

A Study of Embedded History of Karaiyar of Jaffna Peninsula (Sri Lanka) and Coromandel Coast (India)

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ABSTRACT: The Karaiyar (lit.: *karai* = 'shore'; *yar* = '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 ethnohistory 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 how the Karaiyars remember, narrate, cherish and transmit their historical consciousness in terms of folk or social history. This paper also tries to bring out ethnohistorically the embedded nature of a single universal system, though they are divided by the Bay of Bengal. Romila Thapar distinguishes two types of historical consciousness: (1) the embedded history, normally found among lineage based societies, (2) the externalized history, normally found in state-based systems. The Karaiyars inhabiting two different nations share both these histories. The paper aims to shed more light on tracing the ethnohistory through intra-cultural perspectives, as the Karaiyars share a "common universal system" historically and culturally between these two coastal tracts.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropology and history are intertwined in many cultural domains in general and in the domain of ethnohistory in particular. Both these disciplines have strong interrelated dimensions in popular and local history that stress the study of a particular caste or ethnic group from bottom rather than the history that is shaped by interpretations based on ideological impositions emanating from dominant classes (Smith and Smith, 1987). Ethnohistory has particular focus in understanding folk genres that preserve a variety of historical sources. Jan Vansina, who belongs to British anthropological tradition, tries to reconstruct "folk" or "local" history through folklore materials in *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*

('65:144). While historical sources available through epigraphy, documents, copper plates, coins or other archaeological evidences come under "hard" materials, folklore sources are termed as "soft" materials since they carry less definite and indirect sources. Though ethnohistory is not a distinctive discipline, it is a distinctive process of understanding. In the same way it is not exactly a rigid discipline, but divulges into figures inter-related disciplines on the basis of people's own presentation and representation in tracing their history and culture that are always embedded in their oral tradition (Uddin, 2001).

Michael W. Hesson (2006: 854) has pointed out that "ethnohistory refers to the study of the history of a social group from an anthropological perspective". This definition focuses on particular societies' life

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style, religious beliefs, economical behaviour etc. In historical anthropology, it emphasizes indirectly the study of society through its ethnohistory.

During this globalization period, the scope of ethnohistorical research diversifies into a multi-disciplinary perspective. Many world societies have been losing their cultural identity and historical significance during this post-modern period. In this globalization scenario, anthropologists are expected to safeguard and re-build the particular social identity and cultural peculiarity of indigenous societies. 'Social identity' and 'cultural peculiarity' are combined entities of ethnohistory. Society in which identity is traced through birth and kinship or territory and where clan and lineage are fundamental to this identity, gradually give way to other identities such as caste, occupation and community (Thapar, '92: 4). In this background, 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.

Modern ethnographers extend the domain of ethnohistory to various levels such as "micro-history", "subaltern history", "familial history", "local history", etc. Bernard Cohn addresses "proctological history" which studies the masses, the deprived, the disposed, and the exploited. Such historians study from the bottom up and demonstrate the possibilities of a more complex and rounded history (Cohn '87). Ethnohistory in its pristine form is a method of investigation assembled with joint approaches of history and anthropology. It makes a significant contribution to the historical approach in discovering untold, unwritten and un-recorded historical aspects of a particular society, culture and areas.

All societies in this mundane world have special features to distinguish them from other societies. If they have many features that differ from other societies, their ethnohistory is a prominent one amongst them, because it reveals its origins and other cultural peculiarities. In the Indian subcontinent much of the ethnohistorical sources are correlated with cultural phenomena like caste, religion, occupation, etc. Further, it provides social identity to a single person who is a member of the particular society as well as to his society. Every society has developed many ways and means to preserve its identity in

developing an ethnohistory. In this background, this study brings out the ethnohistory of a fishing community called Karaiyar who inhabit the Coromandel coast in India, and the Jaffna coast in the northern part of Sri Lanka.

Caste and ethnohistory are always interrelated entities in Indian social fabrication. Caste differentiations are formed on a community's ethnohistory whereas ethnohistory is developed to distinguish identity of each caste in its own terms. There are many sub-castes among the fishing community whose identities are reflected in their ethnohistories.

