

Social Impact of Women's Fishing in the Coastal Area of Sunderbans, West Bengal: An Emperical Study

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***Abstract:** The Sunderbans region of West Bengal is acclaimed worldwide as the storehouse of rich natural resources but sons of the soil have been suffering a lot. A vast section of the people in this region lives below poverty line. Socio-economic profile is not uniform throughout the inhabited part of the Sunderbans, though rain fed agriculture is the mainstay. This is because of geographical characteristics, population and their background, access to different resources or occupational specialization and non-uniformity of socio-economic transformation. In my research paper, I have highlighted the sources of income of women and social impact of women's fishing in the coastal area of the Sunderbans of West Bengal. Although farming is the main source of income, the second major source is fishing. The adversity, environmental effect and security measures of fishing in the Sunderbans have been described in this article. This article is based on experiences that have been collected by surveying and looking at different books. It's also highlighted the adversity of fishing for women in the Sunderbans.*

***Keywords:** Sunderbans; Women of Sunderbans; Llivelihood; Fishing; Meen; Impact of fishing*

1. Introduction:

People of different castes live in India and they are involved in different jobs. Especially the women in the coastal areas are involved in some economic activities despite being housewives. They make a living and run the family. Income of women in the Sunderbans generally comes from different categories of occupation: piggery, poultry

farming, goatery, duckery, paddy husking and dairy farming, forest workers and prawn seed collectors. The subject of my research is the sources of income for women in the coastal area of the Sunderbans. The main livelihood of the women of the Sunderbans is agriculture but the second livelihood is fishing, which is catching the shrimp. In local language that is called meen. Every year from May to June, fishing takes place along a few kilometers of the coastal areas of the Sunderbans.

2. Objectives of the Study:

The Sunderbans has not been in the same place forever. As it has gradually advanced to the south, it has been planted to the north and people of different nationalities have come and settled there, turning the Sunderbans into a sea of people. When it comes to the socio-economic condition of the Sunderbans, first of all we have to talk about its anthropology and ethnography. The history of the Sunderbans is a history of disintegration. Once the Sunderbans was planted and settled, it turned into a forest; Settlements have been established by re-planting. Due to storms, earthquakes, floods, submergence, oppression of foreign enemies, human settlements in the Sunderbans have become extinct at different times, the Sunderbans has expanded, and it has been replanted. The Sunderbans survives to this day through many ups and downs.

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

- i) To show the challenging livelihood of coastal area of the Sunderbans.
- ii) To show the adversities of catching the shrimp in the coastal area of the Sunderbans.
- iii) To find out the effect on environment for fishing in the coastal area.

- iv) To frame the security measures taken to protect the environment and the marine fish from extinction.

3. **Methodology:**

To make the topic more productive and resourceful, I have gone through surveying methods and looking at different books and internet. Therefore, this study is not based only on the primary data but also on the secondary data sources. The necessary information about the fishing in the coastal area of the Sunderbans were collected from women by appointment.

4. **Coastal Area of the Sunderbans:**

The area selected for the study was the Sunderbans delta region in West Bengal. The Sunderbans constitute the entire globe formed by way of sedimentation of the river Ganges and its tributaries. About 60% of the Sunderbans fall within the People's Republic of Bangladesh and the rest lies within the Indian part of the Sunderbans ranging between the two southernmost districts- the North and the South 24- Parganas in West Bengal.

5. **Livelihood of the Coastal Area:**

90% of women of the Sunderbans are housewives. Generally, they are involved in the activities like fishery, piggery, poultry farming, goatery, duckery, paddy husking and

dairy farming. Income of about 78% of them is originated by catching 'meen', the local term for shrimp seedlings. The spawns of tiger prawn, which are hatched in the saline water, are much in demand by the inland prawn farms, helping the poor to fetch hard cash. A large section of the women catch tiny prawn seedlings with fine nets, which are then sold to bherries'(brackish water bodies for growing fish). They also catch crabs along the banks of the rivers flowing through the forest. They collect these items to sell in the local market. Financially backward families are the ones who earn 4-6 thousand rupees a month by doing this work.

Here, I am quoting from my survey about Saraswati Naskar a resident of Kultali, the coastal area of the Sunderbans. She has seven members in her family and she makes a living by fishing. Her husband does not do anything like that. The family catches the shrimp for three months, even though they do odd jobs at other times of the year.

6. Adversity of Fishing in the Coastal Area:

Many a man is devoured by the tigers which infest the whole area. The local youths cannot join any venture for lack of fund. The government gives out loans for poultry but there is hardly any inspection to see what is being done with the money. Catching prawns and prawn-culture gave an impetus to the economy of the Sunderbans, even though it destroyed forestry. The fish are caught and the rest with the ova are strewn on the banks which pollute the environment and turn the whole place reeking of a foul smell. This has made the rivers bereft of fish. They had been a storehouse of protein for the locals – they have become fishless. Some drop out of schools to catch prawns which are itself a hazardous job. Sometimes they fall prey to tigers or crocodiles and die. And sometimes

they float in the tidal water and drown. The people take enormous risk to catch fish to keep the home fire burning. Once any mishap takes place, they abstain but after a day or two they resume. Fish is so hard to come by these days that people are migrating to places for other jobs and infectious virus has broken out in the bherries to make matters worse. To top it all there are some dishonest businessmen for whom the price of prawn from India has fallen in the international market. There are hatcheries in Andhra Pradesh or Tamilnadu which supply the bherries in West Bengal with ova and small ones. There is no organised sector for pisciculture in the Sunderban. The fishermen do not have any knowledge which fish to catch in which season and their amount. They have defied the rules of nature. They are paying a price for that.

7. Effect on Environment:

Not only that housewife, thousands of people in this area do this work at time of fish breeding. Due to the collection of fish, the destruction of various aquatic species including hilsa, pomfret is increasing and the erosion of river banks is increasing.

According to the Fisheries Department, about 32,000 fish collectors from the coastal area of the Sunderbans were found few years ago. At the same time, a survey by the State Fisheries Department found that about six species of fish, including Hilsa and Pomfret, were being harmed while fishing for shrimp. Because when they go to catch shrimp, they are also caught in mosquito nets and die.

Environmentalists are claiming that, catching shrimp seedlings is causing huge damage to the environment and the total loss is hundreds of times more than the meager income of

fish collectors. At the same time women's reproductive system is also facing problems due to being in saline water for a long time.

8. **Security Measures:**

Financially backward families are the ones who earn 4-6 thousand rupees a month by doing this work. These people do not fall into the organized field. In this way, other fish including Hilsa are being severely damaged in fishing. The government must take action now. Otherwise, all the people who fish in the coastal area will have no way to survive. To make them aware of the harmful aspect of meen fishing and to provide alternative employment for all the women involved in fishing, which is possible government or NGO. Fisheries Department to take alternative measures to deal with this social problem. Despite the assurance of the Fisheries Minister, action is being taken.

9. **Conclusion:**

Despite such adversities, the Sunderbans has endless potential for development. The Sunderbans is unmatched in the world in terms of its abundance of natural resources. If these possibilities can be utilized, a radical change in the socio-economic system here is possible. This is possible only through the best use of aquatic, forest and land resources. This requires research from different perspectives on the Sunderbans. There is endless potential for the development of tourism industry in the Sunderbans. According to Sunderbans experts, there is no shortage of resources in the Sunderbans. Integrated planning is needed, and eradication of corruption. Nature's gift and government money is a condition of utilization.

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