**REIMAGINING THE GOOD CITY FROM ENNORE CREEK**

Interview Transcription

**Toxicity Interview**

Interviewers: Gajendran V., Raju K.

Place of interview: Irular Settlement, Nandiambakkam

Date of interview: 28 March 2023

Geo Coordinates: 13°16.012’ N, 80°17.312’ E

Transcription by: RK

Audio Audio 2 - 01:33:47 hours

Audio 2 - 00:03:49 hours

**Interviewee Information**

Names: Anonymised

Pseudonyms: Prawn pickers/catcher men: R1, R3

Prawn pickers/catcher women: R2

**Audio 1**

**[00:00]**

**Q: Are the children from the community attending school?**

**R1:** Half the children are going to school and half the children have dropped out from schools

**Q: What’s the reason for dropping from school**

**R1:** The mobile phone game ‘*free fire*’ is the important reason for the school dropouts. I feel that foreigners are inventing such games to attract more children and spoil their education. Even if we (father’s) condition our children, their mother would support them. Even mothers aren’t aware of the importance of education in this world. I am not educated, but I have skills to make my livelihood and I can do any work given. But, I don’t wish my children to go through the same hardship I had. I wish them to get educated.

**Q: What kind works do the people in the community do?**

**R1:** Half the people are catching/picking fish and prawns, the other half goes to Painting work, Cutting wood logs, working as Mason and there are some educated people in the community. (pointing at a person walking by)He is the person concerned about the community. He does fishing/prawn picking/ catching. His name is Ganesh (name changed).

**Q: How many years have you been doing prawn catching?**

**R1:** I have been catching prawns/fish since I was 13 years old. Now I am 38 years old. (Pointing at another person walking on the road) They are prawn catchers from ‘Palamedu’, another neighboring ‘Irular’ settlement in Athipattu panchayat.

**R2 (women):** We (people) have been living there for more than 15 years. But we don’t have any ‘patta’ (legal document for residence). We came from [Madhavaram](https://www.google.com/maps/place/Madhavaram,+Chennai,+Tamil+Nadu/@13.1501488,80.2207145,14.95z/data=!4m6!3m5!1s0x3a5264db59c3d4b5:0x9be03109019f05f!8m2!3d13.1487898!4d80.2305586!16zL20vMGY1ZzFq); we have been resettled here in ‘Palamedu’.

**[00:05:17]**

-Some NGOs are helping us with constructing toilets and painting the houses, but the ‘Father’ (of a Church’s missionary) is not letting them to help us. Such an NGO needs to get permission from the ‘Father’. We also informed this to the Athipattu panchayat head.

**Q: Who is helping your community?**

**R1:** Some NGOs are adopting the communities with government permission and helping the people. Currently a NGO from Bangalore is helping us.

**Q: Here prawn picking is important work.**

**R1:** He is important person in prawn picking (pointing R3, who was walking on road)

**R3:** I don’t know any other job other than picking prawn in the river (Aathu thozil). I learned to use the net only after getting married (wife:R2), before that I used to submerge (moozlgi) and pick prawns.

**Q: How would you catch prawns? (To R1)**

**R2:** They (men) would do all jobs like picking prawns by hand (Thadavi pidithal), submerging

and picking prawns (Moozhgi pidithal) by hand and also by using nets.

**R1:** I also go to marine fishing from Palaverkaadu. We use engines, use ‘set nets’ and also have boats (some community members living in Palaverkadu). But we aren’t part of the Fisheries Department’s society.

**R2:** We would search for the prawns in the river with our hand, if we find the prawns, we would pick the prawns, then raise it above the water and carefully put in the *pari1*

**R3:** There are poisonous species in the river, we have to be careful about it.

**R2:** We used to weave the *‘Pari’* using the palm leaves. We used to hold the *‘pair’* with our teeth.

**Q: There some prawn pickers, who would tie ‘*pari’* in their head. Are they from your community?**

**R1:** They learned to catch prawns from us. We are the ones who do prawn picking traditionally. They learned from us. They are from different communities. If we ask anyone, who is *Thadavu-Karanga2,* people would only point at us (Irulars).

**Q: Where would you catch prawns hand pick?**

**R1:** We would ‘hand pick’ the prawns from ‘EB gate’ in Ennore to Kattupalli,

**Q: Are prawns only available at those places?**

**R1:** Most of the river place would have prawn habitat, prawns are available till Pulicat, our (community) people are there in Palaverkadu who do the same *‘Thozhil’* (work). They also use nets, use ‘*Visura valai’* (throwing net) and also they do hand pick the prawns (*‘Thaduvuvaanga’*)

**[00:10:11]**

**R3:** We shouldn’t hand pick the prawns in their space in the North (North of [Kalaaji](https://goo.gl/maps/6PJvakuscg5HaLpX7)); we are allowed to hand pick the prawns till Kalaanji. Irulars from [Kattur](https://goo.gl/maps/WLPePWXkf1FGjkXk8) and [Pazhaverkaddu](https://goo.gl/maps/6itchu9sdPecSxWx5) would hand pick the prawns in the river North of Kalaanji.

**R1:** Women from our village used to hand pick prawns by aligning themselves across the river (kattu pottu Thadavudhal). This would make less chances for the prawns to escape from the hand pickers, if a prawn escapes from one person, it would get into the hands of another person.

**Q: What depth would the prawns live in the river?**

**R3:** Now the river depth has been reduced on one end and on the other end the river has been dredged, it’s hard for us to submerge and catch the prawn.

**R1:** The prawn used to live on the muds of the river bed; They used to partly bury themselves in the river bed. When we (prawn cathers) apply our hands on the river bed, the prawns would be grabbed when we feel their movement.

**R3:** If our (people) feet are muddy (apt for prawn habitat) while stepping on the river beds, then we would ‘hand pick’ the prawns in that place (they would check the sediments)

**Q: What is the height/depth of the river flow and when you would catch the prawn?**

**R1:** We cannot catch prawns during high tide as the sea water would intrude into the river. In a day, water flow in the river changes with high tide and low tide for every 6 hours in a cycle.

**R3:** The same amount of water entering the river would be drained to sea during the low tide. We would be able to hand pick prawns only after half the flood water (during high tide) has drained into the sea.

