

YARUDE POROMBOKE?

A case study on the privatization of coastal commons for tourism in Tamilnadu



For the background to the project and an understanding of the 'Blue Economy', please see the document titled 'Coastal Blues: Background Note', which provides a brief on the concept of Blue Economy, and the aspects of tourism in India within this concept. It also lays down the research objectives for the present case study. For a summary of this and other case studies, see our publication 'Coastal Blues: Tourism under Blue Economy in India'.

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INTRODUCTION TO TAMILNADU CASE STUDY

Tamilnadu (TN) has a coastline of about 1076 kilometres, accounting for 17% of the total coastline of India. The coast of Tamilnadu is home to over 8 lakh fishworkers, and nearly 2 lakh traditional fishing families (Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, 2010). The state has been the top destination for both foreign and domestic tourist arrivals from 2014 to 2017 (Tourism, Culture and Religious Endowments Department, 2019) The total tourist arrivals is already three times the 20-year projections that were made in 2000, (Ministry of Tourism and Culture, 2003) and are growing at a whirlwind rate of 28.5% annually (Tourism, Culture and Religious Endowments Department, 2019). This is not an accidental growth, but a result of consistent promotion of the tourism industry for several decades now, with regular planning processes, fundraising from multiple sources and participation in several international and domestic travel marts.

Promotion of tourism in Tamilnadu started way back in 1986, with the government of Tamilnadu declaring tourism as an “Industry”, with the stated purpose of “*considering Tourism ventures as eligible for suitable concessions as Industry.*”¹ As part of this order, a committee was set up to provide assistance and subsidies in the form of investment subsidies, loan, concessions in electricity and water taxes to tourism projects. In 1992, based on this committee’s recommendations, several subsidies and incentives were provided to hotels, restaurants, golf courses and tour operators.²

Since then, tourism has been strongly promoted by the government of Tamilnadu, and coastal tourism has played an important part in this development. Unlike the ‘sun and sand’ tourism of Goa, much of coastal tourism in Tamilnadu is religious. According to a plan for tourism drafted in 2003, 30% of tourism in Tamilnadu was pilgrimage based and a further 40% was to places of scenic beauty (Ministry of Tourism and Culture, 2003). Much of this is focused on a few areas like Rameswaram, Kanniyakumari, Mamallapuram that combine scenic and religious tourism, and see heavy concentration of investment and high tourist footfall.

The Tamilnadu government has positioned tourism as a way to increase state revenue and earn foreign exchange, and also as an important way to generate employment and reduce poverty. In the last few years, additionally, the government has been talking about ‘sustainability’ and ‘community participation’ on paper. Policy documents since about 2012-13 have constantly mentioned the need to develop tourism in a sustainable manner and the importance of involving the local community in tourism development (discussed further in the next section).

This framework fits neatly within the paradigm of the Blue Economy that highlights the possibility of and the need for heavy investments combined with social inclusion and environmental sustainability. But while this rhetoric looks good on paper, the reality of these

¹ As per order G.O.Ms.No.563 dated 28th December 1986 by the Information & Tourism (Tourism VI) Department, Government of Tamilnadu

² As per order G.O. Ms. No.14 dated 20th January 1992 by the Information & Tourism (Tourism VI) Department, Government of Tamilnadu

narratives remain under question as fishworkers and local communities continue to be marginalized in the process of tourism development.

This case study aims to critically examine how the Blue Economy is playing out with regard to the tourism industry in Tamilnadu, and to analyze the impact that this framework has on local communities, particularly fishworkers.

Methodology and Study sites

For the case study in Tamilnadu, we chose two main sites to undertake our research - Rameswaram and Kanniyakumari. The two sites were chosen as areas where large investments have taken place in the last decade under several projects, and is the hub of tourism in Tamilnadu. Both sites also represent a range across sites of 'scenic beauty' and 'religious tourism' and have varying geographical and ecological importance. Importantly, both areas are sites of local mobilization by fishworkers and other local communities around tourism and other development projects.

Rameswaram

Rameswaram is the seat of Hindu religious tourism in Tamilnadu, considered by some to be second in holiness only to Varanasi. In 2018, more than 99 lakh tourists, both foreign and domestic, visited Rameswaram. Geographically, Rameswaram lies on Pamban island, the tip of the island in Dhanuskodi, merely 18 nautical miles (~33 km) from Sri Lanka. Ecologically, Rameswaram is also the entry point to the Gulf of Mannar National Park (GoMNP), an area of high biodiversity and one of the few marine national parks in India.

Kanniyakumari

Kanniyakumari has been an important site of tourism in Tamilnadu, merging 'scenic tourism' as well as 'religious tourism'. In 2014, there were over 1 crore visitors to Kanniyakumari. Kanniyakumari is the end point of the mainland of India, with the coast presenting a confluence of three oceanic waters – the Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. A majority of tourism is to see this confluence and the cape, but Kanniyakumari also sees Hindu tourists visiting the 3000 year old Bhagwati Amman temple and pilgrims as part of the Ayappa pilgrimage to Sabarimala. Kanniyakumari is also an ecologically important area, the southern tip of the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve (GoMBR).

Method

Our research takes the lens of environmental justice, and centers small-scale fishworkers, who are the primary stakeholders with regard to the oceans. Specifically, when we say 'environmental justice', we mean, firstly, distributional justice, i.e. that poor and marginalized communities must not bear the burden of environmental harms. We believe that fishworkers are the primary stakeholders in coastal and marine space, and therefore their needs and aspirations must be prioritized in the development of these spaces. Moreover, we also take environmental justice to mean democratic decision-making, and therefore, that fishworkers should have a key role to play in the decision-making process around coastal and marine development.

For the compilation of this case study and to answer the research questions above, we have undertaken a combination of primary and secondary research analysis, however, the focus has been on the findings from our primary research. As a part of this study, we have analyzed various government policy documents, meeting minutes, reports, financial documents etc., through which we have been able to understand the policies and plans that have been implemented as well as the ones that are planned. Several of these documents are available online, others have been accessed through RTIs.

Additionally, we undertook a field visit to the two selected sites - Rameswaram and Kanniyakumari - where we documented our observations as well as conducted semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and group discussions with key informants and stakeholders in the area. The table below has details.

Key informant/stakeholder	No. of respondents Rameswaram	No. of respondents Kanniyakumari
Fishing leaders	4	2
Fishworkers	4	1
Other civil society members	2	4
Government officers	3	1
Hotels and other businesses	4	2
Total	16	10

As evident from the table above, in our research, we have attempted to engage with multiple stakeholders, however, the aim in the case study is not to present the viewpoints of these stakeholders. Rather, taking an environmental justice lens as explained above, our research aims to center the voices of the fishworkers and local communities in the conversation on tourism under the Blue Economy.

Before looking at each of these sites, we examine the policies and plans that have guided the development of tourism in the state.

TOURISM PLANS IN TAMILNADU

As mentioned earlier, tourism in Tamilnadu is an old industry, one that has seen heavy investment by the state government. Early on, the focus was on increasing tourist arrivals. Having achieved a high growth rate in the number of tourist arrivals, Tamilnadu has now shifted focus in the last few years to increasing the duration of the stay of tourists and the number of destinations they visit within the state. For this, the government is focusing on infrastructure development, like road and rail connectivity between tourist destinations, more accommodation options and increasing the kind of activities that tourists can do. These activities include the promotion of festivals and fairs, for example, a month-long dance festival in Mamallapuram, promoting pongal as a tourist festival etc. Additionally, two new kinds of tourism that are being promoted are ecotourism and adventure tourism, although both are still in their nascent stages of development.³

In the last two decades, two major planning exercises were undertaken by the government of Tamilnadu with regard to tourism - a Perspective Plan on tourism was undertaken in 2003 and a Vision Plan drafted in 2013. Both of these were envisioned as long term plans, for 20 years and 10 years respectively, ending in 2023. Additionally, tourism development is also envisioned in the Tamilnadu government's 12th Five Year Plan for the period 2012-17. These three documents provide a detailed understanding of the position that the state government has taken on tourism, and are examined briefly below.

