



Social

FISHERWOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT: SOME REFLECTIONS FROM KERALA ‘EXPERIENCES’

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Abstract

Kerala, southern fringe of India has different story of development from the rest of Indian states. The implementation of different policies by the government has been resulted in the betterment of different marginalized communities, especially in the case of women empowerment. For women empowerment, state government has initiated many programs with the support of other local bodies including government and non-government organizations like Kudumbashree program, Gender park etc. It has created many opportunities for women to come forward to main stream of the society and engaging in many public activities. This paper is an attempt to look at state sponsored program for fisher women empowerment called ‘Society for Assistance to Fisherwomen’ (SAF), for uplift of fisherwomen, with the support of both secondary material and ground reality. This paper also discusses about development model of Kerala with special focus on women empowerment.

Keywords: Kerala Development; Women Empowerment; Society for Assistance to Fisherwomen.

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1. Introduction

Kerala, the southern fringe of Indian sub-continent is very different from the rest of Indian states for its social development indicators, which reflected in living standard of the community. Development Model or development experience ‘of Kerala (KMD) has been compared with many other developed’ and under developed countries, for example, life expectancy of Keralites is 70 and life expectancy of America 72, and birth rate of America and Kerala is 18 and 16 respectively (Panikar 1979: 1804, Veron 2001: 605).

Like many of other Indian states, Kerala was considered as one of the most backward states of the country (Devika 2010:799). Political dominance of both left democratic front (LDF) and united democratic front (UDF) and their regular ruling out from the power resulted in competition among political alliances either to implement or promote programs for developing

and improving living condition of people (Steur 2009: 221, Öktem 2012:314). In each electoral manifesto, both political alliances tried to highlight and give priority to the community development policies (Sato 2004:292). Apart from this Kerala has socially and politically well-organized society, stand for their development rights under different political and social organizations which contributes to the state (Nag 1989: 418).

In this paper, I will discuss about the role of development in Upliftment of fisher women who are considered as outlier from development process of the state. For purpose of the analysis, this paper has been divided in to five parts. First part is introduction to current paper. Second part will discuss on how Kerala has been labeled as 'model of development' for the rest of Indian states. Third part will be a glance on women development programs initiated by state government. Fourth part of this paper will be discussed on how fishing community became part of mainstream of the society by the implementation of Society for Assistance to fisherwomen (SAF) at a great level by engaging various income generating activities. Final part of paper will be summary and conclusion with some recommendations.

2. Methodology

As mentioned earlier, this article is mainly based on primary resources like personal interviews, newspaper reports, government offices. Personal interviews have been conducted during 2015-16 in coastal area of Punthura village in Thiruvananthapuram District –the capital district of state-. Fishing and fishing related activities are main source of income. 94 respondents have interviewed including group interviews. Along with primary data, secondary resources also used in this article like journal article, book etc.

3. Why Kerala is a Model for Development

Kerala has been called as a -political laboratory of India-¹ where many development activities were experimented from the formation of the state by different political alliances for improvements of living conditions of people with the implementation of welfare schemes by minimum expenditure of low per-capita income and maximum utilizing social capital. By the last quarter of 20th century, Kerala became a model in terms of its development for rest of Indian states and comparable with many developed and developing countries. Development experience of Kerala was a puzzle for policy experts as the improvements in the living standard of Keralites have taken place within low per capita income but without rapid economic growth. It was widely accepted assumption among development experts that development is not possible without economic growth (Parayil 2000:1). Maintaining or improving material quality of people's life in terms of education, health and social security within low per capita are the main features of Kerala development experience. But, when it is compared with many other states of India, Kerala is in very low position either in terms of per capita income or health facilities and pension payment.

¹ This term coined by K.Raman Pillai in his article 'Politics of Kerala' published by The Indian Journal of Political Science' in 1987.

Compared to other Indian states, Kerala has unique model for rest in terms of its sustainable development attempts. In a broader sense, sustainability has considered not only on the environmental issues but also focused on improving living standards of people with minimum use of both natural and material resources with low per-capita income. Though Kerala has placed very backward income state than many other states of India, quality of Keralites has been compared with life quality of high-income countries like America and many third world countries (Franke and Chasin 2000).

