

FISHING RITUALS OF THE MARINE FISHERFOLK

of

Jambudwip : A Socio-cultural Study

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Introduction

During the early phase of anthropological research in India the main concern was to study the customs of the tribals as isolates. During the last two decades the interest has gradually shifted to the study of the peasantry in various kinds of village communities.

Although the fisherfolk are an integral part of the peasantry, they have practically escaped the notice of the anthropologists except in the compendia of Tribes and Castes volumes. The marine fisherfolk, who are otherwise members of the peasant society, though earning their livelihood from outside the domain of peasant village, have practically been left untouched by the anthropologists in India. It is noticed that after the completion of their marine fishing operation, they return to their villages within the peasant set-up.

Under the situation two basic questions obviously emerge, viz.,

- (i) How do the marine fisherfolk adjust themselves in transient societies outside the domain of the peasantry for their main economic pursuit ?
- (ii) How do they adjust themselves within the intricate and complex organisation of the Indian peasantry when their main source of income is from outside, *i.e.*, from the sea ?

The first phase of our research project is concerned with the study of the marine fisherfolk as transient occupational groups adjusting themselves to the unique ecology of marine fishing and cycle of work.

In the present paper an attempt has been made to delineate the ritual context of the adaptation of the marine fisherfolk.

It will be seen from the following pages that right from sailing out from their natal villages to returning there, in all phases of fishing activities, such as, the preparation of the fishing gears, etc., a series of rituals are performed by these fisherfolk in order to scale down the margins of their occupational

hazards and to help the conceptual and sentimental adjustment to the natural environment.

Field work

Field investigation was undertaken in the different fishing grounds of southern Sundarban in the district of 24-Parganas, West Bengal, during 1967-68.

Intensive study was made in the south western part of the Jambudwip (about seven miles south of Frazergunj) due to its unique situation of isolation. This island is completely uninhabited during off season. Besides collecting data from Jambudwip supplementary information were gathered from Frazergunj and Bakkhali (about five miles east of Frazergunj) on the shore of the Bay of Bengal.

The People

In these fishing grounds the fisherfolk come from different parts of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and set up their temporary camps (*Khunti*) for about four months (October-February) during fishing season, when the sea is relatively calm. With the beginning of southern wind, when the sea becomes rough and the proportion of humidity in the atmosphere increases, these fisherfolk wind up their camps, for they do not venture to catch in the rough sea, nor can they dry up their catch.

The main considerations of selecting a site for temporary camps are the presence of a creek where they can safely harbour their country boats, supply of drinking water and sufficient supply of fuel for their cooking and for boiling preservatives to be applied to their nets to counteract the salinity of sea water.

When they return to their natal villages, these fisherfolk engage themselves in different types of 'non-caste' occupations as their secondary professions, for they are practically landless.

Each of the fishing unit is headed by one leader (*bahardar*) who recruits his personnel from different villages, either on share or on salary basis.

17 fishing units camp in south western part of Jambudwip giving a total population of 243 hailing from 30 different villages of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Nearly all of them are East Bengal refugees and are Kaibarta (Jaladas) by caste except for 15 persons, belonging to different non-fishing and fishing castes, viz., Kayastha (2), Malo (2), Namasudra (6), Rajbanshi (2), Mahishya (1), Malakar (1) and Tanti (1).

Rajbanshi of Budge Budge (24-Parganas), Bauria and Fuleswar (Howrah). These units are comparatively small, varying between 10-14 heads per unit. There is no interaction between the East Bengal refugee fisherfolk and the fisherfolk of West Bengal proper camping, on two sides of the island. This is largely due to ecological set up and cultural variation of these two groups of fisherfolk.

There are 12 fishing units at Frazergunj with an average membership of about 14 persons. Some of the leaders have permanently settled down at Frazergunj.

In Bakkhali there are 17 fishing units and the leaders are all from the villages of Kalinagar and Aukshaynagar near Kakdwip. They originally come from Chittagong (East Bengal). These units are more commercialised and their average size is quite big (about 35). Some of the units may have as many as 40-80 persons. Their business is also carried on a large scale and they operate as the reference model of the fishing units camping in different fishing grounds in the vicinity.

The East Bengal refugee Kaibartas form an overwhelming majority in the fishing units, except for those camping in the north eastern part of Jambudwip.

With this background information let us now proceed to the main theme of the paper, viz., the rituals of these fisherfolk.

Nail-eye and Amulet

As the life of the fisherfolk is always in danger and the catches are often uncertain, they have a strong belief in supernaturalism. Belief in witchcraft and the magical power of amulets are widely prevalent among them.

The success of the fishing operation largely depends on the *manjhi*, i.e., the steerer of the boat. He and his crewmen are sometimes found to put amulets made of *astadhatu* (eight varieties of metals) with a length of three and a half *Kar* (one third the length of a digit) of the left little finger. The amulet contains charred wood of funeral pyre collected in a new moon night, preferably on Saturday—the collector must be stark naked.

Besides this, the *manjhi* and the crewmen may also be found to keep a nail (*kanta*) of the *surjamukhi* * variety of *sankar* fish in an amulet round the waist. This particular nail is supposed to be very poisonous. Further

* Some of the *sankar* fish have one, while some others have two or three nails in their

it is said that the nail of the baby *surjamukhi sankar* fish collected from the womb of the mother fish or of a just born one is most effective if that can be collected unnoticed by any fellow workers.

It is important to note that due to their long association with the sea and its creatures, they have developed some clear idea of the characteristics of these creatures and an institution of magicians (*ojha*) has developed particularly to counteract the poisonous bite of the sea snakes and other poisonous animals of sea, like *sankar* fish, etc. Two such *ojhas* were met with in Jambudwip. Further it is observed that the fisherfolk consume the tip of the nail of the baby *sankar* fish with the belief of withstanding the poisonous bite of it.

The fisherfolk also have a strong belief in evil eye, evil spirit and evil mouth. It is believed that sometimes fishes cannot be hauled due to evil eye and evil mouth. As a precautionary measure some chanted water is brought from the natal villages. It is sprinkled around the *Khunti* area at the time of its establishment. The chanted water is also sprinkled over the nets and on the places where the nets are set. A definite procedure is to be observed in order to get the chanted water, known as *saran para jal*. The *bahardar* or any other person who knows the art should collect the water from the western bank of a pond which is not connected by any channel with any other water source, early in the morning before any bird, like crows, gets down. This type of pond is known as *bandha-pukur*. The water is to be collected in one breath and then the collector should go on reciting incantations and sawing the water so collected in the pot with some teathed implement, like sickle. Before leaving the village for fishing the *bahardar* sprinkles this chanted water over his nets and crewmen.

It should, however, be noted here that the fisherfolk are not solely, or even mainly guided by superstitions. Some rational considerations are also there. When it is seen that the fishes are not entangled due to some technical defects or due to some identifiable natural causes, rational steps are taken to meet these exigencies. But if any technical defect cannot be detected and when it is seen that others are getting sufficient catches just by the side of one's net, such unaccountable hauling is believed to be due to some evil eye or evil mouth. Then the chanted water (*saran para jal*) is sprinkled over the spot.

