Chilika traditional fishers' struggle

For years Maghi Mantri of Panda Pokhari on Chilika Lake watched as local fishermen were squeezed into smaller and smaller spaces by unscrupulous politicians, non-traditional fishermen and illegal shrimp and prawn traders. In 1992 she set up two self-help groups and began to mobilise the local village women. We drive for two hours in a weather-beaten Ambassador on an elevated bund road that starts out excellent, then deteriorates in quality until, in the end, it's a veritable battle against incessant potholes,jaywalking pedestrians, wobbling cyclists and drivers going hell-for-leather. Our destination is a small fishing village whose women and men are trying hard to come to terms with a rapidly changing world. Their once bountiful sea is now flooded with trawlers and shrimp farms, sea pirates and members of the fishermen mafia. The hamlet of Panda Pokhari on the banks of Chilika lake in Orissa's Puri district still does not have even the basic amenities like electricity, medical services or clean drinking water. "We are already starving because we now carry a smaller basket to the market," says 61-year-old Maghi Mantri. "Our men have to go further into the sea in their small boats, dwarfed by big trawlers. We have lived all our lives by the sea, but what will happen to our children?" she asks, worry writ large on her wrinkled brow as she lights a small oil lamp. Around us, life in the village settles down as dusk falls on Chilika. Squatting on her haunches, Maghi Mantri waves a helpless hand around as she explains: "Fishing in Chilika has fallen drastically and today the catch is barely enough to feed ourselves. People from outside -- non-traditional fishermen and the mafia -- have laid a ghera around us, just like the gerries (bamboo barricades) they use to breed prawns. If we fight, we are beaten up." Mantri's family comprises her husband, five daughters and two sons. "One son has migrated to Bangalore; four daughters are married and live with their husbands. But my last daughter, though married, is a heart patient and was declared untreatable in Bangalore. So my husband and another person from the village brought her back home. She now lives with her husband, while we live with this sadness every day of our lives."

"When I was small, Chilika had lots of fish. We had enough to eat -- and then some. We even managed to save money to spend during festivals and other occasions. But in 1995-96 things began to change. The government began to give Chilika on lease, and because we had no money to buy a lease we were left out."

Most fishermen belong to the Prathamik Matsajeen Sannavaya Samiti. This society takes parts of the lake on lease from the government-run Fish Fed, and then, in turn, leases to smaller fishermen. But the lease system fluctuates -- sometimes the Fish Fed gives the lease, sometimes it is the district collector. Says gram panchayat worker Ranjit Samal: "Our problems include a drop in fish, crab and prawn production in Chilika, and the 10% hike in lease value by the government. The six types of leases -- dian, uthapani, saharat, janav, khonda and bahan-i -- are hardly helping matters." Mangu Kali, a gram panchayat worker from Rebananuagon, says traditional fishermen have no power to intervene. The government has opened a new sea mouth, but the dredging now allows fresh water from Chilika to mix with the saline sea water, further damaging Chilika's biodiversity. Also, while earlier floods cleaned the lake they are now rare because there's hardly any water in the lake. The ensuing high salinity is another reason for declining fish catch. Eventually, it is us the fishermen -- at the end of things -- who suffer. Banamali Jana, a gram panchayat worker from nearby Alupatana, says the Chilika Development Authority set up by the government of Orissa doles out a lot of money to develop the lake but it seems to benefit no one. "Only tourists benefit -- from jetties, guesthouses, fancy boats for sight-seeing, museums, parks, pathways." In 1951, the government used to give Prathamik Matsajeen Sannavaya Samiti a three-year lease; now it is just one year and we have to bid for it every year. Some get it, and those who don't have money or clout don't. "In 1991, the Orissa government took a decision that 30% of the area of Chilika around our villages would be given to non-fishermen. But they forgot that the shoreline is the most productive area for us. The coming together of unscrupulous politicians and bureaucrats, together with non-traditional fishermen and illegal shrimp and prawn traders and companies is slowly driving us to penury, hunger and extinction," says Maghi. Fed up with the status quo and the unending daily travails, in 1992 Maghi Mantri began to mobilise local village women around issues that mattered to them -- food security, unemployment and penury, health and education. "Shri Umakant Mohanty, secretary of Gopi Nath Jivak Sangh, a local NGO, took me under his wing and encouraged me to go to my people to shake them out of their inertia. He was constantly urging me to think, to decide, and to act. Not to just sit; to do something! So, very shakily, I began to go from house to house and speak to other women and their families. But the traditional mindset of our women, along with the resistance the men put up, made things very difficult for me initially. Nobody came forward until, desperate and frustrated, I began to berate them about how whining about problems was not going to solve them. This shook the women out of their self-doubt, and gradually some began to come forward to join hands with me," she says with a smile.

