The Tiger Widows of the Sunderbans

In the forests of the Sunderbans in West Bengal, India, limited livelihood options often drive male fishers literally into the jaws of death, with their widows left struggling for survival

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The expression 'Byaghro Bidhoba', which literally translates to 'Tiger Widows', is a term used to refer to women who have lost their husbands to tiger attacks while hunting crabs and fish in the dense forests of the Sunderbans in the Indian state of West Bengal. These are women ostracized and rendered invisible by society, and most people in India are unaware of their plight. What's worse, these women are victimized and harassed by officials of the Forest and the Fisheries departments when they demand their rights and due compensation.

The struggle for the rights and recognition of the Tiger Widows was taken up in 2017 by the Dakshin Banga Maysajibi Forum (DMF), a registered trade union body representing West Bengal's fishworkers. A survey by DMF showed that more than 3000 such women reside in the villages of Sudhangshupur, Shantigachi, Jawahar colony, Patharpara, Satjelia Bagmundi, Bidhan colony, Anandapur and Lahiripur in Gosaba block. The survey brought to public light the women's main demands: to be recognized as 'Tiger Widows' as well as to receive the compensation of Rs. 500,000 (approximately, USD 6000) per person, entitled to them by the Indian Wildlife Protection Act (WLPA), 1972. In addition, the women also demanded a monthly allowance of Rs. 3000 (USD 36) to sustain their livelihood.

During the COVID 19 pandemic, with the help of DMF, and with financial assistance from Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA), the Sunderban Byaghro Bidhoba Samity (Tiger Widow Association of Sunderban) was formed in 2020 under the leadership of Gita Mridha, herself a 'tiger widow'. This Association is a community-based body whose primary objective is to work for the betterment and socio-economic empowerment of Tiger Widows. It works to create awareness among women regarding their rights and has successfully mobilized the women to participate in meetings, make deputations at block and district level, and, with the help of DISHA, to also prepare a pond for fishing by the women members of this association.

Over time, the Association has been successful in amplifying the voices of the affected women, who have submitted their demands to the Forest and Fisheries departments at block and district level, and also to the State Commission for Women in West Bengal. It filed about 25 claims from Tiger Widows with the State Women's Commission, and submitted a writ petition in the High Court of West Bengal. As a result of these struggles, on 18th January 2024, the High Court ordered that a compensation amount of Rupees 500,000 (approximately, USD 6000) each be paid to two widows. Soon after that, in May 2024, two other widows were also awarded similar compensation.

While Gita Mridha is the face of the community and has tirelessly worked to raise public awareness, the collective spirit of its women members is crucial for the Association. The women of the Association say: "Save us, save our community, and save our pride—India's National Animal, the tiger – but not at the cost of our husband's lives. We encroach into tiger territory because of hunger, poverty, and lack of livelihood options. We urge the government to think about our loss and pain, and to consider us as human beings, not only as 'tiger widows'."

Livelihood in the forests of the Sunderbans is full of danger. Women and men who collect crabs and fishes for a livelihood in these forests are vulnerable to attacks by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. This human-wildlife conflict is part of the lives of these communities and cannot be changed. However, change is certainly possible in terms of how society views these women, and whether state agencies are willing to recognize their rights, enabling them to lead well-supported lives, full of dignity.

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TIGER WIDOW ASSOCIATION OF SUNDERBAN

Tiger Widows of Sunderban Byaghro Bidhoba Samity, Haldarpara, Gosaba

Engendering social capital

Vagaira groups, a type of family support mechanism, facilitate 'successful' internal migration amongst fishers on the East Coast of India

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Marine fisheries in India is a caste-based occupation, with a social and political hierarchy in place. For those belonging to the subordinate fishing castes, excluded from decision-making processes at home, migration is an important strategy for gaining economic resources, social power and recognition as skilled and successful marine fishermen. In this pilot study, we explore the processes and mechanisms underlying the internal migration of fishers in coastal Tamil Nadu, India, and the pathways to 'success' both in terms of social mobility and material wellbeing. We interviewed 65 migrants, both men and women, who have moved from Rajakuppam, their village in Tamil Nadu's Cuddalore district, to Kasimedu in the state's capital - Chennai.

Male migration in the locality is rising, mainly as a pathway to accumulate capital for investment in mechanized fisheries. Women often lose access to fish as a result and are obliged to abandon their occupation. While they lose incomes and their contributions are invisibilised, women continue to play important roles in the social reproduction of the fishing enterprise, largely unacknowledged. In seeking to better understand gender relations in the context of rising migration amongst fisher households, we report here on the importance of marriage ties and kinship relations, brokered by senior women, on the outcomes of migration.

A range of factors from coastal erosion and natural hazards to the lack of infrastructure and poor marketing facilities in their village, have made the local fishermen look for opportunities elsewhere. They found fishers in Chennai using advanced craft, gear and engines, but importantly, earning remunerative prices for their catch. This made Chennai an attractive destination. The first migrants from Rajakuppam, however, confronted a host of institutional barriers and everyday conflicts. The Chennai fishers were

D. BALASUBRAMANIAN

Hard to land at the eroded beach. A range of factors from coastal erosion and natural hazards to the lack of infrastructure and poor marketing facilities in their village, have made the local fishermen look for opportunities elsewhere

M. PALANI KUMAR

At the break of dawn, fisherwomen at the harbour. The Chennai fishers didn't allow the migrants to register their boats, or join the fisher association, made them pay penalties for fishing in their waters, and engaged in several small forms of everyday harassment

Pattinavars, while those from Rajakuppam belonged to the numerically smaller and hierarchically subordinate Parvatharajakulam caste group. The Chennai fishers didn't allow the migrants to register their boats, or join the fisher association, made them pay penalties for fishing in their waters, and engaged in several small forms of everyday harassment.

Despite these daily tensions and conflicts, the Rajakuppam settlers gradually built political connections that enabled them to receive federation boats and all government schemes and entitlements alongside local fishers. With this eligibility they formed their own association and enrolled as members in Fishermen Cooperative Societies. Alongside this, they focused on strengthening their social capital, as trust and social support were critical for overcoming the resistance they faced and achieving positive outcomes. As their children grew up, and their daughters married, they formalized a family support group known as '*vagaira*'– literally a collective of members tied together through kinship and marriage, as a form of bonding social capital. Though six *vagaira* groups have been formed with about 65 migrant households, we focus here on the Annamalai *Vagaira*, constituted by the first migrants to Chennai, to better understand its organization and contribution to their success.

The Annamalai *Vagaira* is an informal family collective, constituted over a period of time, bringing together generations for a common goal. A senior woman, Muniammal, 65, wife of one of the first migrants, was central to this social organisation, negotiating with different members of the family their respective roles, contributions and entitlements. While initiated by her and her husband, the next layer of the *vagaira* included her seven children, both sons and daughters, and their families. Once her children were well-settled and self-sufficient, the group was further expanded. Brothers of both her sons-in-law and daughters-in-law constituted the third layer. Over time, other relatives such as her sister's son joined the group. This *vagaira* group now has 13 families owning 26 boats (see Figure 1). While two of her sons are not actively engaged in fishing, her daughters' families all now own boats and are dependent on fisheries for their livelihood.

The *vagaira* provides its new members financial support for investing in boats and gear. When two of Muniammal's second son-in-law's brothers came to Chennai, her daughter mobilised money from her siblings for them to start the fishing business. Gradually after stabilizing their business, they repaid the amount to her daughter. But it is more than money; the group continues to provide emergency cash and capital, technical

Women's social reproduction roles are often ignored in studies of gender relations and divisions of work in the fisheries sector

knowledge, marketing support to fetch better prices and reduce losses, and conflict resolution to start and expand their business. Transparency in sharing information about their fishing assets like crafts, gear and other equipment, creates a team spirit, rather than one of competition. Rapport and trust within the *vagaira* is strong. It is this commitment to supporting each other through the exchange of goods, money and ideas that is perhaps one of the most important factors driving the success of the Rajakuppam fishers in Kasimedu.

While being a member of the *vagaira* group, each family maintains a clear division between the domestic and productive spheres. Women take family-level decisions relating to matters such as education, health, and savings, but those relating to the purchase of boats, nets, other equipment, fixing traders and auctioneers for selling their fish, are taken collectively. With practical experience, new members learn to make informed decisions, while the *vagaira's* collective social capital allows for the sharing of risk, the monitoring of emergent threats and opportunities and the provisioning of moral and material support during times of crisis.

The key elements that keep the group together are the strong relationships between siblings and kin, financial give-and-take, knowledge and asset sharing, collective decision-making and the exchange of suggestions/ advisories. Despite these positive features, conflicts do arise, mostly related to finances and the number of boats owned. Jealousies arise among women if their monetary expectations are not met. It is usually the older women like Muniammal, who talk to the conflicting parties and help arrive at an amicable resolution. As KV, the eldest son of Muniammal, noted, "*my mother is an accomplisher, and she now plays the role of an advisor to many. She helps maintain a smooth growth curve by facilitating the resolution of the small ups and downs among and between the families of our Vagaira*". The other early migrants too established family groups and are doing well in Kasimedu. These groups give hope to the migrants from Rajakuppam and provide hand-holding support if they wish to establish themselves in the sector.

Fishers from many parts of Tamil Nadu migrate to Chennai for fishing, but in the absence of a support system, during times of crisis or conflict, they see no option but to return to their home villages. Rajakuppam fishers, belonging to a homogenous but marginalised caste group, confronted many challenges by supporting each other through their family groups. This strong family cohesion played a key role in making them 'successful' settlers in Kasimedu. KV continued: "*We were the first to become boat owners in Chennai, and we then expanded our team by constituting a family group. None of the 44 fishing villages of Cuddalore has the system of Vagaira; it is we from Rajakuppam who created, demonstrated and sustained this model. Now amongst us, there are five to six vagaira groups, each owning a minimum of ten to maximum thirty boats*".

Over the past four decades, the migrant settlers from Rajakuppam, now owning almost

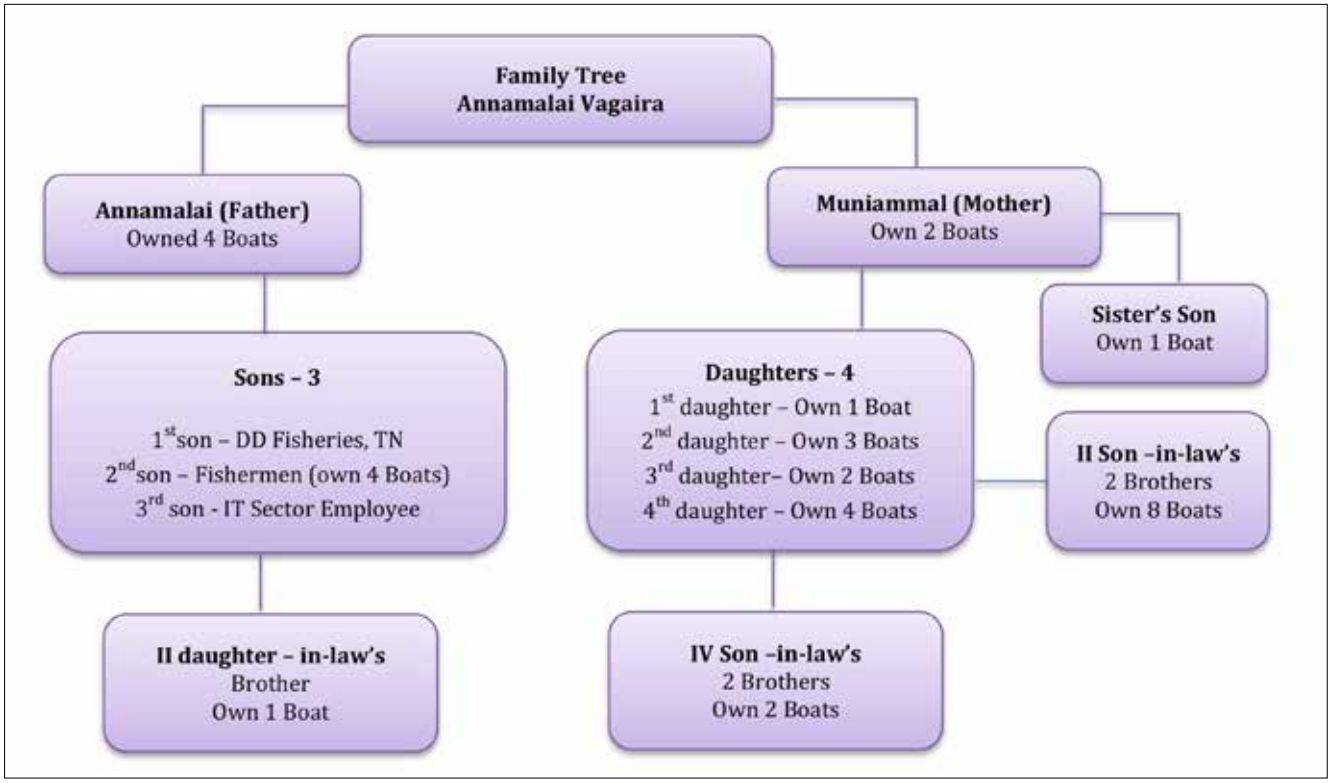

Figure 1: Annamalai Vagaira. The Annamalai Vagaira is an informal family collective, constituted over a period of time, bringing together generations for a common goal

one-tenth of the boats operating out of Chennai harbour, their children in higher education, have achieved both economic and social mobility. They belong to the upper classes amongst fisher families, with a high standard of living, and have broken caste barriers between themselves and the dominant *Pattinavars*. Theirs is a story not of exploitation, but of success, despite the many challenges they faced.

At the same time, their bonds with their family groups; fellow fishers and fishing labour have also become stronger. As Muniammal clarified, "*wives of boat owners, especially senior women, have played a central role in building and maintaining social ties, both within the family and vis-à-vis the wider society*". Women's social reproduction roles are often ignored in studies of gender relations and divisions of work in the fisheries sector. The experience of *vagairas*, explored in this paper, makes visible women's central roles in ensuring the success of migrant fishers' enterprise.

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Building solidarity

Proceedings of a workshop held in Chennai, India, aimed at understanding challenges, finding solutions, and building solidarity among women in fisheries

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Women constitute 56 percent of the fisher population in India and yet they are often voiceless. To address the invisibility and underrepresentation of women in fisheries, a workshop was held in Chennai, India, from 8 to 10 April 2022. Titled 'The National workshop on SSF Guidelines and Women in Fisheries, India', the workshop was part of a process of collective action that had, just before the COVID 19 lockdown period, witnessed the creation of a Women in Fisheries Platform.

The workshop participants were mainly fish vendors but also in attendance were women from the harvesting sector, who are among the most marginalised sections in the fisheries. Women in harvesting were represented by shellfish gatherers from Palghar, Maharashtra; the 'tiger widows' of Sundarbans, West Bengal; active woman fishers from West Bengal and seaweed collectors from Ramanathapuram, Tamil Nadu. The workshop was an attempt to build alliances between the two groups of women in fisheries – harvesters and vendors.

The workshop commenced with participants sharing their experiences on the impact of the pandemic. Two aspects were highlighted: first, the difficulties that women experienced in trying to reach markets despite possessing fish to sell, and in Kerala, the entry of men who had lost their jobs during the lockdown into fish vending spaces. Second, the reappearance of varieties of fish not seen for a long time, as mechanised fishing was put on hold during the lockdown. In addition, participants also talked about the adverse impact of the pandemic on

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Participants of women in fisheries workshop Chennai, India. Despite their enormous economic contributions to the harvest and postharvest sector, women's participation in decision making at the local, state, and national levels is still nascent

children's education; the problems caused by coastal erosion; and the loss of coastal lands and habitation spaces due to climate impacts and harbour development.

Lila Vasant Karbhari, a shellfish gatherer from Palghar district of Maharashtra described the challenges faced by her community. These include climate change-induced unseasonal rainfall that often washes away their shellfish harvest and the difficulty finding fish to meet even home consumption needs. There are 57 villages in Palghar district and a lot of women who gather shellfish are not registered as fishers. As a result, their activities are undocumented; their work is unrecognized; and they are unable to seek compensation for losses incurred.

Purnima Meher, also from Palghar, who is a member of the organization Maharashtra Macchimar Kruti Samitee (MMKS) spoke about the government's apathy towards women fishers. During a recent cyclone, the Maharashtra government provided financial assistance to boat-owning fishermen. However, women fishers, vendors or collectors received not even a mention. After women began protesting, and when Jyoti Meher, secretary of the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) and member of MMKS, forwarded their concerns to the central government, financial assistance for women was sanctioned. However, the scheme had conditionalities attached to it – for example, only women with licenses could access it; therefore, it excluded the majority of women vendors and all of the women who work in harvest and postharvest fisheries.

Gita Mridha, who hails from the Sundarbans in West Bengal, spoke about how her husband who collected fish, crab and honey in the Sundarbans forests was killed by a tiger, forcing her into the ranks of those known as 'tiger widows' – women who have lost their spouses in tiger attacks. Although women whose husbands have been killed in tiger/crocodile attacks are awarded Rs. 2 lakh (USD 2,544) as compensation, Gita could not avail the amount because she did not have a proper death certificate. Describing the current situation in the Sunderbans, Gita said that the core zone of the sanctuary, where fish and crabs are found, is a prohibited area. Fishers travel illegally to these core areas using dinghy boats. On the days that she manages to reach the core area, she said she may harvest up to two kilos of crab and fish. Gita has played a leadership role in the community and helped to establish the Tiger Widow Mahila Samiti in Gosaba block, which has 15 women members. The organization travels out to other blocks to bring other 'tiger widows' (over 3000 in number) into its fold. They plan to reach out to the government in order to secure better compensation.

Hailing from the Southern Province of Tamil Nadu, Meenachi, a seaweed collector from Ramanathapuram, was around eleven years old when she began collecting seaweed. She was married by the time she was 16. Since her husband did not provide for the family and there were children to bring up, Meenachi— one of many such women—would go to sea, earn Rs. 100-150 (USD 1-2) a day and somehow manage to run the household. There would be six or seven women in a boat as well as one man. In those days, there were no regulations on seaweed collection. She would leave her children with her mother for four or five days and go to the nearby islands to collect seaweed. She was always keen to educate her children with her earnings. Today her daughter is pursuing a master's degree. She said that the last two years were hard. She couldn't go out to work during the lockdowns, and there was no income to support the household. Just like fishers, seaweed collectors also could not work during the ban period. Unlike fishers though, they did not receive support. Meenachi felt that there should be some provision made to enable seaweed collectors like herself who have no other means of income to access alternate livelihoods and opportunities during ban periods.

The workshop also addressed the needs and challenges of the women in fisheries post-harvest. 75 per cent of fish marketing and 90 per cent of all processing is done by women. However, their basic needs and rights have fallen on deaf ears for decades.

'The workshop attempted to ... build alliances and foster solidarity among women fishworkers for a more resilient tomorrow.'

Women across provinces said that they lack access to dedicated market areas. They are being pushed out of formal spaces and forced into street vending. In places like Mumbai, 'redevelopment' is used as an excuse to displace women from their vending spaces in traditional markets. Amutha, a fish vendor from Chennai in Tamil Nadu recounted that the market space that women fish vendors like her used, was demolished to widen a road. They were promised an alternative dedicated market space, which is however yet to materialize. Another speaker was Ujwala Patil, an organizer from Maharashtra, who is trying to bring together women whose markets have been displaced. Her organization has also been training women to distribute fish directly to customers using scooters. Despite concerted attempts to gain social security for women fish vendors, they have met with little success. Most fish markets have poor facilities and are in dire need of renovation. They lack clean and hygienic bathrooms, potable water, and lighting. Dedicated market spaces with basic infrastructure are urgently needed.

