

The Work-Wage Relationship in the Traditional Ring Seine Fisheries of Kerala

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Behaviour of fishery wages obtained by crew of artisanal ring seine fishing units based at Alleppey District was studied over a period of two years. The results have shown that the average wage at Rs. 60 per trip of 8 to 10 h duration is comparable to wages in other less organised primary sectors of agriculture related activities. The distribution of the wages over periods shows that there are long spells of low wages and very short spells of high wages. Unlike the commonly held belief, it is seen that extremely low wages and extremely high wages are not season determined. Both tend to concentrate in the same time segment.

Key words : Fishery wages, ring seine fisheries, Kerala

In most production activities, the management representing the capital input shoulders the risk of loss. Workers representing labour input are paid out wages on pre-fixed rates. Such guarantee of steady wages is not, however, always available to the workers in fisheries. Their wages often are not related to the hours spent in fishing but to the catch and the money realized therefrom. In such a situation the fisheries labour shoulders the risk of loss as well as the fruits of high returns. Against the background of labour's risk sharing, it will be interesting to investigate the relationship between the quantum of work and the quantum of wages that is available in fisheries. Since the fisher worker constitutes the weakest and the largest section of the fishermen community, the economic aspects of returns to labour is as crucial in importance as the returns to investment in fisheries.

Materials and Methods

For this study, ten motorised traditional ring seine fishing units operating in Alleppey District were identified. Data on

gross returns, fuel cost, the individual share of each member of the crew were recorded for the period from May 1991 to May 1993. Trip-wise data available for seven crafts designated as A to G ranged between 45 and 185 trips of 8-10 h duration. Coverage of trips for the two crafts (A and G) was low because of their late launching. For three other crafts, trip-wise data were so few that they were omitted from the final analysis. Craft (*Thangu vallam*) size ranged between 12 and 15 m and crew members varied from 18 to 20. The 7 crafts (A to G) included in the analysis thus yielded wage data for 126 to 140 working fishermen.

Results and Discussion

Wages realized by individual members of the crew of seven crafts are presented in Table 1. Wage data was available for a total of 904 fishing trips spread over the two year period of 1991-92 and 1992-93. The total wage realized by a fishermen from 904 fishing trips was Rs. 53,812 which works out to an average of Rs. 59.50 per fisherman per fishing trip. This average wage has a high degree of repre-

sentative value as a long run pointer of wage after absorbing seasonal variations. The figure is based on a good sample size, of at least 20% of the total trips that are possible. Further, the trip data was distributed over all months of each year. Thus the average wage of Rs. 59.50 per trip can be considered as the normal earnings of working fishermen in this class of craft-gear combination.

The wage of around Rs. 60 per working day compares well with wage rates of labour in other less organised primary sectors of agriculture related activities (ISAE, 1993). Economic hardships of fishermen would be far less pressing a problem had the above rate of wage accrued to them more regularly and evenly than is the case presently.

Table 1. Wage realization from fisheries

Fishing craft	No. of fishing trips	Wages realized by individual fishermen of the crew			
		Total, Rs.	Average per trip, Rs.	Highest Rs.	Lowest Rs.
A	49	2,380	48	313	0
B	185	13,759	73	600	0
C	145	5,694	39	260	0
D	126	4,077	32	300	0
E	160	12,478	78	1150	0
F	194	12,912	67	675	0
G	45	2,512	56	300	10
Overall	904	53,812	59.5	1150	0

Table 1 shows the nature and extent of wage fluctuations. Average wage realized from the seven crafts (Table 1) shows a high degree of variation ranging between Rs. 32 from craft D and Rs. 78 from craft E. Wages from the two crafts B and E, show an average of Rs. 70 and that from C and D show an average below Rs. 40 representing a near hundred percent wage difference between crew of different crafts operating in the same area and for

the same season. Technology, familiarity with the fishing environment and the seasons being the same, the steep disparity in wages points to the role of sheer chance in the fortunes of fishing. Secondly, persistence of lower wages for considerable period of the two years implies that trips fetching marginal wages are persistent.

The work-wage equation in the sense of a more or less equal wage for equal work effort is not guaranteed in fishing. The wages per trip per person ranged from a minimum of zero to a maximum of Rs. 1150 (Table 1). Interquartile range of wages per trip per person worked out to be 57.78. Thus 50 per cent of the individual wages fell between Rs. 30.61 to Rs. 88.39 showing variations could be about 300 per cent even after eliminating the extreme values on either side.

