

CHAPTER 3

Ethnical and Socio-Cultural Background of Marine Fishing Communities in Orissa

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3.1 Caste Background of Artisanal Fisherfolk

The southern coast of Orissa differs from the northern coast not only with regard to oceanographical features, marine resources and fishing technology but also with regard to the cultural and ethnical origins of the people who have settled along the seashore and make a living from fishing in the sea. While the tradition of sea-fishing in the southern district of Ganjam is as old as that in the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, sea-fishing started much later in the northern districts of Orissa, stimulated by an increased demand for marine fish from other Indian states and cities, in particular from Calcutta, and by export prospects for prawns. The vast majority of the population of Orissa itself until today has not yet cultivated a palate for marine fish,

3.1 .1 Fisherfolk Castes of South Orissa

The vast majority of the artisanal marine fisherfolk of Ganjam. Puri and parts of Cuttack district, in South Orissa locally referred to as Noliyas, are of Telugu origin. They belong to communities which have been fishing for 1000 and more years, as referred to in literature of the early Christian era (Venkataswamy Nattar 1927) and from the south during the past few decades they spread out to Puri and the southern part of Cuttack district. Noliya is an ancient Tamil word dating nearly 1500 years back according to the Sangam literature (Venkataswamy Nattar, 1927).

The fisherfolk referred to as Noliyas belong to two different castes, namely Jalaris and Vodabalijas.

The name Jalaris relates to the word Jala which means net. In Orissa, Jalaris are concentrated in Ganjam district. Some have also migrated to Puri and Cuttack district. Jalaris also reside along the coastline of Andhra Pradesh, particularly in the districts of Visakhapatnam and Srikakulam.

Among Jalaris there are two distinct groups, viz. the Edu Ratla group and the Pardrevdu Ratla group who do not intermarry but interdine. Otherwise they do not differ much in their habits and customs.

Jalaris live in hamlets very close to the sea-shore. The hamlets usually consist of streets, with houses or huts on either side. The men are exclusively engaged in marine fishing while the women are involved in the marketing of fish. During the sowing and the harvesting season some women also work as agricultural labourers and coolies. Jalaris who live close to Chilka lake possess nets and traps for fishing in the lake. They practise estuarine fishing during the lean seasons in marine fishing.

Jalaris usually own boats and nets and only a small group not owning any assets work as labourers for others who own boats and nets.

During the survey, only one of the four fishing villages studied in South Orissa was inhabited by Jalaris. 85% of all the families in the village were boat and net owners while only 12% worked as labourers.

The Jalaris have a caste council which consists of eight members. The head of the council is called Paddhanau. The membership of the caste council is hereditary.

The council controls all the social and economic affairs of the village. It decides on fishing holidays, ban of certain types of fishing gear, settles disputes connected with marriages, inheritance etc., supervises important social functions like puberty, marriage, death and religious ceremonies, collects village funds for various purposes, levies punishments on guilty persons, arranges aid during

lean seasons in fishing and in times of natural calamities and deals with institutions outside the village such as police, government agencies etc.

Like Jalaris, members of Vodabalijas, the second Telugu speaking fisherfolk caste, reside in South Orissa and are also found in great numbers in the Visakhapstnam and Srikakulam districts of Andhra Pradesh as well as in other parts of the southern districts of the state. They are not mainly confined to Ganjam district as Jalaris are but have spread all along the coastline of Puri and the southern part of Cuttack district, too. Out of the four villages studied in South Orissa, three were settlements of Vodabalijas. Other observation made by officers of the Fisheries Department regarding the caste of Telugu speaking fisherfolk indicate, too, that Vodabalijas are more numerous than Jalaris in Orissa.

The settlements of Vodabalijas are large, having many streets and lanes. Like Jalaris, Vodabalija men are exclusively engaged in fishing while the women are involved in fish marketing.

In some areas Oriya fisherfolk castes such as Keotos or Kevitos have taken over marketing and small-scale processing of fish, which consequently reduced the role of Vodabalija and also of Jalari women in fish marketing.

Vodabalijas regulate their social and economic affairs with the help of a caste council, locally called Kulasamidhi. The head of the council is known as Kula pilla. The number of members differs from village to village, but is generally about five. The membership is hereditary. The functions of the caste council are similar to those of the Jalaris' council.

