

Economy And Ritual Obeisance In A Fishing Community Of North East India

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Abstract

Ethnographers are currently interested in rediscovering rituals and its associated practices within the larger framework of Indigenous studies across societies. As there is limited and informal understanding of local patterns of worship among fishing communities, the study particularly encapsulates an inland fishing community of Kaibartas in Assam. The phenomenon of ritual practices by the fishing community towards fish ethology and conservation of the existing natural resources in north east India is investigated in this paper. The inextricably intertwined aspects and the long lasting constructive dependence of fishing resources with a symbiotic relationship by performing rituals are the critical components for integration with their ecology is unravelled in the study. Faith associated with rituals was supposed to protect and procure plenteous catch in uncertain environments. The paper seeks to question how rituals are believed to help in navigating the uncertainties of their habitat, thereby ensuring desired accomplishments in their fishing activities and fostering group solidarity and well-being among the Kaibarta fishers.

Key words: Kaibartas, economy, rituals, anxiety, uncertainty.

Introduction:

The Kaibartas, a socially low caste community of Assam, are mainly involved in fishing activities. Etymologically, the term 'Kaibarta' is derived from *ke* or *ka* meaning water and *vrit* meaning exist (*Ke+vrit*). So those who derive their livelihood from water are known as Kaibartas. (Bezbaruah 2005).

It is understood that the livelihood for this community depends on heterogeneous and uncertain conditions of the physical environment. They generally undertake their fishing activities in rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, inland pools and paddy fields. To cope with various uncertainties with regard to their livelihoods, Kaibartas perform different rituals to safeguard their fishing activities and provide sufficient fish to eke out their livelihoods.

The concept of ritual informs a common vocabulary and framework to explore developments occurring in different societies. At a deeper level, rituals have great analytical value to explain the functioning of a society. Rituals occur to impact on different levels of society ranging from everyday interactions and relationships, larger groups and organizations, society as a whole. Thus, rituals have potential relevance for the multifaceted nature of social life; it can be utilized in a wide range of studies given the complexity of human behaviour. It is widely accepted that rituals in any form were designed to relieve the given community from generalized anxiety about their livelihood aspects along influencing immediate natural forces.

In many fishing communities of the world, fishing territories are not a common property resource. In

some societies, rights to fish are controlled and such ownership rights operate to reduce uncertainty. McCay (1978:399) points out that in most societies fishing rights involve control over “fishing space” –not the resource itself. The main object however is not to protect or conserve the fish as much as to reserve the fish that are there for one’s self. Through the development of technology, institutions, and communications, the fishers can reduce risk and uncertainty. But for a terrestrial animal like human beings, the sea is still a dangerous and risky environment. Even Malinowski (1922) who worked among the Trobriand Islanders considered open-sea fishing to be dangerous and risky and so always accompanied by extensive rituals.

One of the most common strategies adapted by fishermen to uncertainty is to combine occupations. In the context of India, fishing is one of the hereditary occupations, which is also one of the important sources of food supply to many tribal communities like the Andamanese, the Ao Nagas of Nagaland, etc. The Ao Nagas, though primarily dependent on agriculture, practice both collective and individual fishing in the rivers as well as in the streams. The Andamanese subsist on hunting, fishing and collecting. They fish in the sea and in the pools using nets, short spears, harpoons, bows and arrows. Traditionally, they have the knowledge of poisoning fishes on the pools by means of certain plants, which they crush, and place in the water. The Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh rear fish in the paddy fields. Thus, there are various types of fishing communities ranging from sea-based to that of lake-based or part-time fishing such as the Ao Nagas or the Apatanis who include fishing in addition to agriculture.

Anthropological studies have documented the extent of ocean fishermen’s taboos in a number of cultural traditions around the world (e.g., Anson 1965, Dorson 1964, Creighton 1950, Frazer 1890, Goode 1887), and some researchers have related

the incidence of these ritual proscriptions to uncertainty of the catch or the dangers exist in the sea (as cited in Poggie & Pollnac 1988 : 66). But all over the world, fishing poses similar problems, and the significant contributions of the ‘anthropology of fishing’ have stemmed from studies focusing on the way that human beings are adapted of earning a living in this uncertain and risky environment.

