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## PIRACY ON FISHING BOATS\*

In West Bengal, marine fishing activities were traditionally confined to only Bakkhali and Frazergunj in 24 Parganas district and Junput, Kharpat, Jaldha and Digha in Midnapore district during November - January period. Only a few bag nets used to be operated in the shallow waters of the former five places and small shore seines in the last place. Also a few 'Kachal jal', a primitive purse seine, meant to catch mainly hilsa were in operation in the sea off Midnapore district during the three months.

Mechanised gill netters were introduced in Digha in Midnapore district of West Bengal in the seventies. The success of this venture was evident by the sudden increase (Table 1) of mechanized fishing fleet and its spread in Frazergunj and Namkhana in 24 Parganas district, in the southern portion of the famous Sundarban forest with its creeks and crevices, infested with crocodiles and the ferocious royal Bengal tigers. Fishermen on their way to the fishing ground and to the marketing place have to pass through these creeks with dense forests on both sides.

Taking advantage of this situation pirates started attacking these fishing boats, looting the ration and cash. The occurrence of such incidents was first reported in 1981. In the course of time the pirates became more organized. They started kidnapping the fishermen along with their boats. One

or two of them used to be released to bring back the demanded ransom to get the boat and the rest of the crew members freed. The owners used to oblige the pirates and were reluctant to inform the police fearing reprisal by the pirates. It was only in 1988 that the police were involved when they were informed about the capture of a fishing boat along with the crew at Kasturi creek in Pathar Pratima area. The police rescued the boat and the crew and captured two pirates after an exchange of fire. Again on 26 - 7 '89 one boat belonging to Kakdwp was held by pirates. One crew member was released with the instruction to bring Rs. 70 thousand in cash along with rice, dal and other provisions. The owner arranged the release after payment of ransom. Incidentally, all the cases of piracy did not come to light.

In September, 1989, police rescued one boat along with the crew and in the raid two pirates were killed. On December, 3 a group of fishermen along with their boats were captured and taken to Kolsi Island. Some fishermen managed to sneak out and informed the police, who carried out an operation and rescued 17 fishermen.

The pirates, however, received a set back during their recent encounter with security forces on 9 December, 1989 following which 52 fishermen kidnapped by them were freed. Seven boats along with crew members were captured on 7-12- '89 and taken to Kendo, a 20 sq. km, deep forest island, 30

km from Bangladesh and close to the "Zero line" international boundary of the Bay of Bengal. The BSF and the local police took up the case and rescued 4 mechanised and one non- mechanised boat along with 52 fishermen on 9 - 12 - '89 after an exchange of fire. The police then cordoned the island on 10 - 12 - '89 with 3 police launches and about 10 mechanised boats. The pirates first attacked the police party with guns and bombs. The police returned fire and in the exchange 4 pirates died. The rest of eleven pirates were chased by police into the forest. In a bid to escape they boarded a boat and went to the sea when the BSF vessel Ashok chased them. The pirates jumped into the sea and could not be traced further. Firearms and ingredients to make bombs were recovered. Altogether 105 fishermen were captured by this gang out which police rescued 17 on 4 - 12 - '89 and 52 on 9 - 12 - '89. Some were released by pirates themselves to bring ransom

TABLE I. *Number of mechanised gill netters operated in Midnapore district*

Name of landing centre	No. of mechanised boats			
	1981	1983	1984	1989
Frazergunj	22	129	136	205
Kakdwip	12	Not known	57	160
Diamond Harbour	Nil	-do-	18	100

and the rest purchased their release. One shri Lakshman Roy (27) with 15 thousand rupees in cash was arrested by police when he was going to arrange release of his boat by paying ransom.

The BSF which took the major role in rescuing the fishermen has stepped in to halt the hitherto unchecked piracy. Contingents or BSF personnel are now patrolling the are to create confidence among the fishermen.

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