



தமிழ்மணம் சர்வதேசத் தமிழ் ஆய்விதழ்

Peer-Reviewed | Open Access | Crossref DOI & Global
Indexing | Google Scholar Impact Factor | Multidisciplinary

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63300/tm07042026.26>



Fishing Technology and Coastal Livelihood in Ancient Tamil Society: Evidence from Sangam Literature

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Article Info

Received on 20-April-2026, Revised on 22-April-2026, Accepted on 25-April-2026, Published on 01-May-2026

ABSTRACT

Tamil Sangam literature provides a rich and detailed window into the environment, lifestyle, industries, and cultural structures of ancient Tamil society. Among the various themes, Neithal Thinaï stands out, vividly depicting coastal and marine life, which were integral to this society. The literature extensively elaborates on the lives of Neithal land dwellers, highlighting their maritime knowledge, fishing techniques, community interactions, and their use of marine resources. Key texts such as Agananooru, Purananooru, Natrinai, Kurunthogai, Ingurunooru, and Pattinappalai serve as vital sources, offering deep insights into coastal living and its multifaceted aspects. This paper aims to explore in greater detail the traditional weaving practices, fishing tools, and techniques described in the Sangam texts, as well as the social life of the Parathava community and methods of marine resource utilisation. Additionally, it seeks to shed light on the sophisticated maritime science and the environmental consciousness embedded within Sangam poetry, reflecting the community's respect for nature and sustainable practices.

Keywords: Sangam Literature, Fishing, Neidhal, fishermen, Coastal life

Introduction:

Fishermen are people who make a living by fishing in the water. In the contemporary era, fishing is done by various gears and methods, such as demersal fishing, gillnets, longlines, purse seines, pole and line, pots and traps, dredges, pelagic trawls, and Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs) (Fishing Methods and Gear Types | Marine Stewardship Council, n.d.). According to the FAO report In *Brief to the State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2024* (2024), FAO global marine fisheries and aquaculture production surged to 92.3 million tonnes in 2022, with 91 million tonnes of aquatic animals. In fisheries production, India ranked third worldwide with 6 percent. Its coastline is 11,098.81 kilometers across nine coastal states and four union territories. Since India is called a peninsula due to its geographical features, it is bordered by the Bay of Bengal to the east, the Arabian Sea to the west, and the Indian Ocean to the south. India has various types of land, including deserts, plains, mountain ranges, forested areas, and coastal regions.

Sangam Literature:

These different kinds of areas are already mentioned in the Sangam literature, which encompasses the classical Tamil writings from roughly 500 BCE to 200 CE. So far, 2,381 poems authored by 473 poets have been uncovered within this body of work (Kamaraj, 2025). The earliest Sangam literature is Tolkappiyam, a grammar of the Tamil language. The rest of the Sangam literature is categorised into two groups: the greater eighteen texts (Pathinenmelkanakku) and the lesser eighteen texts (Pathinenkeelkanakku), written during the Sangam period and post-Sangam period, respectively. The greater eighteen texts are divided into 2 collections: 8 anthologies (Ettuthogai), including Natrinai, Kurunthogai, Aingurunuru, Kalithogai, Aganaanooru, Puranaanooru, Pathitruppathu, and Paripadal; and 10 anthologies (Paththupattu). Thirumurugatrappadai, Porunatrappadai, Sirupanatrappadai, Perumpanatrappadai, Mullaippattu, Maduraikkanchi, Nedunalvadai, Kurinjippattu, Pattinappalai, Malaipadukadam.

This literature includes anthologies of poetry and prose that vividly depict the political life, social structure, moral values, love, warfare, religion, and philosophy of the ancient Tamil society. In Sangam poetry, poets have mentioned five types of land: Kurinji, Mullai, Marudham, Neidhal, and Paalai. These denote hill, forest, plain, coastal, and desert regions, respectively. This paper examined how fishing and the people of the fishing community were depicted in the Sangam literature of the Sangam age.

. In the Sangam literature, there are 99 Sangam poets who composed poems about the Neidhal land. Specifically, 38 out of the 99 poets wrote exclusively about Neidhal. Among the poets, the majority of the poems were created by three individuals: Ammovanaar, Nallanthuvanar, and Ulochanaar, with 123, 33, and 31 poems, respectively (Balamurugan, 2024). Sangeetha (2019) states that the lives of fisherfolk along the Coromandel Coast are described through Sangam literature, including Aganaanooru, Madurai Kanji, Natrinai, and Kurunthokai about "Neidhal." The author explains their residential area, called paakkam or pattinam, which denotes both the coastal community's area and their house structures. The importance of wind to fishing and how it creates dunes are also discussed. Additionally, the most important point is that during the Sangam period, the fisherfolk celebrated egalitarian values. Besides fishing, fisherfolk are also skilled and experienced in pearl diving and chank diving.

