



“DO THEY DO OUR *THOZHIL?*”: Toxic Industrialization, Uncertainty, and Refusal in North Chennai

RISHABH RAGHAVAN

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2332-9145>

When Pandian,¹ the headman of a fishing village from the estuarine peninsular neighborhood of Ennore, in the northern periphery of Chennai (India), told me that the prawns and fish he caught were safe to eat, he sensed my disbelief straight away. Having gotten frustrated with a report I had brought up, which presented the results of a toxicological study that showed how Ennore’s fish were laced with a concoction of industrial chemicals, Pandian patted his stomach heartily and told me that those prawns and fish made up a part of his meal nearly every day of the week. Eating them, thus far, had caused him no perceivable harm. “Yet they are saying that there is *mercury* in the fish,” he snapped.² “Do they do our *thozhil?*”³ He added the latter angrily, referring to his profession of estuarine fishing that up until a decade ago had been the dominant source of income among the men in his village. Feeling wary because of how tense the situation had grown, I responded with a guarded nod and Pandian eased up, though only slightly. He sighed and briskly explained that the coal dust that the power plants exuded routinely irritated his skin and that it even made its way to the insides of his body, showing up in the bouts of black phlegm he coughed up on occasion. His nets, he went on, had turned black because of the fly ash that settled in the water, and every time he fished, he felt the ash layer his body. But

these were experiences “only the fishermen could know,” he commented, appearing to find some solace in his own reasoning.⁴ “People should be saying that the power plants are ruining our lives and not speak about the fish, because I’m telling you,” he concluded, stroking the top of his stomach ever so gently, “the fish is fine . . . it does nothing to my body.”

During my many interactions with Pandian, not once did he suggest to me that he believed Ennore was free from industrial pollution. However, the day I brought up the toxicological report, it seemed as if there was something else he wanted me to understand. That day, he expressed how he considered his own bodily encounters with Ennore’s pollution as at odds with some of the results stated in the report. In insisting that his catch was completely harmless because it had not, up until then, caused him any bodily afflictions, Pandian pitted his own epistemic practices against the scientific protocols summed up in the report. The authors of the report had stated that the fish and prawns from the Ennore estuary showed high rates of heavy metal retention; but Pandian, as a fisherman, insisted he knew better. He established his own embodied measurements of the effects of the toxic chemicals that suffused the estuary and, on his own terms, chose to understand this pollution as emanating from the power plants that surrounded his home. In *refusing* to endorse the report’s claims, Pandian was insisting that there in fact existed other ways of knowing Ennore’s pollution. Importantly, in pointing to how his ways of knowing this pollution both emerged from and sustained his relationship to his home—primarily, through shoring up his identity as a fisherman from the neighborhood—Pandian reminded me that there were also other ways of knowing Ennore.

In this article, I critically examine these facets of Pandian’s refusal to uncover how it indexed what it means to live in urban peripheries like Ennore, places experiencing unprecedented levels of industrial expansion and petrochemical pollution. In building on a body of work that has analyzed peoples’ capacity to live with uncertainty and ambiguity when experiences of chemical toxicity and urban marginality intersect (Lora-Wainwright 2013; Auyero and Swistun 2009; Ahmann 2024), this essay posits acts of refusal as a means of mediating some of those experiences. For Ennore’s fishermen, in particular, acts of refusal were often partial, processual, and sometimes even contradictory, offering them the ability to criticize the forms of caste-based urban segregation that sequestered Ennore as a site fit to house the state’s fossil-fuel industries, as well as the petrochemical pollution it was doused with thereafter, and, subsequently, the epistemic practices that (mis)labeled its ecology as polluted. Yet the fishermen’s

refusal did not solely operate as a form of critique. Instead, in following various fishermen from Ennore, the article finds that their stances of refusal could sometimes prove influential in their attempts to forge lives and make claims in a place that they sought to continue calling home, even as it was becoming increasingly industrial and seeped with more pollution.

THE TOXIC INDUSTRIALIZATION OF ENNORE

Indeed, Ennore was witnessing alarming levels of petrochemical pollution. At the time of my fieldwork in 2018, the stretch of coast unfolding in Chennai’s northern periphery found itself in the middle of many different industrial paradigms that all contributed to the pollution in the region: from defunct asbestos-ridden power plants waiting to be razed to smokestacks puffing away the tons of coal burned every day, standing across the naked cooling towers of newer power plants waiting to become fully operational. In other words, what was happening in Ennore is most aptly described as a process of “toxic industrialization.”⁵

Many of the fishers I met from Pandian’s village, much like Pandian himself, were consistent in tracing the onset of Ennore’s toxic industrialization back to the early 1990s when their elders (including Pandian) had consented to the government’s resettlement of their village from one side of the estuary to the other for the construction of the North Chennai Thermal Power Station (NCTPS). Convinced that the promise of government jobs at the coal-fired power plant (even if those jobs were allocated only to two male members within each relocated family) and land titles at the new settlement would sufficiently reorient their futures, the elders had not foreseen the wave of industrial activity earmarked to follow. After the NCTPS commenced operations in 1994, the following three decades saw successive local governments rapidly expand Ennore’s fossil-fuel infrastructures with the onset of neoliberalism in India (Kumar 2022). This resulted in the sanctioning of 5,420 megawatts’ worth of coal-burning power plants, two large-scale commercial ports, and a host of other infrastructural and industrial additions on the peninsula.⁶ Moreover, as many of the fishers still waited on the land titles promised to them, or, like Pandian, found that the “*company*”—a term the fishers used to refer to both private and state-owned industries—would arbitrarily transfer job holders to distant postings when they protested its unremitting expansions, they were left rueing the fact that their home—once considered a bountiful brackish water ecosystem—had expeditiously become the city’s petrochemical outpost.



Figure 1. An aerial photograph of the NCTPS releasing its thermal discharge back in to the Ennore estuary, besides the docked boats that were of the fishermen from Pandian’s village. Photo by L. Lakshmi Narayanan, 2024.

Interestingly, the report that suggested that the fish from the estuary retained toxic heavy metals had been commissioned by a bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT), a special court that dealt solely with cases of environmental concern, and which had been hearing a petition filed by a fisherman from another village in Ennore. Receiving legal assistance through a Chennai-based non-governmental organization (NGO), the fisherman had complained that the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Company (Tangedco)—the main actor in what the fishermen called the “*company*,” as it owned and operated the power plants in Ennore—was illegally dumping toxic fly ash in the estuary and the surrounding wetlands. As a result, the court commissioned a team of scientific experts to study the level of fly ash pollution in the region. In the final report, the experts stated that the contamination in Ennore was indeed high enough to constitute significant pollution and, along with the fact that all of the samples of fish and clams they tested showed retention of toxic heavy metals, also stated that the consumers of the fish, and the fishermen who were exposed to contaminated water for long periods of time, were vulnerable to severe health risks. While the report mentioned that a “separate survey would be required to quantify the

historical and ongoing losses suffered by the fishers" (Ismail, Narasimhan, and Narasimhan 2017, 20), pointing to the fact that it was the power plants' unmonitored discharge of fly ash waste that was the prime source of Ennore's pollution, certain biomedical findings were quick to make it across a range of media outlets. "Loaded with Poison, Ennore Creek Fish Not Safe for Consumption" (Chaitanya 2017) and "How Your Fish Curry Might Contain Mercury, Lead, and Nickel" (Chitra 2017) read the headlines in two popular English-language newspapers in the city.

