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**Poverty, Marginalization and Polarisation:
The Example of a South Indian Fishing
Community**

This paper is based on a study on economic and political change within a fishing community located in the city of Madras. The research work for this study was done between October 1990 and August 1992. It is no exaggeration to say that within these 22 months India totally changed in many respects. Many of those changes are closely connected to what we are discussing in our meeting: poverty, marginalization and development. In some cases these connections are obvious, sometimes they are hidden but nevertheless very much relevant. In his paper the author tries to connect the lives of fisherpeople in Madras city with changes that happened outside their spheres of influence. It is not possible to discuss these changes themselves in detail. As they are closely connected with the conceptual frame of the study the most important events have at least to be mentioned briefly.

Only two months before the research work was started the Iraqis had occupied Kuwait and the western world was preparing for a war to free Kuwait. In November 1990 the V.P. Singh Government - a Government which came into power less than a year before - was forced to quit office. There was a short interregnum of Chandra Shekhar, before the Congress ended his tenure in March 1991 and general elections were announced for mid-May. Then happened this dreadful assassination of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi. After only few weeks in office the newly elected Congress-Government started with an economic reform which meant a total change of the economic philosophy in India, which up to that time was very much inspired by late Jawaharal Nehru. India not only opened up for the multinationals, the Congress-Government also started to change the internal economic structure of the *mixed economy*. Even if the retreat of the state from economic activities is not yet completed and the tying up of the Indian economy with the global market is progressing slower than Finance Minister Manmohan Singh likes it to be, the last four years saw a lot of changes.

Up to now it is difficult to say how the economic reform affected the lives and livelihoods of people living close to the poverty line. Only some weeks back Finance Minister Manmohan Singh stated that India was gradually winning its war against poverty. At a meeting of South Asian Finance Ministers he stated that the number of people living below the poverty line declined from 25 percent in 1987/88 to 19 percent in 1993/94. I think that this is more "*wishful thinking*" than reality. There is no doubt that the Indian economy on the whole is much better off today than it was in early 1991. But does this mean that the people of India will benefit from it? I think that the answer is yes.....and no. Economic development may help to reduce poverty, but often it also creates poverty. Economic development, poverty and marginalisation are often two sides of the same coin. There is no doubt that economic growth is important for the social development of a country. But there is also no doubt that the way this economic growth is achieved is not less important. Different groups of a society are in conflict with each other. They are in conflict about access to natural resources, they are in conflict about subsidies given by the governments, they are in conflict as job opportunities are limited.

In the paper it will be shown how the lives of people are influenced by events and decisions which take place outside their spheres of influence. These processes are linked with the inner structure of the fishing community. I argue that marginalization and poverty is the consequence of the effects of external as well internal power structures. Economic transformation like the *structural adjustment programme* is only one aspect which causes conflicts between different sections of society. Also within the fishing community itself you find a very elaborated structure of different groups which have different interests and are endowed with different power. In the development process such groups are able to prevail which can influence the process itself according to their interests. Groups with insufficient power are threatened to become marginalized by the very same processes.

The paper has two parts. In the first part a few words are said about the theoretical frame of the study. In its second part the paper will discuss

some conflicts which influences the lives of fisherpeople. The paper gives a deeper insight into the structure of such conflicts and its impacts in particular on the most vulnerable sections within the fishing community. **The first conflict** is the conflict between small-scale fisheries and industrial fisheries. This conflict can be described as a conflict over the access to the same resource by different user groups. **The second example** refers to conflicts within the small-scale fishing community itself. The first conflict of this kind is the conflict between fishermen who own means of production (boats and nets) and fishworkers who have nothing to offer than their labour force. The second conflict is caused by different groups which are fighting for the political leadership in a fishing village. By the introduction of new institutions (e.g. cooperative society, political parties) these conflicts are more and more influenced by processes taking place outside the fishing community. All these conflicts lead to a disintegration of the community and by this the most vulnerable groups are most effected.

A third pattern of conflicts are conflicts caused by political instability outside the fishing community. While doing the research at least four major events of political instability affected the life of the fisher-people very much. The first event was the occupation of Kuwait by Iraqi forces which - on the one hand - caused a considerable increase in food prices in India, but - on the other hand - it restricted the movement of mechanised trawler-boats which turned out to be an advantage for the small-scale fisherpeople. The second event was the announcement of President's rule in Tamil Nadu end of January 1991 which was close to become a major law and order problem in the state. The same situation was likely to arise in mid-May 1991 when Mr. Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated near Madras. And finally in November/December 1991 there was the danger of a severe conflict between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu due to the Cauvery water dispute.

On each conflict I will give a short description and then analyse what this conflict means for the lives of the people living in the fishing-community and how they are trying to cope with the situation.

A: Theoretical frame of the paper

In the Indian fisheries sector you find a situation the Indian Government and other Governments of developing countries aim to achieve also for the agricultural sector. By exporting high value marine products India earns much precious foreign exchange. This is not only because prawns realize very high prices in the international market, but also because there are no restrictions for the entry into the markets of the industrialized countries (IGCC 1988). The quantities of exportable marine products are thus just restricted by the quantities that can be caught and by the demand in the industrialized countries. This situation is almost unchanged during the last three decades. In that time both the value and quantity of marine products exported from India increased considerably. Despite this development the economic status of small-scale fisherpeople in India did not improve much. In most parts of the country the fishing communities belong to the poorest sections of society (GALTUNG 1984; KURIEN 1978, 1993; SUBRAMANIAM/ KALAVATHY 1994). They do not only get a neglectable share of the money earned by the export of marine products, very often they are deprived of their resource basis as outsiders tend to see fisheries as a sector they can make easy money in. If this happens people do not benefit from economic development but they are becoming more vulnerable due to economic development. This structure of vulnerability is additionally overlayed by temporal events which might lead to drastical consequences for members of the fishing community as they can not cope easily with such situations like sharp increases in food prices, restricted numbers of days for fishing due to climatic reasons, decrease of fish-catches due to seasonal variations of fish occurrence. Some of these temporal changes are closely connected with the nature of fishing and the fisherpeople created their strategies to cope with them. Changes within the fisheries sector and the inner structure of the fishing community are responsible that these coping strategies are becoming more and more insufficient to protect the members of the fishing community.

