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CLASH BETWEEN PURSE SEINE AND ARTISANAL FISHERMEN AT COCHIN*

The commercial purse seine fishing operations commenced in Kerala towards the end of 1979 and at present about 60 purse seine units are operated from Cochin base. The introduction of purse seining in Kerala in the traditional grounds has been vehemently opposed by the indigenous fishermen and has, on many occasions, resulted in skirmishes between the two from the very beginning. In order to minimise the tension prevailing between the mechanised and non-mechanised fishermen and as a step towards a better management of the pelagic fishery resources of Kerala coast, the Government of Kerala enacted the Kerala Marine Fishing Regulations Act, 1980. As per provisions contained in the act the area of operation of each type of vessel is clearly demarcated. No mechanised craft is permitted to fish upto 8 fathoms. Countrycrafts and catamarans fitted with outboard motors can operate from 8 fathoms. Mechanised boats of less than 25 gross tonnage, are restricted to operate between 10 and 20 fathoms and purse seine boats are permitted to fish only beyond 22 fathoms. The purse seine boats if caught fishing in banned waters can be fined upto Rs.5000/- or the catch confiscated and the fine increased to five times the cost of the catch.

Recently the Government of Kerala started strict enforcement of the Act. In September 1982 the State Fisheries Department seized 6 boats which were found fishing in banned waters and fined Rs.2,000/- each. As a protest against the seizure of the purse seine vessels by the Fisheries Department authorities, the Purse seine boat Owner's Association along with Purse seine boat Thozhilali Union observed one day hartal on 16.9.82, with the support of Cochin Fisheries Harbour Thozhilali Union, Buying agents and merchants' Association, Fisheries Harbour Merchants' Union etc. They also staged a 'dharna' in front of the Office of the Deputy Director of Fisheries, Government of Kerala, Ernakulam. The purse seine boat operators feel that the Kerala Marine Fisheries Regulation Act banning purse seining within 22 fathom zone is impractical, unrealistic and unscientific and point out that purse seining in nearby Karnataka and Goa is banned only within 5 km (8 fathoms) of the sea coast.

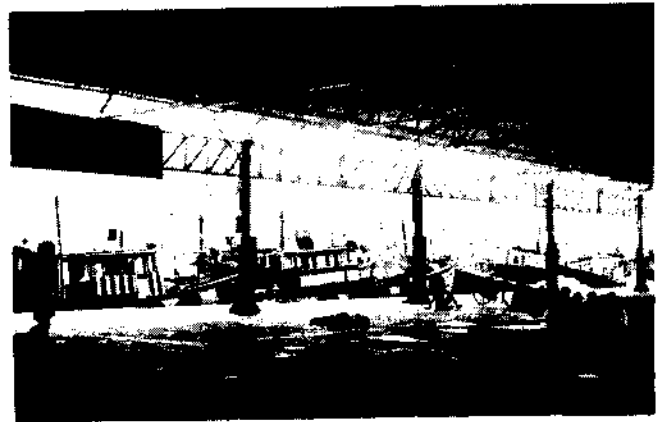
On 2.11.82 a purse seine boat 'Achumon' was set on fire and sunk off Vypeen Island near Nayarambalam by irrate artisanal fishermen. The indigenous fishermen employing thanguvala in country crafts of Puthuvypu,

Nayarambalam and Munambam fishing villages are of opinion that due to the operation of purse seine boats the sea has turned barren for them. According to them the purse seine boats operate all over the inshore areas and seldom beyond 22 fathom line and as a result they are finding it difficult to operate the thanguvala units economically. Normally the purse seine units operate from very early in the morning making on an average 3-4 hauls daily. The catch is lifted out and transported to the base by carrier vessels, while the purse seine continues to operate in the fishing ground. By the time the catch of the indigenous fishermen reach the coast, the supply would have far exceeded the demand. The special survey conducted by the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute to find out the impact of the purse seine operations on indigenous fisheries also showed that before the introduction of purse seining traditional fishermen were able to get higher prices, whenever the catch was less. However, the effect of purse seining at the present level of exploitation and availability was not tangibly felt on the indigenous fishery off Kerala coast (Jacob et. al. *Mar. Fish. Infor. Serv. T & E Ser. No. 40, 1982*).

In protest against the burning of the purse seine on 2.11.82 all the purse seiners at Cochin Fisheries Harbour struck work from 3.11.82. The increased violence of the traditional fishermen against purse seine fishermen had also recently resulted in the burning of the boats 'Veera Ratna' and 'Mahalakshmi'. The strike continued for more than a week, upto 10.11.82. As a consequence of this the Fisheries Harbour had a deserted look (Vide Photographs). With the already reduced activity of drift gill nets and shrimp trawlers at the Fisheries Harbour due to poor catch and as the protest strike by the purse seiners also continued a near fish famine was felt at Cochin and adjacent areas, with the cost of fish skyrocketing.

