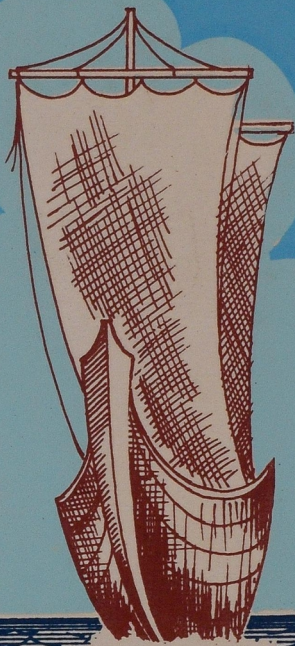


Maritime Trade of the Early Tamils



Dr. S. Padmanabhan

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(A research paper presented in the VII International
Conference - Seminar of Tamil Studies held in
Mauritius during December 1989)

Dr. S. PADMANABHAN

KUMARAN PATHIPPAGAM

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Maritime trade of the early Tamils
(A Research paper on Tamil Studies)

By Dr. S. PADMANABHAN

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Indian Council for Cultural Relations has sponsored the author of this book Dr. S. Padmanabhan as a delegate for the Seventh International Conference - Seminar of Tamil Studies held in Mauritius during December 1989. The author deems it a great honour conferred on him.

PREFACE

A symposium on 'South India and the Maritime Trade' was organised in the South Indian History Congress held at Poona University in the year 1988. I find that the historians who had presented research papers on the topic never touched the glorious history of the early Tamils in the maritime trade. This prompted me to delve into a study of the maritime trade of the early Tamils. The results of the study were presented in a paper read in the VII International Conference – Seminar of Tamil Studies held in Mauritius in the year 1989. At the request of several delegates the research paper is presented in a book form.

I am very much encouraged by the Foreword to this publication from Dr. N. A. Noor Muhammad the former Vice Chancellor of Calicut University. I also wish to express my sincere thanks to Prof S. Nagarajan who has helped me in scrutinising the typed script and correcting the proof.

20. State Bank Colony,
Nagercoil. 629 001
7th April, 1990

S. Padmanabhan

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Nagercoil,
30 March 1990.

FOREWORD

It gives me very great pleasure to give a foreword to the research article on "Maritime Trade of the Early Tamils" presented by Dr. S. Padmanabhan at the Seventh World Tamil Conference held in Mauritius during December 1989.

Dr. Padmanabhan has won a name and fame as a research scholar, who has brought to light the rich and glorious heritage of the Land's End of India - its history, its literature, its arts and architecture and its religions. His well-known monographs in these fields include "The Forgotten History of the Land's End", "The Contribution of Kanyakumari to the Tamil World" and "In and Around Kanyakumari".

Encouraged by the great success that has attended his endeavours, he has now widened his sphere of research to cover the maritime trade of the early Tamils.

Dr. Padmanabhan has based his research not only on literary evidence gleaned from Sangam literature and the writings of foreign travellers - Pliny, Ptolemy and Periplus - but also on the numismatic and archaeological evidences found in Kaveripattinam Korkai and Arikamedu in Tamil Nadu. The author

refers to the observations of two specialists in the field. On the basis of the evidence gathered during the Arikamedu excavations. Sir Mortimer Wheeler observes that the site was occupied by the Romans at the end of the 1st Century B.C. or the beginning of the 1st Century A. D. and sometimes in the 2nd Century A. D. Dr. Tanju Ozoral of Turkey was highly impressed by the similarity between the Roman pottery and other relics excavated in Arikamedu and those found in Antolia in Turkey. According to him, the pottery of Antolia was 1500 B.C. and on the other hand, those in Arikamedu were considered to belong to 100 B.C. Dr. Padmanabhan is therefore of the opinion that it is high time that we in India also adopt a more scientific method in arriving at the approximate date of such ancient relics.

