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MALPE FISHING HARBOUR INFERNO: AN IMPACT ANALYSIS*

An unprecedented fire disaster, in which 196 mechanised fishing boats were gutted, took place at Malpe, a major fishing harbour in Karnataka State in the afternoon of 19th July, 1979. Malpe is situated about 65 km by road north of Mangalore, wherein there was a large concentration of purse-seiners and other mechanised boats. The total loss due to this havoc has been estimated at 2.3 crores of rupees.

Fire incident

The fishing season having ended by the middle of June, a large number of purse-seine boats and trawlers were docked in the yard covering an area of about 8 hectares. The fire started at about 3 P. M. in the north-western side of the present fish landing jetty east of the new fishing harbour under construction. It is reported that the fire was caused by sparks from the welding work carried out by some mechanics on one of the boats. The fire spread rapidly due to dry weather prevailing in the place for three days prior to the incident. Added to this, the bone dry thatched leaves that covered the boats and the winds from the western side helped the fire to engulf the whole area in a short time. Two fire engines from Udipi and three from Mangalore came to the spot and were engaged in the task of extinguishing the fire. There were loud explosions and flames of fire as a result of the bursting of drums and this prevented the local people in helping the rescue team in its work. It was brought under full control only by the afternoon of 20th July. By that time, most of the boats were gutted.

The entire yard presented a bizarre spectacle when we visited the area, with partly and fully burnt mechanised boats with parts of engines strewn about. Fully

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A team of senior officers from Fishery Resources Assessment Division and from Mangalore Research Centre of C. M. F. R. I. was immediately sent to the scene of the fire disaster at Malpe fishing harbour to make an assessment of the damage and its impact on the fishing industry. This report, an outcome of their study is based on first hand information gathered by the team on the spot as well as from various agencies connected with the fishing industry and gives an objective assessment of the situation - E. G. Silas, Director.

burnt sailing crafts, boat building yards and remnants of salt bags were also observed. Fortunately there was no loss of life, as the fire started when the people were away during the noon recess.

Assessment of damage and its immediate impact

Based on the personal visits made by us at the site of the accident and also from information gathered from boat owners and different agencies, it was found that altogether 198 vessels were completely burnt, 40 of them purse-seiners (43½ footers), 140 trawlers (mostly 30 and 32 footers) and 18 sailing vessels. One purse-seiner and 15 trawlers were partly damaged (Table 1.)

Table 1. Details of the loss caused by fire at Malpe

Items	Fully damaged	Partly damaged	Total No. damaged	No. saved	Loss caused (in lakh rupees)
Purse-seiners	40	1	41	4	110
Trawlers	140	15	155	39	92
Sailing vessels	18	—	18	—	10
Boat building yards	5	—	5	—	7
Salt godowns	6	—	6	—	
Sheds with dried fish	120	—	120	—	10

However, 4 purse-seiners and 39 trawlers were saved. In addition, 5 boat building yards, 6 salt godowns and 120 sheds housing dried fish, nets requiring mending etc were gutted. Some of the sheds which served as tea and pan stalls were also destroyed in the fire. The total loss is estimated at Rs. 2.3 crores.

Table 2. Insurance coverage of the vessels damaged by fire

Vessels	No. damaged	No. insured	Percentage of vessels under insurance cover
Purse-seiners	41	41	100
Trawlers	155	105	68
Sailing vessels	18	Nil	Nil

Though the total loss to the nation on account of the fire disaster is to the tune of Rs. 2.3 crores, the individual loss of the owners of mechanised vessels was much less. All the 41 purse-seiners and 105 out of 155 trawlers lost in the fire were insured (Table 2). Owners of sailing vessels, boat building yards, salt godowns and sheds suffered a total loss amounting to Rs. 27 lakhs. About 2000 crew were affected because of the destruction of the boats in which they were employed. Luckily the nets used by the mechanised vessels, particularly purse-seine nets, costing about Rs. 1.5 lakhs each, were saved because they were kept by the owners in their houses as it was off season.

