



LIVELIHOOD

Fishing for prosperity

Tanks of Tikamgarh are transforming lives of Dhimars...

The monsoon this year has changed the socio-economic landscape of the non-descript Birora Kheth village in Madhya Pradesh's Tikamgarh district. It has pushed the village above the infamous poverty line, probably for the first time in memory. The village women formed a fishery cooperative society after they snatched fishing rights on a pond from the upper caste residents in 2001. Making the transition from daily wage labourer in the pond to its owner, the 42-member cooperative has doubled the village's annual income just by selling fish. The monsoon bounty has just added to their profits.

Last year, the monsoon was deficient and the total earning was Rs 20,000. Even though it was for the first time that such a huge amount of money was seen physically in the village, for the cooperative society it was not sufficient. Because, the village's Dhimar (traditional fisherfolks) women residents gave voluntary labour participation worth Rs 26 lakh in May-June 2001 to dig the pond. "In face of drought and diminishing livelihood sources, women have taken the lead to change the fate of the village," says Panchia. "This monsoon the pond would fill up and we are sure to earn around Rs 1lakh," says Panchia Kewat, a Dhimar woman.

Panchia and other village women waged an unusual war against the village's dominant upper cast people who retain control over all local resources. When the pond was completed, the Gramsabha (village council) handed over it to the tribals and scheduled caste people. As a protest the Dhimar women didn't allow anybody to fish and formed their own cooperative society to start a fishery. Finally, the district collector gave a verdict: "Whoever can fish will be given the lease of the pond." Panchia and her 19 friends demonstrated their fishing ability in a nearby pond to convince the Gramsabha and subsequently, their cooperative society got the right. Today, Birora Kheth women's cooperative society has 42 members.

Elsewhere in the district, famed for its traditional tanks, the Dhimar women and men are replaying the story of Birora Kheth. Emerging out of the social marginalisation, the Dhimars are forming strong cooperatives to reclaim their traditional fishing rights in tanks. The Dhimars started the campaign to get fishing rights in traditional tanks in 1995. Today, 29 tanks are under their exclusive control. This includes seven tanks totally operated by women co-operatives, also the most effective and rich cooperatives.

With strong presence in three development blocks of the district, the campaign is an economic miracle: annual income of many families has gone up by 10 times according to a preliminary assessment by Vikalp, a local NGO working on natural resources management issues. Within five years, the 29 fisheries cooperatives with about 4,000 members have earned Rs 48 lakh till the end of 2002. Both men and women

Dhimars have formed saving groups to better manage their earning from fishing. And the cash reserve in various saving groups is more than Rs 1,000,000. Women have taken a lead in saving: "We have more savings than our husbands as they tend to spend much more than us," chuckles Panchia.

Given the socio-cultural status of women, the fact sounds like fiction. Earlier, fishing in these traditional ponds was in the hands of influential upper caste residents. Even though the state laws entitle the fisherfolks such rights. It worked under the now infamous 'agreement' procedure under which economically strong villagers would take it in writing from the fisherfolks authorising them to manage the co-operatives.

"Given the fast spread of the pond reclamation campaign, the 1.75 lakh-strong fisherfolks community seems to have waged a war for their rights," says Om Prakash Rawat of Vikalp, an NGO based in Mandiya village and who first helped the Dhimars in getting organised.

Because traditionally in the fishing communities women do half of the jobs related to fishing. This gave birth to the women self-help groups; it was both an empowering strategy as well as an economic initiative to strengthen the capital base of the community fresh with management of tanks. Women saving groups played a crucial role in forming women co-operatives. Flush with cash money these groups slowly formed co-operatives to take control of new tanks being built under different poverty alleviation programmes. All the seven women co-operatives functioning now are practically managed by these saving groups. In fact these groups have the advantage of capital availability due to their saving. The 15 women saving groups have a cash reserve of Rs 5, 26, 980 till April this year. It was Rs 4, 84, 360 in December 2002. Out of these 15 groups, seven are actively managing co-operatives and another five are in the planning stage. Besides new tanks, traditional tanks are also now being considered for management under women co-operatives.

The drive comes from the instinct to survive. Left without their traditional occupation of fishing in tanks and alternative sources of livelihood, it took a rare social mobilisation to bring them together for freeing the tanks. Post-Independence traditional ponds, the sole source of livelihood for the Dhimars, were transferred to government and fishing rights were given to influential residents.

