

At Sea, Out of Sight

A first-of-its-kind survey in coastal Andhra Pradesh, India, revealed the peculiar vulnerabilities and demands of fishworkers who migrate regularly to Odisha, Karnataka and Gujarat

When the authorities enforced large-scale lockdowns to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the vulnerabilities of migrant workers were thrown into high relief. Other than the hardships and challenges that are common to migrant labourers across sectors, migrating fishworkers face certain specific adversities. The International

lockdown. The surveyors were two civil society activists from AP, well versed in the local language, Telugu, and who have significant experience of working with fishworkers. They enquired after not only the migrant fishworkers themselves but also their groups and communities. They were asked about the reasons for migration and their experiences during the COVID-19 crisis.

The fishworkers had been migrating to three locations to work as crew on mechanized boats: Veraval in Gujarat; Malpe in Karnataka; and Paradeep in Odisha. Almost all the respondents have worked in all three locations at some point or the other, adding to the representative nature of their feedback. All of them migrate for better income. Their migration is largely fuelled by relationships of kinship and family. The survey showed its pattern.

Srikakulam district: Five respondents

The respondents from Srikakulam were in two groups. One migrates to Malpe and the other to Veraval. Dhoni Lakshmana Rao, 40, is from D Matsyalesam village of Echherla Mandal. For 20 years now, he has been going to Malpe to work on mechanized fishing boats. Four others from this district had returned from Veraval, where they have been working as crew on mechanized boats for between nine and 16 years. They include: Cheekati China Danayya, 45, from Narasayyapeta; Komara Gurusurthy, 40, of Mohfus Bandar; and Ganagalla Korlayya, 30, who comes from China Ganagalla Peta. All three areas come under Srikakulam Rural. The final respondent from this district is Moogilkkayya, 35, who hails from D Matsyalesam of Echherla Mandal.

Previous surveys and studies have shown that fishworkers from this region have been migrating to as far as Gujarat—the other end of the Indian coastline—since the 1990s, especially to work on multi-day trawlers.

Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) conducted a detailed survey of 14 migrant fishworkers to understand their conditions, their vulnerabilities and what is required to provide them the security and dignity outlined in international labour laws.

The respondents of the survey were from three locations in coastal Andhra Pradesh (AP): across Srikakulam district, across Visakhapatnam district, and from the hamlet of BCV Palem (Boddu Chinna Venkataya Palem) in Korangi, a fishing village in East Godavari district. Previous surveys and studies have shown that fishworkers from this region have been migrating to as far as Gujarat—the other end of the Indian coastline—since the 1990s, especially to work on multi-day trawlers. A 2016 study had estimated the number of migrants from AP to Veraval in Gujarat at 25,000 every season.

The 14 fishworkers were surveyed in the month of June after they had returned to their villages following the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting

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Srikakulam migrant fishers are working in Gujarat, India. The diet comprises a breakfast of freshly cooked rice with fish fry; lunch usually features rice and fish curry; dinner consists of chapati and fish curry. Vegetables are served with each meal on Saturdays

Visakhapatnam district: Four respondents

The migrant fishers from this region go to work as crew in Gujarat, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra, Odisha and Tamil Nadu. The respondents to the survey, in particular, had returned from Veraval. They included: Koviri Mahesh (Nookaraju), 46; Perla Apparao (Danayya), 48; Perla Dasu (Danayya), 35; and Garikina Mandulodu (Peddayya), 32. They are all from Gangavaram village in Pedagantyada Mandal of the district.

BCV Palem (East Godavari district): Five respondents

Karri Annavaram (Suryanarayana), 35, has been going to Malpe for the last 15 years as crew on a mechanized boat. Previously, he had migrated to Paradeep and Veraval. While he was still living and working in BCV Palem, his father and he fished together on a

wooden shoe-*dhoni*. The catches were meagre and hardly sufficient to meet the family needs. After he got married, his father-in-law Annavaram helped him go to Paradeep, later to Chennai and finally to Malpe. Once he found his feet in the new place, he arranged for around 15 people to find work in Malpe's fisheries, including his father, 10 younger family members, and four young men from the village. His condition improved since he started migrating. Besides, his father being on the same boat gives both of them security and support. Had COVID-19 not forced them back, they had two more months of good fishing left before the monsoon break. Nowadays, he is part of the crew on a Kakinada-based trawler.

