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Fishermen's Struggle Against Mechanised Fishing in Kerala

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Introduction

The fisherfolk movement against mechanised fishing in Kerala depicts the struggle of the marginalised artisanal fishing community for their right and control over their traditional livelihood resources.

This movement stands out as a prolonged and sustained struggle by traditional fisherfolk, supported by a wide coalition of voluntary organisations, religious groups, environmental groups, academic and policy institutions, media etc.

The governance focus of this study is resistance to oppressive policy. The government's policy for allowing mechanised fishing in the inshore waters of Kerala proved to be oppressive for the traditional fisher people of this area. Over-exploitation of a declining marine resource base results in reduction in their level of income. Secondly, rapid mechanisation also ensures that resourceful entrepreneurs take over the resources that had traditionally belonged to the artisanal fisherfolk, thus leading to the destruction of their livelihood.

The study is organised as follows. It begins with a brief description of the context of the movement, goes on to describe the struggle and ends with an analysis of the state - civil society dynamics.

Context of the Campaign

Kerala occupies the foremost position in marine fish production and export earnings from the fishery sector within the country. The famous Wadge Bank is situated within the exploitable limits of Kerala. The presence of shallow mud banks (chakara) which result in the surfacing of particular species of fishes is another unique feature of this coast. A large number of lakes and ponds also offer opportunity for brackish water reservoir and pond fisheries.

Despite the existence of such opulent resources, traditional fishing communities have remained geographically, economically, socially and culturally marginalized. The mechanisation of the fishing industry further accentuated the poverty and social backwardness of the community. Traditionally fishing was carried out by small, unpowered craft confined to shallow waters. Mechanisation began with the Indo-Norwegian Project in 1953, whereby mechanised fishing equipments were permitted to catch fish indiscriminately with the aim to increase fish catches and augment the production of shrimps. Increasing demand for shrimps from advanced countries like Japan and USA created a further impetus to intensify fishing with the use of bottom trawlers. This not only led to a dwindling of fish stocks, but the traditional fishermen who were unable to afford mechanised fishing equipments began to face livelihood problems as the

coastal fishing belt was captured by resourceful non-fishermen. The government also gave active support to private efforts through preferential credit schemes. The beneficiaries of the new schemes were affluent traditional fishermen, who had turned entrepreneurs, and non-fishermen with resources. The impact of technological change in an already fragile ecological zone resulted in a decline in the fish stocks and a subsequent drop in the income of traditional fishermen.

Genesis of the Movement

The fisherfolk movement was preceded by several decades of voluntary action and community building efforts. In the 60s, voluntary organisations working under the leadership of Catholic priests took the first initiatives to organise the fisherfolk. At first this took the shape of awareness generation within the fisherfolk community and organising them into self-help groups to address issues of social and economic backwardness. This resulted in the formation of co-operatives for the welfare of fisherfolk.

This was followed by a consolidation of fishermen's groups into 'labour unions' registered under the Charitable Societies Act, at the district or rather diocesan levels, facilitated and supported by the church. The main mission of these organisations was to promote integrated development of the fishing community. Such organisations evolved in Kollam, Alleppey and Trivandrum. Parallel to these efforts, Dheevera Sabha, the community organisation of the Hindu fishermen, took up issues related to livelihood security of the fisherfolk. The Muslim community however did not respond with such organisation building measures. During this period, the mobilisational efforts of the coastal and inland fishermen remained separate.

To augment the efforts of such community-based organisations in terms of research, information dissemination, training to build awareness amongst local fishermen, leadership development and empowerment, a few NGOs (for example, Programme for Community Organisation, Trivandrum) were established.

At this stage fisherpeople's struggles led to the implementation of a series of welfare measures by the state, like schemes for purchase of boats, pension, kerosene at subsidised rates, government sponsored insurance schemes for fishermen who die at sea, support for children etc.

Kerala Swathantra Malsya Thozhilali Federation: Formation of State Level Federations

Mechanised fishing led to a decline in fish catches and reduced income for the traditional fishermen. Fisherfolk felt the need to strengthen their organisational set up in order to check these negative trends. In 1977, fishermen's organisations from the southern districts of Kerala decided to form a network organisation.

