

# Mapping the Coastal Commons

## Fisherfolk and the Politics of Coastal Urbanisation in Chennai

MUKUL KUMAR, K SARAVANAN, NITYANAND JAYARAMAN

Multiple, overlapping logics of urbanisation are transforming Tamil Nadu's coast. Real estate, infrastructure, tourism, and urban beautification plans are putting unprecedented pressure on the coastal commons. Fisherfolk, whose everyday life and survival is rooted in the commons, are at the centre of these processes of coastal urbanisation. Faced with the prospect of losing access to these spaces, fisherfolk are drawing upon their customary knowledge and new satellite mapping techniques to assert their rights to land and livelihoods.

The authors would like to thank Karen Coelho for thoughtful and incisive comments. This article is in honour of Chandrika Sharma and the fishing communities that she so tirelessly fought for throughout her working life.

Mukul Kumar ([mukul.kumar@berkeley.edu](mailto:mukul.kumar@berkeley.edu)) is a doctoral student at UC Berkeley's College of Environmental Design; K Saravanan ([sarvanan1950@gmail.com](mailto:sarvanan1950@gmail.com)) is a fisherman, and a self-taught GIS and mapping enthusiast who coordinates the Coastal Resource Centre of The Other Media; Nityanand Jayaraman ([nity682@gmail.com](mailto:nity682@gmail.com)) is a Chennai-based writer, social activist, and teacher of journalism.

What was meant to be a routine affair was turning into a nightmare for district authorities across the coastal districts of Tamil Nadu. With less than a day to go for the Chennai district collector to hold a statutory environmental public hearing on a draft Coastal Zone Management Plan (CZMP) for Chennai, fisherfolk and social activists had thrown several spanners in the works. They wanted the public hearing cancelled and reorganised, though the project documents were in order, and the local people, particularly the fishing community, had been given adequate information and notice.

The draft plan, they said, was not really a plan. The CZMP had to be prepared as per the guidelines given in Annexure 1 of the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification, 2011. It had to register the existing use of coastal and ocean commons by fisherfolk, have a long-term plan for coastal land use, and present a long-term housing plan for the fishing community.

The draft CZMP put up for consultation did none of that. It was just a map. The map was wrong. There was no map of the customary use of coastal or ocean commons, and no long-term housing plan for the community. Even worse, none of the information provided in the inadequate maps was in Tamil.

The district official sent by the authorities to convince the fisherfolk to allow the public hearing to take place as scheduled appeared lost as she switched tones rapidly – between threatening the fisherfolk and placating them. “Allow us to hold the public hearing tomorrow. We can hold separate consultations with you after that. All your grievances will be addressed. This is just a preliminary meeting”, she said. When that did not work, she said the public hearing would go on. The law did not permit cancellation of a public hearing unless there was an emergency, she insisted. One fisherman from Nochikuppam, an old fishing hamlet on the famed Marina Beach, was quick to retort. “An emergency can be easily organised”, he said. “The chief minister's car will have to go along the beach road to reach the secretariat tomorrow. All the fisherfolk *kuppams* (villages) are right there. We can block the road. Would that give you sufficient cause to cancel the hearing?” The district official excused herself, clutching her mobile phone. Ten minutes later, she returned to the room to announce that the public hearing had been cancelled for the time being.<sup>1</sup>

### Right to the City

This was not an isolated incident. Nor was it the end of the story. Upset with the manner in which the CZMPs failed to recognise and represent the multiple uses of the coastal

commons by fisherfolk, several Chennai fishing villages have begun a process of translating their customary and traditional uses of coastal and the ocean spaces into maps using a combination of hand-drawn sketches, satellite maps, revenue maps, and focus group discussions with fishermen, youth, and women. Simultaneously, they have used the maps to challenge a Rs 55 crore plan by the Corporation of Chennai to “beautify” the Palavakkam, Kottivakkam, and Neelangarai beaches. The maps were used to demonstrate that the corporation’s beautification plan violates the CRZ Notification, 2011, and disrupts livelihoods and the traditional uses of beaches by the fisherfolk.

Chennai’s fisherfolk had earlier managed to stave off bids on their commons on several occasions. But this instance was different for several reasons. While previous efforts hinged on the considerable community muscle that fisherfolk were and still are able to bring to bear, this effort and others in the recent past added legally nuanced and informed critiques to their threat of mass demonstrations. Second, earlier instances were in response to schemes that usurped or threatened to take over their livelihoods or living spaces. The present protest was carried out with the intent of proactively laying claim to livelihood spaces by invoking laws to secure legal recognition for non-codified customary and traditional rights over coastal commons. Finally, the fisherfolk for the first time were transferring their traditional knowledge of customary uses and spatial demarcations in the coastal and ocean commons onto paper and digital maps. In doing so, they were not only rendering visible uses and rights over the commons that were invisible and unrecognised until now, but also transforming the blunt and clumsy categories of the state and populating them with nuance, variety, and value.<sup>2</sup> As this paper will elaborate using the case of Chennai, fisherfolk are using maps to expose forms of dispossession in and around coastal fishing villages and assert their rights to coastal and ocean spaces.<sup>3</sup> The maps represent fisherfolk’s efforts to inject their own aspirations and vision into the contested terrain of city-making.

