

ஆய்வுக் கோவை

நான்காம் தொகுதி

2013

பதிப்பாசிரியர்

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இந்தியப் பல்கலைக்கழகத் தமிழாசிரியர் மன்றம்

தமிழியற் புலம்

மதுரை காமராசர் பல்கலைக் கழகம்

(ஆற்றல்சால் பல்கலைக் கழகம்)

மதுரை - 625 021

ஆய்வுக் கோவை

தொகுதி நான்கு

பக்கங்கள் : 1658 முதல் 2376 வரை

இ.ப.த. மன்றம்

தமிழியற்புலம்

மதுரை காமராசர் பல்கலைக்கழகம்

மதுரை 625 021.

முதற்பதிப்பு

திருவள்ளூர் ஆண்டு 2044, வைகாசி 4, 5

2013 மேத் திங்கள் 18. 19

விலை ரூபாய். 600/-

கணினி அச்சு : பொதிகை கணிப்பொறி மையம்

நாகமலை

மதுரை 625 019.

அச்சாக்கம் மற்றும்

விற்பனை உரிமை : பிரியதர்சினி பிரிண்டோகிராப்ஸ்

சிவகாசி.

போன் : 04562 223230

448. Fishing Communities in Jaffna: An Ethnographical Perspective

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1.0 Introduction

Studying a peculiar community of particular region in the social scientific perspective is a prominent one in the field of anthropology. In other words, anthropology takes a major role for cultural translation of the primitive societies through ethnographical studies. Ethnographical study was initiated by Malinowski who gave a new way to studying society during the 20th century. However, it must be remembered that the notions of studying human societies began at the time of Aristotle. This paper attempts to discuss the fishing community of Jaffna in ethnographical perspectives.

This study indeed emphasizes the characteristics and differentiation that exists among fishing communities in Jaffna from the historical period and tries to examine the changes took place on those fishing communities. The data for the present study were collected by using several ethnographical tools such as case study, case history, interview with informants, discussion with village dwellers and furthermore documented data particularly the research works carried out by renowned scholars.

1.1 Fishing in Ancient Human world

In the beginning, man was unaware of the ways of cultivating food items he required. The people were totally depended for their survival on their surrounding for gathering food and living. Under these situations, they

initially gathered fruits, leaves, tubers, nuts, roots from the trees; hunted wild animals; and caught fish from fresh water as well as from coastal sea. From the beginning of human history, fishing is the oldest means of subsistence for mankind for a stable food supply. As man became civilized, this gradually evolved into the caste systems. At present, several groups have revealed themselves as belonging to one or other fishing caste. Though, there is uniqueness in the occupational category among the fishing communities, they further divide themselves into several sub-groups of castes.

1.2 Fishing in Ancient Sri Lanka

K. Sivasubramaniam (2011), author of the book *Fisheries in Sri Lanka*, has recorded in this book the ancient Sri Lankan fishing community. According to him, the *Veddhas* belonged to the ancient Sri Lanka were involved in fishing activities in the fresh water and the sea water for their food in many parts of Sri Lanka in the pre-historical period. Deraniyagala (1992) has quoted information from other sources, concerning fishing activities of the *Veddhas*. According to him fish was less preferred than meat in their diet. However, the so called 'Coastal *Veddhas*', netted and also harpooned their catch by wading into lagoons. At the same time, 'Forest *Veddha*' also engaged in fishing in inland waters such as rivers, tanks, ponds etc. Besides hunting for animals, they also plucked fruits and seeds and collected underground yams from the land. Some forest *Veddhas* claimed ownership of fishing pools in the forest area (Sivasubramaniam, op.cit.,:102). The discovery of fishing hooks in *Manninthalai* village in *poonahari*, northern Sri Lanka lends support to the idea put forth by Sivasubramaniam. These hooks, according to Pushparatnam (2003:73) belonged to the megalithic period. However the fishing and agriculture have traditionally been the two main livelihood activities in Northern Province of Sri Lanka.

