

Fisheries Traditions in Bangladesh

Fishing, as old as hunting and gathering of food, is a traditional occupation in Bangladesh. As in some parts of India and Sri Lanka, fisheries resources of the country had been managed through the adoption of sociocultural and religious processes of control. These beliefs played an important role in evolving an implicit mechanism for exploiting and managing the naturally occurring stock of fish over the years, without disrupting the ecological balance and the regenerating potential of the resource itself.

Job-Specific Caste System

Fishing in marine and riverine waters of Bangladesh has long since been considered a traditional practice by a group of people who maintain a different set of sociocultural and religious beliefs from the rest of the communities. These traditional fishermen are known as "Jaladas", a term that implies a family genealogy tied to fishing occupations. The literal meaning of "Jaladas" is slave of water and the "Jaladas" community occupies one of the lowest castes in Hindu religion which introduced a job-specific caste

A family in a typical fishing village in Bangladesh.
Photo by M. Aguero.



A.K.M. MAHFUZUDDIN AHMED*

Department of Economics
University of Chittagong
Chittagong, Bangladesh

system into traditional Hindu society many hundred years ago. They have been operating and living in isolated villages along the coasts or sides of major rivers for centuries. As a community they are relatively autonomous from the rest of the villagers with respect to primary social relations and kinship. They have nonetheless been integrated at present into the village in terms of labor, source of capital, village politics and village resources. Cultural sanctions and social norms created a gap between the fishing and nonfishing communities, and in essence placed the fishery resources under the exclusive exploitative control of these "slaves of water".

The closed nature of the fishing community and the existence of a distinct subculture served as a barrier to the entry of other communities into the fishery, which, being an open-access resource, could have been exploited as well by persons from other communities. On the other hand, these traditional fishermen are bound by social and cultural norms and barriers with regard to adopting changes in their occupation. Over the years they have engaged in subsistence fishing with the least mechanical sophistication in their operations. They abide by some implicit restrictions on the exploitation of the fishery and refrain from the type of effort that might cause harmful effects on the growth and recycling of the resource (e.g., use of dynamites and construction of temporary barriers).

Thus, the sociocultural gap between fishing and non-fishing communities helped regulate the fisheries without much difficulty in the absence of any explicit legal restrictions on entry and exploitation activities. The conservational role of this fishery subculture appears more pertinent in the present day situation wherein factors of caste competition as well as its ideological superstructure seem to be diminishing in importance. The century-old traditions of the "Jaladas" community are now under continuous pressure to break apart. This process started in the mid-1960s with

economic and social changes caused by increasing population and landlessness, lack of opportunities in the industrial sector and the introduction of free market economies and the modern concept of commercial fishing.

