



The rise and fall of Vizhinjam

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ABSTRACT

Vizhinjam is a small port town situated about twelve kilometers south of Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala. Before the rise of Thiruvananthapuram to historical limelight, Vizhinjam played a similar role in the past. Though it was a fishing harbor, what made Vizhinjam popular was spice trade, especially pepper trade. Before the eighteenth century Pepper was not produced anywhere in the world except in Kerala and it was termed as 'Black Gold'. The profit derived from spice trade made Vizhinjam prosperous, and it invited the territorial and economic greedy eyes of other kings. First it was the turn of Pandyas and later it was Cholas who engaged in the 'scramble for Vizhinjam'. The continuous wars and the consequent destruction ended the power and prestige of Vizhinjam and when it came to the twelfth century it lost its economic, political and strategic importance and was reduced to a mere fishing harbor and is continuing in the present day also. But in 2015, Adani Group started the construction of a new International Transshipment Terminal, which again gave a new lease of life to Vizhinjam, and it is expected that Vizhinjam will get back its former glory once the construction of it is completed.

INTRODUCTION

Relevance of the study :

Vizhinjam was most important town of South Kerala before the rise of Thiruvananthapuram. This prestige and power invited the South Indian kings to conquer it. The Pandyas and Cholas repeatedly attacked it to secure economic and political fortunes. Due to this repeated attack Vizhinjam was transformed in to a mere fishing harbor. No serious attempt has been made by any historians to find out the unexpected collapse of a very prestigious and powerful South Indian town. This study is mainly tracing the rise, history, and fall of Vizhinjam, which was the main focal point of South Indian political and economic history.

Aims and objectives of the study :

The present study is aimed at different aspects of the history of Vizhinjam (Kumar, 2006). First, it is aimed to find out the reasons for the rise of Vizhinjam to historical limelight. Here an attempt is made to find out the various geographical, political and economic reasons which favoured for the rise of Vizhinjam. The study then attempts to find out the motive of different Pandyan and Chola kings who had attacked and captured it. Finally the study traces the reasons for the fall of Vizhinjam to one of the insignificant ports in South India.

The article prepared on the basis of both archival and secondary sources. Methodology applied in the study is mainly historical, narrative, analytical and argumentative. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala conducted excavations in this area in 2011, 2012 and 2013 and the artifacts found out from this place

are of great help to reconstruct the history of Vizhinjam. So archaeological sources are also used for corroborating the Primary and Secondary sources.

History of Vizhinjam at a glance :

There are a number of theories explaining the origin of the name 'Kerala'. One theory says that it is derived from the fusion of two words one is 'Kera' and the other is 'Ralanam'. 'Kera' means water and 'Ralanam' means submerged. If we rely on this literal meaning or on the scientific studies of the Geologists, one thing is sure a good portion of Kerala was submerged in water. Kerala is blessed with nearly 44 rivers in the present time. But in ancient time it might be four to five times more than the number of rivers of the present time. The monsoons brought torrential rainfall leading to flooding of rivers and the consequent isolation of places from their neighboring locality. May be this threat of water drove away the people from the plains to the hill sides. In other parts of the world while rivers formed the cradle of culture, in this part of the earth it was hillsides which sung the lullaby of early cultures.

The people lived on the hillsides had their social and political life. They had their families and their main profession was cattle rearing. Some ancient texts say that these people came to this part from Dwaraka along with sage Agastya and they were the followers of Lord Krishna. Anyway, there is a similarity between the profession of these people and the profession followed by the Yadavas or Vrishnis of North India. The first dynasty established by this people who lived on the hillside is called Ay dynasty. The literal meaning of Ay is shepherd. They had their family system and a number of families formed into a small political association called 'Vel'. By conquering other state this 'Vel' political units began to enlarge and became comparatively big states extending three districts such as Kollam, Pathanamthitta and Nagercoil of the present day Kerala and Tamil Nadu states.

