

Chapter Ten

Future Agenda

Bote-Majhi and Musahar presently reside in 19 villages in Nawalparasi district. The majority of the fishing communities in about 10 of these villages¹⁶ still depend on forest and river resources for their livelihood. Their only sources of food security and livelihood are fish and wild vegetables. Channu Ram Majhi from Piprahar says that he makes his living exclusively from fishing in the Narayani River and from forest resources. He says:

“Although it isn’t adequate, we don’t starve”.

In villages such as Keurani, Daldaley, and Bagkhor, fishing communities possess some land for subsistence production. Some landless fishing communities seek alternative income from agricultural daily wage labour. Bote-Majhi and Musahar activists believe that the six-month licence granted to them is the direct result of their struggle.

The journey of the movement of indigenous fishing communities from Nawalparasi has taken more than a decade. Livelihood has been central to the movement. Their story illustrates how resistance over a small issue, in a small place, and from a small village can turn into a sustained movement. The movement is a successful example of a non-violent social movement in Nepal. The movement has exerted a great influence on the contemporary debate about democratisation and helped decision makers to rethinking policies governing protected areas and wildlife conservation in Nepal.

The movement gave birth to a vibrant people’s organisation, owned by the Bote-Majhi and Musahars, one of the most marginalised minority groups in Nepal. The movement also generated activists with sound leadership and campaigning skills.

The social campaigns led by MMBKSS in past and present have taken up the divergence between conservation policies and indigenous fishing people’s rights. As a result, these campaigns have increased indigenous people’s chances of accessing livelihood resources from the CNP and its protected surroundings. Moreover, the magnitude and frequency of human rights violations by conservation authorities, including the Army, have been drastically reduced. Bote-Majhi and Musahar activists interviewed said that they have regained social dignity because they have successfully bargained with public institutions for resources for their communities. It is testimony to the success of the movement that the Buffer Zone Council of CNP is preparing to handover the river in Patiyani VDC, Chitwan to local indigenous fishing communities.

However, the continued activism of MMBKSS highlights areas for future campaigns. After years of struggle, there may be a larger battle ahead over the plight of

¹⁶ Such villages include Piprahar, Laugain, Gairi, Badruwa, Shergunj, Bagkhor, Nandapur, Ratanpur, Tamsariya, and Naya Belhani

communities languishing on the banks of the River Narayani at the periphery of CNP. Vulnerability to floods, housing insecurity, and landlessness are continuous challenges for indigenous fishing communities. The resettlement of communities in safer locations with potential for subsistence cultivation is one of MMBKSS's main focuses. Legal entitlement to land currently occupied by fishing communities is another pressing issue. However, the distribution of land to those who possess no or little land for housing is linked to larger processes of land reform in the country.

Excluding the three-month spawning season, fishing communities are demanding an extension of fishing licences for up to nine months. But there have been conflicting concerns over the decline in the fish catch in the Narayani River Basin and its ramifications on the food security of fishing communities. There is a need to generate ideas and policies for alternative livelihoods for indigenous fishing communities. These should, however, not compromise indigenous people's social ecology and customary rights over productive river and forest resources. It is equally important to find ways out of the ecological crisis affecting the riverine ecosystem through vigorous campaigns and scientific interventions. MMBKSS can be a key actor in bringing both into harmony. Strategies are needed that equally address food security, particularly of forest-dependent communities, and free and continued access to livelihood resources (wild vegetables, fruits, medicinal herbs, and fallen timber).

There are issues that go beyond the local context. The aspirations, dreams, and demands of the struggling Bote, Majhi, and Mushars have links to the current conservation paradigm, and protected area policies and practices. There is an urgent need to democratise and restructure protected area management and policies. It is time to rethink the paradigm of biodiversity conservation, current models of protected area management, buffer zone management, and the presence of the Nepal Army in protected areas, particularly to secure the rights of indigenous communities in and around protected areas. In the context of state policies and the forces of globalisation, indigenous communities are being dispossessed of their natural resources rights and face the erosion of their traditional local livelihoods. At the same time, their indigenous knowledge and practices are being pirated, which is equally critical and needs to be urgently addressed.