

National Forum of Fish Workers: a spiritually inspired movement for alternative development

This is a study of the Christian inspiration which gave vision, energy and hope to the movement of fisher people which started in Kerala in the 1970s. The Christian perspective does not, however, mean a lack of recognition of the essential contribution of Muslims and Hindus. From early on, the National Forum of Fishworkers has been a secular organisation, open to people of any religion or none.

“We march to Delhi. We the labouring people from whom they are stealing our sand, sea and fish; from whom they are taking away our homes and occupations.... Give us the dignity of our skills, our work and our lives. Do not rob us of the sea – our only wealth.”

Fisherwomen and fishermen of India, 1988.

“There is now a growing sense of awareness that while the global move towards free trade, market economies and modern technologies has brought rapid economic growth and many benefits, it has also been responsible for sowing the seeds of economic, technological and social imbalance world over. Redressing this imbalance will require radical changes in our present mind-set and policy frameworks. The state and all other sections of civil society must engender a new paradigm of values, which will ensure an ethos of greater sharing and co-operation.

John Kurien, Towards a New Agenda for Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries Development, South India Federation of Fishermen’s Societies, 1996.

1. Background to Indian fisheries

The traditional scenario

With its 3,750 miles of coast line and innumerable rivers and lakes, India has one of the largest population of fisher people in the world. Estimates vary between seven and ten million, of whom one third are marine fisher people and two thirds depend on fishing in inland waters.

The fishing communities in India are generally very poor and have low social status and little political power. Among them are Tribals, Animists, Dalits, Hindus, Christians and Muslims. Traditionally they have lived as enclosed societies, gathered round the church, mosque or temple which gives them their identity. Each community is socially stratified, particularly on a class (rather than caste) basis. Local merchants often hold positions of power.

Over the centuries, the fisher people have amassed a vast fund of knowledge about the resources in their immediate vicinity and they have developed a variety of technologies, tailored to the specific ecological niches along the coast. This accounts for the immense diversity of artisanal fishing techniques in the country, the hallmark of which has been their ecological sophistication rather than an orientation towards quick monetary gain.

Women have traditionally undertaken a number of land-based occupations in the fishing communities, such as net-making, fish-curing and vending. They are involved in fish harvesting in the inland waters and are particularly skilled at shrimp peeling, which is an important activity in a booming export trade.

The modernisation process

The first modernisation of the Indian fisheries started in the 1950s with a Norwegian-financed project for the introduction of mechanised boats and the renovation of a port in Kerala. The aim was to help the traditional fishermen to increase their production, but the project brought them nothing but trouble, as they did not have the necessary capital to invest in the more expensive gear and fuel needed for mechanised boats, nor did they have access to markets to sell any larger catches.

But this was only the start. During the following decades outsiders came in with trawlers which scrape the bottom of the sea and deplete the fish stock by destroying larvae and young fish. The economy underwent a marked technological polarisation with the traditional fisher people rapidly losing a hold on the livelihood which had kept them going for generations. By 1975, Kerala alone had 3,500 mechanised trawlers. In 1997, the number in the whole of India was about 23,000.

But it was the arrival of purse-seiners in the 1970s and 80s (mechanised trawlers which encircle the fish with a long net and draw the bottom closed to capture the fish) which caused near panic among the fishing communities and led to the first violent clashes. The government of Kerala had set apart inshore waters up to a depth of 20 meters exclusively for traditional fish workers but the trawlers never kept to the rules.

In recent times, the greatest predators of all are the industrial fishing vessels, whose trade is sustained largely by the demand in the United States and Europe for fishmeal for farm animal feeds and pet foods. Even if these huge vessels were prevented from encroaching into coastal waters, the ecological damage caused by deep-sea industrial fishing would still mean the destruction of species essential to coastal fishing.

In the mid-1980s, the Government of India began to support the motorisation of traditional fishing craft. By 1993, however, only about 13 per cent had been fitted with engines. The fishermen who did put outboard motors onto their crafts became dependent on multinational companies whose high prices for their machines and spare parts soon led those with little capital into debt. Moreover kerosene and diesel were in short supply and thus expensive.

