

Korkai, Kayal and Tuticorin Ports: Origin and Development of Pre- European Settlements

K. MARIMUTHU

Guest Lecturer

Department of History, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli (T.N.) India

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INTRODUCTION

In ancient times civilized India confined to the river beds and sea ports. In the lap of South Indian peninsula, *Korkai*, an ancient noble city flourished which was considered to be the cradle of South Indian civilization. To the Tamils, it was not only a magnificent Pandyan emporium, but an abode of Dravidian culture and power. The origin of the three famous Tamil dynasties associated and ascribed to this place by tradition.¹ The early Greek travellers and geographers and the *Cankam* Literature left a detailed legacy about *Korkai*. A peep into its past shows, that it was once a famous port and gate-way to south. Now *Korkai* is five miles in land and its invisible importance as a pearl city withered long ago. What led this busy place to sink into oblivion? It is an interesting subject for historical investigation.

Korkai is the emphonized form of *Kolkai* its derivation is Kol + Kai. In Tamil Koi means to kill and Kai - arm. *Kolkai* there would seem to mean the hand or arm of slaughter. It is the poetical name for a military camp or Government headquarters.² Reputed for pearl fishery, it is located 8° 40N 70° 5E in the far south eastern coast. Having referred to *Colchi* by Periplus in 80 A.D., *Kolkhai* by Ptolemy in 130A.D and *Korkai* in the *Cankam* literature, quite a number of scholars have erroneously identified its location.³

For instance, Dr. Wilson, Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, had, in the thirties of the last century, identified the *Korkai* of the Tamil writers with the *Kolkhoi* of the Greeks and concluded that the place to which both sets of writers referred was Kilakkarai, a seaport in the present Ramnad district. The conjecture was even hazarded, in 1837, by the Rev, William Taylor, who disagreed on philological grounds with Dr. Wilson's conclusion, that the *Korkai* of the *puranas* might have some connection with the Gurkhas of Nepal.⁴ Therefore, it must be a place in North India, according to him. Only in 1838, an anonymous contributor to the *Madras Literary Journal*, brought to light the existence of a *Korkai* in the pearl fishery in the Tirunelveli District. This was a great leap forward. On this basis, Caldwell had identified the places referred to by the Greek Geographers and the *Cankam* literature as *Korkai* in Tirunelveli.⁵

Korkai, an ancient port, is now a village called Maraimankalam at the estuary of the Tamraparni. Ptolemy records the *Kolkhoi* gulf famed for pear) fishing and *Kolkhoi*, an emporium.⁶ The Periplus

calls it *Kolkis* and adds that beyond the port the city with embattlements and ship-building yard was in the interior.⁷ It is a place where pearl fisheries abounded.⁸ The Pearls and conches of *Korkai* had a good market. These were sold in the market here. *Korkai* was so famous that its name was prefixed to that of the Pandiya king.⁹ The combined action of the sea and the river Tamraparni covered *Korkai* with sand in course of time. It is not known when exactly this happened. *Kayal* replaced *Korkai* as the leading port and suffered the same fate later on.

Pearl fishing was the chief occupation of the *Paravas* of *Korkai*. The divers life was always viewed with danger. They took this profession as a challenge when others dare not attempted to. The people of *Korkai* would welcome the divers after pearl fishing with the beating of drum and the feeling of the trumpet. The whole celebrity was befitting to the status of the armed-commanders after a victory. Such a dangerous sports was held with a high esteem by the people of *Korkai*.¹⁰

The gate-way of *Korkai* was adorned with gold and pearls like the ancient Babylonian city. The splendour and grandeur of this city evoked surprise among the foreign traders. The Greeks who visited *Korkai* would anchor their ships in the sea and would take rest on mainland which seemed to them as a paradise on the earth.

The portal city was pushed back by the advancing land. *Korkai* found an inland location. The old vestiges of *Korkai* and its mangled remains though immersed in antiquity, its continuity is kept alive due to the rise of another emporium. The retiring nature of the sea though arrested the significance of *Korkai*, it gave way for the development of another port of equal importance. The pearl fishing and the absence of any other major port in the far South led the development of a suburb of *Korkai* called *Kdyai* or (*Palaya*) old *Kayal*.

The Kolkhoi of the Greeks :

More is known about *Korkai* from the Greeks than from Native writings or traditions. It is mentioned by the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, the circumnavigation of the Erythraean or Red Sea (by which we are to understand the whole Arabian Ocean from the mouth of the Red Sea to the Bay of Bengal), an intelligent Greek merchant who visited India.

