

V.I. SUBRAMONIAM COMMEMORATION VOLUME II

**STUDIES ON INDIAN LANGUAGES  
AND CULTURES**

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**International School of Dravidian Linguistics  
Thiruvananthapuram**

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# KARAIYAR: AN ETYMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

*Anthropology and linguistics are intertwined fields of study. The method of etymological analysis is useful to explore the cultural significance of a particular community in the complex world societies. It is to be emphasized that all diverse societies in the present world have not suddenly appeared; in contrast every society has gradually evolved by adapting their cultural customs and norms to their surrounding environments from time immemorial. In this context this study attempts to discuss the etymological roots of Karaiyar, an indigenous fishing community inhabited on the Jaffna coastal area as a prominent fishing caste group and on the East coastal belt of Tamil Nadu State as a notable peculiar caste group based on three major approaches: geographical, occupational and ethno historical. The social identity of the Karaiyar also evolved by their descent, genealogy, geographical distribution, etc., which were developed gradually during the course of their long history.*

## Introduction

The Karaiyar (lit.: *karai* = 'shore'; *ya:r* = 'people') is an indigenous Tamil speaking fishing caste inhabiting both the coastal belt of the Jaffna peninsula in Sri Lanka and the Coromandel coast of Tamil Nadu in South India. They share a common ethno history and cultural relations over several centuries, yet exhibit distinctive features of local history and cultural identity in their own terms. This study attempts to trace the etymological features of the Karaiyar.

Communities engaged in fishing on the Tamil regions in South India, Sri Lanka are generally referred to as '*mi:navarkal*' (lit.: fishermen). This common ethnonym denotes 'those who subsist on fishing'. This is a common parlance addressed by "others", or an "inclusive" term to denote the overarching nature of coastal people. Originally, people involved in fishing activities in these regions were divided into different endogamous sub-castes identified themselves by different labels based on their ethno history. Pattanavar, Karaiyar, Valaiyar, Paratavar, Sempadavar, Mukkuvar, Paravar, Chettiyaar, Timilor are the major fishing castes inhabiting these regions.

## Fishing in Ancient Tamil region

Ancient Tamil literature also documented the earliest detailed materials of fishing community in Tamil regions. According to *Sangam* literature, an anthology of the oldest literary corpus of Tamil poems, dated way back from 300 B.C. to 300 A.D., and ancient Tamil people inhabited the five different geographical regions called *tinai*. People who lived in these five different ecological zones were called in the following different names in relation to their major occupational patterns: *kuruñci* (hilly tracts), '*kuravar*' (hunters and gatherers), *mullai* (forest-land), '*idaiyar*' (pastoralists),

*marutam* (flat land), *'uļavar'* (agriculturists), *neytal* (seashore), *'mi:navar'* (seafarers), *pa:lai* (desert), *'maravar'* (nomadic plunderers) (Jaiswal 1998: 7).

A wide range of information is available on each ethnic group from ancient Tamil literature authored by various poets (*pulavarkaL*, lit.: learned men) during the *Sangam* period. Fishing community is one among the five different ethnic groups. Fishermen, during *Sangam* period, engaged in many types of fishing activities such as fresh water and deep-sea fishing, trading with other countries, diving for pearls and shells (*changu*), etc. There are several names for fishing communities in *Sangam* literature<sup>1</sup> such as *'Paratavar'* (*Natti*. 38, *Poruna*. 218, *Kurun*. 304); *'Paratar'* (*Agam*. 30, *Madurai*. 317); *'Valaiyar'* (*Patti*. 197, *Perum*. 274); *'Timilon'* (*Agam*. 320); etc. Thurston in his *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909) has documented more than seven fishing castes.

