CHAPTER VII

DECLINE OF PEARL-FISHING
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In the preceding chapter, a discussion has been made on trade in pearls with the western world, particularly with the Roman Empire. It has thrown light on the Romans' love and demand for Pandyan pearls, the medium of exchange in pearl trade, particularly gold and gold coins in the pearl market, and its adverse impact on the Roman Empire as Pliny, the Elder, had cautioned the Romans. In addition, the study shed light on the major port-towns in pearl trade, means of transport, the trade routes and the traders involved in this trade. Moreover, an attempt has been made to evaluate the impact of pearl-trade on polity, society and culture of Tamilaham and vice versa. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to highlight the major causes that led to the decline of pearl-fishing and pearl-trade and chank-cutting with the help of primary sources. Political, social and economic factors coupled with the advent of trawlers and the absence of scientific methods acted as deterrents and caused its decline.

The causes of decline of this lucrative profession and business are of two kinds. They are man-made atrocities, mainly due to political exploitation and instability and unfavourable natural conditions. These are studied to derive a logical
conclusions about the fall of the profession in the modern times. The decline appears to be the cumulative effect of accumulated weaknesses, which were sometimes detrimental to the professionals themselves. These weaknesses were caused both by internal and extraneous factors in the form of natural calamities and man-made atrocities. In fact, man is more dangerous than nature. In its decline man seems to have played a major role in the form of injecting slow poison into the profession due to cut-throat competition and over exaction.

MAN MADE ATROCITIES

The Paravar were reduced to straitened life and unspeakable misery under the rule of the Nayaks and their greedy feudal nobles, called Poligars or Palayakkārars. Already they were deprived of their monopoly of pearl-fishing and they were further oppressed by unjust taxes and additional exactions of tribute from the pearl-fishery. Moreover, the tax collectors and the soldiers of the Nayak rulers frequently plundered the Paravar villages in the event of a delay in payment of tribute.¹

Moreover, the Muslim settlement in the Pandya Country also had adverse impact on the pearl-fishery. The Muslims first settled at Palayakāyal for the sake of commercial

transactions from 9th century onwards, and later they moved to Kayalpattinam and Keelakarai. They were further strengthened by the natives professing Islam and by the Arabs and the Saracenes to take to pearl-fishing as an occupation. During the Vijayanagara conquest of Madurai, some prominent Muslims slowly extended their influence in the pearl-fishery which was the exclusive right of the Paravar. In 1516, the Muslims of Kayalpattinam took the whole of the pearl-fishery on lease from Uthaya Marthandavarman of Travancore and reduced the Paravar to slavery. The Nawabs of Arcot, subsequently, still reduced the power of the Nayaks of Madurai, and extended their influence over the pearl-fishery also. Their depredations, over exactions and plunders of the Paravar made the pearl-fishery loose its old glamour and splendour. Thus, for the first time in their long history, the Paravar lost their right over the pearl-fishery.

POLITICAL INSTABILITY ON THE ADVENT OF THE PORTUGUESE

The situation underwent a significant change with the coming of the Portuguese. Lopo Soarez (1515-1518), the successor

2. S. Arunachalam, op. cit., p. 89.

of Albuquerque, established the Portuguese rule along the coastal districts of Sri Lanka. Then, the commandant of Sri Lanka, Antonio Miranda, recommended the King of Portugal, Manuel I, to take over the entire pearl-fishery of both Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, from the hands of the Muslims. Accordingly, the Viceroy of Goa was ordered to send every year manned ships from Cochin to the Pearl-fishery Coast, to superintend the fishing of pearls and chañks and to give the yearly fishing on lease to the highest bidder. In 1524, for the first time, the annual income of 74000 fanams from the pearl-fishery went to the Portuguese coffers, instead of to the Muslim base holders.

Naturally, this invited the rage of the Muslims, who swore to win back the pearl-fishery at all costs from the Portuguese. Thenceforth there ensued a number of skirmishes between the two, but all ended in the failure of the Muslims. Finally, the issue was settled for the time being in favour of

5. Fanam is a tiny gold coin used in South India.
the Portuguese. This was possible only because of the decisive victory of the Portuguese over Conhale Marakkar, the Admiral of Calicut fleet at Cape Canameira (Kanimedu) near Keelakarai in 1533. On seeing the rising power of the Portuguese over the Moors and Zamorin of Calicut, the Paravas requested them for assistance and obtained a promise of the Portuguese help, on condition that they should become Christians. In such a situation, the Paravas embraced the Catholic religion. The Paravas of seven ports were baptised, who thus became the subjects of King of Portugal.

