

Development Refugees

Fishworker representatives from seven states of India converged at Kolkata to discuss the creation of a National Platform for Small-scale Fish Workers (Inland)

For the 20 mn strong population of small-scale fishing communities working on inland fisheries in India, 20-21 September 2016 proved to be days of immense importance. Fishworker representatives from seven states converged at Kolkata and pledged to fight jointly to end the marginalization and deprivation of small-scale fishing communities and also to end the destruction of water bodies and fish resources.

India is gifted with vast and varied inland water bodies that bear rich fish resources. Rivers and canals, reservoirs, ponds and tanks, oxbow lakes, wetlands, backwaters and estuaries yield 6.14 mn tonnes of fish which is more than 64 per cent of the total fish production of the country. The sector sustains about 4 mn fishworkers and a total population of around 20 mn.

Still, the potential of inland fishery resources is far from fully utilized. It is estimated that less than 10 per cent of the country's natural potential is used for freshwater aquaculture and for brackish water aquaculture, the area under cultivation is just above 13 per cent of the potential area available. In the case of flood-plain wetlands, the present fish production of around 50,000 tonnes can be increased six-fold to 3,00,000 tonnes and in the case of reservoirs, the present yield of 93,000 tonnes can be enhanced by more than ten times to 9,83,000 tonnes.

These huge resources are under severe stress. Rivers are poisoned with heavy pollution loads. Diversion of water from rivers for industry and agriculture is killing their ecological flow. Wetlands, lakes and ponds are being encroached and filled up by

industries and real estate projects. Poor watershed management in catchment areas is cutting down the sources of water for rivers, lakes and wetlands. Natural storm water drainage is intervened by construction of roads, railway tracks and buildings, 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-scale fishers and fish farmers whose livelihood is inseparably linked with the quality of the water bodies. These small-scale fishers and fish farmers

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are, by far, the largest primary stakeholders and natural custodians of our water bodies. Losing their sources of 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-scale and traditional 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 reserve forests, wildlife sanctuaries and reserves.

Inland water bodies

Utilization of vast potentials of inland fisheries, as well as the protection of the inland water bodies, are issues that need to be addressed.

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These issues include river, watershed and water body management, together with the rights and entitlements of the small-scale 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 state boundaries and are truly national in nature.

Thus there is a clear need for a National Policy on Inland Fisheries and a National Platform for Inland Fisheries Groups and Organizations to discuss issues of concern to the inland fishing and fish-farming communities, and take appropriate action.

In view of the above concerns, Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF), an organization of small-scale fishworkers in West Bengal, decided to organize a series of meetings in collaboration with concerned groups over the coming years. The first such meeting was held in Kolkata on 20 and 21 September 2016, with the participation of groups from the states of Odisha, West Bengal, Assam, Manipur, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar and Maharashtra. The NGOs DISHA and ActionAid actively collaborated in holding the meeting and the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) facilitated the effort.

The meeting witnessed the agonies and desperations of small-scale fishing communities working in rivers, lakes, wetlands and ponds as their representatives, one by one, described how the rivers are polluted and dried up by townships, industries and chemical agriculture, how the lakes are shrinking, and how the ponds are being filled up and encroached. The fishing community representatives also narrated how, with the connivance of the government, subsistence fishers and fish farmers are being edged out from the sector by moneyed investors.

The meeting also witnessed the resolve and enthusiasm of the fishing community representatives to close their ranks and negotiate for better future.

Pradip Chatterjee welcomed all representatives of fishing communities, resource persons, government officials and other participants on behalf of Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF). He was followed by Chittaranjan Mondal, Regional Manager of ActionAid, and Sasanka Dev, Secretary, DISHA, who wished the meeting all success.

Sebastian Mathew of ICSF presented the key note address. He indicated the non-consumptive use of water resources by the fishing communities and stressed the importance of human rights over the use of water. He narrated matters of state policy related to inland fisheries, commitments that our country bears to international conventions and also stressed the issues of governance.