According to CHAMBERS (1989) social vulnerability „refers to exposure to contingencies and stress and difficulty in coping

with them. Vulnerability thus has two sides: an external side of risks, shocks, and stress, to which an individual or household is subject; and an internal side which is defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss. Loss can take many forms - becoming physically weaker, economically impoverished, socially dependent, humiliated or psychologically harmed“.

The paper will show how various processes and structures cause social vulnerability within the fishing community.

B: Conflicts and the lives of people in a South Indian Fishing Community

Conflict I:

The Technological aspect of Modernisation

In India the technological modernisation of fisheries started much earlier than that of agriculture. In the early fifties the introduction of mechanised trawler boats and a modern infrastructure (ice-plants; prawn peeling factories, service stations for the trawler boats etc.) started in Southern Kerala and soon spread out to many coastal districts of India (KLAUSEN 1968). Today you find more than 25.000 mechanised fishing boats in India. The vast majority of these boats are trawlers. Some few of them belong to former small-scale fishermen, but the majority of these boats belong to undertakings which originally come from outside the fishery-sector and which regard this field of action as a splendid way of earning profits. By law these trawlers are not allowed to fish close to the shore. Since the early 80s all coastal states of India have passed Fishing Regulations Acts which should ban the mechanised boats from the coastal waters (VERGHESE 1989). **But the problem is:** In these areas you find the highest density of fish. The Indian EEZ is estimated to be able to sustain an annual fish production of

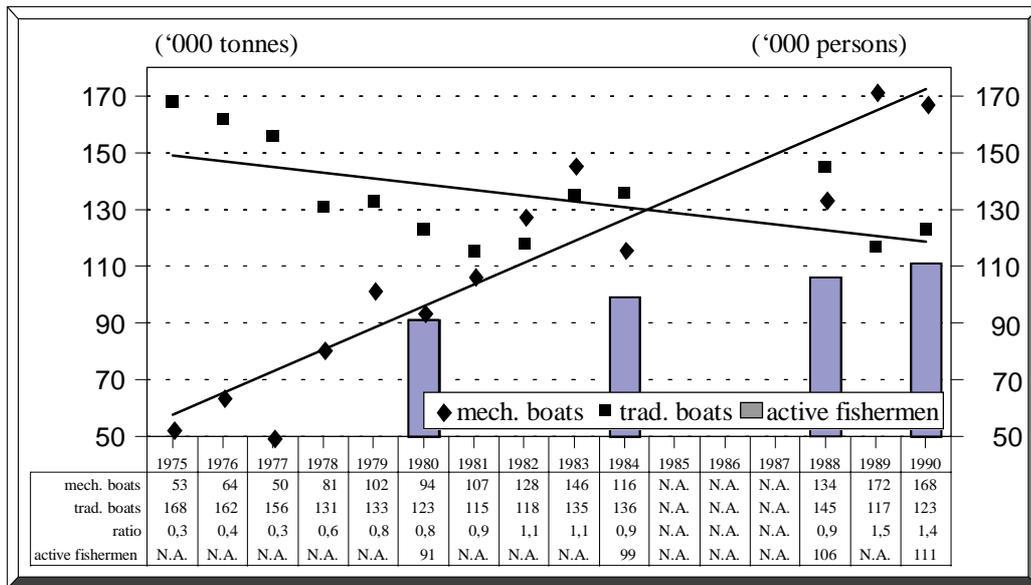
about 4 million tonnes. About 2,4 million tonnes of the exploitable resources lie within the 50m depth range and about 1,3 million tonnes in the 50 - 200m depth range. The resources beyond 200m depth are about 0,3 million tonnes (SINGHAL 1992). At the end of the 80s about 95 per cent of the catches were caught in waters not deeper than 75 m (SILAS 1989). In many regions of India these waters are already exploited in an unsustainable manner. In the coastal waters you find not only the highest concentration of fishes, but you also have the most valuable products there, namely prawns which get very high prices on the markets in Japan, the USA and Europe.

The mechanised boats do not only constantly fish very close to the shore, but also destroy the natural habitats of the fish and their breed. By this the traditional fishermen do not only suffer a temporally decline of catches and incomes, but in the long run the coastal waters become overexploited, which harms the traditional just as the modern sector.

The economic situation of small-scale fisherpeople today depends largely on two factors: a) the degree of intrusion by mechanised boats into their traditional fishing grounds, and b) the number of traditional boats and nets, that means the number of small-scale fishermen per village or area. Closely connected to this last point is the degree of occupational change within the fishing community. If we have a closer look on the situation in Tamil Nadu this becomes evident. While the catches of small-scale fishermen in this South-East State of India declined from 168.000 tonnes in 1975 to 123.000 tonnes in 1990 the number of active fishermen increased substantially. 1975 the traditional boats caught more than thrice the catches the mechanised boats brought in (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Fish-catches and active fishermen in Tamil Nadu

