

Socio- Economics Status of Fishermen Community in Thoothukudi District

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Abstract

The fisherfolk community of Thoothukudi District, Tamil Nadu, possesses a distinctive socio-cultural life closely intertwined with the sea and fishing-based livelihood. This study examines the family structure, gender relations, traditional ceremonies, educational practices, marriage customs, and socio-economic conditions of the fishing communities along the coast. Living close to the seashore is essential not only for fishing but also for boat maintenance, net repair, fish processing, auctioning, and collective occupational activities. The study also highlights the persistence of early marriage, dowry practices, limited female education, and restricted employment opportunities for women. The study concludes that improved education, alternative livelihoods, women's empowerment, social awareness, and better infrastructure are essential for the sustainable socio-economic development of the fisherfolk community.

KeyWords: Socio,Economics Status and Men and Womens

Introduction:

Thoothukudi District, located on the Gulf of Mannar coast of Tamil Nadu, is one of the state's most important fishing regions, with a rich fishing heritage and a large number of coastal villages dependent on marine capture for their livelihoods. Fishing here ranges from traditional small-boat operations to mechanised trawlers operating from the Thoothukudi Fishing Harbour, one of Tamil Nadu's oldest and busiest sea ports. The family life of fishermen and the relationship patterns within their families are closely connected with the sea-based occupation. The sea and the sea-related way of life can find their completeness only when they live settled along the seashore. Fishing in the sea is the permanent occupation of the fishermen in the coastal area of Thoothukudi district; therefore, they build their houses and live along the coastal areas. For reasons such as progress in their occupation, sharing of work, care and affection for children from elders, sharing family responsibilities, and helping in earning income, living in a joint family becomes a necessity for them. When a grown-up man in the house gets married, he usually establishes a separate family. However, elderly members are kept within the family and are looked after with great care and concern.

Staying on the seashore between the fishermen's traditional settlements and the sea is very helpful for their fishing occupation in many ways. It makes it easy for boats to reach the shore and also convenient to repair them. In addition, it provides a suitable place for them to sit for long hours on the sandy shore and mend their torn fishing nets. Furthermore, many

activities such as arranging fish in boxes, drying fish, auctioning them, and drying materials needed for cooking are all carried out on the seashore itself.

Above all, when they wake up in the morning, they must first look at the sea. This reflects the close relationship they have with the sea. By observing the sea in the morning, they can immediately understand the condition of the sea, how rough it is, and the nature of the waves. Based on this, they can decide whether they should go fishing that day or not. For fishermen, living near the sea is not merely for the sake of their occupation. Rather, it is their way of life. There exists a very close and inseparable bond between them and the sea, like an umbilical connection. If this bond is broken, their life itself would lose its meaning. Moreover, fishing is not an activity carried out by a single individual. It is a group activity performed by four or five people together. Many helping hands are required to push the boat into the sea, to pull it back to the shore after fishing, and to unload the fish and nets. In addition, if a boat sinks either nearby or far away, people from other boats must go to rescue it. Therefore, it becomes necessary that some people are always present along the seashore. Hence, building new houses far away from the sea will not truly create a new life for them.

Relationship between Men and Women

The relationship between men and women is closely related to the fishing occupation and is also controlled by village customs and regulations. Men hold positions as the head of the family, political leaders, and leaders in the village panchayat. Women, however, are mainly responsible for managing the household income and expenses. This responsibility does not give them real authority; rather, it is given because they are believed to be better at saving money and managing expenses carefully. Men are associated with the fishing occupation, while women remain at home, giving birth to and raising children. There is a strong expectation that a woman should remain faithful and disciplined at home while her husband is away at sea. If a man marries another woman while still being married, the issue is taken to the village panchayat. The panchayat members call both parties and attempt to reconcile them. If the husband refuses to live with the first wife, they arrange a divorce and ensure that whatever is due to the wife is given to her by the husband. Women who separate from their husbands often remain unmarried afterward, mainly because they have children to care for. If a married woman is found to have behaved improperly, her husband's family will not accept her. The panchayat also refuses to support her and may even expel her from the village.

