

## Social Mobilization in Kerala

Fishers, Priests, Unions, and Political Parties

*Jóna Hálfánardóttir*

**ABSTRACT** This article discusses the emergence of social organizations and increasing politicization of marine fisherfolk in Kerala (India) and the role played by Roman Catholic priests in these processes. Under certain social circumstances, it is argued, cultural/religious factors may play a decisive role in political mobilization. In this case, worsening life situation of Kerala's fishers due to decreasing fish catches together with apathy of political parties to come out in their favour led to massive unrest among the fishers in the 1970s. Catholic priests and social workers active in several coastal localities motivated the creation of fishers' cooperatives and unions, in an effort to direct the people's anger into organized actions to defend their interests. This article tries to shed some light on the interplay between socio-economic processes, technical modernization, and cultural/religious factors in the organization and politicization of Kerala's fisherfolk.

### I

It is by no means a special feature of India that fishing grounds face depletion. Nor is the rising protest of fisherfolk against their worsening life situation restricted to artisanal communities in India. What is rather unique is the role played in organizing social movements on behalf of fisherfolk by Roman Catholic priests in Kerala in India.

The level of political participation and unionization in the state of Kerala has long been higher than the total average in all of India. Unionization of Kerala's fishers, on the other hand, had a relatively late start, the first unions being established in the late 1970s. This article will show that three main interacting factors gave rise to increasing politicization and social organization of Kerala's fisherfolk in the late 1970s.

First, fast decreasing catches of some important fish species denoted overfishing in Kerala's coastal waters, consequent to drastic changes in the techniques and methods of fishing and sharp increase in fishing effort. Faced by decreasing productivity, lowering of their share in the total fish harvest, and increasing economic difficulties, artisanal fishermen became exceedingly restive over their situation, expressed in massive unrest in the fishing villages and violent conflicts at sea. Secondly, the artisanal fisherfolk were, so to say, socially and politically a 'forgotten' group. Political parties, left and right, neither showed any interest in

mobilization work in the fishing villages nor did they react on the fisherfolk's problems. Thirdly, individual Catholic priests and social workers active in various fishing villages, sought in the late 1970s to canalize the rising spontaneous protests of the people into organized action for defense of their interests. With this in mind they promoted the establishment of fishers' cooperatives and unions. By creating cooperatives the fisherfolk tried to break down the existing exploitative social structure in the villages, whereas the unions have organized large-scale agitations aimed at influencing the official policy toward the fisheries.

The present article tries to shed some light on the role of Catholic priests in mobilizing Kerala's fisherfolk for social struggle in their own interests. Cultural, in this case religious, factors, I argue, may play a decisive role in political mobilization, at least in certain social circumstances.

This article is partly based on field work data collected in a Catholic fishing community in coastal-Quilon (southern Kerala) in 1991. There, I conducted field-work which was a part of my M.A. research project on modernization processes in India in general and Kerala's fisheries in particular.<sup>1</sup> In the following I will first discuss the question of the late unionization of Kerala's fishers and point out the main reasons for the lack of mobilization work of political parties and their affiliated unions in the fishing villages. The religious division of the fisherfolk, the historical connections of religious institutions and communal organizations with political parties, and the role of the Catholic church and its representatives in the Catholic fishing villages will be emphasized. Secondly, I will briefly outline the policy toward modernization of Kerala's fisheries, and its socio-economic implications for those engaged in the fishery sector. Thirdly, the rise of fisherfolk's cooperatives and unions, increasing politicization of Kerala's fisherfolk, together with the involvement of the Catholic church and priests in the processes will be highlighted. As an illustration of these processes at the local level I will briefly discuss the emergence and function of a grassroot organization of Catholic fishers in coastal-Quilon.

### II

The state of Kerala situated on the south west coast of India is one of the leading maritime states of the country. Kerala's coastal waters (up to a depth of 50m) belong to India's most productive fishing zone.<sup>2</sup> Kerala has a prominent role within India's fishing economy. The state contributes about a quarter of India's total marine fish production,<sup>3</sup> and approximately one third of the nation's foreign exchange earnings from marine products (Gopalan 1987:43). Apart from being an important export industry, fishing has been a major source of animal protein for Kerala's inhabitants and an important avenue of employment. An indication of the significance of marine fisheries as a source of livelihood is, e.g. the fact that more than 30% of India's marine fisherfolk live in the state. This proportion is quite high, since only 3.7% of



the total Indian population lives there. According to the Fisheries Department of the Government of Kerala, the population of marine fisherfolk in the state totalled 734,000 persons in 1989-90, or a little over 2.5% of the total population. During the last three decades the number of active fishermen has been growing at about 2% per annum. In 1961 there were 80,700 active fishermen in Kerala, 122,000 in 1979 and 134,000 in 1985-86 (Department of Fisheries 1987:40; Kurien and Achari 1990:2013; Meynen 1989:5). The majority of them (about 85%) are engaged in artisanal fishing, operating catamarans and canoes of different sizes. Around 35% of the artisanal fleet had been motorized by the mid-1980s (Kurien and Achari 1990:2014). The remaining 15% of the active fishermen are employed in the mechanized sector, which consists of trawling boats, gill netters and purse-seiners. In addition to active fishermen, hundreds of thousands of people are employed in activities related to fishing like processing, marketing, netmaking and boat-building.<sup>4</sup>

Even though there is a rather big professional population engaged in the marine fisheries, unionization of fishers has a short history compared to other groups of workers in Kerala (such as agrarian and industrial labourers). The first steps toward organization of a state-wide union of fishers were taken in 1978. Then leaders of various newly established, local fishers' organizations met with leaders of similar organizations in Goa and Tamil Nadu to discuss the need for nation-wide action for the benefit of fisherfolk. Subsequently, they established the National Fishermen Forum (NFF), through which unionization in the state was further promoted.

