

“Fire On The Seashore”

—Struggles Of Fisherwomen In Kerala

KERARA has a 590 kilometre long coastline. About 800,000 fisher people live in the coastal areas. Of these, 179,000 are seagoing fishermen, 47,000 are inland fisherman and about 30,000 are fish vending women. The women of this community are generally more educated and aware than men, not only because of schooling but also because of contact with people of other communities in the market and in the homes of their customers.

According to a 1981 survey, 92 percent of fishing people live below the poverty line. In Trivandrum and Quilon districts, they live in very congested areas, almost like slum's. Since their work is connected with the sea, they have to stay on the seashore, and many families live beyond the sea wall which is erected to protect the shore from erosion. During the monsoon, the houses are in danger of being washed into the sea.

During the season when the catch is good, the people eat a fairly balanced diet of cassava, rice, fish and some vegetables. Men are always well fed because of the general belief that the work they do on the sea is the hardest work.

Environmental hygiene is very poor due to congested living conditions. Diseases like tuberculosis, asthma, diarrhoea, worm infestation and dysentery are very common. Since the women carry fish on their heads, they suffer from various maladies of the backbone, and chest pain is frequent amongst them. Loans taken in times of sickness, to buy implements, or

for family functions, have to be repaid at interest rates of 60 to 120 percent, with the result that indebtedness is perennial.

In Trivandrum and Quilon, women are primarily engaged in fish vending. In other districts, in they are employed in net making, and seasonal drying of fish. A number of women are employed the coir industry.

contractors, and are not unionised. Some contractors even take women from Kerala to Gujarat to work in the prawn peeling industry there.

Development Or Destruction?

In 1952, an Indo-Norwegian project introduced mechanised fishing at Neendakara in Quilon. At this time, prawns had become very expensive in the USA



Blocking a key bridge in Ernakulam, to protest against depletion of fish resources

With the introduction of trawling, women and children are employed in prawn peeling. This is a skilled job but is very lowpaid and no effort is made to maintain hygienic working conditions. The labourers are brought in by different

and Japan. In order to catch prawns on a large scale, ground trawling was introduced in Kerala.

A ground trawl net with a powerful engine is used to scrape the seabed. This scraping process not only destroys

vegetation on the seabed but also catches fish eggs and baby fish. Each trawler destroys an average of 25 kilos of baby fish in one operation, and 3,000 trawlers are in operation every day. The baby fish, if allowed to grow, would undergo a 100 percent increase in weight.

The original ground trawl net made of steel rope was invented during the first world war to detect underground mines. In the process, the nets caught plenty of fish. Therefore, after the war, a net made of nylon thread began to be used to catch those species of fish which live on the seabed.

In the industry, ground trawling is termed a destructive fishing process. Therefore, when introduced in Norway in 1936, it was accompanied by certain government controls related to the number of nets to be used, the size of the mesh and the distance up to which they could operate. But no such controls were imposed when trawling was introduced in Kerala. Immediate profit was the only guiding principle of the merchants and middlemen who owned the trawlers.

In 1975, purseiners were introduced. A purseiner is a net designed to catch the species of fish which live on the surface of the sea. The net covers almost one hectare. Its bottom is equipped with rings and weights and its top with floats. A boat with a 100 horse power engine chases and encircles a shoal. The net closes round the shoal and not one fish escapes. This is known as overfishing because the whole shoal is caught without any consideration for the renewal of fish resources.

Purseining resulted in the extinction of white bait in Peru, after which the Peruvian government strictly regulated the amount of fish caught and the species caught. But the need for similar controls was ignored when purseiners were introduced in Kerala.

As a result of these developments, the total catch, both in the traditional and in the mechanised sector, went up to 450,000 tons in 1975. But by 1981, it had decreased to 270,000 tons. From 1969 to 1982, fishing implements increased by 14 percent and

fishermen increased by 26 percent. During the same period, the number of trawlers increased to 3,500 and purseiners to 100. There was a 196 percent increase in the fish catch in the mechanised sector. But, there was a 50 percent decrease in the fish catch in the traditional sector.

Thus, modern developments resulted in the rich becoming richer at the expense of the poor fisher-folk who became poorer, and at the cost of destruction of fish resources and local ecology.

responsible for paying, back loans. She even has to give the man money for alcohol. If she refuses, a big quarrel takes places. Alcoholism is widely prevalent amongst men and results in a lot of violence on women.

