

COVID-19: Andhra Fishers Rescued From Gujarat The Human Face Of A Sector In Turmoil

Kunal Purohit | April 29, 2020



Y Somesh, a migrant fish worker from Andhra Pradesh's Srikakulam district, is one of the over 4,000 rescued from fishing vessels off Gujarat's Veraval port, where they had been stranded since the March 24 lockdown announcement. They are now headed home on 54 buses arranged by the Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh governments on April 28. Thousands of fishers out at sea had been left stranded along India's western coast after state authorities refused to let them deboard, forcing them to sleep on decks, use open toilets and go without baths for days.

Mumbai: For five weeks now, even as the government exhorted citizens to wash their hands for at least 20 seconds several times a day, Y Somesh had avoided using water, except when absolutely necessary.

Stranded on a trawler docked off the fishing port of Veraval in Gujarat, ever since the countrywide lockdown was [announced](#) on the evening of March 24, 2020, this 18-year-old fisherman from Srikakulam district in Andhra Pradesh told **IndiaSpend** this week that he had just eight litres of water per day for all his needs—even while being surrounded by water.

Somesh is one of an estimated 15,000 fish-workers who had found themselves marooned near landing points and harbours on India's western coast, battling physical hardships and psychological trauma when the lockdown was announced. Two have died on boats, and at least two others are known to have been injured.

On April 28, 2020, Somesh and over 4,000 other fish-workers were repatriated to Andhra Pradesh in 54 private buses organised by the Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh governments. There are over 10,000 others who are stranded along the coasts of Maharashtra, Goa and Karnataka and still need help, according to estimates by fishermen associations.

These fishers represent the human face of the ongoing turmoil in the country's fisheries sector which contributes Rs 1.75 lakh crore--\$26.3 billion, nearly equivalent to the Centre's COVID-19 [relief package](#) for the poor--to India's gross value added, and employs [16 million](#) people. The sector is now staring at lost revenues and livelihoods.

Mounting losses, derailed exports, jobs at risk

The lockdown is inflicting a daily loss of Rs 224 crore on the sector, the Central Institute of Fisheries Technology (CIFT), the country's only national centre for research on fisheries and fish-processing, has estimated in a new report accessed by **IndiaSpend**, which is yet to be made public since government approval is pending.

The bulk of the losses will be borne by the mechanised fishing sector: The report estimated that the mechanised sector will see daily losses in the range of Rs 197 crore while the small-scale, non-mechanised fishing sector will experience losses to the tune of Rs 27 crore a day.

"Fishing has come to a halt, exports have been derailed because countries are refusing to import seafood, restaurants are shut and hence, local demand has also dipped," Ravishankar CN, director of the Kochi-based CIFT, told **IndiaSpend**, explaining the cascading effect of the lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The effect on livelihoods would be pronounced due to the nature of the sector in India, Ravishankar stressed. "Unlike other countries, fisheries in India is still a livelihood sector, with most people working on daily wages. It is not corporatised. As a result, daily-wage earners as well as small fishermen will be badly hit due to this disruption," he said.

Fishers' associations also emphasise the impact of the lockdown and the pandemic on a workforce dominated by casually employed migrants, many from below-poverty-line (BPL) families.

On the western coast, where the fishing season lasts till May 31, followed by the annual monsoon fishing ban until July 31, two months of the season have been wiped off, with no fishing, and consequently, no sales. (On the eastern coast, the ban, [meant](#) to encourage fish

breeding, is from April 15 to June 15.) Many fish workers employed on the west coast are unlikely to be able to work until August 2020.

Government yet to announce relief

The industry would face a crisis if the government does not reach out with relief measures, of which there have been none so far, said Pradip Chatterjee, convener of the National Platform for Small Scale Fishworkers (India), an association with 50,000 fisherpeople from 18 states. “We demand that the government pay Rs 15,000 per month per family to fishworkers to sustain them during this period, and financial assistance to help offset losses for the small-scale fishermen who own boats but will not be able to absorb these losses,” said Chatterjee.

