CHAPTER - III

RESEARCH SETTING

GEOGRAPHY

Kanyakumari, the smallest district in Tamil Nadu, with a land spread of 1,684 sq. km. has almost all ecosystems - forests, wetlands, freshwater resources, marine, etc. Since this district is situated at the extreme southern part of the Indian subcontinent, the coastline is formed closely by the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. But the main part of the coast faces the Arabian Sea. The coastal landscape of Kanyakumari District is mainly composed of beach ridges of rocky, sandy and swampy nature in the estuarine regions. On the eastern end of the coast is located Vattakottai (circular fort), a historically important place. On the western end of this village is situated Cape Comorin. The fishermen habitation begins from Arocikapuram and extends up to Neerodi, a coastal village. The district is divided into four administrative units known as Taluks viz. Vilavancode, Kalkulam, Agasteeswaram and Thovalai. The fishermen hamlets are found only in three Taluks and there is no fishermen hamlet in Thovalai Taluk.
COASTAL COMMUNITIES AS RENEWABLE RESOURCE BASED RURAL COMMUNITIES

The coastal communities can be called as renewable resource based rural communities because they rely on natural resources. They live within a bounded area and their primary cultural, social, and economic existence is based on the harvest of renewable resources. They exist in exchange relationships with their biophysical environment and their collective interpretation of this relationship is essential for community equilibrium. This interpretation provides the foundation for the strong sense of place that fishermen feel on the fishing grounds.

A coastal community is an occupation based community with a shared system of beliefs, activities, and commitments, and is connected by bonds that establish a common purpose, fate, a personal identity, a sense of belonging, and a supportive structure of activities and relationships. It largely reflects the particularities of the customs, language, and institutional life; a heritage of significant events and crises; historically determined attributes as size, geography, and demography. Community is formed through a shared mutuality, and the purposeful quest, and opportunity for comprehensive interaction, commitment and responsibility. It has a historicity, rootedness, belonging, and makes for individual well-being,
commitment to others, sense of history, and collective judgment (Yadava, 2003).

**COMMUNITY IDENTITY**

The sense of community identity flows from their traditional occupation of fishing. Fishing is not merely a means of assuring their livelihoods, but more broadly as their way of life, which is vivified by important occupational values and symbols, which in turn underscores their cultural identities. Independence, self-reliance and willingness to take risk are part of their fishing culture. Their concepts, attitudes, whole worldview are influenced by nature; their whole psyche is conditioned by their relationship with nature. Returning at night exactly to their village landing site with the aid of the stars; an intelligent understanding of the influence of currents, winds and lunar forces in the movement and occurrence of fish shoals; comprehensive knowledge of the different fishing ground, the various species of fish and the food habits: all highlight their comprehensive scientific and intricate grasp of the totality of their ecosystem. The fisher people own a valuable and traditional knowledge of the oceans. The colour of water, the run of tides and current, the way of swells rise and fall, the way of waves ripple and break, the behaviour of birds and the occasional breach of fish. All accumulate into a hard-core substantial heavy of knowledge gained out of long experiences on the sea. (Mathew, 2001).
SOCIO-CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

Population

The district itself has on the highest population densities in India-726 per sq. km. In coastal villages the density is as high as 1000 per sq. km. The fishermen live in the most densely populated areas in the world (Sophie, 1980). According to Tamil Nadu Marine Fisher Folk Census 2010, a population of 1,43,388 fisher-folks are distributed in the 71.5 km. of the 42 villages of coastline within Kanyakumari district, and constitute about 26 percent of the total fisher population of Tamil Nadu.

Ethnic Origin

The fisher folk of coastal belt belong to two castes: the Paravar and the Mukkuvar. Both groups are gazetted as Most Backward Community. The Mukkuvars inhabit the Southern Coast of Kanyakumari and settled as far north as the Malabar Coast on the West. The Mukkuvars of Kanyakumari District and those of Kerala have a considerable affinity and are capable of conversing freely and with confidence in Malayalam. A major cultural difference between the Mukkuvars from the southern and northern parts of the Western Coast is that while the northerners practice Marumakkal Thayam (matriarchal system), quite significant in Kerala, and those of the south adopt Makkal Thayam (patriarchal system) (Albaris, 2001).
The Paravars are of the Tamil fisher caste who inhabit the fishery coast extending from Kanyakumari to the Isle of Mannar (Rameswaram). There are many historic reasons for the closer relation with Pandian Kingdom of Madurai and the Tuticorin the port city of Pandian Kingdom, which was the stronghold of Paravars. The Paravars were the chiefs of the coastal region and they ruled their areas as subordinates of the Pandian Kingdom. The leaders of the Paravar community were called by names such as Thalaivan, Pattankattiyars, and Adappannars etc. They were converted to Christianity by the Portuguese missionary.

