

The Pearl Fishery of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) under British Administration in the 19th Century

by

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The pearls of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) had fascinated the West from early times. The classical writers of the 1st century A. D. refer to an extensive use of pearls¹ in the West and the largest production of oriental pearls took place in the Gulf of Mannar, off the Ceylon and the Indian coasts, but more often off the coast of Ceylon. In fact, in September 1863, a unique reference to Ceylon's pearl fishery was made in an opera by Bizet produced in Paris. A brief review of the early times based on references to the fisheries and the trade yield an illuminating and interesting account of the pearl fishery and the pearl trade off the Northern Coast of Ceylon. Such a study is also essential for, even later on, some practices referred to by early writers, about the pearl fishing industry and commerce, continued.

For example Marco Polo's² vivid description of the conduct of the pearl fishery in the Gulf of Mannar informs us of the stone tied to the toe of the diver, the basket used for gathering oysters, and "shark charming" by "kadalkattis" (sea-binders) - these practices continued to last well into the 19th century. Another peculiar phenomenon observed from the early days, which again lasted even in the later years, was that the volume of revenue obtained from the fishery alternated between the Ceylon coast off the Gulf of Mannar and the Indian Coast. This is referred to by Alberuni³ in the 11th century, and Van Goens⁴ in his memoir of 1663 remarks that while the banks of Mannar failed to yield the expected amount of revenue from a fishery, the fishery off Tuticorin was profitable.

1. Arunachalam, S. - *The History of the Pearl Fishery of the Tamil Coast*, (Annamalai: Nagar; 1952) p.2.
2. Marco Polo visited Ceylon in the 13th century - see Edited Paranavitana, S. *History of Ceylon, Vol. I, part i*, (Ceylon, 1959,1960) p. 63; *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*. Translated and ed. by Sir Henry Yule, 3rd. ed. revised by Henry Cordier with notes and addenda, 2 vols, (London, 1920).
3. Arunachalam, S. - *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5; Ed. Paranavitana, S. *op.cit.*, p.63.
4. Arunachalam, S. *ibid.*, p.5. Van Goens was for 3 terms a Dutch Governor of Ceylon. (1660-61, 1663, 1664-75).

In the 19th century too the same feature is evident if a comparison is made of the turnover from pearl fisheries off the Ceylon coasts with those off Tuticorin. A blank year on the banks of Ceylon coincided with the year of rewarding return on the Indian coast.⁵ This shift of fortunes has been attributed to the movement of underwater currents in the Gulf.

Reference to the pearl fisheries and mostly to pearls, in the local or the Indian records of the early times, indicate the existence and importance of this industry from ancient times; but they give little detail of salient facts such as the methods of fishing, the countries with whom there was trade, and of the precise economic conditions of the pearl fishery. In this respect foreign accounts partly supplement with some valuable information. Of the very early times, the *Periplus*,⁶ the writings of Pliny and Ptolemy⁷ have accounts and in, what may be called, the medieval times information about this industry could be gained from the records of travellers like Marco Polo. Arab, European Jesuit, and Chinese travellers have also made their observations about this obviously prosperous industry.⁸

With the arrival of the Westerners to Ceylon from 1505 onwards, information about the commerce in pearls and the fisheries are provided by Portuguese writers and Ribeiro in his *History of Ceylon* of the 17th century gives a useful record.⁹ The Dutch, who were more commercially systematic, have left behind fuller accounts of the pearl fisheries held season after season. Such accounts and details exist in the correspondence of the Dutch officials with their superiors while the memoirs of the Dutch Governors of Ceylon give particulars of the condition and the conduct of the fisheries.

In the 19th century there is enough material contained in government records - these are specially useful and relevant to a study of the pearl fishery, its management, and the commerce in pearls. Among the secondary sources available for a study of this industry in this period, the "*Natural History of Ceylon*" by Tennent¹⁰ and the work of Bennett¹¹ prove valuably informative. For a proper understanding of the pearl fishery in the period of British rule it is essential to review the accounts available from the early days unto the end of the 19th century.

5. Arunachalam, S. - *ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

6. *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, written around 60 A.D. by an unknown author-see Ed. Paranavitana, *op.cit.*, p. 63.

7. Pliny's work is of 77 A.D.; Ptolemy's *Geographia* belongs to 130 A.D. - see Ed. Paranavitana, S. - *op.cit.*, pp. 62-63.

8. Arunachalam, S. - *op.cit.*, pp. 10-11.

9. Joao Ribeiro presented his *History* to the king of Portugal in 1685 A.D. see Ed. S. Paranavitana - *op.cit.* p. 64; Arunachalam, S. - *op.cit.*, p. 11.

10. Tennent, J.E. - *Ceylon: An Account of the Island, Physical, Historical and Topographical*, (London, 1859, revised ed. 1860) 2 vols.

