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CRISIS IN FISHERIES HARBOUR, COCHIN*

Suspension of fish landings at the harbour

First week of January 1982

In the Cochin Fisheries Harbour, controlled by Cochin Port Trust, nearly 5,000 people are employed in various operations connected with the handling of fish catches from an average of 300 fishing vessels (42' purse seiners - 40, 32' purse seine carriers - 80, 24' gill net boats - 50 and 32' shrimp trawlers - 130). Fish worth about Rs. 8.0 lakhs are handled at the harbour daily. After the berthing of the vessels the catch is sold straight away or after unloading, by auction and the fish sold thus is packed with ice and removed from the harbour quay by the merchants. Each category viz: the owner, the agent or the merchant have freedom to engage their own labour for the work connected with the fish handling at the harbour. To have an effective control on the proper handling of fish, the harbour authorities have imposed some restrictions for the entry of merchants and persons connected with the trade. Licences for carrying out these works are being granted by the harbour authorities on payment of specified fees and this has been the practice from the time of the commissioning of the harbour in December 1978.

At present there are about 650 licenced merchants, who participate in auction and remove the fish by all modes of conveyance except by bicycles. Each one of them is provided with 3 entry passes; one for himself and the other two for his labourers. In addition to these, there are also about 400 licenced merchants who purchase fish and remove by bicycles and who are given one entrance pass each. There are also about 85 fish buying agents who are provided with 10 entry passes each for his use as well as his workers. Besides, a large number of other extra labourers also enter inside the harbour paying the prescribed entrance fee. The number of extra labourers depends mainly on the landings. Apart from these the authorities are collecting prescribed berthing charges for various types of fishing boats which come to the harbour for the disposal of the fish, as well as fixed toll charges for the different types of vehicles coming inside the harbour for transport of fish catches.

All these toll charges, licences fees and berthing charges remained unchanged till 31-12-1981. The rates of these licences and fees were revised recently and the implementation of the revised rates from 1-1-1982 is understood to have triggered the crisis at the harbour from 1-1-1982. As a protest against the harbour authorities fish landings were boycotted by all the categories of people engaged in the trade. The old

rates and the enhanced rates from 1-1-1982 are given in table 1.

Details concerning the agitation

On the morning of 1st January 1982 when the drift gill net boats arrived at the harbour as usual to dispose of the catch, the authorities claimed the enhanced berthing charge of Rs 5/- instead of the old rate of Rs 3/-. The boat crew refused to pay these enhanced rates. The merchants and the agents joined hands and did not participate in the sale of the fishes. Out of the 29 drift net boats berthed, a few that unloaded their catch did not get any reasonable price due to the non-cooperation of the agents and the merchants. So the remaining boats took their catches to the nearby private jetties and sold the fish. None of the boats paid the berthing charges.

In the afternoon of the same day 2 purse seiners and 12 carrier boats were observed at the harbour, with the catch iced and covered with coconut palm (Cudjan) leaves in the boat itself due to lack of agents and merchants for the sale. Their catch consisted of a total of 7.5 tonnes of *Caranx djeddaba*, 13.5 tonnes of Oil sardine (*Sardinella longiceps*), 200 kg of Seer fish (*Scomberomorus commerson*) and 100 kg of black pomfret (*Parastromateus niger*). By about 16.00 hrs all these boats left the harbour with the fish and disposed it at the nearby private jetties at Thoppumpady, Fort Cochin, Vypeen and Murukkumpadam area. A total of 14 purse seiners and 153 carriers as well as several shrimp trawlers that arrived at the harbour also had to take their catches to other areas for selling. A few boats that unloaded their catch at the harbour had to sell their fish at throw away prices.

On 2-1-1982 only drift net boats brought catches to the harbour. But all the 37 of them left the harbour without unloading and disposed the catches at the nearby jetties.

Next day being a Sunday none of the boats operated. On 4.1.82, 35 drift net boats, 24 purse seiners and 127 carrier boats and shrimp trawlers together, after bringing their catches to the harbour left without unloading to nearby areas for the sale of fish.