Trend 1975 - 1990



Compiled from different sources by E. Weber

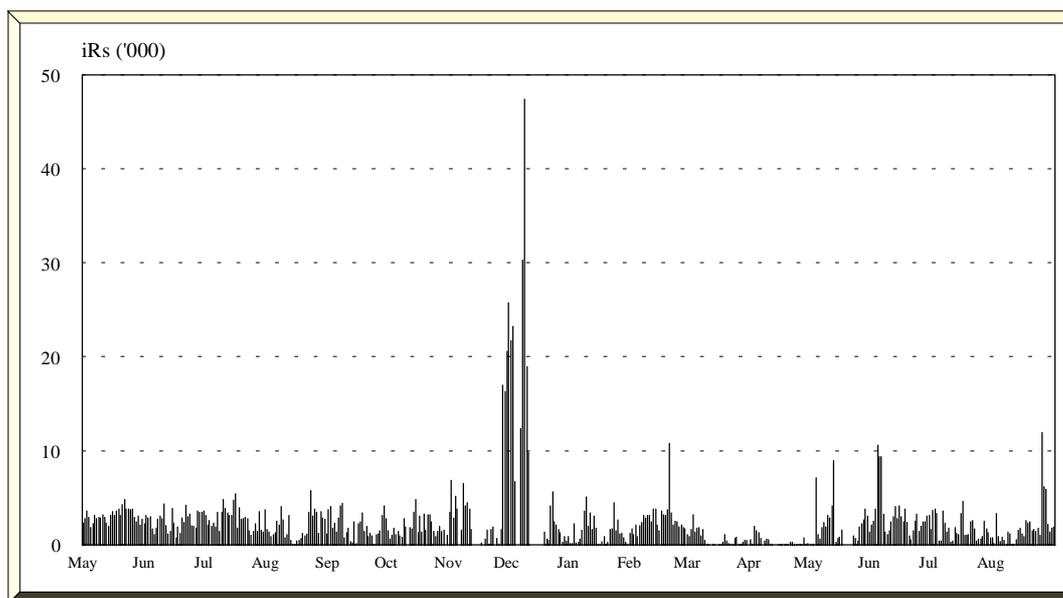
What are the consequences arising from the conflict between small-scale and industrial fisheries? **First the coastal waters tend to become overfished.** This is not only due to the fact that the number of small-scale and mechanised fishing boats has considerably increased during the last four decades, it is also due to the fishing procedures of the mechanised boats which destroy the coastal environment by bottom trawling. By this the natural habitat of the fishes as well as the fishing breed are destroyed. As the mesh-size of the trawling nets are very small the trawler boats also catch the young fishes harming the reproduction cycle of the fishes. Another problem arising from industrial fishery is that the low value, but protein rich by-catch very often is thrown back into the sea as the space on the trawler boats is reserved for the high value

prawns. According to the Bay of Bengal Programme of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) this by-catch in prawn fisheries constitutes as much as 85-95 percent of the catch. By this a big share of low value fish, i.e. fish which poorer sections of society can afford, are destroyed (GORDON 1991).

The following data gives an idea, what this conflict actually means for the lives of small-scale fishermen and their families. The run for prawns by the mechanised trawler-boats threatens their existence. The data collected between May 1991 and August 1992 show that without the income from the prawn catches the small-scale fishermen hardly survive. The data also demonstrate that the small-scale fishermen can easily fail to catch enough for their livelihood.

Figure 2: Value of marketable catches of 37 fishing-teams

Madras, May 1991 - August 1992



Madras, May 1991 - Aug 1992; E. Weber

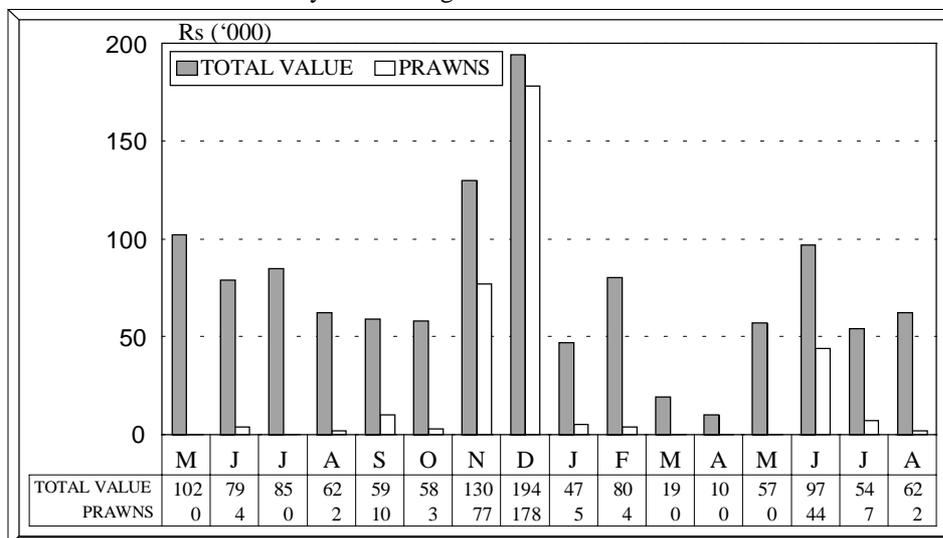
There is a distinct seasonality in the incomes from fishing. A big share of the income is earned in only one month during December. If we have a look on the composition of the catches it becomes obvious that this seasonality of incomes is due to prawn catches. In Tamil Nadu the months of November and particularly December are by far the most important months catching prawns. During these monthd the earnings of the fishermen are clearly above the average (Figure 3). During the 16 months of investigation about 30 percent of the

total income of 37 fishing-teams were from prawns.

But what is more striking: there are actually only few days in which the fishermen were able to catch prawns. During these days the fishermen earned a substantial part of their recorded income. Within 12 fishing-days in December the 37 surveyed fishing boats earned about 6800 Rs on an average. Some boats even realized more than 10.000 Rs. More than 20 percent of the income from 16 months were realized in this short period.