Both caste groups have their settlements along the coastline. They are converted in large numbers to Christianity, with the advent of the Portuguese Jesuits during the 16th century. This mass conversion was primarily the result of a combination of factors including the humiliations of untouchability that they were subjected to, and their aspiration to autonomy and economic independence (Thekkedath, 1982); (Sundar, 2012). Housing patterns are also similar. Strictly, there is no inter-caste marriage. There are, however, exceptions. There is a difference in the linguistic usage between the Mukkuvars and the Paravars. Mukkuvar Tamil dialect language speaking has an accent of Malayalam whereas the Paravars linguistic usage goes well with east coast fishing communities that keep alive a
sense of solidarity and oneness. Work related migratory trips take the men on a seasonal basis from Kanyakumari to Kerala.

Both communities in Kanyakumari district belong to Catholicism. They both go for religious pilgrimages to Christian shrines. Most of the scholars believe that both caste groups, the Mukkuvars and the Paravars, have different roots. However, some have vehemently argued in favour of same ethnic origin based on the common occupational pattern.

Most live in communities that are scattered along coastlines and most of their fishing activities take place near their home communities. They generally live very close to the seashore. This nearness to the sea has the advantage of convenient beach landing for their catch. Fishing is the main source of livelihood. They are totally depending on fishery resources for their survival. Fishing is perceived not merely a means of assuring one's livelihood but more broadly as a way of life (Samuel, 1988).

**Family System**

Traditionally, the fishing communities have joint family system. Nevertheless, there is a more powerful cultural pull in the opposite direction - towards fissure and the separation of extended households into their nuclear components. In the common sense of the communities, joint families are considered as impossible to live
together, owning to conflicting interests and resentments over the
distribution of scarce resources (Ram, 1991).

**Change in Habitation**

The fishermen’s habitation is almost at the fringe of the sea. The dwellings of the community are closely packed. One settlement begins almost where the other leaves off. Now they have started settling at a distance, away from the coast, even though it is uprooting them from the cultural milieu of geographical location. The process of moving towards interior lands has been speeded up by the occurrence of Tsunami in 2004. The fear of Tsunami is so strong that many of the affected people have occupied their houses in new locations (Rabeeca & Katticaren, 2006).

**Occupation & Income**

The fishing population of both castes can be divided into three categories on the basis of the fishing craft they use:

1) Kattumaram and Karaimadi Vallam (plank canoe)

2) Motorized crafts that is, fibre boats with outboard motors with beach landing facilities

3) Mechanized boats with inbuilt high horse power engines.

The mechanized sector fishermen use modern equipment including GPS, fish finders, eco-sounders and wireless communication devices (Rao, 1988). There are different types of fishing gears. There are specific fishing gears for capturing specific species of fishes. The
most prestigious form of artisanal fishing is technologically the most rudimentary one - hook and lines fishing. These fishermen possess a high degree of skill and knowledge. Duunda thozhil / maram thozil / hook and lines work is a hereditary occupation (Sathiadas et al, 1994). The dividing system of earnings from fish catch is found in all sectors. This tradition exists because the crewmembers are from fishing villages and often work as groups of friends and relatives. In fact, the norms of division of returns are situated in the context of communitarian norms composed of strong social and cultural practices (Kurien, 1998).

With the new forms of investment in the production process of fishing, the fishing communities have been introduced into a global mode of production. Those who operate on the non-motorized units have on the average get a lower income in real terms. The income of those fishermen working on the motorized crafts has gone up (Srivasta, et al 1986). Among the fisher-folk population, only 44 percent is fully employed, 52 percent occasionally and 4 percent partially. The fishing job may not be secure during lean season particularly in June. At the time of fishing season i.e. from August to November many species of fish are caught. Even though the fisher people show less apathy for an alternative employment, the non-fishing community members are into enterprises, business and government service as well. Coastal communities have many affluent
members such as food merchants, boat owners, fish brokers, middlemen and private business persons. A scanty number of are in government jobs. Due to lack of adequate intuitional credit facilities on reasonable terms fisher folk are forced to depend on informal credit from the affluent members of the community (Platteau, 1985); (Murickan, 2000); Carmel, 2000).

**Social Customs**

Marriages are arranged at the earliest. These occasions call for extravagant spending. Dowry system is a vicious tyrant. Many families are destroyed in consequence. The family relations are governed by mutual obligations. Community problems are hardly taken to civil courts but are settled by the community leaders (Ram, 1991).

