

Full Length Research Paper

Socio-cultural life of fisherwomen in India-continuity and change (with special reference to Orissa State)

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The purpose of this research is to study the various problems of the fisherwomen in detail such as sex ration age groups, professions, employment, marketing, income, indebtedness, education, residence, water supplies, health care etc. The analysis is based on a field visit, case study and at the same time to collect information through open-end questionnaire survey amongst 360 fisherwomen from three villages from coastal areas of Orissa, which is one of the poor states of India. Using the open end question and interview with fisherwomen, social- cultural life of fisher women was investigated. It is seen that men take over women's work as production has changed from subsistence to the market economy. From the study it is inferred that the fisher women is changing though the process of change is slow. However, during the last decade, the pace of change has increased and it is expected to continue with significant implications for the fisher women society. The preceding discussion makes two things clear. The fisher women woman is changing though the process of change is slow. The change is more marked and substantive among fisher women girls than among middle age and elderly women. This research has addressed the research question as to what development goals have been achieved in India to date. One way to summarize an answer to this question by listing of five types of 'development freedoms' which he regards as important in going beyond simplistic development measures such as gross national product.

Key words: Fisher women, fishery sector, life cycle, birth, death, marriage, rituals, festivals.

INTRODUCTION

The rights of the traditional fishing communities have been in focus in the recent years in the wake of increasing commercialization and consequent unsustainability of marine fisheries. World fisheries have become a market-driven dynamically developing sector representing technological dualism in the fish economy (Choudhury, 2004). Along with the highly organized sector using massive capital inputs, the subsistence and decentralized forms of economic organisation in fisheries remain resilient and dynamic particularly in the developing economies of Asia (Yap, 1980).

Orissa is one of the states of India. Artisanal fisheries provide approximately 25% of the global fish catch and

about 40% of the fish used for human consumption (Warrior, 1998). The fisher women of Orissa are Telugu speaking fishing community. Their main occupation is catching fish in the sea (Bay of Bengal). Though in course of time many of them have learnt speaking Oriya¹, their affinity with Telugu² culture has remained largely unchanged. They are yet to be integrated into the main stream of Oriya culture of Orissa (Patnaik and Sengupta, 1980). In recent years the marine fish economy has gained importance because of substantial foreign exchange earned through export of prawn and other variety of fishes. In spite of this, the fisher women complain, that their contribution to the economy of this country/state has not been duly recognized (Baral,

¹ Mother tongue of Orissa state

² Mother Tongue of Andhra Pradesh which is one of the state of India

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1996). The fisher women are gripped by a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty. They are caught between two cultures and they are uncertain about their status in future in Orissa in which they have settled for a long time (Baral, 1996). As in all subsistent economies, women play an active role in the fishing communities of Ganjam district in Orissa, which is the study region of this paper. In fact, fisherwomen have made the survival of the coastal communities possible (Nandeesh; 1991). Though they have very limited control over the conditions and products of their labour, women have almost exclusive responsibility of running the household and caring for the children (Sahu, 2000). Despite the fact that they play an important role in fisheries, they remain invisible. Their contribution to the sector and their

struggle for survival remain unnoticed. The consequences of the damage done to the traditional fisheries and their ecology through the commercial sectors, hurdles and imperfections in fishing and marketing activities, the increasing hardships faced by the fisherwomen in fish vending, alienation and marginalisation of the fisher folk in Orissa are the major problems of the economy of the fisherwomen in the region (Nirmal and Baral, 2001). After India's independence a number of steps have been taken by the government of India as well as state government for the development of weaker section of the society. In the last two decades both government and voluntary organizations have paid special attention to the problems of Fisher women, who have suffered from several kinds of inequality and deprivation. Fisher women, being victims of both backwardness and gender discrimination, are struggling to find out a space for them (Gulati, 1984).

LITERATURE SURVEY

Warrier (1997) in his survey of fisher folk in Madras (Chennai) City has studied their socio-economic condition. The study shows that for fisher folk, sea fishing is more a way of life than a mode of occupation or business. The study reveals some mistakes in the supply of mechanized boats to fishermen by co-operatives. Mechanized fishing has some adverse impact on these people. Kurien (1984) has analyzed the economic backwardness of marine fishermen and inequality in the assets-holding among them. He has pointed out that these fishermen are exploited by fish traders who buy their fish at lower rates. Kurien (1985), in his macro analysis of marine fisheries sector in Kerala, has helped us understand better the fish economy of the state. He has examined the problems and trends of catch, distribution and marketing of marine fish and the impact of technology change on fishermen. He has studied their literacy, health condition and housing and population growth. He has advised the state government to provide livelihood security to marine fishermen. Klausen (2001)

has conducted a study of two fishermen villages in Kerala in order to study the impact of introduction of modern techniques in sea fishing. Those two villages are situated near the town of Quilon. In one village the fishermen are Latin Catholics, while the other village is inhabited by Hindus. The Government of Norway tried to help the fisher folk of these two villages by supplying those motorboats, nylon nets and other modern things necessary for better fishing in the sea. Under the scheme, the fishermen of the two villages were equally assisted, but Klausen (2001) study shows that the project had differential impacts on the two communities. The Latin Catholic fishermen and fisherwomen under this project got much more benefits than the Hindu fishermen and fisherwomen. This is due to fact that the Latin Catholics are relatively more educated, more conscious and economically better off and that they have the capacity and aptitude for taking risk in making substantive investment in modern fishing. Yap (1980) have studied the role of fisherwomen as well as fish wives in fishing and fish related activities. As fishing in the sea requires a lot of physical strength, the number women that go to the sea for fishing is very small. However, fish wives are of significant economic support to their husbands whose income from fishing is

inadequate. Yap (1980) further argues that mechanization of craft and gear has resulted in the 'economic displacement' of many fish wives. Similarly, large scale sale of fish to whole sellers leave little for fish wives to prepare dry fish or to sell fish in near by place. Prakash (1994) has made a study of the impact of mechanization of fishing on marine fisher folk of Kerala. He has made a case study of the fishermen community on the Vypeen Island in Kerala. Fishing in this Island got assistance from the State Government as well as under the Indo-Norwegian project (Mukharjee; 1969). In the mean time the members of higher communities, whose traditional occupation was not fishing entered the occupation of fishing. As compared to traditional fishermen they are more educated and advanced. As a result, they have taken better advantage of the opportunities for mechanized fishing through external assistance. The study has analyzed the impact of mechanization on fishing. Sarkar (2009) in his study of Sunderban fishermen has drawn attention to four important things about fishermen. One, they continue to resort to supernaturalism like ritualistic pujas to appease deities as a means of fighting against big uncertainties in fishing. Two, mechanization of fishing gears has brought about a big change in fishing economy and resulted in class formation among fishermen. Three, fisherwomen are engaged in dry-fishing, fish-vending, and net-mending. Four, fishermen, in general are largely indebted and they fall victims to exploitation by middlemen working as the linkage between active producers and final consumers. Sathiadhar et al. (2000) have studied the role of fisherwomen in the post-harvest marine fisheries