In its landmark judgement of June 23rd 1993, the Supreme Court of India summed up the situation:

“Over the years, while the population of the traditional fishermen has increased by more than 20.8%, the average production of each fisherman declined by more than half, which resulted in 98.5% of the fishermen population descending below the poverty line.”

Inland fishing

The plight of the inland fish workers is probably even worse than that of their marine-based colleagues. In recent years, problems caused by the construction of huge dams, water pollution and deforestation have been compounded by the government's push for industrial fishing and aquaculture. This involves large tracts of land being taken over for prawn farming by national élites and multinational investors, who export the prawns to the United States and Europe. After 10 years or less, productivity declines, so the aquaculturists move on, taking over more land and leaving behind them saline and toxic wasteland.

Studies have revealed that if the traditional, small-scale, coastal aquaculture was to be upgraded the supply of shrimp could be enhanced in an ecologically appropriate manner which would bring benefits to coastal communities.

2. Involvement of the church

The state of Kerala has an ancient Christian tradition dating from the arrival of St. Thomas , the apostle of Jesus in the 1st century A.D. 12 per cent of the population of Kerala is Christian (compare about 2.5 per cent for the whole of India) but in the southern tip of Kerala all the fishing villages are Christian.

The Christian community in Kerala consists of Latin and Syrian Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants. The fisher people are almost all Latin Catholics but people from other denominations and different religious orders work among them. All these Christians are Indian. Foreign missionaries no longer play a leading role here.

In the early 1960s there was a great deal of debate within the Catholic Church world wide which eventually led to the Second Vatican Council calling for Christians to become more socially and politically aware and active. This resulted in sectors, at least, within the Catholic Church adopting what became known as a “preferential option for the poor”.

Inspired by this debate and moved by the plight of the fisher people in his diocese, the then Bishop of the Latin Catholic Church in Trivandrum, Bernard Pereira, entered into a bold initiative. In 1961, he founded a model fishing village on an uninhabited stretch of land 25 km north of Trivandrum. Low cost housing was constructed and little by little the poorest families of the area started to arrive. The village was called Marianad.

The Bishop invited a group of foreign volunteers - professional Christian women - to work in this project. The criteria they used for building up the village community were: assess the real needs of the people, give out nothing free and make sure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in decision-making. Strong and lively grass-roots participation was thus fostered from the start in Marianad. However, the bishop was well ahead of his time in his approach (as were his Indian co-workers, who replaced the original volunteers) and the increasing confidence of the fisher people was not always appreciated by the more conservative clergy of the diocese.

Conflicts arose when the fish workers began to discuss the reasons why, while exercising a potentially lucrative occupation, they remained poor. There were, indeed, some wasteful practices among them, encouraged by their firm belief that “God would care for the morrow”, but their profits were seriously depleted too by the high cost of loans given by the local merchants. In addition, there was the church tax of 5-10 percent of their daily earnings. The fishermen gave the tax willingly but the right to collect it was auctioned to big merchants who paid only a portion of it to the church.

The first co-operative

A movement to oppose the exploitative structures which led to indebtedness and bonded labour began and in 1971 the fisher people of Marianad set up an independent co-operative, which they registered with the government. This constituted the first challenge to the power not only of the money-lenders but also of the priests in the local communities.

As time went on, the conflict with the church grew because the Marianad co-operative (at first the only functioning village-level fishing co-operative in Kerala) posed a threat to the vested interests of many powerful people. Bishop Pereira's firm support protected Marianad for a while but hostility spread as the number of co-operatives increased.

We thus see Christians acting as deeply committed allies, living in solidarity with the villagers of Marianad and working in a highly participative way but also as oppressive opponents, allied with powerful merchants and determined to keep the increasingly confident and independent fish workers under control.

