Revitalising traditional leadership

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The people of the Pattapu Community live near the coastal lands adjacent to the Bay of Bengal, in the Prakasam District of Andhra Pradesh, India. Their traditional livelihood system, based on fishing and subsistence agriculture, is seriously threatened by the ecological consequences of increased shrimp culture, and the plans for a ship breaking yard. This article describes how the Society for National Integration through Rural Development (SNIRD) supported the traditional leadership system to empower the community organisation, enhance their advocacy capacities and restore the local governance of the ecosystem.

In Prakasam District of Andhra Pradesh in India there are 37 Pattapu villages, called Pattapupalem. The total population of these villages is around seventeen thousand. Though they are Hindus and follow Hindu culture, these people have their own customs, traditions and beliefs, which differ considerable from the present day Hindu traditions.

Kapu community administration
The Pattapu village has traditional leaders, called kapu - which means ‘protector of the village’. Each village can have three different kapus, called Pedha Kapu, Nadu Kapu and Chinna Kapu, who together form the village committee. These traditional leaders have administrative power, are responsible for social control, the economic affairs of the village, and conflict resolution. They are indispensable in all the religious ceremonies and the festive occasions in the villages.

Although the government has installed an official administrative and judicial system, this kapu leadership is still functioning in many of the Pattapu hamlets.

Resolving disputes
If there is any dispute in the village, both the accused and the accuser have to appear before the kapus and the elders of the village. The Saladhi, or messenger, generally announces the meeting seven days prior to it; so all villagers can attend the meeting. It is also the Saladhi’s responsibility to make sure that both the plaintiff and the defendant are present at the hearing.

The hearing is held at the village temple, and the kapu proceed by hearing both sides of the case. They then deliberate over the issue, and the Pedha Kapu declares the guilty. The Chinna Kapu decides the fine or penalty, and the Nadu Kapu enforces the decision. If the accused refuses to abide by the judgment with fine, his property is taken and auctioned to get the penalty amount. If the accused is not satisfied with the verdict, he has the right to appeal to the kapus of two adjoining villages. They meet at the village of the accused, and the case is discussed once again by the nine kapus, three from each village. If they come to the conclusion that the judgement has been unjust or too harsh, they have the right to overturn the verdict and reduce the punishment.

Traditionally, the presence of women at these kapu hearings is strictly prohibited. If any woman passes the venue of the kapu meeting, even by chance, the meeting is cancelled. If a woman commits a mistake, first her husband is called for the meeting, and she is called in for hearing the next morning.

New controversies
Due to westernisation of Indian society, the kapu traditional leadership structure is losing influence among the fisherfolk communities. This is partly due to the media, who often question the kapu decisions, while a changed attitude towards the elders and a liking for court procedures is germinating in the minds of the youth.

The local political parties also have an adverse impact on the functioning of the kapu. If a kapu supports a particular political party, the supporters of the opposition may antagonise the kapu administration at village level. Overt confrontations between the traditional and the government system, however, are rare in the Pattapu communities.

New types of conflicts, due to increased globalisation, are also becoming very prominent, and seriously threaten the village economy and natural resource base. Neither the kapu system, nor the governmental administration has the capacity to effectively deal with these problems. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, the fish landing has declined sharply after 1975, due to various reasons, such as the utilisation of high-tech fishing crafts and gears, destruction of mangrove habitats due to newly constructed shrimp farms, and the collection of shrimp fry in the breeding areas. Another major threat is the governmental plan for introducing a ship breaking yard project (dismantling of oil tankers), which will seriously affect the natural resources in the coastal areas.

Even though there are certain legislations for the protection of traditional fishermen, such as the Marine Regulation Act, the Coastal Regulation Act, the Coastal
Regeneration Zone Bill, and the Aqua Culture Bill, the implementation of these acts is not enforced. Lack of effective development incentives, like a subsidised price for diesel, insurance for traditional crafts and gears, marketing linkages, cold chain facilities, and resolution of gender specific problems in fish selling, are further hurdles in the development of these fisherfolk communities.