11. Bennett, J.W. - *Ceylon and Its Capabilities*, (London, 1843).

Writing about the pearl fishery and trade, the Tamil Poets of the Sangam age¹² refer to the "Parawas", a class of people from South India, who continued to be engaged in pearl fishing even in the 19th and 20th centuries. Similarly, Megasthenes in the 3rd century B. C., said that Ceylon produced more pearls than India - this was evident to some extent during the years Ceylon was under British rule. Likewise, Suleiman, the Arab writer,¹³ has mentioned that the sea around Ceylon yielded valuable pearls. The records left behind by Arabs indicate that they were the main traders in the pearls of Ceylon between 400-1000 A. D. Although it is evident from these Arab references that Ceylon was the primary emporium of trade in pearls, as it continued to be under British rule, unfortunately, they give little detail as to the mode of fishing or about the trade itself. Edirisi (1154 AD)¹⁴ stated that the sea on every side of Ceylon had a fishery of magnificent and priceless pearls. But it is clear from the reports of the Government Agent in the North and other British officials that Ceylon's pearl fishery in any remarkable magnitude really took place on the sea alongside the Northern province. Marco Polo referred to Puttalam on the North West coast as a rendezvous of the pearl fishery, but, though in the 12th and 13th centuries, fishing took place off Puttalam at Calpenty (Kalpitiya) - later on Arippu and Kondatche, further north, became the centres of the pearl fishery. Nevertheless, even in the early half of the 19th century in Chilaw, or "Salabham" which means diving in Tamil, fishing was indulged in; but in no way to the extent in the sea off the northern province. Trincomalee, on the east coast, also yielded some pearls but they were not of such quality or in such quantity¹⁵ as did the sea off Arippu which were the areas that remained the main field of the pearl industry till the end of the 19th century, and even later.

References to shark charmers or "kadalkattis" (literally "sea-binders" in Tamil) abound in literature, and the writers of the later period were really intrigued by the part that these people played in a fishery. The charmer seems to have acquired his office hereditarily; and the office had remained in the hands of one family which enjoyed a monopoly in performing this function at Arippu. The chief charmer was paid by government and received ten oysters from each boat daily during the fishery - to Government Agent, P. A. Dyke (1829-1867) this was an unnecessary expense. James Emerson Tennent, the Colonial Secretary, when Dyke was Government Agent, Northern Province, commented ironically that the incumbent of this office then was a Roman Catholic, but

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12. The "Sangam Age" is surmised to be around the first three centuries of the Christian era - see Arunachalam, S. *op.cit.*, p. 15.
 13. Suleiman also spelt Sulayman. His writings were incorporated in *Silsilat-a!* p. 63. *Jawarikh* of Abu Zayd around 950 A.D. - see Ed. Parnavitana, S., *op.cit.*
 14. Also known as Idrisi, famous Arab geographer - see Ed. Parnavitana, S. *op.cit.* p. 63.
 15. Sri Lanka National Archives (SLNA) - No. 20/168-273 - Colonial Secretary (Col.Secy.) to Government Agent, (Govt.Agent) Northern Province, No.240 of 12 November, 1855; also Arunachalam, S. *op.cit.*, p. 27, note 2.

paradoxically that had not affected the exercise or effectiveness of his functions¹⁶ In fact, Tennent observed that not more than one authenticated accident from the attacks of sharks had taken place during the period upto that of the British occupation.

Agent Dyke's direct involvement in the management of the pearl fishery commenced in November 1834 by which time, on the recommendations of the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission,¹⁷ the Collectorate of Jaffna was abolished, and the Government Agency of the Northern Province had been assigned to him. With characteristic efficiency and an eye for economy, Dyke set out to erect permanent buildings at the site of the fishery rather than spend time and again on buildings of a temporary nature.¹⁸ Arrangements were also to be made for the supply of better transport and communication facilities, and for an adequate water-supply, which had been before a perennial problem. He visited Mannar, the scene of the fishery, almost immediately to plan out the execution of the next fishing enterprise under his supervision. In December 1834 Dyke had been formally and officially entrusted with the management of the fishery by the Governor, Robert Horton (1831-7), and this was his first venture into this new realm of his duties.

His immediate action reveals the personality of the responsible officer whose career was an outstanding example of thoroughness.¹⁹ Certain temples had enjoyed the privilege of employing "charity boats" to fish for pearls free of any charge. A similar indulgence had been allowed to certain fisher-headmen who functioned at inspections - they were entitled to use "privilege boats." As headmen were required to supervise the conduct of the fishery and prevent an infraction of the regulations governing fishing, Dyke felt that this mode of remunerating them caused a conflict between their duty and interest - it was hence an evil. Other public officials too at the fishery received a proportion of the oysters fished out, which were distributed among divers. This had led to unauthorised exactions. As the government had already abolished all fees payable by people to headmen, here was a contradiction of that policy. It reduced the profits rightly due to the pearl divers and acted unfairly and disadvantageously as a disincentive to their industry. The Government Agent regarded it expedient to allow the divers to enjoy any advantage that resulted from an abolition of the grant of such "perquisite oysters." This could encourage divers and boatmen to be more sedulous for they had now a stimulus to work harder.

16. Tennent, Sir James Emerson. *Sketches of the Natural History of Ceylon with Narratives and Anecdotes* - (London, 1868), p. 379.

