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Fish workers on a long, lonely march

Rina Mukherji

THE National Fish Workers' Forum (NFF) has launched a campaign to conserve India's coastline, protect endangered livelihoods and stop the Union government from issuing the Coastal Zone Management (CZM) notification.

In the search for rapid industrialization, India's coastline is being turned into Special Economic Zones (SEZ) and Special Tourism Zones (STZ). The result is the loss of traditional livelihoods and homes as coastal communities get displaced.

Fishing provides livelihoods to more than four million people, and generates 4.5 million tonnes of fish a year.

"The CZM notification will be the death knell of the coast," says Harekrishna Debnath, chairperson NFF and convener of the National Coastal Protection Campaign (NCPC). "Our call is to save the coast and save people who live by fishing."

The Machhimar Adhikar Rashtriya Abhiyan (National Campaign for Fisher-people's Rights) began from Jakho in Kutch, Gujarat, on May 1. It will travel all along the coast and reach Kolkata on June 27. The march will culminate in Delhi in July where a "Fisher-people's Parliament" will be held to coincide with the monsoon session of the Indian Parliament.

"Our appeals and protests have fallen on deaf ears," says Debnath. "Let us all stand together and put up a concerted historic fight against destruction of our coast and our livelihood. Plunderers shall bow before the collective resistance of resolute people and victory will be ours."

The fisher people are marching from Jakho in Gujarat through fishing villages and towns like Mandvi, Ujjas, Dwarka, Porbandar, Mangrol and Verawal onto Ahmedabad. From there they will go to Daman, Mumbai, Goa, Kanyakumari, Chennai, Ongole and on to Kolkata.

All along this route, conventions will be held to make communities aware of the need for conserving the natural ecology of the coast. Wherever possible, mangrove saplings will be planted, says Debnath. There will be an ILO convention at Ambavadi in Gujarat.

nance, resulting in accidents and sometimes the deaths of fishermen. Scarce attention is paid to the coral reefs either, although they account for 25 per cent of the total fish catch in India.

The worst affected states are the ones most industrialized. The Gujarat government condones the excesses of polluting industries all along its coast. Mangroves are depleted to build godowns and factories and soda ash is dumped by chemical industries. "The oil jetties are the worst culprits,"



Fisher people replant mangroves, wherever possible



NFF's complaint is that the Indian coastline is being destroyed in the race to attract investments. To appear industry friendly governments in the states are turning a blind eye to the dumping of wastes at river mouths and in the sea. Oil tankers are being cleaned close to the coast and structures are coming up where the natural contours of the coast should be preserved.

In ecological terms this means damage to coral reefs and erosion. Fishing yields have been dwindling and people have been leaving coastal habitats in search of other ways of earning a living.

The Union government is formally committed to giving priority to farmers and the agricultural sector. But people who live by fishing seem to have been forgotten. They have legal and customary rights to the coast. They are also being hit by trade deals such as the one with the European Union which allows fish imports into India. "Fish prices will plummet and fishermen will starve," says a very worried T Peter, President of the Kerala Swatantra Matsya Tozhilali Federation.

Fishing harbours languish for want of mainte-

says Bharat Patel of the Macchimar Adhikar Sangharsh Samiti (MASS) that represents Kutch fishworkers along the Mundhra coast. Thus, fisheries have totally disappeared from the industrial belt of South Gujarat. And the catch around Daman keeps dwindling by the day

In the past decade, fishermen have migrated in large numbers from South Gujarat to Kutch. But ports and thermal power plants are laying Kutch waste too, Patel points out. The coral reefs of the Gulf of Kutch, that provided a rich ecosystem for diverse species of fish and prawn to breed in, were damaged and broken through to lay the Hazira-Bijaipur-Jagdishpur pipeline in the Eighties, destroying a natural barrier to tidal surges.

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on, salinity has increased turning rich coastal agricultural land fallow all along the Saurashtra coast for the past five or six years. The coast is worst affected where the chemicals hub of Ankleshwar and Verawal and the petrochemical hub of Jamnagar have come up.

"Hilsa has disappeared from the coastal waters of Gujarat and the catch of Bombay Duck and Pomfret has gone down," rues Patel. Tax holidays provided by the Gujarat government following the earth-



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A demonstration against displacement

quake brought industries flocking to Kutch. But in the absence of adequate governance pollution has been so widespread that fish production has drastically dropped.

N D Koli of the Maharashtra Macchimaar Kruti Samiti says Goa is facing the twin onslaught of the shipping and tourism industries. Oil slicks from ships moving close to the coastline, and oil tankers getting washed in shallow waters against all existing regulations continue to pollute the seas. Huge mounds of dead fish and tar balls (caused by ship fuel) pile up on the beaches. As the tourism industry grabs land, and continues to develop resorts, destroying sand dunes and sinking wells along the coast, traditional livelihoods and coastal ecosystems are under attack, drastically reducing the fish catch.