

A STUDY OF FISHERFOLK ORGANIZATIONS IN KERALA¹⁰

by

T.R. Thankappan Archari
Trivandrum, India

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the origins and development of fisherfolk organizations in Kerala and neighbouring states in India. It describes the main categories of such organizations (i.e. social/religious, economic and political) and briefly discusses the problems and progress encountered by societies sponsored by the Government, by the fishermen themselves or by voluntary agencies and notes the emergence in 1978 of the National Fishermen's Forum which brings together 13 major regional fishermen's unions. The paper tries to identify those factors which appear to be common to successful fishermen's organizations and places particular importance upon initiatives taken by the fishermen themselves together with clarity of objectives and full participation by members in planning, implementation and evaluation. It concludes with a description of the steps taken by the Kerala government, in response to fishermen's pressures, to manage the fish resources more efficiently and to improve the socio-economic conditions in fishing communities.

1. Brief History of Fisherfolk Organizations in Kerala

Kerala is a leading maritime State situated in the South West Coast of the Indian Union. It accounts for 10 percent of the coast line of India, 27 percent of the active fishermen and a quarter of the sea fish production. The State shared 37 percent of the all India marine product export earnings. It is a typical case of an over-exploited fishery with nearly 4,000 mechanized boats, 10,000 motorized country craft and 17,000 un-motorized craft.

The fisherfolk in Kerala comprise Hindus, Christians and Muslims. Their total population is about one million, i.e. 3.2 percent of the State population. The marine fishermen live more or less in distinct settlements along the coast stretched over 590 km. The northern region is inhabited largely by the Muslims, the central area by the Hindus and the southern region by the Christians. The inland fishermen are settled along the banks of the inland water bodies like lakes, backwaters and rivers.

The fishermen's organizations in the State grew up along with the development of the fisheries sector over the various Five-Year Plan periods. These could be broadly divided into three categories, viz. social, economic and political.

¹⁰ The paper is an abridged, edited version of a longer document, containing case studies, which was prepared for FAO in 1990.

1.1 Social Organizations

The social organizations are the earliest associations of the fisherfolk. They are caste based. The Christian fishermen (Latin Catholics) have been under the influence of the Church for over the last four centuries, particularly in their social life and developmental activities. Less strikingly, the Hindu and Muslim fishermen also have been attached to their respective religious institutions.

Each fisherman settlement had its own informal system of village panchayats, headed by the rich and powerful members of the community known as *Kada Kodi* (Court of the Sea). It acted as a court to settle disputes and conflicts arising within the village. The decisions of the *Kada Kodi* were invariably obeyed by the members. These informal village panchayats of the fishermen, although they have lost much of their importance with the growth of democratic institutions, exist even today.

1.2 Economic Organizations

The economic organizations of the fisherfolk are those which have arisen with the fisheries development process. These include cooperatives sponsored by Government; societies set up on fishermen's initiatives; organizations promoted by voluntary agencies; and others like production groups, mutual aid associations and women's organizations.

Government sponsored cooperatives:

The earliest economic organizations of fishermen were Government sponsored cooperatives. The first cooperative society for fishermen in Kerala was registered in 1917. The societies of those days were based on castes (Arayan, Valan and Christian). The performance of these caste-based societies was disappointing.

The real thrust to fishermen cooperatives came in 1956 with the formation of the present Kerala State and the beginning of the Second Five-Year Plan onwards. In the wake of this, a three tier structure of fishermen cooperatives was set up. At the primary level, there were the producer cooperatives (Matsya Utpadaka Cooperative Societies - MUCS) through which the Government issued mechanized fishing boats. At the regional level, marketing societies were established to manage marketing of fish as well as supply of fishing requisites. A federation was also registered at the apex level. In 1974-75 there were 189 credit societies, 849 producer cooperatives, 18 regional marketing societies and one cooperative federation. The Government supported the cooperatives with production inputs as well as credit and provision of marketing facilities. Yet the cooperatives generally were a dismal failure. The fishermen had no control in the management of these societies which were by and large benami cooperatives registered by the rich and powerful in the community to take advantage of Government loans and subsidies.

Cooperatives set up on fishermen's initiative:

While Government sponsored societies failed, there were some cases of successful fishermen societies formed at the initiative of the fishermen themselves. A typical example was the case of the Marianad MUCS in Trivandrum District. Around 1970 a well knit group of Kattumaram fishermen of Marianad village, who demolished the hold of the middlemen and moneylenders, wanted to establish a cooperative of their own to take care of their production, marketing and welfare. As the Kerala Cooperative Societies Act did not permit more than one society an area the group was compelled to buy the defunct society in the

village from its original promoter after paying him a solatium to cover up his expenses incurred for registering the society. The society under the new leadership of the fishermen was able to obtain credit, small subsidies, etc. from Government and voluntary agencies. It provided production inputs to members, undertook marketing of the catches, built houses, organized saving and other welfare schemes for the members. The extension and education work carried out by the social activists strengthened their organizational capabilities.

The experiences and the success of the Marianad MUCS were emulated by the fishermen in Trivandrum and Quilon Districts who set up their own charitable societies to undertake similar functions. These societies are also functioning fairly well.

