

Livelihood Transformation among Hilsa Fishing Households in South Govindia Village, Chandpur District, Bangladesh.

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Abstract

The Hilsa fishery has long underpinned livelihoods and local trade in South Govindia Village, Chandpur District, but recent socio-environmental shifts are reshaping household economies. This study specifically investigates how ecological pressures and market-institutional factors drive a transition from Hilsa-dependent livelihoods toward diversified income strategies among fishing households. Between January and June 2024, we used a mixed-methods design: a stratified random household survey of 210 fishing households, 12 key informant interviews, four focus group discussions, and participant observation; quantitative data were analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics and qualitative data through thematic coding. Findings cluster into two main themes: (1) ecological-production stress, evidenced by declining catches, seasonal fishing bans, and climate-related river changes that reduce household fishing income; and (2) market-institutional vulnerabilities, including dependence on intermediaries, limited market bargaining power, and inadequate, short-term compensation that together increase indebtedness and push households toward nonfishing income sources (wage labor, small trade, migration, and aquaculture). Women's growing role in supplementary activities partly cushions income loss but does not fully offset structural insecurity. The study contributes empirical evidence of a livelihood shift from mono-dependent fishing to diversified survival strategies and argues that targeted, integrated policies—linking cooperative marketing, access to credit, and participatory fisheries governance—are needed to support sustainable economic resilience in Hilsa-dependent communities.

Keywords: hilsa; fishermen; livelihood; transformation; economy; fishing; community.

Transformasi Penghidupan pada Rumah Tangga Nelayan Hilsa di Desa Govindia Selatan, Distrik Chandpur, Bangladesh.

Abstrak

Perikanan Hilsa telah lama menjadi penopang penghidupan dan perdagangan lokal di Desa Govindia Selatan, Distrik Chandpur, namun pergeseran sosial-lingkungan yang terjadi baru-baru ini sedang mengubah ekonomi rumah tangga. Penelitian ini secara khusus menyelidiki bagaimana tekanan ekologis dan faktor-faktor institusional-pasar mendorong transisi dari penghidupan yang bergantung pada Hilsa menuju strategi pendapatan yang beragam di kalangan rumah tangga nelayan. Antara bulan Januari dan Juni 2024, kami menggunakan desain metode campuran: survei rumah tangga acak bertingkat terhadap 210 rumah tangga nelayan, 12 wawancara informan kunci, empat diskusi kelompok terpumpun (FGD), dan observasi partisipan; data kuantitatif dianalisis dengan statistik deskriptif dan inferensial serta data kualitatif melalui pengodean tematik. Temuan mengelompok ke dalam dua tema utama: (1) tekanan produksi-ekologis, dibuktikan dengan menurunnya hasil tangkapan, larangan menangkap ikan musiman, dan perubahan sungai terkait iklim yang mengurangi pendapatan rumah tangga dari menangkap ikan; serta (2) kerentanan institusional-pasar, termasuk ketergantungan pada perantara, terbatasnya daya tawar pasar, dan kompensasi jangka pendek yang tidak memadai yang secara bersama-sama meningkatkan utang dan mendorong rumah tangga ke arah sumber pendapatan non-perikanan (pekerja upahan, perdagangan kecil, migrasi, dan akuakultur). Peran perempuan yang semakin berkembang dalam aktivitas tambahan sebagian turut meredakan hilangnya pendapatan, namun tidak sepenuhnya menutupi ketidakamanan struktural. Studi ini memberikan bukti empiris tentang pergeseran penghidupan dari ketergantungan tunggal pada perikanan menuju strategi

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bertahan hidup yang beragam dan berargumen bahwa kebijakan yang terarah dan terintegrasi—yang menghubungkan pemasaran kooperatif, akses kredit, dan tata kelola perikanan partisipatif—diperlukan untuk mendukung ketahanan ekonomi yang berkelanjutan di komunitas yang bergantung pada Hilsa.

Kata kunci: hilsa; nelayan; penghidupan; transformasi; ekonomi; perikanan; komunitas.

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INTRODUCTION

Fish is Bangladesh's second-most valuable agricultural commodity and central to livelihoods and culture. Hilsa (*Tenualosa ilisha*), the national fish and a cultural icon (panta ilish at Pohela Boishakh), generates high market value while many hilsa fishers remain trapped in poverty. This study argues that the paradox—high commodity value but persistent fisher impoverishment—stems from interacting local mechanisms: seasonal fishing bans and gear restrictions, patron–client (mahajon) credit relations, unequal value-chain margins, and climate-linked stock variability. Previous research documents these factors separately but has not explained how they jointly produce economic entrapment at the community level. Using household surveys, key informant interviews, and value-chain mapping in Comilla and coastal communities, we analyze how informal debt, restricted access during bans, and unequal profit distribution reproduce vulnerability. The study contributes an integrated framework linking regulatory, financial, and market processes to fisher poverty and offers targeted policy entry points to reduce dependency and improve equitable returns from hilsa.

In the 2020–21 fiscal year, Bangladesh produced 4.621 million metric tons of fish, surpassing its target. Globally, the country ranks third in inland capture fisheries and fifth in aquaculture production. It is also the leading producer of hilsa, contributing about 86% of the global catch. The fisheries sector contributes 3.57% to GDP, 1.24% to export earnings, and supplies about 60% of the nation's animal protein intake. Hilsa alone accounts for 12.23% of total fish production and about 1% of GDP. It directly employs around 0.45 million people and supports 2.5 million more through related activities. Bangladesh remains the primary global producer and exporter of hilsa.

