

Books or motors?

The case of the little fishing village of Jaleshwar in Gujarat, India throws up questions about the payoffs involved in 'growth' and 'development'

Adjacent to the western end of the Veraval marine drive and just behind the famous Birla temple lies the little Indian fishing community of Jaleshwar. Veraval is today one of the largest fishing harbours in the State of Gujarat. To people in fisheries, Jaleshwar was known in the 1970s as a prosperous fishing village, where the outboard motors (OBMs) had become part and parcel of the artisanal fishery. Visiting the village 30 years later, one notices that it still looks the same; children run around happily, looking scruffy and dirty; the adults go about their business as usual; and besides the new-looking fibreglass canoes on the shore, everything else in the community seems to have remained just the same.

Talking to a group of men in October of 2000, generally a peak fishing time, one realized that the season has not been as good as it should have been, but they are surviving because they had had a surprise catch of whale shark (*Rincodone*). The little community of around 400 families caught 70 large sharks. The large ones fetched Rs125,000 (Rs46.76 = US\$1) each and the smallest ones, Rs75,000. So that was like a windfall.

Mora Arab, now 70 and the first to have tried the OBM, narrates the story of their village. Their forefathers belonged to Patan, the *panchayat* (local council) adjoining the eastern end of the old Veraval municipality. They were cast-net fishermen who went to Hirakote or Sutrapada to fish in good seasons.

But as they did not get good prices for their fish there, 20-25 of Arab's father's generation decided to settle in Veraval so that they could have access to the Veraval market. This was in the 1940s. But, being Muslim, they were denied access to the jetty at Veraval, and so they decided to

settle illegally at the western end of the town, in this unoccupied, sandy space, where a tiny stream flows into the sea at Jaleshwar.

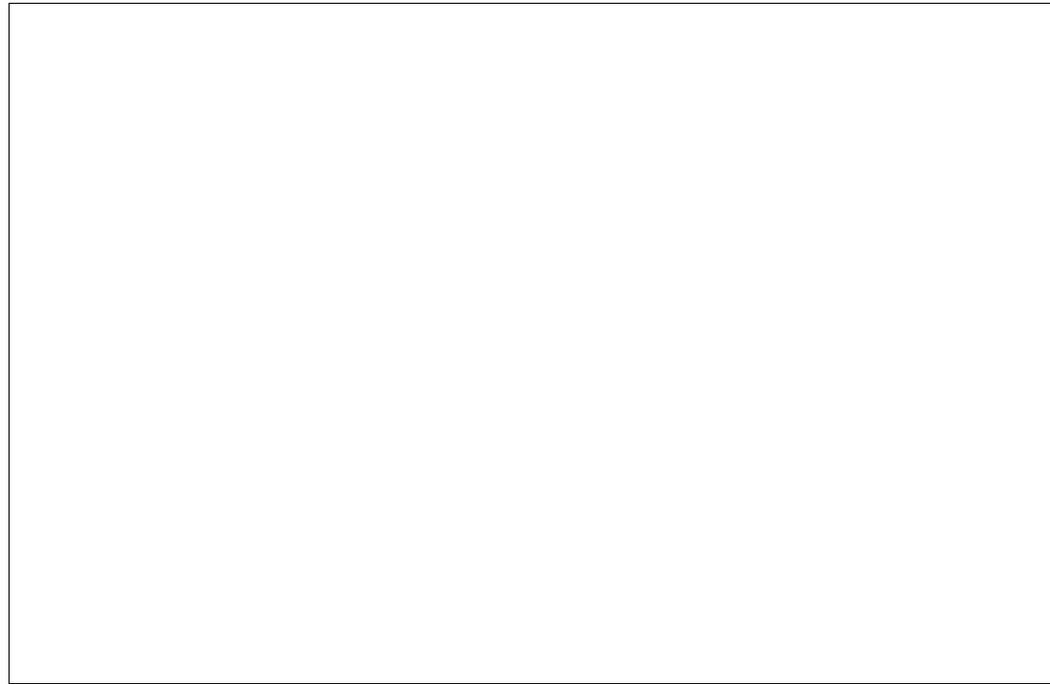
There are still unauthorized settlers today, accounting for around 1,600 votes in an otherwise Hindu-dominated ward of the municipality. The electricity line enters the village and so the houses have unauthorized electric connections, but little else of other infrastructure, like water, sanitation, roads, etc. Everyone buys water on an individual basis from private tankers. But the community has grown in numbers and the fishing too has developed.

The first big change was when the cast-nets were replaced by gill-nets, and the good pomfret catches increased incomes. This community attracted the attention of the government's fisheries officer in 1956, when the fisheries department had received six 4-hp British Anjani OBMs for trial fishing.

