

Pulicat's *Padu* System

Growing resource scarcity in India's Pulicat Lake region is not only putting a strain on the traditional system of fisheries management but also raising vital questions about gender equity in the community

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Pulicat Lake, spread across the southern coastal States of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, is the second largest brackishwater lagoon in India, after Chilika Lake. The saline water of the lagoon makes it an important fishing ground, especially for shrimp and mullets. Over 50 fishing villages currently fish in the lagoon area, using stake-nets (*suthu valai*) exclusively for shrimp, and drag-nets (*badi valai*), shaped like shore seines, for all fish species. The predominant fishing community in the area is the Pattanavar community. In the last few years, some *dalit* (people traditionally assigned a low status in the caste hierarchy) community members have also started fishing near the mouth of the lake.

The fishing communities in Pulicat practise the *padu* system—a traditional system of allocating rights to the fishing grounds to eligible fishermen in the lagoon area. This originated with the dominant Pattanavar community but is now being practised by people from other fishing communities in the region as well. The term *padu* means 'fishing

site'. The *padu* system follows spatio-temporal regulation—fishermen are allowed access to specific fishing grounds by rotation. This means that all eligible fishers can eventually access all fishing grounds.

The system depends on a traditional patriarchal institution at the village level called the '*talaekettu*'. Every male above the age of 18 belonging to the Pattanavar community is eligible to become a member of the *talaekattu* and gain access to the fishing grounds. The membership rights to new members are bestowed by the village elders. The *talaekattu* makes decisions related not only to fishing but also to conflicts and disputes among villagers.

The increase in the demand for shrimp since the 1980s and the growing population of new fishers seeking to access fishing rights in the region are putting a strain on the traditional *padu* system. Moreover, pollutants from industries located in the nearby Ennore port region also damage the health of the fishing ground. In fact, some species have completely disappeared from the lake. As a result, the number of days of fishing allotted to each fisherman has gradually decreased over the years. Currently, the system allows only two days per week for the *suthu valai* fishers and one day for *badi valai* fishers. Once, the *padu* system was sufficient to meet the needs of fishermen who did not have to look at any other form of livelihood—they were expected to fish in their fishing grounds on the prescribed days and could not abstain, without good reason, from fishing. However, the growing pressure on resources has meant that the rules are no longer the same. Today, the rules allow fishermen to leave the fishing village for a year to look for other livelihood options, upon the condition that they diversify out of fishing during the period.

Though the *padu* system has been in practice for generations, it is not officially recognized by the State Government of Tamil Nadu, one of the two States in which Pulicat Lake falls. These communities are also not part of the licensing system of the State fisheries department and so, their customary rights do not enjoy legal protection.

There are two ways of viewing this traditional resource management system. Rajasekharan, a fisherman leader in the region, says: "The *padu* system ensures a harmonious and conflict-free life for everyone in the village

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Women vendors at the Pulicat fish landing centre, India. Women have no fishing rights, as they are not members of the *talaekattu* system

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as it implements an equitable distribution of fishing grounds irrespective of the skills of the fishermen. It can also be seen as a resource management initiative.” He adds that despite the number of fishing villages in the region increasing from three to 24, the *padu* system has spread to cover the new villages, with each village designating its own *padu* area. The villagers have thus managed to avoid conflicts over resource use.

A very different picture of the *padu* system emerges, however, from Sarojini, a fisherwoman from Pulicat. She says: “Women in these fishing villages are not members of the *talaekattu* and hence have no rights over fishing in the *padu* system. Most women are involved in selling and drying fish that are caught by their husbands. So, in case of households where there are no male children, on the death of the fisherman, the *padu* rights automatically revert back to the system, as the wife or girl child is not entitled to such rights. Women-headed households cannot even hire a labourer on wages to use fishing gear and craft. Most often, the fishing gear and craft are sold.” Sarojini explains how the *padu* system discriminates against women even on non-fishing rights. “For drinking water, the village has a lot system of allocating a certain number of pots for each member of the *talaekattu*. However, in the case of families where there are no male members, they are not part of the *talaekattu* system, and hence are not eligible for fair allocation of drinking

water. The system also discriminates in the distribution of welfare schemes available as relief at the time of natural disasters. The distribution of such schemes to women-headed households is done only after all other households get their entitlements, and the decision is left in the hands of the *chettiyar* (village head) and other village elders. Women-headed households do not have any rights over land, except for the husband’s property. They are not eligible to buy any new property within the village nor are they allowed to sell their existing property in a fair manner. The price of the property and also the decision about whom to sell the property to, are both taken by the village elders.”

We, therefore, see how traditional community resource management systems, even while addressing issues of equitable resource use and conflict resolution, can embed within themselves a gender bias. However, even as resource constraints are forcing the system to change, women are beginning to find ways of asserting their rights. As Sarojini explains, “Earlier, women-headed households had no access to village funds. But now, with the establishment of self-help groups in these villages, women are coming out and discussing some of their problems. They have started taking part in a few village-level activities. Women were earlier not allowed to work outside the household; it is only recently that they have started working in the markets.” ❏