**R1:** If 20 units of water is entering the river, the same amount would drain into the river (lowering tide). After 15 units of water is drained we would start to hand pick prawns even while the other 5 units are still draining as we only have limited hours for ‘hand picking’ the prawns.

**Q: Where do the prawns live?**

**R3:** Prawns are produced by consuming the ‘lugworm’ (Poochi) in the river, the lugworm is called ‘Pooran poochi’ which would be long and red in color. The lugworm would lay eggs in the form of sacs (Kozhai), the prawns also lay eggs into the same sacs. From the sacs the offspring evolved.

**R1:** The fishes or any other species would not eat the prawn eggs on the sacs; so the sacs are good breeding space for the prawns.

**Q: What is the life period of prawns?**

**R2 (woman):** The prawn would die once it was caught.

**R1:** Most of the prawns would be caught before their life expectancy.

**R3:** Even as an offspring the prawns would have to survive from their predator like different kinds of fish. If they even grow escaping from the predators we (fishers) would catch them.

**Q: What's the time period for a grown prawn?**

**R1:** It would take 6 months to grow prawn with good size. In 6 months a prawn would be the size of 3 fingers crossed 100 grams; which would be 40 to 50 count; count is a form of weight measurement ( - not sure if it’s indigenous or altered English vocabulary). Their growth is based on their place where they live and what they consume. If they have a good environment, the prawns might grow to 100 grams.

**R3:** Once the prawns hatch from its egg their size would be the size of mosquito larva.

**R1:** Those good size prawns are only available during the rainy season (NE monsoon season), at present (last of March) such prawns won’t be available.

**[00:14:45]**

**Q: What’s the best season for prawn production in a year?**

**R3:** From ‘Aadi’ month (mid July-Mid August) they would start breeding and in ‘Karthi’ (mid-Nov to mid-Dec) month the prawn catch would be high and the season ends by end of ‘Thai’ month (mid-Jan to mid-Feb). After that season the prawn catch would be very less. Again the season would start by next ‘Aadi’ month. Only when the rain water flows in the river, the prawn would grow. We don't know the exact life cycle and their movement.

**R1:** Their growth is based on the place where they live.

**R3:** The prawn would move from another ‘Naadu’ (Tamil term for a Nation, here it is used to mention the Andhra Pradesh state) to our place. It’s called ‘Vadakethi eral’ (Northern Prawns), those are prawns from Irukkam, Andhra pradesh (pulicat lake) and such places. Those prawns would come here, the native prawns would spin and get into the sea.

**Q: How would you identify the Andra prawns?**

**R3:** The Andra species are called ‘Paal ragam’ (milky variety) and another one is called ‘Cemmekkera’, that would be red in color and it would be quite beautiful. The prawns of this river would not be of that color and also the growth is limited compared to those ‘Vadakethi’ (Norther) prawns. Those prawns’ lenght would be a palm size length. The ‘Vellra’ (white prawn - river fish) would be 3 fingers crossed which would weigh 20-30 counts. Karuppera (In Tamil it’s called black prawn -Tiger prawn ) would weigh 50-60 grams or sometimes it would weigh 100 grams.

**Q: What are the different prawn species in the river?**

**R3:** In the river, Cemmekkera,Valimbera, Valcherra, (sennakoni? Not audible) and Karuppera. There are 3 ‘Dinnusu’ (different types) of the Karuppera.

**R1:** Not different types, it’s their look at different sizes.

**R3:** One would be full black; other would have black and red over their body, the third one would be full red in color. Every type of prawn will have a different market value.

**R1:** The red coloured Karuppera’s rate would be higher and it would be ¾ foot in size.

**R3:** Yes, it would be a Jhaan size ( 1 Jhaan is equal to the stretch between tip of small finger to Thumb finger with stretched hand), a Jhaan size fish would weigh 100 grams. ‘Chemmekerra’ would not grow larger than a finger size. Another prawn called ‘Chethrra’ which would be in muddy sediments of the river.

**R1:** ‘Chemmakera’ and ‘Chethra’ would exist together in the river.

**Q: Where does the ‘Karuppera’ live?**

**R3:** The ‘Karuppera’ live under the mangrove (Thillanchedi) plants; they grow under the plants and come to the pits (pallam) in the river. The offspring hatch in the mangroves and grow there. Only the grown ‘Karuppera’ would come down to the pits in the river; once they grow to a size (/weight) of 20 grams they would come into the river.

**Q: What’s a good habitat for the prawns?**

**R3:** If enough seawater is reaching the prawn habitat, their growth and production would be good. If MFL (an industry in Manali area) effluent is discharged in the river. All the prawns would be dead in one run of those effluent in the prawn habitats. Those effluent would come via Ennore in this part of the river. During high tide, effluent would come North of the river without draining in the river mouth. After that we have to lose our livelihood for many days. Sea water is good for healthy prawns.

**[00:20:10]**

**Q: How many days would it take for the river back to normal with ecology?**

**R3:** At that time, all the fishes and prawns would be dead. Only for the next 2 or 3 days fishers from all the villages could fish or catch prawns. After the 3rd day, there would be no fishes or prawns for anyone. Only when the effluent is stopped and only after the high tides are cleaning the river, the situation would be normal.

Prawns from Andra would come spinning in the flood (pirandu varum) during the rainy season in ‘Karthigai’ month (mid-Nov to mid-Dec). Prawns from the river would not go North to Andhra (pulicat lake), these prawns would lead to the pits of the Ennore creek, if those couldn’t end in the pits they would drain into sea via Kosasthali river mouth in the south.

Only the prawns from Andhra (state) would come to Tamil Nadu during rain flood and the flow would be only in one direction, the high tidal flow wouldn’t be there. The river water would taste good and would be fresh to drink. Now (March-summer) the river is saline, but during the monsoon (North East), the water would be fresh (Pacha Thanni), the river would only carry rain water.

**Q: Do the Prawns from Andra are freshwater species?**

**R3:** No. Those prawns are also salt water species. The landscape of the river is vast (pulicat lake is mentioned as river), the stretch of the river would be 20 to 30 kms. Here in Ennore, the river is like a small channel, some places it might be broad. Only near Ennore the river stretch is wide, in other places the river would be narrower.

