

CHILKA BACHAO ANDOLAN¹

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This case study was undertaken as a part of the comparative global research project on civil society and governance, co-ordinated by the IDS at the Sussex University and funded by the Ford Foundation. In India, PRIA co-ordinated the study. The study seeks to explore the interface between civil society and governance with an aim to understand the role and contribution of civil society towards the promotion of good governance in India

Chilka Bachao Andolan (Save the Chilika Movement) was a movement by the people, mostly fishermen, who posed a successful resistance in the early 90's to the Integrated Shrimp Farm Project (ISFP) - a joint venture agreed upon by the Tata Iron and Steel Company and Government of Orissa for intensive prawn cultivation and export. The project was a direct threat to the livelihood of fishing communities living around the lake. The fishermen were supported in their struggle by the non-fishermen (mostly farmers but some of them also engaged in fishing), students, intellectuals, and human rights activists. The lake, an otherwise quiet scenic spot, was stirred by voices of resistance opposing the Tata business house, the government, and the developmental idiom which gives priority to the commercial use of the resources over their local subsistence use. The movement was episodic in nature and uneven in speed. There were different streams of thought and action among which it was not always possible to achieve synchronisation. Yet all these separate formations together gave the resistance the form of a movement. Despite the internal conflicts and contestations among the people and the leaders, the worth of the resistance lies in raising some critical governance issues pertaining to policy formulation, resource use and control, socio-economic equity not only with regard to the specific instance, but with regard to the broader question concerning the prevalent paradigm of development, as well, and more importantly in pointing out the way the Indian state relates to ordinary people and the way ordinary people would like to refashion this relationship.

Methodology

In pursuance of the research framework and the research questions suggested by the Project, the study focused on the key governance problems- the issues and the processes that crystallised people's resistance into a mass movement; support / alliance the movement built with other actors in civil society - other civil society organisations, intellectuals, students, human rights activists; collective mobilisation in Chilika; mechanisms and strategies the movement adopted to interact with the government at local, provincial and national level to influence the policy; and the long term impact of the movement on governance, as far as policy decisions are concerned.

¹ Save the Chilika Movement / Civil Society and Governance / Ranjita Mohanty / PRIA, New Delhi

Information for the study was collected from various sources- interviews were conducted with people from the villages (Panaspada -Gopinathpur, Sara and Satpada in Puri District) adjacent to the ISFP, with students who were involved with the movement; with the leaders of the Chilika Bachao Andolan and with other civil society leaders who gave active support to the movement; with journalists who not only supported the cause but also by providing wide coverage to the movement raised public opinion; with intellectuals; and with political leaders. Pamphlets, press releases and other literature of the movement provided insight into the way the movement articulated the issues and mobilised people. Various studies and government reports on Chilika were a rich source of information on the lake, its ecosystem and the complexities of its socio- economic mosaic.

Contextualising the Resistance

Chilika, located in the Puri, Khurda and Ganjam districts of Orissa, is the largest brackish water lake in India. It is home to large varieties of fish and plants that thrive in the brackish water. The lake is separated from the Bay of Bengal by a long sandy ridge varying between 100 to 300 yards in width with one natural opening near Arakhkuda which permits the flow of water and migration of fish from the sea to the lake. The lake maintains a sweet- saline ecosystem during the year. It becomes sweeter (less saline) between July and December due to inflow of floodwater and becomes more saline between January and June due to the ingress of seawater. Chilika has been identified as a wetland of international importance at the Ramsar Convention, held in Iran in 1971 to which India was a signatory. Government of India has also declared Chilika as a bird sanctuary for facilitating the migration of nearly 132 species of birds from Siberia every winter.

A large number of villages in and around the lake are inhabited by a heterogeneous population comprising of both fishermen and non-fishermen belonging to different castes. Fishing and agriculture are the two primary sources of livelihood for these people. The fishermen belong to the lower castes and most of them are either landless or possess tiny landholdings. They therefore, are completely dependent on fishing. The non-fishermen belong to higher castes and are engaged in agriculture. A large number of them however, have taken to fishing to supplement their income because the productivity of the land is low due to salinity, erratic monsoon and lack of irrigation facilities. Many non-fishermen are now engaged in fishing, particularly after prawn became a lucrative market commodity. Ever since the white prawn and the tiger prawn became lucrative export items, besides many non-fishing families, traders and rich and influential people from outside have taken to shrimp farming thus displacing the fishing communities from their resource base.

