

UNRAVELLING THE SECRETS OF EXCLUSION IN FISHERIES:

A CASE STUDY OF
SOUTH KERALA & TAMIL NADU



National Campaign on
Dalit Human Rights

ABOUT DALIT ARTHIK ADHIKAR ANDOLAN

Dalit Arthik Adhikar Andolan (DAAA) is a unit of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights and is working towards securing and strengthening the economic rights of the Dalit and Adivasi communities and believes strongly in bolstering the agency of the communities. The main vehicle is access to public entitlements like livelihood schemes, education, entrepreneurship, and asset building through the constitutional provisions of budgetary allocations. DAAA believes strongly in the inclusion and promotion of marginalised communities in the economy of the country. DAAA makes strategic interventions in public policy, planning, budgeting, advocacy research, and implementation and monitoring of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Budget.

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A Case Study of South Kerala and Tamil Nadu



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FOREWORD

Therese Jebsen

Program Manager Business and Human Rights

RAFTO Foundation

India has a history of oppression afflicting members of marginalized sections of society, such as the Dalits. Discrimination based on caste has been maintained for centuries, legitimizing uneven power relations between different communities through systematically distributing economic and cultural assets and opportunities unequally between those communities. Steps have been taken to end the systemic discrimination of Dalits since the establishment of the post-colonial state of India with significant contributions from the Dalit liberation movement led by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. However, discrimination based on caste is still prevalent and its eradication demands multipronged action and strategies. I am greatly encouraged by NCDHR-Dalit Arthik Adhikar Andolan for bringing this piece of work highlighting coastal and oceanic industries, through the lens of caste and climate crisis.

This study gives a thorough analysis of social and economic identities and bias encountered by Dalits in oceanic industries and aids the understanding of the multiple layers of Dalit identity in fishing communities. The study discloses how discrimination, dignity, and alienation is affected by caste as a structure shaping the relations between these ocean-based communities and their social and economic conditions. The study also provides an enlightening presentation of how gender relations are interwoven with caste. The present study was conducted in 2024 and constitutes the second phase of a research project, the first phase of which

was conducted in 2022, then highlighting two main sectors of the ocean industry, namely shipbreaking and fisheries in Gujarat and Tamilnadu. This second phase records varied experiences, narratives, and dynamics that change from district to district and state to state in coastal villages of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The work also includes the construction of a platform for these communities to defend their rights, with recommendations for governmental authorities and agencies.

I highly appreciate the NCDHR-DAAA team's pioneering fieldwork seeking to understand these communities in Kerala and Tamil Nadu through the lens of those most marginalized. I hope the study will shed new light on challenges faced by fishing communities in India and encourage future research of this kind. I also sincerely hope that this work will lead to changes for the community on the ground, and especially for the victims and survivors of discrimination and exploitation, towards a better protection of their right to a decent livelihood and recognition of their dignity and universal human rights.

I once again congratulate the NCDHR-DAAA on conducting this study, hoping that the evidence the study provides ensures greater accountability of all stakeholders, including the government, towards communities which are dependent on the oceans.



Beena Pallical
General Secretary
National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR)

PREFACE

It gives me great pleasure to present this research, which highlights the issues that Dalit fisherfolk in Tamil Nadu and Kerala endure. As the ocean-based sectors gradually lose their means of subsistence to corporate control and discriminatory actions within fishing communities, it was produced under the broader purview of the Business and Human Rights framework. By understanding how the small and traditional fishing industry is coping with caste oppression, the study examines one aspect of the blue economy and aims to influence people's perceptions of the various facets of Dalit fisherfolk and their differences from other members of the ocean communities or people. The study was conducted in South Kerala (Kochuveli, Puthiyathurai, Veli) and Tamil Nadu (Kodiyakkarai, Anna Nagar, Sathiya Nagar, Kodiyakkadu, Thillaivilagam- Muthupet). The research describes the intricacies of comprehending caste in coastal and marine environments, as well as how individuals perceive and experience alienation, discrimination, and dignity demonstrate the semantics of the fishing community and the importance of caste system to those who live near the water. The study lays down a context for further research especially those who are interested in the fishing community.

This study explores Dalit identity within the fishing community, contrasting it with the agriculture caste system, aiming to improve understanding of Dalit identity and its divergence from the commonly understood caste system. It provides a comprehensive

analysis of the semantics of the fishing community and the significant role of caste structure in the ocean-based community. The recommendations from the community perspective also highlights state and institutions' failures in emancipation, offering a roadmap for future participatory action research and practice based on caste lens. The presence of Dalits within the traditional fishing community has received very little attention in academic and civil society discourse, we have sought to address this issue by including narratives from individuals for both our past and present studies.

I sincerely thank all our partners and colleagues for their enthusiastic support, which helped this study be published successfully in a variety of ways. This report is intended to support inclusive ocean business for the communities, empower the voices and concerns of the Dalit communities, and hold the national and state governments, employers, and workers who depend on the ocean for their livelihoods accountable. A big thank you to Evita Das, Juno Varghese, Pritika Pariyar and Himani Singh for their efforts in this research and completing with all the challenges they endured. I would also like to thank RAFTO for their continuous support and guidance throughout this process.

Finally our communities who are the real reason why we do what we do salute to your strength and resilience, we hope that this study will highlight the issues and challenges faced by the Fisher folks!

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This study is a concerted effort we undertook along with many community members in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. We express our sincere thanks to all those who have undoubtedly supported us in carrying out this study. We take this opportunity to thank RAFTO who has supported this study and has been a great ally in the Dalit Rights work.

We would like to thank and acknowledge the authors' Ms. Evita Das, Ms. Pritika Pariyar, Ms. Himani Singh and Mr. Amit Kumar for editing the study. Special thanks to Ms. Sajana Jayaraj for designing the study. Appreciation to Mr. N Paul Divakar & Mr. Vijayan MJ.

Our sincere gratitude to all those who supported us in the field study in Kerala, namely - KSMTF - Kerala Swatantra Matsyathozhilali Federation (Anto, Janet, Mercy Mathew, and Charlotte). Ancy and Leno helped with the translations. Cheru Reshmi Centre and Thomas Kocherry Resource Centre for supporting the researchers. Vijayan MJ, Jesu Rethinam, and Jones Spartegus for their inputs. Aparajitha for the detailed transcripts and adding value to the audio translations by strengthening the articulation of the translators.

We would also like to thank our team in Tamil Nadu namely Mr. Durai Pandi state (Director COSCO and state coordinator SWADHIKAR NCDHR), Ms. Punitha (fellow), Mr. Murugesan, Mr. Vadivel, and Mr. Senthil

(who accompanied and arranged the FGD with the communities), Ms. Aparna Prabhu (translator), Ms. Mahalakshmi Ragavan (transcription), officers from the fisheries department Nagapattinam, Professors from Tamil Nadu Fisheries University (TNFU) Nagapattinam, Fisheries Enforcement Officer Vedaranyam, Leader of the Fishermen cooperative society.

We express our gratitude to the community members who not only participated in our study but also greeted us with open arms. We would not be able to do this without the support of the community in both Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

We do acknowledge that this study report is not a response to possible actions nor does it capture the complete essence of the issues but it is a beginning to build on a campaign for better facilities for the community in fisheries industries, particularly women. This is also an attempt to draw your attention to the harsh conditions in which communities work and how their human rights are violated daily.

We at NCDHR-DAAA hope that this report will facilitate deeper engagement with the multi-stakeholders, and state and non-state actors working in this sphere in the coming days.

We would be grateful for your feedback on this report and hope this report opens doors to have more conversations and take action to better their working conditions.

ABBREVIATIONS

C-OP	<i>Conference of the Ocean People</i>
CSOs	<i>Civil Society Organisations</i>
INP	<i>Indo-Norwegian Project</i>
IRDS	<i>Integrated Rural Development Scheme</i>
ITDC	<i>India Tourism Development Corporation</i>
KSMTF	<i>Kerala Swatantra Matsyathozhilali Federation</i>
KTDC	<i>Kerala Tourism Development Corporation</i>
MBC	<i>Most Backward Community</i>
NADP	<i>National Agriculture Development Programme</i>
NBDC	<i>National Backward Development Schemes</i>
NCDHR	<i>National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights</i>
NFDB	<i>National Fisheries Development Board</i>
NFF	<i>National Fishworkers Forum</i>
OBC	<i>Other Backward Class</i>
OEC	<i>Other Eligible Community</i>
RF	<i>Reserve Forest</i>
SC	<i>Scheduled Caste</i>
ST	<i>Scheduled Tribe</i>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Unravelling the Secrets of Modern Exclusion in Fisheries:

A Case Study of South Kerala & Tamil Nadu

This study explores and investigates the meaning of Dalit identity among the fishing community. The fishing community's caste structure and its understanding are distinct from the agriculture-linked caste structure. Therefore, the constitutional status of the fishing community is varied in different states. The study attempts to make an impact on understanding the multiple layers of Dalit identity among the fishing community and how different they are from the mainstream knowledge of caste.

