

Fishing in the Troubled Water: Media Framing of the Human Rights Violations at Palk Bay

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This study aims at appropriating the social and print media construct and coverage of human rights violations in the post Eelam war between Indian Tamil fishermen and their conflict with Sri Lankan Navy in the Palk Bay. The alleged intrusion of the Indian trawlers into the Sri Lankan water and the rebuttal by Sri Lankan Navy leading to the torture, arrest and at times, death of Indian fishermen is being widely articulated and debated in Indian and foreign media. An attempt has been made here using the framing theory to investigate how human rights violations were constructed in Indian print media (*Dinamani* and *The Hindu*) and social media (Twitter).

Keywords: Palk Bay, Indian fishermen, Sri Lanka, human rights, LTTE

Historically and socially, the umbilical cord bondage between the Indian fishermen and their counterpart in Northern Sri Lanka permeated a cultural oneness and the fishermen on the both sides of the Palk Bay lived happily, enjoying the marine resources mutually for generations. The Palk Bay is a strait between the Tamil Nadu state of India and the Mannar district of the Northern Province of the island nation of Sri Lanka. However, the ethnic conflict that erupted between the Tamil people of Northern Province of Sri Lanka and Sinhalese from the early 1980s to 2009, completely changed the sharing of the marine resources of the Palk Bay. The strong hold and the powerful Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was literally controlled the Palk Bay of the Northern part of the Sri Lanka, left with a mutual understanding leaving the Indian fishermen to explore, develop and technologically advance in their fishing practices and harvested the rich marine resources of the Palk Bay till the battle brought LTTE and the ethnic conflict to an end in 2009.

In the tip of the Indian peninsula down the Rameswaram island, the Palk Bay is a shallow stretch of sea with an average depth of 9 meters, stretching over 137 kms with a width of 137 to 641 kms stretch separating India from Sri Lanka with the Gulf of Mannar on the other side of the sea. The Palk Bay with its shallow stretch is not allowing large vessels to cross. However, the shallow stretch is contributing to the lack of turbulence making it a calm basin. The Palk Bay with its positional advantages received abundant and seasonal inflow of natural nutrients allowing to an exceptional fish breeding zone, a natural resource of marine life especially of prawns and pearls (Scholtens, 2012).

The richness of Palk Bay and its natural resources has been a bone of contention historically between the Indian state of the Tamil Nadu and the Sri Lanka. Traditionally, the inhabitants of southern part of Tamil Nadu, which was ruled by Pandyas were identified

with rich pearl harvest from Palk Bay terming “Pandyas kingdom as inhabitants of the pearls”. In spite of the geographical division, the marine resources of the Palk Bay were sourced and shared by the coastal fishermen of the both the countries peacefully and mutually, since both the coastal areas of the Palk Bay was inhabited by the Tamil population. However, the British colonial rule and its aftermath led to geopolitical alignments and mutual readjustments during the post independent era, where the most crucial and important island “Katchatheevu” is being given to the Sri Lankan government by the Indian government, sowing the seeds of conflict over the territorial right of fishing in the Palk Bay.

Often Indian fishermen are alleged to have stretched and crossed their limits to harvest the rich prawn and other fisheries on the other side of the Palk Bay. This led to minor exchanges which were amicably settled till 1980s. However, the ethnic conflict led by LTTE against the Sri Lankan government took a strong root and LTTE sea tiger wing took command of the coastal areas of Palk Bay from the Sri Lankan side, mutual understanding they allowed the Indian Tamil fishermen to fish in Sri Lankan water, which went on unabated till the ethnic war and LTTE came to an end in 2009. Meanwhile, with the advent of the Blue revolution the Indian government helped the fishermen to upgrade their fishing gears and instruments, which resulted in the rapid development of the pattern of fishing. At the end of the war, when the Sri Lankan Navy took control of the Palk Bay, the conflict between the Indian fishermen and the Sri Lankan Navy become a continuous happening, with the Indian fishermen charging the Sri Lankan Navy of torturing of Indian fishermen, capturing their boats and even killing them in the waters of Palk Bay.

