

Draft Report



An Overview of the Marine Fisheries and Fishers in and around Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu

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Context and Objectives of the study

This study was done in the context of growing hardships faced by the marine fishers of Palk Bay in Tamil Nadu who fish in the seas bordering India and Sri Lanka. Many Indian fishers were killed, wounded, captured and harassed in the open seas by the Sri Lankan Navy during the past 15 years on charges of illegal entry into their sea territory and threatening their national security by providing help to the Tamil militants (LTTE). Day after day, this problem is getting worse and more number of Indian fishers and their families who seek a livelihood from fishing are affected severely.

This problem has attracted much attention of the media as well as various political and social organisations of the State. Generally there is a growing sympathy towards these affected poor fishers, but any practical and long standing solution to the problem is yet to come.

Basically this issue has two important aspects to it. One is the compulsions in the nature of fishery here and the other is the involvement of various elements with the ethnic internal war within Sri Lanka. While the first component is not fully understood and made known, the second one is more known to us. This study is meant to deal more with the first component. It is an effort to understand the different aspects of the fishery here, which might help us to understand and tackle this issue in a more realistic manner rather than just sympathising with the affected fishers and not reaching anywhere.

The main objectives of the study are to have a better understanding of the nature of fishery, the origin, growth and changes taking place in fishing practices/technologies, the communities involved in fishing and the attitude of the fishing community to the border problem, authorities etc. This will help the NGOs, Human Rights Groups etc. to have a better and correct understanding of this humanitarian and livelihood problem of the fishing community in this area.

Rameswaram is the most important area where more number of fishers are affected by this problem. Another important affected area is Jagadapattinam in Pudukkottai district and

both these fishing centres are dominated by mechanised fishing crafts. Comparatively artisanal fishers working in country crafts in this sea are less affected. This study has mainly concentrated on Rameswaram island which is the most affected area. The approach used was taking evidences from the affected people, interviews with the fishers and their families of both mechanised and traditional sectors, NGO activists, older people of the community, social leaders, fisheries department officials etc. and analysing different printed materials.

The Setting

Rameswaram is an island situated in the south-central Bay of Bengal coast of Tamil Nadu State. It has an approximate coastline of 80 kms and a land area of 15 sq. miles. It is in the Ramanathapuram (Ramnad) district of the State and is connected to the mainland through the Pamban bridge (opened in 1988) by road and an old meter-gauge railway bridge constructed about 100 years ago during the British colonial period. A famous temple is also situated in this island and thousands of pilgrims visit the temple here as this place has been identified with an event in the epic *Ramayana*.

The Gulf of Mannar is situated in the south of this island and Palk Bay is in the north. The eastern tip of the island is Dhanushkodi and from here it is only about 16 kms to reach Talaimannar of Sri Lanka. As the narrow sea area here between this island and Sri Lanka is very shallow, passage by ships is impossible and even mechanised boats find it very difficult to cross over between Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay during most days of the year. This shallow sea area is known as *Adams Bridge*. During the British colonial period, as the erstwhile Ceylon (present Sri Lanka) was also under their rule, Dhanushkodi was an important port and vantage point in the trade and transport of this region. However, now Dhanushkodi is a discarded place with least habitation, especially after the cyclone in 1986 which destroyed the railway lines and warehouses.

Apart from being an important Hindu pilgrimage centre, Rameswaram is also the most important mechanised fish landing centre of Tamil Nadu and mostly, small trawlers operate from this base.

Total population in this island is estimated to be around 50,000. In the voters list, there are 260,000 voters in Rameswaram island who are above 18 years of age. The active sea going fishermen in the island is 7,650 and with their dependents the strength of the fishing community is estimated to be around 35,000. Thus, the fishing community forms the majority of the people living in this island.

According to CMFRI, there are 15 fish landing centres in the island. According to TRRM (Tamilnadu Rural Reconstruction Movement), an NGO working in this area, there are 23 fishing villages in the island and their target people (traditional fisherfolk) is estimated at 18,500. Probably this figure do not include all fishworkers in the mechanised boats.

Accn. No.	5474
Date	26/9/03
MFN No.	20611

Origin of Fishing in Rameswaram Island

Rameswaram island do not have a long history of fishing by settled fishers as one sees now. Till the middle of this century, traditional fishers from few southern villages in Gulf of Mannar used to go to the island with their catamarans during certain seasons which may last two to three months. They used to put up temporary thatched huts in the island as their women also follow them here for helping with salting, drying and marketing of their catch. These fishers come here during the off season of Gulf of Mannar coast, and they fish at Palk bay where the season would be then good. Some of the migrant fishers also go to *Kachativu* island which is situated in the north-eastern side of Rameswaram island and do fishing in the seas near there. Normally it takes about two and a half hours to reach Kachativu from Rameswaram by a sail boat. As drinking water is not available in Kachativu the fishers usually do not stay there for more than a week.

It was in the early 40s, fishers started putting up permanent houses in the island. Most of these settlers were from *Mookaiyur* and *Kilakarai*, two fishing villages down south in Ramanathapuram district. Almost all these fishers were of *Parava* caste.

At that time these fishers were using only *Thattumadi* (boat seine) in large catamarans. Some old fishermen still remember that time and told that apart from a few local people who were using *Veesuvalai* (cast nets) there were no local sea going fishers living in the island. The migrant fishers used to catch large quantities of *karal* (silver bellies), *parava* (butter fish) and *kathala* from the sea off the upper side of the island. Interestingly they could not find *netholi* (anchovies) and *chavala* (ribbon fish) in the Palk bay, though these were caught in plenty in the Gulf of Mannar. As the fishers started settling in the island, some merchants also stayed here and thus there was no problem in marketing the produce.

