



Orient BlackSwan

CONSERVATION FROM THE MARGINS

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THE RESOURCE OF TRADITION

Changing Identities and Conservation Conflicts in Gangetic Fisheries

*Nachiket Kelkar**

Guddu Sahni,¹ a fisher from Navgachiya in Bhagalpur district of Bihar, showed me a red, cloth-covered, tattered, grimy and partly torn 'I-card', resembling a ration card-like document with paper leaves, from those old days. He proclaimed, somewhat sheepishly and yet somewhat proudly, 'the government agrees that I am a traditional fisherman'. The card declared that Guddu's forefathers had always been involved in fishing in the Ganga River. There was a newfound legitimacy to his life now, through a state-granted privilege in the form of a bunch of ragged paper leaves. He had to pay a bribe of some Rs 3,000 to obtain the document, but now it seemed worth the effort for this newfound endorsement of identity. Why did this matter so much? Being a traditional fisher was never more important in the Gangetic floodplains of Bihar.

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MEANINGS OF TRADITION IN THE GANGA RIVER FISHERIES

'Tradition' is a widely used and contested word in the politics of development and conservation. Often, ecologists and conservationists perceive the 'traditional' as the good, the right thing—worthy of conserving into eternity (Orlove and Brush 1996; Sobrevila 2008). The durable moral rhetoric of the term implies that conservationists often form alliances with local people who are identified as traditional or indigenous, and therefore ecologically benign (as if by default), in 'community-based conservation programs' (Brosius 1999; Leach et al. 1999; Kellert et al. 2000; Dove 2006; Brunckhorst 2010). In contrast, state-led discourses on human development and social justice treat the traditional as primitive, technologically constrained, and backward—as a constituency in need of intervention and uplift (Blaikie 1995; Dove 2006; Torri 2011). The categories of 'traditional', 'indigenous' and 'local' are problematic and political as they tend to 'essentialise' or frame people to fit ideal expectations of the advocates of conservation or development (Brosius et al. 1998: 165).

Through this process, deeper inequalities within, and the cultural self-beliefs of, these so-called 'communities' are glossed over (Agrawal and Gibson 1999). This homogenisation eases the use of strategies of influence towards making 'environmental subjects' out of local people (following Agrawal 2005: 162; Foucault 1977), and changing their identities in complex manners (Bonnes et al. 2006; Clarke 2008). In turn, people use their new identities to wrest economic opportunities, but also become victims of surveillance and increased visibility. Empowerment is burdensome in various ways (Scott 1998; Dove 2006).

The battle lines over the burning question of 'who should fish in the Ganga River?' have now been drawn between 'traditional fishing communities' and 'non-traditional fishing groups' in Bihar (Kelkar and Krishnaswamy 2014). The Ganga River fisheries have been facing declines in water quality and productivity over the last several decades (Payne and Temple 1996; Tsai and Youssof-Ali 1997; Vass et al. 2010). Yet, ecological

decline is not the main reason for current conflicts, which are, instead, rooted deep in questions of social identity. For many fishers, the claim of being traditional arises from the occupational correlates of caste (Lindt 2013). Being from the Mallah or Nisad² castes is linked to fishing and boat-ferrying livelihoods (Jassal 2001; Barman 2008), reinforcing caste identity as a political currency in the stratified and rigid *Bihari* society (Bayly 1999; Sahay 2004; Jha and Pushpendra 2012). For others, traditional identity is linked to cultural practices, customs, values and knowhow of fisheries (Haller and Merten 2003; Hitlin 2003; Nazarea 2006; Abbott and Campbell 2009; Kelkar 2014a).

Many fishers use simple 'tests' of recognising traditional folk from the rest, such as possessing the skill to 'weave and mend one's own net'. The experiential ecological knowledge of fishers about the breeding and migratory habits of fishes, turtles, water birds, river dolphins, and flow dynamics of the river itself is phenomenal and detailed. Such knowledge, distilled through years of fishing in the river, forms another level of the test of tradition. Although this traditional knowledge shows signs of erosion today, it once guided their resource harvest practices. But today, they say that their poverty does not allow for any nuances in their practice. The persistence of certain social practices and caste-specific rituals underlie a diffused version of their own definition of tradition.

TRADITION AND IDENTITY

The stable core of caste identity is based on boundaries reinforced by particular practices, symbols and meanings that differentiate groups from one another (Howard 2000; Lamont and Molnar 2002; Callero 2003; Owens et al. 2010). Traditional identity is also correlated with such identity formation, but rather than being a stable characteristic, identity is contingent and adaptive, often improvised as a response to changing social stimuli (Goffman 1959; Owens et al. 2013).