### Coastal Commons and Customary Rights

Chennai – or Madras, as it was and still is called by some – grew around a fishing village called Madraspatnam. Many early fishing hamlets – such as Mattankuppam that gave way to the Madras Harbour – have disappeared, but many others have survived to this day. According to the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority’s (CMDA) Second Masterplan, in 2007-08, there were 146 fishing villages, one fishing harbour, and 64 fish landing centres in the Chennai metropolitan area. About 18,500 male and 5,500 female workers were engaged in fishing and allied activities in the metropolis, accounting for the lion’s share of primary sector workers in the city. Nearly 2,000 artisanal crafts, most of which were beach-landing boats, were used to fish the local seas (CMDA 2008).

Not too long ago, and even today, in many parts of the coast, including in Chennai, fishing villages form the easternmost boundaries of land use along the coast. Exposed as it is to the open ocean, Tamil Nadu has a high-energy coastline typical of the Coromandel Coast. The region is characterised by sandy

beaches, dune formations, mangrove-studded estuaries, and sprawling brackish backwaters fed by inland water bodies and irrigation tank overflows.

Artisanal marine fishing in Chennai, and in most of Tamil Nadu, is heavily dependent on the availability of beach space. A typical Tamil fishing hamlet consists of a residential cluster atop a dune. In urban centres such as Chennai, congestion and desperation push many to build their houses on lower lying and danger-prone areas close to the sea. Country boats, *kattumarams* (catamarans), and motorised fibre boats are parked in a row, usually in sight of the village and within its customary borders. Artisanal boats usually land the catch on their own beaches from where auction agents, fisher women, or other retailers purchase the fish. The nets are mended and stored on the beach under tarpaulins or beneath thatch-roofed shacks.

As you walk along the beach away from the cluster of houses, you see four-foot high mounds of tarpaulin-covered shore seine nets with coils of rope around them every few hundred metres. Shore seine nets require long stretches of broad beaches. Deployed during the post-monsoon months, from January, these nets are cast around shoals of fish in a u shape. The two ends of the net – sometimes more than 500 metres apart – are hauled simultaneously by two groups of 15 to 30 able-bodied fishermen, who draw progressively closer to each other to close the purse containing the catch. Sardines, anchovies, and ribbon fish are caught in large quantities and put out to dry. Some villages such as Panaiyur Kuppam, famed for its dried fish, have up to two kilometres of beach near them in their boundaries. For some months of the year, most of the beach is covered with drying fish.

Each village has a clearly marked out commons space with known boundaries on land. Likewise, fishing villages have clearly marked out spaces in the ocean. What is permissible and what is not within these commons is common knowledge in the community. Fisherfolk are expected to park their boats within their village boundaries. During emergencies, they can park anywhere and even land their fish. But they are required to take their fish back to their own villages to sell. Similarly, fisherfolk can move freely in the seas as long as they respect the rules laid out by various villages on the territorial limits of space, gear, seasons, or fish.

The traditional fisherfolk-caste panchayat is the institution that regulates the use of commons, and comes into play when disputes emerge in a village or between villages. Disputes on land seldom emerge in the use of commons. However, disputes and even open warfare are common at sea, between artisanal fisherfolk and trawlers, or between two groups of artisanal fisherfolk when one group violates the code of conduct in another’s territory by, say, deploying a banned net.

Until recently, fisherfolk used their customary knowledge of the ocean commons, passed down generations through an oral tradition, and typically codified in the form of customary law, to settle disputes between fishing communities over issues related to space, access, and gear. Fisherfolk know the extent of their village’s boundary, and the boundaries of other fisherfolk villages on land and at sea. Unwritten laws ensure that

fisherfolk from one village drop artificial reefs or fish aggregating devices only in their own seas, and that fisherfolk from other villages avoid them.

Most disputes on the use or abuse of commons are resolved by the fisherfolk panchayats without recourse to secular institutions, including the police. As a result, non-fisherfolk institutions are largely ignorant both of spatial demarcations and the social, cultural, and economic codes governing the coastal and ocean commons. The exclusive (that is, caste-based) nature of artisanal fisheries, and their long tradition of self-governance, including of the commons, have, in a sense, rendered the customary uses of the shore and sea invisible. Further, customary rights are weak entitlements in a political context where even legally recognised rights have to be fought for in courts and on the streets.

