SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILES OF FISHERMEN COMMUNITIES FROM THE SOUTHEAST COAST OF INDIA (11° 42'N; 79° 46'E- 8° 45'N; 77° 34'E)

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INTRODUCTION

The Tropical Marine Mollusc Programme is not only intended to study the taxonomy, biology, ecology, distribution and abundance of muricids in Indo-Thai regions but it also aims at understanding the life style and socio-economic conditions of this poor, neglected section of the society. Further, this programme is also planning to create an awareness in the minds of the coastal folk about the food value of the muricids. This paper mainly focuses on knowledge about the day to day life of fishermen living along the Southeast coast of India on a stretch of 900 km from Cuddalore to Cape Comorin. The study shows that the fishermen who live in certain pockets of sectors I and III have understood the value of muricid flesh whereas a larger part of this community sticks to the conservative idea not to eat the protein rich soft parts of the muricids. The latter attitude is prevailing not only among the fishermen but also among other several sections of the people living along this coastline. Thus it becomes imperative to study the socio-economic conditions of the coastal folk in order to find out the reasons for not consuming this protein rich food.

An oral interview was made with the fishermen of various villages situated along the coastline inquiring about both social and communal life of them. The present paper is based on a few interviews made for a period of 3 months from May to June, 1991. However, this study will be extended with intensive interviews with almost each and every coastal village along the Coramandal coast in the coming months.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS

Village

In general, the villages along the coastal region of Tamil Nadu where the fishermen live have not been properly planned and the houses are built in an irregular manner. Most of the houses have coconut and palm leaf thatches, some have tiled roofs and very few have concrete ones. The small houses have only one or two rooms. Cyclonic storms are common in this region when the Northeast monsoon is active and the majority of the fishermen living close to the sea and along the bank of the rivers then shift themselves to the cyclone shelters constructed by the State Government in the coastal areas. The State Government has also a scheme to provide these fishermen with small constructed houses in a phased manner. Proper drainage, bathroom and toilet facilities are lacking in these villages. The fishermen in the villages of Varuthurai, North Street and Chinnamutton of the Cape Comorin sector store their fishing gear alongside the village streets which are very narrow. In the Porto Novo area of the Cuddalore sector the fishermen have another small hut nearby, without the surrounding walls, to store their fishing gear.

Population

The total population of fishermen in Sector I is around 50,000. In sector II around 45,000 and in sector III it is 25,000. In the Cape Comorin region of sector IV it is about 20,000. Except in Vaippar village of sector III where
Monger at fish market. India.

Fish landing. India.
females constitute 53%, males are numerically dominant in all these villages.

Caste and Religion

Caste and religion play a vital role in the community life of the fishermen. The majority of the fishermen are Hindus (85%) in sector I, Muslims (80%) in sector II and Christians (>75%) in sector III and IV. The majority of the fishermen belong to the Sembadavar (55%), Vannaiar (27%) and Harijan (18%) castes in sector I. The Marikkayars are dominant among the Muslims in sector II. In sector III, the majority of the fishermen belong to the Christian faith and the Fernando caste. The two castes that are dominant in sector IV are Parathar and Mukkuvar, and both practice Christianity. The people of Mukkuvar community help the Hindus of the nearby village during the "Bhagavathi Amman Temple" festival and pull the biggest temple car even though they are of the Christian faith. It is an example of people practicing different religions coexisting peacefully.

Marriage

Only intracaste marriages take place in the coastal villages and most of the marriages are arranged by the elders who get the horoscopes of the boy studied with those of the girls and vice versa and those found suited to each other are married in the presence of their parents, relatives and friends. Intercaste and inter-religious marriages are not favoured by the fisherfolk.

Festivals

The Hindus celebrate festivals like Thaipoosam and Adipadhinettu every year; they offer special prayers to the Kadal Thai; Ellai Amman, Kadal Arasan and other gods and goddesses. They prepare a special sweet rice dish called the Pongal on these days and offer it to the gods along with chicks and sheep. The Muslims celebrate Ramzan, Bakrid, Muharram and Miladi Nabi every year. The Christians celebrate Easter and Christmas. In sector III and IV, the villages celebrate special festivals and offer players in the village church on those days of festivals. In Vaippar village of sector III, the fishermen, natives of the village participate in the Matha Thirunal festival, which is celebrated in a grand manner from the 1st to the 15th of August every year. During this period the fishermen do not go fishing. Likewise in the Cape Comorin region of sector IV the Matha church festival is celebrated in November of every year.

Panchayats

The fishermen have their own village panchayats where disputes and other problems arising from their fishing activities are sorted out. The president of the panchayats is either elected or chosen through consensus. In the fishing villages of sector IV there exists a mini panchayat in each street called Kurusadi consisting of five committee members. Problems that are minor in nature are solved in the Kurusadi itself while only the major ones are taken to the president of the panchayat who is also the head of that village and he is elected every year or once in two years. In fishing villages of sector I, the panchayat meets regularly once in a week to discuss the problems of the village or those of the fishermen. In sector III of the Tuticorin region, the State Government has appointed a Fisheries Officer to solve the problems related to fishing and he is empowered to even seize the boats of the fishermen who do not obey his orders. In sector II of the Madapam region three associations have been established for the welfare of the fishermen. They are 1. The fishermen's Co-operative Society, established in 1952 and under the control of the State Fisheries Department, 2. The Hereditary Fishermen's Association and 3. The Boat Owner's Association. The Fishermen's Co-operative Society holds election to elect seven Directors from among the members of the society. These seven Directors elect a President and Vice-President from among themselves. The tenure of office of these honorary officers is five years. The president of the society acts as the chief of the fishermen community and helps them to get loans.
Returning from fishing. India.

