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# Trade Under Portuguese - Thoothukudi

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## Abstract

*One after another, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British ruled over this town and the Pearl Fishery Coast. They exploited its revenue for nearly 450 years. The Portuguese were the strongest colonial rulers of this town and its surroundings. The Nayaks and the local Kings or chieftains, the Vadugars and finally the Muslims under the patron ship of then Travancore and Calicut rulers harassed the natives. This forced them into the saving hands of the Portuguese. By the end of the beginning of the sixteenth century the Pearl Fishery Coast was brought under the control of Portuguese. The Mass conversion in 1536 is a historic event which changed the history of Thoothukudi.*

*The Paravas of Thoothukudi regained their lost rights of the Pearl fishing from the Muslims and started living a peaceful life under the protection of the Portuguese for more than a century then onwards. They returned their gratitude to the European coloniser by paying tributes in large amounts from their prize catches of the pearls and the chanks of the Gulf of Mannar.*

*At the far end of the Portuguese colonial regime in this region, by the year 1658, Thoothukudi was lost to the Dutch invaders. Thoothukudi came under the control of the Dutch in the year 1658 and continued so till the end of the eighteenth century. The Dutch East India Company built a fort at Thoothukudi making it their strong bastion. The Dutch occupation of Thoothukudi ended in 1825 .*

**Keywords:** Pearl Fishing, Portuguese, Pazhayakayal Port, Manappadu, Marine Products, Slavery, Saltpetre, Elephant, Horse Trade, Jesuit Missionaries

## Introduction

Trade relation between India and Europe is quite old. The Indian Ocean served not only as a means of conducting trade and commerce, but also served as an important means of communication. After the closing of old sea routes in the fifteenth century, the Portugal government sent expeditions under Vasco da Gama to search for a new sea route to India. He arrived at Calicut in 1498. Within a decade the Portuguese had set their foot on the coast of India. Hence, once again the trade relations development between India and European countries. The Portuguese were the first European powers who settled down in India and continued their monopoly up to the sixteenth century.

## The Portuguese on Thoothukudi Coast

The Portuguese also located their important sea ports, in pearl fishery coast after establishing their control over India. After that it went under the control of the Muslim Merchants. The Local Muslim sailors were used by the Portuguese until they established their hold firmly. After that they forced the Paravas to serve them in 1536. These "Paravas" community excelled in maritime skill and labour. They used this community to accomplish their maritime projects.

## Portuguese Settlements

In 16th century Portuguese had contacts with the ports of fishery coast and they had declared to the Zomorin of Kozhikodu that they were in search of "spices and Christians".

They were aware of the pearl fisheries somewhere in the East. Vasco da Gama mentioned that “Pazhayakayal port” had the abundant availability of pearls in his diary. Francisco de Alameda also endorsed it. In Pazhayakayal port the first procurement of pearls and seed pearls was made from the fishery coast which took place between 1505 and 1508. They also had tough resistance from the kayalars but they improved their fishery areas because of their superior technology and navigation skills. The first port which Portuguese founded in fishery coast was Manappadu under the jurisdiction of the king of Travancore said by Jorge Manuel Flores. The important villages of this coast became the most important settlements of fishery coast. The expected quantum of pearl was not obtained by Portuguese so they moved to Kilakkarai where the Marakkayars had monopoly over the pearl fishing. There did not want conflicts with Marakkayars of Kilakkarai, so they moved to another strategic place to control the sea of Sri Lanka and Vedalai also came under their control in 1525. With the permission of Tumbichi Nayak of Paramakudi who was also the ruler of Kilakkarai and Vedala, the first fort of Vedalai was built. At last the Kayalars and Marakkayars who had superior influence on the pearl fishers were also under the control of Portuguese. The important sea ports like Pazhayakayal, Kayalpattanam, Kilakkarai and Vedalai was also under the Portuguese.

### **Seven Ports**

After mass conversion, the Portuguese brought the fishery coast under their control, they also fortified the existing of seven major ports. The seven villages were Manappadu, Alanthalai, Virapandipattanam, Punnaikayal, Thoothukudi, Vaipar and Vembar. Among the seven villages or ports, the Punnaikayal became the central place of the trade activities of the Portuguese, which is in the middle of fishery coast.

### **Trade**

The Portuguese started their trade activities in the fishery coast with marine products like pearls and Chanks. They also engaged in slave trade. Later they alter their horizons. In the second stage, they began trading in primary commodities like rice and textiles. Finally they shifted from intra-region trade

to intra-Asian trade by transportation of west Asian horses and Sri Lanka elephants to the fishery coast and carried saltpetre to Lisbon from the hinterland of Thoothukudi.

