

## Whose responsibility?

**Even in the post-tsunami phase of rehabilitation, few aid givers in India are addressing the issue of safety at sea**

**I**n India, the fishing craft of fishermen are particularly vulnerable to not only natural disasters like cyclones but also mechanical failure, in the case of mechanized and motorized craft, and wind failure, in the case of non-motorized craft. On several occasions, fishing craft and crew have been reported missing for these very reasons. In some cases, they have strayed into the waters of neighbouring countries like Pakistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar, unintentionally or because the currents dragged them there consequent to the mechanical failure of their craft. Whatever the reason, they end up facing hardship.

Recently, for instance, a mechanized boat from the Chennai fishing harbour, along with its crew, entered the territorial waters of Bangladesh when the boat's engine failed. The Bangladesh government arrested the crewmembers and put them in jail for nearly six months without a proper trial and without informing the Indian government. In 2004, a fibre-reinforced plastic (FRP) boat from Nagoor capsized in the deep sea due to strong winds. The capsized boat drifted in the water, with the crewmembers sitting on its upside-down bottom. After two days, one of the rescue boats sent out by the villagers found the capsized boat and brought it back to shore.

On 20 June 2005, a FRP boat carrying three fishermen from Nochi Kuppam, a fishing village in Chennai, set out to sea. While crossing the surf, a huge wave dashed against the boat and threw all the fishermen into the sea. While two of them managed to clamber back on to the boat, another disappeared in the sea in a fraction of second. Many fishermen on the shore, who witnessed the incident, jumped into the sea and searched for the

man, but in vain. The man who disappeared was said to be a good swimmer, and his fellow fishermen guessed he must have died due to injury to some vital organ. In such cases, though the accident could not have been avoided, it would have been possible to at least recover the body had the fisherman worn a lifebelt.

Many people tend to dismiss these incidents as unavoidable natural disasters that the government and fishermen cannot do anything about. However, this is not true. While we may not be able to completely prevent such accidents, we can minimize the effects of the disasters if all the stakeholders realize their responsibilities and act collectively.

With the depletion of fishery resources in Indian coastal waters due to continuous and destructive fishing methods, the operations of mechanized boats in nearshore waters have become unprofitable. Hence, most of the mechanized boat fishermen wish to go into deeper waters in search of fish. Generally, two types of boats can be found in the mechanized sector: the 32-footer and the larger 40-45-footer. Both usually fish for about 12 to 24 hours a day, while the bigger boats can be out at sea for six to 15 days continuously. This type of fishing is called 'stay fishing'. Due to the lack of safety equipment on board, such boats fish only where visibility is good and navigation is possible with the aid of the lighthouses located along the coast.

### Stay fishing

The boats are powered by diesel engines, and each boat has a crew of five to seven fishermen. They take along rice, vegetables, milk and other rations to cook for their 'stay fishing' voyage. They usually have one compass, and some have

a transistor radio too, which is used to listen to music and weather reports.

**H**owever, no boat has the life-saving equipment recommended by the Coast Guard or the State Fisheries Department, like lifebuoys, jackets and flares. Though the boats are registered with the State Fisheries Department, few are insured. During registration, the Fisheries Department officials are supposed to check the seaworthiness and safety aspects of the boat, but this is rarely done. Many of the fishermen of the motorized craft are reluctant to carry sails with them for use during engine failure. Artisanal fishing craft do not carry even basic safety equipment like life jackets, lifebuoys and flashlights. Without flashlights, the artisanal fishers find it hard to deal with mechanized boats, particularly during the night.

According to the India Meteorological Department, most of the east coast of India is vulnerable to cyclones, and usually two to four cyclones hit the east coast every year. During the cyclone period, the fishing boats stop venturing into the sea as soon as they receive weather warnings. However, the boats that are already at sea cannot receive the warnings since most lack transistors and other communication instruments. Once a boat ventures into the sea, all connection with land is effectively cut off completely.

