

# Historic landscape, cultural resource and Shared Heritage: the study of Pulicat

N. SYED TAJUDEEN

Assistant Professor

Chettinad Academy of Research and Education

**Abstract** - The research focuses on the Dutch coastal city of Pulicat on the Coromandel coast, which is situated next to India's second-largest water body, the Pulicat Lagoon. The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between water bodies and settlement planning, as it plays a critical role in the evolution of a city. Additionally, this research seeks to identify the shared Indo-Dutch heritage, which is evident in the cultural environment of the city. This cultural environment is a testament to the natural-cultural link, which promotes sustainable practices by combining the monsoon climate with cultural traditions. The town has a rich history dating back to the pre-colonial period, and it was a significant settlement for Portuguese, Dutch, and British maritime merchants during the 15th century. This history is an essential aspect of the maritime history accounts, which bridges the shared global heritage. However, due to industrialization and the construction of new port extensions, the entire coastal town is rapidly evolving without adequate planning to integrate natural and cultural landscapes. Therefore, this paper aims to describe the natural and cultural values of the city, which define the historic landscape and also attempts to understand the form of settlement and its resilience to natural calamities such as cyclones, tsunamis, etc. Additionally, this research highlights the natural-cultural links that support sustainable development in the city.

**keywords** - Historic landscape, Pulicat, resilience society, Shared Heritage

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Water lilies bloom , in the lagoons  
where cranes part the water lilies , looking for fish  
then fly away to stay in fragrant seaside groves,  
near my lover's village washed by the sea.  
His love for me  
is greater than the sea. “  
Neithal ‘‘ coastal area’’ (Ainkurunuru-184)

Belonging to the Ainkurunuru literature, this Sangam poem from the 2nd century A.D. beautifully captures the essence of the coastal landscape. The Coromandel coast, which runs along the Bay of Bengal and is flanked by the eastern Ghats, spans from Andhra Pradesh to the north. The origin of its name has been a topic of much debate and speculation, with various authorities proposing different explanations. Some have suggested that it was derived from Kuru-Mandala, referring to the Kurus, while others believe it came from "kuru-mandal," meaning black sand. Some have even proposed that it was named after Chola mandalam, the land of Cholam millet, or Khara mandala, the hot country. However, it is most likely that the name is a corruption of "chola mandlam," which refers to the kingdom of the Chola, as suggested by Edgar Thurson in 1913.

The Coromandel coast of India has played a significant role in shaping the country's history, particularly in terms of trade and commerce. Over time, numerous ports have developed along this stretch of the coast. Valuable insights into these early towns and ports have been gleaned from Greek sources of the Sangam period. In fact, more than a hundred named cities, political and commercial centers are mentioned in Sangam literature, Ptolemy's map and other Greek sources. The Kings of the Chola established trade links with the Eastern countries from the ports of the South. However, after the colonial powers arrived, trade in the Coromandel was largely dominated by them. The British, in particular, played a significant role in shaping the region's economy. The Dutch also made their presence felt in the area through VOC, building factories for trade in East India. Over time, the Dutch grew increasingly dominant in the region. Concurrently, the British, the French and the Danes also established trading venues on the Coromandel coast

### Coastal landscape of Pulicat Lagoon:

The Pulicat Lagoon, which lies between the states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, covers an extensive area of 759 sq. km. However, a staggering 84% of the water coverage is in the Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh, with the remaining 16% in the Tiruvallur district of Tamil Nadu. This portion of the lagoon is further specified by three major villages and 30 fishing hamlets. The lagoon's borders fall between 13.33° to 13.66° N and 80.23° to 80.25°E. Historical records suggest that the Pulicat Lagoon used to have a depth of 700 sq. km (during low-tide periods) and 400 sq. km. (during high-tide periods) about 80 years ago. However, due to the decline of the lagoon and its surrounding areas, the total area has now decreased to 460 sq. km. and 250

sq. km. respectively. In 1960, the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) occupied a portion of the Pulicat Lagoon and built a station on Sri-Harikota Island. This is the only rocket launching station they control, and rockets are launched for various purposes during the winter monsoon season. Despite its current state of decline, the Pulicat Lagoon remains a crucial landmark and ecosystem, one that demands attention and conservation efforts.

