Fishing for space: Socio-spatial relations of Indian trawl fishers in the Palk Bay, South Asia, in the context of trans-boundary fishing

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In search of elusive agency: applying Actor Network Theory (ANT) to the trawl fisheries in Palk Bay, India

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Abstract

This article is about re-looking at a very complex and enduring fishing conflict between the Indian trawl fishers and the gill netting fishers of Northern Sri Lanka. On the face of it, the Indian fishers seem to have considerable political agency when compared to their northern Sri Lankan counterparts when it comes to sustained encroachment into Sri Lankan waters for fishing. However a closer analysis shows a more nuanced picture. I follow the everyday lives of the trawl fishers on the Indian side of Palk Bay, using Actor Network Theory (ANT) to detail how this agency and the strategies that give this agency its strength actually come into being. I also make note of the fragility of the network that provides this agency. In the trail that follows the various actors in Palk Bay, it is clear that the much touted agency actually comes from a series of heterogeneous actors and their respective actions. The fishers derive their agency by virtue of their position in a complex and dynamic network that aligns interests of various actors. By using ANT as opposed to other fisheries management paradigms, I address some key limitations including that of theorising power in fisheries.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years a complex fishing conflict has brewed in Palk Bay between the Indian trawl fishers and the predominantly small-scale, gill netting Sri Lankan fishers. The conflict not only threatens the livelihood of the trawl fishers (both owners and crew) in India, but also that of the northern Sri Lankan fishers who have just come out of a three decade long civil war which ended in 2009. The Indian trawl fishers who regularly encroach into Sri Lankan territorial waters to fish have been accused by the Sri Lankan fishermen of destroying their marine environment and also causing havoc to their gill nets.

This article builds upon earlier works (Scholtens et al., 2013) which attributes the continued encroachment of the Indian trawlers into what is now Sri Lankan water to better political agency of the trawl fishers of India. The article saw political agency as power, as it aided in the “individual or collective ability to attain ideological or material needs from a political establishment” (ibid., in para 2 under the sub heading ‘Power as political agency’). Political agency in turn was understood as a ‘variety of individual and collective, official and mundane, rational and affective, and
human and non-human ways of acting, affecting and impacting politically' (Häkli & Kallio 2013, p.181).

Given the scope of the article, it stopped short of explaining how this process of agency actually comes into being among the trawl fishers in India. In this article I would like to take this forward and see how the Indian fishermen actually acquire this agency; how is power operationalized to aid transboundary fishing? How is this agency consolidated? The article will answer these questions by employing the Actor Network Theory (ANT).

One of the conclusions is that among the numerous networks of the trawl owners in Palk Bay, the strongest and most potent network for the Indian fishers of Palk Bay in terms of their political agency is boxed in a series of relation between human and non-human actors that very often lie outside what is typically regarded as the fisheries system. The conflict is very often ‘black boxed’. Within the domain of agency, popular politics and ethnic identities hide some very key actors and their role in the network. ‘Black boxed’, is a term used in ANT to denote a system or object when it is viewed in terms of its input, output and transfer characteristics without actually looking at the various processes at work.

This article unfolds this network. I follow a trail of boat owners, field correspondents of local media, mobile phones, mobile communication towers, television sets and newspapers in addition to a good road and rail link to expose a very strong network that provides agency for the fishers on the Indian side of Palk Bay. Thereby I also emphasize that studying networks in fisheries cannot be done only by studying fishers or the institutions that are visibly related to fishing. Whilst being key actors, the fishermen or fisher institutions certainly do not occupy the central position of the network that enables them agency, but are instead situated within a larger dynamic network wherein the interest of the actors are constantly re-aligned. As actors in these networks, the fishers contribute their part in enacting their role, in addition to being acted upon by other actors.

Through this article I would like to further push the incorporation of other epistemological insights into fishery management studies. After employing ANT in Palk Bay to study this fishing conflict, I will also show how fishery management studies can benefit from alternative stand points such as ANT. Broadly speaking, the epistemological roots of ANT lie in social constructionism and avoid any form of essentialism. To be true to these roots, for the most part of this paper I therefore will abandon engaging with any of the currently available theories or discussions in fishery management. This is also to be faithful to the key principles of ANT
as described by Callon (1986), namely ‘agnosticism’ (presenting all views without judgment), ‘generalized symmetry’ (treating all actors equally; e.g. human and non-human) and ‘free association’ (imposing no a priori categorizations or explanations). I will return to the discussion within fisheries management studies only at the end of the paper.

