Critical Stories of Change - I

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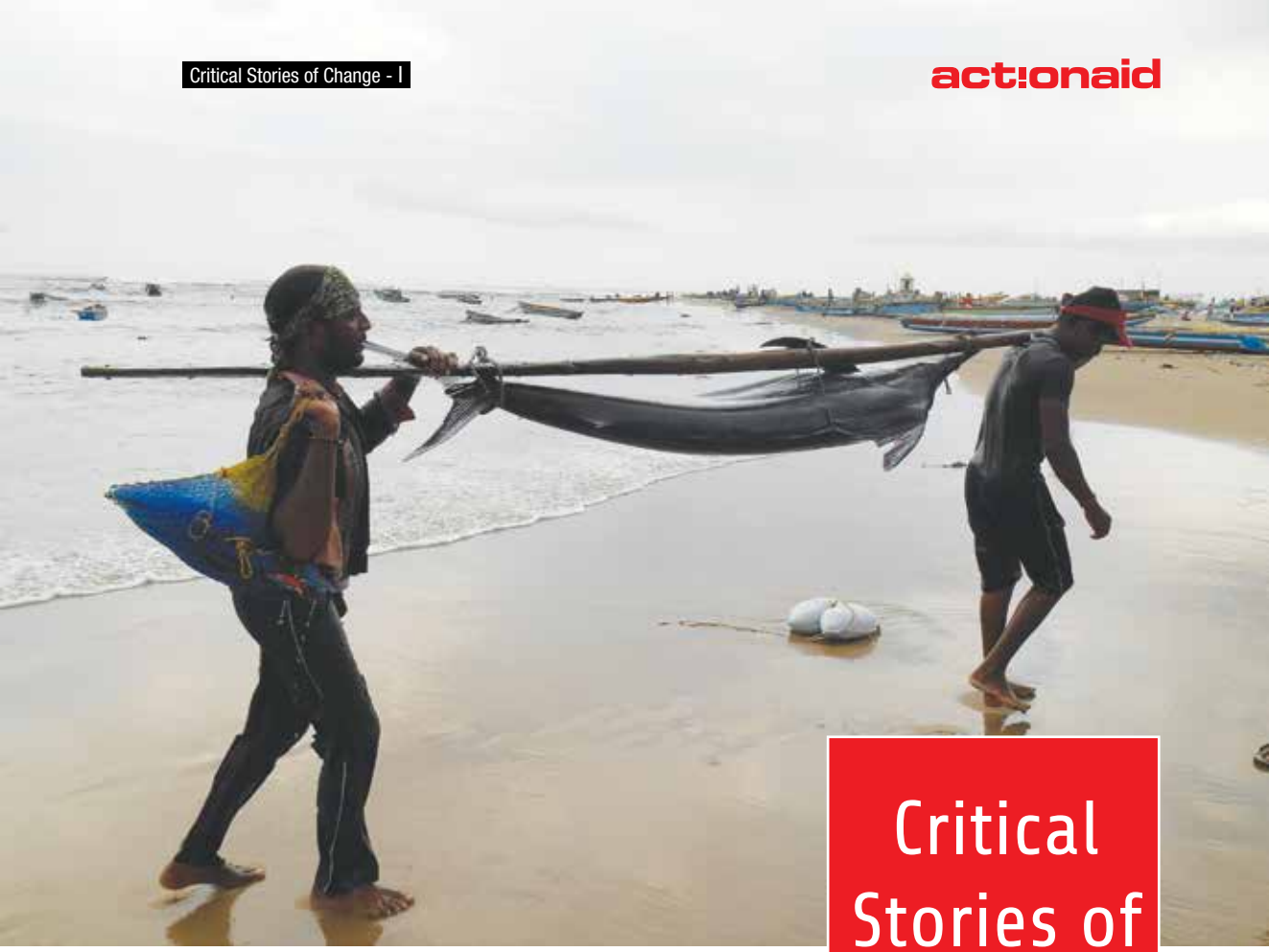


Critical Stories of Change

‘Sea our life, coast our right’

Learnings from Visakhapatnam’s fisher community

By Pamela Philipose

Field Support and ideation: Dipali Sharma and P. Raghu

2013

Glossary

AAI	ActionAid India
BIACPL	Brandix India Apparel City Private Limited
CZM	Coastal Zone Management
CRZ	Coastal Regulation Zone
CSP	Country Strategy Paper
CBO	Community Based Organisation
DFYWA	District Fishermen's Youth Welfare Association
FYWA	Fishermen's Youth Welfare Association
GSS	Gram Swarajya Samiti
GVMC	Greater Visakha Municipal Corporation
MFRA	Marine Fisheries Regulation Act
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NCAFN	North Coastal Andhra Fisher Folk Network
NFF	National Fishworkers Forum
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NYS	Nehru Yuvajana Sangam
RTE	Right To Education
RTI	Right To Information
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
VUDA	Visakhapatnam Urban Development Authority
WTO	World Trade Organization

Foreword

Dear reader,

What you would find in the pages that follow, is a rare attempt to stop for a moment, take a breath and understand in some depth are “efforts” of social change that we are all engaged in, and see how it has affected the communities lives, as they are lived.

There are hundreds of partner social organisations we are collaborating with at present, and many more who have done us the honour of making us part of real, substantial and sustained change in favour of the marginalized and the excluded. At ActionAid India, we derive our inspiration and strength from the ability of the impoverished and excluded people to lead the change, working in partnership with formations of community based organisations and other social movements in their struggles for justice, equality and a life of dignity.

There is, as you may imagine a plethora of amazing stories of perseverance, courage and ingenuity of individuals, groups, villages and urban poor communities, challenging the complex structures of exclusions, poverty and patriarchy. We try our best to get many of them reported in our various publications and platforms, yet the big picture of the journey through time, often escapes us all. While data, log frames and reports contain within them ideas of ups and downs of change, very often the collective narratives of the roads less travelled are not put in one place, nor are failures, despair, fear and backlashes put on record in a “success story” driven world.

The ‘Critical Stories of Change’ is an attempt to address this and put forth a learning record of peoples’ journeys of change. They are ‘critical’ because they try to locate the critical factors which made change possible and ‘critical’ because they do not try to gloss over the difficult and painful parts. In an attempt to document the struggles and experiences of such undaunted and unfazed communities; their leaders –

women and men, who worked against all odds to challenge the unjust and inequitable structures, it seeks as much to document the failures, strife and discordant notes, along the way. 'Critical Stories' also recognise changing political factors and actors outside of us who directly or indirectly contribute to the transformative potential of such change processes

We hope that these documented experiences will provide a real picture and give worthy insights for all of us. We also hope that the stories will inspire all readers to strengthen their commitment to a just and equitable society.

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Women Feature Services for agreeing to support us in this learning initiative. We owe a special thanks to Ms Pamela Philipose for so wonderfully recounting this first story, **'Sea our life, coast our right': *Learnings from Visakhapatnam's fisher community***.

Happy Reading!

Sandeep Chachra,
Executive Director, ActionAid India

Background

Critical stories of change

Critical stories of change is a series of stories describing the role ActionAid International plays in changing the lives of people living in poverty. But in their openness, self-criticism, detailed analysis and celebration of the active role of others, the stories are far removed from self-congratulatory 'good practice case studies'. Critical stories of change are full of life, and are intended to impart the insights, advice and confidences of a friend. ActionAid International often makes claims for its work and achievements. Yet, in the struggle to address the causes of poverty and injustice, ActionAid is often one of many players. What ActionAid rarely gets to know is the significant nature of its contribution and the factors (both internal and external) that contributed to the outcomes. Critical stories of change launches a new learning initiative in ActionAid International.

The stories are the product of a facilitated learning process and aim to explore how change (both negative and positive) happens from the perspectives of different stakeholders. These are stories that explicitly link ActionAid and its partners' grassroots work to a rights agenda and capture the full complexity of ActionAid's development interventions and experiences: from the perspective of poor people, partners and organisation(s) and other stakeholders involved, as well as ActionAid itself. The documented lessons and experiences will hopefully provide insights for all those engaged in the struggle against poverty and injustice.

Acknowledgements

This story would be incomplete if I did not acknowledge the help and support of several women and men who helped me capture not just the scenario on the sands, but the philosophical underpinnings of ActionAid's work. Dipali Sharma, Senior Manager, Programmes, ActionAid India (AAI), proved to be an able and informed guide. At Visakhapatnam, P. Raghu, Regional Manager, AAI, provided a comprehensive backdrop of the work on the ground. He also proved to be an able translator, as also his Secunderabad-based

colleague, G. Rajasekhar, Programme Officer, AAI. Both captured the nuances of a complex conversation with patience and dedication. The insights of the two experts, Alex Tuscano of Praxis, and Charles Wesley Meesa, were valuable in piecing together the big picture. I came back from Visakhapatnam with a host of memories of its resilient fisher community and their leader-activists like Arjilli Dasu, Teddu Sankar, Soorada Devi and O.Bosanna, who spent time and effort in sharing with me their lives and activism.

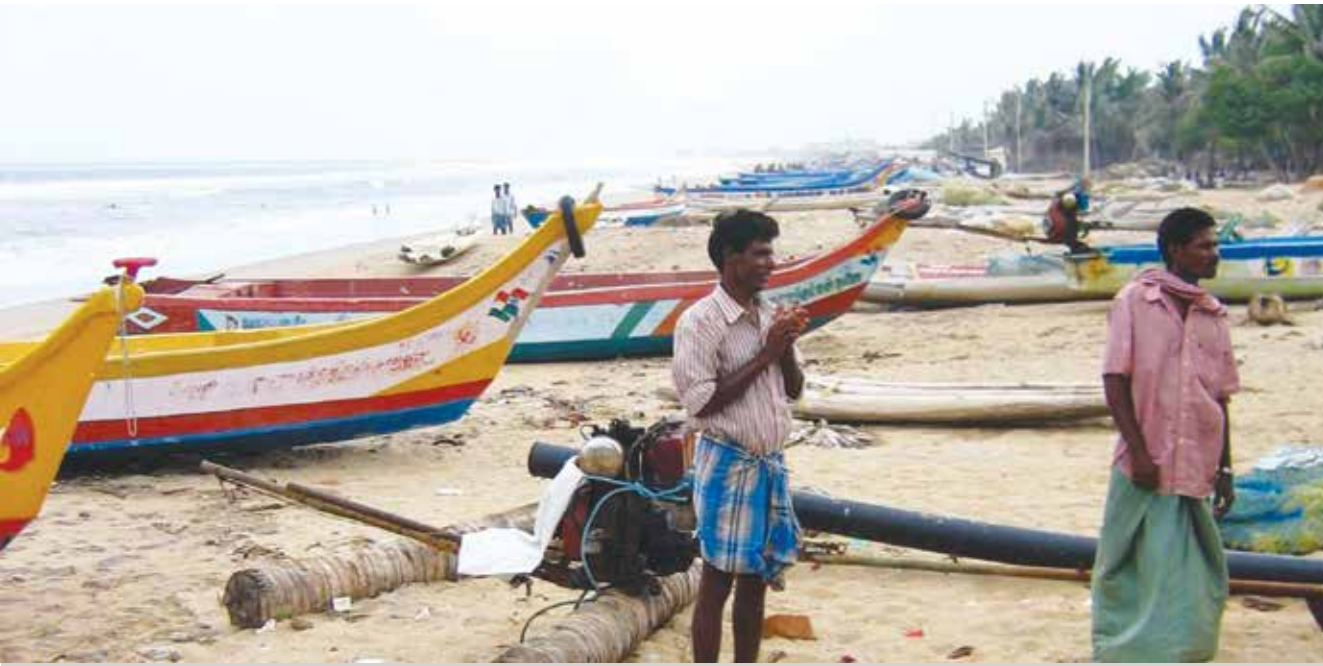
Pamela Philipose
New Delhi

About the author

Pamela Philipose is director and editor-in-chief, Women's Feature Service, New Delhi.

‘Sea Our Life, Coast Our Right’

Learnings From Visakhapatnam’s Fisher Community



“From the 11th century, my ancestors lived their lives fishing in these very waters. The seas in those days were said to be full of fish. That, alas, is no longer the case.”

–T. Sankar
community activist

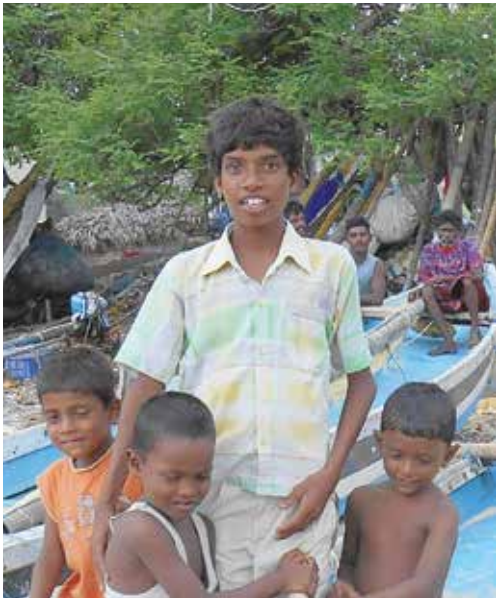
“Once we became aware of our rights as women and as members of the fishing community we gained the courage to speak. Then miracles started happening.”