MARINE FISHERMEN OF THE JAFFNA AND THE COROMANDEL COASTS

Communities engaged in fishing on the Coromandel coast of Tamil Nadu and Jaffna coast of Sri Lanka are generally referred to as 'Miinavarkal' (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 subcastes who identified themselves by different labels based on their ethnohistory. Pattanavar, Karaiyar, Valaiyar, Bharathavar, Sembadavar, Mukkuvar, Paravar, Chettiyaar, Thimilor are the major fishing castes inhabiting these regions.

Edgar Thurston (1855-1935), a pioneering colonial ethnographer who had occupied a chair in Madras Museum during the later part of 19th century documented extensively the castes and tribes of southern India, in the process recording some valuable information about the ethnohistorical sources from an anthropological point of view. However, there are numerous references in ancient epics, legends and mythical stories and medieval literatures on the origins, diversifications, migration and other related facts about the tribes and castes in India. K. S. Singh (2011) has rightly pointed out that:

"There is a continuity in ethnographic traditions which links up the Mahabharata with the present-day endeavours to understand the extraordinary range of diversities - biological, linguistic, and cultural - and also the dynamic process of interaction among the

people of India. The Mahabharata material, therefore, is an integral part of the evolving traditions of Indian ethnography and will always remain relevant to its understanding” (ibid: 31).

The data collected by Thurston (1909) allow us to reconstruct the ethnohistorical sources of Karaiyar diachronically and comparatively. In ancient India, ethnohistorical sources were documented in several ways, but they refer to the views of the religions and kingships. These sources elaborate the history of kingship, victories in the war, state formation, religious matters, temple history and revenue system, and the like. However, there is little information about the history of the people of the land who settled in the areas adjoining the temples and kingdoms. For example, in general, there are sources of ethnohistory related to origins of castes in the Veda, the Mahabharata, the Manusmiruthi, the Arthasastra, the Bagavat Gita, the Ramayana, etc. Ancient Tamil literature also documented the earliest ethnohistorical materials which describe the ancient societies that inhabited five different eco-zones (*tinai*) in ancient Tamil Nadu. 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 following five different geographical regions called *tinai* (Jaiswal 1998: 7):

Eco-zone	People
1. <i>Kurunchi</i> (hilly tracts) - ‘ <i>Kuravar</i> ’ (hunters and gatherers)	
2. <i>Mullai</i> (forest land) - ‘ <i>Idaiyar</i> ’ (pastoralists)	
3. <i>Marutham</i> (flat land) - ‘ <i>Ulavar</i> ’ (agriculturists)	
4. <i>Neithal</i> (seashore) - ‘ <i>Miinar</i> ’ (seafarers)	
5. <i>Paalai</i> (desert) - ‘ <i>Marvar</i> ’ (nomadic plunderers)	

A wide range of information is available on each ethnic group from ancient Tamil literature authored by various poets (*Pulavarkka*; 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* literature¹ such as

‘Parathavar’ (*Natti*. 38, *Poruna*. 218, *Kurun*. 304); ‘Parathar’ (*Agam*. 30, *Madurai*. 317); ‘Valaiyar’ (*Patti*. 197, *Perum*. 274); ‘Thimilon’ (*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 recorded 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.

According to Arasaratnam (’64) fish was an important ingredient in the diet of most of the people in historical times of Sri Lanka. The natural and man-made water bodies also contributed to significant production of fish, in addition to their primary use for irrigating the cultivating lands. 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 the inland water bodies and on the

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.

KARAIYAR: AN INTERCULTURAL IDENTITY

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', 'Karaiyaar', 'Kurukulam' and 'Karaiyaalan'. 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 are not reported in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, one of the marine fishing communities called Thimilar 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 Karaiyars settled in the Sinhalese region

in early historic period completely assimilated with the Sinhalese population (Pathmanathan, '82: 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).

Historical and Cultural Relations between the Jaffna and the Coromandel Coasts

The nature of the relationship between the Coromandel and the Jaffna coastal regions is more deep rooted and historically oriented than that between the Arabian sea and South East Asian countries. Such facts are proved by evidence from archeology, inscriptions and coins excavated over the years (Rajan 2010:16). This relationship started before the arrivals of Vijay from India to Sri Lanka. According to Mahavamsa, he is a semi-legendary figure and believed as the first recorded king of Sri Lanka. It is proper to mention here the interesting observations made by Dr. Paul E. Pories ('19), following the excavations of a part of the megalithic site at Kantharodai, an archaeological site situated 15 km away from Jaffna town. It stands to reason that a country, which is only about 20 miles from South India, would have been seen by Indian fishermen, every morning, as they sailed out to catch fish. He believed that North Ceylon was a flourishing settlement long before Vijaya was born (quoted by Raghavan '71: 8). Further, based on the archeological evidence Deraniyagala ('92) confirmed that there was a well advanced civilization in Ceylon before Vijaya arrived in Sri Lanka.

