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## UNIT 15 FISHER FOLKS' MOVEMENTS

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### 15.1 INTRODUCTION

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Unlike other social groups the collective actions of the fisher folks have generally gone unnoticed in the academic discourse. This perhaps is due to the fact the collective actions by the fisher folks themselves have been relatively less in number than those of other groups. However, their problems have been raised by political parties, civil society organisations and church leaders. But this has been mainly in terms of demanding relief to the fisher folks who suffered due to the natural disaster like tsunami. Nevertheless, there are examples of the collective actions of the fisher folks, which can be categorised as the social movements of the fisher folks. In this unit, we will discuss their social movements. The unit will specifically focus on socio-economic conditions of fisher folks, their issues/ problems and collective actions with reference to two examples, i.e., fisher folks movement in Kerala and Orissa.

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### 15.2 SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE

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#### 15.2.1 Heterogeneity

Fisher folks, (nearly 12 million) form a large section of the Indian population. They contribute enormously to the economy of the country, especially the states situated along the coastlines i.e., Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal, Goa, Andaman Nicobar, Pondicherry, Maharashtra, Gujarat, etc. Involved in the fisheries – catching, selling, processing and marketing fish for centuries, fisher folks provide fish which form the staple of the people living in the coastal states, and also non-vegetarian population living in other states than those of the coastal regions. They also link Indian economy to the world economy through the export of the marine products. Fisher folks are not homogenous groups. They follow multiple religions, a large number of them belong to the low castes. Apart from the coastal regions, they are also found in other areas of the country involved in the fisheries, ponds and big tanks. Largely fisher folks belong to the vulnerable groups of the society. Prof. John Kurien argues that in some area of Tamil Nadu like Nagapattinam, fishing community is not poor and generally

they are better off than many other social groups; in three decades of the last century there has been a considerable improvement in their economic conditions. But they remain “outliers in cultural, social and political terms”.

Besides the division among them on religious and caste basis, they are stratified on the basis of ownership of vessels and employment of labour. On these basis, the fisher folks can be divided into three groups:

- 1) fisher folks who own vessels and work with their families;
- 2) Those who own these and employ other fisher folks; they include film stars, politicians and other wealthy persons.
- 3) Those who do not own them but work on others’ vehicles.

The number of fisher folks who own vehicles is very small. Besides, majority of them own ordinary vessels which are traditional and of poor quality. Those who employ others own trawlers and big boats, better quality and modern vessels.

The fishing activities depend on the weather conditions, which are mostly hostile. During the period of unfavourable weather conditions, the fisher folks get engaged in odd jobs on the harbour.

### **15.2.2 Dependence on Others**

Fisher folks depend on a large number of people. The latter include intermediaries who work as the agents of traders, moneylenders, non-fisher folk owners of trawlers and big boats. The fisher folks do not have direct access to the market. They sell their catch to the intermediaries (or the agents) who in turn sell them to the traders. The intermediaries take their commission and the fisher folks do not get the fair price of their catch. Their earnings are not enough to meet their basic needs which include the items of daily needs and the purchase of boats, catamarans, mechanised boats, nets, catamarans fitted with motors, etc. This forces them to borrow from the intermediaries, traders or the employers on the adverse terms and conditions. Thus intermediaries, merchants, non-fisher folks and richer fisher folks, owners of big boats also work as moneylenders. Generally the fisher folks borrow advance from the moneylenders. As one of the conditions the catch would be given to the trader-cum moneylenders at the prices fixed by the latter. Also, the traders capture the catch from the boats and fix the prices after these have been sold. Although the entire family of a fisher folk is involved in the fisheries, it is the women who are the worst affected by the intervention of the rich merchants and traders.

### **15.2.3 Victims of Natural Disaster**

Their close habitat and dependence on sea for the fisheries exposes the fisher folks to natural disasters like flood, typhoon and tsunami. These natural disasters affects the fisher folks the most. They are deprived of their houses, vessels and lives. The super cyclone in Orissa in 1999 had affected the fisher folks there. The tsunami of December 26, 2004 which affected the coastal regions of South Asia and South East Asia had the devastating impact on residents and tourists of these regions. But these were the fisher folks as a single group which was affected by tsunami. It not only killed many of them and destroyed their vessels and residences, it disturbed their centuries old faith in the sea. It created fear- psychoses about the sea among the fisher folks.

