

Barriers on waters

Water appropriation and attacks on landless workers in South Bangladesh

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In south-west Bangladesh, the division of Khulna is a dynamic area characterized by its very productive economic activities. Its capital, the town of Khulna, is the third largest economic center in Bangladesh and also the administrative seat of the region. It is an important hub served by the

port of Mongla, one of the most important seaports in the county. Therefore, the area attracts a large number of investors and hosts numerous national and international companies. Due to the abundance of freshwater, and the numerous rivers in the district, the economy depends in a large part upon fishing activities and massive shrimp aquaculture.

However, these economic activities bring a number of problems such as pollution, decreased river flow and marginalization of poor people. The shrimp industry significantly destabilizes biodiversity and the ecological balance of the region, endangering the livelihoods of all rural workers living in the area. A growing problem in this district is the installation of barriers – often woven bamboo screens – in the large rivers by powerful landowners to trap the fish and other aquatic resources for their own benefit. Those barriers are used to establish aquaculture farms directly in the river.

Water access in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the law states that rivers is a natural asset and so their use is to be free for all citizens and any attempts to appropriate ownership are illegal. In addition to the impact of cutting the flow of these rivers and destroying biodiversity, many people depend on these aquatic resources to survive. When people lose access to the river it has multiple impacts. They can no longer fish and so they lose both income and a valuable source of nutrition. They can no longer use the river for irrigation and so their crops suffer. The women can no longer draw

water for the home and have to travel farther to find another source. They can no longer harvest water lilies, which is another source of income. They can no longer take their animals to the river to drink and to wash them.

Mora Bhadra River

Bhadra River, the main river of Khulna has been particularly affected by these installations. Indeed, the massive shrimp and fish cultivation and the numerous other polluting activities have turned 21km of this river into a small stream, leading the population to call it the Mora Bhadra, “the dead Bhadra”. Mora Bhadra flows through the region of Dumuria where more than 3,000 people live in 22 different villages that depend directly on this river. The local population uses the river on a daily basis, for transportation, fishing or domestic uses. The illegal occupation of this river by a few rich landowners endangers and destabilizes the traditional way of life and the livelihoods of these communities. Despite being illegal the corruption of local politicians has enabled some businessmen to grab control of the rivers and for personal profit, ignoring the needs of the local population.

Fishermen, and landless workers who can no longer fish to supplement their wages as landless labourers, are the most affected by this situation. Often they have to leave their home to become rickshaw pullers in town as a last resort to survive.

Nijera Kori organization

Nijera Kori began to work with the population of this area in the 1990s. They began to form landless groups (local groups of 15 to 30 members), holding regular meetings to learn about their rights, the laws and regulations of Bangladesh, and discuss among themselves what to do as a group. The landless groups try to instil values of gender equality, democracy and solidarity in all of their members. It is the success in the formation and development of these groups that over time led to the mobilisation against the illegal occupation of Mora Bhadra.

Appropriation of Bhadra River

For many years the landless groups protested and tried to raise awareness about the issues of the river barriers. Seeing their determination, the powerful landowners tried to protect their position on the river by several administrative manipulations. In 2014, they registered at their river barrier operation as the Nolphona Fisherman’s Cooperative» which give them the status of a fishermen organisation. With bribes convinced government representatives to re-classify the Morabhadra River as a water body permitting them to exploit a 21 km section of the river.

The impact on the population was terrible. According to Nijera Kori staff, Prabir Sarkar, “More than 5,000 people lost their traditional access to the river. Then, people from 22 villages came together and decided to unite for their common rights ». A petition with more than 200 signatures was submitted to the local authorities demanding the cancelation of the illegal lease. The government officials, who also benefit from the river barriers, rejected the demand to protect their interests.

