

## CHAPTER 5

# **The Influence of Traditional Caste Occupation on Present Economic and Occupational Status, Perception of Nature and Trade, Child Socialization and Religious Practises and Rituals**

By R. Ray/U. Tietze

Even though marine fishing is carried out traditionally as a caste occupation in India, non-fisherfolk castes have lately been entering this profession in increasing numbers in its artisanal as well as mechanized form. The reasons for this trend are the increased demand for fish for home consumption, an increasing export market for marine products, particularly prawns, as well as a lack of alternative employment opportunities in agriculture, etc.

The entry of non-fisherfolk castes into artisanal marine fishing is, however, restricted to areas where environmental conditions such as natural harbours, creeks, rivers, lagoons, etc. make it possible to operate displacement boats as it is the case in the Balasore district of Orissa.

The surf-beaten open beaches of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and South Orissa from where primarily log rafts are operated with an extraordinarily high amount of skill and experience, have hardly attracted any non-fisherfolk caste members yet, except for beach-based seine net operations.

This chapter examines whether traditional caste occupation still has a bearing in terms of economic and occupational status, in terms of variety and range of the fishing technology in operation, perception of nature and trade, child socialization and religious practises and rituals.

The findings are based on a sample of 126 fisherfolk families selected from six villages in the Balasore district of Orissa. 71 households belong to the traditional fisherfolk castes Kaibarta and Gokha while 55 households belong to other castes e.g. Khandayat, Teli, Gauda, Radhi, Tanti, Kumar and Barik.

Ethnically Balasore's fisherfolk consist of Oriyas and Bengalis of both fisherfolk and non-fisherfolk castes, the latter having taken up fishing either during this generation or one or two generations ago.

### 5.1 Economic and Occupational Status

As pointed out earlier traditional as well as non-traditional Oriya and Bengali fisherfolk practise agriculture and other trades as occupations during certain months of the year. The following table shows how many men/months each group spends per year on fishing and agriculture respectively and thereby compares their occupational status.

**Table 1 : Traditional Caste Occupation vs. Present Occupational Status.**

Traditional Caste Occupation	Present Occupational Status	Men/Month per Household & Year spent on	
		Fishing	Other Occupations : Agriculture, Artisan etc.
Fishing (n =71)		21.1	5.5
Non-fishing : agricultural labourers, peasants, artisans etc. (n=55)		16.6	6.0

Traditional fisherfolk spend more time on fishing, and slightly less time on secondary occupations than non-traditional fisherfolk. Thus the traditional caste occupation has still a bearing on the present occupational status, though mainly in terms of the engagement in fishing. The fact that there is hardly any difference with regard to secondary agricultural and artisanal occupations supports the earlier discussed assumption that other castes have partly taken to sea fishing because of the lack of traditional employment opportunities.

Regarding the present economic status in fishing, the following picture emerges for traditional and non-traditional fisherfolk.

**Table 2 : Traditional Caste Occupation vs. Economic Status**

Economic Status	Traditional Caste Occupation	
	Fishing (n=71)	Non-fishing (n=55)
Labourer	30%	24%
Net owner	46%	31%
Boat and Net owner	24%	45%

The economic status of traditional fisherfolk more or less compatible with the working pattern or operational pattern of the fishing technology. Boats are owned individually. They have a crew of 4-5 on an average. The majority of crew members contribute net pieces in order to get a share from the revenue from fishing.

Thus about one-fourth to one-fifth of the fisherfolk households are boat owners, the rest either labourers without assets or net owners, the latter being in the majority.

In the case of non-traditional fisherfolk, however the boat and net owners form the largest group. This suggests that non-traditional

fisherfolk gets into fishing more by contributing assets (boats) than by contributing skilled labour.

In the following we shall compare boat and net owners and net owners belonging to traditional fisherfolk castes and other castes with regard to the question, how many net pieces or boats they own on an average.

**Table 3 : Traditional Caste Occupation vs. Ownership of Fishing Technology**

Average no. of Technology used and owned by Household	Traditional Caste Occupation	Fishing (n=71)	Non-fishing (n = 55)
Average no. of Net Pieces owned by a Net Owner		8.1	1.7
Average <b>no.</b> of Net Pieces/ Boats owned by a Boat and Net Owner	Boats :	1.2	1.1
	Net Pieces :	53.9	4.1

The table shows that net owners as well as boat and net owners from traditional fisherfolk castes are far better equipped with fishing gear than those from non-traditional fisherfolk castes.

