

The Plight of Fishing workers of AP Migrated to Gujarat

With the incident of 21 Fisher-men held by Pakistan Coast guard when their boats strayed in to Arabian Sea controlled by Pakistan, the plight of fishermen workers migrated from A.P. to Gujarat to eke out a living came in to the light. S

Gujarat is supposed to be an economically developed affluent state in the rule of B.J.P for a long time. But it is apparent that the affluence of the state was based on the ruthless exploitation of the labour power of workers particularly the workers migrated in to from other states.

While the official A.P. adminis-tration estimates that there are around 12,000 fishing workers migrated from A.P. to Gujarat, according to the fishermen working in Gujarat there are around 30,000 Telugu fishermen working there. Besides them many fishermen from Tamil Nadu and South-eastern states toil there. They work for the owners of mechanised fishing boats in the job a catching fish from the Arabian Sea.

Most of the Telugu fishermen are from Srikakulam, Vijayanagaram and Visakhapatnam districts of Andhra Pradesh. Extreme poverty and non-availability of fish catch in the sea-coast of Bay Bengal forced the fishermen from these areas to migrate to Arabian Sea shore of Gujarat, centred at Varaval. Since the sea of East Coast of Bay of Bengal is dumped with industrial chemicals, poisonous industrial waste, and effluents continuously it became a peril to the existence of fish and aquatic life, the fish is extinct. With this due to lack of alternative lively-hood or employ-ment, the fishermen families are forced to migrate to Gujarat as contract labour on mechanical fishing boats.

Though these migrated fishermen are paid from Rs 12,000 to 14,000, and for minors with Rs 8,000 per month, these highly skilled fishermen are forced to work in dismal working and living conditions as bonded labourers.

There are around 8,000 fishing boats in Gujarat and around 100 fish processing units depending on these mechanised fishing boats. The mechanised boats are run by owners of the boats, each owner owning from 10 to 15 mechanised boats. Most of the fish caught in these mechanised boats is exported to the other countries earning around Rs 3000 crores of foreign exchange besides with an income of Rs 15,000 crores from the Indian markets annually.

On each trip of fish catch, the owner earns an income from Rs 25-30 lakhs and sometimes even up to Rs 50 lakhs on each mechanised boat. But he merely spends from Rs 4 lakhs to Rs 5 lakhs on each trip including the cost of diesel oil, ice, ration to fishermen while on duty etc besides wages amounting to Rs 1 lakh per month for 8 fisher-men workers that work on the boat. On average on each boat, on each trip the owner makes a gross average profit of Rs 25 lakhs.

The fishermen workers have to live on the boat in the sea from 20-25 days every month. They are not provided with any arrangements for proper rest or any arrangements for their safety. They have to sleep in petty bunks, crowded in to small space. They have no chance or opportunity to bathe since there is no availability of fresh water on the boat. So these workers are forced to live without taking baths for almost 28 days and are thus forced to suffer with chronic skin diseases and other diseases. They do not have any toilet facilities and they have to defecate and urinate directly in to the sea by hanging on ropes at the side of the boats in dangerous conditions. Even when they reach to land after the fish catching trip, the owners do not allow them to take rest or enjoy holidays. On the shore they have to attend to the works of minor boat repairs, filling up the boat with ice for the next trip, procuring required rations and keeping them in to the boat, filling the boat with diesel oil etc. Even these works are not given time to speak with their other villages while on shore and they can only communicate with the people of their villages if at all their boats meet with the others on sea. In a period of 8 months, a worker can take bath only from 8 to 10 times while landing on shore, that too by making his own arrangements for fresh water to bathe. Many fish workers fell in to sea accidentally and died while venturing in to the sea for fishing. No compensation is paid for the workers killed on duty.

Such have been the horrible working and living conditions of these fish-workers.

Neither the governmental administration of Gujarat state nor of Andhra Pradesh thinks about the welfare of these workers or about their plight. The governmental apathy is callous and inhuman.

Now since the arrest of 21 fish workers of AP by Pakistan came in the media and the stories of their plight have appeared in media, AP government started pretending as if it would take-care of the welfare of fish-workmen migrated to Gujarat. Although thousands of fish-workers migrated and working in inhuman conditions for the past 2 decades viz from 1998, the AP government had not taken any action to the protection of the welfare of those migrants fish workers.

Now the AP state government hurriedly announced that it is deputing a committee to study the prevailing condition of Telugu fishermen who migrated to Gujarat and frame recommendations to relocate them. With an object of hood-winking the people and fishermen community who are eagerly waiting for the release of arrested fishermen by Pakistan. This is the usual trick played by the rulers-instituting committes/commi-ssions, to avoid the ire of people.

It appears that it would take at least 8 months of time for the release of the arrested fish-workers.

The worker's movement shall make sincere efforts to protect the interests of the migrated workers treated like bonded labourers!