So, in 1992, Maghi Mantri set up two small self-help groups (SHGs) -- Maa Tarini and Maa Kali Jai -- whose members contributed rice and Rs 2 per month. "Earlier there were 30 members, but now we have a dedicated strength of 15 members each in Maa Tarini and Maa Kali Jai," she says. "When we started I had to speak to the women secretly by gathering them in my house. But when other women saw its success, they also began joining. Of course the men opposed the idea, but we didn't stop."

After six months of saving, Gopi Nath Jivak Sangh helped get a loan of Rs 8,000 from the bank. "The money was used to make dry fish by salting it. It is more valuable. We made a profit of Rs 5 per kilo after meeting all our expenses (no, I don't remember the exact sum, unfortunately!)." They loaned a portion of the profits to village fishermen, at a minimum rate of interest, so that they could buy nets, baits (weights) and other implements. They even loaned money to non-fishermen, who used the money to buy seeds, fertiliser, paddy, etc. "The fishermen tell us they mainly use loans to repair fishing nets and boats, to seek medical help for their sick children, to pay school fees, for marriages and other social ceremonies, and to improve crops. Because there are just not enough funds they can source," says Maghi. Since the amount available for loans with the SHGs is small, all members do not borrow at the same time; the group decides on the sequence based on the urgency of need. The next person can borrow only when a loanee has repaid his loan. The deposit in the bank now is almost Rs 100,000. Strange as it may sound, the SHGs loaned money on a priority to men who used the money to advance their businesses, and returned the money with interest. "This actually inspired their women!" says Maghi. But the SHGs have not meant an end to their problems. Most fishermen still have no pattas (title deeds) to their homesteads, no land for agriculture, only a lower primary school, and medical facilities that are 4 km away, in Panaspada. The community
health centre (CHC) is in Kiranya, 14 km away. Because of the large number of waterbodies around, diseases like malaria, jaundice, skin diseases and gastric problems are common. The village has only a tubewell for its water supply.

"I earn Rs 1,500 per month as a manual labourer; there's no option but to adjust. Sometimes my son-in-law helps support the family. Because of our BPL card we get rations that allow us to get by. Otherwise, there's only my husband's old age pension -- Rs 200 per month," says Maghi.

K Alleya, general secretary of the Orissa Traditional Fish Workers' Union (OTFWU), is all praise for Maghi and her band of women. "We are determined to protect our way of life. Today, these women have come forward; tomorrow they could be important stepping stones for us to organise ourselves if we do not want to be squeezed by ports, tourist hotels, SEZs or steel and power plants. Where is the space for keotas (traditional fisherfolk) to continue in their traditional profession?"

"Apart from economic security, our groups are slowly becoming nodal points for mobilisation," agrees Maghi. "The women -- and men -- have discovered that they need to come together to find collective solutions to their individual problems, such as unemployment and debt. This is our way of striving to get our Chilika back. But will we have to give our entire lives to dharnas and rallies?" she asks, her rheumy eyes glinting in the wavering candlelight. No one seems to have an answer for that -- yet.

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