



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

OCCUPATION AND STATUS OF PARAVAS COMMUNITIES IN THOOTHUKUDI REGION

KEY WORDS:

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The aim of this paper Occupation and status of Paravas Community in Thoothukudi region peopls. Fishing is not an individual profession but requires the active and collaborative involvement of a team of four to five individuals. The actions involving -pushing and immersing the boat into the sea, then pulling back the returning fish laden boats, alighting the fish from the boat need a lot of hands.Morover as there always exists the danger of the a boat sinking into the waters, it is always pivotal that fishermen are available handy and reside near the coasts itself. Hence, the fishermen could also be termed as the protectors of the seas and coasts. Those fishermen who live even today on the East Coasts are part of the historic generation who once were brave warriors. Presently, these folk have not shown any keen interest in any other field except fishing.

Status of men

Men have always been portrayed as those who are constantly struggling with seas. Boys on reaching a stage, in spite of being at schooling stages, join hands with the elders and are introduced to the art of fishing. This is so because fishing is the only occupation they know of and they do not show any particular interest in other trades. When the provinces were under the Pandiyar Rule, it was badly affected by famine and at those times, it was the fishermen who got good name for proving tons free fish to feed many thousands of families on the entire land. Fishermen prefer to spend most of their life on the seas itself. A fisherman who goes to the sea has to spend a minimum of four to five days at the deep sea itself. When not in the sea, they are occupied by repairing fish nets.

Men go in teams or as individuals and locate places where the fish are available in plenty and begin their fishing. At regular intervals, fishermen schedule a time to collect shells and pearls. The Paravas of **Neithal** also have the claim of taking the first initiative of transporting fish on catamarans for trading with other countries. To keep the seas safe from invasions of other nations, Pandyan kings had given special training to the fishermen to be warriors at sea. Regularly the fishermen leave to the seas by night and return by day and on reaching the land, they cleanse themselves and have complete rest.As the men would be weary from the wearisome struggle at the sea, the women take up the task of selling the catch. Every year, the dive for pearls begin at March and April and they go on for forty days. Prior to the pearl hunt, some specialists in deep diving will be sent before-hand to identify the exact location of the availability of the pearls. During that period, many makeshift structures would be built on the coasts for the trading of these pearls and they are known as **Muthu Nagar**.These shed and structures would be in place until the pearl hunting period continues.

Men and Pearl fishing

During the pearl fishing period beyond pearl divers, a team is assigned to go on a regular surveillance of the area, to keep the pearl pirates at bay. Mostly three to four boats go together for the pearl fishing and once they arrive on the ear-marked area of a ninety to One hundred and eight feet depth, they would lower their anchor and begin their pursuit for the pearls. In such an area, a stone is suspended on a rope into the water and a diver protects his ears by blocking it and applies oil all over his body and he enters into the deep water to collect the low-lying pearls. In this way, fisherman gets into the deep sea and then on collecting his catch of pearls ascends to the boat. Immediately another fisherman takes his place and in this manner all go for a dive. Each boat will accumulate their catch, and heap them separately on the selling

zone at the **Muthu Nagar**.The pearl catch for the period of fifty days will not be touched and will be guarded by a group of fishermen. Then, after fifty days the teams would open their pearl shells and separate them according to their value, then they are bought up by businessmen as per their worth. Hence men play a vital part in the collection of pearls.

Salt Cultivation

After choosing the land for salt cultivation, they will maintain the land in a good condition. Then, they will form beds. Big bed is called as male beds and small one as female bed. In male bed, the sediments which is seen at the bottom is called as **"Gypsum"**. This is used widely in cement factories. From female beds, soft salts (table salt), cultivation salts are manufactured. First three big beds will be large in size. In these beds, ground water is stored. Water stored here will be very salty. As the water is exposed to high temperature, the density of water will be approximately 6 to 8 degree and the water level gets deegreased. In this stage, this high density water will be directed into the female bed.

