

Fishing Practices and the Socio-Economic Empowerment of the Kaibartta Women: A Case Study in the Nalbari District of Assam: India

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Abstract: *Fishes are considered as the largest group of vertebrates. On the other hand fish catching is one of the oldest occupations of mankind and fish has been also one of the most important food items of the human beings from the primitive time. In India million of people of fishermen community including Kaibarttas have been depending on this occupation. Like other parts of India, fishing is a caste based occupation in Assam and is traditionally practised by the Kaibarttas. The Kaibarttas, a constituent of fishing community, is an important caste of India. Fishing is their only main traditional occupation of livelihood. This fishing community is specified as scheduled caste for Assam by the constitution order 1950 (a) Part II: Assam. Assam is full of fishery resources. The Kaibartta women of this area are also connected with this fishing profession. They have been offering helping hand in this profession with the male members of the family. According to 2011 census, the total Kaibartta population in Nalbari district is 23048 among which the number of male is 11758 and the number of female is 11260. This paper will be a sincere effort to study and explore the present socio-economic condition of the Kaibartta women of the Nalbari district of Assam in relation to the fishing practices. This paper will also attempt to describe the origin of the Kaibarttas.*

Keywords: *Assam, Empowerment, Fishing, Kaibartta, Scheduled Caste*

I. Introduction

Empowerment of the women is a world-wide issue. In due course of time, it has been the most debated and discussed discourse among the academicians, intellectualists, politicians and social reformers in the whole universe. The term 'women empowerment' can be described as a process of creation of an environment where women can think and grow independently and make their own decisions on their personal development and contribute their best to the development of the society and the nation. Fishes are considered as the largest group of vertebrates. These are found from the world highest 'Lake Titicaca' in South America to the world deepest 'Lake Baikal'. They occupy everything from Antarctic waters below freezing to hot springs. On the other hand fish catching is one of the oldest occupations of mankind and fish has been also one of the most important food items of the human beings from the primitive time. In India million of people of fishermen community including Kaibarttas have been depending on this occupation. Like other parts of India, fishing is a caste based occupation in Assam and is traditionally practised by the Kaibarttas. The Kaibarttas, a constituent of fishing community, is an important caste of India. Fishing is their only main traditional occupation of livelihood. This fishing community is specified as scheduled caste for Assam by the constitution order 1950 (a) Part II: Assam. Assam is full of fishery resources. The Kaibarttas of Nalbari district of Assam has been surviving on their traditional knowledge based techniques for fish harvesting. The Kaibartta women of this area are also connected with this fishing profession. They have been offering helping hand in this profession with the male members of the family. According to 2011 census, the total Kaibartta population in Nalbari district is 23048 among which the number of male is 11758 and the number of female is 11260.

In India caste based society is a matter of controversy. The sixth schedule of the Indian constitution has declared the scheduled caste community as the weaker fragment of Indian caste based society. The Indian government has taken some large scale measures for the social, economic cultural and educational development of the people of this community. The people of this community have been declared socio-economically backward by a public notification under Article 341[I] of the Indian constitution. As the Kaibarttas are one of the sixteen scheduled caste communities of Assam, so they are not exception to this problem as a whole and particularly the Kaibartta women.

This paper will be a sincere effort to study and explore the present socio-economic condition of the Kaibartta women of the Nalbari district of Assam in relation to the fishing practices. How the Kaibartta women of this area can empower themselves socially and economically through the fishing practices will be another humble attempt of this paper. To study the origin of the Kaibarttas will be another attempt of this paper.

