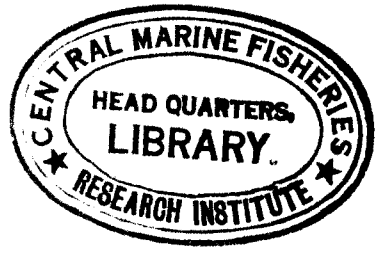
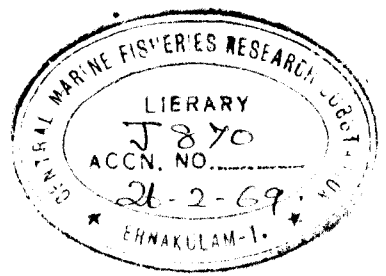


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THE FISH IN TAMIL CULTURE

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THE fish has played its own part in the history and culture of the Tamil country from very early times. We come across copious references to fish and fishermen in ancient Sangam classics.

According to Tamil tradition the land is divided into five classes as *Kurinji* (mountaneous region), *Mullai* (forest region), *Marudam* (cultivable lands), *Neidal* (littoral region) and *Palai* (desert region). References to *neidal* in Sangam classics almost invariably contain descriptions of marine animals and the life of fishermen. According to "Tolkappiyam," Varuna is said to be the presiding deity of *neidal*.

The "Perumbanatrappadai" gives a graphic description of fishermen's hamlets. These abodes are small and built of poles, with woven grass covering the roof. In the sandy yards in front were small pandals where the young and the old rested during the day. They caught fish with nets in the nearby ponds which had an abundance of the red-striped *Kayal* (கயல்) and the greenish *Iraa* (இரூ). The same passage also refers to another kind of fish called *Vaalai* (வாலை) which often manages to escape the hook. The fishermen entertained visitors with delicious food consisting of cooked rice and fried fish.

The "Pattinappalai," which gives a detailed description of the ancient city of Kaviripoompattinam, throws valuable light on the life of the fishermen. The women of the community, clad in garments of the leaves, creepers and flowers, joined with the fishermen to propitiate their favourite deity by planting the protruding saw-like bone of the saw-fish in the sand. They decked themselves with flowers, drank plenty of toddy and sported on the sands. They bathed in the sea to wash off their sins and got rid

of the saline water by bathing again in the river. The fishermen, who went far into the sea during the night, returned in the early hours of the morning when the lamps lit on the storeyed mansions of the town guided them to the shore.

The fishermen are known by a number of names in Tamil literature which speaks of them as *Paradavar* (பரதவர்), *Nulaiyar* (நுலையர்), *Tamilar* (தமிழர்), *Savar* (சாவர்), *Kadavar* (கடவர்), *Kaliyar* (கழையர்), *Valaignar* (வலைஞர்), and *Pattinaver* (பட்டினவர்). The "Chudamani Nighantu" gives the names of various kinds of fish like *Kalai* (கலை), *Sura* (சூர) and *Meeneru* (மீனேறு) which are the names of larger fish. Another kind is called elephant fish, and the one that swallows the elephant fish is called *Timingilam* (தமிழ்க்கிலம்). Further, fishes called *Iraal* (இரூல்), *Aaral* (ஆரல்), *Kendai* (கெண்டை), and *Cel* (சேல்) are also mentioned.

Fish was the royal insignia of the Pandya dynasty that ruled from Madurai. The Pandyas were themselves called "Meenavar" in early literature and inscriptions. The royal banners of the Pandyas carried the fish as emblem and so did the royal seals. The early coins of the Pandyas carry the figure of one fish only. In the later coins two fish are noticed, sometimes facing the same side and sometimes facing each other. In some coins a rod is seen in between. The two-fish-rod motif is seen in the mediaeval coins of the Pandyas and also on buildings like the *gopuras*, *prakaras*, etc. erected by them. Such emblems are seen even to this day at places like Chidambaram, Thiruvadigai, Thiruvannaikaval and Madurai. The Cholas also embossed the fish design on their seals and coins as a mark of their conquest over the Pandyas. Thus the seals and coins of Uttama Chola, Raja Raja and others carry the fish design.

Fish in various designs are often represented in the sculptures of ancient Tamilnad. The incarnation of Vishnu as a fish was a favourite theme of the Vaishnavites. The crocodile, *makara* (மகரம்), is often met with as an architectural motif in ancient buildings.

The fish was a favourite motif with ancient jewellers. A number of precious ornaments made and gifted to the temples by rulers are in the form of fish set with precious gemmes. Some of them are also in the *makara* form.