### **15.2.4 Mechanisation, Globalisation and Fisher Folks**

Traditionally fishing was carried out by small, unpowered craft confined to shallow waters. Mechanisation began with the Indo-Norwegian Project in 1953, whereby mechanised fishing equipments were permitted to catch fish indiscriminately with the aim to increase fish catches and augment the production of shrimps. Increasing demand for shrimps from advanced countries like Japan and USA created a further impetus to intensify fishing with the use of bottom trawlers. This not only led to dwindling of fish stocks, but the traditional fishermen who were unable to afford mechanised fishing equipments began to face livelihood problems as the coastal fishing belt was captured by resourceful non-fishermen. The government also gave active support to private groups through preferential credit schemes. The beneficiaries of the new schemes were affluent traditional fishermen, who had turned entrepreneurs, and non-fishermen with resources. The impact of technological change in an already fragile ecological zone resulted in a decline in the fish stocks and a subsequent drop in the income of traditional fishermen.

The non-fisher folks were further encouraged to dominate fisheries in the 1990s in the light of globalisation. As you will study in sub-section 15.4.2, the Tata House had attempted to set up the shrimp farming in Chilika Lake in Orissa, which not only displaced the fisher folks but also created the environmental hazards. Again, the P.V. Narasingha Rao government introduced modern technology in the fisheries as a part of liberalisation policy.

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## **15.3 ISSUES, LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATIONS**

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### **Issues**

The principal issues/demands on which could be collective actions of the fisher folks are organised are:

- 1) Participation of the fisher folks in fisheries and fishery management; sale and processing of harnessed catches;
- 2) Opposition to the introduction of travelers;
- 3) Resource allocation and management of fisheries;
- 4) Providing catamarans, boats, loans/grants;
- 5) Rehabilitation (in case of the natural disasters) –
- 6) Exploitation by the agents, traders and moneylenders.
- 7) Others: problems arising out of bilateral relations between neighbouring countries – Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan which include arrest of fisher folks while fishing (as they are not able to identify the demarcation of the sea line between India and these countries).

### **Leadership**

Leadership to the fisher folks movements in South India is provided by the church fathers, nuns intellectual-academic activists, student-social activists, professional social workers, community organisers, social and physical scientists. Many of them belong to the fisher-folk communities. They work in league with NGOs concerned with the socio-economic and ecological issues. Most important among them are Fr. Thomas Kocherry, Fr. Puthhenveed. Fr. Paul Arakkal, Fr. Albert Parisavilla, Fr. Peter D'cruze. They

organised the fisher-folks in Kerala on several occasions. Prof. John Kurien is known to have provided leadership to the fisher folks as an intellectual-academic activist. The leadership operates at two levels — local and national. Some of the regional level leaders have graduated to the status of national level leaders of fisher folks. For example, Fr. Thomas Kocherry, a Redemptorist priest and the most towering leader of fisher folks movement of the 1980s, started his political activities in Trivendram district. And he rose to the status of all India level leader in the 1990s. Within due course of the joining the movement, Kochhery took control of the NFF (National Fishermen's Forum). It disappointed the earlier generation of clergy and Bishops. They organised the *Kerala Catholic Bishop Conference* in Kottayam. Kochhery belonged to the “radical” leadership and following his joining of the ASKMTF (*Akhil Kerala Swathantra Malsia Thozhilalee Federation* or the ‘All-Kerala Independent Fishermen's Federation’) the organisation was split in 1983. The two groups of the ASKMTF were led by Fr. Kocherry and Fr. Farisavila separately. The group led by Fr. Farisavila was considered “loyalist” to the Congress by Fr. Kocherry group: the latter held that the group of Fr. Farisavila was formed at the instance of the Congress, which was partner in United Democratic Front (UDF) led by K. Karunakaran. The split in the ASKMTF had impact on the affairs of church; Fr. Kocherry was transferred from his Parish to Kerala. The older generation accused Fr. Kocherry of being in league with the communists and attacked liberation theology which the latter adhered to.

A large number of leaders of the fisher folks were influenced by the ideology of “Liberation Theology” which sought an alliance between Marxism and Christianity in order to liberate the mankind from miseries of life.