Community organisation and gender
In 1992 SNIRD initiated the ‘Organisation of Marine Fisherfolk for Sustainable Resource Utilisation’ project in 45 villages in Prakasam District. It has 17 staff members working on community organisation, micro-credit, disaster management, and protection of the marine ecosystem. The mission of SNIRD is to facilitate the collective advocacy capacity of the target groups by empowering traditional leadership, and facilitate sustainable development at macro-scale. All activities have a gender focus.

To strengthen the participation of women, SNIRD promoted Mahila Sangams, or women sangams, in the first phase of the project, from 1992-1995. Then gramas, or village action committees, were formed with representations from traditional leaders, youth sangams and women sangams. SNIRD organised regular trainings and meetings for the gramas. Initially, the capus treated women as inferior participants but in the course of time the kapus started to accept their participation, and equal recognition was given to them. In youth and women sangam meetings, the development interventions were identified, to be discussed in the gramas. After getting the kapus’ permission and course of action the youth and women sangams lobbied with the government department. Hence the kapus were involved as the decision makers, whereas the youth and women sangams implemented the development interventions along with the guidance of the kapus.

Fish Workers Union
At a later stage, starting in 2000, SNIRD initiated a macro-level organisation. Initially kapu leaders from 45 villages went on an exposure trip to Kerala and Tamil Nadu, to look at various development interventions. After returning they organised a press meeting to highlight the way the state policies hamper the future of the fisherfolk communities. To make the community aware of the unionisation process, the leaders organised a cycle rally covering all the fisherfolk villages in Prakasam District. After the rally, the leaders organised two ‘kapu conventions’ to further plan the macro-level organisation, which would involve all the community leaders. After a series of executive body meetings, the Samudra Theera Matsya Karimukula Union, the Seaside Dwellers Fish Workers Union, or STMKU, was registered under the Trade Union Act in 1998.

The general meetings of the STMKU are organised every six months at village level, while the executive body meets every three months at district level. In these meetings all the members, both men and women, who have paid their membership fee, can participate. Overall, STMKU has a membership of around 34% women.

Lobbying for conflict resolution
One of the main functions of STMKU is to lobby with the authorities to enforce the implementation of the existing legislation, and to influence policy making in favour of the fisherfolk community. For example, the STMKU presented the issue of the Ship Breaking Yard to the relevant authorities at various levels. After a long struggle, with support from the fisherfolk communities and the Andhra Pradesh Pollution Control Board, they succeeded to procure a High Court order to halt any construction activity in the project site. This has been a major relief for the local communities who would have been affected by this project.

Regarding the negative effects of the shrimp culture, various lobbying activities are also under taken. As many of the shrimp farms fall within coastal regulated zones where shrimp culture is forbidden, the STMKU gave presentations to district, state and national administrators, in order to get implementation of the Coastal Regeneration Zone Bill enforced. As a result in Gundamala village, the encroached shrimp farms, which had occupied and destructed mangrove land, were removed. Continuous lobbying for the implementation of the bill is ongoing. Moreover, the kapus of all the fisherfolk villages have ordered the community to stop the collection of shrimp fry in breeding areas, to sustain regeneration of fish resources.

Altering the negative cycle
Influences from outside pose a serious threat for the survival of the Pattapu coastal communities. The experiences of SNIRD show that the newly created democratic bodies, which build on traditional leadership and administrative systems, are effective in enforcing conservation of the ecosystem. Hence, development policies should consider endogenous development interventions that not only involve the communities, but also their traditional leadership structures. Still, only re-enforcing traditional leadership systems is not enough.

SNIRD has enhanced participation of women in decision-making, through the formation of new groups, such as the women’s Sangam, and the village action committees, or Grama Sangam. The kapu conventions, which is being organised once in a year at district level, bring harmony and are strengthening the kapu administration. The STMKU Fish Workers Union has strengthened the lobbying capacity of these traditional leadership structures.

For us it has become clear, that basing the development activities on traditional leadership systems, and facilitating their capacity for lobbying, can alter the negative cycle of events that threaten the existence of these fisher communities.

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