Mudhaliar (1969) describes the existing Sangam literature, such as Tolkappiyam, Perumabanatrappadai, Soodamani Nigandu, and Pattinappalai, as sources that explain about fish and fishermen. The significance of fish is also depicted in temple carvings, architectural motifs in ancient buildings, and ancient jewellery. He mentioned that one of the ancient rulers of Tamil Nadu was the Pandiya dynasty; they had the fish in their emblem, and the Cholas also had the fish on their seals and coins.

Murugan and Muthulakshmi (2022) noted that ferocious fish and sharks were among the types of fish in the Sangam age. Also mentioned that coastal people's rituals about sharks are found in the Sangam literature, such as Aganaanooru, Porannaanooru, Kalithogai and so on... The Sangam literatures utilises the neidhal thinai to mention the day-to-day life of coastal people, to showcase their wealth and prosperity, and to highlight their courage, using it as a metaphor.

How does Sangam literature connect archaeology?

To answer this question, for example, we need to know how ancient ships reached the ports mentioned in the archaeological record. The answer is the "Lighthouse" (Maritime Engineering), explained in Perumpānāruppaṭai (Lines 346-351), which provides a structural description of a lighthouse.

Tamil Verse:

"மடங்கு இறை சென்னி மால் வரை நிவப்பின்
சுடர் விரிந்து அன்ன சுடர் மயிர் எக்கர்...
வானம் ஊன்றிய மதலை போல"

Archaeological Evidence: While wooden and brick lighthouses rarely survive, the description of a "Mathalai" (massive pillar/support) matches the heavy foundation stones found near ancient coastline sites. It explains the logistical infrastructure needed for Roman-Tamil trade. Here, archaeological work has been done through literary sources; evidence has been drawn from Sangam literature, similar to how this paper aims to explore the culture of fish and fishermen. The evidence is also drawn from the Sangam literature.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach. Selected poems from major Sangam literature poem texts, including Aganaanuru, *Purananuru*, *Natrinai*, *Kurunthogai*, *Kalithogai*, and *Soodamani Nigandu*, have been analysed to identify references related to:

- Fishing practices
- Marine ecology
- Coastal livelihood
- Maritime trade

The analysis focuses on interpreting the poetic descriptions in the context of environmental history and maritime anthropological history.

Coastal Livelihood

Fishermen, also known as Barathavar, are actively engaged in the traditional practice of fishing. They spend their time catching various types of fish from the seas, rivers, or lakes, utilising different methods and tools. After harvesting their catch, they are responsible for distributing the fish, whether locally in markets or through various other channels, ensuring that the fishing community people have access to fresh seafood. Which has been explained in Aganaanooru. 10.

Aganaanooru 10:

Tamil verse

"பழந்திமில் கொன்ற புது வலைப் பரதவர்
மோட்டு மணல் அடைகரைக் கோட்டு மீன்
கொண்டி,"

English translation

"Fishermen with old boats and
new nets share beached sharks with horns
with those in their aroma-filled village, to
flouris

The text depicts fishermen equipped with new, freshly repaired nets who have successfully caught a large fish. It describes them standing on the banks of a river or shoreline characterized by substantial sand deposits, highlighting the richness of the environment and their successful fishing effort.

1. Fishing using Fishing nets:

A large, strong net made of twisted fibres used by Barathavars to catch the fish from the ocean-
Natrinai. 63,74., *Aganaanooru*. 250

Natrinai. 74:

Tamil verse

வடிக்கதிர் திரித்த வல்நாண் பெருவலை
இடிக்குறற் புணரிப் பௌவத்து இடுமார்..."

English translation

"Fishermen, load their boats fully with large
nets made from strong, twisted
ropes using fine spindles, go into
the ocean with thundering waves...."

This poem is what the heroine said to the messenger: The fishermen, who cast their strong, thick nets with sharp-edged sinkers into the thunderous, roaring ocean from their boats loaded to capacity, appear like powerful elephants in a restricted enclosure. They drag these boats toward the shore of the great sea, where the small-flowered Gnālal trees bloom; people refer to the lord of this shore as a 'stranger'.

Natrinai. 63

Tamil verse

“உரவுக் கடல் உழந்த பெருவலைப் பரதவர்”

English translation

“where fishermen with huge nets struggle in the powerful ocean...”

Here, the poet uses the ocean as a metaphor to engage the heroine's feelings towards the hero of her heart. And to depict the fishermen's life in this poem, Natrinai. 63.

Aganaanuru-250:

Tamil verse

“அவ் வலைப் பரதவர் கானல் அம் சிறுகுடி”

English translation

“Small village near the seashore groves with fishermen owning pretty fishing nets...”

In Aganaanuru 250, the seashore setting, comprising sand, waves, and play, serves as the backdrop for love. The heroine encounters the hero while playing on the coastal sands, illustrating everyday life on Neithal. The restless sea waves echo her insomnia and emotional upheaval. Therefore, the coastal landscape symbolises both daily life and inner emotions in the poem.

