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Note

Changing aspirations among fishing communities in contemporary India: An ethnographic case study on the Mogaveera women in Malpe, along the south-west coast of India

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Abstract

This paper examines the intergenerational aspirational shift among Mogaveeras, a fishing community in coastal Karnataka. To this day, the older Mogaveeras continue to assert their identity in public by engaging in their caste-prescribed occupation of fishing. Despite the challenges involved, fishing remains a matter of pride and a source of sustenance for many of the older community members. However, the younger Mogaveeras have been attempting to disassociate themselves from fishing. Stories of hardship narrated by their mothers about the caste occupation are pivotal in moulding newer aspirations. Long hours of work under the sun, unstable income, inconsistent fish catches and social stigma make recurring appearances in the life experiences of the older Mogaveera women. Despite receiving an English education, the younger Mogaveeras are not always successful in advancing occupationally due to lack of social capital and access to employment networks. Additionally, patriarchal gatekeeping continues to reinforce the traditional gender roles within the community. Based primarily on fieldwork and ethnographic narratives, the focus is on understanding how different generations of Mogaveera women are negotiating their relationships with fishing, which is their caste occupation.

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The objective of this study is to examine the role of Mogaveera mothers in aspiring to a life beyond fishing for their daughters in Malpe, a harbour town in the coastal district of Udupi, Karnataka. In examining the changing aspirations and attitudes towards fishing, this paper identifies traits and characteristics, several of which have been pointed out by the older women themselves, -that prompt their daughters to move beyond fishing. In developing a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon, a social-generational perspective is employed to show how aspiration is understood and perceived intergenerationally among the Mogaveera women. While the relationship between education and fishing communities in an intergenerational setup has been explored before (Rajasree, 2020; Abdul Jabbar and Muhammed Thahir, 2021), this article emphasises the maternal desire for upward mobility among Mogaveera women, especially through their daughters, and offers a more intimate portrait of intergenerational aspiration within a caste community.

The Mogaveeras are one of the 136 fishing communities identified in Karnataka. They primarily reside along the coasts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts and operate out of the Mangalore and Malpe harbours, respectively. The Mogaveeras are a Hindu fishing caste listed under the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category. The lower-caste positioning of the community allowed Mogaveera women to work, unlike the strict mobility restrictions that were placed on the upper caste women. The Mogaveera women have occupied a front and centre role in their respective homes

since they are traditionally a matrilineal fishing community. With the fishermen out at sea, the responsibility of providing for the family, ordinarily assigned to the man, falls on the fisherwoman. The division of labour among the Mogaveeras allocates post-production and sale of this perishable produce to the woman. Tied firmly to the shore, she remains at the centre of domestic and economic production, making her responsible not just for the food and shelter of her children, but also their education.

In the Asian context, Hannah Bulloch (2021) has identified education as an imperative part of the intergenerational aspirational journey. Reminding us that irrespective of a person's class, 'education is seen as an important and essential investment if one were to fathom a different kind of life from the earlier generations.' Lekfuangfu and Odermatt (2022) conceptualise 'aspirations as distinct from expectations, mirroring what a person wishes to achieve and not what he or she realistically expects to achieve. Kabeer (2000) points out that educational investments are based on intergenerational contracts between parents and children especially when it is a cash-strapped household.

Whether it is the fisher communities in Uruguay and Brazil (Trimble and Johnson, 2013) or in Newfoundland and Labrador (Power *et al.,* 2014), or Java (Hidayati *et al.,* 2021), parents are keen that children pursue their education and find alternate forms of livelihood. On analysing the narratives of parents from fishing communities globally, it is the uncertainty and unpredictability of the occupation that makes most parents anxious about their children pursuing a life in fishing.

This paper draws on conversations and interactions with thirty Mogaveera women: 10 between the ages 20-39 years, 10 between the ages 40-59 years, and 10 between the ages of 60-80 years. As a qualitative study based on ethnographic fieldwork and life-history interviews with Mogaveera women across three generational cohorts, this research does not seek to provide statistically representative data. Instead, it seeks to illuminate the nuanced, lived experiences and aspirations of participants through rich narrative accounts. The fieldwork lasted for three months, from July to September 2021. All the conversations were carried out in Tulu, the native language of the study's respondents. A snowball sampling technique was used to identify and contact respondents, all of whom were Mogaveera women based in Udupi or Malpe. Moreover, since the questions were related to their childhood, education, dreams and aspirations, marriage and family, references from community members helped participants feel more comfortable taking part in the research. Verbal consent was obtained from each respondent at the start of the data collection, before any responses were recorded. The names of respondents have been changed to protect their confidentiality and preserve anonymity.