Perspective Plan for tourism, 2003-2023

In 2003, the government commissioned the development of a 20-year Perspective Plan for tourism, with the stated purpose to identify 'new tourism products' and evolve long-term goals to develop the tourism industry. The Plan was supposed to provide a detailed analysis of the strengths and the gaps in tourism in Tamilnadu, including environmental impact assessments and assessment of economic benefits.

Despite the Plan's idea of doing a comprehensive review of existing tourism destinations and making appropriate plans for tourism development in the state, much of the focus of the Perspective Plan has been on infrastructural development. The document identified several 'bottlenecks' in tourism development, including lack of accommodation, water supply and sanitation, lack of garbage disposal etc. The document also identifies that tourism that is not adequately managed can create 'problems'. Among these, it acknowledges that excess tourism can put pressure on the destination like water and garbage issues, and states that *"local people should be made to participate in planning and development of tourism so that they can bring new ideas, support and influence the decisions, and in turn be a part of it."*

³ Extracted from policy documents that are examined in detail below

However, as mentioned above, despite this recognition, the focus of the solution remains around infrastructure development. The Plan proposes increasing connectivity through airports, rail and road networks, building amenities for tourists etc. Similarly, it acknowledges tourism carrying capacity and the dangers of exceeding it, but in contradiction, the Plan focuses on increasing tourist arrivals without having actually conducted any carrying capacity analysis.

The Plan predicts that with its implementation, the annual growth rate of tourist arrivals will go from ~6% to 12% by 2023. However, the actual tourist arrivals have far exceeded these projections.

The Perspective Plan predicted that on the successful implementation of the plan, the domestic tourist arrivals would be ~1600 lakh. However, according to the Policy Demand Note of the tourism department of Tamilnadu, in 2017, the domestic tourist arrivals in Tamilnadu was already ~3450 lakh, nearly 3 times the projections.

The Plan itself states clearly that a *“major impact of increased tourist activity is that large scale tourist developments also bring a large number of people together which leads to detrimental effects to the ecosystem as a whole.”* Even according to its own plan, tourism in Tamilnadu has far exceeded the number of people expected and planned for. However, tourism plans and policies framed in the later years have not reflected this increase or proposed regulation based on this. Rather, the narrative has become entirely about the benefits of tourism with little acknowledgment of the threats and potential impacts, as seen from Vision 2023 and the 12th Five Year Plan examined below.

Vision 2023

One of the most important documents articulating the government’s vision for the development of Tamilnadu is ‘Vision 2023’. Drafted in 2012, the document states that *“achieving economic prosperity and employment generation with inclusive growth is sought to be achieved through the implementation of a coherent vision.”* As its outcome, it proposes -

- Per capita income to reach US\$10,000 per annum
- Human Development Index to match developed countries
- Provide high quality infrastructure

One of the sectors envisioned under this is tourism, which it promotes as having a high potential for local employment generation. It is important to note that tourism falls under the theme of ‘Nurturing a rich heritage and preserving ecology’. The Vision states that *“in some areas (eg. classical music and dance forms, temples, and beaches) Tamil Nadu has world class splendours to showcase, which need to be “nurtured, packaged and appropriately promoted.”*

The Vision states that preserving and improving the quality of nature and nurturing cultural heritage is a priority, and looks at tourism as an important way of achieving this. This articulation is very similar to that of international conservation organizations around tourism and conservation under the Blue Economy. But even this flawed mention of the link between tourism and the environment completely disappears when looking further.

Unlike the Perspective Plan, Vision 2023 does not offer any recognition of the impacts of unsustainable tourism nor makes any attempts, even on paper, to improve regulation or monitoring of the tourism sector. Rather the focus is on increasing the number of tourists, and infrastructural developments like resorts, theme parks and entertainment complexes. The Vision states that an allocation of Rs. 10,000 crore will be made towards tourism development (0.6% of the total investment), which will be used for the creation of new hotels and resorts, development of heritage locations, development of theme parks and beach resorts. No part of this money is allocated at all to 'improving the quality of the environment' as the Vision claims it wants to achieve.

This narrative of win-win for big business, environment and communities, also supported by the Blue Economy framework, is further articulated by Tamilnadu in its 12th Five Year Plan.

12th Five Year Plan (2012- 2017)

The 12th Five Year Plan (Tamilnadu State Planning Commission, 2012) talks about the need for a 'green lens', and of envisioning economic development on the principle of "low carbon" and "low/zero wastage". One of the sectors seen for this development is tourism. According to the Plan, tourism is seen as an "*engine of development, catalyst to economic prosperity*" (Tamilnadu State Planning Commission, 2012, p. 78). To achieve these objectives, the Plan proposes several strategies, including "*encouragement of private sector and community participation in tourism*" and "*capacity building and human resources development for sustainable tourism*".(Tamilnadu State Planning Commission, 2012, pp. 79-80)

However, despite the articulation of 'community participation' and 'sustainable tourism', the key thrust area for tourism under the plan remains infrastructure improvements. It lists providing quality infrastructure and basic amenities like drinking water, roads, illumination, toilets etc. and wayside amenities on highways as important priorities for tourism.

Another approach for tourism development is the provision of connected services. For example, the government proposes to link and promote the "silk route" and "spice route", promote cruise tourism along the Thiruvalluvar-Kanniyakumari stretch of coast etc.

Among other things, the Plan also proposes “new tourism services”, one of them being eco-tourism. The Plan states that a separate ‘eco-tourism wing’ has been established with the aim of promoting “eco-friendly destinations” while ensuring that the “carrying capacity of the destinations will be taken into consideration” and that nature and wildlife will not be harmed. The Plan also states that the local community will be “actively involved to ensure inclusive development”. However, the Plan proposes the encouragement of resorts in eco-sensitive areas by labeling them ‘green hotels/resorts’.

The Plan had proposed an outlay of ~530 crores with ADB assistance for the development of circuit tourism, and an overall overlay of ~1611 crores for tourism development, further highlighting that the narrative of environmental sustainability and community participation has remained largely lip service.

This narrative of sustainability and community participation has continued to show up in policy notes of the tourism department, along with a continued focus merely on infrastructural investment.

Policy Demand Note 2016-17, 18-19 and 19-20

In recent years, the ‘Policy Demand Notes’ submitted by the tourism department to the Tamilnadu Legislative Assembly also take on this narrative.

In the 2016-17 note, while talking about eco-tourism, the note states that - *While promoting eco-friendly destinations, the carrying capacity of the destinations will be taken into consideration and the local community is to be made actively involved in all developmental activities, to ensure inclusive development* (Tourism, Culture and Religious Endowments Department , 2016).

In both the 2018-19 note and the 2019-20 note, in the section titled ‘Strategy’, the department lists the following among others – *Promotion of environmentally and culturally sustainable and socially inclusive tourism development; encouragement of private sector and community participation in tourism; capacity building and human resources development for sustainable tourism and destination management through employment generation, poverty alleviation, environmental regeneration, advancement of women and disadvantaged groups.*(Tourism, Culture and Religious Endowments Department, 2018)(Tourism, Culture and Religious Endowments Department, 2019)

This narrative of tourism in Tamilnadu, in line with the articulation under the Blue Economy framework, paints tourism with a brush of beneficiality. However, a closer look at the tourism plans and policies show that “sustainability” and “social inclusion” are mere distractions. As seen briefly below, investments in the tourism industry are entirely focused on infrastructure.

