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## The Beds Of Empire: Power And Profit At The Pearl Fisheries Of South India And Sri Lanka, C. 1770-1840

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# The Beds Of Empire: Power And Profit At The Pearl Fisheries Of South India And Sri Lanka, C. 1770-1840

## Abstract

The Gulf of Mannar—the shallow body of water between present-day India and Sri Lanka—was one of the largest sources of natural pearls in the world for at least two millennia. This dissertation focuses on a relatively brief period during which managerial control over the human and natural resources of the pearling industry transferred from Dutch to British powers. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also witnessed a shift in political economic thought, as classical liberalism dislodged mercantilism as the prevailing framework for interpreting the relationship between the state and economy. The Company and Crown governments brought an assemblage of ideas to bear on the management and governance of people and oysters that sought to not only increase productivity but also fundamentally reshape the social, economic, and political foundations of the pearling industry. However, the attempt by British officials to extricate local networks and institutions from pearling operations was fraught with contradictions and seldom delivered on the promise of reform. Through an examination of key targets of government intervention—labor, markets, merchants, sovereignty, and corruption—this dissertation explores the interstices between success and failure and tracks such developments through the evolving contexts of colonialism and imperialism in India and Sri Lanka.

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THE BEDS OF EMPIRE: POWER AND PROFIT AT THE PEARL FISHERIES OF  
SOUTH INDIA AND SRI LANKA, C.1770-1840

Samuel M. Ostroff

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in

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and

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in

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2016

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THE BEDS OF EMPIRE: POWER AND PROFIT AT THE PEARL FISHERIES OF  
SOUTH INDIA AND SRI LANKA, C. 1770-1840

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2016

Samuel Miles Ostroff

*To Marnina, Max, and my parents for their love, patience, and support*

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American environmentalist Rachel Carson wrote, “The edge of the sea is a strange and beautiful place.” I think that the same can be said of dissertations. There are many people and organizations that helped me realize this project. First and foremost, I express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Daud Ali, a real *mensch*. His patience, generosity, critical eye, and kind spirit guided me during this journey. My professors at Penn created a vibrant and open intellectual space for me to explore my evolving interests. The Department of South Asia Studies was my academic home for seven years and I thank Lisa Mitchell, Ramya Sreenivasan, Rupa Viswanath, Teren Sevea, and Deven Patel for always challenging me to think. In the Department of History, Kathleen Brown enthusiastically welcomed me to her seminar and told me to roll up my sleeves and get my hands dirty. Jessica Goldberg took the time to nurture my interest in economic history and tolerated frequent questions about medieval trade and the Cairo Geniza. Benjamin Nathans supported my pursuit of a dual degree for which I am appreciative. Sadly, Michael Katz passed away while I was conducting research abroad but I will always remember the magnanimity with which he treated me when I was a student in his urban history seminar. There are also many professors who inspired me prior to my arrival at Penn. At Bucknell, I thank Tom Ellis, David Del Testa, Donald Davis, John Kirkland, Katherine Faull, John Enyeart, and Leslie Patrick. At Columbia, I thank Sudipta Kaviraj, E. Valentine Daniel, Allison Busch, Anupama Rao, and Samuel Sudanandha.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE BEDS OF EMPIRE: POWER AND PROFIT AT THE PEARL FISHERIES OF SOUTH INDIA AND SRI LANKA, C. 1770-1840

Samuel M. Ostroff

Daud Ali

The Gulf of Mannar—the shallow body of water between present-day India and Sri Lanka—was one of the largest sources of natural pearls in the world for at least two millennia. This dissertation focuses on a relatively brief period during which managerial control over the human and natural resources of the pearling industry transferred from Dutch to British powers. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also witnessed a shift in political economic thought, as classical liberalism dislodged mercantilism as the prevailing framework for interpreting the relationship between the state and economy. The Company and Crown governments brought an assemblage of ideas to bear on the management and governance of people and oysters that sought to not only increase productivity but also fundamentally reshape the social, economic, and political foundations of the pearling industry. However, the attempt by British officials to extricate local networks and institutions from pearling operations was fraught with contradictions and seldom delivered on the promise of reform. Through an examination of key targets of government intervention—labor, markets, merchants, sovereignty, and corruption—this dissertation explores the interstices between success and failure and tracks such developments through the evolving contexts of colonialism and imperialism in India and Sri Lanka.

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## INTRODUCTION: CONSIDER THE PEARL OYSTER

In 1833, as parliamentary debates over the renewal of the East India Company's charter reached a crescendo, Harriet Martineau (1802-76), a young British social theorist and activist, gained increasingly notoriety for her recently-published *The Illustrations of Political Economy*.<sup>1</sup> A collection of novellas, *Illustrations* elaborated various strands of liberal political and economic thought to the general public through a series of softhearted parables. One of the stories in this collection, "Cinnamon and Pearls," is set in early nineteenth-century Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka). Alexander Johnston, a prominent Scottish orientalist and judge, encouraged Martineau to write about Ceylon. She remarked that Johnston was "more thoroughly acquainted with the Cingalese than perhaps any other man then in England."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Johnston served as Chief Judge and President of the Royal Council in Ceylon, during which time he became interested in pearling and collected information on "fisheries, geology, and natural history."<sup>3</sup> When he returned to England, Johnston facilitated the publication of materials related to pearling in the journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, an organization that he helped found with Henry Thomas Colebrooke in 1823.

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<sup>1</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations in Political Economy* (London: C. Fox, 1832-34). For recent scholarly treatments of Harriet Martineau's life and work, see Deborah Logan, *The Hour and the Woman: Harriet Martineau's 'Somewhat Remarkable' Life* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 2002); Logan, *Harriet Martineau, Victorian Imperialism, and the Civilizing Mission* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Sharae Deckard, *Paradise Discourse, Imperialism, Globalization: Exploiting Eden* (London: Routledge, 2014), 133-59.

<sup>2</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography*, ed. Maria Weston Chapman (Boston: J. R. Osgood and Company, 1877), 1:245-46; Logan *Harriet Martineau*, 105.

<sup>3</sup> James Stuart, *An Account of the Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon* (Cotta: Church Mission Press, 1843), 2.

Martineau's "Cinnamon and Pearls" is a highly romanticized tale about an aspirational pearl diver named Rayo and his fiancée Marana. It is an allegory about colonial negligence and the deleterious effects of British rule on local populations and the environment. Martineau meant for her story about a lowly pearl diver to educate the British middle class and advance a vision of economic freedom, moral uplift, and personal fulfillment, all of which, she maintained, the colonial government denied to the people of Ceylon. To promote this project, Martineau combined a sentimental narrative with the language of classical liberal political economy and utilitarianism, translating the abstract political and economic theories of Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and Thomas Malthus into popular form.<sup>4</sup> For Martineau, Ceylon was a suitable context to explore these issues because the island had been "more thoroughly and ingeniously beggared than any dependency."<sup>5</sup>

The story of Rayo and Marana begins with the young couple aboard a small boat. Unable to afford seashell bangles for their wedding, Rayo and Marana resort to stealing conch shells under the cover of night. As Marana acts as lookout for guard boats and sharks, Rayo makes stealthy dives to the ocean floor. The couple returns to shore with

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<sup>4</sup> Liberalism, political economy, utilitarianism, and the Victorian drive to civilize are familiar themes in the historiography of the British Empire. A classic study in this body of literature is Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959). See also Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's 'The History of British India' and Orientalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999); Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). For two recent contributions, see C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Martineau, "Cinnamon and Pearls," 22; Logan, *Harriet Martineau*, 108.



various treasures of the sea when they are spotted by a local priest who admonishes them for violating the commandment against theft. Rayo counters, “Is it theft to get chanks for my bride, when I have worked long for them, and can get no chanks by working? I thought God laid the chanks in our seas for our brides.” The priest responds, “God gave them into the hands of those who possess them,” alluding to the colonial government of British Ceylon. The government “will be angry with any who take them away by fraud and violence.” Fearing that a curse will strike her family, Marana avails herself of a boat to return the stolen conch shells to the sea. However, she is unable to part with a particularly beautiful right-handed conch shell, which she hides in her dress. Failing to lift the curse, Marana flees to her father, a shark-charmer practiced in the art of magic. Marana sought special protection for Rayo, who was preparing for his work at the approaching pearl fishery. “No circumstances had ever produced so happy an effect on [Rayo] as his advancement to be a pearl-diver, an advancement in dignity, if not in gain,” Martineau wrote. During the pearl fishery, Marana’s father joins the pearl fishers in the boat, reciting incantations to protect his future son-in-law and the divers from sharks and other dangers. During a break in the action, Rayo bobs in the water and spots on the boat a bright white pearl that slipped from an open oyster. Not only would possession of this pearl change his life, Rayo thought, allowing him to build a home and turn Marana into a beautiful bride, but it was “the proper payment of his labour, considering that strangers carried away all the profit from the country people.” He reaches for the pearl and puts it in his mouth. Rayo is immediately apprehended, flogged, and issued an emetic to expel the pearl from his gut. The couple is then publicly shamed and forced to work as cinnamon peelers in exile.

For Martineau and her contemporaries, Ceylon was a spoiled paradise, a latter-day Eden ruined by corporate greed and colonial negligence.<sup>6</sup> Writings by Martineau and others portrayed British colonial policies as a threat to the environment of Ceylon and the source of the spiritual and material decay of its inhabitants. In “Cinnamon and Pearls,” Martineau juxtaposed the harsh treatment of pearl divers and cinnamon bark strippers with the bounty of the sea and the beauty of the land. She found a system of colonial dirigisme that kept the local population of Ceylon poor and destitute despite the natural endowments of the island, as those who harvested pearls and peeled cinnamon bark did not enjoy the fruits of their labor. Even though pearl divers were “the natural owners of the native wealth of the region,” they had been “kept bare of almost the necessaries of life” by an overbearing and extractive colonial regime.<sup>7</sup> Symbolically tied to the island, cinnamon and pearls were two of Ceylon’s chief exports. British Ceylon also exercised tight monopolistic control over the production of both commodities.<sup>8</sup> The fertile pearl oyster beds and fragrant cinnamon groves of Ceylon therefore offered Martineau appropriate settings for a story about the dark sides of British involvement overseas. In a section titled “Summary of Principles,” Martineau wrote that monopolies were “disadvantageous as impairing the resources of the dependency, which are part of the resources of the empire, and the very material of the trade which is the object of desire.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Logan, *Harriet Martineau*; Deckard, *Paradise Discourse*. For a discussion of Ceylon as an “Island Eden” in European scientific and environmental discourses, see Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Martineau, “Cinnamon and Pearls,” 21.

<sup>8</sup> Whereas the government monopoly over the cinnamon industry was lifted in the early nineteenth century, British Ceylon continued to manage the pearl fishery as a government enterprise through the early twentieth century. For more on the cinnamon trade, see Colvin R. De Silva, *Ceylon Under British Occupation, 1795-1833*, 2nd ed. (Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries’ Co.), 2:414-44; Vijaya Samaraweera, “The Cinnamon Trade of Ceylon,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 8, no. 4 (1971): 415-42.

<sup>9</sup> Martineau, “Cinnamon and Pearls,” 124.

In using pearling in the Gulf of Mannar to illustrate her belief that monopolies should be abolished, Martineau offered an eclectic vision of British colonialism based on various principles of liberalism and classic political economy.

This dissertation— “The Beds of Empire: Power and Profit at the Pearl Fisheries of South India and Sri Lanka, c. 1770-1840”—focuses on a relatively brief period in the long history of human engagement with pearl oysters and the marine ecosystem of the Gulf of Mannar. In the late eighteenth century, local and global forces led to the transference of control over the pearling industry from the Dutch to the British. In the context of the Napoleonic Wars, the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC) withdrew most of its military and commercial presence from South India and Sri Lanka and pivoted to Southeast Asia. In 1796, by virtue of its defeat of the Dutch, the British East India Company claimed the pearl fishery as a “right of conquest” and assumed managerial control over the human and natural resources of the industry. In 1802, the Company transferred its Ceylon territories to the Crown, which established the island as a formal colony of the British state. This period also witnessed a shift in political and economic thought at a global intellectual level, as classical liberalism dislodged mercantilism as the prevailing framework for interpreting the relationship between the state and the economy. Yet British Ceylon and the Company Raj fiercely guarded their respective monopolies over the pearling industry, even as officers on both sides of the Gulf promoted liberal-minded reforms. This created a contradictory state of affairs. In bringing an assemblage of ideas to bear on the management of people and oysters, the Company and Crown governments sought to not only increase productivity, but also reshape the preexisting social, economic, and political makeup of the industry.

However, attempts by British officials to disembed the pearling industry from local networks and institutions seldom delivered on the promise of total reform. This dissertation explores the space between success and failure, and tracks such developments through the evolving contexts of colonialism and imperialism in India and Sri Lanka.

Focusing on the period 1770-1840, the five chapters of this dissertation are bookended by the present introduction and a conclusion. Each chapter addresses a particular domain of the pearling industry that officials targeted for reform—labor, markets, merchants, sovereignty, and corruption. The lower limit of the temporal frame (c. 1770) is demarcated by a series of events that signaled a changing of the guard. 1768 was the last year the Dutch VOC organized a pearl fishery. Two years later, Dutch Ceylon sent a diplomatic mission to the Nawab of Arcot to negotiate the terms of an agreement concerning the rights and revenue to the industry. In 1784, the British East India Company organized its first pearl fishery near Tuticorin, and the transition from Dutch to British regimes was underway. Seventy-years later (c. 1840), the Company and Crown had solidified their place as the preeminent political powers in the region. Between 1767 and 1837, there were at least thirty-seven pearl fisheries on either side of the Gulf of Mannar, a period of remarkable productivity and intense exploitation. This last decade also marked the beginning of a long fallow period. There was no pearl fishery on the India-side of Mannar between 1830 and 1850, and British Ceylon did not organize a fishery between 1837 and 1854.



MAP OF THE GULF OF MANAR, "THE SEA ABOUNDING IN PEARLS"

Figure 1. "Map of the Gulf of Manar, 'The Sea Abounding in Pearls.'" Frederic Courtland Penfield, *Wanderings East of Suez* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907).

The Gulf of Mannar is a shallow body of water between southeastern India and western Sri Lanka. It is part of the Laccadive Sea, which borders India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, and is located in the Indian Ocean. The eastern boundary of the Gulf of Mannar is the west coast of Sri Lanka between present-day Galle district in the south and the Mannar district in the north. The western boundary is formed by the southeastern coast of the Indian subcontinent. The districts of Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, and Ramanathapuram in the state of Tamil Nadu form the present-day political boundaries of the western littoral. Adam's Bridge, a chain of low-lying shoals and islands, and the Island of Mannar off the western coast of Sri Lanka, create a narrow passageway between the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay known as Palk Strait. Today, the

Gulf of Mannar is a diverse marine ecosystem home to thousands of varieties of flora and fauna, from algae and coral to birds and dolphins, that is protected as a biosphere reserve under the authority of the Indian government.

The Gulf of Mannar was one of the most abundant sources of natural pearls in the world for more than two millennia. The pearling industry is all but extinct today, but under the right conditions, millions upon millions of pearl-producing bi-valve mollusks (*Margaritifera vulgaris*) populated the low-lying shoals and rock and coral formations of the Gulf of Mannar. In the first century, Pliny the Elder described the oysters of Taprobane (Sri Lanka) “as the most productive of pearls of all parts of the world.”<sup>10</sup> The reputation of *Margaritifera vulgaris* as the “greatest pearl producer in the family of pearl oyster” continued to the early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Marine biologist William Herdman wrote in a report commissioned by British Ceylon that “the animal is not a true oyster.” He wrote that *Margaritifera vulgaris* was “more related to the Mussels (*Mytilus*) than to the Oysters (*Ostrea*) of our British seas.”<sup>12</sup> On the western littoral of the Gulf of Mannar, the richest beds were located off the coast of Thoothukudi. Fertile pearl banks were found short distances from the land between Negombo in the south and Karaitivu to the north. European writings on pearling in the region used the local term *paar* to describe the banks of rock and coral upon which clusters of pearl oysters grew. Tamil words were also used to name and identify specific *paars*. The association between the region and pearling was so close-knit that the Portuguese and Dutch both referred to the southeastern

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<sup>10</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 10 Vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> George F. Kunz, *The Book of the Pearl: The History, Art, Science, and Industry of the Queen of Gems* (New York: The Century Co., 1908), 67.

<sup>12</sup> William A. Herdman, *Report to the Government of Ceylon on the Pearl Oyster Fisheries of the Gulf of Manaar* (London: The Royal Society, 1903-06), 1:1.

coast of India as the “Fishery Coast.” One of the Portuguese names for this area was the *costa de pescaria*, while the Dutch rendered the toponym as the *visserijkust*.

The pearl fishery as a conceptual entity evolved along with the management thereof. The classic definition of a fishery in environmental studies refers to the exploitation of fish populations for commercial purposes. Yet further historical contextualization of the term suggests more variegated, and somewhat slippery, meanings. For instance, the pearl fishery in European discourses signified geographic spaces. During the season, the *paars* upon which pearling operations took place were described in such terms. The whole grouping of pearl oyster banks spread across the Gulf of Mannar were also understood to have constituted the pearl fishery. The pearl fishery was also emerged as a discrete administrative category in the Portuguese, Dutch, and English governments. For instance, the Portuguese referred to it as *pescaria*, while the Dutch rendered it as *parelvisserij*. Documents related to pearling in the Gulf of Mannar produced during the era of European management suggests that officials also understood the pearl fishery as an industry comprised of certain communities and specific institutions. From divers and merchants to temples and courts, a complex of local actors and institutions had pivotal roles in the industry, many of which claimed special rights and privileges. Finally, the pearl fishery can be seen as a specific object of knowledge. As this dissertation will show, pearling in the Gulf of Mannar generated significant interest amongst European officials, travelers, cartographers, and naturalists. The scientific study of pearls, mollusks, and marine ecosystems found accommodating homes in colonial

Madras and Ceylon, both of which continued to serve as centers of marine animal and fisheries research through the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup>

The geographic boundaries of the pearl fishery were also not fixed. An intermittent event, the location of the pearl fishery shifted by season. Indeed, European observers regularly commented on the infrequent nature of the pearl fishery and bemoaned the challenges they faced in determining its location and predicting its yield. In his report to British Ceylon, Herdman remarked generally that “a notable feature of these fisheries, under all administrations, has been their uncertainty and intermittent character.”<sup>14</sup> Dutch and British administrators of the pearl fishery also expressed frustration with the sporadic nature of the industry. For instance, Dutch Governor Gustaav Willem Baron van Imhoff wrote in 1740, “experience has shown that, on former occasion, the banks have been unproductive even for a longer period than has yet occurred at present.”<sup>15</sup> The exact number of *paars* was also not constant across eras. For instance, a Dutch report from 1682 recorded thirty-one pearl oyster banks off the coast of India. Less than a decade later, another survey by Dutch VOC officials identified forty-seven *paars*.<sup>16</sup> By the early twentieth century, marine biologist James Hornell found at

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<sup>13</sup> Edward F. Kelaart, *Introductory Report on the Natural History of the Pearl Oyster of Ceylon* (Trincomalie: Government of Ceylon, 1857); Ernest Haeckel, *A Visit to Ceylon*, 2nd American ed., trans. Clara Bell (Boston: Cassino, 1883); Edgar Thurston, *Notes on the Pearl and Chank Fisheries and Marine Fauna of the Gulf of Manaar* (Madras: Government Press, 1890); Oliver Collett, “Pearl-Oysters and Pearl Fisheries,” *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 16 (1901): 165-197; Herdman, *Report to the Government of Ceylon*; James Hornell, *Report of the Government of Madras on the Indian Pearl Fisheries in the Gulf of Mannar* (Madras: Government Press, 1905); S. Sivalingam, *The 1958 Pearl Oyster Fishery, Gulf of Mannar*, (Colombo: Fisheries Research Station, 1961).

<sup>14</sup> Herdman, *Report to the Government of Ceylon*, 1:3.

<sup>15</sup> *Memoir Left by Gustaaf Willem Baron Van Imhoff, Governor and Director of Ceylon, to his Successor, Willem Maurits Bruynink, 1740*, trans. Sophia Peters (Colombo: Government Press, 1911); Herdman, *Report to the Government of Ceylon*, Vol. I, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Markus P. M. Vink, *Encounters on the Opposite Coast: The Dutch East India Company and the Nayaka State of Madurai in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 231.



least fifty or sixty *paars* off the coast of Madras, which he further categorized into three geographic divisions.<sup>17</sup>

Pearling in the Gulf of Mannar attracted the attention of travelers, naturalists, composers, poets, and scholars from at least the early first millennium through the twentieth century. From Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* to Marco Polo's celebrated travelogue, from *Arabian Nights* and *Paradise Lost* to *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* and Leonard Woolf's autobiography, references to pearling in India and Sri Lanka are found in a remarkably wide range of texts.<sup>18</sup> In the ancient world, for instance, Pliny the Elder's late first-century encyclopedia *Natural History* characterized the Gulf of Mannar as a source of the finest pearls in the world.<sup>19</sup> There are numerous references to the pearling in Tamil literature from the early first millennium, including such canonical texts at *Maduraikanchi* and *Silapadiraḱaram*. There are also literary and epigraphical sources that describe the use of pearls as diplomatic gifts, objects in temple gift-giving and patronage, and jewelry adorned by royalty and courtly elites.<sup>20</sup> For instance, a Chola-era inscription records an in-kind gift to the Pañcanadīśvara temple in Tanjavur: “[Prince Śrīvisnuvattanadevar] graciously presented to [Ātavallār] 4 necklaces containing 851 pearls and weighing 22 *kalañcu*, 6 *mañcāti*, and 2 *mā*. [He also gave] an ornament for the foot composed of 1,109 pearls and a cloth sewn with 315 pearls, with a weight of 47, 6 *mañcāti*, and 1 *mā*. Altogether [the total is] 2,285 pearls, and a weight of 72 *kalañcu*, 1

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<sup>17</sup> Hornell, *Report on the Pearl Fisheries*, 25-32.

<sup>18</sup> R. A. Donkin, *Beyond Price: Pearls and Pearl-fishing: Origins to the Age of Discoveries* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1998); Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*. For the Persian Gulf, see Robert Carter, “The History and Prehistory of Pearling in the Persian Gulf,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, 2 (2005): 139-209.

<sup>19</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*.

<sup>20</sup> S. Arunachalam, *The History of the Pearl Fishery of the Tamil Coast* (Annamalai Nagar: Annamalai University, 1952).

*mañcāti*, and 3 *mā*.”<sup>21</sup> Medieval Tamil inscriptions concerned with the trading activities of merchant guilds provide evidence of pearls as objects of trade.<sup>22</sup> A sixteenth-century Tamil inscription at a temple in Kilakkarai provides information about taxes on pearls sold in the market. It records “an agreement by which half a *panam* was to be given on every 100 pearls sold in Kilakkarai and the proceeds to be utilized for the worship and repairs to the temple.”<sup>23</sup>

In the late medieval and early modern periods, merchants, travelers, diplomats, and naturalists gave first-hand accounts of pearling in the Gulf of Mannar.<sup>24</sup> The intrepid Venetian Marco Polo, for instance, offered vivid descriptions of pearl diving, merchant activities, and tax systems.<sup>25</sup> Jordanus, a contemporary of Marco Polo and friar from the Catalan region, penned *Mirabilia Descripta*, an early fourteenth-century travel account that contains a purported eyewitness account of over eight thousand boats that harvested an “astounding and almost incredible” volume of pearls.<sup>26</sup> Shortly after the time of Marco Polo and Friar Jordanus, Muhammad Ibn Battuta, an Islamic scholar and traveler from North Africa, arrived to Sri Lanka and secured a meeting with its “idolater Sultan,” during which they discussed, among other topics, the superlative quality of pearls

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<sup>21</sup> *South Indian Inscriptions* (Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India), Vol. 5, No. 520; Leslie Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 98-99.

<sup>22</sup> Burton Stein, “Coromandel Trade in Medieval India,” in *Merchants and Scholars: Essays in the History of Exploration and Trade*, ed. John Parker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), 50; Meera Abraham, *Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India* (Delhi, Manohar, 1988), 139, 173-76; cf. Daud Ali, “Between Market and Court: The Careers of Two Courtier-Merchants in the Twelfth-Century Deccan,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53, nos. 1-2 (2010): 185-211.

<sup>23</sup> *A Topographical List of the Inscriptions of the Madras Presidency (Collected till 1915)*, ed. V. Rangacharya (Madras: Government Press, 1919), Vol. II, Ramnad District, No. 63 (396 of 1907), 1167.

<sup>24</sup> K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, ed., *Foreign Notices of South India from Megasthenes to Ma Huan* (Madras: Madras University Press, 1939).

<sup>25</sup> Marco Polo, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian, Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, ed. and trans. Henry Yule (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 101.

harvested from waters in the king's domain.<sup>27</sup> From the turn of the sixteenth century, with the arrival of organized trading ventures from Europe, the spiritual descendants of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta—Duarte Barbosa, Pedro Teixeira, Caesar Frederick, Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, and countless others—seldom missed an opportunity to witness the spectacle of pearling.<sup>28</sup> A report by British officer George Turnour submitted to Governor Frederic North of Ceylon in 1799, for instance, reproduced large sections of texts by Marco Polo, Philipus Baldaeus, João Ribeiro, and others.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, a royal commissioner for the British colonial office wrote, “from the descriptions of ancient travelers, [the pearl fishery] is carried on nearly in the same manner that was practised several centuries ago.”<sup>30</sup> As historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam writes, the pearl fishery has been depicted “as unchanging and primitive in character, withstanding the ‘vicissitudes of three thousand years’ without losing an iota of its pristine, romantic, character.”<sup>31</sup>

To better contextualize British management of the pearl industry, it is important to first develop a picture of the preexisting social, political, economic, and environmental conditions surrounding the industry. The turn of the sixteenth century is an important

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<sup>27</sup> Ibn Battuta, *The Travels of Ibn Battūta with Notes, Illustrative of the History, Geography, Antiquities, etc. Occurring Throughout the Work*, ed. and trans. Samuel Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta, a Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); John Clifford Holt, ed. *The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 111-18.

<sup>28</sup> Duarte Barbosa, *Descriptions of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. and trans. Henry E. J. Stanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Pedro Teixeira, *The Travels of Pedro Teixeira: With his Kings of Harmuz and Extracts from his Kings of Persia*, trans. William F. Sinclair (London: Hakluyt Society, 1902); Caesar Frederick, *The Voyage and Travails of M. Caesar Frederick, Merchant of Venice, Into the East India, the Indies, and Beyond the Indies*, trans. Thomas Hickock (London, 1588); Jan Huygen van Linschoten, *The Voyage of John van Huyghen to the East Indies*, ed. Arthur Coke Burnell (London: Hakluyt Society, 1885).

<sup>29</sup> British Library (BL), India Office Records (IOR), G, 11, 54.

<sup>30</sup> *The Colebrooke-Cameron Papers: Documents on British Colonial Policy in Ceylon, 1796-1832*, ed. G. C. Mendis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1:20.

<sup>31</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea: Managing the Pearl Fishery of Mannar, 1500-1825,” in *Institutions and Economic Change in South Asia*, ed. Subrahmanyam and Burton Stein (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 135.

juncture because it is when European powers became directly involved with the management and oversight of the industry. Three European imperial forces in early modern and modern Asia—Portuguese, Dutch, and English—had direct and successive involvement with the pearl fishery between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. As historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam writes, “One can scarcely find an enterprise then that encapsulates the phases of European ‘expansion’ in Asia better than the fishery, which passed through the hands of each of the great colonial powers in Asia of the early modern and modern periods.”<sup>32</sup> The turn of the sixteenth century is also important because at this moment European powers started to produce a large body of detailed historical texts related to pearling that provide information about the location, frequency, volume, and organization of the industry. These materials allow for a historical analysis of pearling in the Gulf of Mannar that belies its characterization as an immutable industry.

The Portuguese *Estado da Índia* was involved with the pearling industry in different capacities from around the turn of the sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century. Vasco da Gama expressed an interest in pearls sourced from the Gulf of Mannar during his visit to the court of the Zamorin of Calicut at the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>33</sup> A few years later, Francisco de Almeida, Portuguese Viceroy of India, wrote to the King of Portugal in November 1507, “The seed pearls and pearls which you command me to send you, I cannot get, as they are in Ceylon and Caile which are the sources of their production. I should have to purchase them with my blood or with my money, which I

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Chandra R. De Silva, “The Portuguese and Pearl Fishing off South India and Sri Lanka,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1978): 17.

have because you have given it to me.”<sup>34</sup> By the 1520s, the King of Portugal and *Estado da Índia* appointed a captain or chief factor of the pearling industry. He brokered deals with Muslim chieftains of Kilakkarai and Old Kayalpatnam that allowed the banks to be fished under local control in exchange for tribute. In the latter half of the sixteenth century, the Nayakas of Madurai and Jesuits supported by the Portuguese crown came to an agreement wherein the Nayakas would receive an award equivalent to one day of fishing. Although the pearl fishery was a nominal seigniorage of the Nayakas, the actual management of the industry was in the hands of the Jesuits and Christian Paravas, and the proceeds flowed to the purse of the *Estado da Índia*.<sup>35</sup> Historian C. R. de Silva writes that “the most important source of income for the Crown was the tax on the divers.” The Portuguese also taxed merchants and boat-owners to participate in the pearl fishery and levied duties on various activities in the bazaar.<sup>36</sup> Some aspects of Portuguese management conformed to the political and commercial practices that are commonly associated with the Iberian empires in the greater Eurasian world.<sup>37</sup> The Portuguese also inserted themselves into local matrices of power. They extended patronage and protection

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 140; Kenneth McPherson, “Paravas and Portuguese: A Study of Portuguese Strategy and its Impact on an Indian Seafaring Community,” *Mare Liberum* 13 (1997): 69-82; Mahesh Gopalan, “War, Movement, and Resettlement: The Paravas and the Jesuits in the Sixteenth Century,” in *Cross-Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World*, eds. Edward Alpers and Himanshu Prabha Ray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 79-99; Pius Malekandathil, “Fishing the Pearl and the Soul: A Study of the Portuguese and the Identity Formation of the Paravas in the Pearl Fishery Coast, 1500-1600,” in *The Mughals, the Portuguese, and the Indian Ocean: Changing Imaginaries of Maritime India* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2013), 39-57.

<sup>36</sup> De Silva, “The Portuguese and Pearl Fishing”; Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea.”

<sup>37</sup> C. R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415-1825* (New York: Knopf, 1969); A. J. R. Russell-Wood, *The Portuguese Empire, 1415-1808: A World on the Move*, 2nd Ed., (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); M. D. D. Newitt, *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400-1688* (London: Routledge, 2005); A. R. Disney, *A History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire: From Beginnings to 1807*, 2 vols., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); cf. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700: A Political and Economic History*, 2nd ed., (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

to Tamil Paravas, extracted tribute and imposed taxes, deployed the use of force, and kept up diplomatic relations with local polities.<sup>38</sup>

With the support of the Kandiyans of Sri Lanka, the Dutch VOC drove the Portuguese from maritime Ceylon and the Fishery Coast by 1658.<sup>39</sup> Present-day scholars have examined the relationship between the VOC and local polities, looking at the place of the pearl fishery in the political economy of the region and its connections to merchant culture, patronage, and identity.<sup>40</sup> The VOC claimed rights to the pearling industry and assumed a role as patrons and protectors of the Paravas community like their vanquished Portuguese rivals. Dutch claims to the pearling industry as a “right of conquest” were further solidified through treaties with indigenous polities such as the Nayakas of Madurai and Setupatis of Ramnad. The VOC also drew upon juridical discourses concerned with territory and sovereignty to further substantiate their claims. Dutch officials built upon the organizational strengths of their Iberian predecessors to develop what appears to be a far more regular and systematic mode of managing the pearl fishery. This common-held perspective is partly due to the nature of the Dutch VOC records, which are well recognized for being very detailed and preoccupied with political and commercial affairs. For instance, William Herdman wrote, “As would be expected, we

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<sup>38</sup> De Silva, “The Portuguese and Pearl Fishing”; Patrick Roche, *Fishermen of the Coromandel Coast: A Social Study of the Paravas of the Coromandel* (Delhi: Manohar, 1984); McPherson, “Paravas and Portuguese”; Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Gopalan, “Paravas and the Jesuits”; Malekandathil, “Fishing the Pearl and the Soul.”

<sup>39</sup> Vink, *Encounters on the Opposite Coast*; Zoltán Biedermann, *The Portuguese in Sri Lanka and South India: Studies in the History of Diplomacy, Empire and Trade, 1500-1650* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*; Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nāyaka Period Tamilnadu* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992); Shulman and Subrahmanyam, “Prince of Poets and Ports: Cītakāti, the Maraikkayars and Ramnad, ca. 1690-1710,” in *Islam and Indian Religions*, A.L. Dallapiccola and S. Zingel-Avé Lallemand, eds. (Wiesbaden: Franz Stein Verlag, 1993), 497-535; Vink, *Encounters on the Opposite Coast*.

have much more definite records of the details of the fisheries during the Dutch and British occupations than during previous times.”<sup>41</sup> In the historiography of so-called “European expansion,” the Dutch VOC has often been contrasted with that of the Portuguese. Iberian imperialism in Asia is depicted as definitively “medieval,” characterized by an overreliance on violence, taxation, and religious conversion to advance its agenda. On the other side of the coin, the VOC is described as a “modern” enterprise and its affairs overseas are portrayed as more capitalist, organized, and tolerant.<sup>42</sup> Yet the Dutch VOC elaborated many aspects of Portuguese management of the pearling industry. In the latter half of the seventeenth century, the Dutch continued to extract tribute from vested parties, impose taxes, and distribute shares of the season’s catch to various stakeholders. The Dutch also taxed diving stones at variable rates based on community membership or religious affiliation. Dutch officials divided the tax-structure into three categories—Christian, “Heathen,” and “Moor”—and graded it with Christian divers paying the lowest rate and Muslim divers subject to the highest tax burden. The VOC also sought to juggle various rights that structured the pearling industry, including the claims of Madurai and Ramnad, as well as the role of local communities such as the Paravas and Maraikkayars that had enjoyed certain privileges under the Portuguese. Violence was also a regular fixture at the pearl fishery during the Dutch era.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Herdman, *Report to the Government of Ceylon*, 1:2.

<sup>42</sup> Niels Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974).

<sup>43</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 146-48.

The mid-eighteenth century marked a major policy shift in Dutch management of the pearling industry.<sup>44</sup> There were only two pearl fisheries organized by Dutch Ceylon in the first few decades of the eighteenth century, 1708 and 1724, and mounting frustration about this dry spell prompted VOC officials to rethink the government's approach. The VOC had organized most fisheries up to his point under the *amani* system. The *amani* system was a form of direct management in which the government proprietor assumed all the risk and fished the banks on its own account. Governor Gustaav Willem Baron van Imhoff shifted away from the *amani* system and introduced a type of revenue-farming, adapted from a system of "renting" that had been employed in the agrarian sectors of the pre-modern economy in the *ancien régimes* of India and Sri Lanka.<sup>45</sup> In 1740, Governor Baron van Imhoff wrote to his successor, "I am inclined to think that unless the fishery is very successful, it would be rather prejudicial than profitable to the Company, and that it would much better if they could be avoided, even if it were by a yearly lease of the license to dive on the pearl banks, in the same way as at present an experiment is made with the diving of chanks, the number of people and tonys [boats] being regulated."<sup>46</sup> Under this arrangement, Dutch Ceylon leased the right to the pearl fishery to a local merchant, who assumed all the risk if the fishery failed to deliver on its expected returns. Contemporaries recognized Governor van Imhoff for his innovative management program. Governor Jan Schreuder wrote in 1762 that Baron van Imhoff "clearly demonstrated to what risk, indeed to what disadvantage the Company was exposed"

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<sup>44</sup> Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 103; Subrahmanyam, "Noble Harvest from the Sea," 152.

<sup>45</sup> C. R. De Silva, *Ceylon under the British Occupation, 1795-1833*, 2nd ed. (Colombo: The Colombo Apothecaries Co., 1953-62); K. M. De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, rev. ed. (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005 [1981]); U. C. Wickremeratne, *The Conservative Nature of the British Rule of Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1996).

<sup>46</sup> Baron von Imhoff, *Memoir*, 53.



when it conducted the pearl fishery under *amani* or direct management.<sup>47</sup> After nearly a century of *amani* as the predominant choice, renting became the preferred mode of management for the Dutch VOC in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

By 1796, the British East India Company had expelled the Dutch VOC from maritime Ceylon and the Fishery Coast. From 1796 to 1802, the East India Company governed the erstwhile territories of Dutch Ceylon from its administrative headquarters at Fort St. George, Madras. Both Dutch and English representatives believed that the East India Company takeover of the island was a temporary arrangement. It was assumed that control over the island would be restored to the Dutch at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. However, high-ranking officials in London decided otherwise and kept it as an English possession. It was also determined that the East India Company would manage Ceylon under the auspices of its Indian government. In 1802, under the Treaty of Amiens, the Company transferred power over the coastal areas of Ceylon to the British Crown, while the coastal districts of southeastern India remained under Company rule. The Company Raj superintended the pearl fishery on the India-side of the Gulf, while British Ceylon took care of the banks off the western coast of the island. Thus, during the first half of the nineteenth century the pearl oyster beds were situated within the domains of two different British powers. Some high-ranking officials proposed bringing the management of the entire pearl fishery under the collective authority of Madras and Colombo, though such a plan never materialized. For instance, Alexander Johnston wrote to the British Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1809 with a “plan for changing the system observed by the

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<sup>47</sup> *Memoir of Jan Schreuder, 1757-1762, delivered to his successor, Lubbert Jan Baron van Eck on March 17, 1762*, trans. E. Reimers (Colombo: Ceylon Government Press, 1946), 81; Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 152.

Ceylon Government, in the management of the Pearl and Chank fisheries on the North West Coast of Ceylon, for placing all the Pearl and Chank Banks in the gulf of *Manaar*, as well as those belonging to the East India Company as those belonging to the Crown, under the same management.”<sup>48</sup>

The Madras and Ceylon governments experimented with both renting and *amani* during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As British traveler James Cordiner wrote, “sometimes government fishes the banks entirely at its own risk; sometimes the boats are let to many speculators; but, most frequently, the right of fishing is sold to one individual, who sub-rents boats to others.”<sup>49</sup> While renting out the entire fishery to single renter was the principal mode of management during the early years of British management it was often accompanied by elements of *amani* when the renter’s contract expired. In such cases, when the fishery was leased to a single renter, the principal leaseholder maintained a right to extend his rental period if a sufficient quantity of oysters remained on the beds at the expiration of his lease. If the renter declined, then the attending officers would take over the fishery and conduct it under *amani*. Decisions about how to best manage the pearl fisheries were regular features of the administrative proceedings of British Ceylon and the Company Raj and many British officials held strong views on the subject. Governor North of Ceylon advanced an argument in favor of *amani*. He wrote: “At all Events I intend to conduct it myself in Amannee, as I shall any other Pearl-Fishery which may take Place during my stay on this Island. Every Reason both of Calculation & Experience has convinced me that there is no mode of carrying on

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<sup>48</sup> James Steuart, *An Account of the Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon* (Cotta: Church Mission Press, 1843), 2.

<sup>49</sup> James Cordiner, *A Description of Ceylon: Containing an Account of the Country, Inhabitants, and Natural Productions* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807), 2:40.

that Business, either so economical, so productive, so certain, or so little liable to abuse.”<sup>50</sup> He warned against devolving too much power to local merchants and asserted that *amani* promoted better natural resource management. These debates over the best mode of management continued through the nineteenth century, yet no concrete government-wide policy emerged.<sup>51</sup> Most of the pearl fisheries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were conducted under the renting system. By the 1830s, however, British Ceylon officials wanted to turn away from the renting system and reintroduce a system of direct management, and by the mid-nineteenth century, officials such as George Vane remarked that the renting “had given much trouble at former fisheries so conducted, and led to abuses of the rights of the divers and boatmen (also, as believed, to the over-fishing of the banks).”<sup>52</sup>

A historical study of the pearling in the Gulf of Mannar sheds light—a pearly, iridescent light—on some of the underlying aspects of British colonialism, imperialism, and governance in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century India and Sri Lanka. Historians have typically identified this period as a critical juncture in the historiography of the British Empire. According to an older historiographical model popularized by British scholar Vincent Harlow, the second half of the eighteenth century is distinguished by the emergence of the “Second British Empire,” which displaced the “First British Empire,” the latter being a system characterized by territorial possessions in the Atlantic and intense commercial regulation. As the American colonies slipped away in the late eighteenth century, this historiographical tradition maintains that Britain swung

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<sup>50</sup> United Kingdom National Archives (UKNA), London, Kew Gardens, Colonial Office 54, Vol. 7, 10v.

<sup>51</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea.”

<sup>52</sup> George Vane, “The Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon,” *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 10, no. 34 (1887), 17.

its attention from the Atlantic to the Asian world, expanding or acquiring territorial possessions in the East while reducing its overall emphasis on trade.<sup>53</sup> More recent studies have challenged the two-phase model of British imperial history and instead followed a line of inquiry that teases out connections across and between the western and eastern frontiers of the British imperium.<sup>54</sup> The second half of the eighteenth century also witnessed a transformation in the relationship between the Company and Crown. The British Parliament started in earnest to undermine the Company's commercial power by gradually eroding its monopoly and staging a hostile takeover of corporate governance.<sup>55</sup> Through a series of legislative acts, often in response to changing realities or events in India, the world's most powerful corporation turned from a trading entity with the inherent qualities of a state into a territorial and administrative political power in Asia.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, the British Crown continued to expand its global footprint, establishing formal colonies that stretched from Guyana to New Zealand.

As the strands of *Pax Britannica* came together to form a global assemblage of power, major intellectual shifts occurred in the realms of political and economic thought. The eighteenth century welcomed the arrival of liberalism as a distinct political theory

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<sup>53</sup> For an overview of the debates that animate this historiography, see Robin W. Winks, ed. *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol. V: Historiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). For a classic study, see Vincent T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763-1793*, 2 vols., (London: Longman Green, 1952-1964); Harlow, "The New Imperial System, 1783-1815," in *The Cambridge History of the British Empire, Vol. 2: The Growth of the New Empire, 1783-1870*, eds. J. Holland Rose, A. P. Newton, and E. A. Benians (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940); P. J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America, c. 1750-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For an important intervention, see Jonathan Eacott, *Selling Empire: India in the Making of Britain and America, 1600-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

<sup>54</sup> H. V. Bowen, Elizabeth Mancke, and John G. Reid, eds. *Britain's Oceanic Empires: Atlantic and Indian Ocean Worlds, c. 1550-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Eacott, *Selling Empire*.

<sup>55</sup> For more on the East India Company in British politics, see Lucy Sutherland, *The East India Company in Eighteenth-Century Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); H. V. Bowen, *Revenue and Reform: The Indian Problem in British Politics, 1757-1773* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>56</sup> Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

and philosophical system that, as many historians have promulgated, eventually merged with classic political economy, utilitarianism, and evangelism to create a distinct, if somewhat inconsistent, ideology of imperial governance in India.<sup>57</sup> Historian Eric Stokes argued in *The English Utilitarians and India* (1959) that British colonial policy in India stemmed largely from a transformation in the way that markets and culture were understood in Victorian England, an intellectual shift represented by Benthamites such as James Mill.<sup>58</sup> *The English Utilitarians and India* initiated a paradigm shift by changing the way in which historians understood the relationship between intellectual thought and public policy in the metropole and colony. It pushed scholars of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Britain and its empire to seriously consider how ideas about law, markets, and society that have been naturalized as the products of European modernity were in fact hammered out in colonial contexts. Those writing in the wake of *The English Utilitarians and India* have drawn further attention to a deep irony. British colonialism in South Asia functioned as a petri dish for the growth and development of liberalism while the tenets of universal freedom and progress espoused by figures such as J. S. Mill and Thomas Macaulay were denied to colonial subjects. Historians of political thought such as Uday Singh Mehta, Javed Majeed, and Jennifer Pitts have demonstrated through careful readings of Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, J. S. Mill, and others that liberalism was not in fact anathema to British imperialism (or other European empires, for that matter), but rather part and parcel to autocratic rule in India, Sri Lanka, and other foreign lands.<sup>59</sup> Mehta's *Liberalism and Empire*, for example, argues that liberalism was, and perhaps continues to be, constitutive of colonial domination and imperial rule, buttressed

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<sup>57</sup> Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*.

<sup>58</sup> Stokes, *The English Utilitarians*.

<sup>59</sup> Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings*; Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*; Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*.

by racist and culturalist discourses spun from essentialist assumptions about Indian history.<sup>60</sup> Figures like James Mill and Thomas Macaulay expressed universalist and abstract ideas about freedom and emancipation even as they promoted paternalistic and interventionist policies in the colonies that sought to “civilize” the darker nations.

In the realm of economic thought, liberal economics displaced mercantilism as the prevailing framework for understanding the relationship between states and economies.<sup>61</sup> Also known as classical economics, this school of economic thought is represented most famously by the works of political economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Thomas Malthus, and asserts that markets optimally function under conditions of minimal government intervention. As many economic and intellectual historians have shown, the rise of free trade ideology emerged alongside the birth and development of a British global imperial order in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Debates about the relative benefits of monopoly had ensued since at least the seventeenth century, often pivoting around the East India Company. Competition between mercantilism and liberal economics continued to shape policy and discourse on trade and empire into the nineteenth century. Bernard Semmel’s classic *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism* made this connection between the rise of free trade ideology and the expansion of the British empire in the latter half of the eighteenth century.<sup>62</sup> From liberal axioms about progress

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<sup>60</sup> Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*; Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*; Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire*.

<sup>61</sup> Bernard Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism: Classic Political Economy the Empire of Free Trade and Imperialism, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Keith Tribe, *Land, Labour, and Economic Discourse* (London, Routledge, 1978); Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making a Colonial Marketplace* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

<sup>62</sup> Semmel, *Rise of Free Trade*; William Barber, *British Economic Thought and India, 1600-1858: A Study in the History of Development Economics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); S. Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Sen, *Empire of Free Trade*; Philip Stern and Carl Wennerlind, eds. *Mercantilism Reimagined: Political Economy in Early Modern Britain and its Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

and improvement articulated by political philosophers like James Mill and J. S. Mill, to ideas about private property and markets found in the writings of Adam Smith, liberalism is notorious for its polysemy. As historian Thomas Metcalf writes, “Liberalism was, to be sure, in no sense a coherent doctrine” and “within early Victorian England there existed liberals of many kinds.”<sup>63</sup>

Historians who have examined the relationship between the discourse of political economy and early colonialism in India have focused on land and private property. Alongside *The English Utilitarians and British India*, there is perhaps no more influential book than Ranajit Guha’s *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (1963) on the ways in which historians analyze the impact of British political and economic thought on policy decisions and administrative structures in eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century India.<sup>64</sup> Guha’s classic essay demonstrates that the Company Raj in post-Plassey Bengal was not only influenced by anti-feudalism and physiocratic ideas about land and value, but also tried to create an entire administrative land management system based on such principles in the form of the “Permanent Settlement” of 1793. In an effort to bring a private property regime to the Bengal countryside, Lord Cornwallis, Philip Francis and other Company officers introduced a land tenancy system that created a class of property owners, drawn largely from hereditary zamindari groups seen as an “ancient aristocracy,” from whom the Company Raj collected revenue.<sup>65</sup> Guha’s seminal work illustrated ways

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<sup>63</sup> Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, 28; Richard Bellamy, ed., *Victorian Liberalism: Nineteenth-Century Political Thought and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>64</sup> Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996 [1963]).

<sup>65</sup> Guha, *Rule of Property*; Sirajul Islam, *The Permanent Settlement in Bengal: A Study of its Operation, 1790-1819*, (Dacca: Bangla Academy, 1979). Some scholars have downplayed the overall impact of the “Permanent Settlement” on rural agrarian society in eastern India. For instance, see Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, c. 1760-1850*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1979).

in which political economic thought shaped the contours of the administrative and governing apparatuses of the Company Raj in Bengal. In the South Indian context, historians have explored the ideological foundations and economic effects of the *ryotwari* settlement in Madras. The brainchild of Governor Thomas Munro, the *ryotwari* system—introduced in 1820—was presented as an alternative to the “Bengal Model” because it theoretically removed local intermediaries and allowed the state to collect revenue straight from the cultivator.<sup>66</sup> However, the *ryotwari* system was still undergirded by the rule of law and English concepts of private property, and the ideal of “improvement” functioned as its primary engine. Historian Jon Wilson offers an important intervention in *The Domination of Strangers*, arguing that the emergence of the Company Raj in Bengal was not isolated from global transformation in systems of governance.<sup>67</sup> He demonstrates that ideological and institutional shifts displaced indigenous systems of rule based on kinship and social hierarchies and replaced it with a model motivated by the “domination of strangers.” Wilson builds upon the work of Stokes, Guha, and others by showing that modern “impersonal” forms of bureaucratic rule were first tested in late eighteenth-century Bengal before finding a place in the domestic political culture of Britain. He also draws attention to the fact that British officials did not fully understand the cultural differences that they confronted in India. The Company Raj in turn undertook “an

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<sup>66</sup> T. H. Beaglehole, *Thomas Munro and the Development of Administrative Policy in Madras, 1792-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); Nilmani Mukherjee, *The Ryotwari System of Madras, 1792-1827* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukopadhyay, 1962); Burton Stein, *Thomas Munro: The Origins of the Colonial State and His Vision of Empire* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>67</sup> Jon E. Wilson, *The Domination of Strangers: Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780-1835* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).



anxious search for semantic coherence,” for which officials used abstract categories and concepts to bring a semblance of epistemological and bureaucratic order.<sup>68</sup>

These works on the administrative structures of the Company Raj are important because they help contextualize the modalities through which British officers attended to the management of the pearl fishery. Indeed, management of the pearl fishery was not cordoned off from wider debates within Company administration about land and revenue structures. As historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam writes, “the spirit of *raiyatwari*, so much in the air in these years, could not leave the fishery’s administration untouched.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, debates around renting and *amani* resonated with discussions about agrarian land systems. Under the renting system, the government proprietor collected revenue by leasing the pearl fishery to a local commercial magnate, who then sub-leased boats to individuals or partnerships. The *amani* system enabled the government to extract revenue by leasing boats directly to individual merchants. British Ceylon and the Company Raj introduced regimes of private property in the agrarian economy, but asserted a monopoly over the production of commodities such as pearls, conch shells, and cinnamon. British officers differentiated pearls from other commodities. The pearl fishery was a seasonal, intermittent event that did not yield annual revenue. Officials also argued that the unique nature of the product, and the fragility of the ecosystem in which it was produced, rendered pearl oyster populations particularly vulnerable to overfishing. The physical qualities of pearls—small, valuable, and easily concealed—and the nature of extraction—miles from the coast and fathoms under water—heightened anxieties. Officers of the Company and Crown promulgated a position that only the skilled and capable hands of a

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<sup>68</sup> Wilson, *Domination of Strangers*, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 158.

strong government could modulate use, protect the persons and property, and provide the proper inducements to attract labor and capital. It was thus incumbent upon the Madras and Ceylon governments to turn the pearl fishery from, as one official wrote, an “uncertain venture” into a “state of regular and rich annual reproduction.” Governor North wrote that “in other farms the Revenue may be indemnified by the Certainty of what it receives from the Sacrifice which It makes. But in this the private Renter has no Superior means of Vigilance; nor is any Sufficient temporary advantage likely to accrue from that mode of administration which can compensate the mischiefs of private avarice armed with public authority.”<sup>70</sup>

The pearl fishery monopoly was a point of contention for philosophers, political economists, politicians, and civil servants who not only engaged in debates about fisheries management and governance but also over trade and empire. The East India Company was a natural enemy to dyed-in-the-wool free trade political economists like Adam Smith. Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) that the East India Company was a “company of merchants” who considered themselves “sovereigns.” He characterized the East India Company as a corporation that profited from a state-granted monopoly, run by deluded merchants who acted like princes, and offered no added value to the economy of its home country. To many, the pearl fishery of Mannar was a particularly egregious case of the deleterious effects of state-granted or state-operated monopolies. Scottish political economist John Ramsay McCulloch—an acolyte of David Ricardo who edited and introduced an 1828 edition of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*—discussed the pearl fishery in *A Dictionary, Practical, Theoretical and*

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<sup>70</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, Vol. 7, 10v.

*Historical of Commerce and Commercial Navigation* (1832). He wrote unequivocally that “these monopolies are of no value.”<sup>71</sup> For McCulloch, mercantilism was an outmoded theory and monopolies were ineffective instruments with which to manage the economy. In the case of the pearl fishery McCulloch reasoned that “the sum for which the fishery is let, equal the expenses incurred in guarding, surveying, and managing the banks.”<sup>72</sup> McCulloch and similar-minded liberal political economists advocated for the total abolition of a government monopoly over the pearl fishery. Lifting the monopoly, and ending “some very oppressive regulations enacted by the Dutch,” would breath “fresh life into the fishery.”<sup>73</sup> Instead of leasing the pearl fishery to a local merchant or reaping the harvest as a government-controlled enterprise, McCulloch recommended that any capable businessman ought to purchase a license.

On the other hand, there were those who advanced arguments in favor of a government monopoly. Individuals who believed in the value and purpose of the pearl fishery monopoly usually had first-hand experience with the industry in contrast to those thinkers and reformers who addressed the issue from a distance as an intellectual topic. For instance, James Steuart served as the master attendant and chief inspector of the pearl banks for British Ceylon in the 1820s and 1830s and authored one of the first single-subject works on the pearl fishery.<sup>74</sup> Steuart wrote in *An Account of the Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon* (1843) “that the Gulf of Manaar pearl fisheries can only be made of general benefit to the community, by their being protected and preserved, or in the language of

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<sup>71</sup> J. R. McCulloch, *A Dictionary, Practical, Theoretical, and Practical, of Commerce and Commercial Navigation*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1835), 887.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*.

political economists, monopolized by Government.”<sup>75</sup> British Ceylon and the Company Raj ought not be high-handed government-proprietors of the industry but should instead be seen as “Trustees of a monopoly” that belonged to the people of India and Ceylon. He wrote, “it is the duty of the Trustees or Guardians of the interests of the community to adopt measures calculated to increase the revenue obtained from it, in order, that the taxes which bear directly upon the people may be lightened.”<sup>76</sup> Steuart did not support government monopolies in all instances, but in his estimate the pearl fishery was unique. He wrote, “We would not be supposed to be favourers of monopoly, or of exclusive rights and privileges of some of the community to the injury of others; nor do we approve of trading Government.”<sup>77</sup> He added, “when a beneficent Providence blesses a country with a peculiar benefit, it is right in the Government of that country jealously to preserve and monopolize such natural advantage for the good of its people.”<sup>78</sup> Jonathan Forbes, the author of an early nineteenth-century study of Ceylon, also supported the retention of a government monopoly. He wrote, “Theorists have called for the abolition of what they are pleased to term ‘the pearl-fishery monopoly,’ and have had the hardihood to assert, that to throw it open would benefit the inhabitants of Ceylon; but it is to be hoped that neither vague theory, nor the sound of a word—monopoly, will triumph over common sense and justice, to deprive the public of Ceylon of this unexceptionable source of revenue.”<sup>79</sup> Monopolists also advanced an argument that government control over the pearl fishery was the most effective method to protect and manage the pearl oyster populations and the marine ecosystem of Mannar. Forbes feared that the lack of

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<sup>75</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 30.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*; Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 159.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Jonathan Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon* (London: R. Bentley, 1840), 1:258.

government oversight would ruin the pearl oyster banks. He wrote, “If the pearl-fisheries of the island were thrown open to all speculators, a very short period would suffice to annihilate this mine of wealth.”<sup>80</sup> Anti-monopolists like McCulloch dismissed this argument wholesale: “The fears of exhausting the banks is quite ludicrous. The fishery would be abandoned as unprofitable long before the breed of oysters had been injuriously diminished; and in a few years it would be as productive as ever.”<sup>81</sup>

Nevertheless, a complete transition from a monopolistic system based on the principles of mercantilism to free trade liberalism never fully materialized. Historian Sudipta Sen has shown how the twinned forces of commercial expansion and territorial conquest led to the erection of a powerful apparatus through which the East India Company interfered in eighteenth-century politics, economy, and society.<sup>82</sup> Interventions by the Company Raj into market affairs through legal, commercial, administrative, and even violent mechanisms flew in the face of free trade principles. Sen illustrates that the political and symbolic economies of certain “prestige goods,” such as betel, salt, and tobacco, were areas in which the company-state regularly interfered. As this dissertation will show, the pearling industry was also a site in which the company-state and colonial state intervened, though the results varied. A peculiar feature during these early years of British management was that neither Company nor Crown expressed much interest in the pearl trade *per se*. The actual buying and selling of pearls was concentrated largely in the hands of a heterogeneous mix of Indian merchants and private European traders. Instead of pearls, and the profit derived from buying and selling precious gems, Madras and

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> McCulloch, *Dictionary*, 887.

<sup>82</sup> Sen, *Empire of Free Trade*.

Colombo in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were far more concerned with the management side of the enterprise. Historians of the British period have focused largely on how the pearl fishery conformed to the larger revenue systems of the Company Raj and British Raj, focusing primarily on the years and dates in which fisheries were held and the revenue that each generated for treasuries.<sup>83</sup> Yet the pearl fishery constituted a rather small section of the overall revenue picture on both the mainland and island. Taxes collected from agricultural lands, as well as cash crops such as cinnamon and tea produced in a plantation system, represented more substantial sources of revenue. Moreover, the pearl fishery was a seasonal event and was difficult to predict, which meant that the two fledgling British governments in the region could not rely on it for annual returns. Discussions of pearls as commodities with trade value are seldom found in official writings produced by Company and Crown officers during this period. By the time the East India Company had wrested managerial control over the pearl fishery from the Dutch in 1796, the Madras government was well on its way towards diversifying its economic base to include revenue extracted from sources beyond the buying and selling of raw materials and finished goods. Through its acquisition of the power to tax agricultural lands in Madras, Bengal, and Bombay, as well as the changing nature of the global economy and money markets, the East India Company consciously entered the world of land and revenue management. The production and consumption of pearls from the perspective of the Company and Crown was not about fishing for oysters and trading precious jewels.

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<sup>83</sup> C. R. De Silva, "The Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon, 1796-1837," *Ceylon Literary Register* 2, no. 10 (1932): 433-42; De Silva, *Ceylon under the British Occupation*, 2:501-510; Lennox A. Mills, *Ceylon under British Rule, 1795-1932* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933); G. C. Mendis, *Ceylon under the British* (Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries Company, 1946); Wickremeratne, *Conservative Nature of the British Rule*.

Bits and pieces of mercantilism and liberal economics converged along the sandy shores of southeastern India and western Sri Lanka to shape the contours of British management of the pearling industry. What may appear at first glance to be some irreconcilable tensions between mercantilism and liberal economics were to some extent eased in a colonial context. Both approaches conformed to the scientific discourse of political economy, suited the liberal tenets of progress, and fit squarely within the idealized work of a political sovereign. French theorist Michel Foucault drew attention to a distinct form of modern governmental power he called governmentality. He remarked that governmentality is “the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security.”<sup>84</sup> Through abstract and universalized knowledge, political economy produced and created a distinct sphere of governmental intervention. It capacitated Company and Crown officials to identify the people, institutions, and natural marine environment that produced and consumed pearls as objects of reform. It was this aspect of British management that represented a novel development in the history of pearling even though the results were far less dramatic.

The governments of Madras and Ceylon in turn introduced various measures that sought to convert preexisting pearling practices, as well as the supporting social, political,

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<sup>84</sup> Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality: With Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 102; Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

and economic infrastructure, into a revenue-generating industry. The aim to dissolve patrimonial and non-economic relationships was further complicated by the fact that officials depended upon local networks and institutions for authority, labor, information, supplies, and capital. A rich and somewhat contentious body of scholarship on intermediaries and services groups in the historiography of early colonial South Asia suggests that this problem was not unique to the pearling industry but common throughout British territories in South Asia during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Scholars have considered the extent to which scribes, bankers, merchants, fixers, landed elites, and other native intermediaries enabled colonial state formation and conquest.<sup>85</sup> Another line of inquiry has focused on the place of intermediaries in scientific and humanistic knowledge production.<sup>86</sup> From religious institutions and royal courts to skilled divers and wealthy merchants, numerous local people and institutions had a pivotal role in the pearling industry, which marked such key stakeholder groups as *the* objects of governmental reform. Madras and Colombo produced fields of state intervention that not only sought to increase extractive capabilities, but also aimed to fundamentally reshape the social, economic, and political foundations of the pearl

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<sup>85</sup> C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); cf. Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "The Making of a Munshi," *Comparative Studies of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004): 61-72; Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012). For Africa, see Benjamin N. Lawrence, Emily Lynn Osborn and Richard L. Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

<sup>86</sup> For instance, see Phillip B. Wagoner, "Precolonial Intellectuals and the Production of Colonial Knowledge," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 4 (2003): 783-814; Kapil Raj, *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650-1900* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Michael S. Dodson, *Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture: India, 1770-1880* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Simon Schaffer, et al., eds. *The Brokered World: Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770-1820* (Sagamore Beach: Science History Publications, 2009).



fishery.<sup>87</sup> From restructuring the rights of local polities to training the flow of labor and interfering in merchant affairs, the governments of Madras and Ceylon sought to break up “traditional” arrangements, and to turn the pearl fishery from an industry “embedded” in local economy and society to one operationalized by the logic of markets and protected by the rule of law.<sup>88</sup>

The temporal framework of this dissertation (c. 1770-1840) is not only important for understanding the history of the pearling in the Gulf of Mannar, but also has significance in the broader historiography of South Asia. This seventy-year period witnessed the so-called “colonial transition,” as the British East India Company in India and British colonial state in Ceylon effectively vanquished their European rivals and subdued indigenous opponents such as the Marathas of western India, Kandyans of Sri Lanka, and the “little kingdoms” of the Tamil countryside to solidify British military, political, and economic preeminence in the region. The introduction of land reforms in Bengal and Madras, as well as the increased use of modern investigative modalities such as surveying and anthropology, further illustrate some of the developments in colonial policy and ideology during this period. Yet historians have been at odds over the exact nature of this era for decades.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, the eighteenth century is one of the most contentious and spirited topics of debate in the historiography of South Asia.<sup>90</sup> One of the

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<sup>87</sup> David Scott, “Colonial Governmentality,” *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 23-52.

<sup>88</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, 2nd Beacon Paperback Edition. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Mark Granovetter, “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 91, no. 3 (1985): 481-510.

<sup>89</sup> Ian Barrow and Douglas Haynes, “The Colonial Transition: South Asia, 1780-1840,” *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2004): 469-78.

<sup>90</sup> Seema Alavi, ed., *The Eighteenth Century in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002); P. J. Marshall, ed., *The Eighteenth Century in Indian History: Evolution or Revolution?* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robert Travers, “The Eighteenth Century in Indian History,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40, no. 3 (2007).

central questions animating debates over the eighteenth century is the extent to which British colonial practices and ideologies impacted or altered the preexisting structures of South Asian politics, economy, and society. Scholars such as David Washbrook and C. A. Bayly brought a revisionist impulse to the field, minimizing the importance of great men and the rise and fall of empires and instead analyzing the structural undercurrents of Indian society and economy from a Marxist-inspired and social-historical viewpoint. In doing so, Bayly, Washbrook, and others came to represent a strain of thinking that advanced a thesis of continuity, suggesting that many elements inherent to indigenous economics and societies set the stage for changes witnessed during the early colonial era, and effectively deemphasizing the influence of British policy and practices on Indian society.<sup>91</sup> Writing from a different perspective, scholars such as Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha, Bernard Cohn, Nicholas Dirks, and Sudipta Kaviraj view the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as constituting a stark break with the precolonial past, implying that the Company Raj in India and British state in Ceylon were not only different beasts than their European and indigenous predecessors but also penetrated local society more deeply through modern forms of knowledge and power.<sup>92</sup> Whereas Bayly, Washbrook, and others focused on the critical role of agential intermediaries such as bankers, fixers, merchants, and landed elites in facilitating both precolonial and colonial state formation, those writing from within the “Subaltern Studies” camp sought to recover the life-worlds

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<sup>91</sup> C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Bayly, *Empire and Information*; David Washbrook, “Progress and Problems: South Asian Economic and Social History, c. 1720-1860,” *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 1 (1988): 57-96.

<sup>92</sup> Guha, *Rule of Property*; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Sudipta Kaviraj, “On the Construction of Colonial Power: Structure, Discourse, and Hegemony,” in *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 39-84; Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

of non-elites like peasants and laborers for whom the weight of colonial rule was acutely felt. It was during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that many historians argue the British poured the administrative and ideological concrete for the foundation upon which the modern colonial state was built. British engagements with the pearling industry provides an excellent site to parse these issues, and this dissertation explores the space between these two arguments by presenting an image of two fledgling governments in the East India Company and British Ceylon that brought an assemblage of ideas and practices to bear on the management of a single industry. British officials differentiated pearling from other industries and introduced new techniques of modern governance to the production-side of the pearl trade. However, a complete overhaul of the industry never materialized as some officers wished. In the case of the pearling industry, the so-called colonial transition not only denotes the passage from indigenous to British regimes and the establishment of British hegemony in the region, but also includes an intra-European changeover from Dutch to British control.

Scholars writing about the history of the pearl fishery also reproduced many commonly held assumptions about the relationship between geography and empire. Colonial (and later nationalist) historians understood political suzerainty and territorial control as isomorphic, a convenient idea derived from Roman legal thought that afforded the political entity in whose jurisdiction the pearl fishery was located with full right and power over that resource. The question of the “sovereignty of the sea” was also taken up by early modern and modern legal and political theorists such as Hugo Grotius, Samuel von Pufendorf, and Emmerich de Vattel, who debated the extent to which a political

entity might legitimately claim control over coastlines and open waters.<sup>93</sup> Twentieth-century professional historians from India used different source materials to write the history of the pearl fishery but reproduced many assumptions about the relationship between sovereignty and territory vis-à-vis the pearl fishery. Take for example the work of K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, historian of South India, who wrote in his study of the early medieval Pandya dynasty that pearling operations conducted from Korkai—the ancient seat of the pearl fishery—fell squarely in the domain of the state.<sup>94</sup> He characterized the relationship between polities and pearling during the Chola period along the same lines.<sup>95</sup> Historian S. Arunachalam promulgated a similar view in *The Pearl Fishery on the Tamil Coast* (1952). An historical overview of the pearl fishery from ancient times to the twentieth century, the impressive temporal scope of the book is overshadowed by its near-exclusive focus on the India-side of the Gulf of Mannar.<sup>96</sup> Published shortly after both India and Sri Lanka gained independence from British rule, Arunachalam's book represented a strain of Tamil geographic nationalism that obscured the historical connections between the island and mainland. For Arunachalam, the pearl fishery belonged to Tamil Nadu and the Tamil people. Arunachalam followed another trend in colonial histories of the pearl fishery. As marine biologist William A. Herdman wrote in his early nineteenth-century report to the government of British Ceylon, “And so we continue to have glimpses, through the centuries, of this ancient and highly prized

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<sup>93</sup> Thomas W. Fulton, *The Sovereignty of the Sea: An Historical Account of Claims of England to the Dominion of the British Seas, and of the Evolution of the Territorial Waters: With Special Reference to the Right of Fishing and the Naval Salute* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Son, 1911); David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Armitage, “The Elephant and the Whale: Empires of Land and Sea,” *Journal for Maritime Research* 9, no. 1 (2007): 23-36.

<sup>94</sup> K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Pandya Kingdom: From the Earliest Times to the Sixteenth Century* (Madras: Madras University Press, 1972), 31.

<sup>95</sup> K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *Cōlas* (Madras: University of Madras, 1975), 604, 609.

<sup>96</sup> Arunachalam, *History of the Pearl Fishery*.

industry being carried on with little or no change, first under the Sinhalese kings of Kandy and the Tamil kings of Jaffna, and subsequently under the successive European rulers.”<sup>97</sup> Likewise, Arunachalam’s periodization tracked the rise and fall of dominant states and empires, following a neat unfolding path that leads from the Pandyas and Cholas of medieval Tamil Nadu to the age of European imperialism and ends with the birth of the nation-state. Historians have also argued that British colonialism in the region initiated a stark break with the past. For instance, historian M. M. M. Mahroof writes, “the arrival of the British was a precursor of a more systematic approach to pearling.”<sup>98</sup>

Jorge Manuel Flores, a historian of the Portuguese Empire in Asia, characterizes the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Strait as a discrete “microworld” of the Indian Ocean.<sup>99</sup> The turn towards a microworld addresses a concern highlighted by Flores in which historians tend to emphasize long-distance trade by capital-heavy merchants across vast oceanic spaces at the expense of local and regional trade. Flores instead turns his attention to neglected trades— “substantially more discrete”—that took place on a smaller scale between merchants of more modest means and primarily in staples and essential commodities like rice. Flores uses the term microworld to not only describe the unique

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<sup>97</sup> Herdman, *Report to the Government of Ceylon*, 1:2.

<sup>98</sup> M. M. M. Mahroof, “Pearls in Sri Lankan History,” *South Asian Studies* 8, no. 1 (1992), 112.

<sup>99</sup> Jorge Manuel Flores, “The Straits of Ceylon and the Maritime Trade in Early Sixteenth Century India: Commodities, Merchants, and Trading Networks.” *Moyen Orient & Océan Indien* VII (1990): 27–58. For more on the connections between India and Sri Lanka, see Michael Roberts, “From Southern India to Sri Lanka: Traffic in Commodities, Bodies, and Myths from the Thirteenth Century Onwards,” *South Asia*, 3, no. 1 (June 1980): 36-47; Roberts, *Caste Conflict and Elite Formation: Rise of the Karāva Elite in Sri Lanka, 1500-1931* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Merchants, Companies and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast, 1650-1740* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Eric Meyer, “Labour Circulation between Sri Lanka and India in Historical Perspective,” in *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950*, eds. Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchédass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 55-88; Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

geography of the region but also the milieu in which people and goods moved between the island and mainland over the *longue durée*. The Gulf of Mannar, according to Flores, is a “gold mine for the historian who enters the scope of the small change.”<sup>100</sup> The microworld of Mannar was importantly not a self-contained one because it sat at the crossroads of a busy interregional oceanic highway system, uniquely situated to serve as an interchange for the eastern and western zones of the Indian Ocean. Oceanic frameworks have allowed historians to analyze connections across geographic spaces and time periods that are otherwise obscured by the borders of nation-states and hardening of modern identities.<sup>101</sup> According to global historian Jerry Bentley, one of the greatest intellectual challenges by historians of oceans is to simultaneously address the dynamics that integrated maritime regions “without losing sight of either local experiences or of the global interactions that sometimes conditioned the experiences of the regions themselves.”<sup>102</sup> According to Bentley, seas and oceans have enormous potential as frameworks to analyze complex historical processes, and to bringing into focus cultural, biological, intellectual, and commercial exchanges between societies. Historian Sugata Bose’s *A Hundred Horizons* offers a potential model to address the such concerns. He conceptualizes the Indian Ocean as an “interregional arena” rather than a coherent

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<sup>100</sup> Flores, “Straits of Ceylon,” 28.

<sup>101</sup> Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For an overview, though the Indian Ocean is conspicuously absent, see the essays in “AHR Forum: Oceans in History,” *American Historical Review*, 111, no. 3 (2006): 717-80. For foundation studies, see Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 4 Vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011 [1974-1989]); Philip Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1984); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>102</sup> Jerry H. Bentley, “Sea and Ocean Basins as Frameworks of Historical Analysis,” *The Geographical Review* 89, no. 2 (1999), 222.

cultural and economic unit, one that lies somewhere between a totalizing “world-system” and hyper-locality.<sup>103</sup>

Pearling in the Gulf of Mannar was one such horizon in the interregional arena of the Indian Ocean. Merchants, capital, labor, information, diseases, and provisions moved along the coasts of India and Sri Lanka and through the Gulf of Mannar during the pearling season. The circulation of people and things animated by season pearling activities formed a distinct route within a wider “circulatory regime” of South India and Sri Lanka.<sup>104</sup> From migration patterns and information networks to capital flows and military deployments, an array of people and things coalesced during the pearling season. Viewed through the lens of circulation, pearling in the Gulf of Mannar provides an opportunity to further bridge the gap between historical studies of India and Sri Lanka. The historiographies of island and mainland are too often divided into smaller units of study to reflect imagined ethno-nationalist geographies and identities.<sup>105</sup> Historian Sujit Sivasundaram argues in a recent study that policies and practices of British colonialism and imperialism effectively separated Sri Lanka from the India during the course of the nineteenth century.<sup>106</sup> Through geographic knowledge production, policing strategies,

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<sup>103</sup> Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). For a discussion of pearling labor and capital in the western Indian Ocean during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, 72-121.

<sup>104</sup> Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchedass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Introduction: Circulation and Society under Colonial Rule,” in *Society and Circulation*, eds. Markovits, Pouchedass, and Subrahmanyam.

<sup>105</sup> For studies that situate Sri Lanka in a wider South Asian context, see John Holt, *Buddha in the Crown: Avokiteśvara in the Buddhist Traditions of Sri Lanka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Holt, *The Religious World of Kirti Sri: Buddhism, Art, and Politics in Late Medieval Sri Lanka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Anne Blackburn, *Locations of Buddhism: Buddhism and Modernity in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010); John D. Rogers, “Early British Rule and Social Classification in Lanka,” *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2004): 625-47; Alan Strathern, *Kingship and Conversion in Sixteenth-Century Sri Lanka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Sujit Sivasundaram, *Islanded: Britain, Sri Lanka, and the Bounds of an Indian Ocean Colony* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>106</sup> Sivasundaram, *Islanded*.

legal power, administrative organization, and numerous other approaches to governing and studying Sri Lanka, the early colonial British government remade the island into a “unit in the Indian Ocean” separate and apart from the wider regional sphere of South Asia.<sup>107</sup> The movement of people and things through the Gulf of Mannar during the pearling season, however, suggests that the process of “islanding” Sri Lanka from India was always a work in progress. Yet the movement of people and things through the Gulf of Mannar at the time of the pearl fishery undermined attempts by Madras and Ceylon to actualize a vision of distinct realms for the Company and Crown. From seasonal migration and smuggling to disease outbreaks and poaching, circulatory patterns related to the pearl fishery compromised the ability of Madras and Ceylon to solidify, reinforce, and police the maritime borderland of Mannar. A comparable set of circumstances can be seen along the Anglo-Dutch maritime frontiers in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Southeast Asia. Historian Eric Tagliacozzo’s *Secret Trades, Porous Borders* examines the formation of a “porous border” through the “illegal trafficking” of drugs, guns, money, and people in Southeast Asia from 1865 to 1915. The formation of an Anglo-Dutch border was intimately connected with “boundary transgression” through the smuggling of contraband along the frontier.<sup>108</sup> British colonial powers of Madras and Ceylon used various mechanisms to police pearling-related activities in the region. From violence and surveillance technologies to mapping projects and interventions in the marketplace, attempts to police and control the circulation of people and things vis-à-vis the pearl fishery shaped the maritime borderlands of Mannar. The frontier has been a useful geographic and conceptual construct in South Asian historiography to understand

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<sup>107</sup> Sivasundaram, *Islanded*, 322.

<sup>108</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).



environmental, economic, political, cultural, and social change and interaction.<sup>109</sup> Jan Heesterman, scholar of South Asia history and culture, also identified the coastline as special type of frontier zone. He wrote, “The Littoral forms a frontier zone that is not there to separate or enclose, but which rather finds its meaning in its permeability.”<sup>110</sup> In other words, the fertile pearl oyster beds of Mannar constituted a “fluid frontier,” a space between *terra* and *mare*.<sup>111</sup> The pearling grounds of the region found their meaning in the permeability of the political and geographic area in which they were located, along the frontier zone between land and sea, humans and animals, island and mainland, Company and Crown, and Europe and Asia.

A heavily securitized zone, the Gulf of Mannar witnessed a surge of military activity during the pearling season when tens of thousands of people migrated to the location of the event. There were many forts and garrisons on the coasts of southeastern India and western Ceylon from whence Madras and Ceylon mobilized troops, artillery, and supplies. The Palk Strait also afforded safeguarded passage and reduced travel time between the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea because ships did not have to sail exposed around the southern tip of Ceylon to reach the Malabar and Coromandel coasts.<sup>112</sup> British Ceylon civil servant Anthony Bertolacci described the importance of the Gulf region in a report on the economic and social conditions of Ceylon: “It ought further be observed,

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<sup>109</sup> For example, see Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Jos Gommans, “The Silent Frontier of South Asia, C. A.D. 1100-1800,” *Journal of World History* 9, no. 1 (1998): 1-23.

<sup>110</sup> J. C. Heesterman, “Littoral et intérieur de l’Inde,” in *History and Underdevelopment: Essays on Underdevelopment and European Expansion in Asia and Africa*, eds. Leonard Blussé, H. L. Wesseling, and George D. Winius (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 1980), 87-92; M. N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003), 38.

<sup>111</sup> John Gillis and Franziska Torma, eds., *Fluid Frontiers: New Currents in Marine Environmental History* (Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 2015).

<sup>112</sup> Jean Deloche, “Le chenal de Pāmban et le route de pèlerinage de Ràmēs̄varam: un exemple d’aménagement ancien,” *Bulletin de l’Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient* 74, no. 1 (1985): 167-82; McPherson, “Paravas and Portuguese.”

that the narrowness of the channel, which separates the Island of Ceylon from the Continent of India—and the position of Adam's Bridge, which checks the violence of the monsoons—leaves on either side of it a calm sea, and facilitates a passage to the opposite coast at all times of the year.”<sup>113</sup> Beyond its military and commercial value, the region was a critical site through which the Company and Crown articulated claims to imperial sovereignty. As historian Lauren Benton illustrates in *A Search for Sovereignty*, empires between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries did “not cover space evenly.”<sup>114</sup> Far from uniform, the geography of early modern and modern empires “composed a fabric that was full of holes, stitched together out of pieces.”<sup>115</sup> Benton writes, “Although empires did lay claim to vast stretches of territory, the nature of such claims was tempered by control that was exercised over narrow bands, or corridors, and other enclaves and irregular zones about them.”<sup>116</sup> As this dissertation will show, the Gulf of Mannar was one such “corridor” through which the English East India Company and British Ceylon stitched together various, and often times contradictory, claims to territorial and thalassic control.

Through the production of maps and charts of the pearl oyster beds, British officials and experts in their employ came to represent the Gulf of Mannar as a knowable and governable space. Cartography was an important discipline through which the Company Raj and British Ceylon produced knowledge about the people, animals, and environment of Mannar. Maps served a valuable purpose, supplying British officials in

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<sup>113</sup> Anthony Bertolacci, *A View of the Agricultural, Commercial, and Financial Interests of Ceylon*, (London: Black, Parbury, and Allen, 1817), 5.

<sup>114</sup> Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

charge of managing the human and natural resources of Mannar with practical information such as the location of pearl oysters and optimal navigation routes. Yet map-making supported British colonialism and imperialism in other capacities. Scholars of India, Sri Lanka, and other colonial and postcolonial societies have shown how cartography, for instance, accompanied colonial knowledge production, governmental power, and territorialized sovereignty.<sup>117</sup> British Ceylon and the Company Raj prioritized the production of reliable geographic knowledge to support its management of the pearling industry. However, during the early years of British management, Madras and Ceylon had neither the skill and expertise nor the infrastructure and funds to support first-rate cartography.<sup>118</sup> In November 1798, for example, fishery superintendents Hugh Cleghorn and George Turnour wrote to Governor Frederic North, “agreeable to your Desire we shall proceed to the Inspection of the Banks of Chelaw when that of the Banks of Manar is finished and we beg that you would give the necessary orders to enquire whether any Chart of the Chelaw Banks may be found among the Dutch Papers, as such a Chart would much facilitate the Object of our enquiries.”<sup>119</sup> Such documents were also sent from other offices within the East India Company administration. For instance, Governor North wrote to his counterpart in Bombay, “Having learned that there are many valuable Charts of this Island, with its Sea Coast and Pearl Banks, in the Engineers [*sic*]

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<sup>117</sup> Matthew Edney, *Mapping and Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); Ian Barrow, *Making History, Drawing History: British Mapping in India, c. 1756-1905* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2003); Barrow, *Surveying and Mapping in Colonial Sri Lanka, 1800-1900* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2008); Jordan Branch, *The Cartographic State: Maps, Territory, and the Origins of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Kapil Raj, “Circulation and the Emergence of Modern Mapping: Great Britain and Early Colonial India, 1764-1820,” in *Society and Circulation*, eds. Markovits, Pouchedass, and Subrahmanyam, 61-95; Raj, *Relocating Modern Science*; Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); J. B. Harley, *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>118</sup> Barrow, *Surveying and Mapping*.

<sup>119</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 84-5.

Office at Bombay, I take the liberty of requesting you Honble Sir in Council to be pleased to give Orders for furnishing me with Copies of them, with as little delay as possible, and particularly of those which regard the Pearl Banks.”<sup>120</sup> Officials relied on maps and charts that were already in circulation and tapped local knowledge networks to learn more. East India Company officials and British Ceylon civil servants also appropriated many charts from the archives of Dutch Ceylon.<sup>121</sup> At that time, the Dutch VOC enjoyed the reputation of employing some of the finest mapmakers in the world and cartography functioned as a “vital instrument” of Dutch rule in Ceylon.<sup>122</sup> Like rivers and mountains, the pearling grounds of Mannar were a favorite cartographic subject for early modern and modern mapmakers. Indeed, as historian Lauren Benton writes, “identifying singularities in nature was in some ways very similar to drawing attention to marvels and prodigies, those oddities that defined the norm and appeared to multiply at the margins of the civilized world.”<sup>123</sup> In 1800, Governor Frederic North of Ceylon appointed French naturalist and surveyor Eudelin de Jonville the first surveyor general of Ceylon.<sup>124</sup> Along with important settlements, roads, and waterways, de Jonville highlighted the location of the pearl oyster beds off the western coast.<sup>125</sup> During the course of the early nineteenth century, both Madras and Ceylon attempted to increase their capacities to bring more

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<sup>120</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 121-22.

<sup>121</sup> For Dutch maps of the pearl oyster beds, see Jeroen Bos, Jos Gommans, and Gijs Kruijtzter, eds., *Grote atlas van de Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie / Comprehensive Atlas of the Dutch United East India Company, deel VI: Voor-Indië, Perzië en het Arabisch Schiereiland / Part VI: India, Persia and the Arabian Peninsula* (Voorburg: Asia Maior / Atlas Maior Publishers, 2010).

<sup>122</sup> Ananda Abeydeera, “Mapping as a Vital Element of Administration in the Dutch Colonial Government of Maritime Sri Lanka,” *Imago Mundi* 45 (1993): 101-11.

<sup>123</sup> Benton, *Search for Sovereignty*, 20.

<sup>124</sup> Rowland Raven-Hart, *Travels in Ceylon, 1700-1800* (Colombo: Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, 1963); R. L. Brohier, *Land, Maps, and Surveys* (Colombo: Ceylon Government Press, 1950); Barrow, *Surveying and Mapping*, 33-6; James S. Duncan, *The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>125</sup> Raven-Hart, *Travels in Ceylon*; Philippe Fabry and Marie-Helen Esteve, trans. and eds., *Quelques Notions sur L’Isle de Ceylon* (Paris: Ginkgo, 2012).

technicality and precision to bear on their mappings of the pearl fishery, but this was always a work in progress. For instance, James Stuart wrote, “The incorrectness of the Chart on which the pearl banks were defined, as attended with much inconvenience, and the earliest opportunity was seized in March 1827, to measure the distances between the most conspicuous places on the sea coast off which the pearl banks lay, and prepare from such bearings and measurements as time and circumstances admitted of being taken, a rough chart upon which the oyster beds might be more correctly defined.”<sup>126</sup>

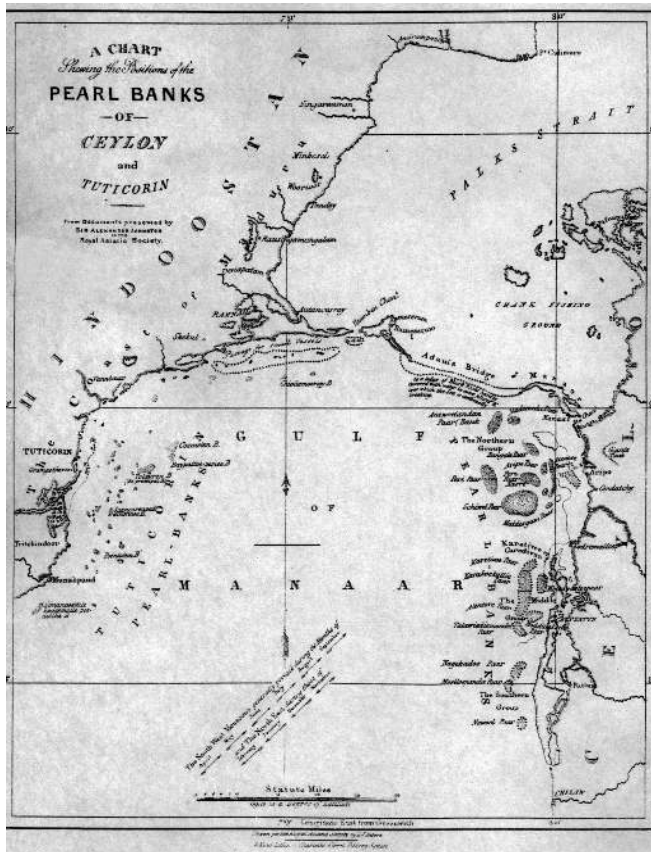


Figure 2. “A Chart Shewing [sic] the Positions of the Pearl Banks of Ceylon and Tuticorin.” James Stuart, *An Account of the Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon* (Cotta: Church Mission Press, 1843).

<sup>126</sup> Stuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 21.

