The Jeopardized 'Hanji' of Kashmir Valley: A Visual Ethnographic Note.

Visual Ethnography

n. 1 · 2022
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2022.1-106

Hashmat Habib, *Indira Gandhi National Open University, India*
Siwani Mech, *Tezpur University, India*

Abstract
Fishing has always been critical to the financial well-being of Indian society. While fishing was once a means of subsistence, it has grown into an important source of income and survival. Throughout the years, fishers in Kashmir's valley have not attempted to alter their tactics. Folklore, oral history, and archive literature all contain accounts of these fisherfolks. The old manner of life of their forefathers and foremothers is now at risk of extinction. These fishers were historically classified according to their social status, power, and social standing. As a result, there may be an increase in social and economic mobility. Residents are abandoning conventional fishing professions in quest of a better social position, jeopardizing the community's future. Traditional fishers fear a dismal future as the fishing industry continues to deteriorate.

Keywords
Fisherfolks, Sustainability, Social Mobility, Tradition, Extinction, Kashmir Valley

Bio
Hashmat Habib is a doctoral scholar in the Discipline of Anthropology, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi in India, Since 2017, he has been conducting research in the field of sociocultural anthropology and has accumulated a wealth of knowledge on social mobility, livelihood patterns, rituals, and socio-political features of many ethnic groups in Kashmir valley. This article is a fraction of the scholar's doctoral research on the ethnographic perceptions of Kashmir valley fisherfolks. He aspires to preserve and depict the historical fishing culture of the Kashmir valley via a range of visual representations.

Email
Hashmat51@gmail.com

Siwani Mech is a Doctoral Scholar in the Department of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University, Assam, India. Her interest areas are regional studies, gender, ethnicity, visual anthropology, and critical theory.

Email
Siwanimech@gmail.com

Introduction

Fishing has been a primary source of income throughout the world. The extensive usage of contemporary fishing fleets has resulted in the exploitation of the ocean's virgin areas, wreaking havoc on the aquatic ecology. However, despite advancements in technology and rising innovation in the fishing business, the sector remains unchanged in its conventional form today (Pramanik S.K, 1993). Fishing in India has a long and rich history before the introduction of modern techniques and procedures and has since developed into an important business that employs millions of Indians. However, fishing has remained a means of livelihood for a particular caste in Indian society. However, post-Independence economic planning had a tremendous influence on fishing culture and spread it throughout the country. With India's extensive coastline and fertile continental shelf, the fisheries sector has developed into a significant driver of rural economic growth. As a consequence, marine harvest grew, improving fishermen's socioeconomic situations, boosting export revenue, and providing new job opportunities. We cannot deny how the growth of other industries has jeopardized traditional enterprises such as fishing, which provides a livelihood and means of subsistence for many people. Nonetheless, capitalism's emergence has had a tremendous influence on the productivity of traditional fishing villages thus eliminating their ability to compete in the global market.

Around the lake and river margins, Kashmir has a large fishing colony called "*Heanz*" in the native Kashmiri dialect and "*Hanji*" in official records. For the most part, they are grouped around Wular Lake, Dal Lake, Nagin, Manasbal as well as Ganjabal lake. This artisanal fishing group has long faced discrimination and holds a low position on the social hierarchy ladder. "This community encircles the most marginalized populations and frequently finds itself outside of traditional sociopolitical and economic activity" (Habib, 2020). Fishers form a community only via their shared work and all that it implies. In other terms, it is a professional community. All previous research on fisher, whether in India or overseas, have viewed fishers as a group (Pramanik,1993)

The fishing industry and other rural villages that have historically relied on Wular Lake are now battling to survive. Numerous challenges including land encroachment, silt deposits, overfishing, and environmental variations are contributing significantly to the economic backwardness of these lakeside fisher folk. One of the informants, Nayeem Ahmad Dar Hanji, 47, who embodied the fishing art from his father and has been in this business since he was 16 years old said:

"*My father raised us solely on the fish business, but I do not want my children to follow in his footsteps; my life has been harsh, and I will never contemplate raising my children in such a reckless way, I am seeing the demise of this ancient fishing culture, as are we...*"

In contrast to the dominant male attitude, women in this fishing community now play a critical role in the market, as sellers, responsible for household management—food, childcare, children's education, family health, sanitation, and economic management—as well as the responsibility for obtaining and repaying debts. They are also setting an example and breaking prejudices by refusing to return home. They are held to the same standards as their male counterparts and are taking the initiative to empower themselves with the support of their male counterparts.

Women's fishing duties are mostly defined by the household's financial status and family size. When it comes to nuclear homes, fisherwomen play a big part in the fishing process. Fisherwomen's living circumstances and quality of life are deteriorating worldwide. They endure physical, mental, and emotional impairment as a result of the stress of long hours, low income, household obligations, the market, and social harassment. Apart from dealing with such challenges, these fisherwomen continue to persist and work to improve their social status and authority.

In a small informal interview with Mrs. Mathanji, 56, who was selling fish at a small market in Jammu and Kashmir's Bandipora area, near a garbage dump, responded to my inquiry about her health problems and said:

"*My children are all living separately in their tin huts, and my husband, who is about 63 years old, went to Wular Lake at 5.30 a.m. to catch fish; we have to survive, and I have to be here; I have to buy numerous medicines, such as pills for high blood pressure, thyroid, and calcium. I've been selling fish for about 28 years and want to keep doing so until I die.*"

Outside the Kashmir valley, very few people are aware of this informal fishing community and its cultural heritage. The images document their daily life, emphasizing their cultural heritage and the critical role of fishing in their existence. The inspiration for this photographic study came from the research using visual ethnographic approaches along the banks of Wular Lake, a place where these Kashmir valley's water dwellers have formed a distinct cultural and ethnic identity. Visual ethnography proved to be an invaluable technique for delving into their cultural ecology and acquiring a greater knowledge of their daily lives, traditions, and livelihoods.

