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### **The Cultural Significance of Fish in India: First Steps in Coming to Terms with the Contradictory Positions of Some Key Materials**

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**The Cultural Significance of Fish in India:  
first steps in coming to terms  
with the contradictory positions of some key materials.<sup>1</sup>**

Peter Reeves

**1. The evidence of fishing and the place of fish as food.**

We need not doubt that fishing has been practised in India since the earliest times. Fish hooks are found among the earliest prehistoric artefacts (Allchin 1982: 69, 287; Sarkar 1954) and in the artefacts of the 'Harappan' civilisation of the Indus Valley (Piggott 1950: 199; Allchin 1982: 194; Sarkar 1954; Bagchi 1955). Moreover, the fish of the Indus themselves are recorded on Harappan pottery (Piggott 1950: 88; Allchin 1982: 199 and 'fish scale motif', 145).

Earliest literary texts, moreover, provide us with a clear, if not extended, view of a range of fishing activity by the late second or early first millennium. Thus the *Rg Veda* refers to the method of catching fish by net and to those people who catch fish (Das 1931: 294) and the documents which elaborate the *Vedas* provide more detail still. The *Vajasaneyi Samhita* and the *Taittiriya Brahmana* list those who lived by fishing - 'the Kaivarta or Kervata, Puanjistha, Dasa, Mainala ... and perhaps the Baina and the Anda' (Das 1931: 295) - and Sayana's commentary actually attempts to relate different groups with specific methods of catching. Macdonell and Keith, in their *Vedic Index*, outline Sayana's explanation:

Dhaivara is one who takes fish by netting a tank on either side, Dasa and Sauskala do so by means of a fish-hook (badisa), Baina, Kaivarta and Mainala by means of a net (jala), Margara catches fish in the water with his hands, Anda by putting pegs at a ford (apparently by building a sort of dam), Parnaka by putting a poisoned leaf on the water'. (Das 1931: 295)

If angling and the use of spears and shooting with an arrow, which are found in the *Ramayana* (Hora 1952: 66-67) are added, then that outline records most of the methods in use through historic time, certainly in inland fisheries.

In the *Arthashastra*, (thought to have been originally written in the fourth century B.C.), there is a great deal of evidence that fisheries were carried on: aquaculture in reservoirs was practised; fishery produce and fishermen themselves were taxed; and the use of fish as manure in agriculture was recognised (Hora 1948b: 7-9). The Asokan epigraphical material, from a period shortly after the earliest form of the *Arthashastra*, confirms these indications. A 'Pillar Edict' which is found in no less than six places throughout the empire openly discusses the fish (along with other animals) which are to be fully protected during breeding and it also seeks to provide other measures to limit the taking of fish and/or their careless slaughter (Hora 1950: 50-54; cf. Thapar 1961: 71-72,

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<sup>1</sup>The research on which this paper is based was supported by an Australian Research Council Large Grant for 1993-95. Please note that diacriticals are missing from Sanskrit and other Indian-language words at present but will be added later.

264): the Gangetic shark, a Gangetic eel, the Freshwater Indian Dolphin (*Platynista gangetica*), the skates and the Puffer or Porcupine fish (*Tetraodon patoica*) (Hora 1950: 44-49)). Such concerns reflect, primarily perhaps, Asoka's preoccupation with non-violence in the propagation of his *dhamma* but they do not suggest any lack of interest in fisheries or their products. Indeed, Romila Thapar has commented that this edict most probably reflected the difficulty which the emperor experienced in banning the catching of fish because of the importance of fish during the Mauryan times (Thapar 1961: 72). Further, Buddhist texts, such as the *Jataka* tales, provide further support to the picture of widespread fisheries. In one place they speak, for instance fishing villages of a thousand families in Kosala are referred to (Hora and Saraswati 1955: 21, 29-30).

Hora and Thapar both hold the view that this evidence of widespread fisheries is also an indication that fish was widely used as food. Hora draws evidence from the *Arthashastra* that 'fish was relished as an article of diet' (Hora 1948b: 10) and Thapar talks of fish as 'an important item of diet in Mauryan times' (Thapar 1961: 72) On the evidence of the *Jataka* tales, Hora and Saraswati claim that

Fish eating was widely prevalent and highly esteemed in the days of *Jataka* tales. Even ascetics enjoyed fish dishes [no. 234].... Ajivikas, a religious order of naked ascetics, are also said to have a fish diet [no. 94]. Women are regarded as having a particular yearning for fish ... [no. 419]. ... (Hora and Sarswati 1955: 20-21, 26-27)

They point out, moreover, that the tales even provide practical culinary advice:

One of the usual modes of preparing fish for eating was to roast it in the embers [no. 216]. We have evidence, too, of fish being dressed and richly cooked, each kind in a different manner [no. 31] (Hora and Saraswati 1955: 21, 27)

In discussing the *Ramayana*, also, Hora points to the fact that the heroes of the epic receive advice of cooking fish on the shores of Lake Pampa:

Laksmana is advised to have the scales cleared and the fishes roasted in an iron pan over the fire (iii. 73. 15) In *Aranyakanda* (76. 24), Rama and Laksmana are advised to cook rice and fish with salt and red pepper on reaching an *asrama* on the west bank of the Pampa Lake. (Hora 1952: 67)

By the time of his 1953 paper on the *Sruti* and *Smrti* literature, Hora was in no doubt about the importance of fish in the general diet:

References to fish in the *Sutras* and the *Smrtis* are only casual. Though they are few and far between, yet they reveal to a considerable extent the part played by fish in man's affairs in those early days in India. It shows also that for the Hindus, most of whom are now vegetarian, fish then formed an important item of food.

Apart from general allusions to fish here and there, we have

references to specific types of fish in different contexts. Chiefly, it is in connection either with the *śraddhas* (i.e. ceremonies where food is offered to the manes and is actually consumed by Brahmana priests) or with certain forbidden foods that the different types of fish are mentioned.

When it is not forbidden, certain species are shown preference over others, either for higher merit or for their greater food value. Again, when meat does form a part of offered food, fish is often declared superior to flesh of other animals. (Hora 1953: 64)

In the *Gautama Dharmasutra*, the *Vasistha Dharmasutra* and the *Yajnavalkya Smṛti*, fish is among the items, mainly of food, which should not be refused if offered voluntarily (Hora 1953: 65) and the *Gautama Dharmasutra*, the *Apastamba Dharmasutra*, the *Manu Smṛti* and the *Yajnavalkya Smṛti* all make recommendations about fish in the *śraddha* (Hora 1953: 65-66). In all of the texts cited above, there are specific injunctions concerning fish which are forbidden: 'misshapen' fish, 'snakeheaded' fish, those - like shark - which exist on flesh alone (Hora 1953: 66-68). But Hora also points out that the texts can contain quite contrary injunctions: the *Yajnavalkya Smṛti* orders three days fasting for eating fish in one place but in another lists the fish 'fit for eating even by the *Brahmanas*', namely, the Simhatundaka (*Bagarius bagarius* (Ham.)), the Rohita (*Labeo rohita* (Ham)), the Pathina (*Wallago attu* (Bloch)), and the Rajiva (*Mugil corsula* (Ham)) (Hora 1953: 68, 74-75).

From his consideration of these texts, Hora reached the following conclusion:

it can be safely concluded that during the period 600 B.C. to 200 A.D., fish was generally considered a valuable article of food among Hindus, though certain species or kinds of fish, for one reason or another, were forbidden to be eaten. Among those regarded suitable for eating, there was a regular gradation in quality or value. ... The *Smṛtis* contain contradictory statements about the use of fish as food which shows the working of the social, religious and political influences by which taking of any kind of animal flesh became a taboo afterwards. (Hora 1953: 75)

This correlation between fishing activity and the consumption of fish as a general part of the Indian diet in early times is not accepted, however, by Tarak Chandra Das in his discussion of 'the cultural significance of fish in Bengal' (Das 1931, 1932).

Fish is mentioned only once in the *Rigveda* (X. 68. 8) where a whole Sukta is devoted to it. But it does not indicate fish as an article of food among the Rigvedic Aryas. It refers to the method of catching them with nets and that also by people belonging to different racial stock. In the later Vedas also, such as the Arthavaveda, the Vajasaneyi Samhita and the Taittiriya Samhita we find mention of fish in various connection but it is never mentioned as an article of food fit for the Aryas. In the later Vedic literature, viz. the Brahmanas, the Upanisads and the Śrauta Sūtras fish is referred to in

several places but here also it is not mentioned as an object of food. ... Thus, though fish, fishing methods and fishermen occur in the different passages of the early and the later Vedic literature it is really strange that not even once it does not appear as an article of food. On the other hand the Vedic literature abounds with references to many other kinds of food and drink ... [and] it would be really strange to miss fish in this long list if it at all had been a kind of food used by the Aryas of the Vedic days. Though this type of negative evidence is no sure guide to our knowledge about the feelings of the Vedic Indians towards fish as an article of food yet it gives us sufficient ground to suspect a sort of taboo on fish in their culture-pattern. But when the sacred literature of later periods, which claim to rest on Vedic traditions, cautiously lifts a few of the restrictions imposed on fish-eating, their attitude corroborates our suspicion and actuates us to believe in the existence of a definite taboo in the Vedic days. (Das 1931: 295-96)

A further indication of the strength of the basic taboo, he believed, lay in the refusal of the Shastras to allow fishing as an occupation to Aryans. Not only was there no reference to Aryans following such an occupation; the Dharmasastras, he argued, were

very strict in this matter and even while delineating *apaddharma*<sup>2</sup> they have not allowed it to the twice-born. On the other hand, it is constantly mentioned as the occupation of low-born peoples who did not belong to their culture or race. (Das 1931: 298)

This conclusion, that fish was not a general part of the Indian diet in early times, confronted Das with the paradox which his articles were designed to resolve: clearly, in Bengal, fish was a most important part of the diet for people at all levels of the population; and he also knew from an earlier article by S. T. Moses, which he cited extensively (Das 1931: 299, 302-3; Das 1932: 96), that the same was also true of many parts of south India, at least among certain groups (Moses 1922-23: 549-50).