sector in Kerala. These women are engaged in gutting, peeling, sorting, drying, marketing, and value addition of marine products. Most of them are engaged in gutting and peeling. The researchers have expressed their concerns over exploitation of these women who are invariably under-waged. The fisherwomen fall victims to money lenders and fish traders. They should be encouraged with adequate financial and technical support. Jayraman (2008) on the basis of his study of a number of fisherwomen Self Help Group (SHG) of the two maritime districts of Tamil Nadu concludes that contrary to the common belief that poor women are not credit worthy, they are far more credit worthy, honest and most importantly, 'bankable' (Dwivedi, 1980). The study shows that the SHGs did play a positive role in helping the fisher folk in their socio-economic development, emancipation and empowerment. It has enabled them to live with self-esteem and gain the awareness that everyone has right to live. Gulati (1984) has published a series of papers highlighting the role of women in Kerala in fishing-related activities. Having studied their day-to-day life and work participation, Gulati (1984) has discussed the impact of technological changes on the fisher folk. She is of the view that as a result of technological innovations in fishing procedures, uncertainties produced by ecological hazards have been considerably minimized. In the context of these changes and developments, Gulati (1984) has studied the social status of fisherwomen. Choudhury (2004), in her study of fisher folk of Kerala, has drawn our attention to the inequality and deprivation suffered by fisherwomen. Women fish-workers enjoy very little occupational mobility, and there is gender gap in control over common property resources and participation in decision making process within in the community. Fisherwomen shoulder a lot of responsibilities and take increasing workloads as fishermen migrate to cities in search of labour leading to 'feminization of fisheries'. Though fisher women have major responsibilities in the domestic area and distribution of catches, they are totally excluded from the decision making process, especially at the community level. Warrior (1998) has also discussed the condition of migrant fisherwomen engaged in the fish processing industry. They are recruited by agents and contractors, who retain control over their work and life. These women because of compulsion at home accept ill-paid jobs and work in slave-like conditions. Baral (1996) has thrown light on gradual changes taking place in the life of fisher women of South Orissa. Fisher women boys and girls are going to schools and colleges; they are now inclined to drift away from their traditional beliefs and practices and seize upon new opportunities. Both fisher women men and women in respect of occupation have diversified and their political participation as compared to the past has increased. Fisher women have begun to move though their rise to equality will be a long haul. Nirmal Sahu et al.

(2009) in their study of the fisher folk of Ganjam district of Orissa, have said that though fisher women have very

limited control over the conditions and products of their labour, they have almost exclusive responsibility of running the household and caring for their children (Pande, 1971). Despite this, they remain invisible. These women do not have any weight in decision making. In this context, this study looks into the nature and extent of the socio-economic problems associated with the decline in the control of resources by fisherwomen which hinders sustainable development of the community (Ahmed, 1966).

Objectives of study

Based on the literature review, the following research objectives were framed:

1. To examining conditions and role of marine fisher women of Ganjam district of Orissa.
2. To study various problems of the fisherwomen such as sex ration age groups, professions, employment, marketing, income, indebtedness, education, residence, water supplies, health care etc.
3. To study socio- economic conditions marine fisher women.
4. To study the pace of change in fisher women community and also find out with significant implications of social and culture changes in fisher women society.
5. To study the changes in fishing cultivation, rituals, religious, marriage customs, community harmony, women roles in changing fishing activity etc.
6. Finally, to suggest some policy issues for development of fisher women community in Orissa in general and in India as particular.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is built upon both primary and secondary data. While the secondary information is collected from official sources and libraries, the primary data were gathered through field survey. Stratified random sampling method was adopted in this study, first to select sample villages and then to choose the sample respondents. Three out of 28 marine fishing villages of the district, around Gopalpur-on-sea, were selected for field survey. These villages are situated in the three coastal blocks of, Chatrapur³, Ganja⁴ and Plauru⁵ of Ganjam district. Chatrapur block has the largest number of fishing villages, of which two are taken for the study. The rest of the villages were chosen from the Puri District. The focal group is the traditional women fish vendors from the age group of 16 to 70 years. It was observed that women of this age group are active fish vendors, and they have no occupation other than fish vending. The total number of sample fish vendors selected for the study from the three sample villages is 360, which constitutes about 12% of the total number of households in the villages. The list of all the households in the sample villages were procured from different organizations such as People's Rural

³ Head quarter of Ganjam District of Orissa

⁴ One of leasing Block of Ganjam Distirct of Orissa

⁵ One leading Block of Puri District of Orissa

Education Movement (P.R.E.M.), Luthern World Service (L.W .S.) and Ganga Devi Mahila Vikash (G.D.M.V.)⁶. The aforementioned NGOs had prepared this list after the Gopalpur super cyclone of the 17th October, 1999. The list were first verified in each of the villages, then they were put to one list for all the villages, from which 360 fisherwomen are selected by using the random numbers generated through MS Excel computer software. Since the fisherwomen are illiterate, questionnaire-based interviews were conducted. Prior to the preparation of the questionnaire, several informal discussions were conducted with individuals and groups from the selected villages. The questionnaire has covered 25 vital issues of traditional fishing communities with special focus on women. Besides the general information about the respondents and their families, the questionnaire covers the reasons for indebtedness, contribution of fisherwomen to the families and communities, women's control over natural and human resources, their hardships and problems, and their opinion on environment and sustainability. The primary data collected from the field was meticulously entered into computer for processing and tabulation. Historically traditional fish workers of coastal Orissa, except of Balasore district which was part of Bengal presidency, have been always of Telugu speaking community. At present there are one lakh marine fishermen belonging to this community in the Orissa coast. Since Ganjam is the border district of Andhra Pradesh, it has the highest number of traditional fish workers who belong to the Fisher women community. Ganjam has the longest history of traditional fisheries of Orissa. Historically the fish workers' settlements on these areas are much older than many towns and semi-urban areas of Orissa. The economy of Ganjam district operates through the interactions of agricultural, forest and fisheries (inland and marine) ecosystems. The economy is predominantly rural and agrarian in character (Sathiadhar et al., 2000). The scope of the work covers the fisheries ecosystems of the coastal villages. The fisherwomen of Ganjam district are illiterate and they do not have any other skill than selling fish. In the ever-increasing competition for scarce fish resources it is difficult for women to procure fish. Fish vending is a difficult occupation in the absence of transport facilities, which compel women to walk 8 to 12 km a day with heavy loads of fish on their heads. Fish vending despite its hardships has continued to be the most lucrative return for women's labour in the fisheries (Sadarmani; 2001). The lack of alternative income generating opportunities in the coastal communities reduces the opportunity cost of labour to the point where it continues to be employed within the fishery in spite of very limited returns. With high rate of growth of population in the coastal communities, the pressure on the resources is likely to be more and supplies may be reduced further. The fish workers of Ganjam district have not upgraded their fishing techniques for the last fifty years while their counterparts in Andhra Pradesh have upgraded their skill. As a result they have better catch even in lean seasons. (Supriya, 2002) The Andhra Pradesh fisher people also have better marketing system. The economic inadequacy leads fisherwomen in Ganjam to obtain money from moneylenders who in turn exploit them with usurious credit, which keep them perpetually indebted. Because of the regular drinking habits of the fishermen all the money they earn through their hard work gets siphoned away by the liquor merchants (Sahu, 2000). It is an empirical study of the social, economic and political life of fisher women. While the coastal villages of Ganjam district inhabited by fisher women constitute the universe of the study, our sample consists of three of these villages, namely, San Aryapalli, Podampeta and Prayagi (Fisher women street). These villages have been selected on the basis of purposive sampling. While a San Aryapalli village is near Chatrapur town, IRE and Gopalpur Port, Podampeta is an interior village, and Praygi is a mixed villages. The hypotheses have been formulated

on the basis of literature survey. The research data have been collected mainly by empirical techniques such as questionnaire, observation and interview. The village of Sana Aryapalli is situated in Chatrapur block of Ganjam district. It is about three kilometers from Chatrapur, the district headquarters. It is to the east of Chatrapur town. It is half kilometer from the road which runs from Chatrapur to IRE/ Gopalpur port. The village is well-connected by good roads with Chatrapur town, IRE and Port. The Indian Rare Earths Ltd. (IRE).

