

TRAWLER FISHERS AND THE MAINTENANCE OF
SOCIAL BOUNDARIES IN CHENNAI, SOUTH INDIA

Maarten Bavinck, Ph.D.
Center for Maritime Research
University of Amsterdam/SISWO
The Netherlands
E-mail: mbavinck@siswo.uva.nl

Paper presented to the
IASCP Conference
May 31-June 4, 2000
Bloomington (Indiana), USA

1. Introduction

Scholars interested in sea tenure generally display a bias towards artisanal fishers, the idea being that such fisheries contain the finest specimens of sustainable management practice. This prejudice has brought about a spate of studies on far-away communities and small-island states. It has, on the other hand, also resulted in the relative neglect of non-artisanal fisheries, such as the ones of trawler fishers in developing countries.

Some authors take the distinction between artisanal and non-artisanal fisheries a long way. McGoodwin (1990:41), who wrote a comprehensive volume on the crisis in fisheries, thus opposes 'ecosystem fishers' and 'biosphere fishers', the fundamental difference being one of range. The category of ecosystem fishers – which from his point of view is synonymous with artisanal fishers - depend on circumscribed fishing grounds and display an active interest in conservation. Thus for McGoodwin (ibid.:108) "indigenous management is mainly the purview of small-scale fishers." Biosphere fishers, on the other hand, roam from fishing ground to fishing ground and subscribe to 'a myth of superabundance'. This myth entails "the feeling that there are always other ecosystems and other resources to exploit should the ones they currently favor run short" (ibid.:41). From such a point of view, trawler fisheries are one of the last places to look for tenurial arrangements.

One could argue, however, it depends on how 'sea tenure' is defined. The current tendency, - fuelled by a realization of environmental crisis - is to connect sea tenure to the responsible management of resources. Several scholars, however, observe that tenure arrangements sometimes have other backgrounds and purposes. For instance, arrangements may reflect the pursuit of repute (Carrier 1987), the structuring of trade (Pannell 1996), or the organization of harvesting (Berkes 1987). For purposes of analysis, I believe it is useful to avoid preconceptions about the nature of sea tenure systems. Instead, one should allow for a multiplicity of objectives, instruments, forms and development phases.

This paper considers the management arrangements employed by mechanized boat¹ fishers in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, India. I focus on the efforts boat owners have made to create and enforce social boundaries, and thus limit access to fishing. Although social boundaries are a particularly hot issue in this particular boat fishing community, and worthy of study for that reason alone, the analysis is also relevant for the discussion on the management of common pool resources (CPR). After all, collective action theorists argue that restricting access is a core element in resolving CPR-problems (cf. Ostrom et. al 1999, Schlager and Ostrom 1993).

The first section of the paper briefly describes the mechanized boat sector of Chennai. It is followed by an analysis of boat owner associations and the types of rules they try to implement. Then attention shifts to the issue of social boundaries.

2. The mechanized boat industry of Chennai

The mechanized boat industry of Chennai came about in the 1960s as part of what Kurien (1978) appropriately calls a 'pink gold rush'. As in many other developing countries (cf. Platteau 1989), this race was triggered by a comprehensive government program to radically modernize marine fisheries and create a 'blue revolution'. In the case of Tamil Nadu, how-

¹ 'Mechanized boat' is the term used in India to denote the small trawlers which ply inshore waters.

ever, the government soon happened to lose control of the innovation process. A motley crowd of film actors, politicians, and middle-class investors moved in, responding to the astronomical prices which the new-found international market offered, particularly for shrimp. In so doing, they pushed aside the old-time fishers of the northern Coromandel Coast.

Thirty years later, when I conducted fieldwork in the surroundings of the city², the situation had again changed. The investors from the beginning had largely moved out of marine fishing, disillusioned by a combination of rapidly declining fishing grounds and severe conflicts with artisanal fishers, and attracted by promises of 'gold' in new venues such as aquaculture. An entrepreneurial class had also arisen from amongst the old population of artisanal fishers to dominate the mechanized boat industry. The dust had settled - mechanized boat fishing had won itself a place in the fisheries sector of Tamil Nadu and created new social structures and professional practices in the process.

The mechanized boat industry of Chennai is concentrated around the fishing harbor in an area called Royapuram. Counting approximately 1,000 mechanized boats and employing some 20,000 men and women as fishers, processors, traders and other service-providers, Royapuram now lodges the largest concentration of boat fishing in Tamil Nadu. The city's mechanized boat industry contributes substantially to the export of marine products from India. In 1995, Chennai ranked as the third-largest export center in the country.

Fishers of Royapuram divide mechanized boats into two types. The first type, making out about three quarters of the fleet, are called *tangal boats* (the verb *tangutal* means 'to stay'), and they remain at sea for anything between three and ten days. Tangal boats vary in length from 32 to 49 feet, and have holds from 1 to 10 tons. The crew of five to six is headed by a skipper, or *driver*. Usually he conducts the vessel northwards, to the inshore fishing grounds of Andhra Pradesh, where trawling is reputed to be particularly good.