Pandian's burst of frustration at my bringing up the report has to be examined against this backdrop of sensational newspaper headlines. He was not alone in feeling that way about the report's claims. Other fishermen I knew also felt adamant that the fish they caught was perfectly safe to eat. One fisherman conceded that on rare occasions his catch smelled like "kerosene,"⁷ but most of the time his catch looked and smelled just fine. "The size of my catch has depleted after the *company* came, that's for sure," he told me, adding that it was in fact his "troubles" that needed to be reported in the papers. But why were people talking about the fish? "Whoever said that," the fisherman concluded, "they are not from this *area*"; it was a charge Pandian also leveled at the authors of the report.

Pandian and the other fisherman were most likely wrong in claiming that their catch was safe to consume. Given the various phases of industrialization Ennore had undergone, chemical contamination simply could not be mapped onto one particular timeline. Instead, akin to what Rob Nixon (2011, 3) describes as "slow violence," the petrochemical pollution that enveloped Ennore was "incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing across a range of temporal scales," such that its effects could remain dormant even for those who closely experienced it. While Pandian, and many other fishermen too, could not deny the evidence of fly ash irritating their skin and lungs, the threat of mercury-laden fish remained imperceptible to them, and the impact on their health might only manifest itself more acutely in the long term.

Nevertheless, I believe that the fishermen's declarations have to be read beyond the assessment of an imperceptible slow violence. As Thom Davies (2022, 419) reminds us, "there is a danger of over-determining toxic landscapes as invisible to the people who inhabit them." Doing so risks positioning communities at the front lines of toxic industrialization as quiescent and passive to both the inevitability and imperceptibility of chemical pollution. Instead, in taking "the perspectives of people who co-exist with pollution at the centre of accounts of slow violence" (Davies 2022, 420), even if their accounts at evidencing toxic

exposure are disparate and only contribute to a generalized sense of uncertainty, ambiguity, and precarity (Lora-Wainwright 2013; Auyero and Swistun 2009), this essay persists with asking what the fishermen's assertions about the lack of toxic compounds in the fish might still reveal about the people and places facing the brunt of toxic industrialization. My contention is that, set against the hard evidence suggesting that the human consumption of fish caught in Ennore posed significant health threats, the fishermen's discounting of the report's findings proves most revealing when examined as an act of refusal.

I draw the term *refusal* from Audra Simpson's (2014) research with the Kahnawà:ke Mohawks in North America. In refusing both American and Canadian citizenship, along with the territorial boundaries that mark both settler states, the people of Kahnawà:ke responded to histories of having been stripped of their land and livelihoods by the very powers who later offered to (differentially) incorporate them into the citizen/state relationship. They did not resist or disobey the citizenship and settlement offers (packaged together with borders, passports, and legal rights) made to them by the American and Canadian governments in the hope of a better deal. Refusal, in other words, is not synonymous with resistance where conventional social, spatial, and political hierarchies inform acts of disobedience and defiance. Instead, the refusal of the people of Kahnawà:ke must be thought of as a form of critique where the very terms and conditions of hierarchical negotiations are rejected and the premise that one should consent to having their stories told for them is denied outright (see also McGranahan 2016).

When Pandian claimed that he, of all people, was perfectly able to tell if his catch was safe to eat, I suggest he was refusing to accept the current material and social order in which fish—the product of his lifelong, hereditary labor of estuarine fishing—had been stripped of its value; in which food had become poison; and where he could no longer trust what he felt in his own body. Read in this light, Pandian's insistence that the fish was edible acts as a critique of how “meanings of contamination are [often] the outcome of power relations” that not only tend to reproduce unequal relationships between residents experiencing contamination and those in positions of authority (Auyero and Swistun 2009, 5) but also inform what is made to count as exposure to chemical toxins (Murphy 2006). In particular, Pandian's was a refusal of the kinds of environmental justice and biomedical research practices that, even with good intentions, “focus on chemical violence by virtue of rendering lives and landscapes as pathological” (Murphy 2017, 496). Indeed, for many of the other fishermen I spoke to, who stood firm on their refusal to endorse the report's findings about the fish—while

at no point denying the levels of toxic industrialization they habitually endured—we have to understand their refusal as presenting “partial and situated critiques of the framing of their community as damaged,” and of their landscapes as toxic (Bickerstaff 2022, 13). What do such partial stances of refusal reveal about life and livelihoods in Ennore? How do they interact with the uncertainty and ambiguity that stem from the uneven modalities of knowing pollution? What do they offer the fishermen who continue to see their home take on unrelenting levels of toxic industrialization?

Guiding itself through these questions, this essay shows how the fishermen’s refusal mediated different experiences of uncertainty that stemmed from living and working in a polluted landscape. In uncovering how some of these uncertainties were experienced as a result of histories of urban segregation that rendered peripheral locations like Ennore appropriate to house polluting industries, and how they were thereafter sustained through the bodily demands of fishing work in a contaminated river, it posits acts of partial, processual, and contradictory forms of refusal as ways in which different fishermen reconciled some of their experiences of living with Ennore’s pollution. In critically engaging emic terms like *area* and *thozhil*, and also showing how collective assemblies became instrumental in challenging Ennore’s toxic industrialization, each of the three sections in this article reiterates the argument that refusal not only helped the fishermen forge lives and make claims in places becoming more industrial and toxic but also mediated their sustained relationship to a place they knew as home.

DIFFERENT AREAS, DIFFERENT SMELLS

The Tamil film *Pudhupettai* (“New Neighborhood”) breaks into its first song a few minutes into the opening. The film’s protagonist, Kokki Kumar—who runs away from his home at the start of the film, and ends up becoming one of North Chennai’s most dreaded gangsters by the end—on meeting his friends in a bustling marketplace, begins singing:

Hē paṭicca nāyē kiṭṭa varāta / Hey educated dog, don’t come close
 eṅka ēriyā uḷḷa varāta / Don’t come into our area
 eṅka ēriyā uḷḷa varāta / Don’t come into our area
 eṅka ēriyā uḷḷa varāta / Don’t come into our area

To make matters clear, in the next verse, one of Kumar’s friends names a few neighborhoods in North Chennai:

Putuppēttai kācimētu eṇṇūru / Pudhupettai, Kasimedu, Ennore,
viyācarpāti eṅka ēriyā / Vysarpadi, our area

With Kumar following right after, listing a few Central and South Chennai localities in contrast:

Hē aṇṇā nakar kē kē nakar / Hey, Anna Nagar, K. K. Nagar,
ti nakar pōt kiḷap uṅka ēriyā / T. Nagar, Boat Club, your area