Tourism investments in Tamilnadu

As mentioned in the previous section, tourism in Tamilnadu has been focused on heavy investments in a few regions. This pattern of investment has continued over the last decade.

In the year 2012-13, the Asian Development Bank approved a project known as the Infrastructure Development Investment Program for Tourism (IDIPT) for Tamilnadu. The project was worth ~ Rs. 500 crores, with ADB putting in 70% of the funds and the state government 30%. Much of the funds under the project have been used for the up-gradation of amenities in existing tourist locations, with a focus on infrastructural development for basic amenities like drinking water, toilets, restaurants, illumination, approach roads, cloak room, parking lots, signages etc.

Again, in 2014-15, the government of India launched the Swadesh Darshan (SD) scheme, under which Tamilnadu was allocated ~Rs. 74 crore to develop coastal tourism under the “coastal circuit”. Similar to the ADB project, most of the SD funds in these areas have also been utilized for creation of basic amenities like drinking water, toilets, parking etc. and infrastructural developments like promenades and benches on beaches etc.

It is interesting to note that both Rameswaram and Kanniyakumari were part of both the IDIPT project under the Asian Development Bank, as well as the Swadesh Darshan project. Observation on the ground shows that money from these projects have been used in a rather redundant fashion, with amenities built under the two projects often in the vicinity of each other. For example, in Kanniyakumari, despite local communities bringing up the issue of open defecation by pilgrims, only 2 toilet blocks have been proposed under Swadesh Darshan. At the same time, there are multiple signages at the same place that announce the boat jetty, funded under separate schemes.



Multiple signage for Sunset point at the same spot under different schemes

This kind of superfluous usage of public funds raises serious questions about the appropriateness of the project components.

But superfluous usage of funds is only one of the issues that coastal tourism is causing. Study of the actual development of tourism on the ground in the two study sites as covered in the

next two chapters strengthens the understanding that the model of tourism development in Tamilnadu is completely infrastructure based, and has been pushing fishworkers out of the common lands and resources that they have used and managed for generations.

TOURISM IN RAMESWARAM

Entering Pamban by train is always dramatic and often fear-inducing. Bounded by the Indian Ocean on one side and the Bay of Bengal on the other, this small island off the east coast of Tamilnadu offers visitors a small glimpse into the fragility of island life as they slowly trundle across the sea on a narrow rail bridge built over 100 years ago.



View of Pamban from bridge

Nevertheless, every year, nearly 1 crore people⁴ make their way across these bridges from the mainland to visit Rameswaram, one of the holiest places in India for Vaishnavite Hindus. It is believed that after the battle of Ramayana, Ram worshipped Shiva here to absolve himself of the sin of killing a Brahmin. The *shivling* that Sita is believed to have made out of mud for this worship, forms the central idol of the Ramanathaswamy temple. (Ramanathapuram District (Official website)) This belief propels thousands of pilgrims to make their journey to Rameswaram every year. But Rameswaram is not just a pilgrim spot. For about 45,000 people, Rameswaram is home.

⁴ Based on RTI reply from Tourism Officer, Rameswaram dated 09.09.2019

Rameswaram is a small town within Ramanathapuram district, with an area of 53 sq.km. and 10,000 households. Along with the town (municipality), Rameswaram taluk also has 156 inhabited villages. Communities of different religious backgrounds live here, a majority of them Hindu, but with significant populations of Christians (8%) and Muslim (4%) residents. The town has an SC population of ~3000 people, approximately 6% of the total population.(Census of India, 2011)

Fishing is an important source of livelihood for the people of Rameswaram. As a coral island on the edge of the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve, this region is rich in biodiversity. According to data from the Central Marine Fisheries Institute (CMFRI), there are a total of 7000 boats in Ramanathapuram district, of which ~1900 are trawlers and the remaining are country-crafts (Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, 2010). But fishing here is not always an easy task, especially for smaller boats. The island is constantly buffeted by winds, often at speeds of 25-30 km/hr(World Weather Online). In fact, according to G, President of a local NGO, winds are so important to the fishers here that they have names for 15 different kinds of winds, depending on its direction and speed. Small-scale fishers also struggle with trawling. Leaders of fishworkers unions in Ramanathapuram say that trawling continues to be a major issue for them. They say that small-scale fishworkers are affected by reducing fish catch, price and resource competition and the damage caused to the ecosystem through bull-trawling.

To add to their troubles, tourism has been continuously expanding in the region, pushing the fishworkers out of their traditionally used commons and resources. Tourism investment had begun here in earnest in the early part of the last decade. In 2015, Rameswaram was included as part of the Tamilnadu 'Coastal Circuit' under Swadesh Darshan with Rs. 15.86 crore was allocated for construction of parking facilities, 'last-mile linkage' and a sound and light show in Rameswaram.⁵

⁵ Based on Swadesh Darshan DPRs retrieved through RTI, letter dated 13.8.2019



Agnitheertham, a major tourist site

While each of these projects was limited in scope, the overall increase in infrastructure investment in the area has also meant expansion of tourist activities, squeezing out the fishworkers who live here. For example, the Swadesh Darshan DPR talks of Rameswaram having 'inadequate development', and envisages a 'developed' beach with lights and benches and promenades and shops, a space designed for visitors to the exclusion of the local communities. Some of the examples of the rapidly shrinking spaces for fishworkers because of tourism are discussed below -

1. Developing and re-developing in Sangumal⁶

Sangumal is an area running along the shore for about 1 km, stretching between Agni Theertham (an important tourist site in Rameswaram) and Olaikuda, a fishing village on the outskirts of Rameswaram town. About 50 families lived in Sangumal itself, but a further 21 villages were dependent on this stretch of beach for fishing - parking boats, cleaning the fish, repairing nets etc. In fact, at one point, several of them were employed in collecting shanks that were sold to the government. According to a youth leader,

⁶ This section has been written based largely on the interview of two local leaders and verified with letters to government authorities and newspaper reports

although the residents of Sangumal had been living there for many years, they were evicted in 2005 on grounds of the area being *poromboke*.⁷

It started in 2005. The District Collector at the time approached the residents proposing the construction of a children's park for tourists. According to a union leader, the Collector promised that the park was only going to take up a small part of the land, and that the development would ensure that the residents got water and electricity. The proposal was to relocate the 50 families currently living there and they were promised *patta land* if they moved. Although the community initially resisted, through a mix of convincing and coercion, the families living in the area eventually left Sangumal. Some moved back to their native villages in the surrounding areas, a few were given land by the government in a nearby plot. According to the leaders, the Collector assured them that the park would not affect their livelihood, and that they would be able to continue using the beach areas as they had traditionally.



Protest against park in 2004

Soon the park was built, fenced and gated. Even though they had been promised that fishing would not be affected, in reality, the fishworkers were prevented from using the beach since the park gates were locked. They had to enter into elaborate informal negotiations with the watchman to access the beach at different times. But the park was not maintained, and soon fell into disrepair. For nearly 10 years after that, nothing happened. Some of the original residents of the area returned and set up temporary houses.

⁷ 'Poromboke' is a contested word in Tamilnadu. While the legal category is that of government waste land, often poromboke are lands used and managed as commons. Not infrequently, the government has used the lack of legal recognition to sell and lease poromboke lands to private players. This blog - [Poromboke](#) - has more resources to understand, and TM Krishna's song, Chennai Poromboke Paadal is a must watch.



