



NPSSFW North-East Regional Meeting

18-19 December, Imphal, Manipur

Venue: PRDA HALL, BISHNUPUR

North-East Regional Meeting of the **National Platform for Small Scale Fish Workers (NPSSFW)** was held on December 18 and 19, 2021 in Imphal, Manipur. The Regional Meeting was attended by 36 activists and representatives of small-scale fishing communities from Assam, Tripura, and Manipur. The objective of the regional meeting was to take stock of the situation for fisheries and fishing community organizations and to chart a road map for future activities. The regional meeting was also expected to develop a North-East regional leadership for NPSSFW.

DAY 1 [December 18, 2021]

The meeting started with a welcome note from Ram Wangkheirakpam, an activist associated with the struggles of small-scale fishing communities of Manipur as a prominent long time activist and the main organizer of the meeting.

A brief self introduction of all participants followed.

Pradip Chatterjee, National Convener of NPSSFW then set the agenda and the context of the meeting. He shared a brief history of NPSSFW including the reasons and objectives of its formation, its present structure and organizational coverage, the challenges it has been facing and its achievements. He also informed the house of the last National Council meeting of NPSSFW held in Delhi (19-20 November 2021). He also explained the purport and importance of national campaigns against the Indian Marine Fisheries Bill 2021 (IMFB Ram Wangkheirakpam2021) and for the Fishing Communities Right to Water that has been flagged off by the National Council. He stated that NPSSFW has already written to all the Chief Ministers of the maritime states and to all the members of parliament to oppose the IMFB 2021. The Government of India could not pass the Bill in the monsoon session or in the current winter session of the parliament to date. He also informed the meeting that NPSSFW took a resolution on the climate crisis and was the only small scale fish workers' organisation to take part in the peoples' summit at Glasgow held on the occasion of COP26 Climate Summit. The dossier that was distributed at the COP26 was also distributed to the participants of the meeting.

This was followed by a presentation on Fishing Communities' Right to Water by Debasis Shyamal, National Council Member of NPSSFW. The presentation mentioned the areas of and fish production from water bodies, number of fish workers attached to the water bodies, lack of right of the fishing communities on the water bodies and the threats of eviction they are facing due to degradation and encroachment. The rapid and continuous attack on water bodies has landed the fishing communities at a critical juncture of history. No fish means no livelihood. And good fish needs good water. As such the fishing communities' Right of Water means the right to access water bodies for sustainable fishing and fish farming as well as the right to protect the water bodies and their fish resources. Three important components of the Right to Water are:

1. Right to access and use public water bodies (water commons) sustainably for fishing or fish farming.

2. Right to Security of Tenure (Security of Lease) on Private water bodies taken on rent for fish farming.
3. Right to protect water bodies (Public & Private) from encroachment, pollution, and degradation.

Recognition of usage of Marine Waters, Rivers, Reservoirs, Lake, Wetlands, Ponds and Tanks under the legal ambit of the Current Framework was also highlighted. The need to push and pressurise the Government towards this was stressed. Collective 'Pani Patta' or title for water use right to be conferred to the community of fishers living by and using the concerned public water bodies. The health of water bodies and their ecosystems was also highlighted further. Special comments from Oinam Rajen (ALLAFUM), KK Chartradhar, and Sudip Majumder towards the presentation were drawn. Onam Rajen brought in the context of Loktak Lake towards Right to Water and KK Chartradhar pointed out how the coinage of terms used for conservation are colonial and that the struggle for Rights is about reclaiming the age-old customary practises and resisting the colonial grab on resources. Sudip Majumder narrated how the tribal and fishing people of Tripura have been deprived of their rights on the rivers and large lakes of Tripura.

The next and last session of the meeting was chaired by Logjam Suranjoy. The State of Tripura report and suggestions for moving forward were presented by Tripura delegates - Sudip Majumder and Biswajit Majumder. A brief history of Tripura Matsyajivi Forum (TMF) which has its presence now in the 5 out of 8 districts of Tripura. TMF is planning to be registered as a Trade Union as soon as possible. The registration and organization work has been stalled due to the onset of the Covid Pandemic. Currently, Co-operatives are leasing water bodies from the Government and then they are leasing those out to the private players. This is a huge nexus of the rich and a big setback for small-scale fishers. To meet the current demands of fish in the market, 5 trucks of Andhra Pradesh fish come in every day. Fish from Andhra Pradesh is cheaper than the locally produced fish as the cost of production in Tripura is higher. Fish from Bangladesh also enter the market both legally and illegally and they are much cheaper. Illegal entry through the porous borders makes the local fish market crash and puts all the burden on the local fishers. Chemicals used to produce and preserve fish that are brought from Bangladesh are also not known. Delegates from Tripura requested a review meeting of the progress within 5 months and was later agreed upon to extend the period to 6 months. The need to have proper resources to help in developing organisational activities in all the sister states of North-East and to have an Office in each State equipped with necessary documentation and Computers, Printers, etc were also mentioned.

