

## A study on Occupational Change of Kaivarttas in Majuli

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**Abstract:** *Kaivarttas are one of the major fishing communities of Assam, constituting 31.8% (2001) populations. From few decades, the processes like globalization of marketing, liberalization of different policies and privatization of education have changes the living pattern of the Kaivartta people, not only in Majuli but also other parts of the Assam as well as in India. Now, they are engaged in different new occupations including government, private and entrepreneurial works. As the occupation is closely interrelates with certain socio-economic and cultural factor. So, it is important to make a study to understand their adoption of new occupation in response to the process of social change. Present study is undertaken into two Kaivartta populated village in Majuli Island to understand the occupational mobility among them and generalized it. The data based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data has been collected through observation, formal and informal interaction. From the study it shows that most of the villagers have taken new occupation rather than traditional fishing one. Besides, it is found that due modern education, new agricultural implements, increasing scientific attitude, political participation and awareness, uplift for social status, unavailability of fishes, improvement of telecommunications etc. are the main factors responsible for their traditional occupational change.*

**Key Words:** *Scheduled Caste, Kaivartta, Occupational Change, Assam, Majuli*

### Historical Background:

The Kaivarttas are one of the sixteen scheduled caste people of Assam. They live on river bank or near sources water where they can catch fish. Although fishing is their traditional occupation, now it seems sizeable people is engaged in agriculture. As per 2001 census total population of scheduled castes in Assam is 1,825,949 (6.9%), and the Kaivarttas along occupies 5, 81,559(31.8%) of the any SCs.

Views differ regarding origin of the Kaivartta. The Dharma Shastas, Samhita, Smithies and Puranas have given different opinion regarding origin of the Kaivarttas. Earliest reference of Kaivartta is found in the great epic *Mahabharata*. Composer of great epic, Vedavyasa, was born from a Sudra father and Kaivartta mother, whose name was Matsya Gandhya, means one who smells fish. So it can be mentioned that from a Kaivartta woman the great epic was shaped. The Mahabharata refers to Kaivarttas as a distinct community. The Adiparva of Mahabharata mentions marriage between Satyawati-daughter of Dhibor king (Matsya Raja) with king Satanu of Hastinapur. Kalidasa mentions in his *Abijnanam Sankuntalam* about Kaivarttas when he narrates recovery of a lost ring of Shakuntala from stomach of a Rahu fishermen (Labio Rohita) caught by fishermen.

In Manu Samhita, term Kaivartta used to means offspring of a Nisada father by an Ayagava mother, who was called Margava Dasa and who subsisted by plying boats. According to Bramavaivarta Purana and Yajnavalkya states Kaivartta was born of a Kshatriya father and a Vaishya mother. According to the Parasuram Samhita, Kaivarttas were born from Goldsmith father and Kuberinis mother. Even in ancient period a few Kaivartta held administrative offices. Tezpur Rock Inscription of Harjaravarman, a ruler of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa (c.820-836 AD) refers to a Kaivartta, who was in charge of collecting state-toll on the rivers.

Etymology of word Kaivartta, consists of various shades of opinion. Some says the word is derived from 'Ka' means water and 'Varta' means living hood. This means that the Kaivartta derives their living from water. But we do not trace meaning of 'Ka' as water in Assamese, Prakrit or Sanskrit languages. The word had its origin probably in Brahman and 'the Sanghita' age when it was known as Kim Varta, Kim i.e., awkward or ugly, Vartanam, i.e. occupation.

According to H. H. Risley (1891, p375-382), Kaivarttas are originated from Aryan and Dravidian races found in Bengal. Sir Edward Gait in his '*History of Assam*' writes "A few others, such as Dom's of obvious of Dravidian origin, the bulk of the population of the Brahmaputra valley in comprised of tribes whose peculiar dialects belongs to the Tibeto-Burma branch". Taranath Das has also same opinion in that Kaivarttas are Dravidian origin. His book *Trivedika*, mentions that early in Harppan culture the Dravidians used to live in the bank of the Indus river several years ago. When the Aryan emerges to the Indus river then the Dravidians had compelled to leave their indigenous place and spread out to different parts of India. The Kaivarttas were trader class and for their commercial purpose they used sea-route, which Aryan regarded out of their custom. So the Aryan called them 'Mlech' and considered them as 'untouchable'.