'Bengalees', Das argued, 'utilise this food material to a greater extent than the inhabitants of any other part of India'. Reports from just before and just after the 1914-18 War showed, he suggested, that probably more than 80 per cent. of the population were fish-eaters (Das 1931: 276). As elsewhere in India, he pointed out, fish was certainly food for lower social groups including tribal people; but in Bengal (and the 'Mahratta tract') the higher social groups also took fish, contrary to the strong taboo which was placed on fish-eating by the highest castes, especially Brahmans, in the central Ganga-Yamuna valley ('the Midland of the ancients', by which he means 'Madhyama Dis' of Vedic India or the 'Madhya Desa' of the Puranas (Schwartzberg 1978: 13, plate III.A.1 and 27, plate III.D.3) and in south India (Das 1931: 276-77). The chief exceptions among higher castes in Bengal, he claimed, were Hindu widows 'of the higher castes' who were not permitted to have fish from the time of their widowhood

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<sup>2</sup> 'rules governing the legitimate occupations and activities of Aryans unable to live in the manner of their class'; Basham 1954: 542.

(Das 1931: 276, 286); the Vaishnavas 'to a certain extent' (Das 1931:276); and 'Brahmins who wish to live up to the orthodox standard of purity' (Das 1931: 276).

Das discussed this paradox in terms of the elements of what he defined as a 'fish trait-complex' in Bengal. In so far as the use of fish as food was concerned, this 'trait-complex' was to be seen in the use of fish in certain ceremonial and ritual situations. He gives two examples of domestic ceremonies in which fish played a role. The first concerned a domestic ceremony linked to the preparation of *kasundi*, the traditional Bengali mustard paste combining 'mustard oil, lemon juice or sour green mango' (Banerji 1991: 14) which took place on *Aksayatriya*, 'the third day of the bright half of the month of Baisakh' [April-May] (Das 1931: 277). Das described the preparations of the *kasundi* - the washing and sunning of the mustard seeds, the pounding into a fine pulp and then the mixing with hot water 'in a new earthen pot in the main house of the family by one of the ladies who has her husband living', the salting and adding of green mangoes, before the regrinding of the pulp and the final mixing.

Three or four days later - on an auspicious day of the week ... a part of this preparation is put into a small, new earthen pot, well-covered and put in a safe place in the house to be opened on the first day of the month of Asadh. The whole operation ... is regarded as a religious rite. Now, on this day, fish must be eaten by all members of the family. (Das 1931: 277-78)

Das then dealt with the ways in which fish were associated with two important social areas - marriage and the rituals of *sraddha*, the obsequies during which offerings are made to the deceased or to the manes collectively.

Marriage, he noted was 'invariably connected with fish in every part of the province' (Das 1931: 284). In the ceremonies which preceded the marriage, fish were invariably among the items sent to the house, respectively, of the bride and groom: in eastern Bengal the items sent for *adhibasa* 'always include a pair of fish with scales', generally one larger than the other; in western Bengal fish were sent for *gaye-halud* 'the ceremony of smearing with turmeric paste' (Das 1931: 284). 'The very beginning of marriage is marked with fish which is regarded as an auspicious article throughout the ceremony and even later in life' (Das 1931: 284). He outlined these other events: 'when the bride comes to the house of her husband for the first time, she enters it along with her husband with a fish in her hand' (Das 1931: 284-85); 'until the symbolic marriage tie is untied, the couple must have fish as an invariable part of their diet' (Das 1931: 285); 'during the married life of a woman, who has her husband living, she must try to take fish on every day, if possible' (Das 1931: 285); 'every month on the third day of her menstruation, when she is ceremonially purified by ablution, she should take fish, though only for that day' (Das 1931: 285); 'when a woman, whose husband is living, comes to the house of her husband from that of her father, she should have fish as an article of diet on that day at least' (Das 1931: 285); whenever a woman is taken from her husband's house to her fathers or vice versa, the party should always bring fish and betel at least as presents (Das 1931: 285-86). Das noted that, in fact, 'wealthy peoples may continue such exchange of presents even later on', such presents acquiring special social significance:

The articles of food sent on these occasions are never wholly

consumed by the families to which they are given but are distributed among all the families who collectively form the *samaj* (community) and also to friends. (Das 1931: 286)

Within this context, ‘the force of the prohibition’ of fish to Hindu widows became, as Das noted, very clear (Das 1931: 286).

