

NATIONAL PLATFORM FOR SMALL SCALE FISHWORKERS (INLAND)

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An Appraisal of the Election Manifesto 2019 of Bharatiya Janata Party from Small Scale Fish Workers' Perspective

The **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)** has come out with their Election Manifesto 2019 '**Sankalp Patra**' meaning Pledge Paper. In the 'Sankalp Patra' the pledges made by the BJP that directly relate to fisheries and fishing communities are placed mainly under the sub-sections '**Fisheries - Blue Revolution**', '**Jal Shakti**', '**Coastal Development**' and '**Coastal Security**'.

It may also be noted that among all the national political parties of the country **BJP is the only party** to have a **National Policy Document** (copy enclosed) on fishing and fishermen. This policy document was presented in early 2014 by Sri Nitin Gadkari, the then National President of BJP. It is natural that this document is an important reference material in assessing the commitments made in the BJP election manifesto 2019 regarding fisheries and fishing communities.

In view of this the **National Platform for Small Scale Fish Workers (I)** takes upon itself the responsibility to respond to the commitments or lack of it to fisheries and fishing communities made by the largest political party of the country in its election manifesto. Suffice it to mention that NPSSFW(I)'s response is based on the **small scale fish workers' perspective**.

Pledges made under sub-section 'Fisheries - Blue Economy' in BJP 'Sankalp Patra':

BJP Pledge –

We will launch 'Matsya Sampada Yojana' with an allocation of Rs. 10,000 crores to ensure availability of storage and marketing tools and infrastructure like ice-boxes, cold storages, ice-plants etc. for small and traditional fishermen.

Comment:

Though the small scale fishing communities have been hearing about Rs.10,000 crores infrastructure fund allocation for fisheries since the last financial year (2018-19), yet no appreciable development to meet their requirements of storage and marketing tools and infrastructure like ice-boxes, cold storages, ice-plants etc. has been witnessed. While the mechanised sector has easier access to the required infrastructure, the small scale sector is grossly deprived. There has been no evaluation of utilisation of the fund towards the benefit of small scale fishing communities. As such, it appears that 'Matsya Sampada Yojana' is old wine in a new bottle and the small scale fishing communities are best advised not to expect much from it.

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BJP Pledge –

We will promote aquaculture through easy access to credit.

Comment:

The aquaculture sector is an example of the **pro-entrepreneur and anti small scale fish farmer policy** pursued by the BJP Government. In its 5-year rule, BJP did not address the problems of small and marginalised fish farmers. Nothing has been done to provide them with security of tenure, let alone ensuring financial access and other benefits like quality fish seed or feed to them. Under Blue Revolution policy lease rents of public water bodies are being enormously and regularly hiked making it inaccessible for a small fish farmer. Though financial assistance is being provided to the entrepreneurs who can pay such rents. Thus the small and traditional fish farmers are being pushed out from the sector. **Small fish farmers' livelihood is being put on auction** through open bidding of public water bodies. It is obvious that the fisheries entrepreneurs and not the small and marginalised fish farmers will get the promised easy access to credit.

BJP manifesto on fisheries is silent about the inalienable right of small and traditional fishers and fish farmers over water bodies.

Coastal prawn aquaculture has spread like wild fire. Encroaching mud flats and beaches, destroying mangroves and polluting surface and ground waters the unscientific and unsustainable intensive aquaculture is wreaking havoc on coastal environment, ecology and biodiversity. The prawn mafia with their money power and political clout are crushing down peoples' resistance. Committing to promote aquaculture without regulating intensive prawn aquaculture means promoting the prawn mafia.

BJP Pledge –

We will facilitate farming of sea-weed, pearl as well as ornamental fish to ensure a better return to the fishermen.

Comment:

Farming of sea-weed or pearl does not have gross negative impacts on ecology provided the habitat of indigenous weed species is not violated. Socially it may have two important implications of concern. It may prohibit fishers from fishing areas and/or it may introduce entrepreneurs to claim holdings in marine areas. As such it is important to ensure collective ownership of the fishing communities on such farms. BJP election manifesto has no commitment on this.

BJP Pledge –

We will bring all fishermen under the ambit of all welfare programmes and social security schemes with expanded coverage for accident insurance.

Comment:

There is nothing wrong with this pledge save and except associated vagueness. It needs to be specifically mentioned what is meant by 'all fishermen' or 'all welfare programmes and social security schemes'. The vagueness in the pledge is a pointer to the probability of its being only partially or not at all implemented.

