

Report on Public Hearings on the Annual Marine Fishing Ban in Purba Medinipur District, West Bengal



16-18 June, 2025

Paschim Panchuria Pradhan Khoti (Khejuri-2 Block), Baguran Jalpai (Contai-1 Block), Shatilapur (Ramnagar-2 Block), and Mahishadal Raj College (Mahishadal Block)

West Bengal, India

Report prepared by Shalini Iyengar, PhD Candidate, Department of Anthropology, Yale University.

Introduction

The annual marine fishing ban has come to be an integral part of the annual fishing calendar in India. Every year, the central and state governments in India announce the annual marine fishing ban. On the East Coast of India, the ban runs from 15 April to 14 June and on the West Coast, the ban runs from 1 June till 31 July. Given the Constitutional demarcation of jurisdiction over marine waters, the Central government notifies the ban on fishing in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the state governments notify the ban within the territorial sea, i.e. 12 nautical miles or 22 km from the baseline.

The demand for the ban arose from long-standing demands by small-scale fishers in India who were concerned about the fish-depletion caused by trawlers in coastal and off-shore waters. These demands, first articulated in the 1970s, led to the formation of the Majumdar Committee in 1976 and eventually led to the enactment of Marine Fisheries Regulation Acts (MFRAs) in each coastal Indian state. The state-level bans are notified under the ambit of these MFRAs. In recognition of the diversity of coastal fishing in the different states, the state-level notifications regarding the annual fishing bans vary with respect to the different types of crafts and gears prohibited from fishing during this period, the different zones of prohibition, and even the duration of the ban within the state's coastal waters.

The first state-level fishing bans were imposed in the late 1980s and by 2000, all coastal states implemented some form of a seasonal ban on marine fishing. The duration of the bans ranged from 47 days to 75 days. However, in 2015, the decision was taken by the central and state governments to harmonize the dates for the fishing ban with April 15th chosen as the start of the fishing ban on the East Coast and June 1st chosen as the start of the ban for the West Coast. Moreover, the fishing ban in the EEZ was extended to a uniform ban of 61 days by the central government. The central government exempts traditional non-motorized units from this uniform fishing ban.

Within West Bengal, the annual marine fishing ban has been implemented since 1995, when the Marine Fishing Rules were promulgated under the aegis of its 1993 Marine Fishing Regulation Act. The ban was previously for 47 days between 15 April and 31 May but over the past decade, the ban has been extended to 61 days. In recognition of the hardship imposed on small-scale and traditional fishers during this period, central and state governments provided Rs. 3000 as livelihood support to fishers under the "Savings cum Relief scheme". However, this scheme has ceased to be operational in West Bengal since 2015, leading to significant distress and hardship for small-scale marine fishers within the state.

For the past several years, Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum and its branches and affiliates have highlighted the issue of fisher distress before the state government and have repeatedly

urged the government to ensure livelihood support for small-scale fishers during the ban period. In response to this sustained campaign and efforts, the West Bengal state government announced the “Samudra Sathi” scheme in the 2024 state budget. Under the terms of the scheme, an amount of Rs. 200 crore was allocated for the state’s 2 lakh fishers. That is, an amount of Rs. 10000 was allocated for each of the state’s marine fishers for the 2 months of the ban period. However, when the details of the scheme were announced by the state fisheries department, the livelihood support was only extended to one member of each fishing household (the latter being defined as per their ration cards). Moreover, as on July 2025, no money has been disbursed under the scheme to any fisher.

Against this backdrop, in light of rising fisher immiseration, Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum took the decision to conduct public hearings to understand the ground-level scenario with respect to fisher perspectives on the annual fishing ban period. The primary purpose of the hearings was to directly hear from fishworkers about their perceptions of the annual ban, the compensation scheme, and to understand the condition of fishers during the ban period. Additionally, the hearings were also intended to increase awareness among fishers and to gain valuable primary data on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the ban.

Methodology

The decision was taken within the union to conduct the hearing in two-phases in the two coastal districts in West Bengal. The following report focuses on the first phase of the hearings which were conducted in the Purba Medinipur district between 16 and 18 June, 2025. The hearings in Purba Medinipur were organized by the Purba Medinipur Matsyajibi Forum (PMMF) and the Kanthi Mahakuma Khoti Matsyajibi Union (KMKMU). PMMF is a branch of the Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF), and its remit spans the entirety of the district of Purba Medinipur. KMKMU is a khoti-level¹ union, comprising small-scale marine fishers and is also affiliated with DMF.

In preparation for the public hearings, a short two page-note explaining the purpose of the hearings was circulated in addition to making announcements about the upcoming hearings to fishers in multiple landing centers along the coast and in the designated marine blocks of the Haldi, Hooghly and Rupnarayan rivers (a full English translation of the note is attached below in Annexure-II to this report). Importantly, there was an open call for participation with

¹ Khotis are community-based fisher governance organizations that manage small-scale fishing operations in the Purba Medinipur district. For a longer description of *khotis* and the criticality of their role, see Santanu Chacraverti, *Report on the Study of Business Prospects of Cooperatives of Small-Scale Marine Fishers in West Bengal* (2017). Available at:

https://dishaeearth.org/old/SSF_cooperatives_Business%20Prospect%20Study_2017.pdf

no discrimination made between different groups of small-scale fishworkers (SSF). Due to this, while a bulk of the fishers who attended the meetings owned and operated either hand-drawn vessels or small 2-cylinder motorized craft (these were almost entirely men, with only two exceptions), we were also able to hear from fish driers and sorters (who are almost entirely women), fishers catching fish on foot, and trawler-workers.

As a result of these efforts, four public hearings were held in Paschim Panchuria Pradhan Khoti (Khejuri-2 Block), Baguran Jalpai (Contai-1 Block), Shatilapur (Ramnagar-2 Block), and Mahishadal Raj College (Mahishadal Block). A total of 283 fishers attended the four meetings with over 140 fishers giving their testimony at the hearings. All fishers giving evidence held marine fisher registration cards issued by the government.