Day boats are smaller and older, and go for one-day fishing trips only. They ply the waters directly surrounding Chennai – waters which are recognized as being seriously overfished – and bring home substantially smaller catches. Fishers seeking employment in the mechanized boat industry therefore generally prefer to serve on tangal boats. Day boats nonetheless still make out a quarter of the fleet.

Royapuram counts approximately 500 boat owners. My survey of a more-or-less representative sample of 33 owners provides insight into differences of class and origin. Three economic classes may be distinguished. The class of poor boat owners tends to coincide with those operating day boats. Such owners tend to have all of their capital locked up in their craft, experience more ups and downs, and can hardly imagine a future outside of fishing. The dismissive treatment they are given by their richer compeers in the boat-owner associations (see below) reflects this category's marginal status.

The proprietors of single tangal boats, who constitute the middle class of boat owners, are definitely in a better position. Working with newer equipment and fishing richer grounds, these fishermen tend to make more investments, and enjoy a higher income. They too cannot picture a future outside of fishing.

² My Ph.D. dissertation in legal anthropology, which was defended at the University of Amsterdam in 1998, considered the complex of marine fishing regulations along the northern reaches of the Coromandel Coast of Tamil Nadu. I discerned three parties with interests in fishing: artisanal fishers, mechanized boat fishers, and officials belonging to the Fisheries Department (cf. Bavinck, forthcoming). Fieldwork took place from January 1995 to April 1996.

The richest class of owners consists of those operating more than one boat, with a current maximum of six. These households often have other investments as well. They often dabble in trade or in the processing of seafood items, and many also operate ice factories, money-lending businesses, fishing gear shops, and more recently, aquaculture farms and hatcheries. This elite continues to orient itself towards marine fishing, just as they restrict marriage alliances to the fishing castes. Boat fishing still forms the cornerstone of their business empires, although other opportunities have started to appear on their horizon.

The members of the different classes tend to have a different kind of involvement in boat fishing. Whereas poor boat owners frequently double as skippers, middle-class and richer boat owners tend to concentrate on the management of their enterprises, no longer going out to sea themselves. A substantial number of the latter categories finished secondary school and sometimes college too.

Class differentiation in Royapuram is criss-crossed by another kind of divide, which fishers commonly refer to as 'insiders' (*namma uur aaRkal*, literally 'those who belong here') versus 'outsiders' (*vellai uur aaRkal*, literally 'those who belong elsewhere'). This division constitutes one of the foci of the on-going politicized debate on fishing rights in the mechanized boat sector, and it is worthwhile briefly considering its contours.

Most contemporary boat owners originate in the Pattinavar marine fishing caste. Pattinavar fishermen constitute the majority in the 229 fishing hamlets of the Coromandel Coast of Tamil Nadu, which have a total population of 242,000 (census 1986). It is an old fishing caste, mentioned by the ethnographers Thurston and Rangachari (1909), and probably settled in the region for centuries.

More specifically, many boat owners originate in the old-time fishing hamlets of Royapuram, which have been gobbled up by the city in the period after World War II. Not only did the city government relocate many hamlets in this period, new fishing neighborhoods arose as immigration of fisherfolk picked up. Although the migratory process itself may be of older origin, the development of the mechanized boat industry and the fishing harbor certainly promoted the influx of single men, and later of their families, into Royapuram.

During the same time period, members of the local fishing population started to seek a livelihood in fields other than fishing. Although their affinity with the fishing profession thereby declined, they largely continued to live in their old neighborhoods. The mixed character of these living areas again increased with the arrival of blue- and white-collar workers of non-fishing caste in search of low-cost housing. The combined effect of these demographic developments was a variegation of fishing neighborhoods and a loss of social cohesion.

The mixed character of the Royapuram fishing population is replicated in our boat owner survey. Six of the 33 respondents in our survey of boat owners said they came from fishing populations in other parts of coastal Tamil Nadu, especially Cuddalore and Kanyakumari. Four others revealed themselves to be of the non-fishing Nadar caste from the south of Tamil Nadu. Since they ventured into boat fishing for profit reasons, members of this category showed the greatest predilection to leave the sector in the future. Their total number is probably larger than the survey results suggest. That is because outsiders face substantial hostility in Royapuram, and many have tried to erase their past.

3. Boat owner associations

The fishing neighborhoods of Royapuram house a rich spectrum of organizations, that can be divided into four types: neighborhood administrations; professional interest groups; political organizations; and migrant organizations. All of these have been established by fishers and in some way relate to the fishing profession. Diverse as the array may be, their office-holders share the opinion that they - and no one else - are responsible for affairs in the immediate surroundings of the fishing harbor. As a former fisher leader said when asked about the division of responsibilities with the state: "This is *our* place" (*engal idam*). Consequently, members of these groups continually attempt to shield the harbor area off from outside - i.e., state - interference. Although they favor self-governance, fisher organizations are not always against outside intervention. In fact, they may even try to harness the power of outside agencies in order to further their own goals.

