*Women in Fisheries news articles compilation*

*FROM MARCH 2020 to MARCH 2022*

***TAMIL NADU:***

**1. Tamil Nadu: Women in fisheries sector: A case of pulicat lake**

<https://mcc.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Madhana-Rekha-UGC-Care-Journal.pdf>

The present paper discusses about the findings of the research study funded by the University Grants Commission. The aim of the study was to highlight the socio-economic conditions of fisher women in the Pulicat village of the Tiruvallur district. The primary source for the research was collected with the help of interview schedule and structured questionnaire relating to size of the family, occupation, level of income, land holding, level of education, living conditions, health status, social contact, etc. The secondary sources of data were collected from the published books, journals and Internet to supplement the study.

The fisheries sector in India has grown substantially over the past few decades. It has been experiencing a boom and is contributing to the economic growth of the nation. About 6 million fishers are dependent on fisheries for their livelihood in India (Amita Saxena, 2011). The total fisher population in Tamil Nadu has 27.60 cents. The fish eater’s population is minimal to 27 percent in Tamil Nadu where the vast potential fish is traded to other states. It is interesting to note that about 48.8% of the fisher folk in the state are women. There are 460 Fisheries Co-operatives run by them with a membership of 2,50,276 women indicating a high level of women participation. Fisher women engage themselves in seaweed collection in addition to the traditional jobs of fish curing, marketing, net making and prawn seed collection. Aquaculture activities can be pursued by the rural women folk at convenient leisure time without being a detriment to their routine. More effort is to be put towards filling the gaps in programme planning rather than programme implementation. The various issues challenging empowerment of fisherwomen have to be seriously taken into consideration while chalking out new development strategies. Women empowerment and the community development through combined efforts require a holistic approach.

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Full article is available at: <https://mcc.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Madhana-Rekha-UGC-Care-Journal.pdf>

**2. Tamil Nadu: Meet the female seaweed divers: ‘Our life is very tough**

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/travel/destinations/2021/09/09/the-female-seaweed-divers-of-tamil-nadu/>

For underwater thrill-seekers, scuba diving is a way to explore exotic marina flora and fauna. However, for hundreds of impoverished women inhabiting the 100-odd coastal villages in India’s southern state of Tamil Nadu, the activity is the only way to put food on the table. The intrepid divers, who range in age from 20 to 70, and inhabit hamlets such as Keelakarai, Erwadi, Rameswaram and Pamban in Ramanathapuram district, deep-dive around the 21 islands of the Gulf of Mannar to harvest seaweed growing on the surface of submerged rocks. The shallow bay has a 365-kilometre coastline, and is teeming with coral reefs and fascinating creatures such as the critically endangered dugongs (sea cows), sharks, whale sharks, sea horses, green and hawksbill sea turtles, dolphins and sea cucumbers. It is also rich in high-quality seaweed packed with minerals and vitamins that commands a premium from pharmaceutical and cosmetic companies.

But what’s remarkable is that the fisherwomen, who are unable to afford pricey scuba diving suits or oxygen cylinders, jump into the rough sea wearing only saris and rubber slippers. Bandaging their hands with cloth to prevent injuries from sharp protruding rocks, they wade deep into the waters to extract seaweed and deposit it in a satchel strapped to their backs. “We sail out into the ocean early morning with local fishermen in their boats. For a good harvest, we have to stay at a selected island for five to six days, leaving our families behind,” says Suganthi Ravi, 37, from Narikuzhi village. Ravi collects “Kappaphycus” seaweed, also known as elkhorn sea moss, a species of red algae bought by seaweed-processing companies to manufacture value-added products for the food processing and agriculture industries.

Seaweed is a type of marine algae. Its consumption by humans dates back to the fourth century. “It grows on hard surfaces such as rocks, stones and dead coral, and is used in the manufacture of drugs and chemicals and as a thickening jelly-like agent [agar agar] in food,” says Dr Sreedhar Shekhar, a marine biologist from Chennai. “India has a long and vibrant 7,500kilometre-long coastline which lends itself very well to seaweed cultivation. The plant has great commercial value and is now being recognised as a renewable source of food, energy, chemicals and medicine.” Reports suggest that given its surging demand, seaweed may be a $26 billion industry globally by 2025. However, for these fisherwomen, one kilogram of seaweed fetches a paltry 20 rupees ($0.30) in the market, with a haul from one trip averaging 40kg to 50kg.

