

KORKAI – AN EMPORIUM OF PEARL TRADE OF ANCIENT TAMIL COUNTRY

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Abstract

This paper deals with the history of ancient port of Pandyan Kingdom Korkai. South India, particularly antique Tamizhakam, attracted foreign merchants and travelers for pearls, teak, peacock feathers, ivory, spices and incenses. When the Greek, Egyptian, Chinese and Roman travelers and merchants visited Korkai, the ancient seat of the Pearl Fishery, they found the industry fully developed and carried on in a scientific way. During the Sangam age, Pearl fishing was a flourished industry. The center of pearl trade was the Pandyan port city of Korkai. Written records from Greek and Egyptian voyagers give details about the pearl fisheries of the Pandyan coast. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea mentions that “Pearls inferior to the Indian sort are exported in great quantity from the marts of Apologas and Omana”. The inferior variety of pearls that the Tamils did not require for their use was in very great demand in the foreign markets. The most expensive animal product that was imported from India by the Roman Empire was the pearl from the Gulf of Mannar which were also in demand in the kingdoms of north India. Several Vedic mantras refer to the wide use of the pearls. The royal chariots were decked with pearls, as were the horses that dragged them. Literary references of the pearl fishing mention how the fishermen, who dive into the sea, avoid attacks from sharks, bring up the right-whorled chank and blow on the sounding, shell. Convicts were used as pearl divers in Korkai.

IndexTerms – Korkai, Pearl Fishery, Sangam age.

Introduction

Korkai is a small village in the Srivaikundam taluk of Thoothukudi district in Tamil Nadu. The meaning of the word Korkai is an army, a camp. Since the beginning of the first millennium B.C., Korkai is the oldest port site of Tamil country. However, its emergence as a noteworthy emporium may have been only around the Fourth and Fifth Century B.C. Korkai is also called Madurodayanallur and Madurantakanallur. The Gulf of Mannar is called by them from the name of this place the Colkhic Gulf, from which it may be incorporated that Kolkhoi the Tamil name of the place is almost matching with the Greek. It is Kolkai, and though that is now euphonically pronounced Korkai. It was once not only the centre of pearl trade but also the principal seat of the civil government in the south that was still surviving amongst people in the neighbourhood. Pearl Fishing, weaving, smithy and ship building were some of the prominent industries of the ancient Tamil country during the Sangam age. Korkai was the center of pearl trade and produced pearls that were sought after not only in Tamilakam, but in the kingdoms of north India and Rome.

Location

The ancient port Korkai might have been situated on one of the tributaries of the Tamirabarani close to the sea coast because Korkai is referred to as the centre of pearl fishing and the Pandyan kings employed criminals as pearl divers.

Now Korkai is nearly 6 kilometres away from the Bay of Bengal and 3 kilometres north of Tamirabarani. Korkai became an inland city due to the gathering of silt at the mouth of the river Tamirabarani. A 2000 years old ‘Vanni’ tree is in Korkai.

Korkai in Tamil Literature

Tamil literature deals with Korkai in good many places. Although literary evidences could be exaggerated yet the essence of truth in such accounts cannot be doubted. Sangam literatures refer to it as Korkai Perundurai. Agananuru speaks of the Valampuri chank (Right whorled chank) obtained from the waters of Korkai. In Sillappattikaram, almost all places the Pandya King is spoken of as Korkai Pandyan. Maduraikkanchy speaks of Korkai as the old capital of the Pandyans. Korkai was mentioned in as pearl yielding – Korkai and great Korkai. There were many references about this port in Ahananuru and Narrinai. Later

Korkai is no fit to be a harbour. As a result the sea coast, a new sea port came into being that to be known as Kayal four miles away from Korkai.

It was the double center of the early Pandya rule, identified with Pandya-Kavada by the Ramayana and the Mahabharat, and as Kapatapuram in Kalithogai. Its reputation is spoken of in Sirrupannatrupadai and Muthollayram.

Glorious Past

Korkai of Sangam period has amazing history. According to Tamil tradition, Cheran, Cholan, and Pandyan were three brothers who at first lived and ruled in common at Korkai, near the mouth of the Tamirabarani river. At that time Korkai was in Kudanadu. Eventually a separation took place; Pandyan remained at home, and had Korkai as the capital, principal center of trade and important port of the early Pandyan kingdom.

Korkai under Pandyan dynasty

The Pandyan dynasty primarily ruled their country from Korkai, a sea port on the southernmost tips of the Indian Peninsula, and in later times moved to Madurai. The first Pandyan king Nedunj Cheliyan I, who ruled from the coastal town of Korkai, at the mouth of river Tamirabarani, has been mentioned in the Sangam works. During the reign of Rajasimha I (A.D. 730-768) and Varaguna II (A.D. 865-885) the Pandya country was separated into four valanadus namely, Tiruvalunthi valanadu, Keralasinha valanadu, Sri Vallabha valanadu and Amithakuna valanadu.