The workshop also brought to light the biases and hardships that women face when they try to avail compensation for losses incurred due to cyclones, floods, and other disasters.

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Women's panel discussion. The workshop also brought to light the biases and hardships that women face when they try to avail compensation for losses incurred due to cyclones, floods, and other disasters

Women vendors and harvesters demanded that, just like men, they too should be compensated during lean periods and for injuries caused by fisheries-related activities. The demand was echoed by the other groups present at the workshop, including the 'tiger widows' from the Sundarbans and the seaweed gatherers of Ramanathapuram.

During the course of the workshop, the women in fisheries group put forward several interesting suggestions and action points. First, they suggested that all women fish harvesters must be recognized and documented. Their economic contribution to fish harvesting also needs to be recognized. In order to improve the livelihoods of women in fisheries, women-specific fisher collectives are needed that prioritize and directly benefit fisherwomen. Women fish vendors' rights to market spaces must be protected and market redevelopment undertaken only in consultation with their representatives. They also demanded that spaces for women street fish vendors be made secure and that the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihoods and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 be strictly implemented. In Kerala, the women have demanded that market committees and harbour management committees should have women representatives from fishing communities.

All the input sessions and discussions led to developing a workshop statement and building the Women in Fisheries Platform. The workshop provided information that will no doubt enable women fishers to intervene more effectively at community-level meetings. The process of sharing information, good practices, and experiences through forums such as the Women's Platform led to strengthening the collective voice of the participants. The workshop statement concisely put forth the needs of the fishing community at large and of women in fisheries in particular. It called for developing national guidelines for Small-scale fisheries and a national policy for women in fisheries, with wider consultation and participation of fishers and fishworkers at various levels. The Women in Fisheries platform would function as a joint forum of different groups with similar needs. It was unanimously decided that the platform would be called 'National Platform for Women in Small Scale Fisheries', NPWSSF in short, and that it would work towards strengthening the position of women in fisheries.

Gender equality is still a distant dream in the fisheries. Despite their enormous economic contributions to the harvest and postharvest sector, women's participation in decision making at the local, state, and national levels is still nascent. The workshop attempted to set right this imbalance and to build alliances and foster solidarity among women fishworkers for a more resilient tomorrow.

Do women fish?

Case studies from India highlight the vital but little-recognised role that women play as fishers

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It is now acknowledged that women account for 50 per cent of the workforce in fisheries and aquaculture, especially when we take into account their work in post-harvest activities like processing and trading. The findings of the 'Illuminating Hidden Harvests' report show that, globally, about one in four workers in small-scale fisheries are women. However, women, especially in developing countries, face substantive challenges to engaging in and benefitting equitably from these sectors. Several studies have pointed out that they have poor access to and control of resources. Also, in India, women are losing out on the traditional access rights they had on landed fish due to factors like mechanisation of fishing vessels. Further, deep-seated patriarchal, cultural and social norms limit their engagement. Most of women's work is in the form of unpaid family labour, which is seen as an extension of household reproductive roles. Incomes they earn for similar work are lower as compared to men, for example, in seafood processing or in fish vending. In dry fish processing and trade, a transition from processors/traders, to low paid and sometimes unpaid labour, is being observed. The one node in fish value chains that engages women and yet is hardly acknowledged, however, is fish harvesting. In India, about 49 per cent of the 2.5 million adult population in marine fishing communities in India, are women. Of the adult population in these communities, 81 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women are reported to be employed in the sector. There are no reports of women in fish harvesting, although 58 per cent of all seed collectors are women

PRIYANKA AJAY NAKHAWA / ICAR-CIFT and ICAR-CIFE

Women gillnet fishers, Raigad, Maharashtra, India. Women mend and make nets, they collect seed, they sort fish when landed, they auction fish and they engage in vending both in markets and door-to-door. They also do fishing

and a massive 74 per cent of all allied workers too, which includes work like net making and mending, marketing, curing and processing, peeling, labour, other jobs.

If we were to formally record all the jobs that women carry out in fisheries their profiles would be highly varied. Women mend and make nets, they collect seed, they sort fish when landed, they auction fish and they engage in vending both in markets and door-to-door. They also dry excess catch or the catch that is specifically meant for drying, they smoke and ferment fish, collect seaweed and work in small-scale pre-processing and commercial processing. They also do fishing. These myriad activities are however, not captured comprehensively.

Besides all this, women bear almost all the burden of household work. A 2019 survey in India found that women (including fisherwomen) spent on average five hours and fifteen minutes in a day doing domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and washing. And one third of the women, mostly those with young children, spend on average another two hours and seventeen minutes every day caring for and instructing children: seven and a half hours in all. And interestingly, for women who have received higher education, the burden of such work is not significantly different than for other women.

There are no data or official records of women doing fishing. Their fishing activities are often termed 'subsistence', which, by definition, is something that is done for maintaining or supporting oneself at a minimal level. Our studies over the past few years, however, show that women do not always only carry out subsistence fishing. Their activities ensure nutritional security as well as additional incomes, and the women themselves consider fishing as their distinct livelihood activity.

In our studies we have documented several cases where women are engaged in reservoir based fish harvest. Reservoirs are large inland water resources that can help increase fish production. Since the main function of reservoirs is usually power generation or irrigation, reservoir based fishing is generally considered a spin-off, secondary activity. Reservoirs are stocked with fish by the Department of Fisheries of the respective states, and fishing rights are leased either to individuals or cooperative societies. Coracle fishing or fishing using small canoes with gear such as gillnets is commonly seen. Generally, fishing is carried out by husband-wife teams and up to 80 per cent of household income comes from this activity. Since equal effort is expended, half of this income is the direct contribution of the women.

Lakes and rivers are important inland water bodies too. In Wular Lake in Jammu and Kashmir, women carry out fishing of snow trouts and common carps, and harvest water chestnut locally called trapa for their livelihoods. The fish is either sold fresh or processed and is in high demand especially during winters. In Loktak Lake in the north-eastern part of India, women use small canoes for fishing using dip nets, scoop nets and traps fabricated using locally available bamboo. The fish is marketed locally.

As in the case of lakes and rivers, fishing in India's coastal backwaters and estuaries has also been documented. In the southern state of Kerala, husband-wife teams carry out fishing using gillnets in the Vembanad backwaters. The marketing is undertaken by the husband, but the wife is an equal partner in all other tasks.

In Raigad, Maharashtra, women along with men engage in single-day gillnet fishing in estuaries, fishing at depths of between three to five fathoms (about 5.5 to 9 metres) and harvest ribbon fish, shrimps, mullets, croakers, and golden anchovy. Women are solely responsible for marketing either in their villages or in faraway markets, depending on the volume of catches.

Bheels are unique to the north-eastern part of the country. These are flood plain wetlands, low-lying areas bordering large rivers, which are seasonally inundated by the overspill from the main river. Women in large numbers engage in fishing using unique dip nets, sometimes reaching the shallow fishing grounds in canoes. These bheels are dominated by nutrient-rich small fishes, ensuring the nutritional security of the households of these women. These fish are an important constituent of the diet of the people in the region and are rich in nutrients.

The pokkali fields are part of the wetland ecosystem typical in Kerala. These are lands where the alternate 'rice-fish system' has been traditionally practised. The fish/shrimp culture that takes place alternately with rice production utilises a natural filtration process. Of late farmers have also been stocking these farms. These lands are open to whoever wishes to fish on it once one crop is harvested and before the second is taken up. Generally women (and very few men) glean or fish and shrimp from these fields. They use small indigenous scoop nets for harvesting, following the lunar cycle to decide on when to fish (fishing close to the full moon and new moon days). Daily fishing can extend up to six hours, in neck deep water. Feeder canals to these lands are also potential sources of fish, where the women carry out the activity when the lands, during the cropping season, are declared out of bounds. The fish is used for household consumption, with the excess being marketed fresh.

Women working in groups also use indigenous gear like coconut leaves for fishing in these areas, collecting the fish by dragging the fronds in the water and handpicking the fish. Again in the northeastern parts of the country,

Women are engaged in various activities in small-scale fish value chains; in the first place, their work needs to be recognised as fish work

we see dip nets being used on the margins of paddy fields for fishing. Women in groups also travel to a neighbouring district and fish in paddy fields, ditches and other waterlogged areas. They go out in groups, fish for about five hours, and then proceed to the market to sell the catch. Groups comprising young and older women from local fisher communities in Raigad, Maharashtra, glean oysters, gastropods and crabs from inshore waters and creeks, using curved blades on a wooden handle. Women from Ramanathapuram in Tamil Nadu in South India, for decades have dived into the waters to harvest seaweed. Seaweed farming is in fact extensively carried out by women.

These are just some examples from among several thousands of women, engaged in fishing in India but who are not licenced fishers. Women are engaged in various activities in small-scale fish value chains; in the first place, their work needs to be recognised as fish work. Women's work makes significant contributions to household incomes and nutritional security. Women are also a major workforce in fish harvesting across the country. Prevailing estimates of 33 per cent of women being part of the workforce therefore need realistic revision. The impact of different stressors is different on men and women; this needs to be recognised too. Gender should be central to policy development and all women in the sector should be recognised as fishworkers. A comprehensive census to generate on-the-ground factual information on women and their contributions must be taken up.

Left in the lurch

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic and nationwide lockdown, fisherwomen in Maharashtra, India, have few fallback options

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The Guhagar fishing village lies in the Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra state in India. It has about 450 fisher families. Earlier, the regular routine for the fisherwomen of the village centred around visiting the beach and fish landing sites early in the morning to gather and buy fish that they would later sell.

Since 25 March this year, India has been under an unprecedented nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19, the novel coronavirus disease. This has severely impacted all economic activity in the country. For fishworkers along the fish value chain this has meant a total stoppage of all work, and loss of income. "Because of COVID-19, for almost a month, all fishing activities have stopped and fishers have no income. Traditional fishers are like daily wage workers who go to the sea daily to catch fish and earn their livelihood," said Ujwala Jaykisan Patil, a Mumbai based fisherwoman leader of the Maharashtra Machhimar Kruti Samiti.

While the government announced a Rs 1.70 lakh crore (USD 22.46) relief package for the poor to help them fight the battle against COVID-19, many, including members of the fishing community of Guhagar, find themselves excluded. According to Deepti Dattatreya Asgolkar, a fisherwoman from Guhagar, "Almost 80-85 per cent fisherwomen and their families in the village do not fall under the BPL (Below Poverty Line) category, and hence, are not eligible for subsidised PDS (Public Distribution System) foodgrains by the government. Also, with no fishing and no source of income during lockdown, who has the money to use cooking gas which costs over Rs 800 a cylinder? So, we go daily to the local forest to get firewood to cook food."

Before the lockdown, the average day for fisherwomen in Guhagar usually started with their leaving home at 3 am to reach the fish landing sites and beaches where fishermen brought the fish catch. There they helped sort out the catch, bought and then proceeded to sell it in local fish markets. Some would go on foot from one residential colony to another, selling fish. Many fisherwomen spent at least ten to twelve hours a day in fish vending and fishing allied activities. All these activities have now come to a standstill. The fisherwomen are now engaged in cooking food not only for their families but also for migrant fish workers stranded in their village.

This plight is not restricted to Guhagar village. The story repeats itself across fishing villages in Maharashtra and in fact all of India. "For the last one month, I am sitting idle at home. Fishermen are not going to the sea to catch fish, and I have no fish to sell. Earlier I used to earn from Rs 200 (USD 3) to sometimes Rs 500 (USD 7) a day selling fish. Now my income is zero. I have received no free rations from the government. If we try and step out, the police catch us because of the curfew," said Tejaswini Kolabakar, a fisherwoman from the Thane district of Maharashtra. Another fisherwoman from Palghar in north Maharashtra, Rekha Gangadhar Tare, added, "Before this coronavirus disease, we fisherwomen used to earn Rs 100-150 (USD 2) a day selling fish. Now our income has dropped drastically. We are somehow just going to local water bodies to catch some fish and feed our stomachs. If we are lucky, we are able to sell fish for Rs 40-50 (USD 0.75) a day."

The National Fishworkers' Forum has demanded that the central government announce an economic package specifically for the fishing community to combat disruption caused by the lockdown, and keeping in mind that the upcoming monsoon ban season will further affect the livelihoods of crores of fishworkers and allied workers.

It has demanded a monthly allowance of Rs 15,000 (USD 200) per fisher family for a three-month period to be paid in advance, and an adequate supply of ration with cooking fuel to the fishworkers.

Meanwhile, in its letter dated 30 March, the Central Department of Fisheries indicated it was proposing financial assistance to those fishers who had bank accounts linked to the government's Unique Identification scheme – Aadhaar. But, so far, no financial help has come.

Even if the government does announce a relief package for fishers, fisherwomen are unsure if they will be covered. "Most of the government schemes and compensation packages are meant for fishers registered with fishing cooperatives. A large number of women involved in fish vending activities are not registered. But they must also be compensated, as they are completely dependent on fishing activities to earn a livelihood," said Ujwala Patil. "Half of the month of March and all of April has been spent in lockdown, which is on till

SHIVAKUMAR MAGADA

A dip in livelihood of women fishvendors in Karnataka, India. Most of the government schemes and compensation packages are meant for fishers registered with fishing cooperatives. A large number of women involved in fish vending activities are not registered.

31 May. From 1 June, a seasonal fishing ban will come into force in the west coast for 61 days. Imagine living without any source of income for three months," said Tejaswini Kolabakar. "We must be provided at least Rs 2,500-3,000 (USD 35-40) per month for the next three months to tide over the impact of the coronavirus outbreak," said Deepti Asgolkar.

On 10 April, two weeks after the nationwide lockdown came into force, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs issued an amendment to the lockdown rules which exempted "operations of the Fishing Marine/Aquaculture industry, including feeding and maintenance, harvesting, processing, packaging, cold chain, sale and marketing; hatcheries, feed plants, commercial aquaria, movement of fish/shrimp and fish products, fish seed/feed and workers for all these activities". The amendment made social distancing and proper hygiene practices in these activities mandatory. However the notice did not help the fishing communities in any substantial way. According to Ujwala Patil "Because of the coronavirus disease, fishers are scared. Fishing villages are densely populated areas. They also accommodate migrant fishworkers. Fish markets are crowded, too. Fisherwomen are too scared to venture out".

The National Fishworkers' Forum while welcoming the revised guidelines, has asked the government to announce clear directions and advisories from the State Fisheries Department in the public domain and respective websites, as there is a combination of confusion and fear among the fishing communities, which is stalling the resumption of fishing activities. It has also demanded "definite orders with respect to auctioning and sale of fish in the harbours while maintaining social distancing".

Deepti Asgolkar, asked, "The government may have said fishing activities are exempted, but there is curfew in place, too. Most fisherwomen go walking to the fish market to sell fish. Amid curfew, how do they do that?"

The lockdown has also affected over 100,000 migrant fishworkers stranded in their boats off the Maharashtra coast. These migrant fish workers, mostly from far off states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand, are stranded as all transport is shut and there is no way for them to return to their home states. "In spite of approaching various authorities and writing letters to the district collectors, no help has come from the government for these stranded fishers across the Maharashtra's coast. Since the lockdown, we are supplying them dry rations and drinking water in their boats," said Kiran Koli of Maharashtra Machhimar Kriti Samiti. Meanwhile, fisherwomen are trying their level best to feed the migrant fishworkers. "There is something about the fishing community that even during a crisis, no one goes hungry. Whatever food is there, is shared between all. While we cook for our families, we also provide food to the stranded fishworkers," said Ujwala Patil.

The other more long term impacts of the pandemic are also becoming evident on the fisherwomen. For instance, Guhagar fishing village in Ratnagiri has 20 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of fisherwomen who save money and use it for various purposes. In the words of Deepti Asgolkar, "All the 20 SHGs in the village are shut, as no one has money to pay the monthly contribution. These are very difficult times and we have received no support from the government".

Because of COVID19, for almost a month, all fishing activities have stopped and fishers have no income.

Organising women

Five groups engaged in organising women in fishing from different parts of India recently got together to share their experiences

Nikita Gopal (nikiajith@gmail.com), Principal Scientist, CIFT-ICAR, India moderated the round table discussion on ***Organizing Women*** at Kochi, India during the brainstorming meeting on Mainstreaming Gender into Fisheries Policies and Legislation. The participants are Jesu Rethinam (jesur1955@gmail.com), Jyoti Rajesh Meher (jyoti.meher26@gmail.com), Ujwala Jaykisan Patil (ujwalajpatil@gmail.com), Seeta Dasan (sewakerala@gmail.com) and Jharna Acharya (jharnaacharyya@gmail.com). The discussion was documented by Manas Roshan (icsf@icsf.net) and transcribed by C. Manjula (manjula.c6@gmail.com), Shilpa Nandy (shilpanandy@yahoo.co.in), A.J. Vijayan (vijayanaj@hotmail.com) and Samyuktha (sam.pc.work@gmail.com)

Nikita Gopal

Recently, five groups working with women in marine and inland fisheries across a number of states in India came together for a round table discussion to share experiences of organising women in the fishing sector. The five were: SNEHA from Tamil Nadu; Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF) from West Bengal; Maharashtra Machimar Kruti Samiti (MMKS-Palghar) and Maharashtra Machimar Kruti Samiti (MMKS-Mumbai) from Maharashtra; and Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) from Kerala. The discussion was moderated by Nikita Gopal, Principal Scientist, Central Institute of Fisheries Technology, India. The round table highlighted the common issues of women in fisheries and also showed how effective the organised strength of women can be in terms of gaining rights and benefits. This article summarises the experiences shared during the discussion.

Jesu Rethinam

Responding to questions posed by Nikita Gopal, the moderator, Jesu Rethinam, Director of SNEHA, shared that her organization has been active with fishing communities, focusing on the women, since 1984. Structuring was done at the village level, with units, called *sangam*, federated up to the district level in the Karaikal district of Tamil Nadu. The first major achievement was in getting women to participate in meetings of the traditional fisher community organizations at the village level, called panchayats. Traditionally, only men have been allowed to sit in and be a part of panchayat meetings. The participation of women in sangam activities initially led to tension and even clashes between the panchayats and sangams. Today women find they have a collective voice in decision making in the village.

The second issue for women members of SNEHA, according to Jesu Rethinam, came with the establishment of a harbour in Karaikal, which led to the shifting of traditional fish landing sites to the harbour. Women had to travel greater distances and also compete with other large buyers for fish. The organization of women helped them to at least enforce a first right on purchasing fish from traditional fishers at the harbour. They even went on a collective strike, with around 400 fish vendors refusing to buy any fish till the first right to fish was granted to them. The fish vendors reduced their purchase and transport costs by pooling resources and buying together. The organizational strength also helped the women fishers in Kariakal to get compensation after the tsunami. Women have now taken up the issue of allowing local fish markets to be handed over on lease to cooperatives of women fish vendors.