After a brief discussion on why I choose ANT as opposed to other presently available theories in fishery management to analyze Palk Bay, I detail ANT itself. I then briefly discuss the context in which this research was carried out. After a brief note on methodology, I analyze and focus on the networks in Palk Bay and describe the strategies (as described in ANT studies) with which these actors function in these networks.

6.2 THE PARADIGMS OF FISHERIES GOVERNANCE

In this section, I will briefly engage with the reasons I use ANT as opposed to other frameworks normally used in fishery management and governance. A detailed discussion on these different paradigms is beyond the scope of this paper considering the large amount of literature available. Readers are requested to turn to Symes (2014) for a summary of different paradigms in fisheries.

The limitations of these frameworks have also been detailed in various contexts. The threefold limitations could be summarized as 1) the difficulty in addressing immensely complex socio-economic systems that are to be governed (Jentoft, 2007 b); 2) the rigidity of the frameworks in which a fishery is seen as a single entity (Murray et al., 2006; Johnsen et al., 2009; Johnsen, 2013) and 3) the inability to address and theorize power adequately (Brookfield et al., 2005; Jentoft, 2000, 2007a; Berkes, 2010; Nightingale, 2013; Davis & Ruddle, 2012).

Power dynamics are a key aspect in Palk Bay as they help us better understand the present conflict and find effective solutions. Thus, can shifting of our epistemological base in fisheries studies, which has been largely essentialist, give a better view on the above mentioned limitations? Can the much touted creative and/or clumsy solutions (Khan & Neis, 2010) stem from other non-structural episteme? In this article I will explore the fisheries conflict in Palk Bay with the lens of Actor Network Theory, a theory which abandons notions of any structural agency in society (Latour, 2005).

ANT by its very ontology (as detailed in the next section) effectively deals with
some of these limitations. It deals with complexity by incorporating a range of actors (both human and non-human), does away with any kind of systemic limitations in its analysis and effectively addresses power by decentering it (Bear, 2012). This certainly will not be the first article which tries to incorporate other epistemological views in fisheries and aquaculture (Bear, 2012; Bear & Eden, 2008; Lien, 2005; Lien, 2007; Lien & Law, 2011; Nightingale, 2013). Most of the literature has engaged with scholarship outside the realms of the discipline of fisheries management or aquaculture. That said, fisheries scholars have recently brought in a whiff of post-structuralism in the whole governance framework with the introduction of works of scholars such as Foucault and Latour (Johnsen, 2013; Johnsen et al., 2009; Urquhart, 2011; Holm, 2003). Their infusion however, still remains constrained by the limitations of the fisheries management paradigms.

Studying networks in fisheries is also not new and various studies in marine sciences and in fisheries have used other network theories such as the Social Network Theory (SNT) (Bodin & Crona, 2009; Cooke et al., 2011; Gibbs, 2008; Hartley, 2010; Marín & Berkes, 2010). These theories however assume a pre-existing static network as already in place. Most of these theories see social networks as an objective reality. ANT disagrees with any such prior assumptions and argues that actor - networks are in a continual state of becoming, and networks can only be explored by following the actors without any predisposed ideas of the network itself (Latour, 2005).

### 6.3 ON ACTOR NETWORK THEORY

ANT was initially designed for the purpose of studying the sociology of science and is very often referred to as Science and Technology Studies (STS). In other words, ANT was in fact the theory of theories (Walsham, 1997; Mol, 2010), however since its introduction it has spread across various disciplines including sociology, geography, management and organization studies, economics, anthropology and philosophy.

ANT tries to understand how networks of actors are formed and kept in a perpetual state of becoming, to achieve certain end (Latour, 1992, p. 281). In this case the end is the political agency or power of the Indian trawlers in Palk Bay. As explained earlier, based on the three guiding principles - a) agnosticism b) generalised symmetry and c) free associations - ANT traces the network by judiciously following the actor and their actions. It does not give any importance to
any of the actors or their actions but only faithfully follows them, ANT is thus very exploratory in its approach. A very important emphasis in ANT is that actors can be both human and non-human. “An actor in ANT is a semiotic definition – an actant – that is something that acts or to which activity is granted by another… an actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of action” (Latour, 1996, p. 373). Hence forth in this article the term actor is defined by this definition. In ANT both humans and non-human actors are studied within a network wherein their identity is defined and established through their interaction with other actors (Law, 1991; Callon & Law, 1997). Every action of the actor is a confluence of action by other actors in the network. It also does not distinguish between the scales of the actors. No actor is big and no actor is small. There is neither the local nor the global and all actors are treated on the same scale. With no prior value attached to any of the actors, ANT faithfully follows up on the various actions of all the actors. It traces these associations formed between the actors as a result of their action.

