

# Reimagining the Littoral through Development Regimes and Local Contingencies

This collection unpacks the multiple trajectories of coastal transformations in the past and the present, with a focus on the different claims made by state and non-state actors to naturalize the coast as a space of flows for greater connectivity, economic growth, and future prosperity.

It looks at the varied local responses to the different development imaginaries employed by colonial and postcolonial India and contemporary China as they embark on large-scale coastal redevelopment and infrastructural projects. By doing so, the contributions seek to nuance existing narratives of displacement and dispossession; to interrogate the multiple meanings of coastal transformations for public and private stakeholders, technocrats, and coastal communities; and to foreground the diverse, uneven, and contradictory nature of these phenomena.

Far from producing homogeneity with modernizing effects, our case studies collectively show that centrally-funded, large-scale infrastructural projects have to be situated within their glocalised contexts and authoritative knowledge regimes about modernity, development, or heritage building. In this way, we shed light on how different groups of social actors and networks – Hindu nationalists,

Chinese fishers, African fishers and traders, Kutch coastal dwellers, and South Indian artisanal and mechanized fishers – appropriate, contest, and co-produce imaginaries of development and, in the process, make the coastal space legible for themselves.

Vidhya Raveendranathan is a Doctoral Candidate at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Georg-August-Göttingen University. As part of the archives projects of the Center for Global Asia, NYU Shanghai, she is currently collaborating with researchers based at the French Institute of Pondicherry in building a 'Coastal Lives' digital archive (<https://cga.shanghai.nyu.edu/researchprojects/archiving-coastal-lives/>). Email: [vr1081@nyu.edu](mailto:vr1081@nyu.edu)

Edyta Roszko is Senior Researcher and social anthropologist at the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway, where she is leading the ERC Starting Grant project *TransOcean*. Email: [edyta.roszko@cmi.no](mailto:edyta.roszko@cmi.no)

## A Bridge over Ancient Waters

Devika Shankar

Separating India and Sri Lanka, the shallow waters around the Palk Strait are perhaps best known for a chain of shoals that have featured prominently in geological writings and religious traditions. As a result, technological interventions around this strategically important region have had to grapple, time and again, with the cultural dimensions of these shoals. If the perceived sanctity of these shoals has appeared to facilitate technological interventions in some cases, it has emerged as a serious obstruction in others. In 1871, shortly after the Suez Canal was inaugurated, members of the Council of the East India Association met in London to discuss the possible construction of another canal further east in the Palk Strait.<sup>1</sup> At a time when steamer traffic in the Indian Ocean had increased considerably, members of the association took turns to highlight the significant gains to be made by cutting a shipping channel between India and Ceylon. They also highlighted the ease with which this could be achieved. In all, it was calculated that such a channel would reduce a return journey between Bombay and the eastern Indian Ocean by almost 720 miles, leading to a 4% reduction in time and expense.<sup>2</sup>

Through the course of the late 19th century, however, as Ceylon's booming tea industry increasingly began to depend on the migration of indentured labor from southern India, the colonial state became less interested in deepening the divide between India and Ceylon. Instead, it

began to explore ways to bridge the physical distance between the two through the construction of "a railway line over the sea."<sup>3</sup> From its inception, those lobbying for the line drew connections between the proposed railway bridge and the limestone formations, known as Adam's Bridge, that had been considered hindrances to navigation. The bridge would be partly built on the shoals themselves, and legends surrounding these formations would also help draw investments toward the project. While Adam's Bridge appears in Islamic and Buddhist accounts as well, its apparent associations with the bridge in the Hindu epic the *Ramayana* would gain prominence in this process. A number of news reports began their analysis of the proposed bridge by recalling the episode in the epic where Hanuman, the monkey god, builds a bridge across the Palk Strait to rescue Sita. When a part-ferry, part-railway line was ultimately inaugurated in 1914, colonial officials similarly used the occasion to emphasize the bridge's mythical past, quoting passages from the *Ramayana* and assuming the names of characters from the epic. With the opening of this line, senior officials proclaimed, history was now following in the footsteps of mythology.