1.3 Fishing and Caste in Jaffna

Jaffna peninsula is approximately forty miles long and four to eighteen miles wide. On its western and northern sides, it is bounded by the Bay of

Bengal and Jaffna lagoon respectively while the Jaffna separates the peninsula from the main land of Sri Lanka. The racial characters are generally similar among Tamils is as in the case of Sinhalese but they are distinguished in language and customs of life (Ragavan, 1971: 5). The Jaffna Tamil (*Yalppanat* Tamil) inhabit an area centred on the Jaffna peninsula, which is situated in the northern Sri Lanka. Their long history as inhabitants of Sri Lanka, together with that of the *Batticaloa* Tamil (*Mattakkalapput* Tamil) who inhabits the eastern coastal region, is said to date back to the second century BC (Sekine, 1984:7).

The caste system in Jaffna is a vital institution (Tambia, 2004: 87). The caste structure in Sri Lankan Tamil society is very much similar to that existing among the Tamils of Southern India, though there also exists a few differences as well. Fishing is the most important occupation that is found along the region of Jaffna peninsula. According to Dutch Governor Van Rhee, Fishing caste of Jaffna is divided into six different castes, viz., *Carreas*, *Mochas*, *Paruwas*, *Chimbalwas*, *Kaddeas* and *Timmalas* (ibid:94). At present, there is three major fishing communities viz., *Karaiyar*, *Timilar* and *Mukkiyar* living in Jaffna. It is noteworthy that *Karaiyar* is the predominant fishing caste group.

1.3.1 Karaiyar

Karaiyar, also known as '*Karayar*', '*Karaiar*', '*Kurukulam*', '*Karaiyalan*' and '*Karava*' in Sinhala, is traditionally both a seafaring and warrior caste lived in the Tamil Nadu state of India, coastal areas of Sri Lanka, and globally among the Tamil Diaspora. Along with *Paravar* and *Mukkuvar*, *Pattinavar*, *Karaiyar* are one of the oldest groups of the coastal region of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Sri Lanka. They are predominantly found in the area known as Coromandel Coast and Northern Part of Sri Lanka. These four seafaring related social groups are regionally distributed, with each group dominating a certain coastal belt. Seafaring activities include trading, coastal fishing, and naval activities.

In Jaffna, even though *Vellalar* is the major caste group, *Karaiyars* form the third largest caste group (Saveri, 2006: 60) but according to the Pfaffenberger's estimate of caste population in Jaffna (Table-2), *Karaiyar* is the second largest group with 10 per cent of Tamil population in Jaffna along with *Vellalar* occupied 50 percent (Pfaffenberger, op.cit., 1982: 47). At present, it is difficult to estimate the caste population due to the government census policy that does not require mentioning the name of the caste group. Many Seashore people particularly *Karaiyar* were converted to Christianity after the Portuguese invented the coastal area of Ceylon while there are a number of people belonged to Hinduism as well Buddhism.

The *Karaiyar* comprises of the traditional fisher caste of Northern Sri Lanka. They are the predominant coastal people settled in the Northern Province having fishing as their main occupation. But, one sub-group of *Karaiyar* claims that they are the deep sea trader. However, *Karaiyar* group is perhaps the older inhabitants of the Jaffna peninsula and stands outside the *adimai-kudimai* social systems of Jaffna (Saveri, 1996: 60) which may be compared with Left-Right side caste systems of South India (Pfaffenberger 1982: 40, 38). The Jaffna society has begun a process of transformation towards the caste's restriction to be flexible with the birth of Tamil liberation struggle and the wave of migration to Europe and America (Saveri, 1996: 61). Besides, it is interesting to note that the parents of adult children like to have arranged marriage within their own caste groups.