ANT primarily focusses on the associations between these heterogeneous (human –non human) actors. It is in explaining the process of formation of these associations that ANT tries to describe how some networks become more influential than others. ‘Translation’ is the term used in ANT to define the process of forming these associations in ANT (Callon, 1986). Translation involves constant negotiations among actants. This negotiation establishes common sets of definitions and meanings necessary to create and sustain a network for a certain end. Connectivity and power (or the lack thereof) are intertwined when describing associations between actors. “When you simply have power – in potentia – nothing happens and you are powerless; when you exert power – in actu – others are performing the action and not you…. Power is not something you may possess and hoard…Power is, on the contrary, what has to be explained by the action of the others who obey the dictator…” (Latour, 1986, p. 265). In ANT, by linking the various actors and their actions involved in the formation of a network to achieve a certain end, we explain power in its active form.

ANT ‘s argument that everything including individuals, society, organizations, nature and politics is a result or effort of the heterogeneous networks gives us the possibility to engage with complex socio-ecological networks such as fisheries. For ANT, there are no essences, only heterogeneous networks. The absence of any a priori distinction between actors when using ANT gives us the scope to do away with conventional dualism often dotting fisheries management studies (Johnsen, et al., 2009).
Networks are thus fluid and dynamic processes wherein actors are constantly negotiating their positions based on the process of translation (Mol, 2010). ANT provides us with various avenues to discuss a network. In this paper I explore the network that enable the agency to the Indian trawl fishers to continue to fish in Sri Lankan waters, and I elaborate on the strategies that strengthen this network. To elucidate this I make use of the four strategies of the networks as detailed by Callon (1986). The strategies include 1) durability of relations 2) mobility across space 3) anticipation of materials to be translated 4) scope of ordering. I will be defining and explaining these strategies in the context of Palk Bay after detailing the case of Palk Bay and its networks.

6.4 PALK BAY AND THE PERILS OF FISHING

The shallow sea called Palk Bay between Northern Sri Lanka and the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu (see Map 2) is of late witnessing a protracted transboundary fisheries conflict between trawl fishers from both nations, who are both dependent on Palk Bay’s limited fishing grounds. The Tamil fishermen of the war torn Northern provinces in Sri Lanka were restricted from fishing for security reasons for most of the 26-year civil war. Since 2009 they have been rebuilding their livelihoods in the midst of a highly militarized environment. On the Indian side, aided by significant state subsidies, the Indian trawler fleet in the region expanded during the civil war period from a few hundred to approximately 1,900 trawlers, part of them filling the vacuum of the rich but abandoned Sri Lankan fishing grounds (Scholtens et al., 2012).

On the Indian side five districts border the Palk Bay namely Ramanathapuram, Pudukottai, Thanjavur, Thiruvarur and Nagapattinam. There are nine major trawl centers in the Palk Bay. Two of these centers, Mallipattinam and Sethubavachatiram, are in Thanjavur. Kottaipattinam and Jegathapattinam are in Pudukkottai district and the rest of the centers are in Ramanathapuram district (ref Map 2).

The Indian fishers have increasingly become dependent on Sri Lankan waters to secure a good catch. At least half of this fleet and those dependent on allied fishing activities would be highly affected if Indian fishers were stopped from entering Sri Lankan territorial waters. Sri Lankan fishers, on the other hand, are furious that the Indian trawlers fish in their fishing grounds: they are angry that trawlers not only turn the rich marine ecosystem into a marine desert, but also prevent them from
fishing as their nets get damaged by Indian trawl nets. On the Indian side, the trawlers also have similar conflicts with Indian small-scale fishers, although local institutional arrangements have provided for some level of co-existence (ibid.). Sometime in the early 1990’s it is believed that the increased conflict between the Indian small-scale and trawler fishers resulted in a set of rules being established only in Palk Bay, according to which the trawl fishers were allowed to fish three days a week and the small-scale fishers were allowed to fish for four days a week. The rules as I understand them were enacted district wise and have come into being gradually over time along the three Indian districts.