Dr. Padmanabhan has to be congratulated for the commendable research he has done in preparing this article. Surely much more work still remains to be done. I have no doubt that the publication of this article will provide the necessary incentive to further research in this fascinating but challenging field of study.

N. A. Noor Muhammad

MARITIME TRADE OF THE EARLY TAMILS

In India, the Tamils were the pioneers to cross the seas in search of a market, for their products. There are concrete evidences to show that Tamil Nadu from very early times carried on trade by sea with several foreign countries. The very locale of the Tamil land which occupies a central position between West and East and having a curved coastal line of three oceans, the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian sea nurtured the sea trade from very early days. The Tamils travelled far and wide in the seas from the China coast land in the East to Rome in the west. People from Rome Greece and Arab Countries came to South India for trading purposes. All these facts have been confirmed by ancient Tamil literature, notes left by foreign travellers and Tamil words absorbed in Hebrew and Greek. Foreign coins and other materials found in the excavations made in the coastal areas of Tamil Nadu also confirm the maritime trade of the early Tamils. This paper deals in broad outline of the ancient and prosperous maritime trade of the Tamils.

The importance of trade is emphasised by the ancient Tamil Poet Thiruvalluvar in his work Thirukkural thus;

“The requisites for a prosperous state are industrious producers, good and learned men forming the elite and high minded men of wealth”¹

Here men of wealth denotes businessmen of the society. An industrious labour force, knowledge and wealth are the elements that make a prosperous state says Thiruvalluvar. Thus the importance of trade had been duly recognised by the society of the ancient Tamil Nadu.

There were two types of trade namely inland and overseas in ancient Tamil Nadu. The persons who were engaged in inland trades were called Sathuvan and the leader of the traders was known as Masathuvan. Sea trader was called Manaikkan. The word Manaikkan is from the word ‘Navai’ which means ship. Kovalan, the hero of the Tamil epic ‘Silappathikaram’ was the son of Masathuvan, a great trader in land. Kannagi, the wife of Kovalan was the daughter of Manaikkan, a great trader in sea. The best trader was awarded the title ‘Etti’² and presented a shield named “Ettippoo”.³

1. Kural 731

2. Silappathikaram XV. 163 - 164.

3. Manimekalai 22 : 111 - 114.

Tholkappiyam which is considered to be earliest, grammatical work in Tamil literature throws much light on the social history of the Tamil Country in ancient days. It reflects an age long and characteristic civilization developed by the Tamil Country before they came into contact with the Aryans. A verse in Tholkappiam mentions the persons who left for trading purposes to earn money.⁴ It further records that the Tamils went overseas alone without taking their women folk.⁵ This fact confirms the overseas trade of the early Tamils. The aphorism of the Tamil poetesst Avvaiyar to seek fortune even by sea faring corroborates the fact that the early Tamils were great seafarers.

Certain words in Hebrew and Aramaic apparently borrowed from Tamil language suggest trade relations between Tamil Nadu and the Western Countries in ancient days. Of them Betel resembling Vetri-lai, Hel (Elam), Ortez, (Arisi), Zengvil (Ingiver), Pilpal (Tippili), Ahal (Ahil) and Tukki (Thogai) are striking instances. These linguistic relations have been confirmed by Prof. Robin of Jerusalem in his lecture in the year 1968.⁶ Some of these words have entered into the Greek language too. The Greek names Oryze

4. Tholkappiyam Porul 30.

5. Tholkappiyam Porul 37.

6. Hand Book of II International Conference - Seminar on Tamil Studies. Madras Page 112.

for rice and Zingiber for ginger are almost identical with their Tamil names Arisi and Injiver. It clearly shows that the Greek merchants conveyed these articles and their names to Europe from the Tamil land.⁷ The word pearl is derived from the Tamil word 'paral' a kind of pearl. These are suggestive of early maritime trade of the Tamils with the countries in the west.