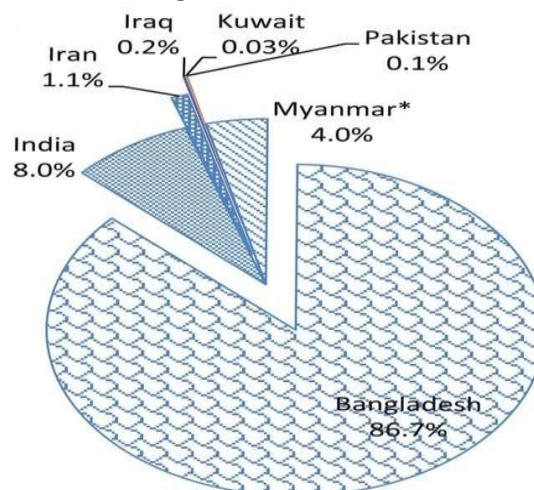


Figure 1. Hilsa fish production rate in different countries of the world (Rahman M.J. et al., 2018).

The Government of Bangladesh enforces a 22-day nationwide ban each October on catching, selling, storing, and transporting hilsa to ensure safe spawning during the peak breeding season (The Daily Star, 2022). In South Govindia village, fishers typically use mechanized boats and several types of nets, including drift gill nets (gulti jal, konajal), monofilament gill nets (current jal), and seine nets (ber jal). However, the latter two are illegal, leaving yarn nets (sutar jal) as the only permitted gear. These nets

primarily catch hilsa, limiting opportunities to harvest other fish species. As a result, fishers depend almost entirely on hilsa catches for income.

This restriction forces many fishers to borrow money from local moneylenders (mahajon) at high compound interest rates to sustain their households. Consequently, most hilsa fishers remain poor, with living standards steadily declining. The Meghna River, one of Bangladesh's largest and most productive rivers, supplies a significant share of the country's hilsa production, and Chandpur district plays a vital role in this sector. Despite this, most fishers in South Govindia live below the poverty line and work as laborers in teams, while only a few own boats and nets. Fishing is their primary livelihood, and alternative income sources are scarce. During the fishing season, earnings are often insufficient to repay debts, and during the ban and off-season periods, income opportunities almost disappear. Government support during these times is limited and inadequate to meet basic needs. As an isolated community, fishers lack access to essential services and economic opportunities.

The cumulative effect is worsening economic hardship, prompting many fishers to leave the profession and seek alternative livelihoods. The inability to repay debts and survive during restricted periods accelerates this occupational shift. Against this backdrop, the present study examines the economic conditions of hilsa fishers and the impact of off-season restrictions on their livelihoods in South Govindia village, Chandpur, Bangladesh.

Background of the Study

The study examines the changing economy of the Hilsa fishermen community in South Govindia Village, Chandpur District, highlighting the deep interdependence between livelihoods, environment, and cultural traditions. Historically, Hilsa fishing has been central to the community's economic stability and cultural identity, with knowledge and practices passed down through generations. The predictable migration of Hilsa once ensured sustainable livelihoods and resilience. In recent years, however, this stability has been disrupted by environmental and economic changes. Climate change and habitat degradation have made Hilsa migration patterns increasingly unpredictable, threatening the income and survival of fishermen. Despite the high market value of Hilsa fish, many fishermen struggle to meet basic needs, often remaining dependent on intermediaries (Mahajans), which reinforces their economic marginalization and exploitation.

The study also explores the broader socio-cultural impacts of these changes. Economic uncertainty, combined with environmental pressures and emerging technological shifts, not only undermines livelihoods but also endangers traditional knowledge and cultural heritage. These challenges reshape social relations and community dynamics in South Govindia Village. Overall, the research situates the community's economic transformation within a broader context of environmental vulnerability, market forces, and structural inequalities. It aims to identify key challenges and provide insights for policy interventions and community-based strategies to promote sustainable livelihoods and long-term resilience.

Statement of the Problem

In South Govindia Village of Chandpur District, the Hilsa fishing community is undergoing significant economic disruption as traditional fishing patterns change. For generations, their livelihoods depended on predictable Hilsa migration and abundance, but this stability is now declining. Erratic fish availability, driven by climate change and habitat degradation, threatens income and food security. Technological advancements, such as mechanized boats and modern fishing gear, have increased catch potential but raised concerns about overfishing and long-term sustainability. Unequal access to these technologies is also widening socio-economic disparities within the community. At the same time, the growing commercialization of the Hilsa fishery has shifted economic control toward middlemen and market forces, reducing fishermen's share in the value chain and exposing them to price volatility.

These combined changes are reshaping the community's economic structure and social fabric. Traditional livelihoods are becoming less reliable, while inadequate social protection increases vulnerability to poverty. The fishermen now face the dual challenge of adapting to environmental and economic shifts while preserving their cultural identity and ensuring sustainable resource use.

