

2. Strength in Numbers

Fishing communities in India assert their traditional rights over livelihoods resources



Phula (orange) and Jaikuvar pulling the net, Birara village, Tikamgarh
© Rajendra Shaw/Oxfam

Villagers in the Tikamgarh and Chattarpur districts of Madhya Pradesh traditionally had the right to fish the region's ponds, but had lost control of these valuable resources to landlords and contractors. Despite encountering violent opposition, the fishers began organizing to reclaim control of the ponds. They established village co-operatives and formed a federation that gave a strong voice to the region's fishing communities. By 2008, fisher co-operatives controlled 151 ponds, with nine run by women's groups. In 2008, their campaign persuaded the state government to revise its fisheries policy, introducing a new law that protects the rights of traditional fishing communities and contains provisions that should help to improve livelihoods in the drought-hit region.

Introduction

The Bundelkhand region of central India is a semi-arid plateau that encompasses six districts of northern Madhya Pradesh and seven districts of southern Uttar Pradesh. Much of the region suffers from acute ecological degradation due to topsoil erosion and deforestation, making the land unproductive. It is also one of the least developed regions in the country in terms of per capita income and literacy levels. In Madhya Pradesh the proportion of the population living below the poverty line was 38.3 per cent in 2004–05 (Government of India),¹ while in 2008 the male adult literacy rate (age 15 and over) was 73 per cent and the female adult literacy rate was just 48 per cent (World Bank).²

Fishing is an important economic sector in India. Inland and marine fisheries together account for around 1 per cent of national GDP and make an important contribution to foreign exchange earnings; in 2004 these amounted to \$1.36bn (FAO, 2009).³ FAO estimates that the sector supports around 14.7 million people, with two million directly employed in full-time or part-time fishing activities and nearly four million engaged in ancillary activities such as net-making and fish vending (FAO).⁴ The state of Madhya Pradesh is a significant contributor to India's growing inland fisheries sector, with over 335,000 hectares of ponds and reservoirs.⁵ The state's annual production of fish amounts to 61,500 tonnes, and it has approximately 1,680 fisher co-operatives with 58,500 members.⁶

Despite the industry's potential, traditional fishing communities in Madhya Pradesh have struggled to sustain their livelihoods. In 1998, when Oxfam began working in Bundelkhand, the rights of traditional fisherfolk had been largely eroded and contractors, given access by village landlords, had gained control of the ponds. Many of the region's 45,000 fishing families had become waged labourers, badly treated and poorly paid, and at risk of losing access to the resources that provided them with a livelihood. The state government provided little or no support for fishing communities, and local officials paid no attention to their grievances.

With the support of Oxfam, fishing communities in the two Bundelkhand districts of Tikamgarh and Chattarpur began fighting to re-establish their rights over the fishing ponds in the late 1990s. VIKALP, a local NGO specializing in sustainable development, also played a crucial role in helping communities to set up village co-operatives to fish the ponds. Their struggle gained momentum as fishermen and women from other villages joined their campaign. This led eventually to local fishing communities regaining control over 151 ponds for the cultivation of fish (and of crops in the dry season) – a huge achievement. Furthermore, the community-led campaign persuaded the state government to introduce a new

fisheries law that guarantees rights to the ponds, improves access conditions, and promises to enhance livelihoods for many more people in the region. With this support, the groups are improving both the ponds and their own levels of organization, in the process emphasizing the empowerment of women.⁷

Marginalized fisherfolk fight back

The Dhimar caste of fisherfolk have traditionally enjoyed fishing rights on ponds and reservoirs (known locally as 'tanks') in the Bundelkhand region. Many of these ponds were built as long as 1,000 years ago. For many years, however, they were neglected and local people fished only for their own consumption.

In 1967 responsibility for leasing the ponds became the responsibility of the *panchayats* (village governing bodies). While on paper fisher co-operatives were meant to have priority, over the years that followed upper-caste landlords, middlemen, and contractors realized the market potential of fish and used their influence in the *panchayats* to take control of the ponds. The terms of the leases they secured were unfair, and local fishers became marginalized, forced to provide low-paid labour for the landlords and contractors. Any attempt to fish on their own account was treated as theft, and fishers were subject to abuse and even to physical violence.

