

Life studies

A seasonal fishing ban meant to conserve turtles in Orissa, India, has fatally affected fishing communities

On 27 September 1997, the Gahirmatha Marine Wildlife Sanctuary was set up in the Indian State of Orissa to protect the olive ridley species of sea turtles in their nesting and breeding habitat, under Section 26 A of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act 1972. The sanctuary of 1,440 sq km is the world's largest nesting site of the endangered olive ridley turtles. It is demarcated into a core area of 725.5 sq km and a buffer zone of 709.5 sq km.

The Indian Coast Guard was appointed Wildlife Warden of the Gahirmatha sanctuary in 1998, with the power to stop and seize fishing vessels, especially trawlers, and to hand them over to the Forestry Department for further action. (The Wildlife Protection Act 1972 is implemented by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, at the national level, and by the State Forestry Departments, at the State level.) All forms of fishing are prohibited in the core area—10 km from the high-tide line—of the Gahirmatha marine sanctuary throughout the year. However, innocent passage through the core area is permitted to fishing vessels with no mechanical means of propulsion. Non-trawl forms of fishing, both mechanized and non-mechanized, are permitted in the buffer area—10 km to 20 km from the high-tide line. Trawlers that are permitted to fish beyond 20 km, however, are required to use turtle excluder devices (TEDS).

For the coastal communities of Orissa, which is amongst the poorest States of India, the fishing prohibitions and the olive ridley issue have turned into a bone of contention because the turtles' breeding habitats in the river mouths also happen to be the richest fishing grounds of the State. The marine turtle congregations

occur in the peak fishing season. Interactions between such congregations and bottom-trawl and gillnet fishing have been reported from 1974. This is perhaps the most striking example of such interactions in the world, involving the protection, almost every year, of an estimated 150,000 adult olive ridley population and their breeding and nesting grounds, on the one hand, and the livelihood interests of about 50,000 fishermen and fishworkers entirely dependent on coastal fisheries, on the other.

Fishing is considered to be the greatest threat facing the olive ridleys in Orissa. The main cause of turtle death is believed to be drowning in bottom trawls and entanglement in certain types of gillnets, which account for about 90 per cent of mortality during the December to February fishing months.

For the first two to three years after the declaration of the sanctuary in 1997, enforcement of the fishing ban was not very strict. As a result, according to forest officials, the mortality of the turtles increased. According to the Wildlife Society of Orissa and Operation Kachhapa (Operation Turtle), during the last 13 years, more than 129,000 turtles have been found dead along the Orissa coast in the Bay of Bengal. With the sandy beaches turning into turtle graveyards, pressure soon began to mount from environmentalists and conservationists from around the world. As a result, the Coast Guard and the Forest Department intensified patrolling, and began strictly enforcing the conservation law.

Traumatic effect

The net effect, however, has been traumatic for Orissa's traditional fishing community, which has to battle poverty

and starvation induced by the fishing ban.

According to Narayan Haldar, the president of the Orissa Traditional Fish Workers' Union (OTFWU), the fishing ban has already broken the backs of the fishing community, especially in the coastal areas of Kendrapara district, where suicide deaths have been reported (see case studies below).

According to Haldar, the fishermen have raised their voices in different ways. On 21 November 2005, around 2,000 fishermen demonstrated in Bhubaneswar, demanding that the sanctuary's seaward boundary should be redrawn up to 10 km from the high-tide line, from the existing 20 km. Similarly, the boundary of the core area of the sanctuary should be reduced to 5 km from the existing 10 km, and innocent passage through the sanctuary should be afforded to all their fishing units. The government should provide them larger boats and engines so they could go offshore for fishing. A 30 per cent loan and a 70 per cent subsidy should be provided to purchase fishing equipment, they demanded.

In January 2006, about 3,000 fishermen blockaded a road in Kendrapara district to protest the ban. Forest Department officials had seized three gillnetters and a trawler, and arrested nine fishermen on charges of illegally fishing in the prohibited area. The irate fishermen blocked the main road at Jamboo village for three hours, demanding the release of the arrested fishermen.

