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**Ethnicity, Caste and  
Community in a Disaster  
Prone Area of Orissa**

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# ETHNICITY, CASTE AND COMMUNITY IN A DISASTER PRONE AREA OF ORISSA

Priya Gupta\*

## Abstract

*The paper deals with community solidarity, and looks at how a sense of community has developed and the manner in which it is demonstrated in the villages that we have studied. This also helps in later arguing how the feeling of oneness works in the context of disasters, and also how people adjust and cope with disasters in Orissa, or even in the ways in which they prepare to face fresh disasters, which are recurring phenomena in this part of the country.*

## Introduction

Group belongingness and solidarity found among different people have, for long, been a subject of discussion for many social scientists, philosophers and sociologists. Those living in an environment that involves an element of risk need people to relate to each other, and carry out activities through cooperative efforts for the survival of all individuals. When disaster strikes in whatever form or intensity, it tends to be a totalizing event or process, affecting most aspects of a community (Oliver-Smith 1996). Hence, it has been called a "natural laboratory" or *crise revelatrice*, as the fundamental features of a society and culture are laid bare in stark relief by the reduction of priorities to basic social, cultural and material necessities (Sahlins in Oliver-Smith, 1996: 304). While literature on disasters brings out the importance of 'community', people on their part are more focused on the community's immediate role in the relief phase. They tend to discuss how well they are able to recover from cyclones or any other disaster, and what losses they have incurred. Although some studies talk of class and caste differences existing in India and more so in Orissa, they do not take a rigorous and detailed look at these issues in times of disasters and their impact on the society. The studies do not look into the complex social structures and systems such as ethnic identity and caste, and the kind of role that they play in bringing together various sections of the society in times of disasters. There could be many factors that contribute to the composition of a community and its ability to cope with disasters. Certain occupations can also have a bearing on the aspect of community belongingness. Particular identities such as caste, language or religion might help them in such situations than just the fact that they all live in a hazardous and disaster prone place, facing recurring disasters together. These different nuances in the formation and survival of communities in times of disasters need a closer look. This paper discusses issues related to the sense of oneness among different people, at least within a group that they consider their own, and uses the material gathered from the field to discuss how the feeling of belongingness enhances group survival. Survival is not seen just as a matter of staying alive, but that this group can sustain itself in both a physical and an economic sense, and carry on the social life that has been in existence for generations.

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## **Conceptualization of Disasters**

Disasters have been defined variously by different scholars and agencies. According to the definition provided by the Government of India and United Nations Development Program (GOI-UNDP), a disaster is defined as "The product of a hazard such as earthquake, flood or windstorm coinciding with a vulnerable situation which might include communities, cities or villages". The Disaster Management Act 2005 of India defines disaster as a catastrophe, mishap, calamity or grave occurrence affecting any area, arising from natural or man made causes, or by accident or negligence which results in substantial loss of life or human suffering or damage to, and destruction of, property, or damage to, or degradation of, environment, and is of such a nature or magnitude as to be beyond the coping capacity of the community or is of a sufficient magnitude that it completely disrupts life in the affected area. Disasters are 'events' as crises situations, which brought out social behavior only in response to the event, 'intrusion of something alien'. This type of analysis assumes that disasters are something out of the ordinary, not part of normal social processes, and only when they occur, do those affected respond to it. The need to return to 'normalcy', which was how it was before the disaster occurred, is stressed in this form of analysis (Clausen et al 1978). As an alternative to this view on disasters, there is another point of view that rests on a vulnerability framework, and argues that in certain situations, it is difficult to differentiate between normal life and disasters. The emphasis is put on the social systems which make people vulnerable to disasters. Therefore, the whole system is such that even normal life has various hazards in it and is prone to risks and disasters which do not come as a sudden event (Wisner et al 2003).

## **Group Formation and Ethnicity**

There might be various contributing factors to the perception of oneness in a community. For example, it may be identity based on ethnicity, culture, caste or occupation. Identity means, 'to know who one is' (Kidd 2002:27), to have a sense of 'similarity with some people and a sense of 'difference' from others. Social identity means a collective sense of belonging to a group. In the formation of a community it is the shared set of meanings that enable people to act and interact with one another and thereby identify with the group. There are various identities that an individual may simultaneously possess such as gender, age, nationality and so on, but not all can generate a "we-feeling" to form a community. Certain identities have a greater bearing on the building up of characteristics such as a feeling of belongingness to a group or community.

Ethnicity, as mentioned above, is a contributing factor to the formation of a community based identity. Ethnicity rests on language, religion, culture, racial distinctiveness or appearance, region, and ancestry. These are important, though not persistent factors, around which ethnic identity tends to build up (Hunt and Coon cited in Parsons 1978; Nagel 1994). When a group is situated in a land away from its own people, ethnicity takes precedence over other group identities. Language, for example, is a basic means of interaction and communication of ideas and thoughts, and a sense of oneness is found among those people who speak their language, especially when they are located in a place where others speak a different language. This difference, sometimes acts as a barrier to the free flow of thoughts between linguistically different people besides tending to create a greater feeling of oneness

with one's own language group because of the shared means of interactions in a place where a different language is spoken. Ethnicity is "the reach for groundings" (Hall 1991:35, 36) and on the other hand it defines "distinctive groups of solidarity," or strategic alliances demanding recognition, both conceptual and material (Parsons 1978:53).