From the vantage point of regional disparities of the state, south and central parts of Kerala has its place in development process from early 19th century onwards than northern part of Kerala under Travancore and Cochin rulers. Arrival of missionaries and foreign traders to Kerala opened door of knowledge to natives of Travancore and Cochin.² They promoted compulsory primary education for all section of society including untouchables which helped to tackle literacy problem of first generation of Kerala and even it created opportunities of government jobs even for lower section of communities as well (Kannan and Vijayamohanam 2004:32). Under Travancore dynasty, in 1901 total number of school was more than three thousand. They promoted not only government school but also allowed grants for private school. So, various christen groups and other social groups established schools in southern part of Kerala during 19th century, even they opened special school for girls (Tharakan 1984). Women ruler from Travancore dynasty named Rani Gouri Parvathi Bai³ issued a historical proclamation on about rolling back all kinds of fee in government school running under Travancore territory. Besides *Ayurveda* and indigenous medical system (Naattuvaydyam), Travancore and Cochin administrators introduced European model of health care system during period of 1811, which helped Kerala to improve health care system more transparent and more effective (Kannan and Vijayamohanam 2004:32). The active participation of community in public debate, having political awareness and keeping consciousness about the rights and duties make Kerala as different one and it helped somewhat Kerala to be model development for rest of Indian states.

Land reform bill of state government was very important footstep in state's development process. When E.M.S Namboodiripad³ came to power government has passed land reform bill in legislative assembly within one week (Ramachandran 2000:98 and Moolakkattu 2007:87) and the bill was known as Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill⁴. It has helped many of low caste people to own the lands with the help of state government subsidies on land prices that caused for their socio-economic developments and at greater level and brought them to the main stream of society at large extent (Franke and Chasin 2000:24).

Like elsewhere in India, Kerala also witnessed that socially promoted customs and practices on the basis of social hierarchies worked as great enemies of social development (Ramachandran 2000:100). But Keralites had broken up these social barriers with massive social actions. Social

² (See, The Hindu newspaper link: <http://www.thehindu.com/2001/01/09/stories/05092523.htm> accessed on 10/12/2016).

³ Comrade Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran Namboodiripad popularly known as EMS Nambudiripad (1909-1998) is one of the founder leader of communist party in India and first Chief Minister of the Kerala state. During his bachelor studies, he left Kerala to join in freedom struggle and jailed in Satyagraha movement and he fought against caste system during his formal education (see official website of communist party of India <http://cpim.org/content/e-m-s-namboodiripad> accessed on 10/01/2016).

⁴ (See Kerala state government official web portal http://kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3668&Itemid=2959, accessed on 10/12/2016).

movements in Kerala during the period of 1920's and 1930's played momentous role in elating living standards of peoples. Similar to other part of the country, Social movements in Kerala during early 20th century was mainly against social evils especially related to women rights like ban of widow remarriages, sati and lack of educational opportunities for them (Manmathan 2013). Matrilineal tradition of state played a crucial role in balancing gender gap in state as women headed family was very common in Kerala among Nayar community and even among Ezhava community (Alexander 2000:152, Kannan 2000:57).

In short, in terms of social development indicators, Kerala has progressive improvements in comparison to rest of Indian states and many developed countries. Political freedom and social opportunities of state in terms of educational access and public health facilities helped the state to be a model of development (Sen 2000: 44).

4. Empowering Women: A Kerala Experiences

Kerala has a successful history of community empowerments, especially for women by implementing various flagship programs introduced by both government and non-governmental organizations. Kerala has taken historical footstep by introducing the concept of 'Gender Park' under initiatives of department of social justice of the state government to bring together state, academicians and civil society in a platform to address gender related issues. It aims to generate space for women to come forward to mainstream of society by providing both income - generating activities and skill oriented training programs like opening small business ventures, She -Taxi is one of the important initiatives of Gender Park.⁵ Even there are many women empowerment programs which has been discussed some of them above among these program 'Kudumbashree' program became more popular and it became a turning point in the history of the state.⁶ Kudumbashree program aimed for eradication of poverty with the participation of women across the state and many women came to mainstream of community (Williams, Devika and Aandahl 2015:1119). This mission has started as a pilot project named as 'Community Development Society' (CDS), which implemented in two districts of Malappuram and Alappuzha, and then government initiated to scale up this program at state level (Devika and Thampi 2007:35). Now the function of the mission have spread in whole districts of the state covered more than 51percentage of households and crossed 41 lakh members and state government providing grants, subsidies and bank loans according to different endeavor of Kudumbashree.⁷ In the year of 2015-2015, government gave 877.63 lakh as subsidy and grant and awarded amount of 1,280-core rupees loan for different Kudumbashree units (Economic Review 2015: 88). The successful history of this mission with its grass root level participation of people from different region of state helped the government to implement various poverty eradication programs like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

⁵ (See official website of gender park <http://genderpark.gov.in>; accessed on 13/12/2016).