### Margins Become Central

Historically, Chennai's seashore has been viewed as a dangerous, hostile, and undesirable place for housing. With the exception of the fishing community that lived on beaches, most other settlements preferred higher ground and more sheltered spaces further inland, around temples and water bodies. When the city was formally founded with Fort St George as the epicentre 375 years ago, Chennai's beaches were empty except for small fishing hamlets that hugged the waterline. As the British expanded their base in the city, they "developed" the northern beaches around "Blacktown" to serve the commercial needs of the port city. The beaches to the south were left untouched, although boulevards and "garden" homes were built along the coast for colonial administrators and settlers.

However, the city's subsequent and ongoing growth as a metropolis has not been without a fair share of tension with resident fisherfolk, primarily because of conflicts over the use of the coastal commons. These conflicts have become more frequent in recent decades as coastal properties, once thought to be inhospitable, became prime real estate, with even the bourgeois public and state institutions staking claims to the commons.

In 1985, in an attempt to beautify Marina Beach, the government forcibly removed fishermen's kattumarams, other boats, and gear. In a pitched agitation that lasted a month and brought Chennai's fisherfolk population to the boil, at least five lives were lost and several people injured in police violence before the boats were returned after a Supreme Court order. Every decade thereafter has been marked by at least two failed attempts to free up and "beautify" Chennai's beaches by reorganising fisherfolk's livelihoods and living spaces.<sup>4</sup>

In 2008, central and state government authorities proposed building a maze of elevated expressways over the coastal city's beaches and riverbanks. According to the Tamil Nadu highways department, the elevated expressways offered a solution to the problem of congestion in the city during peak traffic hours. A proposed 7.5-km elevated Beach Expressway, which would have run from Marina Beach to East Coast Road (ECR) in Kottivakkam, was by far the most controversial. The expressway passed through ecologically sensitive areas such as the Adyar estuary and beaches used as nesting sites by endangered Olive

Ridley sea turtles. The sandy beaches and estuary are the kinds of ecological buffers that provide coastal areas with protection from erosion, floods, storm surges, salt-water intrusion, and sea level rises in an era of climate change.

Besides running right through at least eight fishing villages on Chennai's coast, and threatening to displace thousands of working-class families in Foreshore Estate and Srinivasapuram, the expressway encroached on a substantial portion of the commons. In Chennai, as in many parts of Tamil Nadu, coastal commons are classified as *poramboke* (government land) by the revenue department. In colloquial Tamil, the word is a pejorative used to refer to people considered to be worthless and useless.

A feasibility report on the project produced by a private consultant, Wilbur Smith Associates, referred to the commons used by fisherfolk of Urur Kuppam, a fishing hamlet sandwiched between the Adyar estuary in the north and the hip Besant Nagar Beach, as *poramboke* lands that were empty and unused. By constructing the expressway over them, the government would be mobilising "worthless" lands to create worth, while relieving urban congestion in the hinterland by transferring it to the coast. The worth of the lands to the fisherfolk, and their customary and traditional rights were not just hidden, but obliterated by these official notions of worth and worthlessness and the documents that officialised them. This proposal was defeated after fisherfolk used a combination of tactics, from systematic mining of information on the project using the Right to Information Act to mapping their commons and building alliances with middle-class beach users, in addition to the threat of street protests.

Chennai's fisherfolk may have been successful in thwarting government designs on their livelihood commons. But they have been silent spectators while private parties grab large chunks of coastal *poramboke* lands, including *natham* *poramboke* lands reserved for residential purposes and temples. Private resorts, opulent beach houses, sprawling lawns, and swimming pools now occupy spaces that were once used for parking boats or hauling the shore seine. The modus operandus is simple. The land-grabber purchases a small plot of land with a valid legal title. He then contacts a few street-smart and influential members of a nearby fishing village. For a handsome consideration, they "allow" the land-grabber to extend his eastern boundary towards the sea. The new owner then constructs a compound wall enclosing his property and a substantial portion of the *poramboke* beach lands.

Such encroachments are fewer the further one goes from cities. In rural areas, communities are far more vigilant to activities that compromise their commons. Urbanisation is not without its effects on the community structure of fisherfolk villages. Opportunists who sell common land for a song represent a breakdown in the fabric of the community. Erosion of the commons quickly follows the erosion of community institutions. After all, commons need communities to retain their identity and integrity. Where the community has receded, the government and private sector step in, and the commons have either shrunk or been lost to notions of worth dictated by capital and the markets.

Rather than check such takeover of government and common lands, the Corporation of Chennai and local bodies have actively colluded with private developers by providing such illegal developments with “world-class” roads, electricity, sewage, and water connections. A 2011 directive to the CMDA and Corporation of Chennai to identify all violations of the CRZ remains on paper with no action taken till date.

