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Grading of sacred chanks along Ramanathapuram coast

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Fishery of chanks along the Ramanathapuram coast is formed by two varieties viz. *Xancus pyrum var acuta* (Locally known as *Jadhi*) and *Xancus pyrum var obtusa* (Locally known as *Patti*) under the family Turbinellidae.

During 1980s, the chank fishery was under the control of the Tamil Nadu state fisheries department.

The grading of chank was done by a gauge and the maximum shell diameter of chank was taken as a means of grading for chank. The gauges used were wooden boards of 17.8 c.m. long, including handle and 11.5 c.m. wide, surrounding a circular brass-bound aperture. (Fig 1). Two sizes of gauge were used. If it did not pass through the larger gauge (>75

mm MSD), it was graded as a Class 1 Chank or Full sized-I chank. If it passed through that but not through the smaller gauge (64 mm MSD) it was graded as a Class 2 chank or Full sized II. Any shells which passed through the second gauge were graded as undersized chanks (>64 mm MSD) and confiscated to discourage the divers from bringing immature animals ashore, those still alive were returned to the sea at the end of the day (Table 1). Any shells which were badly worm eaten were also confiscated. The Tamil Nadu chank fishery was a state monopoly the price paid for FS-I and FS-II shells negotiated annually. The Govt. sold the entire animal catch to West Bengal Handicrafts Development Corporation limited.

Table 1 Grading and price of chanks during 1980

Grade	Gauge size	Year : 1980 Price per piece at landing centre
Class-I	>85 mm MSD	3.50
Class-II	>75 mm to <85 mm	3.75
Class-III	>64 mm to 75 mm	--

During the 1994-95, Tamil Nadu Government removed the entire control over the chank fisheries except issuing licences to divers and boats for fishing chanks as there was decline in catches from the chank beds in previous years, the shell traders and merchants of shell craft industry have introduced several grades in addition to above.

At present, the grading is also being carried out using gauge of wooden boards as described above but without brass bound aperture and tripods stands.

Wooden boards are being held with left hand and shells are allowed to pass through the gauge by right hand. In some places, experienced merchants and middle men are using their hand as a gauge for grading the chanks. When the shells are brought to shore, they are sorted again into several varieties according to their size and quality, which largely depends on the locality where they are caught, on the gear in which they are caught and also the thickness of outer lip. These are auctioned to middlemen who supply the chank to the shell craft industry or trader (Table 2).

Chanks are increasing caught in bottom trawler and also in gear such as bottom set gillnets. The

Table 2 Details of grading and price of chanks caught by Shingi valai / Shangu madi / skin diving and trawl net during 2006.

Grade	Gauge size :MSD (mm)	Price per piece at landing centre (Rs)	Selling price per piece to Shell craft industry (Rs)	Price per piece to finished product at Ramnad/ Rameswaram (Rs)
'OO'- Class	>110	600-650 (450)	800-700 (500)	1650 and above
'O'* Class	95-110 (280)	500-550 (350)	600-650	900-1300
No. 1	90-95	400 (220)	450 (300)	800-1000
No. II	85-90	350 (170)	400 (200)	400-600
No. III	80-85	200 (140)	300 (150)	300-600
No. IV	75-80	150 (80)	200 (100)	200-400
No. V	70-75	80 (30)	100 (50)	150-350
No. VI	65-70	40 (20)	60 (30)	150-350
<i>Air</i>	60-65	20 (5)	30 (10)	100-270
<i>Kula</i>	50-60	5 (2)	10 (4)	60-200
<i>Suthai</i>	>50	...	1-1.50	75-125

Price of chanks caught by trawler is given in parenthesis

chanks are vulnerable to over fishing because they spend entire life on the sea bed. In the present system, all sizes from juveniles to adult ones are caught through non selective nature of fishing. So the earlier system of grading should be introduced once again stringently in order to protect the undersized chanks.

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