

## Issues facing Kerala fishermen

A note to Candidates for the Lok Sabha Elections 2004

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### 1. The kerosene problem

Nearly 90% of the artisanal or "traditional" fishermen in Kerala work on motorised boats that use Out Board Motors imported from Japan. These OBMs run on kerosene and they became popular as a result of the special kerosene quota that Kerala Government provides to fishermen. This scheme was introduced in the mid 80s and fishermen have special kerosene permits. The scheme hinges entirely on the supply of kerosene for this purpose from the Govt. of India. Unfortunately, the total kerosene allocation for the state has not increased despite the increase in the number of motors and consequent fuel consumption. As a result, the "kerosene quota" available to each fisherman has been declining over the years. Today a fisherman does not get even a third of his requirements and is forced to pay double the amount to buy kerosene from the black market or even more to buy from the open market. This has made fuel costs very high and a large number of fishing units in Kerala are struggling to survive. The Government of India has failed to increase the kerosene quota for the fisheries sector despite many assurances from the PM and the Petroleum minister.

### 2. Duties on Out Board Motors and spares

OBMs are imported from Japan and there are no Indian equivalents. This is not because of the inability or technological limitations of Indian companies, but due to the small size of the Indian market. In this situation, when there is no Indian product to protect, it is unfair to charge customs duties on imports. Though the duty percentages have been going down over the years, it is still not enough compensation for the increases in rupee value over the years. It is essential that OBMs are made 100% duty free to help the artisanal fishermen. (75% of the OBM market in India is Kerala; Kerala fishermen will be the biggest beneficiary by such a move)

Duties on spare parts are even higher than that on the motors. This makes the cost of maintaining the OBM very high. Here also there is a strong case for removing or at least reducing the duty on spares.

It is important to understand that duty concessions should be given to all dealers and not restricted in any way. At times, concessions have been provided to the so-called "cooperative" sector rather than the trade in general. Such benefits have not actually benefited all fishermen as the Matsyafed has tried to use such benefits to increase its monopoly power rather than actually benefit fishermen. It is worth noting that at no period in its history has the Matsyfed had an active fisherman on its Board. A healthy competition between the private companies, cooperatives and non-governmental agencies will ensure a better deal to the fishermen.

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### **3. Licences for foreign fishing vessels**

In the name of promoting deep-sea fishing, the Government of India has been encouraging the entry of foreign vessels from time to time. In 1994, a joint venture scheme was formulated and there were protests from the fisheries sector all over India. Subsequently, the scheme was withdrawn but some of the vessels that already got the licences were allowed to fish. Since then, there have been various attempts to licence foreign vessels under one pretext or the other. Currently, there is fresh move to licence foreign vessels. This will be extremely dangerous to our fishing interests and will affect all fishermen negatively. It must be understood that the Indian boats are gradually expanding their range over the years and many are now fishing in deeper waters. We do not need foreign technology in this field. What is lacking is an encouragement for the highly skilled fishermen of Trivandrum who go quite deep to develop fishing in deeper waters with appropriate incentives. The Trivandrum fishermen are among the most skilled in the country and are perhaps second only to the Kanyakumari fishermen in their ability for deep-sea fishing.

### **4. The need for a fisheries Ministry at the Centre**

A central fisheries ministry is a long felt need of the fishermen of India. India with a million strong marine fishing community and an even larger inland fishing community has been suffering for lack of proper attention that only a separate fisheries ministry and a minister can solve. For long, fisheries has remained the poor cousin of Agriculture and has suffered from the lack of understanding of the Ministry of Agriculture. Further, many aspects of fisheries come under different ministries. The Ministries of Commerce and Food Processing Industries have also been dabbling in fisheries affairs that there is no coherent or comprehensive intervention in fisheries. A fisheries ministry that will coordinate all the efforts in fishing is therefore a must.

### **5. Absence of legislation governing fishing beyond 12 nautical miles**

Each state Government has jurisdiction over 12 nautical miles from the shore for the management of fishing activities and fish resources. The rest of the sea from 12 nautical miles to 200 nautical miles that is part of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) belonging to India comes under the jurisdiction of the Govt. of India. Unfortunately there is no central legislation covering this area except for the Maritime Zones of India Act of 1981 that regulates fishing by foreign vessels only. This means even fishing by joint venture vessels are not regulated. To protect our sea wealth, the Government of India needs to urgently bring out legislation covering the area from 12 nautical miles to 200 nautical miles. Various committees have prepared drafts but there has been no political will to bring the necessary legislation.

## **6. Resolving conflicts between fishermen livelihoods and environment protection**

In the last few years, a number of interventions in the name of environment protection have been made at the cost of fishermen livelihoods. While the fisheries departments at the centre and state are aware of the balance to be kept between livelihood protection and environment protection, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) has been running rough shod on the fishermen of late. They have suddenly discovered that the Wild Life Protection Act can be used for fish protection also and have started bringing out unexpected orders that ban fishing in certain areas or for certain species. The ban on shark fishing without any input from any fisheries scientific institutions but based on pressures from environmental lobby groups is an example of this. Even though the total ban on shark fishing was removed after fishermen protests, an unreasonable ban remains on certain species of sharks and fishes. The severe restrictions on fishing in the name of turtle conservation in Orissa and the denial of fishing opportunities to 10,000 fishermen in Jambudwip in West Bengal are all part of the same trend and one does not know where and when the MOEF will strike.

