

The market – meanings and life (Draft Do not Cite)

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Abstract:

This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted in the Udupi fish market (central market) between February 2016 and November 2016. In this paper I examine the Udupi fisherwomen's association that I have in an earlier article (Thara, 2016¹) studied as an example of a solidarity economy practice, as these women collectively mobilise through a democratic process of deliberation, and work together to protect their livelihoods from capture by larger fish shops. In this paper, I propose a critical analysis of solidarity economy practices, that are often celebrated in literature as emancipatory, suggesting that a more nuanced detailing of the internal workings of such solidarity economy initiatives, reveal entrenched hierarchies and the frustrations women face in aligning their personal objectives of accumulation alongwith collective objectives of redistribution. Through detailed ethnographic material, I focus on how women think about their work, the meanings they give to choosing to sell fish, their choice of autonomy over dependence, the anxieties of selling and of competition with others and their efforts to live good lives. I look specifically at entrenched hierarchies, with big sellers who are often more politically powerful, representing them and leading the association. I examine the frustrations of small sellers, who both envy and despise the big sellers, lending more value to their own hard earned money, not easy money that big sellers make. Through close interactions with small sellers and many months of participant observation, I argue that the objective of redistribution that solidarity economy practices such as these formally claim, are troubled by the contradicting desires of women, torn between collective objectives of solidarity and individual desires to accumulate through higher profits. Within the dominant framework of the market, in which selling more enables higher accumulation, the solidarity of such associations is fragile and fraught with tensions between ideologies of redistribution and accumulation on the one hand, and practices of solidarity and individual profits on the other. Coming back to the emancipatory potential of such initiatives, I argue that solidarity economy practices that are often largely populated by women often serve to enforce forms of voluntarism and collective benefit on women, thus resulting in the paradox of associations that on the one hand are meant to free women, but through redistribution entrench them in poor paying low income work.

¹ Thara, Kaveri. "Protecting caste livelihoods on the western coast of India: an intersectional analysis of Udupi's fisherwomen." *Environment and Urbanization* 28.2 (2016): 423-436.

Markets – freedoms & anxieties

The fisherwomen of Udupi, are Mogaveeras and shudras in the caste hierarchy. They continue to carry out their traditional occupation even to this day and have had to mobilise to protect their livelihoods from competition from corporate establishments in the area. In 2010 they formed an association and negotiated with the district commissioner to ensure that no shop licences would be provided to fish shops in Udupi district. Today I will present my research in Udupi's central fish market, which includes 35 qualitative interviews that include 12 life histories, apart from ethnographic research, including observation and participant observation in 2016. The market I worked in was established in the 1950s informally when some women began to sell fish at a spot close to the central bus station. Prior to the establishment of markets, fisherwomen would sell fish from home to home under what was called the 'kyeka' system. Under this system each Mogaveera household was linked to a group of upper caste households, and fisherwomen in these households exchanged fish for rice with the assigned households. The relations between these families went back to several generations and women often speak of the keka households in kinship terms due to their longstanding relationships. Often the barter of fish for rice, also included other services such as agricultural work and domestic support provided by Mogaveera women in times of need. Reciprocity was built into these relations with fisherwomen and men employed by kyeka households during the monsoons. Fisherwomen developed and continued to maintain relationships with their kyeka families even after moving to the market. 3 of the 35 women for example spoke of helping their keka families in need – during pregnancies and childbirth, marriages, ill health, etc. In exchange for their services, women spoke of receiving loans and other material support during periods of crisis or need.

In the 1980s with increased transportation and autorickshaws and the possibility of selling fish outside Udupi, the price of fish began to rise. This coincided with nutritional discourses on fish as healthy and fish oil as beneficial. With improved roads and increased modes of transportation Udupi began to receive more tourists, apart from the increasing number of students enrolling into the Manipal University. Fish that was earlier thrown away on roadsides now suddenly was in demand. With the increasing demand for fish, women began to sell fish in the market and over a period of time gave up their kyeka households. With a bounded and static place of selling, the market came to replace barter with money, and caste relations with new market relations. The nature of the activity also changed, women who walked or travelled several miles to barter their fish for rice, now began to use autorickshaws to transport their fish to the market.

