

Fishing Communities in Ancient Indian Civilization: An Analytic Study

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Abstract:

This research paper aims at analysing some narratives from epics which narrate the existence of fishing communities in ancient Indian civilization. Numerous epic sources directly or indirectly declare fishing communities as the ancestors of mankind. Epics like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Matsya- Purana narrate stories of Indian civilization, associated with fishing communities. This research paper intends to analyse some of these narratives in order to see how these narratives depict fishing communities in our glorious civilization.

Key Words: Fishing Communities, Indian Civilization, Epic Sources

INTRODUCTION

Fishing Communities in India remain significant with their tradition and culture. Like any other folk group, their culture includes knowledge, beliefs, and other habits, acquired by them while living and leading their lives. (Taylor: 1)

Fishing communities in many parts of India believe that they are the descendants of deities, sages and races that existed in ancient civilization. Reference to this occupational community in various narratives from epics tends them to believe in this way. These narratives, available in some epics like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Matsya- Purana*, illustrate how this occupational community plays a decisive role in ancient Indian civilization.

Objectives of the Study:

- This study tries to focus on:
- Narratives and Occupational Identity

- Narratives from the *Ramayana*
- Narratives from the *Mahabharata*
- Narratives from the *Matsya-Purana*
- Conclusion

Review of Related Studies:

Authors and scholars have already discussed fishermen's beliefs in their books, articles and research papers. Some authors and scholars have also narrated fishermen's rites and rituals, social customs, performances and festivals in their respective society. Some of such books are as follows:

In *Fishermen and Fishing Ways*, Peter F. Anson narrates folk beliefs of fishing communities of British Isles. Anson also narrates some folk beliefs of the fishermen, living in different parts of the world. Moreover, the author discusses how their lives are dominated by superstitions and religious beliefs and practices,

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available in their society.

Craig T. Palmer explains ritual taboos of fishermen in his work, titled *The Ritual Taboos of Fishermen*. In it, the author narrates the 'anxiety-ritual theory' with reference to the ideas, developed by Bronislaw Malinowski. Based on his questionnaire survey, the author narrates apparent correlation between amount of ritual behavior and extended trip fishing.

Dakhin Kamrup Gaolia Koivarta Gyati Samajor Sangbidhan, a book, edited by Kanank-chandra Das, throws light on social systems, prevailing in the society of the fishermen, living in South Kamrup area of Assam. This book also discusses the role of fishermen's society in settling disputed points. The editor offers a precise note on the society of the fishermen, discussing how their society works for the integrity and social discipline among them.

A detailed study of these books shows that authors and scholars have already focused folk beliefs, rituals and customs of the fishermen, living in different parts of the world. Yet, there is hardly any book or article that reveals narratives from epic sources, describing the existence of the fishermen in ancient civilization. Hence, this research paper may be considered as a maiden effort to analyse some narratives from epics in which fishermen and fish play significant role and form our ancient civilization.

METHODOLOGY

This study relies on primary and secondary sources and brings out a comparative analysis of collected resources.

A. Primary Sources:

Epics like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Matsya - Purana* have been studied in depth in order to observe how some narratives of these epics tell stories about fishermen. After collecting these narratives, field survey has been conducted in some villages and information has been collected from informants

about their association with certain narratives from epic sources. Informants have associated their occupation with two narratives from the *Ramayana*. Similarly, they have associated their occupation with two other narratives from the *Mahabharata* and one from the *Matsya- Purana* that reveal the existence and importance of fishing communities in ancient Indian civilization.

B. Secondary Sources:

Library work has been undertaken in some libraries like Krishnakanta Handique Library, Gauhati University, State Library, Assam and District Library, Guwahati, Assam. Some other narratives have also been collected from field survey and books with a view to gathering knowledge about fishlore and folk life of the fishermen, living in Assam.

Analysis:

Occupational identity of an occupational group may be considered as its life force. The beginning part of this section deals with narratives and occupational identity of fishing communities. Then, this research paper, in this section, offers a detailed description of some narratives that refer to fishermen and their affinity with some kings, sages, deities and races.

A. Narratives and Occupational Identity:

Fishing communities, being a significant occupational community, is characterized by their tradition and culture, available in their respective society. Their tradition and culture form their occupational identity and this identity is based on some narratives, drawn from epic sources. These narratives refer their occupation of catching fish, fishing contraptions, waterbeds and their tutelary gods. Naturally, fishing communities can easily identify themselves with these narratives that help them in glorifying their occupation. Here are some narratives from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and *Matsya- Purana* that declare the existence of fishing communities even in ancient Indian civilization.

