

Pitiful Plunder

The social, environmental and economic destruction that results from the plunder of land in Bangladesh by the shrimp industry is pitiful

Around half a million acres (203,071 ha) of Bangladesh are inundated by shrimp farms. Almost half of these are located in the Greater Khulna region, comprising Khulna, Bagerhat and Satkhira Districts, with the remaining spread over Bhola, Noakhali and Cox's Bazaar Districts.

The easy availability of farmland in these poor southern districts and the lure of quick profits initially motivated farmers to shift from traditional agriculture to industrial shrimp cultivation. Successive governments and the shrimp industry associations have extolled the great benefits and money that the shrimp industry brings to the nation. Shrimp farming is the second-largest earner of foreign exchange in Bangladesh.

Long-term inundation of saline water and the extensive use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and insecticides in shrimp cultivation have significantly diminished the fertility of the soil. Non-shrimp areas too are affected: the yields of most of the crops grown in the shrimp districts have declined drastically. The yields of wheat, jute and sugarcane have met with a similar fate. Fruit trees and vegetable gardens have gradually disappeared. Traditional practices like kitchen gardening, poultry and livestock rearing have waned where shrimp farms flourish. The lack of grazing land and fodder, and widespread, contagious cattle diseases arising from saline water have reduced the numbers of livestock. Cow dung, which is used both for manuring and as a household fuel, is now in short supply.

The salinity in the soil has totally destroyed the habitat for earthworms, which are 'natural farmers'. Shrimp-processing industries drain their

production wastes into the rivers and other natural water bodies and, consequently, pollute the natural ecosystems in the areas. Wildlife like snakes, birds, lizards and mice have vanished from the affected areas.

Prior to shrimp cultivation, sweet-water fish like *rui* or *rohu* (*Labeo rohita*), *katla* (*Catla catla*) and *koi* (*Anabas testudineus*) were found in abundance in these areas. Cultivation of fish in homestead ponds has now become impossible due to the salinity of groundwater.

Prior to shrimp cultivation, sweet-water fish were found in abundance.

The nets used to catch shrimp fry are very fine-meshed and, consequently, their use depletes fish stocks: fry collectors retain the shrimp larvae while discarding the rest, dead. The harvest of shrimp seedlings from nature is considered to be very harmful for the marine environment and is banned in many countries. The practice is rampant in Bangladesh—wild shrimp fry is more resistant to virus attacks compared to its hatchery counterpart.

Mangroves destroyed

Several types of reeds, grasses and weeds, like *durba*, *baju*, *thankuni* and aquatic plants like *kachuripana*, have completely disappeared due to the high salt content of water and soil. Thousands of hectares of mangrove forests have been cleared to make way for shrimp farms. The destruction of the Chokoria Sunderban, a unique

*This article is by **Shailey Fatima** (secretariat@asia-solidarity.org), a Bangladesh-based freelance journalist, who is with Asia Solidarity against Industrial Aquaculture (ASIA)*

mangrove patch in Chokoria Thana of Cox's Bazaar District, stands as a testimony to the severe consequence of shrimp cultivation. Mangrove forests control flooding, preserve water quality and protect shorelines from storms and erosion. Arguably, the physical impact of Cyclones Sidr and Aila would have been less had the mangrove forests been left standing.

The nature of work in shrimp farms requires workers to stand for long periods in stagnant, saline water, which results in skin ailments and infections.

People draw water from unsafe drinking water sources, due to the acute shortage of safe drinking water. Even the water from deep tube wells in most areas is too saline for drinking. As a result, cases of diarrhoea and dysentery in the local population have increased. Childhood malnutrition may have become more prevalent due to the lower yield of local varieties of paddy and the impoverishment of marginal and landless farmers.

The social costs have been equally devastating. According to a recent report, as many as 70 per cent of the shrimp fields in the greater Khulna District are owned or controlled by outsiders; 20 per cent by local rich landowners; and the remaining 10 per cent by small and marginal farmers. Local farmers and landowners fall

prey to the shrimp mafia and end up leasing or renting out their land at very low rates. Some lands are forcibly seized. Often the government *khas* land, allotted to poor landless farmers, is grabbed by the local shrimp mafia. Protests are countered with false lawsuits, death threats and violence by hired goons. Under such pressure, marginal farmers are often forced to sell their lands and migrate to urban areas to seek a livelihood.

In essence, the growth of the shrimp industry has been made possible by systematic and organized intimidation, fear and the violence perpetrated by powerful shrimp farmers and businessmen. While there has been much concern voiced by civil society organizations, there has been very little government intervention of significance to regulate the sector and prevent the grave social and environmental abuses that are synonymous with it.

