



The Sacred and the Sustenance: A Sociological and Folk Religious Dimensions of Fishing in Malda, West Bengal

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Abstract:

This essay explores the intricate relationship between fishing methods and folk religious beliefs in Malda, West Bengal, and conceptualizes "fishing works" as a comprehensive folk cultural phenomenon. Using sociological theories like functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism, it investigates the ways in which local deities, rituals, superstitions, and syncretic traditions impact the socioeconomic lives and identities of fishing communities. The study focuses on how oral traditions and group solidarity support the preservation of this unique cultural bond and how folk religion may adjust to shifting environmental conditions and social injustices. Traditional jobs like fishing, which are both sources of income and culturally embedded customs, are intricately woven into the socio-economic fabric of rural India.

Fishing communities have long been an important part of local economies and cultural identities in West Bengal's Malda district, which is located along the banks of the Ganga River. In light of growing resource scarcity and environmental change, this study aims to investigate the lived realities of fishermen and fisher workers. This study uses the sociological frameworks of folk livelihood systems, environmental conflict theory, and occupational stratification. In this area, fishing is not just a commercial activity; it is ingrained in a belief system related to the river, customary access standards, and ceremonial customs, such as respect for the Ganga as a sacred body.

Keywords - Folk Religion, Local Deities, Folk Custom, Oral Tradition.



Introduction:

The peaceful morning river reverberated softly with the sound of the wooden fishing boat's oars striking its edge. When I first joined the fishermen of Malda's Manikchak block on the Ganga banks, it was just beginning to dawn. The air smelled of clay stove smoke, wet earth, and the river itself and a fog hung over the water. An older man tightened his gamcha around his shoulder and said, "Ganga dibi, Ganga nibiyo." "The Ganga takes, and the Ganga gives." Although I had heard that saying before, it was lived here every day through risk and rhythm.

When I eventually arrived at the riverbank village of Panchanandapur in the Malda district, it was a hot afternoon in early May. The Ganga swelled as a result of monsoon rains, creating new channels through the sandy banks and flowing quickly and dirty. I saw groups of fishermen along the shore mending torn nets, their hands rough from years of work, while other fishermen sat quietly by the sea, waiting for their turn to fish—a process governed not only by time but also by an unwritten law of territorial access. I heard an elder say, "Ei nadi amader maa-o, roji-roti-o." Our mother and our source of income is this river. His statements had a muted force because of a long history of reliance on a river that both sustains and destroys.

I heard the term "fisher war" in whispers, jokes, arguments, and silences; I did not bring it into the field. It does not refer to a specific war but rather to common conflicts that occur between groups of fishermen: over access to sections of the Ganga, over fishing regulations and customs, and between those who are considered "insiders" and "outsiders." Caste identities, seasonal taboos, folk beliefs about river spirits, and the gradual but obvious disintegration of traditional occupational ethics due to market forces are all major sources of these tensions.

Here, fishing is more than just a job; it's a way of life. In addition to being a river, the Ganga is a god and a moral influence on society. Many fishermen whisper invocations to "Maa Ganga" while sprinkling water on their heads prior to launching their boats. In the folk economy, women—who are frequently marginalized in public discourse—play a crucial role by drying, preserving, and selling fish in neighbourhood 'haats' and by carrying out minor rites to ward off bad luck when a catch is subpar.



Objectives of Groundwork Research:

- My goals are to comprehend the folk customs, labour rituals, and daily lives of the fishermen who depend on the river for their survival.
- The study of cultural and occupational life quickly developed into a more in-depth investigation of what the locals frequently called "jhiñt-jhamela" or "fisher war."
- To study fishing rights, the deterioration of the environment and practiced religion, and unequal access to resources found in nature.

Research Methods -

The lives and conflicts of these fishermen are examined in this study through participant observation with sociological lens. Daily observations, regional music, riverbank rumours, and lengthy discussions beneath banyan trees serve as its foundation. I have made an effort to comprehend the fishing community's self-perception and how they interpret the escalating conflicts, not only as an economic struggle but also as a cultural and moral disruption of a way of life that has been passed down through the generations, rather than approaching them through external categories.

I observed how fisher conflicts are lived through casual conversations, participant observation on fishing boats, early morning netting routines, and shared meals with families. These interactions revealed how social struggles entwined with caste, kinship, tradition, and belief are lived alongside economic competition.

Allegations of "outsider" intrusion, disputes over river zones, and unequal distribution of daily catch frequently emerged as outward manifestations of more profound social divisions. Younger fishermen argued for equal share and modern technologies, while older men invoked customary norms. In between, women, who are mostly unrecognized in official documents, worked in silence cleaning, drying, and marketing fish while carrying the weight of unstable economic conditions.

