

Save the Coast, Save the Fishers

A campaign by the National Fishworkers' Forum of India focused on the problems with the proposed Coastal Management Zone Notification

Marine fishing communities in India, the traditional inhabitants of the approximately 8,000-km long coastline of the country, have fished for generations along the coast. For them, the coastal area is as much a lived space as an occupational space, encompassing both the land and the sea on which they live and work. The beach has been the space used for landing fish; selling, salting, smoking, curing and drying fish; and tying up boats and fishing implements and doing maintenance work on them, among other day-to-day activities, which makes the shore as much a working space as the sea.

According to the recently conducted Marine Fisheries Census, 2005, there are 3,202 marine fishing villages and 756,212 households—a total of 3.52 mn people—along mainland India's coastline of 6,002 km. (The total length of the country's coastline, including the islands of Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep, is 8,118 km.). Nearly half of this population (over 1.6 mn people) are engaged in active fishing and fishery-related activities. The maximum number of marine fishing villages is in the State of Orissa (641), followed by Tamil Nadu (581), Andhra Pradesh (498), Maharashtra (406), West Bengal (346), Gujarat (263), Kerala (222), Karnataka (156), Goa (39), Puducherry (28) and Daman and Diu (7).

The inland and marine fisheries sector of India contributes enormously to employment, livelihoods, food security, and the rural and national economy, with comparatively little

support from the government. This contribution, unfortunately, remains highly undervalued. Given the present context of the global food crisis, the role of the fisheries sector in providing fish as food—essential and relatively inexpensive animal protein for millions of people in India, particularly the poor—must be recognized and supported. To cut off the hand that feeds, to make way for illusionary economic growth, would be nothing but foolhardy!

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Yet, today fishing communities in India are under serious threat of being displaced from the coastal spaces they have occupied, to make way for tourism, ports, urban growth, industry, intensive aquaculture, airports, special economic zones (SEZs), and top-down conservation projects. These developments disrupt their access to the sea and water bodies, destroying their sources of livelihood. Traditional fishing communities are finding it difficult to survive, in a context where their rights to coastal lands and fishing grounds are not clearly recognized by the State.

Critical phase

The lives and livelihoods of millions of these marine fisher people have been passing through a critical phase

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in recent years. The steady increase in the price of fishing inputs, depletion of fish resources, growing tensions due to stiff competition over better fishing grounds, and declining incomes from fishing have combined to make fishing a failing occupation. The new era of globalization is further complicating the situation. With the entry of mightier forces into their traditional abodes, the fishing community has been engaged in continuous struggles to protect their traditional sources of livelihood.

In this context, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) constituted the M.S. Swaminathan Committee to 'review' the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification of 1991, which was intended to protect India's coastal zone from destructive activities. In spite of several inadequacies in the CRZ Notification, the traditional fishing communities regard it as one of the very few 'good things' that has happened to them. The Swaminathan Committee submitted its report to the MoEF in 2005. The report reflected the naked bias of the committee towards accommodating the desire of global capital to exploit the country's coastal land and natural resources in the name of 'development'. The committee blatantly recommended measures to dilute the prohibitory character of

the CRZ Notification by introducing a Coastal Management Zone (CMZ) Notification. The fishing community of India, the largest stakeholder in the coastal zone, has, along with other coastal communities, voiced very strong protests against the report. Numerous environmental organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) have also expressed their reservations about the report. However, the MoEF has not heeded these protests and seems to have accepted it in toto.

In 2005 and 2006, the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) organized several mass protests against the Swaminathan Committee recommendations. Hundreds of mass petitions, fax messages and letters of protest were sent to the MoEF. In spite of such a large scale of protest, the MoEF came up with a draft CMZ Notification in May 2007, expressly based on the recommendations of the Swaminathan Committee, to replace the CRZ Notification of 1991. The draft Notification, which was leaked out, appeared to be the death warrant for India's fishing community and an open general licence for privatization and vandalism of the coastal zone in the name of investment and development. A fresh wave of protests began. All the concerned organizations came together under one umbrella, called the National Coastal Protection Campaign (NCPC), to challenge, in one voice, the MoEF's move. NFF spearheaded two massive national action programmes in 2007—on 9 August (Quit India Day) and 21 November (World Fisheries Day). The MoEF has refrained from notifying the CMZ draft for the time being.