### **Organisations**

First attempts to form fisher folks' organisations at village, state and national levels in India were made in the 1960s and 1970s. The earliest union was formed in 1963 in Quilon district in Kerala. By the 1980s the unions were formed in Alleppey, Cochin, Trivendram and Malabar districts. In Kerala there was a direct linkage between the Roman Catholic church and the leadership of these organisations. But it was only in the 1980s and 1990s that these organisations mobilised fisher folks into a movement. There were fisher folks unions in other coastal states like Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. But it was in Kerala where they were most assertive and articulate.

The most significant fisher folks unions in Kerala was *Kerala Swatantra Malsaya Thozhilali Federation* (KSMTF) or Kerala Independent Fisher Workers' Federation. It was an *apolitical* organisation in that it was not affiliated to any political party. In 1977 several district levels unions merged together to form *Kerala Latheen Catholica Malsia Thozhilalee Federation* (KLCFF) was formed. Its state level leadership was principally a cleric leadership, though there were non-cleric leaders also. In order to seek support from the Muslim and Hindu fisher folks, it changed its name to *Akhil Kerala Swathantra Malsia Thozhilalee Federation* (AKSMTF) - the ‘All-Kerala Independent Fishermen's Federation’.

In 1978 the fisher folks' unions of Goa, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and other sates formed a confederation, which came to be called as the National Fishermens Forum (NFF).

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## 15.4 COLLECTIVE ACTIONS OF FISHER FOLKS: SOME EXAMPLES

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Since the 1960s there have been agitations of the fisher folks' in different forms and degrees in the coastal states of the country on some of the issues, which are discussed in the section 15.3 of this units. But it was only from the 1980s that fisher folks' movement took a concrete shape. But Prof. John Kurien points out that the fisher folks' organisations have been concerned more about the allocation of resources and management of fisheries than about their exploitation by the middle men, merchants and moneylenders. He further points out that the development work among the fisher folks by the government is "project-oriented, not people or community oriented". This section deals with the collective actions or the social movements of fisher folks with the help of two examples i.e., their collective actions in Kerala and Orissa.

### 15.4.1 Fisher Folks' Movement in Kerala

The first major organised movement of the fisher folks' in Kerala was in the form of protest against the introduction of trawlers, which took place in the late 1970s. This was consequential to the changes which were a result of the intervention in the early 1960s of the "non-fishermen" investors in the fisheries economy. Shrimp, of which Kerala is among the richest producer, has traditionally been consumed in the South-East Asian countries rather than in Kerala. Demand for the shrimp increased in the international market, especially in the USA, in the early 1960s. In this context a fisheries aid project aided by the Norwegian Government popularised freezing technology and a small variety of trawlers. This led to the entry of the non-fishermen traders in the fisheries, whose prime motive was to earn profit. This also resulted in the proliferation of freezing technology and trawlers. The non-fishermen investors expanded the area of fishing from deep to shallow water. Their entry into the shallow water brought the fisher folks and the profit-making investors into direct competition. Faced with their extinction from fishing in the shallow water and unable to do so in the deep water, the fisher folks protested. During the 1970s there were several instances of the localised riots/protests of the fisher folks of Kerala. By the end of the 1970s their protest took an organised form.

The organisation which organised the fisher folks in their protest was *Kerala Swatantra Malsaya Thozhilali Federation* (KSMTF) or Kerala Independent Fisher Workers' Federation. The leadership to the KSMTF was provided by "A small but influential minority of community organisers, radical Christian clergy and nuns and social scientists". The KSMTE had units at village and district levels with active cadres. The fisher folks' agitations took the form of rallies, processions, demonstration, hunger strikes and *dharnas* in the district headquarters and outside secretariat in Trivendram. They also resorted to lobbying. The agitators also damaged the trawlers, which resulted in police firing and *lathi* charge on them.

Again in 1981, the KSMTF organised demonstrations in 1981 at the focal points of the 600 km. coastal lines in order to catch the attention of the policy makers and planners. The demonstration saw the participation of all age groups which included a larger number of women. The main demands of the agitators included:

- 1) exclusive fishing zone for the small scale fisher folks,
- 2) a closed season for the trawling operation “during monsoon months of June to July”,
- 3) a total ban on the purse-seiner operations, and
- 4) other demands for greater welfare measures for fish workers.
- 5) As their traditional rights to the sea, value system and the technologies have undergone changes to their disadvantage, and as they were denied their rights to sell, fix price and distribute the fish in the market in the post-Independence period, the fisher folks organisations also demanded that their indigenous values, technologies and rights be restored.

