

Neobondage

In the Srikakulam district of the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, migration of fishers has several impacts on the families of coastal villages

It is noon, but despite the scorching sun, Varada Lakshamma is patiently waiting with her basket for the fishing boats to land in one of the remote coastal areas of the Bay of Bengal. She has to hurry to the neighbouring villages and towns to sell the fish. In the absence of public transport, she has to rely on auto-rickshaws. We spoke to her as she was busy buying fish at the auction. We learned that her husband is in Veraval in Gujarat and, like most of the husbands of fisherwomen of Srikakulam district, he has been going to Gujarat for the past 15 years.

Migration from these villages has been happening for the past 20 to 30 years. Normally, 'migration' refers to international movement of persons from country to country, usually in search of employment. In this case, the term migration is used because this district has already seen two waves of migration during which sizeable sections of the population moved mainly to Burma (Myanmar)—the first during the late 19th century and the second, during the Second World War. This third phase, which is actually an inter-state movement of persons, is still referred to as 'migration' in the literature.

More than 50 per cent of the men in the 30-40 age group have migrated, while 90 per cent of the men aged between 25 and 45 years have migrated. The majority have moved to Indian state of Gujarat (mainly Veraval and Porbandar) to work in big boats owned by *saits* (as boatowners in the region are called), most of whom have a fleet of five to 10 boats, while some may own up to 20 boats. A few of the fishermen have moved to Mangalore, Karnataka, to work on

such boats. The rest of the migrant workers go to Chennai, Hyderabad and Vishakapatnam as construction labourers.

In Gujarat, the moment the migrant fishermen take an advance from the *sait*, they are bound by an oral contract. The advance is used by the fisherman's family during his absence to run the household. Once in Gujarat, the fishermen will be on board the boats for 20 to 25 days at a stretch. They venture out as a group to help one another should any problem arise,

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like a storm or an accident or illness. They suffer the inhumane conditions on the boat only out of dire poverty. The saving grace is that there is plenty of food on the mechanized boats. The reasons for migrating are surprising. Sociologically, they can be categorized as 'push factors' (those that leave one with no choice but to move out of one's current—especially parental—home) and 'pull factors' (the lure of another home, country or region).

No infrastructure

Prime among the push factors is the lack of proper infrastructure to fish in the district. There is no fishing harbour, so the fishermen cannot venture out in mechanized boats. There is no cold storage facility or an ice factory in the vicinity. So even if the fishermen land good catches, the chances are high that their perishable goods will get spoiled before they reach the market.

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A second push factor is that the Srikakulam fishermen cannot compete with the large trawlers from Vishakapatnam and Ganjam. They believe that the operations of these trawlers have reduced fish stocks over the years, raising questions of right of access to the area's resource.

A third push factor is the rise in production costs over the years (especially for fibreglass boats and fishing gear) and the status quo in returns on their high investments; sometimes the returns have shrunk considerably, often leading to bankruptcy.

The primary pull factors for migration to Gujarat in search of jobs is the existence of a wage system. Irrespective of the catch, the fishermen are guaranteed a fixed pay. Sometimes, when the catch is good, they receive as bonus an additional, though often meagre, portion of the profit made by the *sait*. But when the catch is low, the *sait*s pay whatever has been fixed as the salary. This opportunity of earning a decent, steady wage has remained the main attraction for fishermen's migration over the years.

The second pull factor is that the wage payments are made as a lump sum, which they end up spending productively, rather than drinking and gambling on a daily wage. They usually build houses with the money they earn or buy ornaments for their daughter's wedding. This is evident from the large number of half-finished houses that can be found in Badevanipeta village in the district. The fishermen continue construction on the building each year with the money they earn by migrating to Gujarat. In one family, on an average, at least three persons migrate and they pool their earnings to construct the house.

The third pull factor relates to the recent advances in information technology, which allows the fishermen to easily transfer money electronically and also communicate with their families. In the past, many fishermen were looted of the large sums of money they were physically carrying home.

Migration, however, has had several negative impacts, especially on health and hygiene. Boys start to migrate with their fathers at the age of 12 (in some cases at the age of 10) and the girls in the village are married off at the earliest. The resultant neglect of education affects their health and sanitary practices. With unclean surroundings, no proper drainage system, stagnant pools of water that are breeding grounds for mosquitoes and flies, and no toilets at home, little wonder that most of the villagers fall sick frequently.

The Day and Night Junction in Srikakulam town has approximately 50 hospitals. The area is awash with hospitals and pharmacies. There are no primary health centres in the villages. The villagers tend to go to a hospital even if they have a mild fever. The doctors, who are often endorsed by politicians, exploit the villagers' ignorance and make them spend large sums of money for each hospital visit.

Cases have also been reported of exploitation of fishermen by the boatowners. But complaints fall on deaf ears. No government wants to accept responsibility for the migrant fishermen. The Gujarat government says they do not come under its jurisdiction. The Andhra Pradesh government, for its part, retaliates by pointing out that the cases of alleged exploitation have occurred in another state.

The case of migration of fishermen from Srikakulam to Gujarat can be called a 'neobondage' system, akin to traditional bonded labour. The fishermen's labour and skills are exploited by the capitalists of another part of the country. 3

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Inter-state Migration of Fishers from Srikakulam District, Andhra Pradesh



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Fishermen setting out on a fishing trip
in Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh, India