The highly profitable export of shrimp in Bangladesh has hit major economic setbacks in recent years for a number of reasons. In 2009, the European Union countries imposed a trade embargo on shrimp from Bangladesh, when harmful levels of the antibiotic nitrofurans were detected in 50 consignments exported from Bangladesh. The global economic recession has brought about a dip in the demand for shrimp as a result of which the price of shrimp in the United States and European countries has fallen by 40 to 45 per cent. The use of low-cost Indian and Burmese shrimp seedlings, which are of much inferior quality and are easily afflicted by virus attacks, has lowered yields and reduced quality, and subsequently fetches lower profits. The PCR laboratory set up by the government to detect shrimp viruses, at a cost of Taka 1 crore (US\$145,096), has not been able to function effectively. As a result, only 52 out of the 84 government-approved shrimp-processing companies are in operation. The rest have temporarily closed due to the lack of orders from importing nations.

Cyclone Aila

Further complicating matters, the recent cyclonic storm Aila washed away

NATASHA AHMAD/ASIA



Women and men of fishing communities protesting against the shrimp industry in Bangladesh. Many believe that aquaculture and shrimp farms have ruined their lives

50 to 55 per cent of shrimp enclosures, especially in Bagerhat, with the loss estimated at over TK 150 crore (US\$22 mn). The shrimp cultivators are now in a dire situation, with the additional burden of bank loans taken in the hope of a boost in production this year. The sector was just in the process of recovery from the heavy blow from Cyclone Sidr in 2007. The farmers are now expecting help from the government in the form of low-interest loans and speedy repairs of ravaged embankments to guard against tidal waters.

A large number of the labourers in shrimp-processing activities are women and children. The majority of these women are single mothers who are now helpless as there is no alternative source of livelihood in these areas. As a result, they struggle to scrape together the minimal subsistence income. A coalition of different shrimp workers' organizations in Khulna District is spearheading a movement to demand basic rights for shrimp-processing labourers. In spite of being such a large economic sector, a minimum wage for shrimp-processing labourers has not been standardized. The workers now demand a minimum wage of Tk 7,450 (US\$108) per month as against the current scale between Tk 1,600 and Tk 4,000 (US\$23 and 58), based on skills and experience. They are also demanding overtime pay for their 12 hour-a-day input. The demands also included appointment letters, maternity leave, congenial working environment for all, including the children involved, and medical compensation. The benefits of shrimp cultivation accrue to a privileged few, while its high socioeconomic and environmental costs are borne by landless and marginal farmers.


In a sign of the bad times afflicting the shrimp sector, disillusioned shrimp farmers, especially those in the Dakope, Paikgacha and Batiyagacha areas of Khulna District, are reverting to the cultivation of paddy and other crops. However, this has not been without problems. The high salinity of the soil, delayed rainfall and lack of adequate amounts of freshwater required for paddy cultivation, has hit the yield of *boro* paddy in Khulna this year. Opening

sluice gates to allow saline water into arable land is banned by law. However, unscrupulous shrimp cultivators continue this practice with impunity. The return to paddy farming by shrimp farmers has also been hampered by the lack of knowledge of paddy cultivation among the new generation of farmers who have been engaged in shrimp

A large number of the labourers in shrimp-processing activities are women and children.

cultivation for the last 20 years or so. It is this new generation of paddy farmers who, in association with some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Agricultural Department are trying to raise awareness against shrimp cultivation. They are hopeful of better yields in the coming years, in the expectation that the salinity in the soil will lessen with rainwater and repeated cultivation of crops.

The economic justification for shrimp cultivation will cease to exist if a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis is carried out. The reported annual revenue of around US\$ 360 mn is pitiful compensation for the social, environmental and economic holocaust that the shrimp industry has perpetrated.

The local community in Bangladesh believes that this 'rape-and-run' industry has ruined their lives, taken away their livelihoods and left them with no food or drinking water. The dream of profit has left them with nothing in hand. The local community is now coming together to gain control over their lost lands. The local political leaders have joined them in this movement but the local administration is still working for the rich gher owners. The situation in these areas is very tense but the people are hopeful that they will be able to win this battle and return to agriculture again. 

For more

www.idrc.ca/en/ev-5533-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

Shrimp Culture in Bangladesh

www.fao.org/fishery/countrysector/naso_bangladesh/en

FAO's National Aquaculture Overview for Bangladesh

www.usaid.gov/bd/files/gendered_analysis_shrimp.pdf

Gendered Approach to Shrimp Culture

www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/wid/pubs/Bangladesh_Shrimp_Value_Chain_Feb_2006.pdf

A Pro-poor Analysis of the Shrimp Sector in Bangladesh

<http://asia-solidarity.org/>
Asia Solidarity against Industrial Aquaculture (ASIA)