



# Naming the Fish

Given the vast cross cultural diversity prevailing in India, including in classification of living beings using the observed characters and naming them in vernacular language, preservation of local names of organisms would go a long way in conservation of the rich biodiversity. Fishes are no exception to this rule, as we in India consider fish as one of the first 'avatars' as science also place fish at the base of evolutionary ladder of vertebrate animals. To know the correct name of a fish is satisfying not only for a fisherman engaged in catching fish but also for a naturalist trying to find out what lives in our country. Moreover, conservation can be effected locally only when local/vernacular names are conserved.

The Western Ghats region of Kerala, which is also a global freshwater biodiversity hotspot, is rich in endemism of freshwater fishes. With around 200 fishes that are there in our inland water bodies, compiling all the existing vernacular names of freshwater fishes and finalising one name for use in official literature would be a challenging task. The restoration of vernacular names of the freshwater fishes will be helpful for the natural history studies and even conservation of the species. The locally available name of species has much to say about the geography, ecology,

meteorology, traditional knowledge, etc. It is understood that the revitalization of these local names is helpful to generate a historical sense and awareness. In order to meet the challenges of biodiversity conservation and save species from extermination all-round information on the name bearing life form is very essential. The folk name is one of the pre-requisite for the proper understanding of the natural history of a species. It is inclined to believe that this principle would have guided our ancestors to name, popularize and transfer the information to the generations succeeded.



Karum kallotti

Use of incorrect vernacular names, including many misnomers often poses greater difficulty in documenting fish, especially when the Kerala State Biodiversity Board is now in the process of preparing biodiversity registers for all the Panchayats of the State. Moreover, this information would also help standardising the data on freshwater fish fauna of the 44 rivers of the state.

The scientists, naturalists and local fishermen in Kerala are grouped together in a workshop christened "Meeninu Oru Peru" on 30th September 2011 at Thiruvananthapuram, organised jointly by Kerala State Biodiversity Board (KSBB) and Department of Aquatic Biology and Fisheries, University of Kerala. The workshop finalised names of about 170 freshwater fishes of Kerala, keeping in abeyance names of fishes with confusing identity.

Aascharya paral





Chenkaniyan 1

Though the folk nomenclature and local names are often created based on specific characters of fish, it is not true in all the cases, as the same name is given to different species in the same geographical area. For example, the name 'Kallotti' or 'Kallu nakki' is given for fishes belonging to the genera Garra, Bhavania, Travancoria and Homaploptera, all inhabiting hillstreams of Kerala and possess the habit of attaching themselves to the rocks. Now they are given separate names as the genus Garra is known by the common Malayalam name 'Kallotti' and the individual species as 'Chuttan Kallotti' (*Garra stenorhynchus*), 'Venna Kallotti' (*Garra hughi*), 'Neela Kallotti' (*Garra mcClellandi*), 'Kullan Kallotti' (*Garra menoni*), 'Periyar Kallotti' (*Garra periyarensis*), 'Karim Kallotti' (*Garra surendranathini*) and the name 'Kallotti' is given to *Garra mullya*, the most common species in all the river systems of Kerala. The names finalised in the workshop considered all the prevailing Malayalam names of a particular species and accepted the one which is extensively used and the one that highlights some special features such as appearance, shape, size, habit, habitat, life styles and behaviour, colour, utility, etc.

A large number of new fishes recorded from Kerala were also given Malayalam names in the workshop. For example, a barb (commonly known in Malayalam as 'paral') discovered from Kallada river in Kerala is scientifically named as *Puntius exclamatio*, following the black exclamation mark-like markings on the lateral sides of the fish. The proposal in the workshop was to



Aattunda



Kurudan mushi

name it "Ascharya Paral", one addition to Malayalam vocabulary of fish names!

The catfish fish discovered from wells of Kerala (scientific name *Horaglanis krishnai*) is blind as lives in subterranean water, and is given "kurudan mushi". 'Mushi' is the name commonly used for catfishes in Kerala. In the Red Data book of IUCN, *Horaglanis krishnai* is listed as Data Deficient since, although it has been recorded from subterranean wells in a small area, very little is known about its status, threats, habitat requirements and habitat condition. The distribution has not been visited since 1979 and the status of the species is currently not known. Better awareness about this fish would help collecting information locally.

When another catfish was discovered again from subterranean habitats in 2011 from Thrissur, it was scientifically named as *Kryptoglanis shajii* (in Latin language 'crypta' means a vault or tunnel and 'glanis' means a catfish) after the fish taxonomist in Kerala Dr C.P. Shaji, the authors propose the name 'Mudu' in Malayalam, which is something in between 'mushi' and 'kadu', two types of catfishes in Kerala, a name perfectly suits the fish. The freshwater puffer fish *Carinotetraodon travancoricus*, which swells up like a balloon when taken out of water is named "Aattunda", based on its presence in rivers and round shape.

Barbs, represented by over 20 species in Kerala, are also given specific names in the workshop.



Chem mullan paral

Some of the popular and unique Malayalam names given to freshwater fishes by the local people, particularly tribes were retained. For example, the names of peninsular hill trout *Lepidopygopsis typus* ('Brahmanakanda'), *Channa barb* *Puntius ophicephala* ('Eettilakanda'), Carnatic carp *Barbodes carnaticus* ('Pachilavetti Paral'), Knife fish *Notopterus notopterus* ('Ambattan kathi'), *Osteobrama bakeri* ('Chem Mullan Paral'), *Puntius denisonii* ('Chenkaniyan' or the popular 'Miss Kerala') were retained. The listing also would help preserving local names of fishes for the future generation.

The proposed names will be kept in public domain for public inputs and circulated widely and the finalised list of Malayalam names will be given to State Institute of Languages and to the concerned government departments for use as official language of fishes in Kerala. ■

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Ambattan kathi