OUR FISH—OUR WEALTH

A PUBLICATION OF
BIOBP
For Fisheries Development
BAY OF BENGAL PROGRAMME
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For hundreds of years now our people have depended almost entirely on the sea for a livelihood. So dependent are we on her that we revere and worship her.

And yet sometimes when the catch is very poor and seems to decrease day by day whatever we do, we tend to blame her. We say she is angry, she has been unkind. Has she?

Could it be that in our ignorance, our need, our greed, we are taking too much, too soon from her?

Are the fishing methods, gear and craft we use today the best ones?

Do they do the best for us by way of catch weight? If they do not, what can we do about it?

In a series of colourful picture story books like this one, we will discuss these questions one by one and try to understand and learn about what we could do to protect and conserve the wealth that is ours — our fish stocks.

RAGHU

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Why this feast? What's going on here, Ramaiu? Who's getting married?
As though you wouldn't know if it were a wedding!

Raghu is coming back today, Panchu.
Oh! I see-e-e!

I still think you should never have sent him out to study. He would have become a first class fisherman.
I have my other two boys and you for that.

But he was the cleverest boy in the school here.

So what? When Raghu came fishing with us the catch was always good.
So what? That was not what helped increase our catch. It was his luck.
Now he is lost to us forever, Ramalu. After sitting in a big school will anyone sit in a kattumaram and go fishing? I ask you.

But he is different. Who can tell what he will do?

Ah! there he comes. Doesn't he look smart?

Mm... m... m! I am hungry. What have you cooked, Mother?

Chicken curry. We cut a chicken for you.

How well you look! It is good to see you back here with us. Come, eat.

Let me change first. These clothes are useless here.

Namaskaram! Father! Mother!
Ah! that’s better. Now you look like one of us. A man! A fisherman!

Are you going to come out in the kattumaram with us? Or will you sit in an office in the town? Less risk. More money, better place in society...

No!

Uncle, if I were going to sit in an office in the town, would I have gone to a fisheries institute? Besides, you know I love fishing, I love the sea, I love the risks. Have you forgotten how...

All right. All right. Meet me at the beach before dawn.
EARLY, THE NEXT MORNING -

Ah! there you are! You are late! The sun will rise any moment now.

Sorry, Uncle! I ate too much. So I overslept.

May the desire to eat much never come to you again, for, a good fisherman feels hunger only when the catch is poor. And...

Not for a moment did I forget anything. You...the sea...our fishing trips.

Hm-m-m...we are still using the same old kattumarams. How are things in the village now?

Not any better, Ragh. If we earn Rs.75 a day during a good season, we are lucky.

...when the catch is good, his stomach is full, as the old women in the village say. I remember, Uncle.

And much of that goes to repay loans...loans taken from the money-lender and the middlemen in the lean season.
Where is Rama? Why hasn't he come as yet? If we don't hurry to the fishing ground...

...there will be nothing left for us, what with so many kattumarams fishing out there...

Ah! He has come!

You are right, Uncle. There are many more kattumaram in the shallow waters than before.

Most of them are five years old. The catch in these waters used to be very good. So...

...many in the village took loans and bought more craft and gear.

We, too, bought our second kattumaram then... the small one... for boating.

Oh!
How many boats does our village have now?

About 250 kattumarams, 17 navas, and 10 motorized boats.

Oh, God! So many kattumarams... and all fishing in the same area!

How can there be a good haul for anyone? If twenty people eat the rice meant for two, can anyone's stomach become full?

He's right! I never thought of that! I told you...

All right, shall we set our nets?

No, not here. Let's go farther out.

What! And let those motorized boats cut our....

Why don't we do as he says and see, Panchu?

Huh!

All right!
What fish do the small *kats* catch?

Croakers, Anchovies, Mullet, Prawns, Carangids, Pomfret, Ribbonfish or Mackerel according to the season, but all very small in size and quantity.

What about the *navas*?

Navas catch mainly Sharks, Skates, Rays, Croakers, Catfish, and Seerfish. All much larger in size and quantity.

And the motorized boats?

The large *kats* there, where Panchu said we should set our nets, catch the same types of fish as the small *kats*, but slightly larger in size and more in quantity.

They sometimes fish close to the large *kats* and sometimes nearer the *navas*. So they catch a mixture of both. But the fish are much larger than those caught by the *kattumarams*.

I noticed that different types of craft all seem to be using similar types of gear, either trammel or gillnets. But...

...amongst the *kattumarams*, many are not using the right gear for this season!

That’s because they don’t have them. Otherwise would they use gear which hardly ever brings them a good catch in the season?

That is why, even amongst us *kattumaram* fishermen, some get a better haul than others and so earn more.
Different craft using similar gear are catching the same kinds of fish... but of different sizes at different depths. That's bad. Why? What's wrong with that?

We are taking away the fish at almost every size level instead of catching only the large ones.

Is that why our nets bring in fewer and fewer of some kinds of fish even in season?

It could be another of the many reasons.
It must be the reason, because, in my father's time, we used to haul in almost double the amount we now do of some kinds of fish.

I knew they'd damage our nets, I knew...

Wait till we get back to shore! I'll show him!

Look out!

It was a good net. We bought it for Rs.2000. A new one will cost us about Rs.2500 now.

What a pity this had to happen... just when they were ready to go farther out.

I'll kill the devil.

I will have to take another loan

Let me get my hands on him!
Tear my net and run away will you? Say you will replace it or else...