Rituals connected with the preparation of fishing gears

The boat and the net are the two most important fishing gears of the fisherfolk. Rituals connected with them are as follows :

(i) *The Boat*

of setting the keel of the boat worship of peer (a deity) is performed by the 'caste priest' of the owner with fruits and flowers. When the boat is built completely, he is again worshipped with fruits and flowers. The married ladies also smear the two ends (*galai*) of the boat with vermilion and mustard oil. They also greet the boat with *baran dala*, i.e., a winnowing fan containing some varieties of cereals like paddy, peas, barely, etc., an earthen lamp, water, blades of grass, mango twig, etc. Some sweets are also distributed on this occasion. When a boat is purchased and is brought to the house of the owner, the ladies also similarly greet the boat with *baran dala*.

The presiding deity of the boat is believed to be *Kastha Devi* among the fisherfolk of West Bengal and *Kastha Durga* among those of East Bengal refugees. Both of them consider the deity as a female one.

The fisherfolk of West-Bengal have a strong notion that if the *manjhi* (steerer) of the boat lives in austerity while in boat, his boat generally does not face any disaster. It is also believed that the deity gives indications of some imminent danger for the boat and its crewmen in a dream. The presiding deity is also supposed to give indications about the location of a successful haul. Sometimes the boats are also believed to emanate some peculiar sounds which give indications of some imminent danger. Such boats are known as *sajag nauka* (i.e., alive boat). Many stories are connected with this type of boat in their society. Further it is believed that in case of disaster or loss of such a boat the deity gives indications of its whereabouts in dream. But the steerer or the owner of the boat must be an expert to interpret all the indications, either direct or indirect, of the deity.

It seems that the concept of the presiding deity of the boat is more dominant among the fisherfolk of West Bengal than among East Bengal refugees, although it will be seen from the following pages that the fishing rituals, as such, are more elaborate in the latter group.

(ii) *The Net*

Net making is the job of the males. The different parts of the net have distinct terms. Some rituals are also connected with the preparation of a net. The number of meshes in a net to be prepared (i.e., the size of the net) depends on the *rashi** name (*rash nam*) of the owner of the net. The number of meshes is counted in terms of *kuri* (twenty) and it varies from fifteen to seventeen *kuris* in the mouth of the bag shaped net. It may happen that just fifteen or seventeen *kuris* do not tally with the *rash nam* of an individual. In that case some two or three meshes are added to or subtracted from the number.

It is believed that preparing the net ignoring one's rash nam will mean some disaster to the owner or to the net. On the other hand successful catch is expected if the net is prepared in conformity with the *rash nam* number. Some stories are also prevalent in this context in their society.

Some days like Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays are thought to be inauspicious for making nets. So they are avoided by some orthodox fishermen even to begin preparing a net. Most of the fisherfolk avoid those inauspicious days while joining the different parts of the net together. But every one should begin to prepare the upper part (*chokh*, i.e., eye of the net) of the net on an auspicious day. It is believed that till the different parts of the net are joined together, they are separate inanimate objects. But when they are joined together, particularly with one of the upper part (*chokh*) and the rituals connected with it is over, it becomes an animate object. Then the net can feel and see. The animate nature of the net is also reflected in other contexts. When the jelly fish closes the opening of the meshes the fisherfolk state that the net has breathing difficulties. It is also said that if the net is not properly set, it has to face many hardship due to strong current of the sea. A weathered net is also called as *bura jal*, i.e., old net. The term *bura*, i.e., old, is prefixed to an animate object.

Life infusing or Phur basani ceremony of the net

Different parts of the net are knitted separately. It has been mentioned that the extreme upper part of the open end of the net in general is known as *chokh* or eye of the net. There are also different parts of the *chokh*. There are four eyes in a net with which, it is believed, that it can see. To join the *chokh* with the net a ritual, known as *phur basani*, is performed to infuse life into the net. This ceremony is performed in the following way :

Three or five married women greet (*baran*) the net with *baran dala* (winnowing fan) containing three earthen lamps, an earthen pot, vermilion, etc. One iron nail, a piece of conch shell, *bach* (looks like turmeric having sweet smell), turmeric, date palm sapling having just one leaf, a little piece of gold and silver, sandal wood paste, vermilion and curd are tied together in a bundle with seven mango leaves. Four such bundles are tied with four eyes of the net where vermilion marks are also made. Then four men sit in a stooping posture in front of the four eyes of the net. They chew betel leaf, betel nut and *kacha halud* (green turmeric) and blow air from the mouth over the eyes of the net. It is believed that some evil spirits and even the mother diety Ganga move in the sea. So if the net is made impure with the air blown from the mouth and spitting over it, those evil spirits who appear in the form of big sea animals would divert their route and the net will be saved, when set in the sea, from destruction. It is said that if such evil spirits are hauled in the net, some ill luck is bound to befall. But the deity Ganga is seldom thought to be malevolent unless she is disturbed and is properly propitiated. The iron nail has also the same magical power to frighten away the evil spirits.

At the time of the ritual some fresh fishes are also strewn over the net with the magical idea that it will bring more fish in the net. The women of the household make some auspicious sound (*jokar*) from the mouth. There is also a strong superstition that no one should be allowed to take anything from the house of the owner of the newly made net on the day of this ritual, due to the belief that it may bring ill luck to him or some black magic may also be performed by others.

On the fishing ground women are not present. The crewmen perform the ritual by themselves in a miniature form excluding the part of the ritual performed by the women with *baran dala*.

The Voyage

The day and time of the voyage is selected in consultation with the Bengali almanac by their caste priest. If such a suitable day is not available in time, they follow the popular saying known as *Khanar-bachan** (saying of a mythical astrologer), viz., *mangaler usha budhe pa jatha ichha tatha ja*, i.e., one can go safely any where on the morning of Tuesday and Wednesday.

All the crewmen assemble in the house of the bahardar for the ensuing voyage about seven or eight days before the journey. Those who operate on share basis system do not generally take their meal in the house of the bahardar on those days, as most of them are from the same village of the bahardar or from adjacent villages. But those who work on salary basis stay in the house of the bahardar for the week. He provides them with food and lodging. He wants to be sure about the presence of his crewmen coming from distant places. Moreover, he requires considerable man power for the last minute preparation. Another important consideration seems to come to play in this connection. The crewmen on share system are close kin and belong to the same village as that of the bahardar who can thus assume common social sentiment with them. In the case of salaried staff the members are usually outside the bond of close kin and territorial sentiment. So, it seems probable that the seven days' participation in rituals and as guests in the household of the bahardar helps to build up a sense of moral community even prior to their departure for the fishing ground for about four months.

It is worth mentioning here that as in share system the loss and profit is equally borne by all the members, there is a tendency for minimising the cost by joint endeavour, whereas in salary system the loss and profit of the business is borne by the bahardar alone and the other crewmen enjoy their fixed salary and free food and lodging according to the contract.

* Khana is a mythical heroine, thought to be a great astrologer. Many of her

Prior to their departure the following three *pujas* (rituals) are to be performed in the house of the bahardar :

(i) *Shani Puja*

It is performed on the Saturday preceding to their departure with fruits and flowers. Generally all the members try to join the celebration. The bahardar must keep fasting while the other crewmen may or may not do so.

One black earthen pot with a plantain is placed in the courtyard in the evening. The caste priest performs the worship and a printed leaf-let, known as *shanir pachali*, is read out. Fruits and flowers are offered in the name of the temperamental deity, Shani, to avert any danger in the sea.