Figure 3: Value of marketable catches of 37 fishing-teams

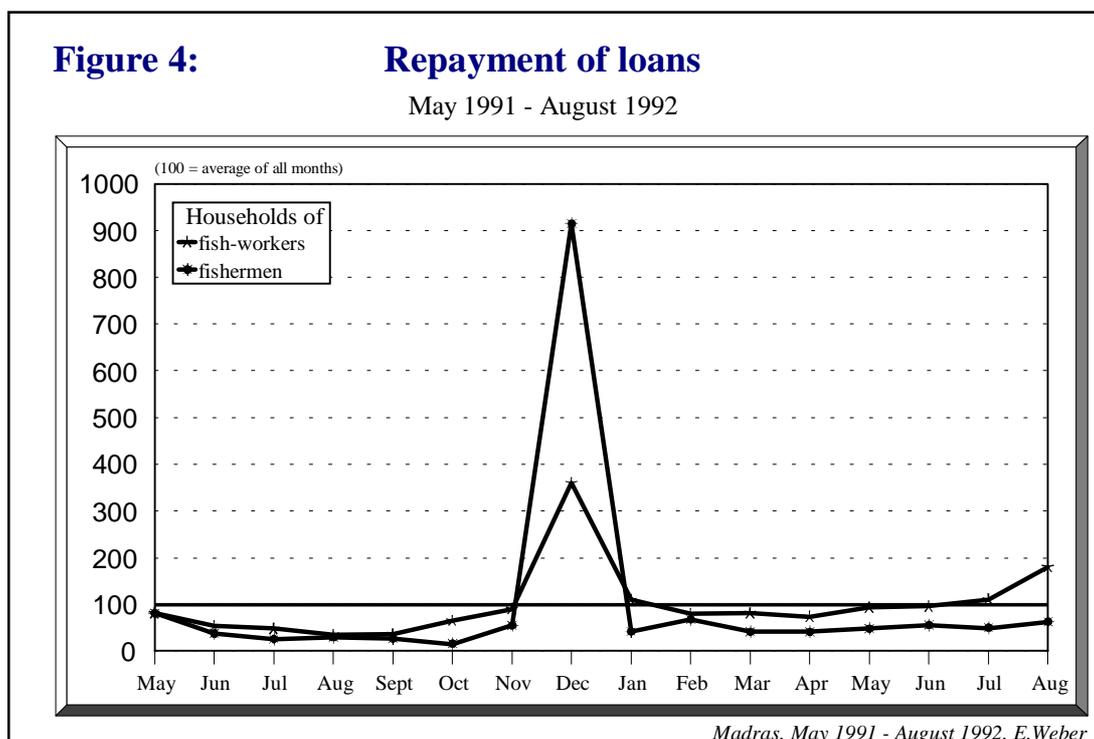
May 1991 - August 1992



Madras, May 1991 - August 1992; E. Weber

One can easily imagine what will happen if this income can not be realized. There are two major threats why this could happen: **First:** during this period, when the fishermen can make their highest earnings during the year, also the weather conditions are the worst. During the monsoon the sea is very rough and the surf very heavy. Sometime those conditions prevent the fishermen from going out for fishing because they cannot overcome the strong surf and their small boats are thrown back to the shore by the strong waves. During monsoon there are many days the fishermen can not go out fishing on their cattumarams. It might even happen that they cannot go out fishing for a period of more than two or three weeks. **Second:** the mechanised boats do not depend this much on

the weather conditions. They can go out fishing while the fishermen with their cattumaram have to stay on the shore. The risk that the mechanised boats catch most of the prawns during those days is very high. If the income from prawns fisheries decreases the economic and social basis of the small-scale fishermen are at risk. Most of the fishermen and fishworkers are endangered to be caught in a debt-trap as in the prawn-season they repay their loans which have been accumulated throughout the year. If the income from prawn catches decreases the fishermen might also become unable to raise the necessary capital for investments. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that their socio-economic status is at risk



Conflict II: The fight for political leadership in a South Indian Fishing village

While the conflict between mechanised and small-scale fishery can be described as a conflict between small-scale fisherpeople and economic and political interests from outside, the second example will concentrate on the internal structure of a fishing village and the economic and political changes taking place on that level.

Traditionally political institutions in South Indian fishing villages are very powerful and well organised (THURSTON /RANGAACHARI 1909); Even today in many fishing villages you find a village headman and a village council, which play a very important role in the political, economic and cultural life of the villages (NORR 1972, BERG et al. 1984). The village headman must witness all marriages and perform certain other ritual duties. He was also the administrator of the village temple and responsible

for organising the temple festival every second year. Additionally he was in charge of the village funds and collected special duties which all villagers had to contribute. When caste laws were broken or serious quarrels emerged among villagers the headman tried to settle the dispute, usually by convening the village panchayat.

In former times the political elites of a fishing village were not elected by the people but their status was hereditary. By this the political structure of a fishing village was quite rigid. In Tamil Nadu fishing villages the most powerful fishermen usually were those who had a boat called „*periya vallai*“ (for the traditional fishing technology see: HORNELL 1924). This big, plank-built boat is entirely used for the fishery with a shore-seine net. In each fishing village there were not more than two or three boats of this type while the poorer fishermen used to go out fishing on *cattumarams*. The elites of the fishing villages - despite belonging to the fishermen caste - called themselves *Chettians* indicating that they were closely connected to money-lending activities. The bottom strata of the fishing society was made up by fishermen coolies working either on a *periyar vallai* or a *cattumaram*. Traditionally these fishworkers were bound to their employers by loans which in fact were interest free and only repayable if a fishworker wanted to change his employer. This rough sketch will do to give an idea of the socio-economic structure of a fishing village some 40 years back. It was closely connected to the political structure as the fishworkers were supposed to back their employers in important village decisions. For operating a *periya vallai* at least 25 fishworkers are needed. To have enough labourers all the time a owner of such a boat sometimes was connected to more than 50 workers by loans. By that he was also politically very influential. In societies where patron-client-relationships play an important role it is often found that those who are economically dependent back the political aspirations of their patrons. This was very much the case in South Indian fishing villages. The economic and political power was concentrated on a few important families. During the last forty years a decentralization of political power took place in the surveyed fishing village. The collapse of the traditional power structure was mainly due to technological as well as to institutional changes

within the community. In the 60s gillnets made of synthetic fibre were introduced into *cattumaram*-fisheries. With this new type of nets the *cattumaram* fishermen were able to catch much more fish than they caught before with the cotton nets. Only some years after the introduction of these nylon nets the prices for prawns in the international market shot up making small-scale fisheries a good business. Within quite a short time the *cattumaram* fishermen overtook the *periyar vallai* fishermen elite economically demanding then to get their due share also in the (political) power structure of the village. This emerging conflict was centered around two important issues:

(a) the demand of several fishermen to elect the village-temple administration. As mentioned above this position function was hereditary. So it was a serious attempt against the political elite of the village.