The fishermen alleged that the Forest Department officials were preventing them from fishing even beyond the 10-km distance. "They arrested the fishermen illegally when they were fishing outside the prohibited area," Tushar Kanta Sardar, secretary of the Kendrapara district fishermen's association, said.

The fishermen of the area say they use small motorized boats, and pay their nets manually, and do not hurt turtles. The large trawlers kill turtles, they allege. Turtle conservationists, however, have a different view. They say that traditional

fishing with 10-14-hp motorized boats also causes turtle mortality.

According to Mangraj Panda of OTFWU, since the fishing ban limits all options for a decent living, the fishermen should be provided an alternative source of income. The union had filed a petition with the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) constituted by the Supreme Court of India. After a visit to Orissa between 10 and 14 February 2004, the CEC directed the State government to demarcate the prohibited zone where fishing is banned.

The 2004 CEC report recommended that innocent passage through the core area of the sanctuary should be allowed only for "traditional fishermen" on local non-mechanized fishing vessels. There should be a committee at the grassroots level, constituted by the fishermen's unions, turtle conservationists, the Forest Department, the Fisheries Department and local representatives. Wildlife protection should be done with the involvement of the community of the area, the CEC proposed.

Unfortunately, nothing has been done yet. The Forest Department has neither demarcated the sea zone nor formed any grassroots committee. As a result, the resentment and misery among the local people have increased, said Narendra Behera, the president of the Mahakalpada *zilla parishad* (village council).

While local fishermen complain, the Forest Department has different views. "The fishermen are trying to make a plea in the name of demarcation. Till date, all those arrested, have been arrested within the 9-10 km sea zone, which is the prohibited area. Of course, the CEC has directed for the demarcation, but it is not an easy task. It requires millions of rupees, which the government has not yet been able to allocate," said A. K. Jena, District Forest Officer (DFO), Rajnagar.

No proposal

He added that there was no proposal from the Fisheries Department for innocent passage. Nor has the fishermen's community given any memorandum to anybody regarding such passage. He also said that the Forest Department does not even know how many boats have been

issued licences. There seems to be a major communication gap or lack of co-ordination between the Fisheries Department and the Forest Department. The fishing ban has a great impact on the fish markets also. According to data from the Fisheries Department, there has been a decline in fish production in Kendrapara district during the last few years.

Greenpeace, the international environmental group, launched *Sugaytri*, a boat specially equipped to undertake exhaustive patrolling to protect the sea turtle. The first event to mark the launch of the campaign was the laying of buoys outside the periphery of the Gahirmatha sanctuary to demarcate the non-fishing zone. Greenpeace also solicited the support of the State Forest Department for the demarcation of the remaining boundaries of Gahirmatha and eventually, the no-fishing zones of other breeding sites, said Sanjeev Gopal, Ocean Campaigner, Greenpeace India.

The CEC is clear in its directives of the need to strike a balance between the rights of traditional fishworkers and the responsibility to protect olive ridleys. The demarcation of the marine protected area in Orissa was the first step in implementing the directives, says Gopal.

Now the immediate intervention that should be made is to give passage to

traditional fishermen to venture into their fishing grounds. There should be proper demarcation in the sea, and the fishermen should be covered under special welfare schemes. They should be provided with alternative sources of income, through vocational training, says Ashish Senapati, the project director of Project Swarajya, an NGO in Kendrapara district.

The fishermen in the Mahakalpada area are mostly post-Partition immigrants and a large number are Bengali refugees from the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), who settled on land provided by the government. Most—80 per cent—of the coastal villagers are Bengali-speaking people who eke out a living by fishing. Being immigrants, they are a political minority, and their voices remain unheard. They are just used as a vote bank, says Rajesh Behera, a freelance journalist.

In last two years, the coastal villages of Kharnasi and Ramnagar have seen at least seven persons committing suicide and seven more reporting severe mental distress, unable to feed their families and repay bank loans after they lost their traditional means of livelihood due to the fishing ban.