In 1995, a group of 12 young Dhimar fishers in Madiya village took organized action to reclaim their traditional fishing rights. They negotiated with the *panchayat* and district authorities to take over the lease of the Achhrumata pond, despite opposition from the contractor who had previously held it. The fishers stocked the pond with fish, but then at harvest time were confronted by thugs hired by the contractor. A pitched battle ensued, which ended with the fishers' huts being burned down.

Undeterred, the Achhrumata fishers persuaded the local police to accept an official complaint, which was seen as an important symbolic blow against the landlords. This unprecedented success, together with legislation passed in 1996, sparked a wave of organization in poor fishing communities, with other fishers filing formal complaints about attacks made on them.

VIKALP's mission is to work with marginalized and resource-poor communities, particularly women, children, and youth, and to empower them with knowledge and skills, so that communities can achieve development and ensure food security themselves through sustainable practices of natural resource management.⁸ With VIKALP's help, this first group of fishers organized campaigns to encourage others to set up co-operatives and, as their self-confidence grew, fishers took over several other ponds. By the end of 1998, co-operatives had control of ponds in Mandiya, Kakuani, and Daretha.

Despite still having to fight the landlords, the experiences of these pioneering groups demonstrated the returns available if fishers were able to organize and control the ponds. However, it was also clear that changes in policy would make it much easier for fishers to retain control in the long term.

In 1996 the fishers' protests led the Fisheries Minister in the Congress Party government of Madhya Pradesh to push through 'fish to the fisher' legislation that granted leases to fisher co-operatives and gave *panchayats* a clearer framework for managing leases. Although contractors used 'dummy' co-operatives and other tricks to get around the legislation and retain their control of ponds, the new law prompted a wave of co-operation and organization among fisher communities.

Box 1. Reaping the rewards of the struggle

In the village of Dumduma a group of fishers took the Ganga Sagar tank on lease, despite demands for compensation by contractors for the investments they claimed to have made. The fishers negotiated the Rs. 50,000 (\$1,083) demanded down to Rs. 32,000 (\$693) and with great difficulty managed to scrape this sum together, along with an additional Rs. 12,000 (\$260) to stock the tank with fish fry. Their first-year returns on the fish catch amounted to Rs. 300,000 (\$6,500), despite the contractors extracting a further Rs. 32,000 (\$693) from the group.

In 1998, Oxfam began supporting the fisherfolks' efforts. A meeting held in Kakoni attracted around 50 fishers, together with representatives of VIKALP and Oxfam, who agreed to help mobilize financial support. Representatives from co-operatives began meeting monthly, and solidarity between the different groups grew. Unsettled by the growing level of fisher organization, the landlords and contractors attempted to prevent them from meeting, making threats and attempting to create splits between co-operatives. There were many instances of nets being stolen, beatings, and abuse.

By 2000, fisher co-operatives controlled 22 ponds – though the majority remained beyond their reach. Challenges included the high cost of leases; lack of capital investment, quality fish stocks, and market linkages; and restricted rights on the use of pond beds to cultivate water lotus (*kamalgatta*) or other crops during the dry months. Even where fishers did control ponds, they often had to pay up to half of their returns to contractors to cover existing debts or to compensate them for investments in fish stocks.

Continued campaigning spread the word to a further 56 villages, and in 2002 a mass meeting of 10,000 fisherfolk was held in Tikamgarh, followed by the presentation of a 14-point charter of demands to the district collector (the most senior government official in the district), who agreed to take up the matter with the state government. In May 2002 a further mass meeting of fisher representatives was organized with the collector. This resulted in the district administration taking stronger action to remove illegal contractors and to punish co-operative officials illegally colluding with contractors.

Box 2. Women gain in self-belief

Women in the fishing communities began organizing self-help groups in the late 1990s. By 2001, many women's groups had accumulated savings of Rs. 15,000–20,000 (USD 330–440) and started making loans to men's co-operatives for the purchase of fish fry and other inputs.