Natrinai. 111:

Tamil verse

“துய்த்தலை இறவொடு தொகை மீன் பெறீஇயர், வரி வலைப் பரதவர் கருவினைச் சிறாஅர்...”

English translation

“Fishermen take their tightly tied nets to catch many kinds of fish and prawns with tender heads...”

In Natrinai 111, the friend offers the hero a message of prosperity and bravery. She depicts plentiful fish, expert fishermen, and hunters, illustrating a vibrant and busy environment. The imagery of boats crossing the sea and catching dangerous sharks underscores the coastal way of life. These scenes aim to strengthen the hero's resolve, encouraging him to stay resilient and hopeful rather than feeling sorrow.

2. Fishing by Direct Attack:

Fishermen from Tamilnadu fishing sharks by direct attacks using a weapon called **Eriyuli**- is a type of sharp spear. This poem aganaanuru. 210 explains the The blood emitted from the wounds of the large fish (shark), killed by the sharp spears thrown by the fishermen

Aganaanuru. 210:

Tamil verse

“குறியிறைக் குரம்பைக் கொலைவெம் பரதவ ரெறியுளி பொருத வேமுறு பெருமீன் புண்ணுமிழ் குருதி புலவுக்கடன் மறுப்பட....”

English translation

“Attack a happy, huge fish, throwing sharp metal barbs, the blood flowing from the wounds changing the colour of the ocean,”

Aganaanuru 210 depicts a coastal community focused on fishing and maritime activities. Fishermen spear large fish, causing the sea to turn red and emit a strong smell. They reside in simple huts and face the challenge of mighty waves daily. The chieftain is shown as the leader of this diligent seafaring group.

3. Fishermen in the Sangam age using nocturnal fishing methods typically ventured far into the sea at night. They relied on shore-based navigation for fishing, placing lights on the stored mansions, which are considered early versions of lighthouses.

'வாள்வாய்ச் சுறவொடு வயமீன் கெண்டி நிணம்பெய் தோணியர்' Natrinai. 111

Marine animals:

1. Crab – அலவன்

Agananooru. 280:

Tamil verse

“திணி மணல் அடைகரை அலவன் ஆட்டி
அசையினள் இருந்த ஆய் தொடிக்
குறுமகள்...”

English translation

“Along with many other flowers in her
pretty hair, she chased crabs on the
sandy shore and got tired...”

In Agananooru 280, the hero is unsure how to win over the heroine, who is beautiful and difficult to pursue. He recognises that gifts alone won't secure her hand. Instead, he chooses to earn her love by serving her and gaining her father's approval through humility and hard work. The poem illustrates the Sangam tradition of marriage involving bride-price and social acceptance. It also emphasises the Neithal thinai (coastal landscape), highlighting fishing, pearl diving, salt production, sandy shores, marine life, and a seafaring, trade-driven economy.

Kalithogai. 131:

Tamil verse

“வாள் நிலா ஏய்க்கும் வயங்கு ஒளி எக்கர்
மேல்,
ஆனாப் பரிய அலவன் அளை புகூஉம்...”

English translation

“The crabs on the moon-like, bright sand
that scuttle around
constantly and hide in their holes, on the
shores..”

2. Shark

Sharks are among the oldest marine creatures and one of the most ferocious fish. In (Ag. 80), sharks, which are called ‘Kottu meen’, and similar references to sharks are found in 23 poems across six Sangam literary works. Specific texts mentioning sharks include 7 times in Agananuru, 10 times in Natrinai, 3 times in Purananuru, once in Kalithokai, once in Perumpanatruppandai, and once in Maduraikanchi. (Mohan, 2007; Nagarajan, 2007; Viswanathan, 2007)

Kalithogai. 131:

Tamil verse

“இனமீன் இகல் மாற வென்ற சின மீன்
எறி சுறா வான் மருப்பு கோத்து நெறி செய்த...”

English translation

“Hanging swing made by linking the white
horns
of
fierce sharks that fought and won with many of
their kind....”

In Kalithogai 131, the poem depicts a lively coastal scene full of natural movement and activity. It uses vivid imagery to describe the interaction between waves, shore, and living beings. Nature's actions are presented in a rhythmic and playful way. The poem highlights the beauty and energy of the seashore environment.

Aganaanuru 80:

Tamil verse

“கொடுந்தாள் முதலையொடு கோட்டு மீன்
வழங்கும்
இருங்கழி இட்டுச் சுரம் நீந்தி, இரவின்...”

English translation

“You come at night, crossing
harsh, narrow paths and vast
backwaters with sharks with horns...”

This line of the poem suggests that horned sharks have inhabited this sea for a long time and that fishermen have caught them using various methods. The poem shows that the friend warns the hero

about dangerous nighttime visits through waters filled with sharks and crocodiles. She reminds him that the heroine is devoted and can be safely met during the day. She describes their daytime activity of drying fish, making it a good time to visit. The poem contrasts risky secret love with a safer, socially acceptable union.