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Since fishing is done by the lower castes in earlier times it was looked down upon as a lowly occupation and higher castes in the past shunned fishing. Now that the higher castes are themselves engaged in fishing, the stigma attached to the occupation is removed. Nevertheless for social purposes the upper castes still maintain their distance from the lower castes. The low social status of the fishermen gets intensified by their low economic status. They live in conditions of poverty, there is not much education among them, and many of them are in debt, taken from moneylenders, middlemen, and traders for household expenses and for buying fishing equipment. The caste and class differences are thus very sharp in the area.

Traditional Fishing Grounds

On the basis of general slope of land and the depth of water in the lake the fishing grounds can be grouped as follows:

Jano: *Jano* fishing grounds are mostly located around the various islands of the lake. *Jano* fisheries are barricaded fisheries (barricaded with split bamboos) in sallow water and are operated from October to February.

Khatri: *Khatri* fisheries are shrimp fishing grounds in which fishing is done with traps. *Khatri* fishing is done mostly with the help of bamboo traps set in shore areas and are operated between March and September.

Bahan: *Bahan* refers to net fishing, which is done in the deeper portion of the lake. Net fishing is done throughout the year but to a lesser extent during October to December.

Dian: *Dian* fishery ground is confined to upland areas and is operated during September to January.

Uthapani: *Uthapani* refers to shallow water fishing during monsoon

The fishing practices differ for the fishermen belonging to different caste groups:

Keuta (also known as *kaibarta* or *khata*) form 68%of the traditional fishermen and they fish with nets. *Kandara*, the second largest group use traps - *dhaudi* and *tata*, for catching crabs and prawns. *Tar* people use bamboo traps called *baja*. *Karatias* use both traps and nets for fishing.

Besides there are *Nolias* - the telegu immigrants who fish mainly in the sea and partly in the lake mouth and in some parts of the outer channel with drag nets and cast nets

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and a large number of refugees from East Bengal who have taken to fishing as their means of livelihood though they do not possess any legal right to fish in the lake.

In the past the castes were required to follow their respective fishing practices and any violation of the rule was considered as a serious social offence. The kandaras and Tars thus could use only bamboo implements like traps and the rest used nets. The fishermen had to go to their prescribed fishing grounds even if it was at a distance from the village.

Fishing Rights of the People

The traditional fishing communities claim their fishing rights to the British period. When Chilika fishery sources were in the hands of the kings of Parikuda and Khalkota, the fishermen used to obtain most of the fishery sources by paying royalty to the king. In order to protect the interest of fishermen and eliminate the non-fishermen and traders encroaching on the rights of the fishermen, the first co-operative society, Balugaon Fishermen Co-operative Store, was established in 1926 at Balugaon, in the Puri District. It brought 24 fisheries under it. After the abolition of the estates and with the fishery sources coming within the preview of the government of Orissa in 1953, they were leased out by the Anchal Adhikari through open auction to the fishermen. The non-fishermen were allowed to take a limited number of dians fisheries and in some cases a few jano fisheries. Besides the unleased bahani areas were open for the non-fishermen to catch fish by paying a nominal fee to the government. This practice continued till 1959 when the Central Cooperative Marketing Society was established in Balugaon. The Central Society was designed to act as an apex body that would take lease from the government and sublease them to the primary fishermen co-operatives. A dual co-operative structure was thus established to protect and regulate the fishing right of the people. The Central Society was to take lease from the Revenue Department through the Collectorate of Puri and Ganjam to sublease them to primary co-operatives at that time numbering 48. Most of the important fishery sources were subleased to the primary societies. In case there was no primary society dians fisheries were subleased to villages dominated by fishermen. Those sources which were not taken on lease by the Central Society were auctioned. The tansildars (government officials from the revenue department operating at the block level) of Puri, Krushnaprasada, Banpur and Ganjam had the right to settle the unleased fisheries through auction. The Chilika reorganisation scheme thus made a clear cut distinction between fishermen and non-fishermen and gave non-fishermen limited right on the lake.

Till 1988 however, there was no clear cut demarcation of fishing sources, type of net to be used, and barricades to be set up to catch prawn. This resulted in considerable

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difficulty for the primary societies to operate. There was a dispute in 1986 between two primary societies relating to the fixing of barricades for catching prawn. It was a dispute between fishermen inhabiting the upper and lower region of the lake. The fishermen in the upper region had fixed very lengthy barricades which obstructed the flow of fish to the lower region. Following this dispute the 1988 policy demarcated the fishery sources; it also increased the annual lease of fisheries to three years.

