

are as human beings. I ask you to also picture me, today, living in the Caribbean and taking every opportunity to SCUBA dive, sharing that underwater world I love, playing around vibrant fish and turtles and rays and sharks and an occasional octopus. I did the thing I thought I could not do, but my list of the impossible goes on. And you?

“We can’t become what we need to be by remaining what we are.” (Oprah Winfrey)

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### About the author

**Dr. MacLennan**, Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Puerto Rico, is currently working on two projects: communication about sex in relationships; religion in the communication classroom. Her most recent experience of doing the thing she thought she could not do involves practising the dynamic Brazilian martial art of capoeira. Despite all her anxieties and fears, she fell so much in love with the movements and rhythms of capoeira that she found herself in the best shape of her life. Thus, in the summer of 2007 when she broke her neck in a car accident, she accredited her avoidance of paralysis and speedy recovery to this continuous adult journey of learning.

### Contact details

University of Puerto Rico, College of Humanities, Department of English, PO Box 23356, San Juan, PR 00931-3356  
Tel: 939-645-4148  
Email: [jmaclennan@uprrp.edu](mailto:jmaclennan@uprrp.edu)

## RESEARCH REPORT

### Community-based adult education for the fisherwomen of Rajapalyam fishing village in Tuticorin, southeast coast of India

Jamila Patterson<sup>1</sup>, Eva Lindén<sup>2</sup>, Christin Bierbrier<sup>3</sup>, Inger Löfgren<sup>4</sup>  
and J.K. Patterson Edward<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1,5</sup> Suganthi Devason Marine Research Institute, Tuticorin, India

<sup>2,3</sup> Nyköpings Folkhögskola, Stockholm, Sweden

<sup>4</sup> Lagman Linds v. 4A, 18279 Stocksund, Sweden

*Rajapalyam village is located in the Tuticorin district along the biodiversity rich Gulf of Mannar coast in southeastern India. The people of this village are economically backward and most of the men are engaged in fishing. The fisherwomen of this village are less literate than the men, or illiterate. Adult education has been introduced to the women of this village in order to enhance their literacy level, environmental awareness and livelihood. Within a very short period, the women have improved themselves greatly through learning and are now demonstrating the importance and necessity of education to neighbouring villages.*

## Introduction

Rajapalyam fishing village is geographically located about nine kilometers north of Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu, India and along the biodiversity rich Gulf of Mannar coast. The Gulf of Mannar is the first Marine Biosphere Reserve in India, declared in 1989 by the Government of India. The village has a two-kilometre coastline where the fishery-related activities are carried out. One of the 21 islands in the Gulf of Mannar, named Vaan, is located about six kilometres from this village and abounds with a wide variety of flora and fauna including coral reefs and seagrasses. The fishermen of this village are involved in fishing around the Vaan island area. A few years ago, fishermen were involved in coral mining in addition to fishing because of low literacy and lack of awareness. However, after the 2004 tsunami, the villagers have realised the importance of island and coral reefs and hence the local village administration has banned coral mining and the fisherfolk have now completely stopped that (now illegal) practice.

Education plays a lead role in enhancing the involvement of community and its livelihood, and also helps in conserving the natural resources for sustainable utilization. It is therefore important that adult education has been introduced in this village in order to build capacity among the fisherwomen to enhance their life and knowledge. Adult education has been important also in other parts of the world as a contributor to national development in southern Africa (Oduaran & Okukpon 2005), for healthy participative democracy in Scotland (Hammond 2006), and in its influence on education and training in Ireland (Morrissey & McNamara 2004). However, the aim of introducing adult education in Rajapalyam village is basic in terms of enhancing literacy and livelihood.

## Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

- collect information about the village and villagers by conducting interviews among village leaders, representatives of Self-Help Group women and fishermen,
- understand the role of women in Self-Help Groups, and
- introduce adult education to the women.

## Profile of the village and villagers

The total area of the village is about ten acres, of which two acres are assigned as a playground and 0.63 acres for a church. Most of the houses are located one kilometre from the seashore in accordance with the Coastal Zone Regulation of the Government of India. Of the total population, 95% are Christians and five percent are Hindus. All the Christians are Roman Catholics and they have constructed one church in the village. The Christian community is against the construction of a Hindu temple in the village. Sundays are local holidays in this village and no one ventures out for fishing. The prime shortcomings of the village are the absence of a school and a primary health centre.

