

The Kaibartas: A Fishing Community of Assam, Their Society and Economy

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ABSTRACT The Kaibartas are one of the sixteen Scheduled Castes of Assam. Fishing is considered to be the primary occupation of the Kaibartas. The present work was undertaken among the Kaibartas of Boripara village, nearby Guwahati city in Kamrup District, Assam. The society and economy of these people and the occupational changes noticed among them due to the impact of urbanization is discussed in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Fishing to a considerable extent, is determined by the heterogeneous and uncertain conditions of the physical environment. The activities associated with fishing have been discussed widely as a cultural type as that of the pastoralists, horticulturists and so on. Such discussions on fishing have taken into consideration the variety of fishing techniques and technologies ranging from simple traps, spears, arrows etc., among indigenous peoples; to the different kinds of sizes of boats and nets employed in small-scale or industrial fishing; general fishing or maritime cultures, etc. Anthropological studies of the so-called 'extreme occupations' of the fishing communities have been analyzed in terms of their distinctive values, social structure and organization inter-related to the special demands of the occupational role. In the small-scale or traditional societies, fishing activities sometime share many of the characteristics of hunting like danger, uncertainty, the use of physical strength and so on. These activities also resemble more closely the gathering of a reliable and easily captured resource. There are examples of regions where the comparative abundance and reliability of aquatic resources permitted a level of social development which is generally associated with agricultural societies (Seymour-Smith, 1986).

Fishing activities are undertaken in seas, rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, inland pools and in paddy fields. The conditions of the weather and location of fish cannot be controlled by the fishermen. The uncertainty stems not only from the physical environment but also from the social environment in which fishing is undertaken (Acheson, 1981). Fishermen operating on a flat,

undifferentiated surface are exploiting animals that are difficult to see which leads to uncertainty. One's catches can fluctuate depending on the activities of fellow fishermen, and even fishermen working with relatively primitive technology can affect the stock of aquatic animals.

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 communication, the fishermen can reduce risk and uncertainty. But for a terrestrial animal like man, the sea is still a dangerous and risky environment. Malinowski (1922) first suggested that human beings cope with irreducible risk through ritual and magic. He noted that in the Trobriand Islands no magic exists in lagoon fishing, where reliable catches can be obtained without physical danger, "While in open-sea fishing, full of danger and uncertainty, there is extensive magical ritual to secure safety and good results" (Malinowski, 1948).

One of the most common strategies used by fishermen to adapt to uncertainty is to combine occupations. According to Leap (1977) fishing is rarely done exclusively in tribal and peasant societies but is almost always combined with hunting, agriculture, or other occupations. The Ao Nagas of Nagaland, 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 are aware of the method of poisoning fishes in 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 fishermen ranging from sea-based to that of lake-based or part-time fishermen such as the Ao Nagas or the Apatanis who include fishing in addition to agriculture.

There are a number of anthropological studies on a variety of topics in communities where people do fishing. 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.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present paper is based on data collected in the course of fieldwork undertaken among the Kaibartas (fishermen) inhabiting the village of Boripara, a fringe village of Guwahati city in Kamrup District, Assam. The data were collected between May 1999 and July 2001.

Primary data on population pattern including educational status, occupational pattern and others were collected using a structured household schedule. Data on physical aspects of the village and socio-cultural milieu were collected using focused interviews and non-participant observations.

Boripara village is situated on the southern fringe of Guwahati city by the side of National Highway No.37. The village is surrounded by a large number of wetlands. The population of the village is 281 out of which 150 are males and 131 females and they are distributed through 46 households (Table 1).

Table 1: Population Pattern among the villagers of Boripara

Community	No. of house- hold	No. of Persons				Total
		Male	%	Female	%	
Kaibartas	46	150	94.94	131	92.90	281
Rajbanshi	3	6	3.8	7	4.96	13
Others	1	2	1.27	3	2.14	5
Total	50	158	100.00	141	100.00	299

The primary occupation of the Kaibartas of Boripara is fishing though many of them have switched over to various ways of earning at present (Table 2).