From ancient times, many Tamil speaking fishing castes had inhabited the Jaffna peninsula, and shared some commonality with the Coromandel fishermen. Sivasubramaniam, a noted scholar in Fisheries and Fisheries Resources, has recorded the ancient Sri Lankan fishing communities in his *'Fisheries in Sri Lanka'* (2009). According to him, the Veddhas were the ancient people of Sri Lanka involved in fishing activities both in fresh water and sea water for their subsistence throughout the recorded history of Sri Lanka.

Deraniyagala, a renowned historian and archaeologist in Sri Lanka (1992), reports various 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 harpooned their catch by wading into lagoons. At the same time, *'Forest Veddhas'* regularly engaged in fishing activities in inland waters such as rivers, tanks, ponds, etc. Besides hunting games, they also plucked fruits and seeds and collected yam from forest tracts. Some forest Veddhas claimed ownership of fishing pools around the forest area (Sivasubramaniam 2009: 102). The discovery of fishing hooks in Manninthalai village in the Poonahari region of northern Sri Lanka lends support to the idea put forth by Sivasubramaniam. According to Pushparatnam (2003:73), a reputed archaeologist in Sri Lanka, these hooks belong to the megalithic period. It is a proven fact that fishing has been a source of subsistence for the indigenous communities in Sri Lanka from the megalithic period onwards.

There are clear and valid evidences from historical records that fishing was also undertaken by various categories of craftsmen and workers. At that time, fishermen operated both in inland water bodies and on coastal waters of the sea. Further, there are records on coastal fishing in Jaffna peninsula, particularly small fishing ports that existed for the use of small boats from India. The region was ruled by the Tamils, and from this, it is revealed that historically the ancient Tamils were engaged in fishing and trade activities with other countries.

### Short introduction to the Karaiyar

The Karaiyar, a deep sea fishing community, now broadly denoted by a generic term both in Jaffna and Coromandel regions, were historically referred to by different ethnonyms such as *'Karayar'*, *'Karaiya:r'*, *'Kurukulam'* and *'Karaiya:lan'*. They

were traditionally engaged in both seafaring and military activities in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka over the centuries. However, due to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, in recent decades they have settled in various overseas countries as Tamil diaspora.

In addition to the Karaiyar, the Paravar and the Mukkuvar are the other old fishing communities in the coastal regions of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Sri Lanka. These three seafaring communities are regionally distributed, with each group dominating a specific coastal belt. In spite of this commonality, a deep sea fishing community called PaTTanavar on the Coromandel coast is not reported in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, one of the marine fishing communities called Timilar who are a numerically populated fishing caste in Jaffna are not found in the Coromandel region.

While ancient Tamil literature refers to coastal population as one of the earliest ethnoses of the five eco-zones, there are no references to Karaiyar. The reference attested as '*Karaiyavar*' is attested in one of the eight anthologies called *Purananuru* (Puram. 248: 8) which denotes them not as a coastal population, but as a group of people standing on a piece of shore. The semantic extension happened in later days identified them as coastal people. At the same time amongst the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, the Karaiyar are known as the Karava, who also engage in marine fishing.

Sivathamby (2005: 41), a noted cultural historian, states that the term Karava in Sinhalese is in fact a terminology used to mean Karaiyar. The Karaiyar settled in the Sinhalese region in early historic period completely assimilated with the Sinhalese population (Pathmanathan 1982: 46). During the Dutch rule, some of them engaged themselves in sea trade, while most of them were involved in fishing. Hugh Nevill, one of those great British administrators who arrived in Sri Lanka in 1865, collected enormous amount of palm-leaf manuscripts during his tenure. According to him, the Karaiyar should be identified as a community and is a peculiar caste which has been settled in South India and Northern Sri Lanka from ancient period (Pushparajan 2011: 29).

### **Etymological roots of the Karaiyar**

It is acceptable suggestion that the Karaiyar has gradually evolved as a peculiar fishing caste group from the ancient fishing populations in the historical processes. The term Karaiyar denoted to one of the fishing communities that has sprung from the root word 'Karai'. This study will etymologically analyze the sources of the root word in three dimensions like geographical, occupational and ethno historical related.