Satellite image of Sangumal in 2012



Photos of Sangumal beach before the park in 2004

In 2014, attention shifted to this area again. The government started building a promenade along the beach on one side, cutting off direct access to the beach. On the other side, in the area where the municipal park stood, a new water sports centre has been set up. According to the owner of this centre, they lease the land from the Tamilnadu Maritime Board.

After the land moved into private hands, fishworkers were completely cut-off and lost all access to that part of the beach and the water area where the centre was taking tourists for boating and snorkeling. However fishworkers continued to use the waters and the beach on both sides of Holy Island. However, conflicts soon surfaced. According to the youth leader, the proprietor of Holy Island began complaining that the smell of fish was bothering tourists, and began pushing the fishworkers further away from the centre. Our own observation showed that the water sports centre may be expanding, since construction was ongoing in the land next to the existing centre. Our observation also showed that along with the water sports centre, other private companies have also been developing properties. A new 3-star hotel has been constructed, and the Tamilnadu Tourism Development Corporation has expanded its premises. Other resorts are also under construction, and several portions of the land were fenced off.



Sangumal overlaid with current construction



Promenade in 2014



Current area available for fishing

Of the original 1 kilometre stretch only a small 100 metre stretch of beach now remains of the original commons. As tourism was expanding, some of the fishworkers also tried adapting to tourism-based livelihoods, but tourism has little space for local communities. One of the fishworkers has set up a tea stall for tourists, but she says that authorities are pressuring her to move because the resorts want a clear beach view. As one fishing leaders said -

“Fishworkers are spread across the coast. But the government doesn't want that. They want to tidy up the coast, tourists on one side and fishworkers on one side. That's why they are moving us from our villages.”

2. ‘Unfit for human habitation’ Dhanuskodi

Dhanuskodi is a thin strip of land, only 45 metres in length, that stretches out into the sea from Pamban island towards Sri Lanka. Until 1964, Dhanuskodi was a thriving town, and acted as the connecting point for travelers to Sri Lanka. Passengers would arrive by train to Dhanuskodi railway station, and take a connecting ferry to Talaimannar in Sri Lanka.(The News Minute, 2019)

In 1964, a cyclone hit Sri Lanka and Dhanuskodi, killing more than 1800 people. The entire town of Dhanuskodi was completely devastated. According to fishworkers we spoke to, the area was declared ‘unfit for human habitation’ and the survivors relocated to other areas. However, with their fishing grounds still in and around this area and having lived here for many years, in a few months, many of the fishworkers returned to their old homes, setting up palm-roof huts and returning to fishing activities. As one fishworker said to us, *“I have been living in Dhanushkodi for the last 40 years or so. My mother also lived here, and my grandmother also lived here. They say that the land is unsuitable for habitation. But we have lived here all our lives, so how is it unsuitable?”*

In 2017, the National Highway No. 87, which went up to Dhanuskodi, was extended to the end of the land at Arichil Munai. According to a member of a local NGO, locals raised objections to the construction of this road, on the grounds that this area was very unstable and building a road would change shore dynamics in unpredictable ways. However, the road was constructed despite these objections. As they had predicted, since the inauguration of the road, there have been several issues with sand closing off the road (Deccan Chronicle, 2019).



Sand on Dhanuskodi highway

Nevertheless, the construction of the road has led to increasing tourism to Arichil Munai. Before the new road was built, any tourists wanting to visit the area could bring their vehicles only up till a certain point after which local jeeps would take them through the sand to the end point. With the road coming in, tourists are able to take their vehicles all the way almost till the sea.



End of the new road at Arichil Munai

Initially, the fishworkers here were pleased with the road construction since it allowed them to transport fish more easily to Rameswaram (Manorama, 2018). Like in Sangumal, some of the fishworkers also took this opportunity to complement their income from fishing by setting up shops for tourists.



Souvenir shops run by fishworkers in Dhanuskodi

However, according to a fishworker who lives in Dhanuskodi, in 2017, soon after the new road came, the Panchayat was given an order to evacuate those living in Dhanuskodi. She said that the residents were told that the basis for this order was the land was unfit for human habitation.

While there seems to be no clear indication right now as to why the pressure to evacuate comes after 35 years of the cyclone, the timing of the opening of the road and this order is ominous. In conversation with the tourism officer in Rameswaram about Dhanuskodi, he said vaguely that now that a road has come, further developments could be thought of. In his words, "Right now there are no facilities in dhanuskodi. It is not suitable for habitation, so we cannot make resorts or anything in that area. But maybe we can plan for some restaurants and such for tourists."

As has been seen in several places including in Sangumal, one project often reduces transaction costs and facilitates more projects to come through. Although the community in Dhanuskodi has protested the order, and is continuing to live there at the moment, whether there will be further, more successful attempts at evicting them remains to be seen.

3. Something smells fishy

In Rameswaram, tourism and fishing happen next to each other. Many of the temples and other holy sites in Rameswaram are located close to beaches, and fishworkers often use the same beaches. More recently however, there is a push to segregate fishing areas and tourism areas, with fishworkers being asked to move away. One of the excuses being used to do this is the 'smell' of fishing - fish waste, drying fish etc. As one fishworker said to us, *“If they see beaches like this, where it is smelling, they will make faces. No, you may think that if there is fishing, it will smell. But people who come here don't think like that.”*



Pamban fishing market beach

An example of this was seen in Sangumal, where the water sports centre started pressurizing fishworkers to move further away from the centre because the smell was bothering tourists. This was also seen elsewhere in Rameswaram.

According to fishworkers, currently, there are three main fish markets in Pamban island - in Rameswaram, Thangachimadam and Pamban - for trawlers as well as for country boats. Fish is sold locally, but also transported out of the island. For this, the fish is loaded onto trucks that pass through the Pamban road bridge to the mainland. The same bridge is also used by tourists to Rameswaram coming by road.

According to fishworkers we spoke to, issues have now arisen because of their use of this bridge. By its very nature, fish markets, fish trucks and areas around them are strong smelling. Due to limited capacity of the trucks, leakage from trucks is common between the months of December and February, when fish catch is at its peak. As one of the fishworkers in Pamban told us, *“When we transport fish in the trucks, there is sometimes a little bit of leakage of water. The trucks come with containers for the fish to be stored. But they usually have less capacity for the total fish catch that is sent, so the containers sometimes get overloaded. Because of this, there might be a little seepage which will have fish smell.”* The fishworkers say that the trucks are stopped and fined between Rs. 5000 to Rs. 10,000, even if the seepage is minimal. During our visit, in July 2019, the conflict had further exacerbated and fishworkers said that the government has been putting pressure on them to use a different route to transport the fish.

There is also a new fishing harbour being constructed in Kunthukal, a little distance away from the current one in Rameswaram. One fishing leader said that he also suspects that the proposed move to relocate fishing boats from the Rameswaram harbour to Kunthukal may also have something to do with tourism and the smell of fishing.

He says, “Right now, it is a spiritual place and the waste from the fishing goes near the temple. There are 1200 trawlers in the area and they use the seawater to clean the boats and their fish. The fish oil and grease from the boat goes into the sea and into the spiritual place. There will be a lot of waste during the rainy season. During the rainy season, the fish doesn’t dry and it smells even more. There are a lot of flies/mosquitoes. The fishers are dependent on the sea so they don’t have a problem with the waste but the tourists have a problem with the fish waste.”

As evident from the above interviews, the response to the tourists’ complaints has been an attempt to push the fishworkers away from the areas where they practice fishing-related activities, even though they may have used those same spaces for many years. This approach of seeing fishing and tourism as mutually exclusive has led to further shrinking of spaces for fishworkers.