Closer to the city, the Corporation of Chennai has announced a Rs 55 crore beautification project for the beaches of Neelangarai, Palavakkam, and Kottivakkam. The project has already run afoul of fisherfolk. Fisherfolk from Palavakkam and Kottivakkam had prepared livelihood use maps for their villages. By superimposing the project map on their livelihood use map, they were able to demonstrate that the beautification would come at the cost of their living spaces and livelihoods. This not only helped the fisherfolk make an informed choice about the worth of the project, but also present a convincing case to the media and others.

The urbanisation and gentrification of Chennai’s southern beaches has introduced new claimants to the beach commons – leisure seekers, frisbee players, and daily walkers, young and old, who throng the beaches for a breath of “fresh” air, and, more insidiously, the state itself. In providing roads to newly encroached beach houses or resorts, or spending crores in beautification, the Corporation of Chennai is serving private interests in the guise of providing public services. In both cases, the corporation’s intervention, using taxpayers’ money, helps prop up property values and potentially “regularise” illegal constructions. The intervention is also a means to convert a communally regulated common space into a state-regulated public space, opened up to facilitate the possibilities of monopoly rent and accumulation.

Contestations over coastal commons are by no means peculiar to Chennai. As Parthasarathy (2011) observes about Mumbai,

There is a long history of protest and struggle by the fishing community against large projects ... From Esselworld and Water Kingdom of the 1980s to the Bandra-Worli Sealink, urban development has affected them more than any other group or class in Mumbai.

### Law of the Commons

Indian law is silent on fisherfolks’ customary rights to coastal and ocean spaces. High courts and the Supreme Court of India, however, have in many instances upheld the right to commons, both in the case of fishing communities and other inland communities. Borrowing from English Common Law, Indian courts have established that the foreshore between the high tide line and low tide line belongs to the government, and fisherfolk can ply their trade there without owning the soil. In 1962, a single judge in the Madras High Court denied the plea of a property owner to possess and fence certain foreshore lands and upheld the customary right of fisherfolk to dry fish and park boats on that land.<sup>5</sup> Public access to the commons has been fiercely guarded by Indian courts. In *Jagpal Singh vs State of Punjab*,<sup>6</sup> the Supreme Court held as illegal the enclosure of a village pond by real estate

developers. Irked by the summary manner in which rights to the commons were sought to be extinguished in that case, the Supreme Court not only ordered the eviction of real estate developers from the pond and its restoration, but also directed all the state governments in the country “to prepare schemes for eviction of illegal/unauthorised occupants of Gram Sabha/Gram Panchayat/Shamlat land and these must be restored to the Gram Sabha/Gram Panchayat for the common use of villagers of the village”. Like most directives that benefit the common people, this order of the Supreme Court remains yet another watershed judgment that is not implemented.

The CRZ Notification, 1991, although a delegated legislation, was perhaps the first law to mention the “traditional rights and customary uses such as existing fishing villages”. But even this notification restricted itself to dwelling units and other built-up spaces, and stopped short of acknowledging customary livelihoods, and cultural and other uses of the commons by fisherfolk.

In 2007, an attempt was made to do away with the CRZ Notification, 1991 and replace it with a Coastal Zone Management Notification. This was stiffly opposed by fisherfolk and environmental activists as it was seen as a weakening legislation.<sup>7</sup> Responding to fisherfolk demands for an act of Parliament rather than an executive legislation that would be open to arbitrary tinkering, the then Environment Minister, Jairam Ramesh, proposed the Traditional Coastal and Marine Fisherfolk (Protection of Rights) Act, 2009. It is noteworthy that this bill was proposed shortly after the enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. The Fisherfolk Act was stillborn. Strangely, it never made news or caught the attention of fisherfolk despite its progressive language and lofty intent.

The CRZ Notification, 2011, which superseded the 1991 edition, goes only a little beyond offering concessions to fishing communities. It requires each maritime state to prepare detailed CZMPs, which will spell out the land-use plan for the CRZ area, and incorporate a long-term housing plan for the fishing communities. CZMPs should also clearly identify the common properties of fishing and other coastal communities.

While the 2011 notification has provisions to check violations and recognise fisherfolk’s traditional rights to spaces and livelihoods, the crucial clauses, like all good clauses, remain wholly unenforced. Its previous version went through more than 30 revisions, all of which weakened the law.

It is as a result of lapses in the law and its enforcement that the spread of built-up areas along the coast, involving privatisation, encroachment, and dispossession, has accelerated in an unprecedented manner. These changes to coastal legal regimes must be understood in relation to the logic of urbanisation that prioritises certain kinds of real estate, tourism, energy, and transportation corridors to promote middle-class values and aesthetics (including “world-class” connectivity, speed, luxury consumption, and “green” beautification)

above the rights and needs of the poor.<sup>8</sup> Parthasarathy (2011) goes further to argue that

this process should be compared with the processes of general colonisation of resources for metropolitan growth, consumption, and accumulation – a historical set of practices that encompass colonialism or imperialism and unequal exchange.

