

Asia/ Sri Lanka**The solution is among us....**

Women take the initiative to improve the management of the lake they depend on for their livelihood

By Geetha Luckmini, the Training Officer of National Fisheries Solidarity (NAFSO), Sri Lanka

Parakrama Samudra is one of the major inland reservoirs under the Mahaweli development project at Polonnaruwa district, in Sri Lanka. More than 500 fisher families depend only on this lake for their livelihood. Bandiwewa is one of the seven small lakes of the Prakrama Samudra. In Bandiwewa alone there are 75 fisher families with forty traditional crafts. Their average catch is around 800 to 1000 kg daily. Small-scale fish traders come from Ratnapura and Ampara areas to buy fish from Bandiwewa.

“Fishing is our family business. Earlier, we earned enough to run our family. We managed to save some money for our future and urgent needs, from our daily catch. This was in the past, when the lake was well-managed,” says Vineetha. Vineetha is one of the fisherwoman in the Parakrama Samudra who goes to the lake to catch fish together with her husband.

Earlier, the fisheries co-operative society was able to manage the lake. The fisher people used the legally approved nets of more than 3.5-inch mesh size. Self-regulation by members of the co-op was common. But this has now changed.

Says Vineetha: “The co-operative society does not exist any more. It was destroyed by unnecessary political interference. Politicians intervened to prevent the arrest of some members of the co-operatives engaged in illegal fishing. Fisheries inspectors were threatened when they tried to check illegal practices, and several were transferred for trying to enforce the law. The officials were fed up. Members were frustrated.”

A majority of the members of the co-op, like Vineetha, were for the enforcement of the regulatory measures. Says Vineetha: “Although they are in minority, they are very powerful with political backing. We are utterly helpless. They cut down trees in the water catchment areas. They hunt illegally in the forest. What can

we do, when law is with the law-breakers? The nets they use are between 2 to 2.5 inches while the legally approved size is 3.5 inches. Beach seine nets and monofilament nets are used even though they are banned for use in the lake.”

The income of fisher families has steadily declined as the catch and the size of the fish has declined. Fishing was no longer a sustainable livelihood for fisher families by mid-2000. The fisher people understood the cause of their problems. They realized the necessity of organizing again.

“We discussed the problem and its causes. We knew that the solution is among us,” says Vineetha. “Unless men come forward to solve the problem, we as women have to take action. Because our children approach us when they are hungry. Can mothers feed them with tears? How do we feed them without income? My husband and I start fishing at 7.00 p.m. and come back around 7.00 a.m. If we cannot sell our total catch, I have to dry the fish too.” With all of these activities Vineetha and her husband earn only about Rs 100 to 150 per day. Which is barely enough for a hand to mouth existence.

Vineetha was a committee member of the former coop society, which was responsible for protecting and managing the resources of the lake. She is now also a founder member of the lake management committee organized under NAFSO (National Fisheries Solidarity).

According to Vineetha: “The fish we catch now are very small, almost 10 to 14 fish to a kg. We feel sorry to kill small fish. They are like our babies. Earlier, when the lake was better managed, there were only 2 or 3 fishes to a kg. This is a very clear indicator of the destruction. This is threatening the livelihood of fisher families. It is exploitation, over-exploitation. That is why I am involved in the management practices, although we face many threats from political henchmen. Who else will protect the lake?”

“After we initiated management practices in July this year, we have already begun to experience some success. Even though it is only four months since these efforts began.”

Recently, the lake management committee, assisted by NAFSO and the Franciscan nuns, had organized a

meeting with policy makers. The Deputy Minister of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development, the Co-ordinating Secretary of the Minister of Mahaweli, the Co-operative Commissioner, the Fisheries Extension Officer of Polonnaruwa, the Fisheries Inspector and a number of Government officials attended the meeting. At this particular meeting the voice of fisherwomen was very high. A number of women like Vineetha voiced their concern over the poor management of the lake.

Ultimately four women were selected to the co-ordination committee. Vineetha was one of them from the Bandiwewa community. Says Vineetha, 'We needed a legal body to protect our lake. So we formed our fisheries co-op again, of which I am a member. Now the Fisheries Inspector should work with us, to protect the lake.'

"I'm not very educated. I'm not much involved in these management and organizing activities. But from our family Vineetha is involved. Our fishing village has realized the importance of their work. I'm proud to have such an active woman as my wife. She is a blessing to my family, my son and daughter. She is an asset to the whole fishing village and to the Parakrama Samudra." These are the words of Vineetha's proud husband.

Women like Vineetha are involved in feeding their families, as well as in protecting and managing the resources of the lake, through the newly formed lake management committee and co-operative society. Women must be involved in decision-making processes, since they are genuinely involved in the sustainable use of resources, the protection of livelihoods and ultimately of humankind.

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