Women

The story of the women of Marianad is extraordinarily interesting, as they presented a lasting challenge to the traditional conservative church, not through outward power struggles but through their own awakening to a very different understanding from that of most of the local priests of what Christianity is actually about. Their story shows, too, the cultural and social barriers put up against them by the men in the village.

Even though the women played an important role in getting the Marianad co-operative onto its feet, they were not included as members. However, with the help of the professional community organisers, they began meeting on their own.

Their meetings began with the discussion of a Bible reading. As their every-day concerns came to the fore, they soon began to veer away from the "other-worldly" moralising interpretations of the Bible made by the local priests towards the empowering insight that the Christian faith has to do with the here and now. The Bible reading was followed by an educational class which covered topics ranging from hygiene to organisational skills and finally they concentrated on finding solutions to day-to-day village problems.

Despite the lack of any support from the co-operative, with their new-found confidence, the women set up their own fair price shop and also ran pre-school and adult education programmes, preventive health work and cultural activities. In addition, they were the first women in Kerala to become members of a church committee.

However, the story ends sadly with the arrival of a new priest in Marianad who vehemently objected to the presence of women on the church committee and to their attempts to set up their own prayer grotto. Supported by most of the men in the village, he marginalised the women's social programmes by crowding them out with religious activity, once again of an other-worldly moralising nature.

Nevertheless, the process of empowerment which had begun with a new look at what the Christian faith is about could never be taken away from those women. It was this understanding of the meaning of the Christian gospel which later inspired many of those active in the fish workers' movement.

3. Fish workers' organisations

The first trade unions

In 1973, Father Tom Kocherry, a Redemptorist priest, moved to Poothura, a little village north of Marianad. There he stayed with two Redemptorist colleagues. It was in Poothura that some nuns of the Medical Mission Order also settled. Their choice, in accordance with Jesus' own identification with the poor, was to live with the very poorest and most outcast communities.

Poothura happened to be the centre for a government project for the modernisation of the small-scale fishing industry but the local fishermen were being sold poor quality boats for which they took out loans and were then cheated by the money-lenders. Tom Kocherry, a highly political thinker and an excellent mass organiser, took up their cause and in 1977, along with a fisherman called Joyachen Antony from Thumba, a village south of Marianad, he helped to found an informal trade union.

This was but one of a great many other initiatives which were going on at the same time, both for development programmes and unionisation. Motivated by Christian teachings about justice and freedom for the poor, many priests and nuns of various religious orders played a leading role in bringing the fisher people together. It was not long before the (still unofficial) unions which had been set up in Quilon, Alleppey, Trivandrum and Calicut joined forces and a federation was formed. This was the first step in what was to become a social, ecological and political movement to secure a livelihood for the fishing families.

Those who were committed to this work understood Christianity in much the same way as the women in Marianad had begun to, as the living faith of communities concerned with justice and peace in this world, and for most of the people involved these were highly formative years spiritually, as well as politically. It was through his work with the organisation that Antonio Alibi, for example, who works on diversification issues for the National Forum of Fish Workers (NFF), began to form the opinion he now holds. "*For me spirituality means that we do some good, and people become resurrected and establish their rights,*" he explained in an interview for this study in November 2001.

Interviewed at the same time, Sister Philomine Marie, one of the nuns from the Medical Mission Sisters, was clear about the change that has occurred in her view of the meaning of Christianity: "*I was brought up as a very traditional Christian,*" she said "*with the idea of saving myself to go to heaven. It was only when I started working with the fishing people that the meaning of Christianity started to evolve for me.*" Another fisherman from the NFF told a similar story: "*Before, I just used to go to church to pray. Now I realise that I must work to liberate the fish workers*".

This sharing of spiritual growth was evidently a strong ingredient of the bedrock of solidarity which bound those in the movement together and it has provided the motivation to keep going through periods of great difficulty.