Percentage distribution of fishing trips by wage ranges is presented in Table 2. Rs. 1 to 50 represented the median range. This range of wages account for the largest percentage of total fishing trips not only in aggregate terms but also for each craft individually. Of the 904 fishing trips made by the seven crafts put together, 441 trips fall within the wage range Rs. 1 to 50 accounting for 48.8% of the total. It can be observed from Table 2 that this wage range accounts for 40.5% to 71% of the fishing trips of each craft individually. This percentage does not exceed 25 for any other wage range for any craft highlighting the tendency of fishery wages to be between Rs. 1 and 50. Fortunes of fishermen thus depend upon the higher wages accruing from 35% of the fishing trips. Two out of every three trips return marginal or no wages for fishermen.

Table 3 displays the distribution of total wage earnings of fishermen by the eight wage ranges. More than 55%

Table 2. Percentage distribution of fishing trips by wage ranges

Wage ranges Rs.	Craft A	Craft B	Craft C	Craft D	Craft E	Craft F	Craft G	Total
0	14.3	12.4	15.2	27.8	15.6	18.0	0	16.2
1-50	55.2	40.5	64.1	56.1	40.6	40.0	71.1	48.8
51-100	16.3	25.0	12.4	10.3	21.3	21.2	13.3	18.3
101-150	10.2	10.3	5.0	3.2	9.4	12.2	9.0	8.5
151-200	2.0	9.2	2.0	1.6	5.0	4.0	2.2	4.4
201-250	-	1.6	0	0	3.7	-	2.2	1.2
251-300	-	0.5	1.3	1.0	0.6	1.0	2.2	0.8
> 300	2.0	0.5	0	0	3.8	3.6	0	1.8

(23.8+18.0+13.6) of the wage earnings come from 31% of the trips that fall within 3 wage ranges of Rs.51-100, 101-150 and 151-200. The still higher ranges that account for a mere 3.8% of the trips provide the fishermen 21.6% of their wages. In contrast, the first two wage ranges which account for 65% of the trips fetch a meagre 23% of the total wage earnings for the period. The disproportion between work and wage is starkly visible as 21.6% of the wages were obtained from 3.8% of the trips as against 23% of the wages from 65% of the trips. The difference in trips is more than 1:16 for almost the same wages.

In a given area of operation, familiarity and technological parity would ensure that the poorer and richer trips are some-

what evenly shared by men on board different crafts. Plausibility of this supposition is not supported by the data available (Tables 1-3). While all crafts except G post zero wages, with a dismal evenness at the low earnings, their payment of highest wages vary by huge margins. Unevenness of the highest wages is so drastic as between Rs. 260 for craft C and Rs. 1,150 for craft E (Table 1). Three of the seven crafts post the highest wages of above Rs. 600 and the rest post less than Rs. 313. This shows that the difference could be of a high magnitude between two better wages earned by members of different crew. The same uneven distribution of higher wages is reflected in Table 3. Of an amount of Rs. 7,023 aggregated by the wage range of > Rs. 300, crafts E and F alone accounts for Rs.

Table 3. Distribution of earnings of ring seine crew by wage ranges

Wage ranges Rs.	Craft A		Craft B		Craft C		Craft D		Craft E		Craft F		Craft G		Total	
	Rs.	%	Rs.	%	Rs.	%	Rs.	%	Rs.	%	Rs.	%	Rs.	%	Rs.	%
0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
1-50	630	27.0	2444	17.8	2405	42.2	1962	48.1	2028	16.2	2115	16.3	807	32.0	12391	23.0
51-100	545	23.3	4075	29.6	1399	24.6	920	22.6	2465	19.8	2935	22.7	490	19.4	12829	23.8
101-150	680	29.1	2395	17.4	840	14.8	495	12.1	1825	14.6	2905	22.4	520	20.6	9660	18.0
151-200	168	7.2	3245	23.6	530	9.3	400	9.8	1345	10.8	1490	11.5	155	6.2	7332	13.6
201-250	0	0.0	700	5.0	0	0.0	0	-	1355	10.9	0	0.0	250	9.9	2305	4.3
251-300	0	0.0	300	2.2	520	9.1	300	7.4	270	2.2	580	4.5	300	11.9	2270	4.2
> 300	313	13.4	688	4.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	3190	25.5	2920	22.6	0	0.0	7023	13.2
Total	2380	100.0	13759	100.0	5694	100.0	4077	100.0	12478	100.0	12945	100.0	2522	100.0	53811	100.0