Despite years of activity in the region with women fishers, the challenge of women's representation remains an issue for SNEHA. The Tamil Nadu Fisheries Welfare Board does not have any women representatives. The demand to include fishworkers in all government benefit schemes still remains to be addressed. Women were included in savings-cum-relief schemes of the state, but only to the extent that there was one representation per family in the fishing community. Issues of fish vendors and street vending have remained a large, unfinished task.

In response to the moderator's questions, Jharna Acharya, an organiser with DMF, said that they had been working with fishers and fishworkers for the last 30 years. One of the demands while organising women was for identity cards and access to government benefits and schemes. The DMF has been successful in securing over 1000 women's identity cards in the districts of South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas and Purbo Medinipur in West Bengal. Another important issue, according toher, was organising communities for rights under the Forest Rights Act in the mangrove-rich region of the Sundarbans, to protect their traditional fishing rights. The community members were given organizational and legal support to face up to harassment from forest and coastal authorities. The women successfully protested against a ban on collecting firewood, and

Jharna Acharya

attempts to cancel traditional boat licenses. The intervention of the DMF also enabled 'tiger widows', the widows of fishers attacked and killed by tigers in the Sunderbans, to get compensation, including a monthly government pension.

The DMF has formed a union of fish vendors, among around 1000 women fish vendors in the region. The union has taken up issues of lease rights to marketplaces constructed by the government, provision of toilets and water facilities in fish markets, and proper location of the marketplaces. On the union's intervention, the government authorities have provided women with ice boxes to preserve fish.

Working with inland fishers in the Howrah region, the DMF was able to get identity cards and credit cards under schemes earlier restricted to farmers working on land. It was able to campaign for restriction in the use of pesticides in farming, which was adversely affecting fish ponds and rivers in the region, and for the government agencies to provide fish fingerlings and feed for small aquaculture operations. The DMF is also working to get land titles to protect tenure for traditional inland fishers.

The DMF has a membership base of 2000 women fishers in its union. The union has been making demands for extending benefits of state schemes announced for women and the youth to fishing communities. However, when asked by government officials to give a list of potential beneficiaries to be considered, the union finds its membership base too small for it to make demands for all women in fishing communities in West Bengal.

Jyoti Rajesh Meher and Ujwala Jaykishan Patil represented the MMKS from Palghar and Mumbai respectively, in Maharashtra. For the MMKS-Palghar, a major struggle is against the various development projects by big industry that threaten the livelihoods of traditional fishers. These include the continuing fight against the establishment of the proposed Wadhawan port by the Jindal Steel Works, as well as ocean surveys by the public sector Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) in some of the most productive fishing belts. The state's Minister for Fisheries had promised compensation to fishers for fishing days lost due to the ONGC surveys, but the calculation of compensation was a big challenge. Fishing along the coast was also impacted by pollution from the Tarapur Industrial Area, and the MMKS was struggling for a ban on effluent disposal into the sea.

Jyoti Rajesh Meher

The MMKS as a trade union was also working with women, to set up women's cooperatives, and take up various issues of their rights. Through continuous struggle, it had managed to get reservation of a few compartments in local trains for women to transport fish in the Palghar-Mumbai belt. Efforts for compensation helped women fish vendors affected by the destruction caused during the Phyan cyclone in 2009, and those impacted by the oil spill from the collision of the two ships, MSC Chitra and Khalija 3, in 2010. The struggle for compensation has been carrying on for nine years, with a final resolution yet to be achieved.

Ujwala Jaykishan Patil

MMKS in Palghar and Mumbai also took up the issue of street fish markets being affected by Mumbai city development plans, in turn impacting women fish vendors. A survey undertaken with the help of ICSF helped the MMKS to identify 102 fish markets in the city and to provide a map of these fish markets to the municipal authorities, with a demand that the fish markets were retained in situ in the new city Master Plan. The lack of facilities to women fish vendors at the Sasoon and Colaba Dock landing sites was also taken up with the city administration.

The union is working with the health of women in the fish trade. Most women are forced to retire from this work due to medical reasons by the age of 45 to 50 years. Many suffer from chronic problems because of the heavy work. The union has been demanding health compensation and pension for women in the sector.

The union has a membership of around 500 fish vendors in Palghar town alone. It has further members from the nearby villages of Palghar district, which is entirely coastalt. The union sees as its next challenge a proper enumeration of membership, including detailed demographical information. It seeks to conduct workshops and training sessions to build awareness among members with regard to issues faced in the sector, and their rights. Ujwala Patil shared that in Mumbai, the demand of the union includes ownership rights being granted to women vendors in the Bombay Municipal Corporation fish markets. The union also has been demanding reservation of land adjacent to the fishing villages for use by the communities. Women have been actively participating in the government exercise of demarcating the outer boundaries for fishing villages in Mumbai.

The round table highlighted the common issues of women in fisheries and also showed how effective the organised strength of womencan be in terms of gaining rights and benefits

Seeta Dasan of SEWA in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India shared that for SEWA in Kerala, the biggest challenge was the the setting up of a commercial port at Vizhinjam. The fishing community was aware of the consequences of coastal erosion, resulting from even the initial construction activities of the project. Struggles included joining in demonstrations by the various fishing community organizations on the streets of Thiruvananthapuram city, campaigns addressing church organizations and political parties, and taking up the matter with the media. SEWA views the organization as a platform to build unity, and provide a forum to take up issues of women fishworkers in the state.

Seeta Dasan

PROFILE

TapasiDolui:

Fisherwoman from West Bengal, India Leading the struggle of fisherwomen in Tangrachar

By **Shilpa Nandy** (shilpanandy@yahoo.co.in), Assistant Professor, Khudiram Bose Central College, Kolkata, India, and Advisor, Women's Wing, Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum

TapasiDolui

From child bride and adolescent mother to community leader, the journey of 48-year--old TapasiDolui, President of the women's wing of DakshinbangaMatysajibi Forum (DMF), a registered trade union of fisherfolk in West Bengal, India, though daunting and full of challenge, is an inspiration to women everywhere.

When she turned13, TapasiDolui was married off to a fisherman in the village of Tangrachar in Kulpi Block, South 24 ParganasDistrict in West Bengala. Everyday thereafter, she accompanied her husband on a small boat, helping him catch fish in the nearby river. Soon she also became mother to two sons. However, Tapasi's life was full of hardship, with poverty and deprivation, andvery little support from her husband.

These hardships, far from crushing Tapasi's spirit, bestowed her with a growing resolve to become independent and to fend for herself and her two sons. She joined a local self help group. Then, with the help of a loan from the group,another loan from a local bank, and money gained from selling off her jewellery and some assets, Tapasi purchased a single-cylinder motorised boat and ten acres of land. Next, she set about training her sons to use the boat. Today, the two boys are adept fishermen and support themselves through fishing.

In December 2017, wishing to help other women stuck in disempowering situations just as she once was, Tapasi decided to form a local fisher cooperative. The cooperative, TangracharMatsyajibiSamabaySamity, now has 36 members – 16 female and 20 male– and meets regularly once a month. With the hard work and enthusiasm of its members, the cooperative has helped to transform and empower the lives of many marginalised and deprived women.

TapasiDolui has emerged as an active community leader, working closely with the DMF which, since 2015, has functioned as a registered trade union body of fisherfolk in West Bengal. She is the President of DMF's women's wing, and leads campaigns and protests in support of the rights of fisherwomen.

The current struggle of the community is for official biometric cards. This is a very important document. which establishes the work identity of a fisher, entitling her to government schemes and subsidies. Historically, women have found it extremely challenging to obtain this card since fishing is traditionally regarded as a male activity.

TapasiDolui recalls the battle she had to go through to obtain her biometric card: "I submitted the applicationfor the card at the anchal (local) office, but for months after that, despite constant follow up on my part, nothing moved. Then, following the advice of Milan Das, the Treasurer of DMF, I decided to directly approach the office of the Assistant Director of Fisheries (Marine), or ADF(M). I related my story to the officials there and told them that I would not leave the office without my biometric card. Luckily, the office of the ADF(M) was sympathetic to my appeal and the card was issued to me. I am now mobilising the community on this issue. Three hundred fishers have joined the struggle and we are collectively raising our voice for our recognition, for our identities, for the protection of our rights to life and livelihood, and protesting against the various types of unlawful activities that have overtaken our coasts in recent times."

Tapasi's main objective now is to increase DMF's membership base. As many as 280 fishers have received the biometric card under her leadership. She is proving to be a catalyst in the lives of the fisherfolk of Tangrachar area. Her work is leading to the empowerment of fisherwomen belonging not just to Tangrachar but also the blocks of Shyampukur I and II, Kakdwip, and Howrah in West Bengal. These are all marginalized women, unheard by society around them, and by the planners and policy makers of our country.

Truly, Tapasi has emerged as the voice of the voiceless.

FILM

Fished! The Fisher Women of Mumbai

Directed by Daya Gupta; Duration 19 min 28 sec; Language: English

By **Indu M.G.** (indumg@yahoo.com), Freelance Communication Consultant, Mumbai, India

This short video gives a bird's-eye view of the lives of Koliwomen. The Kolis are a traditional fishing community from Mumbai, India – one of the original inhabitants of this island city of mostly migrants.

The women form a formidable force in thefishing industry of Mumbai. Although they are not involved with the catch, most of the other aspects are handled by them, such as the sorting, cleaning, drying, packing and selling fish in thelocal markets. They are the fulcrum on which the livelihoods of the families turn; without them, the industry would come to a standstill. Brief interviews with some of them give glimpses of their back-breaking and relentless work. Some women accept itbecause they feel they have no other choice; some cherisha hope in their hearts for a better tomorrow. The film also touches upon the issues of domestic violence and male alcoholism within families.

The film begins with the story of Mumbai as a city of migrants and then moves to the Kolis, but it does not explore the connections between the two. Structurally, it is repetitive. Women work very hard;they have few choices, as this is the only work they know;they have very little money;some have to double up as domestic maids as well; they get no support from the government...these ideas are repeated by all the talking-heads.

There are many problems faced by this traditional community living on the fringes of their ancestralland. However, the only issue that is explored in any depth by thefilmmakers is that of the emerging threat of e-commerce. What about the larger questions of survival such as displacement, restrictions onfishing practices because of urban construction projects, environmental problems diminishing the catch, and so on? The film turns a blind eye to the core issues faced by the community.

Another glaring omission is with regard to the business of fishing.Some of these questions are likely to pop up in the viewers' mind:Has the demand increased? Has the changing landscape of Mumbai affected business? How will the proposed infrastructural projects impact fisherlivelihoods? What impact does environmental pollution have? What does the changing demand[of what?]sayabout the health of the fishing industry? The film talks of governmentapathy but fails to give details of the specific aspects where the fishing communitiesfeel let down.

While the focus of the film, with its understandable limitations of time, is on women, by omitting theroles of the men and the community, a precious context is left out. The viewer does not get a sense of community life in the villages, ¬the koliwadas¬¬¬, dotted all along the coastline of Mumbai.Similarly, the case against e-commerce or government apathy could have been more convincingly and thoroughly made through the use of argument and counter-argument.

Despite its shortcomings, the film holds a beacon to the women fishers who are the very essence of not just their families and communities, but of the artisanal fisheries of Mumbai.

The documentary may be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pQaDImryQA&feature=youtu.be

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Writers and potential contributors to *YEMAYA*, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 1200 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer.

Please do send us comments and suggestions to make the newsletter more relevant. We look forward to hearing from you and to receiving regular write-ups for the newsletter.

Street vendors, fish markets and food security

While women in fisheries cope with the challenges of changing market systems, persistent gender inequities threaten to impact livelihoods and food security.

By **Holly M. Hapke**, PhD (drhollyhapke@gmail.com), Director of Research Development, Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of California, Irvine, USA

New research in southern India, conducted by the Fish4Food Project, reveals that small-scale traders play an important role in ensuring access to fish by the urban poor. By providing low income consumers with small pelagic fish, in particular, small-scale traders support food security as well as contribute to the livelihoods of their own households. Many of the small-scale traders serving the urban poor in southern India are women street vendors who travel on foot from door to door or sit on street corners or in roadside markets. Street vendors are ubiquitous in Asian cityscapes. Yet despite the important role they play in local economies, delivering food and other items to consumers, they enjoy few rights and legal protections, and often face harassment from police and municipal authorities. For women fish traders, these challenges are compounded by other gender-based vulnerabilities and discrimination. Although women fish traders are not a homogenous group – their businesses operate differently based on different capital endowments, where they buy and sell fish, and volume of sales – they nevertheless face a number of common challenges. Women fish traders struggle to acquire affordable credit; they are often denied access to public transport and, in popular culture, 'fish market' and 'fisherwoman' are frequently employed derogatively as metaphors for noisy, raucous, and undesirable behaviour.

Within fish market systems, women traders often face a number of disadvantages because of the way such systems are structured and operate. Research on markets and street vendors around the world reveals that market systems and processes are deeply embedded in—and, indeed, governed by—social factors. Apart from economic considerations such as capital, assets, and scale of operation, social factors such as gender, ethnicity, caste and religious identity underlie power relations and marketplace hierarchies, and, thereby, differentially structure different traders'

HOLLY M. HAPKE

Women fish traders divide jointly purchased fish at Pangode fish market in India. Bulk landings and centralized landing sites, transportation, ice and refrigeration technologies have, in turn, generated a new geography of fish marketing

relationships to the market. For example, who is an insider and who is an outsider determines who has access to fish and who is allowed to sell fish in a particular marketplace. In India, men from trading communities have historically dominated city marketplaces, and women from fishing communities have had to fight for space in which to sell their fish.

Furthermore, gender norms and ideologies define women's work and their mobility in particular ways that impact how they are able to work, and what opportunities and constraints they face as economic development unfolds. Responsibility for unpaid household chores, childcare and other reproductive tasks limits the amount of time at their disposal for engagement in remunerative work, and gendered ideas about women's presence in, and movement through, public spaces limits their mobility. Because market processes are not socially neutral, if new production technology demands shifts in where and when fish is landed, and prevailing gender norms do not support women travelling to distant harbours at night, women may be shut off from sources of cheap fish. Or, if economic transactions become more commercialized, and women traders do not have access to credit because of the way they are socially situated in market hierarchies, they will be negatively impacted as will their households.

Market structures become significant when development interventions are introduced because they inform who benefits and who 'loses' from economic transformations – often in unanticipated ways. For example, if dramatic increases in production favour large-scale merchants buying in bulk over small-scale traders, the latter will be negatively impacted by economic development. In her 1981 book, *Transitional Trade and Rural Development,* Barbara Harriss-White observed: "If Development depends not only on the generation of marketed surplus [increased production] but also on its transfer and redistribution; then … the way this surplus is utilized and redistributed is essential." Thus, the role of fish traders in development becomes a relevant question as does the analysis of the political economy of commerce in a region.

To date, fisheries science and fisheries development policy have suffered from two biases. First is the disproportionate attention to fish production, or harvesting, activities and the relative neglect of fish processing and distribution. Second is a gender bias that has overlooked or minimized women's roles in fish economies. Post-harvest activities have received less attention than fish harvesting in fisheries development initiatives, but these activities are integrally linked to fish production. What happens in one arena dramatically impacts the other. Sixty years of planned development in India has dramatically transformed fish production systems, which, in turn, has transformed systems for the distribution and sale of fish. Planned development in India's fisheries has focused primarily on the introduction of mechanized and motorized production technology, ice and refrigeration technologies, and the construction of modern harbours. Collectively, these technologies have had two impacts. First is an increased size of individual landings. Second is a geographical shift in fish harvesting from decentralised landing sites spread out along the coast to centrally located harbours in a few key sites that can accommodate mechanized boats. Bulk landings and centralised landing sites, ice and refrigeration, along, with improved transportation technologies have, in turn, generated a new geography of fish marketing characterised by increasingly complex commodity chains, linking fish producers in local landing sites to increasingly distant markets and fish traders to new sources of fish supply. In effect, India now has a national fish market in which fish travels all over the country and is available to consumers at an affordable price virtually year-round. While this development has expanded consumer access to fish, for women small-scale fish traders, the impacts are mixed. On the one hand, they have enjoyed increased supply of fish and year-round availability, which has had a stabilising effect over what was, previously, a highly seasonal economy. On the other hand, increasingly commercialised exchange relations and stratified market systems have emerged in which large-scale merchants and commission agents dominate – to the potential detriment of small-scale traders. Although women fish traders have demonstrated creative and entrepreneurial acumen in forging strategies to cope with the challenges of changing market systems, the neglect of post-harvest activities and the exclusion of women from fisheries research priorities and policy have created gender inequities, which could over the long run adversely impact the food security of the urban poor who depend on women small-scale traders to deliver affordable fish.

To read more about the Fish4Food project, see: https://www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-results/research-projects/i/24/26624.html and http://knowledge4food.net/research-project/gcp3-fish4food-india-ghana/

Gender norms and ideologies define women's work and their mobility in particular ways that impact how, they are able to work and what opportunities and constraints they face as economic development unfolds

Ships of hope

Innovative boat clinics bring health and hope to thousands of men, women and children, among India's poorest, who live along the mighty Brahmaputra river

By **Bhaswati K Goswami** (bhaswatigoswami@yahoo.co.in), Communications Officer, Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research(C-NES), New Delhi, India

As the monsoon rages, floodwaters ravage the remote island of Lamba Sapori in Dhemaji district in the northeastern state of Assam in India. Trapped in their waterlogged home, Punyadhar and Oipuli Morang are in dire distress. Their two-year child has had an acute asthmatic attack. There is little they can do, but hope for some help. Time ticks on; each moment's breath a greater burden on the infant. Enter Boat Clinic 'Shahnaz'. On a return trip from a health camp, the boat spots villagers frantically waving at them to stop. Its health team swings to the rescue. Treated with adequate doses of Salbutamol, the child recovers within minutes. For Punyadhar and Oipuli, the team is no less than godsend.

Plying along the mighty Brahmaputra which bisects Assam, sweeping along 891 kms of its territory, before turning south into Bangladesh, are the 'Ships of Hope'. From Dhubri on Assam's southwestern border with Bangladesh, to Tinsukia in the east, the floating clinics have a deep mission to fulfill.

There are over 2.5 million people like Punyadhar and Oipuli inhabiting the islands of the Brahmaputra. Known popularly as *chars* or *saporis*, these are among the most backward areas of Assam. The people here are largely untouched by development activities and remain marginalised, poor and vulnerable. Entire families with young children spend their days in the fields to meet daily needs. Many live in thatched bamboo huts with a small piece of cultivable land. Their homes and farmlands are often temporary in nature, dependent on the whims of the river which often changes its course with ravaging effects on the communities on its banks. There is no access to communications and people are badly hit by recurring floods. Post flood problems—losing homes and assets such as livestock—are common. Children seldom go to school.

The Center for North East Studies and Policy Research's (C-NES') innovative health initiative is aimed precisely at these vulnerable and marginalised communities. The organisation makes an invaluable contribution to their lives through specially designed Boat Clinics.

This unique health clinic story began with a single boat, a prototype called Akha (which means hope in Assamese). Akha received the World Bank's India Development Market Place Award for the year 2004 for unique innovations and transforming the lives of rural communities. With funds from that award, the first boat took shape at Maijanghat, Dibrugarh. From that one boat, the initiative was extended to include nine more.