Rituals associated with fishing were supposed to help the fishermen secure good catch and safe trip. Caught between environmental hazards on one side and development initiatives on the other, if some solutions are not taken rapidly, there will be negative consequences for the survival of these populations as well as for their knowledge systems. To face the adversities of the present environmental scenario, fishermen are still dependent upon traditional knowledge and rituals. But the recent days have witnessed the loss of traditional knowledge which seem to have increased the risks for these indigenous people.

According to Turner, ritual is "a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests" (1967:183). Rituals are storehouses of meaningful symbols by which information is revealed and regarded as authoritative, as dealing with the crucial values of the community (1967:2). Turner's definition of ritual refers to ritual performances involving manipulation of symbols that refer to religious beliefs. Turner defined ritual as "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers" (1967:19).

The Setting: The data for the study was collected from three Kaibarta villages of Kamrup and Nalbari districts of Assam. The two study villages, Barpith and Boripara are situated in Kamrup district

whereas Bornibari is situated in Nalbari district of Assam (Table 1). The Kaibartas practice endogamy and monogamy is the general rule. They are Hindus belonging to the Sakta sect. Among them, a section, have recently become followers of Mahapurushia Vaishnava Dharma. Their major festivals are three Bihu (spring festivals) and their place of worship is the community hall (namghar). The Kaibartas do not have wider commensal relations with other castes. Fishing as occupation, is considered to be polluting and the Kaibartas who practice it, are accorded a low status in the caste hierarchy among the Hindus. The Kaibarta women who are involved in fishing are known as poharibai.

Rituals as a Cognitive strategy:

The study draws upon the works of Malinowski (1948), Mullen (1969, 1978), Poggie and Gersuny (1972), and Steadman (1985) for the theoretical approach. The anxiety-ritual theory states that magic, taboos, and religious behaviour in general functions to relieve men of otherwise irreducible anxiety (Craig 1988:59). Situations of high uncertainty, especially if they are in some way threatening to the individual, induce relatively levels of anxiety. Any activity on the part of the individual which provides a sense of involvement with hope for control can serve to reduce the anxiety (Pervin 1963 as cited in Pollnac 1988: 66). A number of theorists have suggested that superstition and /or religion is a type of activity which can fulfil the function of reducing this type of anxiety (e.g., Jahoda 1969, Malinowski 1948, Kluckhohn 1942, Homans 1941). Steadman (1985) has again proposed that ritual taboos should be found in situations requiring extensive cooperation between individuals—particularly situations where the lack of cooperation would produce costly consequences (Palmer 1988: 64). The Kaibartas of Assam are involved in fishing in the wetlands and rivers of Assam. The rituals of the three Kaibarta villages of Assam are meant mainly to secure a good catch but at the same time the safety of the

fishermen and their boats in the uncertain water bodies is also a significant factor. Thus, the theoretical approach will be a combination of the above approaches and not based on a single theory.

Rituals and fishing:

The Kaibartas of Barpith village (Kamrup district) depend on the beels (wetlands) and the Khanajan river passing nearby the village for their subsistence. The Kaibartas of Boripara village catch fish in the fishery (Borhala beel), Deepor Beel (Kamrup District) and also the Brahmaputra river. In Bornibari, they carry out their fishing operations in the Baria beel and Capla Beel about 3 and 4 kms respectively, away from the village. There are also 20 individually owned fisheries in Bornibari. In addition to individual family fishing units, joint trips (thoras) are organized under the leadership of any one villager.

Generally, when they go for fishing in the beels (wetland) and river, they start for the beel/river in the evening and return in the morning to the shore with the entire catch of two hauls. These fishing ventures entail a number of rituals for a bumper catch as well as safe trip. They associate fishing with belief in some supernatural powers. Everywhere in the world, it is seen that, fishing communities are to face various uncertainties; they are to meet with hazardous climatic and associated natural irregularities which may jointly result in the complete failure of the catches (Sarkar 2009:192). These fishermen consider two types of anxiety to be of prime importance. One is related to production or the type of catch (amount). The other one is related to personal security or safety from the fishing trips. However, after analyzing the rituals and ritual behaviour of the Kaibartas, it was found that they give more importance to personal safety.

