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ABSTRACTS

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Ethnography of Karaiyar

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Introduction and Research Problem

This study is primarily concerned with the ethnography of Karaiyar, numerically dominant fishing communities of the Jaffna coast in Sri Lanka. Jaffna peninsula is historically a prominent cultural zone in Sri Lankan history and culture. Fishing has been one among the oldest means of subsistence activities of mankind for a stable food supply. But, this gradually evolved into a specialized system of economy when mankind became civilized. In India and Sri Lanka, at present, several communities, identify themselves as fishing communities. Though, there is uniqueness in the occupational pattern among the fishing communities, they divide themselves into many endogamous castes according to social status. It is a common feature in India and Sri Lanka that these endogamous sects maintain social differentiations among themselves in terms of endogamy, occupational specialization, community identity, etc. In this regard, this ethnography study provides brief ethnographical descriptions on Karaiyar.

Methodology

Ethnography is a dominant tool used by anthropologists for studying cultural similarities and differentiation between human societies in various part of the world. This study also uses the ethnographical approach to bring out the ethnographical feature of Karaiyar. Ethnography in the field of anthropology plays dual role in studying culture. One is a product of ethnographical fieldwork made in a particular society, viz. the document of a particular cultural experience, another one, the ethnography is a process of fieldwork, viz. a researcher undertakes a fieldwork to record, analyse, and describe the cultural experience of a particular society.

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Ethnographic field work is an in-depth localized research process aimed at the description and analysis of cultural system¹. In this regard, the data used in this study was collected from ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in an artisanal fishing village of Vadamarchchi, Jaffna peninsula during the period of 2012 and 2013. After scrutiny of several villages through the pilot study in the coastal belt of Jaffna, the Katcovalam, one of the artisanal fishing hamlet was chosen as a studying village for this study. The data was analysed through emic and etic perspectives which are prominent data analysing approaches used in anthropological research.

Discussion, Results and Conclusions

Artisanal fishing is still prominent in Jaffna coasts. Those who use traditional techniques such as rods and tackles, arrows and harpoons, hand nets and drag nets, and traditional fishing crafts like *kattumaram* (craft), *teppam* (raft), referred to as artisanal fishing community. A number of scholars have paid their attentions in studying the artisanal fishing communities of Sri Lanka. Raghavan (1961), Roberts (1982), Stirrat (1988), Paul Alexander (1982) and Sivasubramaniam (2009) have studied on artisanal fishing communities in Sri Lanka in various aspects. Raghavan published a book entitled *The Karava of Ceylon: Society and Culture* (1961) which may be considered as a pioneering ethnography on Karava, a Sinhala fishing community in the southern coastal belt of Sri Lanka. It explores the characteristics of one of the fishing communities in southern Sri Lanka both historically and anthropologically. In the meantime, even though other scholars also interested to study the fishing communities in the various aspect, there are lack of interested in studying Kayaiyar in ethnographical aspect. In this regard, this ethnographical study gives the ethnographical descriptions on the Karaiyar community belonged to Vadamarachchi coastal areas, Jaffna.

The Karaiyar, a deep sea fishing community, now broadly denoted by a generic term both in Jaffna regions, were historically referred to by different

ethnonyms such as 'Karayar', 'Karaiyār', 'Kurukulam' and 'Karaiyālan'. They traditionally engaged in both seafaring and military activities in Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka over the centuries. Various authors (Blake 1970: 124-25; Madras Fisheries Bureau 1916: 135; Thurston 1975, vol. 6: 177-78) mention that Karaiyar are traditionally sea fishermen (quoted)⁷. In addition to the Karaiyar, the Parathavar, the Thimilalar and the Mukkuvar are the other traditional fishing communities in Jaffna⁸. These four seafaring communities are regionally distributed, with each group dominating a specific coastal zone.

This ethnographical study covers the major ethnographical descriptions on Karaiyar under the following sub themes:

- Etymological analysis of Karaiyar
- Origin myth of Karaiyar
- Ethnographical atlas of study village
- Occupational specialization and social hierarchy
- Continuity of Matrilineality and speread of patrilineality

As Sri Lanka possess immense marine and riverine resources, a large number of heterogeneous communities living along coastline and estuaries have taken up the occupation of fishing and they have developed wide range of elementary, intermediary and modern technologies over a period of time. In the meantime, they have developed their distinct socio-cultural identity, governance structures and traditional practices, depending on the coast they inhabit. In this regard Karaiyar also developed their significant socio-cultural features and follows their tradition in peculiar manners.

Even though the socio-cultural life of the Karaiyar fishing community was enormously effected by 35 years' war and various environmental disasters specially tsunami in 2004, their cultural identity and tradition are retained through their present day life patterns. It should be mentioned that continuity of matrilineality practices, traditional occupational group life, practices of artisanal fishing techniques enriches their culture.

Keywords: Ethnography, Ethno-history, Cultural identity, Social Hierarchy Matrilineality

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