17. See, Ed. Mendis, G.C., *The Colebrooke-Cameron Papers*, (Oxford, 1956) 2.vols.

18. SLNA - No. 6/1193 - see Letter from Dyke to Col. Secy. 21.12.34.

19. *Ibid.*

20. SLNA - No. 6/1236 - see Dyke's letter to Colonial Secy. No. - 67-16.4.35 and enclosed statement.

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He had also changed some of the former unsatisfactory practices such as the sale of oysters even before they were unloaded. It was but fairer to give the purchaser a chance to examine the articles before he bought them.²¹ In general, Government Agent Dyke's innovations were reasonable and prevented malpractices to a fair extent, while, at the same time, whatever was lost by the officials because of the innovations was compensated for in cash instead of in pearls. Although the financial expenditure at a fishery was thus increased, the gains from the prevention of abuses offset the greater outlay. The fishery had been conducted mainly at Chilavathurai. In 1836, too, a fishery was conducted under the reorganised system and six sales alone brought in over £ 6000.²²

The fishery, in March 1836, again revealed Dyke's efficiency and thoroughness. It afforded ample evidence of the sense of responsibility and interest with which the Agent had set about his functions. The erection of dwellings for those attending the fishery was regularised under the authority of the Assistant Government Agent. No unauthorised habitats were to be set up.²³ The police were brought under the control of the District Judge; and their duties were defined as the grant of protection to those present at a fishery, maintenance of peace and order. The police were prohibited from engaging in any direct management of the fishery, such as enforcing the collection of any dues on behalf of anyone. No person in the administrative establishment of the fishery was to receive presents or perquisites or to engage in speculation - the penalty for an infringement of this regulation was peremptory dismissal. No one was authorised to deduct anything from the shares due to boatmen and divers on account of "privilege" or charity. All contributions to charity were to be purely voluntary. Those empowered to accept oysters at the government centres of collection were not to remove any. If any *chanks* were fished out they were to be delivered to the *chank* renter who alone had the licence to fish for *chanks*. These instructions were precautions taken to ensure an absence of abuse which the Government Agent, by a study of the system under which past fisheries had been held, knew had existed.

Similar stringent instructions were issued to boatmen and tindals operating at the fishery. They illustrate the Government Agent's attention to detail and his interest in regularising the operations. Responsibilities were clearly defined and delegated to the various subordinate officials. Once again a failure or lapse to act in accordance with the prescriptions was made an offence punishable with a fine or even discontinuance from office. Dyke encouraged "informers" with rewards, while those who conducted their operations satisfactorily in terms of the regulations were given an edge over the others at the

21. SLNA - No. 6/1237 - Govt. Agent to Col. Secy. No. 151 - 31.7.35.

22. SLNA - No. 6/1353 - G.A. to Col. Secy. No. 11- 24.3.36.

23. SLNA - No. 6/1353 - G.A. to Col. Secy. No. 6 - 16.3.36 - for detailed memorandum.

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next fishery; they were granted certain concessions such as to choose the boats they wish to employ, priorities in the allocation of licences and so forth. Thus a system of checks and balances was coupled with a system of incentives to conduct the fishery more profitably and in an orderly manner.

Likewise, detailed instructions were framed to govern the actions of the boatmaster. He was to be in charge of stores, allocate berths for the boats, co-operate with the customs to prevent smuggling, determine the seaworthiness of vessels. In brief, he was to oversee all activities concerning the actual fishing. Soldiers were sent in boats, but even they were to serve in different boats on different days. This was a measure to prevent the soldiers being influenced to act in collusion with those who aimed at evading instructions by cultivating an undue familiarity with such personnel.

A fourth set of regulations were drawn up to be observed by the Superintendent of the *Coottoos* or collecting centres of oysters. The government received a share of three fourths of the quantity of oysters in each boat. Specific instructions were given about how oysters should be heaped, demarcated according to the boat from which they were unloaded, and about counting them. Accounts of the quantities of oysters received were to be furnished to the Government Agent, and no time was to be lost in counting them so that by ten o'clock next morning a notice could be issued of the sale.

A fifth section of Agent Dyke's memorandum detailed the type of aid that was required from the military. Soldiers were assigned to guard the Agent's kachcheri or office mainly to protect the treasure, or "specie" or public property, and preserve the buildings from catching fire. Even the *Coottoos* (collection and storing centres) were to be guarded by sentries and if oysters had to be retained in the boats because they could not be unloaded as the vessels had arrived late in the evening they were to be guarded overnight. Soldiers were also despatched in boats so that the activities of the divers could be supervised while they were out at sea, and it could be ensured that they dived only along with the signal to commence diving and stopped when the signal to cease activity was proclaimed. Finally, soldiers were forbidden to accept pearls or oysters from boatmen even if they were given voluntarily.

The Government Agent concluded this comprehensive code of instructions with a set of rules addressed to the Inspector of the Pearl Banks. "*Adappanars*" or superior fisher-headmen and other headmen were to be deployed in the inspection boats to assist in controlling the conduct of boatmen in the diving boats on their way to the shore. At this time, nine government boats, six inspection boats and several of the headmen's boats were a few vessels to which some of the privileges were still officially allowed to be at sea when the diving boats went out. As the boats were out at sea those in the official vessels, under the supervision of the Inspector of the Pearl Banks,

were to station their boats at strategic points, as a precautionary measure, among the diving boats. Officials were to ensure that no oysters were opened while the vessels returned back to shore and the oysters were being landed. These were specific functions in addition to the general duties that had been allotted to the Inspector.