Here, fishing is a way of life rather than just a means of subsistence. It is rooted in a moral ecology that views the river as a sacred body whose rhythms govern social behaviour rather than as a resource to be exploited.



The half-yearly shifting of sandbanks, the seasonal flooding of the Ganga, and the decline in fish populations are all described as both spiritual and environmental occurrences. Stories of previous floods, river goddess rituals, and the transmission of fishing skills all demonstrate how intricately the ecological and the socio-cultural are intertwined. Based on the face-to-face interaction method, this study aims to reveal the textures of these lives—how fishermen contend for ownership, negotiate changing ecological landscapes, and maintain precarious livelihoods in the face of change, uncertainty, and scarcity.

Instead, this study examines "fisher war" as a lived tension that is influenced by social hierarchies, material circumstances, and the constant balancing act between tradition and social, cultural, and ritual adaptation.

Area of Survey—

Sitting next to people as they untangled their nets and stories, one knot at a time, gave rise to this study rather than statistics or secondary readings. I spent several months in 2024 and 2025 interacting with fishing families in the Malda district of West Bengal, specifically in the areas of Manikchak, Kaliachak I, II, and III, and Panchannandapur. I walked long muddy embankments with them, ate with them, and listened quietly as they talked about their lives, including fights, faith, and fish.

The livelihoods of the fish workers in the South Malda, which is located between the Ganga and Mahananda rivers, are intricately linked to the socioeconomic structure and riverine ecology of the area. They constitute a unique and historically significant community.

In the past, these communities—like the Chhota Chain—have made fishing their livelihood and way of life, overcoming the physical difficulties of the rivers as well as the intricate social structures and marginalization that define rural Bengal. In Malda, fishing is more than just a way to make a living; it is ingrained in regional traditions, religious beliefs, and familial bonds, with fisher folk-specific rituals and local, Tribal or Hindu deities forming their shared identity.

Because of the vast riverine networks in Malda, West Bengal, fishing is a folk cultural nexus in Bengali tradition, fish are a symbol of good fortune and prosperity (in West Bengal, on the Jamaisashti celebration, sons-in-law take fish to their in-laws' house.)



Traditionally found in the lower echelons of the Hindu caste system, fishing communities—such as the Bheel, Malos, Kaibartas, and Bagdis—have played a crucial role in the region's economy and social structure.

Particularly in the Malda district, which is home to Tribal, Muslim and Hindu communities, there is a complex religious landscape. Superstitions, myths, and traditional practices are particularly common, particularly in rural areas. The idea of "fishing works" encompasses the whole way of life for fishing communities and goes beyond just a specific economic activity or occupation.

This encompasses their cultural expressions, social structures, spiritual beliefs, and practical methods. The anthropological definition of "folklore" as the customs, myths, and stories of a group of people united by a common religion, geography, or occupation is consistent with this conceptualization. The extensive impact of fishing on many facets of human society, ranging from clothing and healthcare to art and social structures, suggests that fishing is not a solitary activity but rather is intricately woven into and mutually influences the cultural, social, and spiritual fabric of these societies. Thus, rather than being viewed as separate elements, "fishing works" are conceptualized as a comprehensive cultural system in which social organization, belief systems, and means of subsistence are all intricately intertwined. This knowledge provides a more profound analytical framework for understanding fishing communities' lived experiences.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Folk Religion of Fishing in Malda

Localized, traditional practices and beliefs that are different from and frequently conflict with the official doctrines of organised religion are referred to as folk religion in religious studies and folkloristics. This dynamic is seen in Malda, where a sizable portion of the rural populace identifies as extremely superstitious, and superstitions and traditional beliefs are notably prevalent.

a. Views from a Functionalist Perspective

According to functionalism, religious practices and beliefs satisfy important societal needs, such as promoting social control, group cohesion, and emotional comfort. Folk religious rituals and common beliefs probably provide a valuable sense of security and unity for the



fishing communities of Malda, who must deal with the risks and uncertainties that come with their line of work, including unpredictable weather and diminishing catches. Community ties are strengthened and psychological comfort is provided in the face of uncertain results by group rituals carried out prior to fishing excursions or during seasonal celebrations, such as Durga Puja or Bengali weddings that feature fish. This significant functional role in identity formation and community cohesion is reflected in the deeply embedded "it gets in your blood" narrative among fishermen, which denotes an almost mystical attachment to their work and a strong sense of continuity with ancestral traditions.

