



KORKAI – An Ancient Pandya Port City and the History of Vettivel Amman Temple

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Abstract:

Korkai, the ancient city of the Pandya kings, is one of the oldest settlements situated near the Thamirabarani River and close to the Gulf of Mannar. It served as an important political centre and maritime trading hub of the ancient Pandya kingdom. Korkai flourished as a symbol of India's glory and was celebrated as the treasure house of Tamil Nadu. It received special recognition in ancient Tamil literature. The significance of Korkai is also mentioned in Valmiki's Ramayana, an ancient Sanskrit epic. Greek historical accounts also praise Korkai. As Korkai served both as a capital city and as a seaport, it developed into a prominent commercial town. Greek merchants and people from China who came for trade settled in the region.

Key words: Korkai, Yavanas, port city, Vetrivel Amman.

Introduction

Korkai is one of the oldest cities of ancient Tamil Nadu, situated near the banks of the Thamirabarani River and close to the Gulf of Mannar. It was an important political centre and maritime trading hub of the ancient Pandya kings. Korkai flourished as a symbol of India's glory and was praised as the treasure house of Tamil Nadu. Korkai is celebrated in several works of ancient Tamil literature. Its importance is also mentioned in the Ramayana of Valmiki, an ancient Sanskrit epic. Greek historical accounts also praise Korkai. Since it served as both a capital city and a port, it became a prominent commercial town. Greeks and people from China who came for trade settled there. The Chinese settlers who lived in the region are associated with a place now called Kayalpatnam, which is traditionally said to have been inhabited by people who came from Arabia.

At the entrance to Korkai's fort, there were golden doors decorated with precious stones, including pearls. Valmiki's Ramayana is said to describe this splendour. The coastline of Korkai presented a magnificent sight. Greek merchants, Arab horse traders, and people from other regions frequently gathered there. Large warehouses and storage facilities were available for commercial goods. There was also a major customs checkpoint at the port. Every package and its contents were inspected, taxes were collected, and the goods were stamped with a seal before being allowed to pass. Tamil ships, boats, small vessels, and ships from foreign countries gathered at the harbour.

Beautiful gardens surrounded the customs station. Countless coconut trees stood in the area. The pleasant fragrance of the thazhampoo flower (screw pine) replaced the unpleasant smell of fish along the seashore. South of Marungur Pattinam lay the Korkai lagoon, while Korkai Pattinam was situated on its western shore. The Greek writer Periplus is said to have mentioned Korkai, and Ptolemy also referred to it. In ancient times, various kinds of conch shells were found in the Korkai lagoon, which extended inland.

The Korkai lagoon was world-famous for its pearls. In ancient times, the Thamirabarani River flowed into this lagoon. On its banks, near the seashore, stood the prosperous port city of Korkai Pattinam. A Pandya prince lived there.

After the tenth century CE, the Korkai lagoon gradually silted up and disappeared, eventually turning into dry land. This transformation occurred because the Thamirabarani River deposited sand and sediment, while sea waves also carried sand into the area from the opposite direction. Over a long period, the lagoon became filled with sediment and eventually disappeared. The place where Korkai Pattinam once stood is now located about three miles west of the present coastline, in an area associated with the name Mangalakurichi. In the later part of the second century CE, a Pandya prince named Vetrivel Chezhayan is associated with Korkai.

The port is referred to as the "Kumari Great Harbour" in the Tamil epic Manimekalai. The Silappathikaram refers to the Pandya king as the lord of the Kumari harbour of Korkai. Before Rameswaram became a major sacred pilgrimage destination, Korkai's harbour was regarded as a sacred bathing place. People who had bathed in the Ganges would travel to Kumari to bathe in its waters. In later periods, merchant ships gradually stopped visiting this harbour. Greek texts, including the Periplus, are said to mention that a town called Korkai existed beyond the port, with fortifications and a shipbuilding facility.

Vettrivel Amman Temple at Korkai – The History and Tradition Associated with Kannagi

Korkai was an important political and maritime trading centre of the ancient Pandya kings. The Vettrivel Amman Temple, situated in this historic region, is associated with the worship of Kannagi, according to local traditions and certain research notes.

Connection with Kannagi

According to the story of the Tamil epic Silappathikaram, following the events that took place in Madurai, Kannagi's anger was appeased by the Pandya king Vettrivel Chezhiyan, who is said to have organised a festival and conducted worship in her honour at Korkai. Some research accounts suggest that the tradition of worshipping Kannagi continued in Korkai thereafter.

The Name “Vettrivel Amman”

According to local tradition, because King Vettrivel Chezhiyan worshipped Kannagi, the goddess became associated with his name. She is said to have been known as “Vettrivel Chezhia Nangai” and “Chezhia Nangai.” The deity established by King Vettrivel Chezhiyan was initially called “Vettrivel Chezhia Nangai.” Later, the name is said to have evolved into “Chezhia Nangai” and, over time, into “Vettrivel Amman.” Today, she is worshipped as a village guardian deity.

Temple Architecture

According to old accounts, the temple was situated in the middle of a pond. Some research notes describe it as an ancient temple constructed of black stone.

The Distinctive Feature of the Goddess's Statue

One notable feature of the Amman statue is that her head is tilted towards the left. A local oral tradition explains this unusual posture through a story in which Kannagi tilted her head after witnessing a peace-making ceremony conducted by Vettrivel Chezhiyan. This account should be understood as a traditional legend rather than conclusive historical evidence. The ancient temple's location in the middle of a large pond is also described as one of its distinctive features.

Antiquity

According to the account, the temple is approximately 1,000 years old.

Conclusion

Korkai was an important political and maritime trading centre of the ancient Pandya kings. The Vettrivel Amman Temple at Korkai is not merely a place of worship; it is also regarded as an important repository of historical and cultural traditions. The temple preserves the Tamil tradition of chastity worship associated with Kannagi, memories of the administrative capabilities of the Pandya kings during the Sangam period, and traditions connected with the historical narrative of Silappathikaram. Thus, Korkai and the Vettrivel Amman Temple hold an important place in the cultural heritage and historical memory of Tamil Nadu.

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