

# WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND FISHERIES DEVELOPMENT

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Preparations go on all around the globe for the long awaited Earth Summit. Knowing that official positions may not strike any creative dimensions, the NGOs have done their best to lobby and influence policy makers. Some of these efforts are sure to pay dividends, but we from India, and I am sure, many other Asians, are more sceptical than ever. Our country, like many others, is now undergoing a process of radical structural adjustment to comply with demands of the International Monetary Fund in order to receive loans to service debts. It strikes me that this is not only a massive sell-out of our country but a sure choice against the millions in favour of a new privileged rich.

Gone are the dreams of independent India—"Swaraj" as Mahatma Gandhi called it. While people everywhere crave for independence and autonomy, here are we in India willing to surrender all under the garb of growing Hindutva<sup>(1)</sup>. These processes may be difficult to understand for those who do not know much of Indian history, but these new trends are bound to take their toll on the development of fisheries too.

Thinking about women's rights and fisheries development in this context becomes all the more difficult. First of all fisheries development has for the most part paid no heed to the people whose livelihood depends on the fish resource. Even the data on fisheries relate more to the economics of production rather than to the socioeconomic conditions of the fisherfolk. Nevertheless, there are anthropological studies that document the way of life and the struggles of these communities which highlight the survival strategies these people have worked out for themselves against all odds. While this has been the case globally, in Asia and the third world at large, the situation of these communities is far more in jeopardy presently.

As it stands today, the development in technology and the demand for fish have led to the depletion of the fish resource. At the marketing level, further organizing of the market system is the only way to get a better price to the producer; therefore, many organizational and government efforts plan to develop an infrastructure for the same. Little do they realize that in the small sector it is the women who have been predominant; in this

domain; they are redundant only when there are larger bulk landings and when purchase is more on a cash than on a credit basis. So, organized marketing is one more way in which women get marginalized.

The other side of the coin is to see how the people within the sector themselves respond to the changing situation. Most of the reactions within the sector, be they in relation to organization of work, adoption of tools of production, mobilization, etc., have been survival strategies and it is logically so. Unlike in the organized sector, where the capitalist organizes production for greater profit, in this sector there is not much of the cake left to struggle for. Of course, in the long run, the struggle for a greater part of the profit even in the organized sector becomes a fallacy because of the limits to growth, depletion of raw materials, etc. Finance capital begins to play a greater role among the factors of production, leaving labour on the defensive. But, in the unorganized sector, where the dependence is directly on the natural resource for a livelihood, the demand on the State is for greater protectionism. This demand has to be accompanied by an attitude of conservation as well. This, in its very essence, demands a reorganization of society and a rethinking of social values.

The struggle for survival itself heralds the call for the limits to growth. Development in this sector does not mean having more, producing more, etc. but controlling the pollution of the waters, maintenance of ecological balance, respect for the rejuvenation of stocks and re-establishing communitarian controls. These may sound romantic measures even to progressive thinkers today. No question is actually raised about the kinds of technology used and the processes of production itself.

The rate and pace at which technology develops today is also a factor of concern. In fishing, we speak about over-efficient technologies like trawling and purse-seining - nets which have the capacity to take all that comes in their reach without being selective. Or machines that produce nets so fast that people do not have the time to test them out before they flood the market and cause disaster in the fishery. The pace at

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(1) A movement, now also political, to establish Hindu nationalism.

which change takes place, therefore, is faster than the change in life processes itself, and before people have even learnt to master one innovation, they are flooded with others. This disregard for time, or the race against time, also throws out of gear the processes of maturing -both physical and psychological. So, while new technological innovations disrupt all natural processes, with their speed, they also create numerous imbalances and contradictions between traditional and modern systems of knowledge which in their turn destabilize people and lead to insecurity. The culture that new technology imposes on people is often only superimposed on old knowledge systems that are resilient and slow to evolve. Consciousness processes in people evolve on a very different concept of time and all change has to take this into consideration. On the other hand, despite the fact that survival strategies today have forced fishermen to adopt the technologies that are over-efficient and destructive, there may be a possibility to help them question this in their own favour.