Many ecological anthropologists advocate that in human history, geographical specificity contributes to the growth and evolution of various human cultures around the world. Thus geographical entity plays one of the key roles in shaping the cultural forms (Moran 1996: 384). Coastal ecology which had determined many traits of cultural behaviour among fishing communities around the world also developed different levels of social forms within the coastal cultural system. From the ethnonym, Karaiyar, we could easily infer that geographical factors had a direct impact on the life of the Karaiyar, including determining their ethnonym.

The lexeme Karaiyar is derived from the word 'karai' that means 'shore' (DED: 1293) and 'seashore' (Manoharan 1997: 647). People subsisting on an occupation on the seashore have to live near to it. In this context, metonymically the Tamil fishing community lived on the shore and derived their name "Karaiyar" from the geographical location they inhabited from time immemorial. In addition to their ethnomys, their occupational name, too, was derived as "kaTartolil" (lit.: kaTal = 'sea'; tolil = 'occupation'). Subsequently, people who engaged themselves in deep sea fishing referred to themselves as "KaTartolilaLar", meaning 'workers of the sea'. Diachronically Tamil literatures refer to these terms without any semantic change over the years. Reputed historian Sittampalam (1993:132) explains the term Paratavar kulattavar in the ancient epic called *Kannaki Valakkurai Ka:tai* (a regional epic of *Cilappathikaram* in Jaffna) as "Karaiya:r", because they lived along the seashore throughout their history. This connotation in *Kannaki Valakkurai Ka:tai* is also attested to by Raghavan (1961: 8-9), who refers to the term Karaiyar as the old terminology of the current word Karava.

Ptolemy, a well known explorer, ancient astronomer, geographer, and mathematician (A.D. 127-145 Alexandria), also has documented the existences of the Karaiyar as "Kareoi" - the tribe inhabiting the eastern coast that once extended south of Cape Comari in ancient Tamil Nadu. Kanagasabai (1979: 22) opines that the correct Tamil form of *Kareoi* mentioned by Ptolemy is 'Karaiyar', which means "coast men" or "men of seashore". From this, it is evident that the word Karaiyar refers to the people of the seashore and their traditional occupation is also related to sea based activities. This is also attested by the etymological analysis (Tamil Lexicon, Vol. 2: 769). At present these people are mostly found in the Coromandel Coast of Tamil Nadu, on the coastal areas of Andhra Pradesh and northern and western parts of Sri Lanka.

*Vaiyaa paadal* (verse 77) is an ancient Tamil text of Jaffna in Sri Lanka which refers to many different castes who lived during the time of ancient Jaffna kingdom and Karaiyar is one among them (Sittampalam 2006:174). Philip Baladius refers to the Karaiyar who lived on the seashore and the salt marsh (*uppan; arran;karai*) and carried their fishing activities using large fishing nets (ibid: 181).

Let us now turn to other features of the rooted word 'Karai' related to their occupational system. Among the different theories relating to the origins of the caste system, one is based on the type of occupation practiced by a community. It is referred as occupational theory. Nesfield pointed out that the origin of caste was developed on the basis of the different types of work carried out by the people and occupation became the dominant theme for categorizing the people (quoted by Shankar 2012: 195-196). With this background it can be noted that the Karaiyar evolved as a fishing community based on the name of the occupation they carried out on the seashore from time immemorial.

The etymological rooted of the Karaiyar is also thickly related with their occupation. The Karaiyar are mostly engaged in "near-shore" fishing. Their fishing activity is limited to a short distance of about two to three kilometers from the shore.

They use a specific shore seine (*karavalai*) which is specifically made for near-shore fishing (Manoharan 1997: 649). According to fisherfolk in Katkoyalam hamlet in Jaffna, their caste name was derived from the word *karavalai* (*karaval* in regional dialect - lit.: beach seine/ shore seine) which is an ancient fishing method that is practiced even today.