In one of the interviews with an older woman she explained, that she had to struggle hard to feed her children when she practiced the kyeka, and that with the market she

did not have to worry about that. She then added, that in the market she continues to be stressed about selling at a decent price. The market allowed women to set a price for their fish, something they had no control over earlier as kyeka men determined the terms of barter. As women could not barter with other families assigned to other fisherwomen, they had little room for negotiating prices. In the market, they could now determine the price and negotiate with customers. With access to subsidised food and other necessities in the market, they no longer had difficulty feeding their children who were now increasingly sent to school. The shift to the market signified freedom from relations of power and control. As one fisherwoman put it:

'In this work, I am my own master, I am happy that this is my own business, I don't have to work under anyone else'

This freedom is not only from the hierarchies or caste, but from other forms of power, control and dependency. While wage work often provides similar or sometimes higher earnings, women prefer selling fish to other types of work. As one woman pointed out to me, I as a teacher was answerable to my employer, while she was her own boss. Though it symbolised new freedoms from caste and feudal relationships, the market also brought with it new anxieties – and the constant search for 'profits'. Amongst the fisherwomen, the use of the terms 'profit' and 'loss' are frequent and a good 'profit' is often celebrated with a visit to a nearby sweet stall or a bakery – with special treats taken home for the family. One fisherwoman told me, that if she had a particularly good week, she would take the children out on one of the evenings and buy them anything they asked for, anything, doesn't matter what it is, 'to feel happy and make them feel happy' she said. Profits thus signify celebration and loss signifies more work. Loss has to be compensated, said one of the fisherwomen.

'If I make a loss on one day, I have to make up the next day. So the next day I will buy more fish, and try very hard to get a great price for it. It should compensate for the previous day's loss. If it doesn't I have to continue until it is compensated. It often is.. though it takes some time.'

When women have to make up for losses, they often buy more the next day and spend longer hours at the market selling their wares. The anxieties over being able to put food on the table, continues to persist, even if the form has changed from rice to money. The stress over receiving enough rice is now replaced by the stress over receiving enough money. While their quality of life has improved, new forms of consumption have also taken root amongst them. As one fisherwoman explained to me, her son had forced her to invest in a new car that costs almost twice what I had spent on mine recently. They had taken a bank loan but now she was worried about repaying the monthly instalments. Children who now go to schools and colleges are constantly comparing themselves to other children and demands for automobiles or cars emerge significantly from the majority of the interviews (20). Consumption is also mapped within the market, with new acquisitions proudly announced and shared with other women. A new saree purchased during the afternoon is passed around, examined and price discussed. New

bed sheets for the house, do the rounds. A new rice pot for the kitchen is carefully examined and women make calculations on when they can buy one. As women compete to sell fish, they also compete to lead better lives, and consumption is the most visible marker of a good life.

Money, work and morality

Women desire wealth and are often comparing themselves to big sellers who wear more jewellery, own property or boats. In the Udupi main market about 10 women possess boats and these women can be visually marked apart as they wear more gold than the others. Perceptions of accumulation are however complex and oscillate between desire and disdain. Small sellers, those who make just enough to feed their families and educate their children, don't have the capital or the networks to become big sellers themselves. Big sellers often spend large amounts of money each day – between 25,000 – 50,000 to buy fish, and sell to regular customers – most often restaurants in the vicinity and some irregular customers – such as individuals from upper class families. Both the quality and quantity of fish sold by small sellers is inferior to the big sellers. Because big sellers are also big buyers at the auction and can command better prices, they also frequently supply fish to the small sellers. Because of the volume of their work and the higher income they generate, big sellers employ others to help them in their business. Their conditions of life and work are thus starkly different from small sellers. Big sellers thus have access to more free time and thus the ability to engage in political work, mobilising networks and support for the fisherwomen's association. The most powerful fisherwoman in Udupi, heads the fisherwomen's association and is also on the board of several other fisheries associations. Small sellers are aware of the power she exercises and are cautious with her despite their own frustrations about leadership. In the 2016 election to select the leadership in the association, I could sense the resentment and frustration amongst some of the women. As one woman commented softly, what is the point of voting when you know only she has the time and resources to travel, attend meetings and run the association.