Apart from Jalaris and Vodabalijas, ethnically Oriya fisherfolk castes e.g. Gokhas and Kaibartas as well as some traditional agriculturists are also practising marine fishing in a few locations in Ganjam and Puri districts and in the southern part of Cuttack district. For the most part, members of these castes are either confined to beach seine operations very close to the shore or depend on a river mouth to launch their boats, since they are not used to operating fishing craft and gear from open

surf-beaten beaches, except for one location, a village named Jahania south of Astrang in Puri district where Oriya fisherfolk practise sea-fishing with kattumarams, locally called 'teppa', which are traditionally used by South Indian fisherfolk. The fisherfolk of this location, however, have their origin not only in the Kaibarta and Khanda castes but also in the Telugu fisherfolk, who had been invited in the second half of the 18th century by the ruler of Machogan, Basudev Mangaraj, to settle at the mouth of the river Devi, to serve him as pirates.

3.1.2 Caste Background of Fisherfolk of North Orissa

Numerous castes have taken to sea-fishing in Balasore and in the northern part of Cuttack district during the last few decades. Those who were originally practising estuarine and inland fishing were the first ones. Later members from other castes with traditional occupations such as those of agriculturists, artisans etc. followed.

Traditional riverine and estuarine fisherfolk castes of North Orissa are Kaibarta, Gokha and Rajbansi while the non-traditional fisherfolk castes which are now practising sea-fishing comprise Harayans, Khandayat, Radhi, Teli, Ganda, Barik and Kumar.

Kaibarta is the largest traditional Oriya fisherfolk caste found mainly in Balasore district.

The name Kaibarta is synonymous with Kewat or Keota. Kaibartas are divided into two subcastes : Chasi Kaibarta and Jalia Kaibarta or Adi Kaibarta. Chasi Kaibartas have traditionally been peasants and are usually considered superior to Jalia Kaibartas, who have been traditionally engaged in riverine and estuarine fishing (See Thompson 1921, p. 358 and Russel Atiralal 1916, p. 370). Nowadays Chasi Kaibartas are also engaged in sea-fishing. They have titles like Behera, Majhi, Das, Senapathi, Khatua, Burmanik etc. It is not clearly known when Kaibartas took up sea-fishing but it can be assumed that it took place some 60 years ago. Besides fishing, Jalia Kaibartas also cultivate land. Their women are not involved in fish marketing but sometimes in net mending and processing of fish.

There are also Bengali Kaibartas. Some of them have migrated to Orissa and practise marine fishing in Balasore district. It is not exactly known to which subcaste they belong. They claim, however, fishing as their traditional caste occupation.

Kaibartas are usually net or boat owners. Comparatively a few work as free or contract labourers. Kaibartas are often described as the most enterprising of the Oriya and Bengali fisherfolk groups who have adopted new fishing methods, ventured into new fishing grounds, arranged for the marketing of fish etc.

Another traditional fisherfolk caste that practises sea-fishing in North Orissa is Rajbansi also referred to as Jiyar, The number of Rajbansis engaged in marine fishing is much smaller than the number of Kaibartas and Gokhas. There are Oriya Rajbansis and Bengali Rajbansis,¹ the latter having migrated from East Bengal, at the time of the partition of Bengal, to the 24 Parganas in West Bengal and from there to Orissa. Rajbansis have titles such as Barman, Mandal, Singh and Patra. They are referred to as Kshatriyas Before taking up sea-fishing Rajbansis were engaged in inland fishing² and also worked as agricultural labourers.³

While their major occupation has become fishing, Rajbansis usually also own a few acres of agricultural land, which they cultivate either themselves or with the help of labourers.

Their women are not involved in any activity which is related to fishing. Of those which have other traditional occupations than fishing and which are at present practising sea-fishing in Orissa, Khandayat is the largest.

Traditionally Khandayats are peasants. They have entered sea-fishing mainly by investing in fishing boats and nets the surplus money they have accumulated in agriculture.

1. A description of the fisherfolk of West Bengal is attempted in *Men in India*, 1969, Vol. 49, No. 3, pp 241-248.
2. See Thomson, 1921, pp 351 and also Manmohan 1901, pp 50.
3. Risley 1891, pp 375 holds the view that Rajbansis were originally agriculturists.

When fishing became more and more rewarding many Khandayats shifted the emphasis in their economic activity from agriculture to fishing. While in some areas Khandayats own boats and nets without actively participating in fishing operations themselves, in other areas they go out fishing in the sea, sometimes even as labourers in other boats and nets. An initial constraint in taking up sea-fishing might have been the fact that Khandayats rank higher in the caste hierarchy than Kaibartas and Gokhas and fishing is considered an inferior occupation compared to cultivation of land.

