

## CHANGING COURSES:

### A Comparative Analysis of Ethnographies of Maritime Communities in South Asia

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*Abstract* As compared to the ethnographic study of agrarian communities in South Asia, there has been a relative lack of attention accorded to the study of maritime communities as a distinct occupational category with unique cultural and economic significance. This raises a concern about the specific contribution that maritime anthropology has made and could make to South Asian anthropology as a whole. This paper undertakes a comparative review of some of the major ethnographic studies of South Asian fishing communities. The paper identifies the major issues and themes that might be said to characterise South Asian maritime anthropology, and examines the differences in theoretical frameworks used to understand processes of change. Two predominant themes emerge from the broad comparison undertaken in the paper. The first is the study of how fishing communities differ from agrarian communities on the major axes of caste, class, gender, moral economy, ritual, and belief. The second overarching theme is the analysis of the process of transformation that occurs within artisanal fishing communities as they encounter larger national/global capitalist economies. These studies grapple with the Marxian tradition of anthropology in trying to analyse this change. However, another common thread that runs through these works is a critique of the validity of unidirectional change in a classic Marxist mode. Instead, ethnographies of fishing communities in South Asia analyse the complexity of transformation and challenge the notion of complete polarisation between artisanal and modern fishermen.

#### Introduction

As compared to the body of literature available on agrarian society, maritime anthropology in South Asia has yet to carve out a distinctive space for itself. One may surmise that the relative lack of attention accorded to fishing communities historically could be attributed to the fact that they have occupied a marginal position with respect to both 'mainstream' economy and culture. Fishing communities in India for instance have historically not been the dominant agricultural castes, the 'right hand' castes<sup>1</sup>, or the subordinate 'left hand' castes of artisans and itinerants (Ram 1992:22). They have only been attributed to have an affinity to the latter, perhaps by virtue of their very distinct occupation. The dearth of comprehensive studies on fishing communities could also be attributed to the belief (especially amongst government agencies) that it is a fast disappearing 'indigenous' sector (Kurien 1998: 32). The few substantive ethnographies<sup>2</sup> available on maritime communities are enough, however, to destroy the myth of the demise of traditional/ artisanal fishing communities and to provide sufficient evidence of the distinctiveness of their culture and economy to point to a fertile area for contemporary research in anthropology.

Two predominant themes emerge from an analysis of these ethnographies. The first relates to the study of fishing communities in contradistinction to agrarian society. Given that the latter has dominated most anthropological research and thinking in South Asia this is not surprising. It nevertheless raises a challenge for maritime anthropology to contest some of the received wisdom from agrarian anthropology. In carving out an identity and space for coastal communities vis-à-vis mainstream agrarian society, two schools of thought have emerged in South Asian maritime anthropology (Bavinck 2001:87). While one school emphasises differences in the social organisation, modes of production, and culture of fishing communities from agricultural society, the other does not draw such strict boundaries between the two. The first section of the paper examines this debate over the distinctiveness of fishing communities relative to agrarian communities, particularly in regard to the parameters of caste, class, gender, moral economy, and religion. A case is made for fishing communities to be given their due place in the discourse on peasant economies which has to date predominantly been equated with agriculture.<sup>3</sup>

The second overarching theme of South Asian maritime ethnography has been the study of the process of social change and capitalist transformation heralded by the forces of modernisation and globalisation. Hitherto marginal communities have become linked to wider regional, national, and global economies, with fishing constituting an important source for the creation of national wealth. The continuities between agrarian and fishing economies are perhaps more clearly apparent when analysed as sub-parts of a larger capitalist system, subject to its common predicaments. This is seen in the fact that most work does appear to be influenced, either explicitly or implicitly by the Marxian tradition of anthropology in analysing the articulation of traditional modes and forces of production with new / modified social institutions which subordinate localised rural production to the interest of larger market forces - a theoretical school also used to explain the capitalist transformation of agrarian communities. However, while the transformation of agriculture by capitalist relations of production is the subject of a vast literature, the history of capitalism in fishing is relatively less explored (Ram 1992[1991]: 9-10).

The course of change in maritime communities has a distinctive trajectory and is not always unilinear as proposed by a classic Marxist mode of analysis. The encounter of artisanal fishing communities with forces of modernisation, including a mechanised fishing sector operating on the ethic of capitalist accumulation and profit making, may have led to the relative marginalisation, but certainly not the demise, of the traditional fishing sector. Ethnographies of fishing communities in South Asia have focused on the important role that culture plays in mediating the impact of change. The second part of the paper will briefly outline the history of change in South Asian fisheries before showing how individual ethnographies focus on particular aspects of change. Together, these ethnographies demonstrate the complexity of the transformation in fisheries and challenge the notion of a strict polarisation between artisanal and modern fishermen. They also show that the broad course of change under capitalist development has been common to both agrarian and maritime communities. Yet, as Ram points out, '...what is striking is that although capitalism is now operative in both agriculture and fishing, it has not softened the contrasts between the two, or created a labour force for both sectors that is an interchangeable or undifferentiated proletariat (ibid). These changes have

as yet not sufficiently diminished the distinctiveness of maritime economies and cultures, which underlines the need for a distinct South Asian maritime anthropology. They do however raise an important area of ethnographic research: whether the course of change is indeed dissolving the cultural and social contours of South Asian maritime identity.

These two interrelated themes constitute the broad comparative framework of discussion in this paper. Based on the analysis of these two themes, the paper tries to highlight the contribution of studies of maritime communities in challenging received anthropological wisdom and also bring to the fore some areas which have been relatively under-researched. By way of a conclusion, it suggests a possible future agenda for maritime anthropology in South Asia.

