

# seminar



nature's present

# 690

## NATURE'S PRESENT

a symposium on

understanding conflicts around

nature in contemporary India

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# Historicizing mutinies against nature

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THE urgency of halting the destruction of nature and the rational settlement of human conflict over natural resources has become a hallmark of contemporary discourse in the public sphere. Conservation problems appear as irrational mutinies against rational governance and scientific management, and its perpetrators' actions are often explained as self-interest or ignorance couched in discourses of identity, honour, tradition and entitlement. Does the future of conservation then simply demand an intensification of earlier efforts by secular environmentalists, either for better communication and education strategies, or does it call for strengthening conservation battles in courts or on the ground? Perhaps a reflection of contestations over nature in present times can expand our conception of the ambit of environmentalism in future.

This article attempts at such reflection, drawing from marine examples in the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay region along the south east coast of India. This is a region where nature's

elements drew the attention of naturalists and scientists in the 18th and 19th centuries and also the site where the first marine biological research station was established in 1914. This coastline bears many impressions of a much longer history of various communities' interactions with the sea – through enterprises such as boat and ship building, maritime trade, large-scale pearl and chank fisheries which, incidentally, finds mention in Sangam literature from 300 BCE.

A very brief sketch of four controversies that transpired over the last decade will illustrate how the present crisis is commonly perceived. I later identify the common narratives in such controversies that intensify struggles over nature in a markedly different way than before. I end with some ideas on how to perform such environmentalisms and the work it entails.

Illegal transboundary fishing and the politics of identity: The Palk Bay fishing conflict has dominated recent news reports about this region. The years following the bloody defeat of

the LTTE in 2009 witnessed serious conflict in these territories – the tensions centred around the charge of ‘illegal transboundary fishing’ placed on Indian trawlers transgressing into Sri Lankan waters. Here, ethnic identity and economic stakes collide with strong geopolitical posturing over the porosity of the International Boundary Line (IBL).

**S**everal actors on both sides (including fisher leaders, scientists and activists) have denounced the technology of bottom trawling, whether in India or in Sri Lanka (where only gill nets are operated). Tamil trawl fishers from India on the other hand have not only stiffly countered these charges of ecological damage but importantly, that of illegitimacy. At times denying that transgressions occur at all, one of their dissenting arguments has been to claim that the waters and lands between the two nations have known longer histories of common use for the Tamil fisher community than the current separation of use enforced by the artificial boundary of the IBL. They point to a diversity of categories of ‘trawler owners’ stating that economic imperatives lock-in their fishing behaviour since indebtedness awaits them if they reduce the intensity of fishing.

Some trawler representatives will admit that technology has detrimental effects on the ecosystem, but complicate this narrow view by also pointing to the possibilities it has offered – where such activity has fed India’s export capabilities, sustains many local and regional seafood companies and employees and other chains of livelihoods in which coastal people are employed today. In the current debate around the banning of bottom trawling, they raise important questions about the silence of the state which actively led them into adopting this technology between the 1960s till the 1990s and the

‘integrity’ of government officials who look the other way when mega-sized trawlers are illegally given fishing licences.

**E**ndangered species and traditional vocation: In 2001 the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests (under the NDA coalition government headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party) introduced a ban on the collection and sale of all sea cucumbers and sea horses (all *Holothurians* and *Syngnathidians*) under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, presumably on account of worrying concerns about their depleting stocks. Since then, there have been regular instances of illegal catches of these items. In 2004, the confiscation of a Singapore bound container, with over two metric tonnes of dried seahorse, at the Chennai Port was widely reported in the press. In 2015, the online edition of the news network NDTV, reported that the Coastal Security Group (Marine Police) in Tamil Nadu found 600 kgs of processed sea cucumbers in a raid of godowns in Nagapattinam.

In 2014, 16 Sri Lankan fishermen were reportedly arrested by the Indian Coast Guard for catching sea cucumbers in Indian waters (the item is not banned in Sri Lanka). Further, following protests and petitions from various fisher representatives, 2016 saw not just the Tamil Nadu wing of the leftist All India Trade Union Congress openly support the sea cucumber fishers but also the former ally of the BJP in the NDA, the AIADMK Member of Parliament Anwar Raja argued publicly against the ban. In March that year, *The Hindu* reported that Anwar Raja had offered a wide range of reasons in support of lifting the ban – chiefly the impact on the livelihood of fishers but also the harassment by the Sri Lankan navy and the ‘age-old’ tradition of breath-hold diving for fishing.