Those Khandayats who have taken to fishing usually still own agricultural land. Their titles are Nayak, Behera, Mohanty and Patras.

Other Oriya and Bengali castes which were originally engaged in the processing of agricultural products and members of which have recently taken up sea-fishing are Radhi, Teli and Gauda. The traditional occupations of these castes respectively are processing rice (the produce being called 'flattened rice'), extracting oil from mustard and gingelly seeds, and raising cattle and sheep. Members of these castes, which have a higher social status than traditional fisherfolk castes have entered fishing mainly as labourers in other boats or nets or as crew members owning net pieces. They have given up their traditional occupations because income from fishing is steadily increasing due to an increasing demand for fish and high prices while earnings from their traditional occupations are decreasing. Some Radhis, Telis and Gauda do fishing only as a part time occupation, depending on the demand for labourers by boat and net owners.

Titles of Radhis, Telis and Gaudas who have taken up sea-fishing are Jena, Nayak and Sahoo.

Another group of Oriya castes that has recently taken to sea-fishing has traditionally consisted of village artisans such as Kumar (blacksmith), Tanti (weaver) and Barik (barber). They shifted to a new occupation most likely for the same reasons as the Gaudas, Radhis and Telis. Compared to these castes they are more often owners of nets and boats which reflect their better economic situation, Titles of artisans who are engaged in sea-fishing are Mandal, Jena and Nath.



Telugu fishermen of Purl, South Orissa, carrying the catch to the shore



Telugu fishermen of Gopalpur-on-Sea with Kavalavala (gilinet)



— Kaibarta fishermen of Barajdeuli, Balasore district



Kaibarta fisherwomen of Gudubai, Balasore district

Apart from agricultural castes and artisans, Harijans are also engaged in marine fishing in North Orissa, both as labourers and as owners of net pieces.

Besides the castes mentioned above, which have taken to sea fishing as observed during the study, there are other traditional fisherfolk castes practising fishing in lakes¹ and rivers, and engaging themselves in the processing and marketing of fish or in making and selling fishing gear. e.g. Nikari, Jhora, Machua Kandra, Karita, Kuthra, Dandamayi, Ujia, Thosas Mala (or Mal Mallah).² Malas are traditionally boatmen, who practice fishing as a subsidiary occupation. Some Malas took up fishing later on as the primary profession and adopted the name 'Jalo', which means net. They fish mainly in rivers and estuaries.

Thoras are considered a sub-caste of Kaibartas. Besides fishing in ponds, lakes and rivers, Thoras have also been gold washers in the past. Ujias are mainly found in Balasore district as inland fisherfolk. Their name is derived from "Ujon", which means to swim.

Dandamayi, Nikari and Jhora are found in different parts of Orissa, fishing in lakes and rivers.

Karitas are found only in Puri district. Their social status is very low. Khatra is an allied caste which sells fish, caught by members of the former caste. Machua Kandra is a sub-caste of the low-ranking Kandra caste. The caste name is said to denote skill in archery. Machua Kandra are predominantly engaged in preparing and selling contrivances for catching fish.

The brief description of castes which are presently engaged in sea fishing in Orissa shows that the increased demand for fish has initiated a process of occupational mobility. Besides castes which have traditionally practised inland fishing, several non-fishing castes such as agriculturists, artisans and harayans ranking both

1. Oriya fishing communities who follow their occupation in the estuarine waters of Chilka lake and have not yet adapted themselves to sea fishing are described by Roy Choudhury (1977) in *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society* 1977.
2. See K. G. Gupta 1907 and also G. S. Bhattacharya 1957.

higher and lower in the hierarchy of fisherfolk castes have also taken to sea fishing as another artisanal occupation.

This process of occupational mobility has, however, been limited to North Orissa. The reason is most probably that the operation of kattumarams from the surf-beaten beaches of South Orissa requires too many skills and experiences to be easily adopted by other castes as compared to the operation of displacement boats in the shallow inshore waters and estuaries of North Orissa.

