

Turning the Tide: Women's Participation Influences the Course of the Fishworker's Movement

Nalini Nayak

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(Women have all along been an active component of the movement as they are also an active part of the artisanal fishery) But unlike other movements where trade union politics, guided as they are by patriarchal dictates, pursue the beaten track of reinforcing the existing paradigm of 'development for destruction', the Fishworkers' movement, largely as a result of women's continued participation has been able to question the very nature of fishing technologies, their potential to destroy nature's resources and their single minded pursuit of profit as opposed to wellbeing and sustained livelihood.

This paper will highlight how this movement has grown and how it exposed the myth of modern fisheries' 'development' by tracing how the violent onslaught of technology on the fisheries resources results in violence and marginalisation of women in fisheries. Conversely, how only a 'nurture' fishery, which respects life and the sustenance of life, will lead to sustainable development. Nurture fishery, on the one hand involves the use of more ecofriendly management regimes and on the other hand necessitates safeguarding women's continued involvement in the fishery.

The fishworker's movement indicates why and how the sustenance of life and livelihood has necessarily to go together.

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Accn no: 2395
MFN: 2461

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Introduction

November 21st 1998 was celebrated for the first time as World Fisheries Day by coastal communities all over the world. One century after Workers Day, that the industrial working class declared on May 1st in 1889, this is probably the only other occasion when workers internationally declared and celebrated a day for their sector which was also the founding day of their world association, The World Forum of Fishworkers and Fish Harvesters. Although it is too early to assess the impact of such a declaration and whether or not it will be sustained, the fact that workers decide to protect their only means of livelihood in this day and age of global market politics, is indeed commendable and encourages us to enquire into it.

Like in all other sectors of primary production, the artisanal fishworkers have for decades resisted the onslaught of modern development. Although many countries have long maritime traditions, not many of them have really recognised the role that coastal communities play in safeguarding the coastal ecosystems and contributing to the economy except for some like Norway and Japan. The marine resources were targeted resources even prior to colonial times and wars have been fought to defend the access rights to various fish stocks as over fishing had resulted in depletion of certain fish stocks as early as the 19 century. This led to the first demand for jurisdiction over marine resources, beyond the 12 mile territorial sea in 1947 by the USA, followed shortly after by Chile and Peru who asserted their exclusive rights over marine resources within 200 miles of their shores. This led to the creation of The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1984 which was ratified in 1994 upholding the provision of this 200 mile limit.

Unlike the earlier demands that focussed only on the fish resources, its management and access rights, today a whole series of new demands have been linked up as the concept of a sustainable fishery encompasses both the livelihood of the communities that live on the resource and the conservation of the resource per se. Interestingly this wider dimension focussed by fishworkers organisations today has evolved because of the active participation of women in the Fishworkers organisations. Fishing happens to be the only way of life of numerous coastal communities and this means of livelihood has to be safeguarded. 1 The fact that women have organised is really what has helped bring their issues on the agendas of the movements and consequently the fact that these demands have been focussed by the movements has meant that they begin to receive attention even from policy makers.

Fisheries in India

In India, marine fisheries contributes only 2% of the GNP but provides a livelihood to over 30 million people, half of whom are women, living along the 7000 K.M coastline of the country. As part of the post independence modernisation process, the fishing sector has also modernised and within these last four decades, Indian fisheries has seen the typical boom and bust cycle characteristic of a modern strategy that is unsustainable. 2 This has been accompanied by violent inter sectoral conflicts vying for resources on the one hand and conflict between the priorities of the state to earn foreign exchange and those of the coastal communities for food and livelihood on the other.

Around 80% of the Indian population fall into the informal or unorganised sector. This means that the state has no obligation to providing them with a means of livelihood. Most of these people either live off the open access common property resources like the forests, grazing lands, rivers and oceans, while some of them fall into the category of crafts people, artisans and still others as small traders. Over the years and increasingly today, access to these resources is being restricted or is in jeopardy. This is either because of excessive exploitation, which leads to depletion or because of the new economic policy of privatisation for so called "more efficient" use. The modern development strategy based on the use of non-renewable resources has hastened the production process not only leading to over exploitation of the resources but also causing irreparable damage, pollution and degradation.