Discrimination, Dignity and Alienation is the framework through which the research has been undertaken. It documents the complexity of the caste structure in the fishing community and how the state and other dominant communities treat their labour and existence. The study was conducted in South Kerala (Kochuveli, Puthiyathurai, Veli) and Tamil Nadu (Kodiyakkurai, Anna Nagar, Sathiya Nagar, Kodiyakkadu, Thillaivilagam-Muthupet). Along with this, it addresses caste-based prejudice faced by the women from the community. In the case of Kerala, it emphasises how the status of 'outcaste' assigned to the fishing community continues despite the increasing sanskritisation process the community has adopted through different institutions and varied constitutional statuses

received such as OBC, OEC etc. For Tamil Nadu, the focus is on the extent of caste-based prejudice and discrimination women face in the fishing industry. Unlike Kerala, in Tamil Nadu, only the SC communities were interviewed to unpack the gender dynamics in the caste structure. Overall, the study makes an illustrative argument on the semantics regarding the fishing community and how caste structure plays a crucial role for the ocean-based people. The recommendation from the community directly points towards the failures of the state and the institutions they have trusted, for their emancipation. It provides readers a pathway on what participatory action research and practice should be conducted in the future through caste lens.

The study has the following objectives:

1. To provide a cursory glance regarding the situation of the 'outcaste' community (fishing community) and how the idea of an outcaste community gets complex when juxtaposed with the constitutional status they live.
2. To state the nuances of gender and caste from the fishing community perspective; and advocate for the rights of Dalits, making sure to introspect the living realities from the gender lens to enhance our understanding of the community



DALIT WOMEN IN KODIAKADU, TAMIL NADU

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In a study of fisheries, the commonly heard terms are fishers, fisherfolk, fishermen, fisher people, etc. In modern-day usage, fish worker is increasingly used, which derives from the class consciousness framework, built by the inception of independent trade unions in different states. Nationally, this led to the formation of the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) in 1982. This is an important juncture to note in history as it played a significant role in critically looking at the semantics of people and workers from the ocean, sea, and coastland rather than referring to derogatory caste names or terms like 'fishermen'.

Language is a living force and semantic shifts happen constantly to derive many interpretations, meanings, and narratives. For example, it could be used for challenging a norm, ensuring a popular force is pushed into a coerced understanding, enforcing the social hierarchy, etc. Therefore, the role of semantics becomes critical when living in a diverse unequal society and a transition of semantics is to be appreciated when it speaks for the people. However, in the context of fisheries and fisher people, it is important to understand that many of these terminologies are a byproduct of the dominant community perspectives and discourse. When conversing with the marine fishing community, it becomes evident that the primary conceptualisation of their identity does not start with fish or seafood, it starts with the ocean and goes on to the coastlands, mangroves, the shoreline and more.

In recent years, with the hosting of the Conference of the Ocean People (C-OP), the community globally has started a new chapter in the debate around the semantics of its identity. Ocean people, coastal people, children of the ocean, etc. are being actively taken forward as important markers within the identity. These markers of identity open a sea of conversations and debates that have been historically neglected or ignored. One such is the recognition of Dalits in the traditional fishing community. Dalits in the traditional fishing community

have barely been studied or documented in the academic or civil society space. A rich history of fisher people has been documented since the 1950s in a few states. However, documentation or investigation on this homogenous group through a caste lens has been missing.

To inquire into this missing link, a first phase of the study was conducted by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) in 2023 titled – The Situation of Dalits in Shipbreaking and Fishing Industry to introduce ourselves and the readers to certain important questions and perspectives. Who are Dalit fishers? What is their traditional occupation? What is the kind of discrimination committed by dominant communities and the state? What is the kind of constitutional status offered by the state? Some of these questions have been addressed in the 2023 study by presenting narratives of people from Muthupettai, Tamil Nadu, a small hamlet occupied by Dalit fishers.



DALIT WOMAN IN KODIAKADU SEPARATING THE FISHES FROM THE CATCH OF THE DAY ON A SCORCHING HEAT

The occupation of the fishing community traditionally involves extreme physical proximity to the fish in all forms, at every stage – from catching, carrying, storing at homes, and so on. These activities are considered impure, dirty, and unclean, therefore not desirable for a respectable social status in the caste hierarchy.

To understand the idea of Dalit fishers, who they are, and to visibilise them, the geographical area of the study was expanded in the second phase. The second phase of the study includes different coastal villages of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Through this study, the researchers communicate that there is no one way of looking at Dalit fishers in India. There are varied experiences, narratives, and dynamics that change from district to district and state to state. Those narratives are presented in the current research as two different case studies; one of Kerala and the other of Tamil Nadu.

It is important to note that this study uses the term 'Dalit fishers'. But such a term doesn't seem to exist, creating a political space to further the semantics around 'Dalit fishers'. Likely, the search history in Google or Google Scholar or most academic journals will lead to a nil result in this quest. The entire fishing community has always been identified as the 'outcaste'. "In the traditional caste hierarchy, fisherfolk were considered as untouchables" (Alex, 2018).

The occupation of the fishing community traditionally involves extreme physical proximity to the fish in all forms, at every stage – from catching, carrying, storing at homes, and so on. These activities are considered impure, dirty, and unclean, therefore not desirable for a respectable social status in the caste hierarchy. The fisher woman who carries the fish in an overhead basket, the dripping waste water flowing through her body, with the accompanying stink, cannot be acceptable to the men and women who consider themselves holy, divine, and closer to Gods. Though the community was declared an outcaste since ancient times, the constitutional status given to the diverse fishing communities of India varied from Most Backward Class (MBC) to Scheduled Caste (SC) to Other Backward Class (OBC).

In analytical retrospection, none of these class frameworks suit a community ostracised and historically

oppressed. The tracing of fishing communities under the SC status is nearly impossible and such is the experience in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Anthropologically and ethnographically, whenever the fishing community is studied, though the community is known as an outcaste, there has been no conversation and consensus around whether one should be referring to such communities as 'Dalit fishers' or not. In the land and agriculture linked varna system, various Dalit communities have been recognised as the historically oppressed people and hence the constitution unambiguously assigned the SC status to such communities. However, in the case of the water-based fishing communities, the recognition as historically oppressed is missing leading to ambiguous constitutional status given such as MBC, OEC, SC, ST, OBC, etc. There is no consensus on one chosen way of addressing them. Even the demand for exclusive sea tribe identity and status for fisher communities is institutionally ignored.

This discussion is a complex terrain and needs a larger dialogue and debate, which has been missing in academia, civil society, and union spaces. This study shall not get into this debate of whether to refer to the community as Dalit or not, instead initiate a dialogue on the semantics of the identity and when such a lens is applied, what kind of political rights emerge.

Dalit as a political identity explains the rights of an untouchable – where the prism of historical oppression is significantly present. Though the fishing community continues to be considered 'untouchables', there are no conversations around whether or not they should be called Dalits or whether there are avenues to provide them exclusive and significant constitutional status.






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EXCERPT FROM FGD: WOMEN FROM THE DALIT COMMUNITY IN KODIAKARAI NARRATING THE KINDS OF DISCRIMINATION THEY FACE IN THE WORK AS WELL AS THEIR DAILY LIFE.

The community, in many places, has undergone religious conversions to move away from the untouchable status. Historically, the coastal areas of South India have become home ground for Christianity as well as Islam for these reasons. The juxtaposition of class, caste, and religion has played an important role in distracting researchers from engaging deeply in the caste question of the fishers.

A few reasons can be stated as to why studying the fishing communities through a provocative caste lens has been challenging:

-  Intense sanskritisation of the community from religious and mainstream cultural institutions
-  Varied constitutional status for the community and the complexity increases when the communities have gone through religious conversion in search of emancipation
-  The fishing community has always been self-employed and enjoys autonomy in their work. Any loss of freedom or being under supervision is against their ethos. They own the sea and work on the sea and have established different cultural practices to be the harvesters of the sea. This distinguishes them from the agriculture-linked caste hierarchy, where land ownership dictates who the master is. Therefore, fishing holds a unique character compared to what is understood as Dalits or outcastes in the land context.

This study takes the larger framework of the fishing community as an outcaste and addresses the concerns of fisher/ocean people. Hence, the research circumvents the constitutional status assigned to these communities and looks at the community from the Dalit lens. The two case studies that the study will refer to are (a) a group of fisher people from Tamil Nadu who have SC as their constitutional status and (b) multiple groups of fisher people in Kerala who have OBC, SC, and ST as their constitutional status.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

The study begins with exploring the idea of Dalit identity among the fishing community and identifies the nuances of gender and caste-based discrimination among the community. Based on qualitative methodology, the study was conducted in three fishing villages of south Kerala, inhabited by the Dheevara, Mukkuvu and SC community and in three fishing villages of Tamil Nadu inhabited by the SC Paraiyar community.

The study carefully places the contradiction involved with the fishing community, i.e. the constitutional status received versus the fishing community considered 'outcaste'. Therefore, it takes the approach of the outcaste community and brings all the constitutional groupings into the semantics of Dalit identity.