The production and consumption of commodities has become an increasingly popular framework for understanding global connections and historical trends. From agricultural products like sugar and cotton that served as the bedrock upon which the modern capitalist economy was built, to luxury items such as ostrich feathers and porcelain and foodstuffs like pineapples and bananas, the range of commodities that have been the topic of single-subject books by professional historians is remarkable.<sup>127</sup> A cottage industry of popular and journalistic books that focus on particular animals or objects has also emerged.<sup>128</sup> In many ways, pearls stand apart in the history of global commodities because, as some scholars have noted, they were not a global commodity in the same style as sugar, cotton, and spices.<sup>129</sup> The global pearl trade was far more modest in volume and never mapped neatly onto “center-periphery” models.<sup>130</sup> From the turn of the sixteenth century, a global pearl trade emerged that supported the integration of oceanic economies and facilitated the expansion of European empires.<sup>131</sup> With the

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<sup>127</sup> For example, Gary Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Sarah A. Stein, *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). Much of this work stems from the classic account of the Atlantic sugar industry by Sidney Mintz. See Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985). For cotton, see Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Giorgio Riello and Prasanna Parthasarathi, eds., *The Spinning World: A Global History of Textiles, 1200-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014). For a paradigmatic study of Latin America, see Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank, eds., *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006)

<sup>128</sup> Mark Kurlansky, *Cod: A Biography of a Fish that Changed the World* (New York: Walker and Co., 1997); Rebecca Stott, *Oyster* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004); Stephen Bloom, *Tears of Mermaids: The Secret Story of Pearls* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009); Aja Raden, *Stoned! Jewelry, Obsession, and How Desire Shapes the World* (New York: Ecco 2015).

<sup>129</sup> Matthew S. Hopper, *Slaves of One Master: Globalization and Slavery in Arabia Age of Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Molly Warsh, “Adorning Empire: A History of the Early Modern Pearl Trade, 1492-1688,” PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2009.

opening of the New World, pearls from American fisheries started to mingle with “oriental” pearls from Persia and Ceylon in the metropolitan gem markets of Lisbon, Madrid, Antwerp, Amsterdam, Paris, and London.<sup>132</sup> India was a major center of the global gem trade, a de facto clearinghouse. Pearls and precious stones from across the world arrived to emporia such as Goa and Madras before merchants trafficked them to other parts of the world.<sup>133</sup> Dutch gem trader Jan Huyghen van Linschoten spent time in late sixteenth-century Portuguese Goa. He described the process of appraising jewels and also referred to the introduction of pearls from America to the Indian market, which, in his estimate, were of lesser quality than pearls fished from “Oriental Beds.”<sup>134</sup> In the early nineteenth century, British travelers James Cordiner wrote that “the pearls of the largest dimensions, being the most costly, and esteemed as emblems of greatness, find a ready sale among the rich natives of the Nizam’s dominions, the country of Guzerat [*sic*], and other parts of the Indian peninsula.”<sup>135</sup> He found that the “finest pearls” from India and Ceylon were made into “the most beautiful necklaces” in Europe, while the largest supply of tiny seed pearls were shipped to China.<sup>136</sup> As British powers became increasingly involved with pearling in India and Sri Lanka, reference material such as commercial handbooks and dictionaries helped codify knowledge about the gem and its

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> George Winius, “Jewel Trading in Portuguese India,” *Studies in Portuguese Asia, 1495-1689* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); João Teles e Cunha, “Hunting Riches: Goa’s Gem Trade in the Early Modern Age,” in *The Portuguese, Indian Ocean and European Bridgeheads, 1500-1800: Festschrift in Honour of Prof. K. S. Mathew*, eds. Pius Malekandathil and Jamal Mohammed (Tellicherry: Institute for Research in Social Sciences and Humanities of MESHAR, 2001), 269-304. For Madras, see Gedalia Yogevev, *Diamonds and Coral: Anglo-Dutch Jews and Eighteenth-Century Trade* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978); Søren Mentz, *The English Gentleman Merchant at Work: Madras and the City of London 1660-1740* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2005). For a recent study, see Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009)

<sup>134</sup> Linschoten, *Voyage*; Winius, “Jewel Trading in Portuguese India.”

<sup>135</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:66.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

trade. For instance, C. H. Kauffman's *The Dictionary of Merchandize, and Nomenclature in All Languages* (1803) has an entire section devoted to pearls: "Though these ornaments are met with in all parts of the globe, the most esteemed have always been those of Asia, and the east coast of Africa. In the kingdom of Madura, which lies on the east of Malabar, there are many pearl fisheries. Tutukurin or Tutucorin is the principal, if not the only city, on the fishery coast." He added that the "pearls taken at Baharen, though not so white as those of China and Ceylon, are much larger than those of the latter place, and much more regularly shaped than the former."<sup>137</sup> In addition to professional publications for merchant classes, texts such as travelogues, newspaper items, and popular journalistic writings flooded the public sphere of London and other commercial centers, filling the imagination of a reading public with wonder about treasures from the East Indies and the advances of the Company and Crown.<sup>138</sup>

Yet there remains a relative dearth of historical studies on pearls and other precious gems compared to commodities like cotton and sugar in the historiography of capitalism and empire. This marginalization is due partly to the nature of the source material. Aside from questions of language training and archive accessibility, the history

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<sup>137</sup> C. H. Kaufmann, *The Dictionary of Merchandize, and Nomenclature in All Languages* (London, 1803), 259-260.

<sup>138</sup> *The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, a London-based periodical published with a royal license in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, provided an emergent middle-class with useful information on subjects ranging from gardening and cookery to philosophy and politics. The magazine intended to be "instructive and entertaining" for "gentry, merchants, farmers, and tradesman." Such publications often contained first-hand accounts of travels to the East, giving readers a glimpse of the world beyond their shores, areas that were becoming part of their daily lives through commerce, politics, and culture. More than a form of entertainment, such articles mapped onto wider colonial and imperial discourses about the pearl fishery and governance as a form of both "profit and instruction." The author provides the following introduction: "As your Magazine is now the general Repository for Pieces whose Tendency is either Profit or Instruction, I have remarked, with a secret Pleasure, the great Progress it has made in the World; and, in order to contribute all in my Power towards a Work which so evidently tends to promote the happiness of Society, I have sent you the following Account of a Voyage to the East-Indies." *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, July 1753, Vol. 13, 13.



of the gem trade is difficult to track through archival sources because the object of trade does not always appear in the documentary record. Historian George Winius wrote that “jewel trading, both amateur and professional, must surely have constituted one of the greatest semi-visible, half-clandestine economic activities of the early modern period.”<sup>139</sup> Historian Molly Warsh has also described pearls as a mercurial commodity. She finds that “pearls possessed an elusive quality” and a “difficult-to-define mutability that made them only as prominent as their bearers desired.”<sup>140</sup> Indeed, pearls were also easy to transport without detection by authorities, simply concealed in tiny pouches and held on the person, and conveniently left off manifests and other official documents. Warsh also discusses the tendency of pearls and the people who carried them to cross borders. She writes that “pearls did enable a wide range of people to navigate distinct social, geographic, and economic spheres of early modern life.”<sup>141</sup> Recent studies have also started to focus more intensively on the transnational aspects of the global gem trade. Historian Kris Lane, for instance, finds connections between the emerald mines of Colombia and the royal courts of the Mughal, Ottoman, and Safavid empires.<sup>142</sup> Arash Khazeni’s *Sky Blue Stone* draws upon an impressive archive of Persian mineralogical texts (“books of stone”) from the early modern Islamic world to trace the production and consumption of turquoise across Eurasia.<sup>143</sup> Pearls sourced from the Gulf of Mannar also traveled in the slipstreams of an emergent global economy. In the early nineteenth century, James Cordiner described the possible itinerary of a pearl fished from the Gulf

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<sup>139</sup> Winius, “Jewel Trading in Portuguese India”; Kris Lane, *The Colour of Paradise: The Emerald in the Age of Gunpowder Empire* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>140</sup> Warsh, “Adorning Empire,” 4.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>142</sup> Lane, *Colour of Paradise*.

<sup>143</sup> Arash Khazeni, *Sky Blue Stone: The Turquoise Trade in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

of Mannar. He wrote, “various and curious are the operations which the pearls undergo from the time that they are first raised from their native beds by the poorest of the human species, until at last they blaze in the eye of an Indian idol, shine in a diadem, or add grace and beauty to the bosom of a queen.”<sup>144</sup> There are also references to the use of pearl powder in Indian medicines and amulets.<sup>145</sup> Certain low-grade seed pearls and leftover oyster shells were also turned into a lime that was ingested with betel leaf. For instance, traveler Alan Walters, in a late nineteenth-century text on Ceylon, described the “*chunam*, or fine lime made from calcined pearl shells” in a section on betel-leaf chewing.<sup>146</sup> *Chunam* was also used in construction as a type of plaster.<sup>147</sup>

A product of the sea, the marine environmental history of pearl production in the Gulf of Mannar is an important aspect of the enterprise to consider. To borrow a phrase from global environmental historian J. R. McNeil, the history of pearling in the Gulf of Mannar should be written “as if nature existed.”<sup>148</sup> Yet even as environmental history has become an increasingly popular and rich area of scholarly inquiry, the oceans remains largely *mare incognita*.<sup>149</sup> The time is right, in other words, to put the “ocean back in history.”<sup>150</sup> Recent marine environmental histories of fisheries in various historical and

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<sup>144</sup> Cordiner, *Descriptions of Ceylon*, 2:64.

<sup>145</sup> Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 180-81.

<sup>146</sup> Alan Walters, *Palms and Pearls: Or Scenes in Ceylon* (London: Bentley, 1892), 55.

<sup>147</sup> Herdman, *Report to the Government of Madras*, 1:1-2.

<sup>148</sup> J. R. McNeil, “The State of the Field of Environmental History,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resource* 35, no. 1 (2010): 345-74.

<sup>149</sup> John Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); D. Graham Burnett, *Trying Leviathan: The Nineteenth-Century New York Court Case that Put the Whale on Trial and Challenged the Order of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); William J. Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Helen M. Rozwadowski, “The Promise of Ocean History for Environmental History,” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (2013): 136-39; Gillis and Franziska, *Fluid Frontiers*.

<sup>150</sup> William J. Bolster, “Opportunities in Marine Environmental History,” *Environmental History*, 11, no. 3 (2006): 567-597; Bolster, “Putting the Ocean in Atlantic History: Maritime Communities and Marine

geographic contexts have started to close the knowledge-gap between land and sea.<sup>151</sup> In the American context, oysters and oyster culture have received attention from historians of science and the environment.<sup>152</sup> Yet the environmental historiography of South Asia has focused largely on forests and irrigation thereby neglecting much of the subcontinent's expansive coastline and nearby islands and archipelagos, as well as its sea life.<sup>153</sup> Many studies have shown how scientific encounters between European empires and the natural worlds of Asia, Africa, and the Americas went hand in hand with territorial and colonial expansion.<sup>154</sup> European naturalists came to India and Ceylon to observe the spectacle of the pearl fishery and study the marine ecosystem of Mannar. In 1691, for instance, Dutch VOC official and naturalist Hendrick Adriaan van Rheedee

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Ecology in the Northwest Atlantic, 1500-1800," *The American Historical Review*, 113, no. 1 (Feb. 2008): 19-47.

<sup>151</sup> Bo Poulsen, *Dutch Herring: An Environmental History, c. 1600-1860* (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2008); Jeremy B. C. Jackson, Karen E. Alexander, and Enric Sala, eds., *Shifting Baselines: The Past and Future of Ocean Fisheries* (Washington: Island Press, 2011); Margaret Creighton, *Rites and Passages: The Experience of American Whaling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Richards, *The Unending Frontier*. For studies that focus on Asia, see John G. Butcher, *The Closing of the Frontier: A History of the Marine Fisheries of Southeast Asia, c. 1850-2000* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004); Peter Boomgaard, David Henley, and Manon Osseweijer, eds., *Muddied Waters: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Management of Forests and Fisheries in Island Southeast Asia* (Leiden: KITLV, 2005); Micah Muscolino, *Fishing Wars and Environmental Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Joseph Christensen and Malcolm Tull, eds., *Historical Perspectives of Fisheries Exploitation in the Indo-Pacific* (New York: Springer, 2014).

<sup>152</sup> Christine Keiner, *The Oyster Question: Scientists, Watermen, and the Maryland Chesapeake Bay since 1880* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Matthew Booker, *Down by the Bay: San Francisco's History Between the Tides* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>153</sup> Mahesh Rangarajan and K. Sivaramakrishnan, eds., *India's Environmental History* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2012); Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>154</sup> Grove, *Green Imperialism*; Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen, eds., *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Raj, *Relocating Modern Science*; Londa Schienbinger and Claudia Swan, eds., *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Schienbinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Harold Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Peter Boomgaard, ed., *Empire and Science in the Making: Dutch Colonial Scholarship in Comparative Global Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Vinita Damodaran, Anna Winterbottom, and Alan Lester, eds., *The East India Company and the Natural World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

submitted a report to his superiors in Amsterdam on the location of pearl oyster banks among many matters of interests, including descriptions of pearl diving and writings about the life cycle of pearl oysters.<sup>155</sup> The Dutch also undertook an extensive census of the pearl fishery for the first time in 1694.<sup>156</sup> Both Company and Crown governments commissioned reports on the natural history of India and Sri Lanka and one particularly important topic was pearl oysters and their natural habitat. Governor Frederic North of Ceylon, for instance, enlisted de Jonville to study the natural history of the island at the turn of the nineteenth century. During his tenure as surveyor general, de Jonville produced a French manuscript (*Quelques notions sur l'Isle de Ceylan*) that provided an account of his journey around Ceylon complemented by lush illustrations of flora and fauna.<sup>157</sup> De Jonville included descriptions and drawings of pearl oysters that brought specific knowledge about the habitat and life-cycle of the species to the attention of government officials. De Jonville's contemporaries praised him for his work on the pearl fishery. British traveler George Annesley wrote that de Jonville was "possessed of considerable talents." He had a "very great knowledge in several branches of natural history" and "collected the most important information relative to the pearl fishery."<sup>158</sup> De Jonville even presented Valentia with a gift of rare and beautiful pearls.<sup>159</sup> Reports by naturalists such as de Jonville equipped government officials with useful knowledge

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<sup>155</sup> "Extract uyt de missive door den Commissaries-Generaal, Hendrick Adriaan van Reede, here van Mydrecht, etc., geschreven aan de vergaderingh van de seventiene uyt Tutucorin, in dato 16 January 1691," in Pieter van Dam, *Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie*, ed. F. W. Stapel ('s-Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1932), 2:412-33; Subrahmanyam, "Noble Harvest from the Sea," 148.

<sup>156</sup> Subrahmanyam, "Noble Harvest from the Sea," 148.

<sup>157</sup> Jonville Manuscript, British Library, London, India Office Records, MSS Eur. E80-82.

<sup>158</sup> George Annesley, *Voyages and Travels in India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia, and Egypt* (London: W. Miller, 1809), 2:316.

<sup>159</sup> British traveler James Cordiner wrote: "The pearls in general are of a bright shining white; but a few are sometimes found of a beautiful pink, others of a bright gold colour, and a jet black, round and perfect, as well as rugged and uneven. The number of these is so small, as to answer no other purpose but to be shewn [*sic*] as curiosities. A few pearls of the above description were presented to Lord Viscount Valentia at Columbo by Joseph Jonville, Esq. Late naturalist in Ceylon." Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:69.

about pearls and oysters to inform their decision-making around the management of the pearl fishery. The general attitude of the colonial officials about the relationship between science, management, and pearling might be summarized by marine biologist William Herdman who wrote in the early twentieth century, “There is no reason for any despondency in regard to the future of the pearl fisheries, if they are treated scientifically... The material exists, ready for man’s operations.”<sup>160</sup>



Figure 3. Oyster (De Jonville Manuscript, British Library, London).



Figure 4. Oyster (De Jonville Manuscript, British Library, London).

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<sup>160</sup> Herdman, *Report to the Government of Ceylon*, 1:8.



Figure 5. Oyster (De Jonville Manuscript, British Library, London).

Like the pearl oyster beds of Mannar, the archives of the East India Company and British Ceylon have yielded some rich and valuable returns for this project. The archives of the East India Company and British Ceylon are replete with materials that address issues ranging from labor problems and moneylending to disease control that, when taken together, provide a window on the organization of the pearl fishery in evolving colonial and imperial contexts. These documents largely contain material related to people and institutions that preoccupied Company and Crown officials. Indeed, it was only through encounters with government officials that information about the lives and work of local populations such as merchants and divers left an impression in the annals of the Madras and Ceylon governments. While previous historical studies of pearling in Mannar have also tapped Company and Crown records from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the materials used for such works are mainly housed at archives in London. These repositories include the East India Company archives at the India Office Records

of the British Library and the Colonial Office of British Ceylon at the United Kingdom National Archives in Kew Gardens. Yet documents at these archives offer only a glimpse of conditions on the ground. Many of the accounts, reports, policy statements, petitions, and other documents related to the pearl fishery composed by Madras and Ceylon officers at the local level never reached London. Clerks rewrote and edited documents as information went up the chain of command from the district-level office (*cutcherry*) through Madras to London. During this process, key information about the pearl fishery was abridged, synopsised, and even lost. Regular reports sent to London from Madras and Colombo were mainly concerned with revenue returns and management policy at the most general level. In addition to London-based archives, this dissertation uses records from the East India Company's Madras government housed at the Tamil Nadu State Archives in Chennai (India). A particularly rich body of material from the Tamil Nadu State Archives derived from the districts of Tirunelveli, Madurai, Ramnad, and other areas within which the pearl fishery was regularly located. Historian David Ludden writes that District Collectorate records of Madras "represent the most detailed documentary resource for the study of local history in South India."<sup>161</sup> From notes on the examinations of the pearl oyster banks and debates over management strategies to interactions with local merchants and laborers, district-level records offer a textured image of the pearling operations. Furthermore, this dissertation adds unpublished archival material to the historiography of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century South Asia by bringing documents produced by the Dutch VOC into conversation with English-language texts.

Chapter 1— "The Pearl Fishers"—focuses on the lives and labor of divers,

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<sup>161</sup> David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), n. 3, 240.

boatmen, washers, sorters, and other members of the workforce. “The Pearl Fishers” offers a description of pearling in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and focuses on the ways in which the company-state and colonial government sought to discipline labor. Pearl diving is perhaps one of the most commented on features of the industry, and through contemporary travel writings, as well as numerous secondary historical and anthropological studies, we actually have some very rich material on the ins and outs of pearling, such as the make-up of the workforce, the tools and equipment used, and diving practices. Pulling from various archival records, this chapter tracks how, through the use of forced migration and violence to tax inducements and new diving technologies, the governments of Madras and Ceylon, often with the assistance of local community authorities and mercantile elites, sought to reorganize traditional structures and practices of skilled and unskilled labor at the pearl fishery, albeit with mixed results.

The dissertation then takes up the important themes of markets and marketplaces in Chapter 2. “The Great Pearl Fishery Bazaar” critically examines the formation and dynamics of markets and marketplaces that coalesced around pearl fishery compounds near Tuticorin, Punnaikayal, Kilakkarai, and elsewhere on the southeastern coast of India and places like Arippu, Kondachi, and Chilaw on the western coast of Sri Lanka. Attempts to establish regular marketplaces represented efforts by the company-state and colonial state to break-up the traditional circulation patterns of humans, capital, and goods within the Gulf of Mannar during the pearling season. Whereas the pearl fishery was a seasonal event that floated from year to year, Madras and Colombo tried to fix the location of the pearl fishery to single spots, which they believed would increase both security and profitability. From infrastructure projects such as the construction of



permanent buildings to the manipulation of currency standards and money markets, British administrations on both sides of the Gulf tried to reengineer the marketplaces of the pearl fishery through a contradictory set of political economic ideologies and practices.

From the market of the fishery the dissertation turns to the business worlds of pearl merchants. Chapter 3— “The Business World is Mine Oysters”—focuses on the relationships between merchants and states during and after the rent of the pearl fishery. The chapter addresses efforts by Madras and Ceylon to shape the business practices and organization of merchants engaged in the pearl trade. After a general description and overview of the mercantile organization of the pearl trade, Chapter 3 then profiles four commercial magnates that rented the pearl fishery from the Madras government in the early nineteenth century. Each “case study” sheds light on certain aspects of the mercantile cultures and practices of pearl traders.

Chapter 4— “The Most Sovereign Commodity”—explores the historical relationships between the pearl fisheries and politics. This chapter looks at how efforts by the British East India Company and, after 1802, the colonial state of British Ceylon, to establish control over the human and natural resources of Mannar dovetailed with questions about sovereignty. Chapter 4 focuses on disputes over rights, authority, and privileges claimed by local courts and temples. Claims to tax-free boats and shares of the revenue by Indian states and religious institutions were not only concerned with the material benefits derived from the industry but also motivated by the need to have “traditional” rights and honors recognized by the Company Raj and British Ceylon. During the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, both Madras and

Ceylon sought to erode the preexisting economy of gifts and honors that undergirded the pearl fishery. In some cases, the Company and Crown perpetuated the strategies and practices employed by their Dutch predecessors, while in other instances a more complete reordering of the landscape was desired.

Chapter 5 focuses on corruption. “Foul Oysters” describes and analyzes a series of frauds and defalcations investigated by the East India Company around the turn of the nineteenth century. When the Company assumed managerial control over the pearling industry from the Dutch VOC in 1796, officials in Madras and Colombo immediately turned their attention to management of the industry, hoping to use it as a source of revenue to help offset heavy military expenditures accrued during the Napoleonic Wars and shore up its legitimacy over the Gulf of Mannar region. The East India Company organized four consecutive fisheries between 1796-1799, which, according to Company officials in Madras, Colombo, and London, were all racked by fraud and corruption. Frederic North, then the highest ranking Company official on Ceylon, launched a massive investigation into the conduct of the commissioners. A close reading of the results of this investigation reveals that corruption functioned as an instrumental category through which to justify the presence of the East India Company in India and Ceylon. Not only did the investigation address the misconduct of government officials but it also probed the inner workings of the pearl fishery. The investigation quickly turned into a dragnet that gave the Company Raj the latest information about its newest—and potentially most lucrative—source of revenue.

This dissertation seeks to examine the extent to which the pearl fishery was not only a source of jewels and revenue for the Company and Crown, but also functioned as a

site through which governmental power flowed and imperial sovereignty established. Through an examination of government-sponsored engagements with the people and institutions that constituted the industry, this dissertation considers the history of pearling in the wider context of modern colonial governance, statecraft, and imperialism. It also explores the interstitial spaces between success and failure and finds that official discourse and policy intended to bring about major change to the industry were much smaller and less dramatic than intended. The enthusiasm with which Company and Crown officials turned to the administration of the pearl fishery of Mannar also belies any impressions that the British sleepwalked into empire. The depth of engagement by British officials with the people, institutions, and environment reflected the significance of the pearling industry in wider political and economic terrain of South India and Sri Lanka. At the precise moment when the East India Company consolidated its position in southern India, and the British state founded Ceylon as a formal colony of the Crown, administrators on both sides of Mannar turned their attention to the people and marine environment that produced a tiny luminous gem.

Humans throughout history have lived side-by-side with animals yet our interpretations of the past seldom address relationships between us and other members of the animal kingdom.<sup>162</sup> Oysters are modest creatures and have not received the same level of attention as magnificent beasts and friendly companions. A diverse group of bivalve mollusks, some oysters are prized for their culinary qualities while others are celebrated

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<sup>162</sup> For Ottoman Egypt, see Alan Mikhail, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2014). For India, see Julie Hughes, *Animal Kingdoms: Hunting, the Environment, and Power in the Indian Princely States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). For Southeast Asia, see Peter Boomgaard, *Frontiers of Fear: Tigers and People in the Malay World, 1600-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2001); Terenjit Sevea, "Pawangs on the Malay Frontier: Miraculous Intermediaries of Rice, Ore, Beasts and Guns," PhD diss., University of California, 2013.

for their non-edible products, such as pearls and mother-of-pearl shells. One of the central aims of this dissertation is to not only analyze the techniques and applications of governmental power at the pearl fishery but to also pay homage to the humble pearl oyster. To this end, the discussion below tries to impart historical agency to the pearl oyster, to see it more than a producer of gems and shells but a live actor in a complex formed by interactions between humans and the environment.<sup>163</sup> For thousands of years, pearls—formed by the secretion of nacre by mollusks to coat and neutralize foreign irritants like stones and sand—were largely harvested in the wilds of marine and fresh-water environments. Divers in pearling centers across the globe plunged below the water’s surface, fighting against the elements and the limits of their own bodies, in search of a tiny, valuable, and naturally occurring jewel. For Rayo and Marana, the world they inhabited was far different, a world in which the only way of procuring pearls was from nature. This dissertation explores a slice of that bygone world.

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<sup>163</sup> Timothy Mitchell, “Can the Mosquito Speak?” *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 19-53.

Table 1

## Locations of Pearl Fishery and Statements of Revenue, Ceylon, 1796-1837

Year	Location	Organizing Body	Revenue	Revenue (£)
1796	Arippu	East India Company	PNP 93,826	31,000
1797	Arippu	East India Company	P 321,702	106,000
1798	Arippu	East India Company	P 368,019	122,673
1799	Arippu	East India Company	SP 62,185.36.57	23,319.7.6
1801	Kondachi	East India Company	SP 32,054.31.79	12,020.5.0
1803	Chilaw	British Ceylon	PNP 40,638.14.3	12,191.8.0
1804	Arippu	British Ceylon	PNP 184,348.15.0	55,304.8.0
1806	Arippu	British Ceylon	RD 374,481.4.2	28,086.2.0
1808	Arippu	British Ceylon	PNP 236,443	57,863.0.8
1809	Arippu	British Ceylon	PNP 71,413.49.40	18,696.12.11
1814	Arippu	British Ceylon	RD 1,160,609.4.2	87,045.10.6
1815	Chilaw	British Ceylon	RD 4,858.0.3	364.7.1
1816	Arippu	British Ceylon	RD 4,085.10.2	306.8.9
1820	Arippu	British Ceylon	RD 29,233.6.1	2,192.10.3
1828	Arippu	British Ceylon	MR 311,956.2.1	31,195.12.3
1829	Arippu	British Ceylon	MR 397,265.12.3	39,726.11.6
1830	Arippu	British Ceylon	MR 243,690.8.8	24,369.1.0
1831	Arippu	British Ceylon	MR 317,464.1.6	31,746.8.1
1832	Karaitivu	British Ceylon	--	3,869.18.4
1833	Arippu	British Ceylon	--	25,043.10.0
1835	Arippu	British Ceylon	--	38,247.0.9
1836	Arippu	British Ceylon	--	23,535.15.9
1837	Arippu	British Ceylon	--	9,397.15.5

Sources: James Steuart, *An Account of the Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon* (Cotta: Church Mission Press, 1843), 33-36; C. R. de Silva, "The Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon, 1796-1837," *Ceylon Literary Register* 2, no. 10 (1932): 433-442. Abbreviations: Porto Novo Pagodas (PNP); Pagodas (P); Star Pagodas (SP); Rix Dollars (RD); Madras Rupees (MR).

Table 2

Locations of Pearl Fishery and Modes of Management, Madras, 1784-1830

<b>Year</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Organizing Body</b>	<b>Mode of Management</b>
1784	Tuticorin	East India Company	<i>Amani</i>
1787	Tuticorin	East India Company	<i>Amani</i>
1792	Tuticorin	East India Company	Rent/ <i>Amani</i>
1800	Tuticorin	East India Company	Rent
1805	Tuticorin	East India Company	Rent
1807	Tuticorin	East India Company	Rent
1810	Tuticorin	East India Company	Rent
1815	Tiruchendur	East India Company	Rent
1818	Punnaikayal	East India Company	<i>Amani</i>
1822	Tuticorin	East India Company	Rent
1828	Tuticorin/Punnaikayal	East India Company	<i>Amani</i>
1830	Tuticorin	East India Company	Rent

## CHAPTER 1: THE PEARL FISHERS

### LABOR

In “Isabella, or the Pot of Basil” (1818), the English poet John Keats invokes the brutal treatment of divers at the pearl fishery of Ceylon. Adapted from Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*, a fourteenth-century Italian text, Keats’s poem narrates the tragic story of a wealthy English maiden named Isabella. She endears herself to Lorenzo, a man of humble origins, kindling a forbidden love that sets in motion a series of unfortunate and ultimately tragic events. Isabella’s set of vicious and controlling brothers, who intend to marry her to a more distinguished suitor to satisfy their upwardly mobile ambitions, murder the object of her affection. Lorenzo’s ghost then visits Isabella in a lucid dream to reveal the true identity of his killers. She exhumes her lover’s body and buries his head in a basil pot, sullenly caring for the plant and mourning her loss. In this romantic epic, Keats finds literary parallels between the grisly act of Isabella’s brothers and their business exploits, which spanned the “torched mines and noisy factories” of industrializing England to the distant edges of the nation’s overseas empire. In addition to investments in the domestic economy, the brothers reaped great rewards from speculating in the new-found British colony of Ceylon, particularly through a stake in the pearl fishery. But their material gains in the colony came at the expense of the health and safety of poor anonymous pearl divers. Keats wrote, “For them the Ceylon diver held his breath/And went all naked to the hungry shark; For them his ears gush’d blood; for them in death.”

The physically demanding work of pearl divers and other low-level laborers at the

pearl fishery captivated the imaginations of scholars, artists, and travelers who either witnessed pearling operations or read secondhand accounts.<sup>164</sup> Indeed, diving is perhaps the most commented on feature of the pearling industry yet such attention over nearly two millennia, from literary sagas and opera *librettos* to lavish travelogues and fiery political tracts, has by and large invested the lives and labor of the workforce with an idealized, unchanging quality.<sup>165</sup> For instance, the classic three-act opera *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* (1863) by French composer George Bizet is a romanticized tale about tragic love and friendship set in fictionalized ancient Ceylon village, a place far away from the stages and salons of nineteenth-century Paris. American composer Les Baxter and his band released a song titled “Pearls of Ceylon” on the album *Ports of Pleasure* (1957). In the literary realm, travel accounts by globetrotting luminaries such as Marco Polo became cornerstones of subsequent understandings and interpretations of the life and work of pearl divers. His descriptions of pearling in the Gulf of Mannar bear a striking resemblance to those of Dutch and British officials during the early modern and modern periods: “The pearl-fishers take their vessels, great and small, and proceed into this gulf, where they stop from the beginning of April till the middle of May.”<sup>166</sup> Travelers’ descriptions of pearling further reverberated through writings by government officials, naturalists, and travelers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. George Turnour, East India Company officer and superintendent of the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu, for instance, submitted a report on the social and economic conditions of the island to his supervisor, Governor Frederick North, in which Turnour wrote that diving was “prescribed by ancient usage, from which these people cannot be prevailed upon to

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<sup>164</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 137.

<sup>165</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea.”

<sup>166</sup> Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 158.



depart, by any consideration whatever. No degree of richness of the Banks, or value of the Pearls, would induce the Pilot & Arapannars to deviate one *Iota* from what their Fathers, did before them.”<sup>167</sup> A similar discourse on the pearl diver and his work continued into the twentieth century. George Kunz, for example, a scholar of gems and precious jewels, wrote in the early twentieth century, “A remarkable instance of immutability of custom in the Orient is found in the fact that, except in a few minor particulars, accounts written more than three centuries ago, could serve as a description of the methods of the fisheries in recent years.”<sup>168</sup> Sea crafts and other tools used at the pearl fishery received the same treatment.<sup>169</sup> James Steuart, for example, commented on the primitive design of the boats that made up the pearling fleets: “Indeed, when the rude state of their craft and their awkward management are considered, it would appear, that no improvement could have taken place in the people, since the days when the pearls of Cleopatra's earrings were landed at Aripo.”<sup>170</sup> From poems and operas to travelogues and government reports, various writings about pearling over many centuries imbued representations of the lives, labor, and leisure of the industry’s workforce with an idealized and romantic quality.

This chapter seeks to historically contextualize labor at the pearl fishery during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The practice and process of diving for pearls in the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mannar became the objects of governmental reform and improvement during the early years of British management. When British

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<sup>167</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 132 (emphasis in original).

<sup>168</sup> Kunz, *The Book of the Pearl*, 103.

<sup>169</sup> James Hornell, *The Origins and Ethnological Significance of Indian Boat Designs* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1920); Hornell, *Fishing in Many Waters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950).

<sup>170</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 10.

officers assumed direct managerial control over the human and natural resources of the pearl fishery at the close of the eighteenth century, they encountered a complex system of rights, institutions, and practices that had evolved through centuries of engagement with both local and foreign political powers. Far from an antediluvian pastime, many of the problems identified by British officials related to labor had also been singled out by their European predecessors and continued to trouble even the most ardent reformers. For instance, smuggling and poaching were recurring themes in writings by Dutch officials, a topic that also preoccupied British officials on both sides of the Gulf of Mannar. As discussed in the introduction, as the strands of *Pax Britannica* came together in the late eighteenth century, a major intellectual shift occurred in the realm of economic thought, with classical liberalism displacing mercantilism as the preferred framework of political economy. The Company and Crown governments in turn brought new ideas to bear on the management and governance of people and oysters, strategies and techniques that sought to not only increase profits and productivity by attenuating the financial and physical hazards of pearling, but also fundamentally reshape the social, economic, and political foundations of the industry. From armed vessels at sea and police forces on shore, to tax inducements and technological innovations, government officials, as well as native mercantile elites, meant to interrupt “traditional” labor relations and organization. Efforts by the company-state and colonial state to deploy modern forms of governmental power through the management of pearling labor was, of course, not isolated to this particular industry, as scholars such as economic historian Prasannan Parthasarathi have demonstrated in the case of weavers in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-

century Madras.<sup>171</sup> During the course of the early nineteenth century, the sway of liberal utilitarianism and free market ideologies sought to break-up the traditional arrangements and customary rights of laborers and introduce market-based reforms, such as monetary wages and open labor markets. Archival documents and contemporary travel accounts are replete with references to the strategies and tactics employed by the governments of Madras and Ceylon and local pearl merchants to discipline labor at the pearl fishery. Yet many preexisting structures and conditions of labor at the pearl fishery, such as diving technologies, labor relations, migratory patterns, and disciplinary regimes persisted through the early colonial period without being completely transformed as some administrators had imagined.

The discussion below not only provides a description of the pearling process from start to finish but also tracks the impact of company-state and colonial state rule on the lives and work of pearl divers and other laboring groups whose toils were integral to the overall functioning of the industry. The first section—“A Pearling Life”—describes the process by which pearls were harvested from the Gulf of Mannar. It begins with a short description of the examination process that community leaders, local experts, and government officials undertook each year. Based on the results of the assaying process, and after local jewelers and gem merchants evaluated samples of product, officials in consultation with local experts determined the viability of a pearl fishery. The first section also includes a discussion of diving techniques with special attention paid to the simple instruments used by pearl divers and attempts by officials in Madras and Ceylon to “modernize” the practice through the introduction of diving bells, steamships, and

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<sup>171</sup> Prasannan Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants, and Kinds in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

other technologies. The second section— “Labor, Discipline, and Circulation”— examines attempts by the Madras and Ceylon governments to manipulate seasonal migratory flows and other forms of geographic mobility. From coercive measures such as forced migration and physical violence to subtler means like tax incentives, the governments of Madras and Ceylon used a wide range of tools and mechanisms designed to discipline labor and promote the overall profitability and productivity of the pearl fishery. This section further highlights the impact felt by labor after the political transition at the turn of the nineteenth century when the East India Company transferred power over Ceylon to the British Crown in 1802. It pays special attention to how the two government proprietors of the pearl fishery variously competed and cooperated for labor, capital, and information, facilitating (or impeding) the movement of such resources between the island and mainland. The third and final section of this chapter addresses labor, security, and violence by critically examining the elaborate security apparatus erected at the pearl fishery designed to curb theft and smuggling amongst divers, boatmen, and other members of the workforce deemed problematic by British officials and local merchant-investors.

### **A Pearling Life**

When the East India Company assumed control over Dutch Ceylon in 1796, solidifying its position as the preeminent European power in the region, officials involved in managing (and increasing) revenue sources in newly captured areas turned their attention with alacrity to the human resources of the pearling industry. During the early years of Company management, officials on both sides of the Gulf of Mannar concerned

themselves with local Indian and Sri Lankan workers who dove for pearls, commanded pearling fleets, washed and sorted the day's catch, and appraised the product. As discussed in the introduction, the Company produced valuable information about the political and natural histories of the pearl fishery, which dovetailed with efforts to understand the practices and organization of pearling labor. A careful reading of the archival records of the Madras and Ceylon governments and various eyewitness accounts not only provides insight into the practical mechanics of pearling at his particular moment in history but also sheds light on the techniques of powers with which British officials managed a diverse and complex workforce.

Assaying the pearl oyster beds was the first step in the process of organizing a pearl fishery. Descriptions of boats and divers venturing from the shore to known locations of oyster beds and drawing up samples of product are found in precolonial texts, a process that continued to attract the attention of administrators, travelers, jewelers, and naturalists during the era of European management. During the Portuguese era, according to historian C. R. De Silva, native fishermen conducted a survey of the banks at the behest of the factor or captain overseeing the event.<sup>172</sup> Hendrick Zwaardecroon, Dutch VOC Commander of Jaffnapatnam, wrote to the Council of Jaffnapatnam in 1697, "The banks are to be inspected in November by a Commission sent for this purpose, who come in tonys [boats] from Jaffnapatam, Manaar, and Madura, and with them also some Patangatyns and other native chiefs who understand this work."<sup>173</sup> Three decades later, Dutch VOC official Jacob Pielat wrote in 1734, "The pearl banks must be again inspected in February and March as formerly done. The weather is

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<sup>172</sup> De Silva, "Portuguese and Pearl Fishing," 24.

<sup>173</sup> *Memoir of Hendrick Zwaardecroon, Commandeur of Jaffnapatnam, 1697*, trans. Sophia Peters (Colombo: Government Press, 1911), 80.

more suitable for an inspection at that time than any other, so that the work can be carried out with less inconvenience. The inspection in autumn must be revived as soon as the Commissioners consider the pearl banks in a condition to make a dive possible in the following year.”<sup>174</sup> In another instance, Dutch Ceylon Governor Julius Stein van Golleneese (1743-1751) wrote about examining the pearl banks in a formal administrative report to his successor Gerrit Joan Vreeland in February 1751: “And though we have dispensed with the inspection of the banks for this year in order to spare unnecessary trouble and because they were inspected in the previous year with utmost care and were found to be covered only with young and no full-grown oysters, this must be resumed in the following year once more in order to be satisfied that the Company does not lose such important profits by the neglect of its officers.”<sup>175</sup> By the nineteenth century, contemporary observers found that annual examinations continued to serve a useful purpose. As British military officer Jonathan Forbes wrote in 1840, “Repeated examinations of the banks, and judicious restrictions of the fishery to those places where the oysters are of full size, have almost brought the pearl-fishery to be a regular annual addition to the income of the island.”<sup>176</sup> An annual examination of the state of the oyster populations usually occurred in October and November when the southwest monsoon winds subsided, the waters became relatively placid, and travel from the sandy beaches to the pearling grounds was less treacherous. If the results were favorable, then a pearl fishery would be held during the next break in the monsoon winds, which usually came anytime between late February and early April. An examination typically included a

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<sup>174</sup> *Memoir left by Jacob Christiaan Pielat to his successor, Diederik van Domburg, 1734*, trans. Sophia Peters (Colombo: Government Press, 1908).

<sup>175</sup> *Memoir of Julius Stein van Golleneese, Governor of Ceylon, 1743-1751*, trans. Sinnappah Arasaratnam (Colombo: Department of National Archives, 1974), 79.

<sup>176</sup> Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, 1:257.

British officer such as a district collector or specially appointed civil servant who worked in consultation with a small group of local divers and boatmen commanded by the *jati talaivan*. British chaplain and traveler James Cordiner provided a description of the examination during his visit to the pearl banks in the early nineteenth century: “In this service nine boats are employed, in each of which is one pilot, or Arripanaar, two divers, and about eight sailors. The English superintendent, or inspector of the banks, takes his station in the boat of the head arripanaar, who has exercised this profession from his infancy, and received it, like almost all occupations in India, in hereditary succession from his father.”<sup>177</sup>

The Company Raj incorporated local authorities and intermediaries into its governing apparatus, which provided the government access to the laboring groups at the pearl fishery that were critical for its success. At the start of the British era, the Company continued to recognize the titles and privileges that their predecessors had bestowed upon local authorities from the Parava community in recognition of services rendered during the examination of the banks and help procuring boats and divers. In March 1808, for example, Madras extended the title of *jati talaivan* to a certain Dom Gaspar Anthony Dakroos Waascaricah, whose father and other forbearers held the same position, by awarding him a *sanad*, or a document grant confirming his title and authority, and offering him tax-free *mauniam* boats. One British official wrote in a report on the subject in 1808: “There is at Tutacoryn, a family of Parawars or Christian fishermen in which tribe most of the Pearl and the Chank Divers are included, the principal person of which has for some ages past been acknowledged as the head of the Cast [*sic*] and as such the Officers of Government during the Control both of the Dutch and English have been in

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<sup>177</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:39.

the habit of availing themselves of the Persons experience and assistance in examining the Pearl banks and Divers and of procuring through his influence the Number of Boats and Divers required for whose appearance and Conduct he is in some degree responsible in order to add to the respect of the Situation the Dutch have usually granted a commission under the signature of the Governor in Council at Columbo, for the appointment.”<sup>178</sup> George Powney awarded the same title to Dom Gaspar Anthony Dakroos Waascaricah’s father in 1795. According to the Board of Revenue, “As the Cowle [grant] furnished by Mr. Powney to the Parawars was only a temporary one agreed to desire he will transmit to the Board with a draft of another Cowle calculated to secure these People in their just rights and privileges and to give the Head man the power of exercising the same jurisdiction subject to the Collector's authority as he possessed in the time of the Dutch.”<sup>179</sup> The role of the *jati talaivan* (“caste headman”) in particular was critical, as this individual and his associates superintended the examination process, submitted written reports on the state of the pearl oyster banks, mobilized labor, supplies, and capital, and mediated conflicts.

The examination of the pearl banks was undertaken more or less on an annual basis. Dutch naturalist and biologist Henry Le Beck, who visited the pearl fishery of 1797 at Arippu, highlighted the importance of the annual examination and described the process by which it unfolded. He wrote, “The length of time required for this purpose, or from one general fishing to another, has not yet been exactly determined; it is, therefore, a practice to depute some persons to visit the banks annually, and to give their opinions,

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<sup>178</sup> Tamil Nadu Archives (TNA), Tinnevely District Records (TDR), Vol. 3583, 33-5 (15 March 1808).

<sup>179</sup> TNA, Board of Revenue (BOR) Proceedings, Vol. 140, 9185-9 (3 December 1795). For more, see Roche, *Fishermen of the Coromandel*.



whether the fishery might be undertaken with any degree of success.”<sup>180</sup> The length of time between fisheries did vary by season and location, but it was commonsense amongst officials who managed the pearl fisheries that seven years was the optimal life cycle of a pearl oyster. But this was not always the case. They derived this information from their readings of the Dutch records in their possession and through consultations with local divers and boatmen involved in the examination process who knew about the rhythms between the tides. In January 1800, as Fort St. George was planning its first full-scale fishery on the India-side of Mannar since its annexation of Dutch Ceylon, Collector of Ramnad reported on the life cycle of oysters to the Board of Revenue. The East India Company had previously organized small fisheries off the coast of Tuticorin in 1784, 1787, and 1792. One of his assistants had gleaned this information from a local boat captain who had piloted pearling fleets. According to the report, the captain had “informed him there were a great many Oysters which they supposed to be of the age of six and a quarter years old that they seldom or ever exceed the age of seven at which period they vomit the Pearl and die that consequently it has become absolutely necessary...to fish it that it be commenced on the latter end of March or beginning of April otherwise the Oysters will die and the Company sustain much loss.”<sup>181</sup> In another instance a Company official wrote in 1811 that one of the pearl oyster banks, the Klateepaar, had been fished in six years ago and therefore ought to be ripe for harvesting: “It was supposed that in the course of the present month or the next year it would be in a state to be fished again seven years having nearly elapsed since the last fishery which is generally reckoned a Sufficient time for the Oysters to reach maturity. With this view the

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<sup>180</sup> Henry Le Beck, “An Account of the Pearl Fishery in the Gulph [*sic*] of Manar, in March and April, 1797,” *Asiatick Researchers* 5 (1807), 394.

<sup>181</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 242, 220-32 (13 January 1800).

Bank was carefully inspected last year but I am Sorry to state to the Board that from the age of the Oysters they do not appear to have begun to grow again upon the Bank till some time after the old ones were removed as none of those now to be found upon it appeared to be more than three years old and consequently no fishing can be looked for in less than four years hence.”<sup>182</sup> The chief revenue officer for British Ceylon went so far as to appoint a special commission of “several respectable natives” to study the life cycle of pearl oysters on the western coast of the island in 1831.<sup>183</sup>

Over the course of a few days, the examination crew pulled up a relatively modest sample of pearl oysters—anywhere from between a few hundred to a few thousand—and later determined the age and size of the specimens and assessed the yield and quality of pearls. All of this was closely documented by both government officials and members of the assaying team. Following the Dutch practice, British officers kept diaries of the inspections. The day-by-day accounts composed by superintending officers were often filled with rather mundane information and general statements about the assaying process, such as the time boats set sail, the number and frequency of dives, and weather conditions. For example, the second assistant collector to James Cotton of Tirunelveli submitted a diary of his examination of the pearl oyster banks near Tuticorin in January 1818. It contained such gripping details as “2 divers left Tutacorreen about 4 o’clock

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<sup>182</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3587, 297 (11 September 1811).

<sup>183</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 7, 37-41. He wrote: “It appears from the result of this enquiry, that seven years are considered by the natives connected with the pearl fisheries to be the maximum age, which the oyster attain; and from the experience we have had on the Pearl Banks, we believe such to be the case; and the nearer the oysters approach to it before they are fished up, the larger and more valuable are the pearls they contain—the value of pearls being greatly enhanced by the increase in their size. In the course of the seventh year, if the oysters live, the pearl increases in size so much as to more than double their value, and in consequence of this great increase in their value, the temptation to put off fishing them to the latest period is so great, that, in some instances of postponement, whole beds of oysters have died off, and the pearls which they contained are wholly lost.” Ibid., 7.

A.M. and anchored on the Tolayeram paar at 8 o'clock.”<sup>184</sup> Diaries also contained descriptions of the physical qualities and conditions of the marine environment, such as water clarity and depth.<sup>185</sup> The crew submitted written reports with information about the size, duration, location, and expected returns of the fishery. These reports were usually written in Tamil and signed by the *jati talaivan* and other members of the examination crew. Even divers and boatmen affixed their names to the document. For instance, a report submitted to the Board of Revenue at Fort St. George contained the results of an examination near Punnaikayal in 1818. Referred to as either *urzee* or *muchelka*, both Anglo-Persian administrative terms that became increasingly part of the bureaucratic parlance of the East India Company, these reports were drafted in Tamil and subsequently translated into English by *cutcherry* scribes. The *jati talaivan*, a young assistant, four so-called “paar mundaddies,” and six divers examined three banks off the coast of Punnaikayal and “consider those Banks to be in a proper state for a fishery to take place this year, and declare to the best of our Judgement [*sic*], that, there are oysters sufficient to fish for seven days at 50 Boats a day.”<sup>186</sup>

Examinations usually took place at locations known for hosting the most bountiful and reliable harvests, the largest banks of this sort included the Tolaiyerium Paar near Tuticorin, and the Arippu beds off the western coast of Ceylon. Government

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<sup>184</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 788, 4336-62 (6 April 1818).

<sup>185</sup> For example, Collector Hanbury of Tirunelveli wrote to the Board during preparations for the 1810 pearl fishery at Tuticorin about poor water quality: “This operation has been retarded this year to an unusual late period in Consequence of the Divers having Stated to me that from the great freshes [*sic*] in the River, the Water upon the Pearl Banks was so muddy as to make it impossible for them either to pick up the Oysters as to ascertain what the [probable] number might be.” TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 19-20 (19 January 1810). This may have reflected wider interests within the naturalist community at the time. For example, see John Davy, “Observations on the Temperature of the Ocean and Atmosphere, and on the Density of Seawater, Made During a Voyage to Ceylon,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 107 (1817): 275-92.

<sup>186</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3595, 46-9 (7 February 1818).

officials also sought to explore previously unknown reserves of pearl oysters and open up new fisheries to exploitation. VOC officials entertained the use of forced migration to bring Tamil pearl divers from India and Ceylon to other Dutch territories in the Indian Ocean world. As early as 1665, notes and memoranda from Dutch Commander at Jaffnapatnam Anthony Paviljoen floated the idea of sending “four good pearl divers with their tools and implements” from India and Ceylon to the Banda Islands “with a view to discover a bank.”<sup>187</sup> British Ceylon and the Company Raj continued to investigate the possibility of opening new pearl fisheries. These somewhat curious episodes illustrate how Madras and Ceylon spotlighted oysters and pearls, seeking to expand the frontiers of the industry, though such efforts seldom yielded favorable results. Reports occasionally arrived to Madras and Colombo about the prospects of new sources of pearls. In 1815, for instance, Fort St. George learned about the discovery of seed pearls from a “discontented goldsmith” in Guntur district north of Madras.<sup>188</sup> In another case, Madras officials intended to hold a pearl fishery west of Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin) near Travancore in 1822.<sup>189</sup> In 1832, reports alerted officials in Colombo to a new pearl oyster batches. A certain Gabriel Casie Chetty found a pearl oysters near Karadive, a small island in the Gulf of Mannar northwest of Calpetyn, and a modest fishery took place there in March of

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<sup>187</sup> *Instructions from the Governor-General and Council of India to the Governor of Ceylon, 1656-1665*, trans. Sophia Anthonisz (Colombo: Government Press, 1908), 121-2.

<sup>188</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 673, 3276-7 (3 April 1815). Collector Oakes of Nellore wrote, “I am now told by a discontented goldsmith that he has been in the habit, for some years past of perforating pearls taken from the Oysters, as he represents found in the Lake. [The villagers] are the fishers, they first commenced fishing solely on account of their sustenance derived from the fish, but finding that the shells contained this Valuable Commodity, the object of fishing has Change; I should have been unwilling to have brought this subject to your notice had I not yesterday ocular proof of this assertions of the gold Smith being Correct, I procured, a few of the Oysters (which in My opinion rather resemble the large Musel [*sic*] on opening them I discovered a few seed pearls, the gold smith declares that much larger are discovered, and that the Smallness of those I found proceeded from the fish being very young.”

<sup>189</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 534 (18 December 1823); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 935, 715 (6 January 1823).

that year.<sup>190</sup> The Madras government accepted bids for the contract to examine a new-found batch of pearl oysters off the coast of Ramnad in 1833. Three Kilakkarai-based Maraikkayar entrepreneurs—Muhammad Kasim Sahib Maraikkayar, Sheikh Sadah Doolah Maraikkayar, and Vurshay Ebroy Maraikkayar—submitted applications to Fort St. George.<sup>191</sup> In 1834, the *jati talaivan* submitted a curious report in which a village inhabitant stumbled across some discarded oyster shells and broken diving stones abandoned by a river's edge.<sup>192</sup>

Pearl merchants and other gem specialists appraised the results of the examination, and estimated the potential value of the season's harvest to determine the feasibility of hosting a pearl fishery the following spring. British officials appear to have also elaborated the practice of employing local experts to evaluate the quality of the product obtained during the assaying process. As the Dutch commander at Jaffnapatnam wrote in 1697, "If the pearls found in each heap were found by the appraisers to be worth an *ecu* or more, the beds from which the oyster were taken were held to be capable of yielding a rich harvest; if they were worth no more than thirty *sous*, the beds were considered unlikely to yield a profit over and above the expense of working them. As soon as the testing was completed, it was publicly announced either that there would, or

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<sup>190</sup> Simon Casie Chitty, *The Ceylon Gazetteer* (Ceylon: Cotta Church Mission Press, 1834), 137.

<sup>191</sup> Muhammad Kasim Sahib Maraikkayar and Sheikh Sadah Doolah Maraikkayar expected "the same manner as the indulgence granted to the Adapen Shady Talaven at the fisheries of Ceylon and Tutacoryn." Vurshay Ebroy Maraikkayar received the contract and employed a remarkable large crew of 107 people for the project; unfortunately, adverse weather condition and the enormous size of his payroll propelled the contractor into debt. He wrote, "I have expended a large sum of money from the month of Margalee (December) up to the present time for the pay and batta of Donies, amblagars pilots, Charmers, divers, Lascars etc. and in articles, but contrary winds has [*sic*] rendered the expence [*sic*] vain, as they did not allow me to examine the banks to that extent I anticipated as many more places remain to be examined." TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1403, 3236 (17 April 1834).

<sup>192</sup> According to the author of the report, "The discovery of the old shells and the diving stone induces me to suppose that there were Oysters on the banks and that there has been fishery carried once. I picked some pieces of Corals found scattered on the beach." TNA, TDR, Vol. 4708, 121-2 (27 June 1834).

that there would not be a fishery that year.”<sup>193</sup> In the early years of British management, valuations usually took place on-site or at the office of district collector. Appraisers received pearls that had been classed and sorted based on such qualities as size, shape, and color. This was the case at Tuticorin in 1800 when the sub-collector of Tirunelveli reported that “after Collecting the whole of the Pearls” he had them “valued by four merchants” in the presence of other British officials and “many of the other Principal native inhabitants.”<sup>194</sup> After the pearls were evaluated, the district collector sent half the product to Fort St. George and kept the remainder at his office with the idea that prospective renters could view samples of pearls. In January 1807, for example, Collector James Hepburn of Tirunelveli wrote to the Board of Revenue, “The enclosed Bag contains one half of the Pearls found properly classed and sorted which are sent to serve as Masters for the satisfaction of any person at Madras division of offering for the Fishery, the other half is retained by me for the same purpose here.” Hepburn added that this particular batch “have been seen by some very good Judges here who declares them to be of a very colour and of more than a commonly good shape.”<sup>195</sup> Madras and Colombo also actively participated in facilitating the employment of merchants and jewelers skilled in the art of appraisal. In the months leading up to the pearl fishery of 1800, for instance, Frederick North of Ceylon wrote to Fort St. George about sending appraisers and other specialized labor to assist in the Company’s preparation for pearl fishery at Tuticorin: “Should it appear to you that any Pearl appraisers Pilots or other persons residing on Ceylon can be of use, to you, I will send them immediately.”<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Hornell, *Report to the Government of Madras*, 13.

<sup>194</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 242, 223 (18 January 1800).

<sup>195</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 8 (8 January 1807).

<sup>196</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2168 (6 March 1800).

However, British Ceylon appears to have modified the preexisting system of appraising pearls and oysters collected during the examination process in the early 1820s. A specially appointed team of British civil servants superintended the washing and sorting process instead of leaving such responsibilities in the hands of native authorities and local officers. Rather than inspect the pearls on-site or at a nearby district-level office, officials shipped samples of pearls and shells from the far western and northwestern shores of the island to Colombo. In the capital city, a small group of gem specialist appraised the product. As master attendant and chief inspector of the pearl fishery, British officer James Steuart had first-hand experience with this process. He wrote, “These samples are taken to Colombo, where a Committee of officers is appointed to superintend the washing away of the decayed fish from the shells: to see the Pearls collected from the sandy remains, and afterwards sorted, classed and valued, by an assembly of five or six native pearl dealers.”<sup>197</sup> Steuart refers to these pearl dealers as “respectable Moormen” who “perform their work faithfully.”<sup>198</sup> He notes that they are paid modest wages in cash, suggesting a further turn away from the “traditional” system of honors and in-kind payments that had previously structured the organization of their labor.

The viability of the pearl fishery was greatly enhanced by the ability of British officials to tap local knowledge networks. From the men who assayed the pearl oyster banks to gem specialists who valued the product, the superintendent and other officials involved in the preparation and performance of the pearl fishery relied on individuals and communities that possessed first-hand knowledge of pearls and oysters. This was

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<sup>197</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 11.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

especially true during the early years of British management when Company and Crown officials lacked knowledge, information, or awareness about the local details of pearl oysters and the natural marine environment of the Gulf of Mannar. In advance of the 1810 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, for instance, Collector James Hepburn of Tirunelveli wrote, “My opinion must of Course be guided by the Judgement [*sic*] of others as it is a Subject in which I can be but little Skilled and as the Fishery itself is a Lottery Speculation therefore has room for a wide range.”<sup>199</sup> At first, officials extolled the deep insight, intimate knowledge, and autochthonic wisdom that local people had about the pearl fishery. Hepburn continued, “the Divers and Boat People at Tutacoryn who have made an observance & knowledge of these Banks the business of their lives and whose judgement [*sic*] is therefore entitled to attention.”<sup>200</sup> Local experts shaped knowledge about pearls, oysters, marine ecosystems, and navigation within what might be characterized as “contact zone” created by the encounter between local experts and British officials.<sup>201</sup> Knowledge about pearls and oysters, the location of the richest beds, the best techniques to harvest and manage pearl oysters, and the best sailing routes to their location were importantly not forged in the prototypical “contact zone” of colonial cities but instead on the sandy shores of southeastern Indian and western Ceylon and a few nautical miles from the coasts.

However, during the course of the early nineteenth century, individuals and

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<sup>199</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 65, 21 February 1810.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>201</sup> Raj, *Relocating Modern Science*, 2007. Raj demonstrates that scientific knowledge about the natural world was forged in the crucible of the “contact zone” of colonial cities and can therefore be seen as the product of an encounter between European and local knowledge systems. Challenging a “diffusionist model” of scientific knowledge, Raj persuasively shows that vernacular knowledge systems and local knowledge-producing methodologies in South Asia circulated alongside European approaches. Raj adopts the term “contact zone” from Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (London: Routledge, 1992).



groups formerly seen as authorities on pearls and oysters were often portrayed as peddlers of dubious knowledge. For example, James Steuart, superintendent of the pearl fishery and master attendant at Colombo, doubted the nautical skill of local mariners. Even though the boat pilots and captains had “professed with apparent confidence to distinguish one oyster bed from another,” Steuart found that they did not know how to read the navigation charts, proving that “that the local knowledge of the Adapanaars [boat captains] did not make up for their want of experience as mariners and navigators.”<sup>202</sup> Steuart recommended to his superiors at Colombo and London that British Ceylon scale back the duties and responsibilities of local boat captains. He wrote, “The full consideration of these circumstances confirmed the belief, that dependence could not be placed implicitly on the judgement [*sic*] of these men, and that some measures were necessary to prevent one bed of oysters being mistaken for another, which there appeared to be good reason to conclude had been the case, and that fisheries had been lost in consequence.”<sup>203</sup> Steuart proposed replacing local navigators with European ones. In a report he intended for Commissioners Colebrooke and Cameron, Steuart remarked on “the improvement of Ceylon mariners” and discussed “the advantages which might be expected to result from the service of European officers, if they were employed on Board the Government vessels, instead of Ceylonese.”<sup>204</sup> The European sea officers “would make themselves acquainted with the pearl banks,” which would lead to an “increase of knowledge” because “every new Inspector “ would no longer have to learn “every particle of useful information.”<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 20-1.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

By limiting the influence of local authorities and instead building infrastructure from within the colonial administration headed by British officers and staffed by indigenous civil servants, Madras and Ceylon created an increasingly bureaucratized and professional setting in which the pearl fishery was managed. British Ceylon in particular sought to expose the examination process to the logic of markets by dissolving traditional arrangements, such as customary roles, hereditary offices, and material privileges, and the introduction of wage-based employment systems. As Steuart wrote, “Several native headmen are attached to the establishment. Formerly these persons received salaries, and the privilege of employing a limited number of divers at the fisheries; but they are now remunerated by a limited rate of pay, during their attendant on pearl fishery duty, and the privilege of fishing with two or four divers, or, as they call it, one or two stones, according to their ranking the public service.”<sup>206</sup> In the early 1820s, Governor Edward Barnes and Governor Edward Paget established the position of a permanent master attendant and inspector of the pearl banks, which brought the examination process closer into the ambits of the colonial administrative structures. In 1820, for instance, Barnes appointed his personal deputy, a certain Colonel Hamilton, to superintend the pearl fishery. According to one assessment, the experience with Hamilton at the helm had “forcibly pointed out the propriety of a properly qualified officer being appointed to the sole duty of superintending the pearl fisheries, as the best means of obtaining correct information on a subject of such importance to the revenue of the Colony, and much general interest to the community.”<sup>207</sup>

Another area in which the governments of Madras and Ceylon sought to modify

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 19.

was the actual techniques of pearl diving. From at least the medieval period moving forward, the practice of pearl diving is one of the most commented on aspects of the industry. Some of the earliest detailed written descriptions of pearl diving are found in travel accounts from the medieval period, particularly Chinese and European texts dating from as early as the thirteenth century.<sup>208</sup> For instance, an account by Chinese merchant Wang Tu-Yuan from the fourteenth century contains the following description: “There are five men as a rule to each boat, of whom two act as oarsmen, while two...work the rope. The fifth man hangs his neck and bag fitted with a bamboo ring to keep the mouth open, and then, having tied a stone round his waist, he is lowered on the rope-line to the bottom of the sea.”<sup>209</sup> At the turn of the eighteenth century, French Jesuit missionary Fr. Martin wrote a detailed description of diving during his visit to a pearl fishery off the coast of Tuticorin: “When each vessel reached its place, half of its complement of divers plunged into the sea, each with a heavy stone tied to his feet to make him sink rapidly, and furnished with a sack into which he put his oysters, and having a rope tied round his body, the end of which was passed round a pulley and held by some of the boatmen.”<sup>210</sup>

It appears from most available sources that divers continued to employ many of these techniques during the early British period. Indeed, archival and published texts from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries suggest that divers typically used a pyramid-shaped stone with loops to help accelerate their descent to the bottom of the ocean floor. The diver placed his foot in a stirrup-like loop made from coir and carried a basket, formed by a wooden or iron hoop and coir netting and about eighteenth inches in diameter, in which he placed the oysters. Each reddish granite stone weighed about

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<sup>208</sup> Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 158.

<sup>209</sup> Marco Polo, *Travels*; Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 160-1.

<sup>210</sup> Hornell, *Report to the Government of Madras*, 13.

twenty to thirty pounds, a hefty load to handle for the crew of rudimentary sea-crafts navigating rough water. Pearling boats usually contained five stones and ten divers, as two divers shared to each stone. Divers worked at a breakneck pace, alternating between resting and diving for hours on end, from the early morning till late in the afternoon. Robert Percival, an early nineteenth-century British traveler, wrote, “the diver thus prepared, seizes another rope with his right hand, and holding his nostrils shut with the left, plunges into the water, and by the assistance of the stone, speedily reaches the bottom.”<sup>211</sup> When the diver reached the bottom of the ocean, a depth of anywhere between one and ten fathoms, he released the stone from his waist for his partners on board to haul up. For as long as his lungs would allow, no more than a minute or two, the diver collected oysters and other marine products like coral, often aided by stones tied around their waist. When the diver came to the surface, a group of men helped bring baskets full of oysters, rocks, coral, and other marine products on board the boat. The productivity of the divers is astounding by any measure, as a crew of around twenty to thirty people would bring thousands of oysters per day and, over the course of thirty days of fishing, tens and hundreds of thousands of oysters.<sup>212</sup> Aside from diving stones, coir nets, and other tools, the boats used during the pearl fishery, called dhonies or tonies, the general term for a boat in Tamil, and were often seen as simple and primitive crafts.<sup>213</sup> By the late 1830s, British Ceylon started to experiment with the use of steamships to use during the examination instead of traditional coastal crafts with sails and oars. The use of

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<sup>211</sup> Robert Percival, *An Account of the Island of Ceylon, Containing Its History, Geography, Natural History* (London: C. and R. Baldwin, 1803), 64.

<sup>212</sup> At the 1807 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, for instance, over seventy-one million oysters were fished over a thirty-day period. TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 153-7 (14 May 1807).

<sup>213</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 9-10; Hornell, *Report to the Government of Madras*; Hornell. *Fishing in Many Waters*.

steamships was not limited to pearling. For instance, Governor Stewart Mackenzie of British Ceylon wanted to use a steamboat to patrol the pearl banks, convey “treasure,” and transport personnel.<sup>214</sup> In 1840, a steamer named the *Seaforth*, built for the express purpose of pearling, arrived to Colombo from Bombay, which a superintendent of the Ceylon pearl fishery in the late nineteenth century described as an “important change and improvement.”<sup>215</sup>

Pearl diving was an arduous, physically demanding task. The diver’s body, the challenging nature of his work, and the tremendous skill he exhibited became imprinted in the minds of European travelers and government officials. Tamil divers, in particular, were seen as some of the most skilled divers in the world. The introduction of European divers in the mid-nineteenth century, many of whom used breathing apparatuses and newfangled diving equipment, was considered a failure by contemporary observers.<sup>216</sup> The arrival of Arab divers from the Persian Gulf via Bombay to the 1887 Ceylon pearl fishery was met with some controversy though their skills were praised.<sup>217</sup> Percival observed that Tamil Indian divers were quite dexterous with both hands and feet. He wrote that it was “customary with all the natives to use their toes as well as their fingers in working or holding, and such is the power of habit, that they can pick up even the

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<sup>214</sup> Stuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 11, 26.

<sup>215</sup> W. C. Twynam, *Report on the Ceylon Pearl Fisheries, 1899* (Colombo: Government Press, 1902), 13.

<sup>216</sup> W. C. Twynam, superintendent of the Ceylon pearl fisheries from 1862 to 1896, wrote: “Fishing for pearl oysters cannot be profitably carried on by European divers equipped as they are at the present. This was fully proved in 1861, and again [in 1885] when Captain Donnan brought up some European divers to fish the Chilaw banks, and was, I think, obliged to send them all back to Colombo, as they could no simply do nothing in the way of picking up oysters.” Twynam, *Report on the Ceylon Pearl Fisheries*, 17.

<sup>217</sup> Gemologist George Kunz described Arab divers from Bahrain and Kuwait employed at the Ceylon pearl fishery of 1906 as “very energetic and skilful [*sic*] fishermen, far surpassing the Tamils, coming early in the season and staying late, and working on many days when rough seas deter the Indian divers from venturing out.” Kunz, *Book of Pearls*, 113. W. C. Twynam held a different opinion. He describes how the arrival of approximately 2,000 Arab divers to Marichchukkadi in 1899 was met with great controversy. Twynam referred to the Arab divers as “a dirty, thieving, bullying lot, setting all law and order at defiance.” Twynam, *Report on the Ceylon Pearl Fisheries*, 64-5. For more, see Bella Sidney Woolf, “Fishing for Pearls in the Indian Ocean,” *National Geographic*, February 26, 49 (1926): 161-83.

smallest objects from the ground with their toes, almost as nimbly as a European can do so with his fingers.”<sup>218</sup> Eyewitnesses were obsessed with duration of each dive. As early as the fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta remarked that “some [divers] remain down an hour, others two hours, others less.”<sup>219</sup> In 1669, Philiberto Vernatti, British Resident at Batavia, reported to the Royal Society of London: “The greatest length of time that pearl-divers in these part can continue under waters is about a quarter of an hour; and that by no other means than custom; for pearl-diving lasts no above six weeks, and the divers stay a great while longer at the end of the season than at the beginning.”<sup>220</sup> Accounts from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries include discussions of the length of time a diver could hold his breath with increasingly exactitude. For instance, James Steuart, master attendant and fishery superintendent of British Ceylon in 1820s and 1830s, wrote, “When divers are regularly at work, they seldom remain under water more than a minute, the more common time is from fifty three to fifty seven seconds; but when requested or paid to remain under water as long as they are able, we have witnessed the period of their immersion to be from eight four to eight seven seconds.”<sup>221</sup>

There were many health and safety risks commonly associated with pearl diving. Plunging fathoms below the water’s surface exposed the divers’ body to punishingly high levels of pressure, which sometimes resulted in physical damage, such as bloody ears and noses. British official and traveler Jonathan Fellowes, for instance, wrote, “The blood sometimes gushes from the nose and ears of the diver after his emersion from the

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<sup>218</sup> Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 64.

<sup>219</sup> Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 94.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 16.

deep.”<sup>222</sup> Likewise, Steuart observed somewhat less alarmingly that pearl divers “sometimes bleed at the nose and at the ears, but not sufficiently to do them injury.”<sup>223</sup> A full day of diving for pearls was an exhausting and demanding proposition. According to Fellowes, “One day, owing to a calm, the boats were rowed with oars to the banks, and back to the shore. They set out at one o’clock A.M. and did not return until near eight in the evening. But notwithstanding this excessive toil, they renewed their daily labours in less than five hours.”<sup>224</sup> Not only was the actual act of pearl diving dangerous but also the schedule of a divers workday was structured and enforced through rather belligerent means. Take for instance the early morning wake-up call made by the thunderous sounds of cannons and drums. There are references to the use of firearms to signal the start of pearling operations from at least the late Portuguese era and continue through the early years of British management.<sup>225</sup> According to a description offered by Cordiner during his visit to the 1804 pearl fishery at Arippu, “The boat people are raised from their slumbers by the noise of horns and tom-toms, and the firing of a field-piece, generally before midnight, when the land-wind is favourable. The noise and confusion of collecting and embarking upwards of six thousand people in the darkness of night, may be more easily conceived than described.”<sup>226</sup> Under such grueling conditions, it was common for exhaustion and fatigue to set in, which not only compromised the health and safety of the workforce but also impacted the overall productivity and profitability of the pearl fishery. These issues typically surfaced in representations by merchant-renters addressed to

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<sup>222</sup> Robert Fellowes, *The History of Ceylon, from the Earliest Period to the Year MDCCCXV* (London: J. Mawman, 1817), 280.

<sup>223</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 16.

<sup>224</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:70.

<sup>225</sup> João Ribeiro, *History of Ceylon* (Colombo: Government Press, 1847); Hornell *Report to the Government of Madras*, 8.

<sup>226</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:49-50.

Madras and Ceylon in search of remission payments to offset or reduce financial losses. For instance, Annasami Chetti, the renter of the 1807 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, claimed in a petition to Fort St. George that the physical demands of pearl diving *inter alia* reduced the overall yield of pearls and oysters. He wrote, “the Boats are to be sailed at 10 o’clock at Night and arrive at the Fishery at 6 o’clock in the morning and the divers are to fish only for 1 1/2 or 2 Hours the most, but causing them to do it by force, while there was no Wind, the Boats were obliged to be rowed, by which, the Boat people are quite exhausted and arrives there between the hours of 10, 11, 12 o’clock in the forenoon.”<sup>227</sup>

From going naked except for “a slip of calico about his loins” to the lack of any diving instruments such as nose clips, contemporary observers were also impressed by the simple tools and equipment used by divers at the pearl fishery.<sup>228</sup> Indeed, the general absence of nose clips, oils, and similar types of diving aids at the pearl fishery of Mannar struck writers from the medieval period onward.<sup>229</sup> There were coordinated efforts by the governments of Madras and Ceylon to update and modernize the diving process during the course of the early nineteenth century. Historian C. R. de Silva suggests that the Portuguese did not introduce any game-changing technologies.<sup>230</sup> The Dutch brought diving bells to pearling centers in the Indian Ocean without much success.<sup>231</sup> A report by

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<sup>227</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 446, 4428-9 (29 June 1807).

<sup>228</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:50.

<sup>229</sup> Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 159. The use of such devices and substances was more common amongst pearl divers in the Persian Gulf. An account of the Persian Gulf pearl fishery by British Lt. H. H. Whitlock, for instance, contains the following description: “When diving they make use of a piece of horn to close the nostrils, to enable them to breath longer, which likewise prevents the water from getting up the nose; this is about the size and form of a common wine bottle cork, with a notch at one end cut in the centre, so as to fit remarkably well.” Steuart, *An Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 68; Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 114.

<sup>230</sup> De Silva, “Portuguese and Pearl Fishing,” 14.

<sup>231</sup> For studies of pearling in the Persian Gulf that contain discussions of Dutch experiments with diving bells, see Willem Floor, “The Bahrain Project of 1754,” *Persica* 11 (1984), 129-48; Floor, “Pearl Fishing in the Persian Gulf in 1757,” *Persica* 10 (1982): 209-22. There are also references in Dutch sources to the use of diving bells as diplomatic gifts to the Shogun of Japan in 1833. See NA, *Hoge Regering te Batavia*, 1.04.21, ff. 1466a.



French naturalist Eudelin de Jonville mentions the use of diving bells at the Mannar fishery during the Dutch period but wrote that such equipment was “not found to answer the purpose expected.”<sup>232</sup> In the early nineteenth century, British Ceylon officials took another shot. Governor Edward Barnes of British Ceylon, for instance, lauded by his contemporaries for his ingenuity and vision, fetishized technology. Following a series of unsuccessful fisheries in the late 1810s and early 1820s, Governor Barnes “resolved to leave no stone unturned to investigate the subject.”<sup>233</sup> As he prepared to assume the governorship of in 1823, Barnes had two diving bells shipped from England. The first one was a wooden diving bell constructed by the Royal Staff Corps and the second was a more sophisticated type made of cast iron that arrived to the Colombo around June 1825. James Steuart, who was appointed master attendant of Colombo and chief inspector of the pearl banks by 1826, used the diving bells during an examination in March the following year. Men like Barnes believed that the introduction of new technologies and equipment would revolutionize pearling in the Gulf of Mannar. The use of diving bells would deter illicit fishing, provide officials with a more precise assessment of the state of the banks, and prevent the formation of secret agreements amongst divers and merchants to misrepresent the size of the season’s harvest. According to Steuart, “It had been believed by many persons, that the native divers employed by Government at the examination of the banks, were subject to improper influence of certain wealthy natives, who were suspected of employing boats and divers to rob the oyster beds, and that therefore the reports given by the divers could not be depend upon. It had also been said that the oyster beds were at some periods overwhelmed with drifted sand, which at other

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<sup>232</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 51.

<sup>233</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 10; Twynam, *Report on the Ceylon Pearl Fisheries*, 14.

times passed away. To clear up these doubtful reports, appears to have been one, if not the only use of the diving bells; for one native diver at a pearl fishery, would collect more oysters in a day than could be obtained by all the men that could work in a diving bell.”<sup>234</sup> Beyond its intended commercial use, the diving bell also supported marine science studies in the region. For instance, Austrian naturalist and artist Eugen Ransonnet-Villez used a diving bell to render the “submarine scenery” of coral gardens on the floor of the Gulf of Mannar in beautiful colored paintings in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>235</sup>

Not all officials in British Ceylon involved with the management of the pearl fishery at this time shared his enthusiasm for the diving bell. According to Robert Boyd, a revenue officer of British Ceylon, part of the problem may have been poor design. He wrote, “The inapplicability of the diving bells to fishing for oysters arises from the difficulty of working such a machine from the small surface included within its circumference.”<sup>236</sup> There were also those who voiced concerns about the environmental damage such equipment might wreak on the pearl banks. For instance, according to Captain James Crisp, described as “the most intelligent Master Attendant at Ceylon,” the diving bell “may answer very well at first; but it will ultimately be the means of destroying the oysters.”<sup>237</sup> Crisp sounded the alarms, noting that the marine environment of Mannar and its pearl oyster population was too fragile, susceptible to severe damage by a diver in heavy diving equipment tramping along the ocean floor. The diving bell

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<sup>234</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 20.

<sup>235</sup> Eugen Ransonnet-Villez, *Sketches of the Inhabitants, Animals Life and Vegetation in the Lowlands and High Mountains of Ceylon* (Vienna, 1867).

<sup>236</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 52.

<sup>237</sup> John Bennett, *Ceylon and its Capabilities: An Account of Its Natural Resources, Indigenous Productions, and Commercial Facilities* (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1843), 206.

“must crush a great many [oysters]; which will putrefy; and so extremely delicate is the nature of the oysters, that it will spread like a plague, gradually extending its vortex, and destroying all within.”<sup>238</sup> To some extent, Crisp’s comments anticipated the spread of the diving bell to many pearling centers around the world. Colonial powers and enterprising prospectors continued to introduce new technologies such as diving bells and dredging machines at pearling centers across the globe, from Mexico and the Caribbean to the Persian Gulf and Australia.<sup>239</sup>

### **Labor, Discipline, and Circulation**

Most of the divers and boatmen came from southeastern India and the western and northern districts of Ceylon. As one contemporary eyewitness wrote, “The boats with their crews and divers come from Manaar, Jaffna, Ramisseram, Nagore, Tutakoreen, Travancore, Kilkerry, and other parts of the coast of Coromandel. They arrive completely equipped, and furnished with every thing necessary to conduct the business of the fishing.”<sup>240</sup> This description, however, gives the impression that the seasonal migration of boats and divers, as well as the movement of goods and supplies, were unmediated and routine phenomena. But the governments of Madras and Ceylon were involved with the facilitation of seasonal migration and employment of labor. Interventions by political powers into the spatial mobility of pearling labor was by no means a British innovation. References to labor at the pearl fisheries extend as far back as the early first millennium. For instance, the ancient Greek text *Periplus of Erythraean* (c. 100-300 CE) contains descriptions of pearl fishing off the coast of the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent,

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>239</sup> Hopper, *Slave of One Master*, 100.

<sup>240</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:41.

noting that “condemned criminals are employed in this service” and that the king is “the owner of the fishery.”<sup>241</sup> There are no mentions of slaves or criminals forced to work as pearl divers during the eras of European management but this passage from the *Periplus* does suggest a precedent for government involvement with labor. The Portuguese and Dutch relied on local intermediaries to support the recruitment and mobilization of labor for the pearl fishery. Maintaining relationships with local Parava, Maraikkayar, and Lubbai communities along the Indian and Ceylon coasts was crucial for the success of the pearl fishery and often assumed the form extending patronage and protection. There are also concerns with the unregulated movement of people and things during the pearling season generated by fears of smuggling and security. British powers also demonstrated considerable unease when confronted with heavy seasonal migration and undertook measures accordingly to mobilize and discipline labor through a loose assemblage of tools and policies that targeted divers, boatmen, and other members of the workforce.

British Ceylon and the Company Raj turned to the medium of print at the turn of the nineteenth century to spread information about the pearl fishery. This media was not exclusive to the pear fishery but also used to promote leasing opportunities for other industries such as betel, tobacco, salt, chank, and arrack.<sup>242</sup> Madras and Colombo published advertisements encouraging divers, boatmen, and other low-level laborers to repair to the site of the pearl fishery. Published in English, Tamil, Sinhala, and sometimes even Dutch, advertisements contained important information about the pearl fishery, such as the dates and location of the event, as well as the number of boats that the event would admit. For example, an advertisement for the 1803 Ceylon pearl fishery at Chilaw

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<sup>241</sup> Caldwell, *History of Tinnevelly*, 19-20; Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 100.

<sup>242</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 81, 6847-51 (18 October 1793).

contained the following passage: “Notice is hereby given that a Pearl Fishery will take place at Chilaw, in the Island of Ceylon, in the Ensuing season - the Number of Boats employed will be from Eighty, to one hundred, and the fishery will commence on the 20th February 1803, by which day, it is requested that the Boats, and Divers, intending to seek employment for the usual Reward of on fourth part of the Oysters taken, may be at Chilaw that [season] being peculiarly favorable for the operations.”<sup>243</sup> Whereas prospective renters and merchants were addressed by the government in metropolitan newspapers and other media, the divers, boatmen, and laborers resided mostly in coastal towns of Ramnad, Tirunelveli, and Madurai districts and so, in addition to published advertisements and handbill pamphlets, word of a pearl fishery reached the coastal towns and villages of these areas by notices posted in places like public squares, churches, and by the beat of tom-tom drums.<sup>244</sup>

In the early years of British management, when the maritime districts of Ceylon were governed by Fort St. George, and the East India Company was the sole proprietor of the pearl fishery, there was a considerably high degree of cooperation and coordination between officials on the island and mainland. Madras, Colombo, and district-level officers shared and collectively facilitated the circulation of labor, capital, goods, and information to and from the pearl fishery each season. In March 1800, for example, Governor Frederic North of Ceylon shared his infinite wisdom with his counterparts in Madras. North advised and assisted the Madras government as it prepared to host the first full-scale fishery on the India-side of Mannar under British management. He volunteered pearl appraisers and other laborers, provided information about the value and class of

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<sup>243</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3562, 8 (10 January 1803).

<sup>244</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 666, 771 (12 January 1815).

pearls, and suggested sending over an old Dutch sloop that could be used for examining and patrolling the pearling grounds.<sup>245</sup> The following year, Fort St. George reciprocated in kind when it furnished Collector Lushington of Ramnad with instructions to facilitate the movement of boats and divers from his district to the site of the Ceylon pearl fishery. North had requested from Lord Clive at Fort St. George that Collector Lushington be instructed to “facilitate the intended Enterprise” by “sending over the Boats and Divers in his District.”<sup>246</sup> In another instance, the district collectors of areas that formed the southeast Indian coastline—Tirunelveli, Ramnad, Madurai, and Arcot—agreed to distribute advertisements instructing able-bodied divers, boatmen, laborers, and merchants to attend the 1803 pearl fishery at Chilaw on Ceylon’s western coast. According to the advertisement, “It is requested that the Boats, and Divers, intending to seek employment for the usual Reward of on fourth part of the Oysters taken, may be at Chilaw that season being peculiarly favorable.”<sup>247</sup> This was also the case during preparations for the 1809 pearl fishery at Arippu, as Madras and Colombo agreed to share information and distribute “12 printed Copies of the advertisement.”<sup>248</sup>

The relationship between Madras and Colombo cooled with regime change in 1802 when Ceylon was established as a formal colony of the British state. Colonial officials of British Ceylon became increasingly concerned with keeping wealth and resources derived from the pearl fishery on the island. The labor question was one way through which this problem manifested itself in the administrative discourse of British Ceylon. Indeed, much of the labor and capital for the pearl fishery was thought to have

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<sup>245</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2161-87 (6 March 1800).

<sup>246</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 268, 10303-10 (11 December 1800).

<sup>247</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3562, 8 (10 January 1803).

<sup>248</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 482, 14-5 (2 January 1809).

come from India. British officer and traveler Jonathan Forbes identified this problem during his lengthy stay on Ceylon in the early nineteenth century. He wrote, “none of the pearl divers are Cingalese, and only those few who come from Manar are subjects of the British Government; the remainder arrive from various towns and villages on the opposite coast of the Indian continent.”<sup>249</sup> This reflected more general concerns about the overall profitability of the pearl fishery. British Ceylon civil servant Anthony Bertolacci wrote that “the island of Ceylon does not at present derive all the advantages that it ought from the pearl fishery.”<sup>250</sup> Officials like Bertolacci were anxious about losing money and profits to the mainland at the end of the season when merchants, divers, and others returned home, and his early nineteenth-century study of the economic and social conditions of Ceylon paid special attention to the outward flow of labor and capital. He wrote, “The divers, who receive a fourth share of the whole number of oysters fished, are almost all persons from the opposite coast, who come to the fishery to accumulate a little fortune, and take it away. These divers are likewise employed, during another part of the year, in the fishery of chanks, round the coast of Ceylon. This is another source of revenue to the Colonial Government, in which the natives of Ceylon have not hitherto participated in proportion in which they ought.”<sup>251</sup> From Bertolacci’s perspective, Ceylon was overly “dependent upon foreign divers” who received a handsome share of the season’s catch but returned to the mainland at the end of pearl fishery. He saw this drift of labor and capital as “a very serious loss indeed to the colony.”<sup>252</sup> Nearly two decades after Bertolacci, Commissioners Colebrooke and Cameron addressed similar issues

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<sup>249</sup> Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, 1:256; Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:39.

<sup>250</sup> Bertolacci, *Interests of Ceylon*, 2:192.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:192-3.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:268-9.

related to labor. In this report, the commissioners wrote “It may further be remarked, in support of the opinion that the natives of India are not indisposed to emigrate, that numbers annually come over to Ceylon to seek employment during the pearl fisheries, and in the coasting trade of the island.”<sup>253</sup> In another section, the commissioners wrote that the pearl fishery “still attracts a large assemblage of speculators from the coast of India, and of labouring people who come over in search of employment.”<sup>254</sup>

One idea that was regularly entertained to address this problem of seasonal migration was the forced settlement of communities skilled in the art of diving and navigation along the coast of western Ceylon near the sites of the pearl fishery. These proposals, which had been floated by British officers from at least the turn of the nineteenth century, specifically concerned Tamil Paravas. The Dutch VOC had also considered the forced migration and settlement of Parava divers and others skilled in the art of pearling. It may be recalled that Anthony Paviljoen, Dutch Commander at Jaffnapatnam, recommended that “four good pearl divers with their tools and implements” be spirited away to the Banda Islands in Southeast Asia.<sup>255</sup> He emphasized that such a plan had to be executed by force. He wrote, “If asked to go no one will consent to do so, and should they hear of our plan they will all conceal themselves for a time. Four of them must therefore be secretly pointed out by the Patangatyn and be taken on board. Fair promises must be held out to them, and they may be told that they will be required to stay away one year only and receive high wages. This must also be told to those who remain behind, with a view to prevent any general discontentment among them

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<sup>253</sup> *Colebrooke-Cameron Papers*, 1:54.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:100.

<sup>255</sup> *Instructions from the Governor-General and Council of India*, 121-2.



with regard to our action, which apparently would seem rather hard.”<sup>256</sup> In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, British administrators spun a new rationale for the forced migration of pearling labor. According to early colonial histories of Ceylon, the western maritime regions had been devastated by war, famine, disease, and drought. The dry, arid landscape was largely sparsely populated and underdeveloped. According to one weary traveler, when the pearl fishery came to a close, the seasonal migrants who populated a once bustling coastal town returned to the mainland, denuding the coastline: “The moment the fishery is over, Kondatchie’s glory ceases and it then becomes the same miserable waterless (for it has no water except from Arippu), and arid spot that it has been for ages past.”<sup>257</sup> Officials from various corners of the company-state and colonial state administrations believed that offering incentives to members of the Parava community to settle near Arippu would not only provide the pearl fishery with a regular and fixed supply of labor but also facilitate the development of irrigation and agriculture in the area. British traveler Cordiner discussed settling divers, boatmen, and other laborers at Arippu, a measure that he argued would increase rice cultivation and improve infrastructure for water storage: “The ruins of a large tank or reservoir, capable of watering ground sufficient to produce one hundred thousand parras of paddee [*sic*], afford one proof of its former prosperity. It might be highly beneficial to the interest of the pearl fishery, if settlers were again encouraged to reside there; and it ought especially to be rendered the head-quarters of the pilots, divers, and the persons necessary to be employed in conducting the concern.”<sup>258</sup> Establishing a permanent community of divers near the site of the pearl fishery would not only contribute to the development of the

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Bennett, *Ceylon and its Capabilities*, 208.