A highly influential concept is that of 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). This concept highlights how collective identities are created to often serve as tools of political

resistance against dominant social authority (Scott 1998; Howard 2000; Polletta and Jasper 2001). Traditions are of course invented, as is widely observed, and as such there is nothing remarkably new about this idea. However, later scholarship takes an even more dynamic and fluid view of traditional identity as 'strategically articulated positioning' in tune with changing socio-political interests (Hall and Du Gay 1996; Gergen 1999; Hall 2000; Brubaker and Cooper 2014). This means that traditions may not only be invented, but also modified as per the context. For the Mallah and Nisad, multiple push-and-pull factors lead to the use of traditional identity as a strategy: at one level, it is their precarious socio-economic condition; at another, it is a precise understanding of inherent biases in conservation and development paradigms that intersect their lives. It is thus crucial to understand why these strategies emerged, and in what contexts influenced the utility of 'traditional identity' for the Mallah.

This brief theoretical detour can also help us confront complex questions about what tradition really means in the particular sphere of fisheries conflicts in the Ganga River. In general, how do identities of people change through their lived experience? How do the diverse articulations of 'being traditional' change beliefs and perceptions about 'fishing communities' and affect resource management and conservation outcomes? Does the discourse around human development and environmental conservation play a role in producing traditional people? In this chapter, I will attempt to answer these questions by drawing from conversations with fisher folk and their collective reflections on identity. The exploration will focus on the Ganga River fisheries in the Bhagalpur district of Bihar, with which I have had a decade-young relationship. Beginning with a brief history of the Mallah fisher caste and change in the fisheries, I will trace how the articulation and positioning of traditional identity (as per Hall 2000: 17–20) have changed or persisted as features of Mallah identity in different conservation contexts. I will also describe the ecological impacts of changing identities on the fate of fishery resources and the conservation of endangered animal species in the Ganga River.

CONSTRUCTING 'COMMUNITY': THE MALLAH FISHERS

The Mallah fishers in Bihar have historically remained a community living in poverty, landlessness, marginalisation and discrimination (Jassal 2001; Doron 2013; Kelkar 2014a). Despite being regarded as 'low-castes', the Mallah are not treated as untouchables, and this exception goes back all the way to a mythological episode in the *Ramayana* (Doron 2013). The story in which Kewat, the chief of fisher-boatmen, and his crew ferry the god-king Ram, his consort Sita and his brother Lakshman across the river,³ is the most powerful source of legitimisation and dignity for the community even today (Doron 2013: 169–70). This episode portrays the Mallah as being street-smart and cunning, but also as true devotees nonetheless, whose service of Ram earns them the virtue of being 'purified' by his contact. This self-image forms the core of current Mallah identity in Varanasi and other sacred towns, where they operate mainly as boatmen ferrying pilgrims to temples and *ghats* (Doron 2013). Recent conservation discourse on 'saving' the Ganga River has tapped into the idea of the 'traditional fisher-boatman' as a *sevak* (servant) of *Maa Ganga*, their mother.

In regions of Uttar Pradesh, the near-synonymous Nisad caste traces its link to Eklavya, the tribal prince and gifted archer in the *Mahabharata* who was a victim of upper-caste prejudice. These episodes exalt Nisad identity as having played a historically irreplaceable role, but yet victimised (Doron 2013). Colonial accounts (Russell and Hira Lal 1916) retell these myths as an invention of tradition (of attaining purification) towards mobilising and uplifting Mallah identity to resist Hindu upper-caste dominance (Doron 2013).

However, the Mallah fishers in Bihar seem to have reconciled with a contradictory image. These fishers often portray themselves as simpletons, unlike the clever outsider. This is similar to other clichéd contrasts that they reinforce about urban and rural, or rich and poor in India. As another old myth goes, the Goddess Lakshmi lays the imprecation that because they were foolish,

they would always remain poor, but will also always be happy (Russell and Hira Lal 1916).