While doing so, we mention the constitutional status they currently hold and address the communities based on the same to ensure a standardised method of reading all the fishing communities together. Individual and focused group interviews were conducted to understand caste-based discrimination and other negative impacts suffered by individuals in their livelihood engagements with the ocean and the shoreline on the one hand and markets and mainstream society on the other. The interviews were open-ended and were personalised based on the different locations. The respondents were encouraged to respond based on their feelings, historical knowledge and understanding of the state and institutions around them.

In Kerala, communities from different constitutional status were interviewed to understand the semantics of Dalit identity and in Tamil Nadu, the SC fishing community was interviewed to understand the intersection of caste and gender. Information sought from the community included questions on land rights, traditional occupations, primary

livelihood sources, constitutional status, benefits received from the state and other institutions, access to fishing markets, union ties, access to education and basic amenities, their demands, discriminations faced and their recommendations for policymakers.

In Tamil Nadu, additional interviews were conducted with officials from the Fisheries Department, Fisheries Union/fishermen cooperative society leader, Fisheries Enforcement Officer, and Fisheries University professors. These interviews included information on the training and awareness campaigns that have been conducted on different programmes and what has been the implementation status.

The conceptual framework used for the study is Discrimination, Dignity and Alienation. People's responses and narratives were recorded, transcribed, and categorised into the conceptual framework of the study. The study refers to secondary literature extensively to find the existence of the narratives of these fishing communities in the public domain. Newspaper articles, journal articles, interviews and reports were referred for the same. To preserve their anonymity, the respondent's names have not been disclosed; nonetheless, the information has been documented and is available to the organisation.



CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a study of fisheries, the commonly heard terms are There is a wealth of scholarly literature about the fishing and fisheries sector that focuses on several topics; including gender, politics, environment, and religion, yet caste is still the elephant in the room. To fill the gaps and highlight the topics; we have brought this literature review to the fore. As a result, our work adds to the expanding corpus of knowledge about the significance of caste in fisheries.

Smith (1977) opines that fishermen have poor social standing and often constitute a marginalised or even hated minority within the civilizations in which they reside around the world. The fact that fishermen typically comprise tiny and marginal groups within larger, interconnected communities is particularly relevant in the Indian setting. India may not have a large population of fish-eaters, but it possesses abundant fishery resources, ranking third in global fish production. Despite this success, the government has not prioritised the development of the fishery sector, hindering the growth of small-scale coastal fishermen who play a crucial role in the industry (Kurien, 2017).

Indian society has a unique feature of caste and class identities, which have been reinforced by scriptural restrictions on occupational mobility and reservation of superior jobs for higher castes. This stratification of occupational communities as caste communities continues to exist today.

Despite their catch production being a popular food item in India, their occupational identities have made them almost untouchables in different parts of the country (Barman, 2008). The intra-caste hierarchy often favours higher-ups in the hierarchy through local rules on fishing gears, methods, locations, seasons, species, and catches, further marginalising those at the bottom. This discrimination favours the upper caste and further marginalises those at the bottom (Nayak, 2011).

The caste system not only leads to social stratification but also includes certain traditional occupations, such as catching fish for selling, which are traditionally tied to a particular caste (Sonowal, 2020). Most Indian fishermen work as traditional fishermen, making their living from the waters. The term “artisanal fishermen” also refers to them, and they typically employ small traditional watercraft called “catamarans.” (Mathews, 2005).

Fishing communities in India come from various religious backgrounds and are not unified by caste. There can be multiple sub-castes within the community, with religion cutting across these divisions. Class organisations have emerged to address this fragmentation. However, identity politics in India has influenced fish workers, with educated non-fishing members promoting this trend. Only when the voices of the real fishing community are heard will social emancipation take place. After all, it is they who preserve the craft’s skill and have the traditional knowledge and expertise to turn to when the technocratic state-planned “development” process has reached its logical end of depleting the sea (Dietrich & Nayak, 2006).

In both Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the fishing communities face challenges related to caste, religious identity, state-private capitalist development projects, and discrimination by the dominant castes. Several literary works have emphasised this in detail. According to the Kerala State Planning Board (2016), there are 222 marine fishing villages in the state with an active population of 186,000 consisting of a heterogeneous mix of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. Despite their proximity along the coastline, clear-cut boundaries demarcate these communities, ensuring their territorial integrity. The people who fish in the southern part of Kerala have several disagreements with the state about different projects that affect them. These disputes frequently manifested as public agitations, with the church acting as a major mediating and influencing force in the conflict (Ashni & Santosh, 2019).

Kerala has the necessary resources and expertise for a successful fish economy, yet, the fishermen have not been the main beneficiaries of development. The control of the fish economy by those in the trade industry was a significant challenge for fishermen (Kurien, 1985). Kerala was one of the first to adopt mechanised fishing, especially shrimp trawling, with help from the Indo-Norwegian Project (INP) and the state government. However, this led to environmental degradation and fishermen fighting for their share of natural resources (Narang, 2021). Subsequently, the construction of a port in Kerala, known as Vizhinjam International Port, has encountered opposition equally from environmental activists, local fishermen, and the tourism industry. Local fisherfolk are protesting against this shipping corridor project that has blocked their access to the sea. They fear being further away from the sea and losing more fishing grounds if the port is completed. They also claim delayed compensation and non-rehabilitation of families who donated land for the project.

Despite 18,000 cases filed in August 2019, the government has not made any payouts, citing election delays. In August 2022, fishing community members protested coastal degradation caused by port construction through a two-week sit-in. They demanded full implementation of promised rehabilitation packages for affected individuals (Bachan, 2022).

The coastal belt of Tamil Nadu, from Chennai to Kanyakumari, is home to various maritime sub-castes speaking different dialects of Tamil. Here, fishing is a potential route to livelihood security for the fishing communities. The coast of Tamil Nadu has supported fishermen for generations. Fishing is typically limited to specific castes, such as the Meenavar community, considered a most backward caste. Outside of Chennai, the Meenavar community is primarily engaged in fishing, living on the coast alongside Dalit communities at the bottom of the caste system. In addition to being

exploited or restricted, Dalits are socially forbidden from owning seagoing vessels, even if they may be fishermen or reside in an area where fishing would be the most profitable source of income (Gill, 2007). The post-tsunami reconstruction of fisheries led to increased class divisions as fishers with the means to invest in mechanised boats and modern gear gained an advantage. Conflicts resurfaced, with the State Fisheries Department failing to address them adequately. Small-scale fishers have sought to address these issues through institutional innovations, navigating within the framework of neoliberal capitalism to maintain viability (Mansfield 2007; Sundar 2010, Manimohan 2020). Discrimination towards Dalits during the Tsunami relief has also been highlighted by Swadhikar-NCDHR.

Young men in fishing communities face a lack of well-paying jobs, pushing them to become boat owners for higher incomes and status. They adopt modern fishing methods that require capital investment in new technologies. However, with financing difficult to obtain due to regulations and restrictions, they turn to short-term labour migration overseas for initial capital, working for low wages in harsh conditions (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003).

The role of men has been significant when it comes to fishing, as they often go inside the sea/ocean to make a catch, however, women also play a crucial role in the sector due to their biological connection to nature and their involvement in local marketing, social interactions, and community integration along coastal areas. Their voices are essential for the success of this sector. They play an important role in fisheries. They are engaged in a wide range of activities in the fisheries and in fishing communities all around the world. Women are progressively being left out of the production and post-harvest processing processes; they are perceived as dependents of male fishers rather than having a claim to a portion of the resources on their own, even though

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their contributions to capital accumulation through dowries are acknowledged. In this case, the status of fisherwomen is declining due to dowry inflation. Even if contributes equally, it is important to recognise the contributions of different people involved in the fisheries especially labours, migrants, and women (Rao & Renganathan, 2020) Here, we also attest to the efforts and contributions made by Dalit women to the fishing industry, which are mostly overlooked in the literature and for which very few acknowledgements have been made. This study reviews the literature to gain a clear perspective on scholarly issues on fisheries, caste and gender that are relevant to this study. Assessments are required to reach a certain analytical conclusion about fisheries in relation to caste narratives. The existing literature also shows that caste and fisheries have been explored where visible discrimination has been documented, and where the community belongs in the caste structure. However, they all end with the mention of the 'outcaste'. The debates on expanding the connection of caste and fisheries remains a missing spot and the study here attempts to outline the same.



**DALIT FISHERFOLK SORTING THE BEST CATCH IN
KODIAKADU, TAMILNADU**

THE RESULT OF THE CATCH, REDUCTION IS DUE TO
MODERN TRAWLER BOATS, FISHERFOLKS FROM
DHEEVARA COMMUNITY: KOCHUVELLI, KERALA

A group of men are standing on a sandy beach near the ocean. In the foreground, there are large, tangled fishing nets. The men are dressed in casual clothing, including t-shirts, shorts, and a cap. The background shows the ocean and some trees in the distance.

CASE STUDIES: SOUTH KERALA

The history of fishers in South Kerala is documented extensively from the lens of socio-political impact, the role of the church, gender roles, Kerala renaissance and the shifting role of the fisher people, massive resource depletion, ecological challenges, impacts of developmental projects such as Vizhinjam Port, Adani Port and so on. In this case study, we will present the narratives of fisher people from South Kerala. The approach of presenting their narratives will be unique as these narratives will be contextualised through a caste lens and not the constitutional status they hold.