WWW.C-NES.ORG

Boat clinics in Brahmaputra river, Assam, India. The floating clinics have a mission to fulfill for 2.5 million people inhabiting the islands of the river, who are marginalised, poor and vulnerable

C-NES's Managing Trustee, eminent journalist and writer Sanjoy Hazarika, who conceptualised the programme, says that the outreach is beyond his expectations. "We began with a simple idea, with one boat, in one district—Dibrugarh," says Hazarika. "Today, the implementation of the programme in 13 districts with a staff of nearly 200, including doctors, nurses and paramedics, as well as the unstinted support we have received from NHM and UNICEF shows that truly there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come; we are delivering not just healthcare but enabling people to access their basic right to a better quality of life."

Five of the boats have been financed by the prominent editor and economist, Swaminathan S Aiyar, and named after members of his family. The Boat for the Jorhat Boat Clinic has been donated by Oil India Limited (as part of its golden jubilee celebration). The Sonitpur and Kamrup Boat has been donated by Numaligarh Refinery Limited (NRL). The remaining are hired boats. They are designed and equipped to conduct basic healthcare services either on the boat or on the riverbanks of the *char/sapori* villages with space for an out-patient department (OPD), a laboratory, pharmacy, cabins for medical staff, kitchen, toilets and crew quarters, equipped with generators, water tanks and powered by 120 hp engines. The Bengaluru-based SELCO Foundation has donated solar panels for four Boat Clinics. There is provision for dental healthcare in the Jorhat and Bongaigaon boats with support from Mahindra & Mahindra Financial Service Ltd as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme.

While the main focus of the initiative, in partnership with National Health Mission (NHM), has been on women and children, its benefits accrue to the population at large in 13 districts across Assam: Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Nalbari, Kamrup, Morigaon, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia. In these districts, the Boat Clinics are reaching the poor and marginalised with sustained healthcare for the first time. Many had never seen a doctor, a stethoscope or a syringe ever before. At a Dhemaji Camp, an elated health team was informed by villagers that the first child in their village, whose mother was under the team's supervision for her prenatal check-ups, was named 'Doctor'—a reflection of how much the teams have managed to penetrate communities and make their presence felt and appreciated. Besides medical services, the psychological aid that the programme has brought to these scattered communities is adding to their overall well-being. Problems of alcoholism, depression and hopelessness abound in the islands where dwellers lose whatever little they own, year after year, to the river.

In Dibrugarh's Karmi Chuksapori, 25-year-old Phaguni Payeng, married to a daily wage earner and a mother of four, lived in constant dread of another pregnancy. Repeated childbirth had made her weak, anaemic and unable to work in the fields to supplement the meagre family income. Each year, the river would sweep away her temporary home. Only the previous year she lost her only cow and entire belongings. Her life looked unbearably bleak until a neighbour told her about 'Akha' and the health camps.

The health team has since provided Phaguni with an awareness of and education on family planning methods. The team supplies her with iron tablets in the regular camps, which she attends without fail. It conducts immunisation programmes and regular medical check-ups for her children. Today an optimistic Phaguni asks fellow villagers to attend the camps and follow what the team has to say.

Each district has a total strength of 15 team members. This includes one District Programme Officer (DPO), two Medical Officers, one general nurse cum midwife (GNM), one pharmacist, one laboratory technician, two auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs), two community workers and four crew members. The boats go to the islands for three to five days at a stretch with doctors and paramedical staff. Camps usually begin at nine in the morning and continue with a brief break till three in the afternoon, when the team boards the boat for the next destination. After a night's rest, they set out for the next camp. Around 18 to 20 camps are conducted on an average every month. Local communities and leaders are involved in the conduct of the camps, which often are held in difficult conditions with teams battling floods and erosion in the monsoon, and shallow routes and long walking distances to remote villages in the winter.

"At times, we walk six to seven kilometres or more just to get to a village and hold a camp," said a Medical Officer. "But the experience is enriching since the villagers see us as people who are bringing an improvement to their lives; this is visible from our many visits. It is exhausting work but also deeply fulfilling." From Sadiya to Dhubri, children, women, and the elderly crowd the Boat Clinics with health queries and for general check-ups.

There has been a distinct change in attitude, with increasing numbers of young mothers with babies clinging to their backs coming to the immunisation centres

Laboratories which include semi auto-analysers and pharmacies in the boats become functional as soon as the health camps start. Nurses take position in a separate enclosure near the check-up booth that caters to children and women for immunisations, antenatal care (ANC) and postnatal care (PNC). Diarrhoea, dysentery, ear and skin infections (both caused by prolonged exposure to river water, especially among children who are not in school), anaemia and fever are common ailments and most are preventable. The health team gives villagers a lesson or two on maintaining personal hygiene.

There has been a distinct change in attitude, with increasing numbers of young mothers with babies clinging to their backs coming to the immunisation centres. Continuous visits and interactions with the health team with residents have created this transformation. Gone are the days when the very idea of an immunisation team coming to their homes was met with suspicion. There are examples of women asking for family planning because they did not want more children since this could pose a danger to their health. At the close of camps, Medical Officers conduct an interactive session where they speak of the need for family planning, the importance of women's health and that of spacing children. Their audiences listen with rapt interest. This is the Akha model: initiatives, innovativeness, motivation, mobilisation, training, self-help and sustainability, giving all a stake in improving their lives, not just relying on governments and other agencies.

The Boat Clinics have a more popular name—they are called 'Doctor's Boat' by the children of the islands. They run along with the boat on the riverbank, waving their hands in great anticipation as the boat passes by their *sapori,* and continue doing so till it becomes a mere speck in the horizon. And the river quietly flows by..... Y

In Ockhi's wake

The painful aftermath of Cyclone Ockhi reveals the multiple dimensions of disaster preparedness that still need attention in India

By **Shibani Chaudhury** (shibani.chaudhury@gmail.com), filmmaker and development professional based in New Delhi, India

"It was as dark as night at 9am."
"The waves were higher than a coconut tree."
"We tied ourselves to our boat so our bodies could be recognised..."

30th November 2017. While scientific terms for it were still being confirmed and relayed on land, hundreds of fishworkers at sea were already hit by the violent terror of a deadly cyclonic storm. More than 300 lives were lost, either battling Ockhi, or in the deathly silence after—tragic conquerors of the cyclone who died exhausted, wasted—waiting for rescue that could not reach them.

'God's own country' is the famous cliché used to describe the stunning beauty of coastal Kerala. This holds true for the entire Comorin coast curving into the southernmost tip of India. In April 2018 though, as we travelled the Kerala and Tamil Nadu coast to film our documentary 'In Ockhi's Wake', this tagline bore out a devastating irony. Churches across the region stood stoic witness to the pain of those mourning Ockhi's victims. A shore famed for its intrepid seafaring fishers was left bereft, with unanswered questions and an unprecedented official number of 348 men dead or missing at sea. There were 205 missing in deep sea in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, and 119 near shore and 24 deep sea casualties in Kerala.

Those that perished in deep sea had sailed earlier and were lost due to lack of connectivity. The lives lost near shore were of fishermen who went out just before the onset of the storm, unaware of the warnings of the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) issued on 29th November. Apocalypse, either way. Post Ockhi, many issues are being examined: early warning mechanisms, last mile communication, offshore connectivity, preparedness and training of responders and community, integration of traditional knowledge, post disaster relief and rehab, trauma management. Hopefully the urgency of this will not be forgotten and the gaps will be effectively addressed. Meanwhile, what of the void? For every life lost at sea there are at least two or more connected lives on shore grappling with grief and the desperation of completely altered reality. Aging parents, little children, younger siblings, wives—a trail of anguished families lie devastated in Ockhi's wake.

Vallavilai in Tamil Nadu is known for its skilled deep sea fishers. Of the 33 men lost on mechanised boats from this village, 29 were in their early thirties. In this one village, itself therefore, there are reportedly 20 or more widows in their mid-twenties. In the escalating conversations about preparedness and resilience, do the lives of these nameless women and their small children feature? Except for the efforts of the local parish priest to create therapeutic training centres and build skill, there seems to be no other active support to give these women the agency to take their young lives forward.

And, what of those who came back? Survivors, who faced the ordeal of fighting Ockhi, now struggle through a different agony. They survived the storm only to drown in the ruthless maelstrom of impaired livelihoods, lost investments, and deepening debt. The post disaster learnings must also consider the less visible collateral damage to the lives and livelihood of survivors, in Ockhi's wake.

Editorial note: The documentary film 'In Ockhi's Wake', being made by ICSF, is under production and will be made available on YouTube. Details will be announced in the next issue of *Yemaya*.

Beach Profiling for Community Resilience

Women and men in fishing communities in South India work together to generate important beach related data

By **Vivek Coelho** (vivekcoelho@gmail.com), Social and Ecological Stewardship Programme, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India,
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India's 7,500 km coastline is a hotbed of transformation. The 'Territorial Sea', where fishing is allowed, provides an exclusive economic zone in the ocean, 60 per cent the size of its land area. India ranks third in world fish production with a harvest of 6.3 million tonnes. India's seas are also habitat to countless forms of marine and terrestrial life.

Beaches already undergo constant natural changes with the movement of sand by wind, waves, tides, currents and littoral drift. Man-made coastal structures, such as industries and ports, along with natural influences, affect coastlines and beaches. Shoreline ecosystems face a threat as we develop and progress without a basic understanding of shoreline dynamics and processes. The Shoreline Change Atlas of the Indian Coast indicates that 45.5 per cent of the coast is under erosion.

India's four million-strong fishing communities, especially on the coast, have seen their livelihoods go through multiple changes from small-scale artisanal fishing, to trawling and mechanised practices. They are vulnerable communities, steadily losing their homes, resources and space for livelihood activities such as boat parking, fish drying and net mending to the ocean as beaches are eroded.

In the state of Tamil Nadu in India, where the 2004 tsunami wreaked maximum damage, aid flew in and changed lives in many fishing communities. However, self-reliance has not been a result of this aid. Small-scale fishermen see dwindling catch, lose out economically to trawlers, and are also losing the coastal land and beach space around where their homes are located.

SNEHA

Women volunteers recording beach profile, Karaikal, India and this programme has encouraged more women volunteers to get involved

Beaches aren't valuable from the standpoint of aesthetics and real estate alone. They form an essential first line of defence against the ravages of the sea, and soften the impact of lashing waves. Sandy beaches and dunes act as buffers, protecting the hinterland from the sea. Beach sand plays a vital role in restricting saline intrusion into the groundwater of coastal regions.

The National Policy on Marine Fisheries in India, gazetted in May 2017, appears biased towards privatisation of fishing practices, while being silent about constant violations to areas traditionally used by fishing communities, especially Coastal Regulation Zone-1 (CRZ-1) areas. In October 2017, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change in India issued an amendment that relaxed guidelines for the mining of atomic minerals like uranium and thorium in CRZ areas. These amendments follow a string of policy changes drafted and passed without prior public consultation.

The proposed Sagarmala project promises to set up five or six mega ports, a host of smaller ports and 14 coastal economic zones. The implications of the Sagarmala project are alarming. Close to 1,500 km inland of the ports are to be claimed for special coastal economic zones. They reinforce how coastal communities most affected by these projects are not considered equal stakeholders in this process. The social, economic and ecological implications of such initiatives that directly affect the shorelines and fishing communities of India need further consideration.

Stewardship of coastal land is the primary challenge for coastal communities. Ground truth verification of land use patterns of coastal communities have not been carried out adequately, or verified with the perspective of access and rights for ownership. Regional resource maps often omit entire beaches and ecological features, to prioritise coastal development.

Sea level rise and the unpredictability of extreme weather events require local communities to play an active role in creating knowledge bases for appropriate action, to reduce disaster risk and recreate a healthy

coastline. Beach profiles can be documented on beaches where there are already specific problems, or a lack of information about the status of the coastline. Examining this data can tell us how individual beaches respond to a variety of ecological phenomena and anthropogenic activities. The Beach Profile Monitoring Programme was envisioned as a way to empower fishing communities with the data, skills and knowledge to observe and understand what is happening to their coastlines, and be stakeholders in the process of building resilience to changes by stewarding their local ecology.

In 2013, Vivek Coelho, of the Social and Ecological Stewardship Programme (SESP), Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India initiated work in Puducherry on a mandate to work with fishing communities and create a citizen science programme. Interacting with advocacy groups and local communities led to ideas on measuring erosion and accretion patterns.

Stewardship of coastal land is the primary challenge for coastal communities

The goal was to document and create locale specific evidence on shoreline dynamics in terms of erosion and accretion patterns of the beach; and to study beach features through sand grain size analysis and photo documentation. Understanding and documenting beach profiles and sand grain sizes provide basic tools for communities to strengthen their relationship as stewards of coastal ecology.

One method to do this, proposed in 1961 by K.O. Emery, is beach profiling, based on readings taken on the days of the lowest tide, with the use of two graduated poles, whose alignment and intersection with the horizon allow for the determination of elevation change along the profile line. The readings are taken along the profile line of a fixed structure on the beach, known as a 'control point' up to the low water mark. These are then calculated and plotted on a graph to document the profile of the beach in question. The graphs represent the length from the control point to the low water mark and elevation change along this profile line—the contour of the beach. Anyone with a basic working knowledge of reading, writing and mathematics can record and calculate readings. Sand grain size analysis reveals information about effects of tidal influences and man-made factors. It also reveals the presence of magnetic and mineral properties in beach sand.

Coastal communities did respond to initial training but with reluctance. Fisherpeople's lives are burdened with daily labour, commitment to their trade, additional jobs if necessary, running households and caring for children. They have little time to spare to take cognizance of the beach around them and engage in citizen science or research. This was felt strongly in the state of Puducherry in India, where community mobilisation was a challenge.Another hurdle was the cost of the equipment used in the Emery method. The calibrated poles are fairly expensive, and impossible for fishing communities to access. Coelho first used wooden poles, two metres in length with one metre steel scales pasted onto them.

The equipment was bulky, and a five metre long thread was used to space the interval between the two poles. Thread and fingers were used as viewfinders to fix readings with reference to the horizon. The equipment proved to be bulky, expensive, and hard to maintain. Expensive equipment would make it challenging to expand the programme and work with more communities.

Finally, Vivek replaced the calibrated poles with PVC-U pipes and measuring tape, with women's hair ties as viewfinders. This method was formulated and termed the 'Adapted Emery Method for Beach Profiling'. It proved low cost, effective, lightweight, transport friendly and easy to maintain. With an annual cost of Rs 10,000 (USD150) to sustain the entire annual data collection process, the equipment is finally accessible to coastal communities. Engaging the interests of these communities, however, is more challenging. In recent years, industrial expansion into coastal areas has altered lives and livelihoods. Coastal communities can observe how changes in littoral drift and sand movement affect erosion and accretion patterns. But community interest needs to grow to address the changes that cause these occurrences.

The support of veterans working with coastal communities who understood ground realities encouraged community involvement in citizen science. The programme was lucky to build a partnership in the year 2014 with two NGOs, SNEHA (Social Need Education and Human Awareness) and LAW (Legal Aid to Women) Trust in the Nagapattinam region in Tamil Nadu, each of which had a long term relationship with the coastal community. Together, the team trained staff and volunteers to understand their ecological and environmental surroundings in the context of disasters. Trainings also included the processes to record monthly beach profile readings, make calculations based on these readings, plot graphs, and archive the data after every session.

Initially, community members and panchayat (village administration) leaders were nonplussed at the initiative. As a voluntary effort that did not offer monetary benefits and used up precious community time, it was deemed an unwise use of resources.

The manual, *A Tide Turns*, was written to make this initiative accessible to all coastal communities at risk from climate change. As training sessions continued, individuals displayed an interest and pride in understanding and mapping local beaches. The activity of beach profiling promoted principles of teamwork and leadership in volunteers and staff. Volunteers understood the correlation between graphs and what they saw on site; they learnt how to operate high-end cameras, manage a group, and more. They also created a database of monthly reports with readings for the locations archived at the community. Volunteers and external parties can now use the manual as a detailed do-it-yourself (DIY) guide to set up their own beach profiling initiatives.

Coastal communities eventually accepted the programme's benefits and showed support by offering temples, halls and other community spaces for volunteers to calculate readings, analyse sand grains, store equipment, have meals and so on. Fisherwomen in these communities were trained to collect data. Currently, there is an active engagement of the youth, both male and female, in the data collection effort, with older women and men playing a supportive role. In fact, the support that women have extended to the beach profiling programme has encouraged more female volunteers to get involved.

As the programme becomes a part of community life, grooms leaders and offers them ownership over their data, the way forward would be to use such locale specific data to create a healthy coastline. Local organisations and governance bodies could use the programme as an entry point to develop the practice of stewardship, the spirit of volunteerism and to initiate efforts that use traditional knowledge systems to address the urgent need for restoration and regeneration of local ecologies. The initiative's preparedness and mitigation action plans could improve community resilience and build ecological integrity.

Beach restoration is more than keeping beaches clean. It is a holistic approach to recognise eroding, vulnerable beaches and regenerate them. Soft solutions include planting sand binding varieties, indigenous coastal vegetation and building sand dunes. Exploring ecologically aligned and sustainable livelihoods can build community resilience, restore ecology and create a cadre of first responders in the context of disasters.

Evaluating ongoing and proposed development activities along the coast with an ecological lens, and ensuring effective coastal planning requires location specific data to inform decision making processes. India's commitment to implement Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a step towards protecting coastlines. SDG 14 prioritises conservation and the sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources. Community-led ecological monitoring and context specific coastal resource stewardship is critical to disaster risk reduction and should be non-negotiable in the implementation of SDG 14. The programme is open to partner and share knowledge with all stakeholders and decision making bodies to ensure scalability along the Indian coast. Our partner organisations and community volunteers have undergone a 'Resource Stewardship Leadership Development Programme'—specially designed by the SESP-TISS team, with support and supervision from Dr. Monica Sharma, a former director of leadership and capacity development with the United Nations.

The extensive length of India's coastline and its administrative jurisdiction under ten states makes it challenging for government agencies to monitor the coast. With a fishing village located almost every two kilometres along the coast, community monitoring of beaches using citizen science can provide the data to understand the changing dynamics of our beaches. More importantly, it provides a platform to usher in coastal resource stewardship.

Community-led ecological monitoring and context specific coastal resource stewardship is critical to disaster risk reduction and should be non-negotiable in the implementation of SDG 14

FILM

Women at the Water's Edge: Lives of women in climate changed Sunderbans

English and Bengali (with English sub-titles); 22.36 min.

Directed by Ronodeb Paul; produced and narrated by Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt

By **Megnaa Mehtta** (megnaam@gmail.com), PhD Candidate, Department of Social Anthropology, London School of Economics

The Indian poet, Bhupen Hazarika's soul-stirring composition '*O Ganga Boicho Keno* (Oh Ganges, why do you flow?),' inspired by Paul Robeson's "Ol' Man River", plays as we see footage of communities facing irrecoverable loss of their homes, lands and assets by an aggressively advancing river. *Women at the Water's Edge* is a film shot on Mousuni, one of the 54 inhabited islands of the Sundarbans delta in West Bengal, India.

The Sundarbans forests of West Bengal have acted as a refuge, albeit an inhospitable one, to several political and ecological refugees for decades. The independence of Bangladesh resulted in displacing thousands of men and women who came to settle in the then forested regions. In other parts of Bengal, as floods ravaged homes and assets, displaced families moved in search of a new life. For more than a century, as a result of these different waves of migration, including of adivasis, or indigenous communities, brought in by the British for paddy cultivation, the Sundarbans—a mangrove delta in the Bay of Bengal—has become home to four and a half million people, the majority of whom belong to historically marginalised communities of dalits (Scheduled Caste), adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) and Muslims. *Women at the Water's Edge* tells us the story of these people, and of the islands.