Kumar and his friends sing of a segregated city. The parts of Chennai they claim as their *ēriyā* (“area”) are predominantly working-class and lower-caste neighborhoods in North Chennai. In juxtaposition, they label the central and southern portions of the city as the *area* of the *paṭicca nāyē* (“educated dog”). In their *area*, they sing that they face daily squabbles over government-rationed water supply, that they find the smell of fish even on jasmine flowers, and that they have gotten used to mourning the death of fishermen who risk their lives at sea every day. The “curd rice” eaters (a colloquial gastronomic reference used to denote upper-caste Tamil Brahmins) from other parts of the city, they insist, are just incapable of grasping what life in their *area* is like. “Don’t come close,” Kumar and his friends sternly warn the “educated dogs.” “Don’t come into our *area*,” they repeat, as they dance and frolic to the remainder of their tune.⁸

The coordinates of the segregated city that Kokki Kumar and his friends sing about in the song titled “Eṅka Ēriyā” (“Our Area”) apply to Ennore’s fishers and me as well. This spatial distinction has its roots in the British colonial administration, when parts of what is now North Chennai (including Ennore) fell under the administrative limits of the city’s “Black Town” that mostly homed native weavers and merchants who serviced the East India Company’s trading post in neighboring “White Town” (Hancock 2008). Though Black Town was renamed Georgetown in 1906, the area it was composed of continuously expanded with small- and medium-scale industries, attracting lower-caste rural migrants who sought employment opportunities as a result of having experienced repeated famines and market instability under the colonial government (Hancock 2008). After Indian independence in 1947, the state government’s land-use patterns in Chennai (what was Madras until 1996) still continued to “follow colonial precedents, with industrial sites in the north and northwest, and residential and commercial uses predominating in the districts to the west and south” (Hancock 2008, 45). To put it simply, by the late twentieth century, North Chennai had

been affected by decades of spatial and ecological ramifications that came with industrialization.

With the onset of neoliberalism in the late 1980s, however, spatial configurations of many Indian cities were affected by the state’s new role as “a land broker for private capital” (Levien 2018, 61). As a result, and with the introduction of new zoning regulations and land-acquisition laws, peripheral lands became new frontiers for capital accumulation—from private industries and real estate companies to large-scale infrastructure projects—aggressively dispossessing vulnerable caste groups from the urban fringes and resettling them on legally insecure lands still only open to further market speculation (Ranganathan 2022; Coelho and Raman 2013; Gidwani and Reddy 2011). By no means were peripheral wetlands and the urban sea excluded from such processes of urbanization. Instead, as Nikhil Anand and Lalitha Kamath (2024, 131) write about Mumbai, the urbanization of the sea was also “performed across colonial and post-colonial timescales.” Furthermore, they make the point that the colonial and postcolonial state systematically “eviscerated”⁹ coastal inhabitants in a bid to transform the sea with a host of different capitalist infrastructure projects, in the process devaluing the lives and livelihoods of fishers and the coastal ecologies they historically called home.

As an estuarine peninsula on the northern periphery of Chennai, and in a part of the city that has continued to expand industrially throughout and beyond the twentieth century, Ennore was violently turned into a coastal frontier wherein the neoliberal state spatialized its fossil fuel–based industrial and infrastructural ambitions (Kumar 2022). Moreover, given that the fishers of Ennore largely belonged to the Pattinavar caste¹⁰—falling under the state’s administrative classification of Other Backward Classes (OBC)—their lands, rivers, and sea were seen as more disposable for the state to realize its fossil-fuel aspirations. This view aligned neatly with other infrastructural projects in India that have systematically eviscerated lower-caste and working-class residents from their homes (and the city more broadly) in ways that preserved upper-caste and class interests (Baviskar 2020; Coelho 2020). However, it was not just this evisceration that Ennore’s fishers endured. It was also the ceaseless amounts of petrochemical pollution that came with it.

“Can you smell that?” a fisherman called Velu asked me one summer afternoon in 2019, as he sniffed the air in disgust. “After the power plants came, we smell stinky things like this a lot,” he went on, continuing to stitch the ends of the nylon nets that lay in his lap, as we sat on the bank opposite the NCTPS, in

the net-mending cement shack of the village. “But I know it doesn’t smell like this where you live,” he went on. On a few different occasions, Velu later told me that he had taken his family to the beach next to where I lived in the south of the city. He spoke of how the roads there were cleaner, the houses bigger, and the smells altogether different. “They built all the power plants in our *area* and left it all nice for you in your *area*,” he concluded plainly.

Velu’s comments about the differing smells where we each lived reflected the forms of urban segregation that affected our lives. He knew I was an upper-caste man living in the south of the city, which he categorized as distinct from Ennore. But it was not just the power plants or our different caste affiliations that made up the difference for him. It was also the noxious smells that he encountered every day in Ennore, which he escaped when he occasionally picnicked with his family on the southern beach. His use of the term *area* indexed this experience of segregation, revealing that it was not just spatial, casteist, and sensorial, but also, in some way, chemical.

On a different occasion, a younger fisherman called Simbu expressed to me how visits by researchers—be it members of court-appointed committees, research collaborators with city activists, or anthropologists like myself—thickened the experience of chemical segregation. On meeting Simbu under the Ennore bridge one afternoon, I learned that he had only recently ferried a group of scientists on his boat to collect water samples of the estuary. “People like you had come,”¹¹ he told me, adding that the researchers had barely spoken to him—they had only asked him once if he had observed any notable changes to the estuary before proceeding to bottle samples of the water and thereafter simply leaving. “If they are writing about Ennore, shouldn’t I also have a say?” he went on to ask me, telling me he “wasn’t sure what to think anymore.” Activists from the city center had told him that the air was unfit to breathe, that the water was contaminated, and later even that the fish was unsafe to eat. “But what I think, that is what no one really cares about,” he went on, asserting that he wished no one would come to Ennore anymore. “This is my *area*,” Simbu vented. “And you don’t forget,” he continued, “after you leave, all of us are still here.”

Simbu took a while to get over what he felt that afternoon. He sat down by the bridge, initially appearing contemplative and then telling me he needed to leave, giving me a quick wave as he rode away on his bike. On many different occasions he’d asked me why I chose to study Ennore. What was it that I wanted to know about the fishers? At no point did I have an answer for him that I was entirely sure of. He gauged that instantly and often made it clear that he, too, wasn’t entirely convinced as to what I was doing in his *area*.

In laying out the unease he had with me and other researchers visiting Ennore, Simbu revealed that the fishers not only had to contend with the polluting infrastructures that spatially and chemically segregated them from other parts of the city, but also with a flow of activity that attempted to study, identify, and label Ennore's pollution. Both Simbu and Velu, I suggest, flag what [Chloe Ahmann \(2024, 10\)](#) calls a process of being "zoned out." Writing about the heavily industrialized Curtis Bay peninsula in South Baltimore, Ahmann traces how Curtis Bay was zoned out historically—as a quarantine site for new immigrants entering the United States in the nineteenth century, as a militarized industrial zone during the Second World War, and thereafter as a place to house a conglomeration of heavy industries far away from the city. While the process of zoning out Curtis Bay spatially distanced the peninsular residents from the rest of Baltimore, it was amplified by an experiential difference that left many confronting waves of industrial pollution and the mechanisms of government and industry that managed and labeled what counted as pollution or not. The spatial distance, in other words, facilitated conceptual uncertainties as to how toxic places like Curtis Bay were meant to be known and experienced by differently positioned people, fueling contestations among residents and others as to what was best for the peninsula's future.