–Soorada Devi
leader of the local women’s cooperative movement

Introduction

It was around four in the evening at Peda Jalaripeta, one of the largest fishing settlements in Visakhapatnam district, which is now part of the city itself. The waters near the shore were rife with bobbing country vessels and every now and then another boat would be pulled on to the shore as fishermen who had left for sea at three that morning returned home – some with fish, others with empty nets. Meanwhile the children ran, skipped and played around. One group dived into a stationary boat, picked up its oars and pretended to paddle in the sand, the laughter on their faces lighting up the beach. In time, some of them will certainly spend their lifetimes doing exactly that – but in real, not makebelieve, waters. What will their future be? The answer seemed to be blowing in the salty sea air...

ActionAid India has been working in Visakhapatnam district from 1998. The district has a coastal stretch of over 132 kilometres along the Bay of Bengal that is marked by a distinct marine geography with its terraces, pinnacles and reefs, making it a rich field for fishing. Perhaps nobody knew this better than the Dutch, who even set up a fishing village here in the 17th century. But much before the Dutch discovered this site, indigenous fishing communities had been fishing in these waters through the generations, over the millennia. The fishing community here has three distinct caste groups – the Vadbalajis, the Jalaris and the Agnikulakshatriyas, with the first constituting the majority. Today, there are around 62 fishing villages in the district.



Over the centuries, traditional fisher folk have always followed environmentally sustainable fishing practices. They ensured they never fished during the breeding season so that the fish could lay their eggs and fish stocks could get regenerated. They used specific nets for particular seasons so that juveniles could escape. They used catamarans that did not pollute the seas or affect other life forms in the water.

Despite the fact that they have lived in harmony with the environment, their important contributions and inherent rights were never adequately recognised. On the contrary, they were accorded a low status in India's social hierarchy and the situation of fishing communities living along the Visakhapatnam coast was no different. Also since the fishers had to be out at sea throughout the day, their ability to access other fields of work or educational and economic opportunities was extremely limited.

Most fishing villages were scattered, isolated and lacking in even the most basic infrastructure.

Fish is a perishable commodity, and given the lack of access that traditional fisher folk had to storage and processing facilities, their bargaining power was severely limited. The low prices they received hardly met even basic needs.

During the tough times, when accidents happened, when natural disasters like cyclones struck, or during the off-season when fishing did not take place, loan-seeking became a survival strategy and, in a sense, it amounted to "borrowing from tomorrow". The consequent loss of productive assets like utensils, fishing implements, even future catch, impoverished an already poor community.

What is the profile of a typical fishing village here? A 2012 study of the fishing settlement of Jalari-dominated Peda Jalaripeta, conducted by marine academics Sheela Immanuel and G. Syda Rao, recorded that a little less than a quarter of the population of 6,500 (2001 census figures) were into full-time fishing. Only 49 per cent of respondents were literate and their monthly income varied from ₹ 3,000 to ₹9,000. Most of them operated non-motorised catamarans, made of fibreglass or wood.

The latter, although cheaper, costing between ₹ 7,000 and ₹ 12,000, were less sturdy and economically viable than the fibreglass ones

that could cost anywhere between ₹ 20,000 and ₹50,000. Among the respondents, 32 per cent owned fibreglass, and 9 per cent, wooden catamarans.

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The study clearly revealed that given the existing marketing structure of the fish sector, fisher folk here did not personally benefit from the high prices their catch commanded in the consumer market. One needs to remember that this study was of fairly recent vintage and focused only at Peda Jalaripeta which, given its urban status, is possibly the most prosperous fishing village in the district. So one can only imagine the situation in the numerous other fishing villages of this district over a decade ago, when ActionAid India began its journey of change in this region.

First Steps In The Journey

In 1998, ActionAid India initiated a partnership – the first of its kind in Visakhapatnam district – with an organisation called Vikasa, headed by P. Viswanadham. It was the devastating cyclone that struck Andhra Pradesh in 1977 that transformed Viswanadham into a social activist. He decided to work among the coastal communities of the state, and one of the groups Vikasa worked with was the fishing community in Bhimili, an old Dutch fishing town about 25 kilometres north of Visakhapatnam city. The big concern of the fisher folk in those days – and, sadly, it has not gone away – was their sharply dwindling catch.

At the cusp of the 20th and 21st century, the future appeared full of challenges against a backdrop of welfare cuts and a growing free market economy catering to the rising global consumption of fish and fish products. The emphasis of policy makers at both the national and state levels was on the further liberalisation of trade in order to benefit the major private players of the industry – literally the Big

"Fishers were clearly impoverished with the majority living in thatched huts in those days. But what was striking was that this level of poverty was not constant but rising consistently from year to year"

– P. Viswanadham
Director, Vikasa

Fish – to the detriment of the interests of traditional fishers. Visakhapatnam emerged as a significant centre for these fishing interests.

"There was no doubt that the traditional fisher folk of Visakhapatnam were among those worst hit by liberalisation. The trawler lobby was being actively encouraged at that point, and trawlers were encroaching at will into the waters of traditional fishermen," said Viswanadham, recalling the early years with ActionAid India.

"Fishers were clearly impoverished, with the majority living in thatched huts in those days. But what was striking was that this level of poverty was not constant but rising consistently from year to year. In some areas, fishermen were forced to give up their traditional occupation and take up low-paying wage work. That was why ActionAid and Vikasa began to work on the issue of natural resource management and livelihoods from a rights perspective," he added.

Around the year 2000, ActionAid India had just come up with its second Country Strategy Paper (CSP). Entitled 'Taking Sides', it recast its mission as engaging in sustained partnerships with impoverished communities and their representatives. This, in turn, meant promoting the basic rights of the poor.

Initially, according to Viswanadham, the fishing community resisted the idea of getting organised. Slowly, realisation dawned among its leaders that it was only through collective action that they could take on the powerful forces against which they were pitted.

A major outcome of the Vikasa-ActionAid India partnership was the forging of a coalition of six organisations, which took its name from the sea – Keratam, or wave. The Keratam coalition was formed in 2001 and for the first time the fishing community in Visakhapatnam district had an exclusive forum of its own.

Said Baddi Ramu of the Gram Swarajya Samiti (GSS), which is part of Keratam, "At that point the GSS was working with several poor communities but not with fisher folk. Vikasa, supported by ActionAid, then held a large meeting bringing together many organisations working with coastal communities under the banner of Keratam. The only criterion for participating was presence in the field, so we joined up and began working on issues of the fisher folk."

But such mobilisation would have been shorn of meaning without effective community representation and work began on the difficult and often frustrating attempt to build it. The presence of community leaders like Arjilli Dasu, whose organisation, the District Fishermen's Youth Welfare Association (DFYWA), is a part of Keratam, helped immensely. The dynamic unleashed by various groups coming together opened new vistas.

"Once we thought we were alone. Our community comprised our whole universe. Now that universe widened," said Dasu, looking back. Representatives of the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF), a trade union network of over two million fishworkers, came over to present new ideas and strategies. The tradition of observing World Fisheries Day every November on a large scale began at that point and it has continued to date. These occasions were marked by much fanfare and flag hoisting, as well as public speeches. National figures like Thomas Kocherry, one of the founders of the NFF, and Medha Patkar, founder member of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, have visited Visakhapatnam and taken part in these events.

Raghu. P, ActionAid India's Regional Manager, explained, "The emphasis was in situating the struggles of the fisher folk within the context of constitutional rights. We got training sessions organised by experts from Delhi and Hyderabad. They talked about the Constitution and the state's obligation to safeguard the rights of all communities." Interestingly, it was not just the members of the various organisations within Keratam that got trained but all ActionAiders involved in the partnership. "We knew our own limitations and felt we needed to build our own capacities," added Raghu.4

Taking On Trawlers

The group expanded its reach by establishing sanghas, or local groups, in 35 fishing villages. There were different kinds of sanghas, including those exclusively for youth and women. The sanghas gave the community a forum to discuss their problems so that collective solutions could emerge.

An issue like sand mining, for instance, figured in those early discussions. Sea sand, mixed with river sand, was being sold by local mafias to the construction sector, disturbing the ecology of local beaches in the process. Earlier, the community would have had no option but to suffer this in silence. Now they found that not only could they articulate the concern publicly, they could do something about it. In some instances, they were able to impose a ban on sand mining with sangha volunteers taking up the issue with the authorities.

But of all the issues discussed, it was the havoc wrought by trawlers that appeared to be the most urgent. Trawlers are large to medium mechanised fishing vessels, some of which operated illegally close to the shore, sometimes under the cover of night. They invariably adopted predatory methods of fishing. For instance, they used large, closely woven drag nets that caught all sorts of fish, fishlings and shrimps, regardless of their size or commercial value. While the non-profitable catch was discarded, the bigger fish would be sorted out and sold.

This approach was extremely damaging to the local marine ecology, which in turn had deeply negative implications for the traditional fishers. The marauding trawlers also damaged their more fragile boats and ripped their nets. Since they ran on diesel, they polluted the sea in the sensitive zone near the shore that was crucial for the regeneration of fish stock.

Although they were tormented by the growing presence of trawlers, the fisher folk themselves had little idea about the existence of laws that protected their fishing rights. They would try to settle any disputes that arose between them and the trawler operators through personal negotiations. But because there was no equality between them, the fishers invariably lost out. Old-timers recalled how trawler operators would openly ridicule and scoff at their puny vessels and ‘primitive’ fishing gear.

The Marine Fisheries Regulation Act, 1994 (MFRA) had specified an exclusive fishing zone within eight kilometres from the shoreline for traditional fishers. Yet, few in the community knew about its existence or realised that under the MFRA, destructive methods of fishing were banned.

Although tormented by the growing presence of trawlers, the fisher folk had little idea about the existence of laws protecting their rights

As sanghas at the village level were not able to face up to the trawler operators, it was decided to create block and district level platforms to take them on.

As time went by fisher activists were also trained in the use of an apparatus that helped detect the presence of a trawler located within the eight kilometre boundary and obtain its registration number, which was crucial to record for prosecution purposes. District level sanghas began filing cases against trawlers, ensuring that they paid the penalty amounts. Sometimes they were even helped in this effort by the state fisheries department. On one occasion in 2007, Fisheries Development Officer Shankar Rao, actually travelled with the fisher folk and got 13 trawlers to pay fines of up to Rs 2,500 for their incursions.

The other legal provision that the community had little realisation about was the Ministry of Environment and Forest's Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) order of 1991 under the Environment Protection Act, that aimed to protect and conserve the environment of the coastal regions. It sought to regulate all developmental activities in the inter-tidal area and within 500 metres on the landward side. There was also the Andhra Pradesh Marine Fisheries Regulation Act, 1994, giving traditional fishers the right to the coast and sea.

A Cadre Of Youth Volunteers

Arjilli Dasu explained the impact of the awareness drives, "The workshops helped us to understand that as a community we were dependent on access to both the sea and the coast. So when there were serious violations, we were at least alert to them."

Another step in this regard was building a cadre of community youth volunteers through the granting of fellowships. Initially, five young men and five women from nine villages were identified. According to Charles Wesley Meesa, President, Dalit Alliance, and a long-term observer of ActionAid's work in the region, "I consider this development of a youth cadre a major step forward. These youth, conscientised by training, turned out to be important activists. Take Teddu Sankar, who now has his own registered organisation – the Fishermen's Youth Welfare Association (FYWA). He was introduced as a youth volunteer from Peda Jalaripeta village and given a fellowship. He was quick to learn and his involvement spurred effective grassroots action."

Sankar, looking back, reiterated, "It was only after we had gained knowledge of these laws that we could take action." Community leaders needed to be equipped to file cases and such expertise was gained from local experts already working in this area. The first case of this kind involved the widening of the road from Visakhapatnam to Bhimunipatnam that meant the displacement of several fishing villages.

In 2003, a writ petition was filed by a group of organisations, including Dasu's DFYWA and Sankar's FYWA, against the Visakhapatnam Urban Development Authority (VUDA), in the Andhra Pradesh High Court, arguing that the road widening violated the CRZ notification. For almost three years the project was stayed as a result, with VUDA forced to make some modifications to its original plan.

In 2004, another writ petition was filed (WP No:24372/2004) was filed in the Andhra High Court against a beautification project that was to be undertaken by VUDA to build a park at the entrance to the main Visakhapatnam beach and charge an entrance fee. The petitioners, all fishermen, argued that since they used these roads to the beach every day this meant being denied their "lifeline". Four years later, the court ruled that the petitioners

should not be prevented access to the sea and beach in any way.

These initial cases provided the first check on the arbitrary way in which local authorities, in collusion with powerful commercial interests, routinely rode roughshod over the rights of poor and powerless fisher folk. Recalled Raghu, "The very purpose of widening the Visakhapatnam to Bhimunipatnam road was to make this region attractive for investors in the tourism sector. That the project could be stalled, at least for a few years by 'ordinary fisher folk', came as a big shock for the municipality."

The future was to witness many more cases being filed and against even more powerful interests

The Big Wave And After

On December 26, 2004, an area of the earth's crust measuring 1200 square kilometres shifted beneath the Indian Ocean, unleashing monster waves travelling at speeds of 500 km an hour. It came to be known as the Indian Ocean tsunami, affecting 11 countries including India. According to the Government of India, almost 11,000 Indians had died and another 5,000 were missing, many of them fishermen. The natural disaster resulted in the displacement of 380,000, again largely fisher folk.

