

Asian Resonance

Caste and Occupation : The Case of the Kaibartas of Assam

Abstract

The Kaibartas of Assam practice fishing as their primary occupation. The present study was undertaken among three villages of Kamrup District, Assam. The economic life, relationship between education and occupation and the occupational mobility observed among them is discussed in this paper. Occupational mobility among the Kaibartas results only in positional changes rather than structural change in the society.

Key words

Assam. Kaibartas. Economy. Education. Caste. Occupational Changes

Introduction

Caste seems to share a definite relationship with occupation. Within certain limits, one may thus have recourse to a livelihood other than that which is traditional for the caste of which one is a member. Even Beteille (1992:40) argues that prior to independence, many castes in India had the majority of their working members involved in occupations other than those specifically linked with their caste. Moreover, it is quite clear that the caste is not same as a trade guild and the caste system is not purely and simply a professional system. It is also said that caste and occupation are linked through the intermediary of religion (Dumont 1970). But only in certain cases does religion clearly account for the link between caste and occupation. There are a number of different castes who follow some religiously neutral professions. Marriott (1960) opines that the same activity is more polluting if it is the object of a specialization than if it is practiced within the household. Comparing the relative status of two Bengal castes which are both given to fishing, Mukherjee (1963) states that, while the Kaibarta are farmers who fish for themselves, the Namasudra live by fishing, and he suggests that it is not the sale of fish which makes the second inferior to the first. Rather it is fishing as a specialized activity as opposed to farming (and fishing for its own sake) which makes the difference. The specialized activity is directly related to the system; whereas the other is only one feature among others of the particular caste. Ghurye (1932) noticed that caste names are very often the names of trades, but that these are not the only names. There are also ethnic or tribal names, names of sects and names indicating still other features. He further adds that this does not hold for the names of subcastes, for these mark territorial rather than professional or other distinctions. It may be said that occupation is one of the differences, perhaps the most indicative difference, whereby a group seen from the outside, a caste, is designated. But this designation by occupation is more exterior than real, more attributive than effective, since not all the members of the caste necessarily follow this profession. It may even happen that subcastes are distinguished within a caste of this sort by the name of another occupation.

With the increase in population the rigidity of the caste system is not maintained properly when compared with the economy of the people and society (Basu 1975). The caste system is gradually being modified and with the movement of population and contact with various groups by way of easy communication, growth of cities by industrialization and education the change is inevitable. Today, the mobility for individuals and also for the entire castes have become a common practice as the birth rate and demand for an occupational skill in each society are not in proper balance. Modern democratic conceptions of equality and the dynamic nature of a developing economy tend to a fluidity of movement and a differentiation in function. These result in the placement of some high caste Brahmins in almost all occupations right from their priesthood, their hereditary function, to legal, medical or technical professions or even to clerical jobs in offices. Similarly the Sudras, the traditional peasants, have become Sanskrit scholars. The old caste principles are present in the rural areas even today. But in the urban areas a new system is emerging in the form of class which

Chandana Sarma

Department of Anthropology,
Cotton College, Guwahati
Assam, India
chandanasarmas@yahoo.co.in

Asian Resonance

is related with status: the lower and the upper classes. In an analysis of the numerically dominant castes in south India, noted anthropologist M.N.Srinivas (1987) found that certain peasant castes enjoy numerical superiority as well as political and economic power, although they remain middle castes by the varna scheme. Further, higher education and reservation in government jobs has also strengthened the power of lower castes (Beteille 1992). Recent studies also states that migration, expansion of dalits in non-traditional jobs and changes in agriculture have contributed towards the improvement of the relative position of dalits in recent years (Kapur et al 2010). All these suggest that the link between caste and occupation is marginal in modern India.

Methodology

The data for the present study have been collected from three Kaibarta villages of Kamrup District, Assam. The data were collected during the years 2004-2007. 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.