Kopanati Peda Acchiraju (also called Bhairava Swamy), 46, and Karri China Suryanarayana (Peda Narayana), 56, have been going to

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Srikakulam migrant fisherman. In a 29-day trip, they get to take a bath hardly four to eight times. When they bathe, it is mostly with seawater that is washed off with about four small containers of freshwater towards the end.

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Paradeep for the last 10-12 years. Both have previous experience of working on similar boats in Gujarat, Mangalore, Malpe and Chennai. Prior to venturing into mechanized fishing, they were fishing with various kinds of estuarine gears in the creeks and backwaters near BCV Palem. After running up debts, there was no option but to migrate on a long-term basis to Paradeep. Once Acchiraju found his feet, his uncle and his brother-in-law followed him into the seasonal migration. It was the other way round for Suryanarayana; his son and the son's father-in-law had been working in Paradeep and he followed them there.

Pinapothu Mahalakshmi (aka Pentayya Kamaraju), 50, also fished 15 years ago in the creeks near the village on his wooden boat, using estuarine nets—both fixed and drag nets. He found additional income in agricultural labour and net making/repair. Over time, as the family grew, it became difficult to meet the household needs. Moreover, small fishing activities in the village declined, with the wooden boats getting replaced by fibre-reinforced plastic (FRP) boats

and the fishing grounds shifting to the sea and the Kakinada Bay; his estuarine gears were of little use there. Faced with problems on several fronts, migration to Paradeep to work on mechanized trawlers offered a way out. The demand for fishing labour meant that the income was good, regular and sufficient for the family's needs. Mahalakshmi spends most of the year on a trawler in Paradeep, visiting home for festivals. Living on the boat for extended periods of time has its disadvantages but Mahalakshmi has made a virtue of a vice. He said it keeps his expenses down and helps him to save enough to pay off his old debts.

Like him, Sangani Gangadhara Rao (aka Chinna Apparao), 57, has also been working as a crew member on a mechanized boat in Paradeep for the past 10 years. Previously, he worked on a similar boat from Kakinada. That did not work out because his expenses were higher than the returns, partly because he found excuses to avoid going to fish. As he watched his daughters grow up, he felt the drive to work harder and earn better. Migration to Paradeep paved the way for that.

Nature of work, life at sea

The migrants who go to Veraval described their work cycle. The fishing operations last eight months (mostly eight trips) in a year. They leave their villages for Veraval by the last week of July. Work begins in the first week of August. Each fishing trip lasts about 25 days; the return to the harbour takes an additional four days. In Malpe, the migrants are engaged only on the larger boats; the smaller boats are crewed by the local fishers. In Veraval and Paradeep, the boats are more uniform in size and the smaller boats of Veraval employ mostly local crew. In Malpe boats employ 10-15 crew members; in Veraval the count is nine; and in Paradip it is eight to nine. They spend one day in the harbour, unloading the catch and loading supplies for the next trip, starting back for fishing that same night. Fishing is carried out some 270 nautical miles from shore. The sale of fish and shrimp from each trip generates about INR 10-15 lakh (USD 14285-USD 21428) in revenue. The operations close in March and by early April they are back home.

Onboard, the fishers hardly get any sleep because sleeping arrangements are poor, leaving the fishers exposed to the elements; rainy months are much worse. In Malpe, it rains June to August; in Paradeep the season is July to August; and in Veraval, it rains from August to November. In a 29-day trip, they get to take a bath hardly four to eight times. When they bathe, it is mostly with seawater that is washed off with about four small containers of freshwater towards the end. The harbour and its surroundings are unhygienic and the facilities are very poor. The occasional stay on land while the boat is getting repaired—or for some other contingency—is not a welcome distraction.

