

In the News/ India

India: Creating waves

A fisherwoman in India carries the message of conservation and management

An article by Sabyasachi Bandopadhyay in The Indian Express, New Delhi, dated 18-5-2002

Dadanpatrabar, West Bengal, May 17: An illiterate fisherwoman from Dadanpatrabar in East Midnapore is creating waves along the coastal belt of Bengal with her slogan "Save the sea, save marine life".

Ratna Majhi's voice has now travelled beyond the state's boundaries. She will address a seminar in Bangalore in June. The Thiruvananthapuram-based National Fishworkers' Forum, a countrywide organization of fishworkers, is the organizer. Ratna, a Greenpeace International award winner, champions the cause of marine life after learning from experience.

As secretary of Midnapore District Women Fishworkers' Welfare Association, Ratna travels along Bengal's coastline voicing her concern for fishermen's livelihood.

Though she has managed to wrest some sops for fishermen, government indifference often comes in the way. "They have thousands of demands," Fisheries Extension Officer, Piyush Kanti Jana said. "We have conceded some but it's impossible to grant all. It is the Centre that can help."

Government apathy only helps reinforce Ratna's resolve to fight destruction of marine life. She first raised her voice in protest when the catch along the Digha-Contai coastline dipped.

According to Sreekanta Das, member of a 10,000-strong fishermen's association at Dadanpatrabar: "During off-seasons we catch, on an average, 15-20 kg fish. But 10 years ago, it was just the double. If this downtrend continues, we will soon starve."

Ratna cited several reasons for fish scarcity. "Foreign trawlers are encroaching in our economic zone. With their better technology, they make a clean sweep. But they are selective in their catch. What they don't want is chucked out in the sea. This destroys marine life," she said.

Another reason for the declining catch is farms set up along coasts for prawn culture. "The Centre's Aquaculture Authority Law helped people set up prawn culture farms which have harmed marine life," Ratna said.

Aquaculture expert Bishnupada Sen, who was in-charge of several government projects, shares Ratna's fears. He said the farms' untreated toxic effluents are dangerous. Ratna has been protesting but it hasn't really helped her people get a better deal. After several protest marches from last August, all she got were some bicycles, gloves and shoes for fellow fisherfolk and some all-weather roads in her locality.

Members of her organization, however, have faith in Ratna and more people are closing ranks with her. "Earlier, we had no hope for the future," Ashalata Rout, a fisherwoman, said. "But she (Ratna) has brought us hope."