The first action and more opposition within the church

As had been made evident in Marianad, not all the Christians in Kerala were equally committed to change. The tensions between the commercial interests of influential people within the church and the humanitarian interests of the fishermen now greatly increased because of the power shifts arising through the formation of what was rapidly becoming a mass movement. Religious leaders

were to be found on both sides of the divide. On the one hand some of the clergy remained entrenched in the desire to hang onto their institutional power, while on the other the network of committed Christians working with the fisher people continued to expand.

By the early 1980s the problem of the depletion of fish stocks through trawling was becoming acute. Because it was based in the southern district of Trivandrum, the leadership of the federation was predominantly Christian but the fact that they were all faced with the same threat united all the fishermen - Christians, Hindus and Muslims.

In 1981 the first real action began, when the fish workers asked the government of Kerala to establish a commission to study their problems. Picketing and blockades were accompanied by Gandhian-style hunger strikes by the nuns and priests – a novelty in Indian culture, which evoked bitter resentment among some people and great acclamation among others.

For the Christians involved it was becoming very clear that to work for the coming of the Kingdom of God means being ready to face opposition. They were convinced of the need to challenge the state in order that the voice of the fisher people should be heard. They found inspiration for their action in the description in the gospels of Jesus' ministry as a sustained conflict against the authorities who oppressed and marginalised the poor and the disadvantaged.

For these Christians, if “development” is to imply a long-term transformation in people's lives, it necessarily involves a stand-off against the powers that are preventing this – whether these are embodied in the clergy within the church, in extortionate money-lenders at the village level, in a state government or in an international body, such as the World Trade Organisation.

By this time Bishop Pereira had died after a long illness and his successor, together with the other bishops of the Latin Catholic Church, took the side of the Minister of the State of Kerala, and demanded that the struggle should stop. But the bishops found that their power was limited. This was essentially a secular struggle. Moreover, neither the Muslim fishermen in the North nor the priests and nuns from the religious orders fell under diocesan authority. The outcome was that the State of Kerala agreed to pass the Marine Fishing Regulation which opened the way in 1981 for the introduction of a ban on trawling during the monsoon season.

Kerala Independent Fish Workers' Federation: the movement splits

By 1982, tensions within the fish workers' movement itself had arisen because of different perceptions about the religious nature of the federation. Some saw it as an organisation of Latin Catholic fishermen, whereas others, including some of the priests, insisted that it should become the Kerala Swathathra Malsya Thozhilali Federation (Kerala Independent Fish Workers Federation) and that Muslims and Hindus should be included.

The latter view won the day. The independent federation was registered as a trade union and ever since then has worked separately from any religious institutions. However, the decision was taken by only one vote and the movement split, with a minority forming another explicitly Catholic union (now virtually non-existent). That this split was based on two different interpretations of Christian theology as well as on political considerations became clearer and clearer as time went on.

Christianity had been a vital inspiration for the fish workers' organisations but there was a strong awareness among many of the Christians in Kerala of the importance of preserving the multi-faith, or what they now refer to as the “secular” character of the movement (“secular” in the sense

of the inclusion rather than exclusion of all religions.) They favoured this option partly because of the fear of being accused of trying to convert people to Christianity – a suspicion which hangs over all Christians in India – and partly on political grounds, as they wanted to strengthen the movement. However their main reason was that they genuinely wanted to include everyone.

“We always had an inclusive attitude. Our idea was to work together creatively for a new society of justice, love and peace. Different people bring a commitment from their own faith. Development cannot be one-sided. If Christians alone develop, then that is only one side of the face of God. We expressed our faith wrongly, when we said that there was no salvation outside the church. God has created the whole world and would not want anyone to be lost”. (Sister Patricia, one of the Medical Mission Sisters who settled in Poothura).

Tom Kocherry goes even further when he speaks of “secular spirituality” as the sustaining power applicable to all human beings. *“Social change based on a prophetic approach needs the same sustaining power whatever religion or non religion you belong to”*, he says.