(ii) *Satya Narayan Puja*

The deity Narayan is also propitiated on this occasion with fruits and flowers by the caste priest.

An earthen pot is placed with a cocoanut over it. A leaf-let, locally known as *satya narayaner panchali*, is read out in rhythmic tune. The bahardar remains fasting till the ritual is completed. At the end of the ritual all are presented with *prasad* (offerings) and *Kirtan* (songs depicting the honour of the lord Hari) songs are sung.

(iii) *Ganga Puja*

The female deity Ganga is the most important one for the fisherfolk. Their life and success in fishing depend on her grace. So she is propitiated by all the bahardars in one way or other on the day previous to their departure from their natal village. Those who had made special vows may sacrifice goats while others worship with fruits and flowers.

On this occasion the bahardar including all his crewmen remains fasting till the worship is completed. The service of the caste-priest is sought for the purpose. An earthen pot filled with water is placed in the name of the deity Ganga. Locally this pot is known as *Gangar ghat*. The pot is covered with a red *gamchha* (napkin) and a cocoanut is placed over it. But no part of the fishing gear is presented there. The worshipping articles are clarified butter, honey, sun dried rice, flowers and *tulsi* (basil). Towards the end of the ceremony *homa* rite (offering in fire with incantations) is performed by the bahardar with the help of the priest. After the completion of *homa* all should get the *santir jal* (consecrated water) from the priest and a mark is made with the ashes of the *homa* on the forehead of all the crewmen and the bahardar. On the completion of the ceremony a feast is given by the bahardar to all his crewmen. Some friends and relatives are also invited on the occasion.

In the morning of the day of the voyage five married women bring one *baran dala* to the river side. After this they smear the two ends of the boat with mustard oil and sprinkle some water over it. It is a symbolic bathing ritual of the boat—the presiding deity of which is believed to be a female goddess Kastha Devi. Then the two ends of the boat are smeared with vermilion and garlanded. Some paddies are strewn over it and water mixed with turmeric (thought to be auspicious and symbolically representing water mingled gold and silver, i.e., *sona rupa jal*) is sprinkled with tulsi leaves and blades of grass. The married women then make some *uluddhani* sound and perform *arati* (a process of appeasing the deity) with the earthen lamps. At the end of the ceremony they salute the boat and sweets are distributed to all those who are present over there and this brings to the end of the boat worshipping ceremony.

Some of the fisherfolk of Chittagong carry this *baran dala* with them to the fishing ground and bring it back home when they return to their natal village at the end of the fishing season. It is believed that this *baran dala* has the power to bring good luck.

The bahardar then brings the earthen pot which was installed in the name of Ganga on the previous day and carry it over his head to the boat raising *hariddhani* (sacred slogan) in the name of different deities like Ganga, Kali, Banadevi, Kasthadevi, Gaji (a Muslim pir), etc.. All the crewmen join in that slogan. Some of the crewmen also follow the bahardar carrying the net. In some cases the fisherfolk immerse the *ghat* (pot) installed in the name of Ganga after the worship and carry with them to the fishing ground a separate *ghat*, known as *mangal ghat* (auspicious pot), of the *baran dala* and smear the two ends of the boat with curd. A banana plant is also placed near the front part of the boat where the *baran dala*, *mangal ghat*, etc., are placed.

Before the earthen pot and the net are taken over to the boat, they sprinkle some water over the boat and over their heads in the name of Ganga to avert any ill luck. The pot is placed near the prow of the boat by the bahardar and he does not return home till the end of the voyage. Another point to note is that till the pot is placed on the boat the bahardar remains fasting and the pot is carried within the auspicious period, selected in consultation with the almanac. However, the bahardar stays in the boat and the other crewmen bring all the required articles. All the crewmen, before boarding the boat, sprinkle some water over their heads and over the two ends of the boat and jointly raise slogans in the name of the deities mentioned above and start for their voyage.

They generally prefer to start in the morning according to the tide or ebb of the river. But if the tide or the ebb does not correspond to the auspicious time for journey, they stick to the auspicious time and paddle a few yards off the shore and wait there for the tide or ebb whichever is necessary to minimise physical exertion.

Before leaving for their fishing ground they must purchase some scaled fish without bargaining over it. This scaled fish (*amis-mach*) is thought to be auspicious. No ritual is otherwise connected to this fish. It is just purchased to be consumed by the crewmen.

Besides these, the village and the family deities are also propitiated prior to their departure, when all the crewmen take active interest. What seems to be important is that through all these ritualistic activities a 'moral community' begins to grow up even in their natal village which becomes essential for sustaining an unisexual transient society in their fishing ground.

The fishing units from Bihar cannot come directly by boat to the fishing ground and so do not perform any boat worshipping ceremony in their natal village. But they worship their family and village deities on this occasion and the bahardar leaves the village with some of his crewmen in an auspicious time and date giving full instructions to his other crewmen. The residence of the *mahajan* or the financier in Uluberia (Dist. Howrah) is the meeting place of all the fishing units of this region, where the final arrangement is made. It is the moral obligation of the mahajan to house them all on this occasion. The mahajan becomes solely responsible for all the articles taken on credit by his fishing parties.

Those who could not perform the rituals in their natal village, as described earlier, perform the rituals of the boat in a shortened form by themselves obviously without the help of any women as no women accompany any of the fishing units.

On their way to the fishing ground the ghat (earthen pot) which was installed in the name of Ganga is worshipped with sweets and incense is burnt thrice daily—first early in the morning, then at mid-day and lastly in the evening. The bahardar or any other person may perform this rite. A *Kashar* (bell-metal plate) is also beaten on this occasion to scare away evil spirits. No other ritual is performed in the boat on their way. But in case of any danger vows are made in the name of Ganga and she is propitiated accordingly. It is also believed that the deities sometimes appear in dream to any one of the fortunate crewmen who lives in *suddhachar* (austerity). The deity is believed to give some indications regarding the success or failure in fishing or about any imminent danger or of her desire to have any special propitiation and the like and she is appeased accordingly.

Besides this, about one and half a mile off Kakdwip a special offering is made in the *Satamukhi* Ganga where the current is very strong and where there is every possibility of disaster of the boats.

In every unit there are at least two boats. A little quantity of sweets, sun dried rice and a few coins, two duck's eggs smeared with vermilion are

first offered in the name of Ganga near the ghat, installed in her name, by the manjhi (boatman). Then the offerings are thrown into the Satamukhi Ganga from the boats of the fishing unit by their respective manjhis. Some also offer head hair on this occasion. Some orthodox *vaisnavites* (Krishna panthi) do not offer any duck's egg. What seems to be important here is that in case of danger beyond any human control, rational activities are overshadowed by ritualistic performances up to a certain limit.

Setting up of Khunti

The temporary establishment on the shore is known as *Khunti*. It is believed that in every fishing ground there is one presiding deity which is known by different names in different fishing grounds, viz., *Badar Shaheb* (a Muslim *pir* in Chittagong), *Bana Devi* in Frasergunj, Bakkhali and Jambudwip, *Kopil Baba (muni)* at Sagardwip, *Haji Saheb* (a Muslim *pir*) at Rasulpur, *Naikali* in Digha area, etc. The discovery of Jambudwip for establishing Khunti was made by a group of bahardars who had their Khunti previously at Frasergunj. As the Jambudwip is in proximity to Frasergunj the same presiding deity, Bana Devi, is thought to be hovering over the said island. Same is the case with Bakkhali.