This livelihood conflict between the Indian and Sri Lankan fishers cannot be investigated in isolation of its polarizing political context (Shankaran, 1999). The state of Tamil Nadu in India (a state of 74 million people) has been continuously exerting pressure on the Sri Lankan government to take steps to address alleged war crimes, stop Tamil marginalization, and decentralize more powers to Tamil majority areas by way of the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, which created Provincial Councils (Scholtens et al., 2013). Palk Bay formed an important location during the civil war with the Sea Tigers (the sea division of the LTTE) battling the Sri Lankan Navy there and with goods, war supplies and people being smuggled up and down through the Bay to Tamil Nadu (Suryanarayan and Swaminathan, 2009). A very important factor is that both fisher groups are Tamil, sharing a long history and familial and cultural ties that resulted in the moral support for the Tamil Eelam struggle from Tamils in Tamil Nadu. During the civil war, fishing in Sri Lanka was not without its own risk for the Indian trawlers. The Sri Lankan Navy often claimed that it found it difficult to distinguish between Sea Tigers and fishermen. While there are claims and counterclaims as to who was responsible for the deaths of over 200 Indian fishermen in Sri Lankan waters (Vivekanandan, 2011), it is evident that these deaths and the harassment of fishers reinforced strong anti-Sinhala (read: anti-Sri Lankan) sentiments in Tamil Nadu. In the aftermath of the war, the Navy has engaged in regular token arrests and Indian fishermen do report occasional harassment, though it no longer appears to be a matter of life and death (Scholtens et al., 2013).

The Palk Bay is divided by an International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL), which was bilaterally agreed upon in 1974. There is much debate in India on the accord regarding the status of Indian fishers fishing across the IMBL (Suryanarayan & Swaminathan, 2009). However the status quo of approximately 1,000 boats fishing regularly in Sri Lankan waters has hardly changed over the past few years.
The continuing Indian encroachment into Sri Lankan waters can be explained by asymmetrical power agencies between the fishers of India and Northern Sri Lanka (Scholtens et al., 2013). It is this question of agency of the Indian trawl fishers that this paper likes to explore more. How does this agency actually take place? Based on extensive field work among the trawl fishers on the Indian side I will now try to trace the various actors and their networks in understanding these dynamics of agency.

6.5 METHODS

ANT demands a very meticulous methodology of following the actors and their actions. Many times this means direct observations of all the actions that take place. This study is part of my PhD research, falling under a larger research project with the acronym REINCORPFISH that aims to understand and contribute to the resolution of fisheries conflicts in the Palk Bay. Much of my field work in Palk Bay during 2011 and 2012 involved detailed observations of fishers, especially the owners of the trawlers. In particular I was keen to follow what happens when business was not as usual, for example when there was a fishing strike or when a boat did not return from fishing. A total of about 210 days were spent in the various trawl centers of Palk Bay. The ethnographic observations were also supplemented by 61 in depth semi-structured interviews. The bulk of the work was however at the trawl centers of Rameswaram and Mandapam where I spent most of the time and did most of the observations and interviews. This had to do with the fact that Rameswaram was the most affected trawl center when it came to the transboundary conflict. Mandapam was less affected, but the proximity to Rameswaram and the similar social structure of this landing center to Rameswaram made it an interesting case for comparison. I will however draw upon my experiences in the other centers as well to detail the networks of Palk Bay. In this article I also use a substantial amount of material from research literature, official documents, materials from newspapers and television reports, and accounts books maintained by boat owners to supplement my argument. Due to lack of space in detailing the field observations during the field in the next section I will trace the networks based on five instances which allowed me to look deeper in the networks in action.
6.6 TRACING THE NETWORKS

Instance 1
During one of my first visits to Rameswaram in the month of January 2011, some colleagues and I wanted to meet the Additional Director (AD) of Fisheries of Rameswaram. This is a routine practice among researchers in this area, as a courtesy to meet the officials of the department of fisheries to inform them about the start of our project. We went to his office at about 14:00. The AD was away and the Inspector of fisheries was available, we were welcomed and a brief discussion ensued mainly on the project and the study that was to be undertaken by our team. A few minutes into our discussion a middle aged man strolled in. He did not appear to be a fisheries department official, but appeared very accustomed to the officials. His entry also brought an abrupt end to our discussion and the new entrant seemed to be very interested in what we were doing. He then started asking us a series of questions on who we were and what we were planning to do for our study. When asked who he was, the Inspector fisheries answered he was from the “press”. The man did not seem too keen to elaborate on who he was and stopped talking any further to us. This “press” person then started asking questions to the Inspector on a missing fishing boat and its fishers. The manner in which the questions were asked seemed so routine that there was hardly any conversation apart from mono syllable questions namely “Name? Age? Fathers name? Village? ”. Almost instinctively the inspector then dictated the story required for the news. The man left and we resumed our initial discussion with the inspector. The news item appeared in the most of the vernacular press the next day of the missing fishers and their boats. Over the next few months I saw this person almost every time I was in Rameswaram. It was only after many months later that I got to know who exactly this person was. He was the local stringer2 for the Press Trust of India (PTI). PTI is one of the largest news agencies in the country and boasts a coverage network as vast as the Indian Railways.

