

Receding waters, vanishing trades

With the decline of waters in the rivers surrounding the city of Patna in north India, women in fishing communities of the region are facing mounting hardships

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Patna, the capital city of the state of Bihar in North India, is located on the southern bank of the Ganga river. The city is surrounded by the Ganga and its tributaries: the Sone and the Punpun. Inland fishing used to be an important traditional livelihood source in the city. However, as the waters in the rivers recede continuously, fish capture has declined by 70 per cent in just a decade. This has had a dire impact on the fishing communities of Patna and its surrounding areas. Today, traditional modes of fishing in the region have given way to contract systems, whereby annual fishing rights are auctioned to private contractors. The contractor hires fishermen for harvesting. This provides insecure work for a short period for the fishing community. The result has been that

the young among the fishing community seek other forms of employment, often migrating out of their traditional localities.

The daily demand for fish in Patna is 28,000 metric tonnes. With the decline in inland fishing on the Ganga, fish is brought into the city either from other regions within the state or from other states. Patna has its traditional wholesale market areas. From there, the fish goes into retail markets. Generally, the wholesale markets system has been run by men, while women have traditionally participated in retail fish vending—an activity they have relied on for a stable livelihood. However, over the past two decades, the proportion of women fish vendors has declined substantially. The basic reason for this state of affairs is the decline in fish catch, which, in turn, has increased the pressure on those dependent on retail fishing trade.

The government of Bihar and the municipal authorities of Patna have earmarked a certain area for the selling of fish and also tried to regulate fish trade in the city. However, the measures are inadequate and have failed to address the issues of marketplace safety and hygiene. The lack of a properly demarcated area and of security, safety and proper sanitation, make it difficult for women to access these fish markets. The women are also afraid of harassment by administrative authorities and local people. Some women fish vendors have taken recourse to selling fish from door to door. Others have started roadside or neighbourhood fish sales.

This type of vending, outside delineated market areas, is illegal. It brings women face to face with demands for extortion and bribes. Women often have to depend on their menfolk to deal with these illegal systems, thus perpetuating their dependence on the men.

The role of the government in safeguarding both fishing and the access of women to traditional fishing vending operations, is important in the context of creating livelihood opportunities and empowering women in traditional fishing communities. Government intervention can help provide women safe and stable access to fish markets; it can promote hygienic conditions in these markets; and finally, it can make alternative livelihood options available through promoting culture fishing to compensate for the drop in capture fishing from the Ganga. ❏

BIBHA KUMARI



The Boring Road Crossing fish market in Patna, India. The number of women fish vendors has declined substantially