Rapti Siriwardane-de Zoysa

Fishing, Mobility and Settlerhood

Coastal Socialities in Postwar Sri Lanka

Rapti Siriwardane-de Zoysa
Department for Social Sciences
Leibniz Center for Tropical Marine Research (ZMT)
Bremen, Germany

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Prologue: The Market Day that Never Was

> This is my home
> this thin edge of
> barbwire.
>
> But the skin of the earth is seamless.
> The sea cannot be fenced,
> el mar does not stop at borders. (Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*)

'This time they have gone too far to turn back. If this [issue] is not resolved within the next three days, a great disaster will ensue,' Saahir remarked prophetically in Sinhala. When we first met a year before that during my preliminary visit to Pulmoddai in northern Trincomalee, he had been the president of a large lagoon Fisher Co-operative Society (FCS). When I met him again a year later, he had stepped down from co-operative leadership and had taken to local politics. 'In a livelihood such as this [fishing], you need to be in politics,' he would often remark.

It was the last day of June 2012, a date I had noted quite deliberately. Among other things, it also signified the day on which I moved to Uppuveli on the northern fringes of Trincomalee town. Those were particularly parched days in eastern Sri Lanka; it was the height of the tourist season when the southwest monsoons lapped at the western seaboard, and local coastal currents along the northeastern shoreline were perhaps at their mildest. For as long as I stayed in the northeast, I came to regard the sea as being intimately bound with the rhythm of my own life. I began relating to the sea as not just 'place' to be understood in the context of human and multispecies mobility; in the words of Kimberley Peters and Philip Steinberg (2015), the sea materially embodies ongoing processes of 'repetition and differentiation, dissolution and recomposition, statis and dynamism', which closely resembled the motion of my own fieldwork routine that year.

Later that afternoon, I had met with my research assistant Dharshini as we made our way up to Pulmoddai where Saahir lived, approximately 52 km north of the main town. We had planned to have an early lunch together and visit a migrant fishing camp not too far from Saahir's village. Lunch was a hasty affair, for Saahir had just received a phone call during our drive to Pulmoddai. Saahir was fondly referred

to by some of his contemporaries as a busybody, and given how well networked he was, the fact that Saahir should have been one of the first in his village to receive this piece of unfortunate news came as no surprise.

The night before, a small-scale fisherman from Samudragama a predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist settler village located close to the central fish market in Trincomalee town, was said to have drowned while out at sea. Daily nocturnal fishing cycles often begin at dusk and end at dawn the following morning, particularly during the mid-year when stocks of squid are plentiful, and are usually fished at night. July in particular was often referred to as the seasonal 'squid month' in coastal Trincomalee.

Over lunch, he made several hurried phone calls to a number of fisher co-operative members, mosque trustees, and one or two Kuchchaveli pradeshya sabha (local government) councillors he knew in the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), the political party with which he was affiliated. A local wave of mobilisation had begun. This time, however, collective response was to assume a mantel of cautious calculated inaction. The event that sparked it off had only occurred the night before, and in Saahir's view, the fatality itself did not spell the key tragedy. He perceived the event more as a symbolic harbinger to a cycle of 'great disasters' (*maha aparadaya*: Sinhala) in the near future, a very near future in fact, for he had even placed a time duration of 3 days upon it, until which time things would simmer before precariously blowing over. We postponed our plans and after lunch made our way towards Trincomalee town.

Nocturnal fishing misfortunes are all too common in the lives of coastal fisherfolk in the east. I was told that a village of 300 households may report as many as two or three occupationally related male deaths per year since 2009 that may occur as a result of rough waters 30 nautical miles out to sea, tides that weaker 15 or 20 horse-powered fibre-glass day-boats with outboard motors at times struggle to withstand. On the other hand, the risk of a motor engine defect in the dead of night was said to be higher, and a number of co-operative members often bemoaned how costly it was to maintain a good engine. Many were accustomed to using diesel fuel to start their engines, thereafter supplementing the rest of their trip with cheaper, low-grade kerosene (lamp) oil that was said to shorten the average lifespan of an outboard motor. Nocturnal fishing trips therefore were often undertaken at the very least in pairs and often in small groups of four to eight male kinsfolk or friends (depending on the type of craft) from the same hamlet or village.

Indeed, it was the 'accidental' nature of Vidu's[1] death that raised alarms across the district. In many ways, Saahir's use of the Sinhala noun '*aparadey*' to describe the narrative is rife with meaning. Often, the term signifies a past or impending disaster that is implicitly de-naturalised, in the sense that it could be humanly circumvented. Furthermore, the term intimates a sense of shared experience. While fishing-related catastrophes routinely affect households, the death of this fisherman the previous night was rumoured to have repercussions for collective livelihoods not only locally, but in regions of the district as far north as Kokillai that lies nestled on

[1] A pseudonym.

the Mullaitivu border (see Fig. 2). Administratively, Saahir's village fell under the Kuchchaveli Divisional Secretariat. Geographically at least, it was far removed from the main Trincomalee town where Vidu had lived. More important however, the nature of the death was rarely spoken of as a coincidental mishap, despite our hearing several fisher families across the district referring to it as 'vipattu' (accident: Tamil).