Table 4. Distribution of trips by extremes of wages

Craft	Total number of trips	Trips with wages $\geq$ Rs. 100, %	Trips with wages = 0, %
A	49	14.3	14.3
B	185	29.6	12.4
C	145	8.0	15.2
D	126	6.3	27.8
E	160	27.0	15.6
F	194	22.0	18.0
G	45	18.0	0.0
	904	19.4	16.2

6,110, i.e., 87% of the total for the seven crafts. Again, the lone craft of E accounts for 58% of the high wages within the range of Rs. 201-250. Frequency and magnitude of higher wages from fewer trips do not show an evenness of distribution among

higher extremes of wages the above evenness is singularly lacking. One pair of crafts B and E have a substantial percentage of high wage trips with 29.6 and 27, followed by the pair F and G with 22 and 18, A with 14.3 and a pair C and D with 8 and 6.39, respectively (Table 4). Thus the extremes of high wages for different crafts are highly uneven in their distribution, ranging between 6.3 and 29%.

Trips with two extremes of wages viz., those with zero wages and those with wage $>$ Rs. 100 are classified craft-wise and month-wise and presented in Table 5. Of the 176 trips that yielded high wages of above Rs. 100, 114 trips fell on a time segment of 5 months between May and September. Thus 65% of the high wage trips took place during these five months

Table 5. Month-wise distribution of high and low wage trips

Craft	A		B		C		D		E		F		G	
Month	Wages	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100	Rs. 0.0 Rs. $\geq$ 100
January	Nil	Nil	Nil	3	1	Nil	1	Nil	2	2	2	3	Nil	Nil
February	Nil	Nil	1	3	Nil	Nil	4	Nil	Nil	4	1	1	Nil	Nil
March	Nil	Nil	Nil	8	1	Nil	Nil	Nil	1	2	3	1	Nil	Nil
April	Nil	2	Nil	4	1	Nil	3	1	1	4	4	Nil	Nil	Nil
May	Nil	1	4	Nil	1	Nil	1	1	3	12	3	4	Nil	Nil
June	4	2	2	4	2	Nil	2	4	3	11	2	3	Nil	2
July	1	1	2	8	2	7	3	2	3	5	2	6	Nil	3
August	1	Nil	5	6	6	3	4	Nil	4	1	7	8	Nil	2
September	1	1	3	8	3	1	5	Nil	Nil	1	2	6	Nil	1
October	Nil	Nil	5	2	3	1	6	Nil	2	Nil	3	6	Nil	Nil
November	Nil	1	1	8	1	Nil	6	Nil	1	1	2	3	Nil	Nil
December	Nil	Nil	Nil	1	1	Nil	4	Nil	5	Nil	4	Nil	Nil	Nil

crews attached to different crafts. The distribution pattern of trips by extremes of wages is summarised in Table 4. Percentage by of trips with zero wage have a remarkable closeness among different crafts. They varied between a narrow range of 12.4% to 18% with the lone exception of craft D. Crafts return empty-handed not less than once in every seven trips. At

qualifying it to be described as good season. Paradoxically, 55% of the zero wage trips also fell within the same five month period. Extreme wages in fisheries tended to concentrate within the same time segment qualifying for the description of a good season. Therefore, seasonality of catch is not a strong factor in explaining the extremes of wages.

A word in explanation of the paradox is in order. When the catch possibilities are low during lean season, fishermen take out lesser trips, minimising the chances of extremely low wages. In very good seasons as understood by good catches fishermen undertake more trips. Zero wages do not deter them as high wage trips are almost as frequent as the zero wage trips. They are prepared to take more chances, for a given evidence of good catch. As a result, zero catches and high wage catches tend to concentrate during better catching seasons.

For a given work effort, wage realized in ring seine fisheries vary by significant margins. Familiarity with ground and technological parity have not brought

about an evenness of work-wage relationships. More than the lower average wages, their fluctuation between crew and between seasons accentuates the economic hardship of wage earning fishermen. Unlike the generally held view, extremes of wages between trips are not explained by seasonality of catch. The tendency of the extreme wages to concentrate during good season suggests that the uneven work-wage relationship is an inherent aspect of traditional ring seine fisheries.

References

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