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Ruining the Commons and Responses of the Commoners: Coastal Overfishing and Fishermen's Actions in Kerala State, India

Discussion Paper No. 23, May 1991
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Preface

The following paper gives a history of the fishery development process in Kerala state, India. It documents the ruin of the coastal commons caused by the over-intensive fishing techniques which were encouraged by official development plans, and describes the responses of the commoners to the destruction of their resource base. Special emphasis is given to the people's interactions with the state in their efforts to overcome the problems brought by capital-intensive development to the traditional fishing sector. The paper was prepared as part of the UNRISD research programme on **Sustainable Development through People's Participation in Resource Management**, which explores the dynamics of local level initiatives concerned with environmental degradation, examines and analyzes traditionally sustainable resource management practices, and investigates the factors which facilitate or constrain community participation in externally initiated resource management projects and programmes. AT UNRISD, the programme is being co-ordinated by Jessica Vivian.

The author of this paper has been involved in research into the economic, social and ecological dynamics of the fishing sector of Kerala for over 10 years. He has been a member of various task forces on fisheries and natural resources in Kerala, and has worked as a consultant for several international agencies. He is currently Associate Fellow at the Centre for Development Studies in Trivandrum, India.

The paper opens with a discussion of the factors which have led to the over-exploitation of the coastal waters of Kerala since the mid-1960s. Rising international demand meant that the fishing sector became an important contributor to the state's foreign exchange earnings, and government support for investment in this sector was sufficient to overcome the previously prevailing social barriers to entry raised by the caste system. Subsidies also helped to introduce more efficient – and more destructive – fishing technology, with which the traditional, ecologically sound fishing techniques were unable to compete.

By the mid-1970s, the years of over-exploitation had resulted in stagnating or declining harvests. Productivity in the fishing sector was down, with decreased catches and smaller fish caught. Real incomes of fishworkers declined even as rising prices meant a decreased availability of fish for local consumers. In addition, there was a growing income and asset disparity between the traditional fishing population and the newly arrived non-worker owners of large mechanized fishing boats.

The collective and individual responses of the fisherfolk to the resource crisis are analyzed in the second half of the paper. The author emphasizes the evolving socio-economic and techno-ecological forces which shaped the traditional fisherfolk's actions, as well as the diversity and, at times, contradictory nature of the responses. The first step toward collective action was the development of a sense of unity based on class, rather than on caste of community. By the end of the 1970s an independent trade union had been established to articulate the traditional fishing communities' protests over commercial over-exploitation, and to channel the growing unrest. The increased political awareness and organization skills of the fisherfolk meant that the state government could no longer ignore the needs of this community, nor take their votes for granted. By 1989 some of the main demands of the fishing community, including a monsoon-season ban on trawler fishing, had been met, although subsequent events showed how fragile this victory was.

The author concludes by arguing that the traditional fishing community is most affected by the ecological damage done to the coastal resources by commercial fishing fleets. The short-term time horizons of the capitalist trawler owners, and their ability to transfer their resources to other sectors once profits decline, mean that they have a much smaller stake in the survival of the ecosystem than do the artisanal fishworkers who are, through lack of alternative opportunities, tied to the sea. However, it is precisely the mobility of the capitalist class which

gives them disproportionate bargaining power over the establishment of resource management regulations.

Ongoing UNRISD work on the theme of sustainable development and people's participation will investigate further some of the issues raised by this paper. As one of the programme's areas of focus, the origins, strategies and achievements of popular initiatives which impact upon the environment will be examined. Particular emphasis will be placed on the implications of the UNRISD studies for national and international development policy.

April 1991

Dharam Ghai
Director

Introduction

The last words have yet to be pronounced on the ruin of common property resources and the nature of collective action which is initiated in response to such a situation. Influential opinions on both these issues have, however, greatly conditioned the general thinking on these matters.

As regards the first – the ruin of common property resources – the phrase "tragedy of the commons", authored by Hardin (1968), has become the stock response when one hears about increasingly numerous examples of the degradation of our planet's common heritage. Hardin pronounced that **whenever** many individuals freely use a common property resource it is doomed to be degraded and will bring ruin to **all**. The emphasis in his article was largely on the **numbers** of "rational persons" – their increasing population – that take the toll of the commons.