Fig. 1: Map of Sri Lanka, depicting Adam's Bridge and surrounding areas in the upper left (United Nations Map no. 4172 Rev.3, March 2008)

Though the bridge was only partly completed and the railway line never quite became the grand success that its promoters had envisioned, these invocations of mythology would have far-reaching consequences. For instance, when the Indian government began to revive plans for a shipping channel through this very area in the final decades of the 20th century, some Hindu groups rose in protest, insisting that the shoals were inviolable due to their associations with the ancient bridge mentioned in the *Ramayana*.<sup>4</sup> A century earlier, that tradition had been narrated repeatedly in order to

facilitate a colonial public works project by endowing it with much-needed grandeur. In the hands of 21st-century Hindu nationalists, it turned into a historical fact that would serve to prevent further infrastructural interventions. The line between fact and fable, which had begun to dissolve in the first quarter of the 20th century under colonial rule, has collapsed in recent years, to such an extent that in 2017 the Indian Council of Historical Research agreed to conduct archaeological excavations to investigate whether the shoals are indeed man-made structures. In the meantime, all plans to construct a shipping channel by dredging these shallow waters have been abandoned.

The pivotal position occupied by the Palk Strait as a possible bridge between India and Sri Lanka, but also as a central node between western and eastern Asia, demonstrates the multiple ways in which transnational and regional linkages have been both imagined and executed historically. At the same time, the recurrent invocations of mythology to both enable and disable infrastructural interventions in this region at different points of time highlight the extent to which local contingencies have shaped this process in particular ways.

Devika Shankar, Department of History, University of Hong Kong. Email: [devika@hku.hk](mailto:devika@hku.hk)

### Notes

- 1 'Plan to Cut a Channel for Ships between India and Ceylon', April 26th 1871, *The Times of India*.
- 2 'Plan to Cut a Channel for Ships between India and Ceylon', April 26th 1871, *The Times of India*.
- 3 *The Harbour of Colombo, Ceylon and a Railway to Connect Southern India with Colombo*, A. M. and J. Ferguson, 1897
- 4 'Sethusamudram Project Launched', 3rd July 2005, *The Hindu*.



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### Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai

The Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai serves as the hub within the NYU Global Network University system to promote the study of Asian interactions and comparisons, both historical and contemporary.

### Asia Research Center at Fudan University

Founded in March 2002, the Asia Research Center at Fudan University has made extensive efforts to promote Asian studies, including hosting conferences and supporting research projects.

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Based in Bergen, Norway, Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) is an independent research institute on global development and human rights.

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L'Institut Français de Pondichéry (IFP) or The French Institute of Pondicherry is a research center under the joint supervision of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development (MAEDI) and the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS).



## Challenging State Representations from Coastal Environments in the Gulf of Kutch, Western India

Chandana Anusha

**B**urry land-water spaces have long generated fiery contests along the South Asian coastline, unsettling and reconfiguring the very definition of the coast. I focus on one such contest in the Gulf of Kutch, Western India, against the Arabian Sea, where India's largest private port has been under construction since the 1990s. Celebrators of the port present it as a model for high-tech port building, a beacon for India's entry into the 21st century. Opponents present the megaport as activating rampant destruction of the Indian coastline, as representing an industrialized noose around India's neck. The Gulf of Kutch has thus emerged as a prominent theater of contest between nature conservation, small livelihoods, and mega-development.

The multi-commodity port project stretches over 6000 hectares. It needs vast tracts of coastal land for oil tankers, warehouses, containers, and a whole host of logistical operations to handle gigantic volumes of trade. Government-led cartographic efforts to designate coastal land as "wasteland," therefore, have been crucial to the creation of the port enclave. A spectacular intertidal zone has been classified as government wasteland. This unique zone stretches five kilometers from sea into land. During the maximum high tide, seawater comes five kilometers inwards into land, creating this unique intertidal

zone. The state government maps it as swampy and dirty. But the same intertidal area also hosts India's second largest mangroves, which are breeding grounds for fish, fodder for livestock, and fuelwood for coastal dwellers. Beyond this intertidal area, stretches with seasonal vegetation – where goats, sheep, and cattle grazed – are also classified as government wasteland.