The film reveals the catastrophic effects of climate change on the lives of the region's residents. With producer and narrator Professor Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, we traverse the Sundarban rivers and the precarious dirt paths of its inhabited villages. Conversations with residents reveal that it is the women who suffer the most as a result of the havoc wrecked by rising sea levels. Just obtaining drinking water, for example, is a daily challenge. Simultaneously, the islanders' very survival depends on keeping the surrounding brackish water out via embankments. Ultimately, what is most striking is the depiction of the highly contested relationship with water.

The narrator asks, "What will become of these people? Where will they go?" Environmental catastrophe is no new phenomenon for Sundarbans islanders. Floods, cyclones, and tidal surges have repeatedly ravaged the region since time immemorial. Climate change is only one of the many forces of displacement. Equally responsible for displacement are wildlife protection laws, now more stringently enforced by the Forest Department, as sea levels rise. These laws have turned thousands, whose livelihoods depend on natural resources, into 'trespassers.' With small land holdings, and without viable alternative livelihoods, they are forced to migrate to the interiors of India for work, leaving behind their families and homes. Leaving the Sundarbans, their desh (homeland), is not merely a physical departure from one's land, but implies the loss of an entire life-world, of knowledge and social practices.

The Sundarban islanders were being rendered invisible even before the 21st century's alarm around global warming. The long history of structural and systemic violence, denial of access to healthcare, roads and electricity—all served to oppress the people. Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and director Ronodeb Paul, powerfully demonstrate, however, the resilience of the women even as the islands are on the brink of disappearing. The documentary may be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Bl2NkP9k9k&t=10s

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Writers and potential contributors to *YEMAYA*, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 1200 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer.

Please do send us comments and suggestions to make the newsletter more relevant. We look forward to hearing from you and to receiving regular write-ups for the newsletter.

Roadmap for survival

In a two-day interactive workshop, women fishworkers in Kolkata, India, discussed strategies for future struggle and organizing

By **Pradip Chatterjee** (pradipdisha@gmail.com), President of Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF) and Convener of National Platform for Small-scale Fishworkers (Inland), India

The contribution of women fishworkers in India has been at least equal to that of men. However, despite being a colossal human resource that plays a significant role in food security, income and employment generation, women have been systematically discriminated against, both socially and economically.

Based in West Bengal in India, the Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF), a fishworkers' organization, has been facing many difficulties in mobilizing women workers. At a time when we are witnessing an all round attack on natural resource based livelihood options, including fishing, the mobilization of women fishworkers to protect water, fish and fisherpeople is of critical importance.

Experience has taught the DMF that in order to build independent women fishworker's organizations, two factors are important: one, the identification of the problems that women face both as fishworkers and as women, as well as the means to address these problems; and two, the importance of building a separate organization for women fishworkers.

In that context, the DMF organised two workshops with women fishworker activists. The first was held in collaboration with the Rabindra Bharati University on 30-31 March 2016; and the second was organized at Namkhana in West Bengal on 1-2 June 2017. These two workshops were complementary in their aims. The first tried to identify the problems faced by women fishworkers and means to address the problems. The second tried to identify the importance of building a separate organization for women fishworkers.

SOMENATH BHATTACHARJEE

Inaugural session of the workshop on Women Fishworkers in West Bengal—Road Map for the Struggle to Survive, 15-16 June 2017, Kolkata, India

Building on the observations, findings and recommendations of the workshops, the DMF then organized a state level workshop on 15-16 June 2017, at Seva Kendra in Kolkata, in collaboration with two organizations, DISHA and ActionAid. Titled 'Women Fishworkers in West Bengal—Road Map for the Struggle to Survive,' the workshop witnessed the participation of 40 women fishworker representatives from six districts of West Bengal, three women fishworker leaders from Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, four representatives from ActionAid and DISHA, and eight office bearers of DMF and its branches.

The inaugural session was chaired by the President of DISHA, Santanu Chacraverti. Welcoming the participants, Sasanka Dev, Secretary of DISHA, pointed out that such workshops were very important to develop a better understanding of the issues that women fishworkers face. Following a round of self-introduction by the participants, Milan Das, General Secretary, DMF, delivered the opening address for the workshop. He highlighted the activities pursued by the DMF in organizing the women fishworkers in West Bengal, emphasizing the important role played by women activists. Next, Jesu Rethinam, a woman fishworker leader from Tamil Nadu, spoke on the national perspective of the women fishworkers' struggle. She stressed upon the need for strengthening their struggles at the national level and listed out several impending threats to the livelihood of fishworkers, including the dilution of the Coastal Regulation Zone 2011 Notification, which provided fishing communities a measure of protection; development measures such as the creation of industrial and economic corridors along the coasts; and the Sagarmala project, a port modernization venture. The session concluded with an address by the session chair.

The next session, on livelihood issues and concerns, was chaired by Shilpa Nandy, Executive Member, DISHA. Two presentations were made. The first discussed the findings

The mobilization of women fishworkers to protect water, fish and fisherpeople is of critical importance

of a primary study conducted on women fishworkers in West Bengal. The second discussed the conclusions of the two workshops held earlier on women fishworkers' issues. Pradip Chatterjee made the first presentation. He presented the main findings of the study, which included the status of women fishworkers and the problems they face at different levels, for example, with respect to family, society, education, financial inclusion, income, occupation and self-organization. Shilpa Nandy, who made the second presentation, pointed out that the two earlier workshops were actually complementary to each other: one came out with detailed recommendations on the demands of different categories of women fishworkers, while the other detailed the need for separate organizational initiatives for women fishworkers to carry forward their demands.

The next session started with the screening of a documentary on the women canoe fishers of Kultoli that depicted the lives and livelihood struggles of women fishing in the difficult waters of the mangrove-rich Sundarbans, who face the risk of tiger and crocodile attacks on the one hand, and of torture and harassment by staff of the forest department, on the other.

The third session, chaired by Manasi Bera, Executive Member, DMF, was on organizational issues and concerns. Milan Das introduced the idea of a separate women's organization and the possible forms such an organization might take. After that, the women fishworker participants joined a group exercise on organizational planning. The participants formed themselves into four groups, according to their occupational categories, to work out suggestions and recommendations with respect to possible organizational forms for women fishworker organizations to take up their issues.

Thereafter, these groups presented their main suggestions. These included forming women fishworker organizations in various occupational sectors with the exclusive or main participation of women; forming women fishworker platforms at all organizational levels of and in all areas covered by the DMF, and also, the need for adequate and effective representation of women in the various DMF committees.

Pradip Chatterjee, in a special rejoinder, recalled the experience of women's participation in the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) and the efforts taken by leaders like Thomas Kochery and Harekrishna Debnath in the matter. He also pointed out some of the limitations that may be encountered in the effort and commented on the role that women's organizations can play in producing and activating women's leadership in both fishworkers' unions and in society at large. He stressed however that the issue has political and cultural significance and linkages, and that these need to be understood by the women leaders.

Manasi Bera ended the session with concluding remarks.

Changing tides

Labour shortage has improved work conditions for women in seafood processing in Kerala, India, although gender equality in employment is still a distant dream

By **Nikita Gopal** (nikiajith@gmail.com), Principal Scientist, ICAR-Central institute of Fisheries Technology, Cochin, India

Seafood processing factories all over the world are dependent on women's labour. India is no exception. The work in the factories is generally monotonous and full of drudgery. The work environment is not very comfortable, as the workplace temperature and conditions are geared to maintain the quality of the product. Almost all the women are engaged on a contractual basis, with the piece rated daily wages regulated by the number of 'baskets' they process. Men are more likely than are women, to have permanent jobs and higher wages in these factories.

The labour force in the initial decades of growth of the seafood processing sector in India largely came from the southern state of Kerala. This was the situation even as late as until the late 1990s and early 2000s. The women were recruited by labour contractors, and taken to work in factories in other coastal states. The exploitative conditions of their work have been reported in many studies. The situation started changing towards the end of the last millennium. In many states, local women came into the sector and began seeking employment. This suited the factory management as the additional expense on providing logistic facilities reduced. However in Kerala, with lower participation of local women in this work, the fish processing factories were faced with severe labour shortages. To keep the factories functional, women workers had to be brought in from other states. Initially they were organized through labour contractors, or through friends already working in the state. Most of these women did not have the requisite skills to work in the factories. This led to special job training programmes organized by the factory management. Lack of good skills can lead to loss of production and value. It is pertinent to note that despite the high skill requirements, at no time has adequate recognition been given to the women or to their work in this sector.

The changing dynamics of labour availability in the fish processing sector in Kerala has changed the tide in favour of women workers. Though wages cannot be called 'high', they have improved. The migrant women are paid, on an average, Rs 5700 (USD 88.8) per month, and the local women, slightly higher wages at Rs 6500 (USD 101.2) per month. Most factories provide accommodation, transportation, and food at subsidized rates, or facilities for cooking, to their workers. The accommodation usually comes with proper toilet facilities (about one toilet for four workers) and certain basic features, including television sets. Factories incur additional investments for training migrant labour, and in order to prevent 'poaching' of trained workers, management usually has to keep the labour force content. These conditions apply to the seafood processing sector in Kerala, and, in the absence of adequate information, whether similar conditions obtain in other parts of India is difficult to say.

The major factor responsible for the improvement of employment conditions for women has been the shortage of labour in the sector. Further, the requirements of certifications and audits in export factories also include adherence to some minimum labour standards, and this again gets reflected in positive changes in working conditions. Women workers are aware of their improved bargaining capacity, and are able to use this to better their situation.

According to a recent study, migrant women from other states accounted for more than 75 per cent of the labour force in export oriented seafood processing factories in the Ernakulam-Alappuzha belt of Kerala. Around 85 per cent of the migrant women were single and the average age was around 21 years. Most of the women did not return to work after marriage.

In contrast, the average age of local women employed in the sector was around 40 years. Younger women were reluctant to seek employment in the sector. The local women workers were still considered very efficient and skilled. They did not work night shifts. In case work required them to stay late or work night shifts, transportation was provided by the factories.

The study showed however that women continued to earn less than men; and migrant women earned less than local women. Men earned an average of Rs 7600 (USD 118.4) per month, or about 17 per cent more than the local women, and 34 per cent more than the migrant women workers.

Anjali: Woman of the waters

A moving account of the life, the struggles and the indomitable spirit of a woman fisher from West Bengal, India

By **Sujoy Jana** (sujoykh@gmail.com), Member, Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (West Bengal Fishworkers Forum); translated into English from Bengali by **Santanu Chacraverti** (s.chacraverti@gmail.com), Freelance researcher, consultant, and social worker

Baaisha's bridge!

'Baaish' in Bengali—the language of West Bengal on India's eastern coast—means 'twenty-two'. Baaisha's bridge got its name from its 22 piers. Located not far from Mandarmani, a seaside resort in West Bengal, the bridge spans a stream that flows even in the driest months. If you come here one day and, standing on the bridge, look seaward, I can wager you will experience a rush of well-being. You will see the stream serenely meandering down to the sea, silvery fish ponds lining its banks. You will see flocks of migratory birds and fishers with small nets adrift on their dinghies. You will probably also see a woman in her mid 40s easing down the sharp slope of canal into her dinghy. Alone. Wearing a headband. Dark and daring. Supple as steel. With what ease she rides the tide, casts her net, and manoeuvres her dinghy through the treacherous eddies! Be it the dry summer or the pouring rains, she hunts for fish, as day passes into night and night into day.

This is Anjali Bar. She dwells at a stone's throw from the canal in a small hut besides the sea-dyke. Anjali is a fisher. Her days and nights are spent in mud and water—hunting for small local varieties of fish like *parshe* (Goldspot Mullet), *tangra* (a local catfish), and *gule* (mudskipper). Then, after ten to twelve hours of hard labour and with luck, one or two kilos of fish in hand, she hastens to the Satmile market 12 km away. This gruelling toil to feed her family never ends. Anjali knows the Baaisha area as intimately as the contours of her palm. And they all know her—the angry eddies in Baaisha's canal and the swift swirls where the stream meets the sea. For, none dares them with such disdain as Anjali in her 12 ft *pauki* (dinghy).

Anjali was born in April 1971, in a poor fisher family. Her father was Haripada Bar and her mother Sandhyarani. They were residents of Samudrapur village, not far from Baaisha's bridge. Anjali was the first child of this poor couple. Her childhood was one of energetic activity and scuffles with her peers. When the little girl swung from one prop root of the banyan tree to another and leapt into Baaisha's canal, swam against the current and ran laughing up the bank, the elders were impressed. True, people often frowned when she took her tiny siblings far across fields and meadows. But, nobody was really worried. They had faith in this daring yet responsible youngster. She would not let any harm befall the younger ones.

Anjali could make it only to Class Two in her village school. How could she study any further? Poverty stood in the way. How could she afford books? Even a change of clothes was hard to come by. Her mother was ill and it was left to Anjali to take care of her siblings. Her father was a wage labourer at the gigantic drag shore seines. He could come home perhaps once a week. Sometimes he would cast his *beundi* (bag net) in Baaisha's canal hoping for a substantial catch. But, his was a household with eight mouths to feed. The ceaseless toil was telling on him. Haripada's health deteriorated. When Anjali was ten, Haripada fell ill with chronic intestinal ailments. The family could not afford a doctor. How could it arrange for a patient's diet, when even a bare meal proved so difficult?

With her father no longer able to work, Anjali tells how at the age of 11, she suddenly realized that she had grown up. No more games for her. No more waiting for the father to bring in food. Anjali decided she had to feed the family. In those days, fish wealth abounded in and around her village Samudrapur. But, catching fish was not easy for Anjali.

SUJOY JANA

Anjali's village Samudrapur, Baisha canal (in light blue), and other places important in Anjali's tale

She had neither appropriate gear, nor was there anyone to assist her. Moreover, getting a fair price for her catch was more difficult for a youngster. The market was far away. Yet, this girl of 11 had lots of courage and strength of will.

The little Anjali could at first use only the easiest nets—the *chhani jal* (small strainer shaped net that even a child can drag along the water to scoop up shrimp and other small fish) and *khyanpa jal* (a still smaller strainer net that one can use to catch crabs and small fish on mudflats). Having got her catch she would run to the market, sell her catch, and buy food for the family. The villagers would wonder at the playful sprite of yesterday who had suddenly become the mainstay of her family.

When Haripada's health improved, he started going down to Soula at the mouth of Baaisha's canal to cast a *beundi* (bag net). And, his eldest daughter would always be there besides him, assisting him at every stage of work. If the local traders refused fair prices, an uncompromising Anjali would go to another market. And to another and yet another. The roads were unpaved. There was no transport. With a basket of fish on her head, by the end of her day, Anjali would easily have walked some 25 km. She would sink to her bed and fall asleep, dead to the world. But, the net fixed in the stream was waiting for her and the rhythm of the tides was in her blood, waking her up in time to pull in the catch at dawn.

In the mid-1980s, the small-scale fishers started using mosquito nets in their *beundi*. The season for these bag nets was from October to February. The catch consisted of small fish and shrimp. These were dried on the beach and sold. Anjali managed to get a spot for her family at the Aragbania *khoti* (community managed fish landing site) quite a distance from her home. The work at the *khoti* required long hours of hard work. Fixing the net, bringing in the catch, spreading it on the sand, applying the broom at intervals, dusting off the sand, putting the dried fish in packets, weighing and storing them—there was no end to the work, and Anjali and her family would stay at the *khoti* throughout the five-month season.

With the coming of the rains and wind from the south, began the season of the drag shore seine. Haripada's health was now much better. With Anjali beside him, he grew bolder. Hitherto, he had been a wage worker at the seines. Now, he procured a loan and partnered with some other fishers to begin his own business. The business thrived. The family's poverty was eased. But Anjali refused to relax. She continued selling fish with her usual vigour. One day, quite suddenly, her father's business suffered a loss. Haripada fell into debt. Anjali now had to work day in and day out to free her father of debt.

She sits on the ground in front of her hut, reminiscing. Staring bleakly into the distance, she says how her life of continuous struggle had not brought her family anything more than a couple of meals a day. She had not even a tiny piece of land or a few saved rupees to call her own.

Haripada may not have succeeded in his relentless battle against poverty but he did succeed in arranging a groom for Anjali—a young man named Atithi Bar who was from a large and moderately well-to-do fisher family. The young sprite of the waters now became a complete housewife. As the eldest daughter-in-law of the family, Anjali took charge of the household.

Five or six years passed by smoothly. Anjali's first daughter was born. Then, gradually, the family began to face economic difficulties. With poverty, discord raised its head in the household. Anjali began to feel unwanted in the domestic turmoil of the larger family. Hurt, she returned to her parental home, bringing her husband and daughter with her. Did she feel that returning to her old haunts, to Baaisha's stream and the sea, would infuse new meaning and direction into her life? Perhaps.

Each day has been a battle to survive.

And she was not disappointed. The familiar landscape, the unending expanse of untamed water, breathed new life into her, brought her hope.

Anjali refused to burden her parents for long. Within a few months, she fixed a new home besides the Baaisha's bridge, at the foot of the sea-dyke. A home for three, built of bamboo and slips, plastered with mud. Anjali had neither boat, nor net. No share in any *khoti*. An uninvited guest on public land, she had little time to brood about her future, present demanded all her attention.

With a tiny girl to care for, Anjali found it difficult to make ends meet. She sent her husband to work as a wage labourer. The quiet and even-tempered Atithi was well-liked. Getting work wasn't too difficult. Slowly things started falling into place.

But, after a time, difficulties resurfaced. Three more children were born, and with their arrival, the needs of the household multiplied. Leaving the children at home, Anjali was forced to take on more work, to assist her husband or take the fish to the market. The earnings were never sufficient. Holes appeared in the roof. The moon shone in; the rain left the floors muddy and the beds soaked.

But, the roof was the least of their concerns. The home itself was at risk. The land belonged to the irrigation department.

SUJOY JANA

Anjali Bar at work. The endless hours on the boat do not bring sustenance. What will happen in the days to come?

There was a constant threat of eviction. Where would they find a place to stay? They have been living here for 20 years. Yet, says Anjali, people in the neighbourhood see them as refugees and outsiders. Anjali uses the land at the foot of the sea-dyke as her yard and the drainage canal along the sea-dyke as her pond. Besides this 'pond', she has planted mango, jackfruit, and tamarind trees. As she looks at her small home amidst this wilderness, she suddenly feels it isn't hers. As if it was a piece of theft. If only she had a roof, a yard to call her own! Never again would she wake up in panic from sleep—terrified of losing her home!

Anjali is a veteran of countless battles. Each day has been a battle to survive. Sometimes the struggle is against nature, sometimes against social processes, at other times against greedy and powerful individuals. On Baaisha's stream, you find nets fixed at an interval of 50 to 100 cubits. The rampant use of mosquito nets has destroyed fish eggs. Toxic effluents from the countless shrimp farms are poisoning the canal. Fish are dying. Anjali is forced to take her dinghy out to the sea. The fishers at the *khotis* refuse to let her fish. There was a time when Anjali would fish along the length of the entire shore. Now, she is no longer permitted. There was a time when the wetland expanses on both sides of Baaisha were open to her. No longer. The *panchayat* (local administrative unit) has leased them out to wealthy individuals. Where would Anjali find the money for a lease?