Table 1 : Demographic data-districtwise

District	Ganjam	Puri	Cuttack	Balasore
1. Number of marine fishing villages.	29	16	7	184
2. Number of marine fisherfolk households-major time & minor time				
a. No. of households	4132	1766	1686	9260
Average no. of fisherfolk households per village	142.5	110.4	240.9	50.3
b. Average size of household	5.4	6.9	6.1	6.2
c. No. of major time fishing households	3831	1551	1460	7527
	(93%)	(88%)	(87%)	(81%)
Average no. of major time fishing households per village	132.1	96.9	208.6	40.9
d. No. of minor time fishing households	177	184	158	1657
	(4%)	(10%)	(11%)	(18%)
Average no. of minor time fishing households per village	6.1	11.5	25.4	9
e. No. of single old people households	124	25	48	76
	(3%)	(2%)	(2%)	(1%)
Average no. per village	4.3	1.6	6.9	0.5
3. Number of active fishermen	5880	3800	3202	17168

Even though it is not known how many fisherfolk belong to each caste, a rough idea can be obtained about the ratio of Telugu speaking fisherfolk and Oriya and Bengali speaking fisherfolk.

The table above shows the number of artisanal fisherfolk households practising sea fishing in the four coastal districts of Orissa.

While in Puri and Ganjam districts sea fishing is carried out almost exclusively by Vodabalijas and Jalaris, along with a small number of Gokhas, in Balasore district, Oriya and Bengali fisherfolk castes as well as traditional agriculturists, artisans and harayans are engaged in sea fishing.

Cuttack district has Telugu speaking as well as Bengali and Oriya speaking marine fisherfolk.

3.2 Habitation and Settlement Pattern

3.2.1. Habitation and Settlement Pattern of Fisherfolk in North Orissa

The settlements of artisanal marine fisherfolk look quite different in North and South Orissa and thereby reflect the ecological, geographical and ethnic cultural differences described earlier. Fisherfolk in North Orissa, e.g. Balasore district and the northern part of Cuttack district, live in hamlets that are usually part of larger agricultural villages. They are situated either by a river at some distance from the sea, or, in the absence of a river, at a site where agricultural land or at least land suitable for a kitchen garden is available, which again is usually the case only at some distance from the sea shore. Thus fishing villages in North Orissa are generally situated in the middle of a rich vegetation of various types of fruit trees, bamboo groves, palm trees, vegetable gardens and fish ponds, preferably beside a river. Paddy fields and plantations of other crops extend to the sides of the villages, which easily remind us of the agricultural and inland fisheries origins of their inhabitants who, even though practising sea fishing now-a-days as their primary occupation, still follow their traditional occupation of fishing in rivers and cultivating land.

Another feature that clearly distinguishes fisherfolk villages in the north from those in the south is the absence of such fishing activities as launching and landing of boats, unloading of catch, selling of fish to merchants, processing of fish for sale etc., because the village and the landing site are not identical in North Orissa. In the case of villages which are situated upstream, boats and crew operate during the fishing season from temporary camps at the rivermouth, where the catch is also sold. Crew members take turns to visit the village in order to procure food and other supplies as well as to look after their families. Children and women do not visit the fishing camp.

In the case of those villages which are not situated by a river but at some distance from the shore, the fishing activities mentioned above are not very noticeable either. The boats are kept on the shore, which is separated from the village by extensive casuarina plantations as well as by saline lands.

During the fishing season the boats usually do not land at those sites where they are kept but at larger landing sites in rivermouths having good communication links and frequented by a number of fish merchants.

Another feature which distinguishes fisherfolk settlements in North Orissa from those in South Orissa is again based on their different ethnical and cultural backgrounds. Since the fisherfolk of the north belong to both fishing and non-fishing castes, with each one occupying a different status in the caste hierarchy, their houses are not clumped together in a particular part of the village but widely scattered.

The houses themselves are usually situated in the middle of a spacious compound. Compound walls rarely exist. Thorny shrubs, dry bushes or bamboo fences denote the boundary. Inside the compound one can see houses and sheds of different sizes, a small pond, a flat open courtyard with a mud floor, a kitchen garden, various fruit trees and thick bamboo bushes. The largest house serves as living place. It has usually three or more rooms and a wide verandah all around. A separate smaller hut sometimes serves as kitchen if it is not accommodated in the main house. Another

hut may be used as cow or goat shed, another one for husking paddy. Sometimes attached to the main house is a poultry house, where fishing gear and food stuff are also stored. The houses and huts have clay walls, the largest ones sometimes brickwalls. The roofs are thatched with straw, the living place is sometimes roofed over with tiles. The wide open level mud floor is used for drying unmarketable fish. The types of houses and compounds described above are located either on both sides of a village road or in a more scattered way, surrounded by pathways.

