Since time immemorial, fishing has been an essential trade and an indispensable means of food production. Even before the dawn of the day, around 3 A.M., fishing folks begin their day and venture into the sea. What follows is a cumbersome workday, often over 12 hours. During this time, fishing folk are detangling nets, prepping boats, catching fish, auctioning the catch and visiting fish markets. Despite technological advancements, it remains highly dependent on manual labour and indigenous knowledge.

“When my father used to fish, he navigated in the sea and found the directions using the direction with which the wind blows. We used to know at what time the wind will blow during the day. We have 8 different types of winds based on the direction it blows - for example, Vaadai Kaathu blows from north to south and Kachaa Kaathu blows from north to south.”
- Mukesh, a fisherman from Chinna Mudaliyar Chavadi, Tamil Nadu.
Fishing is, however, not an isolated practice and has been significantly affected since the advent of the Anthropocene. The once pristine coastal space is increasingly (over)crowding with both people and material. The coastal space has also been swarming with tourists, which subsequently leads to an increase in waste production. The fishing sites are spotted with heaps of plastic litter on the surface, while the sewage pipeline directly contributes to pollution at sea. Detangling plastic from the fishing nets takes up most of the fishers' time, which adds to their existing lot of problems. Marine pollution has also affected the life cycle and health of the fish, and the fish yield is often muddled with plastic.

“WE OFTEN CATCH PLASTIC IN TONNES. IN FACT, WHEN WE MEASURED THE WEIGHT OF THE PLASTIC THAT GOT CAUGHT IN THE NET TWO DAYS BACK, IT WAS CLOSE TO 1 TONNE. WE CAUGHT MORE, BUT WE HAD TO THROW IT BACK INTO THE SEA AS THE BOAT WILL NOT TAKE THAT MUCH WEIGHT. THAT DAY, WE CAUGHT NO FISH. JUST PLASTIC. THAT IS WHY I DIDN'T GO FISHING FOR THE PAST TWO DAYS.”
- MURALIDHARAN, A FISHERMAN OF 40 YEARS FROM VAITHIKUPPAM, PUDUCHERRY.

The crowded beachside is swarmed with both people and material. Over the years, the coastal spaces have increasingly become a tourist attraction, adding to the plastic pollution. The sewage pipelines connect directly to the sea. Negligence in waste treatment and disposal has added to the lot of problems faced by the fishermen as they are unable to get any catch and spend the day detangling nets. Marine pollution not only affects the fisherfolk but also poses a threat to the species.
In an attempt to reduce overfishing and avoid the threat of extinction, the government in Pondicherry exercises a two-month ban period for April and May. The fish in this region often copulate during this period and are in juvenile stages. During these months, only fishers with sanctioned fibre boats can venture into the sea for a stipulated period. The fish that are caught are sold at the beach itself. Meanwhile, an assortment of fish imported from Karaikal, Visakhapatnam and Kerala are sold to the consumers at the market sites.

During the ban period, fishers receive an inadequate compensation of Rs. 5,500 per household from the Fisheries Department to tide them over for the two months. Their savings, which are already negligible, get used up during this time. The risks involved in the trade and growing uncertainties of the practice often lend to the lack of youth uptake of fishing as a profession. Significant investments are made towards acquiring good education for the next generation, perhaps in the hope of a more stable livelihood. Despite the emphasis on education, some youth are forced to join the trade because of a dearth of other employment opportunities.

“DURING THE BAN PERIOD, WE ONLY GET RS. 5500 FOR THE ENTIRE DURATION OF TWO MONTHS. I HAVE 8 MEMBERS IN MY FAMILY. EVEN IF MY HUSBAND AND MY SONS GO FISHING, THEY WILL NOT GET FISH DURING THIS PERIOD. YOU TELL ME, HOW WILL I MANAGE MY EXPENSES?” - MARIYAMMA, A FISH SELLER FROM VAMBA KEERAPALAYAM, PUDUCHERRY.
The risks involved in the trade and growing uncertainties of the practice often lend to the lack of youth uptake of fishing as a profession, in these parts. There is significant variability in incomes received from fishing, so much so that the fisherfolk themselves cannot report an accurate monthly income. However, their monthly spending (which indicates income as their monthly savings have been reported as zero) varies from Rs. 17,800 to around Rs. 93,000 depending on the yield and circumstance of the household. On average, a fisher family spends approximately Rs. 61,947 per month to support themselves and their families. Some have additional expenses due to health issues within their families, affecting the average. Households also report borrowing to have some amount of money left at the end of the month.

