The Role of Traditional Panchayats in Coastal Fishing Communities in Tamil Nadu, with Special Reference to their Role in Mediating Tsunami Relief and Rehabilitation

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Glossary

ashram: religious institution usually presided by a spiritual teacher
chappals: sandals
chettiar: A Hindu caste category referring to people who undertake financial and trading responsibilities. They occupy a higher caste ranking than the Pattinavars; though the latter claim to be sub-group or a different nomination. Unlike the Pattinavars, the Chettians are usually inland groups. The word is also used interchangeably with nattar (or head of village). The Chettiar village functions as the treasurer of finance in the 64-village system of the Pattinavar panchayats.

chinna: small
dharmakarta: This is a position linked to a temple that attends particularly to its administration, rituals and property. These positions are inherited within villages. They support the Chettiar or nattar in their work and preside in his position in his absence. These could also be bureaucratic government employees who administer temple trusts.

grama kattubadam: village discipline— the willingness to bind individual actions to collective will. It is used when referring to village cohesiveness, collectivity and governance.

idai valai: middle net
jamaat: Muslim community

karaiyar: literally means ‘those living by the seashore’. In Cuddalore, Pattinavars are also called karaiyars, though this term is considered offensive in Kanchipuram.

karyadarsi: secretary who assists the head of the panchayat in his work and preside over community governance in his absence

kattumaram: boats traditionally used by Pattinavar fishermen, made by tying logs of wood together, with a capacity to carry small crew for day fishing

kathu: annual auction of village catch to merchants at fixed prices that is collected by the panchayat on behalf of the community

karubu: cooked food offered to the village deity and shared by the entire village

Mari: an incarnation of Shakti, Hindu goddess, worshipped all over the State

mariyak: ostracism

medu: dune of sand on the coast

mervu: west; refers to the people living inland to the west

nagar andavan: a Muslim patron saint of all fishermen, irrespective of their religion

nattamayi: the nattar system, with prescribed codes of authority and governance

nattar: the chieftain of the village

neelatchiamman: an incarnation of Shakti; the deity of the sea

neerm neeruppu mariyak: fire/water; refers to the more severe social and economic ostracism that involves the entire family

ooru: village, community

padiyachi: one of the caste groupings that undertakes marine fishing

panchayat: the local village governance structure. There are references to two kinds: the ooru panchayat that is the internal governance structure of the Pattinavar community, and the gram panchayat that is part of the formal political structure of the government.

panchayatar: members of the panchayat

pangali: members of families/kin groups from the same caste, sharing both livelihood and community concerns

parivattam: a ritual in the marriage ceremony bestowing membership, wherein the person becomes a pangali— an adult villager willing to undertake family and community responsibility and entitled to a share in the village resources

patta: land deeds

pattam: forehead ornament tied during the wedding in a ceremony called thalaikattu/parivattam

Pattinavar: caste grouping marking marine fishing communities. The word is said to be derived from two sources: patta meaning silk, referring to the trade engaged by these villages in the past; and pattinam meaning towns, referring to people who settled in towns near the sea.
periya nattars and chinna nattars: the two subcategories of the Pattinavar caste, literally meaning ‘big’ and ‘small’

periya valai: beach- or shore-seine

periya: large

pillai: caste category, used interchangeably with chettiar in the study, a group engaged mostly in trading

podhu: common

podhu gramam: This is a title given to the village functioning as common ground in the 64-village system of the Pattinavar panchayats. In a dispute, if one of the villages has issues with the village chosen as the site of the meeting, the meeting will be called in the podhu gramam with its panchayatars acting as witnesses on behalf of the community.

sabba gramam: This is a title given to the village functioning as the secretary in the 64-village system of the Pattinavar panchayats, and in charge of calling all the villages for meetings.

sabba: meeting

Shakti: Hindu goddess, consort of Shiva

surku valai: purse-seine nets used in mechanized fishing to harvest schools of fish, triggering conflicts between the mechanized and artisanal fishing sectors

telsar: official of the revenue department of the State government, officiating at the tehsil (taluk) level

thalai kattu: see parivattam/pattam

thalair: headman

thambalam mathratha: exchange of platters of fruits and offerings like betel nuts and leaf between families to mark marriage engagements

thiruvizha: temple festival

thozhiyil mariyal: a less severe form of economic ostracism, which bars the fisherman from becoming a member of the crew, but excludes the family

turai: street

vanniar: a Hindu caste, considered backward

vari: tax, sometimes used to mark village membership, particularly in Kanchipuram

relan: Hindu god, the son of Shiva and Shakti

Section I: Introduction

This study aims to explore the nature of the Pattinavar caste panchayats that exist along the Coromandel coast in India, stretching from Nagapattinam to Chennai. It also examines the role of these panchayats in ensuring community resilience, particularly after the tsunami, during aid redistribution. A total of 35 villages were covered in six districts: eight in Nagapattinam, three in Karaikal, five in Vizhupuram, five in Cuddalore, eleven in Kanchipuram and three in Chennai.

The study report is divided into six sections. The first section introduces the study, describes some features of the coastal stretch in the six districts, some of the caste references of the Pattinavar, histories referred to by communities and the values that characterize the fishing communities.

The second and third sections focus on the role of the panchayats in the governance of the fisher communities. The second section specifically looks at the role of the panchayat in community rituals, dispensing justice and in terms of financial responsibilities. This section also looks at the qualities of the panchayatars, and the role of women in governance.

The third section focuses on the role the panchayat plays in bridging vertical relations with other Pattinavar communities as well as with the police and the system of electoral politics. These two sections do not differentiate between traditional (nattamai) governance structures from the modern ones (village panchayat), but focus on the role of the village governance in general; the terms nattar and panchayat are therefore used interchangeably in these sections.

The fourth and fifth sections look at two kinds of transformations that affect the community. Section Four specifically looks at the transformation of traditional governance systems into democratically determined ones. It outlines the structure of the nattamai as it existed, its process of change, the nature of the democratic panchayat, and the integration and conflict between traditional and modern values (particularly mechanization of fishing technology).

The fifth section looks at the communities post-tsunami, particularly the processes for the distribution of immediate relief and rehabilitation aid. It covers some of the ways village panchayats redistributed aid to ensure equity in the villages.
The concluding section looks at the post-tsunami changes in panchayats. It also outlines some future concerns of the communities in general.

The Coastal Stretch
The six districts covered in the study from the south to the north were Nagapattinam, Karaikal, Cuddalore, Vizhupuram, Kanchipuram and Chennai. The nature of the sea coast and the geographical peculiarities of the immediate habitat have caused some fundamental differences in the structure and evolution of villages up the coast.

Nagapattinam and Karaikal districts are the closest to the Palk Bay. The villages of Karaikal are nested within the chain of Nagapattinam villages. The area has rich fishing grounds and is close to Sri Lanka. Due to this very proximity, the Nagapattinam and Karaikal fishermen are often caught in the crossfire of the militant unrest in the region. Lives of fishermen, particularly those from the villages in the farthest south of Nagapattinam district, have been lost in the conflicts. Fishing in the area is often prohibited because of national security concerns affecting the villages.

Cuddalore too has rich fishing grounds. Unlike the linear spread of villages in the other districts, some of the villages in this district are found in clusters. Several seawater channels bisect the land close to the shore. These channels naturally divide the villages into natural groups, while isolating others (or clusters of them) from the mainland. For instance, one of the study villages is accessible only by boats plying on the channel separating the village from the mainland. From the channel mouth, villagers need to walk a significant distance to reach their hamlet on the seashore. A motorable road into the village was only built a decade ago. Very close to it is another hamlet, with which it shares a temple.

From Vizhupuram onwards, villages are once again arranged in linear fashion, and are divided from the rest of the state by the East Coast Road (ECR). This road has become very important, due to increasing traffic between Chennai and Pondicherry. It has also accentuated the modernization process and increased the influence of the non-fishing settlements in the west. The villages in Vizhupuram are some of the most modernized ones covered in this study. The straight coastline starting from Pondicherry extending down to Kanchipuram and then Chennai does not provide rich fishing grounds.

Kanchipuram’s proximity to Chennai has altered these villages significantly. However these villages still tend to retain many of the common practices of governance, especially those related to finances. These settlements are denser, with the streets of the settlement organized into individual villages (also called turais), like in the city of Nagapattinam.

Many of the villages close to Chennai have sold much of their land to people building large holiday bungalows near the seashore, to industries and to the entertainment business. The villages of Chennai district are situated within the city and merge with the structure of the city.

Caste
The study broadly covers the panchayats of Pattinavar villages with one lone exception of a padiyachi community. Pattinavars are characterized by their willingness to fish in the sea. It is only from the southernmost end of Nagapattinam that fishing villages are populated by padiyachis, who also took to sea fishing.

Inland Fishing
Inland or river fishing refers to fishing undertaken in sea channels running close to the shore and river mouths. These river mouths in particular are rich in fishing grounds and have in some instances historically acted as trade channels. Inland fishing was usually seen as being safer and therefore lower in the occupational hierarchy, and was hence to be done by older members of the community, by women or by scheduled castes or other backward castes, particularly in Nagapattinam and Karaikal. In Cuddalore, though, transected as it is by sea channels, Pattinavars undertake both inland and sea fishing in different seasons, and one is not held to be superior to the other. In Kanchipuram too, Pattinavars are engaged in both sea and inland fishing.

Other Caste References
While most villagers agree that they belong to the Pattinavar caste, there are differences in how they refer to themselves across the coast, depending on their origin myths, history and relations with surrounding villages. One internal division was chinna (small) and periya (large). However, since the chinna Pattinavars are considered to be of lower status, there was hesitancy in being identified as a chinna Pattinavar.
Down the coast, the villagers also referred to themselves as chettiar, maintaining that both peoples came from the same source. Those who settled in the west (merku, inland) became known as chettiar or pillais and engaged mostly in trading. Those who stayed by the sea were called Pattinavars. (In one instance, these were supposed to be those who settled close to the towns by the sea.) In Karaikal, most of the villagers referred to themselves primarily as chettiar. These communities displayed pride in their excellent and transparent finance systems, considered the traditional occupation of chettiar. In the 64-village system of Nagapattinam and Karaikal (refer to section on the 64-village system), the village in charge of accounts was called the chettiar village.

This identification may represent an aspiration to a better social status within the Hindu caste hierarchy, where chettiar are known to be higher than the Pattinavars. In other districts, villagers claimed that they hesitated to call themselves chettiar in front of outsiders, because they might not receive the benefit of reservation in state resources (education, employment) accorded to backward and scheduled castes. They point out that many of the traditional fisherfolk are extremely poor, despite their caste status, and such reservation is critical for their forward movement.

In Cuddalore, the Pattinavars also referred themselves as karaiyar (those living by the sea shore), while Pattinavars meant those that settled in towns (pattinam). In Kanchipuram, however, it was pointed out that to be called a karaiyar was derogatory, signifying a significantly lower status and used only by non-fisherfolk to humiliate fishing communities. Calling them karaiyar is considered so grievous an offence that physical retaliation is justified.

**Historical References**

Efforts to trace the historical origins of the community remained inconclusive.

**Traditional**

The earliest accounts claimed that the original inhabitants of the village were people who fled from Poopumuhur¹ when it was submerged more than 600 years ago. While fleeing west, the wealthy moved inland (chettiar), while the poorest stayed near the sea and survived by fishing (Pattinavars). They were relatively affluent, thriving on trade with Ceylon (Sri Lanka). It is only in the last four centuries under colonisation that they completely lost their trade and became impoverished.

Two villages claim their historical origins to references made in ancient Tamil texts. More than 10 villages claim that they have been in existence for several centuries. One of these claims to be as much as two thousand years old. A few other villages date their history to more than 200 years ago, but are not sure of the exact period.

**Modern**

Villages have grown considerably in the two centuries due to population increases. New villages came into being, formed by moving away from the mother village into newer locations for settlement.² In the beginning a few families moved in, followed by more people who joined them. One way the process took place was through people moving into a village when their daughter married into a family living there, especially if they had a problem in their own village. In such cases, a group of families would usually move together.

This population growth has been particularly high during the phase of mechanization of fishing along the coast in the last half of the twentieth century. The villages that record a high rate of growth are rich in natural resources. In two villages, the land is fertile and the water excellent; there are plenty of palm, coconut, mango and cashewnut trees. In another village, it is said that anything that is planted grows. Two of the villages have excellent fishing grounds. One is rich in mineral resources, and the coast next to the other has both muddy ground as well as rock formations on the seabed, both of which increase the presence of fish schools in the vicinity. The river next to another village is a critical trade route. It has several water channels to carry goods to the river mouth developed during the colonial trade. Some reports say that it dates from before the colonial period.

**Displaced in the Last Decade**

Three villages traced their history at their current sites to less than half a decade ago. One of these is about 60–70 years old. This is part of a cluster of 40–50 villages that is connected with a particular temple. The state government has displaced them recently. They
are not traditional shore dwellers but used to live in forests, though they used to fish for a livelihood. There they had to pay a sum of Rs 11 every month to the government for staying on public land (this amount was later increased to Rs 136). People protested, claiming that they could not afford this and then came to settle here. Six people who have concrete houses are still living in the forests. One village was relocated in May 1969 because of the Kalpakkam nuclear reactor. In another case, people left their village after serious conflict and resettled in a new village, which is now only a few decades old.

The Pattinavar Community
Communities are central to the Pattinavars right down the coast from Nagapattinam to Chennai. These are seen as being essential to fulfill their life purpose as seen by them: ‘The main duty of a fisherman is to go between land and sea.’

