

COMMENT

Who owns the Coast?

BECAUSE OF INDIA'S AMBITIOUS Nuclear Power Plan fishing communities will be evicted on a massive scale from the traditional fishing hamlets located all along eastern and western coast beaches. But they are feeling the pinch because tourism industry has already displaced them in huge numbers. And it's nowhere so obnoxious as in Puri in coastal Orissa where hotels and emporia have literally crowded out the fish workers.

It's impossible to proceed any further. The freshly laid tarmac has abruptly disappeared. It appears that the waves of the Bay of Bengal only recently swallowed up the road. Strangely, on its landward side, building construction continues undeterred by the sea's appetite. The only people audacious enough to live this close to the sea must be fisherfolk. But 'Sonar Bangla Hotel'? The sprawling and psychedelic Sri Dhananjaya Katha Baba Ashram? The housing colonies of the Gandhi Labour Foundation? Pretty inappropriate titles for fisherfolk residences. Nor do the uncountable clothing emporia, lodges, hotels, or restaurants jostling each other on Puri town's congested Sea Beach Road remotely resemble fisher establishments. In fact, nothing on that road looks like it belongs to this coastal stretch of Orissa.

'Save the Coast, Save the Fisher!' This slogan, raised at its all-India coastal yatra, in May 2008, resurrected the National Fishworkers Forum's (NFF) enduring demand for guaranteed land rights for traditional fishing communities.

In July every year, lakhs of devotees descend on the town for the Rath Yatra of Lord Jagannath and his siblings. The temple effortlessly overshadows any connotation of Puri being a fishing town, and the tourist-devotees it attracts quick colonise the amusements on offer at Sea Beach Road. This brings more of the hinterland onto the beach, squeezing out existing coastal residents. Where do the fishers go?

Three fishing hamlets are located within Puri's municipality limits. They are populated by the Noliya people—a fishing caste who migrated to this part of the coast in different stages. Balinoliyasahi, the oldest hamlet, 150 years old, lies in the centre. About 5 km to its north is Pentakota, only about 60 years old, and to the south is Goudabadsahi. Pentakota is the largest, with a population of about 20,000 fisherfolk, while Balinoliyasahi and Goudabadsahi are home to 5,000 and 3,000 fisherfolk respectively.

The state's prevarication on according titles and conferring land rights and entitlements to fishing communities is an outcome of unsolved puzzles. Who 'owns' the coast, and who has rights to it? Is it not common property and open to all? The confusion and multiple opinions on this subject have led to legislations that attempt to either regulate or legitimize activity on the coast without attempting to clarify the position of fishing communities and their rights.

Only recently, certain factors are driving communities to seek hinterland spaces to relocate to. Lack of availability of land or beach space to facilitate the growth of the settlement is a big constraint. Sea erosion has also caused some families to consider a government offer of relocation to the hinterland. But the large majority of traditional fisherfolk, especially of the Noliya community that operates beach landing craft (not mechanized boats that need harbours), require the beach space for the operation of shore seines, for landing fish catch, for auctions, drying fish, storing boats, mending nets, and an endless list of activities sure to flummox the average tourist who visits a beach twice a year. The hotel owners of Puri are not unfamiliar with fishing activities—just intolerant. □□□ [contributed]