If the engine breaks down, there is no way to call for help from land or from other fishing boats at sea. During this critical time, the boat is anchored and the fishermen have to just wait and hope for help from some boat that happens to pass by. Occasionally, some of the crew who are capable of swimming long distances, jump into the sea with empty plastic diesel cans and swim to the shore, in search of villages. There, they might get some financial help to reach their hometowns or pass on the news of the accident to the boat's owner.

During a cyclone, however, it is impossible to anchor the boat in the middle of the sea due to the strong winds, currents and waves. Boats fishing at mid-sea cannot receive weather reports on time. Even if they were to get the news, it would be too late to return for they would be far from the fishing harbour and would have to navigate their boats against the power of the cyclone. Only the lucky few manage to reach safety; the other boats drift away in the direction of the wind and water current. Some boats may capsize in the sea and their crewmembers drowned.

#### **Mechanical failures**

In some cases, the boat's engine fails due to the extra load necessitated by the cyclone. While some mechanical failures can be rectified quickly by the crewmembers themselves, others cannot. In most cases, the boats are forced to drift

towards the deep sea or towards land in other States of India or in other countries.

If the boat hits the land of other States of India, there is not much of a problem. But if it reaches other countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar on the east coast, and Pakistan on the west coast, the crewmembers invariably get arrested and face possible harassment by local law enforcers. Some fishermen, mistaken for being smugglers, may even get killed in encounters with the law enforcement authorities.

In the matter of safety at sea, there is a clear lack of co-ordination between the government machineries—like the Meteorological Department, the Fisheries Department, the Coast Guard and the Navy—and the fishing boats. (However, good co-ordination exists in the case of deep-sea fishing vessels, since they have all the electronic communication and navigational facilities.

Most of them, though, fish in the same grounds as the small-scale fishermen. This lack of co-ordination leads to conflicts between the traditional and mechanized boat fishermen. Anticipating accidents, engine failure and/or cyclones, the mechanized sector prefers to fish in the shallow waters, which allows easier escape to land in cases of emergency. This is one of the main reasons for the depletion of fish stocks in the resource-rich shallow waters. To avoid conflicts between the two sectors, the government, boatowners and fishermen should own up to their respective responsibilities and strictly abide by safety rules and regulations.

The State government must make it compulsory for all crewmembers to be registered and issued identity cards, which they must compulsorily carry with them while out fishing. All fishing craft should also be registered. The government should encourage all the registered boats to use wireless walkie-talkies or other efficient communication systems to communicate amongst themselves as well as with control stations on land. Several control stations should be installed all along the Indian coast at specified intervals, thereby facilitating easy contact during emergencies. All the coastal States should

have some search-and-rescue boats in good operational condition ready to be used in emergency.

State Fisheries Departments should not register boats that are not built in government-recognized or approved boat centres and do not fulfill all the safety norms. All mechanized fishing boats must be compulsorily painted in fluorescent colours, at least on top, with the registration numbers boldly painted in larger size type. For non-mechanized craft other than *kattamarams*, the paint should be at the side of the boats. For *kattamarams*, fluorescent strips can be attached to the wooden logs, which will help in identification during aerial search operations. Harbour berthing facilities should be given to those boats that are registered and insured, and have seaworthiness certificates and safety equipment.

The government should insist that boats carry sophisticated communication and navigational equipment on board, and it should provide crewmembers training in handling the instruments. Recently, some of the boats in Chennai, Rameswaram and Thuthukudi areas have started using the Global Positioning System (GPS) handsets to find their routes, cellular or mobile phones to communicate with land and other boats (the Thuthukudi boats were provided with wireless sets), and fish-finding devices to find fish shoals. Through communication and navigational instruments, the Fisheries Department can disseminate information on the Potential Fishing Zone (PFZ), given by the National Remote Sensing Agency, Hyderabad, using simplified language understandable by fishermen.

Though the Central Government has spent millions of rupees on this satellite information gathering system, the findings are not disseminated properly to the small-scale fishermen but are used by the deep-sea trawlers, whose contribution to the overall fish catch is minor, compared to the small-scale sector.