Objectives of the Study

Hilsa fish is a valuable and globally popular resource, yet the fishing community in South Govindia village remains economically vulnerable. During government-imposed fishing bans, fishermen cannot catch fish, leading to income loss and dependence on high-interest loans from local moneylenders. Repayment becomes difficult, trapping them in poverty. As a result, many are leaving fishing for alternative occupations, finding them more stable and secure. This raises a key research question: why does the economic condition of hilsa fishermen not improve despite harvesting such a valuable resource? The study aims to assess the socio-economic status of hilsa fishermen in South Govindia village, Chandpur district, and explore factors influencing their livelihood challenges:

1. To describe the changing socio-economic condition of the hilsa fisher communities.
2. To understand the reason behind their oppression and subordination in the hilsa fishing process.
3. To identify hilsa fishermen surviving hand to mouth in spite of the higher price of hilsa fish.

Rationale of the Study

Hilsa is one of the most valuable fish globally and contributes about 12.23% of Bangladesh's annual fish production and nearly 1% to national GDP. Despite this, hilsa fishermen remain among the poorest groups, with declining living standards (DoF, 2022). Most hilsa are caught in the Meghna River, particularly around Chandpur, yet fishing communities along its banks continue to experience severe socio-economic hardship. Many fishermen are leaving the profession in search of more stable livelihoods. South Govindia, a village on the Meghna River, depends heavily on hilsa fishing. While fishing once sustained families year-round, seasonal fishing bans now prevent fishing for four months annually, causing acute financial crises. During this period, fishermen rely on high-interest loans from local moneylenders (mahajon), leading to cycles of debt that are difficult to escape. Economic inequality is pronounced, as boat and gear owners dominate the local economy and exploit fishermen through unfair profit distribution. Middlemen (arotdar) and moneylenders further oppress fishermen by enforcing high-interest, compound-rate loans and controlling fish sales. Consequently, many fishermen abandon the occupation, reducing the number of active fishers.

This research examines why hilsa fishermen remain poor despite harvesting a valuable resource, focusing on exploitation, economic vulnerability, and the broader contribution of hilsa to food security and the national economy.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

The socio-economic conditions of Hilsa fishers in Bangladesh have attracted scholarly attention, particularly regarding poverty, livelihood vulnerability, fishing restrictions, and unequal market relations. Existing studies consistently demonstrate that although Hilsa fisheries contribute significantly to the national economy, the fishers themselves remain among the most marginalized occupational groups. However, these studies often examine individual dimensions of vulnerability rather than the interconnected mechanisms that sustain it.

A major theme in the literature is fisher poverty and livelihood vulnerability. Faruque and Ahsan (2014) found that Hilsa fishers in the Padma River region operate within a common-property resource system characterized by intense competition and declining fish stocks. While the fishery contributes substantially to national GDP, fishers experience persistent poverty due to limited access to productive

resources and unstable incomes. Similarly, Roy et al. (2016) highlighted the precarious livelihoods of fishers in the lower Meghna River basin, emphasizing their limited capacity to withstand economic shocks during seasonal fishing bans.

A second theme concerns fishing restrictions and indebtedness. Studies show that government-imposed bans on catching jatka and breeding Hilsa, although important for conservation, often generate severe financial hardship for fishing households. Roy et al. (2016) reported that the vast majority of fishers rely on loans from mahajans, while Ali et al. (2015) demonstrated that many fishers are compelled to sell boats, nets, and other productive assets to repay debts during restriction periods. These findings suggest that conservation policies may unintentionally deepen economic insecurity when adequate livelihood support is absent.

A third theme relates to power relations within the fisheries value chain. Existing research indicates that mahajans and intermediaries exert considerable control over credit, fish marketing, and pricing mechanisms. From a Marxist perspective, these actors function as controllers of the means of production and market access, creating unequal relations that limit fishers' economic autonomy. Labour exploitation occurs through debt dependency, while class-based power asymmetries enable intermediaries to appropriate a disproportionate share of the value generated by fishers' labour.

Despite these contributions, the literature remains fragmented. Previous studies have largely examined poverty, fishing bans, or indebtedness separately and have paid limited attention to how these factors interact within broader structures of economic domination. Moreover, there is insufficient research on southern fishing communities, particularly South Govindia, where local market dynamics and social relations may differ from other Hilsa-producing regions. Therefore, a significant empirical and analytical gap exists in understanding how debt dependency, fishing restrictions, and market control collectively reproduce class-based vulnerability and livelihood insecurity among Hilsa fishers. This study addresses that gap by applying a Marxist analytical framework to examine the interconnected roles of labour relations, control over productive resources, and class power in shaping the lived experiences of Hilsa fishing communities in South Govindia.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Conceptual clarity is essential for any research, as studies are guided by a theoretical framework. In anthropology, conceptual discussion is particularly important because it distinguishes the discipline from others. Therefore, it is necessary to define key concepts and review relevant theories that underpin the research.

Labour and labourer: Labour refers to purposeful human activity aimed at producing goods. It is a uniquely human process through which people interact with nature to meet their needs. Individuals who contribute physical and mental effort to production are considered labourers. In the fishing sector, those who catch fish in the Meghna River are labourers. The economic condition of fishing communities improves with increased labour intensity, making labour a crucial factor in livelihood and production.