The movement met with the resistance of the lobbies of the investors, intermediaries and Trawlers Boat Owners Association.

One result of the movement was passage of The Kerala Marine Fisheries Regulation (KMFR) Act 1981 for regulation of harvesting zones. But the Act could not be implemented properly, though the Left and Democratic government introduced welfare measures for the benefit of the fisher folks - village societies, insurance schemes, more liberal credit, housing loans, etc. The government also appointed a committee to look into the “scientific and technological issues and assess the socio-economic consequences of the fisheries management demands of the fishermen”. The committee included representatives of the small-scale fishermen’s unions, the trawler owners’ associations, apart from the representatives of administration and scientific community. The committee was chaired by Babu Paul and it was accordingly known as the Babu Paul Committee. But the committee resulted in the stalemate: fishermen’s unions gave dissenting note, and eminent scientists did not participate in it.

The fisher folks’ problems could not be solved by the legislative, administrative and political steps of the government. The KSMTF again announced launching of the monsoon movement in 1984. It raised the same demands again which were raised in the 1981 agitation. Though the movement adopted peaceful methods of mobilisation, on occasions it resulted in the clashes between fisher folks and police. The movement presented a semblance of communal harmony symbolised by the hunger strike of a Hindu fisher men and catholic nun.

The government expressed its unwillingness to ban the trawling during the monsoon period on the ground that it would result in the fall of foreign exchange and unemployment. But the NFF (National Fishermen’s Forum) suggested banning of the trawling during monsoon on experimental basis; it suggested that the help of the FAO Fisheries Division be sought for providing expertise to ban trawling on experimental basis. Rather than to accept the suggestion the government appointed another three-member committee headed by A G Kalawar (Kalawar Committee) to look into the management issues. Submitted in 1985, the Kalawar Committee did not approve the ban on shrimp harvesting during the monsoon but it suggested the reduction in the size of the trawler fleet to half of its existing strength. The committee also suggested “need to encourage the more passive shrimp harvesting gear like trammel nets which were newly introduced by the artisanal fishermen in 1983”, recommended a total ban on purse-seiner operations in coastal waters and “cautioned about the massive motorization drive



being encouraged by the Government”. The recommendations of the Kalawar Committee by and large remain unimplemented marred by the frequent changes of governments in the state.

Towards the end of the 1980s the KSMTF took up new demands:

- i) Only active fishermen should be given ownership of fishing assets,
- ii) asking the government to take legal action against the trawlers/purse-seiners under the KMFR Act.

Women played very significant role in the fisher folks’ movements in Kerala. In fact, it were the women fish vendors of Trivendram district who had launched an agitation in 1979 to demand statutory right to use public transport. As a result, within two years of the agitation, the Fisheries Department introduced special buses for them, though their statutory rights were not accepted.

In the 1990s, the fisher folks’ movement achieved the national character. There was an All-India level opposition to the introduction of the modern technology which got a boost during the liberalisation regime introduced by P V Narasingha Rao’s government. One of the issues which was opposed included DSF (Deep Sea Fishing) units. The NFF launched a national agitation through National Fishermen’s Action Council against Joint Ventures of Fishers’ (NFACAJV). A *bandh* was organised on 23-24 November, 1994, which led to the closure of market and cessation of fishing. The NFACAJV also organised demonstration in the national capital, besides organising *bandhs*, demonstrations at the ports, etc. These actions caught the attention of the Government of India. The latter appointed a committee to review DSF policy in February 1994. This committee consisted of 16 members and was chaired by an retired IAS officer, P. Murari. Dissatisfied with the composition of the committee, Thomas Kocherry, now as a leader of the NFACAJV set on an 8-days hunger strike. As a result, the committee was reconstituted with inclusion of the fishermen’s representatives and increase in its strength of the committee up to 41. The Murari Committee which submitted its report in 1996 made the following major recommendations:

- 1) complete ban on fishing by foreign investors in Indian water by not issuing the new licenses and phasing out the old licenses;

The government promised to disband the DSF policy of 1991 and take steps to protect the traditional fisher folks. The NFF (1997) continued to mobilise the fisher folks throughout the 1990s and the beginning of this century in different ways aiming at generating consciousness among them.

