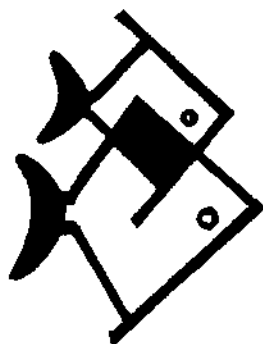


INDIAN FISHERIES

1947 - 1977



**ISSUED ON THE OCCASION OF THE FIFTH SESSION OF
THE INDIAN OCEAN FISHERY COMMISSION HELD AT COCHIN FROM
19TH TO 26TH OCTOBER, 1977**

II

socio-economics

The total fisher population of India in 1972 was 55,83,400, representing about one per cent of the total population of the country. Along the coastline live 32,81,500 fisher folk, and others on the banks of the rivers, lakes, and backwaters. About one million fishermen are actively engaged in the sea fishing. Besides fishing, fishermen also carry out other avocations such as ferrying and water transport, sea faring and salt making.

The fishermen of the country have a distinct tradition of their own. They belong to all the major religions, namely Hindu, Christian and Islam, and to several communities which differ from State to State. The principal fishermen communities of Gujarat and Maharashtra are the *Khar*, *Machis* and *Bhois*; of the Kanara Coast, the *Ambigas* and *Mogaveers*; of Kerala, the *Mukkavas*; of Tamil Nadu, the *Sembadavas* and *Pattanavans*; of Andhra Pradesh, the *Besta*, *Boya* and *Palli*, of Bengal, Bihar and eastern parts of the country, the *Mallah*, *Molo*, *Tiyar* and *Patni*. While the *Khars* have no endogamous divisions or exogamous

sects, the *Ambigas* have endogamous divisions having exogamous sects. Both matrilineal and patrilineal systems are existing in the fishermen communities of *Mukkavas* of Kerala. The *Molo* and *Tiyar* communities are tribals. Thus, a great sectoral diversity exists among the fishermen communities of the country.

In the society, the fishing community occupies a low status. Majority of the fishermen belong to an economically weaker section and follow traditional methods of fishing employing indigenous crafts and gears. The percentage of fishermen who own boats varies from State to State, being 66.7 in Gujarat, 44.9 in Maharashtra, 50.0 in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Orissa and West Bengal, 27.8 in Kerala and 39.0 in Andhra Pradesh. Others work on hired boats or as partners or on wage basis.

The average size of a fisher family varies between 4.7 and 8.6 in different States. Although there has been considerable improvements in the living conditions of fishermen in recent years, there is very little infor-

mation on the income of family of fishermen or on the pattern of their spending. By and large, the fishermen are perennially indebted to the middle-men who advance financial help to them at times of need in return for their entire catch assessed at a low price. The middle-men also control the sale and marketing of fish.

Several factors such as low social status, poor economic conditions, illiteracy, heavy leaning on middle-men, traditional fishing equipments and methods of fishing, low production rate and income influence the socio-economic conditions of fishermen. Prior to Independence, this sector received little attention. Schemes with specific objectives to improve the socio-economic conditions of fishermen were initiated right from the beginning of the First Five Year Plan. Some of the important programmes taken up by the Government to ameliorate various problems encountered by the sector are briefly discussed below.

Housing and colonisation

The acute problem of housing facilities facing the fishermen who live in congested areas of the beach under unhygienic environment susceptible to all sorts of diseases has received priority at least from the Third Five Year Plan onwards. In the beginning, housing colonies were built in coastal areas of the States with Government funds and distributed to the needy fishermen free of cost. But because of the non-contiguous nature of the villages where houses were provided and other technical and administrative problems associated with the construction of the buildings in coastal areas coupled with high cost of construction, the programme could not be implemented very successfully in most of the States. As an alternative measure a scheme for issue of grants for construction of houses in plots owned/possessed by fishermen who have irredeemable tenancy rights over the land was started for implementation during the later part of the Fourth Five Year Plan. Under this scheme, in Kerala, grants were issued to fishermen in four stages on production of stage certificates — the first stage of grant being Rs. 375/-, second stage Rs. 1,250/-, third stage Rs. 500/- and final stage Rs. 375/-. This scheme does not give benefit to most of the fishermen who are either landless or do not have irredeemable tenancy rights over the land occupied by them. Another inherent defect in the scheme is that most of the fishermen

find it difficult to complete the houses with the meagre stage payments with the result that they are forced to borrow money. An ideal scheme to mitigate the problem of housing should therefore aim at providing interest free loan with easy repayment terms. Or else the amount of grant should be enhanced to meet the increased cost of construction.

Dispensaries and community amenities

The fishermen in the coastal areas are subject to all kinds of diseases, as proper sanitation and medical facilities are not available in these areas. Schemes for providing dispensaries in coastal fishing villages have helped to solve the problem to some extent. Community amenities such as drinking water, wells, latrines, common path-ways and community halls have been provided in some of the colony sites, but majority of the coastal fishing villages are without such amenities.