These fisherfolk claim that there are five critical values that determine their character. One is their honesty. People in Karaikal, for instance, narrate that getting credit is never difficult for fishermen from villages in the west (merku referring to non-fishing villages), where their word alone serves as guarantee.

The second critical value that fishermen hold dear is autonomy. Villagers in many villages recount that fishermen are proud to be the only people who are independent and do not tie their hands to earn wages. Underpinning this value is the equality of status between all the members of the village.

The third value that fishermen pride themselves upon is generosity. ‘Fisherfolk are generous. They fish and then give away the catch.’ Community leadership was marked by practices of generosity, building temples for the village, sharing periya valai catch, ensuring safety nets for the vulnerable persons in the community.

The fourth value is courage. ‘Fisherfolk (men, women and children) are the only ones who run to the seashore to watch a storm. Running away from the sea does not cross our minds.’ Staying out on the sea longer and braving difficult seas are marks of bravery. In one village, a significant number of men died because they ran to the shore without understanding the magnitude of the wave.

The fifth value is unity. ‘Fishermen are short-tempered and given to fits of passion and fighting; and they are equally quick to forgive.’ Fisher communities pride themselves on their unity and harmony.

The interpretation of these values in individual and community action has altered over time with modernization and also in the aftermath of the tsunami.

Community Cohesiveness
The fisher communities are all from the same caste and related to each other through kinship groupings. All members of the village are pangais (kin stakeholders) from the same caste, sharing both livelihood and community concerns. Inter-caste marriages are not encouraged—such marriages, especially with lower-caste persons, can be severely punished with ostracism by the community.

Fishing, in which men face the sea together, makes trust between each other critical. Profits from fishing are risky, and individual income erratic. Unlike agriculture, it is not possible to define boundaries of ownership in the sea; and determining individual entitlement is critical. Failure to do so can lead to severe conflicts over sharing resources, escalating into blood feuds that extend over several decades.

Fishing communities have evolved mechanisms to ensure division of risks and profits. The predominant work relationships are based on shares on the catch obtained. Each member of the crew bears a portion of the risk and is entitled to a share in the catch. Shares could also be given to the vulnerable (old people) in the village or used for community purposes and pools as a buffer in individual problems. The system is egalitarian in that each member is answerable only to himself and is not bound by hierarchical wage relations.

A critical collective concern of the village and the panchayat is maintaining peace. During conflict between members, the entire village acts to resolve it, restore balance and compensate damages incurred.

There are some instances along the coast of villages with exemplary records of collective support:

- One village undertakes all medical expenses incurred because of accidents and illness for all members of the village, extending up to about Rs 1 lakh in one instance.
- Post-tsunami, all the members of one village decided to stay together in the temporary sheds
in a gesture of unity, especially to support people who have lost dear ones. By staying together, their hearts would be lightened by interaction.

• Members in one village recount that there has been no history of conflict in their village to date. The people of the village argue vigorously in the meeting, but all animosity is left behind at the boundaries of the village meeting hall.

Section II: Governance
All fishing communities studied (with the exception of one in Chennai city) had formal internal governance structures. These structures and processes had been evolved historically to resolve and prevent conflicts between members of a community or between communities. During conflict between members or villages, the entire community acts to resolve it, restore balance and compensate damages incurred. A critical traditional structure is the ooru (community) panchayat.

The nattar/panchayat acts as a representative of community belief, emotion and action. It fulfils several functions like maintaining community rituals and structures, conferring membership and belonging, resource distribution, grievance redressal and dispensing justice.

Role of the Panchayat
Traditionally, the internal role of the panchayat (also referred to as chettiar or nattar where applicable) is to maintain grama kattupadu, critical in maintaining community cohesiveness. This bonding was through many methods, and served specific purposes—organising/presiding over community rituals and ceremonies (religious and social) and conferring membership; dispensing justice; resource sharing, including maintenance of accounts open to public scrutiny. In modern times, the ability to ensure kattupadu depended on the power that the panchayat still wielded over the community.

Second, the village panchayat mediated/bridged relationships with all other external institutions and structures (including other Pattinavar villages) except during times of serious conflict requiring external intervention, and in relation to state matters like revenue, justice, conflicts with neighbouring villages of other castes, dealings with agencies of electoral politics, etc. For instance, government schemes have to be routed through the panchayat.

Community Temple and Rituals
Rituals
The nattar/panchayat is present at or presides over all the rituals and functions marking the life cycle of the villagers: birth and death ceremonies, ear piercing, marriages, etc. Traditionally, marriage proposals could only advance with the nattar as witness and, in some instances, only with his approval.

The nattar was first informed about any marriage contracts (thambalam muthathu) in the village. He then enquired into the eligibility of both sides before sanctioning and witnessing the formal engagement. The first invitation to the wedding was extended to him. He was garlanded first during the wedding and made to sit on a platform marking his status.

In some villages in Nagapattinam and Karaikal, the nattar ties a pattam (forehead ornament) during the villager’s wedding, bestowing membership. The groom then becomes a panga— an adult villager willing to undertake family and community responsibility and entitled to a share in the village resources. This ritual is called parivattam or thalaikattu.

The meaning of many of these rituals has reduced or altered over time (with the changes in traditional governance practices and modernization) with practising differing across districts. For instance, decisions about marriage are more centred in families, with lesser community and panchayat involvement. Tying pattams no longer marks village membership in Kanchipuram. Instead of marriage marking membership, the communities now consider any member who is 18 or above to be a member who has to pay a village var (similar to the payment to the fisheries societies).

Temple
All the villages have a temple and organise festivals collectively. Many of the deities installed in these temples are associated with community folklore. A critical one is around finding the idol. In at least three villages, it is claimed that the idols were found when nets were cast in certain portions of the sea, marked by unusual changes like bubbling or schools of fish. One of the bits of post-tsunami folklore is that the places of religion and spirituality of all faiths were not damaged in the tsunami.

The temple is the central community space. In many instances, this space sanctifies community values.
For instance, the temple is seen as a space where truth has to be spoken; and therefore the accounts books and the minute books are stored here. In addition to this, temples also own land bestowed upon them by communities; in some cases, communities reside on lands owned by temple trusts, as in the case of two villages covered in this study, where the settlement land is owned by a temple trust. Two other villages own their temple lands collectively and their administration is a function of village governance.

A critical function of the temple is to determine belonging. Members contribute to temple construction and maintenance and its festivals. Most villages will organize a thiruvizha (festival) usually annually. As part of this village festival, an idol of the deity is often taken from the temple around the village. In some instances, the deity is immersed in the sea and is to play in the water. These festivals are believed to be critical for community well-being, and are an indication of village unity. Most seriously fractured and conflicted villages still continue to build a temple and organise the annual temple festival. Failure in this is usually a consequence of severe conflict or failure of governance.

Villagers in a few communities with incomplete temples point to these structures as the consequence of irreconcilable factions among the members in the village. In spite of the strong influence of the temple on the community, Pattinavar fisherfolk claim that they accept practices of different faiths in theirs. For instance, across the coast, fishermen call to nagoor andavan (a Muslim patron saint of all fishermen, irrespective of their religion) in times of distress in the sea or while setting out, and releen while casting the periya valai. In a curious rendering of the story of Mother Mary in Velankanni, one villager narrates that Mari (a version of Shakti worshipped all over the state) was the Mary in Velankanni.

In every village along the coast, there are three or four families who have converted to Christianity. Conversion across religions could (like cross-caste marriages) be punished with community ostracism. In some instances it is claimed that people have reconciled back to Hinduism when they find the new religion difficult. In a few villages, this was seen as a personal choice, irrelevant to community belonging.

**Justice**

Dispensation of justice is a critical function of the panchayat. Thus the panchayat has the power to pass judgements as and when required to resolve conflicts within the village and between villages. The severity of sentencing depends on the nature of transgression and their power to enforce their judgements.

**Transgressions**

Two broad categories of transgressions can be identified. The first is impropriety of action within family and community—rude/aggressive conduct in the community; conflict within families; romantic liaisons not approved by the family/community, particularly for women; sexual misconduct and sexual harassment; and failure to respect public property or to adhere to community rules and rituals. Villagers were extremely reluctant to discuss details of many of these cases, especially those related to sexual misconduct and family fights.

The second was conflict in sharing of resources, particularly at sea (damage to nets or equipment, right to fishing at a particular spot, mechanized vs. artisanal conflict of interests, sharing of catch, contribution to community funds). These fights could occur within the village and between villages. The nature of the judgement levied will depend on the extent of damage.

**Judgements**

The judgements and the actions taken are of different kinds—private counselling, where the issue is sorted out within the conflicting people as quietly as possible; public counselling; collective reprimands; fines for compensation of damage; and severing ties with the community (the less severe economic ostracism followed by the more severe social and economic ostracism and public humiliation).

**Fines:** Many panchayats resort to levying fines on the person, with the amount varying from village to village. It depends on the damage caused and the person’s willingness to accept his transgression. This is the least severe form of punishment. Failure to comply can result in the panchayat fining the person increasingly severe amounts or meting out other punishments.

For instance, in one village a fine of Rs 500 was imposed on those who stripped the barks of the trees for firewood. The women were warned that if they
repeated this mistake, the fine amount would increase to Rs 5000, with an amount of Rs 1000 being given to the person who informs the panchayat about this. In another village, one of the villagers was fined Rs 5000 for harassing a woman at a large Carnatic music concert organized by the village. The panchayat acted immediately, because the eventuality of this transgression had already been considered in an earlier meeting and the amount of fine to be levied agreed upon.

Severing ties with the community: Failure to pay a fine can result in mariyal (ostracism). In these closely knit communities, severing ties can have serious consequences on the individual. Ostracism as a means of punishment could be used for severe transgressions against the community: marrying across caste, approaching the police for an internal conflict, etc.

Judgements involving ostracism follow certain patterns. This ostracism is for a specific period that could be extended depending on the behaviour of the individual. If any other member or family in the village fails to uphold the judgement and includes the ostracised member either as crew members or at the social level, they too will be ostracised. If the individual seeks to join as a crew member or move into another village, the panchayat will communicate to that village to enforce the ban there. To be reinstated into the community, the member may have to follow ritualistic practices like having to visit each member of the panchayat and ask for their forgiveness with folded hands and offerings of coconut and betel nuts.

The less severe economic ostracism: This includes barring the fisherman from becoming a member of the crew, and issuing a ban against taking him as a crew member, thereby preventing him from being able to fish for food and livelihood. The family is not included in this.

The more severe social and economic ostracism: Known as neeru neruppulu (fire/water), this form of action means fire-water ostracism. The transgressor and his/her entire family are banned from sharing water or fire with any other household. They cannot participate in or invite people to social and religious ceremonies. They cannot marry (give and take brides and grooms) within other families of the same caste.

An instance was narrated about a girl seen ‘going out’ by a panchayat member. The mother was called and asked to keep her daughter under check. The woman refused to accede to this demand, and the girl and the mother were placed under mariyal.

Public humiliation: Respect is critical to fisherfolk. A severe way to punish transgressions is to strip an individual of his respect, by publicly humiliating him. A transgressor could be made to ride a donkey around the village bearing a pot with holes that has muddy water tricking down his back. Stealing coconuts could result in having three hung around his neck. If women were to go ‘astray’, they may have to go around the village walking on their knees. These punishments are considered to be so severe that they are used sparingly, only for extreme transgressions, particularly those concerned with sexual misconduct and harassment.

Transformations in panchayat functioning: The role of panchayats in passing judgments has reduced. Many of the villages restrict themselves to fining. In some, the ceiling of the fine amount is fixed, e.g., not more than Rs 100. When practiced, ostracism is usually only for a short period of time—six months or so in one instance. The more harsher form of ostracism—not sharing water/fire—is rarely practiced. Many villagers laughed at a reference to this, saying that if such a judgement were to be passed, the person will just go to the neighbouring village to get a matchbox. Judgements that publicly humiliate the offender were considered oppressive and were a causal factor in the transformation of traditional governance. These punishments are no longer considered appropriate; and their enforcement is quite difficult in these times.

Finance
The fishing economy is based on shares. Its distribution mechanism assumes each individual to be equal and not bound by hierarchical labour relations characterized elsewhere. Across the shore, fishermen echoed their pride in being autonomous in their livelihoods—they do not work under any person as wage labourer. Crew membership is usually equitable, including both labour on the sea and the maintenance and use of boats and nets. Crew can be drawn from the village and this is largely restricted to people of the same community (Pattinavars).
The structure of village membership and resource sharing is also well-evolved. There are clear, detailed rituals and procedures to divide common resources within the village. Given that autonomy is a critical concern, these tend to be equitable in theory. The panchayat plays a critical role in managing village resources. It collects money, maintains accounts and distributes common resources for various purposes.

To ensure community well-being, the panchayat distributes the village resources equitably among all the villagers. In this function, it attempts to ensure community agreement, using formulae for collection and distribution agreed upon collectively in village meetings. It also maintains transparent accounts of share distribution, open to community scrutiny.

To tide over times of crises, the panchayat also provides a degree of security to all members, particularly in times of economic crisis. The nature of artisanal fishing as a livelihood is risky and individual income is erratic. Hence the panchayat has to manage (create and maintain) common community resources to buffer individual storms. Further, in dividing shares the panchayat includes the vulnerable (the elderly and widows), who do not have access to a livelihood in some form.

Village income

The panchayat gets income from different sources. The first is the auctioning of the village’s catch (kutnu). At the beginning of every year of the Tamil calendar or on a date fixed earlier, the catch of the entire village is auctioned to merchants. The price of different fish is estimated, and the catch is sold at that rate through the year, irrespective of market fluctuations. This system acts as a buffer for individual fisherfolk, while ensuring a community fund. In addition, the village also auctions other resources like the use of the village shops, and the money is collected by the village. Fines also add to the village fund.

