

FISHERWOMEN ACROSS THE BAY OF BENGAL REGION (INDIA, SRI LANKA, AND BANGLADESH) AND THE EXTENSION OF THEIR PROFESSION IN ICH- UNDERSTANDING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF A VITAL PART OF COMMUNITY AND THEIR SYMBOLISMS OF SUSTAINABILITY, SURVIVAL, AND CONTINUITY

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INTRODUCTION

The region of Bay of Bengal has been an important part of maritime activities, including trading and fisheries from very ancient times. The significance of the region continues even at present. The massive waterbody is a representation of a busy network of trade and commerce and the basis of livelihoods for thousands who surround it from all sides from various countries. Fishing as an occupation is an important sector of food and nutritional security and India alone, has more than nine million active fisherfolk across its coastline, who are directly dependent on fisheries for their livelihood, amidst which 80 % are small scale fishers. The sector of fisheries employs over 14 million people and contributes to 1.1 % of the Indian GDP.¹ Though the number remains unaccounted for in most countries, but amidst the number of fishermen, there is a substantial number of fisherwomen, who have been contributing through generations in various ways, including supplementing the family income through alternative methods of income, as well as being the main conduits of maintaining various elements of intangible cultural heritage, including traditional methods of fishing. This research paper is an attempt to look into the contribution of the fisherwomen community around the western fringes of the Bay of Bengal, especially looking at the countries of Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka and the vital contributions of these womenfolk. The fisherwomen not only help to sustain the families through the main profession of the family, but also helps financially through various subsidiary modes of income, like handicrafts and artwork. This is extremely helpful for sustaining the family in time of the lean seasons of fishing, as well as during periods of disaster, like the present Covid-19 pandemic situation. These attempts of the fisherwomen, thus, connects various factors to overall social cohesion and development, including sustaining various channels of intangible cultural heritage which directly connects to their main profession and also helps in transmission of community values and also redefines gender roles within the community.

THE BAY OF BENGAL

The Bay of Bengal is an important waterbody in South Asia. It is an embayment of the northeastern Indian Ocean and occupies an area of around 839,000 sq miles (2173,000 sq km). It is around 1000 miles wide (1,600 sq km) and has an average depth of more than 8,500 ft (2,600

¹ (COVID-19 Impact on Livelihoods of Marine Fishing Communities, 2020)

metres). Situated between latitudes of 5-degree and 22-degree north and longitudes of 80-degree and 90-degree east, this waterbody is bordered by several countries from all sides, including Sri Lanka and India to the west, Bangladesh to the north, Myanmar, formerly Burma and also the northern part of the Malay Peninsula to the eastern side. The International Hydrographic Bureau defines this waterbody to extend from Dondra Head, at the southern end of Sri Lanka as the western margin to the northern tip of the Indonesian island of Sumatra as the eastern margin. The Andaman and the Nicobar groups, which are the only islands, separate the Bay from the Andaman Sea. It is also important to add here that the countries which surround the Bay of Bengal, has been blessed with several important rivers, out of which, many drain into the Bay itself, including the Mahanadi, Godavari, Krishna and Cauvery (India), Palk Strait (between India and Sri Lanka) and Mahaweli Ganga (Sri Lanka) on the western side, the Yamuna, Ganga, Brahmaputra, Brahmani, Baitarani, Barak (India) and Padma, Meghna and Surma (Bangladesh) on the northern side and the Irrawaddy (Myanmar) on the eastern side. There are also various tributaries and distributaries of each of these rivers- all of which also drain into the Bay of Bengal.

HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE BAY OF BENGAL

There are various archaeological and historical records which suggest that the region has been an important and busy sector from the very ancient times. Archaeologically, the maritime activities across the Bay of Bengal, connecting to Southeast Asia, can be traced to 4th century BCE. Various archaeological records also suggest that marine vessels used to travel down from the West Bengal and Odisha (India) and Bangladesh coastal regions for trade and commerce- to Sri Lanka and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and then travel towards Southeast Asia. On the other hand, there are various archaeological evidences to prove the consumption of fish and aquatic products as part of diet, dating as far ago as the Holocene period, as available from Sri Lanka² (Holocene high sea-level episodes had occurred between 6,260 - 2,270 yr B.P.)³ in the region. This also confirms the popularity of fishing and aquatic products as part of local diet. At present, the region of Bay of Bengal is a busy area with respect to fishing as a profession. Various agreements across countries are at work in the region to look into a proper functioning of the same, e.g. the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), including the member states like Bangladesh, India, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The region combines a gross domestic product of \$3.5 trillion and houses 1.5 billion people. There are 14 priority sectors of cooperation which have been identified by BIMSTEC and 'Fisheries' is the 6th sector. The region of Bay of Bengal has also witnessed the growth of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which has divided the waterbody between Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar. However, in spite of all of these cooperative arrangements and agreements, all does not seem to be well in the region with the occupation of fishing. Foreign boats are often arrested, who fish in these EEZ regions and clashes between

² (Kulatilake et al., 2014)

³ Shell middens are of significant interest to archaeologists and biological anthropologists as they offer a glimpse of the past, where humans successfully occupied and adapted to coastal environments, exploiting aquatic resources (*Ibid.* pp-1-2)

fishermen of different countries over fishing is also common⁴, in spite of Article 73 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), mentioning that- “arrested vessels and their crews shall be promptly released upon the posting of a reasonable bond or other security.” Regular uncertainty has added to the woes of fisherfolk and added to this is the present condition of lockdown due to Covid-19 pandemic situation- bringing the procuring and sale of aquatic products almost to a grinding halt across the region.

THE FISHERWOMEN AND THEIR WORK

The work of the fisherwomen is vastly limited in the region. These are also considered to be marginal activities and hardly given the same significance accorded to the men who go out in boats and trawlers to the Bay of Bengal for fishing. The activities of the fisherwomen mainly include- selling fishes, catching various aquatic products like seaweed, crabs and prawns through traditional methods or helping in making handicrafts to add to the family income. Across the last several years, there are various organisations and projects of national and international repute, who have been consistently working across India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh to encourage and sponsor the range of activities of fisherwomen.

INDIA

There are various states of India, which border the Bay of Bengal. These are- West Bengal, Odisha, Telengana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Across all of these regions, the work of fisherwomen is limited in nature and is only extended to catching small fry, crabs and prawns and shrimp capturing and molluscs or shells or hand-braiding of fishing nets. At times, the fisherwomen are helped by various welfare projects by the Fisheries Department of India or the work of several independent and local NGOs. These financial assistances also help fisherwomen to engage in fish marketing with bank loans. There are also various success stories amidst the fisherwomen of the region, e.g. the story Chitamma (76) from Ganjam district of Odisha (on the border between Odisha and Telengana in India). Her initial and small initiative for a self-help fisherwomen’s group grew to give birth to ‘Samudram’- saving all the fisherwomen of her village from middlemen politics and procuring a safety in income⁵. The efforts of ‘Samudram’ also extends to preserving the endangered Olive

⁴ <https://www.gonewsindia.com/latest-news/environment/lines-on-water-cannot-save-bay-of-bengal-fisheries-13333>- in 2019, Bangladesh coast guard had arrested over 519 Indian fishermen and also seized 32 boats off the coast of Patuakhali as this is more than 125 kms inside the EEZ of Bangladesh. Though these Indian fishermen were sent back later however, everybody does not get so lucky, which might be the plight of many fishermen from Bangladesh in different neighbouring countries or vice versa.

⁵ Chitamma (76 in 2020) started to empower all the fisherwomen in her village and started something that ensured the livelihoods of hundreds. Being married into the village of Sana Aryjapalli in Odisha, she had experiences debts, poverty, illiteracy, malnourishment and a struggling life as the fisherman husband used to waste the meagre income on alcohol. In 1980s, Chitamma launched an anti-liquor movement. Moving from village to village, she organised women to raise their voices against child marriage, alcoholism and build a high school by 1995. Her stature grew in all the coastal villages with a population of more than 10,000 people. Gradually, Chitamma also