Catamaran landing site. India.
and in setting quarrels arising among the fishermen from their fishing activities. He also regulates their fishing activities as ordered by the State Government. The Fishermen's Society also helps in the quick distribution of compensation amount to the next of kin of accident victims.

Medical Facilities

All the villages in general have medical facilities. Villages that are 1 sq.km in area and have a population of 1,000 people, have in them Primary Health Centres established by the State Government; They have 2 to 3 doctors on the staff including a woman doctor. Government hospitals also function in the towns nearby. Apart from these, private practitioners of the allopathic and homeopathic systems of medicine have their clinics in and around these villages. But, there exist a few villages like Vaippar in sector III, where there is no medical aid available locally to the people. They have to travel to Tuticorin, 35 km away even for emergencies and more often they have to walk a distance of 3 km to catch a bus as the frequency of the bus service to this village is lesser.

Drinking water

Almost all the villages are provided with drinking water which is supplied either through municipal water main or by the tanker lorries. In some places drinking water is drawn from tube wells and supplied. In sector IV of the Cape Comorin region, drinking water is part of the life of the fishermen. Supply through the mains is once in two days during the raining season and twice a week in time of drought. They buy drinking water sometimes at 50 paise (half a rupee) a pot. In Vaippar village (sector III) the water supplied through the mains is hard and brackish. So people visiting Tuticorin take drinking water back to their village from the town whenever they visit it.

Electricity

The majority of the villages are provided with electricity by the State Electricity Board and 20-50% of the houses in each village are electrified. In sector I, the small villages situated near the shore have not been provided with electricity.

Education and literacy rate

The Government has established Primary schools in the villages depending on their population and extent. Normally, primary schools are established in villages with an area of 2 sq.km and a population of 1,000. Middle and high schools are located only in nearby towns. Most of the fishermen discontinue their studies at the middle school level and go fishing on the water.

It is normal for 50% of the population of the school going age to attend primary school: this percentage decreases at the level of the middle and high school. Only very few go on to the college to continue their studies there. However, the literacy rate is less than 30% in most of these areas. This situation is now fast changing with the growing awareness among fishermen of the advantages of education and now they want their children to be educated and employed rather than to make them dependent on the sea alone.

Government Aids and Bank Loans

The nationalized banks provide loans to the fishermen which could be repaid in easy monthly installments. The Governments also advances them about 60% of the purchase price of their craft and gear as loan through their co-operative societies. In many areas, the banks are reluctant to advance loans to the fishermen since many of them do not repay the loans taken out by them.
Marketing

The fishermen market their catch either individually or through their association or through agents. Normally, the fishes are auctioned at the landing centres where the agents of marine food processing companies compete and the highest bidder collects them. The private marine food processing companies also advance money to the boat owners with the stipulation that they sell the catch only to them directly and not through intermediaries of any kind.

Co-operative Societies

There are co-operative stores for the fishermen, from which they can buy essential fishing material at controlled prices. Ration shops also function in all the places to supply them essential food items. The co-operative societies also help the fishermen solve their problems and almost all of them are members of co-operatives. In Ramanathapuram District alone, there are 53 fishermen co-operative societies which together have formed a federation and help their members in getting fuel and gear at controlled prices.

Daily Income and Expenses

The fishermen's daily income depends upon his day's catch and therefore not regular and at a steady level. It ranges from Rs.100-200 a day in the peak season and Rs.20-30 on normal days. His daily living expenses depend on the size of his family and also on his income.

Savings

In sector IV of the Cape Comorin region, about 40% of the people save money which is invested in private chit funds and insurance. In general, fishermen who work for daily wages cannot think of saving since their daily earning is not at all sufficient to meet their day to day family expenses. Only those who own boats could save money but some of the poor fishermen are so thrifty that they could save money and invest it in chit funds.

Entertainment

In sector III and IV the fishermen do not go for fishing on Sundays. They spend the whole day with their family mending their craft and gear. Sometimes they visit cinema houses. But they spend most of their time chatting with neighbours and playing cards. On other days of the week, on their return from the sea they attend to the maintenance of their craft and gear to keep them fit and ready for the next day's fishing. On festival days they get video playing equipment on hire and play them non-stop.

Food

Fishermen prefer seafood mainly and it finds a place on their daily menu. Though they prefer seafood, rice is their staple food. They prefer to eat chicken and mutton on festival days. The fishermen of the Tuticorin area like Xancus flesh very much.

Fishermen

Though the fishermen have a rough exterior because of the nature of their work, they are soft and affectionate by nature. Their mood varies with the volume of their daily catch. They respect and accept the advice of the experienced elders of their community. They have great faith in God. Though the rate of literacy is very low in the community of fishermen they are very well aware of national politics and efficient in their affairs of money. Most of the fishermen take alcoholic drinks in the evening after a day of hard work.

Wives of fishermen

Most of the women of fishingfolk in sectors II,III and IV are housewives. Only a few are engaged in selling fresh catches as well as dried fish. But in sector I, women actively participate in the work of their husbands. They sacrifice their lives for the welfare of their family. They are well-trained in sorting fish, cleaning, drying and marketing them. In sector I, women also act as agents for the boat owners
at auction centres and earn a good commission. When the women lose their husbands in accidents on the sea the Government pays them cash compensation and in the community of the fishermen there is no practice of widow remarriage.

Day to Day Activities

The fishermen wake up early in the morning about 3 to 4 a.m. and go out on the sea for fishing. After returning with their catch they look to their craft and gear and ready them for the next day's fishing and spend the rest of their time with their families enjoying their well-earned respite. Their women also wake up along with their menfolk, prepare food for them and look after the household and children till their return from the sea. In sector III and IV fishermen do not go fishing on Sundays. That day is spend with their families, and in enjoyment playing card and seeing films.