All fishers who wished to give evidence were interviewed by the jury-members present at the meeting. The jury-members included Professor Dr. Shubhmoy Das, Head of Department, Department of Zoology (Graduate and Postgraduate Department), Mahishadal Raj College, Professor Dr. Subikash Mukherjee, Department of Economics, Mahishadal Raj College, and Sagnik Mandal, State Aided College Teacher, Department of Zoology, Mahishadal Raj College, Amitrajit Chakraborty, member of the Secretariat, National Federation of Small-Scale Fishworkers, Raktima Ghosh, PhD Candidate at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, and Shalini Iyengar, PhD Candidate, Department of Anthropology, Yale University. In addition to the jury members, the hearings also saw the presence of two Observers – Pradip Chatterjee, President, National Federation of Small-Scale Fishworkers (NFSF) and Abdar Mullick, Assistant Secretary, Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF).

Evidence was taken on the basis of semi-structured interviews asking three primary questions:

1. Is it necessary to ban marine fishing in order to increase fish stock in the sea?
 - a. If yes, then is 15 April to 14 June the appropriate time for this prohibition?
 - b. Please explain your reasons if you feel that these dates are appropriate;
 - c. Please explain your reasons if you feel that these dates are not appropriate.
2. If it is felt that all fishing vessels should be brought under the ambit of the annual marine fishing ban, then should hand-drawn vessels, vessels with small motors, and large machine vessels be banned for the same duration of time or should there be differences in the duration of the ban period?
3. Is it necessary to give livelihood support during the marine fishing ban period? If necessary, how much support is needed, who should it be given to, and how should that be given?

The interview questionnaire was prepared by the Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum in order to ensure coherence and uniformity across the different hearings. All the jury members received a copy of the questionnaire and the full questionnaire, along with a description of the purpose and context of the hearings was printed and circulated at each meeting. While the fundamental aspects of each hearing remained consistent, the scale and aspects of the format differed between the meetings. This was due to exigencies of weather and location and provide an excellent opportunity to consider the impacts of these different formats on the hearings (my assessment on this aspect may be found below, in the concluding sections of this report).

At the conclusion of the hearings, the jury members shared their documentation of the evidence and their perspectives with the lead-jury member and report writer who collated the evidence and drew inferences based on this material. In addition, the writing of this report was also aided by the valuable data collected by PMMF on the particulars of the fishing ban in the other Indian coastal states. Details of the information received by them is set out in Annexure I to this report. It must be underscored that the hearings were not a mechanical exercise in data collection – as much as the words of the oral testimony, the body language of the fishers and their deep sense of betrayal by the state were all relevant to the preparation of this report.

Acknowledgments

This report benefited from the able assessments and opinions of all the jury members - Dr. Shubhamoy Das, Amitrajit Chakraborty, Raktima Ghosh, Dr. Subikash Mukherjee, and Sagnik Mandal, and Shalini Iyengar. Particular thanks is owed to Shri Abdar Mullick for his support, unflagging energy and active participation in the public hearing process. PMMF, KMKMU, and DMF organized these meetings with zeal and enthusiasm and their willingness to facilitate the meetings, even in light of adverse weather conditions played an enormous role in the successful conduct of the public hearings. A special note of thanks is due to Mahishadal Raj College and the Zoology department in particular. The participation and support of members of the faculty, staff, and student body in the Mahishadal meetings made an enormous difference to the conduct of the final hearing. The scale of participation and the invaluable information gleaned from the four meetings is directly correlated to his unstinting support and engagement in the process.

Above all, a deep debt of gratitude is owed to the hardworking fisher men and women who attended the hearings and patiently and painstakingly shared their perspectives and testimonies at the hearings. The report acknowledges that their efforts and voices are fundamental to this piece of writing and expresses gratitude for their generosity and time.

Evidence from the Hearings

A brief background of the four hearings and the evidence collected from each hearing is set out below.

Khejuri



Jury:

- i. Shalini Iyengar, PhD Candidate, Department of Anthropology, Yale University
- ii. Amitrajit Chakraborty, National Federation of Small-Scale Fishworkers (NFSF) Secretariat
- iii. Raktima Ghosh, PhD Candidate, IIT Kharagpur, India

Observers:

- i. Pradip Chatterjee, President, National Federation of Small-Scale Fishworkers (NFSF)
- ii. Abdar Mullick, Assistant Secretary, Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF)

This hearing, held at the community hall of the Paschim Panchuriya Pradhan Matsya Khoti (PPPM khoti), the largest of the 19 khotis based in Khejuri Block with an estimated 1000-1500 members. The head of PPPM khoti noted that this landing centre was over 60-70 years old. The PPPM khoti has faced the problem of silt deposition along the shore over the course of the past few years, largely as a result of the forest department's activity on the nearby shore. Respondents highlighted fisher livelihood distress – owing to decreased fish availability, fisher migration from the area was high with people travelling to Kerala and other Indian states including Orissa, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and the National Capital Region, often to work as construction labourers. This is unfortunately a common phenomenon along the Bengal coast with members of fishing communities participating in seasonal migration in both fishing and non-fishing sectors.

The meeting was attended by over 103 members of the fishing community and evidence was taken from 52 of them. Fishers attending this hearing were members of PPPM khoti and other neighbouring khotis including along the coast and also fish from neighbouring khotis including Thanaberia Matsya khoti (600 members), Wasilchowk, and Baguran Jalpai. The fishers attending the meeting were largely men who fish within 12 nautical miles from the shore using either hand-drawn crafts or small motorized 2-cylinder vessels. The vast majority of the respondents owned a single boat. Most of the fishers here used behundi or fixed bag nets with a small minority using chandi nets as well. A wide variety of fish were caught here – bomla, bhola, chingri, ilish, topse, patia, lohora, bomla, sea crabs, koi, katla. About a third of the attendees were women fish-sorters and driers.