Korkai was not only the capital city, the primary sea port and an important trading center of the Pandyas because of the availability of pearls. In a description about the ports of the Indian coast Ptolemy writes that Komar or Kanayakumari was a port and a harbour has been mentioned under the government of Pandyas. 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 were part of the Pandya's dominance. Ptolemy, who died in 133 A.D., adds further interesting references of Sosikourai (Thoothukudi) and Kolkhoi (Korkai), an emporium of pearl fishery.

Ptolemy refers to the place as Kolkhai and says that it was an emporium of the pearl trade and the birth place of the Pandya dynasty. The pearl fishery was a major source from which the ancient Pandyan rulers of Tamil Nadu derived their wealth and used it to enhance their power and might till their throne was usurped by the Chola Dynasty in 1064 AD. They invested enormous interest in developing the pearl which yielded them as the principal income of the royal treasury. The most renowned center at this time for pearl fishery was Korkai. Due to the brilliant and extraordinary pearls sold at Korkai, the Pandyan rulers were called the lords of Korkai and Korkaivendan. The extensive trade operated at Korkai in Indian luxuries like pearls and perfumes made one of the Pandyan rulers dispatch an embassy to the Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar which the Emperor welcomed at Athens.

Since Gulf of Mannar is the main source of pearls in India, there are innumerable references to pearls in Tamil literature. Even Kautilya refers to the pearls from Pandya country. Korkai was the harbour city where the pearl fishing was flourishing. Pearl fishery was a conspicuous feature in Korkai. The annual yield of pearl of Korkai was estimated to fetch crores of money from the foreigners. It is also stated that it was in very great demand in foreign markets. As a gift the best variety of pearls obtained was sent to the Pandya king.

Since Korkai was familiarly known for pearl fishery, the Madurai Pandiyas were involved in marketing pearls to Roman Empire, who maintained stable trade relations during the fifth century. Referring to its literary evidence, Dr. Bose said 'Korkai' carved a niche in Silapathiharam – Tamil epic and 'Puranaanooru' in the Sangam literature.

Korkai under Chola dynasty

Korkai continued to be an important natural harbour under the Cholas also. From one of the inscriptional evidences it is clear that Kulotunga 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.

Prior to the capture of the Pearl Fishery by the Portuguese in 1524 we have only stray references recorded on their return journey by sailors and travelling merchants like the Greeks, Egyptians, Barbary Moors, Arabs, Venetians and Genoese. In Rome, in the days of Pliny, pearls from the Gulf of Mannar were valued at a high price and Pliny refers to this fishery as the most productive in pearls among all parts of the world. The earliest reference to a particular locality in the Gulf of Mannar where a fishery was carried on occurs in the Periplus.

In the medieval period, travelers make no mention of Korkai through the headquarters of the Indian Pearl fishery still remained located at the mouth of the Tambraparni, but its name was altered to Chayl, Cail, or Kayl, wherein we identify the Kayal of today.

Archaeological Excavations

Korkai was first excavated in 1870 by Dr. Caldwell who published an article in Indian Antiquary. He made a thorough survey and found the pearl oysters and conch shells on the surface and beneath the soil and also came across two Buddha images, two Singhalese coins and funereal urns. He discussed in detail the sea receding to the east and the construction of a new port called Kayal during the medieval period.

Based on the literary evidence, the State Department of Archaeology of Tamil Nadu excavated Korkai in the 1969 and found evidence for the cultural sequence of three periods ranging from the 3rd century BCE–4th centuries CE, the 4th–10th centuries CE and between the 10th–14th centuries CE. The excavations exposed indigenous pottery with early Tamil scripts, sawed conch shells, Small coins, bangle pieces and semi-precious stones of the early historic period. A brick arrangement was also found along

with the ring well. The excavation revealed the uninterrupted movement of this place. Korkai was significant for pearl fishery and is confirmed by the find of numerous pearl oysters in the various levels of the site.

Arunachalam says, “Korkai was the cradle of South Indian civilization, the place where Pandya rule began”. After archaeological survey excavated Korkai in 1960, 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.

Korkai was described as **Kudanattu Korkai** and **Korkaiyana Mathuroothaiya Nalloor** by the inscriptions found in an ancient Siva temple in Korkai. The inscriptions pointed out that this lord Siva temple is known as Akkasalai Esvaramudaya Mahadevar. But at present it is depicted as Kannaki temple. The idol found in the sanctum is goddess Durga of the 12th century A.D. During the time of Pandyas, there was a mint for minting coins and hence it got the name **Akkasalai**.

Conclusion

The pearls from korkai are world famous. The people of Korkai were mostly of pearl divers and chunk (conch shell) cutters. It is said that the merchants of Greek, Arabian, Chinese and Roman nationalities were frequenting Korkai to load their ships with pearls and peacocks.

Though it continued to function till the 5th century AD, it was on decline since the 3rd century AD. The shifting of the Pandyan capital from Ten-Madurai or Korkai itself to the later capital at Madurai probably linked with this decline.

The harbour of Korkai gradually silted up and deltaic accumulation eventually cut off ready access to the sea. By which, the old town slowly decayed and the population drifted to the new mouth of the river, where another town sprang into being at the cost of Korkai. So Pazhayakayal became the second important port.

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