

# Non-operational trawlers and ban on *Hilsa* export by Bangladesh adversely impacts the fish availability in West Bengal

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Fish availability in the domestic markets of West Bengal had adverse impacts owing to the recent ban on import of *Hilsa* from Bangladesh. Due to incessant rise in prices of *Hilsa*, catfish, major and minor carps in the recent past, fish loving Bengalis relied on marine fishes such as mackerel, sciaenids, seabass, Bombay-duck and flatfishes for their consumption. The marine fishes were less preferred by Bengali fish eating population earlier because of their colour and smell. However, during recent months, steep hike in the prices of marine fishes are observed. The spurt in the prices has been mostly due to the alarming decline in the supply of the fish in markets. National Marine Fishery Data

Centre reports from Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute indicate that the *Hilsa* catch in West Bengal witnessed a heavy decline from 83,000 tonnes in 2010 to 20,000 tonnes in 2011. In 2012 also, the commercial landings of the fish has been dropped further and reached 9,200 tonnes. Since January 2012, the monthly estimated landings of *Hilsa* have been on decline in almost all the months as compared to same periods of the previous year except in August and September (Fig. 1).

The marine fish landings in West Bengal have shown 3.6 fold increase from 0.97 lakh tons during 2001 to 3.65 lakh tons during 2011 (Fig.2). The contribution of West Bengal to India's marine fish

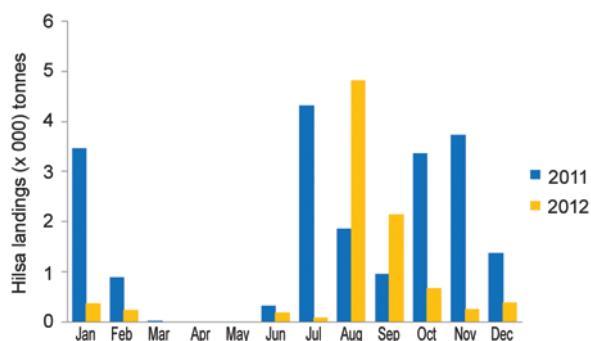


Fig. 1. Monthly *Hilsa* landings along West Bengal coast during 2012

landings was around 4.3% in 2001, which has been increased to 11.2% in 2009. The increase in number and size of fishing crafts fitted with high powered engines and efficient gears, introduction of multiday fishing and extension of fishing grounds have been the important factors which augmented fish landings.

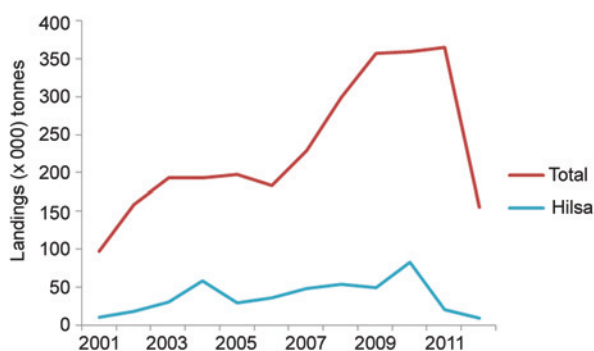


Fig. 2. Marine fish landings in West Bengal

About 85% of the marine fish landings during 2011 is contributed by mechanized sector and as in previous years, the gillnetters and trawlers were doing multiday operations during the fishing season of July to February. On the other hand, during the current year, majority of the small trawlers and boats are not venturing into sea for catching fish as they are incurring huge losses due to extremely poor catch. The estimated landings during January to October are 40% lower than that of the previous year.

*Hilsa*, the national fish of Bangladesh is prominently known as Padma Ilish, Kolaghat Ilish or Ganga Ilish signifying the river belts and areas of its abundance on both sides of Bengal. Significantly,

this fish has played a key role in the economy of Bangladesh. Large quantum of Bangladeshi fishermen is depending on *Hilsa* for their livelihood. Bangladesh because of its recent ban on *Hilsa* export might lose out on export of this fish to India. Myanmar emerging as a potential *Hilsa* resource partner for India will also dampen the prospects of Bangladesh as a prominent exporter to India in the long run.

Bangladesh Fisheries Research Institute (BFRI) is coming up with prospective conservation plans on jatka - the juveniles of *Hilsa* to improve the stock of the fish. *Hilsa* is a migratory fish and it continues to change its course very often. A probable resolution that may help in improving the *Hilsa* stock in this region is to establish a transnational research agency, which should work towards a tri-nation agreement between Bangladesh, India and Myanmar to conserve this fish which migrates extensively. West Bengal government provide alternative employment and rice at ₹ 2 per kg for 2,00,000 fishermen in West Bengal if they abstain from catching *Hilsa* during the breeding/ migrating months of April- May, October - November as a conservation measure. Climate change may also be attributed to the decline in catch in West Bengal region as there is decline in rainfall status in Southern Bengal during the last few years. Adding to the woes in the region, there is severe choking of various creeks in Sunderbans delta due to emergence of islands. Heavy siltation is forcing the fish to take up a new migratory course. Apart from the low catch in West Bengal, even the yields in riverine tracts have been low. Madhvi Sally and Sutanuka Ghoshal in their report on soaring *Hilsa* prices in early August 2012 in *Economic Times* clearly point out the decline in the availability of *Hilsa* in the estuaries of Hoogly. Besides these, industrial effluents flushed into Ganges from many places along the riverine course destroy the quality of water. Eventually, the fisheries of *Hilsa* has declined due to recruitment failure and intensified exploitation of adults and juveniles. Hence, the declining trend of landings of *Hilsa* and reduced operations of trawlers calls for conservation and recovery of the fishery in West Bengal.