On reaching the shore an earthen pot filled with water is installed outside the Khunti area in the jungle under a tree in the name of the presiding deity of the locality. There it is propitiated with sweets and fruits by the bahardar himself. The pot and the tree are marked with vermilion and incense is burnt. A few hairs of the bahardar are offered there. The other members of the unit may also offer their hair as vows for the safety of their life. They all remain fasting till the end of the ceremony. After taking their bath they all go round the tree seven times and then the bahardar performs certain rituals on behalf of the crews on the first day of their arrival. It has nothing to do with better catch, but is done just for the safety of their life. Before performing this ceremony no one should do anything on the shore. At the beginning and end of the ceremony slogans (*hariddhani*) are raised by all the members of the party in the name of the presiding deity. At the end of the ceremony sweets and other prasad are distributed to all and kirtan songs are sung for sometimes.

Then the shrine for Ganga is established within the Khunti area. A small hut like structure is made and different deities are installed inside. The door of the hut must face the south which is thought to be the direction of the original abode of the Ganga.

Remaining fasting the bahardar carries the pot with water and install in the name of Ganga. Then some other pots are installed in the name of other deities. These deities are propitiated by the bahardar himself with clarified butter, honey, vermilion, sun dried rice, banana, molasses, cocoanut, particular variety of pulse (*kala maskalai*) and one new napkin. A

cocoanut is placed on the pot. Two banana and a tulsi plant, which are thought to be auspicious, are also planted there. Special worships are also performed on this occasion for the safety of the boats.

The crewmen remain fasting till the worship is completed. At the close of the ceremony some of the bahardars offer a few strings of hair from their heads in the name of Ganga and salute there by stretching their body on the floor and sob to seek the blessings of the goddess. This sort of sobbing may also be noticed on other occasions too, like annual worship of Ganga. Such intense devotion is seldom noticed in the case of agriculturists where the life and the yield are not so much insecure as in the case of fishing. After all these rites other crewmen also salute the goddess and distribute the prasada (offerings) to all present and kirtan songs are sung communally in which the members of other units are also invited.

Goddess Ganga is invariably represented by an earthen pot, while some other deities like Gaji, Banadevi, etc., are represented by earthen mounds or earthen pots. Many other deities like Kali, Narayan, Ganesh, Durga, Mahadev, etc., are represented by printed pictures. But the Muslim *pir* (Gaji) must be placed separately though under the same shed. In some cases an earthen pot may also be installed by the side of the one representing Ganga.

In Bakkhali a shrine of Badar Saheb (a Muslim *pir*) is represented by a flat earthen mound in a separate hut by the side of that of Ganga. The presiding deity of the fishing ground is Badar Saheb and as almost all the bahardars of Bakkhali are from Chittangong, they have installed the same presiding deity connected with their economic life even when they have settled down in West Bengal after partition. The door of the hut of Badar Saheb faces east and he is propitiated once a day in the evening and twice on every *dasami* (tenth day of every lunar fortnight) day—in the morning and evening with sweets. Vermilion is studiously avoided in propitiating Badar Saheb.

On the north eastern side of the Jambudwip, the fisherfolk of West Bengal proper have established their khunti called *Khamar*. They have open shrines where different sets of deities like *Baba Saheb* (a Muslim *pir*) *Bisalaxmi*, *Bana bibi*, *Kalurai* and *Dakshinrai* are represented by earthen mounds. The mounds for *Kalurai* and *Dakshinrai* are placed a little apart from the other three mounds, though in the same line. A wooden pole, representing the club of *Baba Saheb*, is also planted vertically by the side of the earthen mound representing the deity. It may be noted here that the two deities, *Baba Saheb* and *Bisalaxmi* (a female deity riding on a tiger), are highly esteemed by the fisherfolk of West Bengal. All of them should offer their worship in the main shrines of *Baba Saheb* on the western bank of the Hijli and *Bisalaxmi* on the eastern bank of the Dhaballat. There are permanent structures and regular worships are performed. A system of

panda (jajmani system) organisation has also developed there. These *pandas* are Modak by caste, bearing the surname Gure. They have their fixed *jajmans* (clients). It is the duty of the *pandas* to make necessary arrangements for the worship and to look after the comforts of their clients. Though Hindu *pandas* make arrangements for the worship of *Baba Saheb*, who is also known as *Machandari Saheb*, actual offerings are made to the *pir* by a Muslim *Fakir* (mendicant).

It is worth mentioning here that in their original fishing grounds in East Bengal, the East Bengal fisherfolk were not aware of the deity *Banabibi*, which is very common in southern Sundarban area. But when they came over to southern Sundarban area for their fishing ground, the Muslim suffix *bibi* has been replaced by the Hindu suffix *devi* and she is worshipped as such. But the fisherfolk of West Bengal have not changed her in any way and are worshipping her as *Banabibi*.

The *Kalurai* and *Dakshinrai* who are common deities in southern Sundarban area are not accepted in the Khunti of East Bengal fisherfolk. However, the West Bengal fisherfolk place not only representatives of these in the Khunti, they have also been taken and installed in some of their native villages as well. Now they have become members of their village deities. It seems that the nature and function of the deities are the main consideration for acceptance or rejection of a particular deity. It is believed that the *Banadevi* is the presiding deity of the poisonous snakes, tigers and like other wild animals which infest the area of Sundarban. So all the fisherfolk feel it necessary to appease her, for, they have to collect firewood from the jungle quite often when they are in the fishing ground. But *Kalurai* and *Dakshinrai* are not so malevolent in nature as *Banadevi*. We find the position of *Banadevi* quite high both in the Khunti of East Bengal and West Bengal in this area.

After the establishment of the shrine all other arrangements of the Khunti are made. From this day the shrine is worshipped thrice a day. First, early in the morning before starting any work, a member of the unit should beat the bell metal plate, known as *kansa* and thereby wake up the deity. After that the members who are on the shore may start their day's work. The second worship is performed at noon before the sun leans towards the west. Some sweets and water are offered and incense is burnt. The third worship is performed just by beating the bell metal plate and burning incense when the sun just sets in. After this the incense burner is taken round the Khunti area and also brought into the store room along with beating of the bell metal plate. The idea behind is to drive away the evils of the Khunti.

Besides these on every *dasami* day Ganga is propitiated somewhat elaborately with cocoanut, sugar, sagu or sun dried rice, melted butter and

banana. In some cases the bahardar offers his head's hair on this occasion. It may be noted here that due to their long association with the sea, they have developed an intimate knowledge of their immediate environment. They are fully aware of the fact that on dasami day the tide and ebb come to their lowest level and begin to increase from this day and thereby increasing their catch. So to ensure and greet the ensuring bumper period they try to appease Ganga a little more elaborately on this day. But due to excessive pressure of work, it is not always possible to maintain the actual timings of worship. As a matter of fact, in Bakkhali, where the units are more commercialised, they do not perform the worship at noon. They have gone so far as to defer even for a few days the annual Ganga worship from the scheduled sacred date according to the almanac i.e., the last day of the months of Paus (December-January) if it falls on high tidal period. It is due to the fact that if the tide is high, the possibilities for catch is also high during that period. So if worship is performed during high tidal period, the crewmen will be in a festive mood and will be reluctant to work on net and it would result in a great economic loss. Here the rational idea seems to be dominant one in view of economic consideration.