Instance 2
During September 2012, a colleague and I were visiting Kottaipattinam. We wanted to meet the president of the Kottaipattinam Mechanized Boat-owners Association Mr M. Abdul Hameed.3 We fixed an appointment over the phone and he had asked us to come and wait for him at the office of the association. As we waited outside, one young boat owner came over and asked who we were and what we wanted. We
explained that we were researchers and were waiting for the president to come. He then invited us to sit inside the office and said that he was there to help the president to release a press statement and had presumed that we were from the press. As we waited, we got to know him better. He owned one trawl boat. He was not directly involved in fishing and employed laborers for his boat. He said fisheries were not the only source of income for him and that he had other business that supplemented his income from fisheries. I asked about the press statement that was to be made. He replied that this was a bad season to fish. “We can hardly break-even in this season, not only is the catch poor, the strong winds make it extremely difficult to fish…” He then candidly added “…you will however see that our press statement tells that we are striking work to press for a set of demands from the government… We cannot work in the next two weeks…. Why not make use of this in our favor to press for certain demands?” He then showed the printed statement and it listed a series of demands to the government, including more subsidies for fuel and better protection from the Sri Lankan navy. He said though the real cause for not going to fish was in fact poor catch, the fishers were keen to portray this as a strike from work. In a few minutes the leader arrived and we had a detailed discussion on the fishing in Kottaipattinam. The leader passionately tried to convince us the need of the strike, among other things. As our discussion was in progress, local stingers from a couple of print and electronic media came and collected the statement from the office. There were only few courtesy wishes between the stringers and the leader, and nothing in detail was exchanged between them about the content of the press statement. In the evening back in our hotel room we could already see that some of the Tamil television channels were already beaming news flashes about the strike in Kottaipattinam. The next day almost all the vernacular newspapers carried the news about the strike.

**Instance 3**

The lodge where I stayed for most part of my field work in Rameswaram overlooked main roads which lead to the fishing harbor. It was a very common sight when sitting in the lobby of this lodge to see local stringers and sometimes accredited journalists often travelling in their motorbikes on this road. Some of them are often seen carrying their cameras along. They were most often going to the fishing harbor to get their daily dose of news. When on the harbor, I also saw them talking to the fishers and collecting some news. Most often the main point of discussion
was related to the fishermens’ encounter with the Sri Lankan navy. Most often their movements were close to the motorable part of the harbor, accessing and interviewing a fixed group of fishers present at these locations. On collection of the news snippets, the texts are normally e-mailed by stringers via various internet facilities that are available in Rameswaram town itself. In case of video footages, the video is shot on various video devices, stored in memory cards, video files digitally compressed and sent to the various news channels by broadband internet connections right from Rameswaram. Most of the other trawl centers also have easy access to broadband. News thus sent to various channels is then beamed across India through satellite-aided television sets. The whole process between collecting news and telecasting takes about two to three hours. The print media is equally effective in helping to spread the news of fisheries in Palk Bay. The news sent to the various news presses is printed and available the very next morning. An excellently maintained road between Rameswaram and Ramanathapuram facilitates the process where the news comes in a printed form back to Rameswaram. Similarly the newly constructed east coast road along the coastal stretches of Palk Bay facilitates quick and easy access of men and material. This is also important for fisheries, as distant markets seamlessly get connected to the trawl fishers of Palk Bay through the railways and roads. Good roads alone do not mean anything if there are no vehicles on them. A very recent development in the rural areas of India especially in Tamil Nadu is the easy availability of motorcycles that carry people up and down (Anandhi & Vijayabaskar, 2013). Numerous motorbikes ride this road to and from the harbor. While I preferred to walk between the lodging and the harbor, a distance of about 2 km in total, I was very often offered to be dropped in the motorbike by fishers who had over time become accustomed to my presence among them. The mobility and communication mentioned here would be redundant if it were not for the cellular phones. I will further explain how mobile communication shrinks this space in the next example.