⁶ *Kudumbashree* is poverty alleviation policy of state government through the participation of women under the department of local governance of state government. It is compound of kudumbam+ shree', which means 'she is prosperity of the family'. The mission statement of this program is eradication of Poverty within ten year by empowering women. Program launched in 1998 (see official website of *Kumbashree* program. The structure of this program is different functional body from neighborhood groups to ministry level. <http://www.kudumbashree.org/?q=vision> accessed on 09/03/16).

⁷ (See official website of Kudumbashree <http://www.kudumbashree.org/?q=home> accessed on 13/12/16).

(Williams, Thampi, et al. 2012:990) and Basic Service to Urban Poor (BSUP),⁸ Rajeev Awasojana (RAY).⁹ Beside these programs, Kudumbashree worked as medium of government to organize different programs like conducting various state government awareness programs related to health, education and etc. (Economic Review 2015). Recently state government ministry has decided to recruit women employs from Kudumbashree for Kochi metro in various departments like cleanings, parking areas, restaurants etc. In short, Kerala has projected as model for other Indian states interims empowering women with implementation of various projects and policies especially in case of women.

5. Fisherwomen in Development: Reflection from Kerala ‘Experience’

Someone may ask if there is successful history of Kudumbashree program they why SAF? Even though Kerala has successful impact of women empowerment by initiatives of Kudumbashree program, it has criticized for it exclusionary pattern of project implementations (Shihabudheen 2013:16). People from certain community were not able enjoy benefits these group activities because of their existing social conditions and it also reflected in allocation of financial support from government financial institutions and faced discrimination from the society in the cases of distributions of profits (Williams, et al. 2011:1278). Fishing communities are one of among these groups; they were not able to enjoy fruits of these projects at greater level according to geographical conditions of this community. Living at the fringe of geographical setting with the ownership of small amount of the land and lack of educational attainments and social positions pushed them from developmental activities of the state, they were considered as outlier from development of the state (Kurien 2000:178). Many Projects, which implemented through Kudumbashree programs was not applicable in coastal areas due to lack of community interest to mingle with other communities and lack of skill oriented women form fishing communities.¹⁰

From last couple of years, Society for Assistance to Fisherwomen (SAF) has a great role in enhancing socio economic condition of fisherwomen of the state.¹¹ SAF is registered organization under Travancore Cochin literary and charitable societies Act. This organization came into existence for betterment of fisher women in Kerala after the destruction thousands of fishermen community by the tsunami in 2004 in coastal area of Kerala, many of them lost their lives, houses and means of livelihood.¹² There are many initiatives running under this program like Vembanad project and Theeramythri program. These enterprises are aimed the Upliftment of this community and eradication of poverty from fishing folks by collective actions like

⁸ Basic service to urban poor (BSUP) is a central government sponsored program aiming to wipe out the poverty form Indian urban space. Project can be implemented with the support of state government and government will provide housing for poor urban residents (see official website of Kudumbashree <http://www.kudumbashree.org/?q=bsup> accessed on 13/12/16.)