While Velu's use of the term *area* pinned what an experience of being zoned out was, Simbu's stance that Ennore was his *area* acted more as a refusal toward some of those experiences. He stated how different narratives of Ennore's pollution unearthed in him a confusion about what he felt and knew about his home, and then went on to refuse being caught up in that uncertainty by questioning why it was that his own experiences fell out of those narratives. As a result, much like Kokki Kumar and his friends asserting that North Chennai was their *area*, and that it was best that the "educated dog" stay away, Simbu assertively emphasized that Ennore was his *area* and that he wished no one else set foot on the peninsula if they professed to tell a story about Ennore's pollution that was his to bear and, undeniably, his to tell.

"Refusal," as [Simpson \(2014, 11; emphasis original\)](#) writes from Kahnawà:ke, "comes with the requirement of having one's *political* sovereignty acknowledged and upheld." Simbu, Velu, Pandian and many other fishermen I knew, be it in their claiming Ennore as their *area* or accusing scientists, researchers, and myself of hailing from other areas, desired their political sovereignty be acknowledged and upheld. A denial of their desires unearthed in them the hurtful and confusing experience of being zoned out. Yet it would be misguided

to assume that the fishermen's refusal marked a denial of all accounts of Ennore's pollution and its causes. After all, Pandian did pinpoint the pollution he faced as emanating from the power plants. Velu, too, was convinced that the smells he habitually encountered in Ennore needed to be avoided, and Simbu, perhaps grudgingly, did take the researchers out to the estuary because he knew there was a story to be told about the place's pollution. In other words, their refusal was processual and partial, aimed mostly at mediating the uncertainties that clouded them when others labeled Ennore a polluted landscape, while they were left asking why their own accounts were willfully omitted. What authority did those studying Ennore have, the fishermen asked at those moments. Which *area* did they come from?

"Do they do our *thozhil*?" Pandian asked me, speaking about the experts who wrote the toxicological report about Ennore's fish. "Then how can they speak about the fish?" It was not just the unfairness of externalized accounts summing up Ennore's pollution that mattered to Pandian. Crucially, it was also that the fishermen themselves perpetually produced a wealth of relevant knowledge on Ennore's chemical and toxic contamination. Their *thozhil* was key in this regard.

DO THEY DO OUR *THOZHIL*?

Sitting on a boat one cool December evening, I watched as Velu practiced his *thozhil* until the early hours of the following morning. With the water coming up to his waist, he began by drilling the wooden poles he'd brought along with him into the bed of the river, in the place he was assigned to fish that day as a part of a traditional river-sharing system applicable to all the practicing fishermen in the village.¹² Each pole was drilled into the riverbed, distanced adequately from the other poles to form a rectangle-like structure. After setting up six sets of such rectangles, Velu swam back to the boat and hauled a large net for each set. Tying the net to the poles, the whole setup came to look like a box, with the side facing the direction of the current left open, such that fish, crabs, and prawns swam into the nets. The entire process of setting up his nets took Velu almost three hours. Thereafter, he took a break, checking frequently if the direction of the current had changed—which would mean he would have to rearrange the way his nets were set up—before undoing his nets to draw his catch onto the boat, and redoing them again.

Velu did not own the boat we were on; it was his cousin's. As we were in the high season for fishing, his cousin leased out the boat when he didn't use it,



Film Clip 1. Velu sitting up his nets beneath the northern bridge, with NCTPS in the backdrop. Video by Rishabh Raghavan.

knowing there was always a chance of a good catch. After the costs for diesel and ice to store the catch were taken away, Velu explained, whatever amount the fish sold for at market would be split in equal shares between the boat owner and whoever did their *thozhil*. If his cousin had been on the boat with Velu that evening, he would have gotten two shares of the sale: as owner and as a fisherman. But his cousin hadn't joined, as he planned instead to take the boat out to sea after we returned in the morning. In that way, he maximized the earnings he could get during the fishing season: from his own labor and from that of those to whom he loaned the boat. “He’s a smart man,” Velu told me, explaining that his cousin expected him to get good catch. “He knows I’ll do our *thozhil* well; that’s why I always go to the river during the season.”

Most of that evening, however, Velu appeared in a more pensive mood. There were many moments in between him setting up his nets, with his body still waist-deep in the river, where he paused to take a break. At those times, it appeared as if he took in the sights, sounds, and smells of Ennore’s industrial activities a lot more intensely. Often, he’d call out to me from the water during those brief pauses, either pointing to the NCTPS or ominously pointing in the air, reiterating in one way or another that every inch of his home had fallen into the hands of the *company*. When he hoisted himself back onto the boat after he had completed setting up the nets the first time, he was more forthcoming with what seemed to trouble him. Every time he dug a pole into the riverbed, he explained, he felt different kinds of industrial sediments. Sometimes it was coal ash, sometimes it was construction debris. Sometimes those sharp perceptions were coupled with the nagging sensation that the water was greasy or oily. Velu

ran his fingers along his arms as he spoke. Along with the immediate sensations gathered in the water, there was always something that troubled him during the practice of his *thozhil* since the power plants had been built. He wasn't the only fisherman I knew who tied their bodily sensations to the power plants. Simbu, for example, explained that he knew that the river was laced with "chemicals" from the plants because he regularly broke into skin infections and spent more money on skin ointments than anything else. He also recounted moments when he could not practice his *thozhil* altogether because of the thermal discharge that was released into the river; the water was so hot that dead fish floated on the surface, he told me. Other fishermen also spoke of changes to the depth of the river, the narrowing of its course, and importantly, the reduction to the sizes of their catch.

That evening, after Velu had eventually dragged his nets onto the boat after his break, dropping the prawns, fish, and crabs onto the floor, he appeared satisfied at first. If the second catch of the night turned out just as good, he would go home feeling content he told me, as he began washing the dirt off the prawns and crabs, proceeding to inspect and later sort his catch into different buckets. Yet just as his satisfaction seemed to have peaked, he added: "You should have seen the size of our catch before the *company* came. With one round of nets, we'd catch twice as many prawns, and that was enough for us. Now, we have to go at least two or three times to set the nets, even in season. And in the summer," he carried on, "when the catch is very low, I have to find labor work in the *company* because there is not much fishing work anymore. Nowadays, even boat *owners* have to find other work around here." He marked a heavy pause, sounding somewhat remorseful, before asking: "Without our *thozhil*, who are we?"

