

NOTE

Suffering in Silence

B D writes :

Coastal fisherfolk face a serious onslaught on their livelihood but they at least have the organisational strength and the mobilisation ability to have their voice heard. On the other hand the millions of inland fisherfolk working in reservoirs and lakes, rivers and ponds have largely suffered in silence, isolation and neglect while their livelihood has been increasingly threatened.

In many rivers the fish population has been badly depleted due to increasing pollution as well as the construction of dams and barrages. According to V G Jhingran, former Director of the Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute, 'the denial of migration may result in a permanent and irrevocable reduction of fish stocks ranging from lowering the levels of abundance to complete extermination.'

The Report of the Working Group on Tehri Dam Project appointed by the Dept. of Science and Technology said that the Mahseer, "the most beautiful creature of our important water-ways", is badly threatened. Explaining the reason, this Group said that this species breeds only in running streams and needs to ascend into rivers up to long distances before the laterosensory organs are sensitised to induce the gonads into reproductive activity. This phenomenon is hindered due to obstructions caused by dams and weirs.

Due to pollution and construction of dams on Damodar river and a barrage on Ganga river, the availability of highly relished hilsa fish has declined steeply in the Ganga and its tributaries. Fish obviously cannot complain to builders of dams but surely the latter should keep in mind the silent sufferings of fish and fisherfolk dependant on them while planning their huge structures on rivers.

While river-based fisheries have declined, new fishing opportunities have become available in the man-made reservoirs created by building dams. In the interests of justice, the first claim for obtaining livelihood from reservoir fisheries vests with those persons whose land was submerged by the dam, or else with those river fisherfolk who were adversely affected. Unfortunately the just claims of these deserving groups have been generally ignored by state governments who have instead leased reservoirs to corrupt contractors who try to earn as much profit as possible in a short period, violating all norms of sustainable catch.

In areas like Tikamgarh (MP) known for the richness of their traditional tanks and ponds, fisherfolk have come under the twin pressure of thoughtless tempering with tanks and the efforts of local gangsters to take-over the tanks. Traditional fisherfolks in many lakes (such as Chilika) have been under the threat of mafias for several years. In Bihar Ganga Mukti Andolan had fought to free river fisherfolk from the terror of 'river zamindars' who had been exploiting them for decades. □□□