

# Chapter Three

## Indigenous Fishing Communities in the Chitwan Area

### Reflections of Bote, Majhi and Musahar

#### An idyllic past

Bote and Majhi are indigenous fishing communities, which are historically and culturally dependent on forest and river resources. They are highly marginalised Janajatis (indigenous groups) of Nepal. Musahars, defined as untouchable in the Hindu caste hierarchy, are also fishing communities. Bote-Majhi and Musahar are landless communities and are socially, economically, culturally, and politically marginalised.

The elders of the Bote-Majhi and Musahar communities describe their past as free and uninhibited by state-imposed restrictions on movement and life. One Majhi interviewed recalled:

*“It was like a heaven. We used to be free. We could hunt, make boats, and fish freely.”*

Others described being able to fish and wander around without fear in the thick forests, and to ferry across the rivers. Collecting forest products, fishing, and ferrying was the core of their livelihood strategy. Both groups lived in and around the forest. They grazed cattle inside the forest (a practice called adar) and collected logs swept down by the



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Bote Majhi youth fishing in the Narayani River, Chitwan; in the background, a buffer zone community forest

river. The elder interviewees insisted that their forest use was sustainable. Their needs were limited and firewood and timber were used exclusively for their own consumption.

People used to spend the eight dry months in and around the forest, which provided a secure habitat. When the monsoon set in, they shifted to a clearing close to the river. When the rains receded, they would return to the ghat (ferrying point) and the adjoining forest.

However, the past was not entirely idyllic. The fishing communities were dominated by the landed elite, the maliks. These feared landlords claimed their rights over temporarily vacated lands.<sup>4</sup> Janaki Majhi, who now resides on the riverbank, recalls that her immediate family occupied 3.125 acres of land in the past. They gradually lost all of their land to the maliks.

Elderly Bote-Majhi recall a historic 'Danda Meeting' prior to the establishment of CNP. In Danda, a place still existing in Nawalparasi district, traditional fishing and non-fishing communities negotiated the distribution of resources. Some claimed fishing rights and rights over ferry points. Others staked a claim over the use of certain lands. The concept of individual ownership did not exist at that time. However, this very fluid system of rights over different habitats in the vicinity made the communities vulnerable. As one landless fisherman stated:

*"We are neither in the forest nor in the village".*

### **Significance of ferrying points**

Indigenous fishing communities<sup>5</sup> used to fish and ferry freely between the wide stretches of river from Deughat<sup>6</sup> in the north, to the dam near Tribeni-Bhainsalotan along the south-western boundary of CNP adjacent to the Indian border. Bhausar Ghat and Leda Ghat (which now fall under the jurisdiction of the CNP) and Sigrauli Ghat and Madwya Ghat (now called Narayanghat) were important ferry points in the past. The mukhiya or chautariya (local leaders of traditional fishing communities) decided on the use and management of such ferry points. These ghats or ferry points were never treated as private property. They were common property and could be used by everyone. There used to be one chautariya for every two or three villages. The chautariya was given authority papers over the ghats. These documents are still with the community.

Ferryman (or ghatwarey) would ferry non-fishing villagers in exchange for essential daily food. During festivals, ghatwarey used to collect rice, bread, alcohol, meat, salt, and oil from the local people; a practice called pathi uthauney. They could even pluck jharang dhan (bunches of black paddy). Similarly, chautariya would ensure the collection and distribution of food items.

The occupations of fishing and ferrying ensured the subsistence of the Bote-Majhi. However, with the forces of modernisation and increasing state control over natural resources, fishing communities were gradually displaced from their traditional

<sup>4</sup> Landlords, known as maliks, would exploit agricultural labourers by feeding them snacks instead of paying them a fair wage. This form of labour was called bhagad or banihari.

<sup>5</sup> This section is based on conversations with Amar Bahadur Majhi, leader of the fishing community in Nawalparasi, and elderly members of fishing communities in Piprahar and Shergunj.

