

Existential Struggles and the Perennial Poverty among Small-Scale Deep-Sea Fishermen: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

Fishing in the sea is one of the high-risk occupations due to the long hours of work in the harsh and unpredictable weather of cold, heat, wet and windy, and the difficulty of reaching the shore when emergencies arise. Recent cyclone Ockhi in December 2017 killed more than 500 fishermen in the South Indian Sea and created havoc in their lives of many fishing families; however, every day thousands of fishermen go to the sea for their livelihood, risking their lives and placing their families at risk. In view of this, the objective of this ethnographic study was to explore the lifestyle of the deep-sea fishermen in terms of their existential struggles and the cause of their poverty. Specifically, the study focused on the perennial poverty and the existential worldview of the people mainly: realities of life struggles, meaning of life and death situations, examination of their work culture, customs and rituals, the patterns of thinking and ideas, beliefs, behaviour and knowledge. The study concludes some unique existential worldview, unconventional concepts of life and death and their preference for economic needs over survival and safety needs as defining factors of many of their life struggles. It was also identified that it is not the earnings, but poor budgeting that perpetuates them in poverty. The negligence of government's labour wellbeing measures makes them one of the poorly organized workforces in India.

Keywords: Fishermen Problems, Existential Worldview, High-risk Occupation, Fishing and Economy.

Introduction and the problem

Fishing is identified by International Labour Organisation (ILO) as one of the high-risk occupations. It is due to the fact that the labourers spend long hours of work in the harsh and unpredictable weather conditions, and cannot reach the shore quickly if any emergency arises. Without much education and having no alternate jobs, majority of the fishermen take up fishing as a caste-based traditional profession.

Commercial sea fishing is done in India by small scale fishermen in small boats with less supervision, bypassing many personal safety measures. The small-scale fishing is different from industrial fishing. Industrial fishing is either taken up by a company or corporation as well as by individuals in a more systemised way (Endter-Wada & Keenan, 2005). Small scale fishing is done for survival and livelihood whereas industrial fishing is aimed at profit and wealth creation. Small scale fishing is done by individuals and families who own small boats or hire small boats and, focus mainly on earning a living, not on large profits. Fishing can also be categorised as inshore and offshore fishing. The former is done within a few miles of the seashore; it is also referred to as shallow water fishing. Off shore (deep-sea or high sea) fishing is taken up by both individuals as well as industries who fish in deep waters, miles away from the shore. Shallow waters or inshore fishing is not focused on a particular kind of fish, whereas deep-sea fishing is concentrated on tuna, salmon, sharks, marlin, swordfish and shrimp which has higher commercial market and can earn more money.

According to the National Marine Fisheries Census in India, the active fishermen population is estimated to be 0.99 million and the total marine fish catch in India in the year 2017 was 3.83 million tonnes. As per the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare reports (The Gazette of India, 2017) fish catch increases annually 5.5% when compared to previous years. Of the total marine fish production, 75 percent comes from the 33 percent mechanised sector; 23 percent fish comes from the

62 percent motorised sector and 2 percent fish from the 5 percent artisanal sector. The report also states that the marine fish resources from the near-shore waters are being fully utilized; the deep-sea and oceanic waters offer more opportunities for the high value species that grow in the oceanic waters, such as tunas.

Today governments all over the world encourage sustainable fishing. Marine biologists, aquatic ecologists, oceanographers, geoscientists, maritime economists, scholars and international policy experts are worried about the unsustainable fishing practices in many developing countries that destroy the coastal fisheries. India is one of the countries that follow unsustainable fishing practices. Since the commercial as well as small scale fishing is slowly moving further offshore into deeper waters, the worries of marine scientists are focused on the deep-sea fishing. Some deep-sea fishing methods are that are prevalent among fishermen in India are ecologically destructive; for example, bottom trawling. It is a practice of dragging nets down in the sea floor to scoop up fish without focus on any specific kind of fish. In return, the seabed is smoothened and serious damage is done to the marine ecosystems. Many countries have banned this destructive fishing practice (Srinivasan, 2017; Chestney, 2012). However, in India, currently mechanised trawl fishing is one of the most widely practised fishing methods that accounts for 55 percent of the total marine fish production in the country (The Gazette of India, 2017). This method is banned in the neighbouring Sri Lanka and a violation will attract a possible two-year prison term and a fine of 50,000 Sri Lankan Rupee (Srinivasan, 2017). This is also one of the reasons for conflict between Indian fishermen entering into Sri Lankan waters for fishing; often not understood by the fishermen or ignored, or, not highlighted by the press when such arrests take place. The other eco-destructive fishing methods are, cyanide and dynamite fishing. In cyanide fishing, sodium cyanide is mixed in the water to stun fish without killing them and easy to catch. In dynamite fishing, explosives are used to kill the fish and they are collected for commercial purposes, totally destroying the underwater environment. Kochery was one of the first persons in India to have taken up this issue of unsustainable exploitation of marine resources and its impact on traditional fishing communities, called for a ban on monsoon trawling (Martin, 1994). Besides harmful fishing practices, overfishing is also seen as one of the major threats to sea fishery. On the other hand, there are ways to fish sustainably. The healthy fishing methods and sustainable fishing practices include hook and line method and the modern rod and reel method, traditional spear-fishing and casting nets. In addition, avoiding fishing in ecologically sensitive places like coral reefs, discontinue fishing during hatching period etc are some of the best practices followed to sustain the marine ecology.

