CHAPTER-4
THE SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS OF THE KAIBARTAS

4.1. FAMILY

Family is a residential unit having reciprocal relations and common economic resources, the members of which take food in common kitchen. Family sizes are often variable. It depends to some extent on the biological attributes and psychological satisfaction of the couple and their ages. Moreover, the sizes of the family shrinks when children grow up and break away from their parents to establish their own conjugal units. Most of the fishermen communities like the Kaibarta of Kamrup district live in hamlets which are parts of larger agricultural villages.

4.1.1. FAMILY AS A SOCIAL UNIT

Family is the most important social unit of grass root level which work as an agent of society and helps the society in achieving its optimal goals. The local term for family is ghar / poriyaal which also subsumes residential compound or homestead under its meaning. Families are part of larger aquatic groups called bangsha. Apart from these there are marital kinship groups called kutumbo. Caste also plays an important role in village social structure. But the elementary unit of society is the family. The institution of the fishermen family has a unique position like other Hindu families among the institutions of family in different cultures of the world.
The influence of modern culture has led to some changes in the ideals of Hindu family and also in the ideals of fishermen family. Initially most of the fishermen families were living as joint families with a strong economic background. But in course of time, due to acute economic backwardness, most of the fishermen families of Kamrup district have started living in nuclear households. In the joint family the wife and husband, the parents of husband, his brothers and sisters and also some other relatives live under the same roof. On the other hand, nuclear family or small family is the family where wife and husband live with their own children under the same roof. Most of the family members after marriage establish new households. In case of married sons establishment of new households take place after one or two years of marriage. In such cases a person collect fishing implements again, but he can take with him the implements which he himself had brought. After separation, family members continue to co-operate in all matters except regular economic activities. It is clear from our study that the highest number of families belonging to our study areas are simple nuclear families.

The formation and break-up of joint families have been examined by investigating the mode of inheritance and the instances of separation of the younger generation from the family. Regarding separation from family, the usual practice is that at the time of marriage, the son requests separation from his parental family. If he is not urged by his parents to set up a separate household, the son might also stay on with his parent's family. The parents provide space and essential construction materials and household goods. As a consequence, the newly married wife has to be integrated in the working pattern, status hierarchy and communication pattern of the female subgroup of the family. Again, with the emergence of
a new sub-group e.g. wife and husband, the question of contribution to family income and consumption arises.

Generally, reasons for separation from the family after marriage indicated by respondents from all the study villages are quarrels and conflicts between mother and daughter-in-law, among daughters-in-law and even between daughter-in-law and unmarried sisters mainly because of status conflicts and distribution of work. Another equally important reason can be quarrels among brothers over contribution to family income and expenditure for consumption. O' Malley who discusses the dissolution of joint families in India in general, cites similar reasons: *Family disputes are the most usual cause of the dissolution of families in separate branches. In particular, earning members who contribute to the family resources are disgusted by a system under which idle relatives are a drain upon them, and their wives, devoted to their husbands' interest, keenly resent their energies being exploited* (1975:110).

However, the dissolution of the extended families does not mean the end of the relationships. A year or so after the son's marriage, especially a second son's marriage, start the dissensions and quarrels among the women members of the family. Within a year or two, they result in separation-usually in the same house. Soon after they begin to live independently, their relations again become cordial. They all come together for feasts and festivals and even food is often exchanged. Little children of all the separated families spend most of the time with the grandparents or any other elderly persons.
The partition usually takes place within the same house or the son goes to stay somewhere nearby. Even though the sons stay separately, they always consult the parents or their elder brothers regarding certain problems like venturing into a new enterprise, or a suitable match for the marriageable son or daughter, and so on. Moreover, they all come together for festivals and the ceremonies connected with the important crises of life, birth, marriage and death.

It is observed that the youths generally build separate houses for themselves after marriage. The trend suggests that the percentage of nuclear family will be higher in the near future. According to one of the senior informant of the fishermen society, joint families are gradually breaking down among themselves due to their increasing poverty and lack of guidance of their children (Informant: Laupuli Das).