<sup>258</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:36.

region but also reduce seasonal traffic between the island and mainland, a security problem that made government officials on both sides of the Gulf anxious. John McDowall, one of the commissioners of the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu, wrote to his colleague George Turnour a few months before the start of the event: “[Governor North] will apply to the Bombay Government for the protection you have suggested and will direct the Superintendent of the Fishery to guard against an evil, which threatens to [serve as an] inconvenience to the Divers on the Pearl Banks. It is certainly much to be wished that some of these should settle at Arreppo, and every means should be used during the Fishery to induce them thereto.”<sup>259</sup> In his report on the economic and social conditions of Ceylon, British officer Davey Roberson proposed that Parava divers and boatmen whom inhabited the Indian coast by granting them tax-free land.<sup>260</sup> Likewise, Bertolacci considered directly employing divers and inducing them to settle near the pearling grounds by providing them with free land, tax abatements, and other benefits: “It becomes, therefore, in every way, an object of great importance to protect the interests of the Ceylon divers; and to induce those of the opposite coast, who accumulate wealth in the Ceylon fisheries, to settle in it, by granting them lands, and such advantages as may make them comfortable in it.”<sup>261</sup>

Talks about the forced settlement and migration of laborers to the location of the pearl fishery increased during the late 1820s, a period of intense road construction and infrastructure projects that sought to connect the newly-opened highlands of the erstwhile Kandyan territories to the rest of the island for military, commercial, and political

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<sup>259</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 76-7.

<sup>260</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 54.

<sup>261</sup> Bertolacci, *Interests of Ceylon*, 269.

purposes.<sup>262</sup> In the Colebrooke-Cameron report, for example, the commissioners proposed various measures in support of efforts to repopulate the desolate shorelines of the western districts of Ceylon. For instance, Commissioners Colebrooke and Cameron wrote, “The constant residence of the superintendent at Aripo...might enable him to promote the settlement in the district of many of the people who come over from the continent during the pearl fisheries, and who, if lands were granted to them, might employ capital in repairing the ruined tanks.”<sup>263</sup> Not only would this improve the management of the pearl fishery and reduce dependence on “foreign” labor from the India coast but it would also provide a boon to other industries—such as chaya root cultivation and chank diving—and contribute to the agricultural production and development of the region.

The East India Company’s government of Madras found itself in competition with its neighbors over the human and natural resources of the pearl fishery, a tension that became palpable during years in which multiple pearl fisheries were planned in the region.<sup>264</sup> As early as 1809, just seven years after the transfer of Ceylon to the Crown, the relationship between British officials on the island and mainland started to show signs of wear vis-à-vis labor. Collector Hepburn of Tirunelveli expressed his frustration that the

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<sup>262</sup> Barrow, *Surveying and Mapping*; Sujit Sivasundaram, “Tales of the Land: British Geography and Kandyan Resistance in Sri Lanka, c. 1803-1850,” *Modern Asian Studies* 41, 5 (2007): 925-61; Sivasundaram, *Islanded*.

<sup>263</sup> *Colebrooke-Cameron Papers*, 1:101-2.

<sup>264</sup> Take for instance the controversy over a proposed pearl fishery off the coast of Travancore in 1822. The Travancore government had leased out the right to the pearl banks and requested the support of divers from Tirunelveli district. However, the collector of Tirunelveli refused because there was a fishery scheduled to take place during the same season, which would have drained resources from the far more lucrative fishery at Tuticorin. The collector wrote to his counterpart at Travancore with explicit instructions to refrain from recruiting divers and boatmen from his district: “It has been reported to me by the Jathee Taliven that it is expedient to examine in the Banks in the Neighbourhood [*sic*] of Travancore in the early part of next year with a view to the Possibility of a fishery in April next. I have therefore to request you will impress upon the Travancore Government the necessity of strictly prohibiting the Renter from attempting to engage any of the Tinnevelly Divers & Boats for his fishery.” TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 534 (18 December 1823).

Ceylon government had organized a fishery at Arippu that coincided with one his district. He feared that Arippu, one of the largest and potentially most lucrative pearling grounds in the region, would attract labor and capital that would have otherwise attended the pearl fishery at Tuticorin. Hepburn wrote to the Board, “I can now begin to feel some anxiety as a fishery there would affect the value of the one at Tutacoryn very much from its drawing away, not only the dealers in Pearls, but also the Boat men and Divers who would of course resort to Ceylon in preference to remaining at Tutacoryn.”<sup>265</sup> He was “very doubtful” that there would be an adequate supply of boats and divers to satisfy the demands of two simultaneous fisheries and recommended to the Board that it delay the event. He wrote, “Should certain information therefore be obtained of a Fishery at Manar, it would be preferable to defer that at Tutacoryn, if possible, till next year as both fisheries occurring at the same time would create a Competition hurtful to the revenue of both Governments of this however a better opinion can be formed after the inspection of the Banks.”<sup>266</sup> Hepburn and his superiors at Fort St. George ultimately decided to postpone the pearl fishery until the following year. They even acceded to Colombo’s request to promote its pearl fishery by agreeing to distribute advertisements and provide other forms of assistance.<sup>267</sup> A similar set of circumstances arose during preparations for the 1822 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, an event that Madras already delayed by a year because it conflicted with British Ceylon’s timetable. In this case, Madras and Ceylon took far more accommodative approaches. The collector of Tirunelveli wrote to the Board of Revenue, encouraging Fort St. George to move forward with plans to host a pearl fishery and apprise Colombo of such intentions. He wrote, “it will be expedient to

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<sup>265</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 481, 11542-4 (26 December 1808).

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 11544.

lose no time in making it known by advertisement in order that the Ceylon Government may postpone the fishery of the Manaar banks which as there were expected to be fished last year and delayed as our fishery was might otherwise materially interfere with the fishery on the Coast.”<sup>268</sup> In response, Secretary to the Government of Ceylon, George Lusignan, referred to the “practice which has prevailed on the part of both Governments to accommodate each other, on occasions such as the present.”<sup>269</sup> The secretary conveyed the message to the Governor and instructed the collectors of Mannar and Jaffna “to signify that such Boats and Divers in this Island as may be willing to engage in the Tutacoren Pearl Fishery, should and have license to proceed there forthwith giving notice of their intentions to the Collector of the District that the number of Divers and Boats may be registered.”<sup>270</sup>

The relationship between Madras and Ceylon continued to run and cold. In 1828, the governments organized simultaneous pearl fisheries at Punnaikayal and Arippu. Officials from Madras feared that the Arippu fishery would magnetize resources, attracting a disproportionate and unfair share of labor, capital, and supplies from the mainland to the island, effectively jeopardizing the productivity and profitability of the event at Punnaikayal. Collector Kindersley of Tirunelveli wrote to the Board in December 1827, “there is every prospect a Considerable fishery on this Coast” and that the publication of an advertisement for the Ceylon fishery “would be highly objectionable.” Kindersley feared that “it would lead the Merchants, Boat Owners, and divers to suppose that the Fishery had been abandoned and under such an impression they

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<sup>268</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 78-9 (21 December 1821).

<sup>269</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 908, 2537 (21 March 1822)

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

would of Course be induced to [proceed] to Arippoo.”<sup>271</sup>

The mobilization and migration of labor was not the only arena of the pearling industry in which the governments of Madras and Ceylon meddled. Concerns about security and mobility continued as the divers and boatmen assembled at the location of the pearl fishery, when the superintendent and local members of his administrative team undertook an extensive registration process. Historian C. R. de Silva describes a similar system in place during the Portuguese era: “Then the vessels and the divers due to participate were registered. The number of such vessels varied between two and four hundred with a maximum of eight divers to boats.”<sup>272</sup> Likewise, the Dutch deployed naval vessels to the pearling grounds during the fishery. Governor Thomas van Rhee, Governor of Dutch Ceylon, wrote to his successor, Gerri de Heere, in 1697: “The *fluitje* ‘de Santloper’ has been ordered to remain at the banks during the pearl fishery, partly to serve as a beacon to the *thonys*, partly to prevent any of the *thonys* engaged in the fishery from leaving without paying the dues or stone money, which they might otherwise do.”<sup>273</sup> At the end of the seventeenth century, Hendrick Zwaardecroon, Dutch Commandant at Jaffnapatnam, discussed the various uses of sloop: “The sloop ‘Jaffnapatam’ has been built more for convenience and conveys usually important advices and money, as also the Company’s servants. As this vessel can be made to navigate the Mannar river, it is also used as a cruiser at the pearl banks, during the pearl fishery.”<sup>274</sup> There are also references in the Dutch annals to the practice of registering boats (*uitschrijving*) and divers at the start of the pearl fishery. For instance, Dutch Governor Hendrick Becker wrote to his

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<sup>271</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4701, 192-3 (18 December 1827).

<sup>272</sup> De Silva, “Portuguese and Pearl Fishing, 24.

<sup>273</sup> Van Rhee, *Memoir*, 54.

<sup>274</sup> Zwaardecroon, *Memoir*, 65.

successor Isaac Rumpf in 1716: “The names of the all the divers with their number of stones, each under his Pattangatyn, must be carefully entered by the Commissioners, and each individual must receive a certificate signed on behalf of the Company, while a number of sloops must constantly cruise about the scene of the pearl fishery, to examine every vessel and to see that it has no unauthorized divers or stones on board.”<sup>275</sup> In the early nineteenth century, James Cordiner observed during his visit to Arippu, “As the boats arrive at Condaatchy to be employed in the fishery they are regularly numbered, and their description and the names of their crew are registered in a book.”<sup>276</sup> The collector in whose district the pearl fishery that season was located sent instructions to the superintendent that contained a description of these procedures. Collector Drury of Tirunelveli, for example, wrote to the master attendant of the 1822 pearl fishery at Tuticorin: “You will ascertain at the time of examining the Passes every day that no Boat contains [more] people, divers, or stones than the Number specified in its Pass. Any deviation from this you will report with the number of the boats for my information.”<sup>277</sup> Each boat was assigned a number and issued a passport, complete with a passenger manifest that provided the exact number and names of the divers, pilots, and other crewmen. A copper plate inscribed with both Roman and Tamil numerals that corresponded to superintendent’s logbook was then tied to the boat with coir rope. As Collector Lushington of Tirunelveli reported from Tuticorin in 1800: “A Copper Plate with the number of the Boat Marked upon in in English and Malabar with several yards

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<sup>275</sup> Becker, *Memoir*, 12.

<sup>276</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:46.

<sup>277</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4717, 117-8 (18 March 1828). For similar instructions sent by Drury to a certain Mr. Coq., see TNA, TDR, Vol. 4719, 240-1 (13 March 1830). For instructions from Collector Huddleston to Meyer at Tuticorin during his work at the 1822 pearl fishery, TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 391-2 (3 February 1822).

of Cord attached to it.”<sup>278</sup> These measures were supposed to enable government officials to record and track participants, to know exactly how many boats were cruising the pearling grounds at any given moment, which was an important piece of information since Madras and Ceylon wanted to modulate the exploitation of the pearl banks each season. The registration process, assignment of number, and issuing of passports was also meant to deter illicit fishing, as boats, government agents, and other participants were given the tools to monitor the boats. If there was any behavior deemed suspicious or illegal, an informant could identify the boat by number and notify the authorities. Guard vessels also regularly checked that each boat carried with it proper documentation. According to a public announcement released during the 1799 pearl fishery Arippu, “a Certificate containing the No. of the Boat and the Names of the Tindals, Crew, and Divers [shall] be open for inspection, and that a general Register of the same [shall] be kept by the Commissioners.”<sup>279</sup> If the crew did not have its paperwork in order, carried a phony passport, or employed over and above the assigned number of divers and stones, then government officials were empowered to mete out punishment, which ranged from fines and the confiscation of property to arrest and corporeal punishment. According to the regulations posted at the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu: “And if any person or persons shall presume the employment of a Boat on the Pearl Oyster bank, not fairly purchase at the Public Outcry, and as such bearing a Certificate signed by the Commissioner such, Boat, shall on proof of such fraudulent fishing be instantly confiscated, and the persons so employing it, shall be punished [with] fine, imprisonment, and Corporal punishment as the Commissioners shall Judge the offence to deserve, as well as the Tindall Crew and

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<sup>278</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 249, 3099 (10 April 1800).

<sup>279</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 190.



Divers who are employed on board such boat, and the letter to discover and to bring to punishment such offenders the commissioners hereby promise a reward of 200 St. Pagodas to any person or persons as may give such information as shall convict those employed in such fraudulent transactions.”<sup>280</sup>

Another site of regulation was the content and make-up of pearling boats. The usual complement of crew and equipment included a head pilot or captain, some oarsmen, ten divers, diver assistants, guards, five diving stones, and miscellaneous items such as nets and baskets. The Portuguese and Dutch had also taken an interest in the various members and components of a pearling fleet. This may have been partly due to the fact that both Portuguese and Dutch authorities collected taxes on diving stones and, as evidence suggest, imposed differently based on religious community.<sup>281</sup> Historian C. R. de Silva suggests that the “tax on divers” was the “most important source of income for the Crown” derived from the pearl fishery during the Portuguese era.<sup>282</sup> Rijklof van Goens, Dutch Governor of Ceylon and Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, consulted the Portuguese *tombos* (descriptions or registers) in his possession shortly after the VOC wrested managerial control of the pearl fishery from their Iberian rivals. He found that “the profits derived from the pearl banks... vary in proportion to the number of oysters caught and the number of divers employed.”<sup>283</sup> He added: “It is needless to state here the necessity for good supervision on both banks during the first time of diving.”<sup>284</sup> Anthony Paviljoen, Dutch commander at Jaffnapatnam, wrote that he heard “bad reports” concerning the pearl fisheries and recommended that the “commissioners must obtain all

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 190-1.

<sup>281</sup> For an overview of this system, see Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea.”

<sup>282</sup> De Silva, “Portuguese and Pearl Fishing,” 26.

<sup>283</sup> Van Goens, *Memoir*, 91.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

the information possible in order that measures may be taken to make the receipts cover the expenditure.” For Paviljoen and his colleagues, collecting information about the pearl fishery entailed a close look at the boats and divers. He wrote: “As far as I know the number of vessels with divers is at present from 350 to 400 *Chiampans* [small coastal crafts], each having on board 8, 10, 12 divers, and as many stones with which the divers sink. The income is affected by the number of stones used, because every stone is paid for by the men; the Moor pay 60 and the Christians only 30 [fanams] for each.”<sup>285</sup> Likewise, Governor Hendrick Becker of Dutch Ceylon wrote in 1716, “The tax on the stones is regulated according to the character and position of the divers.”<sup>286</sup> The East India Company and colonial state of British Ceylon did not extend the practice of levying duties on diving stones. Nor did the Company or Crown governments impose a variable-rate tax system based on “the character and position of the divers.”

Even when the Madras and Ceylon governments collected revenue from the industry by leasing out the pearl fishery, officials still took an interest in regulating labor organization, often in consultation with local mercantile elites. During the early years of British management, the makeup of any given pearling boat’s crew and equipment was further regulated by the contract sealed between the renter and government. For example, Chinniah Mudaliar, the renter of the 1805 pearl fishery, included the following clause in his proposal: “That each boat employed in the Fishery shall be Provided with five stones having two divers to each stone, and with the usual Number of Boatmen for working the Boat.”<sup>287</sup> According to the contract, it was incumbent upon the superintendent to inspect and certify each boat through the registration process described above, and Chinniah

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<sup>285</sup> *Instructions from the Governor-General and Council of India*, 100.

<sup>286</sup> Becker, *Memoir*, 12.

<sup>287</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3565, 37 (22 March 1805).

Mudaliar stipulated as much: “That the Boats before leaving the shore shall be inspected by the servant of the Superintendent, in order to see that each Boat is provided with no more than the regulated number of Stones, Divers, etc.”<sup>288</sup> In another case, a proposal from a certain Cabal Mahamed Mercayer of Killakarai for the rent of the 1810 pearl fishery specified that each boat contain twenty-five men.<sup>289</sup>

Yet, despite these efforts by government officials and merchant-renters, the distribution of labor in each boat was a persistent problem in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. One reason for this problem according to official reports was that both British officers and local merchants discerned a considerable skill gap amongst divers and other crewmembers. Not all divers, according to reports, were capable of efficient and productive work. A criterion used to evaluate the skill and ability of a diver was the maximum depth to which he was capable of diving. For instance, a report from the 1799 pearl fishery at Kondachi read, “of the Divers, many were found unequal to diving the Depth of Water where the Oyster Banks lay which were fished.”<sup>290</sup> Another way to assess the relative skill of a boat and its crew was based on volume of oysters. The commissioners of the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu wrote to Governor North that some “rejected boats” averaged only 800 oysters per day, or about twenty-percent less oysters than “that of the Prime boats.”<sup>291</sup>

A boat loaded with the least skilled and knowledgeable team of pilots and divers could fetch a lower price at auction, which government officials considered undesirable not only because it debilitated the market but also tipped the scales in favor of merchants

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>289</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 72-7 (23 February 1810).

<sup>290</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2399, 67.

<sup>291</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 127.

privity to such information. A savvy businessman could place less skilled divers in boats that auctioned or sub-leased while keeping the more capable crews to fish for his own benefit. Fearing that powerful and influential merchants manipulated boat assignments in their favor, the superintendent and his agents thus had no qualms about interfering with the selection process. An advertisement from the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu, for instance, announced that “the Commissioners will, to the utmost of their powers make a fair and impartial distribution of the Divers previously the Sale of the Boat.”<sup>292</sup> Here, government officials attempted to fill boats with divers of equal skill and expertise by dividing them by “character.” Prior to the public auction, the commissioners reported, “we distributed the Divers among the different Boats according to the information we could obtain of their respective Characters, a measure which [thereof] it met with some opposition, we were however enabled to effectuate.”<sup>293</sup> They added that “the correct Justice of this distribution” would prevent any “future combinations” between native merchants.<sup>294</sup> Despite their best efforts, this plan did not work out as they had hoped. The commissioners found it virtually impossible to distribute labor fairly across the boats and, according to Company account books, boat prices fluctuated wildly. According to a letter from the commissioners to Governor North: “We are at loss to account for the difference of price at the respective sales and of the different Boats, [otherwise] than from a difference in quality of the Divers, which notwithstanding all our exertions cannot be perfectly equally distributed.”<sup>295</sup>

Yet Company and Crown officers regularly allowed clauses to enter leasing

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>293</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 372.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 225.

contracts that awarded merchant-renters the capacity to hand-pick divers at the start of pearling operations. For instance, Chinniah Mudaliar, renter of the 1805 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, included the following condition in his contract with Fort St. George: “That I, or my Manager, be allowed to make choice of Boats, Divers, and Boatmen, and to [change] such Divers or Boatmen as may be disabled from working by sickness accident or otherwise.”<sup>296</sup> Rental applications for the next pearl fishery at Tuticorin in 1807 contained similar articles.<sup>297</sup> However, the inclusion of such provisions in contracts between renters and the governments of Madras and Ceylon did not always protect renting parties from seeking compensatory damages. For instance, two native agents, Rama Chetti and Venkatachalam Chetti, employed by the principal renter of the 1800 pearl fishery at Tuticorin submitted numerous petitions to the superintendent, one of which contained a demand to shift the location of the pearl fishery and to allow the renter’s managers to outfit boats as they saw fit. Rama Chetti and Venkatachalam Chetti wrote, “We beg the favor that you will pleased to order that the Fishery be charged to some better Bank than the present one and likewise we beg leave to inform you that there is some Boats for want of proper Divers brings very few Oysters in them therefore we beg that those Boats and people may be changed and place others in their room.”<sup>298</sup> The superintendent acceded to the request of the renter’s agents. He wrote in reply, “You will point out such Boats and Divers as you wish to be changed.”<sup>299</sup>

As Madras and Ceylon struggled with merchant-renters over the authority to

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<sup>296</sup> TNA, TDR, Vo. 3565, 37 (22 March 1805).

<sup>297</sup> For example, a certain Veerasami Brahmin submitted an application for two hundred boats for thirty days at P. N. 76,500 that would have allowed him to “to chuse [*sic*] the boats and boatmen.” An application from a Cuddalore merchant contained a similar clause: “That out of the Boats and men Collected I am to be permitted to Select the best, and that I am also to have Leave to Supply the place of those, who by any accident are rendered unfit for Service.” TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 69-70 (20 January 1807).

<sup>298</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 249, 3382-3 (17 April 1800).

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid*, 3384.

allocate human resources, government officials advanced ideas more fluid and open labor market. From the early days of Company proprietorship, government officials entertained the hope of short-circuiting the power, influence, and sway mercantile elites exercised over the workforce. Governor North of Ceylon, for instance, proposed to the commissioners of the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu that divers ought to choose their boats freely instead of being given an assignment. He wrote, “it appears to me that it would save great trouble and contention, and rather increases than diminish the grand total of the Receipt, if the Divers should be allowed to enter in [which] Boats they pleased the price of each Boat might vary more.”<sup>300</sup> Not only would the boats command a price more favorable to government purses but also the divers would “act with more Spirit, when [with] their Friends.”<sup>301</sup> This idea never came to fruition, and by the late 1820s and 1820s in British Ceylon, officials promoted a system in which divers, pilots, and other members of a pearling fleet were designated by a lottery system. As James Steuart wrote in his report on the pearl fishery, “Those that arrive first at Silāwatorre, provided they were good boats properly fitted up for the service, and having the full-complement of divers, were formerly preferred; but lately it has been found more expedient, to fix a certain day for the Tindals to draw lots of employment.”<sup>302</sup>

In the dark hours of the night and early morning, the pearling crews, merchants, government officials, and curious spectators gathered on the beach to begin the day’s proceedings. The launch zone of the boats was a central hub of activity and in close proximity to other important spaces such as auction sites, marketplaces, warehouses, and washing stations. James Cordiner described the qualities of Arippu that made it a

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<sup>300</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 29-30.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 12.

favorable place to launch and moor boats: “The beach, extending upwards of three miles, from the bay of Condaatchy to the fortress of Aripo, is admirably adapted for the convenient riding of the boats, the water being deep close to a sandy beach, and not agitated by any surf. They drop one anchor, and turn their prows to the sea; their crooked sterns line the shore, and the vessels are securely moored, only a few steps from land, by a rope fastened round a pole.”<sup>303</sup> Each of the boats had been assigned numbers and passports, and buoys and flags placed a few miles from shore marked the boundaries of the pearling grounds for that day. The shot of a cannon signaled the start of the day and the boats set out, guided by a lead pilot, on a three-hour journey to the location of that day’s fishing. There are references to the use of firearms to signal the start of pearling operations from at least the late Portuguese era. For instance, João Ribeiro’s famous seventeenth-century *History of Ceylon* contains the following passage: “At four in the morning, the officer in command of the four vessels of war fires a gun as a signal, and immediately all the boats put off to sea, steering for the place which they have selected to fish at casting anchor there.”<sup>304</sup> Jonathan Fellowes described a similar series of events in his early nineteenth-century travel account. “All the boats depart and return at a given signal. About midnight the whole fleet sails with the breeze that blows from the shore; and, after reaching their destined station, they cast anchor and await the dawn. The diving commences between six and seven o’clock in the morning.”<sup>305</sup> Many of these procedures were formalized by government officials and further codified in policy statements, reports, and lists of rules and regulations drawn up and posted at the pearl fishery. For instance, a document from the 1800 pearl fishery at Tuticorin prescribed how pearling

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<sup>303</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2: 49.

<sup>304</sup> Ribeiro, *History of Ceylon*; Hornell *Report to the Government of Madras*, 8.

<sup>305</sup> Fellowes, *History of Ceylon*, 280.

boats ought to proceed to the pearling grounds: “The fishery shall begin on the 22nd of March on that Day as also on all the following, all the Donies shall sail on a given signal, at the same time under the conduct of such as are called Pilots who shall lead them duly to the Bank which is to be Dived.”<sup>306</sup> Officials and their appointed representatives continued to keep a close watch over such activities. Collector Drury of Tinnevely, for instance, instructed one of his sub-officials ahead of the 1828 pearl fishery near Tuticorin and Punnaikayal to “make a signal to commence the fishery” and to close the fishery “[at] the usual time.”<sup>307</sup> The collector emphasized the need to be extra vigilant that “none of the divers go down after the signal is made” and requested that he be notified about “any deviation from this rule stating the Number of the Boat in which it occurred.”<sup>308</sup>

When the East India Company assumed managerial rights to the pearl fishery of the Gulf of Mannar in 1796, the divers, pilots, and other workers were paid primarily in the form of oysters, usually either one-third or one-fourth of the day’s catch. Records dating back to the sixteenth century indicate that the Portuguese also awarded a share of oysters to the divers, a practice continued by the Dutch.<sup>309</sup> This number of oysters was deducted from the total amount brought on shore each day; the remainder went to the renter or government and small fraction went to the tax-free *mauniam* boats awarded to religious institutions. At the end of the season the superintendent submitted a carefully tallied account of the oysters, a sum that included the divers’ share, and usually amounted to many tens of thousands. From this reserve of oysters, other members of the crew such as the pilots and unskilled peons were paid out. The *jati talaivan* and other such figures

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<sup>306</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 248, 2877 (3 April 1800).

<sup>307</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4717, 117-8 (18 March 1828).

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.; TNA, TDR, Vol. 4719, 240-1 (13 March 1830).

<sup>309</sup> Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 101-3; De Silva, “Portuguese and Pearl Fishing”; Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea.”



who had special relationships with the company-state, however, received certain privileges like tax-free boats and reduced levies. Shark-charmers, security forces, and other workers not technically part of the diving team also received a share of the catch.<sup>310</sup> The counting and distribution of the so-called “divers’ share” was a highly sensitive issue for the superintendent and other government officials because there were many opportunities for laborers and merchants to cheat the system by skimming oysters off the top or reducing the count to ensure a greater haul for themselves and their partners. For that reason, the superintendent assigned a person to count oyster as they were hauled up onto each boat. Collector Lushington described the accounting system at the 1800 pearl fishery: “A Copper Plate with the number of the Boat Marked upon in English and Malabar with several yards of Cord attached to it, is delivered to the Peons who attends on the part of the Company in each Boat, and for every seventy oysters fished he ties a Knot to Express the units another small string is attached on the return of the Boats the plates are delivered up to my Assistant and the whole quantity fished is at once known. To correct errors, they are also compared with the Accounts kept by the Renters Servants.”<sup>311</sup>

Yet despite such flaws, government officials, especially officers of the East India Company, recognized that permitting divers, pilots, shark-charmers, and others that provided services to receive a share of the season’s catch was an essential feature of economy of the pearl fishery. British officers recognized that the practice had been in

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<sup>310</sup> A report from the 1822 pearl fishery, for instance, recorded the quantity of these in-kind payments: the shark-charmers, master attendant, and guard vessel all received ten oysters per boat; the “aumeen” received three oysters per boat; the “muzamdar” received zero oysters; the “sumpretty” received two oyster per boat; and the “cutaway” received a paltry one oyster. TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 228-34 (21 December 1822); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 935, 894-902 (9 January 1823).

<sup>311</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 249, 3099 (10 April 1800).

place for some time and thus it captured their attention accordingly. Allocating a share of the oysters to the divers and other laboring groups was also meant to further attract divers to the pearl fishery and induce them to stay for its duration. Government officials expressed concerns season after season about divers and other skilled laborers absconding when the pearl fishery failed to deliver on its expected returns, labor conditions deteriorated, or activities in the bazaar slowed to a crawl. It was therefore incumbent upon government officials as managers of the industry to provide the divers with incentives to remain engaged with their work. At the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu, for instance, the commissioners distributed a notice addressed to the divers that concerned the *dustoor* or duties and tariffs usually imposed on their share of the oysters.<sup>312</sup> The superintendents were “resolved to give to the Divers every possible protection and encouragement” and announced that the divers’ “share of oysters during the present Fishery shall be subject to no Dustoor or imposition whatsoever.”<sup>313</sup> The announcement added that the commissioners would extend support to in the divers’ “refusal to comply with such claims,” should any disputes arise.<sup>314</sup>

Oysters served as a form of in-kind payment in exchange for a range of goods and services. As special legal counsel to the East India Company, Henry Smith undertook a diagnostic of the pearling industry at the turn of the nineteenth century in London. He wrote, “The Boats and Apparatus are the Property of Individuals, who, as well as the divers and crew are remunerated for each days [*sic*] Work, by a certain proportion of the

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<sup>312</sup> A Persian-Hindi word, *dustoor* refers to a customary “commission or percentage on the money passing in any cash transactions which, with or without, acknowledgement or permission, sticks to the fingers of the agent of payment.” Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* (London: J. Murray, 1886).

<sup>313</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 220.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*

produce of each days Adventure there are also certain Officers, such as the Pilot who conducts the fleet of Boats to the fishing Banks, the Shark Charmers etc. etc. [*sic*] who are paid by a certain number of Oysters from each Boat, the residue of the Oysters taken, is the gain of the Proprietors of the Fishery, who have been accustomed to make it available to them in several ways.”<sup>315</sup> Divers could sell their oysters in the marketplace or presumably try their luck by opening the oysters with the hope of finding a valuable pearl. The proceeds from the sale of oysters in the marketplace went to support their daily sustenance and other needs by purchasing provisions such as rice and liquor in the bazaar. Any windfall profits would be remitted to their villages at the end of the pearling season, although time and again divers and other laborers faced crushing debts. From the perspective of the boat owners, renters, and government proprietors, this system of in-kind payments was cost-effective and reduced risk because there were little up-front labor costs. The divers’ wages, as it were, largely came from the sea. This meant that the livelihood of divers and their families were highly precarious, open to the volatility of the marketplace. If the returns of pearls and oysters were low, or the pearling grounds were struck by inclement weather, then activity in the bazaar waned effectively reducing profit margins from oyster sales. The precarious circumstances of a diver’s life were further threatened because the pearl oysters of Mannar did not serve as a desirable (or tasty) food source. As British military officer Jonathan Forbes wrote, “the pearl-oyster, although neither palatable nor wholesome, has no poisonous quality, and is said to be sometimes eaten by the poorest of those people who frequent the fishery.”<sup>316</sup> The so-called “cutcherry servants”—the scribes, accountants, cash-keepers, and others administrative

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<sup>315</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 39v.

<sup>316</sup> Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, 1:255.

staff—also received a share of the oysters in addition to their normal wages.<sup>317</sup>

The practice of paying divers and other members of the workforce payments in oysters underwent some noticeable changes during the course of the nineteenth century. The colonial government of British Ceylon in particular sought to open the labor system at the pearl fishery to a more market-based and monetary wage structure. Commissioners Colebrooke and Cameron, for instance, referred to the fix-wages received by divers in their report to the Colonial Office in the early 1830s: “The divers generally come over from the continent of India, though some reside in Ceylon. By the schedule of rates fixed by government in the year 1825, the established wages for labourers employed by government in the district of Manar is 3d. per day.”<sup>318</sup> Attempts to promote monetary payments for work also affected the compensation received British civil servants, including master attendant or inspector of the pearl banks, a position that once received a ten oysters per day from each fishing boat. However, in the mid-1830s, the government awarded the master attendant “compensation in money, and the oysters were not taken from the boat people.”<sup>319</sup> Officials, of course, received more than just oysters for their work, and Ceylon officials in particular enjoy a comfortable salary.<sup>320</sup> Across the Gulf, Company officials received a portion of the revenue derived from each pearling season. Not only did the total compensation vary from season to season but the percentage was not fixed. It was not uncommon for the district collector and his subordinates to lobby their superiors in Madras and London after the close of each pearling for bonuses. If the

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<sup>317</sup> The number of oysters granted for compensation was not insignificant. For example, at the 1822 pearl fishery, the head native accountants at the *cutcherry* received 5,240 oysters from the divers’ share, 23,849 from the government’s share, and a total of 29,089 oysters. TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 228-34 (21 December 1822).

<sup>318</sup> *Colebrooke-Cameron Papers*, 1:101.

<sup>319</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 12.

<sup>320</sup> Bennett, *Ceylon and its Capabilities*, 203.

season was particularly robust, or the officials faced especially trying circumstances such as disease and less than dignified accommodations, then they argued that extra commission was owed.

### **Security, Theft, and Violence**

Safety and security were issues of paramount importance for both government proprietors and mercantile elites who strived to safeguard their investments from various threats. The physical qualities of pearls—small, valuable, and easily concealable—and the nature of extraction—miles from the coast and deep beneath the surface of the water—magnified worries about theft. Concerns about theft and security did not arise at the moment the East India Company assumed managerial control over the pearl fishery but had been an issue of critical importance for the Portuguese and Dutch. In the early nineteenth century, a British traveler James Cordiner described the nature of the problem during his visit to the pearl fishery: “The divers, the boat-men, the persons employed in washing the oysters and sifting the sand, leave no expedient untried to accomplish frauds. Even the peons, employed as a check upon the laborers, have been known to attach a viscous substance to the end of their canes, and extract from washing-troughs valuable pearls, with the very instrument used to punish such delinquencies.”<sup>321</sup> There were those who inevitably cast the subject in a moral light, including British military officer turned travel-writer, Jonathan Forbes: “Where thefts are so easily made, and a valuable article like a pearl is so easily secreted, incessant watchfulness is necessary...but I believe their utmost endeavors are ineffectual, as the moral character of most of those assembled [affords] no check to their inclinations...[T]heir only principle and pursuit is how to make money, and

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<sup>321</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:59.

if successful, the end to them would sufficiently sanctify the means.”<sup>322</sup> From the physical safety and well-being of divers to the specters of theft and smuggling, there were many dangers—real and imagined—that not only caused incalculable financial losses and damages but also took the limbs, lives, and livelihoods of divers and other members of the labor force. To reduce or moderate the risks and vulnerabilities of pearling, both Company and Crown officers, as well as local mercantile elites, assembled a multidimensional security apparatus designed to protect people and pearls but also direct the flow of governmental power to the lives and work of divers, boatmen, shark-charmers, washers, sorters, and other members of the workforce. By limiting the boundaries of the pearling grounds, positioning security guards and armed vessels on the water, facilitating the work of shark-charmers, and a host of other techniques, Madras and Ceylon intervened in pearling operations through modern techniques of government power, seeking to shape and influence the lives and work of pearl divers and other laboring groups on which the profitability and productivity of the industry depended.

The threats of theft, smuggling, and poaching were not limited to those few weeks of the pearling season between late February and early April when tens of thousands of people gathered on the shores of southeastern India or western Ceylon. Both Portuguese and Dutch officials had recognized that various smuggling and poaching operations were often linked with pearl fishing. Moreover, according to Dutch sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, pearls were not the only goods that were conveyed secretly or illicitly. Dutch officers were particularly concerned with the illegal movement of cotton, areca, and pepper, all commodities over which the VOC claimed monopolies. For instance, Governor G. W. Baron van Imhoff of Dutch Ceylon (1736-1740) drew

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<sup>322</sup> Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, 254-5.

attention to this problem in a report to his successor. He wrote: “the standstill in the Company’s trade here for a [time] on account of the difficulty of preventing the smuggling of cotton goods up-country. And now we may add also the smuggling of pepper, not to speak of the loss in the sale of the areca-nut, because the presence of more than 100,000 people in the country for more than two or three months will mean that a large quantity of these nuts will be consumed, on which the Company will have no profit whatever.”<sup>323</sup> Anthony Paviljoen, Dutch Commander at Jaffnapatnam, recommended that the VOC deploy security forces such as guard ships to protect the pearling grounds from poaching and prevent the illegal movement of goods. In a memorandum from 1665, Paviljoen wrote, “The prospects for next year are better than they have ever been since our possession. Next January the banks must be careful inspected, and a good sloop must be made to sail coastwise with a view to keep away Moors and other thieves, or to otherwise capture them so that they may be punished.”<sup>324</sup> British officials on both sides of the Gulf of Mannar were also wise to the “notorious fact that the banks are extensively robbed” between the end of the examination and start of the pearl fishery.<sup>325</sup> According to Governor Barnes of British Ceylon in March 1821, this interlude “affords the season for the dhoneyes [boats] to pass from the Southern Coast of Coromandel to this Island, anchoring as they do on our pearl oyster banks and their crews are all divers!”<sup>326</sup> There were also concerns expressed by officials that boats and divers poached the pearl beds during the off-season under the pretense of chank fishing. For instance, Collector Hudleston of Tirunelveli sent a letter to the Board of Revenue at Fort St. George in 1822

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<sup>323</sup> Baron Van Imhoff, *Memoir*, 54.

<sup>324</sup> *Instructions from the Governor-General and Council of India*, 112.

<sup>325</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 79; De Silva, “Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon,” 440.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*

that called attention to the importance of guarding the pearl banks. He wrote: “It is strongly suspected that the chank divers are in the habits of poaching upon the Pearl banks and in Ceylon a Guard vessel is for some time before a fishery employed to protect the Banks. The greater value of the produce of the Pearl fishery on that Coast may require more watchful attention there is necessary for the Tinnevelly Banks but totally exposed as they have hitherto been it is highly probable that they have not [escaped] depredation.”<sup>327</sup>

Divers, boatmen, and other members of the workforce were subjected to additional forms of regulation, coercion, and physical violence during the pearl fishery. Posting rules and issuing edicts concerned with the pearl fishery appears to have also been a preferred tool of the Dutch. *Plakkaaten* (placards) issued by the Dutch Governor Rijcklof van Goens often concerned the pearl fishery. For instance, a *plakkaat* from 1665 issued by Dutch Ceylon explicitly forbid Muslims from traveling to the pearl banks of the Gulf of Mannar during the pearling season because officers “received information” that “many Muslims are not afraid to steal or pilfer.”<sup>328</sup> According to the announcement, the VOC claimed “sovereign jurisdiction” over the “pearl banks of Manar yet these “enemies of the state and general public” steal under “the pretense that they are making a trip or sailing somewhere else.”<sup>329</sup> British officials also issued edicts that established certain rules and prohibitions and posted them in public places at or near the pearl fishery compound, such as the district-collector’s temporary *cutcherry* or a nearby church or place of worship. Aside from promulgating the rules of the pearl fishery, these document

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<sup>327</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 122 (8 April 1822).

<sup>328</sup> Lodewijk Hovy, *Ceylonees plakkaatboek: plakkaaten en andere wetten uitgevaardigd door het Nederlandse bestuur op Ceylon, 1638-1796* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1991), 117.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*



also laid down the penalties for violating them, which ran the gamut from petty fines to heavy flogging.

Another favorite tool through which British officials monitored and regulated activities of divers and boats was the placement of buoys and flags to mark the boundaries of the pearling grounds. This aspect of the pearl fishery was undertaken prior to the start of the event by the superintendent and his assistants with the help of local authorities such as the *jati talaivan*. Supplies like wood, rope, and paint were shipped to the location of the pearl fishery each season, the overall costs of which were relatively affordable.<sup>330</sup> Flags and buoys also marked the locations and qualities of specific clusters of oyster. British traveler James Cordiner described this practice: “The buoys are rafts of wood of a triangular shape, having flats of different colours raised upon them, and are fixed to the place by a cable and wooden anchor, with two large stones attached to it. Drawings of the flags are inserted in a book, and a particularly description is given of the quality, age, and denomination of the oysters found where they are laid.”<sup>331</sup> The placement of flags and buoys not only served as a way to deter theft by keeping all the pearling boats within a specially marked area but also functioned as a de facto mode of natural resource management by concentrating the location of the harvest. The Dutch VOC had also used the placement of buoys and flags. In the late seventeenth century, Governor Gerrit de Heere sent instructions to *opperkoopman* (senior merchant) at Jaffnapatnam concerning the construction and placement of buoys at the pearl fishery. He wrote, “four buoys should be made as beacons for the vessels, each having a chain of 12

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<sup>330</sup> The total cost of labor and supplies for the placement of buoys, flags, and anchors at the 1807 pearl fishery at Tuticorin was Star Pagodas [SP] 29. TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 220 (8 August 1807). For the 1815 pearl fishery, see TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 670, 2134-6 (23 February 1815).

<sup>331</sup> Cordiner, *Descriptions of Ceylon*, 2:42.

fathoms long, with the necessary adaptations in the links for turning.”<sup>332</sup> The East India Company employed this system from the outset of its management. As Governor North wrote to Fort St. George in 1800, the Company had an interest “in preserving the Banks from premature exhaustion & the Power which it has of restraining the Divers on the spot from fishing in improper Places, & of immediately punishing any Irregularity in that Respect.”<sup>333</sup> In a separate letter from Colombo to Madras, Governor North wrote, it “will be necessary for those of Manar to keep the Boats from passing out of the Boundaries affixed to them.”<sup>334</sup> He also recommended controlling the progression of the fishing boats, to make sure that they swept the entire area of the pearling grounds and no oysters went undetected. North wrote, “[I] recommend to you to see that they be obliged to Fish in regular progression from one end to the other of the Banks, without being allowed to go from place to place as their fancy may direct them, by which means a great deal of profitable ground may be left totally unfished.”<sup>335</sup>

Formal contracts with the renter further stipulated that it was incumbent upon the superintendent to mark the boundaries of the pearl fishery using the flag-and-buoy system. During the 1828 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, Collector Drury of Tirunelveli wrote to a certain Mr. Hughes, whom he contracted to command a vessel to patrol the pearl banks. Drury told Hughes that there should be no changes or modifications to the placement of the buoys: “You will be careful that no person approach or change the Buoys upon the Banks excepting those sent under my express orders for that purpose, and they must produce a written authority from me previous to the alteration of the position

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<sup>332</sup> Zwaardcroon, *Memoir*, 121.

<sup>333</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, Vol. 7, 196-6v.

<sup>334</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2165 (6 March 1800).

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*

of the Buoys taking place.”<sup>336</sup> Rules posted for public viewing at the temporary *cutcherry* also contained information about the perimeter of the pearling grounds. According to a list of rules and regulations at the 1800 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, “Proper Buoys will be laid down to mark the space to be fished by the Boats daily and the Tindals will be held answerable not to pass the Boundary prescribed no excuse will be admitted for a disregard of this order but such as transgress it will invariably punished with severity.”<sup>337</sup>

By the 1820s and 1830s, British Ceylon took positive steps to replace the use of flags and buoys made specially for the pearl fishery each season with a more permanent system of marking the pearling grounds. Instead of wooden buoys and colored canvas flags, British Ceylon officials recommended the placement of solid columns in the water. The use of sea-markers was previously seen as untenable because the government did not want to identify the location of rich pearl oyster beds to potential poachers, which would have required year-round guard vessels. As Cordiner wrote in the first decade of the nineteenth century, “The buoys are not allowed to continue permanent, as they would either require a vessel constantly to guard them, or, if not watched, would leave the beds exposed to the ravages of pirates.”<sup>338</sup> Master attendant and fisheries superintendent of British Ceylon James Steuart echo expressed similar concerns over three decades after Cordiner: “The land seen from the Aripo pearl banks being at a considerable distance, and having no striking objects upon it to answer as sea marks, it was considered that such buoys as are used for marking sand banks and dangers, would be useful in defining the relative position of the several beds of oysters: but such buoys would also point out

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<sup>336</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4717, 117-8 (18 March 1828). Collector Huddleston of Tirunelveli sent a similar set of instructions to a certain Mr. Meyer ahead of the 1822 pearl fishery at Tuticorin. TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 391-2 (3 February 1822).

<sup>337</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 248, 2874-80 (3 April 1800).

<sup>338</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:43.

oysters to plunderers, and further, they would not render distinguishing marks upon the land unnecessary—for, if the buoys should break adrift, which they were likely to do in the S.W. monsoon, it would be difficult to replace them with requisite correctness, without the aid of distinct marks upon the land.”<sup>339</sup> Concerns over permanent markers leaving the pearl oyster banks open to the “ravages of pirates” subsided. Governor Barnes in the mid-1820s decided to mark pearling zones with durable, permanent columns. According to Stuart, “[Governor Barnes] resolved to consider the best sites for erecting some columns to answer as sea marks,” and assembled a team to carry out the project, which included Stuart and a captain in the Royal Staff corps. After the team identified the best location of the markers, “plans and estimates were prepared, and the requisite number of bricks ordered to be made of some clay found in the neighborhood of Condatchy.”<sup>340</sup> British officials continued to search for ways to improve the flag-and-buoy system through the nineteenth century. In 1862, George Vane, superintendent of the pearl fishery for British Ceylon, recommended replacement of wooden buoys with less “clumsy buoys” made of iron.<sup>341</sup> However, according to one assessment, “Instead of neat, serviceable iron buoys the Department entrusted with the duty of furnishing the buoys sent up, for the inspection of November, 1862, a number of large, heavy clumsy, iron, coal tar drums, with cables much too short for them and small anchors which could not hold them.”<sup>342</sup> However, “the bungholes not having been properly soldered,” the metal buoys sank to the bottom of the ocean and the commanding officer “reverted to the old

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<sup>339</sup> Stuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 21.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>341</sup> Vane, “The Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon”; Twynam, *Report on the Ceylon Pearl Fisheries*, 15.

<sup>342</sup> Twynam, *Report on the Ceylon Pearl Fisheries*, 15.

triangular wooden buoys.”<sup>343</sup>

Another way in which organizers of the pearl fishery monitored and regulated the activities of boats and diving crews was through the placement of security guards on board. Their primary duties were to detect and deter any frauds or thefts by the divers and crew, such as palming or swallowing pearls, or secretly opening oysters and picking the valuable product out of the animal’s shell with their fingers or slender instruments. As naturalist Henry Le Beck wrote at the turn of the nineteenth century, “the boat owners and purchasers often lose many of the best pearls while the [boat] is still returning from the bank; for, as long as the animal is alive, and untouched, the shells are frequently open near an inch; and if any of them contain a large pearl, it is easily discovered, and taken out by means of a small piece of stiff grass, or bit of stick, without hurting the pearl fish. In this practice they are extremely expert. Some of them were discovered whilst I was there, and received their due punishment.”<sup>344</sup> There were even reports of divers swallowing pearls who, if caught, were given “strong emetics and purgatives” by force. Robert Percival observed in the early nineteenth century, “Those fellows who are employed to search among the fish also commit many depredations, and even swallow the pearls to conceal them; when this is suspected, the plan followed by merchants is to lock the fellows up, and give them strong emetics and purgatives, which have frequently the effect of discovering the stolen goods.”<sup>345</sup> Guardsmen were also employed by the proprietor of the boat, a merchant who purchased the boat at auction or sub-leased it from the principal renter. Cordiner wrote, for instance, that to the crew was “added a peon on

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Le Beck, “Account of the Pearl Fishery,” 404-5; Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:59.

<sup>345</sup> Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 70.

the part of the renter, to guard against fraud.”<sup>346</sup> Likewise, government officials placed a servant in their employ on board to ensure that the day’s catch was accurately measured. This was sometimes written into the contract of the renter. For instance, the contract between the East India Company and Manali Chinniah Mudaliar, renter of the 1805 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, stipulated “a servant belonging to the Superintendent shall be placed in each Boat to take an account of the Number of Oysters fished in the Course of each Day.”<sup>347</sup>

Outside the boats, armed vessels patrolled the waters. The primary duties of these boats were to make sure that pearling fleets fished within demarcated boundaries, checked passports and licenses, and looking for signs of pilfering. This was an expense largely shouldered by the government proprietor. The Portuguese and Dutch had also employed naval fleets to guard the banks and escort boats. For instance, Governor Joan Gideon Loten (1752-1757) of Dutch Ceylon references the use of a guard vessel to monitor the activities of boats during the pearl fishery in a report to his successor in 1757. Governor Loten wrote, “Under [the] pretext of going out fishing, the Moors rob the pearl banks and chank reefs which are situated in front of that place; and although a soldier is stationed there as resident on behalf of the Company, whose duty it is to see whether the vessels which are supposed to go out fishing return again in the evening, it would not be unnatural to suppose that there was opportunity for fraud.”<sup>348</sup> During the British period, some officials stated that the commander of such naval fleets should ideally have been

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<sup>346</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:42.

<sup>347</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3565, 39 (22 March 1805).

<sup>348</sup> *Memoires of Joan Gideon Loten, Governor of Ceylon, delivered to his Successor Jan Schreuder on February 28, 1757*, trans. E. Reimers (Colombo: Ceylon Government Press, 1935), 18. For more on Loten, including mentions of his involvement with the pearl fishery, see Alexander J. P. Raat, *The Life of Governor Joan Gideon Loten (1710-1789): A Personal History of a Dutch Virtuoso* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2010).

either a European officer or military contractor. For instance, Collector Hepburn wrote to the Board with an update on the progress of organizing and preparing the 1810 pearl fishery. He wrote about the need to post European officers to inspect passports and other documents: “I request the sanction of the Board to employ a Vessel upon the Bank at the rate of ten Star Pag. a day Commanded by a European to regulate the tie of Fishing inspect the passes of the Several Boats & to prevent the Banks being destroyed by the Divers examining over it at will before they have Cleared away all the Shells regularly from the part at which they Commence this is a most necessary precaution & one that has always been used.”<sup>349</sup> A minor expenditure in comparison to the total value of the pearl fishery, the hiring of guard vessels was an essential part of managing and protecting the treasures (and persons) that lay in the water. In a report on the status of the pearl banks submitted to the Board of Revenue in January 1807, Collector James Hepburn provided a rationale for the placement of armed vessels. He wrote: “It has always been customary for the Government when this Bank was fished to station a Vessel on it at its own expense with some respectable person on board to regulate the Boats while fishing and to alter the Buoys when required and to inspect the License of each Boat daily [although] it may at first appear that these concerns belong more properly to the Renter, yet I am told that it is so necessary for the security of Government to limit the Divers to a particular part of the Bank and not to allow them to leave till it is compleatly [*sic*] cleaned of Oysters, otherwise the whole could be ransacked in the course of a few days to a probable serious loss and protest from the renter that he had been deceived in the report of the state of the Banks.”<sup>350</sup> The guard vessels were granted authority to not only patrol the pearling

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<sup>349</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 67 (21 February 1810).

<sup>350</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 6-7 (8 January 1807).

grounds but also to go upon the boats to enforce the rules. Collector Drury of Tirunelveli wrote to one of his sub-officials supervising the 1828 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, “You are to be particularly careful that no Boats attempt to come on the Banks where the Buoys are placed without a Regular Pass under any Seal and signature, and in order to ascertain this you are to examine every day the Pass of each Boat that comes upon the Bank should any Boat be found fishing without a regular pass, you are immediately to seize and send it and the person in it to me.”<sup>351</sup> If boats ventured beyond the flags and buoys, a warning shot straight from the barrel of a cannon was fired. According to a set of regulations posted at the 1800 pearl fishery, “Those Donies which begin Fishing before the signal is given, and those that continue to fish after the signal is shown for leaving off shall be fired into from the Guard sloop or otherwise punished.”<sup>352</sup> The guard vessels were also used to signal the start and end of each day’s proceedings by firing a cannon. As the collector of the 1822 pearl fishery wrote to one of his sub-officials, “The Divers do not assemble in their Boats regularly on the firing of The Gun should be fired...and Tom Tom sent in all directions to assemble the Divers who must embark and row out.”<sup>353</sup> To protect the pearl fishery, military supplies, and guns, cannons, and other types of heavy artillery, were transported from various forts and garrisons to the location of the season’s event. In 1822, for instance, Madras hired a bullock train to transport a gun from Palamcottah to Tuticorin.<sup>354</sup> One of the delivery men was even retained by the collector because he needed additional servicemen at the pearl fishery: “I have thought it advisable to detained [*sic*] the escort who accompanied the gun in order to avail myself of their

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<sup>351</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4717, 117-8 (18 March 1828).

<sup>352</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 248, 2878 (3 April 1800).

<sup>353</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 413 (3 February 1822).

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 408-9.



service during the fishery for the protection of the valuable Property which will be collected here under the hope that no inconvenience will result to your arrangements from the measure, but should you particularly require the presence of the men in question they will of course be sent at Palamcottah as you had previously detached a Guard hither on the duty.”<sup>355</sup> Additional supplies and provisions also arrived to the site of the pearl fishery. Collector James Cotton of Tirunelveli, for instance, requested gunpowder along with additional armed guards for the 1815 pearl fishery at Tiruchendur. The collector wanted “a Barrel of Gun Powder, required for making signals at the Pearl Fishery and for the use of the Tenant Sibbendy on guard over the several Treasures in the Tinnevelly District.”<sup>356</sup>

Besides the physical toils of pearling, and when not dodging cannon balls, divers also had to contend with natural enemies such as sharks, jellyfish, and venomous sea snakes. Even though shark attacks were quite rare, both superintendent and merchant-investors employed shark-charmers or “binders of sharks” (Tm. *kadalkutti*). From the shore, as the boats went out to the pearling grounds each morning, shark-charmers recited prayers and cast spells that protected divers and crewmembers from sea predators. An early twentieth-century historian characterized the use of shark charmers as “one of the most novel features” of the pearl fishery of Mannar.<sup>357</sup> References to shark charmers are found in some of the earliest written accounts of the pearl fishery. Marco Polo provides a widely cited description: “In consequence of the gulf being infested with a kind of large fish, which often prove destructive to the divers, the merchants take the precaution of

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 409.

<sup>356</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 678, 5832 (25 May 1815); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 680, 6649-50 (19 June 1815).

<sup>357</sup> Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 115.

being accompanied by certain enchanters belonging to a class of Brahmans, who, by means of their diabolical art, have the power of constraining and stupefying these fish so as to prevent them from doing mischief.”<sup>358</sup> He added that the shark charmers “discontinue the effects of the charm in the evening in order that dishonest persons who might be inclined to take the opportunity of diving at night and stealing oysters, may be deterred by the apprehension they feel of the unrestrained ravages of these animals.”<sup>359</sup> Both Portuguese and Dutch continued to employ shark charmers though the numbers may have been reduced.<sup>360</sup> While often represented in contemporary travel accounts as a curiosity, the shark-charmers were an integral part of the moral economy at the pearl fishery, as well as the overall production and exchange of goods and services. Some historians have claimed that the British governments did not interfere in this sphere of the pearl fishery because of the policy of religious tolerance. George Kunz, author of an early twentieth-century history of pearls and pearling, wrote “The British government, in its policy of noninterference with the superstitions or semi-religious customs of the natives, tolerated these seeming imposters, owing, probably, in a measure, to the fact that the superstitious belief in their necessity was favorable to the preservation of the resources, since it restricted poaching on the reefs.”<sup>361</sup> Not only did the governments of Madras and Ceylon employ shark-charmers but they also actively engaged in facilitating their movement to the location of the fishery each season. In 1802, for example, Robert Arbuthnot, Chief Secretary of the Ceylon Government, requested a pair a shark-charmers from a district-level official in the northern part of the island “to assist at the ensuing

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<sup>358</sup> Marco Polo, *Travels*, 625.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 116.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

inspection of the Pearl Banks of Arripo.”<sup>362</sup>

In addition to regular wages, the governments of Madras and Ceylon usually allocated a share of the oysters to the shark-charmers. As colonial officer James Bennett reported in his study of British Ceylon, “This shark charming trade is a very lucrative one, because as it is not the mere government stipend that satisfies them, they insist upon the additional *daily* tithe of ten or a dozen oysters from each boat, which is readily paid.”<sup>363</sup> Shark-charmers were paid in various forms, including coin, pearls, oysters, and other valuables for their work. According to statements from the 1822 pearl fishery, the “kudulcutties or conjurers” received ten oysters from each boat. The shark-charmers received 5240 oysters from the divers’ share of oysters and 23,849 from the state’s share of oysters for a total of 29,089.<sup>364</sup> Mercantile elites also patronized shark-charmers. As Percival wrote, “The conjurers reap here a rich harvest, for besides being paid by the government, they get money and presents of all sorts from the black merchants and those successful in fishing up the oysters.”<sup>365</sup> Kundappah Chetti, for instance, during his rent of the 1804 pearl fishery at Arippu, engaged some shark-charmers to protect and promote the prosperity of his investment. According to the description of one eyewitness, “the renter indulged in a number of superstitious ceremonies, with a view of promoting his success; and allowed himself to be led away by soothsayers and magicians. In all his conduct he discovered low cunning, duplicity, and mysteriousness, which characterized

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<sup>362</sup> UKNA, CO, 55, 43, 186. The following year, Collector Lushington of Tirunelveli received a letter from a British Ceylon officer: “Having received the direction of this Government to send Shark Charmers to the Pearl Fishery intended to be had at Chilaw in the Ensuing Season I take the liberty of requesting of you Sir to Send over two addressed to the Ammildar of Mannar whom I shall direct to forward them to the Fishery.” TNA, TDR, Vol. 3562, 11-2 (19 January 1803).

<sup>363</sup> Bennett, *Ceylon and its Capabilities*, 205.

<sup>364</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 233 (21 December 1822).

<sup>365</sup> Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 68.

the higher ranks of Indians.”<sup>366</sup> The British governments of Madras and Ceylon later prohibited local merchants, divers, and boatmen from patronizing shark-charmers. According to some reports, there were no shark charmers employed after 1859, and by 1885, the entire system was dissolved.<sup>367</sup>

The social make-up of the shark-charmers at the pearl fishery is not known, but according to contemporary sources, shark-charmers were both “Hindu” and “Christian,” which suggests that they worked across and between communities, transcending any neatly defined religious and communal categories. As officer James Bennet of British Ceylon wrote in the nineteenth century, “Although all the divers are not pagans, superstition so predominates in almost everything connected with the native character, that, however, incredible, it is an indisputable fact, that even the Roman Catholic priests impose a similar farce upon the divers of their faith; for not one of them will descend without a charm, composed of brief extracts from scripture fastened around the arm, which he is told will protect him from danger.”<sup>368</sup> Like frontier zones in other nineteenth-century Asian contexts, the pearl fishery of Mannar was a site through which miracle-workers moved between elite and non-elite worlds and facilitated the extraction and exploitation of natural resources.<sup>369</sup> These miracle-workers used their position within the subaltern and elite worlds to accrue material and spiritual wealth with an entrepreneurial frame of mind. As Fellowes wrote, “As these conjurers are in high repute, and great faith is placed in the potency of their incantations, they are liberally rewarded by the credulity of their votaries; and, as accidents appear very seldom to happen, they readily manage to

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<sup>366</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:70-1.

<sup>367</sup> Twynam, *Report on the Ceylon Pearl Fisheries*, 24; Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 116.

<sup>368</sup> Bennett, *Ceylon and its Capabilities*, 205.

<sup>369</sup> Sevea, “Pawangs on the Malay Frontier.”

maintain their credit unimpaired.”<sup>370</sup> Shark-charmers performed certain rites and rituals, and tales about their magical prowess and accomplishments circulated through both indigenous and non-indigenous knowledge networks. Fantastical stories of shark-charmers appeared frequently in traveler’s accounts of the pearl fishery. Naturalist Henry Le Beck, for instance, wrote about one such tale that he heard about during his visit to the 1797 pearl fishery at Arippu: “I was told, that, in one of the preceding fisheries, a diver lost his leg by a shark; and when the head conjurers was called to an account for the accident, he replied, that an old witch had just come from the coast, who from envy and malice, had caused this disaster, by a counter-conjuration, which made fruitless his skill, and of which he was informed too late; but he afterwards shewed [sic] his superiority, by enchanting the poor sharks so effectually, that, though they appeared in the midst of the divers, they were unable to open their mouths.”<sup>371</sup>

Despite such attention paid to shark-charmers, shark attacks were actually quite rare. Even as Le Beck heard fanciful tales about “counter-conjurations” he witnessed “no accident of this kind” at Arippu in 1797.<sup>372</sup> By that same token, the documentary records of early colonial Madras and Ceylon contain no known references to shark attacks at the pearl fishery. This was also the case through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as numerous British officers involved with the management and scientific study of the pearl fishery noted the absence of shark attacks.<sup>373</sup> Some contemporary observers attributed the low rate of shark attacks to an elaborate system of communication between the crewmembers, in which “the divers immediately signal” if a

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<sup>370</sup> Fellowes, *History of Ceylon*, 282-283.

<sup>371</sup> Le Beck, “Account of the Pearl Fishery,” 403; Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:77-8; Fellowes, *History of Ceylon*, 283; Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 68.

<sup>372</sup> Le Beck, “Account of the Pearl Fishery,” 403-4; Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 68-9.

<sup>373</sup> Twynam, *Report on the Ceylon Pearl Fisheries*; Hornell, *Reports on the Pearl Fisheries*.

shark was seen and “all the boats return instantly.”<sup>374</sup> However, this system did not always work as planned. Le Beck noticed: “A diver who trod upon a hammer oyster, and was somewhat wounded, thought he was bit by a shark, consequently made the usual signal, which caused many boats to return; for which mistake he was afterwards punished.”<sup>375</sup> Even though the threat of shark-attacks was remote, measures were put in place time and again to protect those with vested interests in the pearl fishery from potential dangers that lurked beneath. Renting proposals and contracts, for instance, usually contained a clause that protected the renter from being charged for boats that were unable to fish due to shark attacks. The lease of Chinniah Mudaliar for the 1805 pearl fishery at Tuticorin stipulated that if boats were not able to fish “owing to sharks appearing or otherwise” then they “shall not be included in the Number of Boats charged to [him].”<sup>376</sup> In 1815, at least two of the nine applications for the rent that year contained a similar clause.<sup>377</sup>

Sharks were more a phantom menace than a clear and present danger. While stories about shark-attacks appear to be more apocryphal than authentic, it was another sea-creature—the jellyfish—that presented a real and recurring threat to the safety of divers. Jellyfish could bring a halt to a pearl fishery by preventing divers from plunging below the water’s surface. As the superintendent of the 1800 pearl fishery at Tuticorin wrote, “The duty of a diver is known at all times to be dangerous and that danger increasing towards the latter End of the Months of April and the beginning of May when

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<sup>374</sup> Le Beck, “Account of the Pearl Fishery,” 403-4.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

<sup>376</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3565, 39 (22 March 1805).

<sup>377</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 668, 1589-602 (9 February 1815).

the Land winds bring the Blubbers towards the shore.”<sup>378</sup> That year, an unfortunate bunch of divers sustained very serious injuries from a jellyfish bloom; some even died. Two native agents of the principal renter submitted a petition to the Collector of Ramnad, the official superintending the pearl fishery that year. Rama Chetti and Venkatachalam Chetti wrote, “the [Blubbers] has begin [*sic*] to be much frequent in tutching [*sic*] the Divers and upon some dead, and many wounded, these reasons absolutely will fritten [*sic*] any man to do their duty [properly].”<sup>379</sup> In a dispatch from Tuticorin to the Board of Revenue at Fort St. George, Collector Lushington confirmed that the sting of a jellyfish had killed at least one diver, curtailing diver operations. He remarked, “the southerly winds blew with such violence and the blubber which caused the death of one man collecting in such quantity upon the bank that the Boats only attempted going out three days.”<sup>380</sup> Other times, however, government officials responded with indifference to the safety of divers, believing that deaths by sharks and jellyfish was either an occupational hazard or just the stuff of rumor. Lushington reported that jellyfish attack had become “excited in the minds of the other divers.”<sup>381</sup> Diving was “known at all times to be dangerous...when the Land winds bring the Blubbers towards the shore,” and under such conditions, “nothing but the fear of punishment will compell [*sic*] them to go on with it.”<sup>382</sup>

After a long day of fishing, the boats returned to shore in the late afternoon, greeted by teams of porters to help unload the day’s catch, while merchants, jewelers, boat-owners, and other people who had financial interests in the enterprise watched with bated breath. Cordiner described the scene during his early nineteenth-century visit to

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<sup>378</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 251, 3958 (8 May 1800).

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, 3955.

<sup>380</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 212-3 (8 August 1807).

<sup>381</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 251, 3957 (8 May 1800).

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 3958.

Arippu: “Every boat comes to its own station, and the oysters are immediately put on the shoulders of divers, and carried into the inclosures.”<sup>383</sup> The oysters were divided into separate piles, allocated to the different classes or groups that had claims to the product, and further prepared for the washing and sorting and sorting process that followed. The produce then shifted to enclosed structures called “kootoos,” which functioned as a place to continue to wash, sort, and store oysters. These areas were usually marked off by wooden fences and paved with an oyster-shell based plaster chunam that created a hard surface on which to securely and efficiently wash oysters. British military official Jonathan Forbes offered the following description based on his visit to the pearl fishery at Arrippu in 1828: “Those oysters which were not sold immediately on the arrival of the boats were thrown into enclosures, which were paved, the floors having a slope towards a shallow reservoir.”<sup>384</sup> These structures became increasingly elaborate in British Ceylon from the early 1820s. Workers left the oysters to rot in the hot tropical sun, which killed the animal, and left nothing but the dried flesh of the organism and its shell. It was a simple, cheap, and effective way to find pearls, though special instruments were also used to clip or cut away pearls that formed affixed to inside of the shell. Individuals employed to do the heavy lifting dug large pits in which there were piles oysters, or sometimes left the produce in *ballam*, a long hallowed out canoe-like trough, and rinsed with brackish water. At this point about “twelve to fifteen naked coolies are ranged along the sides of the canoe,” who tilt the canoe on one side to let the water drain, a process repeated until the water ran mostly clear.<sup>385</sup> As European eyewitnesses often mentioned, the washing and sorting process emitted a rancid smell, the mix of putrid oysters and contaminated

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<sup>383</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:54-6.

<sup>384</sup> Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, 1:254.

<sup>385</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:59.



seawater stretched the limits of even the most tolerant olfactory system. As Subrahmanyam writes, “[visitors] were struck by the singular lack of hygiene and overpowering stench of putrefaction that attended the process once the oysters had been brought ashore and sold in heaps by auction.”<sup>386</sup> Some claimed, though, that natives involved in this process were used to such offensive smells, including Cordiner, who wrote, “The labourers and overseers, however, from habit become insensible of the smell, and prosecute their business, without expressing any disagreeable sensations.”<sup>387</sup>

It is at this stage in descriptions of the washing and sorting process that contemporary eyewitnesses and a few scattered government documents, record the labor of women and children, both groups that are otherwise absent from late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century accounts. The silence is a curious one, considering that some visitors to the pearl fishery witnessed “great numbers of women and children resort to Condaatchy.”<sup>388</sup> According to a report by James Steuart, for instance, “when all the pearls that the women can see are extracted, it is again examined by little boys, whose young eyes manage to collect the smallest seed pearls, which could not be seen by the women.”<sup>389</sup> Here, we see that the primary duties and responsibilities of women and children at the pearl fishery were to sort through dried oysters shells and buckets of sand looking for pearls, work for which they were paid paltry wages, though according to some, they willingly did so “with the hope of accidental plunder.”<sup>390</sup> According to these accounts, women sat aligned in rows on the floor of simple huts, working five to a team, picking at oysters shells and sifting sand, making sure that no pearls, even those of the

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<sup>386</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 137.

<sup>387</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:59.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:60.

<sup>389</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 18.

<sup>390</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:60.

smallest size and value, went unnoticed.<sup>391</sup>

The security apparatus that materialized at the pearl fishery each season continued its work during the washing and sorting process because it afforded another opportunity, according to government officials, for laborers to skim product. During his visit to the pearl fishery in the early nineteenth-century, British traveler and writer Robert Percival referred to “many who follow no other occupation but to procure their livelihood by the arts of filching and thieving, at which they are exceedingly dexterous.”<sup>392</sup> He also referred to “rogues” who “flock thither from all parts of India, and no precaution is sufficient to prevent their depredations. Their practice of picking out the pearls from the oysters and secreting them is, in particular, carried to a great height, and it has been found impossible to put a stop to it.”<sup>393</sup> Jonathan Forbes, a British military officer, provided a less than favorable description of the men who came to the pearl fishery when he visited Arippu in 1828, casting the problem in a moral light. He wrote, “I believe their utmost endeavours [*sic*] are ineffectual, as the moral character of most of those assembled at Kondatchie, affords no check to their inclinations or interest they have been attracted, many of them from distance, and at great risk and exertion, by avarice, and their only principle and pursuit is how to make money, and if successful, the end to them would sufficiently sanctify the means.”<sup>394</sup> There was also a story recounted in several contemporary travel accounts about a scheme concocted by some washers and sorters employed by a boat-owner, though evidence of such an event are not found in the official records of the East India Company and British colonial state of Ceylon. In this well-

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 77-8.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 78

<sup>394</sup> Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, 1:254-5.

planned ruse, one of the washers and sorters created a distraction by conspicuously stealing low-valued pearls. During the commotion, his accomplices disappeared a larger bunch of more valuable pearls. However, when the man who caused the commotion was not given a proportionate share of the stolen pearls, he reported the entire cabal to the authorities. The entire group was physically punished and the pearls returned to the boat-owner.<sup>395</sup>

Even as divers, crewmen, washers, sorters and other peons employed at the pearl fishery were subject to various degrees of oversight and discipline they also found ways to undercut both governmental and elite authority through protests, boycotts, and petitioning. As we have seen above, a commonly cited reason that divers refused to work was the presence of predatory sea animals that threatened the physical safety of divers. If an attack or near-attack occurred, divers would often refuse to plunge below the water's surface, grinding pearling operations to a halt. However, there were other means of protest at the disposal of labor, some as simple as tardiness. Contemporary observers viewed such occurrences as "an example of great procrastination, which marks their character in all concerns."<sup>396</sup> Late arrivals to the pearl fishery by boats and divers certainly delayed the start of pearling operations, but such acts were a way through which divers communicated grievances to authorities. Even as British officials engaged in the mobilization of labor ahead of the pearl fishery, the late arrival of divers and boatmen to the camp frequently delayed the state of the event and deepened financial loss. The commissioners of the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu, for instance, wrote to Governor North, "we found ourselves under the necessity of postponing the Sale of the Boats, from

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<sup>395</sup> Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 79-80; Le Beck, "Account of the Pearl Fishery," 404-5.

<sup>396</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:48.

neither Boats or Divers having arrived,” adding that “this delay in the arrival of the boats and Divers is by no means unexpected, as, during the three preceding Fisheries, they never made their Appearance at Arripo before the end of the present month.”<sup>397</sup> The commissioners, in turn, wrote to the collector of Ramnad, “the non arrival [*sic*] of the Divers from the Coast having already occasioned a very considerable loss of Revenue,” reiterating the need of his “assistance and influence to induce that Class of people in [Ramnad] to proceed” to Arippu.<sup>398</sup> In another case, the superintendent of the 1822 pearl fishery at Tuticorin wrote to his counterparts in Madurai and Thanjavur with a sense of urgency about boats and divers, requesting that his colleague “adopt the most effectual means for hastening their departure,” as the “most serious loss must result to Government from the arrival of the Boats being longer protracted.”<sup>399</sup>

Besides late arrivals to the pearl fishery, divers also flat-out refused to work. For example, a report from the 1815 pearl fishery at Tiruchendur described the event as a total failure, so “equally unproductive” that the “Boat People and divers now refuse in a body to go out again to fish.”<sup>400</sup> Labor boycotts also exposed the government to remissions claims from the principal renter, which further reduced the amount of revenue derived from the event. The refusal of divers to conduct their work came into focus when a renter submitted a petition for reimbursement. For example, the principal creditor to the renter of the 1807 pearl fishery referred to labor boycotts in a petition addressed to the Board of Revenue at Fort St. George. He wrote, “The Divers say that the Assistant Collector forbids them not to fish the Oysters in any other place but the place he has

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<sup>397</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 349.

<sup>398</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 225-6.

<sup>399</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 403 (3 February 1822); TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 390-3 (2 February 1822).

<sup>400</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 672, 3168-9 (30 March 1815).

pointed out in which they could find no Oysters nor Could they get any here equal to their Labor and are running away from the work.”<sup>401</sup>

Epidemic cholera was another reason that divers refused to work and absconded from camp. Death and disease at the pearl fishery had previously been attributed to insalubrious conditions caused by rotting oysters. Dutch Governor Baron van Imhoff addressed some of the “inconveniences and dangers” encountered at a pearl fishery in the mid-eighteenth century, including “the risk of a hundred accidents arising from the gathering together of such a crowd with only a handful of men to control them and “the sickness and mortality both during and after the fishery owing to the stench of the oysters.”<sup>402</sup> British officers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were also concerned with the stench of rotting oysters but had also become aware of the devastating effects of cholera. When cholera swept through the pearl fishery compound it caused great panic amongst attendees and postponed proceedings, especially when it converged with other problems, such as the lack of sufficient specie and low yields of pearls and oysters. As the superintendent of the 1822 pearl fishery wrote, “The appearance of the spasmodic cholera would probably under any circumstances have operated most detrimentally to the Interest of the Fishery but united with the deficient produce it was sufficient to have put a stop to it altogether.” He also wrote about how cholera “was particularly felt amongst the Divers whose exposure to the weather and habits of intoxication predisposed them for the attack of the disease.”<sup>403</sup> Over a twenty-day period, cholera infected 239 people; 73 of these were divers and 49 of which died.<sup>404</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3566, 132-3 (24 April 1807).

<sup>402</sup> Baron van Imhoff, *Memoir*, 54.

<sup>403</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 119 (8 April 1822).

<sup>404</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 112 (2 April 1822).

The disease not only incapacitated diving and laboring populations but it also led to them abandoning the fishery altogether. In another case, the superintendent of the 1828 pearl fishery removed boats and divers from active service because low oyster yields and cholera outbreaks made the fishery unavailing. Collector Drury wrote from Punnaikayal to the Board in April 1828, “The divers however had become exceedingly to work; their share was of little or no value to them; and many boats had been withdrawn daily in consequence of some of their crews having been carried off by Cholera. I therefore directed their employment to be discontinued.”<sup>405</sup> According to James Steuart, a cholera outbreak at the 1829 pearl fishery “made fearful havoc of human life.” He added, “[cholera morbus] made its appearance in the first instance among the parawa [*sic*] coolies from Tuticoreen [*sic*], and soon spread from them to the boatmen and divers, and put an end to the fishery some days before the tie prescribed by the contract with the Renter.”<sup>406</sup>

Another contested area was money, wages, and compensation. In a report on the examination of pearl banks in 1834, for example, the *jati talaivan* reported that the divers and boat people refused to work over a wage dispute. He wrote, “The Boat men and divers employed in the Examination refused to work at the rate of pay formerly allowed to them.”<sup>407</sup> Divers and laborers also faced heavy debts and other forms of financial insecurity at the pearl fishery. While there was nothing on the level of slavery witnessed at the Gulf and Caribbean pearling industries, a system of debts and obligations, which, when coupled with an industry that was full of risk and speculation, basically guaranteed

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<sup>405</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4702, 52 (30 April 1828).

<sup>406</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 17.

<sup>407</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4708, 119-23 (27 June 1834).

that divers came to the pearling grounds each season.<sup>408</sup> Pearling was, of course, not the only industry in which they plied their trade, as there was the year-long chank fishery, as well as farming and small-time trading ventures, but the opportunities afforded by the pearl fishery could be a boon to the welfare of divers and other laboring groups. Divers received a share of the day's catch, which they could or sell in the bazaar but prices fluctuated and it was often difficult to unload oysters. This meant that divers were not always able to meet basic needs and often resorted to borrowing money, sometimes at usurious rates. As Cordiner wrote, "Notwithstanding the many exactions and drawbacks imposed on the divers when the fishery proves successful, each man carries home at the end of the season from forty to fifty pagodas to his family. But when oysters do not abound on the banks, the reward for his toil is not more than sufficient to afford him daily subsistence."<sup>409</sup> Collector Hepburn described the precarious circumstances of a diver's life at the 1807 pearl fishery at Tuticorin: "When the Diver returns to the shore at night his share of Oysters is delivered to him and then he must dispose of before he can purchase his supper, he usually lands at three, four or six o'clock and he must be in his Boat again by eleven at night. In this space of time he has to sell his Oysters, to purchase, dress and eat his meal; he cannot therefore spare much time in waiting for a Customer or in haggling about the price. He is obliged to take what is offered to him and as the Buyers are few he is at their mercy."<sup>410</sup> There was always the hope of finding a valuable pearl, but this was the stuff of myth and legend. Le Beck wrote, "The many disappointments usually experienced by the lower classes of men in particular, make them often repent of

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<sup>408</sup> Molly Warsh, "Enslaved Pearl Divers in the Sixteenth Century Caribbean," *Slavery and Abolition* 31, no. 3 (2010): 345-62; Hopper, *Slave to One Master*.

<sup>409</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:56-7.

<sup>410</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 143 (1 May 1807).

their coming here. They are often ruined, as they risk all they are worth to purchase pearl shells; however, there are many instance of their making a fortune beyond all expectations. A particular circumstance of this kind fell within my own observation: a day labourer bought three oysters for a copper fanam (about the value of two-pence) and was so fortunate as to find one of the largest pearls which the fishery produced this season.”<sup>411</sup>

While contemporary observers seized on the image of a humble diver striking it rich, his fortunes turning instantaneously with the discovery of a handsome pearl, the financial lives of divers were patterned by the structures of the marketplace and organization of the pearling industry. Reports from the 1815 pearl fishery at Tiruchendur, for example, refer to the dip in the prices of oysters and pearls in the bazaar. Collector Cotton of Tirunelveli wrote, “It did not however appear that the produce of these Oysters was more valuable, than those of former days fishing, and although on the first return of the Boats, the first day, their Prices rode in the Bazar, it soon fell again, and the Divers and Boat people continued their Complaints, that by the sale of their shares, they were unable to gain a subsistence.”<sup>412</sup> Divers also fell into a debt trap, the victims of usurious moneylenders, many of whom were also the principal boat renters. Ceylon civil servant Anthony Bertolacci discussed the role of debt in the life and work of divers: “To these divers the renters have been in the habit of making advances of money, and keeping them in their debt. By so doing, and making them pay a high interest for the money thus advanced, they derive considerable profits, and keep the divers in constant subjection; so that, being masters of their services, they prevent competitors coming forward in the

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<sup>411</sup> Le Beck, “Account of the Pearl Fishery,” 400.

<sup>412</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 672, 3064 (27 March 1815).



purchase of the chank farms and by these means obtain it upon lower terms when they otherwise could procure it. The Ceylon divers have, therefore been discouraged from that occupation; and those from the coast of the continent have continued to frequent Ceylon, during certain seasons in the year, for the chank and pearl fisheries, and have regularly returned to their villages with the little wealth they have accumulated.”<sup>413</sup> The impact of predatory moneylending and debt on divers came into frame during the 1815 pearl fishery, when the Madras government received numerous petitions from Parava divers and others that had fallen into debt, borrowing money at high-rates in the money market at the pearl fishery. According to a petition submitted by the renter of the 1815 pearl fishery, a certain Cuttah Narrainasawmy, the divers and other boat people suffered from serious material setbacks, which he used as further evidence that the pearl fishery was a calamitous affair, and grossly mismanaged by the superintendent: “They had sustained a loss of 100 to 110 Pagodas each Tonies’s [sic] and had become Debtors and they were also obliged to sell their cloths for their maintenance and for every stone they dived 3 or 4 times it was very difficult to get 1 or 2 Oysters in the Paar and their is not much oysters neither good ones in the paar and the share that came to the divers did not exceed 20 or 40 Cash each man and that they are daily Starving without any advantage to them.”<sup>414</sup>

## **Conclusion**

While there is no pearl diving scene in the Disney movie version of Johan David Wyss’s *Swiss Family Robinson*, the morality-cum-adventure tale about a family stranded on a

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<sup>413</sup> Bertolacci, *Interests of Ceylon*, 2:268-9.

<sup>414</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 688, 9889-90 (24 August 1815).

fictional island in the eastern Indian Ocean contains a vignette about a hunt for pearls.<sup>415</sup> During a solo canoe trip, the eldest son Fritz paddles through a narrow passage to enter a small bay surrounded by low-lying grasslands and shrubs. The bright shimmer of oyster shells at the bottom of the clear tropical waters attracts his attention. He dislodges a few oysters from the rocky seabed, brings them to the shore, and leaves them to decompose in the hot sun. Afterwards, Fritz remarks, “I felt some little round, hard stones, like peas, under my knife; I took them out, and found them so brilliant, that I filled a little box with them.” His father William examines the contents of the box and determines that the stones were not only genuine but “oriental pearls of the greatest beauty.” William then proceeds to talk about pearling operations across the world. From the types of boats and diving techniques to the sorting process and the origins of pearls, the family learns about the pearl fisheries of Ceylon, Arabia, Americas, Africa, and Scotland. But learning about the pearl fisheries of the world does not satisfy their curiosity. Inspired by the events and methods of pearl diving from across the globe, the Robinson family organizes their own pearl diving adventure. This was no mere replication of the “traditional” pearling techniques but instead contained lessons about ingenuity, self-reliance, and hard work. For instance, William encourages each of his children to improve upon the traditional practices of pearling: The father jury-rigs an instrument with rakes and hooks to drag over the beds and the children fashion other tools such as nets to hold the catch. At the newly-named Bay of Pearls, William, Fritz, and other members of the family haul up a “large quantity of precious oysters.”

Tales from the *Swiss Family Robinson* about pearl diving in exotic (and

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<sup>415</sup> *The Swiss Family Robinson, Second Series*, Isabelle de Montolieu and Johan David Wyss, trans. J. C. Locke (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1848).

fictionalized) islands in the Indian Ocean may be mapped onto wider discourses about labor, nature, and empire operational during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Indeed, there are many parallels between the Robinson's pearl fishery and the methods through which the East India Company and British colonial state of Ceylon governed the human and natural resources of the Gulf of Mannar. As the discussion above illustrates, the pearl fishery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was far from an ancient pastime. From armed vessels at sea and police forces on shore, to tax inducements and technological innovations, government officials, as well as native mercantile elites, exposed divers and other laboring populations at the pearl fishery to various forms of oversight, surveillance, and even physical violence. Travel accounts and archival sources from this period are chockfull of details about the strategies and tactics put into practice by authorities to coerce and discipline labor.

## CHAPTER 2: THE GREAT PEARL FISHERY BAZAAR

### MARKETS

“For a month or six weeks previous to the commencement of a fishery, numbers of boats arrive from the ports of Hindostan [*sic*] and parts of Ceylon, filled with people, merchandize, and supplies of all kinds. . . In an incredibly short time, this barren plain, and the shore where the sea turtle basked in peace, are covered with huts and stalls for the sale of all kinds of goods, both Indian and European. Thousands of new inhabitants of all ages and both sexes, in every variety of costume crowd this busy scene.”<sup>416</sup> This is how British Ceylon officer James Steuart described the assembling of people and goods at the location of the pearl fishery each season. Steuart, like numerous commentators from the medieval period onward, provided a detailed eyewitness account of tens of thousands of people flocking to the sandy shores of western Ceylon and southeastern India during the weeks and months prior to the scheduled start of the event. Sixteenth-century Venetian trader Caesar Frederick offered a description of the pearl fishery compound: “When the time of this fishing draws near, they send very good Divers, that go to discover where the greatest heaps of Oysters be under water, and right against that place where greatest store of Oysters be, there they make or plant a village, with houses and a Bazaar, which stands as long as the fishing time lasts, and it is furnished with all things necessary, and now and then it is near unto places that are inhabited, and other times far off, according to the place where they fish.”<sup>417</sup> The volume and diversity of people, goods, and things that

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<sup>416</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 12.

<sup>417</sup> Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 102 [spelling updated for readability].

coursed through the sea lanes and roads of the region were striking to even the most seasoned traveler.

In travel accounts and government documents from around the turn of the nineteenth century, the settlement of the pearl fishery compound, as well as the economic activities that took place in its streets and markets, appear by and large as unplanned phenomena. British traveler and military officer Jonathan Forbes, for instance, “heard that the concourse of people assembled at the fishery” was a great spectacle, and he was excited to see how the people that gathered there “caused a large town, with long streets and valuable shops, to start up as if by magic from the barren plain.”<sup>418</sup> Likewise, British Reverend James Cordiner drew an ironic contrast between the vibrancy and energy of the bazaar and the desolate landscape of western Ceylon: “Retailers in every branch of commerce, even from the remotest parts of India resort to Condaatchy during the season of a pearl fishery, to catch what they can of the transient stream of wealth which flows periodically through its barren plains.”<sup>419</sup> Whereas these writings represent the camp and marketplace at the pearl fishery as an awesome, ephemeral space that emerged on “barren plains,” the reality of the situation was less magical. As historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam writes, “The pearl fishery was never part of a ‘competitive economy’ in any sense: rather, partly because of its geographic location and partly because of the prestigious nature of the product itself, it had long been a privileged sphere for state interference.”<sup>420</sup> Indeed, the markets and marketplaces of the pearl fishery were actually social and economic spaces treated by both Company and Crown officials as the targets of interference and

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<sup>418</sup> Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, 1:249.

<sup>419</sup> Cordiner, *Descriptions of Ceylon*, 2:74.

<sup>420</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 136.

improvement. From marking out boundaries of the settlement and facilitating the movement of goods, capital, and labor to policing and addressing grievances by attendees, British officials on both sides of the Gulf of Mannar sought to organize, control, and manage many aspects of the pearl fishery and its marketplace. To begin with, for government officials in charge of managing the pearl fishery, the unfettered movement of people and things was also problem. From security issues and the spread of disease to unregulated commercial transactions, the pearl fishery compound in general and the bazaar in particular conjured up myriad fears and concerns for British officials, problems that they maintained could only be solved through governmental oversight based on sound management principles. As Robert Percival wrote, “The revenue which Governments derives from [the pearl fishery] is still however considerable, and may by good management be increased.”<sup>421</sup> Backed by the power of their respective monopolies, and equipped with the languages of liberal political economy and utilitarianism, the British governments of Madras and Ceylon drew upon a new set of tools designed to shape the landscape upon which local economic actors searched for pearls and profit.

The bazaar has been the subject of many studies of colonial and postcolonial South Asia.<sup>422</sup> This chapter examines some of the mechanisms through which the governments of Madras and Ceylon sought to manipulate and influence the markets and marketplaces at the pearl fishery. Three interconnected sections draw attention to the

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<sup>421</sup> Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 73.

<sup>422</sup> Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars*; Rajat Kanta Ray, “Asian Capital in the Age of European Domination: The Rise of the Bazaar, 1800-1914,” *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no. 3 (1995): 449-554; Anand Yang, *Bazaar India: Markets, Society, and the Colonial State in Gangetic Bihar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Of Garbage, Modernity, and the Citizen's Gaze,” *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

mechanisms through which the governments of Madras and Ceylon intervened in a range of social and economic activities that coalesced around the pearl fishery each season. The first section— “A Fair on the Grandest Scale”—discusses the formation and organization of the bazaar at the pearl fishery compound. The second section— “An Uncertain Nature”—describes and analyzes various hazards and dangers that government officials identified as threats to the productivity and profitability of the pearl fishery. The final section— “Management Strategies”—offers a close reading of the different modes through which Madras and Ceylon managed the pearl fishery. Government interference in the economic spaces of the pearl fishery was ostensibly meant to attenuate the financial, physical, and environmental hazards of the industry. Protecting the property and interests of merchants that invested in the pearl fishery and others whose labor and capital upon which the industry depended was not the work of benevolent states and enlightened bureaucrats but integrated into projects of colonial statecraft, imperial expansion, and governmental power. In doing so, Madras and Ceylon sought to not only turn the seasonal event of the pearl fishery into a regular stream of revenue but also reshape the conditions within which merchants, divers, boatmen, and others conducted their work and business.