Even so, the divers are happy that their profession gives them an identity and a source of income, about $100-$150 monthly. “My earnings may be meagre, but it has helped me raise a big family, educate my four kids and marry off two daughters. None of my children are interested in my profession, but I’m proud of it and will continue until the day I die,” says Ravi. Muniyaayi, 55, a mother of four who also sells basic grocery items from a makeshift, single-person “petti kada” stall as a side business, says despite her large family, she doesn’t depend on anyone. “My eldest daughter has studied up to bachelor’s level and got married. I work for myself and financially assist my children, too, if they ask.” Mary, 60, who started seaweed harvesting when she was just 7 without her parents’ knowledge, feels proud and self-empowered. “I have three sons and one daughter. But I’m not dependent on my children nor on my husband. I’ve never taken a single paisa from anyone in my life.”

Seaweed collection offers a vital support system for these unlettered women who have never gone to school. “We have no social support system, nor any financial assistance from the government, either. My husband died young leaving our two young kids behind, which pushed me to collect seaweed even though I was petrified of water,” says Mary. Personal struggles aside, professional challenges have also tested the women’s resolve. In 1986, the Gulf of Mannar was declared a National Biodiversity Park under India’s Wildlife Protection Act, which prohibited people from diving here. They still go, though, albeit without permission, keeping an eye out for anti-poaching officials.

Environmental challenges have further added to their travails. The older fisherwomen point out that when they started accompanying their mothers and grandmothers into the sea in the 1970s and 1980s, their collection of seaweed was substantially larger. But now, owing to global warming, the harvest has whittled down considerably. “The nature of the sea has also changed,” says diver Namthai, 73, who has been collecting seaweed since she was 13. “It is warmer and rougher due to which we now have to spend more time underwater. We also have to swim farther from the coast than we used to.” Known as the “brave grandma”, the septuagenarian rues she can only collect 15kg of seaweed in a day due to her age, compared to a young diver’s 50kg.

Responsible harvests

The divers also complain that their incomes have been divided as more divers take to the waters, which impacts the seaweed population in the region. Given these challenges, the women are leveraging their wealth of knowledge about the gulf waters to protect it. Lakshmi Moorthy, 50, a seaweed collector from Chinnapalam village who started diving at 14, is the leader of a group of divers in her area. She says that the women are aware of the perils of global warming and are taking steps to protect the marine ecosystem on which they have depended for sustenance for generations.

“We take care never to overharvest the seaweed. Our cultivation cycle is restricted to 12 days a month. We also avoid harvesting between April and June, when fish breeding is at its peak. We hop between the islands of the region to take only what we need and not stress one particular region.” Moorthy received the “Conservationist of the Year” award from US NGO Seacology in 2015 as a representative of the 2,000-plus women who protect the biosphere in the Gulf of Mannar. The honour included a glass trophy and a $10,000 prize.

She says she has also mobilised local fisherwomen to launch a union of seaweed harvesters. More than 600 of them have started cultivating seaweed on bamboo rafts, which helps save time and labour-intensive trips to the islands while ensuring a good harvest throughout the year, especially during the prohibited fish breeding months. This hardy profession has taken a toll on the divers’ health, though. “Due to the prolonged exposure to the composition of water in the Gulf of Mannar, our hair colour changes and our teeth look stained, both of which make us look older,” says Ravi. “Our hearing also gets impacted as we dive down to between six and 12 feet. At times, seashells give us deep gashes on our feet. Many divers have a problem finding a good match.”

For these reasons, the profession has few takers among the younger generations. Parvathi, 50, from Chinnapalam village, who has been diving since age 10 to collect Gelidiella acerosa, a type of seaweed that’s used to make agar agar, thinks she’s probably the last of her tribe. “Our life is very tough and fraught with risks. Not everybody is so brave,” she says. “We don’t want our daughters to follow our paths. Instead, we want them to study and go for a white-collar job.”

