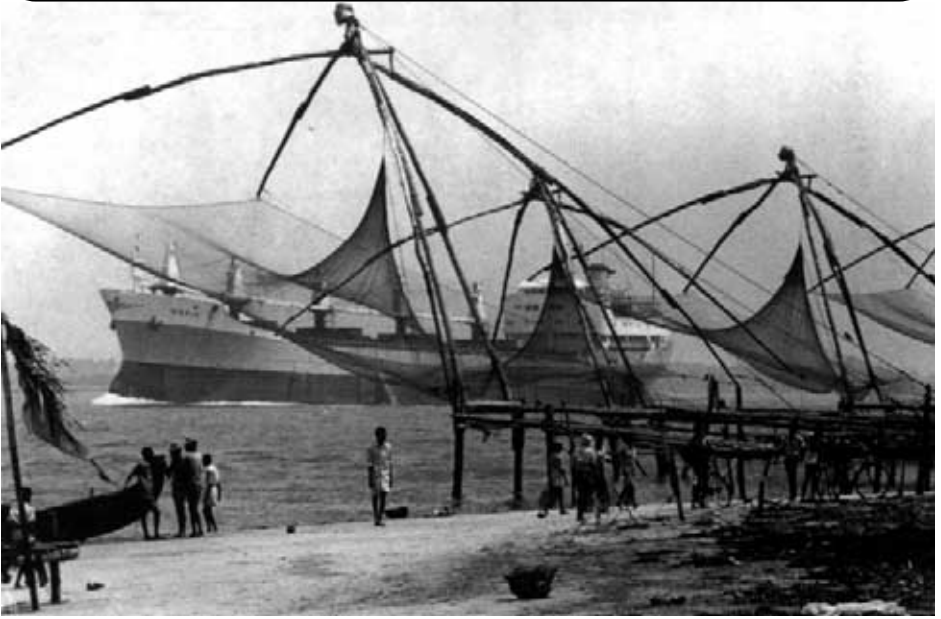


Taking the Pisces

Struggles of the Fishworkers of India



India, with her 6000 km coastline and innumerable rivers, lagoons, lakes, reservoirs and ponds, has one of the world's largest populations of fisher people: over 12 million, with two thirds depending on marine fishing and the remaining third depending on fishing in a variety of inland water bodies. It was my privilege, in 1972, to be appointed parish priest in a small coastal village called Poothura, where all the parishioners were traditional fisher people. My association with the fishing communities started there. I was there with two other priests for 7 years, during which time we got involved in co-op based fishing.

The fishing communities are generally very poor, with low social status and very little clout. Despite having had greater importance in ancient times, fisher folks were relegated to the status of lower castes during the medieval period. Still, the community always enjoyed a certain autonomy and dignity. Fisher people, though highly skilled in their profession, had no access to formal education and they hardly entered into other areas of social life. The education of fisher people and the consequent job-seeking in other departments of life is only a recent occurrence.

From Poothura I began to get in touch with fishing communities all along the Indian coasts. One of the things that has amazed me is the fact that over the centuries the traditional fishworkers have amassed a vast fund of knowledge about resources in their immediate vicinity, and have developed a variety of technologies tailored to the specific ecological niches along the coast. This accounts for the lack of a sin-

gle maritime fishing tradition in India and hence for the immense diversity of artisanal fishing techniques in the country, the hallmark of which has been their ecological sophistication, rather than techno-economic efficiency.

The women play an active role in the fishing community, as they do in all subsistence economies. Therefore, wherever I have set up fishworkers' organisations, I have always insisted on the participation of women. In the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) itself, women play an important role, both at the grassroots level and at the organisational level. There is no evidence to show that women participated at any time in actual marine fishing operations, although women are involved in fish harvesting in the inland waters and exhibit exemplary skills when engaged in shrimp picking. They also gather shellfish from rocky sea banks, and have always been involved in fish processing, distribution and marketing. But recently we came across a woman,

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Meenakshi Manna, in West Bengal, who goes to the sea for fishing. Because of her uniqueness, she is honoured in the NFF as a special member of the executive body.