The origins of the small local organizations can be traced to mobilization work undertaken by some Catholic priests and social activists in various fishing villages in southern Kerala in the 1970s. Indeed, there were fishers' organizations active in Kerala before, but they had been based on caste or community membership. The novelty of the associations emerging in the late 1970s and early 1980s was, first and foremost, that culturally and religiously diverse fishing communities united around a common cause. But why did unionization of Kerala's fisherfolk have a relatively late start? An important explanatory factor is the lack of mobilizing activities on behalf of political parties and their affiliated unions in the fishing villages. Why this political disinterest toward the fisherfolk? Before attending to this question, the particular political orientation in Kerala must be addressed.

Kerala is known for a high level of trade unionism and political participation. The comparatively long history of trade unionism in Kerala is strongly related to the important role played by the communist parties (CPI and after the split of the party in 1964 also CPI[M]) in the political history of the state. Ever since the first general elections in Kerala (1957), when the CPI was voted to power by 41% of the electorate, the communist parties have had a stronghold in the state. Actually, unlike the domination of the Congress party in the central government and in most states, no party has been able to gain an absolute working majority in Kerala's elections.

The different governments in power have been based on a coalition of parties, with the CPI(M) as a leading party in leftist coalition governments and the Congress party either leading or supporting the more rightist coalitions. Both of the communist parties have emphasized the major importance of class struggle for economic and social development. The communists with the active participation of agrarian workers and peasants, for instance, managed to bring about important structural transformations in agriculture, notably the most comprehensive land reforms implemented in India. Moreover, Kerala is considered socially as the most advanced state in India, e.g. the state scores highest on a scale of the Physical Quality of Life Index. This is displayed in factors like high literacy rate (85% in 1990), spread of education and health services, high life expectancy, low infant mortality rate and low population growth compared to the average Indian standards.

This brings us to the question of the restricted (even absent) interest shown by the political parties in the artisanal fishing communities – until the 1980s when the organizational strength of the fisherfolk became apparent. The main reason why left-wing parties refrained from mobilizing the fisherfolk is that they were regarded as a vote-bank for the Congress party and the Muslim League. Actually the latter parties did not have to make any effort to obtain the fisherfolk's votes. Additionally, the left parties viewed the artisanal fisherfolk as a sort of *petty bourgeoisie* (being mostly self-employed entrepreneurs), and not as a potential working class section. 'This was a section that would automatically die in the development process' (Vijayan 1987:55). The very limited organizational work undertaken by the left among fishworkers had been concentrated on workers in the mechanized sector, mainly in Quilon and Cochin.

But why this voting behaviour toward the right on the political spectrum in the leftist oriented Kerala? In order to explain this, one has to look into the religious division of the fisherfolk, the historical affinity of the religious institutions, and communal organizations with the above-mentioned political parties.

### III

What makes the religious division of Kerala's fisherfolk particular is the comparatively high proportion of Christians (mainly Roman Catholics) and Muslims to Hindus. Of the total Indian population 83% are Hindus, about 10% Muslims and 2.6% Christians. In Kerala, on the other hand, 60% are Hindus, 17% Muslims and 21% Christians. Within the fishing population there are only 27% Hindus, but 30% Muslims and 37% Christians (Hiro 1976:4; Kooiman 1984:185; Meynen 1989:11).<sup>5</sup> The religious groups are further divided into endogamous sub-castes or groups between which there is limited social contact.

Both Islam and Christianity have a long history in Kerala. Islam was introduced on the Malabar coast (north Kerala) in the 8th century. Syrian Christians (who are socially high ranking and generally well-off) are believed to belong to a sect of Christians who came to Kerala at the early stage of Christianity. Conversions to Roman Catholicism date back to the arrival of the Portuguese Vasco da Gama (1498) and the following Portuguese hegemony on the Malabar coast. Traditionally, Kerala's fisherfolk belonged to the lowest segment in the Hindu caste system and their occupation was regarded as polluting to people of higher castes (and communities like the high ranking Syrian Christians). Even though a large number of the fisherfolk were converted to Catholicism and Islam, they did not escape the 'untouchable' status ascribed to their occupation. Therefore, the different religious communities faced similar social stigmatization and the same miserable social reality.

In the 19th century Christian missionaries started working in Kerala. They soon gained adherents, especially among untouchables in the then princely state of Travancore in south Kerala. According to Kooiman (1984:190), the social reform movement in Travancore differed from the reform movement elsewhere in India in some important respects. The reform movement elsewhere mainly consisted of 'high caste individuals bent on individualistic and mainly female-oriented reforms.' In Kerala, on the contrary, the social reform movement mostly embodied 'low and untouchable communities, fighting the inequities of a [relatively] rigid caste system and sponsored by European missionaries.' The large scale conversions of untouchables were probably of great influence on the establishment of Hindu reform societies at the beginning of the 20th century. Generally speaking, the caste-based reform societies aimed at changes in the existing caste customs, while low caste organizations also fought for the elimination of restrictions based on the ideology of ritual purity.

The Hindu reform societies did succeed in realizing a number of their aims, like the official elimination of caste restrictions regarding e.g. access to public facilities, education, governmental jobs and the legislature. But the leadership of these movements, mainly drawn from the better-off sections in their communities, did not question growing economic differentiation within their caste or community. Growing polarization of classes, rapidly deteriorating status of peasants and workers (especially during the depression years), spread of secular ideas among Kerala's youth through schooling are only a few but important factors stimulating the rise of a leftist movement in the early 20th century. This movement, unlike the existing caste and communal movements, brought together people who were experiencing a similar economic situation and yet belonged to different castes and communities (see Lieten 1982).

In the late 1920s and 1930s most of the emerging leftist leaders were recruited into active politics within the Indian National Congress in the fight for national freedom. By the 1930s they had formed a separate organization, the Congress

Socialist Party, and in 1940 they separated themselves from the Congress and established a local unit of the CPI. Within a few years the left leaders were able to mobilize Kerala's workers and peasants on a large scale into a politicized mass-movement challenging the social system as a whole.

As mentioned above, the leftist movement did not have any support in the fishing communities. Apart from regarding the fisherfolk as a sort of 'petty bourgeoisie', mobilizing them was not assumed viable because of the very important role of religious leaders in the villages. Moreover, although certainly not completely isolated from the wider society, the artisanal fishing communities were in a marginal position. Unlike agriculture, fishing was the activity of a single low status caste (or religious community) and interaction with other castes and communities was very limited.