Boat owner associations constitute a special case in the category of professional interest groups. Most importantly, these associations have gone beyond the original mission of defending professional interests, and take part in the daily management of the fishing harbor. They share these responsibilities with another fisher organization, the Panchayat Union, which represents the various fishing neighborhoods in Royapuram. The division of labor between the two, though not undisputed, is relatively clear-cut: boat-owner associations oversee the collective of mechanized boat fishing units, while the Panchayat Union is responsible for other activities in the harbor area as well as for the artisanal fishers working there. All matters related to mechanized boat fishing are in principle addressed by the former body.

The first professional association of boat owners in Royapuram developed in the mid-1960s. With the emergence of populist Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu, it soon split up into competing factions linked to different political parties in the state arena. This was the situation at the time of the riots in 1977 and 1978 between artisanal and mechanized boat fishers in Chennai. As a result of these riots, however, the leaders of the boat owners associations decided to bury their differences. Rather than engaging in political rivalry, they merged and established a single boat-owner association. Its members adopted an ingenious practice that assures continuous political support and also solves the delicate problem of selecting an association president. The rule states that the president of the association must belong to the ruling party in the government of Tamil Nadu. The implication is that when the state government changes, the president of the association must step down.

Fisher leaders today describe the history of boat-owner associations since the merger in the late 1970s as an orderly succession that preserved unity. Although there is some truth to this rendition, it also paints too rosy a picture. In fact, history reveals a tendency toward organizational fragmentation followed by attempts at consolidation. In the mid-nineties, two associations commanded the field. The leading boat owner association, the Ad hoc Committee, owed its name as well as its authority to the fact that it was backed by the Minister of Fisheries. This association was challenged by a man called Chandran, who headed a rival grouping of owners. Chandran habitually singled out the Ad hoc Committee on matters of principle and local apprehension. As we shall see later, one of these was laxity in the control of social boundaries.

Administrative capacities

The Ad hoc Committee formed the dominant and most regular force in the regulation of mechanized boat fishing in Royapuram in 1995, and I now limit my discussion to this organization. Officially, the Ad hoc Committee is a voluntary membership organization, which emulates the *panchayat*-mode of decision-making in rural India. In reality, however, this association is dominated by wealthy boat owners and takes action far beyond its realm of membership. Its leaders hold themselves responsible for the well-being of the mechanized

bership. Its leaders hold themselves responsible for the well-being of the mechanized boat fishing industry in Chennai, and try to enforce whatever rulings they feel to be constructive to all mechanized boat fishers, whether they are members or not. However, as its authority is disputed, not only by Chandran's group but by other organized and non-organized opinions in the harbor area as well, it is not always successful. Generally speaking, its authority is stronger on land than it is at sea. As we shall see below, this is one explanation for the emphasis on social boundaries rather than on fishing rules.

What are the Ad hoc Committee's means for control of mechanized boat fishers? The range of situations in which the committee attempts to compel individual boat owners to follow directives is wide, varying from the payment of membership fees to the attendance of its court sessions (see below) and to the observance of special rulings.

Similar to contemporary practice in the artisanal fishing hamlets along the Coromandel Coast, the transgression of a rule usually results in the imposition of a cash fine payable to the Ad hoc Committee. An owner who resists payment of an Ad hoc Committee fine, is commonly denied court services until he settles the old score. If a person continues to refuse to cooperate and if the matter is of a serious nature, the sanction may be widened to include any kind of assistance. As everyone periodically needs a letter of recommendation or an introduction, persistent recalcitrance may cause serious inconvenience to oneself and to one's relatives.

Rather than waiting for a boat owner to report himself, the Ad hoc Committee may decide to take direct measures against an offender. Ordinarily, it impounds the otter boards and the trawl nets of a mechanized boat. In addition to sending a warning signal, this act seriously inconveniences a boat fishing unit. In more severe cases, the Ad hoc Committee issues a ban on professional services and thereby hinders or prevents a boat owner's fishing operations. Thus, the Ad hoc Committee may prohibit the delivery of ice or of fuel, the construction or maintenance of a boat, the beaching or launching of a boat, or even a boat's fishing operations. In all cases, the effectiveness of a ban depends on the grip the Ad hoc Committee holds on the service providers. Finally, the Ad hoc Committee may obtain compliance by threatening a person's life or his property. During the course of my fieldwork, I witnessed examples of all these sanctions being applied.

The success of the Ad hoc Committee's sanctions depends on a number of circumstances. The standing of the individual or the group in question is an important variable. As some incidents demonstrate, poorer boat owners - and others, such as outsiders, who occupy weaker positions - are more responsive to sanctions than powerful, wealthy owners. However, the Ad hoc Committee would be much less successful than it is now if the state did not back its authority.

