

P. K. GODE

**Some References to Persian Pearls
in Sanskrit Literature**

India owes much to Persia on account of the age-long contact of these two countries in the sphere of politics, commerce and culture. As a result of my interest in the history of Indian culture, which has absorbed much from foreign cultural contacts I was led to the study of some problems connected with the Indo-Persian contact. So far I have published two papers bearing on this contact viz. (1) *References to Persian Horses in Indian Literature*¹ (from C.A.D. 600 onwards) and (2) *References to Persian oil in Sanskrit works between C.A.D. 500 and 1100*². After the publication of these papers I began to study the history of Persian pearls as revealed by Indian sources. In this connection I wrote to my friend Shri A. N. Gulati, M. Sc., of the Technological Laboratory, Bombay, on account of his wide knowledge of technical literature, which is not available to me and with which I may not become familiar during my limited leisure devoted to research. In reply to my inquiry Shri A. N. Gulati wrote to me as follows in his letter dated 9—12—1947:

“Your letter opens a new track for me. Persia is one of the oldest pearl-trading countries, and Bahrain Islands in the Persian Gulf are among the most ancient sites for finding pearls. Trade routes connecting Persia by the royal road of Herodotus to the Aegian Sea on Eastern Shores and ancient roads to Afghanistan, India and North-eastern China were well known”. “A flourishing trade was carried on between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley thousands of years before the Christian Era” is stated on page 485 in *Everybody's Book of Facts* of the Home Library Club, Times of India.

Sir George Watt in the *Commercial Products of India* mentions the following facts:

“The Pearl fisheries of India have been famous from remote times. Garcia de Orta in 1563 (Coll. XXXV) mentions the principal localities in

¹ Vide “Poona Orientalist”, Vol. XI, Parts 1 and 2 (1946), pp. 1—7.

² Vide “Journal of the Kalinga Historical Research Society”, Vol. II, No. 1, pp. 15—17. (This paper is reprinted in my *Studies in Indian Literary History*, Vol. I, pp. 322—324).

the Persian Gulf where pearls were then obtained and says the pearls were cleaned and polished with pounded rice and salt. Linschoten in 1598 and Tavernier³ in 1676 describe both the Persian and Ceylon pearl fisheries. At the present time the largest Pearl fisheries in the East are those of Ceylon, for information concerning which the reader should consult the Reports submitted to the Government of Ceylon in 1904 by Prof. Herdman, Mr. J. P. Lewis, and Mr. Hornell; also Herdman's much fuller report published by the Royal Society, London, (1903—06—5 Vols.). In 1905 the total amount realised was Rs. 25, 10, 621 and the number of oysters fished up 49, 250, 189. These fisheries (it is understood) have been really sold, or rather leased, for £ 20,000 — a year to a Company, who are to work them. The only other Pearl fishery of importance is that of the Mergui district, Burma, which forms a considerable source of revenue to the Burma Government"⁴.

(I) If Persia is one of the oldest pearl-trading countries as stated by Shri Gulati we must find references in Sanskrit literature to Persian pearls. Unfortunately it is difficult to get such references in early Sanskrit sources. In the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya, the great treatise on Indian polity composed more than 1500 years ago, we find a list of the different varieties of pearls. These varieties are as follows:

- (1) *tāmraparnika*, (2) *pāṇḍyakavāṭaka*, (3) *pāsikya*, (4) *Kauleya*, (5) *Caurṇeya*, (6) *māhendra*, (7) *Kārdamika*, (8) *Srautasīya*, (9) *hrāḍīya*, (10) *haimavata*⁵.

I am concerned in this paper with the variety *Kārdamika* (No. 7) mentioned above. The editor Shri Gaṇapati Śāstri explains the term *Kārdamika* as follows:

³ Vide p. 121 of Vol. II of *Travels in India* by Tavernier, London, 1889.

⁴ It would be worth while collecting references to Indian Pearl fisheries in Indian and foreign sources of history. Marco Polo in his *Travels* (A.D. 1298) ed. by Thomas Wright, London, 1901, records some interesting information about the Province of Malabar and its *Pearl fishery* (pages 381—384). Separate Companies of merchants with experts in diving for oysters carry on the work of collecting pearl oysters in bags of netting fastened to the bodies of these divers. Pearls obtained in this fishery are "round and of good lustre". This work is carried on from April to the middle of May. The King is entitled to the tenth part of the pearls of his choice and he liberally pays for them. Pearls were sold by Indian traders at Ormuz on the eastern shore of the Persian Gulf (p. 62). Pearls were found in a lake of salt water near Yung-ning-tu (p. 258) and near Zipangu an island of Japan. Some inhabitants of this island have a custom of putting pearls into the mouth of the Corpse (p. 351).

⁵ Vide p. 179 of *Arthaśāstra* with the commentary of T. Gaṇapati Śāstri, (Trivandrum Sanskrit Series, No. LXXIX, 1924, chap. XXXII, *Prakarāṇa* 29).

