

A JOURNEY WITH THE SACRED CHANK

How the Indian chank, or conch, once in the bag of the freediver, is transformed in the hands of skilled workers in a process that also helps create fortunes and contributes to the history of places and people.

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THE FISHERIES and trade for sacred chanks have been practised for over two millennia. Fishers now only need a licence to collect chanks but are free to sell them to anyone. Freedivers collect live chanks from the Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar and sell them, still covered with organic matter and with the animal inside them, to merchants who sort them on the basis of size and quality. The shells then reach small-scale processors, who smoothen and polish them before selling them in distinct markets—bangle manufacturers, decorative shell retailers—or as a sacred object of worship.

It is near impossible for humans to be unaffected by an encounter with molluscs. Those of us who retain only a dim memory of high-school taxonomy might not even know that humans have been in the company of molluscs for centuries. The phylum Mollusca is, after all, a very broad category and encompasses over 85,000 species of invertebrates. Of these, jellyfish and cephalopods such as octopuses and squids might be more obscure, but almost everyone has seen a shell, either split open into two identical sets (as in bivalves) or as a twist of colour and calcium around a cavity (as in gastropods).

Molluscs are found in freshwater systems, seas and even oceans, and there is many a molluscan trace encountered in contemporary everyday life that makes it hard to ignore. In India, molluscs are found amidst human communities across social hierarchies, geographies and cultures. An example of a relatively inexpensive decorative shell, although high on its beauty quotient, is the *Melo melo*, a smooth creamy shell commonly known as the "beggar's bowl". On a research trip to the Palk Bay in 2016, this writer met a Hindu mendicant in Pattukottai, in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu, who proudly showed her a handsome specimen of this shell. He had bought it for Rs.80 after making a special visit by bus to

THE LARGEST SHELL TRADERS

are based in Rameswaram in Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu. The steady depletion of this resource and its durability make shell traders store even lower grade chunks until they command a good price in the market. What was considered low grade and useless at one time can today fetch a good price as polishing techniques and processing material make it possible to mask minor flaws such as holes made by shell-boring organisms. The shells are stored in the open and soon the outer cover disintegrates leaving behind the naked shell.



Kilakarai, over 150 kilometres from Punalotti.

Kilakarai, in present-day Ramanathapuram district, has been the historical hub of trade in marine products and bivalve and gastropod shells. Here, and in the temple town of Rameswaram, molluscan presence continues to turn the wheels of its merchants' fortunes.

The meaning of molluscan presence in our lives is multifold. They can be found tied around the necks of cows, hanging from shops, transport vehicles, and above thresholds of houses, and beaded with ropes and other ritual objects (including also *vanu*, cocoons, sacred threads). Usually marine gastropod shells (mostly smaller *Turbinella pyrum*, or the *Moran* varieties, mostly *Chionea monensis* and *cowries*), they are intended to dispel evil and are emblematic of multiple gods, goddesses, spirits and their mystical and spiritual powers.

At the higher end of molluscan prestige objects are pearls produced by pearl oysters, rare and unusual shells such as the highly valued *vallampuzha*, or *sinistral*, variety of sacred chank or sacred conch. It is known in Sanskrit as *shankhā*, and in Tamil as *shangu* or *chankā*. British records refer to this animal as the sacred chank. But there is some confusion whether the common name is merely 'the Indian conch or shank' to distinguish it from the sacrosanct *vallampuzha* variety owned by some temples and monasteries across the world.

How commodities or things embody value and meaning has been at the heart of anthropological enquiry. Is the sacred chank merely an economic commodity, a cultural object, an ecological entity or a whole that is more than the sum of its parts? We know that throughout human history, marine animals such as the one we call *Turbinella pyrum* have shared deep bonds with humans, dictated human fortunes, and wielded tremendous influence on human behaviour or agency.

In the whole world, there was no other place where this chank was present in such abundance as in the

seabeds of the Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar along the coastal areas of present-day Tamil Nadu and the Northern Province of Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

The fisheries for these animals were aimed at preserving the shell of this animal; the meat was consumed by diver communities. These communities supplied chank for fisheries supplied chank for and various parts of the island, across various parts of the subcontinent for over two millennia, alternating with a fishery for fish, alternating with a fishery for people whose fame was worldwide. The fishery was largely state-controlled since colonial times and only recently moved into the hands of licensed fishers.

However, over the last few decades chank are not collected in as much abundance as before. Fishers attribute this to multiple causes, the primary one being fishing by destructive bottom trawling.