Means of production: These include the tools, equipment, and infrastructure used in the production process, such as machinery, transport systems, and installations. In fishing communities, mechanized boats and nets are key means of production. In South Govindia village, hilsa fishermen rely heavily on such equipment for their survival, highlighting the importance of production resources in sustaining livelihoods.

Mode of production: This refers to the combination of productive forces (labour and means of production) and production relations (social relationships involved in production). It reflects how economic activities are organized and maintained within a society.

Organization: The organization of production and distribution is closely tied to ownership of resources. In South Govindia village, the distribution of fish or income depends largely on ownership of boats and nets, emphasizing the significance of resource control in the fishing community.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual discussion is a central component of research, enabling scholars to move beyond mere description toward clearer interpretation, generalization, and identification of limits within a phenomenon. It also helps articulate implicit theoretical assumptions in a structured way. This study draws on Karl Marx's theory of class struggle to explain socio-economic relations in hilsa fisheries.

Marx famously argued that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (1848). He identified two primary classes: the bourgeoisie, who control capital and the means of production, and the proletariat, who provide labor. Their interests are inherently conflicting, leading to inequality and ongoing social conflict. Class, therefore, is fundamentally rooted in economic relations, with inequality acting as the driving force of class struggle. This theoretical lens is relevant to the hilsa fishing community in South Govindia village. The fishery is capital-intensive, and most fishermen lack the financial capacity to operate independently. As a result, they depend on intermediaries such as arotdars and mahajans for loans (dadon) to finance fishing activities. In return, fishermen are obliged to sell their catch at below-market prices and often pay commissions, limiting their economic autonomy.

Within this system, arotdars and mahajans function as capital owners, controlling boats, nets, and market access, while fishermen contribute labor without control over production outcomes or pricing. This creates a class-like division: investors as dominant actors and fishermen as subordinated workers. Social stratification in the community is closely tied to ownership of fishing assets. Consequently, the relationship between fishermen and intermediaries mirrors the Marxist model of exploitation, where economic inequality generates dependency, subordination, and conflict—key features of class struggle in this localized context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the socio-economic conditions and livelihood dynamics of hilsa fishermen in South Govindia village, Chandpur District, Bangladesh. The quantitative component provided baseline socio-demographic and economic information, while the qualitative component explored the experiences, perceptions, and social relations shaping fishermen's livelihoods. The selection of this design was guided by the research objectives, which required both numerical evidence and contextual understanding of the fishing community.

Study Area and Sampling Procedure

South Govindia village was purposively selected due to its prominence as a hilsa fishing community and its strategic location within the Chandpur hilsa production zone. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify information-rich participants who possessed direct experience of hilsa fishing and related livelihood activities.

The study involved 20 fishermen households, selected based on criteria including age, fishing experience, ownership status (boat owners, fishing gear owners, and crew members), involvement in the mahajon credit system, and length of engagement in fishing activities. The sample size was determined according to the principle of data saturation, whereby no substantially new information emerged from additional interviews. To ensure diversity of perspectives, respondents represented different age groups, economic backgrounds, and occupational roles within the fishing sector.

Data Sources and Collection Methods

Both primary and secondary data were utilized. Primary data were collected through fieldwork conducted between respondents' homes, fish landing centers, local markets, and community gathering places. The study included:

1. **Semi-structured interviews** with 20 fishermen, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes, focusing on livelihood strategies, income patterns, indebtedness, occupational risks, and socio-economic changes.
2. **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)** with five knowledgeable individuals, including community leaders, experienced fishermen, fish traders, and local stakeholders, to obtain contextual and historical insights.
3. **Two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** comprising 8–10 participants each, representing boat owners, crew members, and senior fishermen. These discussions explored collective experiences, challenges, and adaptation strategies.
4. **Non-participant observation** to document daily fishing activities, social interactions, and community practices.
5. **Social mapping** to identify settlement patterns, fishing-related infrastructure, and socio-economic characteristics of the village.
6. **Household census data** to generate descriptive information on household composition, education, occupation, and income sources.
7. **Case studies** of selected households to provide deeper understanding of livelihood vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms.
8. **Visual documentation**, including photographs, was conducted only after obtaining participants' permission and was used to support contextual interpretation.

Secondary data were collected from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, NGO publications, and other relevant documents related to fisheries, livelihoods, and rural socio-economic development.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the household census and interviews were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, and tabular presentations. Qualitative data from interviews, FGDs, observations, and case studies were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Data were organized into major themes corresponding to the research objectives, such as livelihood patterns, economic challenges, dependency relationships, and adaptation mechanisms.

To enhance analytical rigor, findings from multiple sources were compared through data triangulation, allowing cross-verification of information obtained from respondents, key informants, observations, and documentary sources.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

The credibility of findings was strengthened through methodological triangulation, prolonged engagement in the field, and cross-checking of information across different participant groups. Ethical standards were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Prior to participation, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and respondents retained the right to withdraw at any stage. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and secure handling of data. Permission was obtained before taking photographs or recording information, and all collected data were used solely for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hilsa Fishermen Community: Culture and History

This chapter presents a concise overview of the socio-cultural and economic characteristics of the hilsa fishing community in South Govindia village, Bangladesh. The village is situated near the Meghna River, which is rich in hilsa fish resources. The livelihood of almost the entire community depends directly or indirectly on hilsa fishing and related activities. Both primary and secondary data were collected to understand the historical, cultural, and socio-economic realities of this fishing community. Key dimensions such as language, religion, marital status, family structure, education, occupation, and income are analyzed to interpret the concepts of “community,” “culture,” and “livelihood context” in this study.