The Indian fishing and international community have been leveling allegation of gross human rights violations committed by the Sri Lankan Navy on Indian fishermen. This back footed confinement totally demoralized the Palk Bay fishing communities and they lost their hopes of the bright fishing days. In spite of strong resentments continued suffering and killing of Palk Bay fishermen at the hands of Lankan Navy, the government of India was blamed for their indifference and apathetic attitude towards the Indian fishermen plights. Meanwhile, the regime change in the state government of Tamil Nadu and the rise of former chief minister J. Jayalalithaa lend a great hope among the Indian Palk Bay fishermen that a strong leader like her with a decisive mandate may bring solution to the fishermen's problem. However, in spite of her strong reactions, which created inner current between the India and Sri Lanka foreign relations, she could not break the ice as the violations against the Palk Bay fishermen continued unabated. Though efforts of Jayalalithaa brought the captured and tortured fishermen back to India many times, the problem continued to occupy the central point of Tamil politics. Indeed, this made the then government of Tamil Nadu passed a resolution restoring the Katchatheevu back to India in 2013 in the state assembly. This was hailed by all sections of the people, especially the Palk Bay fishermen. When this triangular current of politics got entangled between the state of Tamil Nadu, the Indian government and Sri Lankan government, the Parliament elections of 2014 came about in India. Jayalalithaa was touted as alternative to the Congress and BJP. Contrary to the expectations, Narendra Modi led BJP won a land slide victory marginalizing the Congress party.

During the period, the Tamil Nadu witnessed electrifying election speeches and promises, especially by Modi on the plight of Tamil Nadu fishermen. During the election campaign in the state, Modi once said “Tamil Nadu and Gujarat are coastal states and have a history of sea-based trade in the fields of trade and commerce. As coastal and border state we have similar problems. Gujarat fishermen (with Pakistan) and Tamil Nadu fishermen (with Sri Lanka) face similar problems” (Nairita, 2013).

In the light of the above observations, the fishermen strongly believed that the regime change at the centre would bring some relief to the two decades old conflict at Palk Bay. In contrast, the BJP led government at the centre also followed the same foreign policies which were practiced by the then Congress government.

“There is a general perception that the then Congress led UPA government consistently backed the Sri Lankan government on their battle with the LTTE both with arms, training and geo political logistic support to combat the most dreaded freedom fighters of Tamil Eelam” (Akilan, 2013). Due to this covert support to the Sri Lankan regime the then Congress government at the Centre and their coalition partner DMK led state government faced severe criticism from the Tamils across its diaspora, immaterial of their political leanings. Such a scenario forced the Indian fishermen of Palk Bay confining them to fishing in the limited sea borders, losing their livelihood. In this context, this study aims to investigate as to how the Indian print media (national English daily *The Hindu*, the regional Tamil daily *Dinamani*) and social media (Twitter) looked at the human rights violations during the Congress and BJP regimes.

Human Rights Violations as a Frame

The arrest, torturing, shooting are becoming order of the day for the Tamil Nadu fishermen. The causes are the instances of Indian fishermen being prevented from fishing, facing harassment and arrest by the Sri Lankan Navy, resulting 250 deaths on suspicion of the Indian trawlers aiding LTTE and gun running, while fishing in the area, as reported over the past decades. Sri Lanka Navy had shot and killed 250 Indian Tamil fishermen during past two decades (*Dinamani*, July 16, 2008). When the Tamil fishermen case came up for hearing in Madurai High Court on August 18, 2012, the Tamil Nadu government submitted details of the attack made by Sri Lanka Navy over a period of two decades. According to the figure, there had been 167 incidents of shooting on Indian fishermen by the Sri Lanka Navy between the years 1991 and 2011. As many as 85 fishermen had been killed and 180 injured in these incidents, which took place within the Indian waters.

The Tamil Nadu government constantly reiterates that the Indian fishermen, particularly those from Tamil Nadu, have traditional rights to fish near Katchatheevu, though the Central government has taken the stand that Katchatheevu is an integral part of the Sri Lanka. As the conflict between the Tamil Nadu fishermen and Sri Lankan Navy intensified, the people around the world expressed their opinions which represented their political orientation.

Since the end of the civil war in 2009 in Sri Lanka, there have been countless conflicts between the Sri Lankan Navy and Indian fishermen. The media are by far the most important source of information about conflicts for most the people that have a considerable influence over citizens' perception and opinion. Entman (1993) states that framing was essential selection of a perceived reality and present them saliently and forcefully in a communicating text. Typically framing involves a diagnosis tone with an evolution and prescription in the textual analysis with a causal interpretation. In yet another interpretation, Tiung (2009) looks at framing as a media capacity to visualize and present a reality till the perceived meaning reaches the target groups. Framing is otherwise the content coverage of the media with phrases and linkages in order to create a desire public opinion (Dunaway & Marisa, 2007). Though framing theory assumes mass media as potential tools in the public opinion building, it also needs to be contextualized by the political orientation and cultural indicators of the audience characteristics (Scheufele, 2007).

