



**West Bengal State Assembly Elections 2021**  
**Small Scale Fish Workers**  
**Review Election Manifestos of Main Political Parties**

***No Right to Livelihood, Only Dole***  
***No Self-Reliance, Living on Government Support***  
***Deplorable Race to Turn Labouring Masses into Beggars***

**Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum**  
**The Small-Scale Fish Workers' Union of West Bengal**  
**Rejects Election Manifestos of Main Political Parties**  
**In Protest Against Utter Disregard and Denial of Fish Workers' Rights**

Drums of elections are beating aloud. The main electoral parties are vying with each other to flood the electorate with false promises suppressing their respective misdeeds. Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF), the largest organization of small-scale fish workers in West Bengal, deems it to be its duty to caution the marginalized, deprived and cheated small-scale fish worker communities and make them aware of the real character and electoral deceit of these political parties.

DMF informed all the main political parties of the problems and demands of small-scale fish workers before publication of their election manifestos and also invited them to an open meeting to discuss the same. Only one political party turned up and pledged their support to the demands, but even their manifesto did not reflect that.

DMF observes with regret that preparation of Election Manifesto has become a ritual for the political parties. The political parties are so engrossed in reckless flaunting of false promises and charming deceptions that publishing manifestos with due importance and seeking peoples' opinion or organizing public discussions on those have been rendered to be an unrewarding exercise. Managing somehow to put together electoral manifestos only a few days before the elections is sufficient for them.

One general observation is hard to miss. The political parties, including the CPI(M) who at one time cried hoarse demanding rights of the workers, do not raise the demands of right to life and livelihood of the working people, especially those of the small-scale fish workers. The mighty "He who wields the net, has the right to water" slogan of 1960s and 1970s has now been turned into providing doles of rice, wheat, lentil, housing, insurance and pension. At the most there is an additional promise to provide public water bodies on lease. It is alright to provide rice-wheat-lentil at cheap rate or free of cost, even one residential room or thousand rupees pension can be given, some medical expenses can also be provided, but the right to fish in the seas, rivers, reservoirs, canals or wetlands and the right to protect these water bodies including their fish resources can never be provided. Because trading in water and water bodies fetches many times more profit than the cost of the doles offered to the fisher people.

The same is true for other fish workers. Not rights, but alms. Getting bank finance is not a right of the concerned fisher, fish farmer or fish vendor, it is a favour provided by the ruling political party. Jetty, fish drying structure, storage facility, road, transport, fish market, cold chain etc. are no entitlements of the fish workers, they are government assistances provided by the grace of the political party.

All the main political parties have utterly neglected, deprived and betrayed the small-scale fish workers to promote the interests of big business: -

- **Congress** – The Congress party which, post-independence, enjoyed almost three decades of uninterrupted rule at the centre and in many other states, has been primarily responsible for the aggression of big business in fisheries. The domination of trawlers and mechanized fishing boats in fisheries that entailed eviction of small-scale fishers started under the supervision of Congress government in 1950s. Congress also pioneered in presiding over coastal land grab and destruction of natural water and fish resources in the name of development. Though the Congress government formed a few committees and enacted a few statutes in the face of incessant struggle of small-scale fishing communities, they have never tried to effectively protect the small-scale fishing communities from the aggression of the capitalists. Rather they have consistently failed to properly implement the laws that were enacted by themselves and could somewhat protect the small-scale fish workers.

***Congress Election Manifesto:*** The two-pager manifesto contains eight very general promises – Rule of Law and Security of Women; Social Security; Expansion of Industry and Employment; Development of Food Provider Farmers; Qualitative Development of Education and Health; Protection of Water and Environment; Saving Art, Culture and Heritage; and not politics of dole or subsidy but of sustainable and long-term development. Notably the manifesto does not even mention fisheries or fisher people.

- **BJP** – BJP has not only taken up the baton from where the Congress had left it at the end of its rule, it has broken all-time records in freely selling out natural resources of the country including natural water resources to big business thereby pushing the natural resource dependent communities including fishers to utter ruin. Without any pretense the BJP has boastfully declared – development means as much natural resource sale out as they wish, development means destruction of the life and livelihood of natural resource dependent masses and sacrificing them on the altar of big business as cheap labour. All the statutory instruments enacted over the years to protect natural resources and occupational facilities have been watered down or superseded by weaker instruments. Trawlers and mechanized boats are engaged in destructive and over fishing in the sea with government approval and sponsorship. Small scale fishers are not getting fish. Large number of ports are being unnecessarily installed encroaching upon thousands of acres of mangroves and beaches. ‘National Waterways’ are being installed in all big rivers and even in lakes for cargo transportation adding to pollution and ecocide. River basins are being encroached by industries and townships. Fresh water is being recklessly taken out from water bodies for irrigation, industries or municipal usage, and polluted waste water is released into them. This massive destruction of natural water and fish resources is causing widespread devastation to livelihood of millions of fishers and fish workers. Food security and nutritional status of local people are threatened. The government does not account for this massive loss because the big business houses, real owners of the government, do not approve that. They never want the people to be aware or informed of the real cost of the ‘development’ catered by them.

**BJP Election Manifesto:** The 4-page election manifesto or ‘pledge script’ of BJP contains only 3 promises for fisheries sector – fishermen security scheme: annual grant of Rs.6,000/- for every fisherman; fishing infrastructure fund of Rs. 2,000 crores; and free accident insurance cover upto Rs. 3,00,000/-.