Yet, as Sharma (2011) presciently argued, the CRZ Notification, 2011 offers political closures as well as openings. Under the new coastal zone regulatory regime, state authorities are required to produce CZMPs, including detailed land-use and housing plans for coastal fishing communities. Fisherfolk insist that these plans can only be produced with their deep and exclusive knowledge of the ocean commons and the uses it is put to in everyday life.

More than the institutional “expert” outsider, villagers and slum-dwellers are the most knowledgeable about their immediate environment. To produce a coastal land-use map, an institutional expert would need to interact with fisherfolk to identify the different uses that the land is put to by fisherwomen, men, and children. The job of the expert then becomes restricted to transferring this information onto a paper or digital medium. It is the members of the fishing community that possess and control the information required to prepare a coastal land-use map.

### Realisation and Response

Caught between a landward moving sea and a relentless tide of seaward moving urbanisation, Chennai’s fisherfolk have begun to realise the gravity of the problem that faces them. Unlike earlier times, when they relied solely on their consolidated votes and power to bring their community to the streets to fight undesirable land-use changes, fisherfolk have increasingly begun to resort to nuanced articulations of law, the Right to Information Act, and spatial mapping exercises to drive home their assertions, arguments, and claims.<sup>9</sup>

Fisherfolk have rightly argued that the expressways and beautification projects are nothing but attempts to open up the coast to various forms of real estate development by dispossessing them of their rights to coastal land and livelihood. In cities such as Chennai, coastal wetlands, estuaries, and beaches – essential features of what Gidwani and Baviskar (2011) call the “urban commons” – are being encroached on and privatised without any regard to fisherfolk rights.

In three recent instances – the expressway project, the preparation of CZMPs, and the beach beautification plan – fisherfolk countered the proposed spatial injustice using spatial mapping tools in conjunction with their traditional knowledge. Several studies have convincingly demonstrated that self-enumeration and self-mapping constitute an effective means to resist eviction and claim rights to land, housing, and urban infrastructure (Patel and Sharma 1998; Appadurai 2001, 2012; Chatterjee 2005). Commons and communities are usually relegated to the realm of the informal and non-legal, with the state and its public space-making efforts seen as resting firmly in the formal and the legal. Through this paper, we hope to highlight how the roles have been reversed recently.

The fisherfolk community has used formal tools of mapping to invoke the law and legally claim their right to their commons, while the state agencies stand accused of bending and violating the law for hidden motives.<sup>10</sup>

### Mapping the Commons

The three-year campaign against the elevated Beach Expressway came to an end when a new government led by Chief Minister J Jayalithaa scrapped the proposal, citing the possibility of adverse effects on coastal communities. While the campaign brought middle-class residents and beach lovers, organised as the Save Chennai Beaches campaign, to protest alongside the city’s fisherfolk, it was clearly the fisherfolk’s claim of beaches as a livelihood space that resonated politically.