Some villages levy a tax\(^4\) for being admitted as a member, or on every catch. One village collects vari when the village is in difficulty. The last time vari was collected in this manner was after the tsunami. The kutnu given was dissolved since people only went to the sea after the seventh month. Two villages in Kanchipuram did not have the practice of collecting taxes. One of them claims that the practice was discontinued two decades ago.

In addition to this, during times of distress, periya valai and idai valai catches as well as the total daily catch on designated days can be used to increase the community funds or distributed for cooking in the village.

Village expenses

Building temples, maintaining their rituals and organizing temple festivals is a critical expense. In some villages, the panchayat collects one share of fish from every catch for the temple. The village also collects money from each household for organizing the temple festival (thiruvizha) annually. In some instances, the village resources include temple land and trust funds that the village is traditionally linked with and has to maintain. Such land is usually seen as community property, as in Nagapattinam.

Villages can have a yearly kuzhun, where cooked food is offered to the village deity and shared in the entire village. At this time, if there is scarcity in the village, rice is distributed to all the families to tide over the difficult times. During the lean season the panchayat uses the money derived from such collections to distribute among the villagers, to enable them to tide over crises. It can also use the village fund for a collective purpose to improve the village.

The village money is also used to pay for the expenses incurred by the panchayat in the course of their work for the community. Thus all travel and boarding expenses for administrative co-ordination came from this money.

Transparency

Finally, transparency is highly valued. Panchayats are required to maintain detailed records of village accounts. These accounts are open to public scrutiny, and people can question the panchayat about how the money was divided. One of the reasons cited for the change in traditional governance was the unwillingness of the nattamayi to disclose village accounts satisfactorily. Most panchayats have to show accounts at least once a year, after organizing the temple festival. After the tsunami, more regular meetings have been needed, often as frequent as once a month, and after every consignment of relief/compensation.

Villagers from one village narrated how they had to break away from their mother village. The panchayat there refused to clarify their accounts. Some people protested and their voices were forcibly suppressed.
This conflict escalated till four of the people who questioned the practices of the panchayat were killed. Seeking justice from neighbouring village clusters failed, with the judgement awarded in favour of the panchayat in the mother village. About 30 families left the old village and went to different villages along the coast, but they were asked to leave from these villages. Finally they settled eight years ago in their current village.

Qualities of PanchayatARS
The panchayat is expected to be devoted to community well-being, over and above personal considerations. Besides this dedication to the collective good, other qualities are also listed by the communities.

Equanimity: This quality was highly valued. Restraint and propriety in dealing with aggression from the village is considered essential for settling conflicts between short-tempered men who often drink. Other related qualities that were enumerated included humility in relating, emotional balance, temperance in actions and non-reactivity in charged confrontations—all considered critical in maintaining community cohesiveness.

Impartiality: It is critical that the panchayat has the ability to consider all points of view and act impartially. This is critical to ensure peace since display of personal interests could result in escalation of conflicts.

Good conduct: The villagers spoke of ‘good’ people. The criteria used included being truthful, having a strong character, coming from a good family in the village, maturity, etc.

Hardworking nature: Being a panchayat requires members to work hard for the community. This might require a lot of time spent away from fishing resulting in loss of income for the family. For instance, a panchayat nominated in one village at age 18 stepped down once he married since he had to fend for the family. The necessity for hard work has become particularly true after the tsunami, when the work of the panchayats has increased manifold in managing the post-tsunami scenario.

Formal education: This has increasingly become relevant in the last five decades and is needed to negotiate with modern actors like the State. It is particularly important in the post-tsunami context where extensive co-ordination with the bureaucracy and aid agencies is required.

Modernization has also altered perception of membership to some extent, where it is now not seen as a consequence of only personal merit and pride, but rather of personal profit and politicisation in some villages.

Eligibility Criteria
Different villages across the coast maintain different criteria of eligibility with regards to age and experience.

Given that marriage traditionally marks membership, in many villages only married people will be nominated to be members of the panchayat. In one village, the panchayat did not nominate widowers because this was considered inauspicious. Many villages prefer to have middle-aged men in the panchayat as they have seniority within their families. They are likely to be more experienced and mature, more temperate in their actions and humble in their behaviour.

Young members of the panchayat are seen to be more short-tempered and precipitate in their actions, with less respect and more arrogance in their style of speaking. This, it is feared, will result in increased conflict within the community. However, some villages have the practice of nominating boys as young as 15 years into the panchayat, particularly if their nature/ability is considered ‘good’. In two villages, panchayats, who are now in their early 30s, had been nominated to the panchayat when they were 18 years old. Unmarried men are seen to have lesser responsibility and are therefore able to devote more time to the village. In one village, it is believed that single people are more honest; it is therefore preferred that the cashier of the panchayat be single.

Many panchayats have a combination of both single and married men. In some instances, only the skills and mobility of the younger members are used. In one village the panchayat is composed predominantly of married men. The younger members can attend the panchayat meetings but are not allowed to speak. In other villages only married men are nominated into the executive (head, secretary and treasurer), even though the panchayat members can be as young as 18–20 years. In one of the villages a panchayat, who was nominated when he was 18, stepped down after a
term because it seemed inappropriate for him to hold this position of power, given that his father and his elder brother were part of the village community. After the tsunami, in one village, half the nominated panchayat is young, in order to ensure coordination with the state bureaucracy. However they work under the guidance of the earlier panchayat. In contrast, in another village younger members have especially not been nominated into the panchayat after the disaster, since the tsunami relief and compensation work is considered too serious to be entrusted to them.

**Women in Governance and Community**

**Women in the panchayat**

All the villages along the coast earlier had a rule that women were not allowed (and not welcome) in the panchayat. One comment was that women do not have enough maturity to work on collective matters in the panchayat. Women could only come to the panchayat to give witness statements. Even this was to be avoided if it could (especially in those villages with strong traditional practices); and the panchayatara would go to the woman's house if possible to hear her statement.

**Women in the village**

Any understanding of gender roles has to be contextualised in the peculiar and stringent gender division that exists amongst fisherfolk. Fishing in the sea, all over the world, is a male occupation. Fisherwomen do however have a significant visible role in processing and marketing fish (absent in more conservative agrarian cultures). Women have their own market and shop organizations run on the same membership principles as the own panchayat, though they might be restricted to just marketing functions rather than community well-being.

Fisherfolk communities do impose strong rules against women’s entry into public spaces. Traditionally, women less than 35 years of age could not enter these spaces at all. In recent times, there has been some change, partly because of the self-help group movement, wherein women can come together to discuss collective matters. The anti-arrack movement by women in one village has reduced alcohol consumption. In one village, the head of the village panchayat is a woman (the post is reserved for women), nominated by the villagers and known for her commitment to public service and the recipient of several awards for governance.

**Section III: Bridging Relationships**

**The 64-village Chain**

The chain of fishermen’s villages has evolved over the centuries, and is the spine of the fisher communities along the coast. According to one fisherman in Nagapattinam, in olden days the chain comprised of 64 kinship villages extending from Chennai to Kanyakumari. These villages were bound by continuous communication and exchange up and down the coast, and could respond like a unit. Historically, this chain of membership sprang into action to preserve unity and security in times of crisis, when threatened by external agents or during internal conflicts.

These 64 villages were sub-divided into smaller clusters of eight village chains, then 16, then 32 and finally 64. Each of these levels performed governance functions similar to the panchayats, dispensed justice, worked towards social cohesiveness and had financial responsibilities.

The typical procedure of seeking justice within the village is that if the decision of the village panchayat has to be contested, the person approaches the head village of the 8-village chain. The head village can also be called to settle disputes between two different settlements, including encounters in the sea. This village will then write letters inviting panchayatara from all eight villages and justice will be dispensed in a common meeting. If this is found unacceptable, the aggrieved person can approach successively higher clusters, finally invoking the 64-village chain.

Currently, the 64-village chain extends to only the villages in the Karaikal and Nagapattinam districts. This system also has three other historically designated villages in the collective governance structure. One is the chettiar (finance) village in charge of all the accounts. The second is a sabha (secretary), which is in charge of calling all the meetings of the entire community that the head village presided. Once the head village resolved to call a community meeting to sort an issue, they would inform the sabha, which in turn will issue all the invitations. They would also act in cases filed against the head village. The third was the podhu gramam. It was considered common ground to the entire fisher community. In a dispute, if one of the villages has
issues with the village chosen as the site of the meeting, the meeting will be called in the *podhu gramam*. The *panchayat*ars of the village will act as witness on behalf of the community, in order to ensure that there is no partisanship.

Villagers in other districts, particularly Cuddalore, Vizhupuram and Kanchipuram, deny the presence of such a chain or refer to it as a thing of the ancient past. In all three districts, though, the villages do have clusters of villages that they approach for higher justice. In Cuddalore and Vizhupuram, there are references to a traditional head village, while in Kanchipuram district there is no such designated village. Each village has the prerogative to take critical governance decisions, like whether they permit fishing craft from other villages to fish in their waters. While some villages completely ban it, others allow each fishing craft opportunity to fish for one day in their waters in the belief that the boat has drifted into them. This is also the case in determining the composition of the village panchayat. The larger villages (like the head village) cannot rule in this matter. Furthermore, villages are free to choose a village in the chain to rule over internal conflicts. In this, it is not necessary to go only to the head village, though the head village may be involved in settling the dispute.

**Nagapattinam**

Currently, the 64-village chain extends only to the villages in the Karaikal and Nagapattinam districts. The historical head of the chain is Nambiar Nagar. Villages with conflicts with each other come here to solve differences, e.g., a fight between partners of a fishing craft, burning *surku* nets of neighbouring villages, etc. In addition, Nambiar Nagar is also the designated village to care for the temple that houses *neelatchiannam* one of the critical *ibakki* sites. In addition to these villages, there are three other historically designated villages in the collective governance structure. The Chettiar (finace) village is Karaikal Medu, the *sabha* (meeting) village is Aryanattur and the *podhu* village is Kilinjal Medu.11 Because of modernization, Akkampettai has also emerged as a significant power holder and takes leadership decisions among these villages. A critical reason is the advent of motorized fishing craft and wealth in the area. The only activity for the betterment of the fisherfolk undertaken by Nambiar Nagar is education. There is a scholarship fund for students who perform well in exams in the 10th and 12th standard. The village had also initiated a technical training institute but it is not functioning.

**Cuddalore**

There are no connections with villages in Nagapattinam, because of increase in population and distance. At the time of *nattumai*, Annapampettai served as the head of the 18 villages of the Cuddalore district. The 18 villages stretch from Singarupettu to Parangipettai. Deviampattinam has gained increased importance in recent times. This was a port in colonial times and has a large number of mechanized boats. It already had a reputation for physical strength, and economic power has increased this. Many villages do not go to either of these villages for conflict resolution, as the spread of democratic processes has decreased the power of the longer chain across the district and its ability to intervene in village relations.

Problems are usually settled within the community. Villages may still go to the head village of their own smaller cluster, the *periyakuppam* (the head of a 7-village cluster),12 or the *killai* (this is the mother village of nine villages in the cluster). The *nattar* of these mother villages ranked higher than the village *nattars* and he was offered higher status, especially while tying the *pattam*.

**Vizhupuram**

There are no connections with villages in Nagapattinam, Karaikal or Cuddalore. The 19 villages in Vizhupuram district do not have a traditional head village, though a few villagers referred to Devinampattinam as a place to go to resolve issues (this might have been because both Vizhupuram and Cuddalore originally belonged to South Arcot district).

Hanumantri, with its size and wealth (the panchayat earns well from auctioning jellyfish) has been assuming leadership, with a few villages approaching it for resolution. After the tsunami, though, all the 19 villages in the district got together to co-ordinate relief and rehabilitation, and Hanumantri emerged as the leader of the process. The other big village mentioned is Goonimedu.

**Kanchipuram**

This district has 46 fishing villages located within a span of 120 km. Many villages denied the presence
of active village chains in the district. There are no designated head villages in the district. Each village takes care of its own concerns, and there is no traditional assumption of authority by any one of the villages, as seen in Nagapattinam.

There are accounts of the presence of such structures in the past. One reference was to an 18-village chain from Mahabalipuram to Kadapakkam, of which Pudupattinam was the head. This changed in 1980, with a conflict between the chettiar and the elected panchayat head from the same village (gram). The chettiar lost his power and, following this, the 18-village system also altered. In another account, more than 60 years ago there used to be a 64-village chain from Thirukuzhukondram to Madurangavallam, which was headed by Periyakuppam. There were also references to a chain of 70 villages from Palavukadu to Alambaraikuppam.

The neighbouring villages however continue to come together to settle disputes between the villages. The three village panchayats—Periyakuppam, Chinnakuppam and Aalikuppam—act as a unit when necessary. A letter is usually given to the villages calling for a meeting. They sit down and sort out the different issues. In addition, there were references made to two other organizing factors: personal leadership and the modern organisation for tsunami relief. One villager narrates that till five years ago, there used to be a leader called Vishwanathan in the 25 villages, renowned for his ability to settle conflicts in the district. This was because of his personal charisma, and with his death the system was not continued. The 46 villages in the mavattam are organised as the Kanchipuram Meenavar Ozhinguanaippu Kuzhu, formed by the heads of the village panchayats. It was formed to manage relief and compensation distribution, though it also claims to mediate relationships between the villages. People in other villages are aware of this committee’s existence, though they do not consider it very important.