Further, Karaiyar in Katkoyalam has emphasized that they refer to themselves and also are referred to by others as Karaiyar, because, many fishermen still practice fishing by traditional shore seine (*karavalai*) which is the earliest method of fishing. Now they use mechanized boats and modern fishing gears. The *karavalai* is a handmade net used during lean period involving a large number of people divided into two groups to drag the net ashore. Mostly agnates or clan members are invited to this fishing activity. Lean periods are always negotiated by clan members. In other words, clan members get top priority in forming a crew of the shore seine through which they eke out a living during lean periods.

The final feature of the rooted word of Karaiyar is related to the myth of their origin. Raghavan (1961: 5-6) has analyzed in detail the origin and evolution of the Karava / Karaiyar who descended from the 'Kuru' refugees who became scattered, after the defeat in the Great War between the Pandavas and the Kauravas or Kurus, as described in the Mahabharata. In Central India, they were called Kaur; and in Bengal they were known as *Kur*. The author also states that, around 1137 B.C., when south Indian influences were high in Ceylon, there were references to persons who styled themselves as descendants of Kuru clan (Kurukulasuriyar). Further, according to Roberts (1982: 18), the term Karava is derived from the Sanskrit term 'Kaurava' who are the descendants of the 'Kurus of Mahabharata' and were warrior people of Kshatriya stock.

Mutthutambypillay (2001: 83) in his book entitled *History of Jaffna* relates the leader of the Karaiyar to '*kurukulattalaivan*' (leader of kuru clan). It is noteworthy that *Soolamani Nigandu* refers to the *Kuru* land as the original lineage country of the Karaiyar. Most Karaiyars claim even today that they are descendants of Kuru Kula (clan of Kaurava). The Karaiyar who live in the traditional Katkoyalam village today near Point Pedro located in Northern Province of Sri Lanka claim that they are the descendants of the '*kurukulattavar*'. Empirical data collected during the fieldwork supports their claim.

### **Sub-caste groups of Karaiyar**

The Karaiyar prominence on the coastal tract of Jaffna is an age-old phenomenon. In ancient times they engaged in foreign trade by using indigenously built vessels and gears. From pre-industrial days they have been innovative and technology oriented. In this regard, the Karaiyar also seem to have been divided into sub-castes and at least two broad groups seem to have existed until recent times, a division which may still hold good in certain parts based on the divisions of major patterns of fishing or maritime activities.

According to Raghavan, the Karaiyar in Jaffna are progressively inclined to demarcate between two classes of the group, the *me:lo:n;ki-ki:lo:n;ki* the former the socially advanced class with benefits of higher English education, and employed in educational or other fields in government or private services. The other section denotes 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 to analyze through etymological perspective. In Tamil '*me:la*' means 'over' and '*ki:la*' 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, Sekine referred to these two sub-caste groups as *me:lo:n;ki* Karaiyar and *mi:npiTik* Karaiyar (1984: 12).

### Sanskritization of Karaiyar

It is surprising to note that fishing castes also identify themselves with the dominant agricultural caste namely Vellalar (lit.: 'those who control floods'), both in Jaffna and in the Coromandel coast. But in common parlance, the term *veLLalar* refers to 'agriculturist'. In the course of their history fishermen also started addressing themselves as "*karaituṛai veLLalar*", which literally means 'onshore agriculturists'. This kind of connotation is yet another kind of Sanskritization which happened among Tamil fishermen of both Jaffna and Coromandel coasts. In Tamil social hierarchy *veLLalar* title is an honorific one meant for people of higher status. After such labels came into existence, the cultivating agriculturists were differentiated as "*nila veLLalar*", which means landed agriculturists.