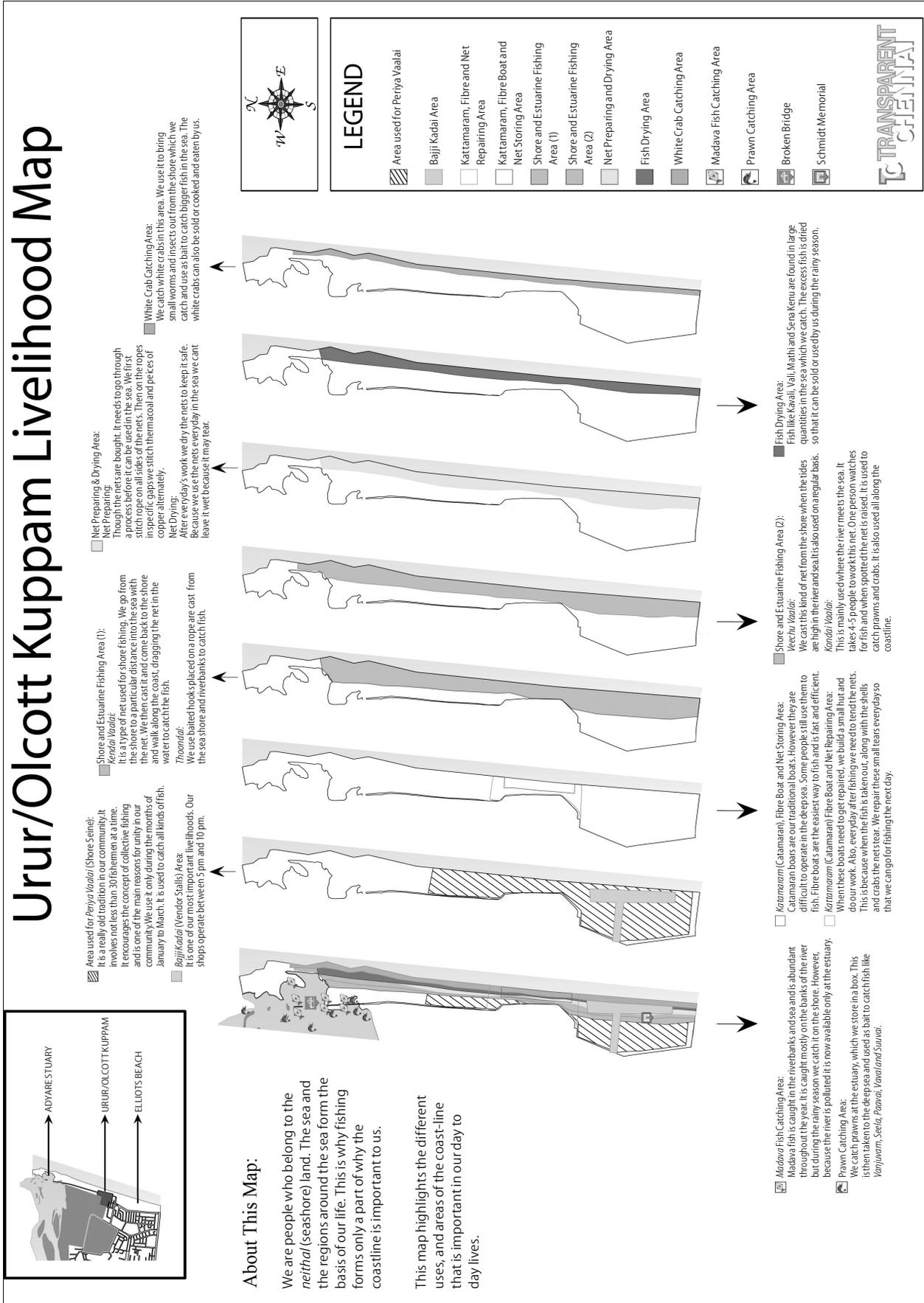
Fishing communities played a vital role in all aspects of the victory. The community of Urur/Olcott Kuppam produced a series of important maps representing the community’s relationship to the ocean commons. These maps were not simply about “participation” or “deliberative democracy”. They constituted a political intervention that challenged Wilbur Smith’s depiction of the beach as poramboke, empty, and unused. The fisherfolk’s maps also challenged the state’s authority to produce “scientific” maps of coastal lands. They provide an exemplary case study of an emergent fisherfolk science, a blend of high-tech satellite mapping and customary knowledge that actively builds political consciousness in the community.

Interestingly, the idea of the map was first translated onto paper in 2008 by five fisherfolk children from Olcott Memorial School who developed a crude hand-drawn land-use map for Urur/Olcott Kuppam as a school project with the help of the last two authors. A subsequent month-long mapping initiative in Urur/Olcott Kuppam more accurately documented the ways in which the community uses the coast, both within and beyond their residential settlements. Although members of two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provided technical and content-related assistance to fisherfolk as needed, the ownership of the maps, and knowledge of how to produce them, resided with the fisherfolk panchayat and its members.<sup>11</sup>

The land use maps of Urur/Olcott Kuppam tell a particular story of the lives and livelihoods of fisherfolk and their relationship to the coast. The community produced four maps on livelihoods, sociocultural activities, infrastructure, and demographics to document its uses of the commons. The maps are relational and polyvalent; they do not rely on any single source of information. Fisherfolk conducted interviews, surveys, and focus group meetings to determine how their community uses coastal space in everyday life.

The recursive and iterative process of community mapping can be broken down into three essential steps. First, large satellite maps were printed and focus groups discussed how particular areas of the shoreline were used by them. The focus groups were not restricted to fishermen. Women, youth, and children were interviewed to find out who used what sections of the beach and for what purpose. In an adult-male dominated culture, this exercise of incorporating the inputs of children,

Figure 1: Livelihood Map



**About This Map:**

We are people who belong to the *neithal* (seashore) land. The sea and the regions around the sea form the basis of our life. This is why fishing forms only a part of why the coastline is important to us.

This map highlights the different uses, and areas of the coast-line that is important in our day to day lives.

Source: Urur/Olcott Kuppam and Transparent Chennai.

youth, and women allowed the invisible among the community to become visible. Second, focus group data was used to generate community maps through global positioning system (GPS) devices and geographic information system (GIS) software. Third, these draft maps were reviewed and revised by village residents, including the language (both Tamil and English) that would accompany the community maps.

The Urur/Olcott Kuppam livelihood map (Figure 1, p 51) shows how the shoreline is divided into shore-based fishing areas (*periya valai* or shore seines, *veechu valai* or hand-cast nets, or *kondai valai* or drag nets), or for launching boats, mending nets, and drying fish. The shore seine requires a vast spread of beach, long and wide, as described above.