**Relationship with the Police**

There is a standing rule in the fishermen’s community that police are outsiders and cannot be allowed into the community for any purpose without the permission of the nattar/panchayat. All village issues and conflicts are to be worked within the village. When needed, the traditional panchayat mediates relations of members with other legal agencies, including the courts and the police.

Most villages maintained that there has been no law and order situation so severe in the village that the police had to be called in. Panchayats claim that this is a reflection of their community unity, which they are rightfully proud of.

Traditionally, there were strict prohibitions laid down on engagement with the police. Individuals in the village could not file cases against members of their own community and their own panchayats. Most village conflicts had to be settled within the village, or within the larger chain of villages and justice systems. Failure to comply with this was seen as disrespect to the community and could result in ostracism. Many panchayats down the coast still prohibit villagers from approaching the police. In one instance, one of the villagers had been ostracised for filing a compensation case against the panchayat. In a rather extreme case, one villager’s shop and house were burnt and he was ostracised from the community for almost two decades for approaching the police to settle a village dispute.

The enforcement of this prohibition depends upon the amount of respect and power commanded by the panchayat. If this respect still exists and the village is united, then people are unlikely to approach the police. Those with fragmented panchayats or highly modernized ones no longer have this kattupadu (discipline). In a ten-year-old, apparently rare, case, one villager was implicated in a case of misbehaviour towards a woman. Both the village panchayat and the 16-village cluster meeting judged that he has to marry her. He fought and went to the High Court. The court ruled in his favour and the panchayat had to revert its decision. With time passing, both the man and woman are now married to different people; and the reversal of the panchayat’s decision by the High Court was not considered harmful.

Further, more and more villages (particularly along the Kanchipuram coast) acknowledge that cases involving injuries and death are beyond their current governance functions. They immediately report them to the police, and the investigations handed over to them. They admit to a fear of the police and prefer to minimise their engagement with them.

In return for restraint in involving modern law agencies, the panchayat sheltered its members from them when needed. Traditionally, when police entered the community to arrest a member, they first approached
the panchayat's house. They explained the case to him and left. The nattar/panchayat then accompanied these members to the station, where they attempted to sort the issue out. This was a critical governance function. For instance, a village severely torn by conflict in Nagappattinam broke into two factions when the nattar was seen to fail in this function. It is claimed that he tacitly supported the filing of 18 false cases against members of the labour union for burning nets and committing murder in the village.

This too has undergone a change in some villages. Villagers note a lowering in the police's respect and behaviour towards them. The restriction on entering the village without the panchayat's knowledge and consent has been weakened. In one village, the elders are only informed of the arrest while it is happening, and if needed usually accompany the villager member to the station. Another village claimed that the police is involved in many village matters and can easily enter the village to apprehend people within.

Electoral Politics

The fisherfolk have an axiom: ‘Bring politics to the people and not the people to politics.’ Like engagement with the police, engagements with political parties and actors are also restricted. Past experience shows that political leadership sets itself up against the traditional panchayat system and threatens the unity of fishermen. Strong electoral affiliations created and aggravated rifts in the community, and the ensuing conflicts in the village became difficult to control.

Personal electoral affiliations, however strong, are only to be restricted to the voting process and not allowed to play a role in the community structure. With only one exception, the village panchayats describes the panchayat selection process as being independent of electoral party affiliations. This village is divided into three sections aligned along party loyalties. Each faction nominates 3–4 members to the panchayat. At the other end of the spectrum, a village in Cuddalore reports that the village as a whole nominates members both for electoral roles in the larger system as well as the panchayat.

Party affiliations can be exhibited only outside the village. A commonly practiced rule along the coast is to permit no political campaigning and propaganda in the village. Most villages do not allow party posters and flags. For instance, one entire village fervently supports the same party, but will still not display political propaganda material in the village. One reason for this is the threat to village unity. In one village, allowing posters and flags in 1986 resulted in serious conflicts that required outside intervention. Since then political flags or posters are not allowed within the village, and can be displayed only on the other side of the East Coast Road. In another village, allowing the painting of walls for electoral propaganda resulted in factions in the village, and now party flags are allowed only on the days that the politician is in the village and then removed the same day.

Some villages (particularly those in Kanchipuram close to Chennai) permit electoral propaganda. Bigger villages with a greater influx of mechanization allow the display of posters (but prohibit hoisting of flags) in the village. A few allow both and maintain that there have been no factions as a consequence.

Section IV: Historical Transformation of Governance Structure

The hereditary nattamayi (the nattar system) has been in existence for several centuries, and the post of village headman passes down from father to son as a hereditary post. Some village panchayats still follow the nattamayi structure. About 20 years ago, most villages in the fisherfolk village chain transformed this traditional structure of governance into more democratic systems that aimed to be inclusive and transparent. The central pivot was the right to express one’s views in the public space and to participate in collective decisions. Two kinds of general principles were agreed upon. One was to shift the power to govern the community vested in the head (nattar) to the panchayat. The selection of the panchayat was conducted in an open village meeting where every member of the village reserved a right to be heard. While the broad principles of the democratization process were laid out, each village adapted these principles with variations based on their own internal power configurations.

The Nattamayi Structure

The hereditary nattamayi (the nattar system) has been in existence for at least the last 300–400 years. In its original form, the nattar used to be the chieftain of the village and had the powers of a king. In recent times, he acts as the leader of the village. In the
northern districts of Kanchipuram, the nattar is called chettiar.15

On the coast, a few villages still have the nattar system. This leadership structure is based on patriarchal and patrilocal kinship. The nattar is often the head of the most respected/oldest/most powerful family in the community, and the position is passed on from father to son. The selection of the nattar was usually a private family affair. Pangali (kin group) families decided amongst themselves, behind closed doors, who would be most appropriate as the nattar. Those who were not within this kin structure were excluded from the process and therefore did not have any say in the decision.

Families who had settled first in the village are often respected for their experience, and usually have representation in the panchayat. In some villages there is more than one nattar, with each of these nattars coming from different kin groupings, and working together on community issues. This depends on how the settlement evolved, with families growing progressively larger through kin migration. Each village may have a number of such family clusters, organized along streets. Many villages have periya nattars and chinna nattars. Some villages could have as many as three or four nattars. Each governs his own cluster; and these nattars form the core of the panchayat. In one village, the northern section has a nattar while the southern section has a chettiar.

Furthermore, additional members of respectable standing are included in the structure of the panchayat to assist the nattars to fulfill their responsibilities. These members are nominated by the nattar; they could counsel him but not take decisions. In one village, the chettiar selects the new panchayat in consultation with the elders. In addition, the village governance structure could have karyadarsi and dharmakartas (temple custodians), who support the nattar in his work and preside in his position in his absence. The dharmakartas attend particularly to the administration of the temple, its rituals and property. These positions too are inherited. In another village, the chettiar is assisted by five panchayatins in addition to a karyadarsi.

A critical concern of the nattamayi is respect. Thus the members of the village have to pay respect to the nattar and panchayat in different ways: by not carrying umbrellas, wearing chappals or sitting in his presence.

Women cannot appear before him. He has to rank first in any community gathering. His word is law and failure to comply could result in punishment. Silence has to be maintained if he sits in judgement.

The nattamayi came under severe criticism because of increasing modernization and awareness. This hereditary structure was increasingly perceived as authoritarian and oppressive by modern eyes (particularly from democratic perspectives). Several accusations were levied against the structure. In Cuddalore, some said that decisions and judgements were made unilaterally as per personal convenience, rather than by inclusive and fair methods, increasing rifts in the village. Human rights were violated, wherein people were beaten up and even imprisoned, as part of enforcing justice. Marking respect and meting out humiliation were cornerstones of this system, continuously emphasising status differences (for instance, villagers stand with folded hands before the nattar). Community finance records were not transparent. Finally, the nattamayi did not pay attention to civic service (electricity, water) and would not relate with the state administration to obtain these amenities.

Modernization has accelerated this transformation. Mechanization, democratisation and privatisation all altered the traditional relations based on kinship and community belonging. In the last century, modern technology in fishing increased individual autonomy. Community and kin relations were replaced by modern relationships (elections, state programmes). More and more of the fishermen are educated, some have travelled abroad; and their financial situation has generally improved. With this, individualisation and personal profit seeking has also increased.

Changing the Nattamayi

The structure of governance has undergone change along the coast, from the hereditary nattamayi to ‘democratic’ panchayats. This change sought to democratize the governance of the community. A new structure of leadership and governance was evolved, with inclusive and transparent decision-making in the community rather than within the family. The critical emphasis was on participation—include people within discussions and decision-making, in spite of differences of opinion.
Traditionally, the nattar did have a panchayat selected by him to support his work, which could only counsel and not decide. Certain processes marked the transformation from a hereditary nattamayi to a selected panchayat. Some of the nattar’s traditional functions (for instance rituals symbolic of decisions and roles) were privatised within the immediate family, reducing his importance. The balance of power was shifted from the head to the body of the panchayat structure, i.e., from the nattar to the members. Functions and roles performed by the nattar were now performed by the panchayat. All the villagers, rather than just the kinship grouping, were included in the village decision-making process, particularly in the selection of the panchayat.

The Changing Chain
The nattamayi was removed as early as half a decade ago in a few villages, particularly those that are close to Chennai. The process of significant and consistent transition across the region though was first seen two decades ago. This transformation was triggered in neighbouring villages across the coast. An immediate cause for the transformation was the collective meetings organized by different organisations to educate/sensitize people about the oppressive nature of hereditary leadership.

A village in Kanchipuram refers to the Association of the Rural Poor in Kanchipuram, led Felix Sughidranraj, that undertook sensitization of young people about this. In Vizhupuram, the village chains were activated by a similar effort undertaken in Devanampattinam by Raghupathy, as a result of which the one-year selection system was discussed and adopted in the entire district. Again, in 1983, the nattamayi in the 18 villages in Cuddalore was also changed, starting from Singarathopu and then spreading to Periyakuppam. There was a fight between the nattamayi and the young men in the village, necessitating police intervention. The 18 villages of Cuddalore together decided to form a committee that will select panchayat members. The villages started changing one by one. Now for 16 years there is no nattar. Instead there is a panchayat headed by the thulaiyar (headman).

The Democratic Panchayat
In more than half the villages, the governance is by the selected panchayat. The broad standards for the panchayat’s selection, composition and practice have also been evolved in the past two decades. It has a certain number of people (usually 8–10) selected as panchayat members by the village. All the male members of the village have a right to express themselves in the selection process as well as in any subsequent action that the panchayat undertakes.

Each village however adapted these standards to its own context, and the selection and composition of the panchayat therefore varies from village to village. In some villages the outgoing panchayat nominates a new panchayat. Some villages also formed committees of people, usually considered elders in the village, who went out of the meeting to make lists of possible panchayatars. These lists are read and collectively reviewed in the larger meeting. Here if any of the members are found to be inappropriate, they are rejected and the committee reconvened to select alternate members. This method of selection was to avoid chaos in the larger meeting. In one village, there is a standard rule that the ten members of the panchayat are to be selected on the same day. At the completion of their term, a new panchayat with new members is selected. The village could have prohibitions on selecting the same member or even members from the same family in subsequent terms, and may specify a period for which they are not to be re-selected.

The panchayat meets as and when required to handle its various tasks. Before the tsunami, this used to be quite irregular. The members may be required to be guided by the elders in the village who selected them; or refer to the village in the execution of their duties.

A critical outcome of the change to the selected panchayat is the accountability of its panchayat members to the people. In one of the most united villages studied, the panchayatars comment that their work is so consistently good because their actions are closely scrutinised for errors. Their position does not spare them from being extensively questioned. A second critical emphasis is on financial transparency. The panchayat has to present accounts as and when required, as well as at regular intervals ranging from a year (before the tsunami) to once a month. At the completion of their term they are expected to show the entire accounts of income and expenses incurred during their term. These are scrutinized in a village meeting.
Comparisons with the Nattamayi

The panchayat has not always met with approbation in comparison with the earlier structure. One villager narrates that earlier, in times of conflict, the person would quietly be called by the chettiar and the problem sorted out mostly through discussions. Meetings would be called only if this failed. In these meetings, the chettiar’s resolutions used to be carefully listened to. People were expected not to retaliate or even speak much; and collective discipline was valued. In the new governance structure, meetings are called easily, everybody has an opinion and none listens to each other. The second criticism centres around the loss of personal dignity and increase in arrogance—people (particularly women and old people) were accorded more respect and consideration in the previous structure. People in the village used to respect social boundaries and one another, but that is now eroding.

Integration

In many villages the transformation from the nattamayi structure to the democratic village panchayat is through integration or co-existence. In one village, the elected panchayat continue to support the nattar, who still performs many governance functions like maintaining village records. Others include the nattar or members of his family in the panchayat. For instance, the sons of nattars have been included in the panchayat. The panchayat is composed of one member from each of the seven family clusters in the village; the nattar acts as a respected member to be consulted in community work. Two villages, while having no nattars, are governed by thalaiyars (heads). While these positions were not necessarily hereditary, they were lifelong. Since the democratisation process has rendered the historical influence of the nattamayi illegitimate, there is often shame in admitting its influence, and the institution is not easily available to public scrutiny.

A consistent feature retained right across the region with few exceptions is the procedure of selection of the panchayat in an open village forum. Election by secret ballot votes was considered an inferior process in selecting the panchayat, since it undermined the relationship that existed between members.

Conflict

Not all villages have integrated the change process in a peaceful manner. In some instances, particularly in villages with rich resources or large incomes, the transformation from the nattamayi to the panchayat has been marked by severe conflict resulting in the development of fractures.14 Mechanized fishing,15 urbanisation16 and democratisation17 have also aggravated these conflicts.

