

Coastal Security of Tamil Nadu

A.X. Alexander, IPS (Retd)

The Tamil Nadu coast line is 1076 km long – in the eastern coast it has 1016 km and in the western coast it has 60 kms. It starts in Trivellore district, meanders through Chennai, Chingleput, Cuddalore, Nagapattinam, Tanjavor, Pudukottai, Ramanathapuram, Tirunelvely Tuticorin districts and winds up in Kanyakumari district. It measures 13% of the Indian coast line.

It holds 591 fishing villages and has nearly 7, 00,000 fisher folk, having 10,300 mechanized boats, 21,500 vallams, 27,600 catamarans – a total of roughly 59,500 crafts. It has a continental shelf of about 41,410 square kilometers with a marine fishery potential of 75,400 million tonnes. The Gulf of Mannar and Palk Strait on the eastern coast are rich in marine wealth – chank, coral beds, prawns, sea horses, star fish, dugongs etc. Further, there are 23 small islands dotting in the Palk Strait and Gulf of Mannar which are rich in mineral and coral beds. The marine wealth is so rich, so rare and so precious that this area has been declared as a protected biosphere. The coast and surroundings house enormous hydrocarbon reserves especially in Nagapattinam district and Ramanathapuram district where there is still exploration.

There are many vital installations on the eastcoast - the Ennore thermal station, the Kalpakkam Atomic power plant, the Valudur power station and the Koodangulam atomic power plant. There are major ports in Chennai, Cuddalore, Nagapattinam and Tuticorin where large scale economic activity takes place. There are chemical complexes in Cuddalore and Tuticorin, and rich uranium and thorium sand beds in Tinnevely, Tuticorin and Kanyakumari districts.

On the shores also lie some of the important tourist and religious centres. Pulicat, the old Dutch headquarters, - the Pulicat lake that affords one a boat ride to Thirupalaivanam, the Muttukadu lake adjoining Chennai where boat festivals are conducted on special occasions and boat rides are organized daily, the Pichavaram back waters where nature abounds with lush given mangroves, and Mahabalipuram where Pallava art and architecture is in full panoply are all in the coast.

There are important and significant pilgrim centres of different faiths on the coast. Rameshwaram where everyday an ocean of people swarm from different parts of the country, Thiruchendur where a sea of humanity converge on important days, Velankanni where every day there is a festival with devotees flowing from different parts of the world and from our country, Nagore or Yeravadi where along with Muslims others congregate in large numbers are all religious centers that are just near the sea.

Prior to Independence, there was no restriction of passport and visa to go to Ceylon from India. All that one had to do was to get a railway ticket, even from Madras Egmore, get quarantined in Mandapam camp, get inoculated and vaccinated there and get into a steamer at Dhanushkodi and land in Talaimannar and continue the journey with the same ticket in the island. The train that took one to Ceylon was called the Indo –Ceylon express or the Boat Mail. The only security intervention was at the Mandapam camp, that too, for prevention of infectious diseases.

But, besides this official sea route to Ceylon there were many other sea routes to reach Ceylon. Tamil Nadu coast was porous with many departing and Landing points. There were no wire meshes either on the coast or in the sea or a wall that segregated the island from the mainland of the sub continent. As a result, one could spot Jaffna men loitering in the streets of Vedaranyam and Kodikkarai or Pattukottai bringing nutmegs and opium and taking back from Vedaranyam, tobacco, cigars and beedi bundles. It was a routine affair and none felt anything wrong about this. Likewise there were Mannar men in Thangacchimadam, Rameshwaram and Pamban who have come to see cinemas bringing along with them bottles of Horlicks and biscuit tins and staying overnights and going back at leisure. Same was the case with our people who went to Jaffna and Mannar and got settled in marriages too. In these unrecognized routes there were very few checks, though Customs department which had their units in Thopputhurai, Kodiakkarai, Muthupet, Thiruthuraipoondi, Mallipatnam, Pattukottai, Rameshwaram, Mandapam, and Sayal kudi had occasional checks on these intruders, mostly for contrabands.

Besides the quarantine agencies in Mandapam camp and customs agencies in different places in the coast, there was another agency called the Protectorate of Emigration and this had units in Chennai, Nagapattinam, Pattukottai, Rameshwaram and Tuticorin. The duty of this agency was to apprehend those who use the country boats from different destinations to Ceylon shores. These units were however closed in 1970s.

