



THE AFFINITY OF PANDYAS AND THEIR ANCIENT PEARL PORT KORKAI

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ABSTRACT

Korkai is a small village situated at a distance of 23 Kilometers from Srivaikuntam in the Thoothukudi district. Initially, Korkai, at the estuary of River Tamiraparani, was the dwelling area of Pandyas. It was an early Pandya capital and also the chief port of the Pandya Kingdom. Pandya Kings called themselves the rulers of Korkai. The Tamil Sangam classics like Agananur, Purananuru, and Maduraikanchi, the classical geographers of Western countries like Ptolemy, Periplus and the travellers like Marcopolo have left plentiful references as a prominent seaport of Pandyas and the centre of pearl fishery. Since Kayal emerged as a new commercial centre, Korkai had lost its fame due to the sea withdrawal from its coast. The style of the ancient Siva temple at Korkai also portrays the relationship between Korkai and Pandyas.

Keywords: Korkai, Pandyas, Port, Pearl Fishing, Trade, and Kayal

Introduction

South India's history in the early period was reigned by the Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras—the Pandyanadu comprising the districts of Madurai, Tirunelveli, and

Ramanathapuram. Korkai served as a significant port and capital in the Pandyas era. During the Sangam period, King Palyagasalai Mudukumi Peruvzhuthi, who hailed as the Pandyarathiraja, created the

Korkai nagar, and it served as the capital and also the capital of the Marokkamandalam east coastal region. This message was mentioned in Nakkirar's Erayanar Kalaviyal book. In the First Pandiyan Empire period, it was the capital of Kuda Nadu, a coastal region in the Pandiyan administration. An inscription in the Ten Tiruppuvanamudayar temple declares a gift of Sheep by Kilavan Appan alias Srivallabha Pandyakkon of Korkai in Kudanadu. An inscription in Uttamaplayam also mentions Korkai in Kudanadu. When the Pandya country came under the control of Chola, An inscription of Rajakesarivarman alias Chakravartin Kulothunga Chola deva reference Korkai alias Madurantakanallur in Kudanadu, a subdivision of Uttamasola valanadu district of Rajaraja-Pandinadu. Inscriptions of the Second Pandyan Empire Satayavarman Kulasekaran registered a sale of land, free of taxes, to the temple by Uravar of Korkai in Kudanadu. Thus, Korkai has remained the capital of Kudanadu for nearly two thousand years. The Pandya Kings who reigned from Korkai were addressed as Korkai Koman, Korkai Kon, Korkai Perunan, Korkai Venthan, Korkai Duravan, Korkai Yali. Similarly, Korkai is also termed Chezhyan Korkai, Narorvazhuthi Korkai, and Thennavan Korkai. (Caldwell,1881)

Pandyas, the Rulers of Korkai

Caldwell (1982) clarifies, "As per the ancient Puranas, the ancestors of the Pandyas, Cheras, and Cholas were three brothers; they existed and ruled in common at Korkai, the land near the mouth of the waterway Tamiraparani. The land held in common by all three was at Mukkani (the three properties) near Korkai. Eventually, a separation took place. Pandyan remained at home while Cholan and Cheran went forth to seek their fortunes and founded their kingdoms to the north and west. The Cholas seem to have ruled Tirchi and Thanjavur district while the Cheras established themselves in Travancore, Malabar, and Coimbatore; the Pandyas were in Madurai and Thirunelveli."

The Pandya Kings were referred to as "Maran" per the old inscription, and a specific part of Korkai was known as "Maramangalam". According to some ancient Tamil poets, Korkai was an eminent town in Southern India in Pandya's Kingdom. Agananuru, one of the eight anthologies of the Sangam period, portrays Korkai as a significant part of the Pandyan ruler Vazhuthi, who possesses a beautiful chariot which is yoked beautifully trotting horses whose hoofmarks cannot be traced on the ground covered-with-the excellent rayed pearls, which the surging waves yield



and also as a far-famed port and capital of Vetrivel Chezhiyan.

The Pathupattu applies Korkai Koman to the early Pandya King, who is not named. King Maravarman Vikrama Pandya is entitled Korkai Kavalan. The Pandya Kings are often referred to in the poems and inscriptions as “Korkaiali” or “Lord of Korkai”. In the Sangam period poetic work Maduraikanci by Mankudi Maruthanaar, he refers to his patron, King Neduchezhiyan, as the Lord of Korkai. Pandyan Neduchezhiyan is notorious for his bravery in the Talayalanganam war, where he fought against Chola, Chera, and five other Velir chiefs' armies and emerged victorious. Arikesari Parakrama Pandyan (1422-1462 A.D), the famous builder of the Tenkasi temple, was known as Korkai Venthan. The residents of the Korkai declared it was, at one time, the residence of Pandya Kings. Some soil and mango leaves from Korkai are still used in the chief festival of the Nellaiyappar temple at Tinnevely, contributing to the theory that Korkai should have been the seat of Pandyan rulers. The Pandyas conserved a well-qualified army and navy. Kayalpattinam and Korkai were the naval stations of the Pandyas. Korkai, the chief port of the Pandyas and the first Pandya ruler, Sirmara Srivallabha, might have started his invasion from this port.