Evidence

The fishers here universally emphasized the importance of the ban period in order to ensure undisturbed fish reproduction and an increase in marine fish stock. Importantly, there was wide agreement on two critical issues: (a) that fish around here lay eggs largely between the Bengali calendar months of Chaitra and Baishakh roughly mid-March to mid-June. Additionally, fishers noted seeing roe-filled fish in Phalgun (mid-Feb to mid-March) and young fish in Jyeshtha (mid-April to mid-June); (b) that some form of a ban period was necessary.

A nuanced take emerged when the fishers were probed on the particulars. It soon became clear that the fishers saw the ban as having a two-pronged purpose – (a) increasing fish stock due to undisturbed breeding time; and (b) deterring trawlers by decreasing the time available to them for fishing and simultaneously increasing a period when SSF could fish in the sea without trawler interference.

Flowing from this, the fishers made several important observations:

- i. The ban period important but was inadequate in its current design. To fully cover the peak breeding period, the ban should commence at least one month prior than its current starting date – i.e., it should start from mid-March or the start of Chaitra;
- ii. While there was general agreement on the need for a fishing ban in the interests of fish breeding, fishers noted that the ban on trawlers needed to be extended to at least 3-4 months at the minimum and that such a ban should start from mid-Phalgun and extend till mid-Jyeshtha – that is, March to June. This suggestion emerged from their observations around the catching of juvenile fish by the trawlers in these months outside the formal ban period (i.e, between mid-February till mid-April). The fishers additionally recorded their outrage that a large proportion of fish caught by the trawlers were frequently dumped in the sea as by-catch, leading to a complete waste of fish-stock and the diminution of fish that SSF could have otherwise caught in due course.
- iii. The fishers here highlighted that the ban should be applicable to SSF as well and most advocated a ban-period duration of 2-3 months. Differences emerged, however, about the ideal months for the ban. About 60% of the fishers felt that the ban should be 2 months between Chaitra and Baisakh. About 20% felt that the ban should be for 3 months from Chaitra till Jyeshtha. About 15% believed that the ban should be 3 months from Phalgun to Baisakh and about 5% believed that the ban should be for 4 months from Chaitra.
- iv. Relatedly, the fishers felt that compensation and livelihood support were essential if the ban was imposed on the SSF. Such compensation should ideally be a minimum of Rs. 10,000 per month. However, opinions were split on the manner that this should be calculated – some advocated a per fisher allocation and others a per household allocation. Fishers universally supported curbing mis-use of the compensation and ensuring that only fishers and fishworkers receive these funds.

Baguran Jalpai



Jury:

- i. Shalini Iyengar, PhD Candidate, Department of Anthropology, Yale University
- ii. Amitrajit Chakraborty, National Federation of Small-Scale Fishworkers (NFSF) Secretariat
- iii. Raktima Ghosh, PhD Candidate, IIT Kharagpur, India

Observers:

- i. Pradip Chatterjee, National Convenor, National Federation of Small-Scale Fishworkers (NFSF)
- ii. Abdar Mullick, Assistant Secretary, DMF

This meeting, held at the Baguran Jalpai Cyclone Shelter was unfortunately disrupted by the onset of the monsoon rains in the afternoon, leading to several fishers being unable to reach the venue. However, in spite of the rain, several fishers from Baguran Jalpai I, II, and Dadanpatrabar khoti attended the meeting and evidence was taken from 38 of them. This hearing saw interesting diversity among the respondents – while the bulk of the fishers who gave evidence were men who owned hand-drawn craft or 2-cylinder vessels, evidence was also given by men and women fishing on foot, women fish driers and sorters, fishworkers working on hand-drawn and small motorized vessels, and trawler-workers.

Baguran Jalpai I and II khotis fish along the shore adjacent to Baguran Jalpai village. Fishing in this area is over 80 years old. Fishers here use several types of nets including *behundi*, *kanthi*, *ber*, *bindha*, *foot behundi*, *goghua*, *bagda*, and *chandi* nets. There are about 14 boats and 250 members of Baguran Jalpai 1 khoti and about 24 boats (13 2-cylinder motorized boats, and 11 hand-drawn boats) and 350 members of Baguran 2 khoti. Dadanpatrabar Khoti is among the largest and oldest khotis in coastal West Bengal and visibly shows the impacts of reduced fish availability. As recently as 10 years ago, the khoti had about 500 boats and 5000 members but today, it has around 100 boats and 2500 members. Fishers here catch fish adjacent to the shore with designated areas for the hand-drawn boats and the larger 2-cylinder vessels.

Evidence

As briefly noted above, the fishers attending this hearing owned, operated, and worked on a wide variety of nets and crafts. A high percentage of the respondents agreed on the need for a ban period, but some fishers here made important distinctions between the bans applicable to different categories of boats. Some of those not in favour of a ban made important and nuanced arguments which require close consideration, as noted below. Similar to the first hearing, the fishers highlighted the deleterious impacts of trawler activity on SSF livelihoods. The majority of the fishers supported some form of a ban period for fishing with most emphasizing a minimum of 3-4 months for all categories of fishers (including trawlers, hand-drawn and small motorized craft). A small minority of fishers sharply disagreed on the utility of a uniform fishing ban and argued for graded bans of upto 3-6 months for trawlers, 2 months for small-motorized boats and exemptions for hand-drawn vessels and those fishing on foot.