Anjali also fishes in the upper stretches of the Baaisha canal. During the last eight years, even this has become a problem. There are now nets fixed in the canal belonging to wealthy people from non-fishing communities. The local administration is hand-in-glove with them. Fish can no longer swim freely. The small-mesh nets are destructive of stock. Anjali has protested. She has sought to mobilize opinion against these practices. As a result, she has earned enemies. Sometime back, a fisher, Nanda Jana, had been thrown out from a local fish market by miscreants. Anjali was quick to protest and she was punished for raising her voice. Her goods were thrown out and she too was evicted from the fish market. She has been fighting long and hard to regain her rights to sell fish.

However, the corrupt local administration and local miscreants joined hands to defeat her efforts. Anjali, however, refuses to give up. She sends her husband to vend their fares from village to village.

Anjali became a member of the Medinipur Jela Upokulio Matsya Vendor Union (Medinipur District Coastal Fish Vendors Union) in 2010. The organization has helped her to get a clearer view of her rights. The stories of fishworkers' struggles in other parts of the country have boosted her spirits. She has also found much inspiration in the tales of struggle of the Sundarbans' fishers, particularly of the poorest, fishing from dugout canoes.

Today, Anjali is a leader and comrade of local fishworkers. She has led the struggle in asserting the fishers' rights to the common use of the Baaisha canal. She has been vocal in raising the demands of fish vendors. She represented her organization at the seminar on marine biodiversity and the rights of small-scale fishworkers held in Chennai in 2014. She has also represented her organization at various forums in her state on several occasions.

As the leader of the fish vendors' union, Anjali feels the need for unity and collective action among vendors in her district to put pressure on the government. There have been some gains. But, much more needs to be done.

Anjali's own profession is in peril. Nowadays, even 12 to 13 hours of fishing do not bring enough catch to sustain the family. Using a boat is impossible in the net-clogged Baaisha canal. That is why Anjali is seen walking along abandoned fisheries, looking for molluscs.

Atithi is now a full-time fish vendor. Since the family has little catch of its own, Atithi buys fish from various *khotis*. He sometimes takes his fare from village to village; at other times he finds a place for himself in this market or another.

Once upon a time, the sea had provided for Anjali. Today, Anjali and her husband no longer think of going to the sea. The endless hours on the boat do not bring sustenance. What will happen in the days to come? To her home? Her pond? The trees? What of their claims on her?

Anjali has no answer to such queries. An urge to survive had pushed her to abandon her childhood and take to the sea. Today, the same urge to survive is pushing her away from the livelihood she knows so well.

Will she be able to ignore the pull of the water and the tides? Anjali has no answer.

Fourteen months later...

Anjali's tale was penned down some 14 months ago. Something changed in the meanwhile.

Sometime in May last year, the dreaded day arrived. Anjali's home was dismantled to make way for a road. How could a humble home and hearth stand in the way of the greater public good? Anjali and her family found a place to stay with a poor woman who had a little extra space.

If you go to Baaisha's bridge, you will still find Anjali's old dinghy. But, no sign remains of her hut.

Round table of women in fisheries

A state-wide round table of women in small-scale fisheries in Goa, India, not only reveals a range of priority issues but also starts a process of self-organization

By **Mariette Correa** (mariettec@gmail.com), Senior Programme Co-ordinator, ICSF

On the 19 February, 2017, a round table of 30 women in various small-scale fisheries related activities was held in Goa, India. This meeting was a follow-up to a workshop held in November 2016 where 63 women from the coastal districts of India gathered together for three days to discuss the issues they faced, and to learn about the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines) as well as schemes and laws relevant to them and how these could be used. Five women from Goa participated in the November workshop and were motivated to carry forward the work in their state. It also resonated for Saad Aangan, a Goa-based gender resource group, which has felt the need over the years, to consolidate the experiences of women in small-scale fisheries in Goa, to take the concerns forward.

Not much has been done at the state level in Goa on the issues faced by women in small-scale fisheries. Their concerns have been subsumed under the overall issues of small-scale fishing communities which come to the fore when there are specific incidents or immediate threats to their livelihoods, as, for example, with the pressures on the coastal lands or waters due to development or tourism. Therefore, to begin with, there was a need to collect information and meet with various groups or representatives of women involved in fisheries, including those who were involved with local level struggles.

Representatives of Saad Aangan and Internationa Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) visited parts of Goa to meet with women. It soon became apparent that certain occupational groups (represented by individual women) would be unable to come to the meeting on 19 Febuary. They were asked to share their concerns which were then presented in the larger group at the round table. Across Goa, there are small markets where a few women (between three and eight, on an average) sit either on the streets or in the markets selling their fish. They travel to the big towns in the early hours of the morning, buy the fish from the wholesalers and then travel back in time to get the morning customers at the market squares. These women survive on their daily earnings and being absent for a day would cause considerable loss. More importantly, many of them are cynical about a resolution of their issues, and may not be sufficiently convinced about the idea of presenting their issues to larger groups nor feel their issues are representative of many other women in similar situations. Some, in fact, pointed to the wholesalers who they said would know of their issues, have helped them in the past and could represent them. However, post the round table it was clear that more efforts would need to be placed on meeting with these women and hearing about their problems in more detail.

The workshop was largely interactive with women from different groups talking about the issues they faced. As a questionnaire had been shared with the groups when they were invited, they had come prepared to discuss the issues they faced in terms of access to resources, markets, health, education, housing, violence and discrimination.

Most of the participants at the round table were in fish vending, from traditional fishing communities. For the majority of the participants, it was the first time that they were speaking in large gatherings about the problems they were facing. Though they came from different parts of the state and represented different communities and groups, there were a lot of common issues that they faced. They spoke about the threat to the livelihoods of their traditional fishing communities and the lack of protective measures. They lamented the lack of spaces in the markets and being gradually edged away from prime locations in the local markets due to other vendors. In certain areas, fish vendors from outside the municipality or *panchayat* (local administrative unit) boundaries sold their fish on the roads or any open area just outside the fish market, reducing the sale of the traditional users of the market. Within the markets, they deplored the lack of water and toilet facilities, and the lack of storage facilities. In several places, the markets were in need of repair and there were inadequate light facilities.

Another problem in recent years that the women faced was the lack of regulations of market timings. Due to the purse seiners, wholesalers arrived at the markets at different times during the day, and vendors came in

from various parts of the state to sell fish. This resulted in huge fluctuations in prices over the day, affecting sales of the traditional users. Traditional vendors have been asking for regulations in market timings to prevent this, but to no avail.

In the capital city of Panjim, the fish market was in a disastrous condition, they said. Alongside the fish vendors were the sellers of meat products, preventing customers from coming to the fish market due to the smells. The lack of regulation of timings in the markets meant that the market was never closed long enough for it to be properly cleaned.

The sharing of experiences and contacts enriched the round table and the women have decided to come together and self- organise.

The government-supported mobile vans for fish vendors were also creating problems for the local vendors. The vans were given on condition that they would be parked in, or travel to, villages where there were no local markets and that they would sell fish at five per cent less than the market rate. However, these vans were parked near the town markets creating competition for the local fisherwomen with their reduced prices. Similarly, cycle vendors purchasing from wholesalers in the markets were selling door-to-door in the villages, reducing customers in the markets. This was being done without the clear permission of the *panchayats* or municipalities.

There being no clear rule about the annual *sopo* (a traditional tax collected by the municipalities/*panchayats*), different amounts were collected in the markets, either according to person, load or space occupied. Women from some remote areas were adversely affected by this when the rates were increased for no ostensible reason. The street vendors along highways or in smaller markets, faced the problems of lack of safe spaces and shelter from the wind, rain, dust on the roads.

The reduced access to fish for sale and for drying fish was experienced across the state, with women having to work longer hours, leading to health problems. They also experienced threats to their land and water resources due to tourism, construction activities, 'development projects' like casinos, and industrial fishing in Goa and neighbouring states. They pointed out the lack of political will and weak governance systems to deal with their problems. Several participants were part of communities that had complained or appealed to the authorities to protect their interests, but nothing much had been done.

Dr Smita Mazumdar, Superintendent of Fisheries, shared the few schemes available for women like provision of ice boxes, loans at low interest rates for fisheries related activities, and funds for 'construction of fish markets'. She said that Rs. five lakhs (approximately, USD 7,500) was available under the last scheme, which was underutilized though the fisheries department had been asking the *panchayats* for their proposals. She informed the group about the requirements to access these, as well as the roles of the fisheries inspectors, surveyors and officers, and who could be approached. Women shared their concerns with her about the implementation issues with some of the schemes, as well as their problems which went far beyond welfare schemes. They were amazed to learn of a new central government scheme which would be implemented by the Goa government, where fish vendors would get Rs. 30,000 subsidy for the purchase of certain brands of motorbikes. The women were upset with this new information. In their view, the schemes would only strengthen those with cycles or who could be mobile—mainly men—further impacting the local market vendors who were already suffering due to the cycle fish vendors.

Success stories were also shared, where women were organized and their federation's demands were not ignored, when the market had to be renovated. The redeveloped market has to an extent been made in accordance with their requirements. Even so, they were facing a lot of difficulties due to the lack of storage space and shelter, and the fact that they have to pay for the use of the toilet and for water.

The fish farms in Goa are largely improved traditional ponds and are owned by families or by the *communidade* (a form of communally-held land association) who lease out the ponds annually or for several years. Most of the farms are monoculture, and the government provides subsidies and training. A few farms are owned by women. The representatives from the fish farms at the round table spoke about the lack of support from the local administration for infrastructure for the fish farms for the economically backward sections.

Participants were informed about the SSF Guidelines, its key guiding principles and its relationship to the issues raised by the women. The importance of social auditing and monitoring of the implementation of the schemes, how the Guidelines could be used to support capacity building of women and strengthening of their associations or collectives, and how elements of the Guidelines could be used to advocate for their interests were discussed. The lack of schemes for women in fisheries in Goa pointed to the lack of recognition of women's work.

The women raised various demands in the course of the round table. They called for transparency and accountability in the design of markets and accountability at all levels.

They made a concerted demand for proper markets, and that women fish vendors be consulted in their design so that it considers their needs. They stressed the need for ice to be provided by the government for small-scale vendors. They demanded that toilets needed to be constructed and maintained in the markets and that water facilites and adequate spaces for storage be provided. They emphasized the need to regulate the timings for wholesalers and vendors in each market, and that ID cards be provided to women vendors who have traditional rights over the markets.

They demanded that fisheries inspectors ensure that there were no vendors just outside the markets and that cycle and rickshaw vendors as well as mobile vans plied in areas where there were no markets. They also demanded the formulation of regulations on where fish markets could be set up. They felt that women vendors should be entitled to pensions and social security schemes, as was being done for the motorcycle pilots in Goa. They asked that certain schemes of the Department of Fisheries could be extended to others (for example, the schemes for rampon nets could be extended to other nets or fishing gear in the *agor/ khazan* or estuarine lands). Finally, as the capital city was being converted to a smart city, the women vendors would like to collaborate with the Fisheries Department to propose a model fish market.

Importantly, the sharing of experiences and contacts enriched the round table and the women decided to come together and self-organize to raise their concerns to the authorities, with the support of Saad Aangan. Representatives of each locality took on the responsibility to organize local meetings to raise the issues and look at the formation of associations or groups. They also decide to explore the possibility of having joint meetings at the local levels with *panchayat* authorities, women vendors and the fisheries department. A delegation would meet with the Director of Fisheries and other concerned departments shortly to formally present their demands.

Cooperative Action

Many opportunities for increased participation of women are open to a fisheries cooperative in an underprivileged community in Maharashtra, India

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Maharashtra is a prominent fishing state in India, with a coast line of 720 km and a fisher population of around 450,000, of whom around 55,000 are active fishers. The state has 304 registered primary marine fisheries cooperatives with a total membership of 114,000. The fisheries cooperatives are part of the strong producer-cooperative sector of rural Maharashtra with a history of over 100 years.

The fisheries cooperatives are formed with the objectives of production and marketing of fish. Many cooperatives have diversified their operations and added ancillary activities such as rendering economic assistance to fishers, undertaking grading, preservation, storage, transport and processing of fish. They also supply necessary fishery requisites like nets, ropes, oil and other requirements to cooperative members on economical rates.

The Adivasi Koli Machhimar Sahkari Sanstha (Tribal Fishermen Cooperative Society) is a cooperative with members from the Scheduled Caste community of the village Shrivardhan of Raigad district in Maharashtra. It was established in the year 1999 to improve competitiveness of its members through services, supply of fishery inputs and access to Government benefit schemes for the fishing community.

SHUDDHAWATI S PEKE / ICSF

The Cooperative members generally sell their own catch as the Cooperative is not able to provide marketing support to their members

The Cooperative Society has its own office building, office furniture and computers at the centre of village connected with telephone and internet facility. It owns assets worth around INR 840,000 (USD 12666). It has 162 members, all from the so-called Scheduled Caste community called Mahadev Koli. Ten members have Below Poverty Line (BPL) status, which serves as an entitlement to certain welfare provisions. Around sixty members were reported to be illiterate. This illiteracy was found especially among women members and the elderly. Most of the younger members were educated.

The male members of the cooperative are engaged in trawl net, *dol* net, gill net and traditional fishing practices. Seven members own trawlers. Twelve members have businesses related to *dol* net operations. Only one member operates with gill nets and there are no purse-seine net operators. There are 35 women members in the Society. They are involved in either fish processing or marketing of fresh or dry fishes in the local market.

The Cooperative members generally sell their own catch as the Cooperative is not able to provide marketing support to their members. Hence, data on quantum of fish caught by members of is not available with their office. Members sell their fish catch through auction at the landing centre of village after every fishing trip.

The Cooperative Society functions according to the Indian Cooperative Society Act of 1960. Its activities fall under the purview of the Registrar of Cooperative Societies of Raigad district. The Cooperative accounts are audited every year by an internal auditor as well as a Government auditor. The Cooperative holds an Annual General Meeting every year when the annual accounts are presented and passed and important decisions are ratified.

The Board of Management meets every month to discuss administration and financial issues. Two women members are part of the Board of Management. It was however observed that women's participation in the decision making of the Cooperative was poor. Most decisions were being taken by men. Women were not much aware of the operations of the cooperative

and most did not attend the Annual General Meetings.

The Cooperative Society has three permanent employees, all from Scheduled Caste community.

The main functions of the Cooperative are supply of subsidized diesel to members, and getting members insured under Group Insurance schemes implemented by Maharashtra Government. However, many Government schemes and services meant for the Scheduled Caste community are not being accessed by the Cooperative. The Cooperative leadership attributed the poor implementation of Government schemes to reasons such as lack of awareness, complex documentation requirement for availing Government schemes and lack of financial assistance from nationalized banks.

Members felt that the Cooperative should take initiative in marketing of fish catch, providing infrastructure facilities for landing and berthing of vessels, providing basic facilities at landing centres such as electricity, roads, drinking water, ice plant and fishery requisites shops. They also felt the Cooperative should proactively work to avail various Government schemes.

It was however observed that women's participation in the decision making of the Cooperative was poor.

Evocations of the Sea

A recent music concert in Bengaluru, India explored the universal metaphor of the ocean in mystic poetry—a space beyond identity where social divisions such as those of gender, class, caste and race hold little meaning

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Design & Technology,
Bengaluru, India

(*Editor's note: Film maker Shabnam Virmani, and the author of this piece, the poet Vipul Rikhi – singers both - are part of the Kabir Project (www.kabirproject.org), initiated in 2003, which explores contemporary spiritual and socio-political resonances of mystic poets, such as the 15th century north Indian mystic, Kabir, through songs, images and conversations.)*

"Evocations of the Sea"—this is how we titled our music concert, which was to be the final session of a 3-day conference on 'Exploring the Scope of collaborations in Marine Biology and Biotechnology between France and India', held at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bengaluru, India from 7-9 March 2016, organized jointly by IISc and Dakshin Foundation. When my colleague Shabnam Virmani and I were approached to present an evening of music as part of this conference, we mused upon how the ocean is evoked in the folk music of Kabir and other Bhakti and Baul poets of India.

The sea is a field of mystery, just as life is, and so it becomes a common theme and metaphor within mystic poetry. Life itself is often described as *bhavsaagar*, or the ocean of becoming. And we have somehow to cross or navigate this ocean, which throws us about, with skill.

The very first song we presented speaks of an ocean which is full of jewels!

Your ocean is full of precious jewels
Some brave pearl-diver will bring them up

The word for pearl-diver in Hindi is *marjeeva*, which literally means one who dies in order to live again. The pearl-diver plunges to his or her death, into the depths of the ocean, and when s/he comes up again, it's as if s/he were born anew. This becomes a powerful spiritual metaphor for Kabir and other poets, to indicate this practice of dying to oneself again and again.

The pearl-divers' country is a wondrous land
An aimless one can't reach there
One on the path knows the diver's pulse
Now she cannot be swayed from her path

Giving up the self, she sits in the ocean
And fixes her attention on the pearl
She brings back that beautiful jewel
Now there is no leaving this ocean

The second song that we sang was also a folk tune from the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh in central India, like the first one. It advises the seeker to ride the waves of the ocean.

Taste the waves of the ocean, friend
Pearls aren't found by plunging into puddles!

The depth and vastness of the ocean here becomes a figure for a wider and freer way of being, which has the reward of a 'pearl'. This is contrasted with much shallower ways of being, clinging to small and limited identities and notions of self.

As both these songs show, the ocean immediately invokes a sense of vastness. Neither Kabir, nor many of the singers who have sung these songs for centuries, lived by the sea. And yet it is a powerful presence in the human imagination, provoking poetry and a sense of the expanse of life.

In January this year we met Dhruv Bhatt, a contemporary poet who writes in Gujarati. As we travelled with him over a period of a few days, he revealed to us how many of his poems 'come to him' as songs—that is, along with the tune. Lovingly he taught us these songs, in many of which the ocean is a strong presence. We presented two of his songs as part of the concert, presenting him in some sense as a contemporary mystic poet, and his songs have a strong folk flavour.

The first one is a delightful song which has a story behind it. Once Dhruvdada (elder brother) was doing a walking pilgrimage along the banks of the Narmada, a river considered holy, which originates in central India and flows to the west coast. On a hot day, he came across a poor farmer hard at work, sweating away in his small field. Moved, Dhruv dada approached him and asked him how he was doing. Flashing a thousand watt smile, the farmer looked up at him and said: "I'm full of joy!" It was an unexpected moment of transformation. It shifted something in Dhruvdada's approach to the man, and to himself. And later this poem came to him as a song.

If, suddenly, I were to come across
Someone on the way
And if they were to ask me
Softly,
"How are you doing today?"
Then I would say,
Nature is so bountiful
And like waves in the ocean
I'm at play!

When we first heard this song, we were utterly taken with it. It describes the joy and play of the ocean. In fact, the same word in Hindi (*mauj*) can be used for both 'wave' and 'joy' – and the poet puns on this through the song.

Life is often described as ... the ocean of becoming... we have somehow to cross or navigate this ocean, which throws us about, with skill.