They had their capital at Aykudi, in Thenkasi near Kuttalam waterfalls. The Ay Vels produced some excellent kings like Anthiran, Thithiyan and Aathiyan. Their rising power invited the hostility of Pandyas and Pandian kings named Pasumpam Pandian attacked the Ay kingdom. The Ays found to be less than a match for Pandiyas. Defeated and driven by them, the Ays fled to Kanyakumari district where they had set up their new

capital at Kottar in Nagercoil district.

There also the condition of Ays were very much precarious, as they had to face the hostility of Pandiyas and Cholas. This compelled them to shift their capital further from Koyttar to another prosperous port town called Vizhinjam.

Vizhinjam was an affluent place and its economic power was as a result of spice trade. Pepper and other spices grown in different parts of Western Ghats were brought to Vizhinjam in boats and sold it to the foreign merchants who came to this town. There was a water way which connected Western Ghats and Vizhinjam at that time and this boosted spice trade. Other important advantage of Vizhinjam was the natural depth of the sea which accommodate even bigger ships of that period. Vizhinjam also had a natural ship anchoring yard created by a channel of a big dead river of an erstwhile age. This channel having a length of nearly two hundred meters is a peaceful place where no sea wave reaches and provided resting place for foreign ships.

Due to these advantages, Vizhinjam was a favorite hub of foreign traders. Pepper was known as Black Pearl, was very much liked by the westerners as it was used for preserving food items and as a great appetizer. Up to 18th century Pepper was produced nowhere in the world. So the foreigners began to throng in the sea ports of Kerala. The period from 5th century to 7th century is known as the dark age of Kerala history as much of the developments in period is shrouded in mystery. But from that darkness Kerala history and the history of Ays began to come out when a Pandian king called Ari Kesari (670-700) attacked Vizhinjam, which was the capital of Ay kingdom. The economic prosperity of Vizhinjam might be the reason for this attack. His successor Kochadayan (700-730) also attacked Ays of Vizhinjam. Apart from economic considerations the prosperity of Vizhinjam as reflected in a magnificent fort, which might have attracted the attention of this invader. During that period Vizhinjam had a fort which was surrounded on its three sides by water. Contemporary writers say that it was very beautiful like that of the court at Sri Lanka. The towers of this fort felt like touching the sky. Another wonderful thing regarding this port was the inner walls of this fort which was fixed with golden plates. Naturally this prosperity might have tempted the Pandiyan kings Kochadayan, his son Raja Simhan (730-765) and grandson, Maran Chadayan (765-815). We don't have any information

regarding the Ay kings who ruled Vizhinjam up to the period of Raja Simhan. But during the time of Maran Chadayan, Vizhinjam was ruled by a king called Chadaiyan. He was followed by his son Karunandan. During the time of this king also Vizhinjam was attacked twice.

By the end of 8th century Vizhinjam was ruled by a king called Karunandaruman. During his time also Pandyas tried to invade Vizhinjam but as a result of the timely action, Pandyas could not succeed and they were defeated at a place called Karaikottai. The Ays had inflicted severe damage to the strength of Pandian forces. The next Pandian king called Sri Vallabha was also not different from his ancestors. Attacking, annexing, and if possible destroying Vizhinjam was the main aim of the Pandyas. He was also motivated by the desire to avenge the defeat of his ancestors. This raid of Sri Vallabha was also not a complete success. After short period of subjugation, the Pandyas were driven out from the land. The next Ay king was Karunandadakkan. He ruled for nearly 22 years and he is famous in the history of Ay kings because he was responsible for the foundation of two important 'Sala' or educational and the military training centers. The first Sala known as 'Kanthalloor Sala' was founded at Vizhinjam. This was very famous at that time so that it was called the 'Nalanda of the South'. The curriculum of this Sala included grammar, Buddhadarshan, Sanghadarshan, Vaisheshika darshan, Mimamsa darshan, Music, Literature, Arts, etc. Buddhism and Jainism was very much famous at that time in Kerala and the curriculum of the Sala reflected this religious literature also. Apart from this, military training was also given to the students. Some historians argue that the teaching of the tenets of Buddhism and Jainism and military training might have infuriated the Pandyas and the Cholas in the years to come. Because Pandyas and Cholas were ardent followers of Hinduism and they could not tolerate the teaching of heterodox sects and military training at Kanthalloor Sala. Karunandadakkan also opened another Sala at a place called Parthiva- sekharapuram, which is situated in the present Kanyakumari district. His reign is also famous due to the importance given to military science and arms manufacturing. A Famous arms manufacturing unit and an arsenal was situated in Vizhinjam at that time. The responsibility for the management of this unit was given to a person called Aviyalanradakkan, otherwise known