⁹ Rajeev Gandhi national AwasYojana (RAY) is fully fledged program by central government India. Mission of this program is poverty alleviation from the urban areas of India aiming from 2013-2022 by the support of the states and union territories. This project involves maintaining living housing conditions and improving basic social structure (see business standard online news paper http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/ccea-approves-launch-of-rajiv-awas-yojana-113090301053_1.html accessed on 13/12/16)

¹⁰ Interview with Ambroos, traditional fisherman from Punthura Thiruvnadapuram. Interview date: 15/10/ 2015

¹¹ Interviewed Maglin Peter, secretary Theeradesha mahila vedi. Interview date: 14/10/2015

¹² See the official website of society for assistance to fisherwomen (<http://www.safkerala.org/history.html> accessed on 14/12/2016).

implementation of various projects to enhance the income generation by improving livelihood and by providing new collective activities, like promoting and developing new micro enterprises, establishments of new common infrastructure facilities like community training centers, common production centers and crafting marketing supports.¹³ More than 89 cores have spent under these projects through various policies like Tsunami Rehabilitation Program (TRP) with the support of Asian Development Bank, Tsunami Emergency Assistance Program (TEAP) and Prime Minister National Relief Fund (PMNRF). More than 89 cores have spent under these projects through various policies like Tsunami Rehabilitation Program (TRP) with the support of Asian Development Bank, Tsunami Emergency Assistance Program (TEAP) and Prime Minister National Relief Fund (PMNRF). Among this, projects of Theeramythri has spread and done very appreciable footsteps for his grass root level programs.¹⁴ As part of skill Development of fishing community, SAF has started training institution called “fishing school” in Alappuzha district of Kerala and some more school will be inaugurated in different district of Kerala.¹⁵

6. SAF Projects and its Implementation

As discussed earlier, SAF is working under the rules and regulations from the fisheries department of state government. It has great manpower from government level to community level. The project of SAF will implemented through these working patterns (see chart 1.1)

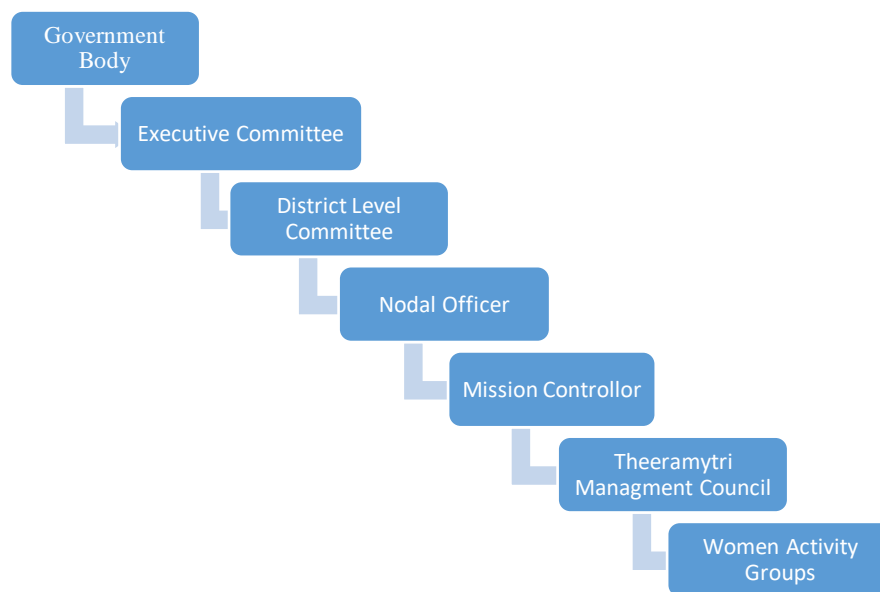


Chart 1.1:

(Source: official website of Theeramythri)

¹³ See The Hindu online newspaper <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-kerala/Empowering-fishermen/article16159968.ece> accessed on 14/12/2016

¹⁴ See the official website of society for assistance to fisherwomen (<http://www.safkerala.org/history.html> accessed on 14/12/2016).

¹⁵ See online edition of ‘The Hindu ’ newspaper <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/reaching-out-to-fisherwomen/article7390792.ece> accessed on 13/12/2016.

As discussed earlier, among SAF projects, Theeramythri is one of the important project which aims to encourage alternative livelihood options for fishing community by providing economic assistance to start new micro enterprises. The main objective of this mission is to promote integrated sustainable development by training them to be engaging in other than fishing activities, which help them to secure their economic condition of fishing community. Now this project has been very popular in coastal villages of Kerala, it has a great impact in everyday life of fisher folks than other project like Kudumbashree program.¹⁶ Now Theeramythri have around 1882 units which are in operation across six different categories viz. garments and textiles, food, coir, fish, supermarket and others along the nine coastal districts of Kerala. (see table .11)

