

The Suno India Show
Abrupt COVID-19 lockdown leaves fishermen in lurch, battling for their livelihood

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After the Indian government announced lockdown from March 25th, 2020, trouble brewed for the fishermen community in India. The deep sea fishermen, who came back in different intervals, unaware of the lockdown did not know what to do with the fish stock. The local markets, interstate transport movement and exports were shut. Many migrant fishermen from Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh were stranded in the state of Gujarat during this lockdown. However, the boat owner communities and the local people are ensuring they are taken care of. The fisher community groups across different states have been taking active measures to reach out to central government and state fisheries for compensation, and to help them ease down during this lockdown.

Compensation mechanisms for fishermen are the need of the moment, as small scale fishermen who are dependent on their coasts for their daily livelihood, are now left without work.

After the central government gave a green signal for transport vehicles to ply within India, fishermen have been able to transport fishes. As fishermen, and allied fisheries face struggle during the Covid 19 times, solutions and proactive measures from government and experts need to be done at the earliest to prevent losses.

It's been over ten days since David, a fisherman from Roachamanagar in Ramanathapuram district of Tamilnadu, went fishing. Since the lockdown, following Covid 19, this has been the plight of fishermen across the coastal Indian states. After the lockdown was announced, the fisheries department told the fishermen not to go into the sea for fishing.

India's coastline stretches for over 8000 kilometres across nine states, two Union territories and two island territories. The fisheries, both marine, and inland, support 14 million people directly

and indirectly. In the global market, India stands at the third place in fisheries, and second place in aquaculture.

Directorate-General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) data reveals that India exported nearly 6.3 billion dollars (or around Rs. 45,000 crores) worth of marine products in the financial year 2019. Andhra Pradesh is the top marine exporting state in the country with a compound annual growth rate of 15%, followed by Gujarat and West Bengal with 10%. In terms of export markets, the US is the largest market for Indian shrimp, while China and Vietnam are the largest importers of Indian frozen fish and mollusks, respectively. Together, these three countries make up about 50-60% of India's marine export market.

India's deep sea fishermen, who usually, are away from the land for about two weeks, were confused and shocked as they landed from the sea. The harbour was shut. Export companies were shut. There were no traders. Fish markets were shut.

And when they stepped out, they only witnessed empty roads with no people on the streets.

They had brought in fishes from the sea, and wondered what would happen to this catch?

Hello, I am Sharada Balasubramanian, and along with my colleague Jency Samuel, we have been talking to various people from the fisheries sector to find out what was happening on ground.

From what I heard from the sources, the lockdown has not just impacted the small fishermen, but also industrial fishermen, exporters, traders, and those in allied fisheries. Ice breakers, boat owners, vehicles owners plying with the fish catch, women fish vendors, all of them, who depend on fishing for their day to day living were affected.

T Peter, Secretary of National Fisheries Forum talks of the situation in India.

In all the coastal states including Gujarat, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Orissa, Kerala, Tamilnadu everywhere fishermen are not going for fishing. This is the reality now.

Peter also mentioned that there were special packages only for farmers, and nothing for fishermen. And even if fishermen wanted to fish, they would not have access to ice, or get a good price for the fishes. So, no one would be going into the sea until the lockdown.

In Veraval, Gujarat, Tulsi Bhai Gohel, the head of Sri Karva Sanyukth Machimar Boat Owners Association says that his concern is for small fishermen, who are out, every single day to catch fishes for their livelihood. He talks about what is happening on the ground in Veraval, Gujarat.

When the boat goes, there are so many people whose livelihoods depend on that. Eight to ten families depend on this after the boat returns from fishing. People work with fish suppliers. There are commercial vehicles, rickshaws, bolero, all those families are also dependent on this. The fishes go to the company, to processing plant, dry fish. Hundreds of people work there.

With no industries in Veraval, Gujarat, Tulsi Bhai, said that there was no scope for any alternative livelihood or other jobs. Meanwhile in Kerala, researcher KK Baiju from Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute talks about what is happening in the state in Kochi, Kerala.

Unfortunately, aquaculture fishermen, for instance in Ernakulam have cultivated prawns, crabs. They are ready. But there is no market. Because there is no export.

