

Politics or Policy?

Reflections on a recent workshop on India's National Fisheries Policy (Inland)

The Training of Trainers workshop on the National Fisheries Policy (Inland) in December 2022 in Kolkata was a great learning experience for the participants. Just that this time around, the learning was of a different nature. It was not from data, facts, meetings or experiences but from many uncomfortable realizations. A vote of thanks is due to ICSF for organizing it. However, a critique of the nature of participation and the tenor of voices is also important.

Every workshop, by design, follows an arc of narratives. Scientists and government representatives, some with a double role, speak about the problems facing inland fisheries, followed by their (almost always successful) solutions and future challenges. They speak about the revenue side and the welfare side of fisheries management in India's inland waters, providing a canvas across states. This discourse is largely based on facts and figures, yet partly driven by a subconscious ideology of modernist neoliberalism. According to eminent rights advocates present at the workshop, it was another version of top-down control cloaked in terms of welfare or justice. Fisher groups then respond saying that these big numbers and platitudes barely address issues they are facing on the ground.

One of the strengths of ICSF workshops is how they always provide this democratic, deliberative space. It is an encouraging attribute for those at the margins, who are not from the government nor aligned with fishing groups or the organizers. The core contention in the debate above is not new; but the management of that debate should be fresh—one workshop at a time.

However, three months after the workshop, what registers prominently is the political oppositions at all costs, especially from the louder rights advocates. The aim of a workshop is

mutual learning, neither consensus-building nor political polarizing. And so, we must grapple with what this tough rights-centred politics on the fisher groups' side may mean for the future of ecosystem-based management of inland small-scale fisheries (SSF).

With the National Fisheries Policy in the public consultation and revision process, and in light of the SSF Guidelines, the much-touted 'Ecosystem Approach' to fisheries management is soon to occupy its own policy niche in India. The phrase has not much traction beyond a buzzword because issues of people's rights and ownership remain unaddressed in the highly diversified and sprawling enterprise of inland fisheries.

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The low interest in ecosystem-based management probably stems from the belief that after communities have control of their fishery habitat and resources, an ecosystem-based approach will magically follow. Because communities will always have the intrinsic knowledge, wisdom, and foresight to understand and implement it. Importantly and arguably, this may not be true in most cases. Like all institutions, community institutions comprise people and their failings. So there is no rational reason, except faith, in expecting them to be better or worse than state or civil society organizations.

Numerous experiences

Experiences from numerous SSF across the world show that, as much as collective action and equitable

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A group photo. The aim of a workshop is mutual learning, neither consensus-building nor political polarizing. And so, we must grapple with what this tough rights-centred politics on the fisher groups' side may mean for the future of ecosystem-based management of inland SSF

management successes, narrowly focusing on rights had led to escalated conflicts, fragmentation and weakening of local informal codes and institutions (Kelkar and Arthur, 2022). It has also resulted in the abdication of responsibilities towards sustainability, environmental conservation, and ethical fisheries development (Bromley, 2009). There's no denying that the demand for rights and rightful 'stakes' in fisheries by community groups is absolutely critical. But increasingly so, the demand for rights is becoming narrower and narrower, with the mention of attendant responsibilities, social or environmental, being conveniently side-lined.

Politics is central and essential to organization and institutional management and use of resources by people. It allows for articulation of shared interests, of rightful demands to reverse long-drawn and normalized socio-economic inequities and injustices. Politics also creates ground for assertions that communities—and not the state machinery—are the naturally-selected institutions for taking decisions on resources. However, when these demands for entitlements become the end rather than a means to the larger goals of equity, justice, or sustainability, there is a problem of self-negation.

This can become a risk when fishers' interests regard themselves as sovereign in their sphere, as seen in the statements

of some workshop participants. In the process, it can disregard any other economic and ecological concerns of society. Researchers have pointed out multiple contradictions within the rights space in fisheries (Song and Solimann, 2019); between universal and specific rights, between rights to harvest and the duty to conserve, and between rights for individuals and community rights. Since this process begins with locating all State and civil society supporters as their sworn enemies, scope for any collaboration diminishes, and any such engagement is seen as weakness rather than conciliation.

Unfortunately, this can become the undoing of the activists' own cause. With a hard-line frame utilized to view all problems, everything appears dark and unfair only outside the community, and the scope for self-checks and constructive reform within the community shrinks. There are critical development concerns facing fishers.

Social welfare

Continued lack of access to social welfare schemes is a big one there, as is increasing involvement in crime, as seen with many inland capture fisheries turning into a criminal political economy. The first part is a structural crisis, the second part is a combination of fishers' agency and opportunism. School dropouts among fishers' children, or health issues

among women and aged fishers, are all severe problems. But are rights-centred political demands helping change the situation? At least in my experience, they have not, what with the absence of constructive political discourse.

The workshop had surprising moments of vicious attacks by several activists against cooperative institutions. It is true, as they repeatedly emphasized, that cooperatives have been functioning poorly, faced elite capture, and were being managed by corrupt functionaries, among other problems. But to respond to historical trust deficits by blaming cooperatives for taking away fishers' rights was a revelation.

It was also ironic that the same fisher representatives who showed utter lack of faith in even a pale shadow of the State, also demanded, in the same breath, numerous benefits and help from the State entities. To think of it, the demand for fishers' rights to resources, having come from disillusionment with the State functionaries in the first place, should also be accompanied by alternative and confident visions of fisheries sustainability and community development. As those visions were sorely absent or missing, the way out of the crises of scale facing fishers and fish resources have to be addressed with collaborative efforts. Surprisingly, the seekers of rights consider this anathema.