Economic rationality of the fisherfolk is also reflected in their frank statements that vows, performing of rituals and kirtan songs alone cannot give better catch, nor can it bring sweet water in their shallow wells to quench their thirst.

Vows, etc., are also made more earnestly in case of any imminent danger in the sea or repeated damage to the wooden poles holding the net when set in the sea. Ganga is propitiated with great devotion when the desired beneficial results follow.

Once the shrine is established, it is very sacredly maintained all through the fishing season. But as the fisherfolk of West Bengal proper return to their natal villages once in a fortnight, they reconstruct the earthen mounds, referred to above, when they come back to the fishing ground again.

The whole of the khunti area is considered sacred and various taboos are connected with it. No one should commit any nuisance within that area. Even after taking their meal they do not wash their mouth and hand within the khunti. Pairing of nails and cropping of hairs are also tabooed within the khunti. Boiling of dirty clothings is not also allowed within the area. Even wild pigs, which are in abundance in the island, are not allowed to be cooked within the khunti for fear of pollution. So some of them take it in the boat. Further, it was observed that once the catch is spread within the khunti area for drying, they are not taken again for personal or others' consumption, nor can those be sold fresh till completely dried.

Besides the shrine, the store-room (golaghar) is also considered sacred.

On the day of its construction some incense is burnt in that area and in the shrine of Ganga. The golaghar is also generally constructed a little apart from the kitchen lest it is polluted. In the evening some water of the Ganga is sprinkled in it and a lamp kindled as is done in the shrine of Ganga.

All these taboos seem to be the outcome of the insecurity of life in that isolated island, particularly, when they go out for fishing in the vast sea. Again, through all these observances they get additional charm and a taste for variety in life beyond involvement in the routine of techno-economic activities.

First net setting

To spot out a zone for setting the net requires a lot of experience and knowledge of environment. When the spot is selected, the boat and the net, with all its accessories including the apparatus necessary for setting the net, are ritually purified. They are stacked near the shrine of Ganga where worship is performed with flowers and sweets and incense is burnt by bahardar himself. All the fishing gears are marked with vermilion. The two ends of the boat are also smeared with vermilion and mustard oil. At the narrower end of the funnel shaped net turmeric, vermilion, some blades of grass and tulsi leaves are tied in a bundle.

After the worship in the shrine the fishing gears with all the accessories are carried over to the boat with a slogan in the name of Ganga, Kastha Devi, Banadevi, Kali, Gaji, etc. One of the fellow crewmen follows these articles with incense burner beating a bell metal plate. Conch-shells, if available, are also blown on this occasion. Some fishermen, particularly those from Chittagong, are also inclined to place an earthen pot (mangal-ghat) at the prow of the boat.

Reaching the boats all of them sprinkle some water over the two ends of the boats and over their heads five or seven times and then all the articles are stacked in the boats. Slogans are again raised in the name of the deities mentioned above when the boats start.

When they reach the spot selected for setting the net, some of the worshipped articles, like flowers, sweets, etc., are thrown by the manjhi into the sea in the name of Ganga and slogans in the name of different deities mentioned above are raised and repeated time and again till all the work is completed.

Before dropping the net it is firmly tied with two vertically fixed wooden posts. The manjhi sprinkles some water from his mouth into the open end of the net to avert the evils of the sea which may damage the net. Some of the manjhis also throw duck's egg, marked with vermilion, into the net at

the time of dropping it. Some of the orthodox bahardars repeat the same ritual whenever they select a new spot for setting the net even in the same season.

Further, it may be noted here that to avert the reaction of salinity on the net some preservatives are applied from time to time. The concept is that when boiled preservatives are applied, the net should be treated as new and rituals connected with setting up of a net is repeated. Again, there is a strong belief that if any of the crewmen in the unit feels that the net should be treated with preservatives, his desire is to be fulfilled, lest any ill luck comes, even at the cost of some economic loss.

To apply preservatives to a new net some auspicious day is to be selected. At the time of applying preservatives five betel leaves and five betel nuts are to be left over the net marked with vermilion.

It may be noted here that the fisherfolk of Noakhali are not much accustomed to drying the fish, while it is common among the fisherfolk of Chittagong. As a result the fisherfolk of Noakhali return to their villages in East Pakistan every day to dispose off the fresh fish in the market. Thereby they maintained their family life in some way or other and their females also used to take active part in fishing rituals. On the first day of their voyage the females used to greet the net and all its accessories with *baran dala* and mark the net with vermilion. Some puffed rice (*Khai*) was also strewn over the net and the residue distributed amongst the children.

The first catch

It has also been reported by the fisherfolk of Noakhali that in East Pakistan when the first catch of the season arrives at the shore, it is greeted by five married women with a *baran dala*. The fish baskets are touched with it and auspicious sound (*ulu*) from the mouth and obeisance are made to them. Some quantity of fish is ceremonially taken in the room by them to be consumed later on. The rest of the fish may be sold to the mahajan for cash money. First of all some betel leaves and turmeric are purchased with that and some amount of the money of the first sale is left apart for the performance of Ganga Puja at the end of the fishing season. In Chittagong the best fish of the first day's catch has to be offered in the name of Badar Saheb. And when the boat with the dry fish reaches the village of bahardar, married women use to greet the boat with *baran dala* which is to be kept in the boat for one night. On the following day the dry fish is handed over to the mahajan. The share of the Badar Saheb is collected by a Muslim Fakir. But here in West Bengal those who appease Badar Sahab keep a large fish from the first day's catch, completely dried with a mark on it hanging in the store room. Sometimes in the evening an earthen lamp is also kindled there. At the end of the fishing season the fish is sold and the money so realised is spent for performing the worship, celebrated at that time.

Those, who do not have any shrine for Badar Saheb, also keep a large quantity of the first day's catch in the store room in the name of Ganga and this is sold at the end of the fishing season and is utilised for her worship. Besides this, here in West Bengal, the first day's catch is also greeted in their khunti (also known as *khamar*) by the crewmen, particularly by the bahardar and the manjhi with incense. Some incense is also burnt in the store room after sprinkling some water of the sea (identified as the water of the sacred river of the Ganga) before storing the first day's catch. Some quantity of the fish is sold to the mahajan for cash. It is later on utilised to propitiate Ganga at the end of the fishing season. No one is allowed to take any fish from the first day's catch or any other article from the khunti on that day outside the khunti area. Again, the first day's catch must not be fried in oil or smoked in fire, for, they say 'when mother Ganga has given us the fish, we should not burn it', although it can be boiled in water.

The first challan

In some of the fishing units, particularly, in the units on share basis, none of the crewmen crop hair, pair nails, clean clothings with soap nor do they use soap or oil for personal use or fry their catch in oil, smoke it till the first *challan* (consignment) is made. This custom is strictly observed by the bahardar and the general manager of the khunti, known as *khuntir manjhi*.