However, the first historical reference on the relationship between India and Sri Lanka is more precisely from the great epic Ramayana (Manoharan 2004: 73). But, according to Sinhala legends, Gauthama Buddha visited the Naga dipa (lit.: island) (North Cyclone) to solve the civil war (Parker 1984: 13). Apart from the literary and epigraphic evidences, certain myths are common to both Tamil region of

India and Sri Lanka. One of the examples is Murugan-Valli myth in Kathirgamam (see Manoharan 2004: 80).

A number of scholars like A. Mutthutambypillay (1912), S. Rasanayagam (1933), K. K. Pillay (1963), M. D Raghavan (1971), S. Pathmanathan, (1982), S. K. Sittampalam (1993), K. Indrapala (2006), K. Rajan (2010) have revealed the deeply rooted cultural contacts between Tamilnadu and Jaffna from the historical period. All of them agree that Jaffna and Tamilnadu have lengthy social, cultural, religious, economic and political relationships. Further, some pre-historians, archaeologists and medical scientists have proved the existence of common genetic features among the population inhabited in these two cultural regions through their genetic analysis (Visagan 2010; Thiagarajah 2011).

In this historical background, this study attempts to analyse the embedded ethnohistory of the Karaiyar from anthropological view point. Various concepts and theories have been forwarded by historians, social scientists with regard to the origin, spread, and evolution of the Karaiyar from an already existing group.

ETHNOHISTORY OF KARAIYAR

There are several embedded sources for tracing the Karaiyar ethnohistory, which is preserved through different lores that vary from region to region. In this context this paper tries to analyse by combining all the related sources relating to their ethnohistory under the following four headings: 1. Geographical perspectives, 2. Occupational perspectives, 3. Religious perspectives, 4. Kingship perspectives.

1. Geographical perspectives

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 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 played 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 with 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 ethnonym, their occupational name, too, was derived as "kadarttholil" (lit.: *kadal* = 'sea'; *tholil* = 'occupation'). Subsequently, people engaged in deep sea fishing referred to themselves as "Kadarttholilalar", 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 kulathavar in ancient epic called *Kannaki Valakkurai Kaatai* (a regional epic of Cilappathikaram in Jaffna) as "Karaiyar", because they lived along the seashore throughout their history. This connotation in *Kannaki Valakkurai Katai* is also attested to by Raghavan (1961: 8-9), who refers to the term Karaiyar as the old terminology of the current word Karava.

A well known explorer, Ptolemy ancient astronomer, geographer, and mathematician (A. D. 127 – 145 Alexandria), also 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 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). Philipus Baladius refers to the Karaiyar who lived in the seashore and the salt

marsh (*uppank attangkarai*) and carried their fishing activities using large fishing nets (ibid: 181).

The etymological analysis of the term referred to Karaiyar reveals that Karaiyar is one of the ancient coastal people and they have developed a unique cultural traits and customs through their adaptation with the coastal ecology.

2. Occupational perspectives

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 become 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 occupation they carried out on the seashore from time immemorial.

The ethnohistory of the Karaiyar is also thickly related with their occupation. According to fisherfolk in Katkoyalam hamlet in Jaffna, their caste name was derived from the word of *karaval* (beach seine/ shore seine) which is an ancient fishing method that is practiced even today. Even though intermediary and modern technologies are on the anvil in Jaffna peninsula, elementary technology is also used till today. Further, they emphasized that they refer to themselves and as well as by others as Karaiyar, because, many fishermen still practice fishing by traditional shore seine (*karaval*) which is the earliest method of fishing. Now they use mechanized boats and modern fishing gears. The *Karaval* 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.

Even though Thurston has pointed out in his *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909) that the Karaiyar, the Karaithurai (seacoast) Vellalar, and the Pattanavar are interrelated communities, there are

some definite differences evolved gradually between them based on their occupational methods. The Pattanavar on the Coromandel coast are mostly involved in marine fishing activities, but also engaged in maritime trade with other countries like South East Asian countries (Bavinck 2001: 48). But 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 (*karavala*) which is specifically made for near-shore fishing (Manoharan 1997: 649). However, Sittampalam ('93) remarks that Karaiyar were once engaged in commercial trading with other countries, even though they are defined as near-shore fishermen today.