While net owners as well as boat and net owners from traditionally non-fishing castes are usually small owners, owners belonging to traditional fisherfolk castes, particularly those who own boats and nets, have a considerable number of assets. Here we examine the type of gear that are operated by both groups in order to explain the quantitative information in the table with qualitative details.

**Table 4 : Traditional Caste Occupation vs. Variety of Fishing Craft and Gear**

Type of Fishing Craft/Gear operated	Traditional Caste Occupation	Fishing (n=71)	Non-fishing (n=55)
<b>Craft :</b>			
Salti /Dinghy (small)		16 (94%)	7 (27 %)
Patia/Danga/Dinghy (large)/Teppa		—	19 (73 %)
Chhoat		1 (6%)	—
<b>Craft, total :</b>		17 (100%)	26 (100%)
<b>Gear, marine :</b>			
Gillnets		28 (26%)	1255 (95 %)
Encircling gillnet		9 (8%)	—
Dragnet		—	7 (0.5 %)
Tidal wallnet		—	1 (0.1 %)
<b>Marine gear, total :</b>		37 (34%)	1263 (96 %)
<b>Gear, estuarine :</b>			
Set bagnet		9 (8%)	26 (2%)
Stake net/gillnet		31 (29%)	14 (1 %)
Castnet		23 (21%)	14 (1%)
Longline		7 (7%)	1 (0.1%)
<b>Estuarine gear, total :</b>		70 (65%)	55 (4%)
<b>Gear, total</b>		107 (99%)	1318 (100%)

The table shows clearly that artisanal fisherfolk, whose traditional caste occupation is fishing almost exclusively own marine fishing gear, while the majority of gear owned by non-traditional fisherfolk consists of estuarine gear, which indicates that the first group practice their occupation predominantly in the open sea, while the latter one is confined to a large extent to estuaries and river-mouths.

Accordingly boats operated by non-traditional fisherfolk are almost exclusively the less sea-worthy types of Salti and small Dhingy, more suitable for estuaries, while traditional fisherfolk use the more sea-worthy types of boats such as Patia/Botali and large Dhingy.

## 5.2 Perception of Nature and Trade

Perceptions of nature have been studied with the help of two questions, the first one asking reasons for good and poor catch and the second one causes of cyclones. The explanations of the respondents have been classified according to the fact whether the respondents cited mainly natural or supernatural causes.

Natural causes of good or poor catch as mentioned by respondents were weather conditions, depth and layer of the sea where the net is set, influence of tide and currents, shoaling of fish etc. Supernatural causes were related to omens, performance of pujas, evil eye, punishment of gods, sin, bad fate, etc.

Natural reasons for cyclones as observed by the fisherfolk were concentration of clouds, air pressure, strong winds and rough sea, sea spray etc. while the supernatural reasons were **similar** as in the case of good and poor catch.

**Table 4 : Traditional Caste Occupation vs. Variety of Fishing Craft and Gear**

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**Table 5 : Reasons for Good and poor Catch**

Reasons	Traditional Caste Occupation	Fishing (n=71)	Non- fishing (n=55)
Natural reasons		47 (66%)	24 (44 %)
Supernatural causes		24 (34 %)	29 (53 %)
Indifferent		-	2 (4%)
Total		71 (100%)	55 (101%)

**Table 6 : Causes of Cyclones**

Causes	Traditional Caste Occupation	Fishing (n=71)	Non- fishing (n=55)
1. Natural cause		52 (73%)	24 (44%)
2. Supernatural cause		11 (16%)	5 (9%)
3. Indifferent		8 (11%)	26 (47%)
Total		71 (100%)	55 (100%)



Both tables show that realistic explanations citing natural causes are given more frequently by respondents whose traditional caste occupation is fishing.

This finding suggests that a longer association with sea fishing leads to a more realistic perception of nature. Similarly, marine fisherfolk by caste have a clearer view of the future of their trade while non-traditional fisherfolk are more often indifferent.

This is shown in the following table, where the answers have been categorized as pessimistic, optimistic and indifferent views.

**Table 7 : Perception of Future of Trade**

Perception	Traditional Caste Occupation	Fishing (n=71)	Non-fishing (n=55)
1. Optimistic		25 (35%)	6 (11%)
2. Pessimistic		40 (56%)	17 (31 %)
3. Indifferent		6 (9 %)	32 (58 %)
Total		71 (100%)	55 (100%)

While almost half of the non-traditional fisherfolk have no opinion, more than 90% of the traditional fisherfolk respondents express a view. AS a result, the percentage of the pessimistic as well as the percentage of the optimistic respondents is greater in the group of traditional fisherfolk than in the group of non-traditional fisherfolk, where the number of indifferent responses is greater.