Organizations promoted by voluntary agencies:

Towards the second half of the seventies, voluntary agencies started entering the fisheries sector in an organized manner, working among the fishermen. It was the time when marine fish production in Kerala declined and the fishermen tried to organize themselves to protect their interests and save the resources from depredation. The Programme for Community Organization (PCO) (1977) was a pioneer among the voluntary agencies. Its approach is that the working masses should form their own people's organizations if they are to become participants in their development. The PCO helps the people to establish such organizations like fishworkers' cooperatives and service societies, women's organizations, youth groups, etc. and works through them.

The South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS) is another voluntary organization working for the promotion of fishermen's interests, particularly in developing small-scale artisanal technology to provide plyboats for fishermen. The Trivandrum, Kanyakumari and Quilon District Fishermen's Federations are affiliated to SIFFS which extends technical and organizational support to fishermen's organizations in these districts.

Collective production groups:

With the growth of modern capital intensive fishing techniques such as ring seining in the artisanal sector, there is a growing tendency among fishermen to form collectives of production groups ranging from 20 to 60 as share holders to own, operate and manage artisanal production units. The growth of the collective production groups is necessitated by the need to raise sizeable equity capital for ring seine fishing.

Mutual aid associations:

In the northern districts of Kerala, certain mutual aid associations exist among the traditional fishermen. Locally it is known as *Kuri kalyanam* (fund raising festival). The fisherman in need of funds calls all friends and relatives to a festival at which each participant donates any amount to the promoter according to his mite. Even though these donations are not treated as loans the fisherman who benefits from the *Kuri kalyanam* is morally bound to reciprocate when others in the community invite him for such festivals. This interesting method of support within the community is restricted to very specific areas and seems to be successful because of a certain equality of economic status among the participants in the *Kuri kalyanam*.

Mahila Samajams (Women's organizations):

The fisherwomen were one of the most exploited sections of coastal society. Of late, they have organized themselves and formed Mahila Samajams (women's organizations) to protect and promote their interests and status in the families, society, fish vending practices, etc. The fisherwomen of Trivandrum have set up a Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and find jobs for members as nursing assistants, run packed food services, stitching, garment making, etc.

1.3 Political Organizations

Faced with failing fish production and heavily exploited resources, the fishermen started forming unions of their own. A number of unions which were formed during 1970-80 functioned mostly as social service societies. But these unions brought the fishermen together to have a more intimate knowledge of the problems faced by them and also helped to develop good leadership from within.

In 1977 the Latin Catholic Fishermen Unions in different districts were amalgamated to form a Kerala Latin Catholic Fishermen Federation. In 1980 this federation changed its name to Kerala Independent Fishermen Federation (KIFF) in order to give it a secular colour. At this time the different castes of Hindu fishermen like Valan and Arayan joined together as one organization under the banner of All Kerala Dheevara Sabha. This process was motivated largely by political compulsions.

The Kerala Independent Fishermen Federation undertook several prolonged struggles, hunger strikes, and long marches to bring pressure on Governments. It compelled the authorities to declare several measures designed to protect the interests of the fishermen and conserve the fishery resources. Today, this union is one of the most powerful and militant fishermen's political organizations in Kerala.

In the wake of this movement, all the political parties, including the Indian National Congress, Communist parties, Muslim League and Revolutionary Socialist Party, have formed their own trade unions of fishworkers who constitute a good vote bank in the coastal constituencies.

As the artisanal fishermen united into strong political unions, the owners and operators of the mechanized boats also formed their associations. The boat owners' and operators' associations wield a powerful lobby in Government. Between the two factions there are frequent clashes and a number of litigations are going on the courts of the State as well as in the Supreme Court of India.

2. Organizations in Other Parts of India

The other states of the Indian Union witnessed the same models of fishermen organizations as in Kerala, viz. development of fishermen cooperatives, entry of voluntary organizations to assist the fishermen and the emergence of political unions of the fishermen.

The Kottar Social Service Society (KSSS) in Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu is an excellent example of a voluntary organization which did very commendable work among the fishermen. Started in 1962 the KSSS was affiliated to the Catholic Church of Kottar Diocese. The KSSS organized sanghams or cooperatives of young fishermen numbering more than six. The sanghams were issued small fibre glass craft. It coordinated collective action

for marketing and adopting alternate selling practices totally bypassing the middlemen in their own villages. Net making centres were set up and young women were provided employment in these centres. Saving schemes were organized for the members. As a result of the intervention by the KSSS, the fishermen sanghams became self sustained.

The Kanyakumari District Fishermen Sanghams Federation (KDFSF), affiliated to the South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies, has a network of fishermen societies under it. These societies organize fish production, fish marketing, saving schemes, net making, credit, etc. The efforts of the Kanyakumari District Fishermen Sanghams Federation are laudable.