Agananooru. 187:

Tamil verse

“வாள்வாய்ச் சுறவின் பனித்துறை நீந்தி
நாள்வேட்டு எழுந்த நயனில் பரதவர்...”

English translation

“That heartless fishermen ride, leaving from
the shore with dew, to hunt for **sharks with
sword like mouths.**”

In Agananooru 187, the heroine informs her friend about the hero's departure to earn money for their marriage. She remembers their secret union and feels anxious about the delay and the risk of separation. The poem captures her fears that their marriage may be postponed. It combines themes of love, longing, and uncertainty, enriched with vivid descriptions of her environment. The text explains how ruthless fishermen, who set out early each morning for their daily catch, have crossed cold shores where sharks with sword-like mouths lie in wait. It depicts sea fishing, boats, and shark-catching at dawn, illustrating coastal livelihoods. This portrays early maritime activity and highlights the deep connection between sea life and human emotions.

3. Turtle

Agananooru. 160:

Tamil verse

"அடும்புகொடி சிதைய வாங்கிக் கொடுங்கழிக்
குப்பை வெண் மணல் பக்கம் சேர்த்தி
நிறைச்சூல் யாமை மறைத்து ஈன்று புதைத்த
கோட்டுவட்டு உருவின் புலவுநாறு முட்டை
பார்ப்புடன் ஆகும்அளவை, பசுவாய்க்...”

“The lord of the seashore with groves,
where a fully pregnant **turtle** breaks and
pulls adumpu vines and covers with them
her flesh-stinking, round **eggs** that look
like ivory dice on the white sand near
the backwaters, ...”

English translation

In Agananooru 160, the friend informs the heroine that the hero, who previously visited secretly, is now openly coming to marry her. She compares his past clandestine nighttime visits with his current public appearance during the day with companions. The poem highlights the transition from concealed love to accepted social marriage. It also reflects the heroine's excitement and the evolving nature of their relationship. Additionally, the poem describes the gentle process of eggs hatching and small turtles emerging into the world. Pregnant turtles gather white sand along the bank, quietly preparing for new life across generations. Beneath the earth, the mother turtle lays her curved, fish-scented eggs, which soon hatch into tiny hatchlings through a split in the shell. The poem depicts sea turtles laying eggs on sandy shores and in backwaters, accompanied by Neithal flowers, illustrating the coastal ecology.

4. Prawn-

Patinapalai. 63 :

Tamil verse:

“கருந்தொழில் கலி மாக்கள்,
கடல் இறவின் சூடு தின்றும்,
வயல் ஆமைப் புழுக்கு உண்டும்...”

English translation

“They gather with their many relatives
and hordes of people from their clan.
people eat roasted shrimp and boiled field
tortoises...”

This line shows that fishermen eat prawns caught in their nets during their leisure time after returning from the ocean.

Nattrinai. 111:

Tamil verse

“துய்த்தலை இறவொடு தொகை மீன்
பெறீஇயர்,
வறி வலைப் பரதவர் கருவினைச்
சிறாஅர்...”

English translation

“Fishermen take their tightly tied nets to catch
many kinds of fish and prawns with tender
heads...”

In Nattrinai 111, the friend tells the heroine that the groom’s chariot is close. She highlights the courage of coastal fishermen who venture into the sea and capture dangerous creatures like sharks. The imagery depicts children playing and men sailing across waters and backwaters. With a tone of concern and urgency, the friend notes that the union is imminent. The poem features scenes of net fishing, shark hunting, boats, and backwaters, illustrating vibrant maritime life. It showcases a coastal landscape of sea, sandbanks, and lagoons, emphasising the significance of Neithal culture.

5. Shrimps:

Shrimp are caught in nets using a long boat from the ocean. The poet mentions that fishing is a dangerous job. While catching shrimp, Indian mackerel- *ayirai* can also be caught simultaneously. Which has been denoted in (Ag. 60.)

Agananooru.60:

Tamil verse

"பெருங்கடற் பரப்பில் சேயிறா நடுங்க
கொடுந் தொழில் முகந்த செங்கோல்
அவ்வலை நெடுந்திமில் தொழிலொடு
வைகிய தந்தைக்கு...”

English translation

“white rice she got from bartering salt mixed
with a sauce of *ayirai* cooked
in sweet tamarind sauce, to her father, who does
harsh fishing work in the vast ocean as red
shrimp tremble, in his curved boat with
beautiful nets and red rods...”

In Agananooru 60, the friend advises the hero not to pressure the heroine too much. She warns that if the mother suspects their love, the girl will be kept under strict watch. The poem describes the heroine’s life along the coast, drawing a comparison between her beauty and the port city of Thondi. It emphasises the tension between romantic love and parental authority in a coastal community. The poem also depicts fishing activities (nets, sea catch) and local food culture (fish, salt trade). Additionally, it portrays seashore life with sandbanks and the port of Thondi, illustrating the Neithal landscape and economic setting.

