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Traditional Fishing Practices of The Bote Community: Challenges and Prospects Around Chitwan National Park, Nepal

Rigan Ghale and Chandra Kishor Chaudhary*

Agriculture and Forestry University
 Rampur, Chitwan, Nepal
 chandra.chaudhary@favf.edu.np

Bote, an indigenous fishing community residing along the Rapti River in Chitwan, Nepal, have traditionally relied on fishing as their primary means of livelihood. However, due to environmental changes, restrictive policies from Chitwan National Park, and limited access to fishing licenses, this practice is now under serious threat. While the park was established to protect wildlife, it has inadvertently marginalized the Bote by restricting their access to the river, significantly affecting their livelihood.

This study, based on field surveys and observations in Bharatpur, Chitwan, ward no. 13 & 22, sheds light on the difficulties faced by the Bote people; one of the marginalized fishing communities residing mainly along the banks of rivers. Key challenges include reduction in the ancestral fishing rights, as mentioned by them, the declining population of key fish species, and the impact of illegal fishing by others. According to the fishermen, from the mid of January to mid of April, they found relatively higher catch than other times of the year and after that up to 3 months there are restrictions in fishing due to the start of breeding season of fish with the onset of monsoon in Nepal. At that time they have to shift their occupation from a fisherman to a labor if lucky, otherwise they have to spend their time without and productive works. According to them, the most commonly caught fish species are *Labeo dyocheilus* (Thed), *Cirrhinus mrigala* (Naini), *Labeo spp* (Bhagan), *Labeo calbasu* (Bashari), *Channa marulius* (Sauri), *Notopterus notopterus* (Patali), *Mystus spp.* (Tenger), *Xenontodon cancila* (Thude/Kauwa). The community has observed a decline in these commonly caught species. Rare species like *Tor putitora* (Sahar), *Garra spp.* (Buduna), *Cirrhinus reba* (Rewa), *Cyprinion modestus* (Moinga) are increasingly difficult to find.

A major concern is the unequal distribution of fishing licenses, leaving many Bote fishers unable to legally access the river. Furthermore, most of them doesn't have their own land either for agriculture or for settlement, compelling them to transit from one activity of livelihood to another is creating an unbalanced relationship between the community and the conservation activity. Additionally, they testify that fishing by the Bote community is not the major cause of wild fish declination instead, shrinkage in the water volume of river (climate change), illegal fishing like poisoning and electrofishing from outsiders, increase in the population of Gharials, pollution and river bed extractions are the contributing factors. This study discusses the Bote's struggle to maintain their cultural identity as well as livelihood through fishing and highlights the pressing need for policy reforms to ensure that their traditional rights are preserved. A collaborative approach between government bodies, Chitwan National Park, and the Bote community is essential to balance ecosystem conservation with sustainable livelihoods for the Bote.



Figure 1: Bote man with fishing license



Figure 2: Picture of *Labeo dyocheilus* from fish catch of Bote people