

NATIONAL PLATFORM FOR SMALL SCALE FISHWORKERS (INLAND)

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An Appraisal of the Election Manifesto 2019 of Indian National Congress *from Small Scale Fish Workers' Perspective*

The Indian National Congress has come out with their Election Manifesto 2019 'Congress Will Deliver'. The National Platform for Small Scale Fish Workers (I) appreciates incorporation of several issues important for fisheries in general and small scale fisheries in particular in the manifesto.

While the manifesto is a response of the oldest national political party to the problems faced by the fisheries sector, it also exhibits their insensitivity to the core issues of the sector. The National Platform for Small Scale Fish Workers (I) responds to the Congress's Election Manifesto from small scale fish workers' perspective in the following lines -

Regarding Fisheries the Congress Election Manifesto 2019 reads -

13 Fisheries and Fisherfolk - Over 140 lakh Indians depend, directly or indirectly, on fishing as a source of livelihood. Congress is committed to faster growth of the fisheries industry.

01. Congress will establish a separate Ministry of Fisheries and Welfare of Fisherfolk.
02. We will constitute a National Fisherfolk Commission to promote fishing and the welfare of fisherfolk. It will address indebtedness and appropriate funding mechanisms for fishing.
03. Congress promises to recognise inland fishing and aquaculture as 'agriculture' and extend to them all the benefits available to agriculture.
04. Congress promises to establish a permanent mechanism with neighbouring countries, e.g. Sri Lanka and Pakistan, to resolve problems faced by fisherfolk and to eliminate conflict, violence, coercive action and loss of lives, and to improve the livelihood opportunities of the fishing community.

Comment:

It is to be noted that the fisheries sector has about 15 million fish workers, which makes the fisheries dependent population at least 60 million or 600 lakh.

While it is appreciated that Congress has taken up 'Fisheries and Fisherfolk' as a separate chapter in its manifesto, we are disappointed to find no reference in it to small scale fishing communities who are by far the **largest primary non-consumptive stakeholders and natural custodians** of our water bodies and fish resources.

We are also apprehensive to note that 'Congress is committed to faster growth of the fisheries industry' as it smacks of subjugation to the interests of business and corporate houses who are involved in industrial fisheries harming the livelihood of small scale fishing communities as well as the sustainability.

We are further disappointed to note that there is no commitment on the part of the Congress to ensure **preferential access** of the small scale fishing communities to marine fish resources over the mechanised sector. All around the coast the small scale fishers are not getting fish due to the mechanised fishing boats indulging in both over fishing and destructive methods of fishing.

We welcome Congress's commitment to establish a separate Ministry of Fisheries and Welfare of Fisherfolk. It would, however, not be a useful exercise if the proposed separate ministry is not

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given a mandate to primarily promote sustainable fisheries and protect the life and livelihood of small scale fish workers.

We welcome Congress's commitment to establish a National Fisherfolk Commission to promote fishing and the welfare of fisherfolk that includes addressing indebtedness and appropriate funding mechanisms for fishing. It should also look after infrastructure, technological and social security requirements. This demand was first raised by the National Platform for Small Scale Fish Workers (I).

However, the Congress proposal to 'recognise inland fishing and aquaculture as 'agriculture' and extend to them all the benefits available to agriculture' is problematic. The 'capture' segment of fisheries, in both marine and inland, is unlike agriculture and both 'capture' and 'culture' sectors of fisheries need a different treatment from agriculture.

The great fish resources harboured by our seas, rivers, reservoirs, wetlands and lakes require protection and enhancement of natural fish stock. While fish workers should also get comprehensive social security, the measures needed for the fisheries include equitable and eco-service compliant allocation of water as well as stopping of pollution from various sources including agricultural run offs.

Congress's promise 'to establish a permanent mechanism with neighbouring countries, e.g. Sri Lanka and Pakistan, to resolve problems faced by fisherfolk and to eliminate conflict, violence, coercive action and loss of lives, and to improve the livelihood opportunities of the fishing community' sounds good. But it is not enough. The party should have committed itself to the democratic process of dialogue and promotion of fraternity between the fisherfolk of India and those of neighbouring countries to develop joint management of common fishing areas.