It all started on a monsoon night in 1994. That night Ram Lal, a resident of Darletha village, defied a fishing ban in the 37.5 ha village pond imposed by the upper caste residents who had the fishing right over it. He took the risk of fishing for what he calls now 'survival'. "I was caught and threatened to be shot by the high caste residents," he remembers. As the elders in the community weren't ready to pick up a confrontation with the upper caste people, Ram Lal put together 15 other Dhimar youths to fight for fishing right: "A decisive way to survive with dignity."

After five weeks of intense discussions on ways and

Conflict resolution

Dhimars have evolved a strong mechanism to deal with disputes

- Members of the cooperative attend regular weekly or monthly meetings to discuss problems and try to resolve them.
- 'Guests' from neighbouring villages are invited to attend to these weekly/monthly meetings to sort out issues and also to exchange notes on how to run their cooperatives.
- On the first day of every month, representatives of all cooperatives gather at Mandiya office of Vikalp (an NGO). Here, all issues related to the members are discussed and resolved. The assembly takes stock of progress of the cooperative movement.

means to reclaim the tank, they sold everything possible in their homes to pay Rs 32,000 demanded by the contractors in exchange for the right. The club turned into a co-operative in 1995 and on March 9, 1996 the co-operative finally got lease of the tank.

Within four months an economic miracle was to happen: when they fished for the first time in June, the earning was Rs 2, 45,000. After deducting expenses and initial investment, each member got an earning of Rs 11,500. As each member was paid for the labour they contributed during fishing, they got an extra of Rs 3000 each. The total income is put at Rs 14,500. When compared with their earlier income of Rs 1500 to 2000 a year it is a 10 times raise. Impressed by their performance government helped them in renovating the tank and using this money last year, they constructed a new tank. Fishing in the new tank is done by all-women cooperative samiti newly-formed in the village.

Since then the campaign has spread very fast: in 1998 two co-operatives were formed which became 29 in 2003. Villagers believe that the spread was fast as the above examples convinced them of the net benefits of the struggle. Village after village saw the Dhimars protesting and taking steps to strengthen their rights. In many villages to force the high caste residents to secede rights over tanks, Dhimars stopped ferrying water, a traditional occupation of the Dhimars. It put lots of pressure on the villagers. In few villages, mere strength of community unity made the point. Interestingly throughout the campaign no village was left alone to fight its battle; as a principle Dhimars from all villages would fight together for any demand of any village.

The core of the campaign is to restore ownership over tanks first and then to bring in the necessary social changes. "The ownership was key to restoration of livelihood," says Om Prakash Rawat. So the strategy was two-tier: first ownership over the tanks has to be restored through cooperatives and the second is to empower the communities so that they can retain the ownership in a sustainable manner.

The economic benefit has resulted into many community innovations also. Given that more and more Dhimars are taking over fishing rights and there is a huge demand for fish seedlings, women co-operative society of Garora Jagir village has dug a huge pond giving voluntary labour participation to use it for producing seedlings for the 29-odd tanks under the control of Dhimars. "It would save money and effort to procure seedlings from the town. So it would lead to more profit also," says Lachhi Bai Rawat, a member of the co-operative. Lachhi Bai was instrumental in getting fishing rights over the tank.

The co-operatives of the Dhimars are fast emerging as a solid body of 4000 people with very strong institutional base. The next big expansion in the campaign is to identify more and more villages with fisherfolks population and also traditional tanks. Vikalp has identified 54 such villages through *Padayatra*. For close interaction and to guard their interests they have formed a three-tier institutional set up. Though not very formal in nature this set up is very cohesive and is adhered to by all the co-operatives religiously. It works in three stages: first at the village level, then between villages and at the apex level the monthly meeting of all co-operatives at Vikalp's office in Mandiya.

The experience of Tikamgarh has national ramifications and a major learning lesson for all who are working in livelihood and poverty sectors. First, it is an essay on the state of a traditional community, which has presence all over the country. Secondly, it is also about a livelihood option that can be revived to eradicate poverty.

A major hurdle is the ownership system. The Indian Fisheries Act came about in 1897, and following

Independence, a number of inland water resources were transferred to the government institutions for revenue earning purposes. Now with the Panchayats, private contractors and other government agencies are the owners and fishery resources are not common property resources.

Using the traditional tanks for fisheries by traditional communities has huge economic potential. India's inland fish yield has gone up by eight times in the last four decades. It now contributes more than 40 per cent of the country's total fish production and 1.4 per cent of the gross domestic product. In the Ninth plan, the Union government has allocated around Rs 207 million, 400 times more than the allocation of the first plan. So there is a policy declaration on it and what needs to be done is a political will to give power to the people to control the resources.