At Kachativu island, traditional fishers from Ceylon also used to migrate for the week-long fishing during season time. As they were also mostly Tamils, there was no alien feeling. There was a Church in this island and a priest used to come from Ceylon during the annual feast and many from both the countries used to gather at that time. Though fishers of the two countries used to fish in the same waters their fishing practices differed and were targeting different species of fish; hence there were not clashes or conflicts. This kind of peaceful coexistence in fishing and gathering at the church during feast time continued even after India's independence.

The Ceylon fishers were mostly using gill nets with large mesh, catching large fishes like *kattavu*, *thedu* and *para*. At that time fishers of both countries also used to exchange goods. While the Indians were fond of shirts, soaps, nylon fishing twines, vinegar etc. the Ceylonese were fond of Lungis and cigarettes.

After independence the Sri Lankan fishers were the first to introduce nylon nets imported from Japan, while Indian fishers were continuing with cotton nets. Enthused with the superior nylon nets, some Indian fishers used to cut and steal the nets of their neighbours. This resulted in the first clash between them and shooting at Indian fishers by the Sri

Lankan Navy and in the process killing one. However immediately the leaders of fishing communities of both sides intervened and restored peace. This was in 1962.

In 1962 itself nylon nets were introduced here and it resulted in technology changes too. The large catamarans totally gave way to *vallams* (canoes) by 1967. This also coincided with the introduction of mechanised boats in Rameswaram. In 1967 about 60 small trawling boats were introduced here.

According to the statistics released by Department of Fisheries, Tamilnadu as on 31-3-1996 there were 1260 mechanised boats registered at Rameswaram. However the records of the office of Deputy Director of Fisheries in Rameswaram shows that the maximum number of mechanised trawling boats ventured to sea in a day during the last 6 months was only 689 and the minimum was 225. There are also about 250 mechanised trawling boats operating from Pamban, which is situated in the extreme western tip of Rameswaram island. So roughly one could estimate the total number of trawling boats operating from the island at present as about 1000.

In the traditional sector, there are about 1500 crafts mainly of four types operating from the island. These include 350 large mechanised canoes, 400 small mechanised canoes, 600 *vathas* (small non-mechanised canoes) and 150 small non-motorised catamarans.

The Fishing technologies, Ownership and Production relations

Mechanised Trawling Boats

Most of the trawling boats in operation here are 38 to 42 ft. size and are made of wood. In the initial years they were engaged only in bottom trawling targeting demersal species, especially shrimp (prawns). But now most of these mechanised boats are engaged in all forms of trawling viz. bottom, mid-water, pelagic and pair trawling during different seasons with different types of nets which evolved over the period. The important trawl nets are locally called *raluvala* (bottom trawl net to catch shrimp), *shankhu madi* (bottom trawl net to catch chank and flat fishes), *meen vala* (mid water high open net to catch different columnar fishes) and *kolli madi* (pelagic net dragged by two boats - pair trawling - to catch sardines and mackerel).

A mechanised trawling boat with all the above said gears would require a capital investment of Rupees 7 to 10 lakhs.

The most important prevailing trawling operation involves the use of two nets - bottom trawl for prawns and high open net for fishes. It is an overnight trip, leaving at 6am and returning by next day early morning. During the trip at day time they use fish net and at night they do bottom trawl for prawns. To reach the rich prawn grounds, the boats have to run about 6 hours towards Sri Lankan coast. The fishers in mechanised boats revealed that the depth there is only about 2 fathoms and so it must be well within the Sri Lankan territory and pretty close to their coast.

Till 1994, the trawling boats were allowed to do this type of fishing from the morning of any day they choose. At the protest of traditional fishermen and difficulties faced by Coast Guard to man these boats the fishing days are now fixed. So, only three fishing trips are allowed during a week, and the days are also fixed - from Monday to Tuesday, Wednesday to Thursday and Saturday to Sunday - in consensus with the representatives of boat owners and traditional fishers by fisheries department officials and Coast Guard. All trawl boats leaving the harbor should collect a token from the department official and return it to them next day morning. The alternate days are apparently kept apart for large motorised canoes and they are not allowed to operate during the days fixed for trawl boats.

The kolli madi (pelagic pair trawling) to catch mainly sardines and mackerel was introduced here in 1986. Two trawl boats join together to do this fishing and the nets are pulled in front at two sides simultaneously. As there was not good market for sardines in Tamilnadu, this type of fishing did not pick up for some years. But with the decline in catches of sardines in Kerala coast and big demand for it in the markets there, many boats started this fishing and it has picked up at a large scale here in the last few years. This type of trawling is done only during day time and the fishing grounds are more closer to the shore well within the Indian EEZ. So, from the beginning they were allowed to operate on all days of the week. This fishing could take place only during the sardine season which lasts about three months of January, February and March. However, after large scale protests from traditional fishers, the fishing season is now restricted. In the last two years the boats were allowed to operate these nets only for 45 days.

At Rameswaram fishing harbor, more than half of the trawl boats in operation are not owned by people from the traditional fishing communities. Even those owned by members of the community, many are no more active fishers. Many merchant capitalists from non-fishing castes and other social backgrounds have entered into this sector and are owning a good number of boats. At the same time at Pamban, almost all the boats are owned by people from the traditional fishing community.

A trawling boat require normally six members as crew, one driver (srank), one second hand and four deck hands. The second hand assists the driver and should also have some basic knowledge about fishing grounds and operation of nets etc. The deck hands do manual jobs like pulling in nets and sorting fishes. Though most of the crew in these boats are from the traditional fishing community, a good number of people from mainly landless agricultural labour are newly entering into this sector as workers in the boats. They begin as deck hands, doing manual unskilled jobs in the boat.

The income sharing system in the trawling boats in Rameswaram is also a bit different from other mechanised fishing centres. In most of the other places, the net income (value of the catch minus fuel and food cum bata expenses of the crew) is shared between the owner and the crew, with owner getting about 60 to 70%.

