



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

LIFE OF THE FISHER FOLKS IN COROMANDEL COAST AS GLEANED FROM SANGAM LITERATURE

KEY WORDS: Light Of Sangam Literature, Coromandel Coast

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe the life of the fisher folks of Coromandel Coast from the light of Sangam Literature. Throughout the stretch of the Eastern Coastline of Tamil Nadu there were many ports in ancient times. That ports attract many foreign traders. Among them, Arabians called the East Coast of Tamil Nadu as 'Maabar'. The East Coast of peninsular India was called as the "Coromandel Coast" by the European writers. The European trading companies have adopted it in their official documents. Portuguese were the first to apply the term "Charamandel" to the coast of present day Tamil and Telugu countries. Barbosa wrote it as "Choromandel" as against the original printing of the term Charamandel, and it stayed for further period. Yule and Burnel and other modern historians adhere and accept the etymology of this term from Cholamandalam, the country of Cholas.

INTRODUCTION

The people were aware of the two major coastal processes that led to the accretion of sand along the shore- the ferocious waves that kept on lashing the beaches. These sea tribes led a simple life in small hutments drawing very little from the environment for food and shelter like their counterparts of hills and forests. Akanaanuuru and Natrinai bring to the fore the carefree lifestyle of the sea tribes. Like farmers do in times of harvest, fisherfolk fill the vessel of all those who approach for alms and then he goes to the lies down there peacefully with little worries over the next day. The shark hunters, overjoyed by the grand catch of striped shark the previous day, refrain from fishing the day after. Mathuraikaanchi speaks of Korkai Barathavar who were engaged in pearl diving and chank diving ventures.

Coromandel Coast

Coromandel had no well defined limits and often was held to extend as far as Krishna river or even to the coast of Orissa. Barbosa defines the limit from Point Calimere to Krishna delta. Some modern writers follow this. Nachinarkkiniyar in his commentary on Tholkappiam, a classical Tamil epic, mentions the limit of east coast as Verkadu (Pulicat). Arasaratnam bifurcates the area north of Pennar as Northern Coromandel and south up to Point Calimere as Southern Coromandel¹. A modern Research Scholar bounds the Southern Coromandel from Cape Comerine to Madras. Arasaratnam names the coastal territories from Point Calimere, to Tuticorin as Madura Coast and beyond south of it as Fishery Coast. To Burtan Stein, the Coromandel Coast corresponds more or less with the territory of the Imperial Cholas of the tenth -thirteenth century, extending to the southern tip of the Peninsula to the Krishna deltaic region.

The coast, a narrow transitional ribbon that occurs where a continental land mass meets a tidal sea, is among the most productive zones of the world. The coastal zone is a buffer to the most densely inhabited land areas-nearly 60% of the world population². To a fisherman, it is a nursery ground for many of the most valuable species such as shrimps and oysters. It is a bundle of natural resource of immense value for commercial, recreational and aesthetic reasons. The coast constitute the tail end ecosystem and the receptacle of all upstream externalities including the heavy load of pollution. They form the dynamic interface between the land and the seas and oceans. They play a pivotal role in world economy as the gateway to cargo transit, and support to industries³.

The Sea and Sea Coast based biotopes, referred to as Neital Thinai, like any other biotope, as self-sustaining, the Sangam literature elaborately delves into the Netal Thinai and the ethnic people therein. Significant among them are those of Maamoolanar, Ulochanaar and Amoovanaar⁴. The ethnic communities along the coasts, like their counterparts in forests, drew the bare minimum from nature and led a life of contentment. Theirs was not a life of wants and worries, but fulfilment⁵.

The fisherfolks of the ancient period heavily relied upon the coastal water bodies rather than on the sea for sustenance. Significant among these are the estuaries. Going by the classical definition of Donald Pritchard, the estuary is a semi-enclosed Coastal body of water which has free connection with the open sea and is strongly affected by tides that mix sea water⁶. The estuary is an ecotone-a transition zone between marine and fresh water habitat. It forms the junction zone or tension belt with considerable linear extent, yet narrower than the adjoining community areas themselves. The estuaries are endowed with rich biodiversity which fall into three categories-residents, transients and migrants⁷.

The sea coast of the Tamil country was dotted with fisherfolks' settlements, small or hamlets called paakkam or seaside towns called pattinam. These settlements were not evenly distributed but selectively placed close to freshwater bodies confluent with the sea⁸. The brackish water bodies that lay connected to the near-shore waters formed the habitats of many a killer shark. Along the littoral regions of these waters were seen the Neithal plant that cast an expanse of its flowers-enthraling like the blue gem stones. Pollens from the flowers of Pandalis and Calophyllum kept falling on these flowers covering their petals like a carpet⁹.

The chest-high-huts of fisher folks were so small and as simple as a cow hide placed over a spear would appear. The hutments faced the coastal water bodies rather than the sea. These pristine water bodies were sandwiched with lush green vegetations called Sholas¹⁰. They made their roofs either with dry grasses or dry palm leaves that kept falling from nearby trees occasionally.

A poet stands awestruck at the high heaps of sand along the shore. Most of these sand dunes have grown to the extent of almost covering the top of tall palmyrahs¹¹. The high heaps of sand gathered by winds are detailed in Kurunthokai. The people were aware of the two major coastal processes that led to the accretion of sand along the shore- the ferocious waves that kept on lashing the beaches. One could see along the South West Coast and the undeterred wind as occurs along the east coast of Tamil Nadu. What the streams were to the hilly terrains, the sand dunes were to the coast.

These sea tribes led a simple life in small hutments drawing very little from the environment for food and shelter like their counterparts of hills and forests. This was due to the simple reason that they could finely fit themselves into nature. Akanaanuuru and Natrinai bring to the fore the carefree lifestyle of the sea tribes. They let nothing come between their happiness and daily chores¹². The sea tribe's life was guided by contentment and not by insatiable desire, a mark of modern living. Though their hutments were very small and humble, any visitor who happened to spend a day with them in their huts will forget their own houses for good.

Fishers of the Sangam period celebrated egalitarianism. Social equity celebrated by the fisherfolks is a feature common to hunter-gatherer community¹³. In a fisher family, both parents were

labouring in order to raise the income. While the father had gone to the sea for shark hunting shortly after recovery from injury on previous expedition, the mother had set out for salt trade.

Sea watching is part of the Barathavar's traditional avocation. It is by such keen observation that a traditional fisherfolk decides upon the appropriate season time of the day to venture into the sea. And seldom do their predictions fail.

The fisher boys who remained the poet of the jungle boys mounting on tall woods in order to keep watch and block the herds of deers. Line fishing was common in shark hunting. Shark axes well fastened to mature bamboo poles were employed in the hunting of horned shark¹⁴. Sometimes the fishers used axes with ropes tied to one end. Akanaanuuru pictures an unparalleled and first hand experience of the deep sea shark hunting expedition.

Conclusion

The mighty shark got trapped by the piercing axe of the bold Barathavar, bleeds profusely, turning the meat smelling sea, red. Unable to bear the agonizing pain, the beast agitates vigorously, darts listlessly to no avail and jumps high on the sky like the arc of the rainbow and dropped by the side of the fishing boats, thoroughly exhausted. Such true-to-life experience of deep sea fishing is hard to come by anywhere since the Sangam Literature except for the recent exposition by Joe D Cruz in his fiction work Azhi Soozh Ulagu.

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