Fish, Das noted, was also an important marker of particular phases of the *sraddha* ceremonies. During the period of mourning, the mourners were required to observe certain taboos’:

The period of mourning depends on the caste of the family and is characterised by total abstention from fish, meat, eggs, some kinds of pulses, onions, etc. Sons and the wife are to wear special mourning dress while all agnates are not to cleanse their clothes, shave their beard or crop hair, etc.... these taboos on food are ‘removed in a ceremony known as *matsyamukhi*’ (fish-eating ceremony). On this day, which falls on the first ceremonially suitable day after the *Sraddha* ceremony, all the relatives especially the agnates, sit together at a feast when fish is served, for the first time to the observers of the taboos. The nearest agnate belonging to the superior grade of agnatic kinship, and preferably older in age, puts a piece of fish from his own plate on that of the chief mourner and this ends the period of taboos for all concerned. Thus fish here serves as an emblem of all the taboos taken together and the partaking of it removes all other taboos automatically. (Das 1931: 287)

Fish also featured among the offerings made to the departed soul in the *adya sraddha* and to the ancestors in the *abhyudhayika sraddha*. Among brahmans, cooked food, including fish, was offered, sometimes to be eaten by the *agradani* (‘a class of degraded Brahmins who receive gifts at funeral rites’); among non-Brahmans, uncooked fish is offered and is taken away by the *agradani*. (Das 1931: 287) Das noted that in some parts of Bengal ‘a piece of burnt fish is offered to the *preta* [corpse] at the time of the *Adyasraddha* ceremony’ (Das 1931: 288).

Das argued that an examination of the ‘customs surrounding fish in Bengal’, which he had already outlined, would show that these could not be associated with the Vedic Aryans. Fish used in the marriage ceremony occurred in parts not prescribed by the ‘sacred literature’; fish in the *sraddha* was also ‘dissociated from the Brahmanical rituals’ and observed only as ‘a social custom’. Later, he adds the point that when the Dharmasutras do begin, at a quite late date, to ‘introduce certain exceptions to this rule [prohibiting fish-eating] and thereby allow consumption of certain kinds of fish’ this appears to be the result of the need ‘to make concessions to popular tastes’ in those regions outside the ‘original Midlandic zone’ to which their influence had been extended and where fish-eating was accepted more widely (Das 1932: 114-15). He was convinced, therefore, that fish was not introduced into the religious and social rites of Bengal by what he calls the ‘bearers of Midland culture’ (Das 1931: 297).

Essentially, therefore, we have two directly contradictory views of the historical place of fish in the Indian diet. Hora's view is that fish-eating was a common element for all classes in early times but was later made the subject of taboos that restricted its use;



and Das's view that there had been a general 'Arya' taboo on fish (and fishing) that was only gradually weakened in certain special areas, like Bengal.

## 2. Symbolic issues: fish in other cultural situations

Das went on to consider a number of other aspects of the 'cultural significance of fish' which he saw as important in providing a basis for an explanation for the historical development that he outlined with regard to fish in the Indian diet. It will assist a discussion of Das's views to outline these other aspects. The first of these other elements was the use of fish as totems. 'Totemism', Das argued, 'persists in the western parts of Bengal among tribal peoples living in these parts and further towards the west', while among 'Hinduised tribes' could be found 'the remains of totemism' (Das 1931: 291-92). He gave a range of examples:

... the Mals of Midnapur and Manbhum, a Hinduised pre-Dravidian<sup>3</sup> tribe of Central and Western Bengal have *penkal mach* and *sal mach* (two kinds of fish) as their totems. Among the Mundas we have *aind* (a kind of eel, *binjuar* (a kind of eel), *area* (a kind of fish), *dundu* (another kind of eel), *dungdung* (a kind of river fish), *hemram* (a kind of fish), *jia* (a river fish), *kandru* (fish), *machli* (fish), *maugh* (fish), *sal* (a big pond fish), *sisungi* (a kind of fish), *sohek* (a kind of fish), *Solai* (fish. ... The Santals have *Boar* (fish) and *aind* (a kind of eel), as sub-septs among them. (Das 1931: 298-99)

He limited the number of such examples that he presented but he was convinced of the importance of the trait: 'Stories explaining these totemic connections are recounted and taboos are observed by the totemites' (Das 1931: 299). One such area in which totems were important was in connection with the next trait within the complex - the belief in fish as temporary or permanent seats for departed souls.

Das was not able to find any instance in Bengal itself of a belief in fish as the temporary or permanent seats for departed souls but he found cases in Chota Nagpur which served his purpose (Das 1931: 292). The Bhumijas, he recorded, had *Bhuiya* and *Salrishi* fish totems; and among them

I found a belief that the souls belonging to the members of a fish-totem return to the fishes in the waters of the river after burial which is done in their case in the river-bed under water. (Das 1931: 299)

The Gonds of the Central Provinces, as recorded by S.T. Moses (Moses 1922-23: 553), provided a second example. Moses indicated, Das wrote, that the Gonds believed

that the souls of the dead take habitation in fish so, after burial 'they go to the river, cry out the name of the dead man and catch a fish which they fully believe is the mortal vehicle of that soul'. This fish is then eaten in the belief that the deceased will be born again in the family. (Das 1931: 299)

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<sup>3</sup> The terms 'Hinduised' and 'pre-Dravidian' will be explained later in the paper.

