

## Fishing to the tune of gunfire

**The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has ruined the traditional livelihood of fishing families in Batticaloa**

**T**he fight for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of Sri Lanka has continued throughout the last decade, affecting all sectors of society. In Batticaloa district, since 1990, thousands—civilians well as armed forces—have been killed or injured, hundreds detained and probably over a thousand have disappeared.

Many young men have joined one or other of the armed forces. Everyone has been affected. Children have grown up knowing only war.

Batticaloa district in north-east Sri Lanka has a 120-km coastline, three lagoons and 200 irrigation tanks. Naturally, it has a large fishery resource. This implies a significant potential for economic growth and social well-being.

However, with a population of 420,000, the district has the lowest per capita income in Sri Lanka, its lowest literacy rate (66 percent, against the national average of 86 percent) and the highest drop-out rate from schools.

Batticaloa has a majority Tamil population (71 percent) and a considerable Moor population (24 percent). At three per cent, the Sinhalese are a minority. More than a third of the people are involved in fisheries (in the lagoons, sea and inland) and associated activities. Batticaloa is famous for its tiger prawns, which are caught in the lagoons.

Possibly due to the easy access and lower expenditure required for lagoon fishing, there has not been a long tradition of fishing in the sea.

Until 1982, marine fishing was mainly done by migrant Sinhalese fishermen from the south and Mannar, using labour

from Batticaloa. Many coastal fishermen from the south migrated to Batticaloa for six months during the south-west monsoon and supported a second family there. This tradition declined with increased mechanisation of craft, which made fishing possible during the monsoon and high winds.

The breaking out of the conflict ensured that Sinhalese migrant fishermen no longer visit Batticaloa. This ended a mutually beneficial relationship.

Soon the temporary settlements of the Sinhalese fishermen started to become more permanent structures and they were provided with a police post for 'security reasons'.

The migrants then came to be regarded as part of the state's plan to 'colonise' Batticaloa. They thus became targeted for anti-Sinhala action.

From the mid-1950s, the Sri Lankan government tried to improve the productivity of the fisheries sector throughout the island by mechanising existing craft, introducing new ones and popularising improved fishing techniques.

This was mainly to curb the import of fish and to improve the nutritional level of the population—70 percent of the animal protein consumed locally was from fish. The state concentrated on the coastal, off-shore and deep sea fishery.

### **Local production rose**

By 1982, imports were still high. Although local production had risen significantly, with production had risen significantly with increased deep sea, offshore and coastal catches, demand had also grown with the population. The shortage in

supply led to higher prices and traders increased their margins.

**I**t was sometimes felt that fishermen is land wide did not benefit from these increased prices. But it does seem that both boat owners and crewmen on motorised craft had annual incomes considerably higher than comparable socio-economic groups such as owner-cultivators. Only crewmen on non-mechanised traditional craft earned incomes similar to those of agricultural workers.

Despite these relatively high incomes, fishermen tended to fall increasingly into debt. This was probably due to a high expenditure on consumption—on clothing, recreation, education and 'luxuries', as well as food and drink. They tended not to save cash, perhaps because of their irregular and seasonal income.

Major repairs to craft or replacement of gear were often financed through credit, which would normally be settled at the end of a good season. The more affluent fishermen tended to move away from the industry.

The fisheries sector did not attract new entrants. Fishing was seen as a caste-based vocation practised largely by the Karayar in the Tamil community (and the Karawa in the Sinhalese). Customary fishing rights were vested in fishing

communities. Outsiders were not allowed to fish in community fishing grounds and labour was recruited from within the community itself.

It seems the government's objectives of minimising imports and improving the national nutritional levels are not being met—SL Rs727 million worth of canned and dried fish were imported between January and June this year. Short supplies and high demand have pushed the price of fish well beyond the reach of the poor in the country.

From the fishermen's point of view, higher prices have compensated for decreased catches, but their standards of living remain low due to the unpredictable and seasonal nature of income.