A women's group first took control of a pond in Birora Kheth village in Tikamgarh in 2002. The women helped to dig the new pond, and when it was complete, put forward their claim to the local *panchayat*. The district collector agreed that the pond would be allocated to whoever could prove themselves capable of fishing it – which the women duly did. They now hold the lease on the pond, manage it, and employ the men to do the fishing work.

This was followed by another women's group taking over a pond in Daretha. Now women's groups have control over 9 ponds in Tikamgarh and five in Chattarpur, stocking them with fish and harvesting and marketing their catches themselves.

VIKALP, with support from Oxfam, helped facilitate this process, with a focus on building capacity and empowering the community, especially women. A central part of this process was the formation of a community-based organisation, the Achhrumata Machhuwara Sangathan, an umbrella group representing the various fisher co-operatives and women's self-help groups. Set up in 2002, the Sangathan's objective was to work with co-operative members to improve the running of the groups and to help them increase their returns, as well as to encourage the formation of further co-operatives (see Box 3).

Box 3. Giving the community a voice

The concept of a community body to represent fishers and co-ordinate their campaign for change was put forward in 2002. The Achhrumata Machhuwara Sangathan is made up of representatives from all the registered co-operatives and unregistered self-help groups that have taken over fishing rights to ponds.

A management committee was elected in 2005, consisting of nine representatives from fishing communities (including three women) and one representative apiece from VIKALP and Oxfam. Elections in 2007 saw the number of women committee members increase to four.

The organization provides a number of services for fisher groups, including:

- A seed fund (Rs. 256,000 (USD 5,600) by 2008) that offers loans to member groups
- Inputs, such as fish spawn, at reduced rates
- Boats and nets that can be rented at harvest times
- Two fish collection centres that reduce transport costs and enable fisher groups to market their fish more easily
- Technical support on lease management, fish production, and organizational development (e.g. book-keeping), and help in accessing government schemes such as insurance.

Most importantly, the Sangathan helps give fishing communities a voice, where previously they had none. Previously, government officials asked for bribes and officials and politicians never listened to fishers, according to Satish Raikwar, president of the Garkhuan village co-operative in Chattarpur. However, he says, 'Today, because the organization is so strong and more and more people are joining, we can put pressure on the government and political leaders.'

With their new-found confidence, the fisherfolk also began to emerge as a political force and became better represented in the *panchayat* structures which control the pond leases. In 2006, seven of the 15 fisherfolk who stood for election won *panchayat* seats.

Progress towards a new fisheries policy

The fishers' campaign for a new policy initiative on inland fisheries in Madhya Pradesh took an important step forward in April 2007, with a state-level workshop organized by VIKALP. Following this workshop, a policy revision committee was formed, consisting of community members and representatives of VIKALP and of another fisherfolk federation, Tawa Matasya Sangh; this committee drafted a policy outline which it presented to the Department of Fisheries. A mass meeting held in Chattarpur in November that year was attended by an estimated 3,000–4,000 fishers, with the Madhya Pradesh Minister of Fisheries, Shri Moti Kashyap, as chief guest. In response to the fishers' concerns, the minister promised to formulate a new fisheries policy that would give priority to traditional fisher castes, peg the annual cost of leases, facilitate pond bed cultivation, and introduce insurance and other schemes for fishers.

The minister held further meetings with representatives of the co-operatives, and another mass meeting took place in Jabalpur, where the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Shri Shiv Raj Singh Chavan, outlined the main points of the new policy. Finally, the long-awaited Madhya Pradesh Inland Fisheries Policy was introduced in August 2008 (see Box 4). The new law has many positive features, including a system of decentralised governance through the *panchayat* system and a well-defined support and extension role for the Department of Fisheries. Of particular benefit to fishers are the new rules on leases, including longer lease periods, lower costs, and a single lease for fishing and water-based crops.

Box 4. The Madhya Pradesh Inland Fisheries Policy 2008: main points

- Priority in fish cultivation is given to traditional fishing castes. Individuals living below the poverty line have priority for ponds up to one hectare in size.
- The lease period has been increased from seven years to ten years (the longest of any state in India).
- To determine the cost of leases, ponds are divided into five categories depending on size, rather than two – thus making smaller ponds cheaper.

The annual lease amount remains fixed for the duration of the 10-year period (compared with a 10 per cent annual increase previously).

