

Heading West

The difficult working conditions of migrant labourers in the fisheries of the Sindhudurg district of Maharashtra raise both social and human-rights issues that need to be solved

The sound of many voices harmonizing together in song filter across the courtyard of Shammi Kelaskar's house, near Vengurla in the Sindhudurg district of Maharashtra state, on the west coast of India. Shammi identifies himself as a fisherman, although he rarely goes fishing these days. The men singing folk songs in his yard are the real fishermen.

I meet them the next morning, sitting on a huge pile of red fishing nets, their fingers working at lightning speed to mend the nets, while they chat with each other in a language that seems extremely out of place. The fishermen speak Telugu, a language from the east coast of India. I wonder what they are doing in this remote part of the Konkan coast. "They have come here from the state of Andhra Pradesh", says Shammi. "I hire them to help with my purse-seine net". The fishers of Sindhudurg may be far removed from the bustling fish markets of Mumbai, yet individuals like Shammi need to employ a sizeable crew of 10-15 men to run their small purse-seine operations that supply sardines for export.

The migrant fishermen working on Shammi's net are not unique. During subsequent visits to the area, I have found that hiring migrant labour from Andhra Pradesh is a regular practice among purse-seine fishing boatowners in Sindhudurg. While migration is not unusual in marine fisheries, it is usually seen along the same coast, or at least within the bounds of recognition of fishing cultures or castes. To see such long-distance migration, to a region like Sindhudurg that is not well connected nor very well known for well-developed fisheries, is highly surprising.

Previous studies on migrant labour from Andhra Pradesh have focused on their contribution to fisheries in the state of Gujarat, particularly in the important fish-landing centres of Veraval and Porbandar. These studies have revealed the organized nature of this labour market, with a system of advance payment to the migrants, followed by a fixed monthly wage. In contrast, the migrant labour system in Sindhudurg is poorly organized, being much newer, and migrants often enter into direct verbal agreements with boatowners, rather than going through contractors.

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Purse-seine operations in Sindhudurg are relatively recent, adapted by locals who had contact with fishermen from other states who use this fishing technology. A purse-seine boatowner from Sindhudurg says, "Purse-seines and mini purse-seines are new fishing gears in Maharashtra. We don't have a lot of experience using them. They have been using purse-seines in Andhra for a long time and so those fishermen are experienced with making and using these nets. That is why we prefer to hire crew members from Andhra". While this statement reveals one of the reasons for the migrants' presence in Sindhudurg, it is not the whole story.

Many Ghabhit fishermen, who make up the majority fishing caste in Sindhudurg district, have reservations

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about using the purse-seine. As in many other fishing villages across India, a big concern is that the use of mechanized fishing gear, like the purse seine, will threaten the livelihoods of artisanal fisherman, by hauling in disproportionately large fish catches. Therefore, many fishing villages in Sindhudurg have come together to ban the use of purse-seines. Not only do the village rules prevent village members from owning and operating purse-seines, the village members will also not tolerate purse-seine operations in their area, by outsiders. For migrant labourers in Sindhudurg's purse-seine fishery, this translates into a high degree of social ostracism. A migrant labourer from the Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh says, "We are usually not allowed to stay in the fishing villages during our time in Maharashtra. This means that we have to stay on board the fishing vessel for the entire fishing season [four months in his case, but it can extend to eight months for some migrants]. Because of this, we do not

negotiate the terms of employment, wages, living conditions and so on. This inability to communicate well, along with the social ostracism that they face, means both an inability and impossibility of the migrants' participation in village activities in Sindhudurg. The songs I heard that evening at Shammi Kelaskar's house were a symptom of that social isolation. These men come prepared to create their own entertainment to pass the evenings, travelling with musical instruments and armed with the knowledge of folk songs.

Working conditions for migrant labour in fisheries are notorious and Sindhudurg is no exception. The Srikakulam fisherman whom I interviewed reported: "There have been times when I have spent up to 20 days on a fishing trip. During this time, I dare not bathe or wash clothes, because I would have to use sea water and thereafter my skin would be chafed by the salt that remains on the dry clothes." While first-aid kits are available on the vessels, there is no concept of health insurance. "If we fall sick, we have to take care of ourselves. We go to the government hospital for free treatment, but our wages for those days are cut. The [boat] owner does not pay for our treatment", said the migrant.