4 Here also a daily salary or bata is paid to the crew on working days at the rate of Rs.125 for driver, Rs.75 for second hand and Rs.60 each for the deck hands. They are given two days salary for overnight trips. Then an incentive is given to the crew according to the catch quantity of shrimps in bottom trawling operations. For every one kg. of shrimps, the driver gets Rs.20, the second hand Rs.15 and the deckhands Rs.10 each. The sales proceeds of other fishes normally goes to the owners, salesmen and accountants. As the crew get incentive only for catching shrimp, in order to earn more income they are under pressure to go to fishing grounds much closer to Sri Lankan coast where more shrimp is available.

In the case of pair trawling for sardines, the sales proceeds is equally shared among the owners of two boats and then incentives are paid in each boat in the following manner; for every 10,000 Rupees, the driver gets Rs.60, second hand Rs.40 and the deck hands Rs.30 each.

Traditional Fishing Crafts

A peculiar and interesting ownership pattern is prevailing here in the traditional fishing sector. While the crafts are generally owned by master fishers or their families the gears (nets, hook and line etc.) are also owned in bits and pieces (there is a uniform pattern and size for each type of net) by the crew who join the master fisher to operate the unit. This decentralised ownership pattern is more dominant among the smaller sized crafts and less in the larger ones which require more capital investment. This is also reflected in their income sharing pattern which are more egalitarian in nature.

(i) Large Vallam (mechanised canoe)

These are plank built canoes of 28 to 32' length propelled with inboard engines. These canoes also take sails with them and whenever they get favorable wind sails are used instead of mechanical propulsion. Various kinds of fishing gears are used in this craft according to the availability and season of different fishes. The main gears in use are *Iluvamadi* (mini trawl net for shrimp etc.), no.2 net to catch medium sized different pelagic and column fishes, no.4 drift net to catch seer fish and *kanava choondai* (hook and line for catching squid and cuttle fish). The crew size of this craft is four to six. Usually the craft owner will also be a crew member.

Among the gears mentioned above, no.4 drift net require more capital investment, while most of the others are comparatively less costly. These large drift nets have a length of about one km. and a width of seven and a half fathoms. This drift net is formed by joining about 25 pieces of nets. Normally an owner of this craft will have about 20 pieces and the rest will be brought by other crew members. A total amount of Rs.1.5 to 2.5 lakhs is required to own such a unit.

The income sharing pattern in most of the traditional crafts are generally the same, though it vary according to the involvement of crew in providing the gear. In large drift net

operations, 50% of the sales proceeds go to net owners and it is shared among them according to the number of net pieces. The fuel expenses are also met by them. Then the rest 50% is shared equally among the crew.

(ii) Small Vallam (mechanised small canoe)

This is also a plank built canoe, but of smaller size with a length of 18 to 24' range. It is also propelled by an in-board engine. Sails are also taken along and used in favorable wind conditions. The crew size is 2 to 6.

Most of the fishing gears used in the big canoes are also used in it except the large drift nets. A craft and gear unit would require an investment of Rs.75,000 to 1 lakh.

The sharing system is very similar to that of the big canoes.

(iii) Vatha (small non-mechanised canoes)

These are small dugouts with a length size of 8 to 12'. Sails are used to propel the craft and no engines. The crew size is 1 to 4. A craft will cost between Rs.15,000 to 40,000.

The main gears used are the *njandu vala* (crab nets), *kanava thoondi* (hook and line for squid) and *Echa vala* (gill net for medium sized fishes). Normally the crew in these units will bring the gear. Vathas will seek the help of mechanised canoes to pull them in unfavorable conditions. The craft owner then will have to pay them Rs.25 for this service.

One of the most popular fishing gears used in the *vathas* are the crab nets. For the last few years most of the fishers are using mono-filament nets to catch crabs. One piece of net will weigh about one to one and a half kg. and it will cost about Rs.400. In this fishing method nets are often torn and it will have to be totally replaced after continuous use of about 15 fishing trips.

In the case of crab nets, where often an equal sized pieces of nets are brought by the crew, the sharing system is very interesting. In this case, the crabs found or trapped in each part (piece) of the net will go to the respective net owner. Each one of them will have to give half a kg. of crabs to the owner as a kind of rent. If a crew do not get any crabs on a day, he will however have to pay the dues to the craft owner from his next day's share. Then each net owner will take home his share of crabs and will sell independently by weight. Normally these fishers borrow advances from different merchants with promises of selling the catch to them only. The same sharing system is also followed in other small gears used in the craft.

In the case of squid fishing also each crew member will have to bring his own hook and lines. The catch will also go to the respective crew member and a rent in the form of fish will have to be given to the craft owner.

Here the fishes are generally sold by weight. Shrimps, crabs, squid, cuttle fish etc. are procured by exporting companies through their merchant agents. Fishes are also sold by weight or measurement in baskets. Most of the craft owners as well as crew members (net owners) used to borrow advances from various merchants with the promise of supplying the produce. Because of this, the price realised will be always lower than the standard price. In the case of shrimp it is an accepted norm that, if advance money is borrowed the price will be less by Rs.5 per one kg. The weighing balances used by the merchants are also usually incorrect and *kallathrasu* is a common term here.

Recently in a few villages, TRRM, an NGO has taken initiative to form fisher's *sangams* to tackle the exploitation of merchants and middlemen. They helped fishers to repay the old debts and started procurement of export varieties of fish. Then they collectively sell it to some companies. Through this fishers have realised the amount of cheating by the local merchants in weighing their produce as well as the price differences. Though it is still in the initial stages, fishers seem to be very enthusiastic about this initiative. However stiff resistance from merchant community is to be expected.

