

# Traditional Fishing Practices and Socio-cultural Activities of Koli Community in Konkan Region of India

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Dr Francis Day, the First Inspector General of Fisheries in India, stated: “Our fishermen are a very miserable lot of people and extremely poor.” This view is no longer tenable as the Koli community has certainly advanced a great deal although it is not up to the mark (Patil, 1984). The Government of India has declared the Koli community as scheduled tribe and given many benefits to them. The daily income of the Kolis has increased due to modernization but the income still remains low. To use modern techniques, the people should obtain loans from various financial sources. Even though cooperative credit societies have been established, it will take a long time for them to clear all their debts. It is important to know whether the government is helping in fulfilling their dreams and improving their standard of living; or there is still lack of cooperation.

The Kolis lead a rather isolated lifestyle and maintain their own socio-cultural values.

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Nothing much about their lifestyle, beliefs, customs, and traditions are known. It is very important to bring into light different facets of their life. The Kolis are well-known for their dance and songs. These people live together in perfect harmony in *koliwad* (a village having a number of hamlets of only the fishing community is called *koliwada*). A preliminary survey was undertaken to know more about them, their aspirations, occupation, social life, customs, traditions, and beliefs. This survey was also undertaken to know the traditional fishing procedures followed by the Koli community in Konkan region.

## Methodology

Ratnagiri and Raigad district were selected purposively from the Konkan region in the state of Maharashtra. From each district one tahsil and from each tahsil, one village was selected randomly and from each village, ten

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fishermen were selected randomly. Thus, the final sample consisted of two tahsils, two villages, and twenty sample fishermen. The data were collected for the year 2005–06, which were analyzed and presented into suitable tables and cross-tables to draw meaningful conclusions.

## Results and discussion

### Socioeconomic status

The fishermen in Raigad and Ratnagiri districts were observed to be poor and carrying out their business with limited means and as a way of life. Therefore, a

study of their socioeconomic characteristics was undertaken. The general information regarding the socioeconomic profile is presented in Table 1.

The overall average age of fishermen was 46.25 years. The village-wise average age indicated that the average age of the fishermen in Paj-Pandhari was 48.30 years and from Navgaon was 44.20 years.

Fishing was the main source of income in both the villages. The subsidiary sources of income were agriculture (60%), poultry (30%), and no other occupation (10%) in Paj-Pandhari village whereas in Navgaon the occupation of 40% of the fishermen was

**Table 1. Socioeconomic characteristics of the fishermen in two villages in Maharashtra, India.<sup>1</sup>**

Particulars	Paj-Pandhari	Navgaon	Overall
No. of fishermen	10	10	20
Average size of family (no.)			
Male	2.80	3.10	2.95
Female	2.30	2.70	2.50
Total	5.10	5.80	5.45
Average age of fishermen (yr)	48.30	44.20	46.25
Education (no.)			
Literate	7 (70)	8 (80)	15 (75)
Illiterate	3 (30)	2 (20)	5 (25)
Occupation (no.)			
Main			
Fishing	10 (100)	10 (100)	20 (100)
Subsidiary			
Agriculture	6 (60)	4 (40)	10 (50)
Poultry	3 (30)	3 (30)	6 (30)
No other occupation	1 (10)	3 (30)	4 (20)
Caste (no.)			
Koli	5 (50)	8 (80)	13 (65)
Kharvi	2 (20)	1 (10)	3 (15)
Bhandari	2 (20)	1 (10)	3 (15)
Muslim	1 (10)	–	1 (5)

1. Figures in parentheses are percentage values.

agriculture, 30% poultry, and 30% no other occupation. Overall, 50% had agriculture as occupation, 30% poultry, and 20% had no other occupation.

Overall, the size of the family was 5.45 comprising more men (2.95) than women (2.50). Of the sample fishermen, 75% were literate and 25% were illiterate. The literate fishermen were more in Navgaon (80%) than in Paj-Pandhari (70%). The illiterate fishermen were more in Paj-Pandhari (30%) than in Navgaon (20%).

Majority of the fishermen in fishing business were Hindus [Koli (65%), Kharvi (15%), and Bhandari (15%)] while only 5% were Muslims. In Navgaon, the majority were the Kolis (80%) while there was no Muslim found. In Paj-Pandhari too the majority were the Kolis (50%) but 10% were Muslims.

