

Marginalized Women Workers of Costal Slums of Kerala

ANILKUMAR.K

(Assistant Professor, University College, Thiruvananthapuram)

Introduction

The word mechanization is a most widely used term in social science. This is more familiar to the discipline of development. The modernity, mechanization and industrial revolution has been fundamental for the transition of Indian society. The mechanization process increases the exploitation of natural resources. Mechanization means change of process or an activity that is run by machines instead of using people or animals. Resources originally implied life which means an image of a spring that continually rises from the ground. Like a spring re-sources rises again and again more over there is a relationship between human and nature. With advent of industrialization and globalism, The natural resources were required as inputs for industrial production and global trade (Gasper 2000)¹The concept of resources and livelihood of rural people including the fisherwomen in coastal areas has been linked to their environment A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (material and social) and activities required for a means of living (Chambers and Coway 1992)² Livelihood needs of men and women are different in terms of their roles, responsibilities and resources (Shangpliang 2012)³. The women are biologically different from men is often emphasized with reference to their child bearing and nurturing capacities. What is generally ignored is that gendering of tasks is based on many other social cultural factors and socialization, rather than natural or biological differences between women and men (Krishna 2002).⁴ In coastal areas the major task of women are assigned to rearing and caring of children, management of family, collection of drinking water and fetching of firewood. The major task of fishing is confined to the male members. The fishermen community has deep rooted affinity and admiration to the sea.

There is common myth existing among the fishermen community is that the life of the fishermen in the deep sea is in the purity of his women. The power on resource and Labor » vested in the hands of male members, Power relation has been historically defined among the male members in the coastal areas. The fishermen community is widely located in the coastal areas of Kerala from south to north. The traditional fishermen community is located in each district under different religions and caste identity. In Trivandrum to Quilon district, they are Latin Catholic Christians. In central part of Kerala, from Alleppy, Kochi and Trichur, they are called as on Arayan or Mukkuvan or in Velan' a lower caste people in Hinduism where as in Kozhikode, Kannur and Kazaragod districts in Northern part of both Muslims and Hindu fishermen community is equally distributed. The educational and occupational status of fishermen community is very poor compared to other traditional occupation group in the state. Mechanization and Labour Sector .The introduction of Mechanized trawling as part of the Indo-Norwegian Project (INP, 1957) resulted in the entry of non-fisherman and middlemen into the industry and their activities rendered the over use of natural resources and exploitation of traditional fishermen (Gosh, 2004).⁵ At present about 54,000 mechanized fishing vessels below 20 mtr. overall length (OAL),operating, a majority is engaged in trawling and sizable percentage operate in the near shore waters resulting in pressure on the coastal stocks.

The intensive mechanized trawling reduced the catchment capacity of the traditional fishermen. The traditional fishermen are found to be economically in a pathetic condition. The incapability over the resources adversely affected the livelihood of fishermen community. The entry of fishing trawlers from European countries particularly from Netherlands in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the government of India, also have reduced the work and income of more than 10 lakh fishing population in coastal areas of India. The government has allowed entry of resources-specific fishing vessels such as Tuna

Long Liners (TLL). Mid water Trawlers (MWT), Hook and Line Trawlers (HLT) and the like about 30-85 such vessels has been operating in the deeper waters of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The mechanized Trawlers naturally reduced fish output for local fishing population dur extensive catchment and rendering the traditional fishermen out of their work (Hiraway 1990).⁶ In addition, the stagnation in the marine fish production creating unemployment in the traditional fishing sector in Kerala.

The Mechanization, Liberalization and Privatization and Globalization (M&LPG) substantially affected the rural population in India. It brought into being technological transformation which changed the traditional work modes, livelihood, resources and power relation in the society (Modi 2012). The transformation in technology affected the 72 percent of people lived in rural India as per 2001 census. The lack of power on technology leads to low catchment and even unemployment among the fisher men community .Above circumstances is found to be instigate fishermen to depend on other sectors for their livelihood. As per 1991 census 92 percent of the women workers engaged in unorganized sector The growth in the female employment in urban areas depends on service sectors, such as low paid docile jobs like house made casual labours, par-time sweeper, cleaners in hospitals and restaurants, sales job and the manual labour in booming construction industry. The overall general situation has fundamentally changed as a consequence of industrialization and urbanization. Large scale migration from rural to urban areas has made new issues in both areas. A significant majority of the labour groups including women migrated to urban areas and employed various kinds of occupation such as skilled semiskilled and unskilled jobs (Modi 2012).

