

Socio-economic Issues of Prawn-seed Collection in an Open Riverain Fishery: A Case Study of Prawn-seed Collectors in West Bengal

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This paper attempts to examine the socio-economic status of prawn-seed collectors, who traditionally live on fishing, in open riverain fishery under 24 Parganas district in West Bengal. The study suggests that the prawn-seed collectors' households are the most vulnerable segment among the poorest of the poor and live under Below Poverty Line (BPL) category. There is high incidence of illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, negligence of children's health and large family size among the majority of prawn-seed collectors' households. Despite the dislike for this occupation, female and adolescent girls, acting as main earners of their households, are compelled to be engaged in prawn-seed collection to support their families in addition to their household duties at the cost of hard labour over day and night; high risks and high occupational health hazard; the monthly income of these families is too low to support their families throughout the year and other members of their families have to supplement them with subsidiary sources of income. The study also suggests that the practice of prawn-seed collection under open riverain fishery is economically inefficient, ecologically unsustainable and socially unsound.

I Introduction

Prawn-seed collection is a household occupation in most of the families in the riverain villages of Sundarban in West Bengal. Anyone visiting the sea-facing blocks in the Sundarban delta will find thousands of men, women and children, who are almost under BPL category, wading through the rivers with nets and bowls in hand to catch prawn-seeds. Many sad stories are heard about these prawn-seed collectors who are mostly women and girls. Some of them met death; some lost their legs or arms, some sustained injuries, viz., fractures of legs and menstrual problems etc. Govt. departments, particularly departments of Fisheries, Environment and

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