The session ended and the participants drove down for a field visit to Loktak Lake.

DAY 2 [December 19, 2021]

Session 1: The first session of the second and last day started with Ram Wangkheirakpam as the Chair. The State of Assam report and suggestions for moving forward were presented by Assam delegates - Ranjita Bania, K K Chartradhar, and Dhruba Jyoti Bharali. In Assam, as of date, there is no structured Organisation that looks after the issues of Fishers and Fish Workers. Work for developing the organisation in Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, and Gholaghat is progressing. A Series of meetings has been conducted on account of building fisher unions. In Assam, fishers are in the informal sector. Covid 19 has impacted the small farmers. Though it was said that agricultural activities are exempted from the Lockdown, import of accessories were not exempted, so people had to face lots of problems and could

not culture fish in the proper way. Fishers have no government identity card and cannot avail the benefits of different schemes of the government. In PMSSY, though it was shown that women farmers are getting benefits from the schemes the reality is different, in the name of women someone else is availing the benefit. Thus women are not at all empowered but looted in the name of empowerment. Participation of women in Fishing is also low. Fingerlings from the government were to be distributed during the summer but are being distributed in December. Winter tells on their survival and growth. Moreover, in December most water bodies are dried up or at a low water level, so it is futile to have a fish replenishment programme. Also, Project Proposals are demanded for getting the funds released. This is a big put-off for the fish workers because almost all are illiterate or do not have the capacity to prepare a project proposal. On top of it, the proposal has to be written in English. This has led to the emergence of a Higher Class of Farmers that are exclusively getting the schemes and benefits.

The Baghjan Oil Spill had affected the Maguri Motapun Wetland Complex. The oil spill has completely destroyed the biodiversity of the Wetland and has also destroyed the fishers' livelihood. Although compensation was given to some, the fishers' had been left out. This is yet another indicator that the Government has failed to recognize and protect the rights of the fishers.

An urgent intervention is required to stop the exploitation of fishers' by different layers of middlemen/mediators that buy the fish for a cheap price and sell it at a much higher price in the market. A need for a co-operative was called upon to stop the mediators and build a better network to the market where fishers will get better prices for their hard work. Also, there is a need to take advantage of various government schemes and assistance despite having differences over government policies. This is required for the collective benefit of the fishers and will help in organising the union more effectively. 429 ponds in Golaghat District were dug under the Blue Revolution scheme. These ponds are of no use as most are private ponds and are of no use to the fishing communities. This project should be stopped as it has become the looting grounds for contractors who are hand-in-glove with the corrupt politicians. Lastly, a value-added fish production plant has been established for the first time in the North-east as a *common facility center* to help the fisher to raise their livelihood. Jeeva Suraksha, Assam is looking after this facility installed by ICAR-CIFE, Mumbai. The Directorate of Extension Education is also a partner in this effort. This is run with the local women's active participation and will continue to do so, to realise the true meaning of Women Empowerment. Apart from this development of an app for fish workers and testing it in a small area was proposed.

Session 2: K K Chatradhar chaired the later part of the session. The State of Manipur report and suggestions for moving forward were presented by Manipur delegates On behalf of Pumlun Pat Khoidum Lamjao Kanba Apunba Lup, Salam Joy Singh, the General Secretary of the union, raised many issues they had been facing since the construction of Ithai Barrage. He shared how the fishers depended on the mother water for various life activities. Since the Ithai Barrage came into being, the White Revolution, the Blue Revolution, the Green Revolution all have disappeared. The non-dependent economy that the villagers had had long been disappeared for more than 40 years now. Many forms of fishing techniques had disappeared.

Moreover, the dam blocked the upstream migratory fishes, hence no sign of many fish varieties for more than three decades. A total of about 10,000 hectares of land, which produced all sorts of vegetables, potatoes, kinds of rice, cereals, etc., had all disappeared. The

more serious concern is with the decreasing open fishing areas due to the expansion of Phumdis, which has covered around 80% of the Wetland area. It takes about 30 to 80 thousand rupees for a fisher to arrange the fishing gear and all sorts of equipment. The water condition had also degraded to the worst situation, which had spoiled the connection of water, fish, rice and fishers. He further raised concerns on how there is no proper functioning of any government schools. Good government policies are only on papers but no works on reality in the area, so the families' struggle and the fight is real, to send their children to the private schools. There are 26 villages and they have been living in these areas for decades now, but the authorities released an eviction notice to expand the shelter of the Sangai. The more inhuman act in this situation is how they released this eviction notice at the second wave when the local leaders and government didn't allow or let the people go out of their houses. The People's struggle and the fight are accurate, and the union worked. He added that the Union is registered to bear the 1020 registration number. From time to time, the government arranged fish melas only to encourage the fish farmers they had invested in under the NCTC Fund. Still, there are no actions to promote any indigenous fishers. He urged the NPSSFW to stand together in solidarity and help them fight against all these issues they had been facing. Haobijam Tikendra added a few points on behalf of Pumlun Pat Sarik Konjen. The people had been struggling ever since the dam came into being; they had not been able to continue with the fishing work. Around 80-90% of open water lake areas are now covered with phumdis as the proliferation has increased at an unimaginable level. The LDA is knocking on the door to clear the phumdis to take up projects that will benefit them. He said that we need to stand together and fight together.