Or else? What will you do?

I'll... I'll break your legs!

Break them, Panchu!

His motorized boat takes away all the fish and leaves nothing for us. Don't spare him!

Come on, Panchu! Don't spare that greedy rogue!

Go on, hit me.

No! Uncle, don't! Don't hit him! It was an accident.

Honestly! It was an accident! I did not expect a kattumaram with a gillnet so far out.
It was I who asked him to go farther out. In fact, you should have gone even farther out.

You were fishing in our zone...

Mm...Mmm... well... no one respects zones. Besides...

...there are a lot more fish in your zone.

Maybe. But it's against the law to fish outside your zone.

Yes! Yes! It's against the law!

I will pay him half the price of the net as per law. I was going to, anyway. But he came and picked a fight.

All the same, if you fish farther out... in deeper waters... with a large mesh driftnet...

...you will find big surface fish like Sharks, Seerfish and Dolphinfish as well as several bottom fish like Bect, Skate and Shovelnose Sharks. These fetch a better... a much better... price in the markets.

If I go out there, the big trawlers will run over my net. And my net costs Rs. 30,000!
Ah! Everyone is here. Shall we begin?

Day by day our catch is becoming insufficient for our livelihood. What is the reason? Is there anything we can do?

Raghu has already given us two reasons. There are too many of us fishing too near the shore. And...

Almost all of us use the same kinds of gear and catch the same kinds of fish.

By doing this we do not leave enough of those fish in the water to mate and make more fish like themselves.

There is another reason too. Fishing here with small-mesh nets, we catch too many baby fish. We do not give them a chance to swim out into deeper waters and grow bigger. Just compare the tiny croakers we catch with the twenty times bigger ones the navas catch!

And, as I told you, your motorized boats must go way out and catch the huge surface fish. Right now they are taken away by fishermen coming from other areas.

If we fish here using large-mesh gillnets, or even longlines, we, too, will catch huge ones which bring more money.

You are right! We never thought of that!
There is one more thing. Too many of us use boat-seines.

What is wrong in that? Our people have always been using boat-seines.

Perhaps that is one big reason why your catch is always poor today. Small mesh nets are bad.

But small mesh nets which we drag through the water are worse. They catch even more young fish than bottom-set small mesh nets.

And, as you now know, when too many young ones are caught over many years, there will be fewer fish in that area.

Then what gear are we to use?

Gear which is not pulled through the water or dragged along the bottom of the sea. That is, passive gear.

There are seven such gear (shown above). With these gear we stay in our boats and the fish come and get caught in the mesh or bite on the hooks. So the craft we use do not need powerful engines. A trip therefore costs less and we save money.

Passive gear like long-lines, and big mesh gear which we do not pull through the water, are the best gear for us in the long run.
Active fishing methods, that is, using gear which we or our craft pull through the water, are bad for us. Too many young ones, especially of shrimp, get caught. Not enough are left in the water to grow big, mate and produce more of their kind for us.

Besides, for some active fishing methods, we have to move the craft and pull the net full of fish through the water. Our craft need very powerful engines to do this and a lot of fuel. So a trip becomes too costly.

Why do we find so many young shrimp near the shore in some seasons and hardly any in other months?

A good question, indeed!

I will have to tell you how a shrimp is born and where it grows and becomes a big shrimp. It's a long story. So I will tell you all about it in the next meeting.

Thank you, Raghu. Then we will meet again like this next week.

Yes, Ramalu. You were right. It was good you sent Raghu out to study about fisheries. We know how to fish. We know the catch is decreasing day by day. We did not know why... where we were going wrong. Now we do.
WHAT WE LEARNT FROM RAGHU

1. Too many of our craft must not fish in the same area — particularly those that fish in the shallow water close to the shore.

2. If we catch too many baby fish and shrimp there will not be enough left in the sea to grow big and produce more young ones.

3. Adult fish and larger-sized fish are generally found at distances where the depth is greater than 20 m.

4. We must stop using nets with very, very small mesh, dragnets, boat-seines and beach-seines because with these gear we catch too many young ones.

5. Active fishing methods cost more because they need high-powered engines, more fuel, generally larger boats and more expensive gear. With active gear and methods, we take away too many fish in a short time. If we are not careful about this today, there will be less fish for us traditional fisherfolk tomorrow, and one day there may not be enough fish left for anyone to catch.

WHAT WE CAN DO

1. Avoid buying new small kattumarams. Replace damaged or old small kattumarams with larger kattumarams.

2. Study the seasons when baby fish come too close to the shore. Avoid fishing there at that time. Fish in shallow water only when shoals of small varieties of fish seasonally move close to the shore.

3. Take our large kattumarams farther out, catch bigger fish with bigger mesh size nets or hooks and lines and earn more money. If sailing with the help of the wind is difficult, we should, where possible, use a motor. All other types of craft should fish well beyond, using nets and hooks and lines, for other types of fish which cannot be caught by the kattumarams. There will be fewer problems of competition and, therefore, fewer quarrels amongst us fisherfolk.

4. We should replace our damaged small mesh nets and boat-seines with gear having bigger mesh.

5. Try and use, as far as possible, passive gear with larger mesh and passive fishing methods.
Look out for our next picture story book. In it I will tell you about the life stories of some of the commercially important fish we catch. For instance, I will tell you how a shrimp is born and where it grows and becomes a big shrimp. These stories will help you to catch fish that will bring you high prices.

RAGHU
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