

# The IGO Spotlights Women in Fisheries

*Glimpses into two useful publications brought out recently by the BOBP-IGO: a review of women in fisheries on India's east coast, and a manual on self-help groups, both authored by Gitanjali Chaturvedi.*

In 1980, a delegate to a BOBP workshop said that “Women in fisheries” was “an area of darkness” because little reliable information was available on the subject. There were few factual reports, very little documentation. Interventions had to be based on conjecture and guesswork.

The picture is now dramatically different. The “area of darkness” has been brightly and boldly illuminated by the BOBP. Between 1979 and 2003, the Programme brought out 13 publications on women in fisheries – reports of workshops, investigations and pilot activities carried out in member-countries. Plus a few score articles in the newsletter *Bay of Bengal News*. The BOBP-IGO has now added two worthy publications to this list.

***‘Women in Fisheries on the East Coast of India: A Review’***

Between October 2003 and March 2004, the IGO carried out a review of women in fisheries in coastal areas of Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal.

A combination of desk study and field work, the review resulted in an 88-page booklet. It contains a 20-page overview on the status of women and of interventions made by BOBP and other organisations; a 36-page report on what’s happening in selected villages and what some NGOs are doing for women in fisheries (based on field visits to 30 villages); 16 pages of annexures and tables, which include a questionnaire

for NGOs and a “checklist for project sites”; and a glossary.

Some glimpses into the booklet: facts, quotes, revelations, nuggets of information:

- In several fishing villages of India’s east coast, women’s role in marketing and processing fish has been diminished in recent years by the advent of middlemen and resource depletion. Women have not been dynamic enough to take up other occupations.
- What were BOBP’s main interventions concerning women? Training fisherwomen of Tamil Nadu to act as links between their villages and the outside world; expansion of the link worker scheme; improving credit facilities; organising an exclusive fish market for women fish vendors of Besant Nagar, Chennai; promoting post-harvest facilities (ice boxes to preserve fish; new and better fish containers for fish vendors; fish drying racks and smoking bins); several socio-economic studies.



**“I am pleased to note that these two publications contain valuable information and once more confirm the long-standing determination of BOBP to improve the living conditions in fishing communities and in particular, that of women.”**

**– Dr Jacques Diouf,  
Director-General, FAO, Rome.**

Further, several BOBP activities aimed at fishing communities in general (such as introduction of beachcraft, extension training, non-formal education) helped women as well.

- Self-help groups (SHGs) have become the new *mantra* for social and economic uplift in fishing villages. They have replaced co-operatives which

*Cleaning the fish before drying – fisherwomen of Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh.*



have become increasingly corrupt. However, SHGs have developed as micro-savings institutions; they have not succeeded in channelling savings into income-generating activities. Reason: the risks of individual enterprise scare women; marketing of finished products is a challenge too. An exception: In Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu, self-help groups in Vellapatty village have helped women to start and run businesses such as petty shops, fish pickle units, crab fattening.

- In 1992, NABARD (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development) launched a programme to link SHGs with banks.

266 banks are part of the SHG network and link 7.8 million families.

90 per cent of SHG members are women; 66 per cent of the SHGs are in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh; the repayment rate of loans to SHGs is 95 per cent; Punnakkayal, Tamil Nadu, has the largest number of SHGs in an Indian village (50).

- “Empowering fisherwomen is a multi-pronged exercise of inculcating awareness, finding income alternatives, assuring livelihood security.”
- What are the non-fisheries livelihoods open to fisherwomen? Agriculture (in many areas of the east coast); tailoring and allied services (fisherwomen in Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu; Nallavadu village, Pondicherry, Bheemunipatnam, Andhra Pradesh, have been trained in tailoring, but need help to start businesses); salt pans (Tuticorin); shell collection and shell craft (Rameswaram); palmyra craft (Keelakarai, Tamil Nadu); shrimp farms (Andhra Pradesh); labour for construction sites and cashew plantations (Telugu-speaking women in Orissa); animal husbandry and pisciculture (West Bengal); growing medicinal plants and herbs (Veerampattinam



*Interactive sessions help in identifying activities that can sustain the SHGs.*

village, coastal Pondicherry); handicrafts (opportunities for business in shell craft and palmyra leaf craft exist throughout the coast. Fisherfolk could supply shells to factories that require lime.)

