

Inland fishermen

## Traditional access denied

**Rich moneylenders in Bangladesh exploit official policy to deny artisanal fishermen access to traditional waters**

**B**eaten by a combination of misdirected government policy and the wealth power of moneylenders, traditional fisherfolk of the riverside villages of Bangladesh are struggling for a just and satisfactory livelihood.

The government's present water body management policy was introduced in 1986. It is meant to provide access to waterbodies (locally called *jalmohals*, *haors* and *beds*) only through leases to fishermen's co-operatives.

But, according to the poor fishermen themselves, the whole programme has been hijacked by rich moneylenders (*inahajans*). In connivance with the police and local officials, these powerful interests have become the *de facto* leaseholders of these waterbodies.

According to a survey by a local newspaper, The Daily Star, Bangladesh has about 10,000 waterbodies of various sizes, totalling around 2.53 million hectares of the country's perennial waters.

Fisheries play an important role in the economy of Bangladesh, contributing nearly four per cent of the country's GDP. It accounts for about 10 per cent of export earnings. Nearly two million people (or about seven per cent of total employment) work full time in fisheries-related activities.

According to Brian O'Riordan of the Intermediate Technology Development Group, an estimated 1.3 million people are engaged in fishing and fish culture, and a further ten million people work during the seasonal floodplain fishery. It was during the martial law regime of Ayub Khan that the *jalmohals* first came

under state control. Until then, they were under local landlords who would tax fishermen for using the waters.

Although the fishermen organised to fight for their rights during the late 1960s, only after Bangladesh's independence did the government abolish the old auction system. In its place it introduced regulation of access through co-operatives. But these were no match for the power of moneylenders.

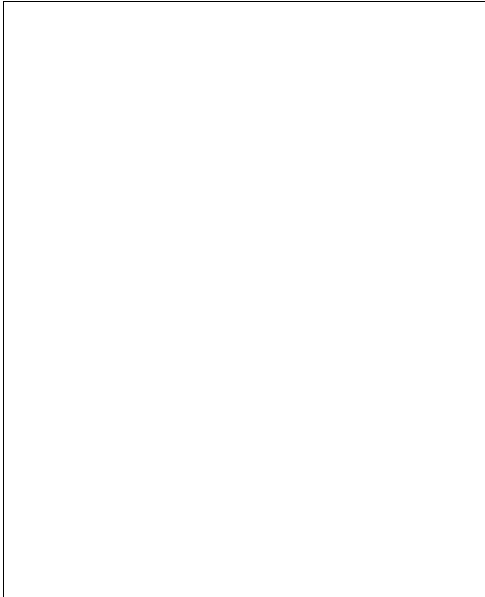
There is a strong and inevitable link between the fishermen and the moneylenders. Since bidding amounts for leasehold rights are high, the fishermen's co-operatives are forced to approach moneylenders. These are influential people who, often enough, engineer splits and factions within the co-operatives to gain control over them.

Since 1986, when the new policy came into effect most waterbodies are controlled and regulated by the government's Ministry of Land. The policy aims to replace leasing with open auctioning and ultimately, a licensing system.

### Difficulties in reforming

Yet, as experience has showed, reforming the system is riddled with difficulties. Identifying genuine fishermen is not easy. Nor is the regulation of catch by inexperienced officials. Also, the fishermen are greatly hampered by the lack of marketing infrastructure. Further, the laws of cooperative enterprise, including the means of appeal, are heavily loaded against the fishermen.

With most co-operatives functionally weak and disorganised, the real fishermen find that they are now effectively barred from their own fishing grounds. A typical case is that of the BenglaCharabahda



*jalinohal*. At one time, this fishery used to provide a means of livelihood to the folk of 15 villages. In April 1991 the government leased out this 2,400-acre closed waterbody for three years in return for 805,600 Taka in annual revenue.

But the leasing policy permits only the 120 members of a particular co-operative society to fish there. Similarly, the Chotra-Uttara river which flows into this water-body, has been segmented and leased out to other societies.

The smaller co-operatives found themselves unable to compete in bidding since the royalty amount was suddenly raised fourfold over the previous term's level.

But even when they formed a consortium to win the bid, one moneylender encouraged a rift in their ranks, say the local fishermen. The moneylender's group wanted to maximise profits by fishing twice during the lease period. According to The Daily Star, in the skirmishes that followed, one villager was shot dead and several others injured.

Intimidation and coercion by the moneylenders' musclemen are now common, complain the fishermen. One fisherman said, "We can fight the robbers and the looters who try to take away expensive nets and other fishing gear, but we are helpless against the 'legal robbery' by the *mahajan's* men supported by police." ■

This article borrows extensively from a series of reports in The Daily Star by Masud Hasan Khan