The process of Modernisation

From the time of Independence in 1947, India has attempted to modernise its economy rapidly, inspired by the technological powers of the West. Ignoring the skills and potentialities of the large number of traditional fisherpeople, the government promoted Western technologies like bottom trawling and purse seining for the large scale harvesting of fish. (Trawling, for instance, destroys sea bed habitats, and the trawl owners often take only the valuable fish, throwing the rest back into the sea as dead 'by-catch'.) These new mechanised boats often operated close to the shore, in competition with the traditional fishworkers for both space and resources. In many parts of India this led to a drastic fall in catches for the traditional fishworkers and in some parts even to depletion of certain fish resources. The plight of fish workers as a result of four decades of development is probably worse now than it was before. Only the problem is not that much a result of government intervention in fishery itself, but more the result of government projects meant for other sectors. Deforestation due to industrialisation and other encroachments, the construction of huge dams (like Bargi, Sardar Sarover and so on), pollution of water, siltation and land reclamation, all these have drastically reduced fish availability and harmed the livelihood of inland fisherpeople. Some recent trends in the fisheries development of the country include the great push being given to aquaculture and deep sea fishing through joint ventures with foreign companies.

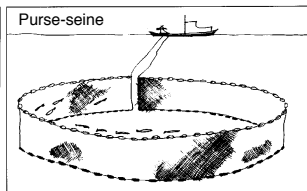
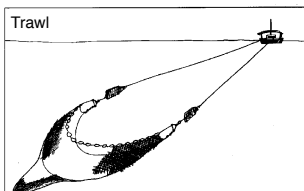
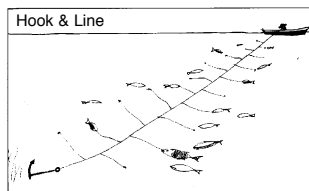
Organisation of Fishworkers

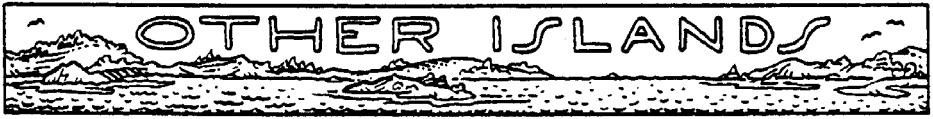
This threat to our very livelihood has forced the fisherpeople to forge new linkages and organise ourselves to face the threats. The growth of All Goa Fishworkers Union, the Kerala Independent Fishworkers Federation, the Tamil Nadu Fishworkers Union etc is the result of such trends.

Through a long chain of hunger strikes, sit-in rallies, picketing National Highways, railway lines, airports, government offices, blocking harbours etc., the fisherpeople were able to obtain marine fishing regulations in most of the coastal states in India—although not without personal cost. For example, in 1985 the fisherpeople were picketing the railway line at Kadakavoor, in support of the fast that was taking place in front of the government secretariat to demand a trawl ban during the monsoon season. Instead of arresting us, the police lathi [long Indian riot batons] charged and removed us by force, beating us up and then putting us into jail—and there have been many instances like this. However, through these ongoing struggles, the fisherpeople forced the government to bring about zonal regulations for the mechanised boats, a night trawling ban, a purse seine ban etc., but these are not strictly implemented so the struggle continues.

Our women have played an important role in all the fishworker struggles. In addition to marching shoulder to shoulder with our men on the issues of trawling, fish depletion, displacement from local markets etc, they have also conducted a number of separate struggles to safeguard their own livelihood. The struggles of the fisherwomen in Kanyakumari and West Bengal against their displacement from net-making as a result of imported Japanese net-making machines deserves special mention. Also, agitations by fisherwomen forced the Kerala government to run special buses to fish vendors, while the Tamil Nadu government allowed the use of public transport for carrying fish. Now the fisherwomen have separate carriages in passenger trains from Thiruvananthapuram to Kollam. Thus the struggles of the fisherpeople have been widespread and extensive, involving both men and women.

Fisheries being a subject handled by the state government, most fishworkers' organisations are at local or at state level, but there is a need to forge a national alliance since many problems have common origins. The National Fishworkers Forum, which had its beginning in 1979, today represents the interests of many of these local movements. It is a federation of





State level registered trade unions in India. Fishworkers, both men and women, working in mechanised crafts and non-mechanised crafts, fish vendors, those who are working in processing plants and those who are working in marine and inland sectors are entitled to become members of the Forum.

The Kanyakumari March 1989

In 1989 this Forum organised “The Kanyakumari March” through the entire coastline of India on the theme “Protect Waters, Protect Life”, with a view to creating greater awareness of the environmental problems as well as forging greater unity among the fishworkers.