SOCIO-CULTURE LIFE OF FISHER WOMEN IN ORISSA

Fisher women belong to two cultures: they are Telugu speaking, but they are also Oriyas as they have settled in Oriya since long. It is expected that their social and cultural life world reflect partly both Telugu and Oriya cultures (Choudhury, 2004). In other words, the fisher women society would represent a blending of these two cultures (Rao, 1987). While discussing this blending of the two cultures, the place and role of fisher women in it are discussed as follows: The life cycle of individual in all societies and communities consists of birth, marriage and death. Both men and women pass certainly through two stages, namely birth and death. While most of them marry, a few may not marry due to one reason or another. While birth is common to all communities, the mode of delivery differs from one community to another community depending on several factors including its level of modernization. The delivery of child may take place in the house itself with the help of a mid-wife or a nurse, or it may be conducted in a hospital. Delivery in the hospital is safe, but due to several factors many pregnant women are not taken to the hospital, though this invites life risk to the mother as well as the baby to be born. Further, family rituals related to the birth of a child are not uniform; they differ from caste to caste, from community to community depending on its location in the tradition- modernity continuum. Similarly there is divergence in the rituals related to the death of a family member. Different caste and communities do not perform such rituals in a uniform way. With this backdrop, we may discuss the life cycle of marine fishermen (Fisher women) and related social phenomena (Susmita, 2011). In Sana Aryapalli among the fisher women there was the practice of doing child delivery with the help of a traditional mid wife, locally called Mallama. Mallama is an old fisher woman. She does not have any formal training in conducting delivery. She has learnt this skill through experience. To conduct a delivery she is paid around Rs100. She is paid more if the economic condition of the mother's family is sound. While conducting delivery she uses hot water, a piece of clean cloth, cotton and teal oil. When a woman gets delivery pain, the Mallama applies teal oil on her belly. After the child is born the Mallama cuts the umbilical cord with the help of a sharpener. A number of times there were complications. Some times such complication becomes serious, doing serious harm to the mother or child, or both (Susmita, 2011).

⁶ NGO of Chatrapur Block

For example in 2007, a fisher women woman of Sana Aryapalli while giving birth to a child, with help of the Mallama developed serious complication. One leg of the child came out, but the delivery could not be completed. The Mallama could not handle the matter. In the desperate situation the woman was rushed to the government hospital at Chatrapur in a treker⁷. But it was too late, before the patient reached the hospital, she had died on the way.

In Sana Aryapalli this practice of delivery has considerably decreased. The fisher women, being exposed to modernization, have become aware of the great risk involved in this type of delivery. They are now increasingly taking the help of trained women for delivery. There is one ANM (assistant Nurse cum mid wife) posted in the local gram panchayat. Though she stays at Bada Aryapalli,⁸ she visits all the villages under the gram panchayat from time to time. She enquires about the problems faced by the pregnant women of Sana Aryapalli. Besides the ANM, there are also several TBAs (trained birth attendance) working in villages. These young women have taken short training in conducting delivery. They have taken two-month training at the government Primary health center at Munisipentha which is ten kilometers from Chatrapur. They are generally under matrices. It is important to note that no Fisher women woman has so far been trained as a TBA. The present TBAs are of general castes. There is no fixed remuneration for TBAs as they are not government servants. But they are conducting child delivery on a voluntary basis. However, the concerned family gives some money to the TBA after the birth of the child. It ranges from Rs50/- to Rs200/- depending upon the economic condition of the family. The ANM and these TBAs give advice and medicines to the woman before and after delivery. The ANM distributes some tablets among pregnant women. If some serious complications develop either before or after delivery, the woman is taken to the government hospital or to some gynecologist practicing privately at Chatrapur. Some fisher women also consult the specialist doctors of Chatrapur for normal check up during pregnancy (Susmita, 2011).

For example, Garamma, the wife of Anneya, was three months pregnant when we met her in Sana Aryapalli. She is just a labourer, while her husband goes to the sea for fishing. Her economic condition is not so good. This was her second pregnancy. Still she was going to Chatrapur for normal check up by a gynecologist Dr. Bramha, who was posted in the local government hospital at Chatrapur. The fee of the doctor for normal check up was Rs 50/-. However, the Mallama is still in demand in the village. Around fifteen percent of deliveries are being still conducted by her. Nowadays, she is using a stainless

blade in place of a piece of Khapara⁹ to cut the umbilical cord. One day after the delivery, the child takes bath in water. Every month the ANM convenes a meeting of the pregnant women of the village. This meeting is known as "Matrumilana Sabha". This meeting is held at the Anganbadi¹⁰ hall. The ANM examines the health of the children and gives medicines to them depending on their health condition. She gives advice to pregnant women about the diet and some other important things. Sometimes before the expected date of delivery each pregnant woman is supplied a kit called DDK (disposal delivery kit); which contains polythene packet, clean blade, clean thread, soap, cotton etc. These things are necessary at the time of delivery. If the ANM is available she is to conduct the delivery of the child; if she is not available, a TBA is to be requested to do the delivery by using the things contained in the DDK kit. Before the delivery a pregnant woman is to register herself with the help of the ANM for the purpose of getting government help. Now, twenty seven percent of fisher women of Sana Aryapalli have registered themselves for this purpose. The U.A.A¹¹ through Anganabadi workers in the village also gives instruction and teaching to pregnant women. Besides teaching the children, the UAA activists help the ANM in matters relating to childbirth and childcare. They also participate in the discussion in the monthly meeting of mother and pregnant women. The ICDS (integrated child development scheme) is giving help to poor women for delivery. It pays Rs400/- to a pregnant woman if her family holds a BPL (below poverty line) card. Many villagers said that after delivery the mother is advised to take wine, preferably whisky to overcome pain. However the ANM, when questioned, denied this (Susmita, 2011).

A few fisher women have been trained by U.A.A in conducting delivery. One of them is B.Chittama, the president of Samudram, a local NGO of fisherwomen. They have also supplied necessary materials and medicines, which they should freely distribute among pregnant women or supply at the time of delivery. These trained women are expected to render free service but they receive money from the concerned families after the delivery is over. Our inquiry shows that delivery through these women is cheapest. The TBAs expect more money from the concerned family. Now days the majority of delivery cases having no complications have been handled by these women, trained by U.A.A. Bachalua Nagama was a fisher women woman of Sana Aryapalli. Her husband Bhima Rao was a fisherman. After she became pregnant the family consulted a local TBA. But as the delivery approached, her condition deteriorated. Chittama, the president of Samudram, came to know of this. She took interest in transferring the patient to the government hospital at Chatrapur. There also the patient could not be properly treated. Finally she was transferred

⁷ One type of transport largely carries fisher community from one place to other place

⁸ One of fishing villages in Ganjam Distict of Orissa

⁹ A broken piece of an earthen pot
¹⁰ Village School

¹¹ NGO working for Fishing community in Orissa

to the Medical college hospital at Berhampur¹². But it was too late. The patient died in the hospital. Adu Kamudu, wife of A. Alleya, is a labourer while her husband goes to the sea to catch fish. While pregnant, she became serious, as she did not get delivery pain. Chittama with the help of some villagers took this patient directly to the medical college hospital at Berhampur. This time she was lucky. A .Kamudu gave birth to a healthy baby (a son) (Susmita, 2011).