II. Review of Literature

Dr. Khagendra Chandra Mahanta's 'Kaibartta Jatir Eti Samiksha', an article published in Natun Dainik, 30th June 1994 focuses on the occupation of Kaibarttas. The author here remarks that 'Kaibartta' is one of the small scheduled caste communities of Assam. He also discusses here how the Indian constitution has tried to uplift them socially, economically and politically so that a sense of renaissance is felt among them. Dr Dhamburudhar Nath in 'Asomar Kaibartta Sakal', an article published in Natun Dainik, 30th June 1994 discusses the social position, religious status etc. of the Kaibarttas of Assam. Referring to the 'Bishnu Purana' the author comments that the Kaibarttas are not inclusive to the Brahmins. Surjya Das, in his 'Mas Aru Masmoria', 1998, focuses on the hardship of the Kaibarttas and their life style. The author here describes the painful life and day to day struggle for their livelihood. He also discusses briefly the culture and religion of the Kaibarttas here. Hemanta Barman, in 'Akhan Kaibartta Gaonor Sabi', an article published in Sutradhar, 1995, describes the pathetic and painful life of the Kaibartta women who go door to door of the people for selling fishes. Debendra Kr. Bezburah, in his 'Brahmaputra Upatyakar Kaibartta jatir Rparekha' mainly studies the socio-economic condition of the Kaibartta community of Assam. Dr. B.N Bordoloi, in his 'Socio-economic condition of the Kaibarttas of Assam: A case study, Assam Institute Research for Tribals and scheduled caste', 1994 has discussed the socio-economic aspects of the Kaibarttas. Ruby Bharaty in her dissertation 'The kaibarttas of Palasbari Revenue: A socio-economic study', 1998 has discussed the socio-economic aspects of the Kaibarttas of Palasbari revenue circle of Assam.

So, the issue of women empowerment with reference to fishing practices of the Kaibarttas of Nalbari district has not been done before. This paper will be a sincere effort to study and explore the present socio-economic condition of the Kaibartta women of the Nalbari district of Assam in relation to the fishing practices. How the Kaibartta women of this area can empower themselves socially and economically through the fishing practices will be another humble attempt of this paper

III. Objectives

The proposed study aims at fulfilling the following objective:

- I. To describe the origin of the Kaibarttas.
- II. To discuss the fishing practices as means of empowering the Kaibartta women of this area.
- III. To discuss the socio-economic condition of the Kaibartta women of this area.

IV. Methodology

The methods adopted for writing this paper are that of multi-disciplinary approaches involving the socio-economic, traditional and religious dimensions. Collection of materials, field survey, case study, interviews and questionnaires are some of the techniques involved in writing this paper. Evaluation and analysis may also be implied as convenient tool of this study. Schedules and questionnaires will be made to collect data from the informants. The information collected will be checked and cross checked from various sources. Methods adopted for investigation of the proposed study are: I. Interview method. II. Case study method. The relevant data are collected from primary and secondary sources. The interview method is done on the following basis. The primary data are collected from the field survey. The secondary data are collected from books, journals, research papers, online sources, various census reports and government documents.

- I. Social aspects: Tradition bearer and older persons of the area
- II. Occupational aspects: Kaibartta fisher men and women of the area.

V. Case Study and the Discussion

The Kaibartta, a constituent of fishing community is an important caste of India. They have been engaging themselves traditionally in the fishing trade which is supposed to be their main livelihood. The existence of the Kaibarttas is evident from the ages of the great epics, such as, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Major fishermen communities of India are generally found in Tamilnadu, Maharashtra, Kerala, Gujrat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Fish catching is one of the oldest occupations of mankind. In India million of people of fishermen community including Kaibarttas have been depending on this occupation. Like other parts of India, fishing is a caste based occupation in Assam and is traditionally practiced by Kaibarttas. The kaibarttas of Nalbari district of Assam have been surviving on their knowledge based techniques for fish harvesting.

Their economic condition of the Kaibarttas is not sound. They have been connecting with the same main age-old occupation of livelihood, i.e. catching fishes is their traditional occupation of livelihood. In due course of time, the Domes or Nodiyals of Assam are known as Kaibarttas. Kaibartta and Namasudra are the two major scheduled castes in Assam sharing more than half of the total Population.

It is very difficult to decide when the Kaibarttas came to Assam. According to some sources the Kaibarttas came to Assam in the pre-historic time. It is assumed that the Kaibarttas started to live permanently in

Assam approximately from the 4th century. When we go through several religious books, Puranas and historical documents it can be said that the Kaibarttas migrated mostly from Orissa and Gour Pradesh. During the reign of Ahoms, many Kaibarttas come to Assam to avoid the wars, taxes and Political ups and downs. To catch fishes in the Puthimari, Kalajal and Baralimari beels, two Kaibarttas were brought to Assam. Later on these two Kaibarttas brought many Kaibarttas and settled themselves on the soil of Assam. During the invasion of Maan and the reign of English many Kaibarttas migrated to Assam as they felt insecure. After the independence many Kaibarttas came to Assam from West Bengal.