The two study villages, Barpith and Boripara are situated in Kamrup district whereas Bornibari is situated in Nalbari district. Barpith is situated at a distance of about 8 km from Guwahati city. The Gauhati University is situated about a kilometer away from the village. It lies on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra River. The National Highway No. 37 which passes just a kilometer away from the village makes it more convenient from the point of view of communication and transportation with Guwahati. The village is bounded on the north by Dharapur, on the south by Lankeswar, on the east by Khanamukh and Tarun Nagar on the west. The village has 37 Kaibarta households. Boripara village is situated at a distance of about eight kilometers from Guwahati city. Actually Boripara is a sub-area of Tetelia village. Tetelia is situated within the Guwahati subdivision in the southern part of the Kamrup District of Assam on the southern banks of the Brahmaputra. Tetelia is divided into four paras (sub-areas). Out of these four paras, Boripara is one which is exclusively inhabited by the Kaibartas. The other paras are Belpara and Jarpara both inhabited by Rajbanshis and other castes and Ghospara inhabited by the Bengalis. The village with 46 households is connected to National Highway No. 37.

The third village under study is Bornibari of Nalbari district. The village is under North Borkhetri Mouza and is about 18 kilometers from Nalbari town. The village is about 88 kilometers from Guwahati city. Bornibari is bounded on the north by the villages of Kakaya and on the south by Dirua, Paikan, and Aahata. To the east of Bornibari is Naptipara village and to the west Paikan, Boon Maza and Dirua villages are located.

Table 1 shows the population pattern of the study villages.

Table 1:

Distribution of the Kaibartas in the Three Study Villages, 2004-07 (please see the page no. 28)

From the table 1, it is evident that the male population (1136) is higher than the female (1035) population. In Kamrup district, Barpith village has a total population of 282 out of which 154 (13.56%) are males while 128 (12.36%) are females. In Boripara, of the same district, there are 150 (13.20%) males and 131 (12.66%) females, out of the total population of 281. Similarly, Bornibari of Nalbari district has a total population of 1608, out of which there are 832 (73.24%) males and 776 (74.98%) females.

Table 2

Village communities of the three study villages, 2004-07 (please see the page no. 28)

Table 2 shows the distribution of population on the basis of the communities residing in the three study villages. In Barpith village, Kalitas, Biharis and few other caste people reside along with the Kaibartas. In Boripara, Rajbanshis and households belonging to other caste reside with the Kaibartas. The population of Bornibari village comprises of Brahmins, Kalitas, Muslims and the Kaibartas.

The population pattern of the three study villages reveal that in all three villages, the number of male population is higher than that of females. The highest number of unmarried males in Boripara and Bornibari are found in the age group of 15-19 years whereas that of Barpith is found within the age group of 10-14 years. Regarding unmarried females, the highest number in Boripara village is found in the age group of 10-14 years and that of Barpith and Bornibari in the age group of 15-19 years. In Barpith and Bornibari, there are 1 and 26 widowers with Boripara being an exception with no widower. Divorce cases, though few, are noted in the study villages. Cases of female divorces are noted in all three study villages but only one male divorcee was noted from Barpith village.

The educational pattern of the Kaibartas revealed that the number of illiterates is higher among females than among males in the three study villages. Girls usually join their mothers at work after three or four years of schooling. Boys, too, leave school at an early age. Only in recent years girls are being sent to school and very few girls go beyond primary education. As regards ownership of homestead land, it is noticed that in Bornibari village, all the households possess homestead land but in Boripara and Barpith villages, a few households do not possess homestead land but live in rented accommodation. Cultivable land is owned by a very few households in all three villages. The villagers suffer from proper sanitation, as only a few households possess toilets. The condition of Bornibari village is little better as the youth organization has provided certain villagers with sanitary low-cost toilets and shallow tube wells. Electricity seems to be a far cry for the villagers of Bornibari as only four households have electricity. However, the condition of the other two villages, Barpith and Boripara of Guwahati city, is the reverse. In these two villages, most of the houses have electricity.

