

# Getting on the Bus

**Bordering the Indian Ocean, Kanyakumari is peninsular India's southernmost district. Here, through years of struggle, women fishers have managed to significantly expand their citizenship rights**

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Often, Kanyakumari district's fishing villages are stereotyped as places without history and their inhabitants as primitives existing outside the world of modern politics. Inland castes and state officials commonly reinforce prejudices about fishing populations: "They are as volatile as the ocean they sail"; "Fishers have no sense of the world. What they know is prayer and fish"; "The coast is a Catholic theocracy and the priest is the god of the fisherfolk. He can tell them to do anything and they'll do it!"

PETER VERGHEESE/VALLAVILAI



Specially designed Passenger cum Goods (PCG) bus, operating in Marthandam-Kaliakavilai-Neerody-Thoothoor in Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu. Such transportation facilities have come about as a result of persistent struggles by women fish vendors.

Such remarks assume that fishers are an isolated and ignorant people who have no comprehension of wider social dynamics and certainly no understanding of their rights as citizens. That their labour is mostly artisanal in nature seems to further consign these fishers to social irrelevance on the fringes of the Indian nation state.

The marginalization of India's southwestern fishers has been reinforced by a history of geographically organized power differences

in the region. Here, social and political status has long been tied to physical location, with coastal residence implying social inferiority, caste primitivism, and second class citizenship. However, Kanyakumari's fishers have not simply accepted their own marginality.

When they have made claims for rights, they have posed considerable challenges to existing social and political norms. Their struggles—demanding an inshore artisanal fishing zone, crafting forms of alternative technology, carving out relationships with regional political parties—have transformed perceptions of the coast as a space without rights, and generated changes, not simply to coastal life, but to the larger fabric of Indian democracy. To put it differently, fisher political action has called into question the very distinction between the coastal 'margin' and the societal 'mainstream'.

One such political project was the struggle by Kanyakumari's fisherwomen for public buses to transport fish to markets. The stigma attached to fish vending is perhaps the most graphic instance of fishers' subjection to caste norms, placing them on a low social rung. The nature of fisherwomen's work brings them into a set of social relations from which fishermen are generally spared. Unlike men whose labour at sea largely dissociates them from other castes and communities, women's work requires them to mediate between the coast and the wider world. As fisherwomen travel to inland markets to sell fish, they encounter other social groups and confront their prejudices. Adding to the inland caste aversion towards the 'polluting' labour of handling fish is the disapproval of fisherwomen for not complying with gender norms. The stereotypes of women fish vendors as filthy, uncouth, argumentative, and lewd are everywhere.

Not only are such pejorative assessments of their bodies and behaviour insulting, they have also had serious effects on coastal women's livelihood. Until their demand for special coast-to-market buses with racks for fish vessels was granted by the Tamil Nadu government, women vendors were routinely denied passage on public transportation. Many older vendors recounted tales of daily struggle to get their

fish to the market before it spoiled. Philomene Mary was one of the most outspoken vendors over the age of 45 whom I befriended during my time in Kanyakumari. She was particularly fond of mocking the horrified reactions of young women from the agricultural villages bordering the coast, who traveled to neighbouring Nagercoil for white collar work.

“If my *mundani* (covering cloth) slips even a little bit, or if my sari is wet, they start to whisper! They are so young, even younger than my granddaughters. They wouldn’t dare to say something to me directly or even look me in the eyes. But they have learned from their parents that they shouldn’t be like us, that they are better than us because we have to sweat and carry a heavy load. But their mothers buy our fish to cook! What would they do without us? They would have to eat tasteless rice and *kozumbu* (curry).”

In the early 1990s, Philomene Mary and a number of other women vendors decided to, as she put it, “push our way onto the bus.” In agitation after agitation, they took over streets and camped out in front of the District Collectorate chanting slogans such as “All mothers have rights!”, “Justice for fisherwomen!”, “The market is ours too!” and “No buses, no fish!”

Philomene Mary spoke to me about what motherhood meant: “What does it mean to be a mother? It means feeding your children, giving them life, helping them understand right from wrong. We are poor people. For us, life is a struggle. No one understands this. Motherhood is a struggle...Without us who would raise the children? Who would feed them? Other mothers can be mothers without struggling but fisherwomen are different. Look, even the government doesn’t want us to be mothers. How can we feed our children without selling our fish? Without getting to the market? They think we are dirty and just want to fight. But really, we just want to feed our children so we have to fight.”

After several years of struggle, the Tamil Nadu government finally granted women vendors buses, specially designed for the transport of fish. The buses delivered upon the state’s promise to support the labour of its artisans and brought the coast within the radius of a redefined, more expansive public. By asserting themselves as workers with rights to public services, fisherwomen forced the state to recognize them as an integral part of a larger citizenry. But this was by no means an undifferentiated body of citizens. In granting these buses, the state not only extended public services to the coast, it also built special buses that recognized the unique needs of a coastal citizenry. The layout of the buses—racks running along one side for the baskets and stainless steel vessels carrying fish, and seats along the other—brought together a modern form of transport with a household trade marked for obsolescence.

In this sense, fisherwomen’s political actions directly refuted the expectation that, with the mechanization of fishing and the entry of big merchants into the trade, their labour would disappear. For their part, women vendors boarded these buses with a newfound sense of ownership: these were their buses to facilitate their work. As Philomene Mary remarked, “It made us feel that we had a right to the bus, a right to the market; that we didn’t have to just keep to our place in the fishing village.”

This instance of fisher activism shows how, through their own political action, fisherwomen came to see themselves as members of a wider citizenry with a right to make claims on the state. In the process, the very definition of citizen was expanded. At the same time, belonging to a larger, rights-bearing public did not erode their unique identity. On the contrary, getting on the bus only strengthened fisherwomen’s perception that their rights are tied to their multiple identities: as women, as fish vendors, and as coastal residents. ❧

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