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## Fishing procedures

The Kolis of the study area solely followed their traditional method of fishing, i.e., *Dol*. The present method of catching fish by trawlers was not practiced because the community could not afford to own and maintain these modern vessels. The traditional method yields lower volumes of fish but the people were able to maintain their day-to-day sustenance. The low level of returns was also reported by Chacko

(1970). The two main methods of fishing in this region are: (1) *Dol*; and (2) Trawler.

***Dol***. In the *Dol* method, hand-woven nets are used for catching fish. It takes four months for one man to weave one net. A hand-woven net is stronger than the machine net. A net is usually 420 feet long. These nets are made of nylon filaments. Black net is more expensive than the other colored nets. Each net costs Rs 25,000 to Rs 30,000. Every boat has three nets. Due to the decrease in the fish production, three nets are used. The nets are placed 18 feet deep in water with the help of wooden poles and two boats, which adjust the distance of the net. The net is pulled off one hour before the high tide begins. The fish, which are trapped, are then harvested. The fishermen carry their own life jackets and first aid kit.

The traditional beliefs of the fishermen are:

- When the moon rises, the high tide starts and it is at its peak when the moon is above the head; when the moon sets, low tide begins and when the moon disappears the low tide is at its peak.
- Moon rise is delayed by half an hour everyday.
- High tide is in the north direction and low tide is in the south direction.
- If the wave direction is from west to east, the fish catch is less; but according to the weather forecast bureau if the wave direction is from south to north, the fish catch is less.
- After *Diwali* festival (October/November), the fish catch decreases and increases after March till May.

- From June to 15<sup>th</sup> August or till *Narali Purnima* (August), fishing is not carried out.

**Trawler.** Trawlers are used by big fishing companies or by foreign companies. They have new improved machinery, which catch large amount of fishes. The net is pulled out after every three to four hours. Since the net of the trawlers reach deep in the sea, i.e., 300 to 400 feet to the bottom of the sea, it catches more amount of fishes. The cost of a trawler is Rs 150,000.

The general opinion of the elders and experienced fishermen was that trawling had depleted enormously the population of fishes thus affecting the catch by those following the traditional method. This is because deep sea trawling harvests even the developing fingerlings and therefore prevents the development of mature adult fish of the next generation.

### Division of labor

It is the men who do all the hard work involved in the actual fishing: construction and maintenance of boats (Fig. 1), weaving



Figure 1. Repairing of boats during the slack period.

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of nets, going out into the sea and facing the hardships and hazards, and hauling the catch when it is brought. Sometimes the boats are on the high seas for nearly 8 to 14 days. At this time it is the men who have to be on board and therefore have to stay separated from their families. They are trained at an early age of 16 years. By the end of their working age they have an experience of nearly 40 years.

The women sort the collected fish and prepare them for actual marketing. The fish is dried (Fig. 2), sorted according to their grades and species, and transported by head loads to the markets for sale. Similar observations were made by Renuga (1992).

The fish is sold by auction. As the fresh fish is hauled in on the shore (Fig. 3), the auction starts. The fish, which needs drying and



Figure 2. Slate fish dried for preparation of fertilizers.



**Figure 3. Ships/boats coming to the seashore early in the morning with the fish catch.**

processing before selling, is separated. After the fresh fish is sold, the procedure of drying the fish begins. They are hung on bamboo strings till the fish is completely dried and fit to be sold. The huge fishes, which are to be sold in big markets and need to be transported, are then stored with ice block to prevent decaying of fish. This fish is then packed properly and sent to other big markets in Mumbai, Pune, Satara and other places for sale. The entire family is involved in this occupation and there is a good division of labor. The tasks are well assigned for all to benefit. Earlier it was the occupation only of the fishermen community especially of the Kolis in Maharashtra. But now even the people from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu have indulged in this occupation and have started as laborers and are therefore

posing a threat to the monopolized occupation of the Kolis.

