch, though appeared hostile in the beginning on religious grounds,<sup>9</sup> later turned out to be friendly respecting the expertise of the Parava community in its pearl and chank fishery.

In the early part of the British period, the economic life of the Paravas mainly hinged on pearl fishing and connected trades. The Parava community played a vital role in this enterprise. The British recognized their community leader as the key person in inspecting the pearl banks and in providing divers from his community for the actual fishery. He was given certain privileges' by way of remuneration for his assistance.<sup>10</sup>

The British, as shrewd businessmen, though

befriended the Parava community in the beginning and later converted the pearl fishing works as government jobs opened to any community and not confined only to Parava community in the Fishery Coast. Their initial support of the community could be sensed in the agreement extended to Dom Gabriel Gomez Vaz Victoria Adepennar (1779-1808), the head of Parava community had decamped with his followers to the outskirts of 'Manapad when Thoothukudi first fell into British hands in 1782.<sup>11</sup>

Pearl divers from the Parava community became one of the segments of the workers while their leader became only a government appointed superintendent of pearl fisheries. The letter of George Powney, Collector of Tinnevely, dated 9 December, 1795 to Senhor Dom Gabriel De Cruz Vaz Paldana, the Head of Parava community of Thoothukudi, indicates this shift: "I am given to understand that you possess an exact knowledge of their location, Thereby appoint you to the office. of conducting the inspection of pearl banks. I have duly communicated to the Administration of the Nawab Asareth of Tinnevely that I have appointed you to the above mentioned office and I expect that he will send proper men to assist you. You will cooperate with them and manage the above undertaking".<sup>12</sup>

Later on, even this appointment of community leader to supervise pearl fishery was withdrawn and the whole operation was leased out to the highest bidder.<sup>13</sup> The conversion of the pearl fishing work and monopoly of pearl fishing into a government operation and its effects on the authority and corporate economy of the fishing community had far reaching effects on subsequent structural changes.

As the Parava community gradually lost its monopoly in pearl fishery, the very operation became not so lucrative as the pearl oysters had started receding from- the Fishery Coast.<sup>14</sup> The economic world in which the Paravas life changed greatly in the nineteenth century but the seafaring and mercantile tradition of the Paravas enabled them in good stead and they found a niche in the maritime economy of modern India when the small wooden boat developed into the larger deep-sea sailing boat as the fishing equipments were indigenous and country made.<sup>15</sup>

In the year 1796 the right of pearl industry was transferred to the British. During this period only the organized inspection of pearl banks before fishery was done. Moreover, the Government conducted the whole fishery. The boats for the fishery was inspected before it was admitted for fishing and also twenty three persons comprising ten divers, ten attendants, one boat owner, one boat steersman and one employee to bale out the water only allowed.<sup>16</sup>

Daily collections were divided into six divisions and each division into four parts. Three parts of each of the six divisions were taken by the government The fourth part of one division was equally divided and taken by the boat owner, steersman and the man who baled out water. Remaining parts shared by ten divers and ten attendants after deducting ninety oysters as the share of the superintendent, clerk, shark charmer and the charity oyster for temples in each part. Each part was divided into three units. Two divers took two and the attendants equally shared the other.<sup>17</sup> The share of the diver during the British period was about one-nineteenth of the day's collection or one fifteenth of the

average collection. The attendants of the divers were getting half of the income of one diver.

The English East India Company conducted its pearl fishery in 1784 when Tuticorin was temporarily in their hands.<sup>18</sup> They made a modest profit which was a decent reward considering that this was their maiden attempt in exploiting yet another area in their new acquisition.<sup>19</sup> James Dott, an English Ambassador at Arcot signed a treaty in February 1786 stipulating the following conditions: "The pearl fishery at Tuticorin will be publicly auctioned to the highest bidder, and the price at which it has been purchased will be divided between the Noble Company and the Nawab, as Lord of Madurai and Lord Suzerain of the Marava country, in two equal portions, after all expenses have been deducted ... All other usages and customs contrary to what has been established in this article, will be revoked and abolished".<sup>20</sup> However, this treaty said nothing about two related issues: first, the pearl fisheries to be held to the south of the Gulf of Mannar, and second, that of the chank fishery. The year 1788 witnessed another treaty being signed between the Dutch and the Nawab regarding equal sharing of profits of the pearl and chank fisheries between the two parties. The chank fishery should as usual be let to the highest bidder and the net produce equally be divided.<sup>21</sup>

In 1795 the English East India Company took possession of Thoothukudi from the Dutch.<sup>22</sup> With this the Dutch factories at Punnaikayal and Manapad and finally the monopoly of pearl fishery, both on the coast of India and Ceylon, was subsequently transferred to the British in 1796 and in 1825 all the Dutch settlements were under the control of British and got the income.<sup>23</sup>

The power of the Nawab of the Carnatic vanished and the British became masters of the whole of South India. The Head of fishermen Community was directed to furnish divers for the pearl and the chank fisheries.<sup>24</sup> His duties consisted of accompanying the inspector of the pearl banks on his periodical visits to the banks which inspection was formerly conducted by the headmen, in furnishing guards to the banks to be fished, in supplying the government with the information of any accidental finds of oysters by the fisherman and in acting as an intermediary between the government and his people with a view, by the exercise of his influence, to ensuring the attendance at the fishery of an adequate supply of boats and divers.<sup>25</sup>

In 1876 A.D., the pearl fishery was fished out to the highest bidder, who looked after the entire organization and conducted the fishery. The Government exercised no control over the operations.<sup>26</sup> Direct government management of the fishery resulted both in increased profit to government and improvement in the conditions under which the divers worked. It led to the authorities to abandon the renting system in 1876. Accordingly, during the season 1876-1877, the fishery was worked departmentally, the port officer of Thoothukudi being given the duty of organizing the work on the new lines as he was already ex-officio superintendent of pearl banks, a designation which eventually was amended to that of superintendent of pearl and chank fisheries.<sup>27</sup>

The rates paid for shells and the general arrangements of the fishery remained the same till 1883-84 when the divers by threat of abstention forced a concession of an extra-five

rupees on the rate for shells, which was thus raised, to twenty-five rupees per 1000.

The Madras government got revenue of nearly one and a half lakh of rupees during 1889 from Pearl and Chank fishing and during 1890 and 1900 got Rs.9000 and Rs. 11,000 respectively.<sup>28</sup> The enactment of the Indian Fisheries Act in 1897 was considered as an important milestone in the history of Indian fisheries. This Act delegated the power and responsibility of development and conservation of fisheries in the inland territorial waters to the respective States. Further, the Act provided certain conservation measures to prevent the destruction of fishery resources, their development, management and conservation.<sup>29</sup>

In 1909, the management of the fishery and chanks were transferred to the Fisheries Department.<sup>30</sup> The Marine Assistant to the Honorary Director was appointed as Superintendent of pearl and chank fisheries.<sup>31</sup> This, change had enabled greater attention to be bestowed to the general management and to the disposal of the produce to the best possible advantage.

Three hundred and seventy five young chanks were marked and liberated, making a total of 2,464 liberated since 1931-32. Twenty five marked chanks were recovered during the year as against sixteen last year. The research is still in an experimental stage. In the field of research several important results were achieved during the year 1937-38. The Kurusadi -pearl farm continued to prosper and apart from establishing the practicability of keeping and breeding the Indian Pearl Oyster in captivity was able to increase its stock by over 21,000 oysters. The discovery of larger bed of pearl oysters enabled the department to expand the pearl farm at Kurusadi Island from a laboratory scale experiment to a small farm on the Japanese model.

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