

## Victory for fishworkers

**Indian fisher people have rallied round to reverse the government's policy on deep-sea joint ventures**

India has a sea coast of 7,000 km. Indian waters are tropical and therefore contain multiple species of fish, but each species occurs only in small quantities. According to one assessment, 3.7 million tonnes of fish are available annually. Of this, 2.7 million tonnes are caught by traditional crafts and around 40,000 small, mechanized crafts.

There are about two million full-time active fishermen, while the number of fisher people totals almost eight million. There are about three million part-time fishermen, whose total population is close to 12 million.

Most of them live below the poverty line in a subsistence economy. They live on the sea coast, with poor housing conditions. Illiteracy among them is about 70 per cent.

The first attempts to develop India's fisheries introduced bottom trawling in the 1960s which resulted in greater pauperization of the traditional sector. This created tensions between the small mechanized and traditional sectors.

The second stage of fisheries development introduced chartering of foreign vessels in order to exploit the deep seas. This too created havoc.

Bull trawling, which was part of the charter operations, depleted resources heavily. All these vessels were fishing in the territorial waters.

This led to open clashes between the traditional and the small, mechanized sector. Not even a single Indian entrepreneur was able to own a vessel in five years, the period stipulated by the charter policy. Thus the Government of India scrapped the policy. However, some of these vessels are still in operation.

The third stage of development was the introduction of 180 foreign trawlers owned by Indian entrepreneurs. This project was a total failure and only 20 remain in operation. Several of the companies ran up huge debts to the Shipping Credit and Investment Corporation of India.

This led to the appointment of an FAO committee to study Indian deep-sea fishing. M. Gudicelli, who conducted the study, said that only 164,000 tonnes of fish are commercially viable in the deep seas. The other varieties are of low value, and catching them would not be profitable. In 1991, the Government of India introduced the joint venture scheme. This led to more open clashes between the traditional and mechanized sectors.

Since 1976, the fisher people of India have been agitating against these destructive policies. However, their campaign took a new turn when they went on a fisheries 'bundh' (work stoppage) on 4 February 1994. Then they organized an all-India strike on 23 and 24 November 1994.

As a result, the Government of India froze the issue of licences to foreign fishing vessels and appointed a committee to review the joint venture scheme. Since there was no representation for fisher people in the committee, they went on a nationwide agitation, which included an indefinite hunger strike in Porbunder, Gujarat, the birth place of Gandhi.

### **Fishers included**

Subsequently, representatives of the fisher people and Members of Parliament representing coastal areas were included in the review committee. On 8 February 1996, this 41-member High Power Committee submitted its report to the Food Processing and Industries Minister.



It contained 21 recommendations, which included a call for the total cancellation of licences. Six months have been given to the Government of India to implement all the recommendations.

If the government fails to do so, it was decided that Thomas Kocherry, co-chairperson of the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF), would go on an indefinite hunger strike at Sassoon Dock, Mumbai (Bombay) from 7 August 1996 onwards.

The NFF requests everyone to support and collaborate with India's fisher people to keep all foreign vessels and industrial fleets out of Indian waters. ॐ

This appeal has been issued by Thomas Kochery, R. K. Patil and Harekrishna Debnath of the National Fishworkers' Forum (41-1771, Veekshanam Road, Kochi 682018, India. Tel: 91-484-370617. Fax: 91-484-370914 or F10/12 Malaviya Nagar, New Delhi 110017, India. Tel: 91-11- 6426783, Fax: 91-11—6426914)