The contribution of migrant marginalized women in Blue collar and white collar job is very low. Bose in his study of the 54 women in two low income slums in quarter settlements in Kolkata highlighted the negative impact of substantial housing on low income women and their families revealed that the condition exacted a huge physical and emotional toll on the lives of the people. The study on occupational status of mothers in the sum of Kerala

revealed that out of the 300 households 47 % of the mother were no-skilled labourers and 31% hare no permanent Vaccination and Alergolod Women Workers of Costal areas, 37 patient engaged in docile activates. Only 1134 employed in government sector as low paid employees. Thus revealed that occupational status of others was very poor (Kumar. 2011)⁷. A study conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Mumbai during 1980 indicated that 15.7% of population was below income poverty line (Deshpande and Deshpande1990)⁸

Disparity, Exploitation and Lack of Production. The 6-herms are mainly formed to be engaged in low paid docile jobs in tertiary sector. Most of the women workers get sum of 300-500 Rupees against their employment .The analysis has also shows that there is a high disparity in wages between male and female workers even in Kerala. The indication of National Sample Survey (NSS) revealed that the illiterate female workers received only 50 percent of the wages of the illiterate male workers Majority of the women casual labours were illiterate and these belong to the age group 35 to 60 years Consequent on the stringent exploitation and economic disparities created impoverishment of the women work force in the coastal areas.

The growing globalizing society due to expansion of air travel facilities, ports and other means of transport made, bread band human net relations making the world as a global village (Carl Mc Luhan)⁹. The emerging phenomenon in the 21 century, information and Technology is not provide any opportunity to the fishermen community in general and working women in particularly instead of submissive low paid jobs. Increase in Financial Responsibility and Family Crises. Women in coastal areas have been under deep rooted socio-economic and psychological problem. They are the direct victims of cumulative events and policy and changes in crude oil prices. The menial income from low paid job is very difficult to maintain the livelihood activities. The lack of power over mechanization and resultant unemployment of fishermen intensified the financial constraints of the women work force in coastal areas. Most of them have been in unorganized sectors. To overcome the financial constraints, the fishermen are found to have depends on money lenders. The poor fishermen family took Ioan to meet the expenses of medical, educational, leisure on wedding or other domestic requirements. The increasing anxiety due to over debt and poverty destruct them mentally and inversely affect their growth and development.

Kerala has a coastline of about 590 km., out of which 60% (as of 2017) has been usurped by the government and private companies. Large and small scale projects are implemented on this land (most of them funded by institutions like the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or the World Bank and by the government), with very little regard for environmental norms, and claiming resources that should be available to the community that inhabits these areas. Fishing has been a source of subsistence for traditional fisher folk communities, both for fishermen and fisherwomen, whereby the work done by the latter has been barely acknowledged. With the advent of globalisation and mechanisation, radical changes have come to the sector and to the communities associated with it. Production has shifted from communities to industries.¹⁰

Globalisation And Its Effects On Coastal Communities

After Independence, it was felt that modernization and mechanization of the fishing sector would help increase productive capacity. The Indo-Norwegian Project (INP) – a tripartite agreement signed in 1953 in New Delhi between the United Nations, the Government of India, and the Government of Norway – came to be as an investment by a Social Democratic government in helping a “backward economy”. With the INP, came technological advancements in harvesting processes. These advancements were supposedly meant to promote economic growth and bestow upon these villages for better infrastructure.

The 1960s saw an increase in the international demand for prawns, which encouraged the government to promote export-oriented prawn fisheries. Mechanized boats were built, and fishermen were trained to use trawl nets. Export oriented fisheries and a high rate of investment allowed merchants, financiers and middlemen to slide into the sector, gradually pushing out the traditional fishing community from mechanized fishing. Prolonged periods of mechanized deep sea fishing and aquaculture, also brought about a multitude of problems ranging from over-fishing, depletion of the oceans, indebtedness of the fish-workers etc. all of which posed an acute threat to the fisheries.

