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(Re-)Negotiating Gender and Class

*New Forms of Cooperation Among Small-Scale Fishers
in Tamil Nadu*

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Between Elite Power and Social Mobilization**

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List of Acronyms and Local Terms

Adarntha valai (also Adantha valai)	A small net used in ring seine fishing, targeting pelagic schools of fish, mainly sardine and mackerel
Beta	Daily allowance
FRP	Fibre-reinforced plastic
HH	Households
hp	Horsepower
INR	Indian rupee
OBM	Outboard motor
OT	Old Town
Peyarntha valai (also Pentha valai)	A large purse seine net targeting large fish such as tuna
Seettu	Local rotating credit association
Seppaadu	A community-based system of resource allocation, including fishing grounds
Thangal	Literally translates to “staying”, refers to multi-day fishing
TNMFRA	Tamil Nadu Marine Fisheries Regulation Act
Ur panchayat	Village elders constituting the traditional decision-making body

Abstract

This paper explores new forms of cooperation emerging among small-scale fishers along the east coast of Tamil Nadu, as responses to wider transformations in fisheries and coastal landscapes. Increased competition for limited open-access resources has resulted in a capitalization of fisheries, with those able to invest reaping benefits and others risking marginalization. In order to retain their status as fishers rather than labourers, and gain a voice in decision-making structures, dominated by the traditional elites, many small-scale fishers have been experimenting with new forms of cooperation involving the shared ownership of large boats, engines and other modern technologies. In the process, one finds shifts in class, caste, gender and generational roles, relations and identities.

Based on data collected from a survey of 200 households and in-depth interviews with 20 households in Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu, the paper explores the processes of negotiation and renegotiation of both gender and class identities, and their intersections. It considers whether, and how, new institutional practices and forms of cooperation (and conflict) are enabling a more equitable sharing of resources and benefits, and in which ways they are further entrenching inequalities.

Keywords

Capitalization; cooperation; differentiation; fisheries; shares; Tamil Nadu

Bios

Nitya Rao is Professor of Gender and Development at the School of International Development, University of East Anglia, UK. With over 30 years of experience as a field-level practitioner, trainer, researcher and teacher, she has worked extensively in the fields of gendered land relations,

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Introduction

India has witnessed a gradual mechanization of marine fisheries since the 1950s, popularly called the “Blue Revolution” (Kurien 1985; Bavinck 2001). The introduction and expansion of trawl fishing coincided with the discovery of rich shrimp grounds in the Indian inshore waters and development of an export-oriented industry for shrimps (Pillai and Katiha 2004).¹ Public investments in infrastructure such as boatyards, harbours and post-harvest technologies; the establishment of the Marine Products Export Development Authority (in 1972); and subsidies for crafts, gear and fuel, provided impetus to this shift. The growth in marine fisheries, focusing on commercialization and export-oriented reforms, reiterated by the National Policy on Marine Fisheries, 2017 (GoI 2017), has also attracted investments by the private sector in a range of support industries (Kurien 1978; Subramanian 2009), now making India 7th in global marine capture fish production (Sathianandan 2017).

Ecological diversity has meant that marine fisheries has always been a diverse sector in terms of both technologies and social relations. While small-scale fisheries are largely family and kin-based, the early Blue Revolution period marked the beginning of visible class formation among the fisher-people alongside a renegotiation of common property regimes. Differences became evident between trawl owners and small-scale fishers, as well as a working class employed on the trawl boats and in the service sector surrounding each harbour (Bavinck 2014; Ram 1991). Today, 34 percent of the marine fishers in India are in the so-called mechanized (small trawl) sector, but they account for 70 percent of the catch—twice that of the motorized, and nine times more than the traditional fishers (Sathiadas 2009).² Average incomes reflect this disparity, with the annual per capita earnings of fishing labourers ranging from INR 13,200³ for a motorized dinghy with bag net to INR 127,200 for a mechanized trawler or purse seiner. Significant variation is also observed within groups of crafts, namely trawlers, gillnetters, purse-seiners, motorized and traditional crafts (Sathiadas 2009). It is therefore not surprising that while marine fisheries in India are considered better paying than other primary sectors (Bavinck 2014), nearly 61 percent of fisher families are classified as Below Poverty Line (CMFRI 2010a).

The same trends are visible at the state level, in the fisheries sector in Tamil Nadu. Following the introduction of mechanization in the late 1950s and the expansion of trawler operations in the 1970s due to the attractive international prices of shrimps, conflicts emerged with the artisanal sector in many parts of coastal Tamil Nadu (Vivekanandan and Kasim 2011). The Palk Bay is a case in point. The small waterbody that separates India and Sri Lanka had witnessed a fierce political protest by small-scale fishers in 1976, against trawlers targeting shrimps in inshore waters. This resulted in a distinctive “three-four-day” rule, whereby trawl fleets venturing into the sea was restricted to three days in a week, allowing the artisanal fishers the remaining four days (Bavinck 2003). In 1983, the Tamil Nadu Marine Fisheries Regulation Act (TNMFRA) further stipulated a three nautical mile zone for the exclusive use of artisanal fishers (Bavinck 2001).

¹ Facilitation of exports through the establishment of seafood processing units with modern machinery for freezing and value addition has contributed to an exponential growth by over 55 times of seafood exports from India (15,762 metric tons to 862,021 metric tons) between 1961 and 2012 (MPEDA 2012).