<sup>6</sup> The convergence between the Kali Gandaki and Trisuli Rivers and the beginning of the Narayani River.



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Majhi fishing in the Narayani River



CDO

Fish catch

occupations. District development committees (DDCs) started to contract ghats to private contractors with whom the Bote-Majhi could not compete.

Apart from being edged out, the State's drive towards 'development' in terms of modernisation led to the construction of bridges and roads and a drift towards surface transport, all at the cost of the ferrying business. For example, ferries used to be the only means of crossing the Narayani, but the bridge connecting Gaindakot (Nawalparasi) with Narayanghat (Chitwan) has replaced them.

### **Rhino patrol: the olive green gainda gasti**

When the State began protecting the forest cover for the conservation of endangered rhinos, the 'Gainda Gasti' (Rhino Patrol) was created. An older Bote-Majhi interviewed recalled the officials as wearing *"olive green uniforms, well camouflaged in the forest"*.

Initially, there was eager exchange between the villagers and the Rhino Patrol staff. The officials of the Rhino Patrol were not familiar with the topography of the forest. Bote-Majhi people accompanied the officials on patrol duty. The Rhino Patrol staff also relied upon the ferrying services provided by Bote-Majhi. In return, the Bote-Majhi were given unimpeded access to the rivers for fishing. Members of the fishing communities, in particular, insisted that during the early days the relations with the officers were smooth:

*"We used to ferry them across the river and offer them fish, and they allowed us to fish".*



Chitwan National Park Administration

Rhino Patrol

Female Bote-Majhi, however, have a different narrative. They reported harassment by the Gainda Gasti at times, especially when they went into the forest to collect firewood, fodder, thatch grass, and wild vegetables. The officials confiscated the women's axes, khurpa (carving knife), namlo (traditional basket), and accused them of *"destroying the forest"*.

This intrusion and harrying, however, pales into insignificance compared to their experiences with the armed security forces that were mobilised later. The national park authorities were described by local people as tyrannical. In comparison to these experiences, the Rhino Patrol seemed harmless, which explains why the elder Bote-Majhi men stressed the cordiality of relations.

The Bote-Majhi also began to encounter the rulers of Nepal. The Royal couple, Rana nobles, and aristocrats paid frequent visits to the national park for recreation. They used to observe the wild animals and, reports state, engage in some hunting. Bote-Majhi people had to provide ferry services for these privileged people, especially where the river was too deep to be crossed on elephant-back. Relationships also included the exchange of knowledge about fish species. Janaki Majhi recounts that one of the Queen's favourite fish was Jal Kapur, which she describes as a *"beautiful creature with red jaws, colourful lips, pretty eyes, and exquisite stature"*. The King preferred another variety called Sahar. Elders in the community remember the Royal couple flinging silver coins from the top of their elephant to the poor people below.

### **Sacred spaces of nature**

The Bote-Majhi delineate spaces within the forest as sacred. These are called 'than' and are guarded by the forest god Bhairu. The water goddess, Jal Devi, is also worshiped. The women of the community say that they offer pigeons, cocks, and goats to the River Narayani. The river is respected for giving life, because it provides water for drinking, washing, and bathing. It supplies fish, fuelwood, and even gold to the lucky ones. Given the high value allocated to natural spaces, there are also local preservation practices. One of these is the observation of Barna Garney, a day when the natural world is given rest. On this day, Bote-Majhi do not fish, ferry, enter the forest, or work in the fields. This takes place every year in March/April (Nepali months of Chaitra/Baisakh).

Gaidu, the god of the rhinoceros, is also worshipped. In the months of June-July (Ashad), the tiger is worshiped as Bagheysari. The deer (chital) and wild boar are also adulated. Killing dolphins is a sin and great care is taken to ensure that this does not happen. According to a senior fisherman the belief is that if a dolphin is killed, there will be misfortune in the community. The same fisherman reports that *"once a dolphin was killed by accident and immediately thereafter a child died"*.