The march started simultaneously from West Bengal on the east coast and from Gujarat in the west and proceeded towards Kanyakumari, the southernmost part of the Indian peninsula. During the march, people were made aware of the evil effects of deforestation, the destruction of mangroves, coastal industrial pollution, and destructive fishing gears [equipment] that were being introduced because of the process of thoughtless modernisation. Street plays, movies, debates, seminars, exhibitions and public meetings were organised during the march, highlighting local problems and drawing from local talents and leadership. This march was really an enriching experience for me. I was the chairperson of the NFF then and I had to do a lot of shuttling between the east and the west coasts.

On May 1, 1989, the marchers from both sides converged in Kanyakumari. The large gathering of 25,000 fisherfolk from all the coastal states was walking towards the venue of the public meeting, shouting against destructive gears and pollution (including the threat of the proposed nuclear power plant at Koodankulam in collaboration with Russia). The police intersected with the rally, creating a commotion and the fisherpeople ran for their life in different directions, then the police opened fire—injuring 20 people. The police have since filed a case against us [like you do when you’ve just shot someone!] which is still pending in court—but the atomic plant so far has not been built.

National Alliance of Peoples’ Movements

While uniting all local movements of the fisherpeople is essential, it is equally essential to see our problems in the much larger context of struggles by other dispossessed groups. Therefore today there is a new alliance, the National Alliance of Peoples’

Movements (NAPM), which is comprised of 157 movements of the dispossessed in the country. This new alliance includes fisherpeople, those displaced by huge dams, those toiling for a mere pittance in the informal sector, (such as small farmers, agricultural labourers, construction workers, Dalits and Tribals) and, in general, all those who are bearing the brunt of the ill effects of Globalisation/Liberalisation. This larger link-up of all the dispossessed is essential to counteract the process by which the powerful groups in society direct development for their own benefit, and destroy both the environment and the livelihood of large sections of the population. Presently I am the National Co-ordinator of the NAPM.

On 27th and 28th April 1998, over 5000 people were gathered in New Delhi, representing 156 Peoples’ Movements from all over the country. These were peoples who were displaced because of the so-called developmental activities of multinational corporations and trade, due to Globalisation and the World Trade Organisation. At that gathering they gave the following People’s Verdict: “The National Alliance of Peoples’ Movements of India, together with people across the world facing displacement, destruction, disparity and discrimination, reject the World Trade Organisation. We oppose all global treaties of exploitation such as GATT and the Multinational Agreement on Investment. We pledge to continue our struggle till we achieve control over our own resources: Water, Land and Forest, by ousting global and national corporate powers.”

Joint-Ventures in Deep Sea Fishing—1991

Globalisation/Liberalisation opened up Indian seas to the factory fishing ships under the guise of Joint Venture and Lease. In this scheme, a foreign company has a 49% share and an Indian company a 51% share. The foreign company then brings huge factory fishing ships and 99.99 % of the investment—thus while in theory it is a joint venture, in practice it is a foreign venture. 25,000 such massive vessels worldwide have depleted all the oceans except the Indian Ocean. Already operating in the Indian waters are about 35,000 small mechanised boats and about 200,000 artisanal [traditional, non mechanised] crafts with a wide range of diversified gears suited to the tropical waters, catching varied species in small quantities. The annual Maximum Sustainable Yield is about 3.7 million tonnes of fish, 2.7 million tonnes of which is already caught. So the planners say that there is still 1 million tonnes to be caught—hence the

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new fishing policy of 1991. Unfortunately the government forgot the fact that the catch per vessel has gone down in all sectors, even before 1991, as a result of existing over-capacity, destructive gears and pollution. Further, the study of M. Gudicelli, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation consultant, categorically said that there was only 164,000 tonnes of fish available in the deep sea that is commercially available, and this can be caught by the existing fleets if they are diversified.

The new policy allowed foreign fishing vessels into Indian waters beyond 12 nautical miles (18 kms) of the coast. Apart from allowing the duty-free import of vessels, the government also decided to permit the sale of diesel at international prices—meaning that the joint ventures are actually paying much less for fuel than the ordinary Indian fisherpeople. Also the vessels are permitted to transfer the catch on the high seas, thereby avoiding the legal requirement to report their catch at the harbour—leaving the door wide open to over fishing and violation of zonal regulations .

What went wrong in the planning?

The planners failed to take into account the traditional skills of the fisher people when they introduced mechanisation in fisheries. They wanted short-term gains rather than sustained growth. The planners followed a kind of development which has been export oriented, which led to the development of a few at the expense of the majority and a lack of fish for the internal market. Since the sea is a common property, it became anybody's property. The people with the sole motive of profit invested capital and used destructive and over-fishing gears. Production went up along with the increase of production costs. The sea became a place of bitter competition between the powerful on the one side, and the people who are fishing for their livelihood on the other.