A resumé of this memorandum has been given above mainly to illustrate the methodical manner in which Government Agent Dyke had embarked in executing his functions. The labour behind the preparation of it, the careful attention to detail, and an attempt at a systematisation of the fishery which was Dyke's intention, was clearly evident. Altogether there were twenty three sales on this occasion, and accounts of each sale were given daily by Dyke in detail.²⁴ The total proceeds exceeded £. 25,816, inclusive of the fees gained from diving boats, and payments had been received in English bills, sovereigns, British silver, silver rix-dollars, Spanish dollars, sicca rupees, Bombay rupees, pound notes and copper. The use of various forms of currency continued well into the late 19th century. The main spots of the yields had been from Modera-gama Paar, Chivel Paar, Periapaaracarai, and Koddappaar and from the South East Paar. The number of *dhonies* in attendance had been four hundred and five.

After a further study of the conditions on the spot itself, Dyke decided to have an Ordinance enacted for the prevention of the beds of oysters in the pearl banks from plunder and extensive injury, usually caused by vessels anchoring in the area.²⁵ Vessels were, therefore, prohibited from coming within the limits of the pearl banks. This was a prudent step as such depredations, owing to the causes mentioned by Dyke, had occurred earlier; and despite the steps taken so far to prevent them they had occurred, and continued to occur, even later, on and off. Although, in general, the Government Agent was ruthless, evidently there had been a number of corrupt practices. An elimination of them was no doubt the motivating factor underlying Dyke's reformatory measures.

As the privileges extended to temples had been enjoyed for so long, a sudden stoppage of them was naturally fraught with difficulties. Therefore, Dyke examined the Dutch correspondence about the pearl fishery and concluded that there was hardly any mention about this privilege. But from a note in the diary of Colonel Hamilton, referring to the fishery of 1820,²⁶ it was seen that the priests of the Rameswaran Temple had formerly enjoyed large perquisites, and that divers had been permitted to fish on behalf of them at the pearl banks of Ceylon.

24. SLNA - No. 6/1353 - See regular letters of G.A. to Col. Secy. especially Nos. 24 and 26 of 14.4.36.

25. SLNA - No. 7/545 - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent, Northern Province, Nos. 44 - 10.2.42; 60 - 3.3.42 and No. 7/574 and also Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent No 84- confidential letter of 12.4.44.

26. SLNA - No. 6/1354 - Govt. Agent to Col. Secy. No. 37 - 14.7.36.

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In 1837, in March and April, another fishery was conducted. Over £. 10,000 was collected from seventeen sales and the fees contributed by boats used for carrying those for diving.²⁷ Strict vigilance was maintained and four *dhonies* discovered in the immediate vicinity of the banks were detained because damage had been caused by them to the deposits of oysters.²⁸ The contract for fishing had been taken by "chettians"²⁹ who were the greatest speculators in this business. This fishery had yielded only a small quantity of oysters with a fair proportion of pearls, but they were generally of remarkably good lustre and hence fetched high prices. Dyke observed that although there were a good number of speculators, minor capitalists however, had fought shy in comparison with their active role in the previous year. Yet, the total capital collected on this occasion exceeded that of the former year.

Ceylonese had purchased the largest quantity of oysters, but more as agents or brokers of the Indian merchants. Thus, actually, the trade in pearls drew a greater number of Indians while the few others, who participated in speculation, were from Colombo or Jaffna. The former year had yielded to the speculators high profits, while, in 1837, they enjoyed only a fair success in their business dealings. The speculators from Jaffna generally sold back the pearls at Madras. Prices had fluctuated rapidly and frequently but no cause could be given by Dyke to explain this phenomenon. There were also discrepancies among the weights used; different classes of people used different weights, and different weights were used for buying and selling.³⁰ A lack of uniformity in the use of weights puzzled Dyke but he could not get any information to account for this curious feature from the records about the pearl trade during the earlier years.

The measures introduced by Government Agent Dyke in the previous year to regulate the trade had on the whole proved useful. Comparatively, the amount of revenue collected generally indicated improved management. Coast-guards had been newly appointed and several important seizures of pearls were made by them when rules were violated. Attempts had been made to evade the Customs' regulations, but not with much success. A new Customs House, which was erected, had proved valuable for the better management of the fishery. The Government Agent had also eased many of the former restrictions on commerce and a flourishing growth of the pearl trade was optimistically anticipated. To protect the beds of oysters and prevent any illicit fishing, the Agent had enforced strict rules for prohibiting the *chank*

27. SLNA - No. 6/1418 - see regular letters from Govt. Agent to Col. Secy. in March and April especially Nos. 25 of 6.4.37 and 26 of 6.4.37.

28. SLNA - No. 6/1418 - Despatch No. 20 of 31.3.37.

29. SLNA - No. 6/1418 - Govt. Agent's letter from Arippu to Col.Secy.-8.4.37.

30. SLNA - No. 6/1418 - Govt. Agent's letter to Col. Secy. 28.6.37, for a review of the fishery.

divers from fishing in the waters of the pearl banks. However, in specified areas, *chank* fishing was permitted for it provided employment to divers who could not be engaged in pearl fishing. Moreover *chanks* too were another useful source of revenue. The want of "specie" had caused much embarrassment and the Government Agent turned his attention towards making better financial arrangements hereafter for conducting the pearl trade. This opportunity of a fishery was also utilised to inquire into the causes that had often led to a shortfall in the anticipated yields of oysters or pearls.