4.1.2. FAMILY AS AN ECONOMIC UNIT

Economic unit is a small portion of the whole economic mechanism which works as an economic agent towards the development of economic life. Among the Kaibarta fishermen of Kamrup district, the property is generally held by the head of the family, who manages it as its custodian. After the death of the father, the sons and daughters inherit the property, if the father does not distribute it otherwise during his lifetime. In the matter of inheritance and succession, pherakati (division of property) system holds good in this district. Each family serves as an independent economic unit in their society. From the occupational analysis, it is found that most of the families of these study villages subsist on fishing. For the interest of group
fishing one helps another economically whatever is possible. But most of the fishermen take loans from outside the group and pay some interest.

Since the Kaibartas have to maintain their family with minimal levels of income, so they need a proper family budget. The family budget is prepared by the head of the family. In this case, some times women play an important role. During the preparation of family budget married and adult one can participate in the scaling. At the time of preparing special budget for socio-religious rites like marriage, annaprashana (putting first rice in the mouth of child), puja festivals and sraddha ceremony, advice of other nearest kins and friends are always welcomed. In a nutshell, all the members of the family act in co-operation on various situations.

With regard to activities related to fishing, men dominate all activities such as fishing, team formation, procurement of inputs, fish marketing and management of fishery finance. Women, however, help their male counterparts in collecting fish from the nets which they bring home, attaching baits to hooks and attaching floats and sinkers to the nets. But in some study areas, women are also involved in fishing, fish marketing and management of finance. Household work including management of family finance is looked after by women with little assistance from male members of the family in general.

4.1.3. STATUS OF WOMEN

Change is development and development is change – following the pattern the human society has always remained dynamic. The status of women in it has consequently always been changed. But in the course of
time, the status of woman was very much lowered among the fishermen society. Female Literacy rate among the fishermen are negligible. Of course, male literacy rate is also dismally low. Due to the acute poverty, most of women are bound to engage themselves to work out site of their villages as a domestic servant or as a daily wage earner. Even then, some women have to tolerate all sorts of cruelties at the hands of their male counterpart.

Dhanalaxmi Dash observes--

*The status of women in any society is the index of its social organisation.*

*Standard of society rises and fall in terms of the status of women* (2005 : 103).

In the ancient times, the Kaibarta women were given an equal status along with men in almost every field of life. As a mother community, they were worshipped among the Kaibartas.

Even today, the wife and husband cooperated in different functions of the household. They together performed religious duties, enjoyed and carried out other functions. They assumed that the wife is the root of *dharma*, prosperity, enjoyment and also regarded as the Lakshmi of the house. No man was allowed to perform religious duties or rites without a wife. That is why, they sometimes recite that:

*Jar nai tiri*
*Sî hatashree*
*Jar nai garu*
*Sî sabatke saru*

(Informant : Haren Das)
The meaning of above lines is that the person who does not have a wife, is an unfortunate self and the person who does not have a cow, he is the poorest person in the society.

But whenever the question of empowerment is arised, everything favours the male counterpart. And the scope of Kaibarta women is limited with domestic and religious duties. Very few of them are economically empowered although they are capable of contributing towards the development of society in sustain and organised manner.

4.2. BANGSHA AND GOTRA AS A SOCIAL IDENTITY

In the socio-religious life of the Kaibarta community the bangsha and gotra are two inseparable social units which are utilised for social identification. The bangsha covers the kins living or dead, close or remote with whom blood relationship is assumed to be traceable on the paternal side. The meaning of gotra is related to racial and familial relationship of blood.

The members of the bangsha should mourn over the death of relatives up to 11 days. Married women are also included to the husband's bangsha and should obey the same it as the husbands do. But in case of death of own father and mother, her husband observes only four days ritual and she does not require to observe that of any single day.

Among the fishermen folk the fudelity of every one being related to everyone else within the bangsha is quite strong. They say that they all belong to the same bangsha (lineage). Whenever misfortune strikes them,
they assemble together and respond to each other for help. In the time of socio-religious occasion or any *rites de passage*, the advice of other members of the same *bangsha* is always accepted. Moreover, all the members of the *bangsha* maintain their financial co-operation as far as possible in extra-ordinary situations. Of course, the lion's share of the expenditure is borne by the economically sound one within the *bangsha*.