Despite all the hardships, the fishers still choose to migrate because of the assurance of regular monthly salaries. While fishing in their own neighbourhood can fetch between INR 5,000 (USD 71) and INR 10,000 (USD 142) a month, the expenses are much higher when a fisher works on his own and lives with the family—there are opportunities for extravagance. Being stuck onboard for 29 days at a

stretch off the Gujarat shore precludes any opportunities for expenditure, automatically enforcing a discipline of austerity. There is no opportunity to spend the income; the boat owners meet the daily needs. The diet comprises a breakfast of freshly cooked rice with fish fry; lunch usually features rice and fish curry; dinner consists of chapati and fish curry. Vegetables are served with each meal on Saturdays.

Terms of work and payment

When the fishermen spoke about the location of their migration, their responses often overlapped, regardless of whether they were talking about Veraval, Malpe or Paradeep. But when they talked about their own villages, very little was common. It is usual for each group of fishermen to work out their arrangements with the boat owners. This does not happen directly, however, but through the mediation of the *tindels* or skippers. It means the migrant routes tend to be stable and unchanging year after year.

The demand for fishing labour meant that the income was good, regular and sufficient for the family's needs.

There are no written contracts of employment. The mode of payment varies from place to place. In Veraval, the fishing crew are paid on a monthly basis; 40 per cent of the annual salary is paid out in advance and the rest in equal instalments, depending on the mutual agreement. The Srikakulam fishermen said the monthly salary varied from INR 10,000 (USD 142) to INR 12,000 (USD 171); the fishermen from Visakhapatnam said the salary ranged between INR 8,000 (USD 114) and INR 10,000 (USD 142). They do not have any share from the catch returns. The boat owners have very little role in the recruitment, the payment of salaries, or addressing the crews' concerns. All such responsibilities rest with the skippers, who are also migrants hailing from Andhra Pradesh. They have separate agreements with the owners

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Srikakulam migrant fishers. While drinking water was supplied, a single well within the harbour premises was the only source of water for all non-drinking purposes

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to cover all their expenses and earn monthly salaries of INR 25,000 to INR 30,000 (USD 357-USD 428); even INR 35,000 (USD 500), in some cases.

A different mode of payment is used in Malpe and Paradeep where the duration of the fishing trip is seven to 10 days: A share of the catch. The average value of catch fluctuates wildly based on the quantity, variety, quality and season of the fishing. Broadly, the value of catch in each trip is INR 8-12 lakh (USD 11428-USD 17142) in Malpe and INR 3-6 lakh (USD 4285-USD 8570) in Paradip. In Veraval it is at least INR 8 lakh (USD 11428), going up to INR 15-20 lakh (USD 28570-USD 21428) The two groups migrating to Malpe reported slightly different arrangements. The crew's share in the income is 21 per cent, divided among the eight members. Dhoni Lakshmana

Rao of Srikakulam said one share goes to each crew member, while two shares are taken by the captain. The BCV Palem fishers said that after deducting all operational expenses from the gross income, 22 per cent of the income is shared equally among the crew members.

Fishers from BCV Palem going to Paradeep said 17-18 per cent of the income from the catch is shared among the crew members, after deducting operational costs from the gross income. Here, too, the crew has no direct contact with the boat owners; from recruitment to all subsequent dealings, the skipper handles it all. He is also a migrant, usually from the same area as the crew—that's how recruitment happens—but has longer experience and a working relationship with the boat owners.

Migrant fishworker sector: A profile

The respondents were asked to enumerate the migrant fishworkers from their state; their gender; their age groups; and the availability and quality of on-shore accommodation. The responses indicated it is mostly men who migrate. No accommodation was provided in Malpe and Veraval and none of the migrants had a place to stay on shore; they spend 29 days in a month at sea. They said it was impractical and unsafe to take their families with them.

A few Telugu women do migrate and are involved in shore-based activities like supply of ice and water; but they were from areas other than where the respondents had come from. In Malpe, it was estimated that 700 fishers were from AP, of whom 280 were from Srikakulam and 40 from BCV Palem. Fishers from Ichhapuram, Nellore and Kakinada also migrated to Malpe. They ranged in age from 16 years to 55 years.