Ethnic groups are traditionally mutually exclusive (Parsons 1978). A common culture with some temporal continuity from the past becomes an important general core for ethnic group formation. Geertz (quoted in Yinger 1985: 158) emphasises the primordial ties, the "longing not to belong to any other group," as the critical defining characteristics of ethnicity, a criterion not easily applied to most persons in modern societies. Ethnic identity is also related to external stimuli, and may vary with changes in the context, but sometimes it becomes independent or functionally autonomous of the stimulus that produced it (Horowitz 1978: 119). For example, a Bengali Hindu woman may identify herself as a Bengali in one circumstance, and Hindu in another; or a Lebanese will identify himself with his sectarian affiliation in one context, and under another, may embrace his Christian or Muslim affiliation (Horowitz 1978: 118).

Ethnicity also depends on the perception of others, who do not belong to the group, that the group in question is different, the perception of those in the groups that they are different from the others, and also on the fact that those in the same group with the same identity share activities based on their 'sameness', whether real or imaginary (Yinger in Kidd 2002). "Membership in an ethnic group is a matter of social definition, an interplay of the self definition of the members and the definition of other groups" (Wallerstein quoted in Horowitz 1978:113). Ascription is an important feature of ethnicity, and ethnic identity is acquired at birth. However, there are possibilities of changing individual identities, for example, with the change through religious conversions or intermarriage (Horowitz 1978). Features such as shared sameness, and collective consciousness tend to create a sense of community feeling, a 'we-feeling' in the group.

## **Community and Ethnic Identity**

There is often an overlap where the features which ethnicity portrays are also encompassed by a community, such as location, solidarity, we-feeling. However, one must bear in mind that whereas community is a form of social organization, ethnicity is a basis for organising a group or society, which exhibits the characteristics of oneness and shared identity to a community to bind it together into a strongly knit group. The shifts in the essence of ethnic identity seem to be related to the persistence of certain external stimuli. Community characterizes a geographical territory, we-feeling, close ties, solidarity, shared norms, beliefs, and a common way of life. It is a social structure which has various institutions within it to manage the social life of the members of the community.

Community identity, as mentioned earlier is shaped by ethnicity. A prominent aspect of cultural identity is language, though it has been closely associated with a relatively diffused conception of common cultural tradition (Isaac 1978: 54). Ethnic identity based on language, for example, of a group of people living in another language dominated area, may lead to the formation of a different community altogether. There may be, however, scope for acculturation or assimilation. The formation of a new community or coming together of people speaking the same language brings in a sense of we-

feeling through residing in the same area, and to the other group of not necessarily antagonism, but certainly that it is a different group, and that there is a distinction between themselves and the others. This would be more so if the people speaking the other language constituted the majority. In such circumstances, the community sentiments and cohesion of the minority or group with the smaller population, get heightened.

## **Ethnic Identity and the Study Villages of Orissa**

To examine the formation of community and a feeling of oneness and its role in the survival of groups, two villages have been selected for this study. These two villages have a similar location as they are situated near the sea shore, which falls in the coastal belt that is prone to cyclones every year in Orissa. They are also significantly different in terms of the occupational groups inhabiting them. One village is predominantly a fishing village<sup>1</sup>, and the other an agricultural one, both with a single caste being in the majority, in terms of numbers. This difference provides for a good comparison between two different groups of people who have been staying in the same region for a long time and face almost the same form of disasters every year. The very fact that these villages have survived the disasters of October 1999, and later on smaller storms and cyclones, or came across several cyclone warnings, make the villages suitable for the study of coping and community survival. In the fishing village, comprising Telugu speaking people, and one of the two villages chosen for the study of coping and surviving disasters such as cyclones, the identity of one or other kind (such as through ethnicity or caste) has a role to play in the formation of a community identity.

### **Fishing village**

The fishing village called Noliyanuangan is located in the coastal district of Ganjam and within the Chatrapur block. It has around 700 households engaged in sea fishing and allied occupations. There are mainly two castes in the village, one being the larger and main caste called the Noliyas after whom the village has been named, and the others are the Sundis with about 30 households, who are Oriya people, and are an economically better off group than the Noliyas. They run grocery shops in the village and are also involved in money lending. As the village is situated just about two hundred metres off from the sea, in a cyclone prone area, there should be a good reason for staying there (i.e. so close to the sea). The Noliyas stay in this place because of the ease with which they can pull out boats into the sea and get them back, as well as clean and dry fish on the sea shore. The Sundis are not very old inhabitants of this place. They came to this village relatively recently (around 10 years) to set up business including selling grocery, as well as money lending. The fishermen's need for credit in the lean seasons and also during ceremonies, and occasions of disasters give the Sundis scope for money lending activities. Getting any credit/ loans from alternative sources is difficult for the fishermen, considering the lack of collateral necessary to secure loans.

The Noliyas also have sub-castes but they hardly mention them, nor does it make any noticeable difference to their occupation. They are originally Telugu speaking people who have been

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<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to mention that this particular part of coastal Orissa is closer to Andhra Pradesh and has several fishing villages like the one considered for this study, inhabited by Noliya fishermen and their families.

residing there for a long time, and they cannot even recall when their group first settled in this area. They are also ethnically different from the Oriya population of the nearby agricultural village (name: Agastinuagan).

