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ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER

AP coastal crisis leaves fishermen marooned

Moneylender troubles, a fast depleting catch due to reckless pollution, and displacement: it has been raining blow after blow on fisherfolk in Andhra Pradesh recently. Will a meeting with a cabinet minister fix things? **Keya Acharya** reports.



15 August 2009 - It is 2 pm in the blazing summer sun at Pudumadaka beach, Vishakapatnam's most important fish-landing centre, 60 km away from the city, in Andhra Pradesh. The old, British-era lighthouse, now newly-painted red and white, stands in mute testimony to the age-old use of this coast and of its four main traditional fishing villages alongside.

But for 40-year-old Ummudi Bangaraiah, age, experience and tradition add up to practically nothing, as he and his five compatriots spread out their net in the sands and untangle the fish from its folds. His catch of the day is a round basketful of sardines, about 4 kilos in all. His total earnings from that catch won't fetch him more than Rs.100; Rs.200 if he's lucky. That money then has to be divided with the other five fishermen in the boat.

If Ummudi Bangaraiah is lucky yet again, that is, not to have any financiers skulking around in the beach, waiting for their pound of flesh. Unable to secure any financial loans from regular banks for their fishing nets, an incredible 15 types in all for various types of fish, hooks, catamarans, outboard motors and cost of 5-10 litres of diesel per day, the fishermen are held in a vice-like grip by debts to private financiers.

The average cost of outfitting a fisherman to go to sea is Rs.1.5 lakhs, excluding annual maintenance. The money covers the cost of a fibre-reinforced plastic boat (approx Rs. 60,000) with a small outboard motor costing Rs. 40,000, different types of nets for another Rs. 40,000 and Rs. 10,000 worth of raw materials such as diesel and other miscellaneous items. The money is payable back to moneylenders at a monthly interest of Rs. 5 for every one hundred borrowed rupees.

Those not able to pay back the high interest rate in cash pay back in kind. In Pudumadaka, Kadapalam, Pandapalam and Jalaipalan villages, all of whom use the Pumumadaka beach, an average day's catch is divided into eleven parts, three parts of which, consisting of the best and most expensive fish such as seer, prawns, pomfret and snapper, are taken by the moneylender and the remaining 8 parts divided by the five or six people in the boat. On a good day, each man may make about Rs.100, but generally even less.

The Pudumadaka fishermen are relatively luckier than their counterparts at the other end of the coastline, 85 kms from Vishakapatnam city. Here, the fishermen of Wadapeta village have to divide their catch into seven parts, three of the choicest of which go to the moneylender, while the remaining four parts are then divided by the 5-6 fishermen on the boat.

Dire grey sea ending livelihoods

But equally dire as this terrible stranglehold of moneylenders, whether in Wadapeta or in Pudumadaka, is the pollution of the seas near Vishakhapatnam, visible to the naked eye by the colour of the seas, a dirty grey for at least 500 metres or more from the beach, outlined clearly by the sea changing back to blue in a neat line beyond that. Fishermen say the seas near the beaches were blue till a decade ago. Major steel, thermal, petrochemicals, fertilizers, ports, harbours and Special Economic Zones (SEZ), the latter of which enjoy 20 year 'tax holidays' are located on the coastline.

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A dark line of waste sludge winding itself down to the sea off the coast at Vishakhapatnam. Industrial pollution is a serious problem in the seas here. Pic courtesy: DFYWA.

Professor O S R U Bhanu Kumar , head of meteorology and oceanography at Andhra Pradesh University at Vishakhapatnam says industrial pollution and violations of coastal zonal regulations is rampant in Vishakhapatnam.

"We dump everything into our seas; even our municipalities dump raw sewage into the sea", says Kumar.

Arjilli Dasu, chief executive officer of the District Fishermen's Youth Welfare Association (DFYWA), trying to bring some relief to 25 fishing villages near Vishakhapatnam, says overall neglect of traditional fishing communities has exacerbated the problem.

"The Indian government has promoted deep sea activities for foreign exchange earnings, the previous government has used coastal areas to promote IT activities and now there are coastal industrial corridors, sand-mining industries, 6-lane highways and a port almost every 50 km, all of whom appear to have forgotten that traditional fishing communities have lived and fished for a livelihood off these coastlines for centuries", he says.