### **Carving out an Identity: How are Coastal Communities Different from Mainstream Agrarian Society?**

While fishing communities from different coastal regions in India and Sri Lanka hail from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, they are linked into a distinct social universe not just in terms of their ecological setting, which shapes a distinct mode of production as compared to agrarian society, but also because of a marginal position that is attributed to them within the larger cultural domain. For instance, the coastal communities of Kerala, where Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities have a significant presence, are all damned as "impure" and "untouchable" (Kurien 2000:6). Similarly, in Tamil literature physical landscapes and their associated cultures are organised in a hierarchical schema, with the *marutam* or cultivated land associated with civilisation, and the fisher people identified as barbarians of the coast (Ram 1992[1991]). However, fishing communities themselves have traditionally challenged this perception of themselves by articulating an identity not bound by the cultural restrictions of 'mainstream' agrarian society. The question is, to what extent does this distinctive self-articulated identity outweigh the continuities which also exist with agrarian cultures? Some authors, as mentioned earlier, have chosen to give more weight to distinctiveness and others to continuity. The following section examines both.

#### *Stepping out from the Moral Universe of Caste?*

The school of South Asian maritime anthropology which highlights the difference between agrarian and maritime societies invokes the '...political challenge of shedding assumptions derived from the majority culture' (Ram 1992[1991]). Ram represents this school most strongly in her writing about the *Mukkuvar* fishing community along the coast of Kanyakumari in South India. She argues against the predominant assumption that all communities in South Asia live within the same moral and cultural universe of caste. According to her, the location of the Christian *Mukkuvars* on the outer fringes of an ancient agrarian civilisation is a metaphor of their social and economic marginality but also, in fact, affords them the space to articulate an independent cultural identity. The *Mukkuvar's* very marginality provides them liberation from the stranglehold of Hindu caste society. Ram writes, 'To the ideology of a caste hierarchy based on purity and pollution the *Mukkuvars* pose

a counter-ideology of a community based on a relationship of difference from and opposition to the model of agrarian society' (ibid). This is reflected in the masculine identity projected by Mukkuvar men, which is based on a close identification with the ocean and shaped by an ideology of independence, individualism, bravery, and resourcefulness. Thus, for the Mukkuvars, working as agricultural labourers is a definite fall in status.

Fishing communities therefore occupy a niche unto themselves vis-à-vis the mainstream caste system. This appears to be true in Sri Lanka as well. Writing of a fishing community in the Sinhalese village of *Gahavalla*, Alexander points out that the pattern of multi-caste villages, general throughout Sinhalese speaking Sri Lanka, does not hold for coastal villages. All the people belong to the *Karava* caste and are associated with fishing. However, unlike the Mukkuvars of Kanyakumari, social mobility achieved by becoming either agriculturists or traders is not looked down upon. Thus, for the Karavas of the southern coast of Sri Lanka, landlords and traders are held to have higher status than the fishermen (Alexander 1995: 23). In fact, it has been conjectured that historically the men who are engaged in beach seining (the predominant mode of fishing) originally settled in Gahavalla as agriculturists. Alexander makes the point that whatever may have been their history, in contemporary times the fishing population of the southern coast is culturally homogenous, with the people of the fishing villages describing themselves as being of '...one caste, one blood and as relatives' (ibid: 25). Given that in Sri Lanka too, fishing has long been a despised occupation, as its practices are contrary to Buddhist ethics of killing, the portrayal of a distinct homogenous identity by fisher folk finds parallels with fishing communities in India.

However, fisher folk acceptance and indeed aspiration of moving into non-fishing occupations is reflective of an emerging continuity with the moral universe of mainstream agrarian society. Johnson describes how, in this regard, the new indigenous merchant capitalist class in the coastal village of *Dhamlej* in Gujarat has consolidated its position in part through a process akin to sanskritisation, seen in its adherence to the *Swadhyaya* sect. The economic success of the fishers has elevated them from near untouchables to a roughly equal status with the dominant *Kshatriya* caste, who are agriculturists (Johnson 2002). It remains to be explored through future research how widespread this phenomenon is. The research question that this raises is to what extent does class mobility lead to a breaking down of traditional categories of ascription like caste, both from the perspective of fisher folk and from that of members of agrarian society?

#### *Challenging and Conforming to Mainstream Gender Ideology*

The division of labour between sexes in fishing communities provides another basis for the negative imagery attached to them by mainstream agrarian society. The actual task of fishing and going out to sea is entirely the domain of men. Women, besides performing the usual roles of domestic reproduction, occupy very specific roles in the economy of fishing. Besides helping in the net making and the drying and preservation of fish, it is predominantly women who sell the catch to traders within the village. They often and even go to rural markets. In many cases women thus become the prime mediators between the village and the town, and, unlike agrarian society, by and large are not restricted to the privacy of the home or even to

the village. This was found to be true of all *theppan* (raft) using communities in Sri Lanka by Stirrat. Fish selling by women is a culturally approved part of the division of labour in fishing communities and considered an aspect of women's domestic work. It is however, viewed very differently by the Sinhalese middle class, who find the behaviour of fisherwomen quite shocking.<sup>4</sup> This sexual division of labour is also widely found amongst fishing communities in India. According to Johnson, in the village of Dhamlej in Gujarat, women do not fish but are involved in relations of exchange through fish vending (Johnson 2002). Ram in 'Mukkuvar Women' too outlines this particular version of domesticity. It is in activities which require substantial contact with the outside world that women really come into their own. This leads her to thus argue that, 'The question of Mukkuvar relations with caste society cannot be discussed in identical terms for men and women. Among Mukkuvars, it is women who bear the brunt of their polluted status in caste society' (Ram 1992[1991]: 22). Similarly, the *Marakatthe*, the fisherwomen financiers in the *Jalari* fishing community of coastal Andhra Pradesh, constitute a distinct category of peasant women by virtue of the significant economic role that they perform by maintaining a near monopoly over fish trade and by promoting enterprise through financing, negating the accepted Hindu ideal that women should stay at home (Sridevi 1989). The role played by fisherwomen thereby challenges received gender orthodoxies on the generalised picture of women in South Asia.<sup>5</sup>

