



Forging unity to manage fisheries

Requests keep pouring into the BOBP office from individuals as well as member-governments. Basudev Bhowmick and Md Riaz, fishing company officials from Bangladesh need sound information on the pelagic stocks of Bangladesh's EEZ; Mustafa Ahmed from Maldives needs better on-board preservation technology for his fishing dhoni; Suharyanto, running an NGO in Indonesia, wants to implement community-based fisheries management in villages where his organisation operates; Daniel Pereira, a multi-day boat owner from Negombo, Sri Lanka, is always apprehensive of a break-down of his fishing boat and its drifting to neighbouring countries where the crew can be detained for long periods. He wants the BOBP countries to evolve regulations which can facilitate early repatriation of such fishermen and their boats... and the list goes on. The reply is common - the BOBP is trying to evolve as an inter-governmental organisation (BOBP-IGO) and interventions can only be possible once the BOBP-IGO is set up.

The BOBP

The Bay of Bengal Programme for Fisheries Management has completed 22 years. The BOBP started in 1979 to help improve the condition of small-scale fisherfolk in the seven member-countries. It's First Phase (1979-1986) was devoted to technology transfer and development in small-scale fisheries. The Second Phase (1986-1994) focused on people-centered activities to alleviate poverty and raise the living standards of small-scale fishing communities. The Third Phase (1994-continuing) is aimed at sustainable development and management of small-scale fisheries through stakeholder approaches to management. During all the three phases, the Programme's approach has been catalytic and consultative and its activities have been people-oriented, and have helped in solving the problems of fisherfolk.

The fisheries resources of the Bay of Bengal (BOB) are almost unique. In terms of area, it encompasses 2.83 million sq km., which includes 277 000 sq km between the continental shelf and 50 metres depth and 522 000 sq km between the shelf and 200 metres depth. The total length of the coastline of the countries straddling the Bay and its adjacent seas is about 105 000 km

(excluding Myanmar's coastline). The BOB is a relatively productive fishing zone of the Eastern Indian Ocean and more than 300 fish species are estimated to be of commercial value.

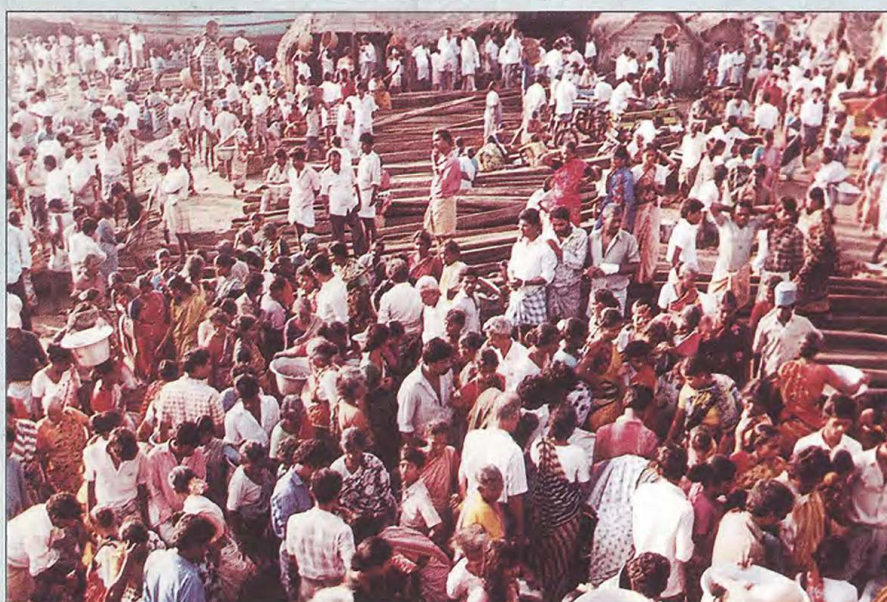
BOBP, it can be said, has left a footprint in the region - in bringing technologies, raising awareness and to some degree in changing behaviour in regard to coastal fishery resource management.



Fishing and safety need to go hand in hand

The fisheries contribution to the national gross domestic product in the BOB countries ranges from a little over 1 per cent (India, Thailand) to as much as 11 per cent (Malaysia) and the gross national product (US \$) varies from 370 (Bangladesh) to 2 300 (Malaysia). Fish is a source of much needed animal protein for coastal populations - as also a major foreign exchange earner for most of the countries around the Bay. The rich fishery resources provide livelihood support to millions of

Depleting resources and increasing demand call for immediate management of the fishery resources





fisherfolk and fishing is the only source of livelihood in many coastal rural areas in the region.

However, fishing is becoming more and more uneconomical because of dwindling resources and degradation of the fisheries habitat and coastal environment. Most coastal marine fish stocks in the BOB are being optimally harvested. Coastal demersal species and shrimp stocks have been heavily exploited, whereas offshore resources have been less intensively fished. Tuna stocks vary but in many areas are fully exploited.