**Caste, and its interconnectedness with occupation and ethnic identity:** An individual usually has several identities, each of which takes precedence in a specific social situation. In the case of these fishermen, caste identity, which is characterized predominantly by their occupation of fishing, assumes even greater importance on which community identity is built, apart from the common language. In this context caste is the binding force of these people. Caste can be seen as an ethnic identity exhibiting a feeling of oneness and a sense of belongingness to a particular group or community. Caste can also be seen as an ethnic group in the same sense as, to quote Parsons (1978:56), "This is a group the members of which have both with respect to their own sentiments and those of non members, a distinctive identity which is rooted in some kind of a distinctive sense of its history". Caste as also an ethnic identity is ascriptive in nature, and acquired at birth<sup>2</sup>. It is an important basis for community formation of the people in the fishing village as well. They perceive themselves as a separate community on the basis of their caste. They find caste a more important determinant of their community identity than language. This particular caste occupies a lower position in the caste hierarchy. In Orissa, any caste which engages itself in fishing activity is generally considered as a scheduled caste. However, the Noliyas, being a Telugu group, is classified as a Backward Caste. Within the fishing village, the Sundis are more into financial dealings (i.e. lending money to the Noliyas), than having any other form of close interaction with them. The distance from the other villages and the proximity to the coast further strengthen their solidarity and group coherence. This is the result of their occupation which requires them to stay near the sea.

**Language as part of ethnic identity:** In terms of culture and language, the community of fishermen is different from the rest of the people in this part of Orissa. Acculturation, a limited form of assimilation or adaptation, has definitely taken place, and most of the village people can speak Oriya. The younger members of the village are even educated through Oriya and English. Language, which constitutes a part of ethnic identity, gains importance as it is the medium of interaction/communication. However, it may also be restrictive, as in the case of many of the older fishermen, who do not understand or speak Oriya. Along with the fact that they are in an occupation that separates them from others and needs them to stay off the land for most part of the day, leads to lesser contact with the people outside the community. This strengthens the bond of togetherness and cohesion between the community members who go fishing. The less frequent contact of the fishermen with the rest of the people in their area other than the people of their own language and occupation, also results in these people not learning the local language. The fact that they also depend on their own people for occupational assistance further hampers interaction with the local people (Oriya speaking). The possibility of their interacting with nearby fish vendors is less as the intermediaries from the fishing village carry out the negotiations and bargaining for them. Sometimes, after getting a catch and unloading it on the seashore, the boat

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<sup>2</sup> Ethnic identity is generally acquired at birth, thus, it is ascriptive in nature (Horowitz 1978).

owner sells the fish to the agents or whole sale vendors (who are from outside the village) at the same spot (seashore). In such cases it is only the boat owner and not the fishermen (even if on occasions the boat owners are also fishermen) who interact with the outside buyers. It needs to be mentioned here that there are approximately one hundred and fifty boat owners in the village, according to the people of the village. The boat owners are also Telugu speaking people belonging to the same village, with many of them also being fishermen.

**Community cohesion and the role of women, and men who are not fishermen:** The community comprises men and women of various age groups with different roles that they play as members of the community. When the community is based on an occupation that requires collective efforts, the role of each member becomes crucial and specialized. The fishing community, apart from the fishermen, also has other members such as women and non fishermen, who have roles to play in the fishing and in the community as a whole. Women who have to go out and sell fish in the local markets frequently interact with the people outside their community. They also take up manual work every day which requires them to interact with the contractors and the nearby farmers, who are mostly Oriya people; however, they face no problems as they can communicate easily in the Oriya language. Although their interaction with those outside their village is restricted to the work situation alone, they act as the major link between the community and the people outside.

Not all Noliya men of the fishing village are engaged in catching fish as an occupation. A few men find sea fishing a dangerous occupation and hence choose to avoid the sea. However, they are attached to the caste based occupation, i.e. fishing, by managing the fishing business in the village. A limited form of division of labor is maintained in this village, with some men who dare face the sea go for catching the fish, while those not interested in fishing manage the fishing business by arranging transport of fish catch to whole sale vendors. The agents, who are most often from within the same village and are also from the Noliya caste, have considerable standing and importance in the fishing occupation. It is also a crucial job to manage because the market involves fluctuations of price, and keeping abreast of information as to which kind of fish is in demand, require a good deal of knowledge and contacts. The agents who are among the non-fishing men of the village have an economic niche in the fish business, and serve a very useful function. The fishermen find it difficult to maintain these contacts, and keeping track of fluctuating demands and preferences, owing to the fact that they are at sea most of the time. Moreover, unless the fish is sold almost immediately after it is caught, the whole effort of fishing may prove to be a very costly waste.

Being on the sea most of the time, specifically at the time when the markets work, makes it very difficult for the fishermen to manage both the jobs of fishing and finding a market for the fish catch. As such, usually they would like to sell the catch to some agent immediately. However, there are some fishermen (the boat owners who also accompany the troop in fishing) who have direct contacts with the whole sale vendors, who send their vehicles to carry the fish catch from the sea shore the moment the fish is unloaded. There are some others who depend on intermediaries or fish traders from the village who are also Noliyas and are into the fish business, as they have direct contacts with the whole sale vendors and arrange transportation to carry the fish catch and sell it to the whole sale

vendor. The boat owner (who is also a fisherman) is paid money immediately on handing over the catch to the intermediary or agent, and the boat owner then divides this money among the members of the troop on the spot. According to some fishermen, they prefer to give the catch to their wives and their own relatives to sell in the local market even though they have contacts with the intermediaries and sell fish to them. The fishermen who are engaged only in catching the fish are also convinced that the intermediaries have a crucial role in the fish business, in whose absence the fish business would not be complete.

