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‘Surrender to nature’: Worldviews and rituals of the small-scale coastal fishers of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Small-scale fishing in the Bay of Bengal using non-motorized, wooden motorized and mechanized boats without basic safety devices is a risky venture. Fishers developed a long tradition of adaptation to the dynamics of the unpredictable nature of the marine ecosystem. The empirical findings presented in this article are primarily based on a two-year long ethnographic study with the caste-based Hindu coastal fishers of Thakurtala fishing village, Moheskhal Island, Cox's Bazar. The worldviews and popular beliefs associated with fish and fishing epitomize a rich cultural history of fish-loving Bengali societies. The article examines pragmatically obvious notions of luck, risks, and socio-political implications behind observances of rituals in the coastal fishing villages. Observances of rituals at both domestic and community ambits are perceived to improve luck, reduce anxiety level associated with marine fishing, and reinforce pre-voyage psychological preparedness of the sea-faring fishers and their family members. It documents the roles of fish and fishing related worldviews in rural Bengali societies along with the pre-voyage and post-voyage activities and rituals observed by coastal fishers. Some ritual practices are characterised by interfaith fusion, and hence, their observance would positively add to the foundations of secular practices, humanism, and mutually benefitting existential philosophy in rural societies. This ethnographic narrative also examines fishing cultures' comprehensive articulations of natural and unnatural elements of marine ecosystem within the broader framework of maritime anthropology.

1. Introduction

“He is out for fishing in the deep sea for seven months as a laborer; the wooden boat is too old; the only small engine gets out of order frequently; it's all blue water around. The boat owner thinks—if fishers are not given any life saving appliance, they will try best to save his boat during cyclone or other sea-borne dangers. Every moment he is in a perilous situation. It is like going for war leaving family members crying until he returns. The only thing we can do is say prayer to Goddesses and wait till his safe return from the sea.”—Joshobala Jaladas, 52, Thakurtala village, Moheskhal Island.

“Fishers perform special rituals...rituals reveal the pains associated with fishing in the sea... these rituals are very specific to ‘Jaladas’ caste identity. Each ritual has a meaning and explanation; it's about surrender to nature.”—Sukhendhu Jaladas, 55, Thakurtala.

In Bangladesh, small-scale fishing is a classic way of life and vital source of vibrant maritime culture. Blessed by the geomorphology and hydrological attributes, historically the water-land interfaces have been the centers of human settlements, civilization, innovations in the use of

crafts and gears, production relations, worldviews, value-laden unique rituals, ecological knowledge, and subsistence livelihoods for millions of fishers [1]. Fish are integral in the Bengali culture and socio-religious rituals ranging from birth to marriage to death, embodying a host of mythologies and distinctive cultural symbolism.

There is a popular saying ‘*Mache bhate Baangali*’, meaning fish and rice comprise the food culture of the Bengalese. Prehistoric artifacts like the *Ashokan* epigraphical materials [2] and *Harappan* pottery, motif, and civilization of the Indus Valley [3–8] substantiate the significance of fish in the Bengali civilization. In addition, Hindu religious texts like *Rigveda*, *Ramayana*, *Upanishad*, *Atharvaveda*, *Manu Smriti*, *Aranyakanda*, and the Buddhist script *Jataka* refer to some tales and rituals of fish and fishing [9]. In general, the ideas of identification with nature are found in the pantheistic and polytheistic traditions prior to the rise of monotheistic religions, and such belief systems are found in the *Sufi* mysticism of Islam and in Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions. Pantheistic religions do not functionally endure anymore, but the worldview associated with them has survived longer [10,11].

To respond to the needs of adaptation and survival, humans evolve sets of rituals in their socio-cultural systems that regulate relations

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within and among groups, and with non-human components of the immediate ecosystems. The importance of the rites and rituals is far greater to the fishing families than what can be envisaged from mere etymological meanings or religious nexus. Hindu caste-based coastal fishers are exceedingly rich in indigenous ecological knowledge [12], and the associated divination upkeeps the experiential and pragmatic knowledge system that sustains their livelihoods. Their worldviews comprise of and evolve around perceptions, traditions, beliefs, orientations, attitudes, rituals, indigenous fishing knowledge, and some cementing forces of localism that altogether reminds the community members of their identities and roots.

This article examines the worldviews and ritual behaviors of small-scale coastal fishers in relation to their perceptions of luck, risks about immediate ecosystems, and loyalty related towards patrons that together reveal their social-psychological processes, philosophical roots, and cultural distinctiveness. The ritual practices encompass both the public and domestic domains, together fulfilling a complex of interconnected intents for the devotees, family members, and the fishing community as a whole. The focus is primarily on the caste-based Hindu fishers and relevant local actors, but as applicable for occasional comparisons, information gathered from similar settings is provided. This article refrains from evaluating the efficiency of any doctrine or philosophy associated with the worldviews and belief systems of coastal fishers, rather it focused on the societal attitude, ritualistic behaviors, mystical feelings, and fishers' mindset.

