



## FISHER FOLK: SOCIAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL SPACES OF MARGINALITY

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### ABSTRACT

Kerala state marked distinct from all other Indian state with its unique model of development. Contrary to this State Development Report 2011 followed by subsequent studies and works of many scholars projected 'Outlier communities'; the communities who are left out of the state achievements in development indices and placed far behind the state average - Tribals and Fishermen.

Considering the outlier position of fishing communities despite many development programmes and projects implemented for the sake of development of fishing communities at central and state levels; the outlier position of fishing communities still remain unaddressed and the community remains at the margin of development. This paper attempts to trace this crucial issue of marginalisation through the concept of 'Space' which has social, political, economic and geographical connotations.

**KEYWORDS** : Fisher folk, Marginalisation, Social Space, Geographical Space

Kerala state and Keralites are proud to have set up a bench mark in the development with the very distinct 'Kerala model' with high development indices said to be comparable to 'developed countries'. Contrary to this State Development Report 2011 followed by subsequent studies and works of many scholars came with a chapter on 'Outlier communities'; the communities who are left out of the state achievements in development indices and placed far behind the state average which marked the high achievement - Tribals and Fishermen.

Considering the outlier position of fishing communities on one side, and on the other - Fishery, perhaps one of the important sectors in which many development programmes and projects have been implemented for the sake of development of fishing communities at central and state levels; - in spite of all these development programmes and strategies executed in this field the question that "why does the outlier position of fishing communities still remain" is remaining unanswered. This paper attempts to trace the answer of this crucial question.

The issue of marginality of fisher folk is looked at through the concept of 'Space' including 'Social Space' and 'Geographical space' since there are different spatial dimensions related to fisher folk as Natural Resource Dependant Community which form and perpetuate their vulnerability and marginalisation.

### SOCIAL SPACE

The concept of Social Space has different Theoretical explanations and attributes given by different scholars from various disciplines viz. sociology, geography, political philosophy etc.

Adopted from the Bourdieu, the social space is other than a mere piece of land referred to the particular status that an individual, a group or a community ascribed or achieved in the social hierarchy, accumulated through different capitals viz. 'social', 'economic' and 'cultural'. The paper deals mainly two very prominent aspect of this concept viz. i) Economic (many scholars defined social space as space where economic activities take place) and ii). Geographic with its both physical and structural dimensions.

To begin with the economic aspect of space regarding fishermen it is worth stating that fishermen are who deal with most lucrative resources in the state which contribute considerably to the state and national revenue including export.

Tracing the reason for the economic vulnerability of fishermen, it could be found that the development programmes in the fishery sector in the name of modernisation itself caused to perpetuate vulnerability and thus the marginality. Rather mere accusation it could be better understood through the framework that Vandana Siva developed to delineate the relationship among the economic

process, use of natural resources and the dependent community. She presents these in the form of three economies; i) Nature's Economy, based on the cost of natural process that rejuvenates and maintains the ecological equilibrium, ii). Survival Economy, based on value of subsistence or sustenance by which majority of people in developing countries depends directly on nature for their survival. And iii). Market Economy based on the monetary cost of the environment for the modern developmental process which pose the economic growth at the central point of development.

The advent of notion of modernisation in fishing sector could be seen as the dominance of 'market economy' over 'nature's' and 'survival' economy. As the capital intensive mode of production it turned fishing from 'subsistence' level, gearing livelihood for millions in the country to the fully 'commercial', preserving the corporate interests; as the result of which many market forces could enter the sector as exploiters of traditional fishing community. Subsequently those who were considered the sole owners and having all the rights of sea resources turned to be bonded labourers. They lost their right over the fish they catch and were compelled to sell them for the price fixed by middlemen or other corporates. When the price for the fish in the international market increased and added considerably to the state economy the poverty of fisher family continued immensely while the income of the corporates inflated irresistibly.

To add the vulnerability many welfare programmes went astray deviating to many who related with the industry out side the traditional fishing community.

### GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE

Geographical Space is a crucial factor that determines people's economic and social status. the communities live away and detached physically or structurally from the mainstream or keep aloof from where the general population occupy- as in the case of most Natural Resource Dependant Communities- will be intrinsically subjected to marginalisation.

Fisher folk who inhabits the fringes of coastal area are alienated or kept aside with its very geographical and physical characteristics which is inseparably associated with their everyday life and livelihood; and thus they are alienated and marginalised from society and societal spaces.

### GEOGRAPHIC MARGINES

As in many there parts of the globe, and particularly other coastal states of India, the fishermen, who have been traditionally engaged with the fishing and allied activities occupy the coastal fringes as their life and livelihood are closely associated with the sea. And

these spaces in its both physical and structural aspects trigger the marginalisation.

