

Those who wield the net: Small-scale fishworkers build momentum in India



In India, a movement of small-scale fishworkers is building to reclaim their rights to water. A recent boat campaign in West Bengal aimed to raise awareness about the rights of small-scale fishworkers to water, fish, and land. Traveling along a 500km stretch of the Hooghly River, organisations mobilised community power to raise awareness, foster connections, and drive action.

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BIn India, millions of workers support resilient food systems by conserving aquatic resources with traditional knowledge and offering affordable, high-quality food. Despite their vital role in ecosystems, including reducing bycatch and preserving culture, small-scale fishworkers lack legal rights over water and land they've used for generations. Without legal protection, they face social, political, and environmental threats. The National Federation of Small-Scale Fishworkers (NFSF) is leading efforts to advocate for their legal rights.

Since its 2016 inception, NFSF has promoted a national 'Small-Scale Fishworkers' Right to Water' movement. It advocates for small-scale fishworkers' access to waterbodies and fish resources for sustainable fishing, and the protection of these resources from harmful activities. The movement also demands social security, gender equity, and climate

justice, aiming to reaffirm fishworkers as custodians of water bodies and strengthen community resilience.

Legal recognition will give small-scale fishers rightful influence in decisions about aquatic resource use. For years, bottom trawling has depleted marine resources, but small-scale fishers lack power to enforce change. The same applies to water pollution from chemical agriculture, industrial aquaculture, and other industries. Recognising small-scale fishers as waterbody custodians can increase their inclusion in policy discussions, strengthening local food systems and fostering community resilience.

The boat campaign in West Bengal

In 2024, the national movement grew with local support from state-level small-scale fishworkers' organisations – the Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF) in West Bengal and



Photo: Amitrajit Chakraborty

Campaigners hold banners calling for the protection of fishworkers to draw the attention of trawler workers, wholesale traders and the public at Namkhana harbour.

the Swatanthra Matsyathozilai Federation (SMTF) in Kerala.

In West Bengal, DMF community leadership led a month-long boat campaign from November 26 to December 23, 2024, traveling 500 km upstream from the Hooghly River's mouth in the Bay of Bengal to the Farakka Barrage in the Gangetic plains, visiting fishing hubs and villages in nine districts.

The campaign targeted fishing community hubs to raise fishworkers' awareness of their rights, draw government attention to small-scale fishworkers' demands and threats to livelihoods, and sensitise civil society and the public to the role of small-scale fisheries in food sovereignty and resource protection.

Draped in banners and blue flags of local fishworkers' organisations, the boat traveled from village to village, inspiring great enthusiasm among the fishing communities. They warmly welcomed the campaign with drumming and songs of resistance. Processions and rallies led by women fishworkers echoed slogans in unison - *Jol Bachao, Maach Bachao, Matsyajibi Bachao* (Save Water, Save Fish, Save Fisher People) and *Jal Jar Jol Tar* (Those Who Wield the Net, Have the Right to Water Bodies). Local fishing communities spoke out against the increasing occupation of coastlines for tourism, ports, harbours, and other commercial projects, which have led to their displacement and reduced access to resources.

They also condemned declining fish stocks caused by destructive fishing practices, such as bottom trawling by large-scale, mechanised vessels. At a notable gathering at

Namkhana fishing harbour, small-scale fishers raised slogans such as "*Trawling Hatao, Matsyajibi Bachao*" (Abolish Trawling, Save Fishworkers), highlighting the presence of trawlers docked at the harbour. Women fishworkers shared how the depletion of natural resources added to women's ongoing struggles. "Hundreds of women fish processors and fish dryers are struggling to make ends meet because there is no fish in the sea," said Tapasi Dolui, Vice-President of DMF.

Fishers from the Sundarbans shared the historical injustices caused by exclusionary forest conservation practices, which still marginalise fishing communities. Fishworkers also discussed issues related to industrial aquaculture and the growing hardships caused by climate variability.

The boat campaign in West Bengal exhibited the indomitable spirit and resilience of a community fighting for survival

The DMF leadership connected the concerns raised by the fishing communities to the larger issue of a lack of rights. They urged communities to collectively fight social injustices through public deputations, sit-in protests, and



Tribal fishworkers from different parts of South 24 Parganas district perform traditional dance forms and enact plays at a public gathering in Kakdwip.

demonstrations. Inspired by these events, a local fishing community joined the campaigners to present demands to the West Bengal Department of Fisheries. The campaign also conducted press conferences along the way.

At a powerful press conference in Diamond Harbour, DMF General Secretary Milan Das delivered a passionate speech, linking the rights of small-scale fishworkers to the well-being of society as a whole: "Small-scale fishworkers are the only non-consumptive stakeholders of the waterbodies. Without small-scale fishworkers there are no healthy water bodies, and without healthy water bodies there is no future in agriculture, no access to healthy drinking water, and no healthy fish on the plate."

The boat then traveled upstream along the Hooghly River into inland waters. Departing from Kolkata, as the boat reached riverine fishing communities, campaigners quickly noticed that community participation was lower than that of their coastal counterparts. This indicated that these communities were less aware and less organised.

In the Nadia district, the campaign achieved a notable milestone when the police inspector announced new, strict penalties for all destructive fishing. The statement was welcomed with applause by the fishing community, who readily volunteered to monitor rivers and wetlands and report such activity. While this was the outcome in just one district, it indicated that change is possible.

Learning and resiliency

Establishing small-scale fishworkers' rights requires ongoing, collective efforts. The main challenge is drafting legislation and ensuring its enactment by the government. It is notable that, after years of NFSF efforts – community engagement, protests, press – both the Indian central government

and West Bengal acknowledged the need for legislation protecting traditional fishing communities. Though not yet policy, this shows the movement's growing strength.

Politically, the campaign aimed to link fishworkers' marginalisation and rights over water, fish, and land. It highlighted the need for grassroots leadership and initiatives to address these issues, emphasising the connection between their struggles and lack of rights. Unlike peasants' land rights movements, fishworkers' fights for water rights are less visible and harder to organise, as small-scale fisheries are mostly subsistence family enterprises with open access to water and fish stock. These livelihoods, key to food sovereignty, have been disrupted by modern development, prompting the water rights movement.

The worsening socio-economic conditions in small-scale fishing communities also cause large-scale migration, challenging the unity of fishworkers, crucial for addressing their issues. The campaign insights have helped develop a future plan focused on building inland fishworkers' organisational capacity and mobilising local issue-based campaigns to strengthen their rights.

Reflecting on the campaign's challenges and successes, it is noteworthy that the recognition of water rights for small-scale fishworkers marked an important step forward. It suggests that with additional campaigns, targeting further stretches of the coastline and more deeply engaging inland communities, progress is achievable. The campaign faced time and money constraints, which are significant factors for future planning. It was clear from the community responses along the campaign trail that fishworkers are ready to organise and get involved.

Developing additional ways to communicate with community leaders to identify specific needs and demands could greatly help the campaign better understand how to support localised, self-organising efforts and strengthen the broader movement's fabric. Building a diverse base of civil society and other natural resource-dependent communities in support of fishworkers is a challenge, but it is a necessary step for future success. Looking ahead, finding ways to connect small farmers, forest workers, and Indigenous communities with small-scale fishers to unite and strengthen community movements with a shared goal of protecting natural resources and local food systems will contribute to building a more resilient community, India, and the world.

Despite the challenges, these efforts exhibited the indomitable spirit and resilience of a community fighting for survival. It sent a strong and clear message – small-scale fishworkers are natural custodians of waterbodies, and fishing communities should have the primary right to these waterbodies. This is critical to weaving resilient food systems. ■

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