Even among those who supported a ban, a large majority dissented from the current timing of the ban for a few separate reasons:

- (a) Unlike the hearing in Khejuri, the fishers here largely dissented from the assertions of a uniform Chaitra to Jyeshtha breeding season for fish. They noted that different species of fish spawn at different times – for instance, rui and pata fish spawn in Aghroayon month (between mid-November and mid-December), ruli, tapra, and patia in Phalgun to Boishakh, and hilsa spawn between Ashar and Bhadra months (mid-June and mid-September). Many other species spawned between Boishakh and Srabon (mid-April to mid-August), particularly in the monsoon season;
- (b) Some fishers raised an interesting point that the current choice of Baishakh and Jyeshtha months for the annual fishing ban were made in the interests of trawlers since this was a period when the bulk of these vessels would come on-shore for around 2 months of repairs

after the conclusion of the winter fishing period in mid-March. Thus, the ban was effectively being imposed at a time when no trawler fishing was ongoing, leading to no real impact on increasing fish numbers;

(c) A few of the respondents also raised questions around the precise purpose of the ban period, as currently articulated and implemented. As one respondent highlighted, from spawning to full growth takes around 6 months raising questions around what a two-month ban could hope to achieve; and

(d) A few of the respondents (around 5%) vocally disagreed with any imposition of the ban for SSF using hand-drawn vessels and fishing on foot. They noted that no compensation would be required if they were simply permitted to fish. About 10% of the respondents (crucially, most of these were women engaged in drying and sorting fish) raised an objection to any ban at all, even for trawlers. They highlighted the impacts on livelihoods and households – not just their own, but even the households of trawler workers. This raises two important questions which are worthy of further investigation:

(a) The impacts of the ban period are likely to be extremely gendered and these differential impacts are important to trace, assess and understand. Women are heavily embedded in the fishing economy in this region and understanding the fishing value chain (including, crucially, their sources of fish, their market linkages, and their incomes) might well reveal important insights into the manner in which the ban period affects local fishing economies. For instance, given the diminution of fish stock in the sea, it is likely that trawler fish make up a high proportion of the fish that women fishworkers are drying and sorting, particularly in the off-season. Particularly important aspects to investigate include – (i) the loss of income from the non-availability of fish during the ban period and the lean months; (ii) if compensation is paid, how the money is distributed within the household; (iii) the different sources of women's cash income, particularly in the lean period.

(b) It is imperative to acknowledge the embeddedness of trawler workers within SSF communities and the economic and kin networks that sustain these relationships, particularly at the ground level.

Flowing from this, the fishers made several important observations:

(a) Several of the fishers highlighted that the bulk of the fish catch here occurred in winter and therefore, curbing fishing between Boishakh and Srabon (i.e. mid-April to mid-September) would be a good way to allow fish to regenerate.

(b) Similar to Khejuri, fishers here also saw the annual ban period as being primarily to curb trawler activity and to give an opportunity for SSF to catch fish undisturbed. The respondents who emphasized this point were largely divided into two groups:

(i) One group called for trawlers to be banned from fishing for 6 months and only allowed to fish in winter (when the main fishing season occurs). Not only would this reduce their impact on the fish stock, it would also ensure that they remained in deeper waters. This was because fish came closer to the shore to spawn between Phalgun to Bhadra months and the trawlers had the tendency of chasing the fish into coastal waters and thereby decreasing the fish available to SSF. This was seen as doubly unfair, since most SSF operated small boats which were unable to fish in the coastal waters between March and September. Thus, not only were trawlers destroying and catching vast quantities of coastal fish, they were doing so in a period where the SSF were unable to even catch subsistence-levels of fish in the sea.

(ii) A second group of fishers called for extending the current fishing ban from Phalgun/Chaitra to Ashar, and only limiting the SSF for two months, preferably Chaitra and Baisakh. This would not only give a longer time for fish to spawn but it would allow SSF to start fishing from mid-May or mid-June in an undisturbed manner.

On the point of compensation, almost all fishers agreed that not only was compensation essential for any imposition of a fishing ban, it must also be increased – the present amount of Rs. 5000 per month (Rs 10000) overall was woefully inadequate. The fishers concurred in saying that a minimum of Rs. 10,000 per month was essential and that each member of the household holding a valid FRC should receive the compensation.

Many fishing households function as multi-generational joint families with several members engaged in fishing activities – giving livelihood support to one member per family, and that too an amount of Rs. 5000 is simply far too low.

Tajpur-Jalda Khoti



Jury

- i. Shalini Iyengar, PhD Candidate, Department of Anthropology, Yale University

Observers

- i. Abdar Mullick, Assistant Secretary, DMF

This meeting, held at the Tajpur Jalda khoti was almost entirely attended by members of khoti, one of the oldest and highest earning fish landing centers in the region. Around 40 fishers attended the hearing and evidence was taken from 14 fishers. The khoti is one of the oldest in this region and at one time, over 10000 fishers using 250 boats were members of the khoti although the number has diminished now. Fishers in the khoti catch fish in the sea [and comprise members both from adjacent villages and from farther away]. A wide number of nets are in use for catching a wide variety of fish – behundi nets, floating gill-nets for hilsa, nongor nets for ruli and lohora (bombay duck), ghurghuri nets for catching ruli and prawns, ghoni bhashani phansh nets for catching ruli, chingri, and topshe, among others. Other fish

caught here include tapra, ribbon fish, babla, squid, parshe, goghua, gangmourola, and bhola. This meeting also saw a number of distinct fishing roles and types represented – from fishers to net-makers, to drier and sorters, to navigators, and boat builders. Another additional point of interest was that the fishers here fished within a wide range of ecologies – some very close to the shore (within about a km or so), others between ½ an hour to an hour from the shore, and some as far as 3 to 3.5 hours from the shore or between 50-60 km from the shore.

Evidence

As briefly noted above, the attendees at this hearing belonged to one of the oldest and most storied landing centers in the district and in the state. This translated into several novel forms of governance and organization and high levels of internal fisher governance.

