

Food Security and Fisheries in India

By Eberhard Weber

When India became independent in 1947, the small-scale fishers belonged to the poorest sector of the population. At this time, fish was the cheapest source of protein. More than 50 years later, protein from fisheries products is the most expensive in India, but the fishers are still among the poorest sector of society. They did not benefit when fish became an expensive food item. In addition, as India has become a major exporter of marine products, fishers' livelihood became threatened. Outsiders entered the lucrative market, and for more than 40 years there has been a fierce fight between traditional fishers and fishing companies.

More than one million people work in India's fisheries sector. About 450,000 are active fishers, most of them working on traditional fishing boats, while the rest are fish vendors or working in fish processing plants. The fisheries sector has undergone many changes. The fish landings increased five-fold, and in 1998 India's share in the world's fish landings was about 4.2 percent, being about 2 percent of India's gross national product.



Fish landing near Kerala

The export of fishery products contributed about three to four percent to India's foreign exchange earnings. In the 1970s, India was the world's biggest producer of prawn. It has been overtaken over by China and Indonesia. Almost 90 percent of the export earnings from marine products are from prawns, lobsters, and cuttlefish being exported to Japan and the U.S.

Modernization of India's Fisheries

Since its independence, India's government has put much effort into modernizing the fishing sector. Modernization of the fisheries required a whole package of measures, starting from supplying the fishers with new vessels, constructing harbors and landing and repair facilities, and ensuring fuel for the fishing fleet. Another important change was the modernization of the fish processing and marketing infrastructure.

The first major fishery project after India's independence was the Indo-Norwegian Fisheries Project (INP) in Kerala. The objective was to improve food security of the poorer sector of society by strengthening fisheries and fish marketing. The project was to benefit the poor fishers by increasing their productivity, and to benefit Kerala's inland consumers by improved marketing of fresh marine products to the hinterland.

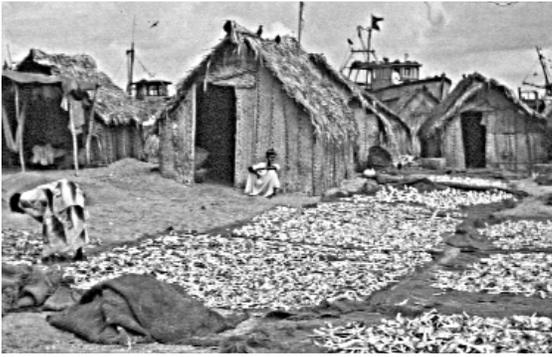
In the early 1960s, the modernization project was facing severe difficulties. Efforts to equip the existing fishing boats with out-board engines failed miserably. Also, fishing vessels that could be operated from beaches, thus not needing harbor facilities (beach-landing craft), were not accepted by the local fishers. This resulted in the development of mechanized

fishing vessels that relied on natural harbors found throughout Kerala. The attempt to supply cheaper fish to those inland failed totally. This was because the increasing costs to fish (energy, processing, preserving, and transporting) increased the price of fish and made it unaffordable for many consumers.

In order to catch fish that could be sold at much higher prices in the foreign market (pomfret and tuna instead of sardines and mackerel), additional major changes were made in the industry. World market prices for these high-priced fish and prawns were on the rise during the 1960s and significant effort was given to their catch and export. This new strategy benefited the Indian government by bringing in badly needed foreign exchange at a time when India was facing a severe imbalance of payment.

By the end of the 1960s, more than 1,200 trawler boats were operating in Kerala, almost all catching prawn. Already the majority of the boats belonged to large fishing houses. This was the beginning of a new class of entrepreneurs who were interested only in maximizing profits in the shortest time possible, with no consideration to food security of the poorer consumers, the livelihood security of artisanal fishers or the environmental sustainability of the resource.

There are huge differences between this modernized fishing sector and the traditional small-scale fishers. The traditional fishers are highly immobile, both in spatial as well as in occupational terms, and for generations they have depended on the resources they are exploiting for their livelihood. In addition, they do not have any other place to go or any other work to do. This is very different than the big fishing entrepreneurs; they are mobile and their main interest is to totally exploit the



Fish drying for market in India

resources. The more they exploit the resource, the higher their profit. When the resources are depleted, they can easily shift their attention to fisheries elsewhere or shift to an entirely different activity.

What started as an effort to increase protein supply for local consumers ended up in benefiting big business houses that sold to the international market, and helping India's government by gaining foreign exchange. The problems increased when some of the modern fishing vessels started to fish species caught by artisanal fishers. Sardines, anchovies, and mackerels were considered to be the poor man's fish, but caught in volume by modern vessels were quite profitable when sold to produce chicken feed.

Today the atmosphere in many coastal areas is highly explosive. Violent conflicts occur daily and lives are lost. John Kurien, the vice chair of the Advisory Committee on Fisheries Research in India, noted, "I don't see this as a law and order problem, but a consequence of failing to address development issues. If we don't put a check to this the situation is bound to explode. In Kerala, everybody is tense. The fishers, the administrators, the politicians are tense. But nobody wants to get together and address the issue—it is so highly political."

Fishing practices today use some of the most damaging equipment. The bottom-trawl net is a plow,

destroying the seafloor and its habitat. The mesh size of the trawl net is small enough that juvenile fish and prawns are caught, thus effecting the species' reproduction ability. In addition, a large percent of the fish caught are not economically

important and are discarded as waste. In the Bay of Bengal, this by-catch constitutes as much as 85-95 percent of the catch that could instead be consumed by the poor. For these reasons, many developed countries ban bottom trawling many years ago. Another harmful yet profitable fishing practice is to fish for prawn during the monsoon season when they come close to the shore to breed. Fishing during the monsoon season depletes the juvenile population, thus destroying the future stock.

Today, more than 50 years after modernization started in Kerala, the fishers are among the poorest sector of Kerala's society. More than 80 percent live below the poverty line, meaning they don't even have a balanced and sufficient diet. In 1956 a person lived on about 14.5 kg a year. In 1992 this has dropped to 8.4 kg. In 1953 fish was among the cheapest food items in Kerala. By the mid 1990s, it was the most expensive. In 1956 almost 50 percent of sardines caught were marketed locally. By the late 1990, this figure had fallen to less than 25 percent.

Johan Galtung, a prominent social scientist working on peace and conflict research for over 40 years, summarizes his experience with the Indo-Norwegian Project in Kerala, "My evaluation is that it is a scandal, and not a partial scandal but a total scandal...the INP project failed in four ways: less protein became available to the

population, the level of living of the fishers decreased, partly violent conflict between the traditional and modern sectors emerged, and depletion of the raw material, particularly the shrimps, set in. Still, however, the project was a success in the sense of being a major source of foreign currency."

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