

HAROA is a small town situated in South 24 Parganas, near the Bidyadhori river, one and a half hours' bus journey from Calcutta. The town is surrounded by agricultural land cultivated mainly by poor agricultural labourers. The town has a large *hat*, several shops, a bank and a school. The population consists of Hindus, Muslims and adivasis. In recent years, several businessmen have taken advantage of the cheap labour available at Haroa to earn large profits from the export of prawns, known as *bagda chingri*.

Women, and some children, are involved in the most painful yet most essential part of prawn processing—the cutting off of the scalps. Of all the workers in the prawn industry, women are the lowest paid and have the least facilities. They are also the least organised.

This is a study of the prawn export business run in Haroa by Naresh Das. He leases several *bighas* of land from a large land owner at Rs 830 per *bigha*. The lease is renewed every two or three years. In large artificial lakes, which were once used to cultivate paddy, baby prawns from the sea are deposited. When they grow to full size, they are sold for export at Rs 80 a kilogram. Fishermen are employed to catch the prawns, guards to patrol the lakes, and drivers to transport the prawns to the Haroa centre as well as from Haroa to Calcutta. Naresh Das owns a truck, a car and two buses. Recently, he purchased a godown.

The prawns are further processed, frozen, and packed at a factory in Calcutta where, too, women are employed. Regular orders from Japan and England ensure a good profit. Yet the people of Haroa and Calcutta do not eat these prawns because they are too highly priced.

Their Hands Bleed

Cutting off prawn scalps requires much dexterity and patience. The prawn, measuring about four inches in length, is held in the right hand and the left thumb is inserted between the open ends of the shell which encases the prawn head. The scalp,

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Prawn Fish Head Cutters Of Haroa

eyes and brain are removed. Sharp pieces of the prawn's anatomy cut into the hand, leaving it scratched and blistered and invariably drawing blood. Hands new to the work get very badly cut, and even hardened ones suppurate and bleed when work is heavy. Women complained of burning and stinging pains in the hands, and of being unable to eat rice except with a spoon.

“After four days' work, we may even

days and had returned to agricultural labour.

However, the operation performed by the women at the cost of such damage to their health is absolutely essential to the industry. The shell, brain and eggs have to be removed without damaging the flesh, and the operation has to be perfectly done if the product is to qualify for export. The women are not permitted to wear gloves since the industrialists say this would spoil



have to take two days off to heal our hands”, said Golehar Bibi, a woman nearing 50, who has been doing this work for about 10 years. A new recruit, Pramila Sarkar, repeatedly asked the interviewer for some relief from her agony. Later, it was learnt that she had given up in a couple of

the quality. One may wonder, though, whether any infection from bleeding hands reaches foreign consumers.

Insecure And Ill Paid

The prawn season is from mid April to mid September, only five months of the year. Even during the season work is

irregular. Sometimes only a couple of hours' work is available, when prawns are scarce. At other times, especially during the full moon, prawns are so abundant that the women have to work at night too. They did not know that night work entitled them to double pay.

About a year ago, women earned Rs 4 or 5 a day. A group would sit around one basket that weighed about seven kilos when full. The payment was at the rate of Rs 6 a basket, and this amount would be distributed equally amongst the women. The system has now been changed. Now, about 100 women sit in a large circle around the shed and work on several baskets. At the end of the session, payment is distributed equally at the rate of Rs 20 per kilo. The difference between the new and the old system is, however, more apparent than real.

At one time, women refugees from Bangladesh were employed at even lower rates, but because they did not know the technique they cut off the whole prawn head which entailed losses for the owner.

Several women work with babies on their laps. At night, they put the babies to sleep on the ground outside the shed. There is a room for the children behind the shed but no one is employed to look after them. There is no bathroom facility whatsoever. Another work related problem which the women face is that of the fishy stink which pervades their clothes and lasts for days even after washing. The women are not given any medication for their hands or any tiffin even when they work long hours. They said that hunger was one of their main problems at work.

There are about 25 male workers at Naresh Das' centre. Their work consists of crushing and spreading ice, loading and unloading, washing the prawns and laying them out, arranging and collecting the baskets, shovelling up the shells when work is complete, and washing down the shed.

All the men are permanent employees, earning Rs 150 or more. They are given

two meals a day office, dal and curry and also Re 1 for tiffin. They are not unionised.

Attempt To Struggle

Only one or two women have the chance, which men have, to be involved in several aspects of the industry and to have a permanent job with a secure income. Sufia Khatoon is one of those women. She has worked for several years as the employee of Naresh Das. She has worked as an ice crusher, fish cleaner and fish head cutter. She is now a permanent employee with a monthly salary of Rs 250. Her job is to collect women for work during the season, and to oversee the unloading and sorting of fish at the marketplace early in the morning. She rarely cuts fish heads nowadays. Occasionally, she goes to the fish processing factory owned by her employer at Entally, Calcutta.

Though completely illiterate, Sufia is an assertive and outspoken woman. She was mainly responsible for ending the system of payment per basket and introducing the system of payment per kilo in Haroa. In an angry voice, Sufia told us how after two years at Naresh Das' centre, she had come to know that he was building himself a two storeyed house while the hands of the women continued to bleed.

During the high season, Sufia called a strike. She stood outside the shed door and threatened anyone who tried to enter. As prawns spoil very quickly in the heat, the owner was forced to introduce the new pay rate. However, even though Sufia called the strike and forced a change of sorts, in reality not much was achieved.

As temporary employees doing seasonal work, the women find unification almost impossible, particularly since there are several head cutting sheds in the locality. Some of the women live in Haroa but others come from surrounding villages and even send their very young children to work as head cutters. As long as fish is plentiful there is work. When the season is over work is over too. It is very difficult to create a sense of unity and maintain a long term struggle on this basis, especially

since all the women are illiterate and totally unexposed to any form of organisation.

One of the workers, Aleya, who expressed a strong desire to form a union, said that if her group went on strike Sufia would bring her group to work. Sufia denied this in a separate discussion, but it indicates the level of mistrust existing amongst the women. Another factor hindering unified action is communal feeling. Most of the women are Muslims and are visibly prejudiced against Hindu refugee or peasant women. The hostility is reciprocal.

Local political people are not interested in organising these women. One CPI (M) leader remained gloomily silent when asked whether his party was interested in the issue. Another well known and highly educated person of the area warned against stirring up a situation that was created and upheld by millionaires. The women workers themselves are Congress (I) voters due to custom rather than political conviction.

Their Demands

Several demands were voiced by the women although they have no viable way of winning them. They want a rise in pay though they have not decided on the exact amount to be demanded. They want free medicine for their hands and a tiffin of bread and tea, especially when they work at night.

They did not know that they have a legal entitlement to job security, and that even as contracted workers, they have a right to creche and bathroom facilities. When told about these legal rights, they hastily expressed a desire to have them implemented.

The study showed that the network of landowners, fish traders and businessmen like Naresh Das, together with an indifferent political leadership, ensures that ordinary people do not enjoy the country's products or even the fruits of their own labour. The picture is very bleak, especially for the women who are at the bottom of the structure yet whose labour is essential to the industry. □