Long lining of hook snoods with small fish which is left at sea and then retrieved along with any fish that have taken the baits is the common method used by small scale deep-sea fishermen in catching tuna in India. It does not damage the seabed or the marine ecosystem; however sometimes turtles and other endangered marine species are inadvertently being caught. Some harmless trawling is also practised by dragging the net through the middle of the seawater to catch fish. It does not cause any damage to the ground marine ecosystem.

To realize the full potential and optimize sea fishing in India, the government has taken many initiatives. Taking into consideration the Indian marine bio-diversity and ecosystem, the Indian government has laid some guidelines for fishing effort management, fleet-size optimization and species-specific and area-specific management plans (The Gazette of India, 2017). To safeguard sustainability, fishing days, area of operation are regulated and fishing ban during breeding period for about 45 to 61 days are mandated. To prevent over exploitation of shallow water marine life and harness, the exclusive economic zones are extending up to 200 nautical miles. The government encourages deep-sea vessels with freezers and processors to store the catch and, offers subsidies to purchase these vessels, which cost around ten million rupees each under Sagarmala Coastal Community Development Plan (Sood & Bhaskar, 2017). However, deep-sea fishing requires specific skill sets to navigate more nautical miles and fishermen will be exposed to deep-sea conditions and many traditional fishermen are not prepared for this venture due to lack of training and skills.

Reason for the study

When fishermen use traditional unscientific means and methods to venture into the sea, the risks from the natural disasters are high. Recent cyclone *Ockhi* in December 2017 killed more than 500 fishermen in the sea and created havoc in their lives. It is the best example of natural disaster and the threat small-scale fishermen face, not occasionally but very often. However, every day thousands of fishermen go to the sea for their livelihood, risking their lives and placing their families at risk. Even though the resources are plentiful and the earnings are reasonably high, the traditional fishermen communities live in poverty. Although they share a vast area of natural resources, fishing communities face ineffective management of the resources resulting in perennial economical disasters. These are the two major reasons for this exploratory study which was undertaken at Beypore port in Kerala.

Objectives of the study

In view of the current socio-economic situation of small-scale deep-sea fishermen, the objectives of this study were twofold:

- i) To explore the existential struggles of the fishermen
- ii) To identify the cause of their perennial poverty among fishermen

Specifically, the study focused on the realities of life struggles, meaning of life and death situations, examination of their work culture, customs and rituals, the patterns of thinking and ideas, beliefs, behaviour and knowledge and its connectivity to their trade, profession and economic wellbeing.

Methodology

This qualitative, exploratory study was conducted among the small-scale deep-sea fishermen at Beypore Port, in Kerala, South India. The authors used ethnography and interpretive phenomenology methods in the framework of existential psychology to collect and interpret data from a group of around 250 fishermen who go for deep-sea fishing in motorized boats for a day.

Ethnographic research is the study of groups of people or a culture through close observation in the field or in a natural setting. Though observations are the main form of data collection, interviews are also used to explore the life world. It is done in longer timeframe and thus helps the researcher to experience the lifestyle routines of the people or community being studied. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis believes that the subjects being studied interpret their experiences into some form that is understandable only to them (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Therefore, the researcher pays attention primarily to their daily life style and tries to explore the inner meaning from their perspective. A detailed analysis of personal accounts followed by presenting and discussing the generic experiential themes, paired with researcher's own interpretation is done to understand and explain the phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Existential psychology focuses on all aspects related to human existence, survival and life-death related worldview. Existential psychology is concerned with fundamental questions about human existence like, what is life, what makes life worth living? what is happiness and how can one find happiness?. It focuses on the human freedom, decision making and responsibility of life and living. It uses existential-humanistic roots to rediscover the richness of lived experiences (Schneider, Bugental, & Pierson, 2001).