Illegal appropriation and corruption

In the village of Nuacali, in Dumuria, the local population has suffered from the illegal occupation of the river for more than twenty years, with disastrous consequences on people’s livelihoods and the ecology of the river. In the district, one man in particular, is known as the initiator and the owner of many river barriers across the area. He is businessman and a high-ranking official who works in the Ministry of Agriculture. Using his political and economic influence he has obtained leases that authorize the activities despite being illegal under Bangladeshi laws. Closely linked to the Minister of Fisheries and Livestock, this wealthy and influential man easily succeeded in getting the government to turn a blind eye to his illegal projects. He and his associates live in the capital, Dhaka, not even residing in Dumuria. They employ poor rural workers from the district, paying them a little more than what they could normally earn to ensure their loyalty. They also employ private militias to protect the river barriers and discourage the local population from taking any action. Despite this intimidation landless workers decided to take action anyway.

Impact on landless groups

The landless groups’ struggle continued, resulting in violent face-to face confrontations, but once more, the government sided with the landowners and used police and troops to control the landless movement. After the intervention of the police and army the situation became worse. Fishermen were forced to go to town and work as rickshaw pullers. Women found it difficult to walk alone and could not get water due to the presence of private militias. Harassments and act of violence against landless people increased. The landowners found new ways to harass the local population. They file cases based on false accusations against the landless group members knowing that they don’t have the resources to fight them in Court.

One young man related his experience: “For the last two years this river was freed from the grabbers but now they occupy it again. My father is actively involved in the protest against those people. I am a good student; I secured an A+ in the Junior School Certificate. Now they are threatening to file a case against me. They know that if they do that, my student life will be ruined. We will not stop the protests so I know that they will probably file a case. But anyway,

to me, this river is more important.”

Government's promises

In August of 2014, during a visit by the Minister, the landless organization met him and asked for free access to the river. The Minister reassured them that he would take the appropriate actions. Despite his promises, nothing was done. The landless groups formed the *Movement for Opening the Morabhadra* and in September, they met the District Administrator to discuss the issue and he assured them he would take his decision before the end of the month. But the deadline was not respected and the District Administrator told the landless organizations that he would make a statement on this problem later.

Finding new solutions

This new defeat in front of the local authorities led the landless organizations to protest even more. The groups launched cultural activities in order to raise awareness and mobilize public opinion. Now 90 % of the people stated that they were in favour of cancelling the lease. Given the lack of



support from the authorities, despite their numerous attempts, the committee and all the landless groups decided to take action themselves. On October 22 2014, the landless people of the 22 villages came to the river and destroyed the river barriers. “It was like a revolution” said Prabir Sarkar, “By their own means, the organisation of landless people freed the river in one day. “

Regaining access to the river for the three thousand people of the area drastically improved their lives. Families could fish freely again in the river, harvest water lilies, and collect water for use in their homes. But this victory didn't stop the rich landowners. They have put some new barricades in the river and even after all the work of Nijera Kori and the landless groups the situation is still unsolved. The protests have not stopped, but neither has the harassment and intimidation. Two days before the interviews for this case study, the daughter of a village leader, was attacked and severely injured by some of the thugs hired by the landowners. Kulum Begum was taken to the hospital, but when the medical personnel learned her identity, they refused to treat her. The money and power of these very powerful landowners controls

some people and institutions. It is an unequal struggle – money and power against the organization and determination of the people. But the attacks haven't stopped them from continuing the fight. The communities are determined to protect the river and their rights as human beings. For that reason, the struggle continues.

Fatima Begum, a landless woman worker who pluck water lilies on the river, stated about the impact of the crisscross screens construction on the river she uses everyday, here is an abstract of her speech: "We have to harvest waterlilies from the river. We have to sell flowers in the markets because it's our way to earn money to survive. They illegally grabbed this river and now they are threatening us, saying: « we will kill you and nobody will ever find your body». They have filed cases based on false accusations to try to make us stop the movement. They filed a case against my husband, which was dismissed, but now they are filing a new case. They harass us all the time. For example they make us come every week to the police station, but we don't have any money to go there and we have to work. How can they do this? We are very poor and this river represents our only way to survive. They can continue to file cases against us, they can beat us, they can kill us, but our biggest concern is getting rid of the barriers. So we will continue. We will free this river again at any price. Even if we have to sacrifice our lives, we will continue. We will fight until the end to prevent them from grabbing the river ever again".