National campaign

Although the Indian fishing community, together with their NGO and CSO allies, has unequivocally opposed the draft CMZ Notification, certain sections of the media, social elites, intellectuals and politicians—even in the coastal States—have remained lukewarm or indifferent to the proposed legislation. This is a matter of concern. The NFF General Body met in Visakhapatnam in December 2007 and decided to organize a national campaign in 2008 to press

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Protesting fishermen and their supporters in Orissa, India, symbolically burning the Coastal Management Zone (CMZ) Notification

for the realization of the outstanding demands of the fishing community. By early March 2008, indications were trickling down that the MoEF, under pressure from the big business lobby and also allegedly from an international agency, was gearing up to issue the CMZ Notification officially. The NFF Executive Committee met in Kolkata on 28 March 2008 and decided to launch the 'Machhimar Adhikar Rashtriya Abhiyan' (National Campaign for Fisher Peoples' Rights) from Jakhau, Kachchh, Gujarat, on 1 May (International Workers' Day), with the motto "Save the coast—save the fishers". The campaign was conducted along the coastline of all the maritime States of mainland India and culminated in Kolkata on 27 June 2008.

The campaign provided an opportunity to gain valuable experience and insight about the realities prevailing on the ground in the coastal fishing communities of India. The traditional fishing communities have been living a life of agony and fear. In the overwhelming majority of fishing villages, there are no roads, schools, primary healthcare facilities or drinking water.

Women have to fetch water from long distances, sometimes walking up to five km on foot. In the absence of transportation, they have to walk five to 10 km to sell their fish in the market. In many places, they live in shanties. They do not have legal rights or title deeds to the land on which they live.

Many tourism projects, commercial harbours, chemical plants, SEZs and various other industrial estates are coming up in the coastal zone. These projects not only occupy coastal lands but also pollute the coastal waters and jeopardize the marine ecology and fish resources on which the fishers depend to make a living.

Many fishing villages have had their residents evicted and many others are waiting for their turn to make way for these projects. There is an unbelievable race among the coastal State governments to attract more and more investment in the coastal zone. The CRZ Notification of 1991 is an impediment to these investment intentions, and hence the urgency

of sending it to oblivion. The CMZ Notification of the MoEF is a move in that direction.

The most important dimension about these two Notifications is the intention that lies behind them. Neither the CRZ nor the CMZ Notification is a complete piece of legislation. As Notifications, they comprise subordinate law made under the Environment Protection Act (EPA), 1986. Though there are inadequacies in the CRZ Notification, there has never been any doubt about its intent—to protect the coastal zone from destructive activities by prohibition of a varied number of activities. The CRZ Notification recognized the traditional and customary rights of the fishing community. It hampered the interests of the moneyed and powerful

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elites, especially those in the tourism, industrial and real-estate sectors. These are the forces that have engineered the annulment of the CRZ Notification by changing the regime from one of regulation to one of management. The very intent of the CMZ Notification is distinctly different and clearly against the purpose of the principal EPA. It deserves nothing less than complete rejection. Hence the NFF demands the withdrawal of the CMZ Notification and implementation of the CRZ Notification of 1991 in its original form until complete legislation is enacted for the coastal zone, by which the fishing community will be recognized as the rightful custodians of the coastal zone.

State of uncertainty

The impending threat of displacement is looming large over the populations in the coastal zone. A state of uncertainty and anguish prevails almost everywhere. The fisher people have found the NFF campaign to be an opportunity to voice their grievances at the national level and press for



Children from the fishing community flocking around the National Fishworkers' Forum campaign vehicle in the State of Orissa, India

their rights. Fisher people rallied around the campaign unitedly, cutting across sectoral, regional, political, religious and gender barriers. During the two-month long campaign, the fisher people demonstrated a total rejection of the CMZ Notification, and expressed unequivocal support for the NFF demands through public meetings, rallies, seminars, village meetings, group discussions, street plays, and so on. There was hardly any opposition to the campaign from anywhere.