The early commercial contacts of the Tamils with foreign countries arose primarily because Tamil Nadu possessed certain commodities which were not available elsewhere, pepper, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon turmeric, saffron, pearl, ivory, cotton, textile goods, certain categories of rare birds and animals - all these caught the fancy of the people in the distant countries and were in great demand.

Pepper was very much liked by Yavanas. So it was known as Yavanapriya. Pepper as well as ginger are found mentioned in Gracco-Roman Pharmacopoeia even in the early half of the first century AD. Most of the historians of Roman Empire including Gibbon attribute the taste of the Romans for pepper and the spices as one of the major causes for the downfall of the empire, for, they had to export gold in order to meet the demand of the people for a large quan-

7. Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years ago -
V. Kanakasabai, Page 31.

tity of pepper and spices, and this demand had drained the national treasury and paved the way for the decline of the empire.⁸ The foregoing historical evidences clarify the fact that the foreign trade of Tamil Nadu centred mostly on commodities like pepper and the spices. Gold might have flowed in large quantities from the western countries and the ancient Tamil Nadu enjoyed prosperity and tranquillity.

The Sangham literature gives a fund of information regarding the maritime - trade of the early Tamils. "Pattinapalai" gives a fine pen picture of the ancient Chola sea - port Kaveripattinam. The port, the ships at anchor, the warehouses and piles of merchandise are all graphically described in the poems. The most prominent articles or exports were gold from Kongu country, pearl from Pandyanadu, sandal from Chera country and pepper from Coorg. The city was a great emporium and port. The import and exports piled up in the customs house looked like hills. They were stamped with the Chola tiger emblem by the officers who were vigilant.

"Madurai Kanchi" gives a detailed description of the city of Madurai, the Pandya capital just as Pattinapalai that describes Kaveripattinam, the Chola

8. Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of Roman Empire - J. B. Bury, Volume III, Page 312.

capital. The city carried an extensive trade even with such distant places like Rome. Traders crossed the high seas, and such things as horse were imported; and pearls gems, conch shells, bangles, salt, dried fish and tamarind were exported. Being a great emporium the city was cosmopolitan, and men of different races, creeds and tongues were found in the city. The hero of "Perumpanatrupadai" another Sangham classic is Thondaman Ilanthirayan, the ruler of Kanchipuram. Ilanthirayan was a chief of a maritime tribe called Thirayar which means seaman. The Thirayars were a seafaring race.

The glimpses of an active maritime trade of the Tamils, the articles of import and export and the description of different types of boats described in the early Sangham literature can no longer be dismissed as fanciful and poetic exaggeration. The literary evidence tallies remarkably with the data furnished by the foreign writers of the early centuries of the Christian era and the vestiges including foreign coins found in different parts of Tamil Nadu during excavations

The brisk trade flowed through ports located on both the western and the eastern coasts. Musiri Varkala, Colachel and Muttam on the west coast and Leepuram, Ovari, Korkai, Nagapattinam, Kaveripattinam and Mahabalipuram on the eastern coast were the ancient ports of Tamil Nadu used for export and import. A detailed description of the ancient ports

of Tamil Nadu are found in Sangham Classics. Ships from east and west reached these ports. Both foreign and national ships were seen anchored in these ports for export and import. The ports were equipped with light houses exhibiting blazing light at night to guide ships to ports as stated in the Tamil text. The notes and writings of Pliny, Ptolemy and Periplus contain valuable information to supplement the account of these ports construed from the classics.

There are references in the Sangham classics to the different types of boats and ships used for transport. Among the earliest known sea craft in India the fishing craft takes the first place. The catamaran was a typical craft for fishing purposes. The origin of this English word Catamaran is from the Tamil word Cattumaram. It was of 2 or 3 logs of wood secured by coir ropes. Split bamboos being used as paddles. In Tamil Nadu small boats were called parisal, thoni, odam and ambi. The big sized boats were known as Vankam, Navai and Kalam. Some of these words are used in Tamil Nadu even today.