A woman's day starts very early. Men go to the sea at different times, depending on the season. The woman has to prepare food for the man to take with him. Then she must rush to the shore to buy fish to sell in the market.



5000, women blocking the national highway, 1985

Women's Status

As a general practice, men give their earnings to women. Property, if any, is generally in the women's names. This may sound as if women are free and independent. They do have some independence because they have control over money and also some freedom of movement.

But this situation also adds to their burden. The woman is wholly responsible for meeting all the family expenses. She has to borrow money and is solely

Women walk an average of five to 10 kilometres a day, usually on an empty stomach. They come back around 6 p.m. and then begin cooking, fetching water, cleaning and taking care of children. In spite of all this, women take an active part in all the struggles of fisherpeople. They seek solace for their sufferings in pious practices and rituals, although they have no place in committees of the church, temple or mosque.

Struggle For Transport

Sheila Rosario, a school teacher, Mercy

Alexander, a fisherwoman, Aleyamma Vijayan, and two nuns. Theresamma Prayikalam and Alphonsa, took the initiative to organise women in Trivandrum district. On December 10, 1978, they called a one day meeting of all the leaders of Mahila Samajams or women's associations in the coastal areas. It emerged that lack of transport facilities was one of the most acute problems faced by fisherwomen. In order to decide on a strategy, they felt the need to study the situation and get together some facts, namely, the number of women going to market with fish for sale, the number of markets, the distance to

village meetings, 40 leaders met for a three day seminar. Street plays, songs and pictures were used to share experiences. An action council was formed which met on April 22. Based on the survey, demands were formulated for special buses for fish vending women, fish storage facilities, health facilities, housing facilities and monthly allowance for widows of fishermen.

On February 10, 1980, the action council handed a memorandum to the chief minister who promised to discuss the matter with the Fishermen's Welfare Corporation. On February 19, the women

police asked women to get up from the tracks. But they refused to get up unless policewomen came to arrest them. The tussle went on for an hour. Phone calls kept coming in from Madras asking the police to remove the women from the tracks. Finally, the police arrested all the men. Then, they started forcibly dragging women off the tracks. Thousands watched the police beating up the women and children. By noon, all the demonstrators were taken to different police stations and locked up. They had left their homes early in the morning, without eating anything. The police did not bother to give them food or water.

At around 10 p.m., they were produced before the magistrate, who ordered that they be produced in court the following day. So at 2 a.m., they were taken to the central jail. The next day, they were produced in court at 11 a.m., and granted bail, and 15 women were admitted to hospital. The court case still drags on and people have to keep appearing in court, foregoing their day's earnings.

Women Leaders

Women leaders have played a decisive role in many agitations. For example, Baby, Josephine and Kamalamma of Pulluvila in Trivandrum were active in the fight for a ban on trawling during monsoon. They entered the fisheries office and were arrested and taken to court. They refused to accept bail and were put in the central jail where they stayed for a few days. Public pressure mounted until the chief minister withdrew the case and the women were released.

In Alleppey, on May 13, 1984, fishermen burned a trawling boat which violated the Fishing Regulation Act and encroached on the area. Such violations occur frequently and government does not take any action. The police arrived and brutally beat up all the people who were watching the boat burn. Five men were arrested.

At this moment, Kuttamma came forward and led 2,000 women and children to the police station. They squatted there and refused to disperse until the arrested men were released. Finally, the police had



Widows of the men killed in Alleppey, lighting the martyr's torch

different markets, and the main difficulties faced during vending.

On February 26, 1979, the leaders met to share their findings. The total number of fish vending women in Trivandrum district was 4,789. The women went to 127 different markets, and the distance covered by them ranged from two to 17 kilometres. Normally, women were not allowed to travel in state, transport buses with fish. Sometimes, they were allowed to travel in private buses.

On March 16, 1979, the activists and leaders met and decided to form a union which would be affiliated to the Trivandrum District Fish Workers' Union.

After a series of zonal meetings and

held a sitin demonstration in front of the secretariat and on March 20, about 2,000 women picketed the central bus station, Trivandrum, paralysing traffic for about two hours. The same day, the chief minister promised three special buses for the women, on an experimental basis. This victory encouraged the women to press for their other demands, and the struggle continues.