"It is very unfortunate that no one pays any attention to environment", rues Kumar, while Dasu complains that the coastline is being used 'like a dustbin'.

Various fishermen in both Wadapeta and Pudumadaka tell most of these industries are polluting with impunity and that there might be regulations against releasing effluents into the seas, but there is no practical enforcement of them.

"We are witness", says Chodipalli Yerrinaidu, member of the Traditional Fishermen's Society set up by DFYWA in Pudumadaka 4 years ago. "Apart from the damage by the apparel city (a Sri lankan garment industry, Brandix, set up in the SEZ), now there is a 'pharmaceutical city' also coming up. We see small dead fish floating in the seas, we see dead tortoises on the beach," says Yerrinaidu.

Some 60 kms away from him in Wadapeta village, 44-year-old fisherman Gantipalle Chinnakasulu repeats Yerrinaidu's problem, saying he has seen, several times, dead small fish floating in the sea.

"Because of effluents being released into the sea, the fish are gone 40 km away. We stay 15 days at sea, but we don't even get the old varieties any more", he says.

Arjilli Dasu says that around 30-35 fish species, earlier found here, have disappeared; among them are types of shark, hilsa, polsa, big snapper and bombay duck. There are also inadequate amounts of seer, prawn and ribbon fish for this summer, while anchovies usually found in October-December, have all but disappeared from inside nets.

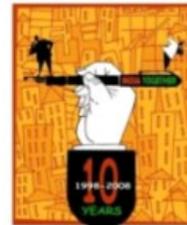
Third blow: displacement

Furthermore, displacement of fishing villages because of rapid industrialization on the coast is killing a gasping community. Dasu says around 120 fishing villages in the last five years have been displaced by the Vishakhapatnam Steel plant, Bhabha Atomic Centre, Gangavaram port and the SEZs. Gangavaram port, for example, gave jobs to 600 village people, but displaced and made jobless over 3000 fishermen. Some portion of the displaced have become seasonally daily-waged labourers while many have migrated, and still are migrating to the Andamans, hoping to manage the only livelihood they ever knew.

"In the next ten years, there will be huge migration from these communities, as much as there will be no fish in the seas", predicts Dasu.

Contributing to depleting stocks and to the fishermen's sad plight are mechanised boats and trawlers issued licenses by the department of industries – using fine nets that catch even small fry.

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Though there are regulations that prohibit mechanized boats plying upto 8 km from the coastline, fishermen in both Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh say they face continuous risk from trawlers that injuriously hit and topple their small boats or drag their nets. Overfishing by trawlers is a countrywide phenomenon that traditional fishermen's societies from Gujarat on the west coast to West Bengal on the east are agitating about.

"Because of effluents being released into the sea, the fish are gone 40 km away. We stay 15 days at sea, but we don't even get the old varieties any more."

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The fish-vendors, mostly wives of fishermen, are deeply strapped due to both dwindling fish catches and thereby lesser incomes, lack of proper storage and transportation, highlighted by Vasupalli Lakshmi's plight. 38-year-old Lakshmi, a fish-vendor from Wadapeta, injured her hip bone traveling in an overcrowded auto that overturned.

"I got no treatment at the government hospital, so my husband had to take me to the private hospital at Tuni. My treatment cost Rs.8000", she says, "The auto driver paid Rs. 5000 and my community collected the remaining money from everyone. But the auto gets crowded because there are no bus services", she adds.

A series of agitations by fishermen and fishworkers' organizations are currently underway, wanting basic help from the government. In 2008, the National Fishworkers' Forum, undertook a coastal march 'Save the Coast, Save the Fishers', from Gujarat on 1st May 2008, reaching Kolkata on 28th June 2008, to campaign for coastal conservation of biodiversity and fishermen's livelihoods.

In July 2009, the NFF met with Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh to put forward concerns on the rapidly deteriorating environment of the coastlines and ask for a separate Fisheries Ministry.

The matter still hangs. ☹

Keya Acharya

15 Aug 2009

Keya Acharya is a Bangalore based development and investigative journalist.

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