These men function as intermediaries between the fishermen and the wholesale fish sellers (who are not of the fishermen community). They are another major part of the community who maintain links with the people outside the community by arranging markets for the fish catch. Women of the village carry relatively small quantities of fish to sell in the nearby village, and whatever is earned is their personal income. The men who manage the fish business undertake a much larger scale of business than women. They carry the fish catch in vans, while women carry the fish in small bamboo baskets.

Communication between the people of the fishing village and those from the outside areas depends also on the language skills of the people. Those who (as mentioned above) have regular interactions with the nearby villages, learn and also use the local language (Oriya) more often than the fishermen themselves. The younger generation of the village is fluent in the local language because they study in schools, and the medium of education is Oriya and the teachers are mostly Oriya people. To an extent, however, language becomes one of the important cohesive factors in terms of the community identity in this fishing village. For those who speak only Telugu, language becomes a means of keeping them within this community; and because of this they also tend to develop an insular outlook towards those who are not part of their own group. The difference of languages strengthens their separate identity with a shared bond of togetherness, more so because they are situated in a place dominated by a particular language other than their own. The contact with ethnic strangers can have influence on shaping or altering group boundaries (see also Horowitz 1978: 121).

**Community solidarity in the fishing and agricultural villages:** Before proceeding with the discussion, it is worth mentioning here the indicators of solidarity, as discussed by Durkheim and Toennies', and later elaborated by Goffman and Merton. To these scholars solidarity is demonstrated in a community by holding the same things sacred, following a common way of life, common beliefs, concentrated ties, frequent interactions, social attachments and involvement in institutions (Brint 2001). With the clear perception that sea fishing is a high risk occupation, the fishermen are also particular about the group of people with whom they go out to sea. The learning process of the fishermen starts from their fathers and older brothers, and the community develops a "one-ness" also from growing up in the same group and environment. Noliyas indicated that they are dependent on their community people to go fishing, as no other people outside their community have the required skills of sea fishing, nor is it easy for any outsider unfamiliar with the vastness and depth of the sea to learn and master sea fishing even after several months. We do not suggest that no one other than this group takes up sea fishing, but only that to these people, familiarity is also a reason to stick together. Further, language,

for example, is a binding force for their own group, but separates them from those who do not speak this language. They explicitly mention that they do not trust outsiders nor do they want to risk the life of someone who is not of their community. Hence, a strict exclusion of outsiders is practiced in the context of fishing. This interdependence on community members in their occupation and other needs strengthens their solidarity and group cohesion. The occupation of fishing also entails other activities such as net weaving, pulling the boats, cleaning and drying fish etc., which require manpower and group work. The work is shared with all the community members. Caste, therefore, is important in terms of binding the group into a community as their caste identity is woven with their occupation and occupational skills.

The fishermen find the occupation itself very risky because it requires them to go to sea where they are at the mercy of the sea and weather, with only a small boat on which they are completely dependant. They do not carry any life saving equipment, and when they face a storm at sea, they can swim to the shore only if the distance is short and not if they were to swim back eight to ten kilometers. The other crucial aspects of the fishing occupation which they mention are the various factors which need to be correct for a venture to take place. This includes an adequate number of people to accompany a trip (at least six people and maximum nine in one boat). They must be healthy, not tired or sick and also willing and daring to go for fishing into the sea; they must have a good fishing net; the weather must be calm and not windy or stormy. In the sea it is all up to them to find where they can get a good catch, though with years of experience they can usually locate the fish. However, a problem that they occasionally encounter is competition from fishermen from the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh who have better fishing equipment and mechanized boats. This often results in a poor catch. The fishermen from Andhra Pradesh can undertake fishing in these areas along with trips to deeper parts of the sea, and take away fish which fishermen from Noliyanuangan could have got. Noliya fishermen have to take a chance every day to catch a reasonable quantity of fish. There are times when they take the additional risk of going fishing even in bad weather, though they are well aware that it is much more risky to their lives. Thus, whether in good weather or bad, they seem to be always in need to go to sea because their livelihood depends on it. Therefore, the occupation itself makes them vulnerable to cyclone hazards. However, one expects that in really bad weather, i.e. during cyclonic weather, they would certainly stay on shore.

The fishermen go fishing with groups (comprising six to nine members as mentioned above) which are formed of members from their caste and village. The group formation is not on any particular basis such as only fraternal brothers or relatives accompanying them. However, a crucial requirement is that only those who have the courage to venture into the sea can join the troop. They must also be from the fishing caste of Noliyas. The fact that the formation of fishing groups is not based on fraternal ties is because in the fishing occupation there are numerous jobs to be carried out.