Simultaneous to the politicization process of Kerala's workers, conflicts escalated within some of the communal organizations, regarding political representations and strategies. The case of the Ezhava movement presents an illustrative example.<sup>6</sup> Conflicts based on divergent ideologies, 'the Marxian ideology of class struggle and the protest ideology based on relative deprivation and ethnic conflict', finally led to a split in the movement (Rao 1976:86). The leftist leaders separated themselves from the movement and joined the CPI, whereas the elite among the Ezhavas strengthened the ties with the Congress.

In sum, mass support for the leftist movement made it necessary for the communal organizations to take a reactionary turn, and to emphasize the traditional values of (a rigid caste) society. In the words of Lieten (1982:8): 'Communalism became the safest way of politics for the ruling classes. Their party, the Indian National Congress, ultimately became a "coalition of ethnically oriented capitalist vested interests".' The affinity of communal associations and the Catholic church with the Congress was clearly manifested after the first CPI government was voted to power in 1957. After staying only for two years in power it was ousted by the central Congress government. The official reason given for this act was that the CPI government had been unable to maintain law and order in the state. These law and order problems, on the other hand, mostly stemmed from violent agitations mounted by the opposition, primarily the Catholic church and the caste organization of the high caste 'Nayars'. The main stumbling block for the Catholics was the Education Bill, introduced by the CPI, which was meant to enlarge state control over private schools (Nieuwenhuys 1990:254). The Nayars joined the Catholic opposition, their main abhorrence being the Land Reform Bill, as their landed interests were being threatened. Not surprisingly, in view of the strength of the Catholic church in south Kerala's fishing villages, the Catholic fisherfolk on a large scale were activated into the agitations against the CPI government.

#### IV

The participation of the Catholic fisherfolk in the agitations against the CPI government might be considered as marking the beginning of their politicization. However, at that stage their political participation was purely communal in character stimulated by Catholic priests safeguarding the interests of the church and the vested order. Moreover, although being a secure vote-bank for the Congress party, direct interaction of the fisherfolk with political parties (Congress included) remained very limited. Only much later, in the 1980s, political parties became interested in the fishing communities, when the fisherfolk had clearly shown their organizational strength. Also at this stage, Catholic priests had a major say in mobilizing the fisherfolk into organized action. This time not with the intention of safe-guarding the interests of the institutional church, but to motivate the people into action for their own interests. The question that arises is: How was it possible for the priests to influence the people in that way? The answer can be found in the particular role of the church and its representatives in the fishing villages.

Although the political parties' presence is rather recent in the fishing communities, the church as a social institution played a dominant role in the political, economic and social life of the Catholic fisherfolk. It was the central institution and the priest 'the *ex officio* leader of the village' (Houtart and Nayak 1988:6). In fact, although other leaders existed, the priests had a major say in village affairs and the internal organization of the local community. In the local political and administrative structure of the Catholic villages, church committees sometimes even functioned as the village council (*gram sabha*) (Klausen 1968; Meynen 1989). The priests generally maintained good relations with the local elites (mostly educated men and merchants). The political relations between the church and the elites, Meynen argues, 'displayed itself by the latter's preponderance in the church committees' (1989:12). Moreover, the church used to levy tax on the fishermen, which generally amounted to 5% of the daily catches, and usually was collected by well-to-do merchants. Actually, no similar mechanism existed with regard to other occupational groups. Merchants and other salaried workers only contributed to the church during times of ritual observances. Nevertheless, whereas the church 'has made significant investments in education and health services, the fishermen have not been the principal beneficiaries of these services' (Houtart and Nayak 1988:6).

Thus, the priest's role in the village was (and is) not limited to spiritual or religious matters. He also engaged himself in all secular matters, even telling the fisherfolk which party they should vote for (or not vote for) at election times. Until recently, the only option was the Congress party. In the 1970s an important development took place concerning the priests' engagement with the fisherfolk. At that time some of them began acting as individuals promoting changes in the existing social relations within the villages, instead of practicing their traditional role only as representatives of the institutional church and the existing social order.

Even though only a minority of priests have turned away from the conventional ideology regarding their purpose as religious leaders, and whose secular interests they are to serve, their involvement in the union struggles indeed has caused controversies within the institutional church. The church hierarchy even has transferred some 'problem' priests from the coastal area altogether. However, before discussing the new fishers' organizations and the priests' involvement in the process any further, it is necessary to briefly view the socio-economic processes going on in Kerala's fisheries in the last few decades. I say necessary because it was the miserable social reality faced by the artisanal fishing communities (and their competition with the mechanized sector) that triggered violent responses which later were canalized into organized actions.

## V

Until the 1960s fishing and related activities were solely carried out by members of fishing communities, who traditionally belonged to the lowest ranking group in the social stratification system. The social features and technical limitations of the artisanal fisheries were important factors in restricting the scale of exploitation of Kerala's fish resources. The social context of production characterized by low productivity served as a framework. The production of the fisherfolk was motivated by the subsistence needs of their households contrary to motivation for production characterizing market economies 'where production is motivated by the accumulation of profit and capital' and 'production targets are indefinite' (Pálsson 1991:43). Within this framework fishing efforts were limited by technical factors such as the construction and labour-intensiveness of craft and gear. These had been adapted over the centuries to the different ecological conditions faced by various localities along the coast. The operation of the various fishing nets in use was selective, that is, specific nets were used for catching particular species in different seasons. Furthermore, fishing as a lowly regarded caste-based activity, plus the specific skills and knowledge needed to carry it out prevented free entry of capital and people from other communities (Kurien 1985).