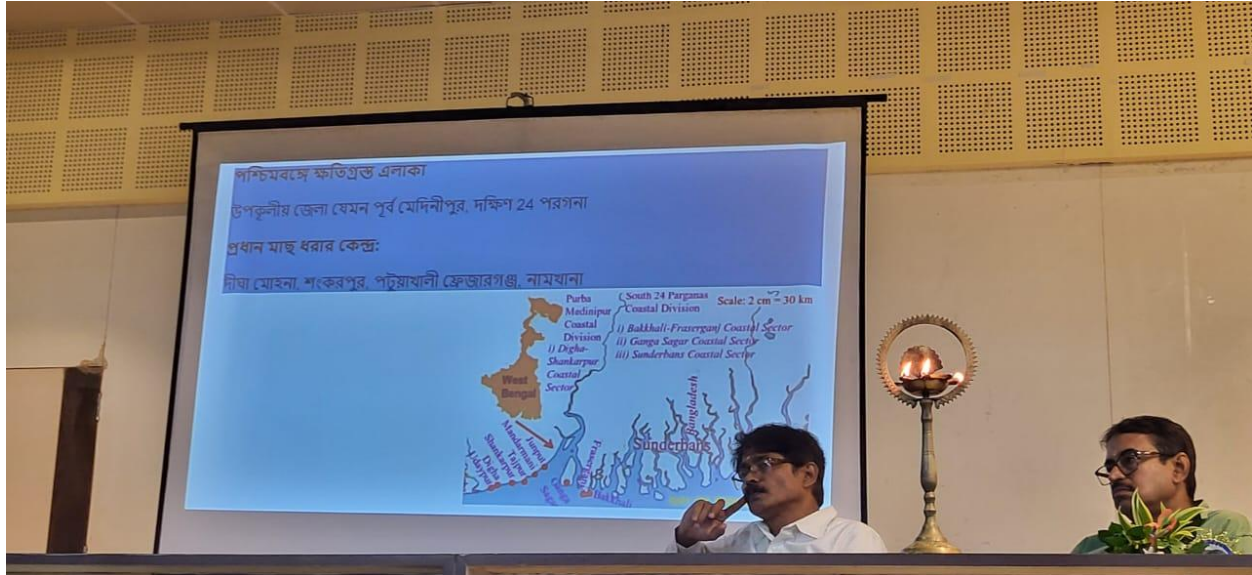
The fishers who attended the meeting largely concurred that the main breeding period occurred between Chaitra and Jyeshtha months (mid-March to mid-June) with some saying that the breeding period extended till Ashar (mid-June to mid-July) and one person saying that the breeding period in the deep sea began around Phalgun (mid-February). They noted that the fish in the sea had decreased due to trawler activity and attributed it to the manner in which trawlers catch juvenile fish.

Flowing from these, the fishers made the following observations:

- i. The fishers here all agreed that the ban should be between two and four months for trawlers and many suggested that the ban should be from Chaitra for the trawlers since that is a period when the fish are spawning.
- ii. The fishers were split on the question of imposing the ban on hand-drawn vessels and motorized boats. Fifty percent of those giving evidence said that the ban should be imposed upon everyone, about twenty-five percent said that it should only be imposed upon small-scale fishers if compensation is given, and the remainder said that small-scale fishers should be exempted from the ban.
- iii. On the point of compensation, differences existed. Almost all the fishers agreed that compensation was important and necessary though differences agreed on its nature. Some noted that INR 5000 per month was sufficient as long as it was paid to each person working in fishing and fishing-allied sectors. Others said that INR 10,000 was essential per month but that this should only be given to those who habitually went to the sea to fish. One fisher noted that a family of 4 needed a minimum of INR 18,000-20000 per month and the amount given should be enough for basic expenses and should be aligned with the number of members in

the family. A significant minority (about 25%) said that no compensation was needed if small-scale fishers were exempted from the ban

Mahishadal



Jury

- i. Professor Dr. Shubhmoy Das, Head of Department, Department of Zoology (Graduate and Postgraduate Department), Mahishadal Raj College;
- ii. Professor Dr. Subikash Mukherjee, Department of Economics, Mahishadal Raj College; and
- iii. Sagnik Mandal, State Aided College Teacher, Department of Zoology, Mahishadal Raj College.

Observer

- i. Abdar Mullick, Assistant Secretary, DMF

This meeting, held at Mahishadal Raj College, saw participation from fishers residing in Mahishadal Block from several riverine landing centres which are classified as “marine blocks” by the state government and hence come under the ambit of the annual fishing ban. Fishers from Badur, Harikhali, Keshabpur Jalpai, Bhangagara, Banka, Mayachar, Natshal, Geonkhali ghats in Nandigram-1, Nandigram-2, Maina, Nandakumar, Kolaghat, Mhishadal, Sutahata blocks in Haldia and Tamluk municipalities, participated in the meeting. 102 fishers were present at this meeting in addition to students, teachers, and staff-members of the Department of Zoology, Mahishadal Raj College.

The fishers based at Badur ghat fish in the Hooghly River and the ghat is about 20 years old. There are about 12 motorized boats at the ghat and the fishers here primarily catch hilsa, bhola, and topse using gill-nets. The fishers based at Bhangangara ghat also fish in the Hooghly river and the ghat is about 30 years old. There are about 25 boats at the ghat and the fishers here primarily catch hilsa and bhola using gill-nets.

The fishers based Harikhali ghat fish in the Haldi river and the ghat is about 50 years old. Previously, the ghat used to be used to cross to [Chandipur kheya] but is no longer in use for this purpose. The fishers here primarily catch hilsa using gill-nets. The fishers based at Keshabpur Jalpai ghat also fish in the Haldi river and the ghat is about 20-25 years old. There are about 10 boats at the ghat and the fishers here primarily catch hilsa and bhola using gill-nets.

The fishers based at Banka ghat fish in the Rupnarayan river and the ghat is about 100 years old. The British used to keep boats at this ghat but even then, there was an active fishing community here. Today, about 40 boats from 4 mouzas fish at this ghat. The fishers here primarily catch hilsa, topse and bhola using gill-nets. Fishers from Mayachar village also fish in the Rupnarayan river. Mayachar village is an island and the fishing ghat there is over 50 years. Today, there are about 20 motorized boats here. Fishers at the village catch hilsa, bhola, and topse with gill-nets.

