

Anjali: Woman of the waters

A moving account of the life, the struggles and the indomitable spirit of a woman fisher from West Bengal, India

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Baaisha's bridge! 'Baaish' in Bengali—the language of West Bengal on India's eastern coast—means 'twenty-two'. Baaisha's bridge got its name from its 22 piers. Located not far from Mandarmani, a seaside resort in West Bengal, the bridge spans a stream that flows even in the driest months. If you come here one day and, standing on the bridge, look seaward, I can wager you will experience a rush of well-being. You will see the stream serenely meandering down to the sea, silvery fish ponds lining its banks. You will see flocks of migratory birds and fishers with small nets adrift on their dinghies. You will probably also see a woman in her mid 40s easing down the sharp slope of canal into her dinghy. Alone. Wearing a headband. Dark and daring. Supple as steel. With what ease she rides the tide, casts her net, and manoeuvres her dinghy through the treacherous eddies! Be it the dry summer or the pouring rains, she hunts for fish, as day passes into night and night into day.

This is Anjali Bar. She dwells at a stone's throw from the canal in a small hut besides the sea-dyke. Anjali is a fisher. Her days and nights are spent in mud and water—hunting for small local varieties of fish like *parshe* (Goldspot Mullet), *tangra* (a local catfish), and *gule* (mudskipper). Then, after ten to twelve hours of hard labour and with luck, one or two kilos of fish in hand, she hastens to the Satmile market 12 km away. This

gruelling toil to feed her family never ends. Anjali knows the Baaisha area as intimately as the contours of her palm. And they all know her—the angry eddies in Baaisha's canal and the swift swirls where the stream meets the sea. For, none dares them with such disdain as Anjali in her 12 ft *pauki* (dinghy).

Anjali was born in April 1971, in a poor fisher family. Her father was Haripada Bar and her mother Sandhyarani. They were residents of Samudrapur village, not far from Baaisha's bridge. Anjali was the first child of this poor couple. Her childhood was one of energetic activity and scuffles with her peers. When the little girl swung from one prop root of the banyan tree to another and leapt into Baaisha's canal, swam against the current and ran laughing up the bank, the elders were impressed. True, people often frowned when she took her tiny siblings far across fields and meadows. But, nobody was really worried. They had faith in this daring yet responsible youngster. She would not let any harm befall the younger ones.

Anjali could make it only to Class Two in her village school. How could she study any further? Poverty stood in the way. How could she afford books? Even a change of clothes was hard to come by. Her mother was ill and it was left to Anjali to take care of her siblings. Her father was a wage labourer at the gigantic drag shore seines. He could come home perhaps once a week. Sometimes he would cast his *beundi* (bag net) in Baaisha's canal hoping for a substantial catch. But, his was a household with eight mouths to feed. The ceaseless toil was telling on him. Haripada's health deteriorated. When Anjali was ten, Haripada fell ill with chronic intestinal ailments. The family could not afford a doctor. How could it arrange for a patient's diet, when even a bare meal proved so difficult?

With her father no longer able to work, Anjali tells how at the age of 11, she suddenly realized that she had grown up. No more games for her. No more waiting for the father to bring in food. Anjali decided she had to feed the family. In those days, fish wealth abounded in and around her village Samudrapur. But, catching fish was not easy for Anjali.

SUJOY JANA



Anjali's village Samudrapur, Baisha canal (in light blue), and other places important in Anjali's tale

She had neither appropriate gear, nor was there anyone to assist her. Moreover, getting a fair price for her catch was more difficult for a youngster. The market was far away. Yet, this girl of 11 had lots of courage and strength of will.

The little Anjali could at first use only the easiest nets—the *chhani jal* (small strainer shaped net that even a child can drag along the water to scoop up shrimp and other small fish) and *khyanpa jal* (a still smaller strainer net that one can use to catch crabs and small fish on mudflats). Having got her catch she would run to the market, sell her catch, and buy food for the family. The villagers would wonder at the playful sprite of yesterday who had suddenly become the mainstay of her family.