There are fishermen who fish every day to cater to the export market for chilled fish. As exports shut, these fishermen have lost their livelihood during the lockdown.

In Tamilnadu, Sageer, the Managing Director of Goldmarine Exports, Chennai, talks about the dent in the export market.

We source from all over the East Coast – from Andhra to Kanyakumari, and on the other side from Cochin to Mangalore. All the East Coast and West Coast, Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea, all the harbours. Right from the lockdown time we have shut down our factory and most of the fishing harbours are closed. So there is no seafood available for exports. And primarily another big reason is most of the airlines have stopped connectivity. So even if there is fish

available we can't export because none of the airlines are operating. Most of the airlines have stopped operation.

As fisheries is a state subject, there are different laws in different states. The fisher groups across different states have been writing to the district administration, state fisheries to help them out of this situation. They are asking for financial compensation, and some relaxations that could push their existing fish into the market for sales.

Peter, on behalf of these fisheries associations has been writing memorandums to the central government, seeking support for the fishing communities.

How are the fishermen selling the fish stock they procured before the lockdown? And are they getting the right price for it? Tulsi Bhai tells more about this from Gujarat.

The rate of ribbon fish was Rs 200, now it is Rs 50-60. The fish that were selling at Rs 35-40 fish is not even selling at Rs 6. Surmi, which was dried and sold as fish is also not working. These fish are sent to a fish mill for processing. Now, since there are no labourers, they are throwing fish into water.

In Tamilnadu, the boats are still returning from the sea, intermittently in this lockdown time. But no new boats are going into the sea, almost three-fourth of the boats from deep sea have landed in the last few days. Jency spoke to Sameeran, Director of Fisheries, Tamilnadu, and he talks about the boat regulation in Tamilnadu during lockdown.

There are 500 boats in 1000 km, and they are all in sea. They are coming day by day. We are regulating in the fishing harbour. Every day 10 or 15 boats, we are allowing. There is no public auction. But we are directly meeting up with buyers so that only the buyers and their vehicles come in, take the products and they will leave.

Paneer Das, a local fisherman from Tharuvaikulam fishing village in Tuticorin district, tells me that fishers have not reached a state where they are throwing the fish back into the sea in his village.

When I spoke to Tulsi Bhai, he raised another huge concern during this time. And that was of migrant fishermen from Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, who were stranded in Gujarat. There were tribal communities, among who were those left behind as well. Tulsi Bhai tells us more.

In Veraval, among the trawling boats, 3700 crew members are local, rest are from south Gujarat like Valsad, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra. There are 20000-22000 people who come for fishing here. Because this season was bad, many boats had stopped going to the sea earlier. Of those who came 10000-12000 have gone home. About 7500-8000 people are locked here. Of the ones who are stranded, there are 3000 from Andhra Pradesh, 4000-5000 from south Gujarat, Valsad area, and from Maharashtra-Gujarat border in the Umargaon border, there are 1100 adivasis as well. We had a meeting with the chief minister on what needs to be done. These people have to be taken care of in Gujarat itself. They cannot be sent out of the state outside due to lockdown.

The existing stock of fishes had to be dealt with. And the fishing vessels that were still coming to the shore- there was a need for a plan on what needs to be done.

Bhaskar, a local trader and exporter, says that almost 70-80 boats went fishing in Tharavaikulam before the lockdown. But if fishes are not sold on time, it could be worrisome for fishermen. He talks more about this.

If the fishermen cannot sell the fishes at the right time, then the price will become cheaper and cheaper. They cannot afford that and the whole stock will get spoiled. As fishermen get these fishes after travelling around 5 to 8 days from the sea, if they cannot sell at the correct time, half of the stock will be wasted. It will be difficult for them.

Sameeran talks more about the initiatives taken in Tamilnadu by the state fisheries, and what would ensue in the days to come.

