

On-the-spot report from a Sri Lankan fishing village

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The daily lives of people in the Thoduwawa fishing village near Chilaw in the northwestern province of Sri Lanka provide a picture of the hardships facing much of the island's rural population.

As it is on the west coast, Thoduwawa was not devastated by the December 2004 tsunami that killed tens of thousands and destroyed coastal communities in other parts of the island. Nevertheless the fishermen in this area are confronted with rising prices, particularly for fuel, poor services and growing danger of civil war.

To reach Thoduwawa one has to take a bus or private passenger van from Mahawewa town, 65 kilometres north of Colombo. Every half an hour a bus or van makes the slow 10-km journey along a poor road with rundown bridges.

Of the village's 1,700 families, about 1,500 depend on fishing. Most fishermen use *teppam*, rudimentary 2.5 x 1.2 metre rafts made of wooden logs or fibreglass. There are about 230 *teppams* in Thoduwawa, together with about 100 small motorboats and 50 large motorboats.

It is a difficult struggle to make a living, especially for the *teppam* fishermen and those employed to work on the large boats. Despite working extremely hard, most live in small flimsy timber houses with roofs made of coconut leaves and no water and other sanitary facilities.

A *teppam* can only carry two fishermen. Most times they are operated by a single man. Launching a *teppam* with fishing nets is a difficult task. Sometimes rafts are toppled by waves, causing injuries. The vessels can be used only in off-monsoon seasons. During the monsoon seasons, fishermen have to travel across the country to the eastern coast or to the north central province to fish inland waters. Otherwise, they have to find daily odd jobs to make a living.

The educational and health facilities in the village are limited. There is a school with rundown buildings, inadequate equipment and not enough teachers. The government dispensary has a doctor but lacks many essential drugs. The children of most families study only up to grade eight or nine.

Talking to the WSWs, Thoduwawa fishermen expressed their anger over repeated increases in oil prices and fears over the increasing threat of war. They complained about the high costs of boats and fishing gear, the lack of decent harbours or

anchorage, unsafe working conditions and poor catches.

Warnakulasuriya Rogus, 55, a *teppam* fisherman for about 30 years, explained their uncertain future: "This is the only job we know. We don't know what will happen tomorrow. If we get a good catch, we can maintain ourselves for now. Otherwise, we have to go into debt. Some days we can get an income of 300-400 rupees (\$US3.00-4.00). Some days, we don't even have fish for our own meals."

During monsoon seasons, he fishes in the local river, mainly for prawns. But his income has been reduced substantially by competition from private prawn farms.

J.K. Anil, 30, a father of two, described his life. "I studied only up to grade 9. After that, I had to start sea fishing with my father. He also had a *teppam*. In those days, life was not so difficult. We had good catches. I also fished in tanks [reservoirs] in the Maduruoya area [in north central province].

"After my first child was born, I returned to the village to fish at sea. Inland fishing had become very hard. There were no transport facilities and no doctors.

"Some days, my *teppam* is carried some 10 km out to sea by the waves. Then it is very difficult to get back to shore because we don't have an engine. Due to the repeated increases in fuel prices, some boat owners have sold their boats and also use *teppams*."

He explained how politicians from the main parties had cheated the fishermen. "In the lead up to every election, the UNP [United National Party] and the SLFP [Sri Lanka Freedom Party] politicians visit us, promising *teppams* and boats, only to repeat the same promises at the next election. But we have received nothing. During the presidential elections [last November] the government started building an anchorage in the village. But we can't believe them until they finish that work."

The men working in large motor boats have to stay away from their homes for about a month at a time. W. Piya Sampath, 23, explained: "Five of us go to sea in our boat. It is a very hard job. We bring water only for drinking, so we can't take a bath for a whole month. We can sleep only two hours a day. We often fall ill and get injured, but we have to stay at sea. Sometimes men succumb to illness. Last year, one fisherman from Iranawila [a neighbouring village] died from cholera at

sea.”

