

## **An Ode to the fishing communities: Fishy tales on the beaches of Puri in Odisha, India**

By Aparna Maladkar (2018)

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Puri, a city located in the coastal state of Odisha in eastern India, is famous as one of India's most worshipped Hindu pilgrimage sites, and for its architectural splendours, natural wonders and beautiful beaches. Puri beach, on the shores of the Bay of Bengal, is known for its splendid golden sands, choppy waters, and beautiful sunrises and sunsets. Tourists from all over the world flock this coastal city to explore its religious and natural potential.

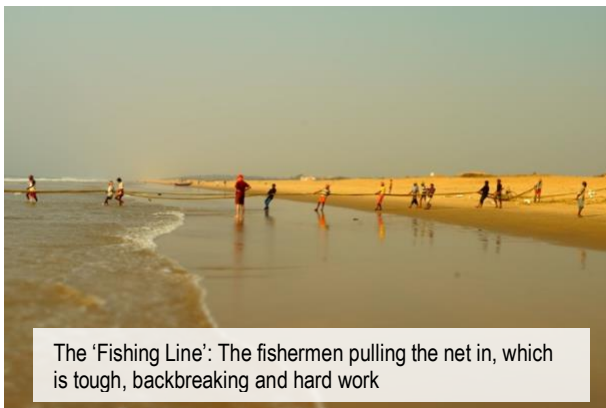


Its coastal location makes fishing a dominant industry in Puri region. On my third day in Puri, I decided to observe the early morning fishing activities that take place just before sunrise. Amongst a few carefree tourists leisurely walking on the beach in the early hours, I was lucky to witness an entirely different world of small-scale fishing business. As I headed to the beach, teams of fishermen were spread along the long beach gathering up their gear to commence a long day of fishing. The fishing groups didn't use boats for fishing nor did they go far out into the sea. The only gear they carried were their fishing nets, their strength and their hard work. This traditional fishing method is akin to manual beach seine fishing, where a fishing net (seine) is deployed from the shore by men and it hangs vertically in the water. I manoeuvred around cawing crows and stray dogs that were circling the fishermen waiting for their spoils, and dead Oliver Ridley turtles strewn along the beach to observe a team of fishermen. Sadly, in recent years, Puri beach has had major concerns with the deaths of hundreds of Oliver Riley sea turtles that travel thousands of kilometres to the coast to mate and nest. In 2017 and 2018, Odisha government made 'Olly' the official mascot for sports events to raise awareness about the endangered Olive Ridley sea turtles.<sup>1</sup>

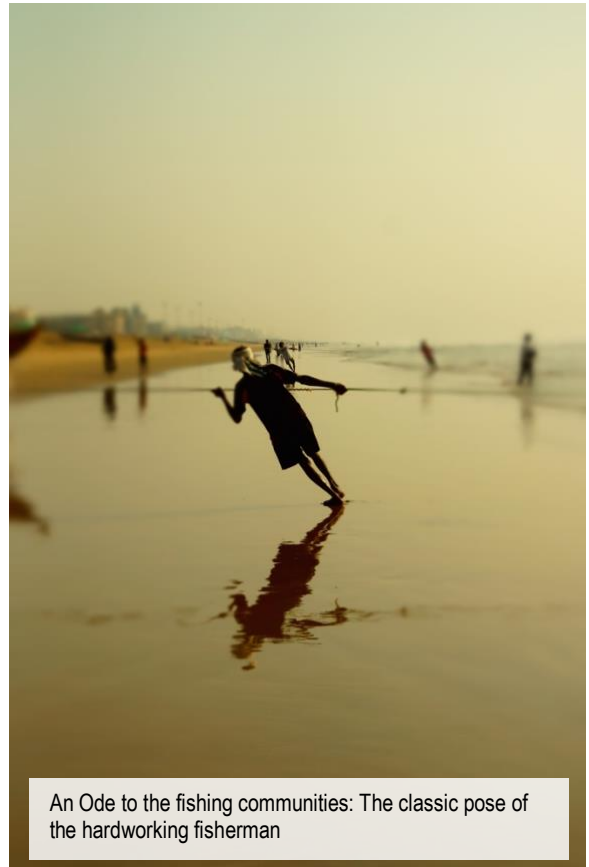
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<sup>1</sup> Hindustan Times. 2020. *Hundreds Of Olive Ridley Carcasses Wash Ashore On Odisha Beach*. [online] Available at: <

