

## **Role and Status of Women in Kaibarta Fishermen Families in Deeporbeel and Urapadbeel Areas in Assam, India**

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**Abstract:** This study compares the life of women in Kaibarta Fishermen families in Deeporbeel area in Kamrup Metro district and Urapadbeel area in Goalpara district in South Western Assam in India. Deepor and Urapad are two large wetlands in the Brahmaputra valley and there is a sizeable population of fishing families in both the areas. This communication lists down all the major roles played by a woman in a fisherman family and prioritizes the six major roles in which they invest significant amount of their time. Status of women with respect to education, access to health care, social status and mobility are analysed. It also throws light on how fishing as a profession has impacted their lives in positive or negative ways. The women in Urapadbeel area invest more time in income generating activities, but the women in Deeporbeel area get greater economic returns. Women in Deeporbeel area are involved in selling of fish in the local market, especially in Godhuli Bazar area, whereas the women in Urapad area are socially barred from taking part in fishing or selling of fish.

**Keywords:** Kaibarta community, Deeporbeel, Urapadbeel, Social status, Income generating activities

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Date of Submission: 29-07-2019

Date of Acceptance: 14-08-2019

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Involvement of male and female members in fishing in North East India are different in case of artisanal fishing and commercial fishing. Traditional artisanal fishing in Assam is a part-time, gender-neutral activity. Both male and female members involve in artisanal fishing as and when they can manage time. For some people, it is a means of recreation too. But, commercial fishing is a full-time activity and it demands more physical labour and serious time investment. Since commercial fishing requires hard physical labour, normally in Assam, it is a masculine profession and only the male members are engaged in commercial fishing. Male members of commercial fishing families stay away from their families when they go for fishing. This creates an opportunity for the female members of the family to play such roles that are otherwise considered as masculine roles.

Ahilan and Selvaraj (1981) [1] studied the role of Fisherwomen in decision making. Specific references on the fishermen communities in Assam, their socio-economy and role of women are found in the works of Das (1986) [2], Dey and Kar (1989) [3], Choudhury (1989) [4], Hazarika (1992) [5], Sharma Thakur (1994) [6] and Provash Das (1997) [7]. Provash Das (1992) [8] illustrated the socio-economic problems of the scheduled castes fishermen of Assam, which mostly referred to the Kaibartas. Kurup (et.al) (1992) [9] studied the socio-economic status of fishermen population in the Vembanad lake area in Kerala. McGoodwin (2001) [10] has thrown light on the family life and cultures of fishing communities. He has shown linkages between the culture and fisheries management aspects.

Provash Das (2002) [11] in his PhD thesis has illustrated in details the socio-economy of traditional fishing community of the Dhubri District of Assam. G.K. Seema (2004) [12] in his PhD thesis has elucidated the status of fisher women in Mogaveera fishing households in Karnataka. M.G. Rethan (2007) [13] in his PhD thesis has explained about the socio-economic status of marine fishing communities in the Gulf of Mannar region. Another PhD thesis by A. Ramasethu (2012) [14] throws light on the socio-economy of fishing community in Ramanathapuram district in Tamil Nadu. Soumen Ray (2013) [15] in his PhD work has studied the sociological aspects of survival strategies and alternative livelihood of fishermen community in Orissa.

J. Deka et.al. (2008) [16] has studied the sustainability aspects of economy and livelihood of the fishermen in the Deeporbeel Wetland of Assam. T.K. Deka (2008) [17] studied the status of wetlands and their impacts on the livelihood of fishermen in Assam. J. Deka, et.al. (2011) [18] studied the impact of climate change on sustainable livelihood of the Kaibarta community in Deeporbeel area.

This study compares the fishing families living around two major wetlands in Assam (India), namely Deeporbeel and Urapadbeel. Both these areas offer inland capture fishery. The study focuses on the Kaibarta community living in the two areas who are involved in commercial fishing. In both the areas, Kaibarta communities live in fringe villages of the wetlands at walking distance within one kilometre from the periphery of the beel. The fishing trips of the male members are about four to eight hours long. They fish either in the day time since morning till evening or the full night. Their absence at home impacts the lady members of the families both positively and negatively. On one hand, they become more empowered to take independent decisions and on the other hand, they face the social evils like alcoholism, promiscuity etc.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENT STUDY