As a patrilineal system of society, the fishermen Kaibarta give emphasis on the paternal side in comparison to that of the mother side. But they maintain almost balanced relationship with both sides.

Besides *bangsha*, certain other terms are also used by the fishermen Kaibartas of this district. The term *bhagi* is used to denote the members of the same blood to whom a villager can actually trace kin link on his father side. The *bangsha* appears to be a wider unit than the *bhagi* continuing upto seventh generation. It is prohibited to marry within the *bangsha*.

In the socio-cultural life of a community, the importance of *gotra* is inevitable, which is used in the every step of *rites de passage* and other religious festivities. In Hindu society, every caste has its own *gotra*, such as, *Bharadwaj*, *Sandilya*, *Viswamitra*, *Jamdagni*, *Gautama*, *Atri*, *Vashishtha*, *Agostya* and *Kashyap*. It is found from the survey that the Kaibarta fishermen belong to *Kashyap gotra*.

**4.3. MARRIAGE AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION**

*The institution of Hindu marriage occupies an important place in the social institution of the world. Hindu marriage can be defined as a religious*
sacrament in which a man and a woman are bound in permanent relationship for enjoyment of all kinds of pleasure like social, physical and spiritual (Das : 2002 : 99).

The Kaibartas regard marriage as a religious sacrament. A married couple is the union of a male and a female sanctified by sacred ceremony comprising among other rituals, the hom (sacrificial fire) in the presence of which the ritual sanctification is performed. Usually a Kaibarta married between the age of 18 and 20 years. However, quite a few are married a year or two earlier.

Ideally the wife should always be younger than the husband. Due to the complete ignorance of age, no definite differences of age could be ascertained. However, it seems that the difference has been normally between five to twelve years.

Marriages are either arranged by the parties themselves or by the elders. Marriages are preferably arranged within the same economic stratum. Child marriages are totally absent.

Premarital sex relations are strongly disapproved in the community. Caste endogamy is the general rule of contracting marriage in the Kaibarta society. However, rigid adherence to caste endogamy finds no room in the Kaibarta society. The Kaibartas recognise the hierarchy of the traditional Hindu caste system with its local variation. Marriage with castes like Suri, Jugi, etc., which they consider lower than their own are generally prohibited. But the marriage of a Kaibarta girl with a high caste boy is accepted as a matter of pride.
As the Kaibartas consider marriage to be a religious sacrament, dissolution of marriage is not easy. But still there are a few cases of divorce that took place in the study villages.

4.4. SOCIAL LIFE

In a Kaibarta family the childrens share an intimate relationship during their childhood. They play together. Both brothers and sisters work for the family and there is mutual cooperation, help and confidence between them. The unmarried daughters help the mother in the performance of household chores, while sons help the father in the occupational activities. Even after either's marriage, the relationship between brothers and sisters remain more or less cordial. Only in rare cases, petty disputes worsen their relationships.

The father expects his sons to be submissive and obedient. He exercises his control and authority over them and guides them in all matters. The children develop an attitude of respect towards their parents. They love, honour and obey them. But as soon as the boy attains adulthood, the intimacy between them gradually decreases. The son develops a tendency of respectful avoidance towards his father. He feels comfortable in a fishing unit, if his father is absent as he cannot smoke freely in his father's presence. When the son gets married the distance between the father and son further widens.

The son shares a more intimate and close relationship with his mother than that with his father. The son gets more affection from his mother than from his father. He can express his views frankly to his mother
and mother is often blind to the faults of her son. But the picture changes as soon as the son gets married.

The parents of the spouses enter into a new relationship, which is established by marriage. Their relationship is very informal. A man has to maintain a cordial relationship with his wife’s family. He is treated with affection by all the members of his wife’s family.