The People

The Kaibartas, one of the major Scheduled Caste communities of Assam are mainly found in the plains district of Assam. They are the aboriginal inhabitants of Assam. They are one of the sixteen

Asian Resonance

Scheduled Caste communities of the State as per Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950. As they are found all over India including Bengal, social scientists have opined that they 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.

The different Dharma Shastras, Samhita, Smritis, Puranas have differently traced the origin of the Kaibartas. The Mahabharata refers to the Kaibartas as a distinct community. In his Abijnanam Sakuntalam, Kalidasa mentions about the Kaibartas when he narrates the recovery of a lost ring of Shakuntala from the stomach of a *rahu* fish (*Labio Rohita*) caught by a fisherman. The Dharma Shastras enlisted them as a fishing community. For example, the great Manu Samhita prescribes to the Kaibartas the profession of fishing. The same profession is associated to them even in the Jatakas where they are called as *Kevartta* (*Ke*-water, and *varta*-livelihood). This means that the Kaibartas derive their livelihood from water. According to Brahmavaibarta Purana, Parasuram Samhita and Yajnavalkya, the Kaibartas are born of Kshatriya father and Vaishya mother. Brahmavaibarta Purana also says that the sons of the Ganga are the sons of the Kaibarta.

However, the origin and migration of the Kaibartas are still shrouded with mystery. Scholars put forward diverse views: they are autochthones of India; they are the descendants of the earliest Dravidians who entered into India, etc. Robinson (1841) traces the Kaibarta origin among the Keots who are no longer treated as Kaibartas. Doley (1980) opines that swarms of migrants from distant regions have been coming to Assam, since the beginning of human history. While the Brahmins and the Kalitas (caste Hindus) of present Assam claim their descent from the early Aryan settlers, the Kaibartas are believed to be the descendants of the first Dravidian immigrants. About Kaibartas, Riskey (1891) writes that they are a large fishing and cultivating caste of Bengal proper, ranked below the Nava Shakha. Nava Shakhas constitute a group of nine castes from whose hands Brahmins take water. On the whole, it can be concluded that the Kaibartas are the earliest settlers of Assam and they are, as found today, a Scheduled Caste following both fishing and agriculture as professions. The occupational structure of the Kaibartas reveals that fishing is the main occupation, followed by agriculture.

The Kaibartas practice endogamy and intersegmental marriages are regularized by a purificatory ritual. No other caste prefers to have marital alliance with them. But the Kaibartas can accept other castes as affinal kins. Monogamy is the general rule though polygamy is also allowed, but only in case of childless marriage and that too, with the consent of the first wife. The widow possesses the right of remarriage.

The line of descent among the Kaibartas is traced through the father who is the head of the family. All the male members of a family enjoy the coparcenary right, unless one goes out of the family during the lifetime of the father.

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 Kaibartas catch fish either in the individual fisheries or various other types of fisheries. These include Fishery Co-operative Society's fishery, Government fishery and Mahaldar's (fishery owner) fishery. The Kaibarta women who are involved in fishing are known as *poharibai*. In addition to their regular household duties they carry out fishing. Rivers, wetlands, marshy areas, and tanks are generally the sources of fishing in Assam but in recent times, the Kaibartas are facing problems regarding utilization of fishing sources.

The Assamese language, belonging to the Indo-Aryan family of languages, is the mother tongue of the Kaibartas and the same language is used for intergroup communication too and they use the Assamese script.

The Kaibartas are Hindus who belong to the Sakta sect. They perform different types of puja like Siva puja, Durga puja, Kali puja, Mare puja and Ganga puja, etc. But presently Vaishnavism is followed by a large section who claims to be followers of Mahapurushia Vaishnava Dharma. There is a mixed group, i.e. followers of Vaishnava and Sakta faiths among the Kaibartas. These families do not like to give up the religious faiths of their ancestors but side by side they observe certain religious practices of Vaishnavism. A section of the Kaibartas, later even became followers of Buddhism and Jainism.

