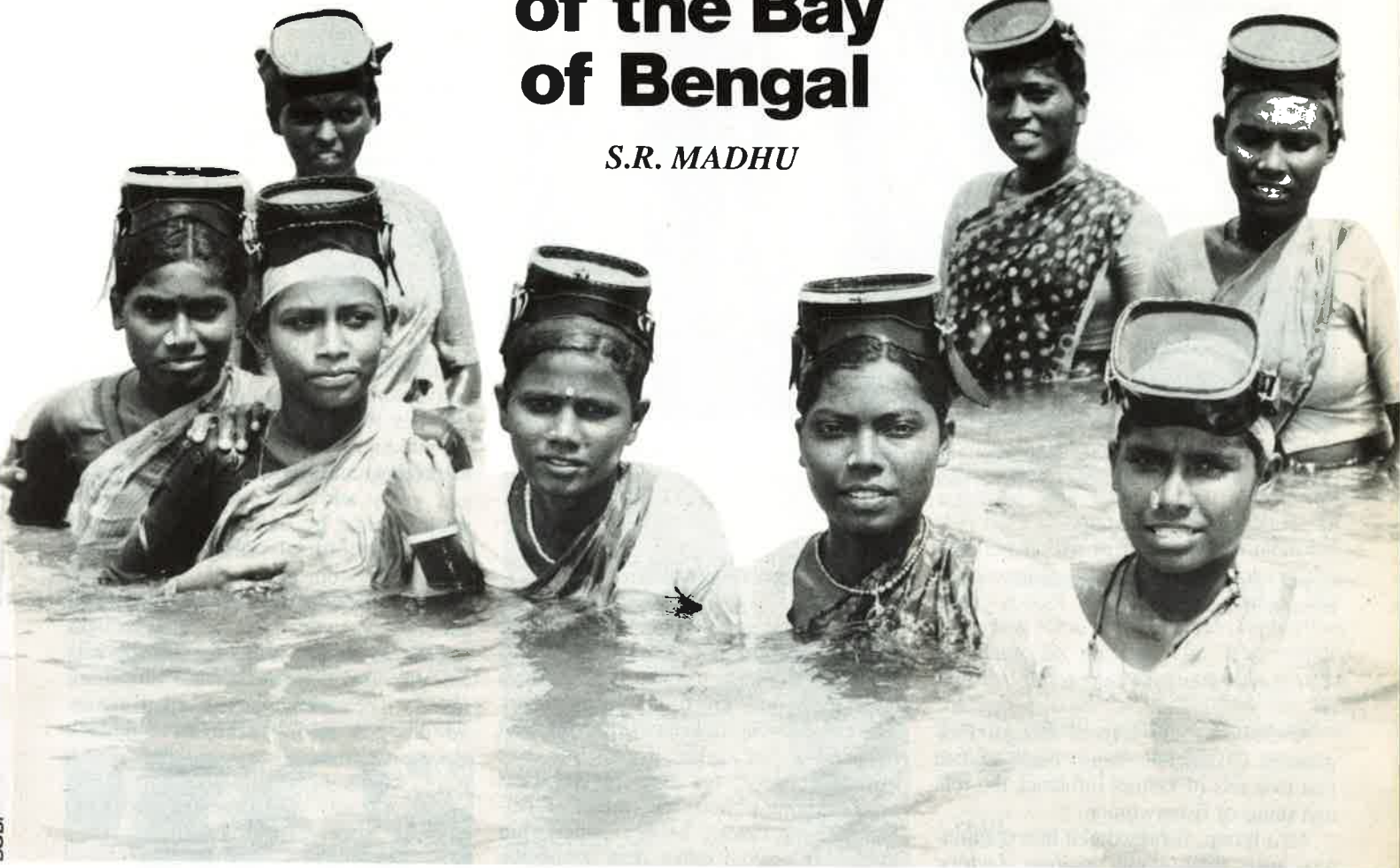


FISHERWOMEN of the Bay of Bengal

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Fisherwomen of Chinnapalem, Tamil Nadu, harvest seaweed from the sea. In a few hours, each woman collects about 10 kilos of seaweed.