Alex Tuscano of Praxis, who has been closely associated with ActionAid India, shared a poignant story from those days. Shortly after the tsunami he was walking on the seashore with a fisherman in the Kanyakumari area. As they left their footprints on the wet sand, which were quickly erased by passing waves, his companion remarked, "Our lives were like those footprints on the sand – the big wave came and took everything away. We are now back to zero."

The Visakhapatnam coastline, being further north, was spared the worst in terms of the loss of human lives, but there was widespread devastation nevertheless. Boats and nets were lost, hutments destroyed and, worse, a pall of uncertainty and fear of another tsunami had descended upon the community. “For months after the tsunami, nobody ate our fish because they believed that it had fed on the dead bodies washed into the sea. So livelihood was a big issue then,” recalled a local fisherman.

Tragedies have a way of bringing people together and the tsunami proved to be a time when the fishing community was in many senses transformed. Earlier, they were more inward looking and consciously avoided seeking linkages with other social groups and organisations. That changed. In 2005, India’s fishing community came together in a striking gesture of solidarity: a Caravan was organised that toured the coastal stretch of the subcontinent. The idea was to get the community to understand current developments and government policies that impacted their well-being and future.

Within Visakhapatnam district, the Caravan covered 136 kilometres, with community leaders like Dasu taking the lead. Six public meetings were held in which residents from 45 villages participated. That unprecedented rally helped to crystallise issues and strategies. Some 400 to 500 petitions were received. Recalled Dasu, “I remember one petition involving a fisherman who was killed because of a trawler. His family did not get compensation. We could take up that case and ensure ₹1 lakh went to the family.” Other issue underlined by the tsunami and now understood by the community was the need to protect mangroves and local ecology.

The Caravan campaign underlined the growing need for stronger collective action. It was around this time that ActionAid India had come out with its third CSP. Recalled Raghu, “As an organisation we realised we had to go beyond local geographies in our work and abandon once and for all old welfarist approaches to issues. We felt it was now important to reach out to the most vulnerable groups and influence changes in policies that affected them directly.”

In the post-tsunami environment ActionAid India saw the importance of facilitating a process by which the collective struggles of the community could be taken to the next level. The initial approach of groups that came to work here after the tsunami was basically a form of charity – making donations of boats and nets, and so on. ActionAid sought to change this approach because it was apparent that a stranded community could not be brought to the shore and just left there. In any case, ActionAid had long believed that social action that attempted to go beyond charity had to be founded on the empowerment of the poor.

The task at hand then was to ensure that the fishing community, post-tsunami, should build their lives with dignity and be enabled to do so. The term 'beneficiary' needed to be replaced by the term 'rights holder'.

Also, while other funding agencies saw their involvement limited to rehabilitation, ActionAid envisaged a long-term presence in the area that would potentially have a transformative impact on the fishing community and take their collective struggles to the next level. A slogan that succinctly captured this agenda went like this: 'Sea Our Life, Coast Our Right'.

The NCAFN Intervention

In order to realise all this, the network mode seemed the most effective way to go since it allowed small groups and even individuals to work with bigger organisations. It was decided to build on the Keratam group – which now had a presence in around 40 villages of Visakhapatnam district – since it was always more effective to use existing, well-tested working relationships rather than attempt to create new ones that could collapse. That was how the North Coastal Andhra Fisher Folk

Network (NCAFN) came into being in 2006 as a decade long intervention in Visakhapatnam district, specifically in the blocks of Bhimili,Visakhapatnam urban, Payakraopeta, Paravada, Pedagantyada, Nakkapalli, S. Rayavaram and Rambili. It was one of ActionAid India's first attempts to initiate a multi-tiered network of this kind. Today, it comprises both CBOs like the DFYWA, FYWA, NYS (Nehru Yuvajana Sangam) as well as NGOs like Vikasa, and the GSS.

The vision NCAFN set for itself at its inception was to address poverty of the fishing community and the injustice done to it. Its mission was to organise the traditional fisher folk of the region in order to enable them to protect their livelihoods and understand their human rights and legal entitlements – an approach mandated in ActionAid's third CSP.

An appraisal process was undertaken to envisage the next steps. A specially constituted team visited the tsunami affected region and came back even clearer about the urgency of the mission. Visakhapatnam was being transformed into an industrial and pharmaceutical hub equipped with a new coastal corridor to house industrial units, tourist centres, ports and economic zones, even while the fishing community, which stood to lose the most in the process, did not figure anywhere in the policy discourse.

The perspective document that emerged talked about the need to strengthen the capacities of community-based organisations at the village, mandal and district levels, including networks like the Andhra Pradesh Samparadaya Matsyakarula Samakya. Strengthening national campaigns against the coastal zone management proposal was a felt need, which required building alliances with other, pan-India organisations.

In the earlier days, attempts at building a cadre of youth leaders had proved successful. This was now seen as an important part of NCAFN's agenda. Women's rights work was to be mainstreamed in the operational area, with existing women's cooperatives strengthened and new ones created.

A Network For New Times

Those were days of fast-paced changes. The twin forces of globalisation and marketisation were changing the contours of the country. The tsunami was seized upon as an excuse for national and state governments to promote an even more pronounced neo-liberal agenda and new legal instruments were crafted for this purpose. Under the guise of a "coastal zone management (CZM) approach" – ostensibly required for the fishing community's own protection – large swathes of coastal land were being handed over at throwaway prices for special economic zones (SEZs), ports and tourism projects. That this was leading to widespread displacement of fishing villages was hardly a factor for consideration.

Among other issues that demanded attention was the depletion of fish resources. The emergence of shrimp farms was seriously affecting the regeneration of mangrove forests and leading to the destruction of the spawning area of many fish and marine life forms. Meanwhile, the fisher folk continued to remain bereft of proper marketing facilities, as well as trading regimes, feeder roads, credit facilities, and infrastructure like cold storage equipment. Even something as basic as drinking water supply, toilets and health services for the community continued to remain unaddressed.

What had changed, however, was that the community had begun realising the importance of organising itself. Previously the authorities may have gotten away with the claim that they were bringing development for all, by commercialising the coast. Now, the community could see through the ruse.

Earlier the conversation was limited to community level problems, now it included macro level developments like WTO negotiations, and how they exacerbated local problems. General concerns

like the increasing use of force by state authorities against social activists or attacks on dalits, also came on the agenda. In earlier years, alliances were built with fisher folk collectives like the Andhra Pradesh Sampradaya Matsyakarula Samakhya and the National Fish Workers Forum. Now it included coalitions of workers, as well as collectivities of the poor, marginalised and displaced, like the Port and Dock Workers Federation or the National Alliance of Peoples Movement. Earlier the leadership tended to be conservative and patriarchal now young leaders demanded the discarding of traditions that were found oppressive.

Since the NCAFN was not a short-term programme, broader issues like the education of children and the empowerment of women were among the foundational principles. The high dropout rate among the children of the fishing community, especially girls, was realised as also the disturbingly poor status of women. Domestic violence was rife and it was the women who had to cope with the twin burden of looking after their families and earning additional income to sustain their families during the off-season when fishing did not take place. Despite women's crucial contributions, no social recognition came their way. They had no control over productive assets or any real decision making power within the community. In order to address this, NCAFN saw the promotion of women's leadership across the network as one of its cardinal missions.

Such perspectives were not imposed on the community but emerged through a process of critical dialogues conducted with the primary stakeholders. Recalled Dasu, "We could share our experiences and the innumerable tribulations of our lives. It was through this experience that we began to realise that the forces disrupting our lives weren't just local but even global."

Added Raghu, "Information and the ability to process that information was prime. If the fisher community could learn in time about a policy that was in the pipeline, which could potentially prove destructive, they could respond before it was too late. People have what we term as 'critical awareness' – an awareness that gets built through action. It is an education received, not through the formal educational system, but through day to day experiences. Among the objectives NCAFN set out for itself was to build critical awareness."

Once the NCAFN was formed, with a convenor appointed in overall charge of programmes and an executive committee represented by member

organisations, and sanghas at the village and block levels, organisational functioning became more systematised. A fund was made available by ActionAid India, with the network continuing to raise resources from other sources, including the government to meet community needs. The rules of association included a code of conduct that emphasised transparency and accountability. The power to take decisions on admitting new members or cancelling memberships, as well as resolving any disputes, rested with the member-partners.

The responsibilities of the network and its member-partners were also clearly demarcated. The overall responsibility of planning, monitoring, implementation and evaluation, as also preparing plans and budgets and making recruitments, rested with the NCAFN. Member-partners were to plan and implement the programme at the mandal level, keep records, report progress and follow an internal participatory monitoring and review process. While the network was responsible for campaigning and advocacy at the district, state and national level; member-partners had to campaign, lobby, disseminate information and carry on advocacy at the mandal and village levels.

"We began to realise that the forces disrupting our lives weren't just local but even global"

The action plan that the NCAFN evolved for itself had several dimensions but its two main pillars were the systematic collectivisation of the fisher folk and building the capacities of CBOs. Capacity building of Mandal Development Committees on the MFRA and CRZ from 2006 onwards, was a good example of this. Once trained they went on to take their struggle against trawlers to the community, the streets and the courts.

Promise And Limits Of A Network

The significance of NCAFN came from the fact that it was one of the first attempts made by ActionAid India to initiate a network within a rights based framework.

The benefits were obvious. For starters, there was the strength inherent in numbers. The value of such unity was best perceived when external developments emerged that posed a threat to the fishing community. It was in those times, particularly, that the existence of a strong platform of this kind brought reassurance and the certainty of response. Also the involvement of various groups with their own specific strengths always contributed to generating more creative thinking about actions plans and strategies, even as it helped multiply contacts and linkages with those working in other states and sectors.

One of the big strengths of NCAFN was that it had emerged out of an organic process. Some of the groups within it had already worked together for at least five years and had presence in over 60 villages. What was noticed almost immediately after NCAFN was formed was that many more individuals, and groups participated in meetings than earlier. The trainings and the 'trainings of trainers' had better outcomes.

The regular interactions with experts and officials, as well as exposure visits proved useful precisely because they were being done in a structured manner from the village to the state level.

Sankar, for instance, developed the confidence to emerge as a community leader with his own organisation, the FYWA, which he had set up in 2003. "What helped was the experience of years of activism. I may have only been a fisherman with minimum schooling. But now I found myself being able to articulate the issues of the community much better and talk to officials as equals. In time, I could become the coastal regional convenor of the National Alliance of Peoples' Movement."

Of course, a network of this kind also clearly had its share of challenges. There was, for one, the task of keeping disparate groups together. When ActionAid introduced a rights based approach for the economic empowerment, health and education, it took time for the idea to be mainstreamed, precisely because some partners did not want to shift from the earlier welfare-based approach with which they were comfortable.

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Divisions and tensions were bound to occur in such a situation, and they did. There was, for instance, the distinct faultline between CBOs and NGOs in terms of campaigns. While the former wanted more radical action and did not fear court cases, NGOs did not see legal intervention as part of their mandate since it involved challenging the state.

The other problem was that they could sometimes subsume the inherent strengths and weaknesses of individuals and organisations, which could get lost within network functioning. This meant that the opportunities to encourage the strengths and address the weaknesses were necessarily limited.

Unsurprisingly, many of these simmering intra-network tensions came to the fore over budget allocation, with some perhaps nursing grievances that they were not being given their due share. The important thing was to ensure that resource sharing was transparent and seen to be so, but this was sometimes difficult to achieve.

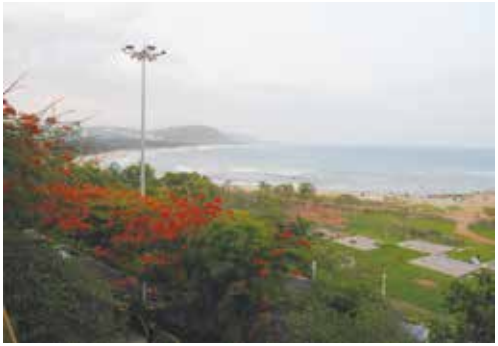
So how does a network take everyone along till the end? That was the question facing the leadership of the NCAFN. The only way was to make it clear that individual interests and group interests can never become more important than collective interests and community interests.

What was obvious then was that if NCAFN was to escape the various traps and produce results it demanded maturity and wisdom from those who led it and its member-partners. It was agreed that there would be perspective building and organisation development processes built into the network. Evolving a vision was seen as a dynamic process and it was felt that partner organisations needed to better understand the human rights based approach through regular orientation exercises so that there could be a common understanding of the real meaning of social transformation.

Network Impact: Scrap The CZM

The united protests of the fishing community against the integrated CZM plan came as early evidence of the potential the NCAFN to aggregate voices of resistance from within the region and to take local concerns to the national level.