In Podampeta Nua Sahi the old practice of Mallamma during the delivery is still continuing. The ANM posted in the local panchayat stays in Kantiagada village. She hardly visits Podampeta Nua Sahi. The fisher women of Podampeta Nua Sahi are so ignorant and backward that they do not complain against the ANM. They do not know that it is the duty of the ANM to regularly visit their village. As a result, the pregnant women of the village hardly get any medical attention. For the whole village there is only one Mallama. She gets some remuneration from the concerned families for the service rendered by her. There is celebration after the child is born. Recently this village has been adopted by the UAA, but it is yet to train any woman of the village in conducting delivery in a scientific way. As it is an interior village, no TBA has so far visited it. Therefore, the villagers have no other option but to depend upon the Mallama for doing delivery. However, when a pregnant woman becomes serious, particularly at the time of delivery, she is taken in a Trekker or in an Auto to the Govt. Hospital, Chatrapur. There is a quack named Ganesh Sahu, doing medical practice at Humma¹³. Though he has not been properly trained, he examines pregnant women and gives medicine to them. Some fisher women of Podampeta Nua Sahi consulted Sahu relating to pregnancy. The fees charged are much less than the fee charged by the specialist doctor of Chatrapur. Therefore some fisher women of this village during pregnancy come to him for checkup. Sri Sahu started practicing at Humma only 5 years back. Thus in the past the pregnant women of the village hardly got any medical attention. Even serious cases were brought only to Mallama. So far, no pregnant woman of this village has come to the specialist doctor of Chatrapur for check up or delivery or for the treatment of post-delivery complication (Susmita, 2011).

Prayagi is a mixed village inhabited by fisher women and general caste peoples. In the past for the whole village there were only two dhais¹⁴ (midwife) belonging to general caste. For many years they were doing the child delivery in Fisher women families. However, of late two Fisher women have started doing this; they are above 50. They have learnt this skill from the general caste dhais. The fisher women Mallamas are paid by the families for their service. However, the ANM occasionally visits the villages. She is not sincere. Sometimes she gives

medicine to the pregnant women. There is an Ayurvedic doctor named Chita Ranjan Mishra of Palur¹⁵. He gives aelopathy medicines to the patients. He also examines pregnant women and gives necessary advice and medicine to them. Some fisher women families of Prayagi take his help for child birth and post delivery care. When some serious complication arises during pregnancy on the eve of the delivery, the woman is immediately taken to the Government Hospital at Chatrapur. As there is direct communication between the village and the district headquarter, in emergency the patient is taken to the Government Hospital for treatment. Prayagi is less backward than Podampeta Nua Sahi, but in respect of maternity care. There is not much difference between the two villages. The only change that has taken place in this respect is delivery of child by Telugu Mallama in place of Odia dhai. In Prayagi village however, as compared to the Fisher women of Podampeta Nua Sahi, the Fisher women of Prayagi are more inclined to take the help of specialist doctor of Chatrapur.

Child birth in fisher women community is rarely celebrated. Only a few families with better status organize some sort of celebration on the 21st day of birth of the child. The child does not take bath every day, because of the fear that it will catch cold. It takes bath on the second, fifth, seventh, twelfth, and twenty-first days after the birth. In the community of the general castes the birth of the child is usually celebrated on the fifth day, the twenty-first day or on the day the child is one year old. The fisher women, in general, do not organize such celebrations. However, on an auspicious day a Bramhin¹⁶ is invited to give a name to the child.

The child mainly depends upon breast-feeding. The activists of UAA, the NGO in the area have taught the fisher women that breast-feeding is best for the child. However, besides this, some fisher women families also give Amul milk to the child. They rarely use Lactogen, as it is quite costly. Most of women have been administered anti-polio vaccines.

When a girl obtains maturity, she is kept secluded in the house for seven days. During this period no male person will be allowed to see her. Only women come to her. During first six days she does not take bath. Only oil and turmeric paste are applied to her body. Every day she is served food once in the daytime by one of the families of the village. On the first day seven married women worship her by offering milk and cake. On the seventh day the girl gets up at 3 a.m. She takes her bath. She white washes one portion of the wall and takes her bath. After this she applies powder on her face and combs hair, then she takes bath. After this early in the morning she goes to the temple for offering. On return she takes her bath. It is to be noted that on that day she takes her bath seven times. That is why this function relating to the maturation of a girl is called in Telugu in

¹² One of important metropolitan cities of Ganjam District of Orissa

¹³ Fishing villages of Ganjam District

¹⁴ Mid wife who helped during delivery

¹⁵ Village name in Ganjam District

¹⁶ One of caste in Orissa

Fisher women dialect “Sataturigadabaiki”, which means that the girl will take her bath seven times. On the seventh day the girl does not take any cooked food. She takes only fruits. On that day a feast is organized to which the close relations in the village and other relatives are invited. If the girl has been married during her childhood, she is sent to the house of her husband one year after she attains puberty (Susmita, 2011).

In Sana Aryapalli and other fisher women villages of the area child marriage is in practice. If a family has more than one son and if the eldest one becomes old enough to marry, the other brothers irrespective of their age are also married at the same time. It is a custom in the fisher women community that all brothers are married on the same day. One of the factors responsible for this is perhaps the desire to reduce the marriage expenditure. Marriage in this community is quite expensive. A lot of money is spent in food and drinks served to guests. Marriage is thus a big economic burden for fisher women. In the fisher women community child marriage is still in existence. Many boys and girls in the age group of 7 to 10 are given in marriage. This is scientifically wrong and psychologically harmful. It creates problems in future. It is just possible that either the boy or the girl in future may not like to honour this marriage. Either of them due to love or some other factor may decide to marry some other person. This is not only bad for the boy or girl concerned; it also results in serious conflicts between the two families. Therefore voice has been raised in recent years by several groups and organizations against child marriage. Dowry system is very much prevalent among the traditional fisher folk in Orissa. In fisher community villages in Sana Aryapalli villages amount of dowry is comparatively high. On the whole, the demand for dowry has increased. This has resulted in families being thrown into deep debt if there are many daughters. Many families have fallen into debt because of the payment of dowry. In the fisher women community, the custom of dowry does not prevail. There is no demand from the side of the bridegroom. However, if the father of the bride is economically well off, he may give some ornaments and other valuable assets to his daughter (Susmita, 2011).

The bride brings different kinds of sweets for distribution in the village of the bridegroom. How much sweet of what qualities she would bring depends on the economic condition of her family? On the marriage day, almost the whole village gets drunk. Both men and women enjoy drinking wine. But the bridegroom and bride do not take wine on that day. In the past, marriages were taking place generally within the same village or in nearby villages. However, in recent years a new trend has developed. Marriages are taking place in distant places of the state and even outside. Some of the places in which the fisher women boys and girls of Sana

Aryapalli have been married are Puri and Paradip town of Orissa and Srikakullam town of Andhra Pradesh (Susmita, 2011).