Thus, each bit of the coastline described as empty and unused by the consultant was not merely used, but used for multiple purposes, sometimes simultaneously. The intertidal zone is used by some to catch crabs, while others dig out burrowing bugs such as *illi poochi* (mole crabs) from the same space for use as bait for hand-lines or long-line fishing. The trendy Besant Nagar beach too was staked in the fisherfolk maps. Vendor stalls (*bajji kadai*) run by fisher women and other fishing spaces were prominently imprinted on what is otherwise seen only as a recreational space. Once again, the invisible was being made visible.

These common areas also depend on public infrastructure such as community toilets and water fountains. The infrastructure map, based on the survey data (Table 1), exposes the extent to which certain fishing communities, which are classified as “slums” by the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board, are neglected by public authorities. By mapping the ordinary ways in which fisherfolk use the seashore, the maps articulate another vision of the coastal commons; one that is based on livelihoods and public infrastructural needs rather than the prerogatives of private real estate development. The coastal mapping campaign in Urur/Olcott Kuppam demonstrated that fishing communities must not simply defend their place on a map, but redraw the map itself.

**Networked Politics**

While the mapping exercise in Urur/Olcott Kuppam was an effective way to halt the Beach Expressway proposal, public authorities have refused to recognise the rights of fisherfolk to coastal commons. The CRZ Notification, 2011, as we mentioned, represents both political closures as well as openings for fisherfolk to claim their rights to ocean commons. On the one hand, it has failed to offer adequate protection of coastal ecosystems and protect fisherfolk’s rights to land and livelihoods. On the other hand, it has raised awareness about coastal issues and fisherfolk rights among government authorities, environmentalists, and fishing communities. This new political awareness has bolstered networks of fishing communities who are actively involved in efforts to enforce and expand their rights to the ocean commons under CRZ Notification, 2011.

The CZMP, which was supposed to be completed in 2013, represents one such political opening.<sup>12</sup> Keenly attuned to the

dangers and opportunities posed by it, fishing community leaders have expanded the scope of the mapping campaign along the coast. Assisted by the second author, himself a member of the fishing community, seven fishing hamlets in Chennai collaborated to develop their own land-use maps. The second phase, which is called the ocean mapping exercise, will identify important fishing grounds, and access routes to these grounds. The third phase will involve identification of public spaces near the coast to accommodate the long-term housing needs of the fishing community.

The ocean-mapping exercise is a response to the summary manner in which ocean and estuarine spaces are being cordoned off and privatised by various means. Ports, harbours, piers, and jetties enclose or obstruct waterways and limit fisherfolk access to fishing grounds. Because it is in the seemingly limitless ocean, no thought is given to fisherfolk use of the enclosed spaces. The movement of large vessels interferes with fishing and places the life and property of fisherfolk in great danger. Sea spaces enclosed for ports are often off limits to fisherfolk. Jutting structures into the sea also necessitate expensive, and time- and fuel-consuming detours to access fishing grounds. Through the ocean-mapping exercise, the

**Table 1: Infrastructure Survey Data**

Playground	There is no playground in the Kuppam neighbourhood. The nearest playground is too far away, which is the corporation playground seen on the map. Because of this, a lot of the times our children resort to playing in front of the local temple.
School	There is a functioning school, the Olcott school, run by the corporation. This school offers courses up to eighth standard. However, from this year onwards, courses will be offered only up to the fifth standard.
Bus stop	There is no bus stop near the Kuppam. The nearest stop is the Olcott Memorial School Bus Stop, which is on 3rd Avenue. We feel this is quite far away.
Community hall	There is no community hall/self-help group (SHG) building. We want a space for community activities behind the building reserved for the anganwadi mid-day meal scheme.
Toilets	There are three public toilet facilities. However, only two of these are currently functioning. The toilet in front of the temple is non-functional.
PDS office (ration shop)	There is no PDS shop in the Kuppam area. The nearest shop is in Besant Nagar.
Hospital	There is a government hospital near the Besant Nagar bus depot. Doctors are available six days a week from 9 am to 2 pm. However, we also have to visit private hospitals like Santhosh Hospital and VHS Hospital because the government hospital has inadequate services and closes early.
Fish market	While we have a fish auction area, we want a larger space to sell our daily catch. The current space reserved for the fish market is too small.
Garbage infrastructure	There are insufficient garbage dumpsters at the Kuppam, which results in trash accumulating on the beach. Further, the Corporation of Chennai hardly comes to our area to collect trash, which affects the cleanliness of the area. In 2010, after fighting with the corporation they promised to provide waste disposal services more regularly. However, it did not last long.
Sewage infrastructure	For a number of residents on the eastern side of the Kuppam, the corporation has failed to provide a functional sewage connection. Because of this, sewage from our homes collects on the beach and adversely affects our groundwater. It also is responsible for spreading disease.