Photo 1 A traditional hearth that serves a dual purpose. Hearths here are mud constructions used for cooking with dung cakes as the fuel source. The upper chamber is intended for storing and drying water chestnuts in harsh winter areas with minimal sunshine, utilising the heat generated by the fireplace. After breaking the dried chestnuts into bits, the top coating is removed. The nuts are crushed into flour and utilised to produce the world-famous Chestnut Tortilla (*gair cxutt*).

Photo 2 Just a tin shed for the shelter. During the harsh winters, fishermen without the financial means to build a *kaccha* house build tin shelters on the Government-owned land to keep their families warm. The shed is usually built at a high enough level to avoid being submerged by rapidly rising water.

Photo 3 Throwing a traditional self-made cast net. Dal, Wular, and Manasbal Lakes rely heavily on cast nets, colloquially known as *zaal*. Due to their simplicity of operation, they are the most widely used equipment, even though operating them requires a high degree of competence and ability. These fishermen weave their nets out of nylon and cotton thread. The mesh size ranges from 1.1cm to 2.9cm, and the diameter ranges from 7.5m to 8.5m.

Photo 4 Community fish catching, using cast nets. The same occupation, collective oneness behaviour, dependency, and all that goes along with it, bound these fishermen together as a community. When the fish harvest declines as a result of the harsh winter weather, community fishing is initiated, in which all members of the group catch the fish together and split the proceeds equitably.

Photo 5 (above) and **Photo 6** (below) are the two ancillary traditional techniques adopted by these fisherfolks. Bilal Ahmad, 28, is shown in Figure 5 grasping a long wood-handled multiple-headed spear known locally as a *panzer*. He must be very still and patient while he observes the minute vibrations produced by the fish beneath the surface. He must distinguish between the vibrations created by the fish and the vibrations caused by the mosquitos all around him. This traditional technique of troughing the spear requires considerable knowledge, and Bilal Ahmad is one of the village's experts. Figure 6 depicts the lengthy hook lines that are stretched in the lake usually in the evening time, with food-laden hooks; they are subsequently gathered after a time of between four and six hours.

Photo 7 Bilal Ahmad, 28, is working hard to dig those drowned chestnuts out of the muck. This traditional method of obtaining submerged chestnuts begins in October and continues until November. When dying plants drop their chestnuts, they become tangled up in the muck below. During the off-season, these fishermen collect the nuts, which they sell to supplement their income for the next year. Chestnuts that have been dried and crushed are added to the flour after it has been milled.

Photo 8 Community fish catching, using cast nets. The same occupation, collective oneness behaviour, dependency, and all that goes along with it, bound these fishermen together as a community. When the fish harvest declines as a result of the harsh winter weather, community fishing is initiated, in which all members of the group catch the fish together and split the proceeds equitably.

Photos 9 12 The women picking green chestnuts, rowing boats, selling their crops, and financially empowering themselves are providing an example for females around the world. While the majority of women in Kashmir continue to be bound by entrenched patriarchal rules. Hanji women exhibit a degree of autonomy in the face of such male dominance. In figure 10, a hanji woman (name withheld) spends about four days a week in her boat and oars for around four kilometres each day in pursuit of green chestnuts. She returns home with a boat brimming with chestnuts and then sells them at the neighbourhood market. Men and women in this community cooperate to ensure their economic survival. Whereas males participate in fishing operations, women, in particular, are more active in the marketing aspect, which includes selling fish and acquiring family necessities.

Photo 13 A fisherman paddles his boat in the ice-cold water during November's mid-season, attempting to locate a fish-catching spot. These fishermen may spend more than a week in the lake, far from their homes, in these classic wooden boats. When I asked Maqsood Ahmad, 29, about his time on the lake during these cold winds, he said, *"I just cannot afford to stay at home. I have to work hard; my family may miss me and be concerned about me, but we have to survive, and I have to be there in the lake to do so".*

Photo 14 A bunch of fishermen attempting to prepare dinner. These fishermen are on a quest to make it through the harsh winter season. They must play it safe to survive and thrive. They sleep in these less secure wooden boats in the middle of Wular Lake while the dip nets remain hung on the boat.

References

CASIMIR, Michael
2021 *Floating Economies, The Cultural Ecology of the Dal Lake in Kashmir, India.* New York. Berghahn Books.

HABIB, Hashmat
2020 The Pattern of Livelihood: A Study of Fishing Community Living Along Wular Lake, Jammu & Kashmir. *Antrocom Journal of Anthropology.* 16(2):183-191.

JOSEPH, Sherry
2003 *Fisherman: Their social and economic development*. New Delhi. Saloni Publishing House.

LANGAN, John
2016 *The Fisherman*. Word Horde.

McGOODWIN, James R.
1990 *Crisis in the world's fisheries: people, problems, and policies*. Stanford University Press.

PRAMANIK, Sankar K
1993 *Fishermen Community of coastal villages in West Bengal, Fishermen community of Hara and Sultan village in 24- Parganas district of West Bengal*. New Delhi. Rawat Publication.