(b) the control over the co-operative society and by this the control over development funds.

Both issues evolved into physical violence in the village at several occasions leading to the consequence that nowadays the unity of the village is in ruins. The village is now divided in three parts, each part having its own political structure. In two of these parts you still find a „village“ headman, a panchayat and a „village“-fund, while in the third part these institutions have totally disappeared. The Fisheries Department however rejected the demand of the fishermen to divide also the co-operative society into three parts.

The implications of the economic and political changes for the most vulnerable sections of the fishing society

The introduction of new fishing gear resulted in an individualisation of fishing activities. By this the *cattumaram* fishermen gained a lot as they were able to realize good incomes due to rising prawn prices in the international market. Some of the former fishworkers also managed to buy a *cattumaram* and the required nets but the vast majority of them remained fishworkers. The higher productivity of the nylon nets as well as the decline of the importance of the *periya vallai* resulted in a decline of the demand for labour in small-scale fisheries. Two, at most three persons are enough to go fishing on a *cattumaram*. Most of the boats nowadays are run by household

members without hiring additional labour from outside. Those fishworkers however who can still manage to get employed regularly are much better off than in former times, but often the prospects for regular employment are very limited. On the other hand it is almost impossible for a fishworker to raise his status by buying a *cattumaram* as well as nets. From time to time there are loans and subsidies given by the Dept. of Fisheries through the co-operative society, but fishworkers are not able to get such loans. As the co-operative society is controlled by fishermen they take care that they receive all the loans and subsidies. This is not only a welcomed contribution to their own investments in new gears and boats, but the fishermen consider it also as a means of resource management as it limits the numbers of *cattumarams*. In times of overfishing this is a vital interest of the fishermen. For a fishworker it is not feasible to buy a *cattumaram* and the necessary nets entirely from his own money as his income is not enough to bear an initial investment of at least 20,000 Rs.

The collapse of the traditional institutions in the fishing village had serious consequences for the poorer sections in the village. Above all the erosion of the village fund turned out to become a major threat for them in times when their income is low or even nil. The village fund traditionally helped the fishermen to bridge periods when it was not possible to go out fishing due to bad weather conditions. Among others the community traditionally collected money from fish-auctioning, it levied a house tax and at marriages the couple were expected to give a part of the money they received to the village fund (*gift-money*). The money was used to conduct the above mentioned temple festival every second

year and to distribute rice among the fishing households in periods when there was no income from fishing. Despite the fact that in two parts of the community this village fund is still existing, it is nowadays mainly used to pay advocates and to bribe policemen in the course of events following the physical violence in the community.

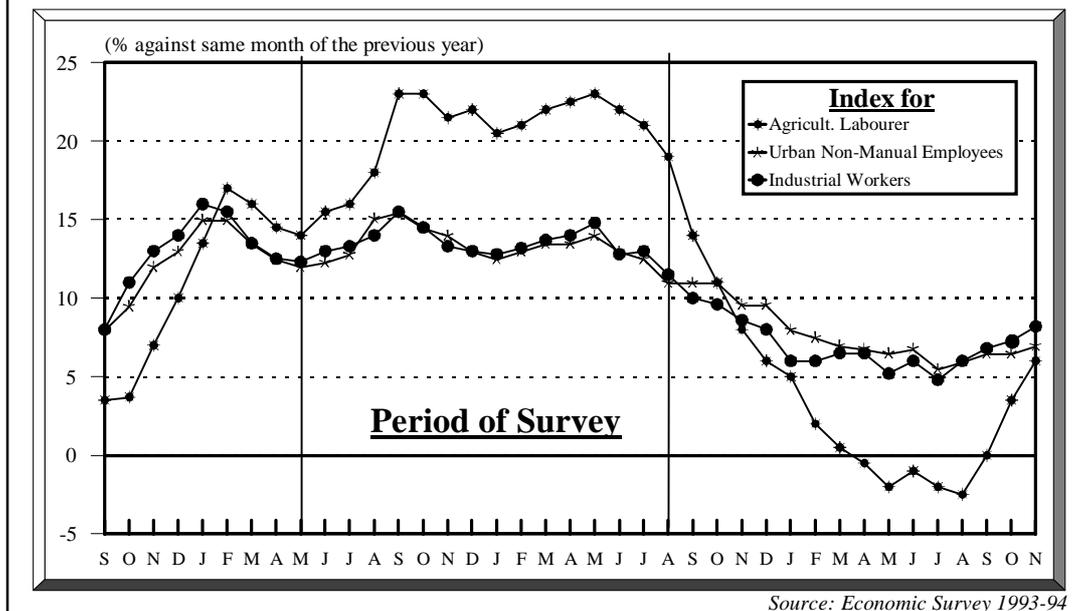
Conflict III: Political instability and its consequences for fishing-households

While the first conflict in this paper refers to user-relationships in the fisheries sector, the second one deals with the internal economic and political structure of the small-scale fisher-community. Both conflicts influence the lives of the community-members in the long run. They are rooted in the political economy of the country as well as in the community itself. The third pattern of conflicts now refers to political instability and its consequences. In this paper the short-term implications are emphasized, even if those conflicts also have their structural, long-term dimensions.

The period, in which the research in the fishing community was conducted, can be described as a period of political and economic crisis in India. Leaving the political aspects apart we will have a closer look at a specific aspect of economic crisis which can severely affect people living close to the poverty line: the food prices. Figure 5 shows that consumer prices in fact increased very much during that period. This was in particular true for agricultural labourers which have quite a similar expenditure structure as small-scale fishermen. Despite good harvests the price rise for food was by far the highest

Figure 5: Evolution of Consumer-Prices in India

Sept. 1990 - Nov 1993



It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the reasons leading to increasing food prices despite of good harvests. The intention of the paper is to show that acute political instability contribute a substantial part to the inflation process. Therefore three events of political instability were selected and their effects on the price rise for vegetables analysed. The events were: (a) the announcement of President's Rule in Tamil Nadu end of January 1991; (b) the assassination of the former Primeminister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991 and (c) the outbreak of violence in Bangalore and the borderregion of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka due to the Cauvery Water Dispute in December 1991/January 1992.

