

For a few rupees more

The boatworkers of Veraval in the Indian State of Gujarat are a harried lot, facing a bleak future

It is just a mass of humanity—‘suppliers’ as they are called—scrambling over several boats to carry baskets of fish to the marketing shed, or crushing ice at the crushers on the landing site and carrying it off to the boats, or fetching water and stores for the boat. Some of them even look jolly, dressed up as if to go off to the cinema, for this is their only day at shore. Some look so young and should be in school or playing around rather than carrying heavy weights at the harbour.

In between all that movement, there are yells, shouts and commands, in a language that does not sound familiar—a large bunch of these workers do not speak Gujarati, the language of the place. Yes, it is quite a sight, and when one gets closer to these people, one is amazed by the stories they tell. They are the people on whom the fishing industry of Veraval depends, and not a single one of them—over 20,000 this season—has a space of his own in this town.

They hail from other parts of Gujarat, mainly from Valsad, the southernmost district of the State, and a large number of them come from across the country, from Andhra Pradesh on the east coast of India. Interestingly, none of the boatworkers are from Veraval itself.

Veraval is the largest fishing harbour of Gujarat, which was developed in the 1960s. Traditionally, too, it was a port but mainly for sailing vessels, large wooden *vahans* which carried grain, chilli, groundnut and, later, cement and soda ash to Rethnagiri in Maharashtra and Kozhikode in Kerala, and from there some of them took spices and terracotta tiles to the Middle East, sometimes bringing back dates to Gujarat. It was mainly the Kharwa community that was engaged in this

trade. The actual fishing—generally estuarine fishing—was done by the poorer Kharwas, using gillnets and smaller canoes, and by Muslim fishermen who were skilled hook-and-line and gillnet fishermen. There were a handful of Kharwas who used plank boats of fairly large size (up to 32 ft) and made multiday fishing trips with gillnets.

In the mid-1950s, the *vahans* began to get mechanized, and, by the mid-1970s, they began to decline with the development of roadways. Trawl fishing was launched by the Department of Fisheries in 1962 with the idea of demonstrating the technology.

By the mid-1960s, the government of Gujarat had realized the need to develop a fishing port at Veraval, as the potential of fish export was already being demonstrated by Maharashtra, its southern neighbour.

The Kharwas, whose *vahans* were becoming redundant, plunged their monies into the fishery, but not knowing much about fishing themselves, engaged the Valsad skippers and crew on their boats. With the completion of the port in 1978 and with the stimulus from the Fisheries Department and encouragement from one enterprising exporter of Kerala origin, who also happened to be in the Department, the gillnets were soon transformed into trawls, and shrimp was the main target.

Largely illiterate

Government subsidies were rooted through co-operatives and were meant only for the Kharwa community. The community, largely illiterate, was dependent on the Fisheries Department and some community leaders who were somewhat educated or had an economic standing from the seafaring trade.

Here too, it was the processor who took the lead in making advances to the boatowners and this is how the actual fishing for export commenced. It did not take long for a few enterprising Kharwas themselves to acquire trawlers and supply fish to the exporter. In the initial stages, these adventurous Kharwas acquired five to 10 trawlers, as business depended on the size of the turnover. They also set the tone of the industry—they were managers of their boats. They employed crew from other areas on a salaried basis and regarded it as a business. Trash fish, which easily made up half the catch, was also in demand. In the early years, much of it was dried and sent to the southern States of India and even to the northeast. By 1984, because of the presence of large ribbonfish, the high open-bottom trawl was introduced and Gujarat saw a new spurt in the fish catches.

During this phase, the poorer Kharwas went into the fishery, taking advantage of the government subsidies both for acquiring boats and for diesel. Some of these poorer Kharwas had worked on traditional craft before, but many had worked with the bigger Kharwar 'suppliers' as wage labour. Seeing the potential in the industry and the fact that others were making big profits, they put all they had into the industry. Instead of getting on to the boats themselves, they followed the others, engaging crew from

the outside, while they themselves turned into shore managers of their boats. Around 40 per cent of them acquired only one boat each, which they managed themselves or through their sons, and all they would do would be to wait for that boat to return after four days at sea. (This duration has become eight to nine days now, in 2003.)

The number of trawlers grew by leaps and bounds between 1986 and 1994. While in 1984-85, there were about 1,030 trawlers of 32-48 ft length in the district, by 1995-96 there were 4,191, which made up 58 per cent of the trawler fleet of Gujarat. This was also due to the liberalized export regulations and the fact that ribbonfish was in big demand in China at that time. Seeing the large profits in the business, several salaried Kharwas went into the industry and the number of boats increased. By 1999, there were 6,749 small trawlers in Gujarat. The southern States of India were already seeing the downward slump in the fishery. Fishworkers were in the dumps in other parts of the country and so this growing industry in Veraval was alluring to these workers who migrated there and were willing to work under very difficult conditions.

