

INDIGENOUS HETEROGENEITY AMONG CHILIKA'S FISHERFOLK: AN INFORMAL BUT EFFECTIVE ARRANGEMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE FISHERY¹

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To an outsider, the terms 'fisher', 'fishermen', or 'fisherfolk' in context of World's second largest brackish water lagoon Chilika may seem to be just a single caste or community primarily practicing fishery for livelihood, but the Chilika lagoon presents a rather interesting though differential social structure² among this community ultimately linked with the sustainability in subsistence fishing.

'Dhibara', 'Kaibarta', or 'Keuta' are the common connotations for Chilika's traditional Odia fisherfolk. They belong to the category of Scheduled Castes(SC). In the recent times there has been a demand from some organizations to exclude these communities from the SC list showing reason that they are not untouchables³; but as (late) Sri Krushnachandra Jena, an aged fisher of Brahmapur village(island) recalled, till few decades before their people were indeed treated like untouchables. However, he said, things changed gradually after 1980s when the commercial prawn culture started flourishing and the upper caste people(who mostly invested in this culture) themselves chose to ignore this traditional distancing (as they had to use the skills of these fisherfolk for their business).

Interestingly however, Chilika's Odia fisherfolk community has several sub-castes, viz. Keuta, Kandara, Khatia, Ghadei, and Karatia, etc.; and we observe that like a division of labour there used to be a division of fishery practices among these sub-castes that ultimately helped balance the pressure of resource exploitation in the lagoon. Like, only two or three of these sub-castes(ex., Keuta and Khatia) were allowed to use nets(made of natural fibres like cotton) for fishing whereas some others(ex., Karatia) were allowed to catch fish only using bamboo-made fish-traps. Open access was available to the lead fisher sub-castes such as the Keuta whereas the Tiara(Ghadei) sub-caste had to exercise its right using long, bamboo traps known as *jaana* (also implying to specified areas as the trap needs to be fixed) or a smaller box-type instrument of bamboo known as *baja*. The net(*jala*) users were otherwise known as '*jalia*'(meaning net-users) to distinguish themselves from other fisher sub-castes, but even among them there was a differential practice that allowed the Keuta to use big nets(traditional) and the Khatia to use the *khadijala*(a basket-type net that has limitations). Big nets can be used in deep waters and to catch even bigger fishes whereas *khadijala* requires a shallow water and is good to catch small & medium size fishes. The Kandara sub-caste used to fish using a reed-made contrivance known as *dhaudi*(good to catch shrimps). The traditional division of fishery practices was so strong that no sub-caste dared to violate the same, and thus on the basis of caste-dominant village systems a particular type of fishing trap was made/available/used in some particular areas and not everywhere. The beauty of this system was that a simultaneous resource use did not exert equal pressure on the resource base in each & every

¹ This is first in the series of NIRMAN's ongoing research study on the socio-ecological crises of Chilika. The study is being led by Bikash Rath. This 1st paper was drafted originally in May 2021 and revised on 18 February 2022. Author contact: bikash1968@gmail.com.

² To understand the complexity, a good reference is Naskar, P.(2018), A Study Of Changing Livelihoods Of Odisha's Coastal Fishing Communities: Reasons And Effects; accessible at [http://www.ijhssi.org/papers/vol7\(6\)/Version-3/C0706031417.pdf](http://www.ijhssi.org/papers/vol7(6)/Version-3/C0706031417.pdf)

³Exclude Keuta, Kaibartya and Dheebbar from SC list', *The Pioneer*, dated 10 June 2019, <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2019/state-editions/---exclude-keuta--kaibartya-and-dheebbar-from-sc-list---.html>

area; rather it was very differential allowing the primary dependents a better access and the secondary dependents(those who also had other options such as wage labour) a secondary access. Some caught fish using nets while some others caught it using small bamboo apparatus. Nets captured higher quantity of all sizes whereas small devices could capture only small quantities of small to medium sizes.



What's more important was the religious approach to subsistence fishing, common to all sub-castes. They all believed that the resource belonged to God, and that since they had to exploit the same to survive hence they must find a balance between their need and their obligation to God. Thus, they adopted a 'net catch' approach, i.e. they used devices or systems that allowed a good scope for the fishes to escape(if they could) the trap; and this way they captured 'what moved in - what moved out= the net capture'. The net capture, even if insufficient, was taken as the God's sanction for the day. They considered their fishing tools/devises to be blessed by goddess Lakshmi who personifies the divine prosperity, and hence maintained certain values that essentially conformed to our modern standards of sustainability as they realized that any unsustainable practice would violate the norms of God⁴.

While the changing times led to the abolition of the age-old social restrictions, the long struggle of Chilika's indigenous fisherfolk for survival assumed in the meantime a critical turn with the encroachment of their resources and rights by the powerful non-fisherfolk. Chilika had already been shrinking for more than a century or so causing a substantial decrease in its productivity, and the non-fishers gradually taking over the lagoon for prawn culture intensified the struggle. Becoming extremely vulnerable, the indigenous fisherfolk could no more rely on their value-based approaches to resource use, and hence abandoning the traditional tools & devices they all adopted modern nylon nets sometimes used as a long-distance barrier traps and sometimes used as a no-escape box trap.

⁴ As explained by Sri Bhaskar Behera of Maleswari Behera Sahi and the villagers of Kholamuhan.

There are some non-Odia fisherfolk known as Nolia who originally belong to the neighbouring state of Andhra. They are a minority in Chilika but are more industrious and also practice marine fishery in the Bay of Bengal which reduces their pressure on the lagoon to some extent. The Odia fisherfolk communities do not prefer to maintain socio-cultural relationships (such as marriage) with them.

Apart from the powerful non-fisherfolk who belong mostly to the upper caste, there are also some lower caste and poor non-fisherfolk (who do not have the fishing rights as their primary occupation has been different) who practice hand fishing in shallow waters. Some local Muslims are also said to have similar practices⁵.

Social restrictions are generalized to be essentially a barrier to human progress, but there are enough examples to counter this generalization. It has already happened in case of lac-based livelihood in Odisha, and now it is happening to fishery-based livelihood in Chilika. And ultimately while Chilika is in danger, its primary stakeholders, the indigenous fisherfolk, are as if nowhere because they might have overcome a social marginalization but under the current pressure of economic marginalization and resource deprivation their decade-long alternative livelihood option of distress migration is also losing its viability under the COVID19 pandemic. No wonder that such conflicts of interest actually resulted in several bloody conflicts on the ground though that could not save the fate of the poor fisherfolk.

⁵ Source: Sri Umakanta Mohanty, Gopinath Jubaka Sangha, Brahmagiri. During a subsequent visit, the author however found that the practice had already been extended to other modes of fishing including net-fishing.