The Fishworkers Rebel

The outbursts to this conflict for resources were spontaneous in the mid 70s. The artisanal fishworkers were outraged against the small-mechanised trawl boats introduced by the government through a Norwegian aided project in the early 60s. These boats were targeting shrimps, which were destined for the export market but which were caught within the coastal waters itself - the area of operation of the artisanal boats. This resulted in conflict at sea as artisanal nets were destroyed by trawlers and the trawlers were dumping large quantities of bycatch which would actually be the catch of the artisanal workers. On the land too, the trawlers were selling the marketable bycatch at much lower prices than the catches of the artisanal sector and women fishvendors who sold the catch landed by the artisanal sector were up in arms against this.

In Goa, on the midwest coast of India, where the revolts first consolidated into a yearlong strike in 1977, it was the artisanal beach seines against the mechanised trawlers. The artisanal fishermen demanded a marine regulation for demarcation of the fishing zones. They were joined at the national level by all other fishermen where conflicts at sea had occurred and they created the National Country Craft and Catamaran Fishermen's Association with one single demand for a Marine Regulation. This awakened the national government, which proceeded to legislate on the question.

Kerala takes the leadership

The next decade saw the fishworkers of Kerala take over the leadership of the struggle. Kerala in the southwest tip of India, where the mechanised trawlers were first introduced, had a different history. With a rich coastline and a very varied artisanal fishery, the fishermen and women have evolved ingenious ways of fishing and post harvest distribution. Being skilled navigators, and using a variety of fishing gear, in a variety of fishing craft, fishermen brace the sea targeting species on a seasonal basis using their traditional knowledge of the food chains and habitation patterns of the multi-species tropical water fishery. With a very decentralised fish landing system, women have played an active role in post harvest activity.

Women sell or process fish converting it into money to sustain the families. In this way, the entire consumer price goes back to the community. Traditionally they walked many miles to the market with loads of fish on their heads, selling it and buying other commodities for the family. Hence, when fish from the mechanised landing centers reached the market in truckloads, they were the first to be hit by the lowering of prices.

Even prior to the outbursts of the trawlers, the fishermen of Trivandrum District, in south Kerala, had created history by revolting against the exploitative practices of the merchants and moneylenders and creating their own cooperatives with the right of first sale. Women too in this district had begun to organise on issues related to their work and in 1978 staged an organised struggle demanding the right to go to the market on public transport which was at that time prohibited. Taken aback by such a demand, the government was forced to look into the matter and find a creative response. It finally created the Fisherman's Welfare Corporation, which, among other things, provided transport facilities

for women fish vendors. With this experience of struggle and even success, the fishermen and women of Kerala (initially in the south) joined the struggle against the trawlers with the demand to ban trawl fishing in the monsoon months of June, July and August, which are the spawning months for fish. 3

With Kerala taking the lead in the movement, the participation of the women and their demands became an integral part of the fishworkers struggle. This manifested itself in three areas as the years went by:

- 1) The demand to accept women as fishworkers
- 2) To pressurise for a fisheries policy that safeguarded women's spaces in the fishery
- 3) To focus the livelihood issues and challenge the existing development paradigm which is male dominated and patriarchal.

The National Country Craft and Catamaran Fishermen's Association was later registered as a trade union under the name of the National Fishermen's Forum and the Kerala leaders also assumed the leadership.

From 'Fishermen' to 'Fishworkers'

Seeing that the trawl ban demand was assuming the major concentration of the struggles in the early 80s, in which women played a very active role, the NFF decided to launch out on a larger mobilisation where the related livelihood issues of potable water, coastal pollution, conservation of the coastal vegetation would be raised. This mobilisation took the form of an Ecological Coastal March covering the entire Indian coastline and culminated in the southernmost tip of India, KanyaKumari, on May 1st, 1989. There was only one slogan, **Protect Water, Protect Life**. Different communities interpreted this slogan differently depending on the way that their lives were threatened by various phenomena. Large numbers of women, who would otherwise be only indirectly related to fisheries, joined the march demanding potable water. Life on the land and life in the water had to be safeguarded. 4

Becoming increasingly aware of the fact that fishing issues encompassed not only the women but also fishing communities at large, the National Fishermen's Forum was forced to change its name to the National Fishworkers' Forum. This did not mean that it was easy to get the consensus of all the male leaders for this as there were always those who said, 'does the name really make a difference?'