The role of the state

This is an appropriate moment to reflect briefly on the position of state institutions in the harbor area. The Chennai Port Trust formally administers the fishing harbor and is also responsible for upkeep and development. The Port Trust officials with whom I spoke confided, however, that they would like to be relieved of this task. Not only does the fishing harbor cost more money than it generates, particularly because users are infamous for their failure to pay harbor dues, but it is a never-ending headache too. Nothing can be settled without due consultation of fisher organizations, that throw up infinite hurdles to any well-intended plan.

The Fisheries Department is the second state institution of consequence in the fishing harbor area. Its officials are charged with the implementation of the Tamil Nadu Fishing Regulation Act of 1984, a piece of legislation which imposes severe limitations on the activities of mechanized boat fishers - at least on paper. The Act requires mechanized boat fishers to regis-

ter and license their vessels, and to observe certain fishing rules. The cornerstone hereof is the so-called 3-mile rule, which prohibits boat fishers from fishing the inshore zone within three nautical miles from shore. However, this rule, as well as many others, is poorly implemented.

One factor explaining this state of affairs may be mentioned. In the mid-nineties, the Minister of Fisheries in Tamil Nadu originated from the constituency of Royapuram, and was of fishing caste. The prevailing system of machine politics³ ensured that local fisher organizations exerted great influence on fishing policy; it also harnessed the Fisheries Department to the minister's band wagon, making it an instrument for the realization of his political goals. As a result of these processes, the Fisheries Department in the harbor area of Royapuram is closely intertwined with fisher organizations, and in particular with the boat owner associations.

The Ad hoc Committee is officially recognized by the Minister and makes maximum use of its political connections to reinforce its policies in the fishing harbor area. Its influence emerges in various ways. Officers from the local police station thus prove to react to a complaint only if it is channeled through the Ad hoc Committee. And the Fisheries Department bureaucrat who is in charge of registering new vessels, asks every applicant to provide an endorsing letter from the Ad hoc Committee. It will be clear that this greatly increases the committee's clout.

4. The rule system in mechanized boat fishing

In the course of their rule-making activity, the Ad hoc Committee and its predecessors have acted with regard to three fields: the practice of fishing, the accession to markets, and the accession to the social ranks of mechanized boat owners.

The rules with regard to mechanized boat fishing are relatively limited. Attention focuses on procedures for the settlement of damages incurred during fishing, either by mechanized boat or by artisanal fishermen. To this end, the Ad hoc Committee runs a daily court at the harbor front. There, the 'judges' - who are all senior members of the committee - cross-question witnesses, examine the evidence and finally arrive at a judgement, which generally involves the payment of a compensatory amount.

The Ad hoc Committee regularly also expresses support to the fishing rules made by artisanal fishing councils (cf. Bavinck 1996, 1998), as well as to legislative measures of the Government of Tamil Nadu. Such adhesion is generally of a symbolic nature, however, and rarely translated into concrete measures vis-à-vis the membership.

In the marketing field, the Ad hoc Committee is more active. Boat owners and workers are naturally interested in obtaining the highest possible prices for the catches they land in the fishing harbor; however, prices tend to vary with supply. In order to influence price developments, the Ad hoc Committee, together with the Panchayat Union, therefore enforces a rule limiting trade in the fishing harbor to fish landed by fishermen from adjacent districts. This prevents bumper catches from Andhra Pradesh, which are regularly transported into Chennai, from being marketed in the area. Another rule restricts fishers from hamlets to the north of Chennai from selling their catches in Royapuram before 8 a.m. By that time, the auctioning of 'local' catches is over. Both measures benefit the collective of 'local' fishermen.

³ The system of machine politics in southern India is described by Scott (1972), Wade (1988) and de Wit (1996).

The third field of rule-making activity concerns accession to the ranks of boat owners who are allowed to base their boats in Chennai fishing harbor, and make use of the facilities there. To this topic we now turn.

5. The control of social boundaries

The outsider issue was one of several problems considered by boat-owner associations in 1995, but it stands out because of its inward thrust. According to popular perception, the problem originated in the permissiveness of fisher leaders in the past and could be resolved only through concerted action. But how was it to be defined? What *are* outsiders and insiders, and where is the boundary between them? This debate, which highlighted the contours of an ambivalent social structure, pitted hard-liners against moderates. The implementation of decisions on the restriction of outsider activity reveals some of the practical exigencies of control and authority in mechanized boat fishing.

From the outset I want to make it clear that the outsider problem in Royapuram involved investments rather than labor and boat owners rather than workers. The important question was: does so-and-so, who comes from a place or social group outside the locality, have the right to operate a boat out of the Chennai harbor? This is not to deny that the large-scale immigration of workers in boat fisheries has often had a negative effect on labor conditions and decreased workers' incomes. However, at least to my knowledge, this has never become a major public issue. Unlike boat owners, boat workers have always been feebly organized. In this section I focus on the outsider problem as it has been debated and handled in Royapuram and largely ignore the labor issue.