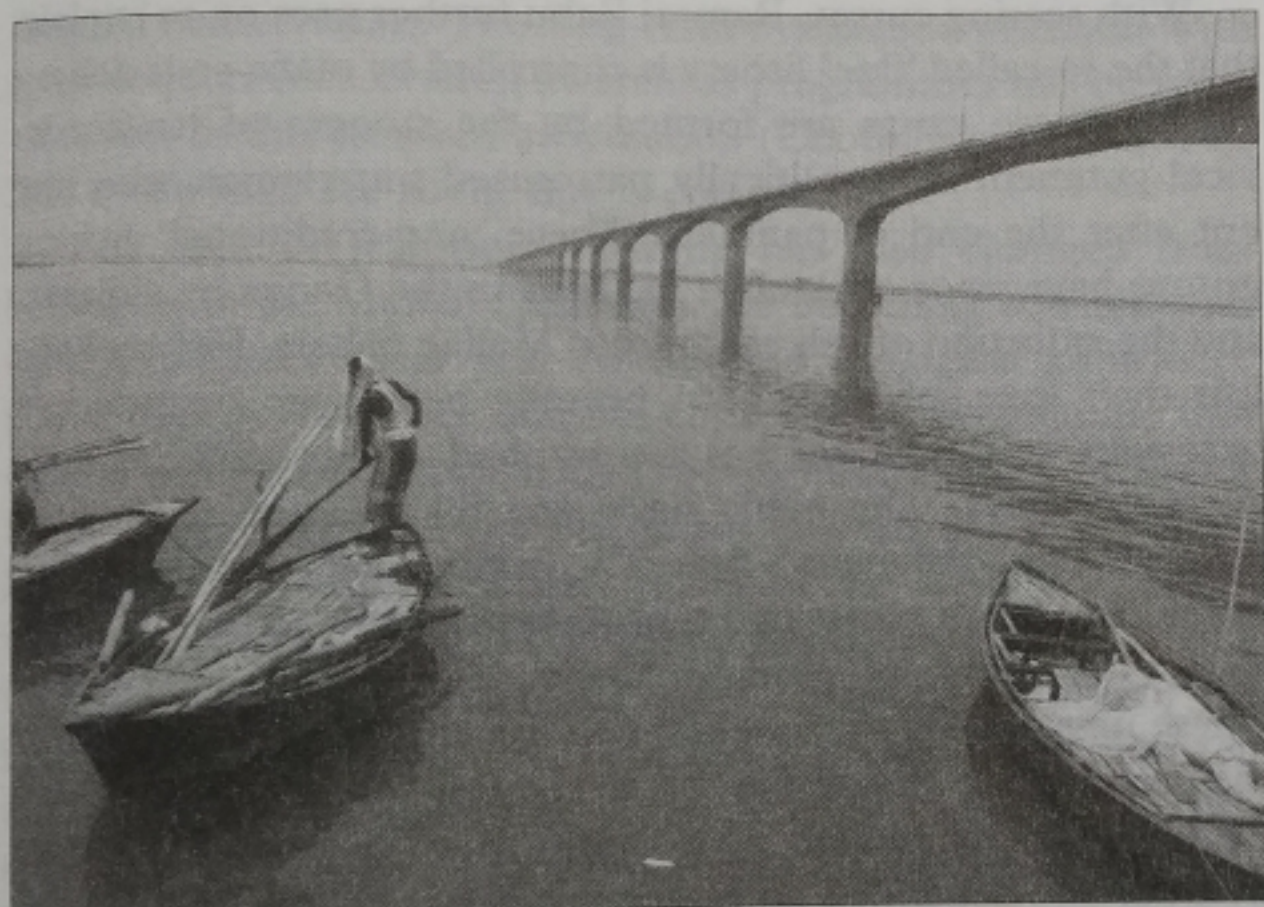
Then there are terribly problematic British depictions of the Mallah community as being lazy, untrustworthy and foolish people (Crooke 1896), which reiterate the 'inferior' characterisation of fisher castes by upper-caste Hindus. Throughout the colonial period, subcastes within the Mallah were enlisted as one of the 'criminal tribes and castes' in India (through an Act that was passed in 1871). The basis for ascribing criminality to certain castes in the Gangetic Plains was that colonial control constrained the mobility in their lifestyles (Sinha 2008). There are colonial records cautioning of the fishers' 'criminal tendencies' and 'lowly' dietary habits, hygiene, and standards of living (Nigam 1990).

To undo this longstanding and stigmatic tag of the past (although it stands legally removed today), the correcting counter-narrative offered by fishers involves bringing traditional identity to the fore. Goffman (1968) shows that new identities are shaped by perceived threats from social stigmatisation. The boundaries between people within and outside the collective then become sharply contrasted (Major and O'Brien 2005). With this background, the current battle over traditional identity becomes an appeal for legitimising the demand for long-due fishing rights. The last 25 years have seen reiterations of this demand through political struggles with different emphases.

Resistance by Dalit groups and the Naxalite movement across Bihar's floodplain villages have spurred significant struggles for social mobilisation and political expression after India's independence (Chaubey 2006; Sharma 2006; Bayly 1999; Jha and Pushpendra 2012; Mukherji and Mukherji 2012). The Ganga Mukti Andolan (GMA) in the late 1980s was a noteworthy social movement against private control of the Ganga River, and was led by floodplain dwellers, primarily fishers (Gupta 1993; Sharma 2006; Choudhary et al. 2006; Kelkar and Krishnaswamy 2014). One contributing factor was that within a decade of the Farakka barrage construction in 1975, many commercially valuable stocks and migratory fish species had collapsed in the upstream reaches of the Ganga River in Bihar (Payne and Temple 1996; Adel 2001; Kelkar 2014a).