With growing interest in trade boat building was undertaken on a large scale. Boat designs have been many and they varied from place to place. "Silapathikaram" mentioned a number of boats in different sizes and shapes. The main varieties mentioned are like

those of horses, elephants and lions⁹. There were huge ships like moated palace¹⁰. A verse in Ahananuru mentions a ship equipped with all facilities¹¹.

We learn from Purananuru that one of the predecessors of Karikala Chola navigated his boat with the help of the sea wind¹². Manimekalai talks about the grave experiences of Sathuvan who has escaped from the whirlwind in the sea during his travel to Java¹³. Pathirrupathu speaks about the boats sailing in the high seas being blown here and there because of the strong winds¹⁴. Kurinchipattu compares a ship sinking in the seas with the mountain being enveloped by darkness¹⁵. In Madurai Kanchi Mankudi Maruthanar describes a ship caught in a whirl pool.¹⁶ In spite of the dangerous situations in the navigational operations the Tamils used to travel across the high seas from very early days.

Dr. Cyril A. Hromnik of United States who made a field survey in South Africa recently furnished very

9. Silapathikaram XIII, 175 - 180.

10. Puram 338.

11. Akam 255.

12. Puram 66.

13. Manimekalai 72.

14. Pathirrupathu 8 ; 6.

15. Kurinchippattu 240 : 5 - 7.

16. Madurai Kanchi 375 - 399.

interesting facts regarding the maritime history of the early Tamils. According to his theory the Tamils are the pioneers to cross the sea in different directions with the help of their Kattumarams. Their navigation was based on stars and winds rather than instruments. Since the time of the Queen of Sheba, who employed some of the Tamil sea traders, Dravidians had possessed seaworthy ships that enabled them to navigate across the sea without having to coast. These ships according to the early Jatakas, were big enough to embark hundreds of merchants and emigrants. The Muslims as well as the Portuguese sea captains availed themselves of the experienced Indian pilots who were available in various ports of India, East Africa, Arabia, Persia, Indonesia and Ethiopia in ancient days. For instance, the ships of Vasco da Gama were guided from Malindi to Calicut, not coasting, but across the ocean straight to Calicut by a Dravidian pilot known as Malemo Canaqua a derivative form of the Tamil name Malumi Kanakan. The small sea craft Catamaran apparently went to East Africa at an unknown early date and became the main coastal craft of Africa. Over the centuries, its shape was modified and developed into a fairly large boat able to load upto 30-40 tons, but its name Mtepe or Mitepe which has been derived from the Tamil word Mithappu is not changed. Thus the findings of Dr. Cyril Hromonik give a new light to the maritime history of the early

Tamils. (The author of this article had a chance to meet Dr. Cyril Hromnik in the VII World Tamil conference held in Mauritius)

The excavations made in various sites of Tamil Nadu like Kaveripattinam, Korkai and Arikamedu reveal the glorious maritime trade of the early Tamils. The foreign coins unearthed in Tamil Nadu represent many countries including ancient Rome, Venice, China, Arabia etc. The Roman coins are the earliest of the European coins to be found in India. Sixty eight types of Roman coins have been discovered in India. Of them about fifty seven types were found in South India.¹⁷ Gold and Silver coins of this class have been unearthed from a number of places among which mention must be made of Coimbatore, Madurai, Salem Tirunelveli and Malabar coast. The period of these finds ranges from the 3rd century BC to 2nd century AD. The coins of almost all the important Roman emperors are represented in these finds. A large number of Roman gold and silver coins belonging to the period of emperors Augustus and Tiberius have been unearthed in many places in Tamil Nadu.¹⁸

The excavations at Arikamedu near Pondicherry have revealed that it was a centre of trade with

17. Studies in the Cultural history of India -

Guy Metreax Page 62.

