

FISHING AND THE KAIBARTAS OF ASSAM

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The Kaibartas, a Scheduled Caste of Assam, are a fishing community. Though fishing is their primary occupation, they still depend on traditional technologies and reflect a peasant culture. This paper attempts to elucidate the duality of the Kaibartas expressed in the peasant economy. They are linked on the one hand to subsistence needs and on the other as consumers/producers with urban centres (or the market).

Introduction

The Kaibartas are one of the major Scheduled Caste communities of Assam. They are mainly confined to the plains districts of Assam. The Kaibartas are one of the sixteen Scheduled Caste communities of the State as per Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 (Bordoloi: 1994: 1-9). They are found all over India including Bengal. Hence, social scientists have opined that probably the Kaibartas might have come to Assam at a very early date from the eastern states of Bengal, Bihar or Orissa. Fishing is the primary occupation of the Kaibartas of Assam.

Fishing has been one of the earliest means of livelihood of mankind. Anthropological studies of the so-called 'extreme occupations' of the fishing communities have been analyzed in terms of their distinctive values, social structures and organization interrelated to the special demands of the occupational role (Acheson: 1981: 275-316). Anthropologists are interested to study fishing communities as they contribute much to the variety and vitality of folk and popular cultures. A proper understanding of the various factors influencing their lives, in the context of their socio-cultural matrix and their genuine needs and aspirations will be a valuable input into the emerging global perspective on the economy and culture of the fishing community.

Methodology

The data for the present study have been collected from three Kaibarta villages of Kamrup and Nalbari districts of Assam. The data were collected during the years 2004-07 and a revisit to the villages was made in 2011. A structured household schedule was used to collect primary data on population pattern including educational status, occupational pattern and others. Data on physical aspects of the village and socio-cultural milieu were collected using focused interviews and non-participant observations.

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The People

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

TABLE 1: VILLAGE COMMUNITIES OF THE THREE STUDY VILLAGES, 2004-07

Village	Village Community	No. of Households	Percentage
Barpith	Kaibarta	37	62.71
	Kalita ¹	13	22.03
	Bihari ²	4	6.78
	Other castes	5	8.47
Total		59	100.00
Boripara	Kaibarta	46	92.00
	Rajbanshi ³	3	6.00
	Other castes	1	2.00
Total		50	100.00
Bornibari	Kaibarta	330	94.29
	Kalita	12	3.43
	Brahmin ⁴	4	1.14
	Muslim	4	1.14
Total		350	100.00

1. Kalita: An upper caste Hindu of Assam.

2. Biharis: Original inhabitants of the State of Bihar, India.

3. Rajbanshi: A backward caste of Assam.

4. Brahmin: One of the highest or priestly caste among the Hindus.

The term Kaibarta is derived from *ke* or *ka* meaning water and *vrit* meaning exist (Ke+vrit). So those who derive their livelihood from water are known as Kaibartas. (Bezbaruah: 2005: 22-24).

Fishing —Their Traditional Occupation

Fishing is considered to be the only important occupation by the Kaibartas of the study villages, even though it is largely a seasonal occupation. There are about 40 to 45 varieties of fish caught by the Kaibartas of the study villages. Generally some of the varieties are available only during the peak fishing season (mid

September to mid May) while the other varieties are found all the year though in fewer quantities. Some of the varieties like *kanduli*, *mirka*, *bhakua*, *sol*, *borali* and *chital* are available only from mid September to mid May. The rest of the varieties are found all the year though in fewer quantities.

The Kaibartas of the study villages follow the Assamese calendar for various fishing activities. As the days in Assamese calendar are calculated in a different manner from that of the English one, therefore a proper correspondence is not possible between the two.

A year in the Assamese or local calendar begins with the *Bohag* month, whereas an English year begins with January. The corresponding English months to *Bohag* are April and May while the corresponding local months to January are *Puh* and *Magh*. There are six local seasons and four English seasons. Thus a proper correspondence between local and English seasons is not possible.

Bohag (April -May)

During this month fishes are found in plenty. Fishermen are busy right from the afternoon, fixing nets in the *beels* and rivers till early morning when they gather all the fish. Some of them in Boripara and Bornibari who also pursue cultivation are busy cutting grains. They do not sell but keep it for their own consumption. They generally cultivate *Boro* paddy, a local variety.