Family Ceremonies

After one year of the child's birth, the ear-piercing ceremony and the ritual of offering the child's first hair are performed. These ceremonies are usually conducted in the family's clan deity temple. The hair offering is made as an act of gratitude to the deity who blessed the family with the child. During the ceremony, milk offerings and sacrificial rituals such as the offering of a goat or chicken are performed. The child is seated on the lap of the maternal uncle, and the ears are pierced. On that day, the maternal uncle invites relatives and hosts a feast.

Puberty Ceremony for Girls

When a girl attains puberty, the clothes she has been wearing are given to the washerman. Until fifteen days are completed, she must wear the clothes provided by him. On the evening of the first day, the women of the village are invited, and water is poured over her head. Neem leaves and an iron object are placed in her hands, and a burning stick is lit while she is asked to step over a pestle. After this ritual, she is made to stay inside a specially arranged enclosure in the house. Due to the belief in ritual impurity, she is not allowed to touch any household items. She is given food separately three times a day. In the morning, she is given pure gingelly oil, eggs, black gram porridge, and palm jaggery as food. At noon, rice is served with a curry prepared with green gram, drumstick shoots, and onions. At night, spicy rice flour puttu is given. On the fifth or seventh day, water from the maternal uncle's house is brought and poured over her. A cloth is placed in the water, and she is bathed after applying turmeric. On the third, fifth, and seventh days considered auspicious odd days women gather together and perform *kummi* (a traditional dance). On the fifteenth day, a priest is invited to perform a purification ritual to remove the impurity. On that day, fruits, flowers, clothes, ornaments, betel leaves, areca nuts, and sweets brought from the maternal uncle's house are used for the turmeric bathing ceremony. The house is sprinkled with cow dung water and sea water, the girl is given new clothes to wear, and she is formally brought back into the house. On that day, women sing songs and perform *kummi* dancing

In some places, songs are played on the radio for fifteen days during this celebration. Girl is dressed in a saree and ornaments brought by her maternal uncle and is seated on a decorated chariot and taken in a procession through the village. Fishermen who once celebrated this ceremony with great splendour and festivity now no longer announce the news of a girl attaining puberty to outsiders. This shows how their customs and practices have gradually changed with time.

Education of fisherfolk

In general, the number of people pursuing higher education in fishing communities is very low. There are many reasons for the lack of importance given to education. Men are mostly engaged in fishing, and when a boy grows up to a certain age, his father takes him to the sea for fishing work. Therefore, there is a common belief that it is enough if he knows basic reading and writing. As a result, in most coastal areas, many young men have discontinued their education after completing or even before completing the eighth or ninth standard. Some even fail in the tenth standard. Economic pressure also pushes boys towards fishing as a profession. Once they begin to earn money daily, their interest in education gradually declines. Teachers in primary and middle schools located in fishing villages also do not always encourage fishing community children to remain interested in education

Female Education

Female education is often looked down upon in fishing communities. It is commonly said, “What is the use of a girl studying so much? Whatever she studies, she will eventually marry a fisherman.” Such attitudes are reflected in traditional sayings like, “Why does a woman who tends the stove need education?”, “If a girl stays at home, the house and courtyard are enough for her,” and “A woman’s beauty lies in sitting near the hearth.” Even though women in fishing communities are given responsibilities such as managing the household, it is surprising that they are rarely encouraged to pursue higher education. Most girls discontinue their studies after the 9th, 10th, or 12th standard. One possible reason is that boys themselves often stop studying early and join fishing work at a young age, so families may feel that girls also do not need to study further. There may also be a fear that if a girl becomes highly educated, she might seek to marry a man from another caste who is equally educated.