An examination of the mechanisms and techniques through which Madras and Ceylon regulated the pearl fishery and its economy is a window on the nature of British power over markets and societies in India and Sri Lanka during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Historian Sudipta Sen demonstrates in *Empire of Free Trade* that, in the case of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century eastern India, markets and marketplaces were sites of competing authority. Two distinct visions of how

markets and marketplaces functioned, one based on European principles of mercantilism and free trade liberalism, the other based on Indian notions of substantive and relational honors, titles, and gifts embedded in social and political systems, converged. “Yet throughout the age of colonization,” Sen writes in *Empire of Free Trade*, “one of the principal issues of conflict with local Indian rulers was not the economy of Indian principalities but the actual sites for the display and passage of wealth, indices of social and political eminence.”<sup>423</sup> The friction caused by rivalries between Indian and European political powers over the production and consumption of “prestige goods” like betel, salt, and tobacco, Sen argues, moved colonial state formation forward in Bengal following the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The English company-state, local polities, religious institutions, and powerful commercial figures struggled to influence and control these materially rich and symbolically important sectors of the Indian economy. Drawing on policy reports and documents produced by the Bengal government, Sen argues that the administrative discourse of the Company Raj treated marketplaces merely as sites of economic transactions, which effectively ignored the complex web of social and cultural functions that such marketplaces served. District-level records produced by British Ceylon and the Company Raj concerning the pearl fisheries offer further insight into company-state and colonial state attitudes towards markets and marketplaces. The pearling industry was also a site of contested authorities, as the Dutch and British company-states encountered competing claims of local polities such as Arcot and Ramnad, as well as religious institutions such as regional temples and shrines.<sup>424</sup> However, in the case of the pearl fisheries, for the East India Company (and, later, British

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<sup>423</sup> Sen, *Empire of Free Trade*, 6.

<sup>424</sup> For more, see Chapter 4.



Ceylon), which had more or less vanquished their European, Indian, and Sri Lankan rivals by the early nineteenth century, the bazaar of the pearl fishery was less a site of contested authority and became more a channel through which governmental power flowed.

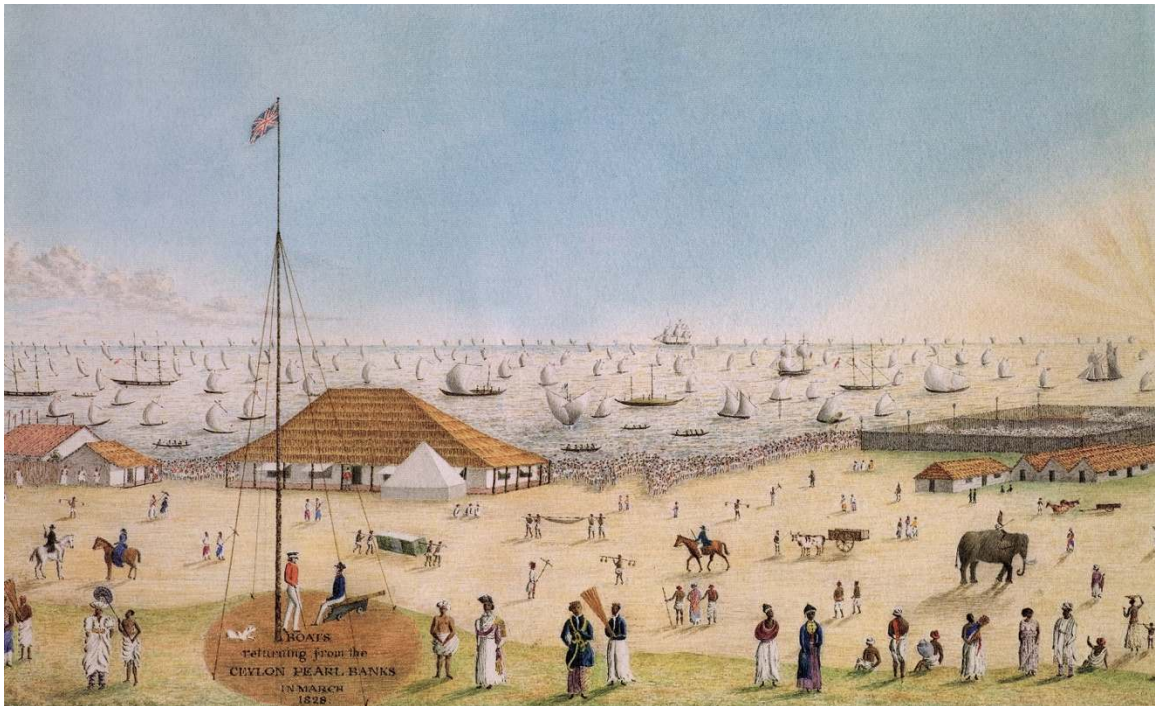


Figure 6. “Boats Returning from the Ceylon Pearl Banks in March 1828.” Hippolyte Silvaf, Watercolor on Wood (Natural History Museum, London). Rohan Pethiyagoda, *Pearls, Spices, and Green Gold: An Illustrated History of Biodiversity Exploration in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: WHT Publications, 2007).

### **A Fair on the Grandest Scale**

The pearl fishery usually commenced between late February and early April during a break in the monsoon winds that one English officer referred to as the “lull.” The collector of Tirunelveli wrote to the Board as he prepared for the 1828 pearl fishery, “The season for fishing, the Banks is necessarily limited to the kind of Lull that usually takes

place, both in winds and Currents, between the two Monsoons.”<sup>425</sup> From the time Madras and Colombo published the dates of the pearl fishery to the scheduled start date of the pearling season, tens of thousands of people from the island and mainland congregated at the site of the event. British traveler Robert Percival remarked on the “several thousands of people of different colors, countries, casts [*sic*], and occupations” that came to the pearl fishery. The compound, he continued, had “vast numbers of small tents and huts erected on the shore” and “the bazar or market before each.”<sup>426</sup> British Ceylon officer James Bennett offered a similar description: “About the middle of January, the boats begin to assemble; between which period and the commencement of the fishery, the medley of adventurers will have constructed their various dwellings, with areka or bamboo poles, and the fronds of the talipat palmyra, and coco-nut palms, paddee straw, and colored cotton cloths, in endless variety, and in tolerable order, upon the arid sands of Aripo.”<sup>427</sup> Descriptions of the town and bazaar also found their way into contemporary newspaper accounts. In 1814, a correspondent for the Ceylon Government *Gazette*, reported on “a most interesting scene—a Town, containing Twenty Thousand People, collected from all parts of India, has risen in the course of few days on 2 spots of Ground, which a short while before the commencement of the Fishery, exhibited not a single Hut.”<sup>428</sup> In the literary realm, Harriet Martineau evocatively characterized the pearl fishery camp as “a mushroom city.”<sup>429</sup> William Millburn, the author of a popular early nineteenth-century handbook on the commercial products of the East, *Oriental*

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<sup>425</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4702, 1 (15 January 1828); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1134, 1005-6 (21 January 1828).

<sup>426</sup> Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 59-60.

<sup>427</sup> Bennett, *Ceylon and its Capabilities*, 204.

<sup>428</sup> Ceylon Government Gazette, No. 653, Wednesday 23 March 1814, UKNA, CO 58, Vol. 1.

<sup>429</sup> Martineau, “Cinnamon and Pearls,” 20.

*Commerce* (1813), described the transformation of the area: “About three miles distant from Aripo, where in general nothing is to be seen but a few miserable huts, and a sandy desert; but during the period of the pearl fishery, it braches out into a populous town, several streets of which extend upwards of a mile in length. The scene altogether resembles a crowded fair on the grandest scale.”<sup>430</sup> These characterizations of the pearl fishery compound as a “temporary” village and a “crowded fair on the grandest scale” produced by travelers, administrators, novelist, and scholars migrated further into the work of professional historians. For instance, C. R. de Silva, historian of Portuguese Ceylon, wrote: “In the month before the fishing was due to be held a series of temporary buildings was constructed on the sea-shore near the oyster-beds. These buildings served as storehouses, shops, and dwellings.”<sup>431</sup> Likewise, historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam described it as a “mobile improvised town,” a characterization that echoes writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Edgar Thurston, who, in his 1890 monograph on pearls and chanks of southern India and Ceylon, referred to the pearl fishery at Tuticorin as a “temporary improvised village.”<sup>432</sup>

The settlement and formation of the pearl fishery bazaar activated capital and commodity networks that connected the marketplace of the pearl fishery with “marine goods entrepôt,” from large capital cities like Madras and Colombo to regional port towns such as Tuticorin and Kilakkarai.<sup>433</sup> Pearls sourced from the Gulf of Mannar

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<sup>430</sup> William Milburn, *Oriental Commerce; Containing a Geographical Description of the Principal Places in the East Indies, China, and Japan, with Their Produce, Manufactures, and Trade* (London: Black, Parry & Co., 1813), 338.

<sup>431</sup> De Silva, “Portuguese and Pearl Fishing,” 24.

<sup>432</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 138; Thurston, *Pearl and Chank Fisheries*, 17.

<sup>433</sup> Kenneth Hall, ed., *Secondary Cities and Urban Networking in the Indian Ocean Realm, c. 1400-1800* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008). For “marine goods entrepôt,” see Eric Tagliacozzo, “A Necklace of Fins: Marine Goods Trading in Maritime Southeast Asia,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 1, no. 1

traveled far and wide, from London to Shanghai. As British military officer Jonathan Forbes wrote in *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, “large pearls appeared to me to sell at prices nearly as high as what they could be purchased for in Britain; trash, or seed pearls, as the very small ones are called, sold much higher; and it was understood that this kind was principally intended for the Chinese market.”<sup>434</sup> The Portuguese and Dutch had procured pearls for their own commercial purposes. For instance, Governor Thomas van Rhee of Dutch Ceylon reported in 1697 to his successor, Gerrit de Heere, that VOC commissioners had “orders to purchase pearls for the Fatherland to the amount of f. 60,000 or f. 80,000 and 50 lb. for the Chinese merchants.”<sup>435</sup> In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, British Ceylon and the East India Company had little interest in the pearl trade *per se*. The extraction of revenue through renting and *amani* was a central concern for the Company and Crown governments, but the buying and selling of pearls was left in the hands of a heterogeneous group of merchants who assembled at the pearl fishery marketplace each season, as well as metropolitan gem markets such as Madras and Colombo. By the end of the eighteenth century, Madras had become the commercial and financial center of the pearl trade in south India, overshadowing smaller “indigenous” coastal entrepôts, such as Tuticorin and Kayalpatnam as the primary centers for buying and selling precious stones. Whereas large Indian ports such as Surat and Masulipatnam belonged to states that relied on land tax for revenue, colonial port cities like Madras and Bombay were not dependent on land

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(2004): 23-48. For references to Madras as a center for marine products besides pearls, see Walter J. Fischel, “The Jewish-Merchant Colony in Madras (Fort St. George) during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries: A Contribution to the Economic and Social History of Jews in India,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 3, no. 1 (1960): 78-107; Yogeve, *Diamonds and Coral*.

<sup>434</sup> Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, 1:267.

<sup>435</sup> Van Rhee, *Memoir*, 20-21.

revenues to the same degree, and instead relied on more diverse sources of capital. These places attracted merchants and other members of commercial society and attracted Indian merchants, bankers, artisans, and laborers, as well as European traders and entrepreneurs. While Madras became the financial and commercial capital of the pearl trade with the rise of the British East India Company, a short period of time each season, the pearl fishery became a temporary urban center that attracted people, goods, and capital, which connected it with other nodes in the pearl trade network.

Descriptions of the physical characteristics and spatial layout of the pearl fishery compound are found in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century accounts. In a report on the pearl fishery addressed to the government of British Ceylon, superintendent James Steuart provided a description of the physical geography of the marketplace and its environs on the western coast of the island: “The small solitary street of native houses at the place where the oyster are landed, is commonly known by the name of Condatchy. But Condatchy properly so called, is a village two miles from the sea, at the head of the bay which bears its name. It is on the northern shore of this bay that the oysters are landed at the village of Silāwatorre, which in the Tamil language means fish market or landing place of the fishery.”<sup>436</sup> He even referred to the bazaar as “Billingsgate,” the famous fish market in London.<sup>437</sup> Likewise, Jonathan Forbes wrote about the layout of the pearl fishery compound during his visit to the 1828 pearl fishery at Arippu, coincidentally one of the pearl fisheries at which Steuart had served as superintendent: “Having heard that the concourse of people assembled at the fishery, caused a large town, with long streets and valuable shops, to start up as if by magic from the barren plain, my

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<sup>436</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 12.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

disappointment was great to find that natives sitting near, or sleeping under two or three palmyra leaves, supported on one side to the height of three feet, procured for such a shelter the appellation of a house, and that lines of the same were miscalled streets.”<sup>438</sup>

Besides the physical layout, contemporary observers also took note of the numerous types of residents of the camp, which included merchants, traders and skilled craftsmen from different areas of commerce, as well as acrobats, jugglers, and various mendicant-types. Many of the people at the pearl fishery were directly preoccupied with the pearl trade. In addition to merchants who rented and sub-rented boats, specialist gem traders and jewelers gathered in the bazar to work their craft. Robert Percival, for instance, witnessed such a scene during his visit to the pearl fishery in the early nineteenth century. He wrote, “the vast number of jewelers, brokers, merchants, of all colours and descriptions, both native and foreigners, who are occupied in some way or other with the pearls, some separating and assorting them, others weighing them and ascertaining their number and value, while others are hawking them about, or drilling and boring them for future use: all of these circumstances tend to impress the mind with the value and importance of that object which can itself create this scene.”<sup>439</sup> The eyes of European observers were also drawn to the diversity of religious practices and figures. Naturalist Henry Le Beck, for example, wrote at length about the “Hindu monks, fakirs, beggars, and the like” and how “vagabonds of every description” are found in the vast crowd.<sup>440</sup> Likewise, Fellowes referred to the remarkable array of people that came to the pearl fishery: “During the season of the fishery, the bay of Condatchy exhibits a most interesting spectacle. At that period this barren spot displayed a variegated assemblage of

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<sup>438</sup> Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, 1:249.

<sup>439</sup> Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 59-60.

<sup>440</sup> Le Beck, “Account of the Pearl Fishery,” 399.

persons of different nations, religion, and manner, and from the most remote regions. It exhibits the commercial bustle of a great mart, and all the combined amusement of a fair on the largest scale. Here are artificers and traders of every description, mingled with jugglers, tumblers, female dancers, mendicants, sharpers, and pilferers of every class, form, and hue.”<sup>441</sup> These descriptions also included references to such notorious practices at hook-swinging, ritualized piercings, and other forms of penance practices in Tamil communities in India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia that fascinated (and shocked) colonial administrators, missionaries, scholars, and travelers.<sup>442</sup>

However, the pearl fishery compound did not spontaneously emerge but was actually embedded in the conventions of colonial infrastructure projects, development regimes, and governmental management. These works included the construction of warehouses for storing oysters, clearing the grounds of discarded shells, erecting permanent buildings, connecting the pearl fishery via roads, and development safe and secure water infrastructure. The Dutch VOC had also emphasized the importance of providing certain provisions to the assembled population and improving the physical infrastructure of the pearl fishery. For example, Hendrick Zwaardecroon, Commander of Jaffnapatnam, wrote in 1697, “The chief points to be considered when a pearl fishery has been authorized are the lodgings for the Commissioners appointed in Colombo; by inclosure [*sic*] of the tanks in Mantotte with banks for obtaining good drinking water; the supply of poultry, butter, oil, rice, sheep, cattle, etc., for provisions.”<sup>443</sup> British

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<sup>441</sup> Fellowes, *History of Ceylon*, 283; Cordiner, *Descriptions of Ceylon*, 2:74; Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 73-74.

<sup>442</sup> Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 154-73; Ulrike Schröder, “Hook-Swinging in South India: Negotiating Subaltern Space within a Colonial Society,” in *Negotiating Rites*, eds. Ute Hüsken and Frank Neubert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 215-36.

<sup>443</sup> Zwaardecroon, *Memoir*, 80.

administrators elaborated some of these efforts and brought a new perspective to the task. As Governor North of Ceylon wrote to the Court of Directors in London shortly before the transfer of power from Company to Crown, “the works completed by the Civil Architect of the Establishment, of whose Officer, I informed your Honorable Court in my last dispatch, are confined to the Banksaul for the ensuring Fishery at Arippe, which will be extended & regulated for all future ones.”<sup>444</sup> These projects, according to North, would “secure the property of the speculators” and “preserve the assembled population from the diseases inseparable from the stench of the place when accompanied with the filth of crowded & unprepared habitations.”<sup>445</sup> Officers such as Governor North supposed that the establishment of orderly and sanitary camps would not only reduce the risk of disease but also create a safe economic zone in which people attending the pearl fishery could conduct business. James Cordiner observed with great pleasure the benefits of an orderly camp a few years after North sent his report to London: “The fishery of 1804 was conducted with more uniform regularity, and less confusion, than any other which previously took place under the British administration. The disputes amongst the natives were less frequent, and less litigious than usual. There was no riot; and no accident happened by fire.”<sup>446</sup>

A major undertaking, much of the planning and work to construct the pearl fishery compound was done under the auspices of the government that hosted the event, the responsibility for which usually devolved to the local superintendent and his agents. Reflecting an interest in bolstering the profitability of the fisheries, the governments of

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<sup>444</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, Vol. 3, 29v.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:73.



Madras and Ceylon usually appointed a commissioner to oversee the actual construction of the camp. His tasks included clearing the grounds of discarded oyster shells from the previous fishery, the construction of “banksalls” or thatched-roof warehouses and godowns for storing produce, marking off areas for the washing and boiling of oysters, erecting shelters for the renter and his entourage, digging spring wells, and preparing an area where all others in attendance could set up temporary dwellings. The construction of the camp and its supporting infrastructure was an expense almost entirely shouldered by the government, an arrangement that was also usually written into the contract of the renter. For example, the proposal of Chinniah Mudaliar for the 1805 pearl fishery at Tuticorin contained a clause that stipulated a “Sufficient number of Banksalls, Dwelling Huts, Tarpaulins, wells or Springs to be digged [*sic*] and sufficient Number of Sepoys Peons etc. should be supplied [*sic*] by the Superintendent of the Pearl Fishery.”<sup>447</sup> The Madras and Ceylon governments were more or less happy to cover these expenses because the potential revenue gained from the fishery far exceeded the cost of organizing one. Expenses, though, were not insignificant factors. For instance, Governor North wrote to the Court of Directors in London, “The expences [*sic*] of preparation will be trifling, and altho’ they are borne immediately by your finances, they are not to be compared to the waste of Labour in the Construction of Houses, the Collection of Provisions and the Transport of Persons which must attend the concourse of the Multitude and which however incurred, must ultimately be deducted from your Profits on the property you dispose of.”<sup>448</sup> Collector James Hepburn of Tirunelveli referred to the cost of erecting warehouses and a shelter for the renter and his retinue in a report on the

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<sup>447</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 404, 1595 (7 March 1805).

<sup>448</sup> UKNA, CO 54, Vol. 3, 44v-5.

state of the pearl fishery at Tuticorin to the Board of Revenue at Fort St. George in January 1807. He wrote, “There is also a considerable expense incurred in erecting the Enclosure for preserving the Oysters Sheds Banksals [*sic*] etc. for the accommodation of the Renter which it is usual to do at the expense of Government and a pretty large contingent [Sibbendy] is also required during the continuance of the Fishery.”<sup>449</sup> He also reassured the Board “that every thing shall be conducted in the most economical manner possible.”<sup>450</sup>

The attending officers hired people to build temporary enclosures for washing, boiling, sorting, and storing pearls and oysters. The area marked off as a square that was populated by huts used to store oysters called a *kottu*. As Le Beck wrote, “The owners of the boats sometimes sell their oysters, and at other times open them on their own account. In the latter case, som [*sic*] put them on mats in a square, surrounded with a fence; others dig holes of almost a foot deep, and throw them in till the animal dies; after which they open the shells, and take out the pearls with more ease.”<sup>451</sup> James Cordiner also offered a description. He wrote: “In some of the palisades, within which the oysters are deposited, there are four square spaces paved and inclosed [*sic*] by brick walls about a foot in height, for the better preservation of the pearls. These compartments communicated by four uncovered drains of gradual descent, with a small bath in the centre of the inclosure [*sic*], so that whatever pearls are swept away by accidental rains, or the washing of oysters, are carried into this cistern, and none can be lost.”<sup>452</sup> At the close of the fishery, the government or principal renter then farmed out the right to sift through the sands in

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<sup>449</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 7 (8 January 1807).

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>451</sup> Le Beck, “Account of the Pearl Fishery,” 404.

<sup>452</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:58.

search of pearls that may have escaped this elaborate set-up. Dutch Governor Jan Schreuder mentions this practice in a report from March 1762 to his successor, Jan Baron van Eck: “The Company farms their collections yearly, or rather the permission to sift them out along the shore; and during my government we obtained [pounds of pearls] although during the first two years no rent was possible owing to the lack of anyone who wished to obtain it. I must however observe that by waiting for two years no higher rent could be expected, as owing to the play of the waves the shore is almost daily washed level.”<sup>453</sup> Collector James Hepburn of Tirunelveli referred to this practice when he wrote to the Board during his preparations for the 1810 pearl fishery: “At Tutacoryn it has always been Considered a privilege of the renter to dispose of the right of Selling the Sand of the Compound were [*sic*] his Oysters were washed for his own advantage and it has always been Sold for a Considerable Sum.”<sup>454</sup> Likewise, Cordiner wrote about the government farming out “the privilege of examining and sifting this soil” because pearls “of considerable size and value, escape attention, and elude the diligence of search.”<sup>455</sup> Ceylon civil servant Anthony Bertolacci reported that the government charged remarkably high rates for this privilege: “If the fishery has been successful, the spot where the contents of each boat have been deposited will sell for 120 or 130 Porto-Novo pagodas, about 5 or 600 rix-dollars. After these six weeks, the privilege of further search belongs to Government; and the whole farm, for the first six months following, will sell, sometimes, for 7 or 8,000 rix-dollars.”<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Schreuder, *Memoir*, 83.

<sup>454</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 23-4 (19 January 1810).

<sup>455</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:61.

<sup>456</sup> Bertolacci, *Interests of Ceylon*, 258-9.

Besides the buying and selling of oysters and pearls, there were other economic activities in the marketplace, as the bazaar attracted textile merchants, potters, grain sellers and other tradesmen and craftsmen. Dutch VOC officers grumbled about how economic activity in the region came to a grinding halt during the pearling season. Common household and consumer products such as cloth and cookware were available along with basic foodstuffs like rice and vegetables. British military official Jonathan Forbes, for instance, observed during his visit to the 1828 pearl fishery at Arippu, “As to the valuables exposed for sale, during the week I remained, they consisted of a few coarse cloths, and the commonest earthenware vessels in which the natives cook their rice.”<sup>457</sup> The pearl fishery stimulated other commercial activities beyond the bazaar. For small-time purveyors, the sale of cookware or local seafood could even be parlayed into oyster speculation. For instance, fishermen from the nearby coastal areas flocked to the pearl fishery compound to sell various sorts of seafood to people that populated the camp. Cordiner, for instance, described an exchange he had with local fishmongers: “A fleet of Negombo fishing boats surrounded the vessel, these being the only conveyances at that time ready to assist us: and they had come on speculation, to gain what they could by catching fish, and selling them for the refreshment of the adventurers at the pearl market.”<sup>458</sup> Besides seafood, which could be expensive depending on the season, the superintendent and other officials were also needed to make sure that a sufficient supply of grain and other foodstuffs were available for sale in the marketplace, as famine was a clear and present threat during the pearling season. As Governor North wrote to the Governor General of Madras ahead of the 1804 pearl fishery at Arippu, “May I take the

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<sup>457</sup> Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, 1:249.

<sup>458</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:4.

liberty of requesting your Lordship in Council, to allow the exportation of Grain from your Southern Provinces to Condatchy in Donies during the ensuing Pearl Fishery, in case circumstances should render it advisable to prohibit its General exportation.” He added: “The daily consumption of that Population assembled of that place has hitherto been amply supplied from the opposite Coast, and as their numbers will probably be very great a want of food would be most a dreadful Calamity.”<sup>459</sup>

Government officials laid out the camp and enlisted people to build structures such as the warehouses and washing stations, but there were many other types of buildings and settlement patterns that fell outside the purview of the government. These included huts of people attending the fishery that did not have a direct relationship with the government proprietor, individuals unlike the principal renter and his retinue. Those who did not receive special privileges from the government instead were left to carry their own building supplies to the site of the pearl fishery. Robert Fellowes, for instance, wrote, “During their stay they reside in temporary huts formed of sticks, mat, pieces of cloth, rice-straw, and Palmyra leaves. The huts are ranged in regular streets, and contain thousands of busy and animated inhabitants.”<sup>460</sup> Likewise, Cordiner referred to people transporting construction materials to build temporary shelters. He wrote, “Every man carries with him the materials necessary for this purpose, which consists of sticks, mats, pieces of cotton cloth of various colours, rice-straw, cocoa-nut, and palmyra leaves: he raises his simple shed almost as easily and as speedily as he could pitch a tent.”<sup>461</sup> The erection of rude structures, however, became increasingly unacceptable to government

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<sup>459</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3563, 70-1 (9 January 1804).

<sup>460</sup> Fellowes, *History of Ceylon*, 279.

<sup>461</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:48

officials during the course of the nineteenth century as concerns over migration, disease, and security at the pearl fishery mounted. By improving the infrastructure of the pearl fishery, colonial officials intended to fix the event to particular spots instead of shifting its location from season to season.<sup>462</sup> Madras and Colombo took many approaches to achieving this goal. Some proposed permanently settling certain populations to Arippu, which presumably reduced the number of bodies moving between the island and mainland during the pearling season. There were also plans to improve existing structures at various locations of the pearl fishery. For example, British officials took notice of a small home near the site of the pearl fishery that once belonged to the Dutch VOC chief resident at Tuticorin. For instance, Collector Hepburn of Tirunelveli wrote to the Board requesting permission for one of his subordinates to use the house during the 1807 pearl fishery at Tuticorin. Even though the house was in a “very bad state of repair” and “striped [*sic*] of its doors and Windows,” Hepburn wanted Fort St. George to grant Company servants working at Tuticorin permission to live in the house during the pearling season.<sup>463</sup>

But perhaps the most elaborate and ostentatious display of efforts by the British governments to develop the pearl fishery was undertaken by Governor North of Ceylon in the first decade of the nineteenth century. North designed and constructed a rather impressive structure that sat overlooking the pearling grounds at Arippu, providing the highest-ranking official on the island with a view of the proceedings.<sup>464</sup> Conceived as a residence for the governor and his retinue during the pearling season, construction on the

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<sup>462</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea.”

<sup>463</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 8 (8 January 1807).

<sup>464</sup> Dhanesh Wisumperuma, “The Doric at Arippu: Its Date and Identification,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* (New Series), 51 (2005): 79-96.

building finished by 1804, and the Governor North took up residence there soon after. It became known simply as “The Doric,” a name derived from the classical design of its exterior columns. In 1802, Governor North happily reported to London, “A Lodge for the Residence of the Governour [*sic*], or the Commissioners of the Pearl Fishery near Arripo, [is] nearly Finished.” There were other infrastructure projects undertaken in conjunction with, and in the vicinity of, the Doric such as the “Brick Pavements & Drains for the Pearl Oysters at Kandatchey.”<sup>465</sup> Governor North provided London with periodic construction reports, though usually these included information on how the project was over time and over budget. For example, in one dispatch to London, Governor North wrote, “The Small House at Arripo is nearly finished, and a beautiful Building, but, owing to the unfavourable Circumstances of the Distance of Materials, the Awkwardness of the Natives employed in its Construction, and the Illness which prevailed among Them, during the greater Part of the Term of their Labour, the Expençe has exceeded the Estimate in a Triple Proportion.”<sup>466</sup> The construction of the Doric and expansion of government oversight of the pearling industry in the first decade of the nineteenth century were not coincidental. The Doric represented the highest ideal of the pearl fishery as a government-regulated space and enterprise. As James Bennett wrote, “[Upon the arid sands of Aripo] stands the beautiful Doric mansion, built by Governor North. This is occupied by the supervisor (who is vested with full magisterial powers) and his friends.”<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> UKNA, CO 54, Vol. 7, 23.

<sup>466</sup> UKNA, CO 54, Vol. 13, 40.

<sup>467</sup> Bennett, *Ceylon and its Capabilities*, 204.

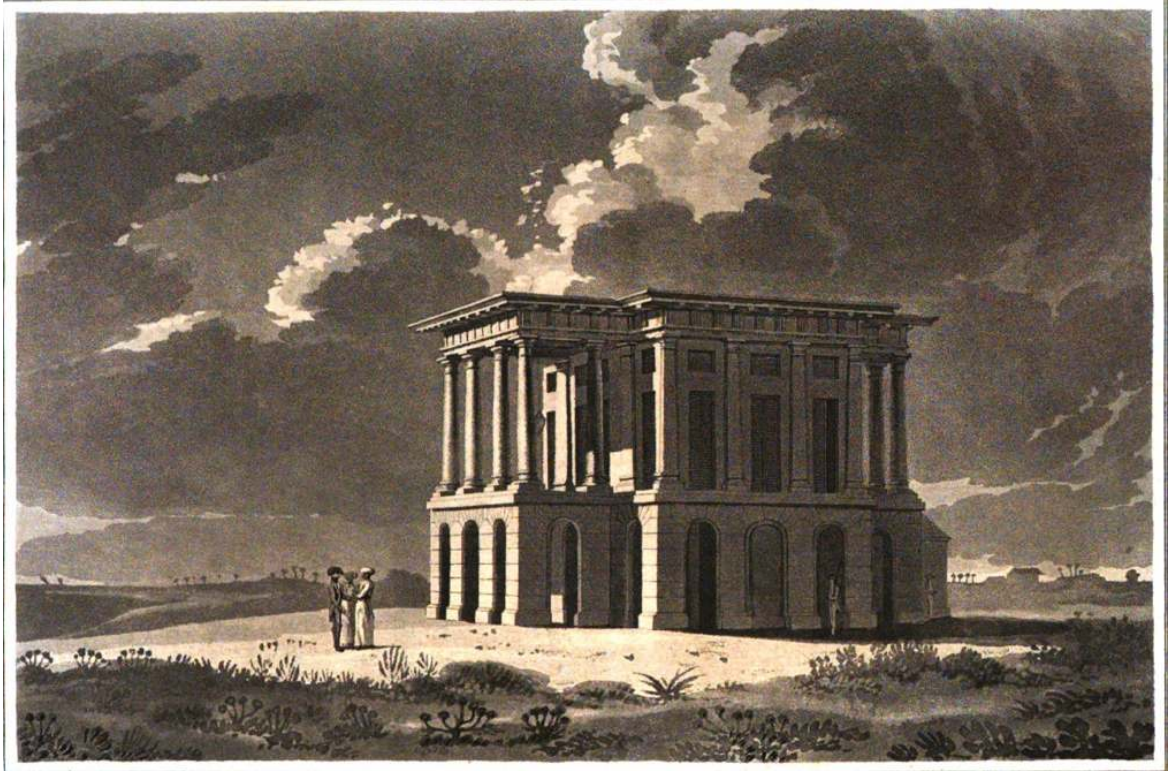


Figure 7. “The Governor's House at Aripo.” James Cordiner, *A Description of Ceylon: Containing an Account of the Country, Inhabitants, and Natural Productions* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807).

Many travelers and friends of the governors who occupied the building expressed wonder at the majesty of the Doric. For example, George Annesley wrote a vivid and detailed description of his stay at the house while a guest of governor: “It is certainly a pretty piece of Doric architecture, and, I believe, very pure. The outside is entirely covered with a brilliant white chunam, which has all the effect of marble. The oyster shells have been burnt to form it, and certainly answer better than any thing else.”<sup>468</sup> However, Annesley was less dazzled by the modest interior of the building and judged North’s choice of locale. He wrote, “The interior is inconvenient, and small. I am surprised that Mr. North did not prefer St. Sebastian to this place, where he can reside for a few weeks only in the year. He would also there have had the benefit of beautiful

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<sup>468</sup> Annesley, *Voyages and Travels in India*, 1:335.



scenery, and lofty shady trees; whilst here nothing can be more unsightly than the country around, which is a perfect flat, sandy, and without a tree.”<sup>469</sup> He continued: “A garden, they say, is to be formed; but for years nothing but the ocean, and as dreary a waste on land, will be visible from the windows.”<sup>470</sup> Traveler Jonathan Forbes gave the Doric a far less glowing review: “A very large house, built by Governor North, at a great expense, is called the Doric, from the style of its architecture, which may be correct, but its plan and situation are so ill suited to the place, as to make it appear one of the most prominent features of the ugliest landscape I had seen in Ceylon.”<sup>471</sup>

Yet the power to survey and watch over the proceedings of the pearl fishery was clearly a priority for Governor North when he selected the location of his residence. Cordiner noticed the strategic value and appeal of the buildings design in his account of Ceylon: “At one end of it a winding staircase is cut off, leading up to the terraced too, from which there is a most extensive prospect of the level country in three directions, and in the fourth the open sea, and a fine view of the line of boats, when they are returning from the banks of oysters.”<sup>472</sup> Cordiner added, “The house is pleasantly situate on the elevated bank, about a stone’s cast from the sea; and the apartments are delightfully cool, being completely surrounded by Venetian doors, or windows reaching to the floor, and constantly fanned by a regular succession of land and sea breezes.”<sup>473</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, the Doric had even become a regular feature of writings on Ceylon. For instance, an item in the *Ceylon Gazetteer* (1843) included a description of the building: “On an elevated bank near the sea shore stands a large house erected by the late

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

<sup>471</sup> Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, 1:249.

<sup>472</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:38.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid.

Earl Guilford, commonly called the Doric, from the front being of that order of architecture. During the period of the pearl fishery off Condachy, it is the residence of the Governor, if he visits the place.”<sup>474</sup> The pearl fishery might even have been something of a leisure activity for English officers and their families. An item in the Ceylon Government *Gazette*, for example, noted that “Governor [Brownrigg] and Mrs. Brownrigg, Sir Alexander & Lady Johnston and a large Party went out on the 15<sup>th</sup> to see the Diving.”<sup>475</sup>

By the 1830s, the Doric no longer served its intended purpose and officials turned their attention to improving the functioning of markets and marketplaces at the pearl fishery in other ways. The government of British Ceylon in particular continued to improve the infrastructure of the pearl fishery compound by building permanent structures, such as warehouses, army barracks, officers’ quarters, and administrative buildings. James Steuart wrote: “Since the year 1834, some comfortable barracks for the accommodation of the Troops, who attend the fisheries as guards over the property, have been built with brick at a convenient distance from the place where the oysters are landed from the Aripo banks. There has also been erected a small custom house, and had the fisheries continued successful, it was intended to have a Court House for the District Judge, and an Office or Cutcherry for the Government Agent built in a permanent manner. Formerly all these erections were of a temporary nature, consisting of bungalows formed of sticks, Palmyra leaves, and mats—the only government building being that which from the style of its architecture, is called the Doric.”<sup>476</sup> The Doric, once a shining

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<sup>474</sup> Chitty, *Ceylon Gazetteer*, 14.

<sup>475</sup> Ceylon Government Gazette, No. 653, Wednesday 23 March 1814, UKNA, CO 58, Vol. 1.

<sup>476</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 11.

example of governmental power and surveillance had fallen into a state of disrepair only a few short decades after its construction, quickly turning from a symbol of colonial state power into a historical relic. It no longer served as a grand residence but instead functioned as sea marker and curious ruin. In the late nineteenth century, one of the superintendents of the pearl fishery for British Ceylon casually remarked, “The old Doric building, which has now almost disappeared, was built, I believe, to serve as a mark as well as a residence.”<sup>477</sup> By the early twentieth century, marine biologist W. A. Herdman wrote, “At Aripu, we visited the ruins of the ‘Doric,’ a classic structure often referred to in the reports of the pearl fisheries, and which we had been using as a landmark.”<sup>478</sup>

### **An Uncertain Nature: Hazard, Security, and Protection**

The Company Raj and British Ceylon employed different strategies to ensure that the pearl fishery was a safe and profitable venture but a host of factors had the potential to undermine the health and vitality of the industry. There were many interruptions to activities at the pearl fishery that did not cause too much commotion or worry amongst parties with vested interests in the enterprise. For instance, religious festivals such as Ramadan, Pongal, and Good Friday often coincided with the scheduled dates of the pearl fishery. Attended mostly by divers, boatmen, and other members of laboring classes, religious and cultural events did cause delays, but they were usually marked off in advance of the pearling season by government officials and the renters were reassured that such special religious holidays would not impinge upon his lease. There were weekly

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<sup>477</sup> Twynam, *Report on the Ceylon Pearl Fisheries*, 20.

<sup>478</sup> Herdman, *Report to the Government of Ceylon*, 1:57.

church services at nearby chapels in Tuticorin and Arippu for the Christian workforce. Sunday was an observed holiday at the pearl fishery, a practice that reached back to the early Portuguese period that was also recognized by the Dutch. The renter was not obligated to pay for these days. This “customary” practice was also written into the contract between the renter and government proprietor as a way to minimize conflict and disagreement between parties. For instance, the contract between Gregory Baboom, the renter of the 1800 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, and Madras contained the following clause: “Whereas it has been customary under the Dutch Government to grant the Divers a respite from their labours Sunday the Sundays within the above [period] of the thirty days of my rent but in consideration of my granting the divers the same indulgence as they have heretofore enjoyed; the Right Hon’ble [Lordship in] Council must consent that four days shall be added to the above mentioned period of my rent.”<sup>479</sup> As seen in the previous chapter, however, authorities did not always respect scheduled recesses from pearling, as there are some documented episodes in which the divers and boatmen were forced by physical violence and intimidation to work on Sundays. According to a petition submitted by Dratcha Annasami Chetti, the renter of the 1807 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, “There was no custom of carrying on the Fishery on Sundays anywhere, they have accordingly one Sunday only but the Boat People were beat and forced to fish on all Sundays afterwards.”<sup>480</sup>

Colonial administrators did not have control over gods and winds but they did identify areas that threatened the profitability of the pearl fishery and placed themselves in the role of mitigating such factors. Security and safety fears brought on by seasonal

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<sup>479</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3559, 32 (12 August 1800).

<sup>480</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 446, 4431 (29 June 1807).

migration, epidemic outbreaks, predatory animals, fragile marine environments, theft, and smuggling increased the risk of investing in a pearl fishery to local merchants. Concerns over disease at the pearl fishery, as well as the uncontrolled migration of people, mapped onto wider concerns in early colonial India and Sri Lanka about sanitation, health, and security at crossroad institutions like bazaars, army barracks, and religious pilgrimages.<sup>481</sup> The pearl fisheries provided timely opportunities for Madras and Colombo to increase the British military and naval presence in the region. The deployment of military forces during the pearling season can also be found in sources from the Portuguese and Dutch eras and were often embroiled in local political rivalries.<sup>482</sup> Likewise, when English East India Company was actively engaged in combat during the Anglo-French Wars in the late eighteenth century, the opportunity to deploy military and naval forces to Mannar during the pearl fishery reflected wider geo-military and strategic concerns. George Turnour, a military-minded officer and one-time superintendent of the pearl fishery, warned Governor North in November 1798 about the vulnerability of the pearl fishery. He requested from Governor North a fresh supply of troops and boats to protect the pearl banks and guard against French incursions. As Turnour wrote, “The first point to which I wish to call your Excellency’s attention is the facility with which the Government of the Isles of France might at a very small expense effectually prevent the execution of a Pearl Fishery, unless precautions be taken that have

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<sup>481</sup> David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993); Yang, *Bazaar India*, 112-60; Eric Tagliacozzo, “Hajj in the Time of Cholera: Pilgrim Ships and Contagion from Southeast Asia to the Red Sea,” in *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print*, eds. James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 103-20; Erica Wald, *Vice in the Barracks: Medicine, the Military, and the Making of Colonial India, 1780-1868* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>482</sup> Schreuder, *Memoir*, 9-18; De Silva, “Portuguese and Pearling”; Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea.”

not been used hitherto.”<sup>483</sup> Turnour estimated that “two or three small Brigs, or Sloops, armed with two or four Guns each at an Expense not exceeding £1,000 or £1,200” would do the job.<sup>484</sup> However, if the French war-boats or any other maritime forces arrived to the pearling grounds and “find no English Cruiser there,” Turnour feared that the “the end of the Expedition would be completely effected.”<sup>485</sup> And though he was “perfectly aware of the difficulty a Cruiser would find in getting out of the Gulph [*sic*] towards the latter end of April,” Turnour was of the “Opinion that two small Bombay Cruisers cannot perform a more valuable Service than protection the Pearl Fishery.”<sup>486</sup>

Turnour’s search for an adequate supply of troops and vessels to protect the pearling grounds further illustrates how government officials from the island and mainland shared military resources, transporting boats and arms various ports and harbors each season depending on the needs and demands of the pearl fishery. In another instance, the superintendent of the 1800 pearl fishery at Tuticorin anxiously waited for the arrival of a sloop from Jaffnapatnam once owned by the Dutch because it “became indispensably necessary for the Security of the Banks against plunder from the Many Boats and Diverse assembled for the Fishery, to engage an armed Cutter to guard them.”<sup>487</sup> When a government boat was not available or delayed, or in cases when officials requested additional support, stopgap measures were taken such as contracting the services of experienced locals. The collector of Tirunelveli, for instance, wrote from Kilakkarai in March 1800, “The Sloop in question will save the expense of hiring a vessel for the indispensable purpose of guarding the banks during the Fishery, and as the people

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<sup>483</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 71.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

<sup>486</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 73.

<sup>487</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 249, 3100 (10 April 1800).

in charge of her have been accustomed to this service they will perform it better than persons unacquainted with it.”<sup>488</sup> In other cases, the superintendent of the pearl fishery hired local Europeans for this work. At the 1822 pearl fishery at Punnaikayal, the superintendent engaged a certain John Meyer, a man who had also served as a guarantor for one of the prospective renters, as the private contractor for a guard vessel.<sup>489</sup> The collector provided Meyer with a list a list of duties and responsibilities to follow during his service, which included checking passports and boat numbers and making sure that boats did not venture beyond the demarcated boundaries of the fishery.<sup>490</sup> Indeed, the instructions sent to Meyer suggests that boats employed during the pearling season served many functions. In his request to the Board for an armed vessel at the 1810 pearl fishery, Collector Hepburn of Tirunelveli outlined how he intended to use one of the boats at his disposal: “I request the sanction of the Board to employ a Vessel upon the Bank at the rate of ten Star [Pagodas] a day Commanded by an European to regulate the tie of Fishing inspect the passes of the Several Boats & to prevent the Banks being destroyed by the Divers examining over it at will before they have Cleared away all the Shells regularly from the part at which they Commence this is a most necessary precaution & one that has always been used.”<sup>491</sup>

Military forces deployed during the pearl fishery were usually made up of native troops under the command of European officers commonly known in Anglo-Indian parlance as Sepoys. The fact that the East India Company employed native troops to

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<sup>488</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2161 (6 March 1800).

<sup>489</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 386 (26 January 1822).

<sup>490</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 406-7 (3 February 1822); TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 449 (8 June 1822). A similar set of instructions were sent to the commander of the guard vessels at the 1830 pearl fishery. TNA, TDR, Vol. 4719, 240-1 (13 March 1830).

<sup>491</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 67-8 (21 February 1810).

guard the pearling grounds and police the event should not come as a surprise. Historians have long acknowledged the role of Indian troops in supporting British advancement and military achievements. Works by historians Seema Alavi, Nile Green, and many others provide social profiles of the troops and the political systems which they inhabited, and the close attention paid to such conditions brings the contours of discipline, recruitment, and military cultures into view.<sup>492</sup> Unfortunately, little information exists on the constitution of the native regiments deployed by the Company army to the pearl fishery, how service in the pearl fishery may have contributed to a transformation of military culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, or whether there was a traditional guard for the pearl fisheries employed by local states that were incorporated into the military ranks of the company-state. Most of the references to Sepoys are preoccupied by logistics and security concerns. The superintendents of the 1799 pearl fishery wrote to Governor North with a request for more troops at the pearl fishery. They wrote that while a “Detachment of Troops destined for the Duty of the Pearl Fishery” was welcome, the contingent of troops only contained “Eighty five [*sic*] Sepoys,” a number “not deemed sufficient for the necessary calls of that Service.”<sup>493</sup> Sepoys were not the only type of native military force deployed to protect the persons and property at the pearl fishery. There are references, for example, to contingents of native military troops that came from the Malay community of Ceylon. In addition to the eighty-five Sepoys

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<sup>492</sup> Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); David E. Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994); Seema Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India, 1770-1830* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Douglas Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in India, 1819-1835* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1995); Kaushik Roy, ed., *War and Society in Colonial India, 1807-1945* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); Nile Green, *Islam and the Army in Colonial India: Sepoy Religion in the Service of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009);

<sup>493</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 202.



requested by the commissioners, they also wanted Governor North to send an “additional force” of a “Capt. & Compy. of Malays” from Calpetyn to Arippu.<sup>494</sup> During his visit to the 1797 pearl fishery, naturalist Henry Le Beck also noted the presence of Malay troops, writing that in order “to prevent riot and disorder, an officer with a party of Malays is stationed here.”<sup>495</sup> They “occupy a large square, where they have a field-piece, and a flag-staff for signals.”<sup>496</sup> Besides temporary reinforcements and seasonal appointments, there are evidence that suggest concerted efforts by British officials to maintain a permanent military presence at forts in places like Arippu and Tuticorin, locations that hosted some of the largest and most frequent pearl fisheries off the coast of the island and mainland, respectively.

Superintendents of the pearl fishery also mobilized armed forces from local zamindar households and compensated such troops with government funds. For instance, the collector of Tirunelveli spent over Rs. 400 for an “Extra Police Establishment” during his time as superintendent of the 1822 pearl fishery at Tuticorin. He believed that reinforcements were necessary because this particular year promised to be a particularly large and robust harvest. He anticipated a healthy return of pearls and profits and witnessed many rich merchants with impressive supplies of coin start to populate the camp. As the collector wrote in a dispatch to the Board of Revenue at Fort St. George, “the great number of Merchants assembled with property not short of 14 lacs of Rupees is in a totally unprotected part of the Coast, rendered it an imperious duty to afford the most

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<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

<sup>495</sup> Le Beck, “Account of the Pearl Fishery,” 398.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

effectual protection to their persons and property.”<sup>497</sup> The “Ordinary police Establishment could not have possibly answered” the security needs, according to Collector Hudleston, which left the merchants and their property exposed to theft and robbery.<sup>498</sup> Hudleston requested armed persons from nearby zamindar estates as a stopgap measure to deter any potential theft or robbery attempts. The collector informed the Board that he “not only entertained the temporary sibbendy which appears in the account but also called on the neighbouring Zamindars of Yettiapoorum and Moniatchy to furnish [men] and by the regularity of the system of Police Established.”<sup>499</sup> At the conclusion of the fishery, he happily reported to the Board, “that not a single robbery of any consequence took place which in such a situation so large a body of merchants and Capital Collected can only be attributed to the efficiency of the extensive Establishment employed in keeping in the [numerous] depredations who were prepared to have taken advantage of any opportunity of plunder.”<sup>500</sup> He also noted that he received positive feedback from merchants, a contingent at the fishery that government officials were, of course, eager to please since they possessed capital, expertise, and authority upon which Madras and Ceylon relied: “The principal Merchants expressed to me their apprehensions of attack at the Commencement of the fishery and I know them to be so well founded that I considered myself bound to take the most effectual measure for their protection.”<sup>501</sup>

Smuggling and other forms of clandestine trade added to the general climate of insecurity at the pearl fishery and further animated the formation of a multi-faceted government security apparatus. Pearls were high-value and low-bulk commodities, which

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<sup>497</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 120 (8 April 1822).

<sup>498</sup> Ibid.

<sup>499</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 924, 8735-6 (23 September 1822).

<sup>500</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 121 (8 April 1822).

<sup>501</sup> Ibid.

meant that thieves, pirates, and smugglers could more easily conceal and transport the product without detection.<sup>502</sup> Portuguese voyager Pedro Teixeira wrote in the late sixteenth century that there was “much trade in smuggled pearls outside the [customs house], free from such hindrances as customs or return of the goods.”<sup>503</sup> Smuggling was also at the forefront of concerns for Dutch VOC officers. Dutch Governor Jan Schreuder, for example, requested that armed vessels target a “smugglers nest” near Calpetyn.<sup>504</sup> A rather broad category, colonial officials and other observers applied the term smuggling to a variety of different acts, which was also the case in other historical contexts such as late nineteenth-century Southeast Asia.<sup>505</sup> In some cases, smuggling—at least as it related to the movement of pearls—was used to describe the failure of merchants to deliver proper paperwork to customs agents and their refusal to pay duties. For example, a certain Gopal Das had seed pearls and embroidered cloths confiscated because he did not have genuine documents.<sup>506</sup> The British further interpreted smuggling as illicit or unauthorized fishing, which was often done under the pretense of chank diving during the off-season. The collector of Tirunelveli included a specific clause in the advertisement for the rent of the 1825 chank fishery “as a warning to any renter from Ceylon who from convenience of salutation may attempt to smuggle.”<sup>507</sup> The advertisement noted that “it may be useful to state that the necessary vessels and all their hands and equipments [*sic*] may be engaged in the neighbourhood [*sic*] of the fishery and that the Chank must be

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<sup>502</sup> Warsh, “Adorning Empire.”

<sup>503</sup> Teixeira, *Travels*; Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 166.

<sup>504</sup> Schreuder, *Memoir*; Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek*, 117; Stein van Golleneese, *Memoir*, 43.

<sup>505</sup> Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders*.

<sup>506</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1287, 5504-5 (9 June 1831); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1289, 5876-7 (20 June 1831); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1286, 5121-4 (26 May 1831).

<sup>507</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4699, 83 (16 May 1825).

landed and pay duty before it can be exported from the Coast of Tinnevely.”<sup>508</sup>

Smuggling also applied to illegal or unauthorized fishing conducted during the season of the pearl fishery. As a list of regulations posted at the 1800 pearl fishery at Tuticorin read, “In case it should happen that a smuggling Dony be found amongst the others with Design to fish Oysters under pretence [*sic*] of wind and Currents and of being driven away by night, and others unfortunate Circumstances, it shall be immediately seized and the parties threatened as the Circumstances shall require.”<sup>509</sup> Illegal pearl diving during the off-season and chank fishery were difficult to stop because both required regular monitoring of pearling grounds. Nevertheless, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries invested British Ceylon and the Company Raj with some new tools to monitor and protect the pearl fishery from theft and smuggling. For instance, British Ceylon codified its police powers through legislative acts in the early nineteenth century. A legislative act of 1811 authorized the government to curb theft and clandestine fishing during the off-season of the pearl fishery by arresting any boats and crews that violated that space.<sup>510</sup> The act was motivated by the suspicion that “depredations are committed in the Pearl Banks of this Island by Boats and other Vessels frequenting those places in the calm season without any necessity or lawful cause.”<sup>511</sup>

The camp at the pearl fishery was a favorite target of thieves. Government officials believed that it was incumbent upon the superintendent and his assistants to mobilize the necessary police forces to deter robbers and raiders from striking the camp.

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<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

<sup>509</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 248, 2879 (3 April 1800). Similar terms and conditions governed the 1815 pearl fishery at Tiruchendur. The superintendent received two Tamil translations of the rules and regulations from a previous fishery. TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 672, 3168-9 (30 March 1815).

<sup>510</sup> Regulation No. 3 of 1811, *A Collection of Legislative Acts of the Ceylon Government from 1796* (Colombo: Government Press, 1853-54), 130.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid.

Collector Hudleston of Tirunelveli in his capacity as superintendent of the 1822 pearl fishery near Tuticorin described the state of affairs to a military commander when he requested a surge of troops and munitions. “It appears to me absolutely necessary,” Hudleston wrote to Lieutenant Colonel Pollock at Palamcottah, “to the efficient protection of the very large quantity of specie which is now collected here” that additional police forces were needed.<sup>512</sup> This was a “very extensive Pearl fishery being expected to take place shortly,” Hudleston continued, and “I have to request that you will have the goodness to order a Havildars Guard from the Corps on duty at Palamcottah to be detached on the duty of Guarding the Banksols [warehouses] at such time as I may apply to the officer commanding for their services.”<sup>513</sup> From Hudleston’s perspective, this was an “emergency,” as there were “upwards of 14 lacs of Rupees as well as that of the valuable proceeds of the fishery” to protect.<sup>514</sup> Under such circumstances, he wrote, the number of guards “should be immediately strengthened to the number of 100 men” commanded by an European officer.<sup>515</sup> Hudleston suggested that these military supplies could be retained for future pearl fisheries so that the government would not have to scramble each season to mobilize troops and arms.<sup>516</sup> Officials also stationed armed vessels to patrol the waters and keep boats from venturing beyond the designated area of the fishery. This required the shipment of military supplies from garrisons and other military establishments to the site of the pearl fishery. After Hudleston requested some firearms and artillery from the commanding officer at Palamcottah in Tirunelveli district, Lieutenant Colonel Pollock dispatched a train of at least twenty bullocks and two drivers

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<sup>512</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 389-90 (2 February 1822).

<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

<sup>515</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 411 (3 February 1822).

<sup>516</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 917, 5778-9 (12 June 1822).

to transport the supplies from his station to the pearl fishery compound outside Tuticorin. Hudleston then enlisted the transporters for added protection during the pearl fishery, writing to Pollock, “I have thought it advisable to [detain] the escort who accompanied the gun in order to avail myself of their service during the fishery for the protection of the valuable Property which will be collected here under the hope that no inconvenience will result to your arrangements from the measure.”<sup>517</sup> Superintendents of the pearl fisheries also requested supplies such as gunpowder from the military divisions of Madras and Ceylon to be used for signal cannons and protection.

The use of heavy artillery for protecting the persons and property at the pearl fishery was not simply for show, as administrators, merchants, and other people who populated the compound regularly faced the threat of theft and violence. For example, after attacking a local native revenue collector in a nearby town, a team of bandits stole cash from the merchants’ quarters at the 1818 fishery at Punnaikayal. A letter from Collector Cotton of Tirunelveli to the Board described “a daring attack by a Gang of Robbers” in a town near Tuticorin “in which they severely beat & wounded” many in attendance and “succeeded in carrying off” over one hundred pagodas that reportedly belonged to the government.<sup>518</sup> According to the collector, “the same Gang” followed that raid with an attack on some of the merchants at the pearl fishery and “plundered to the amount of Pagodas 400 which for a time caused great alarm” across the camp.<sup>519</sup> In order to assuage these fears, the collector ordered an escalation of police forces to protect the compound, which apparently worked, because the happily reported later to the Board

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<sup>517</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 408-9 (3 February 1822).

<sup>518</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3595, 151 (2 April 1818).

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

that “that by strengthening the guards of Peons we have succeeded in quitting their fear.”<sup>520</sup> Collector Cotton added that he was in hot pursuit of the suspects: “I trust through the exertions now using The Offenders on either occasions will not escaped detention but that I shall shortly be able to report to you their apprehension & recovery of some of the Property Stolen.”<sup>521</sup> Aside from actual physical harm and material losses, theft, or at least the perceived threat of theft, could bring economic activity at the pearl fishery to a standstill. For instance, the collector of Tirunelveli who superintended the 1818 pearl fishery delayed the sale of boats at auction because “of the alarm which took place on Occasion of the Robber” a few nights before. Collector Cotton wrote to the Board in April 1818, “In Consequence of the alarm which took place on Occasion of the Robber...the last sale of the Boats was postponed and since then the wind from the East & North East has been strong as to have prevented the Boats from Going out to the Banks after the new Moon tomorrow we may however expect another change of Weather and I will hope...to be able to report to you that the Business of the fishery is again going on prosperously.”<sup>522</sup> British officials and their agents also heard complaints from aggrieved parties. They investigated crimes such as theft and fraud, and meted out justice, which sometimes assumed the form of physical punishment. At the 1799 pearl fishery, for example, the commissioners at the 1799 pearl fishery heard complaints against a certain Meera Lubbai who allegedly robbed the warehouse of a notable merchant and stabbed with a knife some of the people who tried to arrest him. The commissioners listened to

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<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

<sup>522</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3595, 156 (4 April 1818).

the case against the offender and ordered that he “receive [at least one] hundred strokes of a Rattan.”<sup>523</sup>

In the face of security threats that ranged from night raids and illicit fishing to theft, both Madras and Colombo supplied the wealthy elite merchants who rented the pearl fishery with armed guards. Security details were a service provided to the renter based on his special contractual relationship with the governments of Madras and Ceylon and therefore not available to all attendees. There are many documented cases, for instance, of security forces supplied by the Company Raj and British Ceylon escorting the renter and his party to and from the camp. Merchants often carried large supplies of coin, treasure, papers, and valuables to the pearl fishery making them targets for bandits. Protective forces continued their work during the event, performing such duties as watching over warehouses where pearls, oysters, and other high-value items were stored. They also served also served as personal bodyguards of the renter. Their services, however, were not always automatically provided by the government to the renter and his colleagues. Prospective renters made requests for such favors in rental applications and subsequent communications with government officials. For instance, the contract between the Board of Revenue at Fort St. George and Chinniah Mudaliar for the rent of the 1805 pearl fishery contained the following clause: “That I am to be provided with a Guard for the protection and security of the fishery and with the usual accommodations of Bankshalls to be erected at the companys [*sic*] Expense, Taurpaulins [*sic*], etc.”<sup>524</sup> That same year, the application of a certain Chidambaram Pillai read, “The Honble Company should supply the sufficient Banksals and the mats for the Banksals and Houses that may

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<sup>523</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 250.

<sup>524</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3565, 39 (22 March 1805).



be required by the Renter as also the sufficient Guard of Sepoys to guard the Banksalls, Houses and Bazars from being plundered and Robbed or molested.”<sup>525</sup> A Jaffna Tamil merchant named Kundappah Chetti also wanted the East India Company to provide him with armed escorts during his rent of the 1822 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, the same fishery for which Collector Hudleston had called for additional troops to be sent from the fort at Palamcottah. In a letter to the Board of Revenue, he wrote “I further solicit your Board will be pleased to order a Guard consisting of 12 Sepoys and 1 [Nayak] to accompany me and the merchants for the security of our persons and of our respective properties until our safe return to Madras from pilfering and other thefts which may otherwise occasion persons resorting to pearl fishery as was observed on former occasions.”<sup>526</sup> He referred to the pearl fishery as “being abounded with Robbers” who “pilfer the bankshalls where Oysters are stored” in a petition to the Board.<sup>527</sup> As “the Merchants having incurred considerable losses in the former fisheries,” his petition read, “I humbly beg your Honorable Board will be pleased to direct the Collector of Tinnevely or commanding Officer to post an adequate number of sepoy and also such other peons that may be sufficient to secure the Oysters and of supporting the renter with the Merchants connected with this transaction.”<sup>528</sup> To substantiate his plea, Kundappah Chetti even enjoined the Board to consult the records of previous pearl fisheries in its office, as a “similar indulgence was shewn [*sic*] to [him] by the Government of Ceylon in subsequent years.”<sup>529</sup> The Board met Kundappah Chetti’s request and then wrote to the governing council at Fort St. George, asking its members to “procure the necessary authority” from

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<sup>525</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2179 (6 March 1800).

<sup>526</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1129 (7 February 1822).

<sup>527</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1259-60 (11 February 1822).

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, 1260.

<sup>529</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1129 (7 February 1822).

the Governor of Madras for an escort of 12 Sepoys under the proper officer for the protection of the Renter of the Pearl fishery of the Toleyaram parr near Tutacoryn on his way to the place of fishery during his stay there and on his return, since he is under the necessity of moving accompanied by a considerable property.”<sup>530</sup> Under such protection, Kundappah Chetti traveled to the site of the pearl fishery with a large retinue, many of whom carried with them prodigious amounts of coin for the purpose of renting boats and purchasing oysters. According to an official report, “The Renter left this place...accompanied by the Guard which the Honorable the Governor in Council were pleased to allow for the Security of his own Property, and of the large sums of Money taken down by the Merchants who accompanied him, to purchaser the Oysters when drawn up.”<sup>531</sup> British traveler James Cordiner also noticed the size and glitz of the renter and his retinue: “The renter reared a house for himself in one corner of [an extensive square of temporary buildings], of the same perishable material. He brought a large family with him, and thirteen palanquins, to each of which were attached thirteen bearers well dressed, also a few sepoy with rusty muskets, some of which constantly attended him, and ran by the side of his palanquin, when he went abroad in that conveyance.”<sup>532</sup>

While government officials employed guards and police to protect the produce, persons, and property at the pearl fishery, there was also a market for protective services that fell outside the immediate purview of British Ceylon and the Company Raj. From eyewitness accounts, it appears that merchant-investors also hired private guards to oversee operations at various stages of the pearling process. From fishing and diving at

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<sup>530</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 907, 2086-7 (28 February 1822). For more references, see TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1269 (11 February 1822); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 906, 1288-9 (14 February 1822).

<sup>531</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 907, 2086-7 (28 February 1822).

<sup>532</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:48.

off the coast to washing and sorting pearls and oysters on the shore, the presence of security forces was a regular fixture of the pearl fishery. The washing and sorting process was watched particularly close by private security guards. British traveler Robert Percival, for example, wrote that “the boat-owners and merchants dealing in the oysters, are obliged to hire people to collect the pearls out of them; and to prevent embezzling, confidential persons are appointed, who constantly attend to watch over and observe them.”<sup>533</sup> There is little information about the labor market for security and military personnel at the pearl fishery, which is unfortunate because there is a relatively dearth of studies on the topic in the context of southern India compared to northern regions of the subcontinent and the wider Indian Ocean realm. Protection rackets and other forms of organized violence as a form of extraction may have also happened at the pearl fishery but there is not sufficient evidence to develop a complete picture. There is scant evidence to suggest that anything like the seasonal military entrepreneur discussed by historian Dirk Kolff in his classic study of military cultures in north India was present during the pearl fishery.<sup>534</sup>

British officials on both sides of the Gulf also expressed concern about a range of environmental factors, which they maintained had the potential to negatively impact the performance and profitability of the pearl fishery. They were cognizant of the fact that a healthy production of pearl oysters was contingent upon favorable environmental conditions yet forces of nature like violent storms were beyond their immediate control. These events were quite common and thus accounted for in many of the contracts signed by merchant-renters and government proprietors. Such contractual provisions, however,

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<sup>533</sup> Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 79-80; Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:58.

<sup>534</sup> Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, Sepoy*.

did not always protect the government from compensatory claims, as merchants and other parties with vested interests in pearling sought reparations when natural forces acted upon the coastal and marine environments of Mannar. Such was the case at the 1810 pearl fishery on the India-side of the Gulf when a tempest stirred up the water and made it too cloudy for divers to locate and retrieve pearl oysters. The superintendent wrote to the Board, “The weather however unfortunately proved very unfavorable on that day and in Consequence of a very Strong north east wind blew all day and a very Strong Current which rendered the water Muddy & a dark Cloudy day the number of Oysters brought in was remarkably small.”<sup>535</sup> One of the applications submitted for the rent by Cabal Mahomed Mercay of Kilakkarai accounted for such circumstances: “Such of the days as the Boats are prevented going to Sea by Gales of wind or the Muddy State of the sea must not be reckoned.”<sup>536</sup> In other cases, strong currents shifted sands and covered clusters of pearl oysters on the seafloor. For example, when Collector Hudleston of Tirunelveli launched an investigation into reasons for the underperformance of the 1822 pearl fishery, he interrogated members of the crew that had undertaken the initial examination of the banks who, he claimed had “acted with the most unpardonable negligence or shameful fraud.”<sup>537</sup> Most of those deposed blamed the low return of the pearl fishery on this unusual marine environmental phenomenon. According to the results of the investigation, two natives who worked on assaying the banks stated that the tides had smothered the oysters between the time of the examination and the start of the fishery. This not only made it difficult for divers to find the pearl oysters because they were

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<sup>535</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 96 (28 March 1810).

<sup>536</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 76 (23 February 1810).

<sup>537</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 97-8 (21 December 1821); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 908, 2726-8 (28 March 1822).

covered with sand but it also killed off entire sections of the population. According to the crew members, “The Produce fall short on account of sand and...vegetable substances having come under the places before examined by which the oysters are prevented from obtaining their food and consequently died.”<sup>538</sup> Such environmental and climatic conditions further impacted the financial viability of the pearl fishery when renters brought forth remission claims. For example, as the renter of the 1815 pearl fishery at Tiruchendur wrote in a petition to the Board of Revenue in late August of that year, “it appears that a Hurricane happened at the vicinity of Totacoreen whereby and by the Strength of the current the Pearl Oysters which were stuck to the Paars [pearl oyster banks] were washed away.”<sup>539</sup>

There were also health and sanitation issues with which government officials and attendees contend. The pearl fishery compound had long been considered by government officials and travelers as insalubrious, unsanitary, and injurious to a person’s physical health and well-being. Portuguese chronicler João Ribeiro wrote, “for the last nine days [of the fishery] the enclosures are cleansed, as so many flies are bred by the corrupt matter that the adjacent places and the whole country might be annoyed by them, if care were not taken to sweep into the sea the impurities collected during the fishery.”<sup>540</sup> Dutch Governor Baron van Imhoff also wrote about the unhygienic scene at the pearl fishery and speculated about the risks it posed to VOC troops: “We must also mention the hazards run by a few hundred men sent to keep immense crows in order, and their exposure to sickness and death as well after the fishery as during its continuance from the

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<sup>538</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 108 (2 April 1822); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 910, 3209-11 (11 April 1822).

<sup>539</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 688, 9876 (24 August 1815).

<sup>540</sup> Ribeiro, *History of Ceylon*; Hornell *Report to the Government of Madras*, 9.

stench of the oysters.”<sup>541</sup> Tens of millions of oysters were hauled ashore and left to dry in the hot sun, which created a miasma of rotting flesh and stale shells. The stench wafting over from the drying grounds could perhaps be tolerated so long as a handsome profit awaited. As British traveler and colonial official James Bennett wrote, “After the second or third day’s fishing, the stench of the dead oysters becomes intolerable to all, except those whose thirst for gain absorbs every other sense.”<sup>542</sup> The intensity of the smell diminished over time, as the flesh of the oyster wasted away, leaving all but the shell and—hopefully—a bright, beautiful pearl. Bennett continued: “But, as use reconciles one to most things in this life, custom soon neutralizes the olfactory effect of the nuisance; for the stench is considered less diffusive, as the process progresses.”<sup>543</sup> Ceylon-born Dutch naturalist Henry Le Beck offered a graphic description of the scene at the 1797 pearl fishery at Arippu: “The pestilential smell occasioned by the numbers of purifying pearl fishes [*sic*], renders the atmosphere of *Condatchey* so insufferably offensive when the southwest wind blows, that it sensibly affects the olfactory nerves of any one unaccustomed to such cadaverous smells. This putrefaction generates immense numbers of worms, flies, moschettoes [*sic*], and other vermin; all together forming a scene strongly displeasing to the senses.”<sup>544</sup> British traveler Robert Percival offered a similar account: “The stench occasioned by the oysters being left to putrefy is intolerable; and remains for a long while after the fishery is over. It corrupts the atmosphere for several

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<sup>541</sup> Baron van Imhoff, *Memoir*, 54; Hornell, *Report to the Government of Madras*, 16.

<sup>542</sup> Bennett, *Ceylon and its Capabilities*, 205.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>544</sup> Le Beck, “Account of the Pearl Fishery,” 399.

miles round Condatchy, and renders the neighborhood of that country extremely unpleasant till the monsoons and violent southwest winds set in and purify the air.”<sup>545</sup>

Like their predecessors, British officials were offended by the smell of rotting oysters and pestered by swarms of flies. In late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries they came to view the problem through a more epidemiological lens. The pearl fishery compound came to be seen as a disease vector, a dangerous space in which contagions spread. Indeed, there are many documented cases during this period in which European travelers and officials attending the pearl fishery came down sick with various illnesses. George Turnour, for example, contracted so-called “Manar fever” during his inspection of the pearl banks in late 1798. He wrote to his colleague Hugh Cleghorn, “I am sorry to add that the Dutch Surgeon (the only Medical person we have here) is of the opinion, that my Complaint is the Manar fever, & that he is apprehensive of its returning today, tomorrow, or next day; and if it should not return, he thinks that I must have recourse, for eight or ten days to preventive remedies but as I have no doubt, but that with care & an unbroken constitution, I shall be perfectly recovered by that time.”<sup>546</sup> Turnour also feared that he had been inflicted with smallpox during his service, while his colleague James McDowall came down with a case of boils, and Cleghorn believed he contracted a fever from “the putrid exhalations of the oysters.”<sup>547</sup> Government officials also described how the physical conditions of the pearl fishery camp negatively affected their health when writing to their superiors in Madras and Colombo with requests for extra compensation. For example, Collector James Hepburn of Tirunelveli requested a bonus from the Board

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<sup>545</sup> Percival, *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 71.

<sup>546</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 142.

<sup>547</sup> Aylwin Clark, *An Enlightened Scot: Hugh Cleghorn, 1752-1837* (Duns: Black Ace Books, 1992), 200.

following his superintendence of the 1810 pearl fishery. He wrote, “Conducting this fishery required six weeks incessant vigilance and personal attendance on my part obliging me to residing during the whole time a place rendered almost intolerable from the putrid State of the atmosphree [*sic*] Caused by the Exposure of so many Millions of Oysters to Corruption in the open air the bad effects of which were felt upon the health of almost every Servant who Accompanied [my] performance of that duty.”<sup>548</sup> Such requests went to the highest levels of the East India Company and British Ceylon governments and often took several years for replies from London to reach Madras or Colombo.<sup>549</sup>

Cholera was a particularly contagious and aggressive bacterial disease that regularly struck the pearl fishery camp and its inhabitants. Historian David Arnold has called cholera in colonial India a “disease of disorder.”<sup>550</sup> Cholera outbreaks at the pearl fishery were partly caused by poor water supplies and irrigation works along the coasts of western Ceylon and southeastern India. Tens of thousands of people occupied the same densely packed space, meaning that population density was another factor that facilitated the spread of the bacteria. Government officials this state of affairs and took positive steps to mitigate the damage cholera and other diseases could have wrought on the profitability and productivity of the pearl fishery. The employment of medical professions to control outbreaks and treat patients was one way that British governments intervened. In advance of the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu, the superintendents wrote to

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<sup>548</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 142-3 (20 March 1810).

<sup>549</sup> Hepburn waited more than two years to receive a bonus for his work at the 1807 pearl fishery. TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 517, 5017-21 (21 June 1810). In the case of the 1810 pearl fishery, Hepburn did not receive his award until July 1815, nearly five years after he made the request. TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 682, 7610-1 (10 July 1815). Collector James Cotton of Tirunelveli also waited five years for a response from London. TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 936, 1121 (20 January 1823).

<sup>550</sup> Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 159-99; Tagliacozzo, *The Longest Journey*, 133-55.



Governor North, anxious about the potential of a vast number of people being exposed to cholera. They wrote, “Besides the numbers of Europeans, and great concourse of Natives daily expected at Arripo, there is, and probably will continue to be stationed here, nearly 100 of the Honble Company’s Troops, such a Multitude collected in one place, many of whom from their particularly vocations exposed to casualties, must occasionally require medical assistance.”<sup>551</sup> In another case, Collector Hudleston, the superintendent of the 1822 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, urgently requested that a medical professional repair to the camp. He wrote, “Several cases of cholera having recently occurred at the fishery one poor individual being at this moment probably in extremity and the disease having likely to make the most dreadful horror amongst a vast assembled population.”<sup>552</sup> He continued: “In such a situation and under such circumstances I deem the service of a medical officer absolutely necessary here and...have to request your immediate attendance with ample provisions of anti-cholera medicine at the fishery near Tutacoreen.”<sup>553</sup> The nearest on-staff medical professional was William Turnbull, who received a letter from the Madras government that contained dire warnings. Turnbull administered what were described as European medicines, which most likely include opium and laudanum, and he quarantined infected persons on a floating “Hospital Boat.”<sup>554</sup>

In addition to reducing the labor supply and increasing medical expenses, epidemic cholera could further shrink the value of the pearl fishery to Madras and Ceylon if such outbreaks led to the granting of remissions to renters and other commercial peoples. When combined with other hazards such as low yields of pearls and oysters, a

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<sup>551</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 194.

<sup>552</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 413 (15 March 1822).

<sup>553</sup> Ibid.

<sup>554</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 99-100 (25 March 1822).

cholera outbreak could make the difference between a profitable venture and losing one. For instance, the collector of the 1828 pearl fishery at Punnaikayal recommended that the government award refunds to sub-renters because members of certain diving crews suffered from cholera. He wrote to the Board in April 1828: “It will be observed that one boat returned without Oysters some of the divers of the boat were attacked with cholera after reaching the banks and the crew became alarmed and immediately returned, I therefore recommend that the Amount Value of this Boat for One day... may be remitted and request that I may be allowed to return the Money to the Purchasers.”<sup>555</sup> Besides those merchants who rented and sub-rented boats for pearl diving, there were other commercial ventures in the bazaar that were also impacted by cholera outbreaks, such as liquor sales. For example, one of the arrack renters at the pearl fishery of 1828 requested a remission from the collector and demanded the release of property he had advanced as security. He claimed that he defaulted on this rent because of the cholera outbreak. The collector of Tirunelveli appears to have agreed in a report submitted to the Board in late August 1829: “The failure of Sodaly Mootoonadan was in a great measure caused by the cholera having broken out among the Divers and Merchants who had assembled at Pennacoil and altho’ the pearl fishery continued for the period intended, many of the Crews abandoned their boats and many Merchants with their followers left the place before the fishery was concluded.”<sup>556</sup>

Scarcity of coin was another problem that regularly beset the bazaar. Currency shortages were endemic issues across much of late eighteenth-century and early

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<sup>555</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4702, 30 (3 April 1828).

<sup>556</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1204, 8738-9 (31 August 1829). For more on this issue, see TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1191, 5603-5 (11 June 1829); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1195, 6767-8 (9 July 1829); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1197, 7140-1 (23 July 1829); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1205, 9195 (14 September 1829); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1207, 10173-4 (1 October 1829).

nineteenth-century southern India and was especially acute in colonial capitals such as Madras and Calcutta.<sup>557</sup> Cash shortages coupled with a general climate of insecurity generated the use of a range of financial instruments, such as government-issued bonds and bank notes, and set off a flurry of short-term lending and currency exchange at the pearl fishery. As the superintendent of the 1810 fishery at Tuticorin reported, “a great scarcity of Money prevailed at Tutacoryn and if my information was Correct four per Cent for fifteen days was the terms on which it could be borrowed.”<sup>558</sup> Faced with cash shortages, he chose to accept draft notes. “If I had insisted upon money,” he wrote to the Board, “[the oysters] would have sold Cheap in proportion to the difficulty in procuring them.”<sup>559</sup> In the early nineteenth century, British Ceylon civil servant Anthony Bertolacci provided a detailed description of how merchant-bankers took advantage of a market in which ready money was in high demand. “One of the safest adventures is that made by the Colombo and Jaffna merchants,” he wrote. Merchant-bankers “proceed to Condatchy with large sums of Ceylon copper coin, which they change, during the time of the fishery, for treasury notes, pagodas, Spanish dollars, or any other foreign gold or silver coin, at a profit of three or four per cent.”<sup>560</sup> According to Bertolacci, those who exchanged and borrowed money were inclined to shed their “small change” at the expiration of the fishery. The merchant-bankers who exchanged money at the start of the fishery “then return the paper, gold, and silver; taking back the copper, with a new profit; and return

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<sup>557</sup> S. Ambirajan, “Laissez-Faire in Madras,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 2, no. 3 (1965): 238-44; Peter Robb, “Credit, Work, and Race in 1790s Calcutta: Early Colonialism through a Contemporary Lens,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 37, no. 1 (2000): 1-25; Robb, “Mr. Upjohn’s Debts: Money and Friendship in Early Colonial Calcutta,” *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (2013): 1185-217; David Washbrook, “Merchants, Markets, and Commerce,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53, nos. 1/2 (2010): 266-89.

<sup>558</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 141 (20 March 1810).

<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>560</sup> Bertolacci, *Financial Interests of Ceylon*, 191.

with it to Colombo and Jaffnapatam [*sic*]; having gained seven or eight per cent. upon their capital in two months.”<sup>561</sup> The canny dealings of these men also give an indication of the assortment of currency and coin that circulated in the bazaar at the pearl fishery. A similarly complex picture emerged at Arippu in 1828. An advertisement distributed in advance of the fishery provided merchants planning to attend the fishery with an itemized list of the coins and currencies accepted by the Ceylon government.<sup>562</sup> As an advertisement for the 1828 pearl fishery at Ceylon read, which gives an indication of the plethora of coins and different types of payment: “The arrangements of this Fishery will be nearly the same as have been usual on similar occasions. The Biddings to be in Madras Rupees the payments however may be made in Ceylon Currency and other Coins at the rate which will be hereafter Notified. Bills on the Agents of this Government in Calcutta, Madras, or Bombay will in like manner be taken or Letters of Credit being produced to warrant the drawing of Bills on the said Agents. Bills on England will also be taken on the Agent of this Island and the Honorable the Court of Directors calculating the Pound Sterling, into Madras Rupees at the rate last reported by the Agents at Madras of the Exchange there. The terms of [the] sale [is] ready money.”<sup>563</sup> In another instance, British Ceylon removed any additional stamp duties and regulations for transactions ahead of the 1828 pearl fishery at Arippu “in order to facilitate the Business of the Pearl Fishery.”<sup>564</sup>

The governments of Ceylon and Madras sanctioned financial mechanisms to address chronic cash shortages and problems associated with currency exchange. Indeed,

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<sup>561</sup> Bertolacci, *Financial Interests of Ceylon*, 191-2.

<sup>562</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1130, 14790 (10 October 1827).

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>564</sup> *Legislative Acts of the Ceylon Government*, No. 1 of 1830, 361.

here too, by way of ensuring the circulation of money, the British government actively engaged in promoting the economic viability of the fisheries. The Madras-based merchant house of Messrs. Arbuthnot & Co., for example, sent a letter to the Board of Revenue expressing its desire to make funds available to an agent attending the 1818 pearl fishery at Punnaikayal.<sup>565</sup> In other cases, the government had a more direct hand in manipulating the flow of money. For instance, Governor North requested a shipment of gold and silver from Madras ahead of the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu. “This total failure of a supply of Gold will thro [sic] me entirely in the hands of few monied [sic] men here,” North wrote.<sup>566</sup> A series of advertisements in Tamil, Sinhala, Dutch, and English distributed by the Ceylon government were meant to prepare merchants for a market hamstrung by a shortage of coin. The advertisement encouraged merchants to pay either the renter or superintendent for the purchase of boats, oysters, or pearls through draft notes from the Carnatic and British Banks of Madras.<sup>567</sup> The Board instructed the superintendents of the pearl fishery to “assist the Circulation of these Drafts among the Dealers in Pearls, by causing it to be perfectly understood that they will ultimately be secured by the officers of your Government in discharge of any Public engagements, and that they will be the safest and readiest mode of remittance to this Presidency.”<sup>568</sup> However, pearl merchants did not always follow official directives, electing to use methods of lending and transferring money other than those sanctioned by the government. As the commissioners of the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu reported to Governor North, “private adventurers have not only been prevented from coming in the

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<sup>565</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 786, 3600 (12 March 1818).

<sup>566</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 218.

<sup>567</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 304-7.

<sup>568</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 185.

number expected, but the greater part who have arrived neither brought cash nor draughts from the Banks of Madras, and instead of these have been offering us Bills upon their various correspondents in different parts of India.”<sup>569</sup> The choice of draft notes and bills of exchange over cash remittances or other forms of transferring money between centers of commerce and the bazaar at the pearl fishery was significant. Both Company Madras and British Ceylon recognized that the low availability of cash or lack of access to credit could potentially bring commerce at the pearl fishery to a halt. While, at the same time, concerted efforts by government officials to endorse some forms of economic practices and discourage others were an attempt to discipline both merchants and markets at the pearl fishery. The British governments of Madras and Ceylon facilitated the movement of money and extension of credit, taking a more active role in the markets and marketplaces of the pearl fishery at a moment of colonial state formation, imperial expansion, and reform in the early nineteenth century. During the period of the Colebrooke-Cameron commission in the late 1820s and early 1830s, for instance, British Ceylon officials wanted to open the industry to more “local capitalists,” a policy designed to break the hold that native mercantile elites exercised over the affairs of the pearl fishery.<sup>570</sup>

## **Conclusion**

British Ceylon and the Company Raj sought to expand their respective influence over the pearling fishery by interrupting preexisting patterns of circulation through such tactics as controlling the flow of labor and capital, fixing the event to a particular spot, and shaping

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<sup>569</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>570</sup> *Colebrooke-Cameron Papers*; Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*.

the rhythms and organization of the industry. Far from timeless and self-sustaining, the markets and marketplaces of the pearl fishery were social and economic spaces treated by both Company and Crown officials as targets of interference and subjects of reform. From infrastructure projects such as the construction of permanent buildings to the manipulation of currency standards and money markets, British administrations on both sides of the Gulf tried to reengineer the marketplaces of the pearl fishery through a contradictory set of political economic ideas and practices guided by the ideology of improvement. Agents of the company-state and colonial state brought many important aspects of the pearling industry into their direct sphere of influence. However, there was a considerable amount of activity in the social and economic spheres of the pearl fishery, such as lending and borrowing amongst merchants and various sorts of smuggling, that did not bend to the will of Madras and Ceylon officials. Through managerial reforms, members of the Madras and Ceylon governments sought to turn the pearl fishery into a regular and predictable source of revenue, efforts that went hand in hand with colonial state formation and empire-making in the region. It followed that the vicissitudes of colonial and imperial expansion in patterned certain aspects of the business worlds of trading elites, the topic to which the next chapter turns.

## CHAPTER 3: THE BUSINESS WORLD IS MINE OYSTER

### MERCHANTS

From the Safavid port city of Bandar Abbas in June 1685, Shah Sulaimān dispatched a diplomatic mission aboard an English ship to King Narai of Siam. He commissioned the secretary of the ambassadorial team to document the journey from the Straits of Hormuz across the Indian Ocean to the Thai capital of Ayutthaya. *The Ship of Sulaimān (Safīna ‘i sulaimānī)* by Muhammad Rabi‘ bin Muhammad Ibrāhīm provides scintillating descriptions of the political, commercial, and cultural contours of the Indian Ocean in the late seventeenth century through the eyes of a Persian scribe.<sup>571</sup> Muhammad Rabi‘ described Ceylon as the place from whence “the garden of Paradise draws its fair breeze” and described the quality of pearls plucked from the shallow waters between the island and mainland. He declared that pearls from the Gulf of Mannar were inferior to those of Bahraini provenance because the former had “lost their bright countenance out of shame and grief.”<sup>572</sup> He added, “The jeweler of Time and Chance has relegated these Indian jewels of lesser lustre to a low shelf in the bazaar of happiness.”<sup>573</sup> Muhammad Rabi‘ echoed sentiments shared by knowledgeable parties across Indian Ocean: the color, shape, and luster of Bahraini pearls were top-grade but Ceylon produced the largest volume of this prized gem. The large volume of pearls handled by native merchants

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<sup>571</sup> *The Ship of Sulaimān*, trans. John O’Kane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 168-9. A discussion of the text is found in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400-1800* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>572</sup> *Ship of Sulaimān*, 168.

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*



further impressed Muhammad Rabi‘ yet he slyly asked, “how will they convince the pearl merchants of Bahrain that for purity and value the Ceylonese pearls can be ranked as equal with his wares.”<sup>574</sup> As a text by a Persian courtier aboard an English ship bound for Siam, *The Ship of Sulaimān* exemplifies the increased connectivity that defined the early modern and modern worlds and evinces the buying and selling of pearls by merchants as windows on these interactions.

More than a century after Muhammad Rabi‘ ventured from the mouth of the Persian Gulf across the Indian Ocean to present-day Thailand, another intrepid traveler jotted down some observations—albeit more prosaically—during a visit to the famed pearling grounds of Ceylon. James Cordiner, a chaplain in the service of the East India Company at the turn of the nineteenth century, was also struck by the economic and financial lives of pearl merchants. He wrote, “On the occasion of a pearl fishery, immense sums of money are lent by pawnbrokers, a race of people that abounds in all parts of Ceylon. Persons of every description flock to the market for the purpose of gambling; and the lowest of the people, if they can command even the most trifling sum, dream of nothing but making their fortunes here.”<sup>575</sup> Muhammad Rabi‘ had also drawn attention to the speculative nature of the enterprise when he described the pearl fishery as the “world market of fate.”<sup>576</sup> In the context of British colonialism and imperialism, Cordiner’s characterization of the pearl fishery as a form of “gambling” acquired new significance and was mapped onto wider discourses about the economic behavior of Indian merchants. British civil servant James Bennett conjured up such an image. In

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<sup>574</sup> *Ship of Sulaimān*, 169.

<sup>575</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:68.

<sup>576</sup> *Ship of Sulaimān*, 169.

describing the merchants who traveled between the island and mainland during the pearling season, Bennett wrote, “there is scarcely a nation or caste of the immense continent of India, exclusive of Parsee and Arabian traders, of which there are not many individuals, whom the thirst of gain allures to this grand field of speculation.”<sup>577</sup>

This chapter explores the commercial and cultural worlds of the men who inhabited the economic space of the pearl fishery. It concerns the business cultures and practices of merchants by focusing on four commercial magnates who rented the pearl fishery from the Madras and Ceylon governments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Profiling the types of businessmen who obtained the *cowle* or grant of the pearl fishery brings into sharp relief certain aspects of how business elites managed their social, cultural, and economic affairs during a transitional moment in the colonial and imperial histories of India and Sri Lanka.

