

THE PEOPLE RECLAIM THE IRANAITHEEVU ISLAND

In completion of 359 days of protest the people of Iranaitheevu Island decided to reclaim their land on April 27, 2018. From Iranai Madha Nagar (the land where they resided temporarily) they got into their fishing boats and journeyed to their native soil after 26 years of waiting. Civil society activists and catholic priests too joined them in solidarity and travelled to the island—a 45 minutes sea travel.

The CHRD team also joined the people of Iranaitheevu and provided legal consultation as the families decided to remain in their own land which is now heavily occupied by the Navy. Shockingly, there was no resistance from the Navy when the people reclaimed their land.

In reclaiming the island, the people of Iranaitheevu lament that they have not only lost their homes and livelihood but also their dignity and their very lives

The Iranaitheevu community has lived in the island for centuries from generation to generation. The island is rich with natural resources and a long historical background dating back to the 18th century, Dutch era. This is well evident through the 80 feet lighthouse located there, which is a historical monument.

OVERVIEW OF THE IRANAITHEEVU ISLAND

People of Iranaitheevu Island fled their homeland during 1985 and 1992 due to escalation of hostilities between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Navy occupied the island and the displaced people from Iranaitheevu were temporarily settled in an area in Mulangavil. After much demand, they were given 200 acres of jungle land there by the Government Agent and they made shelters there and named it Iranai Madha Nagar. However, due to change of food and vegetation many fell ill and some even lost their lives.

Iranaitheevu Island which is rich with natural resources and the islanders who were once self-sufficient are now struggling to make ends meet. Navy has deprived them of carrying out their livelihood which was mainly fishing.

People were just allowed into the Island once a year to visit the church during Good Friday. It seemed as though Iranai Madha Nagar had eventually become their permanent homeland and they would never step into Iranaitheevu Island again.

The Navy, who are the occupational forces of the island have demolished all the buildings namely the famous Church (Our Lady of Rosary) dating back to 18th century (Dutch period) and two other churches, school and staff quarters which educated students up to G.C.E Ordinary Level, a preschool, hospital with staff quarters, library, community centers, playground, fisheries society, village council office (Pradeshiya Sabha), co-operative society store, post office and salterns. Once these buildings were

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the pride of place and also the village boasted of having rainwater storage sumps in the underground area of the church and other buildings. There are nearly 10 tanks both natural and manmade.

As mentioned above the Iranaitheevu community was self-sufficient as the Island is enriched with resources—both with marine life as well as a fertile land. They neither lacked food nor income; it seemed too good to be true. While the men opted fishing or cultivation, the women of Iranaitheevu reared poultry or got their income by working in shallow waters.

Everything seemed accessible; the Island allows large numbers of boats to be anchored. They always had an abundance of fish due to the coral reefs that surrounded the island and happen to be ideal breathing ground for the fish. They also fished for sea cucumbers, mussels, crustaceans which is excessively available in shallow waters. In addition, they had no need to go far for fishing; just two to three kilo meters out into the sea, which meant only two liters of fuel would be consumed by the boat for travel.

As for the land, it is arable. Vegetables, peanuts, were being cultivated in the land and thousands of coconut trees are grown throughout the island. When the people fled the island they left behind nearly 2000 cows. Now the navy is selling the milk from these cows as well as the coconuts for half the price.

There are no predators such as snakes or mongooses in the island and therefore, they were able to rear poultry. When the people had requested permission to visit their homes in February 2015 from the Navy, they had refused stating the island was infested with snakes. However, the people did enter the island and found these claims to be untrue and brought back plenty of coconuts.

The Iranaitheevu community had their own culture, caste system and way of life; almost everyone is a devout Catholic. Once the people of Iranaitheevu were all self-sufficient and lacked nothing, now they are struggling to meet their day to day needs.