Even though the production of the artisanal fishermen was meant chiefly for the meeting of domestic needs, the fishing communities were not isolated, self-sufficient entities. Firstly, fishing generally was the fisherfolk's sole occupation. Therefore, other goods had to be purchased through market exchange. Secondly, even at very low levels of productivity, large surpluses were available for disposal and trade (ibid.:70). Hence, a part of the catch was sold to local consumers, people in nearby villages and, to some extent, to long distance markets within and outside India (mostly Burma and Ceylon). The marketing was in the hands of different vendors, in terms of scale and distances served. Generally, the first hand sales took place between fishermen and middlemen or merchants, all belonging to the same com-

munity (Klausen 1968:142). The local merchants either sold the fish directly to consumers or to merchants belonging to other communities. Before the use of ice for the preservation of fish became common, fisherwomen salted, dried or smoked fish that could not be directly sold.

In the early 1950s the first mechanized boats, together with the newest ice and freezing-techniques for fish preservation, and isolated vans for fish disposal were introduced in three fishing villages in Quilon district (Sakthikulangara, Neendakara and Puthentura). The mechanization efforts were a part of the 'India Norwegian Project' (INP) undertaken in cooperation between the Norwegian and Indian governments. Fishermen were chosen for training on the INP boats which they could buy on a subsidized basis. Local cooperatives distributed the boats together with state support, such as loans for operating costs, and purchase of subsidiary equipment given independently of INP. The mechanization activities remained quite isolated until around the mid-1960s. Then the government reoriented its policy toward modernization of the fisheries and introduced the 'rapid growth model' instead of the former 'slow modernization' strategy (Kurien and Achari 1988).

The first decade after the establishment of the Kerala state (1956), the government laid the main emphasis on upgrading existing fishing techniques and gradually introducing new ones through state subsidies distributed via cooperatives. The main reason for the change in emphasis toward modernization in the mid-1960s were factors such as: increasing thrust of the Indian government for the development of fish export industries; increasing demand for prawns on the international market (especially U.S.A. and Japan), and successful experiments with bottom trawling for prawns in the coastal waters off Quilon (undertaken by the INP). Until then prawns were an untapped resource in Kerala. Prawns were not an important part of the local cuisine, but had mainly been exported in dried form to South-East Asian markets. In the late 1950s private merchants had begun experimenting with the marketing of frozen prawns in the U.S.A. The successes of the experiments with bottom trawling and marketing of prawns heralded a new phase in Kerala's fisheries known as the 'pink gold-rush.'

In accordance with the modernization-cum-growth model, existing techniques came to be regarded as obstacles to growth and state subsidies for the development of the artisanal fisheries were withdrawn. Instead the main thrust and financial incentives were made available for the introduction of mechanized trawling boats (mid-1960s) and purse-seiners (after 1976), together with the latest techniques in fish processing (ibid.:22). Until the mid-1970s there was a noticeable increase in both prawn and overall fish landings in Kerala. After that, there was a steady decline in the production of prawns, and the total fish catches began to fluctuate. At the same time, prices for fish, particularly for prawns increased manifold which to a large extent compensated decreasing catches.

In sum, by the mid-1970s signs of overfishing, especially of demersal (bottom-dwelling) fish species, became apparent in Kerala's coastal waters. The fact is with

the introduction of large-scale fishing methods, no notice was taken of either the existing ecological and social systems, or what ecological and socio-economic consequences this modernization strategy would have. Organizations of artisanal fishermen, environmental activists and scholars, for instance, have argued that the direct transfer of gear combinations innovated for fisheries in the temperate waters (like trawling and purse-seining) to the completely different ecological context of the tropical waters off Kerala has led to serious ecological disturbances (see e.g. Kurien and Achari 1988 and 1990). Furthermore, stimulated by governmental policy and accelerating fish prices, the boat fleet operating in the coastal waters has grown at a fast rate, and actually far exceeds recommended levels.<sup>7</sup>

Also, the export-oriented growth strategy implemented in Kerala's fisheries has led to increasing socio-economic disparities between regions as well as fishermen. According to several scholars (see Klausen 1968; Nieuwenhuys 1989; Platteau 1984), the level of class distinction was low in the artisanal fishing communities, mainly because the concentration of ownership over the means of production was maintained within reasonable limits. The class distinction between fishermen and fish-merchants (other than small-scale vendors like female headload vendors) was more clear-cut. The local merchants often also functioned as moneylenders in the fishing villages. In order to secure access to as much of the daily catches as possible, the merchants generally established loan contracts with owner-operators. Their main strategy was to advance loans to owners of fishing assets against the agreement that the daily catches would be disposed of through them and that a predetermined proportion of the sale proceeds would accrue to them as interest payments (Platteau 1984:78). This used to be the only way for owner-operators to acquire necessary credit money for productive purposes. At the same time, they were completely at the mercy of fish-merchants concerning when and how much they would get for their catches.

When the modernization-cum-growth model was introduced no effort was made to change the existing exploitative social structure in the villages. Therefore, a process started where those with economic and political power were able to consolidate their power position, e.g. by making use of governmentally-subsidized incentives, distributed via cooperatives. Indeed, the setting up of fishermen's cooperatives was promoted by the Department of Fisheries parallel to the modernization efforts. But according to a governmental report (published in 1981), the scheme of distributing mechanized boats to real producers was a failure because the so-called fishermen's cooperatives were almost all 'benami' (under false name), sponsored and controlled by the rich and influential in the fishing communities (quoted in Kurien and Achari 1990:2013). Moreover, many (if not most) fishermen who did acquire mechanized boats were unable to manage the higher investment, operating and maintenance costs in the end losing their fishing assets into the hands of fishmerchants-cum-moneylenders.<sup>8</sup>