- What about livelihood opportunities in coastal or marine ecotourism? Tamil Nadu has some beautiful churches and forts in coastal areas. Pulicat lake is a bird sanctuary; Pulicat town has some beautiful Dutch relics; The Gulf of Mannar sports religious, educational, leisure and adventure tourism features; Pondicherry has a world-famous ashram which draws people who want an alternate lifestyle; the Orissa coast is dotted with tourist attractions such as Gopalpur-on-Sea, Chilka lake, Konarak and

Puri. The Sundarbans in West Bengal is a tourist attraction. But most opportunities offered by the tourist industry are grabbed by resorts, multinational companies and the local elite.

The author suggests that SHGs be organised among fishing communities. They could cater to tourists by offering beach shacks and restaurants, public call centres (STD booths) and boat rides for tourists. In Goa, Kerala and Sri Lanka, fishing communities are active in the tourism industry. This phenomenon should be studied.

Women from east coast fishing communities could play an important role in tapping the benefits of ecotourism if given proper training.

*Women’s fish market in Besant Nagar – an enterprise that failed to sustain.*



The author notes that Government institutions such as the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI), Kochi, and the College of Fisheries, Tuticorin, train fisherwomen to prepare value-added fisheries products. In the Gulf of Mannar, institutions like the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) and CMFRI teach pearl culture. In Pondicherry, women have been trained in ornamental fish culture. But such training can't be converted to cash in the absence of management and marketing skills. "Teaching skills that do not generate income will only serve to dampen enthusiasm and increase the dependence of fisherfolk on the government."

- NGOs working with fisherwomen have generated awareness on domestic violence, alcoholism and gender rights; they have helped with capacity building, leadership training and occupational training; they have formed SHGs to promote savings and credit; they have organised programmes on literacy, health awareness, sanitation and hygiene.
- The booklet provides information about selected fishing villages on the east coast, women's activities and NGOs assisting them. It also reproduces a questionnaire for NGOs that seeks basic information about the background, achievements and contact details of the NGO, its perception of the problems and needs of coastal communities, and the kind of skills it can impart to them. The BOBP-IGO has a database of 40 NGOs



### Make the SHGs market-savvy!

The SHG movement has effectively transformed the lives of rural women in many parts of the country. However, the weaknesses that have emerged in the overall growth of the SHGs need to be addressed to sustain the movement and empower rural women in a true sense. SHGs lack the skills to penetrate the market; they have been so far hovering on the periphery. Efforts are required to make them market-savvy, and build up functional linkages between SHGs and the growing market.

— Editor

that have answered the questionnaire.

- The booklet contains a 10-page checklist for factual data about project sites on the east coast. A database has been organised about a number of project sites on the basis of information provided through the checklist.



### Working Together: A Manual on Self-Help Groups

This slim and attractively illustrated little publication answers basic questions about SHGs, narrates a few success stories, describes how an SHG is set up and contains an interactive guide for social workers and facilitators. It also contains a useful directory of organisations concerned with SHG formation.

The manual notes that SHGs have been extremely useful in enabling rural credit, but have yet to impact

the rural grassroots because they have been inactive in skill development or market orientation.

Some SHG success stories:

- Women in a remote Karnataka village run a successful courier service, after investing in a few scooters.
- In Thirukanchipet, Pondicherry, a Dalit community SHG has invested in a 16-seat autorickshaw that is a boon since public transport facilities are 5 km away. The UNDP, the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) and MSSRF helped out with money for the vehicle. The autorickshaw makes 70 trips a day and runs on a battery.
- In Rameswaram island, Tamil Nadu, a group of physically challenged people run a centre (Nesakarangal) that imparts training in shell and palmyra leaf craft to people with similar disabilities.
- An SHG of 16 women in Gadimoga village, East Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh, provides mid-day meals to the village school.
- Two women's SHGs in 24 Parganas district, West Bengal, successfully breed and market fish and prawns, and improve sanitation by constructing and maintaining low-cost latrines.

— S R Madhu