Tamiraparani and Korkai

Thamirabarani is one of the significant perennial rivers in Pandya country. It is called Porunai since it originates from the Pothigai hills. (Pate,1917) It is mentioned in Sangam literature, such as Tholkappiyam and Purananooru as Than Porunai, and then the same evolved as Thamira porunai or Thamirabarani. Now, korkai is a murky, tiny village on the northern bank of the Tambraparani, four miles from its mouth. The ancient historical town Korkai abounds to Eral taluk. Previously, this village was in Srivaikuntam taluk in the Thoothukudi district. This village is less than eight kilometers from the shore of the Bay of Bengal.

Korkai was located where the river Tamirabarani meets the Gulf of Mannar. Korkai was an essential port of ancient Pandya kings, famous for trading and exporting pearls. Caldwell (1881) comments on a fascinating point regarding Tamirapani, pandyas, and Korkai. The renowned poet Kalidasa wrote Raghuvamsa in which he mentions Tamiraparani as “The Pandyas having prostrated themselves before Raghu presented to him as their glory, the collected excellence of the pearls of the ocean into which the Tamiraparani flows”, Thus the author describes that Pandyas

found pearls where the river Tamraparani confluence into the ocean.

Pearl Fishing at Korkai

Korkai was one of the most significant centres of pearl fishing in the ancient world. The ancient text Periplus of Erythraean Sea mentions that pearl fishing was conducted by enslaved people and convicted criminals at Korkai of Pandya Kingdom. The Roman scholar Pliny says that the first ranked and high-quality pearls were found aplenty on Taprobane, i.e., in the Tamraparani region. The geographer Ptolemy referred to Korkai as the headquarters and centre of Pearl Fishing during the Pandia reign. Marcopolo described in his book the province of Malabar, a part of the continent of more excellent India, which is situated sixty miles from the island of Zeilan in the western direction. The Sender-bandi was the chief's name, one of the four kings who dominated the world's noblest and most prosperous country. He also depicts pearl fishing occurring in the Gulf of Bay between the Maabar and the Zeilan islands in specific places; water is not more than two fathoms deep, and others ten to twelve fathoms deep.

There are so many proofs in the Tamil poem of the Sangam age that indicate that the Pandyas had control of the pearl fisheries at Kokai. Agananuru stated that

valiant Pandyas guarded the large port of Korkai, which produces pearls. The poet explains that the King's necklace is made of pearls taken from his sea. (S.M. Ganapathi,2016) Purananuru verse states that the Sandalwood from the Podya hills and the pearls from the sea belong to the Pandya King who ruled Madura. Tamil literature of the period, Thevaram, Seevagasindhamani, and Periapuranam, mention the pearls of this region but not their sources from the writings of Magasthens, the Greek Ambassador, and other foreign travellers; it is seen that the Pandya Kingdom was in a prosperous condition during that period.

The pearls of this country earned the Pandyas great fame both inland and foreign. Pearl fishing rights in this region were a significant reason for Cholas and Singhalese's invasion. Marco Polo states that pearl fishing was active in April and May. The chank fishery was an essential profession because they were used to make bangles. A lot of chank bangles were obtained in Korkai.

Pandya's Port

According to various Tamil Purana authors, this place is known to have been a seaport and a place of first-rate importance in South India because of its pearl fishing activities. According to Ptolomy Korkai, it was a noteworthy and vital port for its

commercial accomplishments with other countries. (Caldwell, 1881) The Arthashastra of Kautilya gives some evidence about the trade between the north and south in the age of the early Mauryan empire. In his interpretation of the articles that enlisted the royal reserves, Kautilya comprises pearls from the Tamiraparani River in the Pandyan country. It is also pertinent to note that the ancient Israeli King bought pearls from Korkai.

Korkai was a remarkable place for the Greek writer of The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, who gave detailed descriptions of the ports visited by seafaring traders and the list of articles imported and exported at each port. (Schoff,1912) Due to the extra approach to this port, it remains the main one compared to Nelcynda, a port in Kerala. It served as a port for the vessels moving from the west side, like Ormus, Chisti, and Aden, to Arabic Merchants. Ptolemy, the geographer, refers to Korkai as Kilkhoi emporium. Peutinger Tables map was a facsimile of an ancient Roman map; this port also mentions that.