The role of priests and nuns

It was in 1984 that the fish workers’ movement reached its height with more blockades, campaigning, and hunger strikes. Together with a Hindu fisherman two nuns fasted in Calicut for weeks, narrowly escaping death. People walked miles from the surrounding fishing villages - just to sit with them. The press covered the story every day and there was massive mobilisation on all sides.

The imprisonment of several of the priests and nuns as a result of their campaigning also drew a lot of attention and provoked a great deal of debate. Questions were raised about the morality of their political action, the integrity of a church which largely sides with the rich, the relevance of conversion, the effectiveness of top-down “charity” as a cure for social maladies and whether the violence inherent in the nuns’ “fast unto death” was right or wrong.

What was clear was that the option for the poor of these members of religious orders meant a commitment to live physically and economically at the level of the people they sought to serve, sharing not only their knowledge and their time but also their reputation. There was no “top down” charity here, nor was there a relationship of “experts” on one side and “target group” on the other. The movement was one and they were all in it together. They saw their ministry as embracing the social and economic as well as the spiritual aspects of people’s lives.

In 1985 however, either because this “levelling out” of relationships between the clergy and the lay people was not universally adopted or because of a growing anti-clerical feeling among the fishermen, a discussion arose about the role of the priests and nuns in the Federation. Eventually, partly through pressure from the Muslims who were well organised in the North of Kerala, but also with the support of some of the priests themselves, it was decided that the priests and nuns should withdraw from the leadership.

Nevertheless, because of his skills and the central part he was playing in the struggle, Tom Kocherry was asked to stay on for several more years as the president and, when the National Fish Workers Forum (NFF) for the whole of India was founded, he became the first chairperson. He has now been replaced in the NFF by a Hindu called Harekrishna Debnath from Bengal but he is still permanently invited to the National Executive Committee. Sister Philomine Marie was asked to stay on too and has remained faithfully working as the secretary and the treasurer to the NFF in its small office in Trivandrum ever since.

Women

As in Marianad, the women fish workers in all the fishing communities had organised themselves separately. However, when they saw that the issue of trawling was common to them as well, since without any fish there would be no marketing, they eventually agreed to join the men in the NFF. However, the men, though pleased to take advantage of the excellent organisation of the women at the grass roots level, were also ready to force out the most powerful women at the level of leadership. This is now slowly changing.

National Fish Workers Forum (NFF)

The NFF was set up in 1978 by the All Goa Fish Workers' Union, the Kerala Independent Fish Workers' Federation and the Tamilnadu Fish Workers' Union. It is a national federation of state level fish workers' trade unions in India with its headquarters in Kerala. The present members of the Forum are unions from nine coastal states. Fish workers of all descriptions, women and men from both the marine and inland sectors, are entitled to become members of the Forum which acts in many ways more as a mass movement than as a trade union.

The membership of the NFF has never been particularly large but its religiously and politically inclusive nature has meant that whenever it organises actions it is able to mobilise support far beyond its membership. The forging of a national alliance has provided a platform to tackle the common origins of many problems at state level.

The NFF aims to be an inclusive body in all senses. A third of the members of its national decision-making body are women and concerted efforts are being made, also by many male members, to achieve at least the same percentage at the district level. Since the average literacy in the fishing communities is very low, training has been a vital necessity in order to ensure that the NFF is genuinely an organisation of the fish workers themselves.

One outstanding achievement of the NFF was to persuade the Government of India to rescind the Deep Sea Fishing Policy which had been initiated in the wake of the Indian Government's liberalisation policies that opened up the sea to foreign companies. Another key achievement is the government ruling that there should be no trawling during 45 days of the monsoon months, which is the fish breeding season. However, it is now a question of enforcing laws which have been passed.

Where the NFF has shown extraordinary leadership and vision is in the work carried out beyond India itself. Its key role in the foundation of World Forum of Fisher Peoples (October 2000) has enormously strengthened its cause by giving it an international dimension. It has been greatly helped in this work by the International Collective in Support of Fish Workers, formed in 1986 by a group of social activists who have been vital to the movement in supplying economic and technical research to back up its demands. Fisher people are now aware as never before of the similarity of the problems all over the world posed by factory fishing ships, shrimp farms and the destruction of the environment.