Narratives from the Ramayana:

Various narratives in the *Ramayana* deal with relation/affinity of the fishermen and fish with some magnificent kings and sages. Two such narratives are discussed below to see how fishing communities play an important role in our civilization.

a) Narrative of King Janaka and Astabakra:

Janaka, the king of *Mithila*, met *Astabakra* who was a sage. Although young, the sage proved his talent. *Janaka* wanted the sage to prove his widespread talent. The king asked:

***King king supto nimishoti king swijatong na sopati
Kosya shidhyadoyong nasti king swidhegon bordhote***

This means:

‘Who does not close its eyelid when sleeping?
Who does not breathe during birth, who does not have a heart?
Who grows at a great speed?’

Astabakra replies:

***Matsya supte nimishyadong jatong na sopati
Oshmano hridayong nasti, nodi begen bordhote***

This means:

‘The fish closes its eyelid when it is sleeping,
The egg does not breathe during birth, Hard-hearted man is heartless
River stimulates with a great speed’ (Bezbaruah: 73)

This narrative, as stated above, proves that fish is always considered as a strange creature that does not close its eyelid even though it is sleeping. This reference also proves that fish fascinates human life from the beginning of human civilization. In this way, fish, an integral part of the occupational life of the fishermen, finds a significant place in ancient civilization.

B) Narrative of King Bhagiratha and Ganga:

Ganga is considered by fishing communities as their mother. They believe that the river *Ganga* is the embodiment of goddess

Ganga that nurtures their life and occupation. Several myths and narratives go on to explain how this river, personified as the mother of fishing communities, came to this earth. One such narrative is as follows:

King *Sagara*, the mighty king of *Ajodhya*, decided to perform horse sacrifice. A horse was selected for the purpose. But, it was stolen. The king was furious at the loss of the horse. He asked his sons to go and search for it. They could not find the horse on the earth. So they went to the nether world. Finally, they found it standing near *Kapil*, a sage known for his austerity. The sons of *Sagara* thought that as the horse was standing near the sage, it must have been stolen by him. So they charged him of theft. Being falsely accused, the sage was furious. He burnt all the sons to ashes by his glance.

King *Sagara* was worried for his sons as they had not returned. Finding no clue about them, he sent his grandchild *Angsuman* in search of his missing sons. *Angsuman* went to the nether world and saw the ashes of the mortal bodies. He was upset thinking that the souls of the deceased could not achieve heavenly solace. At that time, *Sumati*, the brother of *Garurh*, appeared before him and informed that the souls of the dead would achieve heavenly solace if their ashes were purified with holy water of the *Ganga*, the river goddess who dwelt in heaven. *Angsuman* informed this to king *Sagara*. The king was terribly upset at this and succumbed to death very soon, thereby failing to bring the water of the holy river to purify ashes of his sons. After his death, *Angsuman* became the king of *Ajodhya*. He was succeeded by *Dilip*. Both these kings failed to bring the river to the ashes of their dead ancestors. *Bhagiratha* became the king after them and he decided to bring the river goddess for the purification of the souls of his great grandfathers. He pursued a long course of austere penance. Finally, *Brahma* appeared before him and asked what he wanted. The king informed the deity that he wanted to bring goddess *Ganga* to the

underworld to purify the souls of his dead great grandfathers. *Brahma* fulfilled the desire of *Bhagiratha*. In this way, *Ganga*, came to the underworld to sprinkle water upon the dead. On her way, she purified the earth too. In the words of Griffith, a reputed scholar of Indology:

‘Soon as the flood their dust bedewed,
Their spirits gained beatitude,
And all in heavenly bodies dressed,
Rose to the skies’ eternal rest.’ (Griffith : 68)

Fishing communities in Assam worship *Ganga* as a deity. They may not see the river *Gangas*. Yet, they worship *Ganga*, the river goddess. This narrative suggests the belief of fishing communities who think that goddess *Ganga* came to the earth and became their tutelary goddess.

c) Narratives from the *Mahabharata*:

Like The *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, another great epic, reflects our ancient Indian civilization. In this epic also, there are some narratives which deal with traditional beliefs of fishing communities. Two such narratives are as follows:

a. Narrative of the Serpent King and *Krishna*:

Fishing communities depend on fresh and pure water to catch fish. Desire for freshness and purity of water adds dimension to some sacred thoughts. This sacredness and purity of waterbeds may have been drawn from some ancient narratives. One such narrative, drawn from the *Mahabharata* is as follows:

Kaliya was a serpent king. He had been occupying the river *Yamuna* and poisoned its water level. The nearby forests had been dried up by the poisonous air that *Kaliya* breathed. *Krishna* realized the damage, made by the serpent king. He jumped into water but was caught in the coil of the serpent king. *Krishna* finally set himself free from the coil with the help of his divine power. He started dancing on the hood of the serpent. *Kaliya* was really afraid

of *Krishna* and he prayed for mercy. His wives also implored *Krishna* to spare their husband. *Krishna* released the serpent and ordered him and his family to leave the shores of the river. The snake king was thus liberated and sent into the sea. (Garrett: 307-308)

Krishna is considered as an incarnation of Lord *Vishnu*. As fishing communities yearn for cleanliness and freshness of water, fishermen believe that *Krishna* defeated the serpent king so that fishing communities and others could get fresh and pure water.

b. Narrative of King *Shantanu*, *Ganga*, *Devabrata* and *Satyavati*:

Every folk group glorifies their past by associating themselves with famous race or dynasty. The root of fishing communities can also be traced to a famous race, popularly known as the *Bharata* race or the lunar dynasty. The following narrative may be mentioned in this regard.