Joint efforts were made by Thiruvanthapuram Roopatha Malsya Thozhilali Union, Kollam Jilla Swathantra Malsya Thozhilali Union, Allpuzha Catholic Malsya Thozhilali Union, Allpuzha Jilla Ulnadan Mahla Malsya Thozhilali Union and Vijayapuram Roopatha Malsya Thozhilali Union. This network was initially named as Kerala Lateen Catholica Malsya Thozhilali Federation (KLCNTF). It was the first unified organisation of the fisherfolk and was formed under the leadership of Fr. Paul Arrakkal of Allapuzha Union and Fr. Albert Parisavila of the Kollam Union. Initially there was some dispute whether the network should keep the word 'Catholica' in its name, as it smacked of sectarianism. However, it was decided to continue with this name due to the insistence of Fr. Paul Arakkal. The KLCNTF intensified the struggle against mechanised fishing by involving the fisherfolk in various modes of protest- hunger strikes, picketing, dharnas, public meetings and submission of memorandums. The competition for space and product also resulted in spontaneous and violent conflicts between trawler owners and traditional fishermen along the Kerala coast. Soon after the leadership of the movement felt a need to secularise and broad base the federation. Deliberations led to a re-organisation of the federation and the name of the organisation was changed to Kerala Swathantra Malsya Thozhilali Federation (KSMTF). While Fr. Albert Parisavila was elected president, Fr. Paul Arrakkal refused to accept the change of orientation and was alienated from the organisation.

Following the formation of this network, state level fishermen's campaigns became a regular feature, since the latter half of 1970s. In June 1979, at a meeting of state leaders (from Goa, Tamil Nadu and Kerala) of the fisherfolk movement it was decided to constitute a 'National Forum for Catamaran and Country Boat Fishermen's Rights and Marine Wealth'. This forum was constituted by

The National Forum carried out the following National level Campaigns

- Prevent water pollution by factories and tankers, ships; initiate fishermen development banks and marine bill-contested by mechanised fishing groups at various levels.
- International campaign for banning export of seafood from India
- Protest against use of development aid and commercial investments in large scale fisheries development by EEC, World Bank and the Paris group of investors.
- Interventions in international deals like purchase of trawlers from Dutch government.
- Presented model Marine law
- Conducted consistent publicity events to attract attention to fishermen's problems
- Conducted campaigns against mechanised fishing
- Conducted campaigns against joint venture fisheries which allows multinational trawlers in the Indian coast.

representatives of 13 major regional fishermen's unions. Fr. Thomas Kocherry of the Kerala Union made a significant contribution in this. The National Forum coordinated the state unions and carried out national level campaigns by lobbying legislators and pressurising the government against the deleterious fishing of mechanised boats and trawlers in the already optimally exploited coastal waters.

From the end of 70s KSMTF commenced its campaign for the enactment of a Marine Regulation Act in line with the recommendations of the Government of India. They used a variety of protest modes, such as marches, processions, rallies and dharnas wherein songs, slogans, graffiti, plays and other means of interactive communication were used. In this process the movement encountered stiff resistance from political interest groups, middlemen and the export lobby. This took various forms ranging from false propaganda to obstructions and delays in getting such a legislation passed. During this period the scientific community played a large role in countering false propaganda with scientific studies supporting the fishermen's demands².

These protests were started under the Communist government. However, it was only when the Congress came into power that the Kerala State Marine Fisheries Act of 1980 was enacted. The legislation was a landmark in the history of the fisherfolk movement in Kerala and included the following provisions:

- banning purse-seiners from within 22 km of the coast
- banning mechanised boats and trawlers from within 20 km of the coast
- banning trawling during the three monsoon months of June, July and August
- Entrusting the task of protecting the marine zone of the traditional fish workers with state police.

However, no effort was made to implement the provisions of the Act. As a result the government set up a series of commissions to look into this issue of non-implementation.

- Set up in 1981, the Babu Paul Commission was divided in regard to the specific need for conservation of marine fishery resources during certain seasons of the year.
- There was a lack of unanimity over the recommendations of the Babu Paul Commission on the issue of banning monsoon trawling. In view of this, and

• Facilitated the creation of a World Forum of Fish Harvestors and Fish Workers (WFF) involving unions of 35 maritime nations in the world. It is led by Fr. Thomas Kocherry of the Kerala movement.

² The right wing party in collaboration with the mechanised fishing lobby had propagated the idea that the ban on trawling during the monsoon months demanded by the fisherfolk would result in social disruption, loss of employment for this community and a huge loss in foreign exchange if Karikadi, a marine prawn was not caught during this period. With the help of scientists the movement proved that attempts to catch juvenile prawn during this breeding season would only lead to a depletion of the resource base and reduced catches in the future.

in response to the continuing unrest in the traditional sector the Kalawar Commission was set up in 1984. It did not agree to a ban on monsoon trawling but suggested a series of measures for the conservation and management of fishing resources. Amongst others, these included a reduction in the number of trawling boats, motorised boats and non motorised boats, a ban on purse-seiners as well as setting up a scientific committee to plan out the total allowable catches on the basis of a resource assessment. The recommendations of this committee were virtually not implemented.