However, paradoxically, the most evident axis around which the differences from agrarian society are asserted, but yet conform to more overarching social and cultural norms, is also with regard to the role of fisherwomen. This is brought out most clearly in Ram's analysis. To the extent that the female body becomes an important site of signification for upholding the communities' sense of self-respect, continuity can be traced with mainstream agrarian gender ideology, lending only a partial truth to the notion of the Mukkuvar's structural autonomy as an unbound caste. Ram writes, 'The threat of hostile outsider evaluations of female potency as signifying lack of sexual restraint and dishonour to the community has radical implications for the disciplining of the female body within the community' (Ram 1992[1991]: 78). The taboo against women's actual involvement in fishing is based on the notion that women are polluting. The twin side to this is that women are invested with power and therefore are considered a potential danger. This is also reflected in the sphere of popular religion, in which women take on the attributes of this dangerous power through the medium of possession and illness. The construction of femininity in Mukkuvar society according to Ram is thus ridden with contradictions in that the very exclusion and confinement of women is used as the basis of a kind of female power over men, an idea which lies at the core of the Tamil view of femininity.

This adherence to a larger gender ideology is also attested to in the case of the *Jalari* fishing community where women, though active in the realm of fish trading, have nonetheless a limited role in the public domain and are excluded from political roles. *Jalari* society too possesses culturally legitimised ways to ensure the subordination of women such as restraints developed to limit their potential for equal participation in work through menstrual and pre-natal taboos (Sridevi 1989).

It may be argued therefore that although the role played by fisherwomen in the economy of fishing communities challenges some of the received wisdom in gender theory, it is nonetheless subsumed by overarching cultural norms to which

women are subject regardless of the occupational setting. As will be described in the section on change, dominant ideas about the sexual division of labour are being exacerbated as artisanal fishing communities become encompassed by larger capitalist systems of production. This generates an interesting future research problem on the issue of whether the role of fisherwomen will continue to remain an important axis for articulating the distinctions between maritime and agrarian society.

#### *Is there greater 'Class' Homogeneity within Fishing Communities?*

The identity of fishing communities is further articulated through their portrayal as being comparatively more homogenous than agrarian society. Based on the argument that the mode of production of artisanal fishing allows for easier mobility, fishing communities are relatively more homogenous and, at least before the advent of capitalism, displayed little class stratification. Stirrat points out that in the Sri Lankan fishing village of *Ambakandawila*, '...most fishermen saw their technology as being remarkably democratic in that it allowed anyone to build up gear over time, moving from the low risk, low income end of the continuum to the high risk, high income end of the spectrum' (Stirrat 1988: 46). This is in marked contrast to agricultural society, where land endures from one generation to another, as opposed to fishing gear, which has a limited life. Ram too found that in the village of *KaDulKarai* in Kanyakumari, the ownership pattern of catamarans indicated a remarkable fluidity. While she found that inequalities did exist between households, this did not lead to the perpetuation of rigid categories akin to classes (Ram 1992 [1991]: 14).

Interestingly, however, Stirrat's own reading proves the self-portrayal of the fisher folk to be partially a myth, in that there were inequalities in gear ownership which arose from differential control of and access to various forms of unproductive wealth such as gold, land, and credit. Similarly, Alexander too points out that within the fishing community there are status distinctions based on the method of fishing practiced. The most prestigious is beach seining, which requires greater investment and yields more profit than the less prestigious inshore and lagoon types of fishing. According to Alexander the considerable difference in finance required inhibited mobility between these different types of fishing (Alexander 1995). This appears to be true of the fishing village of *Kalvimanagar* along the Coromandel Coast (Bavinck 2001). Despite class homogeneity being partially a myth, one must take note of the fact that the portrayal of homogeneity is important to the fisher folk themselves in articulating their identity in counter-position to agrarian society. The extent to which this self-portrayal is in itself dissolving under the changed social relations of production wrought by the process of capitalist development is an aspect to be delved into in future research.

#### *Does Fishing Give Rise to a Distinctive Moral Economy?*

The particular moral economy<sup>6</sup> of artisanal fishing communities before their integration into larger market networks is also worthy of mention, with regard to its relative homogeneity as compared to agrarian modes of production. According to Ram, there were two factors, which modified the potentially hierarchical relations between owners and non-owners of the forces of production. The first relates to the fact that, in the actual practice of fishing, the tasks are relatively undifferentiated and the owners of equipment are not present in a purely directive capacity. The second

relates to the share system of the distribution of the proceeds of the catch (Ram 1992[1991]: 17). The operation of the share system has been found amongst the transient fishing community of fishermen on the island of *Jambudwip* in the Sunderban area of West Bengal (Raychaudhari: 1980) as well the coastal communities of Kerala (Kurien: 2000) and Gujarat (Johnson 2002). Describing the egalitarianism inhering in the share system surrounding the relations of production in *hodi* (fibre glass canoes), Johnson writes, 'At sea, respect is accorded only to a small degree of ownership by means of production. Much more important is one's perceived knowledge and fishing skills' (Johnson 2002: 154). To the extent that traditional / artisanal fishing communities are 'pre-capitalist', this is an important marker of distinction from agrarian society where there has always been a stark stratification between the landed and the landless, even in systems of sharecropping.