The Ceylon citizenship act, and denial of rights to vote to Indian Tamils resulted in many Indian Tamils being sent out of Srilanka as repatriates, but many despite this continued to stay on. On and off, they came to see their wives and their children by unauthorized boats and returned by unauthorized boats. The festival of Katchathivu too also provided the opportunity for reunion of families. The government on both sides mostly turned a blind eye to these transgressions of Immigration laws out of human sympathy and also out of considerations of historical linkages of language and ethnicity. Also the Government felt no serious security risk, except the smuggling of petty goods.

The thought of coastal security started looming large only when waves of people affected by racial violence of Sri Lanka started landing on our shores especially in Rameshwaram, Vedaranyam, Kodikkarai, Mallipattinam, etc. In the early days there were no enumeration of such boat people there were no refugee identities, and no earmarked camps. But as days rolled by and as refugee numbers swelled, all these came into existence.

These refugees brought their own gold, silver, and electronic goods as they thought that they would never return to their homes and most of the times, Government officials did not take cognizance of their violations of the code of the land as there was sympathy for the refugees. Smuggling began to thrive subsequently. And people began to move about between island and mainland and from mainland to island as they pleased without any ban depending upon the war situation.

Along with refugees, militant elements seeking security for themselves sailed in bringing along with them, gold they had looted in the banks and from individuals. Slowly they started purchasing arms and ammunition and explosives from different parts in the country and from elsewhere and started smuggling these back to their island to arm their cadres. They exported enormous quantity of explosives to manufacture bombs. They smuggled petrol, oil and lubricants to keep up their mobility; smuggled medicine to tend their injured cadres and started bringing in their injured cadres for treatment. They smuggled communication sets and owned fast moving boats to ferry across people and goods. They slowly enrolled supporters in India to help them in smuggling. Political bigwigs championed their smuggling brainwashing themselves that they were helping them in their war of independence!

The general situation was one of sympathy for the suffering Tamils and security rules were scarcely applied. It was after the murder of Padmanabha and his associates and assassination of Rajiv Gandhi that government woke up to the seriousness of the situation and strengthened the coast with Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in Pattukottai, Nagapattinam, Rameshwaram, Madurai, and Pamban. This force was stationed as an insurance against any local sympathy for the militants who were moving up and down and smuggling human beings, arms, ammunition, explosives, petrol oil and lubricants, communication sets, and medicines. It also deployed the Indian Coast Guard in Chennai, Mandapam and Tuticorin. To strengthen further, Government of India deployed the Indian Navy in Nagapattinam, Thoppu Thurai, Kodikkarai, Mallipattinam, Rameshwaram, Thondi, Jagathapattinam and Tuticorin. Government of Tamil Nadu, on its part raised a New Force called Coastal Security Group with one battalion and manned sixty check posts on shore in vantage points situated in the thresholds of hinterland. Presently the Government of India has augmented this force, with twelve

marine police stations and twenty patrol boats. The Navy still hires motor launches to patrol where as the coast guard have patrol boats and hovercrafts with them.

To augment their income, the militants indulged in smuggling of heroin and opium also. The Narcotics Intelligence Bureau of the state and Narcotics Control Board of the Government of India kept control over the smuggling of drugs. The customs department however was looking for economic targets and paid little attention to smuggling of weapons and explosives, medicine etc.

From no control of shores in 50s, the control of the coast grew up with presence of various agencies in 90s.

What are the present Security problems in the coast? The first and foremost security problem is the problem of fishermen. Rameshwaram fishermen are accused these days of fishing in and around Katchathivu and beyond near Delft and Kayts islands. Vedaranyam and Nagapattinam fishermen are accused of fishing in the Northern seas of Srilanka. The plea given by the Indian fisherman in Vedaranyam and Nagapattinam as well as in Rameshwaram is that they are after all fishing in their ancient waters and that they have a right to pursue fish and that in the heat of the avocation they take no note of political borders and that they are empowered to fish there even according to 1974 agreement.

The Srilankan fisherman is also no angel. He also gets into Indian shores. These violations of borders have resulted in shooting down of Indian fishermen, deprivation of their catches and nets plundering of their modern fishing equipments etc. These acts of violence either by Srilankan Navy or Srilankan fishermen had resulted in political and law & order fall outs in Tamil Nadu. Even national parties are now jumping into the fray.

