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Job Diversification among Traditional Fisherfolk: A Micro Analysis of Trivandrum

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Abstract: ***Traditional fishing communities in Kerala have historically depended on marine fisheries as their primary source of livelihood. However, rapid socio-economic transformation, technological advancement, environmental degradation, and declining fish resources have significantly altered the occupational structure of fishing communities. The present study examines the factors, forms, and magnitude of job diversification among traditional fisherfolk in Trivandrum district of Kerala. The study adopts a descriptive research design and utilises purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Primary data were collected from 100 respondents across ten coastal villages using a structured interview schedule. The findings reveal that technological changes, resource depletion, seasonal unemployment, migration, and economic insecurity are the major factors contributing to occupational diversification among traditional fisherfolk. The study also identifies migration, daily wage labour, small-scale business, catering work, and participation in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme as major forms of diversification. The study highlights that diversification has emerged as a survival strategy rather than a voluntary occupational transition. The paper concludes that livelihood diversification should be promoted as a complementary mechanism alongside sustainable fisheries development rather than as a substitute for traditional fishing livelihoods.***

Keywords: Traditional fisherfolk, Job diversification, Coastal livelihood, Migration, Occupational mobility, Kerala

1. Introduction

Fishing has traditionally been recognised as a hereditary and community-based occupation among coastal populations in India. Traditional fisherfolk include men, women, and children who are directly or indirectly involved in harvesting, processing, handling, and marketing fish and fish products. In Kerala, the fisheries sector contributes significantly to employment generation, food security, and the socio-economic development of coastal communities.

Over the past few decades, the fisheries sector has undergone major structural and technological transformations. Mechanisation, commercialisation, globalisation, and modern fishing technologies have altered the traditional nature of marine fishing activities. While these developments have increased productivity in commercial fisheries, they have simultaneously marginalised traditional fisherfolk who lack access to advanced technologies and capital resources.

Marine resource depletion, declining fish catch, climate variability, rising operational costs, and increasing competition from mechanised sectors have intensified livelihood insecurity among traditional fishing communities. Consequently, many fisherfolk households are increasingly engaging in alternative occupations to supplement household income and reduce economic vulnerability.

In addition to environmental and economic pressures, educational advancement and changing social aspirations among younger generations have accelerated occupational mobility within fishing communities. Migration to Gulf countries, participation in informal labour sectors, and dependence on government employment schemes have become common livelihood strategies.

In this context, the present study attempts to examine the factors influencing job diversification, identify various forms of diversification, and assess the magnitude of occupational diversification among traditional fisherfolk in Trivandrum district.

2. Statement of the Problem

The traditional fishing sector is currently facing severe livelihood challenges due to ecological degradation, declining fish resources, technological inequalities, and market competition. The sole dependence on marine fishing has become increasingly unsustainable for many fisherfolk households. Seasonal fluctuations in fishing activity and uncertain income patterns further aggravate economic insecurity.

The expansion of mechanised and commercial fishing sectors has intensified conflicts over marine resources and weakened the livelihood base of traditional fisherfolk. Younger generations increasingly perceive fishing as physically demanding, economically unstable, and socially less attractive. As a result, occupational diversification and migration have become common adaptive strategies.

Migration to Gulf countries and engagement in informal labour markets often expose fisherfolk families to debt burdens, insecure employment conditions, and social vulnerabilities. Despite the growing prevalence of occupational diversification, there is limited empirical research focusing specifically on the nature and extent of job diversification among traditional fisherfolk in Trivandrum district.

Therefore, the present study seeks to analyse the demographic profile of traditional fisherfolk, examine the factors leading to diversification, identify the forms of diversification, and assess its magnitude.

3. Review of Literature

Livelihood diversification has become an important coping and survival strategy among rural and coastal communities facing economic uncertainty and environmental stress. Ellis (2000) defines livelihood diversification as the process through which households construct a diverse portfolio of activities and social support systems to survive and improve their standards of living.

