A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE PEARL FISHERY COAST

The Pearl Fishery Coast has a long history from the Sangam Age\(^1\) to the twentieth century. Whoever ruled Tamil Nadu from the early Christian era to the end of the fifteenth century enjoyed monopoly over the pearl fisheries and the pearl trade was a link between the East and the West. There are evidences to prove that several foreign travellers visited this coast for its valuable commodity, the pearls. Not only pearls, but trade in other items was also carried out in and through the Pearl Fishery Coast. Pearls were brought from the deep sea to the shore by a courageous fisherfolk caste called the Paravas\(^2\) who are natives in most of the villages of the Pearl Fishery Coast. The dawn of the New Age had a great impact on the coast and for the first time a European power namely the Portuguese, dared to control it.

"The Pearl Fishery Coast is situated on the Gulf of Mannar. The bed of the Gulf of Mannar was a prolific breeding ground for oysters and natural pearls which was a very rich product of the area.\(^3\) Different names have been ascribed to the Pearl Fishery Coast in different periods. Paralia,\(^4\) Colkhic Gulf,\(^5\) MÁbar,\(^6\)

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1. The three rulers of the Sangam Age were the Cheras, the Cholas and the Pandyas. They ruled Tamil Nadu during the first three centuries of the Christian era. Rajayyan, K., *History of Tamil Nadu - Past to Present*, Kanjirankulam, 1995, p. 29.
2. Paravas, a fisherfolk caste, originally Hindus, were converted in 1536. They were experts in pearl fishing and at present they go fishing and diving for chanks in the Pearl Fishery Coast.
4. To the author of *The Periplus of the Erythraen Sea* 'Paralia', is the coastline below the Travancore backwaters, around Kanyakumari, and as far as Adam's Bridge comprised within the modern districts of Travancore, Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi and Ramanathapuram. Wilfred H. Schoff (trans.), *The Periplus of the Erythraen Sea*, New Delhi, 1974, p. 234.
5. Korkai, the capital of the Sangam Pandyas was the headquarters of the Pearl Fishery Coast. Ptolemy has treated Korkai as Colhik Gulf. John W. Mc Crindle, *Ancient India as described by Ptolemy*, New Delhi, 2000, p. 57.
6. Ibid., p. 292.
Cholamandalam,\(^7\) Choromandel coast,\(^8\) Coromandel,\(^9\) Comorin coast,\(^10\) Pescaria,\(^11\) Fishery Coast, etc., all denote the same Pearl Fishery Coast. There are also names like Madura coast,\(^12\) Tirunelveli coast, (Tinnavely coast),\(^13\) east coast,\(^14\) Tamil coast,\(^15\) and south Coromandel\(^16\) which are linked to the Pearl Fishery Coast. ‘Fishery Coast’ will be the usage which the researcher prefers in the thesis. Thoothukudi was both the religious and the commercial capital of the Fishery Coast and it continues to be so.

**Villages of the Fishery Coast**

The villages of the Fishery Coast can be divided under the following headings:

i) Villages of the Paravas

ii) Villages of the Muslims

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\(^7\) When Pandya coast along with Madurai came under the Imperial Cholas, they called it as Cholamandalakkarai. Subramanian, N., *Sangam Polity*, Madurai. 1980. p. 20.

\(^8\) Here Caile (Pazhayakayal) and Calicale (Kilakkarai), are treated as ports in the Cholamandel Coast. Armando Cortesão Rodrigues (ed.), *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires and the Book of Francisco*. New Delhi, Madras, 1990, p. 271.


\(^10\) Francis Xavier’s usage of ‘Comorin Coast’ included the southern part of the Pearl Fishery Coast, Joseph Costelloe (trans), *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, Gujarat, 1993, p. 50.

\(^11\) Pescaria in Portuguese means Fishery Coast.

\(^12\) ‘Madura coast’ signifies the seaboard of the ancient kingdom of Madura. It included the shores of the modern districts of Tirunelveli Thoothukudi and Ramnad. James Hornell, “The Indian Pearl Fisheries of the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay”, *Bulletin, Vol. XVI*, Madras, 1922, p. 6.

\(^13\) Tirunelveli coast formed merely the southern portion of the Pandya kingdom. Ptolemy and early Greek merchants visited the coast. (Caldwell, R., *A History of Tinnevely*, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 3, 22.)


iii) Villages of the Caraiyars or Kadaiyars and iv) Villages of recent origin

### Villages of the Paravas

The names of the villages were pronounced differently during the Portuguese period.\(^\text{17}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tamil</th>
<th>English(^*)</th>
<th>Portuguese</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kanyakumari</td>
<td>Cape Comorin</td>
<td>Cabo de Cumurim</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kumari Muttam</td>
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<td>Mutão</td>
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<td>Idinthakarai</td>
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<td>Pudukarai</td>
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<td>Alanthalai</td>
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<td>Tiruchendur</td>
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<td>Trechandur</td>
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<tr>
<td>Virapandyanpattanam</td>
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<td>Virandapatanão</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\(^{17}\) The names of the villages in Portuguese were taken from Joseph Wicki (ed.), *Documenta Indica*, (Herenafter referred as DI), *Vols. 1–XVIII*, Institute of Historical Society, Rome.

* Those villages names for which there were no English or Portuguese equivalents were pronounced as they were pronounced in Tamil.
Thalambuli
Punnaikayal
Pazhayakayal
Thoothukudi
Vembar
Vaipar
Mookaiyur

B) Villages of the Muslims

Kilakkarai
Kayalpattanam
Kulasekaranpattanam

Villages of the Caraiyars\(^{18}\)

Kombuthurai
Vedalai
Periyapattanam
Rameswaram
Verkadu

Villages of Recent Origin\(^{19}\)

Kuttapuli
Panjal
Kuttapanai

\(^{18}\) Caraiyars (Kadaiyars) were members of the Pallar (Dalit) caste engaged in pearl fishing.

\(^{19}\) Except Tharuvaikulam and Periyasamipuram, other villages of recent origin were part of the Fishery Coast. But they were not so prominent as other villages during the time of the Portuguese. In Tharuvaikulam and Periyasamipuram the Nadar community is involved in fishing.
Kooduthalai
Tharuvaikulam
Sippikulam
Periyasamipuram

The history of the Fishery Coast is the history of the Paravas also. Their history reveals that the Paravas have been playing important roles as fishermen, pearl divers, chank (conch shell) cutters, salt makers, sea-farers, merchants, traders, etc. To understand the origin and the rich past and glorious heritage of the Paravas, one should know their history.

**Origin of the Paravas**

Today, people of various communities are in search of their historical roots. But here is a community which has retained the name of its occupation, way of life, religious practices and certain characteristics like militancy and hospitality for quite a long period. One is amazed at the fisherfolk of any village along the Fishery Coast for their unique culture that has been preserved and nurtured very carefully so long. These people are called the Paravas in the Sangam literature.20

Various myths and theories have been put forward and proposed by historians with regard to the origin of the Paravas. Edgar Thurston quotes from *Historica Ecclesiastica* that the Paravas and Parvaims of the Scripture are the same. He adds that in the time of King Solomon they were famous among those who made

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voyages by sea. One of the interviews of Patrick A. Roche goes like this “We, the Paravas, are the Parvaims, one of the last tribes of Israel and our present settlement of Uvari in Paravanadu is the Ophir of the Bible”.

It is the general belief among the Paravas that their original country was Ayodhya or Oudh; and it appears that before the Mahabharatha war, they inhabited the territory bordering river Yamuna or Jamuna. Bharatha was not new but derived from the fact that Paravas were descendants of King Bharathan. “We are a regal people and several Sanskrit works attest to our Kshatriya origin.” This is the epitome of the Aryan-Sanskrit heritage as claimed by some Paravas according to the interview given by Roche.

According to Edgar Thurston, the Paravas were once a very powerful people. They had a succession of kings among them distinguished by the title of Adiyarasen, some of whom seem to have resided at Uttara Kosamangay, a famous place of Hindu pilgrimage in the neighbourhood of Ramnad.