The Kaibartas of Upper Assam (eastern part of Assam) are known as Haridhanias who do not employ priests in their socio-religious functions, whereas their counterparts living in Lower Assam (south-western part of Assam), who are called Bomunia; engage a priest for performing their rites and rituals (Singh, 1993). They have no clans. They use 'Das', 'Hazarika', 'Saikia' and 'Baishya' surnames.

Their major festivals are Bohag Bihu (spring festival), Magh Bihu (harvest festival) and Kati Bihu. They also celebrate Janmashtami (Birthday of Sri Krishna). Their place of worship is the community hall (*namghar*).

As regards socio-legal system, the Kaibartas have their own system of law and justice and petty cases are decided in the villages. All kinds of disputes in the villages are settled in a community hall by the elderly men (*Raij*). If anybody refuses to obey the verdict of the *Raij*, he/she is either socially excommunicated or they have to pay a nominal fine. Besides, they also have a state level association called *Sadau Asom Kaibarta Sonmilon* (All Assam Kaibarta Association) to look after the welfare of the community.

As regards the etymology of the word *Kaibarta* it is held that the word *Kevartta* or *Kaibarta* is a derivation of the root *ke* or *ka* meaning water and *vrit* meaning exist (*Ke + vrit*). The term Kaibarta has been derived from *Kimvarta* consisting of two words, viz., *Kim* meaning ugly and *varta* meaning occupation which prevailed during the early age. So those who live in water or follow a degrading occupation are known as Kaibartas. The Kaibartas are one of the fishing communities of Assam who make net and boat, rear fish and collect it, tortoise and other

Asian Resonance

creatures of that species from water, live by selling the collected things and use water ways for their profession. There are as many as eight internal groups among the Kaibartas namely, *Jalia*, *Teli*, *Mali*, *Halowa*, *Seoli*, *Neoli*, *Katharowa* and *Bhari*. Though each of them is involved in the same traditional occupation of fishing, yet each group has its own distinct traits (Bezbaruah 2005).

Economic Life

Fishing is considered to be the only important occupation by the Kaibartas of Barpith, Boripara and Bornibari even though it is largely a seasonal occupation. Fishing developed from a trade once oriented towards subsistence to an occupation which has nowadays become part of the market economy.

There are about 40 to 45 varieties of fish caught by the Kaibartas of the three 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

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 three 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. The interspace of the screen is small (4-6mm). 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 fishes 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 used by the Kaibartas of the three study villages are mainly traps and nets.

The Kaibartas of Barpith depend on the *beels* 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. 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*.

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*, and *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.

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.).

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

Asian Resonance

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.

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. A section of them, 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.

By adopting the customs and way of life of the higher castes and through inter-caste marriages, the Kaibartas have tried to improve their socio-economic status. Even before independence, social movements were organized in Assam to rename the *Doms* as Kaibartas or *Nadiyals*, as an attempt to raise their social status. Thus, in the Census of 1901, the government of Assam identified the *Doms* as *Nadiyals*, and as Kaibartas in the 1921 Census. The *Nadiyals* of Assam further demanded the withdrawal of the word *Dom* from the Assamese dictionary. The government of Assam in turn, directed to use the word 'Kaibarta' instead of *Dom* or *Nadiyal* for all official use and in textbooks for schools.

The change-over from traditional occupation to non-traditional occupations like cultivation, trade, and industry, contract, service, etc. was mainly due to non-availability of the resources of fish, government's take over of the fisheries, influx trade, shortage of capital, and malfunctioning of the fishery co-operative societies. Further, the wetlands and its different species of flora and fauna are being threatened mainly due to accelerated drainage, land reclamation, deforestation, dumping of untreated effluents and sewage disposal, pollution, over-exploitation of wetland species, etc. Lack of sophisticated fishing gears have also compelled most of the Kaibartas to switch over to other means of livelihood.