- Leases are valid for all uses, including the cultivation of crops such as water lotus and water chestnut in pond beds during dry periods.
- Revenues collected from leases are held by the *panchayats* and used for fisher welfare activities.
- Co-operative societies should have a minimum of 20 members, more for larger ponds.
- Women should make up at least 33 per cent of the membership of any new co-ops registered.
- In the case of drought or natural disaster causing loss of fish stocks or damage to pond structures, the lease amount for that year will be waived and the government may provide some financial compensation.
- Ponds should be managed sustainably – annual fishing bans will be enforced, along with restrictions on draining water from ponds.
- Identity cards and self-employed credit cards are to be introduced for fishers, to enable them to access loan facilities more easily.
- Two representatives from fishing communities will be involved in future reviews of the fisheries policy.

Helping to make change happen

Having started in 1998, Oxfam's Bundelkhand programme became part of the NGO's Global Agricultural Scale Up Initiative in 2007. Both Oxfam and VIKALP adopted a more explicit focus on supporting the capacity of fisherfolk to develop sustainable business enterprises and to enhance their livelihoods through a 'power in markets' approach that increased their ability to access and effectively participate in markets. Adopting this way of working did not diminish the importance of the work to support fisherfolk to secure rights over their ponds or the efforts to change policy. Rather, these were essential elements in creating an enabling environment within which fisherfolk could develop profitable livelihoods.

By the end of 2008, the programme had directly benefited an estimated 12,000 households, allowing them access and rights to use 151 ponds, nine of which were controlled by women's groups. For the future, there are plans to reach 50,000 families by 2012 and 100,000 by 2016.⁹ It is anticipated that the fisheries policy approved in 2008 could potentially benefit millions of fisherfolk across Madhya Pradesh. After more than ten years of activities, an analysis highlights the following factors behind the programme's success in achieving change at scale:

Selecting the right issue

Selecting policy change as a key activity meant that the programme was able to leverage wide-reaching change from a small initial investment. In addition, it was important to identify a policy issue

where there was already a community-led initiative with its own momentum and energy. This meant that Oxfam was able to amplify the efforts of the fisher communities and maximize the impact of the work already being done.

Choosing the right interventions to strengthen the movement

The ability to identify gaps in the movement and to provide strategic support to fill them was essential to the programme's success. In particular, programme staff have pointed towards the investment in strengthening the governance structure and organizational capacity of the Sangathan as one of the most effective interventions. In addition, the convening role played by Oxfam and VIKALP was extremely important in attracting relevant actors and experts to support the initiative and in strengthening women's participation and leadership in the community organizations. Commissioning high-quality research on the situation and engaging with the media were also critical in convincing the government to act.

A strategic approach was taken to leveraging support from existing government schemes. For example, labour has been mobilized under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which offers rural people 100 days of paid employment per year on public works schemes.¹⁰ In the Bundelkhand region, pressure on the government to implement this act has provided fisherfolk with valuable paid employment and has improved pond infrastructure. In 2008–09, the government committed to renovate 449 ponds under this scheme. In total, more than USD 290,000 has been mobilized through government labour schemes.

Changing context, changing approach

Oxfam and VIKALP worked with fishing communities over a 10-year period; adapting the focus of the programme in response to changing circumstances was an important part of the model. Initially the programme concentrated on supporting fisherfolk in their struggle to gain control of the ponds. This meant that community organization and district-level campaigns were prioritized. However, over time, engagement with state-level policy became a more pressing issue and VIKALP focused much more on advocacy and on facilitating the engagement of key stakeholders in the policy consultations.

Supporting diversified livelihoods

The programme focused on enabling fisherfolk to capture greater benefits in the fish market – by improving their ability to organize and market their produce jointly. The development of fish nurseries managed by women has provided an additional source of income, as well as improving supplies of inputs. Management of nurseries by women's groups has given women an opportunity to assume a leadership role and to gain recognition and acceptance as managers in the community. However, as ponds are increasingly frequently affected by drought, the cultivation and collective sale of vegetables

in pond beds during dry periods to provide an alternative source of income has also been encouraged. In 2006 a total of 227 hectares of dried pond beds were used for vegetable cultivation, which generated income of USD 36,937 for local communities. The importance of this dual usage of the ponds was acknowledged in the policy framework, and the new lease structure reflects this important development.

