



Together We Can

The Right to Life and Livelihood in Tamil Nadu, South India
Methodist and Presbyterian Women's Special Project
2014-15 in association with Christian World Service



Coastal peoples are some of the most vulnerable communities in India. Living between the land and the sea they are being squeezed from both sides. Large scale industry and tourism are taking over the coastal land, lagoons and tributaries where they have lived for thousands of years. Industrialised fishing and climate change are affecting the quantities of fish and other sea life. Facing a loss of income, jobs and access to coastal waters on which they depend, they are standing up for their rights to land, sea and livelihoods.

Based in Nagapattinam in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, Neythal is supporting communities in their demands to protect the environment and livelihoods. A key founder of the Coastal Action Network, they are sharpening their political and legal skills. While they do not win every time, they have so far stopped the building of the Chettinad Power Plant to name one success. Neythal is helping fisherfolk improve their livelihoods and campaign for the rights of women and children.

"Fishing community people are very self-reliant and independent. We do not want to relocate. We do not want to take alternative employment. We do not want to leave fishing and take orders from others," says one male fishworker.

Agricultural workers demand an end to illegal shrimp farms that are polluting coastal waters and destroying livelihoods.

In a Nutshell:

Neythal works with fisher communities and other coastal groups to protect the threatened ecology of coastal Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry states, and with women. Their key activities are:

- ◆ Reclaiming access to coastal land
- ◆ Improving livelihood opportunities
- ◆ Environmental protection and advocacy
- ◆ Human rights, legal and advocacy training especially for women
- ◆ Organising women's and workers' *sangams* (associations) and campaigns
- ◆ Demanding access to income and services under Indian law
- ◆ Supporting the rights of children, including campaigning against child marriage, discrimination against girls and child labour.



Fishing

According to the 2006 Indian census, 3.52 million people live along India's 8002 kilometre coastline. Of these 1.6 million are engaged in fishing or fishing related activities. About 75% of fish production is from coastal waters. There are 581 fishing villages on the Tamil Nadu coast but their occupants are highly vulnerable. Their customary rights are not legally recognised and the land where they live is often communal or temple land without legal title. Those moved inland by the government after the 2004 South Asia tsunami have lost their livelihoods and are struggling to survive.

Women in Fisheries

Women have an important role in local industry. They may not catch fish, but they clear nets, clean, process and dry the fish. Some take fish further inland to sell for a tiny profit while others cook fish snacks, gather sea weed and shellfish, sell ice or diesel and mend nets. Larger operations are pushing out small fishermen and with them the women who make a meagre living from the catch.

After the 2004 tsunami the women formed the Tamil Nadu Women Fisherworkers Federation to demand government compensation offered to other workers affected. They won and are continuing to work together for improvements like toilets and clean drinking water, and to protect their coast. They may lack education but they want to know what is going on in their neighbourhood and have learnt the benefit in working together to stand up for their families and livelihoods. Their new knowledge and their natural fearlessness makes them powerful advocates.

Respecting women's rights

Neythal's work originated in efforts to provide legal support to women experiencing harassment, rape, lower wages and discrimination. Working with coastal Dalit women, they soon became involved in their struggles to protect their families and livelihoods. The Federation has organised three state level conferences to press for the women's recognition as workers and access to the benefits of being included in the welfare board. Women have sought and won positions in the *panchayat* (local



council) with Neythal training and support. These newly elected women have been able to gain greater protection for their communities and way of life.

Neythal supports women experiencing marital violence, including the forced abortion of girl babies, through the legal system. They actively encourage women's *sangams*. Some campaign against alcohol or for greater respect for widows and women headed families for example.

Protecting the Environment

Living in the space between the land and the sea is the world to fisherfolk. Everything they know and need, they find on the foreshore and seabed. It is in this balance that they have learnt to conserve and share the resources so that there is a role and food for all. So when the shrimp farmers came, they fought back.

Neythal found that only 577 of the 2,486 farms had licences so they mounted legal challenges to curtail the industry. Shrimp farming was only the beginning, they have continued to monitor and record the impact of large industry on the coast and its harmful effects: damage to mangrove forests where fish spawn, salination of coastal aquifers and land, pollution, erosion, pesticides, sea life sucked into thermal power plants and its contribution to global warming. As part of the Coastal Action Network which they helped found, Neythal uses a skilled combination of popular education, training in community information systems to build their own databases, legal action, good science, and political lobbying to protect the coast and its people.

