

## **Fisheries Of Travancore – A Historical Overview**

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### **Abstract:**

Hunting and fishing as chief economic activities of the primitive men preceded even agriculture and farming and hence, in the early stages of the progress of the human race, fisheries held a relatively more important place than in the recent centuries which saw the development of diverse industries and manufactures. As a livelihood activity, fishing and related activities of the subsistent economy was of least interest to the policy makers of both British and Princely Travancore. Fishing and related practices became on the verge of becoming important because the community was neither a worker nor a peasant that contributed to the state revenue

### **keywords:**

Fisheries, Stock fish, Pickling, Drying, Gulf, Travancore, Leaping wealth.

In the days before the invention and introduction of a medium of exchange when trade had necessarily to be carried on by barter, it is said

that products of the sea, such as amber, coral, salt, fish and shell fish were the first articles to be bartered by the uncivilized man. The rise of the modern maritime nations can be traced to the past when man ventured upon the deep ocean for fish to satisfy his hunger. Such fishing ventures paved the way for the rise of the ancient Phoenician fleet as well as that of the Greeks. In medieval times Britain had a great fleet whose only occupation was fishing in the North Sea. Though the haul of fish in the ancient days was small compared to that at present, the fishing interests of various peoples clashed with one another and led to keen rivalries, disputes and even wars. Herring fisheries formed the bone of contention between the English and the Dutch throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Though authentic records pointing to a parallel history of Travancore fisheries are not available the magnitude of the fisheries in relation to the fisheries of the world might justify the hypothesis that this country too held an enviable position from very remote times. Fishing was a lucrative occupation in Travancore from the earliest times. The old Malayalam ballads afford stray proofs of the importance of the Travancore fisheries in the past, while the Valavisu Puranam, whose date is still unsettled, is an ancient Malayalam treatise containing several

references to the methods of fishing in vogue here and to the arts and sciences relating to fishing.

Travancore has a long coastline and a vast extent of inland waters which give her a very important place among the maritime states of India. It is estimated that the value of the total catch of the world amounts to 25,000 lakhs of rupees per years. Luckily for Travancore, the wadger Bank which is one of the best twenty fishing grounds of the world is situated near the coast and is peculiarly fortunate in being able to haul 1/200 of the total quantity of fish caught throughtout the world. The physical features of the Travancore coast are in general so admirable suited for fishing operations that fishing boats regularly resort is the sea. The bed of the sea slopes gradually to a deapth of thirty fathoms which is the trawling limit. The whole of the 8000 square miles of fertile fishing ground near the Travancore coast has a more or less smooth undulating bottom usually of sand, mud or ooze. It is this natural advantage that makes the Travancore waters superior to those of Europe of purposes of fishing.

In the absense of the natural advantages of weather and the direction of the prevailing winds, it would have been impossible to risk even short voyages with the crank canoes and the catamarans which are the only fishing vessels now used by the fishermen of the state. Very

many varieties of nets invading the principles of cast nets, seine nets, ground seine nets, wall nets, trap nets, drift net and small travel nets are the types are being used in Travancore for capturing fishes. It can also be computed that the 6,800 square miles of sea left untapped beyond the coastal waters should annually yield five lakhs of tons of fish. Although this is the theoretical yield, it can be stated with certainty that at least half this quantity of marine wealth, which is sometimes spoken of as the 'leaping wealth' is awaiting collection in the deeper waters near our coast.

Travancore is thus peculiarly fortunate in having at her coasts a steady and never failing source of wealth which can be drawn upon year after year. Several varieties are brought to shore and a very small fraction of this catch would be sufficient to meet the demands of the consumers of fresh fish. The questioning of preserving the surplus fish for later use is therefore of vital importance from the economic point of view. The need for such preservation was understood from very ancient times and the very many methods evolved for the purpose continued day by day. Though scientific knowledge has not yet come within the reach of the Travancore fisherman, even before the theory of spontaneous generation and fermentation was propounded, Travancore fishermen invent different methods of preserving fish as drying, salting, pickling,

canning smoking and cold storage. The first three are the methods usually employed by the Travancore fishermen.

In the case of drying method, there is a certain minimum of water content that will suffice for the growth of micro organisms in fishes. When the quantity of water present in the fish is reduced below this minimum, it will be possible to preserve the fish for a considerable time. This is the Principle of drying fish as a mode of preservation. The fishermen of Travancore by centuries of experience have worked out certain formulae in which all these factors are taken into account in the method of drying fish in the seasons. Though several methods of drying are known in other parts of the world, the only practice that is widely prevalent in this state is to expose the fish to the heat of sun, this being a tropical country where there is plenty of bright sun light throughout the year. The dried fish is technically known as "Stock fish" It has a good home market in the high rangeland. Sixteen to eighteen lakhs of rupees worth of fish of the varieties are preserved by drying and are exported from Travancore chiefly to the markets in Colombo and the Straits settlements.

Next to drying salting is another important method used in Travancore for preserving all kinds of fish. It has been understood that salt mainly preserve fish by extracting water from them. The

composition of the salt used in curing bears great importance in the matter of the penetration of salt into the tissue of the fish. Sea salt is commonly used for salting in Travancore. They contain varying proportion of calcium and magnesium salts and sulphates. These salts effect a retardation of the rate of penetration of sodium chloride into fish during the salting process. Pickling and mild curing are other methods of salting fish, but these are not of much importance in the commercial world. Besides salt, vinegar is a harmless antiseptic that is being used in Travancore for preserving fish.

The long sea coast, the extensive backwaters, the numerous fresh water streams and the vast expenses of punja fields afford excellent places for fish and for developing this lucrative industries. Nearly 20 percent of the shank fisheries of the world is contributed by Travancore. There is a great scope for establishing several subsidiary industries among the fishing folk. The extraction of oil from fish has begun to be popular. The export of fish and fish products has been on the increase.

**Conclusion:**

A well directed extension of the programme for the education of fishermen and the spread of co-operation among them can easily lead to the rapid expansion of the industry. From what has been said about the

Fisheries of Travancore, it may be gathered that Travancore keeps a store of food materials and many submerged in the fathoms of the ocean as a reserve, in the exploitation of which proposes to get more interested.

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