An important feature of the period of the 'pink gold-rush' was a rapid entry into the fisheries of persons traditionally not involved in it, which broke the former caste

barriers of the sector. A number of new investors came from merchant communities, e.g. exporters of coir and cashew who began experiencing a set-back in their industries in the 1960s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, big business houses also began investing in Kerala's fisheries (see e.g. Kurien 1985; Platteau 1984). Moreover, prawn-peeling sheds and modern fish-processing plants attracted labourers from outside the traditional fishing communities. Whereas no measurements were taken to limit harvesting of the fish resources in the coastal waters, the modernization process soon led to overfishing, which further aggravated the economic and social disparities in Kerala's fisheries. The process resulted in the fall of the fish harvest, lower or stagnating wages, increasing class differentiation, heavier work burden on artisanal fisherfolk, and decreasing work opportunities in the fisheries (see for instance Achari 1988; Kurien 1985; Kurien and Achari 1990; Nieuwenhuys 1989). And lastly, availability and quality of fish sold on the local market decreased.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, although increasing fish prices to a certain extent compensated decreasing or stagnating catches, the effects severely were felt in the fishing communities. Artisanal fishermen experienced a decline of 50% in productivity from 1969-70 to 1979-80, and their share in the total catches fell from 84% in 1967-75 to 69% during the period 1976-80 (Kurien and Achari 1988:18). The poverty, social backwardness, in the form of low educational and health standards, and generally unhealthy living conditions in the fishing villages, became quite clear in an official socio-economic census survey conducted by the Department of Fisheries in 1979. This survey demonstrated that the socio-economic conditions of the fisherfolk in all aspects were in sharp contrast with the high-quality life index of Kerala. As much as 50% of the 118,000 fishermen's households had an annual income below Rs 1,000, while only 3% had income above Rs 3,000 (Kurien 1985:80). This means that most of the fishermen's households were living beneath the poverty line set at Rs 4,200 per year in 1980 (Mathew and Scott 1980).

The artisanal fishermen, experiencing decreasing productivity and lower share in the total fish harvest together with increasing incidents of damage caused to their fishing gear by the mechanized boats, became exceedingly discontented with their situation in the late 1970s. Direct, often violent confrontations at sea between artisanal and mechanized boats became common in the face of increasing competition over the scarce resources in the coastal waters. The situation culminated in massive unrest in the fishing villages in the late 1970s. At that time a new process set in as fishers, motivated by individual priests and social workers, began to fight in an organized manner for social betterment and against the destruction of their means of subsistence.

## VI

As indicated earlier, priests in several fishing communities in the southern districts of Kerala promoted the establishment of fishers' associations in the late 1970s. Most of these organizations were joined together in the 'Kerala Latin Catholic Fishermen Federation,' which had the backing of the Catholic church. After the foundation of NFF (1978) unionization in Kerala was further stimulated. In 1980 representatives of different fishers' associations met and formed the *Kerala Swatantra Matsya Thozilali Federation* (KSMTF, Kerala Independent Fishermen's Federation). Even though the majority of these organizations were Catholic, this was an important step in uniting the fisherfolk of different religious communities around their common cause. On the other hand, the fact that most of these associations were under the umbrella of the church hindered the KSMTF in its effort to keep the federation non-communal and apolitical, and soon led to conflicts within it. Actually, confrontations with the communist-led coalition in power during the first two years of KSMTF, significantly eased the union struggle. But when a Congress-led government took over in 1982, the shape of the union changed and the conflicts escalated (Meynen 1989:28). The church hierarchy could neither subscribe to the efforts of some of the union leaders to have the KSMTF put on autonomous footing, nor to the strategies used in the union struggle. The conflicts finally led to a split in the federation in 1983. The conservative faction broke away to form another union (Akhila Kerala Swatantra Matsya Thozilali Federation) which had the backing of the church hierarchy, the Congress party, and parties to the right. At the same time KSMTF officially was registered as a trade union.

KSMTF defined its primary issues to be: the depletion of the fish resources; the destructive methods used by the mechanized boats; the harm caused by the newly introduced technologies of fishing to the livelihood of artisanal fishers; and to strive for socio-economic betterment and justice in the fishing communities. The union has been at the front of regular widespread agitations of Kerala's fisherfolk. Actions and protests taking place in the monsoon months of 1980-81 and 1984 were particularly large-scale and widespread causing law and order problems in the state.<sup>10</sup> The agitations got the attention of the press and, indeed, could not be overlooked by any political party.

In the early 1980s the larger political parties created their own fishers' unions, something they had neglected before. Although other unions made their inroads into coastal Kerala, KSMTF was the leading force concerning strategies and demands, and joint struggles of the unions became common. This was reflected in cooperation between KSMTF and unions sponsored by the left parties. Increasing teamwork of KSMTF and the left, together with involvement of clergy in the union agitations was – not surprisingly – met with hostility from the institutional church. Besides reinforcing doubts and misgivings among the fishers toward the union, the church hierarchy transferred a number of priests, who had participated in the agitations, to

remote areas away from the coast. The opposition of the church particularly adversely affected the KSMTF activities in the district of Trivandrum where 75% of the fisherfolk were Catholic (Kuriackos 1986:49; Meynen 1989:28-29).

In dealing with the authorities, the fishers' unions only have been moderately successful. Their ecological argumentation – relating to the need for restrictions on mechanized fishing in the coastal waters – have weighted lightly against economic arguments of the powerful mechanized boat-owners, big merchants and exporters – such as expected loss of foreign exchange earnings and employment if mechanized fishing were restricted. Nevertheless, the government of Kerala has enacted laws limiting access to the coastal waters, and installed committees of enquiry into the situation of the fisheries. But due to absence of an effective enforcement machinery and legal loopholes, together with the strong position of the mechanized sector, implementation and enforcement of laws and measures has been considerably limited. Although the authorities have been reluctant in putting measures of fishery management into practice, in the early 1980s they did implement some important welfare measures for the benefit of the fishing communities. Simultaneously, in accordance with the policy of the central government, the government of Kerala pursued a scheme aimed at motorization of the artisanal fleet. In view of the situation of the fisheries motorization, of course, only aggravates the depletion problem. As referred to earlier, the government of Kerala, in the early 1980s, recognized that the former policy of distributing incentives through cooperatives had been a complete failure. This recognition led the authorities to establish new cooperatives with the aim of distributing loans and subsidies for motorization and welfare measures. But, as Kumar points out: 'The principal hurdle remains: the political installation of outsiders as office-bearers of the cooperatives. This immediately aborts the avowed objective of creating full-blooded fisherfolk's organizations' (1988:581). This is in clear contrast with grassroot cooperatives which have been established by fisherfolk in several localities in southern Kerala in the last two decades. These cooperatives have played an important role in reinforcing the union process in the Catholic belt. The first of these was established in 1968 when fishermen in the village Marianad in Trivandrum district created the Marianad Fishermen's Cooperative Society.

