



KAMARAJ IAS ACADEMY
Only IAS Academy by Grandson of "Perunthalsivam Kamarajar"

Poompuhar Excavations Reveal Ancient Tamilakam's Maritime Links with West Asia and Wider Indian Ocean Trade Networks

Published On: 29-09-2026

Recent Developments:

- The **Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology**, in collaboration with the **Indian Maritime University**, conducted the third phase of underwater archaeological exploration off **Poompuhar in Mayiladuthurai district, Tamil Nadu**, during September 2026.
- The exploration recovered a **fragment of a West Asian torpedo jar**, more than **250 ceramic fragments including glazed ware**, and **4 terracotta ring wells** from an underwater area covering nearly 2 square kilometres.
- The torpedo-jar fragment is significant because such vessels were used to transport **liquid commodities such as wine and oil** through western Indian Ocean maritime routes, strengthening evidence of Poompuhar's commercial links with **West Asia and the Mediterranean world**.
- The ring wells found on the seabed may indicate the presence of a **palaeochannel**, suggesting that parts of the ancient settlement and its landscape were subsequently submerged because of coastal changes and erosion.
- The exploration is important for understanding **ancient Indian maritime trade, coastal archaeology, Chola history and the integration of Tamilakam into wider Indian Ocean networks**.

Poompuhar: Historical and Geographical Significance:

Location and Historical Importance:

- **Poompuhar**, also known as **Kaveripoompattinam or Kaveripattinam**, was an important early Chola port situated at the **mouth of the Cauvery River**, where the river meets the Bay of Bengal.
- The settlement occupied an important position on the **Coromandel Coast**, providing access to maritime routes across the Bay of Bengal and the wider Indian Ocean.
- **Sangam and post-Sangam literature** portray Poompuhar as a major commercial centre frequented by merchants from different parts of India and Southeast Asia.
- The city was traditionally described through **Maruvurppakkam**, located near the seashore, **Pattinappakkam**, located towards the west, and **Nalangadi**, situated between the two.
- Literary and archaeological evidence together indicate that Poompuhar functioned as an important centre of **commerce, craft production, maritime exchange and urban activity**.

Archaeological Evidence:

- Earlier underwater investigations had already indicated that the ancient habitation extended beyond the present shoreline, while recent excavations have added material evidence for its wider maritime connections.
- The discovery of a **West Asian torpedo-jar fragment** provides material evidence that complements literary references to Poompuhar's overseas commercial activity.

Kamaraj IAS Academy

Plot A P.127, AF block, 6 th street, 11th Main Rd, Shanthi Colony, Anna Nagar, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600040

Phone: **044 4353 9988 / 98403 94477 / Whatsapp : 09710729833**

- The recovery of **ring wells, pottery and structural remains** is also important for reconstructing the ancient settlement, freshwater management and changing coastal landscape.
- The Government of India had permitted the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology to undertake exploration at Poompuhar in 2025; a Lok Sabha reply in March 2026 stated that the report of that work had not yet been submitted at that time.

Poompuhar and Ancient Indian Ocean Trade:

West Asian and Mediterranean Connections:

- The **torpedo jar** is an important archaeological indicator because these vessels were associated with the transportation of liquid cargo across western Indian Ocean routes.
- Its presence at Poompuhar supports the interpretation that Tamilakam participated in maritime exchanges extending towards **West Asia, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean-linked trade system**.
- The evidence demonstrates that ancient Indian maritime commerce involved not only coastal exchange but also **long-distance transoceanic networks**.

Southeast Asian Connections:

- Poompuhar's geographical position on the eastern coast facilitated connections with **Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and other Bay of Bengal trading centres**.
- Literary evidence describes the movement of commodities and merchants between Poompuhar and regions associated with present-day **Southeast Asia**.
- These networks contributed to the movement of **goods, people, cultural practices, religious ideas and technologies** across the Indian Ocean.

Maritime Trade of Major Ancient Indian Powers:

Mauryan Empire:

- The **Mauryan Empire** developed extensive internal and external trade networks connecting different regions of the subcontinent with maritime centres.
- The **Arthashastra** refers to the **Navadhyaksha**, an official associated with waterways and shipping, indicating state attention to maritime activity and regulation.

Satavahanas:

- The **Satavahanas** played an important role in trade connecting the **Deccan with the western coast**.
- Ports such as **Kalyan, Sopara and Bharukachcha** facilitated commercial exchanges with western Indian Ocean and Roman trading networks.

Cheras:

- The **Muziris** region on the Malabar Coast emerged as an important centre of overseas commerce.
- The **Periplus of the Erythraean Sea** and Sangam literature provide evidence of maritime trade involving the Chera realm, particularly in commodities such as **pepper and other high-value goods**.

Pandyas:

- The **Pandyan kingdom** participated in Indian Ocean commerce through ports such as **Korkai**, which was particularly associated with the **pearl fisheries of the Gulf of Mannar**.
- Korkai therefore illustrates the relationship between **maritime trade, coastal resources and specialised commodity production**.

Western Kshatrapas:

- The **Western Kshatrapas** controlled parts of western India and participated in **Arabian Sea trade** through important commercial centres of Gujarat and the western Deccan.