Parava writers owing allegiance to the Dravidian school too point to the regal Pandyan ancestry of the Paravas and opt for the city of Uttara Kosamangay in Ramnad as the original abode of the Paravas. S.C. Motha refers to the twenty one

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21 Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol. VI, Madras, 1909, p. 140.
22 Uvari is situated down south towards Kanyakumari on the Fishery Coast.
23 Patrick A. Roche, Fishermen of the Coromandel, New Delhi, 1984, p. 16.
24 Edgar Thurston, op. cit., Vol. VI, p. 140.
25 Patrick A. Roche, op. cit., p. 16.
26 Edgar Thurston, op. cit., Vol. VI, p. 141.
27 Patrick A. Roche, op. cit., p. 18.
emblems and insignia in vogue among the Paravas to argue for their regal status. "Other evidence of regal origins of the Bharathar" he writes, "is to be found in the use of the fish flag which was the principal flag of the Pandyan kings, being the emblem of the fish goddess (Minakshi) and of twenty other banners depicting birds and animals belonging to the Bharatha kings of the north and the Pandya kings of the south."  

If the Sanskritic and Dravidian interpretations of the past served to establish the Paravas' royal status, the Judeo-Christian heritage had its own complementary value. As some Paravas stressed the trade connections with King Solomon the explicit references to Bharatha kings being the actual rulers of the Parvaim added a regal tinge to the jati (caste).  

Fr. Henry Heras throws fresh light on this issue saying that the Paravas belonged to one of those ancient groups of people who derived their origin from the cradle of world civilization, the Indus Valley. The Moon Paravas as he mentions in the research findings were likely to be the ancestors of the Pandya kings of Madura and of their Parava subjects of the Fishery Coast.  

Leaving their birthplace in the Indus valley, the Bharathars came down south in search of fame and fortune. They settled on the south east coast of India, the

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28 Ibid., pp. 18-19.
29 Ibid., p. 19.
Coromandel Coast on the one side and on the other side along the west coast of Sri Lanka from Negambo to Mannar.31

Here they consolidated their position and became a distinct and important entity in South India. In the ancient Tamil inscription there is a reference to 'Parava men who fished pearls by paying tribute to Alliyarasani, daughter of the Pandya king of Madura.32 They were probably the only people who so fished pearls at that time.

It is noted in the Madras Census Report of 1901, that there are in reality three castes which answer to the name Paravas and which speak Tamil, Malayalam and Canarese respectively, and probably all three descend from the Tamil Paravas who are fishermen on the sea coast. Their headquarters is Thoothukudi and their headman is called Talaivan (leader). They are mostly native Christians. They claim to be Kshatriyas of the Pandya line of kings, and would eat only in the houses of Brahmans. The Malayalam Paravas are shell collectors, lime burners and gymnasts, and their women act as midwives. Their titles are Kurup, Varakurup and Nuraukurup. The Canaries Paravas are umbrella makers and devil dancers.33

It has been suggested that the west coast Paravas are descendants of those who fled from Tirunelveli in order to avoid the oppression of the Muslims.34

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31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Edgar Thurston, op. cit., Vol. VI, p. 143.
34 Ibid.
Whatever their origin, the Paravas make their first appearance in history as fishermen, divers of pearls and organizers and chief beneficiaries of the pearl fisheries along their coast. The word ‘Paravan’ in classic Tamil denotes ‘man of the sea’. Its plural form in Tamil is Paravas. The Paravas are also called ‘Bharathar’ or ‘Bharadhavars’ in conformity with their alleged origin from their royal ancestor, Bharathar, the grandfather of the famous Kulasekara Pandya –founder of the Pandya dynasty in Tamil Nadu.35

The Paravas in the Sangam Age

Social Relationship

The vast and spacious ocean and long and endless seashore have emboldened the Parava fisherfolk not to worry about their future. K.K. Pillai describes the noisy and merry-making life of the Paravas of the Sangam Age: always an atmosphere of joy reigned in the coastal region. When evening fell, the Parava villages were resounding with music and dance. Men were valiant and noble and the women were noted for their hospitality. The young girls were sportive and beautiful with their dazzling ornaments of pearls and gold. The children were precocious and smart, making their voices heard all over the salt-beds and seashore.36 He further says that the females of the Parava caste were famous for the longest ears and for wearing the heaviest and most expensive gold earrings and other jewels made of gold. The longer the ears, the more jewels could be used and this appeared to be the rationale of

The women poured fish oil in the *clinchels* (shells) and used them as lamps at night.

Rice along with fish curry has been the staple food of the Paravas from time immemorial. P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar says that the Paravas cooked rice mixed with a soup of aiyilai (mackarel) fish, flavoured by the addition of tamarind. Fish naturally played a prominent part in the diet of the Paravas both rich and poor. They gathered together under the punnai (laurel) trees and made merry with arrack and toddy. Toddy shops were located near the quarters of the Paravas. They drank the three waters, palmyra, sugarcane and coconut mixed together. It is obvious that the Paravas gave much importance to their daily food and drinking.

**Religious Expressions**

The people of the coastal regions worshipped Varuna, the god of the wide ocean. The primitive worship of Varuna was done by planting the tooth of a shark in the sands of the beach and giving offerings to it.

In their abhorrence of small-pox, cholera and other similar epidemics, the Paravas were keen in raising shrines at the village-entrance and borders for

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38 Expert Committee for History of Tamil Nadu, *Sangam Age, Director of Tamil Development, nd, Madras*, p. 19.
41 *Pattinappalai* 86-87.
Mariammai, goddess of small-pox; she was worshipped especially by the mothers on behalf of their children for protection against and cure from epidemics.\textsuperscript{42}

They also worshipped the moon and the sun. On full moon days the fishermen enjoyed a complete holiday when, like their womenfolk, they adorned themselves, ate heartily, drank toddy and bathed in the sea at intervals throughout the day. They did not go fishing in full moon and new moon; instead they took rest on those days.\textsuperscript{43}

The palmyra and \textit{punnai} trees under which the local business was conducted were considered sacred. The Paravas believed that such trees possessed divine spirits.\textsuperscript{44}

The fishermen performed rituals for a good catch. This was done in front of their houses on a full moon day. They selected the horn of a shark with \textit{chenai} (egg mass) and placed it on the sand.\textsuperscript{45} The fisherwomen worn \textit{thalampoo} (pandarkinus) the flower of \textit{neydal}\textsuperscript{46} and drank palmyra toddy. Both women and men danced in front of the shark horn and the dance movements included actions like the boat floating on the sea, men casting nets and drawing them full of fish, etc. It is said that such custom is prevalent among the tribes of Melanesia.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{43} Expert Committee for History of Tamil Nadu, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{45} Pattinappalai 86-87, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{46} The littoral land is called \textit{neydal}.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}
Economic Life

Various communities have been mentioned in the Sangam literature. The Sangam Literature also speaks a lot about the Paravas of the neydal land. Their heroic sea-faring life and social customs have made interesting pages in the ancient Tamil literature of the Sangam Age and also in later literature.

To the littoral region belonged the Paravas, whose occupation was fishing. From fishing near the coast, they went on to fish in deeper waters. Hence the environment turned the Paravas into boat builders. The chief produce of this region was fish and salt. The Paravas had to take them into marudam (field), mullai (forest) and kurunchi (hilly) lands and barter them for paddy, milk and hill produce respectively. Those engaged in the salt trade were described as 'umanar'.

The environment turned the Paravas into merchants. The quarters of the rich merchants in the neydal presented a prosperous outlook. There was a greater measure of urbanization in the neydal than in the other regions. There were several streets of rich Paravas. Their houses were considerably huge buildings and they contained large godowns. On the terraces of these big houses, torches were kept burning throughout the night, serving as lighthouses.

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48 Srinivasa iyengar, P.T., op. cit., p. 12.
50 Ibid., p. 169.
51 Perumpanarruppadai: 11. 322-5.
52 Ibid.
From the Paravas also arose the race of ancient Indian sailors who later carried Indian goods in boats to Africa and Arabia in the West and to Malaya and China in the East. Besides, many among the Paravas appear to have engaged themselves in pearl fishing and in collecting conch shell.\textsuperscript{53} Highly renowned for its pearl trade, Korkai was the chief town of the leading Paravas of the region. The people of the town consisted mostly of pearl divers and chank (conch shell) cutters.\textsuperscript{44}

The Paravas of the coasts of South India must have discovered early the periodicity of the monsoons; indeed it is impossible to live in the Pandya country for a year without understanding this phenomenon and the possibilities for sea travel it implies.\textsuperscript{55}

An interesting feature is that besides the Paravas, some Panar also engaged in fishing. Apparently a group of Panar belonged to the Parava community.\textsuperscript{56} The womenfolk of the Parava class also sold fish and salt. They dried and preserved the left over fish, which had not been sold in the neighbouring villages. They would guard them from being eaten by birds. Big fish was cut into pieces and got dried. Women sold these.\textsuperscript{57}

There is a lot of information available about the socio, economic and cultural activities of the Paravas of the Sangam Age. The Paravas had led a prosperous life as a community on the Fishery Coast. In course of time, as the Fishery

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\textsuperscript{53} Srinivasa Iyengar, P.T., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 12.