Such legal and geographic classification of the coast as wasteland visually erases diverse lives and livelihoods. It makes possible coastal acquisition for the megaport project. Port developers are thus able to justify their existence on the grounds that the port is productively transforming degraded wasted spaces – watery intertidal areas as well as dry areas – into a thriving hub of global international trade. Thus, since the very beginning of the port project, local coastal dwellers have experienced how government actors shape and mediate industry's appropriation of land.

It is no wonder, then, that after 20 years of living with these transformations, the dwellers are suspicious of government activities to officially represent the coast. As recently as August 2018, the government was attempting to remap the Kutch coastline. An important part of this remapping was holding a public consultation with stakeholders who were directly impacted by coastal remapping. The goal was to fix the boundaries between different spatial units of the coast. Government officials

swooped into Kutch to hold a meeting with the coastal dwellers to confirm whether the provisional maps they created matched local visions of the coast. In this public meeting, a range of coastal dwellers – fishers, farmers, livestock keepers – came together to challenge state-led bureaucratic conceptions of coast.

They were outraged by the reductive representations offered of the coast in the provisional government maps – the reduction of dense mangrove clusters to fixed lines, the reduction of the coast to swamp. "You've shown the mangroves in a line, like people standing in line and waiting for a public toilet!" exclaimed an elderly livestock keeper. "You've marked the full coast as swamp, not all of it is swampy!" argued another farmer. For them, the coast was much more than the intertidal area for fish and marine animals. It included habitats for sparrows, trees, seeds, and cows. They demanded the inclusion of these organisms within the official representation. Furthermore, they challenged how the government had represented fishers' natural landing places – spaces where fishers parked their boats. Whereas the government sought to fix the fishers' landing places through tiny red dots in the intertidal area, the fishers argued that landing places exceeded their confinement to the red dots. These places changed every season, with winds and waves.

In collective local imagination, watery intertidal areas that were leveled and reclaimed for port development between 1996–2012 refused erasure from formal maps.

The dwellers thus articulated an organic, dynamic, and holistic understanding of the coast, against state attempts to narrow it into a static strip of land against sea. Weaving together a vibrant community of human and nonhuman beings, the local coastal imaginations come together momentarily to show that the coast is greater than the sum of its parts, and although the port has radically transformed coastal life, coastal death is not preordained.

Chandana Anusha, Postdoctoral Fellow, Princeton Mellon Initiative in Architecture, Urbanism, and the Humanities/M.S. Chadha Center for Global India. Email: [chandana.anusha@gmail.com](mailto:chandana.anusha@gmail.com)



Fig. 1: Fishing in the intertidal port ecologies of Gulf of Kutch (Photo by author, 2017).

## What Does a Fishing Harbor Do to Fisheries? A Note on Pazhayar Harbor

**“W**e [artisanal fishers] have lost our space [the beach landing site], firstly due to the construction of this fishing harbor in Pazhayar village of Nagapattinam district, Tamil Nadu, India. We were then slowly pushed out of this harbor by the mechanized trawlers and ring seine crafts.” This lament came from Saravanan (pseudonym), a Fiber Reinforced Plastic (FRP) boat owner. Left with no space, he states that they have been forced to park their crafts on the banks of the Buckingham Canal, a mile away from the shore and near the mangrove forest. Their pleas to the bureaucrats and local politicians to construct wooden platforms for landing goods also fell on deaf ears.