In 1991 the Government of Orissa issued an order which divided the fisheries in Chilika into two categories- capture and culture, without however, adequately defining the meaning of the terms. Capture rights were confined to the fishermen and culture was opened to the non-fishermen and those villages which were not member of primary societies. Since the government order did not lay down any guidelines for the operation of capture and culture fisheries, the Collector was free to act according to his discretion. This policy created further confusion and conflict. The fishermen feared that their traditional rights were being curtailed by leasing out culture sources to the non-fishermen.

Despite the time and again reiteration by the government that the policies were meant to safeguard the traditional rights of the fishermen, the policies did not yield the desired effect for various reasons- they were ill defined, there was lack of rational and equitable distribution of fisheries; there was widespread illegal subleasing of fisheries and there was no mechanism to prevent it. The Central Society was given limited power and it acted merely as a body between the Revenue Department and the primary societies. The Central Society itself made erratic distribution and illegal subletting. Most primary societies bypassed the Central society and marketed directly through commissioned agents. The very purpose of a dual co-operative structure designed to protect the interest of the fishermen was thus vitiated.

Initially the culturing of prawn began in the peripheral landmass of Chilika. The leased out dians, Uthapani, and upland jano fisheries were converted into prawn culture ponds with mud embankment. Later the lake, deeper Chilika, was also enclosed with bamboo poles and net for prawn culture.

Since 1980's the lake is witnessing widespread subletting of leased out fisheries by the Central Society and the primary societies and illegal encroachment by non-fishermen and outsiders. This culturing of prawn on a big scale has resulted in the widespread conversion of traditional fisheries into prawn culture ponds or net enclosed gheries (barricaded space). Culture fishery requires heavy capital investment but ensures big profit. Hence many primary societies have found it a source of making money by leasing it out to resourceful persons.

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This widespread culturing of prawn has threatened the livelihood of traditional fishermen as well as the ecosystem of the lake. Thousands of fishermen and non-fishermen families have lost their livelihood due to conversion of traditional fishing sources in to culture fishery. Cases of litigation and *prawn politics* now define the lives of the people in Chilika. Besides large scale obstruction and blockade in the water channels obstructs the free flow of water, free migration of fish juveniles and loss of grazing ground for the fish. The gheries also act as silt trap and accelerate the process of siltation .

It is in this socio- economic and political background that the Government of Orissa made an agreement with the business house of the Tatas for a joint semi- intensive prawn culture project called the Integrated Shrimp Farm Project (ISFP) and allowed the business house of the Tatas an advance possession of 400 hectares of land in Chilika for the IFSP.

The Integrated Shrimp Farm Project

In 1986 the then Congress government of Orissa entered in to deal with the Tata Aquatic Farms Ltd. to lease 1400 hectares of land in Chilika for prawn cultivation for a period of 15 years. The government had 10 % share in the deal. The Janata Dal had opposed the project then. When it came to power in 1989, it merely changed the name of the farm into Chilika Aquatic Farms Ltd and increased the share of govt to 49%. In December 1991, the Governmet of Orissa leased a landmass of 400 hectares in advance (from Barakudi village in Brahmagiri block to Gamhari village in Krushna Prasad block in Puri District) to the business house of Tata for the prawn culture.

The project envisaged the creation of an artificial lake inside Chilika by enclosing the landmass with a 13.7 kms long ring embankment. This artificial lake was to be divided into a number of ponds in which the prawns are to be nurtured and reared commercially.

The project comprised of the following units:

Shrimp farm: 300 ha. pond area in Chilika to produce 1500 M.T of shrimp per annum.

Shrimp hatchery near Puri to produce 200 million post- larvae shrimp seeds.

Shrimp feed mill to be established in due course

Processing plant: to process 1500 M.T of shrimp for export initially in a leased out plant.

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The entire output of the farm was to be processed and exported. The annual turn over from the farms was to be of RS. 3000 lakhs which was to be in foreign exchange.

As a part of the extension service to small scale farmers and co-operatives in Chilika region, the project mentioned that about 70 million post larvae would initially be made available to them along with technical advice. As the requirement for feed increases due to increase in farm areas and production, a captive feed mill would be established in due course. The project stated that the shrimp produced by the farmers would be brought by the project at fair market price. The training, technical assistance, and services would be imparted to the framers free of cost and the Government of Orissa would render any infrastructural help required in this regard.

The Project emphasised that the direct as well as indirect employment of people in the project and opening of new farms would elevate the socio - economic status of the people around the farm!!.