Respondents who migrate to Veraval said that there were between 12,000 and 15,000 fishers who migrate to other states exclusively for fishing.

Most migrant fishers from BCV Palem go to Paradeep (except for a group that goes to Malpe) and the numbers, according to the respondents, ranged from 160 to 1,000. The men lived on the boat for 25 days at a stretch. They fell in the 25-60 age group, with a majority of them between 40 years and 55 years of age. A few fishers here had taken their families along with them because they speak Odiya; this helped them make a living on their own while the men were away fishing.

COVID-19 crisis: Immediate relief and shelter

The fishers were asked about incidences of COVID-19 among the fishermen. All of them said they had not heard of any fishers testing positive for COVID-19, though they were worried about getting infected. In Malpe the fishermen were in a 45-day quarantine in the Malpe harbour. They were given two masks and medical check-ups were carried out on them twice each day. In Veraval, doctors tested fishers but all the tests came out negative. Both in Paradeep and in BCV Palem, the migrants received good medical attention. They

were quarantined for eight days after their return to AP and allowed to go only after all precautionary conditions had been met. One group from BCV Palem said that they visited the local Community Health Centre upon return to BCV Palem from Paradeep, and were sent to Kakinada for quarantine. Once the period was over, they were tested thoroughly for any symptoms and allowed to go home. Doctors and other medical professionals looked after the fishers well.

Boat owners called in their boats, asking them to stop fishing after 18 March, 2020. The fishers in all three locations returned to their harbour base between 19 and 22 March. They had to stay within the harbour area till they left for home. The Malpe fishers left for their hometowns on 17 May, while the Veraval fishers left on 30 April.

The migrant fishers were asked whether, during the lockdown, they were entitled to food rations,

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good hygienic accommodation, medical facilities, counselling and communication with their families. Were they provided timely and accurate information on COVID-19 in a language they understood?

Fishermen who worked out of Malpe said that, initially, food was reasonable but the quality declined with time. Unable to move out of the harbour area, the option was to go hungry. BCV Palem respondents said that the rice they received initially was undercooked; when they complained, they got overcooked rice. In general, the accommodation in the harbour was unhygienic. While drinking water was supplied, a single well within the harbour premises was the only source of water for all non-drinking purposes.

Good health services were provided to all but no counselling. COVID-19 information was available in Kannada in Malpe, but not in Telugu. While cell phones helped in communication with their families, it only made them feel more lonely and homesick. The

BCV Palem respondents also said that supervisors did not respond adequately or appropriately.

Fishers in Veraval said that they were fed during lockdown and quarantine but the accommodation in the harbour was poor. Health services were good but there was no counselling. While information on COVID-19 was available, it needed to be translated by some of them who knew Gujarati. Communication with families was through cell phones.

In Paradeep, responses varied. Kopanati Peda Acchiraju and Karri China Suryanarayana said that while they remained stuck at Paradeep harbour, each fisherman received five kg of rice, lentils and other groceries to cook their food; both the owners and Odisha government helped with this. The owners paid INR 1,000 (USD 14) as advance and that was the sum total of the help they offered. They spent 45 days in the jetty, during which time there were twice-a-day health checkups. The health workers also provided them with face masks. The owner sent drinking water, but there was no water provision for bathing and other purposes other than one well. Pinapothu Mahalakshmi said that in Odisha, several officers from the police, fisheries and other departments visited the jetty regularly and explained what the novel Coronavirus was about. It became difficult to stay in the harbour indefinitely, with no idea of the future.

Getting back home, compensation

The boat owner in Paradeep booked train tickets for the fishworkers to get back home, but when the trains were cancelled again, he handed each of them INR 1,000 (USD 14) to make their own way back; after the first few days, though, he stopped taking calls from the fishers. (The migrant workers are not sure if that is a handout or an advance.) They walked about 85 km to Cuttack where they had heard that a Telugu-owned transport company was helping migrants back home. During quarantine at Iccapuram on the border, they received good food and tea. There were hygienic kitchens and good medical facilities; the fishers were able to charge their phones, talk to their families and keep up-to-date

with everything. However, the INR 2,000 (USD 28) promised by the AP government was not forthcoming. One group received essential food items from volunteers on their return to the village; the state government provided ration four times and gave a one-time cash allowance of INR 1,000 (USD 14). No compensation was provided for the loss of fishing days and opportunities.