MY HUSBAND HAS BEEN TRAPPED IN CYCLONES TWICE. I HAVE STAYED UP MANY NIGHTS CRYING, THINKING ABOUT HIS SAFETY. I DO NOT WANT MY CHILDREN TO BE SUBJECTED TO THIS FEAR AGAIN" -MEENA, A FISH SELLER FROM CHINNA MUDALIYAR CHAVADI, TAMIL NADU

Fishers leave for fishing in the morning time at Serenity Beach, Thandiraayan Kuppam, Tamil Nadu
With the exponentially increasing uncertainties, fisherfolk encourage their children to not follow in their footsteps, perhaps in the hope of a more stable livelihood. As a result, significant investments are made towards acquiring good education for the next generation. From the interviews conducted, we found that 76.5% of youth in respondents’ families are either studying or pursuing a full-time private job. Meanwhile, 5.9% of the youth are fishing while working part-time to ensure economic stability. Despite being formally educated, the remainder of the youth population undertakes fishing, which can be correlated to the dearth of other employment opportunities that plague this area.

“YOUTHS HERE ARE MOSTLY INTO FISHING AS SKILLED-BASED JOBS ARE LIMITED AND THE SALARIES ARE LESS COMPARED TO FISHING DAY-TO-DAY. IN OUTSIDE COUNTRIES, THEY RESPECT THE FISHERMEN COMMUNITY AND THEIR EXPERIENCE IN FISHING, BUT HERE WE ARE TREATED AS LABOURS AND WE HAVE TO DO ADDITIONAL JOBS.” - BHARATH, A YOUNG FISHERMAN
While fishing as an occupation abounded with uncertainties, the pandemic exacerbated the already abysmal state of the fishing industry. The several government-enforced lockdowns between 2020-22 restricted movement and limited market access. This forced the fisherfolk to find alternative means of money, such as pawning jewellery and liquidating other assets. They made alterations to their consumption patterns by minimising expenditure on food and cultural matters. The fisherfolk resorted to borrowing informally from relatives and moneylenders just to feed their families. The government schemes, often limited to rice provision, were of some solace. However, no policies were implemented to ensure safety and protect the livelihood of fishing families.
“NO ONE WAS ALLOWED TO GO OUT. WE WERE BARRED FROM GOING TO THE SEA. THEREFORE WE DIDN’T HAVE ANY SOURCE OF INCOME. BUT AS THE RESTRICTIONS EASED, THEY BROUGHT OUT RULES SAYING THAT ONLY ONE VILLAGE CAN GO FISHING PER WEEK FOR ONLY TWO HOURS. THUS, WE STARTED EARNING AGAIN, BUT VERY LESS. WE HAD TO CUT MANY EXPENSES SUCH AS FOOD TO SUSTAIN. WHEN THE MARKETS ALSO CLOSED, WE WERE NOT ABLE TO SELL THE FISH. AS THE PANDEMIC EASED, THE POLICE THEMSELVES MARKED LOCATIONS FOR US BASED ON SOCIAL DISTANCING RULES ALONG THE EAST COAST ROAD, AND WE WERE ALLOWED TO SELL FISH FOR TWO HOURS.”
-CHANDRA BOSE, A FISHERMAN FROM THANDIRAAYAN KUPPAM.

Compared to the devastating 2004 Tsunami, which was a more concentrated shock, the pandemic offers a bleak hope for a return to normalcy. However, with no help from the State and no other means to sustain their families, the fishers of Tamil Nadu still have to succumb to long working hours and harsh conditions. There is an urgent need to implement policies and welfare schemes that cater to the needs of fisherfolk. For instance, fishers highlight the dire need for providing equitable and accessible education and healthcare. They believe that, as a long term goal, the State could help them in reducing the additional expenses considerably. Additionally, the responses received through the course of this research showed a lack of awareness of existing government schemes and policies. This limits the opportunities and relief measures which could support the fisherfolk and thus need to be promoted actively.
Fishers are also urging the government to increase the Rs. 5,500/household stipend they receive for two months during the ban period. The current amount is not in tandem with the inflation and high market prices of essential goods in the country. The fisherfolk have to make considerable dietary restrictions and reduce essential spending to tide over with this amount. It is disheartening to see that people who are at the forefront of the food production chain are struggling to feed themselves and their families.
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