According to this dynamic, folk religious practices are an essential coping strategy that helps communities endure despite the high risks associated with a livelihood that is directly reliant on erratic natural forces. They do this by offering emotional support during difficult times and by fostering opportunities for social interaction and support.

b. Perspectives on Conflict Theory:

According to conflict theory, by legitimizing the status quo, religion may perpetuate current social injustices and reflect societal stratification. In Malda, fishing communities—which frequently include members of Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Castes—as well as sizable Muslim populations—face severe socioeconomic marginalization. Private interests and local elites have gradually infringed upon their traditional fishing rights, resulting in middlemen's exploitation and a stark lack of political representation.

But for marginalized groups, Malda's folk religion also seems to serve as a subdued yet powerful site of identity assertion and resistance. For example, the Gambhira festival allows common people to voice their complaints to a symbolic "feudal lord" through satire and humorous dialogue between characters such as Shiva (Nana) and Nati, criticizing "all sorts of social and economic evils." Folk practices can both reflect and subtly challenge established power structures, offering a culturally acceptable forum for social commentary and protest. This direct social commentary illustrates a complex, dualistic interplay. This suggests that, in contrast to more formalized forms, folk religion can both reflect and subtly challenge social injustices, providing marginalized communities with a culturally embedded, frequently indirect, way to voice their disapproval and claim their identity in the face of oppressive powers.



Symbolic interactionism focuses on how people use shared symbols and social interactions to create and negotiate meaning. According to this viewpoint, religious identity is dynamically formed by interactions within the religious community as well as by how symbols and rituals are collectively interpreted. Symbols like the fish itself, which stands for wealth, good fortune, and a connection to the divine, and customs like the "Tattva" ceremony, which involves presenting a Ruhu fish in pre-wedding ceremonies, are essential to the collective identity and worldview of Malda's fishing communities. Repeated social interaction and cultural transmission give these symbols and rituals their meaning.

In these communities, knowledge, myths, and rituals are primarily transmitted orally and are an essential component of their cultural heritage and sense of self. Fishermen's stories, like the gripping "it gets in your blood" tale, reinforce their professional and cultural identities by reflecting deeply held ideals of liberty, self-reliance, and tradition. Through oral transmission, the community's distinctive way of life, the values associated with fishing methods, and respect for the aquatic environment are all understood, internalised, and passed down through the generations. This demonstrates that oral traditions are dynamic, active processes of collective memory formation that constantly shape and reaffirm the community's identity, particularly as they perceive expanding threats to their way of life and occupation. They are not just passive historical records or instructional guides.

Folk Religious Expressions in Fishing Works :

i. Superstitions, Folks Rituals, and Local Deities

A pantheon of regional goddesses, including Shitala (the smallpox goddess), Manasa (the snake goddess), and Shashthi (the child's protector), are all highly revered in West Bengal's folk religious landscape. More particularly relevant to fishing, Bonbibi is a highly revered forest goddess in the Sundarbans who is thought to shield fishermen and honey gatherers from tiger attacks. This highlights the close connection between deity worship and work-related risks. The general Bengali reverence for Kali, who is often offered fish, and the worship of Chuno-Biley Kali as the protector of small fish in Bardhaman suggest a broader regional pattern of deities associated with aquatic life and providing protection for those who depend on it, even though there are few direct references to Malda's particular fishing deities.



In some temples, Lord Shiva is provided with fish. He is also a major figure in Malda's Gambhira festival, where he is lovingly referred to as "Nana" (elder or supreme figure), to whom the general public can voice grievances and ask for answers. Vishnu's fish avatar, Matsya, is widely recognized throughout India as a representation of good fortune and divine protection, especially in relation to water and food. A deeper pattern emerges from the particular roles that are assigned to these deities: they are closely related to the risks, hardships, and daily requirements for sustenance that fishermen face. Their devotion is a practical reaction, exhibiting a flexible religious structure that directly tackles surviving and thriving in a harsh setting.

Although there aren't many detailed pre-fishing rituals that are unique to Malda, fishermen's wives in West Bengal typically make offerings to deities like Goddess Ganges and Mangal Chandi in exchange for their husbands' safe return.

Known to be common in rural Malda, superstitions are widespread in fishing communities around the world and are frequently associated with predicting good fortune, controlling the weather, or preventing bad luck. These can include taboos like not whistling while fishing or bringing bananas on board, which are thought to bring bad luck or unfavorable weather.