Many fishermen have been killed in the past decade by the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Many fishing communities are far from urban centres and are sometimes the target of security operations and consequent round-ups.

#### **Women rarely involved**

In Batticaloa, women are rarely involved in fishing activities. If the father in the family used to be a breadwinner, and is killed or missing, the mother and children have to somehow find enough on their own to survive. The extended family helps

if it can. Often, women have to find new ways of earning money and children have to drop out of school to fetch some extra money or look after their younger brothers and sisters.

**I**n September 1993, over 36,000 people in Batticaloa were registered with the government as displaced—either living in or outside refugee camps.

Those so registered receive dry rations from the government, as they are usually not able to carry out their normal means of earning a living.

Among the displaced are many fishing families. Those still living in camps tend to be the poorer ones. A number of young men and women from the wealthier groups have gone abroad.

In one village, five boats and gear remained unused as everyone in the family who might use them had emigrated to Western countries; the families were merely keeping the equipment until the residency status of their children abroad was confirmed.

The result was reduced employment opportunities for fishworkers in Batticaloa. In one of the traditional methods of fishing—beach-seine or karai valai—Sinhalese migratory fishermen used to come to the east coast with a skeleton crew and employ up to 60 Tamil fishworkers on a karai valai. Since June 1990, the Sinhalese migratory fishermen

have not come to the Batticaloa coast. The government has not reallocated the karai valai fishing sites to others. This renders an estimated 3,000 or more fishworkers unemployed.

The Sri Lanka government is encouraging all displaced people to return to their homes, when these are in 'cleared' areas—where the state security apparatus feels it is in control rehabilitation can be implemented.

Those who do resettle receive several grants, including a SL Rs.2,000 resettlement allowance, a SL Rs.4,000 productive enterprise grant and a SL Rs.15,000 reconstruction grant. Not all of these are available immediately on resettlement, as the government departments do not have enough money.

For security reasons, the SLA has not yet allowed some of the resettled fishing communities to begin fishing again. They have to find alternative ways of making a living, as dry rations are only supplied for three to six months after resettlement.

#### Property destroyed

Fishermen's property and productive assets, including boats, have been destroyed (see Table 1).

Several government and non-government organizations have helped replace boats and gear through grants or loans. Many fishermen are unwilling to take loans to replace their boats. They fear these will be

Table 1

#### CRAFT IN BATTICALOA DISTRICT

Craft available (July 1993)	Number	Craft Lost (1978-1992)	Number
3.5 ton mechanized boats	133	3.5 ton mechanized boats	14
17-23 ft fibreglass boats	122	17-21 ft fibreglass boats	120
Lagoon <i>thonies</i>	1,413	Outboard motors	46
Sea <i>thonies</i>	407	Lagoon canoes	2,015
Madal <i>vallam</i>	253	Sea-going craft	410
<i>Theppam</i>	15	Beach seines	75

Source: Batticaloa Kachcheri (District Administration Centre)

Table 2

FISH PRODUCTION IN BATTICALOA DISTRICT  
(figures in metric tonnes)

Year	Marine	Lagoon	Crab	Prawn	Cuttlefish	Total
1980	6,675	402	22	48	8	7,137
1981	8,837	375	18	94	11	9,335
1982	9,283	342	24	81	9	9,739
1983	4,098	271	9	22	5	4,603
1984	3,582	360	15	37	14	4,008
1985	3,256	375	16	69	11	3,727
1986	3,356	142	12	74	19	3,503
1987	3,382	141	9	29	15	3,576
1988	3,432	207	13	19	16	3,687
1989	3,218	223	17	23	19	3,500
1990	2,938	21	6	21	7	2,983
1991	1,472	310	48	30	36	1,896
1992	2,380	368	20	30	9	2,807

Source: Batticaloa District Fisheries Extension Office

destroyed again, leaving them with an outstanding loan they have no means of repaying.

**B**oth the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) and the SLA imposed security zones in coastal areas and lagoons at different times.

