A STUDY ON FISHERMEN COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES IN ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS

Ms S DIVYA
Department of Sociology
Andaman & Nicobar Islands

INTRODUCTION

The word cooperation simply means ‘working together’ in any sphere of human activity. Cooperation as a form of organization is where persons voluntarily associate together as human beings, on a basis of equality, for the promotion of the economic interests of themselves. The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) set up in 1895 is ‘entirely and exclusively dedicated to the promotion of cooperation in all parts of the world’. It helps the members in coordinating research and training and providing the literature on the latest development in various areas of cooperation. The idea of cooperation in India is not entirely a new device. Our Vedas, the Upanishads and Bhagwat Purana have fully subscribed to cooperative existence in the form of ‘the desire to work together, to live together and to think together’. It was towards the end of 19th century that Sir Fredrick Nicholson and the Famine Commission (1901) made a strong case for introduction of cooperative credit societies in India. For the first time legal shape was given to cooperation in the form of Cooperative Credit Societies Act 1904. This was followed by the comprehensive legislation of cooperative societies Act 1912. Fishermen are the backbone of Indian fishing industry and improving their socio-economic conditions not only help them to acquire a better social status and higher standard of living, but also provide the country with much needed protein and accelerate the development of the fishing industry. Cooperatives have been accepted as the only agency capable of improving the economic condition of fishermen bringing about a social transformation.

STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Andaman & Nicobar Islands did not have a traditional fisherman population. People were brought from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal in 1955 for undertaking fishing activity. Socially, educationally & economically fishermen belong to backward class of the society. Long spell monsoon season, extending over six months - a year, affects the earnings considerably. There are 129 registered fishermen cooperatives societies including one A & N fisheries cooperative federation Ltd. in these islands. Inspite of the fact that one fourth of the coast line in India is in A & N Islands. With 0.6 million sq. mtrs of exclusive economic zone, the marine resource are not properly exploited. The performance of the fisheries department of the local administration is far from satisfactory. Hence the research has been conducted to trace out the problems and prospects of fishermen cooperative societies.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To study and evaluate the functioning of the fishermen cooperatives societies in A&N islands
- To review the progress made by fisheries cooperative movement in A & N Islands.
- To study the problems faced by the fishermen cooperative societies in A & N Islands.
- To Draw the conclusions and suggested measures for future development of the fishermen cooperative movement in these Islands

METHODOLOGY

This study relied upon both the Primary & secondary data.

Primary Data
The primary data has been collected through interviews and discussion with officials of the cooperative department, office bearers of the fisheries cooperatives.

Secondary Data
The secondary data has been collected from large number of unpublished report and documents of the cooperative union, annual reports and manual of various fishermen cooperative societies, cooperative books, journals and websites.

COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT IN ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS

The history of cooperative movement in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands dates back to the year 1926 when the Andaman and Nicobar Co-operative societies Rules were framed under the Cooperative Societies Act of 1912. The first cooperative society was formed at Rangachang village in South Andaman for the development of coconut plantation which is the major plantation crop in these islands. Andaman and Nicobar State Cooperative Bank at the apex level and primary agricultural credit societies at the lower level form the credit structure of these islands.
BACKGROUND OF FISHERMEN IN ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS

The islands did not have a traditional fishermen population. Therefore, the fisheries Department undertook the Fishermen Settlement Scheme 1955 and fishermen from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh West Bengal were brought and settled here. At present there are 6253 live license holder of in these Islands.

Fishermen by virtue of their profession live nearer to the sea or backwaters, lead their lives in seclusion, far from the mainstream of civilization. They occupy the lowest rung on the social ladder and mostly belong to the weaker section. They take out their live hood by traditional fishing methods and the rewards offered to them for their effort are barely sufficient for their daily needs. Thus fishermen can be socially, economically and educationally backward section of the society.

Though fishing is a full time profession, fishermen are unemployed during monsoon season owing to unfavorable weather conditions. Even when there is no fishing, the fishermen have to feed their families. They are considered a bar risk and no financial institution comes forward to advance loans to them. This peculiar situation placed the fishermen at the mercy of middlemen/merchants who advance short term loans on conditions disadvantageous to them (fishermen) e.g. delivery of catches during the fishing season at pre-determined prices. Fishermen are always at a disadvantage because the price fixed for their fish is ridiculously low and it only compensates for the interest on the loans advanced and risk under taken by the merchant leaving practically nothing for the fishermen. Thus the fishermen are vulnerable to exploitation by the middlemen merchants.