Background of the outsider problem

The outsider problem is as old as mechanized boat fishing in Royapuram. Initially, this problem was associated with patterns of seasonal migration.

Driver Ramakrishnan: In 1968, when I, as a boy, started working on mechanized boats, it was very common for boats to move down to Cuddalore [a town located 100 miles down the Coromandel Coast, mb] during the lean months from January to March. At that time there was no problem. In those years, Cuddalore boats were also coming to Chennai to market their fish, tank diesel and procure ice.

Originally, many boat fishers from Kerala also visited Chennai. Periods of free access alternated with protest and the denial of entrance.

Dhanalakshmi (retired boat owner): One of the negative customs which has come about is that Chennai people won't allow boats from Cuddalore or from Kerala to moor here any more. In the early years of boat fishing, objections of this kind arose in waves. If the groups coming in were numerous and the prices of fish went down, action would often be taken to remove the outsiders. However, there was also a contrary movement. Local boat owners would make deals with outsiders and say it was their brother's boat or something of the kind. Neighborhood panchayats also would draw income from taxes on outside boats.

As this respondent points out, protectionist measures often have been motivated by declining fish prices. The boat-owner association in Chennai today is deeply concerned about market fluctuations and has taken various measures to control them.

In the 1970s, however, protectionist tendencies started to coalesce throughout northern Tamil Nadu. The boat-owner association stopped the seasonal migration of outside fishers to Chennai, and boat fishers in other ports did the same. Such measures were often motivated by discrimination experienced by members of the own group. Many Chennai boat owners thus recall with indignation how many of their numbers tried to escape the riots of 1977 and 1978 in Chennai. They were not allowed to sell their catches in Cuddalore and were even denied food, drink, and lodging. They assert that this treatment set the stage for a subsequent closing of the Chennai harbor.

Apparently, the termination of seasonal migration to bigger ports like Chennai largely resulted from the autonomous actions of fisher organizations. However, this may have corresponded as well with Fisheries Department policy. Government Order 991 of 1979 aimed, in part, to prevent an over-concentration of mechanized boats in any one location. It directed that "mechanized boat owners should arrange to berth their boats only in the sea area adjoining their own fishing villages." The Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Act of 1983 also contains clauses regulating boat movement.⁴ In general, legislators intended to discourage the migration of boats from one harbor to another since such movements interfered with efforts to increase control over the mechanized boat sector.

In addition to the issue of seasonal migration, the problem of non-fisher investments in boat fishing reached a peak in Chennai in the 1970s and became an important theme in harbor politics. By the early 1980s, many of these investors had left the scene, driven by diminishing returns and by the conflicts which now characterized the relations between boat and artisanal fishers at sea. The discovery of the rich Andhra Pradesh fishing grounds again increased the allure of boat fishing in Chennai. In view of the resistance of local boat owners, however, outside investors now went underground. In this process, a local fisherman served as a front for fishers from other parts of the Tamil Nadu coastline or for non-fishers investors - the so-called *benami* relationship.⁵ A great deal of contemporary activism is directed at unearthing and eliminating such fronts.

From the fisher perspective, outsider and *benami* problems are related phenomena. After all, absentee owners often seek a *benami* front because they are outsiders and anticipate problems with the local fisher population if this fact would be made public. For this discussion, it is sufficient to treat the *benami* relationship as a subset of the general outsider problem.

But Royapuram counts yet another complicated category of outsiders - immigrants, who are largely of fishing stock. I noted above that, after the *début* of boat fishing, the fisher neighborhoods of Chennai expanded rapidly. One category of fisher immigrants developed local ties and eventually became boat owners. What should be done with them? The debate in Royapuram has largely centered on the rights of this borderline group.

The definition of 'outsider'

The outsider problem ranks high on the priority list of Royapuram boat owners today. Not only the activities of boat-owner associations but also conversations with individual boat owners reveal this trend. Thirty-one owners in our survey sample of 33 emphasized that the issue had high priority.

⁴ See Sections 7 and 11 of Chapter 2 of the 1983 Act, which deal with the licensing of fishing vessels in particular fishing ports, and also Rule 6 of the Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Rules (1983).

⁵ *Benami* indicates a relationship in which a piece of property is nominally registered in someone else's name, to conceal the facts of ownership.

What definition of 'outsider' do boat owners employ? Clearly, ideas about the distinguishing characteristics of outsiders, or non-members, mirror those on insiders, or members. Statements reflect a consensus that the main criteria are territoriality and descent. Differences emerge, however, with regard to the conditions under which outsiders can achieve membership. Varying interpretations of rules in this field make for conceptual confusion and also contribute to inaction.

