

## Shrimp culture

## Up in arms

**The women of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh  
decide to oppose the newfound craze for shrimp culture**

Reports are mixed on the prospects for shrimp culture in India. On the one hand, government agencies describe in glorious terms the lucrative earnings from shrimp culture. On the other, there are reports by concerned environmentalists and village folk on the detrimental effects of the recently introduced shrimp culture in the southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

In September 1994, a few Gandhians and many village folk in Thanjavur district were arrested in the quiet of the night, because the small farmers were on the warpath, resisting the conversion of rich paddy lands into prawn farms. They were protesting because prawn culture would lead to the salination of food lands, fresh water would be overused and eventually contaminated, and because prawn culture would not result in any food or work for agricultural labourers.

Protests have been numerous in Andhra Pradesh. According to a newspaper report, over 5,000 acres of *perumboku* (revenue land) have been given to big landlords for shrimp farms. In a state where the power of the landlords is still strong and where the elected representatives of the people, including government ministers, do not bat an eyelid in flouting laws, the people have been so intimidated in the past that they are often afraid to react.

Yet, in Kanapathipalam in Nagaluppalopadu Mandal in Prakasam district, where the local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) is constructing a pipeline and jetty to pump seawater to the shrimp farms at a price, the local people violently opposed him and damaged the initial stonework for the project. Before the fishermen could

get the support of their new federation, the MLA had convinced the local village leaders—the *kappoosto* allow him to proceed with the construction of the jetty. The MLA could also overcome the objections of the forest authorities who opposed the jetty that illegally intruded into the coastal forest.

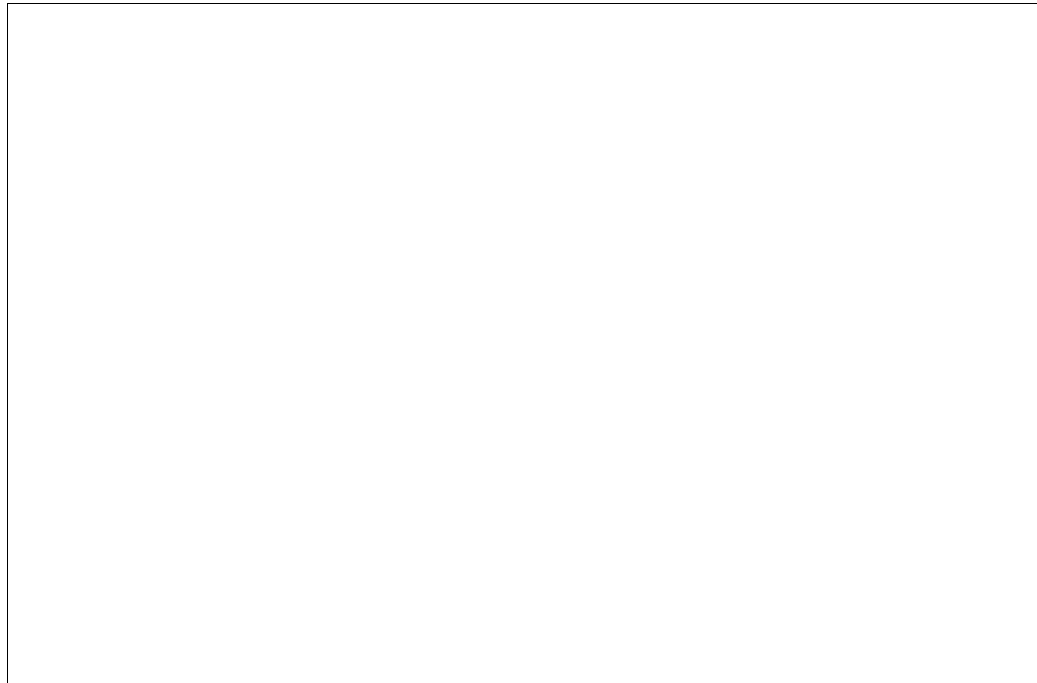
There are several such cases where other elected representatives are in the process of not only constructing a massively expensive distillery—in a state where women have vehemently agitated against the distilling of *arrack*, the local brew—but also converting over 300 acres of low-lying land into shrimp farms.

In early October 1994, there was an outbreak of cholera in a village of Andhra Pradesh called Gundayapalam. This arose from the water in the wells getting contaminated by excessive pumping of ground water for the shrimp farms, and also because of the indiscriminate release of polluted water from the shrimp farms into open streams.

Although some fisher people have opposed the selling of village lands to the shrimp farmers, in Rajupalam Chinnapattupalam, for instance, other fishing communities have been lured by the lucrative prices that investors are willing to pay for the land. This is backed by the fact that coastal fishermen have been facing decreasing returns from fishing due to the encroachment of trawlers.

#### Seed collection

With the construction of shrimp farms but no hatcheries in operation as yet, natural seed collection has become the main occupation of the fishing community, all the way from Machilipatnam to Nellore in Andhra Pradesh. Fine-mesh nets are fixed



in the sea and the collection from the net sorted out on the shore. Large quantities migrating inland in search of manual work, as they could no longer survive on only the shrimp fry are retained, the coast.

Interestingly, the price for fry also varies. It has dropped from Rs 2 to half a rupee per fry of monodon and to a tenth of a rupee for indicus fry. With the recent fall in exports due to the plague scare in India, there is no market for the fry. Fishermen and women have to just sit back and await better days, having sold their outboard motors or finding that their catches do not help them break even in their daily sustenance.

Realizing they have to take things into their own hands, large groups of women from the fishing community have recently come together to decide they will neither collect the shrimp fry nor work on the shrimp farms. At the village level, these women have organized themselves into Mahila Samajams (Women's Societies), supported by a voluntary organization called SNIRD based in Ongole. At a recent local meeting, many women leaders spoke articulately on the problems caused by the shrimp farms and their own shortsightedness in collecting fry. They said they need to protect the sea resources for their children, that it would increase their burden if their well-water got polluted and they were forced to go

farther to collect water. They mourned the fact that some coastal people are migrating inland in search of manual work, as they could no longer survive on the coast.

These women plan to take the issue up with the authorities at the district level. But, unfortunately, the officials have their hands tied. Many months have passed since the Department of Fisheries drew up an 'Environmental Bill' on a code for aquaculture. This bill is wilfully not being tabled in the state legislature because the local politicians are buying time to first establish their infrastructure to build up an open case. If and when the bill gets passed, the damage would have already been done.

#### **No movement**

Unfortunately, there is no fishworkers' movement in Andhra Pradesh. Though there are numerous NGOs working in the coastal parts of the state, in the absence of a fishworkers' movement, no real resistance can be built up. 3

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