Relief and rehabilitation measures

The Karnataka State Government have constituted a committee to assess the damage caused by the fire and identify the actual sufferers for extending financial assistance. Shri P. F. Rodrigues, Hon'ble Minister for Fisheries visited the spot and assured the fishermen that apart from the funds which the State Government proposed to give, additional funds from the Central Government would be sought.

A Public Relief Committee has been formed under the Chairmanship of Shri T. A. Pai, Hon'ble Union Minister for rendering immediate relief to the victims of the fire disaster. Representatives of the banks from Dakshina Kannada area met at Malpe on 24-7-'79 to chalk out a programme of financial help for the fire victims. The Deputy Commissioner, Dakshina Kannada and officials from Agricultural Refinance Development Corporation (ARDC) also participated in the meeting. Shri T. Jacob and Dr. M. V. Pai from C. M. F. R. I. attended the meeting as observers.

For a proper understanding of some of the relief measures it would be useful to give a brief account of the cost structure of the mechanised boats and the procedure followed by the banks in advancing loans to the boat owners for constructing the same.

Table 3. Cost of different types of vessels (in rupees)

Type of vessel	32' Trawler	36' Trawler	43½' purse-seine
Hull	50,000	70,000	1,65,000
Engine	50,000	70,000	1,00,000
Other accessories	8,000	10,000	35,000
Net	10,000	10,000	1,50,000
Total	1,18,000	1,60,000	4,50,000

The cost of a 32' and 36' trawler, including the net, works out to Rs. 1.18 and Rs. 1.60 lakhs respectively while that of a 43½' purse-seiner works out to Rs. 4.50 lakhs based on the prices prevailing in 1978. However, these costs are likely to go up by about 25% at present.

The banks advance loans to the owners of mechanised boats to the extent of 75% of the cost of the boats, the seed capital of 25% coming from the boat owners. ARDC finances the bank to the extent of 80% of the project cost at 8% interest and the bank in turn charges 11% interest to the boat owners. The repayment of the loan by the boat owners to the bank is generally spread over a period of five years with 8 instalments in a year. The instalments are generally paid during the period from October to May. The Karnataka State Fisheries Development Corporation also provides financial assistance to the fishermen by way of loans and by giving subsidy for raising the seed capital.

The banks extend loans to the boat owners after receiving the feasibility reports on the concerned project from competent authorities. The boats, thus obtained through bank loans, are compulsorily registered and insured and the boat owners pay the premium through the banks. The monsoon months extending from June to August are treated as laid up period and if in this period the boats go for fishing the insurance companies, in general, do not take any responsibility for the loss incurred.

In this context it is seen that the loss suffered by the boat owners at Malpe is considerably mitigated, as most of the boats lost in the fire disaster were purchased through bank loans with proper insurance cover.

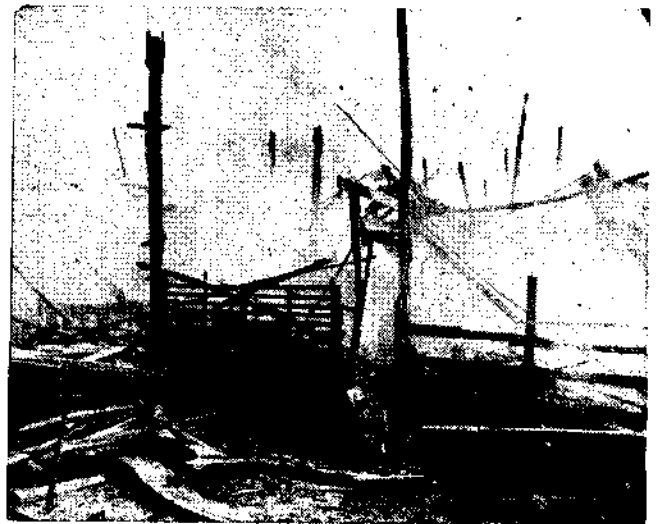
The Karnataka State Government intends to make ex-gratia payments ranging from Rs. 100 to 400 to the deserving persons for which an assessment of the individual cases has already been taken up.