Locals first of all stress that boat owners in Chennai must come from Chennai or the adjacent district of Chingleput - note that this territorial division coincides with the government's administrative units. One common motivation for this distinction is that boat fishers from these districts have no other port to utilize, whereas inhabitants of southern districts have their own harbor facilities. In addition, Chennai boat fishers are convinced that persons of non-fishing caste have no place in mechanized boat fishing - this is a criterion of descent and of ethnic affiliation. Most of them would agree with a more radical boat owner, who answered the question of whether non-fishers should be allowed to operate a boat in Chennai, by categorically stating that "One should be a born fisherman, of the fishing population. Others are not allowed." Notably, this man did not mention a specific fishing caste but the fishing population in general. At no time did I hear that people were refused entry to boat fishing simply because they belonged to a marine fishing caste other than the Pattinavar. This signals the development of a new kind of caste consciousness.

The rule denying non-fisher owners entrance to the fishing harbor does not seem to apply to persons of fishing caste who pursue other professions and then return to invest in mechanized boats. This concurs with the descent criterion.

Most boat owners would agree that the descent rule in principle should be narrowed down to include only patrilineal relatives (*pangaalis*) of local fishers. This relates to the old-time settlement pattern, in which a fishing hamlet is a collection of patrilineages. The rule of patrilinearity excludes affinal kin, including outside men who marry local women. The same radical boat owner quoted above explained that "we follow Hindu law, in which the wife joins the husband. A man who marries into Royapuram is therefore not entitled to operate a boat here." This interpretation, however, contradicts the usual practice in artisanal fishing hamlets in which males who marry into a community build up membership rights over time. Indeed, outsiders hoping to gain a foothold in Chennai often have employed this strategy. Thus, it is not surprising that the radical wing of boat owners in Royapuram has tried to eliminate this loophole.

At one point, members of Chandran's group considered obstructing a wedding of a local girl to a boat owner from Cuddalore, because this would give the man a chance to berth his boat in Chennai. In the end, however, this plan was not carried out, probably because of the negative publicity it would receive in fisher circles. Marriage is, after all, a sacrosanct event.

Another conceptual loophole relates to the rule of territoriality. According to this rule, outsiders build up membership rights by living in a place for a longer period of time and by participating in fishing activities. This stems from the conviction that roots develop over time as old ties weaken. Old-time settlers that continue to stress their relationships with their places of origin tend to irritate locals.

Driver Ramakrishnan: If I settle in the Netherlands, I should not continue to maintain close ties with India. Similarly, Cuddalore boat owners should really settle down here.

However, a portion of them still pays taxes [*uurvari*] or makes contributions [*santaa*] to their place of origin. My employer is like that. His daughter's wedding invitation also mentions Cuddalore as their home town, not Chennai.

How long does it take for an outsider to be recognized as a local and, moreover, to be allowed to operate a boat in the locality? This issue is one of the central points of contention for boat owners. The radical wing argues for a drastic curtailment of immigration, whereas the moderates plead clemency for older settlers.

The debate over the definition of an outsider therefore indicates solid ground alternated with patches of quicksand. I discussed the conditions necessary to transform outsiders into insiders. Interpretations were seen to differ. The criteria which appear firm, such as of district or of caste, can still generate discussion as each has a hazy demarcation line.

The implementation of outsider rules

The difference which arose between the Ad hoc Committee and Chandran's group on the outsider issue was one of degree rather than of ideological position. Both associations spoke out against such involvement. But the Ad hoc Committee took a more moderate - some fishers said 'corrupted' - standpoint, while Chandran favored radical action. Soon after its formation, Chandran's group questioned the Ad hoc Committee's treatment of immigrant boat owners - those who had been operating a boat in Royapuram for a longer period of time. The Ad hoc Committee had developed the habit of imposing a substantial fine on such owners each time they made a major change to their fishing enterprise. Major modifications such as lengthening a craft as well as the replacement or addition of a vessel requires re-registration with the Fisheries Department. The Ad hoc Committee used this requirement to exact compliance with its demands. After all, the department requires that every application for registration be accompanied by a letter of recommendation from the Ad hoc Committee.

Chandran expressed disdain for the favoritism the Ad hoc Committee's policy implied and also commenced to ferret out benami relationships, well into the ranks of the committee. Chandran suspected a committee member, who had just constructed a new boat, of operating it in benami. Thus Chandran prohibited its launching until the documents were to his satisfaction. Although the man in question tried to dodge the order in several ways, he finally yielded. Chandran's allegations apparently turned out to be correct. The boat owner launched the craft only after providing proof that he had procured the vessel from the absentee owner, which made it a 'local' craft.

In the summer of 1995, the Ad hoc Committee commenced a general campaign against outsiders and benami relationships. The committee announced its intent to the boat fishermen public in a pamphlet, as follows:

Our association is determined to remove mechanized boats from outside as well as benami boats which fish and land their catches in our area. In the future, these boats will be removed... Local fishers should not join hands with outsiders in operating mechanized boats (my translation, mb).