The Meaning of Tuticorin :

The meaning of the name *Tuttuk* is said to be the town where the wells get filled up; from *tuttu* (properly *turttu*), to fill up a well, and ‘, a place of habitation, a town. This derivation, whether the true one or not, has at least the merit of being appropriate, for in Tuticorin the silting up of old wells and the opening out of new ones are events of almost daily occurrence.¹¹

The following extract from the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* is of much relevance and interest in this context: ‘several of the chief towns of the district stand upon the banks of the Tamraparni.... Near the mouth of the river is *Kolkai*, the first capital of the Pandians, the earliest seat of the Dravidian civilization, and once a famous seaport. The silt from the river ruined its career as a seaport and it is now five miles from the sea; its place was taken by *Kayal*, where Marco Polo landed, but this also silted up and the Portuguese then established Tuticorin as the chief port on this coast. The pearl and “chank” fisheries off the mouth of the Tamraparni were once very famous, being frequently mentioned in Tamil literature.’¹²

Arrival of portugese in India:

King John of Portugal had acquired some knowledge of India in A.D. 1484, and after causing inquiries to be made as to the possibility of discovering the rich and interesting country in the Far

East, had begun to fit out three ships, but he died before they were ready.¹³ His successor, Dom Manuel, took up the matter warmly, and sent these ships out under Vasco da Gama and his brother Paulo, with orders to try and double the Cape of Good Hope. The full account of the extraordinary voyage made by them is given in the “Three Voyages of Vasco da Gama,” translated and published in the Hakluyt edition; being a translation of certain portions of Correa’s *Lendas da India*. Vasco Da Gama sailed on July 8, A.D. 1497, and arrived close to Calicut on August 26, 1498.¹⁴ The Samuri, or king, of Calicut was at first friendly, but there were misunderstandings on the part of the Portuguese, and they made little or no progress either in trade or in establishing amicable relations with the Hindus. Vasco Da Gama returned shortly after to Portugal. Early in 1500 A.D. Cabral took out another and larger fleet, and arrived at Calicut on September 13th. He at once quarrelled with the Samuri, and instead of peaceful commerce we read of attacks and counter-attacks conducted in such sort by the Portuguese as irretrievably to alienate the natives of the country. A few Europeans, however, settled in that tract, and amongst them Duarte Barbosa, the celebrated chronicler of the time.¹⁵

Vasco Da Gama returned to India in 1504. Proclaiming the king of Portugal lord of the seas, and wantonly destroying with all hands a large vessel having several hundred people on board near the Indian coast. He reached Calicut on October 29th, and immediately bombarded the city, seizing the inoffensive native fishermen in the port, eight hundred of whom he massacred in cold blood under circumstances of brutal atrocity. In 1503 he again left for Europe, after establishing a factory at Cochin. In consequence of his violence a war ensued between Cochin and Calicut.¹⁶ In 1504 Lopo Soares came out with a fleet of fourteen caravels, and proclaimed a blockade of the port of Cochin, in spite of the fact that the Rajah of that place had always shown great kindness and hospitality to the Portuguese

The next year, 1505, Almeida was appointed viceroy of the king of Portugal on the Indian coast, and took out with him a large fleet and 1500 soldiers. After some preliminary fighting at Honawar, Almeida began for the first time to perceive that the true interests of the Portuguese lay in peaceful commerce, and not in sanguinary and costly attacks on the natives; and he also learned from an influential native of the existence of the great kingdom of Vijayanagar and the power of its king, Narasimha (or Narasa). At Cannanore the viceroys son, Loureno, in 1506, received further information as to the state of the country from the Italian traveler Varthema, and in consequence of this Almeida asked King Narasa to allow him to erect a fortress at Bhatkal, but no answer was returned, Varthema has left behind him a valuable account of his experiences at this period. He speaks of Goa as being then under the “Savain,” which is this writer’s form of expressing the ruler known to the Portuguese.

Recently, Mr. James Hornel unearthed a collection of Chank-workshop were in *Kayal*. Coins of Ceylon and Pandya origin had been found in large numbers and an *AkkaCalai* or Mint was also brought to light. To the west of *Kayal* the traces of a palace and ports of the Pandyas are seen even now. Here more than five thousand wells were constructed for the bathing of the war horses. As sea receded from *Kayal*, it became less and less suitable for trade. *Kayal* was abandoned as *Korkai* earlier, in term developed *Punnal Kayal* which is now a mile away from the sea. It figured prominently in the affairs of the Portuguese. Vasco-da-Gama after his return from Portugal submitted a report of his voyage to the Portuguese Government, in which he mentioned a place called *Punnaiik Kayal*.” According to him his place was ruled by a Muhammeden King which was famous for pearls. It was regarded as the earliest Portuguese centre of attraction on the fishery coast. In the 16th Century the Arabs reduced the fishermen, as slaves. The Paravas appealed to Portuguese for

protection and their request was attended to. Portuguese captured Tuticorin in 1533, followed by the mass conversion of the *Paravas* into the Catholic fold. The possession of Tuticorin by the Portuguese changed the very mode of the commercial significance of *Punraik Kayal* in favour of Tuticorin. The cause attributed to this change is similar to those which had rendered *Korkai* and *Kayal* useless.

