

# Nochikuppam, a new symbol of fisherfolk's woes?



**Vareethiah Konstantine, professor and researcher of marine ecology. For contact: [vareeth2021@gmail.com](mailto:vareeth2021@gmail.com)**

About a decade ago, the Tamil Nadu government's advertisement film on environmental awareness was doing the rounds on television. A scene of seashore littered with rubbish and a few catamarans was shown with voiceover saying that the seashore remained polluted. The next scene flashed showing the seashore spic and span with garbage and catamarans missing. Then said the background voice: "This is how our environment should be."

## **Aesthetics vs stench**

The question raised by the Madras High Court on April 11, 2023 over the Nochikuppam fish stalls in a Suo motu case has evolved into an attention-grabbing issue over the fisherfolk's livelihood. The much-touted slogan of 'beautifying the Marina' camouflages the elitist notions of stench and uncleanness. The elitist ideology

finds the topmost expression in the mega projects lined up against the indigenous marine races in Tamil Nadu.

It is generally said, "History is a struggle launched by memory against forgetfulness."

"The people at the lowest rung of the society easily forget history and fail to learn lessons from the past struggles. Governments come and go, but the government machinery always remains strong with memory stored in documents and keeps mounting the same onslaughts on the people," says K. Bharathi (Nochikuppam), president, South Indian Fishermen Welfare Association.

At this juncture let us recall a little bit of the history of the Marina agitation.

### **Previous initiatives**

Officials of the Chennai Corporation took away fishermen's boats and nets at night on November 3, 1985 in the four coastal hamlets - Maattankuppam, Nadukuppam, Ayothikuppam and Nochikuppam – under the project of beautifying the Marina brought in by the then Chief Minister M. G. Ramachndran aka MGR.

Subsequently the fishermen launched a hunger strike near the Gandhi statue on the Marina on November 5. The then opposition leader, M. Karunanidhi, who took part in the agitation, spoke in support of the fishermen, getting drenched in the downpour.

On December 4 a police firing took place, claiming the lives of six fishermen. "Today we owe our existence on the coast right from Maattankuppam to Nochikuppam to those six fishermen who had sacrificed their lives," says Bharathi.

Way back in 2002 the then CM Jayalalithaa announced that all coastal hamlets up to Srinivasapuram would be re-located in

order to facilitate setting up of the Malaysian embassy. But finding a backlash among the fisherfolk, she climbed down, saying that no scheme concerning the fisherfolk's habitation would be brought in without their permission.

Similarly, the elevated highway project announced in 2005 was also dropped following the fishermen's stiff opposition.

It was Karunanidhi, who rubbed shoulders with the fishermen in opposing MGR's project of beautifying the Marina. But ironically it is his son M.K.Stalin, present Chief Minister, who has made efforts to remove the fishermen's stalls in Nochikuppam, flaunting the court's order. In addition, ignoring the fisherfolk's resistance, the government has started the preliminary work for installing pen memorial for Karunanidhi in the sea at the cost of Rs.80 crore.

How to make out all these initiatives of state government?

### **Indigenous inhabitants or encroachers?**

To say that the fisherfolk, Chennai's original indigenous people, are encroachers is tantamount to falsification of the city's history.

A reading of the 400-year modern history of Madrasapattinam will throw up the fact that it was a small fishing hamlet which turned the gateway to South India and over time, evolved into a big city called Chennai now. It was not only the lush landscapes and surging water-bodies of Chennai, Chengalpattu, and Tiruvallur districts but also the ancient marine races' welfare and coasts, which were sacrificed at the pedestal of the development of the Chennai metropolis.

There is another fact that the government machinery refuses to understand: It is the marine races which are guardians and keepers of the common marine resources. Yes! The sea and the coast have been the indigenous fishing people's traditionally privileged regions. The Coastal Regulation Zone's 1991 notification has categorically defined the fishermen's rights in this

regard. But during the tsunami rehabilitation period, officials asked the fishermen, "Do you have all pattas for the coastal land?"

Nobody has bothered about the woes of the people who were re-located at Kannagi Nagar as part of tsunami rehabilitation project. The fisherfolk's relocation has always been a tragic tale.

The Greater Chennai Corporation has gradually and deliberately shrunk the fisherfolk's traditional space in Nochikuppam. Their houses, though simple and humble, were spread over the sprawling sand originally. Later, the houses were reduced to apartments. The loop road was laid on the space long used by the fisherfolk, eating into their free livelihood, dissecting their coastal right of way.

### **Who are the real encroachers?**

Way back in 1996 when Stalin was the Mayor of Chennai, he allowed traffic for one hour on the loop road with the consent of the fisherfolk. In 2006 when he was the Deputy CM, he increased the traffic timing to two hours again with the permission from the coastal people. Like the proverbial camel trespassing on a tent, those who broke into the fishermen's habitations are describing the indigenous marine citizens as trespassers. What a tragic irony!

All this looks like a teaser to the planned drama of evicting the fisherfolk lock, stock and barrel from the seashore.

In fact, where actually did encroachment happen? It did on the Santhome Road. A resolution was passed in the Corporation Council in 2000 to remove encroachments up to 10 feet on either side of the road. Why has the resolution not been implemented till date?

### **Two major issues**

The Chennai metropolis is confronted with two major issues: Water management and rising sea level.

The infamous deluge of 2015 left behind some alarming messages to the city. There won't be solutions to water management and scarcity issues unless lakes, ponds and traditional tracks for rainwater run-off are rid of encroachments.

The next major issue is the rising sea level. A report from the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has lots of shocking messages for us. One of them is that if the sea level rises up 25 cm, half of Chennai, an east coast city, will get drowned in the sea.

Let the slogan – 'Let us change Chennai into Singapore' wait for sometime; first we have to ponder ways and means to save the city. Instead of doing it, they are harping on upgrading the Marina as per the global standards and on introducing development schemes up to Kovalam. In the name of implementing the schemes, they are taking on the sea and fishermen as well. They are adamant in re-locating the sea-bound fisherfolk from the seashore. How to pigeonhole such people?

**Translated by V. Mariappan**