Das showed that there were the ways in which fish was used as offerings to spirits and deities in a number of Bengal festivals and ceremonies related to the worship of the goddess in her various manifestations. He discussed both the worship by high caste women of Parvati as Nistarini, 'one who delivers from difficulties' on the first day of Asadh (June-July). Among the special offerings made to the goddess was 'fish, preferably Hilsa (Indian shad)'; normally these special offerings were cooked and eaten by the devotees only but Das recorded that 'in some parts, certain portion of the fish thus offered, is given to the officiating priest as his perquisite' (Das 1931: 279) and during the worship of Saraswati, the goddess of learning, by 'the whole of the middle class' on Sripancami, 'the fifth day of the bright half of the month of Magh [January-February]'. Fish played a central role in these ceremonies:

In some districts of Bengal (e.g. Jessore) Hilsa (Indian shad) fish is placed before the goddess at the time of worship. In certain other districts, on this day, it is customary to bring a pair of Hilsa fish to the house. They are ceremonially taken with shoutings of *ulu, ulu, ulu* into the interiors of the main house by some woman of the family whose husband is living, if possible by the housewife. Next they are honoured with a few grains of winter paddy and *durva* shoots together with vermilion paint applied to the forehead of the fishes. The scales of these fishes are 'deposited safely in a hole by the side of the centre-post of the main house, which is also otherwise endowed with ceremonial importance'. It is believed that this would increase the progeny and the wealth of the family. Originally the ceremony seems to have been a fertility rite, symbolised by the pair, which has at a later stage come to be associated with ideas of homoeopathic magic- the circular shining scale representing silver coins. This ceremony may also be performed on some other auspicious day later on. (Das 1931: 280)

Also significant, he argued was the role of fish in Durga Puja in Aswin (September-October). 'The greatest national festival of Bengal', Das wrote, 'is marked with the introduction of fish in ritual practices' (Das 1931: 280).

On all three days of worship different varieties of fish are offered to the goddess after cooking both in Eastern and Western Bengal (e.g. Faridpur, Howrah). In the district of Dacca certain new features are 'added which show superimposition of the practices of different cultures'. Here, on the last day of worship, i.e. the Dasami day, boiled rice kept overnight immersed in water, chutney prepared with the lotus stalk and the soup of *boal*-fish (*Wallago attu*) - all prepared on the previous day - are offered to the goddess. It is a strict injunction of the Hindu Shastras that all articles of food must be prepared fresh and the consumption of stale food is decried in unequivocal language. The goddess Durga is fondly conceived in Bengal to be on a visit to her father's house on the earth for this short period of five days, during the whole year, the rest of which she is to

pass in company of a penniless, drunkard and exacting husband. This popular conception of the goddess's visit and her family life lack any Shastric foundation but are often referred to in the medieval Bengali literature. (Das 1931: 280-81)

He then detailed the involvement in the worship of Kali at various times and at particular temples. Das wrote that *boal* (*Wallago attu*) - also referred to as 'sheat-fish' - was offered to Kali on 'the New Moon day of the month of Aswin, i.e. the Dipanvita day'; 'the festival of lights', he commented, 'is distributed all over India but in Bengal it has become associated with the worship of Kali' (Das 1931: 281). In addition to these festival occasions, he pointed out, *boal* was offered in daily worship of Kali in certain parts of the province;

Thus at Bhowanipur in the district of Bogra we have an old temple of Kali dating from the time of Rani Bhawani of sacred memory, of Natore. It is believed that her adopted son, Maharaja Ramkrishna attained *siddhi* (spiritual beatification) at this place. In this temple sheat-fish is daily offered to the goddess along with other offerings (Das 1931: 281-82)

The remaining occasion described by Das was the festivities associated with the last day of the Bengali year, usually observed 'seven days before the Samkranti ... till the New Year's Day' (Das 1931: 283). This, Das reported, was 'a festival in which the lower classes predominate almost to the exclusion of the higher castes' (Das 1931: 282).

The functions of the Brahmin priest and the high class devotee are limited to unimportant ritualistic performances while the real devotees are the lower classes whose chief works as priest in the main rites of the ceremony. ... In the course of this festival god Siva is worshipped on the last day of the year at midnight by the *bala* (the low caste priest) on a spot where a Candal who has died of unnatural death, has been cremated. There the chief performer (*bala*) together with two or three assistants repair at the dead of night and cook rice over a fire kindled with the unburnt or half-burnt wood left by those who came to cremate dead bodies. A *gajar* fish is also roasted on this fire. This cooked rice and *gajar* fish are then offered to Siva on a plantain leaf by the *bala* with recitation of *mantras* (incantations) composed in an archaic vernacular which is not always intelligible even to the performer himself (Das 1931: 283).

