

Fishing communities in transition: Children now hold books instead of fishing nets

Sandwip is an island on the south-eastern coast of the Chittagong district. For generations, a large number of fishing communities have existed on Sandwip. The residents of these communities depend solely on sea fishing to support themselves. These people live isolated along the riverbanks, which has led their social customs and norms to be different from those of other communities. Because of their work, society at large considers them of low social status, and they are marginalised in mainstream society, politics, economics and culture. Over generations they have been deprived of fundamental human rights. However, slow but certain social change is taking place.



Map of Sandwip

One resident of Sandwip describes the situation of his fishing community. Sharidam fisherfolk (Jaladas), age 57: *"I went to the sea holding the hands of my father. My son followed the same holding my hands. This is our life; this is our profession. The society is there, there are government offices and officials, members and chairman of union parishad, but nobody cares about us or even considers us as part of the society. Our children could not get admitted to schools. So we ended up taking our sons into the fishing profession and leaving our daughters with their mothers for household chores. I have five sons and all are engaged in fishing. But with the formation of the landless group, things are changing."*



Fisherfolk's colony

Sharidam continues: *"The landless organisation speaks about our life, our hardships and our rights. Now, we understand somewhat about society. We have found answers to some questions: why society does not want to accept us, why it segregates us, why we cannot speak for our rights, and why we are deprived of government benefits. Now we can speak about these things. As members of a landless group we are now in a new social relationship. Due to our membership, many of our children get the opportunity to join the formal education system, and some have even succeeded in finishing school and are now enrolled in college"*.



Students returning home after school

These changes are due, at least in part, to the work of Nijera Kori. Inclusion of fishing communities into the mainstream social structures has been a key objective of Nijera Kori's conscientisation activities. Since 2006, Nijera Kori has focused on building awareness in the communities about the need for educating their children. Meetings have also been held with schools and government agencies to mobilise their support for the education of fishing community children. This has led to the development of a positive attitude of fishing families toward education, and presently, more children from fishing communities are enrolled in primary, secondary and higher-secondary stages.

Biswajit fisherfolk of Haramia village is 18 years old. In 2017, Biswajit passed the SSC examination from Sandwip Public High School, and is now preparing to apply to a good college. As Biswajit relates it *"During my school years from Grade 6 to 10, with support of Nijera Kori and the landless organisation, I received government stipends and free books, and that contributed greatly to my continued education and my achievements of today. Without their encouragement and the help I received from the government, by now I would simply be working as a fisher to support my family like many others."*

Mrs. Bashirani fisherfolk and her husband Dinesh fisherfolk, both members of the landless



Bashirani and Dinesh Jaladas

organisation, added their voice of hope, *"Initially we had no courage to enrol our children in school. But Nijera Kori and the landless organisation together helped us to get our children admitted. With their support our son received books and our daughter was awarded a stipend. Our daughter, Kabita, is a student of grade nine. Our son, Hridoy, is in his final year of honours at City College of Chittagong. We, like our parents and grandparents, continue to do hard work without much dignity. Our dream, however, is that our children will have better jobs, dignity and an honourable place in society."*

We encourage others from our community to enrol their children in schools, and will continue to work to make our fisher community educated".

Nijera Kori and the landless organizations gathered data to document these changes. In 2007, among the fishing communities, only 10% of children were in primary education, only 5% in secondary, and less than 1% in higher-secondary. By 2017, it was found that 70% of children had studied in primary, and 40 % (girls: 12 %; boys: 28%) in secondary institutions. In higher-secondary, the rate was 8 % (girls: 1%; boys: 7%). However, even though 2% of students went on to university, none of them have been women till now. The landless members who collected the data noted: *“Most of the children from fishing communities are going to school. Besides this, we are also witnessing other changes. There has been a change in the living conditions and in family relations. Their houses are more organised now. They are using sanitary toilets. They are cultivating some vegetables in their homesteads; these were not to be found before.”*



Two sisters: Shila Rani Jaladas (grade 6) and Bina Rani Jaladas (grade 9) who are students of Choukatoli Afaz Uddin High School

Nayanmoni and Rita fisherfolk are two of the landless organization members who collected the field data. Nayanmoni is a higher-secondary student of South Sandwip College and Rita just completed her SSC from Kalapani School. Speaking of their experiences, they stated that because of their education they have become friends with many others in the society. Their families are also bit different from other fishing families now. Previously, they observed that their parents often quarrelled and their fathers would raise hands on their mothers. Now, if there is an argument, because of their education and newfound social position, Nayanmoni and Rita are able to mediate. Thus, the quarrels and fighting have decreased.

When their friends visit they share their experiences, discussing how in the past they were not allowed to go to school; even when they joined the school, students from other communities would not sit next to them. But they also share how things have changed: they are no longer discriminated against and the teachers now encourage them to study. Both Nayanmoni and Rita are now quite self-confident and take an interest in the activities of their village's landless organisations. They help the organisation by recording the minutes of meetings and giving follow-up to the key decisions. They concluded their views with the following words: *“We want to live in the society with dignity. We encourage others to get educated, to earn respect and self-esteem”*.

In conclusion, increased education has helped improve the quality of life in Sandwip. Girls are gaining the self-confidence necessary to succeed in a male dominated society through education and participation in the landless organization. Things are looking up in terms of both boys and girls going on to higher education, and it is clear the girls who have done so will be the first of many.