The established Kharva Hindu fishermen had refused these engines as they were skilled sailors and their catches were good. The fisheries officer was able to talk a few of these Machiyaras (the caste of Muslim fishermen) into trying the OBM as, for the most part, they were still rowing themselves to the fishing grounds or using very primitive sails.

First trials

"We were reluctant to use the motors at the start because we thought the noise of the motors would scare the fish away," says Arab. But the first trials came back with good catches. The fishermen realized that they were able to go to fishing grounds beyond the 15 fathoms where they normally fished. Encouraged by the catches but still untrained, others went in



for the motors, letting the new contraption run as long as the fuel permitted, afraid to touch it, lest it hit back.

Once the trials proved successful, the fishermen were ready to buy the OBMs and the more daring ones made a down payment of Rs500 for a 5-hp Evinrude motor. Evinrude's technician was on the spot to train them in the proper use of the engine and, from then on, there was no return. The fishermen soon needed one, two and three motors to keep them fishing regularly. Very soon, the Johnson 5-hp, Yamaha Aircool 8-hp and, finally, the Mariner 8-hp made their entries. Today, it is the Mariner 8-hp OBM that is the most popular because of its 365-degree rotation feature.

It was not only the motor but also the craft and gear that were gradually transformed. The cotton gill-nets were replaced by nylon ones in the early 1960s and, in the early 1980s, these were replaced or accompanied by plastic rope-nets and, in the mid-1990s, came the much lighter monofilament nets. So while the gear remained mainly gill-nets, their size did change. The number of pieces remained the usual 50-60, but the number of meshes increased. This meant that each piece got longer. Each fisherman utilized three or four different mesh-sized gill-nets to target pomfret, horse mackerel, seer fish and *hilsa*. Over the years, the width of the net also increased and being fixed

gill-nets, they targeted a larger variety of column fish.

These fishermen are also skilled shark fishers. They actually hunt shark in April and May with large spear-like devices with hooks at their ends. The operation can last for two to three days, during which a couple of boats encircle the shark, hook it and leave it to weaken, while they make sure that it remains afloat with buoys attached to the hook-line.

When they see the shark tire, they draw it nearer and then knock it on the head before hauling it in. One really wonders how they do this from their small boats, as the sharks they target are only the really large ones. But the fishermen do not recall any accidents at sea.

Fishing seasons

During the good fishing season, all the fishermen stay in the village, and a normal fishing trip starts around 4 a.m and ends by 9 a.m. In poorer fishing months, many of the fishermen are accustomed to migrate, with their equipment and family, to other fishing locations, generally to Shill, about 50 km west, where they live for about three or sometimes five, months. They sell their fish to local merchants there. With the introduction of the fibre reinforced plastic (FRP) boats in the mid-1970s, which were fitted with ice boxes, the fishermen were able to go for two-day fishing trips to 50-fathom depths.

In Jaleshwar, Muslim fish merchants from Veraval advance the fishermen money for their high-value fish. So, although they are assured of a market, they do not get the best prices because of the merchants' control. Although many of the fishermen are indebted to the merchants, they generally clear their debts during each season.

The fish catches have decreased since the mid-1990s. Veraval, where the fishery was modernized with huge landing and berthing facilities as part of a World Bank project, is home to 2,000 trawlers of 32-55 ft length, and 800 FRPs. Veraval has seen the boom-and-bust of the fishery between 1980 and 1996, with 50 per cent of its fleet out of operation in 2000. But this little community of Jaleshwar, which is still an illegal settlement, has continued to remain operative, adding between three to eight craft to its fleet annually. As the growth of this community has been from within, with no in-migration, over time, the labour to haul the craft and their large nets on shore has decreased, and, for the last two years, oil-operated winches have been used to haul the boats on shore.

So, from all technical points of view, this fishery has modernized, while remaining sustainable. But, then, we may ask how we assess sustainability if the living standards in the community have not 'improved'. While the houses have a more permanent look, they appear more like patched-up structures, growing as and when money becomes available. But, except for a couple of houses at the entrance of the village, few have a new look. Families have remained largely joint and, being Muslim, some of the fishermen have a second wife, a peaceful and regulated system of polygamy, with the first wife managing the common household. So households are large and the age of marriage very young, between 14-15 years, for both boys and girls. Interestingly, all deliveries take place at home, and the younger generation increasingly practices family planning, with the result that a young woman, before 18 years of age, has had two kids and has also undergone laproscopy.