- The Balakrishna Nair Commission was appointed in 1989 following an increase in agitation after the Left Democratic government came into power in 1986. The Committee recommended the banning of trawling during the monsoon months. The order for banning trawlers during monsoon months was cancelled by the Fisheries Minister under pressure of the mechanised trawler lobby and this struggle recurs every year during the rains.

In summary, the absence of a strong political will and the lack of proper machinery and infrastructure have resulted in a non- implementation of the policy provisions of the Act.

Distribution of the Movement

- The movement was strong in the southern districts of Kerala, which were more organised.
- Traditional fishermen along the Malabar coast did not participate actively in the movement as trawling was not significant in the area. In fact they organised themselves into fishermen's unions and purchased mechanised boats.
- A section of the traditional fisherfolk did not participate in the movement as their family members owned mechanised boats.
- In the northern districts of Kerala, there was much confusion that the movement was an attempt to convert people to Christianity. As such, the movement did not gain momentum in these areas.

Relationship with the State

The fisherfolk movement was initiated by the Catholic Church which was largely anti - communist (the party in power was Communist.) Subsequently however, the leadership of the movement and some of the NGOs involved in the movement, became sympathetic to the left government. The presence of significant left-oriented leaders was a major factor which contributed to this. At this point there was also some attempt to join hands with the state. The creation of the Kerala Malsya Thozhilali Congress (name of fishermen's organisation-unrelated to the Congress party) was an effort in this direction. However, this effort was not successful. At the same time there was also an attempt to project the church negatively during this period. As a result, the Catholic church

reduced its involvement and the anti-communist clergy, who had initiated the movement (like Fr. Albert Parisalva), gradually left the scene.

Following this, till the passing of the Kerala Marine Fishing Regulation Act, the state largely supported and promoted the interests of the politically more influential and resourceful mechanised fishing industry, while paying lip service to the demands of the artisanal fisherfolk. Therefore the relationship of the movement with the state also remained primarily that of conflict. In a classic case of double-speak the state accepted the traditional fisherfolk's demands for welfare measures, while undermining their source of livelihood, by delaying and subsequently removing the ban on monsoon trawling as well as other restrictions on trawlers. It appears that the state was motivated more by a desire to contain the intensity of the protests rather than making any substantial change in the situation of the artisanal fishermen.

Apprehensive of the role and growing power of the fishermen's unions and their local leaders, political parties always wanted to influence and co-opt the fishermen's organisations. Two decades after the passing of the Kerala Marine Fishing Regulation Act, not only have political parties annexed the various fisherfolk's organisations, but have also converted them into vote banks to promote partisan interests. In recent years, fishermen too have developed a political response and have used their voting power to defeat political parties and coalitions which have opposed their cause. The failure of the right wing coalition government in Kerala in the 1987 Assembly election is an instance.

Impact of the Movement on Governance

- The movement was successful in pressurising both the union and the state governments to institute policy reforms. Policy initiatives of the Union government included compulsory licensing of fishing vessels, licensing and restriction on foreign vessels, provisions for preventing the discharge of sewage water and effluents into streams and backwaters and helping initiate a State Marine Fishing Regulation Act. However the most significant measure was a series of welfare measures taken up under the 7th Five Year Plan, which included a Group Accident Insurance Scheme, construction of fishermen colonies, protected water supply etc. In addition to bringing the Kerala Marine Fishing Regulation Act, the state government has created a separate Ministry for Fisheries, instituted a series of welfare and relief measures for fishermen through the formation of the Kerala Fishermen Welfare Fund Board. Another measure was the implementation of schemes for the economic development of fisherfolk through Matsyafed, the apex federation of the fishermen's co-operatives.

- While fishermen have got significant number of social security measures to help them deal with their social and economic backwardness, their aim of conservation of resources and ensuring the participation of fisherfolk in fisheries management still remains to be accomplished.
- The movement has also had some unintended consequences, which have harmed rather than promoted the interests of the artisanal fisherfolk. The attempt to help motorise traditional craft of the artisanal fishermen has led to an unregulated increase in the number of mechanised or partly mechanised craft (country crafts with outboard engines). This has not only heightened competition for fish, but has contributed to the depletion of the fishing resources without significantly augmenting the income of the fisher people.
- Political parties have annexed the fishermen's unions and transformed the fisherfolk into vote banks. Welfare schemes are now being distributed by political parties to those who are close or affiliated to them. This has considerably weakened the organisations and divided them along partisan lines. In recent years fishermen have developed a political response where the fisherfolk use their voting power to defeat political parties and coalitions, which opposed their cause. Political parties have experienced the vote power of the fishermen communities in at least two assembly elections in Kerala during 1980s. Political analysts point out that a significant cause of the failure of the right wing coalition government in Kerala in the 1987 Assembly election was the fury of the fisherfolk who voted against them.