Marriage has taken place even in such a different place

like Vizanagar city of Andhra Pradesh. On the day of marriage the bridegroom party consisting of men and women comes in a procession to a temple in the village of the bride. After doing necessary *puja*¹⁷ there, the procession proceeds to a tree, preferably a Nim tree, standing outside the village. The bridegroom brings some pieces of the tree on his shoulder to the house of the bride. He spreads those pieces on the tent (Chamundia) of the *pandal* (Vedi) erected in front of her house. Seven married women in a procession accompanied by drum beating go to the village tank and each one of them brings one pitcher of water to the house of the bride. With the help of this water the bridegroom and the bride take bath and they come to the *pandal*¹⁸ with new clothes. The bride wears a white saree, while the bridegroom wears a cotton cloth (dhoti). After the *pandal* rituals are over, the bride and the bridegroom go inside the house of the bride and they search for a golden ring, which has already been dipped inside the turmeric water of a pitcher. The bride's side bears the expense of the marriage. The marriage is declared over after the bridegroom ties the *mangalsutra*¹⁹ around the neck of the bride. In the past, the fisher women priest conducted the marriage ceremony in the village. However, now-a-days many Fisher women families are engaging a Bramhin priest for this purpose. This perhaps depends upon the educational and economic background of the two sides. This also indicates ‘Sanskritisation’ of fisher women. Now-a-days in Sana Aryapalli some changes have taken place in marriage practices. If the boy or the girl belongs to a family of good economic background, invitation cards are printed in Telugu. Invitations are extended not only to important fisher women but also to non-fisher women of the village and nearby villages. In the village Sundhis²⁰ in general have a higher status. They are generally invited to fisher women marriages (Susmita, 2011).

In these village children marriage is relatively more in number. If in the family there are two sons and one is fifteen and the other is five years old, still they would be married on the same day. When the marriage of the elder brother is finalized the marriage of the younger brother is also finalized, even if he is just five to six years old. This is done to save money. For the poor fisher women family a marriage function is expensive. It is therefore economical for them to get the two sons married on the same day. But this is not done in case of daughters. The villagers said that “it is not possible to find out bridegrooms in a short time.” In general, when child marriages are held, the girl is normally ten or below. Before she gets maturity, she occasionally visits the home of her husband, but she returns back to her parent's home. But after she gets matured, she is sent to her husband's home as a fully fledged wife, and she leads there a

¹⁷ Ritual festival

¹⁸ Stage where marriage will take place

¹⁹ Gold necklace

²⁰ One of caste of Orissa state

normal conjugal life. However, sometimes either the boy or the girl after some years may dishonor the child marriage. In that case one who betrays this child marriage has to pay some compensation to the other side, and the fine amount is determined by the village committee. Many years back a girl of this village named Manik married to Damendu a boy of Kantiguada village near Humma. But the boy after some years did not honour the child marriage. As a result, he had to pay some compensation to Manik. However, she later married to N. Duryadhan, a young man of her own village. In the past child marriage was practiced in Prayagi, but no child marriage has taken place during last five years. In course of interview Kusha Behera, an educated young fisher women of the village, said that in the mean time the villagers have become conscious that child marriage is bad. In this regard, he referred to the efforts of UAA, an NGO which is working for the development of fisher women. He also said that whenever a child marriage has taken place, it has seldom broken at a later stage. In other words, after the boy and the girl have become mature, the girl has been brought to the home of her husband. Although Prayagi is a mixed village the general caste people still consider the fisher women as inferior. They do not attend any marriage festival organized by a fisher women family. However, the fisher women attend the marriage of general caste people (Susmita, 2011).

In Sana Aryapalli some Fisher women were having sex with non-fisher women like Sundhis for money. They were doing this because of poverty. In some cases this was being done with the knowledge of the family members of women. Many people in the fisher women community knew it, but they did not consider it as a serious issue. However this practice, over years, has greatly decreased. One leader of the fisher women community claims that this practice has totally stopped. However, in the course of our field study, we came to know that a few fisher women are still engaged in this practice. The I.R.E and Port are near-by. The employees of these two organizations have money. Some of them might have an interest to enjoy fisher women by paying money. But it seems that this has not happened. This is due to the fact that the fisher women of Sana Aryapalli have become conscious. They have come to realize that they will lose their respect if their women sell their body for money. However, this does not mean that the fisher women community has been totally free from illicit sex. In fact for many years there has been existing extra-marital relationship between Fisher women men and women. Many fisher women go to the sea in the night to catch fish. As a result, night after night they remain absent from their houses. The wives of some of these fisher women feel sex-starved and establish secret relations with other villagers, mostly fisher women. In such cases, the motivating factor is the need of sex and not money. Many people in the village know it. But no attempt has been

made by the leader of the village to stop it. As many people are involved, it would be difficult to take action against them (Mohapatra and Bisoyi, 2011).

This practice is also prevailing in Podempeta village. When the husband regularly goes to the sea in the night for catching fish, his wife is likely to have sex with another fisher woman of that village. In addition to this there is another type of sex problem in the village. The wine makers are sexually exploiting the young girls of the village. In this area wine is cooked in the night in a clandestine way. The process of cooking wine takes nearly six to seven hours. The owners, who are non-fisher women mainly, engage unmarried fisher women girls as labourer. A labourers is paid Rs 100/- for working in the night. But during those hours, she is virtually forced to have sex with the owner. Out of fear and necessity she remains silent. In Podempeta this practice is widespread. Many young girls work as labourers in preparing wine in the night. They go there even if they know that they may be the victims of sex by the owners. The family members of these girls are also aware of this danger. But poverty and fear have made them helpless. For many years this remained a non-issue in the area though many people knew it. However, some fisher women of Podempeta New Street and Podempeta Old Street have gathered courage to raise their voice against this evil practice. Meetings have been organized and presentations have been made to the government but it is too early to say that this practice will come to an end some. So long as there is poverty and illiteracy in Podempeta New Street, the danger of fisher women being sexually exploited by the rich people of the area cannot be eliminated. As long as any case of illicit sex has not disturbed the family life, it remains a non-issue for the village. But when as a result of this some body's family life is disturbed, it becomes a concern for the village committee. The committee after due enquiry, gives punishment to the culprit. The punishment is given in the form of money. The following examples will illustrate this (Susmita, 2011).

In Sana Aryapalli illicit sex developed between Nanda Duryodhan and S.Budhiama. Duryodhan was a thirty-eight year old Fisher woman. He was married, and a father of one son and one daughter. Budhiama, a twenty-five year old Fisher woman, was also married but issueless. Budhiama's husband brought this matter to the village committee. The committee after making enquiry into the complaint imposed a fine of Rs 10000/- each on Duryodhan and Budhiama. If these two wanted to marry and remain together as husband and wife they would have to pay Rs 10,000/- each to the wife of Duryodhan and the husband of Budhiama. This fine amount was too big for Duryodhan and Budhiama. They did not have the capacity to pay this fine amount, as a result one night they secretly fled the village and they have not returned to the village since (Susmita, 2011).

In 2010 Pallama, a young fisher women girl of

Podampeta villages fell in love with a fisher men youth of that village. They did not marry, but they went to Puri in search of work. They stayed there as husband and wife. However, after some month of April 2007, she returned alone to Podempeta. This time she fell in love with Anneya, a married man and a father of four children. This created disturbance in Anneya's family. On the complaint of Anneya's wife the village committee discussed this matter. It decided to allow Anneya and Pollama to marry but put a condition. Within four months they were required to pay Rs 10,000/- to Anneya's first wife as compensation. This was a big amount for a poor man like Anneya. The whole thing has become uncertain. What will happen if Anneya fails to pay Rs 10,000/- to his first wife who is now working as a labourer? Further, what will happen if Pallama's first husband who is working as a labourer in Puri returns to Podempeta and wants to live with Palloaa. Last year, a young fisher women girl of Podempeta Nua Sahi was found unconscious by the side of National High way (NH-5) near Humma junction. That girl had gone to the old street of Podempeta in that night to work as a labourer for preparing wine. It is alleged that she was forcibly raped and thrown unconscious near Humma junction (Susmita, 2011).