Approach roads

Most of the fishing villages are inaccessible by road and the problem of transport is all the more acute. This is a major hindrance to the development of the fishing industry. Fish being a perishable commodity, quick transport is imperative to fetch good prices to the producer fishermen. Construction of link roads connecting the fish landing centres with the main road for quick transport will ensure better prices for the catches. A scheme for construction of roads was taken up for implementation during the Third Plan Period. During the Fifth Plan Period, the scheme has been included under a centrally sponsored scheme of providing infrastructural facilities in selected fishing villages. This scheme, when implemented in full, will benefit a large number of fishermen in the selected fishing villages.

Distress relief

A scheme for giving financial assistance to the dependents of fishermen who lose their life and to those who lose their fishing craft and other implements and also to those who meet with accidents while conducting fishing operations is being implemented. It is necessary to enhance the financial assistance and develop a speedy mechanism for redressal.

Education and training

Considering the low socio-economic status of fishermen, scholarships to students belonging to fishermen communities to pursue post-matric studies is under implementation in some of the States. However, due to paucity of funds only a limited number of children are benefited under this programme. In the Regional Fisheries Technical High School under the Department of Fisheries, Kerala, selected students are also given education with free boarding and lodging on a public school model with fisheries bias.

To impart training to the local fishermen in the operation and maintenance of mechanised fishing boats and in modern fishing methods, a number of Fishermen Training Centres were started in the country. These courses are essentially employment-oriented.

Subsidies

Under the Five Year Plan schemes most of the State Governments have issued some subsidy ranging upto 50% in some cases on the cost of hull/engine of mechanised boats, nylon/terylene, twine, indigenous craft, diesel oil, and so on.

Fishery co-operatives

Organised attempts to promote fishery co-operatives in the country owe their origin to the different schemes taken up for implementation in the Five Year Plans, which provided financial assistance for strengthening the fishery co-operatives. In the early years, emphasis was on the organisation of primary societies of credit type which offered loans to the members for purchase of fishery requisites and for discharging old debts. Subsequently, based on the need for marketing of the catch, marketing unions and regional marketing societies/federations were also organised in some of the States, although in most of the cases, the primary societies themselves undertook the marketing operations as well. Of late, however, apex federations of the fishery co-operatives have also been set up in quite a few States.

Though nearly 5000 co-operative societies were formed in the country exclusively for fishermen, more than two-thirds of these societies are defunct. The members on the rolls in these societies are less than 5

lakhs which clearly indicate the fact that a good percentage of the active fishermen in the country are still outside the co-operative fold. If the benefits of co-operatives are to be extended to fishermen, concerted drives have to be launched to enroll all active fishermen either by enhancing the membership in the existing societies or by organising new societies to achieve in a phased manner, cent per cent coverage.

It has been observed that a good number of members of the societies are not active fishermen and that fish traders and others owning one or two boats who are not themselves engaged in the vocation of fishing have infiltrated into these societies as well as their managements to achieve personal gains. The loan assistance, inputs, services and other facilities meant for the fishermen often do not reach genuine fishermen but are utilised by the middlemen traders and other vested interests who gain control of the societies. It is therefore necessary that such of those members, who are not actively engaged in actual fishing should be weeded out of the societies. So long as they dominate the societies there is no scope for ameliorating the miserable conditions of the fishermen.

There is scope for diversifying the activities of the primary societies. It is advisable that the primaries are affiliated directly to the State level Federation which may establish its own branches at district/regional level for efficient co-ordination of the activities of societies and for marketing of the fish. In the absence of a National level Federation of Fishery Co-operatives in the country there is an urgent need for organising one to co-ordinate the activities of the fishery co-operatives and also to act as the Chief Spokesman of the fishery Co-operative movement both at national and international levels.

The State Governments, in most of the States have been assisting the fishery co-operatives by participating in their capital base for enabling them to raise working capital from institutional finance. Government contribution at the primary level accounted for about half of the total paid up share capital while at the central and apex levels it was nearly three-fourth each. The percentage of share contribution by the State Governments varies from society to society as also for different States depending upon the require-

ments of the societies in each case and the resources available with the State Governments within the plan allocation. According to provisional estimates, Government aid to fishery co-operatives at the end of the Fourth Five Year Plan stood at Rs. 2.61 million. During the Fifth Plan, State Governments together have provided an outlay of Rs. 39.85 million for this purpose.

Though the answer to the problems of the fishermen may be the Fishery Co-operatives, much has yet to be done in the matter of actual management. Instead of thinking in terms of a small co-operative with weak financial base, it is necessary to organise multi-purpose societies under the aegis of a Co operative Federation, with a team of well-trained and adequately paid managers to attend to the day to day business transaction.