Some scholars, on the other hand, opine that the Kaibarttas are the primitive people of Brahmaputra valley or Assam valley. The old books and the wall writing also support the opinions of these scholars. Hajor Barman, the king of old Kamrupa also included the names of Kaibarttas in the stone writing. In the same way, the stone and wall writing of the Middle Age also proves the existence of some Kaibartta villages.¹ The Kaibarttas were the makers of civilization in the Indus valley at Harrapa and Mahenjodaro. They were the developers of Indian writing, township and drainage and central heating system before 2500 B.C. The Kaibarttas were of royal caste. Historian, such as, Gangabandhu Singh has referred to the Padma Purana and Brahma Vaibarta Purana and come to the conclusion that 'Mahisyas' and 'Kaibarttas' are the same castes.

The 'Kaibartta' is Sanskrit word which means one who depends on water. In other words, Kaibartta is a community that earns its livelihood from the related occupation. According to anthropology the Kaibarttas belong to the Drividian origin. 'Kalika Purana' a historical documents explains that the Kaibarttas were living in Kamrup even before the 17th century. According to the Bengali historian, Sevenanda Bharati the ancient home of Mahishya race or Kaibarttas is near the present day Ratnavati on the bank of Narmada. This was known as Mahishamati.²

During the Brahmin and Shanhitā Ages the Kaibartta was known as Kimvarta where 'kim' means ugly and 'varta' means occupation. According to Adhunik Asomiya Shabda Kosh, Kaibartta means a caste the people of which run their lives by catching fishes. According to 'Saraḷ Bangla Abhidhan' Kaibartta means those who live near water and run their lives depending upon it.³ According to the scholar, Nripendra Kumar Dutta 'Kaibartta' and 'Kebarta' have come from the root words 'Kebartta' and 'Keot' which are Sanskrit. These two words originally represent Nisad and Pukkash.

5.1 Study Area

The formation process of Nalbari town is started approximately from 1864. Etymologically, the word Nalbari is derived from the Austric word 'Nal' which means a kind of 'reed' and the Sanskrit word 'vatica' which means a garden or a compound or a courtyard or an area i.e. 'bari'. Thus this area was once known for 'Nal' i.e the reed and hence thus it was known as Nalbari The ancient name of Nalbari was Govindapur. This was named after famous Govinda Ata⁴.

Nalbari district is situated in between 26⁰N and 26.51⁰ N latitudes and 91⁰ E and 91.47⁰E longitudes. Nalbari district is large in areas as well as in population concerned. Besides, this area have sufficient no of fishery resources, such as ,the Brahmaputra river and its tributaries .The Kaibarttas of this area have been surviving on their traditional knowledge based techniques for fish harvesting. Therefore, this area is found to be suitable for the study.

Nalbari district occupies diversified water bodies in various forms, such as, beel-Behkuri, Dhansiri, Bouta etc, swamp, wasteland, ponds and tanks. The Kaibarttas of Nalbari district have been adopting the old traditional techniques of fishing as these techniques of fish harvesting have been generously passed on to newer generations by the older ones. Bhutan falls in the north of Nalbari district and Kamrup district is on the east of Nalbari district. The Brahmaputra falls on the south of Nalbari district and Barpeta district is on the west of Nalbari district.

5.2 Demography

Nalbari district is covering an area 2257sqkm. According to 2011 census, the total population Nalbari district is 769919. Among which the number of male is 395804 and the number of female is 374115. Kaibartta is a major scheduled caste in Assam sharing more than half of the total population. According to 2011 census, the total Kaibartta population in Nalbari district is 23048 among which the number of male is 11758 and the number of female is 11260.