For four months (from January to April, 2018), time to time, the authors lived with the fishermen, travelled with them for deep-sea fishing and observed their daily struggles in the sea using participant observation technique. The chain of conversations, live-in experience, continued observations and interactions gave an opportunity to understand their concept of life and death, their preference for specific needs in life. At the culmination of this, five focus group discussions were conducted among different group of people; two among fishermen, one each among fishermen families and community, psychologists and general population.

Data analysis was done using content and thematic analysis. The raw data collected and the reflective notes taken were initially coded. The coding of the raw data and reflective notes gave a higher-level of insights in the problems of the fishermen being studied. Further abstractions of the

coded data led to categories and additional subthemes. The emergent themes were explored in focused group discussion to outline the fuller existential meaning inherent in the participants' experience.

Results and Discussion

The following is a brief description of one of the trips to the sea on January 27, 2018.

The tuna fishing voyage started on a Saturday night at 1230AM. The team had six members, four fishermen, the researcher and the research assistant who is a relative of the fishing team. The fishing vessel was 32ft length long, made of glass-reinforced plastic (GRP) with two outboard motors (one petrol and one kerosene engine) that can cruise at a speed of 7 to 9 nautical miles per hour. The fishing vessel had no roof and no toilet facilities. The fishermen had a handheld GPS instrument and the boat had a parachute anchor to stop the vessel in case of storm or strong currents. The team reached the fishing spot (35 nautical miles away from the shore; 1 NM = 1.85 KM) around 445AM. Till 7AM in the morning serial hooks were laid, for about a distance of 7 nautical miles. Long line fishing method was used that had hundreds of baited hooks hanging from a single line and the hooks were fitted with small dead fish that were brought from the shore. Around 1500 hooks were laid in a single line.

There were four men in the boat who did the works in a systematic way. One was controlling the engine; the other three were involved in the fishing activity; they occasionally swapped the jobs. The first person takes the line, the second person carefully takes the hook and the third person fixes the fish and drops. After a while, the roles were changed. Once the hooks were laid, it was breakfast time. Rice and fish curry were the menu. Fish curry was prepared in the boat and rice was brought from home; it was also a time of rest and relaxation.

At around 9AM, the team started to collect the fish that were caught in the hooks and it went on over 5 hours. The work was synchronised in a systematic way; one person steered the engine, another was pulling the line, the third person was taking the fish from water and the fourth rearranges the hook and the line in an orderly way. The roles were exchanged now and then. Once the collection of fishes was over, the return journey started at around 245PM. The wind condition was tolerable and it was below 8 km per hour. Occasionally the wind went up to 12 km per hour, still under safe travel conditions, not threatening the fishing trip. Fresh fish curry was prepared again for lunch that was eaten with the old rice during the return journey. Some crew members slept and the others cautiously captioned the boat. Around 530 to 600PM, when the telephone signal was available occasionally, the team contacted some agents in the shore to sell the fish. The fishing team reached the port around 645PM. The trip had a catch of fish for 36 thousand rupees on that day.

The study results brought out three major themes, namely, a) an unconventional existential worldview, b) +unique earning and budgeting and, c) the pathetic government welfare measures.

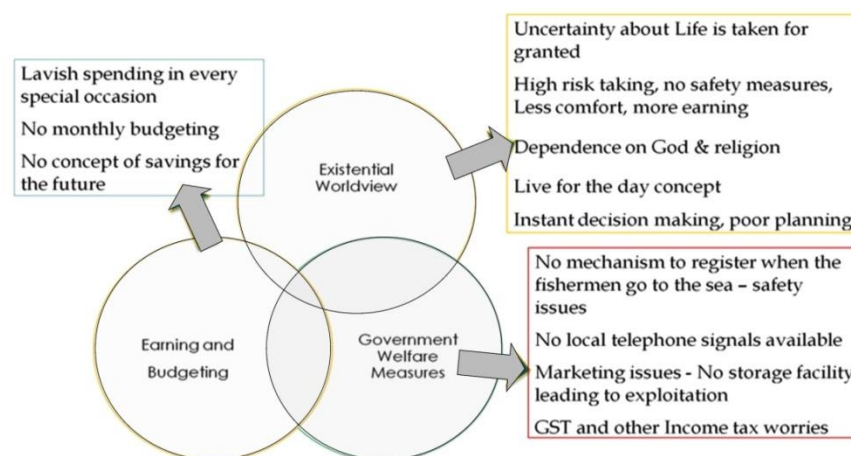


Figure1. showing the evolved themes in relation to poverty

a) Existential worldview: Generally, the fishermen and their families have a unique existential worldview regarding life and death. Risk taking is inscribed in their way of life and take their every