(iv) Small Catamarans

Though small in number, one man operated small catamarans with three logs of wood tied together are also seen here fishing in the near shore waters. It is about 7 to 10' long and small sails are sparingly used. Mostly crab nets, small cast nets and hook and line are used for fishing in this craft. A craft and gear unit will require an investment between Rs.2000 to 5000.

Communities

Fishers who migrated to the island and settled here during the past 50 years mainly belong to four major castes. They are *Parava*, *Kadayar* (Christians), *Valayar* and *Karayar* (Hindus). There are only about 20 Muslims fishing families in the island. *Paravas* who form the major group migrated from the Gulf of Mannar coast south of the island and most of the others are originally from the Palk bay coast. During the recent last few years, however many from other communities/castes like *Nadar*, *Thevar* etc. are also entering into the fishing sector by working as crew in the mechanised boats.

There were other communities also living in the island as it was a major port for commercial as well as passenger transport during the British period and an important pilgrimage centre. One community named *Servar* were mainly involved in petty business, providing passenger amenities and acting as tourist guides in the island at that time. While the port activities were centered in Dhanushkodi, Rameswaram developed as the major landing centre for mechanised fishing boats. But in 1964 due to the severe cyclone, as ware houses, jetties and the rail lines were destroyed in Dhanushkodi the port was also shifted to Rameswaram. This also forced the *Servar* community also to shift their area of operations to Rameswaram. As there were not enough space for both the fishing boats and

passenger/cargo ships to anchor in the same area, there used to be always tension and disputes and it developed into a quarrel between Servars and Paravas.

In 1970, the servar community set fire to few houses of fishers and tension continued for some time. In 1978, there was a big clash and servars succeeded in dividing the fishing community by roping in the valayars and kadavars into their side. It was at that time the *Thevar* community from outside the island came to the help of *paravas*. So *thevars* also started settling in the island involving in fish business as well as started owning mechanised crafts.

So at present, there are now about 400 mechanised boats owned by non-fishing castes like Thevars, Yadavas, Servars and Nadars. Though none of them own any traditional crafts they involve in fish business with them. There are about eight associations of mechanised boat owners mainly on caste lines. The traditional fishers, especially the canoe owners also have associations on similar caste lines.

With the stopping of passenger as well as cargo traffic between Sri Lanka and India by 1983, many people of servar community lost their traditional jobs and some of them are now working as accountants of mechanised boats. The role of the accountant is more important here as the boats have to collect token for fishing before each trip. Then photo identity cards for the crew also is compulsory here and all these are taken care of by these accountants. Normally 3 to 5 boats form a group and an accountant work for such a group. So the accountant acts as a liaison man between the authorities and the boat owner as well as between the owner and the crew.

Palk bay Fisheries: Unnatural growth in the midst of severe constraints

It was already mentioned that Rameswaram has only a short span of fishing history. It was a mere seasonal (a maximum period of three months) centre for a few hundred migrant fishers from Gulf of Mannar till 50 years ago. Its growth as a full-fledged fishing area and becoming the largest mechanised fishing centre of the State within the last 50 years is really phenomenal.

According to the CMFRI (Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, Government of India), Rameswaram topped the State in landings from mechanised boats out of its 70 landing centres during the period from 1980 to 1984. During this period Rameswaram accounted for an annual average of 22,607 tons (18.68%) of landings, and the second best was Tuticorin fishing harbor with only 11,763 tons (9.96%).

In nowhere else in the country the marine fishers come across the international sea boundary (EEZ) so close as is in Rameswaram. The boundary is a mere 8 to 12 kms far from their landing centre. While fishers in other Indian coasts have 200 kms open sea for exclusive fishing operations this is a serious limitation and a restriction in itself. Another major limitation for the mechanised fishing boats here is that they are able to operate in

only direction, i.e. northern side. This is because the shallow Adams bridge is a natural barrier for crossing to Gulf of Mannar and it is also an entirely different sea with vast variation in the nature of benthic bottom and fishery resources. So at the outset it seems to be a mystery as to how Rameswaram managed to achieve this enviable distinction as the major mechanised fishing centre of the State.

Ramanathapuram, the district to which Rameswaram belongs, also ranks first in the total marine fish landings of the State contributing 23.57% during 1993-96 period. The three year average marine fish landings of the district as well as that of the State, with the growth rate from 1984 to 1996 is given in Table 1. The table shows that the growth rate of the marine fish landings of the district is much higher than that of the State. It also shows that during 1987-90 period there was a substantial increase of landings in the district compared to that of the State. Though the growth rate of the marine fish landings of the State is almost stagnant, that of the district shows wide fluctuations with an upward trend.

Table 1
Annual Average Marine Fish landings of Ramanathapuram district and Tamilnadu State from 1984 to 1996

Years	Ramanathapuram District	Growth Rate	Tamilnadu State	Growth Rate
1984-87	30,358	-	2,47,678	-
1987-90	55,136	44.9%	2,74,882	9.9%
1990-93	61,686	10.6%	2,99,651	8.3%
1993-96	77,754	20.7%	3,29,921	9.2%

(Quantity in tons)

Source: S. Durairaj et al. Department of Fisheries, Govt. of Tamil Nadu, March 1997

Tamilnadu State has a coastline of 1000 km and it has four specific sea coasts. They are Coromandal (350 km), Palk bay (270 km), Gulf of Mannar (320 km) and the West Coast - Arabian sea (60 km). When we compare the contributions of different sea areas to the total landings of the State, again we see that Palk bay though with lesser coastline was able to make a sizable and increasing contribution to the State's total marine fish landings in the last 15 years. Share of different coasts in the annual fish landings of the State is given below in table 2.

Table 2 shows that in the eighties all four coasts had an almost equal share in the marine fish landings of the State even though it differed in the length of each coastline. But the

situation changed much afterwards and over the last 8 years while Palk bay continued to increase its share, others coasts were either on the decline or remained stagnant.

