



Session 1: Women's voice and agency: Individual collectives, associations, platforms, institutions

Seaweed Harvesters in the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay: A Tale of Woe

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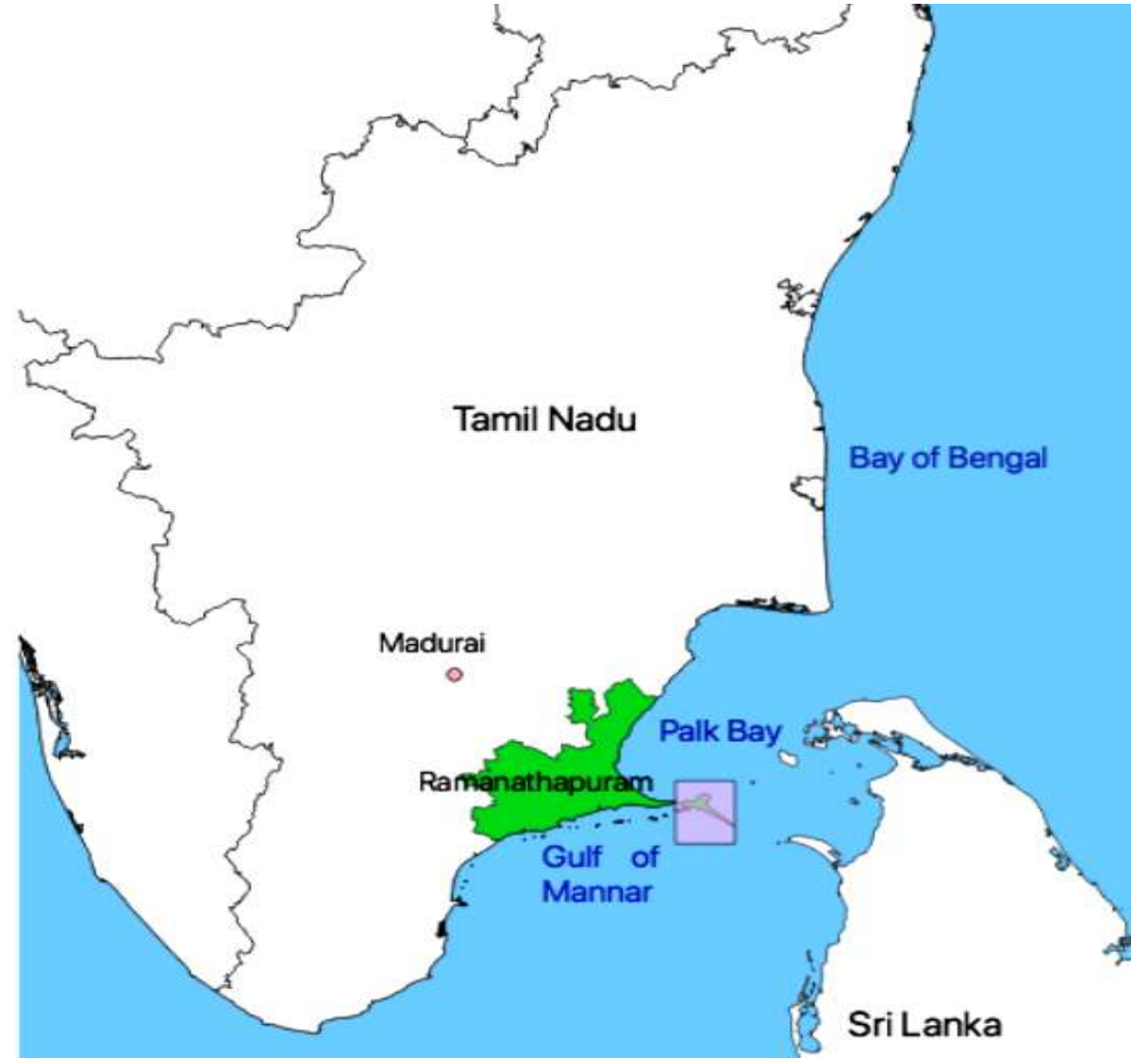
Indian Scenario of Seaweed Production

- **5300 t** - culture (0.02 % of the global seaweed cultivation)
- **18,400 t** - wild stocks (1.7% of global wild seaweed collection), contributes **77.64%** of the total seaweed production

- The wild harvest includes several species i.e., *Gelidiella acerosa*, *Gracilaria edulis*, *Gracilaria crassa*, *Sargassum*, and *Turbinaria*

- The entire farmed biomass is from the single species
- *Kappaphycus alverizii*

Locale of study



Major collected seaweed species (Price/ ton)



Gelidiella

₹ 50,000



Gracilaria

₹ 11,000



Sargassum

₹ 12,000



Turbinaria

₹ 12,000

Seaweed products (Price/ ton)



Algininate

₹ 5,00,000



Agar agar

₹ 18,76,000



Fertilizer

₹ 3,24,000

Everyday Empirics Through Photography

Dwellings



- About **60% of seaweed harvesters' dwells in a pucca house**
- The photo displays a *semi-pucca* house and it is commonly observed that the compound wall erected around the house is made of Palmyra leaf stalk
- The *kolam* is drawn in front of the house which is a traditional practice made using the basic elements of design – dots and lines

Temple



- Most of the seaweed harvesters are Hindus
- A *Mariamman* temple is found near the sea shore and she is regarded as the guardian deity (*kaval deivam*)
- They worship the goddess before heading to the sea and they stated that it is her will upon which they rely to return safely to shore

Harvesting for existence



- Seaweed harvesting is a traditional occupation passed on **from mother to daughter**
- **For the aged, seaweed collection is their only source of income** because it needs zero investment, and provides them with a pittance for a living
- These elderly people participate in the collection throughout the year, both during the peak and lean seasons