Like Durga, the many-handed Hindu goddess, fisherwomen in and around the Bay of Bengal region play many roles. Consider, for example, the following:

In Penthakata, Puri, some 100 fisherwomen make 20 to 30 half-kilometer trips every day during the peak fishing season, as they walk from beach to processing godown with headloads of fish. They earn a meagre Rs2 for each trip!(US\$1 = Rs16)

In Chinnapalem fishing village, Tamil Nadu, fisherwomen go by boat to a seaweed "ground," then swim around and "pluck" seaweed. In a few hours, each woman collects about 10 kg of seaweed.

If not for shore management by fisherwomen, fishermen would be all at sea. The captors at sea would be captives on land ... and the fish economy would collapse too.

Elsewhere in the region, apart from activities as wife, mother and homemaker - which engage them from dawn to dusk - fisherwomen:

- market fish as retailers, auctioneers or as agents of merchants;
- make and repair nets;
- collect prawn seed or fish seed

from backwaters for supply to fish farmers;

- work as laborers for shrimp processing firms - at the landing site, at peeling sheds or at the processing plant;
- dry and salt fish;
- prepare a variety of fish products - fish crackers, fish balls, fish pastes, etc.

Yet fisherwomen get scant reward or recognition. Their potential is hamstrung by taboos, by denial of basic educational opportunities, by lack of access to finance. Surprisingly enough, fisherwomen have received little encourage-



A woman in the Chittagong district of Bangladesh supplements her family's income by making nets.

ment, motivation or guidance from women in authority.

The Bay of Bengal Programme

A study by the Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP) in Tamil Nadu opined that two sets of factors influence the role and status of fisherwomen.

As a group, fisherwomen in a community owe their status to four factors: economic (their performance in fish marketing); technological (their role as netmakers); ownership of assets; and traditional sociocultural factors.

The status of an individual fisherwoman, on the other hand, is determined by her employment position, marital status and level of education. Both sets of factors interplay in determining the status of a fisherwoman.

The BOBP, which began in 1979, aims at developing techniques and technologies to improve the conditions of small-scale fisherfolk communities in seven countries bordering the Bay of Bengal. From early on, improving the status of fisherwomen has been the emphasis.

BOBP activities concerning fisherwomen can be classified into three types:

- income-generating activities;
- training packages to improve the participation of fisherwomen in their own technological, socio-economic and cultural development; and
- credit.

Income-generating Activities

Money-making opportunities for fisherwomen do not abound. In Tamil Nadu, several ideas to raise incomes have been tried and given up as unviable: motorized cycle rickshaws to transport fish; tents for solar drying of fish; insulated boxes for fish preservation; hand-braiding of nets; use of manual net-making machines. Modernization has tended to weaken rather than strengthen the role of women.

Income-generating opportunities depend on local needs and circumstances, and also on the ingenuity of fisherwomen in tapping them. Local demand for low-cost tailors, for "ornamental leaves," for simple handicrafts such as baskets, shrimp paste or whatever, could be converted into cash by enterprising fisherwomen. Planners and development agencies need to identify such opportunities at various places and encourage and assist fisherwomen to tap them.

In Sri Lanka, during the early 1980s, BOBP set up training-cum-production centers in three villages along the west and southwest coast - Ulhitiyawa, Mirissa and Kudawella - for coir rope-making, tailoring and lace-making, respectively.

Coir rope-making at Ulhitiyawa was the most successful of the three activities. Thirty trained women operated looms, produced ropes and sold them through a cooperative. When the demand for coir ropes plunged, the women made combed raw fiber which was, in fact, more profit-

able and fetched a price 30% higher than coir rope.

But the tailoring activity at Mirissa failed. The trainees could not sell their product. They lacked the marketing and management skills needed to cash their production skills - they could not compete with city-based tailoring centers.