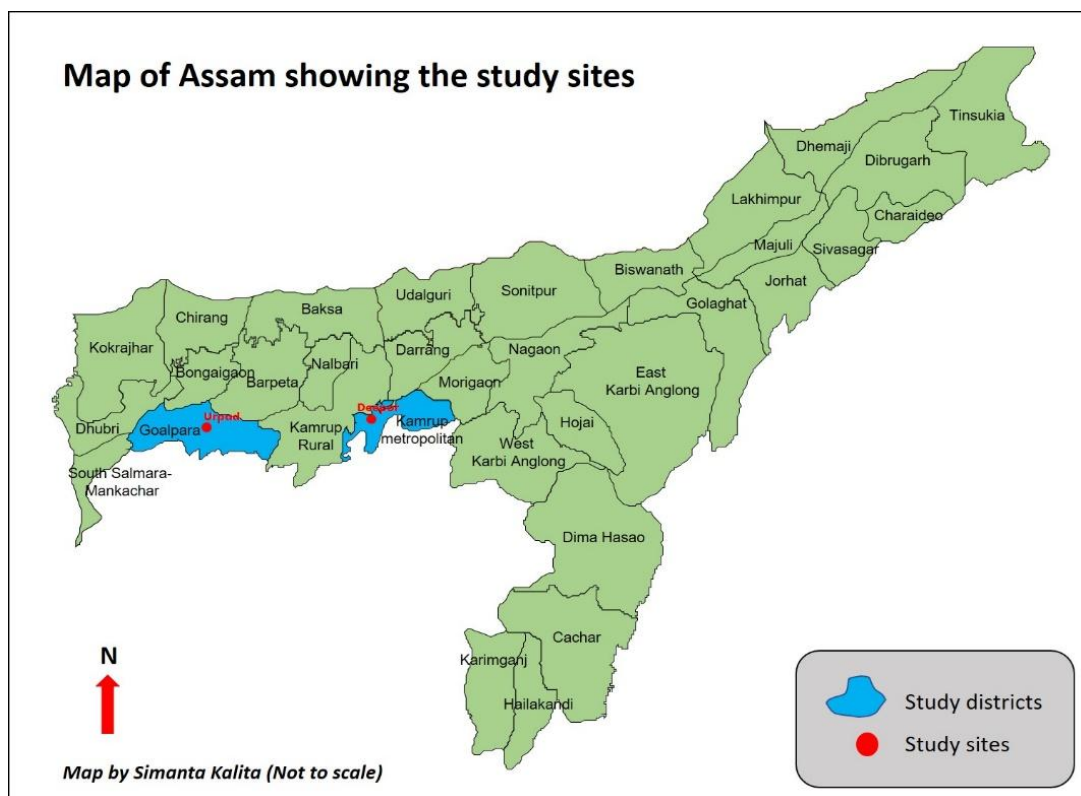
The present study intended –

- To study various roles that the women in a fishermen household perform
- To study the priority given by the communities on their roles and if there is any difference in the two study areas
- To study the impacts of fishing on the social status of women in fishermen households

## III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study area:

The present study was carried out in fringe villages of Deeporbeel and Urapadbeel wetlands in Goalpara and Kamrup Metro districts respectively in the province of Assam in India. Deeporbeel and Urapadbeel are two of the major wetlands in the Brahmaputra valley. Urapad is located in Goalpara district and Deepor is located in Kamrup (Metro) district (refer Map 1).