Jeth (May-June)

This is the last month of their peak fishing season. They generally go for fishing in boats and use mainly *acharajaal*, *dhekijal* and *hatjaal*. Large varieties of fish like *rou*, *borali*, *chital*, *kanduli*, etc., are caught.

Ahar (June-July)

During this period fish becomes scarce and the fishermen use traps, small fishing nets, hooks, etc., to catch fish. They also repair large fishing nets by this time. Some of them in Bornibari start making nets for the next season.

Sawon (July-August)

During this period, fishermen catch fish using small nets and traps in the paddy fields and inland pool. They also catch fish by attaching earthworms to hooks and tied in ropes. These ropes are laid out in the paddy fields or inland pools and small fishes who come to eat those earthworms are caught by the hooks. Then they gather those ropes and collect the fishes. This method is very popular in Boripara. In the meantime some of the fishermen are also engaged as wage labourers in the nearby areas. Some even cultivate vegetables for their own consumption. In Bornibari, a few Kaibarta fishermen also sell vegetables grown in their backyards.

Bhado (August-September)

During this period fishermen prepare themselves for peak fishing season. They repair their nets and if need arise weave or purchase new ones. Boats are also repaired and painted during this period. At the same time they continue fishing and sell whatever they catch. They also spray lime in the *beels* and individual fisheries so that fishes might not be affected by any diseases.

Ahin (September-October)

Since this is their main fishing period the villagers of Boripara perform the annual Narayan Puja on the banks of the Borhala *beel*. The villagers of Barpith and Bornibari perform the Ganga Puja and Ghat Puja on the banks of the *beels* and rivers. During this period they use all varieties of nets and catch fishes like *rou*, *chital*, *kanduli*, *borali*, etc.

Kati (October-November)

As they catch large quantities of fish, fishes are auctioned by the village (Barpith) or the Co-operative Society (Boripara and Bornibari) as a whole. They are bought by the villagers as well as outside traders. Some villagers buy fish in wholesale and distribute them in small quantities to others by retail, keeping a small quantity for their own retail sale.

Aghon (November-December)

The fishermen remain busy in fishing. Some of those who cultivate paddy prepare their lands for sowing seeds.

Puh (December-January)

In addition to their fishing activities, those fishermen who are involved in a little bit of cultivation sow seeds during this period. They hire labourers (in Boripara) as they are busy with fishing also.

Magh (January-February)

During this period they construct fences around their houses and kitchen garden and repair their houses. Fishing continues as usual.

Phagun (February-March)

Generally *puthi*, *kawoi*, *goroi*, *seng*, *kajoli*, etc. are caught by them in this period.

Chot (March-April)

Fish becomes scarce by this time. They use rod and line and different types of traps to catch fish. They also collect firewood, etc., for the whole year.

Fishing Techniques

A variety of fishing techniques are employed by the Kaibartas, but the techniques vary from village to village. However, there are in general three fishing techniques employed in the study villages. Only in Barpith village *katal* technique is absent. The fishing techniques are:

***Bana* fishing technique**

This is an important technique by which fishes are protected in the *beels* and fisheries. It primarily comprises erection of split-bamboo screens (*bana*) across a water way (small river or connecting channel of open *beel*) with the help of bamboo poles. This is carried out in the months of September to November when the water level in the *beels* and rivers recedes. Generally, in *bana* fishes are trapped, forcing them to move along a narrow and long bamboo woven barricade. When the flow of water ceases, the *bana* is dismantled.

***Katal* technique**

It is another method which is applied in *beel* and fisheries. *Katal* is a small and circular (15-30m diameter) sheltered area. They are erected immediately after the monsoon season (August-October) and harvested during January-February. At selected points where fish concentrate, at least 40 bamboo poles (about 12 to 14 feet long) are placed along with tree branches. Water weeds and bushes are placed inside the bamboo barricade which is tied by ropes. Fishes take shelter there in and they find it more convenient to stay in the bushes and eat the barks of the branches. These areas are subsequently encircled by drag nets and fishing is carried out. After the net is spread around, the bushes are removed and the fishes are caught.

Filtering Technique

This method includes use of fishing gears like dip nets, bag nets, sieve nets and encircling nets in inland fisheries. The dip nets (*dhekijal*) which are operated by keeping the nets submerged in water and wandering or feeding fishes are lifted out by rapid operation. Cast nets are thrown on the surface water in shallower area in which the fish of that area are trapped and get collected in pockets.

It may be noted here that among some fishing communities, poison is sometimes placed in water of pools and rivers so as to kill or frighten the fish. However, no method of poisoning is found among the study groups.