The social-generational perspective is largely based on Karl Mannheim's (1952) understanding of a generation and how certain societal norms and historical events, especially in the formative years, influence an individual's behaviour. By combining empirical research with a social-generational lens, this study highlights the various factors that influence aspirations across generations among Mogaveera women in Malpe. This study uses a combination of life-history and career-history interview methods. David Scott (2014) proposes the structured life-history interview method to identify specific historical events that shape a generation's intellectual vision and its collective view of the future. Through a series of questions and answers, this technique is exploratory and participatory in nature. This makes the life-history interview an appropriate tool for an intergenerational project that highlights a historically marginalised community's shift from its designated caste occupation. The career-history interview method was especially useful in understanding intergenerational aspirations. A combination of the informant's biographical narrative and the researcher's active listening yields a wealth of information about various aspects of life.

Fifteen days after delivering a baby, we would return to selling fish. That has been our life. It is that kind of hard work that has kept us in the health and form we are in today. Do you think you would be able to do that?

This is Sita, a frail 73-year-old Mogaveera woman from Malpe. Sita has provided for her family by selling fish since the age of 15. This vignette is a part of my conversation with Sita from July 2021, when I was at Malpe Beach for fieldwork. Sita's memory of her generation is foregrounded in caste labour. Mogaveera women over the age of 60 use the word *kashta* (difficult) to describe their childhood. Sita is certain that I will not be able to return to selling fish 15 days after delivering a baby. She is quick to console me. "*Don't worry; it's not just you, even my daughter cannot do it*." Conversations with older community members revealed monsoons to be the hardest period for Mogaveera households to endure, primarily because fishing was restricted or banned. The coast of Udupi and Mangalore receives about 4-5 months of heavy rainfall. Hence, survival required foreplanning and strategic decision-making by the Mogaveera women. To put food on the table, they had a barter system called *kyeka padathi*. Here, fisherwomen walked short or long distances inland to their patrons' homes with fresh fish. This was traded for vegetables and paddy grains over the summer. They had systems in place to account for how much fresh fish had been supplied and how much paddy was to be given in exchange. In their respective homes, Mogaveeras employed ingenious methods of storing the produce to ensure they had enough food during periods when fishing was scarce, and the only alternative was dried fish. The women were allotted a fixed line of homes to supply fish (fresh and dried) to and these same houses were later passed on to their daughters or other female family members.

However, not everyone from the community engaged in *kyeka* as it was extremely labour-intensive. Homes practising *kyeka* required women of all ages to participate in preparation for this barter. The fresh fish, which arrived as part of the evening catch, was laid out in the front yard on dried coconut leaves to absorb the *pani* (dew). Then, this fish was salted and arranged in the basket that would sometimes be carried over 50 km on foot. Depending on the distance, some Mogaveera women spent the night at their customers' homes and returned a few days later. Then, there were others whose *illa panthi* was closer and they returned to their home by evening. *Illa panthi* is a system that exists to this day, wherein a fisherwoman is assigned a fixed line of homes to supply fish and her business is limited to these clients. Regardless of the distance, this journey was and often still is undertaken on foot, with a fish basket on their head that weighs approximately 25-30 kg.

Along with the fish, the basket also has crushed ice to retain the freshness of this perishable produce. In the hot and humid climate of Udupi and Mangalore, it is a matter of minutes before the ice starts to melt. To ensure that the excess water does not seep down,

fisherwomen place a spathe of areca leaf (*palle*) beneath the fish basket on their head. Recollecting her *kyeka* and *illa panthi* days, a now-retired 79-year-old Kalyani, says, "*we had to stop and spill out the melted ice water from the basket to balance it on our head. Even today, customers help lift the basket off our head to the ground and then, after we are done with the sale, the customer will help us lift the basket off the ground and put it on our head; this weight cannot be managed alone, especially as one age.*" In freeing up fisherwomen to participate in this barter, there was a dependency on other women's labour within the family to keep the house running. This involved cooking meals, cleaning the house, and taking care of both young and elderly members of the family. From a young age, Mogaveera girls were inducted into a routine that involved varying degrees of labour. Even if a few of them had the opportunity to attend school, they had to complete their share of chores at home, which were either domestic or related to fishing. Looking back at her life, 78-year-old Jalaja says, "*my life has been difficult and a constant array of kelasa (chores) either in the house or at the fish market. However, without this, survival would have been difficult*." Both Sita and Jalaja come from households that practised *kyeka.* The understanding is that without this labour, they would have experienced hunger like many others in the community.