With the above premise, the Palk Bay conflict coverage of human rights violations in *The Hindu*, *Dinamani* and Twitter is explored in this study. *The Hindu* and *Dinamani* have given wide coverage and discussed the issue in terms of news, columns and editorials and hence they are chosen for the analysis, whereas Twitter as a social media offered wider opinions of the public and to the point, reflecting and reacting to not only to reality but also to other media and thus chosen for this study.

The emergence of Social media has thrown unlimited scope for the convergence and disposition of the media content, mutually benefited and in the process evolving a new media audience environment in this global scenario. This inter correlation and social interaction strike a unique mediation process that needs to be deconstructed and described for its sheer penetration. The present work is such an attempt to unearth the Print and the Social media coverage of Human rights Violations of Fishermen conflict at the Palk bay.

Most of academicians consider Twitter as easily accessed open source network site, which provide ample amount of tweets and those represent their political orientation. Twitter has more than 190 million registered users and processes about 55 million tweets per day. The number of users and tweets keep on increasing ever days. The events have political significance were debated widely in twitter (Alessio Signorini, 2011). Twitter seems to provide a ready source of data for researchers interested in public opinion and popular communication. As an increasing amount of everyday social interaction is mediated by these systems, servers actively aggregate vast storage of information about user behavior. In comparison to Facebook, which is largely closed-off to the academic community, tweets are small in size, public by default, numerous, and topically diverse (Driscoll & Shawn, 2014). The twitter users freely expressed their views about the conflict. This research has selected social media Twitter as ready source of information to get the public opinion on the human right violations against the Indian fishermen.

Literature Review

Many Indian and foreign scholars worked on the Palk Bay Indian fishermen and Sri Lanka Navy conflict tried to understand the nature of the conflict and its impact on society. The Tamil newspapers have become part of the social institutions that influence events through their coverage. Charu Gupta argued that there is a need to rethink questions of security in the context of people, environment and resources at Palk Bay. His research moves beyond looking at environmental crisis as the sole reason for this conflict. Rather, the research links it to other arenas of society such as economics and politics and attempts to understand coastal conflicts from several overlapping but distinct standpoints including identity, nationalist anxieties, ecology, role of capital, fisher folk (Gupta, 2004).

Hettiarachchi (2007) analyzed in his article titled "Fisheries in the Palk Bay Region: The Indian Factor" argued that the poaching of fishery resources by the Indian fishers on the Sri Lankan side of the Bay resulted not only in significant losses to the economy of the Sri Lanka, but also in severe political problems to the government. He noted that allowing licensed fishing for Indian vessels on the Sri Lankan side of the Bay will not solve the problem of poaching and over exploitation of resources.

In contrast, Suryanarayan (2016) argued that the Palk Bay has never been a barrier; it has been a bridge to link the people of two countries. There also are bonds through marriages, language and ethnicity. He also observed that with the end of the ethnic conflict and the decimation of the Sea Tigers, a new situation has arisen on the Sri Lankan side of the Palk Bay. V. Vivekanandan, the Convener of Association for Release of Innocent Fishermen argued that there is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that trans-border fishing is an

issue in different parts of the world. It seems to be most intractable on the India-Pakistan border. The maritime border between the provinces of Gujarat in India and Sindh in Pakistan remains unsettled, and fishermen on both sides are often caught for fishing in each other's waters. They are then invariably imprisoned, and there are instances of fishermen having spent up to a decade in prison for being caught in foreign territorial waters. Further, he said that the India-Sri Lanka border, especially in the narrow Palk Bay is another hotspot (Vivekanandan, 2008).

Historically, the fishermen on both sides of the Palk Bay are ethnically linked and have freely fished all over the Bay. The Indo-Sri Lankan maritime border agreement of 1974 created a boundary, which was largely ignored by the fishermen on both sides. However, with the start of the civil war in Sri Lanka in 1983, the borders became a matter of concern for the governments of both the India and the Sri Lanka. Since then, there have been hundreds of incidents of arrests and detention of Indian fishermen by Sri Lankan authorities. At times, fishermen caught in the shooting have been killed. Sri Lankan fishermen fishing for tuna on multi-day vessels within the Indian exclusive economic zone (EEZ) also face the possibility of arrest and detention by the Indian authorities.