In both groups the pessimistic views dominate. According to the fisherfolk, with increased exploitation of fish resources the amount of catch is decreasing and hence the future cannot be assured in terms of fish production.

### 5.3 Child Socialization

The economic and occupational status of parents as well as their attitudes and perceptions usually determine to a considerable extent how their children are socialized. This is to be expected even more if the family is at the same time a production unit and the area of socialization is the initiation of children into various types of work and responsibilities to be carried out in co-operation with other family members.

We shall now examine whether the differences between the traditional and the non-traditional fisherfolk in their occupational and economic status, as well as their perceptions of nature and trade are reflected by the ways their children are initiated into the various duties and responsibilities related to their family occupation ( fishing, marketing / processing ), internal household work (cooking, cleaning, washing, child care, tailoring, management of family finance), external household work (firewood collection, water carrying, shopping), and subsidiary occupations (animal keeping, gardening).

Table 8 shows the responses of the 126 fisherfolk households selected from 6 villages in North Orissa, to the question whether a girl or a boy is usually initiated into these activities and' at what age.

In the traditional fisherfolk families the average age at which children are initiated into work is usually lower than in the fisherfolk families with other traditional caste occupations, e.g. agriculturists, artisans, etc. While in families belonging to-the latter group, girls are not at all initiated into fish marketing and processing, this work is very common among girls of the traditional fisherfolk families. According to the responses, the girls are engaged in fish marketing and processing three times as often as their brothers.

A similar picture emerges for other outdoor activities such as animal keeping, shopping, and firewood collection, 'into which girls of the traditional fisherfolk families are more often initiated than girls of the non-traditional fisherfolk families. The reason might be that, in families of agriculturists, village artisans, etc., women traditionally have to stay in the house or close to the house,

**Table 8 : Initiation into Work vs. Traditional Caste Occupation**

Sex/Age Type of work	Traditional Caste Occupation			Traditional Fisherfolk (n=71)		Non-traditional Fisherfolk (n=55)		
	Female child	Male child	No response	Average age of initiation into work	Female child	Male child	No response	Average age of initiation into work
Fishing	-	71	-	13	-	53	2	12.1
Marketing/processing	33	11	27	9.4	-	33	22	13.4
Management of family finance	-	66	5	14.25	-	53	2	19.6
Cooking	71	-	-	10.5	44	-	11	11.42
Washing, cleaning	70	1	-	10.1	41	-	14	11.08
Child care	69	2	-	10.9	47	3	5	12.68
Tailoring	8	-	63	12.75	2s	-	27	20.00
Water carrying	70	1	-	9.5	4s	-	7	10.42
Firewood collection	69	-	2	9.2	30	12	13	12.72
Shopping	11	52	8	9.55	3	41	11	11.94
Gardening	1	30	40	10.45	13	15	27	12.42
Animal keeping	50	1	20	11-15	14	17	24	12.00

while among fisherfolk, this tradition has been partly abandoned because of the special situation, where fishermen have to spend a considerable amount of time away from their home out at sea, and the women have to do a number of outdoor activities. That is why the average age of initiation into work-except fishing itself-is lower among the traditional fisherfolk than among the non-traditional fisherfolk.

On the other hand, children are more often initiated into gardening and tailoring in fisherfolk families, which originally belonged to the agriculturist or artisan castes.

The findings suggest that the traditional caste occupations of artisanal marine fisherfolk in North Orissa still have a considerable influence on the socialization of their children.

#### **5.4 Religious Practices and Rituals**

While there are still distinct differences in occupational and economic status, perception of nature and child education between those whose traditional caste occupation is fishing and those whose fathers or forefathers had traditionally followed other occupations, the question arises, whether this is also the case with religious practices and rituals. In the following paragraphs traditional and non-traditional fisherfolk are compared regarding two aspects of religious culture, namely religious practices and rituals related to the fishing operation itself, and rituals for children.

##### **5.4.1 Religious Practices and Rituals related to Fishing**

Artisanal marine fishing in North Orissa is embedded in a variety of religious beliefs and traditions. Its supernatural and symbolic idealistic significance is met by a number of religious practices and rituals, which are performed by the fisherfolk, to inaugurate a new boat, to pacify the sea, to bless boats and nets, to ensure a good catch and a safe return, etc. The object of rituals and practices is either the boat, the sea and the net or deities that are related to the sea, the boat, and the net, or the goddesses and gods of the greater Hindu tradition, **and** of the lesser Hindu tradition, as well as village or household deities.