4. Whose waters - fighting for use rights⁸

The shrinking spaces for fishworkers, along with expanding spaces for tourism is not restricted to land alone, and extends into the water as well. Another commonly used concept to justify closing off spaces to local communities while opening them to tourists is ‘conservation’.

The ‘fines and fences’ approach has continued to dominate the conservation landscape, creating protected areas and disallowing use of these spaces by local communities (Shahabuddin, Ravi, & Shrivastava, 2007). At the same time, several conservation groups including those who promote the concept of Blue Economy, view tourism as

⁸ Most of this section has been written based on a group discussion with 4 leaders of the seaweed collectors of Gulf of Mannar, and on the documentary ‘Shifting Undercurrents’ by ICSF

being not only benign but in fact, beneficial, to the goals of conservation. This approach to environmental governance has created two *types* of humans in the enviro-legal imagination - the 'exploitative' local communities who destroy the environment and the 'contributing' tourists who bring conservation and money at the same time. This continues to be the case despite research showing that local communities are often the primary stewards of natural resources (Savyasaachi, 1994). On the other hand, tourism has shown to have several negative impacts on the environment (EQUATIONS, 2009). Nevertheless, this imagination of the destructive local versus the benign tourist continues to play out on how conservation and tourism is practiced.

Based on this logic, protected areas continue to push out local communities from access and use of commons in protected areas on the grounds of protecting the environment, while at the same time opening up these same landscapes to tourists. The struggle of seaweed collectors to retain access to traditionally used lands in the Gulf of Mannar National Park is one such example.

The Gulf of Mannar is an area of about 10,500 sq.km. lying between India and Sri Lanka, stretching from Rameswaram in the north to Kanniyakumari in the south. The gulf has 21 uninhabited islands each surrounded by shallow waters. In 1986, a part of the Gulf was declared a National Park, comprising the 21 islands and the surrounding waters up to 10m on the sea side and 6 m on the shore side. In 1989, the entire area of the Gulf of Mannar was declared a 'Biosphere Reserve'. The Gulf is reported to have more than 4000 species of flora and fauna, including several endangered species like the green turtle and dugong. (Department of Environment, Tamilnadu, 2015)

The rich marine life in the Gulf has also been an important source of livelihood for the local communities. Other than fishing, Rameswaram also sees the unique occupation of seaweed collectors. The story of the seaweed collectors is truly remarkable. Every day, at the crack of dawn, groups of women set out from their homes. With 10 women to a boat, they head to the islands closest to them. Here, the women, clad in shorts and t-shirts, a bag around their waist, a steel paddle on one leg instead of a fin, a glass mask over their face, their hands wrapped in cloth to prevent cutting, start the arduous work they come for. Free-diving into the water, they then start the process of collecting seaweed.



Women fishworkers from the Gulf of Mannar Photo courtesy: Bhuvana Balaji

Seaweed collection is an old practice. One of the women we interviewed told us that she had been doing this since the 1990s, and she knows that her grandfather used to go even before that. Lately, however, they have begun to face problems with the Forest Department, who have told the women that they are not allowed to collect seaweed in the area because it is a national park. The reason given for preventing the women from using the islands is 'conservation'. The women are accused of destroying the coral habitats although the women have always maintained that they only collect seaweed from already dead corals and do not harm the live corals. The women have also imposed self-regulation - they do seaweed collection for only 12 days in a month and also impose a month-long ban on themselves. In fact, the president of the seaweed collectors' union has won an award for her role in conservation of the area.

But this has not been enough. The women say that although the national park was declared more than 30 years ago, in the last decade or less, the department has been more active in preventing them from going to the islands. About 5 years ago, there was a major incident, where 3 big boats and 6 small boats were rounded up by the Forest Department. Most of them managed to escape, but 1 boat got caught and confiscated. The women on the boat were taken to the police station. The women we interviewed told us that no case was registered against them, but they were kept in the police station for the entire day and only let off at 6 in the evening after severe protests and negotiations by others from the community.

The women we interviewed told us that this was a common practice. The women say that cases are seldom registered against them, instead, they are harassed and intimidated through illegal practices, like confiscating the boat without due procedure,

taking away their clothes or food when the women are inside the water. The women told us another incident where their boat was confiscated, leaving them stranded on the islands. They had to swim nearly 2 kilometres back to shore, carrying their bags of seaweed and helping a 60 year-old woman who was with them.

However, even as the Forest Department continues to block access of the seaweed collectors to these waters, they also have plans to open up the islands for tourism. According to the Wildlife Warden of Ramanathapuram Division, there are plans to open up one island - Kurusadai, for 'ecotourism'. The plan involves a glass boat ride to Kurusadai island, a day visit on the island and return by the evening. The Department said that there are currently no plans for tourists to stay on the island, but facilities for food and toilets will have to be made for tourists.

These are the first plans for tourism in the Gulf of Mannar National Park. The Department told us that they are keen on ensuring the participation of the local community in the venture, and part of the delay in implementing this project has been objections raised by the local community. In our conversation with department officials, it does appear that these officers are sincere about involving the local community in the ecotourism venture. However the irony of blocking the community from the islands that had been traditionally used as commons, while opening up the same commons for tourists, is not lost on the fishworkers.

5. Capturing lands, capturing waters

As seen in the above sections, tourism in Rameswaram has been relentlessly taking over common lands, through claims of 'conservation', 'smell', and expansion. Tourism in Rameswaram has affected not only the fishworkers, but other communities as well. In the ever expanding resource requirement of the tourism industry, communities are struggling to retain access to adequate water.

According to AR, a member of a local citizens organization, there is severe extraction of groundwater in areas like Thangachimadam within Pamban island. This extraction, he states, is done illegally. According to government orders⁹, commercial water extraction in certain areas requires a 'No Objection Certificate' (NOC). There is also a rule that commercial wells have to be more than 10 km away from the coast. However, AR claims that there are wells very close to the coast, and are operated without adequate licensing. He also mentioned that the commercial wells often have diameters of 8ft or 10ft, compared to 5 ft which is legally allowed, and that whereas the rules state that there should be a 3 kilometre distance between two commercial wells, one can see 3 wells in a one kilometre distance. AR said that there are five major companies that are extracting groundwater for sale, which take about 500 tankers a day.

⁹G.O. 142 dated 23.7.2014 of the Public Works Department of Tamilnadu available at https://tnpcb.gov.in/pdf_2017/Compendium_Vol_01_11117.pdf pg. 55



Water tanker in Rameswaram

He says that the water tankers are bought by two main industries. One is the shrimp farming industry that is run in the area. According to him, there are about 150 ponds for shrimp culture, with each one about 12 acres. The ponds need freshwater because the salt content has to be carefully monitored. So they buy 2 tankers per day. He says that all the shrimp farms are unauthorized except one.

The other industry that buys fresh water from the tankers is the tourism industry. According to the tourism department statistics, there are 89 hotels in Rameswaram¹⁰, of which only 3 hotels have a valid Consent to Operate from the Pollution Control Board¹¹. But according to AR, in reality there are probably about 450 lodges in Rameswaram, of which about 150 have their own source of water. The remaining hotels, he says, have to buy water. Each lodge may buy one or two tankers per day. We tried to verify the numbers independently. In our conversation with the sports centre in Sangumal, the owner suggested that he buys approximately 4000-7000 litres of water in a day.

It is clear from this that there is a complete lack of regulation on the tourism industry, and where regulation does exist, the monitoring process seems to be heavily deficient. This has allowed the industry to get away with even more extraction of critical resources required for the local community's survival.