**Q: What species consume the prawns?**

**R3:** Fishes, snakes would consume prawns. Some insects would consume prawns. Prawns, in their life cycle they would shed their shell, during that time the insect which would float on the river something similar to grasshopper would consume it. That insect would be too small and would jump over the river.

**Q: What would the prawn feed on?**

**R3:** Prawns will feed on ‘Poochi’ (lugworm), algae (paasa) and the dirt ( alukku) that those algae carry. The prawns would catch the prey with their 10 legs and feed on biting the prey by holding it.

**Q: Where do the prawns breed?**

**R3:** The prawns would breed in the places where the algal bloom is seen. In ‘Elai paasa’ (leaf algae - would look like leaves) they would grow well. In our river (part of the river where they catch prawn/fish) those algaes aren’t habitat at present, but those algae were present 20-25 years ago. When NCTPS was started and once the ash was disposed of in the river the algal habitat was lost. Later the ash got dumped into the river and the ecology was lost. As there is no algae, there is no good prawn/ fish production in the river.

**[0025:00]**

Thus the demand for work to make our livelihood has increased and many *‘Thaduvukaaranga’* (prawn pickers) stopped working in the river as the prawn production declined. All the prawn pickers migrated to the Palaverkaadu (pulicat). Those algaes are found near the Andra state border of Tamil Nadu. From Arambakkam, we can witness those algaes. Algaes host the prawn offsprings and also the egg (have to check as earlier it was informed that lugworm sacs host the prawn eggs)

**Q: When does the prawn come out from the river and What’s the time you would choose to pick/catch the prawns?**

**R3:** The prawns would come out during both day and night times. At night we catch prawns with Visuru valai (with a type of nets) using roasted Wheat Bran(‘Thavudu’). We would mix the roasted wheat bran with mud and throw it in the places where we planned to throw net to catch prawns. The prawns' wounds move towards the wheat bran to feed on it, then we would catch the prawns.

**Q: When would you go in the night for prawn catching?**

**R3:** We would start by 6 PM when the sun is present in the sky. We have to walk long distances and have to choose the places, so it is good to start during daylight. The catchers would discuss and decide their boundaries to catch prawns. Based on the number of catchers, they would discuss and set their boundaries. We (cathers) would place themselves on the river banks by marking their boundaries. We would punch the stick in the bank or draw a line to identify the place where we throw the ‘wheat bran’ mixed with muds and throw nets after 10-15 mins to catch the prawns. We would stay there at nights and we only come back in the morning.

**Q: Would you only catch the prawns in the night ?**

**R3:** No, people also catch prawns in the morning.

**R1:** In the morning we have to get into the river to catch prawns and at night we can catch prawns from the dry bank itself (Medu). It’s not because of the tidal difference or water level. At nights the prawns would crawl toward the banks from the pits. At day time, the prawns would stay in the pits and deeper part of the river.

**R3:** During the rainy season more prawns would be available in the river.

**Q: Would you pick prawns at night?**

**R1:** No, people won’t go to pick prawns at night.

**Q: Where would you pick prawns in the river?**

**R3:** We would pick/catch prawns from Ennore to Kattupalli, beyond that prawn catchers/pickers from the Pulicat region would pick prawns. This is the village's limitation for fishing in the river.

**R1:** Prawn catchers/pickers from our (Iruklar) community in Pulicat region (Thadavipidikiranvanga) are part of the Fisheries department’s cooperative society. They live as part of the panchayat, so they have society numbers. Here the river is distant from our place, thus we couldn’t be part of the Fisheries cooperative society. If we buy the boat, we have to keep the boat some 20 kms away from our residence, thus there is no safety for boats and nets. It would get lost. As we are far away from the river we have limitations to form the cooperative society (Meenavar Sangam).

**Q: Where were before 30 years (before settling at Nandiambakkam)**

**R1:** We lived in different places as a small group of 10 - 20 members. At that time people only did prawn picking (and .**‘Podhaikaradhu’?)** We weren’t aware about the Fisheries society and its benefits.

**R3: Only people from my generation are using nets, it would be some 45 years.**

**Q:** What's the name of the river from Ennore to Palaverkadu?

**R3:** Ennore river starts from Ennore and goes till Palaverkadu, Arambakkam and Sriharikotta.

**[00:30:00]**

**Q: What are the different methods of catching prawns?**

**R1:** We pick prawns, use ‘Visuru valai’( Throwing nets) and Yendhu valai (Fetching nets)

**Q: What’s ‘Yendhu valai’?**

**R1:** We tie the net between two wooden logs. We would dip the nets into the river by opening at one end and raise the nets from the bottom of the river. It’s used by pushing the nets by holding it across the river. This net is also used mostly during the night.

**R3:** All the types of finishing are done at night and also at day based on people’s interest and choice.

**Q: What’s the difference between the nets you use?**

**R3:** To catch prawns, we need ‘Yendhu valai’ ; to catch fish we need ‘Kanni valai’.

**R1:** There are 3 to 4 different types of prawn catching nets. ‘Yendhu valai’, ‘Visuru valai’ can be used to catch prawns. Ennore’s Kuppams (Kattukuppam and Mugadwarakuppam) fishers use ‘Suthuvalai’. We don’t use such nets. They also use ‘Aravalai’.

**Q: What are different types of prawns?**

**R2:** Karuperraa, Velleraa, Valimberra, Chethrra and Chemmerkkera.

**Q: Is there any relation between moon waxing, new moon days and full moon days?**

**R1:** During new moon days the flood flow would be high, at that time the prawns would go and settle in the pits/deeper parts of the river. Though they crawl towards banks, they would not come much closer to banks, on those days, the prawns would have limitations to move towards the banks because of high flood. The amount of flood flow would reduce on consecutive days after the new moon day and raise again to next new moon day. We used to say ‘No prawns could be caught because of high tidal flow (vella perukku)’

**Q: Which time do you prefer to catch prawns? Is it during high tide or low tide?**

**R1:** Everyone used to catch prawns only during low tide (vatham); during high tide we used to take rest. The prawns would come closer and gather when the water level (low tide) is reduced. Most of the places in the river would have prawns in the river.