as Sri Vallabha Perumpanakkan. One positive aspect of his regime was the importance given to arms manufacturing and the military education. Due to this Pandyas did not invade Vizhinjam at that time. Karunandadakkan stepped down from the Throne in 885AD. He was followed by the greatest ruler of Ay dynasty and his name was Vikramaditya Varaguna. He ruled between 885 to 925. He was a follower of Buddha, but he had followed religious toleration and he gave gifts to both Hindus and the Jains. Unlike other Ay rulers, we are getting some direct information regarding his rule from a copper plate known as Paliyam copper plate. This copper plate begins by indicating the Buddhist leaning of the king. Unlike his predecessors, Vikramaditya Varaguna had to face the invasion of Cholas. This is well indicated in this Copper plate and it is said that Paranthaka Chola was creating severe threat to the kingdom. Unable to face the onslaught of Parantaka Chola, Varaguna had given the kingdom to a Buddhist Shrine called 'Sreemoolavasam' and the responsibility for protecting the kingdom was entrusted to a person called Veera Kotha. This Veera Kota was none other than the heir-apparent to the Chera throne. With this incident, Vizhinjam lost its prominence as a capital town. But it continued as an important port town under the Cheras.

Once the menace of the Pandiyas were over, Vizhinjam had to face another big danger from the Cholas. To face this problem an arsenal was started at Vizhinjam and Kanthalloor Sala was converted into a military training centre. Again the Cheras dug big trenches and built several citadels to face the eminent danger from Cholas. As had been expected, the Chola came to attack Chera after defeating the Pandyan Kingdom. The army was headed by Chola king called Raja Raja Cholan. He attacked Vizhinjam and destroyed Kanthalloor Sala. The Navy anchored at Vizhinjam was not spared and was destroyed. After keeping some soldiers in the conquered places, Raja Raja returned back. Taking advantage of this opportunity the Cheras attacked and expelled the Chola contingent. This infuriated Raja Raja Chola and he had made another attack on Cheras around 1004-1005 period. He had acted in a very systematic manner. Dividing the army into three groups, Raja Raja proceeded to attack South Kerala. He had sent one section of the Army from the Northern part, another section from the southern part and he equipped the Chera navy to make a lightning attack on the port city of

Vizhinjam. The Chera army stationed at Vizhinjam could not stem the tide of Chola invasion and surrendered before them. The Cholas captured Vizhinjam and destroyed the Navy stationed there. The next Chola king was none other than Rajendra Chola (1012-1044). He also could not keep away from the temptation of attacking the prosperous town of Chera Empire. Rajendra Chola was known as the 'Alexander of India'. He was not ready to be satisfied with Indian procession alone. He attacked Ceylon in 1018 A.D. After that he turned his attention towards Vizhinjam. In 1019 AD he attacked and conquered Vizhinjam. He rechristened Vizhinjam as 'Rajendra Chola Pattanam'. Kanthalloor Sala which was working both as a centre of Vedic education and military training centre was razed to ground by this great warrior. In order to capture the capital of Chera Empire Rajendra Chola marched to north.

