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The Rediff Special/ George Iype

In Kerala, mobile phones are ringing on the high seas. Instead of creating the much feared digital divide between the rich and the poor, cellular phone companies in this southern state have carved out a new business class: 'the mobile fishermen.'

For the past 26 years as a fisherman, Vettath Shankaran used to rely on memory and luck for his daily catch that made his family's both ends meet. No longer! Now Shankaran no longer simply navigate the waters to find his daily catch. Technology has stepped in, changing his fishing habits drastically.

These days, before Shankaran sets out to the seas, he spends a few minutes analyzing the satellite data dished out through the Global Positioning System, a sophisticated satellite information tracking system, installed in his boat.

"Three of my friends and I invested around Rs 60,000 for this new technology. Since then our daily catch has increased and we no longer waste our time and diesel. GPS identifies the potential fishing grounds and we go there only to fish," points out Shankaran, adding, "All these years we relied on memory and luck for our daily catch. Now technology does it for us."

The GPS receiver fitted on Shankaran's fishing trawler receives signals from a complex satellite network -- the Navistar Satellite Constellation, a group of 32 satellites out of which at least four are visible at any time anywhere on earth -- that gives exact location of the fish in terms of latitudes and longitude. The satellite's acoustic signals are transmitted underwater and the signals bounce back when they hit potential fishing zones. The GPS computes the distance and bearing of the fish shoal and find out several potential locations before the fishermen set out to the seas. This data is made available through the GPS received on the trawler.

"It may be a complex technology beyond our knowledge. But we are happy that it is working fine for us," says Shankaran's associate Christopher Dasan.

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Once their daily catch is in the boat, Shankaran, Dasan, and their colleague P K Elias take out their Nokia handset and begin bargaining from the seas. Calls are immediately made to distant areas like Kottayam, Malappuram, and Trichur to strike up the best deals for selling their daily catch. "We strike the deal as soon as we catch the fish so that by the time we reach the shores, our business deal has been settled," he says.

"If you set out from Kochi, you can negotiate with agents in Kottayam from the sea itself, fix the deal, and divert your catch there directly. Often the agents come in their boats to the sea and take away our catch while we continue fishing," Dasan says. "We sell in highly competitive rates to the retail agents because trading in the seas saves us lots of money," he adds.

Elias agrees: "Business is quick and easy because of the mobile phones and the GPS. We are able to do wonderful business these days."

So much so that when the hundreds of fishing boats and motorized canoes set out every day from various shores in Kochi, Kozhikode, Kannur, Alappuzha, and Thiruvananthapuram, fishermen now wrap their cell phones in polythene sheets along with their food, fuel and potable water.

Kerala boasts the highest cellular phone penetration after the metropolitan cities of New Delhi and Mumbai, according to the telecom ministry, and the mobile phones are changing the life-styles of fishermen. "These little gadgets are not the status symbols of big businessmen and executives in Kerala. Every month, nearly 10 per cent of our mobile phone connections are lapped up by the fishing community," points out V G Somasekhar, chief operating officer, Escotel, one of the major cellular operators in the state.

Escotel and its rival BPL are cultivating the unusual fish market segment so seriously that they have even appointed separate marketing executives to cater to the fishing community and have introduced specials schemes exclusively for fishermen.

BPL officials disclosed that 10 out of every 100 customers of BPL Mobile are fishermen. "We estimate that in two years time we will be able to add some 20,000 fishermen to our subscriber base," a senior BPL executive said. "Fishermen are now hooked to the technology because they have realized the immense potential of mobile phones and GPS," he added.

Both BPL Mobile and Escotel cell sites cover the 600-km coastal strip and reaches 25 kilometers out into the sea.

Joseph Xavier, secretary, Kerala Mechanised Fishing Boat Operators Association, says the mobile phones have changed the fishing business in the state. "Earlier it used to be a hard business with lots of risks. Now technology has made fishing an easy and highly profitable business," he points out.

With new cellular players like Air Tel launching its services in Kerala, the mobile marketing to lure the fishermen is on a high pitch these days. "Kerala is one of India's leading maritime states. More than 30 per cent of the country's nearly one million active fishermen are in Kerala. So there is a huge potential for mobile companies here," points out fish exporter Alex Kurien.

Design: Rajesh Karkera

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