This particular case study forces us historians and anthropologists to ask critical questions regarding the underbelly of infrastructural expansion. Such expansion has been instrumental in selling modernist dreams about liberal equality, progress, and economic growth while reproducing unevenness, power, and economic deprivation amongst the fishing communities. As Appel, Anand, and Gupta have argued in the context of Michigan's racial politics, "infrastructure is a terrain of power and contestation."<sup>1</sup>

The frenzied race for expanded investments in megaprojects and the reliance on increasing techno-scientific complexity as a means to "leverage the future" have only deepened existing societal inequalities.<sup>2</sup> By drawing on some of these critical interventions, this paper will sketch the differentiated experiences of the artisanal and women fishers who are caught in the violence of the physical and social detritus created by different capitalist projects, disembedded from their existing social and ecological contexts and drawn into cycles of indebtedness and resource conflicts.

Pazhayar village is located on the mouth of river Kollidam at the northern end of Kaveri Delta (Kaveri is an Indian river flowing through the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka), creating a natural harbor with an estuary rich in biodiversity. It was once an artisanal fishing village where the customary governance (caste/ur panchayat<sup>3</sup>) took care of the coastal commons and fisheries' management. The advent of the fishing harbor in the 1980s paved the way for Pazhayar fishers to expand their capacity through trawling and shrimp farming. Given the promise of an interconnected world, greater economic growth, and prosperity, the then-government of Tamil Nadu utilized World Bank aid to expand the capacities of

the harbor so that it could accommodate the growing complexities of financial and managerial operations as well as the integrated management and development of fisheries, shrimp farming, and aquaculture.

Some fishers – mostly the rich fishers who have the capacity to mobilize credit and the new generation of young educated youths – visualized development in the form of the modernization of fishing fleets and the construction of physical infrastructures like the fishing harbor, breakwater, and fish processing plant. Through this they aspired to be a part of the global economy of fish trading. However, our ethnographic research has revealed that the rhetorical positioning of the fishing harbor as a "technocratic ideal" tethered to foreign trade by the state and rich fishers has only worked to conceal the latent tensions between different groups of coastal communities.

Over the last decade, the ring seine<sup>4</sup> fishery has contributed to the diversification of crafts and gears, absorbed reserve labor power from the nearby agrarian regions, and supplanted the mechanized trawler fishers from the control of the harbor.<sup>5</sup> The use of this technology has particularly targeted the artisanal fishers' control over species and fishing zones. Moreover, with the coming of big traders who possessed superior capacities to procure fish in large quantities, advance contracts, and bankroll huge volumes of credit, the women fish vendors were caught in a disadvantageous position and forced to become laborers at the processing plants. Due to these simmering conflicts between artisanal, trawler, and ring seine fisheries, the Tamil Nadu state government found a short-term solution and enforced a ban on the ring seine fishing practices in 2021. However, the law and order approach of the state has failed to address the "splintering effects of infrastructural systems"<sup>6</sup> on the fishermen's livelihoods and coastal environments. Far from being universally beneficial and homogenous, such systems pushed certain social actors and practices into an unending crisis situation.

Arunkumar A S, Postdoctoral Fellow, French Institute of Pondicherry, Puducherry, India. Email: [arunkumar.as@ifpindia.org](mailto:arunkumar.as@ifpindia.org)

Prabhakar Jayaprakash, Affiliated Researcher, French Institute of Pondicherry, Puducherry, India. Email: [prabhakar.jp@ifpindia.org](mailto:prabhakar.jp@ifpindia.org)

Senthil Babu, Researcher, French Institute of Pondicherry, Puducherry, India. Email: [senthil.babu@ifpindia.org](mailto:senthil.babu@ifpindia.org)

Bhagath Singh, Postdoctoral Fellow, French Institute of Pondicherry, Puducherry, India. Email: [bhagath.singh@ifpindia.org](mailto:bhagath.singh@ifpindia.org)

Shakila H, Affiliated Scholar, French Institute of Pondicherry, Puducherry, India. Email: [saisshaki251998@gmail.com](mailto:saisshaki251998@gmail.com)

Nithya K, Affiliated Scholar, French Institute of Pondicherry, Puducherry, India. Email: [nithanthro@gmail.com](mailto:nithanthro@gmail.com)

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- 4 A fishing gear which targets pelagic species.
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Fig. 1: Medium sized trawl boats parked at Pazhayar harbor (Photo by the author, 2021).