Velu and others drew on a lifetime of bodily experiences accumulated during *thozhil* to produce knowledge about Ennore's toxic industrialization, forming the basis for what Nicholas Shapiro (2015, 370) calls "sustained bodily reasoning." Writing from across the United States, Shapiro considers people's domestic encounters with formaldehyde, a chemical compound that leaked from the building materials of their houses. He shows how the habitual and repeated experience of formaldehyde and its minute "effects and affects" aggregated into bodily reasonings about chemically saturated worlds, and about people's relationships to those. At times, Shapiro suggests, the sheer sum of those knowledge-making accretions expanded into a form of knowing that exceeded reasoning, whether bodily or of the mind. It is this excess of knowledge, this comprehension that touches onto something vaster than one's life, that Shapiro likens to the philosopher Immanuel

Kant's notion of the "sublime." But where Kant saw in the sublime a confirmation of mankind's cognitive abilities to grasp the incomprehensible, Shapiro shifts the intent, and affixes to the sublime the non-human potency of the chemical world. The "chemical sublime," Shapiro (2015, 369) writes, is an "embodied apprehension of human vulnerability to and entanglements with ordinary toxicity, provoking reflection, disquiet, and contestation."

As much as it constituted their work and the source of their income, *thozhil* was also a home-making practice for the fishermen: an activity by which they could keep calling Ennore home and persist in identifying as fishermen. And yet, similarly to the intimacy of the formaldehyde-saturated domestic spaces studied by Shapiro, *thozhil*—their most habitual of practices—staged for the fishermen the sustained repetition of embodied encounters with the chemicals released by the power plants, burdening them with ongoing bodily reasoning. Through *thozhil*, the fishermen were compelled into linking skin infections to their routine of diving into the contaminated river, or into observing how black their once-blue nets had turned because of the ash-laden air, the same air that got them to cough at night as the ash tickled their lungs when they were out fishing. At times, the sum of habitual experiences that some fishermen gathered from their *thozhil*, and the reasonings they crafted from those, were "sublimated" into a vaster kind of comprehension, enabling them to grasp the extent and depth of their home's toxic industrialization—the repeated sight of dead fish, the experience of foul smells in the air, the itchiness of skin infections, their reduced catch. For Velu, there were moments when the accretion of those experiences flooded him with fearsome questions without answers, giving way to an uncertainty with no end: what future did the fishermen have in Ennore? Would they all have to become manual laborers at the *company*, building up the power plants they knew only harmed their lives and livelihoods? Who were they, if not fishermen from Ennore?

For Velu and others, their bodily reasoning routinely gave way to a chemical sublime that made it impossible for them to ignore the uncertainty of their chemical-infused lives. And yet, more than one fisherman, including Velu, nevertheless chose to persist in a very straightforward act: they quite simply refused to quit fishing. On that evening spent on the loaned-out boat with Velu, I met Surya, a young fisherman. When Velu took a break after he finished setting up his nets the first time, his phone rang. "Surya is at the riverbank," he told me, and sure enough, a slim figure was waiting in the dark, and soon hopped onto the boat to help with their *thozhil* that night. It was the first time I met Surya,



Figure 2. Surya and Velu inspecting their catch after having drawn their nets back on to the boat. Photo by Rishabh Raghavan.

and I wondered why he had not joined us from the start. “I have a *contract* job at the private shipbuilding yard,” Surya admitted a little while after he had gotten on the boat, as Velu and he inspected each net for gashes or holes after having sorted out the first catch of the night, and before relaying their nets again. Surya was late because his supervisor had not let him leave on time. But that wasn’t going to be the case for much longer, he added with assurance. He told me that he was only at the job to save money to buy his own boat, because he was planning on becoming a “*full-time* fisherman.”

Over many of our later encounters, Surya explained his reasons to me. It was not only difficult to find permanent employment in the company, but, in addition, those who received government jobs with the resettlement package generally disliked the life that it came with. Surya’s father (then deceased) and brother were the two male members given permanent jobs, but they continued to practice their *thozhil* at every opportunity they got. As company employees, they were mistreated by their superiors, given the lowest-paying positions because they had not completed their school education, and were often posted in parts of the city far away from Ennore. Surya saw the dissatisfaction they felt for the lives they took on. He, too, felt the same way a few times, having taken up a host of small jobs in Ennore. They always involved paying a subcontractor, putting up with supervisors who gave him a “headache,” working overtime without dues, and, eventually, him quitting in anger and exhaustion. “But every chance I got to do our *thozhil*, I always went,” Surya added brashly, because that was the



Figure 3. Surya and Velu running their fingers through their nets to gauge if there were any large gashes or holes that needed immediate repair.

Photo by Rishabh Raghavan.

only way he could “feel free.” At those moments, he told me, he knew he was his “own owner.”

Surya’s declarations by no means marked an anomaly among the fishermen I met in Ennore. Neither did they imply that Surya denied experiencing the harms of pollution when he practiced *thozhil*. He was just as quick as his fellow fishermen to show me the skin aberrations on his arms and legs, or to voice his concerns about the long-term viability of *thozhil*. He also admitted that he feared he would have to dip into the contract market during the lean season, even after he had bought his own boat. And yet, he was persistent in refusing to give up his plans of being a *full-time* fisherman in Ennore. His refusal amounted, in his terms, to an act of freedom.

Such stances of refusal were commonplace among the fishermen. Velu, for example, openly stated his dislike for the fact that he had to engage in contract work during the lean season. And while he did not aspire to buy a boat because it was too much of an investment for him, every chance he got to partake in *thozhil*, he took it up without hesitation. His explanation was unambiguous: he preferred to be a fisherman in Ennore to being, as he put it, “a *coolie*.”¹³ I also met a boat owner who grudgingly exchanged prawns for a labor contract in the summer months, telling me it upset him because he was a “fisherman first.” He was forced to make the deal because it was necessary for him to sustain an income in the summer, but he insisted that there was something inside him that he had “lost.” Pandian, while he earned a pension from the *company*, returned

regularly to practicing *thozhil*. The pride and matter-of-factness with which he claimed *thozhil* as his labor was also tied to the need of sustaining his identity. As we stood on the terrace of his house one evening, Pandian went one step further in vocalizing his refusal to let the toxic industrialization of Ennore erode who the fishermen were. He expressed his desire, as village head, to go back in time and refuse the government's resettlement offer. As we walked back down from his house toward the riverbank, Pandian asked me to take a look at the bottoms of my feet. "It'll be black"—and it most certainly was—he stated ominously, before adding: "If you see that much coal dust every day, then you can't help but feel angry."

Refusal was wedged between the ways the fishermen's *thozhil* reinforced the capacity for many to be fishermen in Ennore, and the feeling that one was withering away in a contaminated river. The practice of *thozhil* sublimated the chemical into the vast and fearsome comprehension of the uncertainty that patterned the fishermen's lives. And yet, simultaneously, it also offered them the capacity to refuse the debilitating feeling that arose from experiencing the toxic industrialization of their home. Some, like Pandian, used refusal as a fuel that turned fear into anger. Others, like Surya, refused so as to feel free. Nevertheless, here too, refusal proved differential and partial—changing with the fishing season, shifting according to who owned boats and who only offered labor. It was sometimes contradictory too—given that the catch from their *thozhil* sometimes fed into gaining temporary work at the company that caused Ennore's toxic industrialization, or, in requiring that the fishermen sustain temporary work at the company so that they could invest in equipment used for fishing. Akin to the hereditary taxi drivers in Mumbai, who, as [Tarini Bedi \(2023\)](#) suggests, take on the city's pollution during driving work to persist with a profession that they find both dignifying and ethical, the fishermen refused to renounce their *thozhil* in a bid to sustain lives and livelihoods they found meaningful. They did so despite the effects and affects of repeated chemical encounters they knew acutely—at times, through a sublime form of comprehension. And they did so to sustain their long-standing relations with toxic ecologies in Ennore, a zoned-out periphery that, crucially, also happened to be their home.