The problem of poor fish catch was compounded by the fact that the Ganga River at Bhagalpur had been under the private control of an oppressive, feudal regime (*panidari*⁴) for nearly 200 years (Reeves 1995, 2002; Sharma 2006; Kelkar and Krishnaswamy 2014). 'This situation appears to have been the last straw in triggering the Andolan', remarked Ramraj Sahni,⁵ an elderly fisher from the Kagzi Tola fishing settlement of Kahalgaon town, which was the epicentre of the GMA.

Image 1.1: Fishers depend on the Ganga River for their livelihoods, but experience a precarious present and uncertain future in fishing.



Source: Kadambari Deshpande, 2012.

NEW ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES AND CHANGING CONFLICTS

In 1991, following GMA agitations and protests, a state government decree overthrew *panidari*, and made the river an open-access, free-for-all resource (Gupta 1993). Despite the symbolical achievement, this shift generated new and intense conflicts between fishers and other groups, primarily

floodplain-farming and livestock-rearing castes. Both groups now wanted to fish the open flowing waters of the river (Choudhary et al. 2006; Choudhary et al. 2014). The shift to open access also melted the hitherto rigid occupational and caste identities of floodplain people into one homogenous category of 'fishers'. Ramraj Babu angrily laments that the present system has backfired on the fishers:⁶ 'The situation of free fishing is even worse. First, only traditional fishers like us could fish in the river because of the *jalkar* (private fishery), so we got at least some protection from intruders. But now look around you. Every other mother-f****r has now become a fisher.'

With searing curses, Ramraj Babu further goes on to explain that the so-called 'free' fishery is controlled by mafia-style fishing gangs. These gangs are formed by the stooges of landlords, local gunmen, and politically patronised musclemen who lost out after the end of *panidari*. These 'non-traditional' fishing groups have since controlled fisheries in the Ganga by violence and the extortion of fish catch from Mallah fishers. Fishers have lost their lives, or have been brutally beaten up on multiple occasions, and their catches are grabbed as frequently as once every few days. The mafia have also on occasion threatened fishers to work the mafia's nets. The fishing mafia use destructive methods—beach-seines and mosquito nets with very small mesh sizes (1–4 mm) are used to barricade entire river channels. These nets can kill the smallest fish fry, and can seriously affect the recruitment of juvenile fish to the fish stocks of the Ganga. Fishing, for the Mallah people and those who claim to have traditionally depended on river fishing, has become a risky and life-threatening task (see Choudhary et al. 2014; Kelkar and Krishnaswamy 2014; Kelkar 2014b for details).

In 1991, around the same time that the *panidari* was terminated, a section of the Ganga River was declared as the Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary by the Bihar government (Kelkar and Krishnaswamy 2014). This section, between Sultanganj and Kahalgaon in Bhagalpur district, overlapped with more than half of the *panidari*-owned stretch. The declaration was met with bitter opposition and protest from fishers working with the GMA, who argued that the sanctuary was yet another

form of state control bent on depriving fishers of their fishing rights (Choudhary et al. 2014).

Threats from the mafia, declining fish availability and the declaration of the sanctuary have since made fishing community leaders call for exclusive control of the fishery. According to them, unlike the 'non-fishers', the 'traditional fishers' ... 'know how to fish sustainably, without damaging fish stocks'. Traditional identity has been strongly reinforced by their (often justified) claims of having the right knowledge and skills to sustainably harvest fish resources. But with the declaration of Vikramshila, the claim has been extended, encompassing a compatibility with dolphin conservation. The long-term interaction of fishers with river dolphin conservation awareness programmes has played a clear role in this renewed articulation (Choudhary et al. 2014). But as we shall see soon, this is complicated.