Vadu and *Perukku*, and Seaweed Harvesting



- The seaweed collection is based on the eternal pattern of ebb and flow of the tides
- They go for collection during the low tide (*vadu*), when the sea level drops and return at high tide (*perukku*)

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Towards sea



- The women seaweed harvesters wake up before the first flush in the morning, do household chores, and head towards the sea for seaweed harvesting

Protective equipment



- Women wear the *saree* during collecting the seaweed, as they are bound by their customs
- They enter the water and collect the wild seaweed with the *shirt/ t-shirt* above their *sarees*
- They wear goggles, flip flops and cocoon their fingers with a piece of cloth
- A sack is tied around their waist to collect the seaweed

A lifetime bending



- They collect at **4 to 5 feet depth**, and good swimmers can reach up to 10 feet
- These harvesters remain in bent posture for hours during the collection and surface every few minutes to gulp the air
- The seaweeds are picked manually without using any equipment, is a painstaking process

Injuries



- Sea urchins, eels and rays are encountered while collection and they pose a menace to the harvesters
- In spite, most of them cover their fingers with a piece of cloth, they are prone to injuries
- Few people were dragged to death, when their bags stuck to stones
- Also, they suffered from sunburn, body pain, and dizziness

Towards drying area



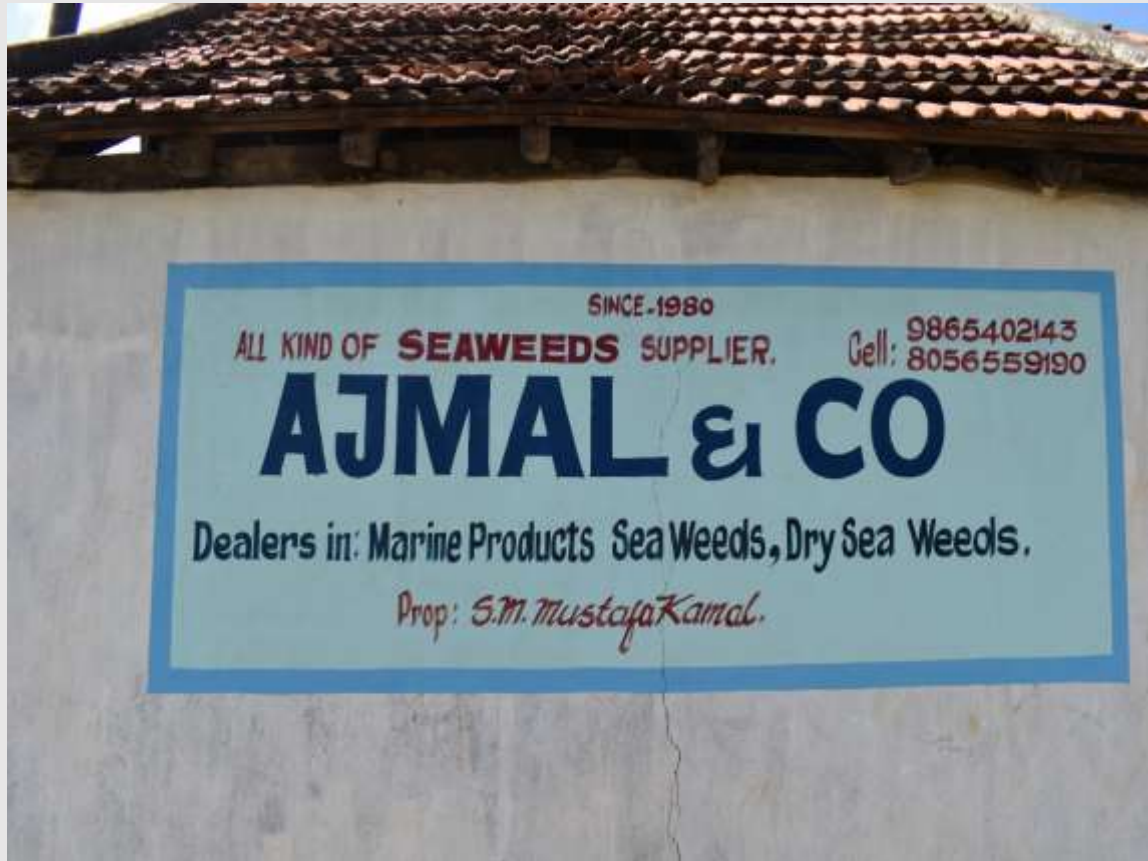
- After harvesting, they carry the sack filled with the fresh seaweed as head load to the drying area
- The sack weighs around 20 to 30 kg and 50 kg in the peak season

Under the sun



- There was no proper drying area/ platform
- The seaweed is spread out on the sand and sun dried for 3 to 4 hours

Sold out



- After dried, the seaweed is sold to the agent/ village level assembler and the seaweed harvesters reap their reward for the day
- The seaweed gathered by the agent is either kept in sacks or heaps and transported to the processor

Seaweed drying



- The agent hires daily wage labourers for drying, where the seaweed is spread out on tarpaulin sheets
- Almost all the labourers are women and are paid a wage of Rs. 250
- During holidays, the labourers' children also assist them and are paid with Rs. 100/ day

Heading back home, and *to return the next day and day after*



- After the hard day, the seaweed harvesters return home under the burning sun

Conclusion

- The harvesters use minimal protective equipment and are prone to occupational hazards
- These underpaid and marginalized women harvesters put their lives in peril for a pittance even though seaweed-derived products command high prices on the market
- Women are visible only in the production node of value chain
- They can be organised and trained to prepare value added products which will supplement their income

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**Thanks for listening
with great patience**