The State Government are favourably considering the question of relief in excise duties and sales tax in the purchase of engines for the boats. The Government are also taking steps to procure wood like wild jack, from within and outside the State and supply the same at concessional rates for building new boats.

At the bankers meeting it was suggested that second hand boats in good condition both within Karnataka and in the neighbouring states of Kerala and Goa may be procured, as the availability of quality wood needed for the building of boats is limited. It



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would also enable the fishermen to go in for fishing in the ensuing fishing season itself. It was suggested that the possibility of obtaining fibre glass/steel vessels might be explored. For such of the boats which have not been insured, the Karnataka State Fisheries Development Corporation has been requested to write off the seed capital and to give subsidy to raise fresh seed capital. The bankers, on their part, would add up the unpaid loans to the new loans to be repaid in easier instalments.

ARDC may consider financing the loans up to 100% including the margin money. They are proposing to extend financial assistance to fish hawkers, persons engaged in fish drying, curing etc. Preferential treatment is likely to be shown to Rampani group of fishermen in regard to issue of loans, material etc. since they belong to weaker sections of the community.

The Relief Committee will be addressing the companies manufacturing marine diesel engines to supply the same at concessional rates to the victims of the disaster.

Owners of sailing vessels, boat building yards and sheds have not insured their properties and the Government may consider extending subsidy to them based on the merits of the individual cases.

This disaster has brought about the need to insure all the mechanised and non-mechanised boats in the country. Registration of the boats will facilitate the financing agencies in giving loans for the boats and in insuring them. This will also be of help in obtaining information regarding additions to the various categories of boats from year to year, in tracing the whereabouts of the boats and in formulating fishery management policies. As a first step, registration of all the fishing boats in the country should be made compulsory.

In the background of the tragedy it is necessary to think in terms of planning safety measures wherever there is a large concentration of fishing boats, similar to those observed in industrial establishments. The Fisheries and Fire Service Departments should formulate and enforce suitable safety measures so that the recurrence of such disasters can be prevented.

Projection regarding revival of Malpe fishing activities

The magnitude of the disaster is quite high;

nevertheless this has been compensated to some extent by the fact that it took place during the offseason giving some time for the fishermen to recoup themselves for fishing in the ensuing fishing season. Action is already taken by the concerned authorities to remove the debris and clear the area so that activities relating to construction of new boats and repairing of damaged ones could be started. While complete recouping of fishing activities by Malpe boat owners will take at least two years, they are expected to make a beginning in this direction in about three to four months with the proposed supply of second hand wooden boats and operation of repaired boats.

On an average about 400 boats consisting of 325 trawlers and 75 purse-seiners used to land their catches at Malpe harbour and out of these, 155 trawlers and 41 purse-seiners have been lost. This would reduce the catch from trawlers by 48% and purse-seiners by 55%. During the last fishing season the catch landed by purse-seiners has been estimated at 14,600 tonnes and by trawlers at 3,400 tonnes valued at Rs. 2.58 and 1.39 crores respectively. Due to the loss of purse-seiners and trawlers as mentioned above, the reduction in the catch would amount to about 8,000 and 1,600 tonnes valued at Rs. 1.42 and 0.67 crores respectively, the total loss amounting to Rs. 2.09 crores. However, it is expected that the reduction in the total catch by the loss of boats at Malpe would be made up by the likely landings of mechanised boats coming from other regions in addition to the operation of second hand wooden boats that would be supplied to the boat owners who have lost their boats. Hence it is hoped that the fall in fish production would be substantially resorted by the end of 1979. Consequently, the bulk of the people connected with the fishing industry like head load workers, fish hawkers, fish curers, tea stall owners etc. are expected to be rehabilitated by the end of the year.

A member of C. M. F. R. I. staff has been deployed to gather information relating to the progress made towards the normalisation of fishing activities in the affected area. This would enable monitoring of the process of rehabilitation in the coming months.

The authors are thankful to the Karnataka State Fisheries and Revenue officials and Shri K. R. Pai, Manager, Corporation Bank, Malpe for the co-operation extended during their visit.

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