For the first challan and also in the subsequent challans some auspicious day is chosen. Five basketful of dried fish are kept near the shrine of Ganga. Some sea water is sprinkled over the basket. They are also marked with vermilion. The bahardar keeps fasting and after taking his bath worships Ganga with fruits and sweets. Some of the bahardars also make vows by offering a few strings of hairs from their head in the name of Ganga. Incense is burnt and bell metal plates are beaten. After the worship the bahardar first carries one of the baskets to the boat. This is followed by the other members of the khunti. One of the crewmen also carries the incense burner and beats the bell metal plate all along the way up to the boat and slogans in the name of the different deities are also raised.

When the bahardar returns after the first challan, he brings with him some sweets and fruits to propitiate Ganga. Members of other units, particularly the bahardars and the managers, are invited on this occasion. In case of good catch a feast is also given to the fellow members, friends and relatives of the vicinity.

After every challan Ganga is propitiated with fruits and sweets. The members of the unit are generally entertained with some special food on this occasion.

Winding up of the khunti

It is claimed that the fisherfolk of Rangabali area of Chittagong use to get indication in dream when the khunti is to be wound up. Ganga appears in dream in different forms. The bahardar is supposed to have a special power to read the implication of the dream. If so implied, he winds up the khunti even if there is sufficient catch or its possibilities, for otherwise some ill luck might fall on his unit. However, when these fisherfolk settled down in West Bengal this feature is not observed. Here the fisherfolk wind up the khunti just at the beginning of southern wind when the sea becomes rough and when humidity increases usually by the second week of February. The main consideration is that with the increase of humidity it is not possible to dry the catch. But at the same time it is said that when they feel an yearning for their family during the later part of the fishing season, it is not wise to continue the fishing operation any more, for, some ill luck might follow. So they decide to wind up the khunti. It is also observed that once a bahardar comes to a decision of early winding up of the khunti, it tends to break down the morale of the members of other units too. The other bahardars around the fishing ground also begin to wind up their respective khuntis. They feel disheartened at the breaking up of the component units of the transient society of the fisherfolk.

When the decision to wind up the khunti is taken, a flag is hoisted there. Sometimes the name of goddess Ganga is written on the flag and all other arrangements to pack up their belongings are also made. Those who have made vows to the deities of other area, like Ban Devi of Frasergunj, go there to offer their worship. On the previous day *kirtan* songs are sung till late hours of night.

On the day of their return voyage for their natal village Ganga is again propitiated with fruits and sweets by the bahardar in the shrine of the khunti. All the crewmen remain fasting till the worship is completed. The money, that was kept apart from the realisation of first day's catch, is utilised for this purpose. When the worship is completed some of the bahardars carry the pots installed in the name of Ganga, on their heads and immerse them in the sea, while a few others leave them as they are in the shrines. Once the pot is immersed none can pass a night in the khunti any more. Before boarding the boat everybody sprinkles some water on the boat and also over his head. Slogans in the name of deities are raised from time to time and incense is burnt and bell metal plate is kept beating all along.

No other elaborate ritual is performed on the way. But every morning and evening incense is burnt and bell metal plate is beaten. *Kirtan* songs and recitations of verses from sacred books are also performed every day to break the monotony of the boat journey. Further, it is seen that a few bahardars of the same locality ply their boats together both in their first as

well as in their return voyage. That also breaks the monotony of their journey and also gives them a sense of security to face the dangers on the way.

The bahardars return to their natal villages with the crewmen if that is directly communicable by boat, e.g., in Tribeni or Kakdwip area. When they reach there, five married women greet them with *baran dala*. There they generally perform a Ganga and a Satyanarayan Puja with the help of their caste priest with fruits and sweets and entertain the crewmen. Those who have vows may also sacrifice goat in the name of Ganga.

But the bahardars of Bihar cannot directly return to their natal village by boat with all their crewmen. They perform the last ritual of the fishing operation at Uluberia, their starting point. There they offer their worship in the name of the important local deities, e.g., Manasha and entertain their crewmen. The cost of this last entertainment and the ritual is borne by the bahardar himself. But the entertainment of the crewmen is not always possible to perform by the bahardar if the catch is not sufficient enough. In that case the crewmen—both on share and on salary basis—extend their helping hands to arrange all the luggage for the next season no matter whether they would function in the same unit or not.

The performance of worship and giving a feast or giving presents, like clothings, dried fish etc. at the close of the fishing season to his crewmen have also a prestige value to the bahardar. Besides this, his good behaviour and attitude towards his crewmen also help him in recruiting his personnel, either new or old, for the next fishing season. For, it is but obvious that in such a transient society where they are to live for about four months interpersonal relation is much counted.

Annual Ganga Puja

So long we were discussing the rituals connected with the different stages of fishing operation. Besides these, the annual Ganga Puja (worship) is performed in every fishing unit on the day of *Makar-sankranti*, i.e., on the last day of the month of Paus (December-January).

It was found that in some areas, such as Frasergunj or Bakkhali, where the khuntis are being established for at least seven or eight years in addition to the performance of Ganga Puja in their respective *khunti*, a communal Ganga Puja is also performed with subscriptions from all of them.

The fishing units in Jambudwip are being established since only 1964. There the different units have not yet been co-ordinated to form a single ritual unit for this purpose and the annual Ganga Puja is performed only in their respective khuntis. But even within this short period some of the

bahardars have started thinking of performing a community Ganga Puja there to relieve the monotony of the island life, if not for the sake of prestige.

In Bakkhali the whole management of the community Ganga Puja is in the hands of bahardars. But in Frasergunj the management is in the hands of the officials of the directorate of fisheries, Government of West Bengal. Some of the local influential persons, irrespective of caste, like Brahman Kayastha, Mahishya, Pod, etc., also participate in it. Some of the bahardars from different fishing grounds are also represented in the managing committee.

The Muslims do not take any active part in these rituals, though they subscribe to it and attend the ceremony. Some of the energetic Muslim young fishermen dance in the cultural functions connected with the annual Ganga Puja festival held at Frasergunj.

The subscription for this joint endeavour is raised from all the fishing units from different fishing grounds, like Jambudwip, Bakkhali, Kalisthan and Frasergunj. Further, it has been observed that funds accruing from settlement of disputes between the fishing personnel are also utilised in his annual Ganga Puja.

The place of the establishment of the khunti is not far off from the famous *Sagar Mela* (fair held at Sagardwip), held on the day of *Makar-sankranti*. It may be noted friends and relatives of the unit members who want to visit the *Sagar Mela* on pilgrimage also attend the annual Ganga Puja in the fishing unit and thereby minimise the mental tension of separation of their dear ones. The ceremonial kin, about whom further discussion will be made later on, are also invited on his occasion. Invitation and entertainment of the inter-khunti members, particularly close friends, relatives and bahardars continue for a few days even after the day of worship. The festive and warm atmosphere in the fishing units on this occasion cheers up their otherwise home-sick mind.

On the day before the worship the shrine of the goddess Ganga is thoroughly cleaned and decorated. All the bahardars try to purchase the image of the deity from Frasergunj or Kakdwip or such other neighbouring township. The goddess is represented by a female form with four hands riding on a *makar* (an imaginary sea animal). Out of the seventeen units in Jambudwip only six could secure the image. It may be noted here that the specialists of image making are traditionally Patua by caste, although some local Mahishyas are also moving into this field. But there are not many in Frasergunj and the bahardars also do not care to place their orders in time. Worshipping an image has a prestige value and it must be procured if there is a vow in that respect. Some of the bahardars or the managers of the khunti are found to try very hard up to the last day to get an image for their khunti.