Natshal ghat is over 50 years old. There are about 15-20 boats at the ghat and the fishers here primarily catch hilsa and bhola using gill-nets. Geonkhali ghat is a ferry ghat linking three districts. Fishing at this ghat is about 15-20 years old. Fishers at the ghat catch fish in the Rupnarayan and Hooghly rivers using gill nets.

Evidence

As noted above, the fishers who attended the public hearing at Mahishadal College fished in the marine blocks of the Hooghly, Roopnarayan and Haldi rivers. When fishers were asked about their perceptions of the ban period, it was clear that the overwhelming majority (some 96%) were aware of this ban. Those unaware were largely shell-fish collectors fishing on foot or on very small hand-drawn boats. A little over half the fishers used small motorized vessels and about half of them used hand-drawn boats. At this hearing, an overwhelming majority agreed on the necessity of the ban period and believed it should be extended.

Over the course of the hearings, the fishers made the following observations:

- i. However, there was disagreement around the period of extension – about half the fishers felt that the ban should commence from the beginning of March while the other half believed that it should be extended to July. There was also disagreement on the vessels which should come under the ambit of the extension. Some 70%

- felt that the extension should be applicable to larger vessels and trawlers and those who go to fish in the sea. That way, the fish will be able to enter the river from the sea and the smaller vessels (that is, those not covered by the ban) will be benefited. However, a significant minority felt that the ban period should be extended for all vessels, whether small-scale or large. However, about 12% felt that the ban period should either not be extended for SSF or should be reduced for SSF.
- ii. The presence of riverine fishers (albeit those fishing in marine blocks) also raised important issues relating to the cumulative impacts of pollution and biodiversity loss. A key point raised by the fishers related to the release of polluted water by the Damodar Valley Corporation for four months of the year. The velocity and quantity of water released, in addition to the polluted nature of its flow, renders the fishers unable to catch fish in the river for several months in the year. In light of these, the ban period for the river needs to be assessed.
 - iii. On the point for the period when the ban period should be imposed, the fishers noted that since they caught fish in the river, they were primarily dependent on hilsa, bhetki, parshe, bhola, tangra, and shrimp. Consequently, their primary concern was around the reproduction of these fish. In the case of shrimp, they believe that they lay eggs in winter or even possibly throughout the year. In the case of hilsa, they believe that they lay eggs in monsoon and winter; imposing the hilsa ban in winter is, therefore, a good idea. However, a ban should be applied all over the country at the same time in order to implement the law properly. That is, while they reiterated that different fish have different spawning times, in order to bring them under the ambit of the same law, the time when most fish lay eggs should be chosen for a ban. Hence, the monsoon ban is reasonable. In addition, some fishers raised the question of a depletion of snails and shell-fish in the river (*geri googli*, *shamuk*) caught in the river and noted that it might also be appropriate to impose a ban period in relation to these species as well.
 - iv. On the point of compensation, the fishers were unanimous in dismissing the amount of Rs. 5000 per month as being insufficient and emphasized that the amount should be increased. However, about 80% of the respondents noted that their objection was rooted in the government's efforts to restrict the recipient to a single head of the household – if the Rs. 5000 was per head, they deemed it to be sufficient. Moreover, they felt that the money should be given to all those involved in the profession. A crucial point, however, emerged from the dissenting 20% who believed that if the amount was increased, then the money would not be available at all. There was also a general agreement that at a minimum, an amount of Rs. 10000 was needed per family.

Analysis and Conclusions

Substantive Assessments

- i. As a preliminary point, it is important to acknowledge the **dynamic and heterogenous nature of fishers**. The four hearings revealed the sheer heterogeneity and dynamism of fishers, all of whom are broadly classified as “small-scale fishers”. While this term has salience in certain contexts, it does not capture the remarkable internal diversity and differences within the community whether on the basis of gender, or class, or income or types of boat ownership within the community, to name just a few. This has implications for a policy exercise such as the one we are conducting. For instance, from the hearings, it was clear that for some fishers, 12 month- fishing was a critical source of subsistence and a ban period at this time would have extremely negative consequences, especially when it was unaccompanied by government support. For others, it was clear that the main fishing period was in the winter months between September/October and February/March with the remainder of the year spent in other activities, whether fish-farming, or farming, or wage-labour. It is unclear if these activities have been chosen as a response to diminished fish in the sea or the ban period or whether this is an active choice towards livelihood diversification since several (although by no means all) fishers also own small pieces of land for farming. It was also clear to us that the question of the boat type was an extremely relevant issue at these hearings. Different kinds of fishing craft – hand-drawn, single/double cylinder – correspond to differences of income and wealth and have very different capacities. As such, policy sensitivity is critical on this aspect.
- ii. **The question of gender is also critical.** Women are one of the most vulnerable and marginalized sections within fishing communities. While they constitute a critical source of labour, particularly during the winter fishing season, they remain usually grossly underpaid since the bulk of their work takes place within families or extended kin-networks. Bans affect them particularly badly since any diminution of fish availability takes away the possibility of earning at least a small amount of money from drying and sorting or selling fish, particularly during the off-season. Moreover, women practice forms of fishing including collecting *pin bagda* or fishing on foot which are also technically proscribed during the annual ban period.
- iii. **Role of Trawlers:** Above and beyond any differences, the fishers at the hearings were near-unanimous in declaring that trawlers were responsible for the

diminution of fish in the sea and that their activities must be circumscribed in the interests of increasing fish stock and in order to ensure the sustainability of SSF livelihoods. For the reasons noted below, the fishing ban for trawlers **must be extended** to a minimum of four months, beginning from Phalgun till Jyeshtha. Fishers were unanimous in holding trawlers responsible for SSF livelihood distress and the drastic depletion of marine and riverine fish. As several fishers poignantly noted, *the quantity of fish wasted by a single trawler is equivalent to the total fish caught by a khoti all season*.