The Ad hoc Committee pursued its goal with a vengeance. In the following months, all boat owners attending court sessions - or at least those who were less well known and less powerful - were obliged to present documents proving their identity and ownership. Moreover, in November 1995, the Ad hoc Committee organized a raid on the northern section of the harbor where it suspected to find many unregistered boats belonging to outsiders. Rather than aiming to remove these boats, however, the main goal of this action was to raise money. Thus, in the

planning meeting before the raid, a senior member proposed - to general acclaim - that every outsider boat they found should be fined Rs 30,000. He argued that it would be impossible to eject all outsiders and pointed out that the Ad hoc Committee could use funds to meet other expenses.

Limitations to action

What were the effects of this movement to defend the privileges of insiders against outsiders? Indeed, some benami relations, such as the instance detailed above, may have been terminated through the efforts of boat-owner associations. Certainly, the ranks of outsiders got the message, which was spread through myriad channels, that they were not particularly welcome in Royapuram.

Interview 1

Boat owner Subramanian: I have been living in Chennai for 30 years and feel at home here. Still I have no freedom. I have to beg the Ad hoc Committee for permission to build a second boat - I may get it, but maybe not. There are many rules and regulations regarding outsiders like me, and I feel bitter about this.

Interview 2

Boat owner James (an outsider on two counts because he belongs to the non-fishing Nadar caste from the south of Tamil Nadu): We are all Indians! Why are there separate categories of fishers? The harbor has been built from tax money raised all over India, and everybody has the right to use it!

In fact, this pressure on outsiders during 1995 resulted in the revitalization of migrant organizations in Royapuram.

But did the Ad hoc Committee make any progress towards their goal of removing outsiders from the harbor area? To my knowledge, they did not. The reasons for this failure are three-fold. First of all, the Ad hoc Committee failed to reduce the number of outside boat owners because of its own weaknesses. For example, it pursued two contradictory goals by attempting to milk outsiders while trying to remove them from the harbor altogether. A lack of endurance also plays a role. This relates to a basic trait of boat-owner associations. Like village councils, boat-owner associations are profoundly sensitive to immediate pressures. Consequently, they fail in long-term planning and implementation.

Secondly, outsiders often succeed in creating local alliances and in using them for their defense. Absentee owners, of course, find a natural partner in their managers, whereas fishers from other parts of Tamil Nadu often take recourse to marriage ties. Experience demonstrates that more powerful contacts with the local population offer a person a better chance of receiving protection. Popular rumor suggested that many of the leading figures in the boat-owner association actually managed boats in benami and thus were not eager to support stringent measures.

The more ambiguous an outside boat owner's position, the easier it is for local allies to do their work. The demarcation of insiders and outsiders was shown to be particularly weak regarding the achievement of membership. Marriage and long-term residence traditionally provide outsiders with rights in a fishing community. Although these avenues are disputed, a person who meets the basic criteria may gather enough support to withstand untoward action.

The last impediment stems from the contradiction between fisher action and state law. An outsider threatened with removal from Royapuram can go to court and demand enforcement

of his constitutional rights. The memory of events in the early 1990s overshadows present-day deliberations. At that time, Chandran, who headed the official boat owner association at that time, ordered at least 11 boats owned by persons from other districts to leave the Royapuram harbor. This initiative ended in failure, however, when several affected boat owners took the case to court and obtained a stay order. The final blow came when the newly established boat workers' union organized hunger strikes and demonstrations to demand government action. They argued that the boat owner association's order was unconstitutional and would result in a loss of employment. The end result was that the outsider boats were allowed to stay, but the owners could not replace their vessels or add to their fleets.

These events continued to shape decision-making in 1995. The following interview with Bhaskaran, the Ad hoc Committee's chairman, illustrates how.

Bhaskaran: Some people say that we should forcibly remove Cuddalore boat owners from Chennai, but we can't do this. Some of them have gone to court and obtained a 'stay' on an association order to go and are fishing still, which is a shameful [*avamaana*] thing. If we tell someone to leave from here and they do, then we are kings who can be proud of ourselves. However, if a person goes to court and gets a 'stay', then he has more power than before. Then *he* will be the *raaja* [king]. The Ad hoc Committee cannot go against the court because officially the Cuddalore man has the right to fish here. Question: But you have other ways to stop a man - by preventing a boat to be constructed or loaded with ice...

Bhaskaran: That we can do. However, then the man will go to the police and show the stay order. The police will tell the Ad hoc Committee not to interfere. I may be a ruling party man, but the police will not always be favorable to me. If I go beyond the limit, the police will thwart me.

Although Bhaskaran may have reasons to down-play his power and his room to maneuver, the essential truth of his statement cannot be doubted. Indeed, the state forum of law, which has a powerful outreach, hinders the range of boat owner associations' actions.

6. Conclusions

So where does this discussion of regulatory activity in South Indian trawler fishing take us? A few points are clear. First, mechanized boat fishers of Chennai *have* founded formal institutions with responsibility for the regulation of fishing activity. Although firmly rooted in the fishing population, these institutions were seen to be closely intertwined with government. The existence of strong institutions in such a recent fishery is noteworthy, and possibly related to the rooting of mechanized boat fishing in old-time artisanal fisheries.