In our field study, two social groups were investigated: Mukkuvar from Veli and Puthiyathura (close to Vizhinjam port), and Dheevera from Kochuvelli. These two social groups fall under OBC and OEC categories respectively. Apart from these social groups, SC fishers from Kovalam were also interviewed. The coastal villages mentioned above are part of Thiruvananthapuram and the order of the villages along the coastline are Puthiyathura, Vizhanjam, Kovalam, Kochuvelli, and Veli.

Questions of dignity, discrimination, and alienation are a concern for all communities present here, but they are varied and have their roots in their historical existence. Mukkuvar and Dheevera are considered impure by the religions they follow. "The fishers of Kerala who converted to Christianity belonged to the Mukkuvar caste and were treated as 'impure', unlike the Syrian Christian converts, who are believed to have been converted from high" (q in L.Ashni & Santhosh, 2019, p. 189) . In the case of Dheevera's "The untouchable status of Dheevera, the fishing caste, is derived from the polluted status of their traditional occupation because it involves the act of killing fish, dealing with flesh and the association of fishing with non-vegetarianism, a lower caste practice" (q in Alex, 2019, p. 5).

It is important to note that religious associations are of extreme importance to this community. It is what defines them. In Klausen's words "religious institution play an important role in their daily lives" (Alex, 2018, p. 43) The fishing community demarcates themselves geographically based on their religious affiliation and has resorted to these religious institutions to contest Brahminical caste orders and build a new identity where they are not looked down upon.

In the case of SC fishers interviewed in Kovalam, it is necessary to know the history and why they have not been documented widely unlike the other communities such as Mukkuvars and Dheevera, who are now referred

to as ex-untouchables. It is extremely difficult to find SC fishers in Kerala since caste has always been understood through agriculture-linked caste structure.

The existence of SC fishers in Kovalam can be traced to 1907, when Ayankalli gave a call to Pulayas and other agricultural workers to hold an agrarian strike to fight back against the caste discrimination and violence Dalits faced at the hands of the landlords. To fight back, the Dalits decided that they would not work in their landlords' fields until and unless the violence stopped. In response, the landlords tried multiple ways of intimidation which led to violent encounters between the Dalits and landlords. Though Dalits did not give up, the strike was affecting their wages. This prompted Ayankali to approach the fishing community to support the Dalits where they can earn from the sea if not land.

As a result of Ayyankali's intervention, one member from each Dalit family was taken into boats by the fishing community and was paid wages - a share of the day's catch. This ensured that the Dalits had a livelihood mechanism in place. While a section of the agricultural community returned to work in the fields after the strike, others stayed back and chose fishing because of the skills they had learnt. This is why the community entailed the SC constitutional status as they were linked to the agriculture-based caste system. The community might not be known as traditional fishers, but because of the years of association and the skills learnt, they consider themselves traditional fishers.

The narratives of the three fishing communities will be understood from the framework of dignity, discrimination, and alienation. Since we are dealing with one Hindu SC community and two OBC communities: Christian OBC (Mukkuvar) and Hindu OEC (Dheevera), in each framework we will lay out narratives of the different communities so that we can present the commonalities and uniqueness of these three communities.



KERALA

FISHER PEOPLE FROM SOUTH KERALA



HINDU SC COMMUNITY,
FROM KOVALAM



**LATIN CATHOLIC MUKKUA
COMMUNITY**
FROM VELI AND PUTHIYATHURA



DHEEVARA COMMUNITY
FROM KOCHUVELI

Thiruvananthapuram

MAP NOT TO SCALE

DIGNITY

Land status, unique skills in their occupation, self-employment, and years of association with the sea and shoreline establish the dignity of the fishing community. Often the dignity of a community is established through contesting cultural norms and practices. They need not be progressive but they build an interpretation of their own which can form a discourse. In the case of southern Kerala, the Kerala Renaissance period which falls within M.N Srinivas's concept of Sankritisation and the association with the Portuguese allowed the fishing community to build an identity that disassociated themselves from untouchables. In the case of north Kerala, the status of sea warriors, particularly given to the Muslim Marakkal community, especially in the battles against the Portuguese and French, have earned the community dignity and respect.

HINDU SC COMMUNITY FROM KOVALAM

*"I have been living in Kovalam for 43 years and have seen my ancestors here too,"
said one of the members of the community.*

The existence of the Hindu SC community in Kovalam cannot be talked about without the Dalit firebrand in Kerala who fought caste apartheid. A contemporary of Ambedkar, he was born into the Pulaya community in Thiruvananthapuram. From opening schools for Dalits, fighting for Dalits' right to walk on public roads to holding agrarian strikes to ensuring the violence against Dalits by their landlords stopped, his spirit of rebellion ensured that even if the rule of law cannot provide justice to Dalits, the rule of their people will. A short introduction to Ayankali is important to establish what he meant for Dalits and the existence of the SC community in fisheries traces back to the Ayankali period.

The main occupation of the community is oyster farming and oyster picking. 28 SC families live in Kovalam. Most women from the community are either daily wage labourers or are engaged in household work. They have a particular kind of boat called Kattamaram[1], for oyster picking. Oyster picking is a risky practice compared to other forms of fishing. Oyster picking is an individual activity, which means only one person goes to the sea. To pick the oysters, they hold their breath underwater for a prolonged period and dive nearly 4 metres.

The sense one gets from the narratives is that the SC community, who were welcomed by the fishing community during 1907 and onwards, had an identity crisis as they were not traditional fishers. It was understood that the fisher people may have left riskier jobs such as oyster picking for the Dalits and people from the SC community and the same were picked up by members from these communities. It is worth noting that other communities cannot engage in oyster picking as they do not possess the skill set. Additionally, they mentioned that during the monsoon, they engage in construction work since they are unable to go to the sea for fishing or oyster picking.

LATIN CATHOLIC MUKKUA COMMUNITY FROM VELI AND PUTHIYATHURA

Role of Religion

"The 'Christian community is concentrated in the central and southern coastal areas of the state'. They are members of the Latin Catholic church. The fishers of this area were converted to Christianity by St Francis Xavier and Western Latin missionaries in the 16th century" (q in L.Ashni & Santhosh, 2019, p. 189).

The Mukkuvar community was considered impure and untouchable. While Catholicism was being spread along the West Coast, the Portuguese, who were expanding their territory took the Mukkuvar community in. This resulted in the church becoming the provider and institution of governance for the community instead of the state. In Kalpana Ram's words: "The religious identity, though hierarchical in itself, helps the Mukkuvars keep a distance from the caste hierarchy of agricultural villages and thus enhances their sense of independence and autonomy as compared -to untouchable castes, despite a certain social ostracism which fishing as an occupation is stigmatised with" (q in Dietrich, 1993, p. 389).

Historical existence

"We have been the traditional occupants of our land and have been living here for more than 4 generations," said one of the women fish vendors from Puthiyathurai.

While listening to their narrative, it was found that their identity and association as a fisher woman there is quite deep and strong. Most of the women from this community are engaged in fish vending. "My mother and grandmother were fish vendors. I started vending only 5 years back when my husband was paralyzed during the Oki cyclone." One of the members from the community states that their day starts at 6:00 am and they come back home by 7:00 pm. They collect fresh fish and then go to their vending zone to sell.

The system of vending is low profit and one has to bear high losses. However, despite the lack of profit, community members are engaged in vending as it is the only sustainable and steady means of livelihood available to them. When asked if they would like to move out and opt for another job, community members responded, "this is our immediate and material reality and we only know how to survive here". The sea is familiar and known to them. Therefore, they remain deeply rooted in the sea and rely on the livelihood that the sea provides.



BHEEMAPALLY, KERALA: EXCERPTS FROM FGD, FISHING IS THEIR TRADITIONAL OCCUPATION, CONSTRUCTION OF THE PORT HAS MADE IT DIFFICULT TO FISH

DHEEVARA COMMUNITY FROM KOCHUVELI

“I am 63 years old and I have been living here. At the age of 18, I started shoreline fishing,” said one of the community members.

From untouchable to Dheevara - The Dheevara community is now known as ex-untouchables. In March 1984, as per a state government order, Dheevara were included in the Other Eligible Community (OEC) list. The Dheevara community went through a Hindu radicalisation process to critique the Brahmanical system and contest the untouchable status. The Dheevara community unified themselves using their Hindu identity to challenge the dominant caste domination. They started their temples which was a place of caste solidarity for them. There was a wave of conversion but the Dheevara community did not enter that system to challenge the Brahmanical system. Instead, through reforms, they formed their own cultural practices and traditions. The respondent mentioned, *“It is the 7th generation involved in fishing. We have a long historical association.”*

Their means of production are through Kattamaram or Kambavallam. Since there have been shifts in the local economy and market, fishing is now conducted through Kambavallam. The non-mechanised boats used by the community can have 30-35 people on the boat. The fishing is not done exclusively by Dheevara.