The second issue – collective action vis-à-vis the ruin of a commons – though less well known and discussed, occupies the mind of numerous academics and policy makers (Berkes, 1986; Chopra, 1990; Netting, 1981; Oakerson, 1988; Ostrom, 1989; Runge, 1986; Siy, 1982). The earliest of these thoughts which tend to dominate current thinking on this issue emanate from Mancur Olson's well known book entitled **The Logic of Collective Action** (Olson, 1965). Olson was of the opinion that the mere presence of a perceived benefit for a group was **not** sufficient to create collective action possibilities to achieve that benefit. He argued emphatically that "... unless the number of individuals is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, **rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests**" (Olson, 1965: 2, emphasis in the original).

Hardin's pronouncements and Olson's predilections are not only conditioned by their respective academic penchants, but also very much by the nature of the materialistic and individualistic societies in which their ideas were conceived. These ideas therefore present a very limited perspective of the issues they address, and they are of limited applicability in a cross-cultural context. When commons are seen merely as a source of recreation, and collective action as the privilege of corridor lobbyists, the conclusions of the theoretical work articulated in the 1960s may be valid. However, in the context of the Third World and the vast arenas of interface between common property resources and survival strategies of millions who depend on such resources for a livelihood, there is greater need to delve beyond unidimensional explanations for tragedies and strait-jacketed responses to collective action. We need to analyse the numerous, often mutually reinforcing factors that lie behind the ruin of a commons, as well as the plethora of actions – collective and individual – sometimes conflicting and counterproductive, which arise in response to this situation.

In the context of the current euphoria for sustainable development and people's participation, the above issues attain a new significance. Common property resources – particularly of the renewable nature – are of prime concern in the sustainable development scenario, and collective action is one important facet which shapes effective people's participation. Sustainable development is premised on a basic notion of intergenerational equity and people's participation postulates a degree of effective collective control in achieving this.

The role of the state is central to the nexus between common property resources and collective action, sustainable development and people's participation. The role of the state in defining the boundaries of common property resources and sustainable development strategies, as well as in prescribing the limits of collective action and people's participation, are well known. And if we do not subscribe to the "neutrality of the state" theory, we must reckon with the fact that the state's role in delineating the contours of these issues is indeed crucial.

In this paper we propose to give substance to some of the above thoughts by analysing the economic and ecological crisis resulting from the ruin of a commons – the coastal marine fishing grounds of Kerala state, the south-western maritime province of India – and the responses of the commoners – the traditional, artisanal fisherfolk – to this situation. The attempt will be to highlight this crisis as the result of a **combination** of economic, technological and social factors inherent in a specific context. We will demonstrate that the ensuing detrimental economic and social consequences are by no means equitably distributed. We will also illustrate how the responses at various levels may be collective or individual, and are unlikely to be uniform or necessarily serving to mitigate the crisis. The role of the state and the dilemmas it confronts in striving to cater to the varying interests it serves will also be highlighted. That sustainable development and people's participation are sterile without participatory development and sustainable participation is an important conclusion of the analysis.

The paper is divided into two main parts.

The first deals with the question of the ruin of the coastal commons. Here we begin with a backdrop which very briefly sketches the relevant aspects of the history of the fishery development process in Kerala state. It further enumerates the various factors leading to the overuse of the commons – called overfishing in fishery parlance, provides the available evidence of overfishing, and assesses the varying impact of overfishing on the different interest groups.

The second part deals with the various responses of the commoners and the interface with the state. This is mainly a diachronic narrative of the crucial responses and the various dilemmas faced by the fisherfolk in their pursuit of ensuring a sustainable future for themselves and fishery resources. The manner in which the state attempts to balance the several social forces that place claims on the commons and its produce will also be assessed. Thoughts on ways to resolve the crisis will form a tailpiece.

1. Ruining the Commons

1.1 Backdrop

Fishing, as a subsistence occupation of a caste-bound community, has a long and hoary tradition in India. Traditional marine fishing communities have evolved, over the centuries of learning-through-labour, a keen understanding of the aquatic ecosystem, and have perfected fish harvesting artefacts which were appropriate to that milieu. Their technology was appropriate for fishing merely as a source of meagre livelihood. Such a situation obtained in India until independence in 1947.