Box 5. Hatchery enterprise spawns growth in profits

Over the past 20 years, the introduction of new varieties of fish and the practice of stocking ponds with fish fry raised in hatcheries have greatly increased fish yields. A pilot project in Tikamgarh to raise fish fry is proving a commercial success.

In the village of Madiya, villagers have set up a hatchery to raise high-quality fish fry, which they sell directly to other co-ops to restock their ponds. The hatchery does not require much water, so this is a sustainable activity even when water levels are low. It is also very profitable, and provides valuable extra income. Other co-ops in the area are now looking to replicate the initiative.

This new enterprise, which generates income while providing a valuable market service, is part of the support the programme provides to fishing co-operatives. In addition, it has helped co-operatives to manage their production more effectively, obtain price information from different sellers, and access markets offering the best prices. Being organized also enables the fishers to sell their produce in bulk, which reduces transport costs and enables them to bargain for a better price.

Source: Oxfam (2008) *Netting Profits*, DVD.

In Bhangwa village in Bundelkhand, the fishing community has developed its own hatchery and no longer has to buy fish fry from government or private contractors. According to Bhuminia, a member of the community, this can save a significant amount of money. 'It cost us Rs. 40,000 (USD880) to develop the hatchery, and each one of the co-operative members contributed Rs. 1,000 for this. We have grown 10 lakh (10,000,000) fishlings from this hatchery, and saved ourselves Rs. 70,000 (USD1540). This is good for our village.'

Scaling up the initiative

The Bundelkhand Fisheries Forum has been established to advocate for the implementation of fisheries policy in the region. The project is being expanded to include two further areas in the Bundelkhand region, Damoh and Sagar. In the existing areas, Chattarpur and Tikamgarh, the number of ponds is to be increased from 150 to 600. The project is also scaling up by helping fisherfolk to move up the value chain. From working on small and medium ponds, communities will now take on the challenge of asserting their rights over large ponds, which will not only strengthen the movement, but will also help them gain market power through control over higher volumes of fish.

Challenges faced

Policy alone is not enough

Although the 2008 fisheries policy has brought significant advantages for fisher communities, there is still a need to address some limitations and ensure that the policy is successfully implemented. For example, the new law lacks provision for increasing supplies of quality fish fry and expanding market linkages, and does not address environmental issues such as pollution control, especially in rivers. Although the roles and responsibilities of some actors (such as the Department of Fisheries) are clearly defined, those of others (such as government departments responsible for irrigation, agriculture, and revenue) are not. These are all areas where Oxfam's programme provides a model that demonstrates the possibilities of the initiative to government departments.

Involving women

Although the 2008 policy stipulates that new co-operatives should have a minimum 33 per cent women members, it does not set out any strategy to increase women's participation. In practice, there are many social and cultural barriers that prevent the adequate involvement of women in the Sangathan. One positive, though unintended, impact in this area has been the emergence of a women's organization addressing issues of violence. However, there is scope to invest more in the entrepreneurial and leadership capacities of women's groups if the programme's gender objective is to be achieved.

Key lessons learned

The development of the new fisheries policy in Madhya Pradesh was a process that began with proactive community mobilization and was based on a consultative approach, facilitated by civil society organizations, and involving the active participation of government officials and political leaders. Key lessons learned from the process include the following:

- Securing rights over assets is a critical aspect of the power in markets approach, but in order to transform people's livelihoods, policy change around asset rights must be complemented by the development of producer-owned enterprises and must work to improve access to both markets and the services that support them (credit, inputs, training, transport, etc.).
- Movements for policy change need to be driven and owned by the community, but are likely to require external support in developing a solid evidence base and in strengthening the governance of community organizations.

- Work is required to ensure the participation of women, where social and cultural barriers make this challenging. However, improvements in economic organization (i.e. through the development of savings groups) offer well-proven opportunities for women to gain power in markets.
- Long-term engagement leads to better and more sustainable results, but strategies need to adapt and change over time in response to changing circumstances.
- Practical limitations that could affect implementation need to be identified and addressed appropriately by the government.
- The example of Madhya Pradesh provides opportunities for other states to review their inland fisheries policies and to make changes that will benefit fishing communities.