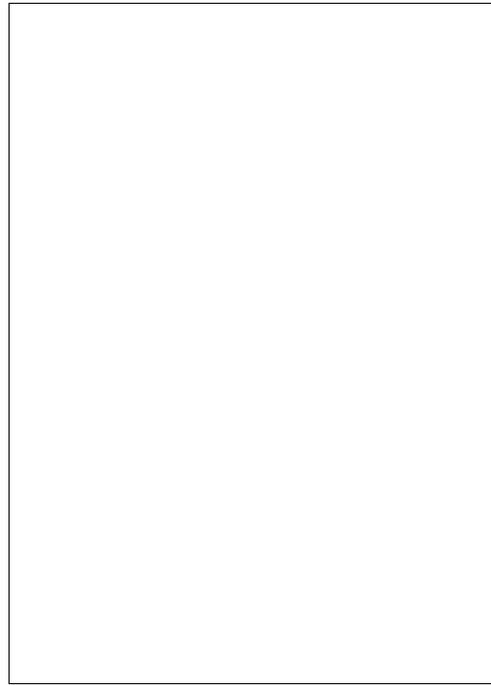
All the women get involved in the fishing activity, as the village is right on the beach.

They are at the shore at landing time, helping in the unloading, sorting fish, if necessary, and retailing the lower-valued species and drying the surplus. Once they cross the 35-year age limit, they seem to have greater freedom of movement and often take off on pilgrimages to holy places in all-women's groups. A few of the older ones have even accompanied their husbands to Mecca. Religious practice gives them their sense of identity and sanctions social behaviour, and the women are convinced that Allah takes care of them. In fact, all marriages take place within the community and between close relatives, but people do not report of many physically deformed or mentally handicapped children.

Though it is situated not even a kilometre away from the busy and bustling city of Veraval, not a single person from Jaleshwar seeks employment in the city. "We all live on the fishery and, in any case, how will we get employment without education?" asks Arab. Besides basic primary education for a small proportion of the youth, the majority in the village are still illiterate. Only one young man has studied up to the high school level. Being Muslim, the men do not drink; so where do all their excess earnings go? They say that the extra earnings have only helped them continue fishing. They need new motors almost every other year, for which they now pay Rs52,000. Although the monofilament nets are lighter, they have to be replaced every almost season. The fishermen continue to use plastic and nylon nets, replacing which is expensive. They get the kerosene for their motors at a subsidized rate, but they still require Rs5,000 or more for kerosene every four months, for each boat. The FRP boats are lighter than the wooden ones and require less maintenance, but their quality is running down too. The fishermen pay Rs52,000 a boat, which needs to be replaced once in five or six years, although their actual life may be from between 10 to 15 years. Together with the subsidies that they received in the initial stages from the Fisheries Department, the fishermen's earnings just manage to keep them afloat.

No wild ambitions

As a community, they do not seem to have any wild ambitions. They all work hard, do not starve and have a basic community



life. Ismail Arab is the community *Patel* (head), together with five other elected elders, who sort out intra-family disputes and represent the community when needed.

But they obviously have very little political clout and suffer caste discrimination even from their better-off Muslim brethren, who belong to the old business community of Veraval. This social 'backwardness' is not surprising in a State like Gujarat. Though Gujarat is productive and rich, the State has not felt the need to develop social infrastructure in the rural areas. With the State abdicating its responsibility to safeguard citizens' social and economic rights, it is no wonder that in this era of liberalization and globalization, Gujarat ranks highest in the development of private investment in infrastructure, according to the most recent World Bank report.

In the context of a search for a sustainable fishery in an otherwise 'growth'-oriented development paradigm, the reality of Jaleshwar raises several questions. The community has adopted modern technology to remain afloat. The investments in the fishery are large and, therefore, the fishing assets are substantial. This actually means that the greatest advantage from the fishery is taken by the companies that supply the fishermen with inputs. The excess

earnings have not been siphoned away for 'social development', like better education and habitation. The fishermen, for their part, have not desired to get bigger and more aggressive in their fishing, despite the trawler threat.

Comparing Jaleshwar to the little fishing village of Marianad in Kerala brings up an interesting contrast. Marianad was where a community development experiment was initiated, which became famous for the people's fish marketing co-operative that provided a case in favour of the artisanal fishery. In 1974, when fishermen from Marianad visited Jaleshwar to see how the OBM was faring, they returned saying, "Fine, the OBMs have helped them catch more fish, but they are still 'uncultured'." Since then, the fishermen of Marianad have motorized too and are not only using 25-hp motors, but also devices like global positioning systems to help locate the fishing grounds. Artificial reefs and more efficient nets have become common too. The village has grown, both internally and due to in-migration, and one can visibly see the developments in housing, infrastructure, allied businesses and material prosperity. The children of the fishermen now go to college and there are even a couple of doctors, engineers, M. Phils., teachers, nurses, priests and several graduates in the village. The fishery is still very vibrant, but indebtedness and wasteful consumerist expenditure is also very high. Violence in the village—both interpersonal and against women—is on the increase. The percentage of suicides and murders in the population is also high. So one wonders about the payoffs. Has competitiveness and aggression at sea led to greater competition and violence on land? Only a deeper study will throw more light on assessing 'growth' and 'development' in the context of the artisanal fishery. ♣

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