On 5-1-1982, out of a total of 26 drift net boats berthed at the harbour 9 sold their fish at the harbour without paying any berthing charges. The rest 17 numbers landed at the Amruth Ice and Cold Storage jetty at Thoppumpady after paying Rs 1/- each as landing charges. The agents and the merchants actively

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Table 1. Charges levied by the Harbour authorities at Cochin

Items	Old rate from Dec. 1978 to 31.12.81	Enhanced rate from 1.1.82	Revised rate after the agitation
A. Berthing charges			
i. Purse seiners	Rs 15/- per day with catch	Rs 25/- per arrival with catch	Rs 25/- per arrival with catch
ii. Trawlers & purse seine carriers	Rs 5/- "	Rs 7.50/- "	Rs 6/- "
iii. Gill net boats	Rs 3/- "	Rs 5/- "	Rs 4/- "
B. Licence fees			
i. Merchants who partake in auction in the harbour and remove the fish purchased by all modes of conveyance except by bicycles	Rs 30/- per month	Rs 50/- per month	Rs 50/- per month from March 1982 onwards only
ii. Merchants who purchase fish and remove by bicycle	Rs 10/- per month	Rs 15/- per month	Rs 15/- "
iii. Agents working in the Harbour	Rs 100/- per month	Rs 150/- per month	Rs 150/- "
C. Toll for entry of vehicles (from 6.00 AM to 6.00 AM next day)			
i. Hand cart	Rs 1/- per day	Rs 2/- per day	Rs 2/- per day
ii. Auto truck	Rs 1/- "	Rs 3/- "	Rs 2/- "
iii. Cycles with maximum 2 baskets	Rs 0.50 "	Rs 1/- "	Rs 1/- "
iv. Tempo van	Rs 2/- "	Rs 5/- "	Rs 5/- "
v. Lorry	Rs 4/- "	Rs 10/- "	Rs 10/- "
D. Extra levy for vehicles for space utilised by the articles in connection with the handling, scales etc.			
i. Hand cart/Auto truck	Nil	Rs 2/- per trip with materials such as creeper, baskets, cudjan leaves etc.	Nil
ii. Tempo vans with materials	Nil	Rs 4/- "	Nil
iii. Lorry with materials	Nil	Rs 5/- "	Nil
iv. Extra levy for the ice taken inside the harbour by any mode	Nil	25 paise per block of 50 kg (subject to a minimum of Rs 1/-)	15 paise per block of 50 kg (no minimum payment of Rs 1/-)
v. Entry fee for extra labour	Rs 2/-	Rs 1/-	Rs 1/-
E. Berthing charges for crafts used for unloading materials			
i. Boats other than gillnets	Nil	Rs 7.50/- per day	Rs 7.50/- per day
ii. Gill net boats	Nil	Rs 5/- "	Rs 5/- "
iii. Extra charges for space utilisation. (for materials landed from the waterside)			
a) Materials like creepers, baskets, cudjan leaves etc unloaded from Trawl net boats	Nil	Rs 5/- per arrival	Rs 5/- per arrival
b) Materials like creepers, baskets, cudjan leaves etc unloaded from gill net boats	Nil	Rs 3/- "	Rs 3/- "
F. Charges for utilising space for net repairs			
i. Purse seine nets	Rs 15/- per day	Rs 25/- per day	Rs 25/- per day
ii. Gill nets	Nil	Rs 5/- per day	Rs 5/- per day
iii. Trawl nets	Nil	Rs 5/- per day	Rs 5/- per day
G. Charges for using bath rooms & latrines			
i. Bathrooms	20 paise per bath	20 paise per bath	20 paise per bath
ii. Latrines	10 paise per one use	10 paise per one use	10 paise per one use

participated in the selling and purchasing of the catch here.

From 5-1-1982 to 7-1-1982 the purse seine as well as the trawl catches were taken to different places for sale. It is understood that they have selected landing centres right from Alleppey in the South to Narakkal in the North and to Chambakkara in the east in the Vempanad lake area depending on availabi-

lity of facilities for unloading and transportation of the catch.

Negotiation and restoration of normal activities

The enhanced toll charges and the other rates were intimated to the public by the harbour authorities through a notification in the Kerala Gazette published on 22-12-1981. The representatives of the

various categories of people engaged in the trade met and submitted a memorandum to the Chairman of the Cochin Port Trust who is also the Chairman of the Advisory Committee of the Cochin Fisheries Harbour on 31-12-1981, requesting for a stay in the implementation of the revised rates for sometime in order to enable them to discuss the matter in detail with the Chairman. The Chairman assured the representatives that due consideration would be given to their representation, at the meeting of the Board of Trustees and Advisory Committee.