Civil Society Assertion

Though the fishing communities had been resisting the commercial use and their consequent loss of control over their resources, never a mass mobilisation could take place in Chilika till the ISFP took shape and the threats became more visible, imminent and gigantic. The people of the villages adjacent to the Tata project were aware about the project but there was little awareness about the threats it would pose to their livelihood. In fact, the people anticipated a good bargain for their fish catch and employment in the project. Initially a few educated people in these villages became sceptical about the project. Later Meet the Students (MTS) group, an informal group of students who took active interest in social change, from Utkal University, Bhubaneswar (the capital city of Orissa) took initiative to visit the villages and discussed the issues with the villagers. Chitta Ranjan Sarangi, though not a student from the university, worked closely with the MTS group and played an important role in awareness raising and organising the people against the Tata project during the initial stage. The students from the University with the local students began visiting the villages regularly. The MTS group was a group of young people pursuing radical ideas of social change and their aim was to make people conscious of the injustices perpetrated both by the society and the state. Later a provincial level students forum Krantadarshi Yuva Sangam (KYS) was formed to mobilise the youths against the Tata project. Its core group was formed by the students who were earlier members of MTS and as they passed out of the university they joined the KYS. Thereafter it was decided that MTS would function at the university level and KYS would function as a forum to mobilise the youths against the project.

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This was in August 1991. With the initiatives of the students a meeting of the intellectuals was convened at Bhubaneswar. Out of this meeting grew Chilika Suraksha Parishad which was assigned the task of creating public opinion regarding the issues in the cities of Orissa, mainly in Bhubaneswar, Puri and Cuttack. It was a forum which invited the think tanks of Orissa society to debate and discuss the issue and provide moral support to the cause which MTS was trying to promote.

Gradually the students also realised that the local organisations could be an effective vanguard for carrying the resistance against the project. Their grounding on the local issues and the trust local people have in their own organisations would help the local organisations carry the resistance forward more effectively. Steps were thus taken to involve the *Chilika Matsyajibi Mahasangha*, a mass organisation of 122 revenue villages in Chilika which works towards the protection of interests of the fishermen. *Chilika Matsyajibi Mahasangha*, which was fallen to the politics of rivalry between political parties, was revived to take up the cause of the fishermen vis-à-vis the Tata project. The *Chilika Bachao Andolan* (CBA) was formally launched in January 1992 to work as an extension of *Chilika Matsyajibi Mahasangha* in the areas adjacent to the project to spearhead the movement. Sri Govind Behera of was nominated as the convenor of the movement.

CBA was extended support by many other civil society organisations like *Ganatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Sangathan* an organisation based in Bhubaneswar and working towards the protection of the democratic rights of the people, and *Orissa Krushak Mahasangha* (OKM) which works for the cause of the farmers. Mr. B.B. Das, the president of OKM, played an important role in highlighting the environment hazards of the project and persuaded the government to undertake an environment impact assessment study relating to the project. He was also instrumental in inviting the attraction of the international community to the issue by campaigning that the Government of India must honour the Ramsar Convention in which Chilika lake was declared as one of the endangered wetland which needed to be protected.

All these civil society initiatives and formations gave the local people's protest the form of a movement which raised economic, social, legal and environmental issues related to the project. The followings were some of the prominent issues raised by the movement:

1. The land allotted to the ISFP was traditionally being used by the neighbouring 26 villages for harvesting prawn. The shallow water collected during monsoon was ideal for the natural breeding of prawn.

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2. The threats of flood and waterlogging due to the construction of the embankment on the Bhubania canal which forms the outlet of the lake into the sea.
3. The embankment would obstruct the movements of the fish and prawn from brackish water to the sea during the breeding season. This would obstruct the natural regeneration of the prawns.

4. Long term availability of fish within the lake would be adversely affected due to the pollution caused by protein feed chemicals and pesticides.

5. The project had moved ahead without the mandatory Environment Impact Assessment.

6. The land given on lease to the ISFP was classified as reserved wasteland and community pasture land. Hence the leasing of the lake was illegal as the lake was not classified under leaseable property.

The above immediate issues were linked by the movement with the central question on development and resource use. As the movement put it:

"The Tata project is not the central point of attack of this people's movement. The prime focus of opposition is the policy of the government towards Chilika and its people, and the Tata project is only an instance of this policy" (From a booklet titled, *Chilika: Voice Of The people*, published by *Chilika Bachao Andolan*, Kantadarshi Yuva Sangam, the year of publication is not available).

¹ See the Report of the Fact Finding Committee On Chilika Fisheries, submitted to the High Court of Orissa, Cuttack on 16th August 1993, for an extensive account of the government policies relating to fishing in Chilika, the ambiguities inherent in these policies and the consequent illegal subletting of the fishery sources and illegal encroachment on the lake by outsiders.

ⁱⁱ See the Integrated Shrimp Farm Project Report of Chilika Aquatic Farms Limited, July 1991, for a detail account of the project.

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