The idea of traditional fishing has also changed from belonging to the Mallah caste alone, to becoming equated with fishing practices used, gear chosen and ecological knowledge about fishing. The river dolphin conservation programme that originated in 1999, through civil society efforts led by Professor Sunil Choudhary from the Bhagalpur University and his team, has been sympathetic to this vision of the traditional fisher (Choudhary et al. 2014). This group has been engaging keenly with the welfare of traditional fisher households through the involvement of fishers in river biodiversity conservation, outreach and education programmes. One desirable outcome of this engagement has been that the intentional killing of river dolphins for their oil has nearly stopped (Choudhary et al. 2006; Kelkar et al. 2010). For Subhasis Dey, a river dolphin conservationist working closely with fishers for the last 15 years, the meaning of tradition is unproblematic in that,

only traditional fishers should have fishing rights to the river because they do not use destructive gear, and possess great knowledge of fish breeding, migration and ecology. Traditional fishers are poor and landless people and have no fall-back options, unlike farming castes and criminal elements that have entered and ruined the fishery with destructive means.⁷

The involvement of fishers in the conservation and monitoring programme has led to a gradual shift towards positive attitudes for river dolphin conservation—unlike the severe opposition and suspicion about the intent of the sanctuary in earlier years. Professor Choudhary drives home an important realisation:

The challenge before us was to reduce their strong antagonism to the sanctuary. Anyway, people have been fishing in the stretch even after the sanctuary was declared—so we realised that the opposition was not exactly to the sanctuary's presence, but to do with 'who' fished there. The real opposition is now to the fact that destructive netting is going on in the river. Also, it is becoming difficult to tell which fishing practice can be truly called non-destructive.⁸

Generally, while conservationists are sympathetic to the socio-economic condition of fishers, their alliance is not immune to suspicion and mistrust on both sides. Fishers and conservationists both seem to be in a silent bargain and weighing of interests. The best instance of this confound is seen in the promotion of traditional fishing practices as ecologically low-impact and benign, and hence favourable for river dolphins, at least in comparison with the destructive methods used by the fishing mafia. As per the State Fisheries Act,⁹ fishing with nylon monofilament gillnets of mesh size smaller than 40 mm is deemed illegal, irrespective of whether it is by traditional or non-traditional fishers (Kelkar 2014a, 2014b). At this threshold, nearly 80 per cent of regular river fishing would still be high-impact and illegal. Even if the threshold is reduced to 24 mm mesh size (as per Choudhary et al. 2006), nearly 60 per cent of existing fishing practices would still be unsustainable.

In fact, fishers themselves had negotiated for the 24 mm cut-off, as they would still get some fish catch, which would otherwise be impossible if meshes greater than 40 mm were used. In short, being able to catch something is a much bigger concern for poor fishers than the impacts of using small net mesh sizes on existing (depleting) fish stocks. Whereas destructive fishing practices may strongly depress the recruitment of fishes by mass-killing fish fry in the river, dolphin by-catch mortality

is higher in larger gillnets—used mostly by traditional fishers at increasing intensity (greater net density at a site) nowadays (pers. obs.). This suggests that current ‘traditional practices’, however positioned, are not ecologically benign, and also under severe pressure from fish declines. But by laying the blame for poor fishing returns solely on non-traditional fishers, fishers might have even been able to promote the higher claims of a sustainable tradition, through the support of conservationists.

But how is one to identify a traditional fisher? Is it by the type of I-card obtained by Guddu Sahni and others from the state fisheries department? Guddu had, in response, and at least momentarily, forgotten his poor and insecure life as a fisher, his precarious income state, his children’s dismal health, and the terribly low water level and fish in the Ganga River in the summer of 2008. As he said, ‘*ab hamein nadi se free mein machhli marne se koi nahi rok sakta* [now nobody can stop me from fishing freely in the river]’.¹⁰

THE RESOURCE OF TRADITION: DIVERSE USES AND STRATEGIC ARTICULATION

Through this production of the ‘traditional fisher’, the fisheries department has opened an identity market, rich in exploitable symbolic resources.¹¹ Intense competition is emerging now to become state-certified ‘traditional fishing communities’, not only among Mallah fishers, but in other caste groups as well. Accession to power positions by Gangota¹² caste members led this group to attain legal recognition as ‘traditional fishers’ in a matter of a few months. Fresh conflicts and disputes over these switched and appropriated identities have also emerged (Choudhary et al. 2014). This moves the idea of tradition further into the realm of the abstract and symbolic, rather than that of its material significance. In the saga of the river fishery, the traditional fisher emerges as the faultless hero, while the non-traditional fisher as the villain (Kelkar and Krishnaswamy 2014). The traditional fisher now is the man with an identity card. The discursive articulation of the meaning of tradition has been used to assert interests and strengthen bargaining power

in the context of river biodiversity conservation. This becomes important, especially when traditional fishers may comply with conservation efforts, yet may demand legal exemption from being penalised or reprimanded for their impacts on river animals.