Community

A community generally refers to a group of people living in a defined area with shared social, cultural, and economic characteristics. However, in this context, the concept of community is primarily occupation-based. The hilsa fishing community consists of people engaged in fishing, fish processing, and fish marketing activities (Uddin, 2000). Their livelihood is closely tied to the Meghna River, which serves as the main source of income and sustenance. Bengali is the only language used for communication within the community, reflecting their integration into the broader mainstream society of Bangladesh.

Religious Belief

The fishing community consists of both Muslim and Hindu households. Religion plays a significant role in shaping social differentiation within the community, particularly among Hindu fishers who are traditionally known as “Jaladash” (water slaves), historically recognized as hereditary fishers.

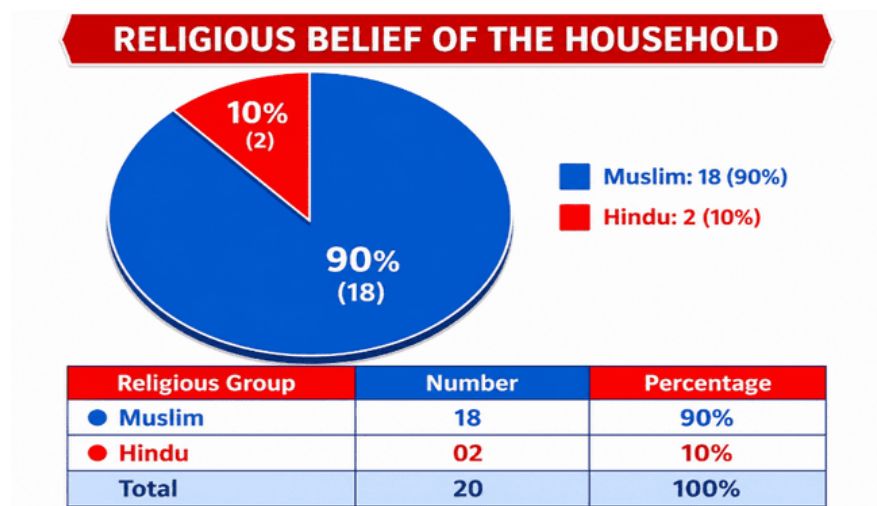


Figure 1: Religious belief of the household

Marital Status

Early marriage is common among hilsa fishers, typically occurring between 18 and 25 years of age. Family planning awareness is low in this community. Among the surveyed population, most individuals are married.

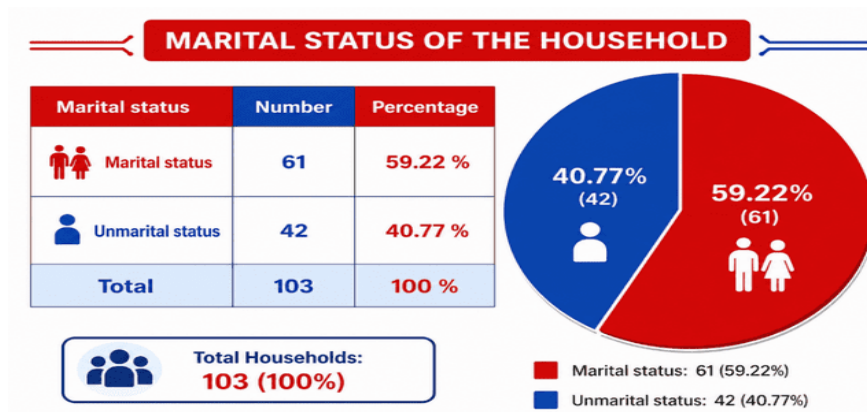


Figure 2: Marital status of the household

Types of Family

The dominant family type in South Govindia village is the nuclear family system. Joint families exist in very limited numbers, mostly among Hindu households. Economic constraints and early marriage patterns often lead to the separation of newly married couples into independent households.