The new ecological consciousness that I speak about, and which relates to production of life-time and not technological time, will find more fertile soil in aspects of traditional consciousness. To the extent that mobilization processes are geared to people's control over resources and sustained development alternatives, then such consciousness processes are crucial in determining the ethical frame of reference and value base for new forms of organization. While I do not advocate a turning back of the clock of history, I am categorically stating that the pace of development should and has to be determined by the broad mass of people and not technology, taking into account the natural life cycles as against 'mastering' nature. While planning will certainly play an important role in determining priority sectors and allocation of resources, active participation of local people's organizations will have to determine production strategies. In fact, this is what people's movements are demanding today. They have reached a level of maturity, being able to determine how development in their sectors should take place. The State will have to find a new role of coordination to facilitate mutuality and transference of surplus. It is certainly not an easy task, but gone are the days when the State can hope to meet either the employment or basic needs of the growing population with its centralized thrust.

It is necessary here to indicate areas in which a conceptual rethinking will have to take place if the process of transformation has to integrate an alternative development process. The crux of the matter will be the stress on the need-based rather than the want-based economy, meeting the subsistence needs of the people. This is not a romantic proposition of going back to the past because producing for need is indeed a challenge to modern science. It is a challenge to the knowledge system of modern western science as also to technology. An acceptance of a new conceptual understanding also raises many ethical questions which cannot

be ignored. They cannot be divorced from the ongoing social processes. Only genuinely participatory processes will be able to answer these ethical questions which cannot be ignored. They cannot be divorced from the ongoing social processes. Only genuinely participatory processes will be able to answer these ethical questions in the right manner. In fact, if we go back to fisheries themselves, the very concept of production is a question. If fishing is an act of capture, then this is not production but hunting. If culture fishery as envisioned today is capital intensive and leads to greater privatization, then alienation from need is a natural consequence. This kind of production will not be an alternative. These conceptualizations of production keep women totally out of it. All their unpaid household labour is relegated to the realm of reproduction and if ever they can be, 'gainfully' employed then they are the labour banks that can easily be exploited.

The re-conceptualization of production, therefore, has to incorporate the element of nurture, which has at its focus the sustenance of life, rather than profit. If we look at production from this point of view, where nurture and sustenance of life are the prime objectives, then one also sees why and how the whole patriarchal domination in society has to be upturned. In fact, it is no make-belief that 'mal-development, as explained by Vandana Siva and other feminists, has been a result also of gender discrimination and male appropriation of the rightful role of women and subsistence in society. The task of nurturing the human being and meeting the subsistence of the family has been thrust on women for no rewards. Patriarchy has been the domination of nature, and therefore life, as the acme of its development, but this is' what the growing numbers of the dispossessed, which include women, and therefore more than half of humankind, begin to question today.

Only by looking at fisheries development in the above context does speaking of women's rights makes sense. In fact fisheries development may be salvaged only if women's rights are taken seriously. When I speak here of women's rights I mean:

- a nurture approach to fisheries at large
- women's participation in the decision making process in the realm of primary production and in the development of the sector
- production of life and for life get basic priority and find first place in the hierarchy of values.

While this may be the large framework in which we speak about women's rights in the development of fisheries, there is no single charter of demands that is going to make achieving this possible. It will have to be a multi-pronged approach.

Firstly, the need for a wide consciousness within the fishworker movement itself. All fishermen's unions and associations should begin to have their women as members even if they are not engaged directly in fishing or post-harvest activities. This is where the division in so called "primary production" is perpetuated. Only if women and all the demands of the household become the concern of the unions, would production begin to be looked at differently. This would eventually encourage the nurture aspects of life too.

Secondly, those spaces which have all along been occupied by women in the production process should continue to be retained for them. These spaces vary from country to country—in some areas they are involved in capture but in most areas in post-harvest work. With the coming of modernisation they tend to be dislodged, and once ousted they will not be able to enter again. The planners have also to keep this in mind.

Thirdly, in areas where women have already become wage workers, their rights as workers have to be secured. Because of poor and desperate conditions women are used as contract labour and badly exploited. Efforts must be made to see that they are covered by

the Contract Labour Act and their life and work protected. They need legal protection.

Fourthly, there are all the problems of the women whose husbands work on the distant water fleets. These women are left alone to care for the family for long periods of time, not knowing where their husbands are and with no assurance of any remittances. The male workers themselves are badly exploited in this sector and while they have to be legally protected, other community efforts have to be organized to support the women who are left behind.

Returning to our point of departure, the tone of pessimism lies in the fact that the restructuring and globalization of our economy under pressure of international financial institutions will render all people's participatory processes and survival struggles futile. If the Earth Summit intends in some measure to set a new track record, then there may still be meaningful to speak of women's rights and fisheries development. The Women's Action Agenda 21, which was framed at the World Women's Congress for a healthy Planet in November 1991, includes many of these areas and should therefore receive support worldwide. □