After returning from sea, the boat owner deducts expenses for fuel and food from the money he receives for the catch. He also takes 55 percent of the remainder, leaving only 45 percent to be divided among the fishermen. Boat skippers are offered a little extra. If the fish harvest is not enough to cover the costs, the fishermen are left with nothing and the arrears are taken from the proceeds of the next voyage.

Sampath continued: “While we are away for a month, we feel homesick. Everywhere around us, we can only see the sea. There is no way to communicate with our families. The boat owner only talks with the skipper [by radio] once every two days. We were at sea even during the last [presidential] elections.”

Antony Fernando, 50, owns a small boat. He complained about repeated price increases for fuel and fishing gear. “When I bought a boat for the first time in 1982 it was 11,000 rupees. But now such a boat costs about 130,000 rupees. In 1982, five litres of kerosene oil cost 35 rupees. Now it is 200 rupees. Three years ago, our daily fuel expenses were about 600 rupees. Now it has risen to 1,700 rupees. Ten years ago, a 25-horse power engine was about 99,000 rupees. Now we have to pay about 247,000 rupees. The price for a set of nets has increased from 45,000 to 85,000 rupees over the same period.”

He denounced the war waged against the LTTE. “Before the war we used to shift to Trincomalee [on the eastern coast] to fish during the monsoon seasons. We only resumed that practice during the ceasefire [between the government and the LTTE]. This year, it seems that we can’t go there because the war is likely to break out again. The war was a result of the denial of rights to the Tamil people. The renewed war will not bring any good, and only poor youth will be sent to fight.”

Niroshi Deepani’s husband, Susil Antony, a *teppam* fisherman, died in March 2004 at Asiri private hospital in Colombo following an accident at sea. She explained: “My husband was severely injured when his *teppam* was toppled by waves on his way back to shore from fishing on February 12, 2004. He was treated at Chilaw Base Hospital for about a month. Doctors said his food digestive system and rectum were damaged. One of his kidneys was severely damaged and had to be removed. Later, he was transferred to Kalubowila general hospital in Colombo. There the country’s best doctors said his life was uncertain. On Susil’s request, he was transferred to Asiri hospital.

“At Asiri hospital he was operated on. The total bill came to 507,022 rupees for 18 days. Before his death I had mortgaged my jewelry and paid 180,000 rupees. I didn’t expect such a large bill. But the hospital would not release his body until the bill was completely settled. The Bishop of Chilaw contributed 100,000 rupees and our villagers donated some funds. I had to sell some of our household belongings to fill the gap. We did not receive his body for three days after his death.”

Deepani is now selling dried fish at weekly fairs in the area to

provide for her family, and relies on help from her relatives and neighbors. Her 11-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son go to school. She has not yet been given Samurdhi [welfare] benefits.

W. Chandra’s husband Antony was a *teppam* fisherman. But now he is 100 km away in Kalpity working for a businessman in return for a loan Antony got from him to buy a fiberglass *teppam*. He visits home once every few months.

Most fishermen expressed their contempt for official politics, especially for the main parties, the UNP and SLFP. They also voiced anger over the role of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has exploited the mass disaffection toward the UNP and SLFP. Having come to the office for the first time in April 2004 as a part of the SLFP-led United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), the JVP secured four ministerial posts, including the fisheries ministry.

Within a short period, the JVP found its support base eroding after failing to keep its election promises about improving the living conditions of ordinary people. Thoduwawa fishermen were especially angry over the fishery minister’s refusal to assist them.

P.T. Wijayalath, a JVP village organiser during 2004 general elections, was now bitter about the party. “At a meeting held by the JVP in Thoduwawa in 2004, party leaders made several promises, including subsidies for fishermen during monsoon seasons, a harbour and a fuel subsidy. But nothing has been done. The fuel subsidy went into the hands of large boat owners. The JVP is like the other two parties. It didn’t contest the 2005 presidential elections because it knew it would be defeated.”

The alienation expressed by the Thoduwawa fishermen towards the political establishment and their concerns over deteriorating living conditions are typical of the sentiments of broad layers of the rural poor throughout the island.



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