These baptised Paravas were condemned by the others, who continued to follow their own religion. At one time, most of the people, who had already become Christians, began to throw away Christianity in favour of their old religion. They were again reconverted to Christianity only by the timely arrival of St. Xavier.8

In 1543 A.D., this great Saint began to preach his religion along the discontented Paravas. His headquarters was Tuticorin. By his solemn service among these people, he

7. Ibid., pp.110-111.
converted the entire Parava community to Christianity. After this, the Paravas remained sincere Christians and built many monasteries for them in the villages and towns. Tuticorin, their chief town, was provided with an excellent hospital, church and a school. The massive conversion began by Francis Xavier had been continued for fifty-three years by father Henrique Henriquez who died in 1600. The Christian conversion of the Paravas had its own impact which is quite visible in their lullabies. Wedding songs at Manapad are completely in the Portuguese language. The songs sung during their work has no beginning and end. Thus the Paravas had to shift their loyalty from their own native rulers to their foreign masters, who were in no way unexploitative of these converts.

The Portuguese, who got complete control over the Pearl-fishery Coast by 1542, soon established their position at Manapad, Punnaikāyal, Thūttukudi and Vēmbār. Their chief settlement was Punnaikāyal, where they founded a hospital and a seminary in 1551. Subsequently, Punnaikāyal lost its

9. J.D. D'orsey, Portuguese Discoveries, Dependencies and Missions in Asia and Africa, Goa, 1927, p.147.
importance and its place was taken by Thūttukudi in 1580. The fine Goan Church at Thūttukudi dedicated to N. Sehora Das Navis (Panimaya Mātha in Tamil) was founded in 1583.12 The new settlers, with their Parava converts, constituted an independent community and derived considerable profits from the pearl-fishery. They acknowledged the authority of the king of Portugal. The Portuguese, however, developed an intolerant hatred towards the Moormen, who were highly experienced in pearl-fishing. Besides, they had the support of the Nayak rulers and were strong enough to establish themselves independent of the Portuguese in their town of Kaḻalpattinam. So the Portuguese were forced to grant certain privileges to the Nayaks, particularly the grant of ten free divers' stones 13 free of cost at the fishery, in return for the protection afforded by that sovereign to the merchants in their journeys to and from the fisheries. The Paravas has thus to satisfy their new masters and to keep their old masters in good humour.

THE DUTCH - PORTUGUESE RIVALRY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE PARAVAS

In 1658 A.D., Thūttukudi together with the pearl-fisheries came under the control of the Dutch (1658 to 1761).

12. Ibid., pp. 75-78.

The Dutch established their first trading factory at Kayalpattinam in 1645 with the permission of Tirumalai Nayak of Madurai. The Nayaks of Madurai and Sethupatis of Ramnad continued to enjoy the concession of free stones, granted by the Portuguese. Politically, the Portuguese and the Dutch were rivals since they had rival interests over the pearl-fishery of Sri Lanka and Thuttukudi. In 1635 A.D. a Portuguese fleet arrived at Thuttukudi to punish the Nayak of Madurai who had seized the Portuguese agent who had been sent to purchase saltpetre in exchange for elephants. Tirumalai Nayak, when he got the Portuguese help in the war against Sethupati of Ramnad, promised to assist them in Sri Lanka against the Dutch. In February 1646 A.D. the king of Portugal instructed the Indian Viceroy to persuade the native rulers to fight against the Dutch. Accordingly, Tirumalai Nayak turned the Dutch out of Kayalpattinam in 1648 A.D. To avenge them, the Dutch returned with ten vessels and commanded hostile operation. They marched to Thuttukudi and demanded the payment of a penalty for the alleged intrigues of the Paravas with the Nayak of Madurai.