Table-1: Distribution of Scheduled Caste Population Percentage in Assam¹

Sl.no.	SC Communities	Total population	Percentage of total population
	All sc _s	1825949	100
1	Bansphor	14760	0.8
2	Bhuinmali	57974	3.2
3	Brittial Bania	47974	2.6
4	Dhupi	49929	2.7

5	Dugla	6364	0.3
6	Hira	55106	3.0
7	Jalkeot	23511	1.3
8	Kaibartta	581559	31.8
9	Lalbegi	552	0.0
10	Jhalo	77533	4.2
11	Mahara	1725	0.1
12	Mehtar	12715	0.7
13	Muchi	70954	3.9
14	Namasudra	555621	30.4
15	Patni	151992	8.3
16	Sutradhar	62032	3.4

¹Source: Census of India, 2001

The 2001 census also reveals that 85 percent of the scheduled caste population lives in rural areas. Wide variation is seen regarding the rural urban distribution of the scheduled caste population of Assam.

Dhupi records highest of 27.9 percent scheduled caste urban population while patni records the lowest of 7.3 percent scheduled caste urban population. On the otherhand, Namasudra, Hira, Muchi and Kaibartta are Predominant in rural areas having more than 85 percent of rural population. The sex ratio of the total scheduled caste population is 935 while the child sex ratio records 959.

²Source: Census of India, 2001

Table-2: Distribution of Scheduled Caste Population in Nalbari District²

Sl.no.	Name of sc	Sc persons
1	Bansphor	175
2	Bhuinmali	2067
3	Brittial Bania	4952
4	Dhupi	5272
5	Dugla	1
6	Hira	3501
7	Jalkeot	397
8	Kaibartta	23018
9	Lalbegi	6
10	Jhalo	3
11	Mahara	33
12	Mehtar	1343
13	Muchi	35199
14	Namasudra	264
15	Patni	2878
16	Sutradhar	3057

²Source: Census of India, 2001

Besides scheduled caste, the scheduled tribe population of Assam is 3308570. Among scheduled tribes Bodos represent nearly half of the scheduled tribe population of Assam. There are eight notified scheduled tribes in Assam, such as, Bodo, Miri, Rabha, Kachari, Lalung, Dimasa, and Deori.

The scheduled caste and the scheduled tribe belong to Hindu religion. Thus Assam is constituted of several religious communities, such as, Hindu, Anukul Thakur, Baishnava, Bathau, Kabir Patni, Sanatan Dharma, Muslim, Christian, Sikh Buddhist and Jain.

²Source: Census of India, 2001

5.3 Occupational Structure

Table-3: District Wise Number of Registered Beel Fisheries and River Fisheries in Assam³

Sl.No.	District	Registered Beel Fisheries	Registered River Fisheries
1	Dhubri	75	13
2	Kokrajhar	2	3
3	Bongaigaon	6	0
4	Goalpara	17	3
5	Barpeta	23	15
6	Nalbari	18	0
7	Kamrup[R+M]	20	5
8	Darrang	16	2
9	Sonitpur	20	5
10	Lakhimpur	11	8
11	Dhemaji	8	8
12	Morigaon	35	5
13	Nagaon	40	12

14	Golaghat	15	1
15	Sibsagar	17	8
16	Dibrugarh	23	9
17	Tinsukia	8	9
18	Jorhat	5	10
19	Karbi-Anglong	0	0
20	Dima Hasao	0	0
21	Karimgang	27	9
22	Hailakandi	6	9
23	Cachar	38	43
24	Chirang	0	0
25	Baska	0	0
26	Udalguri	0	0
	Assam	430	177

³Source: Statistical Hand Book of Assam, 2011

Table-4: Statistics of Fisheries on Inland Water Bodies in Assam⁴

Sl.no.	Type	Number	Water Spread Area in Hect.
1.	Main river	2	205000
2.	Tributories	53	
3.	Registered Beels	430	60215
4.	Un-registered Beels	766	40600
5.	Forest Fisheries	5017
6.	Swamps	9852	39240
7.	Reservoirs	1	1713
8.	Ponds and Tanks	208014	39696
	Total	219318	391481

⁴Source: Statistical Hand Book of Assam, 2011

The occupation related to the Kaibarttas, can be classified into three categories, such as, primary, secondary and tertiary. The Primary occupations are agriculture, animal husbandry, fishery, poultry forming, lumbering etc. The Secondary occupations include people engaged in mining and quarrying, manufacturing and construction. The Kaibarttas, mainly associated with the occupation fishing and its trade. Of course, now-a-days the young generation of the Kaibarttas have changed their traditional occupation of fishing. To run their life smoothly, they have chosen the occupation of wage earning, rickshaw pulling, hand cart pulling etc. A poor number of people are holding their govt. service.