Saptarshi Biswas, Deputy Director of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal, described the efforts of the government, along with their scopes and limitations. He stressed the need for fishing community organizations to emerge.

Archan Kumar Das, Principal Scientist, Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute (CIFRI), gave an overall picture of the inland fisheries and dwelt on its problems and prospects.

B K Mahapatra, Principal Scientist, Central Institute for Fisheries Education (CIFE), enlightened the participants with a short but significant discourse on the statutory directives on inland fisheries.

Fourteen different groups from seven states presented their respective situations, mentioning the problems they are facing and how they think they can overcome them. The groups hailed from Loktak Lake in Manipur; Madhubani in Bihar; Chandil Dam in Jharkhand; Chilika, Bhitarkanika, Mahanadi river basin and Brahmani river basin in Odisha; Godavari river basin in Andhra Pradesh; Bagri Dam and Tikamgarh in Madhya Pradesh; pond- and river-based groups in Hooghly and Howrah districts, Jangal Mahal fishers in Paschim Medinipur and mangrove

forest fishers in the Sundarbans of West Bengal.

Then the participants were regrouped, based on categories of water bodies like rivers, lakes, ponds and reservoirs they are attached with. The groups worked to identify the chief problems confronting fishworkers attached with each kind of water body, and explored how the problems could be dealt with. The groups also worked to indicate the government protections and schemes available to them. After the rigorous group work that continued for two hours, each group presented their findings to all the participants.

The group work and its presentations were followed by a panel discussion on policy elements for inland fisheries. The panellists were Sebastian Mathew, Nalini Nayak, Suman Singh, Mukut Roy Chaudhury, Neelkanth Mishra and Pradip Chatterjee.

It was reiterated that:

- the small-scale fishworkers are, by far, the largest primary (non-consumptive) stakeholders and natural custodians of our water bodies;
- the state policy on fisheries should aim at sustainable use of water and fish resources as well as the wellbeing of the small-scale fishing communities. It should not take enhancement of productivity or investment in the sector as its primary or overarching goal;
- the small-scale fishing communities have to be empowered with Tenure Rights that include sustainable access to, and use of, water and fish resources; Governance Rights to protect water and fish resources from pollution, encroachments and overfishing and destructive fishing; and Rights to finance, infrastructure, technology, market and social security. Further, there should be Residual Rights to access and utilize the resources for alternative livelihood generation.

The panellists also mentioned the need to connect with important fisheries hubs across the country and incorporate the issues of other categories of fisheries like sewage-



Participants at the workshop. The meeting witnessed the agonies and desperations of small-scale fishing communities working in rivers, lakes, wetlands and ponds

fed fisheries or cold-water fisheries to develop a comprehensive policy recommendation. It was also decided that while efforts would be taken to connect with fishworker communities in different states that are still not represented, representatives hailing from different states would strive to build up networks with fishing communities in their respective states.

It was further decided that a draft position paper would be prepared and circulated in one month's time, and the next meeting of the alliance would take place in six months. The name of the alliance was decided to be the National Platform for Small-scale Fish Workers (Inland). To take the work forward, a ten-member Preparatory Committee was constituted with the following activists: 1. K. S. Deben (Manipur), 2. Suman Singh (Bihar), 3. O. P. Rawat (Madhya Pradesh), 4. Munna Barman (Madhya Pradesh), 5. Milan Das (West Bengal), 6. Sannyasi Pradhan (Odisha), 7. Amulya Kumar Nayak (Odisha), 8. Dharam Pal Minj (Jharkhand), 9. Debasis Pal (Andhra Pradesh), and 10. Pradip Chatterjee (Convener, West Bengal). To advise and facilitate the Preparatory Committee, an eight-member Advisory Committee was constituted with the following members: 1. Nalini Nayak, 2. Sebastian Mathew, 3. Mukut Roy Chaudhury, 4. Neelkanth Mishra, 5. Chittaranjan Mondal, 6. Soumen Ray, 7. Neeraj Verma, and 8. Viren Lobo.

For more

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Centre to Roll Out Policy to Support Small-scale, Inland Fishermen