The rhetoric from the scientists' is worth noting also. Scientists of fisheries research institutions at once highlight both 'overfishing' and 'unexplored or potential yield' in inland fisheries as problems of overcapacity as well as underutilization. Overfishing does not leave any potential yield to explore unless fishers start harvesting anything that comes their way. If there are still 'yield gaps', that is, the difference between actual yield and potential yield, then where is the overfishing?

It is a basic question with far-reaching ramifications. From a conservation standpoint, all fishing is overfishing. From a fisheries revenue standpoint, all fishing is under-fishing. This is seen in the way the state fishery departments have been mostly about exploitation of fishery resources. (At the fisheries department office in

Port Blair, a sculpture of smiling shark had a message inscribed on it to this effect: Exploit me for my fins, my skin, my meat.) But when both seem to be happening at once, the fisher becomes both an imprudent resource exploiter as well as a conservative and pessimistic entrepreneur.

Both perceptions may not be true, even though they appear so because of the desperation fishers face in overcoming poverty and social barriers, and adapting to declining and uncertain fish catches. The fishers display resilience in continuing to fish despite their resource base being degraded by dams, water pollution, climate change, and weakening of local institutions. Scientists need to examine that resilience in order to become more acutely understanding of socio-cultural-economic bottlenecks to address problems affecting inland fisheries.

The weakening of local institutions stares in the eye the optimistic faith and vain romantic belief in community power. One activist said he feels energized by the 'consciousness' he senses in local meetings. Event-energy, however, should not be confounded with daily practice, the gaps in which would become apparent if one incisively dissected what community itself has become today.

Community rights are easier imagined than implemented, for the simple reason that the so-framed community consists of increasingly desperate individuals. Inland fishers are rapidly exiting fisheries and migrating to far corners as workshops continue and national policies get developed. In this fickle age of opportunist daily-earning livelihoods and volatile economics, it is increasingly difficult to afford altruism. A common refrain among the poorest fishers during numerous discussions is that they cannot afford to sit in meetings. They would rather fish; even as the better off among their community do not fish anyway but always organize and attend the same meetings.

With these difficult-to-accept realities, why continue holding the belief that only communities can secure social justice or environment? With the notion of community being nebulous, only faith can lead us to promote community-based management as the

panacea for all governance problems in inland fisheries. Community organizations, even if strengthened and reinvigorated, can only be one of the institutions among the larger mix, and cooperative arrangements would be inevitable, even though they would limit politics of rights and rhetoric.

What is the scope for placing concerns of ecological responsibilities and biodiversity conservation, perhaps the most basic need for fisheries sustainability, in the intensively cultivated landscape of rights and demands? Because these concerns matter more, or at least as much as those of human development, equity, justice, ethics, and compliance, it is disappointing to see a rapidly declining scope for them within rights-centric political positioning.

The 'ecosystem' in the ecosystem-based approach, unfortunately, seems to be turning into a space in which the narrowly self-centred political subspecies of *Homo sapiens* can thrive. One cannot help but wonder if it is just 'politics-based fisheries management' that fisher activists and organizations target in the name of ecosystem-based fisheries management.

The workshop might have gone closer to its aim with a more representative and diverse selection of workshop participants, with wider geographic scope and state quotas delimited. Apart from representation being highly uneven, decibel power and prior participation seemed to be two obvious self-selecting variables. The contingents of Odisha and West Bengal had several experienced members, not all of them trainers, probably due to their proximity. Only Maharashtra and Assam had one or two with genuine trainer-level experience and contextual understanding.


The number from two very important Gangetic plains states was zero and two, respectively, and those who attended from the latter were local politicians who barely knew the basics of the National Fisheries Policy or the SSF Guidelines. Representatives from two other states barely attended most sessions. The organizers would need to push for a more well-rounded and careful selection of participants, moving forward, if such workshops

have to achieve the goals of knowledge transfer and mutual learning, rather than hearing the same problems and shouting over and over again, *ad nauseum*.

Notwithstanding the above observations, there's no need for pessimism or cynicism. We can collectively work towards resource-sustainable, environmentally-conscious, economically equitable, and socially just inland fisheries management in the future. Fisher collectives and unions, and their activists and advocates, have been giving voice and representation to many marginalized and neglected groups. They need to continue doing this important work, but probably not by staying dismissive or unseeing of the changing micro-political and economic realities within communities.

The romance of activist consciousness cannot be a delusional one about the virtues of imagined or supposedly united communities. Moving towards ethical fisheries would need to involve a careful revisiting of what and how demands for rights, and whose rights, are prioritized. And, in the process, who may be left out. Accordingly, demands for rights will have to be tempered with a more thoughtful, inclusive engagement for concerns about socio-economic, community-based development and environmental conservation.

Democratic dialogue

These goals have to be joint, not one following another. One hopes that future workshops develop new ways and means for dialogue that remain democratic and healthily dissenting but also work towards problem-solving with a collaborative orientation across the political and institutional bouquet necessary for fisher communities and fisheries development. 

For more

National Training of Trainers (TOT) Workshop (Inland Fisheries) on the SSF Guidelines

<https://www.icsf.net/resources/icsf-tot-inland-fisheries-2022/>