Table No.1.1: District wise number of SAF units

Name of Districts	Number of SAF units
Thiruvananthapuram	140
Kollam	422
Alappuzha	303
Eranamkulam	276
Thrissur	207
Malappuram	124
Kozhikode	201
Kannur	125
Kasaragod	84
Total	1882

(Source: Annul Repot ,2016 by central marine fisheries institute, kochi)

7. Functionalities of SAF

Like Kudumbashree program, activities of SAF is based on Self-help Groups (SHG). Each group is consisting of 7 to 120 members and average group members are 8 to 11 members. As indicated earlier Each group (women activity group) are organized by under the guidance Theeramythri Management Council (TMC) including local representative of Panchayat or municipal governing body. (Department of Kerala Fisheries). Activities of each groups are coordinated by a leader who are selected by group members. There is no certain criteria or eligibility for selecting group leaders. Generally, they are very active and interested in keeping relation with others.¹⁷ Annually all groups are re-organized. Formation of groups are based on the interest or based on their skills like garments, production centers and supermarkets etc. accordingly by the collaboration of different public and private agencies government are organizing various training programs for representatives of different SAF members. (Madyamam 2016). This project has brought positive changes in everyday life of fisherwomen especially social and economic period.¹⁸

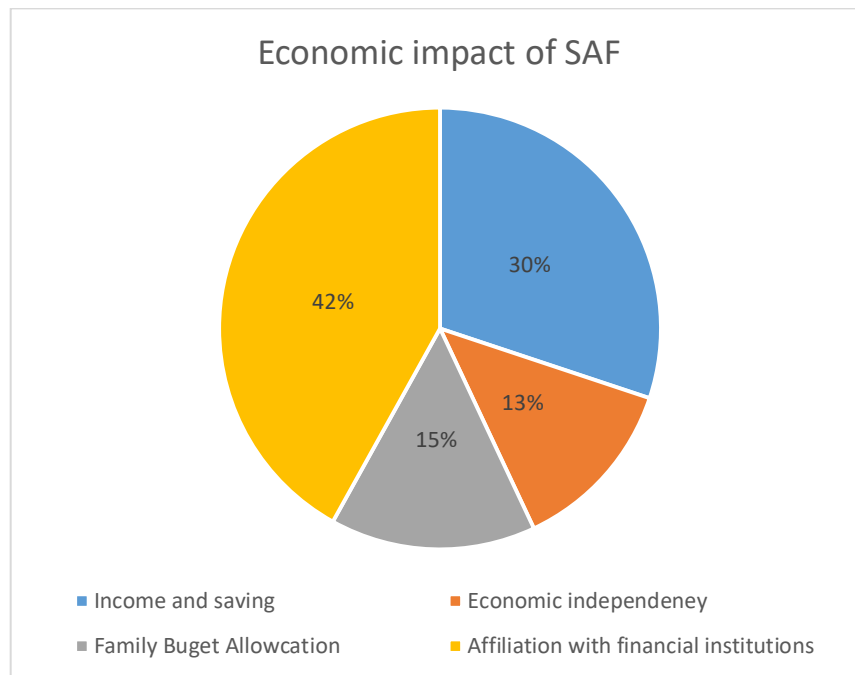
¹⁶ Interviewed Maglin Peter, secretary Theeradesha mahila vedi. Interview date: 14/10/2015

¹⁷ group Interview with SAF SHG. Interview on 15/10/2015.

¹⁸ Political participation has included in social filed.

8. Economic and Social Impact

At large level, economically this project has benefited more than ten thousand coastal line families through supporting around two thousand five hundred micro enterprises (Integrated Rural Technology Center). During my filed works, the Respondents were very happy to share positive changes in their everyday life after participating in SAF activities. Economically they are empowered in many ways, (see graph 1.1)