The state attempted to carry out the mechanization program, while simultaneously creating producer cooperatives. Mechanized boats were to be issued only through producer cooperatives to groups of fishermen. However, as John Kurien points out, these cooperatives were often dominated by financiers and middlemen and were the furthest thing from being fishermen organizations¹¹.

In order to counter this ‘nexus of exploitation’, communities of artisanal fishermen saw it necessary to organize themselves, and forge linkages. The cooperatives that were formed by the fishermen, differed from the ones created by the government, in that they were run by members of the community and facilitated small repayments, at low interest rates. The Kerala Swatantrata Matsya Thozilali Federation (KSMTF) was one such organization.

These organizations led to the ‘political awakening’ of the artisanal fishing community. As trade unions and cooperatives cropped up, the coastal communities of Kerala witnessed a barrage of hunger strikes, and demonstrations. Their chief demand was that trawling during monsoon season (breeding season for the fish near the shore) should be banned. Other demands included curbing the pollution of inland water resources, a comprehensive regulation by the Marine Regulation Act and that mechanized boats must not operate 5 km. beyond the coast.

Women: The Worst Affected

There are approximately 5.4 million people engaged in fisheries in India. Women account for 1.6 million, and more than a million come from the 222 fishing villages in Kerala¹². Most of these women depend

on supplementary activities like processing and marketing of fish for survival. However, the conception of the INP was based on the premise that fisherwomen had little to no involvement in the fisheries.

Women in fishing households are traditionally not allowed to go to sea. They look after childcare and domestic chores. However, most of them were also involved in supporting activities such as head-load fish vending, deferring coconut husks and manual rope making, shell collection, processing, marketing, net-making etc. These activities served as a way for the women to supplement their family income. Taking up any of these activities was considered to be a “loss of status” for the family, and hence, when asked (through surveys, interviews etc), the matter was mostly kept private, leading to an erasure of the work carried out by these women. As a result of this erasure, violence was meted out to women, both on their identity in society and on their physical entity.

The divide between men and women grew wider. As men from local fishing communities were displaced as fishers and “procurer of produce”, they were still absorbed by the industry as head load workers, agents, fish-sellers, thereby displacing the women. They had greater access to technology and greater mobility within the markets and the villages, which allowed to them to do so. It was the fisherwomen who sold the catch the men brought in at markets. A fall in fish stocks meant that they would have to procure the produce from elsewhere, deal with the cooperatives, and resist manipulative moneylenders. Less produce meant less income, and less income left them indebted to money lenders. And with the traditional fish markets swallowed by big corporations, they were left all the more vulnerable and insecure. They found themselves having to travel long distances to sell their produce in markets, and yet they were being denied entry on public transport because of their smelly baskets. To add insult to injury, large scale sand mining activities made the water unfit for consumption, forcing women to walk long distances to fetch drinking water.

A loss in productive activity had the men turn to alcoholism and gambling, leading to a spike in cases of wife beating and desertion and sexual harassment.

The Resistance

As women started to collectivize, they started off by getting involved in religious activities and discussions on topics of common interest. The late 1970s-80s saw a rise in the number of women’s organizations in coastal villages. By the end of the 1980s, the women members of KSMTF decided to set up a women’s wing – the Theeradesa Mahila Vedi (TMV). Women like Aleyamma Vijayan, Sister Philomene Mary, Sister Alice and Magline Peter set this movement in motion.

Since its inception, TMV has waged continued resistance against the incessant marginalization and exploitation of local fishing communities. The one that has been most proudly talked about is their fight for special buses. The women took to the streets, picketed, marched, fasted and organized a strike for about four to five years, until the government relented and provided them with special buses. In fact, the first ever march of the women fish vendors (1979) saw them march with their fish baskets to the secretariat to demand for the right to access public transport.