\textsuperscript{55} Srinivasa Iyengar, P.T., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 36.


\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid.}
Coast passed through different fortunes under different ruling dynasties, the Parava life style also underwent changes. This will be discussed in the following pages.

The Fishery Coast Under Various Kingdoms

The Fishery Coast under the Pandyas

The Tamil country was ruled by the Cheras, the Cholas and Pandyas from 300 B.C. to 300 A.D. According to a tradition, the above three were brothers who originally resided at Korkai, near the mouth of the Tamiraparani river in the Tirunelveli region. While the Pandyas remained at home, the other two brothers eventually went separated. Korkai, the capital of the Pandyas, became the primary sea port and an important trading centre because of the availability of pearls.

The earliest definite reference to a particular locality in the Gulf of Mannar where fishery was carried on, occurs in the "Periplus of the Erythraean Sea", written about the end of the first century A.D. by an Alexandrian Greek. In a description about the ports of the Indian coast he writes that Komar was a port and a harbour has been mentioned under the government of Pandyan. From Komar the district extended to Kolkhi (Korkai) and the pearl fishery was conducted by slaves or criminals condemned to the service, and the whole southern point of the continent was part of Pandyas' dominion.

58 The term 'Pandyas' denotes the Pandyas of the Sangam Age as well as the First Pandyan rulers, who ruled Tamil Nadu after an interval of three centuries.
60 Mc Crindle, op. cit., p. 57.

26
According to Ptolemy also Kolkhi was an emporium of the pearl trade and the birth place of the Pandya dynasty. Maduraikanji refers to Korkai that it was the centre of pearl fishery.

The foreign trade of Sangam Tamil Nadu (Tamilaham) under the Pandyas was brisk and had developed all the ancillary requirements such as labour, shipping and lighthouses. This proves that trade was not a freak but a bright chapter in a continuing tradition of Tamil Nadu. Markets existed and even ordinary businessmen traded directly with countries overseas.

The pearl trade with Rome is strongly evidenced by the Roman writer Pliny. Roman coins have been found throughout South India, especially in Tirunelveli district and in the island of Mannar. The Indian king who sent an embassy to the Emperor Augustus, was not Porus, but a Pandyan, the king of the Pandyas, called in Tamil "the Pandyan". This evidence is an interesting proof of the advanced social and political position in consequence of the foreign trade the Pandyas carried on at Korkai, in connection with the pearl fishery and also on the Malabar Coast.

The harbour of Korkai gradually silted up and deltaic accumulation eventually cut off ready access to the sea. In consequence, the old city gradually decayed and the population drifted to the new mouth of the river, where another town

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62 Mc Crindle, op. cit., p. 57.
63 Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., The Pandya Kingdom, p. 31.
64 Pillai, K.K., op. cit., p. 264.
65 Caldwell, R., op. cit., p. 17.
66 Arunachalam, The History of the Pearl Fishery Coast of the Tamil Coast, Annamalai University, 1952, p.52.
67 Caldwell, R., op. cit., p. 17.
sprang into being at the expense of Korkai. So the second important port was Pazhayakayal.68

In the intervening space between Korkai and Pazhayakayal exist traces of ancient dwellings. Even today farmers find small white shells called 'chippi'69 in abundance while they plough their land for cultivation.

Apart from Korkai, there were several other ports where trade and other commercial transactions had taken place in the Fishery Coast. Though Thoothukudi was not spoken of like Korkai or Pazhayakayal by the travellers in the early Christian era, there are references to Thoothukudi in the early, the medieval and the modern periods. Ptolemy found this place famous for trade in pearl.70

Another important port was Kilakkarai, situated between the Gulf of Mannar and the ports of Pamban and Thoothukudi. Traders from Middle East countries assembled in this port from very early times. Horses were imported in Kilakkarai from Arabia by the Pandya kings.71 In the early centuries of the Christian era the Pandyas exploited to the full the pearl fisheries of the east coast. Besides the pearls, conch-shells were also extracted from the Ramanathapuram coast.72 The Arabs who settled in Kilakkarai in the eighth century imported horses from Persia and

69 Chippi is a kind of shellfish. They are found on the seacoast of all the villages. They are collected, burnt and used for making marter.
70 Mc Crindle, op. cit., p. 57.
71 Ramaswami, A., op. cit., p. 23.
72 Ibid., p. 326.
exchanged their glass and mud products with pepper and textiles. They established trade contacts with Sri Lanka, China and Sri Vijaya. Anjuvannam was the trade guild through which they controlled and promoted the trade activities in the east coast. Along with pearls and chanks, precious stones such as beryle were also found in the Gulf of Mannar.

Arunachalam says, “Korkai was the cradle of South Indian civilization, the place where Pandya rule began”. The civilized living conditions of the people of Korkai and the nearby areas such as Pazhayakayal and Kayalpattanam during the Pandya era came to light only after archaeological survey excavated Korkai in 1960.

The Imperial Cholas on the Fishery Coast

In the ninth century inter-power conflicts between the Pallava and the Pandya kingdoms presented opportunities for the revival of the Cholas into a formidable power. Since the pearl and chank fisheries of the Gulf of Mannar were very lucrative, the Chola kings also made rival claims and at times seized control over them. Raja Raja Chola I (985-1015), the first great Chola ruler had formidable naval fleet and hence subdued the Pandyas. Madurai and the rest of the Pandya

75 Abdul Rahuman, op. cit., p. 305.
76 Beryles are precious stones in different colours were found in the Gulf of Mannar, Animesh Ray, op. cit., p. 25.
country became part of the Chola Empire. He also brought the Cheras and the northern region of Sri Lanka under his control.\textsuperscript{79} The Tiruvilangadu plates contain account about the invasion of Raja Raja on Sri Lanka. He, by his powerful army excelled, crossed the ocean by ships and burnt the King of Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{80}

Rajendra Chola (1012-1044), the son and successor of Raja Raja made a triumphal march through the Pandya and Kerala countries. He appointed one of his sons as viceroy (the Pandya and the Kerala king) with the title Chola-Pandya since Madurai being the headquarters of the new viceroyalty.\textsuperscript{81} The new viceroy took possession of the bright spotless pearls, which were the seeds of the spotless fame of the Pandya kings.\textsuperscript{82}

Rajendra Chola sent overseas expeditions to Sri Vijayam and won victory over it. Thus the Chola empire of South India was in constant communication with the islands of archipelago and with China during this period is very clear.\textsuperscript{83} Therefore the Chudamani-vihara in Nagappattanam by the Sailendra King of Sri Vijaya cannot be viewed as an isolated undertaking all by itself. But it was the outcome of a flourishing maritime commerce between the countries of western world and China, in which Arabs, Indians and the people of the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago acted as intermediaries.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., p. 77.
\textsuperscript{80} Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., \textit{Cōlas}, University of Madras, 1975, p. 172.
\textsuperscript{81} Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., \textit{A History of South India from Pre Historic Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar}, Oxford University Press, 1955, p. 174.
\textsuperscript{82} Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., \textit{Cōlas}, p. 201.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., pp. 218-220.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
The Cholas called the east coast as Cholamandalakkarkai where pearls were found in abundance. There are no records to give authentic information about pearl industry. Only a few of the Chola inscriptions record the grant of the pearls to the temples. The pearls were very common with the people of this period and that they were dived for in the seas. The literary works of the Chola period like Thakkayakaparani and Kamba Ramayanam refer to the pearls in many places. But there are enough references about pearls, which prove that pearl was a source of revenue for the Cholas. Korkai continued to be an important natural harbour under the Cholas also. In Tanjore (Thanjavur) a variety of jewels and ornaments of gold were made mounting precious stones and pearls. Siraf in China was an important market for pearls says the Arab writer, Istaknri of tenth century. From one of the inscriptive evidences it is clear that Kulottunga Chola Deva was pleased to seize the pearl fisheries of the Madura country. Cotton and silk garments, pearls, jewels, ivory, nuts and pepper were the principal items of export from the Chola kingdom.