When a person dies in a fisher women community the dead body is taken to the cremation ground, where it is burnt in fire. If the wife dies, the husband goes to the cremation ground. He first lights the funeral pyre (Mukhagni). But if the husband dies, the wife is not allowed to go to the cremation ground. The eldest son lights the funeral pyre. If he has no son, one of their close relation lights the funeral pyre. On the third day the family members accompanied by a small mud-pot (known in Orissa as Kalasi) go to the cremation ground and collect some pieces of bone of the dead person. This day is called "Mruturujakalini". When they find it convenient they throw these bone pieces in the sea at Puri or in some other holy rivers. Up to eleventh day after death in the night a lamp is lit in house in honour of the spirit of the dead person. This lamp is called as "Hia". In the family of the dead person food is taken only once in the evening from third day to the eleventh. In case of general caste people only a vegetarian meal is taken. But in case of fisher women this meal includes cooked fish. This is in keeping with the close bondage between fisher women and Sea-fish. The eleventh day is called as "Bedakalina". If the father dies the sons clean shaves their heads. If the mother dies then the husband clean shaves his head. Next day that is on twelfth day a feast is organized to which the relations and friends are invited. A similar fest is organized on the death anniversary. All the relations and friends are also invited to this feast. In Sana Aryapalli there are few Dandasi²¹ families. They are schedule caste people. When a fisher women family arranges a feast on the twelfth day after the death of one family

member, it invites the relatives and friends through a Dandasi, who acts as the messenger. He is paid some amount from both sides. On the eleventh day some riots are performed on the bank of the village tank. In case of general caste people, these riots are performed under the supervision of a Bramhin. But in case of fisher women these riots are performed under the supervision of a "Dandasi". When husband dies the wife accompanied by some women of the village goes to the village tank and takes her bath there. Until eleventh day she wears bangles and applies vermilion on her head. However on the eleventh day she is taken to the village tank with head covered so that nobody can see her face on the bathing *ghat*²². She breaks her bangles and vermilion is effaced from her head. After taking her bath some *puja* is performed, and then she wears a white saree²³ send by her father families and bracelets made of silver in her hands. In general caste families and *Sradha*²⁴ is performed on every death anniversary. But Fisher women do not perform such *Sradha*. They give their offering to the spirit of the dead person once in a year on every Makara Sankranti (Susmita, 2011).

Dress, hair style and ornaments are common to all societies and communities. But all these groups do not dress themselves similarly. Nor do they maintain same hair-style and wear same ornaments. Important factors of divergence in these respects are cultural background, economic condition, and the level of modernization. For example, young girls of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh studying in colleges or universities or working in government or private organizations generally wear similar kind of dress. But Oriya and Telugu girls living in villages wear different kinds of dress. This difference is mainly due to the difference between the two cultures; Oriya and Telugu. Similarly, economic condition is also a related factor. Rich girls wear more costly and fashionable dress than poor girls. Education may be another factor. Even a girl of poor family studying in a high school or college, would differ from her mother and other elderly women of her family or village in respect of hair style. Rich women would wear gold ornaments while poor women, though fond of such ornaments, cannot afford them. The following discussion on dress, hair style and ornaments of fisher women would give a fair idea about their economic condition, educational background and also about the values and customs of the fisher women community (Susmita, 2011).

The traditional dress of fisher women male is related to his occupation. He dresses himself up in such a way that he feels comfortable while catching fish in the high sea.

He wears a small piece of cloth covering the lower part of his body, while the upper part of his body remains uncovered. However, he wears a cap of conical size. This cap has two functions. Firstly, the cap, because of its

²² The place where people will take bath

²³ Costumes generally wear female people

²⁴ Ritual festival of Orissa

²¹ One of the caste in Orissa

conical size, has the aerodynamic function of cutting through the pressure of the sea wind. Secondly, inside the cap there is a small chamber in which the fisher woman keeps a matchbox and some *pikka* (country cigarette) made of tobacco leaves. The fisher woman wears a *saree*. While the lower part of one portion of the *saree* touches her feet, the other portion of the *saree* falling down from the left shoulder is tied around her waist. The style of *saree* wearing is helpful in properly covering the upper portion of her body. This also helps a mother to carry her baby when she goes out for selling fish. The baby is placed inside the bag like fold formed in one portion of the *saree*, while the other portion of the *saree* is tied round the waist. Fisher women are fond of wearing *sarees* of different colours. Their favourite colours are green, red, pink and blue. They rarely wear white and yellow *sarees*. Sometimes they cover their head with *saree*. In the past, blouse wearing was rare. However, in course of time many Fisher women have started wearing blouse, particularly when they go out. When they work inside the house, they do not feel comfortable by wearing blouse. But most of them while going to a nearby market or a town, wear blouse. Only a small number of fisher women wear *peti-coat*. Change in dress is more visible in Sana Aryapalli than in Podempeta. This is logical because Sana Aryapalli is more exposed to modernization than Podempeta. In this result, Praygi is closer to Podampeta than to Sana Aryapalli (Susmita, 2011).

Young boys and girls have tended to wear modern dresses. While the school going boys wear half pants and shirts, the college going boys wear full pants and shirts. Full pants and shirts are also popular among other fisher women youths. They may not be educated or employed but they wear full pants and shirts when they go to the town, market or to a government office. Similarly young fisher women girls have developed fascination for modern dresses whether educated or uneducated. They wear frocks and *salwar-kamij*²⁵. The educated young girls also wear inner garments. Some of them also wear *langawani*,²⁶ which is popular among the girls of Andhra. This is not surprising because fisher women are Telugu speaking and they retain a lot of Telugu culture. From their clothes one can have an idea about the educational and economic background of fisher women. Those fisher women who have better educational and economic background dress themselves better than other women. Similarly, there is difference between the dress of the school going girl and another girl who is not studying. An uneducated fisher woman girl may be wearing a frock or *langawani*, but generally she is less conscious of her dress than an educated girl. An old man is content with a small dhoti. He rarely wears a shirt or a T-Shirt. When he goes to a nearby market or town he may wear a shirt. These old people seldom wear T-Shirt. But young boys

are fond of wearing attractive T-Shirt. When they go out they invariably wear T-Shirt or shirts.

Fisher women are fond of using ornaments. As they are poor, few of them can afford to buy gold ornaments. They generally use ornaments made of silver. In general, they use earrings and nose rings. Many of them use chains of colour beads. Hardly of them uses a gold necklace. Some old women are using silver anklets (known as *Khadu*) round their ankles. They use glass bangles of different colours. Few of them have gold bangles.