PROBLEMS OF FISHERIES COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES IN ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS

With the aim of improving the economic condition of fishermen, Government encouraged formation of cooperative societies in various islands since 1956. Official records show that there are 129 registered fishermen cooperative societies including one A & N Fishery’s cooperative federation Ltd. A review of the functioning of these cooperatives reveals the following facts:

- Most of these societies do not have a programme of business operations.
- Most of the societies do not have trained staff to manage the day to day work.
- The societies lack technical and financial guidance to support their diversified activities.
- Lack of infrastructure facilities result in societies talking up limited business activities.
- In many cases the societies have a low volume of business rendering them unviable.
- Involvement of the fishermen in societies business is inadequate.
- Management efficiency, which is an important factor for success of the societies is lacking.
- In many instances the interest taken by the government for promotion and regarding the cooperatives is inadequate.
- No proper record is maintained for the business activities of these societies.

Due to this weak cooperative structure and operational and managerial deficiencies, the fishermen mainly operate in their individual capacity. Fishermen prefer to deliver their catches to the merchant at the landing centre and get rid of the further responsibilities of marketing their catches because of the complexities of marketing. Consequently middlemen take up the various marketing function of pooling the catches, handling, grading, processing, storage, transport and sale of fish. It is observed that there are more levels of intermediaries in the fish trade than required, appropriating a disproportionate share in the consumers prices, compared to the services they render and ultimately leaving a small residue to the fishermen. The fishermen therefore do not get their due share of the consumer’s price. All the local markets are nearer to the fishing ground. The fishermen can sell their catches directly to the retail traders.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING FISHERMEN COOPERATIVES

While the local administration is continuously evolving plans to improve the socio-economic condition of fishermen, the magnitude of the problems makes it necessary to involve the cooperatives organization for bringing about a transformation among backward community of fishermen. The following suggestions will help to initiate steps for reviving and strengthening fisheries cooperative societies.

1. Government’s Role

The local administration has to play an active role through the cooperative department in providing necessary assistance and guidance to the societies. The help should be directed both towards the social and economic problems the fishermen. The assistance should be continued till the industry crosses the take off stage.

2. Members’ Education

The cooperatives are to be developed as self-sustaining units capable of maintaining continuity of operation, independent of changes in the elected body. This can be ensured only when the educated in the philosophy of cooperation is provided to the members to enable them to play their role effectively as cooperators.
3. Collective decision-marking

Before starting a project, it is desired that the members are informed of the project to be taken up, its capital requirements, utilization of services of members, expected profits etc. the members should be enlightened about the benefits of the project and their willing participation should be obtained. The decisions should always be taken by consensus. The members' participation is essential for the success and progress of the society.

4. Managing Committee

The managing committee should have well laid out policy on each stage of operation. Whenever required meeting should be held and any doubt expressed by the members should be cleared. The members of the managing committee must inspire among its members a sense of responsibility so that they actively help the organization to succeed.

5. Personnel Management

The fishermen cooperatives comprise of work force of fishermen who are educationally backward to carry out various activities. Hence personnel management assumes greater importance. The services of the technical personnel of Government Fishermen Department shall be utilized by these societies.

6. Improved Fishing Methods

Maximum economic return can be achieved through modernizing the fishing practices. Owing to ignorance in these areas, an individual fisherman is unable to reap the benefits of this labor. The use of gill nets, shore seine nets, anchors nets, and cast nets should be encouraged by providing them at subsidized rates to the fishermen.

7. Marketing

The area of marketing needs to be strengthened. Sufficient number of retail shops should be provided to the fisheries cooperatives to take up direct selling. The marketing skills of consumer cooperatives stores, Port Blair should be used as ‘model’ to this job.

8. Cold Storage

Sufficient cold storage facilities should be provided in fish landing centres and other fishing areas. The rent for using this facility can be subsidized by the local Administration. This will help the fishery societies to enjoy better bargaining power by exercising control over supply.

9. Export

The surplus fish product form these islands can be processed and packed for selling them in the cities of mainland. The increased frequency of air service to Chennai and Kolkata should fully exploit. The Government should provide the infrastructure facilities with the financial assistance from National Cooperative Department Corporation, to take up this project. The Andaman and Nicobar State Marketing Federation should be actively involved in this project.

10. Fishing Equipments

The Fisheries Department of the local Administration arranges to sell the fishing equipments at subsidized rates. It is suggested that these equipments should be distributed only to the cooperatives so that the monitoring operation is easily and the possibility of misuse of these equipments by unauthorized businessmen can be checked.

Fishery cooperatives have an assured way of getting stable returns. Selected leaders should be first educated in fishing, management and marketing techniques. The state assistance in respect of infrastructural facilities and technical guidance will go a long way in reorganizing the societies on sound economic lines. Meaningful and urgent action alone can re-activate the fishing industry in these islands which possess enormous marine wealth.

CONCLUSION

In order to make peace, progress and prosperity it is necessary to follow the path of cooperation. Where cooperation is strong, the fishermen, farmers, small businessmen, workers and consumers have a better standard of living. The study reveals that cooperation can remove the evils of monopoly and safeguard fishermen against all sorts of exploitation. Cooperation is a potentially powerful instrument in ensuring the desired pattern of economic development of these far flung islands.

References

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