There are references in the medieval inscriptional record to mercantile organizations of South India such as *Manigrāmam* and *Ayyāvole* involved in the buying and selling of pearls and other precious stones.<sup>578</sup> Marco Polo’s travel account offers a description of merchant activities at the pearl fishery of Mannar. He wrote, “[The] many merchants who go divide into various companies, and each of these must engage a number of men on wages, hiring them for April and half of May.”<sup>579</sup> Likewise, Venetian traveler Caesar Frederick mentions the presence of merchant “companies” at the pearl fishery in his account from the second half of the sixteenth century.<sup>580</sup> In the mid-eighteenth century, under the guidance of Governor Baron van Imhoff, the Dutch VOC

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<sup>577</sup> Bennett, *Ceylon and its Capabilities*, 203.

<sup>578</sup> Abraham, *Medieval Merchant Guilds*; cf. Ali, “Between Market and Court.”

<sup>579</sup> Marco Polo, *Travels*; Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 100; Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 158.

<sup>580</sup> Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 102.

decided to reduce its risk by renting the pearl fishery to local merchants. There were still some drawbacks, however. Governor Jan Schreuder wrote about the lease of the 1750 pearl fishery at Trincomalee in a report to his successor, Jan Baron van Eck: “The renter who was probably encouraged to offer that amount owing to the great fuss which had been made regarding those banks, and eager to carry on the work as diving was easy in a bay where there was no drift or still less current, was grievously mistaken in his high expectations.”<sup>581</sup> Following the Dutch practice, British Ceylon and the Company Raj tended to lease out the right to fish the banks. The cultures and practices of merchants who rented the pearl fishery refracted through the lens of credit and debt sheds light on how businessmen navigated a complex and evolving economic landscape. Much of the material found in the archives of British Ceylon and Company Madras contains information related to relationship between the principal renter of the pearl fishery and those who underwrote his contract with the government. To pearl merchants at the turn of the nineteenth century, credit and debt were more than abstract concepts and lines on a balance sheet but also provided the substance of personal business relationships. Materials related to the lease of the pearl fishery also provide details about the relationship between local merchants and the British governments. From scrutinizing the applications of prospective renters to adjudicating claims for remissions, Company and Crown officials at various levels of the Madras and Ceylon governments interfaced with local mercantile elites yet never fully realized efforts to influence decision-making, mold economic behavior, and disrupt kin-based business ventures at the pearl fishery.

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<sup>581</sup> Schreuder, *Memoir*, 81.

The business worlds and cultural practices of merchants remains a relatively neglected aspect of South Asian history. Economic historian Claude Markovits has called to “return the merchant to South Asian history.”<sup>582</sup> According to Markovits, one of the reasons that historians of South Asia have not paid sufficient attention to world of the merchant stems from biases and prejudices found within early colonial writings. Indeed, many of the early historical writings on India’s economic past were penned by European merchants. They were members of massive overseas trading corporations and did not always sing the praises of their local counterparts, which often assumed the form of expatiating Orientalist stereotypes about irrational, rapacious, and shifty locals. Colonial administrators also railed against predatory *bantias* or rural moneylenders who they blamed for backwardness of the Indian agrarian economy. Markovits writes further that Indian and other non-European businessmen “languished in obscurity,” blamed by historians of various stripes for “having failed their mission of creating the bases of a bourgeois capitalist society in India.”<sup>583</sup> Some recent studies have profiled specific merchants to offer alternative perspectives that are not hamstrung by the need to explain the development of capitalism in India. For instance, historian Lakshmi Subramanian writes, “This [new kind of business and economic history] would focus not so much on problems of interpretation but on life histories and narratives that suggests a range of complex impulses informing merchant behavior.”<sup>584</sup>

District-level records of the East India Company’s Government of Madras at Fort St. George are a particularly rich trove of documents concerning the commercial

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<sup>582</sup> Claude Markovits, *Merchants, Traders, Entrepreneurs: Indian Business in the Colonial Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 253-70.

<sup>583</sup> Markovits, *Merchants*, 254.

<sup>584</sup> Lakshmi Subramanian, *Three Merchants of Bombay: Business Pioneers of the Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Penguin Press, 2016), 3.

magnates who rented the pearl fisheries and their interactions with the Company Raj. Historian David Ludden writes that the District Collectorate Records of Madras “represent the most detailed documentary resource for the study of local history in South India.”<sup>585</sup> Yet historians have not read such materials with a view towards the pearl fisheries during these early years of British management because most scholarship has relied on letters, reports, and other documents found at archives in London. Information that reached the East India Company headquarters on Leadenhall Street or the Colonial Office in London was generally concerned more with annual revenue figures and managerial policy and less with the financial intricacies of the industry and its local investors. The records of Tirunelveli are of particular interest because this was the administrative division within which fell most of the pearl fisheries on the India-side of Mannar fell. Records from the Tirunelveli *cutcherry* contain many papers that did not become a part of the Board of Revenue’s official collection at Fort St. George, which, in turn, meant that they seldom reached the metropole. Triangulating district-level records with documents from the upper echelons of Company administration and published primary and secondary sources provides a window on the commercial lending and borrowing practices of merchants who invested in the pearl fishery. Correspondence between local merchants and other sorts of private business papers have unfortunately not been located but the Company archives are replete with official documents related to the lease of the pearl fishery. Merchants that rented the pearl fisheries formed only a small section of the traders, financiers, jewelers, and other businessmen involved in the pearl trade but such figures are overrepresented in the documentary record due to the special contractual relationships that they enjoyed with the government. Merchants who

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<sup>585</sup> Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, n. 3, 240.

submitted applications for the rent of the pearl fishery hailed largely from elite trading classes in colonial capitals like Madras or towns that had long-standing connections with the pearl trade such as Tuticorin, Nagapattinam, and Kilakkarai. Credit and debt were vitally important to the undertaking. Company policy stipulated that an applicant provide the name of a guarantor, a person that ensured that the renter fulfill the obligations of his contract (*muchelka*) with the government. The Board of Revenue also required the winning bidder to deposit cash, draft notes, or other forms of property into the treasury as a form of collateral.

The highly speculative and risk-laden nature of the pearling industry often brought even the most prudent and well-heeled renters to the brink of ruin. In such cases, the Board called upon a guarantor to satisfy the renter's obligation. Through letters, petitions, and in-person supplications, renters and their associates pursued remission payments and other forms of remediation to offset financial loss. Documents related to such claims suggest that there was more at stake than the material and financial well-being of a renter and his associates. Men also traded on their reputations. Those who commanded extensive resources and cultivated a reputable status in the eyes of the business community and British authorities improved their chances of winning the bid. While men of modest means and lesser visibility regularly tendered rental applications, it was more often than not their distinguished counterparts who received the grant. Successful bidders often brought together a group of investors for the purpose of renting a pearl fishery and engaged in other forms of social and cultural entrepreneurialism that potentially augmented status and reputation. Types of social and cultural engagement by merchants who invested in the pearl fishery included charitable contributions to religious

institutions, involvement in community and caste affairs, and the mediation of interpersonal and business relationships through the language of honor, trust, and friendship. In other words, the rent of the pearl fishery demanded the expenditure of capital in all its forms.<sup>586</sup> A tight braid of economic and social credit was threaded through the business worlds of pearl merchants. When an aspiring renter put forward a bid for the lease of the pearl fisheries he wagered both economic and social assets. If the venture failed, he would not only lose a significant amount of money but also risked falling out of favor with his creditors and other business associates.

Recent studies bring multi-disciplinary and global perspectives to the history of money and credit, which provide blueprints on how to undertake a study of the social and cultural aspects of lending and borrowing in specific historical settings such as the pearl fishery and its attendant trade in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century India and Sri Lanka. Scholarship on topics ranging from traders of the medieval Mediterranean world to the consuming and mercantile classes of England and the dispersed trading networks of the early modern world have opened the doors for a new historiography of the “cultures of credit.”<sup>587</sup> The cultural aspects of credit and debt have also received the attention of collaborative scholarly projects that provide valuable

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<sup>586</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 46-58.

<sup>587</sup> For example, see Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (New York: St. Martin’s Press 1998); Claude Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Margot C. Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Trivellato, *Familiarity of Strangers*; Sebouh Aslanian, *From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean: The Global Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Jessica Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

perspectives on non-western and global contexts.<sup>588</sup> Such work brings new views of business cultures and organization into sharper focus, shifting attention beyond account books and the long-term evolution of commercial and credit institutions to see more dynamic, relational, and contextualized business worlds. Whereas historical studies of credit and debt usually treat the terms as abstract concepts in terms of accounting and macroeconomics, for merchants with aspirations to rent the pearl fishery, credit and debt shaped their everyday lives and structured interactions with their peers. As historian John Smail writes in his study of eighteenth-century British mercantile cultures, “To appreciate these aspects of commercial credit, we must stop treating credit as an abstract factor of production (or consumption) and approach it instead as an open-ended and everyday element in the lives of merchants and manufacturers.”<sup>589</sup>

To fully appreciate how the extension of credit and acquisition of debt structured and affected the business worlds of pearl merchants at the turn of the nineteenth century, it is necessary to situate such transactions within their specific social and cultural milieus. In the case of South Asia, historians have long debated and discussed how caste and kinship relationships shaped attitudes towards credit in mercantile organizations.<sup>590</sup> Scholars have also discussed the meaning and use of financial instruments such as the *hundi* or bill of exchange in indigenous banking systems and long-distance trade, as well

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<sup>588</sup> David Henley and Peter Boomgaard, eds., *Credit and Debt in Indonesia, 860-1930: From Peonage to Pawnshop, from Kongsi to Cooperative* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009); Chia Yin Hsu, Thomas M. Luckett, and Erika Vause, eds., *The Cultural History of Credit and Money: A Global Perspective* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

<sup>589</sup> John Smail, “Credit, Risk, and Honor in Eighteenth-Century Commerce,” *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 3 (2005), 441.

<sup>590</sup> C.A. Bayly, *Rules, Townsmen and Bazaars*; cf. David Rudner, *Caste and Capitalism in Colonial India: The Nattukottai Chettiars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).



as the significance of money in regional and transregional economic systems.<sup>591</sup> One of the central questions in this body of scholarly literature concerns the identities and solidarities of mercantile communities in pre-modern social and economic dispensations. Some have emphasized the importance of shared cultural traits, such as religion and language, in fostering connections amongst members of a particular group and maintaining collective mercantile identities. Others have downplayed the importance of caste.<sup>592</sup> Historian C. A. Bayly for instance, viewed caste as a significant feature of mercantile communities and activities but emphasized that it was not *the* fundamental unit of organization for those in urban markets. He wrote: “it is difficult to see how caste in any sense could have been the prime parameter of mercantile organization in complex cities. Forms of arbitration, market control, brokerage, neighborhood communities and above all conceptions of mercantile honor and credit breached caste boundaries, however construed, and imposed wider solidarities on merchant people.”<sup>593</sup> Scholars have also underscored the importance of kin and caste in the business worlds of Indian merchants. Anthropologist David Rudner argues that caste was an essential feature of Nattukottai Chettiar banking and trading activities, providing members of the group with valuable bits of “social capital” that were especially useful in maintaining long-distance

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<sup>591</sup> L.C. Jain, *Indigenous Banking in India* (London: Macmillan, 1929), 70-92; Irfan Habib, “Banking in Mughal India,” in *Contributions to Indian Economic History*, ed. Tapan Raychaudhuri (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1960); Habib, “The System of Bills of Exchange (Hundis) in the Mughal Empire,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* (1972), 290-303; Marina Martin, “Hundi/Hawala: The Problem of Definition,” *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 4 (2009): 909-37; Amiya Kumar Bagchi, ed., *Money and Credit in India History: From Early Medieval Times*, (New Delhi: Tulika, 2002).

<sup>592</sup> C. A. Bayly and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Portfolio Capitalist and the Political Economy of Early Modern India,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 25, no. 4 (1988): 401-24; Subrahmanyam, *Political Economy of Commerce*.

<sup>593</sup> C. A. Bayly, “Indian Merchants in a ‘Traditional’ Setting: Benares, 1780–1830,” *The Imperial Impact: Studies in the Economic History of Africa and India*, eds. Anthony G. Hopkins and Clive Dewey (London: Athlone Press for the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1978), 192; Medha Kudaisya, ed. *The Oxford India Anthology of Business History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 100.

commercial relationships between the Tamil heartland and Southeast Asia.<sup>594</sup> There are others that see a more fluid system, in which the strength of caste and kin bonds varied by institutional setting and context. For example, it has been argued by some historians that temporary marketplaces, bazars, and fairs witnessed the temporary breakdown of caste as an organizing principle of commerce.<sup>595</sup>

Looking through the prism of a single industry such as the pearl fishery provides a distinct perspective on the business worlds of merchants because it does not focus on a specific group or caste but instead reveals a spectrum of businessmen who invested in the production of a single luxury commodity. This line of inquiry reveals a variegated commercial landscape within which a multiplicity of social and economic actors interacted. An in-depth review of applications submitted to the Madras government for the rent of the pearl fisheries in the early nineteenth century suggests that shared or overlapping identities were not hard and fast prerequisites for prospective renters. While members of the same family or merchants who shared similar geographic and cultural backgrounds often engaged in the rent of the pearl fisheries, such relationships were not the exclusive type of arrangement. Many previous studies of the pearl fisheries have not focused on the mercantile cultures and organization of the trade but instead emphasized its sociological make-up.<sup>596</sup> Indeed, most scholarship has formed a communal and group-based profile of the industry, composing a portrait of the industry as a site of investment

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<sup>594</sup> David Rudner, "Religious Gift Giving and Inland Commerce in Seventeenth-Century South India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (1987): 361-79; Rudner, "Banker's Trust and the Culture of Banking among the Nattukottai Chettiars of Colonial South India," *Modern Asian Studies* 23, no. 3 (1989): 417-58; Rudner, *Caste and Capitalism*.

<sup>595</sup> T. Mizushima, *Nattar and Socio-Economic Change in South India in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1986); Washbrook, "Merchants, Markets, and Commerce."

<sup>596</sup> Roche, *Fishermen of the Coromandel*; Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*; Malekandathil, "Fishing the Pearl and the Soul."

by Hindu and Muslim “mercantile communities,” such as Maraikkayars and Chettis, while low-status Muslim Lubbai and Christian Parava populations provided labor as divers, boatmen, and washers. An oft-cited passage in Duarte Barbosa’s early sixteenth-century account described some aspects of the mercantile organization of the pearl trade. He wrote: “A wealthy and distinguished Moor has long held the farm of the duties levied on seed-pearls. He is so rich and powerful that all the people of the land honour him as much as the King. He executes judgement and justice on the Moors without interference from the King.”<sup>597</sup> The pearl fishery and its attendant trade also appears to have attracted merchants from across the region. As early as the seventeenth century, Dutch VOC officials took an interests in merchant activities. In 1694, Dutch factor Floris Blom addressed capital and commodity networks that coalesced around the pearl fishery: “This dearness of the pearls is caused by the arrival of many merchants from the lands of the Mogol, Madure, Tansjouwer, et cetera, with great capitals, each of whom wanted the jewels most strongly, and who have bid so high and made purchases that many experience native merchants swear that on some varieties they will make a loss rather than a profit.”<sup>598</sup> Historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam draws attention to the changing profile of merchants who rented the pearl fishery from the Madras and Ceylon governments in the nineteenth century.<sup>599</sup> He finds that the Chettiars and Maraikkayars, as well as a few stray European merchants, tended to be the most successful revenue-farmers during this early period of British management. During the course of the nineteenth century, Subrahmanyam writes, “Nattukottai Chettiars in the fishery grew more and more marked,

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<sup>597</sup> *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 123; Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 141.

<sup>598</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 139.

<sup>599</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

reaching a height in the mid-nineteenth century.”<sup>600</sup> He adds: “The earlier dominance of Parava and Maraikkayar interests is thus no longer visible; the link between control of labour (here, divers) and the investment of capital had turned relatively fragile.”<sup>601</sup>

The pearl trade may appear at first glance to meet certain expectations about markets and societies in pre-modern Asian wherein primordial attributes such as language, religion, caste, and kin formed the substance of economic relationships. While pearl merchants tapped caste and kin networks for financial support, connections beyond so-called “natural ties” provided alternative or supplemental sources of capital. Indeed, there are many documented cases in which merchants without shared religious and cultural affiliations joined forces to bid for the rent of a pearl fishery. For example, a certain Muslim Maraikkayar merchant from Kilakkarai named Caveek Mahamad and Ramasami Naick of Ramnad each offered the other’s name as security for their respective rental applications for the 1807 fishery at Tuticorin.<sup>602</sup> In another instance, a European private merchant tendered an application for rent of the 1800 pearl fishery at Tuticorin that included the names of “Camasooru Hucadoo, and Rajahram Lasastoo.”<sup>603</sup> He characterized these two men as “respectable Soucars [bankers]” and offered them as guarantors of his proposal.<sup>604</sup> Business relationships that coalesced around the pearl fisheries—from partnerships in the highest echelons of the trading elites to micro-lending and borrowing by divers and laborers—did not conform to standard interpretive models about pre-modern economies and societies.

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<sup>600</sup> Ibid.

<sup>601</sup> Ibid.

<sup>602</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 440, 1439-61 (28 February 1807).

<sup>603</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 248, 2456 (17 March 1800).

<sup>604</sup> Ibid.

Merchants often mediated relationships based on credit and debt obligations and mobilized capital for the rent of a pearl fishery based on notions of trust, honor, and friendship. These ideas also permeated relationships between local Indian agents or *dubashes* and their British employers whom dabbled in the pearl trade. For example, a certain Venkatachalam Pillai from Vandalur, a village on the southern outskirts of Madras, was dubash to James Jervis, a British officer who served as head assistant at Jaffnapatnam for the East India Company.<sup>605</sup> In this capacity, Jervis undertook an examination of the pearl oyster beds at the request of his superior, Robert Andrews.<sup>606</sup> Not only did Jervis perform his duty of supervising the assaying process but he also somehow managed to secure the rent of 1796 the pearl fishery for PNP 150,000.<sup>607</sup> However, the fishery got off to a slow start and Jervis submitted a petition to the Company in late March or early April 1796 requesting an annulment of his contract for the rent. The Board of Revenue stated “that several difficulties had occurred to prevent the Pearl Fishery taking place to the extent that was expected” and the “Renter had entirely receded from his Engagements.”<sup>608</sup> James Cordiner, the British chaplain at Colombo, wrote in his account of Ceylon, “From the unsettled state of the country, no native made suitable offers for the fishery; it was therefore let to Mr. John Jervis, a junior merchant in the Company, on terms, by which he might have acquired a handsome fortune; but his courage failed him, and he was released from the bargain.”<sup>609</sup> The pearl fishery, however, reportedly turned a three-fold profit after the Company released Jervis

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<sup>605</sup> John Penry Lewis, *List of Tombstones and Monuments in Ceylon* (Colombo: Ceylon Government Press, 1913), 405-7. For more on Venkatachalam Pillai and members of his extended family, see Susan Neild-Basu, “The Dubashes of Madras,” *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 1 (1984), 7-8, 17.

<sup>606</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 139, 8405 (12 November 1795).

<sup>607</sup> BL, IOR, H, 606, 355; BL, IOR, Madras Revenue Proceedings, Range 275, Vol. 8, 458; De Silva, “The Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon,” 434; Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 155.

<sup>608</sup> BL, IOR, H, 606, 355.

<sup>609</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:71-2.

from his contract and farmed it out to a group of native merchants. Jervis had in all likelihood come to the pearl fishery saddled with massive private debts and it appears that Venkatachalam Pillai was not only his *dubash* but also his primary creditor.

Venkatachalam Pillai later penned a personal narrative or memorial about his life, sections of which include discussions of his relationship with Jervis. He wrote, “I had proceeded [to the pearl fishery] in the hope that he would be able to discharge his debts...But I have been greatly mortified at Mr. Jervis’s having given up the lucrative farm of Pearl Fishery.”<sup>610</sup> His financial ruin combined with the collapse of his relationships with Jervis sent Venkatachalam into a downward spiral because he was “overwhelmed with grief.”<sup>611</sup> Venkatachalam described how he “wandered so far as Bombay and Poona to linger out the rest of my day in misery and obscurity...I thought my deplorable condition better among strangers than among acquaintances. I lost Mr. Jervis and all I had in the world.”<sup>612</sup> Not only did Venkatachalam lose his wealth but also his personal honor and private friendship with Jervis. From the perspective of Venkatachalam, he and Jervis certainly had a bond that exceeded the prototypical relationship between a *dubash* and his employer, which further illustrates the integral role of credit and debt in the economy of the pearl trade as well as the financial risks of such investments.

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<sup>610</sup> S. K. Govindaswami, “Some Unpublished Letters of Bouchier and George Stratton (1771-1802),” *Madras Tercentenary Commemoration Volume* (Delhi: Asian Education Services, 1994), 31-2.

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>612</sup> *Ibid.*

## Regimes of Renting, Risk, and Remission

From the moment the East India Company secured managerial control over the pearl fishery of the Gulf of Mannar, British officials on both sides of the Gulf desired to turn the industry into “a state of certain, regular, and rich, annual reproduction.”<sup>613</sup> One way that British administrators set out to achieve this goal was by compelling local pearl merchants to modify and adapt their business practices, which many viewed as speculative and reckless. Dutch officials had also expressed concerns about the speculative nature of the enterprise. Governor Daniel Overbeek addressed the problem in a report to his successor, Julius Stein van Golleneese, in April 1743 that the fishery “cannot be otherwise than injurious to the Company, and especially to the people.”<sup>614</sup> He wrote: “[The pearl fishery] is nothing but a lottery or a gamble, at the close of which hundreds and even thousands, return home completely ruined, against one or a few who may make a fortune. To the unfortunate ones nothing remains but their imagination, so their minds are upset, much to the distress of their families. And no wonder! From the moment a pearl fishery has been ordered, weavers, dyers, merchants, everyone leaves his long practiced occupation, and as the saying is, ‘not an old woman remains at her spinning wheel,’ but each and everyone makes preparations to take part in the dangerous game of the pearl fishery, each flatter himself with the expectation of good luck, and driven by the hope of a fortune even beyond his dreams.”<sup>615</sup> Likewise, British officials denigrated the habits and behaviors of pearl merchants as “rapacious” and “superstitious,” but they also understood that government finances benefitted immensely

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<sup>613</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, Vol. 3, 3v.

<sup>614</sup> Overbeek, *Memoir*, 41.

<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-2.

from the episodic injection of local capital made by the pearl fishery. While there was nothing that resembled the coordinated legislative efforts to differentiate gambling and speculation in colonial north India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, administrators in early colonial Madras and Ceylon tried to reform the economic and financial practices of pearl merchants in other ways.<sup>616</sup> Through careful attention to managing the industry, British officials believed that merchants engaged in the pearl fishery and its attendant trade would turn from reckless speculators into responsible economic subjects. It was therefore the responsibility of the government to reduce the hazards of the pearl fishery and turn it from a “Speculation of Loss” to a “Speculation of Advantage,” as Governor North wrote.<sup>617</sup> In a letter to the Court of Directors in London, North remarked, “[The Pearl Fishery] is not, like a Lottery, a Speculation of Loss but a Speculation of Advantage to the Persons engaged in it. It appears to me therefore as much the Interest of Government to Diminish the Hazard of it and to reduce it as nearly as possible to a clear and calculated advantage, as it is certainly the Duty of Government to Discourage that mad and desperate Spirit of Speculations which is but too Prevalent among this rapacious and superstitious People.”<sup>618</sup> As the previous chapter explored vis-à-vis the bazaar, administrators of Madras and Ceylon sought to create a safe and secure economic space through good management and governance that would not only turn the pearl fishery into a regular and predictable stream of revenue but also mold mercantile practices.

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<sup>616</sup> Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture, and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 143-99.

<sup>617</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 8-9.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid.



Remissions were one way through which the government interfered in the economy of the pearl fishery and attempted to turn it into a predictable and profitable venture despite the many physical hazards and financial risks associated with the pearling industry. The cancellation of debts was a privilege enjoyed by the renter and his partners based on their contractual relationship with the governing body that held managerial rights over the pearl fishery. Governor North wrote to the Court of Directors in London with an argument in favor of the government awarding this particular indulgence. He described how the financial fates of the government and renter were interwoven and it was in the best interests of all parties to safeguard the investment. He wrote: “The advantage of the Proprietor, I should think, be increased in proportion to the safety of the Speculator, that by the Certainty of the Profit of and Diminution of the Risk, and the more extensive the concern and the greater the Risk, the greater, in a high Progressive Proportion, must be the Profit held out to the Enterpriser to induce Him to undertake it. In the Pearl Fishery Government is the Proprietor, and, of course, must gain whatever the Speculator pays on account of Security, and lose whatever he withholds on account of Danger.”<sup>619</sup> For the Madras and Ceylon governments, forgiving the debts of renters was a small concession if the pearl fishery was to remain a viable source of revenue. But not all officials believed extending remissions was the best policy. British Ceylon civil servant Anthony Bertolacci, for example, discussed some of the advantages and disadvantages of this practice, suggesting that while granting remissions removed some of the risk for the renting party it overextended state finances. He wrote, “For when the fishery has failed, the Ceylon Government has made a proportionate remission of part of the payment to the

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<sup>619</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 8-9.

contractor, that he might not be a loser.”<sup>620</sup> He continued: “This remission, from the nature of that fishery, the Colonial Government will and must always allow; notwithstanding an article is never omitted in the contract, by which it is agreed that it shall not be granted. But if, upon the fishery proving unsuccessful, Government were to refuse it, no person would come forward, at the next fishing, to purchase it.”<sup>621</sup> Bertolacci noted that these levels of risk were associated with this particular management system. Instead of awarding all the boats to a single renter, the government should dispose of them “all to one contractor, it is subject to a great chance of losing a considerable profit, without that of making one, if the produce should be so trifling as to disappoint the general expectation.”<sup>622</sup>

Governor Maitland of Ceylon (1805-1812) also expressed concerns about handing out remission payments to the renter at the end of the pearling season. He recommended “getting rid of the evil of the practice of granting Remissions.”<sup>623</sup> The mode of conducting the pearl fishery, according to Maitland, was a secondary concern to whether or not a sufficient number of pearl oysters were present on the banks. In a letter sent from Colombo to London in 1806, Maitland wrote, “Whichever of these plans is abstractedly the best, in the situation in which I found the Island was a matter of very trivial consequence, as by the heavy Remission granted on a former Pearl Fisheries by my Predecessor, it did not become a matter of any consideration how we let it in commissioner of getting rid of the evil of the practice of granting Remissions.”<sup>624</sup> In 1806, Maitland introduced a new system of management, one that reduced the number of

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<sup>620</sup> Bertolacci, *Interests of Ceylon*, 193.

<sup>621</sup> Ibid.

<sup>622</sup> Bertolacci, *Interests of Ceylon*, 194.

<sup>623</sup> UKNA, CO 54, Vol. 22, 30; UKNA, CO 54, Vol. 25, 11.

<sup>624</sup> UKNA, CO 54, Vol. 22, 29v-30.

boats and sought to limit the frequency and size of remissions claims, an attempt to block a key avenue through which merchants protected their investment in the pearl fishery. Maitland recommended renting the entire fishery of fifty boats to a single renter on one important condition. The principal renter was prohibited from sub-leasing the boats to other merchants without the express approval of the governor's private secretary. The renter was also required to advance a large sum of money to the government. According to Maitland, "The evident gain from adopting this line was that Government had all the advantage of the Aumany Fishery, and the Renter became neither more nor less than the Black Agent of Government who by his Knowledge of the habits of the Natives managed the letting of the Boats in a manner infinitely more genial to their Habits than could have been done by a European."<sup>625</sup> However, the new system never gained traction and British Ceylon reverted back to the previous mode of management. The debate, however, continued to animate discussions about how to best managed the pearl fishery. More than three decades later, James Bennett warned about the practice of extending remission payments to renters, which he found parasitic and self-destructive. Bennett even proposed doing away with the renting system all together and suggested replacing it with a true lottery. Instead of reviewing proposals and granting the lease of the pearl fishery to a renter, the government of British Ceylon should simply sell tickets. Bennett argued that a lottery was not only a better way to realize a handsome profit but it also reduced the chance of the principal renter bringing forth a remissions claim. He wrote, "a lottery might be preferable to farming it...to the highest bidder; but it is very bad policy to hold out an expectation, that, in the event of failure, the speculator may claim a reduction of his rent; for these gentry take very good care, in the event of the profits *exceeding* their

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<sup>625</sup> Subrahmanyam, "Noble Harvest from the Sea," 157-8.

calculations, to keep the overplus [*sic*] to themselves. The sale should be peremptory; and the speculators forewarned, that, in the event of failure, the government will not, under any circumstances whatever, entertain their claims to a reduction of the rent.”<sup>626</sup>

Government largesse in the form of remissions payments was also intended to ingratiate wealthy merchants and to keep their capital invested in the pearling industry. Remissions though were not indiscriminately handed to the aggrieved parties following a fishery that underperformed. As much as Madras depended on the money and authority of local merchants for the pearl fishery to function effectively from season to season, British officials often found themselves in antagonistic positions with elite pearl merchants. Through petitions, letter-writing, and in-person appearances before British officials and administrative bodies such as the Board of Revenue, renters and their associates had to prepare and present cases for remission payments. Those who brought claims before the government also employed strategies beyond formal petitioning and letter-writing, such as decamping and withholding payments. While British officials viewed such behavior as ignoble, and often times took such conduct into account when considering the validity of a remissions claims, these functioned as viable economic and political strategies for merchants with their wealth and reputations at stake. Remissions granted by the governments of Madras and Ceylon could prove the difference between an absorbable loss and total ruin. But the constraints placed by trust, honor and the desire for a good name also established expectations of what constituted proper conduct. Perhaps counterbalancing the prodigious risk assumed by renters and their guarantors and the

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<sup>626</sup> Bennett, *Ceylon and its Capabilities*, 208.

uncertainty that hung over the pearl fishery camp, these constraints seemed to have offered a way to bring stability and regularity to an otherwise volatile industry.

As much as the rent of a pearl fishery brought with it financial and reputational risks it also held the potential for enormous gains on both fronts. It not only provided immediate access to one of the world's most abundant sources of natural pearls but it also boosted the profile of a renter in the certain sectors of the business community. One media channel through which the renter gained notoriety was official government publications, especially newspapers and pamphlets that spread information about the ensuing pearl fishery and its lease holder. The Collector of Ramnad received a letter from the Board of Revenue in March 1800 that instructed him to "publish throughout your districts that the pearl Fishery at Tutacoryn has been rented for the present season to Mr. Gregory Baboom Armenian Merchant."<sup>627</sup> In another instance, an item in the *Ceylon Gazette* from February 1816 highlighted that Gopalan Chetti rented the pearl fishery at Arippu: "We understand that Kopalen Chitty of Jaffna has been declared the highest bidder for the Pearl fishery which is soon to commence. If Kopalen Chitty should fulfill the stipulated conditions of which from his respectable character and punctuality at a former fishery that he rented we have no doubt his contract will be finally concluded and signed on Friday next."<sup>628</sup> As the rent of the pearl fishery advanced the business interests of merchants and promoted their reputation in the commercial world, it also nestled them more snugly into the arms of Company-directed and colonial state-controlled commerce. In some cases, merchant-renters had business arrangements with the East India Company that were not limited to the pearling industry, such as contract shipping

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<sup>627</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2295-8 (13 March 1800).

<sup>628</sup> Ceylon Government Gazette, No. 751, Wednesday, 7 February 1816, UKNA, CO, 58, Vol. 1.

and commodities trading. Holding a *cowle* for the pearl fishery presented the renter with further opportunities to interact directly with high-ranking government officials. This was the case at Arippu in 1804 when Tamil merchant Vydelinga Chetti met with Governor North of Ceylon. According to one eyewitness account, “The renter soon went and waited on the governor, and paid him many compliments in the figurative style of his country. He is the only native, belonging to the British territories in the island, who enjoys the privilege of sitting in his excellency’s [*sic*] presence.”<sup>629</sup>

Following the examination of the pearl oyster beds, if the superintendents determined that a pearl fishery was feasible, then officials distributed advertisements in the capital cities of Madras and Colombo and throughout the coastal districts. The results of the examination regularly produced enthusiastic and optimistic responses from officials that were not only intended to increase the likelihood of a pearl fishery but also intended to stoke interests amongst merchants with renting aspirations. Stephen Lushington, the Collector of Ramnad, wrote ahead of the 1800 pearl fishery at Tuticorin: “The examination which has been made of the Banks gives the fairest promise of a larger produce than has ever known from them, and the privilege of fishing them is an object of speculation, in which many merchants and Individuals in these Countries are desirous of embarking.”<sup>630</sup> At the same time, advertisements also had to temper expectations so as to reduce the likelihood that the government would receive remissions claims from merchant-renters disappointed in the yield of pearls and profits. These advertisements often became a reference point for the renter in his attempt to secure a remission following a fishery that fell short of expectations. For example, a petition submitted by

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<sup>629</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:48.

<sup>630</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2172 (6 March 1800).

Vydelinga Chetti in 1804 read, “That in Consequence of [the] Examination account Certified in the newspaper, I have...rented this Fishery, by trusting that the number of Oysters will yield every day agreeable to the former Fisheries.”<sup>631</sup>

Advertisements for the pearl fishery usually appeared in Tamil and English but also sometimes Sinhala and even Dutch during the early years of British management. The language of advertisements reflects the social and cultural heterogeneity of the pearl fishery, as well as the complex political history of the region. While the divers, boatmen, and petty merchants received word of an upcoming fishery through pamphlets, handbills, and public proclamations, most of the renters hailed from elite commercial classes and received invitations to tender applications in newspapers such as the *Government Gazettes* and *Madras Courier*.<sup>632</sup> These same newspapers also provided periodic updates to the reading public once the event was underway. A short article from the *Ceylon Gazette* read: “Our letter from Aripo of the 17th state the Pearl Fishery to be going on well, Oysters continued to be fished in abundance the average Number about 15,000 each Boat per diem in some instances Boats have brought in 25,000.”<sup>633</sup> Members of the Board, as well as the superintendent of the fishery, communicated directly with the editors of these publications about advertisements for the pearl fishery. In March 1818, a representative from the Board of Revenue sent a letter to the editor of the *Government press* “to request that the enclosed notice may be printed underneath the advertisement on the subject of the Pearl Fishery at Pinnacoil under date the 23rd February 1818 and that

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<sup>631</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, Vol. 14, 103-3v.

<sup>632</sup> For a history of newspaper publishing in Madras, see Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism in Colonial South India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 73-124.

<sup>633</sup> *Ceylon Government Gazette*, UKNA, CO 54, Vol. 1.

the same may be published in Hand bills through the President as soon as possible.”<sup>634</sup> A decade later, the Board sent multiple letters enclosed with drafts of the advertisement to the Madras *Gazette* and *Courier* to promote the 1828 pearl fishery.<sup>635</sup> Advertisements included technical information, such as the number of oysters caught and the type and quantity of pearls found, as well the dates, scale, location, and managerial mode of the forthcoming fishery. Merchants submitting proposals for the rent of the pearl fishery frequently referred to such notices in their applications. For example, the application of one Cabal Mahomed Maraikkayar of Kilakkarai for the rent of the 1810 pearl fishery at Tuticorin began, “Wherever it is mentioned in that advertisement published under dated [*sic*] the 11th February 1810 that a Pearl Fishery will Commence at Tutacoryn on the 25 of March Next.”<sup>636</sup> The organizers of the pearl fishery also made samples of pearls available for inspection by prospective renters. The pearls were sorted, classed, and valued by specialist jewelers employed by officials overseeing the preparations for the pearl fishery. Advertisements contained information about the class and size of pearls gathered during the examination process and gave notice to prospective renters that samples were available for inspection. As an official wrote to Lord Clive at Fort St. George ahead of the 1800 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, “Musters of the Pearls accompany and as they are in the event of advertising the Banks to be reserved for the inspection of bidders care should be taken that they are not mixed.”<sup>637</sup> The advertisement for the 1830 pearl fishery at Tuticorin read: “Muster of the Pearls may be seen and further particulars

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<sup>634</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 786, 3241 (5 March 1818).

<sup>635</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1137, 1701-4 (21 February 1828).

<sup>636</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 75 (23 February 1810).

<sup>637</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 242, 314 (16 January 1800).



known on application to the Office of the Board of Revenue or at the Cutcherry of the Collector.”<sup>638</sup>

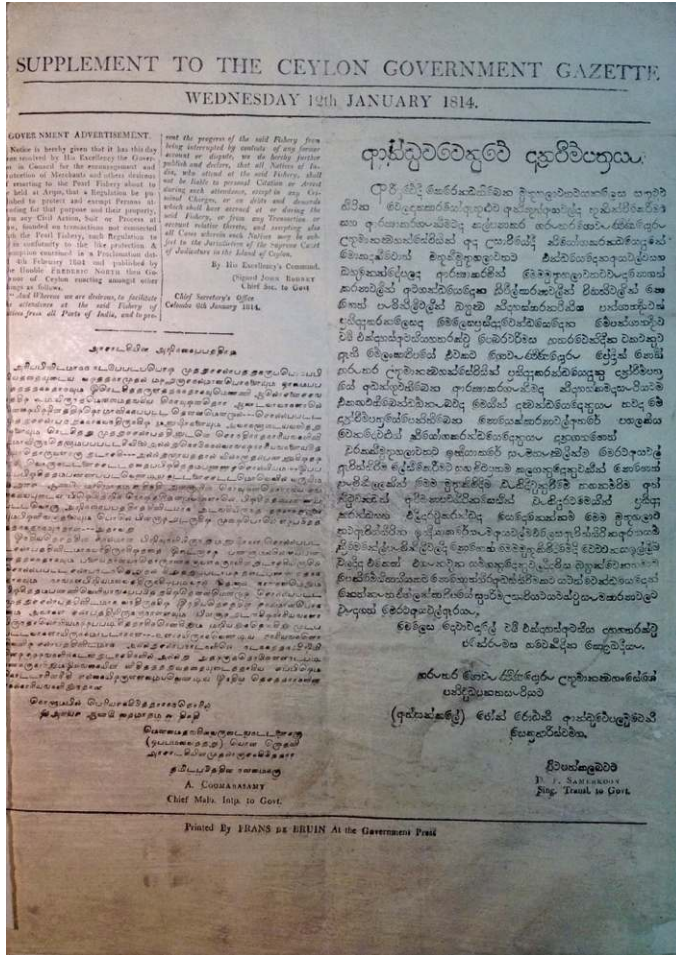


Figure 8. Pearl Fishery Advertisement, Ceylon Government Gazette, 12 January 1814 (United Kingdom National Archives, Kew Gardens).

Advertisements distributed by Madras and Colombo also included specific instructions on how to tender applications. Prospective renters submitted sealed proposals with the amount of rent and the terms and conditions of the engagement to officials at district-level offices, the Board of Revenue at Fort St. George, or branches of the Ceylon government depending on the location of the pearl fishery. Applications had to be

<sup>638</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4704, 15 (1 February 1830).

inscribed with a specific note on the front of the parcel. As the advertisement for the 1818 pearl fishery read, “It is required that all proposals bear on the envelope the following superscription ‘Proposals for renting the Pearl Fishery in the Vicinity of Pinnacoil’ and that they contain a tender of sufficient security for the due performance of the Engagement.”<sup>639</sup> Advertisements set deadlines for the submission of proposals, which colonial officials observed rather closely, though there was some flexibility on a case-by-case basis. Collector James Hepburn of Tirunelveli wrote to the Board that he was considering shifting the application deadline because he did not want to “run the risk of my misconception which an alteration of the time might occasion.”<sup>640</sup> He subsequently forwarded “Copies & Translations of three different Proposals” to Fort St. George on “the day fixed for the receipt of Proposals.”<sup>641</sup> Failure to abide by such strict deadlines was often met with the scorn of Company officials. For instance, Collector Cotton of Tirunelveli received a message from the Board in January 1815 that instructed him “to accept the most favorable tender that may be made within the time prescribed for the intended pearl fishery” and asked why the collector had “so long delayed submitting any communication on the subject.”<sup>642</sup> These were not idle concerns, as there were in fact many instances in which government officials rejected applications because they had been submitted after the published deadline. In March 1800, for instance, Collector Lushington of Ramnad replied to an applicant who tendered an application after the stated deadline, “your reference to the advertisement published under my signature in the

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<sup>639</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 784, 2432-42 (16 February 1818); TNA, TDR, Vol. 3595, 46-9 (7 February 1818). For the same clause found in advertisements for other fisheries, see TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 666, 754-77 (12 January 1815); TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 364-67 (5 January 1822); TNA, TDR, Vol. 4365, 123-31 (11 February 1828); TNA, TDR, Vol. 4704, 10-8 (1 February 1830).

<sup>640</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 66-7 (21 February 1810).

<sup>641</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 75 (23 February 1810)

<sup>642</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 667, 1062 (16 January 1815).

newspaper without noticing the Proclamation limiting the time tendering offers...issued at this place for the information of yourself in common with the other Inhabitants of Tutacorin.”<sup>643</sup> The faithful observance of application deadlines was not simply the result of officials being sticklers for the bureaucratic rules but stemmed from fears over fraud and collusion. Officers believed that late applications were more likely to be fixed with information about the other amounts and that such proposals were blatant attempts to manipulate the price of the rent. For instance, the collector disqualified two applications for the rent of the 1807 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, “having been tendered two days after the appointed time are therefore obnoxious to the suspicion of having been fabricated from a Knowledge of the other proposals.”<sup>644</sup> In another instance, a district-level official describes how a certain Chidambaram Chetti, who was also then serving as security for one of the applicants, “produced from under his cloths [*sic*] another sealed proposal the amount of which Rupees 70,350 exceeded the highest of the former offers by Rupees 135.”<sup>645</sup>

District collectors and members of the Board of Revenue were the principal officials in charge of reviewing applications. Much of the important work in this process took place at the administrative headquarters of the district within which the pearl fishery that particular season was located. Thus, the district-level office or *cutcherry* emerged in the early nineteenth century as an important site of governmental and bureaucratic power in Madras. Historian Bhavani Raman has described these spaces as “the central point of

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<sup>643</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 248, 2457 (17 March 1800).

<sup>644</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 440, 1448 (28 February 1807).

<sup>645</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1239, 5734-5 (31 May 1830).

contact between officials and inhabitants.”<sup>646</sup> Officials maintained that the district collector had a better sense of a prospective renter’s character and creditworthiness compared to those who sat in Madras and Colombo. For instance, the acting collector in Tirunelveli wrote to Fort St. George that the Board “may look to me as being more immediately on the Spot, for some information respecting those men who are represented as Securities.”<sup>647</sup> Madras and Ceylon officials gathered information about the renter and his partners through various channels and often summoned each applicant for evaluations and credit checks. For instance, the Board ordered that Collector Hepburn of Tirunelveli call the five highest bidders to his office and “question them with regard to the Conditional offers set forth in their respective proposals.”<sup>648</sup> Collector Hepburn reviewed the candidates and reported to the Board: “The three first Proposals in the accompanying List, though considerably highest in point nominal amount, were clogged with a condition which greatly reduced their [value].”<sup>649</sup> After all the proposals were received and evaluated, the collector of the district within which the fishery was to be held invited prospective renters to his office. In front of the applicants, he announced the government’s decision and awarded the rent to the winning bidder. The acting collector of Tirunelveli reported to the Board in January 1807 that he had “opened and read aloud [4 Tenders] in the Cutcherry and in the presence of the several Bidders.”<sup>650</sup> Such ritualized procedures were not mere formalities but important steps in evaluating the reputation and character of the renters and his guarantors by both government officials and competing applicants.

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<sup>646</sup> Raman, *Document Raj*, 33.

<sup>647</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 65 (20 January 1807).

<sup>648</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 509, 1661-2 (1 March 1810).

<sup>649</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 510, 1816-7 (8 March 1810).

<sup>650</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 64-5 (20 January 1807).

It is noteworthy that the governments of Madras and Ceylon did not always award the rent of the pearl fishery to the highest bidder. For example, the Board of Revenue at Fort St. George received thirteen proposals for the 1807 pearl fishery at Tuticorin while four other prospective renters tendered their applications at the Tirunelveli *cutcherry*.<sup>651</sup> Officials dismissed four applications from the outset because they doubted the reputation of the person serving as security or the applicant failed to offer the name of a guarantor. It was further discovered during the review process that one of the sureties offered by an applicant was “by report not able, in any case of any accident to furnish the whole sum for which he must enter into a Bond.”<sup>652</sup> The reputation and conduct of a prospective renter and his guarantor during the application process could further impact the fate of his proposal. For example, the collector of Tirunelveli summoned the five highest bidders for the 1810 pearl fishery to his office to discuss the terms of their proposals. One of the renters, however, did not answer the call and it was later revealed that his guarantor could only cover a fraction of the total rent. In another case, the Board referred to the highest bidder for the 1815 pearl fishery at Tiruchendur as an “obscure individual.”<sup>653</sup> Officials disqualified the applicant and granted the *cowle* to the next highest bidder, a certain Cuttah Narrainaswami, whom appeared to the Board “to be a respectable man, and the security he has given is unexceptionable.”<sup>654</sup> Cuttah Narrainaswami had also forwarded two security bonds of worth 10,000 Sicca Rupees and had the support of a British private merchant named Thomas Parry.<sup>655</sup> The reputation of man’s family and his business

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<sup>651</sup> Ibid., 64-73.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid., 65,

<sup>653</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 668, 1611 (9 February 1815).

<sup>654</sup> Ibid.

<sup>655</sup> For more on the life and work of Thomas Parry, see G. H. Hodgson, *Thomas Parry, Free Merchant of Madras, 1768-1824* (Madras: Higginbothams, 1938); Hilton Brown, *Parry’s of Madras: A Story of British Enterprise in India* (Madras: Parry and Co., 1955).

associates was also taken into consideration during the review process. For example, Collector of Tirunelveli James Hepburn referred to the family of Said Muhammad Maraikkayar when reviewing his application for the rent of the 1810 pearl fishery. He noted that the prospective renter was “the Grandson of Old Abdul Mahoomed Murcay of Kilkerry,” one of the most “respect[ed] Merchants on the Coast.”<sup>656</sup> Even for men who enjoyed sterling reputations and commanded vast wealth, the rate of failure for renters was remarkably high. Yet the promise of the pearl fishery continued to attract the attention of investors and serve as a site of considerable commercial activity, partly through the efforts of the Madras and Ceylon governments to mitigate the dangers of investment in the pearling industry.

While British Ceylon and the Company Raj were dependent upon the infusion of local capital to the pearl fishery, many government officials also expressed the desire to break-up certain merchant coteries. In doing so, Company and Crown officials hoped to open new opportunities to merchants with lesser means and broaden participation in the industry without reducing the overall revenue potential. Ceylonese officials, particularly those under the influence of Governor North, wanted to short-circuit the sway of commercial elites over the pearl fishery, to pry the industry away from the grip of Tamil merchants from mainland India and the northern districts of Ceylon. During the early years of British rule in Ceylon, this was viewed as a way to keep money on the island instead of losing it to the mainland. Anthony Bertolacci, the author of an early colonial history of Ceylon and former personal assistant to Governor North, advocated “giving an opportunity to the small capitalists in Ceylon to venture upon this speculation, and to

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<sup>656</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3586, 73 (23 February 1810).

purchase the boats direct from Government, instead of paying an advanced price to the renter, who has almost always been a merchant of the continent of India, and not an inhabitant of Ceylon.”<sup>657</sup> By granting favors and concessions to merchants from India, British Ceylon was a willing participant in its own financial demise, allowing merchants to rent the fishery with little to no risk, after which time they returned home with coins, pearls, and other spoils of the land and sea. A family of Tamil merchants from Jaffna helmed by Kundappah Chetti and Vydelinga Chetti was the primary target of such efforts. As one British officer wrote, “Their Influence must be considerable over all the Boat Proprietors and Divers, their exertions and representations, and that dread of novelty and of innovation which is so prevalent amongst all the Natives may prevent many persons from speculating.”<sup>658</sup> Governor North wrote to the Court of Directors in London at the end of February 1799 in reference to these two notorious merchants from Jaffna, upset that they had formed “combination among the black Capitalists who speculations are not likely to be attended with the same advantage now, when open competition is offered.”<sup>659</sup> North also bemoaned the fact that the renter “was impossible to controul [*sic*] & to overlook,” as they also offered to lend money at an “unconscionable Premium.” He concluded, “These are the evils against which I am to struggle.”<sup>660</sup>

The motivation for government officials to break-up certain merchant groups or “combinations of bidders” was manifold. Primarily, superintendents of the pearl fishery sought to prevent collusion and price-fixing for sub-rented and auctioned boats. The manipulation of the market for boats by merchants such as Vydelinga Chetti had the

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<sup>657</sup> Bertolacci, *Interests of Ceylon*, 258.

<sup>658</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 54.

<sup>659</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 17.

<sup>660</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18

potential to reduce the overall revenue derived from the pearl fishery. Further anxiety over price-fixing stemmed from the fact that such activities occurred secretly between merchants, as members of the same family and businessmen with established connections came to agreements that were not sanctioned or known by officials thus beyond the immediate purview of government officials. Renters exercised undue power and sway over operations at the pearl fishery in other ways. For instance, officials believed that renters unfairly manipulated labor pools by selecting the best divers for their boats and distributing the less skilled ones to boats that they put up for sale. At the same time, however, the power of renters to select divers for boats in their employ was seen as a customary right that found its way into renting proposals and contracts. For example, in a bid for the 1805 pearl fishery at Tiruchendur, a certain Cappanayar Mercair submitted a proposal that contained the following clause: “Out of the Boats and men Collected I am to choose what Boat and man are fit after so if any Boat or Boats man or mans [*sic*] should find any accident not fit for the service I am to change them.”<sup>661</sup>

From the perspective of the renter, the prospect of a remission all but guaranteed either a healthy share of the oysters and pearls or a proportionate refund, which effectively reduced financial risks and increased potential rewards. Remissions could mean the difference between an absorbable loss and total ruin for the renter and anyone else tangled in his web of credit and debt. For Madras and Ceylon, the extension of remissions and cancellations of debts functioned as generous incentives for investment by prospective renters because it safeguarded local capital. Such protections were thought to spur economic activity at the pearl fishery, leading to increased prices in boat sales and a

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<sup>661</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3565, 31 (7 March 1805).



more robust market for pearls and oysters, which further enriched the public treasury. However, an overly generous remission payment could reduce the overall profit margin of the enterprise, an effect that officials certainly recognized and wished to avoid. For example, as Bertolacci wrote, “The fisheries of the years 1808, 9, and 14, were sold to the same renter. That of 1809 had been sold for 260,000 Porto-novo pagodas; but having failed, a remission was granted him, which reduced the revenue of that year to 25,000*l*.”<sup>662</sup> This was not always the case, however. A healthy yield of pearls and oysters and robust markets for such produce could also minimize the chances that a renter brought forward a remission claim. For instance, Governor North wrote to Lord Hobart in London with an update on the 1803 pearl fishery at Chilaw in an uncharacteristically cheerful tone: “Every Boat was let for its full value, every oyster sold for its highest Price, and I am justified in declaring that no Renter who would not have clogged us with Remissions which would have frittered away the whole Emolument could have undertaken it with any Prospect of Success.”<sup>663</sup> British officials also hoped that the extension of remission payments would instill a sense of confidence in the group of merchants likely to rent the pearl fishery. For example, the renter of the 1815 pearl fishery at Tiruchendur, Cuttah Narrainasawmi, wrote to Fort St. George with a request for a remission, after which the Board “recommended a liberal remission to the renter, with a view of guarding against the impression which the unfavorable [result] of that attempt

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<sup>662</sup> Bertolacci, *Interests of Ceylon*, 257.

<sup>663</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, Vol. 11, 11v.

was calculated to produce on minds of speculators in such undertakings as well as on grounds of justice.”<sup>664</sup>

Even as British officials acknowledged the important function of remission payments they laid down policies designed to limit such indulgences. Efforts to reduce the likelihood of a renter bringing forth a remission claims began at the earliest stages of application process and continued through end of the engagement. Company and Crown officers were liable to reject proposals that stipulated each boat catch a minimum number of oysters per day. For instance, Collector Hansbury of Tirunelveli reviewed applications for the rent of the 1807 pearl fishery at Tuticorin. He reported to the Board, “The Proposals it will be seen are replete with Conditional agreements the most Considerable of which relates to the number of Oysters to be taken by each boat where the Renter seems disposed to provide perfectly for that security against Loss, to which as you have observed, he must in some measure be considered to be reasonably entitled.”<sup>665</sup>

According to Hansbury, accepting proposals with this conditional clause “really involves all the risk and inconvenience of aumanie [direct management] for whilst it secures the renter from all uncertainty and even keenly in considerable profit, it subject[s] Government to indefinite loss.”<sup>666</sup> The collector remarked that many “men of credit and substance” submitted applications for the 1807 pearl fishery but were “embarrassed with the objectionable clause.”<sup>667</sup> Officials sometimes entered into negotiations with the prospective renter about the terms and conditions of their contract. For example, William Petrie, President of the Board, wrote to Lord Clive in March 1800 concerning the contract

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<sup>664</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 704, 15820 (26 December 1815); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 682, 7513-4 (6 July 1815).

<sup>665</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 65 (20 January 1807).

<sup>666</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 440, 1447 (28 February 1807).

<sup>667</sup> *Ibid.*, 1448-9.

of Gregory Baboom, the renter of the pearl fishery at Tuticorin. He wrote, “The offer of Mr. Baboom being the highest, we called before us and explained to him that it was objectionable in that part which stipulates for a specific number of Oysters per Boats and that we could not accept or recommend any Proposal containing such a Clause since it opens a door to unavailing contention and the frauds of servants etc. and while it gives a certainty to the Proposer subjects the Company to indefinite loss.”<sup>668</sup> The protocols for remission claims were often included in the renter’s contract. For example, Gregory Baboom’s contract contained the following article: “If by any storm or interruption from an enemy the fishery should be impeded a reasonable remission is to be granted to me upon a full representation of the circumstances.”<sup>669</sup> The renter was supposed to “make an immediate representation” to the superintendent “on the spot who must ascertain without delay the truth of the reports made.”<sup>670</sup> Renters were therefore compelled to watch proceedings at the pearl fishery closely so that they could submit a petition on the spot.

Company and Crown officers also used the extension of remission payments to smooth over relationships between the government and merchants. Remissions could therefore have a palliative effect. For instance, Vydelinga Chetti, the patriarch of a powerful Tamil merchant family from Jaffna, rented one hundred and fifty boats for thirty days at PNP 300,000 during the 1804 pearl fishery at Arippu. British chaplain James Cordiner addressed the rent of the 1804 pearl fishery in his travel account: “As he had been unsuccessful, he was allowed the produce of the extra days at the rate of 400*l*. Sterling each day. Government also granted him a remission of about one-third of the

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<sup>668</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2202-3 (10 March 1800).

<sup>669</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3559, 33 (12 August 1800).

<sup>670</sup> *Ibid.*

rent which he had bargained to pay; so that the total gain to the revenue by this fishery did not exceed seventy-five thousand pounds sterling. Government however would not have realized nearly so much, if they had conducted the concern on their own account, for it was well known that the renter lost by it.”<sup>671</sup> Vydelinga Chetti submitted a petition directly to Governor North, a man with whom the renter was personally familiar.

According to the petition: “If the Oysters fished were so much fewer than the usual number in former fisheries, so as to change the concern from an advantageous to a ruinous one, a Remission would be granted to me on your Excellencies [*sic*]

Consideration of the Circumstances.”<sup>672</sup> Governor North consented to the Vydelinga Chetti plea and granted him a remission of nearly one-third his total rent. Governor North reasoned that this short-term sacrifice to the public treasury was necessary if merchants of such wealth and resources as Vydelinga Chetti were to remain confident in British oversight of the pearling industry. Governor North then sent a letter to Lord Hobart in London with the following update: “I am happy to add that this remission was most thankfully received by Him, and has certainly rendered the other Capitalists in India well disposed [*sic*] to this Government, which may, perhaps, hereafter, stand in great need of their assistance.”<sup>673</sup>

### **Pearls into Peas: The Curious Case of Gregory Baboom, c. 1800**

At the turn of the nineteenth century, an Armenian merchant named Gregory Baboom made a bold play to corner the opium trade between India and China. Described by a

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<sup>671</sup> Cordiner, *Description of Ceylon*, 2:70.

<sup>672</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, Vol. 14, 103v.

<sup>673</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, Vol. 14, 85v.

contemporary English writer as a “noted character” and “equally well known in Bengal and Madras as in Canton,” Baboom managed an impressive and diverse portfolio.<sup>674</sup> From opium and spices to camphor and tin, Baboom was, like many of his contemporaries engaged in long-distance trade, well-versed in the buying and selling of an assortment of bulk and luxury commodities. He brokered deals with local merchants and European trading companies in vibrant port cities of India, China, and the archipelagoes of Southeast Asia, spinning a web of business relationships that spanned the eastern Indian Ocean and South China Sea.<sup>675</sup> Baboom even traveled to Philadelphia in the second decade of the nineteenth century as the agent of a Hong business partner to collect the debt of an American opium trader.<sup>676</sup> However, his attempt to secure an exclusive contract with the Company to transport opium between India and China failed. Company officials in Calcutta rejected his offer, after which Baboom turned his attention for a brief period to another venture.

In January 1800, Gregory Baboom tendered an application to the Board of Revenue at Fort St. George for the rent of the pearl fishery at Tuticorin. As the first full-scale fishery on the India-side of Mannar organized by the Company since its annexation of Dutch Ceylon, British officials expected a high level of interest. The pearl banks off the coast of Tuticorin had not been fished since 1768 because the Dutch VOC held industry in abeyance during a protracted dispute with the Nawab of Arcot. Company officials presumed that the long fallow period had restored the health and vitality of the

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<sup>674</sup> John Barrow, *Travels in China* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1804), 612.

<sup>675</sup> For a short biography of Gregory Baboom and a profile of his commercial activities, see Carl Smith and Paul A. Van Dyke, “Four Armenian Families,” *Review in Culture* 8 (2003): 40-50.

<sup>676</sup> Frederic D. Grant Jr., “The April 1820 Debt Settlement between Conseequa and Benjamin Chew Wilcocks,” *Americans and Macao: Trade, Smuggling, and Diplomacy on the South China Coast*, ed. Paul A. Van Dyke (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 73-94.

pearl oyster populations and that the coming harvest would be abundant and profitable. Collector Stephen Lushington of Ramnad wrote, “the Banks have not been fished for several years it is likely that an advertisement for Proposals to rent the Fishery may bring forward offers to a large amount.”<sup>677</sup> Four merchants including Gregory Baboom responded to the call for applications. Baboom tendered the highest amount (PNP 137,000) and he was also the only applicant who supplied the name of a guarantor. In line to receive the *cowle*, Baboom’s application, however, included the so-called “objectionable clause” that stipulated each boat fish at least 4,000 oysters per day. Fearing that such a provision would expose the government to frauds and necessitate an expensive remission payment, the district collector and members of the Board rejected the terms of Baboom’s proposal. The Board then summoned Baboom to Fort St. George and requested that he remove the clause from his contract. According to the Board, “It is agreed to call Mr. Gregory Baboom before the Board who having attended at it explained to him that his stipulations are so objectionable that the Board cannot recommend a Proposal containing a clause which cannot fail to open a door to unavailing contention, and the frauds of servants, and while it gives to the Proposer a certainty, subjects Government to an indefinite loss.”<sup>678</sup> Baboom agreed to strike the section from his proposal, which satisfied the Board and awarded him the rent of one hundred and twenty boats for thirty days at an adjusted rate of PN 60,000.

Although the pearling industry would become increasingly dominated by local capital in the early nineteenth century, it is significant that the Board granted the first pearl fishery on the India-side of Mannar organized by the Company to an Armenian

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<sup>677</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 242, 221 (13 January 1800).

<sup>678</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2181 (6 March 1800).

merchant with whom it had previously conducted business. In 1799, Baboom approached the British East India Company's committee on the China trade with an audacious plan. He submitted an application for an exclusive contract to move opium from the plentiful poppy fields of eastern India to China, the primary consumption market of the drug. Baboom wanted a three-year agreement with the Company that fixed the price and quantity of product. The deal would have made Baboom very rich but he never realized his vision of dominating the opium market because Company officials in China and Bengal rejected his proposal.<sup>679</sup> Baboom had also brokered a deal with the Company to transport specie and spices between Canton and Madras for P 80,000.<sup>680</sup> The Board may have also viewed Baboom and his affiliation with the Armenian trading community as a safe and reliable alternative to local Indian capital. Furthermore, Baboom had brought together two distinguished businessmen of Madras—Samuel Moorat and John De Fries—to underwrite the venture and guarantee his contract. A prominent leader of the Armenian community in Madras, Moorat bore honorific titles, such as *Agha*. He was also the proprietor of a pleasant garden in Egmore known as the Pantheon and the epitaph of his marble tombstone memorialized his munificence and philanthropic work.<sup>681</sup> Baboom also joined Moorat in some of his charitable work and bestowed gifts to the same religious

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<sup>679</sup> Smith and Van Dyke, "Four Armenian Families," 47.

<sup>680</sup> H. R. C. Wright, "The Moluccan Spice Monopoly, 1770-1824," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no. 4 (1958), 105-6; Margaret Sarkissian, "Armenians in South-East Asia," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 3, no. 2/3 (1987), 13.

<sup>681</sup> The tombstone of Samuel Moorat reads: "By integrity and urbanity in public dealing, by hospitality and benevolence in private life, by exemplary conduct both in moments of difficulty and those of prosperity, and by numerous acts of benevolence to the necessitous, he became beloved by all who knew him." Mesrovb Jacob Seth, *History of the Armenians in India from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, (London: Luzac & Co., 1897), 148-9; Seth, *Armenians in India: From the Earliest Times to the Present*, (New Delhi: Asian Education Services, 2005 [1937]), 593; C. S. Srinivaschari, *History of the City of Madras* (Madras: P. Varadachary & Co., 1939), xlvi.

and cultural institutions.<sup>682</sup> The other guarantor of Baboom's contract was John De Fries, one of three members of a family that operated an eponymous merchant house in Madras.<sup>683</sup> Like his co-guarantor Samuel Moorat, John De Fries was embroiled in the scandal over the debts of the Nawab of Arcot.<sup>684</sup> He was also named as a witness in the investigation of the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of Governor Pigot of Madras.<sup>685</sup> Moorat and the De Fries family became tangled in a separate affair concerning litigation over some slaves in 1817-1818.<sup>686</sup> De Fries was also a proprietor of the Carnatic Bank and he financed numerous urban infrastructure projects such as the construction of fortified walls, hospitals, and bridges in Madras.

While the exact terms of the agreements between Baboom and his partners are unknown, it appears that both Moorat and De Fries had interests in the pearling industry beyond their respective roles as sureties. For instance, Baboom carried with him to Tuticorin a letter of credit in Moorat's name. As the Board wrote to Collector Lushington, "Mr. Gregory Baboom informs the Board he may have occasion for money at Tutacoryn and Carries with him a letter of Credit from Mr. Samuel Moorat Armenian Merchant you are authorized to take Mr. Baboom's bills on Mr. Moorat in favor of the

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<sup>682</sup> Moorat and Baboom both patronized the Mkhitar'ar Society, a religious and educational order of Benedictine monks in Italy. Moorat contributed to the Armenian church in Madras and the chapel on its grounds bears his name. It should also be noted that at least two members of Baboom's immediate family are buried in the cemetery at the Armenian church. Seth, *Armenians in India*.

<sup>683</sup> H. D. Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras, 1640-1800*, (London: J. Murray, 1913), 3:14, 78-9, 110, 138, 164, 370, 397, 400, 423, 456, 491, 499, 509, 511, 534, 570, 573-4.

<sup>684</sup> BL, IOR, H, 308; BL, IOR, MSS, F331, 25; BL, IOR, H, 316, 23-9. For published references to his involvement with the scandal over the debts of the Nawab of Arcot, see J. D. Gurney, "The Debts of the Nawab of Arcot, 1763-1776," PhD diss., Oxford University, 1968, 158, 217, 282, 293, 314, 323.

<sup>685</sup> *Original Papers with an Authentic State of the Proofs and Proceedings before the Coroner's Inquest, which was Assembled at Madras, upon the death of Lord Pigot, on the 11<sup>th</sup> Day of May 1777*, (London: T. Cadell, 1778).

<sup>686</sup> *Papers Relating to the Treatment of Slaves in the Colonies*, Vol. XXII.



Board of Revenue for such sums as you may be able to advance from your treasury.”<sup>687</sup>

The house of De Fries engaged in the buying and selling of pearls and other marine commodities, such as coral.<sup>688</sup> A newspaper advertisement in the *Madras Courier* from June 1790 notified the public about the sale at “Public Outcry” by De Fries & Co. “in the Black Town on Monday the 21<sup>st</sup> June, a Parcel of fine beautiful large Pearls for ready money.”<sup>689</sup> The firm had also submitted application for the rent of the 1800 pearl fishery, as well submitted applications for the rent of the 1808 Ceylon pearl fishery and 1815 pearl fishery at Tiruchendur, but in neither of those instances was it awarded the *cowle*.<sup>690</sup>

A number of problems plagued the 1800 pearl fishery at Tuticorin, which brought both Baboom and Madras face-to-face with the possibility of heavy losses. On the one hand, there were circumstances beyond the immediate control of the superintendent and renter. For example, strong southerly winds created unsafe boating and diving conditions, which delayed fishing days and reduced productivity. Aside from climatic issues, a large contingent of divers boycotted the fishery because one diver reportedly died from injuries sustained from a jellyfish attack.<sup>691</sup> On the other hand, there were many problems at Tuticorin that were directly connected to the management of the pearl fishery. The superintendent and other government officials, for instance, had mishandled the recruitment of labor. A sizable group of divers from Kilakkarai arrived late to Tuticorin because the start date of the fishery overlapped with Ramadan. Collector Lushington wrote to the Board in March 1800 that Kilakkarai was one of the “principal Ports from

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<sup>687</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2298 (13 March 1800).

<sup>688</sup> Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras*, 3:140.

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.*, 449; G. H. Hodgson, “Three Hundred Years of Madras Commerce,” in *Madras Tercentenary Commemoration Volume*, 239.

<sup>690</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2171-4 (6 March 1800); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 668, 1589-602 (9 February 1815); Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 158.

<sup>691</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 251, 3955 (8 May 1800).

whence the Boats and Divers are furnished for the Fishery” and that there was “considerable delay having arisen in their departure in consequence of the Rumjan [*sic*] Feast.”<sup>692</sup> Government officials were also miffed by the late arrival of Baboom and two native agents in his employ, which further delayed the start of the fishery. A member of the Board of Revenue wrote to Collector Lushington: “[I] hope that Mr. Gregory Baboom will have arrived in time to Commence the Pearl fishery within the period specified in the Cowle which as it admits the employment of an additional Number of boats if procureable [*sic*] will they also trust make up to Government the full amount of the rent agreed to be paid, in the event of the weather, proving unfavorable toward the close of the fishery and preventing it being carried on for thirty days.”<sup>693</sup>

Without any known experience with the pearl fisheries or trade, Baboom appointed two native agents—Rama Chetti and Venkatachala Chetti—to manage the affairs of his rent at Tuticorin. Baboom appears to have tasked Rama Chetti and Venkatachala Chetti with a range of duties and responsibilities, from overseeing the washing and sorting processes to outfitting the boats with divers and pilots. Yet interfacing with government officials superintending the pearl fishery was perhaps their most important duty. Rama Chetti and Venkatachala Chetti represented themselves as “Managers of the Pearl Fishery on the part of Mr. Baboom” in the written record of these exchanges.<sup>694</sup> The two agents also explicitly stated in their appeals to Company officials that they were bound by duty and obligation to faithfully conduct the “Business then

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<sup>692</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2161 (6 March 1800).

<sup>693</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 248, 2709 (28 March 1800).

<sup>694</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 249, 3383 (17 April 1800).

entrusted by our employer in [the Company's] Care.”<sup>695</sup> Through various forms of oral and written communication, including petitions (*arzee*), face-to-face meetings, and middleman messengers, Rama Chetti and Venkatachala Chetti conveyed to government officials a set of demands and grievances. Rama Chetti and Venkatachala Chetti wanted the authority to outfit the renter's boats with the best available divers. They also wanted to grant the pearling fleets access to the entire oyster banks instead of limiting the range of boats to within demarcated boundaries marked by buoys and guarded by gunboats. Baboom's agents also complained to government officials that the pearls were of poor quality and in short supply. According to a petition addressed to Collector Lushington: “Since these three days we found the Oysters brought to be very young ones and that by the tryal [*sic*] we made, produce very little Pearls in them and if should be continued so, will attend to great prejudice to the Renter.”<sup>696</sup>

Collector Lushington wrote to Rama Chetti and Venkatachala Chetti to declare that it was not the government's responsibility to compensate the renter because the pearl fishery was not “interrupted by Storms or Enemies.”<sup>697</sup> Baboom now faced arrears on his rent, but instead of paying down his debt, it appears that he absconded to China where he continued to trade in a range of bulk and luxury goods and even flirted with smuggling opium and other contraband.<sup>698</sup> Before he disappeared from Madras, however, Baboom sent a letter that enjoined the Board to collect the outstanding payments for his rent from his guarantors. In this capacity, Moorat engaged in lengthy deliberations with the government, demanding that, at the very least, the Board grant a remission for two days

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<sup>695</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 251, 3951-9 (8 May 1800).

<sup>696</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 249, 3382 (17 April 1800).

<sup>697</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 251, 3959 (8 May 1800).

<sup>698</sup> Paul A. Van Dyke, “Smuggling Networks of the Pearl River Delta before 1842,” in *Americans and Macao*, 64.

of unproductive fishing. Moorat refused to cover Baboom's debts until the Board heard his plea. He wrote in a letter addressed to the government, "Mr. Baboom has left no Instructions with me for the payment of the additional Sum you have claimed from him I am sorry Consistent with my duty I cannot Comply with the discharge of any other than the Sum I have already Tendered you."<sup>699</sup> Moorat eventually acquiesced to the government's demands, and by the end of his negotiations he paid his truant associate's debt of more than PNP 43,700.<sup>700</sup>

Meanwhile, in China, Baboom had a sealed contract for the sale of pearls for 100,000 Spanish Dollars with Pan Changyao (Conseequa), a prominent and powerful Hong merchant based in Canton.<sup>701</sup> While Baboom was in India procuring the product through his rent of the pearl fishery, a certain Charles Mackinnon served as Baboom's agent in China. Pan Changyao found Mackinnon less than amicable and the Company refused to intervene because Baboom carried heavy debts, though it is not known whether these debts were related to his rent of the pearl fishery.<sup>702</sup> An English diplomat and traveler John Barrow based in China provided an account of a curious exchange between Baboom and an unnamed Hong merchant, who may very well have been Pan Changyao: "Just before his failure in about a half million sterling, [Baboom] deposited a valuable casket of pearls, as he represented them, in the hands of one of the Hong merchant, as a

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<sup>699</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 262, 7661 (4 September 1800).

<sup>700</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 260, 7182-3 (18 August 1800).

<sup>701</sup> Kuo-Tung A. Ch'en, *The Insolvency of Hong Merchants, 1760-1843* (Nankang: Institute of Economics, Academica Sinica, 1990), 334; Smith and Van Dyke, "Four Armenian Families," 47; Grant, "Debt Settlement," 73-94.

<sup>702</sup> Smith and Van Dyke, "Four Armenian Families," 47.

pledge for a large sum of money, which, when opened, instead of pearls were found to be a *casket of peas*.”<sup>703</sup>

### **Wealth, Status, and Patronage: Manali Chinniah Mudaliar, 1800-1805**

From its founding as a British settlement in the mid-seventeenth century, Madras had been a center of the pearl trade and other marine commodities such as chanks, coral, and fish skins. The consolidation of power by the British East India Company further solidified Madras as a hub in the capital and commodity networks that coalesced around the pearl fishery and its attendant trade. Historian Susan Neild-Basu marks the turn of the nineteenth century as a “historical juncture” in the history of Madras, a moment when the city was “poised between its long-standing role as a territorial enclave of foreign commercial enterprise and its future status as the regional capital of an imperial power.”<sup>704</sup> Economic historian Tirthankar Roy describes this type of urban transformation as one of the hallmarks of early modernity in Indian economic history.<sup>705</sup> At the center of this dynamic urban culture was a loosely associated class of commercial and political magnates, men from *dubash* families who self-styled themselves “merchant-kings” through temple patronage and other forms of charitable giving.<sup>706</sup> In the dual registers of kingship and divinity, wealthy men patronized artists, endowed temples, mediated local disputes, and served as intermediaries between state and local society.

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<sup>703</sup> Barrow, *Travels in China*, 612.

<sup>704</sup> Susan Neild-Basu, “Madras in 1800: Perceiving the City,” *Studies in the History of Art* 31 (1993), 221.

<sup>705</sup> Tirthankar Roy, *India in the World Economy: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Roy, *An Economic History of Early Modern India* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>706</sup> Neild-Basu, “Dubashes of Madras”; Susan Lewandowski, “Merchants and Kingship: An Interpretation of Indian Urban History,” *Journal of Urban History* 11, no. 2 (1985): 151-79; Kanakalatha Mukund, *A View from Below: Indigenous Society, Temples, and the Early Colonial State in Tamilnadu, 1700-1835* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2005), 136-68, Washbrook, “Merchants, Markets, and Commerce.”

Historian Susan Lewandowski finds that Madras between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed a veritable explosion of temple construction, a boom financed largely by merchants. She argues that “Hindu commercial communities used a classical pattern of gift-giving to legitimate their power base during a period of capitalist intrusion.”<sup>707</sup> In doing so, she continues, “merchants involved in building temples in Madras City were not only acquiring religious merit in their acts as donors, they were also legitimizing their authority over the new neighborhoods they established.”<sup>708</sup> Many discussions of dubashes in eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Madras, however, downplay their economic roles and argue that their power and influence derived from their political functions and social positions and less their role as brokers and financiers.<sup>709</sup> To her credit, Neild-Basu speculates that a “deeper enquiry into family histories, court archives, and the records of agency houses may yet disclose further commercial interests among dubashes.”<sup>710</sup> Indeed, records related to East India Company management of the pearl fishery suggests that the pearling industry was one such “commercial interest” that continued to attract the attention of dubashi elite in the early nineteenth century. Many of the merchants from Madras that bid for the rent of the pearl fisheries hailed from dubashi families and invested directly in the pearling industry, diversifying the portfolios of Madras-based merchants, which often included land holdings and stakes in other commercial interests and trades. The rent of a pearl fishery further increased the status and standing of the *cowle*-holder in the quick-changing urban milieu of Madras, providing another source of wealth that could be applied to

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<sup>707</sup> Lewandowski, “Merchants and Kingship,” 153.

<sup>708</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>709</sup> Neild-Basu, “Dubashes of Madras,” 19-20.

<sup>710</sup> *Ibid.*

philanthropic and charitable works. Patronage was not a new area of engagement for pearl merchants, as demonstrated by the life and work of Cītakkāti, a celebrated patron of Tamil literary culture who is memorialized as a righteous and generous benefactor.<sup>711</sup>

One of the most prominent members of this emergent class of politically involved and economically powerful men in Madras City was Manali Chinniah Mudaliar.<sup>712</sup> Chinniah Mudaliar is an important figure in the history of the pearl fisheries because he and other members of his family were involved in the industry on at least four documented occasions. He submitted applications for the rent of the 1800 and 1805 pearl fisheries, successfully securing the lease for latter, and in 1809, he requested funds from the Madras government to speculate at the Ceylon pearl fishery at Arippu. For the 1822 pearl fishery, one of his sons wanted to provide security and serve as the guarantor for the principal renter's contract with the Company. Besides materials directly related to the pearl fisheries, there are myriad references to Chinniah Mudaliar and his family in the records of the Madras government from the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century that, when taken together with texts from the literary sphere, provide a remarkable picture of his commercial and political activities. Chinniah Mudaliar pursued the rent of the pearl fisheries with the same verve that made him a prolific and celebrated patron of literature, music, and religious institutions. Cultural patronage and philanthropic giving for men like Chinniah Mudaliar also provided a venue for the

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<sup>711</sup> Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*; Shulman and Subrahmanyam, "Prince of Poets and Ports."

<sup>712</sup> For more on Manali Chinniah Mudaliar, see Niels Brimnes, *Constructing the Colonial Encounter: Right and Left Hand Castes in Early Colonial South India* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), 153-8; Neild-Basu, "Dubashes of Madras."

distribution of surplus capital, some of which was acquired through the rent of the pearl fishery, and created a positive feedback loop between commerce and charity.

Chinniah was a member of an elite Vellala family from Manali, a village near Madras. He managed extensive landholdings in the hinterlands of Madras, mostly in Chingelput district, and participated in the financial sector as a moneylender, describing himself as a “saukar” and serving as one of the directors of a Madras-based bank.<sup>713</sup> Like Gregory Baboom, Chinniah Mudaliar had previous financial engagements with the East India Company. For instance, he was a member of a nineteen-person party that extended a loan for nearly two lakh pagodas to the Madras government at a rate of twelve percent.<sup>714</sup> Other business interests included lending capital to local landowners in Thanjavur district and extensions of credit to rice merchants.<sup>715</sup> Chinniah Mudaliar built upon the success of many within the Vellala community, which made significant economic and social advances during the course of the eighteenth century. A historical caste marker of agricultural elites in South India, many Vellalas moved into positions of economic and political power in urban Madras, standing alongside, and in some cases displacing, traditional commercial groups. Indeed, by the late eighteenth century, many of the dubashes in Madras came from communities that did not have prototypical ties to finance and business.<sup>716</sup> Vellala elites remained connected with their village roots, effectively drawing upon a rural register of power and authority that differed from their urban counterparts. As historian Susan Neild-Basu writes, “the interplay between high

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<sup>713</sup> Ambirajan, “Laissez-Faire in Madras.”

<sup>714</sup> Neild-Basu, “Dubashes of Madras,” 22; Kanakalatha Mukund, *The Trading World of the Tamil Merchant: Evolution of Merchant Capitalism in the Coromandel* (Chennai: Orient Longman, 1999); Brimnes, *Colonial Encounter*.

<sup>715</sup> Neild-Basu, “Dubashes of Madras,” 24.

<sup>716</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.



rural status and wealth and influence acquired in the colonial urban context became an important feature of the growing prestige and authority of the late eighteenth-century dubashes, both in the city of Madras and in its hinterlands.”<sup>717</sup> By straddling the line between rural and urban cultures and authority, Vellala dubashes and other nouveaux-riches served the Company’s emergent interests in land revenue systems all while enriching their own material well-being and social standing.

In such an urban environment, Vellala dubashes and other urban elites fashioned themselves as merchant-kings through cultural patronage and philanthropic giving to religious institutions. Many of these men, including Chinniah Mudaliar, appear in the annals of Madras as cultural and political brokers, mediating disputes between left-hand and right-hand caste communities, as well as between natives and the colonial state.<sup>718</sup> His father, Manali Mutukrishna Mudaliar, for instance, was the last Chief Merchant of the East India Company in Madras before the post was dissolved and the dubash system filled its place. Mutukrishna later became dubash to Governor Pigot, adding profits from Company-directed trade to his considerable land holdings in Chingelput district. The elder Mudaliar was also one of the founders and primary benefactors of the Chenna Kesava Perumal temple in Madras, the construction of which benefitted from land and monetary donations from the Madras government. As historian Joanne Punzo Waghorne finds, “The Company provided the land and a portion of the funds needed to construct the building. Mutukrishna Mudaliar put up 5,202 pagodas (currency) to the Company’s 1,173, with the rest of the 15,652 raised by subscriptions from the community at

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<sup>717</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>718</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule: A South Indian Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Neild-Basu, “Dubashes of Madras”; Mattison Mines, *Public Faces, Private Voices: Community and Individuality in South India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Brimnes, *Colonial Encounter*, 142; Mukund, *View from Below*.

large.”<sup>719</sup> Following his father’s death, Chinniah Mudaliar became the trustee or *dharmakarta* of the temple, at title the family would eventually struggle to keep through litigation in the 1830s. He was according to one government report regarded as a “person of respectability and well liked by those interested in the good conduct of the affairs of the Pagoda.”<sup>720</sup> A plaque at the complex records the name of Manali Mutukrishna Mudaliar and his son, above which on a pillar is a carved figurine of the donor.<sup>721</sup>

Aside from temple patronage, Chinniah Mudaliar and members of his family were also major benefactors of the budding literary and musical scene in Madras at the turn of the nineteenth century. Though it may be apocryphal, Chinniah Mudaliar reportedly had an instrumental role in introducing the violin to South Indian classical music. Chinniah Mudaliar connected Baluswamy Dikshitar (1768-1858) with a European teacher who trained the famous musician in basic violin techniques, which allowed him to develop and adapt the instrument to the Carnatic context.<sup>722</sup> References to Chinniah Mudaliar and his father are also found in Tamil and Sanskrit texts. The most famous example of commercial and cultural elite sponsoring the production of literary works is the *dubash-diarist* Ananda Ranga Pillai, who commissioned at least three Sanskrit and Tamil works with biographical themes.<sup>723</sup> Likewise, the father of Chinniah Mudaliar extended patronage to the Tamil poet Arunachalakavirayar, the composer of a Tamil Ramayana set

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<sup>719</sup> Joanne Punzo Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61; Brimnes, *Colonial Encounter*, 154.

<sup>720</sup> Brimnes, *Colonial Encounter*, 154; *Madras Tercentenary Commemoration Volume*, 360-1.

<sup>721</sup> Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods*, 59-60.

<sup>722</sup> V. Raghavan, “Some Musicians and their Patrons about 1800 AD in Madras City,” *Journal of the Madras Music Academy* 16 (1944), 129; Amanda Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 29.

<sup>723</sup> V. Raghavan, “Notice of Madras in Two Sanskrit Works,” *Madras Tercentenary Commemoration Volume*, 107-12; David Shulman, “Cowherd or King? The Sanskrit Biography of Ananda Ranga Pillai,” in *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, eds. David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2004), 175-202.

to song and verse (*Ramanatakam*). The poet refers to Mutukrishna Mudaliar “as a king (*bhupati*), learned in all languages and looked up to by everyone as a person who always spoke the truth.”<sup>724</sup> Chinniah Mudaliar is also mentioned in the *Sarvadevavilāsa*, a *campū-kāvya* Sanskrit text from the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>725</sup>

All accounts appear to suggest that Chinniah Mudaliar had the economic, cultural, and social capital to make a competitive offer for the rent of a pearl fishery. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, Chinniah Mudaliar received a fillip to his accumulated wealth when he inherited a sizable estate from a Komati merchant, a certain Suncoo Chinna Kistnama.<sup>726</sup> Chinniah Mudaliar was the primary creditor to Suncoo Chinna Kistnama and became the trustee of the estate at the time of the Komati headman’s death, shortly after which time he submitted an application for the rent of the 1800 pearl fishery at Tuticorin.<sup>727</sup> Inheriting the estate certainly increased Chinniah Mudaliar’s capital base and perhaps made the rent of a pearl fishery—a notoriously uncertain and risky venture—a more viable investment option. In 1800, Chinniah Mudaliar had competed against Gregory Baboom, De Fries & Co., and another prominent merchant named Chidambaram Pillai for the rent of the pearl fishery. According to his application, “As soon as the fishing is over the account shall be settled and the amount which may produce from me as a Renter shall be paid into the Honble Company's

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<sup>724</sup> Mukund, *View from Below*, 160, 187-9.

<sup>725</sup> V. Raghavan, ed., *The Sarva-deva-vilāsa* (Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1958); Neild-Basu, “Dubashes of Madras”; Mukund, *View from Below*; Indira Viswanathan Peterson, “Mapping Madras in *Sarvadevavilāsa*: Urban Space, Patronage, and Power in a Nineteenth Century Sanskrit Text,” in *Passages: Relationships between Tamil and Sanskrit*, eds. Kannan M. and Jennifer Clare (Pondicherry: Institut Français de Pondichéry, 2009), 333-58.

<sup>726</sup> Eugene Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795-1895* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Brimnes, *Colonial Encounter*; Mattison Mines, “Courts of Law and Styles of Self in Eighteenth-Century Madras: From Hybrid to Colonial Self,” *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 1 (2001), 55-65.

<sup>727</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 409, 4424-5 (24 June 1805).

treasury at Madras three months after the fishery is over if the Board approve of the above Proposal I am ready to give sufficient security for the punctual payment of my Engagement.”<sup>728</sup> Chinniah Mudaliar failed to receive the rent because his bid was lower than Baboom’s offer and he did not provide any further information about his security deposit.

Five years later, an examination off the coast of Tuticorin found a large batch of ripe oysters, a surprising development that sent Madras officials scrambling to organize a fishery. As the Board wrote to Governor Bentinck, “Unless this Bank be fished in the course of the present season, it is probable that the whole produce may be lost.”<sup>729</sup> Klattee Paar, the bank on which the examiners found a healthy supply of pearl oysters, was significantly smaller than Tolayeram Paar, the site of the previous fishery in 1800 and the largest bed off the coast of Tuticorin. The superintendent in consultation with the Board therefore decreased the number of boats and reduced the duration of the fishery. Government officials placed an advertisement in the Madras *Gazette* that announced sixty boats and ten days of fishing were available for rent. Chinniah Mudaliar answered the advertisement with a *durkhaust* or proposal for PNP 500 per boat. The Board initially rejected his proposal, after which Chinniah Mudaliar increased his offer to PNP 700 per boat, which was enough to beat his competitor, a certain Cappanaynar Mercair.<sup>730</sup> As the winning bidder, Chinniah Mudaliar signed a contract with the East India Company at Fort St. George in March 1805 in which he agreed to make an advance of P. 10,000 and pledged to pay all outstanding charges on his rent within thirty days of the close of the

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<sup>728</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 247, 2178 (6 March 1800).

<sup>729</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 401, 471-2 (24 January 180).

