

Challenging State Representations from Coastal Environments in the Gulf of Kutch, Western India

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Burry land-water spaces have long generated fiery contests along the South Asian coastline, unsettling and reconfiguring the very definition of the coast. I focus on one such contest in the Gulf of Kutch, Western India, against the Arabian Sea, where India's largest private port has been under construction since the 1990s. Celebrators of the port present it as a model for high-tech port building, a beacon for India's entry into the 21st century. Opponents present the megaport as activating rampant destruction of the Indian coastline, as representing an industrialized noose around India's neck. The Gulf of Kutch has thus emerged as a prominent theater of contest between nature conservation, small livelihoods, and mega-development.

The multi-commodity port project stretches over 6000 hectares. It needs vast tracts of coastal land for oil tankers, warehouses, containers, and a whole host of logistical operations to handle gigantic volumes of trade. Government-led cartographic efforts to designate coastal land as "wasteland," therefore, have been crucial to the creation of the port enclave. A spectacular intertidal zone has been classified as government wasteland. This unique zone stretches five kilometers from sea into land. During the maximum high tide, seawater comes five kilometers inwards into land, creating this unique intertidal

zone. The state government maps it as swampy and dirty. But the same intertidal area also hosts India's second largest mangroves, which are breeding grounds for fish, fodder for livestock, and fuelwood for coastal dwellers. Beyond this intertidal area, stretches with seasonal vegetation – where goats, sheep, and cattle grazed – are also classified as government wasteland.

Such legal and geographic classification of the coast as wasteland visually erases diverse lives and livelihoods. It makes possible coastal acquisition for the megaport project. Port developers are thus able to justify their existence on the grounds that the port is productively transforming degraded wasted spaces – watery intertidal areas as well as dry areas – into a thriving hub of global international trade. Thus, since the very beginning of the port project, local coastal dwellers have experienced how government actors shape and mediate industry's appropriation of land.

It is no wonder, then, that after 20 years of living with these transformations, the dwellers are suspicious of government activities to officially represent the coast. As recently as August 2018, the government was attempting to remap the Kutch coastline. An important part of this remapping was holding a public consultation with stakeholders who were directly impacted by coastal remapping. The goal was to fix the boundaries between different spatial units of the coast. Government officials

swooped into Kutch to hold a meeting with the coastal dwellers to confirm whether the provisional maps they created matched local visions of the coast. In this public meeting, a range of coastal dwellers – fishers, farmers, livestock keepers – came together to challenge state-led bureaucratic conceptions of coast.

They were outraged by the reductive representations offered of the coast in the provisional government maps – the reduction of dense mangrove clusters to fixed lines, the reduction of the coast to swamp. "You've shown the mangroves in a line, like people standing in line and waiting for a public toilet!" exclaimed an elderly livestock keeper. "You've marked the full coast as swamp, not all of it is swampy!" argued another farmer. For them, the coast was much more than the intertidal area for fish and marine animals. It included habitats for sparrows, trees, seeds, and cows. They demanded the inclusion of these organisms within the official representation. Furthermore, they challenged how the government had represented fishers' natural landing places – spaces where fishers parked their boats. Whereas the government sought to fix the fishers' landing places through tiny red dots in the intertidal area, the fishers argued that landing places exceeded their confinement to the red dots. These places changed every season, with winds and waves.

In collective local imagination, watery intertidal areas that were leveled and reclaimed for port development between 1996–2012 refused erasure from formal maps.

The dwellers thus articulated an organic, dynamic, and holistic understanding of the coast, against state attempts to narrow it into a static strip of land against sea. Weaving together a vibrant community of human and nonhuman beings, the local coastal imaginations come together momentarily to show that the coast is greater than the sum of its parts, and although the port has radically transformed coastal life, coastal death is not preordained.

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Fig. 1: Fishing in the intertidal port ecologies of Gulf of Kutch (Photo by author, 2017).

What Does a Fishing Harbor Do to Fisheries? A Note on Pazhayar Harbor

“We [artisanal fishers] have lost our space [the beach landing site], firstly due to the construction of this fishing harbor in Pazhayar village of Nagapattinam district, Tamil Nadu, India. We were then slowly pushed out of this harbor by the mechanized trawlers and ring seine crafts.” This lament came from Saravanan (pseudonym), a Fiber Reinforced Plastic (FRP) boat owner. Left with no space, he states that they have been forced to park their crafts on the banks of the Buckingham Canal, a mile away from the shore and near the mangrove forest. Their pleas to the bureaucrats and local politicians to construct wooden platforms for landing goods also fell on deaf ears.