Johny Stephen argued that how the politics of scale affect a process of dialogue led by civil society actors over fishing conflicts taking place at the Palk Bay. An agreement over fishing rights reached between these fishers in August 2010 remains largely unimplemented, but takes centre stage, which examines the negotiation processes in terms of politics of scale and highlights the various difficulties encountered. In a trans boundary context, national and regional identities at times override local identity and interests, thereby making locally constructed solutions difficult, if not impossible, to implement (Johny, Menon, Scholtens, & Bavinck, 2013).

J Scholtens (2012) tried to provide grass-roots insights into the post-war status of the north Sri Lankan fishing population and how their recent recovery has added a new dimension to the Palk Bay conflict. The article analyzed the relevance of existing and proposed governance responses. Contrary to popular perception in India, the paper argues that since the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka the nature of the conflict in the Palk Bay has changed from one in which Indian trawler fishermen were faced with the Sri Lankan navy, to one which sets them primarily in opposition to the technologically less advanced Sri Lankan fishermen. The literature review in this article endeavored to inquiry into areas that were seen as relevant and would contribute to a better understanding of the framing and the fishermen conflict at Palk Bay which lead to the following research questions.

RQ1: Is there any difference in *Dinamani* and *The Hindu* coverage towards human rights violations against Indian fishermen by Sri Lankan Navy at Palk Bay during the Congress and the BJP government at the Centre?

RQ2: Is there any difference in Twitter responses toward human rights violations against Indian fishermen by Sri Lankan Navy at Palk Bay during the Congress and the BJP government at the Centre?

Methodology

The study focused on framing of the Indian fishermen - Sri Lankan Navy conflict at Palk Bay in selected two newspapers *Dinamani* and *The Hindu* and Social media Twitter using quantitative frame analysis method. Traditionally, the content analysis method used to understand the media content by categorizing them "pro or con", "favourable or unfavourable", or "negative or positive" towards a certain issue. The researchers in this

study have made assumptions based on analysis the categorizing content. The content analyses would treat all negative or positive terms as equally influential, thus ignoring the salience of different text elements and how these combine to influence audience thinking (Entman, 1993).

According to the Rebecca Bruu Carver, frame analysis on the other hand, is attentive to the salience of various elements embedded in a text, so that it is possible to pick out the dominant meaning as well as the more subtle ones. It therefore has the potential of getting beneath the surface of news coverage, exposing any "hidden" meanings, and often comprises many different categories in a coding scheme. Further, he argued that quantitative approaches in the frame analysis tend to be more reliable because they are often based on a predetermined list of categories. Quantitative frame analyses tend to match media content to already-established frame categories and then map the frequency of occurrence of these categories. A quantitative approach is therefore generally more applicable to deductive frame analysis, although quantitative computer-assisted approaches are becoming popular for inductive analyses (Carver, Einar & Jarle, 2012).

An attempt has been made in this study using the frame analysis to investigate how human rights violations were constructed by Indian print and social media. The study period for this work is two years (the last one year of the then Congress and the first one year of the BJP government at the Centre) from May 2013 to May 2015. This period is significant because the country witnessed major changes in from economic to foreign policies.

Dinamani had published 79 news items related to the human rights violations during the period while *The Hindu* published only 11 news items. By adopting the quantitative frame analysis method, we have analyzed these articles and measured them with the help of the 5 point Likert scale. The keywords generated from these news articles used to extract the tweets from the social media Twitter pertain to the fishermen conflict. The keywords are: Tamil fishermen attack, Sri Lankan Navy attack, #Savetamilfishermen, #Saveinnocentfishermen, Tamil fishermen arrest. Keyword search method was adopted to extract the tweets which related to the human rights violations. By using keyword search method, the researcher collected 59 tweets from May 2013 to May 2015 which related to human rights violations. The public responses in social media (Twitter) carefully analyzed by using qualitative frame analysis method, where political deliberations are heavily made.