The *Karaiyar* also seem to have been divided into sub-castes and at least two broad groups seems to have existed until recent time, a division which may still hold well in certain parts. According to Ragavan the *Karaiyar* in Jaffna are progressively inclined to demarcate between two classes of the group, the *melongi-keelongi* the former the socially advanced class with benefits of higher English education, and employed in educational or

other field in government or private services. The other section denoted the class that pursues fishing, mainly deep-sea fishing, as their main avenue of livelihood (1971: 142). The terms used to denote these classes are interesting. In Tamil '*mele*' means 'over' and '*kile*' means 'under' so that the terms are easily explicable as 'those who are over' and 'those who are under', reflecting a rather deep bifurcation of society based upon socio-economic status (Hussein, 2008: 233).

However, when I was in the research field namely *Katcovalam*, a fisher folk man a retired government school teacher who claims them as *melongi* told to me that *melongi* means that who are working off the sea. Indeed, most of the *melongi Karaiyar* engaged in sea trade business before the independence of Sri Lanka. After independence, they have been forced to change their traditional sea trading business. But, Sekine (op.cit:12) has mentioned that these two sub-caste groups follow *melonkik Karaiyar* and *minppitik Karaiyar*.

It should be mentioned, *Katcovalam*, the traditional fishing village located 5km from Point Pedro is a small town in the *Vadamarachchi*. It has been mentioned that *Vadamarachchi* is a culturally significant place which is more or less 30 Kms away from Jaffna. When I was in the fieldwork, the village dwellers of *Katcovalam* recorded about the prevailing caste system that there are two types of sub-caste: *meen pettik karaiyar* and *meen pittikatha Karaiyar* (fishing and non-fishing caste) within *Karaiyar* fishing community.

Furthermore, according to Kenneth David, *Karaiyar* in Myliddy coast between Kankasanthurai and Palali in Jaffna peninsula's northern coast, are divided into two sub-caste groups viz., the wealthier '*tevar Karaiyar*' and the 'Poorer or Ordinary' (*Cataranar*) *Karaiyar*. The *Tevars*, they say, are identified with founding ancestors, namely, *Periyanadutevan* and *Veerimanikatevan* (Hussein, 2008: 233).

It is noteworthy that marriages are not allowed between the two sub-caste groups of *Karaiyar* approximately two decades. According to Kandipan, Attorney Lawyer who belongs to *melogi Karaiyar* caste group,

these marriage limitations have undergone flexibility due to the ethnic war and migration. Beside Kulasingam a social writer in *Vadamrachchi* has mentioned in an interview with him that the parents of children consider the caste status when they select the marriage proposal for their children.

1.3.2 Mukkiyar

According to Ragupathy (1982:208) *Mukkiyar* are couch-shell and pearl divers. They gained the name because of keeping their breath under the water. The term of *mukku* in Tamil means 'keeping the breath'. After this trade declined, they switched over to fishing. Kenneth David mentioned about the *Mukkiyar* that they are lagoon fisher group (Pfaffenberger, op.cit: 39) and Sekine has denoted *Mukkiyar* as 'fisherman' (1981: 13). In the mid 20th century, 2 per cent of Jaffna's Tamil population is *Mukkiyar*, estimated by Banks (incomplete data) (Pfaffenberger, op.cit: 47).

1.4 Conclusion

Fishing is not only an occupation or an economically beneficial activity; but it is a way of living for many people living along coastal areas. The Dravidian word *meen* 'fish', indicates the fauna which lives in water; but in the ancient time it had several meanings such as 'activity', 'a group of people' etc. Community engaged in fishing in the eastern coastal area of Tamil Nadu and Jaffna in Sri Lanka has always been referred to as *Meenavarkal* referring to 'fisherman'. At the same time there are some social hierarchies among them too. This has given rise to several nick/caste names among the fishing communities. In this regard, Fishing communities in Jaffna also preserve their cultural peculiarity as well their cultural significant through this kind of caste practice. The social differentiations seen among the Jaffna Tamils not emphasized here. On the contrary, the nature of this community in the historical trends is recorded.