trip to the sea is thus accepted by the fishermen and their family in this accepted worldview. The uncertainty surrounding each fishing trip is taken for granted as a fact of life in their existential life world. The value for safety and security is given less preference and it is also an accepted fact. The families of the fishermen are prepared for a disaster, death or any other calamities every day whenever the fishermen go to the sea. Since the place of fishing is far from the shore, there is no telephone connectivity; the small-scale fishermen do not use satellite phones either. The fishermen reach the shore in a prescribed time frame and that is the reference point for the friends and relatives that they are safe. If they do not return after 3 to 5 hours beyond the expected time, the friends generally go for a lookout; and if they do not return for a day, the family panic. Although coast-guard and other facilities are available for search operations, the fishermen completely rely on their traditional ways of search operation in the initial stage and only in extreme cases sought the help of costal guards. Since risk taking and uncertainty of life is ingrained in their lifestyle, they fail to take the available scientific safety measures and precautions. This specific existential outlook of life in turn leads them towards religion as a defence mechanism.

The uncertainty in the profession is replaced by their serious involvement in the religious practices and the related customs and rituals. They are emotionally involved to many pious religious practices and use the religion as a coping mechanism in their daily life situations. Religion and God become a protective gear for them. They start the day with the prayers and proclaim the profession of Christian faith. They invoke God's presence and blessings in their workplace and in every life setting. The religious leaders also play an important role in their life. They consider the religious leaders as God's servants; whose duty is to build a bridge between them and God. Also, whenever possible, they spent lavishly on religious functions and celebrations. So, the amount of uncertainty in life, high religio-centric life, strong dependence on God and religion become part of their worldview that guides their existential struggles.

b) Earning and budgeting: The poor budgeting is identified as one of the major problems in the life of fishermen, which leads them to miserable economic life situation. The table below depicts a sample calculation of a fishing trip taken in a boat of four fishermen and their earning in normal circumstances.

Table 1. Sample earning and income of small-scale deep-sea fishermen

| | Minimum | Maximum |
|-------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Fishing trip per month | 12 | 15 |
| Average daily income | 30,000 | 65,000 |
| Average monthly income | 3,60,000 | 9,75,000 |
| Monthly fuel & other expenses | 96,000 | 1,20,000 |
| Repair works | 20, 000 | 60,000 |
| Net monthly income For four persons | 2,44,000 | 7,95,000 |
| Net monthly income per person | 61,000 | 1,98,750 |

At an average, the fishermen get 30 to 50 thousand rupees in a single fishing trip, which is divided among four or five people who go for fishing in a single boat. In such setting, besides their fuel and other daily maintenance expenses, each fisherman will have a net earning or profit of 4 to 7 thousand per head, per trip. If there is a high demand for fish in the market, the earning may go up to 60 to 70 thousand rupees per trip. In such a case, the net profit would go up to 10 thousand rupees per head, per trip. At an average, they go to the sea 12 to 15 days in a month and in a simple calculation, their monthly earning would be 20 to 50 thousand rupees in a month. The uncertainty of life and the related worldview in accepting death at any time lead to lavish, unaccounted living and expenditures. The poor budgeting and careless expenditure lead to spontaneous, unprogrammed lifestyle. They spend on cultural and religious practices without having a structured settings or personal accounting system.

Consequently, a dilapidated economic settings and structure has crept into their living. From the study observation and conversations, it is evident that if they budget their life based on a monthly planning, based on a net monthly income of 15 or 20 thousand rupees, they can lead a very comfortable life, avoiding unwanted expenditures and save some extra money regularly. They can also have occasional extra cash flow when they get a good catch or sudden inflation in the fish price. This monthly budging is not ingrained in their system and if it is done, their poverty would disappear.

The level of needs is often surrounded around survival needs and, in order to make money they discard a lot of work-related safety measures. For example, from the experience and observation, the boat they travel for nearly 18 hours is comfortable enough only for 5- or 6-hours travel. It has no toilet facilities, hardly people can move around and it is difficult to even stand comfortably. For the time they spend in the sea, they need a bigger boat so that some amount of comfort and safety can be added. The uncomfortable travel in the scorching sun and rain make their working conditions miserable. A bigger boat with a roof, toilet and cooking facilities are basic necessity for a fishing trip of more than 10 hours. However, in view of reducing cost and earning more money, the fishermen take smaller boats for long hours of fishing. Similarly, satellite phone facility is also not utilized by them due to the higher cost of maintenance. The fishermen cling on to the outdated safety measures and sacrifice modern technological facilities to satisfy their basic needs of earning money.

c) Government welfare measures: Although a lot of schemes and other development activities are initiated by government, there are lot of areas of negligence from the part of the government that in turn play havoc in their lives. First and foremost, there is no special Ministry for fishing and marine concerns in India. The fishery is a joint department of animal husbandry and dairying. Therefore, the basic issues of fishermen are not taken in to serious consideration by the central government. There are defined government norms and mechanisms for online registration and licensing system for all fishing vessels operating in the marine sector (traditional, motorized, mechanized and non-mechanized). However, there are no provisions to guide or monitor the fishermen when go to the sea; they are completely left alone to their fate. How many fishermen go to the sea every day from a specific port or village, where do they go for fishing, what kind of vessels are used and what kind of fishing is done - are not known to any officials; the basic essential details are not registered or known to anyone except the friends and family members. Therefore, when danger arises in the sea, no one knows the whereabouts or even the number of fishermen affected. The family members will come to know only after a day or so. Although costal guards are there in the ports, the seriousness of their patrolling has no use to the fishermen.

During the trip taken by the researcher, not even a single boat was seen after crossing 15 nautical miles. This tells the tale further and was evident from the *Ockhi* disaster reports; it took more than a week to know the exact number of deaths from each port and village, not from government records, rather data collected from villages and from family members. Even after a prolonged house to house censuses, no one knows even today, exactly how many people died. These poor government involvements pose a greater threat to small-scale fishing industry as a whole in India. Once fishermen go to the sea, after around 5 to 7 NM, no regular telephone signals are available. The fishermen do not hold any satellite phones and their whereabouts are not known to anyone. The Department of Fisheries (DoF) of the maritime States/UTs, Coastal Marine Police and the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) should make some simple mechanism to have a registering system, which should not become a burden to their earning or livelihood. The anticipated worry of fishermen is that if such systems are introduced by the government, automatically corruption and extraction of money will be crept into the system. This normal Indian fear makes the fishermen not to pressurise the government bodies to start any basic safety mechanisms.

Various forms of abuse in the profession and business are happening, exploiting the ignorance of the poor, hapless fishermen. When the fishermen come to shore after their fishing journey, they are in a hurry to sell the fish due to lack of cold-storage facilities. This situation is exploited by brokers and middlemen in the market, who, without any mercy, fix the price of the fish lower than the market price. The government has not fixed any minimum price for the fish, nor provided any free cold-storage facility for the fishermen in many ports. These exploitations by brokers and middlemen in the market are already accepted by the fishermen as a lesser evil and, overlook them as an unavoidable

part of the trade. This ultimately reduces the hard-earned income, stolen by some crooks and cheats. The negligence of government's labour wellbeing measures makes them one of the poorly organized workforces in India.

Although government has taken a lot of initiatives these days, it does not reach them in time or the fishermen are ignorant of these facilities and provisions. The government has norms for fishing vessels varying in design, construction material, size, engines and gear and area of operation. The legislations relating to registration, survey and certification, mandatory carriage of identification documents and tracking equipment, need to be updated taking into consideration the cultural lifestyle of the people.

All the government institutions working for the fishing industry is seen as an extra burden by the fishermen to extract money from them. They are afraid, if daily registering of their fishing plan is made mandatory, GST and other taxing will eat up their daily income. They will be pushed to pay income tax for their meagre earnings. So the fishermen look at various organisations/departments like, Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), etc as a threat to their daily earning rather than as a beneficiary organisations.

Conclusion: This study on small scale deep-sea fishermen conducted at Baypore port in Kerala explored the meaning, values and inner dynamics. The repeated meetings, conversations, interviews and live-in experience unearthed the existential worldview, unconventional concept of life and death and their preference for economic needs over survival and safety needs. It was also identified that it is not the earnings, but poor budgeting that perpetuates them in poverty. Various forms of exploitation in the profession and business are overlooked by them as an unavoidable evil in the trade. The negligence of government's labour wellbeing measures makes them one of the poorly organized workforces in India.

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