Analysis of State Civil Society Dynamics

Issue for Redressal

The issue under consideration concerns the government's policy on allowing mechanised fishing in the coastal waters of Kerala.

Traditionally fishing was carried out by small unpowered craft confined to shallow waters. Later the government allowed the fisherfolk to catch fish indiscriminately using mechanised fishing equipments. Increasing demand for shrimps from countries like Japan and USA created a further impetus to intensify fishing with the use of bottom trawlers. The introduction of a large number of mechanised boats led to a dwindling of fish stocks. Moreover, traditional fishermen who were unable to afford mechanised fishing equipments began to face livelihood problems as the coastal fishing belt was captured by resourceful non-fishermen. The government also gave active support to private efforts through preferential credit schemes. The beneficiaries of the new schemes were affluent traditional fishermen who

had turned entrepreneurs and non-fishermen with resources. In short, the consequences of mechanised fishing proved to be oppressive for the traditional fisherfolk. Not only did it reduce their level of income by reducing the amount of fish catch, but it threatened their very source of livelihood without providing any alternatives.

The case highlights how a *coalition between state and market results in creating a breach within the fishworker community*. A significant consequence of state-supported rapid and large scale industrialisation was the division of fish workers into two opposing camps. The mechanised fishing sector created a class of workers (employed in fishing boats, fish processing industries, freezing plants and ice-plants, boat building and repair yards, net manufacturing units, trading firms associated with fishing and fish processing industries and middlemen operations) who began to identify themselves and their future with modern craft and gear. This was supported by the economically strong and hence politically influential boat owners and export processing lobby. Together they became a formidable force opposing the traditional fishermen whose moves they could easily counteract. Despite court rulings, they could delay the implementation of new regulations for a considerable span of time.

Nature of the Intervention

The struggle by civil society organisations was aimed at opposing the government's policy of promoting mechanised fishing in the coastal waters of Kerala. As pointed out earlier, by threatening the livelihoods of the fisherfolk, this policy had turned oppressive for the artisanal fisher people. As such civil society organisations not only *opposed this policy but demanded a better and more comprehensive legislation* with an aim to conserve marine resources in the long run. Even after such a legislation was passed, civil society groups continue to struggle in order to *ensure that the policy does not remain only on paper but is translated into practice*. So far their efforts have not been successful.

The nature of demands made by the marginalised traditional fisher people changed over the years. In the early years fisher people's demands were related to the *provision and implementation of welfare measures* for the community, which were aimed at improving their social and economic backwardness. These ranged from education for children, provident funds, to compensation for those who had died at sea. In the early 80s this changed to a demand for a *Comprehensive Marine Regulation Act* for the conservation and systematic use of fishing resources. This act demanded the banning of trawling during the monsoon months, banning mechanised fishing in the shallow coastal waters and entrusting the task of protecting the marine zone to the traditional fish workers together with the state police.

Strategies and Tools

The relationship between state and KSMTF was primarily one of conflict. The CSO used a variety of tools like demonstrations, dharna, picketing offices, road block, rail block, march, hunger strike to register its protest against the state. This was complemented with systematic linkage building with external intermediaries, like bureaucrats, academics, media activists and others.

The movement relied on a multi-tiered organisational set up to co-ordinate and carry out parallel campaigns with a view to influence various levels of the state simultaneously. What began as a grassroots level movement, without any strong demands in the isolated coastal villages three decades ago has now become a strong mass movement of the Indian fishworkers, well connected with the international campaign. The fishermen's unions fight for immediate local needs at the district levels. This includes bringing the frequent violation of the provisions of the Marine Fishery Regulation Act by boat owners to the notice of enforcement machinery and local authorities. The state level unions fight for the enactment of state level legislations and influencing the state government to implement national policies and centrally sponsored schemes. The National Forum takes up national level issues and tries to elicit international sympathy for the Indian fishermen, besides co-ordinating the strategies at the grassroots and state levels. At the national level, more efforts are devoted to lobbying among legislators and bureaucrats in order to influence the central government for a comprehensive National Marine Regulations Act as well as to formulate policies for the welfare and economic upliftment of the fishermen. At the international level the WFF tries to influence donor agencies such as FAO and World Bank to refuse finance for capital intensive fishery technologies in India. Different tactics are employed at different levels.