Pallavas:

- The **Pallavas** maintained maritime and cultural connections from the eastern coast with **Southeast Asia**, particularly regions corresponding to present-day Cambodia and mainland Southeast Asia.
- These links demonstrate that maritime commerce also facilitated wider **cultural transmission and political interaction**.

Other Important Ancient Indian Ports:

Western and Southern Coast:

- **Muziris:** An important Malabar Coast centre associated with trade across the Arabian Sea and contacts with the Roman world.
- **Bharuch:** Located on the Narmada and known as **Broach**, it became an important western Indian commercial centre connected with inland and maritime trade.
- **Korkai:** A major Pandyan port associated with the **Gulf of Mannar pearl fisheries**.

Eastern Coast:

- **Arikamedu:** Located near present-day Puducherry, it has yielded archaeological evidence of **Indo-Roman commercial connections**.
- **Tamralipti:** Located in present-day West Bengal, it was an important eastern maritime centre connecting India with both western and eastern trading regions.
- **Kaveripattinam:** The port of Poompuhar served as an important centre for trade with **Southeast Asia and the Far East**; NCERT material also identifies it as a major centre for merchandise handling and shipbuilding.

Maritime Trade as a Driver of Ancient India's Prosperity:

Economic and Urban Impact:

- Overseas trade generated **wealth, customs revenue and wider markets** for Indian agricultural, craft and luxury goods.
- Major ports developed into **urban commercial centres**, attracting merchants, artisans, sailors and specialised service providers.
- Foreign demand encouraged specialised production of **textiles, spices, beads, ceramics, pearls and metal goods**.
- Rulers benefited through **customs duties, port taxes and regulation of commercial activity**.

Cultural and Technological Impact:

- Maritime networks facilitated the movement of **religions, art, languages, ideas and technologies** across the Indian Ocean.
- Sustained maritime commerce encouraged advances in **shipbuilding, navigation and knowledge of seasonal monsoon winds**.
- NCERT notes the ancient Indian tradition of **stitched shipbuilding**, in which wooden planks were joined using cords rather than nails, demonstrating technological adaptation to Indian Ocean sailing conditions.

Underwater Archaeology and Changing Coastal Landscapes:

Kamaraj IAS Academy

Plot A P.127, AF block, 6 th street, 11th Main Rd, Shanthi Colony, Anna Nagar, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600040

Phone: **044 4353 9988 / 98403 94477** / Whatsapp : **09710729833**

Archaeological Significance:

- Poompuhar demonstrates how **underwater archaeology** can supplement literary and terrestrial archaeological evidence for reconstructing ancient Indian history.
- The discovery of structures and ring wells below the present sea level suggests that archaeological interpretation must consider **coastal erosion, changing shorelines, palaeochannels and sea-level changes**.
- Modern investigations use technologies such as **side-scan sonar, echo sounders and other seabed-survey techniques** to identify submerged archaeological features before targeted excavation.

Broader Historical Significance:

- Poompuhar provides a case study of how ancient Indian coastal settlements were simultaneously **economic centres, cultural interfaces and nodes in international trade networks**.
- Its archaeological record helps connect **Sangam literature with material evidence**, strengthening the multidisciplinary study of early historic South India.
- The continuing exploration also demonstrates the importance of protecting submerged cultural heritage from **coastal erosion and changing marine conditions**.

UPSC Relevance:

General Studies Paper I:

- **Ancient Indian History:** Sangam Age, early Cholas, Cheras, Pandyas and ancient urban centres.
- **Indian Culture:** Maritime heritage, literature, archaeological sources and cultural exchanges.
- **Geography:** Coastal geomorphology, palaeochannels, erosion and changing shorelines.
- **World History Linkage:** Ancient Indian Ocean networks and India's commercial connections with West Asia, the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia.

Prelims Focus:

- **Poompuhar:** Early Chola port on the Cauvery–Bay of Bengal interface.
- **Korkai:** Pandyan port associated with pearl fisheries.
- **Muziris:** Major Malabar Coast trading centre.
- **Arikamedu:** Important archaeological site associated with Indo-Roman trade.
- **Tamralipti:** Major eastern maritime centre.
- **Arthashastra:** Reference to **Navadhyaksha** in the context of waterways and shipping.
- **Periplus of the Erythraean Sea:** Important source for ancient Indian Ocean commercial networks.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Analytical Framework:

- **Archaeology + Literature:** Poompuhar shows how archaeological material can corroborate and contextualise evidence from Sangam and post-Sangam literature.
- **Indian Ocean World:** Ancient India was an active participant in a wider maritime system linking **South Asia, West Asia, the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia**.
- **Economic History:** Ports functioned as nodes connecting production centres, inland markets and overseas consumers.
- **Cultural Diffusion:** Maritime trade facilitated the circulation of **commodities, technologies, languages, religions and cultural practices**.
- **Environmental History:** The submergence of parts of Poompuhar highlights the role of **coastal erosion, palaeochannels and changing shorelines** in shaping human settlements.

- **UPSC Core Insight:** Poompuhar demonstrates that ancient India's maritime economy was not an isolated coastal phenomenon but an interconnected system in which **ports, inland production centres, merchant networks, monsoon navigation and overseas markets** collectively supported economic and cultural exchange across the Indian Ocean.