Fishing Implements

Fishing implements used by the Kaibartas of the three study villages are mainly traps and nets. They use different types of nets like *Chitkijal* (a big net fitted to a pair of split bamboo), *Acharajal* (cast net), *Haatjal* (hand net), *Dhekijal* (dip net), *Berajal* (a very long net with meshes), *Langijal* (gill net), *Phasijal* and *Mohri*

jal. Various types of traps like *Chepa* (valve trap), *Polo* (cage trap), *Charaha* (a valve less bamboo trap), *Ghuni* (It is a drum-shaped bamboo trap), *Balda* (a box-like fishing trap with a valve), *Jakhe* (basket trap), are used for fishing by them. In addition, they also use *borhi*, *Jowar* (a multi-pronged spear), *Nol borhi* (a hook attached to a short line is hung from the middle of a floating twig). *Khale* (fishing basket) and *Jiyoni* (a drum-shaped bamboo container) are used for preserving the fishes alive. A passage is provided in *jiyoni* for putting in and taking out the fishes from inside the container. The container is kept dipped in water in the *beels*. Another requirement of fishing is the boat. The central part is scooped out from a solid log of wood and then it is shaped like a boat. It generally needs two men, one to row the boat and the other to operate the net. The boat is painted with coal tar to make the joint leak proof and durable. At present these boats are manually propelled.

These fishing implements require good deal of care. Most of the nets, to be lasting, are treated from time to time with a preservative. Another part of net care is mending. When the net drifts in the water, sometimes the fishes tear off the meshes. The larger holes are temporarily mended by the fishermen there itself while the rest of the mending is done either at home or on the banks when the net is spread for drying. Similarly, the bottom of the boat must be scrubbed once a month or in two months to avoid damage by pests and moss. Besides, the boat has to be oil-painted twice or thrice a year.

Fishing Operations

The Kaibartas of Barpith (Kamrup District) depend on the *beels* (wetlands) and the Khanajan river passing nearby the village for their subsistence. The people do not have any possessory right over these water sources. Some of them, especially women also buy fish from persons owning fisheries or from Maligaon (a railway township situated on the southern part of Guwahati city) fish market and sell them in the neighbouring villages.

In addition to the individual family fishing units, joint trips are organized under the leadership of any one villager. Such fishing units are called *thoras*. A *thora* comprises of eight members, who are drawn from a cross-section of the family fishing units of the whole village. It is with the sheer motive of having a good individual catch that a joint fishing activity is undertaken.

The Kaibartas of Barpith do not possess individual fisheries except one fisherman, (aged 28 yrs.). The Kaibartas of Boripara (Kamrup District) do not possess individual fisheries. They catch fish in the fishery (Borhala *beel*) owned by fishery co-operative societies which is auctioned by the Government for every three years. In Boripara, the working unit is usually the family (a man, his wife and their children) and this unit is frequently self-sustaining. In seasons when fish is found in plenty, each family serves as a small co-operative unit. The man

(husband or father) along with his brothers and sons catch fish in the inland pool and bring home the catch. The women at home remove the fish from the nets. The sons or younger brothers of the fisherman then take the fish to the market to sell.

When fish becomes scarce, it requires the co-ordinated efforts of several families. Womenfolk would attach baits to hooks and tie these hooks to coconut ropes. Two or three fishermen belonging to different families would then share a boat and carry these ropes and leave them in water either in the inland pool or in paddy fields, which are filled, with water. Later, fish caught is then equally distributed among the different members.

In addition to the individual family fishing units, joint trips (*thoras*) are organized under the leadership of any one villager. The institution of *thora* is an important feature of the fishing operation in the *beel*.

In Bornibari (Nalbari district), the Kaibartas unite on the household basis that is, men from one household have individual fishing business. But during rainy seasons, when more men are needed, fishing is organized on a co-operative basis. These fishermen carry their fishing operations in the Baria *beel* and Capla *beel* about 3 and 4 kms respectively, away from the village. There are 20 individually owned fisheries in Bornibari. Generally, the fishermen start for the *beel* in the evening so as to reach there in time. On reaching, they fix the nets and sleep. Getting up at midnight they haul the nets, mend the holes if necessary and fix it again. When the net is fixed they eat their meals consisting of rice and fish either cooked at home or cooked on the banks itself. In the morning they haul the net and return to the shore with the entire catch of the two hauls.