The Chinese sources record four separate Chola missions to China. The Chola envoys have presented the Chinese emperor with eight hundred kilograms of pearls, sixty pieces of ivory, sixty pounds of incense and three thousand three

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86 Ibid.
87 Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., Colas, pp. 604, 609.
88 Ibid., p. 593.
89 Ibid., p. 607.
90 Rajayyan, K., History of Tamil Nadu, p. 90.
hundred pounds of perfumes. Also the envoys scattered pearls from a silver container under the Chinese throne as they retired. One understands from these Indo-Chinese missions that the Cholas exercised immense control over the Fishery Coast.

"As a general rule a pearl was considered valuable if it was perfectly round; the test for its absolute roundness was, that it did not cease rolling about all day when put on a plate. Foreign traders (coming to China) were in the habit of concealing pearls in the lining of their clothes and in the handles of their umbrellas, and thus evaded the duties leviable upon them".

The Chinese records, concurrently, tell us about the tributary trade between China and Chola kingdoms. The tributes from the Chola kingdom were mostly carried by Arab merchants. Tribute bearers could make a huge profit because they were allowed to bring free of duty, prescribed quantities of goods for resale.

The 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 the Arabs usually controlled trade through guilds.

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92 Ibid.
94 Tansen Sen, op. cit., p. 37.
Cholamandala Coast had several ports and from there spices, gems, pearls and chanks were exported to Sumatra, Java, Burma, Malaysia, Malacca, Indonesia and Far Eastern countries by these Arabs. The Chola and the Arab merchants visited Sri Vijaya in South East Asia and from there reached China.

A particular community called Kudirai-Chettis dealt in horses. They imported horses from abroad, particularly Arabia and perhaps Pegu, and distributed them among the princes and nobles in the Chola kingdom. The extensive trade described by Marco Polo and Wassaf in the beginning of the fourteenth century during the Pandya rule could not have sprung up suddenly, and its beginning must be traced to the Cholas, if not an earlier period.

The manufacture of sea-salt was carried on under government supervision and control, and was subjected to considerable imports in kind and money, local and central. The salt-pans of Kanyakumari were also among the more important centres of salt manufacture, which was a widespread industry all along the sea coast.

The Cholas succeeded in maintaining extensive maritime activities and asserted their naval supremacy for over a century. However the Sailendras made costly adventures between 1236 and 1256 proved to be the last chapter in the Hindu oceanic supremacy. The prolonged war between the Sailendras and the Cholas ultimately harmed both and the freedom of trade and navigation was jeopardised.

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96 Ibid., p. 12.
97 Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., Cōlas, p. 607.
98 Ibid., p. 593.
99 Ibid., p. 200.
The Cheras also had commercial relations with the people of the West. Roman coins found at Cannanore and the traces found at Cranganore testify to the extent of maritime activity on the Malabar Coast. They (the Cheras) maintained a navy which was overpowered by the Cholas, who had a formidable fleet. The Cheras concentrated on maritime activity in the eastern seas also. The Malabar fleet continued its existence till the advent of the Portuguese. The Pandyas were more active in and around Sri Lanka. The Gulf of Mannar was exploited by them for pearl-fisheries. During the Chera – Pandya era pearls and pepper dominated the overseas trade.

Revival of the Pandya Rule on the Fishery Coast

During the middle of the thirteenth century the reign of the Second Pandyas began in Tamil country and naturally the Fishery Coast also came under its sway. It was Jatavarman Sundara Pandya (1251-1268) who revived the Pandya rule.¹⁰⁰

Among the traditional powers of Tamil Nadu, the Pandyas had the most prolonged and yet the most chequered existence. For almost fourteen centuries, from the Sangam Age to the Afghans’ conquest, they had a continuous history, either as an independent dynasty or as a subordinate feudatory. Jatavarman Sundara Pandya, defeated Rajendra Chola III, expelled the Cholas from Madurai and founded the Second Pandyan Empire.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Rajayyan, K., History of Tamil Nadu, p. 101.
¹⁰¹ Ibid.
Pazhayakayal continued to be the important port of the Second Pandyas also.\(^{102}\) It was visited by Marco Polo, the Venitian traveller, and Wassaf the Arabian traveller during the reign of Maravaram Kulasekara Pandya (1268-1310.

According to Marco Polo, “Cail (Pazhayakayal) was a great and noble city, and belonged to Ashar, the eldest of the five brother kings. It was at this city that all the ships that came from Aden and Arabia, laden with horses and other wares from Ormuz and Kis touched. Traders touched this port, because it was excellently situated, and provided a good market for trading”.\(^{103}\)

Marco Polo further says that,

“Pearl fishing was an important industry of the Tamils. His account elaborately speaks about pearl fishing: It (the pearl fishing) began in April and continued till the fifteenth of May. Both big and small pearls were available in the Pandya kingdom. At the time of pearl fishing, the first 10 parts were given to the ruler as his share. The eleventh part was given to the magicians who cast spells to protect them from danger. The rest went to those who were involved in pearl fishing. These pearls were exported to different parts of the world. The rulers of Tamil country made immense wealth from this trade. The pearls from the Pandyakingdom were in great demand in foreign countries.”\(^{104}\)

According to Rajayyan, Pazhayakayal was noted for overseas trade and Thoothukudi for pearl fishing.\(^{105}\) Friar Jordanus, a missionary bishop, who visited

\(^{102}\) Caldwell, R., op. cit., p. 72.

\(^{103}\) Benedetto, L.F., The Travels of Marco Polo, New Delhi, 1994, pp. 323-324.

\(^{104}\) Ibid., pp. 323-325.

\(^{105}\) Rajayyan, K., History of Tamil Nadu, pp. 103-104.
India about 1330 A.D. tells us that as many as eight hundred boats were then engaged in the pearl fisheries of Tirunelveli and Sri Lanka.106

About the pearl fishery, Marco Polo says that in the Pandya kingdom there were found very large pearls, both good and beautiful, and precious stones. The king wore round his neck a fine silk thread, which hung down in front of him to the length of a pace; on this thread were strung most beautiful large pearls and most precious rubies, 104 in all. He also wore bracelets studded with precious stones and pearls in three different places round his legs. He wore splendid pearls and other gems on his toes.107

No one was allowed to take out of his kingdom any big or valuable stone or any pearl over half a saggio in weight. Several times the ruler issued a proclamation throughout his kingdom to the effect that all who possessed fine pearls and valuable stones were to bring them to his court, and he paid them twice their value. It was a custom of his kingdom to give twice the value of all fine pearls and valuable stones. So traders and other people, when they had such fine stones, willingly brought them to the court, as they were well paid. This then is the reason why this king was so wealthy, and possessed so many precious pearls.108

Wassaf describes Mábar and believes Kayal (Pazhayakayal) as the port of Mábar. According to him, the king was healthy and wealthy. His treasury was filled with gold and pearls. Also Wassaf says that huge ships with wide sails

frequented the coast. Laden with costly goods, they came from Sind, Hind and China. Costly goods that were found in Iraq, Khurasan, Turkey and Europe reached the Pandya country.109

The horse trade of Pazhayakayal was of considerable political importance and a good part of the revenues of the kingdom was spent on the purchase of horses for the king and the army. There is a reference to horse-dealers from Travancore in an inscription of the time (No.161 of 1907).110 The Arabs imported horses from Arabia for the Pandya king and obtained pearls, precious stones, etc., in exchange. They also imported horses from Persia and silver and copper from Far eastern countries. They trained the Tamils in horse breeding and care.