The fishing communities in Nawalparasi believe that each type of fauna has its own 'capital' or favourite location. The Chitwan area is the capital of rhinos. Inside the forest, now the National Park, there is a rock called Dhok, which is regarded as the home of the god of rhinos. Rhinos from afar congregate around the rock. Likewise, the capital of crocodiles is Budhikandar, located at the Bhim Dam. The capital of tigers is located in Kanhakhola, Bhainsalotan, south of the Narayani River.

## The Ecological Crisis: Challenging Stereotypes

*"Narayani ko kakh ma hurkeko ham"* (we are brought up in the lap of River Narayani) is the sentiment of the fishing communities residing on the banks of the river. They have a close bond with, and veneration for, the 'river of life'. Kaka, an elderly traditional healer from Musahar tole, Shergunj, remembers the abundance of fish in the River Narayani. He reported that a single trip yielded a boatful of fish, *"Ek dunga bhari machha hunthyo"*. Fishing at night was common, as this was the best time to fish. Now fishing at night is prohibited and elderly fishermen like Kaka can only think fondly of days gone by.

Local fishermen contest the myth that fishing in the river affects the food chain and deprives crocodiles of food. Many local people became agitated when this issue was discussed and colourful language was used to castigate the ill-informed 'white-skinned experts'. These wildlife conservation measures saw fish as nutrition for the crocodile, ignoring its importance as a basic food for the fishing communities. Today, fishing is prohibited in areas where crocodiles are concentrated.

The Bote-Majhi and Musahar are concerned about the decline of fish in the rivers. Folklore and folk songs are rich with references to a past that is fondly remembered. It remains to be explained how a fisher-folk using hand-knitted fishing nets or bows and arrows could cause the depletion of fish in the river. However, local Bote-Majhi and Musahar claim that their practices do not harm aquatic fauna, because their methods spare young fish and during spawning, fishing is curtailed.

Obviously we need to look beyond local fishing practices for the causes of the ecological crisis in the Narayani River Basin. In 1984, the Bhrikuti Paper Mill was established with Chinese assistance as a public venture on the banks of the River Narayani. Environmentalists have raised concerns over the flow of toxic effluent into the river and Chitwan National Park. In 2000, two young local lawyers from the environmental action group Pro-Public filed a petition in the Supreme Court. Its verdict urged the Government to prohibit the pollution of water and restrict the plant to certain thresholds (Kshetri 2004).

The ecological crisis does not stem from the impact of the paper mills alone. There has been natural population growth in Chitwan. Distilleries, breweries, and other factories also threaten the quality of water. Agro-chemicals such as fertilisers and pesticides introduced during the Green Revolution are washed into the ground water and rivers. Against such toxicity, wildlife has little chance (Dhital and Jha 2002).

The decline of fish resources also affects other fauna and bird life. The number of dolphins and other aquatic species are also dwindling because of the Gandak Barrage, located near the southern western boundary of CNP adjacent to the Indian border. Until 1996, 18-20 freshwater Gangetic dolphins were seen per year, but in 2002 there were only three. The population of Brahminy ducks has declined as well. In a news report it was stated that no systematic census has been done on the estimated 400 gharials released into the Narayani River from the Kasara breeding farm since 1978 (Thapa 2003). An IUCN study shows that in 1992 only seven per cent of the released gharials survived. The effect of pollution on the gharials is cumulative (Thapa 2003). Air pollution is also likely to affect the flight of migratory birds.

There are many accounts of wild animals found dead on the riverbanks. It is believed that these animals died from consuming the poisonous waters of the river. Amar Bahadur Majhi, leader of the fishing community in Nawalparasi, encountered a dead deer. He saw no sign of physical injury, but the abdomen of the deer was green and swollen. Likewise, indigenous fishing communities have seen fish die from unnatural causes. According to them, the fish becomes pale and its skin discolors.