Mechanization of Technology

Mechanization (like other modernization processes), when confronted with traditional practices, has triggered serious conflict in the fishing community. It involves radical changes in the fishing technology used, and hence in the occupational relations. The coast has also seen an influx of trawlers in the last few decades, particularly in Nagapattinam, Karaikal and Cuddalore with rich fishing grounds and harbours. These boats usually stay out on the sea longer, sometimes for a week, and use large nets that draw in schools of fish from deeper seas. They have some preservation facilities to store their catch. They require heavy investment for fuel and stocks (ice and food). Artisanal and mechanized fishing interests have been pitted against each other, particularly in heavily mechanized areas. Mechanization, with its capacity to sweep fish clean from the sea, has reduced the sea catch. Further they concentrate greater wealth, increasing economic power within the community, which can challenge traditional or community authority. The emergence of Akkrampettai in Nagapattinam or Devanampettanam in Cuddalore as leaders in village chains is one such challenge.

Within villages, this conflict of interests influences governance. In highly mechanized villages,18 the panchayats often represent trawlers rather than artisanal interests. This has led to the formation of labour associations, factions in the village that represent artisanal fishing interests, particularly after the tsunami. However the term ‘labour’ can be misconstrued.

Trawlers also retain a share system, as in artisanal fishing. In the case of large mechanized fishing craft, where investments costs may be high, the crew member may not need to share the risks but will take back a smaller portion of the catch (80:20 rather than 60:40). Further, the same individual can go as a member of a kattumaram on one trip and of a trawler on the next—villagers retain the autonomy to go as crewmembers in artisanal fishing craft as well as in mechanized fishing craft.
Only in one village in Chennai is the structure of the village *panchayat* not evident. In addition, two of the villages in Vizhupuram district narrate a history of exploitation from the *ashram* trust that they are traditionally associated with.\(^{19}\)

Section V: Tsunami

The Death Toll

The districts that had the highest death toll were Nagapattinam and Karaikal. The first of the three waves that hit the coast in these districts was devastatingly large, and extremely swift and turbulent. The villages northwards from Karaikal (particularly in Kanchipuram) record lower rates of death, except in a few instances. Here, it was only the last of the three waves (experienced as surges of the sea rather than as a wall of water) that was significantly large. People who responded to the warning about the first two waves escaped. One other reason for the low death toll, it is narrated, was the priority given to lives rather than to property.

The death toll was also determined by other factors. More children, old people and women died, because they could not swim or did not have the physical strength to survive the wave. *Medus* (dunes) and walls also determined the flow of water and the subsequent devastation, cutting off escape in some instances while directing water away from settlements in others. Many villagers had not gone fishing, reducing death tolls. Some fishermen at sea also remained unharmed. In one village, there was a weekly market, with women buying and selling fish, and men folding nets after fishing on the shore. Many people from within and outside the village drowned. In another case, school-going children trained in disaster preparedness escaped at the first instance of danger and were safe, even before the adults of the village.

Disposal of the Dead

Most villagers returned back to the village to search for their families and to bury their dead on the day of the tsunami itself. Given the degree of loss, the primary concern remained the dignified interment of the dead rather than loss of property. For instance in a village in Nagapattinam, the elder in the village narrates that he organised a team of 30 young men, who systematically searched for and recovered the bodies. The bodies were buried promptly to prevent their decomposition. All the ornaments on the bodies were also buried with their owners. Bodies continued to be found in advanced states of decomposition for more than a month after the disaster.

Immediate Relief

People fled westwards, away from the sea, to (relatives’ houses in nearby villages, nearby camps, schools and marriage halls). They returned to the villages during the day, while staying away at night. Many of the men had to attend to the dead immediately.

For the first one or two days, there was no food and no water (especially in some of the most affected villages). By the second day, most villages had received food from neighbouring villages, relief donors and community kitchens. At this stage most communities had to adapt to becoming recipients, a change that was difficult to make at this juncture. The leaders of the villages had also dispersed during the first few days of the tsunami.

Role of Supporting Villages

There is a difference between various reports of the role of neighbouring villages in different districts. Close to Nagapattinam city, villagers report there was no support forthcoming from neighbouring villages. A village in Karaikal reported that their neighbours resented the amount of aid coming in. In marked contrast to this, villages in the other three northern districts recount instances of great kindness, e.g., a case wherein a neighbouring *jamaat* of Muslims helped bury bodies, moved the injured to hospitals, opened their halls to offer shelter and cooked food for all the people.

Distribution of Immediate Relief

In the relief distribution period, the mechanisms of community sharing already evolved formed the foundation of the *panchayat* and village functioning and distribution. In all villages, there were no serious conflicts during this period. In two instances (one of these is a village with blood feuds), existing conflicts were laid aside after the tsunami during immediate relief distribution. It is only later that some of the conflicts resumed or worsened.

The immediate relief articles distributed included clothes, raw food, cooking materials and utensils, and household articles like beddings and buckets. In some instances, money was given as relief. Different agencies
distributed relief—state organizations, religious and political charity efforts, and development organizations.

All the villages remark that the much needed and well-intentioned relief was generous and timely, but that they were wary about the consequences on the unity of the villages. This phase also marked transformations in panchayat and village orientation in order to negotiate with aid and State agencies.

**Distribution Process**

A common set of procedures was used along the coast. The village *panchayats* had assessed the damage in a few days. Hence they were vested with the power of dispensing relief equitably. Some features stand out. First, the relief material was deposited in a community structure that acted as a repository, usually the temple, *panchayat* office or school. If the organization could dispense enough relief to all the members, distribution followed. Otherwise they were asked to deposit the materials till more were collected, in order that they could be distributed to all members of the community. If they refused to do so, the materials were not accepted. Second, all members were informed about the arrival of aid (a microphone was used in one village to make announcements) so that they could witness the distribution process. The distribution (particularly in Nagapattinam and Karaikal) was on the basis of a token system. In some instances, the *panchayat* nominated a committee (say, of young men) to oversee distribution. Third, the accounts of the distribution were maintained in the village in the accounts book open to public scrutiny.

**Issues in Relief**

In commenting on the sale of relief articles, one fisherman said that the relief material was often in excess, inappropriate or poor in quality. In one village, the old clothes were sold and the money received was shared amongst the members of the village. The relief phase marked a critical transformation in the values of the community. Shrewdness in acquiring aid, irrespective of its appropriateness, took predominance over generosity. Two villages redirected the relief that came to the village to one that had suffered considerable damage and loss of life. However this act of generosity became a source of regret later, when the village did not receive any further relief or compensation. Now, the villagers feel that they have been foolish.

**Aid**

Communities along the coast geared themselves to negotiate the aid process, both of the state and of voluntary organisations. A critical shift in community values was to collect as much as aid as was possible to avoid being ‘foolish’. In many instances, *panchayats* had to reorient themselves or be replaced if they failed in this. They had to play two critical roles in the aid process: enumerate members of the community to allot and enlist shares, and collect and distribute aid received in keeping with internal processes of sharing.

**Enumeration**

Damage enumeration conducted by the state machinery and various voluntary agencies tested village cohesiveness. The enumeration involved detailed listings of the loss of life and the degree of damage to shelter, fishing craft, fishing gear and accessories (hooks, bait) and livelihood materials. Some villages report that enumeration of members, particularly by the state machinery, was affected by several factors.

**Shock:** At the time of enumeration, the suddenness of the disaster had left many people in shock. People had dispersed and critical people in the community were missing. The state beneficiary lists prepared were not adequately representative; and often differed from those enumerated by the *oorn panchayat*. In one village, the enumeration list of the *tehsildar* listed about 140 houses instead of the 163 houses in the village. At that time the *panchayat* could not give the entire list, because many people had fled the village immediately after the tsunami.

**Membership:** Issues arose in counting households. Unmarried sons could be considered part of a household or enumerated separately. One village also narrates that some of the members who were not listed questioned this, and the money was divided equally. Two other villages also enumerated lesser numbers of people: 41 families divided amongst 62 members and 72 divided amongst 110 members. This dilemma was particularly sharp in villages that followed the tradition of identifying members by marriage in some of their internal functions. In Kanchipuram, for instance, where village membership
commences at the age of 18 and the new member has to begin to pay a tax to the panchayat, these issues did not arise.

Large villages with rich resources did not count recent migrants as members. In one village, only 281 families out of 420 have been enumerated for post-tsunami relief (The central government distributed Rs 8000 over a span of five instalments—Rs 4000 followed by Rs 1000 four times—as disaster relief to each of the families affected by the disaster.) The remaining families were not enumerated by the panchayat, which did not consider them vāri (tax-paying members of the village). Because of the rich river- and sea-fishing, a number of families have shifted into the village over the past few years. Their application for membership has been rejected, on the basis that there are no guarantees that they will continue to stay in the village in future.

**Role of the government:** In many instances, the government enumeration process aggravated conflicts within the village. State personnel in Nagapattinam were immediately transferred and new enumerators unfamiliar with the communities were brought in. Unequal access to State machinery undermined structures of authority and resource sharing within the village. Panchayats were often not consulted in the state enumeration, leading to discrepancies in estimates by the two institutions. State records (e.g., fisheries department records of boats) in the villages tend to be erratic. In one village, it was ruefully reported that the number of fishing craft after the tsunami is considerably less than the number before the tsunami. The numbers used were from the records of the fisheries department. Recording a fishing craft in the fisheries department requires the person to pay a registration fee, and fishermen do not want to incur this expenditure.

**Questions about enumeration:** Villages charged that the numbers finalised by the government were questionable on several counts. There was inappropriate distribution of compensation in unaffected areas (villages lying to the west). There was also a sizeable inflation in beneficiary numbers in State records. They also report that attempts to seek justice from police had not been successful. Questioning these inflated figures met with threats to personal safety and redirection of further aid away from these villages.

**Redistribution of Compensation and Aid**

In addition to enumeration, the second critical function of the panchayat was organization and distribution of compensation in the village. Many villages reported that the initial phase of aid arrival in the village was marked by chaos. When some members of the community received aid, others who did not get it immediately came to know of this and protested. These conflicts had to be resolved at the panchayat level.

To avoid these conflicts, the villagers in many communities collectively agreed to divide the aid received from both the state and the voluntary organizations equitably. Many villages worked out the methods of organizing the aid received and redistributing it among the members. In one village, for instance, the panchayat sat together and decided how to divide the compensation. These calculations were then presented to the larger community and the final amounts negotiated and agreed upon. Those that were unwilling to accede to this decision were to be placed under mārijal. Similar patterns were followed in distribution of fishing craft compensations from the State.

The structures and mechanisms already traditionally present for resource sharing provided the foundation. The panchayats usually collected and redistributed the relief and boat compensation due for the entire village from the State, as well as the aid provided by voluntary organisations. Since transparency was a critical concern of these communities, in most villages people knew about the quantity and kind of aid received by the village. Many villages also instituted new processes to increase this transparency, e.g., monthly meetings on community accounts.

Most of the panchayats collected the aid received, and redistributed it internally across the community to ensure equity. This study explored four kinds of aid: the relief given to individual villagers; the boat compensation (including trawlers) given by the state; nets and other equipment given by voluntary organisations; and housing. The calculation of compensation due to each person was determined by several factors.

**Quantum of Aid**

The quantum of relief distributed also involved redistribution and conflict. Villages in Kanchipuram
and Karaikal reported fewer difficulties in distribution, while those in Nagapattinam and Vizhupuram faced greater difficulties. One reason that villagers in Karaikal say that redistribution was easier in these villages was the ample amount of aid received from the union government, and the fact that the villages and their panchayats were remarkable stable during the dissemination process.

**Community Estimates**
Communities arrived at their own lists of beneficiaries based on assessment of damage, membership in the community and the amount of compensation distributed. The panchayat reconciled these lists with the beneficiary lists made by the government and aid organisations. In a few villages, special committees were appointed to undertake the assessment and reconciliation. In many instances, these differences were equalised to ensure that those who were not covered by state and aid organisations also received a share.

**Membership**
Most villages redistributed the compensation on the basis of member shares. For this, they used the modern criteria of 18 years of age and payment of vari for membership, rather the traditional one of marriage. The redistribution of the compensation required reconciliation of these two estimates, particularly in villages with more traditional communities.

**Shares**
The share of aid received from alternate sources and already given to individual members also determined the redistribution process. The redistribution process also accounted for structural differences.

In one village, compensation for 50 FRP craft was received. These beneficiaries have been asked to give a portion of their compensation to the village fund to be redistributed. Their damaged fishing craft have already been repaired by a voluntary organisation. In addition, they have also received shares (one boat shared by three members) in the 96 FRPs (Fibre Reinforced Plastic craft) distributed in the village by another non-governmental organization. Their refusal to share their state compensation with the village was contested. At the time of the study, a larger cluster meeting involving the neighbouring 6-7 villages had been called to resolve the issue.

In three villages, villages collectively decided to compensate people on the basis of damage to nets and wood, and divide the rest amongst the members in the village. In another village, nets given by non-governmental organizations were distributed amongst those who lost theirs. Out of the last cheque of compensation given to the 249 kattumarams, the panchayat gave money to repair the damaged boats and then distributed the rest equitably. Thus people who fish have been given Rs 13000, those who are not fisherfolk but maintain petty businesses in the area have been given Rs 7000, couples have been given Rs 10000, widows Rs 2000, widowers Rs 5000, and unmarried men Rs 8000. In yet another village, the panchayat divided the nets equally amongst the people. Further they also recovered a certain amount from the people who got compensation, and divided up the money amongst old people (Rs 5000 for men, Rs 2000 for women), widows (Rs 2000) and unmarried youth (Rs 5000).