The importance of molluscs has not diminished despite significant shifts in cultural modes among people. Today, the Gulf of Mannar is one of the last remaining sites for the sacred chank. The life of the mollusc underwater is a story for another day; equally little is known about the physical and transformative journey of the chank when it encounters a diver. Chank has to be literally hunted down by skilled breath-hold divers who have tricks and skills to find their quarry. Once safely secured in the diver's bag, a series of transformations await the mollusc on land.

THE OPERCULUM, a calcareous lid that covers the opening of the shell when the animal retracts into it, used to command a high price at one time as it was ground into a paste for use in the manufacture of incense. Artificial fragrances are added to this paste so that the scent lasts for a long period. Women and children collect the operculum that is removed from the animal and await a passing trader. The value of the operculum varies; a handful can fetch anywhere between 20 and 100 rupees.





THE SCIENTIFIC NAME of the mollusc that lives in the chank is *Turbinella pyrum*. Once it is removed from the water, the animal dies slowly. The animal is edible and is consumed domestically where there are no facilities for its preservation with ice, or traders to sell it. The local preparation in the Pak Bay, of a curry with chank meat, is similar to other curries with chicken or mutton. In some regions, the meat is shaved into chips and sun-dried. This is then deep-fried and served as an accompaniment to other food preparations.

ONLY IN THE LARGER TOWNS of the Pak Bay and Gulf of Mannar coastlines are there facilities for storage, preservation (by ice) and sale of chank meat. In Mandapam, a trader has established direct market linkages with retailers in Bengaluru. The chank meat is sold to select restaurants specialising in Korean cuisine. Post-harvest processing is simple and involves cleaning off physical impurities using only water. The meat is packed in standardised boxes that are frozen and later transported. The trade involves a careful assessment of risks and only small volumes are traded on the basis of guaranteed demand.