Source: Urur/Olcott Kuppam and Transparent Chennai.

fisherfolk hope to make the maze of routes and destinations that they see in the seemingly empty ocean visible.

The maps that are sought to be developed will highlight not only the areas under customary use, but also hint at areas that have been illegally encroached on, and identify government lands that the government has wilfully allowed to be privatised. Networks of fishing communities across Tamil Nadu are demanding that their maps on livelihoods, infrastructure, and sociocultural life be taken into account in the formulation of CZMPs. Mapping as a skill and a tool of choice has caught the attention of other fishing villages too.

In July 2014, the central government's National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Zone Management in Chennai invited leaders of the city's fishing communities to present their maps, and comment on the centre's fishing spaces maps. Fisherfolk representatives who took the stage reminded the gathering that when it came to coastal land use and fisheries, they were the experts, not the government. The department of environment's eye-in-the-sky mapping skills could provide the technology for the maps. But it would need fisherfolk involvement to meet the rigorous detail required in the CZMPs as per the CRZ Notification, 2011.

More and more fishing communities and groups that work with them are realising that the critical information and

knowledge required to develop proper CZMPs reside in their own communities. With this realisation has come a certain confidence that the notification and the plan that it mandates may well be a first step in their long struggle to get their customary and traditional rights to land and oceans legally recognised.

## Conclusions

We have discussed the context in which fisherfolk mapping initiatives emerged in Chennai, their methods and practices, and their expansion along the coast of Tamil Nadu. For now, community self-mapping represents an essential medium through which fisherfolk assert their rights to coastal commons, especially within the context of rapid coastal urbanisation and significant shifts in regimes of coastal zone regulations. Fisherfolk mapping initiatives are increasingly networked, both in terms of how they share information technology and how they build regional networks of solidarity. These emergent networks of fisherfolk – and their vision of a coastal commons based on livelihoods, public infrastructure, and everyday social and cultural life – constitute an important countervailing force to forms of uneven development and dispossession that would wipe fishing communities and the coastal commons off the map.

## NOTES

- 1 In a number of other districts too, public hearings were cancelled. This was unprecedented on several counts. Across India, government authorities have become adept at organising public consultations that generally fly beneath the radar of affected communities. The minutes of the CZMP public hearings from Ramanathapuram and Thoothukudi expose how effective the district authorities are in keeping the public out. Just five people spoke at the Ramanathapuram meeting and 15 at the other. There is no dearth of studies pointing to the farcical and ritualistic nature of public consultations in India. See, for example, Coelho, Kamath and Vijayabaskar (2013).
- 2 See Appadurai (2001, 2012) and Chatterjee (2005) for a discussion of how the urban poor have used self-enumeration and self-mapping techniques to redefine categories of urban governance to resist evictions.
- 3 We suggest that the maps represent an instantiation of Maringanti's (2011) concept of a "right to the city via the commons", which includes not only "a demand for a just and sustainable social order where collective resources are respected and regenerated to support life" but also "a democratic approach to the creation of knowledge about our cities". We also draw inspiration from Lefebvre's (2006) and Harvey's (2003) respective discussions of a "right to the city".
- 4 For a detailed discussion of the history of proposals to "beautify" Chennai's beaches, see Arabindoo (2011).
- 5 *Abbas vs Andi Chettiar and Ors*, 29 March 1962, Madras High Court, AIR 1963 Mad 74.
- 6 *Jagpal Singh vs State of Punjab*, 28 January 2011, Supreme Court of India, 11 SCC 396.
- 7 See, for example, Menon, Rodriguez and Sridhar (2007).
- 8 For an examination of these themes in Chennai, see Coelho and Raman (2010); Arabindoo (2011).

- 9 We view these political strategies as building upon deep regional histories of fisherfolk politics and rights-based struggles in south India, as discussed in Subramanian's (2009) analysis.
- 10 See Roy (2009) for a discussion of the state as an informalised entity.
- 11 The mapping exercise used technical and content-related advice from members of two NGOs. Siddharth Hande, who worked with Transparent Chennai, provided technical and survey-related advice, and the third author, a member of the Save Chennai Beaches campaign, provided content- and process-related advice.
- 12 See the discussion of CZMPs in CRZ Notification 2011, with an emphasis on Annexure 1 (ii)(7), which reads, "In the CRZ areas, the fishing villages, common properties of the fishermen communities, fishing jetties, ice plants, fish drying platforms or areas infrastructure [sic] facilities of fishing and local communities such as dispensaries, roads, schools, and the like, shall be indicated on the cadastral scale maps. States shall prepare detailed plans for long term housing needs of coastal fisherfolk communities in view of expansion and other needs, provisions of basic services including sanitation, safety, and disaster preparedness."

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