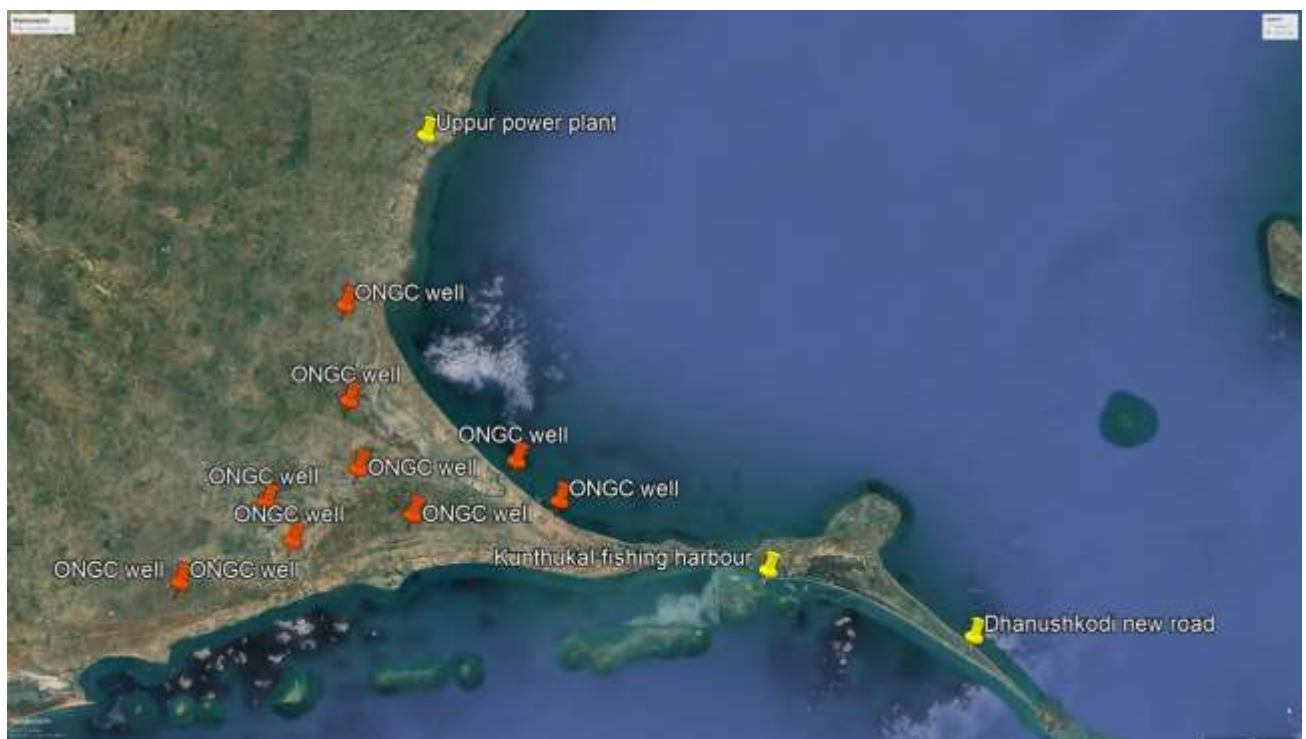
Fishworkers in Rameswaram are struggling with resource grab in two ways. On the one hand, resources are being freely sold to the tourism industry through legal measures like in

¹⁰ According to statistics provided by Tourism Officer, Rameswaram, email dated 19 July 2019

¹¹ According to RTI reply by Pollution Control Board, Ramanathapuram District, letter dated 23.09.2019

Sangumal, on the other, the lack of regulation allows the industry to also extract resources illegally like with fresh water. Between these two forms of coastal resource grabbing, the local community, particularly the fishworkers are left in the lurch, struggling to hold on to traditional coastal commons that are being rapidly sold to private bodies, denied access to traditional fishing grounds through protected area systems, and and now further threatened with a loss of adequate fresh water resources.

Unfortunately, tourism is not the only industry in the area that is capturing coastal commons. In and around Rameswaram, a range of projects are underway, some of which are shown in the map below. In Uppur, ~52 km from Rameswaram, construction is ongoing of a 200 MW thermal power plant and desalination plant proposed in an area of 1013 acres.¹² Closer to Rameswaram, ONGC has proposed the drilling of 22 exploratory onshore wells¹³ in an area of 413 sq. km. Several of these wells are located less than 10 kilometres from the Gulf of Mannar National Park, and are surrounded by villages and agricultural fields. In Kunthukal, a fishing harbour is currently under construction¹⁴ to “facilitate deep sea fishing” (DT Next, 2018).



Ramanathapuram development projects

Each of these projects continue to take up more and more space, pushing the fishworkers out of their traditional commons. As a local leader puts it, “Tamilnadu has a long coastline and the fishing villages are spread across the coast. But the government wants to push all the

¹² Based on Environment Clearance given to M/s Tamilnadu Generation & Distribution Corporation Ltd., file no. J-13012/01/2012-IA.II (T) dated 18.05.2016

¹³ Based on letter to M/s Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Ltd., file no. J-11011/207/2013-IA-II(I) dated 30th August 2018

¹⁴ Based on observation and information from local fishing leaders

fishers into one small part of the coast, making many villages into one village, so that they can use the rest of the coast for tourism and ports and other projects.”

The unrelenting development along the coast is not only taking away common lands and resources from fishworkers, but, as the case study from Kanniyakumari shows, it also threatens the coast itself and the survival of coastal communities.

TOURISM IN KANNIYAKUMARI

The clouds gather overhead, darkening the sky. All around is greenery. On both sides of the train lush paddy fields glitter with droplets, freshly washed in the rain. And in the distance, thousands of fans circle loftily, the windmills that provide electricity to this part of the country. Going from Nagercoil junction to Kanniyakumari, small canals interweave their way into the villages that jostle the countryside. Small churches and temples abound, and small boats are parked in the manakudy estuary. But as you reach the end of your journey, the sea drawing nearer, the quiet landscape suddenly mushrooms into multi-storey buildings stacked next to each other. These are the numerous lodges that cater to the 1 crore (Ministry of Tourism, 2014) tourists that arrive here every year. You have reached the end of the mainland of India, the Cape of Comorin.

The attraction of Kanniyakumari is obvious. It is not only a cape at the end of the mainland of a country, it is also at the confluence of three oceanic waters, the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Kanniyakumari is also the southern tip of the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve, a 10,000km stretch of marine waters rich in biodiversity that stretch upwards from here until Rameswaram. But of course, there is more to Kanniyakumari than the attraction of being at 'land's end'.

The tip of Kanniyakumari is categorized as a Special Town Panchayat within Agastheeswaram Taluk in the district also called Kanniyakumari. The district, with its headquarters in Nagercoil, is a large one, bordered on one side by the oceans and on the other by the Western Ghats. On its west lies Thiruvananthapuram, once the seat of the feudal lords. At the time of independence, Kanniyakumari fell within the Travancore-Cochin presidency (areas now forming the southern parts of Kerala, from Kochi to Thiruvananthapuram), forming its only Tamil speaking area. However, soon after independence, the Tamil speaking population revolted under the leadership of Marshall Nesamony, demanding to be made part of the independent state of Tamilnadu. In the reorganization of states in 1956, Kanniyakumari officially became part of Tamilnadu. (Kanniyakumari District Official Website)

The district is home to 18.7 lakh people, and boasts an average literacy rate of 91%, higher than the state average of 80%. Almost half of the population of Kanniyakumari is Christian, including almost all the fishworkers. (Census of India, 2011) Whereas in the interiors, paddy and coconut cultivation are important (Kanniyakumari District Official Website), fishing continues to be an important source of livelihood in the coastal area.



