



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

THOOTHUKUDI UNDER COLONIAL RULE

KEY WORDS: The Portuguese, the Dutch, the British, exploitations, Pearl Fishery coast

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to highlight the Colonial history of Thoothukudi District. 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 patronship of the 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 Portuguese. At the fag 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. In the years between 1658 and 1818 the British made several attempts to take over the affairs of the Pearl Fishery Coast. Finally, Thoothukudi was conquered by the British East India Company on 1st June 1825 and remained under their rule till the independence of India in 1947.

Introduction :

Thoothukudi otherwise known as Tuticorin, the Southern gateway of India, is the headquarter of the district in Tamil Nadu. It is about 540 km southwest of Chennai and geographically located in the Gulf of Mannar. The city of Thoothukudi is also known as "Pearl City" or "Thirumandhiranagar". Sangam literature and the travelogue of Ptolemy and others mention Thoothukudi as a trading centre. The region was abundant in marine wealth like the famous pearl oysters and the Chank. So various foreign and native rulers tried to control this area. With its resources Thoothukudi was a prize catch for the ancient rulers of South India as well for the European colonisers.

Glimpses of Thoothukudi :

Thoothukudi was mentioned by Ptolemy as 'Sousikarai'. Its anglicised name is 'Tuticorin'. Bishop Robert Caldwell noted in his "History of Tinnevely" the reason behind its name. The name might have originated from the acute water scarcity experienced by the people and their needs met by digging wells and drinking from them. Once exhausted, the wells were closed and the next was dug. The Cholas and the Pandyas, the representatives of the Vijayanagar emperors, the Nayaks of Madurai, the Sethupathis of Ramanathapuram, the Poligars, the Nawab of Arcot and local chieftains held control over this coast mainly for its lucrative revenue collected through the famous pearl fishing and the Chank fishing. In ancient days, the pearls from Thoothukudi had adorned the necks and crowns of the Roman queens. There was established pearl trade between this port and the Roman tradesmen (the Yavanas) also.

Under the Colonial Rulers :

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 patronship of the 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 Portuguese. The Mass Conversion in 1536 is a historic event which changed the history of Thoothukudi. The Paravas of Thoothukudi regained their lost right 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 pearls and the chanks of the Gulf of Mannar.

At the fag 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.

The British Arrival :

In the years between 1658 and 1818 the British made several attempts to take over the affairs of the Pearl Fishery Coast. Finally, Thoothukudi was conquered by the British East India Company on 1st June 1825 and remained under their rule till the independence of India in 1947. The Nawab of Carnatic defeated the Nayak of Madurai and became the ruler of the southern region of TamilNadu. The Nawab signed a treaty with the British East India Company and transferred his full right over the Pearl Fishery Coast to them. This enabled the British to collect all the revenues through tax in the region which included Thoothukudi and the Pearl Fishery Coast.

The Pearl Fishery and the Chank Fishery :

The economic importance of Thoothukudi continued during the British presence also. It has been noted by historians that during the 19th century, sixteen spells of pearl fishing were conducted under the supervision of the British rulers. The income through these fishing was not as attractive as that received by their predecessors, the Portuguese. A few pearl fishing conducted after 1900 at Thoothukudi were found to be almost failures in terms of the revenue brought. However the chank fishing, conducted every year fetched a constant income for the British agents. The population of pearl oysters in the Gulf of Mannar almost becomes extinct and deteriorated during this time either due to natural phenomenon or by extreme exploitations. The British set up a well organised department of fisheries in the Madras state to monitor these affairs. This included a scientific survey of the pearl banks and the chank beds. A government official in the rank of Superintendent of fisheries was appointed for this purpose. The coral reefs which were the feeding and nursery grounds for the oysters were clandestinely removed for making lime stones building materials.

Colonial Economy :

After the 17th century, with the out break of Industrial Revolution in England, there was a great need for cotton all over the world. By the end of 17th century, America exported Indian made "Country Cotton" to England. By now the English East India Company came to realise the quality of "Indian Cotton Goods" particularly those imported from Thoothukudi. It was given the name Tinnevely Cotton. After then, the English took steps to develop the production of cotton in India, particularly in and around Thoothukudi area. Britain had to depend on India for raw materials and food grains to feed the rising industrial population. So the Indians were exploited: indigenous industries were ruined and Indian economy was converted into a colonial economy. India became a market for manufactured British goods and a source for the supply of raw materials to her industries. Some Indian goods also were in good demand in European markets. The Europeans

gained huge profit by trading in Indian goods which drained the wealth of India and filled the British coffers.

Conclusion :

Thoothukudi was ruled by the Pandyas and the Cholas in early period. Later it was colonized by the Portuguese, Dutch and by the British. Even from Sangam Age the foreign traders came and had trade contact with Thoothukudi. Among the coastal areas in Tamil Nadu, Thoothukudi has the history of its own. It was the pearl fishing and trading centre for the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English. Britain had to depend on India for raw materials and food grains to feed the rising industrial population. So the Indians were exploited: indigenous industries were ruined and Indian economy was converted into a colonial economy. Thus Thoothukudi occupies an important place in the history of Tamil Nadu.

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