Threats to coastal people

- ♦ Coal, thermal and nuclear power plants cut people off from traditional land and waterways as well as killing fish life. In Cuddalore there are power plants every five kilometres along the coast.
- ♦ Shrimp farming reduces groundwater levels, increases soil salinity and pollution and employs fewer people.



Jeya Subrimaniyam is the ex-president of the Vellapallum Panchayat (council) and recognised for her success on behalf of poor communities. This despite opposition from her male vice president who unsuccessfully filed a case against her in the high court. Under her leadership, the *panchayat* installed street lights, water pumps, improved roading and better sanitation.

Her biggest challenge was to a local landowner who had taken over 24 acres of communal land, including water catchment areas. She took a formal complaint to the District Collector despite opposition from community members reluctant to challenge him. With the District Collector's support and help of local police, the *panchayat* reclaimed the land. Their victory has greatly improved the availability of water.

Jeya's husband was not so happy. Along with his mother, he pressured her not to challenge the landowner. Mindful of her community's urgent need for water, she persisted against his wishes. He beat her and they are now separated. She cares for her adolescent daughters with the support of her own family. The couple lost their only son in the tsunami.

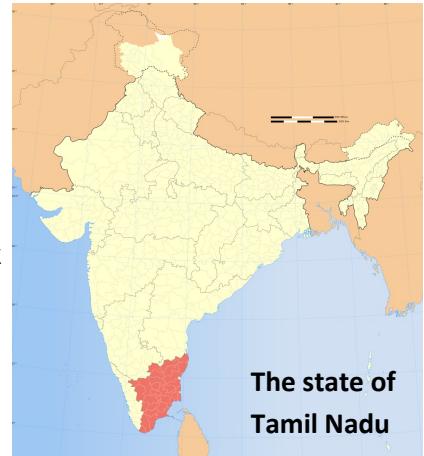
Jeya benefited from the support and training offered by the Tamil Nadu Federation of Women Presidents of Panchayat Government. Her success was recognised with three leadership awards and she has a high degree of local support.

- ◆ Mining sand for use in construction is destroying the coast and waterways.
- ◆ Industrialised fishing practices and more commercial marketing mean fewer fish for fisherfolk to catch and sell.
- ◆ Shipbreaking, new port facilities and the proposed Sethusamudram Shipping Canal are damaging fishing grounds and coral reefs.
- ◆ Development and loss of land in the wake of the 2004 tsunami. Over 40% of people have yet to be given permanent shelter. The land is being used for tourist and other commercial ventures, including ports.
- ◆ Trade agreements favouring foreign imports or large scale fishing interests over smaller operations eg the World Trade Organisation negotiations on non-Agriculture Market Access (NAMA).

Campaigning for Children's Rights

Neythal is a member of the state wide Child Rights Protection Network advocating for fair treatment for children. Now that child labour under the age of 15 is illegal in India, employers are exploiting 15-18 year olds. In the coming year Neythal will take the campaign against *Sumangali Thittam* to local politicians. It is a form of child labour in Tamil Nadu where young women are employed in what is effectively child labour. They are promised a large pay out which could be used for a dowry or to

repay a family debt after 3-5 years of exploitative work in the textile industry, often in spinning factories. They work long days in very poor conditions, suffer regular harassment and their movements are tightly controlled. Few receive the promised pay out.



The state of Tamil Nadu

In June last year Neythal helped stop an arranged marriage of the 15 year old daughter of fisherfolk. They confronted her family and members of the *panchayat* with the help of local police. Neythal reminded the *panchayat* of its responsibility to implement the Child Marriage Prohibition Act 2006 and convinced the family not to proceed. Ishwarya is now back at school.

Neythal organises public hearings, holds workshops, educates young people and challenges politicians on the right of children to health care, good food, education and protection from abuse, molestation, discrimination, child marriage and child labour. They support the teaching of environmental perspectives in schools and the role of children in protecting nature.

Scripture for Devotions

Luke 18:1-8 Parable of the Widow and Unjust Judge
Exodus 1:15-22 The Clever Midwives

CWS has produced a PowerPoint about the work of Neythal for the Special Project. It comes with a talk that you can adapt. Contact us for a copy.



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