Payment is often in the form of a lump sum given at the end of the fishing season, which the migrants sometimes prefer because they have no place to store the money during the fishing season. This is because the migrants do not have bank accounts or access to safe storage in Sindhudurg. The payment is supposed to take the form of a daily wage plus a share of the profit, but since it is paid in a lump sum, the migrants often find it difficult to calculate how the final amount was arrived at. The migrants perspective is expressed thus: "The fishing is so variable...one day we may have a bumper catch and then we may not get anything for weeks. At the end the [boat] owner will say that he is running at a loss, and we can't say anything. We have to take whatever he gives us." This lump-sum

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have regular access to fresh water for bathing and washing clothes. We are often not served by the shopkeepers within the fishing village, and have to walk further [to the larger marketplace in the town] to use these facilities." Such migrants are completely dependent on the boatowners, being unfamiliar with the language, local culture, customs, and so on.

Many of the migrants that I came across in Sindhudurg travel together in groups. These men are related or are from the same village and can therefore look out for, and support, one another. In each of these groups there are one or two people who speak Hindi or a smattering of Marathi, and serve as the spokesperson(s) for the group. It is up to this person to

payment also means that if a migrant has to leave mid-season, he will have to forfeit his payment.

Given these difficult working conditions, it is hard to understand what drives the migrants to return to these fisheries year after year. In a study titled 'Inter-state migration of fishers from Srikakulam district', by Bhaskara Sarma and Venkatesh Salagrama report that among fishing communities there, working in mechanized fisheries is considered a respectable occupation, in comparison with participating in traditional or artisanal fisheries in Andhra Pradesh. These workers command higher rates of dowry and their lump-sum payments or advances are useful to clear loans or debts. Migrant labour is also related to lower rates of alcoholism. Being confined to the boat during the fishing season, the migrants have little access to alcohol. The wives of some of the migrant labourers say, "We prefer our husbands to work on the west coast, because the alternative would be to work on the trawlers of the Vishakapatnam harbour. At the gate of the harbour is a liquor shop, where most of the day's earnings are usually spent, before the men come home".

While there are clearly social and some health benefits to migration, the monetary and financial benefits to choosing to migrate are still difficult to quantify. Bhaskara Sarma and Venkatesh Salagrama judge the overall impact of migrant labour on the family income of the Srikakulam fishermen to be low, especially for the poorest families. While this is increasingly the case in the bigger fishing destinations, like Porbandar and Veraval, (Gujarat) where the fisheries are in decline, the problem is only exacerbated in destinations like Sindhudurg where migrant labour is not well organized. Many of the workers in Sindhudurg report having originally come looking for work in Goa's fisheries and upon not finding any, they wandered north into Sindhudurg. Now that news of this new destination for migrant labour has spread, fishermen from



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Mini purse-seine boats are docked at a fishing jetty in Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra, India. The owners of such boats are the main employers of migrant labour

Vizianagaram district of Andhra Pradesh have also begun to migrate to Sindhudurg. This glut of labour availability has potentially worsened the bargaining position of the migrants. Migrants to Sindhudurg and Goa report lower wages and overall earnings than those who find work in the big fishing harbours of Veraval or Mumbai.

In Sindhudurg, the migrants' presence has translated into ensuring the persistence of the purse-seine fishery. Despite protests by local fishermen, the purse-seine has been retained due to the easy availability of experienced crew from Andhra Pradesh. The escalating conflict between purse-seine boatowners and local artisanal fishermen once again sees migrants caught in the crossfire. They are often the targets of physical altercations at sea over purse-seine usage in artisanal fishing areas. An artisanal fisherman even reported having held a couple of migrant crew members hostage for a day in order to demand compensation from the boatowner. The migrants' situation not only results in their own exploitation but also exacerbates conflicts between users of different types of fishing technology in Sindhudurg. As a case of 'neobondage', migrant labour in Sindhudurg's fisheries is both a social and a human-rights issue that needs to be solved. 3

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