When Haripada's health improved, he started going down to Soula at the mouth of Baaisha's canal to cast a *beundi* (bag net). And, his eldest daughter would always be there besides him, assisting him at every stage of work. If the local traders refused fair prices, an uncompromising Anjali would go to another market. And to another and yet another. The roads were unpaved. There was no transport. With a basket of fish on her head, by the end of her day, Anjali would easily have walked some 25 km. She would sink to her bed and fall asleep, dead to the world. But, the net fixed in the stream was waiting for her and the rhythm of the tides was in her blood, waking her up in time to pull in the catch at dawn.

In the mid-1980s, the small-scale fishers started using mosquito nets in their *beundi*. The season for these bag nets was from October to February. The catch consisted of small fish and shrimp. These were dried on the beach and sold. Anjali managed to get a spot for her family at the Aragbania *khoti* (community managed fish landing site) quite a distance from her home. The work at the *khoti* required long hours of hard work. Fixing the net, bringing in the catch, spreading it on the sand, applying the broom at intervals, dusting off the sand, putting the dried fish in packets, weighing and storing them—there was no end to the work, and Anjali and her family would stay at the *khoti* throughout the five-month season.

With the coming of the rains and wind from the south, began the season of the drag shore seine. Haripada's health was now much better. With Anjali beside him, he grew bolder. Hitherto, he had been a wage worker at the seines. Now, he procured a loan and partnered with some other fishers to begin his own business. The business thrived. The family's poverty was eased. But Anjali refused to relax. She continued selling fish with her usual vigour. One day, quite suddenly, her father's business suffered a loss. Haripada fell into debt.

Anjali now had to work day in and day out to free her father of debt.

She sits on the ground in front of her hut, reminiscing. Staring bleakly into the distance, she says how her life of continuous struggle had not brought her family anything more than a couple of meals a day. She had not even a tiny piece of land or a few saved rupees to call her own.

Haripada may not have succeeded in his relentless battle against poverty but he did succeed in arranging a groom for Anjali—a young man named Atithi Bar who was from a large and moderately well-to-do fisher family. The young sprite of the waters now became a complete housewife. As the eldest daughter-in-law of the family, Anjali took charge of the household.

Five or six years passed by smoothly. Anjali's first daughter was born. Then, gradually, the family began to face economic difficulties. With poverty, discord raised its head in the household. Anjali began to feel unwanted in the domestic turmoil of the larger family. Hurt, she returned to her parental home, bringing her husband and daughter with her. Did she feel that returning to her old haunts, to Baaisha's stream and the sea, would infuse new meaning and direction into her life? Perhaps.

And she was not disappointed. The familiar landscape, the unending expanse of untamed water, breathed new life into her, brought her hope.

Anjali refused to burden her parents for long. Within a few months, she fixed a new home besides the Baaisha's bridge, at the foot of the sea-dyke. A home for three, built of bamboo and slips, plastered with mud. Anjali had neither boat, nor net. No share in any *khoti*. An uninvited guest on public land, she had little time to brood about her future, present demanded all her attention.

With a tiny girl to care for, Anjali found it difficult to make ends meet. She sent her husband to work as a wage labourer. The quiet and even-tempered Atithi was well-liked. Getting work wasn't too difficult. Slowly things started falling into place.

But, after a time, difficulties resurfaced. Three more children were born, and with their arrival, the needs of the household multiplied. Leaving the children at home, Anjali was forced to take on more work, to assist her husband or take the fish to the market. The earnings were never sufficient. Holes appeared in the roof. The moon shone in; the rain left the floors muddy and the beds soaked.

But, the roof was the least of their concerns. The home itself was at risk. The land belonged to the irrigation department.

Each day has been a battle to survive.



Anjali Bar at work. The endless hours on the boat do not bring sustenance. What will happen in the days to come?

There was a constant threat of eviction. Where would they find a place to stay? They have been living here for 20 years. Yet, says Anjali, people in the neighbourhood see them as refugees and outsiders. Anjali uses the land at the foot of the sea-dyke as her yard and the drainage canal along the sea-dyke as her pond. Besides this 'pond', she has planted mango, jackfruit, and tamarind trees. As she looks at her small home amidst this wilderness, she suddenly feels it isn't hers. As if it was a piece of theft. If only she had a roof, a yard to call her own! Never again would she wake up in panic from sleep—terrified of losing her home!