Those returning from Malpe also denied getting this cash. They said boat owners who had been supportive earlier were not so forthcoming this time around. Fishers returning from Veraval to Srikakulam said that about 30 per cent of them received INR 2,000 (USD 28) compensation. According to fishers returning to Visakhapatnam from Veraval, until now, no government officer has shown interest to know about their situation or to offer any assistance. When the fishers approach them, they reply that they have no information or orders to support the fishers.

The migrant fishworkers were asked if they were repatriated to their villages under government arrangements; if not, who had borne the costs. The responses were varied. Migrant fishermen from Srikakulam in Malpe said that each of them had raised INR 4,400 (USD 62) from boat owners to pay for the bus journey back home. It took them two days to go from Malpe to Srikakulam, where they were quarantined for two weeks, followed by another six days of quarantine in the villages before meeting their families. They said that their travel expenses were INR 2,000 (USD 28). They had not received the relief promised to help them tide over the quarantine period. BCV Palem migrants in Malpe said that they raised INR 4,000 (USD 57) each to find their way back to their villages.

From Veraval to Srikakulam or Visakhapatnam cost the fishers INR 3,000 (USD 42) each that they raised from boat owners. The group from Visakhapatnam said that the state governments of AP and Gujarat had discussed their repatriation several times. The fishers had tried their best to pressure them into prompt action. There was a proposal to send the workers back by sea route on a ship, but this was abandoned in favour of bus transport.

Relief and assistance

The migrants were asked if they had been receiving help from other quarters. The Srikakulam group from Malpe said that they had not received any support from anyone. The group from Veraval said the same. While they were in Veraval, the AP government had arranged to distribute to each of the migrant fishers 10 kg of rice, blankets, groceries for cooking, soaps, mosquito nets and masks. The Veraval group from Visakhapatnam said aside from a dry ration kit provided by the NGO District Fishermens Youth Welfare Association (DFYWA)—itself quite inadequate—they had not received any support from any other source, government, NGOs or otherwise.

The BCV Palem group from Malpe said that the Boat Union association provided food from day four onwards because their food stocks did not last beyond the third day. Back in BCV Palem, the state government supplied rations in four cycles along with INR 1,000 (USD 14) per family as immediate assistance.

Some local philanthropists (Boddu Satyanarayana and Voleti Jaggarao) as well as the local shrimp processing units like Apex provided the fishers with rice and other essential supplies. The Member of the Legislative Assembly of Yanam, Malladi Krishna Rao, supplied vegetables to every household in the village. More recently, ICSF helped a small number of fishers with a package of essential items.

What do the migrant fishworkers demand?

Their list of suggestions and demands is long, be it related to recruitment, working and living conditions, or social protection. The responses were quite similar on this count, pointing to a clear path of common action.

Those who go to Malpe and Veraval demanded written contractual agreements directly with the boat owners, signed in the presence of officials of the two state governments and the local boat owners' associations in Malpe; these bodies should vouch for the agreement. They demanded identity cards and the reduction in the duration of fishing voyage from 29 days to 15 days, letting the crew rest for at

least five days in a month; this led to the demand that the harbour premises need cleanliness and maintenance. The captains, they urged, should be instructed to avoid fishing near the Pakistan border. They need insurance cover because those who die or suffer accidents at sea are not protected at all just now, covered neither by the boat owners nor the state governments, even though the boats are insured. They demanded bio-toilets on the boat for safety and convenience; fishers sometimes fall overboard while relieving themselves, in the absence of toilets.

They need the same support and services that the AP government extends to other fishers in the state. The fishers said that if mini-jetties were built in AP and they were provided boats and nets at 90 per cent subsidy, they will not need to migrate for work.

