

Organizer, Communicator

Harekrishna Debnath (1949 - 2009)

Harekrishna Debnath, who was born on 16 October 1949 and died on 30 December 2009, was not only a brilliant organizer, but also a humane communicator and strategist

The year 2010 commenced on a sad note for the fishworkers of India with the departure of Harekrishna Debnath, the chairperson of the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF). In 1989, he joined the struggle for the rights of India's coastal communities to "Protect Waters, Protect Life" (the theme of the march organized by NFF along the coast of India). Harekrishna very soon demonstrated his political commitment, analytical acumen and strategic skills in organizing the dispersed and marginalized fishworkers of West Bengal into the Paschim Bengal Matsyajibi Forum.

It was in these initial years that I got to know Harekrishna closely. He took me through the Sunderbans to see the plight of the fishers, and during that trip two things became very obvious: Harekrishna was determined to see that the community of fishworkers should find its rightful place on the development agenda of the State; he was also able to endear himself to the local people who were awaiting a leader to articulate their demands and bring them to the attention of society at large. Harekrishna was able to do that brilliantly, not only through the respect he commanded with the State Fisheries Department but also by building up a support network in the State. As a result, several issues that would have gone unnoticed, like the banning of the age-old winter fishery in Jambudwip or the installation of a nuclear plant at Haripur, which are affecting the fishing community, have been brought to the attention of the nation.

The support Harekrishna garnered was visible in the variety of people from all classes who visited him and wrote about him in the nine months that he battled the cancer that was devouring him. And battle he did, because even towards the very end, when he was short of breath and could hardly speak, he made it clear that the struggle had to continue and for this it was important that all friends should carry the task forward.

As the chairperson of NFF, he had the difficult task of maintaining a national movement of federated members. He handled that too with the skills of a master craftsman,

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accommodating different perspectives while simultaneously focusing on the national agenda of the movement. The coastal march that he led in 2008, "Save the Coast, Save the Fishers", focused on the impact of global politics on local communities, and highlighted the need to consolidate the base of the fishworkers' movement, which had got eroded over the years. For Harekrishna, these were all huge challenges that needed attention, notwithstanding any fatal disease.

In 1994, Harekrishna addressed a session of the United Nations Fish Stocks Conference, drawing attention to the fate of millions of coastal

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An Amicable Leader

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Harekrishna Debnath was born on 16 October 1949 at Charfasson in the Bhola district of erstwhile East Pakistan, the largest offshore island region of present-day Bangladesh. The son of a school teacher, Harekrishna had a postgraduate degree in physics from the University of Dhaka. He was a student leader of the Awami League, before relocating to India in 1973 where he assiduously worked for the rights of Bangladeshi refugees.

Harekrishna began his association with the Indian fishworkers' movement two decades ago through the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) during its coastal march under the theme "Protect Waters, Protect Life". That was the first campaign in India to draw attention to

the degradation of the coastal zone from pollution and habitat degradation.

Throughout his working life, Harekrishna tirelessly fought for the rights of fishing communities. In 1996, as a leader of NFF, he actively campaigned to rescind the joint-venture policy of the Government of India, which liberalized foreign fishing in the Indian exclusive economic zone. He fought against the displacement of traditional fishing communities in the name of industrial development and coastal aquaculture. He also campaigned against the denial of the livelihood rights of traditional fishers in the name of turtle conservation, and wildlife and forest protection. He fought for the humane treatment of fishers in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka who are jailed for transboundary crossings and fishing in adjacent territorial waters.

The national campaign that Harekrishna led against the draft Coastal

people worldwide who were being marginalized by official development policies. Harekrishna was an orator par excellence, able to mix solid content with the literary sentiment so typical of the Bengali language.

At our last meeting, he embraced me tearfully and said, "I have made several mistakes, but I have given my all to the fishworkers' movement. Now my days are numbered, but the movement has to go on and we need all of you to be with us in the struggle".

Yes, it was painful to see Harekrishna go. He felt he still had so much to say and do. Based on the difficulties he faced in organizing fishers, he felt strongly that the State has a responsibility to help the unorganized sector. Unfortunately, Harekrishna did not put down any of his reflections in writing. That is a loss, for I am sure his accounts would have been a useful historical and literary reflection on fisheries from a community perspective.

Harekrishna dedicated his life to the struggle of marginalized fishworkers.

I can only salute his everlasting commitment. I feel honoured to have known him closely. 

Zone Management Notification in 2008 was responsible for its withdrawal by the government. The Notification was opposed by traditional fishing communities, whose campaign subsequently led to consultations with all stakeholders on an appropriate regime for coastal zone management in India.

While active in mobilizing fishing communities to protect their rights to life and livelihood at the national level, Harekrishna was involved, along with Thomas Kocherry, in the formation of the World Forum of Fishworkers and Fish Harvesters in 1997.

Harekrishna was keen to employ the provisions of international legal instruments to benefit traditional, small-scale fishing communities worldwide. In the process, he engaged with the United Nations and its agencies.

Harekrishna upheld a vision of sustainable development of traditional, small-scale fishing communities, a vision that transcended national boundaries.

His concerns extended to the social issues that affect tribal, indigenous and internally displaced peoples and refugees.

Among other things, Harekrishna was a national leader of traditional fishers. He was the Chairperson of NFF when he breathed his last on 30 December 2009. Even after being diagnosed with lung cancer, he worked hard on several issues of concern to fishworkers.

In his demise, Indian fishing communities and other disadvantaged groups have lost not only a brilliant organizer and thinker, but also a communicator and strategist. In Harekrishna's sad demise, the world of small-scale fisheries has lost an amicable leader who could connect ideas, spaces and action, all with a human touch and always for the benefit of all affected parties.

—*This tribute is by Sebastian Mathew (icsf@icsf.net), Programme Adviser, ICSF*

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Harekrishna Debnath dedicated his life to the struggle of marginalized fishworkers. He believed that the movement in support of fishworkers should go on

For more



www.coastalcampaign.page.tl/Home.htm
Save the Coast, Save the Fishers