Apart from water pollution, other interventions have disrupted the natural riverine regime of the wetlands. The Triveni Dam was constructed at the southern end of Nawalparasi, on the Indian side of the border, near the south-western border of CNP. Fish and other aquatic species move upstream and downstream according to the seasons. The sluice gates of the dam, however, do not respect the natural movement of aquatic life. River species travel downstream towards the Indian side to escape the cold. During the months of July, August, and September (Nepali months of Shrawan, Bhadra, and Asoj) the fish travel downstream. At that time the sluice gates are open. But when the fish return in April and May, the gates are closed. This also affects the free movement of crocodiles and Gangetic dolphins.

Moreover, with rapid commercialisation, unsustainable fishing practices have sprouted. Bote-Majhi and Musahar people commented on the growing practice of fishing with 'thulo jaal' (larger nets with smaller weaves), especially near Triveni Dam. These nets cause over-fishing both in quantity and quality, because young fish, which cannot be sold, are also caught. The poisoning of fish for commercial gain and recreation has also been reported. In addition, fishing during the spawning season is not uncommon.

### **Precious horn: Majhi's loyalty**

Three years ago, Khor Bahadur Majhi of Shergunaj found a rhino horn and other remnants of a rhino inside the national park area. It was during one of the annual openings of the park for the collection of thatch grass by local communities in the buffer zone. Khor Bahadur brought the rhino to the attention of CNP authorities. He buried the horn near a bush and later informed the authorities. There is provision for a reward of NRs 50,000 in such cases, but he was offered only NRs 20,000. Claiming even the NRs 20,000 was difficult and took several submissions to the Buffer Zone User Committee.

The ecological balance of the river has also been affected by deforestation. Sediment from sand and rock mining is washed into the river, raising the level of riverbeds and causing the silting of feeder streams. With the river literally choking, fish and other species no longer have a habitat conducive to survival.

It is easy to place the blame for this complex mix of factors on the marginalised and poor fishing community, instead of looking for the real causes.

*"The Authorities of Chitwan National Park accuse us of poisoning the river. Fishing is our traditional occupation; we earn our living from fishing. The river is just like our harvest. Does anyone burn down their own harvest?"* Amar Bahadur Majhi

On the contrary, the members of the fishing community have reportedly chased away and threatened those who poison fish. In a similar vein, the indigenous inhabitants of the area are blamed for the decline in the populations of one-horned rhinos and tigers. The accusations range from ferrying poachers across the river to engaging in illegal logging.

The members of the Bote-Majhi and Musahar communities counter such false accusations with irrefutable logic:

*“If we were involved in poaching or smuggling rhino horns, we would certainly set up tall buildings in Narayanghat and live a prosperous life. Why are we still languishing on river banks and struggling for our livelihood?”*

Some of them say that they have witnessed poachers arriving in jeeps, crossing the river in highly sophisticated boats, and entering the national park forest. The fisher people are quick to alert the park authorities when they encounter such incidents, or when they chance upon animals killed and abandoned in the forest or by the river.

## Local Ecology, Indigenous Wisdom and Livelihoods

The actual wealth of the forest is known only to the indigenous people. The forest yields food, shelter, and medicine (Table 2). There are abundant varieties of vegetables, fruit, and medicinal herbs. Over 40 species of potent medicinal herbs can be found in the forest. There is also a high diversity of fish in the River Narayani. Some fish species have already died out, others are in serious decline. Professional scientists are