<sup>730</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3565, 29-31 (7 March 1805).

fishery.<sup>731</sup> The application of Chinniah Mudaliar was remarkable because the Board accepted it without the usual requisite of a named guarantor. Instead, he put forward land, mortgaging some property holdings as payment and security for the rent.<sup>732</sup>

Chinniah Mudaliar was mired in debt from other engagements and he had trouble meeting the obligation of his contract. Chinniah Mudaliar belatedly deposited the final payment of his rent into the treasury in June 1805, which irked members of the Board of Revenue because they did “not perceive any good cause for delay in the payment of Current revenue due by Chinniah.”<sup>733</sup> At the same time Chinniah Mudaliar was closing his rent of the pearl fishery he also faced arrears on his lands, a chronic problem that continued to burden his family through at least the 1830s. Described as the “largest *zamindar*” in Chingelput district, Chinniah Mudaliar had somehow fallen behind on his payments. In 1812, for example, Chinniah Mudaliar had not paid the necessary taxes on at least nine of his estates in Chingelput, representing to the district collector that he lost P. 2.5 lakhs over an eight-year period.<sup>734</sup> While Chinniah Mudaliar ultimately fulfilled his contract with the Company for the rent of the 1805 pearl fishery, he remained in debt and the Madras government eventually seized and subdivided his property. The Collector of Chingelput received papers from the Board that contained the following instructions: “If you have not already completed the Subdivisions of Chinniah Moodely's Estate, the Board desire that you will lose no time in effecting this object in the mean time you will acquaint him that if he does not immediately discharge the arrears...due by him, measures must be taken to enforce payment and will with that view submit draft of an

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<sup>731</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3565, 37-9 (22 March 1805).

<sup>732</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 409, 4424-5 (24 June 1805).

<sup>733</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 408, 4343 (20 June 1805).

<sup>734</sup> Brimnes, *Colonial Encounter*, 154-5.

advertisement for the sale of the Lands in question.”<sup>735</sup> Chinniah Mudaliar was insolvent at the time of his death yet members of his family continued to find the pearl fishery an attractive arena of investment. In 1822, only six years after his father’s death, Mutukrishna Mudaliar agreed to serve as security for the rent of the pearl fishery at Tuticorin.<sup>736</sup> However, Mutukrishna had three brothers, all of whom objected to the agreement. The brothers argued that they constituted an “undivided family,” a form of joint property relations, which effectively required Mutukrishna Mudaliar to account for all matters related to his father’s estate.<sup>737</sup> The brothers brought a suit of equity against Mutukrishna Mudaliar via their English barristers James Minchin and Thomas Teed, who notified the Board that the estate would not be offered as security for the rent of the pearl fishery.<sup>738</sup>

### **Credit, Honor, and Reputation: Annasami Chetti, 1807**

Competition for the rent of the 1807 pearl fishery at Tuticorin was fierce. The Tolaiyirum Paar off the southeastern coast of India had not been fished in seven years, which provided ample time for the pearl oyster population to reach its optimal age. The advertisement that year promised “that quantity of Oysters on [the Bank] is very great that they are now arrived at maturity and tho’ small, are of very [fine] color and good

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<sup>735</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 567, 3078 (30 March 1812). For more on the estate of Manali Chinniah Mudaliar, see TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 566, 2948-55 (23 March 1812).

<sup>736</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1258-69 (11 February 1822).

<sup>737</sup> For more on the undivided family in colonial law and society, see Mytheli Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Birla, *Stages of Capital*; Eleanor Newbiggin, *The Hindu Family and the Emergence of Modern India: Law, Citizenship, and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>738</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 906, 1841-2 (18 February 1822).

shapes.”<sup>739</sup> The collector and the Board received a total of seventeen applications. Acting Collector James Hansbury of Tirunelveli received four proposals at the district *cutcherry*, while the other thirteen applicants tendered applications to the Board at Fort St. George.<sup>740</sup> At the time, this was the largest number of applications received by the Madras since the East India Company secured managerial rights over the pearl fishery, surpassed by 1810 pearl fishery at Tuticorin when eighteenth prospective renters tendered proposals.<sup>741</sup> Despite being an “a man unknown” to government officials, Annasami Chetti received a *cowle* for the rent of two hundred boats for thirty days.<sup>742</sup> The proposal of Annasami Chetti was unusual because it did not specify a monetary amount but instead “unconditionally” agreed to pay PNP 7,500 over and above the highest offer. Annasami Chetti’s competition dwindled as soon as the review process started when the collector and members of the Board disqualified two applications because they had been received after the deadline.<sup>743</sup> Another set of applications stipulated that boats had to fish a minimum number of oysters per day, the so-called “objectionable clause” that found its way into many proposals. As one official wrote, “Numbers 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 14, 15 and 16 tho [*sic*] in five of them has security been sufficient, are mostly then made by men of credit and substance they are however most of them embarrassed with the objectionable clause.”<sup>744</sup> A certain Cottah Sanganah submitted the highest offer of PNP 90,000 and emerged from the pool of applicants as the top contender but his application was riddled with one problematic clause after the other. The Board wrote that the application “is

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<sup>739</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3566, 51 (19 January 1807).

<sup>740</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 440, 1439-61 (28 February 1807).

<sup>741</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 509, 1642-62 (1 March 1810).

<sup>742</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 440, 1459 (28 February 1807).

<sup>743</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 440, 1448 (28 February 1807).

<sup>744</sup> *Ibid.*

qualified with a restrictive clause and is moreover in some degree objectionable on the protracted period proposed for payment and the non specification [*sic*] of Securities the man however, the Board believes is himself fully competent.”<sup>745</sup> Left with few options, the Board awarded Annasami Chetti the rent for a hefty sum of PNP 97,500. For the purpose of the rent, it appears that Annasami Chetti borrowed the entire amount from a banker named Hari Prasad. Hari Prasad was a Madras-based agent of the firm Gopaldas Manohardas of Banaras, one of the largest and most successful indigenous banking firms in eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century India.<sup>746</sup> Annasami Chetti received the *cowle* but he did not appear before the Board to receive it or any other documents related to his lease. Instead, Hari Prasad went before the Board to seal the contract, advance the rent, and receive the grant. The absence of the principal renter and unorthodox mode of payment did not escape the suspicious eye of the Board, which commented that Hari Prasad “appeared impatient for a conclusion of the agreement.”<sup>747</sup>

A number of problems impacted Annasami Chetti’s rent of the 1807 pearl fishery at Tuticorin. In the first instance, the boats were not properly numbered and a forceful northerly wind prevented vessels from arriving to the pearl fishery in a timely fashion and safely reaching the pearl oyster banks. As Collector Hepburn wrote in late March 1807, “In consequence of the forty six [*sic*] of the Boats having arrived here late...they could not be numbered and their Crews registered and the necessary preparatory for fishing made on their part to enable them to begin...as intended.”<sup>748</sup> He added: “The winds also

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<sup>745</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 440, 1450 (28 February 1807).

<sup>746</sup> Kumkum Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics, and State in Early Modern India: Bihar, 1733-1820* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 189-92; Lakshmi Subramanian, *Indigenous Capital and Imperial Expansion: Bombay, Surat, and the West Coast* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>747</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 440, 1450 (28 February 1807).

<sup>748</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 87 (26 March 1807).



blow strongly in a northerly direction which rendered it impossible for any Boats to reach the Bank. For these reasons it was found necessary to delay the commencement of the Fishery.”<sup>749</sup> The fishery quickly hemorrhaged labor and capital, which weakened an already depressed market for pearls and oysters. As Collector Hepburn wrote to the Board in a dispatch from Tuticorin, “the Oysters sell at a very low price in the Bazar of this place and if a Calculations of the produce of the Fishery be made accordingly the value of it will appear very low.”<sup>750</sup> Divers and boatmen started to flee the camp and there was also famine with which to contend.<sup>751</sup> The collector sent the following report to the Board: “In Consequence of the great scarcity prevailing this year in all the neighbouring Districts the number of Strangers here is very small, hardly anybody indeed but the Boat men and Divers, the thousands of speculators Cheats and Gamblers that were seen on former Occasions are not now to be met with and as there is but little demand there is consequently no competition in the purchase of Oysters.”<sup>752</sup>

Annasami Chetti entered into protracted disputes with Collector Hepburn and other Company representatives over the terms and conditions of his contract. As Annasami wrote, “I have addressed several Petitions to the Collector Sub Collector and to the Board of Revenue on the subject of my Rent, but no proper redress been given.”<sup>753</sup> Most of the issues over which Annasami Chetti and Collector Hepburn wrangled concerned the limits of the renter’s rights and authority. For example, Annasami Chetti complained that the collector usurped his authority by inflicting corporeal punishment on laborers and refusing to allow the renter access to all the pearl oyster beds. According to

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<sup>749</sup> Ibid.

<sup>750</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 142 (1 May 1807).

<sup>751</sup> Ibid.

<sup>752</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 143 (1 May 1807).

<sup>753</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 447, 5235 (20 July 1807).

the renter, the collector unfairly flogged divers for refusing to work and subjected money-collectors in his employ to the same harsh treatment. Not only did a government official physically punish his agents but the collector also confiscated the money in their hands without cause, which Annasami Chetti wanted back.<sup>754</sup> Annasami Chetti then invoked custom, asserting that it was his right to inflict such punishment. He reportedly said, “a Pearl renter everywhere punished his people at will short of hanging or cutting off their heads and that if [I] had known he was not to do so, [I] would not have rented the Fishery.”<sup>755</sup> Annasami Chetti also operated under the assumption that the principal renter had free reign over the industry during the time of his rent. He wanted to let the pearling boats venture beyond the demarcated boundaries of the fishery, but Collector Hepburn prevented him from doing so. Annasami Chetti claimed that this check on his authority further contributed to his heavy financial loss. He remarked in a petition, “As the Collector did not deliver me the whole place of Toolayeram Paar which I Rented for 97,500 Portonovo Pagodas, but limited small Spots thereof I request that such Spots may be measured and after deducting the value thereof, at the Rate of 97,500 Portonovo Pags per whole place of Toolareyeram Paar, order the remainder to be paid to me.”<sup>756</sup> He further claimed that the quality and quantity of the produce did not match the description found in the advertisement: “That the Oysters taken out from the abovementioned limited place are extremely worse unripened [*sic*], and no pearls in great many of them. The Pearls are not in the least comparable with the quality and description described in the Government Gazette. I do not know where are the such Kind of Pearls.”<sup>757</sup> Tensions

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<sup>754</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 447, 5233 (20 July 1807).

<sup>755</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 138 (1 May 1807).

<sup>756</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 447, 5230 (20 July 1807).

<sup>757</sup> *Ibid.*, 5230-1.

between the renter and collector escalated, as Annasami Chetti went so far as to claim that the collector “took the Oysters to his own advantage.”<sup>758</sup> For his part, Hepburn wrote to the Board with unflattering reports about the renter’s behavior at Tuticorin: “Instead of exerting himself to make his loss as small as possible, he has adopted another Policy and hopes that by stating frequent and frivolous objections and throwing unnecessary impediments in the way of the Fishery.”<sup>759</sup>

It became apparent during the course of the pearl fishery that the renter would bring a remission claim to the Board and Collector Hepburn sent advanced warning to Fort St. George. He alerted them to the fact that Annasami Chetti would likely “proceed to Madras to sue for a remission.”<sup>760</sup> Annasami Chetti departed the camp for Madras with ten days left on his contract to present his case to Company officials at Fort St. George. According to a report from the collector, “The Renter himself suddenly disappeared one night about a fortnight ago giving [out] that he was gone to Ettiapore but without leaving any authorized agent to manage his concerns or acquainting me either with his departure or with whom I was to communicate on his part during his absence.”<sup>761</sup> There were other incidences that reflected poorly on the renter in the eyes of government officials. Not only did Annasami Chetti informally designate an unnamed agent without proper documentation to manage his affairs at the pearl fishery but he also, according to Collector Hepburn, left his share of the seasons catch “lying in heaps unopened.”<sup>762</sup> As Annasami Chetti’s oysters festered on the beach, the unnamed *gomastah* or agent had

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<sup>758</sup> Ibid., 5234.

<sup>759</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 114-5 (22 April 1807).

<sup>760</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>761</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 154-5 (14 May 1807).

<sup>762</sup> Ibid., 155; TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 444, 3655 (25 May 1807); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 445, 4131 (18 June 1807); TNA, TDR, Vol. 3566, 184 (1 July 1807).

reportedly “shut himself up in his house and would not allow one of the Renting people to attend to open the Compound or to receive and take care of the Renters share of the Oysters.”<sup>763</sup>

Annasami Chetti eventually reached Madras and appeared before the Board of Revenue with a series of petitions in Telugu that demanded the “Honourable Company shall become answerable for the loss” sustained by him as the renter.<sup>764</sup> In these documents, Annasami Chetti first represented himself as a competent businessmen with extensive knowledge of the pearling industry, demonstrating a remarkable command and fluency in the trade, by referencing different categories and classes of pearl.<sup>765</sup> Yet, in subsequent pleas, Annasami Chetti struck a different tone as a hapless and disgraced man, one who thought that he could “derive some advantage from the fishery” and took the published results of the examination of the pearl oyster beds at face value. He wrote: “As I am a poor man and thought that I can derive some advantage in the Fishery and your Honors are sensible in my Proposal mentioned that I would pay the highest Sum. No Oysters had been taken from the Sea by me, even made a trial before I purchased the Farm but depended on the news paper [*sic*], that has been published, when my Proposal was accepted for the Fishery and on bringing the Soucar to be Security, you have demanded sum to pay the amount in ready money, which he did as I am a poor man, it became dangerous to my Life, but the Honble Company would not unjustly ruin any one and well known in the world that they are acting with justice.”<sup>766</sup> Annasami Chetti claimed that the advertisement was misleading and the produce of the pearl fishery was

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<sup>763</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 156 (1 May 1807).

<sup>764</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 447, 5231 (20 July 1807).

<sup>765</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 446, 4425 (29 June 1807).

<sup>766</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 446, 4424-5 (29 June 1807).

disproportionate to the numbers in the newspaper. He wrote, “I had Rented this pearl Fishery and paid ready money thro’ my security placing my entire trust and confidence upon the Government Gazette, I do not know that I would be disappointed in the manner abovesetforth.”<sup>767</sup> Other times he tried to prove that he was a trustworthy individual who had simply fallen on hard times. For example, he reassured the Board that all the produce from the pearl fishery was accounted for and protected: “The Oysters [*sic*] that were fished in the Fishery are deposited in the Banksalls the washed Pearls are also lodged there, there are Company Guard placed over it and there is an account Kept for what has been expended.”<sup>768</sup> Annasami Chetti then claimed that he was “subject to an Entire Ruin” and “destruction by the heavy loss.”<sup>769</sup> He even referred to how the loss of money as renter of the pearl fishery threatened both his life and honor. “It seems that the Soucar will not leave me with life,” read one of his petitions.<sup>770</sup> Annasami Chetti’s petition continued: “I have borrowed the money of him and paid the Company and purchased the Fishery but I did not swallow it up, I am not the man that has a estate of 4 or 5,000 Pagodas but maintained success [*sic*] by being faithful but my misfortune was such that I apprehend, it will cost me my life, I am a poor man and has a large Family to maintain and it rests with your Honors to save my life and honor and support me.”<sup>771</sup>

The record of Annasami Chetti’s conduct at the pearl fishery, which the collector and members of the Board viewed as ignoble, further impacting his claim for compensation. During the course of deliberations, government officials lambasted

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<sup>767</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 447, 5235-6 (20 July 1807).

<sup>768</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 446, 4426 (29 June 1807).

<sup>769</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 447, 5236 (20 July 1807).

<sup>770</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 446, 4427, 29 June 1807

<sup>771</sup> Ibid.

Annasami Chetti's character.<sup>772</sup> Collector Hepburn wrote about the "extraordinary mode of conduct observed for some time past by the Renter of the Pearl Fishery."<sup>773</sup> Even the Governor of Madras "observed with surprize [*sic*]" when he read about the "perverse conduct of the Renter."<sup>774</sup> Additionally, the Board considered the dubious transaction between Annasami Chetti and another merchant. According to the claims of Dutch merchant A. L. De Veer, Annasami Chetti fleeced him by sub-renting a boat at an unfair price. According to a petition submitted by De Veer, Annasami Chetti charged him SP 200 more than the other sub-renters, despite having "assured me upon his honor" and "on account of the Friendship betwixt between us" at a previous fishery that he was receiving a fair price.<sup>775</sup> The Board, however, refused to intervene in the matter because it was a private transaction and advised De Veer to submit a claim to the Tirunelveli *zillah* or district-level court.<sup>776</sup> In light of this information, Madras responded coldly to the plight of Annasami Chetti and attributed his loss to the "indolence, indiscretion, and mismanagement."<sup>777</sup> According to the Board, "the renter so far from having cause for complaint has been treated with uncommon indulgence and that his disappointment may in great measure be attributed to his own indolence indiscretion and mismanagement."<sup>778</sup>

Like his business associate, Hari Prasad submitted petitions for remission to the Board. The House of Gopaldas Manohardas faced a deficit of more than SP 88,000 for which they sought full compensation. In addition to the loss of SP 30,000 sustained during the fishery, the government held a portion of the rental payment and its accrued

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<sup>772</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3582, 114-5 (22 April 1807).

<sup>773</sup> Ibid.

<sup>774</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 447, 5236 (20 July 1807).

<sup>775</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 444, 3723 (28 May 1807).

<sup>776</sup> Ibid.

<sup>777</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3566, 183 (1 July 1807).

<sup>778</sup> Ibid.

interest. Hari Prasad feared that he would “inevitably fall sacrifice to the just resentment of [the house of Gopaldas Manohardas] and thereby draw upon him his total ruin.”<sup>779</sup> As the experiences of Annasami Chetti and Hari Prasad illustrate, the rhetoric and practices of honor and trust were integral not only to the formation of business relationships based on lending and borrowing of money, but were also strategically deployed in the pursuit of remission following the underperformance of a fishery that brought renter and their creditors face-to-face with financial insolvency and a spoiled reputation.

### **The Prodigal Son Returns: Kundappah Chetti, 1821-1822**

Kundappah Chetti has a recurring role in the history of the pearl fisheries during its early years of British management. He and his father Vydelinga Chetti were the principal renters of numerous pearl fisheries on the Ceylon-side of Mannar during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. Even after the fallout of the investigations into corruption at the pearl fisheries in the late 1790s (Chapter 5), Vydelinga and Kundappah Chetti continued to engage with the government of British Ceylon on at least three occasions. Two decades later, Kundappah Chetti used Nagapattinam as the staging ground for his return to the world of the pearl trade when he made a successful bid for the rent of the 1822 pearl fishery at Tuticorin. According to his application, Kundappah Chetti “learned from the Government Advertisement recently published that the pearl fishery at Toolayerampar subject to Tooticorin will be rented out,” for which he bid M. Rs. 720,000 for a thirty-day fishery with two-hundred boats.<sup>780</sup>

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<sup>779</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 461, 1644 (17 March 1808).

<sup>780</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1127 (7 February 1822).

The experience of Kundappah Chetti is noteworthy because he successfully negotiated favorable terms and conditions ahead of his rent and then secured a sizable remission from the government after the venture went south. Practiced in the art of the pearl trade, Kundappah Chetti used his skill and expertise to negotiate a remissions claim and other concessions with the Madras government. For example, he submitted a petition or *arzee* to the Board before the event started some special accommodations such as a postponed start date and the supply of protective forces to guard his coterie of merchants. He wrote, “As the place of pearl fishery being abounded with Robbers, and as they pilfer the bankshalls where Oysters are stored, and as the Merchants having incurred considerable losses in the former fisheries I humbly beg your Honorable Board will be pleased to direct the Collector of Tinnevelly or commanding Officer to post an adequate number of sepoy and also such other peons that may be sufficient to secure the Oysters and of supporting the renter with the Merchants connected with this transaction.”<sup>781</sup> Kundappah Chetti clearly knew the threats and challenges presented by the rent of a pearl fishery and how to effectively reduce such risks to his persons and property. His confidence is apparent in subsequent petitions and other interactions with representatives of the Madras government. He refers to his experience as a renter of the Ceylon fisheries and speaks authoritatively about the rules and procedures for collecting a remission payment. The case of Kundappah Chetti thus illustrates how a senior pearl merchant not only used his knowledge of the industry to negotiate a cancellation of debts but also how he leveraged his status to secure a more favorable outcome for himself and his business associates.

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<sup>781</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1259-60 (11 February 1822).



Last fished in 1810, the Tolaiyerum Paar off the coast of Tuticorin held out the promise of an excellent return for both renter and proprietor. After a twelve-year break, government officials were quite optimistic about the profitability of the upcoming pearling season. Collector Hudleston of Tirunelveli wrote, “The estimated value of the produce of the Oysters taken up during the examination fully equals my most sanguine expectations and holds out the prospect of a much richer fishery than has been known since the first undertaken.”<sup>782</sup> An examination of the bank was undertaken by the *jati talaivan* in late January and early February of 1821 determined that the pearl oyster populations would admit a fishery of one hundred and fifty boats over twenty-five days. However, the logistics for organizing a fishery on such short notice were far too difficult for the collector and his agents to overcome. Besides the quick turnaround, the East India Company was involved in a protracted dispute with Dutch authorities over the status of Tuticorin and other erstwhile territories of the defunct VOC. After careful consideration, and heeding the advice of the *jati talaivan*, Collector Hudleston recommended postponing the fishery until the following year. He wrote to the Board, “[After a great deal of conversation with the Jathee Taliven] on the [subject] it appears to me that he is disposed to defer the fishery altogether to next year although he has reported a partial one practicable.”<sup>783</sup> The collector continued: “[The *jati talaivan*] states that the addition of a year to the age of the oysters will so greatly enhance their value that the loss in quantity by the various contingencies of Currents Monsoon or the species of fish which destroy the oysters will be greatly counterbalanced by the superior quality of those which

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<sup>782</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 78 (21 December 1821).

<sup>783</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 5-6 (10 February 1821).

remain.”<sup>784</sup> An examination of the same banks the following year found an ample supply of pearl oysters and the *jati talaivan* thus determined that there would be “a very valuable fishery in the ensuing season.”<sup>785</sup>

The Madras government distributed an advertisement in early January for the rent of the 1822 pearl fishery at Tuticorin. The official publication of the advertisement came after some delay, as Company officials took time to determine the best or preferred mode of management. Collector Hudleston had initially recommended that the government organize the fishery under a modified *amani* system in which boats were sold at public outcry to separate renters. On the one hand, Hudleston wrote, “The [*amani*] mode of conducting the fishery might very probably produce much more to Government and I am disposed to be of opinion that it would from the difficulty of finding employment for capital sensibly experienced by monied [*sic*] men at present and the avidity with which the native merchants pursue this speculation.”<sup>786</sup> On the other hand, “[renting] secures to Government under the stipulated conditions which appear equitable and conformable usage a Revenue unprecedented on the occasion of any former fishery.”<sup>787</sup> Collector Hudleston averred that direct management by the Company was the best course of action unless a merchant came forward with a particularly attractive offer. The appearance of an angel investor was not beyond the realm of possibilities. As the pearling season approached, the collector referred to the alacrity “with which this speculation is pursued in this country,” and that such pursuits are “well known and the public expectation which has been strongly excited on this occasion from the general impression of the richness, of

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<sup>784</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>785</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 902, 11268 (27 December 1821).

<sup>786</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1126 (7 February 1822); TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 88-9 (21 December 1821).

<sup>787</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1126 (7 February 1822).

the Examination.”<sup>788</sup> Hudleston’s hesitation to farm out the entire fishery stemmed from his fear that the produce would not meet expectations and open the government to a flood of remission claims. He wrote, “the only doubt which I have as to the expediency of renting the whole fishery arises from the uncertainty how far the produce may fall short in quantity of the estimate made of it though that [estimate] is as much to be relied on as any former one.”<sup>789</sup>

In early February 1822, Kundappah Chetti—represented as the “son of Vydealinga Chetty Merchant of Jaffanapatam and now residing at Nagapatam”—answered the advertisement with what he described as a “humble proposal” to the Board.<sup>790</sup> He proposed leasing the whole fishery—two hundred boats for thirty days—for M. Rs. 720,000.<sup>791</sup> Despite his early doubts, Collector Hudleston eventually conceded that Kundappah Chetti’s offer was far too attractive to ignore. He wrote, referring to the prospective renter’s *durkhaust* or proposal, “Upon the whole I think the most advantageous mode of disposing of the fishery will be the acceptance of the proposal which is now forwarded.”<sup>792</sup> Kundappah Chetti’s winning bid vied with three other prospective renters for the grant. The next most competitive offer came from one of his family’s chief rivals, Abdul Cader Maraikkayar of Kilakkarai. The elder Maraikkayar merchant submitted his application to Collector Hudleston at the Tirunelveli *cutcherry* but it only amounted to M. Rs. 561,750. Abdul Cader did not receive the rent of the pearl fishery but the Board awarded him the right to all the chanks fished during the pearling

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<sup>788</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 79 (21 December 1821).

<sup>789</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1126-7 (7 February 1822).

<sup>790</sup> *Ibid.*, 1127.

<sup>791</sup> *Ibid.*, 1125-1130.

<sup>792</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1127 (7 February 1822).

season.<sup>793</sup> As for the other bidders, a certain Ramaswami Mudaliar of Chingelput submitted an application for M. Rs. 532,000, while Said Tambi Maraikkayar in his capacity as an agent for Said Sathakootulla Maraikkayar of Kilakkarai tendered a slightly lower bid at M. Rs. 530,000.<sup>794</sup>

Those members of the Board of Revenue at Fort St. George who reviewed renting applications found many favorable aspects of Kundappah Chetti's proposal. In the first instance, Kundappah Chetti agreed to pay his rent in three equal cash installments rather than credit and bank notes: "Should my proposal meet your approbation and the farm be granted to me I will pay the amount of my farm as follows. One third of the amount to be paid at the place of fishery previous to fishing. One third of the amount to be paid after fifteen times fishing from the day of fishing and the last Instalment to be paid on a thirty times fishing as soon as the fishing is over. The different sums to be paid in different coins of the Madras Currency."<sup>795</sup> Kundappah Chetti also referenced his previous engagements as renter of the pearl fishery in the application: "It will appear on reference that I have been very punctual in my engagement with both the Madras and Ceylon Government and therefore humbly solicit the Kind compliance of your Honorable Board to my humble proposal."<sup>796</sup> It is curious, however, that the Board did not bear in mind that Kundappah Chetti's previous rents of the pearl fisheries had subject to accusations of fraud, corruption, and misconduct (Chapter 5).

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<sup>793</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 907, 2243-4 (7 March 1822); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 908, 2496-8 (18 March 1822). For more on the Maraikkayar involvement in the chank trade, see Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*.

<sup>794</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 907, 2085-8 (28 February 1822).

<sup>795</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1128 (7 February 1822).

<sup>796</sup> *Ibid.*, 1129-30.

Another important aspect of Kundappah Chetti's application was that he offered the names of two "respectable persons" as security.<sup>797</sup> The Board of Revenue accepted Gopal Chetti of Nagapattinam and Manali Mutukrishna Mudaliar of Madras as guarantors of their contract with Kundappah Chetti, both of whom had previous engagements with the pearl fishery. Manali Mutukrishna Mudaliar was a member of a prominent business family and his father had rented the pearl fishery of 1805. Gopal Chetti had submitted an application for the rent of the 1810 pearl fishery at Tuticorin.<sup>798</sup> He was also awarded the rent of the 1816 pearl fishery at Arippu. However, Gopal Chetti remarked that "he had made an erroneous calculation; that the Merchants would not come forward to support him, and that he was unable to complete [*sic*] the Installment."<sup>799</sup> At the 1822 pearl fishery, the renter and his two sureties formed an agreement, the preamble to which read: "Know all men, by those present, that we Cundapah Chitty of [Jaffanapatam], Manally Moodookistnah Moodely of Madras and Gopaul Chitty of Negapatam are jointly and severally held and firmly bound into the Honorable the United Company of Merchant of England trading to the East Indies."<sup>800</sup> The two guarantors entered into the bond for M. Rs. 1,440,00, or twice the amount of the total rent, providing further evidence that the renter and his associates assumed significant risk when they obtained a *cowle* for the pearl fishery. The bond between Kundappah Chetti, Manali Mutukrishna Mudaliar, and Gopal Chetti also illustrates the various legal and extra-legal mechanisms through which merchants moderated behavior. For example, a section of the bond captures the mutual obligations the renter and his guarantors accepted between each

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<sup>797</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1128 (7 February 1822).

<sup>798</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 509, 1642-62 (1 March 1810).

<sup>799</sup> Subrahmanyam, "Noble Harvest from the Sea," 158.

<sup>800</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1262 (11 February 1822).

other and with the Company: “The said Cundapah Chitty hath inconsequence offered the above bounden Manally Moodookistnah Moodely and Gopaul Chitty as his sureties. Now the Condition of the before written obligations is such that if the said Cudapah Chitty his Heirs Executors or Administrators shall and do in all things well and truly observe, perform, fulfil [*sic*] and keep all and every the stipulations and agreements contained in the said Above statement and in the said Muchilka or Agreement.”<sup>801</sup> Mutukrishna Mudaliar and Gopaul Chetti signed these papers in the presence of three British officials, after which Kundappah Chetti sealed the contract with the Board and the government awarded him the *cowle* for his rent. These documents also laid out the terms of the agreement between the government and the renter, which included the payment schedule and the expectations of the guarantors.

Kundappah Chetti further leveraged his experience renting the pearl fishery to win additional concessions from the Madras government. For instance, Kundappah Chetti requested that the government provide him with armed guards during the period of his rent. British Ceylon and Company Madras regularly supplied such services to renters, a benefit that went beyond the usual deployment of armed vessels and other forces during the pearling season. Kundappah Chetti wrote, “I humbly refer your Board to the records of your office of 1797-8 and a similar indulgence was shewn [*sic*] to me by the Government of Ceylon in subsequent years.”<sup>802</sup> The Board complied with Kundappah Chetti’s request and sent a letter to members of various military divisions of the Madras government instructing them to mobilize troops for security detail. According to its minutes, the Board “Ordered that the copy of [a] letter be transmitted from the Military

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<sup>801</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1263-4 (11 February 1822).

<sup>802</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 905, 1129 (7 February 1822).

Department to the Town Major of St. George with authority to furnish the Native detail desired in it to accompany the Renter of the Taleyaram Parr Pearl fishery until his return to this Presidency.”<sup>803</sup> Arrangements for the safe travel of Kundappah Chetti and his entourage appear to have been made to the satisfaction of all parties. A Company official reported that Kundappah Chetti departed Madras “accompanied by the Guard which the Honorable the Governor in Council were pleased to allow for the Security of his own Property, and of the large sums of Money taken down by the Merchants who accompanied him, to purchase the Oysters when drawn up.”<sup>804</sup>

However, the pearl fishery of 1822 at Tuticorin failed to meet expectations. The fishery did not yield a sufficient number of pearls and oysters. According to a report from the collector to the Board, “the Boats went out yesterday morning to the Toolaurum Bank to commence the pearl fishery, but from the wind not being as favorable as could be wish and their having left the shore late, did not arrive at the Bank till 11 o'clock when it was found that two of the Buoys had drifted from their stations during the night before; under these circumstances a productive day's fishery could not be expected, and some disappointment has been occasioned by the smallness of the return.”<sup>805</sup> The Collector and other officials blamed the *jati talaivan* for the problem. They went so far as to open a formal investigation into whether he had intentionally misled the government about the state of the pearl oyster population with an eye towards fishing the banks at the close of the fishery for his own benefit.<sup>806</sup> Epidemic cholera also struck the compound, which disproportionately affected laboring classes. Disputes with Dutch authorities at Tuticorin

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<sup>803</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 906, 1288-9 (14 February 1822).

<sup>804</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 907, 2086-7 (28 February 1822).

<sup>805</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 908, 2638 (25 March 1822).

<sup>806</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 101-12 (2 April 1822).

and other nearby settlements were also contributing factors. According to Collector Hudleston: “the result of the Fishery... has too fully confirmed the apprehensions entertained of absolute failure of produce from the Bank.”<sup>807</sup> He remarked that these circumstances “render it unpracticable [*sic*] to carry on the fishery according to the original engagements with any hope of satisfactions or advantage to Government or any of the parties concerned.”<sup>808</sup>

In the face of considerable financial losses, and motivated by the conviction that the Madras government had bungled its management duties, Kundappah Chetti pursued a remission and demanded that he be released from his contract. Government officials generally agreed that annulling his contract was the best course of action. The Collector wrote to the Board, “the Pearl fishery as far as it has gone has totally failed to answer the expectations formed of it and proposing that the engagements of the renter be immediately declared void and the Oysters hitherto fished up.”<sup>809</sup> Collector Hudleston also argued that the experience of Kundappah Chetti at the Ceylon fisheries had skewed his expectations. The Ceylon pearl fisheries were far more abundant than those on the India-side of Mannar, which meant, according to Hudleston, that Kundappah Chetti submitted a higher amount for the rent. He wrote: “The calculations upon which the produce of the Fishery was estimated are borne out by the result of former fisheries both as to quantity and quality. The offer however of the renter was higher than any data could have warranted and appears to have been made under the influence of his experience in the fisheries in which he had been concerned at Manar, where the Banks are generally

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<sup>807</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 101 (2 April 1822).

<sup>808</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-2.

<sup>809</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 908, 273 (28 March 1822).



much more productive and valuable than those off the Coast of Tinnevely. Even there several instances of failure have been met with equaling [*sic*] in extent that which took places on this occasion.”<sup>810</sup> The collector ultimately acquiesced to the demands of Kundappah Chetti and recommended that the government extend a remission and award an annulment. He wrote, “the Renter should be released from engagements to fulfill which must have involved him in hopeless and inextricable ruin.”<sup>811</sup> The Board initially refused to release Kundappah Chetti from his contract because the pearl fishery was not yet complete at the time of the request. They reasoned that releasing a renter from his contract at the “first appearance of any unfavorable circumstances would be an example of relaxation which would produce most dangerous consequence.”<sup>812</sup> The rent of a pearl fishery brought with it inherent risks and, according to the Board, it was not the responsibility of the government to indiscriminately compensate renters for financial loss unless it was found culpable or negligent. According to the Board, “it is a principle of all contracts of the nature of the present rent that the contractor takes upon himself the risk of loss as well as the prospect of gain.”<sup>813</sup>

The experience of Kundappah Chetti at the Ceylon pearl fisheries helped him during the course of his negotiations with Madras. He claimed that on previous occasions the Ceylon government annulled his contract and provided him with a generous remission when a pearl fishery failed. He was also granted the option to fish the banks for free and awarded the right to purchase oysters fished by the government under *amani* at fixed prices. Based on his experience across the Gulf, Kundappah Chetti believed he was

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<sup>810</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 115 (8 April 1822).

<sup>811</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 70-1 (13 May 1822).

<sup>812</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 908, 2731 (28 March 1822).

<sup>813</sup> *Ibid.*, 2730-1.

entitled to the same treatment as renter of the 1822 pearl fishery at Tuticorin. Government officials of Madras, though, were not familiar with this policy, and Kundappah Chetti compelled them to examine the records of the Ceylon pearl fisheries conducted under the authority of the East India Company in the late 1790s. As Collector Hudleston wrote, “In an instance which was brought to my notice on this occasion at the Pearl fishery at Manar the documents connected with which were submitted to my [Perusal], the Government of Ceylon in Consideration of the Comple[te] failure of the Bank not only released the Renter from his obligations but permitted him to fish for 3 days gratuitously as some remuneration for the expense he had incurred in so great an undertaking.”<sup>814</sup> In other words, the renter used knowledge derived from firsthand experience to gain an edge in negotiations with Madras over the validity of his contract and financial obligation. Kundappah Chetti was subsequently released from his contract “citing precedents of similar arrangements to Ceylon.”<sup>815</sup>

Kundappah Chetti also used his expertise to negotiate better terms for his associates. For example, Kundappah Chetti claimed in his petitions that he and other members of his renting party were damaged both financially and physically by the failure of the pearl fishery. In a petition to Fort St. George, Kundappah Chetti wrote, “The fishing commenced according to your orders on the 15th of March the produce of the Boats was so trifling on the very first day that on its being represented to you were sensible that the produce was insufficient.”<sup>816</sup> Kundappah Chetti continued: “It is now 36 days since the period and our accounts remain unadjusted nor are we enabled to return to

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<sup>814</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 105 (2 April 1822).

<sup>815</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 116 (8 April 1822).

<sup>816</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 72 (13 May 1822).

our homes in Consequence of which I and the purchasers of Boats are exposed to great loss by waiting absent from our mercantile pursuits at great expense.”<sup>817</sup> Besides the financial damages, Kundappah Chetti referred to how the insalubrious conditions of the pearl fishery camp affected the physical health of his party, writing that “we also find our health affected by the water at this place disagreeing with us.”<sup>818</sup> Taking all of these factors into account, Kundappah Chetti expected the Madras government to annul his contract and compensate him for losses. Again, he highlighted the fact that he “frequent[ly] had the rent of Pearl Fisheries not only under the Madras but the Ceylon Government” and wrote that he was in “partnership with others in these speculations in which I am perfectly experienced.”<sup>819</sup> Kundappah Chetti continued: “I entrust that you will settle my accounts and those of my partners in Conformity with the agreement which I executed, to you, and speedely [*sic*] permit us to receive back our money and return to our places of residence without further loss.”<sup>820</sup> Instead of returning home to Nagapattinam, Kundappah Chetti decided to stay at the spot of the fishery, partly to settle his accounts with merchants whom he had lent and borrowed money.<sup>821</sup>

In the end, all of these negotiating tactics and strategies appear to have worked for Kundappah Chetti. The Board decided on the claim of Kundappah Chetti by June 1822, a rather quick turnaround time since such matters were often left to lie on the table for months or even years. Kundappah Chetti was released from his engagement and reimbursed for certain expenses accrued during his rent, as well as a portion of the rental

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<sup>817</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>818</sup> Ibid.

<sup>819</sup> Ibid.

<sup>820</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 73-4 (13 May 1822).

<sup>821</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 917, 5715 (10 June 1822).

payment he advanced.<sup>822</sup> The *cowle* and security bond were also voided by Madras and the first installment of the rent (Rs. 240,000) returned to Kundappah Chetti. He agreed, however, to purchase more than three million oysters directly from the government for Rs. 52,963. He also agreed to pay the government for some of the expenses related to the materials, construction, and labor for the erection of bungalows and other structures, which totaled Rs. 807.<sup>823</sup> These sums were subsequently deducted from the money that he had deposited into the government treasury in advance of the fishery (Rs. 105,000), so roughly half of his money was actually returned after the deduction. However, Kundappah Chetti was not able to collect these payments in person. In a final petition to the Board, Kundappah Chetti wrote that he had fallen ill and was not able to make the trip to Madras to receive the money from the treasury. He wrote: “[Your petitioner] would have likewise proceed to Madras (as he is directed by the Honorable Board) to receive the money deposited there, had he not been sick and closely confined to bed otherwise. Your Petitioner therefore sends his son...for the purpose and humbly trusts that your Honorable Board will be graciously pleased to deliver the deposit into his hands...Doing which favor he shall always [be] with the liveliest and real sentiments of manifold gratitude.”<sup>824</sup>

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<sup>822</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 917, 5716 (10 June 1822); TNA, TDR, Vol. 4364, 111 (2 April 1822); TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 910, 3213 (11 April 1822).

<sup>823</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 134-6 (8 August 1822).

<sup>824</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 933, 11357-8 (23 December 1822).

## Conclusion

The rent of a pearl fishery offered an outstanding opportunity for merchants such as Gregory Baboom, Chinniah Mudaliar, Annasami Chetti, and Kundappah Chetti with the requisite economic, social, and cultural capital to boost their profits and reputation in a fast-changing business environment. However, pearling was a notoriously uneven and unpredictable venture. Naturalist Henry Le Beck observed during his visit to Arippu at the close of the eighteenth century that “it was generally supposed that the renter would be infallibly ruined, as the sum he paid for the present fishery was thought exorbitant.”<sup>825</sup> However, he continued, “this conjecture, in the event, appeared ill-founded, as it proved extremely profitable and lucrative.”<sup>826</sup> Indeed, sometimes the pearl fishery was “profitable and lucrative” for the *cowle*-holder, which also meant generally that the government received a generous fillip to its coffers. However, time and again the rent of a pearl fishery turned merchants into debtors and besmirched their reputation, honor, and social standing. Financial mechanisms that facilitated lending and borrowing not only provided the means to secure transactions, but also mediated social relationships between merchants. Lending and borrowing sought to mitigate the financial risks of investing in the pearling industry by spreading the possibility of risk across multiple parties. But even such forms of risk management could not overcome the financial fallout from a fishery that failed to deliver on its expected returns. The twin factors of extraordinary promise and potential peril shaped the business worlds and economic practices of merchants engaged in the pearl trade. Fundamentally a form of speculation, merchants borrowed and advanced prodigious sums of money with no assurance that the season’s catch of

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<sup>825</sup> Le Beck, “Account of the Pearl Fishery,” 393.

<sup>826</sup> *Ibid.*

oysters would yield a favorable return of pearls and profit. The dangerous conditions of pearling and its attendant trade redoubled the importance of trust and reputation between agents and principals, interweaving economic credit and social credit into the fabric of the pearl fishery and its economy. The business worlds of pearl merchants are all the more remarkable because of the high value of the commodity and speculative nature of the enterprise, which elevated the significance of trust and reputation between lenders and borrowers and agents and principals. Securing the rent of a pearl fishery thus required the mobilization of capital in all its forms—economic, cultural, and social—and entrepreneurial merchants effectively placed both financial and personal assets on the line when submitting a proposal to the colonial government. East India Company officials from the halls of Fort St. George to district-level collectors acted to mitigate financial risks to all parties involved through the protection of credit. At the same time, the government held out the prospect of a remission, though such an indulgence was difficult to obtain for a renter and his associates. In other words, the colonial government sought the best of both worlds. It wanted to reduce risk and maximize profit and at the same time further incentivized investment in the pearling industry by local capital through the offer of remissions. Relationships of credit and debt that coalesced around the pearl fisheries were deeply implicated in a political and commercial landscape shaped by colonial and imperial expansion of the East India Company and British state in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. British involvement in the lending and borrowing practices of pearl merchants were meant to bring greater regularity and oversight to an uncertain branch of revenue, while, at the same time, produce good economic subjects to be incorporated into the British Empire.

## CHAPTER 4: THE MOST SOVEREIGN COMMODITY

### SOVEREIGNTY

In March 1828, two agents of Avudaiyarkoil, a Shaivite temple also known as Tirupperunturai located in present-day Pudukkottai district, led a six-person party across the Gulf of Mannar to Arippu. Sundaralingam Pillai, Muttu Pillai, and four cooks and peons set out from their hometown through Rameswaram and continued by boat to Kondachi Bay. The group ventured across land and sea to receive *mauniam* [Tm. *māniyam*] or tax-free boats and diving stones on behalf of the temple. However, they encountered an unforeseen roadblock. Governor Edward Barnes of British Ceylon reversed decades of precedent by refusing to deliver boats and divers usually allocated for Indian religious institutions. Sundaralingam Pillai, Muttu Pillai, and representatives from four other rights-bearing temples—Rameswaram, Thirupallani, Thiruchendur, and Uthirakosamangai—made repeated appeals to government officials with the help of professional scribes whose services were offered at the pearl fishery. They also scheduled a series of face-to-face meetings through local go-betweens to plead their case to government officials. The temple agents petitioned Governor Barnes in what they described as a “polite manner” and attached “ancient [documents] given in the time of [Tirumalai Nayak] and [the Setupati of Ramnad],” which, Sundaralingam Pillai and Muttu Pillai maintained, would “prove the enjoyment” of Avudaiyarkoil and demonstrate “much of the holiness of the Pagodas.”<sup>827</sup> They presented copper-plate inscriptions

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<sup>827</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1168, 11458 (6 November 1828).

awarded to the temples by the Nayakas of Madurai and Setupatis of Ramnad alongside government-issued certificates and passports from the Dutch and British to substantiate their claims that tax-free boats and divers were protected rights conferred by former sovereigns of India and subsequently recognized by European powers. Sundaralingam Pillai and Muttu Pillai also suggested that government officials solicit the opinions of “the other Gentlemen and the great Merchants” attending the pearl fishery who “will Certify the truth of our allegation.”<sup>828</sup> Despite a mountain of evidence before them, Governor Barnes and his colleagues maintained that the government was under no obligation to recognize such claims to tax-free boats and divers. Sundaralingam Pillai, Muttu Pillai, and representatives of the other temples returned home empty handed. Reports about the confrontation at Arippu streamed into the Madras government. The temple agents reached out to Company officials and asked them to intervene in the dispute with British Ceylon.

The events at Arippu in 1828 set off a decade-long debate between the East India Company and British Ceylon about rights and authority at the pearl fisheries. British Ceylon officer George Lee, former postmaster general at Colombo, who “undertook laborious examination of a large and very interesting mass of Documents” concerning the claims of the “Indian Pagodas,” issued a report in 1838.<sup>829</sup> He delivered the results of his investigation to Governor J. A. Stewart Mackenzie at the Queen’s House in Colombo in August 1838. The Lee Report on the “Claim of Indian Temples on the Pearl Fisheries” came at the end of a period in which the pearling industry had been the object of targeted governmental reform and improvement. Drawing on the power of monopoly, Governor

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<sup>828</sup> Ibid., 11459.

<sup>829</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166.



Barnes and his colleagues proposed abolishing the renting system and implementing a type of direct management in which the pearl banks would be fished each season as a government enterprise. What appeared to be an innovative reform was actually the return to an older system of management. The Portuguese and Dutch had both managed the pearl fishery along the same lines until the mid-eighteenth century when VOC officials introduced the renting system. British Ceylon and the Company Raj elaborated this mode of management in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries but the rights of religious institutions at the pearl fishery had not been stripped away. British Ceylon tried to decouple the claims of religious institutions to tax-free boats and divers from the wider political economy of the pearl fishery, which went hand in hand with efforts to disembed local networks and institutions from the industry more generally. The work of Governor Barnes and his colleagues came at the precise moment when the British colonial office in London appointed commissioners W. M. G. Colebrooke and C. H. Cameron to bring liberal-minded and reform-orientated perspectives to the political, economic, and social structures of the island.

Questions surrounding the rights and privileges of Indian religious institutions at the pearl fishery became palpable during moments of political transition. Dutch officials deliberated about the nature of such claims when the VOC wrested managerial control over the pearl fishery from their Portuguese rivals in the mid-seventeenth century. At the turn of the nineteenth century, when the East India Company emerged as the predominant European power in the region, officers revisited the question of the Indian temples. The early nineteenth century witnessed a series of attempted reforms to the pearling industry and British officials on both sides of the Gulf designated the *mauniam* boats and other

privileges as one such target. From modifying the number of tax-free boats to revoking privileges outright, British Ceylon and the Company Raj sought to change the relationship between local institutions and the pearl fishery. British officials on both sides of the Gulf preferred to validate claims to material benefits derived from the pearl fishery but often refused to acknowledge any political rights. This chapter examines the relationship between political sovereignty and the pearl fisheries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It focuses on two key institutions—local polities and religious institutions—and describes how British Ceylon and Company Madras sought to terminate the preexisting rights and privileges enjoyed by courts and temples. The first part of the chapter analyzes a series of diplomatic negotiations over the rights and revenue to the pearl fishery between the Dutch East India Company, Nawab of Arcot, and English East India Company in the 1780s. The second section returns to the events at Arippu in 1828 and examines efforts by Madras and Ceylon to redefine the role of religious institutions at the pearl fishery.

The title of this chapter—“The Most Sovereign Commodity”—evokes a famous passage in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*. In his encyclopedic text from the early first millennium on the natural world, Pliny referred to pearls harvested from the Indian Ocean as “the richest merchandise of all” and “the most sovereign commodity throughout the whole world.”<sup>830</sup> Pliny alluded to the symbolic associations of pearls with kings and queens but he also invoked another meaning of the word in which pearls might be seen as the purest and supreme expressions of precious stones. Indeed, unlike gems extracted from mines, such as diamonds and rubies, pearls do not require any cutting, polishing, or

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<sup>830</sup> Pliny, *Naturalis historia*; Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 3.  
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shaping. Besides drilling holes to string them together, pearls remain largely untouched by jewelers. The royal connotations remained as kings and queens and shahs and sultans in royal courts across Europe and Asia displayed pearls as symbols of royal wealth, power, and prestige. The relationship between the production and consumption of pearls and sovereignty was articulated in a different context, as British Ceylon and the Company Raj hitched claims to legitimacy over the land, water, people, and resources of Mannar to their control over the pearl fishery.

The Gulf of Mannar held considerable military, commercial, and political value for European powers and indigenous polities and the pearl fishery was a keystone industry in the geopolitics of the region.<sup>831</sup> Historians Lauren Benton, Kerry Ward, and others have advanced compelling arguments that the geographies of early modern and modern empires were not uniform but manifested themselves through the creation and management of intersecting fields of partial sovereignty.<sup>832</sup> As Benton writes in *A Search for Sovereignty*: “Empires did not cover space evenly but composed a fabric that was full of holes, stitched together out of pieces, a tangle of strings. Even in the most paradigmatic cases, an empire’s spaces were politically fragmented; legally differentiated; and encased in irregular, porous, and sometimes undefined borders.”<sup>833</sup> The geography of empires between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries, in other words, was more like a patchwork quilt. By that same token, as historians Jane Burbank and Frederic Cooper write in *Empires in World History*, “The world did not then—and still does not—consist of billiard-ball states, with impermeable sovereignty, bouncing off

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<sup>831</sup> Flores, “The Straits of Ceylon”; McPherson, “Portuguese and Paravas.”

<sup>832</sup> Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6; Benton, *Search for Sovereignty*.

<sup>833</sup> Benton, *Search for Sovereignty*, 2.

each other. The history of empires allows us instead to envision sovereignty as shared out, layered, overlapping.”<sup>834</sup> Likewise, according to Benton, “Although empires did lay claim to vast stretches of territory, the nature of such claims was tempered by control that was exercised mainly over narrow bands, or corridors, and other enclaves and irregular zones about them.”<sup>835</sup> Mannar was one such “corridor” through which the English East India Company and British colonial state of Ceylon stitched together various, and often times contradictory, claims to territorial and thalassic control. Efforts to control land and sea were of course not unique to early modern oceanic European empires and historical evidence suggests that indigenous polities in the Indian Ocean sought to “territorialize” the sea through state-sponsored violence.<sup>836</sup>

Sovereignty was no small matter for the Dutch and English East India Companies in Asia. Scholars have long recognized the fact that European trading organizations were not pure business enterprises. Even contemporary critics of the East India Companies noticed fundamental contradictions in the organization and structure of these nominal business corporations. Scottish philosopher Adam Smith also expressed contempt for the East India Company in *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith maintained that the commercial work of these corporations was antithetical to the role of political sovereign that they had assumed in West and East Indies. He wrote: “A company of merchants are, it seems, incapable of considering themselves as sovereigns, even after they have become such. Trade, or buying in order to sell again, they still consider as their principal business, and

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<sup>834</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 16-7.

<sup>835</sup> Benton, *Search for Sovereignty*, 2.

<sup>836</sup> For example, see Roxani Eleni Margariti, “Mercantile Networks, Port Cities, and ‘Pirate’ States: Conflict and Competition in the Indian Ocean World of Trade before the Sixteenth Century,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51, no. 4 (2008): 543-77.

by a strange absurdity regard the character of the sovereign as but an appendix to that of the merchant, as something which ought to be made subservient to it.”<sup>837</sup> In 1788, Edmund Burke remarked in a speech at the impeachment of Warren Hastings, “the East India Company in Asia is a state in the disguise of a merchant. Its whole service is a system of public offices in the disguise of a counting-house.”<sup>838</sup> Modern historians have further outlined the tensions between the political and commercial mandates of European international trading corporations. For instance, Dutch historian Jurrien van Goor characterizes the VOC as a “hybrid state” that was preoccupied with “business concerns” but acted “like a kingdom.”<sup>839</sup> Likewise, historian M. C. Rickleff describes the VOC as a “quasi-sovereign power” based on the rights it was granted from the States-General charter.<sup>840</sup> Historian Janice Thomson writes in a similar vein that the VOC was “endowed with nearly all the powers of sovereignty.”<sup>841</sup> More recent works have challenged the characterizations of the East India Companies as “strange absurdities” and excised qualifiers such as “quasi-“ and “hybrid.” Pioneering studies by Philip Stern on the British East India Company in India and Adam Clulow on the Dutch East India Company in Japan have shown that these corporate trading ventures functioned essentially as early

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<sup>837</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 368; Sankar Muthu, “Adam Smith’s Critique of International Trading Companies: Theorizing ‘Globalization in the Age of Enlightenment,’” *Political Theory* 36, no. 2 (2008): 185-212; Emma Rothschild, “Global Commerce and the Question of Sovereign in the Eighteenth-Century Provinces,” *Modern Intellectual History* 1, no. 1 (2004): 3-25; Rothschild, “Adam Smith in the British Empire,” in *Empire and Modern Political Thought*, ed. Sankar Muthu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 184-98.

<sup>838</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, Vol 7: Speeches on the Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1870), 23; Stein, *The Company-State*, 3-18.

<sup>839</sup> Jurrien van Goor, “A Hybrid State: The Dutch Economic and Political Network in Asia,” in *From the Mediterranean to the China Sea: Miscellaneous*, eds. Claude Guillot, Denys Lombard, and Roderich Ptak (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998), 193-215.

<sup>840</sup> M. C. Rickleff, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, 4th ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 31.

<sup>841</sup> Janice E. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 32.

modern political states. The Dutch and English East India Companies were therefore not abnormal or strangely mutated merchant-empires. The possession of territory, the power to negotiate treaties, the ability to mobilize an army, the means to organize tribunals, and the use of select political discourses all indicate how these purportedly mercantilist operations were effectively “company-states” from their founding in the early seventeenth century.<sup>842</sup> As historian Philip Stern writes, “While the English East India Company may have become a territorial power in South Asia in the mid-eighteenth century, it had actually been a form of government, state, and sovereign in Asia for some time.”<sup>843</sup>

Founded by royal charter in 1600, the East India Company enhanced its own corporate and political sovereignty by piecing together treaties, grants, charters, and other agreements with indigenous rulers across the Indian Ocean realm and wider Asian world. In the late eighteenth century, treaties and grants from local rulers in India became increasingly important for the Company as it sought to legitimate its presence in the region and form an “empire by treaty.”<sup>844</sup> Numerous studies of the East India Company and British Empire have wrestled with the problem of imperial sovereignty in Asia. Eminent British historian Vincent Harlow famously characterized late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a transitional period between the “First British Empire” and “Second British Empire, the autumn of an “old imperial order” and dawn of a “new

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<sup>842</sup> Stern, *The Company-State*; Adam Clulow, *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); cf. Arthur Weststeijn, “The VOC as Company-State: Debating Seventeenth Century Dutch Colonial Expansion,” *Itinerario: International Journal on the History of European Expansion and Global Interaction* 38, no. 1 (2014): 13-34.

<sup>843</sup> Stern, *The Company-State*, 3.

<sup>844</sup> Robert Travers, “A British Empire by Treaty in Eighteenth Century India,” in *Empire by Treaty: Negotiating European Expansion, 1600-1800*, ed. Saliha Belmessous (New York: Oxford University Press), 132-60.

imperial order.”<sup>845</sup> Revisionists such as C.A. Bayly and others of the so-called Cambridge school of imperial and colonial history doubted Harlow’s characterization of the British Empire as a coherent and centrally-commanded political force that methodically spread its reach across the globe. In *Imperial Meridian*, Bayly found that global political formations like the British empire were fragmented into smaller imperial units. He also placed Asian empires such as the Mughals and Ottomans on equal footing with European powers and suggested that the East India Company entered a fully-formed and dynamic Asian political and economic scene. Bayly and others also maintain that the position of European trading powers fit easily within the Indian environment, that it was in fact the dynamics of the eighteenth-century Indian political economy that pulled the Company away from its commercial work into the political realm.<sup>846</sup> He added that “all the most important features which characterized the European rise to dominance in this ‘greater southeast Asia’ were represented in the island of Ceylon.”<sup>847</sup> In response to interpretations that see the East India Company as a “ragged and conflict ridden community of separate interests,” historian Sudipta Sen writes, that one “can easily lose sight of a remarkably powerful and decisive state that won out in the colonial confrontation with local powers and succeeded in containing much endemic resistance.”<sup>848</sup> In the case of the pearl fishery, the East India Company and British state entered a political landscape in which many rights, claims, and authorities coexisted and overlapped. From *mauniam* boats for temples to revenue sharing with local polities, a patchwork of rights characterized the political structures of the pearl fishery through the

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<sup>845</sup> Harlow, “New Imperial System.”

<sup>846</sup> C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (London: Longman, 1989).

<sup>847</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>848</sup> Sen, *Empire of Free Trade*, 122.

early period of British management. British Ceylon and the Company Raj sought to transform the pearl fishery into a simplex of rights and authority with corporate and colonial sovereignty as its organizing principles.

In a classic study by historian C. H. Alexandrowicz, *An Introduction to the History of the Laws of Nations in the East India*, the author situates British treaties and other legal activities in the context of European expansion in the Indian Ocean.<sup>849</sup> He finds that British and Asian powers competed on a level playing field as full and active participants in the so-called “law of nations,” a legal-political concept concerning natural law stemming from the works of Hugo Grotius, Emmer de Vattel, and other jurists and political philosophers. In the early seventeenth century, questions surrounding the legitimacy of the East India Companies in Asia converged with disputes between the British and Dutch over North Sea herring fisheries, which came to a head at the Anglo-Dutch Colonial Conferences in London and The Hague in the 1610s.<sup>850</sup> One of the representatives of the Netherlands United Provinces was jurist Hugo Grotius, who just a few years prior to his attendance at the conference had anonymously published *Mare Liberum*, which argued that the seas were free and open to all nations.<sup>851</sup> Scottish law professor William Welwood wrote a rejoinder to Grotius and his followers, which argued against the notion of the “free seas” and advanced the view that states could claim

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<sup>849</sup> C. H. Alexandrowicz, *An Introduction to the History of the Laws of Nations in the East India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967); Alexandrowicz, *The Law of Nations in Global History*, eds. David Armitage and Jennifer Pitts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>850</sup> Fulton, *Sovereignty of the Sea*; Armitage, *Ideological Origins of the British Empire*; Armitage, “The Elephant and the Whale”; Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Poulsen, *Dutch Herring*.

<sup>851</sup> Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Martine Julia van Ittersum, *Profit and Principle: Hugo Grotius, Natural Rights Theories and the Rise of Dutch Power in the East Indies* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Monica Brito Vieira, “Mare Liberum versus Mare Clausum: Grotius, Freitas, and Selden’s Debate on Dominion over the Seas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (2003): 361-77; Peter Borschberg, *Hugo Grotius, the Portuguese, and Free Trade in the East Indies* (Singapore: National University Press, 2011).



dominion over water.<sup>852</sup> Political and legal theorists further deliberated on the relationship between the sea and sovereignty, so-called “non-floating fisheries” such as pearl oysters, conch shells, and coral, as well large marine mammals like seals and walruses, were singled out because these animals lived along or just beyond the shoreline. German political theorist Samuel Pufendorf had also addressed the topic of fisheries in *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*. He wrote, “tis very usual that some particular kind of fish, or perhaps some more precious commodity as pearls, coral, amber, or the like, are to be found only in one part of the sea, and that of no considerable extent. In this case, there is no reason why the borderers should not rather challenge to themselves this happiness of a wealthy shore or sea than those who are seated at a distance from it. And other Nations can with no more justice grudge or envy them such an Advantage.”<sup>853</sup> During the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European legal thought turned from the theory of natural law to legal positivism. The continual use and exploitation of natural resource, a principle outlined as “positive prescription,” was wedded to territorial claims.<sup>854</sup> Jurists elaborated a state-friendly vision of the relationship between the sea and sovereignty, whereby Swiss political theorist Emer de Vattel could ask, “Who can doubt that the pearl fisheries of [Bahrain] and Ceylon may lawfully become property?”<sup>855</sup> For Vattel, coastal fisheries were the

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<sup>852</sup> Martine Julia van Ittersum, “Mare Liberum versus The Propriety of the Seas? The Debate between Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) and William Welwood (1552-1624) and its Impact on Anglo-Scotto-Dutch Fishery Disputes in the Second Decade of the Seventeenth Century,” *Edinburgh Law Review* 10, no. 2 (2006): 239-76).

<sup>853</sup> Samuel Pufendorf, *The Law of Nature and Nations*.

<sup>854</sup> Alexandrowicz, *History of the Law of Nations*; cf. Pitts, *Turn to Empire*; Travers, “British Empire by Treaty.”

<sup>855</sup> Emer de Vattel, *The Law of Nations*, eds. Béla Kaposy and Richard Whitmore (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008), 252.

exclusive property of a sovereign and control over such resources brought with it territorial rights to the coastline. He wrote in *The Law of Nations* (1758):

The various uses of the sea near the coasts render it very susceptible of property. It furnishes fish, shells, pearls, amber, &c. Now in all these respects its use is not inexhaustible; wherefore the nation to whom the coasts belong may appropriate to themselves, and convert to their own profit, an advantage which nature has so placed within their reach as to enable them conveniently to take possession of it, in the same manner as they possessed themselves of the dominion of the land they inhabit. Who can doubt, that the pearl fisheries of [Bahrain] and Ceylon may lawfully become property? And though, where the catching of fish is the only object, the fishery appears less liable to be exhausted,—yet if a nation have on their coast a particular fishery of a profitable nature, and of which they may become masters, shall they not be permitted to appropriate to themselves that bounteous gift of nature, as an appendage to the country they possess, and to reserve to themselves the great advantages which their commerce may thence derive in case there be a sufficient abundance of fish to furnish the neighbouring nations?<sup>856</sup>

He added that “a nation may appropriate to herself those things, of which the free and common use would be prejudicial or dangerous to her.”<sup>857</sup> It was for this reason that Vattel concluded a governments could lawfully “extend their dominion over the sea along their coasts, as far as they are able to protect their right.”<sup>858</sup>

Discourses on the relationship between the sea and sovereignty further migrated into the writings of Dutch and English officials and shaped the management of the pearl fisheries. A recurring argument in favor of dominion over the sea was that it protected natural resources. Pearl oysters, like other luxury marine products—and unlike “inexhaustible” floating fish populations such as cod or herring—were viewed as particularly vulnerable to over-exploitation and therefore needed special protection. And it followed that the power to provide such environmental protections could only be

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<sup>856</sup> Vattel, *Law of Nations*, 252.

<sup>857</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>858</sup> *Ibid.*

exercised by authorities of a sovereign body. Dutch officers made arguments in this vein, suggesting that the exploitation and conservation of the pearl oyster banks further entitled the VOC to territorial and thalassic control. For instance, Dutch Governor Hendrick Becker wrote about the importance of holding regular inspections of the pearl oyster banks in a report to his successor, Isaac Rumpf, in 1716: “These yearly inspections are held in the hope that these profitable banks may furnish the Company with the rich revenue to which it is indisputably entitled as Lord of the Shores, and also to enable it to purchase this jewel of the sea at a reasonable price so as to meet the demand.”<sup>859</sup> Regular examinations of the oyster banks not only determined the feasibility of hosting a pearl fishery but it also reinforced sovereign claims to the land and sea based on the principal of prescriptive use. In March 1762, Dutch Governor Jan Schreuder discussed the relationship between the pearl fishery and VOC claims to the island in a report to his successor, Jan Baron van Eck. Schreuder and other VOC officials believed that agents of the Kandyan court sponsored smuggling activities. He wrote: “And we may add to this how the Kandyans have more than once attempted to dispute our rights of exclusive monopoly and possession of our valuable marine products and to participate in the same, and with that object in view have caused our pearl banks to be inspected and surreptitiously fished for pearls.”<sup>860</sup> He added: “A clear proof that the Company has nothing in which the King does not seek to take a share and to play the master, even in matters which are out of this jurisdiction as the sea, as if he would also appropriate to himself our sea rights.”<sup>861</sup> According to Schreuder, the VOC had “by right of conquest, naturally acquired the full rights which the Portuguese had exercised,” which Dutch

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<sup>859</sup> Becker, *Memoir*, 12.

<sup>860</sup> Schreuder, *Memoir*, 17.

<sup>861</sup> *Ibid.*

officials interpreted as “sovereign rights over the sea and its products along the shore.”<sup>862</sup> He recommended like his predecessors that regular examinations should be undertaken “with the object of exercising our *dominium maris*.”<sup>863</sup> Dutch officials like Jan Schreuder pointed to a treaty signed between Admiral Adam Westerwold and King Rajasinha of Kandy at Batticaloa in May 1638 as further evidence that Company had an exclusive right to the maritime areas of island.

The British East India Company appropriated the pearl fishery as a so-called “right of conquest” from its Dutch rivals in 1796. Company officials produced reports on the history of the island that attempted to shore up these claims to the coastal areas of Ceylon. As one Company officer wrote at the turn of the nineteenth century, “It is clear that we are, by right of Conquest, & the consequent devolution to us of whatever belonged to the Dutch, entitled to all the most valuable part of the Island.”<sup>864</sup> He continued: “Our Sovereign possession of that uninterrupted belt which follows the whole circumference of the coasts and encircles and hems in the entire Kingdom of Candy, places that Kingdom virtually under our control & dominion.”<sup>865</sup> Like the Dutch VOC, the East India Company connected rights to the natural resources of the island to territorial control and political sovereignty. According to author of this report, “our command of the Sea & Harbors makes us masters of the other Chief sources of riches to Ceylon, the Pearl fishery. Such being the case, is not the independent [*sic*] and Sovereignty of the King of the interior of the Island, a name more than anything else?”<sup>866</sup> This idea—that the pearl fisheries could be the lawful property of a sovereign—was

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<sup>862</sup> Schreuder, *Memoir*, 40.

<sup>863</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>864</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 54, 61.

<sup>865</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

<sup>866</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

further codified by a British colonial act in 1811, which extended the state's dominion over the pearl banks beyond three miles from shore, the distance previously recognized by international law. British Ceylon now had control over waters extending anywhere from six to twenty miles from shore, depending on the exact location of the pearl banks. The regulation expanded state policing powers and permitted British Ceylon officials to arrest any unauthorized vessels traveling along the pearl oyster beds in the name of security and environmental conservation.<sup>867</sup> This law even found its way into debates between the United States and Britain over seal hunting in the late nineteenth century. According to records of the summit between American and British leaders, “[The Ceylon] pearl fisheries have been treated from time immemorial by the successive rulers of the island as subjects of property and jurisdiction, and have been so regarded with the acquiescence of all other nations.”<sup>868</sup>

The East India Company had to reconcile a mix of local state and customary rights with a fledging European legal and political framework concerning maritime spaces. The patchwork of customary and legal rights that structured the industry appear in the documentary record as particularly frayed during moments of political transition. In 1796, when the East India Company secured managerial rights to the pearl fishery from the VOC, British officials turned to the archives of their vanquished rivals to develop a deeper understanding of the issues. British administrators inherited a massive store of documents, some of which remained in their original location at Colombo, Tuticorin, and other erstwhile Dutch settlements, while others were sent to Fort St. George. Company officers used Portuguese and Dutch records to glean information about the pearl fishery,

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<sup>867</sup> *Legislative Acts of the Ceylon Government*, No. 1 of 1830, 361.

<sup>868</sup> *Fur Seal Arbitration* (Washington, 1895), 10:47.

building a body of knowledge about the industry through which to adjudicate claims, assess taxes, and improve management. These records were put into conversation with other materials, such as local historical narratives of the past written in Tamil and accounts supplied by village accountants or record-keepers known as *karanam* or *kanakkupillai*, a position and title that was later incorporated into the bureaucratic apparatus of the company-state of Madras.<sup>869</sup> *Cutcherry* assistants translated and organized the documents and district collectors and their European staff communicated information to their superiors at Fort St. George and London. These materials included internal correspondence and letters between officers, as well as compilations of “native” documents such as literary texts and copper-plate inscriptions. Most of these textual sources were available in translation, as British officers did not permanently store original inscriptions in the “records rooms” of the district offices but instead worked mostly with versions rendered in English by *cutcherry* scribes. One reason for this was that those institutions, individuals, and families that held grants to *mauniam* boats at the pearl fishery kept copper-plate inscriptions and other valuable documents in their possession, submitting them to Company authorities for review upon request. Many of the grants awarded to private individuals and families such as hereditary positions like the *jati talaivan* remained in possession of families well into the twentieth century.<sup>870</sup> There are also references to agents of the temples carrying the original grants and deeds with them to the site of the pearl fishery, which, of course, brought with it certain risks such as theft and damage. For example, a petition to Company Madras following the

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<sup>869</sup> Velcheru Narayana Rao, “Prints and Prose: Pundits, *Karanams*, and the East India Company in the Making of Modern Telugu,” in *India’s Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 146-66; Raman, *Document Raj*.

<sup>870</sup> Roche, *Fishermen of Coromandel*; Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*.

1828 pearl fishery at Arippu from agents of Rameswaram read: “Although the oldest account of the Pagoda had been destroyed by time and age still the accounts for the last 100 years are in the Pagoda to prove the privilege which the Church had enjoyed likewise the various documents to and certificates hereunder mentioned granted by the several Gentlemen who superintended the fishery at Manar in the different periods from the year 1796 to 1814 will also establish the right of the Pagoda.”<sup>871</sup> In another case, Company officer George Parish undertook an extensive investigation into the pearl fishery shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>872</sup> He referred to the “History which has been given by the Curnan [*karanam*] of Tutacoryn of the first Settlement of the Portuguese and the Dutch of Tutacoryn,” which showed that the Dutch had conducted the pearl fishery “upon certain Conditions prescribed by the Hindoo Government of the Country.”<sup>873</sup> However, according to Parish, “Gentoo Sovereignty” sunset and “the Dutch drew the Revenues of the Fisheries of the Coast for a time entirely to themselves.”<sup>874</sup> Through this interpretation of archival materials and local textual sources, the East India Company constructed an historical narrative in which they were depicted as rightful sovereigns of the land and sea.

### **Pearl Fishery Diplomacy**

Pearls were an important feature of courtly and political cultures in Europe and Asia. The courts of early modern Europe invested pearls with symbolic value. The use of pearls not

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<sup>871</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1151, 6362-88 (3 July 1828).

<sup>872</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3598, 121-30 (30 June 1803).

<sup>873</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>874</sup> *Ibid.*

only associated royal courts with sovereignty but also symbolically and materially connected them with pearl-producing areas in Asia and the Americas.<sup>875</sup> Pearls, as well as other precious stones like emeralds and turquoise, were also an important aspect of kingship within the wider cultural imperium of Islamic Eurasia.<sup>876</sup> Flemish gem merchant Jacques de Coultre characterized the Mughal court as a black hole for precious gems and stones: “I am here to say that of what I have seen, the Mogul has more treasures in precious stones, gold, and silver than all the kings of Europe together... It is a very certain thing that from all parts of the world are sent pearls, emeralds, rubies, and jewels of great price to the India of the East, and we know that it all ends up with the Mogul.”<sup>877</sup> In another famous account, French jeweler and merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier described a bejeweled peacock throne of the Mughals that had an elaborately decorated canopy “covered with diamonds and pearls, with a fringe of pearls all round.”<sup>878</sup> According to historians Annemarie Schimmel and Burzine Waghmar, “pearls played an especially important role during the time of the Mughals, and double and triple strands of pearls were symbols of nobility by the time of Akbar at the latest.”<sup>879</sup> Precious gems like pearls and diamonds also functioned as objects that mediated encounters between European ambassadors and Indian courtiers. For instance, French physician and philosopher François Bernier visited the court of Aurangzeb in the late seventeenth century. He wrote in *Travels in the Mogul Empire* that the emperor wore a “necklace of immense pearls”

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<sup>875</sup> Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*; Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991); Warsh, “Adorning Empire”; Marcia Pointon, *Brilliant Effects: A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewelry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>876</sup> Annemarie Schimmel and Burzine K. Waghmar, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004); Lane, *Colour of Paradise*; Khazeni, *Sky Blue Stone*.

<sup>877</sup> Lane, *Colour of Paradise*. For more on Jacques de Coultre and his travels in Asia, see *The Memoirs and Memorials of Jacques de Coultre: Security, Trade, and Society in 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Southeast Asia*, trans. Roopanjali Roy and ed. Peter Borschberg (Singapore: National University Press, 2014).

<sup>878</sup> Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India* (Delhi: Asian Education Services, 2004), 304.

<sup>879</sup> Schimmel and Waghmar, *Empire of the Great Mughals*, 174-79.



and that gifts from courtiers, which included pearls of considerable value, served “as an act of courtesy and condescension.”<sup>880</sup> Englishman James Tod also wrote about pearls as objects in courtly gift-giving protocols: “I gave [Prince Kurrun] a rich necklace of pearls, another day an elephant, and it was my wish to give him rarities and choice things of every kind.”<sup>881</sup>

Evidence from literary and visual cultures also suggest a close link between pearls and royal courts in southern India and Sri Lanka. For instance, Marco Polo reported that the King of Ma’bar possessed a necklace of “104 large pearls and rubies of great price,” passed down from king to king, which he used as a rosary during his daily prayers.<sup>882</sup> There are also eighteenth-century murals at the Ramalinga Vilasam that depict various uses of pearls at the court of the Setupati of Ramnad. One of the panels at the Ramnad palace represents the Setupati awarding strings of pearls to dancers.<sup>883</sup> In another panel, European courtiers appear before the Ramnad king with a tray of pearls stacked like a pyramid. The shape of their hats and style of dress suggests that the envoys are agents of the VOC.<sup>884</sup> Pearls were also significant in the self-styled representations of the Nawab of Arcot. For instance, a famous portrait by Scottish portraitist George Willison of

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<sup>880</sup> Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 169-70; Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, 1636-1668* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1914).

<sup>881</sup> James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1829), 1:363.

<sup>882</sup> Marco Polo, *Travels*; Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 115.

<sup>883</sup> R. Nagaswamy, “Mughal Cultural Influence in the Setupati Murals in the Ramalinga Vilasam at Ramnad,” *Facets of Indian Art: A Symposium Held at the Victoria and Albert Museum*, ed. Robert Skelton (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1986), 203-10.

<sup>884</sup> For more on the Setupatis of Ramnad and the pearl fishery, see S. Thiruvengkatachari, *The Setupatis of Ramnad* (Karaikudi: Alagappa Chettiar Training College, 1959); K. Seshadri, “The Setupatis of Ramnad,” PhD diss., Madurai University, 1976; S. Kadhivel, *A History of the Maravas, 1700-1802* (Madurai: Madurai Pub. House, 1977). For more on the relationship between Ramnad and European powers, see Pamela Price, *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Lennart Bes, “The Setupatis, the Dutch and other Bandits in Eighteenth-Century Ramnad (South India),” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 44, no. 4 (2001): 540-74; Jennifer Howes, *The Courts of Precolonial South India: Material Culture and Kingship* (London: Routledge, 2003).

Muhammad Ali Khan (r. 1749-1795) depicts the Nawab in his regalia, draped with a long string of pearls around his neck. Historian Susan Bayly writes that Willison's portrait of the Nawab also "had political value in its own right."<sup>885</sup> According to Bayly, "in the Muslim states of the Deccan and North India, the ceremonial presentation of portraits had long served as a means of expressing suzerainty and overlordship."<sup>886</sup> Art historian Natasha Eaton has also addressed the relationship between portraits and empire in eighteenth-century India with special attention to the East India Company and the Nawab of Arcot.<sup>887</sup>

There is evidence from Dutch and English archival sources that the East India Companies used pearls as diplomatic gifts to mend relationships with local courts. For instance, in the 1760s, Dutch Ceylon requested permission from Ramnad to erect stone buildings and warehouses at Kanyakumari, but the VOC was rebuffed by the Setupati in no uncertain terms. Dutch Governor Jan Schreuder wrote: "According to general opinion we might have attained our object had we insisted strongly enough and complied with his request [of] *four handsome pearls*."<sup>888</sup> Pearls also found their way into political intrigue. Dutch Governor Daniel Overbeek expressed concern that "avaricious courtiers" from Kandy were subsidizing smugglers to shuttle goods between the island and mainland. He suggested gifting some men of the court high quality pearls to drive a wedge between members of the faction and break-up their alliance with the band of pearl-runners that Overbeek characterized as "Chettis and Moors." He wrote that a "beautiful string of

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<sup>885</sup> Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*, 170.

<sup>886</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>887</sup> Natasha Eaton, "Between Mimesis and Alterity: Art, Gift, and Diplomacy in Colonial India, 1770-1800," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, no. 4 (2004): 816-44; Eaton, "The Art of Colonial Despotism: Portraits, Politics, and Empire in South India, 1750-1795," *Cultural Critique* 70 (2008): 63-93.

<sup>888</sup> Schreuder, *Memoir*, 44-5.

pearls of No. 1 quality will soften their resentment and especially His Majesty would be made to understand in significant terms how much more beneficial and profitable it will be both for his own subjects and those of the Company to remain at their work.”<sup>889</sup>

The place of pearls and other precious jewels in encounters between European and Asian courts is well documented in early modern travelogues, European archives, and vernacular language sources, all of which reveal the true value of pearls in the diplomatic realm. A close look at the courtly and diplomatic spaces occupied by the pearl fishery in the late eighteenth century indicates a further layer. Like the pearl fisheries of Mannar, the diamond mines of Golconda were hotly contested by native and foreign powers, particularly in the seventeenth century, and a look at the sources from whence such precious gems and stones came sheds further light on the place of the production of such commodities in the political economy of the region.<sup>890</sup>

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<sup>889</sup> Overbeek, *Memoir*, 42.

<sup>890</sup> Lieutenant Newbold, “Mineral Sources of Southern India No. 8 Diamond Tracts,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 7, no. 2 (1843): 226-40; John F. Richards, *Mughal Administration of Golconda* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral*; Søren Mentz, “English Private Trade on the Coromandel Coast, 1660-1690: Diamonds and Country Trade,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 33, no. 2 (1996): 155-73; Ishrat Alam, “Diamond Mining and Trade in South India in the Seventeenth Century,” *The Medieval History Journal* 3, no. 2 (2000): 291-310; Bruce Lenman, “The East India Company and the Trade in Non-Metallic Precious Materials from Sir Thomas Roe to Diamond Pitt,” in *The Worlds of the East India Company*, eds. H. V. Bowen, Margarette Lincoln, and Nigel Rigby (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002), 97-109; Trivellato, *Familiarity of Strangers*, 224-270; Karin Hofmeester, “Shifting Trajectories of Diamond Processing: From India to Europe and Back, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Global History* 8, no. 1 (2013): 25-49.



Figure 9. Muhammad Ali Khan Wallajah, Nawab of the Carnatic, Oil on Canvas, George Willison, c. 1774 (British Library, London).

The pearl fisheries emerged as a discrete topic in diplomatic negotiations between the Dutch VOC, Nawab of Arcot, and English East India Company in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The problem stemmed from a series of encounters between the VOC and Arcot at the 1767 pearl fishery at Tuticorin and the 1768 pearl fishery at Arippu.<sup>891</sup> An agent of the Nawab of Arcot, Virappa Pillai, came to Tuticorin and Arippu to receive *mauniam* boats, collect a share of the revenue in the form of a day's catch, and perform some ceremonial functions such as raising the Arcot flag over the bazaar. Dutch

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<sup>891</sup> Subrahmanyam, "Noble Harvest from the Sea," 153-4.  
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VOC officials, however, had no intention of awarding recognition to the claims of Arcot. The agent of the Nawab were also “attended by a large party of Armed Sepahis [Sepoys],” which the Dutch perceived as an act of aggression and exacerbated the problem.<sup>892</sup> At the same time, however, representatives from Ramnad received a warm welcome from Dutch officials, and the Setupati of Ramnad received his usual share of boats and divers. According to a letter from Colombo to a Dutch official presiding over the pearl fishery, “We expressly forbid you by these presents to allow to the Nabob’s envoys more than ten Dhonies, and with respect to the Theuver to depart one hair’s breadth from what is given him by our treaty and we order you to abide most closely by these instructions, even should they happen to put a stop to the fishery; and if force is employed on their side, you will meet it with force.”<sup>893</sup> VOC officials alluded to a treaty signed between Dutch Ceylon and Ramnad in 1767 that conferred Ramnad a portion of the revenue and access to tax-free boats at the pearl fishery.<sup>894</sup> Ramnad received two free diving boats at all future pearl fisheries off the coast of Madurai and the right to purchase five boats at the Ceylon fishery. Ramnad ceded possession of Palk Strait—the narrow passageway between the northern tip of Ceylon and promontory of Rameswaram—and transferred the power to levy duties, control shipping traffic, and station armed vessels.

The violent encounters between the VOC officials and agents of Arcot and Ramnad at Arippu in 1768 reverberated through the pearling industry for nearly three decades. The intervening years witnessed protracted disputes over the rights and revenue to the pearl and chank fisheries between the Dutch VOC and Nawab of Arcot. Relations

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<sup>892</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 6v.

<sup>893</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>894</sup> *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlandico-Indicum*, Vol. VI (1753-1799), ed. J. E. Heeres (‘s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1934); Hornell, *Report to the Government of Madras*, 18; Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 153-4.

between Dutch and Arcot intensified shortly after the events at Arippu. In 1770, Dutch commander Pieter van Sluysken traveled from Colombo to Arcot on a diplomatic mission to address the pearling industry *inter alia*. Sluysken tried to reduce the award of the Nawab to twenty boats. Sluysken kept a detailed diary of his journey to the Nawab's palace at Chepauk on the outskirts of Madras. There is an oft-cited exchange between Sluysken and the Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan Wallajah (r. 1749-1795) that offers a window on the place of the pearl fisheries in the political geography of the southern India. The Nawab reportedly said to Sluysken, "These provinces have always belonged to the turban wearers. Are they meant to be under the rule of Europeans?"<sup>895</sup> The Nawab continued to interrogate Sluysken: "Which nations inhabited those lands in the past? Men who wore turbans or hats? Were the white or black the people who owned the country before? The white were always in Europe and the blacks always have occupied these lands!"<sup>896</sup> Nawab Muhammad Ali sent a letter to Sluysken in October 1770 that recapitulated his claims to a share of the pearl and chank fisheries: "As to Tutacorin, the whole pearl and Chank Fisheries of this place is the property of the Circar, what right then have the Dutch to half of that pearl fishery, and the whole of the Chank Fishery?"<sup>897</sup> From the perspective of Arcot, the pearl and chank fisheries fell squarely within the Nawab's territory, which invalidated the claims of the Dutch to a portion of the seasons produce and revenue. This was, after all, the land of "turban-wearers" and did not belong to European "hat-wearers." The Dutch, on the other hand, claimed a share of the pearl

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<sup>895</sup> NA, OBP, VOC 3691; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Penumbra Visions: Making Politics in Early Modern South India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Subrahmanyam, "Noble Harvest from the Sea," 153-4.

<sup>896</sup> NA, OBP, VOC 3292, "The Mission to Arcot in September 1770 by Pieter Sluysken," ff. 713v-4r; Subrahmanyam, "Noble Harvest from the Sea," 153-4.

<sup>897</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56, 8.

and chank fisheries based upon their usurpation of Portuguese territories. Dutch VOC officials also reasoned that the native powers such as Arcot did not hold compelling documentary evidence to substantiate such claims. As Sluysken wrote, “it may perhaps be the case, says he, that under the King [Tirumalai Nayakar], the pearl fisheries were held in the manner your Highness details in the following paragraphs, but there exists nothing to prove all this.”<sup>898</sup> In fact, Sluysken continued, “all the documents which can be produced show, that the Hon. Company became independent proprietors of the Pearl Banks by force of arms, and have been always acknowledged as such, and the Fisheries have ever been conducted by the Company without opposition or discussion.”<sup>899</sup> The summit resulted in multiple drafts of provisional accords but the contracting parties never ratified a single version. Colombo and Arcot remained locked in a stalemate. Even though it never reaped profits from the pearl oyster banks, the VOC continued to find value in its control over the industry. Between 1768 until 1796, Dutch Ceylon let the pearl oyster beds lay fallow. The decision to hold the pearl fishery in abeyance was went hand in hand with its policy towards Arcot. According to the logic of this policy, if Arcot did not scale back its demand for full recognition of rights to the pearl and chank fisheries, then the VOC would continue to deprive the embattled and deeply indebted state of much-needed revenue.

The tête-à-tête between Sluysken and Nawab Muhammad Ali in late 1770 did little to resolve the gridlock between Colombo and Arcot. Debates over rights and revenue at the pearl fishery continued to flow beneath the surface of Dutch-Arcot relations for the next decade and a half. In 1786, the East India Company entered the

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<sup>898</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 7v.

<sup>899</sup> Ibid.

fray. As the debts of the Nawab mounted, and the Company continued to penetrate the administration of Arcot, the Nawab was left with little more than the trappings of a sovereign ruler.<sup>900</sup> The arrival of an envoy representing Arcot to Colombo in 1786 marked the beginning of a new round of talks between the Dutch and Nawab. This time, however, officials of the East India Company represented the interests of the Nawab, who continued to face crushing debts. The head of the party from Arcot was James Dott, an English ambassador at the Nawab's court. These talks led to the draft of a treaty in 1786.<sup>901</sup> According to the Dutch-Arcot-English treaty of 1786, "The pearl-fishery at Tuticorin will be publicly auctioned to the highest bidder, and the price at which it has been purchased will be divided between the Noble Company and the Nawab, as Lord of Madurai and Lord-Suzerain of the Marava country, in two equal portions."<sup>902</sup> It also stipulated "the farmer will be ceded all the rights that may exist over the bank or banks that he has farmed. He will do with the oysters and the pearls that he extracts what he will, and shall in consequence conduct this operation in the freest manner, and so that no one may interfere in it. All other usages and customs, contrary to the what has been established in this article, will be revoked and abolished."<sup>903</sup> The 1786 treaty stipulated that the Nawab was to receive half the profits from fisheries off the coast of the mainland and thirty-six free boats at the Ceylon fisheries. For their part, the Dutch continued to

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<sup>900</sup> Gurney, "Debts of the Nawab"; Gurney, "Fresh Light on the Character of the Nawab of Arcot," in *Statesman, Scholars, and Merchants: Essays in Eighteenth Century History Presented to Dame Lucy Sutherland*, eds. Anne Whiteman, J. S. Bromley, and P. G. M. Dickson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 220-241; Jim Phillips, "A Successor to the Mughals: The Nawab of the Carnatic and the East India Company, 1763-1785," *International History Review* 7, no. 3 (1985): 364-89; Pimmanus Wibulsilp, "'I am Nawab of Arcot': Reconsidering the Political History of the Late Eighteenth Century Kingdom of Arcot Through the Eye of Nawab Muhammad Ali Wallajah (r. 1749-1795)," M.A. Thesis, Leiden University, 2012.

<sup>901</sup> "Treaty of 25 February 1786," Heeres, *Corpus Diplomaticum*, 6:567-71; Subrahmanyam, "Noble Harvest from the Sea," 154.

