

State of Fisheries and Fishermen Cooperatives in Rajasthan

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A document by
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Rajasthan state has both fresh water and saline water resources. It has 4.23 lakh hectare fresh water area and 1.80 lakh hectare salt affected areas at full tank level, besides that there is more than 30000 hectare area as river and canals and 80,000 hectare as waterlogged. The department of fisheries regulates fishing activities and implements schemes as per guidelines of central and state government. As per official records about 16500 fishers are engaged in fisheries related activities with the targeted fish production and the average production of fish resources in the state is 200 kg/hectare.

There are three big tanks in the state where local communities have right to catch fish and they sell the catch to the contractor which is authorized (giving highest bid of purchase in the auction) for purchase of fish. The three tanks are Jaisamand (Udaipur district), Kadana (Dungarpur district) and Mahi (Banswara district). There are village-wise cooperative committees of fishermen constituted in the villages surrounding these tanks where these communities live. These committees are named 'Matsya Utpadak Sahkari Samiti' (Fisheries Producer Cooperative Committee). A local fishermen committee member is designated as 'Vyavasthapak' (Manager) who is responsible for keeping the record of daily fish catch of each fishermen and periodical timely payment to fishermen through the cooperative's account in which the contractor periodically deposits the total amount (as per species-wise rates) payable against the total purchase from that cooperative. The cooperative manager also coordinates between fisheries department and the cooperative committee. There are 23 village-wise cooperative committees at Jaisamand, 17 at Kadana and 18 at Mahi, overall having around 7000 registered members.

Till the onset of Covid-19 pandemic the fishing activity was going on as usual but the situation has turned to gruesome due to stoppage of fishing and purchase by the contractor. Although the fisheries department had issued notice in April 2020 regarding continuation of fishing and its sell and inter-state transport but the contractor (who had contract of all the three tanks) stopped purchase and left the fish landing sites, leaving the local fishermen

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single-handed.

Some issues that have come to notice after onset of Covid-19 and which need immediate attention are as follows:

- I. The purchase contractor at Jaisamand, Kadana and Mahi has stopped fish purchase since beginning of last year's lockdown. Fish landing sites are unofficially left closed. Local fishermen are left unaided by the fisheries department and no specific covid-19 relief schemes or measures have been announced for the fishermen communities of the state. Local fishermen are compelled to transport their catch by their own means and sell in the market themselves. Many of them also tried to find alternative livelihood viz. daily wages work, open small vegetable and grocery shops etc.
- II. Similar as above is the situation at other fishing sites throughout the state where fishing contracts are given to contractors. These contractors hire fishermen mostly from other states like West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand etc and those hired fishermen had returned to their homes during last year itself. Despite permission to fishing activity during lockdown the migrant fishermen have not returned in sufficient numbers hence the private fishing activity also is still hampered.
- III. As mentioned above, no specific covid-19 relief schemes or measures have been announced for the fishermen communities of the state, they are getting all other relief schemes including free & cheap ration under food security scheme etc declared by the state and central government, but not any attention or handholding support from the directorate of fisheries and the state department of fisheries.
- IV. The managers of Fisheries Producer Cooperative Committees are not getting any communication or dialogue or exchange of information between cooperative committees and the fisheries department officials. Neither any official updates about Covid-19 related guidelines, nor any information regarding relief measures and vaccination from the fisheries department.
- V. No online or offline meeting of fisheries officers and managers of cooperative committees & fishermen communities has taken place since start of last year's lockdown.
- VI. A fresh official purchase bid for Jaisamand, Mahi and Kadana being invited and is supposed to be finalized by the end of closed (for fishing) season.
- VII. The state government has shortened the closed (for fishing) season by one month (i.e. from 16th June to 31st July 2021 instead of 16th June to 31st August 2021) as a means to help them restore to main livelihood.
- VIII. Release of fish seeds (varieties and numbers) is done by the fisheries department without consultation with the fishermen community and their representatives (managers of cooperative committees); same practice has been followed this year.

- IX.** There were very few cases of Covid infection in fishermen communities because they have better immunity and resistance to diseases; they also remained confined to homes and did not roam outside unreasonably therefore remained safe from the pandemic.
- X.** The vaccination drive is going on as per state government's schedule and the fisheries department is not doing anything or playing any facilitative role for vaccination of fishermen community. First dose of vaccination has completed and the second dose is expected sooner.
- XI.** The state government has released a declaration (document) of fisheries welfare schemes under Pradhanmantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY) but that has also not been communicated to fishermen communities or even to the managers of fishermen cooperatives.
- XII.** There is no update about 'collective accident insurance' since the onset of last year's lockdown.
- XIII.** The 'Saving Cum Relief' scheme is not being implemented as per rules and neither the collection of saving from fishermen of Jaisamand, Mahi and Kadana is done according to the designated amount, nor they are given relief amount in back during the closed (for fishing) season as per norms. The scheme has provision of collection of Rupees 1500 in total from a registered fishermen during the fishing season (i.e. 9 months) and the same amount is added by the State government and central government respectively, making a total amount of 4500 rupees which is given to the fishermen during the closed (for fishing) season @ 1500 per month. Instead of this, rupees 100 per month are collected from the fishermen during the period he did fishing (i.e. if the fishermen did fishing for 5 months then 500 rupees shall be collected from him) and the equal amount is added under state and central government's contribution respectively (i.e. rupees 500 each from state and centre, thus totaling to 1500 only) and that total amount (Rupees 1500 as example mentioned) shall be paid to him/her during the closed season.
- XIV.** The distribution of boats and nets is an irregular activity that has not happened since long. There is no official assistance for repair and maintenance of boats and nets and the poor (including BPL category) fishermen are compelled to bear all expenses themselves.
- XV.** There are provisions of grants under different programs like Inland fisheries Development; processing, transport establishments etc. The provision includes 40% grant of the total cost for general category fisherman and 60% grant for woman, ST&SC and cooperative committees. While most of the local fishermen are BPL and do not have much resources for sustaining respectable livelihood, the grant seems less and there is demand for increasing it up to 60% for general and 75% for ST&SC, woman and cooperative committees respectively.

Concluding Remarks:

- a) There has been no handholding support from the fisheries department during Covid-19 pandemic period since March 2020 and the fishermen have been left unaided for livelihood by the department.
- b) The fishermen communities of Jaisamand, Kadana and Mahi are left dependent on the purchase contractor and if that contractor stops or withdraws from the purchase (as has happened during Covid-19 lockdown) the department has no alternative mean to continue the purchase and market sale. A local fishermen enterprise, assisted by the government (for establishing market linkages) may be one of the alternative solutions to reduce the dependence on the contractual private purchase.
- c) A strong federation of fishermen community in Rajasthan is imperative and NPSSFW should take initiative in this regard. The start can be done with collaboration with dedicated persons / organisation(s) that have local linkages with fishermen communities, planning of strategy with provisions of budget to bear the expenses.
- d) Meetings with managers of Fisheries Producer Cooperative Committee and creation of regional groups of fishermen representatives separately at Jaisamand, Kadana and Mahi and further activities including handholding support, meetings, orientation, trainings, promotion to local leadership and legal aids to fishermen for ultimately creating regional federations as well as a collective state level federation.
