Critical Reflection: Researching the Seasonal Fishing Ban in Chennai and Presenting at BCUR

Samyuktha Shankar, University of Warwick

Abstract

This article offers a critical reflection on my involvement in a research project examining the 61-day seasonal fishing ban in Chennai, India, conducted under the Undergraduate Research Support Scheme (URSS) and subsequently presented at the British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR). Moving beyond empirical findings, the reflection adopts a reflexive analytical lens to interrogate how knowledge is produced, interpreted, and disseminated within specific academic and socio-political contexts. The discussion is structured around three interrelated dimensions: policy, academic practice, and personal positionality. This framework is chosen to move beyond surface-level evaluation towards a deeper examination of the assumptions and power dynamics embedded within the research process. While the project generated substantive insights into the tensions between sustainability imperatives and subsistence needs within Chennai's fishing community, its value also lay in revealing how such insights are shaped by the researcher's standpoint, methodological choices, and the institutional frameworks through which knowledge is validated. Ultimately, this reflection positions reflexivity as central to producing research that is analytically rigorous, ethically grounded, and socially accountable. These insights carry significance not only for the specific project but also for broader undergraduate research practice.

Keywords: Positionality, Knowledge Production, Research Ethics, Fisheries Policy

Introduction

Research is rarely a neutral act. The questions we ask, the communities we enter, and the institutions through which we disseminate our findings are all shaped by assumptions we carry long before we begin. This reflection examines my experience as part of a four-member team conducting research into the 61-day seasonal fishing ban in Chennai, India, under the Undergraduate Research Support Scheme (URSS), and the subsequent presentation of our findings at the British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR) in April 2026 at the University of Glasgow. Through a three dimensional, this reflection analyses not only what happened, but what it meant, what it revealed, and how it will shape my approach to research in the future.

While the project generated insights into the sustainability–livelihood tension within Chennai's fishing community, its deeper value lay in exposing how such insights are shaped by the researcher's positionality, the assumptions embedded within research design, and the institutional frameworks through which knowledge is validated and disseminated. In this sense, research emerges not simply as a process of discovering objective truths, but as one of negotiating perspective, interpretation, and power.

This reflection therefore examines the project across three interrelated dimensions: the academic (how knowledge was produced and interpreted), the policy-oriented (how findings were framed and communicated), and the personal (how my positionality shaped engagement with the field). In doing so, it positions reflexivity as a central methodological responsibility that underpins both the validity and ethical integrity of research.

Background

Over the summer, as part of a four-member interdisciplinary team supported by the URSS bursary, I conducted research into the 61-day seasonal fishing ban implemented annually in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. Chennai is a major coastal city with a substantial fishing community comprising fishermen, fishing-allied workers, and boat owners for whom fishing constitutes the primary, and often only, source of income. The ban, enforced during the fish breeding season, is designed to promote long-term marine sustainability and prevent overfishing. However, it creates a significant period of enforced economic inactivity for one of the city's most vulnerable communities,

generating a direct tension between environmental policy objectives and immediate livelihood security.

Our research investigated whether this tension was inevitable or whether it could be mitigated through more targeted policy design. Our findings indicated that the trade-off between sustainability and sustenance is not inherent, and that it can be meaningfully balanced through policies focused on financial inclusion, differentiated welfare support, and livelihood diversification during the ban period. As a resident of Chennai with cultural and linguistic familiarity with the community, my specific role within the team included securing access to interview participants, conducting and translating interviews, and contributing to the writing and framing of the final report.

Upon completing the research, our team was invited to present our findings at BCUR, one of the UK's foremost forums for undergraduate research. This opportunity allowed us to share our work with a wider academic audience and to position our case study as a transferable framework for understanding policy conflicts between sustainability and sustenance across different sectors and geographies.

Interpretation

The following analysis consolidates the interpretive dimensions of this experience into three thematic areas: policy significance, academic learning, and personal development. This structure reflects three levels at which the experience proved most significant.

Policy: Challenging the trade-off

The most significant policy finding of the project challenged the notion that environmental sustainability and economic sustenance are incompatible. We demonstrated that framing this relationship as a binary choice often reflects gaps in policy design rather than incompatibility. By identifying targeted mechanisms such as financial inclusion schemes, differentiated welfare support calibrated to different categories of worker, and livelihood diversification programmes, we outlined conditions under which the sustainability-sustenance trade-off can be bridged. This reframing allowed us to go beyond documenting hardships and demonstrate that more

equitable outcomes are achievable within the existing regulatory framework, provided that policy design is attentive to the differentiated vulnerabilities within the fishing community.

This stratification was not something I had anticipated at the outset: I had entered the project with an implicit assumption of broadly shared hardship, and the divergence I encountered required recalibrating both the analysis and my prior expectations. The risk of flattening internal complexity of producing a single representative narrative from a heterogeneous community is what Spivak (1988) cautions against, arguing that assumptions of internal consensus can silence the most marginalised within already marginalised groups. Adopting a more inclusive approach, complicated our research but also strengthened it further.

Academic: Knowledge production and the role of Dissemination

On the academic side, presenting the project at BCUR reframed it from an isolated study into a case study with broader relevance for policy. Conversations with other researchers across at BCUR2026 expanded my understanding of the sustainability-sustenance tension as a problem that recurs across multiple sectors that underpin everyday life. his cross-sectoral dialogue was something I had not anticipated, and it deepened my appreciation for the value of undergraduate research as a forum for intellectual exchange.