### **Living condition**

The effluent of industrial establishment on the coast also adversely affects fish development and therefore the yields. Earlier, prior to the establishment of the Rashtriya Chemical Fertilizers (RCF), there was no water supply in the village. People had to bring water from a source 4–5 km away. But now the RCF has arranged for a pipeline, which helps the people to get tap water supply. Other facilities to improve their standard of living like provision of school, medicinal facilities, employment of the nearby residents in the industry, recreational facilities, etc. have been started.

***The women sort the collected fish and prepare them for actual marketing.***

There are many risks that the fishermen community has to face while catching fishes on the high seas. Some of these risks are loss of life in cyclones, tornadoes, tsunami, high-pressure zones, and low-pressure zones; and damage to boats due to sea animal attack, iceberg crash, or oil tanker crash.

**Reasons for migration**

The main occupation of the Kolis is facing extinction and in the near future there will be very few people opting for fishing as their occupation.

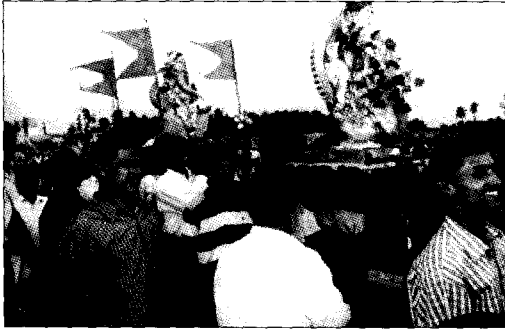
**Cultural activities**

Festivals, folk dances, and beliefs are the part of culture of the fishermen. All the fishermen in both the villages celebrate the same festivals with great pomp and enthusiasm (Table 2). There was not even a single festival unique to a particular village. The main festivals celebrated by the Kolis are:

- *Ram Navami* in *Chaitra* (April)
- *Narali Purnima*, *Gokulashtami*, and *Nag Panchami* in *Shravana* (August)
- *Ganesh Chaturthi* in *Bhadrapada* (September) (Fig. 4)
- *Dasera* in *Ashwin* (October)
- *Mahashivratri* in *Magha* (February)
- *Shimga (Holi)* in *Phalgun* (March)

**Table 2. Cultural activities of the fishermen in two villages in Maharashtra, India.**

Category	Item	Paj-Pandhari	Navgaon
Festivals celebrated	<i>Ram Navami</i>	Yes	Yes
	<i>Narali Purnima</i>	Yes	Yes
	<i>Nag Panchami</i>	Yes	Yes
	<i>Ganesh Chaturthi</i>	Yes	Yes
	<i>Shimga (Holi)</i>	Yes	Yes
	<i>Gokulashtami</i>	Yes	Yes
	<i>Dasera</i>	Yes	Yes
Dances (and songs) performed	Koli dance	Yes	Yes
	<i>Dingalo</i>	Yes	Yes
	Koli song ( <i>Koli geet</i> )	Yes	Yes
Beliefs	Offering coconut to the sea will calm it during the monsoon	Yes	Yes
	A woman getting 'possessed' is able to solve their problems	Yes	Yes
	' <i>Satavi Devi</i> ' writes the future of the child	No	Yes
	Visiting the ' <i>Bhagat</i> ' to solve their problems	Yes	No
	Observing <i>sutak</i>	Yes	Yes



**Figure 4. Celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi festival.**

Nearly all their festivals have a resemblance to those celebrated by the Hindus. The Koli community is subdivided into several sub-castes: Gavit, Aarvi, Suryavanshi Koli, Son Koli, and Mahadeo Koli. The majority of the fishermen found in the two study areas were the Mahadeo Kolis. The details of some of their major festivals are:

*Ram Navami:* It is celebrated on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of *Chaitra* (April). It starts before five days of *Navami*. It is a time of social gathering. *Kirtans* and *bhajans* are arranged for five days in temples. The *Palaki utsav* is held and the *palaki* procession is taken in every village.

*Narali Purnima:* It falls on the 11<sup>th</sup> day after *Nag Panchami*. Kolis offer coconut to the sea on this day. The police *patil* is the first one to offer his offerings to the sea. These offerings are in the form of decorated coconuts. The coconuts are taken to the sea in procession. The procession is led by 'Songs' (people dressed in fancy clothes), followed by 'Vajantri' (people who play musical instruments), and then followed by the people with offerings. This is the main festival of the Kolis and it is celebrated with

great pomp. There is a *puja* held before offering the coconut to the sea. The materials used for the *puja* are milk, flowers, turmeric, camphor, and oil lamp. After the *puja*, the person (police *patil*) enters the sea till the water reaches his chest and then immerses the coconut into the sea. The belief is that the sea will calm down and it will be safe for the fishermen to enter the sea for fishing.