Various authors refer to the Karaiyar as hereditary sea fishermen (Madras Fisheries Bureau 1916; Thurston '09; Warriar '67). It is noteworthy that in the Coromandel coast the dominant fishermen Pattanavar are divided into four endogamous sub-castes namely Cinna Pattanavar, Periya Pattanavar, Karaiyar and Pataiyacci (Bharathi '99: 7). Here in this part of the Coromandel coastal belt the Karaiyar are identified as one of the subcastes of the Pattanavar. In the Jaffna peninsula the Pattanavar are not seen anywhere in its long and continued history.

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 “Karaithurai Vellalar”, which literally means ‘onshore agriculturists’. This kind of connotation is yet another kind of Sanskritization 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.

In the same way the inland fishermen or fresh water fishermen originally called as *Sembadavars* started addressing themselves as ‘Guha Vellalar’. According to their origin myth Guha of Ramanyana was a boatman, who helped Lord Rama, became

recognized as his brother. The descendents of Guha now claim this lineage for themselves by referring to themselves as Guha Vellalar. 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 *Agamudaiyan* 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 Agamudaiyar (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 Karaithurai 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 through the trading with overseas.

3. Religious perspectives

In the Indian context in general, and in the Tamil context in particular, the origin of caste is always attributed to some kind of traditional theories that are linked to religious legends and myths. These theories indicate that the caste system is originally created by the Almighty. The ethnohistory of the Karaiyar also supports this theory that the role of the gods in the creation of caste system is well attested in several cases.

An element of religious tone is always embedded in the history of the Karaiyar. Their ethnohistory and origin myths are mutually interrelated and complementary in nature. Many scholars explored in detail the origin of the Karaiyar with Mahabharata as the source (M.D. Raghavan '61, M. Roberts '82, M. Tanaka '97, K. Sivasuramian 2009, M. Pushparajan 2011). Raghavan ('61: 5-6) 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 Kauras; 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 descendents of kuru clan (Kurukulasuriyar). Further, according to Roberts ('82: 18) the term Karava is derived from the Sanskrit term 'Kaurava' who are the descendents 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 'Kurukulathalaivan' (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 descendents of Kuru Kula (clan of Kaurava). At the same time some of them claim themselves to be the descendants of the King of the Sun clan (*Sooriya Kula Racaakkal*) (Pushparajan 2011: 29).

Thurston ('09: 376) recorded some details on the *Varnakula Vellalar* or *Acchu Vellalar*, an identity for a specific group of Karaiyar, who generally call themselves 'Varnakula Vellalar', named after Varuna, the god of rain, also a clan deity for them. A legend narrating the migration of *Kurukulathar* inhabiting the Jaffna coast is a valuable source of history. This group claims that they migrated from the coastal town of 'Kurumandal' (today known as Coromandel coast in Tamil Nadu), Kavirippoom Pattinam and Thanjavur regions in Tamil Nadu. Some versions of the legend relate that the Karaiyar/Karava were brought by captains of the 'Kurukula', 'Varnakula' warriors during the rule of the Tamil and Sinhala Kings of Sri Lanka (Antoninus 2005: 7). 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 'Kurukulathavar'. Empirical data collected during the fieldwork supports their claim.

According to Rasanayagam ('99: 124-25), a Nayak king of Tanjore, Tamil Nadu, sent 5000 warriors under the leadership of 'Varnakula' Captain to help the king Sangiliyan of Jaffna. This fact is attested to by the statement in *Kannaki Valakkurai Kathai* (an episode in Cilappathikaram epic, a version followed in Jaffna). The name 'Karaiyar' was known from that period, and they started claiming themselves as Varuna clan.

Another myth is concerning the relationship between the Karaiyar and the gods Siva and Vishnu. There are some legends regarding the *Maasi Maham* festival. On this auspicious day, Siva, goes to participate in the abluion (holy bathing festival on the seashore) in the seashore. He is the son-in-law of the fishing community. The fishing communities have traditional legends relating Siva as their son-in-law. One of the legends is based on the *Valaiveesu Puranam*, according to which long time ago, Parvati, the consort of Siva, was born as the daughter of the fisherman, who was a leader of the community. Long ago, one day a big fish caught in the net damaged the fishing gears and it could not be brought to seashore by any means. It happened regularly. In order to find a solution for this, the headman of the fishing community prayed to Lord Siva. In response to their prayers Siva came as a fisherman and caught the fish. In turn he married the fisherman's daughter, Parvati. This legend binds Siva with the fishing community.