Subsequently, at the training sessions that the NFF organised for its cadre at the national level, the Kerala activists integrated the debate on patriarchy with a view to evolving a "feminist perspective of fisheries". This coincided with the growing consciousness of the need to conserve and regenerate the fish habitat, which was increasingly damaged by trawl fishing, development activity along the coast, reclamation of the marshlands and the growing aquaculture industry. Aquaculture was the new god promising to increase fish production to meet the falling production in the capture fishery. With subsidies from the State and with the introduction of modern technologies, this drew the investors in. It did not take long before the negative impact of intensive aquaculture hit the daily life of the coastal communities and women were up in arms again. Isolated as these areas are from the mainstream and from the centers of power, the mobilisation of large masses of women crying halt to this development, finally resulted in a Supreme Court Judgement to stop the growth of aquaculture and later to an enactment of a regulation to conserve the coastal zone.

Conscious of the destruction both of the environment and their own life in the capture and culture fishery, the feminist perspective therefore focussed on **nurture** as opposed to **capture** and **culture**. Nurture implied sustaining life both on the land as well as at sea. Nurture meant caring and often non-remunerated labour to sustain the matrix of life. Historically, this task has been borne by women but if fisheries have to be safeguarded, nurture has to become the concern of both men and women.

The debate on patriarchy related both to the development paradigm built on the logic of modern science and the manner in which it led to the feminisation of poverty. 5 In the artisanal fishing communities, the entire family would have their specific tasks in the fishery in a complementary division of labour between men and women. This kind of fishery which recognised the timely change

of season, the fish and food chain using multiple gear to target specific species, was sustainable over many decades. However, this system succumbed under duress - exploitative trade practices, increased fishing effort, and over-efficient gear - motivated by the false conception that 'production' could be increased indefinitely. Maximisation of profit, at the cost of fish as food for local consumption and the employment of women and the weaker fishermen was the motivating force. This trend was supported by the state policies which legitimised it and even subsidised it.

In these transformation processes, there were changes in community life and the division of labour between men and women. In areas where export agents took over the catches, women lost access to fish for sale and were turned into wage labour to sort and dry fish for the exporters. In cases where new technologies for higher productivity were introduced, the landings initially grew in size and could not be handled by women merchants who were unequipped or who did not have the cash to purchase fish in bulk. In cases where women wove nets, the new machine made nets, drove the women out of work. In other instances, women were relegated to the household to become housewives. In the 'developed' world, fishers began to be called 'professionals' and the open access to the fishery was curtailed. With the man being generally the fisher, women lost all social recognition and right to public participation. Unfortunately the male dominated unions accepted this definition of professionalism by the state and women were completely marginalised.

Contrary to the northern trend, the NFF emphasised the role of women as fishworkers. It took up the problem of the migrant women workers in the fish processing plants. Exploited as they are and working in inhuman conditions, from 1993 the NFF lobbied for workers rights for these women both at the state and national levels. When the dreaded fish disease, Epizootic Ulcerative Syndrome (EUS) hit the inland waters of Kerala on which thousands of families depended for a livelihood, the NFF waged a struggle for compensation. This struggle which was largely led by women, sought compensation for women headed households too, and they succeeded. In 1996, when women were excluded from the 'savings cum relief scheme', the NFF launched a nationwide struggle to demand their inclusion. This was a government scheme which encouraged the fishermen to save money in the fishing months and this was returned to them three fold in the three monsoon months of poor fishing. Initially, fisherwomen were accepted in this scheme too when one fine day they were suddenly refused saying the subsidy was only for fishermen. As a result of the struggle, all state governments accepted to include women in the scheme - a major victory that they were workers too. 6

As in the Indian experience and analysis of the artisanal sector and its sustainability of fishing for a livelihood, the concept of the 'fishworker' as opposed to the 'fisherman' was introduced at all levels of debate. In 1984 when the FAO organised its Conference on the Law of the Sea, and refused admission to the artisanal fishworkers, the Indians, together with other like minded coastal groups lobbied for the reservation of the coastal waters for the artisanal fishery and the rights of the 'fishworkers'. Subsequently when the fisheries of most of the world collapsed due to overfishing, the FAO began to make a case for the artisanal fishery, accepted the 'gender just' concept of the 'fishworker' and lobbied for a new Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, integrating many of the ideas and demands expounded by the Indian Fishworkers' Movement.