Linked to the problem of fishermen is the problem of Katchathivu. The Indian fishermen still go near this theevu (island) as they consider it part of their place of fishing. They cite the church of St. Antony built by Seeniyappa Padayatchi to establish their right. They also recall that it was part of Ramanathapuram Samasthanam and now a days quote and interpret the provisions available in the agreement to fish in historical and traditional waters and dry the nets in the island. They are aware of Swaransingh's interpretation that drying of the net presupposes fishing in the area. Cases have been filed in the Supreme Court demanding annulment of the 1974 agreement seceding Katchativu. However, recently our Minister for External Affairs has said that Katchathivu belongs to Srilanka. A few fishermen have reacted to this statement. A few fishermen have voiced the need to arm themselves. However, to settle the issue of fishermen and Katchativu civil societies on either side have met and drawn a certain programme for fishing. But all fishermen have not fully agreed to this and that the

Government has also shown lukewarm interest in the moves. Some scholars have suggested taking the island on lease in perpetuity, and licensing the fishermen on either side; but all these suggestions have not been heeded to. The steps taken by fisheries department, by numbering the boats by registering the boats, by painting the boards, by rationing the fuel, by issuing identity cards etc. have not curbed the trips to Katchathivu.

With fishing becoming difficult more and more children of fishermen are resorting to more and more higher, and technical and marine based education. The girls are doing much better than the boys in education and number of girls joining Medical Colleges is on the increase. It is for the government to ensure preference to these boys and girls in sea related industries and business instead of telling them to concentrate on other methods of fishing. They should also think of issuing preferential CDCs to the offspring of traditional fishermen.

The problem of arrivals of refugees by sea is almost extinct. Only stray cases of occasional trickling are reported. Nevertheless refugees have not ceased to be a problem. Now well organized agents seem to be on the prowl in the refugee camps recruiting refugees to settle in Canada, Christmas Island and Australia. They choose their hands from refugee camps, collect exorbitant money, build a boat and illicitly set sail to new pastures endangering the lives of people on the boat. Recently they were detected somewhere near Vizag as they were ready to set sail. Stories of aborted departures of such people of have come from Quilon, Kutralam, and Karaikal are heard. Also stories of such people, not being welcomed, in Canada, and people being standard in Indonesia are heard. This is illicit trafficking and government agencies have to remain sharp to curb this.

There were days there when the militants in need of money for their movements, and professional drug smugglers were smuggling heroin and opium to Srilanka and Europe using Indian shores. But not anymore. Now locally grown Ganja is moving through our shores to Srilanka. The opium that Indian smuggler used to supply does not qualify the grade desired by the buyer. Also there seems to be difference of opinion in money transactions between the Indian sellers and Srilanka buyers. Hence, there is lull in heroin activity.

Our sea wealth is being denuded and sent out of Indian shores. Also, with in India, coral blocks that are denuded from sea and the coast are in great demand in construction works and there is a steady stealthy supply.

The sea and sea coast are getting polluted all over as many industries have come to existence very near the coast. These industries disgorge their effluents in to the sea. Many of the rivers dump

their refuse in to the sea. People who visit the sea shores desecrate it with plastic bags, remnants of food, and human refuse. There is need for environmental security. The pollution control board which concentrates now on industries may have to turn its attention to the coast.

The New shipping service has started from Tuticorin to Colombo. Though the cost of travel is cheaper still the ship is not running to full capacity. Already a case of smuggling of gold from Srilanka has been reported. Soon this will be a regular feature. The boat services from Rameshwaram to Talaimannar are also seriously contemplated. Though this would result in a boom in the economy of Ramanathapuram district, smuggling especially of Chinese goods could not be ruled out.

Local police, Coastal security police, Indian coastguards, India Navy, Narcotics Intelligence Bureau, Narcotics Control Board, Department of Atomic Energy, Temple Board, Tourism Department, Fisheries Department, Customs Departments, Intelligence Bureau are involved in managing the security of the coast. Yet, at times, there is little exchange of information, despite regular coordination meetings.

Some of the agencies do not have adequate logistical support; the small customs units do not have sufficient number of vehicles and boats, communication sets and even binoculars. Some of the sea going units still have to hire launches from local fishermen to patrol the seas. Some of the units do not have effective communication sets. Nor do they have night vision binoculars.

Sometimes equipments are thrust upon some formations even when they explicitly express their inability to handle these effectively. The Tamil Nadu coast guard police steadfastly refused to have boats for patrol as they felt sea can be effectively handled by Indian Navy and Indian coast guard while they can handle any security problem emerging from the sea perching themselves in the land. But boats have been thrust upon them. Though they are sailing with difficulty they find it difficult to acclimatize themselves. They feel that the government should put the boats to better use by handing them over to sea going formations or formations that need them or should employ sea going fisherman to man these boats by specially recruiting them in the coastal security group of police.

Coastal security would be considered best when all the stake holders in the coast are secure. This means security of not only the physical coast, but also the ports; the ships that get berthed in; the people who work there; the wealth in the sea bed--, the hydro carbons, the corals and chunks, the rare sea species; the fishermen, the fishing, the beautiful tourist spots, the religious centres, the vital installations and the men and officers who provide security.