Notes

- ¹ Planning Commission, Government of India.
- ² World Bank 'India at a Glance', latest year available 2002–2008.
http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/ind_aag.pdf
- ³ The sector contributed 1.07 per cent of total GDP in 2003–04. FAO (2009) Fishery and Aquaculture Country Profiles.
http://www.fao.org/fishery/countrysector/FI-CP_IN/en
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ C.M. Muralidharan and N. Mishra (2009) 'Community-Led Inland Fisheries Policy Development – Madhya Pradesh Sets The Trend', paper prepared for Oxfam's Small Farmers, Big Change event in May 2009.
- ⁶ Madhya Pradesh Department of Fisheries.
- ⁷ Green, D. (2008), 'From Poverty to Power', Oxfam International, pp.146-147.
- ⁸ <http://www.vikalpa.co.in/index.html>
- ⁹ Oxfam case study of Livelihoods Programme in India. Drafted by R. King, revised by S. Mahajan, N. Mishra, J. Zarembo, and S. Baden (September 2008).
- ¹⁰ NREGA is designed to enhance the livelihood security of households in rural areas. It provides at least 100 days of guaranteed waged employment per financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work at the minimum wage of Rs. 100 (\$2.15) per day.

References

- Department of Fisheries, Government of Madhya Pradesh (1996) 'The Authority and Rules of Three-Tier Panchayats in Fisheries in Madhya Pradesh'.
- Department of Fisheries, Government of Madhya Pradesh (2008) 'Madhya Pradesh Fish Culture Policy and Authority and Rules of Three-Tier Panchayats in Fisheries' (Hindi).
- A. Dhuru (2006) 'A Report on the Status of Fisherfolk in Tikamgarh and Chatrapur Districts of Madhya Pradesh', Oxfam India Trust, Lucknow.
- A. Mathur and I. Pachauli (2006) 'Sangarsha Gatha' (Hindi); 'Fisher Rights on Natural Resources: A document on experiences of Tikamgarh (M.P.)', Oxfam India Trust, Lucknow.
- Oxfam IASU Programme (2009) 'Inland Fisheries in India: Issues and Options'.

S. Sukumaran and K. Murugesan (2008) 'Bundelkhand – Ponds and People. A study of the pond-based livelihoods in Tikamgarh district of Madhya Pradesh'. Draft report: Oxfam India Trust, Lucknow.

VIKALP (2008) 'Annual Report 2007-08'.

© Oxfam GB on behalf of Oxfam India, April 2011

This paper was written by Mr. Neelkanth Mishra and Mirza Firoz Beg. The authors wish to thank Oxfam India, especially Mr. Sharad Mahajan, Mr. Nawal, and other team members of IASU (part of Oxfam India's Agricultural Scale Up team) for their support. Thanks to Mr. V. Vivekanadan and to the VIKALP team, especially Mr. O.P. Rawat, Mr. Sriram, and Ms. Gauravi, and to the community representatives, who made a huge contribution to this paper. The author would also like to thank Mr. Sidhu, Director of Fisheries, Madhya Pradesh, and Mr. Panigrahy and Mr. Pandey, Joint Directors of Fisheries, for sparing their valuable time to discuss the new fisheries policy. The assistance of Emma Donne, Claire Harvey, David Wilson, Kirsty Wilson and Abigail Humphries Robertson is also acknowledged in the production of this paper. This is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues. The text may be freely used for the purposes of campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full.

For further information please email publish@oxfam.org.uk or go to <http://publications.oxfam.org.uk>.

ISBN 978-1-84814-839-0. This is part of a set **Small Farmers, Big Change: Achieving scale in the development of smallholder agriculture.**

Oxfam GB

Oxfam GB is a development, relief, and campaigning organization that works with others to find lasting solutions to poverty and suffering around the world. Oxfam GB is a member of Oxfam International.

Oxfam House
John Smith Drive
Cowley
Oxford
OX4 2JY

Tel: +44.(0)1865.473727
E-mail: enquiries@oxfam.org.uk
www.oxfam.org.uk