Women mobilise in the North

Interestingly again, when the northern fishery collapsed, it was the women, the Wives of the Fishermen's Associations that took to the streets demanding justice and sustainable livelihoods. Conscious of the fact that fishworkers in the southern world were also mobilised to defend their rights, these northern women took the initiative to inform themselves about the problems of the fishworkers in the south. This was a revelation to them, as they understood how the state and the vested interests manipulated fisheries development in favour of the big business interests both in the north as well as in the south. On seeing thousands of women involved in the fisheries of the south, they looked back at their own history and understood how they as women had been marginalised from the fishery in the north and how they were forced into so much of unpaid labour just to keep their husbands boats afloat.

They understood the role played by the state in marginalising them in the workforce by 'professionalising' fishing and making it only a male activity. They reacted to the manner in which the state discriminated against them when subsidies were given during the moratorium on fishing in Canada. In France, it was the women who took to the streets when fish was dumped in their country either from Senegal or from Eastern Europe, when the trade barriers were lifted. They created 'Committees du Survive' (survival committees) to demand that the prices of the fish that their men caught would not be affected by this dumping of other cheap fish. In short, what the wives of fishermen in the northern world began to realise was how they have been marginalised in the process of modern development, which in itself is not sustainable.

In November 1997, fishworkers from around the world met in India and decided to create an organisation of their own, The World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers. Many women's organisations, wives of fishermen and fishworkers themselves, were also present. They have decided to struggle for the rights of the artisanal fishers and the right to a livelihood from fishing.

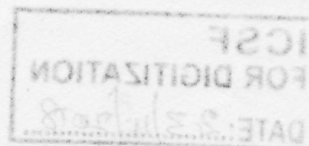
The impact of women's issues on the movement agenda

This mobilisation of women, be it in the north or in the south, has not only questioned the focus of the traditional 'fishermen's' organisations but challenges the priorities of the state in the context of globalisation. Where fishermen's organisations have only lobbied for a greater share of the cake, and better prices, the presence of the women forces the demands for local food security, better social and health infrastructure and calls attention to the need for nurture of life at sea and on the shore which has to be sustained. Where women are involved in the movements, the state is forced to listen to them and pay heed to their demands. The organisation of women has therefore helped the movement to widen the focus of its demands moving out of the ambit of professional trade unionism and impacting more as a social movement union. It has also focussed on the fishing community rather than on the fishing profession as the crux of the problem and the focal point of the mobilisation. In this way it brings to the forefront the question of livelihood and sustainability rather than profit.

The fact that women's demands find a place on the agenda of the fishworkers union does not necessarily mean that unions have really found a via media for gender just praxis. There are still a number of hurdles that arise in women's participation in decision making and these have to be constantly worked on. Able women are also sometimes dropped by the wayside when they give up the struggle within in desperation. It must also be recognised that not all men at decision-making levels are convinced about the demands to retain women's spaces in the fishery. The anti patriarchal thrust is carried through because of the constant pressure made by women within the organisation and the fact that some of the male leaders are convinced about it and see the logical connection between life and livelihood.

In fact the basis on which the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers proceeds is the wider basis for the conservation of a livelihood that integrates both a production system that is sustainable and a cultural way of life. This is what is undermined in the ongoing phase of globalisation. On the one hand, globalisation seeks to shift production to locations where it is more 'efficient'. Efficient today actually means cheaper, irrespective of social or ecological costs. Efficient also means maximisation of profit and this refers to the scale of operation, which again has no consideration for the renewability of the resource base. On the other hand, globalisation also means homogenisation - a global monoculture built on capitalist values thereby undermining the pluralistic and multi dimensional ways people have evolved to live in harmony with their environment and sustaining such a way of life with meaning systems that have a communitarian base. The W.F.F. tries to give expression to this, not in turning the clock backwards, but in trying to develop a logical, gender just frame for a sustainable fishery. Fishworkers at an international workshop, who affirmed the survival of the artisanal fishery, finally concluded saying 'Without Women in Fisheries, No Fish in the Sea'

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ICSF
FOR DIGITIZATION
DATE: 23/11/2018

MPN
2461

6 pages