**Q: Who would sell the prawns?**

**R1:** My mother would sell the prawns which I would get from the river. I stopped catching prawn since I got married. Because in the market we face many issues while selling the prawns with drunk men who would quarrel with us, rowdies atrocities. Those people would ask the prawns rating Rs.500 for just Rs.150. It would be hard for us to sell it for such a low rate. We would sell prawns by gathering them as small piles, not by weighing measurements.

**R3:** We would do it as a retail business in Athipattu market and in Pudhunagar market.

**Q: wouldn’t you take the prawns to any other outside market?**

**R1:** If we catch 20-30 kilograms of prawns we would go to Kasimedu fishing market to sell it at an auction (people would get a good amount of prawns only during NE monsoon season) and that would be bought with a very lower price. We won’t get our eligible compensation for our hard work at that time. Prawn rating Rs. 3000 would be bought only for Rs.1500 because of the season (NE monsoon). Our community faces most difficulties in this society during rainy seasons. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. We only carry an umbrella in the rain to catch prawns; we have faced all the hardship in the rains and winds of that season to catch prawns and sell them in the market. During that season, by coming back home after selling the prawns some would get sick and require some 2 days rest to recover. Then we have to start again.

**[00:35:00]**

**Q: You mean that you have issues with marketing the prawns?**

**R1:** There should be a common market with a tax system; then only if any issues like drunken men abusing a retailer in the market can be conditioned by the tax collectors.

**Q: When was the last time you caught prawns?**

**R3:** I couldn’t go as I met with an accident.

**R1:** It’s been 17 years since I had been fishing/prawn catching; I stopped fishing since my marriage.

**Q: What's the status of the river?**

**R1:** Our livelihood is spoiled because of the ‘Chettinad’ coal yard, Harbors (ports) and EB (Electricity board -Tangedco). They have dumped the sand dredged from sea and the ash into the river and the river has reduced its size. We were only dependent on this livelihood, all these were a big hit to our livelihood and we are completely lost. We are traditional fishers/prawn pickers, we also use nets. But ‘Kuppathars’ (Dominant/General fishing community) started doing all this fishing work. As we couldn’t access the river from a distance, all out ‘Paadu’ are owned by them. They come from Ennore and catch fish/prawns in Kattupalli.

**Q: Do you have your own Paadu?**

**R1:** Yes, we had the Paadu system. We were catching fish/prawns with hope as we had the ‘Paadu’ system earlier. Dominant fishing community individuals would have 10-15 logs. They would catch fishes/prawns for all the years. If they don’t come to the ‘Paadu’ and appear after a few days and while then If we (Irular community) were catching prawns/fishes at that specific ‘Paadu's', we have to leave the ‘Paadu’ immediately. We could use the ‘Paadu’ if they wish and give us 2 or 3 ‘Paadu’, if not we have to leave the place to them.

**Q: Is that the present situation or in the past?**

**R1:** It’s the same every time. We have to choose other places. We had our own ‘Paadu’ and left it to them because of these kinds of issues. They would scold us badly and it would be a huge issue if we claim our rights. We would go fishing/prawn catching regularly from ‘Aadi’ month (mid-July-mid-Aug) to ‘Chithirai’ month.

**Q: Is that stopped now?**

**R1:** Because of ash pollution and encroachment, our river width has reduced and our livelihood has stopped. When the river was larger, we would pick prawns wherever we went and also catch fishes wherever we went. Currently all the places have become muddy (cheru) and ‘Irungkeluthi’ fish population has increased, it’s a poisonous fish. Our people would get poked by that fish in the river.

**Q: How does ‘irunkeluthi’ fish look?**

**R1:** It does look similar to catfishes and it would have 3 spikes on it; while catfish would have only 2 spikes on it. If we touch it would not react and it would be silent. But if we touch and squeeze it(trying , it would start whirling (swirl) and the spike would hit people. If the fish hit the catchers at 10:00 AM, the pain because of its poison would preval till the next morning 10:00 AM.

**[00:40:05]**

**Q: Is there any other impact because of Irunkelithi's poison to the body?**

**R1:** All the nerves (Narambu) in the body would have pain; people would be intended to attend suicide because of pain across the body.

**Q: Have you been hit by Irunkelithi's** **fish?**

**R1:** I have been hit by the fish thrice. First 2 times I had severe pain, when the fish hit me for the third time, one person gave me medicine. After that I was hit by that fish 10 times, but I had no pain because of the medicine, which was so powerful.

**Q: Who gave the medicine to you?**

**R1:** The person was from Andhra, he also belonged to our Irular community. It was traditional country medicine. The medicine has to be consumed. Currently my uncle in Palaverkadu is giving medicine to affected people. People would cry after getting hit by the fish, they could laugh/smile once they took that medicine, the medicine is instantaneous.

In the sea we have ‘Thumbi’, ‘ooran’ fishes, all these are poisonous species in the sea. ‘Vaalkadayan’ (sea snake) in the sea is also poisonous. Those species wouldn’t come to the river. But in the past those snakes have visited the creek. Currently those marine species couldn’t come to the creek because river space is minimized.

**Q: Is still half the people who are catching fish/picking prawns actively as you said earlier?**

**R1:** Yes; near ‘[Matha kovil](https://goo.gl/maps/D47UTA9XrMexgkjz8)’ (Mother mary’s shrine) people reside in huts to pick prawns/catch fishes. There are 10 huts at that place. People from this place also go there for fishing.

**Q: Has the prawns been impacted by the ash pollution and effluent discharge in the river?**

**R1:** Prawns growth and production has been reduced and also our livelihood has declined. Earlier there used to be small channels, and in those channels would have crabs (Kattu nandu). Mangroves (Thillan chedi) would be present along the canals. Crabs would be present beneath the Mangroves. Because of the coal-ash deposition, Mangrove's growth at that place has reduced and lost its habitat at that place. Those channels were dug for the salt pans which existed at that place. Now all those canals have vanished because of the ash blockages.