The presence of the caste council in the fishing village also contributes to the control and management of fishing activities. All the villagers must obey the voice of the council because it not only regulates the activities but also solves disputes whenever they arise. The caste council is an essential part of the fishing community which maintains their caste relations and occupational relations within and with other castes and villages. This signals the importance of the community rather than only the

family. There is more of community interdependence, and the collective identity of the community is more significant than the family or kin in other occupational affairs. As such, being engaged in a risky enterprise is a crucial factor in binding the fishing village together. The roles played by different members, especially women and men are different in the work sphere. There is a differentiation found in the fishing activity itself. Women are not allowed to go to the sea for fishing, and it is a man's domain in this village, and they do not share the same risks as the men who do. This strengthens the feeling of oneness among the fishermen at sea. For the women their main domain is normally within the house, though they also work outside the village because of economic necessities, forcing them to undertake daily manual work at construction sites besides selling fish in the local markets. This is not to suggest that the men who are not in the fishing activity are not part of the community, or that the women remain outside the community either. The sense of community is also related to the risks of living in this area, due to natural disasters; and this factor is common to all who live in the village. In any case, the fact that some men go to the sea for fishing evokes a sense of trepidation for others in the family. The men who are related to the fishing enterprise but not engaged in the actual fishing too share this anxiety. For all of them, the fact of family members being engaged in a risky enterprise brings its own stresses and strains, and a sense of shared burden.

During the cyclone seasons, when there are low pressure conditions over the sea (April-May, and September-November) there will be no income from fishing as the men cannot go to sea. This kind of situation stays for several days at a time, and whatever little savings they may have had gets exhausted in a very short while. Hence, they need to find alternate work. At these times, it is the women who go for work on a daily basis. While conditions on the sea make it impossible for the men to go out fishing, the conditions on the land may still be manageable for women to go for work.

Women are not included in the fishing activity because of the general feeling that they are too weak physically to take up a job like fishing which requires considerable amount of strength. As for the other requirements associated with fishing that include cleaning, drying and selling of fish in the local market, which are also important responsibilities, the community depends on women to carry out these tasks. Thus, even though women do not exactly share the risk of fishing in the sea they form an important part of the community. The bonding between the members is maintained even during normal times through the interdependence inherent in the fishing occupation.

Other than the normal caste and occupational activities, they also perform certain group activities such as celebrating a village festival called *Thakurani Jatra*, or worshiping the mother goddess. This is an important event of the village and the entire village has to contribute towards it. Contribution here generally refers to monetary payments. The festival is celebrated annually, and even those who have migrated to other places but who have their families in the village, are required to send money for this festival. There is a fisherman who officiates as *pujari* (priest) and performs the *puja* (worship rituals). He is from a Noliya family that has been celebrating this festival for many years. The men of that family are very knowledgeable about the rites and rituals that are to be performed during this festival. The Noliyas consider the festival as a community festival, which is related to their caste and village. While this ritual takes place, the other members of the caste also participate by offering fruits

and flowers. For the village temple, where daily worship is performed, they have hired a Brahmin priest who lives in the village to perform these daily rituals in the temple<sup>3</sup>.

The caste panchayat collects funds from the villagers and manages the festival. It is a big occasion for the whole village to participate in and enjoy themselves. The villagers describe it as their village festival. This festival is also performed in the agricultural village, but they do it separately where there is no role of caste panchayat or any other such institution. They too attach a lot of importance to this festival, but for them a Brahmin *pujari* performs the *puja*. In the fishing village the festival is also performed by the villagers themselves, and no one else is supposed to participate, except that they can come and watch.

Activities that are conducted in groups also help in group bonding and instill a sense of closeness with neighbors and people of the village. Leisure activities of men include net weaving—or more accurately repairing the nets, and playing cards, where as in the case of women, they include gossiping, helping each other in household chores such as grinding spices and cutting vegetables. These are some of the neighborhood related phenomena. Even while going out for daily labor or selling fish, women prefer to go in small groups of four or five, as the places to which they need to walk up (usually walk) are four to five kilometers from the village.

In situations of crises they need the help of each other, in rescue operations for instance, because no outside help reaches them in the initial stages of disasters. The first help is received from the community members. Such help includes helping especially older people to safer places such as *pucca* houses. One should mention here that roughly one-third of these people still live in *kuchha* houses. If they rear animals these too have to be taken to safer places. After the cyclones pass over they require help in rebuilding broken houses and boats, clearing debris of fallen trees and houses. All these necessities bring them together as a community in the event of a disaster.

The risks related to life and livelihood in fishing activities have led to certain family practices that are meant to secure the lives of fishermen and their livelihood too. Women of the village report that to ward off dangers of high tides and wind storms endangering the lives of their family members who go fishing, and also to get a good catch, they worship the sea everyday, before their husbands or sons leave for fishing. This is a daily practice which women follow, praying that the sea remains calm. All the respondents, especially women in the fishing village report that this is an every day practice. There are even songs, in praise of the sea as a provider of livelihood and so on. These are normally sung by women, which also include praise for the sea. These songs are in no way indicative of any reference to the sea as a potential disaster. The farmers in the farming village report that they do not worship the sea as their lives are not in danger as with the fishermen, nor do they depend on the sea for their livelihood like the fishermen do. According to the farmers, the fishermen worship the sea as a powerful entity that has a direct impact on their lives and livelihood, and they pray to her not to cause harm to their family members who go fishing. According to the people in the fishing village, the sea has

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<sup>3</sup> This is an interesting and uncommon phenomenon, because the fishing caste is generally seen as one occupying a position at nearly the lower end of the caste hierarchy. Brahmin priests do not usually work in such a capacity when the caste involved is not an upper caste, and the one that is engaged in this kind of activity.

an important place in their life. They have grown with her presence in their life and that they do not want to stay away from her, but do expect to be protected from danger.