Somesh, who spoke to **IndiaSpend** on his mobile phone from the fishing vessel on which he lived with nine others before they were repatriated, said he has heard that workers would be paid their wages during the lockdown. “But, till we get the money in our hands, no one is believing this.”

Chatterjee said that the association was receiving complaints from many fishworkers about unpaid wages. “As soon as fishing stopped due to the lockdown, many boat-owners stopped paying wages to their workers. This has had an immediate impact on the workers because they will be going back home empty-handed,” he said.

Cast away on water, not allowed to set foot on land

“We were not given the option of returning to land when the lockdown was announced,” Somesh told **IndiaSpend**. So he and his co-workers had no choice but to remain on the 16-foot wide and 80-foot long fishing vessel, with a covered area the size of a small room and a lone toilet till the afternoon of April 28, 2020.

The vessel’s owner, based in Veraval, delivered food (rice, pulses, vegetables, oil and spices) once a week, along with some 500 litres of water, which was not sufficient for their needs, Somesh said. “We got 70-80 litres of water every day between the 10 of us. Each of us had 8 litres a day, with which we needed to bathe, clean and drink,” he said.

A person needs between 50 and 100 litres per day to meet their basic needs, a World Health Organization (WHO) [estimate](#) shows.

There are no government figures for the number of stranded fish-workers. However, fishing associations and civil society actors estimated that at least 15,000 fishworkers had been living on vessels on the western coast since the lockdown. While some media reports have

said that 4,000 workers are stranded in vessels docked off Veraval, the Andhra Pradesh Traditional Fish Workers' Union (TFWU), representing the predominantly Andhra workforce, said the number is over 5,000.

Most of the stranded fisherfolk work on vessels that go to the sea for multi-day fishing expeditions, ranging between 15-20 days, said Velji Masani, a boat-owner, and president of the Akhil Bharatiya Fishermen's Association. Most were out on fishing expeditions when the lockdown was announced and had to be summoned back by owners.

While vessels have toilets and space for the fish-workers to rest and sleep, workers are not used to staying in them for more than a fortnight at a stretch, Masani pointed out. Many workers themselves opted to stay on their boats, not realising how long the lockdown would stretch out, he said.



A group of fish-workers in their fishing vessel, anchored off Gujarat's Veraval port, before they were repatriated by buses on April 28, 2020. There were at least 4,000 workers from Andhra Pradesh stranded in Veraval since the countrywide lockdown in the wake of COVID-19, all of whom have now been repatriated.

While stating that boat owners would pay workers for the duration of the lockdown, Masani pointed out that owners were also losing money, both because work had come to a standstill, and on the expenses they were incurring. "Each owner was spending approximately Rs 45,000-Rs 50,000 a month on getting food and water supplies to these workers. Owners are suffering tremendously too," he said.

Not all boats have toilets, according to Somesh. “Some fish-workers either used the toilets on the vessels around them or went in the open, on the deck,” he recalled, adding that workers were expressly forbidden from disembarking when they dock at Veraval harbour, facing the landing point, to pick up their rations. When they stepped out on April 28, 2020, it was the first time in five weeks that any of these workers had stepped on land.

Psychological trauma, death

Masani, whose association has been coordinating with about 800 boat owners whose boats and workers had been stranded along the Gujarat coastline at various landing points--from Porbandar to Mangrol, Okha, to Diu and further south, in Navsari and Valsad--said he worries that physical hardships aside, the lockdown is now having a deep psychological impact on fish-workers.

Anxiety was a precipitating factor in the deaths of two fish-workers from Andhra Pradesh, stranded off the Veraval coast, according to Masani. Forty-five-year-old T Jagannathan, hailing from Gara Mandalam sub-district in Srikakulam, who had stopped eating, and had become increasingly anxious about contracting COVID-19, died on April 9, 2020, TK Rahman, head of the TKFU said.