*Holi:* It is celebrated on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of *Phalgun* (March). It is celebrated for five days. Fishing is stopped during this time. On the first day, the boats are decorated with garlands. On the second day, there is dancing and enjoying by the *tandels* (a *tandel* is the chief of fishing crew on a boat) and *nakhavas* (persons who sail the boats). There are nine *vadis* [a *vadi* is a hamlet of at least 4 (or more) houses] in the village: *Turewale, June Kulabakar, Nave Kulabakar, Wadiwale, Shetawali, Godewale, Kalagiwale, Vithabai, and Rasthale*. On *Holi Purnima*, firewood is collected and set fire at night. An arecanut (*Areca catechu*) plant is planted in a pit and around it the firewood is arranged. Coconuts and cloth are offered to the arecanut as offerings. The festival or lighting of fire takes place on the seashore. In the evening, women perform dances known as 'Dingalo' around eatables, coconuts, bananas, etc. During this celebration sometimes a sensitive woman may get 'possessed' by a spirit and she is considered to be able to offer solutions to problems faced by people who ask her questions.

The same dances are performed and the same Koli folk songs are sung in both the

villages with no uniqueness in a particular village. The belief that '*Satavi Devi*' writes the future of the child is not dominant in Paj-Pandhari, whereas in Navgaon visiting the '*Bhagat*' during crisis is not found, may be due to a better standard of living. But all the other beliefs are still dominant and common to both the villages.

Some of their customs concerning the human condition bring families and the community together to collaborate. A brief account of unifying features of the Kolis are as follows:

**Deities:** The main deities of the people living in Paj-Pandhari are *Khandoba* and *Bhavani*. In Navgaon the main deities worshiped by the people are *Ram* and *Shiva*. Other gods are also worshiped.

**Childbirth:** Five days after childbirth the goddess *Satavi* is worshiped. The belief is that she is the one who writes the fortune of the child. After two months, the hair is shaved off irrespective of the gender of the child and the hair is offered to the sea.

**Marriage:** Marriage is mostly endogamy. There was no widow marriage before but this started 20–25 years ago. Child marriage prevailed earlier, but has been abolished now. Marriage rituals are conducted for three days. Dowry system also has been abolished.

**Death:** In some cases the Son Kolis bury the dead. There is a funeral procession led by a group of mourners humming *bhajans*. A shade is raised in the place where the corpse is buried for three days. *Sutak* is observed for 12 days (*sutak* is observance of isolation period by a family after the death

of a family member). All the favorite food of the dead person is cooked and placed on a piece of cloth with '*bhakri*' made out of *maida* (refined wheat flour) and then offered to the sea. If a young boy or girl dies then a male or female doll made out of rice paste is placed in front of the *rui* tree (*Calotropis gigantea*) and then the *brahmin* performs the ritual of marriage.

**Beliefs:** The people believe in convulsions in certain persons and obey their advice given in that condition. The belief in magic men, locally known as '*Bhagats*', still persists. They visit '*Bhagats*' during crises.

## Conclusions

The new generation is given the opportunity of getting educated and therefore their aspirations are to become doctors and engineers. Very few people want to stick to their ancestral occupation. Due to decline in the fish catch and the risk of life, the elders too are not encouraging their children to join their occupation. Moreover, there is no guarantee of a daily income. Hence, the youngsters feel discouraged to opt for their age-old occupation.

The beliefs of the Koli community were constantly changing with the importance of education, modernization, and improved standard of living. But still some of their beliefs like offering coconut to the sea to calm it down, believing in a woman getting 'possessed', and trusting her to solve their problems, observing *sutak* are still followed and persist. It is still the festivals that bind the people of the community together. The elders of the village are still continuing with fishing as occupation for their living. But the



children have already chosen some other income sources and fields with less risk. If this continues the sustenance of the fish industry is endangered.

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