

Ethnic Food Tradition of Kerala Fisherfolk

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As India is surrounded by Arabian Sea in the west, Bay of Bengal in the east, and Indian Ocean in the south, fishing traditions have their roots in Indian civilization since the ancient past. Moreover India is also considered the Land of Rivers as there are several rivers flowing across the country. The origin of fishing traditions can be traced to the ancient Harappan civilization. The earliest available records on the life of the fishermen of the southern region of Indian peninsula are from the Sangam literature. The ancient literature like *Ahananuru* and *Kuruntokai* poems gives literary references of the fishermen communities, including their cultural, economic, and social history. Sangam texts, though written in Tamil language, shed light into early Kerala life and dates back to the first five centuries of the Christian era. The physiographic divisions of the Sangam period were termed as the *tinais* or five eco zones. The *neythal* (coastal) region was occupied by people like the Minavar, Parathavar, Parthavas, Nulayars and Turaivans. In *Thiruvilayadalpuranam*, a collection of epic stories written by Paranjothi Munivar described the fishermen as *neyther*, *parathavar*, *valayar*, *karayar*, *arayar*, and *pattanavar*. The term *valayar* was derived from the Tamil term *valai*, meaning “net.” The term *karayar* was derived from the Tamil word *karai*, meaning “shore.” The term *pattanavar* was derived from the Tamil word *pattanam* meaning “town” with the natural advantage of being a coastal region with the people engaged in fishing and salt making as their livelihoods.

The ancient Tamil poem *Ahananuru* describes the *parthavas* who leave for fishing and catch a variety of fishes using strong and structural nets. It also explains that the fishermen get injuries from the fishes like sharks. The fisherfolk dine with fish curry; their children play and enjoy in the sea. The poem also narrates about the barter system in their trade as they exchange salt and fish for paddy. The Mukkuvas of North Malabar are highly organized under strong religious faith with temples in their locality showing their cultural identity. In ancient times they had no temples with Brahmin priests. Their deity goddess Bhadra-Kali was represented by a log of wood, which was placed in a hut that was considered a temple. There, they assemble four times a year to offer sacrifices of a cock and fruit to their deity.

The maritime tradition of Kerala has a past rooted in legend and continued until colonial rule. The landing of Vasco da Gama on the Kerala coast is believed to be directed by Mukkuvas of the coast who found fishing. The accounts of foreign travelers also supplemented the information on the splendid life of Kerala fishermen.

The ethnic food system represents the culture, tradition, custom, and lifestyle of a community that follows and is considered to be on par with the ethno botanical food system. Fishing communities also possess knowledge on the nutritional and medicinal values related to the diverse resources of the sea.

Fishermen of Kerala belong to ethno-regional communities with unique food culture as they live in close association with the sea. Fish being the main diet of fishermen communities, the people have developed food habits with fish as their main delicacy of their daily diets. Fish delicacies are also based in accordance with the nutritional needs. Another interesting wisdom they transfer from one generation to the next is the usable and avoidable fish varieties in certain seasons.

The sociocultural aspects of fisherfolk food habits will be discussed in the paper.