Das then gave several examples of fish being venerated, protected and/or treated as important objects in themselves. The first of these examples were details of fish in pools at temples or other sacred sites:

Thus the temple of Tripureswari of Tippera is widely known throughout Bengal for its sanctity and antiquity. ... It is dedicated to Parvati in her aspect of Tripureswari. This temple has a tank attached to it where fishes abound and are carefully protected from

molestation. Every day at the end of the daily *puja* the flesh of a he-goat sacrificed to the goddess is cut into pieces and given to the fishes in the tank. No one ever thinks of killing or eating or annoying them in any way and they also, on their part, have become so tame and accustomed to their food at that appointed time they all congregate near the place whence the pieces of flesh are distributed. (Das 1931: 288; other Bengal examples 288-89; U.P. examples 289; South Indian examples 302-03)

A second example was the use by Bengali merchants of living fish as 'sacred objects and auspicious symbols':

In the socio-economic rite of *Punyaha* of the merchants of the different districts of Bengal, fish occurs as a sacred object. On the first day of the year every merchant invites his habitual customers to his shop on a friendly visit and also expect that the creditors [presumably in the sense of those who have had credit] will pay some money on this day. A plate is kept for this purpose on which the creditor is to place his part of the due. By the side of this plate, in a vessel filled with water, a few living fishes are kept both as sacred objects and auspicious symbols. (Das 1931: 289)

His third example was the taboo on the eating of Hilsa from 'the day following *Bijaya Dasami* day (tenth day of the bright half of the month of *Aswin* - i.e. Sept-Oct.) till the next *Sripancami* day (fifth day of the bright half of the month of *Magh*, i.e. Jan-Feb)':

During this period the strict observers of ancient customs do not eat this fish. The prohibition has the salutary effect of providing for a copious supply of this important article of food in the next year as this taboo protects the fishes during their breeding season (Das 1931: 290).

Finally, he recorded a number of fears 'in the mind of ordinary people' which associated fish with evil spirits and ghosts: ghosts were believed to try to get amateur fishermen to part with some of their haul; nets of fishermen were believed to be effective weapons against the evil designs of these supernatural enemies; pregnant women could not touch any fishing implement 'as they might be possessed by evils spirits who have some undefined connection with these instruments' (Das 1931: 290). In *Dacca* district, he noted,

when a woman loses her child soon after birth and that successively a number of times, a special variety of small fish is caught and its forehead daubed with vermilion and let loose by the woman concerned. It is believed that thenceforth her children will live the usual span of life. The fishermen also do not kill such vermilion-marked fishes but allow them to return to their own element. (Das 1931: 291)

Finally, he pointed to the use of fish as symbols. Basically he referred to examples which he had already given and simply commented:

We have noticed that in many of the social ceremonies fish appears [sic] as fertility symbols. In certain other cases they are mere auspicious symbols which character also may be ultimately traced to their connection with fertility rites. In addition to these instances there are others which belong to the domain of nefarious magic. In some parts of Western Bengal a kind of small fish, locally known as *ogol taki* which is not eaten by the higher caste peoples, is cut on the crossing of roads in the hope of recovery from certain specified diseases. (Das 1931: 291)

Taken together with the use of fish as food, these symbolic and other uses of fish constituted, in Das' view, the 'trait-complex' which placed fish in a significant position in a number of central social and religious ceremonies and which invested fish with importance in relationships with relatives, with the deities and with a wider world of powers in which magic and other such forces operated. The question that was important for Das, having analysed the component parts of the complex, was: 'But who did raise this commonplace article of food to the sphere of religious ritualism?' (Das 1931: 298) In his attempt to answer to this question Das raises an historical argument which would place fish in a very particular place in India's historical development and it is important, therefore, to consider his approach.

### 3. Fish in Indian Culture: a 'Non-Arya' Development?

Essentially, Das proposed an answer in terms of the long-term cultural history of India involving the amalgamation of the various groups known to have contributed to the population of the subcontinent over prehistoric and historic time. In doing so he used the terminology of the physical anthropology of his day<sup>4</sup> in order to distinguish three elements in the 'racial stratification' of Bengal which he believed could potentially have played roles in the development of the fish trait-complex<sup>5</sup>. These three groups were:

<sup>4</sup> In utilising Das' categories for the purpose of the present discussion we do not wish to be seen as endorsing this 'racial' explanation of India's cultural history - not least because we believe that it raises as many questions as it answers! Moreover, we are aware that although much of the terminology of physical anthropology and the descriptive categories it deploys - and in some cases use of the evidence of anthropometry on which it was based - remains in the mainstream literature (Ghurye 1957: 116-42; Hutton 1963: 2-7; Nilakantha Sastri 1966: 58-62; Thapar 1966: 26-27; Allchin 1968: 48-50), it is clear that there is now a tendency to down-play the so-called 'racial' descriptors in this discussion. Thus, Spate and Learmonth talk of 'ethnic stocks' (p.151); Thapar (p.27) underlines that 'Aryan' is a linguistic, not an ethnic term; and the Allchins move to speak merely of 'physical types' (p.48). Kosambi (1975: 80) perhaps puts the doubts best: 'The people who first ... spoke the Sanskrit language ... called themselves *arya*. The term persists through later Sanskrit and its derivative languages ... Western scholars from the nineteenth century onwards used the word Aryan to denote a considerable group of closely related languages ... An "Aryan Race" was considered for some time as ridiculous a concept as a "Brachycephalic grammar". This conclusion may still be retained, not because there were no Aryan people in antiquity but because the whole concept of race based on skeletal measurements, hair colour, skin pigmentation, colour of eyes, is now regarded as of doubtful genetic validity.'

<sup>5</sup> In concentrating on these three groups he recognised that he was 'leaving aside the controversial question of the Negritoid element' and accepting that the 'part the Dravidians played in the formation of our

- the ‘Pre-Dravidians’, or ‘Proto-Australoids’, the ‘tribal’ peoples and the vast majority of lower-caste peoples, who were ‘the substratum of the Bengalee population and even of the Indian people’ (Das 1931:294);
- the brachycephalic (‘broad-headed’) ‘Alpines’ (Das 1931: 293) who are seen to constitute the higher castes in Bengal (as well as in parts of Maharashtra and some important areas in the peninsula<sup>6</sup>); and
- the ‘Dolicho-Aryans’ (i.e. dolichocephalic or ‘long-headed’ Indo-Aryans), the ‘Indo-europoeus Dolichomorphus of Haddon’, the people ‘who originated the Vedic culture in the Valley of the Five Rivers and carried it down in all directions’. Das argued that ‘the cultural influence of this stock was immense over the people of Bengal but the racial impress can only be traced in the higher castes and that even as a veneer only’. (Das 1931: 293-4)

Given his argument about the mere ‘veneer’ of Indo-Aryan presence in the Bengal population, Das might have relied on that fact alone to argue that the Indo-Aryans played only a minor role in the development of the fish trait-complex. However, he went much further than this and argued that this group was actively opposed to the use of fish and to allowing Aryans to fish as an occupation. He argued, therefore, that this group was not only *not* a contributor to the trait complex but was, in fact, an active opponent of it.

Such a conclusion meant that Das was left with the task of assigning importance in the development of the fish trait-complex to two groups, the ‘Pre-Dravidians’ or ‘Proto-Australoids’ and the ‘Alpines’, and the great bulk of the remainder of his paper - the latter pages of the 1931 section of the paper (pp. 297-303) and the bulk of the 1932 section of the paper (pp. 96-111) - were devoted to the examination of comparative evidence designed to show (a) that Pre-Dravidian peoples were closely related to the catching and use of fish and had built fish totems into their social systems, in Bengal itself and in the subcontinent generally; and (b) that the importance of fish as sacred objects, as an element in social ceremonies, as offerings to spirits and deities and as symbols of fertility and good fortune were marked throughout the entire range of peripheral areas around the subcontinent where brachycephalic peoples predominated and where the influence of the dolichocephalic Aryans was weakest. He concluded, therefore, that attitudes to fish as an edible object, the use of fish as totems and beliefs in fish as the seats for departed souls were derived from Pre-Dravidian sources (Das 1932: 111-12), while the remaining elements - offering fish to the deities, the use of fish in social ceremonies, regarding fish as sacred objects and the symbolic regard for fish - ‘were most probably originated or developed’ by the Alpine elements (‘the

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people still remains uncertain’; p.293. He was well aware of the Mongoloid elements in the tribes to the east and southeast of Bengal but he regards these as ‘comparatively recent immigrants into these places; pp. 292-93.

<sup>6</sup> We need to observe that, while Das identifies the ‘western Brachycephals’ or ‘Alpines’ group as significant and, by deduction, sees them as contributing important ‘traits’, he does not identify any basis for understanding why they might have had this concern for certain aspects of fish.

brachycephals themselves') (Das 1932: 112).