What was the CZM? It was a concept that emanated from the recommendations of the M.S. Swaminathan Committee that was set up in 2004 to review the CRZ notification of 1991. However, while the 1991 notification clearly mentioned the customary rights of traditional fisher folk, and recognised their right to live and work within the non-development zone in order to earn a living, these recommendations did nothing of the sort. Capitalising on the alarm that had followed in the wake of the tsunami, the Swaminathan Committee – which incidentally had submitted its report in February 2005 while the tsunami was still recent memory – also came up with a new definition of 'coastal zone', which was to include an area 12 nautical miles from the shoreline. It also envisaged what it termed as "setback lines" along the coast, based on the vulnerability of the region to natural disasters and the building of seawalls.



Immediately apparent from the CZM proposals was the fact that while sectors like industry and tourism stood to gain a great deal, communities that had lived along the coastline over the centuries – an estimated 3,200 fishing villages all over India – were all but overlooked under the new perspective. The Government of India moved into translating these recommendations into a draft bill that may have become law had it not been met with unrelenting opposition. The issue united India's fishing and coastal communities in a manner rarely witnessed before.

In 2007, there was a national consultation on the impending threat that the CZM proposal spelt,

with representatives from fishing communities and the groups working with them, meeting at Chennai. Instead of a CZM policy, they demanded a comprehensive legislation to protect the coastal environment and the livelihoods of coastal communities based on public consultations. In 2008, soon after the draft CZM bill was made public, the National Campaign for the Rights of Fisherpeople, anchored by the National Fishworkers' Forum, with its slogan 'Save the Coast, Save the Fishers', undertook a nation-wide march in protest against the CZM notification. In June that year, the marchers also came to Visakhapatnam and were accorded a warm welcome. It was also an opportunity to place local concerns over a proposed Coastal Corridor Project along the shore near Visakhapatnam before the entire country.

The march helped the leaders gain a better idea of the scenario on the ground. Based on village-level discussions, a charter of demands was drawn up, which, besides asking the government to discard the CZM notification, demanded the cancellation of fishing permits to foreign vessels and the enactment of a social security bill for fishers.

The NCAFN kept the campaign against the CZM going locally. Over 10 days, it conducted public meetings and marches across 76 villages. Apart from talking about CZM, the effort was to build awareness about the traditional rights of the fishing community and their inalienable right to the sea, a right that was being systematically taken from them through the proposed new policies. NAFCN also conducted a study, entitled 'SEZs – Policy Claims and People's Experiences' – so that an understanding could be built up on the larger issues behind such policies. What was not generally known was the role of institutions like the WTO in opening up access to the fish stocks on which traditional fishers had depended upon over the years to corporate fishing interests.

To ensure that the CZM move was defeated, NCAFN members also contacted politicians during the

The NCAFN kept the campaign against the CZM going locally. Over 10 days, it conducted public meetings and marches across 76 villages. Apart from talking about CZM, the effort was to build awareness about the traditional rights of the fishing community

run up to the state and parliamentary elections of 2009. Some parties like the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Prajam Rajya Party responded positively by including the concern in their election manifestoes.

Since the issue had become a politically unpopular one, the newly elected government at the Centre through Jairam Ramesh, the Union minister of Environment and Forests, embarked on a series of 200 consultations with fishing communities all over India on the CZM proposal. They were held in an open manner with wide participation from the community. In the end, the message could not have been clearer: scrap the CZM proposal. Because of the pressure built by mobilisation across the country, the government was forced to allow the CZM proposal to lapse.

If anyone had doubts on the importance of networks in mobilising the fishing community, this campaign put an end to them once and for all.

Speak Our Language

Several themes emanated out of the CZM mobilisation, including the right of the community to be consulted on issues that have a bearing on their lives. That a draft CZM Bill could be prepared without any public consultations and that it was made available only in English, came as a wake up call. Traditional fishermen were not even given a copy of it in a language they could understand. ActionAid India had always recognised the importance of language in its programmes, which was why laws like the MFRA and the CRZ notification had been translated into Telugu and made available for the first time with its support.

A very good example of the elitist approach of the government's planning process was the Visakhapatnam Master Plan (VMR)-2021 prepared

by VUDA. process was the Visakhapatnam Master Plan 2021 prepared by VUDA. It completely overlooked the presence of the fisher folk, their homes, their traditional landing grounds, the places they dried their nets, the temples of their deities. Compounding the injustice was the fact that the master plan was made available only in English.

In 2006, a case against the Government of Andhra Pradesh was filed by residents of Peda Jalaripeta in the Andhra High Court (WP No: 26966/2006) demanding that the master plan be made available in Telugu, as per the government's own order of 2005 stating that all government orders, rules, regulations and special rules shall be in Telugu. The petitioners stated that since "they had no knowledge in English", unless the relevant orders and proceedings are furnished in Telugu, they may not be able to access it and their "valuable rights" would be affected. The very use of the word "rights" in the petition filed by the community testified to the fact that the rights discourse had now permeated quite deeply into local activism. The VUDA had to quickly issue a Telugu version of its master plan!

The government, meanwhile, was going full steam ahead with its plans to "develop" the Visakhapatnam coastline. It was a notion of development that had no place for the fishing community and their rights; it was a model of development that either destroyed or appropriated common resources. The moment demanded that old strategies be reviewed, even revived, and new strategies be forged.

Community leaders were now more familiar with court procedures. They also understood the use of legal instruments like the Right To Information (RTI) Act, because ActionAid India and its partner, Vikasa, had in the early years introduced the right to information as a concept in local activism. But it was only when the RTI Act came into force in October 2005 that it could actually be used. Under it, citizens could access information from a "public authority", which was required to respond to such a request within a month. A community leader like Sankar, became so adept at using the RTI regime that he could even access file notings.

Recalled Sankar, "We began using RTI almost from the day it became a law. We would combine RTI filing with our court cases, because you need a lot of information to file cases, including government maps."

In fact, the Visakhapatnam to Bhimunipatnam stretch, lush in natural beauty and extremely picturesque to the view, would have been completely different if the local fishing community had not filed CRZ violation cases at regular intervals. Over 50 CRZ violations were identified over the years by the community, most of them with the help of the RTI law. The violators ranged from owners of resorts, hotels, restaurants, IT companies, apartments, restaurants and prawn hatcheries to government buildings – the municipal offices at Bhimili, was an example – and even the famous Dr. Ramanaidu Film Studios at Madurawada

The Visakhapatnam to Bhimunipatnam stretch, lush in natural beauty, would have been completely different if the local fishing community had not filed CRZ violation cases at regular intervals

The highpoint of the campaign was when the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests issued an urgent directive in July 2011 to various state authorities to identify CRZ violations within their jurisdictions and initiate action within four months. They were also asked to put all the relevant details on their respective websites. Among the authorities enjoined to take immediate action were the Andhra Pradesh State Coastal Zone Management Authority, and the Additional Chief Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh.

Whose Development? At What Cost?

While their detractors tried to tar them as "anti-development", these fisher activists were not deterred. Clarified Sankar, "We followed up only on violations of the law. We were not against development, per se, but against anything that illegally disturbs the lives and livelihoods of the fishing community."

Some of these violations went on to become full-blown public protests. Dasu recalled the struggle caused by the setting up of a SEZ in Achutapuram block in which a Sri Lankan-company, Brandix India Apparel City Private Limited (BIACPL) had acquired a thousand acre plot to develop a mega ₹4,000 crore apparel project. Apart from spinning and treatment of raw materials, the operations involved the dyeing of cloth. The toxic effluents from the unit were to be taken through a pipeline that the government had constructed, and discharged into the sea near the Pudimadaka panchayat. Local fisher folk feared that these effluents would destroy their fishing grounds.

In 2006, a public hearing on the issue was conducted by the joint collector. Dasu, who was heading the Visakhapatnam fish worker's sangha, then submitted that such a hearing would have had better participation from the fisher folk if they had been contacted through means of the traditional tom-tom. He also pointed out that the fishing community was handed nothing but a fait accompli in this matter because the details of the project had been kept hidden even as work on it carried on.

The community kept up the struggle against BIACPL. In July 2008, there was a large mobilisation that included marches and public meetings in which over 11,000 people, mostly either fishers themselves or involved in fishing activities, participated. The Brandix authorities handled the issue with the familiar mixture of blandishments, threats and false promises. Not only did it claim its operations were environment-friendly, it stated publicly that it would provide direct employment for 60,000 persons and indirect employment for another 30,000, which, of course, did not happen. Presently only 4,500 people are employed by BIACPL, including those in other states.

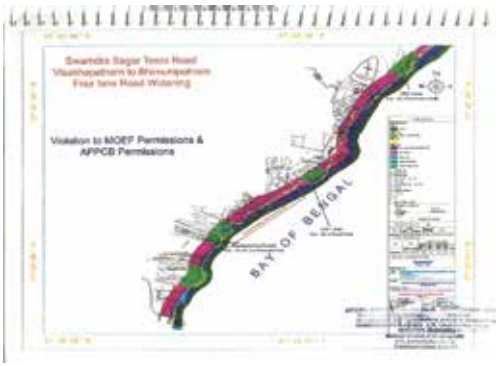
The case demonstrated how commercial units wanted to use the sea as a cheap rubbish dump. Brandix was not the only one. There were several pharmaceutical and chemical units that have been constantly looking for ways to discharge their toxic effluents into the Bay of Bengal without having to build expensive discharge infrastructure. But once again it was the fishing community that was left to pay the price. As Dasu explained, "Traditional fishers, who cannot go into the deep sea, are worst hit by such pollution along the shoreline."

The Legal Route

Apart from public agitations, the legal route was followed in at least 18 CRZ violations uncovered by fisher activists. Maps accessed through the RTI route proved crucial to this process. The court found merit in many of the writ petitions, and construction was ordered to be stopped in several instances.

An extremely important case, which was foundational in nature in its articulation of first principles, involved the building of an illegal jetty at Rishikonda beach in Visakhapatnam's Chingadila block.

What was striking about this writ petition (WP No:16708/2005) filed in 2005 was that two of the three petitioners were groups that were part of Keratam and headed by fishermen. Among the respondents was the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, the Government of Andhra Pradesh, and other administrative authorities. The writ petition pointed out that "the construction of the road protruding into the sea is unconstitutional".



A lot of emphasis was placed on seeking through the RTI route relevant information, including maps – maps were crucial in attempts to nail CRZ violations

The judgment was delivered by the Andhra Pradesh High Court in 2012. Although it took seven years in coming, it was almost magisterial in its sweep.

Not only did the court rule that the jetty be dismantled and the beach be restored, it noted that it had affected the environment and deprived fishermen from carrying out "their profession as they are legally entitled". The court went on to observe that such a jetty could have led to further expansion of the project, posing an even bigger threat in the future. There was a clear reiteration of the right to life, when the court observed that "the life and liberty of the fishermen cannot be curtailed except in accordance with law or by operation of law". Two Supreme Court judgments were cited in this verdict – S. Jagannath versus Union Of India & Ors of 11 December, 1996, and the T. Damodhar Rao versus The Special Officer, Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad, 2001. The first recognised that the sea coast is a "gift of nature to mankind" and the second emphasised that the protection of the environment is not only the duty of the citizen but an obligation of the state and its organs.

Within a month of that ruling, bulldozers and dumper trucks were hard at work, removing the illegal jetty and restoring the beach to its original condition.

The Rishikonda Jetty verdict was an unqualified victory for the fisher community, even more significant because it was so rare. The struggle against the Gangavaram Port, which led to widespread displacement of fishing villages, turned out to be a series of battles, both outside the courtroom and within it, waged over many

years. Originally conceived as a public owned project, the port transmogrified into a public-private partnership in 2000. This led to controversy over whether public land on which it was to be housed – which had once been used by local fishers and farmers – could be handed over to a private consortium.

The port had not even figured in the Visakhapatnam Master Plan, despite the fact that it obviously held significant implications for the city. Apart from the more general impacts, the existence of this port directly affected at least 1,185 families living primarily in the two fishing villages of Gangavaram and Dibbapalem. While some of the residents here may have been satisfied with the rehabilitation and resettlement packages given to them, others were not. The ensuing skirmishes extracted a heavy cost, including the loss of life. In one instance at Gangavaram village in March 2006, a fisherman was killed in police firing and at least 50 were wounded.

Given the huge investments and political backing it enjoyed, this state-of-the-art port – the deepest in India – did get built and began functioning from 2009 onwards. But the serious repercussions it had for thousands of fisher folk has never been fully accounted for, nor documented. Today, not only has access to the sea been denied to fishing communities living in the vicinity, the port's activities have raised pollution levels of the surrounding waters, seriously affecting the daily catch.

But even the little that the Gangavaram Port authorities sanctioned by way of compensation, which included jobs for fishing families, may never have been realised if the community had not mobilised against it.

The battle against Hinduja National Power Corporation Limited was similarly an uneven contest between an industrial behemoth violating CRZ regulations, yet supported by successive state governments, pitted against a scattered community with very little voice, resources or information. G. Nooka Raju, a resident of Appikonda Chepalapalam, an ancient fishing village which boasts of the oldest Shiva temple in this region dating back to the 13th century, described the situation, "Once this thermal plant in our close neighbourhood is commissioned it will spell the death of fishing in this area since the sea will be contaminated by the release of ash and hazardous effluents."