Over the four or five days that followed, Vidu's death prompted a temporary suspension of all craft-based fishing activity – any form of fishing in fact that warranted some degree of mobility over coastal waters. At first, this hiatus in fishing activity was not spurred by official decree, but was a voluntary decision made after extensive consultations with other neighbouring fisher co-operatives, one that was driven by fear and caution. Ironically, Vidu, a non-descript artisanal fisherman whom many had never heard of, became the very embodiment of a livelihoods-related faux pas. His was an unfortunate tale that assumed a life of its own, morphing into a metaphor that was ultimately ethnicised with fervour.

The facts themselves, as two older children from Samudragama told us that very evening, were somewhat threadbare. The night before, a crew comprising four crewmen (*goloyo*: Sinhala) had set out after midnight, rather an irregular time to take off on an all-night fishing trip. The boat had returned early the next morning with a member of its crew missing. Yet it was only 10 h after its return that the Trincomalee Town and Gravets police had been alerted. Key office-bearers of the Samudragama FCS were notified closer to noontime, the children emphatically stated, perhaps because Vidu's friends 'trusted he was still alive… and they took it upon themselves to rescue him'. Meanwhile, the sequence of events that had befallen Vidu that night was narrated to us with much conviction and alacrity. We were told that while Vidu fished, a boat from the nearby predominantly ethnic-Muslim village of Jamaliya had thumped their vessel, demanding a share of their landings:

> there was a jostle as they [Vidu and friends], wanted to safeguard their catch. The Muslim men had brought long knives and threatened to cut them… and while they fought, one of them pushed Vidu and he fell into the sea and he drowned. The Muslim boat swiftly took flight. The culprits are still in hiding, and the police have taken Vidu's friends in for questioning. They are the only witnesses. This afternoon another fleet of boats from our village went out to look for the body, but could not find it. They returned close [to] 5pm. Vidu's widow weeps ceaselessly. The funeral house is open, and they have brought in a closed coffin. The police will now give a grace period of three days for the assailants to turn themselves in and confess. If they don't there might be trouble in Jamaliya.

Apart from the palpable trope of ethnic othering, the moral placement of the two sets of protagonists (vis-à-vis the relative passivity of one group as opposed to the other) was arguably predestined to play their assigned roles in such a narrative. When asked whether there was a prior history between the two groups of men, the responses became vague.

As we watched the evening sun slink behind the horizon, it struck me how uncanny it was to see the shoreline of Samudragama this desolate. The canvas of the evening sky cast a pale gold hue upon the sand along with the scores of fibreglass boats parked in long rows, pulled above the scaly contoured line at which the tides broke. A few dogs sauntered by, stopping occasionally to scratch at their flea-bitten backs.

Samudragama sits behind the old Trincomalee town fish market, in fact, the only market in town that was operational during the time of my main fieldwork stay between June 2012 and May 2013. What remained exceptional about the day after Vidu's death was that the market was shut down. The characteristic iceboxes had been drained and stacked high, and the floor hosed clean. The sandy stretch in front of the market was bereft of the usual fleet of lorries and smaller trucks that often parked there as the fish were iced and packed for transport. Apart from a frayed signpost there was nothing to indicate that this grey, dank wall-less concrete structure functioned as the district's central fish market. As we left the market street and made our way back, we noticed a truckload of policemen stationed on the adjacent street. There were a few army personnel among them.

The following day, the market remained closed and I learned from a traffic policeman that the market might not be open for a few more days for fear of a hartal, or a public protest with a propensity for violence. He then stated that his compatriots would keep close watch over the next few days, for the facts were seemingly simple: a Sinhalese fisherman allegedly had been killed by a group of Muslims. This emphasis on Vidu's singularised identity as a Sinhalese fisherman (as opposed to the non-descript 'Muslim' rabble) was reproduced in most of the narratives that I came across among local state officials. These discourses certainly bore far-reaching implications.

In outlying areas like Pulmoddai and Kokkilai, not to mention closer divisional spaces such as Kinnya and Muthur that had sizeable neighbourhoods with closely knit mosque associations, the cessation of all fishing activity in the peripheral areas translated into a strategy of lying low. Indubitably, this collective response came at the great cost of foregoing daily disposable incomes, particularly during an already short fishing season, and the advent of Ramazan. Meanwhile, over the first week of July, a number of Sinhalese-owned boats operated as usual, particularly among the migrant encampments (vadi) in the far north and south. In Samudragama, few if any fishing boats set out to sea on regular fishing trips. This hiatus was often articulated as an act of respect for the deceased and his surviving kin.