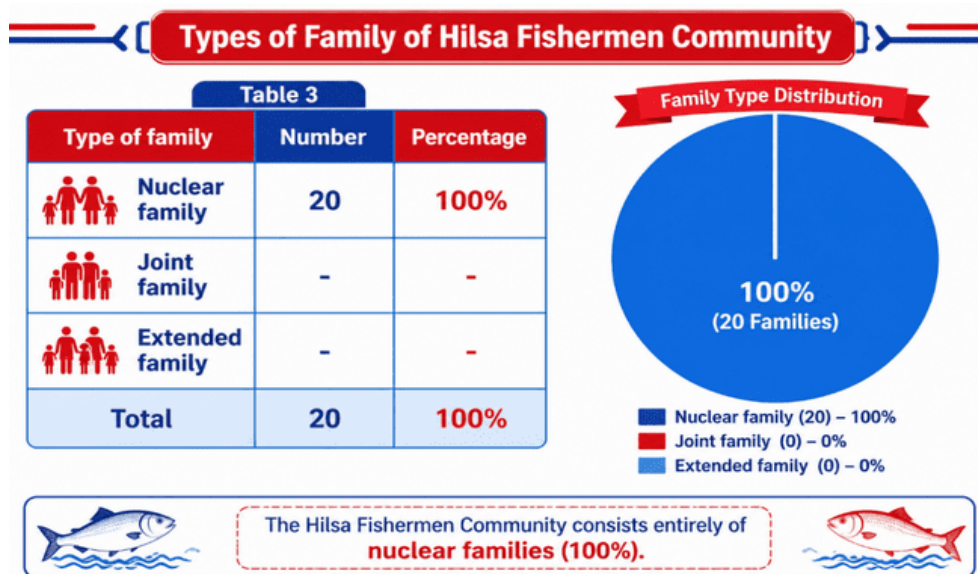


Figure 3: Types of family of Hilsa Fishermen Community

Table 3 shows that all selected households are nuclear families, consisting of husband, wife, and unmarried children. Low income is a key reason for the prevalence of nuclear families.

Educational Status

Educational attainment among hilsa fishing households is generally low. Older and even current generations remain illiterate, although recent trends show increasing school enrollment among children.

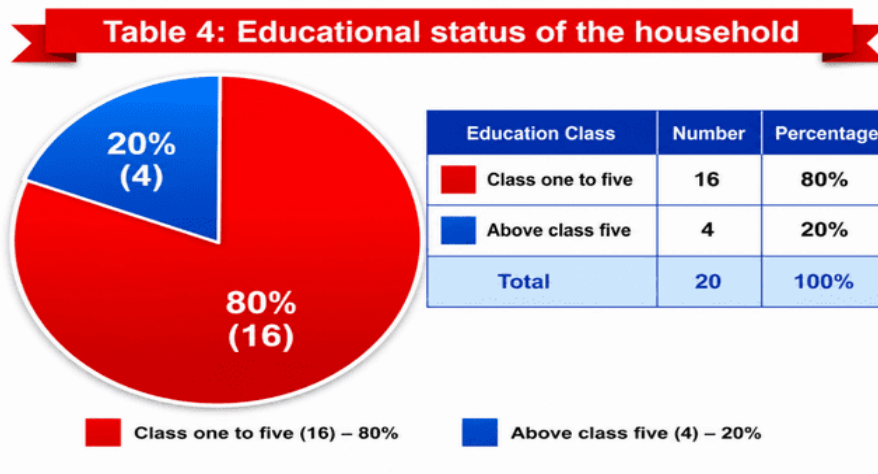


Figure 4: Educational status of the household

Table 4 shows that 80% of respondents have education up to class five, while only 20% have studied beyond class five. However, awareness regarding education is gradually increasing in the younger generation.

Trading and marketing

Hilsa fishing is the primary occupation, but due to seasonal restrictions, most fishers also engage in secondary occupations such as agricultural labor, soil cutting, livestock rearing, and cultivation. Hilsa fishing Working as agricultural laborers, cutting soil, rearing animals and agricultural cultivation etc.

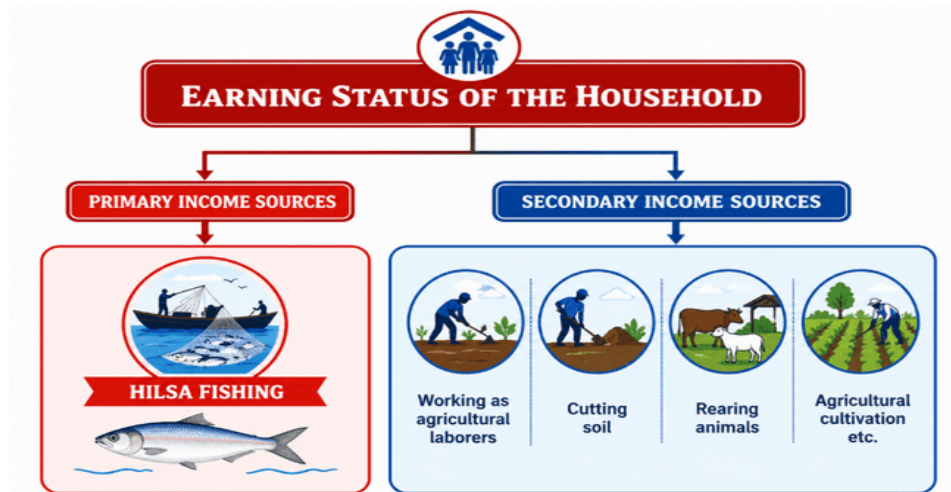


Figure 5: Earning status of the household

Figure 5 shows that all respondents depend on multiple income sources, as fishing alone is not sufficient for year-round survival.

Income of Hilsa fishermen

Income varies depending on fish availability and seasonal restrictions imposed by the government. Fishers can usually work only seven to eight months per year due to fishing bans during breeding seasons.