It is promised that every fisherman would get an annual grant of Rs.6,000/-, but it has not been spelt out who will be covered under 'fisherman'. Fishers, fish farmers, fish vendors, fish sorters and driers, artisanal makers and repairers of fishing nets – all are workers of fisheries sector and failure to mention them raises apprehension of their exclusion. The authors of the manifesto have not considered it necessary to inform the people the purpose of the promised Rs. 2,000 crores fisherman security infrastructure fund, particularly its utility to the small-scale fish workers. Moreover, it appears that they were so casual about an unworthy job like preparation of an election manifesto that they missed to note that the Fisheries Department of the Government of India has already decided to provide accident insurance of Rs. 5,00,000/- under PMMSY.

- **Left Front** – The left front, as a legacy of the role played by them while in opposition, somewhat spoke of the rights of toiling people up to the first 10-12 years since they assumed the reign of the state government from Congress in 1977. The slogan “Water to the Fisher” was heard along with the slogan “Land to the Tiller”. ‘Barga’ (share cropping) records were prepared to resist eviction from farm lands, land reform was accomplished in agriculture to a large extent, but the right of the small-scale fishers or fish farmers on water bodies was never recognized. After that phase it had been the history of eviction of small scale fishers from the seas, rivers, reservoirs and wetlands due to the ‘development’ initiatives of big business, and that of the small scale fish farmers losing hold on ponds and tanks due to escalating rent – both presided over by the Left Front Government. The noose of corruption also tightened with time. Misuse of power guaranteed defalcation of government programme and scheme funds meant for fish workers. Land sharks were invited to start so called development evicting farmers and fishers. 20,000 fishers were evicted from Jambu island on the pretext of conservation. The Nayachar island off Nandigram, inhabited by thousands of fishers and fish farmers, was handed over to corporate houses to install a chemical hub. Left front government fell in 2011.

**Left Front Election Manifesto:** The policy to manage fisheries has been laid out in 7 lines of the 16-page manifesto – the state should achieve self-reliance in fish farming and get back past success; the fisheries cooperatives will again be provided lease of government water bodies, canals, wetlands and rivers by agreement at cheap rate; subsidies will be arranged for coastal aquaculture; cooperatives will be formed and encouraged to farm fish in vested, partially vested and government restored private water bodies; women self-help groups will be encouraged to take up collective or cooperative farming, this will strengthen the process of empowerment of women; use of paddy fields for other purpose will be discouraged to ensure food security.

The promise is for providing water bodies to fish farmers not as their entitlement but on lease at cheap rate. This means denial of fishers’ or fish farmers’ right to water bodies and continuation of the system of putting fishers’ or fish farmers’ livelihood on bid. Leasing means giving right of fishing or fish farming to the highest bidder. Subsidising coastal aquaculture is a proposal for disaster. Coastal intensive shrimp aquaculture is devastating coastal environment and ecology – sea and river waters, even groundwater are getting polluted, soil is becoming non-cultivable, natural fish resources are being wiped off from the coast. Subsidising this destructive profiteering trade means helping the shrimp mafia at the cost of the life and livelihood of small-scale fisher people. Encouraging women self-help groups for collective fish farming is, beyond doubt, a good proposal. But how these groups will be able to get water bodies to farm fish while small-scale fish farmers themselves are not getting water bodies because of the rents of ponds have increased by leaps and bounds? There is nothing in the manifesto on controlling lease rent or ensuring security of lease for fish farmers.

- **Trinamul Congress** – Trinamul Congress wrested the reign of state government from Left Front in 2011. Just after assuming power they arranged to increase the lease rent of government water bodies manifold through a statutory amendment in November 2012. They completely forgot their promise to rehabilitate fish workers on Jambudwip island. They even arranged to sell off Nayachar island to a foreign company to construct a thermal power plant. Under Trinamul rule corruption went out of bounds. There has been unbridled loot of government scheme fund depriving poor fish workers by a nexus of political leaders, government officials and cooperative office bearers. Repeated complaints by the fish workers failed to get any response from the government.

**Trinamul Congress Election Manifesto** – Only 6 lines have been allotted for fisheries in the 66-page election manifesto of Trinamul Congress. Two lines of which bear an account of success – ‘In 2020-21 (upto 30.12.2020) West Bengal has produced 1.29 million tonnes of fish and 24,875 crores fish seedlings’. The manifesto has avoided uncomfortable questions like how many fish workers have got employment or how much increase they had in their income during the period. The rest 4 lines of the manifesto bear only one ridiculous promise – ‘A new scheme for rearing fish fingerlings with the support of self-help groups will be started. Two such units will be commissioned in every block where the fingerlings reared by self-help groups will be collected and distributed among other self-help groups by the department. This will definitely increase the income of self-help groups. It is a pity that in the state of fish-eating Bengalis inhabited by 2.5 million fish workers Trinamul Congress failed to see any fish worker community, let alone the problems faced by the fish workers or their solutions. Millions of fishers, fish farmers, fish vendors, fish sorters and dryers or women net makers and repairers did not catch the eyes of the ruling party of West Bengal. It is only natural that the authors of the manifesto, socially irresponsible as they are, had no business to deal even with questions like where will the SHGs find water bodies when the small scale fish farmers are finding it too difficult to find them.



***Fishing communities can expect nothing other than disrespect, neglect and eviction from these political parties of our country. The election manifestos of these parties are manifestos of insult for the fishing communities. The insult must be retorted squarely. The fish workers must unite to protect their life and livelihood, to save water, water bodies and fish resources. Mighty rallies and unceasing struggles of millions of fish workers can only bring about the recognition of dignity and livelihood rights ending years of disregard, insult and deprivation.***

***For***

**Food Security, Employment Generation and Public Health**

**SAVE WATER, SAVE FISH, SAVE FISHER PEOPLE**