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RETURN OF FISHERY COOPERATIVES IN MARITIME STATES OF INDIA

During the past decade and a half, there is a renewed effort at revitalising the cooperative movement in several maritime states in India. Not long ago the fishery cooperatives were written off as unviable and ill suited to serve the fishermen communities. The factors that led to this dismal picture of the seventies and the somewhat bright prospects of nineties are worth examining as the organisational health of fishery cooperatives is likely to make the fishing operations more productive and remunerative.

The fishery cooperatives like their counterparts in agriculture, originated at the initiative of the States in India. Inspired by the success stories of the Village banks in Germany and Italy in the early decades of this century, cooperative societies were set up in rural areas to promote thrift, facilitate credit and supply inputs. Both the colonial governments in British India and the native princes played pioneering role in guiding cooperative movement in the country. As in general education, the princely State of

Travancore took an early lead in establishing fishermen cooperatives as far back as in 1917.

In terms of the number of societies and the strength of membership, fishermen societies registered phenomenal growth during the two and half decades that followed the country's independence. More than 3500 primary fishermen societies were registered by the early seventies. A study conducted in 1984 showed that the cooperative societies, in terms of numbers registered, exceeded a thousand in Kerala, followed by 662 in Andhra Pradesh, 580 in West Bengal and around 450 in Maharashtra and Tamilnadu each. Their presence was no less significant in Gujarat, Karnataka and Orissa.

Fishermen Cooperatives in this early phase served as catalysts in mobilising savings and channelising the credit supply. Evaluation of the performance of the Cooperatives during this period invariably led to dismal conclusions. Cooperatives

failed both as mobilisers of savings as well as efficient credit agencies. There was hardly any significant resource mobilization on the part of fishermen. Members contributed very little to the financial health of the Cooperatives. The total paid up capital including reserves took place mostly due to increase in government contribution to both. This shows that the cooperatives were unable to convert the peak season cash surpluses into savings.

The credit supply was mostly a one way traffic: funds flowing into the hands of fishermen and failing to create a pay back stream. Overdues as a percentage of outstanding loans ranged between 86 percent and 32 percent in different states except in Maharashtra where it was 12 percent. Recovery situation was dismal in almost all states.

Fishery Cooperatives during this period have undoubtedly suffered from lack of Cooperative culture that is the most marked social inadequacy of less developed populations. Noth-

ing illustrates this problem more eloquently than the data on total membership of the societies. In several states, the membership of the societies put together far exceeded the number of active fishermen in the state. Obviously, membership was taken by the same in different societies or it was acquired in the name of the near and dear who were not directly engaged in fishing.

A major cause of the collapse of Cooperative movement in fisheries was the absence of effective management both in societies and in fisheries. At a time when the very concept of Cooperation was undermined as an instrument of development, it was gaining ground under private initiative.

In the early eighties, Cooperative effort became imperative for fishermen. The new technologies of motorised traditional craft and the improved gears became much sought after fishery techniques in the face of

competition from the mechanised craft. The improved technology was costly. Individual fishermen are not adequately endowed to raise the investment funds. The mutual help and cooperation became essential for profit from the new technology. It was this realization that led to the revitalisation of Cooperative movement for fishermen.

Fortunately for the movement, the renewed interest in Cooperatives was not limited to state initiative alone. Though Cooperativisation was spear headed by state agencies such as Matsyafed in Kerala, and the State Fishermen Development Corporation in Karnataka, voluntary agencies with deeper grass root level contact with fishermen also came to play a key role in reviving Cooperatives. In this respect, the role of voluntary agencies such as Quilon Social Service Society, South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies and the Alleppey Diocesan Charitable and Social Wel-

fare Society are of great interest to the future of the movement in Kerala.

Whether private or public, the new thrust of operation in fishery Cooperative seems to be what may be called a systems approach. No longer fishermen left to rot in a technological and financial muddle after loaning out a few thousand rupees. The key element of management is hired by these bodies and placed at the disposal of fishermen. Most primary societies affiliated to these bodies have access to credit, expert guidance on procurement and operation of any technology, marketing of catch and fish processing. Through periodic seminars and workshops, fishermen are brought to closer interaction with technologists, bankers, input suppliers and sources of market. Fishermen seem to respond very favorably to this new found systems approach of the new Cooperative movement.

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