As soon as they reach the shore, the men go home for bath and meals while the other members of the household or group carry the catch home and hand it over to the women. They spread the used nets for drying, replacing them with fresh ones.

Production among the fishermen of the three study villages generally means their daily and seasonal catches. These catches range from low catch, average catch to big catch. During the peak fishing season, that is, mid September to mid May, the fishermen's catch range from big to average. During these big catches fishes like *rou*, *kos*, *borali*, *ilish*, *chital*, *mirga*, *sal*, *sol*, etc., are caught. On an average catch, they catch fishes like *rou*, *goroi*, *kawoi*, *magur*, *singora*, *baami* and so on. When they catch *moa*, *dorikona*, *saleconi*, *puthi*, *tora* and so on their catch is low. In Boripara and Barpith, the big catches generally mean 150-200 kg per day. On an average catch, it ranges from 80 kg to 100 kg. But a low catch does not exceed 80 kg or so per day when fish becomes scarce during the breeding season, i.e., from October to March. But in Bornibari, the big catches generally means 200-300 kg per day. On an average it ranges from 100 kg to 150 kg. A low catch does not exceed 70-80 kg per day when there is scarcity of fish.

Marketing of Fish

In Barpith, fishermen sell both fish caught by them and purchased from others. As soon as the catch is brought home, it is given in charge of the women of the house. They sort out the salable fish and either the woman or any male member of the house immediately takes it to the market. The fish is carried to the market by cycle or rickshaw. Some of them, especially women also buy fish from persons owning fisheries or from Maligaon fish market and sell in the neighbouring villages (Khanamukh, Dharapur etc. which are about 8 to 10 km from Guwahati city).

In Boripara, marketing of fresh fish is done in two ways. If fish are auctioned by the society as a whole or privately, they are bought by the villagers as well as outside traders. Some villagers buy fish in wholesale and distribute them in small quantities to others by retail, keeping a small quantity for their own retail sale. Others buy small or large amounts of fish directly for retail and also barter fish for vegetables. If the village auction does not take place, fishermen take their produce to the market for retail or sell it to the traders on the banks itself. If they employ rickshaws to lift baskets or carry baskets to markets, they pay them daily wages.

In Bornibari, some of the fishermen sell fish to the wholesalers (both Kaibartas and Non-Kaibartas). The wholesalers transport the fish to various centers of fish sale including Guwahati. A section of the Kaibartas of Bornibari, who are regular sellers proceed early in the morning, almost at dawn, to the banks of *Capla beel* and *Baria beel* where fresh fish is auctioned. After buying the fish at the auction, these men proceed to their respective places of sale. They even go to Guwahati.

Again those Kaibartas who sell only fish caught by them have to wait for their own boats to come. As soon as the catch is brought home, it is given in charge of the women of the house. They sort out the salable fish and one of the male members immediately takes it to the market. The fish is carried to the market by cycle, rickshaw or auto-van (if they go to Guwahati).

The women sellers, mostly widows, buy fish from wholesalers and sell it in the neighbouring villages (Belsor, Kakaya, etc.) or in the Bornibari bazaar held on Thursdays and Sundays.

Fish traders also advance loans to the fisher folk and as a result the fisher folk are bound to sell the produce at prefixed rates to the traders. Apart from fish traders finance and credit within the Kaibarta fishing economy are provided by friends and relatives and by professional money lenders from outside the community. Among the fisher folk there is a group of persons who, having accumulated capital by fishing and fish marketing, act as financiers later on.

The Kaibarta women directly connected with fishing business, of late, are not in a position to pursue the fishing business because of various factors such as nearby marshy lands have become unfit for fishing, the local fish auction market is beyond their reach as men folk outnumber them and their educated sons and daughters generally do not allow them to catch and sell fish.

Other Occupations

In Barpith village, out of the total male Kaibarta population, seventy four are engaged in fishing as primary occupation (Table 2). The next important occupation followed by the Kaibartas is working as office assistants in various government and non-government organizations. They also work as casual labourers in and around the village. Some work as drivers, bus conductors, mechanics, tailors and vegetable sellers. Among females only few are engaged in fishing. There are also a few weavers and one tailor and one each working as a pre-primary school teacher and as office assistant. The rest of the female populations are either students in schools and colleges or housewives.