Over 60 people are required for shoreline fishing around and fishing communities from the nearby areas also join. The Dheevars have 8 boats and fishing in the stretch is done through these boats. 300 families live in this area.

DISCRIMINATION

Even when the fishing community managed to escape the 'untouchable' status and embraced other religions to attain the same, they remained deprived of their rights. Even the rights guaranteed to them under the Constitution prove ineffective. Both religious and Constitutional rights are not delivered. The forms of discrimination are not universal but designed for each different community. Discrimination in certain cases is direct and institutional but as modernisation has seen its light, ways of discrimination have also evolved.

HINDU SC COMMUNITY FROM KOVALAM

Historical Discrimination

“We have heard from our ancestors that they were not allowed to catch fish and were not allowed to enter boats belonging to people from other fishing communities. However, we do not face such discrimination now,” said one of the community members.

It was difficult to probe further into the aspect of discrimination faced by this community. However, this gives a sense that the fishing community which belongs to an outcaste community manufactured their mechanism to establish a caste-based hierarchy. In other words, a graded inequality formed among the outcaste community.

Lack of Benefits

Compared to the Dheevara or Latin Mukkuvar community, this community has not had the benefit of accessing loans from the state fisheries department or the union. Even for their boats, nets, and the kattamaram they use, this community is kept away from any benefits offered by the state. As fisher people, they only receive a meagre amount of Rs 1,000 a year as educational support.

The fisheries department recognises them as fisher people but the benefits meant for them do not reach this fishing community. “We have filed a case in the centre and state fisheries department, they keep seeing that they will respond. But they never respond,” said a member of the community. They do not receive any benefit from the National Backward Development Schemes (NBDC). It is also to be noted that this community was kept away from the Indo-Norwegian project by design.

**LATIN CATHOLIC MUKKUVA COMMUNITY
FROM VELI AND PUTHIYATHURA**

Role of Church:

The church is one of the important institutions for the community. “The fishers are the subjects of both the church and the state, having to negotiate with the authority structures of both these powerful institutions” (L.Ashni & Santhosh, 2019). Mostly “church is the face of these fishers and plays a crucial role in demanding welfare measures and other facilities from the state” (Ibid). For the community, the church is their essential identity and a central association. The community members were thorough with the details of parish governance such as the number of families, wards and units involved in the parish. However, they did not have much idea about their panchayat or ward details. This shows that their knowledge about their parish states their association and identity with the church.

The church is also the decision-maker in their lives, making it difficult for the community to question the church’s actions. Protection and mediation by the church come at a cost. For example, whatever money the families earn from catching fish, 2% - 5% of that income has to go to the church. Every family must adhere to this. Additionally, families have to contribute to church festivals. While this is not forced upon people in words, they face ostracisation from the church if the contribution is not made. The church’s maintenance cost is also taken from the family members of the community. It was said that in some areas they stopped taking such contributions based on whims and fancies when the community protested. Regardless, a certain amount of contribution has to be given to the church by all. There is no walking away from that. When Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) conduct relief programmes or other events church always plays the gatekeeper. any intervention from anyone including CSOs, will only happen with the approval of the church. The church decides where a relief or program should run and how it should be implemented. The community said that there is no transparency and accountability from the church.

When the community members were asked why they still go to church, one member said,

“Where shall we go? They are the only ones who will give me space for my burial.”

Another member said,

“We want to believe in the government but they do not care about us. The church also does not address our concerns. But where else do we go? We only have the church.”

The community took the church’s help to build a new identity and emancipate themselves from caste hierarchy. However, the church has reinstated means of exploitation.



PUTHIYATHURA, KERALA: INTERVIEW WITH THE WOMEN FROM MUKUVA COMMUNITY

DHEEVARA COMMUNITY FROM KOCHUVELI

Untouchability Continues

Deepika Alex Rose has written about caste-based discrimination that continues with the Dheevara. Though Dheevara navigated a mainstream identity for themselves, they are still treated as untouchables when it comes to religion. “There are upper caste temples in which ex-untouchable castes, including the Dheevara, are not permitted. A Konkani Brahmin temple near Araya village of Kadukarappally still prohibits lower castes from entering its premises. An Araya research participant who visited this temple a few years ago was asked about his caste and was instructed to immediately leave the temple. Dheevara priests opine that they are never employed in Brahmin or Nair temples.”

Selective Exclusion

The Dheevara were also not included in the Indo-Norwegian project and they do not receive any benefits from the NBDC, just like the Hindu SC community in Kovalam. It points to the pattern that Hindu outcaste communities were particularly excluded. The Dheevara, for the past three generations, have been working in hazardous conditions in the sea because of acid waste from the titanium factory. They produced material and corporeal evidence and showed their acid burnt hands and heads. Protests had taken place to stall the titanium project and the Adani port. However, the ports kept functioning, damaging the ecosystem and compensation was demanded. The Dheevara community members state that there are three parishes in the area and that the churches run like a proper organisation.

One of the community members said, “the church functions as a mediator between political parties, panchayats, and fishers to arrive at a package of compensation. The compensation money is disbursed to the church and they oversee the distribution of the package in the affected area, which is Veli to Kanamthura. However, we have not received any money and we want you to note it down”.

The church actively excludes the Dheevara community from benefits they should receive. This attitude also shows that despite coming from the origin of the outcaste, the church is selective and selfish about followers of the religion in its approach.

ALIENATION

Transition of the fishing community from the outcaste to a certain caste group has given them a sense of identity. However, the functionality of outcaste continues and it can be noticed in how the state navigates with different communities differently. The community has the right to land, resources, jobs, and a dignified life. Yet dispossession of various kinds, manipulation, and Brahmanical system and capitalism have slowly and steadily threatened their sovereignty rights over the ocean and land.



“We can’t see anything under the sea because of algae. They use a particular kind of chemical to break the rocks underneath the sea. These rocks are the primary place where the oysters breed. The waste generated from these ports also flows towards the north, leading to collecting of dust on oysters, affecting its quality and breed.”
- a community member from Kovalam.

Complexity in the Caste Certificate:

“Our ancestors were given SC certificates but we have ST certificates”

This narration is not clear to the researchers, nor is there any literature available to investigate further on the confusion of the constitutional status received. It is interesting to note that when we were speaking to the community, they identified themselves as Dalits, a political identity but having a constitutional status of ST certificated. This confusion of the constitutional status among fishing communities is a common affair. In our previous study, the fishing community from Muthupettai, Tamil Nadu stated that their ancestors received an SC certificate and that they now have a BC certificate.

Land dispossession

“Three generations before us were given land rights”.

The process of land dispossession began in the late 60s. “The Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC) and The India Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC) took over our land for hotel construction and gave us alternate land and shifted us to a different place within 5 km”. The community was being robbed of their right to land and ocean and by extension, their livelihood. “We had 3 cents of land and they took over that land. I even had the papers for the land, still, they took it away”. Around 22 families have been displaced from this area. At present, the land that belonged to the community is highly valued in the market. Notices were given to this community to relocate immediately and it is to be noted that the alternate land was given to the people who were there during 1970 and by 1980 the panchayat approved a scheme to assist in the construction of houses. But the succeeding generations have been rendered landless as there is no source of income. They lost their livelihood because of Vizhinjam port and Adani port. “We were already facing the impacts of Vizhinjam. Now, the construction of Adani port has ruined our lives. “Our oyster catch has reduced from 90 percent to 10 percent”. There has been a drastic drop in oyster harvesting in the last decade. The dredging activity conducted because of the port construction has affected the biodiversity of the ocean. The chemicals released from the port activity have led to the formation of algae.

“We can’t see anything under the sea because of algae”.

They use a particular kind of chemical to break the rocks underneath the sea. These rocks are the primary place where the oysters breed. The waste generated from these ports also flows towards the north, leading to collecting of dust on oysters, affecting its quality and breed. “The Vizhinjam project, from its inception, attracted widespread protests and public scrutiny, as many reports pointed out its adverse consequences on the fragile ecosystem of the Arabian Sea and the livelihood of fishers in the area” (L.Ashni & Santhosh, 2019). The communities around Vizhinjam port demanded compensation for the damage that has occurred due to port construction. The community here states that they did not receive any compensation and were met with absolute apathy. A sea march protest was held in 2001 from Kovalam to Adani port raising demands for compensation. This protest was undertaken by the larger fishing community and more than 500 people participated. “We participated in this march to raise demands for our compensation,” said a community member.

**LATIN CATHOLIC MUKKUA COMMUNITY
FROM VELI AND PUTHIYATHURA**

Land ownership

The Puthiyathurai women reiterated their ownership of the land and their identity with the land during the interview. “The land belongs to us,” said one of the members. One of the community members mentioned that her grandmother bought land 38 years ago and has been the owner ever since. Her mother also owns land. However, recently, they have witnessed complications in the land arrangement. The earlier generations have patta and registration certificates. But for the past 15 years, the community has not received any patta.

The timeline of their narrative builds a direct connection with the onset of Vizhinjam Port. The state-supported development projects were taking indirect control over the lands of the fisher people.

“The place where we are sitting right now, I bought this land and paid 3 lakhs for this place. But I do not have any patta or registration for this place because now our land has been declared poromboke’ .”