At first glance, Vidu's ill-fated demise, and its dominant and countervailing narratives, have little about them that is particularly noteworthy. Plotlines are often reconstructed against dominant boundary politics. Ethno-religious othering has often remained an anticipated dynamic in the context of inter-communal mobilisation and the fashioning of everyday dissent. What was so different about Vidu's case, as a number of fishermen and women said, was the fact that he was evidently Sinhalese. Violent intra-group clashes out at sea did occur with some degree of regularity in Trincomalee, at least during the aftermath of wartime. Arguably then, an intra-ethnic tussle, irrespective of whether or not it implicated members from two

distinct villages, may not have warranted the same sequence of cautionary action taken by the local state authorities.

Over the course of that month, I collected at least twelve different narrative interpretations and renditions of that single fatality. Some described Vidu's death as an insiders' cabal, for one of his so-called friends had not too long ago threatened the dead man with a switchblade during a tavern scuffle. His 'set' was said to have been predisposed towards rancour and retribution, for why then would this motley crew have included Vidu in their boat: a man who had only recently taken to fishing after he had married a woman from Samudragama, a man who owned a simple outrigger canoe, and could barely swim?

Others pointed towards the incidence of small-scale piracy (or a slightly modified extortive practice evidenced in the demand for *kappam* or protection money). It was widely believed that it was the Samudragama crew that had plundered the Jamaliya boat's catch. Other versions embossed this narrative by claiming that while the kappam-seekers often originated from Samudragama, they had to have a legitimate reason to attempt to bully the Jamaliya group into submission. Therefore, an uncommonly bounteous catch at night was hardly providential or seen as a matter of sheer luck. On the contrary, it often pointed to the use of unauthorised fishing gear and other illicit practices such as fishing with lights, for what other reason then did Vidu and his crew have to venture out to sea past midnight, if not for the fact that they may have been tipped off by another seafarer about a company of rule-breakers from Jamaliya?

Ultimately, Vidu's death brought about a ripple effect of its own: a series of significant local events and localised policy shifts. These transformations inevitably hewed the thin red line that forms the backbone of this book and its key arguments. Contrary to official narratives, which in part concealed the mysterious circumstances of an artisanal fisherman's death, inter-village and inter-communal coalition building became an immensely swift affair. The issues at stake were not at first identity-based gripes. They comprised a litany of grievances that were framed by the context of scores of cross-ethnic village co-operative fisher societies living in close proximity with one another.

These grievances most often centred on shared and seemingly quotidian livelihood predicaments and insecurities. These included the pervasive use of illegal fishing practices amid other forms of exploitative resource extraction, ineffective top-down partisan and patronage-led governance structures, together with informal piracy networks, extortion and rent seeking while out at sea. Some village leaders were steadfast in arguing how the ethnicisation of the 'Vidu case' unwittingly diluted the possibility of attention towards more immediate bread-and-butter issues and political injustices.

Despite the diverse versioning of the same event, the re-alignment of grassroots fisher collectives and alliances crosscutting place-based, linguistic, ethno-religious and other political boundary markers remained particularly striking. Ultimately, Vidu's fatality implicated an entangled web of seasonal migrants, settlers and local collectives, whose lives were diversely patterned by post-war circulations of labour, knowledge, capital and normative discourses on belonging and rights to livelihood.

Meanwhile, as seemingly fixed ethno-nationalist insider-outsider boundaries went, such events often laid bare amoebic forms of inter-communal life across proximate villages and distant places – as unities and loyalties continually flowed, ebbed and morphed according to the grievances that were being politicised at a given time and place.

Against the varied canon of wartime ethnography, Sri Lanka's Eastern Province has often been regarded as the most ethnically and religiously diverse region of the island (Spencer et al. 2015). Yet its socially heterogeneous spaces, from Amparai to the northern fringes of Mullaitivu have often run the risk of being metaphorically imagined as ethno-religious patchworks or mosaics of Tamil-Muslim-Sinhala enclaves. In this vein, the 'Balkanisation of the northeast' has been a phrase that been in circulation among certain NGOs circles, scholars and actor networks across the international aid and development landscape since the late 1970s. More recent empirical research, over the past decade at least, have had much to contribute in the way of how interfaith and civil society encounters unfolded and were sustained in moments of interspersed 'peace' during Sri Lanka's civil war, which at the same time fused with recalibrated grievances and power asymmetries that followed in wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 (see Hyndman and de Alwis 2005; Gaasbeek 2010; Lawrence 2010; Walker 2010; Thiranagama 2011; Spencer 2012; Spencer et al. 2015; Orjuela et al. 2016).