6. Valai fish (ribbon fish) (வாளை)-

Purananooru- 18:

Tamil verse

“பூக் கதூஉம் இன வாளை,
நுண் ஆரல், பரு வரால், ...”

English translation

“Schools of *valai* fish in the deep moats snap
up the flowers of the
short-trunked portia trees that are near the
water with tiny
eels, large murels and lustrous *keliru* fish!”

In Purananooru 18, Kudapulaviyanar advises the Pandyan king on righteous rule and lasting fame. He emphasises that true greatness comes from ensuring prosperity through water and agriculture, not just war. Food from land and water is vital, making water management the king’s key duty. The poem concludes that preserving water resources leads to enduring glory. It highlights a world surrounded by the sea and filled with fish, stressing water as the foundation of life, agriculture, and prosperity, and linking natural resources to good governance.

7. Eel fish – ஆரல் .

Kurunthogai. 25::

Tamil verse

“ஒழுகு நீர் ஆரல் பார்க்கும்
குருகும் உண்டு, தான் மணந்த ஞான்றே”

English translation

“millet stalks, was looking for eels in
the running water when he took me.”

In Kurunthogai 25, the heroine mourns the disappearance of the hero who had promised marriage. With no witnesses to his vow, she doubts its truth. She labels him a “thief” for secretly enjoying her love before leaving. Her grief embodies betrayal, doubt, and emotional suffering. The poem depicts flowing water, Aral fish, and a stork (kuruku) waiting to catch fish, symbolising coastal ecology. It employs seashore imagery to represent secrecy, vulnerability, and emotional betrayal.

Kurunthogai. 114:

Tamil verse

“ அல்கலும்
ஆரல் அருந்த வயிற்ற
நாரை மிதிக்கும் ...”

English translation

“At night,
the storks with stomachs full of
eels will tread on her forehead...”

In Kurunthogai 114, the friend explains to the hero why she left the heroine behind. She mentions that night is falling and the area is unsafe due to birds that might cause disturbances. Playfully referring to a doll as their “daughter,” she highlights the girls’ imaginative play. She requests that the hero meet the heroine properly and ensure her safe return. The poem is set in the Neithal (coastal) region, characterised by fish and water birds like storks, illustrating shoreline ecology. It depicts nighttime coastal life, where birds and sea-related elements influence human activities activity.

Purananooru-18:

Tamil verse

“பூக் கதூஉம் இன வாளை,
நுண் ஆரல், பரு வரால், ...”

English translation

“Schools of *valai* fish in the deep moats snap up
the flowers of the
short-trunked portia trees that are near the water
with tiny
eels, large murrels and lustrous *keliru* fish!”

Types of boats

On the Coromandel Coast, there was a jetty built during the period of 300BC (Wheeler et al., 1946; Rao, 1970). This says the boat construction for trade and fishing in Tamil Nadu is the forerunner in the fishing ground. Fishermen have created vessels in different types. Literature mentions types like 1. Kattumaram (Agam, 280); 2. Navai (Nat, 295), 3. Thimil (Puram, 274), 4. Thoni (Puram, 343), 5. Kalam (Puram, 386), etc. (Subramanian, 2003).

1. Thimil (தீமில்):

Thimil, a notable vessel in the Sangam literature, is known for deep-sea fishing. The boat features a curved, large hull and a design optimised for extended stays at sea, enabling fishermen to venture far from the coast, sometimes even at night. Specifically, the reference to fishermen who "went far into the sea during the night" pertains to those using Thimil boats, which are specialised fishing vessels. The Thimil boat has a distinctive crescent-shaped curvature at both ends, with a broad interior space and narrow tips, making it easily recognisable. Due to its shape and size, it is often called Kodunthimil in various literary contexts. The vessel is robust and long enough to carry heavy nets and catch substantial fish, such as sharks, highlighting its strength and capacity. Consequently, it is

renowned for descriptive adjectives such as Nedunthimil and Thinthimil, which mean "sturdy" and "strong," respectively, emphasising its substantial form. Despite its length and sturdiness, the Thimil boat can move rapidly across the sea, enabling fishermen to cover extensive areas efficiently during their fishing expeditions.

Nattrinai. 331

Tamil verse

“எந்தை திமில் இது, நுந்தை திமில்” என
வளை நீர் வேட்டம் போகிய கிளைஞர்
திண் திமில் எண்ணும் தண் கடற் சேர்ப்ப!...”

English translation

““This is my father’s boat” and, “This is
your father’s boat,”
as they count the sturdy boats of their
relatives who went fishing in the ocean...”

In Nattrinai 331, the friend encourages the hero to visit freely, avoiding social boundaries. She describes a peaceful coastal town where residents are friendly but unaware of their love. Daily life includes salt production, fish drying, and beach activities. The poem reassures the hero he can safely unite with the heroine, depicting scenes of salt carts, dried fish, seabirds, sea life, fishing boats (Timil), and children playing near the coast, emphasizing the Neithal theme culture.