After Siva married to Parvati, the headman requested Lord Siva to visit them every year in order to see his daughter. Siva promised to visit them every year on the day of *Maasi Maham* festival, during which Siva along with Parvati go to the seashore and take a holy bath. Likewise in Jaffna, the Hindu deities are brought to seashore for abluion all along the Tamilnadu coastal belt. Siva, Muragan, Pillaiyar (Ganesh) and other Goddesses are taken to seashore on the first moon day (*Aadi amavasai*) of July and the full-moon day of April (*Chitra Pooranai*) every year. These days are important days to place ceremonial offerings to the deceased ancestors as a mark celebration of their death anniversary. It is to be noted that during the annual festival the Gods of Vallipuram Krishnan, Selvasannithi Murugan, etc. are brought to seashore for abluion.

One of the festivals called '*Samoothira therththam*' (lit.: 'ocean abluion festival') organized during the annual festival in Vallipuram, supports the myth related to the Karaiyar. This myth is stated in the *Thadsana Kailaya Malai* which was translated by Nagalingappillai from Sanskrit and published by the Vallipuram temple (2005: 135-141). According to this myth, a fish was seen in the ocean and it could not be trapped easily. After a long chase it fell on the lap of a woman called *Lavalli* but the fisherfolk of

Katkovalam referred to this lady as *Vallinachchi*, the fisherwoman. Surprisingly, this fish turned into a human baby on the lap of the woman said above. The Karaiyar carried the baby to their village. On their way they felt thirsty and searched for good water. They placed the baby under the shade of a tree and searched for a spring to quench their thirst. When they returned they had found a 'Sakkaram' (wheel of Lord Krishna) instead of the baby. Later, they built a temple for Lord Krishna on the same spot. To this day the fisherfolk continued to celebrate this festival as *Samuththra thirththam* (ocean abluion festival). This legend, too, relates Karaiyar with mythical sources of their origin and superiority.

4. Kingship perspectives

The caste system did not come into being all of a sudden. It was a product of a long term social and cultural evolution of Indian subcontinent. The origin of caste was influenced by several factors and one among them was related to kingship inheritance.

In some ethnohistorical studies, it was emphasized that the Karaiyar were considered to be the traditional naval warriors, also engaged in boat building, overseas trading, and fishing activities during leisure time. They also provided mercenary forces and were considered to be the most valorous by local kings in India and Sri Lanka. They were brought by the kings as warriors and labourers from South India to Sri Lanka. The king allocated specific roles to each group and this became formalized over the years, and finally these occupational groups became crystallized as castes, as we see it today. In this background, if we trace the origin of the Karaiyar caste among the Cattiyur Hindus in Chilaw, Sri Lanka, we could elucidate through their lores which state that they were brought as servants by king Kulakkottun. There are interesting migration tales about the arrival of the Karaiyar in the Manmiya of the Munnesvaram Sivan Temple authored by Somaskanta ('27: 12-18, 35-38).

It is recorded that king Kulakkottun came to Sri Lanka in the year 512 of *Kaliyuga* period. Hearing about the greatness of the Munnesvaram temple, the king renovated the shrine and performed *kumbhabhisekam* (temple consecration). In order to perform daily worship and conduct other duties of

the temple, he brought various servants (*tolumpalarkal*) from Tamil Nadu. The king enjoyed the way they performed their functions properly and sincerely. In order to supervise the services of these people, a prince was brought from Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Through a coronation ceremony he was acclaimed the king of this area. Then, the king Kulakkottun left for India and lead a peaceful life.

Traditionally, the Karaiyar is one of these servant castes brought by the king. The hierarchy of the Karaiyar was formalized on the basis of authority-service relationship rather than in terms of their purity. According to the Hindu concepts of pure and impure, the traditional occupation of the Karaiyar is not pure, but their caste is higher than the rest of the castes in coastal region in Sri Lanka. The accepted superiority of the Brahmin caste in the caste hierarchy at the period clashes with the above ideology (Tanaka '97: 28).