K Raju, also from Srikakulam, who was only 22 years old, reportedly died of a heart attack on April 22, 2020. “His wife had recently delivered a baby,” said Masani. “His colleagues told us that he kept expecting to be rescued, and became worried when this did not happen.”

Two others are reported to have fallen off their vessels and grievously injured themselves.

“As days stretch into weeks, the workers are getting restless. Often, some stop eating, and others fight amongst themselves. The frustration is starting to show,” Masani said.

Since their mobile phones worked, the stranded workers were able to speak to their families. However, they had little else to do, as they huddled together, five to 15 to a vessel, in the only roofed area, housing the steering wheel as well as other electronic equipment, to shelter from daytime temperatures crossing 30 degrees Celsius.

State governments have neglected fish-workers during the lockdown, Chatterjee said. They had not adhered to the Union Health Ministry’s [directions](#) to state governments asking them to ensure proper living conditions for migrant workers, house them in relief camps/shelter homes, and also arrange counselling for mental health problems. He said his organisation was planning to move the National Human Rights Commission to draw attention to the plight of fish workers.

However, following the two deaths, political pressure started building on the Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat governments, asking them to repatriate these fishworkers. Former Congress President Rahul Gandhi had [asked](#) the government to move the fishworkers to a relief camp, whereas former Andhra Pradesh chief minister N Chandrababu Naidu had [urged](#) the Gujarat government to rescue the workers.

Initially, media reports last week had [indicated](#) the governments were likely to repatriate the stranded Andhra Pradesh fishers by cargo ships, after conversations between the chief ministers of the two states. However, Masani said that local boat owners expressed their displeasure to the Gujarat government about this plan.

“Cargo ships are expensive and they would take about eight days to reach, whereas buses would take about two days. Hence, we urged the government to consider buses instead of the ships,” says Masani.

A thriving sector, powered by unorganised migrant workers

The fisheries sector is a major employer in India, providing a livelihood to over 16 million people. Over the last five years, the sector has seen a steady growth of over 6% in its production. In 2017-18, it produced 12.59 million metric tonnes (MMT) of fish, up from 9.40 MMT in 2012-13, according to the [Handbook on Fisheries Statistics, 2018](#), produced by the Union Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husband and Dairying. The report pegged the sector’s contribution to the gross value added in 2017-18 at Rs 1.75 lakh crore.

The sector is a major export earner: In 2017-18, the country exported over 1.3 million metric tonnes of fish worth Rs 45,106 crore, according to the handbook. In 2018-19, this figure rose to an estimated Rs 46,600 crore, according to the CIFT report, which called fish “the most important agricultural commodity exported from India”.

The CIFT report has warned that the disruption caused by the lockdown, including the closure of seafood processing plants, has the potential to affect national and global food and nutritional security needs. While most other countries have halted imports, China has eased some import restrictions, the report said. “Seafood processing firms vary from simple processing targeting localised markets to high-end activities targeting the export market. Closure of these firms affects the market supply of processed and packed food products in the domestic and international markets.”

As of July 2019, the ministry handbook said, there were over 269,000 registered fishing vessels across the country. Of these, 65,876 were non-motorised vessels operated mostly by small-scale fisherfolk. In addition, 136,000 vessels were motorised vessels, while 66,198 vessels were mechanised vessels, many of them taking multi-day fishing trips with anywhere between seven and 15 crew on board.

Behind this sector's growing economic clout is migrant labour, both intra-state and inter-state, Marianne Manuel, assistant director at Dakshin, a non-profit focusing on advocacy on marine conservation, pointed out. "Mechanised fishing, almost exclusively, depends on migrant labour. In addition, even allied sectors like ice-factories, cold storage facilities, also extensively employ migrant labourers," Manuel told **IndiaSpend**.