Official ignorance

Both Jyotiprakash Das, the District Collector of Kendrapara, and Suresh Mohanty, the Chief Wildlife Warden, claimed to be unaware of the deaths in the

fishing community, reportedly induced by the poverty that resulted from the fishing ban. But they did not hesitate to accept the fact that the livelihoods of the fishermen have definitely been affected by the ban and that they are yet to provide a single alternative source of livelihood for them. “Definitely, the turtle conservation and fishing ban has had a great impact on the fishermen. From time to time, we visit the places that have reported the deaths, but officially, I can’t say that the deaths are due only to the fishing ban. A proper investigation is needed,” said B. C. Hembrum, a Fisheries Department official at Kujang.

It is high time that the whole international community, the government machinery, turtle conservationists, environmentalists and NGOs start thinking of the interests of the fishermen and their families and communities, and link these with the protection of the olive ridley turtles.

CASE STUDY 1: Gauranga Saha

Gauranga Saha of Kharnasi village died on 14 March 2004 at the age of 50, leaving behind his 44-year old wife, Arati, and five children—two sons and three daughters, one of whom, the second, Tulasi, 20, got married last year. The eldest son, Deepak, is 24 years, and the youngest, Debabrata, 15, studies in the ninth class. The other two daughters are Nilima, 22, and Bulu, 18.

Saha committed suicide by consuming poison, confirmed his widow. She said that after the fishing ban, he was increasingly worried about the family’s source of livelihood. The family owned four boats, outfitted in 1997 with 10-14 hp motors. A boat costs around Rs250,000 (US\$5,666) and typically, six persons work on each boat.

Saha was the *sarpanch* (village council leader) of Kharnasi during the last term. He had borrowed Rs150,000 (US\$3,399) from the fish merchants Nari Tarai and Bapina Saha of Paradeep to repair his nets and gear. In 2001 the Forest Department seized two of Saha’s boats. Another boat had already been destroyed in the 1999 supercyclone. In 2002 Saha’s second daughter got married, so he had to borrow Rs2,500 (\$56) from the fish

merchant for the dowry. Thus Saha’s loan burden multiplied as time went by—moneylenders in the coastal villages of Orissa double their interest rates for every three months of default.

According to Arati, since 2001 the family had virtually lost their source of livelihood. Though they had one boat left, the fishing ban prevented Saha from going fishing. Since then, he was a very depressed man. He constantly worried about how they would marry off their two daughters. The elder son had already dropped out of school to help his father. But as they could not venture into the sea to fish, he too sits idle. “Just two days before his death, he bought me a cotton saree as I was managing with just two sarees. He assured me that everything would be fine. He also, at the same time, said he regretted not being able to do a lot of things for the family. Destiny did not seem to support us...Who knew those would be his last words?” Arati sobbed.

Saha ended his life by consuming poison when the entire family was asleep. When they did not find him on the bed in the morning, they searched all around and finally found his body in an isolated room, which had been lying unused for a long time.

The family plans to hand over their only boat to Bapina, the fish merchant, to repay a debt of Rs70,000 (\$1,577). Their current financial condition is miserable. Deepak, the elder son, is unemployed and idles out the fishing ban period; he can get work on other boats as a deckhand for only two months, earning Rs500 (\$11) per month. Arati sells puffed rice, for which she earns Rs2 (\$0.05) a day. Her daughters roll *beedis* (cigarillos). “For 1,000 *beedis*, we make Rs30 (\$0.7). To bind 1,000 *beedis*, we take two days, so per day, we get only Rs15 (\$0.35). And in a month, we get work for only 12 to 14 days,” Nilima said. That means that on average both sisters earn about Rs225 (\$5) per month. Add to this their mother’s income of about Rs90 (\$2), and their total monthly income comes to about Rs 315 (\$7), or yearly, Rs4,780 (\$108).

CASE STUDY 2: Bidyadhar Ram

Bidyadhar Ram, 35, of Kharnasi village committed suicide by hanging himself one night in an abandoned thatched

building near his house in December 2005. His widow, Sikha, is 32 years old. "For the last few years, he was depressed and frustrated," she said. "One day two months ago, in December 2005, he came and told me that he could no longer maintain us because he had a loan burden of Rs10,000 (\$225), accumulated over time from borrowings from the trawler owners of Paradeep.