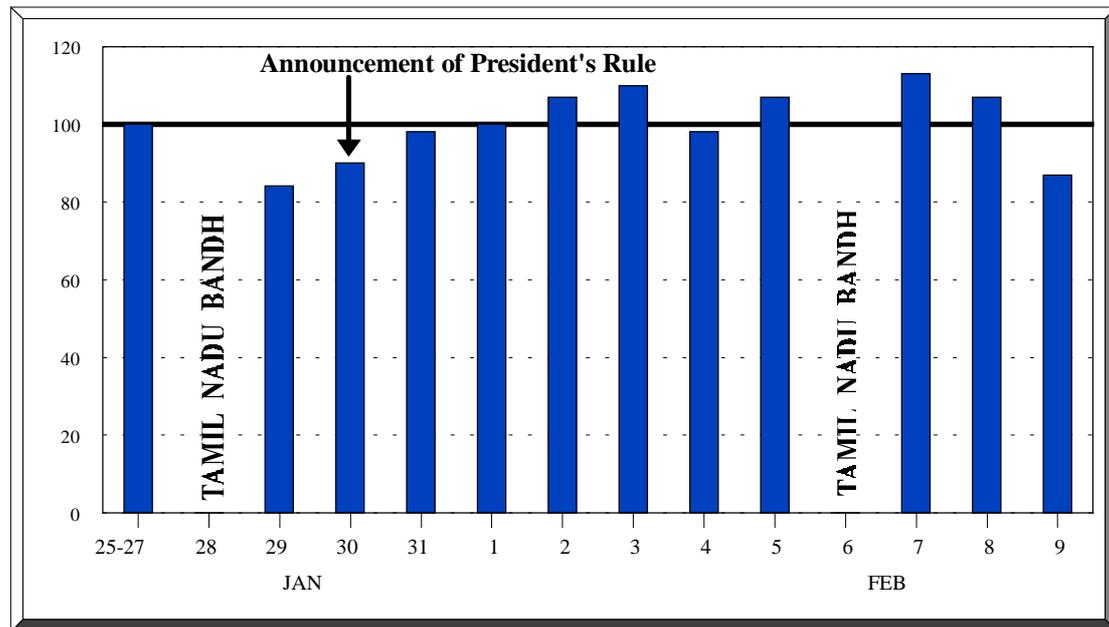
All three events were felt in Madras, but as it is shown later the implications for the supply and prices of vegetables varied a lot from case to case.

a. The announcement of President's rule in Tamil Nadu (January 30, 1991): Already some months before both the AIADMK as well the Congress(I) opposition in Tamil Nadu tried to put pressure on Primeminister Chandra Shekhar to dissolve the DMK-Government in Tamil Nadu as it was alleged not able to check the LTTE

influence in the Southern districts of the State. According to the opposition those districts were no longer under the control of the State Government. Additionally the DMK-Government was blamed to back LTTE-militants in the state and even allow Indian terrorists to have training camps in Tamil Nadu. It was therefore said to be a threat for the unity of the Indian nation. For January 28, 1991 both the AIADMK and the Congress(I) announced a *Tamil Nadu Bandh* to stress their demands. For February 6, one week after the announcement of President's Rule, the DMK and other political parties also announced a *Tamil Nadu Bandh*. The announcement of President's Rule itself caused widespread violence in the whole of Tamil Nadu. Freight transports to Madras came to a standstill, two freight trains with food heading for Madras were derailed in Andhra Pradesh. During the two *Tamil Nadu Bandhs* also the economic life in the South Indian metropolitan city came to a standstill. „Trucks and lorries did not ply. The arrivals at Kothwal market was only 10 per cent of the normal as a majority of goods transporters preferred not to ply their vehicles fearing detention en route“ (THE HINDU, 29.01.1991).

Figure 6: Evolution of Vegetable Prices in Madras

Jan 25 - Feb 09, 1991



Source: Own Survey, Madras 1991; E. Weber

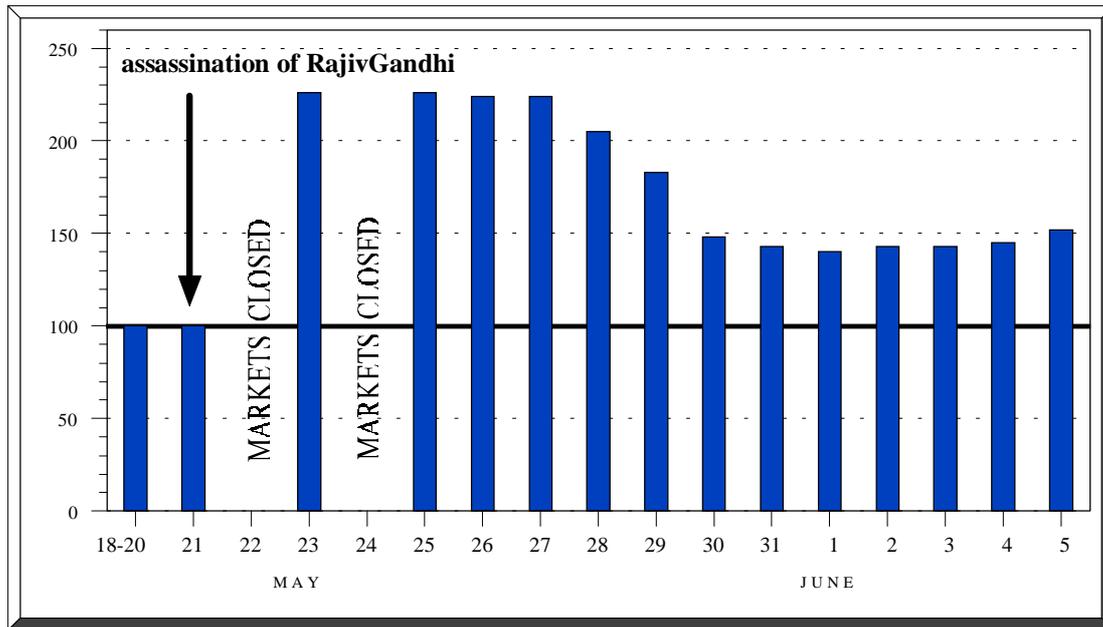
If we have a closer look at the fluctuations in vegetable prices during this period of political instability it becomes evident that the whole episode didn't affect consumer price severely. It is true that between Jan. 28 and Feb. 7 economic life in Madras was interrupted on several occasions. However regarding the *bandhs* people were able to adjust as protests of this kind are quite common in India and well announced some days in advance. Thus people have the opportunity to stock up with essential items and even to prepare for the possibility that the *bandh* itself turns out to become a major law and order problem affecting economic life even for a longer period. According to the National Horticultural Board, Madras Office, wholesalers fearing the outbreak of widespread violence had ordered additional supply of vegetables to Madras the days before the *bandh*. Thus it is not surprising that on the days after the *bandh* the vegetable prices were even lower than before as it happened on Jan. 29. The announcement of President's rule itself lead to a slight increase in prices. The highest prices were recorded on Feb. 7, the day after the DMK organized *bandh*. This time vegetable transports

