

Bay of Bengal Programme

Development of Small-Scale Fisheries

THREE FISHING VILLAGES IN TAMIL NADU

A socio-economic study,
with special reference to the role and
status of women

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PREFACE

This paper results from a socio-economic study conducted during March—May 1981 in three fishing villages south of Madras— Perianeelankarai, Chemmencheri and Pattipulam.

The study examined the socio-economic conditions of marine fisherwomen, their involvement in productive activities and the scope for new income-generating activities. The study also sought to improve knowledge and understanding of the organisation and economics of traditional fishing communities.

It is hoped that the paper will be found useful by planners, sociologists and economists, and by those concerned with small-scale fisheries development in general and women's role in fisheries in particular.

It is vital that data obtained from such a study should be sufficiently comprehensive and accurate. The strategy adopted for data collection was to first approach headmen of the villages through local contacts familiar with the villages, and secure general information about the villages from the headmen. Questionnaires for individual interviews with village women were prepared on the basis of this information.

Ten selected women investigators were briefed thoroughly on interview methods, both in the office and in the field; they then conducted individual interviews with 300 women from the three villages over a period of 14 days in March 1981. This was followed by group interviews and supplementary interviews with influential people such as teachers. All this data was tabulated with the help of two of the investigators who were qualified statisticians.

The socio-economic study and the paper resulting from it are activities of the Bay of Bengal Programme for Development of Small-Scale Fisheries, referred to in brief as the Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP). This is a regional FAO programme funded by the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) and executed by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), and covers five countries bordering the Bay of Bengal— Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The main goals of the BOBP are to develop and demonstrate appropriate technologies and methodologies to improve the conditions of small-scale fisherfolk and to boost supplies of fish from the small sector in the BOBP's member countries.

The author of the paper would like to thank Mrs. Freda Chandrasekharan, Assistant Director of Fisheries, Tamil Nadu, for her cooperation in the planning of the study; to the ten investigators for their diligence and perseverance in data collection; and in particular to two of the investigators— Ms. A. Hidayathul Kamila and Ms. A. Jayanthi— who helped tabulate and compile all the data.

This document is a working paper and has not been officially cleared either by the FAO or by the Government.

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1. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

1.1 The survey

A brief survey **was** carried out of the socio-economic situation of three small fishing communities near Madras, with special emphasis on the economic role and status of women. The methods used to obtain information, and to ascertain the opinions of the women regarding development and change, were (a) questioning of individual women (all the women were interviewed), (b) the interviewing of key persons in the communities, and (c) group discussions with the women.

1.2 Infrastructure and services

Although the three selected villages are close to Madras this does not seem to have affected their way of life very much. Such services as water, electricity, roads, postal and telecommunications, shops, medical services and housing are no better than in the more remote villages in the same district or in other coastal districts of Tamil Nadu; that is to say, they are generally poor. Nor do the villagers avail themselves as much as might be expected of the comparative ease of access to schools and banking institutions. Apart from trade in their only product, which in effect is exchanged for essential supplies not produced within the villages, the three fishing communities remain cut off from the surrounding countryside and nearby city.

1.3 Incomes and expenditures

The landings of fish are too small for fish merchants or middlemen to be willing to visit these villages regularly to buy the catch and transport it to market. There is therefore no auction. The fish has to be marketed by the women of the village, at least for the most part. It can be noted in passing that the average catch is only as much as will supply the needs of the village and the few bicycle traders, and what the womenfolk are capable of carrying to the market on foot; they possess no transport vehicles.

All families borrow for most expenditures, even for food items during the lean season; the largest sums are borrowed by the families with the most assets.

Job mobility is absent and there is little income from non-fishing activities. The local prawn processing plants provide few employment opportunities because they prefer to recruit labour from elsewhere. Only two men, of better education than most, have taken up jobs outside the village. The remainder continue fishing by traditional methods.

1.4 Role and status of women

Because they market the fish, the women in these small villages exercise rather more power, and play a more important economic role, than do the women in larger fishing villages visited by fish merchants: the women sell the fish and receive the money; they are therefore in a strong position to decide whether the money is to be saved or spent, and for what. They in fact participate in decision-making on the buying of nets, boats and other fishing equipment as well as on the handling of domestic purchases.