## Moving Beyond a Single Story of Chinese Distant-Water Fishing (DWF) in West Africa

Hang (Ayo) Zhou

When responding to a question – “Do you think the Chinese presence in the Gambian fisheries industry is positive or negative?” – local informants provided varying answers. Whilst a local vessel captain praised that “the Chinese [...] are giving us many opportunities to make money,” a longtime fish dealer rebutted him categorically by stating that “small market workers become out of business.” What this short vignette indicates is the heterogeneity in local actors’ perceptions and experiences of the Chinese Distant-Water Fishing (DWF) in West Africa, a region to which China dispatched its very first DWF fleet in 1985. This heterogeneity is, however, often overshadowed by the dominant tendency within existing analyses to reduce maritime interactions between China and West Africa into “a single story.” This single story condenses China into a homogenous entity and situates all of its engagements with Africa within a timeless and placeless spatial realm, depriving the African coastal actors of agency.

The fishing sector accounts for two percent of West Africa’s GDP, with numbers going up to 13.5 percent in the case of Senegal. In the past decade the region has witnessed a rapid expansion of Chinese activity: 89 Chinese vessels (out of 153 total foreign vessels) are authorized to fish in Guinea Bissau alone.

Granting Chinese and other foreign players access to fishing grounds was never a simple economic proposition. It takes on geopolitical significance and embodies the

Fig. 1: Porto do Alto Bandim, the main fishing port in Bissau currently under renovation with the support of Chinese foreign aid (Photo by the author, 2022).



different constellations of African political and economic interests. One question that deserves discussion is whether the growing competition for fisheries’ resources equipped the coastal African countries with greater bargaining power and independent decision-making to forge agreements with foreign actors? Here, any understanding of agency needs to be further unpacked to examine whether these agreement negotiations served only elite power interests or whether they were instrumentalized to introduce developmental transformations in the fishing sector. This is a particularly relevant question to pose as China’s effort to access fishing resources often included the provision of other coastal or fishing-related infrastructures, such as the construction of the Alto do Bandim fishing port in Bissau.

At the other end of the spectrum of African agents are the local fishery actors, including fishermen, fisherwomen, traders, vendors, and agents operating in ports and on-shore markets. These people are among the first to face the direct consequences of the resource crunch due to the growth of foreign industrial fishing. While it would be simplistic to assume that the relationship between artisanal and industrial fishers is naturally conflictual

with binary representation of industrial fishers as “evil” and small-scale fishers as “pristine,” such characterizations continue to dominate current narratives of the Chinese DWF in West Africa. Unfortunately, this position prevents us from developing an empirically-grounded understanding of the manner in which local fishery actors interact, negotiate, and cope with the Chinese fleets.

Instead of ascribing the “victim” identity to local fishers, this article argues that it is worthwhile to explore the human and social dimensions of conflicts and collaboration between Chinese industrial fleets and small-scale fishers in coastal West African countries. Particular attention should be given to the agency of the latter as they learn to live with the former, both at sea and on land. The production of catch by Chinese fleets depends upon the participation of local business partners and laborers on boats (often themselves with fishing experience); yet little is known about who these workers are and what their motivations and experiences are of working on Chinese fleets. Adverse weather conditions and the need for daily supplies also force the Chinese fleets to dock sometimes at local harbors. We again know surprisingly little about the socioeconomic interactions

between local fishing communities and Chinese crew members on the shore. Do the latter seek to secure a minimum level of social acceptance from coastal hosts? Has their presence created any economic and material benefits for coastal communities, and if so, how are they structured and distributed? The degree of reception and patterns of interaction are unlikely to be solely dictated by the Chinese side of the equation. They also depend upon local conditions, including, at the very least, power, gender, and socioeconomic dynamics in West Africa.<sup>1</sup>

Hang (Ayo) Zhou, Postdoctoral Researcher, Chr. Michelsen Institute, Norway. Email: [hang.zhou@cmi.no](mailto:hang.zhou@cmi.no)

### Notes

- 1 This work was supported by funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 802223 *Transoceanic Fishers: Multiple Mobilities in and out of the South China Sea – TransOcean – ERC-2018 – StG*).

