



FISH CULTURE: ITS ROLE IN THE CULTURAL LIFE OF THE PEOPLE OF NORTH-EASTERN INDIA

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ABSTRACT :

Fish plays a significant role in the cultural life of the people of North-Eastern India and naturally many beliefs and ceremonies are associated with fish. Fish is a rich source of animal protein and its culture is an efficient protein food production for aquatic environment. According to the Hindu Mythology the Lord Vishnu's Dashavatar, it is the appearance also known as incarnation. The first avatar is or Fish, Matshya is the half fish, a half human form of Vishnu. Society and culture both are related to religion. The fish as a food and as a symbol occupies an important position in the history of religion and in the culture of Gods. The fish appeared as prohibited in the diet because of its sacred nature. Fishes are considered sacred. Fish is one of the important items used in the marriage ceremonies of many communities of North-Eastern India. The Khasis of Meghalaya use fish as an essential item in the marriage ceremony. Marriage is the most important ritual for human life; it is full of social custom. These customs carry the social heritage of society.

Many species of fishes are used as sources of medicine. These fishes are honoured and people do not catch these fishes for food. There are many places in Assam which are named after fishes or related to fish's names. Uses of these names are shown the fish love among the people. Folktale is the distinguished part of folk literature. Tales can't be a private wealth of any race. It spreads verbally from one place to another. Various stories are found which are related to fish in our culture. Fish plays many roles in culture from their economic importance in the fishing industry and fish farming, folklore, mythology, religion, art, literature, etc.

Keywords: *Fish-lore, North-Eastern India, food taboo, ritual symbolism, indigenous medicine, folk belief.*

I. Introduction:

North-Eastern India is one of the most ecologically and culturally diverse regions of the Indian subcontinent. Characterized by an abundance of rivers, wetlands, streams, and hill water bodies, the region has historically depended on fish as a primary source of protein. Fish forms an essential component of everyday diet among both tribal and non-tribal communities. However, despite its widespread consumption, the cultural meaning of fish in North-Eastern



India cannot be understood merely in dietary or economic terms. Fish occupies a complex symbolic position within indigenous worldviews, ritual practices, and systems of belief.

In many communities, the consumption of fish is governed by strict taboos that are socially and ritually enforced. Certain fish species are avoided by specific clans, social groups, or individuals of high ritual status. These taboos are often rooted in myths of origin, ancestral narratives, or beliefs concerning purity, pollution, and the supernatural. Among the Assamese Hindu society, particularly in earlier times, members of the higher castes refrained from consuming certain varieties of fish, though such restrictions have gradually weakened in contemporary society. Nevertheless, the persistence of these beliefs among tribal communities highlights the enduring cultural significance of fish beyond changing social realities.

Ethnographic studies reveal that fish is intimately connected with ideas of life, fertility, death, and rebirth. Fish is used in marriage rituals, fertility ceremonies, healing practices, and rites associated with death and the supernatural. In many societies, fish is believed to possess medicinal and magical properties, and specific species are used in indigenous therapeutic systems. At the same time, beliefs in fish ghosts, aquatic spirits, and supernatural guardians of water bodies impose moral and ritual restrictions on fishing practices, functioning as traditional mechanisms of ecological conservation.

Despite the richness of fish-related beliefs and practices, scholarly attention to fish-lore in North-Eastern India has remained relatively scattered, confined largely to ethnographic descriptions rather than holistic cultural analysis. This paper seeks to address this gap by presenting a comprehensive study of the role of fish in the cultural life of the people of North-Eastern India, drawing upon classical anthropological and folkloristic sources.

II. Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To examine the cultural taboos and mythological beliefs associated with fish consumption among different communities of North-Eastern India.
2. To analyze the ritual, symbolic, and medicinal roles of fish in marriage, fertility, healing, and death-related practices.



3. To explore the ecological and conservation significance of fish-related beliefs and supernatural traditions.

III. Methodology:

The present study follows a qualitative and descriptive research methodology, relying entirely on secondary sources. Data have been collected from classical ethnographic works, folklore studies, anthropological monographs, and regional cultural research publications. Major sources include the writings of Elwin (1958), Hutton (1921, 1969), Mills (1922, 1926), Hudson (1908, 1911), Barua (1959), and Ghosh (1979).

A thematic content analysis method has been employed to interpret and synthesize data related to fish taboos, ritual practices, medicinal uses, and supernatural beliefs. Comparative analysis has been used to identify similarities and variations across communities. The study adopts an interpretive anthropological approach to understand fish-lore as an integrated cultural system rather than isolated customs.

IV.Result and Discussion:

Fish as Food and the Emergence of Taboos

Although fish constitutes a staple food in North-Eastern India, its consumption is not uniform across communities or social groups. Food taboos concerning fish often reflect broader social hierarchies, ritual purity norms, and mythological beliefs. In traditional Assamese Hindu society, particularly among higher castes, certain fish species were historically forbidden. These prohibitions were linked to notions of ritual purity and social distinction, though many of these restrictions have weakened in modern times.