18. Indian Express, Madurai dated 2-5-89.

Greco - Roman world. On the basis of internal and external evidences furnished by the Arikamedu excavations Sir Mortimer Wheeler concludes that the site was occupied by the Romans at the end of the 1st century BC or the beginning of the 1st century AD and sometimes in the 2nd century AD¹⁹. During his visit to Arikamedu Dr. Tanju Ozoral, Assistant Director General of Antiquities and Museum of Turkey said that he was struck by the similarity of Roman pottery and other relics found in Arikamedu and in Antolia in Turkey. According to Ozoral the pottery of Antolia were 1500 BC old.²⁰ But in India these pieces were dated only 100 BC old. The method of arriving at the date adopted in Turkey is more scientific. So on this basis, the Indian date would have to be suitably revised.

Thus the Sangham classics, the writing of the foreign authors and the relics found in the excavations throw light on glorious sea trade of the early Tamils. It is regrettable to note that no attempt has been made so far in the field of excavation and underwater archaeology in the western coast of South India which is very near to the European and

19. Ancient India - Sit Mortimer wheeler page 24.

20. Indian Express, Madurai, dated 27-11-83.

Arabian countries. The history of India, particularly of Tamil Nadu can be wonderfully recovered if any excavation in the land and historical research under the sea in the western coast of South India are undertaken,



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By S. Padmanabhan

**(A paper presented in the World Hindu Conference
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Price : Rs. 3-00

... Here is a sincere attempt by an author who has many good books to his credit, to present in capsular form the fundamentals of Hinduism and comparisons with other great religions like Christianity and Islam to show how they have much in common with our religion.

The author feels rightly so, that Hinduism in its broader sense should include religions like Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. He also says that Christianity and even Islam have been influenced to a great extent by Buddhism. Jesus Christ had a fascination for India from his childhood and the life history of Jesus from his 13th to 30th year is not clearly depicted. It is surmised that he came to India and studied the philosophies propounded by our holy sages during this period. Similarly Hinduism's contribution to Islam according to the author was significant. The word Arabia has its origin in the Sanskrit word Arva meaning horse, and it was called by that name, meaning the land of horses. Before the rise of Islam Hinduism was practised there.

The author has many more interesting points to make which all deserve to be studied very closely. To put out all these facts it requires great courage which the author seems to have in abundance. A very interesting book indeed!

IN AND AROUND KANYAKUMARI

BY

S. PADMANABHAN

In the esteemed presence of His Holiness Jagadguru Sri Sankaracharya Sri Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal of Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam, the multicoloured editions of the book "IN AND AROUND KANYAKUMARI" were released by His Excellency Shri Prabhudhas B. Patwari, Governor of Tamil Nadu in the Hindu Religious Writers' Conference held at Kanyakumari on Saturday, the 25th March 1978. His Holiness received the first copies of all the versions. This book has been translated by well-known authors in all the National languages of India and also in French.

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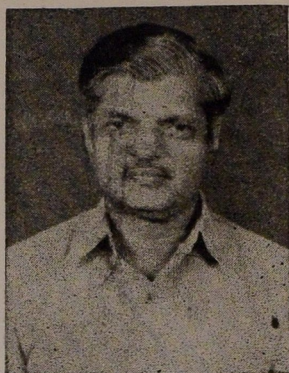
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Mr. S. Padmanabhan with his home town at Nagercoil in Tamil Nadu was born at Trivandrum in Kerala on 31st March, 1934. He graduated from the University of Travancore in 1956 and entered State Bank Service in 1957. He is a gold medalist in Indian philosophy and has sustained interest in the history, religion and culture of India. He has carved a reputation for himself by his study of Temple - architecture in South India. He is a well-known broadcaster and producer of special features on temples for All India Radio.

His articles have appeared in most of the popular prestigious Magazines and Dailies in India and abroad. He has participated and presented Research Papers at several International Conferences on Religion Culture and Tamil Studies. In recognition of his outstanding contributions he was awarded a Doctorate Degree by the World University Round table of U. S. A. in a function held at New York.

This book is the text of the research paper presented by the author in the International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies held in Mauritius during December 1989.