



Dried fish sector drying up

PRABIR BARUA CHOWDHURY, Chittagong

THE existence of dried fish business is under threat as the supply of fish to local markets has declined in the last 10 years. The business has made a strong position in the economy as it has its appearance both on international and local markets. But no governments have paid enough attention to the sector, traders said.

Most industry insiders believe the market for dried fish, locally known as *shutki*, started shrinking two decades ago. The government clamped down on fish import through illegal ways in the 1990s, but it did not correct or make easy the legal ways of fish or dried fish import. It affected the sector badly.

Besides, pirates are a big threat to the dried fish sector. There is a serious risk for fishermen of being attacked by pirates when they go fishing in deep sea. The sector along with the local fish markets suffers from it.

Traders said demand for local dried fish is high on domestic and foreign markets. Due to a shortage of production in the country, traders have to import dried fish from India and Myanmar.

Dried fish is found in different names and sizes. Dried pomfret is the costliest and sells at Tk 2,500 a kg in the market.

Though dried fish is popular in Chittagong as regional food, it has also earned a good name in the international arena. Some local businessmen and corporate houses export a huge quantity of dried fish to the United Arab Emirates, the UK and USA.

Milton Barua, a trader, said dried fish is a delicious dish among Bangladeshis abroad. Dried fish can earn huge foreign currency for Bangladesh, as it has become a lucrative product in international markets, he added.

Traders said dried fish is popular among the people of all classes. The poor could afford it as its price was comparatively low in the past. But now the prices have gone so high that



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A man dries fish in the sun. Demand for dried fish is high among Bangladeshis both at home and abroad, but the sector is shrinking because of declining supply.

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they hardly can afford it.

"Five to ten years ago, the price of 'churi shutki' was about Tk 200 to Tk 250 a kg. Now it costs around Tk 800," said Saif Chowdhury, a local dried fish trader.

Chowdhury said, for the sake of the poor, it is now the government's duty to ensure sufficient supply of dried fish in the market.

Local traders said pirates harm the sector a lot. Now fishermen are not keen to go fishing in the sea that eventually worsens the fish crisis.

"There is no arrangement to ensure security for deep-sea fishing," said a supplier, preferring not to be named. He came from Cox's Bazar to

Asadganj to take some orders of fish for making dried fish.

"The southern parts of Kutubdia and Moheshkhali, and the western parts of Sonadia and Banskhalia are some of the favourite places of the pirates where fishes are found aplenty," the businessman added. He said they have no alternative to avoid these places. The pirates loot all the catches and sometimes kill the fishermen also, he added.

Fishermen, boat owners and suppliers said they always need to stay alert against the pirates.

Generally storeowners place their orders with the suppliers to bring fish from different areas, including Cox's

Bazar, Moheshkhali, Teknaf, St Martin's, Kutubdia, Rangadia, Baishdia and the Sundarbans. Collecting fish from the sea, the suppliers dry those in the sun and then supply to storeowners.

Most of the traders like to import fish and then dry those, said a businessman. "Because the cost of importing dry fish is higher than fresh fish."

The supplier said some fisherman catch mother fishes in the May-June period when they lay eggs. They take the chance of a lack of surveillance and catch the mother fishes, he added.

He said the Indian government has

deployed coast guards in their territory to stop fishing during the breeding season and the Indian fishermen follow the rule with full respect.

A trader in Asadganj, a centre of dried fish business in the region, complained that it is tough for middle-class traders to get big loans from banks who ask them to mortgage something to get loans. He said it is almost impossible for the traders.

He said the government should pay attention to the sector if it wants to make the sector profitable.

The government has to provide easy loans to them and restrict fishing in the May-June period, he added.

A cry for govt help and awareness

Leading dried-fish trader speaks to The Daily Star on problems and future

PRABIR BARUA CHOWDHURY, Chittagong

DRIED fish or shutki was a dish for common people 10 years back, but it has now become a dish only for the rich, said Mohammad Musa Sowdagor, president of Asadganj Shutki Traders Association in Chittagong.

"The present market prices of dried fish created this situation. Five to ten years back, a kilogram of *churi shutki* was priced at Tk 250. But now the price has almost trebled to Tk 800 a kg."

A shortage in supply, high duty on import and a continuous threat of pirates in the sea are some of the factors that led to such price hike, added Sowdagor who has been a trader in Asadganj for the last 35 years.

Dried fish has a good demand both at local and international markets because of its taste, he said. But local traders cannot fulfil the demand as fish supply from the sea has come down to a great extent. Traders now import dried fish from India and Myanmar, he added.

"Fifteen to 20 years ago, dried fish was a special dish for people living in the port city. Now people of other parts of Bangladesh also consume it," Sowdagor said.



Mohammad Musa Sowdagor

product is increasing by the day. The Asian community, including the Bangladeshis, is the main consumer of the product in Europe. China is

becoming a good market for dried fish. The country has started buying half-baked fish from Bangladesh." Sowdagor said the sector now

needs government help to expand.

He said the threat of the pirates has become a serious problem for the sector. Many fishermen now do

not want to go for fishing in the deep sea because if they fail to come back in the daylight, they often become victims of the pirates, he added.

He urged the government to deploy coast guard in most of the fishing zones. He also said the pirates hurt the sector a lot, resulting in an unusual price hike.

He also blamed some fishermen who fish in the May-June period. "Mother fishes release eggs during this period." Catching a mother fish means destroying the lives of crores of fishes, he added. "It's a suicidal work for both the fish market and the fishermen for the future."

The businessman suggested the government should provide alternative jobs to all fishermen during this period to restrict them from catching fishes.

To help lower the price of dried fish, he said the government should reduce the present 56 percent import duty on such fishes. "The market will expand if the government keeps the rate in between 30 and 35 percent."

"If the government and different private organisations help the sector grow, this will earn a lot of foreign currency, and will soon become a viable export sector," Sowdagor said.

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