In 2016, the Madras High Court took cognisance of a petition filed by the Nagai Seafood Catchers Association for lifting the WLPA imposed ban. Fishers engaged in breath-hold diving for the collection of sea cucumbers claim that it has been a traditional activity which they must be allowed to practice. They also lay the blame for depleting sea cucumber numbers on unregulated bottom trawling in this region.

**T**echnological innovations as tradition: Over the last three years, a group of fishers from the Teresapuram quarter of Thoothukudi city began using the controversial ‘hookah diving’ system to scrape the sea bottom and collect dead chank (*Turbinella pyrum*) shells. The fishers argue that diving and collecting shells is a traditional vocation practised by the Catholic Parivar and Kadaiyar castes but also by the Hindu Muthurayar caste and Muslim Labbai or Marakayar in this region. The use of this technology, their leaders argue, is merely a technological innovation, a mark of *naveenakaalam* or ‘the new times’ that they have to go along with, and that technological innovation is central to the practice of fishing.

The risk to life in the hookah system is considerable where, unlike with the scuba diving apparatus, hookah divers use long rubber pipes directly connected to compressors that pass on unfiltered air. Often working for a couple of hours at a stretch, the ‘compressor divers’ do not follow standard scuba diving protocols such as controlled descents or ascents, bottom time limits, making decompression stops or dive times. Reports of deaths resulting from decompression sickness have been noted but are not openly discussed. The practice of chank collection by this method has brought down the price of live caught shells which involve greater labour for cleaning and polishing aside

from the labour involved in breadth hold diving or free diving. Compressor divers and their leaders passionately argue that this is a risk they are willing to take in order to feed their families, somewhat akin to labour in foundries and mines.

In 2015, the Jayalalithaa government also announced a limited subsidy for the purchase of scuba diving equipment to carry on this work which soon turned unviable. Leaders of the divers' associations argue that they have obtained licenses from the fisheries departments (which does not specify technological limits in this case) and that the true source of the depletion of chank is bottom trawling introduced by the state in the first place.

**M**aritime infrastructure impacts and reviving maritime glory: Despite heavy criticism and protest from coastal communities, the Ministry of Environment and Forests awarded environmental clearance in 2006 to the Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project (SCCP), a dredging project to widen and deepen the shallow channels of the Gulf of Mannar, Palk Bay and Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka. Technically, SSCP involved an annual dredging of the seabed for approximately 167 km to make a navigational channel about 300 metres wide and thereby support ships with a draft of about 10 metres. The channel route is only a few kilometres away from the Gulf of Mannar National Park and within a portion of the larger 10,500 sq km Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve. It aims at bypassing transshipment at Colombo port and promoting coastal shipping in India.

The idea of a navigable canal in this region can be traced to James Rennell in the late 18th century and subsequently, multiple though aborted attempts were made to revive it, extending into the post-Independence period.

It was finally resurrected in the years of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) rule in Tamil Nadu when it was a coalition partner with the UPA-I government at the Centre (where DMK leader T.R. Baalu controlled the portfolio of the Ministry of Shipping, Road Transport and Highways). SSCP was introduced by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2005 in Madurai city as a project that would bring glory to the Tamil Nadu state and economic benefits to the nation. Significant portions of his project inauguration speech were dedicated to the 'great and glorious maritime tradition' of Indian merchants, boats and trade, arguing that the SSCP would help revive this fading glory.

**A**n examination of these present-day controversies reveals a range of actors (scientists, environmentalists, fishermen, government officials and policy makers), each of whom contributes to at least three intersecting narratives – of nature, modernity and technology. But absent from most claims related to these narratives is their open historicization. Thus, they only allude to a past, but shy away from an active engagement with how power and injustice in the past may have contributed to the making of such claims.

Common to all these accounts is the discussion over nature – whether it is impacted or not impacted by a particular set of human interventions, whether the impacts are justified or not, and who bears culpability for crimes against nature. While some actors appear to speak in nature's terms (biological or oceanographic descriptions such as increased sedimentation from dredging, fishing down food webs, mesopredator release or the endangered status of marine species), others describe their relations with nature through non-science cultural categories where economic life, tradition,

honour and community feature prominently. Workshops, meetings and public hearings that debate the present controversies display very little insight into how each actor came to forge these ideas about nature.

Thus, meetings on tackling bottom trawling are not informed by an environmental, economic or social history of bottom trawling on this coast. Nor is there sufficient understanding of how each of the actors ('trawling owners', 'the maritime nation', 'illegal fishers') themselves emerged and the operation of power and injustice in aiding their emergence. Thus, despite multiple actors shaping current fisheries (either around key species, or techniques), its regulation is not discussed using legal principles that bring into play history, such as a Common But Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR). Precisely since ideas like CBDR require an acknowledgement of injustice and power differentials which are sometimes complicated to make, and because they broaden the number of actors who are complicit in forging a crisis, it is unpalatable to powerful actors as an acceptable legal principle.