Paddy fields in Kanniyakumari

According to CMFRI's marine census of 2010, there are more than 40,000 fishing families in Kanniyakumari, with 20% of Tamilnadu's total fishing population living here. There are 47 fishing villages in the district. Kanniyakumari district has a total of more than 10,000 boats, of which only 645 are trawlers. (Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, 2010)

Interestingly, despite the entire district being approximately 1600 sq.km. in area, tourism is largely restricted to the tip, an area of only about 4 sq.km or less. Most of the tourism is focused around the Vivekananda Rock Memorial, the Thiruvalluvar Statue, and the Triveni Sangam, i.e. the confluence of the three seas. Looking at the history of tourism development in Kanniyakumari also, one sees that a large portion of the funds have been used for in this 4 sq.km area. In 2015, Kanniyakumari was also included in the Coastal Circuit under Swadesh Darshan, under which ~ Rs. 31 crores has been allotted to develop tourism in Kanniyakumari, with an additional Rs. 1.84 crores for another beach called Thekkurichi in Kanniyakumari district.¹⁵ Much of the money has been used for building amenities, infrastructure including sea wall and promenade, and parks.

Unlike in Rameswaram, in Kanniyakumari, there has largely been a segregation of tourism from fishing areas, quite likely because tourism is geographically limited to the cape region. This has meant that conflicts over land and resources between the tourism industry and fishworkers has been limited. But tourism has been expanding in the region, and this

¹⁵ Based on Swadesh Darshan DPR received through RTI response dated 13.8.2019

expansion threatens not only the livelihoods of fishworkers, but their very survival. A key reason for this is the ecological vulnerability of the region.

Buffeted by the ocean from all directions, Kanniyakumari is highly vulnerable to cyclones and other natural disasters. In December 2017, Kanniyakumari, among other places, was hit by Cyclone Ockhi, with death tolls reportedly reaching more than 80 and more than 500 fishermen missing (The News Minute, 2017). In 2004, Kanniyakumari was hit by the tsunami that killed more than 800 people according to some reports (Times of India, 2004). But a more systematic vulnerability that Kanniyakumari faces is also from shoreline changes. According to a 2011 paper, the coastal zone of Kanniyakumari sees high erosion on one part of it and accretion on the other, with their research showing that Kanniyakumari has seen a net erosion of 0.204 sq.km. between 1999 and 2006, at the rate of -29,142 sq.m per year in the same years (Mujabar & Chandrasekar, 2011). The paper also reports that the Kanniyakumari coastline is recorded to be one of the major erosion coasts of India.

The high vulnerability of the coastline is also reiterated by scientist Lal Mohan who says that the coasts of Kanniyakumari are “unstable, and highly changeable”. The depletion is very high, he says, and a “small change can deplete the shoreline and submerge villages”.

But despite evidence of the already unstable coastline in this region, unregulated construction continues along this coastline, as seen in the map. The biggest of these projects is the International Container Transshipment Terminal¹⁶, originally proposed in Enayam, but later moved to a location closer to the main tourist area of Kanniyakumari, between the villages of Keelamanakudy and Kovalam (The New Indian Express, 2017). The project received its terms of reference in 2016, but the proposal has seen major protests across Kanniyakumari (Deccan Chronicle, 2018). Nor is Enayam port the only development project in this stretch of coastline. As pointed out by Dr SP Udayakumar, there are a range of projects - port, mining and power - that stretch across this coastline between Alappuzha in Kerala and Tuticorin in Tamilnadu. In Trivandrum, there is a major international seaport being constructed in Vizhinjam¹⁷. Only a few kilometres north of this, a fishing harbour is being constructed in Muthalapozhi in Trivandrum, which was stayed by the High Court (Times of India, 2019) but was continuing work as we observed on 2nd November 2019. South of this, the Muttom lighthouse and road is being developed¹⁸, along with mining of rare minerals from the coast of Manvalkurichi village near Colachel in Tamilnadu¹⁹. On the eastern coast, the Kudankulam nuclear power plant is only about 25 kilometres away from Kanniyakumari and the Udangudi thermal power plant²⁰ is another 50 kilometres north.

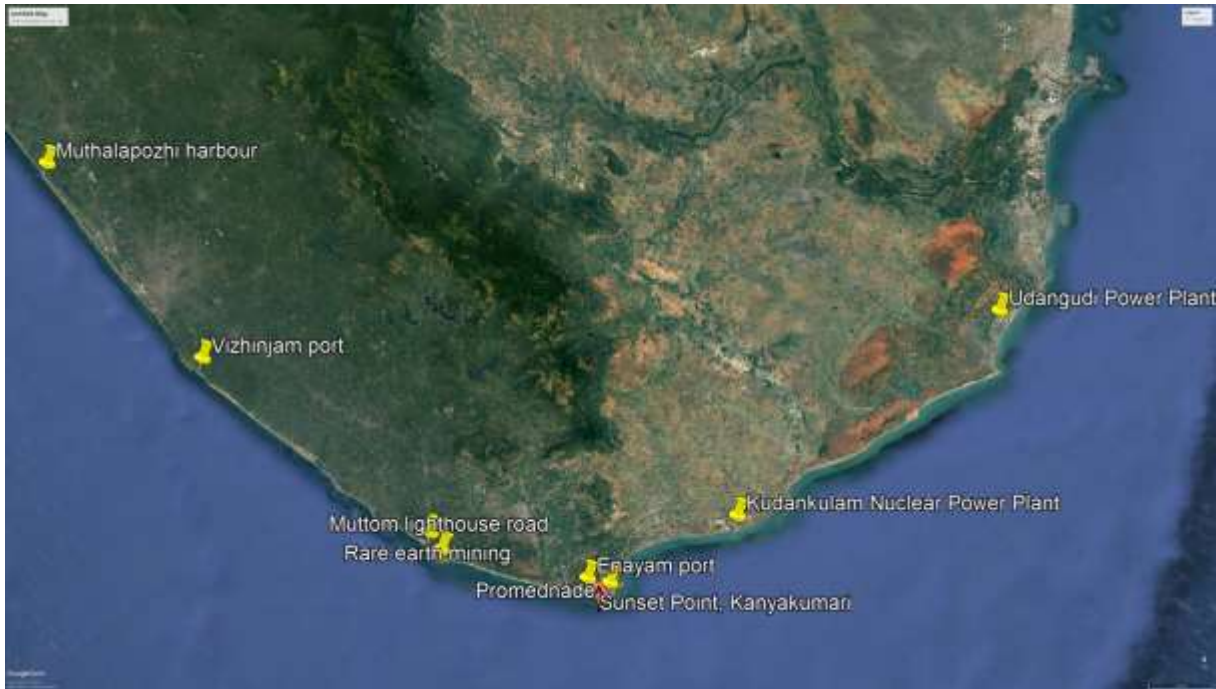
¹⁶ Letter by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change to M/s V.O. Chidambaranar Port Trust with 'Terms of Reference', File No. 21-26/2016-IA-III dated 19th December 2016

¹⁷ Letter by the Ministry of Environment & Forests to Vizhinjam International Seaport Limited granting environment and CRZ clearance, File No. 11-122/2011-IA-III dated 3rd January 2014

¹⁸ Letter by the Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change to M/s Directorate of Light Houses and Lightship giving CRZ clearance, File No. 11-28/2017-IA-III dated 3rd October 2017

¹⁹ Letter by the Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change to M/s Indian Rare Earths Ltd. giving environment clearance, File No. J-11015/61/2011-IA-II (M) dated 6th April 2018

²⁰ Letter by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change to M/s TANGEDCO with 'Terms of Reference', File No. J-13012/19/2015-IA.I(T)s dated 2nd November 2015



Kanniyakumari development projects

These projects all along the coast are not only taking away common lands from fishworkers, but also have the potential to inflict major damage to an already vulnerable coastline. It is in this context that tourism development is taking place in Kanniyakumari. Rather than taking account of the shoreline vulnerability and taking appropriate measures, tourism development in the area is further exacerbating the vulnerability.