**Q: What are the lost canals/channels?**

**R1:** Industries are built over many canals.

**Q:** Would you catch prawns in those canals?

**R1:** Along the canals there would be some small pond-like structure with salt water, we would catch prawns, crabs and fishes in that pond-like structure. Now all that has been flattened by ashes and industries has been built over it. Now our livelihood has been minimized. Earlier,we would go straight into the canals and come back. As we weren’t going to those place for long time, Ennore (Kattukuppam and Mugdwara Kuppam) fishers stated to claim those ‘Paadu’ (fishing grounds) as only less catchers would go to pick prawns/catch fishes with limited number of days in a year (relative to Ennore fishers)

**Q: What’s the difference between the prawns caught 25 years back and prawns that are caught now?**

**R1:** Before 25 years, we would earn wherever we go to catch/pick prawns. Nature was spread wide and it was connected to all. We can get one kilogram of prawn in just 2 hours. But, at present if we need one kilogram of prawn; if we start by 9 AM, we have to pick prawns till 3 PM. It would take such a long time for us. Sometimes, it’s easy for us to catch 1kg of prawns in just 1 hour.

**[00:45:15]**

**Q: Are there any changes in prawns’ health?**

**R1:** Yes, the prawn’s health has reduced.

**Q: Do prawns have toxicity because of the pollution?**

**R1:** Prawns pulsating (Thudippu) capacity would be reduced when the chemical/oil flow in the river. The prawns would float while the industrial effluents are discharged into the river. The effluent water would go back, after that the water would have some mixtures of the effluents that would look like water filtered from oil. At that time the prawns would die immediately after being taken out from water.

**Q: Is there any connection between the prawns' health and ash?**

**R1:** No; nothing like that.

**Q: What people are doing for their livelihood as the river spread has reduced and prawns’ population has diminished? How are people managing these situations?**

**R1:** We have no other option. We have to adapt to the situation.

**Q: Are they going for any other job?**

**R1:** They would go for any job that they get. People are going for Painting work, Mason work, Cutting wooden logs and such kinds of jobs. These people would go fishing/prawn catching if it’s required.

**Q: Are there any interesting stories regarding prawn catching?**

**R1:** I am more interested in catching crabs. During my young age we would go to catch crabs; my brother would accompany me; we would carry a bag with us. There would be crab nests in the Mangroves, the crabs’ would be huge (expressing the crabs’s size by opening the hand in front for his chest to a ¾ foot \* ½ foot). In a day we would be able to catch 2-3 clusters (kothu) of crabs; we would sell it by arranging them as piles (kooru), a pile would weigh 2-2.5 kilograms. I am more interested in catching crabs. We used to catch ‘Kattu nandu’, which would be green in color. I have caught the crabs by holding them with my hands along my stomach; chest. The crab could have bitten me anyhow while catching crabs in those positions. It was a good thing that I escaped from the crab bite.

**Q: Did you catch the crab in the river bed?**

**R1:** We would check for the crabs by submerging into the water. They would sit inside the water, with their heads out above the water, the water would be 3-4 ft, they change their position based on the flood/tide level. I was playing in the water while searching for crabs by submerging in the river; while I was flipping in the water, the crab exactly hit my body in the stomach; I just grabbed the crab and it weighed 1 kilogram. The crab could have bitten me, but it didn’t bite at that time. I just tapped the crab and it went away from the body and again I caught the crab. We bought the crab and tied its claws with its body. I shared the income by selling the crab with 9 people; even now people used to portray me stating that I shared income with 9 people by giving each Rs.200 by selling the crab. The only crab was sold for Rs.1500. The rate would differ based on the seasons. Now it’s rate is higher; during covid time, the rate was lower. If a crab weighs one kg, then its rate would be Rs.1700-1800. A normal crab would be sold for Rs.300-400.

**Q: When was your last crab catch?**

**R1:** I left this work (fishing in the river) 17 years ago. Even now I can go, but I lost interest. There is a tool to catch the crab, it’s just an iron rod which would have a hook at one end to catch the crab. I would use the rod to find it in the bore and place my hand in its mouth knowing that it would be biting me and cause pain and bleeding. We have to resist the pain and catch the crabs; My younger brother used to watch me with interest as I would be catching the crabs wildly.

**Q: Are those crabs available at present?**

**R1:** Yes, but not like before.

**Q: Why is that so?**

**R1:** The fly ash has spread in the river and the Mangroves got destroyed; the canals got destroyed. There are no places for the crabs to build their nests. People are using crab nets to catch them; they just remove the crab from the net after it is caught in the net. It’s been used for a long time by Kuppathars (dominant river fishing community). We don’t use those nets, we only catch them by hands; which keeps the crabs population to grow/sustain. The nets would yield 100 crabs at the place where we would only catch 10 crabs; because of that crabs production has declined. 800 female crabs would produce 1 lakh crabs, these net catches stops the growth of the crabs. Our livelihood has changed, industries are the reason for the loss of livelihood.

**Q: Has your livelihood changed?**

**R1:** Earlier we used to live separately as small groups; we find it hard to sleep and commute to the place where we fish. But at present, everyone can easily commute with their motorbike to fishing sites. Even non-fishers would come to the place and claim the place as their ‘Paadu’ (fishing ground), would not give space to us. There are individuals who work in industries in shifts and catch fishes/prawns with nets. By the time we walk from our place to the river, any other person would come on bike and would have started the catching. Most people in Ennore have employment. But we lack employment. People (from other communities) used us and got employment. Now the river depth has reduced (meadu aaiduchu).

**Q:Who are the reasons for slits in the river?**

**R1:** Tamil Nadu Electricity board, Harbour (port) and Chettinad coal yard are the reasons for the elevation of the river bed. The port dredged the sea sand to harbor the coal carrying ship movements and dumped it on the river as they viewed it as an empty place rather than dumping in the sea itself. The sea got deeper, the river/floodplains bed got elevated. In some places industries were built. The government decided to desilt the river, but if the river was desilted deeper, we won’t have livelihood; there was a meeting organized concerning our livelihood.

It was said that an employment offer would be given to 100 Irular community individuals and 100 ‘Kuppathan’ (Dominant fishing community). But all the job offers were taken by ‘Kuppathans’. I have attended 2 such meetings held some 3 years back, we were invited from Nettukuppam from their village ‘letterhead’ stating asking for employment as our livelihood is severely impacted. 50 people from Nandiambakkam Irular settlement (colony), 50 people from Palamedu and 50 people from Mariamma nagar participated in the meeting. All the TNEB employment was taken by them.