Off late due to faulty government policy of giving leases to non-fishing communities has caused almost extinction of these communities. Many of these communities are now either just surviving by daily wage jobs in urban centres or are facing starvation in villages. Take the case of Koibortos in Assam. The community numbering around 4000 has been fishing in the nearby Sesa Noi and Hajikoti rivers since early 19th century. It all changed when money poured in. The government grants leases for fishing to the rich contractors, though they are supposed to be leased to the traditional fisherfolks. The whole benefit goes to the contractor and poor fisherfolks get almost nothing. These people are now working as fish labourers in the estuaries of the Ganga and the Sunderbans.

Similarly the Dheeveras of Kerala are a case in point. This low caste Hindu community was traditionally involved in inland fishing. According to a survey by the Church Mission Society College, Kottayam, non-fishing communities like the Ezhavas have driven out the Dheeveras. In the West Bengal hardly 25 per cent of the people involved in fishing are traditional fisherfolks. It was the fate of the Dhimars.

The demand of the Dhimars to be declared as scheduled tribe comes from this fear. Most of the fisherfolks are scheduled castes and scheduled tribes depending upon the ethnological characteristics of an area. But there have been squabbles over their status. A classic case was when the Madhya Pradesh government gave ST status to the Majhi tribe only in the Vindhya Pradesh area. In 1976, the benefits were extended to the whole state, but the Majhi sub-castes were still put under the other backwards castes list. When chief minister Digvijay Singh wanted to grant all Majhis with a ST status, political pressure, caste politics prevented him and now Majhis are again left nowhere. If he is really serious about the fate of the Dhimars, he has to look into it, feel the Dhimars.

Co-operative of fisherfolks is a very effective livelihood instrument at the grassroots level. One example is the case of the Samajik Shaikshanik Vikas Kendra. In Jhanjharpur, Bihar, the Samajik Shaikshanik Vikas Kendra, an NGO, is reclaiming traditional tanks to be used for fishery development. In these 525 villages spreading over the districts of Madhubani, Saharsa, Darbhanga and Supour, fisheries have become the new idiom of sustainable natural resource use. These tanks were either used by the zamindars or high caste farmers like in Tikamgarh or were derelict. The organisation has already reclaimed more than 50 tanks. They organise people who search for tank suitable for fishery and then make co-operatives to manage it. The village's residents share the earning from the tank and a part is used for the development of the village.

Innovations

Seed Bank: Keeping in mind the fact that more and more societies are being formed, the concept of a community seed bank was given shape. It was to overcome the absence of capital money, a major hurdle in further investment in the tanks. The seed bank is like a community bank where 17 villages make monthly capital contribution. Each village contributes Rs 100 every month and the money is used to give loan to members for buying nets, seeds and other accessories. Till April this year, the seed bank had a balance of Rs 75,700.

Informal Federation: To strengthen the campaign all the 19 societies have formed a network in 1999. The job of this network is to collectively buy seeds to save money on transport and also to get a better price and quality for the seeds. Now the network is working towards selling fish from tanks collectively. This would ensure access to big markets like Jhansi and can also take away botheration of price fluctuation and unsold stock. It is helping the campaign in a major way to counter the big fish traders. This network has become the informal federation and is a counter to the restive influential traders in villages who still control majority of the tanks.

The rise and fall of Tikamgarh's tanks

Tikamgarh was a marvel in traditional tanks

Tikamgarh has one of the country's highest tank densities. The relatively satisfactory levels of groundwater in the region is due to the large number of traditional water tanks built mostly during the Chandela rule a thousand years ago. The Dhimars had traditional fishing rights on these tanks.

Tanks irrigate 10,820 hectares in the district. According to a survey by Krishna Gandhi and Sunanda Kirtane of Lokodyam Sansthan, Jhansi, the areas under irrigation from tanks has increased over the years.

According to settlement records, 962 tanks were constructed during the Chandela period, most of which were small and had low bunds. Of these, mostly high castes farmers were using 125 tanks for tank-bed cultivation. The number of these tanks has come down to 421. In 1961, the number of large tanks irrigating more than 40.5 hectare was 65. But at present, the number of tanks such tanks is about 351.

The irrigation department leases out tank-beds for controlled cultivation. But leaseholders, in collusion with corrupt Panchayat and government officials, usually manage to breach the embankments illegally and release the water before the appointed time to take two crops in a year. This is one of the most serious threats to water harvesting systems in the area.