Ram did not have any boat of his own; he worked on trawlers as a helper, earning Rs100 (\$2.25) daily. I decided to go to my parent's home for some time, thinking that I would return with my children when the fishing starts.

The day after reaching my parent's house with my children, I was informed that Ram had committed suicide by hanging himself. If I could have smelled his intention, I would never have left him," Sikha lamented. Sikha said that though they were not financially very sound, they managed a hand-to-mouth existence. Their problems started over the last five years. When the fishing ban got longer, Ram could not earn anything, and so he started borrowing money from the trawler owner whom he used to work for earlier.

Asked whether they had had a fight before she left for her parent's house, Sikha said: "It soon came about that we couldn't provide a square meal for our children.

That irritated me and frustrated him. So we had arguments and fights sometimes, like any family in a similar situation, I guess. My husband was rendered helpless. He tried to go outside and get work as a wage labourer but in this area, no work was available."

Sikha now stays in a one-roomed thatched house with her three children and old mother-in-law. The eldest daughter, Mausumi, is 14 years old. The two sons, Bitu, 10, and Bibekananda, 7, are with her mother. The family does not own any land. They built their thatched house on government land. Their only source of income is the daughter, Mousimi, who now works as a maidservant in a nearby village. "I have to walk at least 2 km to reach that village. They pay me Rs2 (\$0.05) daily," Mousimi said. Both the sons have been withdrawn from their schools and will be sent to the town to work as child labour, according to their mother.

CASE STUDY 3: Sukumar Sarkar

Sukumar Sarkar, 54, of Pitapata village committed suicide by consuming pesticide in March 2004. He had three children—daughters, Sabita, 23, and Binita, 21, and a son, Bhabani, 20. His daughters had been married off before his death. His widow, Golapi, left the village with her son last year.

Though we could not contact them, we could gather information of the family



from the president of the *panchayat* (village council), Narayan Haldar, and the villagers. According to them, Sarkar owned two gillnet boats, fitted with 10-15 hp motors. In 2002, the Forest Department seized both the boats. Though Sarkar managed to work on other boats for some time, after the fishing ban, all fishermen, including the trawler owners, were in financial difficulty. Sarkar managed to marry off his daughters by borrowing some money. Meanwhile, he fell ill and could not go out in search of work. The fish merchants from whom he had borrowed money would frequently badger the family for repayment, so one day, Sarkar's son, Bhabani, migrated elsewhere and his widow Golapi went to stay with her daughter-in-law.

CASE STUDY 4: Rashyamaya Mandal

50-year old Rashyamaya Mandal of Ram Nagar village committed suicide on 10 April 2002. Mandal had six children—three daughters and three sons. The eldest daughter, Sabitri, is 26 years old; the other children are: Ganesh, 24; Laxmi, 22; Bijili, 21; Sanjay, 15; and Pintu, 14.

According to Mandal's widow, Kalidasi, they had one motorized 20-ft gillnet boat, which they had already lost to the 1999 supercyclone. Besides, they had one country boat and two acres of land, on which they sometimes grew paddy. "We were living hand-to-mouth because we

had a large family, with six children. My elder son abandoned his studies to go fishing with his father. When the ban was imposed, our economic condition got worse. Meanwhile, the marriage of our elder daughter, Sabitri, was finalized. My husband took a loan from the bank for her marriage. To repay the loan, we mortgaged our two acres of land to Ranjit Mandal of Ramnagar and Mahant Babu of Kharnasi village. During the fishing ban, we faced lots of problems in meeting our daily needs. My husband's frustration from the financial crunch cost him his mental balance. He began to behave abnormally and went out for days together. My children had to search for him and bring him back home. One day, all of us went to attend a social function and when we returned home late in the evening, he was no more. He had committed suicide by hanging himself," Kalidasi burst out in tears.