**Instance 4**

One day, one of my regular respondents was very nervous when I met him at about 8:30 in the morning. I feared the worst and I started hesitantly to have a conversation with him on what happened. He said one of his boats still had not returned from fishing and that there was no contact with the boat either. Calls to the Indian mobile number of the skipper were met with the message that the phone
was out of range. He had two boats. One was about 40 feet in length. The skipper also had another phone with a Sri Lankan mobile number, which also did not work. The other boat of the owner returned and those inside said that they did not see the missing boat. Boats normally work in tandem and have Very High Frequency (VHF) radio set on them by which they communicate with each other. The owner was furious with the skipper of the second boat and said that he could have made sure both the boats made it together. With all this commotion, I decided not to continue the conversation, but rather stand beside the owner and observe what was happening. The owner was trying to convince the second boat skipper and workers to return to the sea to search for the missing boats. The second boat's crew and skipper were not too happy to go back as they have already had a very tiring trip. The owner was trying to give all types of incentives to the crew, as well as reminding them that they had the moral responsibility to search for the boat. While these negotiations were happening the brother of the owner began making a series of phone calls on his mobile phone, to all the other boat owners whom he knew, asking them if any of their boats had seen or spotted the boat. At about 9:30 with still no trace of the boat, he then called the clerk at the fisheries department and informed him about this and asked if a “salvaging order“ could be issued. A salvaging order is an official piece that allows fishers to enter the sea and search for lost boats or fishermen. The salvaging order has to be issued by the fisheries department, and requires to be shown to the coast guard and the navy personnel patrolling the area as well. This order also contained the details of the lost boat as well as the details of the boat which goes in search. It is a lengthy bureaucratic process to obtain this order and hence requires to be initiated at the earliest. In the meantime the hesitant crew of the second boat was convinced and their names dictated over the phone to the clerk, who by then said he would start preparing the salvaging order. Phone calls went in all directions, and I could not keep track of the numerous calls that were made and received. One of the calls was also to the Alliance for Release of Innocent Fishermen (ARIF) co-convener, Mr Arulanandam. He was called to ask if he had any news from Sri Lanka of any boats being captured. At about 10:30 there was a call about the boat being spotted and that one of the last returning boats was towing it along. I could sense that the owner was both relieved and angry. Relieved that the boat was not captured by the Sri Lankan navy or was involved in a mishap, angry because the crew did not communicate to the owner on land about their troubles. The boat had broken down and for some reason the mobile phones were not picking up any signals. This was a scenario where the ending was happy, however
if it was a case of a lost boat, until there would be any news, the boat owners would be hapless. It is high pressure situation wherein the boat owner is the one person who will then be held responsible to various actors on the ground including the fisheries department, the police, the navy, the local press, the local police intelligence and the family of the crew. During my research I have met many such owners and the hopelessness of the situation can be seen written across their face. Most of them avoided talking to me, others had little to say and were very often seen talking on their mobile phones when travelling on their motorbikes.

**Instance 5**

On February 18th 2011, leading newspapers and television news channels in India carried the news of the release of 136 Indian fishermen (though mostly from Nagapattinam, a fishing centre outside Palk Bay) held by a local court in Jaffna for trespassing and poaching in Sri Lankan waters. They were released after being held in custody for only two days. The release circumvented the judicial process in Sri Lanka, bowing to the diplomatic pressure from India which in turn was due to local political pressure. The arrest of the fishermen generated a string of protests by various political parties in the state of Tamil Nadu, with each of the parties condemning the arrest and asking for some radical steps be taken up by the Indian government to protect Indian fishermen. The protests were in form of marches in public roads captured by both the print and the electronic media and by official press releases. In all the cases the protest was against the Sri Lankan state, which in fact had no direct role in this whole episode,6 it were in fact the Sri Lankan fishermen who were directly involved in the initial arrest of the Indian fishermen.7

**6.7 STRATEGIES OF THE NETWORK**

The above instances are indicative of the daily lives of the trawl fishers of Palk Bay. The statement that Indian fishermen have better agency than that of their Sri Lankan counterparts partly masks the numerous strategies that align to make this agency function. As shown above, agency is achieved through a complex network of human and non-human actors and their actions. ANT discusses these strategies of translation or the process that go into consolidation of networks in four categories (Callon, 1986).
6.7.1 Durability of Relations

Making the network durable is very important when it comes to strategizing networks. It has to stand the test of time. The network stands the test of time when relations in the network are embodied in durable materials. The fisher experience with the Sri Lankan navy has to be embodied and translated through durable media such as newspapers, news videos and through various commonly issued statements of the various political parties. Texts and videos keep reinforcing the fisher experience over time. Very often when there is news of an arrest it is common to see file clips of the fishing boats and the harbors being replayed time and again. In the five instances above we saw the process of how fisher experiences are embodied in texts, prints and videos and reproduced time and again.