Regarding income the occupations can be divided into two categories, such as main occupation and subsidiary occupation. The occupation is considered main when it contributes more than 50 percent to the family income. On the other hand the occupation which helps in enhancing the level of total income of the family may be regarded as the subsidiary occupation.

Table no. 5 shows the distribution of main occupation among 300 surveyed families. From the survey it is observed that out of 300 families 95 families earn their livelihood depending mainly on fishing occupation. The members of the family directly or indirectly take part in this profession.

Table-5: Distribution of Main Occupation⁵

No.	Main occupation	No of family	P.C
1	Fishing	95	31.66
2	Cultivation	28	9.33
3	Hand cart pulling	29	9.67
4	Business	23	7.67
5	Rickshaw pulling	41	13.67
6	Service	30	10
7	Contract	14	4.67
8	Wage earning	40	13.33
	Total		100%

⁵Source: Primary Data Collected from Field

5.4 Economic Condition

Rightly does observe R. Thapar: “Land being an important economic asset, problems concerning the division of land and inheritance received special attention in contemporary Dharma Shastra and commentaries.”⁵ Economic conditions is an important factor in the life of a community. It plays a vital role in the social and cultural life. For a rural community land plays a vital role in formation the economic status. Other occupations also influence the economic life. The actions required to meet up the demands of essential materials.

The study of economic system means the combination of three economic structures, such as, production, distribution and consumption. Paul. A. Samuelson observes: "Economics is the study of how men and society choose, with or without the use of money, to employ scarce productive resources, which could have alternative uses, to produce various commodities overtime and distribute them for consumption now and in the future among various people and groups in the society."⁶

The non-economic factors also effect and shape the economic activities. Economic backwardness effect the socio-cultural fabric which reflects the values, motivations, attitudes etc., after religion, caste creates some inimical conditions in the society. The Kaibartta, a constituent of fisherman community is seen to be poor and down trodden.

The Kaibarttas can be identified as poor in terms of nutrition, per capita income, physical quality of life index, hygienic condition etc.

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5.5 Social Condition

Society is a system whereby people live together in an organised community. It is also a way of living. It is a particular grouping of humanity with shared customs, beliefs etc. Society indicates the mutual relation among human beings. Rightly does observe E.B. Tylor: "That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."⁷

Generally a society is consisted of the people. Society includes the political issues, economic issues, friendship, mutual understanding, relationship etc. It is also the combination of Arts, religion and language. It is a web of social relationship. Several organisations help in establishing social relationship. Social relations are complex. These institutions, associations and groups control and regulate the mutual relationship between individuals. Rightly observes R.N. Sarma: "Society is an organisation, a system or pattern of relationship among human beings. It may be defined as the total complex of human relationship, a complex of forms or process, living and growing by interaction."⁸

The Kaibarttas generally live interspersed with the general caste people in Assam. It is observed that the Kaibartta group of people in Nalbari district also live along with the general caste people in the same village. But they have kept own identity by practising their own cultures. But the Kaibarttas are not seen living together in a separate village. But they are seen living in a Suba i.e area inside a village. The Kaibartta families are patriarchal in nature. The whole family affairs centre round the father as he is the head of the family. According to the social customs of the Kaibarttas, when the head of the family dies, his sons cremate his dead body. They also observe the Sradha ceremony. After the death of father, the son automatically inherits the property. On the other hand if the man dead has no male issue, daughter inherits the whole property. In the social system of the Kaibarttas they are categorised into four classes: 1. Halwa Dom. 2. Jalwa or Jaliya Dom. 3. Sauriya Dom. 4. Kacharipuria Dom.

The main occupation of the Halwa Doms is the cultivation. They tilt the soil with plough. But they also catch fishes and sell it in the market. Socially, Halwa Doms are more respected than the Jalwa Doms. The Jalwa or Jaliya Doms basically run their life by catching fishes. They are also known as the following ways: 1. Patni. 2. Dom-Patni. 3. Dom or Nodiyal. 4. Motak Dom.