### **Agricultural village**

The agricultural community does not face the kind of risk to life (as with fishing) as to enhance community solidarity. However, this village, which is situated a kilometre away from the sea shore, also displays a sense of community. The agricultural village is predominantly inhabited by the Khandayat caste (a farmer caste). Language, in their context, is important not in segregating them from other villages but integrating with the rest of the Oriya villages and nearby towns, thereby increasing their scope of interaction and network building. They too have the shared experience of disasters that provide more of the feeling of oneness for the entire village including both the castes that live in the village. The agricultural community comprises the Oriya agricultural caste of Khandayats. There are 400 households in the village, out of which only ten families belong to another caste, i.e. Brahmins, who are employed in temple affairs. The temple work includes worshiping the temple deities every day and cooking the *mahaprasad* or the offerings to deities. The Brahmins also own agricultural land and they depend on the Khandayats to cultivate their agricultural land. The Brahmins consider the village as a community though the caste difference with respect to the Khandayats is maintained through the temple work they undertake. For the Khandayats too, the village constitutes the community. The interdependence on the other castes is evident as Khandayats are the ones who maintain agricultural lands for the Brahmins, who, because of their cultural norms do not touch the plough. The fact that they live near the coast and frequently face water surges makes their occupation (i.e. agriculture) vulnerable to the vagaries of nature. These, however, are not as much a threat to their lives as the ones faced by the fishing people.

The community consciousness of the agricultural community is not so much related to their occupation of agriculture, as the fishing people where the risky occupation binds them together. Their community bonding is not only restricted to the village, but also their relatives in nearby villages and towns, as they are local Oriya people. Their vulnerability to the natural hazards of cyclones and water surges which affect their crops and for some families, also the place of residence, does contribute to a sense of shared problems. They need the assistance of each other to survive and save the produce. When there are water surges in the rainy season, crops could be submerged. Farmers help each other in clearing the agricultural land, and try to close the openings in the land from where the sea and river water overflow, causing water surges. When there is loss of crops after the cyclones or heavy rains, financial needs also greatly increase. Those who suffered less of crop damage, or have financial savings off the last crop, provide help to the other villagers who ask for it. The Brahmins provide monetary assistance to the villagers in need too, though they charge interest on it. They are among the propertied people in the village.

All the farmers who were interviewed reported that they needed money for every activity involved in agriculture, from buying seeds and fertilizers, to harvesting crops and transporting them to the market. Even in normal times, i.e. when there is no disaster, they still need to borrow money from friends and relatives in the village or from nearby towns. Apart from that, they also borrow from the

rich farmers (three families) who are engaged in cashew farming. The borrowing increases when there are disasters, which recur almost every year and cause severe damage to their crops. Cyclonic conditions of high wind and heavy rains last for several days causing water surges, and damage to their crops. Whenever there is a cyclone, whatever loans they take for the crops get wasted. Therefore, they need to take more money as loans to survive during those times when they do not earn anything from their lands. Money needs also increase to meet family necessities such as school fees, food, fodder etc. They indicate that they prefer to take only the minimal amount of money, which they can repay. Due to disasters, however, the frequency of taking money has never come down, and has in fact become a vicious cycle, because every year these same conditions prevail.

Shortage of water is a major problem as well. The villagers get water from a pond called *tampera* in Oriya. Some have water reserves of their own, but those who do not have their own water reserves rely on the village pond *tempera*<sup>4</sup>, which is a common reserve. It is up to the discretion of the people who own reserves to distribute water during times of low rainfall. There is also a smaller pond near the farming fields, and supplying water to agricultural fields, but is owned by a rich landlord family. They allow other people to grow some leafy vegetables on it. Generally, the larger farmers draw water first from the *tampera* and then they let others use the water from this source. Since there are so many farmers who use water, it becomes problematic at times to share the water, and there are often disputes between them. The villagers complain that there is no support from the government in arranging for irrigation water to the agricultural fields.

The main problem that the villagers face relates to the disaster proneness of the agricultural lands of this village. This area is near the meeting place of the river and the sea, and heavy rains cause the river to overflow and submerge the land. They complain that there is no dam to protect their agricultural lands. Even when only small storms occur, high tides in the sea can lead to water surges. The worst happens if the sea water surges in, as it affects the agricultural lands for a longer period, making it unfit for growing crops. This was the case during the 1999 super cyclones (there were two). Generally agricultural fields are not affected for long periods during smaller storms when only the river water surges in. When there are high tides and sea water surges onto the land, it also brings in sand, then not only are the crops lost but the land too becomes temporarily unfit for farming. It requires at least six months to make it ready for farming again. Besides, falling trees also affect the village environment, and this worries the villagers as well.

### **Occasional dry seasons and 'drought'**

Other than cyclones that disrupt the agricultural activities of these farmers, there are instances of delayed rainfall which villagers indicated as another hazard that causes trouble almost every year. The local farmers refer to the condition as 'burning of crops', and this destroys existing crops. The 'burning' is caused by the heat of the sun, though there is no actual burning as such. Alternating between them, there are times when cyclones destroy their crops through excessive water, and at other times, water scarcity and drought-like conditions that cause the dying of crops, giving the agriculturists little reprieve

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<sup>4</sup> A pond-like water reserve commonly owned by all the villagers.

between these extremes. With the hope that for the whole year there is one or the other crop which might be successfully grown and reaped, farmers grow various crops such as paddy during the rainy season (from August to January), and chilli, gram, and groundnut during the summer (from February). Other than these they also grow green leafy vegetables *saag* in the pond which adds to their main income from the major crops such as rice and chilli.