**[00:56:00]**

**Q: Have there any changes in the prawns over the years?**

**R1:** During new moon days in earlier times, the prawn size would differ. If we get a smaller one on any new moon day, on the next new moon day the prawn size would be larger and the size of the prawns also change based on the places. At present all the prawns are the same size because of the retarded growth due to the ash, nature (ecology) is lost, all the flora has died. Algaes is important food for the prawns, algaes died once ash was deposited. Earlier ‘leaf algae’ (elai paasai) would be everywhere in the creek. If we hit the algae, the prawns would jump out of it, small prawns (podi eral) would live inside the algae; prawns food (theeni) has reduced. Ash is full of chemicals, as the prawns habitat is impacted by ash, its strength and growth has reduced.

**Q: How do you identify its health?**

**R1:** Earlier we used to get the prawns with a good size of 20-25 counts (grams) anywhere and anytime. Now it’s hard to get a prawns with 10 counts (gram) size. The count measurement is used in the prawn aquaculture ponds. I have worked in prawn farming. I would do the sampling. I was working with prawn farming around 2008. I would also stay there for a couple of days. They would ask me about the prawn's growth. There would be a doctor in the farm, he would sample the prawns and identify diseases like jaundice, pox, etc. I would ask how to identify the pox, he informed me that if the prawn shell unpacks itself, then the prawn would have pox. Because of the prawn farm there are possibilities for the prawns in the river to get pox and Jaundice. In prawn farms, they would medicate some prawns and leave it in the ponds, they would spread those medicines with their excretions.

**Q: Were you able to find if the prawns in the river had diseases?**

**R1:** I would be aware if I see the prawns but others won't be aware of it. Others would just point to ash and industries for prawn loss in the river.

**[1:00:30]**

**Q: Are you still working in the prawn farms?**

**R1:** No. All those farms have been closed as the government has ordered not to grow the natural habitat eatables in aquaculture farms.

**Q: When was it stopped?**

**R1:** This was stopped by 2009. There are cases where people used to rob the prawns from the aquaculture farms when they couldn’t find the prawns during their catch. These cases regarding the prawns can’t withstand in courts. It’s because the aquaculture owners are doing the similar livelihood as prawn catchers and they are growing the prawns with compulsion against nature. In such cases the court has ordered not to grow prawns in aquafarms as it’s bad to farm the naturally growing edible species in natural water bodies.

**Q: Aren’t there any prawn aquaculture farms?**

**R1:** To my knowledge there are no prawn aquacultures. I think there are 2 aquaculture farms near Kalanji.

**Q: How is it possible to allow the aquaculture the Government Order to ban?**

**R1:** I am not sure about?

**Q: Where do the fiddler crabs live in the creek/river?**

**R1:** Fiddler crabs live across the banks of the river in all the regions. When they shake their arms, it would appear as if they are calling them to challenge the people watching it to catch. Some would say that they are beautifully grazing on the river bank. Their action would be pretty. Some others would describe their action as washing clothes manually.

**Q: Wouldn’t people catch the fiddler crab?**

R1: No; they are so small. Only some migrant North Indian laborers would catch them to consume as they weren’t aware it’s not edible.

**Q: Where do they specifically live in the river?**

**R1:** They only live on the bank and not inside the river. During high tide they would close their nests to safeguard themselves from flood and during low tide they would come out of their nests. When we go near the crabs, they would suddenly get into their bore nests.

**Q: Do you know about their growth/life cycle?**

**R1:** They would grow anywhere in the Ennore and I am not sure about the life cycle.

**Q: Are there different types of fiddler crabs?**

**R1:** There are two types, one would be red in color and other would be in red color.

**Q: How much are fiddler crabs connected to the environment?**

**R1:** It’s part of a river. There are water snakes, ‘Moiikku’ crabs which would be huge. Fiddler crabs would have one small claw and a large claw. ‘Moiiku’ crabs also have one larger claw and other small claws.

**Q: Would people consume ‘Moiikku’ crabs?**

**R1:** Some people would eat it and some would not?

**R3:** People used to consume it as medicine if they have a cold, phlegm, cough.

**Q: What do fiddler crabs consume?**

**R1:** Fiddler crab's basic food is sand, it will keep on consuming sand. If we watch the crab at their non nesting place, it would keep on consuming sand. The crabs would form sand balls and consume it.

**Q: Are there any species that would consume Fiddler crabs?**

**R1:** Foxes would feed on fiddler crabs; Other crabs, fishes would feed on the fiddler crabs.

**Q: How do the foxes consume Fiddler crabs?**

**R1:** Yes. I have seen it. There are more foxes around rivers.

**Q: Are there any other species like birds that consume the Fiddler crab?**

**R1:** There is a bird called ‘Kotta-ullan’ that would consume Fiddler crab but not fishes. It’s a large bird and would look beautiful. They have brown beaks. Their beak shape is apt to catch the fiddler crabs. Birds would catch the fiddler crab when the crabs are about to enter into their nests.

**Q:** **Why aren't people consuming fiddler crabs?**

**R1:** Not sure, no one would catch the fiddler crabs and traditionally no one would consume the fiddler crabs. Only some of the North Indian migrant labor workers would consume those crabs as they could only catch fiddler crabs and not the crabs which we used to catch as the crabs would bite them.

**Q: Have you ever been bit by crabs?**

**R1:** The crab grabbed my wrist and bit me, I had severe pain and when I tried pulling the grabbing crab from my hand, I got my wrist teared and had bleeding.

**Q: Are the fiddler crabs present in the polluted parts of the river?**

**R1:** These crabs population would be higher next to the mangroves. Their habit was lost and after replantation of the mangroves, the crabs were back.