Table 2
Coastal Region-wise Estimation of Marine Fish Production
in Tamil Nadu from 1980-81 to 1995-96
(Four Year Annual Averages)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Coromandal coast (35.0)</i>	<i>Palk bay (27.0)</i>	<i>Gulf of Mannar (32.0)</i>	<i>West Coast (6.0)</i>	<i>Total (100.0)</i>
1980-84	57850 (24.3)	59875 (25.2)	66559 (27.9)	53858 (22.6)	238142
1984-88	51196 (20.5)	66848 (26.7)	69386 (27.8)	62535 (25.0)	249965
1988-92	67527 (23.3)	101116(34.9)	87948 (30.3)	33265 (11.5)	289856
1992-96	92780 (28.6)	118890(36.7)	84158 (25.9)	28450 (8.8)	324278

(Quantity in tons & Figures in () are %)

Source : S. Durairaj et.al, Dept. of Fisheries, Govt. of Tamilnadu, March 1997.

During the last four years Palk bay with only 27% coastline contributed 36.7% of the State's fish landings, while the other two major coasts Coromandel and Gulf of Mannar with 35% and 32% coastline contributed only 28.6% and 29.6% respectively. So, it could be concluded that it is the fish landings from the Palk bay which steadied the fish landings of the State, or otherwise the State would have shown a decline or a negative growth rate. The fall or stagnation in the fish catches in all the other three coasts could be attributed mainly to uncontrolled over-fishing, as one could see that the effort and capacity of fishing vessels are on the increase in the State.

But, why then the similar trend is not witnessed in Palk bay coast is to be clearly understood and analysed. Though this study does not intend to go more deep on this aspect due to lack of time and access to important datas which are necessary for such an in-depth study, one could easily make a hypothesis that this higher growth in the midst of an otherwise declining fishery around is highly unnatural and it is definitely due to the opening up of new areas of fishing for the fishers of this coast. This aspect is explained below.

It is a known fact that, fishing in northern and north-western seas of Sri Lanka is almost dormant after the outbreak of ethnic war in that country. Till early 1980s these areas were widely fished by the fishers in that region. This coastal sea of Sri Lanka, above Talaimannar and towards Jaffna in the north, has been traditionally a well known fishing ground for shrimp. This sea coast is blessed with many lagoons, mangroves and backwaters which are ideally suited for the replenishment of the shrimp resources. But by

early 80s fishing was virtually stopped here due to the growing ethnic war in this region. Coastal fishers of this region, especially those in mechanised fishing boats, were forced to stop fishing for security reasons. Many left fishing and either became refugees or shifted to land based jobs.

So it is this situation described above, which attracted the fishers on the Indian coast who are closer to this sea to make use of the new opportunity. Since Rameswaram is the nearest landing centre on the Indian coast to this suddenly discarded rich fishing ground, though well within the jurisdiction of another nation, local Indian fishers began to converge there. Mechanised fishing boats from Jagadaipattinam and Kottaipattinam (Pudukkottai district) and Mallipattinam (Thanjavur district) all situated in the northern Palk bay also find it lucrative to fish in the Jaffna coast of Sri Lanka though they have to cover a long distance compared to the fishers in Rameswaram.

- So this goes to answer the question posed above as to why fish landings from the Palk bay and also that of Rameswaram is showing an upward trend while others cause concern with a declining trend. The ethnic war in Sri Lanka is acting like a blessing in disguise for fishers in the Palk bay of Tamilnadu in terms of providing more fish.

From talking with fishers engaged in mechanised fishing in Rameswaram, it is very clear that they fish most days of the year well within Sri Lankan waters. They are forced to fish there to remain in fishing. According to them much of the demersal species like shrimp is no more available in the Indian waters as they are overfished, and it is still available only within the Sri Lankan waters. The traditional fishers engaged in canoe fishing also endorse this and they point out that many varieties of fish which were available years back in plenty to them in the near coastal waters are no more seen nowadays. Catch data for Rameswaram fishing harbor also reveal that composition of major species have changed very much in recent years. The CMFRI data shows that Silver bellies contributed 51% of the total landings of the mechanised boats during the period from 1980 to 1984. However fishers, as well as the Fisheries Department personnel in Rameswaram reported that this particular fish is seen very rarely now and may not contribute more than 5% of their annual landings. All these, clearly point to the fact that fishers here are now more and more depending on fishing in Sri Lankan waters for livelihood.

If they strictly follow the rules and do not cross the boundary then the crew will also be thrown out of jobs as they could not bring any catch. The only time now they fish within Indian waters is when they do pair trawling for pelagic sardines. It is done only for 45 days of the year and compared with the income from shrimps it is rather low, though incidents of firing and loss of lives are not at all reported during that period.

The Risks involved

This kind of fishing in 'illegal' waters is naturally not possible without paying a price for it. Whether one can call it illegal is also questionable and this is dealt later. But fishing within another country's waters is not at all an easy proposition in any situation. And it is all the

more complicated when the area is more strategic and crucial for a country which has been waging a fierce civil war.

As this area is suspected to be the major en route for entry and supply of contraband arms and ammunitions for the militants, there is constant vigil by the naval and military personnel of Sri Lanka. The situation is further complicated as the militants are of Tamil origin and the fishers here are from Tamilnadu.

The Indian fishers revealed that, they are generally not always shot at or arrested whenever they are spotted inside the Sri Lankan sea territory by the navy boats. Compared to the instances of boundary violation by the Indian fishers which are taken note by the navy men the retaliation is very negligible. So it is not the crossing of the border and fishing by the Indian fishers which are normally obstructed and dealt with severely by the Sri Lankan navy. Indian fishers also revealed that, some times the navy men come close to their boats and ask fish for consumption. Some even said that, earlier they used to request us for fish and now they just demand it.