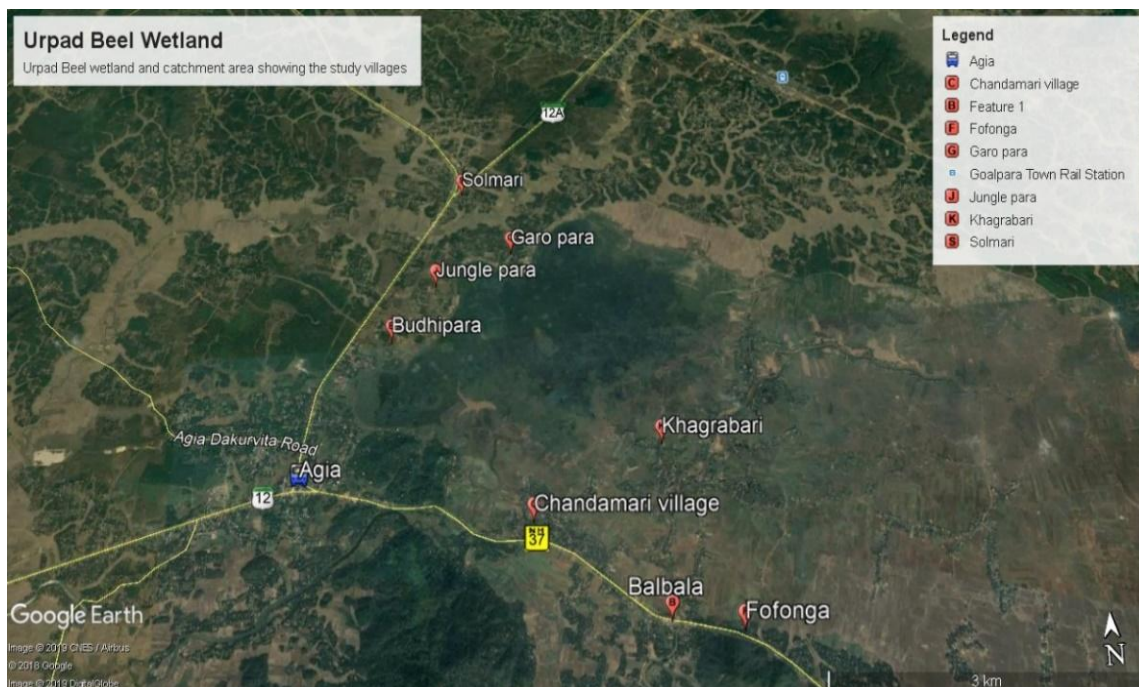
**Map 1: Map of Assam showing the locations of Urapadbeel and Deeporbeel**

**Urapadbeel**(26° 6'6.95"N; 90°34'45.77"E): Urapadbeel (Map – 2) is a freshwater lake located near Agiavillage in Goalpara district. Urapad is one of the *Wetlands of National Importance* listed by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change<sup>1</sup>. Urapad is very rich in aquatic biodiversity and is an important Elephant water hole. Numerous species of migratory birds flock this wetland in the winter. It is locally famous as the Pink beel due to the pink cover of water lily during winter. Interactions with the fishermen, ladies of fishermen families were done in the following habitations–

<sup>1</sup>[www.moef.nic.in/report/0708/Annex-07.pdf](http://www.moef.nic.in/report/0708/Annex-07.pdf)

*Role and Status of Women in Kaibarta Fishermen Families in Deeporbeel and Urapadbeel Areas in..*

- |               |               |
|---------------|---------------|
| 1. Solmari    | 4. Agia       |
| 2. Junglepara | 5. Balbalaand |
| 3. Budhipara  | 6. Khagrabari |