Analysis

The N value of the Congress is 37 and BJP regime 42 as seen in Table 1. The mean value of the Congress regime is 1.35 and BJP regime 1.38. There is very less difference between the mean values. The result of t test as seen in Table 2 for the *Dinamani* related to human rights violations against the Indian fishermen by Sri Lankan Navy during the Congress and BJP regime + (77) = .191, $p > 0.5$ provided evidence that there is no significant difference at 5 per cent level. The findings show that during both Congress and BJP government at the Centre, there was not much difference in reporting of the Indian fishermen issue in *Dinamani* on the human rights violations by Sri Lankan Navy at the Palk Bay.

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of *Dinamani* stories

<i>Dinamani</i>	Period	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Human rights violations	Congress	37	1.35	.857
	BJP	42	1.38	.492

Table 2. Difference in reporting human rights violations by *Dinamani*

<i>Dinamani</i>		t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
Human rights violations	Equal variances assumed	-.191	77	.849	-.030
	Equal variances not assumed	-.185	55.779	.854	-.030

The N value of the Congress regime is 5 and BJP regime 6 as seen in the Table 3. The mean value of the Congress regime is 1.20 and BJP regime 1.67. The difference between the mean values is 0.47.

Table 3. Descriptive analysis of *The Hindu* stories

<i>The Hindu</i>	Period	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Human rights violations	Congress	5	1.20	.447
	BJP	6	1.67	.516

Table 4. Difference in reporting human rights violations by *The Hindu*

<i>The Hindu</i>		t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
Human rights violations	Equal variances assumed	-1.583	9	.148	-.467
	Equal variances not assumed	-1.606	8.969	.143	-.467

The result of t test as seen in the above Table 4 for the *The Hindu* related human rights violations against the Indian fishermen by Sri Lankan Navy during the Congress and BJP regime + (9) = -1.583, $p > 0.5$ provided evidence that there is no significant difference at 5 per cent level. The findings show that during both Congress and BJP government at the Centre, there was not much difference in reporting of the Indian fishermen issue in *The Hindu* on the human rights violations by Sri Lankan Navy at the Palk Bay.

Table 5. Descriptive analysis of Twitter

<i>Twitter</i>	Period	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Human rights violations	Congress	32	1.59	.560
	BJP	27	1.96	1.055

The N value of the Congress regime is 32 and BJP regime 27 as seen in the Table 5. The mean value of the Congress regime is 1.59 and BJP regime 1.96. The difference between the mean values is 0.37.

Table 6. Difference in representing human rights violations by Twitter

Twitter		T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
Human rights violations	Equal variances assumed	-1.715	57	.092	-.369
	Equal variances not assumed	-1.634	38.016	.111	-.369

The result of t test as seen in Table 6 for the Twitter related human rights violations against the Indian fishermen by Sri Lankan Navy during the Congress and BJP regime + (57) = .1.715, $p > 0.5$ provided evidence that there is no significant difference at 5 per cent level. The findings show that during both Congress and BJP government at the Centre, there was not much difference in the messages on the Indian fishermen issue in Twitter on the human rights violations by Sri Lankan Navy at the Palk Bay.

Conclusion

The conflict between the Indian fishermen and Sri Lankan Navy over the cross-border fishing issue in the Palk Bay have repeatedly been the subject of the newspaper headlines in India and Sri Lanka for more than two decades. During the period from 1983 to 2005, a total 378 Indian fishermen were lost their lives to the conflict. Though Sri Lanka has good foreign relationship with India government, its Navy is involved in serious of human rights violations against the Indian Tamil fishermen. In 2014, during the Indian parliament election campaign, the BJP leaders had accused the then Congress government for the mismanagement of Tamil Nadu fishermen issue in the Palk Bay. After the BJP came to the power there was no significant change in the situation and the Sri Lankan Navy soldiers are continuing their violations against the Indian Tamil fishermen. The t test analysis of the *Dinamani* and *The Hindu* revealed that there was no significant difference between the Congress and BJP government towards the Palk Bay fishermen conflict on human rights violation issue. Similarly, the t test analysis of the Twitter data also revealed that there was no significant difference between the Congress and the BJP governments towards the Palk Bay fishermen conflict on human rights Violations issue. After the BJP came to power at the centre in 2014, it changed many foreign policies. However, the analysis reveals that like Congress government, the BJP regime was also giving more importance to the Indo-Sri Lankan relationship than the Indian fishermen and Sri Lankan Navy conflict.

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