A Palm leaf manuscripts (*ola* script) in Sinhala entitled 'Mukkru Hatana' recorded by Hugh Nevill describes that the battalions of Karava include 7740 soldiers who came from the Coromandel coastal area known as areas of Kurukugal and defeated the Mukkuvars (a fishing community) and Thuluggar (Muslims). At the same time, Britto's History of Jaffna records that Parakiramabaku VIth, the King of Kotte (1412 – 1467) invited the battalions of Karava and facilitate trade with other countries (Pushparajan 2011: 31).

At this juncture, it is necessary to shed more light on some ethnohistorical accounts recorded by Europeans in the 18th century during their colonial rule in India and Sri Lanka. One of the records says like thus: the Cattiyur Karaiyar, one of the Karaiyar communities identified region wise in Sri Lanka, is said to have migrated from Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu, South India to Mannar, in the mid-seventeenth century. They moved southwards from Mannar to Puttalam and Mannur and finally settled in Cattiyur probably in the early eighteenth century.

Cattiyur Karaiyars share some aspects of the legends that state the reasons of migration from Tamil Nadu (Tanaka '97: 30-31) as follows: a fisherman's family in Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu had a beautiful daughter named Kamalakkanni. One day, the king of the area noticed her beauty and fell in love. He

expressed his desire to marry her. However, the king was notorious for his cruel behaviour and the parents were reluctant to offer Kamalakkanni to the king for marriage. They consulted with their villagers on this matter. It was extremely difficult for them to refuse the request of the king who was very powerful, and they finally decided to agree to the king's request and fixed the date for wedding ceremony. However, on the suggestion of their chief, all the villagers (eighteen families: twelve fishermen, three fishermen of low status, two washermen and a barber) vacated the village the day before the wedding. They headed for Sri Lanka in seven large boats leaving a tied to one of the auspicious poles of the ceremonial canopy under which the wedding was to be performed and reached the coast of Sri Lanka.

The myths of the Karaiyar reveal their homeland and their later diffusions to Jaffna peninsula. The legends and other lores associated with their nativization in the Jaffna coastal also reveals the 'two histories' as discussed by Romila Thapar (2000).

CONCLUSION

The ethnohistory of the Karaiyar brings forth various myths, legends, migration tales and other lores related to their origin and spread, how they transformed into an important fishing community of this region, and their present status as a dominant ethnos on the coastal Jaffna. The origin myths and other related legends of later period succinctly narrate their prominence both historically and culturally.

While considering the ethnohistory of the Karaiyar, they emphasize very much on the age-old cultural relationship between India and Sri Lanka. Their ethnohistory reveals the deeply rooted relationship between South India and Sri Lanka, particularly with northern Sri Lanka. Pathmanathan ('93: 668) states that social, political, economic and cultural relations existed between Sri Lanka and South India, particularly with Tamilnadu and Kerala since prehistoric times, probably due to the geographical proximity between the regions concerned (*ibid*: 668).

Though the cultural relation between the South India and the Jaffna is known from time immemorial, the literary records are also available from the period of ancient Tamil epics Cilapathikaram and Manimegalai, composed during the period 3 A. D. to

4 A. D. However, other literary sources also help us to understand the relationship between both these countries. In this regard, several prominent ethnohistorical documents are available.

Due to the geographical proximity between these two countries, it is evident that Sri Lanka was more influenced by South India rather than South India by Sri Lanka (Pillay 2001:1). This is clearly confirmed by the ethnohistorical sources. For instance, both the rulers of Tamil and Sinhala kingdoms in Sri Lanka were dependent on the warrior groups of South Indian states while they were colonized by others. The king Sangiliyan of the Jaffna kingdom sought support of the Tanjore king while he was facing a threat from Portuguese, and Sinhala king Paragramabagu VIth got support from a South Indian king. Such instances continued throughout the Sri Lankan history.

On the other hand, one of the myths of the Karava (Sinhala fishermen) who inhabit on the west coast of Sri Lanka, relates their origin with Kauravas of Mahabharata. Their origin myth claims their ancestral land was West Bengal in India. This myth may ethnographically be correlated with the Mahavamsa, which contains the origin myths of Sinhala society in Sri Lanka. According to Mahavamsa, the ancient Pali text on Sri Lankan history, compiled by Buddhist monk Mahathera Mahanama documented in the 5 A.D. the king Vijaya and his followers of the Rarh region of ancient Bengal landed in Sri Lanka in 543 BCE (Thiagarajah 2011: 365-367). The origin myth of Karava is deeply rooted in Mahavamsa, and this connotation of ethnohistory is attested with the arrival of king Vijaya from Bengal.