Among the farmers not many group activities take place. Even the leisure activities that the farmers engage in are not group activities, but individual ones such as relaxation, unlike in the fishing village where they involve groups of people playing cards or repairing their fishing nets. Farmers are busy for much of the day, working on their own fields. During whatever spare time they get, they watch television, either at home or at a neighbor's house. Sometimes, they sit and gossip among themselves. Women do farming work as well, and they manage growing the *chilli* all by themselves. They also take care of cooking, cleaning the home, and are busy most of the time. Whatever spare time that they get is spent gossiping with the neighbors. This is virtually the only form of leisure time activity that they engage in. Their group life is not as vibrant as that of the fishing community, at least in normal times.

### **Location, vulnerability and community bonding**

"When hazards and disasters are viewed as integral parts of environmental and human systems, they become formidable test of societal adaptation and sustainability. In effect if a society cannot withstand without major damage and disruption a predictable feature of its environment that society has not developed in a sustainable way" (Oliver-Smith 1996: 304).

In anthropological research, a disaster is defined as a process/event involving a combination of potentially destructive agents from the natural and or technological environment and a population in a socially and technological environment vulnerability (Oliver-Smith 1996). Blaike et al (quoted in O'Hare 2001) define vulnerability as the characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate and cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard. This also shows that certain social and demographic groups are more vulnerable than others to greater difficulties during recovery from disasters (Bolin in O'Hare 2001). These groups include people marginalized by class, caste, gender, race, ethnicity, age, income, and geographical location.

The very fact that some people are poor, pursue a specific occupation and belong to a particular caste adds to their vulnerability. Therefore, various identities within a group sometimes interplay in heightening their vulnerability to hazards. Poor people lack choices of place. Their occupation forces them to stay in disaster prone areas. Risky livelihood, hazard prone locations of settlements owing to a hazard prone occupation leads to physical vulnerability (Ariyabandhu and Wikramasinghe 2005). The inaccessibility to alternative places to settle also forces them to stay in such hazard prone areas (Samanta 1997).

The association between community and place needs to be discussed. The place here is important in the context of location or situation, and in the sense of community size in terms of population. As Scherer (1972) states, we cannot ignore the possibility that some kinds of environment are more conducive to the formation of community than others. If we start with this point we can build

up the basis of the argument that the very fact of being situated in disaster prone areas, with their dependence on uncertain weather and risky occupations strengthens or weakens community identity.

In the case of farmers, their life is not at threat because of the sea being near. They have agricultural land and prefer to stay near the land which is closer to the sea and the *Rusikulya* river. Agricultural activities involve lots of work on the farm land such as sowing, harvesting, etc. Agriculture requires days of work and needs them to be near the farm land, so that they can properly and frequently take care of it, and avoid crop damage due to insects, or animals, or even human pilferage. Sowing and harvesting also require lots of manpower and time which means they need to stay near the land to do it on time. These requirements compel them to stay near the sea, because of the location of their lands, and are vulnerable to the vagaries of nature. In such circumstances, in the event of any disaster, they have to depend on each other. This is so because they are some distance from towns and supportive facilities. Every facility is relatively far from them. In times of disasters, they do not get immediate relief because there are other factors which determine the provision of relief materials to the people in need, for example, the proximity to roads and the block office. When the area is severely affected by cyclones, providing relief is decided at the collector's office (i.e. the district headquarters), and their considerations are on the basis of who is worst hit, rather than trying to provide relief to everyone at the same time. It is, therefore, a chancy matter to receive aid just at the right time, and when they are most in need. Further, because of the distance, and water logging of the roads, there may be delays in receiving aid even if the collector's office decides to send relief to these villages. This also leads to the strengthening of group solidarity within the territory of the village as the distance from the other villages also restricts the possibility of getting immediate assistance during crisis situations. Not only the major cyclones, even the smaller ones that may not be considered as particularly destructive by the authorities at the district headquarters can be destructive for these communities that stay so close to the sea.

Place is very important for the formation of a sense of community. One's location decides one's accessibility or vulnerability to various conditions. A location is 'given' in the sense that a person has virtually no control on its geographical features, of being hazard prone, or of temperature and rainfall. When a group settles, it has to adjust to these characteristics of the location, and more so in the context of economically poor people pursuing traditional occupations such as fishing or farming. In such a case, the location becomes very important in terms of group integrity and cohesion.

## Conflicts

A community not only has solidarity in it to enhance the chances of survival but also at times, there are encounters and flare-up of conflicts. Conflicts may be intra village at times or inter-village at others. Both the communities encounter conflicts between families related to family issues, or occupational issues or inter village conflicts on some or the other issue. In the case of the fishing village, they have quarrels over matters related to family, marital or occupational disputes within the village. These and many other issues are dealt with by an institution which is part of the fishing community, that is, the caste council or *jati gosthi* headed by the caste head called *gan mukhiya* (village head in Oriya) or *pedamanusulu* (literally big man, in Telugu). The caste head is jointly chosen by the villagers through

consensus. The particular person chosen may be one whom all of them find dependable and more importantly, the one who is sensitive in nature, one who listens to them and tries to solve the problems impartially, and takes care of their work. In any fishing venture, the fish catch is shared equally among all the members who accompany that particular trip. This applies to all except the boat owner who gets two shares, i.e. one share as a member of the fishing trip and the other one as the owner of the boat used for this fishing trip. In the event of someone not wanting to give equal share to all the members in the fishing venture, the case would be taken to the caste head, who then decides as to how to punish the person for flouting the rule of group integrity.