6.7.2 Mobility across Space

The networks have to also be mobile across space. The various communications systems including mobile and internet technologies and the media play a key role in maintaining a seamless narration of the fisher’s plight in Palk Bay across space. The media prints or telecasts the local lived experience of the fishers and the reaction of political establishments together. Though geographically they may be separated by a good distance, their actions are brought together, collapsing scales and distances. Thus, the trawl fishers of Palk Bay and the political establishment and thereby an arm of the state unknowingly share a common platform through the media. It is to be noted however that once this common platform is removed then both these actors are quite distant. This also explains the innumerable hurdles the fishers have to face in order to activate the state machinery when trying to get some issue sorted. As an example, as mentioned earlier, getting a salvaging order can be a tedious and time-consuming process.

6.7.3 Anticipation of Materials to be Translated

This network of the Palk Bay fishers is kept alive by the ability to anticipate a particular reaction from the political parties. The anticipation of a strong condemnation to arrest or apprehension of the Indian fishers is key to the whole network being held in place. As seen in the instance of the arrest of the 136 Indian fishermen, a political reaction in favor of the Indian fishermen is assured. This reaction is in turn reinforced by popular politics which requires every political party and its leaders to
capitalize on the ethnic issue in Sri Lanka. If there would not be any reaction then the network will not hold up. The weakness of the network can be best explained in July 2012 when the fishers of Palk Bay struck work for ten days when the exporters failed to give profitable prices for their catches especially for shrimps. Surplus stock of shrimps drove down the price and the trawl fishers of Palk Bay were affected badly. The surplus was apparently caused to multiple factors including a good crop of cultured shrimps. Some media houses carried the news however the fishers had to ultimately call off the strike without striking any deal either with the exporters or with the state. The only face saving reason given for withdrawal of what was termed an indefinitely strike was the oral assurance by the minister of fisheries that he would look into the issue.

6.7.4 Scope of Ordering

The strategies of translation are extended only when the range of the network gets extended beyond the local and the relationships that qualify this network get reproduced in a variety of different locations along the network. This means that the relationship between the Indian trawl fishers and that of the Sri Lankan navy has to be successfully reproduced at various scales. Thus the reproduction of the conflict between the Indian trawl fishers and the Sri Lankan navy gets replayed at various locations starting from the local to the national. The conflict is replayed and reinforced in the state of Tamil Nadu with the chief minister writing letters to the Prime minister of India for every arrest made. When the prime minister of India discusses fishing-related issues with the president of Sri Lanka then the most local of relationship gets reproduced at the highest level. All along the network the Indian version of the fisher issues get reproduced and reinforced, thereby ordering the network in favor of the Indian fishers. This reproduction of the conflict at various points of the network reinforces the network.

6.8 DISCUSSION

ANT is about power in a network and is a theory of how power works; ANT sees power as an effect of the various relations and not the cause. In this article we can see that it is through the position of the Indian trawl fishers as being between the various actors of the network that they get their agency. This agency starts with the
local stringers, their need to get news because they get paid per news item. Not all news given to the stringers will get published; the editors have to decide on what is important and not important. The editors of the various media houses in turn see enormous political and public interest in fisheries news only if related to Palk Bay, more particularly if related to the fishers’ encounter with the Sri Lankan navy. The public on the other hand is increasingly interested in consuming this news based on the daily incidence of the encounters with the historical backdrop of the ethnic issue. The final war in Sri Lanka and then the coupling of the fisheries issue of Palk Bay seems to also help many of the political parties in their daily politics. The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu has now made it a habit to write to the Prime Minister of India after each incidence of arrest, each time asserting the lack of political will by the Central Government in taking stern action against Sri Lanka.

All translations that occur right from the news feed from the field (stringers) to the editor’s office and then to various public forums (in form of print and electronic media) does not happen in a vacuum and the extensive use of mobile phones, internet connections and the rail and road links actively perform their actions in aligning this network in favor of the Indian trawl fishers.

This argument can be further strengthened by our project’s experience in Sri Lanka. This research was done in a project that involved civil society and research institutions. During the second phase of the project in 2012, it was felt among the project partners that the Sri Lankan side of the story was not being communicated effectively in the popular media. To this regard there had been increased effort to coordinate media coverage of this issue in Sri Lanka. We have since seen an increased attention to the plight of Sri Lankan fishers and increased arrest of the Indian fishermen.