Generally the fishermen of the three study villages associate the following rituals with fishing:

Satyanarayan Puja: This is a ritual performed to worship Lord Krishna. The ritual is conducted by a

priest. He chants mantras (ritual formulae) and guides the performer, to make offerings and say prayers, which follow the recitation of the Geeta, a sacred text. A chapter or two of the Geeta is recited and then the ritual concludes. At the end, Prasad (sacred food) which consists of fruits, soaked gram and a mixture of rice powder, curd, banana, sugar and ghee is distributed among the devotees and the inmates of the house. The villagers offer milk, and light earthen lamps in the inland pool. It is only after the performance of this ritual that the villagers go for fishing in the rivers or wetlands. This worship is performed at community level during the month of April by the villagers on the banks of beel (wetlands). Each household, however, performs this puja during different times of the year if they desire so.

Ganga Puja: Ganga puja is a ritual performed at the fishing sources by every fishing household of Barpith and Boripara village. Actually the family head performs this puja. In order to perform this puja, a pair of pigeon is also required. With the help of the trunks of a plantain tree, a small raft is made on which a wide plantain leaf is spread and keeps it floating at the edge of water. On it, the head of the family puts the Prasad, fruits, flowers, dubori (dog grass), sesamum seeds and a few burning incense sticks and an earthen lamp. An earthen pot is also offered. The worshipper then sits near the edge of the water and with folded hands touches the ghot first and then the water of the beel. After the ritual is over, a lump of the Prasad is placed on the plantain leaf and the raft with the remaining articles is allowed to float away from the bank. The Prasad is distributed among the participants assembled at the bank of the beel.



There is an extricable relation between Ganga puja and fishing. A man, if he feels insecure, particularly about any fishing operation, may make small offerings and perform this ritual to ensure success of his venture.

In Bornibari, the fishermen perform ghot puja in lieu of Ganga Puja. This is similar to Ganga Puja, the head of the household performs it. The ritual is called ghot puja as a ghot or earthen pitcher containing water is used in the ritual. This ritual is performed to appease the jalkouri (presiding deity or custodian of the water bodies, etc). Sarkar (2009) also mentions about Ganga puja performed invariably by the fishermen of the Sunderban area. Before going to the distant rivers and sea for weeks together it is essential for the fish workers to propitiate Ganga mata on group level (Sarkar 2009: 199).

The Kaibartas believe that death or birth as defiling and offensive to the deities and so the fishermen do not undertake any fishing operation for a stipulated period after the birth or death of a relative. They also believe that menstruating women must not touch any kind of fishing gear. Besides these, fishermen avoid from their fishing activities on a new moon day or a full moon day and on such other festive occasions like Vishwakarma Puja, Lakshmi Puja and on Bihu (Magh, Bohag and Kati).

Thus, Satyanarayan Puja and Ganga Puja are the two rituals that are associated with fishing of the Kaibartas. The Kaibartas start the fishing season with the Satyanarayan Puja. This creates a sense of

solidarity among them as this puja is performed in the village at the community level. After the performance of this puja only can the fishermen afford to venture out in the rivers and wetlands. Ganga Puja though performed individually on certain occasions is also a community ritual. When the group as a whole prepares to go out on a fishing trip, they perform this ritual on the banks of the river/wetland. This gives them a sense of confidence, security and feeling of togetherness.

Other Rituals

These Kaibartas follow Hindu religious beliefs and their practices are very much similar to those of the other Hindu communities. The fishermen also celebrate the three Bihus (festival of Assam) and the annual Durga Puja etc, at community level. A number of spirits, evil and benevolent are found to influence the life of a Kaibarta fishermen. Among them, bak and jalkouri are the most influential ones. A bak, usually considered to be a tall-bodied figure, is a powerful spirit capable of devouring all the fishes of a beel overnight. It frequently haunts a beel or a stream. They move about at night swallowing fishes left over after fishing operations are over in a beel, etc. People engaged in fishing in a beel at night are scared of a bak. It is believed that a bak often rides on horse-back and hence it is known as ghora-bak (ghora means horse). They use various measures to keep these evil spirits away and sometimes even a smoldering string of dry straw is used as a repellent. Further, ghat puja or Ganga puja is performed to keep the area free from the evil effects of bak. Fishing is not trouble-free unless these spiritual beings are properly propitiated. These pujas are performed either individually or at the community level. In addition to these two spirits, there are Chamans who mostly live on tree tops and attack new-born babies and expectant mothers, beera, another female spirit loitering about under bamboo groves in the evening and Pihaceni, female spirits dwelling in the cremation grounds.