Another type of settlement of the Oriya fisherfolk in North Orissa is represented by street houses which directly border the village street. The houses are not separated from each other and from the road by compounds or fences but the houses have common walls, thus forming a long stretch of buildings on both sides of the roads, having raised verandahs under their thatched roofs.

The street house itself serves only as an ante-chamber through which one proceeds to the elongated main house, which consists of a series of rooms one after another, having verandahs in front. All main houses are built at a right angle to the row of street houses, the back of each main house forming the boundary of the elongated rectangular courtyard of the house at the rear. The main house leads to a separate kitchen shed behind which a kitchen garden is located. The ante-chamber is used for husking paddy and for storing firewood and other materials. The main house contains living rooms for members of the usually extended families. In these rooms, fishing gear, food stuff, utensils and other valuable items are kept.

On the whole the houses of the Oriya and the Bengali fisherfolk are not very much different from the houses of the agriculturists, which is really not surprising, because even the traditional fisherfolk castes such as Kaibarta, Cokha and Rajbansis have been regularly engaged in agricultural activities during lean seasons while others who are now practising sea fishing were once agriculturists by caste.

3.2.2 Habitation and Settlement Pattern of Fisherfolk in South Orissa

In South Orissa with its wide, open beaches and scarce vegetation along the coastline and its fisherfolk fishing in the sea from time immemorial, having no agricultural origin whatsoever and no tradition in river fishing either, the settlements of the marine fisherfolk are situated in most cases almost directly on the beach or very close to it on sandy ground with hardly any vegetation, not to speak of agricultural land or kitchen gardens. The beach in front of the huts serves as landing place, initial market place for the fish, a place for drying kattumaram logs and fishing gear as well as for net mending and other activities.

Fishing hamlets in South Orissa are generally of two types. The first type is mainly represented by settlements which have been formed by fisherfolk who have migrated recently, which means during the last few decades from Andhra Pradesh or Ganjam district to Puri district and the southern part of Cuttack district and are residing on land almost on the beach which is owned by the government and has not been allotted to them. These settlements consist mainly of make-shift huts which are arranged haphazardly. Many of the huts do not have side walls and are constructed like a tent using only wooden poles and palm leaves.

The second type of fisherfolk hamlet in South Orissa is inhabited by those fisherfolk who have been residing there already for a long period, having had the opportunity of choosing the location of their villages. As it is also the case with make-shift huts mentioned above, the fisherfolk hamlets are separate settlements and do not form a part of agricultural villages.

A well established fishing hamlet in the south has one or two main streets, and a number of lanes and side streets. The main streets are occupied by families of well-to-do fisherfolk owning several boats and nets or by families that were well-to-do in the past. The houses usually have clay or mud walls, in some cases even brick walls, and are much smaller than fisherfolk houses in the north. The clay and mud walled houses have thatched roofs of straw or palm leaves, the latter marking a better economic status,

while the houses with brick walls have usually asbestos roofs. All houses are generally street houses with a very small compound at the back. Sometimes palm thatchings are used to mark the boundaries between the houses at the rear.

The space being limited, in some villages the houses have a paddy storing place below the roof.

The interior of the house is usually divided by partition walls into three rooms. The inner room serves as a bed and store room. The other two rooms open onto the front and the back of the house. One of the outer rooms leads to a kitchen, which however is used only during the rainy season.

The cooking is done on ovens which are arranged in a double row in the middle of each street. The huts have a raised verandah known as 'Arugu'. The verandah is used to keep the net and other fishing accessories. It is also used as a place of rest and a meeting-place for family members and neighbours. Some houses have a small backyard garden, in which a few plants like pumpkin creepers, one or two coconut trees and some flowers are grown. In comparing settlement patterns and housing conditions between South and North Orissa and between the Telugu and the Oriya/Bengali fisherfolk, it should be kept in mind that the latter groups have been for ages permanent settlers of the soil, depending partly on agricultural land for their living, while the Telugu fisherfolk never knew such binding to the soil but traditionally keep shifting in search of new fishing grounds.

As described above, the settlements of marine fisherfolk in Orissa are either isolated hamlets scattered along the coast or part of agricultural villages, which are often situated at the side of a river. In both cases access to infrastructural facilities becomes a problem.

3.2.3 Infrastructural Facilities

Common features of the 29 settlements of artisanal fisherfolk in the southernmost Ganjam district are the absence of clinics and primary health centres and hospitals within a reasonable distance from the fishing village, the lack of electricity, the absence of secondary schools as well as the lack of functioning tubewells.