In many cases, the decision about whether a girl can continue her schooling or college education is made by her maternal uncle. If the maternal uncle does not intervene, the girl’s elder brother may decide and stop her education by telling her not to continue. However, this situation has slightly changed after the natural calamities. There is now a growing interest in sending both boys and girls to school. One of the reasons for this change is that many government agencies and non-governmental organizations that came to provide tsunami relief also created awareness about the importance of education. These organizations have also been conducting evening educational classes in fishing villages. In addition, the government has provided educational assistance such as scholarships, free textbooks, uniforms, and bicycles to students studying in government schools, which has encouraged both boys and girls to show greater interest in education. Poverty still prevents many from attending school regularly. Students from better-off families often go for private tuition, while poorer students cannot afford it, creating inequality in education. Furthermore, in many fishing families, men often return home drunk in the evenings, which also affects the children’s studies. Even when women from fishing communities receive education, they are often not allowed to go to work. In this way, male authority continues to control women’s lives, preventing them from pursuing higher education or employment opportunities.

In fishing communities, the birth of a male child is often associated with the ability to earn income through fishing, which is the primary occupation. Therefore, even if a man is not highly educated, he is still given more authority and respect than women. In earlier times, men who wished to marry a woman would offer gifts and goods to the bride’s family according to their capacity and then marry her. Elders say that this practice existed among fisherfolk for many years. However, times have changed now. Today, it is the bride’s family that provides gold and other goods demanded by the groom’s family. Asking for a large dowry has become common. Even poor families are expected to give at least ten sovereigns of gold, bronze utensils, a two-wheeler, and about twenty pots filled with grains and groceries needed for the household. Because of this, many poor families are forced to borrow money to conduct the marriage. Marriage in fishing communities is often celebrated in a very elaborate manner. Even ordinary families spend money on printing invitation cards, sometimes costing ten or twenty

rupees each. In addition, there are expenses for loudspeakers, digital banners at the marriage hall, processions in cars, photography, and video recording, which increase the overall cost. This desire to celebrate ceremonies in a grand way often arises from the uncertain nature of their livelihood.

Marriage

Usually, once a girl attains puberty, she is considered ready for marriage, and discussions about her marriage begin immediately. If there is a cross-cousin (the maternal uncle's son) who has the customary right to marry her, the girl's family will not search for another groom. He can directly express his wish to marry her, and generally no one will oppose it. Only if that cousin himself refuses to marry the girl can the family look for another groom. In this community, there are usually no marriage brokers. The groom's family directly approaches the bride's family. Most marriages take place within the fishing community itself, and often among relatives. The reason is that this is believed to ensure the girl's safety, maintain family ties, and reduce dowry demands.

In most cases, fisherwomen are married at a very young age. A girl who is fifteen or sixteen years old may soon be married, especially if the cross-cousin marriage custom applies. Soon after marriage, she may become a mother. As a result, many girls who should be continuing their education are instead forced to take on the responsibility of raising children. By the time they reach thirty years of age, many women already have two or three children, which often leads to various health problems. There are also cases where women remain unmarried because no one comes forward to ask for their hand in marriage. In such situations, they may remain unmarried throughout their lives. According to local people, the main reasons are poverty and the breakdown of relationships with the maternal uncle's family. Usually, if someone asks for the girl's hand before she turns twenty, the marriage takes place. Otherwise, it may never happen. Once a woman crosses the age of twenty, even if she is beautiful, she may be rejected simply because she is considered too old for marriage.

Conclusion

The fishermen community of Thoothukudi District depends mainly on fishing, which is both their livelihood and way of life. However, their income is often low and unstable, making them economically vulnerable, especially during fishing bans and natural disasters like the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Most families are nuclear, with limited education, low social participation, and moderate living conditions. Gender inequality is evident, with men holding decision-making power while women manage households with less authority. Overall, despite strong cultural traditions, the community faces challenges such as poverty, low education. There is a need for better education, alternative livelihoods, improved infrastructure, and women's empowerment to ensure sustainable development.

End Notes:

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