Fishers also pointed out situations when the Sri Lankan navy react vehemently on innocent Indian fishers. They described three such common occasions. Firstly, whenever a fierce fighting takes place between the Tamil militants and the Sri Lankan army inside their country and if there is more casualty among their army men, there will soon be some retaliation on the poor Indian fishers at the sea here. So it is then an angry and emotional reaction by some of their immature navy men who identify the Indian fishers with the tamil militants. Another occasion is, at times of patrolling if they think that any Indian fishing boat is carrying more quantity of diesel than what is required, then also they start firing at them without any provocation and in the process killing many innocent fishers. Sometimes, when a suspicious Indian fishing boat is asked to stop for searching and if not obliged out of fear or so, they are shot at. Often new fishers experience it as only experienced fishers are able to understand the commands.

The Indian Coast Guard and Indian Navy are also seen here patrolling the sea borders. Fishers are generally not very satisfied with them because they try to prevent them from going to the Sri Lankan waters. The general expectation of the fishers here is that they should retaliate at the Sri Lankan navy whenever they shoot at Indian fishers. But it is not possible for interference by the Indian Navy as the incidents often take place well within Sri Lankan waters. There were stray occasions when Indian fishers were shot at and killed by the Indian Navy men allegedly without any provocation.

However, the involvement of Indian Navy and Coast Guard has apparently helped to marginally regulate the mechanised fishing operations at Rameswaram. Fixation of specific days for fishing by the mechanised boats are enforced more at the instance of these agencies. By doing so while they are able to man the boats more efficiently, it has also helped to impose a fisheries management measure - a trawling ban of four alternate nights in a week which should definitely help to conserve the stocks. The tokens given to each boat when they venture to sea by the Fisheries Department is also verified at sea by these

agencies. They also insist on photo identity cards for all the fishers. The mechanised boats generally follow these procedures as they face stiff punishments if not complied with.

Whether one can call the fishing operations of Indian fishers within the EEZ of Sri Lanka illegal is a point of contention for many people involved with this issue. First of all they argue that Indian fishers were traditionally fishing within the present EEZ of Sri Lanka till 1983 without any hindrance. So Indian fishers could claim traditional use rights to fish in this area.

But whether the Indian fishers were as active as they fish now is of dispute because Sri Lankan fishers were also then fishing in this area. In the earlier period, before the advent of trawling, traditional fishers of both the countries used to have a healthy co-existence in this sea area as they were engaged in fishing for target species with different gears.

The Indian fishers also are unhappy about the agreement reached between the two countries on the status of Kachativu island. They are angry that fishers were never consulted before the exclusive right over the island was given to Sri Lanka by the Indian government.

Apparently the Sri Lankan navy men are not unduly worried about strictly fishing operations by Indian fishers within their EEZ. It is actually the supply of goods and arms for the militants they are more worried about. But are there elements involved in such dubious and anti-national (for Sri Lanka) activities in this area? It is a rather difficult question to probe with. We can only gather what people talk about it and cannot provide proofs with.

In Rameswaram, generally fishers who seek a livelihood from fishing are not involved in any activity of supporting Tamil militants across the border. But, it is alleged that some anti-social elements are involved in supplying goods to the militants and the local fishers point out that there are about 30 mechanised boats (owned by people outside the fishing community) which actually do no fishing but involved in this illegal activity. Fishers here do not consider the operations of such people as political in nature, but act for just making money like smugglers. Diesel is of great demand for the militants and since fishers also use it as a fuel it is very difficult to find the miscreants. Till about 8 years ago, these miscreants were also allegedly supported and let loose by the local authorities for political reasons. So these people managed to become millionaires overnight by involving in this activity and are posing as boat owners, some fishers allege. However, according to them now such activities are more and more curbed, especially after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. However, it is still alleged that, with backing of various political parties they manage to go scot-free and continue with it.

While some miscreants indulge in such shady deals and make a lot of money too, it is often the innocent fishers who face the repercussions.

Fisher's organisations and history of struggle

It was in 1978, the first organisation of fishers namely Rameswaram-Vercot Fishermen Association was initiated in this island. Soon in 1979, fishers living in the western tip of the island also formed an association namely Pamban Deepu Meenavar Sangam. Both had no political party affiliation and were formed in the backdrop of the riot between the servars and Paravas in 1978. These associations acted to settle disputes and clashes between fishers in the sea as well as at land.

But as soon as the first incident of shooting and killing of Indian fishers by the Lankan navy took place in 1983 they came together to protest it. As the State authorities were not able to do anything about it and a few more incidents occurring in the sea they resorted to agitation though in peaceful forms. About 2000 fishers started indefinite mass hunger satyagraha from morning to evening in front of the Public office. Three demands were put forward by the struggle committee. They were 1) Ensure stoppage of firing by Sri Lankan Navy 2) Give permission to fishers to visit Kachativu during Church festival and 3) provide fishing passes and permission to fish freely. On the third day, at the intervention by the then Chief Minister late Sri. MGR, leaders were invited to Madras for discussion with the Chief Secretary for discussions. During the discussion, the leaders were asked whether the fishers would agree for evacuation from the island and shifting to another uninhabited coastal area. But the leaders did not agree to and as none of their demands met with they had to return. The agitation continued and fishing was also stopped for 27 days. The then Chief Minister intervened again and sent his private secretary to talk with the leaders of agitation. The emissary pleaded with the leaders to stop the agitation with promise of sympathetic and positive consideration of all their demands. The agitation was then temporarily called off.

But soon after 3 months, again a shooting incident occurred and some fishers were killed. So agitation was also renewed with leaders starting hunger strike. As part of the agitation, fishers surrounded a small passenger ship named 'Irwin' and kept it in their custody for a day. It was like a *gherao* in the mid sea. But even this agitation did not result in any achievement and some fishers started leaving the area out of fear.