Converting a church-led movement into a secular mass movement by getting out of the sphere of influence of religious leaders was a tactical move. Fishermen belonging to different religions and castes- Christian, Muslim and Hindu in particular- dispensed with their caste and religious differences to emerge as a single group. Thus KSMTF came to represent fishermen's interest as a whole rather than only those of Christian fishermen.

Another tactical move was the formation of a National Forum for the cause of fishermen. Thus, what originally constituted of hundreds of petty dispersed communities of fishermen ultimately emerged as a single unified mass movement. The result was an intense political action for conservation of fish stocks and participation of fishermen in the management of fishery wealth.

Committed leadership to the movement was provided by the Christian priests and nuns. The case is an exemplary example of the role religious institutions like the church can play in mobilising people for their welfare. They helped to make the community aware, mobilise them into action, co-ordinate, direct and lead such action as well as to coalesce like-minded forces at various levels - local, state, national and international. However, the prominence of the Christian leadership prevented the development of local leadership from within the community.

Key Partners

NGOs

NGOs played a major role in mobilising the fisherfolk. They helped to make the fishermen aware of their rights and challenges ahead, mobilised them for mass media campaigns and lobbied to influence legislators and administrators. Support NGOs provided research, information dissemination and leadership development support.

Catholic Church

It played a major role for initiating and leading the movement. Initially they dealt with economic and social backwardness amongst the fisherfolk and development of self-help groups. It provided leadership helped to bring different groups like inland and coastal fishermen together. They made demands ranging from modest ones like the construction of sea walls, free rations, establishment of housing schemes, to major decisions like prohibition of mechanised fishing within 5 km of coast. Formation of district and state level unions and federations was carried out under the committed leadership of catholic priests and nuns.

Scientific community and intellectuals

Until the fishermen's campaign gained momentum, the interaction of scientists with fisheries sector was limited to owners of mechanised means of production, processing and export. As a result of the movement they began to study the effect of trawling and purse -seining and the impact of water pollution. Several fishery economists working in Universities and independent research institutions, started identifying themselves with the cause of the fishermen. They also published articles in newspapers and journals. Thus, the media and intelligentsia helped to form favourable public opinion about the fishermen's campaign.

Media

In the beginning the campaign had to make deliberate and consistent efforts to draw the attention of the media. However, as the movement and mass mobilisation gained momentum and started creating a crisis situation for the government, the campaign itself began to draw the attention of the media. The

support of the scientific community and intellectuals also helped to make the media favourably disposed towards the movement.

Political Parties

The impact of political parties was mixed. Securing sympathetic support from political parties helped the movement. Association with political parties allowed the campaigners to carry out lobbying among legislators and policy makers. The enactment of the Kerala Marine Fishing Regulation Act was a result of support from the newly elected Congress government. On the other hand, differences in political ideologies caused conflicts in the leadership of the movement, alienating certain key people from it. At a later stage this also led to the polarisation of the movement and its division along partisan lines.

Implications for Civil Society

- Civil society is not separate or independent from the state or the market. In fact political actors and market agents make continuous attempts to manipulate and corrupt its agenda and weaken its mass base. On the one hand, the mechanised fishing lobby successfully divided the fisherfolk into two opposing camps. On the other, the recent politicisation of the fisherfolk unions is representative of incursions of political interests into civic groups. Both resulted in considerably weakening the base of civil society. Thus it follows that civil society is a locus of contestation for power and influence, not only in the larger community, but also between civic groups and the state, or civic groups and the market.
- Diverse and multi-layered coalitions within and outside civil society help to strengthen the base of any movement. In fact, by translating the concerns of a marginalized group into the language of a diverse audience, such coalitions help to build public opinion and garner support for their cause.
- Religious institutions like the church form a vital part of civil society. The study shows that given their mass support, such institutions can play a vital role in promoting the cause of the marginalized, mobilise people for a cause and lead such efforts effectively. However, the downside of such religion-led movements is its possible fragmentation on sectarian lines and its inability to gain the support of people belonging to other religious groups or communities.
- External intermediaries play an important role in initiating and sustaining civil society interventions. They are vital in terms of creating awareness within a marginalized community, activating them to take action, helping to organise and mobilise such communities and in building links with other groups in society, who could support the cause of such marginalized groups.