Second, we noted that the restriction of access to mechanized boat fishing in Chennai is one of the items on boat owner associations' lists, playing up forcefully in 1995 during fieldwork. Boat owners' motives for action in this field can be read as a blend of three types of protectionism: protection of harbor facilities (which risk becoming overburdened), protection of the market, and protection of the marine resource. The latter concern is significant; after all, authors like McGoodwin (1990) do not discern any kind of resource conservation ethic among trawler fishermen. Such statements clearly need to be qualified.

The political nature of deliberations around limiting access to mechanized boat fishing in Chennai is an interesting sideline feature. The topic arouses severe emotions among fishermen and effectively divides the population into various segments; it also pits one boat owner association against another, finally bringing in state agencies as well. As Jentoft and McCay (1995:227) observe, "fisheries management is [...] a political issue and must, accordingly, relate to conflicting interests, values, and world views." In academic discussions on CPR-management, this dimension is readily forgotten.

Third, it is clear that boat owner organizations, despite their ambitions, have not been very successful in realizing their goals of regulating access. I located the reasons for this state of affairs in various aspects of the local working environment. After all, the mechanized boat industry of Chennai is differentiated and large, and boat owner associations are only one of many institutional actors. Their grip on the population and on events is therefore partial indeed. Added to this is the long-term process of immigration into the industry, which has created substantial conceptual and political problems for organizations seeking to enforce social barriers. Who does one keep out, and how does one mobilize enough political power to accomplish the goal?

The criteria that boat owner associations apply to the issue create two special kinds of problems. First of all, the traditional criteria of descent, affinity, and locality - which are applied to make a distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' - prove to contain too many ambiguities to be practical. In reality, they are dodged and manipulated by all parties. The other kind of problem relates to the contradictions existing between fisher law and constitutional law. By applying to government courts, injured parties have been able to thwart the measures imposed by boat owner associations, dealing a blow to the legitimacy of fisher law in the process.

A final remark concerns the aspect of organizational maturity. Historical analysis demonstrates that organizations respond to both external and internal circumstances, and develop over time. One could argue that this is particularly true for new organizations. For this reason, I believe it is wrong to take institutional setups in recent fisheries, such as the mechanized boat fishing industry of Chennai, as constituting mature end products. Rather than fixing them in time, it might be more worthwhile to put effort into establishing potentialities, as well as prospective points of leverage.

REFERENCES

- Bavinck, M. 1996. Fisher regulations along the Coromandel coast: a case of collective control of common pool resources. *Marine Policy* 20-(6): 475-82.
- Bavinck, M. 1998. "A matter of maintaining the peace," state accommodation to subordinate legal systems: the case of fisheries along the Coromandel Coast of Tamil Nadu, India. *Journal of Legal Pluralism* 40: 151-170.
- Bavinck, M. forthcoming. *Marine resource management: conflict and regulation in the fisheries of the Coromandel Coast*, New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Berkes, F. 1987. Common-property resource management and Cree Indian fisheries in Subarctic Canada. In *The question of the commons. The culture and ecology of communal resources*, eds. B. J. McCay and J. M. Acheson, 66-91. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Carrier, J. G. 1987. Marine tenure and conservation in Papua New Guinea. Problems in interpretation. In *The question of the commons. The culture and ecology of communal resources*, eds. B. J. McCay and J. M. Acheson, 142-167. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Jentoft, S. and McCay, B. 1995. User participation in fisheries management, lessons drawn from international experiences. *Marine Policy* 19 (3): 227-46.
- Kurien, J. 1978. Entry of big business into fishing, its impact on fish economy. *Economic and Political Weekly* 13 (36): 1557-65.
- McGoodwin, J. R. 1990. *Crisis in the world's fisheries. People, problems, and policies*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ostrom, E. et. al 1999. Revisiting the commons: local lessons, global challenges. *Science* 284, 278-282.
- Pannell, S. 1996. *Managing the discourse of resource management: the case of Sasi from Southeast Maluku, Indonesia*. Paper read at workshop on Fisheries in the Eastern Indian Ocean Region, July 2, Indian Ocean Centre, Perth, Western Australia.
- Platteau, J. P. 1989. The dynamics of fisheries development in developing countries: a general overview. *Development and Change* 20 (4): 565-97.
- Schlager, E. and E. Ostrom 1993. Property-rights regimes and coastal fisheries: an empirical analysis. In *The political economy of customs and culture: informal solutions to the commons problem*, eds. T. L. Anderson and R. T. Simmons, 13-41. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Thurston, E. and K. Rangachari 1987 [1909]. *Castes and tribes of Southern India*. Vol. 6. Reprint. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.
- Scott, J. C. 1972. *Comparative political corruption*. Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice Hall.
- Wade, R. 1988. *Village republics. Economic conditions for collective action in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wit, J. de 1996. Poverty, policy and politics in Madras slums. Dynamics of survival, gender and leadership. New Delhi: Sage Publications.