Community Mobilisation Was Key

Dasu, who is himself a former resident of Gangavaram village, observed, "For us, these are life threatening developments. Whole villages get disrupted and everybody within the community suffers, especially the children. In the eighties we were displaced by the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant, 20 years later it was the Gangavaram Port. We are pitted against very powerful forces and these forces are only going to multiply."

Among these is one that the Andhra Pradesh government has long been working on: the multi-crore Visakhapatnam-Kakinada Petroleum Chemicals and Petrochemicals Investment Region (commonly known as PCPIR). Slated to cover 250 square kilometres along the coastline of three seaward districts – Visakhapatnam, Nakkapalli and Kakinada – PCPIR is envisaged as a combination of ports, airports, SEZs, industrial parks and export houses. It is the coastal location of the region that is of paramount importance to investors since this provides access to the Krishna Godavari basin. That is why this gigantic project could hit fisher folk hard and the authorities could bring in laws to ease their way. Fisher folk will need to prepare for this confrontation in the days to come. The future division of the state after Telangana comes into being will only hasten the pace of change.

The community's activism of the last ten years around multiple issues has had two striking features: a stable working relationship between NCAFN member-partners and the increased participation of ordinary fisher folk in these struggles. The message that networks are the need of the hour, given the serious challenges facing the fishing community, has reached every man and woman in the community.

Ordinary women to come to the forefront of public action and Ocipilli Saraswathi of Gajapathinagaram village is a good example. Under the leadership of GSS, an NCAFN partner, she, along with others from the village, came forward to strongly oppose the setting up of the Lohita Life Sciences, a chemical plant, at Kumarapuram in Payakaraopeta mandal. They feared, not without reason, that it would destroy not just their environment and livelihoods, but their health as well. Even before environmental clearance for the plant could be procured, construction work had begun. When the local collector, post facto, organised a public hearing for

the clearing of the plant, Saraswathi and others demonstrated before the Andhra Pradesh Pollution Control Board in October 2011, stating that they would settle for nothing less than having the plant scrapped. Ocipilli Saraswathi recalled, "We were delighted when we were successful in stopping that public hearing. It gave us, ordinary village people, a sense of our collective strength."

The power of the network has other demonstrable impacts. That NYS, another CBO-member of NCAFN, could organise a large, cross-sectoral public environmental consultation over the setting up of Carbon India Limited in the Atchutapuram SEZ, was because of support from other organisations in the network. New ways of agitating also emerged as a result of such popular participation. In the mobilisation against the expansion of the Visakhapatnam base of the Indian Navy at Rambili, the community stalled construction by organising cooking at the site. They held what was traditionally termed as a 'vantavarpu', or cooking food as a mark of protest. Over 3,000 community members participated in the protest. A 93-day relay hunger strike and a foot march of 70 kilometres were also organised. Resources for this were raised locally and this in itself was a significant step forward for any movement seeking to achieve sustainability.

In the mobilisation against the expansion of the Visakhapatnam base of the Indian Navy at Rambili, the community stalled construction by organising cooking at the site. They held what was traditionally termed as a 'vantavarpu', or cooking food as a mark of protest

While the loss of fishing grounds and livelihoods can never be properly quantified, the several rounds of agitation around the expansion of the naval base forced the government to promise compensation of ₹ 1 lakh to all those above the age of 18 years, shore up local schooling facilities and provide permanent and contract jobs at the new base. As in earlier cases these compensation packages, modest though they were, would not have been possible without sustained community action.

But it is also clear that compensation has largely meant providing jobs to those hitherto in fishing, even while the economic base of the very existence of the fishing community was being undermined. So fishers were forced to become manual workers, even as the natural resources that had sustained their lives were being increasingly and systematically taken away from them.

Waves Of Social Transformation

In the tasks the NCAFN perspective plan had set down, strengthening the campaigns against CZM and CRZ violations within a rights based framework were undoubtedly seen as major interventions. But ultimately this was about the social transformation of the fishing community, which meant understanding rights to health, education and livelihoods. It also meant promoting gender equality within a traditional community that had discrimination against women embedded within its mores and practices.

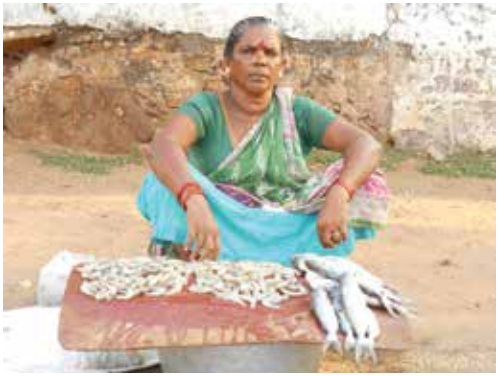
In fact, ActionAid India, right from its earliest days in Visakhapatnam district when it was partnering Vikasa in the late nineties, had perceived women's rights as an important, cross-cutting component of its action priorities, because it perceived gender inequality, in and of itself, as an injustice that had to be tackled. So when Vikasa began organising women, including those from the fishing community, ActionAid supported the effort by assisting in the setting up of self help groups (SHGs).

After Keratam was formed, three kinds of groups came into existence: the Sampradaya Matsakara Samakyas, or traditional fishers' sanghas; fisher unions at the village, block and district levels; and women-headed cooperatives based on a corpus fund and run as SHGs.

Bringing fisher women together, however, was easier said than done. Recalled Vikasa's director, P.Viswanadham, "When we first began, there was complete male domination in the fishing community. During our first meetings, the men would come but not the women. We had to take permission from the men to even speak to the women."

Strategies To Mobilise Women

Several strategies to change this reality were adopted. Gender trainings for both men and women – separately at first and then together – were held. There was also a careful balancing of the sexes in identifying community leaders – an exercise that started with five men and five women chosen from nine villages. Added Viswanadham, "We organised big gatherings with representation from all the sanghas at the block, district and even state level as part of alliance building. The process was termed as



'Spandana', and it enabled village women to meet and interact with those from other parts of the state, discuss common problems."

In this way an understanding emerged that, apart from issues like the dwindling catch and skewed coastal development, fisher folk faced multiple challenges, including that of low food security, poor schooling, forced migration and deeply entrenched gender biases. These issues had never been articulated within an overwhelmingly patriarchal society where discrimination against women meant that they were not even allowed to stand on the shore when the men ventured into the sea. These were women who had never attended public meeting or had never voiced their opinions even if they were in one; where they could not even speak to outsiders or leave the house without permission. In contrast today, with the silence broken, even sensitive issues like domestic violence gets articulated.

After NCAFN came into existence, there was an even greater emphasis on gender, with specific recognition being accorded to women's political identity, roles, responsibilities and rights, both within the network specifically and society in general. The focus now shifted from 'training' to structured 'capacity building'. For instance, in 2008, attempts were made to build capacities of 38 women leaders.

Ending violence against women, within the home and outside, was recognised as a non-negotiable issue and since there was no space within traditional panchayats to voice this concern, it was

decided that NCAFN would have to be more pro-active on it. As a follow up on a study on violence against women conducted by Gramya, a resource centre for women based in Nalgonada, the network decided to take the issue up as an "intensive campaign" at various forums, linking it with the rise in alcohol consumption. The Hyderabad-based women's group, Asmita, helped to organise a district level workshop in which protection officers participated and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, was explained in detail.

Through discussions and trainings, the women began to perceive the link between low literacy levels and incomes, on the one hand, and domestic violence, on the other. If women enjoyed economic independence, they were less likely to become the victims of violence within the family and were better able to defend themselves.

Then there were the specific needs of women as fishers. While corporate fishing practices were destroying the livelihoods of the fishermen, they were also undermining the little space that fisher women had within the sector. Modernisation of fishing practices often translated into a 'masculinisation' of fisheries. With the growing presence of the export market the old supply chains within which women vendors had a role to play, got broken down. Ordinary fisher women found themselves pitted against powerful trading blocs with access to sophisticated infrastructure like cold storage systems. Incidentally, many women fish vendors in Visakhapatnam, as indeed elsewhere, are single, are the only earning members of their families, buying fish in order to sell it and making a little money for their families. So this crisis of access hit them hard.

These issues, however, did not figure as prominently on the NCAFN agenda as those that directly concerned fishermen. There was a tendency to use women in a manner that was almost manipulative if not downright instrumentalist. Women would be transported to shore up crowds when needed or when a particular action needed to be made appealing for the media.

But some important breakthroughs took place. The Keratam coalition set up women's cooperatives in 2005 to address the serious difficulties women vendors faced in getting institutional credit and market facilities. Women were introduced to the various provisions of the Cooperative Act, and trained in the basics of general administration and

book keeping. Understanding techniques to market and provide value addition to fish and fish products were also envisaged. Dasu's organisation, DFYWA, for instance, trained women in solar fish drying processes. He recalled, "Ours was the first model for this particular technology, and over the years we could train 6,000 women in it." Land rights were also on the agenda.

Once NCAFN got constituted, there were regular attempts to highlight the rights of women fish workers, especially on the occasion of International Women's Day. In 2007, for instance, one of the major demands raised was the recognition of women vendors as workers along with men, so that they got proper identification documents and access to facilities like toilets. In 2009, there was an extremely successful

10-day campaign that focused on women's contribution to the fishing economy and community life. In 2011, women went on a peacefull rally against the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation for collecting taxes from them when they came to sell fish, though no amenities in terms of shelters or toilets were being provided.

In 2009, there was an extremely successful 10-day campaign that focused on women's contribution to the fishing economy and community life

Meanwhile Vikasa, a NCAFN member-partner, organised through its sanghas 4,500 local women into SHGs, of whom about a quarter were fisherwomen. Every member had to pay a membership fee of ₹ 50 and received a share capital of ₹ 600. The total turnover of the venture was ₹ 2 crore, and its savings hovered around ₹1.25 crore.

Fisherwomen have also occasionally mobilised themselves on their own issues. In 2006, the women's sanghas managed to get rights to homestead land issued to 60 local women, who had been living without land or any other entitlements for over three decades. In 2010, they protested the fact that while compensation was provided to the men who had lost out because of the construction of the Gangavaram port, they themselves were not given a paisa in relief although they too had lost their sources of livelihood as a result.

Building political consciousness and a sense of self-awareness within the women of the community so that they could emerge from women-only sanghas to take part as equals in public action; so that they could gain voice and presence in mainstream activities, were of course among the long term goals of NCAFN. Gains were made to some extent and one of the signs of this progress was the fact that 33 women's sanghas, working as a federation, participated in the international One Billion Rising campaign against gender violence in 2012-2013.

Giving Children Back A Childhood

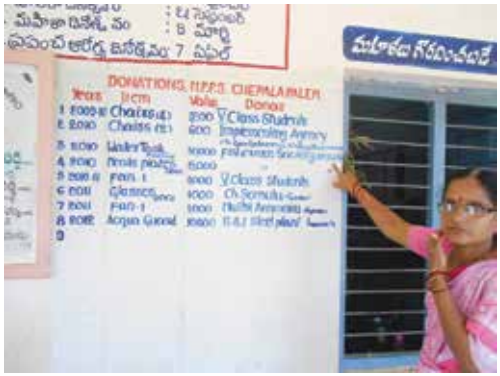
These were heartening signs. But it was difficult to gauge the depth of social transformation within the community. Child marriages were rampant – a trend that is evident even today, particularly in urban shanty towns, including fishing neighbourhoods. This, in turn, revealed indifferent schooling, especially for girls. According to local activists, girls from the fishing community were often prevented from attending school once they became adolescents. While NCAFN's members have tried to highlight this issue, they have constantly come against social apathy.

A teacher in a school for children from the fishing community agreed, "We try and tell them that early marriage and motherhood is bad for both the mother and child, but they are not prepared to listen because these are community practices that go back centuries."

If it was marriage for young girls, many boys got sucked into the fishing trade much before they were ready for it. They too then become school dropouts. Dasu, who had himself been forced to leave schooling prematurely, observed, "Every child from the fisher community who drops out of school makes our future a little more bleak. It means that he or she will not be able to claim a better life. Schooling is absolutely crucial for the community."

Typically, the schooling system for the fishing community is under-resourced, with poor infrastructure and missing teachers. One of the major gaps that emerged was the lack of an effective local level monitoring regime, which incidentally had been made mandatory under the Andhra Pradesh Act of 1998. In its perspective document, NFCAN had underlined this concern.

In 2009, when the government enacted the Right to Education Act (RTE), which directed the state to provide free and compulsory education to all children between six and 14 years of age there was some hope of change. After the law came into force, 26 new schools came up near fisher villages. But Dasu, who had personally taken a lot of interest in the running of schools for the children of the fisher



community – the water tank that slakes the thirst of the young kids of the Mandal Praja Parishad Primary School at Appikonda Chepalapalam has been donated by his organisation – believed RTE Act or no, the community had to keep up pressure on the schooling system if the children were to get a proper education.

The water tank that slakes the thirst of the young kids of the Mandal Praja Parishad Primary School at Appikonda Chepalapalam has been donated by an organisation working for the local fishing community

It was decided, therefore, that members of the village education committees within sanghas would meet with headmasters and teachers for regular updates, and interact with parents so that they were encouraged to keep sending their children to school and take prompt action when instances of child abuse or corporal punishment occurred. The feedback from these activities would be then shared at bi-annual block level meetings.