It is also disappointing to note that the Congress manifesto has nothing to say on the **main cause** of marginalisation of fishing communities of our country, namely **lack of legal right (title) of fishing communities over water bodies**. The Congress manifesto has no mention of the inalienable right of the fishing communities on water bodies let alone any commitment to establish that right.

We are further disappointed to find no mention in the manifesto of projects like **Sagarmala, Industrial and Economic Corridors, Merchant Shipping Corridor, River Linking, National Waterways** etc. that are ruining the fisheries in general and small scale fisheries in particular. The manifesto also fails to mention the ill effects of '**Blue Revolution**' and '**Blue Economy**' schemes that are pushing out the small scale fishers by a new breed of fisheries entrepreneurs and further opening up fisheries to business and corporate houses. The Congress must take a clear position on this.

We take this opportunity to remind Congress that in 2012 at the 11th CoP of Convention on Bio-Diversity in Hyderabad, the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of Congress publicly spoke of the need to enact a **Fishing Communities' Rights Act** as the Forest Dwellers' Rights Act to recognize and protect the fishing communities' right to life and livelihood. Congress was in power up to 2014. But nothing was done in this regard. It is disheartening to see no mention of the commitment in the manifesto.

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Apart from the chapter on fisheries the Congress Manifesto has made important pledges regarding environment, some of which are very relevant to the fisheries sector. As such, the National Platform for Small Scale Fish Workers (Inland) takes upon itself the responsibility to assess these pledges –

49 Environment And Climate Change -

Congress pledge -

02. We will constitute, by law, an independent, empowered and transparent **Environment Protection Authority (EPA)** to establish, monitor and enforce environmental standards and regulations. The EPA will replace all other bodies that currently exercise jurisdiction and powers.

Comment:

This is a vague commitment. Will this Authority be an autonomous body or an arm of the ministry? Also, will the EPA subsume all existing authorities or will be just another body? There is no clarity on the status of the proposed Authority.

Congress pledge -

04. We will formulate a **comprehensive land and water use policy** and plan that will include measures for the conservation of ecosystems and the bio-diversity and wildlife contained therein, without affecting the legitimate rights of local communities.

Comment:

It is wrong in principle to divorce the local communities from the ecosystem and then pledge to protect their legitimate right. The Congress should have pledged to recognise the inalienable right of the traditional natural resource dependent communities (including fishing communities) to be considered as part of the ecosystem and its natural custodians.

Congress pledge -

06. Congress will join hands with State Governments to stop, fully and finally, the **discharge of effluents** into the rivers and to clean all the rivers of India.

Comment:

We have experienced 'Ganga Action Plan' under the Congress Government and the 'Namami Gange' project under the BJP Government. Thousands of crores of rupees have been washed down the rivers in the name of stopping pollution.. There has been no admission of the failure of such plans or projects let alone indicating the causes. Without an appraisal of the failure of these efforts to stop pollution, new promises to 'fully and finally' stop discharge of effluents into the rivers hardly makes any sense.

Congress pledge -

07. Congress promises to protect the **coastal zones** of the country. Recent steps that diluted the coastal zone regulations will be reversed. The coast will be preserved without affecting the livelihood opportunities of fishing communities.

Comment:

While the commitment for reversal of recent dilutions of coastal zone regulations is welcome, we are constrained to note that the Congress has not spelt out its own position with regard to the

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recently revised CRZ regulations. The sweeping statement does not indicate what dilutions are going to be reversed and what provisions are going to be restored. This does not help us in assessing Congress's position vis-a-vis the recently revised CRZ regulations.

It is also disquieting to note that the manifesto does not make any reference to the public commitment made by the then Minister of Environment Jairam Ramesh of Congress, in January 2011, regarding enactment of a comprehensive Coastal Regulation Zone Act in place of the notification. It is disappointing that the Congress did not take any step towards the enactment in three years that it was in power after the commitment made by its Minister of Environment.

Congress pledge -

09. We will allow the import of sand for construction and stop the **illegal mining of sand** in riverbanks.

Comment:

Commitment to stop illegal mining of sand is welcome. It is important to protect both our coastal beaches and river beds or basins and their ecology for fish resources and fishers' habitat. But import of sand must also be environment compliant. We must not destroy the environment of other countries to protect ours. India must maintain its responsibility towards the environment of the planet.