- iv. **Purpose of Ban period:** Is the fishing ban for increasing fish in the sea, or providing a respite from trawler depredations, or both? While the government notionally announces the annual fishing ban for the purpose of encouraging fish to spawn and grow, it was clear that SSF also saw this period as a potential period where they could catch fish without trawler interference and waste. This is a policy question for the union to answer but it is critical, given how badly SSF livelihoods have been affected by the decrease in marine fish.
- v. **Duration and Period of Spawning:** While there were clear differences between fishers on the spawning period, in general, the period from Chaitra to Jyeshtha was identified as critical. It is also important to note that while fishers disagreed between the different landing centers, there was broad agreement internally. This indicates two aspects – (1) there are likely to be variations in fish spawning in different ecological spaces and niches; (2) perceptions of spawning are also contingent on where the fishing is occurring; and (3) depending on which species of fish are either habitually caught in that space and/or habitually caught by the particular fishers at that time. For instance, we spoke to one fisher who fishes well beyond the territorial sea (alongside the trawlers) who noted that he had seen fish with roe around Phalgun. Fishers who fish in near-coastal waters mentioned that fish came closer to the shore to spawn, particularly during the monsoon season and mentioned seeing fish with roe and juvenile fish in the Chaitra-Ashar months. Putting these pieces together, it is clear that (i) the ban on trawlers (which fish farther from the coast) the ban period might potentially be applied differently to different parts of the sea in order to more effectively protect fish during their spawning period and at juvenile stages.
- vi. **Different vessel-dependent ban periods:** While a small-but-significant minority supported exempting small-scale fishers from the ban period, a significant majority of fishers saw the importance of a more broad-based ban. There were important caveats, however. Fishers supported a longer ban period for the trawlers and graded ban periods for different sub-categories of SSF with motorized vessels restricted for longer than hand-drawn fishers and foot-fishers.

- vii. **Compensation amount:** As numerous fishers reiterated, it is shocking that livelihood support has not been given to fishers in spite of budget allocations in this regard. At the time that the support scheme was announced, an amount of Rs. 200 crore was allocated for 2,00,000 fishers i.e. Rs. 10000 per fisher for the 2 months of the ban period. However, when the Fisheries Department announced the details of the scheme, they declared that the amount of Rs. 5000 per month would be paid to a single member of a household (household being defined as per the ration card). This discrepancy needs to be clarified and corrected at the earliest. It was also clear that limiting the per household amount to Rs. 5000 per month (Rs. 10000 overall for the two-month ban period) was woefully inadequate (and indeed, flew in the face of the budget reports which had announced a figure based on the total number of fishers in the state). It is important to ensure that the money is revised to Rs. 10000 per fisher, per month, or, at a minimum, to ensure that every household is given an amount of Rs. 10000 per month.
- viii. **Climate Change Impacts:** While the hearings did not explicitly raise the question of climate change, it was clear from the fishers' responses that climatic changes were influence both the biodiversity and the weather patterns they experienced while fishing during the year. Key among the observed changes were changes in fish availability, shifting monsoon seasons, unseasonal rain even in late autumn and winter and unpredictable storms. These have led to increased immiseration of SSF making state intervention in restricting trawlers an even more urgent imperative.
- ix. **Absence of scientific information:** There is urgent need for more granular evidence-based approaches towards the fishing ban, particularly given the dramatic changes to marine ecologies at a time of climate change and biodiversity loss. In the absence of studies and research, approaches towards close seasons are likely to be *ad hoc* and completely divorced from any actual impacts on fish biodiversity.
- x. **Broad-based approaches towards marine conservation:** The decrease of fish in marine waters is a sadly observable phenomenon. However, this phenomenon has many causes including the enormous amounts of fish caught and wasted by trawlers, inappropriate bottom trawling gear in the shallow continental shelf off the coast of West Bengal, an ever-increasing number of trawlers in the sea, and constant SSF immiseration.

Suggestions for future hearings

General suggestions

- i. **More granular questions:** Which months do they earn the bulk of their income? What do they do during the ban period. Which are the main months in which they fish?
- ii. **Time of the hearings** – Given the seasonal nature of fishing activity, the timing of the public hearing is likely to be influential in the nature of the fishers whose views and perceptions are being captured. For instance, it is likely that the views of fishworkers working as labourers during the fishing season and/or the views of those only fishing during the winter fishing season might have been better captured by holding the meeting during the winter months.
- iii. **Taking physical maps to understand where the fishing is occurring.** This can be done either with GPS, or with physical maps, or both.

Procedural Suggestions

These are my observations about aspects that can be amended and improved for future hearings.

- i. Jury members must have a common format for asking questions and recording them. Ideally, the same set of jury members should conduct all the hearings in a district; if this is not possible, then at least one jury member should be present at all the meetings in a district. Moreover, it is essential to have a meeting between all the jury members for the hearings as well as separate meetings between the panel members (where the jury is sub-divided into panels). This will help with the following (i) understanding the context of the hearings and the expectations from the jury members; (ii) allowing all members to agree on the format and their individual roles (for instance, it is better to have one member asking questions and the other documenting the responses and it is good to discuss this allocation of responsibilities at the outset).
- ii. Jury members should be clear about the purpose of the hearings, whether it is to hear from people about their perspectives on a subject or to improve awareness or to arrive at an agreement about a possible course of action, or even to choose between different alternatives. It is of course likely that multiple objectives can and should be combined but without clarity, a hearing of this nature risks delivering uncertain outcomes.
- iii. This set of hearings provided an excellent opportunity to experiment with a range of approaches towards the hearing formats from the extremely informal (Shotilapur – where the only infrastructure needed was essentially a table and a few chairs) to the extremely formal (Mahishadal College – where the highly formal hearing was conducted in an auditorium with the participation of a large number

of faculty, academic staff, and students in addition to the fishers and where formal presentations were made at the start of the meeting). It is worthwhile reflecting on the formats and their differential value – each provided a valuable opportunity to hear from, and inform different sections of the fisher population and their potential allies. However, it is worthwhile noting that the Shotilapur format provided possibly the best outcome when assessing the combination of informality, intimacy, and low cost and organizational effort. If possible, this model of hearings should be recommended and their frequency improved. Having such hearings as a regular feature of union activities would be extremely desirable since this provided an excellent opportunity to both hear first-hand testimonies from the fishers and understand their perceptions and concerns but also to engage in disseminating information and increasing awareness among the fishers.