The Arabs were also involved in weaving and the east street in Kilakkarai was known as 'Paruthikara Theru' (Cotton Street). Anjuvannam was the name of the trade guild of the Muslims who made up a prosperous community.111

Although horse trade flourished in Tamil country, rearing of horses proved to be a failure. According to both Marco Polo and Wassaf, conditions then prevailing in South India were not suitable for the breeding of horses. Therefore the Pandyan kings relied solely on the Arabs for horses.112

109 Rajayyan, K., History of Tamil Nadu, p. 103.
111 Kamal, S.M., Muslimkalum Tamilahamum., p. 191.
112 Afdalal Ulama and Tayka Shuayb Alim, Arabic, Arwi and Persian in Sarandis and Tamil Nadu, USA, 1993, p. 22.
The Muslims were not content with trade alone. They also participated in politics and social life. Apart from their supremacy over the maritime trade, especially horse trade with Arabia, the Muslims also enjoyed a prominent role in the political realm of the Fishery Coast.

The Moors who had already succeeded in appropriating for themselves the entire overseas trade on the coast of India had firmly established themselves on the east coast – in Kayalpattanam in the south; and also as lease holders they had gained control of the pearl fishery. Tamil Muslims were known to have made periodic visits from the Coromandel Coast to the ports in South East Asia, particularly.

The influence of the Arabs continued from the rise and progress of Islam down to the thirteenth century. It gave them a predominance by which they were able to hold the sea and monopolise all intercourse with India. Their trading emporia all along the coast had existed centuries before the Muslim conquest of the South.\(^{112}\)

The glory of the second empire of the Pandyas reached its zenith under Maravarman Kulasekhara, but the fall came in a rapid succession of events. The death of the ruler was followed by a civil war between his sons, Sundara Pandya and Vira Pandya. The former sought the aid of the Muslims and subsequently Malik Kafur was sent by the Delhi Sultan Ala-ud-din Khilji who led his army to the Pandya kingdom in 1311. Thereafter Madurai was reduced to a province of the Muslim. This Mábar expedition drained away a vast amount of resources from the Pandya kingdom.

\(^{113}\) *Ibid.*
According to Baruni, several boxes of pearls were among the other items taken by the Madurai Sultanate.\textsuperscript{114}

Malik Kafur’s inroad into the Madura (Madurai) country, though it did not bring the Pandya territories into subjection to the Sultanate of Delhi, nevertheless marked the beginning of the end of the second empire of the Pandyas. From this time on, the history of the Pandyas became a record of progressive decline in the portions of the Tirunelveli district. Though the Pandyas made repeated attempts to revive their glory they had to remain content with a vassal status under Vijayanagar, and towards the close of the sixteenth century, they finally disappeared from the pages of history.

The Pandya kings were the natural lords of the Paravas of the Fishery Coast and were accordingly sometimes styled as Minavarkon, ‘the king of the fishermen’. The unchallenged monopoly enjoyed at the Fishery Coast by the Tamil rulers particularly the Pandyas for more than one and a half millennium, passed on into the hands of the Muslim rulers.

Muslims on the Fishery Coast

As it has already been discussed, the Arabs who had settled in Pazhayakayal, Kavalpattanam and Kilakkarai were supplying horses to the Pandya rulers from ninth century onwards. The establishment of Madurai Sultanate was a boon for them, as it strengthened their position further in the extreme south. Malik Kafur’s invasion was followed by a couple of intrusions which completely brought down the reign of the traditional rulers of Tamil Nadu.

\textsuperscript{114} Rajayyan, K., \textit{History of Tamil Nadu}, p. 110-111.
Ghiyas-ud-din Tughlaq sent another army in 1321 under his son and heir Ulagh Khan to extend Islam up to Kanyakumari. Mábar was made a province of the Delhi sultanate when Muhammed bin Tughlak made Devagiri his capital in 1326.

Jalal-ud-din Hassan Shah asserted his independence in 1334 when he became the governor of Mábar. Ibn Batuta, a Muslim servant of the Emperor of Delhi visited Mábar that included both the Pandya and the Chola countries under the government of Muslim kings.\textsuperscript{115}

The Sultanate of Madurai lasted from 1336 to 1380. It was in the days of Alauddin Sikandar Shah (1368-1378) that the invasion of Madurai (1371) by Kumara Kampana, the Vijayanagar prince, occurred and the Sultanate was brought to its end.\textsuperscript{116}

The Madurai Sultanate brought all the Muslims of north and south and east and west together. Not only the Islamic spirit but also the profitable pearl trade in the Fishery Coast provided a lucrative proposition for the Muslims.

The Arabs who had already settled on the western coast in the seventh century moved to Pazhayakayal and then to Kayalpattanam. They were called by different names. In the west, they were known as Mappilars, and in the Chola Mandalam they were called by names such as Lebbais, Ravuthars and Marakkayars or Marakkars. These names were not caste identities but specified particularly the profession each group carried out. The word ‘Marakkar’ or ‘Marakkayar’ is derived

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
from the Malayalam word ‘Marakkan’ which in turn was derived from ‘marakkalam’ (boat). They involved in overseas trade. The Portuguese used the word ‘Marakkar’ in their documents for the first time.117

After their settlement on the Tirunelveli coast, the Muslims slowly began the propagation of their religion, first under peaceful means. They made matrimonial relations with some of the Paravas also.

The Muslims made periodic visits from the Coromandel Coast to the ports in South East Asia. The Chulis (trade community) from South India, as they were more commonly known, took textiles and rice and brought back pepper, tin, aromatic woods and elephants from South East Asia.

The advent of the Muslims to the south was ordinarily dependent upon the advance of their political power. Ever since the famous expedition of Malik Kafur (1310), every successive wave of Muslim invasion left behind large deposits of soldiers and camp followers in the Deccan and the southern districts.

The Tamil Muslims were experts not only in pearl fishing but also in selling them. The Marakkayars of Kayalpattanam and Kilakkarai earned more in pearl fishing after the Cholas and the Pandyas. Their trading centres in Madurai, Rameshwaram and Kilakkarai were known as Mutchuchawadi or Muthupettai where they sold pearls. It is true that their great grandfathers were known as Muthuvappa. This has been mentioned in the Chokkanatha temple inscription at Kilakkarai. Muthupettai or Muthuchawadi existed in Periyappattinam also. From Rameswaram

pearls were brought to Quilon and then taken to foreign countries, according to Chinese travellers.\textsuperscript{118}

Many Arabs became chieftains in the east coast. They had already become powerful during the period of the later Pandyas and their influence continued now under the Sultanate. There was a concentration of Arab Muslim traders in Kilakkarai and Kayalpattanam and the area between these two places was a nucleus of the Islamic spirit.

\textbf{Vijayanagar Empire and the Fishery Coast}

The Vijayanagar empire was founded by the Sangama brothers in 1336 when the Muslims were knocking at the doors of south Indian kingdoms. Bounded by the river Krishna in the north, Kanyakumari and the southern ocean to the south and the two oceans to the east and the west, the last Hindu empire protected Hinduism for more than two centuries. Its main aim was to put an end to the onslaughts of Islam and to revive Hindu civilization and culture.\textsuperscript{119}

During the period of Bukka I (1356-1377) 'Liberation of Madurai' was one of the major events. His son Kampana II was despatched on an important mission in the South. Due to the frequent invasions by Delhi Sultans, the whole of South India was in chaos. He (Kampana II) set out on a victorious campaign in the south east

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., pp. 110-111.

\textsuperscript{119} Vasundhara Filliozat (ed.), \textit{Vijayanagar, as seen by Domingos Paes and Fernão Nuniz (16\textsuperscript{th} Century Portuguese Chroniclers) and others}, New Delhi, 1997, p. 1.
from his headquarters Mulbagila (eastern gate) that was the capital of “Nikarili Chola Mandala”.

When the Vijayanagar empire conquered Madurai, many prominent Muslims had retreated to the Fishery Coast and slowly began to establish their authority and extend their influence into the pearl fishery itself which was till then the exclusive right of the Paravas. The political authority of the Vijayanagar empire, in spite of its several attempts, could not curtail the economic growth of the Muslims.

The interests of the Paravas were not safeguarded though the Vijayanagar rulers received their (the Paravas’) tribute from the pearl fisheries. Abdur Razak says that Devaraya II had round his neck a collar composed of pure pearls of regal excellence. To the Vijayanagar rulers the Pearl Fishery Coast was a prime source of wealth but it was an area that was not cared for.