Relationship between education and occupation

It is noticed that with the rise in the educational level, the percentage of fishing population to the total employed population seems to decline. Table 3 shows the relationship between education and occupation.

Table 3

Relationship between education and occupation among the Kaibartas of the study Villages.

(please see the page no. 29)

From Table 3, it is evident that there is a correlation between education and occupation. The number of men employed in fishing as against the total number of employed men varies inversely with their educational level. Majority of the men engaged in fishing are illiterates. Next, are the men who have had primary education. Those who have studied upto seventh standard form another fishing category. On the other hand, the position is just the opposite so far as the non-fishing occupations are concerned. In the three study villages, illiterates are not found to have pursued non-fishing occupations. Persons having secondary education and beyond are found to be engaged in non-fishing professions. Thus, it is seen that with the rise in the level of education, the percentage of fishing population to the total employed population has decreased.

The non-fishing occupations in Boripara and Barpith are wage earning, business and working as office assistants in various government and government undertakings. In Bornibari, business, service, wage earning, agriculture and working in

Asian Resonance

biscuit factories (elsewhere) are the non-fishing occupations generally pursued by most of them. It is seen that those in service or business are more or less literate. Whenever a Kaibarta boy completes his IXth standard and beyond, he feels that fishing as an occupation does not suit an educated person like him. Even his parents believe that being exposed to a different life-style in school, it is impossible for him to stand the tough life of a fisherman. In Bornibari, another important factor is noticed regarding preference to non-fishing occupations. The biscuit factories away from the village have attracted a large number of young Kaibartas whose minimum qualification is of studying at IVth standard. They are regular wage earners which also lured the young Kaibartas. One of the reasons for the change-over from fishing to non-fishing occupations is avenues of employment in various factories and companies in and around Guwahati.

A higher rate of occupational mobility is noticed among the Kaibartas of Barpith and Boripara than that of Bornibari. Information was gathered about the occupation of a respondent, his/her father's occupation and his/her father's father's occupation. Such information was collected from altogether 175 male respondents: 48 from Barpith, 48 from Boripara and 79 from Bornibari. In no case two siblings were chosen as respondents as that would led to duplication of the father's and father's father's occupations.

Table 4

Occupations of the Respondents (R), their Fathers (F) and Father's Fathers in the Study Villages.
(please seen the page no. 29)

It is evident from Table 4 that the father's (F) and father's fathers (FF) of the respondents (R) pursued fishing in the case of the Kaibartas of Bornibari village. Among the Kaibartas of Barpith, 53.85 percent F and 76.92 per cent F F pursued fishing. In Boripara also, only 52.08 percent F and 93.75 per cent FF pursued fishing. Thus, excepting the Kaibartas of Bornibari, changes in the traditional occupation have occurred both among the Kaibartas of Barpith and Boripara even in the case of F and FF generations. This is because of the fact that Barpith and Boripara being situated within the periphery of Guwahati City, most of them find job of one kind or the other in the various urban and industrial concerns of Guwahati City. The large number of saw mills, rice mills, flour mills, biscuit factories and plastic companies has engaged a good number of young Kaibartas as unskilled and semi-skilled personnel.

It is evident from the table that the percentages of fishermen are 37.04, 43.92 and 72.16 in the case of the respondents belonging respectively to Barpith, Boripara and Bornibari. This indicates that the traditional occupation has been given up by a number of respondents both among the rural and urban Kaibartas.

As regards the rate of movement of F and R from that of the occupations of FF, it is evident from table 25 that in the case of Kaibartas of Bornibari, all the F were fishermen like their fathers. In the case of R of Bornibari, 27.84 per cent have switched over to various non-traditional occupations. Among the Kaibartas of Barpith and Boripara, 62.96 percent and

56.08 per cent, respectively have switched over to various jobs from their traditional occupations. Thus, the rate of movement of both F and R from their traditional occupation is higher among the Kaibartas of Barpith and Boripara as compared to their counterparts in Bornibari. This implies that the rate of occupational mobility of both F and R among the Kaibartas of Barpith and Boripara, both situated in the periphery of Guwahati city is the highest as compared to those of Bornibari.