### PHYSICAL HAZARDS OF SPACE

**Unsafe Shelters:** Many fishing families live in unsafe homes in the coastal areas as considerable number of them live in houses with un-thatched roofs while some others occupy in seemingly well roofed houses. In most of the cases though they look well built and furnished the matter of safety is always a concern. The proximity of their houses the sea exposes them to the danger of being hit by rough seas, tides and floods that can destroy them abruptly. The flood 2018 and the incidents of 2013 in which more than two hundred houses were washed away by high tides and irregular waves, leaving thousands homeless (rehabilitated by Government of Kerala in 'Pratheeksha' residential apartment by the end of 2018).

**Problems of Drinking water and sanitation:** Though the coastal dwellers live in, with and by sea water, the drinking water is still a major issue for the coastal population. The high water table, high salinity, condemnation etc. result in scarce safe and pure drinking water.

Many studies have proven the presence of hazardous chemical contents in water widely in the Kerala coast. Similarly studies and researches have come out with the prevalence of water borne diseases among the coastal population.

Sanitation is also a menace in most of the coastal villages across the state. High water table level, difficulties to construct sanitary latrines, still remain unsolved in many areas in the state. Though the state of Kerala is claimed to be ODF (Open Defecation Free) State, many members of the fishing families, including women and children depends open toilets for their primary needs. High population density and crowded habitation of the fishing villages make the situation worse.

Apart from very intrinsic limitations and risks related to geography, fishermen constrain themselves to their geographical margins.

### SOCIAL AND SPATIAL MOBILITY

The spacial movements of fishermen seen to be limited and constrained within a very particular area for many reasons .

Physical movement, travel or commutations and their patterns are determined and designed by i) Livelihood activities, ii) Extent of family, relatives and kinship and iii) Social Network.

i). Members of fishing communities are mostly engaged in fishing and allied activities which is closely related to coastal area which restrict most of their commutation between residence and sea.

It is worth mentioning that younger generation of the traditional fishing communities are seen to be least interested in sticking to their traditional job. Rather they prefer other petty jobs to meet the daily living. Though they are engaged in non-fishing activities like running petty shops, doing manual labours etc. their physical movements are seen to be very much limited in and around coastal villages and adjacent areas.

ii). The family formation and marriage relations are found to be non exceptional from the scenario. Since most of the fishing communities in the state practice endogamous marriage, family and marriage relationships take place within the communities and with in the coastal spaces near or far.

The pace of upward social mobility regarding various institutions like marriage among fishing communities is marked to be slower than that in other communities in the state. The reluctance of general communities to have relationship with them too limits their mobility.

iii). Even though the cohesion and bonding within the community is

exceptionally strong, poor social networking and relationship with the people outside reflect in the poor social capital.

The above constraints are stemmed from either i) Objective criteria which focus on the shared characteristics of the group such as ethnicity, national origin, culture, language or religion; or ii) Subjective criteria which focus on two key points: the principle of self-identification and the desire to preserve the group identity.

objective criteria; say the attitude of general population towards them which is very crucial and need to be addressed in a very progressive gesture; as it ends up in marginalisation in various forms viz. Cultural stereotype, Stigmatisation of the occupation and Caste discrimination. The idea and image of fishermen even among educated and progressive general population of the state is albeit disgusting and tending to keep them always at the margin. Notions of 'uncivilised', 'unhygienic' and 'untouchable' are still in prevalence when it comes to the making relations with fishermen. many times they are kept away branded or labeled with '*Kadappurathukar*' (coastal people) or '*mukkuvar*' (fishermen).

Marriage relations with fishing communities considered to be taboo despite of religious differences they belong to, as they have been placed at low levels in the social ladder and caste hierarchy and they have been considered as impure and untouchable within each religious boundary they occupy such as Hindu, Islam and Christianity.

They have been denied many opportunities. Employers are reluctant to give job for them. For the surprise many education institutions refuse to give admission for the students from coastal area or belong to fishing community which triggers their deprivation even from the education which is the hallmark of Kerala development; and which can result long term and drastic impact through social mobility.

### CONCLUSION

The marginalisation of fisherfolk though it has historical, political and cultural justification; the economic and geographic reasons can't be ruled out. Both social and Geographical space form and formulate their livelihood and contribute considerably to their social capital. The social alienation of the geographical space is seen to be major catalyst of marginalisation and which is to be dealt with inter sectoral and inter disciplinary coordination at all levels of administrative executions, political interventions and academic engagements.

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