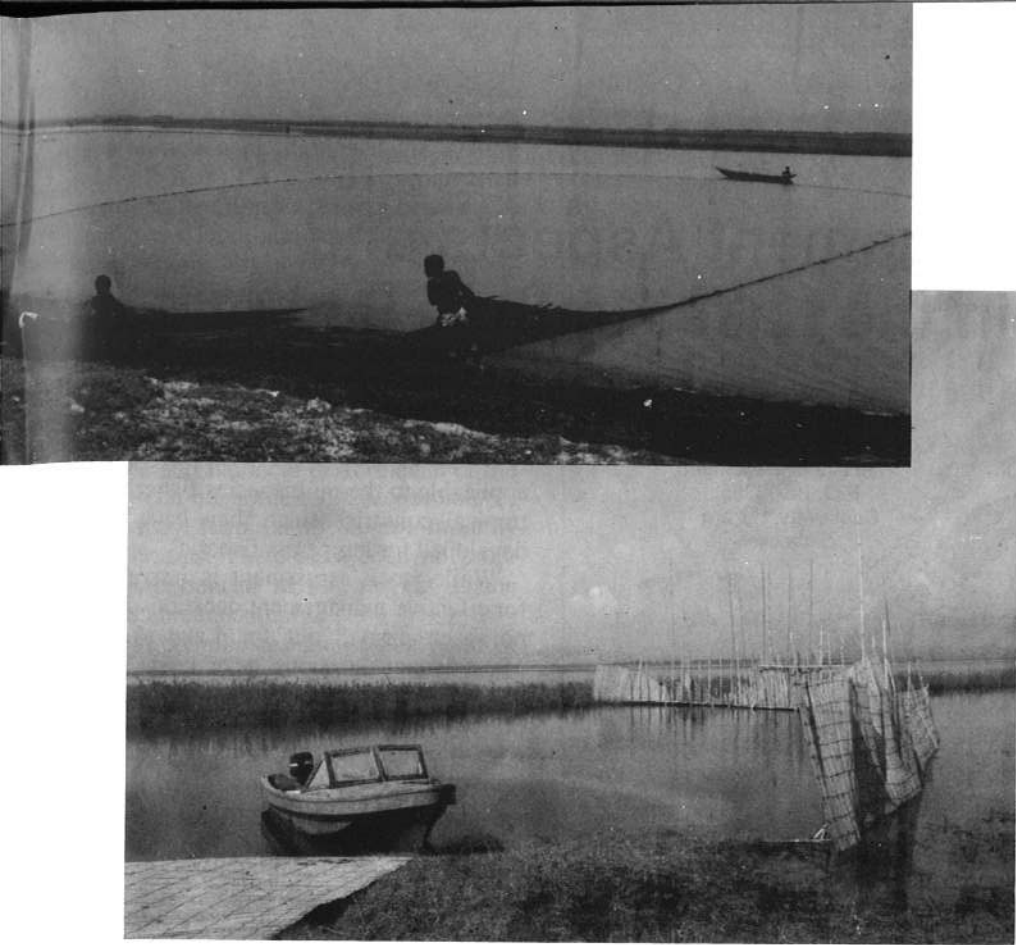
In the course of time and for more practical economic reasons people from other communities including Muslims are becoming more and more involved in this occupation. The behavioral pattern of these new-fishermen is different from that of the traditional "Jaladas" community. For instance, in the case of riverine fishing, most of the newcomers are Muslims ousted from land-based agriculture and are yet to develop the ethics of their newly adopted occupation. They always think of going back to farming if and when opportunity comes, e.g., if they are able to get back their farmland lost by river erosions. Ironically, such prospect is very bleak. They never are able to get back their rights on recovered lands by fighting against the wealthy landlords who always have an upper hand in grabbing newly accreted land. In consequence, they suffer from their own dilemma. They think of fishing as a temporary means of earning a living and exert the least effort in obeying the fishing norms. They often resort to destructive methods of fishing such as the use of small-mesh nets to catch undersized fish; construction of temporary barriers; or the use of fishing gear to cover the whole stretch of river during the dry season to catch large numbers of fish indiscriminately. And yet, they have to depend on fishing for the rest of their lives.

Socioreligious Injunction

The Hindu society in ancient Bengal observed a socioreligious injunction of not eating hilsa (*Hilsa ilisha*, a dominant migratory species of coastal waters, estuaries and large rivers in the Bay of Bengal region) from *Bijoya Dasami* (September-October) to *Sri Panchami* (January-February). This discouraged fishing of spent and immature hilsa during the winter season. Such injunction worked towards the conservation of the fishery. This practice is, however, no longer followed and large-scale hilsa fishing is now carried on even in winter.

A different type of socioreligious injunction prevails in the case of intensive fishing of natural depressions (e.g., *beels*

*Currently a research fellow at ICLARM.



Destructive fishing practices (1) the use of fine mesh nets; (2) construction of temporary barriers. Photos by M. Aguero.

and *haors*) in which the fishermen refrain from catching fish on Saturdays. Observance of such fishing holidays stemmed from the belief that the fish species spread in the vast open waters of the natural depressions stay in contact with

the god of fish and remain very quiet in the water, lacking any urge to feed themselves on Saturdays. Traditional fishermen, having very strong faith in supernatural powers, do not want to disturb the fish on that day.

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Destructive Practice

In contrast to the above, an example of anti-conservational action which is an outcome of traditional belief is the fishing of small-sized hilsa, known as *Jatka* in Bangladesh and *Hilsa Khorja* in West Bengal. According to traditional belief, *Jatka* is a separate fish species which appears only during certain months of the year. It is caught in large numbers in big rivers during March and April when the water level is at its lowest. Such practice has been considered highly destructive as the fish do not get an opportunity to breed even once.

Weakened Role of Tradition

In the absence of any explicit authoritarian control over the resources of the vast open-access waters, sociocultural traditions and beliefs have long since regulated the fisheries. Although the gradual exposure to the market economy together with social development policies aimed at integrating fishing communities -- socially, culturally and institutionally -- into the wider socio-cultural system has weakened the role of older traditions and beliefs, some of them still have important implications for regulating the fisheries of the present times. ●

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