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Omissions that speak a lot –

BJP ‘Sankalp Patra’ has forgotten to even mention the commitments they had made 5 years ago in their ‘**National Policy on Fishing and Fishermen**’ to stop overfishing and pollution in the sea or land acquisition on the coast. Perhaps it has been too uncomfortable for them to repeat those today after they have presided over 5 years of rampant over fishing and destructive fishing by mechanised fishing boats, unbridled pollution of coastal waters and massive encroachments on coastal land.

Pledges made under sub-section ‘Jal Shakti’ in BJP ‘Sankalp Patra’:

BJP Pledge –

Water is a critical resource but its management is spread across various departments, even at the Central level. We will form a new Ministry of Water unifying the water management functions to approach the issue of water management holistically and ensure better coordination of efforts. The Ministry will expeditedly take forward the ambitious programme, conceptualized by Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, for linking rivers from different parts of the country and ensure a solution to the problems of drinking water and irrigation. We will initiate work on this programme by constituting an authority.

Comment:

It is quite evident that BJP’s concept of water and water bodies is focussed exclusively on the consumptive use of water. There is no mention of the non-consumptive use or ecological services of water or water bodies. The contributions of rivers, lakes, wetlands, reservoirs and tanks, as great repositories of fish resources, to the food security, nutritional status and employment of our countrymen find no mention in BJP’s water policy. Also, the manifesto fails to appreciate the ecological services of water or water bodies. For example, the river linking, an ecological disaster, is proposed to ensure supply of drinking water and irrigation, while there are available cheaper and non-ecocidal alternative ways and means for the same.

BJP Pledge –

We will launch ‘Jal Jivan Mission’ under which we will introduce a special programme, ‘Nal se Jal’ to ensure piped water for every household by 2024.

Comment:

BJP pledges to provide drinking water to everybody by 2024 under ‘Jal Jivan Mission’ that relate to ‘Nal se Jal’ which means consumptive use of water. While we welcome this pledge, it makes us apprehensive not to see any mention to ensure protection and promotion of ‘Jal Jeevika’, i.e., the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of people including fishers who earn their livelihood from non-consumptive use of water bodies.

BJP Pledge –

We will ensure sustainability of water supply through special focus on conservation of rural water bodies and ground water recharge.

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Comment:

The commitment to conserve rural water bodies is welcome. But no mention or recognition of the role of small scale fishing communities as **not only the largest primary non-consumptive stakeholders but also the natural custodians of the water bodies** makes the policy commitment devoid of the core implementation strategy. The small scale fishing communities, always and everywhere, are striving to save the water bodies and their fish resources for their livelihood needs. It is indispensable to have the participation of these communities in preservation of rural water bodies.

Pledges made under sub-section 'Coastal Development' in BJP 'Sankalp Patra'

BJP Pledge –

Potential of coastal development for transportation, tourism and for economic upliftment of coastal communities has remained unexploited in the country. To exploit this potential fully, we have launched the Sagarmala programme and will ensure speedy completion of the projects under this programme.

We will double our port capacity in the next five years.

Comment:

Some hard facts lay bare the main purpose of such commitments. Small scale marine fisheries had been a sector that generated largest employment without any investment from the Government or the corporate. Millions of fish workers earned their livelihood from the sector and they never complained about unemployment or poor earnings. The government introduced trawlers and mechanised fishing boats in our seas which caused over fishing and destructive fishing that made our near shore waters barren of fish. The so called coastal development with ports, tourism and industries poisoned the coastal waters with pollution. Due to these, hundreds of thousand fishers and fish workers have been driven out from their traditional occupations. This impoverishment, destitution and marginalisation of traditional coastal communities has been in stark contrast with amassing of immense fortune by the corporate tycoons like Adanis and Ambanis who looted away and destroyed the coastal natural resources. BJPs pledge is a pledge to continue with this process.

While doubling of port capacity in next 5 years is a pipe dream, the most uncomfortable fact is that less than 50% of the existing installed port capacity of the country is being utilised. As such emphasis should have been given on optimum utilisation of existing capacity and not on increasing the capacity. This is all the more important because each and every port spells massive disaster to environment, ecology and livelihood of fishing communities by causing shoreline change, pollution, destruction of fish stock and stopping fishing activities on a large area.

Then what lies behind the drive to massive increase in the number and capacity of ports? It is obvious that BJP's commitment is in reality a commitment to gift the corporate operating in port and shipping with public money and assets in terms of

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bank loans, large stretches of coastal land and waters. The small scale fish workers have nothing to gain from it and everything to lose.

BJP Pledge –

We will further encourage integrated development of coastal areas including coastal cities, coastal transport and coastal industrialization.

We will undertake the upgradation of infrastructure for connecting the coast and hinterland to ensure smooth transportation.

We will continue to focus on development of inland waterways for shipping inland cargo movement from road and rail to water transport.