“*Kārdamikam, Kardamā nāma Pārasikeṣu nadī, tasyām utpannam*” (*Kārdamika* is a pearl produced in *Kardamā*, a river in Persia). I am not aware of the authority on which this explanation of *Kārdamika* is based by Gaṇapati Śāstri. Presuming it to be correct one is likely to conclude that this is the earliest reference to Persian pearls in Sanskrit sources.

(II) The great Indian astronomer Varāhamihira (C.A.D. 500) in his Sanskrit treatise on astronomy called the *Brhatsamhitā*⁶ devotes chapter No. 81 to characteristics of pearls (*muktalakṣaṇa*). Verse 2 of this chapter reads as follows:

Siṃhalaka-pāralaukika-Saurāṣṭraka
tāmraparṇi-pāraśavāḥ
Kauberā-pāṇḍyavāṭaka-haima-ity ā-
karāhy aṣṭau 2

(There are eight places which produce pearls viz.,)

- (1) *Siṃhalaka* (Ceylon)
- (2) *Pāraloka* (Country)
- (3) *Surāṣṭra* (Kathiawad)
- (4) *Tāmraparṇi* (river⁷ of this name)
- (5) *Pāraśava* (Country)
- (6) *Kauberā* (Country)
- (7) *Pāṇḍyavāṭa* (Country)
- (8) *Haima* (Country of the Himalaya mountain)

In verse 5 of this chapter the pearls of the *Pāraśava* country are described as follows:

Jyotiṣmantah-Śubhrā-gurava-
ḥatimahāguṇās-ca Pāraśavāḥ

(The pearls of the *Pāraśava* country have many high qualities such as brilliance, whiteness, and heaviness).

It will be seen from a comparison of the list of pearls in the *Arthaśāstra* with that in the *Brhatsamhitā* that the following varieties are common to both these lists:

- (1) *Tāmraparṇika*
- (2) *Pāṇḍyavāṭaka*
- (3) *Haimavata*

Verse 2 of chapter 81 of the *Brhatsamhitā* quoted above is quoted by King Bhōja (C.A.D. 1050) in his chapter on pearls (*muktā-yukti*) of his work

⁶ Vide pp. 442—443 of *Brhatsamhitā* with Marāṭhī Translation by J. H. Athalye, Ratnagiri, 1874.

⁷ About “River Pearls” see p. 421 of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. XVII (1929), article on “Pearl”. No reference to Indian rivers producing pearls is found in this article, which mentions rivers in Scotland, Ireland, U.S.A. etc. producing pearls.

Yuktikalpataru (ed. by Īśvara Chandra Shāstri, Calcutta, 1917) p. 111 (verse 87). In verses 89—92 King Bhoja explains the different kinds of pearls mentioned in verse 87. Explaining the term *pāraśava* he states in verse 91 that it is yellow (“*pītam pāraśavod-bhavam*”). This statement about the yellow colour of the *pāraśava* pearls made by Bhoja conflicts with the statement of the *Bṛhatsamhitā* about them according to which the *pāraśava* pearls are white (*śubhra*).

A friend of mine holds the view that the *Pāraśava*⁸ pearls mentioned in the *Bṛhatsamhitā* are possibly identical with *Pārasika* (Persian) pearls. This is a hypothesis worth examining but at present I have found no evidence of a dependable type in support of it.

(III) Leaving aside the *Kārdamika* pearls and the *Pāraśava* pearls of doubtful identification I shall record some direct references to the Persian pearls. In the encyclopaedic Sanskrit work called the *Manasollāsa* of King Somēśvara (composed about A.D. 1130) we get the following references to *Pārasika* (Persian) pearls:

Pages 67—70 of *Manasollāsa* (Vol. II, G. O. Series, Baroda, 1925) deal with the examination of pearls (*mauktika-parīkṣā*). Verse 434 on page 68 reads as follows:

Śuktijanmāmbudhermadhye Simhale Cāravāṭake
Pārasike barbāre Ca bhaven muktāphalam Śubham 43

(Good pearls are produced in Ceylon, Barbara Country, *Parāsika* country etc.)

Verse 440 on page 68 reads as follows:

Pārasikodbhavam Svaccham Sītam muktāphalam Śubham
Isachyāmam ca rūkṣam Ca mauktikam barbarodhbhavam 440

(Pearls produced in the *Pārasika* country (Persia) are clear and white etc.). The above two references to Persian (*Pārasika*) pearls are definite and reliable. They show that about A.D. 1100 the Persian pearls had already established a good reputation in the Indian market by their beauty and high quality.

(IV) There is a Sanskrit work on pearls and other precious stones etc. called the *Ratnaparīkṣā* by Agastī. It is represented by a manuscript in the Government Manuscripts Library at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona (No. 189 of 1892—95). On folio 11 of this manuscript we find the following verses⁹ mentioning the different kinds of pearls produced in different countries including Persia (*Pārasika*):

⁸ I do not find any identification of the *Pāraśava* country in *Historical Geography of Ancient India* by B. C. Law, Paris, 1954.

