Deconstructing Rights
Decentralization and the New Domestic Order in Kerala’s Fishworker Communities

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“The refugee is perhaps the only thinkable figure in which one may see today the forms and limits of a coming political community”

Giorgio Agamben
Deconstructing Rights

- **CONTEXT**: Fishworkers in the sea of financial capital
- **OBJECTIVES**: Study decentralization and women’s rights
- **THEORIES**: Cultural Studies, Feminist Theory
- **METHODOLOGY**: Fieldwork and Ethnography
- **KEY FINDINGS**: Shift in EFFECTIVE RIGHTS of Fishworkers; New Domesticity in Politics
- **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**: Lifeworld rights: Decentralized control over sea, land, and markets
- **FUTURE RESEARCH**: Impact of speculative economies on women’s rights & decentralization
Research Questions

• What roles have coastal women panchayat members played with relation to the present issues faced by women in the community?

• If they have not played any critical role, what is the context in which this gap between representation and life emerges?

• How can the language of rights be rewritten to ensure that power for the marginalized becomes power of the marginalized?
Body of Kerala going through radical surgery driven by financial capital (sand mining, rock blasting, paddy fields turned to housing units, tourist resorts around all water sources inland and coastal, high-rise buildings and economic zones like Technopark, mega-development projects like Vizhinjam port)

Context in which marginalized communities depending on natural resources for livelihood are facing direct threat to existence

Economic rationality extending to all spheres of life and thought
JCBs and Jewelry stores the dominant metaphors and all-pervasive symbols of social change and social desire
THE FISHERWORKER COMMUNITIES

222 fishing villages in 590 km coast

Gender division of labor

Christian and Hindu women: selling and processing

Religions: Latin Catholic, Araya, Muslim

Economy: no control over resources or markets
CONTEXT

Real estate bubble building up along coastline

Hyper-development of coastline for tourism and business

Communities depending on natural resource turn into refugees of development

Marginalized in seas due to capital-intensive fishing
Women in Coastal Panchayats

• None work in fishing industry (they have family links)

• All are higher in terms of class status from the poor in their constituency

• None have taken up gender, labor, or caste issues
Women in Coastal Panchayats

• Few have previous history of political activism

• All in marginal role in political parties

• Few exposed to women’s movements/ issues

• All exist in “gender peace” and in functional families
WARD AS EXTENDED HOME

• Main work: streetlights, roads, electricity, water, Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards, housing, starting women’s self-help groups

• Ward where woman expands her maternal role as caregiver and sustainer of community

• Panchayat representation creates POLITICAL DOMESTICITY for woman who gains space in the public sphere
Double-edged Empowerment

Gender functions as a double-edged ideology. Women elected because they are women. If they fail to do basic things, they are blamed because they are women, even by other women.

Bureaucratic resistance to women trying to get things done: missing files, absent contractors, sluggish staff.

Resistance within political parties to women in roles of power
Rights and Power

• Gap between women’s rights and women’s power
• Women’s rights do not translate into women’s power
• Nor do they translate into voice for marginalized communities
Rights without Guarantees

• Women fight hard battle to translate a right without guarantees into effective rights
• Successful women are those who use range of strategic communication tactics from persuasion to persistence to aggression.
• EFFECTIVE RIGHTS or LIVED RIGHTS fought for by individual women
• ACCESS TO POWER gained by individual women
Powerless to challenge dominant development agendas

- For example, Ratnavalli, Nattika panchayat member took us to show resort encroachment over local waterway to sea, but powerless in panchayat to oppose it.
Asuntha Mohan, president of Vizhinjam panchayat, voted out by hotel lobby in no-confidence motion.

Her own party comrades voted against her.

Asuntha trying to set up biogas plant to deal with waste from tourist hotels.
What are the cultural and political contexts of the gap between political representation and EFFECTIVE or LIVED RIGHTS of women?

Reordering of women’s space in politics is accompanied by a reordering of the symbolic terrains and lived sites of women’s citizenship.

SHIFT IN WOMEN’S CITIZENSHIP underwrites their political representation
Key Shift in Citizenship

**CITIZENSHIP OF RIGHTS**
Political life histories of women activists in older struggles use the language of rights (avakasam) and demands.
Political subject of rights is within the state, and has sense of “natural justice” that can challenge the state.
Hidden gender male, but can be usurped by female.
Economic underpinning: labor and livelihood rights
Right to life is primary.

**CITIZENSHIP OF HANDOUTS** (AANUKOOLYAM)
FGDs in poorer localities of fishworkers who use language of aanukoolyam.
Translates into handout, benefit, privilege.
Political subject in gray zone of rights.
Hidden gender is feminine.
Economic underpinning: credits and concessions.
Right to life a secondary right.
NOT GLOBAL VS LOCAL, NOT GLOCAL BUT GLOBAL VS DOMESTIC

Age of Aanukoolyam --handouts -- marked by New Domestic Order that rewrites cultural and economic citizenship of Below Poverty Line women in coastal areas.

New Domestic Order emerges in conjunction with financial capital power that redefines women’s economic rights

“Local Power” no longer is power over the local. Not glocal, which implies global and local inhabit same playing field. Instead, women’s political rights can be termed DOMESTIC RIGHTS
CONTEXT OF DOMESTIC RIGHTS: Disappearing Lifeworlds

- Displaced from seas by capital-intensive fishing
- Displaced from land due to real estate speculation bubble on coastline
- Older women’s local unions formed in mid-80s now changed into microcredit self-help groups
- Move from language of labor and rights to language of credit and concessions (aanukoolyam) marking DOMESTICITY of women’s rights
Loss of Pottamma

- Space of safe continuation and reproduction of food no longer exists
- Life ecology based on unmeasured sea wealth now subservient to international capital interests that have taken over fish economy
- Pettamma -- birth mother; pottamma -sea as mother

No access to markets
Displacement from Living Spaces

- New Coastal Zone Management Laws
- Tourism & development projects as value of coastline grows with speculative economy
- Fishworkers living without legal deeds and others threatened with displacement
GROWTH OF MICROCREDIT SELF-HELP GROUPS (SHGS)

Mini-Entrepreneur Femininity that fosters domestic cultures of management, account-keeping, running small businesses in intimate space of community

“SHGs are like tied boats. They don’t move, and they have no direction.”
THE VALUE OF RIGHTS

Financial capital changing VALUE of coastline

Women have no control over markets or VALUE of their productive resources

Local Power is a new Domestic Right that has no control over the actual development of the area eg. Vizhinjam

Economic Rights reduced to formation of self-help groups

VALUE OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS?
Policy: Lifeworld Rights

• Need to rethink women’s rights in decentralized systems of governance

• Individual women end up facing paradoxes of rights vs power. Rights tied to community, and not to gender. Rights given when lifeworlds are disappearing

• Need more holistic approach to women’s rights that takes their lifeworlds into account

• Need to think policy from the perspective of the “refugees of development”
Communicating Research

Policy communication is directed at the state. But how do we communicate to those whom we took our “raw narratives” from? How are we using “emotional testimonies”? How can we build reflexivity in our methodology and practice? What kind of imaginative infrastructure can we commit to communities we draw knowledge-capital from?