How, then, did these elements come together in Bengal? Das argued that

the Pre-Dravidians form the substratum of the population throughout the greater part or even the whole of India. The dolichocephalic and the brachycephalic Aryans together with the Dravidians found the country in possession of these dark-skinned, broad-nosed, short-statured and long-headed people, who were absorbed by them in different proportions in different centres. The society which grew up as a result of this racial miscegenation also reflected the racial and cultural contact in their social institutions. When the brachycephals came to live among the Pre-Dravidians in the aforementioned areas and probably mixed their blood with the autochthones they adopted the purely Pre-Dravidian elements in the fish-complex and then developed them according to their own culture pattern. (Das 1932: 112)

Those adaptations, he suggested, took some items and left others. 'Thus, fish which formed an important article of diet among the Pre-Dravidians were adopted by the brachycephalic immigrants. So it is we find fish-eating among the higher classes of the broad-headed belt of India' [i.e. in Maharashtra etc, as well as Bengal] (Das 1932:112); but, on the other hand, 'as totemism did never form a trait of the brachycephalic culture-pattern, fish in the role never occurs, even one, among them, but is limited to the purely Pre-Dravidian groups or those lower castes recruited from them' (Das 1932:112-13). With regard to the ideas of fish as seats for departed souls, this was introduced among higher castes in certain parts of India (Das 1932: 113). His overall summation of this process suggests elements of reciprocity with just a suggestion of the higher castes retaining some control over 'their' contributions:

Under the circumstances it seems plausible that these brachycephals adopted fish as an article of food at the first instance from the Pre-Dravidians and gradually raised it to the plane of ritualistic use. The magical properties of fish might have formed the link between the two groups as we find fish in this role both among the Pre-Dravidians and among the brachycephals (Alpines). The introduction of fish in the social ceremonies among the higher castes alone to the exclusion of the Pre-Dravidian tribes might have been caused by these brachycephals who thus developed the trait on its normal course. In course of time the trait-complex was further developed among the same people and fish was introduced as offerings to deities and gradually became sacred objects by themselves. The sacred character of fish might have been a logical development of the original Pre-Dravidian idea about their being temporary or permanent seats of departed souls. (Das 1932: 113-14)

Why was there, however, so little influence of the Vedic traditions on the higher castes in Bengal (and perhaps in other parts of the 'brachycephalic belt')? Das argued

that the contact between the Pre-Dravidians and the Alpines had been of sufficient duration before Aryan influence entered Bengal, for these later 'Midland' influences not to be greatly effective - at least in the parts of the culture in which fish played some part (Das 1932: 113) - although here his earlier points that the fish elements avoid the 'sacred' elements of ceremonies and that those who desire to be orthodox' have to forego elements of the fish-complex would suggest that there may have been influences that work at subtle levels.

#### 4. Fish in 'mainstream' culture?

Leaving aside the nature of the 'ethnographic' argument being used by Das for the time being, it is necessary to ask whether a view of fish within Indian culture can be fully sustained in the basis that it derived essentially from outside one major element of that culture as it developed and, indeed, that there was some central parts of the cultural formation that regarded it as, in some ways, anathema. The problem with such a conclusion is that it seems to be at odds with the recurrent role of fish within the some central elements of the cultural formations which become so important in India historically.

In this regard it is important to consider elements such as the importance of the first (fish) *avatar* of Vishnu - *Matsya* - who is the saviour of the Veda in the Vedic version of the 'flood' (Danielou 1964; Kosambi 1962; O'Flaherty 1980; and Zimmer 1962) and the persistence of the image/symbol in certain art forms - e.g. Madhubani painting (Thakur n.d.; Vequaud 1977), and as a symbolic and/or decorative element in royal courts, palaces and the like.

As an illustration, it might be useful to consider the connections with fish of Satyavati, the mother of Veda-Vyasa, the compiler of the Mahabharata and the arranger of the Puranas. Satyavati is also the second wife of Santanu, the grandfather of the Kauravas and the Pandavas; indeed, she arranges for her other son, Vyasa/Krishna Dvaipayana, to father Dhrtarastra and Pandu from the widows (Ambika and Ambalika) of her own two sons by Santanu, Citrangada and Vicitravirya. Satyavati is said to be the daughter of the Apsaras, Adrika, 'who was condemned to live on earth in the form of a fish' - so that she is also called Matsyadari, 'fish-born' (Dowson 1957: 288); she bore Vyasa after intercourse with the seer Parasara in 'a ferry she plied on the river Yamuna' (van Buitenen 1973: xiii); and she is said by van Buitenen to be 'the daughter of a fisher tribe chieftain' (van Buitenen 1973: xiii). Dowson explains that she was the daughter of Uparichara, a Vasu or demigod, who by command of Indra became king of Chedi. He had five sons by his wife and a son (Matsya) and a daughter (Satyavati) by the Apsaras, Adrika (Dowson 1957, 326).

It would seem to be difficult to sustain a view that fish is unimportant in a culture which has, at the centre of its mythic structure, a fish figure (*Matsya*) who provides for the preservation of the very culture itself and also, in the very foundations of its great epic, a figure (Satyavati) who provides the essential mainsprings of the narrative and whose referents are overwhelmingly those with a 'fish' connection. In the light of this it would seem wise to look for other elements that might account for the recurrence of the fish image: the importance, perhaps, of fish as a symbol of fertility or fecundity? the fact that fish can be seen as a 'vehicle' (e.g., for the soul)? Such questions are the next stage of this inquiry.



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