Despite this, women are non-entities when it comes to community affairs: they are not eligible for election as village leaders, or as members of the village council, and they are not allowed to take part in village meetings. Religious and cultural beliefs and customs bear harder on women than on men, another example being the restrictions placed on the mobility and activities of young unmarried women. Most women have a good deal of leisure time. There is therefore a pool of potentially productive labour that is under-utilized.

There is a trend towards nuclear families setting up houses on their own. The young wife is thus no longer under the direct control of her mother-in-law and can make her own decisions on domestic matters. However, she has nobody to help her in looking after the children and doing

the household work and she is thus prevented from taking fish to market. Although she still has spare time, the young mother would be prevented from engaging in many other types of income-earning activities if these were established. Consideration should therefore be given to provision of child care centres.

1.5 Opportunities for progress

When discussing the possibility of new income-generating activities for women, a preference was expressed by a minority of older women for making fishing nets rather than diversifying into non-fisheries products such as handicrafts.

The best method of progress, it was felt by most women, would be the provision of more nets and fishing craft; they did not seem to be aware of the possibility that the resources of fish within range of the present type of craft, and available to capture by the existing types of fishing gear, may not be able to support much more fishing effort. Whether this is indeed the case is not known.

1.6 Development, capital investment and technical assistance

The study has revealed a condition in these small villages which differs in some interesting ways from that in large fishing villages in the same district and state. Those concerned with development, investment and technical assistance should therefore treat with caution statements purporting to be generally true about artisanal fishing villages.

The social, economic and technical problems existing in these three villages may be less amenable to simple straightforward solutions by way of capital investment and technical assistance than is sometimes supposed by those concerned with the planning and execution of development programmes. It is difficult to discern from the information available any specific opportunities for investment or technical assistance that would bring decisive and indisputable benefits, unless additional fish resources can be identified and made accessible to the fishermen. Even this could have adverse effects: it would require the adoption of a marketing system capable of handling larger amounts of fish; among the positive features of the present system are (a) the participation of the women in the marketing process, which allows direct sales to the consumer and means that the women handle the family income and (b) the supply of cheap animal protein to the nearby agricultural communities; this depends on delivery across country, on foot, by the fisherwomen. Care would have to be taken that these benefits were not jeopardized by development.

2. DESCRIPTION OF SURVEY

2.1 Background

Although a number of studies of the socio-economic situation of fishing communities in India have been made in the past, these are not representative of small villages in Tamil Nadu. Moreover these studies ignore to a great extent the involvement of women in the fishing economy.

In particular, since the International Women's Year in 1975, international organisations have placed greater emphasis on the role and status of women in third world countries. This emphasis grows out of the conviction that women can contribute to the process of national development and out of the realisation that they represent almost one half of the world's population, whose skills and energies must be tapped for this effort.

Women's issues pertaining to development cannot be treated separately from men's issues, but it is crucial that they are not overlooked. The importance of projects oriented towards women must be recognised not only to ensure an even distribution of the improvement in the standard of living of women, men and children, but also to ensure that women attain an equal status with their husbands and are equipped to play a part in the community commensurate with their abilities, whether potential or already realised.

The most effective step towards equal status for women is the earning of their own income so that they can make their own distinct contribution towards meeting the needs of the family. When introducing new income-generating activities it must be ensured either that the present daily workload of women (household, children) is not increased too much or that it is reduced to the maximum extent through infrastructural improvements (water supply, roads, preschools, shops, etc.)

2.2 Purpose of survey

Detailed information on the daily life in rural and fishing communities in developing countries and on the roles and activities of women therein is a prerequisite for initiating meaningful women-oriented projects. As there were no empirical data available on the socio-economic situation of fisherwomen in the coastal districts of Tamil Nadu it was decided to conduct a study with the following objectives:

- To examine the socio-economic condition of marine fisherwomen.
- To examine the involvement of women in productive activities.
- To examine possibilities for initiating income-generating activities for fisherwomen. (In this context, the term 'fisherwomen' embraces all adult female members of a fishing community.)

