

Empty boats, loaded trucks

Rapid changes in fish marketing in a small village in Kerala, India, highlight complex market dynamics and throw up difficult questions

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A few days ago I visited the fishing village of Pallam in the southern coast of Trivandrum, India. This is a densely populated fishing area. Women fish vendors in the SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) Union had told me that they were facing harassment from the fish agents and were being badly abused. They also said that in some areas, these agents had been banned because they bring in bad fish. Initially I was confused because I did not understand why agents in Pallam were bringing in fish. On enquiring, they told me, 'Oh, you have not come to the shore for long and that is why you do not see the hundreds of trucks that come in every morning with fish from all over the country.' I had seen a couple of trucks on some occasions when I passed the coast, but I had not seen any substantial number. So I decided to go one early morning and it was indeed a surprise. It was a day when there was a hurricane on the east coast and so the trucks from that area had not come in, but yet there

were quite a number and the shore was as busy as ever. Hundreds of women fish vendors buying fish, sorting it, repacking it and taking off in auto-rickshaws (three-wheeled vehicles) to the market.

The women told me that this had been going on for the last four or five years and the number of trucks coming in had gradually increased in numbers. There were women from all the neighbouring villages who had come to buy fish

there. This was not an unusually bad time for fishing—the end of the monsoon, but yet, the fishing boats that were coming in did not have much of a catch and hence, did not have much to sell. Moreover, what they did bring home—good fresh mackerel—the women did not want to buy. The auctions were commencing at rates they did not think would be profitable to buy at. I saw an auctioneer try six times to restart the auction, always bringing down the price, and still there were no takers. I do not know what price he finally sold his fish at because women were just turning away and the auctioneer knew that the fisher would be at a huge loss if he sold any lower.

We had seen a similar situation in the wholesale market, when fish caught by the larger trawlers and other crafts was brought in from the big landing centres, and the women vendors purchased for retail sales. But a wholesale market of this kind right there in the fishing village was a more recent phenomenon, and very disturbing for the following reasons.

The fish brought in plastic crates looked extremely old. It was packed with ice which, according to some merchants, had been treated with ammonia, so the fish was semi-frozen. The women examined the fish in the crates and then bid for a crate at a time. Then they settled down with their crates, repacked the fish in their containers, again adding ice and salt. In a small container they also carried some sea sand, to sprinkle on the fish before selling to give the impression of fresh fish from the shore.

Along with the crates, there were also cartons of frozen fish. The label on the carton said reef cod but bore no date or country name. The fish inside was like stone and the women who bought it told me they would take it to their village and salt and dry it. When I spoke to the truck driver, I was told that this fish was brought from the cold storage of the Cochin harbor. This brought back memories of women at the Accra harbor in Ghana buying fish in cartons from the cold storages, where the European fishing fleet had sold the fish that they had fished off the west African coast back to the African women. These women too had no more fish on their shores,

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Insulated vans bringing iced and frozen fish to the sea shore in Pallam, Kerala, India

and took the frozen fish to their villages to smoke and preserve. I did not think I would see this in our fishing village, at least in my life time. But things have changed rapidly.

There were a couple of other striking features on the shore. I was surprised to see the number of younger women with books and pens, writing down the accounts of the auction. These literate local women were a new layer of people involved in the marketing chain. Earlier the auctioning agents themselves kept these accounts and claimed the money from the women buyers. Now it was the younger women who heckled the women buyers to return their dues. These women were paid a daily wage which was quite substantial. But the man who actually auctioned the fish seemed the villain in the chain. In addition to a percentage of the sales price, he also kept a portion of fish after the auction was settled. This was a loss to the woman who actually bought the fish, and she had no way of controlling this.

The other new phenomenon was the number of women who worked as head loaders. Women now found employment to unload fish from the boats, and also from the trucks. This was well paid wage work, payment being both on a piece-rate and on a daily-wage basis. The stronger women who did not want to leave the village to sell fish took to this work. Wage work in the community was now an established phenomenon for women in fishing, and all this work continued to be unrecognized and unrewarded.

The women vendors who are members of the SEWA union were ambiguous about what they thought of this phenomenon. On the one hand, they felt this was a reality that they could not wish away. There was not enough fish being caught on their shores, and therefore the incoming trucks helped them access fish from other shores. They could thus continue to eke a livelihood through fish trade. On the other hand, this brought down the value of the catches of their own fishermen who landed fish on their shores. The fresh fish had to compete with fish from trucks. Moreover, there was no control over the quality of the fish the trucks brought in.

The women were angry with the men agents who spoke to them roughly, often using

vulgar language. They resented the practice of the auctioneer taking away a part of the fish as his share. They would rather pay a fixed percentage of the total auction value, but not this unregulated payment in kind.

According to the merchant who had started this market, "This is all about markets—fish has to move from the shore to the consumer. In this process hundreds of people can make a living. So isn't this a good system? When I see that very little fish is being landed in Pallam, I call my agents and tell them to divert the trucks with fish this side, and they come. Or when there is too much fish landing here, I ask the agents to come and buy from here for other markets. The price is determined by the availability and the demand in the market and the fisherman is the winner in the long run". This merchant said that when he started this market in Pallam eight years ago, there were only twelve boats catching fish in this village.

Now there were over a hundred. Similarly, there used to be just a few women from the village purchasing the fish, but now there were hundreds. There were 17 teams of merchants—each with its own labour chain. There were also teams of ice suppliers with their own chain of labourers. As he explained, "Look at the employment we have generated, and we are all local people. We contribute to the local economy, and to the Church whom we pay two percent of the income. So the Church has managed to also build a community hall and other services for the community. We have a Merchants' Association and we control the quality of fish that comes into the village and we are sure it is not bad fish." However, he was unaware of where the frozen reef cod in cartons came from.

So while the merchant was right in saying that the fish market looked alive and a large number of people had gained employment, the gains from the process were certainly not equitable. Just observing the various players, and their housing and other facilities, the class differentiation among them was clearly visible. The major gains went to the large merchants, and the Church had also substantially grown in size and stature. The others were merely surviving. ❏