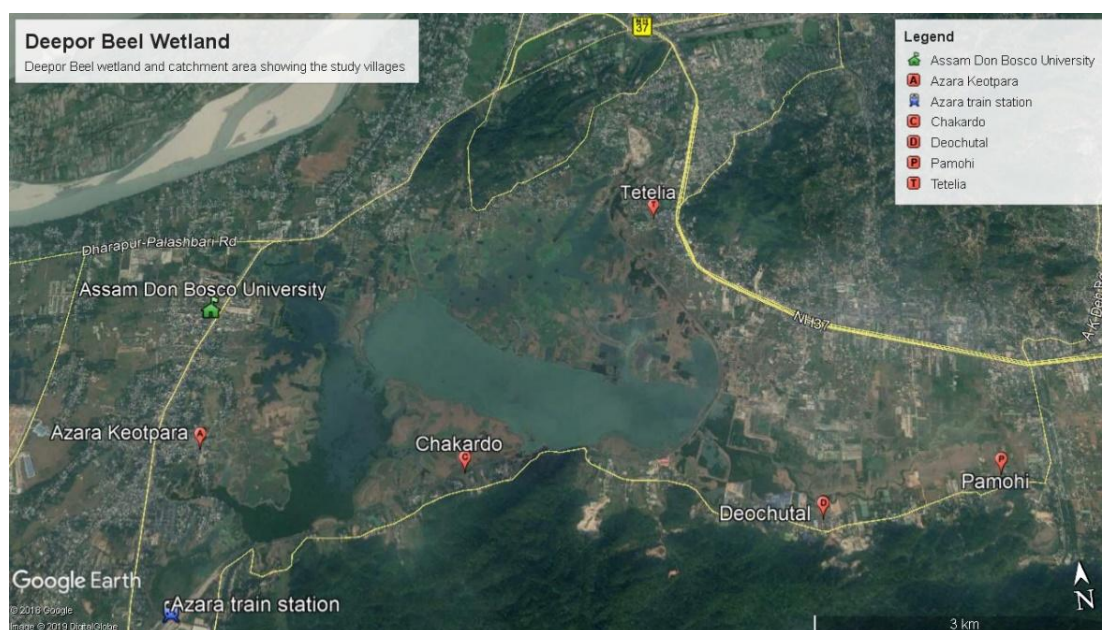


**Map 2: Map of Urapadbeel (prepared using Google earth online internet tool)**

**Deeporbeel** (26° 6'58.45"N; 91°37'7.72"E): Deeporbeel (Map – 3) is a fresh water lake located near Azara/ Tetelia/ Pamohi in Guwahati city of Kamrup Metro district. Deepor is one of the Wetlands of National Importance and a Ramsar Site listed by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change and Ramsar Committee<sup>2</sup>. Deepor is very rich in aquatic biodiversity and is an important Elephant water hole. Numerous species of migratory birds flock this wetland in the winter. Interactions with the fishermen, ladies of fishermen families were done in the following habitations –

<sup>2</sup> [www.moef.nic.in/report/0708/Annex-07.pdf](http://www.moef.nic.in/report/0708/Annex-07.pdf)

1. Tetelia
2. Azara Keotpara
3. Hatuwapara
4. Hirapara
5. Nowapara
6. Natun Basti and
7. Borbori



**Map 3: Map of Deeporbeel (prepared using Google earth online internet tool)**

**Data collection and analysis:**

Secondary data were collected from the following institutions and personal interviews with senior researchers –

1. Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes
2. Assam Science, Technology and Environment Council
3. Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority
4. Centre for Environment Education, North East Regional Office and
5. Block Development Offices

Primary data on the women members of the fishing families and their household engagement were collected through –

1. Key informer interaction
2. Focus group discussions
3. Semi structured questionnaire survey of fishermen, fish vendors, fish whole seller, family members of fishing communities

Entry point discussions were done with community leaders and youth leaders from both the areas. For the focus group discussions, standard PRA tools suggested by Narayanasamy (2009) [19] were used. Random sampling was done using a semi-structured questionnaire to collect information about the types of roles played by the women in their households, mobility pattern of women, access to education, access to health care, time distribution in household chores, income generating activities, and involvement in husband's profession. A source list was prepared for the survey taking clue from the key informers. A sample size of 100 individuals, including fishermen, ladies of fishermen families, non-fishing members in the same locality and community leaders was considered for the survey. Most of the data collected were qualitative. Quantitative data were analysed using excel and web-diagram of time investment have been prepared separately for both the areas. Digital photo documentation were done using Nikon make DSLR camera D 7000. Geographical points were recorded using Garmin make portable GPS instrument GPS 72H.

**Mapping:**

High resolution wetland maps of the two beel eco-systems were prepared using Google Earth Pro app. The image stock of the areas are given below –

- Urapadbeel – 3 km scale - (Image 2019 – CNES / Airbus, Digital Globe; 2018 - Google)
- Deeporbeel – 3 km scale - (Image 2019 – Digital Globe, 2018 - Google)

**IV. RESULTS**

This study has documented similarities and differences of status and role of women in Kaibarta fishing households in Deeporbeel and Urapadbeel areas in Assam. It has also traced out how fishing as a profession has shaped or influenced the lives of women in the two areas.

**Womens’ time distribution in Deepor and Urapadbeel areas:**

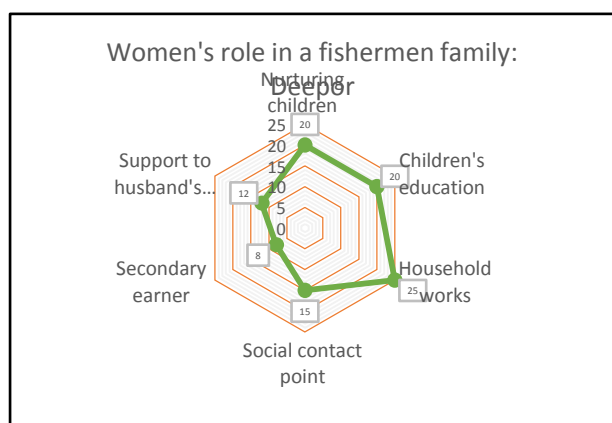
According to the respondents, following are the tasks where the ladies of fishermen families invest majority of their time –