What seems to be important in this context is that their decision to bring the image at the eleventh hour largely depends on the volume of catch which they cannot foresee earlier and which they believe is due to the grace of the almighty Ganga. Those who cannot get the image, perform the worship on earthen pots, installed in the name of the deity.

In the morning of the worship the bahardar carries a new earthen pot marked with vermilion and an *am-sarat* (mango twig) in its mouth, in a procession singing kirtan songs to the sea to bring water facing south, believed to be the direction of the abode of the deity Ganga, with the caste priest reciting incantations. One of the crewmen goes on sprinkling water from another pot with the idea of purifying the whole track of the procession. He goes on singing kirtan songs up to the shrine of the khunti where the bahardar installs the earthen pot in the name of Ganga.

The bahardar after taking his bath clads himself with a new *dhoti* (loin cloth) and performs the worship with the help of the caste priest. The other crewmen also gather there. They go on singing kirtan songs althrough.

The worship of Ganga is performed according to the Hindu scriptures. First of all worship of *pancha-devata* (five gods) viz., Ganesh, Surya, Visnu, Siva and Durga is performed. It is followed by the worship of Ganga. Homa (offering to sacred fire) is also performed with melted butter, etc. At the end of the worship *anjali* (offerings of flowers) is performed and salutations are made by all. In addition the bahardar offers a few strings of hair from his head in the name of Ganga as a token of his great reverence. No part of the net or of any fishing gear is placed before the deity or the pot installed in her name. But at the close of the ceremony some *santirjal* (chanted water) is sprinkled overall the fishing gears and in every nook and corner of the khunti to purify them all.

The offerings are in general fruits and flowers. Goat may also be sacrificed or let loose after worship if such vows are made. The colour of the goat depends according to the vows.

It was found that one bahardar in Jambudwip once lost his net three years back. He made vows in the name of Ganga to let loose a goat for three consecutive years and the last performance was made during the annual Ganga Puja festival in his khunti in 1968. After bathing the goat, its horns and head were smeared with turmeric and vermilion. A few leaves of tulsi, wood apple and blades of grass were tied round its neck. The bahardar got hold of the goat, recited some incantations as directed by the caste priest and thereby offered in the name of the deity. Some quantity of rice and a few coins were also tied round the neck of the goat with a new *gamchha* (apkin). Then the goat was just raised a little from the ground by the bahardar and was touched to the earthen pot installed in the name of the

city and finally it was let loose when anybody, except the bahardar or his direct descendants, like sons, etc., could catch hold of it and make good use of it. But it could not be slain inside the *khunti*, nor could it be cooked there, although there was no bar to taking it in boats or such other places. At the *khunti* area was polluted as the bahardar himself was a Vaisnavite.

Some superstitious beliefs are also connected with this day. It is believed that the deity herself moves in the sea with her followers as has been pointed out earlier.

Rituals of those who do not establish any khunti on the shore

The type of fishing gears, viz., gill net or hook and line are operated by the fisherfolk of this category. They dispose off their catch fresh. They are mainly the Malo (East Bengal refugees) and the Rajbanshi. These fishing gears help them to keep their catch fresh as they can be removed from time to time, whereas, those who operate bag net having their *khunti* on the shore where they dry up their catch, have to wait to remove their catch from their net till the end of tide or ebb and by that time the whole catch becomes a lump due to the strong current of the sea.

As the fisherfolk of the other category, i.e., the Malo or the Rajbanshi do not have any shelter on the shore, they do not perform any ritual on land, nor do they have any shrine over there. Their rituals are circumscribed within relatively limited activities compared with those who dry up their catch as described earlier. Moreover, their limited number of rituals may also be ascribed to the fact that they do not stay in one place for the whole fishing season. They move from one fishing ground to the other and as such come in contact with new sets of people in different places as also dealers of fresh catch. Again, about once a fortnight they go home, as is done by the original fisherfolk of West Bengal who dry fish during low tide when the volume of catch decreases. As such it is not unlikely that the fisherfolk of this category have developed a limited number of rituals to form an intense moral community in such a transient society when they have other venues to get their emotional and moral support. They do, however, install their family dieties, Ganga, Kali, etc., and the presiding diety of the fishing ground in the boat itself where incense is regularly burnt, bell metal plates beaten and some sweets offered every morning and evening. Thus it is seen that living in insecurity leads the fisherfolk of both the categories (those who dispose off their catch fresh or those who dry them up) to establish some sort of shrine in their transient abode—either on the boat or on the shore, to get a feeling of security and emotional support.

It was found that one important object of offerings of the Malo is salt, which they consider, to be sugar of the Ganges (sea) and to goddess Ganga only and not to any other deity. It is important to note here that except

salt no other object of offering owes its origin to the sea, river or pond. Even fish, the main object of the fisherfolk, is not offered in their fishing rituals, except in *phur-basani* ceremony when some fresh fishes are strewn over the new net for some magical purposes as described earlier. On the same occasion some conch-shell, an aquatic object, is also offered in the name of Ganga who is believed to be presiding over the sea. It may be noted here that the symbol of married Hindu women in West Bengal is conch-shell bangle and vermilion, so they are also offered to goddess Ganga, although aquatic objects are not a part and parcel of the offerings of fishing rituals. *

Besides the Hindu fisherfolk of this category, one section of the Muslim, known as the Nikari, are also engaged in catching fish with small bag nets with a different technique near the creeks. They dispose off their catch fresh. It may be noted here that the Nikari proper, in general, are fish traders and not fish catchers. But these Nikaris have taken to this profession due to economic pressure. As a result they have lost their social status and are gradually forming an endogamous unit by themselves.

These Muslim fisherfolk also have a limited number of rituals connected with fishing. On the day of starting their voyage, a Muslim *maulabi* (mendicant) is called in to recite passages from *milat-sarif* (a sacred book of the Muslim) and sweets are distributed. Some of the Muslims also do the same thing after their first catch. The same thing may also be repeated when any danger in the sea is overcome and on the last day of winding up of their fishing operation of the season.

The Muslim fisherfolk of Basirhat (24 Parganas) contribute fifty paise per unit for every challan to appease the pir of one Lahul-Amin, popularly known as Aminia Madrasa. The total return of the last catch is also contributed for this pir. One son-in-law of the said *pir-saheb* collects the whole contribution. A fair is held near the residence of the *pir-saheb* from the 13th to the 15th Falgun (February-March) and at Aminia Madrasa from the 17th to the 19th of the same month at Basirhat when many Muslim fisherfolk take active part.

As the Nikaris are traditionally fish traders, their long association with that trade might have led them to contribute generously from their every challan for the welfare of the pir.