At the dawn of the sixteenth century, Saluva Narasirnha II (1496-1505) was the Vijayanagar emperor. It was during his reign that the Portuguese first arrived in India in 1498. On the arrival of the Portuguese, the only kingdom that seemed to them to have any real independent existence was that of Vijayanagar. Vira Narasimha (1503-1509) began the Tuluva dynasty and during his reign, the Portuguese were in touch with the Pazhayakayal port. The Portuguese set their foot

122 Ibid.
on the Fishery Coast in 1520 i.e. during the reign of the greatest Vijayanagar emperor, Krishnadeva Raya.

As a man of statesmanly qualities, Krishnadeva Raya realized the importance of the Portuguese friendship. The Portuguese were also interested in maintaining friendly relations with the ruler of the mightiest empire in the Deccan. They sought friendship with Krishnadeva Raya which was readily granted. This resulted in the advancement of trade and commerce and the promotion of mutual interests. Krishnadeva Raya obtained high breed Arabian horses through the Portuguese who also aided the emperor in his campaigns against the Bijapuris.

The Portuguese consolidated their position on the Fishery Coast when Achyuta Raya (1530-1542) became the next emperor. During his time the historic event i.e. the Mass Conversion took place in 1536 A.D. The Portuguese were on the look out for such an opportunity and brought the full coast along with its entire marine richness under their control.

By 1500, South India upto Kanyakumari had been consolidated under the single and strong Vijayanagar empire, though there were several local centres of power under various Nayaks, with varying degrees of autonomy.

Fishery Coast Under Nayaks and Poligars

Before Krishnadeva Raya regularised Nayakships, the Tamil country was ruled as a straightforward military outpost by the Vijayanagar rulers. The

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123 Ibid., pp. 181-182.
124 Rajayyan, K., History of Tamil Nadu, p. 122.
numerous Nayaks appointed by the government were empowered to maintain law and order and to collect revenues in the conquered territories. They were not the representatives of the Tamil Nadu population but agents of a Telugu-speaking government which lay beyond the cultural borders of Tamil Nadu.\textsuperscript{125}

Krishnadeva Raya introduced the Nayankara system in Tamil country and Senji, Madurai and Tanjore were put under three Nayaks. In practice the Nayankara system presented a graded form of oppression in Tamil Nadu.\textsuperscript{126}

Visvanatha (1529-1564) was the first Nayak of Madurai which included probably all the present day districts of Rammad, Madurai, Thoothukudi and Tirunelveli. Madurai experienced the rule of numerous Nayaks who squandered away on concubines and priests the resources they mobilized through oppression and exaction. The Nayak period witnessed the rise of a political order called the Poligar or Palayam system. Similar in character to the Nayankara system but of a subordinate status, it was destined to have a chequered existence in the history of the Tamil Nadu.\textsuperscript{127}

The duties of the Poligars were to collect the tribute and maintain troops for the service of the king. In fact the Poligars, mainly Telugu nobles, exacted nine tenths of the produce and paid a part of collections to the Nayak. In their turn, the Nayak paid half of their collections to the Vijayanagar emperor as tribute. The

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., pp. 145-146.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Rajayyan, K., \textit{Rise and Fall of the Poligars of Tamil Nadu}, University of Madras, 1974, pp. 1-19.
Poligars enjoyed paramilitary, police and revenue powers. Economically the Poligar system ruined the Paravas of the Fishery Coast.\(^{128}\)

The Fishery Coast, at the arrival of the Portuguese, was a hot bed of rival claims and vaguely defined political authorities. The coast was a bone of contention among the three rulers. The defiant attitude of the rebel Nayaks towards Vijayanagar was rampant. The later Pandyas continued to receive favours from the Vijayanagar rulers till their exit from Tamil Nadu. Finally the eastern ports were not paid as much attention as that of the western ports by the Vijayanagar rulers. At the climax, the Parava - Muslim conflict created a conducive atmosphere and finally the Portuguese struck roots in the Fishery Coast firmly.

At the time of the arrival of the Portuguese the Paravas were divided up among three kings namely the king of Quilon in the south, Vettumperumal, the king of Kayathar at the centre and Tumbichi Nayak in the north. The coastal region up to river Tamiraparani near Punnaikayal was under the rule of the Great King or the Great King of Kanyakumari. Thoothukudi was under the ruler of Kayathar.\(^ {129}\) In the north of Thoothukudi, villages like Vembar, Vaipar and Kilakkarai were under Tumbichi Nayak who like his colleague of Kayathar, had submitted to the mighty emperor of Vijayanagar.\(^ {130}\) All three were concerned about their share of the rich yield of annual pearl fishery.\(^ {131}\)

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\(^{128}\) Ibid.


\(^{131}\) Sathyanatha Aiyar, R., History of the Nayaks of Madura, Oxford University Press, 1924, pp. 68-69.
The pearl fishery in the Gulf of Mannar, which provided immense wealth to the Pandyan kingdom, was now distributed among various petty rulers and the Parava fisherfolk had to pay taxes to all these local leaders in order to carry on the pearl fishing business.

Even after the establishment of the Nayakship, disturbances in the south did not come to an end. Krishnadeva Raya’s death was followed by confused political activities in Vijayanagar. The governor of Cholamandalam, Saluva Vira Narasimha, revolted against Achyuta, the successor of Krishnadeva Raya. Tumbichi Nayak, the Paramakudi chieftain collected a significant number of soldiers and defied the authority of the Vijayanagar. These two rebels joined hands with Udaya Marthanda Varma, the King of Travancore. By driving away the Pandya ruler of Tenkasi, Marthanda Varma set up his government there. These three rebels turned against the Vijayanagar emperor.

Though the Vijayanagar had extended up to Kanyakumari, the local rulers had not been done away with and there were petty Pandya and Chola descendants ruling nominally in parts of their ancestral territories. A Chola king named Vira Sekhara Chola invaded the domains of a Pandya called Chandrasekhara Pandya. The afflicted Pandya appealed to the emperor who ordered Nagama Nayak to settle the matter. Nagama drove out the Chola easily but tried to liquidate the Pandya also under the pretext of strengthening the imperial administration. Krishnadeva Raya

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wanted to punish Nagama Nayak and send Visvanatha to Madurai to put things straight there, which he began to do in earnest from 1529.133

Throughout the greater number of years of the reigns of the Pandya kings of the later line, the kings of Vijayanagar appeared to have exercised supreme authority. But they did not interfere much in the internal affairs of the country but were content with receiving tribute and occasional military help. Thus the various petty states included within their nominal rule were protected from foreign invasion and their propensity to spend their time in fighting with one another was kept in check.134

Udaya Marthanda Varma, the sovereign of Travancore had Kayalpattanam under his control. He also extended his dominion across the peninsula. He had established himself so far successfully in the south that he held Pazhayakayal on the Fishery Coast in his possession and appointed a viceroy. This hemmed in the Pandya feudatories of the empire, who since the advent of the Vijayanagar authority in the south had retired to the western parts of the Tirunelveli district and had broken up into five comparatively petty chieftaincies.135

A number of minor ‘Pancha Pandyas’ (The Five Pandyas) refused to submit to foreign rule. Perhaps the Pancha Pandys looked upon Visvanatha Nayaka’s government as an alien government. Finally they became part of the Poligar system.136

134 Caldwell, R., op. cit., p. 54.
While in the Deccan the Vijayanagar and Bahmani kingdoms stood side by side, frowning upon each other, in the south their viceroyalties stood side by side in mutual fear and suspicion.137

Old states were in the melting pot of invasion and insurrection and especially was this true of southern India, where political paralysis had begun to affect the Vijayanagar empire, beginning, as it was usual in all those provinces furthest from the centre of the state.138

It is evident that Vijayanagar itself was more oriented to the ports of the west coast for its trade networks which was perhaps partly due to the great demand for horses for its military. The eastern ports were thus not of primary importance as far as the imperial centre was concerned and came under the autonomous control of the local Nayaks and rulers. The Nayaks with very small areas under their control, and thus with a narrowed power base sought to extend both their economic and political power through their control over trade and eastern ports.139

The Portuguese were fortunate in arriving India at a time when the native states were in the crucible of change, when internecine warfare left the chief's with neither time nor power to cope efficiently with a more highly organized foe from overseas.140

137 Thiruvenkatachari, Madura Vijayam of Ganga Devi, Annamalai University, 1957, p. 51.
139 Kanakalatha Mukund, op. cit., p. 46.
Fishery Coast in 1500

The Fishery Coast at the arrival of the Portuguese in the first decade of the sixteenth century was important socially, economically, politically and culturally. The two flourishing communities namely the Paravas and the Muslims were vying with one another, creating a conducive environment for the arrival of the Portuguese. The Parava - Muslim rivalry had reached its climax.