This high density water even gets evaporated and attains a solid state. That is called as **"Salt"**. This salt is gathered and brought to the factory for cleaning. After cleaning, **"Iodine"** is added and sold out by companies. High breed salts are called as **"Solid Salt"**. This is brought and cleaned in fertilizing company and then it is used for medical use also. This land is taken from Government on lease in term of 99 years and this salt manufacturing is done. These lands are called **"Saltern"**. These contractors are called as the boss. Yearly once, these contactors gather and determine the **"Salary Scale"**.

Status of women

In the Paravar community a lot of duties were entrusted on women. They still seem as lacking real freedom. A married fisherwoman plays a great role in the family life of Paravar. In the **Neithal land**, Paravar women took up the task of selling the fish. They either sell it for money or in exchange of goods. At fair sand processions, they seemed to dispose of their fish quite briskly. They also marketed their fish in the roads, lanes, streets and places of common gathering. The Paravar women involved in the marketing of the fish had profound negotiation skills. On selling the fish for cash or in exchange they would keep the left over and unsold fish to get dried up fish to form **karvadu** (Dry Fish), that too is for selling. As the men would be fatigued by their long hours at sea, the women would take up the onus of selling the fishes caught. Hence from the Sangam Era itself, the women had played a mutual role in being a background support to their husbands.

The Paravar women employed at fish factories undergone unbearable stress at their workplace. At fish plants, they come across many physical and mental agonies. Some issues they have are undue working hours, late night shifts, low salaries, poor working conditions and environments, poor shelter. In this way, these women have to face undue pains at work station. Women faced there physical tortures like Swedish harassment, physical misconduct, usage of double meaning are a few tortures. The Paravar women have to pay exorbitant amount to the conductor to take their fishes to the market. At times, they were looked down upon by co-passengers. As women have to go long distances to sell their fish and being expected to sell all the fish at hand, they were unable to return to their homes on time, this badly destroys their family life. Though the women returned after a day of logging to sell their fish, it is only after entering their homes that

their house chores begins. In this way the lives of the working Paravar woman was a life of abject struggle.

Women at fish plants

Internationally Keralaite Paravar women are the most employed at the fish plants all over the world. Most fish plants make use of Kerala Paravar women for all their jobs. These women are appointed in three categories ...

- *Administrative staff in the Office*
- *Machines and maintenance.*
- *Daily wages.*

In these categories, the Paravas were employed only in the lowest strata of jobs. Their tasks involved chopping the fish heads, removal of scales, cleaning of the fishes and insertion of ice bars. Some other tasks were the segregation of fish, freezing the fish. Most of the Paravar women were employed on a daily basis.

Health conditions of Paravar women

The cool water, the ice and the heavy duty fridges played major role in affecting the health of these women. Many women who had been employed in these plants for years suffered from rashes, sores and skin diseases. They were forced to continuously stand and handle the chilling fish at freezing temperatures without any gloves. At places of sorting of fish, women had to spend several hours, seated in unbearable cold conditions. Because of this, they had irritations in their eyes, difficulty in breathing, body pain and cold. The native (*MPEDA*) had clearly tabulated certain rules and regulations to be followed by the factories. According to it, the factory were mandated to create clean and sanitized environments, gloves and body and head cover, coats to be given to protect themselves during work. At many work spots women were made to handle fish and the sharp bones and shells, this had led to serious health threats. After their working hours, they suffered from scars and cuts at their finger tips, blisters and the traumatic experiences. As they did not have any other alternative employment opportunities, they simply endure of the pain-staking work. In Kanyakumari, the Catholic Church had formed an organisation called Coastal Peace and Development and had enlisted all women who carried and sell fish on their heads.

Clothings of Paravas

Paravas wore the bright colour clothes, especially yellow, red and green also blue. They also liked Lungies and towels which was suitable good for fishing. The chairs were made of pearl. The place of pearl diving was called as pearl calapam. String of pearl, pearl for studs, gold bangles with pearls in it, pearl with big string were worn as the jewels. Women wore gold and *silver jewels studs, bangles sized studs, old studs, string chains, bangles, rings* were worn by them. Usually the women in seashore used more money in clothing and jewels. The festivals in houses and christian festivals were celebrated by buying new clothes.

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