In four villages, part of the compensation given for kattumarams was collected and then distributed amongst those who had not received anything. In one of these villages, the panchayat redistributed the money collected in the following manner: those who work in the sea (Rs 15000); those who work on the shore (Rs 10000), daughters without father (Rs 7500), husband and wife, and educated boys (Rs 5000), those who have daughters and no sons, and widows (Rs 2500).

Some villages only collected money for fishing craft that were not damaged and then redistributed this money. In one village, only those people who received compensation and did not own the kattumarams were asked to contribute to the village. The owners got Rs 8000 and the village collected the remaining Rs 14000. There has been some conflict related to this within the village.

In one village in Chennai with many labourers, the compensation received was given to the owners directly, who in turn gave Rs 1000 to each of the labourers who work as their crew.

**Mechanized Fishing Craft**
Greater equity was seen in sharing the aid by the artisanal fishing sector, particularly when compared to the mechanized fishing craft. This was a direct
reflection of the panchayat’s will and ability to collect money from all sections of people, irrespective of their economic power. In villages with large concentrations of mechanized fishing craft, panchayats could often not enforce redistribution of their compensation. Mechanized fishing craft owners maintain that the costs of maintaining and running the craft are so prohibitive, that it cannot be expected of them to share the damage compensation given by the government. In one village, the money collected was returned back to the people after a decision in a village meeting because fights broke over this issue.

In three villages in Nagapattinam, conflicts have broken out because of the unwillingness of mechanized fishing craft owners to share their compensation with the members of their crews and with those who ply kattumaranams between the trawlers and the shore. Only three villages on the coast reported that the compensation received for mechanized fishing craft in their villages was also divided between the villagers.22

**FRP Fishing Craft given by Non-governmental Organizations**

All along the coast, FRP fishing craft have been distributed by non-governmental organizations. Many villages distributed the FRP fishing craft to all the members of the village, with each craft being allocated to a certain number of people. Some villages distributed the FRP fishing craft to those who did not get compensation for any craft. In one village, names of the crew members in the villages were picked by lottery to avoid conflicts. In addition some of the villages also have fixed the price of each membership. Thus people could sell these membership shares in the FRP if needed.

**Compensation for Women**

In some instances, using traditional sharing patterns may also have emphasized existing inequities. Women (particularly widows with no male heirs) were not eligible for shares, or received smaller portions in many villages, particularly in Kanchipuram district. Along the coast, widows without sons or male heirs are usually excluded from patriarchal and patrilocal village membership. Because they cannot contribute to the livelihood activities in the village, they receive usually smaller shares in the village catch, about half or less than half of what is given to a crew member. Many of these women dry and sell excess catch in the village. They do not have fishing craft.

Most villages along the coast had no special schemes for widows in the village. The panchayat perceived its main role to be one of channelising resources and not that of reaching out to particularly vulnerably people. The panchayat only routed aid that was specifically given to widows.

Even though there were no special provisions for widows, many villages in all districts (with the notable exception of Kanchipuram) enumerated widows as shareholders in the aid received after the tsunami. Many villages also allocated a share in the FRP fishing craft distributed. In one instance at least, these women could sell their share at the price (Rs 10000) fixed per share by the panchayat.

In Kanchipuram, however, widows without male heirs were not considered members in aid distribution and received half a share or no share at all in compensation received for boats. There was one single exception among the villages studied in this district, where the two widows in the village were given the same shares as the other members. In one village, one woman narrates that her share of aid is only half that of other members. A share in the FRP fishing craft distributed was also denied to her. She had tried to become a member and offered to pay vari (Rs 80 per month) even before the tsunami. This too has been refused. She has six daughters, all of whom are married. They did not get any shares from the compensation received for the craft. A critical reasoning to justify is that they are not earning members for the village.

The women who sell dried fish were also not counted in the compensation. In one village, a cluster of old women who sell dry fish on the shore report that they received no special schemes or compensation. On the day of the tsunami, they were on the coast and watched the wave come in and fled for their lives. All of them lost their entire stock of dried fish in the tsunami and now have no source of income. This loss was not compensated. One of the women despairingly claimed that it would have been better to have died in the tsunami, since this would have meant that her family received compensation at least for her death.
Enforcement of Redistribution
Failure to comply with the redistribution decided by the panchayat can result in mariyal. One of the villagers (G) has filed a court case against his panchayat for collecting part of the compensation for his fishing craft from him. He had been excommunicated both economically and socially because he was not willing to pay the village his share. His approach to the district administration to act in removing the mariyal has been unsuccessful. Apparently G had already been compensated for his fishing craft by the village from aid received earlier. Therefore the village felt justified in asking him to pay his share from the cheques he received for another fishing craft.

Housing
The critical long-term concern of the fisherfolk villages is that of relocation and housing. The government has promised relocation in alternative locations where possible. In return, the villages will have to surrender the old land to the government. The fishing craft and gear will be stored in a shed specially constructed for this purpose. The community is caught between contradictory pressures of livelihood and the safety of the family. After the tsunami, fisherfolk report that they are afraid of living on the shore. While the men are reasonably confident about surviving such disasters because they are used to the ways of the sea and can swim or ride the waves, women and children are not so skilled. Given that women and children are the ones to spend most of their time on the shore, their safety has now become the critical factor in deciding reconstruction of their homes.

The seashore is an integral part of their livelihood. Their fishing practices require their boats to be pushed into the sea. Nets are repaired, catches auctioned and fish dried on the shore. Fishing craft, fishing gear and other fishing equipments are also stored here. By living close to the sea, the fishermen also protect this property. In return, they continuously monitor the seashore and its changing ecology. Thus fishermen, particularly artisanal fishermen, are acutely aware of the dilemma between safety and their livelihood.

The seashore is a critical factor in building the structure of the fisherfolk community down the coast. One reason that fisherfolk communities down the shore have been largely resilient is the constant information sharing that historically occurs because of continuous movement and sailing on the coastline between the villages. This chain of information and action is slowly disintegrating under the pressures of modernization (mechanization, urbanisation, industrialisation). The exact nature of post-tsunami housing aid in altering this chain could not be covered in the study. If pursued, this enquiry might offer important insights into the future changes in community structure that can be expected.

Many villages are wary about the state relocation plan because they believe that to be physically alienated from the shore will make fishing extremely difficult and even impossible. Further, they are afraid that the land thus acquired will be used for purposes that will degrade the environment (like shrimp farming) or will create an influx of outsiders (like for the entertainment and hospitality industries).

Relocation
Some villages are willing to relocate, even if it involves the risk of losing the land that their old houses stand on. In one village, 70 houses have been razed. The government is paying Rs 30000 per acre to buy land for the new houses. The extra money needed for the purchase of land will come from the village money. Another village, for instance, has been allocated land for 127 families 500 metres from the coast, next to the vanniars. They agreed to shift for safety reasons and were willing to house their craft and gear in sheds.

Some villages were willing to relocate because they did not own the land that they were settled on. Relocation would entitle them to ownership of the house and land. Two large communities were willing to relocate to new areas, while remaining confident that they will retain the area where the damaged houses close to the sea are located.

Refusal to Shift
Many villages insisted on remaining at their earlier location. This was particularly true of villages in Kanchipuram and Chennai. In a village with factions, one faction did not want to return to the village but wished to relocate to the area where their temporary shelters have been constructed. This is being contested.

Shifting Close By
Some villages have bought or used land that was already available to build new houses. Thus they have relocated
to a nearby area while retaining control over the old areas. In some villages, people have chosen to buy land nearby with village money and carry on with the reconstruction work. Thus they have had access to new land while retaining control over the old seashore. For instance, in one village, 230 houses have been relocated. These households already had land deeds (pattas) far from the sea and close to the river under a previous government free housing programme. Hence, the old land is still under the individual's name and does not have to be handed over to the government.

Section VI: The Communities
Post-tsunami

The Post-tsunami Panchayats

It is only in 14 villages that the panchayats have not changed because of the disaster and still remain the same (or have changed only as part of regular practice). Of these, five villages still have the nattamayi. All the other panchayats have been changed after the tsunami.

Three significant factors played a role in this transformation: competence, accountability of the panchayat and the presence of historical conflict that was aggravated by the tsunami and the subsequent aid dispensation process.

Competence

The post-tsunami period requires harder work and ‘modern’ competencies to negotiate with the various aid dispensing agencies, and to draw, manage and redistribute aid. Some panchayat members resigned their positions, quoting personal reasons or illness as a cause for their inability to carry out the extra work that the post-tsunami scenario demanded. Many communities changed their panchayat members in order to draw aid in larger amounts and distribute it better. In some instance, villages removed panchayat members for inappropriate behaviour: drinking, lack of seriousness and unwillingness to attend to extra work. In two villages with nattamayi, the nattar/chettiar remained the same, while the rest of the members were changed because their behaviour was inappropriate. In two villages, some of the old panchayat members continued while others were changed. Here, people claim that the panchayat members were drunk and unable to pay attention to all the work of the villages. Members with competencies to handle the new kind of work were also selected by the community.

Accountability

The relief and rehabilitation compensation was also seen as collective resources, and its collection and equitable distribution was also seen as a central governance function. The transparency of the distribution process within the village, the shrewdness in negotiating with external agencies, and their ability to account for expenses became significant.

Accounts had to submitted for public scrutiny when demanded. These accounts have to give details of all the money and relief that was collected, and the pattern of its division. Almost all villages had a rule that accounts have to be shown at least once a month. One of the villages that prides itself on the transparency of its accounting procedure says that the panchayat meets on every new moon day in the month and the accounts are shared amongst the villagers. Other villages insist on the submission of accounts for public scrutiny regularly, at intervals of two months, four months or yearly.

Issues in Finance

The panchayats in some villages were altered because of issues with accounts. In one village, one of the members of the panchayat was asked to step down because he stole Rs 20000. He in turn filed a case of corruption against the panchayat, to which it has retaliated by filing a case of defamation against him. The panchayat itself changed after its appointed term, after organising the temple festival and showing the annual accounts. In another village, though the panchayat changed, the panchayat members were extremely reluctant to disclose why. It was hinted that this might have been because of the manner in which relief was distributed. The panchayat printed coupons on the basis of which relief was distributed. 26 coupons were left out, following which the entire panchayat was changed.

This phenomenon of changing panchayats was most marked in two villages. In one of these villages, the panchayat was changed twice in the course of a year since the tsunami (the current one is the third panchayat). The first two were changed because they were not transparent and did not show accounts.

A critical factor in financial accountability is whether the expenses incurred by the panchayat are reasonable. It is entitled to deduct expenses incurred
by them in carrying out its role (lodging and boarding, transportation, entertainment costs). In many villages, the tsunami compensation work is perceived with a degree of suspicion. In another village in Chennai, the villagers report that the panchayat was changed three months ago for not showing accounts. The panchayatars used to go to the neighbouring arrack shop, with each spending a good sum of money on drinking. Those who did not drink were given their share of money to spend on whatever they wished to.

**Shrewdness in Acquiring Compensation**

Some *panchayats* also changed because of their unwillingness to prepare incorrect figures. There were several pressures from different members in villages to quote larger damage compensation to the state. The extra compensation thus obtained was distributed between the members.

In one village, a member of the previous *panchayat* claimed that it was changed in February because the members refused to quote higher damages for increased compensation. The resulting low compensation had led to conflict in the village. Finally, the *panchayat* was changed and a new one brought in. In spite of this, villagers recount that there has been no history of conflict in the village to date. In another village too, the *panchayat* was changed because it under-represented the damage. Furthermore, the previous *panchayat* head was not in good health, and was hence unable to fulfil his responsibilities.

**Aggravation of Historical Conflict**

The historical cohesiveness of the village determined how membership representation and damage assessment was arrived upon. The post-tsunami disaster compensation has further aggravated conflicts and polarised factions within the villages, particularly in villages with highly politicised *panchayats*, with each faction forced to compete against each other for limited resources. The aid redistribution exacerbated existing conflicts.

In Nagapattinam, the distribution of aid (cash and fishing craft distributed) was directly affected by the *panchayat*’s ability to negotiate ongoing conflicts between mechanized and artisanal fishing interests. Where the *panchayat* has been seen to be partisan to the interests of the mechanized sector, labour associations have been formed. For instance, in two villages, *panchayats* were unwilling to represent artisanal interests in their estimates of fishing craft. This was seen by the artisanal fishers as an opportunity to get new fishing craft and become autonomous. Owners of mechanized fishing craft however did not want to permit this independence, and their influence in the governance of the village is considerable. They also denied shares given for the mechanized fishing craft to the crew. In both villages, a section of people have moved away, organising themselves into labour associations that perform similar functions as the *panchayat*.

**The Future**

In looking to the future, there are some common concerns of the community that were articulated.

**Changes in Ecology**

Only three villages felt that there has been no change in the ecology of the coast because of the tsunami. One pointed to the systematic deterioration of the ecology unleashed in the past few decades of modernization (dredging for the Sethu Samudram project, for instance) and mechanization. There has been steady pollution of the coastal waters. Chemical wastes from neighbouring industries dump their effluents into the sea. Mechanized boats using large nets have increased. At least 42 varieties of fish have been eradicated. Mangroves and other trees on the shore that could reduce the impact of storms and other natural disasters have been destroyed.

Almost all the other villages on the coast felt that the tsunami had affected the ecology of the coastline, the winds and currents of the sea. The changes listed included:

*Erosion of the coast:* Many villages report the volume of water in the sea has increased: it has moved closer, eroding the coast; and the volume of the sea has increased with the normal tides now as high as those on new and full moon days.

*Turbulence:* The sea is now turbulent with more forceful currents and winds like those seen only on new moon and full moon nights. One village reported strange sounds at sea, like those in heavy storms.