**3. Tamil Nadu: 2004 Tsunami survivors still await houses**

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/2004-tsunami-survivors-still-await-houses/articleshow/80360439.cms>

More than a hundred fisherwomen from Kasimedu gathered at the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board office on Tuesday and demanded new houses for the ones destroyed in the Tsunami in 2004. The women said they have been waiting for 16 years to get a new house. “We have visited every state department and sent several petitions requesting authorities to sanction us a house. But we have heard nothing from them so far,” said M Santhi, who lost her house near Kargil Nagar to the giant waves.

Due to the delay in providing alternate housing, many of them moved to rented homes and a few became pavement dwellers. Around 1,500 families in and around Kargil Nagar were allotted houses in several TNSCB quarters but they were left out, they said. Their plight has worsened due to the pandemic. “Majority of our earnings is spent on rent and we can barely make ends meet,” said Selvi, another fisherwoman. Officials from the department said they are considering various housing schemes and will decide suitably.

**4. Tamil Nadu: New job avenues for fishing community**

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/new-job-avenues-for-fishing-community/articleshow/74448504.cms>

A Jeyasudha has been selling fish for more than a decade but she hardly makes enough to run her household of four. Looking for an alternate livelihood, the 34-year-old woman is among the five fisherwomen who are learning to drive under the Skill and livelihood training’ (Salt) initiative by the Tamil Nadu Skill Development Corporation (TNSDC). The Salt initiative that conducts training in driving, tailoring and electrical mechanic work has added flavour to the life of fisherfolk in coastal hamlets in Villupuram district. “All that we know is to sell fish. Through the training more opportunities are opening up for us. In fact, my children are so proud of me. It has instilled confidence in me,” said Jeyasudha, whose husband sustained an injury in a boat accident a few years ago and now runs a petty shop. At present, the training is on at six places in Villupuram and will soon be expanded to other districts. The programme, a brainchild of assistant collector (trainee) of Villupuram V Sivakrishnamurthy, is aimed at bridging the gap between the market and skill sets of the fishing community members to provide them with sustainable employment.

The unused multi-purpose evacuation shelters (MPES), constructed for use during natural calamities are being used to train the men and women. “We interacted with members of the community to know their interests and educate them about market-driven employment opportunities,” said an official. Within a week more than 1,300 enrolled for training. Former panchayat president of Konimedu Kuppam M Ramesh said the fishing community welcomes the officials’ efforts. “Youngsters are learning different skills for free and receiving a government certificate” he said. Officials also plan convergence of various departments to extend financial aid to youngsters to form self-help groups to start businesses. “From the next phase of the programme we will diversify and offer new courses. Youngsters will be encouraged to start food processing units, come up with their own brand of ready to cook sea-food products and set up boat repair workshops,” said the official. Similar programmes will be launched in a phased manner in other MPES. “We are planning to replicate the model in other coastal districts,” said managing director of TNSDC V Vishnu.

**5. India’s women seaweed divers swim against the tide of climate change**

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-climate-change-women/indias-women-seaweed-divers-swim-against-the-tide-of-climate-change-idUSKBN21H0IY>

In a blue plastic barrel, Meenakshi Mookupori packed her belongings for a five-day stay on an island in the Indian Ocean, off the Coromandal coast of south India. Besides her clothes, toothbrush and soap, she included her diving gear – a worn-out pair of black socks, a locally made pair of goggles, cheap plastic slippers, cloth gloves, a round metallic plate with straps – and pain killers. Mookupori, 56, is one of nearly 2,000 women in Tamil Nadu state who dive to collect seaweed used in making agar, a gelatinous substance that becomes a thickener in food and medicines. I started accompanying my mother and grandmother to sea when I was eight or 10, she said, as she helped load cans of drinking water onto the boat. Those days, the seaweed collection was huge. We would bring back bags full. Now the quantity has reduced. The number of days we harvest the seaweed has also reduced. The sea has changed and we also had to. Rising sea levels, hotter temperatures and stronger currents along this coast – considered one of the best for commercial seaweed cultivation – are some of the changes Mookupori is seeing.