Table 1: Key Folk Deities and Their Associations with Fishing/Water in West Bengal

| God, Goddess, and Folk Deity Name | Primary Social and spiritual Role | Relevant Context or Examples (West Bengal/Malda) |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Maa Kali | Benevolent mother goddess | Worshipped with fish offerings |
| Chuno-Biley Kali | Protector of small fish | Specifically protects <i>chuno maach</i> (small fish) in Bardhaman |
| Bonbibibi | Forest guardian (from tigers) | Protects honey collectors and fishermen in the Sundarbans Locality. |
| Lord Shiva (Nana) | Supreme figure or guardian or receiver of grievances | Central to the Gambhira festival, it receives complaints from common people. |
| Matsya (Vishnu avatar) | Divine protection and luck and rescuer | Vishnu's fish incarnation, symbol of luck and preservation |
| Mangal Chandi | Blessings for safe return. | Worshipped by fishermen's wives for safe journeys. |
| Goddess Ganges | Blessings for safe journey. | Worshipped by fishermen's wives for safe journeys. |



ii. The ability to adapt and syncretic practices

Bengali folk religion is characterized by syncretism, which is the dynamic blending of indigenous, Muslim, and Hindu customs. This is best demonstrated by the Baul-Fakir tradition, which rejects orthodoxy and places a strong emphasis on direct, experiential communion with God, bridging traditional Hindu-Muslim divides. Bengal's "syncretic folk cultural tradition where Sufi mysticism was assimilated with Tantric, Buddhist, and Vaishnava Sahajyia traditions" is the source of this syncretic faith, which is defined as a "fusion of both Hindu and Islamic practices."

This combination is an active, dynamic process that promotes "social cohesion, collective action, and sustainable environmental practices" rather than just the passive coexistence of different beliefs. It creates a "collective belief system" that enables groups to "adapt, endure, and recover from adversity." For livelihoods that depend on resources, like fishing, this "eco-religious approach" fosters harmony between people and their surroundings. This demonstrates how syncretism is a dynamic cultural strategy that helps these communities deal with internal conflicts (like caste divisions) and external pressures (like privatization and resource degradation) by promoting unity and shared resource stewardship through a blended faith system.

iii. Oral Traditions and Traditional Ecological Knowledge :

Oral traditions are very important to fishing because they are the main way that people pass down important information about navigation, equipment, fish behavior, seasonal patterns, and sustainable harvesting methods from one generation to the next. Elders are very important to this process because they tell stories, show how to do things, and mentor younger people. This includes having a "deep and personal understanding of plants, animals, and natural events" and coming up with and using "the right technologies for hunting and fishing."

TEK or Traditional Ecological Knowledge often includes built-in conservation measures that help keep the environment in balance. These involve the use of selective hooks, net designs that naturally allow smaller or non-target species to escape, and "pulse fishing," which involves fishing certain areas seasonally and then letting them recover. In West Bengal, the community committee-run traditional khoti system guarantees compliance with fishing laws,



encouraging equity and teamwork and demonstrating a community-based approach to There is proof that traditional fishing methods are dwindling, even though TEK and oral traditions are crucial for sustainable fishing. Due to declining catches and unstable finances, younger generations are becoming less interested in fishing, and the number of boats in Khotis has been cut in half. Because fishing dependence is seen as a source of poverty and a hindrance to "development," national policies frequently ignore the detrimental effects on capture fisheries, forcing people to diversify into other types of work.

This suggests that oral transmission of TEK is directly and causally threatened. The very basis of traditional knowledge and practices is being actively undermined by the move towards mechanized fishing and the widespread economic pressures, which could result in the loss of priceless ecological wisdom.

Conclusion: "Fishing operates" as Folk Culture Embodied:

In Malda, West Bengal, "fishing works" are much more than just a means of subsistence; they are a profound expression of folk culture, where a dynamic, flexible folk religious system is intricately woven with the practicalities of survival.

Sociological theories are essential for comprehending this phenomenon because they show how these practices help to maintain and build collective identity through shared meanings and narratives (symbolic interactionism), navigate and subtly challenge power imbalances and caste inequalities (conflict theory), and promote community cohesion and emotional comfort (functionalism).

The communities' adherence to superstitions, performance of particular rituals, and dependence on regional deities all represent an adaptive reaction to the risks and uncertainties that come with their line of work.

The privatization of water bodies, resource degradation from overfishing and pollution, and socio-economic marginalization are major modern issues facing Malda's fishing communities despite their rich cultural heritage and innate resilience.

The survival of traditional practices, the effectiveness of folk religious coping strategies, and the generational transfer of priceless Traditional Ecological Knowledge are all directly threatened by these outside forces. In order to appreciate the resilience and growing



vulnerability of these distinctive cultural systems in the face of rapid modernization and environmental change, it is imperative that "fishing works" be understood through these integrated sociological and folk religious lenses.

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