Shantanu was the king of *Hastinapur*. One day, he went for hunting. On his way, he saw a beautiful woman, sitting beside a river. The king was fascinated by her exotic beauty and proposed to marry her. The woman agreed on condition that the king would not ever question her actions. The king agreed. After some years, she gave birth to a child. But she threw it into the river. King *Shantanu* could not say anything as he was bound by promise. Thereafter, she threw all her newborns into water. Finally, their eighth child was born and as the queen approached the river to throw the newly born baby, King *Shantanu* could not restrain himself anymore and prevented her from throwing it into water. The queen smiled and reminded the king of his promise. She gave the child to the king and disappeared. The king finally came to know that his wife was actually goddess *Ganga*. The king brought up his son and named him *Devabrata*.

King *Shantanu* was happy with his son. Yet he could not tolerate the absence of his wife. One day, when he was wandering on the

banks of the river *Yamuna*, he smelt a beautiful fragrance. He tried to find out the origin of the smell and discovered that it was coming from a beautiful woman. When asked, the king came to know that she was *Satyavati*, the daughter of a fisherman. *Shantanu* wanted to marry her and he went to her father to get his consent. The father, when asked, agreed to give his daughter's hand in marriage if *Shantanu* gave kingship to her future child. *Shantanu* was disappointed with such condition as he considered *Devabrata* to be the fittest king of his country. So, he decided not to marry *Satyavati*. He returned with a broken heart. After some days, *Devabrata* came to know about it. *Devabrata* went to *Satyavati*'s father and promised that he would never demand the kingship of the country. The cunning father of *Satyavati* then told *Devabrata* that his son might claim the throne though he would not demand the kingship. On hearing it, *Devabrata* assured the father that he would never marry. *Shantanu* finally got married to the daughter of the fisherman and their sons and grandsons became the kings of the country and shaped the famous *Bharata* race.

Fishing communities always find a close association with this narrative. As *Satyavati* was originally the daughter of a fisherman, fishermen consider *Bharata* race as the descendants of fishing communities.

d) Narratives from *Matsya- Purana*:

Apart from the narratives drawn from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, there are many other narratives in Indian epics and scriptures which deal with the existence of fishing communities in ancient civilization. In this regard, one narrative from *Matsya- Purana* can be mentioned. It is as follows:

a. Narrative of the Fish God and *Manu*:

Fishing communities believe that fish is the incarnation of Lord *Vishnu* and this belief may be identified with the narrative of *Matsya Avatara*, as depicted in the *Matsya - Purana*.

One day *Brahma* was asleep. A power-

ful demon, *Hayagriva* stole the *Vedas*, emerging from his mouth. On the other hand, a royal saint *Satyavrata* attained the rank of a *Manu*. *Vishnu* had seen the demon stealing the *Vedas* and decided to slay it. He assumed the form of a very small fish for this purpose and glided himself into the hands of *Manu*. The fish became bigger and bigger and the saint understood that this fish must be Lord *Vishnu*. *Vishnu* revealed to *Manu* the imminence of a deluge. He also told him that a large vessel would appear to him in which he was to embark together with the seven *Rishis*, taking with him all the plants and all the seeds of created things. As advised, *Manu* obeyed the behest of the Lord. When the water covered the surface of the earth, *Vishnu* again appeared to him in the shape of a golden fish with a single horn. *Manu* attached his vessel to its horn. While *Manu* was floating with his vessel, attached to the horn, the fish god taught *Manu* the doctrines and the science of the supreme spirit. When the deluge subsided, the fish god killed *Hayagriva* and restored the *Vedas*. (Garrett: 389)

Fishing communities often believe that Lord *Vishnu* always bestows favour to all his worshippers. The Lord, they believe, assume the form of fish so that fishermen can catch fish and run their source of livelihood. Fishermen believe that the golden fish, an incarnation of Lord *Vishnu*, first came to this earth who created all other fishes for fishermen.

CONCLUSION

A detailed analysis of all these narratives from epics suggests the fact that fishing communities associate themselves with these narratives in order to narrate their origin in this earth. Moreover, they justify their occupation and equalize their position with other castes and classes with the help of these narratives in which they are linked with some benevolent deities, noble sages and famous races. There is no denying the fact that these narratives from epics declare the presence of fishing communi-

ties in ancient civilization, signifying their importance in formulating our culture and tradition.

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