#### **Fishing legislation**

Once it is able to guarantee the abovementioned facilities, the government can strictly enforce the fishing regulation legislation. At the same

time, the mechanized fishermen will gain the courage to go into the deep sea to fish (beyond the area of artisanal fishermen, that is, not within 3 or 5 miles from the shore, depending on the particular coastal State's law), thereby avoiding conflicts between the traditional and mechanized sectors. The fish resources in the deep seas can be better exploited, and both fishermen and the government can benefit economically.

**T**he government should advise and encourage artisanal fishermen to carry lifebuoys, life jackets, first-aid kits, emergency lamps or flashlights, portable compasses for non-motorized craft, and global positioning systems (GPS) for motorized craft, along with sails and identification cards.

The State Fisheries Department should act as a nodal agency to register all seagoing fishermen so they can avail of the monetary benefits of welfare schemes run by both Central and State governments, like insurance and other schemes for the unorganized sector. The government should also implement a provident fund scheme for the fishermen in which the government should pitch in with the employer's contribution. Insurance companies should consider the fishing sector as a special category and should come forward to insure boats with moderate premiums, which can be afforded by the owners who are already burdened by large operational costs.

The Coast Guard and the Navy must remain alert, particularly during the monsoon seasons, to help the State government launch search-and-rescue operations without delay. The Coast Guard and the Fisheries Department should conduct random checks at sea to ensure that safety equipment and identity cards are in place. If not, the fishing licence of the boat should be cancelled immediately and the boat seized. The Coast Guard must also, through the Fisheries Department, train fishermen how to handle conditions of distress and emergency.

Watchtowers should be constructed at the seaward entrance of each fishing harbour and posted with coast guards.

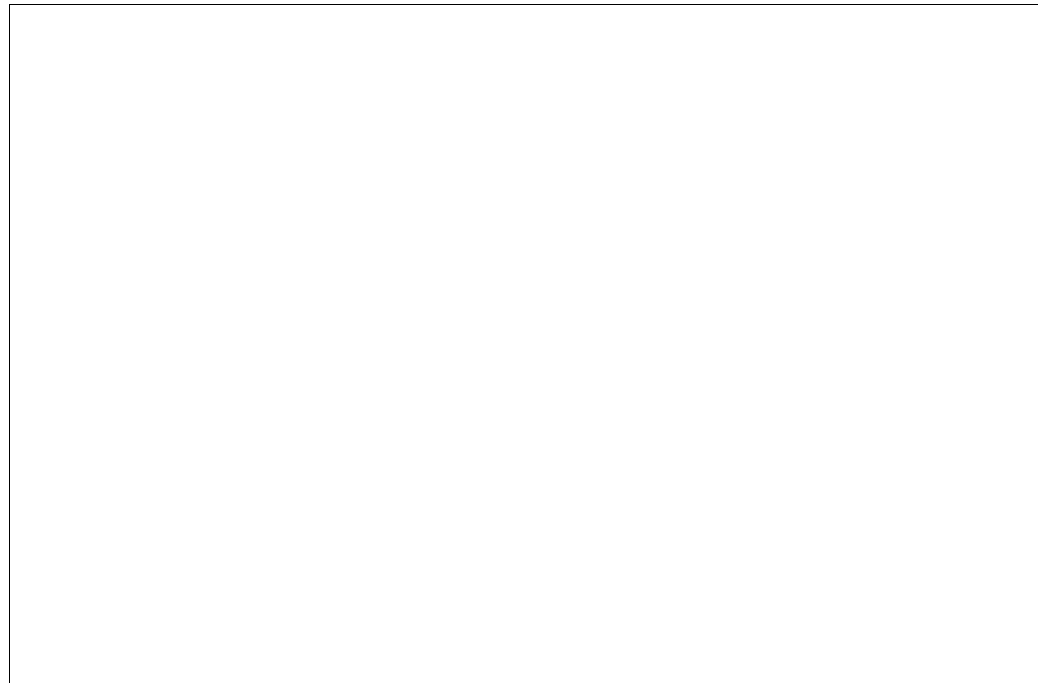
Fishing boats going out to sea should inform the Coast Guard about their expected destinations. The Coast Guard should not allow any boat to venture out to sea when there is an adverse weather warning from the Meteorology Department. This will help avoid loss of life and property.