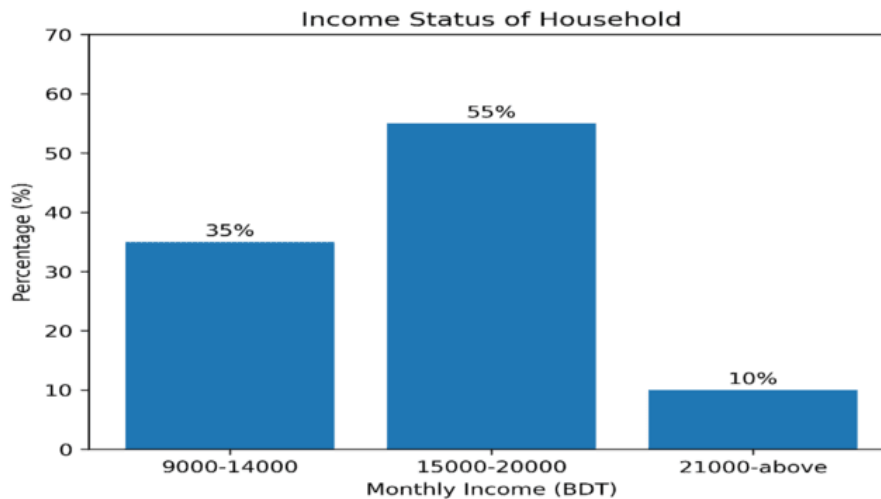


Figure 6: Income status of the household

This graph indicates that most households (55%) earn between 15,000–20,000 BDT monthly, while 35% earn 9,000–14,000 BDT, and only 10% earn above 21,000 BDT. Although hilsa fishing was once sufficient for livelihood, increasing economic pressure and seasonal unemployment have made survival more difficult for many households. However, some families still maintain relative stability due to improved fishing technologies.

Economic Condition of the Hilsa Fishermen Community

In South Govindia village of Chandra Union under Chandpur district, situated on the bank of the Meghna River, the hilsa fishing community has traditionally depended on river fishing as their primary livelihood. Fishing, along with boats and nets as essential tools, has been the inherited occupation across generations. Hilsa fishing has not only served as the main income source but also provided nutrition and basic household needs for these families. Traditionally, fishermen engaged in fishing almost throughout the year, often working day and night depending on tides. Daytime fishing commonly took place from around 3:30 am to 10:30–11:00 am, while night fishing was usually from 5:00 pm to 8:00 pm. Their fishing schedule was flexible and largely tide-dependent. In earlier times, this continuous engagement in fishing allowed them to meet household needs by selling hilsa and other fish, ensuring relatively stable livelihoods.

Table 1. The present economic status of the household

Monthly economic status	Number	Percentage
9000-14000	07	35%
15000-20000	11	55%
21000- above	02	10%
Total	20	100%

Table 1 shows that most households (55%) earn between BDT 15,000–20,000 per month, indicating this as the dominant income range in the fishing community. Around 35% of households earn the lowest income bracket (BDT 9,000–14,000), mainly those who work as daily laborers without owning boats or nets. Only 10% of households earn above BDT 21,000, typically those who own fishing assets. Overall, the data reflect moderate but unstable income conditions, with limited economic security among a large portion of fishermen.

Impact of Changing Economic Condition on the Hilsa Fishermen Community

In the past, most families could sustain a comparatively stable livelihood through fishing. However, the present situation has changed significantly due to seasonal fishing restrictions (four-month ban period), during which fishing activities are completely prohibited. This has resulted in food insecurity and economic hardship for many households. During these periods, fishermen often reduce their meals to two per day and rely on low-cost food such as vegetables. Fish consumption also declines significantly from 5–6 days per week to only 1–2 days per week. In response to these challenges, fishermen are increasingly adopting alternative livelihood strategies. Many are now engaging in agriculture, cattle rearing, soil cutting, and small businesses to reduce dependence on fishing. These changes have also influenced their socio-cultural life, including education patterns. In earlier generations, most fishermen were illiterate and followed their fathers' occupation. However, there is now a gradual increase in educational awareness, with families showing greater interest in educating their children rather than solely relying on fishing.

Table 2: Comparison between past and present economic source

Past economic income source		Present economic income source	
Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
Only catching hilsa	Catching other fish	Catching hilsa and other fish	Agricultural cultivation, rearing cattle, driving vehicles and small business etc.

Table 2 illustrates a clear shift in livelihood patterns. Previously, hilsa fishing was the primary occupation, with limited supplementary fishing activities. In contrast, the present situation shows a diversification of income sources, where agriculture, livestock rearing, transport services, and small businesses have become primary or secondary occupations, while hilsa fishing is increasingly considered secondary. Overall, the study indicates a gradual transition from a traditional fishing-based economy to a more diversified livelihood system, driven by seasonal restrictions, economic insecurity, and changing socio-economic aspirations in South Govindia village.

Discussion of Findings

The study was conducted in South Govindia village, a hilsa-dependent fishing settlement located near the Meghna River in Bangladesh. Survey data indicate that the community is culturally homogeneous, with Bengali being the primary language used by all respondents. The majority of households identified as Muslim, while a small proportion belonged to other religious groups. Most respondents were married and lived in nuclear families, although some joint family structures were also observed. Educational attainment was generally low, with a considerable proportion of fishers having only primary-level education or no formal schooling. Fishing was reported as the principal occupation of most respondents, while others were engaged in fish trading, processing, boat-related work, and seasonal wage labor. Household income levels varied, but the majority of families fell within the low-income category and depended heavily on hilsa fishing for their livelihood.

