

Revisiting Mahabalipuram: The challenge of restoring livelihoods

Some 18 months ago, BOBP-IGO and its partners organized a workshop in Mahabalipuram on reviving fisheries and rehabilitating fishing communities after the tsunami. (See *Bay of Bengal News*, Vol. IV No. 7) The workshop followed an international conference on health and safety in the fishing industry.

During the workshop, fisherman P Vasu from Mamallapuram village presented a graphic picture of the tsunami's havoc. He said members of his community needed help to rebuild their assets, restore their health and livelihoods and revive their psyche. Dr George A Conway, Chief, Alaska Field Station of NIOSH, and other expert delegates to IFISH-3 then visited the village.

The expert team observed the damage wrought by the tsunami as well as the reconstruction effort. They were struck by the poor quality of post-tsunami boats in the village, which revealed basic design flaws, says Dr M Paramasivam, BOBP consultant. ("Scantling rules were ignored, skin thickness was inadequate, deck construction was weak. Further, the boatbuilders handled strong chemicals, paints and glue without taking proper precautions.")

In April this year, Dr Conway, Dr Y S Yadava of BOBP-IGO and others re-visited Mamallapuram village and spent a day with the community there to find out how they were faring.

Some basic facts about the village. It has a population of 639, who live

Meetings with officials at GRT Temple Bay (right top and middle) and the Mahabalipuram fisher community (right).



in 149 houses. There are 219 full-time fishers and 19 part-timers. Some 350 fishers are members of the fisheries co-operative society. They use 90 motorized boats and 70 non-motorized boats.

The fishing village receives some assistance from the five-star hotel adjacent to it. Manager Shabin Sarvotham of the GRT Temple Bay said the hotel has provided the village with fencing and toilets; it has given the fishers jobs; it has hired fishers to take the hotel inmates out on pleasure trips.

The visiting team met the Mamallapuram residents and panchayat heads at the local community hall. "We have to come to see and listen and understand," said Dr Conway and Dr Yadava.

What are the community's needs? The fishers said they needed cell phones and GPS (geographical positioning system) tools. They wanted their FRP boats repaired. Bath and toilet facilities in the village, and the underground



Dr Conway inspecting the damaged FRP boat.

drainage system, badly needed improvement and repair.

The fishers talked about their livelihoods – fishing practices and seasons, landings, income and expenditure. They wanted training in fishing technology, in repair and maintenance of outboard engines, in preparing value-added products, in FRP boat maintenance. Also tailoring training for the women. They wanted better marketing and

net-making facilities, and a restaurant that would serve refreshments. Dr Yadava assured the fishers that their requests and information on their needs would be conveyed to the authorities concerned.

On behalf of BOBP-IGO, Dr Yadava presented the community leaders with equipment to help women fish vendors of the village – several sets of ice boxes, weighing balances, aluminium containers and buckets. He requested feedback on the use of the equipment.

Dr Conway told the community that a programme on 'Augmenting Occupational Safety and Health of Coastal Communities in India' would soon be initiated and implemented through BOBP-IGO. Mamallapuram would be covered by the project; the BOBP-IGO would therefore visit the village frequently to discuss their livelihoods and welfare. The fishers welcomed the news and thanked Dr Conway and Dr Yadava, who then went round the village and inspected the boats on the beach.

There's further good news. An FAO- executed IMO-funded project on FRP boats will soon start functioning under the BOBP umbrella at Chennai. It will provide advice and organize training on FRP boat design, maintenance and repair. With the FRP boom in the region – particularly in India and Sri Lanka – the project is timely.

What happens when boats are defective

Just a few days before Dr Conway and Dr Yadava visited Mamallapuram, four fishers of the village almost lost their lives, because of a defective FRP boat. Here's the story of Karunakaran (38), Hari (38), Raghu (35), and Kumaran (30) in their own words.

"We had an FRP boat given to us by Christ India Austria, an NGO. We were not happy with the boat, it had vacant compartments in the deck. But we had to earn our bread, we had to make a living.

"On that day of March, we set out to fish at 3 a.m. We were fishing at a place about 18 km from the shore, and about 18 fathoms deep. To our horror, our boat started leaking, and water started gushing out. We used our raiments to plug the leak but that didn't work.

"The boat sank. So did our hearts, we thought that was the end. But we decided to be brave, we encouraged each other, we managed to keep afloat. To our great good fortune, some other fishers from our village noticed us, rowed toward us and took us aboard. Saved!

"We managed to locate the sunken boat and tow it ashore. We were exhausted when we reached ashore. We were taken to hospital, we had to spend Rs 8 000 on medical expenses, we also spent Rs 6 000 to repair the boat and engine. That took a whole month, and we couldn't fish. But we worked as labourers in other boats to at least earn Rs 50 to Rs 100 per day.

"An experience we won't forget."