The condition of the Fishery Coast is dealt with under two stages.

i. The unique life style of the Paravas.

ii. The Parava - Muslim conflict.

The Unique Life Style of the Paravas

The Parava Society

The Paravas mainly occupied the villages on the Fishery Coast. In some villages Maravars and Caraiyars also lived. The Mukkuvars were found in Kanyakumari and in the villages west of it. In the interior places the Shanars lived and they took tending the palm trees and tapped toddy. The Paravaś, Caraiyars and Mukkuvars were involved in fishing pearls and chanks on the Fishery Coast.

The Paravas were honourable, trust worthy and partly friendly. They greeted others with folded hands.\(^{141}\) The fishermen, with dark brown complexion wore only a small loincloth and white scarf around their head.\(^{142}\) The Parava males, in former days, considered it as a mark of caste prestige to bore the ear lobes and to


hang them with gold ear rings sometimes studded with pearls.\textsuperscript{143} The people in the Comorin coast were illiterate.\textsuperscript{144} Early accounts of the Paravas and Mukkuvars speak about crushing poverty, wide spread alcoholism and universal illiteracy.\textsuperscript{145}

The affluent Paravas had slaves but not others. Slaves were found in houses and temples. Slavery was developed on account of the high rate of family taxes introduced by the Nayaks.\textsuperscript{146}

The men ate by themselves and turned their backs to their wives while eating. They ate from copper bowls, without touching their food with the left hand, and they also drank from copper vessels, usually without bringing the rim to their mouth. They chewed betel, the nut of the areca palm, rolled up with lime in the leaf of the same tree, a practice which turned their teeth black, and their saliva red. They drank the sweet, intoxicating arrack (uräk) of the palmyra palm. The poor Paravas slept on the bare floor.\textsuperscript{147}

Sati existed and those women who refused to burn themselves became public women. They had to leave their home and go elsewhere. Those who opposed sati were killed and those who performed sati were venerated. The people believed that the woman who committed sati would live along with her husband in the next life.\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., p. 557.
\textsuperscript{145} Charlie Pye-Smith Rebels and Outcasts-A Journey Through Christian India, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 189-190.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
Adultery and superstitions were rampant and magicians played a significant role in the lives of the people.\textsuperscript{149}

**Parava Religion**

The Paravas were originally Hindus and had pagodas (temple with idols) in their villages as objects of worship. They had a special attachment to the Hindu temple at Tiruchendur. They believed that God Subramanian was married to a Parava girl named Deivanai. The inhabitants of the seven villages (Manapadu, Alanthalai, Virapandyapattanam, Punnaikayal, Thoothukudi, Vembar and Vaipar) took active part in the religious festivals of the temple. Their \textit{Jathi Thalaivan} (head) who resided in Virapandyanpattanam (a hamlet of Tiruchendur) was to give the first pull to the chain with which the processional car of the idol was drawn. The Parava aristocrats of Virapandyapattanam should have their palanquins borne on the shoulders of Idayars (shepherds) who were the bearers of the idol of the temple.\textsuperscript{150}

The soothsayers venerated devils. The Paravas would weep before the devils and plead with them to forgive their sins. The Brahman priests pronounced magical formulas destined to ward off the sharks from the pearl divers. The Paravas did not kill cows.\textsuperscript{151}

**Parava Politics**

The Parava villages had their own government and all the authority lay in hands of the \textit{Pattangattim (Pattangattis)}.\textsuperscript{152} They ruled over a village and were

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{151} \textit{DL.}, Vol. III (1553-1557), 1954, p. 231.

\textsuperscript{152} Pattangattim (Pattangatti) - Overseer of a Parava village on the Fishery Coast.
chosen from the more prominent individuals. At their head was the *Pattangatti-Mor*, the chief of the caste. The Paravas dwelt in seven chief localities\textsuperscript{153} and their headman was known as *Jathi Thalaivan* or the Lord of seven villages.\textsuperscript{154}

**Parava Economy**

According to James Hornell\textsuperscript{*},

> "When the Portuguese rounded Kanyakumari they found the pearl fisheries of the Gulf of Mannar in the hands of the caste of shore dwelling people, already alluded to as Paravas, whom tradition shows to have had control of this industry from time immemorial".\textsuperscript{155}

The Paravas enjoyed the monopoly of the fishing, pearl fishing and salt manufacturing which are said to be their chief occupations. Fishing and other works were done by the members of a Parava family together and no wage labour is said to have been associated with their activities. The fishing party consisted of both elders and youngsters of the same family. The technical know-how, whatever they had, was passed on from generation to generation. This suggests that their production-relations had not cut across the limits of their kinship relations. The Paravas as expert boatmen were engaged in bringing the imports from the foreign vessels which must have been employed to take the exporting items like pepper to the distant ships\textsuperscript{156}

\textsuperscript{153} The seven localities were* Manapadu, Alanthalai, Virapandyanpattanam, PunnaiKayal, Thoothukudi, Vembar and Vaipar.


\textsuperscript{*} James Hornell was the Director General of Madras Fisheries for the whole of Tamil Nadu under the British Rule. He has given first hand information about the pearl fisheries in the Fishery Coast.


The Paravas who were fishermen and coastal traders had formed themselves into a well-organized community. Their social organization had some peculiarities. According to one version, the community was divided into two distinct classes the wealthy and the boat owners.\textsuperscript{157}

Interrailages between these two classes were not permitted and if at all it occurred, it was only very rare. As a result of their connection with the pearl fisheries, their villages from Vembar to Ovari came to be regarded as typical of the community and its organizations while the Paravas who lived in isolated villages from Ovari to Kanyakumari were closely knit together into.\textsuperscript{158}

The fisherfolk excelled in maritime skills and they attracted attention because of their multifaceted relationship with the sea. They lived at the junction of major trade routes between the western and eastern Indian Ocean, centering on southern India and Sri Lanka and were involved in minor trade and fishing. Similarly, the Lakshadweep and Maldive islands, source of cowrie shells and dried fish, invited the attention of mercantile and political elites from southern India over the centuries.\textsuperscript{159}

From Manapadu to Thoothukudi aljofor (small and bright pearls) which were more valuable was available and people here were economically better than others in the Fishery Coast.\textsuperscript{160}

\textsuperscript{157} James Hornell, \textit{Pearl Fisheries, Vol. XVI}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{159} Kenneth McPherson, \textit{The Indian Ocean - A History of People and the Sea}, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{160} \textit{Ibid.}
In order to dispose their pearls, the Paravas made agreements with the kings that a market day should be proclaimed throughout their dominion; merchants would come from all parts of India and the divers and settlers would furnish all the provisions necessary for the multitude. Two kinds of guards and tribunals were to be established to prevent all disputes and quarrels arising during this open market. Every man being subject to his own judge, and his case being subject to his payments was then also divided among the headmen of the Paravas. The Pattangattis were the owners of that fishery and hence they became rich and powerful. They had weapons and soldiers of their own, with which they were able to defend themselves against the violence of the kings or their subjects.\textsuperscript{161}

About a month after the opening of the pearl fishery, the Pattangattis announced its end. The merchants packed their wares and loaded them on to the ships. Booths and cottages were set on fire and the return voyage would begin. They left the coast behind them as lonely and bare as they had dwellers in the vicinity, who sought for a few lost pearls in the sand of the pits. In the Parava villages, however, the wild lamentations of the women began for fathers, husbands, brothers or sons whom the sea, sharks and sickness had carried away and would never again return.\textsuperscript{162}

Southern Coromandel was one of the intermediate points in this segmented trade, where ships from Malabar brought rice and abundance of goods from Gujarat, pepper, and commodities like copper, quicksilver and vermilion which

\textsuperscript{161} Georg Schurhammer, \textit{Francis Xavier, Vol. II}, p. 188.