Dev & Lahiri (1984, p20) make interesting revelation regarding origin of the Kaivarttas of Assam. "An analysis of ancient records-Mojohor and copper plate-granted by Ahom king Shiva Singha during the year 1135 B.S (before Sankardev) and 1657 Saka in favour of Barpeta Satra reveal that a sect of Kaivartta, some of whom were fisherman by profession, adhered to Buddhism in early days and that for their non-acceptance of Hinduism, which was then prevalent in Assam, they were looked down upon by the Hindus of Assam and were contemptuously called Doms. From famous Mojohor of 1135 B.S. it appears that three persons viz. Sarva, Daika and Sarongo, who happened to be sons of one *bolo Dom* were Hinduised by illustrious Vaishnava reformers Sri Sankrdeva and Madhadeva and were declared in Mojohor as Kaivarttas and 'Bhaktas' of Barpeta Satra. It is significant to note that there always existed a strong desire among the Doms of Assam valley to acquire caste name Kaivartta."

Some Assamese eminent scholars and historians trace origin of the Kaivarttas. According to Lakshiminath Bezbarua, Rai Bahadur Kanaklal Barua, Kaivarttas are Dravidians. Gunabhiram Barua in his Assam Buranji has not elaborated about the Kaivarttas. It appears that Kaivarttas of Assam in those days were insignificant and in later years their number inflated with inclusion of Doms and Nadiyahs into fold of Kaivarttas.

The Kaivarttas were earlier called Dom in Assam and formed another of the numerous castes in the islands population. They were belongs to the scheduled castes, who, according to the estimation of the year 2001, from 21,479 souls. In the beginning of the last century a movement was started by the Kaivarttas for their social uplift, they demanded replacement of the term Dom for the honorable word Kaivartta, a Sanskrit word meaning people who live on water i.e. by boating and fishing. Their movement was supported by Pitambardeva Goswami, the powerful Satradhikara of Garamur Satra, against all sorts of opposition from the orthodox religious heads of the time. Their demand was also supported by Lakshminath Bezbaruah, one of

the founder fathers of modern Assamese literature and the most known satirist, in his journal *Banhi*. Consequently, in 1914 their demand was conceded, and they came to be known as Kaivartta. The Kaivarttas are found in almost all places of Majuli live in their own exclusive villages. In Majuli there are almost 42 no. cadastral and non-cadastral Kaivarttas villages. Some of their known villages are at Salmara, Sensowa, Kamalabari, Garamur, Kharjan, Nagargaon, Dhekiajuli, Kakarikata, Chilakala, Dakhinpat, and so forth.

It is not known for certain as to the time of beginning of their settlement in the island. As the Kaivarttas belong to the group of settlers of the region, there is no doubt that they belong to the early generation of its inhabitants. It is also no doubt that they formed a part of its population along with other artisan peoples, like the Yogi Katani or Naths, Khanikar Chutiyas and so forth during the early monarchical days. There are historical evidences that Aniruddhadeva (1553-1626), the founder of the Mayamara seet of Vaishnavism of Assam, proselytized some of them here in Majuli itself at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Following him, his sons and brothers also had made their centers of proselytisation among those people later. As a matter of the fact, Majuli has now a fraction of the Kaivarttas called by the name Matak (Matak Kaivarttas), a term, said to have been derived from two Assamese compounds e.g. mat and ek, Matak, which means opinion one (*mat* means opinion, *ek* means one). The Kaivarttas including the Matak Kaivarttas are a section of the poor and backward peoples of the island. A very few families of the caste in Majuli have been able to up-stare the ladder of economic progress backed by education and capital. The decline of the fishing business in Majuli and scarcity agricultural land for cultivation is the main reasons for poor economic status of the Kaivarttas of Majuli (Nath, 2009, p45).