As the coastal stocks are getting fewer and fewer, the fishermen are moving deeper. While fishing technology has improved, enabling small-scale fishing vessels to fish in deeper waters, their safety at sea is weak – resulting in loss of life at sea or drifting of boats to neighbouring countries where fishermen languish in prisons or detention centres for lengthy periods.

The Need for Management

The fisheries in the BOB countries is dominated by the artisanal and small-scale fishermen. The generally positive economic performance of the marine capture fisheries in the BOB is being achieved in an environment where the growing fishing pressure has accelerated conflict between different categories of resource users, where the fisheries resources are being optimally exploited, and in some cases even over-exploited and where access to fishing has no limits. How long can the BOB sustain this rate of exploitation? Management has to step in if the fisheries is to be made sustainable. In the prevailing situation, there are no quick-fix approaches to the complex social and environmental problems of the Bay. Resource management will need long-term commitment and investment. And management paradigms will need a shift if the Bay's fisheries are to be sustained and the quality of life of the poor fisheries is to be improved.

The challenge for fisheries management in the Bay of Bengal is clear - better management of coastal artisanal and small-scale fisheries.

While the BOB countries can manage the fisheries within their national jurisdiction to a certain extent, a cooperative effort by the countries is essential to manage the fisheries outside the EEZs. To ensure long-term sustainability of the stocks, both coastal and trans-boundary, the member-countries have to come together, forge unity and manage the fisheries. Management in isolation will be a short-sighted approach. Common decision making platforms need to be evolved to carry new forms and approaches to management. This vindicates the need for a permanent inter-governmental organisation (IGO) in the region to cater to the management needs of the Bay's fishery resources.

The BOBP-IGO

The BOBP/FAO Mission which documented the Learnings of the Third Phase of the BOBP (1994- 1999), noted that the "member- countries voiced a strong desire to see the work begun by BOBP Third Phase to

continue. It also noted that the catalytic and information- sharing functions provided by BOBP would enable national activities to move forward much more quickly and completely than they would in the absence of regional- level support".



Post- harvest continues to be the weakest link

To overcome continuing poverty and resource depletion, there is a definite need to manage the Bay's fisheries. Cooperation among the Bay of Bengal countries would pave the way for confidence- building in the larger management of the Bay's resources.

Presently, there is no inter-governmental organisation that can facilitate and enable sustainable development and management of

Fisheries management will need reduction in fleet size





small-scale fisheries in the BOB region. This need is particularly acute given that a very large proportion of fisheries in the region is small-scale in nature, and it provides livelihood to millions of fishers and their dependents as well as valuable and affordable animal protein to the poor people of the region. It is felt that the needs of the member- countries can be effectively met through regional cooperation. The BOBP-IGO will also be an ideal mechanism for FAO and other international development agencies to address their constituencies in the BOB region for sustainable development and management of the fisheries resources.

The BOBP-IGO will become a means of closing gaps in management areas and a vehicle for promoting sound fishery governance in the region. It is also seen as an ideal mechanism to create a framework for regional cooperation and facilitate the setting up of an effective fisheries management system, especially for optimum utilisation of the shared, trans-boundary and straddling stocks; develop reliable fishery information and statistical databases on marine fin and shell fish stocks; harmonise rules,

At Phuket, Thailand, in October 1999, when the representatives of the BOBP member- countries had gathered to participate in the 24th Meeting of the Advisory Committee, a consensus was reached among the member- countries and they strongly endorsed the need to continue the BOBP or to evolve a new regional mechanism, which would have the ability, as the BOBP did, to address critical and important issues and concerns relating to fisheries development and management, both at the policy and implementation levels. The Chennai Declaration on Sea Safety for Artisanal and Small-scale Fishermen also recommended that the issue of sea safety could be addressed on an urgent basis only through a regional mechanism like the IGO.

The process to evolve the BOBP-IGO is underway and the member- countries are meeting in Colombo in early 2002 to decide on the future of BOBP. A decision at this meeting of the plenipotentiaries would have a vital bearing on the long-term sustainability of the Bay of Bengal's fishery resources and on the livelihood support it provides to the millions of fisherfolk and their families — *Editor*

regulations and procedures in the member-countries in conformity with global initiatives; develop methodologies and national capacities to address issues concerning post-harvest losses and wastage, quality assurance of fish and fishing products; etc. Within the Bay, there are well-documented maritime boundaries duly acknowledged by the Bay's coastal states and this would further facilitate the regional mechanism for managing the Bay's fisheries resources and ecosystem.

The BOBP has always been a valuable forum in the region for cooperation in raising common issues and challenges and meeting them head-on. An IGO will ensure the logical progress of the BOBP – an institution which means much to Md Riaz, Suharyanto, Daniel Pereira and Mustafa Ahmed; officials and scientists of the region; to governments and NGOs; and also for the success of sustainable fisheries development and management of the Bay of Bengal region.

Y S Yadava

A new dawn — new hopes, new aspirations