Kalithogai-149:

Tamil verse

“நிரைதிமில் களிறாக, திரைஒலி பறையாக”

English translation

“Where rows of boats appear like
elephants...”

In Kalithogai 149, the friend uses striking coastal imagery to address the hero. The sea is portrayed as a battleground, with boats resembling elephants heading into combat. The crashing waves evoke war drums, while seabirds flying overhead are likened to an approaching army. This vivid imagery celebrates the hero and calls on him to listen. The poem depicts the sea as a battlefield filled with fishing boats, waves, and seabirds, highlighting coastal life. It employs maritime symbols to craft a lively war analogy rooted in the Neithal landscape.

Kalithogai. 136

Tamil verse

“இவர்திமில் எறிதிரை ஈண்டி வந்து
அலைத்தக்கால்”

English translation

“Where boats ply and crashing waves
break...”

In Kalithogai 136, the poem describes waves striking a Timil boat and then receding. As the water pulls back, it leaves behind traces resembling crab tracks along the shoreline. These marks are compared to lines carved by thorns in an arena. The poem vividly captures the sea's dynamics through detailed imagery, emphasising wave movement, boats, and crab activity on the coast. It employs natural coastal scenes to create visual patterns and poetic analogies, effectively illustrating the lively coastal environment.

Aganaanooru. 60:

Tamil verse

“பெருங்கடற் பரப்பில் சேயிறா நடுங்க
கொடுந்தொழில் முகந்த செங்கோல்
அவ்வலை
நெடுந்திமில் தொழிலொடு வைகிய

தந்தைக்கு”

English translation

“Ocean, as red shrimp tremble, in his
curved
boat with beautiful nets and red rods...!”

Aganaooru 70:

Tamil verse

கொடுந்திமில் பரதவர் வேட்டம்
வாய்த்தென்”

English translation

“Flesh-reeking village who catch fish
with curved boats, praise the
benefits...”

In Agananooru 70, the heroine confidently believes that critics of their premarital relationship will stay silent after they marry. The hero is depicted as a generous leader of a fishing community who shares his catch with others. While village women gossip about their love, their union will ultimately put an end to all criticism. The poem emphasises themes of love, social pressure, and the victory of a legitimate marriage. It reflects the life of fishermen, their nets, and fish-rich coastal villages, highlighting a maritime way of life. Additionally, it depicts a coastal area (Kalam Perundurai) with punnai trees, festivals, and a sea-oriented community culture.

Agananooru 65:

Tamil verse

“மீன்கொள் பரதவர் கொடுந்திமில்”

English translation

“Lamps lit by fishermen with curved boats
as they appear high on the tall waves
that touch the sky...”

In Agananooru 65, the hero describes how the heroine chose to elope with him willingly. He recounts that she endured social criticism from her mother and others but still chose to be with him. Their concealed love is likened to a bright light, like a fire or lamp shining in the dark. The poem celebrates love, courage, and the boldness of elopement that defies societal norms. The imagery of fishermen using lamps at night to fish from boats along the coast in Agananooru 65 highlights coastal life. The lit-up boats on the sea symbolise maritime activity and the hidden nature of love that is now visible.

Kattumaram (கட்டுமரம்):

Literally "tied woods", this is the iconic raft made of 3 to 7 logs lashed together. It is heavily associated with the Pattinaver (Pattinavar), a fishing community of the Coromandel Coast (Sangeetha, 2007).

Thoni (தோணி):

A larger, often three-masted boat used for coastal journeys, ferrying cargo, and pearl fishing: a speciality of the Paradavar community of the southern "Fishery Coast" (near Tuticorin). Portuguese missionary Francis Xavier SJ noted that in 1542-1543, in southern India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, large boats called thonis were used as fishing vessels (Schurhammer, 1977). Thoni is a word still in use to denote boats in southern part of Tamil Nadu in India.

Natrinai.111:

Tamil verse

'வாள்வாய்ச் சுறவொடு வயமீன் கெண்டி
நிணம்பெய் தோணியர்' -

English translation

“They climb on their boats and brave the salty waves, bring bountiful catches of fatty fish and sword-mouthed sharks.

Naavaai (நாவாய்):

Nattrianai. 295:

Tamil verse

“வேறு பல் நாட்டுக் கால் தர வந்த
பல வினை நாவாய் தோன்றும்
பெருந்துறைக்...”

English translation

“The liquor jars, that are brought by ships that sail from many countries to the big port, by our father...”

In Nattrinai 295, the heroine, confined at home, shares her suffering with her friend. Her declining beauty and increasing distress are likened to a withering creeper. Her parents are aware of her condition and closely guard her, preventing her union with the hero. The friend argues that marriage is the best way to protect her youthfulness and happiness. Additionally, these lines from Nattrinai 295 mention the exchange of beverages between countries, facilitated by large ships called Naavai,

emphasising international trade and maritime links.