They got a written promise to pay a fixed sum. They left the place carrying even the fishing boats along with them.\textsuperscript{15} In 1658 A.D., the Dutch captured Thuttukudi from the Portuguese. But, when the pearl-fishery came under the Dutch, it was not in a prosperous condition.\textsuperscript{16} Manucci (1683-1708 A.D.) mentions about the deterioration of the pearl banks. He said that already the seas of Tuticorin and Mannar no longer yielded the quantity of pearls that they were yielding in the ancient days.\textsuperscript{17} So they decided to set up the expensive system of direct management and all 'free stones' were abolished. In fact, the Paravas had been thrown from pillar to post in the political rivalry between their native and foreign masters.

**PEARL-FISHERY UNDER THE NAWABS**

In 1736 A.D., the Nawab of the Carnatic conquered the Nayakdom of Madurai. The Nawab was very powerful on land as well as on the sea, as he had the active support of the English East India Company. He opposed the cancellation of the privileges granted to the Nayak and the Sethupati. So the Dutch allowed him

\textsuperscript{15} R.Sathianathaier, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.137-138.

\textsuperscript{16} S.Arunachalam, \textit{op.cit.}, p.128.

\textsuperscript{17} H.R.Pate, \textit{op.cit.}, p.233.
to have some free divers. When the Nawab began to demand the same privileges in the Sri Laṅka fishery also, the Dutch suspended the fishery in 1768, until some agreement was reached with the Nawab. In 1782, the English East India Company took over Tuticorin from the Dutch holding it till 1785. In 1785, Tuticorin was restored to the Dutch and in the following year a provisional treaty was drawn up between the Nawab and the Dutch, whereby the Nawab got fifty percent of the proceeds of the pearl-fishery. The fisheries were to be rented out to the highest bidder. But the treaty was not ratified by the Nawab. In 1788, the Nawab made another treaty with the Dutch, whereby it was stipulated that the net produce of the fishery should be equally divided. The treaty was followed during pearl-fishing at Tuticorin in 1791. In 1795 the Madras Government again took possession of Tuticorin from the Dutch and restored it only in 1818. Ultimately, the territories of the Tamil coast passed on to the Company by the close of the eighteenth century. The power of the Nawab of Carnatic vanished and the British became the masters of the whole of South India.

20. Ibid., p.8.
THE BRITISH MASTERY IN THE PEARL-FISHERY

The pearl-fishery on the Pândyan Coast and Sri Lanka passed into the British hands in 1796. In the 19th century, there were only thirteen pearl-fisherries, which yield some pearls. All the business, connected with the pearl-fisherries, were under the Superintendent stationed at Tuticorin. The continued deterioration of the pearl banks resulted in the complete abandonment of pear-fishing in the beginning of the 20th century. 21 Coincided with the political rivalry, there was a continued depletion of the pearl oysters in the pearl banks.

As long as the pearl-fishery remained under the control of the Pândyas, the Paravas enjoyed their royal patronage and tax exemptions. But when the Pândyan Kingdom passed into the hands of the Sultans and later of the Mughals, the Paravas lost their privileges and the concessions. They were heavily taxed. 22 The main reason was that the Muslims also started pearl-fishing. So, frequent clashes took place between the Muslims and the Paravas. 23 Moreover, the predatory activities of the pirates, the

22. Ibid., p.95.
23. R. Caldwell, op.cit., p.115.

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plundering and marauding Muslims and the perverted Portuguese, and the callousness of the local leaders have all left their impact, detrimental to the pearl-fishing activity in the Gulf of Mannār. This acted as one of the major factors for its decline.

**UNHEALTHY COMPETITION**

Normally, pearl-fishing took place once in ten or twelve years. The divers in their quest for wealth used to take out the entire lot of the oysters, including immature oysters. It naturally affected the production of oysters in terms of new recruits. The number of divers engaged in pearl-fishing were far too many, while the area of pearl-fishing remained the same. They competed with one another in their attempt to get more pearl oysters, and collected even unripe oysters, resulting in the depletion of mother oysters and juveniles, which would replenish the stock. Their illiteracy and unhealthy competition perhaps led to this disaster. Moreover, the government has also failed to regulate the pearl-fishing in time by enforcing suitable laws to curb the over cropping. Narrow competitions among the contending political parties naturally had their adverse impact on the profession, which was undisturbed under the Pāndyas.

APPEARANCE OF CULTURED PEARLS

Besides, there is a decline in demand for pearl ornaments in world market. All those empires which maintained a steady demand for the Pandyan pearls have gone. People also rose against the luxurious and extravagant life of the Emperors as it is evident from Pliny the Elders caution. When demand in foreign markets dwindled, and the cost of production rose high, the profession appeared less lucrative. Production of less quantity meant soaring prices of natural pearls. To rival this, artificial pearls or cultured pearls are produced having the same lustre and beauty. For example, the natural pearls cultured at Veppalodai near Tuticorin and in Bombay may be cited here. Cultured pearls produced in Bombay are in great demand due to their lesser cost than natural pearls. In fact, the manufacture of cultured pearls at less cost dealt a severe blow to the traditional occupation of the Paravas, who, by this time, were not trained in substitute occupations. However, their early adversity offered them a lesson to enjoy the fruits of literacy and employment opportunity.

25. S.Vaithyanathan, op.cit., p.79.
INDUSTRIAL DETRIMENTS

After India had attained her independence in 1947, she started on a career of industrialization to compete with the other countries. The Five Year Plans have helped India start a large number of industries all over India. Once when India accepted a mixed economy, at least a few industrialists started their chemical industries in and around Tuticorin. In fact, in recent years, the number of such industries has swelled very much. These industries including chemical industries discharge their effluents into the sea. The atmospheric air and the sea water have been polluted mainly by the fly-ash from Tuticorin Thermal Power Station and other industrial pollutants like Dharangadara Chemical Works, Southern Petro Chemical Industries and the Sterlite Industries. They have very severely affected the chances of reviving pearl-fishing, which Tuticorin was once famous for.

SHIPPING DETRIMENTS

With the construction of commercial harbour at Tuticorin ship traffic has been on the increase. Consequent on this, the

26. V.Sridhar, 'Pollution threat agitation against Sterlite Unit in Tamil Nadu', in Front Line, 24/01/97, p.48.

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oil spillage seriously endangers the atmosphere. Besides, the operation of mechanized fishing trawlers (bottom trawlers) in the paars and in their vicinity is disturbing the bottom ecology of pearl oyster beds. Clear and calm sea meant large production of pearls since a clear water is essential for the growth and survival of pearl oysters. A disturbed atmosphere results in disturbance of pearl germination. In addition, attempts are being made in recent years to deepen the sea so as to enable big ships to anchor in the shores of Tuticorin. This resulted in the destruction of coral rocks, which provided space for the growth of oysters.

DESTRUCTION OF CORAL ROCKS AND ITS ADVERSE IMPACT

Moreover, the coral rocks are also destroyed to get calcium, an anti-national act that could have been cried a halt to protect the ecology of the country. Nearly 137 varieties of coral rocks exist in the Gulf of Mannar. This is the major reason for the purity of the sea water of the Gulf. These rocks are said to prevent the out-break of storms, gales and cyclones. When the coral rocks are destroyed, the sea level rises and the onset of monsoon changes. Further, it may cause earthquakes and

tremors. These, in fact, act as detriments to the healthy breeding of pearl oysters. Furthermore, the Sethu Canal Project between Rameswaram and Sri Lanka, proposed by our government, is feared to have its hazardous impact on this, for the area between Rameswaram and Sri Lanka is very fertile for the growth of pearl oysters. The environmentalists say that rocks and climate conducive for the growth of oysters and shells, will be adversely affected by this project. Besides, non-appliance of scientific methods in rearing pearl oysters and pearl-fishing is to have its detrimental impact on the pearl-fisheries.

NATURAL CALAMITIES

The pearl oysters are always found attached by byssus to some hard substratum such as rocks, dead coral outcrops or sand grit, covered with marine organisms. The Gulf of Mannar, the area of occurrence of pearl oysters, are known as pearl banks or paars. The Gulf had before 1961 about sixty five such pearl banks, located between Kanyakumari and Rameswaram. These banks lie at a distance of about 12 to 20 km away from the coast, at depths of 15 to 20m. As said earlier, Hornell divided these paars into three divisions, viz., Northern or Keelakarai division extending from Adam's bridge to Vaipār, the Central or Tuticorin Division extending from Vaipār to Manapād and the Southern or
Kanyakumari Division extending from Manapad to Kanyakumari. Of these, the Central Division was the most productive one in view of the fact that, out of the 40 pearl-fishings that had been undertaken between 1663 and 1961, 39 pearl-fishings had been in the paars, located in this division alone.

**IRREGULAR CHARACTER**

An unhealthy feature of these pearl-fishings from the fishers' point of view is their irregular character; fishing sometimes being conducted after long intervals. This is due to periodical decline of fishable quantities of pearl oysters in the pearl banks for a number of years. This irregular character and the absence of matured pearl oysters, in fact, affected not only the morale of the pear-fishers but the glory of the Pandyan Empire.

A lucrative business, which turned out to be one of the occupations of a section of the Paratavar from time immemorial, it lost its production at the land of its origin. Enquiries have been made by the scientists, underwater archaeologists and local researchers as to why pearl-fishing in the Pandya Coast had

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declined. Various reasons have been put forward by these researchers and scientists. Even the local fishermen who are much concerned about its decline suggest some probable reasons.

DETRIMENTS OF PREDATORS

The failure of spatfall, increase in pests like wearing mussels and boring worms, predation by gastropods, octopi, sharks, rays and sea breams and over-growth of algae, changes in the oceanographic conditions, occasional silting and non-availability of sufficient number of breeding population 30 are said to be the other detriments. Added to the physical and biological factors, affecting the survival of pearl oysters, both young and old in the pearl banks of Gulf of Mannar, other factors like over-fishing, over-crowding and diseases are also responsible for the depletion of stock in the beds. Predation by fishes like Balistes sp., Zethrinus sp., Serranus sp., Tedron sharks and rays mainly Rhinoptera and Amphotistius species (string rays) certainly leads to its depletion. 31 Moray cells and Octopi, covering the spat by modiolus mat and predation by


gastropods are found to destroy the pearl oysters, causing severe injury and shortage in their availability. 32

IMPACT OF SEA-LEVEL CHANGES

Proliferation of marine molluscs modiolus in the pearl oyster beds affecting the development of pearl oyster - spats is said to be another factor for its fall. Besides, removal of mother oysters by fishing, resulting in reduced spat production, leads to resource depletion. 33 Natural phenomenon like changes in sea-levels also affect the growth of oysters. R.Caldwell has cautioned that in Tuticorin the sea has receded to the interior part, as it is now, which had once extended up to Korampallam, eight Km away from Tuticorin. 34 Besides, due to changes in underwater currents, the oysters have migrated to the interior portion of the sea which also resulted in gradual depletion of oysters.

Further, there is found no steady but fluctuating nature in the pearl oysters. Even the absence of a leader could have


33. Ibid., p.35.

34. R.Caldwell, op.cit., p.250.
affected the oyster population. A leaderless shoal of oysters is something like a rudderless ship. Herdman attributed the bottom currents caused by South-West monsoon to be responsible for the successive broods of young oysters to appear as well as to disappear regularly. Shifting of sand due to strong currents is said to cause widespread molestation to oysters both young and old, in addition to the troubles caused by the natural enemies.35

At last in 1961, due to these unfavourable conditions, pearl-fishing at the Gulf of Mannar was abandoned. Throughout the recorded history of India from about 7th to 3rd century B.C (i.e the times of the composition of the Ramayana-Mahabharata, the Sañgam works and Arthasastra) to 1961, pearl-fishing and pearl-trade had become the major professions of the Paratavar or Paravas of the Pandyas. During this long stretch of time, for about twenty three centuries, the Then Pandi Nadu had been the centre of pearl-fishing. This no doubt, had added to the economic, political and diplomatic greatness of the Pandyas. The Pandyas monopoly in pearl-fishing and trade in pearls, however, was not a loss to the Paravas. On the otherhand, it was advantageous to them. They enjoyed certain privileges and their patronage, which were denied to them when the political power

changed hands. This seems to have dealt the severest blow to the remunerative occupation of pearl-fishing, which went out of hands in 1961.