### **Objectives of the Study:**

Present study is an attempt to understand the changes take place in occupational dimension of the fishermen community in respect of the process of social change. The paper also focuses what are new occupations they were adopted and what are the factors responsible for adopting new earning source for their livelihood.

### **Methods and Materials:**

There are 42 Kaivartta populated villages in Majuli sub-division of Jorhat district, among them Deka-Senchowa and Malaphindha Kaivartta village is randomly selected for the present study. Every households of the village is taken as a unit of the study. Data are collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are collected through observation, formally and informally interacting with the villagers. Books, Journals, Government records and census are use as a secondary data. Data analysis involves use of descriptive statistics involving frequency count and percentage.

### **Result and Discussion:**

Occupational change, as nomenclature depicts, is change in traditional occupation of members of a society in order to earn their livelihood. Such occupational changes are mainly in terms of changes in distribution of their activities in socio-economic structure of a society. Kaivarttas, which constitute predominant scheduled caste community in the Brahmaputra valley

of Assam, are traditionally fishermen by profession. But the contemporary Kaivartta society is passing through a process of change and the occupational structure is under the process of transformation.

Now a day Kaivarttas are adopting diverse ways for their livelihood such as agriculture, business (grocery shop, stationary shop, cycle repairing, furniture shop etc.); government service (teacher, army service, clerical and fourth grade etc.); driving and daily worker. A few of them continue traditional occupation along with agriculture. Table 1 shows the occupational distribution of households of the Deka-Senchowa village and these occupational categories may reveal the trend of occupational mobility.

**Table 1**  
**Occupation Distribution in Deka-Senchowa Village**

Sl. No	Name of Occupation	No. of Household	Percentages
1	Fishing, Fish trading cum Agriculture	28	18.06%
2	Agriculture	52	33.54%
3	Business	19	12.25%
4	Service	31	20%
5	Agriculture, Business cum Service	2	1.29%
6	Diver	1	0.64%
7	Day Workers	22	14.2%
<b>Total</b>		155	100%

Source: Field Study in Deka-Senchowa Village, Jun-July, 2011

The table depicts that in Deka-Senchowa Village 18.06 percent households continuing their traditional occupation i.e. fishing and fish trading and agricultural activities at a time. Due to uncertainty and irregular income from fishing, these sections of villagers take fishing as seasonal income source. There are 33.54 percent families, who completely shifted their occupation to agriculture field. Through their paddy land is scarce and though they are living from hand to mouth, they would not like to return derogatory traditional profession. Modern education brings rapid changes in every aspect of human life. Most of the educated people of the village get government jobs such as teacher, defense, government official, clerk etc. The percentage of economy forms government job is (31) 20%. There are 12.25 percent petty businesses simultaneously. There have only one household (0.64 in percent) which has the bread earner in driving profession and while 22 households (14.2 in percent) earns their daily rations doing physical labour such as house building, painting and agricultural worker etc. in inside and outside the village.

**Table 2**  
**Occupation Distribution in Malaphindha Kaivartta Village**

Sl. No	Occupations	No of Household	Percentages
1	Fishing, Fish Trading cum Agriculture	33	33.33%
2	Agriculture	48	48.48%
3	Business	5	5.05%
4	Service	2	2.02%
5	Agriculture, Business cum Service	-	-
6	Diver	1	1.01%
7	Day Workers	10	10.10%
<b>Total</b>		99	100%

Source: Field Study in Malaphindha Kaivartta Village, Jun-July, 2011

The occupation pattern of the village indicates that out of 99 families, 48.48 percent are engaged in agriculture. They have no other subsidiary income source. About 33.33 percent of households depend on fishing and fish selling fish and also cultivate. This section of people neither has sufficient agricultural land nor could they live on by fish and fish selling. So, they are continuing both, seasonally. There are 5 families i.e. 5.05 percent engaged in business while only 2 (2.02 in percent) households depend on government service. Due to uncertainty in income level from the traditional occupation, 10.10 in percent (10 in numbers) family depend on driving as profession.