Thus, public hearings or environmental clearance processes for the SSCP did not witness a debate on the meaning of, or the truth or social costs around, 'India's past maritime glory.' It also failed to mitigate the social and environmental costs arising from the project objective of remaking maritime glory in the present. In short, the historical operation of power in producing various actors and the historicized costs of their relations with nature is absent in environmental governance processes around marine issues.

**T**he second narrative that is common to all actors but not separate from the discourse of nature is that of moder-

nity. This modernity is articulated in multiple ways. Secular environmentalists claimed a modern understanding of nature when they argued that the SSCP had to be stopped because of ecological impacts of dredging and not on account of the putative destruction of the Rama Setu Bridge (which nationalist Hindutva affiliated groups claimed was a sacred site built by Lord Rama's army of monkeys over a million years ago). They also argued for a modern conception of equality and justice as constitutional rights, claiming that SSCP would jeopardize the livelihoods of hundreds of small-scale fishers.

On the other hand, the proponents of the SSCP argued for the modernization of the shipping industry in a double movement – a step away from economic backwardness but also a step towards a status of past glory. The hookah divers' claim that their use of high-risk compressor diving technologies was both traditional and modern 'innovation' for them, is a particular representation of modernity.

**E**nvironmental governance does not enquire into the full sets of effects of such claims (except that on nature), or why such claims arise in the first instance. A broader conception of justice in relation to nature, or a more political ecology, might ask in what way does the claim to a particular modernity privilege certain groups in the way they relate to nature? And do they choose particular representations or are there alternative states of being that these groups could equally have claimed? Could the hookah divers find alternative ways of expressing their modernity in a manner not just acceptable to an external community but also feasible in the context of over-fishing and social immobility? How do the other actors constrain or privilege each other's claims to modernity?

Once again a turn to a historicized view is inevitable if claims to modernity must be explored.

**A** final common narrative in the above sketches relates to technology. Not only is there a tendency among conservationists to speak of technology as neutral, but the assault on nature is seen as the 'misuse' of technology (of underwater diving gear, of bottom trawling technologies, of dredging equipment, of market information, use of mobile phones by sea cucumber poachers, and so on). However, seen in conjunction with the narrative of modernity and that of relations with nature, we come to appreciate the control that technology has over society.

All maritime enterprises today are replete with technological artefacts and materials. The introduction of technologies in the field of fisheries was closely enmeshed with the discourse of modernity. From fishing, to conservation, to dredging – all activities are mediated by multiple technologies. However, in adjudicating their impacts on nature, we will need to simultaneously examine possible effects on identity and the differential relations of people with technology through time.

Idealized versions of environmental governance and management of marine resources are structured around simple and ahistorical categories of actors and actions. However, in practice, a number of other logics surrounding cultural categories such as identity, ethnicity, or nationalism are put into play while negotiating nature based decisions. While self-interest and ignorance are not unlikely explanations of the multiple mutinies against nature, they are not generalizable as explanations for the cultural expressions regarding nature and its use. Cultural categories emerge from the representations of historical experiences.

Thus, 'India's past maritime glory' is as much a contemporary cultural expression that arises from a particular reading of historical accounts, but also from the omission of other accounts that qualify the meaning of the entity 'India', or those that highlight the intricate contingencies of social relations, maritime labour and status, technological engagements that shaped maritime trade in the past.

**C**ontemporary controversies over nature, argued through intertwined narratives of nature-modernity-technology, are therefore historically shaped. Thus, an environmentalism in the present will not only have to account for justice with regard to nature-culture relations in the present but also injustices in such relations in the past. A possible way at understanding injustices in the past is by (a) being attentive to the framing behind particular historical engagements with nature (e.g. the 'improvement' of fisheries through the introduction of trawlers) and (b) interpreting multiple historical sources to understand the distribution of the fruits and costs of such activity. Actively looking for omission and silences from historically weaker actors in contemporary accounts will illuminate where injustice in the present is likely to emerge. This double vision can help expand the idea of environmentalism to account for justice not just in nature but also in culture, over time.

This does not call for jettisoning nature altogether, but rather a revision of relations with nature based on the mediating effect that the attention to history can produce. Hopefully, this will lead to a more wholesome appreciation of how rights and wrongs are constituted in these relations and what shape justice should take. Such a maritime environmentalism that brings social relations and history to the fore is not diluted but goes deep.