

## THE GLIMPSES OF NAGAPATTINAM IN MARITIME TRADE ON THE COROMANDEL COAST IN THE EARLY COLONIAL PERIOD

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### **Abstract**

*The Coromandel Coast, extending along southeastern India, served as a dynamic hub of maritime exchange linking South Asia with the wider Indian Ocean world. Among its ports, Nagapattinam occupied a preeminent position as both a commercial and cultural interface during the early colonial period. This study re-examines Nagapattinam's evolution between 1500 and 1824, tracing its transition from a Chola-era naval base to a contested colonial entrepôt. Drawing upon Portuguese and Dutch East India Company (VOC) archival materials, Tamil inscriptions, and field studies, the paper reconstructs the socio-economic and cultural transformations that shaped the town's maritime identity. It highlights the reciprocal influences among **local merchant communities, European trading companies, and indigenous political powers**, revealing a pattern of negotiation rather than domination. By situating Nagapattinam within the broader framework of Indian Ocean port societies, the study underscores its role as a microcosm of **creolised urbanism**, where commerce, belief, and cross-cultural contact intertwined. The analysis thus contributes to Indian Ocean historiography by foregrounding **indigenous agency** and the enduring continuity between pre-colonial and colonial maritime systems.*

**Keywords:** Coromandel Coast; Nagapattinam; Indian Ocean trade; Dutch East India Company; colonial encounters; cultural hybridity.

## 1. Introduction

Nagapattinam, situated along Tamil Nadu's southeastern seaboard, occupied a significant position in the maritime geography of the Coromandel Coast. Its location near the River Uppanar and the fertile Cauvery delta made it a vital outlet linking inland agrarian prosperity to oceanic trade. The town's trajectory from a Chola naval outpost to a key colonial entrepôt exemplifies the dynamic intersections of politics, commerce, and culture that defined early modern South India.<sup>1</sup>

The term "Coromandel" itself—derived from Chola Mandalam—came to symbolise a region of profound economic and cultural interconnectivity. European traders, beginning with the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, perceived this coast as an indispensable node within the Indian Ocean trading system.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite Nagapattinam's prominence, historical attention has largely gravitated toward other ports like Masulipatnam or Fort St. George.<sup>3</sup> This study seeks to restore Nagapattinam's place in maritime historiography by weaving together European documentation and Tamil sources to illuminate its social and cultural transformations across three centuries.

## 2. Historiography and Analytical Framework

The historiography of the Coromandel Coast has undergone notable shifts. Early colonial gazetteers by W. Francis and narratives by Nilakanta Sastri portrayed the region primarily through administrative and economic lenses.<sup>4</sup> Later, scholars such as Sinnappah Arasaratnam, Om Prakash, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam reframed these studies within global and regional systems of exchange.<sup>5</sup> Arasaratnam's work emphasised the active role of indigenous merchants in the trade dynamics of the seventeenth century, while Subrahmanyam introduced the concept of improvisation within colonial governance, highlighting adaptation rather than domination.<sup>6</sup>

M.N. Pearson and K.N. Chaudhuri expanded the analytical horizon by treating the Indian Ocean as an integrated cultural and commercial arena.<sup>7</sup> More recently, S. Jeyaseela Stephen has illuminated the agency of Tamil Muslim merchant groups—the Marakkayars—in sustaining networks that predated and coexisted with European expansion.<sup>8</sup> Building on these perspectives, this paper adopts a socio-cultural approach, viewing the port not simply as an economic site but as a crucible of interaction where material exchange intertwined with belief, identity, and negotiation.

## 3. Methodology and Sources

The research employs a combination of textual, archival, and material evidence. Portuguese manuscripts from the Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (Lisbon) provide valuable insights into early encounters between European traders and Tamil maritime groups.<sup>9</sup> Dutch East India Company (VOC) documents preserved in The Hague offer rich data on governance, trade regulation, and cultural mediation during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>10</sup> Complementary Tamil epigraphic materials, including the Negapatam Grants and temple inscriptions, shed light on local landholding and ritual patronage systems.<sup>11</sup>

These written records are supplemented by field studies in Nagapattinam, Nagore, and Tharangampadi, where extant churches, mosques, and cemeteries reveal patterns of multicultural coexistence. The methodological framework, therefore, balances textual interpretation with spatial and cultural analysis, allowing a reconstruction of the town's layered historical identity.

## 4. Nagapattinam under the Cholas and their Successors

Long before European arrival, Nagapattinam had established itself as an active node in transoceanic commerce. During the Chola period (c. 985–1275 CE), it functioned both as a naval base and as an embarkation point for expeditions to Southeast Asia. Inscriptions and foreign accounts—from Chinese to Arab sources—underscore its importance in the thirteenth century as a thriving port integrated into wider networks of exchange.<sup>12</sup>

The dual urban structure of Ur (agrarian settlement) and Pattinam (mercantile quarter) characterised much of Tamil coastal organization.<sup>13</sup> This framework facilitated the coexistence of temple-centred redistribution economies and maritime mercantile interests. Such continuities persisted into the post-Chola period, laying the groundwork for Nagapattinam's adaptation to successive colonial powers.