to Madras again were partly interrupted due to the derailment of a freight train. „In what was believed to be a sabotage attempt, a goods train derailed [...] resulting in a holdup of all the trains from the southern districts rescheduled to arrive in Madras before the start of the *bandh* (THE HINDU, 07.02.1991). All in all however there was no day when prices were higher than 13 per cent compared to the average vegetable prices between Jan. 25-27.

b. The assassination of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi (May 21, 1991): At the end of May the people of Madras again witnessed a period of political instability. In contrast to the situation in January/February the assassination of Mrs. Rajiv Gandhi came totally unexpected. Touring Tamil Nadu on the eve of elections he was killed in a bomb blast near Madras on the evening of May 21. The same night normal life in whole Tamil Nadu was interrupted. Wireless messages had been flashed to all district headquarters to keep offices, banks, schools, colleges and universities closed and also to stop bus services for the next two days.

Figure 7: Evolution of Vegetable Prices in Madras

May 18 - June 05, 1991



Source: Own Survey, Madras 1991; E. Weber

In Madras itself several buses and lorries were set ablaze and followers of different parties were roaming in the streets destroying shops that were not closed. Vegetable markets in Madras were also closed on May 22. On the next day the prices had more than doubled compared to the average level between May 18-21. Also the following days the vegetable prices remained on a level that was distinctly higher than before. Even two weeks after the assassination vegetable prices were still 50 per cent higher than before.

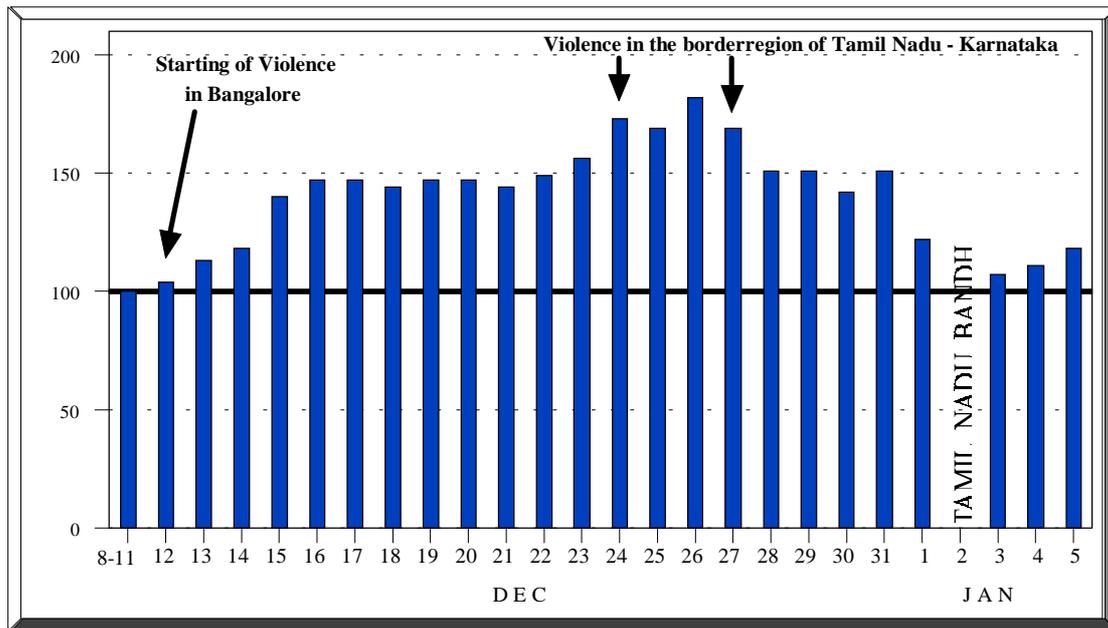
c: The outbreak of violence in Bangalore and the borderregion of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka due to the Cauvery Water Dispute (December 1991/ January 1992):

In December 1991 politically motivated violence again resulted in a price rise for vegetables in Madras. This time the violence was due to an Interim Order by the Supreme Court forcing the Karnataka Government to release water to Tamil Nadu. The Interim Order was published by the Government of India in its official gazette of December 11, 1991. In reaction to this the Karnataka Government called for a bandh on

December 13. A day prior to this there was a massive procession in Bangalore, which developed into large-scale violence. Houses of Tamilians living in Bangalore were destroyed and thousands of them fled the town. Later also the borderregions of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka were affected. „Farmhouses owned by Tamilians were attacked, looted and set on fire and Tamil cultivators and agricultural labourers were driven away. [...] In the days which followed, Kannadiga homes were attacked and landowners belonging to Karnataka in the Gudalur area of Nilgiris district were driven out“ (GUHAN 1993: 42). Despite the violence had spared Madras itself it had considerable effects on the vegetable prices there. Important supply-regions for Madras vegetable markets are located in the affected areas. The situation worsened as the shrinking supply from those regions could not be compensated by supply from other regions because a cyclonic storm had hit both coastal Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh causing heavy destruction in vegetable tracts there (THE HINDU, 17.12.1991).