The struggle against foreign fishing vessels

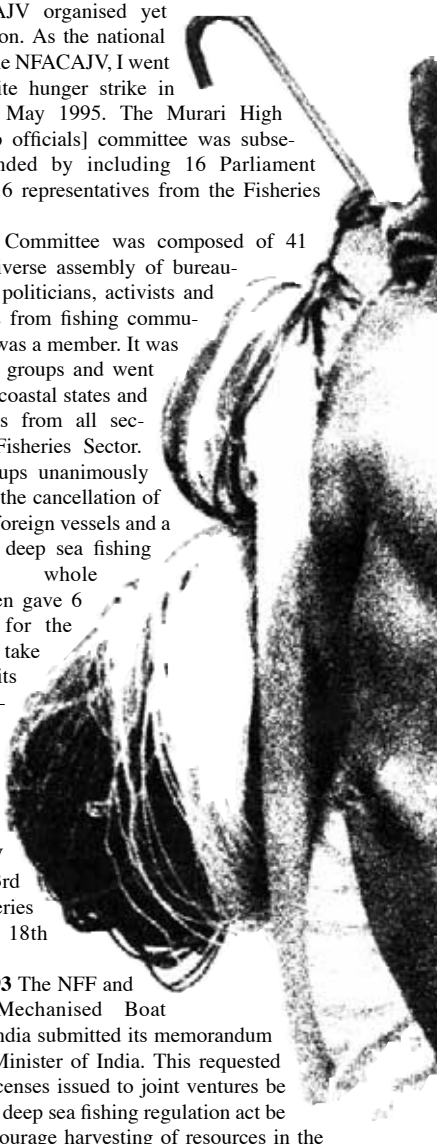
The National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) brought together all sections of fisheries in India under the banner of the National Fisheries Action Committee Against Joint Ventures (NFACAJV) and began to protest. It organised the first All India Fisheries Strike on 4th February 1994, prompting the government to suspend the issuing of licences and to appoint the Sudarsan Committee to study the problem. (Although Sudarsan was one of the people responsible for introducing the joint venture scheme

in the first place!) The committee submitted a report upholding the 1991 Fisheries policy. So the NFACAJV organised another All India Fisheries Strike on 23-24 November 1994. This led to the appointment of another committee called the Murari Committee—but this was composed of government officials only.

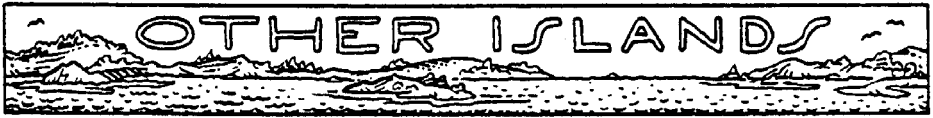
The NFACAJV organised yet another agitation. As the national Convenor of the NFACAJV, I went on an indefinite hunger strike in Porbandar in May 1995. The Murari High Power [ie. top officials] committee was subsequently expanded by including 16 Parliament Members and 6 representatives from the Fisheries sector.

The Murari Committee was composed of 41 members, a diverse assembly of bureaucrats, experts, politicians, activists and representatives from fishing communities—I also was a member. It was divided into 5 groups and went around all the coastal states and took evidences from all sections of the Fisheries Sector. All the 5 groups unanimously recommended the cancellation of all licenses to foreign vessels and a review of the deep sea fishing policy—the whole Committee then gave 6 months time for the government to take a decision on its 21 recommendations. However, since the process was delayed, the NFACAJV organised the 3rd All India Fisheries Strike on 18th January 1996.

October 1993 The NFF and the Small Mechanised Boat Operators of India submitted its memorandum to the Prime Minister of India. This requested that all new licenses issued to joint ventures be revoked, and a deep sea fishing regulation act be enacted to encourage harvesting of resources in the



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deep seas on a sustainable basis. **February 1994** The NFF, 31 other organisations and the trade unions of nine maritime states called for a one-day All India Fisheries Bandh [a form of protest when there will be total strike], demanding the scrapping of the joint venture policy. The small mechanised sector and the artisanal sector did not go to sea on 4 February. The main fisheries harbours and fish markets were also affected.