When the son separates from his parental family, the partition takes place within the same house or the son goes to stay somewhere nearby. The children are treated with the same affection as before and they move freely in both the houses. The sons, even after staying separately, consult the parents or their elder brothers on certain problems like marriage of their children, entering into new enterprises and so on. Moreover, they all come together for festivals and the ceremonies connected with the important crises of life - birth, marriage and death. The following remarks justifies it--

The Kaibartas practice endogamy and intersegmental marriage are regularised by a purificatory ritual. No other caste prefers to have marital alliance with them. But the Kaibartas can accept other castes as affinal kins. Monogamy is the general rule though polygamy is also allowed, but only in case of childless marriage and that too, with the consent of the first wife. The widow possesses the right of remarriage (Ahmed : 1995 : 27).

The line of descent among the Kaibartas is traced through the father who is the head of the family. All the male members of a family enjoy the coparcenary right, unless one goes out of the family during the lifetime of the father.
The Kaibartas do not have wider social relations with other castes. Fishing as occupation, is considered to be a lower profession and the Kaibartas who practice it, are considered to have a low status in the caste hierarchy among the Hindus.

Basically, the Kaibartas of the study villages are Saktas and they follow the religious beliefs of the Hindus. However, in the study villages, there are also the followers of Vaishnavism, Krishnaguru and Anukul Thakur. The ritual behaviours of these fishermen are similar to those of the neighbouring caste communities of the region. For the worship of the individual gods and goddesses, festivities are organised at community level. For a particular divinity, the festivity is held at a fixed date of the Hindu calendar year. The worship of the divinities like Siva, Lakshmi and Kali, may be performed by individual households also at any period of the year. As a community, the Kaibartas organise Satyanarayan puja at the community level in the beginning of the fishing season (Kati) in the month of November on the river banks. Ganga puja is another ritual performed before any fishing undertaking. Above all the Kaibartas also have a strong belief in spirits like jalkouri, pihacheni, beera, bak and chaman.

4.5. CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETIES AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Co-operative societies can be considered as a guardian of fishermen community in the field of fishery resurces. It not only provides gainful employment opportunities but also enhances the socio-economic condition
of fishing community by providing financial as well as promotional assistance. As Ray says-

Co-operation has a very important role to play for the economic and social upliftment of a community and also an economy like India where most of the communities are under-developed (1998: 173).

Our study finds only 20 registered fishermen co-operative societies in the entire Kamrup district. But there are some unregistered fishermen co-operative societies which are operated in unorganised ways in Kamrup district of Assam. The right to fishing in above fisheries is auctioned by the government and is settled with the highest bidder for a period of three years, of course, this three year term has been increased into five years in the present system of beel / river auction. But in the name of fishery societies, these fisheries are taken by some mahajans who share with the committee of fishermen societies.

Let us consider the case of a fishery co-operative society of a study village viz. Boripara –

In Boripara the Borhala beel is owned by fishing co-operative societies, which is auctioned by the Government for every three years. The Borhala Fishery Co-operative Society Limited was registered on 6th July 1976 (Regd. No. G.I. 76-77, 6th July) under Cooperative Societies Act, 1949 (Assam Act I of 1950). Earlier the society was named as Tetelia Bhetarbori Co-operative Society (1964-1975). At present there are 70 members. Out of the fish caught in the fishery, the society’s share is 40 paise per rupee and the rest 60 paise are the real income of the fishermen. The Government charges 25 paise per rupee from the society. The fishery
belongs to the Government and they make a settlement for 3 or 4 years. The working committee of the Society has 7 members with a president and a secretary. Out of the money earned, the society purchases boats, fishing nets etc. on community basis, pay wages to the secretary (as the president's post is honorary). There are specific rules and all the members of the society can go for fishing in the fishery. But if more than one member from a household go for fishing, they have to pay a khazana for per extra person. The Society does not enter into business transaction with the fishermen all the year round. Fishes are auctioned by the Cooperative society as a whole during the period from mid September to mid May when there is plenty of fish. The rest of the year the supply of fish is not regular due to floods. Majority of the fishermen continue with their fishing activities and they earn so little that they could hardly maintain their families (Informant: Lohit Das).