In inter-village conflicts, such as the one wherein a fisherman from this village (Noliyanuagan) puts out a net for fishing and a fisherman from another village, by mistake, puts out his net on top of the earlier net, with the latter cutting the former's net (at this stage it is not a mistake but a deliberate act), and taking the entire catch of fish. This becomes a conflict that needs immediate resolution. The first fisherman or group of fishermen (of one boat) loses all the fish they may have caught, and ending up in an unhappy situation. This issue is then taken to the caste head of the Noliyanuagan village who then sends a letter to the caste head to which the other fisherman belongs. Both the parties, along with the caste heads, sort out the matter. At times, if the issue is not resolved, it is taken to the sarpanch, i.e., the elected head of the statutory panchayat. However, this rarely happens as fishermen prefer fishing conflicts to be resolved within the fishing groups themselves.

In a majority of cases, the caste head solves the disputes with all complying with his decisions. If they are not satisfied, then they can go to a court; but they rarely go to court and mostly rely on the caste council to solve all these problems. Even though there are conflicts, they tend to bring them together as a group to solve them. There are rules for certain issues such as occupation related problems. Whoever breaks the rules of group integrity and group work (e.g. quarrel over getting a place on the fishing trips) is liable to be banned from work for as many days as the *gan mukhiya* thinks as appropriate. Hence, community people tend to avoid committing such faults. Rifts of this type do not break up the group or the bonds that hold the group together, but for some time do create a feeling of antagonism among the families involved in the dispute.

In the farming village, the case is different, as there are no such community institutions to solve internal disputes. They either solve them among themselves, or depend on the statutory village panchayat to solve their disputes, or else go to law courts. The disputes do create differences affecting the community set up, but they tend to solve the disputes within themselves. Access to water creates major crisis among the farmers, and its sharing becomes a serious issue. Hence, they are also planning to constitute a *pani panchayat* for proper distribution of water to all the farmers. They also feel that there is a need for collective efforts in the management of water use, which is both a scarce resource and needed by all for agriculture. No disputes whatsoever really threaten the group as such, but there are disputes with other castes such as the local scheduled castes. These people lived within this village earlier and used to work as wage laborers on the agricultural fields, but as they shifted to nearby cashew plantations, they left the village. This also resulted in antagonism between them and the farmers in the village. The people belonging to the scheduled caste now live in a different village.

## **Shared experiences as the basis of community formation**

Group identity on the basis of ethnic identity and caste play an important role in the formation of community. These communities have faced disasters earlier such as the super cyclone of 1999, apart from other cyclones and more recent warnings of cyclones as well. They perceive these shared experiences of disasters and impending threats of the same kind for the whole community as building blocks of community cohesion. The required preparedness to face disasters strengthens the need to act collectively and build resilience, to the perceived threats or hazards. They are aware of the possible impact and need to face these problems as a community. This sense of cohesion is found in the two villages of Orissa, since they could only rely on their own immediate village members in the event of a disaster, or even in the preparations to face any fresh disaster (having received warnings about an impending event such as a cyclone). The logic is simple in that owing to the distance from other villages and towns, and being situated in a disaster prone coastal belt on the sea shore, there is always a risk involved and a fear of a possible disaster. In such circumstances, the only people on whom they can depend on are the immediate community people made up of the same language and caste group.

## **Conclusion**

The fact that both villages are located in a disaster prone area and are in occupations that have their own share of risks, leads to the strengthening of the sense of community, and feeling of oneness. The distance from other villages and towns, and frequent disasters require them to stay together and help each other as a community, for a safer existence. The occupation that they pursue demands group work, especially for people in the fishing village. The risks to life and livelihood further heighten their interdependence. In the case of farmers, the vulnerability of the occupation to frequent encounters with water surges leading to economic losses, binds the community together. They need each other to assist in recovering from the losses in terms of physical assistance to clean the damaged crops, close the openings from where water surges in, and also provide monetary help to the needy ones.

The people themselves express their notion of oneness by highlighting important activities which mark their strong bonds. In their accounts, they display their unity and closeness by choosing to go only with their own community men from within the village for fishing ventures, and do not trust anyone other than their own community members to accompany them. They choose only their own community men to work as intermediaries and manage the fishing business with the wholesalers outside the village. When there are crisis situations such as cyclones or water surges, they depend primarily on the community members, for assistance. They depend only on their own community members in times of any other personal problem. To those in the fishing village, their caste members are also their community (the other group that lives in the village interacts with the fishermen but are not considered part of the fishermen's 'community' in the manner in which they see it). In the agricultural village, the entire village is seen as the community, even though there are two different caste groups in the village. Whatever the case, the community is a necessary social construction, in the context of the precarious existence of these people who live near the seashore. It is the community that is seen as the one which preserves their group existence in the context of disasters that periodically strike this place.

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