



NATIONAL PLATFORM FOR SMALL SCALE FISHWORKERS

NPSSFW/Convener- 005/24

April 19, 2024

To
The President,
Indian National Congress (INC).

Sub: Appeal to Indian National Congress for inclusion of small scale fish workers' demands in their commitments to the Indian Voters for the Parliamentary Elections 2024.

Sir,

Greetings from the National Platform for Small Scale Fish Workers (NPSSFW), the largest organisation of small-scale fishers, fish farmers, fish vendors and other ancillary workers working in the fisheries sector in India.

As a political party pledged to represent and protect the life and livelihood of the people of our country, especially the weaker sections, we request you to recognise the importance of small scale fisheries in food security, nutritional status and employment, especially employment of women. We would also request you to reflect upon the plight of small scale fish workers and address issues of their chief concerns in your commitments to the electorate.

More than 6 crores fish workers engaged in small scale fisheries as primary and secondary workers produce about 110 lakh tons of fish which is more than 62% of country's total production. Women constitute more than 44% of the fisheries workforce in the primary sector of fisheries, while in the secondary sector it is much more than 50%. More than 50% of our countrymen eat fish. These figures testify that small scale fisheries play a very important role in maintaining food security, nutritional status, employment and especially gender balance in employment.

The small-scale fishers and fish farmers are by far the largest primary non-consumptive stakeholders of our water bodies and fish resources. Since good fish needs good water, the small-scale fishers and fish farmers always and everywhere try to protect the water bodies and their fish resources. They are the natural custodians of our water bodies.

Yet the small-scale fish workers are severely marginalised and deprived of their just and natural rights and entitlements. From Manipur to Maharashtra or from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, the small-scale fishers and fish farmers do not have any legally recognised right on the seas, rivers, reservoirs, wetlands, tanks and ponds in which they do fishing or fish farming for livelihood. Neither they have any right to protect the water bodies and fish resources from pollution, encroachment, excessive water diversion, over fishing or destructive fishing. The national water policy does not even mention fish, fisheries or fishing communities. Government

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schemes and policies are favouring large scale fishing and big business in fisheries which are further marginalising the small scale fish workers. In the face of unprecedented degradation of water bodies and decrease in fish resources, tens of thousands of small-scale fishers and fish farmers have to leave their traditional occupation every year and migrate in search of livelihood. Women fish workers are the worst sufferer. The fishing hamlets on our coasts, river banks and wetlands present a picture of poverty and destitution.

It is utterly deplorable that even after 77 years of independence the small scale fishing communities of our country are legal non-entities. The government does not even inform them, let alone consulting them, when coasts and coastal waters are given for ports or tourism; river stretches are allotted for waterways, dams and barrages; catchment areas of water bodies are intervened by constructions; or water is excessively diverted from water bodies for consumptive use.

Further, small-scale fish workers are the worst victims of the climate crisis though their carbon footprint is the least. Unpredictable and recurrent inclement weather, frequent cyclones and heavy downpours, sudden draughts and floods make the work in fishing increasingly difficult, risky and non-remunerative.

In view of the above, NPSSFW urges upon you to include the following main demands of small scale fish workers in your election pledges.

The demands –

1. Provide the small scale fishers and fish farmers with collective title (community patta) to legally recognise their inalienable right to catch or farm fish in all public water bodies like the seas, rivers, reservoirs, wetlands, tanks and ponds including in the waters of protected areas.
2. Recognise the right of small scale fish workers to participate in co-management of waterbodies and their fish resources to protect the natural resource base of their livelihood from pollution, encroachment, excessive diversion of water, overfishing and destructive fishing.
3. Enact laws to ensure preferential access of small scale fishers to fish resources.
4. Stop subsidising unsustainable large scale fishing and intensive aquaculture. Instead, promote and improve sustainable small scale fishing and fish farming based on traditional knowledge and practice.
5. Review all government schemes and their implementation including the Pradhan Mantry Matsya Sampad Yojana (PMMSY) schemes that majorly sponsor the large scale fishers and big fisheries entrepreneurs, restructure fisheries policies of the government to primarily and majorly favour the small scale fish workers.
6. Provide finance, infrastructure, information, training and appropriate technology to promote livelihood practices of small scale fishers, fish farmers, fish vendors, fish sorters and driers, net makers and repairers and all other ancillary fish workers.
7. Provide comprehensive social security including housing; life and health insurance; old age, infirm and widow pension; insurance for boats, nets and other implements; adequate livelihood support for lean season; education support for children etc.

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8. Provide small scale fishers, fish farmers, fish vendors, fish sorters and driers, net makers and repairers and all other ancillary fish workers with just and adequate compensation in the event of natural calamities; and help them to have climate resilient housing and livelihood practices.
9. Ensure gender justice to women fish workers on wages and working conditions; and provide preferential access to women fish workers for government schemes and supports.
10. Ensure, in consultation with local fishing communities, ecological baseline of the fisheries resources (native fish species) in tanks, reservoirs, rivers and marine coastal areas so that external threats can be ascertained and addressed.
11. Ensure monitoring and check on introduction of exotic / non-native / invasive fish or other aquatic & amphibian species in inland water as well as coastal water. Take stringent legal actions against violators.
12. Review all bills and regulations that adversely affect small scale fisheries and take steps to amend or repeal those. Particularly important is the review and repeal of statutory regulations like the Coastal Aquaculture Authority (Amendment) Act, Major Ports Act, Inland Waterways Authority Act, the Draft Indian Marine Fisheries Bill.
13. Introduce certificate, diploma & degree courses in all universities on fisheries management. Ensure preferential access of boys and girls from fishing community families to these courses.

Thanking you and in anticipation of an early response from your end.

Sincerely,

Pradip Chatterjee,
National Convener
NPSSFW