The first and foremost responsibility of each craft owner is to keep the boat and engine in good condition always, and ensure that the boat has adequate insurance coverage. Lifebuoys, life jackets, smoke flares, first-aid kits and emergency ration kits must be on board. Each owner must know how many crewmembers have ventured out to sea for a particular voyage and their names, addresses, fisheries society membership number and also their expected fishing destination. (The lack of such information often hampers the Fisheries Department from identifying the crewmembers who have gone missing in a cyclone or have been captured in other countries' territorial waters.) The owners should keep a logbook, where all the requisite information is entered, and this information should be passed on to the fisheries authorities immediately after the departure of the fishing boat. The owners should employ only persons who are members of the fishermen's co-operative society. (According to official norms, in a fishing accident, the government will provide compensation to the family of the deceased or physically injured person only if the victim is a member of the co-operative society.)

The owners should insist that their employees insure their lives in the Group Insurance Schemes of various insurance companies. Owners should not encourage fishing during cyclone warning periods. Boatowners should build their boats in government-recognized boatbuilding centres, thereby ensuring seaworthy boats.

#### **Co-operative membership**

All crewmembers and other shore-based workers should themselves take the initiative to become members of their respective co-operative societies, and should also get their lives insured in Group Insurance Schemes. They should keep their identity cards with them when



they go fishing. The card will help the law enforcement authorities distinguish genuine fishermen from criminals like smugglers or pirates. The crewmembers must co-operate with their owners by giving accurate personal information and also their intended fishing destination. Finally, and importantly, the crew should help other boats in distress in the middle of the sea.

**I**f these rules and regulations are followed, the loss of life and property at sea during disasters can be considerably minimized. Observing such norms can also go a long way in managing the fishery resources and thereby avoiding conflicts between artisanal and mechanized fishers. But for that to happen, there must be good co-ordination amongst all the departments concerned with fishing and safety, preferably supervised and controlled by a single authority, like the State Fisheries Department, so that needless bureaucratic delays can be avoided. The Fisheries Department, in turn, can play a vital role through vigorous campaigning using posters, seminars, meetings and documentary movies at fish-landing centres and fishing hamlets and also through mass media like radio and television.

Today, after the 26 December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the safety of fishing communities and fishermen, in particular,

has gained importance in the eyes of officialdom. In the post-tsunami relief and rehabilitation phase, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have supplied many FRP boats and wooden *kattamarams* and a large quantity of various types of fishing nets and gear to the tsunami-affected coastal districts. With the number of artisanal craft and the length of fishing nets increasing dramatically, there is now the strong risk of overcapacity in the fisheries of the tsunami-affected areas. Unfortunately, though, little of the post-tsunami aid has focused on safety equipment. As a result of the aid in craft and gear, all the artisanal craft will now concentrate on inshore fishing with their newly acquired lengthy fishing nets, instead of going to deeper waters. This will lead to increased fishing pressure in the coastal waters, followed by conflicts among fishers. Another potential problem is the resultant lack of space to cast nets, and the restricted movement of boats in the sea. This could lead to poaching of fish from others and the destruction of competitors' nets at sea. All these problems will lead to an increase in operational costs and a decrease in returns. This will, in turn, cause new tensions among fishermen.

#### **Safety aspects**

Since safety equipment may not be affordable by all fishermen, it is time for both the government and NGOs to divert their attention towards safety aspects, and

provide money from tsunami relief funds to buy safety equipment for both mechanized and non-mechanized craft. Also, insurance companies should come forward with norms to insure all types of fishing craft at nominal, affordable premiums. Only when all the stakeholders involved with the issue of safety at sea get together to analyze the situation and find out remedies, will the problems in implementation get solved in an amicable way. ♣

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