Developmental Approaches

The Scheduled Castes are the economically oppressed and socially less privileged than the higher castes. The Special Component Plan (SCP) of India for Scheduled Caste was designed during the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980 – 85). It was planned to channelise flow of benefits and outlays from the general sectors of the state for the development of Scheduled Castes. The Government of Assam has allowed reservation of seats for admission in the technical educational institutions like science, medical, veterinary, agricultural colleges. The Government has even taken initiative by providing them with pre-matric scholarships and other incentives (book grants and school uniforms etc.) to increase the number of girl students and raise the enrolment of students in the secondary level of education. Even centrally sponsored post-matric scholarships are disbursed among the successful candidates. The Government of Assam has also passed an act by which seats were reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under State Government services.

Among the Kaibartas of Barpith and Boripara, villagers are deprived of the many developmental schemes. These two villages fall under the jurisdiction of Guwahati Municipal Corporation. Bornibari, being situated in a rural setting has been benefited due to the efforts of the Bornibari Youth Organization. The youth organization was established in 1970 with the sole motive of bringing all round development of the village.

Various programmes are organized in Bornibari from time to time by the Bornibari Yuvak Sangha in collaboration with Rashtriya Gramin Vikash Nidhi (RGVN), Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART), Development of Women and Child of Rural Areas (DWCRA), Training of Rural Youths for Self-Employment (TRYSEM) and the World Bank.

In the past 50 years, there has been remarkable progress in the development of the fisheries sector in Assam. The *beel* and riverine fisheries in Assam are under the administrative control of the state Government. They are leased out at an annual revenue basis to the individual lessees or Fishery Co-operative Societies either by preferential lease or by open or tender auction. The Assam Fishery Development Corporation, set up in the year 1975, is also another important organization for the management of some fisheries in Assam.

The fishery enterprise requires a considerable amount of capital for investment to initiate a commercial farm. The government felt the importance of the growing demand for fish production and set up a Technical Committee on Inland Fisheries

Asian Resonance

to determine the intervention required for popularizing scientific fish farming. On the basis of the recommendations of the committee, the Government of India launched in 1973 a centrally sponsored Pilot Scheme of Fish Farmers' Development Agencies (FFDA). The main aim of the scheme was to disseminate the scientific method of composite fish culture among the fish farmers and to coordinate the activities of various institutional agencies in inland fishery development programmes. The first Fish Farmers Development Agency (FFDA) was established in Assam in 1974-75 in Kamrup District. Later on, the Scheme has been gradually extended to other districts of the state. During these years, the FFDA in Assam have been providing training in agriculture to selected persons in their own training centres, arranging loan from banks for the fish farmers and also providing subsidies along with the bank loans to excavate new ponds or expand and renovate the old ones. The scheme also provides necessary technical guidance to the fish farmers whenever it is required. In the recent years, the North-Eastern Council (NEC) has embarked upon a comprehensive programme for developing pisciculture in the entire North East India by arranging augmentation and diversification of fish seed resources in the region. Even in Assam the Council has taken up a scheme of setting an air breathing fish seed farm at Nowgong to produce 4 million fry of various species of *magur* (*Clarias batrachus*) and *Kawoi* (*Anabas testudineus*) annually.

Conclusion

With the rise in the level of education, there has been a gradual decline in the number of fishing population. The educated Kaibartas are leaving their traditional calling of fishing in preference to non-fishing jobs.