Megasthenes has the following to say about the *makara* and other sea monsters off the coast of South India: "All the energy of the inhabitants of the Island of Taprobane is devoted to catching fish and the monsters of the deep; for the sea encircling the island is reported to breed an incredible number of fish, both of the smaller fry and of the monstrous sort... Some fish are in appearance like women, but, instead of having locks of hair, are furnished with prickles. They say whales also frequent this sea.... The dolphins are reported to be of two sorts—one, fierce and armed with sharp-pointed teeth, which gives endless trouble to the fishermen and is of a remorselessly cruel disposition, while the other kind, which is mild and tame, swims about in the friskiest way and is quite like a fawning dog. It does not run away when any one tries to strike it and takes with pleasure any food it is offered".

Regarding fishing off the coast of the Maldives (*Maladvipa*) islands, Ibn Batuta, a mediaeval traveller, has the following to say: "All the Maldives are destitute of grains except that a cereal resembling millet is grown in the region of Sawid and transported thence to Mahal. The people subsist on a fish similar to *lairun* and called *Qulb-ul-mas*. It has red flesh; it has no fat, but it smells like mutton. When they cut each fish into four, cook it lightly and then place it in a palm-leaf basket and smoke it. They eat it when it is quite dry. From here it is also exported to India, China and Yemen".

The fabulous wealth of the Pandyas was mainly due to pearl fishing. Korkai was the main port where this industry flourished. Early travellers like Ptolemy have made references to pearl fishing at Colchi (Korkai). The *Mahabharata* refers to the pearls of the Pandya country.

Aelian, an early classical writer, refers to pearl fishing in Tamilnadu in the following terms: "The Indian pearl-oyster (I have already spoken of the Erythraean kind) is caught in the following manner: There is a city which a man of royal extraction called Soras (சொரசர்) governed at the time when Eukratides governed the Baktrians and the name of that city is Perimuda. It is inhabited by a race of fish-eaters who are said to go off with nets

and catch the kind of oysters mentioned in a great bay by which a vast extent of the coast is indented. It is said that the pearl grows upon a shell like that of a large mussel and that the oysters swim in great shoals and have leaders, just as bees in their hives have their queen - bees. I learn further that the leader is bigger and more beautifully coloured than the others and that in consequence the divers have a keen struggle in the depths which of them shall catch him, since, when he is taken, they catch also the entire shoal, now left, so to speak, forlorn and leaderless, so that it stirs not and, like a flock of sheep that has lost its shepherd, no longer moves forward against any incipient danger. As long, however, as the leader escapes and skilfully evades capture, he guides their movements and upholds discipline. Such as are caught are put into tubs to decay and, when the flesh has rotted and run off, nothing is left but the round pebble. The best sort of pearl is the Indian and that of the Red Sea. It is produced also in the Western Ocean where the island of Britain is. This sort seems to be of a yellowish colour, like gold, while its lustre is dull and dusky. Juba tells us that the pearl produced in the straits of the Bosphorus is inferior to the British and, not for a moment, to be compared with the Indian and Red Sea kind".

This may be compared with the account of Marco Polo " You must know that the sea here forms a gulf between the Island of Seilan and the mainland. And all round this gulf the water has a depth of no more than 10 or 12 fathoms and, in some places, no more than two fathoms. The pearl-fishers take their vessels, great and small, and proceed into this gulf, where they stop from the beginning of April till the middle of May. They go first to a place called Bettelar and (then) go 60 miles into the gulf. Here they cast anchor and shift from their large vessels into small boats. You must know that the many merchants who go divide into various companies and each of these must engage a number of men on wages, hiring them for April and half of May. Of all the produce they have first to pay the king, as his royalty, the tenth part. And they must also pay those men, who charm the great fishes to prevent them from injuring the divers whilst engaged in seeking pearls under water one-twentieth part of all that they take. These fish-charmers are termed Abraiaman and their charm

holds good for that day only, for at night they dissolve the charm so that the fishes can work mischief at their will. These Abraiaman know also how to charm beasts and birds and every living thing. When the men have got into the small boats they jump into the water and dive to the bottom, which may be at a depth of from 4 to 12 fathoms, and there they remain as long as they are able to. And there they find the shells that contain the pearls (and these they put into a net bag tied round the waist and mount up to the surface with them and then dive anew. When they can't hold their breath any longer they come up again and after a little, down they go once more and so they go on all day). The shells are in fashion like oysters or sea-hoods. And in these shells are found pearls, great and small, of every kind, sticking in the flesh of the shell-fish.

In this manner pearls are fished in great quantities, for thence in fact come the pearls which are spread all over the world. And I can tell you the king of that State hath a very great receipt and treasure from his dues upon those pearls.

"As soon as the middle of May is past no more of those pearl-shells are found there. It is true, however, that a long way from that spot, some 300 miles distant, they are also found; but that is in September and the first half of October".

