

Fish Vendors Struggle for their Rights!

The coastal fish vendors of East Medinipur, West Bengal, India come together to assert their rights as fishworkers

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On 16th November 2010 the small town of Contai, located about 150 km west of Kolkata, capital of the Indian state of West Bengal, witnessed an unusual event. Hundreds of fish vendors, under the banner of (East) Medinipur District Coastal Fish Vendors' Union, gathered in protest outside the office of the marine fisheries department. The fish vendors, having experienced years of neglect and being at the very bottom of the social hierarchy with neither rights nor benefits, have now begun to come together in struggle.

In the Contai subdivision of East Medinipur district, fishing and fish processing provide a means of survival to thousands of people who are among India's poorest. Living conditions are hard—almost every year the district is lashed by cyclonic waves and winds that flatten the houses of fishers, farmers and other local residents.

Though only men engage in active fishing, both men and women are involved in the selling of fish. There are about 5,000 fish vendors in the district, with more men vending fish than women. The district has about 42 landing centres used by small-scale and traditional fishers and three

harbours from where fish vendors buy fish, typically using as working capital money borrowed from local moneylenders at interest rates that range between 160 per cent and 200 per cent per year. With daily earnings averaging around Rs100 (USD 2.2) per working day, fish vendors face backbreaking levels of indebtedness.

While fishermen, that is, men who engage in active fishing, receive occupational recognition in the form of a government-issued identity card, and hence are entitled to the welfare benefits floated by the fisheries department, fish vendors enjoy no official recognition at all. The fishing communities of East Medinipur largely occupy "Below Poverty Line" or BPL status, a poverty marker which currently marks nearly one-third of India's population. However, welfare schemes of the fisheries and other departments remain largely out of the reach of fish vendor, either due to lack of information or due to lack of access.

Caught between a callous state on the one hand and the loan shark on the other, the life of fish vendors is a daily struggle. Infrastructure and facilities for fish marketing are woefully inadequate. They have to vend fish in the open along roadsides and in a few designated markets. These markets, like the Seven-Mile Market in Contai, offer spaces as little as 200 sq feet for up to 150 fish vendors, with no supporting infrastructure such as storage facilities, ice, water supply and toilets. Men and women vendors have to travel long distances without public transportation, often on poorly maintained roads to reach these congested and dilapidated markets. Due to their vulnerable position local clubs, goons and musclemen frequently fleece them through forcibly-taken exorbitant contributions.

For women fish vendors, the situation is even grimmer. In addition to household responsibilities, they also have to bear the brunt of fish vending in circumstances that are often much more difficult than what men face. They are also exposed to sexual harassment by the local mafia that controls the fish markets.

A long list of violations and denials makes up the story of the lives of East Medinipur's fish

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Hundreds of fish vendors gathered in protest outside the office of the marine fisheries department in Contai, East Medinipur, West Bengal

Basic Demands of the (East) Medinipur District Coastal Fish Vendors' Union, affiliated to the NFF

- Issue Government Fishworker Identity Cards to fish vendors as recognition of occupational dignity
- Provide working capital at soft interest rates to save fish vendors from moneylenders and usurers
- Arrange for markets with proper facilities for selling fish
- Provide transport facilities like cycles and motorcycles to fish vendors with subsidy and under easy repayment terms
- Provide modern weighing machines and cold boxes for preserving fish to fish vendors with subsidy and under easy repayment terms
- Provide fish vendors with modern *carrates* (carrier boxes) at subsidized rates
- Bring all coastal fish vendors under the 'Relief cum Savings' scheme (that operates during the lean fishing season)
- Permit formation of Marine Co-operative Societies by fish vendors for their socio-economic upliftment.
- Immediately introduce old-age pension and insurance schemes for fish vendors
- Bring fish vendors under housing schemes for economically-backward sections (EWS)
- Stop coercive and unauthorized collections from fish vendors by local clubs, goons and musclemen

vendors. The good news is that they are no longer willing to suffer silently. The vendors are slowly realizing the worth of their contribution to the economy and demanding a measure of fairness and justice in return.

Their union, the (East) Medinipur District Coastal Fish Vendors' Union, affiliated to the National Fishworkers' Forum, has begun by presenting a set of their basic demands to the Fisheries Department, Contai. The struggle is poised to move forward, with the fish vendors realizing the power of collective struggle for achieving their demands. ❏