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Fishing in troubled waters

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The fisherfolk of Orissa have evolved environmentally safe nets to catch fish.

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Ever eaten shrimps? Pomfret? Seer fish? If you have there is a good chance that it came from Orissa. In fact, a fair amount of the fish comes from Orissa. But rarely do we wonder how they are caught, and who catches them. "So why do we need to know this?" you ask.

Interestingly, the modern machine-dependant sea or "marine" fishing carried out in many parts of Orissa today is less than 50 years old. Prior to this, marine fishing was the monopoly of the Telugu speaking community — Noliyas from the southern coastal districts of Puri and Ganjam. The Oriya fisherfolk of the Northern coastal districts preferred the abundant and relatively safer option of inland fishing in the maze of Orissa's rivers. These people developed remarkable fishing techniques, boats and nets that helped them in their fishing. They possessed a unique understanding and relationship with the sea.

Orissa's fisherfolk studied the movement and the environment of the fish and experimented repeatedly to evolve particular nets to catch specific fish. They developed an array of nets. The most popular are "gill nets", which trap fish by their gills. These come in various lengths, material and structure for different areas of the sea and different depths. Other fishing methods include the use

of the "hook and line method" — where a number of hooks are strung on a long length of plastic. Juicy bait of small fish, squid etc. are attached to the hooks and, when drawn in after a few hours, brings in seer fish, catfish and even shark. There is also the beautiful performance of catching fish using a "shore seine" — a large hand-made net taken to sea by row boats and drawn from two ends by at least 50 men standing on the shore!

Fishing boats (or crafts), grounds, nets, techniques, and even the fisherfolk have undergone a transformation in the recent years. Earlier most nets were made from natural fibres such as cotton and hemp, but this has given way to the use of nylon and, more recently plastic. Many efforts were made by the Government to assist in the motorisation of the artisanal fishing craft. The idea was to reduce the physical hardship of rowing and also to promote safety. This meant that the fisherfolk could travel further and fish longer and bring ashore more fish.

One such effort was also the introduction of the modern "trawler boat" a few decades ago, which catches mainly shrimp. This has proved to be extremely destructive. It is a mechanised boat and uses a machine driven "trawl" net, which scrapes the bottom of the sensitive seabed and catches every fish in its path. These trawlers have also known to cause the death of the famous Olive Ridley turtles that come to nest in Orissa's beaches.

In comparison, the traditional nets left the seabed undisturbed, allowing for sea life to develop. However, the inventive traditional fisherfolk and their knowledge have almost been ignored in efforts for development. Despite their skill, these people from migrant communities of Bangladesh and Bengal remain unbelievably poor.

We need to support the traditional workers of Orissa and help them safeguard their art of fishing. This is probably the only way to ensure the supply of fish and the very life of the sea.

What can I do?

Visit the super market and the local fish market.

Make a list of the names of the fish sold in both places (you could even draw them in your book).

Find out everything you can about the fish, its price, where it's caught and by whom from both local fish vendors and the store manger.

Check the differences in your information. Ask an adult to help you identify the fish in your drawings. Quiz them on your newfound information.

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