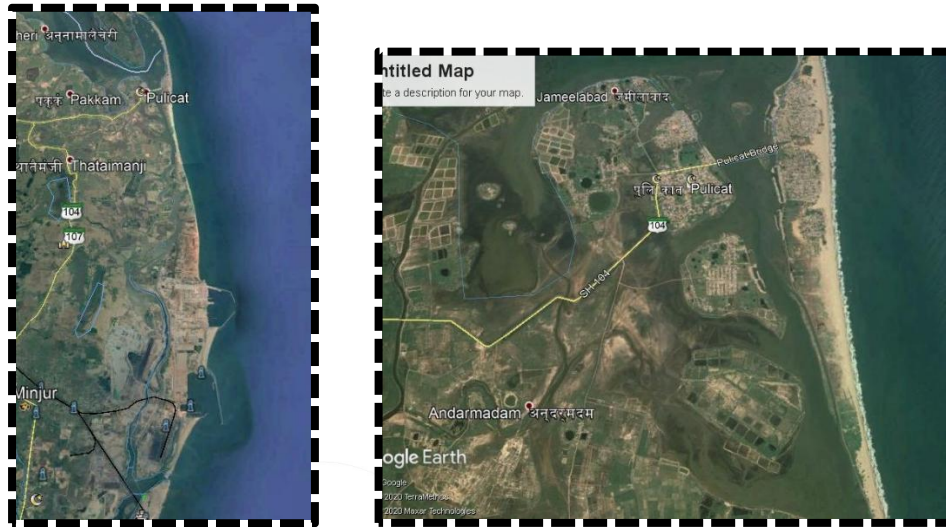


FIG 3 &4 (GOOGLE EARTH IMAGE SHOWING PULICATE FROM ENNORE CREEK, 2020)

ISRO has no interest in the management or protection of the Pulicat Lagoon, which is currently overseen by the State Forest Departments, but this lack of attention presents an imminent ecological red-alert that demands urgent action. A decline in water levels could have a negative impact not only on the local flora and fauna but also on migratory birds, the livelihoods of dependent communities, and the area's climate profile.



FIG 5 (BANKINGAM CANAL 1961)



FIG 6 (BUCKINGHAM CANAL 2020)

The Buckingham Canal, which runs for 79 km along the south-eastern coast of India, has played a crucial role in the region's maritime history. It is closely linked to the Pulicat Lagoon, which helps to stabilize its water level. The canal is fed by three rivers: Arani, Kalangi and Swarnamuki. This water system has been instrumental in facilitating trade in coromandel cotton and textile products since the 6th century, attracting merchants from Arabia, East Asia and Europe. Despite its historical significance, the Buckingham Canal has been neglected in recent years. The construction of the MRTS railway line extension scheme has led to the gradual disappearance of the canal. In addition, the NTPC and NTCL thermal power stations pose a threat by dumping fly ash into the canal. Pulicat's location in the middle of the Coromandel Coast has made it an important transit point for sea merchants. Its shallow sand beds provide suitable harbors for docking, making it a key center for sea trade for centuries. However, the declining water levels and neglect of the canal pose a danger to the indigenous flora and fauna, as well as to the livelihoods of dependent communities. Urgent attention is needed to protect and preserve this important part of India's maritime history.

**Significance of Historic landscape**

The name "Pulicat" is derived from the Tamil word "Pazhalaverkadu," which is a combination of three words: Pazhaya (old), vergal (root), and kadu (forest). The history of Pulicat can be traced back to the 10th century when it was a major port during the Chola kingdom. There is ample evidence to prove the important trade ties that the coast of Coromandel had with the Eastern countries during the Chola period. The ecology of the lagoon has influenced the area for one millennium, as seen in language, food, commerce, trade, and construction technology. The Pulicat Lagoon has a specific environmental management system that has been followed by a local fishing community named Paadu for more than three centuries. Paadu means "to share" in Telugu, and the Dutch method of fishing may have been inspired by this community to avoid infighting. Paadu is a

verbal agreement on traditional fishing rights, primarily governed by a specific caste. If these basic needs are met, they become an economic source. The lagoon and its surrounding area have provided all the opportunities required to explore and extend economic activity well beyond the Asian continent. The Pulicat temples, founded between the 10th and 13th centuries, indicate trade ties with other regions across the subcontinent. Unfortunately, most of these temples are in a dilapidated state, and the majority of the historic temples are unprotected and under the government's purview. Proper conservation guidelines and policies need to be put in place to preserve this heritage. Overall, Pulicat Lagoon has a rich history and cultural significance, which needs to be preserved and protected for future generations.

The rich history of Pulicat reveals that local Arabic Tamil scripts provide access to the Muslim presence in the area for centuries. The Arab merchants who arrived in Pulicat during the 11th century played a crucial role in boosting the growth of cotton and its demand, making this region the hub of the world's cotton movement. The Muslim migration to Pulicat dates back to the Chola dynasty, with references to the Chola Rajan. During this period, Muslims were traders, merchants, and expert shipbuilders who had connections to the Arabian coast and Southeast Asia. The boat building culture and the vernacular knowledge of sailing can still be observed in the settlements. The Muslim community has contributed significantly to the culture, cuisine, and traditions of Pulicat, which are still evident today.

The establishment of the sea route from India to Europe by the Portuguese in the 15th century was a significant event in the history of global trade. Pulicat, with its strategic location and natural harbor, played a key role in supporting ships in distress during this period. Local Muslims have made references to the arrival of Hollanders who landed in Pulicat in search of water and subsequently engaged in business dealings with the locals. The Portuguese enjoyed a monopoly on the trading market for about a century, and Pulicat was a major port town during this time. However, the battle of Tallikota in 1565 A.D. was a turning point, and the Portuguese subsequently declined in importance. Other European countries did not emerge on the scene until the end of the 16th century, and it was not until the 17th century that the Dutch established a presence on the Coromandel coast and began trading with local Muslim rulers. Despite the shifting political and economic dynamics, Pulicat remained a hub of trade and commerce, with a rich and diverse cultural history shaped by the influence of various communities and the exchange of ideas and goods.