For instance, in the case of the Ganges river dolphin, all the initial conflict in perception seems to have rarefied. Many fishers poached river dolphins for blubber oil, to use as bait for catching *bachwa* (*Clupisoma garua*), a catfish species (Choudhary et al. 2006). But now, most have given up this practice, and are also urging others to stop hunting dolphins. Fishers consciously portray themselves as cohabitants with the dolphins, giving rise to impressive slogans: 'if the river dolphin survives in the Ganga, only then can the traditional fisher survive'. The recent *dolphin mitra* (friends of dolphins) programme launched by the Bihar state Forest Department and compensatory afforestation (CAMPA)¹³ funds provided selected fisher informants with short-term cash incentives (Rs 2,000 per month or 31.74 USD; during the study, 1 USD = Rs 63) in lieu of reporting events of destructive fishing and dolphin mortality (Kelkar and Krishnaswamy 2014; Choudhary et al. 2014). However, this programme has fallen into the jaws of governmental corruption: as per recent accounts by some fishers, the Forest Department is now paying them to 'keep their mouth shut' even if dolphins die in gillnets. Reputations are obviously at stake, but this shocking revelation suggests that even Rs 2,000 appears enough to dismantle the fickle 'traditional' friendships with Ganges river dolphins.

Despite this, other factors have managed to retain an overall positive perception about dolphins. There seem to be no significant opportunity costs of not using dolphin oil given a better alternative in the form of palm oil, or new gear and baits. In the meanwhile, by-catch mortality, which remains the main direct threat to dolphins (from traditional fishers), is excused because it is accidental and inadvertent, and does not invite serious penalties (as for deliberate hunting). Supporting river dolphin conservation programmes has thus hardly required changing the status quo. However, many surprises are in the offing when it comes to other riverine biodiversity. Bird hunting serves as an opportunity for fishers to highlight their conflict

with farming castes living in the floodplains, and how they are the government's neglected 'stepchildren' as opposed to farmers. They justify this claim by providing a moral distinction between how farmers and fishers look at animals sharing their resources and space.

Dinesh Babu¹⁴ of Bahattrra village claims that hunting by farmers is out of spite and revenge against birds: 'the farmers indiscriminately hunt birds with large traps, nets and poisoned seeds. Birds eat their grain, so they have ample reason to do so. Why would we hunt birds unnecessarily?' Gore Lal adds to this point: 'traditional fishers are always on the river, and they become easy targets for the Forest Department. We hunt birds, but only for food, not through any feeling of revenge, because we are traditional fishers.'

But the logic reverses when turtles are hunted. Traditional fishers make an exception in their conservation compliance by clearly stating that it is as much their cultural right to hunt and eat turtles as it is to fish in the river. Doron (2013) writes about fisher communities in Varanasi challenging the ban on turtle hunting prescribed by the Ganga Action Plan (GAP)¹⁵ in the 1980s. The GAP identified that a decline in turtle numbers was one of the reasons for worsened water quality, as human and cattle corpses rotted in the absence of scavenging by turtles. Fishers had then agitated about the government's conspiracy against their traditional way of life (Doron 2013). Currently, in the Vikramshila sanctuary, many fishers who claim commitment to the dolphin conservation programme, especially those from Kahalgaon, make no such promise for turtles, which continue to be hunted whenever the opportunity arises (pers. obs.). Traditional fishers have thus been successful in extracting this material advantage and the rampant illegal freshwater turtle trade yields to high-demand markets in northern West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Many fishers are connected to these markets through middlemen across this region. Fishers themselves admit that their own hunting of reproductive adults has driven populations, and even some species of soft-shelled turtles, to local extinction. But this is without any apology; 'Mallah identity is inseparable

from turtle eating', according to Radhe Krishna Sahni of Kahalgaon.¹⁶ The fishers of Kahalgaon are widely known for their turtle-hunting skills and also hired in locations as far as Goa for sea turtle hunting. These fishers have also hunted and eaten the occasional gharial and mugger crocodiles seen in the Ganga. There is blatancy in the way turtle hunting is viewed as fully acceptable. Fishers use deflecting tactics and logics like 'egg-laying animals should be exempt from "conservation"', and that 'because turtles lay hundreds of eggs, they can be harvested just like fish'.

However, the issue of turtle hunting has also created recent subdivisions based on ideas of new criteria of purity and pollution drawn from contact with conservation programmes, and employed *within* the Mallah castes. 'Higher' subcastes (Gori and Mahaldar fishers) blame 'lower' subcastes (Banpar) as possessing the 'impure' habit of eating soft-shelled turtles (that feed on human corpses). Although many fishers eat turtles, the relatively better-placed groups within them, that also interact more with conservationists, now look down upon the practice. This illustrates how fishers have actively manipulated inherent biases in dolphin-focused conservation programmes, where turtles have perhaps been a lower priority and difficult to access, despite the knowledge of the negative impacts of hunting.