The entire village has electricity facilities and about 99% of the houses have electricity connections. The remaining one percent, the very low income group, has no electricity connection as they cannot afford it. Rajapalyam is connected by a good tar road and 11 minibuses are operating via this village to connect with the Tuticorin town. There is no proper sewage system and only five percent of the village houses have toilet facilities. The majority of the villagers use the open and bushy areas surrounding the village for their toiletry needs. Though public lavatories exist, very few villagers use them.

The total population and education details are presented in Table 1. The population of the village is 799, of whom 435 are women. Fisherwomen constitute about 55% of the total population. Most of the people in this village are educated up to elementary school level and comparatively few villagers are uneducated. Very few members

of the village are educated to college level. Both the elementary level educated and the uneducated people do not know how to affix their signature, and instead, use thumb impression. The men are involved in different types of occupations such as fishing, seafood vending, small-scale business and manual work to earn their livelihood. Most of the women in this village are housewives and a very few women are engaged in selling fresh and dried fish in the village and the neighboring villages.

*Table 1: Population and education level of people of Rajapalayam fishing village*

No. of families	Total population	No. of males	No. of females	No. educated to school level	No. educated to college level	No. uneducated
175	799	364	435	700	85	14

In the total population, 700 are educated to school level, 85 educated to college level and 14 are uneducated, and this is in approximately equal ratio for women and men. The women educated at school level and the uneducated women are the ones involved in the activities of the Self-Help Groups.

### **Role of women in Self-Help Groups**

All the fisherwomen of this village are members of the Self-Help Groups and these groups are under the control of the Tuticorin Multipurpose Social Service Society run by the Roman Catholic Diocese. The Bishop of the Tuticorin District is the president and he is assisted by several members (Patterson 2003). There are seven of these groups in the village and each has 20 members. Their main role is to promote small savings and to help in availing government

loans from banks at low interest rates in proportion to their savings. This finance is utilised for their monetary needs arising out of health care, family functions, children's education and the like. The Self-Help Group presidents collect the loans from the banks and divide the money among the group members.

### **Involvement of the women in adult education**

Through cooperation funded by SPIDER, Sweden, involving information and communication technology among the Suganthi Devadason Marine Research Institute (SDMRI), the Coastal Ocean Research and Development in the Indian Ocean (CORDIO), and the East Africa and Nyköping's Folkhögskola School in Sweden, adult education has been introduced in this village. Initially, the staff of SDMRI was trained in adult education by the staff of Nyköping's Folkhögskola. Based on this training, two women coordinators from Rajapalayam fishing village were selected by SDMRI and delivered training in adult education in their local language. After the training, SDMRI provided basic education materials such as alphabet books, blackboards, slates, chalk pieces, papers and pencils to the village coordinators and encouraged them to start adult education in their village. Initially 40 women attended the adult education program, and after witnessing the progress, more women (n=64) from that village and also from the nearby small village (Nehru colony) also started attending classes. The participants are between 20 and 60 years of age. Of these 64 women, 16 are uneducated and the rest have been educated only to elementary level.

Since all women are engaged in different types of work until noon-time, the village coordinators conduct the classes daily between 2pm and 6pm. The coordinators initially taught the English alphabet to the low literate women and the alphabet of their mother tongue (Tamil) to the uneducated women. Now 24 women are learning English. The women are trained to write their own names and affix

their signatures by writing their own names. After training them to write their names, they are taught to read and write small words. Once the women members are trained in words, the coordinators teach them how to read and write sentences. They are regularly given tests in writing sentences and filling in blanks in sentences. Once the women have learnt small words, they are given training in reading and writing their village names so they can read the destination name boards on local buses, thereby enabling them to travel alone without others' help. They are also given environmental education. Due to the dedication and involvement of the participants and the hard work of the coordinators, adult education is achieving success in this village within a relatively short period. Women who previously affixed their signature using their thumb impression are now writing their names for signatures.

### **Salient outcomes**

The main outcomes arising from this project are the following.

- Women have learned to affix their signature by writing their names instead of thumb impression.
- Women who knew how to write their names in Tamil have learned also to write them in English.
- Women have learned to read bus boards and have started to travel alone.
- Women have learned simple mathematical calculations through adult education.
- Women have learned to write their family members' names.
- The fisherwomen are now using their learned skills to guide their children and grandchildren in their education.
- Rajapalayam village is now demonstrating to its neighbouring villages the importance of adult education.

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