(Mechanised vessels, also called trawlers, use trawl nets as fishing gear and are fitted with stronger engines and a larger catch, alongwith cold-storage facilities on board. Motorised and non-motorised fishing, on the other hand, is done with smaller boats, meant largely for single-day trips.)

The Andhra-Gujarat nexus

Gujarat, despite being the state with the longest coastline at 1,600 km, has only 64,395 traditional fishing families, as against 517,000 in Andhra Pradesh with a coastline of just 974 km, according to the handbook.

As a result, workers from Andhra Pradesh, especially skilled fishing workers, as well as those from other fishing states such as Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, flock to Gujarat and find employment in its fishing industry.

About 25,000 fishworkers from Andhra Pradesh migrate to Gujarat every season, from August to April, a 2016 [research paper](#) by Manas Roshan for the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, titled 'A study of Migrant Fishers from Andhra Pradesh in the Gujarat Marine Fishing Industry,' estimated.

The migration is backed by a strong economic rationale--from higher pay to better opportunities, the study said. Most fish-workers are paid anywhere between Rs 7,000 and Rs 25,000 per month, depending on their seniority and role. Most skilled workers spend their time on various tasks, from lowering fishing nets to repairing them to segregating the catch, according to the species.

"In many fishing states, such as Andhra Pradesh, mechanised fishing is taking over areas where, earlier, small-scale, local fishing communities used to fish," said Chatterjee. "The near-shore areas are now over-fished due to these mechanised boats, forcing the local fishing communities to migrate to other areas in search of livelihoods."

"There is no collective bargaining by the workers because there are no exclusive unions or associations to represent them," pointed out Siddharth Chakravarty of The Research Collective, a New Delhi-based organisation focusing on development issues. (Most of the associations do not specifically represent migrant fish-workers.)

As a result, the workers had been unable to demand better living conditions, and this impacted them during the lockdown, too, Chakravarty said. “Since the workers are not organised, the boat owners were liaising with government authorities after the lockdown. There was a sense that fishing might resume soon and hence, the boat owners were possibly not too keen on getting their workers to disembark,” he said.

As a result of their being unorganised, there are also few data on the migratory patterns among fishworkers.

Impact of the lockdown and pandemic on women fish-workers

The losses incurred as a result of the lockdown may have a disastrous impact on already struggling fish-workers and smaller boat-owners in the industry, experts have warned.

Over 600,000 of the 818,000 traditional fishing families in the country fall below the poverty line, according to the 2018 Fisheries Statistics of India. The bulk of these were in Tamil Nadu (183,000) and Andhra Pradesh (150,000).

The social security net around these families is thin and inadequate, according to Dakshin’s Marianne Manuel. “There is no sector-specific social security net. They cannot access the generic welfare benefits like the public distribution scheme because they are migrants, staying away from their families,” she said.

Many within the sector are also anxious about possible disruption that the COVID-19 pandemic will cause in the way the industry operates.

There have already been glimpses of such changes. For example, in West Bengal, the government has been selling the fish produced in its farms through online orders taken via mobile applications. In Assam, the government has asked wholesalers to initiate door-to-door deliveries of fish, [media reports](#) indicated.

Most of these models eliminate a very crucial and gendered component of the industry--fish-selling women. Of the 16 million people employed in fisheries activities, 5.5 million are women, according to [government data](#).

“Women form the bulk of the labour involved post-harvest and sale of fish, almost exclusively for motorised and non-motorised fishing vessels, as well as a big chunk of the mechanised fishing vessels. They are a major stakeholder in the industry but they often go unnoticed,” said Manuel.

Thus, disruptions in the way the industry organises these activities will affect these women first. “One of the big questions facing this industry, going ahead, is what the role of women is going to be like. No one seems to have the answer, yet,” she said.

*(**Purohit** is an independent journalist, writing on politics, gender, development, migration and the intersections between them.)*

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