These strategies have helped to nudge the community's attitudes on schooling in the right direction. Certainly, there are more children in schools today than a generation ago, but the transition to a new order required forward linkages. That was where youth sanghas came in. Unemployment was a huge concern and NCAFN evolved various interventions and programmes, from fellowship support and traininfor community development to workshops for adolescent girls, to reach out to young people. The youth sanghas produced many potential leaders for the community. For instance, in the wake of the protest against the Visakhapatnam Master Plan, when youth were mobilised to map all the traditional locations important to the fishing community, it helped immeasurably to build a sense of stewardship among them that would otherwise have been missing.

The impact of these programmes will only be known in the years to come, but one thing was certain, the rights based approach that ActionAid India adopted contributed to local activists perceiving the discrete rights of various sections of the community. Said Sankar, "It helped us distinguish between the rights and demands of children, women, youth, men, the elderly and disabled – who face a double discrimination, both within the family and outside."

Safety Nets for Wielders of Nets

Despite being buffeted by the rough winds of globalisation and neo-liberalism, traditional fisher folk around the world have very little by way of a safety net. Recognising this, the International Labour Organization had proposed security measures for them like legal protection for job security, safety in the sea, leave, and support in their old age through a viable pension programme. While India has several central and state savings and relief schemes for the fisher folk, it amounted to very little in terms of actual assistance on the ground. There were also major gaps – old age benefits, for instance, were totally missing, and the elderly in all fishing villages lead a very insecure existence.

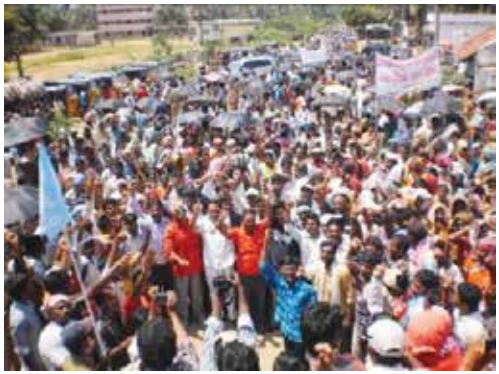
The support, such as there is, is minimal – ₹ 1,200 a month and 30 kilograms of free rice – and this is only available to those who had registered boats. NCAFN members joined fishermen in other parts of the country to pressurise the government to deliver on this, even while it worked to build general awareness about accessing entitlements that some did not even know existed.

One of the demands that emerged through this process was that a sum of ₹4,000 – 7,000 be

made available to all fisher families during the lean period. A memorandum was given to the Union Minister of State for Agriculture and Food Processing Industries, Mr Tariq Anwar, when he visited Visakhapatnam in early 2013.

Dwindling catch leading to a sharp drop in household incomes and greater food insecurity had several repercussions, ranging from rising alcoholism and domestic violence to higher levels of out-migration. Ending this downward spiral was clearly an urgent need and, once again, community pressure proved useful, whether in getting ration cards issued or job cards. In June 2012, the collector of Visakhapatnam summoned a review meeting of all the stake holders to identify suitable work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act for the community. Prompt action followed, with 12,830 job cards being issued in 53 fisher villages at a budget of ₹17.58 crore.

But these, at best, were episodic and scattered gains, the impacts of which were necessarily limited. What was far more important to do was to anticipate and respond to policy making that would have adverse impact. Apart from coastal land being parcelled out for ports, tourism projects, industrial



hubs and the like, mining posed a huge challenge in a region rich in mineral resources. Sand mining had been going on for a long time, and the sand dunes – an intrinsic part of the local ecology – were being destroyed. The old law governing CRZ was also set to change, with a new CRZ law being proposed that would liberalise many existing regulations in favour of corporate entities at the expense of coastal communities and their environment. Future dislocation and displacement at a mass level was no longer just a distant threat but a imminent possibility. Given this, it was felt that it was high time that the fishing community got a protective law similar to that of forest dwellers who got the Forest Rights Act, 2006, that recognised their right to hold and live in forest land.

The NCAFN is actively supporting the idea of a law that protects the rights of fisher folk. A letter written to the Andhra Pradesh chief minister in December 2012 by the FYWA, a member-partner of NCAFN, urged him to lobby for such legislation, pointing out that although the "coast is the birth right of traditional fishermen, because one gains the right at the place where he or she lives and the nature has created this right (for fishermen)", there is no law that recognised that right.

Arriving At The Right Conclusion

It has been over a decade since ActionAid India has been working among the coastal fishing community in Visakhapatnam. The NCAFN's interventions will come to an end by 2015. In 2006, it had set for itself six broad goals: strengthening CBOs at the village, block and district levels; strengthening campaigns against SEZs and CZM, and seeking better implementation of CRZ notification to protect the interests of traditional fisher folk; building capacities of CBOs; promoting community fellowship to address issues related to education and health, as well as asserting the livelihood rights of the community; strengthening women's cooperatives and mainstreaming women's rights work in the operational area; and building alliances between the local fisher community and other organisations and collectives of the poor.

Gains have been made in terms of these objective, some more than others. For one, the importance of staying together in the face of significant external threats and articulating the issues of fishers better and more creatively have, to an extent, been realised The network has remained intact and today, there are around 85 sanghas that have emerged under its umbrella, representing, transforming and fighting for the community. NCAFN's partners are now experienced campaigners and ideological mentors.

In fact, a new generation of leaders, many of them from the community, has emerged. They are less driven by tradition, more aware of the world around them and alert to both threats and opportunities. Women, who were a missing factor in the mobilisations of a decade ago, are now far more

visible and vocal. With ActionAid India's support, training in the use of the law and legal instruments like RTI has had a telling impact. Several projects and constructions that would have negatively impacted the community have not been able to come up due to the community's ability to file RTI applications, go to court, lobby with politicians, hold public demonstrations and articulate its point of view.

At the same time, these gains have not been uniform across all the sanghas. Better results could have been achieved with more focused leadership. Leaders had indeed emerged but since they were from different backgrounds, there was sometimes a lack of ideological clarity and unity. The issue of gender could have been given more emphasis. How far the ideals of the women's movement have been heard, absorbed and responded to by the community is still uncertain. With better intra-network understanding, there could also have been less polarisation, interpersonal friction and differences of opinion on strategy – especially between CBOs and NGOs. Some organisations joined the network and later moved on. The membership of two groups had to be cancelled, while two others proved to be inactive. Whether the occasional tensions within NCAFN reflected the failure of ActionAid India's strategy of network funding remains an open question. Besides this, community representation within NCAFN could have been better – and this has undermined its impact.

Finally, there could have been more effort in providing to the community a deeper understanding of class, caste and patriarchy, and how they intersect in today's society. Because the focus of the network was on the community's immediate concerns, sometimes important issues relating to India's larger social realities tended to get neglected.

A more micro-level assessment of the NCAFN emerged in an interesting exercise conducted in Visakhapatnam in June 2013 by external reviewers Alex Tuscano and Charles Wesley Meesa, during which NCAFN members and many representatives from the fishing community assessed for themselves the gaps and gains of their years of activism. Explained P. Raghu, "We felt we needed to conduct such an intervention since we were in the throes of a withdrawal process with the NCAFN project slated to come to an end in 2015, after which

the community would have to pick up the baton. We wanted an assessment of how prepared were they for this task." Participants were first asked to critically assess the status of the 85 sanghas currently functioning under the NCAFN umbrella. Each sangha was to be assigned to one of three categories: 'formation stage', or just starting out; 'formalisation' stage, or somewhat established but still needing support; and 'consolidation' stage, or a position where they can function independently. The answers were revealing in their honesty. The great majority were either in the first or second category – 38 and 28 in the formation and formalisation stages, respectively. Only 19 were considered in the third category. After analysing the results, it was clear that NCAFN's energies and resources over the next two years needed to be focused on bringing those sanghas in the formation or formalisation stages, to the 'consolidation' stage.

The leadership potential of community was also gauged. Participants were asked to compute the total number of men and women who could be regarded as leaders and then assess in which category they best fitted: still learning; functioning, but with a little guidance; or functioning independently. While the total number of leaders emerging through NCAFN functioning was impressive – 1016 in all – the great majority, some 500 men and women, were in the learning stage. The number of those functioning independently was extremely low – just 27.

According to Tuscano, it was important to locate these leaders, at roughly two per village, to make full use of their potential, even as the work to create more leaders goes on. According to him strong leaders committed to working for the movement needed to be supported financially, but they had to be chosen carefully. "They should have the ability to work with people, listen to them, rather than impose their own views," he said.

The importance of future financial sustainability was emphasised. Learning to raise funds without external support needed to become an important part of the immediate agenda. Raising funds requires certain steps to be taken. First must come the realisation that funding of the movement should be from the sanghas, and that would be the ultimate test of their respective strengths.

Second, learning to use the available money wisely was also vital. Every paisa needed to be spent in a way that benefited the community. One of the suggestions that emerged was to build a cadre of fund raisers for the community over the next two years, with ActionAid India's help.

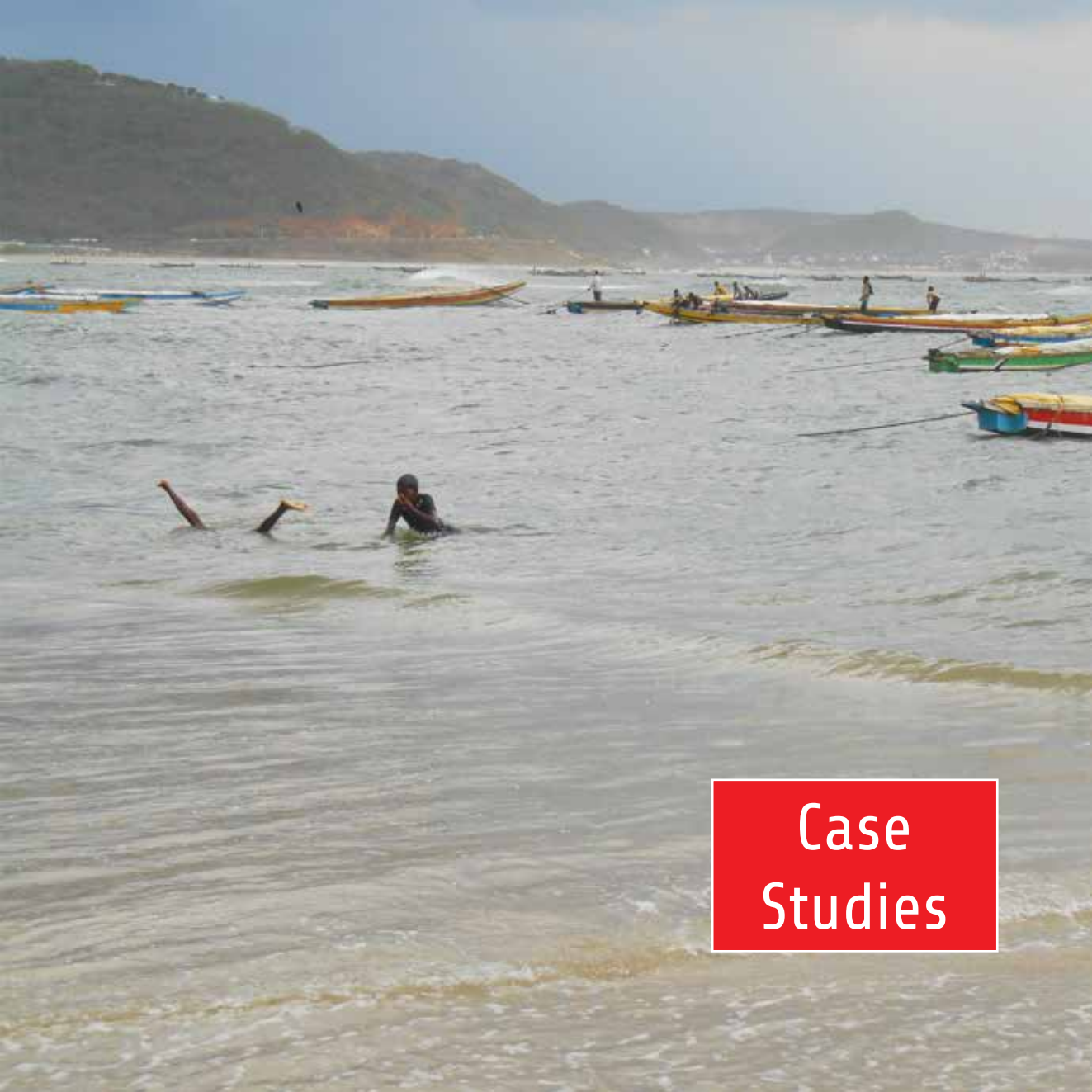
Participants were asked to critically assess the status of the 85 sanghas currently functioning under the NCAFN umbrella

The lack of priority given to women's issues was a gap that emerged at the review meeting. Clearly, there needed to be a renewed emphasis on the rights of women being a non-negotiable principle for all partners. While NCAFN had long highlighted that there should be no compromising on the principles of ensuring that all girls went to school and that there was to be no domestic violence in the community, there have not been many gains on these scores.

But arguably the most significant question that emerged at the review meeting was this: How best can the resources available be deployed in the coming two years? The phase-out period needs to be productive in terms of building not just NGO presence, but people's presence. So in the coming two years, the available financial resources need to be allocated to bridge the gaps that have been identified.

