

# South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies: Creating Sustainable Fisheries

*Reaching out to about 60,000 fishermen and women, SIFFS aims at creating a sustainable fishery and a developed fishing community, through the protection and enhancement of livelihoods in marine fishing*

## SIFFS AT A GLANCE

SIFFS was registered as an NGO in 1980 in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, under the Travancore Literary, Scientific, and Charitable Societies Act of 1955. Its aim was to create “a sustainable fishery and a developed fishing community, through the protection and enhancement of livelihoods in marine fishing.” Today its area of operation extends over 12 districts in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, comprising 156 primary societies federated into five district federations. SIFFS is the apex body of a three-tier structure, with primary societies at the village level, and district and regional federations at the middle level. The services provided by SIFFS to its members include marketing of fish, boat making, out board motors (OBMs) sales and service, ice plants, providing credit, policy research and advocacy. It has a membership of 9,100 and reaches out to about 60,000 fishermen and women. Its financial partners include international donor organizations for grants and Indian Banks for credit. It has a credit portfolio of Rs 15 crores.

## THE EVOLUTION OF SIFFS

By virtue of possessing a 590-km-long coastline and bountiful resources of marine fish, Kerala is a major fish producing, consuming and exporting state in the country. The number of fishing households in the state has recorded an increase of 20 per cent between 1980 and 2005. Mechanization of fisheries in India during the 1950s and 60s has resulted in the growth of trawlers (that adversely affect the environment as well as the livelihoods of traditional or the artisanal fishermen) and other mechanized boats. Motorization, which began in the 1980s, has helped small fishermen improve their catch and competitiveness, without competing with the non-mechanized traditional fishing. The share of artisanal fishermen in the number of boats, fish catch and income has declined drastically whereas that of the mechanized sector has increased tremendously, over the years.

However, the socio-economic condition of these small fisher-folk was pathetic, characterized by low levels of literacy, alcoholism among men, high population density and poor sanitation in their villages, indebtedness and an exploitative fish marketing system by the middlemen.

*The share of artisanal fishermen in the number of boats, fish catch and income has declined drastically whereas that of the mechanized sector has increased tremendously, over the years*

After the successful culmination of a *Vimochana Samaram* in 1959, the Church leaders in Thiruvananthapuram district turned their attention to alleviate the poverty of fishermen in a couple of coastal villages by providing them with loans and fishing equipment. Because there was no discernable change in their condition, they set up a new fishing village, Marianadu, by resettling 56 poor Christian fisher families from nearby villages, with the intention of developing it as a model village through Marianadu Community Development Project (MCDP) in 1962–63. A team of social workers, deputed in this village, initiated a host of activities such as a health programme and a savings scheme. After a few years of work, they realized that unless these fishermen were freed from the exploitation that they faced in the fish trade, their economic condition would not improve. Hence, they promoted a co-operative of the fishermen, Matsya Utpadaka Co-operative Society Ltd., in 1968 to take control of the sale of landed fish through its own representative. Apart from selling fish at the highest price through an auction, it also provided for deductions at source (out of the amount earned) for compulsory savings and loan repayment, for each member of the co-operative. In a few years, the Marianadu model, based on the integration of fish marketing with savings and credit, became established.

The activists of MCDP then formed an NGO, Programme for Community Organization (PCO) in 1977, to spread the Marianadu model to other fishing villages. By the end of the 1970s, there were primary fish marketing co-operatives in 20 villages in Thiruvananthapuram and the neighbouring Kanyakumari district in Tamil Nadu, promoted,

trained and supervised by PCO and other NGOs. Within a short time, the fishermen started getting a good catch and resolved their credit problems but faced new problems such as marketing and obtaining good quality nets. On a suggestion by PCO to form a federation of primary co-operatives in Thiruvananthapuram district, to address these issues, the fishermen came together and formed SIFFS as their apex body in 1980, to undertake business activities such as fish export and bulk purchase of fishing equipment, which would be difficult for each individual society to take up on its own.

SIFFS began by linking fish workers with Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) and commercial banks, borrowed a fish van and marketing staff from Marianadu, and started marketing interventions. In 1982, Vivekanandan from Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) joined as a professional to manage the marketing, and directed its growth for more than two decades. Apart from successful interventions in marketing and bulk supply of nets, SIFFS set up a strong boat building project in 1982, with assistance from Intermediate Technology Development Group of UK, which helped the artisanal fishermen (the main target group of SIFFS), to adopt the modern technology of OBMs and motorize their craft.

When PCO and other church-based NGOs in neighbouring Kollam and Kanyakumari districts felt the need to integrate their fishermen under SIFFS, they decided to create a three-tier organization with district-level federations taking care of day-to-day requirements of primary cooperatives and SIFFS focusing on long-term issues. The new Board of SIFFS had a Chairman and the CEOs from all the district federations were its members, Vivekanandan became its CEO.

The further expansion of SIFFS to other areas in Kerala was put on hold for a while because the state government launched a major initiative for forming fishermen welfare societies across Kerala and formed an apex co-operative, Matsyafed, in 1984. Unlike the self-managed SIFFS co-operatives, these government-promoted societies were dependent on government subsidies and other welfare measures and, hence, failed. For a few years, SIFFS focussed on technology by successfully developing and commercializing a variety of boat models, training of users and mechanics in OBMs, which enabled it to gain a reputation for its technical competence and understanding of the fisheries sector.

In the 1990s, SIFFS undertook a variety of activities such as becoming a leading supplier of OBMs in southern India, supporting and strengthening the district federations when they parted from their promoting NGOs, launching a micro-credit programme with bulk loans from the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) for providing loans to members of primary societies when banks were reluctant to provide unsecured loans; setting up an ice plant network; exporting chilled fish under social labelling; and growing timber for

*Apart from making use of outside professionals for technical and commercial tasks, SIFFS hires youth from the fishing community wherever possible and trains them to take up different jobs. Some of these young men have grown to senior positions.*

traditional *kattamarams*. Its area of operation was expanded by forming a regional federation of three districts in northern Kerala, forming village societies in central coastal districts of Tamil Nadu, and entry into Andhra Pradesh. Post the tsunami in 2004, SIFFS expanded to six more districts in Tamil Nadu to promote the long-term development of devastated fisher families.

Unfortunately, SIFFS also faced many structural issues such as an increased dependence on SIFFS of some unviable district federations, failure of business activities in some districts, and a poor relationship between the fishermen and staff that resulted in some professionals leaving the organization.

SIFFS is governed by a Board of Directors elected for a two-year period and its 29-member General Body comprises five representatives from every Full Member federation and two from an Associate Member federation. Apart from making use of outside professionals for technical and commercial tasks, SIFFS hires youth from the fishing community wherever possible and trains them to take up different jobs. Some of these young men have grown to senior positions.

SIFFS relies on a mix of grants and loans for its activities. The business activities such as boat building are set up as separate profit centres, where they benefit from an initial capital grant but subsequently they meet the operating expenditure and run the business by themselves by raising the required loans from Banks. SIFFS obtains grants from various donors with which it has long-term relationships for its non-commercial activities such as research and policy advocacy.