The transformation of this system and a gradual shift towards a wage system of recruitment along different coastlines in India has diminished this egalitarianism due to changed relations of production. Nevertheless, as will be described in the next section, the local moral economy continues to play a role in governing systems of local production catering to larger markets. In some cases it even acts as a check on the extent of 'legitimate profit' allowed within a community.<sup>7</sup>

#### *A Different God: Ritual and Belief*

As compared to agriculture, fishing as a productive process is subject to far more uncertainty. Despite the fisher folks' indigenous knowledge<sup>8</sup> of the ecology of the sea<sup>9</sup>, fishing continues to be unpredictable. Unlike land, which is partially domesticated through agriculture, the ocean is still associated with the unknown and the untamed (Ram 1992[1991]). This symbolism of the ocean is reflected in the rituals and belief systems of maritime communities. The entire productive process of fishing is associated with particular rituals. Fisher folk accord as much importance to the role of the supernatural as to material explanations grounded in the use of technology in explaining their work (Ram 1992; Raychaudhari 1980). The female deity of Ganga is believed to be the presiding deity of the sea amongst many fishing communities (West Bengal, Orissa, and Tamil Nadu), and is propitiated with much devotion. Even though Bavinck feels that Ram underestimates the practical orientation of fishermen, he too describes how the inhabitants of the coastal villages in Tamil Nadu look upon the sea as *Kadamma* (sea mother) and the belief that *Kadamma* is the same as *Gangaiyammam*, the goddess of the river Ganges (Bavinck 2001). Although different authors give different weight to belief systems in explaining the orientation of fisher people to the sea, they all acknowledge the role played by belief in the supernatural. Some even go so far as to argue that, even though the agricultural cycle is also associated with rituals, the rituals of fishing communities are imbued with a tone of urgency and depth because of the special vagaries of the ocean (Raychaudhari 1980).

However, elements of continuity and similarity with the content of rituals surrounding agriculture too exist. Raychaudhari writes, 'It is interesting to note that the ritual offerings of the fisher folk are like that of the agriculturalists as they are also a component of the same peasant society. No marine object except salt, which is believed to be the sugar of the Ganga, has yet been accepted as offering by these

fisher folk in their fishing rituals' (Raychaudhari 1980: 135). Similarly, according to Johnson's work in Dhamlej, the largest local fishing caste, the Hindu Kharvas, make offerings in the same temples as their agricultural neighbours. In a similar vein Ram provides an interesting analysis of popular religion in Mukkuvar society. She describes how the figure of the Virgin in popular Catholicism has been transformed by the Mukkuvars, by worshipping her as a figure of central importance in her own right, thereby incorporating elements of goddess worship prevalent in Hindu Tamil society. This shows that the relationship of the Mukkuvars with Hinduism while asserting difference is not entirely unambiguous, allowing them to also simultaneously escape the orthodoxies of the Church (Ram 1992[1991]).

Thus, while the identity of fishing communities vis-à-vis agrarian society coalesces around several axes as described above, each of these make coastal communities stand as much within as outside mainstream society. Elements of continuity can be found in all the ethnographies, although the importance accorded to continuity as opposed to difference varies. In alluding to two schools of maritime anthropology - one which downplays the differences and the other which accentuates them - Bavink raises the question of whether the standpoints can be reconciled (Bavink 2001). Could one argue that this reconciliation takes place spontaneously, if one acknowledges that fisher folk are integral to peasant society<sup>10</sup>, and more importantly if the peasantry is not primarily equated to agriculturists? This admission in itself will perhaps enable a broadening of the scope of peasant studies to allow the contribution of maritime anthropology. Furthermore, although some of the continuities are becoming stronger between traditional fisher folk and agriculturalists under the impact of modernisation, the axis of identity, which remains so important for the fisher folk themselves, holds tremendous research potential. This is especially so given that, although the broad history of economic change has been similar in both traditional maritime and agrarian communities, it is still mediated by cultural factors which lend each of these occupational categories a distinctive identity, as is described in the following section.

### **History of Change: The Role of the State**

Before discussing how the process of change brought about by the forces of modernisation and globalisation has been analysed in the different ethnographies, a brief history is important in order to provide an overall structure to the varying contexts. The broad history of change that maritime society and economy has been undergoing has been fairly common to all the countries in South Asia, as seen by the experience of India and Sri Lanka.

In the case of India, this process of change began in the post-independence era with the State playing a major facilitating role. Like the State's agricultural policy, the thrust of the fisheries policy in the Five-Year Plans beginning in the 1950s was to promote an increase in productivity<sup>11</sup> through a state led development programme of 'modernisation'<sup>12</sup> and conversion to an export orientation.<sup>13</sup> The program introduced standardised new craft and gear, as exemplified by the introduction of the trawler and industrial fish processing techniques. The first few decades of the post-colonial era saw a complete neglect of the artisanal fishing population. The basic

thinking amongst policy makers at the time characterised traditional fishing as being, 'largely primitive, carried on by ignorant, unorganised and ill equipped fishermen...their techniques...rudimentary, their tackle elementary and their capital equipment slight and inefficient' (Kurien 1985: A72). Thus, traditional fishing communities were thought to be incapable of making the transition to modernity, and the state believed that small-scale subsistence units would gradually wither away. However, contrary to expectations, the artisanal sector continued to exist<sup>14</sup> catering to the local and domestic demand for fish, and increasingly also to export markets. It was only in the late 1970s and 1980s that the artisanal sector came to the fore for the government, propelled by two factors: the formation of fishermen's organisations protesting against unbridled trawler fishing and, later, government licensing of foreign factory vessels<sup>15</sup>; and the unleashing of a new wave of globalisation under a new liberal economic regime (Kurien 1998). In order to placate the fishermen's protests as well as to meet ever-increasing export demand, the state responded by providing subsidies for the technological upgrading of traditional fisheries. This was principally seen in fishing nets made of new materials as well as in the installation of outboard motors on fishing vessels. The resultant increase in productivity helped integrate traditional fishing communities into larger local, national, and global markets.