The Master Attendant advanced two reasons as to why the expected quantity of oysters could not be recovered from a particular area - the destruction caused by fish and disturbances that had been caused by an earlier fishery.³¹ There was also a danger from frequent inspections for such examinations disturbed the oyster beds. Several banks from which an extensive output was anticipated had failed in 1836 to give sufficient returns although, with Dyke's improvements in management, more than the former number of people had flocked to the fishery. The new system had encouraged capitalists of every degree to speculate and participate in the pearl fishery business. To avoid any disappointment among speculators at the limited output of the fishery, fishing had been permitted even in banks that were not originally earmarked for exploitation. The whole fishery of 1836 may have failed as a financial venture if Dyke had not taken such a course of action; but, on the other hand, this had adversely affected the fishery of 1837.

Since Dyke took over the responsibility for superintending the pearl fisheries this task alone consumed three months of his time in an year; and, even at other times, matters concerning the pearl fishery needed to be attended to. To him any assignment given by the State meant trust reposed in him, and it was in such a spirit that he had made improvements in the management of the pearl fishing industry. However, it was an onerous function, and he requested for the services of an assistant. But the Colonial Secretary could not release anyone suitable for the post. On the other hand it was agreed that a special allowance had to be paid to Dyke or a reward for the services rendered in connection with the fisheries had to be granted.³²

In November 1837, Government Agent Dyke embarked on an inspection of the banks off Arippu as a preliminary preparation for another fishery in 1838. He wanted also to make a general examination for obtaining a better understanding about this industry. The objects of his inspection were clearly explained;³³ he wanted to attend to the requirements for the fishery during the next season; to gather information regarding the oyster deposits so that

31. *Ibid.*

32. SLNA - see Dyke's personal note to P.A. Anstruther, Col. Secy. of 28.6.37.

33. SLNA - No. 6/1419 - Govt. Agent to Col. Secy. - letter of 27.12.37.

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the beds to be fished may be decided upon; to conduct the fishery in the most effective manner; and to acquire a clear understanding of the future prospects in pearl fishing, which was rather important. The fishery had now begun to cause concern in the minds of the provincial administrator - would it be a regular one and would it be a dependable source of revenue?

Meanwhile, in February 1838, new information was uncovered about the privileges that had been traditionally accorded to the South Indian Hindu temples as a result of Dyke's study.³⁴ Princes from South India had made grants of privileges at the fishing to the four temples of Ramnad. This was evident from an extract sent by the Colonial Secretary to the Government Agent of the Northern Province, who had been endeavouring to trace the reasons for the grant of privileges and whose attempts to abolish which had provoked many protests. The pearl fisheries of Colombo and Mannar had formerly been at one time under the authority of the Carnatic kings of Madura in Pandyan-dalam. Subsequently, the fisheries had come under the purview of the descendants of Pararajasegaram of the Jaffna Kingdom as a result of his conquests. Pararajasegaram was referred to in the documents as the then reigning king of Colombo. Later the Carnatic kings who wanted to win back the rights over the fisheries, assisted by the Rajah of Ramnad, had made a forcible attempt to regain their lost control. Confronted by such a situation the king of North Ceylon had consented to permit the Carnatic kings to engage themselves in the pearl fishing industry along with a specified number of boats; and the Zamindar of Ramnad had been allowed to fish with 96 divers.

About 250 years ago another Carnatic king had duly endowed to two temples the privilege of fishing for five pearls from a boat. Similarly, the Ramnad Zamindar had gifted to the Rameswaram temple the right of receiving seven pearls, from each boat out of the ninety-six pearls to which he had been formerly entitled. Another endowment was granted to this same temple, the right to fish for three more pearls. Accordingly, whenever the pearl fisheries were held, boats from these temples engaged in fishing to the permitted extent; and the revenue gained thereby was appropriated for the benefit of the temples. The Zamindar had also continued to enjoy the privilege of fishing for pearls even during the years when the Carnatic kings were powerful.

When the Dutch took possession of the island's coast, their official authorities had examined the rights and privileges enjoyed by the temple authorities and foreigners to fish at the pearl fishery; and they had discontinued the privilege which had been allowed to the Zamindar. His descendants, who were weaker now, never claimed that right again, but privileges which had been granted to the temples were continued, and no objection was raised by the Dutch against the rights enjoyed by the temples.

34. SLNA - No. 6/1420 - Govt. Agent to Col. Secy. - No. 22 of 1.2.38.

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The Colonial Secretary also despatched to Dyke an address sent by the guardian and manager of the Zamindary of Ramnad to the Acting Collector of Jaffna explaining the circumstances under which South Indian princes had made grants of privileges to the four temples of Ramnad and how they had acquired the right to do so. Dyke, however, saw no good reason to continue the grant of such privileges to alien authorities, and wanted similar information regarding the grant of privileges that were being claimed by three temples in Tanjore and Tinnevely respectively.³⁵ The continuance of these privileges entailed a loss of revenue, and was also unfair especially when the exercise of such privileges was being tainted with abuse. Moreover, the Government Agent represented the British who were not particularly sympathetic towards indigenous religions.

