

By DALE LUIS MENEZES



Fishing in Troubled Waters: Markets and Laborers

Six months after the shocking revelation came to light that fish imported into Goa is preserved in the carcinogenic formalin, the issue is nowhere close to a solution. Recently, health minister Vishwajit Rane announced that the ban on imports will be in place for six months, except for those traders who comply with health and quality regulations. This apparently unstoppable poisoning (or adulteration) not only brings the governmental authorities under the scanner for being unable to stop such malpractices, but also highlights the manner in which the fishing industry operates in most parts of coastal India. It is important to discuss the labor practices and potential policy decisions that would address allied issues, including the issue of formalin.

It appears that all the coastal regions of peninsular India are linked in the manner in which the fishing industry operates. All the states in peninsular India are export-oriented: the best catch goes to the metropolitan markets of Bombay and Delhi. The labor for most of the mechanized fishing on the west coast, such as that in Goa and Maharashtra, comes from the east coast: from Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, as well as Bihar. The first reports of tainted fish were discovered in Kerala, linked to fish imported from Andhra Pradesh. Hence it is not surprising that the issue in one place has snowballed into a crisis for other regions. Soon after formalin-laced fish was detected in Kerala, other states, including Goa, Assam, and Meghalaya were on alert. Short periods of import bans, coupled with damage-control exercises by the fish traders associations of Andhra Pradesh, were followed by normalization of business.

But the issue did not die; at least not in Goa with illegalities coming to light every other week since June 2018. Last month, fish traders from the neighboring district of Sindhudurg in Maharashtra were up in arms alleging that local politics in Goa was impeding their exports, and they were facing harassment at the Goan border despite following all the rules and regulations of the Goa Government. Karnataka is also threatening to halt mutual exports and imports from and to Goa if fish from its coastal regions is not allowed to be imported into Goa. The peninsular states seem to be dependent on each other for labor and export markets.



The mechanized and labor intensive nature of the industry, largely through trawl and purse seine fishing, requires that a large chunk of the fish be exported. The economics of the fishing industry suggests that local production for local consumption, or self-sufficiency, is not possible - not in Goa or anywhere else in peninsular India. The quantity of industrially-produced fish is either too much for local consumption, or certain types of fish are not part of local diets. Hence, despite banning imports from other states, Goa's fishing industry depends on exports. This is the reason why Karnataka and Maharashtra get affected with a fish import ban in Goa. This is also why calls for banning export of Goan fish or threats to stop exports completely cause considerable worry to Goan fish traders.

Apart from the macroeconomic setup, most of the fishing industry is sustained by, as mentioned earlier, poor migrant labor who are mostly men away from their families and who work in extremely difficult and unhygienic conditions. They do not have benefits like health insurance and are informally contracted to work, without much options in case of conflicts with their employers. After the catch is brought ashore, it is transported to various destinations near and far. The drivers and the laborers are the ones who have to deal with the police checkpoints and the ire of the locals if any illegalities, such as in the formalin case, are detected.

Next are the distribution networks through the wholesale and local markets, including door-to-door delivery. In Goa, these wholesale and local markets, in addition to providing employment to local men and women, also once again employ a lot of poor migrant labor. Unregulated markets, along with cheaper imported fish means that local fish vendors inside the markets have to compete with those, generally migrant, vendors outside creating its own set of problems due to an export-oriented industry. We see hundreds of women in local markets and along the roads who sell fish throughout the day whether it rains or the scorching sun beat down on them. In every town and village there is an absence of proper market infrastructure. Add to this is the uncertainty of earning one's daily wages when the government is unable to regulate illegalities in the industry, and when the big bosses of the industry are not committed to providing proper working conditions to those that service the fishing industry. This is similar to what happens in other profit-driven, high volume industries like real estate: the labor of the poor is appropriated while the laborer is dispensed with. Who will fix all of this and not just the poisoned fish that we are forced to consume?



What's happening with the formalin issue is not just a tragedy for those who are economically dependent on the fish industry, along with those who consume fish daily, but also an environmental disaster in the making. Much of the trawl and purse seine fishing, in addition to the destruction of marine ecology by the mining and tourism industry, is depleting the stocks of fish at alarming rates. This is the right time to integrate worker rights and environmental concerns with debates over our health so that future governmental policies and regulations will be drafted with an eye not only on people's health and worker rights, but also to safeguard the environment.

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