Big sellers are powerful and are to be pandered to, and yet big sellers are almost immoral. One day as I waited for a fisherwomen to complete her sales to take a video interview we had scheduled that afternoon, the woman sitting next to her said to me, oh you have to wait she is a big seller. To this the woman I was waiting for became very enraged and began yelling asking her what she meant when she said big seller? What did it mean? Did she see the basket before her? Was that big sales? Was she making so much money? Was she so rich? Was she rolling in wealth? Why then did she have to come here and sell? The term big seller was suddenly an accusation, of wealth improperly gained, of greed, of bad money. There is an underlying resentment of the large gap between small and big sellers, while the small sellers struggle to accumulate, the big sellers they share the market with, are able to make a lot more money in much less time. Big sellers often finish selling by the afternoon while small sellers struggle to sell their baskets of fish till the evenings and most often till the night. It is not just money

that they have accumulated to become big sellers, but also a set of relationships with customers, politicians and local land owners, that bring together financial capital and social and political capital that enables them to continue accumulating. In this context, a big seller is viewed as immoral – a state brought about by an excess of money and other types of capital that the small sellers can never access. The market as a place thus exacerbates these hierarchies, as they are more visible and witnessed and experienced publicly. That money should come so easily despite lesser labour is often spoken about in interviews. The money that small sellers make is thus qualitatively different from the money that big sellers make. It is hard earned money, while the money that big sellers make is easy money, the money of the wealthy, the rich.

Money acquires its qualities from the labours that it encapsulates, hard earned money is thus money that is imbued with certain moral qualities, that easy money cannot attract. One of the fisherwomen explained to me that it takes a lot of work to make the small amounts of money she makes at the end of her day. She has to wake up very early each morning at 4 and bathe, cook and clean her home before she leaves to the harbour at 7 to buy her fish. Tiffin boxes have to be packed for her children and herself, and everything has to be ready for the evening meal when she returns after work. After the auctions she arrives at the market early each morning and leaves everyday in the evening before 5 if she is lucky and has managed to sell all her fish. If not, she sits till late at night until her basket is empty. Very rarely she will pack fish with ice, to sell next morning. It's a lot of hard, physical work.

'Our lives, Mogaveera lives are very difficult, it is so difficult that if we recount it even God will feel sad. We have to work and make a life like the others, bring up our children... what to do'

Selling fish is spoken of as work essential for the reproduction of their families. Here reproductive work does not only include domestic work but also productive work undertaken in the market. These roles of mother and provider are seamlessly interwoven in the discourses on fisherwomen by fishermen as well as customers buying from them. In an interview with a Mogaveera fisherman, he consistently spoke of the fisherwomen as feeding her children and feeding the community, by providing fresh fish in the market. If supermarkets come into business this would mean that people don't get fresh fish anymore. With refrigeration there is no saying how fresh the fish is. With fisherwomen selling fresh catch bought each morning from the harbour, they were assuring the freshness of the fish. In this sense, fisherwomen are providing a service to the community, he argued.

These narratives that gender the work of selling fish, making what is an economic activity seem almost like a domestic one, result in gendered policies that view this work as requiring limited protection or support from the state. While Mogaveera fishermen have access to a range of benefits from the state, fisherwomen are not considered for similar support. Fishermen working on boats are entitled to compensation during the monsoons, while fisherwomen do not have access to such compensation. This points to

the recognition of fishing as work, and the lack of recognition of women's work, which is more a service than work in itself - a service due to their families and the community, by virtue of being women. It is here distinguished from a service that is paid for and constitutes a service that is more in the nature of an obligation, something women render for a low price, by virtue of being women and not as economic agents. The local fish market is thus not a space of big business, unlike the fishing boats that are crucial for exports and assures state revenues. It is more a space in which livelihoods are eked out. Fishermen who have transitioned into owning boats and factories, have access to a range of state benefits including diesel & electricity subsidies, while the new modern fish markets built by the state for fisherwomen have no such benefits. To the contrary, investment in these constructions is recovered through monthly rents.