Comment:

Not even a lip service to conserve or protect coastal natural resources, not a single reference to sustainable development. **BJP's recipe for coastal development is an open advocacy of unbridled assault on the environment and natural resources.** Coastal cities, coastal transport and coastal industrialization, upgradation of infrastructure for smooth connectivity and turning the rivers into cargo routes without any pre-condition for conservation of natural resources or sustainability – **it is a declaration of war on our coasts and an assertion to wipe off from the coast all natural resource dependent traditional livelihood including that of the fishing communities.**

Pledges made under sub-section 'Coastal Safety' in BJP 'Sankalp Patra':

BJP Pledge –

After effectively strengthening coastal security through implementation of a coastal security scheme to provide modern equipment and allocating funds to the states for establishing coastal police stations, establishment of National Committee for Strengthening Maritime & Coastal Security, Island Information System and National Academy of Coastal Policing, we will continue to take steps for ensuring security of India's long coastline.

Comment:

BJP's idea for coastal security is solely constituted of infrastructure, technology and defence personnel. The party is blind to the fact that it is impossible to provide an impregnable security system on a more than 8,000 kilometre long coastline only through installation of infrastructure, use of technology and deployment of defence personnel. In its cynicism of the small scale marine fishing communities BJP has also glossed over the fact that millions of small fishers engaged in fishing with thousands of boats sailing all over the near shore waters provide a scope of surveillance much more comprehensive than the small number of vessels lying with the coast guard and coastal police. It is indispensable to include small scale fishing communities in the system to provide coastal safety.

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Whither the pledges that BJP had made under its “National Policy on Fishing and Fishermen” (copy attached) published 5 years back just before the Parliamentary Elections in 2014??

It is worth mentioning here that among all the national political parties of the country only BJP has an official policy document on fisheries and fisher people. Some of the main commitments made therein with their outcome are cited below –

- **BJP had promised to make a separate Ministry for Fisheries**, but we have got only a department in the Ministry of Agriculture. That too only a few days back in February 2019 at the end of their five years tenure at the Central Government.
- **BJP had promised to protect traditional fishing communities from overfishing in the sea by mechanised vessels**; but in effect the BJP government has promoted overfishing by subsidising them and by not imposing any restriction over indiscriminate loot of marine fish resources.
- **BJP had promised to contain unbridled pollution of the sea by industrial effluents and domestic sewage, particularly by thermal power plants**, but actually the BJP government has not only failed to contain pollution but also has promoted it by installing new thermal power plants and all kinds of polluting industries and activities along the coast.
- **BJP had promised to restrict land acquisition along the coast to protect the coastal fishing communities from eviction due to SEZs, ports, thermal plants and other industries**, but in effect the BJP government has introduced Sagarmala project to install large number of ports all along the coast, coastal industrial and economic corridors, large scale tourism and other industries as ‘Blue Economy Growth’ to expedite eviction of traditional fishing communities from the coast. It has thrown open the floodgate of encroachment and destruction of the coast by approving CRZ 2018 Notification superseding CRZ 2011 Notification.
- **BJP had promised to protect mangroves as buffer from the gust of cyclones and sea surge as well as nursery of fish**, but in effect the BJP government has allowed conversion of mangrove forests by lifting all CRZ restrictions on those. From Gujarat to West Bengal the coasts of India have been witnessing large scale destruction with connivance of both the Central and state governments.
- **BJP had promised to bring about a fresh water fishing policy**, but till date it has failed to come out with a National Policy for Inland Fisheries. At almost the end of their 5 year tenure, on 27th February 2019, a Draft National Inland Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy (NIFAP) has been published for comments.
- **BJP had promised to prepare an inventory of pools along the rivers and declare rivers, flood plain lakes, wetlands and pools as protected areas for fish**, but actually the BJP government has fuelled destruction of river ecosystems by projects like River Linking and National Waterways let alone huge number of thermal power plants and industries sanctioned on river basins.

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- **BJP had promised to promote fishing community cooperatives in natural and government owned large water bodies like lakes, wetlands and reservoirs, but in reality the BJP government has expedited the eviction of traditional fisher people from the water bodies by promoting a new breed of entrepreneurs through schemes under Blue Revolution which are dedicated to investment led increase of fish production. Water bodies are being given to highest bidders in violation of the traditional livelihood right of indigenous small scale fishing communities.**

BJP has taken to a new and record level the sell out of our natural resources to corporate and business houses, ostensibly to please them for getting a share of the ransom. It had lied to the people of India including the fishing communities before the last parliamentary elections to trick them into voting for them.

It is all the more deplorable that BJP's Election Manifesto for 2019, makes no reference to the commitments they had made five years ago in 2014 before the last elections. They comfortably forget their past commitments while making new ones. **They treat the people as fools with short memories.**