Tattooing is common to fisher women (both men and women). A Fisher woman tattoos her name or the name of her husband on the body of her right hand. She believes that after her death she will not be punished by Yama (the lord of death), if she has tattoo her hand some fisher women tattoo a black spot on the center of the forehead. Some fisher women males also do this. Tattooing is a very painful process. It is done with the help of a pin, and a kind of black powder. In case of a child the pain is less. But many young women go for tattooing only after marriage so that they can tattoo the names of their husbands. However this practice in course of time has considerably decreased. The young girls today are generally not in favour of this. In Podempeta, which is an interior village, tattooing has still attraction for many fisher women. Interest in tattooing is much less in Sana Aryapalli, which is a more developed village. Tattooing is also declining in Praygi village. It is interesting to note that tattooing has become a fashion for some modern young men and women of cities and towns of India, particularly among cinema stars and models. Beckham, the famous British football player, is very fond of tattooing the name of his wife, on his body. But this is not a trend in backward states like Orissa in which tattooing is associated with tradition and backwardness. The fisher folk in the three villages are Hindus. Marine fishing is a caste occupation and the fisher folk in all the three villages belong to one or the other sub-caste of the main fishing caste group of Fisher women. Twenty years back, Christianity entered the village of Sana Aryapalli. In that year of 1990 four families were converted to Christianity. At that time there was no hostile reaction from Hindu fisher women and other Hindus living in the village. In the mean time more families have adopted Christianity. As the number of Christians in the village and nearby fisher women villages has substantially increased, a church has been built in this village. (This church was built in the year of 1991). Though this church has been built near the Gitamandir²⁷ which is a Hindu temple, there has not taken place any conflict on this issue between the two religious communities. Those who have been converted to Christianity are, by and large, much poorer than other fisher women. These fisher women believe that conversion to Christianity will bring about improvement in

²⁵ Costumes generally wear young fisher female folk

²⁶ Costumes generally wear fisher female folk

²⁷ Temple situated in sample village in Sana Aryapalli

their condition. In fact, they are getting some help from the church in respect of health, education etc. Sometimes they receive free medicines, books, slates etc. Hindu-Christian conflicts have taken place in the state of Orissa several times. There broke out a serious communal and ethnic conflict in the district of Phulbani (later named Kandhamal) in 1994. In that district, Panas²⁸ (Scheduled caste) are mostly Christians while most of tribal (Kandhas) are Hindus. In late 2008, a more serious communal-cum-ethnic conflicts broke out in that districts. But such conflicts have not disturbed the relationship between Hindu fisher women and Christianity fisher women of Sana Aryapalli and nearby villages. In fact, in Gopalpur-on-sea and nearby villages, many fisher women have been converted to Christianity. A local NGO run by a Christian father is allegedly helping the spread of Christianity among the fisher women of the area. It is extending different kinds of assistance to them. It is yet to extend its activities to Sana Aryapalli area in which another NGO, UAA, has been active for many years (Susmita, 2011).

The culture of a society consists of the values, orientations, attitudes, and beliefs etc. of people about the system to which they belong. It may be the social system or the economic system or the political system. Culture includes customs, traditions, practices and people's beliefs and perceptions about themselves, their relations with others, their relationship with authorities, their place in the group or organization of which they are members and their attitude towards divine forces. Culture is a dynamic process, it is not static. Culture grows and evolves. Only when a large number of people of some system believe in and practice something for a long period, a culture takes birth. Culture grows out of orientations, beliefs and attitudes etc accumulated for long and shared by a large number of people. Culture is a powerful binding force; it injects cohesion and unity into the system or group. A system may consist of people belonging to different religious, caste and other such groups with divisible potential. Regionalism and localism are other divisible forces. But, in spite of these differences and diversities; the system would remain united and strong, if it has got a well-established and integrated culture. Culture has another important function; it is a source of identity and self respects. It provides an identity to the members of society or community. In spite of diverse roots and belongings, they have a common identity because of their culture. They are proud of their culture which distinguishes them from others. Culture constantly reminds the members of the system of their real roots and implicitly advises them to stick to their own roots. There are now wide-spread fears that because of fast spread of communication and modernization, and high speed of mobility of people and ideas, the local cultures are in danger of polluted or

destroyed. Little traditions are vulnerable to invasion by great traditions. In order to defend itself from such invasions by foreign cultures, a culture needs to regularly reenact itself. The strength and sustainability of a culture would depend on how much sincerely and regularly the individuals concerned observe their customs, traditions, rituals and festivals. The more regular and sincere they are in this respect, the stronger and more lasting their culture is, and vice-versa. This framework would enable us to properly appreciate the cultural practices of marine fisher-folk of Ganjam district of Orissa. Our discussion, besides focusing on the sample villages, would include experiences of some other Fisher women villages of the district which would make our study more complete and meaningful (Susmita, 2011).

Fisher women are highly religious people. They are also, to a great extent superstitious. Throughout the year, they perform a number of *pujas*. They worship different gods and goddesses with the main motive of having good catch of sea fish and returning safely from the sea. Many also do *puja* and offer sacrifices for prevention of end recovery from diseases. While some of this gods/goddess is worshipped throughout the state, some others are specific to fisher women. In general, the religious beliefs and practices of fisher women are related to sea and fishing. With more of modernization, they are getting slowly attracted to the 'great tradition' of the state. However, there is no sign that they will be discarding their own 'little tradition' in near future. Like other castes, the fisher folk worship the important Hindu gods like Shiva and Vishnu and believe in the philosophy of the Hindu religion. They go to the nearest Shiva and Vishnu temples during important festivals; they also undertake pilgrimages to important temples like the Simanchalam Narasimha temple near Vishakhapatnam city and the Tirupati Venkateswar temple in Andhra Pradesh. Another important temple much revered and visited by them is the Jagannath temple at Puri, Orissa. Besides the important Hindu gods, innumerable local deities mostly Ammavaarus (Mother Goddess) are worshipped. Among local deities, the village deities who differ from village to village hold an important place of worship. Apart from this every family has their special family deities who were worshiped by its matrilineal ancestors (Susmita, 2011).

The most important of all local deities common to the Telugu fisher folk is Gangamma²⁹ or Horochandiammavari³⁰. The goddess is mythological by associated with Lord Shiva. Even though she is the personification of the river Ganga, the same goddess is referred to by all the fisher folk of Orissa as a sea goddess. This belief originates from the fisher folk of north Orissa who traditionally were practicing fishing in the tributaries and delta of the river Ganges. Gangamma is worshipped in connection with most of the fishing rituals. She is supposed to wander in the sea protecting

²⁸ One of the Caste of Orissa

²⁹ Name of Goddess worshipped by fisher women folk

³⁰ Name of Goddess worshipped by fisher women folk

the fishermen while fishing in the sea and blessing them with good catches. The shrine of Gangamma is a small brick or mud structure facing the sea. Inside this miniature shrine there is a wooden painted image dressed in red cloth. In the month of March or April, a festival is observed for Gangamma with *pompand*³¹ the ceremony by the whole village. It is believed that if this festival is not observed, the deity will not be appeased, which will lead to poor catch. The festival of Gangamma is celebrated with the sacrifice of goats and chickens. At the beginning of the *puja* (worship) nets are stacked in front of the shrine by different families. After the sacrifice the blood is sprinkled on the nets. Fisher women also offer clothes to the deity. *Puja*³² is conducted by offering flowers, coconuts, bananas, wine, vermilion, some leaves of date palm, sandal wood, incense sticks or ghee threads and four pieces of red flags. The male fisher women take these things to the seashore and offer them to Gangammata with a prayer for blessing to catch more fishes from the sea. Every day the fishermen pray at the shrine before they go on fishing. In case there is a good catch a *puja* is conducted for Gangamma. They also vow to sacrifice a chicken if the catch were to be good (Susmita, 2011).

