

# Political Movement of the Fishing Community

Fisher folk community, Fishing community, Kutch fishing community



# Abstract

Historically a politically isolated group, the fishing community of Kutch has come a long way to organize themselves into a trade union and fight for their rights. The journey has not been smooth and has involved several failures and half-successes, but the resilience and endurance of the fishing community has enabled them to emerge stronger and the efforts are now showing results.

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The fisher folk stay in traditional settlements (called Banders) near the coast. The Banders are at a distance of 70-80 kms from main villages. Families from 3-4 villages might settle on a Bander. But the fisherfolks' rights over this land are yet to be established. Ibrahim Kaka says, "We have been fishing on these coasts for 200 years. There is plenty of evidence to prove that we have been fishing on these coasts for so many years. But, our land is yet to be regularized."

Till 2001, Kutch was of little interest to outsiders. But the Bhuj earthquake of 2001 changed it all. The devastation caused by the earthquake saw massive aid pouring in and the government seized the opportunity to create better infrastructure facilities and also provided a 10 year tax holiday for industries. This led to a rapid influx of industries and little consideration was given to the impact on environment and traditional livelihoods.

Seeing trouble brewing in the near future, the fisher folk decided to initiate efforts to try and get the bander land regularized. They submitted nearly 60 Memoranda to the district Collector and other concerned authorities to recognize Bander land and allot the same to the fishing community. The efforts of the fisher folk didn't yield the desired result, but didn't go in vain either. The Gujarat Maritime board recognized the existence of traditional fishing settlements in the Mundra coast.

As the fisher folk had rightly foreseen, there were several instances of them being affected by industries, but the flash point came in 2007, when the road from Shekhadia village to their fishing area was blocked by construction of Adani's Airstrip.

When repeated requests and memoranda fell on deaf ears, fisherfolk launched the historic “Shekhadia struggle”, a 32 day agitation to fight for their rights to gain the access of road. At the end of the struggle, the Adanis had to accede to the fisher folk demands and with some pressure from the district administration, agreed to build an alternative access road around the airstrip for the fisher folk.

The Shekhadia struggle was the inspiration for the formation of the fish workers’ trade union MASS (Machimar Adhikar Sangharsh Sangathan).



Fishermen taking part in the 32 day protest



Fisherfolk gherao the mamlatdar during Shekhadia Struggle.

In 2008, MASS got associated with NFF (National Fish workers Forum), which is a national level trade union representing fish workers all over the Indian coast. MASS joined hands with NFF in opposing the recommendation of the Swaminathan committee and demanded the strengthening of CRZ Notification, 1991 so that fish workers interests are protected.

The strong opposition by NFF and fish workers all over the country stopped the Government from hastily implementing the CMZ notification and instead conducted a series of consultations to understand the issues of the coastal communities and to understand how the CRZ notification can be strengthened.

MASS used the platform provided by NFF and the CRZ consultation to highlight the issues of the fisher folk at the national level. During the CRZ consultation in Mumbai, the MASS general secretary Mr. Bharat Patel made a presentation before the Environment Minister.

The Minister was so shocked by the nature of violations happening on the Kutch coast that he immediately announced that a committee would be sent to investigate the issues. The anti-CMZ campaign was the first national struggle that the fish workers participated in, and it gave them the exposure to national level struggles and also helped to highlight the issues of the Kutch fisher folk at the national level.





The anti-CMZ campaign in Kutch



Late Shri Harekrishna Debnath(NFF), leading the struggle

Strengthened by participation in the anti-CMZ campaign, MASS started an agitation for protection of traditional rights of fisher folk in the Mundra coast where indiscriminate industrial expansion (Adani Mundra Port and SEZ) threatened to displace them. The fisher folk organized a protest meeting in Mundra on the eve of the 2008 assembly elections and announced their intention to boycott the elections if their issues were not addressed.

Also, MASS initiated legal action for the second time against the Adanis (first was the High Court case during the Shekhadia struggle). The fish workers appealed in the NEAA (National Environment Appellate Authority) seeking cancellation of environmental clearance for Adani Mundra Port and SEZ. Though the NEAA didn't cancel the project clearance, it took note of the genuine interests of the fisher folk and directed the Gujarat Government to ensure that the project caused no hindrance to fishing by the traditional fish workers.

In 2009, the fish workers got the information that the OPG group was planning to set up a 300 MW coal based power plant, which would directly affect Bhadreshwar Randh Bander, the second largest fishing settlement in Kutch coast.

Fish workers realized that this was a do-or-die situation for them. In a way the OPG struggle was a turning point in the history of the fish workers' struggle.

This time, the fish workers found new allies in the salt pan workers, pastoralists and interestingly the Jain community (The Vasai Teerth in Bhadreshwar is one of the pilgrimage centres of the Jains) who were also affected by the project. The combined might of a united opposition resulted in a protest that was unprecedented in Kutch.

Issues being raised at the OPG public hearing



In a Gandhian way of conveying its opposition, none of the persons from the local community touched the food and water provided by the company during the public hearing. The massive protest was followed by legal efforts and ground level vigilance to prevent any illegal activity by the company. In one instance, a violent clash broke out between the fish workers and the company security guards and the former were implicated in criminal cases and spent over 3 months in jail.

The fish workers pursued legal action and explained their position to the authorities and in the end, the state expert committee decided to defer the environmental clearance for the project. This came as a big relief for the fish workers who are confident that they can take on the might of corporate interests and protect their livelihoods.

In a step towards strengthening itself and improving its functioning, MASS has formalized its bylaws, by electing a 23 member executive committee and also applying for formal registration as a trade union.

MASS has been using latest technology in its struggles, professionally supported by Fishmarc and Setu Information Centre. A participatory study using Google Earth was conducted by Fishmarc and partner NGOs on the current situation of the Kutch coastal Environment, people and livelihoods. MASS has been campaigning with the Government to implement the recommendations of the study. MASS also has its own blog, [www.masskutch.blogspot.com](http://www.masskutch.blogspot.com) and Facebook account, MASS Kutch, Gujarat, to keep the outside world informed about the struggle and share its experiences with interested persons.