

THE ROLE OF FISHERWOMEN IN THE *BECHE-DE-MER* INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Beche-de-mer industry is essentially a cottage industry. The men are engaged in going out into sea and diving for the material. At some places women and children are engaged in collecting holothurians during low tide from muddy flats. After men return from sea the work can be taken over by women in degutting and boiling holothurians. This will relieve additional burden on men who go out into sea and also gainfully engage the women. Formation of fisherwomen Societies and imparting training to them will definitely improve the *beche-de-mer* industry in Tamil Nadu. The active participation of fisherwomen in this foreign exchange earning industry will certainly improve both the industry and the financial conditions of the fisherwomen.

INTRODUCTION

Beche-de-mer industry is essentially a cottage industry based on artisanal fishery and located in rural areas. In this industry men, women and even children play a significant role. This paper mainly deals on the involvement of fisherwomen in the industry and their role in different stages of processing is given.

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ROLE OF FISHERWOMEN

Collection of sea-cucumbers

Though the collection of sea-cucumbers remains the domain of men, women also take part in shallow waters. The divers are all men collecting the material from 2 - 5 m depth. In some places like Kungadalgut during low tide the women wade in water and collect the specimens from the muddy flats.

Degutting

When men return home tired after a days diving women can take over the processing from

them to relieve the burden. In some places like Tirupalakudi and Devipattanam women are actively involved and engaged in degutting operations. This is a relatively simple process involving in making a small slit near the posterior end of the animal on the dorsal side. The women are well equipped to do the job.

Boiling

Boiling the holothurians during processing can also be taken up by women with advantage since it is only cooking the animal to the required stage. The usual practise is to put them in drums and boil when the numbers are large. In some places like Mullimonai and Kattumavadi where the collections are small, they are boiled in large aluminium vessels. This type of boiling in Aluminium vessels is largely taken up by the women.

Burying

The material after it is boiled, is buried near the shore to allow bacterial decomposition of the outer layer of the skin. This work also is now taken up by the women in some places.

Cleaning

The material which is buried is kept moist to allow bacterial decomposition. After 15-18

hours, the holothurians are removed from the pit and put into plamfibre oven baskets. While one woman pours water men trample and clean the material thoroughly. In some places women clean individual specimens by brushes. After second boiling the material is put out for drying on palmyrah mats.

Grading

Grading is an important aspect in processing of sea-cucumbers. Women are excellantly suited to do the job in separating the samples according to the species, size and also shape. The value of the material depends much on the shape, size, colour and odour of the material. So grading has to be done carefully otherwise the labour involved goes as a waste.

Packing

Packing of the materal is the last operation in the processing of *beche-de-mer*. Packing materials include coir mats, jute hessian sacks and polythene bags. Packing in attractive cartons lined by polythene helps in extending the storage life and commands better price in the market. Packing operations can also be taken up by women since grading and packing are relatively simple jobs.

FORMATION OF FISHERWOMEN SOCIETIES

Fisherwomen societies are to be formed in every fishing village where holothurians are processed. The entire catches of the holothurians are given to the societies by the fishermen. Not a single specimen should reach the hands of private agents who are at present making huge profits in the industry as middle man. The members of each society in each village may be divided into minimum required groups so as to look after the works of the cottage industry without any hindrance. Each group should attend specific works like procurement of materials from landing centres to the processing centres, processing of the material and packing

of the processed goods and also marketing. Thus the doors of the industry can be closed to the middlemen. The entire profits gained by the society is shard by the women of the society. So each member is responsible for the success of this cottage industry.

SHORT-TERM TRAINING COURSES FOR WOMEN

The Department of Fisheries in collaboration with other Central Institutes should take responsibilities to impart the practical training of the processing methods to the women of the society by conducting short-term courses. The curriculum should cover in giving the basic knowledge of the functioning of the society, technical knowledge of the processing methods, the consciousness in quality control, marketing and management aspects, etc.

OTHER INFRASTRUCTURE FACILITIES

The Marine Products Export Development Authority should come forward to provide other facilities to the women societies. Each society should be provided with a cleaning shed, processing hall, smoke house and store room, etc. MPEDA should provide financial assistance for this.

AUDIO-VISUAL TRAINING TO FISHERWOMEN

Generally the fisherwomen are illiterates. Audio-visual education programme in all the fishing villages are to be conducted so as to inculcate the need for the conservation of sea-cucumber resource and also the need for the hygienic way of handling the highly valuable yet easily perishable and exportable products.

The role of fisherwomen in the industry right from procurement to packing gives employment opportunities to the women folk. The social status and economical standards of the fisherwomen will be improved by involving women in *beche-de-mer* industry.