An assessment of the primary fishermen cooperatives in Maharashtra showed that the majority achieved consistent progress both in terms of profit and membership. The fishery cooperatives in Satpati, in particular, has achieved considerable improvements in credit, storage, preservation, transport and marketing facilities. The societies have been successful in curbing the various malpractices of the middlemen associated with fish marketing. On the other hand the District Federations and the Apex Body in Maharashtra did not fare well.

2.1 Emergence of National Fishermen's Forum

In 1978, 13 major regional fishermen unions met in Madras and set up a National Forum for cattamaram and country boat fishermen's rights and marine wealth. These unions, coordinated by the National Forum, had been protesting and striking against the deleterious fishing by large number of mechanized boats and trawlers in the already heavily exploited coastal waters.

The National Fishermen's Forum in 1989 organized a Kanyakumari March with one faction started from West Bengal in the East Coast and another faction from Maharashtra in the West Coast and finally converged at Kanyakumari to protest against the dangerous nuclear policy of the Government to set up plants at Koodamkulam and other places having devastating repercussions on the life of the people and environment. In 1990 the NFF, supported by scientists, professionals and fishermen leaders, organized an All India Seminar on National Fisheries Policies for Fuller Employment and Sustainable Development in New Delhi and drew up recommendations for the consideration of the Union Government, States Governments and Planning Bodies.

3. **Successful Types of Organizations**

Most of the successful fishermen's organizations are those motivated at the initiative of the fishermen or promoted by voluntary organizations. The Kada kodi Panchayats, Mutual Aid Associations, Collective Production groups, Fishermen Cooperative Society at Marianad, Fish Marketing Centre Quilon, Programme for Community Organization, Trivandrum, South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies Trivandrum and the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) are among the successful fisherworkers' organizations in Kerala. The factors contributing to the success of the organizations could be summarized as follows:

- (i) Initiative from the fishermen.
- (ii) Objectives clear, meaningful and beneficial to all the members.
- (iii) Leadership from within inspired by religious or socialistic values keeping solidarity, collectivism and egalitarian principles as the base of the organization.

- (iv) Involvement of the target group in planning, plan implementation and evaluation.
- (v) Access to credit, grants, etc., and the effective utilization of the funds, avoiding waste expenditures.
- (vi) Flexibility in development approach, making adjustments and adaptations based on consultations and deliberations involving all concerned.
- (vii) Management compact, efficient, unbureaucratic and above corruption.

4. Trends in Government Interventions

Under pressures from the fishermen's unions because of resource problems, falling production and the inactivity in the working of the state sponsored fishermen, cooperatives influenced the Kerala Government to intervene the fisheries sector in an unprecedented manner towards the end of the seventies. The Government adopted a multi-faceted strategy to improve fisheries and fishermen's life. The measures included were the following:

- Enactment of Kerala Marine Fishing Regulation Act (KMFR Act) 1980;
- The Kerala Fishermen Welfare Societies Act (KFWS Act), 1980;
- Appointment of an Expert Committee to examine thoroughly the problems of marine fishing and the need for regulating mechanized fishing, the need for banning trawling during the monsoon and other related issues;
- Introduction of an Intermediate Technology in 1980 to motorize the country craft and increase the fish catches and income to fishermen; and
- Enactment of Kerala Fishermen Welfare Fund Act (1985).

Under the provisions of the KMFR Act, the coastal waters up to 20 m depth from the shore north of Quilon to Manjeswar (about 512 km coast) and 30 m depth south of Quilon (78 km coast) were declared to be the exclusive reserve of the artisanal craft while the mechanized boats were to operate beyond this depth and the purse seiners were banned from operating in the territorial waters. The KMFR Act aimed at protecting the interests of the artisanal fishermen, establishing law and order in the sea and ensuring regulation of marine fishing and conservation of resources.

The KMFR Act provided for a grassroot level nodal agency of the fishermen to organize production, marketing, welfare and credit in order to provide a real thrust to artisanal fishing. Accordingly the coastal villages were delimited into 222 villages and an equal number of Fishermen Welfare Societies (FWS) were constituted, one for each fishing village. Each society was conceived as an autonomous body to administer the activities and a fishery official was posted as its Secretary. A nominated Managing Committee drawn of fishermen's representatives was made responsible for its management. For want of development funds, the activities of the FWS during the first 2-3 years confined to merely distribution of welfare funds previously handled by the Department.

In 1984, a Kerala State Cooperative Federation for Fisheries Development Limited (MATSYAFED) was set up under the Kerala Cooperative Societies Act to activate, coordinate and guide the working of the village societies. Three District Cooperative

Societies were registered as primaries to the federation as the FWS were formed outside the Cooperative Societies Act. Although the National Cooperative Development corporation (NCDC) initially provided certain funds for the working of the FWS, they insisted on the reorganization of the welfare societies under the Cooperative Societies Act for easy inflow of cooperative funds. Accordingly the FWS were replaced in 1988 with 81 Fishermen Development Welfare Cooperative Societies covering the entire coast of Kerala. The State Government also enacted another legislation viz. the Kerala State Welfare Fund Act (1985) to implement all the welfare schemes handled by the Department. Old age pensions, lump sum grant to fisherchildren, compensation against loss of life and other welfare schemes were brought under Welfare Board.