Among the deities related to the sea, the boat and the net, 'Gangamata', the goddess of the sea, is the one most commonly worshipped. River deities such as Brahmani and Dhamrai are also of considerable significance, even though limited to a certain region. For instance, these two deities belong to the estuaries and coastal areas close to the mouths of the rivers Dhamra and Brahmani. 'Kasthabudi' is generally worshipped as the goddess of the boat and 'Varuna' as the god of the winds. Very frequently it was found **during** the study, that boats, nets and the sea were personified and worshipped by the fisherfolk.

Gods and goddesses of the greater Hindu tradition, who are worshipped by the fisher-folk of North Orissa in the context of fishing operations are 'Kali', worshipped particularly by fisherfolk of Bengali origin, 'Satanarayana', 'Gayatree', 'Jowar', besides household, village and local deities and goddesses and gods of the little tradition. In the case of goddesses and gods related to the sea and the boat as well as in the case of 'Kali', a small idol of the deity is usually installed in the bow of the boat.

It was observed during the study that while details of rituals and practices as well as objects of worship sometimes differ from village to village and region to region, a common pattern prevails.

The main occasions for the performance of the acts of worship are the beginning of a fishing trip, the full moon and new moon days (corresponding to high tides and the first fishing trip with a newly constructed boat) apart from rituals related to boat building.

A general practice of worship among the marine fisherfolk of North Orissa, as observed during the study, is to burn incense sticks or ghee threads while sailing to the fishing ground. Others offer daily fruits, flowers or just prayers to the boats or their goddess or god before setting out to sea.

Another daily practice, of 'Kali' worshippers in particular, and also of those who worship 'Gangamata,' is the splashing or sprinkling of the 'holy' Ganges water on the bow of the boat. A variation of this custom is that the fishermen, before setting out to sea, take a bath in the morning and ritually offer water to the bow of the boat with their hands. Once a fortnight, on new moon and

full moon days, a puja is usually performed, during which coconut, sun-dried rice, milk, bananas, vermilion, fruits, flowers, sandalwood paste or liquid, and cinnabar are offered to the boat or the deity. Some fisherfolk also offer the boat goddess 'Kasthabudi' or 'Kali' a new saree on this occasion, by fixing a red or blue piece of cloth to the bow of their boat.

This practice is also followed on the first fishing trip with a newly constructed boat as well as in the last month of the old year ('Chaitra Sankranti').

In the following table, rituals and religious practices have been classified into three groups according to the object of worship, viz. practices related exclusively to boat, sea, net, or to respective goddesses and gods, practices involving also other deities, besides those mentioned above, and practices involving exclusively other deities than those related to boat, net and sea.

Traditional and non-traditional fisherfolk are compared with regard to the three categories, in order to see whether fisherfolk with other traditional caste occupations than fishing have already assimilated religious practices related to their new environment to the same extent as the traditional fisherfolk.

**Table 9 : Religious Practices and Rituals vs. Traditional Caste Occupation**

Religious Practice	Traditional vs. non-traditional Fisher folk	Traditional Fisherfolk (n=71)	Non-traditional Fisherfolk (n=55)
Exclusively related to sea, boat, net		46 (65 %)	39 (71%)
Not related to sea, boat, net		4 ( 6%)	6 (11%)
Both		21 (30%)	10 (18%)

The table shows that the religious practices of the non-traditional fisherfolk relate exclusively to fishing to an even larger extent than those of the traditional fisherfolk. This circumstance, which is surprising at the first glance, can be interpreted as a sign of cultural overassimilation, which is the result of taking up a new occupation that is more dangerous and more hazardous in nature than the traditional caste occupation. Considerable spiritual and religious assurance is required and it is obtained by performing a large number of offerings to the sea and the boat in order to pacify the sea and ensure a safe return.

#### 5.4.2 Rituals for Children

Five different types of rituals for children are generally observed among the fisherfolk of North Orissa.

'Sasthipuja', 'Punchuati' or 'Uthiary' are performed on the 6th or 7th day after the birth of a child. Even though the exact contents of the rituals differ from caste to caste, from village to village and sometimes even from family to family, the general pattern as observed is that Sasthi, the goddess of the children, is worshipped and invoked to bless the child. After anointing herself with turmeric and oil, the mother of the child takes a purificatory bath in a pond so that she can take up household work again. The child is also bathed for the first time. In some cases the horoscope of the child is prepared by an astrologer, and a name is given to the child,

The second type of child ritual is represented by 'Sivapuja', 'Ekoisa' and 'Namakaran' which are performed on the 21st day after the birth of the child. On these **occasions** 'Siva', 'Jaladevi', 'Gangamata', 'Sasthi' as well as village deities are worshipped for the sake of a prosperous and bright future for the child. A name is given to the child and the horoscope is prepared if it has not already been done during the rituals performed on the 6th or 7th day after the birth of the child.