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 rural to urban situation. In relation to the context of Redfield's (1941) evolutionary scheme of 'rural-urban continuum', it can be stated that as one moves along the continuum from rural environment to urban environment, 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. Cities offer their residents a far wider range of options and opportunities and enable them to engage in many more interests and activities than are possible in rural areas. 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. In an attempt to discern a 'rural – urban dichotomy' in the socio-economic life of the Kaibartas, it can be stated that the Kaibartas of the three situations, i.e. Barpith, Boripara and Bornibari range from most urban to least urban. From this point of view the Kaibartas of Bornibari are close to the rural environment and the Kaibartas of Barpith and Boripara are close to the urban environment.

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 shimmering 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. This change has also contributed to the emergence of new dimensions in the field of social and economic relations. In Bornibari it is seen that outside the circles of a villager, his kin, his caste and his village, a Kaibarta carries on more intermittent social relations that are nevertheless of high importance for him and for the whole social system. But one thing is clear that occupational mobility never affects the hierarchy of the caste in any way. Even though a person changes his occupation he continues to remain as a member of the caste he is born into.

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

The discussion on economic life 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 shortage of capital, difficulties in transportation and marketing of their catch, etc. 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.

Caste disparities do not disappear with development. 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). However, in the villages bordering Guwahati city, there are cases of inter-caste marriages. Caste inequalities seem to be lower in these two villages

Asian Resonance

than the one situated far away from Guwahati city. The concept of purity and pollution are not that rigid in these two villages (Barpith and Boripara).

The present scenario indicates that change with regard to occupation is inevitable. The age old methods of fishing are admittedly very ingenious and so returns from fishing will be meagre. Those Kaibartas who wish to continue with their traditional occupation must try to acquaint themselves with the up-to-date knowledge about the habits of fish, especially their seasonal migration, and with the results of the scientific experiments carried on in fishing techniques. If the Kaibarta fishermen are induced to take advantage of the various types of insurances, they would be immensely benefited. For all these improvements, co-operation among the people and help from outside are both necessary. People's participation in the development programmes undertaken by various development agencies is very much essential.

It seems that the link between caste and occupation has weakened in the recent years. A number of forces have played their role to disrupt this age-old link. Land reforms, declining income from fishing, link with urban centres, and lucrative offers in the city have forced many of the fishermen caste to engage themselves in other vocations. Increased requirements for education among modern professions have led to influx of people from a variety of castes into modern occupations (Sharma 1999).

References

- Basu, M.N. 1975. *Sociology*, Calcutta: The World Press Private Ltd.
- Beteille, Andre. 1992. *The Backward Classes in Contemporary India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Bezbaruah 2005. *Socio-economic change and dimension of social mobility* Project Dalit: Guwahati. Assam
- Desai, Sonalde & Amaresh Dubey. 2011. Caste in 21st Century India : Competing Narratives in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVI No.11 (March 12).
- Doley, Durgeswar 1980. 'Assamese liberalism' in *Assam and the Assamese Mind*, p.35-36
- Dumont, Louis 1970. *Homo Hierarchicus*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Ghurye, G.S. 1932. *Caste and Race in India* London: Kegan Paul
1961. *Caste, Class and Occupation* Bombay: Popular Book Depot.
- Kapur, Devesh, Chandra Bhan Prasad, Lant Pritchett, and D Shyam Babu .2010. "Rethinking Inequality: Dalits in Uttar Pradesh in the Market Reform Era", *Economic & Political Weekly*, 45 (35): 39-49.
- Marriott, McKim 1960. *Caste Ranking and Community Structure in Five Regions of India and Pakistan*, Poona: Deccan College, Monograph, Ser., No.23
- Mukherjee, Bhabananda 1963. 'Caste-Ranking among Rajbanshis in North Bengal' (Bala Ratnam, ed): *Anthropology on the March*. pp.206-12.
- Redfield, Robert. 1941. *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

- .1955. *The little community: viewpoint for the study of human whole*.
13. Ristley, H.H. 1981. *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* Vol.1. pp.375-382
14. Robinson, William 1841. *A Descriptive Account of Assam* Chap.VII, P.263
15. Sharma, K.L. 1999. *Social Inequality in India : Profiles of Caste Class and Social Mobility*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
16. Srinivas, M.N. 1987. *The Dominant Caste and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks.

