



Long Live the Fisher people's struggle

One is bound to run short of superlatives to describe the victory the fisher people across the country have achieved. Their victory, which came as a result of their week long agitation, should be noted not only as a victory of the fisher people, but also as a victory for all the struggling masses in the country. This is all the more significant in this era of Globalisation, when poor people especially marginalised communities across the globe are being denied of their basic right to life and livelihood.

The Agitation

The Fisher People in India were on a national agitation from the 8th of January. Ten leaders of the National Fishworkers Forum were on an indefinite hunger strike in different parts of the country. The coastal belts almost came to a standstill. The indefinite hunger Satyagraha was supplemented with marches, boat rallies, cultural programmes, dharnas, gheraos, etc. The struggle in cities (Mumbai, Panjim, Thiruvananthapuram, etc) and in townships (Nagercoil, Ongole, Contai, Kollam, Prakasham, Ramnad, Chatrapur, etc) as well as coastal villages (Umbergaon, Rameswaram, Paradip, etc) was quite extensive with people of all walks of life participating.

Background & Demands

Two of the major policy level demands of the fisherpeople included withdrawal of the Aquaculture Authority Bill and the implementation of the Murari Committee Report. Justice Kuldeep Singh's Supreme Court Judgement of 1996 ordered the demolition of all the intensive aquaculture farms in India in a case filed against the Union of India. The order came as a relief to the traditional fishing community across the country as it permitted only the traditional and improved traditional farms. But the Indian ruling class, led by the nexus between the prawn 'mafia', politicians and bureaucrats wanted to bypass this verdict. This led to the Aquaculture Authority Bill to legalise aquaculture in the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ). It also intends to legitimise the existing intensive aquaculture farms and wants to create new farms as a "via media between intensive and improved traditional". This is now being introduced in the Parliament. It assumes significance in the context of the Supreme Court / Government decision to relocate the polluting industries in the National Capital Region. Aquaculture remains one of the most polluting industries in the country, which not only pollutes inshore water, but also ground water.

It is very ironic that the very politicians and bureaucrats who brought in the trawlers now argue that there is depletion and shortage of prawns. They explain that this is the reason why aquaculture must be introduced. But the traditional fisherpersons' view that natural, marine growth of prawns is not polluting is more authentic. This leads to the conclusion that implementing a monsoon trawl ban is more important than reintroducing aquaculture as a method to counter the decline of the prawn.

People who have been following this issue will remember the years of struggle that got millions of poor fisher people the support of all the political parties and the Central Trade Unions to cancel the licenses issued to foreign fishing vessels. Shri. L.K. Advani, the then opposition leader staged a walkout together with all the BJP members of Parliament in 1995 for the same. At that time, the cabinet accepted the 41 member Murari Committee's 21 recommendations, but the present NDA government has failed to implement most of them.

The import of fish is bound to destroy the domestic fish industry in the country, just as it has done in the case of rubber, tea, edible oil, pulses, apples, etc. In fact the permission given for the import of Sardines, Mackrels, Bombay Duck, Herring, and others makes it very clear that the decision makers are determined to destroy the fishing industry in this country. Above all, the government is also encouraging the import of frozen and processed fish. These will wipeout the domestic fish industry and displace 10 million fisher people. Hence, the fisherfolk have demanded a halt to the import of fish for sale in the domestic market, a demand that is more than just.

Further, the Gujarat Government has been going ahead with a plan to construct a 12,000 crore commercial harbour in Umbergaon which will displace one lakh fisherpeople. The fisher people had been opposing the project under the leadership of Col. Pratap Save. The Gujarat Police under DYSP Dr. Narendra Amin arrested 48 fisher people including Col. Pratap Save and while in custody he was tortured to death. The case against the police officers responsible for his murder remains in the dark, as even the FIR is yet to be filed. Now the fight of the people of Umbergaon as well as fishworkers across the country is aimed at stopping the construction of this mega port as well as to punish the murderers of Col. Pratap Save.

The Savings cum Relief Scheme is a measure to protect the fisher people, who are living below poverty line. But the GOI has been discriminating against women and inland fishworkers under the guise that the initial notification was issued for marine fishermen only. Even after the promise by the Prime Minister, the bureaucrats have been determined not to include women and inland fisher people in the scheme. Other demands of the struggling people included release of innocent fishermen from jails in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives. They have also insisted that an adequate supply of diesel and kerosene be available to all fishworkers at subsidised rate with a proportionate increment.

After the enactment of 'Law of the Sea' in 1984, 200 miles (EEZ) of sea belong to the respective nation on its shore. If there are two countries sharing a sea and has less than the proposed sea limit, it is divided into half. This has led to a lot of violation of territories by innocent fishermen due to the lack of any demarcation in water. In our subcontinent, there are many of these fishermen in the jails of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives. They do not possess valid passports and visas and hence many at times are even sentenced to jail terms as suspects of spying. For long there has been a demand for a diplomatic solution to this issue.

Achievements

The weeklong struggle of the fishworkers was called off as a result of the meeting their representatives had with Union Cabinet ministers and bureaucrats of the associated ministries. The National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) leaders were able to get an assurance from the government that the latter would not do anything to bypass the Supreme Court order on Aquaculture. The Agriculture Ministry will continue with the subsidy for diesel and kerosene at the proportionate increment rate (this was also one of the recommendations of the Murari Committee). GOI would appoint a committee to review the implementation of the Murari Committee recommendations. Representative of traditional fisher people will be included on this Committee. A notification for the inclusion of inland fish workers and women in Saving-Cum-Relief scheme would be issued soon by the agriculture ministry. The NFF has also extracted an agreement from the agriculture ministry

that a uniform ban be imposed on fishing in monsoon season. The Agriculture Minister has directed all the concerned coastal states to bring in such a ban before the ensuing monsoon season.

Government representatives clarified that the Center is not taking up the construction of a port at Umbergaon and that the Gujarat Government has no permission to go ahead with any such plan. On the demand to punish the murderers of Col. Pratap Save, the Center has issued a notice to the Gujarat Government asking them to inform what action has been taken on the issue. One of the most important achievements of the agreement was the government assurance that import of fish will only be on a very limited scale, and solely for processing and further exports meaning imported fish will not be sold in the domestic market. The Ministers have also assured that all cases of arrested fishermen will be processed on an expeditious basis. They have directed that all requests for release be processed immediately.

Road Ahead

This victory has been due more to the pressure the agitation put on the central as well as state governments than to a by-product of round table discussions or other measures. It is this realisation that has to keep up the spirit of the masses. It has also a message to people's movements across the country in different sectors that there is no short cut to victory which requires sustained struggle of the masses. Only the outspoken demands by the fisherfolk and their willingness to challenge all power structures has broken the silence of the authorities in favour of the fisherpeople. The times ahead require that people's movements across the country realize the inherent strength, which comes from the just nature of their struggles. *Three cheers to the fisherpeoples' victory.*

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