The Telugu fisher folk particularly of Ganjam district of Orissa celebrate mainly those festivals that are generally celebrated by South Indians. While they perform *Puja* at home, they visit shrines and attend fairs.. *Makara Sankranthi*³³ is one of the important festivals celebrated in all sample villages, that is, Prayagi, Podempeta and Sana Aryapalli. It is celebrated in the middle of January. The fisher folk worship their ancestors and Gangamma, the goddess of the sea. Before this, a small festival called *Bhogi*³⁴ is celebrated, when the fisher folk dispose of all old things and do house cleaning. On the day of the festival, *Puja* is performed to invite the spirits of the ancestors to take the food prepared by the family so that they may bless the off springs and ensure the welfare of all members of the family. It is believed that if this festival does not please the ancestors it may lead to poor fishing and illness among family members. *Makara Sankranthi* is the festival during which the rich as well as the poor cook meat. For this purpose they buy a goat a month or two before the festival, feed it well and sacrifice it during the festival. While the sacrifice of the goat and chicken takes place at the altar of Gangamma, cooked food is kept at a special altar prepared at home. On the first day of the celebration pots of new rice are cooked with *juggery*.³⁵ In addition to the worship of ancestors, a *Puja* is conducted for Gangamma at the seashore and fishing implements are kept near the shrine where goats or chicken are sacrificed and the blood is sprinkled on the nets. *Puja* is

conducted by burning camphor. *Kothammavairi*³⁶ is the celebration of the beginning of the Telugu year. It is celebrated in the month of March. *Kartika Pournima*³⁷ is another important festival celebrated in the month of November and December. It is a common Oriya festival, which reminds one of the olden days when merchant ships sailed from Orissa to distant countries like Indonesia and Malaysia to barter goods. Those sailors are regarded by the fisher folk as their ancestors too. The women, whose fathers, brothers and husbands went on the long voyage, had to fast and pray for their safe return, hence it is predominantly a women's festival. During the festival all mud houses are completely renovated and a new roof is constructed or the old one is repaired. The women along with the children collect clay a few days before the festival and prepare the hut themselves except for the roofing. It is considered their duty to whitewash their houses. The women fast and perform *Puja* with sweet and meat. They offer these at the altar of large Hindu temples. The children make decorative paper boats and float them in temple ponds. On the day of the festival boat and net owners hire new labourers to work for them during the next year.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion makes three things clear. One, the fisher women are changing, though the process of change is slow. However, during the last decade, the pace of change has increased and it is expected to continue with significant implications for the fisher women society. Two, the change of fisher women represents a blending Telugu and Oriya cultures. With the passage of time, they have adopted and internalized more and more of different elements of the Oriya culture, which is the mainstream culture of the state. Three, the change is more marked and substantive among Fisher women girls than among middle age and elderly women. Fisher women represent two aspects of marginalization in India. Firstly, fisher women (marine fishermen) are a backward community. For long, they have been steeped in illiteracy and ignorance. They have been exploited and oppressed by local dominant caste on the one side and on the other, by Government officials and political leaders. They have been long neglected by the Government. Though some policies have been made by the Government for their welfare, these have not been properly implemented. Further, the Government has not accepted their demand to be included in the category of Schedule Castes. Some Oriya – speaking fishermen have been accepted as Schedule Caste. Fisher women are more backward than them, but their demand for Schedule Caste status has not been conceded. Therefore, they feel discriminated against. Secondly, fisher women have also been victims

³¹ Rituals of Fisherwomen community

³² Means worship

³³ Festival organised by fisher community

³⁴ Festival organised by fisher community

³⁵ Food items consumed by fisher folk community

³⁶ Festival organized by fisher folk

³⁷ Festival organized by fisher folk

of all those difficulties and disadvantages which their gender invites. Fisher women in Orissa suffer from a serious handicap. Though residents of Orissa since long, they are primarily Telugu-speaking. They had migrated here from Andhra or the Andhra part of old Madras province in search of catching fish from the sea. Some of them also came to ferry men and goods between the beach and ships anchored near the shore of the old Gopalpur Port (during British Rule). They have settled in the coastal part of Orissa. They live in small villages or hamlets near the beach of Bay of Bengal. They are afflicted by an identity problem. With Telugu as their mother tongue, they are not fluent in Oriya. Many of them speak Oriya, but Oriya does not come to them naturally. To varying degrees, the fisher women of three sample villages enjoy Oriya festival, but they continue to observe most of Telugu festivals. They have not, as yet, been integrated into the main stream of Oriya culture. Fisher women are landless. Fishing is their main occupation. They catch fish from the sea; they sell fish and dried fish. Fisher women, directly and indirectly, have a role in these activities. When fisher males return to the shore with the fish catch, fisher women collect fish from the boat and carry head-load of fish back to their house. These women sell fish/ dried fish in the village, nearby villages and even in some weekly markets held in distant places. Preparation of dried fish is exclusively the work of women; they also help in repairing nets in the off days. Some Fisher women and girls are engaged in the prawn processing in the prawn godown of the fish merchant (Susmita, 2011).

While fisher women males, in general, continue to stick to fishing and fishing related activities such as selling nets, building and repairing boats and fish business, fisher women have shown more occupational mobility. A fair amount of diversification has taken place in their occupational life. Fishing related activities continue to remain the core of their occupational life. But, besides this, they have moved over to some other occupations. In recent years, many fisher women have been engaged as construction workers. On daily wage, they are working in house building, road construction and other such works. In the morning they go the work place, and return home in the evening or even after night has arrived. As construction work has increased manifold, fisher women and other poor women are engaged in this work in most parts of the year. Fisher women are also engaged on daily wage in paddy – rowing and paddy –cutting. Many Fisher women girls of Sana Arjipalli which is a relatively developed village mainly due to its proximity to I.R.E., Chatrapur and Gopalpur Port work in nearby cashew – factories owned by non-fisher women. They are required to manually shell cashew nuts. This work is time taking but low paying. While some fisher women are engaged as security personnel in cashew grooves, some young fisher women are hired for cooking wine in the night in an isolated place away from the village. Poverty compels

these young women to accept this work which is risky and unsafe for them. Some years back it was not conceivable that fisher women would be engaged in any other activity except fishing related one. But, in course of time, they have, to a significant extent, diversified in respect of occupation (Susmita, 2011).

Fisher women, in respect of education, are very backward. Most of men and women are illiterate. Traditionally, they have been averse to getting education. They have failed to positively respond to the educational initiatives of Government and voluntary organizations. In Sana Aryapalli village, schools have opened since long, but interest of fisher women boys and girls in getting education did not take off for a long time. However, the efforts of Government and voluntary organizations to spread education among fisher women have not been a total failure. They have achieved some success. Many fisher women boys and girls have not only passed M.E. and High Schools. Some of them, including some fisher women girls of Sana Aryapalli and nearby villages are studying in colleges. But the picture is much worse in most of fisher women villages which have not got conducive location of Sana Aryapalli which is near urban centers. In isolated, rural areas, fisher women are yet to show much interest in education. Even if there are schools near by, they have little interest to send their children to schools. In this respect girls are much worse off than boys. Fisher women parents still seem to be thinking that there are no points in giving education to their daughters. Even in relatively more developed villages like Sana Aryapalli, there is to some extent gender discrimination in the field of education. The drop out in schools is much higher in case of girls than boys. Education is the gate-way to development and Fisher women need to be sensitized about this. Without education, fisher women will fail to move (Susmita, 2011).

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