1. Nurturing of children
2. Children’s education
3. Household works
4. Act as social contact point (as the Husband has no or less time for social activities)
5. Act as a secondary earner of the family
6. Support to husband’s profession

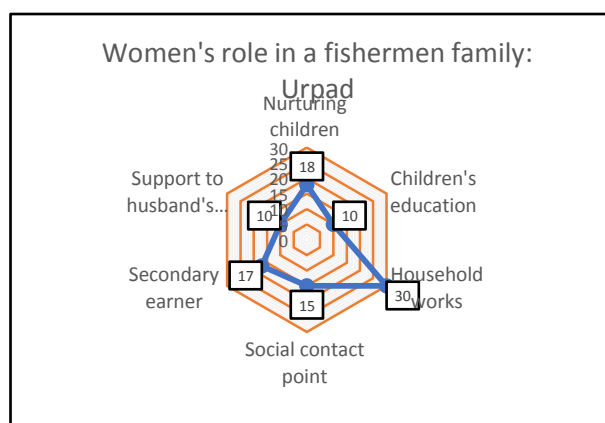
They were asked to budget the time of their diurnal calendar and then it was converted to a percentage score. The analysis of this data gave the following comparative table for the fishermen household ladies of the Deeporbeel area and Urapadbeel area –

**Table: 1: Women’s time distribution in Deepor and Urapadbeel areas**

Activities	Percentage of time given in the diurnal calendar	
	Deeporbeel area	Urapadbeel area
Nurturing children	20	18
Children’s education	20	10
Household works	25	30
Social contact point	15	15
Secondary earner	8	17
Support to husband’s profession	12	10
	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>



**Fig: 5: Ladies’ time distribution (Deepor area)**



**Fig:6: Ladies’ time distribution (Urapad area)**

Comparison of the above two graphs shows that there is a marked difference in the time allotment by the ladies of the two areas.

**Status of Girls' education:**

Most girls in Deeporbeel area has access to upper primary and secondary level education; Many of them have passed the matriculation examination and reached the higher secondary or even college level. It has been observed that many fishermen parents from Deepor area have enrolled their boy children to nearby private schools. Thus, the Government schools in the area has a higher enrolment rate of girls than boys.

The girls in Urapadbeel area has access to only lower primary and middle school. High school is located away from their habitation. Only a few countable numbers of girls have passed Matric examination in Urapadbeel area. Due to poor economic condition, fishermen parents from Urapad area can't afford to send their children to private schools. Also, private schools are located away from their habitations.

The higher academic level of girl child in Deeporbeel area can be attributed to the presence of educational institutions in the vicinity, presence of private schools in the neighbourhood and better economic condition of parents.

**Role of women in family economics:**







The economic planning for daily shopping, groceries etc. of a fishermen household is done by the ladies in both the areas. This gradually makes them better planners and better managers. They also learn to have small savings. As a tradition, women of the fishermen families in both Deeporbeel area and Urapadbeel area are not allowed to go for fishing. In Deeporbeel area they are involved in selling of fish in the local market. But, women in Urapadbeel area are not involved in selling of fish.

Many ladies belonging to fishermen households were found to have their own income sources in form of a weaving loom, small duckery/ poultry and kitchen garden. Noteworthy that ladies in Urapad area invests more time in income generating activities like weaving, duckery, poultry etc. But, the ladies in Deeporbeel area has higher income as fish selling gives more economic return vis-à-vis the time investment.