The findings suggest that the hilsa fishing community represents an occupation-based social group whose economic and cultural identity is strongly linked to the Meghna River. The predominance of low educational attainment may limit access to alternative employment opportunities and modern fishing technologies, thereby reinforcing occupational dependence on fishing. Similar observations have been reported in previous studies of fishing communities in Bangladesh (Uddin, 2000). The prevalence of low-income households indicates economic vulnerability, particularly during fishing ban periods and seasonal fluctuations. Furthermore, interview responses revealed concerns regarding market instability,

indebtedness to local moneylenders, and inadequate institutional support. These challenges, combined with environmental pressures such as climate variability and declining fish availability, may increase livelihood insecurity and encourage temporary migration. Therefore, the socio-cultural cohesion of the community remains strong, but sustainable livelihood development requires enhanced education, financial support, technological access, and effective government interventions.

Current Living Condition of Hilsa Fishermen

Economic Challenges

The hilsa fishing community of South Govindia faces persistent economic hardship, primarily driven by low and unstable income, market exploitation, and increasing livelihood insecurity. Continuous financial pressure and declining profitability have compelled many fishermen to diversify their occupations. Some have migrated abroad seeking better employment opportunities, while others have turned to small-scale entrepreneurship or informal sector jobs to ensure survival beyond traditional fishing.

A major structural problem is market exploitation. Although hilsa fish commands a high market price, fishermen receive only a small fraction of the profit. Middlemen and traders dominate the supply chain, manipulating prices and limiting fishermen's bargaining power. As a result, even when market value increases, it does not translate into improved income for the fishing households. This unequal distribution creates a cycle of poverty, where fishermen remain dependent on subsistence-level earnings despite working in a high-value fishery sector.

Limited access to broader markets further intensifies their vulnerability. Due to inadequate transportation infrastructure and weak links to urban buyers, fishermen are unable to directly sell their catch at fair prices. This dependency on intermediaries reduces their income potential and restricts opportunities for economic advancement.

Debt burden is another critical issue. Fishermen frequently borrow money for boats, nets, fuel, and maintenance at high interest rates. Uncertain fish availability and fluctuating catches make repayment difficult, trapping them in long-term debt cycles. This financial instability prevents savings accumulation and reinforces economic dependency.

Environmental Factors

Environmental changes in the Meghna River system have significantly impacted hilsa availability and fishing sustainability. The declining hilsa population, driven by overfishing, habitat degradation, and pollution, has reduced catch volumes and increased competition among fishermen. This ecological stress directly threatens both livelihoods and long-term resource sustainability.

Climate change has further intensified these challenges. Alterations in water temperature, rainfall patterns, and river flow disrupt the natural migration routes of hilsa fish. As a result, fishermen experience irregular and unpredictable catches. Additionally, extreme weather events such as storms and flooding increase occupational risk and reduce fishing opportunities.

Overfishing remains a persistent concern. Despite awareness campaigns and regulatory measures, illegal fishing practices—such as the use of banned nets—continue in some areas. These activities contribute to the depletion of hilsa stocks and undermine conservation efforts, ultimately affecting the entire fishing community.

Loss of traditional fishing grounds is also evident due to riverbank encroachment and land-use changes. Fishermen are forced to travel further into unfamiliar and often risky areas, increasing operational costs and physical danger while further stressing fish populations.

Social Dynamics

Socially, the hilsa fishermen of South Govindia face structural marginalization and limited institutional support. Government assistance remains inadequate, with insufficient access to subsidies, training

programs, and financial services tailored to their needs. This lack of targeted policy intervention restricts their capacity to improve living standards and adapt to changing conditions.

Technological backwardness is another significant challenge. Many fishermen continue to rely on outdated boats and traditional equipment. The absence of modern tools for navigation, fish detection, and storage reduces efficiency and limits their competitiveness in the market. Consequently, they struggle to maximize catch value or improve income stability.

As hilsa availability declines, fishermen are increasingly forced to spend longer periods at sea or travel further distances, raising both cost and risk. This intensifies economic pressure and contributes to occupational stress.

In response to these challenges, livelihood diversification has become more common. Migration abroad, small business ventures, and informal employment are emerging as alternative survival strategies. These shifts indicate a gradual transformation in the community's occupational structure.

Overall, the living conditions of hilsa fishermen in South Govindia reflect the combined effects of environmental degradation, economic exploitation, and social neglect.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that the livelihood structure of the hilsa fishing community in South Govindia has undergone a significant transformation, with hilsa fishing shifting from a primary source of household income to a supplementary livelihood activity. Empirical findings reveal that declining fish availability, seasonal restrictions, rising production costs, market uncertainties, and broader socio-economic pressures have reduced the economic viability of traditional fishing. As a result, many households have diversified their income sources through wage labor, small businesses, migration, and other non-fishing occupations.

This transition reflects not only an economic adjustment but also a broader process of social change that is reshaping household resilience, occupational identity, and community life. The findings are consistent with previous studies on fishing communities in Bangladesh, which have documented the growing vulnerability of river-dependent populations and their increasing reliance on livelihood diversification as an adaptive strategy. However, the experience of South Govindia also highlights the localized impacts of environmental and market-related challenges within the Meghna River region.

The study contributes to the understanding of how environmental and economic changes influence rural fishing communities and underscores the need for integrated policies that combine sustainable fisheries management, social protection measures, and alternative livelihood opportunities to enhance long-term community resilience.

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