This village was created on formerly uninhabited land, between 1960-62 by the church-aided Trivandrum Social Service society. A group of community organizers was invited to live and work in the village. After working there for seven years (following a community development approach) the group realized that their work would be of limited use if the exploitative economic structure of the village was not dealt with. Most of the village land was owned by a landlord. He had gained extensive control over the fishers as they, in return for his permission to live on his land, had to sell their catches through him (Meynen 1989:31). By establishing a cooperative, the fisherfolk successfully managed to escape the grip of the landlord and improve their economic situation. The cooperative took care of the auctioning

of the members' fish, including obtaining credit from the buyers. Integrated with the auctioning system the cooperative ran a saving scheme and a credit system linked to the purchase of fishing equipment for its members. The Marianad example was extended to several other fishing villages during the 1970s.

In Trivandrum district the process was aided by the activities of the Programme for Community Organization (PCO), an autonomous NGO organization started by the group of community workers active in Marianad. In 1980 around 15 such village-level societies jointly formed an apex body, the South-Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS). In the 1980s cooperatives in Quilon district, established by the Fishermen Community Development Programme (FCDP), and societies operating in Kanyakumari district (in Tamil Nadu) joined the SIFFS.

Within SIFFS, which adopted a three-tier organizational structure, the main function of the independent primary-level village societies is: marketing of the members' production; promotion of saving schemes among the fishermen related to the auctioning; arrangement of bank loans for fishing equipment. Some of them are also engaged in boat-building and/or selling of fishing requisites. The second tier, or the district federations, have representatives from each of the village societies. They intervene in the marketing of fish for distant internal and external markets. They sell fish directly to export houses eliminating a chain of middlemen. Moreover, in addition to monitoring and assisting the primary-level societies they engage in the supplying of ice, purchasing of fishing requisites in bulk, and educative and welfare activities. The main function of the apex SIFFS (apart from supportive role offered to the district federations) is: development and promotion of new technology, e.g. boat-building, research and training. Although SIFFS extends only to a minority of Kerala's artisanal fishers and its operation capacity is limited, it, at least, has been able to curb the exploitative practices of the local elites.

## VII

Whereas the primary-level societies within SIFFS all are based on similar principles, there are local varieties regarding strategies and successes in dealing with the elites. Among the more successful are the cooperatives in Quilon district organized by the FCDP. In contrast with the PCO in Trivandrum, which has no direct ties with the Catholic church, FCDP is closely related to the local clergy; a particular congregation within the Catholic church called the Salesians of Don Bosco.

Priests belonging to that congregation were offered a parish in a well-off neighbourhood in Quilon-town in 1975.<sup>11</sup> They refused the offer and insisted on being placed in a coastal parish. Accordingly, they were assigned to an ecclesia in Pallihottam, a small fishing village in the Quilon municipality. Pallihottam, like most fishing villages, was known for its poverty, and moreover, for the increasing violence of its inhabitants, due to growing economic difficulties. During the initial

years, the Salesians concentrated on social uplift activities and on bringing the people together. Since approximately 90% of the people were illiterate one of their first tasks was to start to teach reading. After a short time span, the Salesians extended their activities to four neighbouring villages which was not quite appreciated by the church hierarchy. According to a local parish priest, both their mobilization effort and concrete acts provoked the church hierarchy. A case in point is that the Salesians gave the church land in Pallihottam to the people to live on and assisted a number of families to build on the land. However, it was their mobilizing work in the villages which most irritated the church hierarchy. As my informants told me, the church hierarchy contended that the Salesians (and later the FCDP) were preaching Marxism in the villages.

The priests succeeded in mobilizing the fisherfolk. Instead of justifying the existing exploitative social relations, they postulated that the extreme economic inequality in the fishing communities was sinful. They helped the people realize the exploitative social structure in their villages, the main causes for their poverty-ridden situation, and most importantly, that by concerted action something could be done to change the situation. In 1977 the 'Latin Catholic Matsya Thozilali Union' was formed in the area, under the leadership of Fr. A. Parishavila. The fisherfolk's movement in coastal Quilon was one of the initiators of the National Fishermen Forum and the KSMTF. In 1979 FCDP was founded, and officially registered. Apart from the condition set by the Salesians, that the chairman of the organization should be a Don Bosco priest (in Pallihottam), FCDP was put under the control of the fishers themselves.

Beyond direct union activities and other motivational work aimed at promoting critical awareness among the fisherfolk, FCDP succeeded in destroying the 'traditional' fish-marketing structure. Through establishing fishermen-controlled marketing centres in all five villages, FCDP has been able to break down the former power of merchants-cum-moneylenders who controlled both the prices of fish and when the fishers got paid for their sold catches. Moreover, by mediating grants and loans on soft terms from banks and funds, FCDP further challenged the moneylenders' grip on the fishers. As indicated by a 36 year old fisherwoman:

One of the most important changes taking place in the fishing villages in my life is that organizations like FCDP make it possible for poor people to acquire privately or cooperatively owned fishing assets instead of entirely having to rely on work for others. Banks, of course, did exist but they only lent to the rich people like the mechanized boat owners in Sakthikulangara. There were no possibilities for poor people to acquire loans except from moneylenders.

The union activities were separated from FCDP in 1984 and the economic activities were set on autonomous footing in 1985 – under the name 'Fishermen Welfare Society' (FWS). Nevertheless, the relations between FCDP, FWS and KSMTF have remained very close and their work interwoven. Since 1985 FCDP mainly has been concerned with social and educational activities, like formal and non-formal education, all kinds of social projects, seminars and courses on various subjects of

concern for the fisherfolk. Furthermore, since 1982 a fisherwomen's organization has been active within FCDP. It is concerned with various topics of relevance for the fishing community in general and the fisherwomen in particular. The activities of FWS are similar to other SIFFS cooperatives. About 1,200 fishermen, operating motorized and non-motorized artisanal crafts, are members of FWS (1991). Those who bring their catches to auctioning in one of the FWS markets automatically become members of KSMTF. Indeed, the fisherfolk in the five villages, on the whole, are highly unionized. Of the approximately 5,000 persons directly engaged in fishing and related activities, around 3,000 are members of KSMTF and a number of the other 2,000 are members of the union related to the institutional church. Moreover, according to my informants amongst fishers in coastal Quilon (including FCDP, KSMTF and FWS workers) the people in the villages on a large scale support the left-wing parties. The fisherfolk's movement itself does not relate to any political party, and this left-wing tendency neither is appreciated by the church hierarchy nor the Salesians.

According to the chairman of FCDP,<sup>12</sup> the persistence of the Salesians in the struggle for, and with, the fisherfolk, no longer can be disrespected by the institutional church. Although the relations with the church hierarchy still are far from being smooth, the clear strength plus the economic and social achievements accomplished by the FCDP have forced the church hierarchy to improve the relationship, and in some ways to change their strategies toward the villagers. This is, for instance, reflected in recent years by the Quilon Social Service Society which under the auspices of the institutional church and headed by the local clergy (other than the Salesians), has been building up a similar marketing system as that of FWS. Although they, of course, present some competition to the FWS, they are more concerned with inland fishers and less with marine fishers than FWS.

Hence, it might be argued that the modernization of the fisheries, the subsequent depletion of the coastal waters, and the increased competition over the resources enhanced changes in the political and social culture of the villages. Seemingly paradoxical, the prime mover for translating the people's dissatisfaction over their difficult socio-economic situation into political action were Catholic priests.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, even though Kerala's fisherfolk still face enormous socio-economic problems, and their grassroot associations only involve a small part of the total fishing population, at least locally they have been able to curb the malpractices of the elites, and influence policy making in the fisheries. Keeping in mind the traditional conservatism of the Catholic church as a social institution in Kerala, the role played by individual priests in the process indeed is extraordinary. Most importantly, they set in motion a change concerning the fisherfolk's ideas over the reasons for their miserable socio-economic situation and mobilized them into direct organized action to change it. In essence, the priests motivated a turn from the conventional ideology by rejecting that the existing exploitative social order is

based on the 'will of God' and the fisherfolk's poverty is their 'fate', toward a more progressive or radical one.

## VIII

As discussed above, Kerala is known for its long history of political radicalism and trade-unionism. This fact undeniably provided the initiators of the fishers unions and grassroot cooperatives with an important start in their mobilization effort and strategies to deal with the authorities (see Meynen 1989:23). The unionization process of Kerala's fisherfolk in many ways resembles that of other groups of workers earlier this century. Although later than for most categories of workers, the same process of a turn from social organization based on communal representation toward a class-based organization can be detected in the case of the artisanal fisherfolk. This does not mean that communalism has become absent in their struggle, but that at least they have taken important steps toward uniting around their common cause.

It is important to note, that whereas the mobilization of Catholic fisherfolk in the agitations against the first CPI government in Kerala could be viewed as the first stage of their politicization, their interaction with political parties was very limited for years to come. Only much later the fisherfolk united in struggling for their own interests. It is significant that in both cases, the major initial drive came from the Catholic church, and not from political parties and their affiliated unions. Though certainly unintended by the church hierarchy, the church stimulated a seemingly paradoxical development of organizing the fisherfolk and later even motivating the rise of a union that has increasingly worked together with the political opponent of the church, the left in Kerala. The indisputable success of the priests in mobilizing the fisherfolk, first of all, is related to their social function in the Catholic fishing villages and, generally speaking, to the importance of religion for the fisherfolk. Just as the priest is the 'ex-officio' leader in the villages, so is religion more than 'belief' for the fisherfolk. Rather, it is *the* philosophy of existence, penetrating into all aspects of life and death in the fishing communities.

To conclude, some individual priests in Kerala have rejected the conventional theological epistemology, which takes the existing social structure as 'natural' or 'god-given,' and preaches obedience to spiritual and secular authorities. In view of the very important role of religion and religious leaders in the fishing communities, by taking side with the people these 'problem priests' gave the people substantive basis for revolting against the exploitative social structure in the villages. Moreover, by assisting the people in finding 'secular' causes for their poverty, e.g. the exploitative socio-economic relations and over-exploitation of the fish resources and stimulating them into action, they have given the people hope for changes in *real life*.

### Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to Miklós Rác and the editors of *MAST* for their valuable comments. I also want to thank Polly S. Hewson for commenting on my English.

### Notes

1. The main findings of the research are presented in my M.A. thesis; 'Modernization in India; Example Kerala's Fisheries.'
2. All fishing operations of the state are conducted in the coastal waters.
3. In 1988-89 India's marine fish production totalled 1,817,000 tonnes (National Fishermen Forum 1991:31).
4. It is difficult to tell exactly how many persons are employed in these activities due to a lack of reliable data. Meynen, for instance, indicates that in 1979 roughly the same number of people were estimated to be engaged in activities related to fishing, as that of active fishermen (1989:5). Leela Gulati, on the other hand, refers to the fisheries as providing employment for another 350,000 people (1988:151).
5. The Catholic fishing communities are mainly concentrated in the southern districts of Kerala while the Muslim communities chiefly are in the northern districts.
6. Ezhavas (Iravas, Ereyas) together with Chovans and Tiyyas were classified as toddy tappers, although only a few of them actually were occupied as such. Most of them were sub-tenants and agrarian labourers. In the caste hierarchy, they were regarded as being the highest among untouchables. As outcasts, they had to observe many restrictions related to their polluting state, which seriously restricted their moves in the fast changing society at the turn of the century. Together they formed around 25% of the total population in Kerala. Presently these groups are all known under the name Ezhava.
7. In 1986 an official fishery-experts committee recommended: 1,145 trawlers, 0 purse-seiners, 2,690 motorized artisanal boats, and 20,000 non-motorized boats to be allowed to operate in the coastal waters. In fact, there were: 2,807 trawlers, 54 purse-seiners, 6,934 motorized, and 20,170 non-motorized boats in operation (Kurien and Achari 1990:2014, table 4).
8. Platteau, for instance, cites in his analysis of the transformation process in Sakthikulangara that the majority of trawler owners have never been regular active fishermen, but rather those engaged in occupations related to fish trade 'more specifically in the marketing and processing stages of the export "fish chain"' (1984:88-89).
9. According to Kurien, the latest estimates of protein intake in Kerala date back to the early 1960s. Then, fish was the cheapest source of animal protein in Kerala and accounted for 3/4 of the total animal protein intake. He emphasizes that while the per capita availability of locally consumed fish was 15.2 kg in 1956-58, it had decreased to 9.2 kg in 1982-83 (1985:80 and 86, note 102).
10. The monsoon months (June-September) constitute the main season of bottom trawling for prawns. Monsoon also is the spawning season for many fish species in the coastal waters. Artisanal fishers together with a number of fishery experts (see e.g. Kurien and Achari 1988 and 1990) argue, that bottom trawling