TABLE 2: DETAILS OF OCUPATIONAL PATTERN OF THE KAIBARTAS OF THE STUDY VILLAGES, 2004-2007 (POPULATION AGED 15 YEARS AND ABOVE)

Occupation	Male			Female		
	Barpith	Boripara	Bornibari	Barpith	Boripara	Bornibari
Fishing	70 (60.87%)	45 (49.45%)	163 (31.17%)	4 (7.02%)	- (0.00%)	29 (8.90%)
Fish selling	4 (3.48%)	- (0.00%)	10 (1.91%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	2 (0.61%)
Agriculture	- (0.00%)	2 (2.20%)	26 (4.97%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	1 (0.31%)
Driving	5 (4.35%)	2 (2.20%)	6 (1.15%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)
Handcart/rickshaw puller	1 (0.87%)	- (0.00%)	4 (0.76%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)
Teacher	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	13 (2.49%)	1 (1.75%)	- (0.00%)	9 (2.76%)
Business	- (0.00%)	7 (7.69%)	56 (10.71%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	3 (0.92%)
Service	9 (7.83%)	4 (4.40%)	36 (6.88%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)
Net making	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	1 (0.19%)	2 (3.51%)	- (0.00%)	27 (8.28%)
Wage earning	8 (6.96%)	7 (7.69%)	24 (4.59%)	- (0.00%)	2 (3.77%)	- (0.00%)
Weaving	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	6 (1.15%)	- (0.00%)	14 (26.42%)	46 (14.11%)
Tailoring	2 (1.74%)	- (0.00%)	1 (0.19%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)
Vegetable selling	1 (0.87%)	1 (1.10%)	3 (0.57%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)
Bus conductor	2 (1.74%)	- (0.00%)	1 (0.19%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)
Mechanic	2 (1.74%)	- (0.00%)	2 (0.38%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)	- (0.00%)

contd. table 2

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Male</i>			<i>Female</i>		
	<i>Barpith</i>	<i>Boripara</i>	<i>Bornibari</i>	<i>Barpith</i>	<i>Boripara</i>	<i>Bornibari</i>
Nurse	-	1	-	-	2	1
	(0.00%)	(1.10%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(3.77%)	(0.31%)
Carpentry	-	-	8	-	-	-
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(1.53%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)
Servant	-	-	1	-	-	6
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.19%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(1.84%)
Musician	-	-	2	-	-	-
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.38%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)
Factory worker	-	-	21	-	-	-
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(4.02%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)
Salesman	-	-	5	-	-	-
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.96%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)
Tuition	-	-	2	-	-	-
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.38%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)
Butcher	-	-	5	-	-	-
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.96%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)
Farm worker	-	-	1	-	-	-
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.19%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)
Tortoise seller	-	-	4	-	-	-
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.76%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)
Gram sevak	-	-	1	-	-	-
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.19%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)
NGO worker	-	-	4	-	-	2
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.76%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.61%)
Biscuit factory worker	-	-	38	-	-	-
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(7.27%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)
Instructor	-	-	2	-	-	-
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.38%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)
Housewives				38	29	155
	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(0.00%)	(66.67%)	(54.72%)	(47.55%)
Old	3	1	17	-	1	4
	(2.61%)	(1.10%)	(3.25%)	(0.00%)	(1.89%)	(1.23%)
Student	8	21	60	12	5	41
	(6.96%)	(23.08%)	(11.47%)	(21.05%)	(9.43%)	(12.58%)
Total	115	91	523	57	53	326

As regards secondary occupation some are engaged as casual labourers or wage earners and some females are engaged in weaving.

In Boripara, fishing as an occupation includes both catching fish as well as selling fish. In this village women are not involved either in catching or selling fish.

The second most important occupation of the village is weaving, though practised only by women. The Assam Apex Weavers' Artisans Co-operative Federation Limited, in short 'Artfed' is giving training to the village womenfolk in weaving. Working under Project Packet Scheme sponsored by the Ministry of

Textiles and Ministry of Human Resources (started in '98 March) their main aim is to form co-operative society at the marginal level. These women who have already received training from Artfed's Training Centre are required to weave clothes for the co-operative. The co-operative provides them with looms and threads.

Some of them are nowadays engaged in business, service and others work on wage basis as casual labourers either in the neighbouring villages or in nearby petrol pumps, or in the biscuit companies and plastic companies nearby the village. Moreover, a few of them are also employed as dressers and nurses in the Guwahati Medical College, Public Health Center and nursing homes.