*Drinking water:* One village claimed that its underground drinking water supplies have dried out. Two others
narrate that the water has been contaminated after the disaster and is not as sweet as before.

Weather, wind and currents: The ability to predict winds and currents in the sea is critical for fishing. Knowledge of these factors is very highly valued. In many villages, fishermen report that they are no longer map these as well as before, resulting in disorientation, both in fishing and in gauging safety.

Seabed: Many villages, particularly in Kanchipuram, commented that that the nature of the seabed, its rock formations, areas of slime and sand have changed, probably because of the forceful ebb of the tidal wave. Villagers estimate that four or five years will be required before they can chart the seacoast again, to help them to avoid damage to their nets and understand fish patterns.

Availability of fish: A few villages record an ongoing reduction of fish caused by ecological destruction caused by mechanized fishing. However, villages consistently claim that the amount and variety of fish available has decreased considerably since the tsunami. Villagers also claimed that the behaviour of fish has changed, including their migration patterns, growth and presence. Only one village attributed the cause of reduction in availability of fish to the increase in the number of nets used after the tsunami.

Restarting Work
Almost all the villages on the coast did not start work for at least three months after the tsunami. In some instances, villages stayed away from the sea for more than 6 months. Several reasons were quoted. Fishing gear were destroyed, and had to be repaired or acquired. Fishing craft were damaged. After the tsunami, there was a general rule in the community along the coast that till all the members had seaworthy fishing craft, no one will go for fishing. The 45-day ban when fishing is not allowed also occurred during the same period. All members had to be present during relief and rehabilitation distribution to ensure equity. Those boats that did go to the sea did not make enough money to cover even the diesel costs of running the boat.

Only one village reported wryly that they went back to the sea four days after the tsunami and stayed through the night, because they were convinced by an NGO to do so. Now people are fishing in the sea again, though they remain wary.

Fear of the Sea
The unpredictability and severity of the tsunami have left many fishermen with lingering doubts about the nature, behaviour and safety of the sea. Their uncertainty about their predictions of the coastal behaviour has increased these doubts.

This has resulted in changes in their fishing practices. They are unwilling to stay at sea especially at night or when the waters are turbulent. Members of the village go in groups. Only 60 per cent of the people who earlier used to fish go to the sea now. Most of these are younger than 40, while earlier even 55-year-old men used to go to sea. People return back after a specific time even if they have no catch, rather than stay till evening as they used to before the tsunami.

Education
After the tsunami, fishing is seen as both dangerous and erratic, and the emphasis on education as a way to find employment elsewhere has further increased. Most boys are educated till the 10th standard, and girls till the 8th standard. In earlier times, the average level would only be till 4th or 5th standard, just enough for functional literacy.

Different families place varying emphasis on the usefulness of higher education. Seeking education is difficult. Schools are few and children have to travel long distances with little road or transportation access. And it does not necessarily promise a secure employment. Many individuals in the community seek higher education against great odds. Entry here is difficult, one villager states, and reservation as a most backward caste will help.

Some villages hold that some of the children do not even know how to swim. Others maintain that not all the children will be able to get employment outside, and may have to fish for their livelihoods. Their children are encouraged to learn the work on the seas during their holidays, so that they have the option of fishing to fall back on. One village comments that most people will continue to fish for their livelihood. A small percentage of people who have money and can afford higher education will migrate out. Another pointed out that fisherfolk communities have stagnated in their growth because
they have become inward-looking. Before mechanization, fishermen used to stay at sea only for five or six hours a day. Now with the increase in mechanized fishing craft, they remain at sea for 3–4 days and lose touch with the world. Their knowledge does not expand.

Those with access to education, knowledge and networks in the outside modern world move away from these villages as quickly as possible, rather than staying and using this knowledge to foster stronger linkages within. As a consequence, the community has been deprived of critical awareness and education about current realities.

Endnotes

1 Referred to in the Tamil classic Silapaddikaram
2 Cuddalore
3 One way to understand this complex word could be as the willingness to bind individual actions to collective will.
4 The Iccinapattinam temple in the neighbouring village is considered famous because of the manifestation of the goddess, kannonor marumman. This temple is shared equally between the two villages. The story of the idol of the goddess in the temple is as follows. The goddess is said to have come to the shore of the village, to be worshipped here. The sea boiled off the shore of Iccinapattinam; and there was a cluster of heavy fish that came into the iadivalai. The katunarram people at sea found that there was a statue of the goddess in their nets. They brought the goddess to shore and established her as the village deity.
5 In one village, villagers narrate that the children of the village sought refuge in the temple during the assault of the wave, and hence remained safe.
6 One village narrates that Thirukandapuram (Soundraraja Perumal)s was to have come to the seashore. There he saw a beautiful fisher girl called Padmini Nachiar, who was 13 years old. He kidnapped her to marry her. However she started her periods. Soundraraja Perumal’s first wife Andavananachiar would not allow the menstruating girl into the temple. Hence she spent three days in the village before she accompanied her husband back to his house. Even now in memory of these three days, the god’s idol comes from the temple and spends three days in the village before going back. Traditionally, the women of the village cover their heads and ensure that their faces are not seen by strangers, so as to prevent kidnapping.
7 One reason for these conversions is the support (emotional and material) that the church gives these people.
8 The tax is called vati. Payment of a tax marked membership in Kanchipuram district.

The king felt that the maintenance of the temple and its property should be given to a village that was courageous and united. All the villages competed for this honour. The king had a big pūja (religious ceremony) and called the heads of all the villages to it. Here he asked villages to volunteer for undertaking maintenance. At that time four villages came forward. They were Karaikalmedu, Kilinjalmedu, Namibrar Nagar and Aryanattaturai. In order to select between these four, the king laid down a severe test of faith. One of the villagers from each village had to be ready to descend into a boiling vat of oil. Whoever survived this would then qualify for the custody of the temple. The heads of the village returned to their villages to consult the other members, hesitant to proceed with the life-threatening test.

In Namibrar Nagar, one of the villagers was renowned for his devotion to Siva. He came to hear about the king’s test and volunteered that he would be willing to undergo it, vesting his faith in the god, willing to surrender his life if required. His only concern was about the future of his three daughters. Recognizing that of all people, he was the one most likely to pass the test, the grateful village in return promised that it would take care of all his daughters.

The other three villages could not identify anyone with equally strong faith. The devotee from Namibrar Nagar was brought before the king. Preparations were made for him to descend into the vat of oil. The devotee was completely equanimous at the critical time, but was stopped by the king, who commented that all he wanted was the evidence of courage and faith, and preparedness to undergo such a severe test was enough. There was no reason now to go further on this course of action. Thus the custody of the temple was given to the village and it became the thulai (head) village of the 64 villages. The village is the site for the annual Mahakali—the day when the gods come to the water to play. The god from the temple is brought to the seashore with great pomp to dip in the sea.

Adipattanayar: Adipattanayar, one of the 63 Nayanari of Tamil tradition, was said to be a fisherman who lived in Namibrar Nagar. It is said that this saint loved Lord Siva so much that he would offer the first share of the catch to the god and release it back into the sea. He continued this practice both during good and bad times.

A time arrived when there was no fish in the sea, and his family went hungry. The saint still continued in his practice of giving the first share to the god. Then the god decided to test him, and sent a golden fish to his net as his first catch. He wanted to see if adversity and greed would make the saint forget his practice. However, Adipattanayar remained unaffected by the golden fish and returned this too to the sea in the name of the god. Pleased by this unwavering devotion, Lord Siva appeared before him and blessed him, whereby he became one of the Nayanari.

The name of the village: A story is told about how the name of the village came about. The Chola king and his wife often strolled down the seashore enjoying the sweet breeze. Once, however, the air was very still, and the king complained about it. One of the fishermen nearby looked to the sea and pointed out to a wave on the water. He told the king that there would be a good breeze when the wave went back and returned, i.e., in about half an hour. Sure enough, when the wave returned, with it came a breeze. Commenting on the accuracy of the fisherman’s prediction, the king called the village Namibrar Nagar—a village that can be trusted (nambr means trust in Tamil). This story also marks the honour paid to the fisherfolk, who were renowned at that time for their honesty and reliability.
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10 Large nets that scrape the ocean floor and capture eggs and fish just hatched. These conflicts about nets are symptomatic of the deeper issues between the mechanized and artisanal fishing sectors.

11 They are known for their impartiality and impeccability in maintaining records. The village itself has not had disputes for more 50 years.

12 Periyakuppam was the mother village, and they had fisheries society in this village

13 The functions of the nattar and chettiar are similar, and only indicate a difference in practice. In the document the term nattar is used to include the chettiar of Kanchipuram.

14 The case of village D: In one village in Madras district, 40 years ago there were three chettiar. Of the three chettiar, only one was in power till 1998. The other two families had slowly lost their prominence over the years. The village is a very wealthy village and get profits from the shops both at the temple (which is an important one) and from the Mount Mary Church. These shops are auctioned every year for about Rs 20 lakhs each; this amount is then divided and distributed equally amongst all the members of the village. The chettiar system was finally done away with because he failed to show accounts adequately, was not considerate to the needs of the village people and did not allow them to become independent of the fishing trade. The crisis was precipitated when the chettiar undertook the responsibility of giving kuzhu to the village deity (food cooked for the entire village as part of a ritual). Finally, on the day of the ceremony, he performed it within his house and went to the temple without including the rest of the village. When the villagers came to know about this, they were furious and forced him to step down altogether.

15 The case of village K: This village is in the midst of severe conflict. The village has a nattar system. A labour union has now been formed. The village was split into factions around these two affiliations, about 4–5 years ago. One adhered to the nattumayi and the other nominated a labour union.

The village has some of the best fishing grounds in the area because of its proximity to the Palk Bay. As a result, fishing is highly mechanized, with many trawlers from the district fishing in these waters. Over a period of time, artisanal fishing suffered. Many people in the village felt that the entry of fishing craft from outside should be stopped.

These fishing craft used to erect a cluster of thatch huts to store their nets near the village. These thatched huts were burnt down and conflict broke out. Cases were filed against 18 of the labour union members, claiming that they were involved in the burnings and murders. It is believed that this intervention by the police could not have been without the tacit support of the nattar. This support to move against members of the labour union, they believe, is because of his partisanship towards the mechanized sector, which had the most to lose when the ban was imposed.

Since then, there have been several conflicts in the village, with villagers becoming partisans of one or the other camp. This split in the village is reflected in their temple for the village goddess. The construction of the temple has been suspended over several years, with both sides preventing its completion. This conflict has spread to the temple festival too. The expenses for the festival and the salary of the priest come from contributions by all the members of the village. One of the governance roles is to ensure that these formalities are completed annually. However in the village, the labour union claimed that the nattar has neglected these responsibilities, forcing them to perform these functions.

The labour union claims that the ownership of the village land has now been transferred in the nattar’s name. The original ownership was a kootupattai, where the land was commonly held by 54 members of the village. This land is temple (vaikaranum) land given to the village. It is claimed that the 54 names have been scratched out and replaced by the nattar’s name in red ink in the legal property document. There is a court case against this transfer of property. The proceedings have been stayed till the tsunami work is over.

Efforts to nominate a new panchayat in the village have not been successful. Once, when the nattar did resign in an emotional move, a new panchayat was nominated. This proved short-lived—the nattar returned back to power through insidious means. The village has had several meetings with the 64-village cluster to resolve the conflict and unite the village. The nattar is not willing to listen to reason.

After the tsunami, in the initial period of relief distribution, all the villagers remained united. The nattar was hospitalised because he broke a leg, and therefore could not influence the village much. Within a short time of his return to the village, the factions have re-emerged. Aid towards village development organized by the labour union has been disrupted by the nattar. A community/marriage hall worth about Rs 28 lakhs was to be built in the village. The nattar complained to the temple trust owning the village land, which has in turn prohibited the construction of the marriage hall.

The nattar’s power is maintained by his easy access to the state bureaucracy and the district collector. His sophistication in engaging with outside agencies and people has added to this power. This has increased after the tsunami, with increased interventions by the state and development organizations.

The labour association says that 70 per cent of the ooru supported the union before the tsunami, even though they were afraid of the nattar. All compensation is being distributed between the two camps, which are serviced by different non-governmental agencies. Most people in the village move between the two camps so that no aid is lost. As a result of this, village affiliations along the conflict lines have become unpredictable.

16 The village has about 500 fisherfolk. This is now divided into three parts—south, middle and north—to prevent the formations of factions. This has been the consequence of a falling out about 15–20 years ago, when it was agreed that all the three factions will work independently to avoid further conflict. There used to be a chettiar and a nattumayi, but no longer.

With this split, the village panchayat was also dissolved. Thus they claim that there is no formal panchayat. There are five panchayat members in the south village. These are not official. These panchayat members continue their work and there are no nominations or elections. The panchayat comes together only if there is a need. They will come together to solve problems, give judgements and then disperse.
The villager we spoke to was quite insistent that there were no formal authority, and that the power he enjoyed was because of his concern for and contribution to the community. He also claimed that one reason why the panchayat is not formal is that the village does not have any income and is poor. Therefore the panchayat only works to solve family problems and does not look into law and order situations.

"The case of P: P is educated and does not go to fish. In 1965, the new gram panchayat was elected from the village. P's father was the new panchayat leader. At that time, the district collector chose the panchayat leader. P is also called Ravan. When asked why he has such an unusual nickname, he narrates that his father was greatly influenced by Periyar, and wanted to remove religious superstition. His home was one of the few households that had a radio, and he worked to get electricity and roads to the village. P too is in the gram panchayat and is acquainted with and supported by district officials both within the revenue department and the police.