It was a fine morning as each group walked into the sea carrying their net to some distance; there was some shouting heard over the sound of the wind and the waves, though they all seemed to be in tune with each other. Each team of about 10-12 fishermen formed a 'fishing line' holding the net at uniform distances and patiently waiting in line once the other end of the net was immersed in the water. When the hauling in of the net started, the whole beach came alive, and locals and tourists joined in the process of pulling



The 'Fishing Line': The fishermen pulling the net in, which is tough, backbreaking and hard work



An Ode to the fishing communities: The classic pose of the hardworking fisherman

the net in. Two fishermen quickly increased the gap between them when I expressed a wish to join them; the work was extremely tough and backbreaking with the chopping waters working against the cumulative strength of the fishermen. The fishermen shouted advice throughout and worked in absolute sync with each other. At any one time, I could see a number of 'fishing lines' along the beach and the classic pose of the fisherman pulling the net dotted all along the beach, simultaneously personifying his immense strength and struggle.



The Haul: Sadly, some catch very little indeed...



The Haul: While some are lucky...





Crabs: Does this mean good money?



The variety: pomfret, hilsa, sardines, anchovies, mackerels, prawns



The Crab-Fish Line



The fisherman sorting the fish; notice his beautiful rings...



The on-site bargaining to sell fresh fish



Sold! The first sale of the day



The backbreaking work though at times had very few rewards; some didn't catch anything at all, while others were lucky. The haul was quickly spread out on the beach and sorted, and unwanted items thrown back in the water, which were consumed by the crows and dogs. The locals quickly gathered around the spread and started haggling for the best fresh fish as the fishermen tried to make their first sale of the day. The remaining fish was then loaded into wicker baskets, which were carried by the fisherwomen to the Puri markets. The fisherwomen literally ran to the markets to get there first to make the best sales due to fierce competition between fishing groups.



Fresh fish, anyone?



The rest being readied to be sold in the Puri markets



The fisherwoman on the market run (literally, due to fierce competition between the fishing groups)



Trying to make a sale for 'natural' pearls and stones from the Bay



Well-deserved rest before it all starts again

Studies have shown that beach seine fishing is mainly practised in underprivileged and economically disadvantaged fishing communities of Puri who are often not able to afford fishing boats. This fishing method requires many people with proper understanding of this traditional fishing technique to achieve a good haul and generate a good income for all people involved. Due to these reasons, and along with impracticality and inconveniency of this fishing technique, and unpredictability of a good catch, this practise is slowly going out of use. The catch, which often isn't great, is usually sold to the local fish vendors and the local people.<sup>2</sup>



Once the fish is on its way to the market, the fishermen rest on the beach for some time before starting the whole process again. Subsistence livelihood of the poor coastal fishing communities in Puri is extremely challenging way of life. To make reasonable amount of money for everybody in the team, the fishermen have to go fishing a number of times throughout the day. The returns are so low that the fishermen hope to make additional money by trying to sell inexperienced tourists 'natural' pearls and stones from the bay. Despite their struggles, it is amazing to witness the enthusiasm, spirit, and dedication of the hard-working fisherfolk.

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<sup>2</sup> Naskar, P., 2018. A Study Of Changing Livelihoods Of Odisha's Coastal Fishing Communities: Reasons And Effects. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, [online] 7(06), pp.14-17. Available at: <[http://www.ijhssi.org/papers/vol7\(6\)/Version-3/C0706031417.pdf](http://www.ijhssi.org/papers/vol7(6)/Version-3/C0706031417.pdf)> [Accessed 4 June 2020].