In my torn trouser-pocket hide
Many joyful, dancing waves
Even when alone
I'm in a carnival each day
…
Water in the eyes comes and goes
But the moistness within never dries
The shore may keep accounts
Of less and more
The ocean doesn't bother about such scores
The sun may rise and set everyday
The sky over me is always the same

(See words and translation of the full song here, as well as a downloadable audio version: http://cityoffeeling.blogspot.in/2016/03/ochintu-koi-raste-made.html)

The other song of Dhruvdada which we sang also evokes the sea as a place of joy and bounty. On one side, it says, is the ocean with its waves; on the other, is the fertile, green earth. There is joy as far as the eye can see.

We also sang a song of Kabir which describes the journey of a boat. My boat is now sailing smoothly, says Kabir. It has fear neither of shallow nor of deep waters, no terror of storm or rain, no anxiety of turning upside down. This is because it has found the right navigator, the guru who is guiding its path.

But this guru, the boatman, is a somewhat strange figure.

Kabir says the one who rows
Without a head
Only he can point out this path
This is an untellable tale
Of great benediction
Only a rare boatman
Can describe it

And so we arrive into tales of headless boatmen! When we seek to navigate these waters with our limited minds, perhaps we are led astray. But when we give up our need for control and allow ourselves to be guided by something larger, a great benediction appears. Could this be the 'untellable' import of this song?

The sixth and final song we presented was a Baul song (from the Bengal region in the east of India) by a famous Baul fakir and poet called Lalon Fakir. It is a call in a simple and full voice. The poet is asking to be 'taken across'. He says that he cannot see the way. He has been left all alone on this shore, and the sun is setting on the horizon. Things appear dark, and this plea is his only support. In his helplessness, he still finds the strength to call out for help.

We had never before curated a whole concert just around the sea. It was a beautiful experience for Shabnam and me, to immerse in these waters, and perhaps come out on the other shore, refreshed.

(All translations by Vipul Rikhi)

Hard days and nights

Hardships at work, a lack of support at home, and little or no social security combine to create a bleak future for women fishsellers in Mangalore, India

By **Ellen Thorell** (ellen.sigrid.thorell@gmail.com), Graduate Student in Human Ecology

Mangalore is a port city situated in the west coast state of Karnataka in India. The city hosts both large-scale and small-scale fisheries along its coastline. Traditionally, fishermen catch the product and sell it at a daily auction in the harbour to women vendors, who thereafter transport the goods to the market for commercial sale. The trade starts early in the morning, when the fishermen return to the harbour from their nightly fishing. The women fish vendors therefore also start their day in the early morning and work through the day till their stocks are sold or the sun goes down. One woman described her working day: "I have to sit around a lot, and that makes my body ache. It's also very hot in the sun and my eyes hurt. I have to take medicines for pain, and am often too unwell to work and am forced to stay at home for days in a row."

The marketplace is very hot, humid and unhygienic, with mosquitoes everywhere. The women have to sit in uncomfortable positions all day, which is bad for their health. They also need to work long hours to make the work profitable. All the women said that they would generally be at work as long as the sun was up. They claimed that if the lights at the market had been functioning they would have worked even longer hours. They work through the year. One woman said that she sold fish on all except six days in a year. Older women vendors find it difficult to sustain a reasonable income from the profession.

ELLEN THORELL

Auction at Bund fish market, India. The women fish vendors start their day in the early morning and work through the day till their stocks are sold

On an average, a fish vendor makes around Rs 100 (USD 1.50) a day. There could be days when the market is slow, and she ends up with no profit or even a loss for the day. This economic model has forced women into taking loans daily. Most fish vendors do not have any savings, and many have substantial debts. Given their financial status the vendors cannot access banks, and are forced to borrow money from private lenders, very often at usurious rates of interest.

The women have to pay a fee of Rs 10 (USD 0.15) per day to the city corporation for their vendor space in the market. This works out to around a tenth of their daily income. For this payment, the vendors do not get any service from the corporation, beyond the use of the market space. The corporation does not feel obliged to arrange for waste removal, lighting, etc. Discontent with the way in which the marketplace is organized and the total lack of any facilities has provoked the vendors in the past to organize strikes and protests. However, these protest actions have not got them any real attention from the corporation, whose office bearers add that such protests are not their concern but rather an issue for the police.

The women get their livelihood from local fish stocks but have no control over how fish reserves are exploited. They therefore also face future declines in the amount of fish available for daily sales.

After an entire day, from dawn to dusk, spent in procuring fish and selling it at the marketplace, the women return home to all the tasks of housework. The domestic sphere is their sole responsibility, and they get no support from husbands. This daily grind of sweaty work in extremely poor working conditions, followed by the total lack of support from husbands towards sustaining the family, leaves the women with very little energy to even think of changing their lives or destiny. It robs them of energy to stick up for their rights and protest against the daily oppression. Society also reinforces this view of them being relatively powerless. According

to a former union activist, women are neither viewed by society, nor even by themselves, as able to shape their own destinies. The social structures determined by poverty, gender and class that surround them, form their identities and deny them the spirit to try and change their circumstances.

What, then, are the possibilities for effecting improvement and benefiting fish vendors? First, communication between the women and different local institutions must be improved. The women should be empowered to have greater influence in the decisions regarding the market structure, as this deeply affects their dignity and democratic rights. The corporation must also be prevailed upon to visit the market and gain more local knowledge. Today, they only get the information once a year, through a third party, and this is not sufficient. The local community must also provide better legislation concerning the exploitation of the resource to avoid over-fishing. On a socio-economic level, in order to increase the vendor's level of agency, it would be beneficial to provide better security such as sickness benefits. Thereby, women might not need to take daily loans and end up trapped in debt. The union's solution is focused on providing more favourable loans. While beneficial in the current circumstances, this might not help in the long run. Finally, opportunities for education for young women in the fisheries sector will give them the opportunity to switch to other sectors if the fish sector breaks down.

Receding waters, vanishing trades

With the decline of waters in the rivers surrounding the city of Patna in north India, women in fishing communities of the region are facing mounting hardships

By **Bibha Kumari** (bibhak136@gmail.com), committee member of Aquaculture without Frontiers (AwF) and Women's Network and Faculty member, Department of Environment and Water Management, A.N. College, Patna, India

Patna, the capital city of the state of Bihar in North India, is located on the southern bank of the Ganga river. The city is surrounded by the Ganga and its tributaries: the Sone and the Punpun. Inland fishing used to be an important traditional livelihood source in the city. However, as the waters in the rivers recede continuously, fish capture has declined by 70 per cent in just a decade. This has had a dire impact on the fishing communities of Patna and its surrounding areas. Today, traditional modes of fishing in the region have given way to contract systems, whereby annual fishing rights are auctioned to private contractors. The contractor hires fishermen for harvesting. This provides insecure work for a short period for the fishing community. The result has been that the young among the fishing community seek other forms of employment, often migrating out of their traditional localities.

BIBHA KUMARI

The Boring Road Crossing fish market in Patna, India. The number of women fish vendors has declined substantially

The daily demand for fish in Patna is 28,000 metric tonnes. With the decline in inland fishing on the Ganga, fish is brought into the city either from other regions within the state or from other states. Patna has its traditional wholesale market areas. From there, the fish goes into retail markets. Generally, the wholesale markets system has been run by men, while women have traditionally participated in retail fish vending—an activity they have relied on for a stable livelihood. However, over the past two decades, the proportion of women fish vendors has declined substantially. The basic reason for this state of affairs is the decline in fish catch, which, in turn, has increased the pressure on those dependent on retail fishing trade.

The government of Bihar and the municipal authorities of Patna have earmarked a certain area for the selling of fish and also tried to regulate fish trade in the city. However, the measures are inadequate and have failed to address the issues of marketplace safety and hygiene. The lack of a properly demarcated area and of security, safety and proper sanitation, make it difficult for women to access these fish markets. The women are also afraid of harassment by administrative authorities and local people. Some women fish vendors have taken recourse to selling fish from door to door. Others have started roadside or neighbourhood fish sales.

This type of vending, outside delineated market areas, is illegal. It brings women face to face with demands for extortion and bribes. Women often have to depend on their menfolk to deal with these illegal systems, thus perpetuating their dependence on the men.

The role of the government in safeguarding both fishing and the access of women to traditional fishing vending operations, is important in the context of creating livelihood opportunities and empowering women in traditional fishing communities. Government intervention can help provide women safe and stable access to fish markets; it can promote hygienic conditions in these markets; and finally, it can make alternative livelihood options available through promoting culture fishing to compensate for the drop in capture fishing from the Ganga.

A Right to Fish, a Fight to Live

In the Sundarbans forest in the east coast of India, women canoe fishers organize themselves to secure their constitutionally-protected right to survival and livelihood

By **Urvashi Sarkar** (urvashisarkar@gmail.com), journalist, and researcher with South Solidarity Initiative

A tall and lean fisherwoman with a strong face stares at the evening sun fading into the still waters running through Kultali, an island in the Sunderbans forest; Anima Mandal is angry. She hasn't eaten since morning.

She was there for a meeting that the Kultali Forest Range beat officer had fixed for 2 pm on February 14, 2015 at the forest range compound in a corner of Kultali, across a river. Nearly 50 women, and a few men, had turned up for this crucial meeting to make two pressing demands—the return of their confiscated fishing canoes (*dongas*) and for the women to be recognized as traditional small-scale fishworkers, with a right to fish for their livelihood.

The women, organized under the Kultali Mahila Donga Matsyajibi Samity [Kultali Women Canoe Fishers' Association], had travelled a long way from Madhya Gurguria village—on foot, on cycles fitted with wooden planks and by boat—to make it to their appointment.

It is already past 5 pm. A number of women begin tracing their steps back towards a dinghy headed homeward: some hurry back to feed and care for the children they've left at home and others return home for fear of husbands who could turn violent. Anima and a few others choose to stay back at Kultali and represent the group, determined to get a response from the Forest Department. They walk around the compound, to the edge of a murky green pond, where their confiscated canoes of palm trunk lie stacked. The women are appalled; debris and wood bits from the canoes have started to peel off and mingle with the water. "Our canoes have been broken into pieces and thrown into the water. There must be lakhs of rupees (floating) in this river," says Geeta Sahu, a fisherwoman speaking softly. Her indignation, however, is unmistakable, shared by the workers standing beside her, still waiting.

PRADIP CHATTERJEE

Women of the *Mahila Donga Samity* and members of the *Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum* in front of Kultali Forest Range beat office, West Bengal, India

The conversation among the waiting crowd turns to input costs: the cost of palm trunks from which the canoes are dug out, the labour cost for chiselling, and the cost for coal-tar coating maintenance, all amounting to about Rs 5,000 (USD 80). Almost every confiscation necessitates this extra expenditure on their part, to build a canoe from scratch. "It can take at least two or three months to gather such a sum. Wooden boats, permitted by the Forest Department, are too expensive to afford," explains Beena Bag, one of the fisherwomen. They walk down some distance and spot a couple of confiscated *dinghies*, still sturdy, poking out through a mass of trees. The canoes and *dinghies* are the fishworkers' only means to catch crab and fish, their sole means to earn a living. By now Anima is fuming: "Why confiscate the canoes and hurt us in the stomach? We don't earn salaries, you know. This is not Calcutta city, where each month people earn something to be deposited in the bank. Nobody is going to hand me a bag of vegetables to cook. Life is different here."

Indeed, life is starkly different in the Sunderbans. For Anima, and other fisherwomen like her, the day begins at 3 am. After housework, they take their canoes into the rivers. To make a catch, they wade into cold, chest-level water. Once they have caught the fish, they return home to cook and feed their children. Crab and fish depots are the next stop. The women come here to sell their catch with hope and no guarantees to make a little money. On days there are earnings, they are funneled into immediate household expenses, fishing input costs (if any), and

savings for the less fortunate days in the week. Many of the communities here are landless second or third generation fishworkers, entirely dependent on fishing for their survival. And so, what they earn will determine what they buy at the market.

Anima was 10 or 12 when she got married. She recently lost her husband to a stroke. "There is no decent hospital here. Even pregnant women need to travel for two hours to Joynagar, where there are hospitals," she exclaims, frustrated. The number of men in the Sunderbans has declined over time, mainly due to migration for better livelihoods; most move to cities as construction workers or get involved in tiger killings for the profit.

The women are also bitter about having no stake in the proposed tourism projects in the Sunderbans. "Why won't they involve us in the tourism projects? It will give us better jobs and a better quality of life. Nobody seems to wants to engage with us. For instance, the big boats catch fish and crab just like we do, but it is us that the Forest Department goes after."

If life is not hard enough, the Forest Department's confiscation of their canoes has ensured that it becomes even harder. The reason cited is that since the canoes do not have a boat license certificate (BLC), granted by the Forest Department, they are therefore not authorised to ply in the Sunderbans; Kultali is part of Sunderbans reserve forest area, preventing the fishworkers from catching crab on their own land, unless they have a BLC.

The BLC regime has several problems including a non-transferable nature, the possession of BLCs by those who are no longer fishworkers, a thriving black market, and the non-issuance of fresh licenses. ICSF study, *Report: Fishing Community Issues in the Sundarbans' Tiger Reserve* outlines these problems in detail (http://mpa.icsf.net/images/stories/mpa/report_2march_kg.pdf). To deter fishworkers, the Forest Department uses methods such as seizing fishing nets; the women complained of receiving threats that glass bits would be mixed into with the riverbank sand, to prevent them from going (as they walk barefoot) to fish.

"The denial of the community rights of the forest dependent fisherwomen to fish in the forest waters is a violation of the FRA," says Pradip Chatterjee, President of the *Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum*. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) is meant to secure the access rights of forest-dwelling people, including sustainable use and conservation of the biodiversity of their home grounds.

He notes that despite repeated calls, the West Bengal government is yet to notify the FRA in the North and South 24 Parganas Districts: "The failure to notify the Act has resulted in the denial of livelihood rights to forest-dependent people including fishers, wild honey collectors, drywood collectors, and shell collectors (among others), leading to consequent conflicts with the Forest Department." Implementing the FRA would allow fishworkers to catch crab without BLCs.

The beat officer enters the scene a little past 6 pm. He speaks with the women of the *Mahila Donga Samity* and members of the *Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum* in front of Kultali forest range beat office. The officer states that the canoes have been confiscated because of their alleged use for poaching. Episodes of poaching involving canoes have been sporadic, the women argue, the entire fishing community should not be penalised.

They promise to act as informers for the Forest Department during instances of poaching, but insist on their right to continue using canoes for fishing. The beat officer agrees not to seize canoes for the next three months, during which time the movements of the canoes will be supervised. He also agrees to take up the issue of the rights of forest-dependent fisher communities with higher authorities.

When he voices a grouse about the government having to pay compensation when there are deaths caused by fishworkers venturing into tiger territory, he is reminded that fishworkers do not voluntarily venture into tiger territory, but because it is a question of their livelihood.

By the time discussions conclude, night has already set in. The women are happy to have this victory, even if temporary. They pile into a dinghy that takes them into the dark waters of the Sunderbans. Anima gazes at the still waters and towards home.

(This article was first published on The People's Archive of Rural India, www.ruralindiaonline.org on March 12, 2015)

Empty boats, loaded trucks

Rapid changes in fish marketing in a small village in Kerala, India, highlight complex market dynamics and throw up difficult questions

By **Nalini Nayak** (nalini.nayak@gmail.com), Member, ICSF

A few days ago I visited the fishing village of Pallam in the southern coast of Trivandrum, India. This is a densely populated fishing area. Women fish vendors in the SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) Union had told me that they were facing harassment from the fish agents and were being badly abused. They also said that in some areas, these agents had been banned because they bring in bad fish. Initially I was confused because I did not understand why agents in Pallam were bringing in fish. On enquiring, they told me, 'Oh, you have not come to the shore for long and that is why you do not see the hundreds of trucks that come in every morning with fish from all over the country." I had seen a couple of trucks on some occasions when I passed the coast, but I had not seen any substantial number. So I decided to go one early morning and it was indeed a surprise. It was a day when there was a hurricane on the east coast and so the trucks from that area had not come in, but yet there were quite a number and the shore was as busy as ever. Hundreds of women fish vendors buying fish, sorting it, repacking it and taking off in auto-rickshaws (three-wheeled vehicles) to the market.

NALINI NAYAK

Insulated vans bringing iced and frozen fish to the sea shore in Pallam, Kerala, India

The women told me that this had been going on for the last four or five years and the number of trucks coming in had gradually increased in numbers. There were women from all the neighbouring villages who had come to buy fish there. This was not an unusually bad time for fishing—the end of the monsoon, but yet, the fishing boats that were coming in did not have much of a catch and hence, did not have much to sell. Moreover, what they did bring home—good fresh mackerel—the women did not want to buy. The auctions were commencing at rates they did not think would be profitable to buy at. I saw an auctioneer try six times to restart the auction, always bringing down the price, and still there were no takers. I do not know what price he finally sold his fish at because women were just turning away and the auctioneer knew that the fisher would be at a huge loss if he sold any lower.

We had seen a similar situation in the wholesale market, when fish caught by the larger trawlers and other crafts was brought in from the big landing centres, and the women vendors purchased for retail sales. But a wholesale market of this kind right there in the fishing village was a more recent phenomenon, and very disturbing for the following reasons.

The fish brought in plastic crates looked extremely old. It was packed with ice which, according to some merchants, had been treated with ammonia, so the fish was semi-frozen. The women examined the fish in the crates and then bid for a crate at a time. Then they settled down with their crates, repacked the fish in their containers, again adding ice and salt. In a small container they also carried some sea sand, to sprinkle on the fish before selling to give the impression of fresh fish from the shore.

Along with the crates, there were also cartons of frozen fish. The label on the carton said reef cod but bore no date or country name. The fish inside was like stone and the women who bought it told me they would take it to their village and salt and dry it. When I spoke to the truck driver, I was told that this fish was brought from the cold storage of the Cochin harbor. This brought back memories of women at the Accra harbor in Ghana buying fish in cartons from the cold storages, where the European fishing fleet had sold the fish that they had fished off the west African coast back to the African women. These women too had no more fish on their shores,

and took the frozen fish to their villages to smoke and preserve. I did not think I would see this in our fishing village, at least in my life time. But things have changed rapidly.

There were a couple of other striking features on the shore. I was surprised to see the number of younger women with books and pens, writing down the accounts of the auction. These literate local women were a new layer of people involved in the marketing chain. Earlier the auctioning agents themselves kept these accounts and claimed the money from the women buyers. Now it was the younger women who heckled the women buyers to return their dues. These women were paid a daily wage which was quite substantial. But the man who actually auctioned the fish seemed the villain in the chain. In addition to a percentage of the sales price, he also kept a portion of fish after the auction was settled. This was a loss to the woman who actually bought the fish, and she had no way of controlling this.

The other new phenomenon was the number of women who worked as head loaders. Women now found employment to unload fish from the boats, and also from the trucks. This was well paid wage work, payment being both on a piece-rate and on a daily-wage basis. The stronger women who did not want to leave the village to sell fish took to this work. Wage work in the community was now an established phenomenon for women in fishing, and all this work continued to be unrecognized and unrewarded.

The women vendors who are members of the SEWA union were ambiguous about what they thought of this phenomenon. On the one hand, they felt this was a reality that they could not wish away. There was not enough fish being caught on their shores, and therefore the incoming trucks helped them access fish from other shores. They could thus continue to eke a livelihood through fish trade. On the other hand, this brought down the value of the catches of their own fishermen who landed fish on their shores. The fresh fish had to compete with fish from trucks. Moreover, there was no control over the quality of the fish the trucks brought in.

