



“Pearling' in the Gulf of Mannar

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Sri Lanka carries various names such as Pearl of the Indian Ocean, Taprobane, Tear drop in the Indian Ocean, Serendib etc. There is a legend that says that aristocratic queen Alli lived in the area near Kuduramali which is located north of Puttalam not too far from the Pearl fishing area Arripu. The legendary story projects her as a great feminist who ruled the area north of Puttalam near Ponparripu which was destroyed by a natural catastrophe. Queen Alli later submitted her self to the brave Pandava prince Arujuna. Like Cleopatra she was lover of pearls and the historians are of the view that Pearl fishing in Arippu area existed thousands of years ago and was exported to middle east in exchange of horses the Arabs brought to Kudiramalai. The name itself signifies the location as Horse point, one time popular seaport. The coral reef from Kalpitiya to Mannar was exploited by many foreign traders. Ecologist fear that this natural richness may be destroyed if Sethusamudram project is implemented. There is no evidence for such stories but during the British rule Pearl fishing did thrive in that region. Romans loved pearls. Beauty queen of Egypt, Cleopatra possessed two

expensive pearls. Those pearls were one time owned by a King from East and she bought them from him because of her love for pearls. She dissolved one of the two pearls in Vinegar and drank it to increase beauty. The value of pearls gradually decreased when artificial pearls came into the market.

The most abundant supplies like Rome's famous *lapilla Indica* in the first century came from the pearl banks in the Gulf of Mannar in Sri Lanka via India. Sri Lanka is regularly mentioned as a source of pearls not only in Buddhist and Indian literature, but also by Greek and Roman writers. "Salapam" in Tamil means pearling. There is coastal village near Arripu by the name Silvathurai which is different from the Tamil name for Chilaw 32 miles south of Puttalam.

There is a season for pearling. During that season one time Arripu harbour was full of people from various countries. Today nearly every pearl in the world market is cultured - grown by humans. The Japanese akoya pearl oyster, which produces most of the pearls in the world, is Mari cultured. It is born in a hatchery where eggs and sperm are artificially combined. In the Polynesian islands in the Pacific, the lagoons formed by the atolls play the true parent where oysters spawn naturally, and it is only when they combine to form larvae that they are surgically treated to generate nacre or the Pearle scent substance that forms the pearl.

The history of Sri Lankan pearl industry stretches to the period of King Vijaya. The Mahawamsa notes him, sending his father-in-law, the Pandu King of India, "a shell pearl worth twice a hundred thousand (pieces of money)" at that time. Thereafter, it records King Devanampiyatissa, sending priceless treasures to King Asoka of India, including "eight kinds of pearls." And it was not only with India that Sri Lanka of ancient times traded in pearls. Megasthenes a Greek writer of the 4th century BC, notes that "the island of Taprobane was more productive of gold and large pearls than the Indias."

The colonial masters who ruled Sri Lanka for 300 years exploited and made good use of the pearl resources in Sri Lanka. In fact, the profits from pearl fishery and the need of transporting the pearl harvest made the English open up a road from Anuradhapura to Arippe as early as 1833. And it was in the late 1800s that Sri Lanka then known as Ceylon made a special link with the western coasts of Australia, due to pearls.

The divers who are involved in pearl fishing were named "Mukuvar" in Tamil and the caste name was derived from their profession as they have to hold their breath and dive into the deep sea. Divers were a superstitious lot who were afraid of shark attack, so the government employed shark-charmers to provide them with the necessary incantations to ensure their safety while on the job.

Divers operated at an average depth of about 9 fathoms. They seldom remained underwater for more than one minute each time they dived, using a nose clip to hold their breath. To enable them to reach the surface as quickly as possible, they would go down on a stone through which a rope was passed. When they needed to come up again for air, they would tug on the rope and be hauled up with the stone. The oysters they collected and put into a bucket would be hauled up at the same time.

Normally the brother in law of the diver goes with him to hold the rope that controls the movement of the diver under the sea. When he feels uncomfortable he signals the person who holds rope by jerking the rope and immediately he is pulled to the surface. The reason for brother-in-law getting involved in this action is because only he, for the affection for his sister will look after the safety of the life of his sister's husband.

Those days the pearl fishing went on all day until another gun fired by the Superintendent called the boats back. The collection of shells from each ship would be placed in one of the hut compartments in the kudu in three equal heaps. Two heaps would be the government's share and the other heap would go to the divers.

At the auctions held each evening, the Jaffna Government Agent's representatives would oversee the government's share. The divers made their own deals.

How did the pearl fall into the hands of humans? Is it by an act of God? No one knows exactly. Anthropologists and historians give credit of the discovery to those coastal civilizations in the Indian peninsula and to the riverine civilizations of China and the Americas. Whatever the origins are, the high regard for pearls could be noted in the fact that almost all civilizations valuing it as a symbol of wealth, prosperity and royalty. No wonder it was the most cherished and coveted gem of all, for in ancient times it was just one out of about 15,000 oysters collected that had the possibility of bearing a natural pearl.

The natural pearl is formed as a protective reaction of the oyster, stimulated by a foreign object such as a grain of sand or even a small parasite intruding its sensitive inner tissue. To diffuse the intruder, the oyster encapsulates it in layers of nacre or the mother of pearl secretion, and the pearl grows in size as the number of layers increases. Pearls are formed in shelled mollusc such as oysters, mussels, clams, conch and abalone living in freshwater as well as in the seas.

References:

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