Yet within these figurations, another equally salient narrative has remained relatively muted. The socio-spatially and historic stories of hundreds, if not thousands of transient migrants – some translocal and others more sedentary – who have seasonally followed monsoonal winds, oceanic currents, migratory fish species and even flows of tourists, between and within island coastlines, its peripheries and its edges. Moreover, the book explores the complex lifeworlds of diverse fisherfolk who inhabit a tense, contemporary landscape of militarised shorelines, while rendering particular attention to how localised independencies and ties of networked patronage form and are sustained across spaces of ordinary life. It is here that I turn to the fluid, liminal coastline of Trincomalee, where place-based and state-driven projects in ethno-religious surveillance and b/order-making have remained divisive. In situating my exploration within distinct saltwater lifeworlds that the littoral northeast affords, I focus on manifold meanings and ordinary practices that pattern everyday kinds of sociality between small-scale fisherfolk that live markedly dissimilar lives from more sedentary agrarian communities that reside in close proximity.

In retrospect, this project in its entirety has been the outgrowth of a question that I, as maritime anthropologist and a political ecologist, was initially inspired by: How is a universal phenomenon such as social co-operation discursively constructed and practiced among resource-dependent communities, communities whose lifeworlds are often framed by scholars with allegories of competition and vigorous rivalry? As a point of departure, I regard everyday pluralism and relational dynamics that crisscross dominant or hegemonic modes of national(ist) differentiation, such as religion and ethnicity, remain the default mode of social existence, even during times of violence and armed conflict (Das 2013).

In taking this view further, I echo the late decolonial queer feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) in stating that we, in every possible way, inhabit social spaces of inbetweenness that are sedimented through historic and contemporary trajectories of rupture and transformation that realign ways we think about ourselves and others. However, at the same time, it is important to bear in mind that these 'threshold perspectives' encrusted in the ways of reading and cohabiting the world do not always and evenly chip away at restrictive identity politics in ways one would expect. In this regard, I take a step back by considering this project a modest intervention on comprehending the many ways in which people who inhabit plural spaces imaginatively and ethically interpret, legitimate, normalise and, at times, politically challenge oppressive extramundane structures – structures that more profoundly pattern the lives of those they perceive as being 'Other' or markedly different from themselves.

In the same vein, this journey – through the making of this book – foregrounds an ethnography of selfhood and of 'home'. While completing the manuscript from the distant proximity of northern Germany, a crucial part of my challenge has been how to write about diverse modes of sociality while sidestepping the tendency to romanticise processes of inter-communal interaction in their entirety. Moreover, since the inception of this project, I have grappled with the question of how relational hierarchies and power-laden patronage ties could be further integrated into the equation, while examining the situated gaze that my own socio-spatial privilege affords.

Irrevocably my focus on social co-operation, as an analytical lens, has continually proved a precarious endeavour. The project often ran the risk of being misinterpreted as a naïve effort on my part to over-emphasise the presence of inter-communal solidarity and togetherness, well above the harsh post-war realities of everyday fear, suspicion and of structural violence that vein Sri Lanka's securitised north and east. Therefore while navigating the labyrinthine terrain of fisher lifeworlds and post-war sociality (in its plural sense), this book attempts at unhinging a host of normative meanings (and their performativities) that pattern codes of everyday conduct along and between liminal coastlines, and at sea. A more immediate peril was the risk of unwittingly essentialising the particularities of small-scale fisher 'cultures' against more grounded societies, while at the same time acknowledging the context-laden complexities that contemporary Sri Lanka offers.

Meanwhile this journey signifies a different kind of homecoming. While engaging with my cultural insider-outsiderliness (which I will further explore in the following chapter), the many convivial and ethnographically driven encounters in the making of this book prompted, encouraged me to more expansively engage with the rich saltwater lifeworlds of an island-state in which I was born, but had barely spent much time. Given my childhood fascination in maritime history, my early anthropological referents stemmed from Nusantara, Oceania, the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean Worlds besides other accounts on diverse 'peoples of the sea' – from the Orang Laut and the Vezo, to the decolonial writings of Epeli Hau'ofa. To start with, my formative fieldwork was in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago, so to regard this project as a long-awaited return would seem somewhat ironic. Nevertheless, these

last five years have sharpened an imaginative eye towards unequivocally witnessing the intricate diversity of Lanka's fluid coastal spaces, many of which are only beginning to be explored across contemporary ethnographic contexts.

Ultimately, *Fishing, Mobility and Settlerhood* is not simply about how or why ostensibly diverse coastal communities comprising affines, strangers and rivals simply interact (or do not). It is about the ways in which everyday ethics, varied interpretations and practices of sociality (i.e. relationally being-in/with-the-world) themselves are continually negotiated and reconfigured against the backdrop of ordinary livelihood struggles and aspirations. The study is also about the manifold ways in which broader vernacular meanings of relationality remain spatially and historically contingent, particularly in times of militarised peacebuilding.

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