From above discussion it is become clear that dependency on catching and selling fish gradually reducing among the Kaivarttas of this island. They were gradually shifting towards agriculture, business, and service sectors of economy. Though catching and selling was the traditional occupation of the villagers but of late most of the villagers prefer rather cultivation than the traditional one. Their forefather did not care to possess land property and did not think that agriculture was a main source of living but present day Kaivarttas were not embracing the same idea. They prefer to cultivate in their suitable agricultural land (though it is scarce) as like non-Kaivarttas neighbouring villagers. Mention can be made that not the agriculture sectors but also in business and service sectors they are not lagging behind. Thus it can be said that economic dependency of the Kaivarttas is under process of transformation.

There are many reasons for gradual decline of their traditional fishing and fish selling occupation. These are as follows:

1. With the emergence of modern education the villagers thought that their traditional occupation gives them low social status in the society.
2. Fishing needs hard labour. Though they labour hard, the non-availability of fishes, exploitation of middleman and lack of modern equipment prevents sufficient income to maintain their family.

3. Most of the marshy land, river, *beels* near the village have been taken over by the government and leaseholders got the extreme power. Term and conditions of the *Mahaldars* are also not satisfactory to them.
4. Society's attitude towards fish trade compels the younger section to seek other profession.
5. Earlier it was only the Kaivarttas who catching and selling fishes, but at present it is found in Majuli the Misings and other no-Kaivarttas people are getting engaged in this profession. That may also they are less benefited because of the increase in competition.

### **Conclusion:**

Although, it is difficult to draw clear cut notion on occupational changing scenario of the community, but it does not mean that they are still embracing their traditional occupation. Present study reveals that possession of traditional occupation i.e. fishing and fish selling is gradually declining among the Kaivartta of the island. From the above data (table 1 and 2) it is observed that out of 254 families only 24.01 percent families (61 in numbers) are engaged in the age old traditional occupation. Most of the villagers of the island switch over to different occupational field such as cultivator (39.37%), businessman (9.44%), driver (0.78%), day labour (12.99%). In a project, conducted (2004-06) under Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institution of Asian Studies, Kolkata by Dr. Nath, it is found that there was only 5 percent educated people are employed in different government jobs, while 3.78 percent are engaged in business, 1.54% percent in wage earning works, and rest in agricultural and community profession. Thus about 98 percent people exclusively depend on their traditional caste-profession (Nath 2009b, p147). From the present study, it is understood on traditional caste-profession is gradually decreasing day by day and new earning is emerging.

Reasons for such change in their traditional occupation are of both internal and external. Internal reasons are mainly due to psychological factors such as enthusiasm of people to assemble a better life, inferiority complex of younger people since profession is considered as derogatory and urge of people to enhance their social recognition in broader society. External forces are also playing an important role in bringing a change in traditional profession of villagers either by creating barriers to pursue their existing profession or by offering them opportunities to shift themselves into a better profession than their traditional profession.

External forces that are creating barriers and forcing the villagers to shift themselves to some other occupations i.e. low profit margin of fish trading more particularly during summer seasons, dwindling of sources of fish since most of *beels* and fisheries have been taken over by Government and the terms and conditions of the Leaseholders (*Mahalders*) are not satisfactory, negative attitude of society towards fish selling etc.

On other hand external forces which offer opportunities to villagers to shift themselves into a better profession include building of school and college due to which education is spreading in the village and educated people are reluctant to follow their traditional occupation. Besides provision for better educational facilities to villagers, advanced communication technology, governmental policies and programmes, banking facilities, and modern agricultural equipment etc., are enhancing villages to opt for a better occupational opportunity.

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