In response to Dyke's request a further despatch in late 1838 from the Colonial Secretary scheduled all the documents relating to this controversial subject of the privileges that had been granted to the temples in South India.³⁶ This despatch contained *inter alia* Sir Edward Barnes' (1824-31) despatch with his correspondence with the Madras Government. Governor Barnes in December 1829 had disallowed the claims to such privileges pending a decision about them from England. The Madras Government had then protested that privileges hitherto enjoyed by the temples had been denied by the Ceylonese authorities. Since then, although action had not been taken to investigate the right to such claims to privileges and decide upon a legitimate course of action, the Hindu temples had been permitted to enjoy these privileges at the fisheries. Now Dyke's attempts to effect radical changes had brought up this controversial problem again to the fore. The Government Agent, with his characteristic thoroughness, obtained for scrutiny all documents, some dealing with the Portuguese, the Dutch and the early British position with regard to this bone of contention. He wanted to justify the course of action he had advocated - a stoppage of the continuance of these troublesome privileges.

Meanwhile, Dyke's newly promulgated rules continued to be followed in respect of the pearl fishing industry. The *Adigar* or Chief Headman of Mannar was instructed in 1841 to prohibit fishing with drift nets in the banks as this caused extensive injury to the pearl oyster spawn.³⁷ By 1844 a scheme for compensating those officials who had been entitled to "privilege oysters" because of the functions they had performed at the conduct of a fishery had

35. SLNA - No. 6/1421 - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent, No.297 and enclosures.

36. SLNA - No. 6/1421 - see letter and enclosure along with despatch No. 297 of 22.10.38 to Govt. Agent from Col. Secy; letter from Dyke to P.E. Wodehouse of the Col. Secy's office of Oct. 21, 1838; also see sheet filed along with this despatch for all correspondence.

37. SLNA - No. 8/117 - Govt. Agent to Col. Secy. -No. 121 of 15.4.1841 also No. 7/545 - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent, No. 95 of 5 May 1841.

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been fully implemented.³⁸ The officials, or fisher-headmen such as the *addappanaars* of Mannar and Navanthurai, the *periapattengatty* of Mullaitivu and the Karaiyur *maniagar* of Jaffna, were now allowed to engage in fishing on their own account with separate boats instead of being permitted to fish from boats where they functioned as inspectors and supervisors.

The Colonial Secretary's office gave to Government Agent Dyke almost a free hand in the arrangement of the conduct of the pearl fishing industry. In 1840 June, the office of the Resident Supervisor of the pearl banks was abolished. The duties of inspecting and reporting on the prospects of the pearl banks were assigned to the commander of the government steamer. However, before any final instructions were issued, Dyke's opinion was canvassed as the Governor "was desirous of receiving the matured suggestions of your long experience in the management of the pearl fisheries."³⁹ In view of such encouraging exhortations Dyke brought about numerous changes and innovations in the conduct of the fisheries.

Again in November 1840, Dyke was requested either to participate in or give directions in regard to an inspection of the pearl banks because of his "vast experience".⁴⁰ Such a repose of confidence and the grant of almost unrestrained authority partly accounts for the authoritarian manner in which Dyke introduced numerous fundamental changes in managing the pearl fisheries.

In 1842, the Governor Colin Campbell (1841-7) entrusted to Dyke the responsibility of framing measures for the protection of the pearl banks.⁴¹ The Government Agent had, as early as in 1833, invited the attention of the Colonial Secretary to the need for tackling this problem. By 1843, however, a new Ordinance for the conservation of the banks was enacted, based on the proposals of Dyke.⁴²

In 1847, contrary to expectations, the prospects of the pearl banks appeared bleak. The Acting Master Attendant had been pessimistic.⁴³ Depredations had been wrought by fishermen casting nets in spite of prohibitions, and no revenue could be expected from the fishery for five years. If the oyster spawn was left undisturbed to mature, a fishery was possible by 1852. Some parts of the banks were in a ruinous state, and could be unproductive for years. The

38. SLNA - No. 8/133 - Govt. Agent to Col. Secy. - No. 266 of 7.10.44.

39. SLNA - No. 7/544 - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent No. 89 of 2.6.40.

40. SLNA - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent No. 213 - 30.9.40.

41. SLNA - No. 7/545 - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent Nos. 44 of 10.2.42 and 60 of 3.3.42.

42. SLNA - No. 7/574 - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent No. 84, Confidential despatch of 12.4.44.

43. SLNA - No. 20/316 - 256. Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent No. 147 of 17.5.47 and enclosures - Report from Acting Master Attendant, No. 18 of 12.4.47 and annual inspection notes of *Adappanaars* of March 9th. to April 6th. 1847.

rest of the banks afforded no hopes at all for there were no oysters. The banks had to be carefully watched because Negombo fishermen proceeding to Karativu, were habitually casting their nets thereby damaging the pearl banks and disturbing young oysters. Similar observations were there in the report of 1847 submitted by the *addappanaars* and the headmen of Chilavathurai - there were no oysters except for young immature ones.⁴⁴ It was hence decided that no further inspections should even be made till 1852; the banks were not to be disturbed.