The lesson from Sri Lanka was that marketing opportunities are as important as training in production skills. In the absence of the former, the latter is quite futile as an income generator for women.

In Bangladesh, BOBP worked during 1982-85 with 13 groups of fisherwomen, 180 in all, in two fishing villages near Chittagong. The effort was to adopt a participatory approach to raise women's incomes through a variety of activities: net-making, fish farming, fish drying and marketing, and raising chickens, ducks and goats and fruit trees. Two social workers hired by BOBP and a couple of Bangladesh officials liaised with leaders of the fisherwomen groups.

The success of the income-generating activities was varied. Net-making brought in cash so long as twine for making nets was provided through BOBP. Fish culture failed - it obviously needed expert inputs. So did goat-raising. Chicken and duck



Moves are afoot to set up an organized fish market for the fisherwomen of Besant Nagar, Tamil Nadu.

BOBP



BOBP

During peak fishing season, women of Penthakata, in Puri, India, make 20 to 30 half kilometer trips each day, as they walk from beach to processing warehouse with headloads of fish.

rearing yielded some money in modest amounts. As for the trees, a few survived and cattle gobbled up the rest.

The cash outcome of the income-generating activities was thus hardly spectacular. However, they enabled fisherwomen to analyze their own condition, organize themselves, work in groups, discover their own potential and develop a more positive approach. This was perhaps the major gain.

Can women benefit from seaweed culture? A pilot project now on in Mandapam, Tamil Nadu could yield answers. Culture trials (for vegetative propagation of a *Gracilaria* species) began in 1988. If they succeed, the remarkably energetic women of Chinnapalem village - who regularly harvest seaweed from the sea - would benefit. So perhaps would women from nearby villages if the technology catches on.

Training Packages for Women

In Tamil Nadu, BOBP's "link worker" scheme has inspired better participation by fisherwomen in their own development.

In 1981, a 3-month training program in community organization was held for fisherwomen of Chingleput district. The trainees learnt how villagers can benefit from banks and cooperatives, and tap government schemes for their welfare and development. These trained fisherwomen then served as "link workers" - channels of communication with the outside world. Several useful, easily replicable schemes were initiated: small bank loans, savings activities, simple community halls, day-care centers for children, better health services for fisherwomen.



BOBP

Coir-rope making by fisherwomen at Ulhitiyawa, Sri Lanka.

After BOBP terminated its role in the link worker scheme, the Fisherwomen's Extension Service of the Fisheries Department continued to activate fisherwomen. Forty-four cooperatives societies have been set up to channel fisherwomen's energies into useful schemes. They vary in effectiveness depending on local circumstances and on the enterprise of individual fisherwomen. In Tharavakulam, Thanjavur district, for example, a vegetable-cum-fish market is being managed by a fisherwomen's cooperative society.

Another potential success story of group action with fisherwomen originates from Besant Nagar, Tamil Nadu. An effort was made to get the fisherwomen

here to analyze their condition, highlight their major needs and come up with solutions. The fisherwomen agreed that they need an organized fish market to sell their catch. The Fisheries Department has welcomed the idea; BOBP has prepared a draft design for a fish market and contacted various government authorities to pursue the scheme. The fisherwomen are also being trained to run the market through a trust to be formed for the purpose. The outcome of the endeavor will be watched with interest.

Credit

Fisherwomen throughout the Bay of Bengal region have identified credit as a major need. They put credit to more productive use than men do. Several BOBP extension activities, including those in Tamil Nadu and Bangladesh discussed earlier, have had credit components. Since the institutional credit system operates on formal lines, fisherfolk who operate informally have shied away from it. However, banks seem receptive when approached for small loans by groups of fisherwomen.

In sum, the BOBP experience with fisherwomen has shown that while income-generating opportunities depend on local circumstances, encouraging and activating fisherwomen for more vigorous participation in development, is an approach that can be tried everywhere.

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