

Coastal Fishermen in Bangladesh: The Livelihood of Half a Million Fishers Supported by Marine Fisheries

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Shahnaz Pinki, a dedicated working woman, has a deep dietary affection for sea fish. Residing in Sharif Para of Charfasan Upazila Sadar in Bhola District, located just 25 km away from the sea, she has to embrace her busy schedule on a daily basis but never misses an opportunity to visit the local fish market and buy her favorite fish from there. Sharing her love for sea fish, Shahnaz expresses, "I go to the market in search of Hilsa and other varieties of sea fish. Marine fish is really essential for our physical well-being".

The value of sea fish can even be felt in the local markets of Dhaka, the capital city, which lies approximately

300 km away from the coast. Ramzan Ali, a small-scale trader, regularly travels to Dhaka's Mohammadpur fish market to sell sea fish. Residing in Nurjahan Road, Dhaka, he attests that the demand for sea fish is more than before. Buyers seek different marine fish species, and meeting this rising demand becomes challenging if the supply from the sea diminishes. Ayanuddin, a fish trader at Mohammadpur market, shares, "The demand for sea fish has escalated significantly. Buyers crave diverse marine fish varieties. However, if the supply dwindles, meeting the demand becomes an arduous task".

Beyond the local fish markets scattered across the country, the demand for sea fish extends to popular tourist destinations. The fry-fish markets in renowned spots like Cox's Bazar or Kuakata Beach are teeming with an abundance of sea fish and crabs. Tourists flock to these markets to savor the flavors of the seafood. The demand for sea fish among tourists is steadily growing. Yet, the stories of hard work and life-threatening fishing endeavors undertaken by the coastal fishermen of Bangladesh remain largely untold. Abul Bashar, a fisherman from Tulatali village in Bhola Sadar, sheds light on these experiences based on his terrible experiences at sea. Abul Bashar recounts, "Many fishermen have lost their lives at sea while fishing alongside us. They never returned to their families. Personally, I have encountered storms and fishing robberies numerous times. Many a time, they killed people. Fortunately, I survived. Every fishing trip to the sea carries risks to our lives. Our efforts contribute to the national economy, but we remain burdened by debts despite the perils we face".

Around half a million fishermen reside in coastal areas, but approximately one million are engaged in fishing, fish marketing, and related occupations. Despite the various risks, these individuals play a vital role in advancing the coastal fisheries sector, forming an integral part of Bangladesh's potential blue economy.

The Government of Bangladesh has identified 26 potential sectors to develop the Blue Economy. Several of these initiatives have been in progress

for quite a few years, driven by the efforts of the marginalized workforce residing in coastal regions.

Hilsa Production is Increasing Every Year

Hilsa fish is caught in Bangladesh from both rivers and the sea, but nowadays, most of it comes from the sea. Many fishing trawlers from different districts go to the sea to catch Hilsa, such as Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Bhola, and others. In 2017, Hilsa fish from Bangladesh was recognized as a special product known as Geographical Indication (GI), making it known worldwide as a product of Bangladesh.



Afser Mrida, from the same village Tulatali, has been fishing since he was a child. He started fishing as a hobby with his father when he was only 8 years old, and now, at 53, he has spent 45 years of his life on fishing boats. Initially, he fished in the river near his home, but when he turned 20, he started going to sea like other fishermen. Fishing in the sea implies risks, as they face natural hazards that affect the livelihoods of coastal fishermen in Bangladesh.

Afser Mrida is not alone; there are millions of people along the coast of

Bangladesh who are involved in fishing and marketing fish. They face hardships throughout the year, struggling to survive in this profession and often getting trapped in debt. Despite the challenges, fishing remains the main source of income for coastal fishermen. They rely on marine fisheries resources, catching not only Hilsa but also other fish species and crabs.

To increase Hilsa production, the government has implemented various measures. They have imposed bans on catching Hilsa during the Hilsa growing and breeding seasons. The bans last for several months, allowing Hilsa to grow and breed without disturbance. The government also provides assistance to fishermen during these periods. As a result of these initiatives, Hilsa production has been increasing every year, which benefits the national economy. In 2008-2009, the production was only 0.3 million metric tons, but by 2020-2021, it had increased to 0.56 million metric tons.