They said that the monthly salary must be enhanced from INR 15,000 (USD 214) to INR 20,000 (USD 285).

The average value of catch fluctuates wildly based on the quantity, variety, quality and season of the fishing.

Some portion of the income from fishing revenue is set apart from the sharing process (Veraval does not have a sharing system); the respondents said this amount should also be shared with the crew. They said sharing patterns differ between the boats that have skippers from Tamil Nadu and those from Karnataka. While the owners pay impartially, how the skippers pay the crew depends on their whims. This needs to stop, they said; recruitment is best handled by the owners directly, making them responsible for the needs and well-being of the crew.

All information, warnings and other notices should be provided in Telugu, they said; the boat owners should pay for the travel expenses incurred on account of the lockdown, compensating the fishers for the loss of two good months of fishing.

Location, location, location

Paradeep migrants said their conditions were better than those who stayed and worked in their villages. They received regular salaries and are looked after well. Only an emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic left them in need of support that was difficult to find. They called for a systematic approach to support migrant fishers in emergencies. One part of it will have to be improved facilities to rest in the harbour after the fishing trips. During the COVID-19 lockdown they had to spend several days in the harbour, putting up with poor amenities.

Several of their demands were the same as those of the migrants of Malpe and Veraval: accountability from the boat owners; toilets on the boats; insurance; emergency cover; and identity cards, among other things. A

Respondents who migrate to Veraval said that there were between 12,000 and 15,000 fishers who migrate to other states exclusively for fishing.

major difference was how the Paradeep migrants wanted to deal with the boat owner; they were happy with the captain as the *via media*. They thought direct contact with the owner put the worker at a disadvantage on account of difference in language. They also thought the owners were on their home turf in Paradeep, while the workers were not, reducing their ability to drive a bargain.

The reaction to the question of insurance was different, too. Some fishers of BCV Palem said in case of a fatal accident, the deceased fisher's family receives a compensation of INR 50,000 (USD 714), contributed from a common fund set up by the skippers in Paradeep. In earlier times, the Paradeep fishers said, the owners arranged for medical treatment of a migrant who had fallen ill. If the treatment was prolonged, they arranged for the worker to return home.


Pinapothu Mahalakshmi said that each fisherman has an insurance policy, but no savings schemes nor other

government support programmes. Every fisherman has his own cell phone. The state government relays weather warnings and organizes a meeting with all people in the harbour every 10 days to give advice on safety practices.

Skilled but unrecognized

When asked if they considered themselves skilled, all the respondents responded in the affirmative, citing their considerable experience of fishing. They knew swimming and signalling and were adept at using different kinds of fishing gear – trawl, long-line and hand lines, for example.

Malpe migrants said that they knew their fishing grounds lie between 13°N and 17°N; that if they travelled closer to 18°N, they would reach Mumbai. They know how to operate a global positioning system (GPS) and put it to regular use on their boats.

In addition, Paradeep's migrant fishers said that since there was no difference in fishing between Kakinada and Paradeep, they found it easy to adapt to the fishing systems there. Gangadhara Rao is partially blind on account of having only one eye but is a skilled fisherman. He is of advanced age and hence in charge of cooking and is a good cook—an example of the diverse skills that go into migrant fisher's work. 

For more

ICSF's Survey of Migrant Fishers and Fishworkers during COVID-19, India

<https://www.icsf.net/images/what%20is%20new%20page/India%20Migrant%20fishworkers%20survey.pdf>

India: Left in the lurch

<https://www.icsf.net/yemaya/article/EN/60-2343.html?lang=en>

Inter-state migration of fishers from Srikakulam district, Andhra Pradesh

https://www.academia.edu/10610681/Inter_state_migration_of_fishers_from_Srikakulam_district_Andhra_Pradesh

A Study of Migrant Fishers from Andhra Pradesh in the Gujarat Marine Fishing Industry

https://www.icsf.net/images/occasionalpapers/pdf/english/issue_160/160_Migrant_Fisher_Study_Manas_Roshan.pdf