Six to seven months after the birth of the child, the third type of ritual called 'Annaprasana' is performed. On this occasion the child is given solid food for the first time. The shaving ceremony is another type of ritual. On this occasion of 'Chudakarma', the

head of the child is shaved for the first time and village deities are worshipped.

The fifth and last type of child ritual performed by fisherfolk in North Orissa includes the birthday of a child as well as 'Prathamastami', which concerns only the first-born child and is celebrated in the month of December. On both occasions the child is given new clothes.

The following table numerically relates the observance of each ritual with the traditional and non-traditional fisherfolk households.

Table 10 : Rituals for Children vs. Traditional Caste occupation<sup>1</sup>

Ritual	Traditional vs. Non-traditional Fisherfolk	Traditional Fisherfolk (n=71)	Non-traditional Fisherfolk (n=55)
Sasthipuja			
Punchuati	6th or 7th day	11 (15%)	28 (51 %)
Uthiary			
Sivapuja			
Ekoiisa	21 st day	42 (59%)	11 (20%)
Namakaran			
Annprasana	6th or 7th month	14 (20 %)	14 (26%)
Chudakarma		1 ( 2%)	5 ( 9%)
Prathamastami/ birthday	1st year	2 ( 3%)	4( 7%)

Characteristic differences between the traditional and the non-traditional fisherfolk are :

Comparing the rituals performed on the 6th or 7th day after the birth of a child with the rituals performed on the 21st day, we find that traditional fisherfolk emphasize clearly the latter while non-traditional fisherfolk emphasize the former.

1. The numbers in the columns do not add up to the total number of respondents because some families do not perform rituals at all while others perform several rituals.



Moreover, as far as the contents of the rituals are concerned, traditional fisherfolk worship more often 'Jaladevi' and 'Gangamata', both goddesses of the sea, so that the new born child may not face any difficulties later on, while fishing in the sea, whereas in the case of non-traditional fishermen, 'Sasthi' is usually worshipped for the general well-being of the child.

Even though the table does not show much difference between traditional and non-traditional fisherfolk with regard to performance of Annaprasana, the contents of the ritual differs. In the case of traditional fisherfolk, fish is given in many cases as the first solid food to the child and also offered to the gods.

Other rituals such as Chudakarma and Prathamastami, are less frequently performed by traditional than by non-traditional fisherfolk.

All in all, the findings show that the child rituals of artisanal marine fisherfolk in North Orissa reflect their traditional caste occupation.

### 5.5 Summary

Artisanal marine fisherfolk whose traditional caste occupation is fishing differ from artisanal marine fisherfolk with other traditional caste occupations with regard to all the aspects that have been studied, even though the latter, too, have been fishing for one to three generations. Compared to their counterparts traditional fisherfolk spend more time on fishing and less on secondary occupations.

They operate more seaworthy boats with larger amounts of gear in the open sea while non-caste fisherfolk operate less seaworthy craft with smaller amounts of gear and are more confined to river mouths and estuarine waters, While fisherfolk by caste show a distribution of economic **status** which is congruent with the operational pattern of the fishing technology, non-caste fisherfolk participate in fishing more frequently by contribution of assets.

Because of their longer association with the marine environment, traditional fisherfolk have a more realistic perception of nature than fisherfolk with other traditional caste occupations.

Similarly, by virtue of their longer association with fishing, traditional marine fisherfolk seem to have a more definite view of the future of their trade than do artisanal marine fisherfolk with traditional caste occupations other than fishing.

With regard to the education of their children, traditional fisherfolk families initiate girls into fish marketing and processing and also in outdoor activities such as shopping, firewood collection and animal keeping, while in fisherfolk families with traditional caste occupations other than fishing such as agriculturists and artisans, girls are restricted to activities in or close to the house. The greater role of women in traditional fisher-folk families as well as the generally lower age at which children are initiated into work can be ascribed to the regular absence of fishermen from their homes which is not the case with farmer and artisan families.

The performance of rituals for children in the non-traditional fisherfolk families differ from that in the families of traditional fisherfolk, where deities related to sea, boat, wind etc. play a more important role.

As to the rituals that are performed before or while going out for fishing, non-traditional fisherfolk worship the sea, boat and net and their deities more often than traditional fisherfolk. This phenomenon can be interpreted as an element of overassimilation to the fisherfolk culture in order to compensate for the insecurity caused by a new and potentially threatening environment, which is why most of the rituals include prayers for a safe return from the sea.

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