Another person said, “How can it be poromboke land when this land has always been ours?” Their sight of labour and source of livelihood were claimed by multiple parties; the state, union, and the Adani private corporation.

The community has no information regarding when the land was declared poromboke. It was one of the ways of taking control of their land. Additionally, the intervention of the church is important to note. The church portrays itself as the messiah of the community. However, “in due course, the church exerted its authority over fishers, with the priest acting as a chief intermediary” and “assumed multiple roles—as the landlord, tax collector, religious authority and intermediary between fishers and rulers.” The church acted as a mediator to protect the interest of the fisher, however with time, the interest of the party became questionable.



**KOCHUVELLI, KERALA: FISHERFOLKS FROM DHEEVARA COMMUNITY
PUTTING THEIR BEST FOOT FORWARD EVERYDAY TO CATCH THE FISH**

“Various interest groups in Vizhinjam, representing diverse socio-economic and political affiliations, have complicated the community’s response to this infrastructural project.”

The classic example of the complication of the response can be seen in the case of poromboke land. The church did not fight for the community when it was declared poromboke land, while it was clear that the livelihood and land of fisher people were at stake. Instead, it became a protector in disguise. They laid stone crosses as a symbol to establish the land being associated with the church, establishing that the community is dependent on the church and that the land and its people are protected by the church. However, this has left the community no choice but to be dependent on the church. In Kurien’s words “Conversion to Christianity provided the fishers with a new identity, their occupation prevented upward mobility in the social ladder and, thus, they stayed outside the acclaimed Kerala model of development” (q in L.Ashni & Santhosh, 2019, p. 190). “The church acted as the mediator between the state and these outliers whenever they wanted to communicate and engage with each other” (Ibid, 2019)

Port vs People:

The construction of the port and its activity around has affected the shoreline massively. The shoreline from Veliyathura to Veli has eroded. Sediments are collected more towards Puthiyathura side creating more land and extended shoreline. This has resulted in conflict of interest with regard to ownership and access. The topographical nature of the land has also changed. These areas have become low-lying areas and the sea water gushes into their house. “I would have never bought the house had I known the sea would affect us in this manner,” said a community member. This has resulted in several health conditions such as dysentery, malaria, boils, and jaundice among the community, specifically children.



**DHEEVARA COMMUNITY
FROM KOCHUVELI**

Robbed our Resources

*“The titanium factory and the upcoming Adani port have robbed our resources,”
said one of the community members.*

In the past 10 years, the coast of South Kerala has been massively affected because of developmental projects. Capitalism is never kind to the oppressed community and this is a testament to how modern industry ensures that the historically oppressed communities are trapped in their economic mobility. One of the community members explained to us his reality.

“Look, I am carrying a small polythene to catch fish today, this is our situation.”

It is worth noting that these industries did not comply with the promises they made to the community and proceeded to destroy their resources. The titanium factory and the Adani port just like any development project in India presented a better lifestyle, economy, and jobs for the community. 5 percent reservation for the community was promised by the titanium project. However, it is yet to see the light of the day.



^[1]Kattamaram is a traditional boat. They are characterised by being made from three to seven tree trunks tied together with fibre lashings

¹ Poromboke: Stretches of land reserved for shared communal use which cannot be bought or sold. Poromboke essentially is a conjugation of two Tamil words--Puram meaning outside and pokku which refers to books of accounts. This included rivers and river banks, eris (irrigation tanks), grazing and pasture lands, kazhiveli (marshlands) and salt pans, among others. No single individual or group owned these lands and crops were usually not grown in the common poromboke lands.

CASE STUDIES:

TAMIL NADU






**DALIT FISHERFOLK COLLECTING THEIR
NETS IN KODIAKADU, TAMILNADU**



EXCERPT FROM FGD: IN KODIAKADU DALIT COMMUNITIES NARRATING THEIR DIRE EXPERIENCES OF DISCRIMINATION IN DAY-TO-DAY LIFE

Three general fishing zones have been identified along Tamil Nadu's coastline. These are:

-  Pulicat Lake to Point Calimere that lies in the Coromandel coast;
-  Point Calimere to Dhanushkodi that covers the Palk Bay and the Palk Strait; and
-  Dhanushkodi to Kanyakumari which covers the Gulf of Mannar (Kumaraguru, et al. (2008).

The field survey was done with the Dalit fisherwomen from Scheduled Caste Paraiyar communities in the following areas:

 **Kodiyakkarai:**

Kodiyakkarai (also known as point calimere) located around the coromandel coast, Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu is bounded by a part of the Bay of Bengal in the north east and Palk strait on the south west which embraces a vast swamp. It is one of the most important bird and black buck sanctuaries in India and forest that extends over an area of 25 km (Damotharan, et.al. 2010).

- a. Anna Nagar- 32 participants
- b. Sathiya Nagar-37 participants

 **Kodiyakkadu:** 24 participants:

In 1907, the Kodiyakadu RF² and the Kodiyakadu expansion RF were notified for the Point Calimere Forest in the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu. They covered a total area of 1729 hectares. Kodiakkarai and Kodiyakadu are two of the nearby villages, located around 11 km south of Vedaranyam town. Despite the presence of a sizable saltpan and the observed hyper salinity, the Kodiyakaddu Lake demonstrated that the water was comparatively fresh (Ali, 2005).

 **Thillavilagam-Muthupett (Thiruvarur District):**

8 participants



Chennai

TAMIL NADU

DALIT FISHERWOMEN FROM SCHEDULED
CASTE PARAIYAR COMMUNITIES



KODIYAKKARAI
NAGAPATTINAM DISTRICT



KODIYAKKADU
NAGAPATTINAM DISTRICT



THILLAIVILAGAM-MUTHUPETT
THIRUVARUR DISTRICT

MAP NOT TO SCALE

DISCRIMINATION

“We interact with them (Dominant caste), but we can’t voice out our opinions or speak decisively in such interactions.”

“Yes, we do experience caste discrimination, although many within our community are hesitant to speak openly about it.

- a community member

Regarding instances of caste discrimination, the respondents have highlighted that the situation has improved compared to the past. However, there are instances of financial suppression faced at the hands of the dominant caste groups. The respondents were hesitant to discuss the kinds of suppression or coerciveness as they were afraid of being publicly scrutinised, or their truths being known publicly leading to further discrimination for speaking out. Historically the community has faced severe social restrictions such as being prohibited from touching fishing boats due to the Brahmanical belief system. The Brahmanical order also ensured their economic opportunities were limited to scavenging remnants and relying on meagre earnings from dried fish sales. In other words, restricting them to their way of life.

The harbours visited in Tamil Nadu are under the operation of individuals from dominant caste groups. Dalit fisher people residing here barely have any control on the market or on their fish catch. They are compelled to sell fish at a dictated price set by the dominant caste groups. Men are involved in collecting small quantities of fish and selling them in the market as street vendors. Women from the community engage mostly in shore-related activities such as fish cleaning, drying the fish and collecting shells. Additionally, they are involved in the transportation of fish, shrimp processing, shrimp, development of value-added fish products, etc. The fish catch is transported by hiring a vehicle to Cuddalore and Nagapattinam district. Both the areas are controlled by the dominant caste groups and people are forced to sell their fish catch at a low price.

Over time, Dalit fisher people were gradually integrated into the financial support programs like the Integrated Rural Development Scheme (IRDS) in the fishing industry. Access to such financial support programs was occasional. The respondents recounted despite the progress, certain blatant practices of discrimination persist such as restricted access to basic services like barber shops, exclusion from ritual practices, and the denial of equal participation in religious processions.

During religious functions and gatherings, we are often relegated to a position that is not in close proximity to persons of dominant caste status

“As members of the scheduled caste, we are excluded from temple rituals. Despite residing in six streets with approximately 400 residents, the temple chariot has not visited our area; it is only seen in the streets inhabited by the dominant class”

Although instances of physical violence have diminished, remnants of discrimination endure, symbolised by the continued exclusion of Dalit-inhabited streets from the passage of temple chariots. The Dalit communities attend the dominant caste weddings and eat with them, the dominant caste arrives at the marriage but leaves without partaking in the meal.

“We do attend weddings within the dominant caste group and are invited to participate. Similarly, we extend invitations to them for our own marriage ceremonies. However, while we attend their weddings and partake in their programme, they often decline in participating in our marriage functions”

They recounted aggressive destruction of the fish nets by the dominant caste fisher people to dissuade the lower caste from fishing. The prejudice against the older Dalit people continues in the form of “name-calling” by young individuals of the dominant caste.

“Yes, there are limitations on where we can fish. We are not permitted to catch fish in areas designated for upper-caste individuals.”

“During the 100 days working program by the government, despite their seniority, we refrain from calling them ‘Akka’ (sister). They say, “How can you call me sister, we can’t be siblings.”

The respondents narrated that they face caste-based discrimination even during natural catastrophes like tsunamis and cyclones like Gaja. The relief supplies are unevenly distributed. The Dalit households only receive poor quality relief material if any.

