

Plight of Coastal Fisherfolk

Bharat Dogra

Panos South Asia and Kalpavriksha (a leading vol-untary organisation working on environmental issues) are organising a series of inter-actions of media persons and activists. These dialogues on 'covering the environment in an era of economic reforms' started with an inter-action on coastal areas involving environmentalists, representatives of fisherfolk communities (and other communities of coastal areas) and media-persons in Delhi.

A particularly significant aspect of this intervention was the serious concern expressed time and again by activists representing fisherfolk communities about the many-sided, increasing threats to the livelihoods of fisherfolk.

Harekrishns Dabriath, chairperson, National Fishworkers' Forum said, "Nearly 10 million people depend directly or indirectly on coastal fisheries and almost an equal number on inland fisheries in India. Most of the traditional fisherfolk are passing through extremely difficult times of livelihood crisis, particularly in coastal areas, despite the fact that fisheries earn a lot of foreign exchange for the country."

He added, "What is taking place in the name of development in coastal areas is actually devastating the livelihood of fisherfolk. Destructive sand mining goes on unabated. A massive nuclear power expansion plan includes several nuclear reactors in coastal areas such as those at Haripur (W. Bengal), Bhavanagar (Gujarat) and Kudankulam (Tamil Nadu). New ship breaking yards are being sanctioned. Land reclamation is merrily going on at several sites."

At present in Contai area in W. Bengal, a large number of fisherfolk are losing their livelihood as a number of impressive hotels have been built very near to the sea, violating coastal regulations. As hotel-owners don't tolerate the fisherfolk and their work like drying fish on the beach, they'll be forced to move out, he said.

Relating an even more shocking instance, he said that even environment pretext like saving tiger are being used to evict fisherfolk from Jambudwip area. "As many as 10000 fisherfolk were evicted from here," he said.

Suicides by impoverished fisherfolk and their deaths in clashes with police have been reported from several places including Jambudwip (W. Bengal), Kendrapara (Orissa) and Vishakapatnam (Andhra Pradesh). A leader of the community Col. Pratap Sabe was killed in police custody in Umbergaon, Maharashtra.

Chandrika Sharma of Chennai-based International Collective in Support of Fishworkers said that fuelled by pressures of economic globalisa-tion, coastal and marine areas are increasingly being targeted, often in an unregulated manner, for a host of projects leading to eviction of fisherfolk or loss of access to beaches for berthing boats and processing fish.

Some fishing communities, for example Sondikud village (Orissa) or Gangavaram (Andhra Pradesh) were displaced twice. In some cities fishing

communities were original inhabitants, as in Chennai and Mumbai, but now face eviction and disruption. In Chennai this issue has come to the forefront in the post-tsunami days, she said.

Chandrika Sharma emphasised that the impact of such negative development is most acutely felt by traditional fisherfolk using non-mechanised craft, as also those, (particularly women) fishing, collecting and gleaning without boats. The hazardous waste dumped by industries in water harms women whose work involves wading in water for hours.

Drawing attention to a vulnerability of skilled coastal fisherfolk, Chandrika Sharma said that till today they lack clear titles to the land they live and work on or well-defined access rights to the waters they have customarily fished in. However the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification 1991 had recognised the traditional and customary rights of fishing communities to their habitat.

A concern that was expressed time and again in this dialogue was that the CRZ notification is now being abandoned and a draft CZM (Coastal Zone Management) notification based on the recommendations of the M S Swaminathan committee is to be finalised soon. Fisher-folk representatives fear that this may lead to greater threats to traditional fisherfolk and lesser protection for fisherfolk rights.

Fatima Babu, a teacher-cum-activist working with coastal communities in Tamil Nadu against industrial pollution, said, "The new proposal, the CMZ, would mean the death knell to coastal communities."

Fatima Babu expressed concern that in the name of finding alternative employments in the post-tsunami days fisherfolk are being shifted away from the shore.

In Tuticorin fisherfolk participated courageously in the struggle against pollution by a copper-smelter, using their boats to blockade a ship, but they were let down by politicians she said. Mega Project like the Sethu-samudram Ship Canal Project and Koodankulam Nuclear Power Project pose many sided hazards and threats, including threats to the livelihoods of fisherfolk, she said.

Pankti Jog from Janpath voluntary organisation in Gujarat spoke on the basis of the experience of a 'Samvad Yatra' or 'dialogue travel along the coast of Gujarat to understand changes in livelihood patterns in last two decades. The 'Samvad Yatra' covered 450 villages.

This experience revealed that apart from fisherfolk livelihoods of coastal farmers are also being devastated as traditional salt making and mining works are replaced by large-scale mechanised operations. Many villages have lost their water-sources as a result of the devastation caused by these.

B C Chaudhary of the Wild Life Institute of India said that at least one port is expected to come up at every 50 kms. of India's coastline, in most cases destroying productive riverine estuaries. A large number of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are also in the coastal areas. At the same time the littoral mangroves are one of the most threatened habitats in the coastal zone and there is no protection for coastal sand dune habitats.

B C Chaudhary concluded his speech on ecological threats to coastal areas by asking, "have we reached the point where the tenacity of this unique zone is going

to give way to a disaster that no amount of curative or restorative process can bring back?" □□□