The movement is a highly complex one and it suffers from many crises. Lack of finance is becoming an acute problem but so far the NFF has resisted depending on funding from abroad.

4. Christian inspiration: concluding comments

It may not be illuminating nowadays to label the interpretation given to Christianity by many of the leading fish workers of Kerala as “liberation theology” but whatever one calls it, it is a theology which sees “development” as the liberation of the poor and the oppressed from the structural relationships which serve to perpetuate their poverty and their oppression. The exaltation of the humble and the meek may be concerned with putting mighty individuals down from their seat (Luke 1:52) but it has equally to do with changing the way the world is ordered in the interests of the powerful as a whole. To-day this theology places a greater focus too on the whole creation of God and thus on our delight in the natural world entrusted to us and our duty to look after it wisely.

The proponents of this interpretation of the gospel of Jesus Christ believe in the power of God, working through people, to transform the world into a place in which no-one is excluded but where everyone from the highways and byways is invited to the feast (Luke 14.12-24). It would thus be contradictory to their deepest held convictions to accept the inevitability, much less the desirability of an economic model which essentially involves the accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few to the exclusion of the large majority. Moreover, they see the destruction of the environment this model has brought with it not only as detrimental to the lives of the poorest people in India but also as running counter to any idea of respecting the world entrusted to us by God.

Inherent to the theology of the Christians who acted as a catalyst for the fisher people’s movements in Kerala is the importance of giving power to those who are powerless - that is: enabling people, as far as possible, to make their own choices about matters which affect their lives. This has coloured not only the aims of the fish workers’ movement but, above all, the way it has worked. The emphasis on training, despite the budget limitations, and the continued efforts to include women in decision-making positions, despite the prevailing counter-culture – of which the Christian institutions are a part - are two examples of this.

The story of the fish workers’ movement shows, however, that these views about liberation and empowerment do not find a consensus among all Christians. This divergence is not due merely to diverse political opinions. It is essentially a question of how different people understand and live out their Christian faith – though, as we saw at the beginning, the two are intimately related.

But perhaps one of the most important aspects of this story has been the relationships between the fisher people and those from the churches and religious orders who are working with them. Here there have been no “outsiders” coming in to give advice. The commitment of the priests and nuns who have put down deep roots in the fishing villages exemplifies a living out of the Christian belief that all people are children of God and all are equally valuable members of one family.

Many of the values highlighted in this study as hallmarks of a Christian contribution to a process of development are, of course, shared by people of other religions or of none. The Hindu and Muslim fisher people would certainly identify with the view that development is about enabling people to sustain a livelihood in harmony with other people and with the natural resources around them. Moreover, in both these religions there is a strong tradition of sharing with the poor. That the contribution of the Hindu and Muslim fish workers is outside the scope of this study does not mean a lack of recognition of the spiritual motivation which may have moved them to take part. On the contrary, we should emphasise the present insistence by Tom Kocherry and others on the “secular spirituality” which inspires the NFF – the inspiration and power to be found in all religions.

Perhaps we should conclude that most important for this account is simply to show how, in the specific case of the fish workers in India, a certain group of Christians has made a highly significant contribution to development. The way they have chosen to do this is by acting as a catalyst for the formation of a secular movement of fisher people which has led to some important improvements for the fishing communities. Their spirituality has sustained them and given them courage and enlightenment about the course of action they should take. Their commitment has led them to challenge the kinds of priorities usually set for Christian action by the churches. That their option for the poor has also transformed the way in which they understand and live their own faith, only goes to show how intimately their spirituality and their everyday lives are intertwined.

The story of the NFF has been inspired above all by the belief that when the Christian gospel speaks of “good news for the poor” it means setting people free. The Christians who began the fish workers’ movement brought with them a message of hope - hope which has united men and women from all different religious traditions.

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Wendy Tyndale

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