July 1994 Non-mechanised, mechanised and other fishing interests drowned their differences, coming together as the National Fisheries Action Committee Against Joint Ventures (NFACAJV), to confront a larger, common foe. In July, the committee called for a Black Day (during which every one wears a black badge as a sign), and fishworkers in several coastal areas hoisted black flags on their boats, and staged marches and demonstrations.

November 1994 On November 23 and 24, 1994, the fishworkers struck work, and fishing in the maritime states came to a virtual standstill. It is estimated that about one million persons stood off from work at sea, and in the processing plants and markets, as a mark of protest.

May 1995 Fishworkers' leader and Convenor of NFACAJV, Thomas Kocherry, launched an eight-day fast in front of the birth-place of Mahatma Gandhi in the coastal state of Gujarat, while across India there were several supportive actions.

November 1995 All the major central trade unions in the country organised a national convention of fishworkers against anti-National Foreign Fishing in Cochin (Kerala), and called for an All India Fisheries strike on January 18,

1996. The NFACAJV called for the blocking of the harbours on the same day, and the response was tremendous, with many of the major ports including Kandla, Mumbai and Kochi obstructed with catamarans and boats.

January 1996 The central trade unions and NFACAJV jointly organised a successful All India Fisheries strike on January 18.

August 1996 Indefinite hunger strike by Thomas Kocherry in Mumbai. The Central Minister for the food processing industry came to Mumbai for talks with the Fisheries Leaders to find a solution.

September 1996 The Central Cabinet accepts the recommendations of the Murari High Power Committee.

February 1997 The Ministry for the Food Processing Industry rescinded the Joint venture deep sea fishing policy, and takes action to cancel the licenses—except for those of the 31 vessels already in operation.

March 1997 The Government appoints the NFACAJV committee to monitor the implementation of the Murari Committee recommendations.

Today, the implementation of the 21 Murari recommendations is still a big question. The new government of 1997 has not shown any interest in them, and the NFACAJV Committee that was working closely with the government has been dismantled. There are still about 40 foreign vessels operating in the Indian waters. We are told that their licenses are life long—but no such facility exists for Indian fishermen: they have to renew their licenses every year. The struggle continues.

Coastal Industrial Aquaculture

Simultaneously, we were struggling against coastal industrial aquaculture. When Shrimati Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister, she wrote to all the chief ministers asking them to protect the coastal zone ranging from 0-500 m area of the coast from sea. On the 19th February 1991 the government issued the 'Coastal Regulation Zone Notification' (CRZ) which recognised the traditional and customary right of traditional fisher people over the coast for the first time. There were 13 prohibitions in this zone, against industrial pollution, dredging, constructions etc. Though initially the government did not see the implications, later it wanted different amendments because of the pressure from the hotel and industrial lobbies. But the fisher people resisted this move and the Supreme Court insisted upon strict implementation of the CRZ Notification without diluting it. But the government was still encouraging activities which went right against its own law. The Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA) and the Ministry of Commerce took the lead in promoting the shrimp industries, thereby violating all

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the protections to the coastline enshrined in the CRZ. The economic policy of the government, which was desperately looking for foreign exchange through any means apart from opening our seas to the huge foreign fishing vessels, also invited multinational corporations and other capitalists to establish industrial aquaculture all along the coastline, with the sole purpose of exporting the produce. Now aquaculture has become a big business not only in India but in Asia and many other developing countries.

Development for whom?

Aquaculture has been hailed as holding “much promise for meeting increasing food demands” [Now where have I heard that one before?!] and as providing “important economic and nutritional benefits to many regions of the developing world”. The questions that need to be asked are:

- For whose nutrition is the food produced?
- Who benefits from the sale of the produce?
- How does it satisfy the hunger of the starving millions of the producing nations?
- How does it affect agriculture and marine fisheries?
- What are the ecological hazards encountered?
- Are human rights, particularly the rights of the poor and the powerless (small farmers and fisher people) upheld or violated?