⁹ These verses have been quoted by M. L. Khambete in his Marathi book *Ratna-Pradīpa* (Jalgaon, 1931), p. 327.

Siṃhalaḥ prathamo jñeyo ārabāto dvitīyakaḥ
Parasīkastyīyastu Caturtho barbarākaraḥ
Susnigdhā madhuvarṇaṅca succhāyam Siṃhalākare
Ārabāte śucisnigdhāmāpītam ca śaśīprabham
Sitattvam nirmalattvam ca parasīkākārodbhavē
Barbaram jalarukṣam ca varṇairākaramādīset

In the above extract the qualities of different kinds of pearls produced in different countries are mentioned. The names of countries which produce these pearls are: (1) *Siṃhala* (Ceylon), (2) *Ārabāta*, (3) *Parasīka* (Persia) and (4) *Barbara*. The qualities of Persian pearls mentioned in the extract are their *Sitattva* (whiteness) and *Nirmalattva* (clearness). These two qualities are also mentioned as characteristics of Persian pearls in the *Mānasollāsa* of A.D. 1130, where they are indicated by the words (1) *Sita* and *Svaccha* corresponding to (1) *Sitattva* and (2) *Nirmalattva* in Agastī's *Ratnaparīkṣā*. Very probably the *Mānasollāsa* is indebted to the *Ratnaparīkṣā* of Agastī for this statement. If this probability is proved on definite evidence we may conclude that Agastī's *Ratnaparīkṣā* is earlier than about A.D. 1000.

(V) The *Śabdakalpādruma* (Calcutta, 1891), Vol. III contains an article on pearls, in which extracts about pearls are quoted from several Sanskrit texts. On page 733 of this volume we get a long extract about pearls from the *Garuḍapurāna*, chapter 69. In this extract the eight countries which produce pearls viz., *Siṃhala Pāraśava* etc. (mentioned in the *Bṛhatsamhitā*) are also mentioned in a verse, which is followed by another verse, the last two lines of which read as follows:

Utpadyate varddhana-parasīka -
pātālalokāntarasimhaleṣu

(Pearls produced in *Varddhana*, *Parasīka* countries etc.). On reading the two verses referred to above, the first of which mentions the *Pāraśava* country and the second mentions the *Parasīka* country, an impression is gathered that the author of these verses treated these two countries as different and not identical. If this impression is correct, the possibility of identifying *Pāraśava* pearls with *Parasīka* (Persian) pearls becomes quite remote. The references to Persian pearls and their high qualities recorded above from Sanskrit sources prior to C.A.D. 1150 clearly show the trade in these pearls carried on by Indian and foreign traders some centuries prior to C.A.D. 1000. Ormuz, situated on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Persia has been described in A.D. 1298, by Marco Polo in his *Travels* (London, 1901) pp. 61—63. He states (p. 62) that this port was then frequented by traders from all parts of India, who brought for sale precious stones, pearls etc. Evidently these Indian traders must have taken to India the Persian Pearls from the port of Ormuz, the great emporium of the merchants in the

kingdom of Kirman. The continuity of this trade in Persian pearls with India has been vouched by Tavernier (1676). It is further vouched by John Fryer's *Travels in East India and Persia* (Hakluyt Society, London, 1912). These *Travels* were carried out between A.D. 1672 and 1682. About the Persian pearls Fryer states (pp. 364—365):

“The best (pearls) are found in the Persian Gulph (shared between the Persian and Arab, they farming the Fishery yearly to those that bid most) between the island *Ormuz*¹⁰ and *Byran* (Bahrein) etc.”.

The ancients obtained their pearls chiefly from India and the Persian Gulf. Since the days of the Macedonians pearl-fishing has been carried on in the Persian Gulf¹¹. It is possible to suppose that Persian pearls must have been imported to India and other countries many centuries before the Christian era. According to A. Lucas¹² mother of pearl was used in Egypt from pre-dynastic times but the pearl was not used until the Ptolemaic period. In the necklace of Queen Ahhotpe, mother of King Amosis, of the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty pearls are used but Lucas describes them as “button pearls” and not true pearls. Pearls are referred to in the *Holy Bible* (Revelation 18: 12 and 16 — “The merchandise of gold, and silver, and precious stones, and of pearls etc.”). There is every possibility about these pearls having a Persian origin.

Though definite references to Persian pearls in early Indian sources have not yet been traced by me the possibility of the trade of Persian pearls in India in ancient times cannot be altogether ruled out. I hope the readers of this paper would throw more light on the subject of this paper than what I have thrown in the foregoing lines.

¹⁰ *Ormuz* is mentioned as *Harmozeia* by Arrian in his *Voyage of Nearchus* (C.B.C. 325) — see p. 646 of *Hobson-Jobson* by Yule and Burnell, London, 1903.

¹¹ Vide p. 421 of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. XVII, 1929, para on “Pearl Fisheries”.

¹² Vide p. 458 of *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries* by A. Lucas, London, 1948 (3rd Edition).