**Table 2: Local resources for livelihoods**

Livelihood Resource	Local Names
Wild vegetables	Niuro (Mid Feb–Mid June); sisno (nettle); sinrukha; kowa; jaluka; nandi bhauji; chethari bhogthi; pakhar ko saag; badher; marawa; narkat; koche ko saag; simli dhan; bihidi; ban pedhalu; agai; jibri ko saag; goda ko saag; gurmi; chathai; titmi; ban karela; theka ko saag; lode ko saag
Fruits	Forest pedhalu; gittha; bhyakur; tarul; hardi aruwa; gauwa; kaukath; anthera; kusum; chana dummar; rukh geda; panchaura; khajuri; amala; amauro; bel; aarp (mango); khaniya; kachur
Raw materials	Khar; khamba; danda; ballo; bhata; khadai; baruwa; babiyo; bodar; fafi; mohalani; bhokata; charcharey; panalati
Fish species	Gonch ( <i>Bagarius bagarius</i> ); sahar ( <i>Tor putitora</i> ); ratar; paat; rohu; naini; bhagan; bainkha; nemana; jal Kapoor ( <i>Clupisoma garua</i> ); gardi; thed; tengar; barali; saura; raja bam; katla ( <i>Neolissocheilus</i> ); asala (snow trout); gadhan; dahara; patashah; nonari; ghondura; khursa; chalhi; chipuwa; chiksahiya; lamko tilwa; taruni tilwa; jharkat; bam; malghah; gainchi; ketahi; mumura; bagha gohira; thada mudiya gohira; nakta gohira; chipley gohira; lachwa gohira; dhonga; girkit macha; datkeri; kanti; sidraha; bhadchi; paidan; dhalai; guruna; lahare; pahadey gohira; dedhuli; khekawa; kotari; jhinga; goga; kathu bhedari; bhana sehari
Aquatic species on verge of extinction	Sahar; katile; asala; gonch; baikha; bhagan; tengri; jal Kapoor; bam; Gangetic dolphin



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Local women in a traditional fishing community making bunches of niuro (wild vegetable) collected from CNP



CDO

Indigenous fishermen and women returning with firewood; in the background, the Narayani river and CNP buffer zone community forest

still trying to classify the populations of the river. One study found 69 species of fish belonging to 9 orders and 19 families in the Narayani River system. Of these, 13 species were identified and classified as cold water fish (Dhital and Jha 2002).

## Erosion of Rights and Local Livelihoods

The state-imposed exclusionary conservation policies and practices disregard the dependence of indigenous communities on, and their relationship with, livelihood resources in the forests and rivers. These policies and practices jeopardize the deep socio-eco-cultural relationship of the people with other components of the ecosystem. The alienation of local communities from their customary practices of resource usage and management and the denial of their usufruct rights has resulted in a serious livelihood crisis. The interventions have far-reaching implications for both the social ecology and livelihood strategies of indigenous people living in the buffer zone area of Chitwan National Park and they seriously limit the autonomy and freedom of the Bote-Majhi and Musahar communities. The ways in which the rights of the Bote-Majhi and Musahar communities have been eroded are discussed below:

### Fishing and ferrying

The traditional livelihood practices of the Bote-Majhi and Musahar have been restricted since the establishment of Chitwan National Park. The issuing of contracts for ferrying has displaced indigenous communities.

### Timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs)

The vegetables growing wild in the forest have been a rich source of nutrition for indigenous communities, who depend on them for food for at least three months a year (Table 3). In the past, these vegetables were also collected and sold in the nearby market, providing cash to purchase other subsistence-related commodities. The access to this source of food and livelihood has been curtailed since the formation of Chitwan National Park. A wide variety of wild fruits are also found in the forest (Table 3). These fruits are an important source of nutrients.

**Table 3: Wild Fuit and vegetables in the forest and their collection season**

Vegetable	Collection Season	Fruit	Collection Season
Mushroom	May–July	Farsa	March–May
Bamboo shoot	June–September	Khanayo	Unknown
Titami	July–September	Kusum	July–September
Parwar ko saag	March–May	Aanp (wild mango)	June–August
Jibret saag	Perennial	Jamun	May–June
Narkat ko saag	March–May	Kyamuno	May–July
Pidhalu (large potato)	December–February	Khajuri	March–May
Bihidi	June–September	Kera (wild banana)	May–July
Niuro	February–July	Baheri	January–April
Kurilo	October–July	Yamar	January–April
Chandil	July–September	Dama	January–April
Dai	July–September	Amala	July–September
Sipligan	March–May	Dimi	May–June
		Bayar	Mid November–February

Members of the indigenous communities living within the buffer zone of Chitwan National Park claim that more than 49 varieties of medicinal herbs are found in the forest (Table 4). These medicinal herbs meant that indigenous communities were not dependent on commercial pharmaceuticals in the past.