Table 2: Occupational patterns of the Kaibartas

Occupation	Male		Female	
	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
Fishing	45	15	-	-
Weaving	-	-	14	-
Agriculture	2	5	-	-
Driving	2	-	-	-
Wage labour (in company)	1	-	2	-
Casual labour	6	7	-	-
Office assistants	4	-	-	-
Business	7	-	-	-
Nurse/Dresser	1	-	2	-
Unemployed	7	-	8	-
Students	58	-	45	-
Too young	15	-	10	-
Veg. seller	1	-	-	-
Housewife	-	-	50	-
Too old	1	-	-	-

THE PEOPLE

The Kaibartas are the aboriginal inhabitants of Assam. They are one of the sixteen Scheduled Castes of the state as per Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950. The origin and migration of the Kaibartas are still shrouded with mystery. Doley (1980) opines that swarms of migrants from distant regions have been coming to Assam, since the beginning of human history. While the Brahmins and the Kalitas (a Hindu caste) of present Assam claim their descent from the early Aryan settlers, the Kaibartas are believed to be the descendants of the first Dravidian immigrants. About Kaibartas, Risley (1891) writes that they are a large fishing and cultivating caste of Bengal proper, ranked below the Nava Shakha. Nava Shakhas constitute a group of nine castes from whose hands Brahmans take water. The Dharma Shastras also enlisted them as a fishing community. They are called as *Kevaritta* in the Jatakas (*Ke*__water, and *varta*__livelihood). This means that the Kaibartas derive their livelihood from water.

Among the Kaibartas of Boripara, a family whether it is an extended or nuclear one, is referred to as '*poriyaal*'. Fisherfolk families of Boripara are characterized by patrilocal and patrilineal descent and patriarchal authority. Property is equally divided among all the sons

Table 3: Family type among the Kaibartas

Type of family	Total No.
Incomplete nuclear family	4
Nuclear family with dependents	5
Nuclear family without dependents	32
Lineally extended family without dependents	3
Collaterally extended family	1
Lineally collaterally extended family with dependents	1
Total	46

and if a married daughter returns from her in-laws' house she is also given a share.

As regards the average family size there are 11 households whose total family members do not exceed more than four persons, 32 households with members in between five and ten and 3 households with members exceeding more than ten persons.

Marriages are preferably arranged within the same economic stratum. Childhood marriages are totally absent. Pre-marital sex relations are strongly disapproved in the community. Caste endogamy is the general rule of contracting marriage in the Kaibarta society. Marriage with castes like 'Suri', 'Jugi', etc. which they consider lower than their own are generally prohibited. But the marriage of a Kaibarta girl with a high caste boy is accepted as a matter of pride.

Avoidance of one kind or another between certain relations is observed among the Kaibartas of Boripara. A daughter-in-law does not appear before her in-laws' without her head covered. The son-in-law also maintains a formal relationship with his parents-in-law, characterized by respect and consideration. The bride also treats her husband's elder brothers with respect. She never talks to them directly and never appears before them without covering her head.

The Kaibarta kinship terminology is characterized by the simultaneous use of both classificatory as well as descriptive terms. The terms used to address close kins, related by blood or marriage are equally and freely used to address the neighbours.

FISHING ACTIVITIES

Fishing is considered to be the only important occupation by the people of Boripara even though it is largely a seasonal occupation. There are about 45 varieties of fish caught by the fishermen

of Boripara. Generally, some of the varieties are available only during the peak fishing season (mid September to mid May) while the other varieties are found all the year round though in fewer quantities. Some of the varieties like *kanduli* (*Notopterus notopterus*), *mirka* (*Cirrhinus mrigala*), *bhakua* (*catla catla*), *sol* (*Channa striata*), *borali* (*Wallago attu*) and *chital* (*Chitala chitala*) are available only from September middle to mid May. The Kaibartas of Boripara follow the Hindu calendar for various fishing activities.