The women were angry with the men agents who spoke to them roughly, often using vulgar language. They resented the practice of the auctioneer taking away a part of the fish as his share. They would rather pay a fixed percentage of the total auction value, but not this unregulated payment in kind.

According to the merchant who had started this market, "This is all about markets—fish has to move from the shore to the consumer. In this process hundreds of people can make a living. So isn't this a good system? When I see that very little fish is being landed in Pallam, I call my agents and tell them to divert the trucks with fish this side, and they come. Or when there is too much fish landing here, I ask the agents to come and buy from here for other markets. The price is determined by the availability and the demand in the market and the fisherman is the winner in the long run". This merchant said that when he started this market in Pallam eight years ago, there were only twelve boats catching fish in this village.

Now there were over a hundred. Similarly, there used to be just a few women from the village purchasing the fish, but now there were hundreds. There were 17 teams of merchants—each with its own labour chain. There were also teams of ice suppliers with their own chain of labourers. As he explained, "Look at the employment we have generated, and we are all local people. We contribute to the local economy, and to the Church whom we pay two percent of the income. So the Church has managed to also build a community hall and other services for the community. We have a Merchants' Association and we control the quality of fish that comes into the village and we are sure it is not bad fish." However, he was unaware of where the frozen reef cod in cartons came from.

So while the merchant was right in saying that the fish market looked alive and a large number of people had gained employment, the gains from the process were certainly not equitable. Justobserving the various players, and their housing and other facilities, the class differentiation among them was clearly visible. The major gains went to the large merchants, and the Church had also substantially grown in size and stature. The others were merely surviving.

Fighting for space

Efforts to form a union of women in small-scale fish vending in Gujarat, India, promise to go a long way in addressing the problems of lack of space and facilities that these women face

By **Shuddhawati S Peke** (shuddhawati@gmail.com), Programme Associate, ICSF

When you first met Hansaben and Shailesh, the two young and cheerful community organisers from the coastal town of Veraval in Gujarat, India, appear to be simple and shy. They have been part of an organization called Jan Jagruti Manch (People's Awareness Forum) since they were adolescents, and have witnessed their families fight against powerful influential leaders of the *Kharava caste panchayat* (fishing communities' traditional institution). In continuing this struggle against existing traditional systems, they are trying to organize small-scale fishers. Hansaben is at the forefront in organizing women vendors and women fish processors employed in fish processing plants at Veraval. The National Fishworkers Forum (NFF), and Program for Social Action (PSA) have all supported these efforts, with inputs from International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF).

Our meeting with the women of Jan Jagruti Manch started at nine in the night. Many of them had returned from fish processing work, had their bath and finished their house work before rushing to the meeting. In earlier meetings, Hansaben had tried to teach the women how to sign their names. But the women had become suspicious of this activity, and some women had stopped attending meetings. Even so, 60 women gathered for this meeting and shared their experiences. They were all resident of Beria in Veraval, from the traditional *Kharava* community. Almost half the women gathered worked in fish processing plants. They explained that although they did not face the same problems that migrant fish workers face, they were concerned about low wages, job insecurity, the absence of social security measures like provident fund and health insurance, and about workplace safety and working conditions, including lack of protective gear like gloves and gumboots. Some expressed fears over forming a union, as employers were bound to retaliate against such efforts. An NFF representative at the meeting shared experiences of organizing trade unions for women in the south Indian state of Kerala, and talked about the benefits of such efforts. The women appeared to appreciate the importance of unions and expressed a desire to form a trade union of their own.

SHUDDHAWATI PEKE

Hansaben with women fishworkers attending meeting at Veraval, Gujarat, India. Meeting with the women of Jan Jagruti Manch started at nine in the night

Over the days that followed, Hansaben accompanied me on visits to fish markets in Veraval and Porbandar. There are two main fish markets in Veraval. Fisher's Colony Market is the oldest. A new fish market at Bheria is getting built at the original market site, so currently vendors sit in a nearby area. They have been waiting for the past two years for the new market to be constructed, sitting out in the sun, and watching both their fish stock and their health deteriorate. The market is for both wholesale and retail fish trade. Women generally get fish from wholesalers in the market in the morning, and sell their stock through the day. Many women could be seen standing with small buckets of fish for sale. Hansaben said that the local Corporation (local body) had not consulted the nearly 300 vendors while planning for a new market. As the women were not organized, they were not able to follow up with the Corporation's plans or time frame to finish construction of the market.

A visit to another market in Bheria revealed the same situation for women vendors. Here the women did not even have a demarcated market space to call their own. They were vending in the streets for the last 15 years. There were presently 200 vendors, and for a few hours in the evening, the whole street was flooded with vendors and customers. Older vendors had, over the years, made temporary structures with fish baskets,

thermocol boxes and wooden planks to display their fish, while new vendors stood around the plastic baskets in which their fish was kept. A senior vendor we talked with raised concerns over the recent growth in the number of vendors, due to which older vendors were losing both customers and work. She also feared that the Corporation planned to shift vendors to another area altogether. Most of the women were young, and there were even some children among them, trying to sell a few crabs.

The next day Hansaben and I went to Porbander, another coastal town in Gujarat and the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi. We visited the wholesale fish market in the morning and the retail market in the afternoon. Earlier this was a single market where wholesale and retail fish trade carried on side by side. After the Porbander Corporation built a new fish market at a distance from the original market site, wholesalers chose to auction their stock on the busy streets that were easier to access. As is the case of small-scale fish vending across Gujarat, fish was stocked on the sides of the streets, without ice and under the scorching sun. The crowd of vendors and customers in the narrow streets made it difficult for people to walk. Accidents were common in this market. The market was said to be controlled by a woman with the reputation of being a '*gunda*' (antisocial element) who exercised every possible means to maintain her control. The women here would not even to dare to speak of organizing.

The retail fish market was a well-built structure with separate *galas* (sections) for each vendor. The vendors however chose to sit on the ground in the open areas under the scorching sun, atop their usual thermocol boxes and wooden planks. They said that the space they had been given was too small to accommodate their wares. They were also angry that the Municipal Corporation had shifted them from their original space to this new fish market. There were far fewer customers coming to this market. In protest, they have been refusingto pay taxes to the Municipal Corporation. Life is hard for these women whether in fish processing industries or in fish markets. People like Hansaben and Shailesh are trying to organise them into a trade union. A collective union forum will no doubt help them in being able to negotiate with the local Municipal Corporations and Fisheries Departments to gain more control over their livelihood.

Life is hard for these women whether in fish processing industries or in fish markets.

A question of identity

For the first time ever, the Indian State of Tamil Nadu will issue identity cards to women seaweed collectors from the Gulf of Mannar, in recognition of the unique nature of their work

By **Sumana Narayanan** (icsf@icsf.net), Programme Associate, ICSF

Women seaweed collectors from the Gulf of Mannar in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu will soon get State-issued identity cards, which they hope will recognize the unique nature of their work. The recognition will also perhaps enable them to access welfare schemes targeting fishers who go to sea. They also hope that the identity cards would ease their troubles with the forest department.

The Gulf of Mannar, a shallow bay off the east coast of India, is a no-take zone (a national park under India's Wildlife Protection Act of 1972). The protected area consists of a 560-sq km area that includes 21 islands. Seaweeds grow abundantly in the shallow waters around the islands and while collection of seaweed is not banned, entry, let alone collection of resources, is banned in and around the islands. The women therefore run the risk of running afoul of the State forest department.

In 2013, the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), with support from the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) Project, conducted training programmes for the fishing communities of the Gulf of Mannar with a view to developing a community-led management plan for the marine resources of the Gulf, using an Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM). BOBLME is a project of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), involving the Bay of Bengal countries (India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand), that aims to have a coordinated regional plan for fisheries and environment management. At the training programmes, the women seaweed collectors had intense discussions to zero in on some potential measures they could implement, as well as several issues on which they wished to ask for the State's support. Towards this, a meeting with State government officials was organized under the aegis of the State Planning Commission.

At the meeting on June 11, 2014, fishing community representatives from the Gulf of Mannar had an opportunity to share their current initiatives and ideas for sustainable use of the area's marine resources. The meeting was attended by officials from the forest and fisheries departments, the State Planning Commission, the planning, development and special initiatives department, and researchers.

The women seaweed collectors spoke of how they have restricted their seaweed

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Seaweed collectors in Gulf of Mannar, Tamil Nadu, India. The Government of Tamil Nadu will soon provide identification cards to women seaweed collectors, recognizing this unique group of women fishers

collection to twelve days per month—six days around the new moon period and six days around the full moon time—from an earlier situation of no controls over collection. In 2006, they developed this practice, after discussions with the State forest department and researchers, because they felt the seaweed harvesting was going beyond sustainable limits. The number of collectors had increased and the seaweeds were not getting time to regenerate. The women had also resolved not to use metal scrapers to collect the seaweed as they damaged the coral substrate. Instead, the women switched to using their hands to collect the seaweed. However, to protect their fingers from the sharp corals, they tied rags around them. In addition, they pointed out, they follow a 45-day ban on seaweed collection; this year (2014), the ban period extended to over two months. The women wanted compensation for this period, noting that the men are compensated. The women also requested the State to organize insurance for them as they too go out to sea.

The women also highlighted the fact that the islands are important to the fishers as a place of refuge during inclement weather and to repair boats when out at sea. The women said they were willing to work with the forest and fisheries departments to conserve resources. They (the fishing community) understand the need for conservation measures as they are dependent on the very same resources for their life and livelihood and want, therefore, to ensure that future generations of fishers are not left bereft. The women also refuted the allegation that they destroyed live corals; noting that seaweed grow on dead corals and therefore the women do not go near the live corals. Neither do the fishing boats break corals as alleged. As one woman asked, if our boat hits corals, the boat would be damaged so why would we deliberately go over corals? Instead, fishers use the deep channels that are free of corals to approach the islands.

During the discussions, the fisheries department noted that it issues identity cards only to fishermen as they go out to sea to fish, and since women focus on post-harvest activities on land, they are not included in this scheme. It argued that welfare schemes are based on families; hence, the women are also covered under the schemes. Responding to the women's demand for compensation for loss of work during the ban period, equivalent to what fishermen were awarded, the department argued that the compensation given to the fishermen was for the family, and not for the fishermen, as individuals. The gender implications of this compensation policy, apparently based on the assumption that men are the traditional head of the family and women are only their dependents, were not, however, discussed.

At the end of the day, it was agreed that the Tamil Nadu State would recognise Gulf of Mannar seaweed collectors as a unique group of women fishers. It would also, for the first time, provide identification cards to women seaweed collectors via the fisheries department. The possibility of providing protective equipment, such as gloves for the women collectors and the use of scissors/cutters to harvest seaweed, would be considered. Finally, it was agreed that the State would also explore the possibility of seaweed collection from deeper waters (6 to 7m), and then provide the women with the required training for diving as well as gear such as oxygen tanks.

Remembering Usha Tamore

A tribute to the memory of an inspiring and unforgettable woman, who led women fish vendors in Mumbai, India, towards autonomy and strength

By **Shuddhawati S Peke** (shuddhawati@gmail.com), Programme Associate, ICSF

In 2013, when I started actively engaging with women fishworkers in Mumbai, India, I got to know Usha *tai*. (The word *tai* means 'elder sister' in Marathi, the local language spoken in Mumbai.) She had brought women fishworkers from her network to the women's wing of Maharashtra Macchimar Kriti Samittee (MMKS). In the year that I worked with her, I got a glimpse of her life as both a woman fish vendor and a woman leader who fought for women vendors' rights. I also got to know her as a fighter in her personal battle against ovarian cancer.

Usha *tai* was a strong person. She had separated from her husband for personal reasons, and brought up two sons on her own. She remained a working single mother until the very last days of her life. She succumbed to cancer on 13 July 2014 at the age of 51.

Usha *tai* was a fish vendor in Pickle market of Mahim in Mumbai. She started working as a fish vendor with her mother from the age of 13. She was a bright child but poverty denied her the opportunity to pursue a school education. After marriage, she decided to stay on in Mumbai instead of going to her husband's village. In 1975, the land traditionally used by women vendors to sell fish was privatised for the purpose of setting up a hospital. Fisherwomen who were unaware of this fact came out in large numbers to protest their displacement from their traditional market site. As a result of their protest, a small market was built by the city corporation behind the hospital that came up. This, however, was not enough to cater to the needs of the women vendors. A few years later, the government threatened them with further displacement. This was when Usha *tai* came to the forefront of the vendors' battle against the local government authorities and politicians. The struggle was successful in preventing their displacement.

Recognising her capabilities, the leadership of a local fishworkers' union called upon Usha *tai* and a few other women leaders from Mumbai to register a district-level women's fisheries cooperative in 2005. Usha *tai* was made the secretary of the newly-formed cooperative. The cooperative under her leadership grew to have more than 5000 women members. However, she was disillusioned by the functioning of the cooperative and the direction it took. She felt that though the cooperative was a women's cooperative, the real leadership and control was in male hands. She refused to be a subservient and started looking for alternatives.

A few years ago, Usha *tai* came in contact with MMKS and happened to attend an

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Usha Tai in a discussion with representatives of fishworkers organization at a meeting organized by ICSF

ICSF workshop to discuss a study of women vendors in Mumbai. These meetings inspired her to help start a women's trade union. She drew upon the extensive ties she had built over her years as secretary of the cooperative to form the union. What followed was a series of meetings with women in *koliwadas* (urban fishing villages). Usha *tai* was nominated secretary of this proposed women's union.

Under the leadership of Usha *tai* and another stalwart, Ujwala *tai*, women vendors in Mumbai started placing their demands before the municipal authorities. Mumbai's Fisheries Department until then had focused solely on the demands of male fishers. Through this struggle, the Department was, for the first time, made aware of the woes of women vendors. The Fisheries Department was forced to call a meeting with women fish vendors from Mumbai, listen to their issues and promise to cater to their needs. This was the first success of the organized women vendors.

Usha *tai* was also at the forefront of many other meetings with the government authorities along with the MMKS leadership. Amidst all this, she was also fighting cancer, struggling to earn her livelihood from fish vending, supporting her children, fighting against the wrongdoings in her cooperative and also working towards founding a new women's union. She managed all this with a smile on her face. The harsh effects of chemotherapy, including loss of hair, did not deter her.

Usha *tai*'s views on family and children were very different from those of most other women from her socioeconomic conditions. She was determined to educate her children, and got her daughter-in-law enrolled in college for graduation. She was the happiest person when she was around her granddaughter for whom she had big plans. She kept exhorting other women fish vendors to take control of their lives. She was, and continues to be, an inspiration to many women vendors in Mumbai.

Mapping markets in Mumbai

By actively participating in the mapping of the city's fish markets, Mumbai's fish vendors take an important step towards having a greater say in the development of the city

By **Shuddhawati S Peke** (shuddhawati@gmail.com), Programme Associate, ICSF

On the western coast of India, Greater Mumbai, with an estimated population of 12.5 million, is home to the women's wing of the Maharashtra Macchimar Kruti Samiti (MMKS), a local state union of fishworkers. Recently, MMKS Women's Wing, which has been struggling for women fish vendors' rights, took an important first step towards having a greater say in the city's development by getting the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) to agree to a joint exercise of mapping the city's fish markets.

Mumbai has 60 municipal fish markets and any number of informal ones. Informal fish markets include street fish markets as well as privately owned fish markets. Apart from these, Mumbai's *koliwadas* (urban fishing villages) also have landing centres, auction halls and retail markets. The development of these fish markets, of urban fishing villages and of infrastructure related to transport and other activities falls under the purview of the MCGM. Currently, the MCGM is drafting the development plan for the period 2014 to 2034.

As part of this process, the MCGM, after preparing a land use plan, called for public consultations based on twelve different themes including land use, transportation, environmental sustainability, formal housing and public amenities, education and gender. This was jointly done with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to ensure public participation. The MMKS Women's Wing was also involved with this exercise. They brought to the discussion issues of the women fish vendors operating in fish markets and landing centres, in particular the need for land and amenities for their activities.

SHUDDHAWATI S PEKE

In the Byculla Gujari private market the owners have stopped providing basic amenities. Vendors have no security for either their fish, or themselves

According to MCGM data, there are 60 municipal fish markets in Greater Mumbai but, up until this particular survey exercise, there was no data on informal fish markets in the city. Not surprisingly, there was also no initiative until recently from the government to provide basic amenities to informal vendors. Now however, the National Policy on Street Vendors (2009) makes mandatory the protection of street vendors and hawkers by formulating town vending committees, registering hawkers and giving them identity cards, and delineating markets or hawker's zones. At the request of the MCGM, the women's wing of the MMKS in coordination with MCGM and local fish vendors in a month mapped all the formal and informal fish markets in the city.

The survey found that while Mumbai city has formal markets, suburban areas are covered largely by informal markets. There are 30 formal markets in Mumbai city while there are 22 in western suburbs and only twelve in eastern suburbs. The suburbs are largely covered by unstructured and semi structured or fully structured informal markets, located or built on government land and funded from discretionary funds of local government representatives.

A number of development issues were revealed by the survey. Commercial activities including large corporate markets had displaced a number of old fish markets. In the case of the Babulnath Municipal Market, a big business house received sanction to set up a shopping complex due to which 20 women fish vendors were displaced. At the Habib private fish market, the owner evacuated fish vendors systematically by cutting off the electricity and water supply, and now for the past 15 years the place provides poor housing to migrants in the city. In the Byculla Gujari private market and the Chira Bazaar private market the owners have stopped providing basic amenities, and are waiting for fish vendors to leave to give the land over for commercial development.

Municipal markets provide formalised built structures and tax the vendors on their premises. However, in many cases fish markets are pushed to a corner with poor amenities and unhygienic conditions. Vendors have no security for either their fish, or themselves. Street fish markets have another set of issues including absence of regulation and security.

In Mumbai, there are three routes to the development of urban market areas: through government funding; through Public Private Partnership (PPP); and self development. Wholly government funded projects are extremely rare. Government agencies prefer to develop up-market projects. While the PPP model is supposed to be inclusive, builders and private developers attempt to corner premium space for their commercial activities. Often residential complexes are built by the private developers on space allotted to fish markets in the development area, leading to clashes between residents and fish market users. Activists working with women therefore recommend self development as this ensures maximum benefit to vendors and gives control over their land and land use. They are not faced with the constant threat of commercial and semi-commercial developments under the PPP model that coexist with their establishments, and gradually bring pressure on the fish vendors to move out for various purported reasons like public nuisance and hygiene. In the year ahead, the task for MMKS is to use the learning from the mapping survey to advocate for transparent and inclusive process of market development.

This mapping process has achieved many important things. Formal fish markets, and for the first time even informal markets, got documented officially by the city corporation. Photographic documentation has been created, which will be an important reference source and evidence for fish vendors to fight for their rights in the face of future developmental activities. The next step in the exercise is circulating a questionnaire developed in collaboration with market department of MCGM to get detailed information on fish markets. A comprehensive report including the survey and the questionnaire data will then be submitted to the MCGM. The MCGM Commissioner has promised to call for a meeting, based on the report of fish vendor representatives, to settle fish market issues one by one. Over the next two decades, the city is looking at large developmental projects and expansion activities that will change its urban landscape. Informal establishments will face increasing problems to safeguard user rights and access basic amenities.