ENNORE FOR US

The fishermen were not alone in having to engage with the uncertainties that arose from their bodily reasonings on chemical pollution or those that resulted from Ennore being zoned out. Many of Ennore's other residents also

questioned why it was that their narratives were excluded from reports about their home. They did so publicly at times, organizing press meets, conferences, and protest marches to broadcast their demands for a place they knew was saturated with petrochemical pollution. In fact, the first time I ever heard Pandian speak was when he was invited onto the stage of a public conference put together by a small, Ennore-based non-profit organization. Representatives from each of Ennore’s fishing villages, its working-class residents, labor union members, and city-based politicians and environmental activists took turns that evening speaking under a banner that read *Nammaikkana Ennore* (Ennore for Us). I had received a flyer from one of the organizers at the Ennore bus stop a week before the event, and he insisted I come, as the event was an opportunity for Ennore’s residents to broadcast what *they* themselves wanted for their neighborhood. The flyer listed some of those demands: asking for the land on which the local government school operated in Ennore to be made public property; for that land to then house a college and a full-time hospital for Ennore’s residents; for the illegal dumping of toxic waste into the river to be stopped; and that appropriate, permanent jobs be given to all residents of Ennore. As the organizer himself insisted, “Now it is time we say what we want.”

On the day of the conference, I listened to an array of speakers from Ennore and elsewhere discuss what they deemed the urgent needs of Ennore’s residents. Many of the speakers prefaced their talks by alluding to how Ennore was



Figure 4. A group of residents stand in front of the “Nammaikkana Ennore” hoarding outside the meeting venue in Ennore.
Photo by Rishabh Raghavan.

relegated to the margins of a segregated city. Frustrations were raised about the lack of “city-like investments” that patterned life in other parts of Chennai, with examples of how there were still no emergency medical facilities in Ennore, or how public transport services simply did not match the requirements of Ennore’s residents. One speaker demanded that the state government write Ennore into its wider urban planning frameworks, even petitioning for the Chennai Metro rail project to extend to their neighborhood.¹⁴ The most common theme among many speakers was that despite the many *companies* that had set up base in Ennore, its residents were constantly overlooked when it came to accessing jobs. “Even small *contract* jobs they are not willing to give us,” one speaker said in a humorous tone, drawing a few tepid chuckles from the audience. But he swiftly recalibrated the mood among the audience. “Without this meeting ending today, even tomorrow and the days after that I wish to see our people carry on making themselves heard,” the speaker went on, insisting that if the objective of receiving “proper jobs” was to be achieved, Ennore’s residents had to sustain their efforts at speaking out for themselves.¹⁵

Pandian stood apart in this regard when he came onto stage. He began by going into detail about the relationship between the river and sea and how the flows between them sustained the mangrove forests that protected the Ennore estuary. The mangroves, he proceeded, in turn nurtured the fish, prawns, and crabs that the fishermen had caught for many years. “But all of this changed after I signed the papers for the state to build its power plant,” he said, then offering an example of how the construction of the bridge in Ennore left a lot of industrial debris in the river that had still not been cleared up. “You can all come and see it,” he added, speaking about the mount of debris, “because even now it is still there.” For most of his talk, Pandian mentioned many points I would later go on to hear: “coal dust” was everywhere, the river mouth was choked with industrial sediment, the government had “cheated” the fishers with their relocation offer. At one point, however, Pandian expressed deep regret for having personally consented to the government’s plan to construct the first power plant on “his land,” thereby granting the government the ability to pollute Ennore’s river. However, he soon stepped away from the weight of that regret. “Whose river do you think it is?” he asked the audience. “It is our river,” Pandian insisted, expressing his refusal to be weighed down by the unfair conditions of his consent many years ago. “It is the river of the people of Ennore even now,” he added, showing how both his regret and his refusal dragged on through different stretches of his life, well into the present.

Refusal, Simpson (2016, 330) writes, “holds on to a truth, structures this truth as a stance through time” and “operates as the revenge of consent—the consent to these conditions, to the interpretation that this was fair, and the ongoing sense that this is all over with.” Pandian repeatedly expressed his regret for having consented to the government’s offer by forfeiting his land for the construction of a power plant. This regret offered him the basis from which he later began to refuse the power plant’s presence in his home, thereby “avenging a prior injustice and pointing to its ongoing life in the present” (2016, 330). Moreover, while I had assumed that Pandian’s refusal stood in conflict with the demands made by other residents—given that many petitioned for stable jobs in the companies that unequivocally contributed to Ennore’s toxic industrialization—I was proven wrong when I spoke to him later. “If young people from our village all got *permanent* work,” he said, “then I can say something good has happened to us.”

I came across similar desires from other fishermen too. Velu, and even his cousin who owned the boat, had both told me that they would be willing to accept permanent employment at the company. “But you think they’d offer us *permanent* work?” Velu’s relative had scoffed, changing the subject of our conversation. A young fisherman I met had told me how he was in the process of getting his driver’s license to increase his chances of permanent employment at the *company*. Driver positions proved difficult to secure, he insisted, but if you had the right contacts, which he claimed he did, the job was accessible. But most important was his explanation as to why he planned to become a driver: “Every corner of Ennore the *company* has come, and they are saying more is only going to arrive.”

The young fisherman, as did the others, revealed how, when the spatiotemporal rhythms of industry and toxicity collide in zoned-out peripheries like Ennore, futures are often cast both in hope and doubt, even as they steadfastly remained uncertain (Ahmann 2024). Pandian, Simbu, Surya, Velu, and the young fisherman all refused the imposition of this uncertain future onto themselves and their homes. Some, like Pandian, voiced desires for a past when Ennore was theirs and they were solely fishermen. At other points, they refused to endorse the labeling of the ecologies of their home as polluted, wanting their own experiences of toxicity to reveal the truth about their *area*. Frequently, they refused to be subsumed by the uncertainties that their *thozhil* awoke in them as they fished in a highly industrial landscape. They chose instead to engage with Ennore on their own terms: as fishermen. And sometimes, their refusal was aimed

toward a future yet to come—one they saw as only becoming more industrial and toxic—and of which they wanted nothing if it meant they could no longer live and work in their own home.