The study concentrates mainly on women's participation in the fishing economy. Their involvement in family and household activities is also considered, but only in terms of 'time spent'.

2.3 Method of survey

2.3.1 *Selection of villages*

The criterion for selection of the villages for study was that they should be small communities who owned and operated only fishing craft of traditional types, without mechanical propulsion or other recently-introduced gear or equipment.

2.3.2 *The initial approach*

How the socio-economic research team approaches the communities which are to be interviewed is of great importance. One very good approach is for the team to enter the village accompanied by a person known to the research team and who has relatives among the people of the village.

In the Chingleput district of Tamil Nadu, south of Madras, there are 63 small fishing communities.

A fisherwoman of Madras, already known to the research team, had relatives in three of the small fishing villages in this district: Perianeelankarai, Chemmencheri and Pattipulam. (See Appendices 2 to 5). Accordingly one of the investigators was taken by this fisherwoman on an informal visit to her relatives in these three villages.

During that visit contact was made with the village headmen and it was agreed that a group of women investigators could come to ask them for information about the villages and their fishing activities. The three headmen agreed to co-operate with the team and provide the required information.

2.3.3 Interviews with headmen

As a next step a team of four investigators went to the headmen with a prepared questionnaire to obtain data on the fishing economy, ownership patterns and infrastructural aspects. The interview of each headman took about 3-4 hours. Furthermore, the headmen were prepared for a series of visits of women interviewers who were to gather information about the life and activities of the fisherwomen.

Based on the information gathered from the initial interviews, a second questionnaire, this time for use in interviews with individual fisherwomen, was prepared and translated into Tamil. It consisted of closed as well as open questions. Please see Appendix 1.

2.3.4 Sample size

Each of the chosen villages has a population of about 400. All women claiming to be above the age of 14 years in the three villages were interviewed, 300 in all. The timely realisation that the latest population figures from the fisheries census differed widely from reality resulted in the decision to make a sample frame and mark all the houses with numbers.

2.3.5 Selection, training and supervision of investigators

Though the fisherwomen in the chosen area do not observe purdah, it was much easier to approach them through women rather than through men. Ten women investigators were selected to carry out the interviews. A few of them had worked as investigators in rural areas but only one had previous experience in interviewing fisherfolk. Intensive training was given to the investigators to prepare them for the field study. With the help of photographs and games they were made familiar with the situation in a fishing village, and the social manners of the fisherfolk. The aims and objectives of the survey were explained to the investigators. They were made to understand very clearly that the fisherwomen should on no account be led to expect prospects of financial help as this might only result in disappointment. The investigators were given an intensive familiarisation course on the questionnaire as well as on the methods of investigation. Part of the training was given in the field while pretesting the questionnaire.

During the three weeks of the investigation period, a meeting of all investigators and team leaders was held daily for about 30 minutes to discuss problems they had encountered in the field. This was done in order to eliminate as many mistakes as possible. The team leaders also paid regular visits to the villages to solve problems on the spot, if needed.

2.3.6 Individual interviews

Individual interviews were conducted as described above with all the 300 adult women over a period of 14 days in March 1981. The presence of menfolk during each interview was noted.

2.3.7 Group interviews

After the individual interviews had been completed, group interviews were carried out in order to get additional information from women regarding their opinions on new income-generating activities. Discussion guidelines were prepared beforehand. All fisherwomen in the selected villages were informed that a team of three investigators would like to discuss their way of life

with as many women as were interested in a discussion. A group of about 30-40 women then gathered and a 2½hour discussion took place. The discussion was recorded and later translated into English.

2.3.8 Interviews with other key persons

To get information on education, training and job opportunities for fisherwomen, additional key persons were interviewed. They included teachers and headmasters from the four schools accessible to children of fisherfolk, trainers in handicrafts who are training fisherwomen and the manager of a prawn freezing plant in Neelankarai.

2.3.9 Tabulation

Tabulation of data was done manually with the help of those investigators who had basic knowledge in statistics, and was completed during May 1981. The tables are presented later in this paper. The raw data are stored in the BOBP, Madras.