Drinking water is usually taken from open wells which are exposed to contamination. In some areas such as Chatrapur, wells dry up seasonally which causes serious water problems.

With regard to primary schools and road communication, the villages of the artisanal fisherfolk are better off. Primary **schools** are located within easy walking distance of almost all settlements, even though their capacity is not sufficient, considering the number of children of school-going age.

In the northern and central parts of Ganjam district the fishing villages are usually connected by motorable roads. Most of the hamlets in the southern part, however, can be reached only after walking for miles on sandy footpaths, which submerge under water during the rainy season. In some cases creeks and small rivers have to be crossed.

Except for those fisherfolk settlements within the municipal area of Puri town, the 17 fishing villages of Puri district lack almost all infrastructural facilities such as tube wells, primary health centres and clinics, electricity and roads, and are worse off than the fishing villages in Ganjam district. The reason might be that these settlements were established much later than the villages in Ganjam district by fisherfolk who have migrated from Andhra Pradesh.

Similar is the situation in Cuttack district with its numerous rivers, creeks and estuaries, Roads which are motorable throughout the year are almost absent. In most cases rivers and creeks have to be crossed to reach the settlements. Tube wells are hardly to be found. Drinking water is taken from open wells, rivers and ponds. In some cases salinity of water becomes a problem during certain parts of the year. Clinics and secondary schools are not within reachable distance for most of the fishing villages of Cuttack district. Excepting one, none of the settlements is electrified.

In Balasore district the lack of modern health facilities within reachable distance from the fishing villages seems to be the major problem. At present primary health centres are the only significant institutions. Their number is, however, far too small

to play an effective role with regard to preventive and curative health care,

The lack of road communication is a problem in the northern part of the district.

Regarding schooling, a considerable number of fishing villages is still out of reach of primary schools. Secondary education is rarely available for the children of marine fisherfolk.

The situation with regard to drinking water supply and supply of electricity is better than in the other three districts.

On the whole the majority of the settlements of artisanal marine fisherfolk in Orissa are still deprived of modern infrastructural facilities and services such as road communication, education, health care etc. and depend very much on their own resources. The relative isolation from modern social institutions should be kept in mind when evaluating their cultural and social interaction patterns as well as their attitudes and perceptions, later on.

3.3 Festivals and Rituals of the Telugu Fisherfolk of South Orissa

The religious rites that are performed and the deities that are worshipped by the fisherfolk of South Orissa reflect their folk culture as well as their adherence to the culture of the larger society. While the gods and goddesses of the Hindu great tradition do have a place in their worship, it is the local deities who play the most important role in the day-to-day life of the fisherfolk. Apart from this, fisherfolk practise ancestral cult too.

3.3. 1 Worship

Like other castes, the fisherfolk worship the important Hindu gods like Siva and Vishnu and believe in the philosophy of the Hindu religion. While they go to the nearest Siva and Vishnu temples during important festivals they also undertake pilgrimages to important temples like the Simhachalam Narasimha temple and the Tirupathi Venkateswara 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 'Ammavaaru's (mother goddesses) are worshipped. There are benevolent and malevolent deities. Among local deities the village deity which differs from village to village holds an important place of worship. Apart from this every family has its special family deity worshipped by its patrilineal ancestors. While the origin of the local deities is not known some mythological stories are told connecting them to gods of the Hindu great tradition.

The shrines of these deities vary in form from brick-walled shrines to a wooden pole or an inverted pot.

The most important of all local deities common not only among Telugu fisherfolk but also among Oriya and Bengali fisherfolk is Gangamma or Horochandiammavaari. The goddess is mythologically associated with Lord Siva. Even though she is the personification of the river Ganges, the same goddess is referred to by all the fisherfolk of Orissa as a sea goddess. This belief originates from the fisherfolk of North Orissa who traditionally were practising fishing in the tributaries and delta of the Ganges. Gangamma is worshipped in connection with most of the fishing rituals. She is supposed to wander in the sea protecting the fishermen on the sea and blessing them with a good catch. The shrine of Gangamma is a small brick or mud structure facing the sea. Inside this shrine or rather miniature shrine there is a wooden painted image dressed in red cloth. In the month of March or April, a festival is conducted for Gangamma with pomp by the whole village. It is believed that if this festival is not conducted, the deity will not be appeased: which will lead to poor catch. The festival of Gangamma is elaborately conducted, sacrifice of goat and chicken being a part of it. At the beginning of the pooja (worship) nets are stacked in front of the shrine by different families. After the sacrifice the blood is sprinkled on the nets. They also offer cloth to the deity. Pooja is conducted by offering flowers and coconuts and by lighting camphor. Everyday fisherfolk pray at the shrine before they go on fishing. In case there is a good catch, a pooja is conducted for Gangamma. They also vow to sacrifice a chicken if the catch turns to be good.