**Influence of fishing on the lives of women:**

As mentioned in the introduction, commercial fishing compels the male members to be away from the family for long hours. As a result, the ladies take greater responsibilities of the children and the family compared to other non-fishing households living in the vicinity. Impacts of fishing on the lives of women have been observed to be both positive and negative and can be studied under the following heads -

**a. Greater mobility:** As mentioned above, fishermen engaged in commercial fishing are compelled to remain away from the family for a long time in a day. It was observed that women in both the areas move from their households for different purposes and the extent of their mobility have definite patterns. Women in these two areas mostly move out of their homes for the following six reasons, which are represented in the mobility map with the following icons -

Purpose of mobility	Icon used in the map
• For going to place of worship (Mandir/Naamghar)	
• For going to workplace	
• For dropping or picking up their children to and from school	
• For taking a family member (mostly children) to hospital/health centre	
• For going to market for buying regular grocery/food items	
• For going to Panchayat or other Govt offices	

Fishing households are represented in the map as (🏠) and the non-fishing households are represented as (🏡). The mobility maps show three rings – the inner ring represent the habitation boundary; the middle ring represent the village boundary and the outer ring represent the block boundary.

Four different Mobility Maps have been prepared for –

1. Ladies of fishing families in Urapadbeel area
2. Ladies of non- fishing families in Urapadbeel area
3. Ladies of fishing families in Deeporbeel area
4. Ladies of non- fishing families in Deeporbeel area

Karibartafishing communities in Urapadbeel area live in Junglepara and Khagrabari. Both fishing and non-fishing households are scattered over these habitations. There is no school, market, health centre or Govt office inside these two habitations. Women are not employed anywhere outside their families. There are temples inside the habitations.

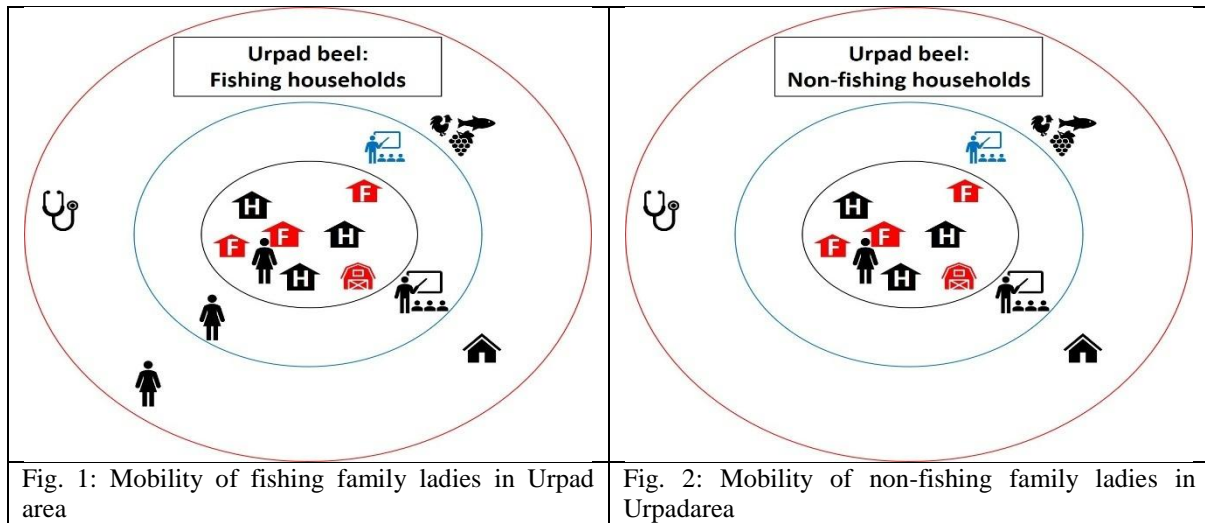


Fig. 1: Mobility of fishing family ladies in Urapad area

Fig. 2: Mobility of non-fishing family ladies in Urapad area

Since the ladies in fishing households take responsibility of taking their wards to schools or hospital or doing household shopping, and these establishments are located outside their habitations, in the above left map (fig:1) a greater mobility pattern is seen. In case of non-fishing households, the male members take the responsibility of dropping their children at school, shopping for the family, taking family members to hospital. Hence, lesser mobility is seen in case of women from non-fishing families (Fig:2). Children as young as Class II standard are also seen going to school with their elder siblings or with elder children in the neighbourhood. This indicates that the social security is better in Urapad area.

In Deeporbeel area, Kaibarta community lives in AzaraKeotpara, Hirapara, Natunbasti, Borbori, Nowapara, Tetelia, and Hatuwapara. Here also, the women of fishing households show greater mobility (fig:3) compared to the women of non-fishing households (Fig:4).