Finally, indigenous fishing communities use timber to construct boats, buildings, and other products. The forest also provided fuelwood and grass for fodder for stall-feeding, building construction, and other uses. The collection and gathering of forest products has been restricted since the delineation of the Park. The creation of the Park initially displaced the indigenous people who lived there. Later, Park authorities 'permitted' the very same people from the buffer zone to collect *khar khadai* (thatch grass) once a year for a fee (Table 5). The state first takes away a right, and then, selectively, gives part of it back for a fee as a 'concession'.

**Table 4: Medicinal herbs in the forest and their uses**

Medicinal Herb	Use
Dudhelo	Consumed by women after giving birth to help with breastfeeding
Ku ku kadai	Body cleansing
Lalwanti	Juice cools the body
Amali	A broad spectrum medicine for good health
Lagi goda	To heal a wound
Bhan bhaniya	Protection from allergy
Chuha (asura)	A leaf cooked and consumed to cure fever
Dharma ruwa	Consumed to bring down fever when hallucinating
Lali guji	Unknown
Simthi root	Consumed to bring down fever
Patiya bush	Digestive aid
Paudaha climbers	Consumed to bring down fever

## Grazing practices

Cattle provide milk, meat, biomass, and fertiliser. Milk and other products are an important resource in the market place and augment livelihood. However, the practice of grazing cattle in the forest was stopped after the creation of the National Park. This narrowed the grazing space notably, making maintenance of livestock very difficult for cattle-raisers who mostly belong to the poorest strata.

## Threat of wild animals

National Parks are notorious for accentuating and aggravating the animal-human conflict. There have been numerous reports of threats posed by animals to people living in the buffer zone. The loss of human life, injury, and the loss of domestic animals are regularly documented. Crops that lie in the way of animal herds are crushed and ruined.

**Table 5: Other forest products, their collection season and uses**

Raw Material	Collection Season	Use	Benefit
Firewood	All year except during monsoon	Cooking	No need to buy fuel
Grass	All year	Feeding domestic cattle	Generates milk, organic fertiliser, meat, ghee
Bhorla ko pat (leaf)	April–May	Used to cover the roof of a cowshed (chatri chauney); used as an umbrella; protects domestic cattle from excessive heat	
Babiyo	August–October	String, bandhan, namlo	To secure material/goods for transporting
Khar (thatch grass)	October–February	Roofing	No dependence on market for building materials
Khadaï	February–March	Fencing and weaving bhakari (traditional basket to store grains and seeds). Also used as raw material to construct huts.	Reduces dependency on the market
Timber	October–March	Construction of huts and boats; housing material; used to make homemade furniture	No need to buy housing materials and furniture from the market
Paat	January–March	To make handmade fans, carpet, bida (knife handle), damlo and namlo (rope for carrying things), and musical string instruments.	Reduces dependency on the market
Bamboo	January–March	To make chatri, doko (traditional baskets), and namlo; used for housing material	Reduces dependency on market products
Yakada	January–February	To make dhadiya (traditional basket used for fishing)	Reduces dependency on market products
Kansh	January–February	To make deli (fish basket)	Reduces dependency on market products
Beth	October–February	To make machiya (handmade stool)	Reduces dependency on market products
Patuwa	October–February	String; used to weave beds	Reduces dependency on market products
Kucho	September–November	To make brooms	Reduces dependency on market products