Kalam (கலம்):

Kalam is a smaller version of Naavaai, which helps facilitate maritime trade among nearby countries.

Agananuru. 280:

Tamil verse

“நலஞ்சால் விழுப் பொருள் கலம் நிறை
கொடுப்பினும்...”

English translation

“Ocean, enter the huge, deep ocean in
boats...”

Purananuru. 386:

Tamil verse

“கடலே கால் தந்த கலன்
எண்ணுவோர்...”

English translation

“People stand in the seashore groves and count
the
ships brought by the wind...”

This poem vividly depicts a ship that has been sailed across the ocean, harnessing the power of the wind to navigate its journey.

Other than fishing work

These fishermen are commonly known as the barathavar people, who were simple fishermen before they took up trading, pearl fishing and salt production along this coast (Ray, 1994). The salt farmers, called as ‘Umanars’, lived an unstable life, as mentioned in the Sangam literature.

1. Pearl fishing:

Agnanooru. 280

Tamil verse

“தருகுவன் கொல்லோ தானே, விரி திரைக்
கண் திரள் முத்தம் கொண்டு, ஞாங்கர்த்...”

English translation

“A fisherman from the huge
boat with beautiful groves who bring
rounded pearls from the wave-filled
ocean...”

In Agnanooru 280, the hero is uncertain about how to win the heroine’s affection. He understands that mere gifts won't secure her hand. Instead, he chooses to earn her father’s approval through service, humility, and collaborative work. The poem illustrates marriage customs and the value of social acceptance. It depicts salt fields, sea fishing, and pearl gathering, highlighting coastal livelihoods. Additionally, it mentions sandy shores, crabs, and maritime trade, emphasizing the Neithal landscape.

Ingurunooru. 195

“வளைபடு முத்தம் பரதவர் பகருங்,
கடல் கெழு கொண்கன்”

This poem uses the act of pearl fishing in the ocean as a metaphor to symbolise the pursuit of precious things and treasures. It also highlights the wealth of the heroine's father, showcasing his prosperity and affluence through vivid imagery and symbolism.

2. Conch fishing-

Ingurunooru. 194

“கடல் கோடு அறுத்த அரம் போழ் அவ்வளை...”

Here, Kadal Kodu (கடல் கோடு), meaning sea conch, is used to make ornamental bangles. This indicates that conch fishing was also practised during the Sangam period.

3. Salt farming:

Agananooru. 390

Tamil verse

“உவர் விளை உப்பின் கொள்ளை சாற்றி,
அதர்படு பூழிய சேண் புலம் படரும்
ததர் கோல் உமணர் போகும் நெடுநெறிக்
கண நிரை வாழ்க்கை தான் நன்று
கொல்லோ?...”
“..... “நெல்லும் உப்பும் நேரே ஊரீர்!
கொள்ளீரோ?” எனச் சேரிதொறும்
நுவலும்...”

English translation

Stating the price of salt grown in saline land, going to faraway places with dusty paths, the lives of salt merchants with thick goads must be good when they go on the long paths in groups.
“....Town people!
Rice for salt, straight exchange! Will you barter?...”

In Agananooru 390, the hero falls in love with a salt-selling girl from a coastal village. She is depicted selling salt in the streets, calling out exchanges of salt for paddy. Enchanted by her beauty and charm, he becomes intensely attached but struggles to express his love visibly. The poem illustrates his longing and uncertainty about how to win her.

Natrinai. 254:

Tamil verse

“உமணர் தந்த உப்பு நொடை நெல்லின்
அயினி மா இன்று அருந்த...”

English translation

“Rice from paddy, the salt merchants got trading their salt...”

In Natrinai 254, the friend recalls the hero playing happily with them on the seashore. She invites him again, assuring him of a warm welcome and no barriers to join with the heroine. The poem highlights coastal life's salt trade, small village living, and simple farming without rain. It underscores that the hero can safely approach and be with the heroine without fear or restrictions.

Natrinai. 138:

Tamil verse

“உவர் விளை உப்பின் குன்று போல் குப்பை
மலை உய்த்துப் பகரும் நிலையா
வாழ்க்கைக்,
கணம் கொள் உமணர் உயங்குவயின்
ஒழித்த...”

English translation

“Whose salt merchants with
unstable lives who move
through the mountains selling
salt that grows in saline land...”

In Natrinai 138, this poem describes a coastal community whose lives depend mainly on salt farming. The poem depicts a man involved in the coastal salt trade, transporting and selling salt across different regions. Their existence is marked by uncertainty and instability as they face the challenges of their delicate, reliant lifestyle. He participates in communal festivities such as dancing and gathering neithal flowers. The vibrant coastal culture is showcased through festivals, music, and women dancing to the sound of the waves. Though initially unknown, he gains admiration for his skills and kind-heartedness among the villagers.