Estuarine fisherman with traps in Gudubai, Balasore district



Houses of traditional Oriya fisherfolk of Balasore district



Street-houses of Telugu fisherfolk in Gopalpur-on-Sea, Ganjam district



Shrines of Telugu fisherfolk in Gopalpur-on-Sea, Ganjam district

Apart from Gangamma a number of other local deities like Ammavariamamma, Poleramma, Rajamma, Rajappa, Yerenamma, Samalamma, Potiraju, Guruappa, Muthiyalammavaaru, Neetiammavaaru, Karalaskthi or Kaal kaalka sakthi, Bhoolokiammavari, Nukalammavaaru, Gangalaammavaaru, Enugasakthi etc. are worshipped. Some of these deities have more than one name. In a village different families have different shrines on the sea shore for the worship of different deities which they consider their family deity. The deities are represented by painted wooden images or wooden planks or poles erected only at the time of festivals or by stones or earthen pots buried in sand and marked with vermilion.

Among the deities mentioned earlier, Ammavariamamma, or Peddhaammavariamamma and Poleramma are referred to as village deities. A festival is conducted for Pedeaammavariamamma in the month of April. This festival is celebrated for the welfare of the villagers. The deity is taken from its usual place and kept in the centre of the village. Each day a celebration is undertaken by one of the well-to-do fisherfolk families which takes the deity to its house. On these days the family gives a feast to the whole village. In the morning and in the evening after being decorated the deity is taken around the villages. All the poojas are conducted by a fisherman-priest. This period of celebration is accompanied by 'Shandais' (weekly open markets) conducted in the village. No one goes fishing on these festive days.

Rajamma is another important deity worshipped by the Jalaris and Vodabalijas. In the miniature shrines on the sea shore Rajamma is represented by a female figure riding on an elephant and carrying a sword. She is supposed to bless barren women with children. She is also supposed to give good catches to devotees. The festival celebrated for Rajamma is similar to that for Ammavariamamma except in magnitude. Along with Rajamma, honoured during the festival is Rajappa, supposed to be her husband,

Important aspects of the festival are fire-walking and tonswing of barren women.

The deity Bhoolokiammavari is supposed to reside in the graveyard. She has no image. Sometimes, at the time of worship,

an earthen pot is dug into the mud, marked with vermilion, and worshipped. There is much fear of this goddess among the fisherfolk. She is supposed to inflict sudden death if she is not properly appeased.

The goddess Samamma is supposed to protect fishermen from fever. Her image is represented by a red skirt and a green Coat.

The image of goddess Yerenamma is a woman sitting on a white horse with a sword. She is supposed to protect fishermen from drowning in the sea and from being caught by the shark.

Nukalammavaaru is the deity supposed to be responsible for cholera and small-pox.

Gangalammavaari is another sea goddess. She is worshipped for protection of nets and boats.

Kaalakasakthi is another goddess who is worshipped for good catches.

Enugasakthi is a deity supposed to cast evil spells if the deity is not propitiated with sacrifice. Both these goddesses are represented by pots only.

There are other deities worshipped, too, but it is clearly not known if each of them has a definite image and a separate origin. Sometimes a shrine for the village deity in a fishing village contains a huge number of different images. Most of the deities are not worshipped separately since they are mostly worshipped along with the main deity. While the village deities have the highest status, deities connected with diseases come next in importance. Another interesting factor to be finally mentioned is the worship of a deity named Bengali Babu, represented by a white man sitting on a horse. The origin of this deity is attributed to the influence of a colonial English officer who was benevolent to the fisherfolk (Thurston 1907).

Apart from these deities each family worships its ancestors with much awe. Sometimes images are made and kept along with the images of deities, Prayers to ancestors by means of burning

camphor by fishermen priests are considered to be necessary if catches continue to be small. Every festival performed for any of the deities also includes prayers to ancestors. In the miniature shrines along the shore painted wooden images of ancestors are kept to the left and right side of the main deities in a row. The festival of harvest, Makarasankaranthi, and Kothammavasai are celebrated by the Telugu fisherfolk as days of ancestral worship. Goat and chicken are sacrificed. Several eatables are prepared along with meat preparations at a temporary altar for ancestors.