Change Is Like The Sea: Limitless

ActionAid India's work among the fishers of Visakhapatnam district has, in many ways, reflected its own evolution as an organisation. Dipali Sharma, ActionAid India's Senior Manager, Programmes explained, "Earlier, we were more focused on local issues. Then we realised this was not going to help beyond a point because the causes were related to bigger issues and to policy making, which was why we decided to focus on alliance building with the socially excluded and marginalised. We also privileged a rights-based approach in all our activities. When our Fourth CSP came out in 2012, an emphasis was placed in situating the historical marginalisation and exclusion of marginalised communities – like the fishing community – against the current neoliberal paradigm. So the focus was not just on rights as entitlements but rights from the context of social justice." Change is like the sea. Its beginning can be seen but not its end. The journey of the fishing community to claim its rights to the sea and coast has been an inspiring one but it is far from over, and will perhaps never be fully over. But helping that journey to begin and providing guidance at a very crucial phase of its evolution, has provided a bountiful catch of learnings for both ActionAid India as well as the fishing community of Visakhapatnam district.



Case Studies

‘Our Occupation Will Die With Us’:
Fish Vendors Speak

Olisetty Poleramma and Pilla Muthyamma are fish vendors who live in the village of Peda Jalaripeta. They are among the estimated 15,000 women fish vendors in the region. Although only in their fifties, their weather-beaten faces made them look much older.

For much of their life, their days have followed a fixed pattern: waking up early, trudging to the fish market, about six kilometres away, and then vending about 15 kilos of fish a day which they carried on their heads in plastic containers. By the time they sold their stocks, the sun would already be veering to the west. It is only when they get back home in the evening do they bathe and have their first full meal of the day.

Mornings for Poleramma were always a rush. “The earlier one arrives at the market, the better the quality of the fish one gets. Time is very important in this work. Since fish is perishable, we need to buy and sell it fast,” she said.

The fish she gets is auctioned in lots. It is always a gamble – sometimes, especially when the catch is thin, prices tend to be high and the women are often not able to recover the money they invested in the fish. “Yesterday, for instance, I incurred a loss of ₹20. But one has to take these uncertainties in one’s stride,” explained Muthimma.

Usually, if they invested a thousand or so on, they stood to make a profit of ₹100-200 a day – which is roughly the minimum wage. Although their village is on the coast and active fishing goes on here, the women never buy what the fishermen in Peda Jalaripeta bring in. This is because the catch usually came in only by the evening, by which time the women vendors were done with their selling and there was no way they could store large amounts of fish for the next day. So both the fishermen and the fish vendors were dependent on the market. The former sold their produce directly to traders who sold them directly to big fish cartels or auctioned them in the local market. This pattern meant that neither the fishermen, nor the fish vendors, exercised control over this trade which was dominated by powerful lobbies.

Both Poleramma and Muthimma mentally set a 3 pm deadline by which they hoped to have sold their fish, but this of course was not always possible. “We continue until everything is gone, and that could be 4 o’clock or even later,” Muthimma explained.

Their relationship with those who buy their

fish was like an elaborate shadow play, which involved a great deal of teasing and banter. "Some of them start by denigrating the quality of the fish. They say, 'What rotten fish you have brought today.' We reply in kind. We will, for instance, put back the basket on our heads and walk away. Then they will cajole us into selling them the fish," Poleramma elaborated. Somehow, in this way, a mutually agreed price is arrived at, with both parties assessing their gains or losses!

While this life was by no means easy, it was the only life they knew, as one woman put it. "I carry about 10-14 kilos of fish every day on my head roaming the streets, calling out to potential buyers. Over the years we have got used to these heavy loads and market uncertainties. But we have to go on until every fish is sold, even as the sun beats down and the body is exhausted," revealed Muthimma. Both she and Poleramma sustain themselves on one glass of tea in the morning. "It is only after I have sold the fish and had a bath that I sit down to a meal. Most of us somehow don't feel like eating in-between because our hands and clothes smell of fish," said Poleramma.

She lost her husband, a fisherman, seven years ago to a stroke. "He was a good man and did not drink like the others. But long years at sea wore him down," she revealed. Since her husband never took their son out to sea, the younger man did not develop a taste for the profession. He plied an auto-rickshaw and supported his family and widowed mother, whose earnings as a fish vendor was undoubtedly a value addition to the family income and helped buy extras like vegetables. Pilla's situation was more fragile. She has four children, all of whom are married except one son, who is physically disabled. "I look after him and support him, since my husband cannot earn anymore," she said. Her husband, a long-time fisherman, developed heart problems, leaving Muthimma the only breadwinner in the family.

Women fish vendors in the village were part of the Peda Jalaripeta Women's Cooperative Society, and supported by Sankar's FYWA. But positive outcomes have been slow in coming, partly because in the hierarchy of activities, the interests of the humble fish vendor were often forgotten. As Poleramma put it, nothing has really changed for them, "Our sangha has about 24 members and we meet occasionally and share our sorrows. One of our demands is for toilets in the markets. We would also like a cold storage for unsold fish."

The FYWA office was located in Peda Jalaripeta and Teddu Sankar was keen on making the sangha more relevant. "We want to bring domestic workers and fish vendors on a common platform," he said.

But what was striking was that both women believed that fish vending was dying as an occupation. Most of their children have opted for other ways to earn their livelihood. Poleramma put it this way, "When I was growing up, our lives revolved around fishing. Today my granddaughters, who are in school, lead very different lives. Fish vending in our family is sure to end with me."

Arjilli Dasu: Fisherman at 7, Community Worker at 17, Community Leader at 27

The Vadabalijas are the dominant fishing community in the region. Arjilli Dasu, who is in his early forties, belongs to this community and was born in the village of Gangavaram.

He remembers going out to sea with the older fishermen at the age of seven. At 10, he lost his father. Recalled Dasu, "My father was an alcoholic. He underwent two surgeries before he died." That death brought to an end Dasu's formal schooling, who was then in Class III. It was his mother's younger brother who supported the family and Dasu had to help his uncle cultivate a small patch of land he owned for the next four years.

Dasu's mother tried to earn something by vending fish, but with five children to feed, it was a tough battle. Through a rough-and-ready barter system of trading fish for rice, the family would manage a meal a day and Dasu remembers going hungry as a child. But the boy was bright, and with help from relatives he could pass the Class Six examinations. He then requested his older brother, who was by then helping to support the family, to allow him to carry on his schooling, "I told him all I needed was food, and I would manage the rest." In this way, he completed his matriculation and signed up for an ITI course as an instrument mechanic.

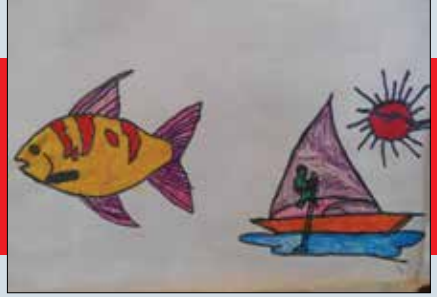
Apart from his studies, Dasu was increasingly getting drawn into community work. As a 17-year-old, he would take people in need of government loans to the authorities and later, when there was a severe outbreak of malaria, with more than a hundred dying in a month, he ferried the ill to hospital. The other issue was displacement. For setting up the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant, 24,000 acres of land were acquired, even though only 7000 acres were utilised. A part of this land was later handed over for the Gangavaram Port. All this meant the displacement of thousands of families including his own, giving Dasu his first introduction to "development" with an ugly face.

Through the nineties, Dasu grew both in his understanding of the political economy of the fishing community as well as in public stature. A campaign he led by involving fisher youth to plant 50,000 saplings, won him the District Youth Award in 1992. That year he formally set up his NGO, the DFYWA.

The fishing community was in dire need of both livelihood options and easier credit. In 2001, Dasu anchored an initiative to produce dry fish hygienically that was promoted by the central Ministry of Food Processing Industries and the Directorate of Youth Services. Over 6,000 women were trained in this process, improving the earnings of thousands of families. Similarly, after a campaign for better credit facilities, the Andhra Pradesh Fisherman Cooperative Society Ltd came into existence, helping the community to buy nets and boats. By now Dasu had married and supporting a family became difficult. This was why for a period of almost a decade Dasu turned to journalism to earn a regular income.

Through it all, the DFYWA work continued. He involved himself in all the campaigns undertaken by NCFAN. "We were able to delay, even stop, many projects that threatened our existence and ensure better compensation packages, and this gave us confidence to carry on. The rights approach introduced by ActionAid proved to be very important for our mobilisation," Dasu emphasised.

The DFYWA presently has over 350 registered members who are exclusively from the fishing community, and works in nine blocks of Visakhapatnam district. What keeps Dasu going is his fierce commitment to the fishing community, evident in his concluding words, "This struggle has become my life. I will continue, no matter what."



Red Suns And Pink-finned Fish: School Scenes On The Sea Shore

Schooling for many of the fisher folk of the earlier generations has either been non-existent or barely existent. This is another reason why the cheerful, whitewashed government school –Mandal Praja Parishad School – in the village of Appikonda Chelalapalam, in Visakhapatnam's rural outskirts, is so reassuring. Catering to classes from nursery to Class V, its 72 pupils – 41 girls and 31 boys – are all children of the local fishing community.

The origins of Appikonda fishing village are lost in the mists of time, as is evident from the 13th century Shiva temple dating back to the Chola dynasty that towers over the landscape. But its hoary beginnings notwithstanding, this is a village under siege in the modern era, wedged in by the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant, on the one hand, and the soon-to-be commissioned Hinduja Power Plant on the other. The land for both gargantuan establishments has been parceled out by the government, and with it chunks of the coast from where fishers pursued their livelihoods.

Said Arjilli Dasu, whose organisation, DFYWA, supported by ActionAid, has not only got itself involved in helping this school financially and materially but also taken a keen interest in its running, "Many of the fishing families here have been displaced over three decades. Children's education is the first to be affected when families are displaced. That is why the DFYWA is so keen to ensure that this school really delivers good education." This is also reflective of ActionAid's commitment to improve the quality of public education for girls and boys equally.

As if to remember its primary purpose, a school notice board bears this information: Village Appikonda Chepalapalam. Total population: 1070 people. Literates: 408. Illiterates: 602.

"Our school is working to change this reality, so that the number of illiterates comes down to nil," stated Ananthalakshmi, the headmistress. She pointed out that there is a high dropout rate among her students. Boys, as they get older, often join the adult members of the family for fishing. For the girls, early marriages are rampant. "Once they have studied up to Class V, parents are reluctant to send them to high school since it is located in the main revenue village of Islampit, more than three kilometers away," explained Ananthalakshmi.

But the local educational establishment was also at fault. Said Dasu, "We have noticed a lack of attention being paid by village school monitoring systems despite the existence of Andhra Pradesh

Education Act, 1998, and the RTE where our children are concerned."

According to Janardhan Rao, one of the three teachers in the school, the lack of awareness of the parents was also a big factor for indifferent schooling, "All our parents are from the fishing community which is facing hard times. Many of the fathers and mothers have been forced to become wage labourers and cannot care for their offspring."

Life for these children is not without traumas of various kinds. According to Rao, poverty and frustrations has meant that there are significant levels of alcoholism and domestic violence within families. This in turn has led to marriages turning sour and one parent or other disappearing with the children.

Children who go in for fishing early suffer from many serious health reversals. The boys who went out to sea were required to perform tasks under the punishing sun far beyond the capacity of their young bodies. Certain varieties of fish can cause serious injuries as well.

The girls get involved in catching shrimp in the sea and backwaters and also suffer from fatigue and skin diseases. According to local accounts, two thirds of wages earned by children were utilised for supporting families, while the rest was spent by the children themselves on cards, watching movies, smoking and even liquor.

The school then also functioned as a safe haven. Ananthalakshmi put it this way, "If our children were not safe in school between nine and four, they would be vagrants. So the school is really a life line – keeping boys from bad company and girls from early marriages."

Interestingly, the Mandal Praja Parishad School, aside from imparting Telugu and maths, also emphasises environmental sciences. Said its perceptive headmistress, "We want to give our children an education that will impact their lives. Since our children love to go to the beach – the sea seems to have irresistible appeal for them – we bring them information about the sea, even at the primary stage."

This was where Dasu's DFYWA also chipped in with its members teaching the children to swim. They have even demonstrated to the kids how to stay afloat with the help of easily accessible material like plastic bottles, when disasters like cyclones strike. The organisation has also donated ₹30,000 to the school to build a water tank, and other requirements like steel plates for the mid-day meals.

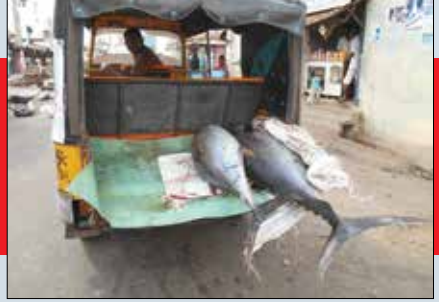
Change is slowly setting in. Parents have now come to realise the value of education and are also interested in their children doing well. Some 40 to 50 of the children of this government school were presently studying in high school, and the teachers there proudly revealed that a few have even become graduates.