Next on their agenda, demands were placed at the panchayat markets they worked for, for the provision of basic amenities like drinking water, ice boxes, a toilet, a space to change their clothes and protection from the goondas who circulated in these markets. Demonstrations have also been organized to protest unfair tax collection by the contractors. TMV and its members have also stepped in and pursued cases

of domestic violence and sexual harassment, that eventually culminated in the arrest of the perpetrator, giving women the confidence to report cases of violence.

In 1992, the fisherwomen, along with the fish-workers association, set up huts in front of the secretariat's office where they cooked food, and slept for 15 days until fisherwomen were included in government schemes offering financial aid and insurance. Not only did this give them added financial security, but also demanded that they be recognized as fish workers by the state.

The resistance by the artisanal fisher folk community is the epitome of the phrase "one step forward, two step backwards". Although the fisherwomen were given special buses plying to and from markets, in 2004, they took to picketing the office of the bus administration to discuss the shoddy maintenance of bus operations.

In December 2004, a tsunami swept through coastal communities in Kerala and along with it, income and the ability to access cash for most women. Relief shelters offered very little privacy and sanitation facilities, separate toilets etc., and also put them at the risk of being harassed by men and being overlooked by male doctors.

Livelihood programs, focused on the number of boats lost, thereby ignoring the work done by women and were simultaneously excluded from relief measures. In 2017, they carried out a 65 day struggle against the construction of LPG storage plant built by the Indian Oil Corporation in Kochi. Till date, most local fish vendors and hawkers face the threat of eviction by corporate lobbies, but it is the resistance of the fisherwomen that have kept these forces at bay¹³. The global conference on women empowerment in 1988, pointed out that empowerment is the only and surest way of partnering women in development. The WHO and the UN have repeatedly emphasized on the need to strengthen women at grassroots, in order to ensure the nations' development. Considering the fact that women are by nature power-shy as well as powerless, empowerment is necessary to make the women equal partners at all levels of development. Though one can see various reform movements and empowerment strategies developed for the early history of India, the latter was taken up very seriously only during the last decade. Earlier, women's empowerment centered on 'empowered' women, where as today it is realized that empowerment of women should start at the grass root level.

In India, self-help groups or SHGs represent a unique approach to financial intermediation. The approach combines access to low-cost financial services with a is applicable in the SHG context. Rao argues that empowerment should 'attempt to change the current social and economic institution that embodies the basic and unequal power structure in the society'. Empowerment is a long, complex process. Margaret(1949) described three levels to empowerment. The first is the awakening of individual consciousness; the second, is development of collective consciousness; and the third and final, is at the level of translating collective skills and resource into political and legal action, ultimately leading to women's empowerment¹⁴. This is a process of social transformation, where women gain control of decision making over issues that affect their lives, in order to have access to and control over resources and benefits. Thus, through empowerment, women become an important and active ingredient of social development. The process starts with enlightenment. As long as the women are ignorant they cannot be empowered. Mohini (1998) defines empowerment as a process whereby women become enlightened, and thus, increase their own self-reliance to assert their independent right to make choice and control resources that assist in challenging and eliminating the factors that subjugate them¹⁵. Thus the concept of SHGs is that of helping oneself for development through one another. By participating in SHGs, women begin re-examining their lives critically and collectively. SHGs enable women

to look at old problems in new ways, analyze their environment and situations, recognize their strength, alter their self-image, access new kinds of information and knowledge acquired at gaining greater control over resources of kinds.

Micro-credit initiatives have become increasingly popular as a way to mobilize poor communities through the provision of loans through specialized financial institutions (Mosley and Hulme, 1998). Small groups are formed, and loans are allocated to members, based on group solidarity instead of formal collateral (Montgomery, 1996).¹⁶ This strategy appeals both to those on the left, as it is based on redistribution principles, and to those on the right for it promotes self-sufficiency and independence of the poor through capitalist activities (Mosely and Hulme,1998). Micro-credit schemes have been particularly targeted towards poor women, who are often discriminated against not only by institutions, but also within their own households. The provision of loans to women may then serve the dual goals of increasing household wealth and empowering females (Amin et al., 1998; Kabeer, 2000).¹⁷ However there is conflicting results of micro-credit on women's status and well-being. While some consider it contributing towards women empowerment some others doubt whether it has succeeded in achieving its real objectives (Montgomery, 1996; Rahman, 1998).¹⁸ Given the above background, the authors deemed it worthwhile to look at the vying evidence and draw their own conclusions regarding whether indeed the SHG