It was shortly after this, in 1532, that the Portuguese, who had already formed a settlement in Cochin in 1502, appeared on the scene to champion the cause of the Paravans against the H.Moormen of the coast; the Paravans became Christians and subjects of the king of Portugal. The Muhammadans were chastised, and by the time that Xavier arrived on the coast (1542) the control of the pearl-fishery was completely in the hands of the Portuguese. Within a few years the new-comers had established themselves at Manap-pad, Punnaikayal, Tuticorin and Vembar, their chief settlement being Punnaikayal, where a hospital and a seminary were founded in 1551. Punnaikayal subsequently declined in importance, and its place was taken by Tuticorin, The new settlers with their Parava converts constituted themselves from the first into an independent community and, to judge from the scanty records which survive, managed to derive considerable profits from the pearl-fishery. They acknowledged no master save the king of Portugal; and it was, presumably, in order to collect the tribute due to the central government that the emissaries of Vijayanagar and of his Nayakkan lieutenants-the “Badages” (or Vadugans) to whom Xavier so often refers, were constantly descending on the coast¹⁷

With their policy of defiance towards Vijayanagar and Madura the Portuguese combined an intolerant hatred of the “Moormen.” These Muhammadans, bringing with them from the coast of Persia the valuable experience of their native pearl-fisheries, were a force to be reckoned with. They obtained the support of the Nayakkan ruler and were soon strong enough to establish themselves independently of the Portuguese in their own town of Kayalpatnam. The Nayakkan demanded and obtained free stones for himself and conferred similar privileges on the Mussalman headman of the re-formed settlement; he further directed that one of the headman’s residences should be “near Marie Amman’s Chapel at Tuticorin.” The Portuguese in the end were forced to make contributions to the Nayakkan in return for the protection afforded by that sovereign to the merchants in their journeys to and from the fisheries.

The Tuticorin harbour is formed by a low sandy cape the “Devil’s Point” referred to projecting eastward from the mainland on the south, where in north direction extend the Punnaiyadi, Cronjee and Pandyan islands; a mile north of Pandyan island is a rocky shoal, partly exposed at low water, extending in a north-westerly direction towards the mainland. Within this circular chain of islands and reefs lies the harbour. For fairly large coasting craft perfect shelter is found within the reef in eight or nine feet of water. Ocean-going vessels anchor in the roadstead outside Pandyan Island five or six miles from the town; and even coasting craft of large size have to proceed to this roadstead to complete their loading.¹⁸ The entrance to the harbour is a channel about half-a-mile wide, lying between two sets of submerged rocks. There is no distinct bar, the twelve feet line of surroundings running parallel with the coast and shoaling gradually towards the land. An entrance from the south existed until quite recently between Devil’s Point and PunnaiyadiTivu, but is now completely closed. It is in this direction and also in the southern part of the harbour generally that the silting, of which so much complaint is heard, has chiefly taken place. The local currents, which set with the wind and vary accordingly in direction and strength, are operating constantly to bring about changes in the coast line.

As a port, Tuticorin stands second in the Madras Presidency and fifth in British India Regular

lines of steamers trading with Europe call there, and the British India Steam Navigation Company maintains a daily service with Colombo and a weekly service of coasters. The Asiatic Company's steamers call fortnightly.¹⁹

Kayalpatnam, a little port protected by a reef, is visited by country craft all the year round as at Kulasskharapatnam, the south-west monsoon does not interfere with this class of trade.