## The Maritime Reorientation of China in the Indian Ocean

Xuefei Shi

China’s distant water fishing industry has been under heavy scrutiny recently, sparking considerable controversy over its social, ecological, and geopolitical impact. In 2018, a 10-year investment of 2.7 billion USD from China into fisheries in Madagascar, endorsed by the then Malagasy president, stirred backlash from both Madagascar’s technocrats and international civil society. The deal was called off eventually, but it raises an acute question about Chinese fisheries’ interest in the Indian Ocean, an ocean highway plagued by overfishing, littoral underdevelopment, and maritime insecurity.

Chinese transoceanic fishing fleets and their bases – aquacultural farms, seafood brokers, and logistic companies – play an important role linking the aquatic food chain between Madagascar and its surrounding waters. By identifying their origins, modalities, and trajectories as well as the distribution of seafood produce, this paper not only seeks to shed light on China’s blue footprint in this ecologically vulnerable area, but also to question assumptions regarding the presence of Chinese fishers as being an outcome of the expansion of state capitalism. Instead, I foreground the importance of a historically-grown Indian Ocean network without much involvement of the state, thereby complicating the overarching narratives of state development.

This novel perspective allows a shift from the current state-centred perspective to a people-centred perspective on distant water fishing. It questions the nature of overfishing as a Capitalocene morbidity that not only endangers the sea but also alienates the



Fig. 1: Malagasy fishing boats (Photo by the author, 2022).

life of common fishers. In the past years, Chinese fishing fleets have transformed Madagascar’s seascape, facilitating the dispossession of local marine resources while inserting them into the global market via an “underwater” network intertwined with the larger interests of state and capital. Zooming in on Chinese fishing fleets’ development practices through the lens of a living Sino-Malagasy maritime space helps to illuminate the scale of China’s impact in Africa’s seas.

Furthermore, the focus on the fishing and maritime industry in Madagascar answers to a “seablindness”<sup>1</sup> in mainstream studies of China-Africa relations, of the Maritime Silk Road, or of China’s global expansion, which are typically land-focussed. Incorporating the role of Chinese seabound migrants in the *longue durée* of Asian fishers’ transoceanic mobility across the Afrasia sea<sup>2</sup> (i.e., the Indian Ocean) echoes to a

maritime reorientation in anthropology that re-evaluates not only the relationship between land and sea but also the sanitizing role of development projects.<sup>3</sup> In the case of the Indian Ocean, which has been always at the crossroads of ancient and modern maritime worlds, the recent Indo-Pacific conceptualization has again brought this ocean to the forefront of the geopolitical chessboard. Yet, its littoral regions are poorly developed in comparison with the busy maritime transport and marine resources it provides, especially on its western (African) side. This situation owes much to the region’s peripheral position in the colonial world system and on the edge of the Eurasia. Such a European- and continental-centered system is now being challenged by the revival of lateral commercial flows from China and India to Africa, via the localized maritime links across

the Indian Ocean. This is a controversial, inadequately defined form of extraction,<sup>4</sup> but it is still a promising “catalyst” that may “finally haul Africa from underdevelopment and poverty.”<sup>5</sup> However, as the case of Madagascar shows, the development of Sino-Malagasy space not only rewrites the thalassology of the Indian Ocean<sup>6</sup> but also reveals its problematic entanglements into present-day enclosures of local resources.<sup>7</sup>

Xuefei Shi, Postdoctoral Researcher, Chr. Michelsen Institute, Norway. Email: [xuefei.shi@cmi.no](mailto:xuefei.shi@cmi.no)

### Notes

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