

Local Movement of Indigenous Fishing Communities Around Chitwan National Park

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Bote Majhi youths fishing in the Narayani River against the backdrop of a buffer zone community forest in Chitwan National Park, Nepal

The lives of indigenous communities dependent on natural resources have been affected by nature conservation, and the more recently fashionable 'biodiversity conservation' movement. These communities have never been at the centre of the conservation discourse, nor have they had adequate representation in global environmental movements that have affected their lives.

Their struggles and sufferings have not found adequate space in research, mainstream media, or popular discourse. This research, conducted in the context of ICIMOD's project, 'Advancing Minority Rights to Environmental Justice' supported by the Ford Foundation, revisits some of these communities and presents a glimpse of the history of the grassroots social movements of the Bote-Majhis and Musahars – indigenous fishing communities living along the river banks of Chitwan National Park in Nepal.

The Botes and Majhis are fisherfolks categorised as marginalised 'janajatis' (indigenous groups) historically and culturally dependent on forest and river resources for a living. Musahars are considered Madheshi Dalits of the southern lowlands of Nepal. They are treated as untouchables and are also traditional fisherfolks. Both these groups are socially, economically, culturally,

and politically excluded landless communities. In Nawalparasi district they can be found in 19 villages; the majority are residing in the vicinity of Chitwan National Park. They delineate spaces within the forest as sacred ('than'), guarded by the forest god, Bhairu. They revere and worship the river. They also worship Gaidu, the god of the rhinoceros, and other animals such as the tiger (Bagheysari), the deer (chital), and wild boars. They believe each type of fauna has its own capital or favourite location; Chitwan is the capital of the rhinos. Their acquaintance with the diversity of forest and riverine ecology reflects their indigenous wisdom and ecological knowledge.

The elders of the Bote-Majhi and Musahar groups idealise their past as free and uninhibited by state-imposed restrictions. They used to reside in the forest in the vicinity of rivers, and depended on both these

resources for a living. When the monsoon set in they moved to safer locations. They fished in the stretches of the Narayani River from Deughat (between Kali Gandaki and Trisuli rivers) north of the dam near Tribeni-Bhainsalotan, along the south-western boundary of Chitwan National Park, adjacent to the south Indian border. River ferry points were treated as common property. Documents intact with the community show that these traditional fisherfolks had authority over the use of the rivers. Ferrying villagers in exchange for food provided them additional livelihood.

When the state began protecting forest cover to conserve the endangered one-horned rhinoceros, a 'Rhino Patrol' was deployed. Bote-Majhi men accompanied the officials on patrol duty, ferrying them in exchange for unimpeded access to the river. The women, however, had their first brush with harassment when they collected fodder and wild vegetables.

Slowly, the forces of modernisation and the intrusion of state control over natural resources displaced these groups from their traditional occupations and sources of livelihood. Apart from constructing bridges and roads, state authorities began issuing private ferrying contracts to outsiders to generate revenue, at the cost of the ferrying business of the local communities.

The Royal Chitwan National Park was established in 1973 as the first national park of Nepal and came under the protection of the Royal Nepal Army from 1975 onwards. Park management favoured wildlife conservation and restricted access to forests and made fishing in the river illegal. By the mid-1980s even ferrying passengers across the river was banned. Like many other conservation areas around the world this kind of exclusionary conservation logic disregarded the dependence on and relations of indigenous populations with nature, alienating local communities from their usufruct rights and customary resource use practices, and creating a serious livelihood crisis amongst landless groups. The severe restrictions imposed by conservation authorities posed problems for indigenous fishing communities including the Bote Majhis and Musahars. Their nutrition standards dropped and incidents of atrocity against them by the conservation authorities such as seizure of fisherfolks' items, fish catch, forest produce and verbal abuse, physical assault, forced labour, and sexual harassment committed against them grew. The struggle launched by marginalised Bote-Majhis and Musahars must be understood in this historical context.

The communities began to resist park impositions and abuses from 1983/84. Ten active community members across different villages began organising at the local level. Almost a decade after the establishment of the Chitwan National Park, an amendment to the National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973 allowed the provision of forest products or other services against payment of prescribed fees (Section 16a). Some traditional fisherfolks were permitted to fish in the river after 26 years in 2000, upon annual payment of a fee of fifty rupees, but the provision did not include the Majhi and Musahar communities.

Despite this so-called 'democratisation', January 30, 1993 marked a dark day in the lives of the fishing communities. National park authorities simultaneously confiscated boats and fishing nets in several villages including Sandh, Badruwa, Laugain, and Piprahar, torching fishing nets and baskets, smashing boats, and battering the villagers. Recalled one of the community leaders:

“The incident shook us. An inner voice in us revolted and nagged: Why are we silent? If our forefathers have grown up in this land, river, and forest, why can't we exercise the same rights (as they enjoyed) over these resources?”

Immediately after the incident activists and leaders of fisherfolks held their first convention ever at Laugain, which led to the formation of an informal body of fisherfolk representatives. The organisation was registered under the name of Majhi Musahar Bote Kalyan Sewa Samiti (MMBKSS) in 1994. By 1997, MMBKSS had expanded its network through village level groups in 16 villages of Nawalparasi. MMBKSS began to work closely with an organisation called Community Development Organization (CDO) in the mid-1990s, which was to become an important ally in their struggle.

During one of their meetings in 1997, amidst continuing atrocities against the fisherfolk, the idea to organise a 'gherao' (blockade) at Laukhaney range post emerged. Around 200 protesters surrounded the post, exerting pressure on the authorities. This was the breakthrough that carried the MMBKSS towards its sustained campaign. Following this protest, on 20 August 1999, around 900 people, the majority coming from the tribal fishing communities, marched to a mass meeting in Kasara, the headquarters of Chitwan National Park,

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demanding fishing licenses and that they be allowed to gather wild vegetables; demanding also a complete stop to army violence against them.

This was a turning point in the movement. Collective pressure, including from political parties, made the conservation authorities concede to their demands. **A right has to be seized, it is not a given**, was a lesson learnt that day. After the Kasara mass gathering and dialogue with park authorities, the process of issuing six-month fishing licenses to the fisherfolks began.

Beyond the struggle for fishing rights and protest against violence on fisherfolk, MMBKSS led the campaign for secured housing for the fishing communities—constantly exposed and vulnerable to floods during the monsoon. The Bote-Majhis and Musahars began to claim their rightful space and share in resources management through institutions like the village development committee, community forest group, buffer zone users group, school education committee, amongst others. They also began winning electoral seats at ward levels in some villages, and claiming their citizenship rights. Finally their dignity, identity, and place in society began to be recognised.



Naya Sharma Poudel

A village meeting of indigenous communities at Laugain settlement

Conclusion

The tide of the movement has ebbed in recent years. Internal discord amongst activists within MMBKSS has affected the pace and spirit of the movement. Yet, looking back, the movement had succeeded in triggering campaigns beyond Nawalparasi and has encouraged traditional fisherfolk in buffer zone areas in various protected areas of the country to launch similar non-violent social campaigns.

The struggle of indigenous peoples like the Bote-Majhis and Musahars has exerted influence on the contemporary debate on democratisation and in rethinking policies governing protected areas and wildlife conservation in Nepal and elsewhere. Their experiences as a part of a movement for life and dignity illustrate how the spontaneous resistance of marginalised communities, if they take the shape of a non-violent movement, could engage powerful conservation agencies and influence democratic practices and state policy. The struggle of the Bote-Majhis and Musahars serves as an exemplary example for grassroots movements of poor and powerless groups to obtain environmental justice.

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