Fishing and Taboos:

Pollution beliefs are found to be intricately associated with fishing activities among the Kaibartas of Assam. Generally, ceremonial pollutions include that of women's menstruation, birth and death pollutions. Kaibarta women observe menstruation as a period of ceremonial pollution. She is generally segregated from the main house and is given only a corner of the house. In most of the fishing communities in the world, it is the men who conduct the primary fishing work and the women who look after the in-shore activities (Sachs 1997; McGoodwin 2001). Likewise, the Kaibarta fisherwomen play no role in the actual process of fishing, which is solely the domain of males. The reasons for this are multiple, and have various religious and social connotations. There are also adaptive reasons as to why in most small-scale fishing communities, it is the men who are the primary producers. Firstly, fishing is physically demanding work, and men are generally somewhat larger, stronger, and have greater upper-body strength than do their female counterparts. Therefore, on an average they are potentially more productive. Another reason is that human societies rely on women's reproductive capabilities for sustaining their populations, and because fishing is potentially dangerous, that sustainability is less threatened by having mainly men, rather than women, working at sea (McGoodwin 2001).

The birth and death pollutions are known as ahuj. On delivery, a woman enters a period of ceremonial uncleanness. The exact period for which it is observed is one month. Besides the mother, the whole family of the father of the child is considered ceremonially impure for a period of eleven days, more or less uniformly in the three study villages. Similarly, a death in the family renders the entire family impure for a period of twelve days. During these periods of defilement, a fisherman refrains from any fishing activity. He is also not included in the village group fishing expeditions. Moreover, a Kaibarta fisherman refrains from fishing on a new

moon or a full moon day. It has also been observed that pollution beliefs reduced fishing efforts considerably by preventing men from fishing during periods of defilement (birth, death, etc.). Although some of this time might have been spent in productive activities such as in mending nets and in preparing other gears, there is no doubt that both religious beliefs and practices reduce fishing operations to a considerable extent.

In addition to the individual family fishing units, joint trips are organized under the leadership of any one villager. Such fishing units are called *thoras*. A *thora* comprises of eight members, who are drawn from a cross-section of the family fishing units of the whole village. It is with the sheer motive of having a good individual catch that a joint fishing activity is undertaken. Before undertaking any joint venture, the *Kaibartas* of the study area are found to perform certain elaborate rituals for the safety of the fishermen as well as to secure a good catch. Either on the banks of the *beel* (wetlands) or river, they perform *Ganga/Ghot Puja* where all the villagers participate. They start for their fishing trips only after the performance of this ritual. Sometimes they also perform *Satyanarayan Puja* in lieu of *Ganga Puja*. In these elaborate rituals priests are engaged to perform the ritual. However, during rainy season, they may perform such rituals without any priests before undertaking any venture to ensure safety.

The *Kaibartas* of *Barpith* village depends on the *Khanajan River* passing nearby the village for their subsistence. The people do not have any possessory right over these water sources. The fishermen of *Boripara* do not possess individual fisheries. They catch fish in the fishery (*Borhala beel*) owned by the fishery co-operative society or organize their joint trips to go fishing in the *Brahmaputra river*. In *Bornibari* village of *Nalbari* district, the fishermen carry out their joint fishing operations in the *Baria beel* and *Capla beel* about 3kms and 4kms respectively, away from the village. Rainy season requires the joint co-operation of several fishermen.