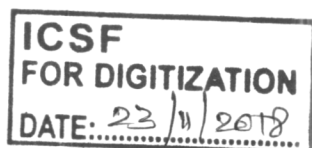
In 1985 again when three fishers hailing from Pamban area were shot at and killed, people spontaneously resorted to agitation. The mob damaged the railway track and set fire to a train bogey. Train services to and from Rameswaram was disrupted and police officials were thus prevented to enter the island from mainland. It was only after the burial services of the victims were completed on the next day, police were allowed to come.

In 1986 soon after a series of incidents of shooting by Sri Lankan navy at the Indian fishers, there was an instance of Indian navy men capturing a Sri Lankan navy boat and it was brought here with 26 soldiers and charged of violating into Indian territory. After this incident fishers recalled that for a long period there was no shooting.

However incidents are taking place regularly with heavy casualties on the lives of fishers and fishers of this area seem to have started coping with it as fate accompli. Organisations of fishers too do not see any practical solution to end this misery.

When a death occur as a result of shooting at sea, the State government give an amount of Rs.10,000 to the bereaved family as compensation. An amount of Rs. 25000 is also given to the family through the co-operative society as part of the insurance scheme to which all fishers are entitled for accidental death.

Most of the fishing families who have settled in the island in *purampokku* land for many years are denied legal land title deeds in the name of a proposed project to be implemented in the island. Because of no land records the fishers are unable to make use of housing schemes and other welfare schemes meant for fishing community. Most of the fishing families live in thatched huts and most of them are not electrified. Fishers Cooperatives promoted by the government are not functioning well here also as in other parts of the State.



Overview of women's roles in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan

India

Some 3.52 million fishers and family members who belong to 756 212 households live in 3 202 marine fishing villages of India. Among men, the major fishery-related occupations are labour (39.2%), net-mending (28.6%) and marketing (14%). The major women's occupations are marketing (41.8%), labour (18.4%) and curing/ processing (18%). Women dominate in fish marketing (73.6%), while men dominate in net-repair and net-making (nearly 80%) and in providing labour to fishing boats (69.5%).

Sustaining fishing communities in India communities has been the task of women, who not only play the role of wife and mother, but who contribute substantially in many ways to the income of the family. In stages of harvest, women fishworkers perform the following: **pre-harvest** - making and mending nets, preparing hooks with bait, pond preparation, seed collection, and feeding; **harvest** – clam and mussel picking, collecting seaweed and pearl diving; and **post-harvest** – fish vending, processing (salting and drying), oil extraction and they also work as labourers in the processing plants.

As is true in other sectors, the contribution of women in the fisheries sector is not taken seriously by the State. Not only does the State not have any data on women but rarely, if at all, are any budget allocations made to support the work of women in fisheries.

Bangladesh

There are 1,320,480 people employed in fisheries in Bangladesh. Traditionally women did not have access and control over resources like land, knowledge, cash and tools. The social position of women was so inferior to that of men that women had little or no influence on the decision-making process. Lack of access and control over cash income perpetuated the myth that women's work was less important than men's. Fishing was an activity traditionally reserved for Hindu males, with the exception of some widows and older women in the southern part of the country. In 1996, fishing was the second most important occupation outside the agricultural sector, yet only 3 % of working women fished (Sultana *et al.*, 2002). However, women now actively participate in both fishing and in resource management. New markets have also allowed women to gain access to coastal resources. Aquaculture has created a demand for shrimp fry and many women, regardless of religion, age and marital status, now catch shrimp fry, e.g., along the coast of Bangladesh. Women and children comprise 80 % of the workforce in shrimp fry collection (Sultana *et al.*, 2002).

Women in Bangladesh play a significant role in the small-scale fisheries sector. About 30% of women in rural and coastal areas are directly or indirectly engaged in small-scale fisheries. Of the total employed in the fisheries sector, about 10-12% are women. The major areas of women's involvement are aquaculture, shrimp culture, fish processing, net, gear and craft making. Though women in Bangladesh, similar to their counterparts in the region, are not involved in active fishing from the sea, they participate in certain forms of fishery as a family along with the men. In parts of Bangladesh, where women are involved in fishing, it is only through activities such as shrimp seed and fish fry collection and mostly it is only women from the poorest families who get involved as fry collectors. In Bangladesh, women who are involved in the fresh fish trade are usually old or divorced and almost all of them belong to the Hindu fishing communities.

Though Bangladesh has a fisheries sub-sector in its National Plans since 1973, the focus on women has been negligible. It was only since the sixth national plan that the scope was broadened to include fishing communities, which paved the way for the inclusion of women. However, the 1998 National Fisheries Policy does not mention the strategy to improve women's participation in fisheries despite having it as an objective.

Sri Lanka

Out of a fishing population of 547,523 there are 148,167 employed in fisheries in Sri Lanka. A key issue in the fisheries sector is the role and status of the wives and other women in fishing families. There is evidence of positive developments from the women's perspective. Fish handling, grading and processing for local markets principally involve women and there is some evidence that they are becoming more active in these activities. Earlier, shore-based post-harvest fisheries activity provided certain opportunities for women. Their roles were traditionally important because they were the processors and handlers of fish for the domestic market. However, these traditional roles have been to support the male fishers, as economic partners to their spouses. Cultural barriers have strictly controlled the women's behaviour and participation. They are also highly affected by collapses in the industry but have very little role in resource management.