Pearl fishery :

Tinnevely has long been celebrated for its pearl and chank Pearl fishery, fisheries.²⁰ The pearl oyster formerly abounded on the reefs and shoals off the coast of Ceylon and Tinnevely, and yielded during the first half of this century a total revenue of Rupees 8,87,021, or an average of Rupees 1,47,836 in each of the six years in which a fishery took place.²¹ The fishery is very uncertain. It has taken place in eight years only since 1800. This is due to the migrating habits of the pearl oyster.²²

Chank Fishery :

The chank is a large convolute shell five inches long by three broad, and is regarded in Northern India especially with a superstitious veneration. Large quantities are obtained from the muddy bottom of the sea off the Tinnevely coast near Tuticorin, like the pearl oyster, by means of divers. Both are a monopoly the property of Government.²³

The chank fishery has yielded average revenue of 5,253 rupees during the last twenty years. Unlike the pearl oyster the chank is always found off Tuticorin, and the fishing has been regularly leased out by Government to the highest bidder. The pearl oyster disappeared from Tinnevely waters about eighteen years ago, but has recently been found again in large numbers so as to give hopes of a fishery at no distant date.²⁴

Tuticorin Harbour :

Tuticorin was not only a village, but appears to have been a place of some little trade, before the arrival of the Portuguese; but the Portuguese were especially attracted to it by the advantages offered by its harbour, which is the only place that can be called a harbour along the entire Coromandel Coast.²⁵ The harbour is well sheltered from every wind by islands and spits of sand. Unfortunately it is so shallow that only vessels of sixty tons' burthen can load in it. Had it not been for this disadvantage Tuticorin might have eclipsed Madras. The Portuguese, as we have seen, made Punnaikayal their chief station for a time, but as there is only an open roadstead there, without any thing that harbour, could be called a harbour, they made Tuticorin their chief settlement from about 1580. Probably the vessels used by the early Portuguese, though built in Europe, were not much larger than good-sized country craft, so that they would be able to load and unload inside the harbour. Probably also the harbour was a few feet deeper than it is now. This indeed may be regarded not as a probability, but as a certainty, for there is abundant evidence to prove that the whole coast has been steadily rising little by little out of the sea for ages.

Coral :

The principal island that on which the light-house stands, is called Pandiyan-*tlvu*, the island of the Pandyan. Coral, called in Tamil *nurai-kal*, foam-stone, is formed abundantly in the shallow water outside the islands.²⁶ Whenever people dig in the town of Tuticorin they find about two feet beneath the surface a thin layer, generally only a few inches in thickness, of a fine-grained grit stone, called by the native's *uppukal*, salt-stone, formed by the induration of the upper surface of

the sea bed when the sea covered the place. Underneath this stratum we find sea sand, the larger grains above, the smaller below, as is usual in sedimentary depositions. Sea sand and shells, including deep sea shells, are found lying on the surface of the ground or a few inches beneath the surface, as far inland as Korampallam, at the fifth milestone on the road to Palamcottah. The grit-stone formation lies beneath, as elsewhere, all along the coast, and is found half a mile further inland. It also is full of recent shells; but with this difference that the shells in the grit-stone are fossilised and very much comminuted. The shells lying on the surface are not fossilised, many of them are nearly perfect, and some retain traces of their original colour. The open country near the Korampallam Grit-stone, tank is covered with deep sea shells, such as chanks, pectens, oysters, and a few pearl-oysters. Large quantities of sea shore shells are also found. The place in the vicinity of the Korampallam sluice, where we find these chanks, and c, is 11 feet above the present level of the sea at Tuticorin. Chanks are usually found in 7-fathom water, but we may take a minimum depth of 5 fathoms, and reckon 30 feet for the depth of their habitat. This added to 11 gives us about 40 feet, as the depth of the sea which swept over.²⁷

Deep sea shells found inland :

Tuticorin at that early period when these shell fish were living in sea Dottoin at Korampallam. The natives of Tuticorin confirm this conclusion by a so-called tradition. They say that it was at Korampallam, when the sea came up to that place, that Tuticorin first began to be built, and that as the sea retired they built their houses further and further to the eastward, till they reached the place where Tuticorin now stands, and where it has stood ever since the arrival of the white men.²⁸ This seems to me a tradition invented to account for the fact which people could not help observing, that sea shells were found lying on the surface of the ground at Korampallam.

Conclusion :

India is a blessed country. It is surrounded by three seas such as the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. The vast coastline is a precious gift of nature to our country. As a result of the opening to the sea on all sides, we have many ports which are helpful in sea-trade and commerce.

This paper mainly focuses its attention on the ancient Tamil Ports like *Korkai*, *Kayal* and *Tuticorin* and their significances and highlights the early history and the trade contacts with western and eastern countries. Excavated antiquities reveal the influence on socio-economic and cultural life of Tamils. Further commercial contacts have been brought to light in the future excavations of these sites. Developments of these ports are of great value to the nation because it not only increases our commercial benefits but also builds our friendly relationships with other nations.

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