**Q: How the river sediments have changed over the years, from which people used to pick prawns?**

**R1:** The sediment got slurry. In a 20 feet deep river, the 5 feet would be slurry, only the rest 15 feet would have water. Even if we submerge (muguradhu) to pick prawns they (Dominant fishers) aren’t letting us submerge starting with we are using nets to catch fish/prawns in the river. If we raise our concern to Ennore fishers (Kattukuppam and Mugadwarakuppam) on restricting our traditional methods of prawn picking by submerging (mulzugi era thadavaradhu), they would ask if we (Irular community) are part of fisheries department cooperative society. Their statements are that we can do prawn picking by submerging( mulzugi era thadavaradhu) if we are part of society and not if we aren't part of the society.

**Q: How does the slurry sediment look?**

**R1:** It would be black and very slurry. We would keep our leg in the sediment and then we would submerge. In the submerge we would be inside the water for 5 to 10 seconds, we had full breath holding capacity. Now we have lost all that energy, only people who love nature would have such energy and at present, we are surrounded by ash on all the sides; dust is on all the sides of our place. We couldn't hold our breath even for 2 seconds. We breathe ash and dust. If we mob our house floor in the morning, while we are back to the home in the evening again the floor would be filled with dust. The dust deposits over Television, cupboard racks. All the houses would be dusted.

**Q: Where does the dust come from?**

**R1:** All those dusts are ash dusts; ashes fly to our place from the container trucks carrying ashes on NCTPS-Athipattu road. The ashes would fill our eyes, it’s tough to walk along the roads and it’s hard to ride the bikes on that road.

**Q: How toxic the ash dusts are?**

**R1:** If we stand on the ash our feet would be itching. Earlier we used to apply mud over our body and we had no issues. But if we play over the ashes for just half an hour, our body would itch because of its chemical composition.

**Q: How does the ash smell?**

**R1:** Ashes are burned soils.

**[01:15:00]**

**Q: How does the slurry mud smell?**

**R1:** It would smell quite like drainage.

**Q: When the river was dumped with sand?**

**R1:** from 2003 it was dumped for some time. The sand was dumped in 3 places. One was near the NCTPS main gain, another place was opposite to Kamarajar port; the sand was dumped adjacent to the river and during rains, the river is inundated with water as a slurry part of the sand. In one month the inundated slurry would become part of river sediments. We all made this an issue as river depth reduced. Another one was the Chettinad coal yard; a pipeline was laid to pump the dredged sand from the sea to the current coal yard on the west bank. Our prawn catch/picking canals were destroyed. In Karthigai month, we don’t worry about walking a long distance to the river from our palace. We would go near Kasimedu to catch/pick prawns and sell them in Kasimedu. Now we're going to Pazhaverkadu and Kattupalli. The reason is ash. Ennore people directly come to the river with bikes and they catch in the river.

**Q: Would you fish in the black slurry muddy parts of the river?**

**R1:** Sometimes if we have some necessity, we have to get in. We won’t get into the slurry muds, but we have to travel longer to catch fishes/prawns. I would catch prawns if we (family) wish to continue.

**Q: How frequently would you take prawns in your diet?**

**R1:** Prawns have high fat content. If we are preparing for a bodybuilding competition; in general people used to have to follow a 40 day diet prior to the competition date. I have been part of 2 competitions in my young days. In general chicken has less fat content and eggs would have little fat in it. Only if we have fat in our diet, we can have good muscles while we participate in the competition. Thus, I used to consume prawns 3 times a day, then only the mussels would be skinny. If we consume prawns normally at that rate we would get fat and we would get body pain. Because prawns cause high flatulence. If we consume it continuously for a week we would get fat deposition in our body. In my home, we used to consume prawn only once in a year. We should not consume the prawns regularly. Prawns are equal to potatoes.

**[01:20:10]**

**Q: Are the prawns caught from slurry sediments toxic?**

**R1:** Only in places where 20 ft deep has been dredged, there would be 5 feet of slurry muds. But in places the river low is faster, the river won’t be that much deep. We used to catch prawns in those places. In the Ennore region, the river would be deeper. Prawns require muds to their habitat and to consume; prawns consume sediment/sand. Sediments would have the iron nutrient content that they required. Now the prawns are consuming the ashes instead of the sands, it’s toxic for them and life and health is reduced as it consumes ashes.

**Q: Can you explain about the ‘Paadu’ system you had?**

**R1:** I left my Paadu now. I am going to cathing, but if they (family) asks for prawn, then I would go for the catch. Thus, I left my ‘Paadu’ to another fisher/prawn catcher, it’s near ‘Chettinad coal yard’. I would go by bike, catch prawns with nets and would come back. The other person was coming daily and I left the ‘Paadu’ and am doing another job now. There are different Paadu in the river. One is Subbahraalam, which is salt pan (Alam), my father and uncle (father’s younger broter - Chithapa) had their ‘Paadu’ in Subbaraalam. After their death, someone dredged that ‘Paadu’ and started to claim the ‘Paadu’. If a person is not using the ‘Paadu’ for some 10 days and if another person is continuously using the same ‘Paadu’ for 10 days, then it would automatically become their ‘Paadu’.

**Q: Does the toxicity of the river change over season?**

**R1:** This season, chemical water (effluent) discharge would be there in the river as there is no rain, as it’s summer, the high tide won’t be lesser. During the rainy season, the high tide flood would be more from sea, the water would be pure. Sometimes we would use the river water to cook food while staying next to the river in the small tents. All the places would only have drinking water, if 10 feet flood is experienced 5 ft would be fresh water and 5 ft would be salt water. Water level would be high (Perukkam) and prawn production would also be high. During that time we can see more Northern prawns (Vadakeethi eral) that come down from the North. Prawns’ size would be bigger, each person would catch 20-30 kg in a day. Everyone likes that season, even if it’s raining people would go and catch/pick prawns with hard work.

