

## Don't be hasty and impetuous

**This note cautions against hasty judgement of the role of women in the fishing-caste *panchayats* of Tamil Nadu, India**

**T**he tsunami of 26 December 2004 and the relief-and-rehabilitation efforts that followed have swung the spotlight on to the fishing-caste *panchayats* (village councils) of the Coromandel coast of Tamil Nadu, India.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government agencies and concerned intellectuals in India have suddenly discovered, amongst the physical wreckage, the heartbeat of an unknown and vibrant institution. It stood in their way, mediated their well-intended efforts, and, in the end, won many of their hearts.

However, in assessing the role of fishing-caste *panchayats* for the future, one must keep in mind some troubling aspects. One of the most tenacious of these is gender. All observers agree that caste *panchayats* are dominated by men. Opinions differ, however, on whether this is harmful to the interests of fisherwomen, and whether the situation can be remedied.

Having studied the functioning of caste *panchayats*, particularly with regard to their role in the regulation of marine fisheries, I would caution against hasty judgement and impetuous action. *Panchayats* should be understood in relation to their social and historical contexts. One should also take care not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Caste *panchayats* of the Coromandel coast are remnants of pre-colonial village administration forms of government that have survived the imposition of colonial rule and, subsequently, the establishment of the democratic republic of India. They have endured, first of all, because of the isolation of coastal areas and the government's long-term disinterest in the affairs of coastal villages. Above all,

however, they have lasted because of their essential role in village life. Settling disputes with regard to a wide range of problems—from fishing rights to domestic affairs—*panchayat* leaders decide on issues that otherwise tend to split the community.

They determine the rules for fishing in their sea territories as well as the arrangements for marketing at landing sites. In times of collective need, such as during the yearly offseason, it is the *panchayat* that distributes food and other necessary items.

When disaster strikes fishermen at sea, the *panchayat* takes action to support the widows. Finally, the *panchayat* is the community's voice to the outside world: an intermediary with the police station, the Fisheries Department, NGOs, and so on. It is in the latter capacity that *panchayats* have recently attained renown.

But the caste *panchayats* of the Coromandel coast are not standalone institutions. They are the tip of the iceberg resting on other village structures, in all of which gender distinctions are a core element. Let us, therefore, take a look at the fishing village as a social entity.

### Single ethnic group

Most of the fishing villages of the Coromandel coast are dominated by a single ethnic group: the Pattinavar caste. Each Pattinavar village is broken up into several lineages, or *pangaali* groups, which are constituted according to the patrilineal principle. Patrilinearity implies that children 'belong' and are loyal to their father's family group, rather than to their mother's relatives. As a political unit, each fishing village of the Coromandel coast has three layers: the household, the lineage and the village. Households are

represented in the *pangaali* group, each of which has several leaders.

**A** selection of these leaders is deputed to the village *panchayat*, which is composed in such a way that it reflects the relative weight of each *pangaali* group. Dominant lineages (either in number or in economic-political significance) exercise more influence in the *panchayat* than do lesser lineages.

Throughout this sequence of institutions—household-*pangaali* group-village—it is men who exercise most influence. This emerges also in the list of village membership, which, along the Coromandel coast, is an official matter. Membership is the prerogative of adult fishermen alone. It is the collective of village members (*varikkaarar* or taxpayer) that maintains the village fund, decides on issues of joint importance, and takes action to enforce whatever decisions have been reached.

It is they who defend the village in times of danger. Contrarily, when a village enjoys an economic bonanza—and tsunami relief can be considered an example of such a bonanza—the goods are divided over the collective of village members. In this case, the system of dividing rights and responsibilities gives advantage to households with a large number of adult men, in opposition to those with many womenfolk. (However,

when it comes to taxes, the situation is reversed.)

From an institutional perspective, therefore, men enjoy more authority in village life than women do. But does this mean that the fishing villages of the Coromandel coast are glaring examples of patriarchal society? There is reason to deny such an interpretation. Fisherwomen along the Coromandel coast are vocal and quite capable of voicing their opinion, even though it sometimes needs to be channeled through men. They tend to control the household's purse strings and have an important say in expenditure. Such an economic position precludes subservience and contributes to clout.

This does not mean that women's position in the village's political system, which culminates in the *panchayat*, cannot be improved upon. It definitely can. There are indications too that the *panchayat* system is flexible enough to incorporate change, provided it is given time.

#### **Debate and negotiation**

However, any movement in the direction of larger women's representation should, in my opinion, emerge from the inside, and not from the outside. It should result from debate and negotiation within village society, and follow the local pace, and not be imposed. This, on the one hand, is a matter of respecting indigenous

cultures. It is also a recognition of the value of effective village government, also with regard to fisheries. We should take proper care of our institutional heritage, even though it sometimes contains unpalatable elements.

Gender

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