As we probe into these questions we find that industrial aquaculture leads to ecological degradations and human rights violations, while adding further to the wealth of the rich and wetting the appetite of those who are already well-fed. Aquaculture is the cause of salination of land and ground water, and of pollution from the high fertiliser feeds, with practically no possibility of restoration. Agricultural lands become

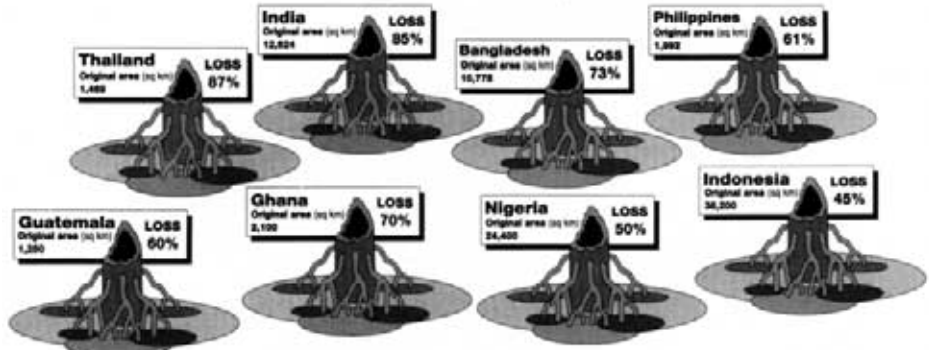
infertile due to the high dosage of chemicals involved, and the shrimp industries move to new areas as the previous sites are exhausted—a kind of rape and run approach. It depletes marine fisheries by its destruction of mangroves and marine forests—each ton of industrial shrimp also requires ten times its weight in marine fish, which is used as feed for the shrimp. It displaces traditional fisher people, small farmers and agricultural labourers. It creates unemployment. It is a social and cultural invasion into the life of the coastal people, whose prior rights in their own place are completely ignored.

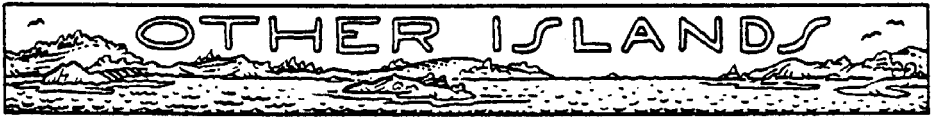
The people who were affected by the shrimp culture came together and protested. The movement was strengthened by many organisations coming together. A national action committee was formed which elected me as its co-ordinator. We had to wage the battle on many fronts—at the grassroots level, creating awareness among the people and getting them into the movement; at the level of scientific research, getting scientific data and the interpretation of it by experts and diffusing the findings; and at the legal level, filing a case against the shrimp industries. This was a prolonged battle.

Finally the Supreme Court in its landmark judgement of December 1996 ordered the demolition of all the aquaculture farms because it was a violation of the CRZ Notification of 1991. Workers in the farms to be demolished were to be paid 6 years’ wages as compensation, and outside the CRZ zone, no shrimp culture was to be allowed on mangroves, wetlands, forest lands, agricultural lands, salt pans, village common lands etc.

However, the government is trying to circumvent the Court order by bringing in an Aquaculture Authority Bill, and by diluting the demands of the

PERCENTAGE LOSS OF MANGROVE FORESTS (SELECTED COUNTRIES)*





CRZ Notification of 1991. One of the present concerns of the NFF and other related organisations is to stop the bill and to prevent any change in the CRZ Notification. In 1998 NFF conducted a nation wide coastal survey of all the violations of the CRZ, and is preparing to stage a National Fisheries Strike on May 10, 1999 in connection with this.

World Forum of Fish-harvesters and Fishworkers.

The problems of fisher people all over the world are similar. The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation's reports of 1995 and 1996 have found unequivocally that the fisheries of the world are undergoing the most serious crisis ever recorded. At least seventy-five percent are in or verging on a state of collapse due to the ravages of over-fishing, destructive fishing gears—most particularly by factory trawlers—and the effects of coastal industrial aquaculture, industrial and domestic pollution, and the myriad consequences of global warming. Fishing communities all over the world are under the threat of extinction.

So the fisher peoples' organisations from 35 countries came together in New Delhi from 17-21 November 1997 and formed the World Forum of Fish-harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF). The objectives of the Forum are to protect the fish resources and the fishing communities by promoting sustainable development of fisheries through eco-friendly gears and methods, and to work for a global ban against all destructive fishing (particularly factory trawlers), coastal industrial aquaculture and coastal industrial pollution. I was chosen as the co-ordinator. The WFF has declared November 21 as World Fisheries Day. On this day, every year, all over the world actions, campaigns, studies etc will be organised with the view to protecting the fish resources, and fishing communities, through sustainable small fisheries and by evoking public awareness.

"On World Fisheries Day, we focus on the issues of marine ecology, and of all inland water bodies, responsible fishing practices and the welfare of fishing communities. We celebrate our achievements and express our concerns for the present and our vision and aspirations for the future through various ways and means—workshops, rallies, public meetings, symbolic actions, cultural shows, street plays, exhibitions, art forms like music, dance, poetry etc. using the print and the electronic media, creating awareness and reminding ourselves of our responsibilities." WFF Press Release, November 10, 1998.

A new awareness

The first World Fisheries Day (November 21, 1998) has made a significant mark in many parts of the world. It also happily coincided with the International Year of the Ocean. Fisher people, fish consumers and all those who are concerned about preserving and promoting marine ecology, in many parts of the world, joined together in making this day a memorable one. President Clinton declared November 21, 1998 as World Fisheries Day in the USA. [Hm... ..] A new awareness among the public has been created.

Our Vision and Goal

Yet, this is no time to rest on our laurels. All we have done is to remind ourselves and the public of the tasks ahead of us. Our vision and goal is to establish the principle and the practice that the natural resources belong to the local people who have cared for them and who have sustained them, while harvesting their fruits for themselves and for others. On the other hand, the process of Globalisation / Liberalisation (which is nothing other than almost total freedom given to people with money to make more money), has allowed anyone with money to move into any place and make more money with scant regard for labour rights, environment and human rights. Thus, the struggle is between two unequal sides; one side having all the power, all the knowledge and all the money, while the other side is devoid of all these.

True Development and Progress

True development, progress or success story should include the following factors: It should lead to fulfilling the basic needs of the poorest, as the priority, and not the greed of the rich. The prior rights of the local (fisher) people and their natural technological knowledge should be respected and built upon. The developmental activity should involve the people who are already traditionally engaged in and are dependent upon it for their livelihood, and should help them to improve on their methods. It should be sustainable, respecting the environment and eco-balance. There should be no socio-cultural or economic invasion by outsiders.

Mobilisation of the people who are affected by the evil of Globalisation / Liberalisation in various so called "development" projects, which are actually downright destruction, is the need of the hour. At the same time, we appeal to the governments for protection. We have to keep the states under check by con-

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stant pressure so that the existing laws that recognise the rights of the poor are not tampered with; that no law or policy which gives undue advantage to the rich at the cost of the poor may be passed; and to get the governments to implement their own laws and the verdicts of the judiciary that uphold the rights of the poor and so on. [Best of luck!] We need the art of collaboration and confrontation with the governments, states and elected persons. All this should lead to legislation, at the national and the international levels, which is conducive to the socio-political change that we aim at.

For example, as regards overcapacity of fishing fleets, it is no longer an issue to be proved. We need to be vigilant, rather, to see how various governments address this issue and to see that the overcapacity is not imported or exported. When fish stocks get depleted, the governments often declare a “moratorium on fishing” which punishes the small fish-harvesters—who are already victimised by the licenses given to the big fleets. This should not happen again. The smallest and the least who is fishing for his or her livelihood should never be disturbed. The top most capacity, which has created the crisis, has to give way to the lesser ones and the process should

continue until the level of sustainability is reached. This is not a matter of pity for the small fish-harvesters, but it is a question of restoring the social justice which has been blatantly outraged.

Change in ownership pattern

In order to make this vision a reality, a radical change in the ownership pattern is necessary. The people whose livelihood depends on the land or forest or sea should own the same. The fishing communities, which totally depend on fishing for their livelihood, should own the water bodies like the sea, lakes, rivers, lagoons and reservoirs. They should also own their fishing implements. They should manage the water bodies, fish resources, and the sale and distribution of fish. The fishing communities, particularly the fisher women who distribute fish and small fishing implements, assume great importance. The people have to be mobilised to take control over these resources.

For example, the fishing communities should take control over the water bodies. They should take control of the fishing implements and manage the sale and distribution of fish. The traditional and improved traditional aquaculture and pond aquaculture should be encouraged and that, too, should be owned and controlled by the fishing communities. The fish consumers should have direct access to the fishing communities.

Mobilisation of peoples has four distinct elements:

Togetherness:

All those who have a stake in fishing for livelihood (actual fishers and not those who only invest in fishing gears for profit) should come together. All those who are affected by factory trawlers, coastal industrial aquaculture and coastal industries should be brought together. A close relationship should be created between fish consumers and the bona fide fish-harvesters.

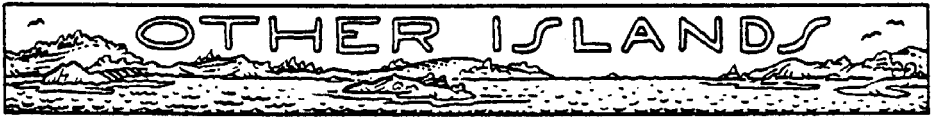
Awareness:

Systematic education of the people about the evils of Globalisation / Liberalisation, which has paved the way for overcapacity, destructive fishing gears and depletion of fish, and has made them aliens in their own sphere.

Campaign:

This campaign has to begin in the local areas, leading to the national level and international level. However, we begin this at the local level addressing local issues. The problems and analyses of the local place and its implication at the national and international level should be drawn out.





Training:

The fishing communities—which have been exploited by ruthless money lenders, middlemen and merchants and which have, as a result, lost control over their own harvesting and the fruit of the harvest—should be trained to manage the fish resources, sale and distribution.

Clear vision and Constructive action

The process of struggle and the process of building up should take place hand in hand. There is no blueprint or chronological order. These stages can be over-lapping and may differ from place to place according to each situation. Let us keep our vision and goal clear before us, and forge ahead for the fulfilment of it.

Contacts

World Forum of Fish-harvesters and Fishworkers

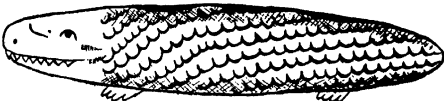
Cherureshmi Centre, Valiathura,
Thiruvananthapuram 695 008, India.
Tel. & Fax: (91) 471—50 1376;
E-mail: nff@md2.vsnl.net.in

National Alliance of Peoples Movements

57, D.V Pradhan Road, Near Tilak Nagar,
Hindu Colony, Dadar (East)
Mumbai—400 014

Bloodbath at Chilika Lake

The internationally important Chilika Lake wetland reserve has been the scene of recent bloody confrontations between local villagers and police. Despite being singled out for special mention in the anti-aquaculture Supreme Court judgement of December 1996, which banned shrimp farms from within a thousand metres of the lake, corruption has allowed the farms to continue in operation. In July 1999 villagers issued a 24 hour ultimatum before dealing with the problem themselves, destroying a magnificent total of eleven illegal farms. This triggered vicious reprisals from the police, who have killed four people and injured thirteen others in their raids on the villages. The fishworkers have responded to this outrage by blocking road and rail links in solidarity, and the city of Bhubaneswar (the regional capital) was brought to a grinding halt by demonstrators making a human wall—an action which resulted in a massive two thousand arrests.



Kamunist Kranti

In contrast to the huge, often spectacular struggles described here, one Indian revolutionary group has begun to strongly criticise massive, unitary and often union led battles and has evolved a radical alternative. Kamunist Kranti (communist revolution in Hindi) have in their 20 year experience of workers resistance moved from traditional leftist attempts to encourage and lead strikes etc. towards a strategy of small steps. They have basically come to believe that head on conflicts are largely useless- they almost never work in their own terms and are always an obstacle to developing workers' self activity. Large numbers of people seem active, but it is representatives and leaders who think, decide and issue orders to the 'masses'. Demos and strikes are called and controlled by leaders, mass meetings are arenas for fights between union bosses/other leaders, ex-bosses and potential bosses, all of which discourages self activity. Spectacular confrontations also provide larger, easier targets for the state/management to control and manage by dealing with the union hierarchy, or if necessary to crush with brute force.

Against this Kamunist Kranti try to develop and encourage the more mundane forms of resistance they see around them everyday, even amongst the 'apathetic' workers who avoid spectacular struggle. Peoples ties of friendship and family extend from the community into the workplace and effectively form 'affinity groups'. People look out for each other and open numberless channels of communication with other 'groups'- this often allows collective resistance to emerge. In one case toilet breaks were reduced- workers pissed on the floor until they were restored. In another example, workers ordered to use dangerous machinery with no training obediently took their places, but 'accidentally' broke the machinery proving that they obviously needed better training. 'The activities of affinity groups span from mutual help to routine resistance against productivity and discipline, to steps of change that question and challenge hierarchy, competition, money relations and wage slavery'. Recognising how participants belittle these smaller actions, and despite resisting representation, lack strong enough links with other groups, Kamunist Kranti try to encourage and develop this resistance in a sustained and expansive way.

Kamunist Kranti can be contacted at the radical library they set up: Majdoor Library, Autopin Jhuggi, N.I.T Faderabad 121001, India. Email: Revelrytion@hotmail.com

(This was mostly nicked from articles in the excellent Collective Action Notes paper- POB 22962 Balto., MD 21203, USA)