During the purse seining season about 55-60 purse seine units are operated from the harbour bringing an average catch of 100 tonnes of fish per day. The average estimated loss of catch during the strike period would have been about 800 to 1000 tonnes of fish consisting mostly of small sized oil sardine in the sizer range of 95-120 mm, as assessed from the trend

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Purse seiners and carrier boats lying idle at Cochin Fisheries Harbour due to strike on 3.11.82.

of purse seine landings immediately prior to and after the strike. The price of juvenile sardine fluctuated between Rs.500/- to Rs.800/- per tonne indicating that the total loss during the strike period would have amounted to between Rs.5.2 to Rs.6.5 lakhs. There was good demand even for cheap and trash fishes like small carangids (mainly *Alepes kalla*), juveniles of small sized sciaenids (*Johnieops dussumieri*, *J.sina*, *Kathala axillaris* and *Otolithes ruber*), flat fishes (*Cynoglossus macrostomus*) etc. which were marketed for prices ranging from Rs.1.5 to 2.0 per kg. Usually when there is good purse seine landings, these catches are mainly used for drying and very seldom marketed fresh. The price of quality fishes like pomfrets and seer fishes shot up. The purse seine strike made a majority of the nearly 5,000 workers employed at the Fisheries Harbour in connection with the handling of fish catches under employed. On an average 17 hand carts, 47 auto trucks, 154 bicycles, 24 tempos and 35 lorries come to the harbour every day. The production of ice in the factories near Cochin also was greatly reduced.

While the purse seine boat fishermen condemn the State Marine Fishing Regulation Act demarcating the area of fishing for purse seine boats, the traditional fishermen insist that if the law is not strictly enforced the traditional fishermen would become extinct due to starvation. The purse seiners while steaming out for fishing from the harbour very early in the morning often sight shoals very near the shore, which they usually fish. Off fishing villages like Puthuvyppu, Nayarambalam, Vypeen etc. the operation of purse seine boats can be seen even from the shore, which generally leads to tension between the indigenous and purse seine fishermen. It may also be noted that the motorisation of the country crafts with out-board engines has also not picked up to the same extent in these villages, as in the fishing villages of south Kerala.

The purse seine boats resumed fishing operations from 10.11.82 based on the discussions held at Trivandrum between the boat owners and the State Government authorities. However only few units ventured into

the sea for fishing fearing attack from the artisanal fishermen; the number of purse seines operated on that date being only 6 with 12 carriers. Their catch consisted of mainly juvenile oil sardine in the size range 95-120 mm. On 11.11.1982 there was no operation of purse seine boats from the harbour. However, from 15.11.1982 all the purse seines started fishing and landed good quantities of oil sardine. In December 1982 the State Fisheries Department impounded 15 purse seine boats for fishing in the prohibited waters. All these boats were fined Rs.5,000/- each. The tension between artisanal and purse seine fishermen is also continuing unabated. On January 10, 1983 members of some associations of the artisanal fishermen of nearby fishing villages of Cochin staged a 'dharma' at Ernakulam demanding total ban on purse seine fishing. Perhaps, due to some of these factors and pressures, some of the purse seine units have already shifted the area of operation from Kerala coast. At present only about 25-30 purse seine boats are operated from the Cochin Fisheries Harbour per day, whereas about 55-60 units were fishing daily in 1981 and 1982.

Banning of purse seines in Kerala cannot be considered a long range solution for the problem. The Kerala coast is rich in pelagic fish wealth. Sardines and mackerels are the most important pelagic fishes as far as the traditional fishing methods are concerned. The

indigenous fishing crafts alone cannot exploit the entire resources and if so left to them, the cost of fish is bound to skyrocket. In order to minimise the resentment of the artisanal fishermen to purse seine fishing, the patrolling of the sea to check fishing in the banned area should be intensified. But the fisheries department is helpless due to lack of infrastructure and manpower. The moment a patrol boat is cited the purse seine boat leaves the catch and speeds away. So proper petrolling in order to prevent the purse seiners operate in the banned area is a great necessity.

At present there is no co-operative society for fishermen in this area. As in the case of all other trades, the middlemen are exploiting the fishermen who actually undergo all the hardships in the sea and get only a meagre share. One possible way of aiding these fishermen is that the Central and State Governments and scheduled banks should extend liberal credit facilities to artisanal fishermen both on individual and co-operative societies and each such society can be entrusted with a limited number of purse seine units which should operate within the specified area. This will also help in spreading out the purse seine fishing effort more uniformly along the coast, preventing unhealthy concentration of fishing effort in certain specified areas and would probably help in minimising the conflict between the fishermen.