At the same time, presenting research on a marginalised community to a Western academic audience prompted a critical interrogation of the direction of knowledge flow itself. While dissemination to a wider academic audience was valuable, research conducted about marginalised communities and presented within Western institutional contexts risks reproducing the extractive dynamics it may seek to critique. It highlighted how knowledge production is often oriented towards the priorities of academic institutions rather than the needs of the communities involved. This tension resonates with postcolonial critiques of development research, particularly those advanced by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), who argues that research methodologies are never neutral but are embedded within broader structures of power. Smith demonstrates how dominant forms of knowledge production privilege Western

epistemologies while marginalising indigenous ways of knowing, often reducing communities to sources of data rather than participants in knowledge creation. In this sense, research can function as a form of extraction, where the benefits accrue primarily to academics and institutions rather than to the communities themselves. Reflecting on this did not invalidate the value of the project, but it reframed its ethical implications. It reinforced the importance of ensuring that research outputs are not only academically rigorous but also accessible and beneficial to the communities involved. This aligns with Smith's call for more community-centred and reciprocal approaches to research, where knowledge is not simply taken from communities but produced in ways that are accountable to them.

Personal: Positionality, Bias, and Reconnection

On a personal level, the project prompted a form of reconnection that I had not expected. Having grown up in Chennai, I had lived in proximity to the fishing community without fully acknowledging either their economic contribution to the city or the particular vulnerability their dependence on a single, seasonally interrupted livelihood created. The floods that periodically affect Chennai have seen fishing communities play active roles in rescue operations, yet their essential role enters mainstream civic conversation. Engaging with this community as a researcher by listening, translating and representing, deepened my sense of connection to the community I had underappreciated.

This personal engagement also required me to examine my positionality. As a resident of Chennai, I entered the project carrying what Bourdieu (1990) describes as *habitus.* This refers to deeply ingrained dispositions shaped by one's social environment which simultaneously enriched and constrained my interpretation. My cultural fluency enabled trust and access during the interview process, yet I had to remain vigilant against allowing familiarity to substitute for analysis, particularly in moments when community perspectives diverged from our emerging findings. On several occasions, I had to actively interrogate whether I was interpreting interview responses through the lens of what I expected to hear rather than what was actually being communicated. This can be explained through Schön's (1983) distinction between knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action. My initial responses to participants often reflected the former,

shaped by my proximity to the context. However recognising the potential for these instincts to reproduce unexamined assumptions, I deliberately engaged in reflection-in-action allowing me to critically interrogate how my positionality was shaping what I perceived as “obvious” or “familiar”.

Rather than attempting to eliminate positionality bias entirely, we actively sought to recognise and mitigate its influence on our interpretations. As a team of four, we brought distinct relationships to the material, with varying degrees of cultural proximity and interpretive distance. This plurality enabled a form of triangulation, as interpretations were continuously cross-referenced across different positional standpoints. In doing so, we introduced a corrective dynamic that no single researcher could have achieved in isolation. The collaborative structure of the project therefore functioned not only as a methodological strength, enhancing analytical rigour, but also as an ethical safeguard against the uncritical reproduction of individual biases.

Future planning

This project has reshaped my approach to research in several ways. First, I realise that positionality is not as a methodological limitation but as an active and ongoing dimension of the research process. Reflexivity, which refers to the practice of continuously examining how one’s background, assumptions, and relationships shape interpretation, is most effective when embedded within the research design from the outset, rather than applied retrospectively. In future projects, I intend to formalise this process by documenting my assumptions at the beginning of any fieldwork and revisiting them at key analytical stages. The divergence between initial expectations and empirical findings will be treated not as an inconsistency to be resolved, but as a site of inquiry in its own right.

Second, my experience at BCUR has sharpened my awareness of the responsibilities that accompany research dissemination. Presenting findings to an academic audience is not a neutral act of information transfer; it involves deliberate choices about framing, emphasis, and audience, all of which carry ethical implications. While academic dissemination remains important, the outputs of this research must also be accessible to the communities that informed it. To address this, we have sought to extend

dissemination beyond academic spaces by producing a documentary format designed to broaden accessibility and ensure the research reaches those most directly affected.

Conclusion

In reflecting on this research experience, it becomes clear that the process extended beyond the production of findings to a deeper interrogation of how knowledge itself is generated, interpreted, and disseminated. Engaging critically with positionality, reflexivity, and the ethics of knowledge production has reinforced that research is not merely neutral but one embedded within broader structures of power and responsibility. The experience challenged me to move beyond viewing bias as a limitation to be eliminated, and instead to recognise it as a dimension to be critically managed and made analytically productive.

Moreover, the project underscored the importance of situating research within its wider social and institutional context. From navigating insider perspectives to questioning the direction of knowledge flow towards Western academic spaces, I developed a more nuanced understanding of the ethical implications that accompany both research practice and dissemination. These insights will have a lasting impact on my academic development, shaping a more deliberate, and accountable approach to future research.

Ultimately, this reflection demonstrates the value of critical self-examination as an integral component of rigorous scholarship. By systematically interrogating assumptions, methods, and outcomes, reflection not only strengthens the quality of research but also ensures that it remains ethically grounded and socially relevant.

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To cite this paper please use the following details: Shankar, S. (2026), 'Critical Reflection: Researching the Seasonal Fishing Ban in Chennai and Presenting at BCUR', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Volume 19, Issue 1, https://reinventionjournal.org/index.php/reinvention//. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities, please let us know by emailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

ISSN 1755-7429