

## Bhagora Talab



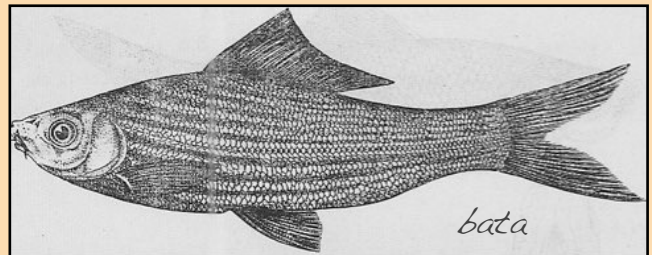
*Journal entry, April 21, 1972*

*We had pushed our cycles up onto the top of the earthen dam of Bhagora Talab and, bending down, I sighted along Parichat's outstretched little brown arm, which gleamed in the morning sun from the oil he always applied. He exclaimed, "Bahut accha jaghur hai, sahib. Hum bata puckeri gaye, bilkul." (Very good place, sahib. We will catch bata, absolutely). He was pointing to a little curve in the feeder stream, perhaps a kilometer distant. That curve had been at the bottom of the reservoir after last year's*

monsoon rains, but months of drawdown for crop irrigation had exposed the gully and left sizable pools here and there. And so we walked our cycles down the dam face and then rode along the waterline to the spot. Subdal, Bhartu and I watched as Parichat extracted his 5-meter diameter cast net from a bag and arranged it expertly in his arms. Both Parichat and Bhartu, the only workers of the fisherman caste at Bhagora Fish farm, were about 5 feet tall wiry little men who despite their size could fling out a cast net in a perfect circle. It was such a treat to watch Parichat throw it and he sure knew his spots. He slowly pulled up the tether rope and enveloped in the net were 5 silvery bata (*Labeo gonnius*), each about a foot long. Subdal immediately went to gather some driftwood and before long a fire was kindled and the fish gutted and impaled on green sticks. We roasted them carefully for about 10 minutes and then began our little feast, savoring the oh-so-wonderful freshness of the superb flesh while spitting out the numerous small bones.



My cook, Habbu, also an expert



Parichat

*Squatting next to the fire on the bank of this little stream, I also began to savor the scene: we were employing the exact methods in use for thousands of years, timeless aboriginal methods which needed no improvements.*

*May 9, 1972*

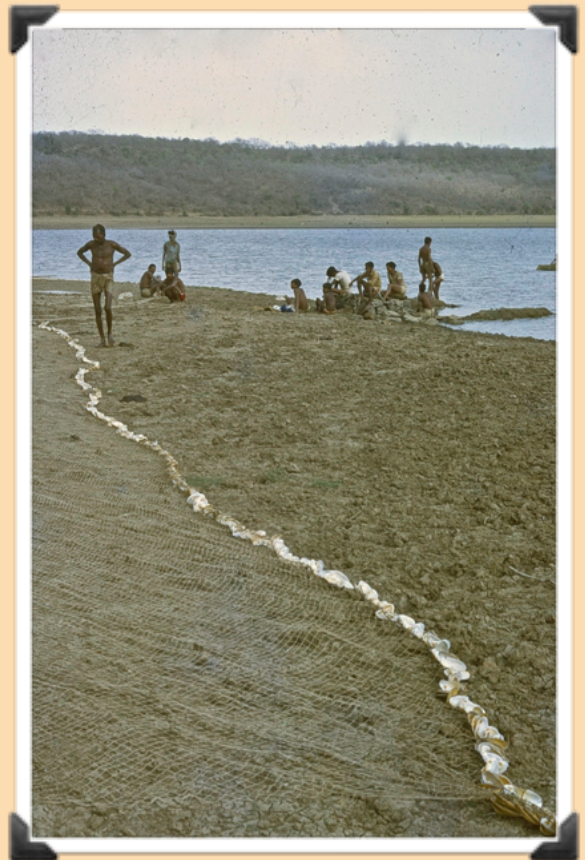
*Camera in hand and standing atop the earthen dam (bundh) of Bhagora Talab, I'm imagining its construction, probably around 1920. That's easy to do because the earth-movers employed were most likely ancestors of those employed at the fish farm earlier this year: tribal men and boys excavating with mattocks and filling the baskets for the women who acted as human dump trucks. Our little project was minuscule in comparison and so now I'm envisioning hundreds of earth-filled baskets balanced expertly atop silver-and tattoo-embellished girls and women, all exhibiting superb posture.*

*But the man who "built" Bhagora Talab was Madhav Rao Scindia, Maharaja of Gwalior at that time, a vassal of the British. It was part of a much larger project, with most of the funds concentrated on Chandpatha Reservoir, with its 1-1/4 mile crescent-shaped masonry dam, sailing club and wildlife reserve, and Ghasari Reservoir. Both are upstream*



of Bhagora Talab by way of a 2-1/2 mile canal that channels overflow monsoon runoff to Bhagora.

For months Bhagora Talab's water level has been receding, first to provide crop irrigation and then from evaporation. Now with its area reduced so much and before the hot season arrives in earnest, the time has come for commercial fish harvest. And so early this morning Fisheries Inspector Rajiwansi and I met Contractor (tekidar) Alliar and his fishermen, a combination of caste Hindus and his Muslim relatives, to conduct a harvest not to exceed 10 quintals (one metric ton). The 90-meter long seine is laid out, one of traditional construction: cotton bar, hemp lines, the bottom one strung with thousands of perforated clam shells for weight and, it is said, to spook the fish before it. The float line has bunches of buoyant reeds attached every couple of feet. With much slapping of the surface, the men scare the fish toward the narrow end and then quickly draw the seine across and crowd them, at which point many rohu and mrigal jump over the net. Then the men elevate the seine's float line with bamboo poles to prevent further escape. Now a much smaller seine is employed repetitively to bring groups of fish to shore for weighing and packing in the truck with ice.





*The entire harvest is of just one species, Catla, the plankton-eater, and the most valuable for sale at the Calcutta fish market. And that will be their destination after the truck deposits its load, with fresh ice, at the Jhansi train station.*







*But not every fish will go. It's time for a well-deserved fish curry feast. And Baboot Singh gets a fish for his son's family in Shivpuri.*

*Upon walking past one of the larger fish lying on the bed of reeds used to keep it clean, I have halted because one of those very large black pupils seems to be focused on me- a bit unnerving, something I have to shake off.*