Motak Doms are different from Nodiyals in some respects. The Nodiyals follow the Vaisnavism. Motak Doms are the pupils of Moamoria Goseion.⁹ Motak Doms do not eat 'Sal fish'. On the other hand the Nodiyals do not even touch the 'Sal fish'. Social status of Jaliya Doms is higher than the Sauriya Doms. The Sauriya Doms carry the dead body and they rear pig as occupation. The Kacharipuria Doms also carry the dead body and play the role of sweepers. Other Doms hate them for their occupation.¹⁰

From the survey it is found that child marriage is not observed among the Kaibarttas. The marriageable age of a boy is 25 years and it is 16 years in case of a girl. But exception is also seen regarding the age limit.

Divorce is seen in Kaibartta society. After divorce she can remarry counselling with the elders of her family. In such cases marriage ceremony is not observed.

5.6 Literacy

It is said that education is knowledge and knowledge is the third eye of man, which can give him insight into all affairs and teach him how to act. Education is the greatest instrument for the development of society. The immediate aim of education is to prepare the different castes of people for their actual needs of life. Polite behaviour and ideals can be taught with the help of education. Education helps man in the preparation for simple living.

Rightly does observe R.N. Sarma: Education gives him the ability to succeed in his struggle for existence. Education is the part of adoption. For man, adoption is more social than natural. Hence education adopts man to society. A man receives education in the family, school-playground, club, office in fact everywhere.¹¹

The Kaibartta people are not well adorned by education. There is educational institution in every village to provide educational facility to the children of the Kaibartta community. But poor enrolments of the students of the Kaibartta community to the schools are noticed during the time of survey. Many students have left schools without completing the primary education. Poor economic condition, lack of awareness of the guardians, etc are the main reason after leaving the schools of the students. Moreover lack of proper educational facilities also effect in the higher studies of the Kaibartta students.

From the survey it is observed that the over-all educational condition of the Kaibartta community is miserable. The large-scale illiteracy has greatly affected the productivity of labour ways of new life style and growth of per-capita income. The causes of the low rate of illiteracy may be as follows.

1. Majority of the Kaibartta people are dependants on the profession of fishing. So directly or indirectly the children have to help their parents in catching, selling and rearing fishes.
2. The Kaibarttas mostly live near the beels, ponds and rivers in rural areas.
3. Lack of awareness of parents regarding the benefits of education comes in the way of educating children.
4. Economic condition another fact which is responsible for the increase of no literacy among Kaibarttas. The parents cannot facilities their children for getting education. The Kaibarttas as a fishing community can difficulty run their life. They cannot pay attention for the education of their children. The poor family always try to disprove as daughter as soon as they can.

Table-6: Distribution of male and female literacy rate, 7 years and above among the scheduled castes of Assam⁵

Sl No	Name of the scheduled caste group	Total	Male	Female
1	All scs	66.8	75.7	57.1
2	Bhainmali	72.2	79.8	64.0
3	Brittial Bania	81.0	88.6	73.0
5	Dhupi	76.0	83.1	68.3
6	Hira	72.5	82.7	61.8
7	Jalkeot	69.3	78.9	58.8
8	Jhalo	52.8	64.3	40.3
9	Kaibartta	72.1	80.5	63.3
10	Muchi	47.9	60.4	34.2
11	Namasudra	60.02	70.1	49.5
12	Patni	75.9	81.5	69.9
13	Sutradhar	67.2	76.6	57.2

⁵Source: Office of the Registrar General of India, 2001

VI. Findings

The findings of the proposed study are as follows:

- Kaibarttas are one of the prominent fishing communities among the sixteen scheduled caste communities having 28.04% in the district.
- Female literacy rate covering 63.3% among the Kaibarttas is lower than male literacy rate covering 80.5% in Assam.
- After having enough potentiality in fishing sector in the district women are still away from empowering themselves through fishing practices.

VII. Conclusion

No doubt the Kaibarttas are one of the prominent fishing communities in Assam. But at present this traditionally practised fishing occupation has been losing its importance among them. Though, the Kaibartta women equally participate in this occupation, they have failed to economically empower themselves to some

extent. A heavy amount of fishes are imported to Assam in every year. On the other hand for the continuation of this occupation of the Kaibarttas not so much measures have been taken by the state government. So if proper measures are taken, the women of this community can really empower themselves economically. Otherwise women unemployment in this community will increase in near future.

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