We met up with Y. Yasodha, who had completed her fifth standard examination and will soon be going to high school in Islampit. A bright eyed child with her hair neatly held back by green pins and arranged in two doubled plaits that frame

her face, she said that she was really looking forward to studying further. She showed us coloured drawings that the younger students had made, with all the pride of a little teacher. But when asked which one caught her fancy, Yasodha smiled and pointed to a crayon sketch. It showed a big yellow fish with pink fins, with a fisherman in a boat rowing in a patch of blue, behind which glowed a bright red sun.

The sea and its fruit are clearly the dominating images in the lives of the students of Mandal Praja Parishad.

Fishers Need Their Own Act



One of the laws supported by fisher activists and networks, including NCAFN, is the draft Traditional Coastal and Marine Fisherfolk (Protection Rights) Act, 2009, which envisaged a demarcation of "critical coastal zones" to monitor and protect marine biodiversity. The proposed Act wanted state governments to constitute a state-level monitoring committee to carry out the process of recognition and protection of the rights of traditional fishermen. It also sought to ensure the prevention of over-fishing in coastal areas by declaring fishing holidays and the implementation of mesh-size regulations used by traditional and other fisher folk.

The draft Act recognised the following rights of fisher folk on the coastlands:

- *The right to hold and live in the coastal areas under individual or common occupation for habitation or for fishing for livelihood by a member or members of such family.*
- *Right of ownership and access to areas.*
- *Other community rights of uses or entitlements such as fish and other products of water bodies, and traditional seasonal resource access of nomadic or pastoralist communities.*
- *Rights of settlement and conversion of all villages, old habitation, unsurveyed villages and other villages in coastal areas, whether recorded, notified or not, into revenue villages.*
- *Right to protect, regenerate or conserve or manage any community resource which they have been traditionally protecting and conserving for sustainable use.*
- *Rights which are recognised under any State law (or laws of any Autonomous District Council or Autonomous Regional Council) or which are accepted as rights of these fisher folk under any traditional or customary law of the concerned fisher folk of any State/UT.*
- *Right of access to biodiversity and community right to intellectual property and traditional knowledge related to biodiversity and cultural diversity.*
- *Any other traditional right customarily enjoyed by the traditional fisher folk.*
- *Right to in situ rehabilitation including alternative land in cases where the traditional fisher folk have been illegally evicted or displaced from coastal land of any description*

without receiving their legal entitlement to rehabilitation prior to the 13th day of December, 2010.

The draft law also enjoined states and union territories to expand and strengthen the functioning of the various fisheries departments/agencies so that these departments/agencies were mandated to establish markets for the purchase at fair prices of the catch obtained by fisher folk using traditional means. Further, they were required to encourage the development of fisheries cooperatives for the purchase of the catch procured through traditional means, and were to be responsible for specifying rates for the purchase of the catch from the fisher folk from time to time. The establishment of iceplants/cold-storage facilities for the preservation of the catch to the fisher folk and provisions for cold chain for transport purposes to outside markets also fell under the responsibilities of the departments of fisheries. Among the other stated responsibilities of such departments under the Act was to ensure the upgradation of fish processing and cleaning facilities and the provision of technical and financial assistance in the form of loans to buy traditional boats and gear and other facilities necessary for fish processing and marketing.

The draft law made it mandatory for the departments of fisheries to provide training and institute knowledge transfer processes within the traditional fisher folk so that their capabilities of processing and marketing their produce were enhanced.

Teddu Sankar Courts Justice For Fisherfolk

As he looked out on to the stretch of the Bay of Bengal facing Visakhapatnam city, Teddu Sankar recalled his ancestors, "There were three fishing villages in this strip that go back to the 11th century, and my village of Peda Jalaripeta was one. For all these years, my ancestors fished in these very waters. The seas in those days were said to be full of fish. That, alas, is no longer the case."

When Visakhapatnam came up with a master plan in 2006, the presence of the fisher folk remained unacknowledged. Thereby hangs a tale. "For one thing, the master plan was issued in English. So our first step was to go to court stating that this violated our constitutional rights. The authorities were thus forced to make the master plan available in Telugu," recalled Sankar.

What was more, local youth were mobilised to come up with an alternative map showing the sites where the fishing community landed their boats, dried their nets. It captured their sacred places and the sand dunes that were intrinsic to the coastal ecology. They wanted this city's master plan to reflect this because the forces trying to push the community out of the frame were so powerful that a corrective was urgently needed.

The first time Sankar's organisation, FYWA – set up in 2000 and registered in 2003 – with other organisations, decided to go to court was in 2002. The case involved the proposed widening of the four-laned Visakhapatnam-Bhimunipatnam road, many sections of which violated the CRZ notification.

Since then, Sankar and his associates have been able to go to court over many so-called developmental projects that have completely ignored the interests of fishing community to the benefit of powerful vested interests. Sankar had the details of every one of these cases on his laptop but they are also recorded in his memory and he can rattle off details of each case. Among them is the famous one involving the Rushi Konda Jetty, against which the FYWA, the DFYWA and others filed a case in 2005.

How had Sankar, who has formal schooling only up to Class Seven, been able to file over 13 court cases besides making innumerable RTI applications? It was the local activism of groups like Vikasa, supported by ActionAid, that made this possible. Sankar revealed, "For the first time, we were exposed to concepts like CRZ. No one

had told me that there were laws like the MRFA and the CRZ to protect the rights of traditional fisher communities like ours. The trainings made possible by interested individuals, introduced me to CRZ mapping and to filing PILs – completely new experiences for me."

Maps, he discovered, were crucial for the campaign. So Sankar learnt not just to read them but how to procure revenue maps through the RTI route. He also learnt to document information on the fishing community by filing it away carefully into neat retrievable files as both soft and hard copies. "Once we heard that a project was coming up we would systematically set out to find out whether it violated the CRZ order, what its survey number was, whether it had received permission and whether environment impact assessments had been done. This data later helped us in filing our cases," Sankar explained.

Of course, the pressure from those affected by this activism was also tremendous. Sankar and his colleagues were dubbed as "anti-developers", and were subjected to open threats of violence. This is where the strength of a network like NCAFN proved crucial. "When the fisher community faces a common threat, it always helps to unite them, although different groups may respond to the issue in different ways," remarked Raghu. According to Sankar, NGOs did not always see legal interventions as part of their mandate, but what did help forge a united approach was the rights-based framework promoted by ActionAid. "The trainings and the 'trainings of trainers', as well as exposure visits helped a lot. Earlier we were too inhibited to even talk to officials, now we can conduct a conversation with them as equals," Sankar said.

Like Arjilli Dasu, Sankar has also emerged as an articulate defender of the interests of the local fishing community. He has also tried to pass on his skills of documentation, filing RTI applications, and doing case work, to younger members of his community. Said he, "For the last eight years, I have given trainings on RTI, coastal mapping techniques and legal work. At least a thousand youth, not just in this region but across the state at the village, school and college levels, now know RTI filing. Not all of them are using this expertise but at least 25 per cent of them are and that bodes well for the future."

Two Local Women Ride The Waves Of Struggle

Soorada Devi, 28, from the fishing community in the small village of Gangadipalem, educated herself by trying to understand the social processes going on around her. Her formal education was basic, with her schooling coming to an abrupt end after Class X, when she got married.

Yet, today, working in the old colonial Dutch fishing village of Bimili, Devi is an able defender of the rights of her community as vice president of the block level Samparadaya Matsyakarula Samakya (traditional fisher folk society) and co-convener of the Samparadaya Matsyakarula Samakya at the district level, posts that were earlier held by men. Besides this she is a ward member from the community and manages five women's cooperatives. The collection of money and book keeping entailed is done without outside help.

It was her association with Vikasa, ActionAid's first partner in the region, that set this young woman on the road of discovery. Said Vikasa's head, Viswanadham, "Devi's evolution as an activist is the result of regular capacity building exercises. Through ActionAid, many local women like her received a lot of exposure."

She began by attending the fortnightly meetings of a women's sangha (cooperative society) run by Vikasa regularly. Among the first issues Devi was exposed to was sand mining. "The sand mafia was mixing sea and river sand in a place close to our village and 29 of us women confronted them," she recalled. Interestingly, it was the women's sangha that took up this issue; the men showed no interest.

Slowly she got drawn into the other activities of Vikasa on a voluntary basis. After the tsunami, however, she was put in charge of working with women in 10 fishing villages, for a stipend of Rs 1000 to cover travel costs.

One of the processes ActionAid, in partnership with Vikasa, introduced was organising large gatherings with participation from all the communities at the block, district and state level.

Said Viswanadham, "It was part of alliance building and we termed the process 'Spandana'. Such strategies helped women here to meet up with women from other parts of the state, and get acquainted with different social processes."

Soorada Devi nodded in agreement, "Once we became aware of our rights as women and as members of the fishing community we gained the courage to speak. Then miracles started happening." Gender sensitisation played out in different ways, including in sensitive matters within the family. When her husband's family wanted her to go in for a third child after the couple had two daughters, in the hope that it would be a son, Devi resisted. "I was happy with my daughters." Today the girls are doing extremely well in school, and their mother hopes they will become professionals some day.

But Devi would be the first to admit that the problems the community women face have not gone away, only taken on new forms, "Alcoholism is a huge concern. There are shops known as belt shops which are illegal branches of the main licence-holding shop. We women tried to intervene in one instance and even succeeded in shutting the belt shops – but only briefly. They sprang up again and every gully in our villages has one." Alcoholism was linked closely to domestic violence. The women sanghas have tried to take up the issue but admitted that a lasting solution was difficult to achieve.

The encounter with the sand mining mafia brought about an understanding of the ecological sensitivity of the local coastal stretch. "First we had to fight against mechanised boats fishing illegally in our waters. Now we have to fight big projects that violate guidelines," Devi said. To do this, she had to learn how to use the Right to Information Act.

Soorada Devi's community work has not gone unnoticed. On International Women's Day 2013, she was given a special award (Naveena) as a social activist by a local television channel, TV 9. When the cameras came to her village to capture her life, it created quite a stir. For the first time an anonymous woman from the fishing community was given the attention of mainstream media.

Like Soorada Devi, 41-year-old Yejjala Laxmi is a daughter of the sea. From the small village of Rjuvaram, located in Payakaraopeta block of Visakhapatnam district, Laxmi too had only a basic education, having been married at the early age of 15.

What made all the difference to her evolution as an activist was her association with Grama Swarajya Samithi (GSS), an NCAFN partner in the area. At first she would sit quietly at meetings convened by the

women sanghas run by GSS. Over time she began to find the discussions riveting, and got drawn into the issues of the local fisherwomen.

From the articulation of issues to taking action on them was a logical progression for Laxmi. She now began to volunteer her time for GSS activities. The tsunami highlighted the need for greater mobilisation on the ground and Laxmi was put in charge of working with women and children in the local villages of Payakaraopeta mandal, earning a small stipend of ₹750 for the first time in her life. She recalled, "Although I was from the region and knew many of the realities, that period provided certain insights into the specific problems of women that I would never have gained if I had not worked so closely with the community."

When the issue of the coastal corridor came up and GSS organised mass meetings in Payakaraopeta block, Laxmi participated actively, encouraging local communities to express their opinions without hesitation.

Laxmi is now a seasoned fisher activist as part of the Payakaraopeta Sampradaya Matsykarula Samakya (block level platform for the fishing community). Being a woman has not come in the way of her assuming leadership positions – something that would have been impossible for her mother's generation. Not only is she secretary of the Payakaraopeta Mandal Indira Kranthi Padham (block level women's SHG), she is the vice president of the Visakha Zilla Sampradaya Matsykarula Samakya (district level platform for the fishing community) and a ward member from the community. She also manages three women's cooperatives.

Remarked a confident Yejjala Laxmi, "Over the years, I have learnt a great deal, including how to interact with government officials. But the issue closest to my heart is children's education. Our children drop out of school for various reasons and I want to do my best to see that this doesn't. After all, their future depends on that."

About the initiative

In this edition, we present to you a story about the indigenous marine and back-water fishing communities in Andhra Pradesh, who have been living peacefully along the coast, with their environmentally sustainable practices ensuring a healthy and dignified life to several generations.

Their contributions and rights, however have never been recognised and the advent of advanced technologies in the fishing industry and the continuous onslaught of the market forces has pushed these communities into an inescapable trap of poverty. The tsunami of December 2005 further took them back by several years, by not only destroying their lives, property and means of livelihoods but leaving them ever more vulnerable to displacement by vested interests wanting to usurp vast coastal lands for huge capital gains by taking advantage of the fear and despair that existed among the coastal communities then.

The story takes us through the journey of these fishing communities in their struggle to assert their rights and the effort to rebuild their lives after the Tsunami. The emergence of North Coastal Andhra Fisher folk Network (NCAFN), a strong network comprising of community leaders and activists, community organisations, NGOs and several other civil society organisations extending from Visakhapatnam to Krishna districts in Andhra Pradesh was key in mobilising this community and building their agency.

We hope that the various strategies adopted by this initiative in the form of youth and women leadership programmes, their political conscientisation, building of unions and collectives etc and the various lessons from these strategies will provide important insights for other similar initiatives aiming at such social change processes in other parts of the country.

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