“Yes, during such times (disasters), relief materials are distributed primarily to non-Dalit individuals, while we often receive spoiled food and leftovers, indicating discriminatory treatment in the distribution of aid.”

The community members also stated that there is a union and a fishermen co-operative society, but no dalits occupy roles inside the union, except for being one of the Board of Directors. This portrayal has also turned into a token effort.

“No, they (Dalits) do not hold any other positions such as President, Vice President, Treasurer, or Secretary within the union. However, it’s worth noting that the Board of Directors retains the authority to appoint individuals to these positions.”

President of the union

DIGNITY

“We require housing, boats, and access to information regarding schemes designed for our community. Despite submitting petitions, we have not received any response. Additionally, although we have diligently contributed to our savings, the union has failed to provide us with the appropriate.”

The dignity of the community lies in access to land, housing, boats etc. and for the same the community has repeatedly been urging the government to take an appropriate measure to address their issue by providing adequate resources such as boats and nets to ensure fishers' livelihoods are sustained. In this case, the community has made specific demands that they emphasise to reclaim their right to a dignified existence, considering the lost resources and unfair treatment towards the community.

Despite writing to the competent authority multiple times, their fundamental right to live with dignity is bare. The community members also mentioned the presence of a union has not improved their situation as their demands are not heard or ignored. As a result, considering these difficult circumstances, the community mentioned there is a need for their own fisherman's cooperative society, and both the community and individual fisher people have also put forth this demand.

Additionally, the women from the community mentioned that their contribution to the fishing industry is ignored and underappreciated at local and global levels. Women control nearly every aspect of fishing-related operations in Tamil Nadu, including fish sale (93%), peeling (89%), and curing/processing (87%)³. The reason for the lack of recognition stems from the restricted definition of fishing put forth by the fisheries policy. The fishing activity is only identified when the act of fishing is done by boat or vessel. Women are primarily involved in shore-related activities; therefore, their contribution and skills has always been a deliberate oversight by the government.

The women from the community also narrated that in their nearby village's women are allowed to be part of the union, however in their community only men participate. In the case of membership of any fishing union, members of the Dalit community are only eligible for membership within the Union. Both men and women have separate unions, yet all leadership positions, including president and vice-president, are occupied by non-Dalit individuals who are not fisher people themselves. There has been a historical pattern of only dominant cast individuals holding higher authoritative positions in these unions. This lack of representation and presence of the Dalit community in the authoritative position has led to irregular distribution of government schemes and a failure to adequately address the struggles of the Dalit members involved in the union. Establishing a separate society specifically dedicated to representing the issues faced by Dalit women is imperative to ensure their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed effectively.

“Our community requires the establishment of a dedicated union.”

The community believes Dalit individuals should be organised into a separate union which is distinct from the mainstream, enabling them to live a dignified life and participate in markets, access governmental schemes, and effectively advocate for their struggles and concerns. They also stated that their daily wage is 700 Rs which is insufficient to support their family.



EXCERPTS FROM FGD IN DIFFERENT STUDY AREA TAMIL NADU

The discrepancies of relief material have simultaneously led to conflict within the community. The uneven distribution of the relief material affected the unity of community and as a result individuals from the community who have received boats during Gaja cyclone and Tsunami were compelled to sell the boats to navigate the conflict rising in their own community.

“Our community relies on basic necessities such as boats and nets for fishing. Although some fishermen received assistance during the tsunami, many of us lost our boats and nets. Furthermore, a significant portion of the community did not receive the essential items needed for fishing. If the government could provide these essential resources, it would greatly contribute to the economic development and resilience of our community.”

“Our primary request is to be included in the union, allowing us to advocate for our needs collectively. Additionally, we seek welfare schemes such as access to loans, which would greatly support our economic stability and growth. Furthermore, the current daily wage of Rs. 700, despite our extensive labour, is insufficient for our needs. We also request support in addressing alcohol consumption among some men in our community, as it adversely affects household finances.”

The dignified life they have envisioned also ensembles the land, without land they do not have any identity. The community has been living on this particular land for decades, yet they have not been able to acquire the land ownership. It is interesting to note, their land has been in contestation since 1961, where the Tamil Nadu Land Reforms Act of 1961 aimed to reduce land concentration among upper castes and provide land to landless Dalits. However, after 40 years, only 4% of the land intended for redistribution was achieved and the upper caste disproportionately benefited from this program (ibid, 2007). The respondents said that here most of the Dalit fisher people do not have access to land or land rights, which is another significant area of concern.

They also mentioned that they do have the patta document, however it is said that they are living on temple land. The community has not been asked to vacate from this land but they do not have access to basic amenities and freedom to construct pucca houses on the land.

“No, despite residing in the same place for generations, we are unable to claim ownership of the land on which we live, as much of it designated as government owned or belonging to any temple. Specifically, the land in our area is under the jurisdiction of the Vedaranyam Temple.”

“We have not received any directives from the government to evacuate the area, the land owners (people associated with the temple) often obstruct us from engaging in activities such as fencing.”

“The most pressing issue in our area is water scarcity, as we only receive water supply once every 10 days. Consequently, we must conserve and ration water carefully due to this scarcity, making it our most significant challenge.”

The community also aspires to a dignified life through their coming generation. They want their children to pursue their education and succeed, so that they can be independent in making choices for their livelihood. They also voiced the reality of current situation where even if their students are highly educated, it is always the dominant caste who end up the better positions at work

“Our aspiration for the future generation is that they do not have to rely on fishing for their livelihood. Instead, we want them to pursue education, explore opportunities beyond fishing, and achieve financial stability and success. We hope they do not endure the same struggles and hardships that we have experienced.”

“An elderly woman sadly discloses- “Most of our children are educated and completed their master degree, yet they are not given posts. All good posts are taken by the dominant caste people. If our children are in such posts, through our children we also come to know about the schemes and policies available for us.”

ALIENATION

A systematic alienation has been put into practice and it is furthermore difficult to track these practices. It is to be noted the community we interviewed are constitutionally assigned SC status however they are deprived of the constitutional status because they are fisher people. In other words, the state coerces them to be beneficiaries of only one identity: either SC or fisher people. The Dalit fisher people have been pushing for certain welfare programs for their community however they are met with opposition from dominant caste fisher people, who claim equal entitlement to the benefits of these schemes as well.

Another kind of alienation is seen when the Dalit fisher people are turned from owners to workers. The boat owners in this area are mostly from the dominant communities and often they are the money lenders. The Dalits here often access loans for emergencies however that comes at a cost. i.e. being a slave to them and working on their boats until the debt is paid. In other words, forming invisible mechanisms of alienating the dalits from their resources and savings. The similar pattern could be seen in training and accessibility to information and schemes. They have been categorically kept away from information on policies. They have been hardly approached by any government institute or civil bodies. In times of distress, they sought assistance from government officials to address their issues and seek solutions, however, the situation has been so unfortunate, despite submitting petitions on numerous occasions, the responses from government officials have been inadequate and lack proper attention to their concerns.

“Unfortunately, we are not aware of any such schemes or policies. Additionally, when we do voice our demands, the dominant caste individuals insist on equal treatment, claiming that any benefits for the Dalit community should also apply to them. As a result, we remain uninformed about any specific schemes or policies meant for our community.”

Whenever they voiced their demands, the dominant caste individuals insisted on equal treatment, claiming that any benefits for the Dalit community should also apply to them. As a result, they remain uninformed about any specific schemes or policies meant specifically for the community. They are all subjected to the negligence of administration and contempt of the society. They demanded specialised training to enhance their collective efforts and to gain access to all the schemes intended for their community.

“We require training sessions on government schemes and guidance from experts to enhance our awareness and understanding”

“Despite residing in this region for generations and being involved in fishing, we are facing financial hardships. There is limited scope for the development of our profession. We advocate for a fair pricing structure and a profit-sharing arrangement instead of a fixed salary, given the demanding nature of our work. Additionally, we require modern technological equipment to enhance the preservation of the fish we gather.”

There used to be an initiative by the fisheries department in providing training, however due to insufficient funds such training programs have come to a halt. The participant is supposed to self-finance and the Dalit fisher people often opt out from such initiatives because they cannot afford the fees. The fee depends on how long the program is: Rs. 300 for one day, which includes all the materials, lunch, certificates, and snacks. Rs. 500-2000 for 2-3 days, and Rs. 2000-5000 for 5-15 days, depending on availability. Also, people who live below the poverty level can get 50% less fees.

“Initially, training programs were conducted supported by funds from organisations such as NADP and NFDB. However, the funding for these programs has been significantly reduced.”

The community believes that such training programs will empower them. Their demand for attending such programs is clear; they demand to be compensated with a daily allowance as they will lose the whole day's income. This demand still stands nowhere in their favour

“Therefore, attending training sessions may result in the loss of this income, making it difficult to motivate them to participate without additional financial support. They often ask for compensation to cover the potential loss of income if they attend the training.”