3.3.2 Festivals

The Telugu fisherfolk of South Orissa celebrate mainly those festivals that are generally celebrated by south Indians. They celebrate one or two Oriya festivals, too. While the former are celebrated at home by the whole village, the latter are celebrated by visiting shrines and attending fairs.

Makarasankaranthi has to be mentioned as one of the important festivals of the fisherfolk. It is celebrated in the middle of January. The fisherfolk worship their ancestors and Gangamma, the goddess of the sea. Before this a small festival called Bhogi is celebrated when the fisherfolk dispose of all old things and do house cleaning. On the day of the festival, pooja is performed to invite the spirits of the ancestors to partake the food prepared by the family so that they may bless the offsprings and ensure the welfare of all the living members of the family. It is believed that if the ancestors are not appeased by this festival it may lead to poor fishing and illness among family members. Makarasankaranthi is the festival during which the rich and the poor cook meat. For this purpose they buy a goat a month or two before the festival, fatten it and sacrifice it during the festival. While the sacrifice of 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 celebrations pots of new rice are cooked with jaggery.

In addition to the worship of ancestors, a pooja is conducted for Gangamma at the sea shore and fishing implements are kept near the shrine where goats or chicken are sacrificed and the blood is sprinkled on the nets. Pooja is conducted by burning camphor.

Kothammavasa is the celebration of the beginning of the Telugu year. It is celebrated in the month of March. The well-to-do of the village distribute money or presents among the poor.

Karthigapournima is another important festival celebrated in the month of November or 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 fisherfolk 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 festivals 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 white wash their house. The women fast and perform pooja with sweetmeats. 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 among the fisherfolk hire new labourers to work for them during the next year or more.

Apart from these festivals, the fisherfolk celebrate particular days in honour of the numerous deities. The celebration for the deities in general is in the form of Jataras. Sacrifices of animals are made to various deities during the Jataras. In the evenings story-tellers, to the accompaniment of music narrate the exploits of the deities.

Apart from these festivals once, twice or thrice a year according to the availability of village funds, a festival is conducted for the village deity. The shrine of the village deity is usually in the middle of the village or at the entrance to the village. During the festival which takes place for three days, the deity is taken out of its abode to the houses of well-to-do fisherfolk who undertake the expenses and celebrate the festival for that day which includes a feast for the whole village. These families are regarded at this time as being related to the deity by fictive kinship.

In the evenings 'Harikathas' are conducted by musical parties who tell mythological stories of gods, Puppet dance, street dramas and fairs are also conducted in the evenings. On the last day of the celebration the deity is taken back to its abode. From the beginning of the celebration to the end, the caste/village panchayat rules that no villager should leave the village or spend the night outside. Breach of this rule is supposed to bring the wrath of the deity.

3.3.3 Rituals associated with Fishing

The Telugu fishermen of South Orissa follow special rituals while going to sea and while launching a new boat.

At the sea shore before going out to sea fishermen pray to Gangamma to give them a good catch and also to bring them safely back to the shore. They also pray to favourite deities and their ancestors. Once in a while, they sacrifice a chicken and offer coconuts and fruits to the sea goddess and perform a pooja at the shore. At the time of full moon day, they pray to **goddess** Gangamma by burning incense sticks and offering bananas **and** coconuts.

Just before launching their boat the fishermen take sea water in the mouth and spit it on the kattumarams and also sprinkle sea water on the head and pray.

At the time of launching a new boat, especially in the case of the boat used for beach seining, an elaborate ritual is performed called the marriage of the boat, with the boat personified as 'Maogala', an auspicious goddess, to the sea. An auspicious day is fixed by the boat owner in consultation with a brahmin. The boat owner husband and wife or, mother and son go to all the net owners they know well and invite them for the marriage. The boat is decorated with coloured papers. Turmeric paste and vermilion are applied to the boat. Inside the boat, baskets full of fruits, flowers, sweets, parched rice, and parched grams are kept. After everybody has assembled a chicken is sacrificed at the helm of the boat so that its blood flows on the boat. This pooja is carried out in front of friends and relatives and sweets and fruits are distributed. Elderly married women referred to as 'Sumangalis' push the boat ritually into the sea, later on it is actually launched by men and children. The first day's catch is partially sold and partially distributed to kith and kin.