

Negligence of Safety at Sea by Fishermen of Gujarat

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Commercial fishing ranks as one of the most hazardous occupations in the world. Work at sea is potentially dangerous particularly during bad weather conditions and accidents are bound to occur at sea leading to loss of life. Safety is of paramount importance at sea and the responsibility of safety of vessel and crew primarily lies with the master of the vessel.

The fishermen of Gujarat are engaged in artisanal, motorised and mechanised fishing. Presently, commercial fishing fleet in Gujarat consists of about 14,000 motorised and mechanised crafts and about 8700 non-mechanised crafts. Unlike the past when the operations of fishing vessels of Gujarat used to be confined to traditionally known fishing grounds near the coast, for the last 5-7 years fishermen have been venturing farther into deeper waters in search of new fishing grounds and exploitation of resources in the deeper waters. Presently most of the trawlers undertake voyages upto 10 days to carry out fishing in depths upto 200 mts.

Since 1989, under the India Remote Sensing Utilisation Programmes, with the cooperation of Gujarat State Department of Fisheries and ISRO Ahmedabad, efforts have been made for locating potential areas of fish accumulation through remote sensing. The information is then put on notice board of the fish marketing hall of Fisheries Terminal Division for the benefit of cooperative societies, boat owners' associations, newspapers and AIR. The information displayed has been found to be useful to the fishermen to reach new fishing grounds farther from the shore.

Success in deep sea fishing depends largely on the intuition and skill of the Tandel to navigate and locate commercially by important fishing grounds and to carry out fishing safely at sea. Accidents of various types may occur to vessels and crew members during fishing due to bad weather, faults in materials used in construction or construction itself, collision or human error. Government and other developmental agencies have to promote safety consciousness among fishermen so as to make their work at sea as safe as possible.

It is surprising to know that, though all fishermen agree that the life at sea is risky and hazardous and accept it as part and parcel of their profession, none of the fishermen of Gujarat who go for fishing carry on board the minimum safety equipments like first aid box, life buoys, life jackets, fire extinguishers etc., and very few fishermen are aware of the sea safety measures.

Usually fishermen rely on their own wisdom and claim that they have experience in safeguarding their lives out at sea. They also express confidence that they can forecast bad weather or disaster well in advance by studying the pattern of the clouds, waves, colour of the sea, flocking of sea birds etc. Most of the fishermen feel confident of braving any odds while out at sea, as they are good swimmers and therefore give less of importance to structured safety measures. They do not bear in mind that without proper navigational and safety aids the consequences can be catastrophic.

Most of the fishing vessels in Gujarat are equipped with a compass.

During 1994-95, around 150 sets of walkie-talkie sets were provided to the fishermen of Gujarat all along its coast, with around 50% subsidy, to utilise the sets in case of emergency for their safety. Unfortunately this scheme was stopped due to the following reasons : a) The sets required licenses which had to be renewed every year and the fishermen felt this ritual cumbersome, b) The after-sale service for the maintenance of the instrument was very poor and many fishermen had to keep their sets idle due to repairs c) As the fishermen carry out fishing in the seas bordering Pakistan there were constant checks and harassment by the coast guard and security personnel, and d) It was presumed that the sets were misused by the fishermen for purposes other than safety.

However, the Fisheries Terminal Division of the State Fisheries Department, Gujarat, collect information from weather forecasting agencies and announce the weather conditions sufficiently in advance as warning to the fishermen to warn that they should not venture going out to the sea for fishing during the period covered by the forecast.

Although regulations for safety exist in the case of large mechanised vessels, it is unfortunate that small mechanised and motorised traditional fishing boats do not come under the purview of these regulations. Some of the safety rules of large mechanised fishing vessels can be extended to cover them as well.

Many technological developments are heralding a new era of safety and efficiency of operation of fishing vessels at sea. These have made safety/



communication/navigational equipments easier to use and more affordable than in the past. The advantage is that fishermen out at sea can spend more of their time for fishing, by reducing the time required to move between fishing areas and also to reach the port safely taking the shortest route. Few of these are listed below.

(GPS) Global Positioning System: This unit is very handy and indicates the position of the vessel accurately at any time. It also indicates her speed and course for safe and efficient navigation. Position of productive fishing grounds can also be stored and recalled whenever required.

VHF communication units : Very High Frequency (VHF) units are used mainly for distress communication and conveying, information on catches area of operation etc., to nearby vessels as well as to shore.

(EPIRB) The Emergency Position Indicating Beacon : This unit has been designed to take advantage of satellite

technology that permits marine distress location anywhere in the globe.

(SART) Search and Rescue Radar Transponder : This unit is handy and responds to radar signals of any vessels within the range of five miles.

While fishing boats have to be equipped with different navigational, safety and communication aids, fishermen must have the traditional qualities of sound knowledge of the sea and good judgment, proper understanding of seamanship and navigation so as to minimise danger while out at sea.

With the rapid pace of development in science and technology, many types of compact and efficient navigational aids, and safety and communication equipments are being introduced. These can be used by the fishing vessels to improve their efficiency and safety.

As a beginning, few safety equipments like life jackets, life buoys, life rafts, fire extinguishers, first aid kits etc., are to be made mandatory by

the State Fisheries Department/Port authorities for obtaining registration for mechanised boats to reduce the needless loss of life at sea.

Safety should be first and foremost but this is given the last priority in order to reduce investment. Fishermen must be exposed to a logical line of thinking aimed at preventing accidents. The fishermen must be trained and conditioned to face any eventuality while out at sea. Fortunately, as many fishermen have lost their boats and lives during the past several years fishermen are more receptive to listen to advice to carry with them the minimum safety gear, provided the cost is reasonable and affordable.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Dr. Ravindran, K., Director, CIFT, Cochin for giving kind permission to publish this paper and to Mr. K.K.Solanki, Scientist-in-charge for the encouragement.