Conclusion

The fishing community being patriarchal, continue to hold strong cultural prejudice and bias against women. Although women from the maritime community were comparatively stronger than women belonging to other sectors, they still remained predominantly subservient to their men folk. Fisherwomen generally remained at home taking care of house hold or doing sundry work such as processing dry fish and vending fish door to door. The introduction of SHG by the Government supported by other allied agencies, leased a new of life to the fisherwomen living in the coastal area, as it provided a window of opportunity for these women, and through them, their families, to achieve upward social mobility. Upward social mobility or empowerment of women usually took place in three stages, viz. motivation by experts, a kind of anticipatory mental social mobility and actual actions. The formation of women's groups, regular savings and income, a new perspective and knowledge, conscious group mobilization, frequent dialogue leading to cooperative decision making, together contributed towards creating an alternative to women's traditional role. Thus, it turns enhanced the women's ability to articulate and ensure them a relatively higher status in family and in the village. Hence, one gathers that women were capable of gathering themselves to seize the opportunity for their individual development as well as that of their family members. This increase in household income and exposure to novel experiences with enterprises and allied financial institutions, however, did not translate into women acquiring new status or power within the family. Further, it was found that women were harassed by their spouses, plagued by technical problems concerning marketing and more importantly, the increasing exposed to health hazards resulting in elevated morbidity rates. While some label micro-credit as revolutionary movement and a new paradigm for development, there is still much to ponder on the real impacts of micro-credit. Some have indeed questioned whether micro-credit leads to poverty

References

1. Gasper. Dex (2005) Ethics of Development, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi. p.8
2. Chambers, Robert and Lyndon. Coway. (1992). Sustainable rural livelihood: Practical concept for the 21st century. P.3
3. Shanepliang. Rokha. M. (2012) Forest Legislative and Livelihood Strategies, Sociological Bulletins, Vol. 61, P.2
4. Krishna. Sum (2004) Livelihood and Gender: Equity in Community Resource Management, New Delhi: Saga Publication. P.89
5. Ghosh, D. Sanjunva, (2004). Ban on Trawling the Aquatic Environment, Kerala Calling, P 5.
6. Hiruway, Indira. (1996). Economic Reforms and Gender Issues in India. The Indian Journal of Labour Economic, Vol. 39. P.65.
7. Kumar L.P. (2011) socio-Cultural Determinants of Adolescents Behavior in Slum, Ph.D Thesis, Department of Sociology. University of Kerala. P.125.
8. Deshpande, S. and Deshpande L. (1994). Bombay Labour Flexibility survey: A Micro-Level contribution. The Indian Journal of labour Economics, 37 (0) 535
9. Carl Mc Luhan . The Global Village, Bantam books, 1989 ,P. 82.
10. Sen, Sunanda (2010) Globalisation and development, National Book trust, New Delhi, P.44.
11. John Kuiryan- The Molecules of life, 2013, p. 51.
12. Census Report, Government of India, 1991. P.83.
13. Survey of Indian Agriculture, The Hindu, 2006, p. 130
14. Margaret EG (1949). In Elaine Murphy editor. Reproductive health rights- Reaching the hard to reach, pp. 129-137.
15. Mohini GV (1998). Emancipation and Empowerment of Women, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi. P.4
16. Montgomery R (1996). Disciplining or Protecting the Poor? Avoiding the Social Costs of Peer Pressures in Micro-credit Schemes, J. Int. Dev., 8(2): 289-305.
17. Kabir N (2000). Conflicts over Credit: Re-evaluating the Empowerment Potential of Loans to Women in Rural Bangladesh, World Dev., 29(1): 63-84.
18. Rahman A (1998). Micro-credit initiatives for Equitable and Sustainable Development: Who Pays? World Dev., 27(1): 67-72.