

ABSTRACT

Dried fish production, a sector and subsistence that has received rare attention in research, is anchored predominantly in human values and protracted associations between the community and local ecologies. Dried fish economy thrives on the contributions of many people with distinctive roles and positions along the value chain while women play a pivotal part by making up nearly half of the workforce. However, the economy has undergone profound changes in recent decades due to its exposure to a bundle of social, political economic and ecological risks resulting in growing inequalities, livelihood uncertainties and marginalization of fishworkers. This study, focusing on Sagar and Namkhana blocks in the Indian Sundarbans, seeks to make sense of what is ‘place-based’ ‘customary’ or ‘ordinary’ imparting plural values to dried fish amid the corrosive effects of fisheries governance. Through a systematic literature review, I synthesize theoretical and empirical insights around small-scale fishing and fish drying couplet, thereby advancing a conceptual idea of ‘social economy’. The ethnography that the study engages in draws on qualitative research tools accompanied by audio-visual methods, to ground itself in spaces asserting what is always ‘social’ in economic practices, where concerted activities traverse across land, water, food and identity. Furthermore, it navigates the ‘gendered’ terrain of dried fish production to note how labour, in enmeshed domestic and workplace roles of women, are (re)produced and bounded by space and time. My fieldwork also reveals the continuing mobilization of the fishworkers’ organization in Bengal. Adopting a (two-way) participatory approach, I demonstrate how fishworkers’ activism operates as a counter-hegemonic force to translate local struggles into sustained claims for rights and recognition. Finally, I explored the transdisciplinary potential of the research through a knowledge co-production workshop attempting to forge a collaborative space for meaningful dialogues and shared understandings about the possibilities for climate-resilient dried fish production. Findings of this research may serve as a crucial entry point for discussing ‘blue (in)justices’ against unrecognized economies like dried fish under the dominant blue economy discourse. Simultaneously, the critical observations and participatory initiatives underpinning this research may inform scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in formulating new lines of inquiry and approaches to policies and interventions.