During the recent years Fisher folks’ movement in Kerala got linked with the international movement of the fishermen in the sense that the issues raised by it were framed in the light of the report of the International Conference of Fish workers and their Supporters (ICFS) held in July 2005. These included the familiar issues — participation of the fisher folks in the fisheries and their management; sale and processing of the harvested catches, which were raised even earlier. The ICFS also recommended to the national governments to “Associate local fisher men’s organizations or fishing communities in devising and implementing regulatory measures — but with the possibility of their effective control.”

### 15.4.2 Fisher Folks' Movement of Chilika Lake : Anti-Prawn Culture Agitation

Chilika Lake was a reference point of the fisher folks' movement in 1999. Chilika Lake known for the largest brackish water in Asia, is a source of livelihood to a large number of the fisher folks of Orissa. Chilika Lake was declared as wetland of international importance by the Ramar Convention. The Lake is also habitat of a large variety of biodiversity including dolphins and different migratory birds. Since 1992 an NGO, *Orissa Krushak Mahasangh*, with Banka Bihari Das as its president had helped to organise the local fishing communities around Chilika Lake with the with the help of the Mangrove Action Project.

Tata House sought to set up a large number of industrial scale semi-intensive shrimp farms on the shore of Chilika Lake. Tata's move was stopped mid-way as result of the court injunction. The court injunction came after the hard legal battle between the Tata House and fisher folks. Though the court injunction prevented Tata's attempt to proceed, a large number of shrimp farms came to be built illegally on the Chilika shore by other groups involving mafia, politicians and bureaucrats.

The fisher folks launched an agitation against the shrimp farming in the Chilika Lake in 1999 May-July. The organisations which took lead in were *Chilika Matsyajib Mahasangh*, National Fisherworkers Forum NFF (India), World Forum for Fish-harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF). A large number of the fisher folks participated in the agitation. On June 11, 1999 the agitation took a violent turn resulting in police firing in which four fisher folks were killed and 13 were seriously injured. The fisher folks destroyed a large number of prawn farms. They formed human wall to prevent the movement of vehicles into cities, stopped the trains. The *bandh* saw maximum success in Bhubaneswar.

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## 15.5 SUMMARY

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To sum up, the fisher folks form a larger section of Indian population, especially in the coastal states — West Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Gujarat, etc. They contribute enormously to the domestic and international economy. They consist of diverse social and cultural groups belonging to three major religious — Hindu, Islam and Christianity. In terms of economic categories, there are broadly three groups among them — those who own their own vessels and use them them for fishing, those who do not own vessels but work on the boats and trawlers of other fisher folks, and those who own boats and travelers and employ other fisher folks. The third category also consists of the non-fisher folks, traders, politicians and moneylenders.

The fisher folks are subject to the exploitation by the moneylenders and traders. They are also worst sufferers of the natural disaster like flood, typhoons and tsunami. Since the 1990s they are facing the stiff competition with the machenised boats and trawlers, as a result of the liberalisation policy introduced by P.V. Narasingha Rao's government. Though the fisher folks have a large number of problems, the issues on which they have been mobilised into the collective actions are related to their participation in the fisheries and their management and protecting them from the competition with the machenised boats and travelers.



The fisher folks have been mobilised into collective actions from the 1960s onwards. Although fisher folks movements have been noticed in other states also, it is in Kerala that they have been most organised and sustained. It has been possible due to efforts of their leadership and organisations. Both the leadership and organisations have been existing at the district, state and national levels. In 1978 different fisher folks' unions formed a confederation known as the National Fishermen's Forum (NFF).

The leadership to the fisher folks especially in Kerala has largely been provided by the Church Fathers, nuns, social activists, intellectual-academic activists. Their collective actions have involved demonstrations, *dharnas* and hunger strikes. On several occasions their agitations resulted in violence. The government responded mainly with the appointment of commissions. The recommendations of the commissions have generally remained unimplemented. Nevertheless, the fisher folks' movements have made significant contribution to the social movements in the country.

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## 15.6 EXERCISES

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- 1) Discuss the socio-economic profile of the fisher folks and identify their main problems.
- 2) Write a note on the leadership and organisations of the fisher folks.
- 3) How do you understand the fisher folks' movements as social movements? Explain with the help of some examples.