From the study, it is evident that there is a correlation between education and occupation. The number of men employed in fishing as against the total number of employed men varies inversely with their educational level. Majority of the men engaged in fishing are illiterates, with few of them had primary education. Those who have studied upto seventh standard form another fishing category. On the other hand, the position is reversed so far as the non-fishing occupations are concerned. In the three study villages, illiterates are not found to have pursued non-fishing occupations. Persons having secondary education and beyond are found to be engaged in non-fishing professions. Thus, it is seen that with the rise in the level of education, the percentage of fishing population to the total employed population has decreased. This inversely influence their dependence on rituals and beliefs with regard to fishing.

Out of the total 312 *Kaibartas* involved in fishing from the three villages all of them believe that rituals do have a strong influence on their fishing activities. According to them, though these ritual taboos cannot be observed (seen) yet they have certain effects. They stated that dependence on ritual taboos become a necessity in situations when they go for fishing in rivers or wetlands during rainy season. On such occasions, there is no assurance when there are storms and rainfall occurs and water level rises. This sometimes creates real panic among the fishermen and sometimes their boats may even capsize. That is why before undertaking joint trips they perform elaborate rituals on the banks.

Of the total *Kaibartas* engaged in fishing (312), 224 of them informed that reliance on taboos and rituals increase when they go for fishing in the rivers and distant wetlands during rainy seasons. However, when they go for fishing in the nearby wetlands and ponds etc., they do not rely on elaborate rituals. In fact, solitary fishing does not require the performance of elaborate rituals. Only when, they go for fishing in the rivers/wetlands during rainy

season when the water level increases and also more men are involved do they perform Ganga puja/ghot puja on the banks. They also laid emphasis on the fact that though a bumper catch is always desirable, they are more concerned with the safety of the fishermen. Interestingly, it was found that opinions differed with regard to people engaged in other occupations. Due to their engagements in various jobs and services these people hardly could follow every ritual or taboos. They only participate in the annual rituals performed by the villagers on the banks of the rivers/wetlands. Thus, there is a close relationship between fishing and rituals. The habitat also has a strong influence on rituals as certain rituals like Ganga Puja/ Ghot Puja and appeasement of spirits like Jalkuori are all related to the water bodies. Just like Reddy's Irakkam fishermen in Pulicat lake of Andhra Pradesh, in Assam also 'rituals function as instruments to instill psychological strength and social solidarity (2020:202)'.

Conclusions

Rituals, habitat and economy are inextricably intertwined among the Kaibartas of Assam. Rituals play an important role among the Kaibarta fishers of the three study villages. The habitat seems to exercise a strong influence on the fishers' belief systems. It is found that when they venture out for fishing in the wetlands and rivers for more than one day, they proceed after performing elaborate rituals. Another feature noticed among them is that, ritual taboos are observed more frequently when they organize joint trips. The leader selected for such joint trips arranges elaborate rituals on the banks. However, solitary fishing and that too, in the nearby ponds and swamps does not require the elaborate performance of rituals or taboos. Fishing at nearby ponds, small rivulets for a smaller period of time, the risk factor involved is less and there are fewer cases of mishaps. When they got out for longer duration it results in staying overnight on the water/banks and they are far away from their homes. To secure a good catch as well as to ensure

the safety of the group, these fishers believe following taboos to be more efficacious. Safety of the boats is another reason for the sharp increase in taboos for longer trips. Thus, it can be concluded that ritual taboos exist in cases when some sort of danger or crisis is involved. It is more frequent in situations like fishing where there is considerable amount of risk involved and involves some type of cooperation. The Kaibartas who are engaged in fishing only are found to accept a number of ritual taboos. This signifies that it is related directly to their economy. Anxiety reduction and personal safety are found to be the two main reasons for ritual acceptance among the Kaibartas with strong influence from the habitat. We can conclude that this type of cognitive strategy in the form of religious rituals is paying well for them for generations. It is hoped that these traditional beliefs and rituals must be synchronized along with modern scientific ways to face the hazards and risks of the ecosystem. Hence, traditional knowledge can be amalgamated with latest technical knowledge for effective fisheries management. Indigenous beliefs, rituals coupled with a modern technology shall mitigate risks involved in fishing activities in different ecological terrains, further; it facilitates good benefits for fishers' economy.

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