This was because the LTTE used these to transport men and materials. A near total ban on night fishing in the lagoon was also imposed. In some areas within sight of army camps, limited numbers of fishermen were issued fishing permits and their movements were restricted. They had to conform to zones of operations and time deadlines for fishing, and harbour their boats near the army camp.

There has also been a total ban on using boats with outboard engines, except from Valaichenai and Muhathuvaram fishery harbours. Both lagoon and sea fishermen used to start out around midnight and return at daybreak. These restrictions meant reporting to the security camp before 5.30 p.m. and returning only after daybreak, even if the weather turned unfavourable during a trip.

This left them very little time to sell their catch, mind the gear and get some rest, before going back to fish at 5.30 p.m. Some of these restrictions have been eased this year.

Over the last 10 years, there has been a fall in fish production (see Table 2). The peak production of fish was in 1982 for marine species and in 1980 for those from the lagoons. The decline in catch since 1983 could be due to the ethnic violence.

While 1991-92 were good years for lagoon fishing, a substantial reduction in the catch level of prawns caused incomes to drop during that period. Fishermen feel this is primarily due to the degradation and pollution of the lagoons. It could also be due to restrictions on marine fishing.

When fishing was banned at sea but allowed on lagoons, several marine fishermen fished on the lagoons, using craft and gear which was inappropriate for lagoon fishing.

Demand for fish in, and from, Batticaloa is great. The traditional supply of fish islandwide, from Mannar, Jaffna, Mullaitivu and Trincomalee has been

disrupted by the conflict. Since 1990, for religious and political reasons, the government has not supported fish culture in inland irrigation tanks.

**P**rawns, shrimps and crabs from the lagoon have a market outside the district, but only for a short season. From the late 1970s, large export companies advanced credit to both lagoon and sea fishermen, and paid high prices for these seafood.

With the uncertain security situation reducing the supply for export, the large export-oriented companies no longer extend credit. A few local entrepreneurs have started exporting crabs and prawns to Colombo and to East Asian export markets.

Traditionally, the big traders in fish come from the Sinhalese and Muslim communities. The war has disrupted this. A few traders dominate the Batticaloa market. They buy fish at auctions at the landing sites where the lack of competitive buying has kept prices low. Due to the problems of preservation and transport, fish is sold almost exclusively in the local market.

There are many problems with preservation and transport. One is the shortage of ice. There were only two ice factories. One was staffed mainly by Sinhalese, who had to leave after the violence in the late 1980s, and the equipment there is now in poor repair. The other factory was damaged.

Despite the existence of a large market for dried fish within Sri Lanka, fish tends to be dried only when there is a surplus. Much of this used to come from Mannar, but now has to be imported from south India.

Transporting anything within and around Batticaloa is a problem. Vehicle movement is restricted and military check-points delay shipments. Even landing sites situated a few kilometres outside Batticaloa town are frequently unable to access their usual markets.

At present, the caste barriers seem to be coming down. Many seasonal fishermen do some farming and farmers do some

fishing-agricultural production is low and farmers need supplementary income. Some lagoon fishermen fish at sea; some part-time fishermen also have other occupations, including government jobs.

Many of the earlier community and co-operative organizations no longer function. The relationship between the different ethnic groups has greatly worsened due to the conflict and many of the earlier community leaders have either been killed or have left Batticaloa.

It is clear that all interventions in Batticaloa must take account of the current security situation and recognize that this is unlikely to change soon. Such initiatives must try to identify the needs of fishermen and fishing communities through consultation and try to rebuild relationships between the different ethnic groups.

#### **Develop local capacity**

Many agencies have been providing more boats and gear for use on the lagoon, despite the fact that it seems to be over-fished. It may be more important to try and maintain the lagoon environment. Further, more attention needs to be paid to developing local capacity for marine fishing and for the preservation and marketing of fish.

This article is based on a 'Needs Assessment' study of fishing communities in Batticaloa by Mano Rajasingam.