Far from being static the dynamics of the network will change over time and space. If we were to isolate the Indian trawl fishers outside this network of media, communication technologies and the interconnectedness, they are in fact the victims of the situation they find themselves in. Given the enormous risk to life and property the fishers undertake for their daily survival they can hardly be termed as ruthless exploiters of natural resources. The death of about 200 fishermen in the past 26 years does not speak of a group of greedy trawlers but rather a group of fishers who have no other options.

In this article we used ANT to examine the process that leads to a particular outcome which in this case was the political agency of the Indian trawlers. Other processes can be similarly studied by examining the conditions that bring other
actors together towards achieving a particular goal. However an important point to be taken note of is that the outcome is not always finite and as we have seen in July 2012, the case of demanding more price for the catch, the coming together of the various actors did not result in the desired political agency of the Indian trawlers. Network building is also increasingly becoming complicated and increasingly made irrelevant through various intermediaries and discussed in another paper (Stephen et al., 2013).

6.9 CONCLUSION

This paper explains the political agency of the Indian trawl fishers of Palk Bay using ANT. I wanted to see the dynamics of power among the Indian trawl fishers which make them continue to fish in what is very much Sri Lankan waters, in spite of the enormous risk associated with it. To do this I tried to trace their networks. Of the various networks, I chose to follow the most potent network that established their agency vis-à-vis fishing in Palk Bay that linked the media, communication infrastructure and popular politics of the region. The network was strengthened and held together by the various actors and their strategies. All along while tracing this network I showed how agency was established. The power of the Indian trawl fishers of Palk Bay is not best explained when it is stated that it is derived from themselves or from an invisible political climate that supports their agency. Rather, power as observed here is from the numerous ‘actants’ and their acts in a network that has been built over the years in Palk Bay on the Indian side. The roads, railways and communication revolution in India has acted in ways which have further enhanced this agency, but communication alone without the other intermediaries and their translations does no good to the trawl fishers of Palk Bay. The fragility of the network was also highlighted. This is an important observation, which adds to the fact that what seems like indomitable power can actually crumble when certain links in the network become weak.

Where does this take us in terms of fisheries management? Fisheries systems as described in the fisheries governance literature are not systems “out there” for researchers to study. Rather the systems are made up of networks that encompass everyday lived experiences and relations of the fishers. What we as researchers see or define is framed by our understanding of these networks with a particular idea on what a fisheries system looks like. This understanding of the system does not in
any way guarantee that what is out in the real world is the same as what is described by us. Rather, it is it is more accurate to state that it is the other way around: as researchers we describe what we understand the world to be. ANT demands the researcher to listen to the actor and follow their actions and describe the world in the eyes of the actor. In other words the networks are to be traced in the eyes of the actor. These actions are not confined to the fishery systems as we know them but can rather lead us to different terrains of social and the collective lives of the fishers and the world in which they live.

How best can we incorporate ANT as a method into understanding fishery governance and in particular into network governance? Few attempts have been made over the years (Johnsen, 2013). However like Saunders and Bylund’s (2010) analysis I also argue that the fisheries governance paradigms and ANT are not compatible and should not be used together. Not only because of “…so many essential differences in their epistemological and ontological thinking particularly around pre framing and circumscription of phenomena of research interest, the treatment of human and non-human entities, notions of what constitutes an actor and assumptions of the importance of understanding flux “(ibid., p. 10) but also because it defeats the very purpose for which ANT was devised.

ANT also has its disadvantages. In a field such as fisheries where every study is invariably and implicitly obliged to prove its relevance to policy or possible intervention, an analysis from disparate case studies generating non-comparable result might be analytically misfit. However ANT, when employed studiously, can provide some crucial and useful information in understanding socio-spatial relations between the various actors involved in a fishery system.

**End notes**

1. ‘Fisheries scholars’ defined rather crudely in this context. It means scholars who are associated or working in fisheries departments in universities and/or whose work have appeared in journals pertaining to fisheries.
2. A stringer is “a journalist who is not on the regular staff of a newspaper but who writes stories for that newspaper”( http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ stringer) usually paid on the basis of each news item..
3. Name used after receiving oral consent during the interview.
4. Date and name of the owner not mentioned for reasons of confidentiality.
5. This is a civil society organization which works with the arrested fishermen and also part of the larger REINCORPFISH project.


References


Davis, A., & Ruddle, K. (2012). Massaging the misery: Recent approaches to fisheries
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