**[01:25:00]**

**Q: How have these things changed life? sedimental change, slurry and all that.**

R1: No one is there to voice out our issues, ‘Thadavukaarnga’ (rub-ers); our livelihood was completely dependent on prawn picking. There were some people who voiced out our issue and benefited out of it; we never got benefited. That’s all we are all, we should make our livelihood by any other job. I would do any job which I like, currently I am going to cut wooden logs. But no one should say that I am not a fisherman, I have used nets that much in fishing; my nets would fly to catch prawns/fish. I love this work; now I am in a situation where I can’t do this job anymore. Our livelihood has become deficit. We used to throw nets at hip level water; my elder brother used to throw nets at chest level water; another brother used to throw nets by getting into the water and throwing them repeatedly. If we start by early morning 2 AM, we would catch prawns by nets till sunrise. Our family used to catch prawns like this. Now no one from our community is doing this work (Thozhil). My father used to be a wood log cutter and my mother used to be a prawn pricker. But none of us are doing this job. If I go to Ennore with friends (from the community) I would use ‘Suthu valai’ (curve nets), ‘Nandu katcha’ (catch crab basket) and ‘Aravalai’. If I go to ‘Pazhaverkaadu’, I would go to sea, hold the engine (a part of sea fishers work to hold the engine), would use nets in the sea; Even I know all these, I (we) am not part of the fisheries corporation society, we don’t exercise our rights because we aren’t part of the cooperative society. Normal fishermen would say we can’t give society cards to prawn pickers (Thadavukaaranga). Because the Kuppathars (General fishers) are living along the river and we are 20 km away from the river. You can see the ‘Kuppathars’ would have the villages along the rivers and their boats would also be parked lining in the river. As they have parked the boat next to their village, people would know who boat has been parked and the boats would be safe. If we park our boats in the river which is too far from here. If some steal the boats and change the boat painting, there would be no idea about the boat after that. My son is 17 years older, he has no idea what my traditional livelihood is; those livelihoods are over with my generation. If we were living next to the river, my son would have learned about my livelihood. Now we are 20 kms away from the river, and now my son has to find a livelihood based on where we live.

**Q: Why have you come here from the river bank?**

**R1:** We lived in the place where EB (NCTPS) 1st stack (stage III) stands now. There were around 50 families. At that place father used to work as a fish lifter (meen thookuravaru). Fish would be removed from the net and collected in the basket. My father used to lift a basket and ship it to a nearby place from the boat, and was working for daily wages (kooli). From there we were shifted to ‘Athipattu Pudhunagar’. If we were living in that space, we would been fishing in the sea and we would have been part of the fisheries department’s society.

**Q: Why did you come here from ‘Pudhunagar’?**  
**R1:** My wife was from here (Nandiampakkam Irular settlement, called as Nandiyambakkam irular colony; colony is term used to refer living spaces of scheduled caste/ scheduled tribe people). In Pudhu nagar all the people who received money have sold their land/houses and left the place. Only our house and my Aunt (Chithi; mother’s younger sister or father’s younger brother’s wife) have houses from our community. I would go to the river and my wife would be in the home alone, at nights we face issues like tapping the doors, sighting (etti paakradhu) the house.Thus I decided to leave the place and settle with our relatives here. Those lands were given by TNEB and also employment was given; it was a double benefit for us. The salary for the employment was Rs.500 per day, our people used to earn Rs.500 per day at that time. They denied government employment as only 1 day earning was given as a salary for one month. Our people were stupid at that time, that’s how I could see. AT that time, it was seen as earning per day greater than earning the same amount for a month. Now people who got employment are earning Rs.40,000, 50,000 and 60,000.

**Q: Has no one from your community employed in EB?**

**R1:** Only one person has been employed and he has passed away. My father has given the employment in written statement to a person in Ennore region named Akash (name changed) as his successor (Varisu). He was not able to do that job, thus he has compensated the job for Rs.25000.

**Q: How many years have you been here from Athipattu Pudhunagar?**

**R1:** I came here from Athipattu pudhunagar 18 years ago.

**Q: When did you come to Athipattu Pudhunagar from Ennore?**

**R1:** I am not aware of the year as I was a kid then. I was only aware of these things when I was 10 years old. I am not sure, we were resettled when I was maybe 1 year older.

**Q: How many families are here?**

R1: There would be 200 families.

**-01:33:47**

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**Audio 2 - 00:03:49 hours**

**00:00:00**

R1: We have been part of the Fishers association in Kasimedu, Chennai. They only present themselves as fishers (Pattinathavary; the general and dominant fishers community) and us. They finger points us fishers and they are getting benefited out of it, not letting us to getting benefitter out of it. Because of that we said we were not interested to be part of that association. We told them,”you are playing games with us”

RK: Do ‘Thadavukaranag (catching prawns by tracing the river bed:the Irular community)’ have a fisheries society identity card?

R1: Yes.

R3: People (Irular community) in Pazhaverkadu have that; but people in here don’t have that, no one has that.

R1: If we are part of the fisheries society there are lot of subsidiaries.

RK: Is it possible for initiative from the community to get the fisheries society identity card?

R1: If we need that card, we need to show them where we used to go fishing. If they are coming for enquiry, we are too long from the River, if they ask,”will you safeguard your fishing boats, nets if provided?”. If we are near the River we can comment about it. We are so far from the River, if they (bureaucrats) even get us things, it would be wasted. That’s why we are thinking so much. Society is a larger agency.

GV: You told about a person who was running a case on housing?

R1: You tell me when you are free; Sunday also it’s possible.

GV: What’s his name?

R1: His name is \_\_\_\_ (C1).

RK: How do you see the society (fisheries society: government agency)?

R1: Society is a good thing; we would be getting benefitted, it’s really a good thing. A person came and told he would help us get the society identity card; I also informed those things for our people. But our people were not cooperating for that.

GV: You told me that you got cheated 4 - 5 times. How did the people get cheated?

R1: It can’t be stated openly, people have been cheated in such things. Private individuals has collected taxes from us; people have taken us somewhere in the name of something for their own benefits. After all these, when we make interventions in good things; people are not ready to believe. Their thought is that “we might get cheated”. They do not understand the importance of the ‘fishery society’ and its beneficiaries. If the fisher is dead after joining society, through society they would be getting some 2 to 3 lakh money from the government. But what people are commenting about is,”Why should I only get the money after my husband's death? (enga veettu-kaar setha apro thaan enaku andha kaasu varanumaa?). Before there was something called a society tax, if we pay that tax we would get finance from it. If our village is flooded, for that we would get 10,000 rupees (ooru thaviuyum boodhu oru 10,000 rooba vandhudu); in this we have good subsidies, we can get boats, we can get engines, all such things would be served. Society is a good thing for us; society tax is not going to let us down, it’s an important thing for the fishers’ community.

**-00:03:39**

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