<sup>902</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>903</sup> *Ibid.*



enjoy their monopoly over the cloth trade, but many issues, specifically the chank fishery and fisheries held at certain areas on the Ceylon-side of Mannar, remained moot.

Two years later, another Company officer arrived at Colombo to negotiate on behalf of the Nawab. James Buchanan represented the Nawab Muhammad Ali in an ambassadorial capacity during negotiations with Dutch Ceylon over rights and revenues to the pearl fishery of the Gulf of Mannar. Buchanan, appointed by the Governor Archibald Campbell of Madras to attend the Nawab's court, was subsequently tapped by Muhammad Ali to serve as a special envoy to Colombo. The 1788 summit at Colombo resulted in a treaty signed by Buchanan and Dutch Governor Jacob Van de Graaff on July 7, 1788.<sup>904</sup> The treaty awarded Nawab Muhammad Ali a quarter of the revenue from fisheries held on the Ceylon-side of Mannar and half of the revenue from fisheries held on the India-side. Like Sluysken before him, James Buchanan kept a detailed record of his mission, the results of which are contained in the so-called "Buchanan Letter Book" and contain materials in English, Dutch, French, and Persian related to the summit.<sup>905</sup>

From the outset, Buchanan expressed to his Dutch counterparts a desire for a swift and amicable solution to the problem of the pearl fishery. He wrote in May 1788, "I have now to propose to you that as the right and proportions of His Highness the Nabob and the Honourable Dutch East India Company to the Pearl fishery of Tutacorin and Manar, have long been a subject of dispute between His Highness and the Honorable Company, and as they are not yet clearly understood by the Partys [*sic*], a Negociation [*sic*] to remedy this misunderstanding and to place their respective Rights and Proportions on a

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<sup>904</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401; BL, MSS Eur. E56, 19-22; Heeres, *Corpus Diplomaticum*; Subrahmanyam, "Noble Harvest from the Sea."

<sup>905</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56.

clear and permanent Establishment by treaty, may be now commenced.”<sup>906</sup> However, a “clear and permanent establishment” did not come easy to Buchanan and the others involved in the negotiations. The parties agreement on the terms of a treaty came only after long and tedious negotiations that stretched deep into the year. A letter from Buchanan to the Nawab captured the Englishman’s frustration with the intransigence of the Dutch VOC. “I have obtained much and granted nothing,” Buchanan wrote.<sup>907</sup> “They have been extorted like Drops of Blood from them, and a good deal of plain language and altercation has been used to bring them to those terms, which I can assure your Highness are the best to be obtained from them.”<sup>908</sup>

The Nawab not only mandated that Buchanan negotiate a favorable set of terms concerning the pearl fishery but also tasked him with related responsibilities. For instance, the Nawab instructed Buchanan to get hold of the pearls allocated for Arcot. A letter from Muhammad Ali to Buchanan read: “All the Pearls that are received by you as the Circars share of the Fisheries you are to keep, and to forward them to the Presence when directed.”<sup>909</sup> The Nawab also authorized Buchanan to purchase “any large pearls” brought up by the divers during the pearl fishery “[on] Account of the Circar.”<sup>910</sup> Even as Muhammad Ali tasked Buchanan with these responsibilities he also placed limits on the Englishman’s autonomy, reminding Buchanan that he served at the pleasure of the Nawab. A letter from Arcot to Colombo asserted that the Nawab had ultimate decision-making power: “You are not even to enter into any preliminary treaty with the Dutch [until they] shall have clearly stated their demands and that they have been laid before us

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<sup>906</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>907</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>908</sup> Ibid.

<sup>909</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56, 2.

<sup>910</sup> Ibid.

from our Approbation or disapprobation.”<sup>911</sup> The Nawab also stationed a native commercial agent at Tirunelveli to support Buchanan during the negotiations and serve as a point-person for Arcot.

According to correspondence between Buchanan and the Nawab, the question of the pearl fishery was the most important item on the agenda. In January 1788, near the start of the summit at Colombo, Buchanan received a letter from Chepauk Palace with instructions concerning his mission to Ceylon. Nawab Muhammad Ali stressed the importance of the pearl fishery and instructed Buchanan to table matters related to the chank fishery and cloth trade. After a particularly drawn-out discussion with his Dutch counterparts, Buchanan wrote to the Nawab: “The reason the Chank Fishery was not included in the proposals for a Treaty was, that I understood from the Nabob Ameer [i.e. Amir al-Umara, the younger son of Muhammad Ali] verbally two days before I took Leave he wished me to settle the Pearl Fishery first, and let the Chank alone for the present.”<sup>912</sup> Buchanan also counseled Muhammad Ali to continue asserting his claim to the pearl fishery and refuse any offers to transfer rights to the VOC. As Buchanan wrote to the Nawab from Palamcottah (present-day Palayamkottai in Tirunelveli) in March 1790, “I have said that in the event Your Highness thought of assigning part of Your Countries, this wou’d be the last of them you wou’d think of making over, as there are two Fisheries of Pearls depending on it for next year, That of Tutacoryn certain, and every likelihood that the Dutch will [no] longer object to your Highness’s people seeing the banks of Manar.”<sup>913</sup> He continued: “Your Highness wou’d certainly lose two

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<sup>911</sup> Ibid.

<sup>912</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56, 31.

<sup>913</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56, 161.

Fisheries of Pearls by assigning over this Country however short a time the War may last.”<sup>914</sup>

There were other issues that animated the negotiations at Colombo. A particularly sticky issue was the right asserted by the Nawab to hoist his flag at the pearl fishery. Muhammad Ali maintained that he had a customary right to have a representative “attend the Fishery with Troops and a Bazar to hoist His Highness the Nabobs Colours during the Fishery, and to receive the Customs of the Bazar for the Circar.”<sup>915</sup> However, the Dutch continued to deny the Nawab his right to display the Arcot flag at the pearl fishery. Buchanan wrote in a letter to the Nawab that “the right to hoist your Highness’s Flag at Manar was long disputed.”<sup>916</sup> The issue appeared in a draft of a treaty between the negotiating parties. Article Four permitted both Dutch and Arcot flags to fly above the bazaar during the pearl fishery: “The Colours & Flags usually display’d by the High Contracting parties during the Pearl fishery, the Bazar for Provisions & all other things of that nature shall remain on the usual footing.” Article Seven of the same provisional treaty also addressed “honors and distinctions,” which reiterated the rights of the Nawab of Arcot to display his flag above the camp of his representatives: “Should His Highness Chuse [*sic*] to send his Donys as above mentioned to the Manaar fishery, the person Charged with the Conduct of them shall be permitted as a mark of honor & Distinction to hoist His Highness’s Flag Close to his habitation & more over he may have a guard of 50 men of His Highness Seapoys [*sic*] Commanded by an officer.”<sup>917</sup> Buchanan commented on the significance of this clause in a letter to the Nawab: “This Article settles his

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<sup>914</sup> Ibid.

<sup>915</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56, 5.

<sup>916</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56, 16.

<sup>917</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 251.

Highness's right to display his Flag at Manar which the Dutch strongly objected to, and still more to the Company of Sepoys; the keeping a Bazar for the benefit of the Circar they reject as a right to which they cannot consent nor ought to be expected."<sup>918</sup> He added: "It would ill become me to insist on this being the only obstruction to the Treaty, as His Highness was pleased to say I might receive the benefit of the Bazar for any own use; I have therefore agreed it shou'd not stand in the way of accommodation of differences."<sup>919</sup> It was agreed in the end that an agent of the Nawab was only permitted to display Arcot insignia near the house in which he stayed. Buchanan addressed his concerns about the flag to one of his Dutch counterparts in a letter from late November 1789: "As to what you say of the Company's Flag being hoisted at the same time with the Nabob's, I confess I have looked with much Surprize[*sic*] of your neglect in that respect, as you must know that it is ill timed at present, and that common Decency required that the Dutch Flag ought to be hoisted in Compliment to His Highness. These Neglects can have no good Effect, but may produce mischief."<sup>920</sup> Buchanan even wrote to Arcot to recommend that he put the flag issue to rest and focus more on securing proportionate shares of the seasons catch and revenues. He wrote afterwards to the VOC: "I wou'd recommend that in lieu of these various Rights and Claims of His Highness, such general proportion of the whole Fishery as appears to you to be just & adequate on fair and liberal principles."<sup>921</sup> A clause concerning banners and colors at the pearl fishery compound was included in a provisional draft of a treaty but the parties ultimately crossed it out of the final version.

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<sup>918</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56, 23.

<sup>919</sup> Ibid.

<sup>920</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56, 134-5.

<sup>921</sup> Ibid., 5.

A new problem emerged when Buchanan and Governor De Graaf ratified the treaty. The parties had to enforce the terms of the agreement. Apparently pleased with Buchanan's work as an ambassador, the Nawab of Arcot appointed the English officer to manage his commercial affairs in Tirunelveli and oversee the implementation of the treaty. In December 1789, Buchanan received a letter from Chepauk concerning his new role: "In consideration of your great friendship and attachment, I have entrusted the whole business of the Pearl Fisheries etc. Manar & Tutacoryn to your management."<sup>922</sup> The Nawab wrote: "You must therefore use all your exertions to see the Fisheries conducted, in concert with the Circar's People, with success, which will convey great pleasure and satisfaction to my mind. But if the Dutch in their conduct depart from the rules of rectitude and good faith; I will, with the Helping of God, take such steps as it shall never more be in their power to act a dishonest part towards my Circar."<sup>923</sup> He added: "You will therefore be pleased to exert yourself with a cheerful heart in the accomplishment of the Circar's Business."<sup>924</sup> Buchanan was joined by a native agent of the Nawab, a certain Mahomed Aslam Cawn, who, was "merely by way of an Ameen to be under [his] directions."<sup>925</sup> Buchanan received a handsome salary and other perquisites, including a distinguished title, fine horses, and a loan of one lakh SP.<sup>926</sup> Making sure that the Dutch followed the terms of the treaty presented more of a challenge to Buchanan than hashing out the details of the actual agreement. For instance, an article in the treaty allowed Arcot to have representatives attend the annual examination of the pearl oyster banks. According to this section: "Those, to whom the high Contracting parties, shall

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<sup>922</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>923</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>924</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>925</sup> Ibid.

<sup>926</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56, 105-12.

confide this care, shall in the most convenient time caused the above mentioned [pearl oyster banks] to be visited and after they have been visited they are Judged Rich enough for a fishery shall be announced to the publick [*sic*] as customary at what day the sale shall be made which shall be done before the Commissary's appropriated of both sides."<sup>927</sup> This was more than a mechanism for Arcot to jointly prepare for the pearl fishery. Nawab Muhammad Ali wrote to Buchanan from Chepauk House in December 1788 on the subject and contextualized it in terms of political sovereignty: "The Dutch of Tutacoreen [*sic*] in fact were always subject to the Princes of the Country during the times that the [Rajahs] held the Government of Trithcinpoly [*sic*] and Madura, and indeed ever since, the Dutch of Tutacorin were constantly held in subjection."<sup>928</sup> He declared, "By the Grace of God, I am now the Sole Sovereign of the Carnatic."<sup>929</sup> It was for this reason that the Nawab of Arcot further asserted his customary right to the pearl fishery. He added: "In the year [1751-52] I went to arrange the affairs of the Tinnevelly Province, I fixed my encampment near Tutacorin. At that time the Dutch who were settled there had not the presumption to attempt any measures contrary to the Ancient established usages. These established Customs I consider to be still in force and my Friends the English are the Supporters of all my Rights. I cannot therefore allow the Chief of Tutacorin to deviate from the former Customs."<sup>930</sup>

October-November 1789 marked the first examination of the pearl oyster beds following the ratification of the treat between the Nawab of Arcot and the Dutch VOC. In accordance with the terms of the agreement, the Nawab dispatched his agents to the Gulf

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<sup>927</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>928</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>929</sup> Ibid.

<sup>930</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56, 56.

of Mannar to assist with the assaying process. Three persons—Muhammad Islam, Abdul Kader Maraikkayar, and Shankar Das—joined Buchanan on the western shores of Ceylon. Buchanan used the power of his office to facilitate the travel of the Nawab’s agents. He provided them with the necessary certificates and passports to travel from Palamcottah to the location of the examination. According to one of the documents, “The Bearer of this Letter, Abdul Kader Tumby Maracayar, is directed to take charge of the management of the four Tonies sent on His Highness the Nabob's part to examine the Pearl bank.”<sup>931</sup> Buchanan and these three men joined Dutch VOC officials “to the end that the true state of the Banks may be fully known to be both parties.”<sup>932</sup> Yet anonymous reports reached Chepauk House that revealed VOC officials had been undertaking secret inspections of the pearl banks without notifying the Nawab. This was a clear violation treaty. According to these reports, the Dutch resident of Tuticorin had commissioned twenty-one boats over a two-month period to assay the pearl oyster beds. It also came to light that VOC officials had intentionally spread misinformation about the results of the pearl fishery. The anonymous source reported to Nawab Muhammad Ali that the Dutch resident at Tuticorin “pretends the Pearls are not ripe enough for a fishery.”<sup>933</sup> The Nawab and his advisors hoped that Buchanan would “plainly see the unfair and deceitful conduct of the Dutch.”<sup>934</sup> However, Buchanan questioned the veracity of this information and dismissed it as rumor and hearsay. He advised the Nawab to take a more measured and diplomatic response. He wrote: “Twenty one [*sic*] Tonies cannot be employed in the way Your Highness is informed without the knowledge of many people at Manar, and if

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<sup>931</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>932</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>933</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>934</sup> Ibid.



your Highness's informers cannot bring proof, I humbly think they might be punished, because [Governor] Van de Graaff will require that Proof be made before he punishes the Chief of Manar.”<sup>935</sup>

Another issue related to enforcement of the treaty was the custody of pearls. This matter came to the fore when reports arrived to Arcot that the Dutch were not only surreptitiously examining the pearl oyster beds but also hoarding pearls collected during the process. Despite the small quantity and modest value of the sample product, Buchanan reminded his Dutch counterparts that the Nawab of Arcot had a legitimate claim. He wrote, “I know they are very small of little or no value, but it is proper they should be sent here, and this I demand not as a matter of Favor but of right it is also proper that His Highness the Nabob who is Sovereign of all this Country should have due respect paid to him by the Chief of Tutacorin.”<sup>936</sup> In April 1789, Dutch Governor Van de Graaff replied to Buchanan: “Concerning the Pearls found at the examination of the Pearl banks of Tutacoryn, I think, henceforth one may follow this rule that immediately after the Examination is done and that the pearls have been examined by the Committee that they may make their report of their business and value they shall be immediately divided in two parts and then one half shall be took for each of the high Contracting parties.”<sup>937</sup> This expression of good faith was followed by a shipment of “five small parcels” of pearls to Arcot, the receipt of which Buchanan confirmed in a letter to Dutch officials.<sup>938</sup> Buchanan wrote that the “Samples of the Pearls found on the Examination of the Tutacorin Banks“ represented “Proof of your Friendship towards His Highness The

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<sup>935</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56, 142.

<sup>936</sup> BL, MSS Eur. E56, 85.

<sup>937</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>938</sup> Ibid., 100.

Nabob.”<sup>939</sup> He included a caveat: “If they had been sent as they ought, when first demanded, tho’ of no value it might serve to show your good inclination, but withheld by you so long as they have been contrary to His Highness’s Rights I cannot look upon your sending them now in any point of view but that of barely doing Justice.”<sup>940</sup>

The ambiguity surrounding the claims of Arcot to the pearl fishery continued through the early years of British management. When the East India Company obtained managerial control over the pearl fishery in 1795, British officials extended the Arcot’s claims without much controversy. One channel through which the Company Raj managed its relationship with Arcot was by simply honoring preexisting treaties. For instance, in February-March 1796, Nawab Umdat ul-Umara, the son and successor to Muhammad Ali, sent a letter in Persian to Governor Hobart of Madras: “Understanding that your Lordship has farmed out the Pearl Fishery at Manar, I have to request that you will be pleased to furnish me with a positive order to your People, directing them according to ancient Custom, to deliver the Sirkars share to the person whom I shall send for the purpose from my pursue to pay him the same honors as the Dutch were accustomed [*sic*] to do, to give him the usual place for his residence at Manar, and to do everything that has heretofore been Customary.”<sup>941</sup> George Powney, Collector of Ramnad, also recommended to the Board of Revenue that Madras deliver Arcot advanced notice of the examination dates. He wrote: “I beg leave to recommend that his Highness the Nabob may be addressed on the Subject, and a proposal made to him that the Banks at Tutacoryn should undergo examination according to the usual mode by persons appointed on the

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<sup>939</sup> Ibid.

<sup>940</sup> Ibid.

<sup>941</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 225-6.

part of His Highness and Government in the Month of November next.”<sup>942</sup> Powney added in a separate letter that he had “written to the Nabobs Manager at Tinnevelly” and was “ready to adopt measures in Conjunction with him [that] he examine the Pearl Banks at Tutakoryn.”<sup>943</sup> The Madras government in turn notified Nawab Umdat ul-Umara about the pearl fishery and he appointed Mahomed Islam Khan “to act in concert with [Powney] in the examination of the Pearl and Chank Banks at Tuticorin and the Conduct of the fishery.”<sup>944</sup>

This policy of accommodation quickly became far more restrictive. The superintendent of the 1796 pearl fishery at Ceylon, Robert Andrews, instructed an agent of the Nawab to leave the pearl fishery and travel to Madras. At Fort St. George, the native agent would adjust the Nawab’s account and receive the share of the produce and revenue due to Arcot. However, during two subsequent pearl fisheries, the Company Raj rejected the claims of Arcot and instructed Andrews to limit the role of the Nawab’s agents. The Madras government wished for the superintendent to bring the boats usually allocated for Arcot under his direct supervision. He would account for the produce and add the results to the Nawab’s account.<sup>945</sup> According to a letter from Fort St. George to London in August 1796, “We soon after received information from the Resident on Ceylon that His Highness’s Agent had arrived at Manar without a single boat or any other preparation for the fishery, and that he had demanded the use of the whole number of boats then at the fishery for that the space of one day.”<sup>946</sup> The letter continued: “We have informed the Nabob that the Island having been taken possession of in the name of His

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<sup>942</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 137, 7721 (15 October 1795).

<sup>943</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 140, 9186 (3 December 1795).

<sup>944</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 146, 1304 (1 February 1796).

<sup>945</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 240, 220-4.

<sup>946</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 217, 4783, 1.

Majesty, we are not at liberty to relinquish any part of its Revenue without authority, and according to the Assurance we have given His Highness, we beg leave to refer the matter to your consideration.”<sup>947</sup> The Company Raj and Arcot therefore had very different ideas about the exact nature of the rights and privileges that structured the pearl fishery.

The East India Company extended support to Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan Wallajah during his dispute with Dutch Ceylon over the rights and revenues to the pearl fishery of Mannar. However, the Company Raj took a different position towards Arcot’s claims to the pearl fishery after the Dutch withdrew from the region. Madras officials further eroded the rights of Arcot. In January 1799, North sent a collection of documents to Fort St. George concerning Arcot and the pearl fishery. He feared that agents of the Nawab would interfere with the pearl fishery at Arippu he was in the process of organizing. North wrote, “I must at the same time request your Lordship in Council, to stipulate that whatever advantage, you may be inclined to grant those Princes may be taken from the Proceed of the Fishery and they may not be allowed to interfere in the management of the Fishery itself.”<sup>948</sup> North found no compelling evidence that the so-called “Indian Princes” had access to the pearling grounds during the assaying process. Importantly, the pearl fishery at Arippu in 1799 was the first one conducted under North’s supervision, and he was steadfast in his commitment to staging a smooth and well-managed event. He wrote: “Such an interference can only Cause a Concurrence prejudicial to both parties, besides subjecting us to disputes, and difficulties, and preventing the effects of the strict and vigilant Administration of the Concern, which it

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<sup>947</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>948</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 242.

has been my wish to Secure.”<sup>949</sup> North also sent instructions to the superintendents of the pearl fishery turn away agents of the Nawab. He wrote, “Should any persons arrive at the Fishery as Agents for the Nabob of the Carnatic...and set forth any Claims, to priviledges [*sic*] therein, you will decline any such, till you shall have received Instructions from the Supreme Government concerning the claims of their respective Masters.”<sup>950</sup>

### **Sacred Rights: Companies, Crowns, Temples and Dargahs**

When the East India Company obtained managerial control over the pearl fishery in 1796, the status of Indian religious institutions at the pearl fishery of the Gulf of Mannar was not fiercely disputed. Company officials scrutinized the claims of Arcot and other Indian polities but recognized the rights of temples and dargahs to *mauniam* or tax-free boats and divers. The sacred rights of Indian religious institutions were viewed by British officials as more pieces in the patchwork quilt of the pearl fishery. Five temples—Rameswaram Avudaiyarkoil Thirupullani, Thiruchendur, and Uthirakosamangai—and one dargah—Nagore—received a relatively small share of the total number of boats that fished the pearl oyster banks each season. As British chaplain and traveler James Cordiner wrote in the early nineteenth century, British Ceylon awards “small privileges to several other pagodas of less note than that of Ramisseram [*sic*].”<sup>951</sup> These “small privileges” were based upon “ancient grants made by the rajahs of the country, before European settlements were formed in India.”<sup>952</sup> Notably absent from Cordiner’s

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<sup>949</sup> Ibid.

<sup>950</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 183; BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 57.

<sup>951</sup> Cordiner, *Descriptions of Ceylon*, 2:57.

<sup>952</sup> Ibid.

description is the dargah at Nagore, which reflected colonial-era prejudices about the function of such grants in the political economy of India. During the course of the early nineteenth century, British Ceylon and the Company Raj attempted to strip away the political significance of the *mauniam* boats at the pearl fishery. The pearl fishery at Arippu in 1828 was a watershed moment, when efforts by Madras and Ceylon to extricate the rights of temples and dargahs intensified, and the role of Indian religious institutions in the pearling industry was problematized by British officials.

The events at Arippu in 1828 set off a decade-long debate between the East India Company and British Ceylon about rights and authority at the pearl fisheries. British Ceylon officer George Lee, former postmaster general at Colombo, who “undertook laborious examination of a large and very interesting mass of Documents” concerning the claims of the “Indian Pagodas,” issued a report in 1838.<sup>953</sup> Three salient questions emerged during the course of his investigation. A letter from the Colonial Secretary in London to Colombo outlined the agenda in July 1836. First, investigators needed to ascertain “the real nature of the grants” and determine “whether they may be fairly characterized as private or political acts.”<sup>954</sup> Second, “whether if the superstitious feelings of the Chiefs and Priests were consulted they would be found to extend to such a regard for the interests and welfare of the temples on the continent of India as to desire a maintenance of the grants in question.”<sup>955</sup> Third, colonial officials asked whether religious institutions on the island received the same sets of benefits as temples and dargahs on the mainland.

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<sup>953</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166.

<sup>954</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 61v.

<sup>955</sup> Ibid., 61v-62.

The scope of the investigation extended beyond the limits of these three questions and British official addressed many important issues that the problem of tax-free boats and diving stones at the pearl fishery. Company and Crown officers interpreted “private acts” as charitable work performed by a native head of state. According to this line of reasoning, when the Nawab of Arcot or Setupati of Ramnad granted tax-free boats to a temple or dargah, he did so as a munificent gesture for his own religious merit and not as a political act. It followed that the status of the *mauniam* boats at the pearl fishery originated as a form of religious philanthropy and was therefore not the work of a sovereign. Madras and Ceylon were therefore under no obligation to admit the *mauniam* boats at the pearl fishery because the conditions of the gift had effectively sunset. Company and Crown officials also believed it was incumbent upon the government to determine the sources and substance of each grant. British officials traced the history of each award and decided whether the Company and Crown governments were obligated to recognize the rights claimed therein. For instance, agents of Tiruchendur presented Collector Eden of Tirunelveli with a copper-plate grant from Tirumalai Nayaka of Madurai. According to the grant, Tirumalai Nayaka awarded the temple one boat and five diving stones at the Tuticorin pearl fishery. Collector Eden wrote to the Board in October 1836: “Under what authority or circumstances the Pandian Dynasty were entitled to make such a grant on the Manar Pearl Fishery, I am unable to furnish any information, but the Temple in question has been in the actual enjoyment of this Privilege for a great number of years, and the validity of the grant has not hitherto [been known].”<sup>956</sup> British officials often conduct inquiries regarding the authenticity of copper-plates and other materials presented by temples as evidence of their long-standing right to *mauniam* boats. For

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<sup>956</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 81-81v.

instance, in 1818, around the time at which Company Madras restored Tuticorin and other erstwhile VOC territories to the Netherlands, Collector John Cotton of Tirunelveli looked into the claims Tiruchendur and Uthirakosamangai. He wrote that “the Pagoda People here, say they have accounts of 50 or perhaps 100 years back, and these I have now ordered to be brought to [his] Cutcheree and examined.”<sup>957</sup> The agents of Tiruchendur and Uthirakosamangai claimed that the documents, which included a copper-plate grant from Tirumalai Nayaka dated 1541, were completely genuine. However, Collector Cotton expressed some doubt about his ability to verify these claims. He wrote to the Board in May 1818: “It is however, I fear quite impossible to trace out when the first discovery of the Pearl Oysters in the Gulf of Manar was made or when by whom the first Pearl fishery was carried on, for the Grant which is written on Copper, to the Pagodas this place of one Maunium Boat in the fisheries that take place both at Manar and on this Coast, bears date so long back as the year 1541, on the reign of [Tirumalai Nayaka], 244 years ago, and there are few accounts extant.”<sup>958</sup> Even as British officials struggled to ascertain the exact nature and substance of these awards copper-plates and other “ancient” documents were invested with a high degree of authority. For instance, Collector Cotton wrote in November 1818 that even though the copper-plates are “nearly alike in form” they should be sufficient “to bring to light any historical facts, that may be traced from them.”<sup>959</sup> In another case, Collector Blackburn of Madurai wrote to the Board in October 1836: “A perusal of these documents, which to my mind fully established the

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<sup>957</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3595, 218 (14 May 1818).

<sup>958</sup> Ibid.

<sup>959</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 3595, 486 (23 November 1818).



rights of the temples, have every appearance of being genuine and granted by competent authority and their long undisputed exercise of this right confirms me in its justice.”<sup>960</sup>

Representatives of the so-called “Indian Pagodas” appeared sensitized to the arguments advanced by Company and Crown officials that sought to erode the foundations of their claims to *mauniam* boats. For instance, the managing authorities of Rameswaram submitted a petition to Fort St. George that argued Madras and Ceylon must honor gifts made to the temple by previous regimes: “Whatever Enams, free gifts or Charities established by the former ruling power to the Churches and Mosques etc. were upon producing authentic documents in continuance according to Mamool [custom] by every subsequent Government.”<sup>961</sup> The petition continued: “Though the Ramnad [Setupatis] do not at present enjoy any privileges there can be no reason why the Churches should be deprived of its rights and privileges. If the [grants] of the former powers are unauthorized groundless, or fraudulent, it ought to be discontinued, but if otherwise, the Columbo Government should in justice protect the continuance of such charities under the existing laws and Regulations Enacted by Government.”<sup>962</sup> British Ceylon officials felt otherwise. For instance, Governor Edward Barnes wrote, “However, I confess myself, I have always doubted the necessity of the British Government granting these claims as a matter of right, under the Grants produced, and I should rather be inclined to imagine the concession originated more as a measure of expediency and indulgence, than as an absolute right.”<sup>963</sup> He continued: “The circumstances of the times with regard to Indian Affairs are materially altered, and as the Pearl Fishery at Aripo has

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<sup>960</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 86.

<sup>961</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1151, 6367 (3 July 1828).

<sup>962</sup> Ibid.

<sup>963</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 20.

become the sole and exclusive property of the British Government by right of conquest, it may fairly be considered questionable, how far these claims forwarded as they are upon grants of this nature made by former Rulers of the Country, should be conceded.”<sup>964</sup>

Governor Barnes alluded to a line of argumentation that both Company and Crown officials liked to follow during these disputes with Indian religious institutions. Madras and Ceylon officials like Governor Barnes were of the opinion that their European predecessors had invested native powers with the authority to award the temples and dargahs *mauniam* boats in exchange for services rendered at the pearl fishery. For instance, Dutch Ceylon recognized the rights of Arcot at the pearl fishery because it was pragmatic, a de facto exchange of access to the cloth trade for access to the pearl fishery. According British Ceylon officer George Lee in his report, “the monopoly of [the cloth] trade had been guaranteed to the Dutch by several commercial Treaties, the first of which appears to be dated in 1690 for the sake of [the cloth] trade, concessions in the Pearl Fisheries beyond any forms precedent had been made to the Nabob.”<sup>965</sup> He also wrote that “the Dutch conceded to the Nabob and Theuver certain boats from 1667 to 1732, that they might not prevent divers & boats coming to the Ceylon Fisheries from their Coasts.”<sup>966</sup> George Lee and other colonial officers found that the Dutch VOC had awarded Arcot and Ramnad certain concessions at the pearl fishery in exchange for their cooperation. The source of the *mauniam* boats were also fundamentally transactional, as native kings had awarded tax-free boats and divers to local religious institutions to accrue religious merit. Undersecretary R. W. Hay of Britain

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<sup>964</sup> Ibid.

<sup>965</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 8v.

<sup>966</sup> Ibid., 9v.

wrote to Colombo from Downing Street in August 1835: “It appears from the documents which were formerly transmitted to this Department from Ceylon, that the grants made to the Indian Temples were in the nature of offerings presented by individual princes of the Island to their favourite Gods or Goddesses or as private gifts of charity for which the individual who offered them was promised infinite blessings; and the permanency of these gifts was anticipated by the denunciation of innumerable ills on those who should ‘obstruct them.’”<sup>967</sup> By defining grants of tax-free boats and divers to religious institutions as private acts, British Ceylon and the Company Raj supplanted the preexisting relationship between temples and polities in the political economy of the pearl fishery. Hay wrote that the grants “do not seem to have proceeded upon any principle of national intercourse between the Indian Temples on the one hand and the Temples of Ceylon on the other.”<sup>968</sup> Officials drew upon historical and anthropological evidence to support their argument. Most accounts in the early nineteenth century found that temples used *mauniam* boats and divers to collect pearls and other marine products like conch shells for use in religious ceremonies.<sup>969</sup> For example, in a written plea submitted by representatives of Rameswaram in June 1828, the petitioners refer to a copper-plate grant that Vijaya Rangunatha, the Setupati of Ramnad, awarded to the temple in 1636 to use three diving stones “for the purpose of making Jewels to the said Deity to be worn on

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<sup>967</sup> Ibid., 63v.

<sup>968</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 74.

<sup>969</sup> Thurston, *Pearl and Chank Fisheries*; James Hornell, “The Chank Shell in Ancient Indian Life and Religion,” *The Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society* 4, no. 4 (1913): 157-64; Hornell, *The Sacred Chank of India: A Monograph on the Indian Conch* (Madras: Government Press, 1914); David Heppel, “The Chank Industry in Modern India,” *Princely States Report* 2, no. 2 (2001).

Friday festivals.”<sup>970</sup> Reports also found that the Nagore Dargah used the produce and proceeds from *mauniam* boats to support activities at the shrine.

As the sole proprietors of the pearl fishery, Company and Crown officials maintained that services once rendered by the temple and dargah to native powers were no longer needed. “Hindu” and “Islamic” rulers may have reinforced divine authority through relationships with local religious institutions but British Ceylon and the Company Raj drew upon a set of legalistic principles. The kings that had originally bestowed *mauniam* boats and divers on Indian religious institutions had either collapsed or lost any semblance of real political power in the region. Company Madras and British Ceylon sought to interrupt the preexisting circuits of gift-giving and instead fit the *mauniam* boats somewhat awkwardly into a fledgling legal and political framework. Scholars have shown that that *mauniam*, *inam*, and other forms of gift-giving were integral to the political economy of medieval India. The extension of land grants to temples and monastic orders, the reduction of tax burdens to merchant communities, and conferring honorific titles to dutiful courtiers and valiant warriors were all important parts of the pre-modern Indian political economy. Historian Burton Stein wrote that “important forms of property, such as *mauniam* or *inam* privileges to revenue immunity were simply defined as direct gifts from kings and gods, which in many cases would then pass into market circulation.”<sup>971</sup> Anthropologist and historian Nicholas Dirks documents in *The Hollow Crown* the course through which temple rituals, honors, and distinctions underwent substantial changes in southern India under the Company Raj. Dirks writes,

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<sup>970</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1151, 6365 (3 July 1828).

<sup>971</sup> Burton Stein, “Privileged Landholding: The Concept Stretched to Cover the Case,” in *Land Tenure and Peasant in South Asia*, ed. Robert E. Frykenberg (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1977), 67-77.

“The cultural system of both state and temple was radically revised under colonialism.”<sup>972</sup> He continues: “Like religion itself, the temple was reinvented in an attempt by the colonial state as a protector of all that as good and inviolable in Indian culture and institutions while removing the life force that had pulsed through them in the old regime.”<sup>973</sup> For Dirks and others, the Madras company-state stripped any real political meaning and influence that temples enjoyed under the *ancien régime*, and these efforts extended into the political and economic realm of the pearl fishery.<sup>974</sup>

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Company and Crown officials considered the rights of religious institutions at the pearl fishery as nebulous but they did not reject the claims outright until 1828. For instance, Governor Frederick North of Ceylon regulated access to tax-free boats and divers usually allocated for Arcot and Indian rulers at the Arippu pearl fishery in 1799, but he was not overly concerned with the so-called “Indian pagodas.” He received orders from his superiors at Fort St. George to maintain the status quo and admit the temple claims “without any Reform or alteration.”<sup>975</sup> At the close of the pearl fishery, North wrote in a letter to Madras that “the Claims of the Pagodas and Persons interested in the Fishery” are “Small, well known and easily kept within due bounds.”<sup>976</sup> Governor Barnes would later cite these words in his correspondence concerning the question of the *mauniam* boats in the late 1820s and 1830s.<sup>977</sup> However, the conservative approach followed by Governor North and his colleagues should not be mistaken for indifference. Even though he viewed the claims

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<sup>972</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 290.

<sup>973</sup> Ibid.

<sup>974</sup> Dirks, *Hollow Crown*; Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict*.

<sup>975</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 243.

<sup>976</sup> Ibid.

<sup>977</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 19v.

of Indian religious institutions as “small” and “easily kept within bounds” it was nevertheless incumbent upon the government to probe the nature of such rights. North’s curiosity came at transitional moment when British officials were largely in the dark about the pearl fishery. An investigation would provide Company and Crown officers with useful information about the industry. Reading Portuguese chronicles, delving into the records of Dutch Ceylon, and interpreting “ancient” copper-plate grants provided Madras and Ceylon with an opportunity to filter such texts through a framework that suited British interests.

Efforts to adjudicate the rights and claims of Indian religious institutions to tax-free boats and divers at the pearl fisheries began somewhat modestly at the turn of the nineteenth century. In 1799, Governor North reached out to Robert Andrews, former revenue officer at Jaffnapatnam and superintendent of the first three pearl fisheries organized by the Company. Andrews was considered by his peers to possess intimate knowledge about the pearling industry. He compiled a dossier that included formal treaties, certificates issued by the government to temple agents, and translations of copper-plate grants. Henry Smith, a barrister commissioned by the East India Company to investigate charges of corruption against Company employees at the pearl fishery, also addressed the Indian temples in a report. Inquiries by Andrews and Smith came at a moment of when Company officials exhibited tremendous optimism about their newest resource because the pearl fishery held out the promise of delivering extraordinary revenues to a cash-strapped organization. Through greater knowledge and careful management, the East India Company could turn a moribund industry into a lucrative source of steady and regular profit.

During the course of the early nineteenth century, however, officials on both sides of the Gulf changed their attitudes towards the *mauniam* boats at the pearl fishery. The Company Raj continued to admit various privileges and entitlements to religious institutions. British Ceylon followed a different course and undertook efforts to erode the foundations upon which the temples and dargah claimed tax-free boats and divers. The decision by Governor Barnes to deny religious institutions *mauniam* boats at Arippu in 1828 stemmed from a wider set of policy reforms. In the 1820s, British Ceylon officials wanted to downsize the number of boats admitted to the pearl fishery each season and increase the frequency of the event. According to these proposals, a handful of boats, about ten or fifteen, would fish the banks on an annual basis. Previous regimes followed an older model of resource management in which the government proprietor sought to maximize the number of pearling boats and increase yields. The reforms proposed by Governor Barnes and other British Ceylon officers reverberated through debates about Indian religious institutions and the *mauniam* boats. If British Ceylon held small annual fisheries, then the boats and divers regularly allocated for religious institutions would represent a larger share of the produce and revenue. Moreover, colonial officers wanted to discontinue the practice of leasing the pearl fishery to local merchants and instead fish the banks under a system of direct management. Governor Horton of British Ceylon wrote in February 1835 that “small Fisheries should be carried on in order that native speculators of small capital may have an opportunity of entering upon the speculation,” a policy suggestion that anticipated the policy conformed to many of the proposals found in the liberal-minded Colebrooke-Cameron commission.<sup>978</sup>

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<sup>978</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 60.

British officials viewed the dissolution of claims to *mauniam* boats by Indian religious institutions as an important step in this process of reform. For example, James Steuart, superintendent of the 1828 pearl fishery at Arippu, wrote about the “very doubtful privilege had been withheld by... Governor Sir Edward Barnes, who considered it inconsistent with the bearing of a Christian Government to contribute towards the support of such Temples.”<sup>979</sup> These temples were also “not situated within the territory of Ceylon” and therefore “they could have no political rights connected with its fisheries.”<sup>980</sup> High-ranking officials of British Ceylon further sought to erode the claims of religious institutions through narrow and creative interpretations of documentary evidence. Governor Barnes even moved through judicial channels when he solicited the opinions of members of the supreme court of British Ceylon in 1829. As there were no “Law Officers of the Crown” on the island, the governor hoped that two judges, Richard Otte and Charles Marshall, might adjudicate the claims of the temples and dargah and throw their weight behind the governor’s position.<sup>981</sup> Otte and Marshall ruled that British Ceylon was under no obligation to recognize the claims of the Indian religious institutions. In October 1829, they wrote to Governor Barnes, “upon considering the origin and the nature of the claim, we do not think that the documents before us would furnish sufficient grounds in the point of Law, to call upon a Court of Justice to enforce it.”<sup>982</sup> The judges conceded that the awards had been legitimacy honored during the *ancien régime*, writing that “the grants of the Indian Rajahs or chiefs were binding on

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<sup>979</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 27.

<sup>980</sup> Ibid.

<sup>981</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1222, 14613-24 (17 December 1829).

<sup>982</sup> Ibid., 14622.



their Successors and on all who derived their Title to the Fishery thro [*sic*] them.”<sup>983</sup> The Portuguese and Dutch had chosen to recognize the claims of religious institutions to *mauniam* boats even though they were under no obligation to do so. There was, in other words, no legal precedent binding British Ceylon to the decisions of its predecessors. Judges Otte and Marshall wrote in a report to Governor Barnes: “We do not think that any obligation to continue the privileges conceded, was imposed upon the Dutch or any other...which derived its Title from conquest and even admitting that the Dutch had allowed the Native powers or their Grantees to participate in the benefit of the Fishery, we cannot from thence conclude that the British Government was under any obligation to make similar concessions.”<sup>984</sup>

Debates over the *mauniam* boats continued for at least the next decade and culminated in 1838 with the release of a report by George Lee, former postmaster general of Colombo.<sup>985</sup> He delivered the results of his investigation to Governor Mackenzie at the Queen’s House in Colombo in August 1838. The Lee Report on the “Claim of Indian Temples on the Pearl Fisheries” came at the end of a period in which the pearling industry had been the object of targeted governmental reform and improvement. Lee set out to determine the extent to which Indian religious institutions had a right “to employ Boats, free of the payment of purchase money, at the Pearl Fisheries.”<sup>986</sup> He undertook a “laborious examination of a large and very interesting mass of Documents” concerning the claims of the “Indian Pagodas” at the Ceylon pearl fisheries.<sup>987</sup> Drawing largely from Portuguese and Dutch records in his possession, as well as East India Company and

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<sup>983</sup> Ibid.

<sup>984</sup> Ibid.

<sup>985</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166.

<sup>986</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>987</sup> Ibid., 1.

British Ceylon records at Colombo, Lee reaffirmed the pronouncement of Judges Otter and Marshall. Members of the administration of British Ceylon showered the Lee Report with praise. For example, James Stuart wrote, “Much light has since been thrown upon this subject by Mr. George Lee, the Post Master General of Ceylon. With great industry and research, and with much public spirit and considerable ability...this gentleman has selected and translated from the records of the Dutch in Ceylon, many interested papers on the subject of the pearl fishery.”<sup>988</sup>

British Ceylon also viewed the question of the *mauniam* boats through a financial and economic lens. Lee drew attention to this problem, writing that “employing a very limited number of Boats, which by admitting the privileges of the Temples on their present footing, would cause a loss to the Government.”<sup>989</sup> From the perspective of Lee and other British Ceylon officials, the most expedient solution was to simply revoke the privileges that Indian religious institutions enjoyed. According to Lee, Robert Andrews “may have felt the expediency in 1796 of this conciliation of the Priests,” and Governor North “may not have been willing too scrupulously to investigate the claims,” but those approaches to the question the *mauniam* boats that did not suite the current situation.<sup>990</sup> He wrote, “this Colonial Government need surely not be influenced by the motives which actuated Mr. Andrews, or Mr. North, when they feel the claims to be large most doubtful, and in small fisheries highly exorbitant.”<sup>991</sup> Lee’s colleagues applauded his work. For instance, James Stuart wrote, “[Lee] has satisfactorily shewn [*sic*], that the Hindoo Temples and Priests never had the right, under any former Government, of sending boats

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<sup>988</sup> Stuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 28-9.

<sup>989</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 81v.

<sup>990</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 95v.

<sup>991</sup> *Ibid.*

to fish for any pearl oysters free of payment; nor, that under any other circumstances should they permitted to do so in future under this Government.”<sup>992</sup>

Debates about the place of Indian religious institutions at the pearl fishery assumed new meaning in the context of the rivalry between British Ceylon and the Company Raj. The Company and Crown governments in the region competed for more than the human and natural resources of the pearling industry. Madras and Ceylon were also preoccupied with their own territorial and sovereign claims that ran through managerial control over the pearl fishery. For instance, there was speculation that Governor Barnes rejected the claims of the temples and dargah because the East India Company had violated a gentleman’s agreement that stipulated the two governments would not host concurrent pearl fisheries. Colombo notified Madras about their plans to organize a pearl fishery at Arippu in 1828, which was the first planned event since 1820. However, Company officials ignored these requests and moved forward with its own plans to host a pearl fishery in the vicinity of Tuticorin and Punnaikayal. The collector of Tirunelveli sent a letter to the deputy secretary of Ceylon in March 1828 that contained correspondence on the subject. He wrote, “on enquiry it is found to be unpracticable [*sic*] to meet the wishes of the Ceylon Government to obtain the attendance of the Divers of this Coast at the present fishery at Arippoo all the divers who are likely to be employed at Pinnacoil are making necessary preparations for that purpose and it would be impossible for them to proceed at the present Moment to the Banks.”<sup>993</sup> Company officials further sabotaged the efforts of their Ceylon counterparts by hesitating to distribute advertisements for the event. A letter from Madras to Colombo stated that “the

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<sup>992</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 29.

<sup>993</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4702, 18-9 (28 March 1828).

publication of the Advertisement...might interfere with its success.”<sup>994</sup> The Company also surreptitiously mobilized labor and capital in preparation for its own fishery. According to a petition from the temple agents, “Government had commenced fishery on their part at Tutocoreen in opposition to his with a view to put a stop to this fishery and consequently the Maharajah [Governor of Ceylon] had sustained great losses from half the Number of Merchants having proceeded to Tutocoreen.”<sup>995</sup>

Company officials appear to have supported the claims of Indian religious institutions to *mauniam* boats at the Ceylon pearl fisheries. For instance, the collector of Ramnad shared a large collection of documents from his office with the Board of Revenue ahead of the 1828 pearl fishery. He wrote that these documents “fully prove the right of the Pagodas to the privileges claimed, and which I hope will be restored to them.”<sup>996</sup> Between 1829 and 1831, agents of religious institutions continued to present their case but British Ceylon officers refused to award them *mauniam* boats time and again. However, records from the 1832, 1835, and 1836 pearl fisheries indicate that the government reinstated the *mauniam* boats and that each institution enjoyed at least one boat and five diving stones.<sup>997</sup> Even the Rani of Ramnad entered the fray when she submitted a petition to the Board on behalf of Rameswaram.<sup>998</sup> As James Steuart wrote in his 1843 account, “In the absence of proof to the contrary, the Home Government viewed it as a political and religious right, which in justice, should not be interfered with, and the Secretary of State for the Colonies instructed the Governor of Ceylon, to allow those

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<sup>994</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4712, 7 (11 January 1828).

<sup>995</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1151, 6368 (3 July 1828); UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 27-9.

<sup>996</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 1151, 6362-88 (3 July 1828).

<sup>997</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166.

<sup>998</sup> Ibid.

Temples of Hindostan, that had previously enjoyed the privilege, again to share in the pearl fisheries of the Gulf of Manaar.”<sup>999</sup>

Tensions between Company and Crown governments over the pearl fisheries spilled over into the unexpected domains of accounting and record-keeping. In 1817, Madras expanded its bureaucratic control over religious institutions in the Presidency through Regulation VII, also known as the “Madras Endowments and Escheats Regulation.” This act allowed the government to become the principal managers of religious lands, money, and endowments of sacred institutions within its domain. A power formally invested in the Board of Revenue, the Madras government exercised considerable control over all sorts of religious institutions, from churches and shrines to temples and academies. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and others have documented how the early nineteenth century witnessed increased bureaucratization and centralization of temple affairs in Madras.<sup>1000</sup> Governor Barnes of British Ceylon referred to this institutional arrangement a memorandum on the pearl fishery. He wrote, “I have only further to add that, with exception of the Temple of Nagore, which is a Mahomedan Institution, I am given to understand that the East India Company possess themselves of all the Temple Revenues allowed the Temple, in lieu thereof, and of dedications and offerings, a fixed sum annually for their proper maintenance and keep, which is, considerably less than the Revenues they receive.”<sup>1001</sup> The superintendent of the pearl fishery assigned the revenue and produce from each *mauniam* boat to accounts of the

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<sup>999</sup> Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries*, 28.

<sup>1000</sup> Chandra Y. Mudaliar, *Secular State and Religious Institutions in India: A Study of the Administration of Hindu Religious Trusts in Madras* (Wiesbaden: Stein, 1974); Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict*, 105-138; Franklin A. Presler, *Religion Under Bureaucracy: Policy and Administration of Hindu Temples in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>1001</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 19v.

district within which each temple was located. As the superintendent of the 1822 pearl fishery at Tuticorin wrote to the Collector of Madurai, “The sum due to the Pagodas is in deposits in the Treasury here & will be paid to any persons authorized to receive.”<sup>1002</sup> Governor Barnes and other Ceylon officials found this system suspicious. For example, Governor Barnes of Ceylon wrote, “The East India Company possess themselves of all the Temple Revenue (with exception of the Nagore Temple which is a Mahomedan institution) allowing them in lieu thereof and of dedications and offerings a fixed sum per annum for the proper maintenance and keep of authorised Temples.”<sup>1003</sup> His successor, Governor Horton, also addressed the problem: “My attention has been very forcibly drawn to the subject of the Boats allowed to certain Temples on the Continent of India.”<sup>1004</sup> He found that the Indian temples “derive no direct benefit from this permission, in as much as the Madras Government receive their revenues under an arrangement existing between them.”<sup>1005</sup>

British officials on both sides of the Gulf paid special attention to the shrine of Shahul Hamid at Nagore in Tamilnadu.<sup>1006</sup> The dargah and its *mauniam* boats were an exception at the pearl fishery for reasons besides its categorization as a “Mahomedan Institution.” Nagore did not possess copper-plate grants from Indian rulers like the temples, which confused government officials in charge of adjudicating its claims. P. B.

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<sup>1002</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4697, 317 (3 May 1823).

<sup>1003</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 20-1.

<sup>1004</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>1005</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1006</sup> Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*; Vasudha Narayan, “Nagore Dargah of Hazra Shahul Hamid,” in *Dargahs: Abodes of Saints*, eds. Mumtaz Currim and George Michell (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2004), 135-47; Torsten Tschacher, “Circulating Islam: Understanding Convergence and Divergence in the Islamic Traditions of Ma’bar and Nusantara,” in *Islamic Connections: Muslim Societies in South and Southeast Asia*, eds. R. Michael Feener and Terenjit Sevea (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 2009), 48-67; Catherine B. Asher, “The Sufi Shrines of Shahul Hamid in India and Southeast Asia,” *Artibus Asiae* 69, no. 2 (2009): 247-58; Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

Smolleff, Secretary to the Board of Revenue of Madras, wrote in August 1837, “the Mahomedan Durgah at Nagore...possess no grants, but its right has to a certain extent been acknowledged by the Ceylon Government.”<sup>1007</sup> He added: “the privilege of fishing during a rented Fishery has been actually enjoyed by it during the years 1831-33 and 35. This does not however appear to have been allowed when the Fishery has been under Aumany management.”<sup>1008</sup> Instead of copper-plate inscriptions, Company and Crown officials accepted government-issued certificates and passports issued to the Nagore dargah in support of its claim to tax-free boats and divers at the pearl fishery. N. W. Kindersley, Collector of Thanjavur, wrote to Fort St. George in May 1837, “The Nagore Durgah holds no grant, but its claim to 2 boats is in some sort admitted by the Ceylon Government [and] its agents produce the accompanying Certificates granted to them for three years.”<sup>1009</sup> The question of the dargah was further complicated by the fact that it did not receive any *mauniam* boats when the pearl fishery was conducted under the *amani* system. According to Collector Kindersley, “The great disproportion in the receipts of the two institutions, the former being allowed one boat, and the latter two, is explained by the [Temple] claim being admitted only in the Aumany Fishery which takes place after the rented Fishery has closed. Whereas the Durgah is allowed 2 boats during the rented Fishery, but denied any in a year in which the Fishery is not rented.”<sup>1010</sup> In many of the document related to the *mauniam* boats, the concessions enjoyed by Nagore are effaced by terms such as “charity,” which further placed them in a bureaucratic category separate and apart from the temples. The claims of the dargah were further complicated by the fact

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<sup>1007</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 75v.

<sup>1008</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1009</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 77.

<sup>1010</sup> Ibid., 77v.

that the privileges do not appear to have been invested in the institution *per se* but held by individuals who fished on its behalf. A report by Robert Andrews to Governor North in January 1799 referred to a certain Chinna Tambi Maraikkayar from Nagore who was due 2 boats or 10 diving stones for “charity.”<sup>1011</sup> At the 1822 pearl fishery at Punnaikayal, a certain Madar Sahib received tax-free boats on behalf of the dargah, but the superintendent was not unable to determine the validity of the claim because there was no record of this person at previous fisheries. According to an investigation by Collector Cotton of Tirunelveli, Madar Sahib enjoyed the privilege of tax-free boats and divers at the 1797 pearl fishery. He also appears to have submitted an application for the annual rent of the Tuticorin chank fishery in 1798-1799.<sup>1012</sup> Madar Sahib submitted a copper-plate deed to Collector Cotton but he was dubious of its authenticity: “A writing on copper purporting to be a Deed of Gift of the mauniam claimed, by one of the Hindoo sovereigns of the Carnatic upwards of 300 years old was presented in support of the Claim, but as there were no public accounts showing that the Boat applied for had been allowed on the occasion of any former fishery, I have not examined into its authenticity.”<sup>1013</sup>

In search of a solution to these problems with the *mauniam* boats, high-ranking officials such as Governors Barnes and Horton pitched a new idea. Instead of permitting boats and divers to attend the pearl fishery on behalf of the temples and dargah, British Ceylon would simply transfer money to the accounts of each institution. According to this plan, British Ceylon would provide a “commuted money-allowance,” a figure

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<sup>1011</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 232.

<sup>1012</sup> TNA, BOR Proceedings, Vol. 206, 5442-51 (23 July 1798).

<sup>1013</sup> TNA, TDR, Vol. 4696, 55-6 (8 April 1822).



determined by the average profit derived from the fisheries during the last three seasons. George Lee addressed this proposal in his report. He wrote, “The most advisable means for their satisfactory adjustment will be the grant of a commuted money-allowance, to be paid by the Ceylon Government, to such of the institutions referred to us have hitherto been in the enjoyment of the privilege, including the Durgah of Nagore.”<sup>1014</sup> This proposal acknowledged the rights of the religious institutions to a share of the pearl fishery but protected the financial interests of British Ceylon by curbing the total number of crews that fished the oyster banks each season. However, not all parties involved agreed to this plan, as representatives of the religious institutions in question refused to capitulate to the demands of British Ceylon. Madras officials appeared amenable to the solution. Collector Eden of Tirunelveli wrote to the Board in October 1836, “I should imagine the [trustees] of the Pagoda would have no just grounds of Complaint, if they were allowed in lieu thereof an annual sum equivalent to the average of their receipts.”<sup>1015</sup> The collector also communicated to the Board that agents of Tiruchendur showed no interest in modifying their claims. He wrote, “I am sorry to say I have proposed this to them without success, nor can I induce them to entertain any compromise whatever. They state generally that they are unwilling to have this privilege placed on any other footing.”<sup>1016</sup> Three months later, Collector Eden returned to the Board with same news. “I regret to have to state the [Trustees] of Trichendoor Pagoda continue to refuse their consent to any other adjustment of their claim to employ Boats in the Manar Fishery, than as it now exists.”<sup>1017</sup> The trustees of Tiruchendur considered that

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<sup>1014</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 75-6.

<sup>1015</sup> *Ibid.*, 81v.

<sup>1016</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1017</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 83v.

“the privilege itself is much more valuable to the Pagoda, than any advantages arising out of it.”<sup>1018</sup> The Board also received depositions of representatives of Tiruchendur. These documents further illustrated the conviction with which the temples demanded recognition of their rights to *mauniam* boats. A statement signed by no less than sixteen representatives of Tiruchendur presented the position of the temple in very clear terms: “Some time ago you said that you would state your opinion regarding the employment of boats in the Manar Pearl Fishery on account of Soobramanaswamy Pagodas at Trichendoor after you were informed of the manner in which the claims of the Stalatars of the Pagodas at Madura and Tanjore to employ Boats in the same Fishery might be adjusted you will now state how and in what manner you wish the Revenue derived from one boat each day which is allowed to be employed in the above Fishery on account of the said Pagoda should be paid.” The statement continued: “It is our desire that during the period the Fishery may continue one boat should be employed each day on our account according to Mammool and we prefer this to any other arrangement.”<sup>1019</sup> A member of the Board of Revenue responded to these claims: “It does not, however, seem probable that this arrangement will be assisted by the Staladars of the Tirchandoor Pagoda, but in the Board’s opinion it is in the power of Government in its capacity of Guardian over all public institutions to make arrangements of this description.”<sup>1020</sup>

It is perhaps no coincidence that the next time at which the question of rights of religious institutions came at another moment of political transitions. In 1857, when the Company Raj transferred control of India to the British Crown, George Vane, the

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<sup>1018</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1019</sup> UKNA, CO, 54, 166, 83v-4.

<sup>1020</sup> Ibid., 76.

superintendent of the Ceylon pearl fisheries, addressed the place of “Hindu temples of the Madras Presidency” at the pearl fishery. He linked this question to debates surrounding the renting system. Vane wrote, “The renting system and Temple claims had given much trouble at former fisheries so conducted, and led to abuses of the rights of the divers and boatmen (also, as believed, to the over-fishing of the banks.”<sup>1021</sup> Vane and his colleagues determined that they would conduct the 1857 pearl fishery under *amani* and, unlike the renters at previous fisheries, refuse to admit “the Hindu temples of the Madras Presidency to fish on their own account.”<sup>1022</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As propriety over the pearl fisheries successively passed through the hands of three great European colonial powers, the Portuguese, Dutch, and British bundled together various sorts of rights and privileges. As British powers entered the complex political landscapes of eighteenth-century India and Sri Lanka, the Company and Crown governments sought to interrupt the traditional circuits of gift-giving and sovereignty that had animated the pearling industry. British officers on both sides of the Gulf analyzed rights claimed by Indian polities and religious institutions to the pearl fishery and fit them somewhat awkwardly into a fledgling juridical-politico framework. In doing so, the British sought to not only present themselves as rightful sovereigns to the land and sea but also restructure certain aspects of the pearl fishery.

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<sup>1021</sup> Vane, “Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon,” 17.

<sup>1022</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 5: FOUL OYSTERS

### CORRUPTION

In late 1799, Governor Frederic North of Ceylon detected some alarming inconsistencies in the account books of the recently closed pearl fishery at Arippu. North did not expect to learn anything new about the event as he leafed through these documents. He already knew that the produce and profits from the seasonal event had fallen short of expectations, a disappointing return for the first pearl fishery conducted under his governorship. North had appointed three officers to superintend the pearl fishery and to keep him abreast of the situation on the ground with regular dispatches from Arippu. From the number of oysters each boat fished per day to petty skirmishes amongst merchants, North felt that he had a good handle on most matters related to the pearl fishery that year. However, Governor North's audit of the accounts, together with intelligence he gathered during an extensive tour of the coastal districts of Ceylon, brought new information to light. The number of boats released to fish the pearl banks exceeded the corresponding amount of money received by the government. The accounts also failed to reconcile nearly two hundred pounds of pearls that belonged to the East India Company. Signs of inconsistent bookkeeping combined with the missing pearls lent credence to rumors that the commissioners of the pearl fishery—Hugh Cleghorn, Lt. George Turnour, and John McDowall—had engaged in dishonest behavior during their assignment. Under “circumstances of suspicion” concerning the “Conduct of the

Superintendents during the Fishery as well as the Agents employed by them,” Governor North convened a committee to investigate the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu.<sup>1023</sup> Three specially appointed British officers—General Hay MacDowall, Colonel Josias Champagne, and Judge James Dunkin—produced a multi-volume dossier. From colluding with local merchants to accepting bribes and embezzling money, the range of accusations was remarkable, and a dark cloud settled over the East India Company’s management of the pearl fishery. As the investigation progressed it revealed that the alleged fraudulence at Arippu in 1799 was only the tip of the iceberg. It found repeated “frauds and abuses” at the previous three pearl fisheries and portrayed the pearl fishery as a den of iniquity and corruption. Governor North wrote that the losses incurred by his government at Arippu in 1799 were “but a flea-bite,” and a “gross and incalculable fraud” had befallen his pearl banks on previous occasions.<sup>1024</sup> Like the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu, the preceding pearl fisheries became millstones around the governor’s neck, and corruption weighed down yet another territory at the expanding frontiers of the East India Company. In a few short years, the pearl fishery had gone from being seen as one of the greatest natural resources won by the East India Company to an industry beset by ineradicable and endemic corruption.

Efforts by Governor North and other high-ranking officials of the East India Company to stamp out corruption at the pearl fishery were not cordoned off from a wider imperial landscape shaped by anti-corruption ideologies and policies. During the course of the eighteenth century, corruption became an increasingly salient term in the administrative language of the East India Company and wider sphere of British political

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<sup>1023</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 5, 112v.

<sup>1024</sup> De Silva, *Ceylon under the British*, 2:504.

culture. The specter of corruption haunted the pages of political tracts and the floor of Parliament and manifested itself through the East India Company and its governance of India. From the halls of British parliament to the shanty camps of the pearl fishery, anti-corruption discourses and crusades dovetailed with the making of the British empire in Asia. An examination of the pearl fisheries at the end of the eighteenth century through the lens of corruption throws light on colonial state formation and empire-making in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century India and Sri Lanka. It is no coincidence that corruption reared its ugly head during a political transition, the precise moment at which the East India Company assumed territorial control over Dutch Ceylon. The decidedly firm course of action followed by Governor North and other British officials hastened the establishment of the island as a formal colony of the British Crown and facilitated the erection of a government bureaucracy designed to manage the labor, capital, intelligence, and natural marine environment of the pearl fishery. Officials set into motion a series of reforms designed to limit so-called “private” influence at the pearl fishery, which targeted elite pearl merchants usually leased the industry from the government. Investigations into corruption at the pearl fishery also signaled to politicians back home, Company employees in India and Ceylon, and local elites and power brokers that the East India Company was capable of managing an unpredictable and volatile industry such as the pearl fishery. As historian Nicholas Dirks writes in *The Scandal of Empire*, “the history of empire—or of the Company—in the eighteenth century has been written about as a problem of management and control in which scandal was an impediment to the success of the Company rather than endemic to it.”<sup>1025</sup> Scandals like

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<sup>1025</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 25.

the charges of corruption that wracked Company management of the pearl fishery at the turn of the nineteenth century provided an entry point for government intervention. While never reaching the spectacular heights of the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings, the events that took place at the pearl fisheries in the late 1790s and early 1800s offer no less insight into how the modern British Empire was born in scandal. The mobilization of corruption and anti-corruption discourses created moments at which the implementation of policies and reforms intended to improve the management of the human and natural resources of the pearl fishery became possible.

### **Corruption, History, and the East India Company**

Scholars of various stripes have noted that corruption is a notoriously ill-defined and capacious term. From biological connotations of decay to individual moral failings and compromised institutions, the polysemy of the term corruption makes it difficult to nail down an exact definition.<sup>1026</sup> Many commonly cited definitions in social sciences such as political science and economics refer to corruption as the use of public office by an individual for private gain. Political scientist Joseph Nye offers a classic formulation. He defines corruption as “behavior that deviates from the formal duties of a public role (elective or appointive) because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) wealth or status gains.”<sup>1027</sup> Political scientist Carl Friedrich provides another succinct definition: “Corruption is a kind of behavior which deviates from the norm

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<sup>1026</sup> Bruce Buchan and Lisa Hill, *An Intellectual History of Corruption* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 5-7.

<sup>1027</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “Corruption and Political Development: A Cost-Benefit Analysis,” *American Political Science Review* 61, no. 2 (1967), 416.

actually prevalent or believed to prevail in a given context, such as the political. It is deviant behavior associated with a particular motivation, namely that of private gain at public expense...[I]t is the fact that private gain was secured at public expense that matters.”<sup>1028</sup> In most scholarly studies, as well as policy-oriented reports by governments and think tanks, corruption is seen as a breach or violation of the normative boundaries between public and private and legal and illegal. The assumption underlying this understanding of corruption is that it is a transgression of idealized bureaucratic norms of western modernity, that a person holding public office should perform his or her duties free of private influence or interest. Alongside such efforts to define corruption as a transgression of the boundaries between public and private and legality and illegality comes the largely neoliberal and policy-oriented viewpoints that corruption is endemic to emerging market societies. From this viewpoint, corruption is a managerial problem that wracks the developing world and it can only be rooted out through institutional reforms.<sup>1029</sup> In that regard, corruption is seen as a problem that affects the non-Western world and further evidence that developing nations have deviated from the normative paths of political and economic development. Corruption in India is often seen as a particularly thorny topic and the mainstream international business community has broadly viewed it as a hindrance to economic development and barrier to investment.<sup>1030</sup> Such definitions of corruption, however, gloss over the multiplicity meanings of the term by accepting it as transgression of cultural and institutional norms. There are many

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<sup>1028</sup> Carl J. Friedrich, “Corruption Concepts in Historical Perspectives,” in *Political Corruption: Concepts and Contexts*, eds. Arnold J. Heidenheimer and Michael Johnston (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 15.

<sup>1029</sup> Vinay Bhargava and Emil Bolongaita, eds., *Challenging Corruption in Asia: Case Studies and a Framework for Action* (Washington: World Bank, 2004).

<sup>1030</sup> Ravi Venkatesan, “Confronting Corruption,” *McKinsey Quarterly*, January 2015.



scholars who have flipped the negative connotations of corruption on its head and maintain that such violations are effective mechanisms through which marginalized peoples can access power, influence, and resources in rather inequitable conditions.<sup>1031</sup>

From this perspective, corruption can be seen as a positive force that accelerates political and economic development in institutional settings that are otherwise weak and compromised.<sup>1032</sup> Sociologists have constructed relational models that move towards a more dynamic understanding of how corruption operates amongst social actors. Eminent sociologist Diego Gambetta, for instance, views “corruption as a market” in which “agents of corruption” conduct what are essentially exchange transactions.<sup>1033</sup>

Corruption can be understood not just as the use of private office for public gain but must also be seen as entailing a range of social and cultural behaviors and practices that vary by time and place. For instance, corruption can open lines of communication between citizen subjects and states or function as a type of protest. Corruption, and responses to it, can also be a channel through which governmental power and state violence flow. Approaching the critical study of corruption as a discourse and practice and less as an abstract theoretical concept have been particularly profitable in the context of the Global South.<sup>1034</sup> The South Asian context has received a remarkably large share of scholarly attention on the role and place of corruption in modern and contemporary

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<sup>1031</sup> Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); James C. Scott, *Comparative Political Corruption* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

<sup>1032</sup> Pranab Bardhan, “Corruption and Development: A Review of Issues,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 35, no. 3 (1997): 1320-46; Bardhan, “The Economist’s Approach to the Problem of Corruption,” *World Development* 34, no. 2 (2006): 341-8.

<sup>1033</sup> Diego Gambetta, “Corruption: An Analytical Map,” in *Corrupt Histories*, eds. Emmanuel Kreike and William C. Jordan (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 3-28.

<sup>1034</sup> Daniel Jordan Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Steven Pierce, *Moral Economies of Corruption: State Formation and Political Culture in Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

societies. One reason for this output has been that Indian domestic politics in recent years have turned state corruption into a favorite talking point on the campaign trail. Corruption has emerged as an issue that spans the ideological spectrum and become the object of spectacular political protests.<sup>1035</sup> From gaining access to public utilities to encounters with police and electoral politics, corruption, and the way people talk about corruption, is woven into the fabric of everyday life for many people in South Asia. Amidst such political and cultural phenomena, anthropologists have produced fine-grained and sophisticated analyses of corruption, the state, and everyday life in contemporary India.<sup>1036</sup> From rural police stations and electoral politics to bureaucratic centers and urban water infrastructure, the anthropology of corruption in modern and contemporary India offers rich theoretical insights to understanding ideologies and discourses corruption in different historical dispensations. Anthropologist Akhil Gupta, for instance, remarks, “the ‘system’ of corruption is of course not just a brute collection of practices whose most widespread execution occurs at the local level. It is also a discursive field that enables the phenomenon to be labeled, discussed, practiced, decried, and

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<sup>1035</sup> Aradhana Sharma, “Epic Fasts and Shallow Spectacles: The ‘India Against Corruption’ Movement, its Critics, and the Re-Making of ‘Gandhi,’” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (2014): 365-80.

<sup>1036</sup> Akhil Gupta, “Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State,” *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (1995): 375-402; Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Pamela Price, “Narratives of Corruption: Anthropological and (South) India,” *Forum for Development Studies* 2 (1999): 315-27; Jonathan Parry, “The ‘Crisis of Corruption’ and ‘the Idea of India’: A Worm’s Eye View,” in *The Morals of Legitimacy: Between Agency and System*, ed. Italo Pardo (New York: Berghahn, 2000), 27-57; Arild Engelsen Ruud, “Corruption as Everyday Practice: The Public-Private Divide in Local Indian Society,” *Forum for Development Studies* 2 (2000): 271-94; Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria, “Ordinary States: Everyday Corruption and the Politics of Space in Mumbai,” *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 1 (2011): 58-72; Jeffrey Witsoe, “Corruption as Power: Caste and the Political Imagination of the Postcolonial State,” *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 1 (2011): 73-85; Beatrice Jauregui, “Provisional Agency in India: Jagaad and Legitimation of Corruption,” *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 1 (2014): 76-91; Lisa Björkman, *Pipe Politics, Contested Waters: Embedded Infrastructures of Millennial Mumbai* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 165-97.

denounced.”<sup>1037</sup> Recent work by anthropologist Lisa Björkman also offers a way to think critically about the state and corruption. Björkman’s *Pipe Politics, Contested Waters* is a political ethnographic study of the connections between water infrastructure, liberalization, and politics in twenty-first century Mumbai. Björkman offers a fresh theoretical perspective on discourses and practices of corruption through her ethnography of “hydraulic landscapes” in contemporary urban India. She writes, “The corruption discourse allows for a widespread belief in the coherence of the waters department’s knowledge and authority over the distribution network to coexist alongside everyday experiences of breakdown, shortage, and volatility.”<sup>1038</sup>

Corruption discourses and practices, however, have not received the same level of critical attention in historical scholarship.<sup>1039</sup> Yet areas of historical scholarship that have received a fair share of attention are the East India Company in British politics, the infamous impeachment trial of Warren Hastings, and the activities of Company employees in India. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the discourse and practice of corruption became a mechanism through which the Company and Crown imagined and symbolically represented their respective empires in Asia. The representation of the Company Raj and British Crown through the discourse of corruption also enabled various interest groups to critique or offer, to borrow a phrase from Gupta, a “diagnostic of the state.”<sup>1040</sup> Those studies that focus on the East India Company have largely reiterated

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<sup>1037</sup> Gupta, “Blurred Boundaries,” 385.

<sup>1038</sup> Björkman, *Pipe Politics*, 168.

<sup>1039</sup> Kreike and Jordan, *Corrupt Histories*; Nancy Park, “Corruption in Eighteenth-Century China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 4 (1997): 967-1005; Nandini Chatruvedula, “Imperial Excess: Corruption and Decadence in Portuguese India, 1660-1705,” PhD diss., Columbia University, 2010; Erik Lars Myrup, *Power and Corruption in the Early Modern Portuguese World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

<sup>1040</sup> Gupta, “Blurred Boundaries,” 389.

certain social scientific assumptions about corruption as a real and identifiable problem within the corporation's organization. While many officials and British parliamentarians concerned with the affairs of the Company more or less agreed that corruption was a problem, there was less agreement on the practices and activities that actually fell under its rubric. The ambiguity of the term in British political discourse and the administrative language of the East India Company thus had something in common with seventeenth-century Portuguese India and eighteenth-century China in which corruption had multiple meanings and struck different discursive registers, including religious, moral, legal, and philosophical.<sup>1041</sup> It was the capaciousness of the category that gave corruption its rhetorical power, and that allowed it to be an engine of reform and improvement in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Madras and Ceylon. Corruption was neither an obstacle to state formation nor a hindrance to economic interests, but rather an instrument that facilitated the construction of the Company Raj and paved the way for the establishment of Ceylon as a Crown Colony that would become the so-called "The Pearl" of the British Empire.

Eighteenth-century Britain was home to major changes in conceptual understandings of corruption.<sup>1042</sup> A religio-philosophical understanding of corruption as a degenerative force gave way to a view that saw it as a violation of the virtuous separation between the interests of the commonwealth and individuals. In British political culture, this meant the decline of "old corruption," described by one scholar as "a parasitic system that taxed the wealth of the nation and diverted it into the pockets of a narrow political

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<sup>1041</sup> Chatruvedula, "Imperial Excess"; Park, "Corruption in Eighteenth-Century China."

<sup>1042</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Buchan and Hill, *Intellectual History of Corruption*.

clique whose only claim to privileged status was its proximity to the sources of patronage.”<sup>1043</sup> The waning of “old corruption” gave way to a new understanding of corruption in which individuals used public resources and offices for private gain.<sup>1044</sup> British and Scottish philosophers such as Hume, Locke, Smith, and Burke engaged with the topic of corruption and such “civic humanist” ideas penetrated Whig and liberal political discourses in the eighteenth century.<sup>1045</sup> The expansion of trade and empire was also a significant factor that contributed to a conceptual sea change in the intellectual history of corruption. As historian Philip Stern illustrates, the relationship between the East India Company and corruption was present from the corporation’s founding in the early seventeenth century but was effectively concealed through the humanistic language of virtue, honor, and service. He demonstrates that corporations were originally seen as noble entities that protected against corruption by discouraging individual gain at the expense of shared profit. However, critiques of mercantilism and monopolism by liberal political economists became mainstream in the latter half of the eighteenth century and the East India Company was represented as a breeding ground of corrupt behavior. Talk of corruption by Adam Smith, Edmund Burke and many other liberal thinkers and parliamentarians were some of the most forceful blows to the standing and reputation of the world’s most powerful corporations. A set of loosely connected scandals concerning the East India Company’s overseas territories, from the trial of Warren Hastings to the debts of the Nawab of Arcot, rocked the British political establishment in the latter half of

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<sup>1043</sup> Philip Harlin, *The Waning of ‘Old Corruption’: The Politics of Economical Reform in Britain, 1779-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

<sup>1044</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1045</sup> Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, History*.

the eighteenth century.<sup>1046</sup> At the precise moment when the Company turned from a network of trading enclaves into an expansionist territorial power, the balancing act between public and private good and merchant and sovereign faltered.<sup>1047</sup> Shifts in attitudes towards empire combined with attempts to eradicate old networks of traditional power and influence within British political cultures also led to tightened regulations over imperial affairs overseas.<sup>1048</sup>

Intellectual critiques of the East India Company by liberal political economists combined forces with parliamentary action to upset the equipoise between Company and Crown. As Stern writes, corruption became the “political and legal foundation for Parliamentary intervention into the ‘private’ Company’s empire on behalf of the ‘public,’ rescuing the British Empire in India, while in the long run, condemning the Company to a gradual loss of autonomy and political power.”<sup>1049</sup> Beginning with a parliamentary inquiry in 1767, British politicians gradually increased their oversight of the East India Company through a series of legislative acts: The Regulating Act of 1773 was the first concerted effort to regulate the Company’s government in India through caps on annual profits and dividends, prohibitions against officials accepting gifts or “presents” from local rulers, the establishment of a high judicial body at Calcutta, and the political reorganization of the government in India. The East India Company Act of 1784

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<sup>1046</sup> P. J. Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); David Musselwhite, “The Trial of Warren Hastings,” in *Literature, Politics, and Theory*, ed. Francis Barker (London: Methuen, 1986), 77-103; Vinod Pavarala, “Cultures of Corruption and the Corruption of Culture: The East India Company and the Hastings Impeachment,” in *Corrupt Histories*, 291-336; Dirks, *Scandal of Empire*; Brian Smith “Edmund Burke, the Warren Hastings Trial, and the Moral Dimension of Corruption,” *Polity* 40, no. 1 (2008): 70-94; Eddy Kent, *Corporate Character: Representing Imperial Power in British India* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2014).

<sup>1047</sup> Philip Stern, “Corporate Virtue: The Languages of Empire in Early Modern British Asia,” *Renaissance Studies* 26, no. 4 (2012), 529.

<sup>1048</sup> H. V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6; Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, 100-63.

<sup>1049</sup> Stern, “Corporate Virtue,” 530.

established the Board of Control, formally subsuming the Company under the authority of the British state. Additionally, the Charter Acts of 1793, 1813, and 1833 were important because they contained determinations about the Company's monopoly and other matters, such as political appointments and policy reforms.<sup>1050</sup> The Charter Act of 1793 renewed the East India Company's royal charter and was, according to the document, "An Act for continuing in the East India Company for a further term the Possession of the British Territories in India." Besides the China trade, the Company lost its monopoly over commerce with the renewal of its charter in 1813, an act that also asserted sovereignty of the British crown over India. By 1833, the Company lost its monopoly over the trade in tea and other commodities from China, which effectively ended its commercial authority and removed what was once one its most effective tools of power. In the end, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed the birth of a new relationship between British state and East India Company, one that mapped onto transformations in the intellectual sphere, as the principles of mercantilism competed with economic liberalism in the domain of political economy.

Critics of the East India Company made connections between the consumption of precious stones with political corruption and the cultural excesses of India. The association of jewels and corruption had been made with regard to the courts of Stuart England and Mughal India, but it acquired a new meaning in the context of British imperialism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>1051</sup> Many first-hand accounts by early modern European travelers such as Thomas Roe, François Bernier,

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<sup>1050</sup> Sutherland, *East India Company in Eighteenth-Century Politics*; H. V. Bowen, *Revenue and Reform: The Indian Problem in British Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Bowen, *Business of Empire*.

<sup>1051</sup> Warsh, "Adorning Empire," 217-48.

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier recorded European views of Mughal excess. For instance, Thomas Roe described the jewelry and costume of Jahangir during his ambassadorial to the Mughal court in the early seventeenth century: “His sash was wreathed about with a chain of great pearls, rubies, and diamonds drilled. About his neck he carried a chain of most excellent pearl...so great I never saw; at his elbows, armlets set with diamonds; and on his wrists three rows of several sorts. His hands bar, but almost every finger a ring; his gloves, which were English, stuck under his girdle; his coat of cloth of gold with sleeves upon a fine [cloth] as thin as lawn; on his feet a pair of embroidered buskins with pearls, the toes sharp and turning up.”<sup>1052</sup> Such fantasies are were also captured on the British stage, such as John Dryden’s *Aurangzeb* from the early 1700s and Elizabeth Inchbald’s *The Mogul Tale*, which premiered in 1784.<sup>1053</sup> The association between jewels, royal splendor, and sovereignty can also be seen in images from the *Padshahnama* in which Shah Jahan receives jewels and precious stones from European courtiers, and a mural from the Ramnad Palace in which European “hat-wearers” are depicted giving pearls to the Setupati.<sup>1054</sup>

However, by the mid-eighteenth century, the association of Indian jewels and Oriental excess was no longer exclusively tied to the courtly cultures of Europe and India but instead became wrapped up in the nouveaux riches of English society.<sup>1055</sup> In the latter

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<sup>1052</sup> Sir Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of the Great Mogul, 1615-1619*, ed. William Foster (London: Hakluyt Society, 1899), 324. Note that this the passage has been updated with modern spelling for the sake of readability.

<sup>1053</sup> John Dryden, *Aurunge-Zebe; or, the Great Mogul* (London, 1704); Elizabeth Inchbald, *The Mogul Tale, or, The Descent of the Balloon* (London, 1796).

<sup>1054</sup> Schimmel and Waghmar, *Empire of the Great Mughals*; Nagaswamy, “Setupati Murals”; Subrahmanyam, *Penumbra Visions*.

<sup>1055</sup> Romita Ray, “All that Glitters: Diamonds and Construction of Nabobery in British Portraits,” in *The Uses of Excess in Visual and Material Culture, 1600-2010*, ed. Julia Skelly (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 19-40.



half of the eighteenth century, England witnessed an influx of men known as nabobs who returned to England from India with money in their pockets and political aspirations on their mind.<sup>1056</sup> For members of the establishment, nabobs represented a new breed of corruption that combined the worst aspects of mercantilist commerce with the excess and decadence of Asian despotism. In the public sphere, nabobs were the objects of fierce mockery in pamphlets, newspapers, and political cartoons.<sup>1057</sup> Political and social elites feared that Nabobs returning from India would upset the hierarchies of British society by purchasing estates and titles, entering the rarefied world of the landed gentry, seeking political office, and introducing garish tastes to the cultural world. Lord Chatham, for example, remarked on the creeping influence of nabobs: “The riches of Asia have been poured in upon us, and have brought with them not only Asiatic Luxury, but, I fear, Asiatic principles of government. Without connections, without any natural interest in the soil, the importers of foreign gold have forced their way in Parliament by such a torrent of private corruption as no hereditary fortune could resist.”<sup>1058</sup> Scholars have drawn attention to the place of diamonds, pearls, and other precious gems in the construction of nabob identity.<sup>1059</sup> Prominent members of the East India Company conspicuously displayed symbols of wealth and status upon their return to England. For instance, Robert Clive gave his wife a “new set of jewels” and the wife of Warren Hastings attended a party in 1784 wearing diamonds with an estimated value of nearly £20,000.<sup>1060</sup> The associations between the East India Company, nabobs, jewels, and corruption deepened

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<sup>1056</sup> Tillman Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>1057</sup> Nechtman, *Nabobs*; Christina Smylitopoulos, “Rewritten and Reused: Imaging the Nabob in ‘Upstart Iconography,’” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 32, no. 2 (2008): 39-59.

<sup>1058</sup> Lawson, *East India Company*, 120; Kent, *Corporate Character*, 38.

<sup>1059</sup> Ray, “All That Glitters”; Nechtman, *Nabobs*.

<sup>1060</sup> Pointon, *Brilliant Effects*, 179

in the literary sphere. For instance, Elizabeth Ryves's satirical poem *Hastiniad* (1785) seized on the association of nabob decadence, jewels, and corruption in an unflattering portrait of Hastings and his wife: "Next glitt'ring on a high rais'd car, / To catch th'admiring gaze from far, / The Dame's regalia beams sublime, / Rich spoils of many a ransack'd clime. / And costly robes all broider'd round, / With pearls in farthest India found; / Or studded, glorious to the view, / With opals of each varying hue."<sup>1061</sup>

The self-representation of nabobs in particular and East India Company employees more generally were remarkably different than the savage derision they both faced in the British public sphere.<sup>1062</sup> Take for instance a painting commissioned by the Court of Directors of the East India Company for their headquarters on Leadenhall Street in London. On the ceiling of the hall where the Revenue Committee met was an oval-shaped oil painting by Italian artist Spiridione Roma in a baroque and neo-classical style titled *The East Offering its Riches to Britannia*. Now held at the British Library, *The East Offering its Riches to Britannia* depicts an allegorical female figure representing India with pearl earrings and naked from the waist up presenting strings of pearls on a pillow to Britannia, the female embodiment of the British nation. Alongside the figure representing India is a woman dressed in stereotypical Chinese costume offering tea and pottery. A merchant ship flying the English and Company flags appears in the background and the gods Neptune and Mercury flank Britannia. This image resonates with an engraving from *The Universal British Directory of Trade and Commerce* (1751), which depicts female personifications of the four continents appearing before Lady

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<sup>1061</sup> Elizabeth Ryves, *Hastiniad, An Heroic Poem in Three Cantos* (London, 1785).

<sup>1062</sup> Ray, "All That Glitters."

Britannia. The figure representing India notably proffers Britannia a box of jewels.<sup>1063</sup> There is also the marble relief by John Michael Rysbrak titled *Britannia Receiving the Riches of the East India*, commissioned by the Company in 1728 as a chimneypiece for the East India House, which depicts Britannia receiving pearls and precious stones from allegorical female figures of Asia and Africa. The painting and relief commissioned by the East India Company bears a striking resemblance to a satirical image by William Dent, *The Wise Man of the East Making His Offering*, published in 1788. The artist depicts Hasting kneeling before George III with a gift of pearls and diamonds. George III replaces Britannia as the recipients of gifts from the East. The dress of Hastings is a visual allusion to the biblical Magi from the East who brought gifts to infant Jesus. Hasting is also kneeling before the King as if being knighted. The visual repertoire of the image brings together the symbolism of Islamicate kingship and sovereignty, as well as the royal objects and paraphernalia, note turban worn by Hastings and the jewels he is presenting to the king, which refer to the Governor-General laying claims to political power and sovereignty in India. As art historian Romita Ray writes, “Thus the caricature accentuates the former Bengal governor as the confluence of multiple fears defined by the now influential polity of nabobery, the troublesome alliance between the monarchy and the Company, and the perceived infusion of *nawabi* if not Mughal customs and taste into the upper echelons of British society.”<sup>1064</sup>

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<sup>1063</sup> *The Universal British Directory of Trade and Commerce* (London, 1751); Ray, “All That Glitters”; Pointon, *Brilliant Effects*, 41.

<sup>1064</sup> Ray, “All That Glitters,” 27.



Figure 10. “The East Offering its Riches to Britannia.” Spiridione Roma, Oil Painting on Ceiling of the East India House, London, 1778 (British Library, London).

### **Corruption and State Formation in Ceylon 1796-1802**

Whereas India continued to be governed by the East India Company until 1856-7, the early history of British Sri Lanka is marked by three distinct organizations of power: Between 1796 and 1798, the East India Company governed Ceylon from Fort St. George. In 1798, the introduction of a system of dual-control meant that the formal sovereignty was invested in the Crown while the East India Company handled most day-to-day administrative matters. In 1802, Ceylon became a colony directly administered by the British state along the same lines as the Cape of Good Hope and other overseas

possessions.<sup>1065</sup> When the East India Company incorporated Dutch Ceylon into its expanding territorial empire, officials naturally turned their attention to governance and administration in these areas. The question of corruption loomed large from the start of British rule in Ceylon. British officials depicted the Dutch VOC government as particularly rapacious and corrupt. For instance, British officials such as Henry Dundas, the Secretary of War and member of the body in charge of guiding the transition of maritime Ceylon to British rule, looked disparagingly upon Dutch management strategies. He wrote in a letter addressed to the chairmen of the East India Company that Ceylon was a “Settlement recently withdrawn from the oppressive System practised by the Dutch in the [Governance] of their Colonial Possessions, and particularly those in the Eastern World.”<sup>1066</sup> Besides the administrative structures and revenue system of Dutch Ceylon, East India Company officials also held VOC officers in low regard. In a dispatch to the Board of Directors, members of the council at Fort St. George wrote that Dutch VOC employees on the island appeared “enveloped in corrupt obscurity.”<sup>1067</sup> Modern historians have echoed British attitudes towards the administration of Dutch Ceylon. Historian P. E. Pieris, for example, wrote in his early twentieth century monograph *Ceylon and the Hollanders*, “Ceylon was treated as a convenient spot where blockheads, libertines, and bankrupts who had influence with the Directorate could easily be

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<sup>1065</sup> De Silva, *Ceylon under the British Occupation*; Mills, *Ceylon under British Rule*; De Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*; U. C. Wickremeratne, “The English East India Company and Society in the Maritime Provinces of Ceylon, 1796-1802,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1971): 139-55; Wickremeratne, *British Rule in Sri Lanka*; Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention*; Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006); Sivasundaram, *Islanded*.

<sup>1066</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 2v.

<sup>1067</sup> *Ibid.*, 176v.

dumped.”<sup>1068</sup> Reorganizing the revenue system was no small matter for officials such as Henry Dundas. He wrote, “the Settlement both under the Portuguese and the Dutch Governments has been so woefully mismanaged it will be considerable time before its Trade Agriculture and interior prosperity can be restored to that state of which it is capable.”<sup>1069</sup>

An early set of reforms to the existing revenue system came at the recommendation of Robert Andrews, the head of a committee that investigated social and economic conditions on the island. Andrews recommended that the Company Raj replace local intermediaries and revenue collectors with company-trained *amildars* and *dubashes* from Madras. Native Indians in these capacities would come to exercise political power in the coastal districts of Ceylon and participate in revenue farming. Andrews also recommended the revocation of many import and export duties, as well as the eradication of *uliyam* and *rajakariya* service requirements. Some historians have described how these reforms “affected all strata of society and every ethnic group in the population” and “provoked immediate and widespread opposition.”<sup>1070</sup> There was serious blowback to the policies, and the riots and rebellions that followed remain a particularly heated debate in the historiography of Sri Lanka. Historian Nira Wickramasinghe argues against nationalist interpretations that see this violence as a response to increased taxes and a sign of proto-nationalist consciousness. She offers a more textured reading in which shifts in

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<sup>1068</sup> P. E. Pieris, *Ceylon and the Hollanders, 1658-1796* (Tellipalai: American Ceylon Mission Press, 1918); Mills, *Ceylon Under British Rule*, 8.