\textsuperscript{162} \textit{Ibid.}
normally were imported from Europe for the east. Ships came with spices and drugs, from Malacca, China and Bengal.\textsuperscript{163}

Commodities, which came from diverse parts of Asia and Europe, were mostly bought in exchange for Indian cloth. The Coromandel merchants primarily invested in gems and precious stones to bring back to India. Trading in precious stones, pearls, coral, silver and gold was an important part of their business both in the Coromandel and in the Malabar Coasts. Barbosa observed that in several port towns the Chetti merchants dealt in gem stones, pearls and precious metals.\textsuperscript{164}

The trade covering south Coromandel, the Bay of Madura, the ports of Sri Lanka and south Malabar was even more brisk. This was a trade in essential consumer goods which deeply influenced the lives of the people of those areas. Thanjavur and Tirunelveli were providers of rice to Sri Lanka and Malabar. The whole area up to Tirunelveli provided textiles to Sri Lanka and Malabar. In return came pepper and spices from Malabar, betel nuts, elephants and cinnamon from Sri Lanka and coconut produce from both the regions.\textsuperscript{165}

The Paravas took to coastal small boat trading and to servicing ships out in the roads of the large ports. They used their expertise in pearl-diving and boating to move into shipping and trade. They became major operators in the trade between Coromandel, Madura, Malabar and Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{166}

\textsuperscript{163} DL., Vol. IV (1557-1560), 1956, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{164} Durate Barbosa, \textit{op. cit.}, Vol. II, p. 125.
\textsuperscript{165} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{166} \textit{Ibid.}
At the arrival of the Portuguese on the Fishery Coast, the Paravas seemed to be of experts in all the seafaring activities. They along with the local merchant communities and Muslims conducted maritime trade in the Indian Ocean. But they had to fight with the Muslims to their fortune.

**Parava – Muslim Conflict**

Navigation in the Indian Ocean was pioneered by the Arabs, and they were the dominant players throughout history, as far as sailing ships in the western part of the basin are concerned. They were the forerunners to the Europeans in trade agreement, sending trade representatives abroad, fixing the boundary in the sea, barter system, port contact, etc.

In the seventh century the Arabs who settled on the west coast married Kerala women. They moved to Pazhayakayal and then to Kayalpattanam. They mastered themselves in pearl and horse trade. Through marriage and conversion, they established Tamil Muslim communities and had pushed the Paravas, the owners of the pearl fisheries down.

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

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167 Ibid.
169 Ibid.
became uncontested masters of the seas. They tyrannised the poor Paravas, prevented them from fishing without their permission and claimed a monopoly of dealing in pearls. The Paravas who had always considered the Muslims as intruders and usurpers now rose in arms against them.

The Moors who had spread themselves over India, and principally along the coast of Madura, were strengthened by the natives professing Mohammedanism and by the Arabs, Saracens and the privateers of the Zamorin of Kozhikodu (Calicut). They began to take to pearl diving as an occupation, but being led away by ill feeling and hope of gain, they often attempted to outreach the Paravas, some of whom they gained to their party and to their religion, by which means they obtained importance. The kings themselves joined the Moors, anticipating greater advantages from the trade which they carried on and from their power at sea; the Paravas were oppressed and although they frequently rose against their adversaries, they always got the worst of it.

The Fishery Coast became the habitation of several Muslims who had settled there after their expulsion from Madura by the Vijayanagar rulers. The Muslims had practically become the ultimate owners of all the pearl fisheries.

It seems that the Muslims also had a glorious past in the Fishery Coast, like the Paravas. At a certain point, history shows that the Muslims gained an upper hand over the Paravas. According to Roche, there are several factors, which caused


the Parava-Muslim struggle. With the indigenous fishing know-how as well as the superior Arab navigational expertise, the Kayalar had gradually emerged as the prime maritime caste in the region. While other native sea-faring groups did not threaten Parava economic interests, the Kayalar did. They threatened the entire basis of Parava identity and livelihood and the groups seized on trivial incidents to try and oust the other from the vicinity.  

The Kayalar-Parava struggle centred upon the pearl and chank fisheries. Both pearls and chank shells were valuable commodities with regular markets in China and Bengal. The Kayalar-Parava contest was in fact more broad based and incorporated a struggle for carrying on the trade along the Coromandel Coast and across the Palk Strait to Sri Lanka.  

The Paravas and the Kayalars had tightly knit corporate solidarities. The separate corporate identities and rivalry of the two groups had been nurtured over three centuries not only on account of the splintering of certain segments of Paravas from the parent body to intermarry with the Arab settlers of Kayalpattanam but also because of their conversion and incorporation into Islam as Kayalar.  

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 base of sea-faring skills and mercantile expertise, linked to the prosperous and expanding Muslim trading world.\textsuperscript{175}

Barbosa notes that it was the custom of the Paravas to fish pearls exclusively for the boat-owners every Friday. Generally the boat owners were Muslims. Besides, they also used to fish for a whole week at the end of the season for the Muslim dignitary of Pazhayakayal. Thus it is clearly established by Barbosa that the Muslims were boat owners who also wielded immense power and influence in the region.\textsuperscript{176}

The problem for the Paravas was associated with the rise of Muslim mercantile and other sea-faring groups along the Coromandel Coast. Indian Muslim mercantile groups which dominated sea lanes from the Arabian Sea to the Strait of Malacca.\textsuperscript{177} On the Tirunelveli coast, the Kayalar-Parava converts to Islam and other Muslim groups like Navayats, and Marakkayyars were rapidly undermining the economic base of Paravas by intruding into their pearling and other maritime activities. The position of local Muslim groups 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 and Venad.\textsuperscript{178}


\textsuperscript{176} Duarte Barbosa, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 22-24.

\textsuperscript{177} Patrick A. Roche, op. cit., p. 40.

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid.
The Paravas’ inability to withstand the superior Kayalar military and maritime power explains their recourse to outside help. Bereft of support from contiguous groups and faced with the possible collapse of their entire economy, the harassed Paravas turned for succour to the only power that had proved a match for Muslim seamen on the Indian coast.\textsuperscript{179}

Though the Vijayanagar kingdom had been extended up to Kanyakumari in the extreme south of Tamil Nadu, the rulers of the same empire were not interested in bringing the entire territory under one jurisdiction because the Vijayanagar rulers were held up between the Deccan Sultans in the north and the Madurai Sultanate in the south.

Though the Fishery Coast had rich deposits of marine resources, neither the Vijayanagar emperor nor did his viceroys (the Nayaks) make any attempt to establish monopoly over the same. They must have been carried away by the pollution concept of the Vedas which prevented the Hindus from undertaking any dealing with the seas.

There was no power to stop the intrusion of the Muslims into the Fishery Coast. As a result, the Muslims grew strong and pushed the Paravas to the edge of the shore and the Paravas were not in a position to assert their access to the pearl fisheries.

There were a number of local rulers vying with one another to control the fisherfolk who were scattered over three kingdoms. These local rulers also took

\textsuperscript{179} Kenneth McPherson, "Paravas and Portuguese", p. 137.
the side of the Muslims since they had already become powerful economically. Their (Muslims) association with all the Muslim merchant groups made them the real owners of the Fishery Coast. The Parava-Muslim conflict had reached its climax at the arrival of the Portuguese.

Tamil rulers have used pearls mainly as an ornamental item. Yet there are references to show that pearls were bartered for other commodities and many foreign trade missions visited the Fishery Coast. The Pandya rulers who were in possession of the Fishery Coast for more than thirteen centuries were satisfied with the tribute paid by their subjects, the Paravas. The latter were also content with their status.

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. This 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 and their viceroy (the Nayakas and Poligars) extracted their share of revenue from the Paravas and left them to the mercy of their various oppressors.
At a global level, the tension between the Cross and the Crescent continued after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and it had its repercussions in the Indian Ocean also. Wherever the Portuguese met the Muslims, the Portuguese were reminded of the Spanish Moors whom they detested. Here in the Fishery Coast they found an opportunity to challenge the same Muslims. They also found a large community wanting to be freed from the oppression of the Muslims. The Portuguese found these conditions and situations very conducive to further their cause.

Their two aims, namely ‘Spices and Christians’, were to be realised on the west coast. On the east coast they were motivated by another motto ‘Pearls and Christians’. The opportunity came in handy and the Fishery Coast came into the fold of the first European power - the Portuguese.