

Revisiting Chinnapalem: The Women Seaweed Collectors Today



The December 1987 issue of Bay of Bengal News carried a photo essay headlined “We are hungry only for seaweed”. Written by the then editor of Bay of Bengal News, the essay profiled the women seaweed collectors of Chinnapalem fishing village in Tamil Nadu in words and pictures. Gitanjali Chaturvedi recently visited Chinnapalem – 16 years after the BBN story. She describes what she saw and heard.

A half-smile, a stick-on bindi, a diaphanous saree, underwater goggles – in her sunburnt hands she clutches an enormous chunk of seaweed that trails into the sea from one end... her eyes reflect energy and a lust for adventure... she is one of the women

Chinnapalem – 16 years back

The sun is blazing fiercely now. Pleasantries with their friends in Mannali island over, the nine Chinnapalem girls walk to the other side of the island, put on their goggles, strap the forecal bags around their waists and enter the sea. Soon they are in neck-deep water and also in the thick of seaweed territory. They fan out in different directions. They dive, grope around and come up with thick bushy seaweed, which they slip deftly into the forecal bag.

The girls are now animated, like a hunter after prey, as they repeatedly dive and grab the precious paasi as seaweed is known in Tamil. It belongs to one of three varieties – *Gracilaria edulis*, *Gelidiella acerosa*, *sargassum*.

“We go out to collect seaweed 10 to 15 days a month,” says Maniyayi. “The best period is two days before and four days after full moon and new moon”. Reason : the tidal variation during these days makes for easy sea trips.

“On every trip we collect 10 to 15 kg of seaweed. If our collection is consistently poor for four or five days, we go and stay in an island for a few days at a stretch. We take with us rice, chillie powder, tamarind, salt, plus a barrel of fresh water for cooking and drinking. Over a single stay in an island, we can return with a few hundred kilos of seaweed.

– From the Bay of Bengal News , December 1987.

seaweed collectors of Chinnapalem immortalised in print by *Bay of Bengal News* 16 years ago. She and her fellows said “We are hungry only for seaweed,” and that was the heading of this evocative cover story.

The story talked about women diving into the sea with their improvised scuba gear and underwater goggles, a bag strung sideways across their shoulders for collecting their harvest of seaweed. After paddling about for three hours, they dump their seaweed into a boat moored on the shore, change into a fresh set of dry sarees, picnic on the beach before rowing to their village half an hour away.

What’s the situation some 16 years later? Seaweed collection in Chinnapalem has been seriously curtailed. With the birth of the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve Forest, officials have



prohibited women from venturing to Krusadai Island, a rich source of seaweed. There is resentment in the village; people are refusing to consider any other livelihood options.

I decide to visit the village, 20 minutes from Pamban on the Rameswaram island. The BOBP had initiated a seaweed cultivation programme here 17 years ago; it is likely the village will articulate its grievances to me. Accompanying me are three members of Mundalmunai village – which is known for a success story in pearl culture.

My friends from Mundalmunai tell me that I will be dealing with a very obstinate bunch of women in Chinnapalem. ‘They are adamant about collecting seaweed. They have refused to listen to reason... we suspect it is all politics.’

Chinnapalem is not a prosperous village. It has no source of fresh water, no electricity or public health centres. Vagrants linger about, staring into space. Infants naked save for a single black string tied around their waist, play with pebbles on the mud paths. Speckled hens peck tentatively at huge

mounds of refuse. A few women string beads and shells into garlands. A woman with flaking skin and knotted hair sits by the fish, waving mechanically at the flies with a hand-held palmyra fan.

Almost every fishing village has at least three pregnant women, and Chinnapalem is no exception. A few men stutter about, wobbly with the previous night’s excesses. Chinnapalem has a high rate of alcohol addiction – a local fisherman with bloodshot eyes directs me to the panchayat hall where a meeting has been organised. A few women are in the process of sweeping the sand out of the rectangular hall with a palmyra broom. Straw mats are dusted and placed on the floor for me to sit on. Some 50 people assemble in a matter of minutes. My interpreter introduces me, saying I’m from the BOBP; they can tell me about their problems, I’m here to help them.

A section of the gathering sniggers. A village elder gets up and addresses the crowd. ‘It is all for our benefit. She is not from the Forest Department. She wants to speak with the seaweed-collecting women, so let them speak first...’ Some one

else butts in, perhaps a politician: ‘Let me give you some vital information about our village... It has 350 houses, 50 are made of cement, the rest of thatch... there are 800 adult men, 750 fisherwomen. All the women collect seaweed. They leave at 6 a.m. and return by noon after having collected seaweed for three hours...’

I tell him that I would like to speak with the women... I begin with straight questions. How many boats leave for the island? Do you still have your scuba equipment? Did you see the photographs taken 16 years ago? There is plenty of excitement. Underwater goggles, still wet with seawater, are passed round for us to see. I distribute copies of photographs from BOBP’s archives. People are identified; there are squeals of delight, shrieks and gasps as the copies are snatched and passed from one person to the next.

The women speak, and respond sporadically to questions.

- “We collect seaweed some 15 days a month... it isn’t a regular activity. We are upset because we can’t go to the island anymore.”

