

Remembering Rambhau

An energetic and committed worker for the cause of fishers, he was a lighthouse for the fishworkers' movement

Rambhau Patil, an enterprising member of the fishing community of Maharashtra in India, was 79 years old when he left us on July 29, 2018, for his final journey. Born Ramchandra Patil, he received the affectionate moniker of Bhau, or Rambhau, due to his benevolence and his always-on smile. Almost always dressed in a *khadijhabba*, a traditional pyjama-like loose-fitting shirt and trousers, he was never seen without his bag full of books and documents hanging down his shoulder. Rambhau was born in the village of Mahim in Wadrai, Maharashtra. Although fishing was his family's ancestral trade, he was brought up and raised in an educated environment. Rambhau completed his primary and secondary education at the block headquarters in Palghar.

a co-operative of fishermen. Fishing gear, at necessity for fishing, was made available to the village through this co-operative, along with essential items like food grain and kerosene.

The co-operative also took efforts for children's education to address the illiteracy in the village. These efforts included the opening of a Rashtra Seva Dal centre for adolescents and youth. This centre conducted recreational activities like sports and singing sessions in order to bring about social and political awareness.

Rambhau actively participated in all such events. Therein lay the strong foundation of his future socio-political activities. After completing his education, Rambhau took up a job at the famous Haffkine Institute, a biomedical research centre. He was also deeply interested in art and architecture. This drew him towards a diploma course in architecture, for which he studied after his working hours. He could not complete this course; family responsibilities forced him to give up his job and assume the family's fishing business.

He began an independent fishing business in 1969. He also tried trawling, a new business in Mumbai at that time. Subsequently, over the next two to three years, he tried his hand at a fishing business at Satpati, a place known for the trade. He could not land much success. He began to think through the problems in the fishing business, the risks and their solutions. This is what later led him to join the fishermen's movement. Undaunted by failure, he refused to sit quietly. He became the sarpanch (head) of his village at the behest of the people there. He remained in that position for a good 15 years.

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The village had produced several freedom fighters; its inhabitants came from various tribal groups, a fishermen's community and small farmers. After being released from jail, these freedom fighters strove to unite these underprivileged communities through a socialist movement. They began working for their economic empowerment by creating co-operatives and social organizations. The fishing community was in dire straits then. They were severely exploited by the traders and agents in their business. Rambhau's father, the late Kanha Patil, took the initiative in forming

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Tireless work

Rambhau worked tirelessly to make housing available to the fishermen and to establish their rights over it. Another important issue was housing for the tribals. The village was spread over a large area, the tribal hamlets were remotely located. He hence prioritized the building of roads, and the creation of drinking water facilities, followed by a health centre and a school. He managed to get these facilities executed despite the fund crunch. He used his architectural/engineering knowledge—and his aesthetic sense—in the construction of the structure and in the design of a water scheme.

His work was widely celebrated, extending his social and political circle.

He continued to read extensively, consulting with experts and those who had experience in the fishing business. He ended up joining the Maharashtra Machhimar Kruti Samiti (MMKS), an organisation fighting for the rights of fishermen.



This was a period of change; with mechanization of the fishing industry had begun and other several new schemes had been introduced in the coastal areas. Moreover, the country was also going through the phase of economic restructuring and globalisation. This had created large industrial settlements in the coastal regions for improving employment opportunities. The period also saw introduction of commercial ports, atomic energy plants and chemical industries, which would release their toxic wastes into the rivers, bays and seas nearby.

Increasing pollution in the coastal villages endangered fishing activity. MMKS began organizing protests around these issues. The founder of MMKS, Bhai Bandarkar, along with Moreswar Mistry, who formed the union of sailors, and Motiram Bhawe had organised protests against mechanization and environmental pollution. They also campaigned in

Mumbai and Delhi to obtain diesel subsidies as well as tax rebates on the equipment necessary for the fishing business. They were fairly successful.

In the 1980s, Rambhau was introduced to Thomas Kocherry, who was leading a campaign to organise the fishermen in Kerala and Tamil Nadu to fight for their rights. In 1989, he had organised the Kanyakumari March around the slogan “Save Water, Save Life”. Rambhau had joined this March along with several of his colleagues. Thus began his association with the National Fishworkers’ Forum (NFF). This was a turning point in his life. At this stage, he met several leaders from across the country, including Harekrishna Debnath of West Bengal

and Nalini Nayak of Kerala. Although Rambhau was already sensitive to women’s issues, the objectives of NFF gave him the scope to incorporate women into the union and to develop an appreciation of women’s contribution in this field. He

used to enthusiastically elaborate upon the importance of using the term “fishworkers” in the title of NFF. Incorporating women into the movement was not an easy task, as he explained later. He served as President and Secretary of both MMKS and the NFF over several years. This was a time when several important leaders of the organization died one after another—Thomas Kocherry, Harekrishna Debnath, Mathai Saldanha and MD Koli, an important leader from Maharashtra. Rambhau did not allow a leadership vacuum. He kept the organization stable and held its components together. During this period, he faced disappointment, too.

Significant struggles

The significant protests and struggles Rambhau helped organize include:

- The struggle against foreign fishing vessels: This struggle continued for a long time. Participating in a hunger

strike along with Thomas Kocherry, he fasted for nine days.

- The Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification of 1991: He travelled throughout the country to raise awareness about the Notification and organised several awareness campaigns.
- He campaigned to acquire subsidy for diesel fuel, which is essential for operating fishing vessels. He subsequently also succeeded in increasing the subsidy amount.

Rambhau was fond of writing. He used simple language which could be easily understood by the common fishworker. He translated into Marathi the 1995 FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and also the booklet about the recommendations of the Murari Committee. Another concern of his was the relationship between mangrove forests (Tivarvane) and the fishing occupation. He composed songs for the worship and celebrations held on the Fishworker's Day every year, encouraging everyone to sing along.

He spoke incessantly of the importance of preserving and protecting the rivers, bays and salt marshes in the villages. Rambhau made a major contribution in the protests and campaigns for laws regarding marine biodiversity, environmental protection and conservation. He traversed the country while working for MMKS, the NFF as well as the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), with which he was associated. His family responsibilities did not hold him back from his social activism. He found several colleagues, friends as well as mentors among these three organizations. He always felt grateful for this. He was very appreciative of the fact that he met activists from all castes and religions while working with these three organizations.

Rambhau had the good fortune of Sane Guruji's company during his youth. He always upheld the values and principles of peace and democratic socialism, working for the greater common good. He would always assert, while addressing public meetings, that in the coastal fishworkers' communities, there were activists from different background, and yet there never was

any dispute on the coastline. In his four decades of public work, he always received great support from his loving family, his brothers, his wife Lalita, his sons Jivitesh and Prashant and daughter Vandana; their co-operation and contribution to his achievements is by no means insignificant.

Rambhau, the energetic activist and a lighthouse for the fishworkers' movement, left us on 29th July 2018. 🙏

For more



<https://indianfisheries.icsf.net/images/stories/indian/FULL-NFF-BOOK121208.pdf>

Save the Coast, Save the Fishers: Report of "Machhimar Adhikar Rashtriya Abhiyan", May - November 2008, National Fishworkers' Forum