He had, through his contacts within the state administration, obtained a lease for a khadi shop from the government. The chettiar did not want him to set up this shop and threatened him. He got the shop despite this. He tried to point out to the chettiar that the shop was on paraambookku (common village land that is lying fallow) land and was not personal property, and that the shop too was government property that he had to lease annually. Therefore there was no reason for objection to his setting up this shop.

The chettiar threatened to break down the shop and put it in the sea. In turn, P registered a case with the police station. The police station summoned the chettiar for the enquiry. About 200 people from the village went to the police station in support of the chettiar. In the station, the chettiar treated the police inspector with disrespect, who became enraged and ordered a lathicharge on the gathered people. On returning back to the village, they broke the shop and threw it into the sea. They also set his house on fire with his children inside. Relatives rescued the children. They beat up the police photographer. Because he went out of the community to the police, he was placed under martial, and no one within the village was allowed to interact with him and his family, and they were forced to flee the village.

Finally, the police filed a case against the chettiar, and he withdrew. The case was settled in 1990, and the chettiar was asked to pay compensation for the destruction of the house. Though the damage amount was close to Rs 75000, the chettiar finally agreed to pay Rs 50000. One reason for this was that he worked in the harbour in a central government job and was scared of losing it. P came back to the village in 1998.

"Village O: O lies at the junction of a river and the sea and therefore has both rich fishing grounds and fertile land. It is the last village lying to the north in the cluster. In 1983, a harbour was constructed and the number of mechanized fishing craft in the village increased. Large numbers of people migrated into the village in the last two decades as crew on these fishing craft. In the village, there is a hamlet of Vanniachi who work as crew on the trawlers and fish in the inland river. However a significant number of members from the same Pattinavar community also work as crew. They are usually poorer and have no fishing craft. At that time, many of the people working as crew formed a iyangam (labour union) and asked for a 2 per cent raise in their share of the catch. This was violently suppressed by the fishing craft owner association in the village. The community of labourers did not have the organizing capacity required to hold firm. The labour association maintains that the nature of the village panchayat has changed considerably in the last two decades, with increased domination by fishing craft owners and those with money. This is the only panchayat that is elected and follows electoral party factions.

"Villages E and F: E and F villages were under the control of one of the religious maddams (ashram-type establishment), associated with a nearby Murugan temple. The maddam was started by a person called Biala Samy 18 generations ago, or so the story goes. He acted as the citraasan (petty king) and his word was law.

The two villages traditionally used to supply half the catch for the maddam as toll. This toll was considered to be a mark of their devotion. They also had to give bags of rice on gurn poushahn (a Hindu festival day) to the maddam (religious institution). The members of the two villages also had to serve the maddam, and their labour could be commanded when required. The people from the villages had to carry the samiar (mendicant) in a palanquin, and undertake any other personal task that he sets them to do. If they were in their houses sleeping at the time when they were called, they would be woken up with burns from hot sticks and made to work. They were restricted from wearing chappals, white dhotis and watches and from carrying umbrellas, all considered signs of respectability and status. They could not refuse to give fish and rice, work for the maddam or violate the restrictions placed on them. The village would pressure individuals to comply, as it was believed that if they disobeyed, the village would face illness and death.

The larger agrarian village to which these fishing hamlets belong has two other major castes—the Gounders and the Vanniars. These oppressive practices are changing slowly, though this has been a difficult process. The practice of giving fish was discontinued only two decades ago when the villagers revolted. Despite the revolution, the samiar's influence is still felt in the two villages. To this date, the nattar and the panchayat have to refer to the maddam's decree to sort out their problems. The maddam keeps track of the important happenings in the village; and it is difficult to keep information from them. Thus it was assumed that even the interview for this study would be reported to them immediately.

The land in the village is held by the maddam trust. Though this was traditionally village land, it was acquired by the maddam as part of a yagna, wherein a horse was let loose and all the territories that it covered was appropriated by the maddam. Most of the land in the village is now held by the temple trust, and only the pattan of a few houses are with the people. Much of this land has been sold to foreigners at large profits, without the consent of the villagers.

The maddam threatens the use of physical force even to this date to enforce its writ. It is backed by the 3000 family-strong Vanniar hamlet. Any attempt to resist means the invoking of this force against the fishing hamlet. Narrating an instance, the village is not allowed to carry its dead on the road but instead has to use the seashore. Recently this was not possible because the
topography of the land changed. The villagers carried the dead body on the road. People affiliated to the maddam attacked them. The samiar has asked for the burial ground to be shifted from its traditional place to one closer to the sea. The villagers are afraid that the sea will erode the ground and expose the buried bodies, but see no option but to comply.

Village F: Though detailed information was not collected in the study about this phenomenon, one example was narrated. As recently as in 2001, one of the families in the village was asked to pay Rs 10000 for installing electricity in its house, because it was on temple land. The son in the family protested. After a struggle for over a year, the panchayat reduced the amount to Rs 4000. It was only after a final threat to involve the whole fishermen's community that the amount was reduced. In this year, the family had no access to electricity and the boy had to study by lamplight for his post-graduation degree.

The village did not have a panchayat for two years before the tsunami. The panchayat members said that it was not necessary to have a panchayat during the regular functioning of the village. Upon closer questioning, it was discovered that there was a conflict between two factions in the village. This has been so bitter that no panchayat has been able to function till the tsunami; the yearly temple festival was organized only two months after the tsunami. The panchayat has changed many times in the last year, and panchayatars are looked upon with suspicion. It is taken for granted that those who are in the panchayat will use the position to increase their own incomes.

20 The case of Village X: Villagers report that the relief compensation given by the government was only for 148 out of 165 families. About 37 people got left out of the enumeration process. The panchayat reports that the government has enumerated 229 cards in the village, of which they dispensed 148 cards. When this came to the attention of the panchayat, they demanded and received compensation for another 40 cards.

The case of Village Y: There are a total of 331 families in the village. Totally, the relief amount (Rs 4000 + Rs 1000 per month for four months) distributed by the revenue department was for 618 cards. Before the collection of the last instalment, the panchayat changed as a matter of course. While collecting the last instalment for the village, the new panchayat demanded a receipt. The tehsildar refused to give them one, which is when they came to know about the inflated numbers.

He questioned their demand saying that if the previous panchayat had been unconcerned about receipts, why should this one bother. He offered Rs 50000 to the current panchayat for not pursuing the issue further. The panchayat refused and shared this information with the village. They finally accepted Rs 40000 under pressure.

When the new panchayat returned to the village and confronted the old members about the distribution of relief, they refused to give accounts for the discrepancies, and then disappeared. The village passed a judgement of mariyal against the head of the old panchayat and the cashier.

They in turn appealed to the head of the district, who imposed a fine of Rs 10000 (instead of the Rs 1 lakh each expected) on 8 members of the old panchayat. Additionally, the new panchayatars were ordered to not ask for accounts or move further on this issue. Threats were issued saying that they will be ostracised from work in the area and that their fishing craft will be towed away by trawlers. Though the people were not willing to accept this judgement, the panchayatars were forced to sign this document.

The old panchayat members also approached the police station in their jurisdiction. The police recorded the statement from the new panchayat members. However when they tried to file a case against the previous panchayat members, the police refused to file the FIR. The police ruled that the old panchayat members will pay a fine of Rs 1000 and then be accepted back in the village. No further action was taken.

The current panchayat members were put in place by the old panchayatars. The previous panchayat has experience of the electoral systems and has good relations with the bureaucracy. Some of the new members selected were reluctant to take on this position. They were threatened by the panchayat that if they refused to do so, and then they had to sign a document surrendering their (and their families') rights to be nominated to the panchayat in future. All the people nominated were forced to sign.

Most of the new members selected were people who did not have political experience, were meek and silent in the face of panchayat power, and had mainly concerned themselves with fishing. The panchayat is shaken and the panchayatars were unsure about how long their stand would hold out. Of the 11 members in the current panchayat, 2 are part of the families of the old panchayatars. They and their pangals (about 100-old families) have aligned against the current panchayat. The panchayatwar who narrated this has himself received several death threats. The police have not acted on any of the complaints on these death threats.

The case of village Z: The village was given compensation for 511 families. In the third instalment, the panchayat members found that the list at the ration shop had 813 names. This made them suspicious, leading them to enquire about all the lists once again. The new copies had only 511 people listed as beneficiaries. Not satisfied, the village organized a rasta roko asking about the false numbers listed. State pressure was brought to bear on them and the police were brought in to disperse the protesters. The panchayatars and village elders quickly decided to disperse, afraid of an outbreak of violence, especially amongst the youth. Since this public protest, the village has been punished, whereby non-governmental organizations providing disaster support have been redirected to other villages. This is in spite of the fact that the village is one of those with the largest number of fishing craft and one of the largest catches on the coast, as many of the villagers go fishing regularly.

The case of village D: Villagers narrate that the first round of enumeration only included those who lived on the shore. Then the people did a barta (strike), because of which about 1200 more people were included. When asked about the significantly larger figure, the villager said that the larger numbers included people who were not in fishing but worked as skilled labour in the city and were living on premises in the village.

Kanchipuram: To increase state 'commissions', villagers report, a second round of enumeration of fishing craft damage was ordered in Kanchipuram district, more than six months after the tsunami. By this time, much of the debris had been cleared in the
villages and evidence was difficult to show. This issue was discussed in the Kanchipuram district committee of panchayats. At that time, many villages agreed to stand together, resisting this damage assessment. While some villages refused the process of re-enumeration, others permitted it. Those villages that permitted the second round of damage assessment have received complete compensation. Those that resisted it have been punished, and the aid dispensed is very low (e.g., Alambarakkupam).

21 Two villages maintained that their damages have been underestimated because they questioned the government about the inflated beneficiary figures. Further, despite heavy loss of life in the former and extensive damage to fishing craft in the latter, no non-governmental aid has been forthcoming. One village has not received any FRP fishing craft, an unusual circumstance when almost all villages have received at least a few fishing craft. This, the villagers believe, is because the state has redirected the voluntary organizations away from these villages as punishment. The only compensation that the village has received from any NGO is a few kuttumarams.

22 In one village, people who got compensation for the mechanized fishing craft were willing to give Rs 750000 to the village. When asked about the willingness of fishing craft owners to share their compensation, the panchayatar commented that these fishing craft had been anchored outside the area and had suffered no damage, except that arising from not being used. These fishing craft owners had requested the panchayat to at least seek Rs 1 lakh each. When they received a compensation of Rs 3.5 lakhs, they had no objections to giving part of it to the village. Of the Rs 2.5 lakhs given to the mechanized fishing craft, one-third was collected by the gram panchayat for the village fund.

23 In one village, an old gentleman has kept village accounts for 34 years as part of his traditional secretarial role to the panchayat. Part of his functioning included reading accounts out to the gram sabha (quarterly, half-yearly and annually) for its scrutiny. He claims that he refused to undertake his role in the village because he did not want to be part of the errors committed then.

24 The case of village O: The current conflict has been precipitated by the way the panchayat has mediated and distributed the compensation that has been received. They remark that the panchayat mostly behaved equitably during the relief dispensation phase. However the labour association claims that most of the benefits of the aid subsequently go to the fishing craft owners and not to the artisanal fisherfolk. They described this through how fishing craft were distributed. There were 59 mechanized fishing craft and 203 kuttumarams allocated to the 1170 families in the village. About 110 kuttumarams were originally used to ply between the mechanized fishing craft and the shore, transferring the catch and stocking the fishing craft.

The labour faction of the village demanded that the money given for the kuttumarams should be divided amongst the families who go as labourers on the trawlers and do not have a fishing craft of their own. The panchayat did not agree to this. One reason is that it will be difficult for the panchayat to find new crew members. In addition, the labourers asked for shares in the compensation paid to the fishing craft owners for the loss of their trawlers, since they were also shareholders in the catch. This request was also denied, saying that these fishing craft were private property and the owner had complete right to the entire compensation amount. When the labour association held to its stand, violence broke out and they had to shift out of the village. One section of the village has left their original homes and settled further down the coast as a separate settlement.

Currently, the panchayat has allocated 127 kuttumarams to this hamlet and 26 to the Vannaischis, while retaining 50 in the original village. The share of the labour association was however not forthcoming. They in turn called for a 16-village meeting where the Pallyar panchayat was ordered to pay compensation. The first instalment of this has been distributed amongst all the members of the village.

Further, the oom panchayat only allocated 40 FRP fishing craft promised by a non-governmental organization. Of these only 14 have arrived. These fishing craft were to be shared among groups of 4–5 members in this community. There were too few fishing craft to be shared amongst all the workers.

The panchayat itself holds that many of the numbers cited by the labour association are not accurate and are based on accounts delivered by a continuous flow of different aid agencies into Pallyar, which did not include the panchayat in the enumeration process.

The case of village M: In another village too, there is a split with the formation of a labour union. The reason cited is that the panchayat is increasingly unconcerned about the needs of artisanal fishing. This has increasingly become evident post-tsunami, especially during the relief period, when the panchayat was completely unconcerned about their well-being and did not even visit them when they sought shelter in a neighbouring marriage hall for the first three days after the tsunami. The lack of interest by the panchayat members precipitated the formation of the labour association.

The case of village R: Though the village originally maintained that there were no changes in the panchayat after the tsunami, there is some indication that the village was previously divided into two factions. The current panchayat is about three years old. There were 16 members originally, of whom one was asked to step down. The reason given was that he had committed a mistake. When questioned more closely, they indicated that there were two factions in the village. This history of blood feuds, dating back more than 22 months, still continues in the village. The head of the village also acts as the head of the 19-village cluster of Vizhupuram.