Additionally, they require support from the government to promote and raise awareness about development schemes and their significance for community welfare. They request support in addressing rising alcohol consumption among men of the community, which adversely affects household finances. To address such concerns, they typically approach the President of the Panchayat however generally their distresses are brushed under the carpet. Finances pose the most significant obstacle as a minimum of 1 lakh rupees is required to undertake large-scale fishing operations. This proves to be a substantial barrier preventing them from pursuing larger-scale fishing operations and entering markets beyond daily wage work.

Expanding their small-scale fishing requires broader strategies such as the provision of low-interest credit by moneylenders/banks, enabling access to welfare services for fisher folk from the government and the negotiation of a place in the fish market to sell fish. The usurious moneylenders would keep them under perpetual penury for generations by providing them with net, boat, and a small amount of money in advance for their survival. They must pay half of their earnings to the money lender who lends them money at a high rate of interest.

“Repaying these loans (from boat owners) often compels us to continue working on the boats, regardless of our health or circumstances. This situation fosters a sense of being enslaved to those who provided the advances.”



EXCERPTS FROM FGD IN DIFFERENT
STUDY AREA TAMIL NADU

Similar patterns of alienation could be seen where most of the boat owners are members of the dominating communities, and they frequently act as money lenders. The Dalits in this area commonly take out loans in times of need, but doing so has its costs. For example, serving as their slave and labouring on their boats until the loan is settled. Economic exploitation remains their most acute problem. In other words, forming an invisible mechanism of alienating the Dalits from their resources and savings has become a norm.

“We have not received any loans, and we have not yet established these activities as businesses.”

“To foster the development of our community, we require access to loans from banks and self-help groups. However, we emphasise the necessity of obtaining loans with lower interest rates to further support our growth and progress.”

One of the officials mentioned how the Dalit fisher people anticipate financial gains when they are asked to take up leadership roles. It is imperative to note how financial gains have been painted as a reason to keep them out of leadership positions and deliberately vilifying the character of the community.

This also shows how Dalits are perceived in the positions of leadership and how justifications are used to keep them out of those positions.

CONCLUSION

The study outlines the complexity of understanding caste in the marine and coastal spaces and how dignity, discrimination and alienation are perceived and lived by the people. Popularly, caste has only been viewed through the lens of discrimination and declaring a status of a certain community in the varna hierarchy. The discourse ends here.

The subtle role and expressions of caste in these communities are least explored, further compromising the political rights of people. The study here directs readers towards how dignity is expressed and demanded when their access to resources and public life are both stripped of them. It is not the lamenting of the loss that is attempted in the section on dignity, but their assertion on the land, sea and traditional knowledge is categorically stated.

Furthering this, 'discrimination' is not sheerly from the regular journalistic lens of marking instances of physical violence and abuse. The effort here is to understand and analyse how historical discrimination continues unabated. As to how communities have made efforts to walk away from 'outcaste' status, but the discourse around outcaste continues. How people are subjected to the selective exclusion that takes place by virtue of who gets to be in authority - on who gets the benefits of schemes, projects, and policies. A concoction of the

Brahmanical system, modern industry and capitalism have systematically alienated people from their resources. It has also been expressed how they are kept away from a knowledge system such as scheme/policy entitlements. Varied institutions for their own benefit have manufactured ways of keeping the community in the dark. A promise of a false emancipation and change/denial of land ownership have alienated the community from their own assertive cultural norms and practices.

Even though the economic conditions of the fisher people have improved over the years, they continue to face financial discrimination by the dominant castes in the market. The discrimination, dignity and alienation of the fisher people is visible in the resource conflicts, access to market, social and cultural practices, participation in the union/society, decision-making process within the union/society, access to government schemes and basic needs like land, livelihood, and loans.



PICKING UP THE BEST IN
KODIAKADU: TAMIL NADU

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMUNITY



EXCERPTS FROM FGD IN DIFFERENT STUDY
AREA IN TAMIL NADU

KERALA

- 1.** The construction of the ports should be banned. The dredging activity and construction of harbours have destroyed the ecosystem, fish catch and lives of the fisher people. Therefore, the construction of the ports should effectively and immediately come to a halt.
- 2.** The construction of the port has significantly impacted the shoreline by creating more land and extending the shoreline, holding companies accountable for the damage is necessary.
- 3.** State-supported development projects are encroaching on the lands of fisher people, impacting the life and voices of the community. Power dynamics often mute community input leading to an erosion of life and values. It is long overdue that the community be given land ownership with legal patta and registration certificates as the rightful owner of the land.
- 4.** Along with the boats, nets and kattamaram which are their primary source of income, we strongly urge that the community be granted access to loans from the union or the state fisheries department.
- 5.** The community belonging to OBC, OEC, SC and ST are not provided with any assertive rights granted through the constitution. Those rights should roll back.
- 6.** Accessing educational and health support is one of the major concerns, review of such schemes is necessary.
- 7.** The Titanium factory has a provision to provide jobs to the fisher people, in fact based on such provision's titanium factory took control of their resources. However, community members state that they have been betrayed by the state and the titanium factory. The granted provision which still exists on paper should be implemented.

8. Land regulation is changed based on the interest of the port construction companies, chemical factories and other development-led projects should be reviewed by the state and civil society organisation. A mapping of such nature will direct towards the numerous violations done to the ocean and its people.
9. The climate warnings and disaster warnings have created a situation whereby the fisher people are not able to access the sea for fishing for more than 100 days in a year. The community alone bearing the brunt of natural and man-made disasters amounts to extreme injustice. The governments must compensate the fisher people, including sea-going fishermen as well as women vendors and those in allied activities.
10. The fisher people, long denied of their legal land rights, deserve legislation like the Forest Rights Act 2006 – in the form of Coastal Rights legislation, which recognises their inalienable land and livelihood rights.



**HOOK AND LINE METHOD TO CATCH
THE FISH: KOCHUVELLI, KERALA**

TAMIL NADU

- 1.** To ensure that the community can take advantage of the different schemes related to fishing, we highly propose that there be an awareness programme for them. The community is completely unaware of any such programmes.
- 2.** Strict resource monitoring is strongly advised to ensure that the community is not subjected to prejudice regarding their right to fish. Concerns expressed by the community about not being able to fish or about members of the dominant caste cutting their nets resulting in taking other jobs should be closely watched, and if instances of discrimination are discovered, harsh punishments should be meted out to those involved and the provisions of the SC/ST PoA Act should be applied
- 3.** We firmly believe that elections for the union/fishermen cooperative society's president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary should be held. Since resources and relief supplies will be provided to the Dalits without compromise, it would be preferable if they had their own union or society independent of the dominant caste.
- 4.** We stress how important it is to get loans with reduced interest rates to continue advancing the community's development. since the officials informed us that some members of the community are reluctant to pick up government-issued checks, and occasionally they forget to deposit the checks for pick-up. The community, banks, and the fisheries department should have serious conversations to resolve this issue. To hold this conversation, understand one another, and end the mistrust between the parties, a platform is necessary. Furthermore, because of this, the communities will be discouraged from taking out loans from the dominant community and will not be compelled to keep working on their boats to pay back these debts.
- 5.** We fervently urge the administration to take up the matter of the Dalits' land rights. We demand that ownership rights over the lands be granted to them. Giving them ownership of the land would allow them to build pucca houses, access to basic utilities, participate in livelihood programmes, and, most importantly, live without having to worry about being evicted, which would address half of their problems

6. Although the fisheries department officer claimed that Dalit fisher people receive training from the Fisheries University once a year, the communities have not claimed any such benefit, and in fact, they are unaware of any such programmes for those working in this field. We feel that there is a lack of outreach to the communities and that it is the responsibility of the state and organisations like the Fisheries University to do so. For this reason, we implore the department to set up the awareness programme for these trainings first, allowing the communities to participate and benefit from them.
7. The state government and fisheries department are urged to support funding for the training for the Dalit community and reinstate the funding process. If attending the training venue is not possible for them, it is recommended that the training be conducted in close proximity to the communities' living areas.
8. Since a sizable section of the community did not receive the necessary supplies for fishing, the community asked that fishing-related goods, such as boats and nets, be given to them during unusual situations, such as tsunamis and cyclones.
9. We discovered that several highly educated children from the communities had returned to fishing due to a lack of employment prospects. A government run working men's and women's hostel should be created specifically for members of the SC and ST communities to support individuals who wish to relocate to metropolitan areas in search of employment, since some have done so while others were unable to do so owing to financial constraints. More entrepreneurship schemes and programmes should be introduced in and around the fisheries and other related fields for children who are unable to leave or wish to work in their own village.
10. Strict measures and accountability should be applied to those who discriminate against others based on their caste. Discrimination should be prohibited in all rites of passage, including marriage, rath yatra, and social and religious ones. It should also be strictly enforced against groups that engage in discriminatory fishing practices.
11. Dalit women face limited market access due to transportation issues and limited fish supply. To improve their situation, it is recommended to provide easy transportation and strengthen women's collectives in market governing bodies. Their rights over fish market/marketing should be strengthened and prioritised, and their contributions and possibilities should not be diminished.



EXCERPTS FROM FGD FROM DIFFERENT STUDY AREA IN TAMIL NADU

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~ DR BABASAHEB AMBEDKAR



**National Campaign on
Dalit Human Rights**