The lack of any social protection to cover sickness, dips in business or other crisis, means that small sellers are bound to the market. The market is thus a space that comes to mean many things for them. It is a space that is precarious, a space in which one can lose money, make losses, but also a space in which a decent livelihood can be made. As one fisherwoman explained, when she takes a holiday, she keeps thinking of the others who have gone to work, that they made some money, that she could have made some money too.

'It is the desire to make more money that pulls me back.... the 1st of each month is a holiday because the boats don't work on this day, that's why the association meetings are held on this day, its because of this that we take a holiday ... left to ourselves we would store the previous day's fish in ice and sell on the 1st too.... now as we are members of the association and we have the meetings, we don't sell on the 1st..... apart from this one day, we work on other days, unless we are sick or we have any other social event that we cant avoid... otherwise everyone wants to be here... to work.... to make more money.....'

While the capitalist market provides no protection from risk or losses, the market still provides women with support from other women. Linked to each other through kinship and communal ties, women selling in Udupi's market make close friendships and relationships that seem to provide respite from the ravages of capital. Even if they compete with each other to sell fish, often trying to empty their baskets before their friends, there is a sense of security in the relationships they make here. Women support each other in times of need, helping others in the market sell their fish. Shopping expeditions are made to get the best deal to help other women buy scales or weights. When a woman goes out to run errands in the afternoon, her friend often sells the fish in her basket if a regular customer passes by. Women buy fruit and share it amongst each other. When a woman is striking a bad deal, her neighbour reminds her that she should not. News of harassing customers is passed around so women are careful while dealing with them. A solidarity that functions informally through friendships functions to keep women together and unified during times of need. This inherent solidarity makes it possible for the formal association to mobilise against the state. During the monthly

meetings, women come together and set aside their other differences to unite to protect their livelihoods. Even if the interests of big sellers are different from those of small sellers, they still stand united to protect the market from corporates. It is this inherent, almost organic solidarity that enables them to work together and to adopt a single representational form irrespective of other differences.

Conclusion

While it is tempting to end with a thesis that these women have successfully resisted the capitalist system, locating this practice within a larger set of institutional practices and structures pushes me to ask another question. What is the function of fisherwomen within the larger capitalist economy? As I have shown earlier, Mogaveera men benefit heavily from state support in both fishing and fishing related industries. On the other hand, fisherwomen receive little support and are made to pay for the markets built by the state. This reinforces hierarchies and patriarchies both between men and women and between fisherwomen themselves. In a capitalist context, it reinforces women's marginalisation within the economy. The refusal to engage in the improvement of women's livelihoods, through the provision of refrigeration, subsidised electricity in modern fish markets, packaging & storage facilities and the tools and equipment that can improve the work of cleaning and selling fish, reveals a capitalist logic that appropriates existing patriarchies to maintain women's work outside the logics of accumulation. Capitalism thus creates and maintains these spaces of respite and controlled progression, where a low tech, low resourced occupation allows citizen consumers to buy fish at the lowest possible prices, while the capitalist logic flourishes through big sellers. This responds to consumers who want fish at the lowest possible price, something profit oriented enterprises cannot ensure. The mobilisation and solidarities of fisherwomen in protecting their livelihoods defies the logics of capitalism as it places collective livelihoods above private profits. And yet their everyday lives, their desires and practices in the market reveal the underlying tensions between these alternative economies and the dominant mode of economic life. It shows us how desires of accumulation and profits are slowly instilled, thus transforming the very fabric of economic life. The market thus signifies freedom from some forms of power and control while subjecting them to others.