In Bornibari village, a number of males are engaged in agriculture and in service in various government undertakings. Some of them are engaged as teachers, weavers, carpenters, shopkeepers, vegetable sellers, in wage-earning work in various factories (cycle, biscuit, etc.). Business mainly includes dealing with grocery and stationery items.

The Kaibarta women are expert weavers but due to poor purchasing power, they are not in a position to earn substantial income. There is scope of improving the economy by undertaking various cottage industries. Their men and women possess all the skill of various cottage industries. But due to non-availability of raw materials at cheaper cost, the Kaibartas are not in a position to earn from the cottage industries.

Fishery Co-operative Society

Boripara and Bornibari villages are operated by fishery co-operative societies. In Boripara, the *Borhala beel* is owned by fishing co-operative societies, which is auctioned by the Government for every three years. The Borhala Fishery Co-operative Society Limited was registered on 6th July 1976 (Regd. No. G.I. 76-77, 6th July) under Co-operative Societies Act, 1949 (Assam Act I of 1950). Earlier the society was named as Tetelia Bhetarbori Co-operative Society (1964-1975). At present there are 70 members. Out of the fish caught in the fishery, the society's share is 40 paise per rupee and the rest 60 paise are the real income of the fishermen. The Government charges 25 paise per rupee from the society. The fishery belongs to the Government and they make a settlement for 3 or 4 years. The working committee of the Society has 7 members with a president and a secretary. The Society makes a yearly profit of Rs. 4,000 or Rs. 5,000 whereas individual fishermen make profit of Rs. 1,500 or Rs. 2,000. Out of the money earned the society purchases boats, fishing nets etc. on community basis, pay wages to the secretary (as the president's post is honorary). There are specific rules and all the members of the society can go for fishing in the fishery. If more than one member from a household go for fishing, they have to pay *khazana* or a fee amounting to 60 paise or 40 paise per extra person. The Society does not enter into business transaction with the

fishermen all the year round. Fishes are auctioned by the Co-operative society as a whole during the period from mid September to mid May when there is plenty of fish. The rest of the year the supply of fish is not regular due to floods. Majority of the fishermen continue with their fishing activities and they earn so little that they could hardly maintain their families.

In Bornibari, there is the 'Bornibari Machmaria Santha' (a non-governmental fishery co-operative society), which was established in 1982. The Santha owns the Bakrikuchi Reserve land comprising of twelve (12) bighas. The working committee of the Society has 12 members with a president and a secretary. At present there are 70 members. Any member may buy the reserve for a period of 3 or 4 years, by paying Rs. 4,000 only. They deposit their income in the bank (Pragjyotish Gaonlia Bank) and in the month of Magh (January-February) the income is distributed equally among the members. The society makes a yearly profit of Rs. 17,000 to Rs. 18,000 and each member gets Rs. 300 each. As this co-operative has no linkage with the government, the functioning of this society is also not proper as compared to the co-operative of Boripara village. This co-operative appears to be somewhat malfunctioning.

Fishing Assets

The Kaibartas are well aware that their fishing economy can be maintained at a workable level by means of capital accumulation and investment. Capital outlay is required for repairing the implements, especially nets and boats and for buying new equipments. One of the sources for the flow of capital includes their occupation itself. They have to look for profit and have capacity for saving. Secondly, they depend on the village council or *Raij* for borrowing money. Fish traders also give loans to the fishermen. They have to pay a nominal interest varying from 50 paise to 1.00 rupee per month. The people prefer taking loans from private moneylenders than from the Government, for they feel secure with the former, even if they fail to pay the installments.

In the fishing economy, capital is recognized in the possession of various fishing appliances and accessories, which are individually, owned property. Capital is required to purchase these implements. The Kaibartas can hardly afford to make any saving when fishes become scarce in the riverine region. On the other hand, people with occupations other than fishing are found to be able to save and invest capital.

Gill nets (*langi jaal*) are the most widely possessed nets among the three villages. On an average Barpith and Boripara possesses 6.55 and 6.29 nets per household respectively. In Bornibari, the average possession is 10.25 nets per household. In Barpith and Boripara (villages nearby Guwahati city), villagers possess more hand nets in comparison to cast nets. But in Bornibari, the villagers possess more cast nets in comparison to hand nets. Further the possession of landed property also indicates the economic position of household.

Income and Expenditure

Fishing is the only primary source of income of these fishermen, excepting a few who are involved in other occupations. On the basis of their total annual cash income, the Kaibartas of the three study villages have been divided into three categories – Rs. 30,000 and below, in between Rs. 30,000 and 60,000 and the other group Rs. 60,000 and above. In some households, there is more than one earning member and their total income has been calculated.