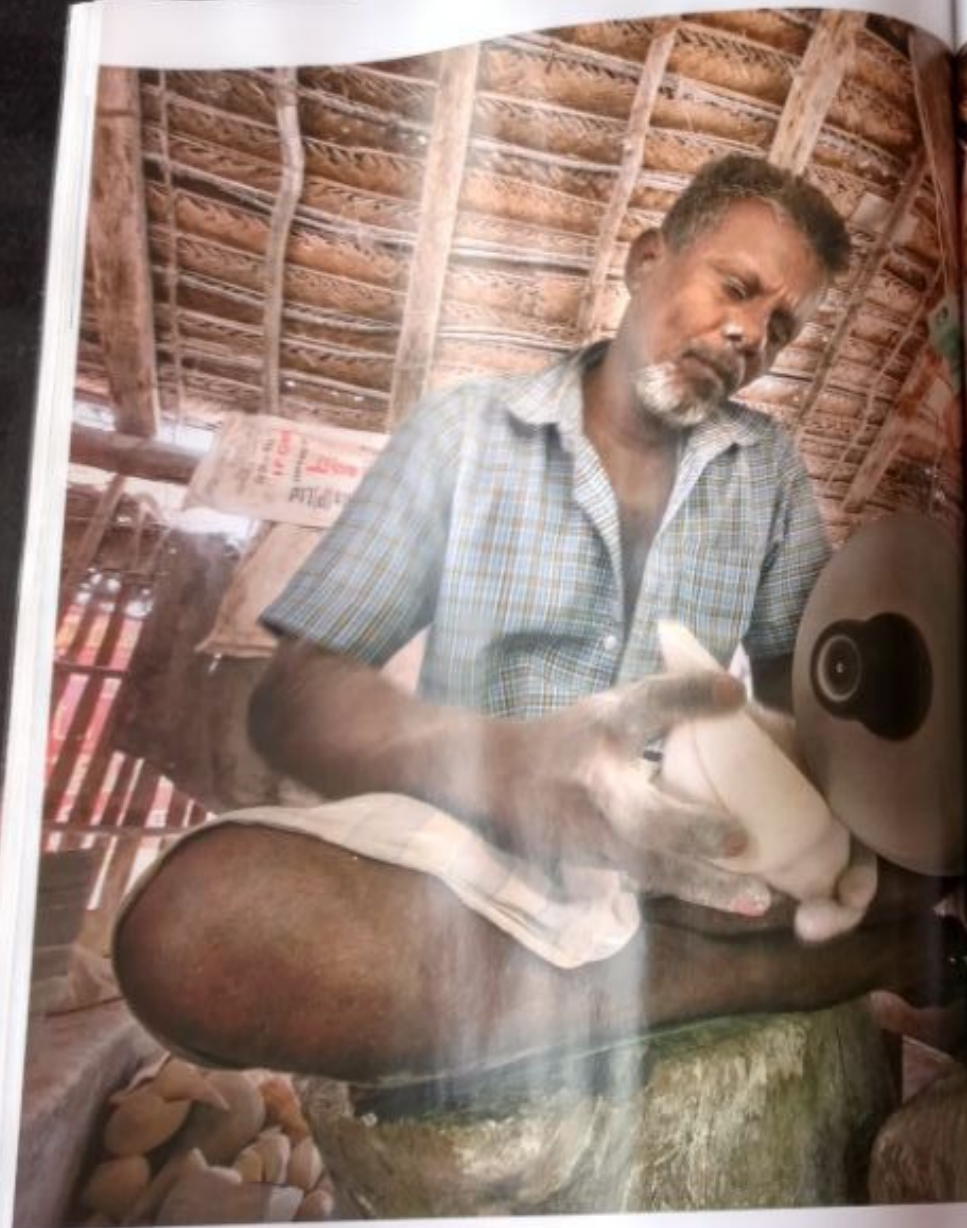
CULTURAL IMPRINT

The life of the chank above water begins with the death of the animal. Cooked, consumed or chilled for a distant food market, it leaves lasting cultural imprints on its consumers. Many other stages of transformation are bestowed on the chank. The animal itself is divided into its parts, with shell, flesh and fat (the operculum, a calcareous lid that covers the opening of the shell when the animal retracts into it) moving along different economic chains.

This photoessay captures some moments of this writer's journey with the chank as it changes shape and is transformed at the hands of humans. We also witnessed the ways in which chanks might be seen as forcing certain skills among those who labour over its transformation, their peculiar instruments and working conditions, and the ways in which the chank might create human fortunes and contribute to the history of places and people. □
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(For a full collection of photoessays on marine life in the Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar, write to aarthi77@gmail.com for a copy of the book *Knowing the Palk Bay* produced with support from the Coastal and Marine Protected Areas (CMPA) project of GIZ, India.)

THE SHELLS are sourced by middlemen who sell them to larger shell traders such as Kalam Traders and Gandhi Traders in Rameswaram. Here, numerous people are involved in processing work. Shells have to be graded on the basis of weight, shape, smoothness and size. They are also categorised into jaali and patti varieties, the two main local "types".



THE MAIN SHELL TRADERS

in Ramswaram and Kilakarai in the Gulf of Mannar have processing units located in their premises. These units operate small motorised polishing machines that smoothen the naked shell, devoid of its outer covering of organic matter, and give it a uniform shape. The rough edges of the mouth of the shell are smoothened so that it can be gripped freely without fear of injury. The people involved in the polishing work have been doing it for most of their lives and often with the same employer. The apex of the shell is cut off to allow air to be blown into it. Blowing the conch is supposed to lend auspiciousness to the environs of the devotee.



AFTER THE SHELLS ARE POLISHED, they are once again stored in separate piles in godowns, always according to the variety—either jaadi or pani. These shells are rarely sold as they are, that is, without processing or chemical polishing. While it may appear as though a large quantity is processed daily, in reality fresh stocks of good size are only available depending on the success of each new season, and often traders dip into earlier stocks to meet the demand.



THE PROCESS OF POLISHING

involves subjecting the shell to two stages of chemical treatment. First, the shell is placed in a solution of bleaching powder where it loses some of its pigmentation. Next, it is briefly dipped in highly diluted hydrochloric acid. In the larger processing centres, workers are seen wearing gloves and protective boots, but the acrid smell of acid is reminiscent of its corrosive power and offers a strange contrast to the glistening smoothness of the shell. Save for its shape and name, there is little to indicate the chank's incredible journey from the Palk Bay's seabed to the mantelpiece of a consumer's home.



THE FINAL STAGE OF DEPARTURE from coastal Tamil Nadu to different parts of India and abroad can sometimes involve a long waiting period for the chank. To negotiate the fickleness of both supply and demand in the chank trade, owners of successful companies rely on vast networks of knowledge-bearers on either end of the supply-demand spectrum. The livelihoods of those involved in the trade (fishers, traders, labourers, sales people and owners) depend on several generations of knowledge production and practice. All links of the chain need to be strong for this trade to survive. To ensure the fair distribution of benefits from this trade, these multiple skills and knowledge must be understood. At the same time, we must acknowledge that the gains in this trade have brought with it an accumulation of losses, both in culture and in nature.