Ridley Turtle in the region and fishing is banned from November 1 to May 31 (apart from the national bank of India on fishing from April 15- May).⁶ A mention should also be added here about the fisherwomen across Andaman and Nicobar Islands of India. Fisherwomen belong to various ethnic tribes and both men and women are generally seen to engage in fishing- using traditional methods. Both men and women catch fishes from the shallow reef and rocky areas during low tides, however, it is the men, who go out in the coastal waters to fish and the women hardly accompany them there. Both men and women are engaged in night fishing as well. The traditional knowledge of both men and women also helps them in fishing and warrants them forehand about natural calamities, including cyclones, rain (by observing cloud pattern and flow of cool air), wind, waves (from Nicobari calender), water currents (based on direction of drifting of fishing line/ boat) and depth (by seeing water colour or direct observation)⁷.

From various parts of India, there are different examples of fisherwomen supplementing their meagre income through other additional sources. These include various handicrafts items and art products, e.g. the *patachitra* form of folk art from the region of Bengal, where the painting of the stories of '*machher biye*' (marriage of the fishes) by the fisherwomen, directly reflects their main profession. The *patuas* (the artists) are performing artists and the pictures are scroll paintings, accompanied by song, which are sung by the artist while displaying the scrolls. There are also the examples of wonderful fish-scale handicraft items from the fisherwomen of West Bengal region. The adjoining regions of Odisha, Telengana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Andaman and Nicobar Islands (India) have various handicraft items made from molluscs and shells and coconut elke (polished coconut shells) as well as rag dolls- which are also primarily made by the women to sustain extra family income.

BANGLADESH

In Bangladesh as well, the role of women remains relegated to the background. Although detailed statistics are not available, it is estimated that about 30% of women in the rural coastal areas are directly or indirectly engaged. in small-scale fishery activities, e.g. in Barisal and Rajshahi districts (fish capture, selling, drying and curing of both freshwater and sea products), Chittagong and Khulna districts (shrimp processing plants), etc.⁸ Several fisherwomen have

helped to organise a saving-credit system with the fisherwomen and also organised a fair system of trading with traders outside of Odisha and in 2006, the women of Sana Aryjapalli started to trading by using the fish catch of only eight traditional fishing boats with detachable engines under the banner of 'Samudram' (meaning sea). This was registered as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in 1995, with Chitamma as its head. The fisherwomen were successful in releasing their boats from various moneylenders by facilitating bank loans and enlisting the support of non-profit OXFAM in 2008. The activities of the fishermen have continued over the years, with several of them owing their own boats, thanks to the women of Sana Aryjapalli. Though there have been circumstance of lean years, especially with the production of fishes dwindling in the Bay of Bengal waters (e.g. in 2017) yet, the efforts of Samudram did not fail to motivate the locals.

⁶ (*Fisherwomen in Odisha Unite to Take Back the Trade from Monopolistic Practices*, 2020)

⁷ (Ravikumar et al., 2016)

⁸ <http://www.fao.org/3/ad745e/ad745e00.pdf>

received training for generating alternative income from such activities as net making, cage culture/fish farming, poultry rearing (ducks and chicken), small dairy products (keeping goats and cows), handicrafts (doll-making, sewing, embroidery), starting new business ventures (small grocery shop/tea stall) and plant nurseries. The beneficial efforts of various national and international projects have also helped fisherwomen find a voice through savings groups to help households, particularly fisherwomen with access to low-cost credit.⁹

SRI LANKA

The story of the northern and eastern fringes of Sri Lanka, which borders the Bay of Bengal, however has limited documentation due to the lengthy political conflict that the country faced across three decades. Though the war affected the entire country and its economy, the northern and the eastern sections were particularly affected to a great extent. The fisheries sector was also at the very centre of the post-war reconstruction discussion in Sri Lanka, when the war ended in May 2009. The fishing industry, especially in the northern and eastern sections were vastly crippled through loss of equipment, lives and infrastructure and very heavy restrictions. Thus, due to various problems, a proper documentation of fisherwomen during the war period across the northern and eastern parts of the country is hardly available. However, it should also be mentioned that this is an important study and will help to highlight specific contributions of women through non-traditional roles (e.g. household heads or sole bread-earners of a family, etc.) and also the use of traditional maritime practices to support community in times of disaster. Such a study is also essential to understand about the women's roles, which even continued after the war.