Total workers

At the peak time of the Veraval fishery, which was around 1998-1999, there were about 4,000 boats, each with six workers, which made a total of 24,000 workers

working for eight months of the year when the port was open. Since 1999, the catches have fallen, and several boats operate only for four to five months a season. But since around 2001, one-fifth of the fleet has not operated at all because the boats are either too old or because the catch per unit effort has declined so drastically that fishing is no longer viable. Kharwa owners who have other occupations—several have salaried jobs—do not find it profitable enough to spend time managing the boats. Some of them have also borrowed money from their employers, which they have to repay.

The boatworkers of Veraval range from 14 to 60 years of age. Some of them came as experienced fishermen but a lot of them have learnt the ropes on the job. Gurumurthy from Srikakulam in Andhra came to the Kandla port in Gujarat at the age of 13 to work as a casual labourer, loading and unloading goods at the harbour. He had completed his seventh standard at school, but had to go to work as there was no other income in his family and he had three sisters to look after. After working a couple of years there, an older fisherman took him on to a fishing boat, where he worked as a cook. While on the boat, he learnt the work on board and then became a boathand or *khalasi*. He remembers getting typhoid during his first boat trip, after which he had to go home. But he returned soon after he got well and continued to work. Some years later, he moved to Veraval and gradually became a *tandel*, the key person among the workers. Now, for the past six years, he has been regularly based at Veraval, bringing with him others from his district. Several of the deckhands tell the same story as Gurumurthy, many starting as cooks at very early ages and gradually graduating to higher positions.

Despite all the hardships, for boatworkers like Gurumurthy, life is more gainful here than back home. Most of those who come from Andhra are from fishing villages; often, hundreds come from a single fishing village. But in the case of those from Valsad, this need not always be the case. Several of the *tandels* and *khalasis* have come from an agricultural background, or had been wage workers in construction or other fields, and have

learnt the fishing work on the job. Those who have been traditional fishermen from the Valsad area are called *mota bhais* (big brothers), and they are probably the best-paid too. They also have the fortune to work on the better and bigger boats, while the Andhra *tandels* get the smaller and older boats—and lower salaries. Both the Valsad and Andhra skippers bring their teenage sons along, together with their brothers and other relatives.

The *tandel* is the key person among the workers. It is with him that the boatowner makes the deal for the next season. He is given an advance of around Rs60,000-80,000 at the end of one season in lieu of the next, which is four months off. It is his job to recruit the crew, which he does mainly from his own village, giving each of them a small advance as well. Most of the crew do not know exactly what they will get for the season, but it is generally around Rs2,000, while the *tandel* gets around Rs. 8,000-9,000 a month.

Once they take charge of a boat, this will be their home for the next eight months. The cabin room is the cleanest space on the boat. This is the room dedicated by the owner to God, and the place where the deckhands eat and sleep. There they have a clock and a calendar, with which they religiously keep track of the time.

They start right away, soon after the owner has supplied the boat with provisions to take care of the crew's food, and so on. The crew does all the loading and unloading of the material on board. Their fishing trips are generally of eight to nine days duration now. When they are back in the harbour, they get exactly 24 hours to offload, reload and get to a cinema if they can. While on the boat, they are not allowed to consume liquor. They use sea water to bathe and wash their clothes. They also have to sort the fish to some extent, to make sure the good varieties are well preserved. The boat is often decorated with lines on which they dry some of the fish too.

Sending money

The boatowner handles all the accounts. He also sends money to the families of the workers on their request. But settlements are made only at the end of the season, at which time they are at his mercy, as most

of them are illiterate. If they feel they have not been treated well, they do not work for the same owner the next year. Very few continue to work for the same owner for more than three years.

Some boatowners have been let down by *tandels* who collect their advances and do not return. It has also happened that *tandels* have not received their full settlement at the end of the season. Everything in the business runs on trust. A worker is allowed to go home once during the season. This is the only time he gets to communicate with his family and to take money home.

The Veraval harbour now has a modern toilet facility, which is a welcome change. The condition of the water in the harbour itself—a dirty blue-red and foul-smelling—could be the result of human waste. But the workers refute this conclusion, saying it is due to waste from the processing plants that is released into the harbour.

The Veraval fishery has been built on the sweat and toil of these boatworkers. But for them, the future is grim—they can see the boon gradually fading before their own eyes, as the unmanaged fishery spins into steady decline. ❧

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