The Kaibartas depend on the fishing implements and the *beel* (natural large wetland). Each individual family possesses their own required fishing implements. The Fishery Co-operative Society of the village also provides boats and fishing nets to those fishermen who cannot afford to have of their own. While fishing gear is purchased but repaired by the fisherfolk themselves, boats are constructed by carpenters. Equipment and accessories such as yarn, hooks, etc. are sold in shops which are rarely run by members of the fisherfolk community.

The Kaibartas of Boripara employ different fishing techniques such as traps, nets, fishing by rod and line and so on. The simplest type of trap used by them is the *polo* (cage trap) made of bamboo strips. It is generally used in knee-deep still water usually in the *beels*. Fishes hidden in the mud are usually caught by this trap. Sometimes an artificial dam is prepared in shallow running water leaving a small passage. The fisherman places a *chepa* (valve trap) at the passage where the fishes exist and blocks the open mouth of the trap, placing the valve against the current of water. The fishes are lured into the trap with the water and are trapped. Nets are generally of various types and the fishermen of Boripara use nets mainly during their peak fishing season. Gill nets are of three varieties—*puhilangi*, *garelangi* and *kawoilangi*. Handnet (*haatjaal*) is also used to catch fish in shallow water. Dip net (*dhekijaal*) is a variety of hand operated net but it is used in deep water. Cast net (*acharajaal*) is large and can cover a huge area. Other implements used by them are rod and line (*borhi*), basket trap (*jakoi*) and fishing basket (*khaloi*). There is another indigenous method of catching fish among these fishermen. During the months of July and August when fish becomes scarce, they catch fish in the paddy fields and inland pool. The fishermen attach

earthworms to hooks tied in ropes. These ropes are laid out in the paddy fields or inland pool and small fishes who come to eat those earthworms are caught by the hooks. They then gather those ropes and collect the fishes.

The organization of the labour force among the fishermen of Boripara is very simple. The working unit is usually the family. When fish becomes scarce, it requires the co-ordinated efforts of several families. In order to catch fish in large scale, joint trips are organized. Such fishing units are called *thoras*.

Production among the fishermen generally means their daily and seasonal catches. These catches range from low catch, average catch to big catch. During the peak fishing season, the fishermen's catch range from big to average. On an average catch they range from 80kg to 100kg. But a low catch does not exceed 80kg or so per day when fish becomes scarce during the breeding season.

The Kaibartas of Boripara do not possess individual fisheries. They catch fish in nearby Borhala *beel* owned by the Fishery Co-operative Society of the village which is auctioned by the Government in every three years.

Marketing of fresh fish is done in two ways. If fishes are auctioned by the society as a whole or privately, they are bought by the villagers as well as outside traders. Others buy small or large amounts directly and retail them and also barter fish for vegetables.

Fishing is the primary source of income of these fishermen, excepting a few who pursue other occupations. The households dependent exclusively on fishing have deficit family budgets than those who have subsidiary occupations other than fishing. Birth, death, puberty, marriage, illness, etc. are occasions which mostly disturb the family budgets. Davies(1951), states that with industrialization, modernizing forces tend to accelerate the movement of people from one status to another. Moreover, such movement begins to increase keeping pace with population growth, urbanization and secular education. The democratic set up of a country and the economic changes also favour this trend of movement (Jain, 1969).

Information has been collected about the occupation of the respondent, his/her father's occupation and his/her father's father's occupation. Such information were collected from 48 individuals. In no case two siblings were

chosen as respondents as that would have led to duplication of the father's and father's father's occupations.

Table 4 show the occupations of the respondents, their father's and their father's father's. It is seen that the earliest generation (father's father's) was centred on fishing followed by labourers (both wage and casual).The next generation (father's) was a mixed one, majority being fishermen followed by agriculturists, casual labourers and wage labourers. The present generation shows adoption of a wide variety of other occupations including business, driving, office assistants, nurses/dresser etc. in which the earlier generations were not involved.