After Mandal's death, the family had to sell their country boat for Rs2,500 (\$56), though its market value is almost Rs7,000 (\$158). Their land was confiscated by Ranjit Mandal and Mahant Babu, as they could not repay their debt. Now they have neither land nor a source of livelihood. The elder boy, Ganesh, is now the sole earning member of the family. Ganesh used to work as a casual labourer for Rs50 (\$1) per day. But since there are no jobs easily available in the village, he has to go far off in search of work, and gets to work for only 10 to 12 days in a month during the seven-month fishing ban period. Occasionally, he finds work on a trawler when the fishing ban has been lifted. His monthly income is about Rs600 (\$14). His mother sells dried cowdung cakes, but makes very little income from her work. The total monthly income of the family is Rs720 (\$16). The six members of the family have to survive on that amount.

CASE STUDY 5: Sripad Jagdar

48-year-old Sripad Jagdar of Ramnagar village died in November 2004, leaving behind four children: Ranajan, 24, Ranjit, 23, Sapan, 16 and Sanjay, 12. His wife, Srimati, said that Jagdar had one motorized 10-hp gillnet boat, which is still with the Forest Department. Though they did not have any land of their own, Sripad could earn enough for his family, hiring other boats for fishing. Before the ban was

imposed, he was earning up to Rs4000 (\$90) per month. After the ban, gradually the family income shrunk and soon became insufficient for a decent living. Meanwhile, Sripad contracted a tumour in his abdomen, and doctors referred him to the city hospital.

“At first, we somehow managed to collect Rs15,000 (\$338) by borrowing and got his operation done in a hospital in the capital. When he fell ill again, the doctor diagnosed it as a stone in his kidney, and advised us to take him to Hyderabad for treatment, but we could not since we were left without even a single paisa,” Srimati said. As a result, he remained at home and ultimately died for want of proper treatment.

“If fishing had not been banned, and our fishing activities had continued as earlier, we would not have lost our father. You are directly or indirectly forcing people to die. It’s happened to us,” laments Jagdar’s eldest son, Ranjan. All the three brothers now collect shrimp fry from the river, each earning about Rs7-10 (\$0.22) per day. They have no cultivable land, and only a mud house to live in, and their mother does not even get a widow’s pension from the government.

CASE STUDY 6: Jagdish Das

Jagdish Das, 55, committed suicide by consuming poison in September 2003. His wife, Kalpana, said that after the fishing ban, both his 14-hp motorized boats got destroyed. Das has seven children: four sons and three daughters. The earnings from his two boats were not sufficient for the large family. Besides, all the children were studying, and there were loans to be repaid.

Being very introvert by nature, Das never discussed his financial condition with anyone, not even with his wife. The couple had great hopes for their two sons who were doing undergraduate studies. Both hoped to get good jobs once they graduated. Meanwhile, Das developed a physical ailment, but the family had no money to take him to the hospital. Kalpana then decided to sell their only house to treat her husband. Though she broached the subject with him, he never responded. Two days later, he committed suicide.

Now the Das’ do not have a source of income. Though the two sons gained some sort of employment in a private school, they have not started getting salaries. Das’ sons were very reluctant to give an interview. They wished to regard the whole thing as a family affair.

CASE STUDY 7: Birat Haldar

Birat Haldar of Kharnasi died in January 2003 after consuming poison. He leaves behind his wife Deepali, and two sons. They now survive by working on trawlers and collecting shrimp fry from the creeks. Though we could not meet them, the villagers of Kharnasi confirmed Haldar’s death and his family’s plight.

CASE STUDY 8: Jodan Biswas

Jodan Biswas, 46, of Ram Nagar, committed suicide by consuming poison. He leaves behind a son. The small family had been earning a living from fishing. Biswas had one boat, which has since been taken over by the fish merchant, to whom he owes Rs40,000 (\$903), which he had borrowed for the treatment of his wife’s tuberculosis, which she never survived. His wife’s death and the financial crisis following the fishing ban forced Biswas to commit suicide. His only son has since left the village.

This report has been filed by Sarada Lahangir (sarada_india@sify.com), correspondent, ANI, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India