The Colonial Secretary wanted, in 1853, the Government Agent to arrange for an inspection of the banks.⁴⁵ But the Master Attendant had already reported again, after an inspection, that no fishery could be expected before March 1855. Therefore, the protection and fishing of the available few oysters were entrusted to the experienced Government Agent of the Northern Province - Dyke. An inspection by the Master Attendant entailed a considerable expenditure of £.400 - £.500; this was to be avoided; and moreover only occasional inspections were advised to avoid damage from frequent inspections too. "The art of pearl oyster fishing is so peculiar, that its successful practice is not to be acquired without experience",⁴⁶ lamented the Master Attendant who held that the errors of the Naval Supervisor at his first fishery in 1836 were responsible for the losses sustained during the years thereafter.

A pearl fishery was, however, next conducted only in 1855. A shortcoming on this occasion was the lack of suitable accommodation for the staff and in typical manner Dyke forwarded further plans for more improvement. Since "the arrangements as to pecuniary allowances are made on the principle of alluring the best men available in the public offices to volunteer for this service"⁴⁷ it was inconsistent with this principle to provide bad lodgings for them. As usual, the Governor Henry Ward (1855-60) in deference to the Government Agent's wishes permitted Dyke to take the necessary action for supplying this want.

In 1857 the government finally acceded to Dyke's request and agreed to pay an extra allowance to him as the officer superintending the fishery.⁴⁸ Earlier, these duties, now allocated to the Government Agent since 1835, had been performed by the Commissioner of Revenue, an office that was abolished in 1833 with the implementation of the Colebrooke-Cameron reforms. As liberal hospitality had to be exercised to maintain the good understanding of

44. *Ibid.*

45. SLNA - No. 20/1946 - 269 - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent. No. 22 of 28.2.53 and enclosure - Master Attendant's No. 9 of 14.2.53. to Col. Secy.

46. *Ibid.*

47. SLNA - No. 6/2350 - Govt. Agent's letter of 3 Nov. 1856 to Col. Secy. and summary of Governor's reply to Govt. Agent's No. 704 of 17.11.56.

48. SLNA - No. 6/2385 - Col. Secy.'s letter to Govt. Agent of 27 January 1857.

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all employed on a fishery, and Arippu was a desolate place without resources, the cost of living was high. Therefore Dyke requested an extra allowance of £.100, and the provision of a palanquin.⁴⁹ In former times the office of the superintendent of the fishery had been like a sinecure while now with the changes effected by him it was a responsible position.

As the diminishing returns from the fisheries and the failure to conduct them with the frequency of earlier years was causing concern to the government about an industry which had before been highly profitable Dr. Kelaart was appointed in 1858⁵⁰ to investigate the Natural History of the Pearl Oyster. The idea was to study scientifically the causes for the waning of this enterprise and to take steps to maintain it as a flourishing business, as it had before been.

Meanwhile, the inhabitants of the Northern province represented to the government the impropriety and objectionable practice of granting shares of pearl oysters to headmen.⁵¹ In 1860, therefore, the government even abolished the privileges allowed so far only to headmen employed at the fisheries. They had been permitted to retain a certain number of divers to fish on behalf of them. Dyke had since 1835, when he initiated the reforms regarding the privileges at the fisheries, felt that headmen enjoyed such privileges in a way similarly as all headmen in general received certain percentages of the revenue at the will and pleasure of the government subject, of course, to any alteration or regulation that government may introduce. Before 1835, headmen alone had not enjoyed such concessions; many other public officers too had received a certain proportion of oysters as a perquisite. But Dyke had immediately stopped the payment of all such allowances. Instead he had implemented a scheme of paying fixed salaries and pecuniary allowances at the sales of oysters so as to afford all in service at the fishery a fair remuneration.⁵² Accordingly, the grants of oysters to the headmen were abolished except for the proportion given only to the "shark charmers".

Regarding the headmen, the change Government Agent Dyke had introduced was one meant to ensure that those who fished on account of the headmen went out in separate boats, while the headmen themselves were out at sea in other boats. This measure was to ensure that headmen would not neglect their duties by paying greater attention instead to their own interests. This change was done without the consent of the headmen. If the practice of engaging boats from Jaffna and Mannar at the inspections and the fisheries was to be

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Addresses delivered in the Legislative Council of Ceylon by Governors of the Colony-together with the Replies of Council, Vol. 1.,* (Colombo, 1876). p. 344; also Sri Lanka National Archives (SLNA) No. 6/2438 - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent, No. 78 - 10.3.58 and enclosure - Colonial Office minutes; also see SLNA - No. 20/2030 Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent, No. 25 - 26.1.58.

51. SLNA - No. 20/295 - 280 - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent, No. 124 of 25.5.59.

52. SLNA - No. 20/2015 - 417 - Govt. Agent to Col. Secy., No. 367 - 10.12.60.

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continued, the Government Agent felt that some liberal allowance had to be granted to headmen because it was through the influence of headmen that boats and men were obtained. Without their cooperation inspections of fisheries could not be ordinarily conducted, but since allowances were to be now given, Dyke could make it obligatory for headmen to render the requisite aid.