### **Pearl and Chank Fishing**

Pearl fishing was carried out at several locations of the fishery coast. Pearls were particularly rich at Kilakkarai, Vedalai, Pazhayakayal, Punnaikayal and Thoothukudi and along the entire fishery coast. Pearls and aljofar (seed pearls) were fished by the fishermen on the Kanyakumari coast also. Kanyakumari pearls were the same as those of the fishery coast. Like pearls, chank fishing too was carried out in the fishery coast. The Chank (Chanco in Portuguese) was called as the mother of pearls (turbinnella phrum) and divided into two categories. They are, the right looped or ‘valampuri’ and the left looped or ‘edampuri’ Chanks. In the fishery coast they were found between pearl banks and coral beds. Chanks were found both in Thoothukudi and to the north of it. They have also founded the quantity of islands situated around Thoothukudi.

### **Slave Trade**

Slavery was one of agents which preserved the marine interests of the Portuguese in India, especially in the fishery coast. The Portuguese were participating in slave trade right from the beginning of their appearance in the Indian Ocean. African slaves brought by them were largely well-intentioned for their own use (as labour, domestic servants, fighting men and ship hands) in the Estado da India (State of India). Portuguese officials and casados (married settlers) were the chief slave owning groups. Slaves were engaged in making saltpetre also.

### **Trade in Essential Commodities**

Apart from pearls, Chanks and slaves, there were other items of Portuguese interest on the fishery coast. Among them, rice and textiles played a crucial role. There were many other items which passed through the fishery coast to other coasts and countries. Thirunelveli provided rice to Sri Lanka and Malabar. The whole area up to Thirunelveli provided textiles to Sri Lanka and Malabar. In return they got pepper and spices from Malabar, betel nuts, elephants and

cinnamon from Sri Lanka and coconut produce from both the regions. Apart from rice and textiles, the Portuguese traders exported a number of items like pepper, sandal wood, tamarind, copper, vermilion, cloves and maize. So trade between the fishery coast and Europe and also between the west coast and the east coast were through the fishery coast.

### **Trade in Strategic Goods**

The Portuguese displayed a strong involvement in trade of war animals also. The import of war horses dates from the thirteenth century both in the north and South India and the Portuguese supply in this lucrative trade as the situation favoured this extensively.

### **Horse Trade**

The horses and elephants both were the high-priced animals. They had very close associations with the rich and the powerful. There was an important demand by the government of Vijayanagar for elephants and horses as they played an important role both in wars and in the royal paraphernalia. It resulted in the Portuguese dominance in horse trade. The Portuguese were reported to have sold horses as early as on 11 October 1512 to the Nayak of Kanyakumari region.

### **Export of Saltpetre**

There was world-wide competition particularly between the Portuguese and other European countries in establishing their settlement in the newly discovered areas. The Portuguese were also involved in the Thirty Years Wars (1618-1648). These factors enhanced the export of saltpetre from India to Portugal. Saltpetre was used mainly in preparation of gunpowder at essential item in every coloniser's armoury. The Portuguese were interested in exporting saltpetre from 1630 onwards for an economic reason too, they were on the look out for other trade items to balance the declining pearl trade. Located areas where saltpetre was abundant and entered into a series of contracts and agreements with the local rulers to get it.

The Portuguese demand for gunpowder for use within India was locally met by the gunpowder factory at Goa. The demand accrued at a steady

pace, and the factory at Goa was unable to produce as much quantity as was needed. The shortfall had to be compensated by the gunpowder factory at Lisbon. Therefore the Portuguese regime at Goa sent large quantities of saltpetre to Portuguese on the annual carracks to feed the Lisbon factory. Saltpetre was produced mainly through natural processes. Normally, it was mined in the form of brown-black dust and washed in the factories with water chemically treated. Saltpetre which was washed only once or twice was expected to be of a low-level quality. The Portuguese processed it again in their factory either at Cochin or at Goa before processing it as a final product or sending it to Portugal. Saltpetre which was washed thrice was of a medium quality and that which was washed four times, was considered to be the best. The Portuguese officials collected Saltpetre from Sindh, Palaghat Thoothukudi and Madurai. It was believed that the substance obtained at Madurai was the best, because it required only two washes for purification.

### **Elephant Trade**

The Portuguese were not the originator in the introduction of elephant trade to the Tamil Kingdoms. The Marakkayars were already importing elephants from Sri Lanka to Kilakkarai which were on sale in various places in the fishery coast. Since the Portuguese were in need of saltpetre they traded elephants return for saltpetre with the Nayak of Madurai. The merchants who traded in elephants obtain them in Sri Lanka and sent them to the fishery coast. The animals were sold at varying prices determined by the height of the elephants.

### **Conclusion**

The Portuguese presence, settlements and commercial activities on the fishery coast for more than a century brought tremendous changes on the fishery coast. Between such changes the coast never lost its uniqueness or identity but issue as one social entity with its rich diversity intact. The impact of the Portuguese rule was mainly in religious area and the shadow of this influence continued to be manifested in various forms. The Portuguese found that in the fishery coast certain social evils survive against women who were not treated on par with men.

Several measures have been taken by the Portuguese to address this issue. The Jesuit missionaries took up this as duty and sowed the seeds for the liberation of women in this part of the country. They also carried the task of nurturing the new Christian in their new belief. The colonial and commercial activities of the Portuguese changed the Parava polity and economy to a great extent.

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