2. Analytical framework

This research is particularly influenced by the early works of social scientist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) and ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942). Durkheim theorized that religious practices support a morally grounded belief system connected to supernatural resources, and the social networks cultivated through engagement in religious practices reinforce social solidarity to shape an integrated social whole and function as a structural vehicle for lessening anxiety [13]. Malinowski's famous ethnographic works with the Trobriand islanders revealed that no matter how bizarre or mysterious ritual practices might appear to people of 'advanced' societies, these collective ritual behaviors have cognitive reasoning within the specific maritime milieu. Ritual practices play vital roles in shaping collective institution and shared mental constructs, healthy functioning of the communities, and coping against environmental challenges, fishers face at sea [14].

The need for observing rituals is more critical to some communities than others. Human societies and cultures adjust through subsistence patterns to a given ecosystem, meaning that ecological relationships may be viewed as part of a network of cultural adjustments and adaptations [15]. In exploring the cultural and natural areas of native north Americans, Kroeber aptly comments: "no culture is wholly intelligible without reference to the non-cultural or so-called environmental factors with which it is in relation and which condition it...in each situation or area, different natural factors are likely to be impinging on culture with different intensity" [cited in [15: 24]]. Rapaport argues that the unquestioned religious belief might have a major adaptive significance in human life, and it is futile to look for empirical foundations and scientific accuracy of such a belief system. It is important to examine whether the belief system "elicits behavior contributing to the well-being of the actors and to the maintenance of the ecosystem" of which they form integral parts, and naturalistic or scientific explanations might even have negative outcomes in the end [16: 261].

The system theory of Rapaport and Vayda views cultures as adaptive responses to the ecosystem; Marvin Harris puts forward the theory of cultural materialism arguing that the primary shaping forces in the development of local cultural traditions are the 'biological imperatives of survival' in the ecosystems [cited in [17: 143]]. Rituals are "socio-

religiously defined sets of actions, performed for spiritual, emotional and socio-political needs", and mainly intended to influence spiritual powers [18: 279]. Rituals consist of a sequence of invariant acts or utterances that the participants must learn, adapt, and perform in person in a formalized way as basic social acts [16,19]. Worldview is the mental model of reality, and the basic way of interpreting things and events that pervade a culture so thoroughly that it becomes a deeply rooted life-system.

The eclecticism of Malinowski's ethnographic works makes it obvious that human experience in a rural setting cannot be fully captured by any theoretical prominence. The arguments made in this article are rooted in the pragmatically obvious notions of: 1. Uncertainty and probability/luck, 2. Risks, and 3. Power and socio-political implications of rituals in the locality. First, the notion of uncertainty and luck is discussed. There are two known essential elements in fishing: 1. Fishers with their crafts, gears, skill, knowledge, and experience, and 2. The natural uncontrollable ecosystem with heterogeneous distribution of aquatic resources. As fishers provoke the concurrence of two independent factors (fishing efforts and fish), they appear as an intermediary between the two otherwise unconnected realities through perceived luck that is neither natural nor of human order [20]. Luck is viewed as the "nominalization of the logical space, or area of possibilities, wherein all the chance variations take place, and it tends to become reified as a cosmological entity" [20: 67]. The patchy availability of fish spatially and temporally, and the varied level of catch is culturally translated in terms of individual traits. The bridging element between fishers' efforts coupled with skill, indigenous knowledge, and catch level is equated to luck that portrays cosmological, economic, social, and psychological manifestations through its arbitrary causations. Skill in fishing is obvious, but skill alone is not finally effective [21]. This proposition points to the fact that the very nature of fishing itself provides the conceptual underpinnings for the notion of uncertainty and luck.

The second notion of risk as psychological vent is central to the observance of many rituals. The widely perceived eco-psychosocial risks associated with sea fishing and the fear maintained in the narrow-gauge socio-religious system add to the frequency of rituals. Rituals are observed more frequently as the level of perceived risk increases. Developed through his seminal works with the Trobriand fishers, the anxiety-ritual theory of Malinowski reveals that celebration of socio-culturally appropriate rituals serves the purpose of relieving humans of otherwise irreducible anxiety. "It is most significant that in the lagoon fishing, where men can rely completely upon his knowledge and skill, magic does not exist, while in the open-sea fishing, full of danger and uncertainty, there is extensive magical ritual to secure safety and good results" [14: 30]. Maritime anthropologists argue, "the positive relationship between number of taboos and day versus trip fishing suggest that the greater amount of risks associated with trip fishing results in anxiety which is lessened by more extensive ritual behavior." [22: 261]. Some other scholars put forward the correlation between the ritual behavior and the economic risks and personal jeopardies [See [23] for a synthesis].

The third notion relates to socio-political implications of rituals and festivals in the context of solidarity and power display. Scholars argue that taboos should be viewed as a vehicle of promoting cooperation among the crewmembers by communicating a willingness to accept traditional patterns of authority of the skipper, and get their works done with energy and determination [23]. Rituals reinforce the commonly shared moral values, thus strengthening the collective conscience and group feeling. Durkheim argues when people worship their objects of veneration, they reaffirm their own society and its social order [cited in [19: 406]]. Based on observations of the rituals and village festivals of the Tamil fishermen of Chattiyur village of Puttalam district, Sri Lanka, it is claimed that Hindu festivals not only emphasize the communal or egalitarian aspect of the society, but also serve to legitimate a local political structure [24]. Publicly organized rituals, reflective of the

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