Ceremonial kin

It may be mentioned here that it is not always possible for the *bahardars* to carry with them all the belongings to their natal villages when they wind

* But many rituals are connected with fish in Bengal as has been pointed out by Shri T. C. Das in his article 'The Cultural Significance of fish in Bengal' published in *Man in India*, Vol. XI, XII, 1931, 1932.

their khunti. They try to keep some of the luggages in the custody of their friends from among their ceremonial kin who have their permanent habitation in the vicinity of the fishing grounds. To develop such ceremonial or fictional kinship is fairly common among the fisher men, particularly among those who have visited the fishing ground for some years. These ceremonial kinlike *dharma-baba* (father), *ma* (mother), *bhai* (brother), etc., do not necessarily belong to their own caste. Usually a person with fairly good economic status is selected for such relationship and they are often very helpful to the bharadar and other crewmen, when they are in the transient society away from their family life. Reciprocal invitation on ceremonial occasions also give them a touch of family life. Thus they get their emotional and economic support through such *ad-hoc* relationship. These relationships also continue to persist even when they return to their natal villages through association in different spheres of their life.

The development of such ceremonial kinship bondage seems to be situational. The fisherfolk visit the same area, year after year leaving their families in their natal villages. The sympathetic help of some local influential persons sometimes become essential to them and as such it is not unlikely to develop such a ceremonial kinship bondage. If one carefully scrutinises the spatial distribution of these ceremonial kin, it is seen that all of them are influential persons and are located either close to their khunti or near the market centres of the marine fishing complex, like Uluberia or Kakdwip which fall on the route of their voyage and with which they are to keep regular contact throughout the fishing season for the smooth running of their business.

Discussion

Like the agriculturists, who perform many rituals in different stages of their operation, the marine fisherfolk, a specialised component of the peasantry, have also elaborate traditional rituals connected with the different phases of fishing operation. But unlike the agriculturists the marine fisherfolk feel more dependent on the freaks and vagaries of nature. They earn their livelihood from the vast unfavourable open sea where the life is always at stake and the yield is largely beyond any human control. This element of insecurity and uncertainty combined with the unique situation of social deprivation of living away from their family, imparts a tone of urgency and depth to their ritualistic efforts and beliefs.

The fishing units are headed by different leaders. They recruit their personnel from different villages and families, either on share or on salary basis, for about four months. There is, of course, a tendency to form the unit on caste, kin and village basis. They stay in the fishing ground for about four months in a transient society.

In such an insecure way of life in the sea they accept the female deity

Ganga as the presiding deity of the vast sea and is highly revered. Probably the concept of the deity Ganga of the Hindu pantheon, connected with the sacred river Ganga, is projected by the fisherfolk to the sea—the source of their livelihood.

The life in the sea and the catch are believed to be depending on the sweet will of the deity. The fisherfolk tend to present their occupational activity in a fatalistic mode. As long as they are in their fishing ground or engaged in anything connected with fishing, they consider their success and failure in terms of the pleasure and displeasure of the goddess Ganga.

Besides the deity Ganga some other deities, like the presiding deity of the fishing ground or of the wild animals which infest the area, etc. are believed to be affecting their life in the fishing ground are also propitiated by the fisherfolk.

But some rational considerations are also there. Their superstitious beliefs may tolerate economic loss only upto a certain degree after which a rational approach to livelihood activities dominates. They give much emphasis on technological perfection of their fishing gears for better catch. It has been observed that a group of commercialised fisherfolk has also deferred their annual Ganga puja for a few days from the scheduled sacred full moon day when the possibility of the catch was high.

The livelihood activities of the marine fisherfolk, right from sailing out from the natal village for fishing operation, including the preparation of fishing gears, etc. to handing over the catch to the mahajan and winding up of the khunti, etc. at the close of the fishing season, are connected with a series of rituals. But except the annual Ganga puja followed according to the Hindu scriptures, the form and content of the other rituals of the fisherfolk connected with fishing, are not very elaborate. There is also not much difference in the details of the numerous rituals performed on various occasions.

It is interesting to note that the ritual offerings of the fisherfolk are like that of the agriculturists as they are also a component of the same peasant society. No other marine object, except salt which is believed to be the *chini* (sugar) of the Ganges, has yet been ritualised by these fisherfolk.

The minor rituals, performed in their own way by a section of the Muslims, seems also to be due to the insecurity of life and uncertainty of catch. These Muslims do not propitiate any deity like the Hindus, but passages from one of their sacred books are recited and sweets are distributed on important occasions.

The fisherfolk lead an isolated life for about four months in the fishing

ground leaving members of the family, relatives and friends in their natal villages. Under the situation they can hardly absorb themselves solely in catching fish or in such other activities connected with it without participating in any other social life. As a result even when they are isolated from their family life for their economic pursuit, it is but natural that the marine fisherfolk tend to develop a cohesive moral order in their new surrounding through inter-personal behaviour and contextual cultural phenomena, like recital of holy verses from 'sacred' literatures, kirtan and *bhatiali* songs, rituals and other recreational activities to get their emotional support.

The material object of their economic pursuit, *i.e.*, the fishing gears, etc. are visualised as animate object. Thus life infusing ceremony of the fishing gear is performed and a weathered net is termed as *bura jal* (the term *bura* is used as prefix to denote only aged animate object). It is not unlikely that thereby they feel the warmth of their kin in such an isolated fishing ground. The various observances connected with their khunti also give it an esthetic touch.

Their intense urge to get an emotional and moral support is also reflected in the development of the institution of ceremonial kins, no doubt, some economic considerations are also there.

The family life of their village is also projected in some of their regular activities. It is found that while ten or twelve persons jointly pulling a heavy net (about ten or twelve maunds) a rhythmic melodious verse is uttered by them. The content of the song seems to be significant, *viz.* "the mother has served the meal with palatable dishes, so let us hurriedly finish up our work, so that we can enjoy the dishes and the affection of our mother". It is quite obvious that in doing such a heavy work some melodious rhymes minimise the physical exertion and help them to apply the pull at one and the same time. But the content of the rhyme gives us the indication of their urge to project their family life in the transient society where they feel the want of the love and affection of their mother.

To get a little tinge of variety in their isolated monotonous life in the fishing ground a socio-ritual observance, connected with their dead ancestors, is made according to the Hindu scripture on the last day of the month of paus when friends and relatives are also invited from different khuntis.

All these features are more persistent in the case of the fishing units of the East Bengal refugees than those of West Bengal proper. It may be due to the fact that the units of the fisherfolk of West Bengal are more close kin and village oriented. Moreover, they return to their natal village at least once in a fortnight and so their temporary establishments on the shore are not made so elaborate. Cooking, dining, etc. are done on their boat itself. As such they need not build up such a moral community like those from East Bengal.

Thus it is seen that the life activities including various marine fishing rituals are influenced by three major factors, *viz.*,

1. Insecurity of life in the vast open sea.
2. Uncertainty of the yield.
3. Living in a transient society for about four months during the fishing season.

The intensity or degree of reverence to their deities, in general, seems to be felt more by the fisherfolk than is shown by the agriculturists. This feature might be due to the first two factors.

Acknowledgement

The author is indebted to Dr D. K. Sen, Director, Anthropological Survey of India, for giving him the facilities to carry out this investigation and to Shri B. Mukherjee as an incharge of the project. The author also takes the privilege of showing his deep sense of gratitude to Dr S. C. Sinha without whose kind cooperation, valuable suggestions and inspiration although, it would have not been possible to prepare this paper. He is also indebted to all those of the Directorate of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal, particularly to Shri S. B. Maity and Shri P. K. Das, who rendered their kind cooperation during the field investigation and to all his fisherfolk friends who were at Jambudwip.

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