Let us, now, look at the contemporary socio-cultural history of Karaiyar, who held a complex nature of social mobility over the centuries. They tried to develop themselves as one of the dominant castes in the coastal region of Jaffna through political and economic network of the region. This has resulted in maintaining their identity strongly in the local/national mainstream. The Karaiyar have been stabilized their prominence over the centuries in all walks of life by accepting modern fishing technologies, which slowly and gradually empowered them with increased economic power.

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. Since Sri Lankan land mass is vastly encircled by sea water, the Karaiyar prominence developed from strength to strength over the centuries. Through this they have started claiming equal to Vellalar (agriculturalists) of interior Jaffna in almost all walks of life.

The Karaiyar prominence and dominance throughout their history has been reflected in different genres of lores and other sources. For instance, one of the legends that links to Mahabharata states that they are descendants of the king of Kauravar. In addition to this, the Karaiyar in Jaffna believe that their ancestors are devotees of Varuna, who is the sea god, and therefore they identify themselves as *Varnakulla Sooriya*.

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 (agriculturalists), through which the Karaiyar empowered their prominence in many spheres of social life. The title “Vellalar” (‘those who control floods’ - a term meant for agriculturalists) was considered not only a new one, but an elevated status as well. In this social process the fisherfolk started claiming themselves as ‘Kadal Vellalar’ (lit.: ‘sea cultivators’) comparing themselves with agriculturalists who have been addressed as Nila Vellalar (lit.: ‘those who till the land and cultivate crops’).

Further, Sivaratnam (‘68: 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. Through this the social mobility process gradually pushed the Karaiyar among the top castes in the Jaffna caste system.

Some sources of their ethnohistory link them with the god of the fisherfolk that too, establishes their primacy in social position. The *Valai viisu puranam* is one of the concrete examples for this. According to this *puranam* (a religious legend) God Siva is related to the fishing community. Similarly, there is yet another myth among fisherfolk of Katkivalam that the God Vallipuram Krishna came here in the form of

a fish and salvaged them with pride and fame with his omnipresence.

With this background, we can give due attention to the ethnohistorical value of myth both in terms of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. The myths related to the Karaiyar ethnohistory are to be viewed syntagmatically and paradigmatically. The narratives of indigenous people about the origins of the world, and all the beings and elements that populate it also connect with their history. Malinowski ('48: 84) in his discussion, on the role of myth emphasizes the pragmatic value of myth in enforcing a belief. The narratives of the myth have the function of legitimizing the social structure and providing it with a charter. Myths especially come into play when social or moral rule demanded justification and sanctity. Malinowski's stress is upon the social power of myth, and the potency of its use in matters of political concern that have to do with the legitimizing of the inequities of privilege and status. The Karaiyar myths, lores and other sources are embedded with their history either manifestly or latently, giving room to trace their long and continued history.

There is always a link between ethnohistory and the origin myth of caste/community. Such theories on the origin of caste like traditional theory, occupational theory, religious theory, political theory, racial theory and evolutionary theory try to explain the phenomenon in multiple ways. The idealist and materialist approaches in the dynamics of caste system view it as a closed system encompassing the Indianness nature of inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the structure. On the other hand, materialists refer to the caste as an economic phenomenon which maintains social inequality by the acceptance of the people. However, both approaches try to explain the caste structure and its dynamics in the social hierarchy. In this regard the ethnohistory of Karaiyar is mostly correlated with the horizontal and vertical socio-cultural mobility among the fishing and non-fishing communities of this region. Thus, ethnohistorical sources of Karaiyar share an intracultural history of the region, as well as a "common universal system" that embraces a wider spectrum of historical and cultural relation to the Tamil nation as a whole. Such historical and cultural relation also rooted with the neighbouring coastal land where their cognatic kin

inhabit parallelly exhibiting some common features as well as with some unique features. Viewing Karaiyar ethnohistory from this perspective, both from inter and intra-cultural approaches, their embedded history is definitely a source of fascination for anthropological theory and method.

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NOTE

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

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