In the case of Sri Lanka the role played by the state has been slightly different than that in India, although the changes in the life and livelihoods of the traditional fisher folk have been quite similar. The transformation of these communities by capitalism was catalysed with the development of a large market for fish, based on a diverse set of factors including a growing population, better communications, and increasing political centralism following the Second World War. These broke the barriers between localised spheres of production and exchange, integrating them into regional and national markets (Alexander 1995). However, the 'governing elite' that dominated the Sri Lankan State had a strong influence over the operation of national markets. The extension of their political patronage brought them into conflict with the local traders who controlled the market for fish products. Fishermen were caught between these two groups. The state concentrated on co-operative organisation through the Ceylon Fisheries Corporation as a means to counter the power of traders. The Ceylon Fisheries Corporation became the largest producer of fish, owning a fleet of trawlers and controlling the biggest trading organisation. Both areas of activity were failures, however, with the latter becoming another channel of extending patronage. Stirrat writes, 'If State intervention was on the one hand a means of limiting the threat of trader power, it was also a means by which individual MPs attempted to consolidate their own political position, and such individual motivations led to a further undermining of any hope that the State sector might be a dynamic force in the development of the Sri Lanka fishery' (Stirrat 1988: 148). This critique applied later to the system by which the state promoted the acquisition of fishing gear although the State-sponsored introduction of new gear did lead to the development of capitalist relations of production in Sri Lanka.

### *The Thread that Runs Through South Asian Maritime Anthropology*

Almost all the substantive ethnographies of fishing communities in India and Sri Lanka have addressed this process of change. What further binds them together is

that they reflect some influence of the Marxian tradition of anthropology, to the extent that this change has been analysed from the perspective of changing relations of production within fishing communities. Relations of production are transformed when localised rural production begins to cater to larger market forces. Common to the experience of all the coastal communities seen in these ethnographies is the role played by a new class of traders as a link between local production and the market. All the works describe the rise of class divisions and the concentration of ownership of the means of production in the hands of a few in the context of the introduction of new technology. The process of capitalist exploitation as a result of this has been described as being the experience of virtually every coastal community thus invoking either implicitly or explicitly classic Marxian analysis. One of the defining characteristics of the process of capitalism is production for surplus accumulation and profits, which accrue not to the producers but the owners of the means of production. The broad pattern of this separation between direct producers and owners can be discerned at three principal levels:

1. Unlike traditional craft and gear, which are produced from locally available raw materials, the production costs of new technologies get paid to extra-village sources.

2. The new craft and gear are not only more expensive but have higher maintenance costs, which only a few wealthy households within a community can usually afford. Most 'middle class' fisher folk tend to acquire new technology by taking credit from middlemen who also market the produce. The fisher folk lose their bargaining power over the price of the produce as they get caught in a trap of credit advances made by the traders in return for the right to the produce. The ownership of the means of production has in many cases been found to gradually get concentrated in the hands of these traders themselves, who get transformed into petty capitalists.

3. In the context of State policy which has encouraged, at least in the Indian case, the modernisation of the sector through the introduction of trawlers, the most evident polarisation has taken place between a category of non-fishing owners and a large category of wage-workers, who constitute a new maritime proletariat. This is coupled with increasing seasonal migration of artisanal fishermen to work as wage labourers in the mechanised sector.

### **Varied Analyses of the Mediating Role of Culture**

This broad Marxist analysis is a simplification of a more complex shift that occurs with greater integration into the global market. This complexity has been captured by each of the ethnographies analysed in this paper. All the works describe the resilience of small-scale fishers. Given this, they are probably closer theoretically to the neo-Marxian school of thought, according to which, 'Capital being a social relation of production can integrate numerous organisational forms into its process of exchange and ... non-capitalist household forms of production are a way in which local social structures mediate the effects of capitalist penetration' (Kurien 1998:8). They further move away from classical Marxist analysis by arguing against the validity of unidirectional change. An argument is made against 'dual economy' theories which explain the existence of small-scale producers predicated

upon a distinction between a capitalist and pre-capitalist / traditional sector (Stirrat 1988). While this understanding of the process of change binds these works together, they are distinguished from each other in that each of them focuses on a particular aspect of transformation by showing how the 'superstructure' as it were, is equally important in determining the nature of change as the 'base', thus critiquing economistic and technologically deterministic arguments. Each of these studies demonstrates the complexity of change by pointing to social and cultural factors that mediate it.

### *Against Technological Determinism*

Studies have demonstrated that the organisation of social relations of production is not just determined by the technology of production. Small, autonomous producers can exist under both feudalism and capitalism. Their existence cannot characterise a mode of production as capitalist or pre-capitalist. A critique of 'dual-economy' theories as well as a unilinear process of change is found in Ram's work. Her study reveals that the men in Mukkuvar society continue to work with artisanal craft and gear, combining this with seasonal migration to work as labour on mechanised craft in the large port towns of Kerala and Eastern Tamil Nadu. Further, like Alexander and Stirrat she argues that the non-mechanised nature of technology does not in itself indicate the relations of production within which it is embedded. Thus, while artisanal production may be unchanged in its technical aspects, it has undergone transformation in that it has begun to cater to a world capitalist market (Ram 1992[1991]: 130). The reproduction of these small producers is predicated upon several other factors.

This is exemplified in Stirrat's work, which provides an interesting account of the role played by traders in the reproduction of small scale, autonomous units of production. In the village of Ambakandawila, each household is an independent economic unit, based, '...upon the relationship between a particular technology of production and a particular way in which exchange is organised'. He characterises the traders as merchant capitalists, in that their interests lie in primarily expanding trade rather than developing the techniques of production. This has inhibited the development of large-scale units of production. Thus, the fishing community has been integrated into the larger Sri Lankan economy without a change in the technology of production, but by being tied to particular traders who mediate between them and the market. The particular merit of Stirrat's work also lies in the role he accords to culture and ideology in mediating the transformation. He argues that the process of individuation and atomisation of production has not taken place in a cultural vacuum. Even though capitalism has penetrated Ambakandawila, the community has retained a particular cultural ideology, which equates control over and consumption of goods with social standing. Thus, Stirrat attributes the autonomy of households and lack of cooperation amongst them not just to commoditisation, but also to a particular ideological setting (Stirrat 1988).

