

National Meeting of Fish Workers Engaged in Inland Fisheries

- *A Concept Note*

India is gifted with vast and varied inland water bodies bearing rich fish resources. Rivers and canals, reservoirs, ponds and tanks, oxbow lakes, wetlands, backwaters and estuaries yield 6.14 million tonnes of fish which is more than 64% of total fish production of the country. The sector **sustains about 4 million fish workers** and a total population of around 2 crores.

Still the **potential of inland fishery resources is far from utilised**. Less than 10% of the country's natural potential is used for **freshwater aquaculture and for brackish water aquaculture** the area under cultivation is just above 13% of the potential area available. In the case of flood plain wetlands the present fish production of around 50,000 tonnes can be increased 6 times to 300,000 tonnes and in the case of reservoirs the present yield of 93,000 tonnes can be enhanced by more than ten times to 983,000 tonnes.

These huge resources are **under severe stress**. Rivers are poisoned with heavy pollution load. Diversion of water from rivers is harming their ecological flow. Wetlands, lakes and ponds are being encroached and filled up by industries and real estates. Poor watershed management in catchment areas is cutting down the sources of water of rivers, lakes and wetlands. Natural storm water drainage is intervened by construction of roads, railway tracks and real estate thus subjecting large number of ponds to intermittent overflow. Run off from chemical agriculture is destroying the fish resources of wetlands and paddy fields.

The first victims are the small fishers and fish farmers whose livelihood is inseparably linked with the quality of the water bodies. These small fishers and fish farmers are by far **the largest primary stakeholders and natural custodians of our water bodies**. Losing their livelihood they are being turned into development refugees and have to migrate to other occupations and areas in search of a living.

Most ironically thousands of these small fisher people, who have been struggling to protect their livelihood and the water bodies, are being driven out of the aquatic areas falling within protected areas like wild life sanctuaries and reserves.

Utilisation of vast potentials of inland fisheries as well as the protection of the inland water bodies needs to address issues like river, watershed and water body management together with the rights and entitlements of the small fishers and fish farmers to sustainably use and protect the fish resources and their habitats. **The issues and the ways and means to address them cut across the state boundaries and are truly national in nature.**

Thus it calls for developing a **national platform** to discuss issues of concern to the inland fishing and fish farming communities and take appropriate action.

The **National Policy on Inland Fisheries** needs to provide –

1. An assessment of the potentialities for inland fisheries and a road map for utilisation of the potentialities;
2. Guidelines for the rights and entitlements of the small fishing and fish farmer communities to protect, augment and sustainably use the fish resources in all inland water bodies;
3. Guidelines for protection of water bodies and their catchment areas;
4. Guidelines for recognition and incorporation of fisheries in all development planning that affect water bodies and watershed management.

To make the government sufficiently sensitized to the need of a National Policy on Inland Fisheries and also to ensure that the concerns mentioned above are incorporated in it, we need a National Platform of small scale inland fishers and their organisations.

There have been many attempts to organize the fishing communities. We have witnessed many heroic and instructive struggles by the small scale fishing communities to protect their livelihood alongwith the fish and water resources. The task ahead calls for strengthening of individual efforts by learning from each other, sharing resources, exchanging views, joining initiatives and coordinating activities. And this can be best done through a National Platform of fishing communities working in inland fisheries.

In view of the above **DISHA**, an organization working with small scale fish workers based in West Bengal, proposes to organize a series of meetings in collaboration with Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF) and concerned groups over the coming years. The first such meeting that will include groups from the states of Odisha, West Bengal, Assam, Manipur, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra and Bihar will be held in Kolkata on **20th and 21st September 2016**. The initiative is collaborated by **Action Aid India**.

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