There is an ancient Tamil proverb which narrates the nature and process of social mobility, or what M.N. Srinivas (1962) described as Sanskritization in Indian context, in this fashion: *kaLLan* becomes *maravan* who in turn develops into *akamuTaiyan* and he finally climbs to the top of the social order as *veLLalar*. In the Tamil social mobility the *kaLLar* (thieves) became *maravar* (soldiers), who later developed into *akamuTaiyar* (another Kshatriya), and were finally elevated to the top caste as *veLLalar* (agriculturists). The same process was also adopted by the fishermen who at one stage of their social mobility identified themselves as *karaituṛai veLLalar*, the prefix denoting 'seashore', the suffix amalgamating all of them into a top category. The Karaiyar in the Jaffna not only enjoyed as a dominant caste but also occupy in the upper ladder of the social hierarchy in the region.

An onward social mobility in Jaffna peninsula over the centuries witnessed a kind of "commonality" and "equality" between on-shore communities (fishermen) and off-shore communities (agriculturists), through which the Karaiyar empowered their prominence in many spheres of social life. The title "*veLLalar*" ('those who control floods' - a term meant for agriculturists) was considered not only a new one, but of an elevated status as well. In this social process the fisher folk started claiming themselves as '*kaTal veLLalar*' (lit.: 'sea cultivators') comparing themselves with agriculturists who have been addressed as *nila veLLalar* (lit.: 'those who till the land and cultivate crops').



Further, Sivaratnam (1968: 158) clarifies in detail the other title namely "Kurukulam" used by the Karaiyar. Due to their fishing occupation, initially they were regarded as people of a lower status. But due to their importance in that region they became prominent in many spheres of social life. In the Jaffna caste systems, the Karaiyar has gradually tried to maintain their social status among the top caste groups through the social mobility process called Sanskritization.

### Conclusion

This study has indeed emphasized the etymological characteristics of the Karaiyar fishing community through analyzing the ethno historical documents and the fieldwork notes collected from a traditional fishing village namely Katkoyalam located in the northern part of Sri Lanka during four months from May to August 2012 and examining the interrelationship between the Karaiyar denoting term of a fishing community and their ethno historical, geographical domains, major occupational features. Finally, this study has attempted to elaborate the impact of social mobility process on the Karaiyar fishing community based on theoretical approaches.

In ancient Tamil societies, fishing belonged to a particular ecological zone and the people who were engaged in fishing and related activities were referred to by several ethnonyms. However, Paratavar, one of the ethnonyms denoted ancient fishing social group in the Sangam era is an old fishing society and other ethnonyms only reveal their occupational patterns i.e. Valaiyar, Timilon, Mukkuvar. In this regard these fishing societies are to be hypothetically considered the Paratavar or their sub-groups. It was attested by the statement of Clarence Maloney (1969: 237-238) that the caste of Paratavar on the Cola coast had largely been absorbed into other castes viz. Paratavar caste was originally formed by the merger of diverse trading and fishing groups, then spilt several times, and lost large segments as new castes were formed and sections changed status in the caste hierarchy. But it should be analyzed in detail.

The brief etymological analysis exemplifies that the ethnomys term Karaiyar has three different features. First, the geographical feature that emphasizes the term Karaiyar is denoting a peculiar fishing community, derives from the Tamil word of Karai due to where they had lived for long. Second, as per occupational pattern, it states that the people who are using the particular net namely Karaivalai is referred by the name of that net. Finally, ethno historical sources according to the legend and myth of their origin, social identical name comes from the ancestors. These three types of analyzing suggest that the Karaiyar is an indigenous fishing group and their social formation began from time immemorial.

### End note

The following references are made in the Sangam literature: *Paravathar'* (Narrinai. 38, Porunarrarupatai. 218, Kurunthokai. 304); *'Parathar'* (Akananuru. 30, Maduraikkanci. 317); *'Valaiyar'* (Pattinappalai. 197, *Perumpanarrupatai.* 274); *'Thimilon'* (Akananuru. 320).

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