Annexure I

Andhra Pradesh

Andhra Pradesh implements the annual fishing ban for 61 days between 15 April and 14 June. During this period, the state government prohibits fishing by mechanized fishing vessels, as well as motorized fishing boats having either in-board or out-board engines in the state's waters. Non-motorized traditional fishing crafts are excluded from the ambit of this ban.

As of 2025, Andhra Pradesh provided livelihood support to fishers during the ban period under the Marine Fishing Ban Relief scheme. Rs. 20000 was transferred to each fisher by Direct Benefit Transfer. A total number of 117,761 marine fishers have received this money as of 16 May 2025. Importantly, this scheme is only applicable for sea-going fishermen.

Goa

Goa implements the annual fishing ban for 61 days between 1 June and 31 July. During this period, the state government prohibits fishing by vessels fitted with mechanical means of propulsion and by vessels using trawl-nets and purse-seine nets in the state's waters. Fishing vessels by registered motorized canoes using only gill-nets and fitted with outboard or inboard motors of upto 10 HP capacity are excluded from the ambit of this ban.

Kerala

Kerala implements the annual fishing ban for 52 days between 10 June and 31 July. During this period, the state government prohibits the use of bottom trawls in the state's waters.

Maharashtra

Maharashtra implements the annual fishing ban for 61 days between 1 June and 31 July. During this period, the state government prohibits fishing by both mechanized and motorized vessels in the state's waters. Non-motorized boats fishing traditionally are excluded from the ambit of this ban.

Odisha

Odisha implements the annual fishing ban for 61 days between 15 April and 14 June. During this period, the state government bans fishing in the state's territorial waters by all fishing vessels. Traditional fishing crafts of up to 8.5m with or without engines are excluded from the ambit of this ban.

Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu implements the annual fishing ban for 61 days between 15 April and 14 June. During this period, the state government bans fishing by motorboats and trawlers in the state's waters. Traditional fishing vessels are excluded from the ambit of this ban. No fishing is permitted within 5 nautical miles from the shore.

Annexure-II

A Public Hearing organized by the Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum on issues relating to the fishing ban order

Fishing Ban Order

The Indian government announces a ban on fishing in marine areas for a few days every year. The purpose of this order is to ensure the undisturbed breeding of the fish and increase their numbers.

Previously, the “ban period” extended to three months or ninety days. Later, that was reduced to 45 days. Today, the ban period extends till 61 days. On the West Coast of India, the ban runs from 1 June through 31 July and on the East Coast, the ban runs from 15 April till 14 June. This order is implemented differently in different areas along the coast.

The Territorial Sea and Exclusive Economic Zone

Countries exercise rights over marine resources in an area that extends till 200 nautical miles (nm) or 370 km from the baseline. This area is called the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Within this area, the first 22 km (12 nm) is the coastal state's maritime borders over which they exercise control. That is, in some places, the state of West Bengal exercises jurisdiction over these waters and in some places, the state of Odisha and in other places, the state of Tamil Nadu. From 22 km till 370 km, the Central government exercises control and jurisdiction. However, the Central government maintains responsibility for defending the territorial waters.

Types of Prohibition

The Indian government issues an order to ban marine fishing in the EEZ between 22 and 370 km from the baseline. This ban applies to all mechanized boats. The only exception is made for “traditional non-motorized vessels”. However, ordinarily, such vessels do not fish in the EEZ areas beyond 22 km.

All coastal states issue their own notifications in line with the dates set out by the Central government notification. The important aspects of these coastal state notifications are:

- i. No state apart from West Bengal imposes a ban on hand-drawn vessels during this period.
- ii. Only West Bengal imposes a ban on all fishing vessels during this period.
- iii. The Central and state governments jointly operate a “Savings cum Relief” scheme to provide livelihood assistance to small-scale fishers during the ban period. Currently, fishers can avail Rs. 3000 under this scheme. However, the West Bengal government has stopped this scheme in the state since 2015.
- iv. Apart from this Central government scheme, the state governments also provide livelihood assistance to fishers during this ban period. For example, the Andhra Pradesh government gives Rs. 20000 to fishers.
- v. Not only has the West Bengal government stopped the “savings cum relief” scheme, it has also not given marine fishers money under the Samudra Sathi Scheme announced in the budget last year. Under the scheme, fishers were supposed to receive Rs. 10000 (Rs. 5000 per month) as livelihood support but this money has not been disbursed.

Questions at the Public Hearing

The Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum is organizing this public hearing in order to understand small-scale coastal fishers’ opinions and perspectives on the issue of the ban period.

In relation to this, there are three principal questions:

4. Is it necessary to ban marine fishing in order to increase fish stock in the sea?
5. If it is felt that banning marine fishing is necessary for at least some of the year, then is 15 April to 14 June the appropriate time for this prohibition? Do most of the fish spawn in this period? Should the time for the ban period be increased or decreased? Should another time be designated for the ban period?
 - d. Please explain your reasons if you feel that these dates are appropriate;
 - e. Please explain your reasons if you feel that these dates are not appropriate.
6. If it is felt that all fishing vessels should be brought under the ambit of the annual marine fishing ban, then should hand-drawn vessels, vessels with small motors, and large machine vessels be banned for the same duration of time or should there be differences in the duration of the ban period? What should the proposed time-periods and durations be?
7. Should hand-drawn vessels be exempted from the ban?

8. Is it necessary to give livelihood support during the marine fishing ban period? If necessary, how much support is needed, who should it be given to, and how should that be given?

Please Attend the Public Hearing

It is necessary to hear and document the views of small-scale fishworkers. We are requesting all small-scale fishworkers to be present at this meeting.