

FISHERIES OF THE WEST COAST OF INDIA

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FISHERMEN CO-OPERATIVES

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CO-OPERATION is more essential in the fishing industry than in any other, since the people engaged in this industry are largely poor and depend for their finances on middlemen who very often exploit them. As a result of this, the workers actually engaged in the industry do not thrive, as much as might be expected. Further, the profits obtained from fishing are uncertain, since one good season is often followed by one or more bad seasons. The fishing season lasts for only about nine months in the year on the Kerala coast, there being no fishing carried on during the monsoon months. The profits made during the season would certainly be sufficient if prudently utilized to carry the fisherman and his family over the non-fishing months. But through force of habit, the fishermen usually spend away all their earnings during the fishing season itself and borrow money from the middlemen for their expenses of the slack season. Though the middlemen advance money, they appropriate a big proportion of the next seasons catches in realization of the amount advanced. The result is that in the course of a few years many of the working fishermen have to surrender the ownership of their boats and nets to the creditors. Thus, out of about 1,00,000 fishermen in the Kerala State who regularly go out to sea for fishing, only a very small percentage own the boats and nets which they use and enjoy fully the fruits of their labours. This is a very sad state of affairs.

From what has been stated above, it will be seen that the prime needs of the fishermen are, firstly, the elimination of middlemen by the creation of an agency catering to their credit needs and marketing their produce to good advantage, and secondly, the encouragement of the habit of saving.

With these main objects in view, Sir Frederick Nicholson, the founder of the earliest Fishery Department in India, namely the Madras Fisheries Department, strove for the starting of Fishermen Co-operative Societies. The earliest Societies to be started were in Malabar. There were great difficulties in the beginning, both in organizing the Societies and in getting them to work successfully. As the fishermen are out in the sea most of the day and often till late at night, the officers of the department are unable to

get in touch with them to organize co-operative work among them, nor are they able to maintain effective supervision. Most of the working fishermen are very ignorant, and unable to perceive the advantages of Co-operative Societies. It was only after the Fish Curing Yard staff and Fishery School teachers who happened to live in the fishing villages were made *ex-officio* Secretaries and Presidents of these Co-operative Societies that they showed any marked improvement in their working. The number of Fishermen Co-operative Societies in the Kerala State at present is well over 100. In the Malabar area alone (the districts of Cannanore, Kozhikode, Palghat, Trichur and Ernakulam) there are 89 Fishermen Co-operative Societies with a membership of 10,000, a paid-up share-capital of Rs. 3,10,000 and outstanding loans of Rs. 7 lakhs. The Societies encourage the members to save what they can, by distributing hundi boxes to them in which to deposit their savings, these being remitted to the societies at the close of the month. Savings deposits in the Fishermen Co-operative Societies of Malabar area alone totalled Rs. 11,000 during last year. Thrift collections are also made by way of cess levied on the salt sales to the members from Fish Curing Yards, the total amount collected during the same year being Rs. 6,500. The Fishermen Co-operative Societies have also an aggregate investment of Rs. 32,000 in the shares of other Co-operatives. The proper working of the societies and their orderly progress depend mainly on the interest and sincerity of the Board of Directors. There are a few societies in the Malabar and Travancore-Cochin areas which have made commendable progress. Kaipamangalam Society in Trichur District and Kasargode Society in Cannanore District are good examples. The Kaipamangalam Fishermen Society has an office and godown of its own, and advances loans on jewels, and conducts chit-funds, besides carrying on other usual activities. Repayment of loans is prompt, less than 1% of the loans being overdue. The Kasargode Fishermen Society has been advancing loans to sea-going fishermen for purchase of boats and nets, with the result that half the number of boats in that area are now owned by the members of the Society themselves. This Society has also undertaken the marketing of fish. The Society advances money on fish besides helping the members to sell the fish jointly and obtain better prices. Some of the Societies make bulk purchases of articles required by the members, such as yarn, nets, coir-mats and even food-stuffs and cloth which they distribute to the members on advantageous terms. Apart from credit facilities, the members of the Societies make good savings through joint purchase of their requirements.

As the borrowing is restricted to a maximum of Rs. 1000, and the period of ordinary loans is not more than three years, most of the fishermen

were unable to utilise the loans for the purchase of boats and nets. To get over these difficulties the Kerala Government have provided a substantial amount in the Second Five-Year Plan, to be used for issue of long term loans repayable in ten years. These loans are issued to the members either for the purchase of boats and nets or for the clearing of debts incurred on boats and nets. This scheme is bound to be of very great benefit to fishermen.

Till 1950, the lease of fishing rights in inland tracts of water was by public auction the lease being granted to the highest bidder. The working fisher folk were not much benefited by this practice the right of fishing being obtained in auction by men with capital to invest. In order to see that the profits go to those actually engaged in fishing, Fishermen Societies are now given the right of obtaining the lease at rates not exceeding the average of the previous five years' rentals. Several societies have earned considerable profits as a result of this arrangement. In the grant of licenses for stakenet fishing also, members of Fishermen Societies are given preferential treatment. Members of Vengalam, Velur, Elathur, Madai, Chettuvayi, Engandiyoor, Deeverajana, Engandiyoor South, Kaivarthajana and Kadapuram are given such licences for inland fishing in Baliapattam, Tali-paramba, Korapuzha and Chettuvayi rivers.

For co-ordinating and expanding the work of the Fishermen Co-operative Societies, a Federation of these societies has recently been instituted in Malabar. Its objects are, to arrange for the proper marketing of the fish caught by the members of the affiliated Societies, to construct or take on lease Ice Factories, Cold Storages, etc., to purchase or take on hire improved types of fishing boats, gear, etc., and generally to assist and guide the affiliated fishermen Societies in the conduct of their business. Out of the 89 Societies in the Malabar area, 46 have become members of this Federation.

The Kerala Government have a scheme to bring all the working fishermen into the co-operative fold, to bring about ownership of all the fishing boats and nets by Co-operative Societies and to ensure that collection, processing and marketing of the produce are done on co-operative lines. There is good reason to hope that when this scheme begins to operate, the lot of the fisherman would be greatly improved.

The ultimate aim of the co-operatives extends beyond the promotion of the fishing industry and envisages the welfare of the fishermen community as a whole and tries to make them a useful section of our society.