Following a discussion of the representatives of the trade with the Chairman on 7-1-1982, (the 7th day of the agitation) in which the latter gave the assurance that their protest in the enhancement of the rates would be seriously considered and a positive decision in their favour taken in the next Advisory Committee Meeting, the normal functioning of the Fisheries Harbour was resumed from 8-1-1982. As assured by the Chairman, the Advisory Committee of the Cochin Fisheries Harbour met on 22-1-1982 and after discussions agreed to reduce some of the revised berthing charges for the boats, toll charges of some of the vehicles, the toll charges on ice etc. (vide table I).

First week of February 1982

Cochin Fisheries Harbour constructed at a cost of Rs 4.0 crores, although provided with the facilities for handling, packing and transport of the catch, lacks one of the vital facilities i.e. an Ice Plant that could produce required quantities of ice for preserving the catches landed. Inside the Campus there is a small ice plant with a capacity of 25 tonnes per day managed by a private party and started functioning recently.

Lack of sufficient ice to preserve the catch has resulted in dumping large quantities of decayed oil sardine and other fishes on several occasions. On 28-1-1982 for instance, a total of about 1,000 tonnes of big sized oil sardine (180-215 mm) was caught off Cochin and brought to the harbour by the purse seiners and carriers. In addition, indigenous crafts fitted with out board engines were also hired by the purse seiners in the sea to carry the oil sardine catch to nearby centres.

As there was not sufficient ice available in the Fisheries Harbour to preserve the 1,000 tonnes of oil sardine landed there, the merchants were reluctant to purchase the fish. With the result the price came down from the usual rate of Rs 900 - 1,500 to Rs 400 - 500 per tonne. Even at the reduced price the whole catch was not taken. So nearly 25 tonnes of decayed oil sardine were dumped in the backwaters and several tonnes of decayed fish were transported for use as manure.

The ice required at the Fisheries Harbour has to be brought from nearby private Ice Factories in and around Cochin in 50 kg blocks by lorries, push carts and other transports and thus made available inside the harbour for purchase. Initially in 1978 the price of ice inside the harbour was Rs 70/- per tonne which later rose to Rs 100/- per tonne.

Till 31-12-1981, the harbour authorities were not levying any charges for bringing ice inside the harbour. But from 1-1-1982 onwards a levy of 25 paise per ice block of 50 kg subject to a minimum of Rs 1/- was introduced. As a result the ice merchants increased the price of ice from Rs 100/- to Rs 115/- per tonne.

In protest against this increase in the price of ice, the fish merchants started an agitation and struck work from 3-2-1982 demanding a reduction of the price of ice. Their demands also included commissioning of an ice Factory and a freezing plant inside the harbour. The grievance of the fish merchants was that the price of the ice was only Rs 45/- per tonne in the neighbouring places of Cochin.

Due to this strike by the fish merchants all the fishing boats operating from the harbour had to suspend their fishing operations.

The protest and the agitation by the fish merchants continued for 3 days from 3-2-1982 to 5-2-1982. However, normal fishing operations were resumed on 6-2-1982 onwards after the private ice plant owners at Cochin agreed to reduce the price of ice to Rs 95/- per tonne as a result of negotiations by the Sub-Collector of Ernakulam. The levy of 25 paise per ice block of 50 kg was reduced to 15 paise, without any fixation of minimum.

Problems of the purse seine boat crew

There are about 52 purse seine boats operating at Cochin Fisheries Harbour each having a crew of about 30 persons. The crew members of these purse seiners are understood to have started an agitation for getting increased share of their wages. Till recently the crew were given 30% of the amount realised from sale of catch as their share. (i.e. 30% of the total price of the fish, after deduction of 5% commission for the auctioneer or the agent). From December 1981 the purse seine boat owners are giving to the crew only 30% of the net amount realised (i.e. after deducting the days expenses such as diesel, oil, mess expenses for the crew etc. from the total realised amount). The crew wants the original payment of the share of wages restored and are agitating for the same. Negotiations for an amicable settlement of the problem are under way and it is hoped that a settlement in the grievances of the crew will be found

soon, which would very much help in the smooth functioning of the purse seine fishing activity at Cochin. In resolving such problems in the various

segments of the fisheries, more concern and involvement of the State Department of Fisheries would be helpful.