A pattern emerges when we track the highly variable articulations about traditional identity through the differing interactions with riverine animal species. For fish species, traditional wisdom alone is showcased as averting the collapse of fisheries at the hands of destructive fishers. However, this claim is not supported by the ground realities of fish stock depletion and river pollution. But the larger undesirable effects of fishing practices on species conservation and river ecology are negotiated in creative ways, and species-by-species. There is an uneasy equation in the case of river dolphins. Despite their support for conservation, dolphins do frequently die in gillnets of traditional fishers—by accident. For birds, farmers are thought to hunt in large numbers, but not fishers, who do so only for a living. Fishers thus claim to have only a small role to play in declining bird populations. The same traditional fishers may

be indifferent to hunting turtles to near local extinction—as it is their cultural right to hunt. Apart from these mixed and unbalanced implications for conservation of endangered river animals, the question still remains: are there positive spinoffs of traditional identity for conservation?

With otters as metaphor, the sense of community is articulated through a pleasantly surprising harmonious discourse. Smooth-coated otters cause considerable damage to fishing nets when they attempt to extract fish caught in them. Yet, surprisingly enough, despite high losses, fishers do not mind otters. There is no persecution of—or retaliation against—otters to be seen in the Vikramshila region. Killing an otter is seen as a sinful act that will lead to harm and ruin for the wrong-doing fisherman and this reinforces a positive and appreciative—even caring—attitude towards them. The elderly and kind Ramesji Nisad¹⁷ sums it up: 'otters have their own small societies, just like us, and are another *community* of fishers, just as we are'. Perhaps as a result, otter densities are remarkably high, and they seem to enjoy *de facto* protection in the area.

MAKING AND REMAKING TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES

A few key points bear mentioning through this exploration. First, the idea of being traditional might have its origins in deep-rooted social injustice, but historically produced social situations might have changed it to an invented label that is a tool, a strategy, and an articulated narrative for political assertion. Second, the story of how fishers became and were made traditional fishing communities indicates that the conflict over fisheries changed from its material origins to purely symbolic representations. Although fish resources might have collapsed in the river, the discursive resources of image and identity appear to have substituted them; and are available to be fished, freely. Third, the allying of conservation outcomes with the interests of 'traditional people' clearly appears mixed and inconsistent. The making and remaking of traditional fisher communities in the Gangetic plains underlines the need for

even well-intentioned conservation and human development approaches, to look beyond outcomes and at the larger political environment, which produces and changes social identities (Parker 1994; Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Stets and Biga 2003; Vaccaro et al. 2013). Further, the whole idea of privileging the traditional as the glorious and virtuous needs to be categorically revisited (Brosius et al. 1998; Kellert et al. 2000; Dove 2006). At the same time, finding how traditionally-received wisdom, cultural practices and knowledge could truly contribute to locally sensitive decision-making is critical (Leach et al. 1999; Clifford 2000; Hitlin 2003; Nazarea 2006; Doron 2013), especially in relation to wider political trends (Clifford 2000).

The story of traditional fishing identity in Bhagalpur resonates with numerous tales of political negotiation and struggle from across the world. In India, there is a wealth of critical scholarship that is inspired by the idea of changing identities in relation to environmental discourse (for example, see Rangan 2003). These histories link expressions of identity with cultural experiences, influences of power, and the motivations of local people to adapt to change. A remarkably similar trajectory is traced by Muehlmann (2013), writing on the indigenous Cucapá fishers of the Colorado delta in Mexico. The Cucapá, through the policy maker's gaze, are denied fishing rights because on occasion they do not 'act indigenous enough', or 'after centuries of discrimination on the grounds of ethnic difference, government policies now encourage *indigenous self-identification...*' (emphasis mine; Muehlmann 2013: 13–14). The irony in the ethnography comes from the way the Cucapá, who now are integrated with the wider society of Mexico, must become traditional once again, so as to be categorised as such by the state.

In the Zambezi river floodplains, fisher narratives and policy discourses on overfishing coalesce and diverge according to emerging notions and boundaries around traditionally righteous identities (Haller and Merten 2003; Abbott and Campbell 2009). The images of traditional people in the Amazon have been used by outsider anthropologists and activists to certify their 'authenticity' and 'exoticness' to aid donors and state agencies (Conklin 1997: 713). Li (2000) describes communities

in Indonesia and the competitive politics around who captured the 'tribal slot' with specific attributes and ideals held by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The articulation of indigeneity and tradition has strongly emerged at the edges of enclosures for appropriation and conservation of resources, made through political conflict. Globally and locally, communities have drawn both from traditional old practices and social mainstreaming to form hybrid identities of 'ecologically noble citizens' (Doane 2007; Yeh 2007), thus renewing their positions and stakes in environmental negotiation, and building resilience in periods of civil conflict, reorganisation and political regime shifts (Field 1999; Lee and Hitchcock 2001; Rangan 2003; Carrus et al. 2005; Dove 2006; Furlong 2006).