HARDSHIP FACED BY THE PEOPLE OF IRANAITHEEVU

When the Iranaitheevu community fled the island, there were 143 families now they have expanded to 340 families. The island is divided in two parts—SinnaTheevu (36 acres) and PeriyaTheevu (143 acres). Everyone has deeds to their lands but most of them have lost these documents due to multiple displacements. However, these documents could be obtained at the Poonaaeryn Divisional Secretariat.

Presently the islanders carry out their fishing in a restricted environment with limited facilities and high cost. Almost 40 liters of fuel is consumed for 12

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kilometers of travel (for just a single trip and the only trip that will be done) due to heavy winds and distance. Back in the island, the people could make two to three trips a day with minimal fuel cost. The competition too has increased as other islanders come fishing in separate boats to the same area. The people of Iranaitheevu too own boats, but now they share the boats due to cost of fuel. They are only permitted to dock 10 boats at a time for short periods in a 200 meters X 25 meters strip along the island's coast. But this was not the case earlier; the island of Iranaitheevu seemed like a natural harbor and hundreds of boats could be docked. Now, every time the boat is docked, they are compelled to register their names, National Identification Card Nos., Boat engine Nos. to the nearby naval post.

Similarly, the Island's community used dry their nets closer to their homes back in the Island but now the nets get robbed as they are dried at a distance.

As for the women in the island, who were once involved shallow water fishing, poultry and cultivation which brought in good income almost equal to the men are now working in houses for daily wages— hardly sufficient to meet their daily needs.

The people of Iranaitheevu Island hardly went to the mainland for neither employment, education, medical treatment nor purchase of food etc. When the people left Island in 1992, they took all their belongings along with them however; they lost everything in 2009 during the final phase of the war.

PEOPLE RECLAIMING THEIR LAND AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

After the war ended in 2009, residents of Iranaitheevu Island attempted to visit their homeland which was continuously denied by the Navy. It is unclear as to why the Navy and the government is denying the people of Iranaitheevu to resettle in their lands, as some of the coastal areas on the periphery of the island is only occupied by the Navy. No valid explanation was given to the people by the government when this issue was raised.

When the people entered the island to reclaim their land the villages seemed unidentifiable. What was once a thriving village with coconut trees, poultry farms, agricultural lands as well as a busy fishing hub is now totally neglected and naturally transformed into a green jungle of overgrown trees, tangled plants and shrubs.

The islanders, providing appeals to relevant ministers and local government bodies was to no avail. In fact, a group of people from Iranai Madha Nagar travelled to Colombo and met with relevant officials in the UN, EU and the Human Rights Commission regarding their plight. They explored legal options with CHRD. With the support of a civil society organization namely Mannar Social and Economic Development Organization (MSEDO) and Catholic priests, the people peacefully began a protest which resulted in receiving a letter from the Presidential Secretariat stating that the matter is being referred to relevant bodies and once the background check is completed, the lands will be allocated returned to their rightful owners. However 359 days had passed but the government failed to keep its promises, which prompted the people to reclaim their land.

White flags were attached in the boats carrying the people of Iranaitheevu and others on the day they decided reclaim their land. They were expecting resistance from the navy before entering the island. But strangely, there was no confrontation even after entering the island,

except for three naval soldiers who inquired from the Priest as to what was the issue all about and informed that the commander in charge was not in the island and this issue is something the government must decide and not the navy.

The residents of the Island became emotional entering the village after two and half decades. A prayer was held at the church and the residents began exploring the land they had abandoned 26 years ago.

After the people of Iranaitheevu abandoned the land the church too was damaged. However, it was observed the navy had carried out few repairs in the church. It is important to note that one such restoration is the crucifixion statue of Jesus, where the loin cloth worn by Jesus is universally white, however, here it is painted in blue. It was the same plight for the statue of Saint Theresa. The residents of the island felt it symbolized the carried out in the Church was funded by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress. This too raised many questions as to why such an organization would be interested in the island or the church.

The people of Iranaitheevu island reclaiming the land is only just the beginning of a long and hard journey; much work needs to be done such as ensuring their right to life, housing, water sanitation facilities, education, health care and development. The relevant authorities must take swift action to address these basic needs of the people of this island.

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