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The Indo-Norwegian Fisheries Project, 1952-1972

In June 1952, the Norwegian *Storting* set up “Fondet for hjelp til underutviklede land” (Fund for aid to underdeveloped countries) with a first grant of 10 million kroner. At the time, Norway was still receiving aid through the Marshall-plan program. It had already been decided that the fund should be used for a development program in India, but not what the project should be. In October 1952, a Norwegian delegation travelled to India to meet with the Indian government and to decide on the project. The Norwegian representatives had little knowledge of India before leaving, and only general ideas about what kind of project they would support. The Indian authorities presented several different projects, but most of them did not fit with the Norwegian intentions. In the end, the parties settled on a project to develop the fisheries in India.

At the time, Indian plans for development of fisheries was built on a three-pronged strategy: developing fisheries in the deep seas with large fishing vessels to supply Bombay (today Mumbai); developing the coastal fisheries with modern fishing vessels from medium-size harbors; and motorizing the traditional beach-fisheries. India wanted Norwegian help to develop the deep-sea fishing station near Bombay, where the country lacked qualified personnel, and they thought that Norwegian know-how, technology and experience could contribute to increase the food supply in the country. However, the Norwegian delegation refused, and instead preferred to focus on the beach fisheries. The India-Norwegian Fisheries Project was set up as a joint partnership between Norway and India and it was co-led by Indian and Norwegian administrators.

The Norwegian aid program would be a pilot project that would focus on developing two fishing villages in the state of Kerala on the southwest coast of India. The fishermen in the villages were poor, and they made their living by fishing close to shore from large canoes. The plan for the project was to motorize the fisheries. This would make it possible for the fishermen to go farther out to sea and thus be able to catch more fish and to prolong the fishing season. In addition, motors would make the boats faster, and they could return quicker to shore with better quality catches. On shore, the project would introduce the use of ice, of deep-freezing technology and refrigerated trucks, all to be owned and operated in cooperatives, which would supply the local consumers with more and better fish for the same price as before.

The project soon ran into problems. It did not take long to realize that putting a motor on the canoes or importing small motorboats from Norway, was not an improvement. The motors were more expensive and demanded much more maintenance, and even though they gave the boats more speed, they were less seaworthy than the traditional canoes in the shallow and rough waters close to the coast. In addition, the fish stayed close to the beaches, so the added speed and reach of the new boats did not offset the disadvantage of being more expensive to operate. The project managers instead developed a new flat-bottomed motorboat which was constructed at a new boat yard which was set up in one of the villages. The new boat-type did not convince the local fishermen either. After intensive experiments, the project gave up trying to modernize the beach fisheries in 1960.

Neither did the onshore development go according to plan. Setting up the deep-freeze infrastructure was costly, but the deliveries of fish from the local fishermen were unstable, and the capacity was rarely used to full. The plan to organize the marketing operations of the fish through fisherman cooperatives (as had been done in Norway in the 1930s) did not work as well in the context of Kerala.

The cooperation between the Indian and Norwegian project workers was also problematic, and in at least two instances, Norwegian complaints led to key Indian administrators being replaced. Norwegian demands about how things should be done, frequently clashed with Indian administrative practices.

However, when the project from 1960 instead started to focus on developing fishing vessels which could be operated from a nearby harbor, the fortunes shifted. The new boats were inexpensive enough (and subsidized enough) to make it possible to purchase for ordinary fishermen in the area. The new vessels could go farther out to sea and catch different species of fish. More importantly, the boats could also be used for shrimp fishing. There was a huge international demand for shrimps, and the deep-freeze infrastructure now could be utilized to develop a lucrative export trade in shrimps. When the shrimp boom took off, local merchants now went into the fishing industry, buying vessels and hiring crews. For those who had capital to invest, fortunes could be made.

Conclusion

When Norway pulled out of the Indian-Norwegian Fisheries Project in 1972, the country had contributed around 122 million kroner towards the project. In the same period, Indian authorities had contributed around 120 million kroner to the project. During the 20-year period that the project operated, around 1,000 Norwegians in total were involved in the project in India. The project was criticized for not helping the poor fishermen, but instead creating wealth for local merchants and although it led to economic development, it also created larger inequality in the communities. The two villages had now become one of India's fishing centers with up to 2,000 motorboats and close to 20,000 people worked on land in fishing related activities during the heights of the fisheries season. Around 2,000 people had received training courses of shorter or longer duration.