The Kaibartas do not keep any accounts of income and expenditure. It is only on the basis of a rough estimate of their daily catch and earnings that their income per annum has been calculated. The table 3 shows the annual income of the Kaibartas of the three study villages.

TABLE 3: ANNUAL INCOME OF THE KAIBARTAS OF THE THREE STUDY VILLAGES, 2004-07

Income (Per annum)	No. of Households		
	Barpith	Boripara	Bornibari
Rs. 30,000 and below	25	24	196
Rs. 30,000 – Rs. 60,000	10	14	119
Rs. 60,000 and above	2	8	15

But the difference between gross income and net income is considerable as a large amount has to be spent every year for repairing and purchasing of fishing equipments. The Kaibartas of the three study villages are found to be reluctant to state their income and expenditure as they fear that such an estimate will result in the levy of income-tax.

Like their income which is uncertain, their expenditure is equally unplanned. They never store anything, yearly, monthly or even weekly, except firewood in some households. Whenever foodstuff or any such item is exhausted, some quantity of it, depending on the cash at hand, is purchased. Articles of clothing are bought during festivals and whenever needed. Daily items of expenditure like sugar, tea, vegetables and fruits are purchased daily or once on two or three days. Daily expenses include the money spent on biscuits and other eatables, betel leaves and nuts, *bidis* (cigarettes) and so on.

It is seen that the amount that they earn are often not enough to meet their expenditures. This compels them to borrow money from the 'society' which is also called *Raij* and the money lenders (Mahajan) against promise of repayment. Sometimes their relatives residing in neighbouring villages also help them. For calculating the expenditure on food articles, the quantity and value of the food items consumed by them in a day were collected (as they fail to recollect the expenditure incurred by them for a full month). Except the two Bihu festivals during the months of *Magh* (January – February) and *Bohag* (April – May) there is

a near uniformity in the pattern of food consumed at different months of the year. Except fishes all other food items are purchased from the local markets. Though they consume *atta* (wheat flour) and *suji* (wheat product), *maida* is rarely purchased. Sometimes they consume bread also. Kerosene oil, firewood, gas cylinders (LPG) and match boxes are purchased by them. Vegetables like pumpkin, cucumber, cabbage, ladies finger, tomato, brinjal, bottle gourd, potato and onion are mainly consumed. As regards expenditure on entertainment, some of them possess television sets, while most of them own a radio. Luxury goods include soaps, hair oil, face powder, etc. Clothing also required heavy expenditure. Purchasing of allopathic medicines also incur expenditure in case of illness. Ceremonial expenditures are involved in the holding of various religious functions in the household from time to time and also for the performance of the annual community festival of Narayan Puja. They also consume tobacco, betel nuts and country liquor. Books, papers, slates, pencils, and school/college fees are the major expenditure involved in education.

The income and expenditure account for a year shows an excess of expenditure over income. The households dependent exclusively on fishing have deficit family budgets than those who have subsidiary occupations other than fishing. Birth, death, puberty, marriage, illness etc. are occasions which mostly imbalance the family budgets.

The difference with regards to performance of economic function, division of labour and ownership of assets, find their equivalents in social status, role in political leadership of the community, role in cultural functions, marriage patterns, and standard of living. Labourers not owning any assets live in smaller houses than owners of craft and gear.

Functions performed and rituals are usually connected with economic status. Those with poor income find it hard to perform the various ceremonies associated either with birth, death or marriage in a large scale involving the whole village. Those who can afford to perform these rituals, invite lots of people. The functions again reflect the social status of the person or family who perform the function.

The fishermen's economic position after all depends on the season and on luck. Due to uncertainty of the catch, the exact economic position of a family at any time is liable to fluctuate. If the season is consistently bad for three or four years, the fisherman incurs heavy debts. But if he is fortunate and get big hauls of varieties of fish that fetch high price in the market, then his earnings are high.

A Peasant Economy

The Kaibartas of the study villages however, express the dual nature, characteristic of the Indian peasantry. On the one hand they are linked to subsistence needs and on the other tied in to the market either as producers or consumers in the wider economic systems. Taking into consideration these three study villages, it may be

stated that Boripara and Barpith being part of greater Guwahati occupy one end and Bornibari being situated in exclusively rural environment, is on the other end of the continuum from folk to urban situation. In relation to the context of Redfield's (1941: 340-344) evolutionary scheme of 'folk-urban continuum', it can be stated that as one moves along the continuum from folk society to urban society, there is increase in heterogeneity which has led to occupational differentiation and individualization. There is noticeable change in the ways many people lead their daily lives. Boripara and Barpith being situated in the periphery of Guwahati city are under the constant influence of the city. As a result there are more similarities than differences between these two villages.