Allison and Ellis (2001) observed that fisheries-dependent communities often diversify into non-fishing occupations due to declining marine resources, income instability, and environmental vulnerability. They further argued that diversification reduces livelihood risks and enhances household resilience.

Kurien (2001) highlighted that technological modernisation and commercialisation in Kerala's fisheries sector have increased inequality between mechanised fishing sectors and traditional fisherfolk. The study emphasised that traditional fishing communities are increasingly being marginalised within the changing fisheries economy.

Bavinck (2001) examined conflicts between mechanised and traditional fishing sectors in India and found that resource competition has significantly affected the livelihood security of small-scale fisherfolk. Similarly, Béné (2003) noted that poverty among fishing communities is closely linked to declining fish stocks, environmental degradation, and economic vulnerability.

Salagrama (2006) reported that declining marine resources, indebtedness, migration, and lack of institutional support have compelled fishing households to seek supplementary occupations. Informal labour, migration, petty trade, and participation in welfare schemes were identified as common diversification strategies.

Recent studies further indicate that climate change, coastal erosion, and technological transformation continue to intensify livelihood insecurity among fishing communities (FAO, 2022). Diversification has therefore emerged not merely as an economic choice but as an adaptive livelihood strategy.

The existing literature indicates that occupational diversification among fisherfolk is shaped by economic necessity, environmental pressures, technological changes, and changing social aspirations. However, region-specific studies focusing on traditional fisherfolk in Trivandrum district remain limited.

4. Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in the Sustainable Livelihood Framework proposed by the Department for International Development (DFID). The framework explains how households utilise available assets and resources to construct livelihood strategies under conditions of vulnerability.

According to the framework, fishing communities experience vulnerability due to environmental degradation, seasonal unemployment, declining fish resources, and market competition. These vulnerability factors directly affect livelihood security and compel households to adopt alternative coping strategies.

The framework identifies five forms of livelihood assets:

- Human capital
- Social capital
- Natural capital
- Physical capital
- Financial capital

Traditional fisherfolk often experience limitations in access to these assets, particularly financial and physical capital. As a result, occupational diversification becomes an adaptive livelihood strategy aimed at reducing risk, stabilising income, and improving household survival.

The study also draws upon the concept of occupational mobility, which explains the movement of individuals from one occupation to another due to economic, social, or environmental pressures.

5. Objectives of the Study

General Objective

- To study job diversification among traditional fisherfolk.

Specific Objectives

- To study the demographic profile of the respondents.
- To analyse the factors leading to job diversification among traditional fisherfolk.
- To identify the forms of job diversification among traditional fisherfolk.
- To assess the magnitude of diversification among traditional fisherfolk.

6. Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive research design to examine job diversification among traditional fisherfolk.

Universe of the Study

The universe of the study consisted of traditional fisherfolk residing in coastal villages of Trivandrum district, Kerala.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select ten coastal villages from five regions of Trivandrum district. From each village, ten respondents were selected through simple random sampling. The total sample size of the study was 100 respondents.

Tools for Data Collection

Primary data were collected using a structured interview schedule. Secondary data were collected from books, journals, government reports, research articles, and online databases.

Variables of the Study

Independent Variables
- Demographic profile
- Factors leading to diversification

Dependent Variables
- Job diversification
- Forms of diversification
- Magnitude of diversification

Data Analysis
The collected data were classified, tabulated, and analysed using descriptive statistical methods such as percentage analysis and frequency distribution.

Ethical Considerations
Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity of respondents were maintained throughout the study.

7. Limitations of the Study

1) The study was limited to selected coastal villages in Trivandrum district.
2) The sample size was limited to 100 respondents.
3) The study primarily used descriptive statistical techniques.
4) The findings may not be generalised to all fishing communities in Kerala.

8. Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of Respondents
The study revealed that 51 percent of respondents were below 45 years of age, indicating the predominance of economically active individuals within the fishing sector. All respondents had been residing in coastal areas for more than 20 years, reflecting strong occupational and cultural attachment to fishing livelihoods.

The study further found that 54 percent of respondents owned less than three cents of land, indicating limited asset ownership and economic vulnerability among fishing households. The findings support earlier studies which argue that traditional fisherfolk often experience inadequate access to productive assets and institutional support.

Factors Leading to Job Diversification
The findings indicate that 98 percent of respondents were directly engaged in fishing activities, while 95 percent used semi-mechanised fishing methods. About 24 percent of respondents were engaged in occupations other than fishing, and 19 percent occasionally participated in supplementary employment activities.

Seasonality of fishing emerged as an important factor influencing occupational diversification. Fourteen percent of respondents reported that seasonal unemployment compelled them to seek alternative employment opportunities.

Technological advancement was perceived negatively by 79 percent of respondents, while 37 percent believed that technological changes contributed to marine resource depletion. These findings are consistent with the observations of Kurien (2001), who noted that commercialisation and mechanisation have marginalised traditional fisherfolk.

The study also revealed that 43 percent of respondents considered alternative occupations necessary for survival. More than half of the respondents believed that diversification improved their quality of life. Occupational diversification was therefore perceived as a practical coping mechanism against livelihood insecurity.

Forms of Job Diversification
The findings reveal substantial occupational mobility among fishing households. Nearly 73 percent of respondents did not want future generations to continue fishing, primarily due to hard labour, uncertain income, and declining livelihood opportunities.

Migration emerged as a significant form of diversification. About 45 percent of respondents reported that family members had migrated to other places for employment, while 32 percent indicated migration to foreign countries, particularly Gulf nations.

The study also found that many respondents engaged in daily wage labour, small-scale business, catering work, and employment under MGNREGA schemes. Participation in informal labour sectors reflects the increasing dependence on supplementary income sources among fisherfolk households.

Magnitude of Diversification
The findings indicate that occupational diversification has become widespread among traditional fisherfolk. Diversification was largely driven by economic necessity rather than occupational preference.

The respondents increasingly depended on multiple income sources to cope with declining fish catch, seasonal unemployment, and rising household expenditure. Diversification therefore functioned as a livelihood stabilisation mechanism.

The findings support Allison and Ellis (2001), who argued that livelihood diversification enhances resilience and reduces economic risks among vulnerable communities.

9. Policy Implications

- Government agencies should promote sustainable livelihood diversification programmes among coastal communities.
- Technical and vocational training programmes should be introduced to improve employability among fisherfolk youth.
- Fisheries policies should prioritise the protection of traditional fisherfolk from resource exploitation and commercial competition.
- Awareness regarding welfare schemes such as MGNREGA should be strengthened.
- Institutional credit and financial assistance should be made more accessible to fishing communities.

- Coastal infrastructure including harbours, storage facilities, and transportation systems should be improved.
- Sustainable fisheries management practices should be implemented to prevent marine resource depletion.

10. Conclusion

Occupational diversification among traditional fisherfolk has become an important adaptive livelihood strategy in response to changing socio-economic and environmental conditions. Declining fish resources, technological transformation, seasonal unemployment, and livelihood insecurity have compelled many fishing households to engage in alternative occupations.

The study highlights that diversification does not necessarily indicate complete withdrawal from fishing. Rather, it functions as a supplementary mechanism for economic survival, income stability, and risk reduction.

Migration, informal labour, self-employment, and participation in government employment schemes have become increasingly common among fishing households. However, diversification should not be promoted as a substitute for traditional fishing livelihoods. Instead, policies should focus on strengthening sustainable fisheries while simultaneously enhancing supplementary livelihood opportunities.

A balanced policy approach integrating sustainable fisheries management, livelihood support, skill development, institutional assistance, and social protection measures is essential for improving the socio-economic conditions of traditional fisherfolk communities.

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