**Religious Life**

The fishermen define themselves as Catholics as well as fisher people. Most of the community’s religious beliefs and practices derive from its exploitation of particular marine ecosystems and marine species. Their spiritual life is closely interconnected with the sea. Fishing at sea involves risks and uncertainties. As a result many fishers develop elaborate sets of magical belief, ritualized behavior and taboos which facilitates the psychological coping with these risks. As such, there these benefits and behaviours are important components of the cultures that help to sustain fishing efforts (Alexander, 1980).
Migration & Gender Role

Migration of the members of the coastal communities takes place in three forms. Firstly, those families with their economic uplift move out of their traditional coastal villages into the district headquarters town of Nagercoil. These are mostly mechanized boat owners, government employees and private businessmen. Often they visit their home village. Secondly, those migrate temporarily to other States of India such as Kerala, Karnataka, Goa, Gujarat, Maharashtra etc for fishing during the lean season. These migrants are mostly the male fishermen but not their households. They come back to their respective homes after fishing. There is also trans-migration in which the fishermen who seek fishing employment go to gulf countries. They rejoin with their families depending upon the months of holidays allotted to them by their gulf-sponsors. It is a phenomenon that when men migrate, women take up household responsibilities. The household patterns are female-headed. As a result of male migration from their households for a long period of time, the daily management of households falls on women for much of the year. The women enjoy higher autonomy. But, it does not contribute to the increase of social status. Social expectations about men’s roles as breadwinners often foster male out-migration. As gender-role norms and expectations continue to change in various culture regions, the role of women in fishing community changes accordingly. Some women who are found
working in processing units bring in vitally needed cash incomes for their households. Generally speaking, the social norms in the fisher communities prescribe that the primary producers be men, especially where production activities take place at sea. Women on the other hand, are expected to perform dual roles: first, as the mainstays of their households and second as the mainstays of fish processing, marketing and distribution. Male children often do works associated with fishing at shore ride, working with their male kinsmen, while female children are expected to do chores around their homes. Women in coastal communities have high literacy rate. Their involvement in Self Help Groups has brought about tremendous economic activities and participation in political activities. SHGs have become the main vehicle for women’s empowerment (Ram, 1991); (Gulati, 1999).

NON- GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS

South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies

SIFFS is a non-government organization working in the marine fisheries sector. SIFFS is the apex body of organizations of small-scale artisanal fishermen. It was first established in Marianad, as Marianad Matsya Utpadaka Co-operative Society (MUCS) about 20 km north of Trivandrum, the capital city of Kerala. It was aimed to market the fish caught by its members, providing credit for renewal of fishing equipments and promoting savings. Then it was named as SIFFS.
Today it has a three-tier organizational structure. With over 9104 members, organized through 153 primary societies in eight districts of southern peninsular India. SIFFS now provides a range of services to members and non-member fish workers.

**Kanyakumari District Fishermen’s Sangams Federation**

KDFSF was formed in Kanyakumari district in 1974 under Kottar Social Service Society. Later in 1983, it was reorganized to coordinate the activities of the individual Sangams, which continue to grow in number and membership, despite entrenched opposition from traders and middlemen who faced diminished profits and a loss of patronage. By 1990, there were thirty societies in 26 villages, with a total membership of 2500 fishermen. The central purpose of the KDFSF is to liberate the traditional fishermen from the clutches of exploitative middlemen and to provide them with a collective identity.

**Coastal Peace and Development**

In 1950s, the Kanyakumari Fishery with an Indo-Norwegian collaboration project promoted the process of mechanization of fishing crafts and thereby some of the fishermen from among the fishing population became mechanized boat owners and became wealthy. The traditional sector, in large numbers, were chronically at loggerheads with the mechanized sector fishermen as the latter encroached the usual marine grounds of the traditional fishermen. It was out of the serious concern of the conflicting sectoral divides, CPD was
established in 1996. It was aimed to facilitate peace initiatives among warring fishers over the access and use of marine resources and for peaceful co-existence as well. It works under Kottar Social Service Society (KSSS), Kottar diocese. CPD facilitates the coastal people in the promotion of socio-economic and cultural empowerments. One of the activities of CPD is to empower fisher children to take up higher education especially professional courses.

As concluding remarks, the fishing communities in general are withdrawn and inward looking and insulated from the mainstream. They feel secure staying along with their coast. The life of the fishing community centers on the Catholic Church and religious activities. The fishing communities feel that they are completely protected by the church. The men in general express their dissatisfaction in the leadership that exists in the community and still refuse to take up responsibility to lead their own community. It is illiteracy, lack of awareness and understanding of their social status that forces them to be where they are, without questioning their leadership style. The leadership is still very much in the hands of merchants, moneylenders and craft owners, those with large families and big voices.