Graph No.1.1:

source: filed work

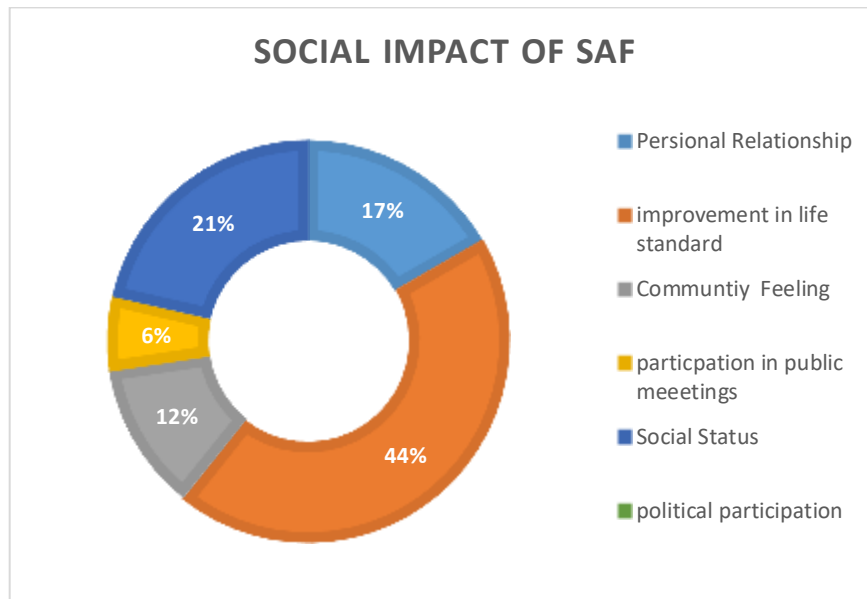
The graph clearly shows, how SAF has been effected a community in terms of their economic activities. 30 percentage of respondents are stated to save income from their wages, which has been support for them to survive during trawling times, during scarcity of fish and all means of income from the side of male member end for a while SAF members are taking care for house hold expenditures. Earlier during the time of trawling, fishing families depends for daily survive was on public financial systems including public and private bank based on the interest which lost economic stability of fishing community.¹⁹ Moreover this, they linked to private or national financial systems like banks and co-operative societies.

Along this economic impact in community it has effected social life of fishing community. As a community living at the trip of geographical location and their nature of job somehow they were socially discriminated by other community. Other community were not willing to build social relation and they have felling of insecurity from fishing community.²⁰ But, after implementation of there is tragic change in social atmosphere of fishing community. Respondents says, various training and skill development programs helped them to come out form 'community' circle and

¹⁹ Interview with Soumya, Leader SHG. Interviewed on 15/10/2015.

²⁰ Interview with A.J vijayan, Social worker. interviewed on 15/10/2015.

to mingle with other communities. By being engaging in various projects they have to meet different community and strengthen their social relationships (see Graph 1.2)



Graph.1.2:

Source filed work)

This graph shows impact of SAF in social life of fisherwomen. 44 percentage of respondents have improved life standard because of increasing economic profile of family members. They are very happy to say that after joining in SAF activities, they are invited in join public meetings and they became part of political alliances. Political participation of fisherwomen helped them to discuss in front of other community and seek solutions. Now, there are many women wings among fishing community, which are affiliated with different political alliances including United Democratic Front (UDF), Left Democratic Front (LDF) and National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Political participation of fisherwomen played a major role preventing exploitations form other community members.²¹ By being part of different projects of SAF, they should attend many training programs in different places. at a great extent, it helped to communicate with other people from different social and political backgrounds. It helped them to build up personal relations and vast their social networks. In short along with economic empowerment of fisherwomen, SAF has acted as medium for social empowerment of fisherwomen.

9. Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to look at political, economic and social impact of Society for assistance to fisherwomen project. At a great level, it highly involved in Upliftment of very backward community in the state. Many of development project were lapsed for them because the geographical and occupation nature of community. But, after formation of SAF social and economic profile of fishing community has been increased through implementation of different income generating activities in the coastal areas of state. Engaging women in different professions like food producing sector, supermarkets, fish drying units, helped community to

²¹ Interviewed Maglin Peter, interview date. 14/10/2015.

increase income and leading standard living conditions. Their experiences with other community make them aware about the importance of education motivated them to educate their children.

Many respondents have criticized involvement of local political biasness in recruiting of project officers. They are appointing project officer on the basis political interest without concerning his qualifications. In many cases, political affiliations of officer have caused for discriminations in approval of projects and allocation of subsidies. In Highly market competitions in terms of productions, quality, export and import many stakeholders are questioning the survival of SAF products with the limited number of products and its quality.

Notes: Earlier version of this paper were presented at the school of social sciences, central university of Gujrat

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