

Chapter Six

Political Impact of the Movement

The organised struggles of the Bote-Majhi and Musahar have generally been successful in expanding their socio-political space and have enhanced their access to public institutions to bargain for their share of resources. Moreover, activists have generally acquired a better status within their own communities.

Access to Local Political Parties

The Bote-Majhis were able to use the local elections in 1996/97 (2053 BS). In Pithauli VDC, Jit Bahadur Majhi was elected as a Ward Chairperson. Eleven people from indigenous fishing communities were also elected as Ward members, including two women. This development emerged out of the demand for representation of backward and marginalised groups in political parties.

Access to Buffer Zone User Committees

The buffer zone user committees (BZUCs) and management councils were formed in the mid-1990s (2053 BS). The process itself was not very transparent. Local communities in the buffer zone, especially marginalised and backward or poor communities, were left out and initially did not show interest in participating. However, later, members of the Bote-Majhi and Musahar started to develop an interest in participating in these committees.¹³ A total of eleven members of indigenous fishing communities, including two women, became representatives on the various buffer zone user committees. Bet Bahadur Bote was elected as the treasurer of the BZUC in Pragatinagar. Bote-Majhi and Musahar reported that despite their presence, they felt marginalised in the decision-making process because the buffer zone user committees are still dominated by local elites with a higher caste or class status. One notable issue that brought about a change in the role played by the Bote-Majhi and Musahar representatives was a claim for budgetary allocations for their communities. Bet Bahadur Bote, while he was a treasurer of the BZUC, proposed a plan for the construction of an embankment in his community. The plan was passed, but resisted by local elites. Later, the intervention of the BZUC helped to resolve the case.

Bargaining for Resources for Community Ponds

In 1999, Hom Bahadur Musahar, on behalf of his community, submitted a proposal to Lamichaur BZUC for the construction of a pond and a fish farm to create livelihood alternatives and overcome hardships caused by fishing restrictions. After obtaining approval from the warden of the National Park, they approached the BZUC for funding.

¹³ Channu Ram Majhi in Rajahar, Jit Bahadur Majhi in Pithauli, Suk Bahadur Majhi in Kawasoti and Khor Bahadur Majhi in Aghauli entered the executive body of the BZUC.

In 2003, they received NRs 36,600 for pond construction. In 2004 and 2005, they acquired NRs 20,000 and 40,000 to construct three community ponds for fish farming on two bigha of land. Although construction is still incomplete, in 2003 the fish farm earned NRs 6,000 in six months. This income increased to NRs 26,000 in 2004 and NRs 35,000 in 2005.

Conflict over land

In 2003, at Kawasoti, landless indigenous fishing communities demanded a plot of land from the Forest User Committee of the BZUC to construct a pond for the economically backward fishing communities. The land was located in the vicinity of the Namuna Community Forest. Later, the local upper caste elites opposed the idea of giving forest land for pond construction. The secretary of the Forest User Committee provoked the villagers who began to harass and threaten Musahar women. This resulted in a local conflict. The demand of the Musahar community was for five kattha of land. The settlement reached was for two kattha of land, which was then raised to the five demanded by the community. Today 11 Musahar households depend on the pond built on this land.

Community Development

Several achievements have been made during the past few years. Most of these are the result of indigenous people's activism, as described above.

In Piprahar, as a result of an appeal from local fishing communities, the Army stationed in the Park constructed a one-storey pucca building as a school. The VDC makes regular financial contributions to the school.

Villagers have built embankments across their settlement paid for by the Buffer Zone User Committee as part of the Parks and People Programme (PAP). Water pipes and tube wells have been installed as a consequence of collective bargaining.

In Kujauli village, fishing communities sought NRs 500,000 for the construction of a canal. In Keureni village, the BZUC provided a water pump worth NRs 50,000 to the Bote community.

In Daldaley, the Buffer Zone User Committee allotted NRs 90,000 for flood prevention. In Bagkhor in Aghauli VDC, the Bote community received NRs 12,000 from the Buffer Zone User Committee and NRs 6,000 from the VDC for the renovation of a school building.

In 1998/99, the Bote community from Ratanpur, Koluwa VDC received NRs 50,000 and NRs 100,000 from the VDC for flood-prevention. They have managed to acquire land for a community pond.

In Laugain, local fishing communities have a seed fund of NRs 20,000 for income-generating activities, and also financial support for the community school and a well. They received NRs 40,000 from the Buffer Zone User Committee in 1998/99 for flood prevention.

The installation of tube wells in fishing community villages has also been made possible in Rajahar, Pithauli, Parsauni, and Koluwa, among other places.

Access to Community Forests

Kumarwarti Community Forest, located at Laugain, Pithauli VDC, falls into the buffer zone of CNP and occupies an area of 90 hectares. Before the conversion of the forest into a community forest, the open space was used as grazing land. Landless indigenous fishing communities who did not possess cattle could not avail themselves of this resource.

Local conflict

In 1997, the local forest user group (FUG) organised a song competition on the occasion of Teej, an important festival for Hindu women in Nepal. Tej Bahadur Majhi objected to the event on the basis that community forest resources should also be allocated for indigenous festivals such as Jitiya and Fagu. They argued that the FUG, dominated by high-caste Hindus, imposed their decisions on the rest. Local Tharus supported the fishing communities in this debate.

Once a year, the collection of khar, khadai (thatching grasses), and fodder from the community forest is permitted. Khar is used as a roofing material and can also be profitably sold. In 1997, the fishing community was sent a notice by the FUG to the effect that khar can be sold to outsiders only if it cannot be sold to FUG members or residents of the VDC. The sellers found this unfair and surrounded the office of the VDC chairperson until the notice was revoked.