Normally boatmen were uninterested in participating in inspections for they had to work very hard for a brief period while neglecting their normal and regular more rewarding occupations. Moreover, work at inspections entailed considerable exposure to bad weather and a risk to their vessels. Therefore boatmen were usually reluctant to work merely for wages if it was denied to them also the chance to speculate in the business of a fishery. In view of the above factors, Dyke urged that the grant of allowances needed to be continued, but with a modification⁵³ - such allowances were to be reckoned as percentages on receipts, but upto a fixed maximum. This scheme he felt would meet the objection to the present plan which sometimes permitted headmen to receive allowances quite often disproportionate to the services they rendered. However, it was also realised by all those supervisory officials associated with the pearl fisheries that improvements were essential in the establishment of the fisher-headmen.⁵⁴ None of these headmen were actually mariners, they knew little about the position of the banks, nor did they possess an adequate knowledge of the management of and the sailing of boats - they were lacking in sufficient skill to discharge their duties. Consequently it was not possible to regulate or control efficiently the proceedings of such people when they were used in inspection or at fisheries. Captain Steuart, the late Inspector of the Fisheries, had recommended that these offices should be held by intelligent, experienced seafaring men from the class which usually commanded the native craft, but it was not easy to obtain their services for a brief and speculative venture.

Another problem that interfered with the conduct of the pearl fisheries in these years was the recurrent outbreak of cholera epidemics. In fact, in 1858 measures to be taken for meeting such calamities were suggested.⁵⁵ A better type of healthier and permanent buildings was to be erected hereafter, and many other sanitary improvements were to be introduced. These recommendations were made after consultation with W.C. Twynam, the Assistant Government Agent of Mannar. John Capper, who was alarmed at the ravage caused

53. *Ibid.*

54. SLNA - No. 20/411 - 285 - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent, No. 6 - 1.11.61.; also enclosures - copies of letters from Auditor General and Superintendent of the Pearl Fishery - Auditor General's No. 66 of 1.2.61; Superintendent of the Pearl Fishery, George Vane's No. 35 of 22.10.61, and the reports of 1.5.1839 and 5.10.57.

55. SLNA - No. 20/480 - 279 - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent, No. 252-23.8.58.

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by epidemics of cholera from Arippu in the Tamil districts, suggested that oyster shells should be turned into lime which could be utilised as a disinfectant to purify decomposing matter.⁵⁶

In January 1862 the Government Agent was required to make arrangements for the next fishery at Arippu in the coming year.⁵⁷ Buildings were to be erected, the services of the requisite personnel were to be obtained, and all preliminary needs for the event were to be finalised. This seems to have been the last fishery for which arrangements were made under Dyke's administration, and it was held in 1863.⁵⁸ During Government Agent Dyke's tenure there had been long periods when there had been no fisheries. From 1837 to 1855 no fishery worthwhile recording was conducted, and again, from 1864 to 1873, after his tenure of office in 1867, there was a bleak period.

Dyke had assumed duties as Collector of Revenue in September 1829 and from October 1833 he had functioned as Government Agent of the Northern Province till he died on duty while on circuit at Kopay on 9th October 1867. Towards the pearl fisheries and the management of them he had demonstrated an untiring devotion to service, and exhibited a rare capacity and zeal in administration. He had introduced economy and efficiency in managing the pearl fisheries and he had tried to wipe out corrupt and abusive practices in a severe yet fair manner. On the whole, however, the fisheries had proved to be an infrequent source of revenue, an undependable speculation; and later on it even became a poor economic enterprise. Between 1837 and 1854 the fisheries became an annual charge on the colony instead of producing an annual income.⁵⁹ But the pearl though small was Queen among the jewels according to St. Gregory,⁶⁰ and therefore with hope and optimism in the words of Keats, "the Ceylon diver held his breath, and went all naked to the hungry shark;" and "his ears gush'd blood; for them in death",⁶¹ even in the years to come. Thus the search for pearls and oysters continued nonetheless, for like rich honesty dwelling like a miser in a poor house, as Shakespeare had said, the pearl lay in the foul oyster.

56. SLNA - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent, No. 280 - 13.9.58.

57. SLNA - No. 20/285-419 - Col. Secy. to Govt. Agent, No. 28 of 28.1.62.

58. *Addresses delivered in the Legislative Council of Ceylon by Governors of the Colony together with the Replies of Council, Vol. 11* (Colombo, 1877), pp. 43-43. This fishery was a failure owing to a destruction of oysters by large skates. However, the Inspector of the Pearl Banks and the Superintendent of the Fishery had anticipated it to be a success.

59. Tennent, Sir James Emerson - *Sketches of the Natural History of Ceylon with Narratives and Anecdotes*, (London, 1868), p. 374.

60. Quoted in Warmington, E.H. *Commerce between the Roman Empire and India*, Part II, Chapter 1.

61. Keats, John. - *Isabella; The Pot of Basil*, Stanza XV.

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Always a gamble, and although precarious, the fisheries did on and off prove to be a significantly valuable source of income. In 1887, 1889 and 1890 a total sum of £.120,720 was derived from them.⁶² In 1891 there was the most successful fishery of the century when the income derived was £.96,370. Out of these amounts only a negligible quantity was spent on the arrangements for the fisheries largely owing to the economies and innovations that had been so efficiently introduced by Dyke. The beneficial effects of Dyke's measures became most manifest in later years under his equally illustrious successor, W.C. Twynam, on whose worthy shoulders the mantle of Dyke had fallen. Twynam was the Government Agent of the Northern province from 1869 to 1896. Dyke had died in 1867.

62. Gordon Cummings, C.F. - *Two Happy Years in Ceylon, Vol. 1.* (Edinburgh and London, MD CCCXC II), pp. 7-8.