Does the plasticity of traditional identity imply that the Mallah fishers are merely an opportunistic community of fence sitters? Does this plasticity indicate corruption of generations of cultural integrity from more recent external influences of development and conservation promises? Or is it just another political and economic adaptation to overcome the difficult, poor and hungry lives they lead? I argue that traditional identity has been each of these things at various historical moments and periods, which have transformed the self-images of fishing people in the Gangetic floodplains. With increased outmigration for labour jobs, new vulnerabilities, and life-changing transitions, are the Mallah going to remain fishers only in memory? What then will be the future of the biodiversity and ecology which has had shared histories with fishing people in the Ganga River?

EPILOGUE

The roles and contexts in which they have attempted to find a place may have changed, but tangible benefits from these shifts have yet remained elusive—for both fishers and biodiversity. Guddu Sahni's 'role' as a fisher in the Ganga River has changed several times through the last nine years I have known him. In these years, he has been on all sides of the fishery conflict—his fish catch has been extorted by criminals, poverty has forced

him to work as a labourer in mafia fishing rings, he has been a *dolphin mitra*, providing conservationists with vital information on turtle poaching, and has dived into the river to find corpses for the police—of fellow fishers murdered by criminals. He has also been a rickshaw puller, farm hand and construction labourer, in places very far away from home. Until he was reincarnated as a traditional fisher in the records of the government, this was his life. Yet it is difficult to say if anything has materially changed even after years of having received his identity card.

NOTES

1. Names of individual fishers have been changed throughout the manuscript. I first met Guddu Sahni in 2007 at Bhagalpur, and he agreed to be our field assistant for the ongoing dolphin ecology research project. Around the same time, he had received an identity card from the Bhagalpur district fisheries office. Guddu's home was at Navgachiya, a small town on the northern bank of the Ganga, near Bhagalpur city.
2. Fisher castes broadly include the synonymous sub-caste identities of Mallah, Majhi, Nisad, Kewat, Gori, Bind, etc. (Jassal 2001).
3. Details in Doron (2013).
4. Water equivalent of *zamindari* (form of feudal land-lording).
5. Conversations with Ramraj Sahni at Kahalgaon over the last eight years. Ramraj Babu has been at the forefront of the fishers' agitation against the panidari, and later against the harassment of fishers by mafia rings using destructive fishing gear. Although no longer in a leading role now because of his old age, he continues to support this cause.
6. Conversations with Ramraj Sahni in 2012. Details of this narrative provided in Kelkar (2014b).
7. Conversations and discussions with Subhasis Dey in March 2013, a little before the event of a 'traditional ecological knowledge' workshop with elderly fishers from the Bhagalpur district.
8. Conversations with Professor Choudhary during a meeting of the research team in June 2012.
9. The Bihar Jalkar Fisheries (Management) Act, No. 13, Government of Bihar, 2006 (amended in 2013).
10. Conversations with Guddu Sahni in April 2008. The summer saw an extreme low in the river flow both due to poor releases from

upstream dams and the resulting heavy water abstraction from tributaries. Upstream of Munger, it was said that one could cross the Ganga on foot, as there was barely any water flowing for some days.

11. This conception is inspired from Harrison (1999).
12. The Gangota people represent a floodplain-dwelling caste dependent on livestock-rearing, farming and labour jobs for livelihood. They are also part-time fishers and boat-ferrying people. The Member of Parliament from Bhagalpur represents this vote bank. Their recent rise to power has been influential in making the Gangota a feared community in floodplain villages.
13. Compensatory Afforestation Fund of the Bihar state government, 2012–13. Under the *dolphin mitra* programme, eight selected fishers received a small monthly ‘incentive’ in lieu of their help in reporting dolphin mortality, hunting and destructive fishing events in the river. After the initial few months, most of these funds never reached the local Forest Department from the state headquarters until much later.
14. Conversations with Dinesh Babu and Gore Lal in 2012–13. Both men are experienced fishers. Though not Mallah by caste, they are highly skilled and believe in using ‘traditional fishing gears’ over destructive ones.
15. Plan for restoration and cleaning of the River Ganga prepared by the Indian government. Full implementation remains pending to date.
16. Statement made by Radhe Krishna Sahni, as narrated by his brother, in 2008.
17. Conversations with Ramesji Nisad at Navgachiya between 2011 and 2014. Ramesji, 75, is widely regarded as one of the most knowledgeable fishers, active for about five decades in the Ganga and lower Kosi Rivers.

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