It is high time that a central ministry for fishing takes up all responsibility for protecting fish resources and MOEF stops dabbling in fisheries issues. In this context, it may be worth considering another suggestion. *This is to separate the Environment ministry from that of the Forest Ministry.* Environment ministry is historically associated with the Forests because our first environmental legislation was aimed at preserving wild life like the tigers. In today's world when environmental issues are broader and complex, an independent environment ministry that is multi disciplinary is called for.

## **7. Focus needed on 'management' of fisheries rather than "development"**

Today with India exploiting most of the fish resources to the maximum, the priority should be given to fisheries management rather than development of harvesting capacities. Here both the centre and states have failed miserably. We have too many boats and too much of equipment in fishing. This leads to unhealthy competition and reduced returns to fishing. In Kerala, at least 30% of the fishermen are unemployed or underemployed due to uneconomic operations. Proper management measures are needed to ensure that fishing operations are controlled and more revenue can actually go to the fishermen. Management measures will need to embrace both mechanised and traditional fishermen to ensure that the entire population in fishing can be sustained with the existing fish resource base. *The Government of India needs to come up with a comprehensive fisheries management policy that integrates the state level activities also.* However, the approach to enforcement should not be one of mere policing but of building management systems based on participation of the fisherfolk.

## **8. Greater emphasis on social development of the fisherfolk**

While the schemes for the development of the productive capacities of the fishermen have run their course, social development is still lagging. Special attention and centrally sponsored schemes to improve the education, health, housing and sanitation is called for.

The fishermen continue to live under inhuman conditions that are aggravated by the lack of space for their habitation. Considerable investment is needed in village infrastructure and development including the rehabilitation and relocation of fishermen wherever possible. Special schemes to improve the educational status of the fishing community are urgently called for.

#### **9. Conflicts between mega projects on the coast and fishermen livelihoods**

In many parts of the coast a variety of projects are coming up including cargo ports, tourism projects and industrial developments. Many of these projects threaten to displace the fishermen from their villages and their livelihoods. There is need to ensure that safeguards are built into coastal projects of all kinds to ensure that no fishing livelihoods are affected and fishermen are not displaced. In this context it is important to note that the proposed container port at Vizhinjam, which is supported by all parties, has raised the apprehension of the local fishermen in the Vizhinjam-Poovar belt. The actual location of the harbour remains contentious as locating it just south of Vizhinjam might affect tourism while locating it further south near Adimalathura will affect the fishermen.

#### **10. Need for alternative livelihoods**

The future of the fishing community depends on a good number of them continuing their traditional occupation in a dignified way while the others move out of fishing and reduce the pressure on fish resources. This needs the development of alternative employment opportunities. Both State Government and non-Governmental organisations need to be supported for schemes that will provide vocational training for youth from the fishing community to diversify their employment opportunities.

#### **11. Special attention on the fisherwomen**

Fisherwomen are involved in a variety of post harvest activities on shore in many places. In some places they however remain housewives. Overall, there is a need to look into the special problems faced by the women and to ensure that they can also have sources of income and lead a dignified life. The life of a fish vendor is hard and very little has been done to reduce the burden of fish-vending women. Centrally sponsored schemes to benefit the fisherwomen are required.

#### **12. Restoring Government contribution for Savings cum relief scheme**

The Centrally sponsored Savings cum relief scheme started with one third contribution from the fishermen and two thirds contribution from the state and central governments. Now the contribution of the state and central Governments has been reduced to half. This is one of the popular schemes and encourages the fishermen to save and reduces his vulnerability during the lean season. Hence the fishermen are demanding the restoration of the earlier two-thirds contribution by the Government.

### **13. Legislative and policy support for Kerala's Welfare Fund**

Kerala has developed over the years one of India's best social security system with a wide range of benefits to fishermen including pension for old fishermen. However, the entire system is in shambles as the revenue streams have dried up. A cess on the export of sea food from the state was one of the main sources of revenue visualised for the Fishermen's Welfare Fund. However, the export companies have managed to evade their responsibilities and have even got a Supreme Court order in their favour. The Government of India needs to examine this issue carefully and consider the possibility of bringing in legislation that will enable the State Governments to find suitable means of generating revenue for fishermen welfare measures. Alternatively, a Central cess on exports to help all states to run welfare activities for fishermen could be considered.

### **14. Concluding Remarks**

The above issues have been chosen with a view to what can be done by central intervention rather than issues that come within the exclusive purview of the state government. It is expected the M.P.s from Kerala will take up these issues with the Government of India and the Parliament.