Pandian's speech at the public meeting, then, despite being out of step with the rest of the speakers, was by no means antithetical to the demands put forward for permanent work in the company. The fishermen, as did Ennore's other residents, contended with "the contradictions of existing in worlds that demand chemical exposures as the conditions for eating, drinking, breathing" (Murphy 2017, 497), even when they knew that the sustained exposure to chemical pollution only caused them considerable uncertainty and harm. As a result, their acts and stances of refusal themselves took on partial and contradictory positions, foregrounding a variety of desires. Crucially, public assemblies like *Nammaikkana Ennore* offered residents the opportunity to voice and broadcast such stances of refusal. Simultaneously, it also gave many the stage to voice their desires to be heard, to be recognized—even if that meant that they were to take part in the processes contributing to the toxic industrialization of their home—all in the "hope that things will be different" (McGranahan 2016, 338), even if *how* they were to be different was anything but clear.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND UNCERTAINTY

In places like Ennore, zoned out as peripheries for the growth of toxic industries and infrastructures, uncertainty cuts through human lives and livelihoods. In the Argentinian shantytown of Flammable, Javier Auyero and Débora Swistun (2009) show how residents, state representatives, epidemiologists, and industry officials all diverge in their narratives on petrochemical contamination: those divergences escalate into a "toxic uncertainty" that leaves residents' relationships with surrounding chemicals and industries perennially ambiguous. Writing from polluted rural China, Anna Lora-Wainwright (2013) concludes ominously that the gap between residents' experiences and knowledge of toxicity and the quantification of pollution by law, state, or industry impede any potential for collective action. Because, as M. Murphy (2006) reminds us, imperceptibility is key to the workings of chemical exposure, the epistemic practices put in place to materialize chemicals' presence, and their affects and effects, cannot avoid dealing with a politics of uncertainty that sometimes preserves, and sometimes furthers, uneven power relations (see also Liboiron 2021).

In this essay, I cast the fishermen’s refusal as an active engagement with Ennore’s politics of uncertainty. When Velu, Simbu, or Pandian refused to leave their land, river, and senses of self and enacted forms of refusal by persisting with their *thozhil*, they did not only do so *despite* toxic uncertainty—but also as a bid to engage knowingly with this uncertainty. In uncovering how their refusal was partial, processual, and sometimes even contradictory, I argue that the fishermen’s lifetime of chemically informed reasoning had sublimated Ennore’s toxic uncertainty into something they were able to, at times, grasp. In that sense, they knew the full extent of how precarious their lives and livelihoods were and gauged how their encounters with pollution also constituted encounters with historic forms of spatial and sociopolitical unevenness. Nevertheless, they persisted through unevenness and uncertainty, knowing that certain pasts may not necessarily lead to any futures. Perhaps one thing only was certain: the fishermen would not accept that their desires to build meaningful lives and livelihoods, and to sustain long-standing histories of calling Ennore home, be written out. Any impediment to their presence in Ennore was met with their refusal.

ABSTRACT

This article shows how acts of refusal mediated different experiences of uncertainty among the artisanal fishermen who lived and worked in Ennore’s (Chennai, India) polluted landscape. In uncovering how some of these uncertainties were experienced as a result of histories of urban segregation that rendered peripheral locations like Ennore seemingly appropriate to house polluting industries, and thereafter sustained through the bodily demands of thozhil (the profession of artisanal fishing) in a contaminated river, the article posits acts of partial, processual, and contradictory forms of refusal as ways in which different fishermen reconciled some of their experiences of living with Ennore’s petrochemical pollution. In critically engaging emic terms like area and thozhil that the fishermen used to flag their stances of refusal, and also showing how collective assemblies became instrumental in challenging Ennore’s polluting industries, the article argues that refusal not only helped the fishermen forge lives and make claims in places that were becoming more industrial and toxic but also mediated their relationship to a place they knew as, and desired to continue calling, their home. [refusal; toxicity; pollution; uncertainty; fishermen; South India; urban segregation]

அருப்பொருள்

இந்த கட்டுரை, எண்ணூர் மாசடைந்த நீர்நிலைகளில், பாரம்பரிய முறையில் மீன்பிடிக்கும் மீனவர்களின், வாழ்வாதார ஐயப்பாடுகளை விளக்குகிறது. பல இரசாயன ஆலைகளை சுமக்கும், நகரத்தின்

விளிம்பில் தள்ளப்பட்ட எண்ணூரின், 'நகர்புற-பிரிவினை' வரலாற்றை ஆராய்ந்து, சுகாதாரமற்ற நீரில் இறங்கி மீன்பிடி தொழில் செய்யும் மீனவர்களின் தேவைகளை கண்டறிந்து, எண்ணூர் மீனவர்கள் எவ்வாறு தங்களின் வேறுபட்ட அனுபவங்களை வைத்து 'எண்ணெய் கசிவு' போன்ற மாசுபாட்டை எதிர்த்தனர் என்பதை, நடைமுறை கூறுகள், செயல்முறை வழக்கம் மற்றும் முரண்பாடுகளின் மூலமாக இக்கட்டுரை நிறுவுகிறது. 'ஏரியா' மற்றும் 'தொழில்' போன்ற வட்டார வழக்குகளை பயன்படுத்துவதன் மூலமாக, எண்ணூரை மட்டுமே தங்கள் வீடாக கொண்ட மீனவ மக்களின் மனநிலையையும், மாசுபாட்டை எதிர்க்கும் சமூக கூட்டுறவையும் புரிந்துகொள்ளமுடிகிறது. தங்களுக்கே சொந்தமான மொழிநடையிலும், பெரும் இரசாயன ஆலைகளை எதிர்க்கும் தங்களின் நிலைப்பாட்டின் வாயிலாக எண்ணூர் மீனவர்கள் எப்படி தங்கள் வாழ்வாதாரம் மட்டுமின்றி, தாம் வாழ்ந்து மணலுக்கும் தம்மை வளர்த்த கடலுக்கும் இடையேயான உறவினை வலுவூட்டுகிறார்கள் என்பதை இந்த கட்டுரை ஆறிந்தாய்கிறது. [மறுப்பு; விஷத்தன்மை; மாசுபாடு; தெளிவின்மை; மீனவர்; தென் இந்தியா; பெரு நகர பிரிவினை]

NOTES

Acknowledgments Capucine Tournilhac has seen this article through its many renditions, ever since its earliest conception as a chapter in my doctoral thesis, and it is to her that I owe my first thanks and gratitude. Jason Cons has been a tremendous mentor and friend, and I am deeply grateful for his support through the writing of this article. Ursula Rao, Duncan McDuie-Ra, Andrew McDowell, Ghassan Hage, Kavita Dasgupta, Siddharth Chadha, Lotte Hoek, Jamie Cross, and my departmental colleagues at the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology have all been influential at various stages of the production of this article, and I extend my gratitude to them all. The three anonymous reviewers, whose insights have made this article in many ways, were generous with their critical feedback and support—I thank them dearly. The bulk of the fieldwork that preceded the writing of this article stemmed from my doctoral studies, which were generously funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

1. All the names of my interlocutors have been changed.
2. All the quotes in this essay have been translated from Tamil to English by the author. However, all italicized terms within quoted sentence emphasis the direct use of the term or phrase in the sentence. For example, with "mercury" and "thozhil," I mean to indicate that Pandian used the English word *mercury* and Tamil word *thozhil* in direct speech.
3. Pronounced "tho-lil," the Tamil term could be used to mean "profession," "work" and/or "labor" depending on the speaker. Here, Pandian was referring to the labor put in during fishing work. Yet the phrase "our *thozhil*" could also, in other contexts, mean "our profession" or "our work." It is the dynamism of the term, and the ways in which it meant different things for the fishermen, that I extend through my use of the term.
4. I use the terms *fishermen* and *fisherman* to both highlight the gendered connotations of my fieldwork and augment the gendered boundaries of *thozhil*. While the labor of fishing in the estuary was predominantly carried out by male fishers, the labor of selling fish in the local market, childcare, cooking and caring was largely taken on by fisherwomen. Elsewhere, my use of the term *fishers* denotes the wider fishing community in