Tongbram Brajamohan Singh explained the situation around the Upokpi Khunou Areas. The Upokpi Khunou Joint Fishermen Welfare Co-operative Society Ltd is registered bearing registration no. 121 of 2013. According to him, the fishing communities do not pollute the Lake. The people here focus on fish farming and fishing from the Lake in his areas. They had been residing there since the 1950s. According to a survey conducted in 1976, till 1984/1985, there are 72 land patta. Later, in 2008/2009, the documents got digitalised, but the survey mapping was declared incomplete, and a correction was needed. Later the Survey Department stated that the total areas covered around 50 acres of land. So he opined that the government needs to bring up alternative arrangements for the fishers to survive.

Longjam Suranjoy, the Secretary of PRDA, shared the issues of Ishok, Shamusang areas where the Lake extends and comes under the Lake's buffer zone where the Merakhong River, the Nambol and the Nambol River flows in. The problems here had been with the uncultivated lands where the ring road proposal from Sendra to Naorem, Utrapat, marked boundaries. The boundary marking made the fishers and the farmers afraid with the idea that the government could take up any project at any time and hence decided to sell their lands in minimal amounts that they could raise. Without these lands and their traditional ways, almost all families are in debt for about 3-4 lakhs.

Khoiram Kiranbala on behalf of ALLAFUM, raised a few points on how men no doubt goes for fishing, but women play an essential role in processing the fishes and selling them to the market. But the more significant problem lies with the travel time from the hut inside the Lake to the nearest land, Ningthoukhong, where there is no shelter for them even to change their wet clothes when it rains or rest a while after the long journey. Meisnam Promo also added that above all these problems, there is only one primary school in the middle of the Lake, but it is only for a few primary kids and those above 7th standard has to go out somewhere in the hostel schools where these families earnings make it hard for them to send

them away. She added that if such higher education schools were nearer, they could have easily overlooked their children even when they work.

Decisions -

A. A ten member Regional Council with Ramanand Wangkheirakpam as Convener was elected to look after the work of NPSSFW in the North-East. The members are -

- 1. Ramanand Wangkheirakpam, Convener.**
- 2. Salam Joy Singh.**
- 3. Oinam Rajen Singh.**
- 4. Khoiram Kiranbala.**
- 5. K K Chatradhar (Bhai).**
- 6. Ranjita Bania.**
- 7. Dhruba Jyoti Bharali.**
- 8. Sudip Majumder.**
- 9. Biswajit Majumder.**
- 10. (Woman member from Tripura to be suggested later).**

B. Regional Council will hold a review meeting in the next 6 months;

C. The Mission Statement of NPSSFW will be translated in Assamese and Manipuri languages.

D. To take forward the National Campaign on Fishing Communities' Right to Water;

E. To demand Fishers' Identity cards;

F. To speed up the union building process;

G. To make State Level Offices in each constitute states, which would incorporate computers, printers, etc;

H. To make common facility center for value addition;

I. Separate workshop on Value addition and processes;

J. To work on reducing debts of the fishers and access KCC and PMMSY;

K. To protect, conserve and manage water bodies at primary levels and resist threats to water bodies;

L. To promote solidarity and information sharing within unions;

M. To send regular reports and updates for the website.

N. No project affecting the fishing communities without Free, Prior, and Informed Consent of fishing communities;

O. To work on co-operative formations;

P. To arrange for financial assistance to unions;

Q. To make a survey app to assess the situation of fishing communities and fisheries;

Other Observations and Directions Suggested:

- 1. The North-East Regional Council of NPSSFW under the convenership of Ramanand Wangkheirakpam will be guiding and monitoring the work in progress in the states and in the region.**
- 2. NPSSFW central leadership will provide all available assistance to the Regional Council and help launch the National Campaign on the Fishing Communities' Right to Water in the region and the states.**

- 3. A central poster will be developed for the campaign by NPSSFW. It will be translated in state languages for campaign activities.**
- 4. NPSSFW will try to provide membership Registration & I-Card software developed by its constituent organisations.**
- 5. The Mijoram delegates could not participate in the regional meet. They have requested NPSSFW to convene a Mijoram state level meeting. NPSSFW gladly accepted the request.**