

FROM ASIA/India

Celebrating Fisheries Day

by Nalini Nayak, a social activist working with fishworkers in India, and a member of ICSF

The celebrations for the World Fisheries Day were launched in July with an all-India campaign to include women in the Famine-cum-Relief scheme of the government. This is a participatory welfare scheme whereby fishermen contribute a certain sum of money for nine months a year and then get it back in the three poor fishing months, with an equivalent amount contributed by the State (provincial) and Central governments.

In 1996, women fishworkers were barred from this scheme on the grounds that this was a scheme only for 'seagoing' fishermen. The National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) decided to take up this issue as a national struggle, and launched a sit-in protest in all State capitals on 1 July.

This caused ripples even in States where the scheme did not exist, as the protesters refused to call off the struggle until their demands were met. The struggle went on from three to 15 days in different States. In West Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the State governments agreed to give their share of the contribution to the women.

The Central government vacillated and finally gave an assurance that it would include it in the annual budget for the following year. Meanwhile, the Women's Commission has also put pressure on the Agriculture Minister, pointing out that this is a blatant case of discrimination. For the State unions of the NFF this is an important step towards recognizing women as workers.