Most of the Kaibartas of Boripara and Barpith now began to be engaged in the various urban and industrial concerns of Guwahati city. Now they are not entirely dependent on fishing as there is visible shrinkage in terms of fishing population and fishing area, in recent years due to rapid urbanization and industrialization. It has also been found that the shimmerings of occupational change have reached even the rural Kaibartas. The non-availability of cultivable land and uncertainty and insufficient income from fishing have had an impact upon the rural Kaibartas.

Occupational change has differentiated the Kaibartas from one another in their social as well as economic status. Given the occupational underpinnings of the *varna* system and the linkages between occupation and income, it is not difficult to see caste as a system of material inequality (Desai & Dubey: 2011: 40-49). This change has also contributed to the emergence of new dimensions in the field of social and economic relations. But there is hardly any space for social mobility. A man cannot change his caste since it is fixed by birth; nor can he change his status by increasing his income or wealth since there is no scope for it in the village (Kuppuswamy:1993:110-112). Thus, as a result of education and contact with the city, there is considerable opportunity for improvements on the basis of wealth and education, but the fishermen cannot change their caste. Swamy (1976: 1933-1939) differentiated the Indian peasants into four categories: landless, poor peasants, well-to-do peasants and small peasants. It is not even possible to incorporate the Kaibartas into a specific category of Indian peasantry due to their dual nature.

Being entirely a fishing community, the Kaibartas are never self-sufficient. They had always to rely on their neighbours not only for the necessities of life like food and clothes but also for the marketing of fish. The growing processes of interaction through communication networks, marketing centres and other institutions have introduced to them the features of 'peasantry'. The Kaibartas of the study villages follow Hindu religious beliefs. Their practices are very much similar to those of the other Hindu communities, but their mode of observance sometimes differs between the three villages. The common Hindu rituals observed by the Kaibartas of the three study villages are *Siva Puja*, *Lakshmi Puja* and *Geeta-path*. *Saraswati Puja* is celebrated with great devotion in Boripara but not in the

other two villages. Again unlike the other two villages, Diwali or *Kali Puja* (the festival of light) is celebrated in Bornibari in a grand manner. They perform *Ganga/Ghat Puja* before undertaking any fishing operations. Except *Ganga Puja*, other rituals are common with the larger Assamese community. On the one hand, they are part of the regional peasant culture and on the other; they are linked with the mainstream of the nation through commonly shared mythology, growing inter-regional contacts through markets.

Summary

The Kaibartas of Assam of the study villages depend on traditional technologies for fishing. The discussion on the economic aspect of the Kaibartas of the three study villages indicates a number of difficulties and disadvantages that are present in the traditional occupational pattern of fishing. These difficulties and disadvantages could be resolved by way of taking up different steps by development agencies and organizations. The socio-economic condition of the majority of the Kaibartas is not good. Consequently, the Kaibartas who mostly depend upon their traditional calling are experiencing a number of problems including encroachment of inland water bodies, floods, shortage of capital, difficulties in transportation and marketing of their catch, etc. Mechanized equipments are totally absent among them unlike the fishermen of other parts of India like those of Sundarbans (Sarkar: 2009:218-219), Mumbai (Punekar:1969:238-241), Karnataka (Krishna: 1990: 66-69) and so on. As they are still practicing traditional methods of fishing, income from it is uncertain and the return has always remained poor. Not all fishery co-operatives among them are functioning in desired way. Due to the want of money, many of them have not been able to purchase modern fishing accessories to replace their traditional ones.

The age old methods of fishing are admittedly very ingenious. The Kaibartas need to acquaint themselves with the up-to-date knowledge about the habits of fish, especially their seasonal migration, and with the results of the scientific experiments carried on in fishing techniques. They should be aware of various types of insurances and also avail them for their own benefits. The Kaibartas therefore, need to co-operate with each other and be open for assistance from outside. Development programmes have been formulated from time to time but these should be formulated taking into consideration their immediate requirements. People's participation in the development programmes undertaken by various development agencies is very much essential.

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