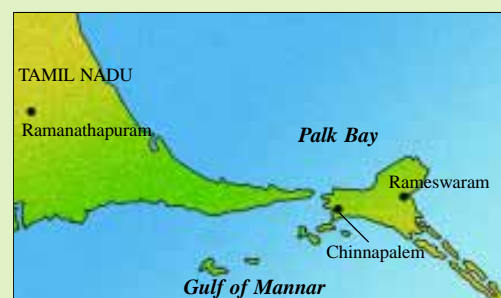
Seaweed: the Wider Picture

Seaweed is a recognised source of food the world over. Seaweeds like nori and wakame are consumed in abundant quantities in Japan, Korea, China, and Taiwan. Internationally, the seaweed industry is worth anywhere between 6 and 7 billion dollars. It covers a number of seaweed products of both edible and non-edible usage. Some examples: alginates, agar, carrageenan, kelp meal, liquid extracts, nori, wakame, kombu.

Carrageenan, one of the most important products extracted from seaweed, is a hydrocolloid, consisting mainly of the potassium, magnesium, sodium and calcium sulphate esters. It is commonly used as a clarification or gel-forming agent in food processing applications, although its usage in other industries such as dentifrice and pharmaceuticals is also significant.

India harvests approximately 22 000 metric tonnes of various macro-algae annually, against a potential of about 870 000 mt. Most of the seaweed harvested are natural agarophytes and alginophytes that can be used to produce agar-agar and alginates on a smallscale. With about 8 000 km of shoreline, India could be well placed to become one of the world’s largest and most competitive producers of *Eucheuma* and value-added carrageenan.

Due to its many geographical advantages, Tamil Nadu can organise a seaweed-based industry capable of creating sustainable alternative livelihoods, particularly for coastal and fishing communities.



- “Earlier, men would mend their nets on the beach, we would collect seaweed and join them and picnic. Now the Forest Department guards harass us if we go there. They even take away our dry clothes and hide them if they see us collecting seaweed.”
- Earnings from seaweed collection? “About 50 rupees a day, on the good days.” An argument ensues about the earnings. The politician exclaims: “Weren’t you collecting between 15 – 20 kg a day? And didn’t you get about Rs. 6 a kilo? Doesn’t that work out to Rs. 120 a day?” The women retort: “If we really earned that much, you men would have prevented us from collecting seaweed.”
- How long have the women been collecting seaweed? “We started doing so regularly only in the 1970s. We collected four different kinds of seaweed that we sold to traders – local traders from Ramnad or traders from Madurai and faraway places.” What do the men do? “They are fishermen, but they laze about most of the time... they also mend nets sometimes.”
- Wouldn’t the women earn more in some alternate activity that occupied them all the time? “When we supplemented the family income with seaweed collection, the household income was about Rs. 1 500... now we just about manage to earn Rs. 1 000.”

The politician bristles at this talk. He gets up and waves his arms furiously. He says that since I’m talking about alternative livelihoods, I must be from the Forest Department. “I forbid any of you women to speak with her! You are gullible women... you could fall for anything.” He tells me ‘If you want to help us out, we are willing to consider fish culture. But we need several acres of land that you must buy in our name... We will of course form a society’.

An elderly man rises and implores the gathering to calm down. He says the village must not look at



Chinnapalem women harvesting seaweed.

everyone with suspicion, then NGOs which can help them will stay away from the village. Make the best use of your opportunities, he advises.

Bickering breaks out. Abuses fly from all corners. Women shriek, men shout, children bawl. The Panchayat hall resembles a battle field. “Breakdown,” my interpreter whispers. I decide to leave. I motion to my friends from Mundalmunai who have now been embroiled in the melee. ‘Nandri!’

I thank the people in Tamil. The meeting breaks up. From the corner of my eye, I see the politician smirk. He’s gleeful that the meeting has come to nought.

Are the Chinnapalem fisherfolk justified in their demands? The community stubbornly looks to the sea for resources and employment – it is not their fault. The sea is an integral part of their identity, and the women have got used to earning money from seaweed collection.

I wonder whether the rules of natural resource management applicable to forests in the mainland can be applied to marine ecosystems – which is what I fear the Forest Department is unimaginatively doing in this case. All varieties of seaweed have a life span after which they are swept on the shore. Surely

it should be possible to design a management strategy that can allow seaweed to be exploited in a sustainable manner? Over 2 000 people in the Gulf of Mannar depend on seaweed collection as a source of livelihood. The women in Chinnapalem form only a fraction of this number.

But my sympathy for the people of Chinnapalem is guarded. They have been closing all avenues for negotiation. The Forest Department had agreed to allow the women of Chinnapalem to visit Krusadai Island every alternate day until a management strategy could be evolved; the village rejected the proposal outright. All or nothing, they averred.

It can be argued that the people have a right to the resources that they have historically exploited. But at the same time, they also have a duty to preserve the resources. What worries me most is the inability of the Chinnapalem population to accept change. When they are offered options or alternatives, they should seize the opportunity and not waste it. If the obdurate populace at Chinnapalem walks a tightrope between subsistence and survival, aren’t they partly responsible?