### *Change Contoured by the Local Moral Economy*

Like Stirrat writing on Sri Lanka, Alexander too argues against technological determinism. He writes, 'In most cases technological innovations should be regarded as by-products of the new social relationships which have made it possible for extra

village agencies to determine the logic of village production? However, he falls more squarely within the tradition of Marxian anthropology for, in his study of the village of Gahavalla, he describes how the traditional moral economy is inappropriate to new conditions where localised rural production is subordinated to larger market forces. Characterizing Gahavalla as an 'irrational economy', he attributes the paradox of excessive beach seines to this disjunction:

The procedures which regulate such aspects of beachseining as the ownership of nets, access to the fishery and minimal division of revenue between owner and labourer evolved in a semi-subsistence economy. In their original cultural context, these procedures, which are based on a moral notion of equal opportunity were a equitable and efficient means of managing the fishery, but in the contemporary economy dominated by market logic they are both inefficient and inequitable (Alexander 1995: 4).

The role played by culture in mediating the nature of change has also been shown by Johnson in his analysis of the Gujarat fisheries. In contrast to the experience of other coastal states in India, the experience of transformation in Gujarat is distinctive in that it has not been outsiders, but rather the local fishing elite themselves who steered the pace and direction of fisheries development. This has been facilitated by the particular cultural context of Gujarat, where members of non-fishing communities have little interest in fishing because of the staunchly vegetarian character of the Hindu population of the state. Furthermore, using a dialectical approach to analyse the articulation of local domestic commodity production with the forces of globalisation, Johnson also demonstrates how the process of class formation in the village of Dhamlej has been mediated by the moral economy of the village. He points out that the most successful traders / suppliers of fish are those who have negotiated the moral economy by '...striking a balance between realizing profits, being competitive and engaging in socially appropriate behaviour' (Johnson 2002:155). This is because in the moral economy of Dhamlej, egalitarianism outweighs paternalism: 'The extraction of surplus value by a dominant class does occur and visible differences in material success are permitted, but only to a point' (ibid: 158). This in turn explains how an elite group of fishers from the village itself, rooted in and familiar with the local moral economy, has been able to challenge and displace outside merchants.

#### *Gendered Impact of Change*

There are few substantive studies available on the gendered impact of capitalist transformation on maritime communities. Ram's 'Mukkuvar Women' makes a notable contribution in this area. She shows how cultural constructions of female sexuality render capitalism as a gender-specific historical process. This is seen, for instance, in marriage payments, which, according to her, play a fundamentally different role in the new fishing economy. Ram writes, 'Women's dowry, once the basis of their control over a subsistence-credit economy, now functions increasingly as a source of capital, to be invested in male ventures either into wage labour or into small-scale capitalist entrepreneurship in ownership of trawlers, paddy land and coir factories' (ibid: 236). Furthermore, the process of capitalist transformation has further confined women within the domestic sphere and narrowed the horizons of

their working lives, as, in trying to retain their sexual respectability and therefore cultural acceptability, women have a lesser role to play in a world of wage labour and petty trade. Therefore, contrary to economic and anthropological theories, women's paid work is not always empowering if it takes place in disapproving cultural milieus. While women's involvement as fish traders in the artisanal economy, which takes them beyond the domestic sphere, is legitimated by retaining fish trading within the ambit of domestic reproduction, their involvement as wage workers takes place in conditions which are not considered to be socially acceptable. Ram's work thus moves away from economic interpretations in the classical Marxist rendition of capitalist transformation. Further, interestingly, Stirrat points out in the context of Sri Lanka how capitalism is working as a cultural system whereby dominant ideas about the sexual division of labour are being imposed upon and actively adopted by fishing communities, reflected in the younger generation frowning upon the involvement of women in fish selling (Stirrat 1988).<sup>16</sup>

One may argue, therefore, that the impact of integration into larger markets has brought women who are engaged in fisheries closer to women in engaged in agrarian economies. This is especially the case in fisherwomen's work as wage labourers and it relates to their general disenfranchisement due to a loss of control over a local subsistence economy. In this sense, capitalism has very different implications for fisherwomen than for men, whose profession has retained its distinctiveness.

#### *Conflict: Property Rights and Tenure*

Even though artisanal / traditional fisher folk may have adapted to new social relations of production by beginning to cater their production towards a larger market or in working as wage labourers in the mechanised sector, their negotiation with the latter has not been without protest. The history of change in maritime societies has witnessed conflict between small fisher communities and the large mechanised sector principally with respect to competition over resources or, in other words, to the 'common' space of the sea. This has brought to the fore issues of property rights, tenure, access, and management regimes surrounding coastal fisheries.

Bavinck's work along the Coromandel Coast is perhaps the only comprehensive study addressing these issues in the South Asian context.<sup>17</sup> Issues of common property management and the operation of customary rules have again been more extensively documented and studied in relation to land and therefore agrarian society. This is perhaps due to the predominant view that the sea is largely an open access resource. Bavinck critiques this perception, arguing that resource allocation is never unstructured. His own work shows how artisanal fishing settlements all along the Coromandel Coast employ a variety of instruments to regulate access to the fish resource.<sup>18</sup> Access is defined by a notion of territoriality in that different hamlets, as represented by their panchayats, have a prerogative to exploit adjacent coastal zones (Bavinck 2001: 112). However, there is no system of exclusion, in terms of not allowing others to fish within the same area. Thus, even though the sea then becomes open access<sup>19</sup> for all practical purposes, this access is structured by norms of reciprocal access between hamlets defined by prerogative to an area. Further, there are regulations on the use of particular types of fishing gear. The absence of these customary rules and local social institutions has been put forth as one possible reason for the overfishing of the Gujarat coastal waters (Johnson 2002).