Fishing communities were well-represented in the first and second assemblies of the FUG. After some time their attendance in the assemblies thinned. Between 1997 and 2002, there was only one representative from the fishing communities on the executive committee of the FUG. The leadership was monopolised by high caste Brahmins. The agenda was dominated by upper-caste concerns and the fishing community representatives felt marginalised within the group.

In 2002, when the forest was opened for collection of khar and khadai, Jit Bahadur Majhi, a local leader and an MMBKSS activist raised the issue of irregularities in the general assembly, as well as the conduct of the executive committee. Jit Bahadur entered the campaign for FUG chairperson. His political affiliation with the CPN (UML) lent him support in his campaign against the existing chairperson, who belonged to Nepali Congress. The collective pressure from the local fishing community forced the existing Forest Committee to declare a general assembly. On the day of the assembly many fishing community members attended and their presence helped to turn the outcome of the election in Jit Bahadur's favour. He became the chairman of the newly-elected Executive Committee (Ghimire 2004).

Women take the lead

Bote women from Dibyapuri VDC were in conflict with the Dibya BZUC. The ban paley (forest guard) had refused local Bote women access to the forest to collect jalugo (green vegetables) and to fish. Green vegetables and small fish (bhura machha)

available in the wetland area falling under the jurisdiction of the community forest contributed significantly to their food security. The women protested against the restriction. Along with local women activists from MMBKSS, they went in a delegation to the president of the CFUG. The president happened to be the vice-chairperson of the VDC. The restriction was lifted. Since then, the Bote community has had unrestricted access to small fish and vegetables in the wetlands and permission to collect firewood from the forest.

The Buffer Zone Community Forest User Group

Access to local community forests in the buffer zone has been a key demand of the movement. Through membership of the Buffer Zone Community Forest User Group (BZCFUG), fishing communities have gained access to grass, firewood, and thatch grass, as per the rules of BZCFUG.

In community forests like Sishwar Community Forest, 32 Bote-Majhi have acquired membership in the BZCFUG. However, membership is now declining as people are losing interest in forest user committees because of the growing perception that information about meetings is not given and that the decision-making process is not clear. However, the growing forest cover in the vicinity has left communities vulnerable to destruction by wild animals from the Park.

Citizenship Campaign

Indigenous fishing communities face severe bureaucratic problems acquiring citizenship. The need for citizenship was felt when applying for jobs in the Ghadiyal Project, a ferrying service for tourists.

This issue was raised by MMBKSS and supported by the MP Majhi Lal Tharu Thanet and Hari Bahadur Musahar from Shergunj. Hari Bahadur suggested consulting the local MP. The MP supported the fishing community and took many of them to the Chief District Officer with whom he initiated a dialogue on the question of citizenship. Fishing community members from Shergunj were the first to acquire citizenship certificates as a result of the campaign. Afterwards, the campaign spilled over to neighbouring villages. Local Bote-Majhi and Musahar leaders then began the citizenship campaign in Laugain, Rajahar, and other villages.

Free Education

Education had been identified as an important issue by indigenous fishing communities during their regular meetings. This issue has also been addressed in public campaigns.

In Piprahar, Rajahar VDC, Amar Bhahadur Majhi once asked that some children be admitted to the local public school. He was aware that primary education was free, but the school administration demanded NRs 40 admission fee for school infrastructure. This was not acceptable to the local fishing communities who decided to protest. They organised a rally in the village market (Rajar bazaar) demanding free education. Dozens of Bote-Majhi and Musahar children participated in the rally. The VDC finally agreed to support school education financially, focusing on children belonging to minority

groups. Later the school made a special provision for completely free education for children belonging to the Bote-Majhi and Musahar communities.

The campaign received media coverage and became an inspiration to fishing communities in other villages. The experience was also discussed in MMBKSS's meetings to replicate the struggle elsewhere. In a school at Gaindakot, fishing communities also demanded free education. The school refused to oblige so the communities took a delegation to the VDC. The Nepal Local Self-Governance Act provides for the allocation of VDC funds for the welfare of indigenous and disadvantaged groups. The VDC then asked for details of the school-going children from the local fishing community. Later, on the basis of that data, the VDC allocated funds for the education of children from the fishing community.

In other VDCs¹⁴ free education was provided without much pressure from fishing communities, simply on the basis of application and an appeal by MMBKSS. This was one of MMBKSS's sustained and successful campaigns.

Campaign for a Just Fishing Tax

Indigenous fishing communities residing on the banks of the Narayani River in Gaindakot had been paying NRs 1,200 to the municipality as a fishing tax. This sum was felt to be unreasonably high. Local Bote-Majhi and the MMBKSS decided to launch a campaign against such unjust taxation. They demanded that the tax be reduced to NRs 50 to be consistent with Chitwan National Park, which charged NRs 50 annually from indigenous fishing communities residing in the buffer zone. Although the fishing communities in Gaindakot do not fall under the jurisdiction of the CNP, they claimed that since Bote-Majhi communities had been fishing freely for many generations in the Narayani River, NRs 1,200 was unduly onerous.

In 2001, around 60 local Bote-Majhi, including activists from MMBKSS, went in a delegation to the Gaindakot VDC and organised a rally to put more pressure on the VDC officials. In meetings, which were attended by the chairperson of the VDC, pressure was put on the chairperson to help. Eventually the VDC agreed in writing that Bote and Majhi from Gaindakot would only be required to pay the nominal charge of NRs 50 as a fishing tax.

¹⁴ Bhedabari, Pragatinagar, Daldailey, Amarapuri, Pithauli, Kawasoti, Aghauli, and Koluwa VDCs