Pakistan

There are 272,273 people employed in fisheries in Pakistan. In the past women usually accompanied their male family members on fishing trips. There was no major division of work. The whole family was usually engaged in fishing, cleaning and drying. Women were also engaged in the sell of fish in the local as well as remote markets. Women also used to fish in the shallow waters of the coastal areas. However, with the commercialization of fisheries and expansion of the sector, women were slowly and gradually pushed out of the process and activities. Hence the role of women of the fishing community has almost come to an end. The Pakistan government has done little for the fisherwomen and their livelihoods. Fisherwomen are not mentioned anywhere in government policy documents/legislations/laws.

Maldives

The country relies virtually on two sectors – tourism and fisheries. While the contribution of fisheries has been declining over time, it remains vital to the economy, because it is the main provider of food items and employment in a number of atolls. In the Maldives, fishing activities and harvesting marine life in the oceans, lagoons or reef flats are performed exclusively by men. Post-harvesting activities aimed at adding value, such as salting and drying fish, are the domain of women. Forty-five species of reef fish are commercially important; the salted and sun-dried reef fish are exported. With the progressive mechanization of the fishing industry and a shift in the external demand for dried and salted fish, women's employment in fish-processing industries has declined sharply. On the atolls, women's share of the economically active population fell in 1990, before increasing again in 1995. In 1995, two sectors dominated employment on the atolls—manufacturing, which accounted for up to 50 percent of female employment; and fishing, which represented 34 percent of male employment.

Accn. No.	9626
Date	14/10/08
MFN No.	5066A

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		<p>conservation of marine living resources; the interests of local communities and indigenous people are taken into account, in particular their right to subsistence.</p> <p>17.94. Coastal States, with the support of relevant subregional, regional and global agencies, where appropriate, should:</p> <p>(a) Develop research capacities for assessment of marine living resource populations and monitoring;</p> <p>(b) Provide support to local fishing communities, in particular those that rely on fishing for subsistence, indigenous people and women, including, as appropriate, the technical and financial assistance to organize, maintain, exchange and improve traditional knowledge of marine living resources and fishing techniques, and upgrade knowledge on marine ecosystems;</p>
The United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement, 1995	<p>Article 5: General Principles</p> <p>Article 24: Recognition of the special requirements of developing States</p>	<p>In order to conserve and manage straddling fish stocks and highly migratory fish stocks, coastal States and States fishing on the high seas shall, in giving effect to their duty to cooperate in accordance with the Convention</p> <p>(i) take into account the interests of artisanal and subsistence fishers;</p> <p>2. In giving effect to the duty to cooperate in the establishment of conservation and management measures for straddling fish stocks and highly migratory fish stocks, States shall take into account the special requirements of developing States, in particular:</p> <p>(b) the need to avoid adverse impacts on, and ensure access to fisheries by, subsistence, small-scale and artisanal fishers and women fishworkers, as well as indigenous people in developing States, particularly small island developing States;</p>
The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), 2000	<p>Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger</p> <p>Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women</p> <p>Goal 4: Reduce child mortality</p> <p>Goal 5: Improve maternal health</p> <p>Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability</p>	<p>Target 1: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of population below \$1 (PPP) per day</p> <p>Target 2: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of underweight children under five years of age people who suffer from hunger</p> <p>Target 4: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and to all levels of education no later than 2015</p> <p>Target 5: Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate</p> <p>Target 6: Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio</p> <p>Target 9: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources</p> <p>Target 10: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation</p> <p>Target 11: By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers</p>

Appendix: Some international legal instruments of relevance to women in fishing communities

<p>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979</p>	<p>Article 14</p>	<p>1. States Parties shall take into account the particular problems faced by rural women and the significant roles which rural women play in the economic survival of their families, including their work in the non-monetized sectors of the economy, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the application of the provisions of the present Convention to women in rural areas.</p> <p>2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development and, in particular, shall ensure to such women the right:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) To participate in the elaboration and implementation of development planning at all levels; (b) To have access to adequate health care facilities, including information, counselling and services in family planning; (c) To benefit directly from social security programmes; (d) To obtain all types of training and education, formal and non-formal, including that relating to functional literacy, as well as, inter alia, the benefit of all community and extension services, in order to increase their technical proficiency; (e) To organize self-help groups and co-operatives in order to obtain equal access to economic opportunities through employment or self employment; (f) To participate in all community activities; (g) To have access to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes; (h) To enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communications.
<p>Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), 1992</p>	<p>Preamble</p>	<p>Recognizing also the vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and affirming the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation for biological diversity conservation.</p>
<p>Agenda 21: The Programme of Action for Sustainable Development, 1991</p>	<p>Chapter 17 of Agenda 21</p>	<p>Article 17.81. Coastal States should support the sustainability of small-scale artisanal fisheries. To this end, they should, as appropriate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Integrate small-scale artisanal fisheries development in marine and coastal planning, taking into account the interests and, where appropriate, encouraging representation of fishermen, small-scale fishworkers, women, local communities and indigenous people; (b) Recognize the rights of small-scale fishworkers and the special situation of indigenous people and local communities, including their rights to utilization and protection of their habitats on a sustainable basis; (c) Develop systems for the acquisition and recording of traditional knowledge concerning marine living resources and environment and promote the incorporation of such knowledge into management systems. <p>17.82. Coastal States should ensure that, in the negotiation and implementation of international agreements on the development or</p>

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		<p>conservation of marine living resources, the interests of local communities and indigenous people are taken into account, in particular their right to subsistence.</p> <p>17.94. Coastal States, with the support of relevant subregional, regional and global agencies, where appropriate, should:</p> <p>(a) Develop research capacities for assessment of marine living resource populations and monitoring;</p> <p>(b) Provide support to local fishing communities, in particular those that rely on fishing for subsistence, indigenous people and women, including, as appropriate, the technical and financial assistance to organize, maintain, exchange and improve traditional knowledge of marine living resources and fishing techniques, and upgrade knowledge on marine ecosystems;</p>
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