Anjali is a veteran of countless battles. Each day has been a battle to survive. Sometimes the struggle is against nature, sometimes against social processes, at other times against greedy and powerful individuals. On Baaisha's stream, you find nets fixed at an interval of 50 to 100 cubits. The rampant use of mosquito nets has destroyed fish eggs. Toxic effluents from the countless shrimp farms are poisoning the canal. Fish are dying. Anjali is forced to take her dinghy out to the sea. The fishers at the *khotis* refuse to let her fish. There was a time when Anjali would fish along the length of the entire shore. Now, she is no longer permitted. There was a time when the wetland expanses on both sides of Baaisha were open to her. No longer. The *panchayat* (local administrative unit) has leased them out to wealthy individuals. Where would Anjali find the money for a lease?

Anjali also fishes in the upper stretches of the Baaisha canal. During the last eight years, even this has become a problem. There are now nets fixed in the canal belonging to wealthy people from non-fishing communities. The local administration is hand-in-glove with them. Fish can no longer swim freely. The small-mesh nets are destructive of

stock. Anjali has protested. She has sought to mobilize opinion against these practices. As a result, she has earned enemies. Sometime back, a fisher, Nanda Jana, had been thrown out from a local fish market by miscreants. Anjali was quick to protest and she was punished for raising her voice. Her goods were thrown out and she too was evicted from the fish market. She has been fighting long and hard to regain her rights to sell fish.

However, the corrupt local administration and local miscreants joined hands to defeat her efforts. Anjali, however, refuses to give up. She sends her husband to vend their fares from village to village.

Anjali became a member of the Medinipur Jela Upokulio Matsya Vendor Union (Medinipur District Coastal Fish Vendors Union) in 2010. The organization has helped her to get a clearer view of her rights. The stories of fishworkers' struggles in other parts of the country have boosted her spirits. She has also found much inspiration in the tales of struggle of the Sundarbans' fishers, particularly of the poorest, fishing from dugout canoes.

Today, Anjali is a leader and comrade of local fishworkers. She has led the struggle in asserting the fishers' rights to the common use of the Baaisha canal. She has been vocal in raising the demands of fish vendors. She represented her organization at the seminar on marine biodiversity and the rights of small-scale fishworkers held in Chennai in 2014. She has also represented her organization at various forums in her state on several occasions.

As the leader of the fish vendors' union, Anjali feels the need for unity and collective action among vendors in her district to put pressure on the government. There have been some gains. But, much more needs to be done.

Anjali's own profession is in peril. Nowadays, even 12 to 13 hours of fishing do not bring enough catch to sustain the family. Using a boat is impossible in the net-clogged Baaisha canal. That is why Anjali is seen walking along abandoned fisheries, looking for molluscs.

Atithi is now a full-time fish vendor. Since the family has little catch of its own, Atithi buys fish from various *khotis*. He sometimes takes his fare from village to village; at other times he finds a place for himself in this market or another.

Once upon a time, the sea had provided for Anjali. Today, Anjali and her husband no longer think of going to the sea. The endless hours on the boat do not bring sustenance. What will happen in the days to come? To her home? Her pond? The trees? What of their claims on her?

Anjali has no answer to such queries. An urge to survive had pushed her to abandon her childhood and take to the sea. Today, the same urge to survive is pushing her away from the livelihood she knows so well.

Will she be able to ignore the pull of the water and the tides? Anjali has no answer.

Fourteen months later...

Anjali's tale was penned down some 14 months ago. Something changed in the meanwhile.

Sometime in May last year, the dreaded day arrived. Anjali's home was dismantled to make way for a road. How could a humble home and hearth stand in the way of the greater public good? Anjali and her family found a place to stay with a poor woman who had a little extra space.

If you go to Baaisha's bridge, you will still find Anjali's old dinghy. But, no sign remains of her hut. ❏