Tamil Nadu
The Tamil Nadu coastal belt which begins North of Chennai near the Pulicat Lake to the West of Kanyakumari in the South is inhabited by different maritime sub-castes speaking different dialects of the Tamil language.

Pattanavars
The ‘Pattanavars’ are the dominant fisher group residing along the Bay of Bengal coast, from the East Coast on the Krishna River, Andhra Pradesh to Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu. Among the Pattanavars, one broad internal division is periya and china pattanavars.

The Pattanavars have developed a distinct formal internal governance structure or panchayat (Their panchayat is independent of the government structures institutionalized by the state). This time honored village council is no empty, powerless body. Every settlement has one or more headmen called Yejamanan/nattamayi, who are assisted by Thandkaran and a Paraiyan Chalavathi. The traditional role of the panchayat is to maintain community cohesiveness, presiding over all matters including weddings, religious ceremonies, maintenance of community funds, dispensing justice, and enforcing judicial actions and enquiries. The village panchayat mediates/bridges relationships with all external institutions and structures (including other Pattinavar villages), except during serious conflict. These traditional caste panchayats govern over groups of people, as well as defined physical territories. In the case of artisanal communities, the rules relate to territories and technical innovation and use of fishing techniques.

Along the coastal stretch from Karaikal to Nagapattinam, the Pattanavars have a federated structure of governance made up of 64 kin-ship villages. These 64 villages are sub-divided into smaller clusters of eight village chains, then 16, 32, and finally 64. At each level the panchayat maintains social cohesiveness, dispenses justice, and holds financial responsibilities. The head of the 64 village in this region is Nambiar Nagar.

The tsunami of 2004 and post-tsunami recovery activities placed a unique and inordinate stress on the panchayat - changing functions, responsibilities, and required expertise in a very short amount of time. Gomathy (2006) describes how the panchayats sprung into action, to first assess and record the damage to life and property, acquire sufficient aid from the state, charitable and development organizations, and distribute and manage this influx of aid.

The Padu system of Pattanavars in the Pulicat region
The Pattinavars who inhabit the Pulicat region of Northern Tamil Nadu bordering Andhra Pradesh, differ from the rest of the pattanavar communities in the state by virtue of a unique fishing practice that they follow called the padu system. Mathew (1991) defines the padu system as a traditional system of granting entitlements to eligible members of a particular community (the pattinavars) in certain designated fishing grounds of the Pulicat Lake. Padu refers to ‘fishing site or ground’. There are three designated padus in the Pulicat (Vadaku padu, Munthurai padu and Orai padu). The
eligible fishermen are allowed access by means of a lottery system wherein each village knows at the outset the designated days of the year for that particular village in that specific *padu*. Apart from the access to fish in the *padus*, the entitlements also differ depending on the gear used, specifically the use of stake net (*suthu valai*) or the shore seine (*badi valai*), which is usually owned by the community “elite”.

*Padu* system was originally created more for equitable sharing of fishing grounds (the sole users being the *Pattanavars*) rather than resource conservation. Demographic pressure has decimated the fishing resources in the lake over the last few decades, and *padu* fishermen had to resort to further sub-division of the fishing grounds or the expansion of crew size/boat. Since the 1930s, *padu* fisherfolk have had conflicts with marine fisherfolk who claim a stake in the lake’s already dwindling fisheries, and who do not feel bound by the traditional system.

**For further reading**


Couthard, S. The interplay between fishing access and the ability to adapt: Insights from a South Indian fishery. Department of Economics and International Development, University of Bath, U.K.


Downloaded from http://indianfisheries.icsf.net
Information compiled by International Collective in Support of Fishworkers

on *Pattanavars* from castes and tribes of Southern India. Volume VI. Cosmo Publications, Delhi, pp 177-186, 1975.