

Economic injustice in small-scale wetland Fisheries in West Bengal, India



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In the state of West Bengal in India, fisheries are basically small-scale in nature. Small-scale fishery in Beledanga wetland is an inland, open-water fishery conducted by fishers in adjoining villages of Gopalnagar, Barrackpur and Beledanga in Bongaon Block of North 24 Paraganas district of West Bengal. The watershed area of the wetland is 148.7 acres (60.18 ha) with a depth of 10 to 12 ft. The current fish production is 32 tones. The wetland fishery is managed by Beledanga Barrackpore Fishers' Cooperative Society (established in 1958), which has seven board members and six permanent employees. Nearly 80% of the population of the households residing around Beledanga wetland belong to socially and economically marginalized Scheduled Caste, and are registered members of the Fishers' Co-operative Society. They are bestowed with fishing rights in Beledanga wetland by dint of their tradition in fishing as the primary occupation in their families. The fish harvested from the wetland is sold at the nearby wholesale and retail markets within 0.5 km radius. Fisher's average monthly household income varies from ₹ 5,000 to ₹ 15,000 (USD 60 to USD 205). As their secondary occupation, fishers work as daily wage labourers, either in their own villages or in the nearby peri-urban and urban areas.

Photo: Stocking Indian Major Carps in Beledanga wetland through in-situ raising in pens through SCSP Programme demonstrations of ICAR - CIFRI. Beledanga wetland, India. 2019 ©Purna Chandra

Location:

Beledanga wetland, Bongaon, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, India

Ecosystem type:

Freshwater

Main gear:

Cast net, surrounding net, traps, drag nets

Target species:

Catla (*Labeo catla*), Rohu (*Labeo rohita*), Mrigal (*Cirrhinus mrigala*), Snakehead murrel (*Channa striata*) and Mola (*Amblypharyngodon mola*)

Vessel type:

Dugout canoes, small catamarans

No. of small-scale fishers:

176

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Justice in context

Types of justice:

- Distributive
- Social
- **Economic**
- Market
- Infrastructure/wellbeing
- Regulatory
- Procedural
- Environmental
- COVID-19 related

Leasing is becoming a serious issue for the fishers of Beledanga wetland and might overtime lead to substantial economic injustice. The State Government puts the entire wetland on lease for a period of five to six years in which the bidders are asked to place tenders above the threshold level fixed by the Government. The highest bidder would obtain the possession of the wetland and an exclusive right to fish there for the time period mentioned in the leasing process. However, it has been observed that there was an abrupt increase in the threshold price of lease in recent years that is put up to the bidders, most of whom are groups of small-scale fishers that do subsistence fishing in the wetland. The price rise in the bidding process was nearly 75 times of the base price during the time period 2019-20 (from ₹ 7,190 to ₹ 5,31,043 equivalent to USD 99 to USD 7300) for the whole wetland for a course of five to six years. This has resulted in a huge economic burden for the members of the Beledanga Fishers' Co-operative Society to rise up to level of the new threshold level. This situation is becoming a threat to the local traditional fishers who are now faced with fear of losing their fishing rights in the wetland should they not be able to pay the ever-increasing lease in the future.

For these fishers, fishing in the wetland is their primary occupation. However, the abrupt increase has created undesirable pressure on these small-scale fishers, forcing them to seek out additional avenues for earning income. The current economic injustice, if left unaddressed, might displace the traditional fishers from the wetland. At the same time, fishing rights will fall in the hands of wealthy individuals or groups who can afford to pay the high lease and gain monopoly, which will not only evict the local small-scale fishers from their long-held resource but also hamper the aquatic ecosystem of the wetland through unsustainable exploitation of the fisheries resources. Traditional fishers losing their fishing rights might result in social migration and social tension due to a lack of employment.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

Small-scale fisheries in India are defined as traditional fisheries involving fishing households using relatively small amount of capital and energy, relatively small fishing vessels, making short fishing trips, close to shore, mainly for local consumption. Almost entire inland fisheries in India are considered as small-scale fisheries, which not only contribute to nutrition, food security, poverty alleviation and trade but are also closely associated with the sustainable livelihood of millions of fishers and fish workers through generations.

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Dealing with justice

In India, fisheries fall under the state jurisdiction with each state having its own policy and strategy for fisheries development. To date, little has been done to address the economic injustice caused by the increased lease in Beledanga. Wetlands are the wealth of an ecosystem and are crucial for human survival. Traditional fishers are dependent on them for their life and livelihoods but due to the huge lease amounts, most of the fishers' cooperative societies in West Bengal are losing interest in wetland fisheries. The small-scale fishers belong to the lower strata of the society and they are not educated or equipped enough to fight for their justice.

Leasing of wetlands is under jurisdiction of the State. Since wetlands in West Bengal have multiple uses for water, such as fishing, irrigation, jute retting, horticulture and tourism, certain State Government's policy changes in the matter of leasing of inland water-bodies like wetlands need to be re-examined and their implications need to be evaluated. The social activists and researchers have to raise their voices in the social media to draw the attention of the State Departments and governing bodies. Dealing with economic injustice is often a matter of economic reforms. In this case, the price fixation for the lease value may be made in due consultation with the Fishers' Co-operative Society. ICAR – CIFRI supports the Beledanga Fishers' Co-operative Society in administrative liaising with the State Department of Fisheries of West Bengal for developing justified leasing policies at the state level through dialogues and political governance and proper institutional mechanisms in order to address the issue.

Sources:

- Primary data and information collected as apart of activities of SCSP programme of ICAR – CIFRI.



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