Ershad Hossain, the President of Bhola Small Fishermen's Association, mentioned that there was no government ban on Hilsa fishing in the past. However, after conducting research on Hilsa, the government imposed the ban to boost production. This has brought benefits to the ecosystem, government, fishermen, and traders.

According to World Fish, Bangladesh produces 65% of the world's Hilsa, with India accounting for 15%, Myanmar, and other countries along the Arabian Sea, Pacific, and Atlantic

Oceans contributing the remaining 10%. Hilsa is caught in 11 countries, but production is decreasing in most of them, except for Bangladesh, where effective initiatives have increased Hilsa production.

Marine Fish is Important in the International Markets

Once upon a time, Hilsa, as well as many other types of fish, were found in the maritime area of Bangladesh. Some of the notable ones were Laksha, Rupchanda, Kalochanda, Tuna, Mackerel, Laitya, Chapa, Sea Rita, Shapla Pata Fish, Tailla, Poa, Popa, Surma, Hilsa, Knife, Faisya, Sea Bin, and Sea Koi. These fishes were in high demand in both local and international markets. Bangladeshi



fishermen regularly caught about 20 commercially available fish species, along with various types of shrimps, totaling around 40 types of fish, from the Bay of Bengal as a source of food.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, the world harvests about 8.44 million tons of seafood every year, providing 15% of the global protein supply. In Bangladesh, during the 2017-2018 period, a total of 43.34 lakh tons of fish were produced, with six and a half million tons coming from the sea. However, considering the sea's potential, the marine fish catch in

Bangladesh was relatively low. Statistics indicated that the entire Bay of Bengal yielded about 80 lakh tons of fish annually, but Bangladeshi fishermen could only catch 0.7 million tons.

The largest market for sea fish was in the Chattogram region, and the Khulna and Barisal regions also had markets with various types of sea fish. Sea fish from the coastal areas were transported to the capital city of Dhaka and other parts of the country. Some sea fish and crabs even had international markets. Many fishermen along the coast of Bangladesh relied on catching sea fish to make a living. Subir Biswas, a fisherman from Chattogram, had been fishing in the sea for nearly 20 years. He shared that fishing in the sea was risky but essential for their livelihoods. They hoped for fair prices for their catches and a healthy fishing environment.

According to the Department of Fisheries, the production of marine fish has increased in recent years. In the fiscal year 2021-22, a record 0.73 million tons of marine fish were harvested. This was higher than the 0.7 million tons harvested in the previous year and the 0.68 million tons in the year before that. Experts believed that the quantity of marine fish in the Bay of Bengal had increased, but they emphasized the need for initiatives to increase the number of commercially important fish. They stressed the importance of conducting extensive research on marine fish and planning for sustainable harvesting.

Professor Dr. Manjurul Kibariya from the University of Chittagong, Department of Zoology, explained the issue of low or zero oxygen areas in the sea near Bangladesh's maritime



area. This problem was identified in 2016, but its exact location and extent were still uncertain. Proper investigation and research are essential to address this issue because fish and other aquatic animals cannot survive without underwater oxygen. Without sufficient oxygen, the fish would die or be forced to leave the affected areas.

Fishermen's Problems Must be Solved

The sea contains various resources apart from fish. The government of Bangladesh has embraced the concept of utilizing these resources through the blue economy. Among the sectors of the blue economy, fisheries play a crucial role. For hundreds of years, the fishermen along the coast of Bangladesh have been extracting fish from the sea, which serves as their

source of livelihood. However, these fishermen face numerous challenges in fishing due to various factors. Climate change has led to increased natural hazards such as cyclones, rising sea levels, and siltation in nearby seas. Additionally, there are other environmental crises as well. Fishermen often complain about receiving unfair prices for their fish, as local markets are controlled by syndicates. Moreover, they highlight the lack of a conducive fishing environment in the sea. To promote the development of the blue economy, apart from government initiatives, fishermen themselves also should take various initiatives to address these issues.

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