FIG 9 (DUTCH TRADING SHIPS ON THE COROMANDEL COAST [CIRCA 1680](#))

The textile trade played a crucial role in the maritime trade of all European countries during the 16th to 18th centuries, accounting for 70% of their trade. Historical documents indicate that more than 4,500 ships passed through Pulicat during this period, greatly impacting not only the coastal areas but also the hinterlands. The first European fort in Pazhalaverkadu was established by the Portuguese in 1502 AD, but it was later destroyed and rebuilt as Fort Geldria by the Dutch in 1602 AD. However, the British completely destroyed the Dutch fort in 1825 and it now lies in ruins, covered by vegetation and left as a vulnerable no man's land. Despite its historical significance, the fort has not been given proper attention for preservation and restoration.

The name Pulicat has an interesting origin. It was once called Pallaecatta, which means European, and was later used to refer to a type of cloth. The cloth, known as sarong or lungi, was worn by both men and women in Asia, while in Persia it was used as a turban along the silk route-region. The material was introduced to Mexico by Spanish and Portuguese and is still referred to as Palliacatte. The British later made the famous woven and dying fabric "Madras Checks" popular. The Pulicat area's socio-economic prosperity emerged through foreign trade and financial market development strategies such as the Dutch East India Company, the world's first joint-stock company. The influences of the Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, and English are inseparable from the cultural heritage of the Pulicat area, owing to the area's long history of maritime trade. The influence of maritime trade on food and lifestyle is another fascinating aspect of socio-economic integration. The building technology introduced by the Portuguese was the most significant change in India. The use of lime created from shell fire in the construction of Dutch (or Chinese) tiles was a novel concept. The primary source of lime shells was deep diving mining in the lagoon. The centuries-old tradition of deep mining has managed to maintain the water level within a few meters (2-3 Mts). The ecological significance of this cannot be overstated, as it has a significant impact on the region's flora and fauna.



### Management of Natural and cultural Heritage

NGOs and public litigations have been instrumental in using the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and the Coastal Regulation Act of 1991, among other environmental legislation, to protect water bodies. However, wetland systems have not been specifically addressed in other legislation. The lagoon of Pulicat plays a crucial role in the region by attracting rain clouds during the annual monsoon season. This underscores the fact that the health of the wetland has a direct impact on the attractiveness of rain clouds and the safety of coastal towns. Given that the coastal region is water-scarce, there is a pressing need for comprehensive planning and conservation measures to protect these wetlands or lagoons through rainwater harvesting and by enriching biodiversity. Such efforts would not only protect the lagoon and its ecosystem but would also benefit the local communities and help safeguard their livelihoods.

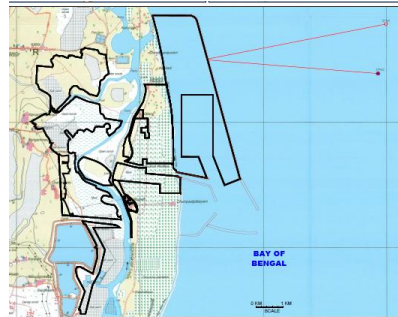


FIG 11 (PROPOSED REVISED MASTER PLAN DEVELOPMENT OF KATTUPALLI PORT)

### Conclusion

For centuries, trade and commerce have been the driving force behind the development of the Coromandel Coast, and it has played a significant role in shaping India's post-independence growth. The region has been a melting pot of diverse cultures and has shared a rich heritage relationship with various Asian and European countries. As a result, it has been quick to adopt new technology, education, and urban governance practices. However, the recent developments in two new container ports located at the north and south ends of the coast have raised concerns about their impact on the lagoon. The lagoon is a vital ecosystem that supports the livelihoods of many communities, and any harm caused to it could have far-reaching consequences. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the effects of these new ports on the lagoon and take necessary action to mitigate any adverse impacts.

### REFERENCES

- [1] R.Alex.Rea, "The Monumental Remains of Dutch East India Company in the presidency of madras 1664-1824," Madras, 1897.
- [2] Philips Baldaeus, The description of the East India cost of Malabar and Coaramandel- ASd 1640. AE published 2000.
- [3] Bishnupriya Sahoo & K Bhaskaran Prasad, "Assessment on Historical Cyclone Tracks in the Bay of Bengal, East Coast of India", International Journal of Climatology". March 2015.
- [4] Farooqui, A and GG Vaz 2000, 'Holocene Sea-Level Changes and Climate Fluctuations; Pulicat Lagoon: A Case Study', Curr. Sci.79 (No.10): 1484-1488 R. Nicole, "Title of paper with only first word capitalized," J. Name Stand. Abbrev., in press.
- [5] Census of India, 1961, Madras Vol. I X, District census handbook of Chengulput district, Vol. I.
- [6] District Census Handbook, Andhra Pradesh, Census 1961: Visakhapatnam, Vol. 16, Aandhra Pradesh, 1967.