TABLES

Table 1

Distribution of the Kaibartas in the Three Study Villages, 2004-07

District	Village	Male	%	Femal	%	Total	Total no. of house hold
Kamrup	Barpith	154	13.56	128	12.36	282	37
	Boripara	150	13.20	131	12.66	281	46
Nalbari	Bornibari	832	73.24	776	74.98	1608	330
	Total	1136	100.00	1035	100.00	2171	413
District	Village	Male	%	Female	%	Total	Total no. of house hold
Kamrup	Barpith	154	13.56	128	12.36	282	37
	Boripara	150	13.20	131	12.66	281	46
Nalbari	Bornibari	832	73.24	776	74.98	1608	330
	Total	1136	100.00	1035	100.00	2171	413

Table 2

Distribution of the Kaibartas in the Three Study Villages, 2004-07

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

- Kalita: An upper caste Hindu of Assam.
- Rajbanshi: A backward caste of Assam.
- Brahmin: One of the highest or priestly castes among the Hindus
- Biharis: Original inhabitants of the State of Bihar, India.

Table 3

Relationship between education and occupation among the Kaibartas of the study Villages

Degree of education	Total No. of Employed Men	No. of Men Employed in					
		Fishing			Non fishing		
		Barpith	Boripara	Bornibari	Barpith	Boripara	Bornibari
Illiterates	75	34 (45.95%)	20 (44.44%)	41 (21.24%)	-- (0.00%)	-- (0.00%)	-- (0.00%)
Primary (std. 1- 4)	100	29 (39.19%)	9 (20.00%)	50 (25.91%)	-- (0.00%)	-- (0.00%)	12 (5.56%)
Secondary (std. 5- 7)	275	11 (14.86)	16 (35.56%)	97 (50.26%)	18 (60.00%)	10 (41.67%)	123 (56.94%)
Above std. 7	112	-- (0.00%)	-- (0.00%)	5 (2.59%)	12 (40.00%)	14 (58.33%)	81 (37.50%)
Total	582	74 (100.00%)	45 (100.00%)	193 (100.00%)	30 (100.00%)	24 (100.00%)	216 (100.00%)

TABLE 4

Occupations of the Respondents (R), their Fathers (F) and Father's Fathers in the study Villages

Occupations	Barpith			Boripara			Bornibari		
	R (%)	F (%)	FF (%)	R (%)	F (%)	FF (%)	R (%)	F (%)	FF (%)
Fishing	37.04	53.85	76.92	43.92	52.08	93.75	72.16	100.00	100.00
Wage earning	14.82	15.39	3.85	28.34	12.50	4.17	10.13	-	-
Service	16.67	19.23	-	8.17	-	-	2.55	-	-
Bus/Taxi driving	9.26	-	-	3.08	-	-	-	-	-
Mechanic	3.70	-	-	3.08	4.17	2.08	1.26	-	-
Tailor	5.56	-	-	-	-	-	1.26	-	-
School teaching	1.85	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Vegetable seller	1.85	7.61	-	3.08	4.17	-	-	-	-
Agriculture	-	3.85	15.38	3.08	27.08	-	3.79	-	-
Weaver	3.70	-	-	-	-	-	1.26	-	-
Hand-cart puller	1.85	-	-	-	-	-	1.26	-	-
Bus conductor	3.70	-	-	-	-	-	1.26	-	-
Factory worker (Biscuit companies)	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.55	-	-
NGO worker	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.26	-	-
Nurse	-	-	-	3.08	-	-	-	-	-
Business	-	-	-	4.17	-	-	1.26	-	-
Total	100.0 0	100.0 0	100.00	100.0 0	100.0 0	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00