² Mechanized refers to large boats (over 15 meters in length) with higher horsepower (hp) in-board engines (80 hp and more), while motorized crafts are traditional boats fitted with out-board engines (2-20 hp) (Sathiadas 2009).

³ GBP 1 = INR 95.

The 2004 tsunami sped up some of these trends. Debilitating losses of both lives and property in the fishing communities led to the state widely distributing fishing equipment amongst them. Though such relief and rehabilitation efforts were carried out under the oversight of the main governing institution in the fishing village, the *ur panchayat*, this influx of new boats and gear led to the near total motorization of small-scale, artisanal fishing on the east coast of Tamil Nadu (Pillai and Thirumilu 2005; Bavinck 2008). Alongside the expansion in the trawl fleet, this development intensified the density of crafts and competition within the artisanal sector, leading to a sharp decline in the catch per unit (Bhathal 2014; Vivekanandan et al. 2005).

The post-tsunami reconstruction of fisheries then seems to have intensified class divisions, based on the ability of fishers to invest in mechanized boats and modern gear. Conflicts re-emerged. With the State Fisheries Department lagging behind in implementing the rules, rather treating such conflicts as law and order problems to be handled by the police and civil administration, small-scale fishers have attempted to deal with these issues through institutional innovations as discussed in the next sections. Their strategies to remain viable, often framed within the dominant discourses and practices of neoliberal capitalism (Mansfield 2007; Sundar 2010), involve processes of accumulation, albeit circuitous and indeterminate (Sneddon 2007; Menon et al. 2016), given the different social locations and life conditions of the fishers (Sinha 2012). In the face of growing competition, they also involve the search for new fishing grounds, often further away from home, with implications for labour mobility and labour relations (Rajan 2002).

In this paper, based on data collected from Cuddalore district in Tamil Nadu, we explore how small-scale artisanal fishers are coping with competition from the mechanized fishing sector. In particular we ask, to what extent are changes in labour relations and institutional mechanisms, including the emergence of new forms of cooperation (and conflict), enabling a more equitable sharing of resources and benefits, and in which ways are they further entrenching inequalities? Our focus is on the interlinkages between technology, capital and labour, and its implications for classed, gendered and generational inequalities and subjectivities in fisher communities.

After briefly setting out our conceptual starting points in the next section, we move to a discussion of our methodology and study context. We then discuss our main findings, analysing the implications of changes in patterns of capital and labour mobilization on norms for sharing and cooperation, and inequalities more broadly, before concluding.

Conceptual Starting Points

Much social science research in the field of marine or inland fisheries, as indeed in the realm of common property more broadly, has adopted a political ecology approach to enquiry and analysis. This field has grown and benefitted from simultaneous concerns around the politics of environmental degradation and conservation, sustainable livelihoods in a context where nature is privatized through new forms of accumulation and dispossession, and social justice amidst growing inequalities between winners (those who benefit) and losers (those who bear the costs) (Mansfield 2007; Campling et al. 2012)⁴. The effort is to unpack nature-society interconnections and power relations across multiple scales, in this case, the renegotiation and management of common property resource regimes in the face of mechanized fishing, the deepening of class

⁴ See also Rocheleau (2008), Elmhurst (2011) and Bavinck et al. (2018).

relations and inequalities resulting from capital accumulation, and, at the micro-level, the impacts of this on caste, gender and generational relations.

Capitalist accumulation has taken place in global fisheries in many ways: enclosure of the coastal commons and dispossession of small-scale fishers (Mansfield 2004; Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012), emergence of wage labour (Howard 2012), neoliberalization of fisheries policy in the form of individual transferable quotas (Crosoer et al. 2006; Høst 2016) and Marine Stewardship Council certification (Pérez-Ramiraz et al. 2012; Agnew et al. 2014). This process of capitalist transformation in fisheries has strengthened a small group of capitalist fishers with concentration of wealth while marginalizing a large section of small-scale fishers by appropriating their access to common property.

The simultaneous processes of mechanization and infrastructure development in the marine fisheries sector in India, supported both by neoliberal state policies and global markets, has resulted in the growing privatization of nature-society relations. As resources get privatized, however, changes are likely in the social rules governing their access, use and consumption (Ostrom 1990). The governance of marine fisheries is very different from other common property regimes involving land, water or forests, as the seas constitute a renewable resource, and the movement of fish therein is not constrained by political boundaries. Territorial use rights in small scale fisheries and the governance of the marine common property regimes in South India are well documented (Mathew 1991; Hopewell 2004), characterized as they are by institutional fragmentation and legal pluralism, a condition in which different rules, norms and values coexist with conflicting interests (Bavinck et al. 2013).

While management of common property resource regimes forms an important context for this study, we focus in this paper on two interlinked issues, the first relating to the processes of capital mobilization and accumulation and the second to labour mobilization, labour relations and forms of resistance. We argue that both of these processes involve not just a renegotiation of labour relations, focusing on a discourse of “shares” versus wages (Howard 2012), but equally gender and generational relations (Hapke and Ayyankерil 2018), as they intersect with each other, and contribute to shaping identities and notions of wellbeing.

Traditionally, within the small-scale fishing industry, the key mechanism for distribution of surplus was the “share” system, rather than wage payments. After the deduction of expenses, the surplus value of the catch is divided between the owners and the crew at an agreed proportion

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