Bavinck invokes the notion of 'tenure' not just in terms of sea-based property rights which structure access, but also as a management system or regime. In this sense law is then not understood, just '...as a description of normative behaviour', but an order that combines rules and authority. Including authority in the conceptual framework allows the author to bring in a political dimension.<sup>20</sup> Bavinck adopts a legal pluralism approach<sup>21</sup> to analyse the multiple tenure regimes to understand the clash and negotiation between the artisanal fishermen and the mechanised sector along the Coromandel Coast.<sup>22</sup> His work demonstrates how legal pluralism plays out in practice by addressing the nature of co-existence between legal systems focusing on a common social space. Bavinck identifies three tenure systems that structure the management of Coromandel fisheries. Any reference to maritime tenure usually looks at the rule systems of the traditional fishers. He however tries to bring the tenure system (although minimal) of the mechanised sector to the same analytical plane. And finally, he looks at the articulation of these two systems with State law.

Bavinck considers a complete tenurial system, taking a system-oriented approach. Such approaches usually present a static picture. The strength of his work lies in the dynamism that he has been able to bring to the systems approach by looking at it from a 'management' point of view that incorporates the play of local politics. The effectiveness of non-state legislation and fishermen's rulings along the Coromandel Coast is anchored in the existence of very strong community based institutions of conflict resolution. Bavinck describes how fisheries regulations are the prerogative of village level institutions.<sup>23</sup> Further, issues that affect more than one village are addressed by 'panchayat circles', which are composed of representatives from many villages.<sup>24</sup>

Artisanal fishers come into conflict with the mechanised fishing sector over its destructive technology and its incursions into artisanal fishing space. The issue of overexploitation of the coastal commons stands at the centre of this conflict. It highlights the impact of globalisation, which underpins the existence of the mechanised sector. A significant question that remains unanswered and could be an issue for further research in Bavinck's work is the impact of articulation between the different tenure systems of the Coromandel fisheries on resource conservation. Johnson's work on Gujarat does not indicate the presence of a multiple tenure system as has been described by Bavinck for Tamil Nadu. However, he stresses that a solution to the acute problem of over-fishing along the Gujarat coast will probably lie only in the chalking out of a tenure system that recognises the 'partial connections', or the commonly shared threats, between the different sectors in the fishery (Johnson 2001).

### **In Conclusion: Areas for Further Exploration in South Asian Maritime Anthropology**

Various themes are common to all the ethnographies analysed above and enable the delineation of a space for maritime anthropology. The two overarching themes which have so far structured the direction of analysis of maritime anthropology in South Asia have been the identity of fishing communities vis-à-vis mainstream agrarian society and the transformation of traditional communities by capitalist relations of production heralded by the state's modernisation policies and globalisation. One

can discern a relationship between these two themes in that one may argue that, through the course of change, the distinctions between maritime communities and agrarian society are getting blurred in some respects. However, as has been shown in the first section of the paper, ethnographic research on South Asian fishing communities does not provide conclusive proof that maritime and agrarian communities are becoming more similar, even if areas of continuity do exist and continue to emerge under the impact of integration into a capitalist system of production. As I have pointed out, the uncertainty does suggest a fertile area for further research. Are the social and cultural contours of maritime identity, as articulated in terms of relative freedom from the strictures of mainstream caste society, relative egalitarianism, and the distinctive role of women in fishing communities, dissolving? And, if this is the case, on what basis is a common identity between agrarian and fishing communities being forged? The economic process of capitalist transformation, as has been discussed, emerges as the most obvious one. Are there other cultural and political influences which are also playing a role?

The ethnographies discussed in this paper do argue that all of these influences have to be considered in order to understand change in South Asian fishing communities. This in keeping with the theoretical approach common to a greater or lesser degree in all of the ethnographies I consider which, while accepting the general utility of a Marxist perspective, rejects its classic form in favour of a neo-Marxist approach. Each author thus shows how cultural factors have mediated the process of capitalist development in the communities they study. This examination of the diverse factors shaping capitalist transformation in fishing in South Asia has to be deepened.

The process of capitalist change, modernisation and globalisation has brought about significant transformations in the relations of production in South Asian fishing communities. One of the most important outcomes of this, and one which has been amply noted, has been the creation of large trawler fleets whose interests have generally clashed with those of artisanal fishers. While there has been important work on the artisanal fishers' social movements and organisations that have arisen out of this process, more analysis needs to be done of what has really been a case of world historical importance for artisanal fishers' mobilisation. Conflicts and negotiations between the mechanised fishing sector and the artisanal sector have stimulated research on marine common property resource management in South Asia but considerable work remains to be done on gathering comprehensive evidence on the extent of rule systems and management regimes from the different parts of the region. The issue of coastal fishing and management in turn points to another important area that has been well researched for other natural resources such as forests and water: the study of resource degradation and conservation from a social science perspective. This area connects with work on marine resource management for it would entail an analysis of narratives of resource degradation and informal ways of mitigating such degradation, while also contributing to the debate on livelihoods versus conservation.