The next Chola Kings were Rajadhirajan and Kolathunga Chola. They also followed the same policies of their ancestors when they attacked Vizhinjam and Kanthalloor Sala. In most of the inscriptions of Cholas there is a statement like "Kanthalloor Salai Kalam Arutharuli" and the Chola Kings took pride in stating so. Historians have different views regarding what it means. Majority of them argue that it means 'destroyed the fate of Kanthalloor Sala'. Even though the Cholas made these type of spectacular achievements, they could not keep the places of Kerala, including Vizhinjam for a long time. They were expelled from these places.

But the repeated attacks and destruction sealed fate of Vizhinjam, and Chera Kings deserted this once prosperous port town. The other developments happened at that time also adversely affected the fate of Vizhinjam. One such development was the falling down of the surface water level and the consequent drying out of the river which connected Western Ghats and Vizhinjam. As a result of this, the transportation of pepper and other spices came to an end. This was a big blow to the economic prosperity of Vizhinjam, as this place derived its wealth from the spice trade with other foreign powers. This situation was utilised by the neighboring port towns like Kollam and Kolachal. These ports became very much prominent after the decline of Vizhinjam port. Other important development was the rise of Thiruvananthapuram as a temple city. With the rise of Brahminical Hinduism and Padmanabhaswamy Temple at Thiruvananthapuram, this temple city became the

most important point of attraction which also adversely affected the prestige of Vizhinjam.

After the 12th century A.D, Vizhinjam could not keep its former glory and remained as a small fishing harbour. Vizhinjam had passed through several stress and strain of history. Majority of the marks that time has made on Vizhinjam had vanished from the shores of Vizhinjam. But there are something which stand erect questioning the march of time. They are nothing but six hindu temples. The people here had changed everything. But due to the sanctity attached to the temples, they were spared because of the fear of divinity attached with the temple. The Rock Cut Temple which was made in the 8th century is one among them. It was made by the Ay kings and art historians like Kramrich comes to the view that it is having similarity with Pallava style. A few temples are devoted to Lord Siva and Goddess Bhagavathi. Majority of these temples are not properly cared by the local people who were converted to Christianity and Islam in the later years.

During Sangam Period the inhabitants of this place belonged to Villavas, Aayar, Velavar, Kuravar, Vedar, Pulayar, Parayar, Panar etc. They might have come from the Southern side of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. They might have been attracted by the calm sea and a backwater like place for keeping their boats. They belonged to lower class of hinduism so that they were denied entry into these temples. This particular situation was exploited by Islam and Christianity. And majority of the people of Vizhinjam were converted to these Semitic religions. So these temples were also discarded by the high class people who might have migrated to some other prominent places.

This place contributed quite a lot for the educational progress of Kerala. Ancient University called Kanthalloor Sala was located in this place. It is often considered as the 'Nalanda of the East'. A number of subjects like Grammar, Philosophy, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa, Music, Literature and Arts were taught in this great educational centre. But the entrance was restricted to Brahmin students alone. Due to incessant attacks by Pandyas and Cholas, this great educational institution was destroyed and it was relocated near to the Padmanabhaswamy Temple, in the present Chala area. In the field of Malayalam literature also Vizhinjam has its own contribution. Two famous Malayalam literary figures, Ayya Pilla Asan and Ayyani Pilla Asan, lived near Vizhinjam. They are popularly known as Kovalam

Kavikal (The poets of Kovalam) and their works Rama Kadha Pattu and Bharatham Pattu are real assets to Malayalam literature.

Vizhinjam was the most prominent place in Kerala before the rise of Thiruvananthapuram. History is a silent witness to the rise and fall of places and persons. Vizhinjam was at its pinnacle of Glory between 7th century to 12th century after that it slowly dissolved into dynamics of history. But like a Phoenix, Vizhinjam is emerging once again from its own ashes. The Six

Thousand Five Hundred and Ninety five crore Vizhinjam International Sea Port Limited, the work of which was started in 2015 by Adani Group will give a new rebirth to this ancient port city.

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