COASTAL PEOPLE & SOCIETY

People's names

1. Barathavar- பரதவர்-

Barathavar is the most common name for the fishermen in the Sangam period. There is much evidence in the Sangam literature identifying the name Barathavar.

Natrinai. 4, 38, 63, 74, 87, 101, 101, 11, 175, 199, 207, 219, 239, 303, 331, 372, 388. Kurunthogai. 124, 304, 320

Ingurunooru. 195

Kalithogai. 106

Agananooru. 10, 30, 140, 210, 250, 280, 300, 330, 340, 350, 65, 226, 366,

Madurai kanji. 96

2. Nulaiyar– Soodamani nigandu. 72., Agananooru. 366
"நனைமுதிர் தேறல் நுளையர்க்கு ஈயும்" Agananooru. 366
3. Kadalar – Soodamani nigandu. 72
4. Thimilar– Soodamani nigandu. 72, Agananooru 320
'திமிலோன் தந்த கடுங்கண் வயமீன்' Agananooru. 320.
5. Salar– Soodamani nigandu. 72
6. Alavar – salt farmers **புறநானூறு- 30**
"பரதவர் நுளையரோடு பஃறியர் திமிலர் சாலர்
கருதிய கடலர் கோலக் கழியரே, நெய்தல்மாக்கள்
விரவிய பரத்திமேவு நுளைச்சியே அளத்தி நீண்டு
பெருகிய கடற்பிணாவே நெய்தலிற் பெண்ணின் நாமம்..." Soodamani Nigandu. 72

People places:

Other Tamil ports and landing places may be recognised in place-name suffixes: 'pattinam', 'pakkam', and 'puram' (Rajamanickam & Jayakumar, 1991).

Pattinapalai. 78-83:

Tamil verse

"கிடுகு நிரைத்து, எஃகு ஊன்றி,
நடுகல்லின் அரண் போல,
நெடும் தூண்டிலில் காழ்,
சேர்த்திய குறுங்கூரைக் குடி நாப்பண்
நிலவு அடைந்த இருள் போல,
வலை உணங்கும் மணல் முன்றில்;..."

English translation

"In the settlement where fishermen live, small-roofed huts surrounded by long fishing rods resting on them appear like memorial stones surrounded by spears stuck in the ground with rows of shields hanging on them. The front yards with fishing nets drying in the sand appear like the moon and its dark spots..."

In Pattinapalai, specifically in sections 78 to 83, the text describes the living quarters of the fishermen's community, highlighting their own homes and residential arrangements.

Customs and beliefs

To increase the birthrate of fish in the ocean, there is a ritual for that, which has already been mentioned in Agananooru. 210 and Patinapalai. 86, they won't fish on the day, they consider that day as more auspicious.

Patinapalai. 86:

Tamil verse

"சினைச் சுறவின் கோடு நட்டு
மனைச் சேர்த்திய வல் அணங்கினால்;..."

English translation

"They plant horns of pregnant sharks, pray to the powerful god, wear thālai flowers and drink liquor, of palmyra trees with scaly trunks, that was offered to their god..."

Conclusion:

The inner songs found in the Sangam literature, particularly those centred around the weaving landscape, offer a rich portrayal of the interconnectedness among the three main characters: the leader, the second figure often referred to as the companion or friend, and the messenger. These songs vividly depict the complex expressions of love and longing, especially in situations where the leader and the other main figure cannot meet face-to-face. In such cases, feelings are conveyed through the messenger, highlighting the importance of this role. This exchange not only reveals the depth and intensity of romantic emotions but also provides insights into the social structure and societal norms of that historical period. Furthermore, each land region i.e., Thinaï—such as Kurinji, Mullai, Marutham, Neithal, and Palai—embodies a distinct landscape and reflects the unique lifestyle, customs, and values of the people residing within them. Notably, the Neithal Thinaï vividly captures the life, occupations, economic conditions, cultural practices, and ethical values of coastal communities, painting a comprehensive picture of their way of life. Through these songs, we gain a profound understanding of the lifestyle, prosperity, cultural norms, and social morality prevalent during that era. Future studies will continue to explore and elucidate the detailed lifestyles, cultural dimensions, and value systems of the indigenous communities inhabiting each of these landscapes, providing a more complete picture of their historical and cultural identity.

Statements and Declarations:

Acknowledgement: I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my friends, my girlfriend, my brothers, and my sisters, who generously contributed their knowledge regarding this.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest and Funding Statement: The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the authorship or publication of this theoretical work. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent: As this is a theoretical paper with no human participants, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

AI-Assisted: Grammarly is used to enhance the language.

Data Availability Statement: No empirical data were generated or analysed in this study. Theoretical frameworks and literature sources are attached in the supplementary file and are available upon request.

Author Contribution information:

Author 1 – Conceptual idea, evidence search, interpretation, and writing. Made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work, data interpretation.

Author 2 – Writing.

Author 3 – Drafted the work or revised it critically for important intellectual content, and approved the version to be published.

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