Finally, with one or two exceptions, the historical perspective is weak in most of these ethnographies. Given, for example, that communities living by the coast have rich traditions of engagement with far-flung places through historical trade links, more work on external cultural influences would be very valuable indeed.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to the hierarchical Hindu caste system, the right hand stood symbolically for purity and the left for pollution.
- <sup>2</sup> This paper draws on ethnographies of fishing communities in Sri Lanka and India, which appear to have been the only sites of substantive ethnographic work on the topic undertaken to date in South Asia.
- <sup>3</sup> Firth's work (1946) opened up a new field in the anthropology of fisher folk as a part of the regional peasant economy. While this triggered off a set of studies on coastal communities in various parts of the world, the literature on South Asia has tended to be more in the nature of standard socio-economic surveys rather than in-depth analysis of the various facets of maritime societies including, in particular, the cultural aspects (Raychaudhuri: 1980, Kurien 1998). Similarly, Alexander contends that there has been an absence of detailed studies of indigenous concepts of sea tenure and resource conservation, of marketing practices, and of catch distribution - what he terms as the 'moral economy of maritime society' (Alexander 1995).
- <sup>4</sup> A common image of fisherwomen is that of being aggressive, uncouth, and using abusive language.
- <sup>5</sup> This challenge to received gender orthodoxies is differentiated, however, and the importance of gender ideology must be taken into account. The role played by women outside the domestic sphere in Muslim fishing communities is generally more circumscribed than that of their Hindu counterparts.
- <sup>6</sup> Drawing on E.P. Thompson, *moral economy* may be defined as 'The sum of conditions that shapes the expression of class and sets limits to acceptable class behaviour in a given context' (Johnson: 2002)
- <sup>7</sup> The use of the concept of moral economy has been subject to the critique that it rests too heavily on the distinction between market and non-market societies. The validity of this concept in contouring change amongst maritime communities, as some ethnographies demonstrate (see Johnson 2002), could perhaps prove a counter to such critiques.
- <sup>8</sup> Fishermen's perceptions of their marine environment have been examined with regard to winds, cyclones, tides, and currents in coastal Orissa. Correlations are made between fish detection methods, fishing procedures, and these natural forces (Tietze 1985). Tietze has been pointed out that the differences in perception and knowledge of the marine environment between the fisher folk of North and South Orissa clearly reflect the ecological differences as well as the fishing techniques employed in the two areas.
- <sup>9</sup> Johnson points out the remarkable ability of fishers in the Gujarat village of Dhamlej to discern subtle variations in sea water colour to guide decisions on where to set their nets (Johnson 2002: 146).
- <sup>10</sup> In fact, Alexander argues that despite occupying a niche defined by a distinctive technological sub-culture, fishermen are nevertheless the quintessential peasants.
- <sup>11</sup> Entitled the 'blue revolution', this policy was to be a complement to India's green revolution in agriculture (Bavinck 2001).
- <sup>12</sup> See Kurien's work on the State's first attempts at this in Kerala through the Indo-Norwegian project initiated in 1952 (Kurien: 1985)
- <sup>13</sup> This was seen in the veritable 'pink gold rush' following the success of some initial attempts by individual entrepreneurs in at marketing frozen shrimp abroad in the 1950s (Bavinck 2001; Kurien 1985; Rubinoff 2001)
- <sup>14</sup> This is seen in the continuation of artisanal fishing by Mukkuvar fishermen and amongst the fishermen of Kalvimanagar (Ram 1992, Bavinck 2001).
- <sup>15</sup> The Indian government, under the pressure of the structural adjustment programme (SAP) in the early 1990s, adopted a "mare liberum" (open sea) policy under which it invited joint ventures into its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Since the vessels licensed under such arrangements were fishing for the same stocks, they met with heavy protest from the national trade union of the small-scale fishworkers which, after a protracted struggle, led to the cancellation of most joint venture fishing licenses (Kurien 1998).
- <sup>16</sup> See also Hapke's work (2001) on the Kerala fishery.
- <sup>17</sup> Raychaudhuri makes a brief mention of what he considers to be the 'tenancy right' amongst the transient fishing community that he studied in West Bengal, which could be understood as an indigenous system of tenure. He describes how the fishermen follow a convention of allowing a minimum distance between nets in order not to deprive the adjacent nets of a particular type of catch (Raychaudhuri 1980: 101). He also indicates a notion of territorial rights in the sea in describing the property right of an initial

fisher who sets his net in a particular location to that site. Even if the fisher moves his net temporarily to follow a shoal of fish, no other fisher is allowed to occupy the site throughout the entire season (ibid: 168).

- <sup>18</sup> Kurien also briefly alludes to institutional arrangements, which are communitarian in nature in Kerala's marine fisheries, that define access and conservation norms within the community (Kurien 2000).
- <sup>19</sup> However, not all fishing is open access. Beach seining and fixed lure are two stationary methods linked to territory (Bavinck 2001:126).
- <sup>20</sup> Even though a legal pluralism approach enables a better understanding of reality, and appreciation of non-state systems of rule making, from a theoretical and conceptual standpoint does it not make the boundaries between law, management and politics too fluid? What then remains in the notion of law itself, as an order, which has an overarching moral legitimacy in the Durkheimian sense?
- <sup>21</sup> Legal Pluralism has been defined by Merry as a 'situation in which two or more legal systems co-exist in the same social field' (Bavinck 2001: 35).
- <sup>22</sup> Problems between artisanal fishermen and the mechanised sector have arisen because the shrimp targeted by the latter abound in the same waters fished by artisanal communities. This leads to gear clashes as well as competition over resources.
- <sup>23</sup> The involvement of caste panchayats in adjudicating fisheries disputes may however be a region-specific phenomenon. Even though the fisher castes of Gujarat have strong caste councils, they are not involved in adjudicating territorial disputes over fishing grounds, which is in contrast to the activities of the caste councils along the Coromandel Coast (Johnson 2002).
- <sup>24</sup> It may be useful to point out that this system of village administration is universal to Tamil agrarian society. These traditional caste panchayats are now having to accommodate themselves to new systems of village governance (*Panchayati Raj*) that are being promoted by the State. While Bavinck's study points to the inherent adaptability of the traditional caste panchayats in Tamil Nadu to accommodate to these new institutions, Kurien's study of the institution of the 'Sea court' (*kadakkodi*) in Kerala, shows that it has lost some of its legitimacy and efficacy in the face of change. A comparison of the experience of these institutions between agrarian and maritime society would provide interesting insights into how the process of change has been mediated with respect to custom and law.

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