Among tribal communities, fish taboos are more deeply rooted in myth and folklore. The Wancho tribe of Arunachal Pradesh avoids certain fish believed to have originated from a girl who was transformed into a fish. This belief, recorded by Elwin (1958), reflects a worldview in which humans and animals share a fluid ontological relationship, and consumption of such fish is considered morally and spiritually inappropriate.

Fish Taboos among the Nagas



Among the Sema Nagas, two varieties of fish are strictly avoided. One is tabooed for young men due to a legend that attributes its origin to a part of a man's anatomy accidentally severed after a successful love affair. The consumption of this fish is believed to symbolically threaten masculine vitality. The second variety is avoided because it is believed to cause extreme suffering at the time of death (Hutton, 1921).

Similarly, among the Angami Nagas, members of high social status, such as the Mohvus or stone-pullers, refrain from consuming a small species of fish. This abstinence reinforces social distinction and ritual hierarchy (Hutton, 1969). Such taboos illustrate how food practices are used to construct and maintain social order.

Fish, Ancestry, and Clan Identity

In Manipur, certain members of the royal family abstain from consuming eel-like fish due to the belief that their ancestral deity Pakhangba sometimes assumes the form of a serpent (Hudson, 1908). Eating such fish is thus perceived as an act of sacrilege. Among the Khasi tribes, fish taboos are linked to clan history and ancestral conflict. Certain fish are considered taboo because they symbolize a mythic episode of vengeance following inter-clan rivalry. These fish are remembered as "fish of vengeance" and are avoided as a mark of historical memory and moral restraint (Barua, 1959).

Fish in Fertility Rituals and Reproductive Beliefs

Fish plays a crucial role in fertility rites among several communities. Among the Dimasas of North Cachar Hills, childless couples perform a religious ceremony involving offerings of specific fish species. These fish are believed to possess reproductive potency and are offered to deities to invoke fertility. Once children are born, parents abstain from consuming these fish, while the children may do so later (Barua, 1959). This practice reflects a belief in sympathetic magic, where abstinence reinforces the sacred power of the ritual.

Medicinal and Therapeutic Uses of Fish

Fish occupies an important place in indigenous medical systems. Certain Assamese communities use specific fish species to treat ailments such as nocturnal urination, female



reproductive disorders, and digestive problems. Fish bones, scales, bile, and even stones found in fish foreheads are believed to possess medicinal properties.

Among the Aos, dried fish offerings are made to fate spirits to cure infertility and repeated miscarriages (Mills, 1926). Angami Nagas apply fish brain to injuries to extract thorns, while Lushai communities believe that fish soup cures diarrhoea and mild dysentery. In Manipur, the entrails of certain fish are consumed to improve eyesight. These practices demonstrate a sophisticated indigenous understanding of natural resources and their therapeutic potential.

Fish in Marriage and Life-Cycle Rituals

Fish plays an indispensable role in marriage ceremonies across North-Eastern India. Among the Khasis, dried fish is ritually placed on the floor and offered to gods, ancestors, and the community during marriage ceremonies. The fish is then suspended from the roof until the birth of a child, symbolizing fertility and continuity.

Among the Mishings, fish is central to betrothal ceremonies. A large number of fish must be presented to the bridegroom's family, and any deficiency is considered disrespectful. During the final marriage ceremony, the bride and groom are fed together on the same plate with dried fish and special rice, symbolizing unity and shared destiny.

Manipuri marriage rituals involve the ceremonial release of live fish representing the bride and groom. The movement of these fish in water is interpreted as an omen for the couple's future (Barua, 1959). Such rituals highlight the symbolic association of fish with life, movement, and prosperity.

Supernatural Beliefs and Ecological Ethics

Belief in fish ghosts and aquatic spirits is widespread across North-Eastern India. Many water bodies are believed to be inhabited by supernatural beings that punish excessive fishing. These beliefs discourage over-exploitation of aquatic resources and function as traditional conservation mechanisms.

Certain Naga communities prohibit fishing during the cultivation season, reinforcing ecological balance (Hudson, 1911). Manipuri Vaishnavas abstain from fish consumption during specific religious periods, reflecting ritual discipline and moral restraint.

V.Conclusion:



The cultural life of the people of North-Eastern India reveals that fish is far more than a source of food. It is a powerful cultural symbol embedded in myth, ritual, medicine, social hierarchy, and ecological ethics. Fish taboos articulate clan identity, ancestral memory, and ritual purity, while its ritual use in marriage and fertility ceremonies symbolizes life, continuity, and prosperity. Medicinal and magical applications of fish reflect a rich indigenous knowledge system that integrates nature, health, and spirituality. Moreover, beliefs in fish spirits and supernatural guardians serve as effective traditional conservation strategies, regulating human interaction with aquatic ecosystems. Understanding fish-lore thus provides deep insight into the indigenous worldview of North-Eastern India, where culture and ecology exist in a mutually sustaining relationship.

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