CONCLUSION
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Fishing is one of the oldest occupations of human beings; but pearl-fishing, chaṅk-cutting and trade in them are all specialized professions. In Tamil Nadu these were professed by the Paravas or Paratavar of the neidal tract (littoral region) of the Pāndya Coast. The present study, Pearl-fishing in the Pāndya Coast, tells us that this profession and its attendant trade have a hoary antiquity. However, the available sources of India date the profession back to a time earlier to the composition of the two Indian epics, perhaps by 7th-6th century B.C. But, in Tamil Nadu, recorded history of the profession seems to begin a little earlier to the composition of the popular Saṅgam Classics, perhaps before 3rd century B.C. In the Indian context, the profession seems to have a recorded history of twenty-seven centuries; but, in the Tamilian context, it seems to have a recorded history of twenty-three centuries.

In such a situation, the date of the beginning of the profession, though not possible to contemplate on an exact date, may be placed even a few centuries before the composition of the epics. Since the Rg Veda speaks of pearls and since the finest variety of pearls have come from the Pāndya Coast, the date of
the beginning of the profession may be traced a few centuries back to the composition of the Veda. The Rg Vedic people might have referred to a prevalent profession of pearl-fishing. If that may be true, the profession and its trade could have preceded the Vedic Aryans. At this stage, even in the absence of any reference or remains to pearls in the Indus Valley Civilization, we may not be far away from the truth that the profession and its trade were not unknown to the Indus Valley people. This view finds support in the term Minas or Minavar (Tl.), which is said to have been very popular among the Indus valley people. For the sake of clarity and precision, we have taken the beginning of the profession and its trade in Tamil Nadu to a date earlier to the composition of the two Indian epics, as they speak of the Pandyan pearls. However, we have in Tamil Nadu a continuous recorded history of the profession for twenty three centuries (c.B.C. 300-1961) only.

Pearls and chaňks were fished in the Pândya Coast or in the Pearl-fishery Coast or the Parava Coast. It is still located in the Coromandel Coast or the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal, between Thondi in Ramnad in the north and Kanyakumari in the south. This is the exact area of the Gulf of Mannar and the
Palk Strait in Sri Lanka. This region is full of coral reefs, advantageous for the pearl oysters to stick on and breed. This place was earlier called Kapatapuram or Pāndya-Kavāṭe of Vālmīkī and Kautilya, the prosperous and beautiful capital city of the Pāndyas of the second Sāñgam. But, it was unfortunate that this early capital city of the Pāndyas was lost to the sea and the Pāndyas had to shift and set up their next capital at Madurai on the Vaigai river. The place of Kapatapuram was taken up by Korkai, the seat of pearl-fishing, whose antiquity is traced back to about 9th century B.C. on archaeological grounds. The port-city, the busy trading centre, was situated on the mouth of the ever-perennial Tambraparni river, which takes its course in the Podiyamalai (Podiya Hill), the abode of the Sage Agastya, from whom Tamil is said to have been born, and meanders through the rugged terrain and plains of the erstwhile Tirunelveli District.

Korkai, the secondary capital city thenceforth and the primary sea-port-town of the Pāndyas, maintained its place of pre-eminence as the seat of pearl-fishing and chaṅk-cutting for many centuries, particularly of the Sāñgam and post-Sāñgam epochs, upto the rise of Kayalpattnam. It, in fact, served as
the inter-continental mart for pearls and chaños and as one of the middle ways of the East-West sea-borne voyage. It was the famous Kolkoi or Kolkhōi or Korkai of the Western geographers/mariners/voyagers/adventurers. A brisk trading centre, it was also the seat of the head of the Paravas, whose military prowess the Pāṇḍyas of the Saṅgam age and the first Pāṇḍya̲ Empire had to shatter and wrest the Parava Coast from them after fierce fightings and establish the Pāṇḍya monopoly in pearl-fishing and pearl-trade.

Paratar or Paratavar or Paravar were called variously according to their professional specialization as Mukkuvar, Karaiyar, Nolambar or Nolaiyar, Umanar and Mutthukulippavar or Chaṅkukulippavar. But a most common term used to denote them is Mīnavar or Mīnas, whose origin is traced back to the Indus Valley era. This is also a term very commonly used to denote the Pāṇḍyas, who had the double-carp as their royal emblem. This relates the Pāṇḍyas with the Paravas themselves, thus making them the forerunners of pearl-fishing and sea-borne trade.

The Paravas take pride in a long pedigree and trace their origin back to the progenitors of the Mahābhārata. There is still a view among them that their real ancestor was the famous
Bharat, from which the later term Paratar or Paratavar or Paravar is said to come. In such a situation, some scholars have derived their origin from the Hebrew-Christian descent or pro-Āryan or pro-Dravidian descent. However, these were all conjectures, based on some non-irrefutable references. But, the truth is that they were the original inhabitants of the littoral region (neidal tract) similar to the Kuravar, Vēduvar, Villavar of the Kurinchi tract or the Idayar or Āryar of the Mullai tract or the Ulavar or Ürār of the Maduram tract or the Maravar of the pālai tract. But, in the process of Āryanization or Sanskritization of Tamils, they took pride in tracing their descent from the heroes of the Bharata War. Though Sanskritized in some of their beliefs, they still maintain their original and unique characteristics, more akin to the pre-Dravidian people of the south.

These Paratar or Paratavar or Paravar (to mention just the variations in the corruption of terms) were great pearl-fishers, chaṅk-cutters, ship-builders and sea-farers. They were known for their physical strength, breath-control and sea-trade. The anonymous author of the Periplus of the 1st century A.D. and Marco Polo of the 13th century A.D. record that
condemned criminals were employed in this adventurous but risky job of pearl-fishing. But this does not appear always true.

But, normally, Paravas who were experts in pearl-fishing and chańk-cutting had acquired skill in diving from an early age. They just followed the traditional methods of breath-control and pearl-oyster collection or chańk-cutting. They very well knew the seasonal changes, riping of pearl-oysters, the time and methods of harvesting. They also knew the method of separating pearls from the oysters by a process of letting them rot. Tamil works, however, do not give us much details about the pearl-oysters, their shoal leaders and their queen. But, Megasthenese of 3rd century B.C. and Aelien of 2nd century A.D provide us with some details of pearl-oysters, particularly how they were caught and brought ashore. Highly experienced Paravas had the technical skill in classifying and grading pearls according to their shape, size and lustre and fixing their cost in internal and external markets. A lustrous pearl, full in shape and size, was the love of the Pandyas, who lavished much on having it and the Paravas too obeyed the command of the Pandyas and kept them apart for the Pandyas. Thus the Paravas generally accepted the political overlordship of the Pandyas, though there were instances of
protracted wars between the king-like leader and the ruler of the land. On the whole, the Pandyas respected the Parava supremacy in their profession and went to their help whenever any external threat endangered them. So the Paravas maintained their individuality under the Pandya patronage and flourished and they, in turn, helped the Pandyas have their monopoly in pearl-fishing, chańk-cutting and trade in them.

Their living quarters were known as ceris and kuppam, known for their bad-smell and Epicurean living. Though pearl-fishing was their primary occupation, some were engaged in chańk-cutting, salt-manufacturing, drying and salting fish and selling them too. With the exception of a very few who are Protestant Christians, the entire community is Roman Catholic. They were earlier predominantly a Hindu community, but converted to Catholicism after the advent of St. Thomas and the Portuguese including St. Francis Xavier. But Catholicism failed to alter their traditional beliefs and customs completely. Both traditional and modern concepts and practices still prevail upon them.

The Paravas were known for their graded hierarchy in their social living and status. They had their King-like leader,
whose command was respected and obeyed; then every pearl-fishing village had their leaders, who owed their position to the king-like leader. They were called Pattamkattis. They maintained their bodyguards and soldiers, who supported their King-like leader at times of threats, both internal and external. Their richer members were traders, whole-salers, fishers for wages, brokers, contractors and boat-owners. In Tuticorin and in other coastal areas, they constituted nearly one fourth of the total population. But, at present, they constitute only twenty per cent of the total population in these areas. They had developed their own culture and customs due to their long isolation from the rest of the hinterland. However, their life was not totally independent of other people, but was one of interdependence. Though their social life was one of irañgal (sorrowful), their heroic sea-faring life and social customs have made interesting pages in the ancient literature of the Sañgam age and also in the poems of later days.

As long as the Pandyas were ruling over the coastal regions of Tamil Nādu, the Paravas enjoyed absolute right over pearl-fishing besides many special concessions. The Pandyas developed diplomatic relations with western countries, especially
with Rome. Since the 14th century the Pāndya power and monopoly over the fisheries began to decline due to external invasions and internal confusions. With the political eclipse of the Pāndyas, the future of the Paravas underwent great changes. The Muslims, who snatched away the monopoly of pearl-fishing from the Pāndyas, imposed heavy taxes on their pearl-fishery, from which they had been hitherto exempted by the Pāndyas.

After 1376 A.D. the Pāndyas were finally replaced by the Vijayanagara-Nayak rulers, who enjoyed certain privileges in the Pearl-fishery. However, this epoch was not free from clashes between the Nayaks and Muslims. Meanwhile, the Pāndyas withdrew to the region of Tirunelveli and ruled over a small tract of land, making Tenkasi and Kayattar as their capitals. Towards the close of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, the Pāndyas of Tenkasi had a steady decline and finally disappeared. The political eclipse of the Pāndyas brought significant changes in the position of the Paravas too. After 1516 the Paravas lost their right over the pearl-fishing to the Portuguese, who by 1542 A.D. got complete control over the fishery. In 1658 A.D. Tuticorin together with the other pearl-fisheries came under the Dutch and were under them till 1761 A.D. In 1782 A.D., the
English East India Company took over Tuticorin from the Dutch and were holding it till 1795. In 1795, the Madras government took possession of Tuticorin. Thus the loss of Pandya monopoly over pearl-fishing, chaṅk-cutting, trade in them and all privileges sent shock waves to the Paravas, who turned an exploited lot in the succeeding generations.

Pearl-fishing, chaṅk-cutting, and their trade made the Paravas develop inter-continental trade and cultural contacts. The Pandyas were one of the forerunners of developing trade and diplomatic relations with foreign countries, with particular reference to the Roman and Chinese worlds. Though the medium of exchange of internal trade was barter, that of external trade was by means of gold and gold coins. The Pandyas and the Paravas made good of the great Roman demand for Pandyan pearls. These pearls beautified the royal women like Cleopatra and Lollva Paulina, wife of emperor Gaius, etc. and even the Emperors themselves. Beautification of their bodies, dresses and even chappals with pearls was a fashion for them. This demand brought huge quantities of Roman gold to the Pandya Country. The hoards of gold coins of Roman origin, unearthed and collected from various
places in Tamil Nadu, strengthen this. This demand for Pandyan pearls is said to have drained Roman gold and led to its fall.

Recorded history tells us that since first century B.C., there was close trade and cultural contact on pearl between India and Rome. But, it is held that there is no evidence for direct trade contacts between Korkai and Rome. Pandyan pearls and other commodities of export were sent to Alexandria through Uraiyur and Musiri and from there to Rome. Perhaps it was because the Roman traders anchored their ships at Musiri (Panther) and loaded commodities including pearls and set sail on to Alexandria and then to Rome. After the revival of the Second Pandyan Empire, pearls were sent from Korkai to Rome through Madurai and Pataliputra. But, India's trade contact with Rome and China had been amply proved by the presence of innumerable Roman and Chinese coins in and around ancient Tamilaham.

Among the exported commodities from India, particularly from Tamilaham to the West, the Pandyan pearls occupied a primary position. The glory of Pandyan pearls was at its zenith in the Roman Empire and the historian Pliny the elder remarked that the coffers of the nation were being emptied for the import of pearls.
Meanwhile, some Marxian historians have cast serious doubts about the relevance of the term trade in the context of exchange. They have been led to presume that there was no medium of exchange between Rome and Tamilaham, strengthened by the absence of any means of exchange other than Roman coins in various places of South India. In the meantime, they have not denied the prevalence of a network of trade in pearls. However, their view has been disproved by the archaeological findings at Arikamedu, Alagankulam and Kodumanal. They have also argued that the Tamils had not developed the science of minting coins for trade and they used only Roman coins for that purpose. But, this contention is also dismissed in the light of the discovery of a large number of Pāndya, Chēra and Chōla coins that too before the 3rd century B.C. Besides Rome, they also had trade contacts in pearl with Palestine, Assyria, Mesopotamia, Babylonia and Śri Lanka in the past. India, Tamilaham in particular, had been greatly influenced by her trade contact with the overseas countries of the East and the West in economic, social, medicinal and cultural fields.

In fact, pearls, which had once shaken the economy of a mighty Empire like Rome, began to disappear from the market after
1961, and pearl-fishing as an occupation of a particular community, namely the Paravas declined after a long period of about twenty-three centuries of history, i.e. from 3rd century B.C. to the 20th century A.D. It was a lucrative and prosperous but risky occupation until the advent of the Portuguese.

The decline was due to internal and external factors, i.e., man-made atrocities and natural calamities. With the advent of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English, there arose a large number of problems to the professionals. Their political rivalry had its worst impact on it. The loss of royal patronage under the Muslims and the British, frequent change in masters, their exploitation and greedy pastures led to its unavoidable decline. Sea-piracy, predatory activities, skirmishes between the Muslim Moors and the Christian Europeans and Europeans and the native rulers had their adverse impact on the profession. Playing to the tune of these external masters, the Paravar too played havoc on the pearl-oysters by harvesting unripe oysters and chanks. Thus they led to an artificial depletion in the stock and prevented new breedings. Besides, the polluted atmosphere that arose among the Paravar regarding the use of stone-money, loss of stone-money and dropping the privilege led to unhealthy struggles, leaving
their adverse impact on pearl-fishing in Tuticorin. As a consequence, the government legally abandoned pearl-fishing in 1961 which was once its monopoly and started producing cultured pearls.

In this context, some suggestions have been put forward by experts to revive yielding of pearl-oysters in their natural beds. Herdman suggested the transplantation of young 'strikes' or broods of oysters from useless or unreliable paars to other yielding paars, which offer better growing or survival conditions. Hornell suggested rehabilitation of the outer series of pearl-banks by transplanting the scattered oysters found in shallow areas (5-7 F) around the reefs and islands at the head of the Gulf, and developing of hollows in the pearl oyster-beds and filling them with rocks to provide better anchorage for oysters.


The government is to take steps to protect pearl-fishing by declaring the regions of the oyster-beds as protected areas. The government may also ban the use of trawlers in these areas by enforcing special laws of the forest and fishery departments. Once the oyster beds are safeguarded and breeding of pearls is ensured, the government may offer high incentives to the pearl-divers. They may be educated in the modern scientific methods of pearl-fishing and artificial breathing. The divers' families affected by the abandonment of pearl-fishing may be identified and helped with financial aid for their subsistence. Insurance scheme may be extended to the families of pearl-fishers. Modern educational facilities can be extended to their children and employment opportunities extended to them. For, as a result of the abandonment, the Paravas, the traditional pearl-fishers, have sunk deep in economic misery and social status. Trained only in the occupation of diving for pearls and conches, they could not switch over to other professions. They were, in fact, an exploited lot. Had they thought of their children, they could have left them a good fortune. Unfortunately, they led a hand to mouth or Epicurean living. Their descendants too find it very difficult to adjust to other
professions. Their services were not given due recognition. They can also ill-afford to buy trawlers or mechanized boats and enter into this competitive occupation of fishing. Besides, the industrial growth of independent India has dealt a severe blow on this type of traditional occupation. This is a venture involving more risk and danger than any other industrial work. But, due to the steady flow of pollutants and wastes from very dangerous chemical industries into the once calm and clear sea, the pearl-oyster-beds were spoiled and pearl-banks have been destroyed. This further adds injury to the already injured minds of Paravas and leads to health problems of all. This needs the immediate attention of the government and private agencies for ameliorating the worsening condition of the Paravas, a historically reputed occupational class of Tamil Nadu.