Some study has been conducted, in the post-war period, through academic fieldworks and ethnographic explorations around the district of Trincomalee (on the eastern coast of the country) on the borders of Bay of Bengal. The fisherwomen in the region is greatly divided across ethnicity and religion and comprises of Sinhalese (Buddhist), Sri Lankan Tamil (Hindu), Sri Lankan Moor (Muslims) and other ethnicities, including the Vedar ethnic community (according to the data from the Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). The Sinhalese and Tamil women are mostly involved in selling fishes and the Muslim women are generally involved in gleaning of clams and molluscs from mud or collecting seaweeds. The Vedar women are the only ones who are seen to take part in fishing to draw the catch to the shore- alongside the men. In Sri Lanka, the role of fisherwomen is severely restricted in comparison to other regions. Historically, the fishing occupation in the eastern parts of the country were only dominated by men. In the post-war period, the meagre contribution of fisherwomen brings to light some specific significant socio-cultural perspectives- the survival of traditional methods of fishing and the high segregation within fisherwomen community on the different activities related to fisheries on the basis of religion and ethnicity. Though their roles are severely restricted, yet, the fisherwomen are often seen to be part of alternate methods of livelihood and planning. There have also been many small projects across the years to encourage these activities amidst fisherwomen. These variously include income through handicrafts (making products of wood,

⁹ (*'Invisible' Fisher Women of Bangladesh Raise Their Voice*, 2017)

mollusks and coconut elke), animal husbandry (rearing of cows, buffaloes and goats), sewing clothes, eco-tourism and aloe vera farming (for use in medicine and cosmetics). These various efforts are reflected across a wide section of the lagoons on the eastern and northern parts of Sri Lanka (and also the western parts), including- coastal areas of Mannar district, Batticaloa, Panama to Pottuvil stretch, Rekawa, Ussangoda, Kalametiya coastal stretch, Puttalam lagoon and Maduganga¹⁰.

THE PRESENT PANDEMIC SITUATION DUE TO COVID-19

The pandemic situation at present has hit the fisherwomen community severely across the region. Across the last several months, though many national, English dailies from across India covered the plight of fishermen from time to time, yet very few spoke about the plight of fisherwomen. A thorough research of English, national dailies for this research paper, yielded sparse information about the plight of fisherwomen during the pandemic from India. One such report is from Kerala (western part of India) (10th July 2020-*Ban Deepens Crisis for Fisherwomen- The New Indian Express*, n.d.). This report highlighted the plight of women as the sole-bread earners of the family as the husbands lost their jobs due to the pandemic. The fisherwomen also were facing trouble in procuring enough fish to sell or were being forced to sell their products at a very low price as there was a time limit for the markets to stay open. Another report from the state of Tamil Nadu (India) from the very beginning of the pandemic lockdown period (report by- M S Swaminathan Research Foundation, 7 April, 2020)¹¹ spoke of very similar circumstances of the fisherwomen- the catches were very limited in nature, the loss of selling space in the markets to fishermen, selling off the day's catch at very low prices as the markets were operating for limited time, etc. The prices dropped down drastically for most fisherwomen, e.g. if the fish rate was INR 500/kg before lockdown ensued, it dropped down to INR 300-350/kg as a result of lockdown and social restrictions.

CONCLUSION

The development of coastal aquaculture is common to the entire region of study and the primary reason is the increase in foreign exchange earnings generated from shrimp farming. Women play a very important role in this. Across India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, fisherwomen also play a very vital role in supplementing their household income through arts and handicrafts, animal husbandry, farming and other methods, yet the recognition of the role of fisherwomen towards sustaining livelihoods in the region is minimum. As women bear an important part of any subsistence pattern, it is important to recognise their worthwhile contribution and give them due recognition as the true torchbearers of social cohesion and intangible cultural heritage.

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¹¹ (COVID-19 Impact on Livelihoods of Marine Fishing Communities, 2020)

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ENDNOTES