

**Book Review: Development or Displacement? Snapshots from Small Scale Fisheries in Kerala by Dr. J. B. Rajan, 2022, Kerala Institute of Local Administration, Mulamkunnathukavu, Kerala; Pages 144.**

Dr. J. B. Rajan, the renowned academician and prolific writer in fisheries, in his latest book titled "Development or Displacement? Snapshots from Small Scale Fisheries in Kerala", argues and counterargues the impending dangers hampering the sustainability of the small-scale marine fisheries sector of Kerala. The book has the 'flair of the fisherfolks' social and economic situation, struggles and tribulations, their social strengths and livelihood deficiencies' as S. M. Vijayanand IAS (Rtd.), in his forward, says. It is a compendium of articles showcasing a wide-angled and focused view of the real-life situations of the fisherfolk, enriched by good data. Leaving 'the proper conscientisation' as the sole tool for the development by taking in the fishermen as the 'subjects' of development, the book leaves glimpses of thoughts on rethinking the actual displacements happening in the fishers' livelihood in the guise of so-called 'developments'.

**A Bird's Eye View**

As a researcher and writer on contemporary fisheries, fishing communities and coastal issues, the author's book contains 17 chapters that are broadly categorised into two sets: pre-mechanisation and post-mechanisation, along with reflections on the present status of the fishers' living conditions. Pre-mechanisation phase provides a vivid account of the sector before the advent of INP (Indo-Norwegian Project), detailing its traditional characteristics and systems. The chapters of post-mechanisation are divided into technological changes, repercussions and status, and are enumerated with ample statistical analysis. The final chapters on the overcapacity in fisheries, credit dependency, spatial mobility of labour, distressed situation of women in fish processing plants, and the extent of employment diversification among fisherpeople further merge the varied topics discussed to propose that Matsya Bhavans have to

function as Village Information Centres to revive the sustainable fishing practices through co-management regimes.

**The Need for 'Blue Cooperatives'**

The book is a systematic anthology of writings to uphold the traditional and indigenous knowledge of the fishermen and a counter-intuitive reading to get back to the roots of traditional fishermen to bring in development from within. Traditional fish harvesting technologies are largely environmentally benign and depend on a variety of factors such as profile of coastline, extent of surf action, tidal effect, width of the continental shelf, configuration of the fish resources, wind and weather conditions, availability of raw materials and fabrication skills, and socio-economic factors. They can only endure the sustainability prospects of 'the blue cooperatives', which are the need of the hour. The ominous words of Dr. J. B. Rajan, '...the old patterns of social relations have given way to more individualistic and competitive patterns, with the result that the organisations of fishing communities have become more mechanistic', are intriguing and alarming at the same time.

**Fast Changes – Not for the Good?**

With the commencement of Indo-Norwegian Project in 1953 (INP) and subsequent changes in fisheries, the sector witnessed the vanishing wisdom of fisherpeople, which was acquired with indigenous knowledge and skills. Later, over the years, the State government's intervention and the creation of formal forums and institutions have all impacted the traditional systems. Dr. J. B. Rajan classifies the formation of fishermen cooperatives by the State government, along the political line, as a complementary reason for the decline of 'traditional science and systems' in the fisheries acquired through the trans-generational processes. After the mechanisation through INP in 1953, a sudden surge in technological developments started, and an export-oriented, market-driven and lucrative profit-making arena sprouted out. Later, with motorisation in the traditional sector in 1980, the introduction of plywood boats in 1982; artificial

reefs in 1982-83; 'disconet' (Trammel net) in 1984; and ring seine, minitrawl, monofilament, and FAL in 1985, the modernisation in the fisheries sector has gone beyond in hundreds and thousands of percentages than the stipulated measures. The author's basic question, "Why have these changes happened so fast and so radically?" is being raised again and again in the book, detailing the social and economic damage caused by the mechanisation and motorisation of the marine small-scale fisheries sector of Kerala.

### **Is Development Good or Bad?**

The rudimentary critiquing of the development in the small-scale fisheries sector would reveal a decline in the share of total turnover for the fisheries sector in percentage terms. The technical analysis conducted based on the CPUE (Catch Per Unit Effort) of different fishing gears reveals that the so-called developments in the fisheries sector have contributed more towards the industrial and trading sectors and remain a necessary evil in parity with technological advancements. Dr. J. B. Rajan argues that this is because the existence of ring seine depends upon motorisation, marketing, etc., and hence the corresponding sectors of industry and trade also claim a substantial portion of the additional income generated. This reveals the fact that with the improvised technology, the intervention of merchants and traders towards the sector is increased, and much of the incremental benefit is reaped by them, whereas the fisheries sector remains to be the loser. The question 'How long can they sustain such loss?' should open the eyes of the government and authorities. The book reveals that as a result of technological change in artisanal fisheries, fish production has increased. But this has been achieved through structural changes in production factors, especially at the cost of huge investment and increased fuel and maintenance costs. And much of the benefit of

incremental income dissipated to other divisions of the economy, such as the industrial and trading sectors.

### **Going Back to the Roots is Essential**

Gradually fishers have moved from subsistence fishing to the market economy. How long can they retain their concern for environment? Fishing methods that have been questioned and criticised before are now being introduced. The book suggests reasons for returning to the origins and reclaiming the lost traditional and indigenous knowledge and living for sustainable development. The question, 'Is the fisheries sector moving towards a dynamic equilibrium?' is answered through the last five chapters on overcapacity in fisheries, credit dependency, spatial mobility of labour, distressed situation of women in fish processing plants, and the extent of employment. The book, in fact, takes us to a broad reading of issues related to small-scale fisheries. It discusses the problems in the context of mechanisation and motorisation so far happened in the sector and analyses them with concrete data and literature. Dr. J. B. Rajan sees the solutions in building up community-based and locally flourishing Matsya Sabhas, which can coordinate and disseminate locality-specific information on climate conditions, government interventions, etc., to the fishermen. 'Going back to the roots' is the key answer to the question 'Development or Displacement?'

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