The Greeks initially visited Korkai port, which encircled Cape Comorin. They called the Gulf of Mannar Colkhic Gulf, indicating the importance they assigned to Kilkhoi. (R. Sinna Kani,2007) Strabo mentions an embassy sent by an Indian

King to the Court of Augustus. He wrote that the embassy was from King Pandyan to acquire Augustus's relationship. This shows that trade and merchandise activities blossomed through Korkai during the Pandiyan era.

In Tiruvilaiyadalpuranam, Tamiraparani has been referred to as Sudhanadhi. At the same time, Ptolemy, in his works, cites that Korkai was based in the northern side of River Solen. As pronounced in Greek, Solen means Sudhanadhi. (R. Sinna Kani,2007). The excavation at this old port city revealed its contacts with Rome, Greece, Egypt, and China. To summarise, the place called Kolkhoi in the Mannar Gulf was familiar to the Greeks in ancient times for their overseas trading. The archaeological studies and the location of the village, as well as the traditions followed in the locality, evidenced that there was a significant port and a city where pearls were merchandised globally.

Kayal

Silappathikaram explained that when Kannagi, the wife of Kovalan, burnt the city of Madurai, the Pandya King fled to Korkai, made it his provisional capital, and reigned from the Korkai until Madurai was reconstructed. (Schoff,1912) Korkai's fame faded away after the change of capital to Madurai by Pandiyas at the end of the 5th

century A.D. Korkai unceasing to be the principal port for the pearl trade; however, river Tamaraparani was storing silt in the sea near its mouth Korkai was becoming more and more an inland town and was to end with neglected in favour of Kayal which rose on the delta made by river Tamraparani as its mouth. Marcopolo (1953) described the Kayal: "Cail is a great and noble city and belongs to Ashar, the eldest of the five brother kings. In this city, all the ships from Kis, Aden, and all of Arabia are touched, laden with horses and other things for sale. And this brings a great concourse of people from the country roundabout, and so great business is done in Cail." He explained about the city and the ruler of the town. Kayal was a significant trading place for merchants and foreigners since the city was well maintained and governed with peace and facilitation for trading activities without hindrance or fear. (Pate,1917) The King of Kayal was wealthy enough as he had an immense treasure of gold and jewels and liked to wear a lot of ornaments himself. During the Second Pandyan Empire, Kayalpattinam was a celebrated port town that imported horses from Arabia and other countries. (Pate,1917) Korkai was known as the mother city of Kayal, and it has the privilege of being the birthplace of the Pandyan empire. In Tamil literature, Kayal

means backwater and lagoon. The name Kayalpattinam came later, and it was referred to as Sonagarpattanam.

Korkai Siva Temple

According to an inscription at Akasalai Eswaramudaiyar temple, that was the 30th regnal year of First Kulothunga Chola. Another inscription belonging to the year B.C.1100 mentions Rajaraja Pandinattu Uttama Cholavalanattu Kutanattu Korkai alias Madhranthaganallur (T.V. Mahalingam, 1995). The design and style of the temple appear to be about the end of the ninth century A.D. or the beginning of the tenth century A.D. (Dhaky, Meister,1999). This Siva temple has square vimana without devakoshtas. It has Padabandha adhisthana and modest Brahmakanta pilasters. The hamsamala lower the prastara displays hamsas in profile. The vyalas overhead the kapota are exposed as complete figures in profile, rather extensively engaged. The nasis are in Pandya idiom, with broad mukhapattls and smaller gadhas. The kantha and prati carry maximum vyala figures in profile. The drive has kosthas that are empty. The Sikhara is square and has a vast Pandya-style mahanasis.

Conclusion

In the Sangam period, the Pandyas ruled from Korkai, an important seaport and capital. Korkai was the capital of the



Maroka mandalam east coastal region during the sangam age and it became the capital of Kudanadu, a small coastal administrative region located between Thoothukudi and Thiruchendur during the first Pandyan Empire and the Second Pandyan Empire. The relationship between Korkai and the Pandya remained until the end of the Pandyan empire, which was proved by the Adiveerarama Pandya, one of the later Pandya rulers who declared himself as Korkaiyali. The Pandyas had an undisputed monopoly in pearl fishing and pearl trading. During that time, the most significant pearls were exported to the Mediterranean countries from Pandya's port. This famed Pandya's Korkai remains a calm, small village.

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