## 5. Portuguese Expansion and Indigenous Responses (1500–1658)

The early sixteenth century witnessed the arrival of the Portuguese, whose interests in the Coromandel Coast stemmed from its rich textile and rice exports. Initial interactions were marked by both cooperation and conflict. Portuguese traders often clashed with local Muslim merchants, particularly the Marakkayars of Nagore, who resisted their monopolistic ambitions.<sup>14</sup> A 1524 record from Lisbon describes one such confrontation, revealing indigenous agency in defending existing trade structures.<sup>15</sup>

By the mid-sixteenth century, the Portuguese had secured trading privileges from the Thanjavur Nayaks and established a fortified settlement at Nagapattinam. Their imposition of the cartaz (naval pass) system sought to control maritime movement and levy duties on local traders.<sup>16</sup> Although this provoked resentment, it did not extinguish indigenous participation; rather, it created a hybrid commercial environment. Catholic missions, schools, and hospitals soon followed, embedding Portuguese religious and social institutions within a plural coastal society.<sup>17</sup>

## 6. Dutch Hegemony and the Cosmopolitan Port (1658–1781)

The Dutch supplanted the Portuguese in 1658, with the support of the Nayak rulers of Thanjavur. Over the next century, the VOC consolidated its influence through treaties and infrastructure development, including the construction of the

fortress Vijf Sinnen and the relocation of its Coromandel headquarters from Pulicat to Nagapattinam in 1690.<sup>18</sup> The town's urban landscape transformed with planned streets, warehouses, minting facilities, and a hospital.<sup>19</sup> Under Dutch rule, Nagapattinam became a cosmopolitan settlement inhabited by Tamil weavers, Muslim merchants, Malay seafarers, and European administrators.<sup>20</sup> Dutch records reveal attempts to integrate Tamil language and customs into governance—evident in Tamil-inscribed coinage and bilingual decrees.<sup>21</sup> Yet the VOC's dominance was undermined by rivalry with the English East India Company, culminating in British occupation during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1781).<sup>22</sup> The subsequent treaties of Paris (1784) and London (1824) formalised British control.<sup>2</sup>

### 7. The British Transition and Urban Transformation (1781–1824)

The British phase signified a shift from maritime commerce to administrative centrality. The East India Company subsumed Nagapattinam within the revenue system of Thanjavur, diminishing its earlier autonomy as a port city.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, vestiges of its multicultural past remained visible in architecture and community life.<sup>25</sup> Churches, mosques, and European cemeteries continued to coexist alongside Hindu temples, symbolising the layered cultural legacy of the town.<sup>26</sup>

Although Nagapattinam's maritime prominence waned under British rule, its historical significance endured. The transformation of its coastal economy reflected a broader pattern across the Coromandel, where colonial consolidation reoriented trade routes and local identities.<sup>27</sup>

### 8. Cultural Hybridities and Maritime Society

Nagapattinam's evolution illustrates the complex interplay between commerce and culture. Its port society was shaped by negotiation rather than domination—by the convergence of Tamil, Islamic, and European traditions.<sup>28</sup> The intermingling of linguistic, religious, and culinary practices reveals an enduring creolisation that transcended political boundaries.<sup>29</sup> Churches and mosques stood side by side, Tamil-Portuguese vocabularies emerged, and maritime rituals incorporated elements from multiple faiths.<sup>30</sup>

This hybridity situates Nagapattinam within what scholars describe as the “ecology of the Indian Ocean world”—a space of movement, adaptation, and synthesis.<sup>31</sup> Rather than a passive backdrop to colonial enterprise, the Coromandel littoral emerges as a dynamic cultural frontier that shaped and was shaped by global currents.<sup>32</sup>

### 9. Conclusion

Nagapattinam's long maritime history—from its Chola origins to its colonial reincarnations—embodies the resilience and adaptability of coastal South India. The port's story challenges linear narratives of European dominance, revealing instead a sustained dialogue between local traditions and external influences.<sup>33</sup> Through its shifting political masters, Nagapattinam retained a distinctive identity grounded in pluralism and maritime vitality.<sup>34</sup>

By interpreting the port through a socio-cultural lens, this study reclaims its place within Indian Ocean historiography as more than an economic node: it was a living arena where trade intersected with belief, diplomacy, and everyday life.<sup>35</sup> Its legacy continues to remind us that coastal societies were not peripheral but central to the making of the early modern world.

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