Table 4: Occupations of the respondents, their father's and father's father's

Occupation	Respondents	Father's	Father's	Father's
Fishing	72.92	52.08	93.75	
Casual labourer	8.34	12.50	4.17	
Office assistants	4.17	-	-	
Driving	2.08	-	-	
Business	4.17	-	-	
Nurse	2.08	-	-	
Agriculture	2.08	27.08	-	
Wage labour	2.08	4.17	2.08	
Vegetable seller	2.08	4.17	-	
Total	100	100	100	

Basically, the Kaibartas of Boripara are Saktas and they worship a number of Gods and Goddesses. But two of the rituals like Satyanarayan Puja and Ganga Puja are associated with fishing. They believe that death or birth as defiling and offensive to the deities and so the fishermen remain on shore for a period after the birth or death of kins. They also believe that menstruating women must not touch any kind of fishing gear. Besides these, fishermen avoid fishing on a new moon day or a full moon day and on such other occasions like Vishwakarma Puja, Lakshmi Puja and Bihu festivals.

CONCLUSION

The city of Guwahati along with its urban growth has been radiating influence into its surrounding villages. The contact with the urban life has to a large extent affected the general life of the Kaibartas. The old thatched roof and mud flooring are being replaced by tin roofs and paved flooring, respectively. Use of electricity for lighting purposes is seen in majority of the houses.

Education by inducing people to take to non-fishing jobs has also changed the standard of living and style of these families; with more or less fixed income, the expenditure of these families is also regulated. Now they are not entirely dependent on fishing as there is visible shrinkage in terms of fishing population and area of the wetlands in recent years, due to rapid urbanization and industrialization. As a result of the constant contact with the urban avenues through employment, the habits of these people have changed. It is mainly the educated and those employed in non-fishing occupations who acquire the alien traits first and others follow the suit.

In so far as fishing is concerned there is little change in the age old tools and techniques, except for the replacement of materials in fishing implements. Regarding the materials and fibres from which accessories such as floats, sinkers, head rope, foot rope, and netting are fabricated, synthetic fibres such as nylon, polyethylene and polypropylene have almost completely replaced natural fibres and materials such as cotton, hemp, wood and clay. It has increased the efficiency of the traditional gillnets to a very large extent, due to the fact that synthetic fibres are less visible than natural ones, apart from other advantages such as easier handling, hardly any need for preservation, longer life span and less weight.

Being entirely a fishing community, the Kaibartas are never self-sufficient. They had always to rely on their neighbours not only for the necessities of life like food and clothes but also for the marketing of fish. They have thus lost many of the basic features of the 'little community' as discussed by Redfield (1955). The growing processes of interaction through communication networks, marketing centres and other institutions have introduced to them the features of 'peasantry'. On the one hand, they are part of the regional peasant culture and on the other, they are linked with the mainstream of the nation through commonly shared mythology, and growing inter-regional contacts through markets.

It is felt that the Kaibartas of Boripara at present require improvement of traditional education and occupation. Though the awakening to the importance of education has already started among them, the drop-out rate is still high. High expense in education is a major problem for the entire community. Special scholarships should be granted so that deserving poor students

can study. Moreover, parents should be made aware of the existence of fisheries school so that they can send their children to receive training. They should be made conscious of the fact that not only experience but also education is necessary to make one a good fisherman.

The age-old methods of fishing are admittedly very ingenious. The Kaibartas must try to acquaint themselves with the up-to-date knowledge about the habits of fish, especially their seasonal migration, and with the results of the scientific experiments carried on in fishing techniques. The illiterate Kaibarta fishermen would be immensely benefited if they are induced to take advantage of the various types of insurance. For all these improvements co-operation among the people and help from outside are both essential.

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