in the monsoon is particularly harmful, because by scraping the seabottom the trawl-nets destroy the fish spawn.

11. My information on the history of FCDP is mainly derived from personal interviews with its chairman, director, and local KSMTF leaders.

12. Personal interviews with the chairman of FCDP who is a local Don Bosco priest.

13. I say *seemingly* because if the development of the priests' involvement in the fisherfolk's struggle in Kerala is put in a broader context, it becomes clear that the process is not at all paradoxical. The non-conformist movement within the Catholic church in Kerala namely is not an isolated phenomenon. It corresponds to similar movements that base their theological considerations on 'liberation theology' and are active in many other so-called Third World countries.

### References Cited

- Achari, T.R.T.  
1988 Status Report on Kerala's Fisheries. In: K. Mathew (Ed.), *Voice of the Storm*. Cochin: N.F.F. Pp. 20-43.
- Department of Fisheries  
1987 *Kerala Fisheries an Overview*. Trivandrum: Government of Kerala.
- Gopalan, U.K.  
1987 The Fishery Resources of Kerala and Their Exploitation. In: *Fisheries Crisis and Policy Approach Kerala* (Proceedings of the State Level Seminar held at Trivandrum on August 27-28 1987). Trivandrum: PCO Centre.
- Gulati, L.  
1988 Women's Changing Roles in the Kerala's Fishery. In: J. Nadel-Klein and D.L. Davis (Eds.), *To Work and to Weep: Women in Fishing Societies*. St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland. Pp. 149-168.
- Hálfánardóttir, J.  
1992 Modernization in India; Example Kerala's Fisheries. M.A. Thesis, University of Amsterdam.
- Hiro, D.  
1976 *Inside India Today*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Houtart, F. and N. Nayak  
1988 *Kerala Fishermen - Culture and Social Organization*. Lourain-la-Neuve: Centre D'Analyse Sociale De la Culture (Centre Tricontinental) and Trivandrum: PCO Centre.
- Klausen, A.M.  
1968 *Kerala Fishermen and the Indo-Norwegian Pilot Project*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Kooiman, D.  
1984 The Gospel of Coffee. In: D. Kooiman, O. van den Muijzenberg and P. van der Veer (Eds.), *Conversion, Competition and Conflict; Essays on the Role of Religion in Asia*. Amsterdam: Free University Press. Pp. 185-214.
- Kumar, K.G.  
1988 Organising Fisherfolk Cooperatives in Kerala. *Economic and Political Weekly* XXIII(12): 578-582.

Kuriackos, N.U.

- 1986 An Exploratory Study on the Unionization of Traditional Fishers (with Special Reference to Kerala Swatantra Matsya Thozilaly Union Quilon District). Project Report submitted to the University of Madras, in part fulfillment of the requirement for the M.A. Degree.

Kurien, J.

- 1985 Technical Assistance Projects and Socio-Economic Change, Norwegian Intervention in Kerala's Fisheries Development. *Economic and Political Weekly* XX(25-26):70-87.

Kurien, J. and T.R.T. Achari

- 1988 Fisheries Development Policies and the Fishermen's Struggle in Kerala. *Social Action* 38:15-36.  
1990 Overfishing along Kerala Coast, Causes and Consequences. *Economic and Political Weekly* XXV(35-36):2011-2018.

Lieten, G.K.

- 1982 *The First Communist Ministry in Kerala*. Calcutta: Bagchi.

Mathew, M.T. and W. Scott

- 1980 *Developing a Monitoring System at the Local Level, Vol. 1: Socio-Economic Observation Areas in Kerala*. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

Meynen, W.

- 1989 Contradictions and Constraints in Fisheries Development: Capital, Artisanal Workers and Shrinking Resources in Kerala. *Working Paper No. 51*. Den Haag: Institute for Social Studies.

National Fishermen Forum

- 1991 An Approach to the National Fisheries Policy for Fuller Employment and Sustainable Development in the Eight Plan. New Delhi: National Fishermen Forum.  
1989 Invisible Nets: Women and Children in Kerala's Fishing. *Maritime Anthropological Studies* 2(2):174-194.

Nieuwenhuys, O.

- 1990 *Angels with Callous Hands: Children's Work in Rural Kerala (India)*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Free University Amsterdam.

Pálsson, G.

- 1991 *Coastal Economies, Cultural Accounts; Human Ecology and Icelandic Discourse*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Platteau, J.Ph.

- 1984 The Drive Towards Mechanization of Small Scale Fisheries in Kerala: A Study of the Transformation Process of Traditional Societies. *Development and Change* 15(1):65-103.

Rao, M.S.A.

- 1979 *Social Movements and Social Transformation*. Madras: MacMillan.

Vijayan, A.J.

- 1987 Whither the Independent Unions. In Programme for Community Organization *Development where Nature Women and Men Matter; Tenth Year Review*. Trivandrum: PCO Centre.