Tourism is exacerbating coastline vulnerability

Currently, there are already about 80 registered lodges/hotels in Kanniyakumari, many of them built very close to the sea, and many of them may also be violating the rules of the Coastal Regulation Zone notifications. Although a complete survey has not been done, casual visual observation makes it very clear that several structures, especially hotel walls and promenades are less than 500 m from the High Tide Line.



Hotels next to the sea

Not only does there appear to be no clear monitoring of CRZ violations and action taken, in conversation with the District Collector of Kanniyakumari, he talked of the CRZ as one of the “issues” that tourism has to overcome. This cavalier attitude to vulnerability is also reflected in the project development.

Under Swadesh Darshan, more than Rs. 1 crore has been allocated for the construction of a sea wall. Research has repeatedly shown that sea walls, rather than stopping erosion, can further exacerbate shoreline changes (Rodriguez, Subramaniam, Sridhar, Menon, & Shanker, 2008). The president of one of the fishworkers' cooperatives in Kanniyakumari also supports the view that seawalls should be avoided, pointing out that seawalls tend to only change the pattern of erosion and accretion putting coastal villages at risk. Despite the overwhelming evidence against them, a sea wall was constructed in Kanniyakumari in the tourist area, stretching from the Triveni Sangam area almost until the sunset point.

Furthermore, to increase tourism in the region, ~Rs. 2 crores has been spent on laying a ‘last-mile’ road and a promenade that runs from Triveni Sangam until Sunset point. This road and promenade, approximately 2.7 km, makes for a beautiful ride for tourists, the sea falling away on one side as you ride into the sunset.



Promenade to sunset point

But the road cuts through the rocky beaches and the vegetation-covered dunes right next to them, completely destroying the dune. Dunes are extremely important for coastal ecosystems, not only acting as a filter preventing salt-water intrusion into freshwater aquifers, but also acting as barriers that protect the seashore. Moreover, plants like the beach morning glory (*Ipomoea pes-caprae*), seen in the picture below, and found all along the coast of Kanniyakumari, are important in preventing erosion because their roots hold the sand in place (Namboothiri, et al., 2008). For a shoreline already highly unstable, such construction completely removes the natural protection, and can further destabilize the coast by blocking wind and wave movement, and by removing vegetation that helps reduce erosion.



Beach vegetation in parts that are not constructed



Portion of beach being cleared for promenade

It seems clear from these observations that the vulnerability of Kanniyakumari is not being taken into account when tourism development is being planned. An examination of the Swadesh Darshan DPR also shows a lack of any social or environmental impact assessment or a clear vulnerability mapping, which is critical in places that already exhibit high vulnerability levels.

Moreover, tourism in Kanniyakumari is further threatening the ecology of the region and the lives and health of the fishworkers and other local communities in the area through unregulated disposal of waste.

Unregulated waste disposal affects fish and fishworkers

One of the major problems identified by several interview respondents in Kanniyakumari was regarding waste, specifically, the disposal of solid and liquid waste by the hotel industry. Of the hotels in Kanniyakumari, only 6 have Consent to Operate.²¹ All of the other hotels seem to have no regulation of their solid and liquid waste disposal. According to one of the hotel managers, the hotel has a private Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) that is used for disposal, however, locals allege that all the hotels send sewage is being sent directly into the sea. They state that sewage lines run from the hotels to the beaches through their villages and empty out into the sea.

This accumulation of waste on the beaches restricts access for fishworkers in these areas since they cannot store their boats on these beaches and cannot use them for net repair, fish drying and other activities involved in fishing. Moreover, fishworkers complain that they have to wade through the waste and sludge to go out far enough to put their nets or pull their boats ashore.

The fishworkers in the nearby villages have been attempting to put a stop to this practice by petitioning local authorities, but to no avail. Letters have been written at various points to the Hoteliers Association in Kanniyakumari, the MLA, the Special Town Panchayat and the District Collector, stating that there are drainage pipes leading from the hotels that discharge toilet waste directly into the sea in certain areas (Retchakar street, Sannathi street etc). The letters point out that these are areas inhabited by people (7000 inhabitants according to one letter), who are being affected this drainage. The letter states that fishermen, going into the sea through this water as well as women and children in these areas are catching diseases from the exposed drains that run into the sea.

²¹According to RTI reply by Pollution Control Board, Kanniyakumari District dated 23.09.2019



Waste near fishing beach

During the peak season of the Sabarimala pilgrimage, there are several lakh pilgrims coming to Kanniyakumari as part of their pilgrim journey every day. However, no special provisions have been made to manage this crowd, no regulations or guidelines exist. There are also inadequate facilities for the pilgrims, and locals complain that these tourists/pilgrims are openly defecating on the beaches, adding to the waste issue that the villages nearby are already facing. However, despite repeated demands to the authorities, as of now, no action has been taken.

The indiscriminate disposal of garbage into the sea impacts not only the communities living next to these areas, but also the fish here. One of the leaders of a fishworkers federation, says that plastic is a huge problem in Kanniyakumari. Highlighting the impact of this waste on fish populations, he says -

“Here we have corals and that is where you will find all the fish. There will be fish of different sizes that are living between the corals and they will be around the corals. But now the corals are covered in plastic. If you go down and look, you will see that many of the corals have a layer of plastic over them, and so it suffocates them. Without the corals, the fish also die.”

CONCLUSION

The manner in which tourism is being developed in Tamilnadu aligns with the practice of the larger Blue Economy model of heavy investment in ocean resources. What we have from the tourism component of Blue Economy is a capital intensive model of tourism that brings with it several negative impacts of displacement, loss of access to resources, dilutions of environmental norms and dilution of labour laws among other things. By definition, a capital intensive, investment heavy model of tourism, is structured and designed to exclude marginalized communities like fishworkers - completely contrary to the rhetoric for tourism that promotes local involvement and maximizing benefits to the local communities.

This form of development, however, is only serving to further exacerbate the marginalization of fishworkers in the state. With increasing tourism expansion in coastal spaces, fishing communities are finding themselves pushed away from their commons, while at the same time, these spaces are being sold to private players. Moreover, this form of inadequately planned tourism is also harming the environment and increasing the vulnerability of fragile coastal landscapes and threatening the survival of communities living here.

While this is the reality of how tourism is being developed under the Blue Economy, it is possible to imagine a better reality, one that empowers local communities rather than disenfranchising them, and one that builds on the stewardship of nature. ***Alternatives are possible - of a people-centred approach to tourism with environmental sustainability and democratic decision making as key principles.*** What we need is a re-imagination of tourism that recognizes the customary governance of coastal communities to their commons and allows for participation of fishworkers in decision making and ownership of the tourism. It is also important to acknowledge that tourism is sensitive to several external factors like natural disasters, the state of the global economy among others. The pandemic, which severely affected the tourism industry is a case in point. So we need to firmly place tourism as a means of additional source of livelihood (not a primary one). Fishing and allied activities have to be linked to the tourism industry and not sacrificed for the sake of tourism.

Coastal and ocean commons are not just a 'physical resource base' to stake claim and share - it is not a pie that can be cut up into neat little slices. So we will need to replace this current model of tourism under Blue Economy with models that acknowledge commons as community and not as marketable products.

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