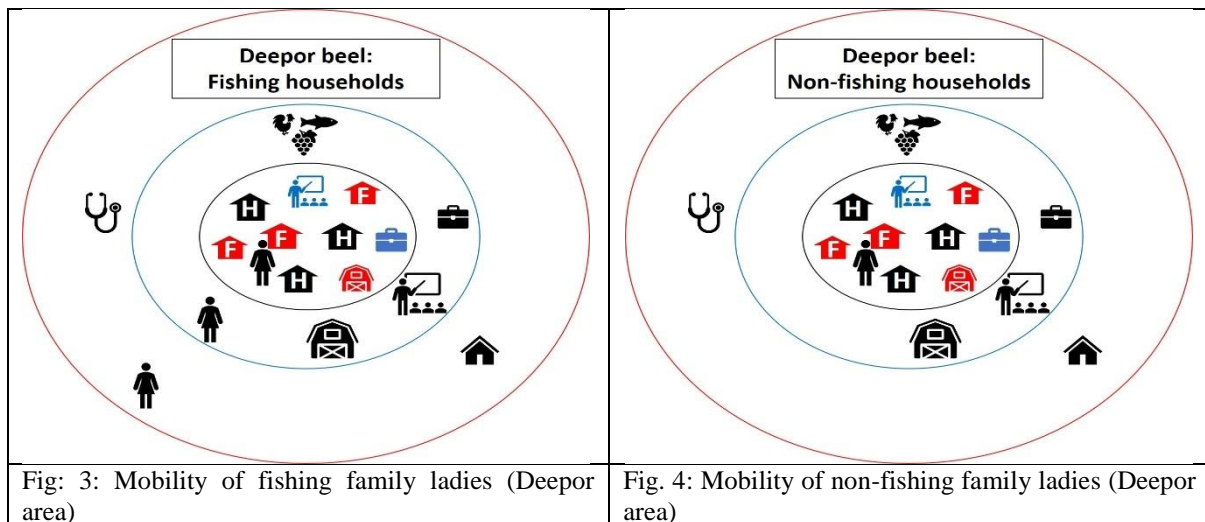


Fig. 3: Mobility of fishing family ladies (Deepor area)

Fig. 4: Mobility of non-fishing family ladies (Deepor area)

Comparison of the women of fishing families from Urapad and Deeporbeel areas, shows the following differences–

1. Some women in Deeporbeel areas sell fish in the Godhuli bazar market. So, they move out of their homes for their profession. But, women in Urapad area are mostly housewives. Some women in Deeporbeel area are also employed in businesses or as household help. This obviously increases their mobility, but this pattern was not studied in details as it is not influenced by fishing.

2. Many famous temples are present in different villages in Deeporbeel area that are visited by women independent of the male members. In Urapad area, women mostly visit the local temples located inside their habitations.
  3. In Deeporbeel area, Panchayat and other offices are located in the vicinity. Although it is not a general trend for all fishing households, some ladies belonging to fishing households were seen to visit the Panchayat office. This was not observed in Urapad area.
  4. Children in Deeporbeel area are dropped by parents till they reach upper primary level. But, in Urapad area, children as young as Class II standard are also seen going to school with their elder siblings or with elder children in the neighbourhood. This indicates that the social security is better in Urapad area. This also indicates that the mobility of fishing household women is less influenced by children's schooling in Urapad area than in Deepor area.
- b. Exposure to peer learning:** Most women of fishing households of current generation are either uneducated or they have done only Primary schooling. As mentioned above, many women from fishing households regularly visit schools to drop and pick up their children. This gives them an opportunity to interact with other ladies and teachers. Many ladies in Deeporbeel area are members of the School Mothers' Group. They effectively use this platform to learn from the fellow women and teachers. Azara Keotpara Lower Primary School, located near Deeporbeel, has provided a room to the mothers of the students. They can assemble in that room and discuss issues related to their children's education, health, school Mid Day Meal etc.
- c. Exposure to health care:** In absence of the male members, for any medical emergency, ladies take responsibility of taking the patient to the nearest healthcare facility. This has not only given an opportunity to the ladies to have better knowledge about the health of their children, but this has also provided an opportunity to the ladies to avail better medical facilities for themselves. During the interactions, it was felt that the ladies of fishermen families who visits the healthcare centres have better knowledge about contraceptives and menstrual hygiene management.
- d. Babysitting:** If the fishing household has a baby, s/he gets less time from the mother. In some cases, they remain unattended for long time, sometimes even up to more than an hour. Some families in Jungle para village in Urapad area have developed a system where ladies take responsibility of the children in the neighbourhood in turn. All Children of the neighbourhood are assembled at one place and one lady takes care of them while the other ladies do their household chores. This is done in turns so that everyone can complete their works and the children are also safe. This is like an unpaid creche service.