- Ennore, thereby bringing the fishermen, fisherwomen, and fisher children within its fold.
5. See [Jayaraman \(2020\)](#) for their use of the term when writing about Ennore and that from which I borrow for this article.
 6. The bulk of the ethnography stems from my doctoral fieldwork (2018–2019).
 7. The fisherman used the colloquial term for kerosene, which was *Krishna oil*.
 8. A clip of this song is accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7D6JZ-aeGY>
 9. Anand and Kamath extend [Vinay Gidwani and Rajyashree Reddy’s \(2011\)](#) conception of “eviscerating urbanisms” that describes a set of interlinked forces that patterns urban transformation in metropolitan India suggesting that it it doubles up as a crucial diagnostic tool when it comes to studying the urbanization of India’s coast and seas.
 10. The fishers I speak of belong to the Chinna Pattinavar (small Pattinavar) subgroup who mostly fish in the estuary, as opposed to the Periya Pattinavar (big Pattinavar) subgroup who fish at sea.
 11. My relationship with Ennore’s fishermen took a slightly different turn, as I was not explicitly associated with any of the activists or research groups that worked there.
 12. I refer here to the *padu* system as the way Ennore’s fisherman governed fishing practices in the river, discussed by [Panini \(2001\)](#) and [Mathew \(1991\)](#).
 13. Velu’s use of the word *coolie* emerged from the same term that was used to refer to certain forms of indentured Asiatic labor in the nineteenth century (see [Varma 2016](#); also [Valentine 2008](#)).
 14. The Chennai Metro Rail is a government rapid rail infrastructure project for the Chennai Metropolitan Area.
 15. See [Mitchell \(2023\)](#) for how collective assemblies in India often emerge from and engage with the refusal of being heard by state electives and employees.

REFERENCES

- Ahmann, Chloe
 2024 *Futures after Progress: Hope and Doubt in Late Industrial Baltimore*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Anand, Nikhil, and Lalitha Kamath
 2024 “Eviscerating the Sea.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 44, no. 1: 118–34. <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-11141543>
- Auyero, Javier, and Débora Alejandra Swistun
 2009 *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Baviskar, Amita
 2020 *Uncivil City: Ecology, Equity, and the Commons in Delhi*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Bedi, Tarini
 2023 “Bumpy Roads, Dusty Air: Gadbad and the Sensate Ecologies of Driving Work in Contemporary Mumbai.” *Cultural Anthropology* 38, no. 1: 60–86. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca38.1.04>
- Bickerstaff, Karen
 2022 “Living on with Sellafeld: Nuclear Infrastructure, Slow Violence, and the Politics of Quiescence.” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 47, no. 4: 955–70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12540>
- Chaitanya, S.V. Krishna
 2017 “Loaded with Poison, Ennore Creek Fish Not Fit for Consumption: Study.” *The New Indian Express*, November 20.
- Chitra, Rachel
 2017 “How Your Fish Curry May Contain Mercury, Lead and Nickel.” *Times of India*, July 21.
- Coelho, Karen
 2020 “Lines in the Mud: Tank Eco-restoration and Boundary Contestations in Chennai.” *Urbanisation* 5, no. 2: 121–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455747120965508>
- Coelho, Karen, and Nithya V. Raman
 2013 “From the Frying Pan to the Floodplain: Negotiating Land, Water, and Fire in Chennai’s Development.” In *Ecologies of Urbanism in India: Metropolitan Civility*

- and *Sustainability*, edited by Anne M. Rademacher and K. Sivaramakrishnan, 144–68. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/9789888139767.003.0006>
- Davies, Thom
 2022 “Slow Violence and Toxic Geographies: ‘Out of Sight’ to Whom?” *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 40, no. 2: 409–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654419841063>
- Gidwani, Vinay, and Rajyashree N. Reddy
 2011 “The Afterlives of ‘Waste’: Notes from India for a Minor History of Capitalist Surplus.” *Antipode* 43, no. 5: 1625–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00902.x>
- Hancock, Mary Elizabeth
 2008 *The Politics of Heritage from Madras to Chennai*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ismail, Sultan Ahmed, D. Narasimhan, and Balaji Narasimhan
 2017 “Environmental Impacts of Coal Ash Pollution on Ennore and Surrounding Areas of North Chennai Thermal Power Station (NCTPS).” Expert Committee Report for National Green Tribunal (South Bench) in OA 08 of 2016, Government of India.
- Jayaraman, Nityanand
 2020 “Unfit for Habitation: Life in Chennai’s Industrial Badlands.” *Carbon Copy*, October 29.
- Kumar, Mukul
 2022 “Fossil Neoliberalism and Its Limits: Governing Coal in South India.” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5, no. 4: 1853–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486221099383>
- Levien, Michael
 2018 *Dispossession without Development: Land Grabs in Neoliberal India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Liboiron, Max
 2021 *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Lora-Wainwright, Anna
 2013 “The Inadequate Life: Rural Industrial Pollution and Lay Epidemiology in China.” *China Quarterly* 214: 302–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741013000349>
- Mathew, Sebastian
 1991 “Study of Territorial Use Rights in Small Scale Fisheries: Traditional Systems of Fisheries Management in Pulicat Lake, Tamil Nadu, India.” *FAO Fisheries Circular*, no. 839. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.
- McGranahan, Carole
 2016 “Theorizing Refusal: An Introduction.” *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 3: 319–25. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca31.3.01>
- Mitchell, Lisa
 2023 *Hailing the State: Indian Democracy between Elections*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Murphy, M.
 2006 *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
 2017 “Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations.” *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 4: 494–503. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.4.02>
- Nixon, Rob
 2011 “Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor.” In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 128–49. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194.c4>
- Panini, Devaki
 2001 “Addressing Livelihood Issues in Conservation-Oriented Projects: A Case Study of Pulicat Lake, Tamil Nadu, India.” In *Conflict and Cooperation in Participatory*

Natural Resource Management, edited by Roger Jeffery and Bhaskar Vira, 63–74.
London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ranganathan, Malini

2022 "Towards a Political Ecology of Caste and the City." *Journal of Urban Technology* 29, no. 1: 135–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10630732.2021.2007203>

Shapiro, Nicholas

2015 "Attuning to the Chemosphere: Domestic Formaldehyde, Bodily Reasoning, and the Chemical Sublime." *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 3: 368–93. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca30.3.02>

Simpson, Audra

2014 *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

2016 "Consent's Revenge." *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 3: 326–33. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca31.3.02>

Valentine, Daniel

2008 "The Coolie." *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 2: 254–78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2008.00009.x>

Varma, Nitin

2016 *Coolies of Capitalism: Assam Tea and the Making of Coolie Labour*. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110463170>