Now the biggest challenge before the NFF is to live up to the expectations of the fisher people and strive to achieve their demands through sustained struggles. Another important challenge is to sustain, with a long-term perspective, the fighting spirit and enthusiasm created by the campaign among the fishing community.

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The younger generation in the fishing community is as concerned about these issues as the rest of the community. There is a growing consciousness about the community's

rights over the resources on which they depend for their livelihoods. Having witnessed the plight of traditional peoples caused by the intrusion of big businesses in the coastal zone, they want a strict regulation regime in the coastal zone. In many places along the coast, youth and students from outside the fishing community too participated in the national campaign and collaborated with NFF.

The campaign has succeeded in making the draft CMZ Notification an issue in the coastal States. It sent out a loud and clear message that the fishing community of India does not want the CMZ Notification. At least four State governments, namely, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Maharashtra, have now raised the matter with the Central government, asking for further discussions on the draft Notification. Politicians in coastal States are taking more interest in the CMZ issue. The campaign has also been fairly successful in building up awareness among civil society actors about the issues involved. The campaigners have built fairly satisfactory linkages with all potential allies and have managed to get the environmental groups to also back their stand on the withdrawal of the CMZ Notification.

The social history of coastal India is replete with incidents of traditional fishers' struggles against coastal encroachment, pollution and destructive fishing gear and methods. We know harvesting nature's bounty can only be sustained if the resource base is conserved. Hence, the traditional fishers' struggles for the right to fish have always been intertwined with attempts to conserve resources. That is why Indian fishers, under the aegis of NFF, conducted the historic 'Kanyakumari March' in 1989, with the famous slogan "Protect waters—protect life".

Kanyakumari March

In a way, the Machhimar Adhikar Rashtriya Abhiyan 2008 was an extension of the Kanyakumari March of 1989. Whatever was achieved by the Kanyakumari March is facing catastrophic reversal today. Our coasts, our waters and our livelihoods are

seriously threatened. That is why NFF reinvented the spirit of the Kanyakumari March and extended it to the present-day context. We started the Abhiyan with the slogan “Save the coast—save the fishers” on the same date (1 May) on which the Kanyakumari March ended exactly 19 years ago.

This time, however, only one core group campaigned along the whole mainland coastline, from Jakhau to Kolkata via Kanyakumari, for 58 days, without any rest or break. For the 1989 Kanyakumari March, two core groups campaigned simultaneously along the east and west coasts of India for 28 days, and converged at Kanyakumari. Together, they covered about three-fourths of the coastline. This time around, the core campaign team traversed more than 12,000 km and addressed 194 meetings at important fishing centres and fishing villages. It held 22 press meets and four State-level seminars, apart from many roadside receptions and briefings. Showing great resilience, the affiliate unions organized and conducted the campaign meets in their area; in 1989 most of the State-level unions were still in the formative stage.

As a trade union, NFF represents the aspirations of the fishing community of India and works to secure their traditional livelihoods. NFF has led many struggles in the past, with laudable success. Unfortunately, in recent times, many of our hard-earned achievements are being systematically sent to oblivion.

As a consequence of globalization, the proponents of ‘growth and development’ have started privatizing our rivers, coasts and seas, squeezing out the fishers from their traditional sources of livelihood. A sense of frustration has started creeping into the community and its organizations.

It was at such a crucial juncture, when the pressures of privatization, commercialization and globalization are undermining the livelihoods of traditional communities and destroying their natural resources, that the NFF campaign “Save the coast—save the fishers” focused on traditional livelihoods and rights of fishing communities, and brought

their grievances to the forefront. The campaign has rejuvenated the organization and galvanized the fishers along the entire coastline of India, from Kachchh to Kolkata. It has reinforced the trust of the community in NFF. **3**

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For more

www.coastalcampaign.page.tl

Macchimar Adhikar Rashtriya Abhiyan (National Campaign for Fisher Peoples’ Rights)

keralafishworkers.org

Kerala Independent Fish Workers’ Federation

www.trinet.in

TRInet (The Resource and Information Network: for the coast)