Railway Picketing

As part of the general struggle, hundreds of fisherfolk picketed the Kadakkayoor railway station in Trivandrum on June 3, 1984. Women, with children and babies, went straight to the tracks and men sat outside the station. The

to give in. All this time, Kuttamma was in agony. Her body was severely bruised from police beatings. After the release of the five men, she and 21 others injured went to the government hospital.

Some Profiles

Lily Arulappan, aged 34, has five children. One child died of leukemia. Her husband drinks and does not give her any money. She gets up at 4 a.m., does the cooking, and at 6 a.m., goes to the shore to buy fish. If she can afford it, she sends the fish to market with a cyclist. He charges Rs 20 to 25 for a distance of 10 to 15 miles. At other times, she travels by bus or on foot, carrying the fish on her head.

In the morning, she has only a glass of lime. While in the market, she has some lime juice. She has lunch after returning home sometime between 2 and 4 p.m. Then she goes to the shore again and if fish is available, buys it and preserves it in ice to sell the next day.

Her husband is of no help to her. There are constant quarrels between them. She finds happiness in her children. She sent them to school and wanted them to study further but was forced to put them to work in order to supplement their income. She has a debt of Rs 16,000.

She is a member of the union and has been a member of the executive committee. But her husband's drunkenness and the heavy burden of supporting the family on her own makes it almost impossible for her to participate in union activities nowadays.

Fazila comes from a Muslim family of Perumathura. She started working in a coir unit at the age of seven. Occasionally, she used to help her mother Umma sell fish in the market. She also continued her studies up to class six.

At the age of 16 she became acquainted with the Mahila Samajam which ran a nursery for the children. The nuns who ran it began to train her to help there. She picked up very fast and finally became a teacher there. She is one of the most dynamic teachers and an expert dance teacher. She changed the character of the local *opna* dance and made it a vehicle to express ideas of equality and freedom for women. She is also the secretary of the

Mahila Samajam. She does some coir making to supplement her income.

Recently, she married Nazir and her troubles began. He drinks and beats her and tries to stop her from participating in activities. She resists his control. She now has a son, and also looks after her husband's child by his first wife.

Martyrs' Flame

A landmark in the struggle last year was the lighting of the martyrs' flame. On April 23, 1985, four fishermen were killed during night trawling in Alleppey. Night trawling is banned, yet the police did not arrest those who had broken the law, resulting in these deaths.

The union decided to carry a martyrs' flame along the coast of Kerala up to the capital, as a protest against the governments apathy. On June 30, the widows of the deceased lit the flame in Kattoor. Thousands of watching fisherfolk wept, and the women sang a song written by E.G Peter, a fisherman.

You who rule us, listen.

*Do you know of a place called
Kattoor?*

*Do you know us, who hold this
flame?*

Have you forgotten Babu, whom you

*killed years ago?
Do you remember the four lives
you have now taken?
They are our brothers who vent to
sea*

*To sustain these widows and their
children*

*Do you have any humanity?
Is there any rule of law in this
land?*

*Is there any law to protect the
poor?*

*If we have any human spirit in us.
We will rise up to fight for our
rights.*

*Remember, struggles continue
All over the country.*

*Remember, we are changing our
strategy,*

*Success is our goal, success is our
goal.*

*The hunger and thirst of the sea's
children*

*Burns like afire along
the seashore.*

*This flame rises from that fire on
the seashore*

*You ministers, you rulers of this
land,*

*Open your eyes,
Before this great fire burns you
up.* □

Rural Women's Meet

Over 100,000 people from Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, including 17,000 women, gathered in Chandwad, Nasik district, on November 9 and 10. The *zilla parishad* elections were coming up in the district and Sharad Joshi, the leader of the Shetkari Sanghatana of Maharashtra took the initiative to organise a novel women's meet to gain the support of the rural women.

The Shetkari Sanghatana was founded in 1980 and has developed a one point programme demanding a lucrative price for agricultural produce. They now are working to incorporate women into their overall strategy of the 'war on agricultural prices'.

The convention made two specific demands with regard to women. The first demand was that women be paid a full day's wage for five hours' work so that the work they do in the household is given some value. If this demand is not met, then women working in the fields, for eight hours a day should be paid 50 percent more than are men—this additional sum should come from the agricultural prices commission.

Many autonomous groups and women belonging to various political parties heeded Joshi's call to come to the meet, feeling it would give them greater exposure to rural women.

The Chandwad convention was one of the largest gatherings of rural women in Maharashtra in recent times.