***Influence of fishing on children's education:***

Because the father and mother both become busy, father for fishing and mother for all other household responsibilities including shopping and maintaining social contacts, children's education become neglected. Economically they are not so sound, and therefore only a few have been able to put their children into private schools or keep a private tutor. Thus, very few of their children reaches College level.

During the study, following three types of issues were also reported. These are not common phenomenon but exceptional cases. Due to the privacy issue, names and locality are not mentioned in these cases

***Alcoholism and other intoxicants:***

Fishing compels the commercial fishers to be away from the family. Those who fish during the night, sleep in the day time. So, they are also cut off from the society to a great extent. This aloofness leads them to alcoholism. Also, the peer influence plays a great role in it. Apart from Alcohol, many fishermen also take other intoxicants like Biri, Cigarette & Marijuana. Occurrence of cancer is also reported high.

***Homosexuality:***

Fishing in the night keeps the fishermen away from their wives. When they come back home, they are tired, and they need rest. Also, during that time, their female partners are busy in household activities. They spend a long hour on the boat with male fishermen. Hence, some cases of homosexuality were reported.

***Polyandry:***

Since the husband is away from home, some cases of polyandry were also reported during the study. In the reported cases the second male partner are either from within the family or from the neighbourhood.



### V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION





From this comparative study, it can be summarily said that –

- Women in both the areas give almost equal time and importance to nurturing of children.
- Women in Deeporbeel area give more time and importance to Children’s education. This is partially influenced by the fact that Deeporbeel is urbanized and educational facilities are available in the vicinity. Also, in Deepor area, many mothers go to drop their children, whereas many children in Urapad area travel to school alone or with elder siblings. This indicates that there is a better sense of security in Urapad area.
- Household works are almost similar in both the areas. But, in Urapad areas most families keep domestic animal like cow, duck, poultry. This takes some extra time.
- In both areas, women give same amount of time for maintaining social contacts. Paying social visits, attending marriage and other functions etc are similar in both areas and these are mostly done by the ladies.
- Women in Urapad area invests more time in secondary income sources like weaving, poultry rearing, duck rearing etc. but women in Deepor area have better per capita income.
- Women in both areas support their husband in professional tasks, i.e. drying of nets, selling of fish etc.
- When it comes to girls’ education, in both areas, boys get preference over girls.
- Overall, girls in Deepor area have better access to quality education than in Urapad area.
- Women of fishing households have greater mobility than the women of non-fishing households in the neighbourhood.
- Fishermen household women visiting schools to drop their children get an opportunity of peer learning in school. Many of them become members in the mothers’ group too which helps in grooming their leadership.
- Fishing household women take responsibility of taking their family members to hospitals. This also enables them to get better knowledge about healthcare and better access to medical facilities.
- Fishing negatively influences the education of children. In absence of the male members, female members take responsibility of the family and children’s education is somewhat neglected.
- Few cases of alcoholism, homosexuality and polyandry were also reported that has a link to fishing

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors express their heartfelt gratitude to the Management of Assam Don Bosco University including the Hon’ble Vice Chancellor, Hon’ble Registrar, Hon’ble Director of Research and the Head of the Department of North East India Studies for allowing to carry out this research under the Department. Field level data collection and entry point activities were supported by Mr. Jogesh Barman, Sri Ajanta Barman, Ms. Minu Barman, Mr. Pabitra Biswas, Ms. Junu Biswas, Mr. Purna Das, Mr. Khagen Das and Ms. Pranita Das. Hence, the authors offer their acknowledgement to all of them.

### Photographs

	
<p><b>Interaction with elderly women</b></p>	<p><b>Interaction with young women &amp; girls</b></p>
	
<p><b>Sibling care in Urapad area</b></p>	<p><b>Interviewing the fishermen in Urapad</b></p>

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IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Kakoli Das Kalita et.al. "Role and Status of Women in Kaibarta Fishermen Families in Deeporbeel and Urapadbeel Areas in Assam, India." IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 24 no. 08, 2019, pp. 32-41.