The co-operative societies of Kamrup district have reflected a miserable failure in its activities. The main locuna, however, is that such societies are not running properly and societies are used for the interest of few middlemen like secretary, chairman and executive members of the society with other non-fishermen financers. It is learnt from the respondents that non-fishermen rich persons and some leaders of fishermen community are backing these societies in the name of fishermen and enjoying the maximum profit. The prevailing settlement policy of fishermen is not conducive to the fishermen. Indeed, the prevailing settlement policy of fisheries indirectly favours the middlemen. After getting settlement of fisheries by the local fishery co-operative society, the committee of the society takes finance from the middlemen for giving lease price instalment. Sometimes finance is taken from them for the payment of early part of
settlement. Therefore, the middle men become the owner of the fisheries and they manage the fisheries and earn maximum profit. Respondents informed that they take share which is locally known as *khajna* (revenue) or *bhag* (part) to the tune of 50 percent fishermen's income from fishing. For the purpose of maximum profit the middlemen bring fishermen from outside Assam at cheap wages and the local fishermen are not getting employment to earn their livelihood.

Therefore, government gives preference to the fishermen co-operative societies for giving lease of the fisheries and protecting it for the development of fishermen community. Although Government of Assam has taken so many projects with the aid from World Bank and Assam Fisheries Development Corporation Limited for the upliftment of fisheries and fishermen communities (which are mentioned in Chapter-VI), but no fruitful result has been achieved as yet.

4.6. VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION

In the management of village administration, the fishermen have their own system of law and justice for only petty cases which are decided in the villages. The other criminal and out of capacity types of cases are sent up to local police station. Village council is known as *Raij mell* by the Kaibarta fishermen of Kamrup district. Disputes are referred to the village council for settlement. When a dispute between two parties arises, either of the parties or both the parties may approach the village council for settlement and the parties in trouble also inform to the head of the village. Accordingly all the leading persons of the village assemble in the village
public place or in front of namghar and settle the dispute. If anybody refuses to obey the verdict of the Raij, he/she is either socially excommunicated or have to pay a nominal fine. During the survey, information of some genuine cases were collected one of which is mentioned below. The case was found in the Keotpara village:

One day two neighbours picked up a quarrel with one another in connection with reconstruction of boundary wall. In the beginning there were exchange of hot words between the two and the quarrel moves to its extreme when one neighbour hit the other neighbour with stick, which resulted in a serious injury. The offender was immediately caught hold by the villagers who assembled there and was forcibly taken to the village Namghar and an urgent meeting was convened. The case was heard and considered. The offender was found guilty and asked him to compensate the treatment cost of the victims and the village council warned the offender not to commit such misconduct in future. Both the parties payed obevience to the village council and forgave each other (Informant: Jogen Das).

The village people have firm faith on the capacity of the village council in settlement of village level disputes undiscriminately. The village council does whatsoever is considered to be fit for the betterment of the village. School, road, bridge and other institutions which require collective affairs are done by the villagers themselves under the guidance of the village council.

Besides this, the village council looks after the management of the Namghar of the villages. In most of the Kaibarta fishermen villages, on every Thursday evening there is a religious gathering in the Namghar.
Religious scriptures and epics like *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana* and *The Geeta* are read out and discussed which are controlled by village council. Besides, Kaibartas also have a state level association called Sadau Asom Kaibarta Sonmilon (All Assam Kaibarta Association) to look after the welfare of the community.

### 4.7. NAMGHAR

Like other typical Assamese village, Kaibarta villages are also Namghar centric. The Namghar serves as a local centre of devotional worship for the Kaibartas. It exercises not only religious practices but also social and jural functions. The Namghar is organised on the principle of equality between members. Each family contributes equally to the cost of construction, both in cash as well as in labour. In the study villages, men and women assemble separately in the Namghar once a week for *Bhagavat path*. Villagers sits here to hear complaints and try offences. Decisions are reached unanimously and all adult members especially males are free to attend the same. Each of the study villages possesses one Namghar each, which is located more or less in the middle part of the village. Each Namghar is repaired if and when necessary by the respective Kaibartas of the villages. It has been quite rightly opined--

> Assamese Vaishnavism is institutionalized at village level in the Namghar system. The Namghar is the local community within which its members live their lives. In each Assamese village there is at least one Namghar (Cantile : 1984 : 67).
Special services are held in the Namghar on the occasion of Bihu and other religious festivals. The Namghars are also the basic unit of Kaibarta rural society.

References:


