

Indian Fisheries - A Retrospect

Part I. Some Sociological Aspects

Dr. T. K. Govindan

Scientist S-3, Central Institute of Fisheries Technology, Cochin-682 029

Fish and fishermen community have been intimately interwoven with the Indian population from pre-historic times. Indian mythology is replete with legends and anecdotes involving them. Probably the earliest reference to fish in the country is inherent in the first incarnation of Lord Mahavishnu viz; the Matsyavathara. The Lord incarnated at different intervals of time with definite purposes, which happened to coincide with different stages of evolution of life in this universe. According to Darwin's theory of evolution, organic life in this planet originated in aquatic environs, which lends support to the above legend. The role of Guha in Ramayana in ferrying Srirama and his entourage across the river enroute to his life in exile in the forests, the anecdote of Santhanu Maharaja falling in love with Matsyagandhi who happened to ferry him across a river, Kalidasa's Sakunthala where the souvenir ring presented to his mistress by King Dushyantha accidentally drops into a river, gets swallowed by a fish and is recovered subsequently, the story

of Pradyumna, the child son of Srikrishna being thrown into the sea by the Asura called Sambara, the child getting swallowed by a big fish and its subsequent recovery by some fishermen who happened to catch the fish are but some other examples in perspective. Fish and fisherfolk have thus been part and parcel of Indian life from time immemorial.

Curiously enough, the caste system that got itself established in India earmarked particular professions/jobs to particular castes. The reference to 'Chaturvarnya' in the Bhagvadgita shows that division of labour based on castes existed even in those remote days. In ancient Hindu custom, fishermen belonged to the lowest caste referred to as 'Sudras'. Caste-wise division of labour is particularly conspicuous in Kerala where there are Brahmins as priests following spiritual avocations both in the temples and society, Kshatriyas as rulers and chieftains with numerous kingdoms until about a century ago, Vaisyas or business community, Nayars who were partly

dependent on Brahmins and partly became land-owners etc, Asaris (Carpenters), Moosaris (Potters), Kollas or Karuvas (Blacksmiths), Thattans (Goldsmiths), Velas / Parayas / Kanakkans (Coconut tree climbers), Ezhavas (Toddy tappers), Valas / Mukkuvas (Fishermen in backwaters and sea respectively), Kshurakas (Barbers) etc etc. In a similar manner, caste-wise distribution of labour was prevalent in the other states of India also. However, after attainment of independence and the several social reforms advocated and effected by the national administration, the social picture in the country is fast undergoing revolutionary changes.

Later on with the advent of other religions into the country, viz; Islam and Christianity, people who got converted into them continued to follow their own avocations prior to their conversions. During the recent couple of centuries, the marine fishing population in India has been found to consist of Hindus, Muslims and Christians and whatever be their religion, they are among the lowest rung of the society. Backwater fishing in Kerala still continues to be mostly the monopoly of the Vala community. On the west coast Muslim fishermen are known by different names like Daldis, Pudu Muslims, Moppilas etc and Hindus by names like Bhois, Kolis, Mukkuvas, Mogers etc in different parts of the coast. Roman Catholics predominate in southern Kerala and Palk Bay and Hindus on the Coromandal Coast. Fishing villages have hereditary headmen, priests etc who hold sway on all family and caste disputes, a picturesque depiction of which appears in the famous Malayalam novel

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'Chemmeen' written by Thakazi Sivasankara Pillai and translated into so many Indian and foreign languages.

In India, fishing used to be a hereditary avocation carried down through generations with the entire families getting involved in it in some way or other, like the women folk and children assisting in disposing off of the catches, mending nets etc. The traditional sea fishermen of India were very ignorant, conservative and superstitious and fishing had been regarded as one of the meanest of all professions. They were very poor, did not possess their own boats and nets and used to work somewhat like bonded labourers under middlemen who owned such facilities. In some cases the middlemen and financiers used to advance necessary funds to the actual fishermen for purchase of boats and nets and in return they had to surrender their catches to them at non-remunerative rates arbitrarily fixed by them, with the result that the fishermen themselves hardly received sufficient money to lead a normal decent livelihood.

According to the 1931 census, the fishing population of (pre-partition) India was 16.9 lakhs and those engaged in ancillary occupations like transportation, distribution and curing of fish numbered about 7.3 lakhs, both together constituting 0.5% of the total population of the country. Present day India has 2500 marine fishing villages with a population of 21.2 lakhs. Statistics of persons engaged in inland fishing is not readily available.

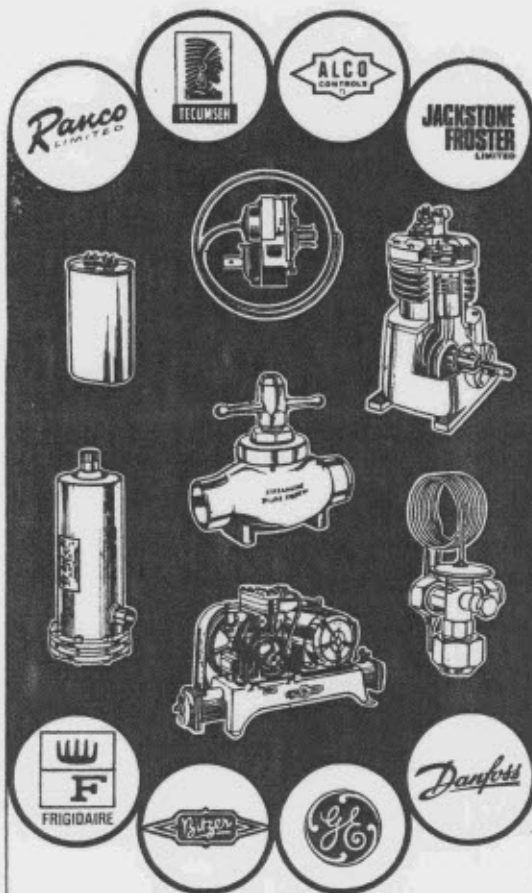
In pre-independence India, the occupation of fishing and even dealing in fish were looked down as very

mean to be carried on exclusively by the lower classes of people. Also, fish used to be consumed by only low caste people, Brahmins and other high castes remaining pure vegetarians. Some region-wise differences also existed, eg; in Gujarat, almost the entire population used to be vegetarians and a lot of coercion was needed to induce the people of the state to take to fishing as an avocation. On the contrary, in Bengal fish is considered to be not in any way different from a vegetarian item and is un-avoidable even for the highest caste viz; Brahmins who have to use it even for religious ceremonies. But it is gratifying to observe the revolutionary changes in the out-look on fisheries that have occurred in the country after the second world war, attainment of independence and her emergence as an exporter of sea-foods processed by the sophisticated methods of freezing and canning. Along with the export of such commodities in the fifties, mechanised fishing also caught up to meet the increasing demand for prawns for freezing, canning and export to the most developed countries of the world. The social stigma associated with the profession disappeared and even upper caste people occupying high status in the society started plunging into the industry, attracted by the high margins of profit that it brought in. Since mechanised fishing and processing by the sophisticated methods called for huge capital investments, educated and

moneyed people ventured into the field and now one can find Rotarians, Lions, Y's men and such other elite of the society and even multi-national companies all vying with each other in the once detested fishing and fish processing avocations.

It was the ignorance, illiteracy and impecuniosity of the fishermen community and concerned entrepreneurs in pre-independence India that were the stumbling blocks standing in the way of modernisation and improvements in the Indian fishery industry. It is heartening to note that conditions have taken a drastic turn for the better, elevating India today to the seventh position among the fish producing and to the top-most position among prawn producing nations of the world. It is a matter of pride for each and every Indian that the country has earned foreign exchange worth Rs. 361 crores in 1982-83 by way of exporting processed seafoods, starting from very humble beginnings of the post-war years and that the country is well poised to soar greater and greater heights in this field with all the developmental programmes launched by both the Union and State Governments as well as private and enterprising entrepreneurs. ○

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INDIA'S MARINE PRODUCTS EXPORTED

Port of Shipment	PUD TAILON	PUD	PD	FR	HLW/T/F	HLB	CFF
A. JAPAN:							
Cochin	277.980	2.100	25.379	2.270	163.080	41.400	9.960
Madras	0.400	—	—	1.407	195.540	56.620	20.140
Calcutta	44.540	—	—	—	400.940	—	—
Paradeep	79.760	—	—	—	319.000	—	—
Mangalore	151.620	—	—	—	64.980	—	—
Vizag	63.060	—	—	—	173.320	182.940	7.380
B. U. S. A. :							
Cochin	129.060	—	1116.047	348.786	22.320	6.320	—
Madras	2.180	—	—	—	6.000	4.100	—
C. EUROPE:							
Cochin	81.020	—	61.471	18.160	31.840	4.000	—
Madras	—	—	—	—	0.780	7.920	18.380
D. WEST ASIA (Arabian Gulf):							
Cochin	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
GRAND TOTAL:							
JAPAN:	617.360	2.100	25.379	3.677	1316.860	280.960	37.480
U. S. A.:	131.240	—	1116.047	348.786	28.320	10.420	—
EUROPE:	81.020	—	61.471	18.160	32.620	11.920	18.380
West Asia (Arabian Gulf)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Figures of Bombay Port Trust not available.

DURING THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER 1983

(Quantity in Metric tonnes)

FL	Clam meat	Scampy	Squid tubes	CP/UCP	LTR/LTS	Mackerel/ cat fish/ fish fillets
—	23.120	—	—	—	—	—
—	—	—	—	—	—	—
—	—	—	—	—	—	—
—	—	—	—	—	—	—
—	—	—	—	—	—	—
—	—	—	—	—	—	—
—	3.940	10.556	—	—	22.990	—
—	—	1.317	—	—	—	—
7.010	—	5.766	1.420	—	—	100.000
12.590	—	—	—	—	—	—
—	—	—	—	28.600	—	—
—	23.120	—	—	—	—	—
—	3.940	11.873	—	—	22.990	—
19.600	—	5.766	1.420	—	—	100.000
—	—	—	—	28.600	—	—