This particular case study forces us historians and anthropologists to ask critical questions regarding the underbelly of infrastructural expansion. Such expansion has been instrumental in selling modernist dreams about liberal equality, progress, and economic growth while reproducing unevenness, power, and economic deprivation amongst the fishing communities. As Appel, Anand, and Gupta have argued in the context of Michigan's racial politics, "infrastructure is a terrain of power and contestation."¹

The frenzied race for expanded investments in megaprojects and the reliance on increasing techno-scientific complexity as a means to "leverage the future" have only deepened existing societal inequalities.² By drawing on some of these critical interventions, this paper will sketch the differentiated experiences of the artisanal and women fishers who are caught in the violence of the physical and social detritus created by different capitalist projects, disembedded from their existing social and ecological contexts and drawn into cycles of indebtedness and resource conflicts.

Pazhayar village is located on the mouth of river Kollidam at the northern end of Kaveri Delta (Kaveri is an Indian river flowing through the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka), creating a natural harbor with an estuary rich in biodiversity. It was once an artisanal fishing village where the customary governance (caste/ur panchayat³) took care of the coastal commons and fisheries' management. The advent of the fishing harbor in the 1980s paved the way for Pazhayar fishers to expand their capacity through trawling and shrimp farming. Given the promise of an interconnected world, greater economic growth, and prosperity, the then-government of Tamil Nadu utilized World Bank aid to expand the capacities of

the harbor so that it could accommodate the growing complexities of financial and managerial operations as well as the integrated management and development of fisheries, shrimp farming, and aquaculture.

Some fishers – mostly the rich fishers who have the capacity to mobilize credit and the new generation of young educated youths – visualized development in the form of the modernization of fishing fleets and the construction of physical infrastructures like the fishing harbor, breakwater, and fish processing plant. Through this they aspired to be a part of the global economy of fish trading. However, our ethnographic research has revealed that the rhetorical positioning of the fishing harbor as a "technocratic ideal" tethered to foreign trade by the state and rich fishers has only worked to conceal the latent tensions between different groups of coastal communities.

Over the last decade, the ring seine⁴ fishery has contributed to the diversification of crafts and gears, absorbed reserve labor power from the nearby agrarian regions, and supplanted the mechanized trawler fishers from the control of the harbor.⁵ The use of this technology has particularly targeted the artisanal fishers' control over species and fishing zones. Moreover, with the coming of big traders who possessed superior capacities to procure fish in large quantities, advance contracts, and bankroll huge volumes of credit, the women fish vendors were caught in a disadvantageous position and forced to become laborers at the processing plants. Due to these simmering conflicts between artisanal, trawler, and ring seine fisheries, the Tamil Nadu state government found a short-term solution and enforced a ban on the ring seine fishing practices in 2021. However, the law and order approach of the state has failed to address the "splintering effects of infrastructural systems"⁶ on the fishermen's livelihoods and coastal environments. Far from being universally beneficial and homogenous, such systems pushed certain social actors and practices into an unending crisis situation.

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Notes

- 1 Appel, H., N. Anand, and A. Gupta. 2018. Introduction: Temporality, Politics, and the Promise of Infrastructure. In N. Anand, A. Gupta, and H. Appel (eds.), *The Promise of Infrastructure* (pp. 1-40). Durham: Duke University Press.
- 2 Harvey, P., C.B. Jensen, and A. Morita. 2017. Introduction: Infrastructural complications. In P. Harvey, C. B. Jensen, and A. Morita (eds.), *Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Companion* (pp. 1-22). Oxon: Routledge.
- 3 Ur Panchayat is a traditional village council different from the legislative elected village representatives.
- 4 A fishing gear which targets pelagic species.
- 5 Bavinck Maarten. 2020. The Troubled Ascent of a Marine Ring Seine Fishery in Tamil Nadu. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 55, Issue No. 14.
- 6 Marvin, S. and S. Graham. 2001. *Splintering Urban Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition*. Routledge.



Fig. 1: Medium sized trawl boats parked at Pazhayar harbor (Photo by the author, 2021).