Scientists say they are caused by climate change. With the rise in sea temperature and salinity, seaweed growth has declined in the last decade, said K. Eswaran, a scientist who heads the field research unit of the Central Salt and Marine Chemicals Research Institute in Ramanathapuram district. Women who harvest seaweed have definitely been impacted, with their incomes coming down by at least 20%, he said. Mookupori grew up watching her mother leave home before dawn, board a boat and go to work harvesting in the Gulf of Mannar. The shallow bay with a 365-kilometre (225-miles) coastline is known for its coral reefs and is home to endangered species such as dugongs, a marine mammal related to the manatee. In 1986, the region was declared a national biodiversity park under India’s Wildlife Protection Act and collecting natural resource there was prohibited. A Tamil Nadu government report noted at the time that the major environmental threat to the gulf region was quarrying of coral for production of calcium carbide and lime. But creation of the marine park meant restrictions on accessing the bay’s 21 uninhabited islands to fish – or to collect seaweed – for 125 local villages. It was like they were declared thieves in their own backyard, said Venugopal, the program head for the non-profit International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) Trust. The national park excluded them from that space, making it challenging for the women to earn a livelihood, instead of giving them rights to the sea and including them in the conservation program. However, with few other options to earn a living, the gulf’s seaweed collectors have continued to illegally ply their trade.

Raniamma, 50, one of the harvesters who works with Mookupori, said she always keeps an eye out for anti-poaching officials when she and other seaweed harvesters sail to the islands for a harvest. Being caught there can carry a fine. But if we don’t camp on the island, we are unable to collect enough seaweed to sell, she said, rolling up her sari and slipping into leggings and socks held up by rubber bands. For each five kilograms of wet seaweed she collects, Raniamma earns 75 Indian rupees (about $1). Once the seaweed is dried and cleaned, it is sold by traders for 400 rupees ($5) per five kilos to domestic industry buyers. We only take what we need from the sea, which is seaweed, Raniamma said. The anti-poaching officers don’t understand. We live off the sea and we are also its guardians. What we see down there is precious and we know it, she said. The women of Bharathinagar in Ramanathapuram district, who have waded into the waters of India’s southeast coast for decades, possess a wealth of knowledge about the gulf waters. Now 60-year-old Mariamma Masanam, her fingers gnarled after years of harvests, can see conditions shifting. We feel the changes. The waters are rougher and we have to spend longer hours underwater to fill our bags. We are also traveling farther from the coast then we did earlier, she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Ramanathapuram district wildlife warden A.S. Marimuthu has also seen the changes, and said he was looking for ways to collaborate with the women. They have never been a big problem for us but we hope they will play a bigger role in managing the marine reserve with us. Under a United Nations Development Program initiative, for instance, eco-development committees have been set-up in fishing villages, with women educated on conservation and given training for alternative careers to reduce their dependence on the sea.

For now, to deal with the changing conditions and protect their seaweed beds, the women have cut the numbers of days they harvest and discarded the metal scrapers they once used, now gathering the seaweed with their hands instead. To counter charges of over-harvesting, they ply their trade only about 12 days a month and ensure they rotate between islands. None of them harvest between April and June, the main breeding season for fish. But their biggest push to protect the ecosystem and their livelihoods has been to begin cultivating – as well as harvesting – seaweed. In additional to wild harvesting, the women now grow seaweed on bamboo rafts, as part of an effort promoted by the Tamil Nadu government. But set-up costs are significant and harvests unpredictable, the women say. Still, there are more than 600 women who have shifted to cultivating seaweed and that has helped the ecosystem tremendously, said Eswaran. Growing seaweed also has helped the women get a harvest in summer months when wild harvesting is harder as higher temperatures and disease outbreaks cut seaweed growth, he said. Mookupori and Raniamma, however, consider themselves likely to be the last generation of seaweed harvesters along this cost. All of the six women on the boat with Mookupori are over 50, with deeply tanned skin, greying hair and wrinkled faces. The women talk about the harsh conditions of the sea, the rising tides and the great physical strength required to hold one’s breath and go down to the depths. But with every passing year, yields are falling and fines for wild harvesting increasing, they said, making their work an unattractive job option for their children. Our children would never do this, Mookupori said. In fact, sometimes we take them to the islands just for a picnic and show them a little of what we do. But when we stop diving, there will be no one else.