Basically, we have declared this fish and fishery products as one of the essential commodities. Transportation, processing, everything is exempted from the lockdown. That is something I

have to make it clear. So processing, pre-processing – especially those culture – our major export is from culture prawns vannamei. The vannamei (also called Pacific White Leg Shrimp, vannamei is an exotic variety that was introduced to India around 2002 or 03) culture is going on. It is based on a farm area. It won't bring more crowds, unlike the capture fishery. So, those activities are happening. But there are some logistics problems in cargo handling at ports and all. There is a decline in the exports, but it has not directly hit the market so far because they can hold for some more time. We have exempted the production and transport of fish, shrimp, and all inputs like seeds, etc. Transportation of all these inputs and pre-process and process of shrimp are happening now. Government has selectively stopped marine capture fishery because it involves people from all villages coming together and overcrowding in the harbours and fish landing centres. Those activities are stopped as of today.

After the lockdown announcement, interstate transport services were stopped. From Tharavaikulam, most of the fish catch goes to Kerala, and with the inter-state transport shut, there were issues. However, the central government issued a statement to the fisheries that now the fishes can be transported across the country. The officials from Tamilnadu and Maharashtra tell that now fishes can be transported, however, without crowding. Bhaskar talks about this from Tharavaikulam.

In Kerala, they are spraying disinfectant on the vehicles. They also advise the drivers and conductors to wear masks and wash their hands regularly. Our police are scared that we may get the corona from there. Actually it's a good thing they are cautious, anyway, we also have to sell the fishes right?

Central government has allowed transportation of fish and fisher products that includes shrimp feeds and medicines to prawn culture farms. Now, stocks from Tharavaikulam are going to Kerala. Though these solutions and decisions are surfacing, and follow up actions are initiated on ground, officials tell that the decisions from government needs to be quick. Any delay would

mean more losses as the fishes will start rotting soon. There is also proper guidelines needed for the fish dealers or traders.

Meanwhile, Baiju wrote to the Chief Minister of Kerala, with a solution that would address the issue of how existing fish stock can be used productively.

The Kerala government started community kitchens for health workers, police, locals, covid affected patients. Free food is offered to everyone. Right now, they are giving only vegetables. Why don't we provide fish in these community kitchens? There are 900 local bodies. If we circulate it in one local body, at least 4-5 community kitchens are there. In one day if 25 kilos are sent to one panchayat, 900 into 25..that will meet the operations also.

In Tamilnadu, fishermen are enrolled in the National Fishermen Savings and Relief Scheme. Almost 4,64,000 people in fisheries and allied activities have been enrolled in this. And there is a recommendation for a special package that is under consideration with the government of India.

This is a scheme where there is a contribution from the beneficiary of Rs 1,500 which they can pay over nine months. It's a small scale savings scheme. They can contribute 1,500 over nine months. The 1500 rupees comes from the Tamil Nadu government, Rs1500 comes from the Government of India. End of the year we will be paying them Rs 4,500.

We have a scheme for women also. Because the scheme is not for women in the Government of India. We have a special scheme for TN. There 3000 is paid by the government of Tamil Nadu. At the end of the ninth month we will pay 4500 rupees.

Sameeran says that the government of Tamilnadu has recommended the central government for support and this is what he says.

We are getting requests from different quarters, not as a proper proposal or written grievance but we are in touch with federations and associations. So this is one of the major suggestions and appeal to the government, we are getting their grievances. But they have not

given a letter or something. We have taken it for granted and we have sent the proposal to the government.

In Kerala, there is no special compensation for fishermen, but experts are talking to the state fisheries and coordination committees to support these families. In Gujarat, where migrant fishermen are stranded, fisher groups are helping them. Tulsi Bhai says more about this.

The boat has crew members and the boat owner needs to take care until they return. Right now, boat owners are arranging for food. If they don't, we do whatever is needed from the boat owners association.

The Kisan Credit Card was given by the Indian government to fisheries and animal husbandry farmers to help them meet their working capital needs. In 2019, the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying industry sent out a note that credit card holders for fisheries would have a credit limit of Rs 2 lakh to meet their working capital needs. Tulsi Bhai talks about the benefit of Kisan card during this time.

Kisan cards have some benefits. For running a boat, we can take loans. And the interest for it is 7 percent, 3% is borne by the central government, and 4% by the state government. We don't have to pay interest, and then we can slowly pay the money back. This is a support we expect from the government, and secondly whatever losses we have gone through, they should help us cope with that.

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