Figure 8: Evolution of Vegetable Prices in Madras

Dec 08, 1991 - Jan 05, 1992



Source: Own Survey, Madras 1991/92; E. Weber

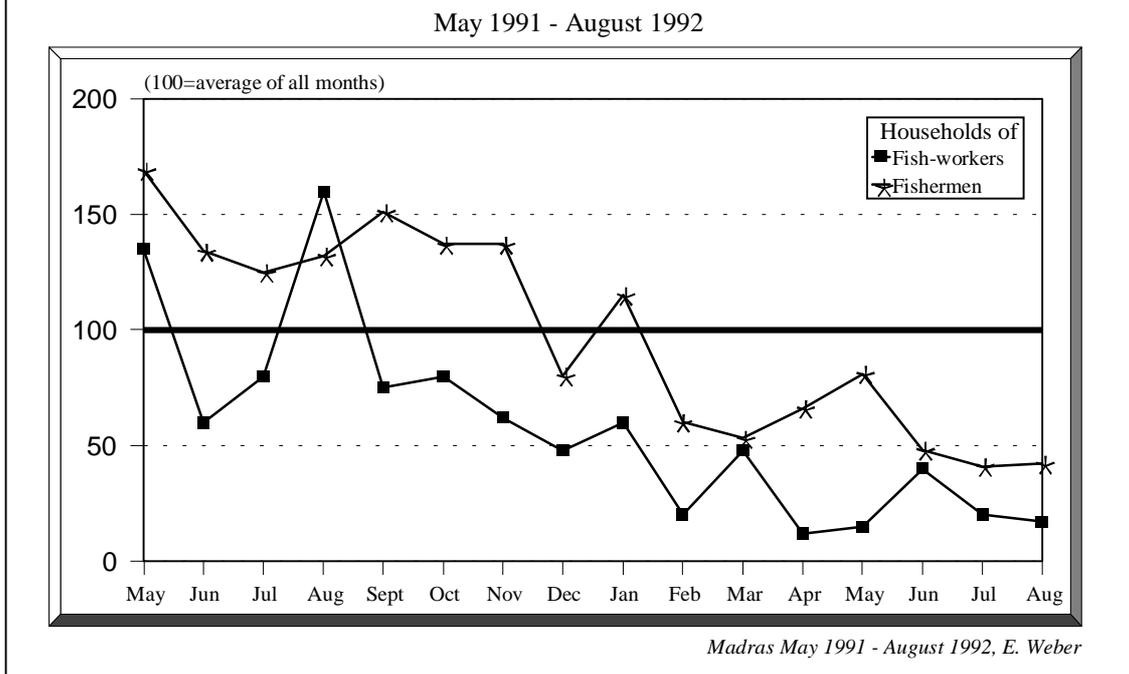
Conclusion

Despite high prices for prawns in the international market and no entry restrictions to the markets of the industrialized countries the vast majority of small-scale fishermen in India are still living in poverty. Because of the highly profitable business of prawns exports the big business entered the marine sector shrinking the income opportunities of the small-scale fishermen considerably. Within the fishing community the fish-workers were most affected from this process because they are increasingly facing the problem of un(der)employment. This is also due to the fact that in the small-scale fishery sector the entry of new technologies (synthetic gears) has raised productivity very much. As this did not coincide with growing employment opportunities outside the fisheries sector fishworkers (and also fishermen) are forced to stay in this trade. In the last years however many households from this group started to send their children for work. Many girls from the age of 10 years onwards are now working for shoe-export companies.

However, the fate of the people living in the fishing community is not only influenced by processes from outside. The diversification of power in the village led to serious internal difficulties resulting in a collapse of the former political structure. In this process institutions which are traditionally a protection to the most vulnerable sections of the community also disappeared or were utilized by the better-off groups for their own purposes.

All this could be observed in the last 40 years and the structure of the fishing community changed very much. Besides this, short-term crisis had considerable effects. During the months the research was conducted inflation rates were very high in India especially for food. Additional to the economic crisis of 1991/92 there was also a political one. Investigating the effects of political instability on consumer prices it could be noticed that some events can lead to a sharp price rise which devaluates the purchasing power of the people. If such unforeseen situations continue for a longer period and if no intervention from outside takes place it might even lead to starvation among such groups where no assets could be built before.

Figure 9: Evolution of savings in *Chit-Funds*



In the households surveyed in the study the savings made in informal *chit-funds* - a common form of saving money among fisherpeople - decreased both in households of fishermen and fishworkers. This can be considered as a crucial point because it tends to undermine the households' coping capability in the future.

In particular a sudden price-rise caused by political instability can result in starvation if socio-economic, political or demographical factors have already destabilized the coping strategies of the most vulnerable sections of society to such an extent that they are no longer able to adjust to their worsening situation. Despite this situation - fortunately - did not arise during the research in a South Indian fishing community the results of the study imply that groups which

are even worse off than fisherpeople can suddenly driven close to starvation due to events outside their sphere of influence. Recent attempts to boost agricultural exports from India have to be seen from that perspective. The state has to ensure that marginal farmers and landless agricultural labourers are not excluded from production if agriculture happens to become a major foreign exchange earner. The experiences from the fisheries sector imply what possibly happens if *big business* once sees an opportunity to prosper. Social and environmental considerations are put aside allegedly in the name of the nation's prosperity. If comparative developments take place in the agricultural sector a major tragedy in India cannot be ruled out.

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