<sup>1069</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 26v-27.

<sup>1070</sup> De Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*, 278.

local authority interrupted previously open channels of communication where local peasant populations had once directed grievances to the Dutch government.<sup>1071</sup>

Another concern for officials guiding the transition from Dutch to British rule of maritime Ceylon was the so-called “unity of the Indian Government.” The British state had obtained control over Dutch Ceylon with the political and military support of the East India Company in the context of the Napoleonic Wars. A central concern therefore was which British power should govern the island. Officials also had to decide whether the East India Company should rule Ceylon as part of its India government. Another option on the table was the establishment of a separate government for Ceylon under the auspices of the East India Company. A third possibility was the establishment of Ceylon as a formal colony of the British Crown. Two competing visions of empire met during these debates. Henry Dundas wanted to establish Ceylon as an official British colony under similar terms and conditions as the Cape of Good Hope. Leadership of the East India Company, however, had a different idea. The Court of Directors in London in concert with Governor-General Wellesley in Calcutta advocated for the unification of India and Ceylon under the authority of the East India Company. Wellesley took a broader regional view of the problem. He considered Ceylon, with its protected harbors and passageways, to be of vital importance for the Company to maintain its military and commercial strength.

In 1796, it was decided that the East India Company would rule Ceylon from Fort St. George. This arrangement was followed by a system of dual-rule introduced in 1798.

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<sup>1071</sup> Nira Wickramasinghe, “Many Little Revolts or One Rebellion? The Maritime Provinces of Ceylon/Sri Lanka between 1796 and 1800,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 32, no. 2 (2009): 170-88.

As Dundas wrote to the Court of Directors, “it gives me much satisfaction to announce to you my Sentiments that a System may be adopted which will obviate any legal difficulty in the Establishment of a Government, and at the same time substantially preserve that unified authority which you so strongly urged.”<sup>1072</sup> Frederic North, Earl of Guilford and son of British Prime Minister Lord North, was appointed as the first British governor of Ceylon. British officials such as Dundas and North advocated for the expansion of British power over the Ceylon trade. Dundas wrote in December 1800, “But altho [*sic*] I am of opinion that the Political Government of Ceylon should be carried on in different hands than the Government of India, I am equally of opinion that in every Commercial Point of view it ought to be held upon a footing more beneficial for the East India Company than even the Territories under their own immediate administration. Our Indian Possessions are open to the Trade of all other Nations, as well as of our own East India Company but this cannot be allowed with regard to the Trade between Ceylon and Europe.”<sup>1073</sup> He continued: “In that respect it must be held upon strict Colonial Principles and the Monopoly of its Trade must be reserved for the East India Company.”<sup>1074</sup> Dundas also referred to revenue derived from the pearl fishery and cinnamon. He wrote, “There are several smaller Articles from which a Revenue arises, but exclusive of the Pearl Fishery, the only really valuable Article of Trade, is the Cinnamon.”<sup>1075</sup> The system of dual rule ran its courses by the end of 1800, however. Dundas wrote to the Court of Directors, “when the expedient was adopted of blending together the Governments of India and Ceylon it was done upon a very superficial knowledge of the Subject and upon an

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<sup>1072</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 1v.

<sup>1073</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-8.

<sup>1074</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>1075</sup> *Ibid.*



erroneous supposition that such a measure was necessary in order to preserve the unity of our Indian Empire.”<sup>1076</sup> Dundas described how he spent “many months...reading the best informed authors upon the subject of Ceylon and by conversing with those most qualified to give me information, taken a more comprehensive view of the subject.”<sup>1077</sup> He decided to “place the Island of Ceylon upon the footing of a Royal Government and to administer its affairs upon the principles which the Government of the Cape of Good Hope is conducted.”<sup>1078</sup> Dundas found that the “junction” between the “government of the Company [and the] King’s hands [had] done no good, and [caused] a good deal of mischief.”<sup>1079</sup>

Company officials saw the pearl fisheries of India and Ceylon as a potentially lucrative source of revenue that could facilitate the expansion of Company trade and offset military expenses. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Dutch VOC officials had also recognized that profits from the pearl fishery could be used to underwrite military ventures. For instance, in 1665, shortly after the Dutch VOC defeated the Portuguese, Rijklof van Goens, Governor of Ceylon and Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, wrote: “Because when the Portuguese recover their strength they are very likely to attack this Island. That besides the protection of the Island itself attention should be paid to its revenues, derived from the pearl fishery and from dye-roots, salt, and elephants.”<sup>1080</sup> In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the East India Company faced heavy financial burdens from military campaigns against native powers such as

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<sup>1076</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 26.

<sup>1077</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1078</sup> Ibid., 26v.

<sup>1079</sup> “Henry Dundas, Private Letter to Wellesley, 11 September 1800,” in *Two Views of British India, The Private Correspondence of Mr. Dundas and Lord Wellesley, 1798-1801*, ed. Edward Ingram (Bath: Adams & Dart, 1970), 297-8.

<sup>1080</sup> Van Goens, *Memoir*, 11.

Tipu Sultan and the petty lords of the Tamil country. The Company was also engaged in military battles with its French and Dutch rivals, which further added to its financial woes. As historian Anthony Webster and others have noted, “At the time of the acquisition of the Bengal *diwani* the mood in London and Calcutta was bullishly optimistic; it was believed that Indian revenues could finance a huge expansion of the Company's trade.”<sup>1081</sup> The Company could recoup the cost of conquest through the extraction of revenue and levying of duties in newly incorporated areas. As Dundas wrote, “the first consideration...is the inexpediency of encumbering at present the Revenues of India, with the expenses of this Settlement [Ceylon].”<sup>1082</sup> The cession of Ceylon to the East India Company in 1796 was not only practical but it was also meant to compensate the East India Company for wartime expenses. The Court of Directors made this clear in a letter to Governor North: “The acquisitions may be rendered as productive as possible, in order to defray the Expenses of the military and other Establishments, which may be deemed necessary for the defence of the Island, and the due Administration of Civil Affairs.”<sup>1083</sup>

British officials believed that the pearl fishery would become an important source of revenue for the East India Company in Ceylon. However, the pearl fishery was a highly specialized industry with which the British had little or no managerial experience. As Henry Dundas wrote, “it is truly singular that notwithstanding the long possession which the Portuguese and the Dutch have successively held of the valuable Fishery we are at this Moment much in the Dark both as to the real value of and as to the best manner

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<sup>1081</sup> Anthony Webster, *The Twilight of the East India Company: The Evolution of Anglo-Asian Commerce and Politics, 1790-1860* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), 23.

<sup>1082</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 26v.

<sup>1083</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 1; *Colebrooke-Cameron Papers*, 2:87-8.

of conducting it.”<sup>1084</sup> Governor North appointed Davey Roberson and George Turnour to gather information about Portuguese and Dutch management of the pearl fishery. Robertson and Turnour compiled reports on the economic and social conditions of Ceylon and each devoted considerable attention to the pearl fisheries.<sup>1085</sup> North also employed French naturalist Eudelin de Jonville to undertake an extensive survey of the island, which resulted in an illustrated manuscript on Ceylon’s natural history, and later became the first surveyor general of British Ceylon.<sup>1086</sup> Through such appointments, North was determined to investigate the natural world of Ceylon “with a view to its future cultivation and improvement.”<sup>1087</sup> British officials also turned their attention to the organization and management of the industry. They believed that the government monopoly claimed over the industry would be an effective mechanism through which to “reduce [the pearl fishery] into such a regular train of management as to render it materially productive.”<sup>1088</sup> As Henry Dundas wrote in 1800, “It is perfectly clear that the Banks of the Fishery cannot be exposed to an indiscriminate use and possession but the Fishery must remain a Monopoly in the hands of Government to be occupied either by annual Leases or by a more extensive tenure.”<sup>1089</sup> He continued: “The Trade and Profit to be made by the Sales of Pearls in Europe or elsewhere should belong to the East India [Company] seems to me at present to be the most eligible.”<sup>1090</sup> The East India Company also asserted its monopolistic control over the buying and selling of pearls between the Asian and European markets. Whereas debates in the British public sphere exposed

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<sup>1084</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 29.

<sup>1085</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 54.

<sup>1086</sup> De Jonville, *Quelques notions sur l’Isle de Ceylan*; Barrow, *Surveying and Mapping*.

<sup>1087</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 8.

<sup>1088</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>1089</sup> *Ibid.*, 29v.

<sup>1090</sup> *Ibid.*

cracks in the edifice of mercantilism, the East India Company's monopoly over the pearl fishery and its attendant trade sat as a curious outlier.

The nature and organization of employment in the East India Company was another important matter for officials to consider. Some high-ranking members of the Company believed that talented administrators were unlikely to accept work at Colombo or one of its subordinate stations because the rank-and-file believed that there was less opportunity for promotion and fewer avenues towards personal enrichment compared to India. As Dundas remarked, "If therefore the Servants of the Company in India were to be employed as they have been in the Service of Ceylon it would be unreasonable to expect that the servants of Superior talents and capacity would wish to be employed in situations in which their prosperity would be comparatively very limited...[T]heir hearts could never warmly engage in the service of Ceylon."<sup>1091</sup> It was generally accepted that India was by far the more attractive assignment. The wages may have been low but the opportunities to amass small fortunes through private trade and gift-giving or "presents" were ample. Critics of the East India Company like Edmund Burke believed that such a climate created a breeding ground for corruption. He remarked, "emoluments...so weak [*sic*], so inadequate to the integrity of the character that it is impossible...for the subordinate parts of [the East India Company] to exist, to hope to exist...in a state of incorruption."<sup>1092</sup>

The character of government officials was an important consideration for men like Governor North. For instance, in a book on the economic and social conditions of

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<sup>1091</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 27-7v.

<sup>1092</sup> Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 6:286-7; Smith, "Moral Dimension to Corruption," 84.

British Ceylon, his personal secretary Anthony Bertolacci made an explicit connection between good governance and good governors. He wrote, “To govern those regions, able men are requisite, who have served a long apprenticeship in the science of combining the happiness and wealth of the subject with the power and prosperity of the Sovereign—men of steady and firm temper, possessing a liberal and enlarged mind, well stored with the knowledge of civil laws and polity, and as exalted as the station in which they are placed.”<sup>1093</sup> Governor North was forced by his superiors in Madras and London to fill many vacant posts in his administration with Company servants from Fort St. George. He doubted whether the training received by Madras officers was even applicable to Ceylon and he emphasized character, honor, and other such virtues. According to North, officers from Madras did not fit this profile and he wrote frequently about the chicanery and insubordination he witnessed amongst of Madras-trained administrators. For example, in a letter to a secret committee of the East India Company, North wrote, “that determined and systematic spirit of Opportunities and of Hatred, which has guided Them in all their Actions, and which has made them turn every Mark of Confidence which I have shown them, & every Authority with which I have invested them into Engines to Discredit my Person, and to thwart my Government.”<sup>1094</sup> Madras had acquired during the course of the eighteenth century the reputation of being a hotbed of corruption, the chief culprits of which were the city’s *dubashes*.<sup>1095</sup> As one Madras-based officer wrote in 1789, the city was overrun with “tribes of dubashes,” and Company employees were seen as

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<sup>1093</sup> Bertolacci, *Interests of Ceylon*, 5.

<sup>1094</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2403, 25.

<sup>1095</sup> Nield-Basu, “Dubashes of Madras.”

particularly vulnerable to the overtures of *dubashes*.<sup>1096</sup> For instance, Lord Cornwallis wrote that East India Company servants “are obliged, both from habit and necessity, to allow the management of their officials, as well as their private business, to fall into the hands of *dubashes*.”<sup>1097</sup> He described *dubashes* as “cruel instruments of rapine and extortion” who could turn “the most upright and humane intentions...perfectly useless to the interest of the company, and to the unfortunate native who happen to be within reach of their power and influence.”<sup>1098</sup> As Sanjay Subrahmanyam notes, Governor North saw the events that transpired at the 1799 pearl fishery “as a sign of the venality to be associated as a norm with Madras-trained officials,” who were “aided and abetted by Indian mercantile interests.”<sup>1099</sup>

Anxieties about the role and influence of local intermediaries led to a series of reforms to the revenue system and legal infrastructure of Company Madras in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Measures included the establishment of a new legal system and efforts to regularize land revenue, first in the form of a permanent settlement based on the Bengal model, and then the ryotwari system designed by Thomas Munro.<sup>1100</sup> These reforms were meant by and large to insulate the “public” operations of the state from “private” or “local influence” of Indian professional classes and the kin and patrimonial networks within which they traveled.<sup>1101</sup> Indeed, breaking or neutralizing preexisting professional and patrimonial bonds in the legal or administrative spheres and

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<sup>1096</sup> Innes Munro, *A Narrative of the Military Operations of the Coromandel Coast* (London: T. Bensley, 1789), 19; Nield-Basu, “Dubashes of Madras,” 2.

<sup>1097</sup> Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, 23.

<sup>1098</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1099</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 156.

<sup>1100</sup> Stein, *Sir Thomas Munro*.

<sup>1101</sup> Robert E. Frykenberg, *Guntur District, 1788-1848: A History of Local Influence and Central Authority in South India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); Raman, *Document Raj*.

the marketplace was undergirded by the principles of British liberal-utilitarianism and Whiggism. As in the case of the *cutcherry* analyzed by historian Bhavani Raman, reforms to the pearl fishery were also intended to create docile and responsible economic subjects and remove local influence. British Ceylon and the Company Raj wanted to operate on the idealized principles of modern liberal governance by limiting private influence of over public affairs. However, both Madras and Ceylon were dependent upon the local networks of knowledge, capital, and labor that they wished to abolish. Raman illustrates in *Document Raj* that one way in which this contradiction of early colonial rule was resolved came through the depiction of Indian servants and other subordinates as disreputable and untrustworthy. According to Raman, the precise moment at which the Company Raj consolidated its power in the region and expanded its administrative apparatus, “cases that portrayed cutcherry employees as embezzlers and tricksters began to come thick and fast.”<sup>1102</sup> She writes, “The condemnation of the dubashes and the rise of the Madras revenue servant did not end the lucrative tie of kin and cash at the administrative frontier.”<sup>1103</sup> Yet even as the *dubashi* system waned at the turn of the nineteenth-century it flourished in newly incorporated areas, which brought “cycles of corruption and reform and discussions of clerical deviance” to the “administrative frontiers” of places such as Ceylon.<sup>1104</sup>

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<sup>1102</sup> Raman, *Document Raj*, 43.

<sup>1103</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>1104</sup> *Ibid.*

## Corruption at the Pearl Fishery, 1796-1799

The East India Company organized four consecutive pearl fisheries in the late 1790s. These were the first full-scale pearl fisheries on either side of the Gulf of Mannar since 1768. The pearl banks had not been fished for nearly three decades because the Dutch VOC had been involved in a protracted dispute with the Nawab of Arcot over the rights and revenue to the industry. However, shortly before the turn of the nineteenth century, at the end of this four-year period, a large volume of documents arrived to the desk of a London barrister. As Sanjay Subrahmanyam writes, “the corruption investigation... has the characteristic flavour of such enquiries in the period, revealing a sub-stratum of suitably Machiavellian ‘native interests’ which manipulated the Commissioners and in fact covertly controlled the entire operation.”<sup>1105</sup> The reality of the situation was far more complicated. Henry Smith, solicitor for the East India Company, was recruited by Governor North and appointed by the Court of Directors to issue a legal opinion on a complicated case. Three superintendents of the pearl fishery faced charges of corruption and Smith received a dossier that contained a wide range of materials. From official correspondence and revenue reports to private papers and transcripts of depositions, Smith assumed the role of an armchair barrister. The nature of the materials and the *modus operandi* of the investigation further complicated Smith’s assignment. For example, the investigators questioned Tamil-speaking and Sinhala-speaking witnesses with assistance from language interpreters, the transcripts from which government clerks excerpted. Company officials in Madras and Colombo selected documents from local records offices to include in the dossier and therefore many documents of interest to

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<sup>1105</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 156.



present-day historians never reached London. After he “endeavoured to see how far Mr. Cleghorn, Mr. Macdowal or Lieutenant Turnour are implicated as Parties to the [Offences],” Smith determined that “the depositions of the Witnesses” and “the Documents produced before the Commissioners put it beyond a doubt that the grossest frauds, abuses and corruption and even theft were committed at the Fishery of 1799.”<sup>1106</sup>

A striking feature of the investigation is the litany of acts that became subsumed under the categories of “frauds, abuses and corruption.” The salient statute was of the East India Company’s code was “33 Gov. 3<sup>rd</sup> Cap. 52 Sec. 65,” which referred to “any willful breach of trust & duty of any officers or Servants of the Company in the East Indies.”<sup>1107</sup> Solicitor Smith enumerated no less than twelve charges against the superintendents at the beginning of his report: First, Cleghorn and Turnour did not faithfully represent the state of the pearl oyster beds and failed to report and deliver pearls collected during the examination to the proper authorities. Second, the superintendents did not accurately record the number of oysters collected during the assaying process. Third, the most valuable pearls collected by government-employed boats disappeared on the watch of the commissioners. Fourth, Cleghorn stole pearls from one of the warehouses for his private use. Fifth, the superintendents brought only 86 ½ lbs. of pearls to account when government’s share of oysters should have produced 188 ½ lbs. of pearls. Sixth, that “Bribery, Corruption and Extortion” were rife during the sale of boats and leasing of shops. Seventh, a parcel of pearls was sold for P 800 but the Company only received credit for P 550. Eighth, the amount collected from sea customs was less than what appeared on the accounts submitted by the superintendents. Ninth,

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<sup>1106</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 113.

<sup>1107</sup> Ibid., 116v.

finer levied and goods confiscated were not properly registered. Tenth, the statement of charges accrued during the preparation and management of the pearl fishery was more than the actual costs. Eleventh, a set of “false accounts” meant “to deceive Government were fabricated and rendered.” Twelfth, and lastly, the commissioners had “delegated the whole of their very extensive Authority to a Common Dubash” and closed the lines of communication between themselves and the “speculators” that assembled at the pearl fishery.<sup>1108</sup>

Despite the mountain of evidence before him, Smith was not fully confident in his ability to undertake a comprehensive investigation. He wrote, “I apprehend the Evidence will not be thought sufficiently creditable to ground upon it any positive charge of corruption against the Superintendents.”<sup>1109</sup> A source of his doubt stemmed from the fact that much of the information related to the alleged frauds and corruption came from the testimony of Narayana, a person which Smith described as a “common dubash.” Narayana served as the cash-keeper and supervisor of the government’s storehouses during the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu. Smith and other Company officials doubted the veracity of his statement. Not only was his testimony self-incriminating but it also appears to have been made under some duress. Governor North had issued a warrant for the arrest of his father, Jagannath Nayak, and ordered Company agents to confiscate documents in his possession related to the pearl fishery. Narayana, Jagannath Nayak, and other persons of interest were arrested and extradited to Colombo, where, according to reports, Narayana was kept in “iron to force him to confess.”<sup>1110</sup> According to a report,

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<sup>1108</sup> Ibid., 113-3v.

<sup>1109</sup> Ibid., 116v.

<sup>1110</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 205.

“examination [of Narayana] might have thrown much light on many dark and nefarious transactions which took place in the various branches of the Fishery.”<sup>1111</sup>

Governor North portrayed Ceylon as a resource-rich island in dispatches to London. He described rich pearl banks and fragrant cinnamon groves and maintained that proper management could turn Ceylon from a moribund Dutch colony into a prosperous British territory. North maintained that the Dutch had mismanaged the natural resources of Ceylon and the reforms of Robert Andrews had not improved the situation. He wrote, “Altho on my arrival on this Island I did not know so well as I now do, how full of Corruption and Iniquity the System of Government had been.”<sup>1112</sup> North arrived to the island to find a financially strapped government and he made it his prerogative to turn Ceylon from a liability to an asset. He asked the Court of Directors to delay in forming an opinion about the “pecuniary advantage” of Ceylon. He wrote, “I have arrived to an empty Treasury, an insisting Country, and resisting Population, probably neither the Pearl Fishery, nor the Cinnamon Investment of the two next years, will be so complete and productive...as they have been since our possession of the Island.”<sup>1113</sup> Company officials in London responded favorably to North’s initiative and asked him to form an exact view of the natural resources and revenue prospects of the island.

The status of Ceylon was ambiguous during the Anglo-French Wars at the end of the eighteenth century. Neither Dutch or British officials knew for certain whether the island would be returned to Holland at the conclusion of the conflict. It was entirely possible that the East India Company would possess Ceylon for only a short period.

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<sup>1111</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 208.

<sup>1112</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2403, 22.

<sup>1113</sup> *Ibid.*

Company officials were therefore eager to draw the greatest possible revenue from the pearl fisheries while Ceylon was under its control. In a report on the economic and social conditions of Ceylon, British official Davey Roberson wrote, “From the uncertainty of future possession, it has been judged adviseable [*sic*] to draw the greatest possible revenue from the [Pearl] Banks while in [our] possession.”<sup>1114</sup> The Company organized three consecutive pearl fisheries (1796-1798) under the direction of Robert Andrews. Fresh from his recent success as ambassador to the Kandyan Court, and with the relevant experience as former resident and superintendent of revenue, Andrews was the natural choice to oversee the first full-scale fishery under British management. He conducted the preliminary examinations of the banks and decided that the pearl oyster population was sufficient to admit a fishery each season. He was also responsible for giving passports to boats, delivering boats and divers to merchants, ensuring that pearling fleets stayed within demarcated boundaries, and protecting the compound from raiders.

Although the initial focus of the committee was the 1799 pearl fishery, the investigation became a dragnet that reviewed nearly all of the documents related to the pearl fishery in possession of Madras and Ceylon. The widened scope of the investigation not only brought the conduct of Andrews as superintendent under suspicion but it also threw the integrity of the entire pearling industry into question. The investigation found that under his watch nearly twice the number of boats registered by the Company had launched from the fishery compound to the pearl banks. The terms of the renter’s contract permitted only one hundred and fifty boats per day but some witnesses testified that some days upwards of four hundred to five hundred boats fished. These were extraordinarily

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<sup>1114</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 54.

high numbers even for the most robust fishery. Anywhere between 12,000 and 15,000 boats could have fished the banks over a thirty-day period even though the account books registered only 5036 boats in 1797 and 4474 boats in 1798. Officials estimated that allowing the extra boats to fish without payment “must have amounted at the very least to upwards of five lacs of Pagodas.”<sup>1115</sup> Andrews fought against these charges tooth and nail. One particularly hard fought battle he won was the right to review the multi-volume dossier. He read and annotated these documents and his marginalia along with other writings provide insight into the logic of his defense. In a letter to Lord Clive in Madras, for example, Andrews wrote, “I now stand accus’d of malpractices, the result of which I trust will be such as to induce your Lordship and His Excellency to acquit me of all dishonorable Conduct and to restore me that Character and Confidence, which I have hitherto sustained unblemish’d for the space of twenty four [*sic*] years in the service of the Honble. Company.”<sup>1116</sup> At stake for Andrews was not only his employment and material well-being but also his “character and confidence.” High-ranking officials similarly remarked that Andrews’s reputation was in jeopardy. Lord Clive, for example, in a somewhat lukewarm defense of Andrews, called for an expedient resolution to the case, emphasizing that it “so deeply affects his fame and Interest.”<sup>1117</sup> Clive relayed these sentiments to his counterpart in Colombo. He wrote to Governor North, “We are induced to hope, by every motive connected with the honor of the British administration of India,

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<sup>1115</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 42.

<sup>1116</sup> *Ibid.*, 154v.

<sup>1117</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2399, 73.

that Mr. Andrews may be able to relive his Character from the imputation of fraud so public and extensive.”<sup>1118</sup>

The list of people that gave testimony to the special committee ranged from the elite merchant classes to low-level laborers and divers through Europeans employed by the Company. In his review of the dossier, Henry Smith found no reason to doubt the sincerity of the witnesses, an attitude that contradicted feelings that many had towards native Indians in British colonial legal culture. Smith wrote, “None of the witnesses appear to be of bad or doubtful Characters, or to have been themselves (with exception of [the Renter]) Parties to any Fraud, or to be actuated by any Malice against Mr. Andrews, or to have had an Interest to misrepresent the facts they stated.”<sup>1119</sup> Daniel Roderigo, a Tamil Parava who served as the chief pilot during the pearl fisheries of 1797 and 1798, was one of the most important witnesses. Roderigo emphasized his experience and knowledge of the industry by saying that he had “been brought as a Pilot on the Pearl banks from my Infancy and employed in that way for forty years.”<sup>1120</sup> The crux of Roderigo’s testimony contradicted many of the official accounts submitted by Andrews. He testified that upwards of four hundred and fifty to five hundred boats were active at the pearl fishery in 1797 despite having recommended to Andrews that only one hundred and twenty to one hundred and fifty boats be permitted. Roderigo remarked, “he knew [the number of boats] perfectly well as none could go without his permit it was the general opinion that by allowing so many Boats to fish, the Banks would be exhausted

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<sup>1118</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>1119</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 44v.

<sup>1120</sup> Ibid., 120.

and ruined.”<sup>1121</sup> Roderigo further claimed to know these figures because he had employed one of the shark-charmers to count the boats that were left behind on shore each day.<sup>1122</sup> The shark-charmer and Roderigo reportedly kept these accounts in a private logbook that never found its way before the committee. Despite the fastidiousness with which Roderigo saw to his duties, and notwithstanding the veteran status he enjoyed after four decades of work at the pearl fishery, some committee members questioned the motivation of his testimony. On the one hand, Roderigo had an incentive to accurately count the number of boats because he received a single payment of one pagoda from each boat and a daily payment of five oysters from each boat. On the other hand, the committee surmised that it was also in Roderigo’s best interest to inflate the boat tally because he would receive a larger reward. It also appears that Roderigo received P 100 from the renter but no such *baksheesh* from Andrews, which aroused suspicion that he was motivated purely by revenge, intent on ruining superintendent’s reputation because he was stingy with his tips.<sup>1123</sup>

Other testimonies shed light on the intrigue at the pearl fishery. A certain Naga Mudaliar, for instance, corroborated the account of Roderigo. Naga Mudaliar’s duties at the pearl fisheries are not known but it appears that he was employed by the East India Company to be an *arripar* or officer in 1798 and was present at the examination of pearl fishery in 1797. He arrived ten-days late to the pearl fishery because he was in Jaffna attending to an undisclosed matter, but he sent a person to Arippu on the condition that they would split any profits from the job. After his arrival, for some unknown reason,

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<sup>1121</sup> Ibid., 42v.

<sup>1122</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53.

<sup>1123</sup> Ibid., 42v.

Naga Mudaliar started to count the boats. According to his testimony, Naga Mudaliar counted at least 500 boats, more than three times the official number submitted by Andrews. The fact that he counted the number of boats for no other reason than his own interest was a highly dubious motive in the eyes of the investigators. Henry Smith looked askance at his testimony: “[I did] not pay much attention to his Account. As I do not think the account which a Man took merely for his amusement without any useful purpose to be answered.”<sup>1124</sup> During a second round of testimony, Naga Mudaliar reportedly submitted a statement and account in Tamil on a palm-leaf written in his own hand. The numbers corresponded roughly to the statement of Roderigo. While the committee had no reservations about the legitimacy of the palm-leaf account, Andrews questioned its authenticity and inferred that it was evidence of a conspiracy.<sup>1125</sup>

The testimonies of Daniel Roderigo and Naga Mudaliar brought many issues to light but they were marginal figures compared to the renters. In 1797 and 1798, Vydelinga Chetti and his son Kundappah received the rent of the pearl fisheries. Vydelinga Chetti and Kundappah Chetti were two members of a prominent Tamil mercantile family from Jaffna who became thorns in the side of the Ceylon government in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Vydelinga and Kundappah rented one hundred and fifty boats for thirty days for a total of PNP 277,000. The grant or *cowle* also contained a clause that if the boats did not fish a certain number of oysters then the renters were owed a proportionate remission. Testimony after testimony implicated both father and son at the center of controversy that had engulfed the pearl fishery. For example, a certain merchant named Sivalingam Chetti testified at a temple in Nellore on

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<sup>1124</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>1125</sup> Ibid.



November 22, 1800 that his father Muthu Chetti had partnered with Vydelinga and Kundappah for the rent of the 1797 and 1798 pearl fisheries. According to the terms of the partnership, Muthu Chetti contributed one-eighth of the rent in 1797 and one-fourth of the rent in 1798. Muthu Chetti was the brother of Vydelinga and Sivalingam's testimony is replete with salacious details about backbiting and underhanded dealings amongst family members. Sivalingam, for example, fell out of favor with his father after he complained about the quality of divers that came equipped with the boats he purchased at the pearl fishery. Muthu Chetti was also on bad terms with his brother Vydelinga and his youngest son, Gopaul. Though Sivalingam reported that he never spoke with his uncle Vydelinga at the pearl fishery, he testified that he overheard him talking about the pearl fishery one day when he passed by his home, though he was unable to make out the content of the conversation.<sup>1126</sup> Compelled by Governor North's aggressive interrogation, Sivalingam remarked, "It was said they have made a great deal of Money." To which North barked, "Does he know nothing of his own knowledge what did he think people meant by making Money the wrong way was it giving bribes to the Gentlemen."<sup>1127</sup>

The testimony of Abdul Cader Saib, the patriarch of a prominent Maraikkayar family from Kilakkarai, is also noteworthy. He and other members of his family regularly attended pearl fisheries and made sizable offers for the rents of both the pearl and chank fisheries on numerous occasions. Abdul Cader Saib appeared before the commission at Jaffna on December 8, 1800. He reported that Vydelinga Chetti had approached him with a proposition to recruit "4 principal [*sic*] men with himself" to testify before the government commission. Vydelinga Chetti wanted him to testify that there were no more

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<sup>1126</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 138v.

<sup>1127</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

than two hundred boats at the pearl fisheries in 1797 and 1798. Vydelinga Chetti informed Abdul Cader Saib that the chief pilot Daniel Roderigo observed more than four hundred boats though it was known amongst those that attended only one hundred and fifty were authorized to fish. In exchange for his testimony and efforts to mobilize four other men, Vydelinga Chetti would give Abdul Cader Saib a cash payment of P 500. Abdul Cader Saib returned with two other individuals to whom Vydelinga Chetti made the same offer. But he had a change of heart. Abdul Cader Saib remarked that a certain Nagalingam Pillai had “told him that it was not proper to give false evidence however he was sent for three times the last time he went and gave Vydelinga a positive Answer that he would not interfere in that Business.”<sup>1128</sup>

### **Corruption at the Pearl Fishery of 1799**

After three consecutive fisheries, the prospect of organizing a pearl fishery in 1799 was an open if not daunting question for Company officials in Madras and Ceylon. According to some preliminary reports, the resource was stretched thin and it was not known whether the oyster populations could support another season of intensive pearling. Examinations helped officials reach a different conclusion. The results of an examination determined that certain areas had “escaped the general rapacity and which may be dragged next February with every appearance of profit.”<sup>1129</sup> In advance of the 1799 pearl fishery at Arippu, Governor North appointed Hugh Cleghorn, George Turnour, and John McDowall as superintendents. Cleghorn had written to Henry Dundas with some doubt

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<sup>1128</sup> Ibid., 140-40v.

<sup>1129</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 188.

about the short-term viability of the industry, remarking that the “Pearl Fishery would for several years be altogether unproductive.”<sup>1130</sup> Private letters between Cleghorn and Turnour contain a more optimistic tone. For instance, before he arrived to Ceylon, Cleghorn wrote to Turnour from Bombay and asked for a report on the economic and social conditions of the maritime provinces of Ceylon that the East India Company had recently annexed. Turnour had undertaken an extensive survey of the island and paid special attention to the pearling industry. He sent “many papers concerning the Pearl Fishery” to Cleghorn in Bombay.<sup>1131</sup> Cleghorn reviewed these documents and determined without “a doubt that the Banks may be fished this season with every appearance of success.”<sup>1132</sup> A few months later, however, the superintendents informed Governor North at the close of the season that the pearl fishery failed to meet expectations. They wrote, “our success when compared with the splendid profit of former years may appear inconsiderable but your Excellency will have the goodness to recollect that we have only had the gleanings of former harvests.”<sup>1133</sup>

In January 1799, Governor North provided Cleghorn, Turnour, and McDowall with detailed instructions about how to undertake preparations for the pearl fishery. McDowall was the first person to arrive at Arippu, dispatched by North to start gathering labor and supplies for the construction of the compound. He hired local labor to assist with the process. McDowall was told by North to “employ natives of this Island that may learn the Conduct of the Fishery.”<sup>1134</sup> North also instructed McDowall to construct warehouses for washing and storing oysters, prepare the layout for the bazaar, and find a

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<sup>1130</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 188.

<sup>1131</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53.

<sup>1132</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 188.

<sup>1133</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 73.

<sup>1134</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 212.

suitable renter for the sale of arrack. He wrote: “You will farm all the shops of Bangsalls by public outcry, leaving open spaces where necessary for persons to sell Provisions in [stalls] on whom no Tax shall be levied, but a Register should be kept of them.”<sup>1135</sup> North told the superintendents that they “should exercise over the Fishery itself and the persons coming to it, and employed in it, the fullest and most completed authority.”<sup>1136</sup> Indeed, Governor North invested the superintendents with much authority over the persons and affairs at the pearl fishery. Turnour came from a military background and North awarded him all the pretensions befitting an officer. He wrote, “take the Command of all the Troops sent to Aripo” and enjoy “the same Military honour both in Respect their Habitations and their Persons” that the superintendents of the previous year received.<sup>1137</sup>

There were a number of problems that impacted the pearl fishery at Arippu in 1799. The commissioners informed Governor North that environmental conditions such as strong winds and boisterous seas prevented boats from sailing to the pearl oyster banks. According to a dispatch from Arippu, “The wind has been entirely contrary for some days part, and consequently no Fishing has taken place, and even during many of the latter Days that the Boats did get to the Banks, the quantity of Oysters taken was so small, as to leave no encouragement to the Divers and Boatmen to make the necessary exertions.”<sup>1138</sup> The pearl fishery of 1799 was also delayed for nearly two weeks because the divers and boatmen were dilatory in their arrival to Arippu, which caused a temporary labor shortage. Other problems included a lack of specie, an insufficient number of troops to guard the camp and fishery grounds, and the need for an on-site medical professional.

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<sup>1135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1136</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 255.

<sup>1137</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>1138</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 59.

There was also low turnout. Many of the officials attributed the relatively small number of merchants at the pearl fishery to wars in peninsular India, which made travel between the island and mainland unsafe. As Governor North wrote to the Court of Directors in London, “At the beginning of the Fishery, the Commissioners finding the few Speculators whom the Circumstances of the [War] had allowed to resort to Arrippo, avers from entering into any deep and dangerous Speculation.”<sup>1139</sup> A low supply of basic provisions such as rice and liquor added to the general climate of insecurity. British officials feared that there would not be enough grain to feed the four hundred thousand people that they estimated would attend the pearl fishery. Governor North, for example, wrote to Lord Clive in Madras, “I lose no time in calling your attention to the Situation of the immense multitude which will shortly be assembled at Arrippo for the Pearl Fishery as their probable number is estimated near four hundred Thousand.”<sup>1140</sup> John McDowall was in charge of the rice supply and he warned Governor North that a terrible famine was on the horizon. He wrote, “The important object of securing a sufficient supply from the immense Crowd of Speculators who assemble at the Fishery and my anxiety to ensure the due Collection of so important a Branch of the Revenue will I trust appear to your Excellency a sufficient cause.”<sup>1141</sup> The problem, however, was that Madras had placed an embargo on rice exports due to famine in its own countryside, so it was difficult for North and his commissioners to gather a supply of rice that would satisfy demand. As most of the rice for the Ceylon market came from southern India, the organizers of the pearl fishery were dependent upon shipments from the mainland. As Governor North wrote to Lord Clive, “As they can draw no one article of Provision from this Island I

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<sup>1139</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 11.

<sup>1140</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 184.

<sup>1141</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

most earnestly request your Lordship in case the prohibition should be general to order your resident at Nagore to Ship and Consign to Mr. McDowall Collector at Aripo on account of this Government such a quantity of Rice as maybe adequate to the demands of that Population for two months or at least as much as you can spare.”<sup>1142</sup> North cobbled together bags of rice from various ports and towns in the region. For instance, he requested three to five thousand bags of rice from the commissioner of Cochin, found room for four hundred bags on one ship and fifteen hundred bags on another one set for Ceylon. North bought fifteen hundred bags rice from a local grain merchant, Sekupati Maraikkayar. The merchant had expressed interest in speculating at the pearl fishery with his profits, so the commissioners were instructed to pay him in a currency that would suit that purpose. North instructed the commissioners to pay him with bills they had on hand, but if no money was available, the commissioners could secure RD 25,000 from the collector at Jaffna. When McDowall received the shipment he noted that there had been “great wastage” at Arippu and found that large quantities of rice had already been discharged to troops and laborers stationed at Kondachi and Calpetyn.<sup>1143</sup> He added that “one of the Chests of Wine for the Hospital of Trincomale” had been broken open in Kondachi and “many Bottles taken from it.”<sup>1144</sup>

During their assignment at Arippu, the commissioners believed that local merchants at the pearl fishery engaged in highly manipulative and dishonest forms of behavior. British officials witnessed various practices that they described as bribery, embezzlement, and the falsification of accounts. For instance, Cleghorn wrote, “the sums

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<sup>1142</sup> Ibid., 183-4.

<sup>1143</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2402, 174.

<sup>1144</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 230.

of money which have been offered me in this miserable district, to continue occupants in their offices, exceeds [*sic*] belief.”<sup>1145</sup> It appears that Cleghorn described a practice in which a local man of standing offered money and goods in exchange for an appointment as an officer at the pearl fishery. As early as December of 1798, Cleghorn had written to Governor North to gripe about such pay-to-play tactics. Cleghorn reported that the go-between of a local *amildar* offered him P 2,000. Cleghorn agreed to meet the messenger’s employer and requested that he bring the promised money to the rendezvous point. In a trade for cash, Cleghorn would give the *amildar* an official document bearing the governor’s signature that could be exchanged for a formal appointment at the pearl fishery. Cleghorn apprised Governor North of the situation: “Whatever letter I may judge it expedient to give him to you...you will know how to appreciate it and if he presents it in person before my arrival at Colombo, you will determine whether he ought to be secured.”<sup>1146</sup> In another instance Muthu Chetti—the brother of Vydelinga Chetti and uncle of Kundappah Chetti—sent a letter to Cleghorn requesting that the superintendents appoint one of his confidants to the position and manager and cash keeper of the fishery. The letter read, “Yourself and Mr. Turnour can undoubtedly get an advantage of about 20,000 Pagodas besides your commission.”<sup>1147</sup>

The superintendents wrote to Governor North in February 1799 shortly before the start of the pearl fishery with their plan to “render the produce of the Fishery as beneficial as possible to Government.”<sup>1148</sup> The primary strategy employed by Cleghorn, Turnour, and McDowall was to increase demand for boats by limiting the number of boats for sale.

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<sup>1145</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 189.

<sup>1146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1148</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 315.

As the commissioners wrote to Governor North, “We have judged it advisable among other resolutions, to limit the number of Boats, to be employed at the ensuing Fishery, that the adventurers knowing with certainly what proportion of the whole may be considered as the property of each Individual may thereby be encouraged to speculate with more Confidence.”<sup>1149</sup> Once the event was underway, however, the superintendents decided to expand the number of boats from one hundred and fifty to three hundred and fifty. This decision seemingly ran counter to reports sent by the superintendents from the fishery camp that contained alarmist anecdotes about inclement weather, food shortages, and stagnant markets. Governor North nevertheless approved of the increase in the number of boats because he believed it would reduce the likelihood of clandestine fishing. He wrote, “Since so great a concourse of Boats are assembled, it is no doubt very probable that if they were prevented from Acting openly, they might Fish fraudulently.”<sup>1150</sup> Yet the decision to increase the number of boats for auction became overshadowed by the overall low demand and price of pearls and oysters. The commissioners believed that a cabal of merchants colluded to keep the price of boats low. Writing to Governor North from Arippu, the commissioners remarked, “it is possible from a Combination of Bidders, or from some other cause, the price offered for Boats towards the end of the Sale may fall below their full value.”<sup>1151</sup> This “combination of bidders” referred to by the superintendents appear to have artificially deflated the price of boats, which could have negatively impacted the revenue return for the East India Company. In an effort to minimize the loss and crackdown on the scheme, the superintendents decided to purchase boats on account of the East India Company.

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<sup>1149</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2401, 315-6.

<sup>1150</sup> Ibid., 322-3.

<sup>1151</sup> Ibid., 316.



Cleghorn, Turnour, and McDowall wanted to avail themselves of the “power of purchasing some Boat per Government to prevent the price being Commanded by a few Monopolist Exporters.”<sup>1152</sup> The superintendents continued in a letter to Governor North: “We could not however any Instance exceed the Sum of PNP 1200 per each Boat, and we thought ourselves perfectly justified in doing so as the specimen from the Banks during the two last days fishing has been sufficiently favorable.”<sup>1153</sup> Purchasing boats on account of the government would stimulate the market and break up the clique of merchants who they believed were responsible for deflating boat prices. They recognized, of course, that this plan was fraught with risk. The commissioners wrote to Governor North, “we will exert ourselves to obtain for [Government] every possible advantage from the undertaking tho’ at the same time we will endeavour to dispose of [them] as soon as an opportunity offers, at a price [if] possible not less these that at which they have been purchased.”<sup>1154</sup>

Despite efforts by the commissioners to stoke demand by increasing and decreasing the number of boats for sale and purchasing boats with government funds, activity in the marketplace remained rather weak. The commissioners responded by offering select merchants certain concessions to purchase large clusters of boats. The superintendents meant to splinter the “combination of bidders” that they believed were manipulating the market for boats. As they wrote to Governor North, “the effects of the combination then alluded to amongst the Principal Bidders have daily become more apparent and have compelled us to take the strong measure of suspending the sale in the

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<sup>1152</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 31.

<sup>1153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1154</sup> Ibid., 31-2.

hope of detaching one or more of the most wealthy by offering them a credit or some other Indulgent to stand forward as great speculators.”<sup>1155</sup> One of the merchants they hoped to put forward as a “great speculator” was perhaps the most influential and powerful individual at the pearl fishery, Vydelinga Chetti. The commissioners approached the Jaffna merchant and proposed that he purchase one hundred boats. Vydelinga Chetti initially accepted the plan but then reneged on his promise because he was reportedly “actuated by the general alarm occasioned by the want of success in the Boats employed.”<sup>1156</sup> After Vydelinga Chetti backed out of the agreement, a relative, Ram Nayak of Thanjavur, came forward and offered Kundappah Chetti as his guarantor. The key clause in these proposals concerned the number of oysters that each boat fished per day. The merchants wanted to include a provision in the contract that stipulated each boat must fish at least 4000 oysters per day. When neither Vydelinga Chetti nor Ram Nayak agreed to accept the offer, the commissioners instead threatened a total government takeover of the fishery. They wrote, “we gave out that it was a resolution to fish all the boats upon hand, for the benefit of Government. By appropriating Public Banksalls, and by increasing the Number of Peons and guards the Merchants were convinced that we were resolved to carry this plan into effect.”<sup>1157</sup> Once the commissioners recognized that this saddled the Company with even greater risk, and incidentally increased the chances of “fraud” and “embezzlement,” they returned to Vydelinga Chetti. In a letter to Governor North, the commissioners wrote: “To the chance of profit is to be opposed the probability of neglect and the certainty of embezzlement. And the moment we conceived ourselves at liberty to abandon this Project will prospect

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<sup>1155</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>1156</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>1157</sup> Ibid., 43.

of advantage to the Public we did not hesitate a moment to relinquish a system whose Management was attended with so much risk to Government.”<sup>1158</sup> The two parties modified the terms of the contract so that Vydelinga Chetti became eligible for a proportionate remission if a boat did not fish at least 5000 oysters per day.

The commissioners circulated advertisements through the bazaar that notified the merchants about the sale of boats at public auction. The first advertisement set the criteria of a remission at a minimum of 5000 oysters per boat per day. The second advertisement was more generous and offered boat-owners a remission if the divers fished less than 4000 oysters per boat per day. These were not arbitrary figures but based upon records from previous fisheries. The pearl fishery of 1797 saw each boat fish an average of 8000 oysters while boats at the 1798 fishery brought up an average of 6000 oysters per day. It was this decision by the commissioners to modify the advertisement and extend remissions that would be their undoing. A low yield of oysters resulted in the government being faced with numerous remissions claims from merchants. Moreover, due to various problems merchants faced accessing credit during the pearl fishery, many of the boats had been purchased with cash instead of letters of credit or draft notes, which made it difficult for the commissioners and their agents to track the transactions. The money advanced to the commissioners was “partly sent to [Governor North] & partly sent to the Supreme Government,” which meant that it was no longer available on site for the commissioners to include as remission payments.<sup>1159</sup> The commissioners sent numerous letters to officials including Governor North, Lieutenant Governor Josias Champagne, and Lord Mornington, the Governor-General in Council at Fort St. George, requesting

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<sup>1158</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>1159</sup> Ibid., 64.

that the government issue merchants draft notes to these merchants as a form of repayment. For instance, in a letter to Lieutenant Governor Josias Champagne in Colombo, the commissioners wrote, “this Circumstance may lay us under the unavoidable necessity of requesting you to grant us to different Individuals now here, Bills on the Supreme Government to pay them the balance of their Respective Deposits.”<sup>1160</sup> They also included a list of all the persons to whom the government owed money along with the requested amounts.<sup>1161</sup> The commissioners received a letter from the government secretary in Colombo a few days later with the bills and instructions “to deliver to the persons in whose favor they are Drawn in payment of the balance of their respective Deposits.”<sup>1162</sup> This matter of remission payments in the form of government-issued bills came to haunt Cleghorn, Turnour, and McDowall because investigators alleged that money went missing during the flurry of exchanges.

There were also questions about record keeping practices at the pearl fishery. Cleghorn, Turnour, and McDowall believed that the boat owners had intentionally underreported the number of oysters fished by each boat. They reported to Governor North from Arippu that “a great proportion of the Boat holders did not give in a fair return of the number of Oysters delivered by their Boat at their respective Banksalls.”<sup>1163</sup> This not only “exposed Government to a certain and unavoidable defalcation of the expected Revenue” but it also “augmented that defalcation by fraud.”<sup>1164</sup> The motivation, according to the superintendents, was to augment the case for a remission payment by reducing the reported number of oysters all while keeping the pearls and oysters from

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<sup>1160</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>1161</sup> Ibid., 75v.

<sup>1162</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>1163</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>1164</sup> Ibid.

each boat. As the commissioners wrote, “We believed that the Boatholder, with very few exceptions are Guilty of Gross misrepresentations in the Accounts they delivered of the quantity of Oysters brought by their respective boats.”<sup>1165</sup> The commissioners claimed that their response to the boat owners “was calculated solely to prevent the Company from suffering a defalcation of Revenue by a fraud.”<sup>1166</sup> Not all of the boat owners engaged in such acts, according to the superintendents. The alleged frauds and misrepresentations were “universally acknowledged by the honest boatholders.”<sup>1167</sup> Vydelinga Chetti and Kundappah Chetti were at the center of intrigue at the pearl fishery again. According to the investigation, the boat holders were under the thumb of Vydelinga Chetti and Kundappah Chetti, who misled the superintendents and their agents about the number of oysters that were fished in order to bolster remissions claims. Yet there was no evidence to support such claims. Governor North lamented that it was difficult to prove their direct involvement with the scheme: “That the Renter connived at his abuse and received advantage from it I can not pretend to aver, the Difficulty of Preventing it I have already mentioned, and the immense Profit which he received from the Enterprise though it may be generally suspected, cannot easily be known and can never be made a Positive Proof any Direct Infringement of his Contract.”<sup>1168</sup>

Another issue that riled Governor North was the late submission of the account books. Governor North had already grown suspicious that something strange was afoot when he had not received the pearl fishery accounts in July, two months after the close of the fishery. This was not only a sign of misconduct to North but it also impacted his own

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<sup>1165</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 135.

<sup>1166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1168</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 6.

duties because he could not submit reports on the pearl fishery to London. Transport between Colombo and London was infrequent, which meant North needed to review and copy all the pertinent documents in time before the next ship disembarked. He tried to compel John McDowall to expedite the accounts to no avail. One problem was that the superintendents had not received sufficient instructions on how to reconcile 86 ½ lbs. of pearls fished with government funds. Nor had the pearls been properly valued, which made it a challenge to reckon the final accounts. It was also reported that there should have been 188 lbs. of pearls on the government account, which the governor and other officials in his administration took as positive proof that the produce disappeared. As Deputy Governor Josias Champagne wrote to the superintendents, “These pearls form the subject of an after account, but I cannot see how their not being immediately sold or value, can hinder the Commissioners from making their accounts in the manner now required of them.”<sup>1169</sup> When McDowall finally delivered the accounts to Colombo, the governor and his deputy both remarked on “the principal inaccuracies and informalities of those documents.”<sup>1170</sup> Aside from McDowall’s late submission of the accounts, the missing pearls were also the subject of an investigation into the conduct of Cleghorn and Turnour, as they had reportedly skimmed a few pearls for personal use. In his report, Company solicitor Henry Smith wrote that Cleghorn and Turnour “admit to the fact and state they that they looked upon [the pearls] as a perquisite out of which they defrayed certain expences [*sic*].”<sup>1171</sup> While the overall value of the pearls was a drop in the bucket compared to other forms of defalcation that the government reportedly experienced,

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<sup>1169</sup> Ibid., 141-2.

<sup>1170</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>1171</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 217.

allegations of petty theft hurled at the superintendents lent more credence to the belief that the pearling industry was morally and ethically compromised.

At first, Governor North defended the conduct of Cleghorn, Turnour, and McDowall in communications with his superiors in Fort St. George and London. The most commonly cited factors for the disappointing results of the pearl fishery were low yields of oysters and pearls due to overexploitation at the preceding fisheries and a general climate of insecurity caused by war in the region. With regard to the decision of the superintendents to grant remissions to merchants, Governor North was ambivalent. On the one hand, he shielded Cleghorn, Turnour, and McDowall from formal censure. On the other hand, he acknowledged that the decision to extend remissions to the merchants that purchased boats was ill-advised. As North wrote to Fort St. George, “I hope [you will] not be inclined to blame the Commissioners for having at the end of the Fishery acted against words and sense of their own Proclamation.”<sup>1172</sup> To be sure, North was displeased with the decision of the superintendents to reduce the number of oysters that made merchants eligible for remissions. But he also wanted the Madras government to honor such requests and return the money owed to pearl merchants and boat purchasers. He saw this as a necessary concession to preserve the “credit and good faith” of the Ceylon government amongst the mercantile communities that gathered at the pearl fishery each season.<sup>1173</sup>

North changed course as more information came to light. He launched salvo after salvo, attacks that culminated in the formation of the committee of inquiry that ultimately

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<sup>1172</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 96.

<sup>1173</sup> Ibid.

led to reprimand and suspension of the superintendents. Governor North directed much of his frustration and resentment towards McDowall. McDowall was a Madras-based civil servant in the East India Company, which made him a serviceable scapegoat for the governor's campaign against the "corrupt" and "wicked" Madras clique. Governor North wrote of McDowall: "But the violence of Mr. MacDowall, the head of that Party [i.e. the Company employees from Madras] has so far exceeded the bound of Prudence, that it has broken out into acts of positive and direct Disobedience to my orders and those of the Lieutenant Governor during my absence."<sup>1174</sup> One reason that McDowall was reprimanded was because he apparently abandoned his post at the pearl fishery for a few days without notifying the proper authorities. As Cleghorn wrote to North, "I never imagined I had the smallest power to grant leave of absence to any person, except perhaps a clerk in my office. When Mr. MacDowall notified me [of] his intention of meeting you at Mannar I observed that there were none here who could grant him permission. I think he replied that a Collector required none to visit any part of his own district."<sup>1175</sup> Then there were the accounts. Besides the tardy submission of the accounts and the missing pearls, McDowall had failed to reckon over 2000 bags of rice. Like the government's share of pearls, McDowall complained that he was not informed on how to bring the rice to account by Governor North.<sup>1176</sup> Cleghorn too submitted his opinion on the rice shipments and corroborated McDowall's version of the events. He wrote, "When the Government rice arrived, it was marked in our minute and ordered to be sold at the price fixed by you [Governor North]. And I believe this to be a really done as if the

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<sup>1174</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2403, 27.

<sup>1175</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 204.

<sup>1176</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 129, 2402, 172.



business was transacted before my own eye.”<sup>1177</sup> Governor North suspended McDowall, which was also perhaps a harbinger of things to come for the other superintendents. In McDowall’s place, Governor North appointed General Hay MacDowall as collector and authorized him to investigate the matter of the unaccounted for rice. General MacDowall then measured the *parras* of rice and tallied the number of bags with “scrupulous exactness” and stated confidently that “no collusion, artifice or stratagem has been made use of to defraud the Government.”<sup>1178</sup> If McDowall was guilty of anything it was carelessly reporting the sales but these were but “venial trespasses.” He was allowed to return to his office but discharged one month later for an offense unconnected to the pearl fishery.

The commissioners of the 1799 pearl fishery engaged in full-throated defenses of their conduct in correspondence with the governor and members of the investigative committee. But this was the limit of their defense because the superintendents were not given an opportunity to appear before the committee in person. As tensions mounted between government officials and the superintendents, Cleghorn, Turnour, and McDowall wrote to Champagne to elucidate the circumstances at the pearl fishery. They wrote, “We have thought it at once our duty to his Excellency, to our Royal Superiors in Europe, and to ourselves to state such facts, and suggest such reasons as we flatter ourselves will convince His Excellency Mr. North, that we did not deserve the censure he has passed upon us.”<sup>1179</sup> The commissioners claimed that they had never received a letter from Governor North. They wrote: “Had these forms been communicated to us our duty

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<sup>1177</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 204.

<sup>1178</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>1179</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 124.

would, and must have obliged us to obey them. We are perfectly satisfied that no uncandid [*sic*] reflection can originate with your Excellency, but in [understanding] of so heavy a charge we must remark that your Excellency in this instance has been led into a mistake.”<sup>1180</sup> The commissioners reiterated that they acted “with the purest motives” and “with the utmost zeal for the Interests of Government & the Company.”<sup>1181</sup>

The defense of their management, however, degenerated into vicious backbiting and character assassination. Cleghorn, for example, wrote to North that the failure of the pearl fishery began with Turnour’s shambolic organization of the preliminary examination of the pearl oyster beds. According to Cleghorn, Turnour’s “plan looked so well on paper” but was “all fallacious in practice.”<sup>1182</sup> Cleghorn, in other words, passed the buck, trying to stay in favor with Governor North. “I confess I was deceived and I regret that I may have been the means of deceiving you,” he wrote to North. Cleghorn represented Turnour as a mercurial and volatile personality who was unsuited for the important work of pearl fishery superintendent. He wrote that Turnour was prone to “sudden impressions” and preferred “the distress of disappointment to the constant vexation of suspicion.”<sup>1183</sup> Cleghorn launched further attacks on the reputation and character of his colleague, even casting aspersions on the relationship between Turnour and his *dubash*. In a separate letter to Governor North, Cleghorn wrote: “[Turnour] is completely under the management of his Dubash who may make him a bankrupt tomorrow. Our banksaal was robbed and upwards of 3,000 Pagodas worth of pearls carried off. It was done I believe by the Dubash of Turnour dared not take the least step

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<sup>1180</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>1181</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>1182</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 200.

<sup>1183</sup> Ibid., 199.

to an enquiry.”<sup>1184</sup> This *dubash* referred to by Cleghorn was the notorious character Narayana, who was in charge of the *banksalls* and served as the head cash keeper at Arippu. Narayana had, according to Smith, “exercised in a most corrupt and scandalous manner, and that the Superintendents did not personally interfere either to watch the washing or sorting of the Pearls, or even, when washed or sorted to take charge of them...that the Company was greatly plundered.”<sup>1185</sup> Cleghorn appeared to shift blame to Turnour for the lack of oversight he exercised over Narayana, which allowed the *dubash* to pilfer the warehouses of pearls and oysters and shorten the store of cash.

It appeared that Cleghorn and North had developed a mutually beneficial relationship. Cleghorn pegged the worst of the transgressions at the pearl fishery on his fellow commissioners and North received information that augmented his anti-corruption campaign. However, the relationship between Cleghorn and North turned soured rather quickly when details about Cleghorn’s alleged theft of pearls came to light. According to the testimony of the *dubash* Narayana, Cleghorn had “clandestinely secreted and carried off a quantity of selected pearls” and hired a jeweler to “bore pearls at his bungalow near Colombo for fifteen days to the number of 2,600.”<sup>1186</sup> Cleghorn “came into the Banksaal one Morning and Emptied an earthen Pot of Picked Pearls into his Handkerchief telling Narrain to keep it secret.”<sup>1187</sup> Jagannath Nayaka, a relative of Narayan, offered further details about the arrangement with Cleghorn, testifying that Cleghorn had hired him to bore and string the purloined pearls, pearls that were later found by the investigators at his house in the suburbs of Colombo stowed away in a bag hidden from plain sight.

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<sup>1184</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 198.

<sup>1185</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 116v.

<sup>1186</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 209.

<sup>1187</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 114v.

According to the investigators, “Jaggaloo Naig then pointed out a chest which stood in the room where we sat examining him and which he said contained the pearls he was speaking of, when removed from his house after his arrest.”<sup>1188</sup> The investigators opened the chests and found a few small packets of pearls. One of the bags contained an incriminating piece of evidence: a note written on a bit paper in Cleghorn’s hand that read “bad.” This bag—labeled “No. 3”—contained 2 ½ lbs. of pearls that were later appraised at PNP 847.<sup>1189</sup> In a letter to the Court of Directors in London, Governor North addressed the case against Cleghorn: “These are circumstances not depending on future proof, not resting like the story of the pipkin-full of pearls emptied by Mr. Cleghorn into his handkerchief on the unsupported assertion of a rogue, but solemn facts.”<sup>1190</sup> Cleghorn later explained to Governor North that a “person of rank” had contracted him to purchase pearls at the fishery, a task that Cleghorn delegated to Narayana. The “person of rank” referred to by Cleghorn was Henry Dundas. Dundas had asked Cleghorn to purchase pearls with the intentions of giving them to his wife. Dundas wrote that he told “Lady Jane that I would make her such a present from the produce of one of my own conquests.”<sup>1191</sup>

## **Conclusion**

During a moment of political transition between Dutch and British rule, the pearl fishery became an economic and political space cast in the long shadow of corruption. As a

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<sup>1188</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 209.

<sup>1189</sup> BL, IOR, G, 11, 53, 114v.

<sup>1190</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 209.

<sup>1191</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

political discourse within the British imperium, and a social and cultural practice within the administration of the East India Company, official responses to corruption were important features of colonial governance and state formation in Madras and Ceylon at the turn of the nineteenth century. Identifying and responding to corruption in all its forms became one way through which the East India Company (and later the British Crown) imagined sovereignty and created channels through which governmental power flowed. To recall the words of anthropologist Akhil Gupta, “The ‘system’ of corruption is of course not just a brute collection of practices whose most widespread execution occurs at the local level. It is also a discursive field that enables the phenomenon to be labeled, discussed, practiced, decried, and denounced.”<sup>1192</sup> The various sorts of behaviors grouped under the umbrella term of corruption—bribery, embezzlement, fraud, and insubordination, for example—did not ruin attempts at establishing Ceylon as a British territory but instead catalyzed the process. What British officials marked as corruption at the pearl fisheries in administrative documents and private writings was actually the mobilization of kin and patrimonial networks. Ceylon held strategic military value for the East India Company and the pearl fishery was a potentially lucrative source of revenue. The administration of Governor North sought to maximize the productivity and value of the pearl fishery through principles of good governance and natural resource management. He used the investigation into corruption at the pearl fisheries as an opportunity to introduce managerial reforms. For instance, he proposed a system in which the location of the fishery would rotate every seven years. Governor North drew upon both scientific and local knowledge to propose a system of natural resource management that essentially amounted to crop rotation. In a letter to the Court of Directors in London,

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<sup>1192</sup> Gupta, “Blurred Boundaries,” 385.

North referred to his plan of “dividing the [bank] into Seven Parts” and described that “one of which may [be] Fished each year by a Proportionate number of Boats, so that at the Expiration of the Seventh year (which is the Supposed Term of the Maturity of Pearl Oysters) the First Division may again [be] Fished and a Constant succession of Fishery be in that [Manner] without danger of exhausting or injuring the Banks.”<sup>1193</sup> North was praised by his contemporaries for his attempts to root out corruption at the pearl fishery and turn the industry into a viable and profitable venture. George Annesley wrote, for example, “it may be affirmed, that few men ever entered the British dominions in the East with purer intentions, or more enlightened views, or left them with a higher character for honour and benevolence.”<sup>1194</sup> Governor North also reflected on his time in Ceylon. He wrote: “But whatever be my Fate, my conscience will never allow me to regret that I have not contributed to our national and the Dilapidation of our National Resources, by overlooking gross and Scandalous Negligence and by encouraging in the Guardians of the public Interests that dangerous system of blind and ideal Confidence in Agents of known Intrigue and Improbability which has proved the Scourge of our Subjects and will prove the Ruin of our Employers.”<sup>1195</sup>

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<sup>1193</sup> BL, IOR, F, 4, 130, 2402, 10.

<sup>1194</sup> Annesley, *Voyages and Travels to India*, 1:315.

<sup>1195</sup> Clark, *An Enlightened Scot*, 211-2

## CONCLUSION: SONG OF THE PEARL THAT MIGHT BE

In Harriet Martineau's fictionalized story about the plight of pearl divers, "Cinnamon and Pearls," a character cries, "Who is it that robs us, not only of our spice and our pearls, but of all that many another country would give us for our spice and our pearls, if it be not the English." The voice of this anonymous villager captured Martineau's sentiments regarding colonial dirigisme. The publication of "Cinnamon and Pearls" in Martineau's magnum opus *The Illustrations of Political Economy* came at the tail end of a period during which intellectuals and policymakers rethought the relationship between the East India Company and British Crown, and brought forward ideas rooted in liberal political economy to manage the affairs of state. By blending literature and economics, Martineau described the virtues of *laissez faire* capitalism, and translated the liberal philosophies of Smith, Ricardo, Mill, and Malthus into romantic allegories. In "Cinnamon and Pearls," Martineau used the tragic tale of Rayo and Marana to advance a critique of mercantilism and highlight the downside of British rule in Ceylon. She offered a vision of imperialism based on liberal political economy and charged Britain to spread civilized society overseas. A fictionalized story about the plight of pearl divers, "Cinnamon and Pearls" anticipated her concern for the welfare of women and the campaign for the abolition of slavery. Later in life she advocated for government intervention to help the downtrodden and enslaved, which was a departure from the attitude she held with regards to the government's role in the economy. In *British Rule in India* (1857), published at the precise moment when the East India Company transferred its Indian territories to the

Crown, Martineau reflected on the impact of British rule on Ceylon. In a chapter titled “Beginning of Comprehensive Domestic Amelioration,” Martineau appeared satisfied with the long-term results of British rule. She described Ceylon as “the most effectually improved part of our eastern dominion,” adding that “nothing but misrule could spoil such a country.”<sup>1196</sup> Martineau attributed the favorable outcomes to the influence and steady hand of the British government. She wrote, “Besides the ordinary treasures of the sea, pearls and pearl-shells abounded within reach of its shores... The change within a few years after their welfare was fairly taken in hand by the British was remarkable.”<sup>1197</sup>

This history of pearling in the Gulf of Mannar during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century reflects that the situation on the ground was far more complex and variegated than Martineau and others described. The governing effects of Company and Crown rule during this period of political flux left impressions of varying depths on the people, institutions, and environment of the pearling industry. This project explores the space between success and failure, and tracks such developments through the evolving contexts of colonialism and imperialism in India and Sri Lanka. It finds that the overall impact of British management was less extensive than the Madras and Ceylon governments had envisioned. The introduction of policies designed to improve pearling in the Gulf of Mannar were more often miscarriages of reform. As this dissertation shows, pearling in the Gulf of Mannar was a source of a tremendous amount of discursive energy for Company and Crown officials. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, European powers in the region—whether company-states such as the Dutch

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<sup>1196</sup> Harriet Martineau, *History of British Rule in India: A Historical Sketch* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1857), 139-40; Logan, *Harriet Martineau*, 111.

<sup>1197</sup> *Ibid.*



and English East India Companies or formal colonial governments like British Ceylon—devoted considerable attention to the pearling industry. From sending diplomatic missions to local courts and examining the pearl oyster banks, to the deployment of naval vessels and the construction of camps, British Ceylon and the Company Raj committed substantial resources to the management of people and oysters. In many ways, the interest in the people, institutions, animals, and environment of the pearling industry far exceeded the hunt for gems and profits.

A historical study of the pearling industry in the Gulf of Mannar highlights some underlying aspects of British colonialism, imperialism, and governance in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century India and Sri Lanka. The vicissitudes of early colonial Madras and Ceylon patterned the conditions under which British Ceylon and the Company Raj managed the human and natural resources of the pearling industry. It was during moments of political change that Company and Crown officers addressed questions about the status and organization of the pearling industry with the greatest verve. Historians have characterized the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a transitional period between the First and Second British Empires. This same timespan witnessed the emergence of the East India Company as the preeminent political power in India, as well as the establishment of Ceylon as a formal colony of the British state. This roughly seventy-year period has been characterized as the period of “colonial transition,” and historians have engaged in contentious and spirited debates about the exact nature of this era. Pearling in the Gulf of Mannar offers an interesting case to further parse questions that animate the historiography of this period. The time period covered by this dissertation, c. 1770-1840, is not only important for understanding the history of the

pearling in the Gulf of Mannar, but also significant in the broader historiography of South Asia.

The political reorganization of the region introduced new ideas about how to govern human populations and manage natural resources located in areas under British authority. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed a sea change in political economic thought, as classical liberalism displaced mercantilism as the prevailing framework for interpreting the relationship between the state and economy. The debates between mercantilist and liberal principles in the sphere of political economic thought percolated through Company and Crown management of the pearling industry. Historian Sudipta Sen has shown in *Empire of Free Trade* that a transition from a monopolistic system based on the principles of mercantilism to free trade liberalism never fully materialized. He looks at Company Raj engagements with the political and symbolic economies of “prestige goods” such as betel, salt, and tobacco in eighteenth-century Bengal. Like Bengal, British officials introduced policies designed to establish private property regimes in the countryside, but asserted monopoly control over the commodity production of pearls. Debates about the management of the pearl fishery did not take place independent of wider concerns within British administrations about agrarian lands and revenue. Many of the issues that motivated the introduction of land tenancy systems in Bengal and Madras reverberated through the management schemes that British officials imposed on the pearling industry. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the pearling industry of Mannar was situated between free trade and monopoly, which not only created a contradictory state of affairs, but also produced some rather uneven results.

The Company and Crown governments brought an assemblage of ideas to bear on the management and governance of people and oysters that sought to not only increase productivity, but also reshape the preexisting social, economic, and political conditions of the industry. British officials targeted labor and capital networks, as well as institutions that claimed certain rights and privileges at the pearl fishery, such as temples and local courts. From temples and kings to divers and merchants, numerous local people and institutions had important roles in the pearling industry. Officials depended upon these same networks and institutions for authority, labor, information, supplies, and capital, which further complicated the efforts of reform-minded officials. Each chapter of this dissertation addresses a different area of the pearling industry that British officials deemed problematic and thus open to government intervention. Chapter 1 considers labor. Chapter 2 looks at markets. Chapter 3 explores the business world of merchants. Chapter 4 examines the relationship between the pearl fishery and sovereignty. Chapter 5 wades into the question of corruption. As each chapter shows, liberal-minded reforms did not initiate an era of open markets and technological progress, but rather further exposed the human and natural resources of the pearl fishery to distinctly modern forms of governmental power.

The shallow fertile waters between present-day India and Sri Lanka were once home to one of the largest sources of natural pearls in the world. A historical study of British management of the pearl fishery offers a fresh perspective by virtue of its place near the shoreline. Indeed, many of the debates about ideology and policy in early colonial South Asia have focused on agrarian land systems. As an intermittent and seasonal event, British officials differentiated the pearl fishery from other revenue-

generating industries. They also marked pearls as a special type of commodity. British officials found that the unique nature of the product, as well as the sensitive marine environment within which pearls were produced, rendered the fishery vulnerable to overuse. Company and Crown officers thus promoted a position that only the skilled and capable hands of a strong government could properly protect and manage the industry, and implemented policies and practices in accordance with that viewpoint.

This dissertation also draws attention to the political and geographic significance of the Gulf of Mannar and its pearl oyster banks. An area of military and commercial value, the “microworld” of Mannar was home to a vibrant coastal trade, while the Palk Strait afforded safeguarded passage between the eastern and western zones of the Indian Ocean. Historian Lauren Benton notes in her book *A Search for Sovereignty* that early modern and modern empires “did not lay claim to vast stretches of territory.”<sup>1198</sup> Instead, she writes, the “nature of such claims was tempered by control that was exercised over narrow bands, or corridors, and other enclaves and irregular zones about them.”<sup>1199</sup> A reading of British discourses on geographic space and political sovereignty in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries suggest that the Gulf of Mannar was one such “narrow band” or “corridor” through which the Company and Crown laid claim to territorial and thalassic control. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the pearl oyster beds were located within the domains of two different British powers. The movement of people and things through the Gulf of Mannar at the time of the pearl fishery undermined attempts by Madras and Ceylon to actualize a vision of distinct realms for the Company and Crown. From seasonal migration to smuggling and disease outbreaks, circulatory

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<sup>1198</sup> Benton, *Search for Sovereignty*, 2.

<sup>1199</sup> *Ibid.*

patterns related to pearling compromised the ability of Madras and Ceylon to solidify and police the maritime borderlands of Mannar. The pearling grounds of the region found their meaning in the permeability of the political and geographic area in which they were located, along the frontier zone between land and sea, humans and animals, island and mainland, Company and Crown, and Europe and Asia.

The roughly seventy-year timeframe covered by this dissertation represents a blip in the long history of human engagements with pearl oysters and the marine ecosystems of the Gulf of Mannar. For thousands of years, pearls—formed by secretion of nacre by mollusks to coat and neutralize foreign irritants like stones and sand—were harvested in the natural marine environments like the Gulf of Mannar. However, the early twentieth century witnessed the decline of natural pearling centers across the globe, including the Gulf of Mannar, and debates about the best mode of management continued up to that point. For instance, British Ceylon awarded a twenty-year lease in 1906 to a private corporation, Ceylon Company of Pearl Fisheries Limited.<sup>1200</sup> The former governor of British Ceylon, Joseph West Ridgeway, and William Herdman, marine biologist commissioned by the Ceylon government, were at the helm of the company.<sup>1201</sup> The Ceylon government sang a variation on an old tune. As Subrahmanyam writes, the “Ceylon government’s position was that it was anomalous for the state to take charge of productive enterprise; for, in fact, this was the business of private capital.”<sup>1202</sup> The Ceylon Company of Pearl Fisheries only enjoyed the fruits of two harvest, however. The corporation collapsed by 1912 and the next pearl fishery did not take place until 1925.

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<sup>1200</sup> Kunz, *Book of the Pearl*, 108-11; Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea.”

<sup>1201</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Noble Harvest from the Sea,” 167.

<sup>1202</sup> *Ibid.*

The government continued to sponsor examinations of the banks, but results were disappointing. One of the last recorded pearl fishery was 1958, the first one organized under the authority of the independent state of Ceylon. This pearl fishery is also notable because of its use of heavy machinery. According to S. Sivalingam, a government scientist, “Most of the difficulties encountered by employing skin divers for fishing operations can be overcome by dredging the oyster with the help of mechanized boats.”<sup>1203</sup> His argument that a dredging machine reduced “capital expenditure” and “no extra staff is required for supervisory work” echoed voices from the previous century.<sup>1204</sup> The government then auctioned bags of presorted oysters to merchants at a market in Colombo. Sivalingam observed that “owing to the excitement of a fishery after the longest interval of blank years on a record, the prices were very high at the start.”<sup>1205</sup> However, he continued, “the buyers were mostly those who bought them for personal use or out of curiosity or those trying their luck.”<sup>1206</sup> He thus lamented the absence of “the usual [Indian] businessmen” whom typically purchased “large quantities for trade purposes.”<sup>1207</sup> Sivalingam commented further that “the success of future fisheries” was contingent upon finding “a suitable export market,” and speculated that “there still appears to be a good market for natural pearls in India though cultured pearls offer stiff competition.”<sup>1208</sup>

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<sup>1203</sup> S. Sivalingam, *The 1958 Pearl Oyster Fishery, Gulf of Mannar* (Colombo: Fisheries Research Station, 1961), 14.

<sup>1204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1205</sup> Sivalingam, *Pearl Oyster Fishery*, 19.

<sup>1206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1208</sup> *Ibid.*

Indeed, another important development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the introduction of commercially viable cultured pearls.<sup>1209</sup> An ancient technique in which a foreign object was inserted into the fleshy part of the animal and then submerged in shallow water was mastered in fin de siècle Japan. Experimentation with this process led to an innovation in which spherical cultured pearls could be produced at an economical scale. This innovation is most closely associated with Mikimoto Kōkichi, who, in 1893 under the tutelage of a Tokyo professor, successfully produced a cultured pearl. Mikimoto enjoyed immense commercial success and his name is still synonymous with high-quality cultured pearls today. The wider availability and lower cost of pearls in the first half of the twentieth century came with a democratization of fashion. It was during this time that icons like Coco Chanel turned pearls from a royal luxury into an object of everyday elegance. Scientist in India also developed the capability to produce spherical cultured pearls on a commercial scale in the 1960s and 1970s. India, however, has not been able to build a cultured pearl industry and the market continues to be dominated by China.<sup>1210</sup> Cultured pearls from China are produced at an industrial scale and have flooded the global gem markets, driving down prices while increasing consumption. Today, cultured pearls fill the cases of retail stores up and down the hierarchy of the consumer market, from Tiffany's to Target.

It would be far too easy to plot the history of the pearling industry into a familiar declension narrative to explain human-induced changes to the environment. From dredging and overfishing to the rise of industrial manufacturing in the region, the latter of

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<sup>1209</sup> Kiyohito Nagai, "A History of the Cultured Pearl Industry," *Zoological Science* 30, no. 10 (2013): 783-93; Raden, *Stoned*.

<sup>1210</sup> D. S. Dev, "Pearl Culture Project in India," *Pearl Oyster Information Bulletin* 7 (1994), 5-6; Micheline Cariño and Mario Monteforte, "An Environmental History of Nacre and Pearls: Fisheries, Cultivation, and Commerce," *Global Environment* 3 (2009), 66-7.

which attracted labor and capital previously concerned with pearling, a confluence of local and global forces probably led to the slow death of the pearling industry. A long-term perspective suggests that a common thread in the history of pearling in the Gulf of Mannar is its intermittent and seasonal character. From the sixteenth century onwards, the period during which historical documents are most accessible, each successive generation ruminated over the mercurial nature of the pearl oyster and its marine environment.

Marine biologist Daniel Pauly has identified a similar phenomenon that he calls “shifting baselines” and introduced historical perspectives to the study of the marine environment and fisheries populations.<sup>1211</sup> William Bolster’s *The Mortal Sea* builds upon the idea of “shifting baselines” to show that each generation of Atlantic fishermen feared dwindling supplies of fish, which directly challenges characterizations of the sea as an exhaustive resource. Bolster uses historical evidence to show that fish populations in the Atlantic remained relatively stable until mechanization. Those engaged with the management of the pearl fishery of Mannar from the sixteenth century onward always feared that a crisis of productivity was imminent. For instance, Dutch Governor Baron van Imhoff wrote in 1740, “it is now several years since the pearl banks have fallen into a very bad state both at Manaar and Tuticorin; this is mere chance, and experience has shown that, on former occasion, the banks have been unproductive even for a longer period than has yet occurred at present.”<sup>1212</sup> In the early nineteenth century, Ceylon civil servant Anthony Bertolacci remarked, “the pearl fishery, is doubtless, one of the great resources of the

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<sup>1211</sup> Daniel Pauly, “Anecdotes and the Shifting Baselines Syndrome of Fisheries,” *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 10, no. 10 (1995): 430; Jackson, et al, *Shifting Baselines*; Kathleen Schwerdtner Mániez and Bo Poulsen, eds., *Perspectives on Oceans Past: A Handbook for Marine Environmental History* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016).

<sup>1212</sup> Baron van Imhoff, *Memoir*; Herdman, *Report to the Government of Ceylon*, 1:3.



Colonial Government; but it is one of a very uncertain nature.”<sup>1213</sup> He added, “It has, I believe, been the ambition of every successive Governor, since we acquired possession of Ceylon, to place this source of revenue upon such a systematic plan, if possible, to derive from it a permanent sum yearly: but hitherto their endeavors have failed; and the periods at which the fisheries can be effected, appear, still, to remain a matter of great uncertainty.”<sup>1214</sup> As this dissertation shows, the “uncertain nature” of the pearl fishery did not hinder but rather enabled European engagements with the human and natural resources of the industry. The peculiar logic of colonial rule and governance meant that people and oysters were always in need of improvement. As marine biologist William Herdman wrote in the early twentieth century, “there is no reason for any despondency in regard to the future of the pearl fisheries, if they are treated scientifically.” In other words, he added, “the material exists, ready for man’s operations.”<sup>1215</sup>

The symbolic association of pearls and the Gulf of Mannar continues to the present day. Travel writing still characterizes Sri Lanka as the “Pearl of the East,” and materials promoting tourism on the island describe it as “pearl-shaped island” and a “pearl-shaped tear hanging from the cheek of India.”<sup>1216</sup> Across the Gulf of Mannar, Thoothukudi is known as the “Pearl City,” and there is an express train of the same name that travels to and from Chennai. There are even efforts to revive the industry underway in Tuticorin today.<sup>1217</sup> Cities across the globe have assumed this title of the “Pearl City.” Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh, known as the “City of Pearls,” continues to be famous for its gem markets and tourists flock to gape at the jewels of the Nizam. Pearling is all but

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<sup>1213</sup> Bertolacci, *Interest of Ceylon*, 192.

<sup>1214</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>1215</sup> Herdman, *Report to the Government of Ceylon*, 1:8.

<sup>1216</sup> Harry Williams, *Ceylon, Pearl of the East* (London: R. Hale, 1950).

<sup>1217</sup> “Pearl Farming Loses its Sheen in Tuticorin,” *The Hindu*, October 12, 2011.

extinct today, but many cities and states have taken undertaken efforts to memorialize this bygone world. For instance, Doha, the capital of Qatar, connects to its pearling past by proudly displaying a statue of an oyster with a pearl in its shell. There are even man-made islands off the coast of Doha that are designed to resemble a string of pearls. The project, known as The Pearl-Qatar, is a multi-billion-dollar real estate development project complete with luxury apartments, hotels, and shopping. Nor has the association between politics and geography completed faded away. There are regular news reports of state authorities arresting fishermen for violating the maritime boundaries of India and Sri Lanka. A government-contracted consulting firm has also developed a geopolitical theory called “The String of Pearls,” which refers to a Chinese strategy to create military and commercial alliances across the Indian Ocean.<sup>1218</sup>

One of the central aims of this dissertation is to not only analyze the techniques and applications of governmental power, but to also find a suitable role for a simple bivalve mollusk in the story. To this end, the discussion tries to view the pearl oyster as more than a producer of gems and shells, but also a live actor in a complex formed by interactions between humans and the environment. In a path-breaking essay titled “Can the Mosquito Speak?” historian Timothy Mitchell challenges popular historical narratives about Egyptian development in the second half of the twentieth century. For Mitchell, the development goals of Egypt were not only hamstrung by war and colonialism, but also unassuming malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Yet historical scholarship has not considered the impacts of malaria and mosquitos because social scientific biases privilege human

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<sup>1218</sup> *Energy Futures in Asia: Final Report* (Booz Allen & Hamilton, 2004); Christopher J. Pehrson, “String of Pearls: Meeting the Challenges of China’s Rising Power Across the Asian Littoral,” *Strategic Studies Institute*, July 2006; David Brewster, “Beyond the ‘String of Pearls’: Is There Really a Sino-Indian Dilemma in the Indian Ocean?” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 10, no. 2 (2014): 133-49.

agency, which, in turn, reproduces forms of modern techno-political power. Mitchell instead emphasizes “hybrid agencies.” Understanding how technology, environment, animals, and humans interact sheds light on the features and functions of modern governmental power and techno-politics.<sup>1219</sup> The inability of British officials to completely overhaul the pearling industry was complicated by a notoriously fickle marine environment. The growth and production of pearls and oysters also retained an air of mystery and wonder. In many ways, British interventions in the industry were bound to fall short. Each season, tens of millions of oysters were harvested from the shallow waters of Mannar, yet only a fraction yielded pearls, and only a handful of those were of any quality and value that are commonly associated with precious gems. Vexed officials found the yield of oysters and pearls nearly impossible to predict and the revenue and production often fell short of expectations. At the end of the pearling season, merchants regularly submitted petitions to British Ceylon and the Company Raj seeking compensation for financial losses. Government officials drew upon a contradictory set of discourse and practices that did not work with any consistency on the people, animals, institutions, and environment that constituted the pearling industry of the Gulf of Mannar. Pushing for change, but unable to escape the underlying dynamics of the industry, the British were unable to realize a vision of widespread reform. But, alas, this was the nature of the beast.

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<sup>1219</sup> Mitchell, “Can the Mosquito Speak?”

## GLOSSARY

- amāni* – lands or resources under direct management of government
- ani, annee* – first-order pearls
- arzasht, arzee, urzee* – formal petition or supplication (Persian: ‘*arzdāsh*t)
- ballam* – boats made from a single piece of timber used for washing oysters
- bangsal, banksall* – warehouse, storage facility; godown
- calapa, calakku* – pearl oyster
- campanottis* – boat owners
- canku, sangu* – conch shell
- carāppu* – moneylender, moneychanger, finance banker
- circār, carkaar, sarkar, sircar* – government, the state
- Chetti, Cetti, Chitty* – South Indian community associated with banking and trade
- cowle* – formal contract or grant
- dargah* – Muslim saint’s tomb
- dhonie, doney, thoney, toni* – small, shallow boat with one mast; coastal craft
- dubash* – “two tongues,” broker, agent, or secretary for Europeans in Madras
- darkhast, durkhaust* – petition, representation, supplication
- dustoor* – tax relief
- fasli* – annual revenue cycle
- gōmāstāh, gomash*ta, *gomastah, gumāsh*ta – agent, representative
- īnām* – tax-free land or other gifts for religious or charitable purposes; present; reward
- jāti talaivan* – “caste headman,” community leader of Paravas
- kachcheri* – cutcherry, government agent’s office, usually at district level
- kadalkatti* – “binder of sharks,” shark charmer

*kanakkupillai, karnam, karanam* – accountant, bookkeeper, scribe  
*kāval* – protection  
*kāvalgār, kāvalkārār* – local policemen; military post charged with protection  
*kōvil, kōyil* – temple, church, and other buildings of worship  
*kootoo, cottoo, kutu* – warehouse for washing and storing oysters  
*kuliyal* – pearl and chank diver  
*Labbai, Lubbai* – Tamil-speaking Muslim coastal community  
*lascorn* – indigenous soldier  
*māniyam, manyam* – tax-free or low tax award, usually of land or other resources  
*mantakkam, mundadies, munducks* – assistant to diver  
*Maraikkayar* – elite Tamil-speaking Muslim community, mostly merchants  
*masie, masi* – small pearls that do not pass through baskets  
*masjid* – mosque  
*muccalikkā, muchelka, muchalika* – formal agreement; written obligation; contract  
*Mudaliyar* – title used by Vellala elites  
*muttu, muthu, mootoo* – pearl  
*Nakarattar* – Tamil-speaking trading caste  
*narkkayiru* – coir rope  
*nāyaka, nayak, nayakkar* – lord, warrior, chief, or general; viceroys of Vijayanagar; term used by South Indian lineage of rulers of Kandy kingdom  
*ōlai* – palm leaf used for writing and recordkeeping; manuscript; document  
*pār, par, paar* – pearl bank  
*Parava* – Roman Catholic Tamil speaking maritime community  
*parra* – unit of measurement  
*pagoda* – temple; gold coin  
*palam* – unit of weight  
*palhota* – thatched hut  
*pākam* – share, measurement, portion

*Pattangattim* – Tamil caste authority or notable

*pattayam* – copper

*peon* – indigenous foot soldier or unskilled laborer (Por. *peão*)

*Pillai* – title taken by high-caste Vellala

*ryotwāri* – system of land collection in which government collected taxes directly from cultivators without the use of

*sanad* – written document conferring honor or title

sepoy – Indian soldier

*Setupati* – “guardian of the bridge,” title of Marava rulers of Ramnad

*shroff* – moneylender, moneychanger, banker

*Silāwatorre* – fish market or landing spot

*sowker, soucar, savukar* – banker, financier

*Tevar* – title meaning godly, godlike, or holy often used by Maravas

*tool, thul* – seed pearls

*vēlālar, vellālar, Vellala* – elite agricultural group of Tamil country

*zamīndār, zemindar, zamindar* – landlord or estate owner under permanent settlement

## APPENDIX

### *Governors of British Ceylon, 1798-1841*

Frederick North, 1798-1805

Thomas Maitland, 1805-1811

John Wilson, 1811-1812

Robert Brownrigg, 1812-1820

Edward Barnes, 1820-1822

Edward Paget, 1822

James Campbell, 1822-1824

Edward Barnes, 1824-1831

John Wilson, 1831

Robert Wilmont-Horton, 1831-1837

James Alexander Stewart-Mackenzie, 1837-1841

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Madurai Collectorate Records

Ramnad Collectorate Records

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