It was not only the back-breaking work that this generation of women had in common. Many of them had husbands who were either unable to support them financially or had passed away. Like the women, the men from the community were mostly involved in fishing and had limited education, which dissuaded them from pursuing other occupations. However, injury or a lack of physical fitness prevented them from going to sea to fish and earn a livelihood. Therefore, it is not uncommon for Mogaveera fishermen to stop contributing economically once they become unfit to go to sea. Under these circumstances, the women in fisher families play a vital role in managing the struggles of everyday life. Almost all Mogaveera women over the age of 60 have engaged in their caste occupation either through *kyeka*, at the fish market, at the *santhe* (weekly pop-up markets), or in their homes as part of preparing the fish for either of these activities. Saravati, a 76-year-old Mogaveera woman who currently in charge of running one of the fish markets, says, "*despite coming first in my class at the government school, I was made to discontinue school in 5th standard. I wanted to continue studying so badly, but we did not have the money. At the age of eleven, I was doing it all: babysitting 4 or 5 children since we lived in a joint family, helping with illada kelasa* (domestic chores), *and selling fish to supplement the family income.*" This is a relatable experience for several of Saravati's contemporaries during their adolescence. The *aase* (desire) to stay in school and study was expressed by many of them.

One finds several Mogaveera women engaging in physically demanding work, either by selling fish or working at the harbour, well beyond the age of 70. Mala is a 74-year-old Mogaveera woman who engages in *thumbuna kelasa* (head loading) at the Malpe *bunder* (harbour). As part of her job, she carries baskets of fish from the landing centre to the auction site, or from the auction site to the transport trucks. Several Mogaveera women engage in *thumbuna kelasa* (head loading), but very few are from Mala's age group. Despite their advanced age, most of them prefer to continue working. While for some, it is a matter of survival, for the majority, it is an escape from their household. Spending time in the market or at the harbour is described as enjoyable, a momentary distraction from mundane worries. Mala enjoys gossiping and discussing politics with other fisherwomen at the bunder. For many of them, the need to stay relevant, active, and fit arises from seeing their husbands wither after discontinuing fishing (Reitzes and Mutran, 2006). The *bunder* (harbour) is not just a space to conduct business but also a place to catch up with friends and share their joys and troubles. Many ageing fisherwomen gather to talk about their grandchildren and the hopes they hold for their futures. "*As long as our hands and legs are functioning, we will continue working. We do not want to depend on anyone else for our expenses.*"

Among the Dheevaras, a Hindu fishing caste from Kerala, community members use the word 'shame' to describe women continuing in their caste occupation (Alex, 2019). In the case of Mogaveeras, whether it is men or women, old or young, once they decide to pursue fishing as a livelihood, they refrain from using the word shame or the Tulu equivalent *nachige* when discussing their work. Whether Sita, Jalaja, or Mala, all of them proudly claim that, since they are engaging in their *kula kasabu* (caste occupation), there is nothing to be ashamed of. During our conversation, Jalaja recalls several occasions on which she has stood up for herself and confronted upper-caste men for humiliating fisherwomen and making lewd comments. She says "*people mock and insult Marakala* (a term also referring to the Mogaveera community) *women and look at us as lowly creatures. We are probably as old as their mothers, but they address us in singular terms and are outright disrespectful*." All three women admit that much has changed for the community in their lifetime.

However, the element of shame remains among younger Mogaveera women, who view fishing and their caste occupation from the outside in. As Saravati points out, "*Mogaveera girls who have completed their graduation come only for office-level jobs in Malpe not to sell fish or do any other kind of labour. There is a sense of "shame" for them to be associated with the bunder or Malpe in general. They would have seen their mothers doing this job and then decided that they would not continue doing this. I know my daughter wouldn't. Today's children cannot do what we do. They do not have the physical stamina for it. In fact, they have not been trained, so they will not know how to do this. Ninety per cent of the women are truly unhappy with their children returning to this profession.*" Over the years, much of the community has managed to rise out of poverty and redirect their attention to resources that promises a more comfortable life. Education has topped this list and remains a priority for Mogaveera parents even today. Gina Crivello and Virginia Morrow (2020) found that school education has consistently represented a ray of hope capable of breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty.

For older Mogaveera women, income often depends on several variables, such as the day's business, the number of customers served, and the volume of sales. They must also account for the fishing ban period when rationing money. The harbour and fish markets are often characterised by unorganised labour (Mills, 2003). In contrast, a fixed monthly salary appears more attractive and stable to them and is viewed as attainable for their children through white-collar employment. Like Mala, Mogaveera mothers who work at the bunder believe office jobs are structured, with fixed working hours, designated lunch breaks, and holidays. "*I have one cup of tea at 4 am before leaving home and then the next meal depends on the business I have for the day. On most days, I have my next meal after*

coming back home sometime in the late afternoon. I don't think any parent wants their child to live like this." This sentiment is echoed by many. However, at the same time, there is considerable concern that their children may not find employment outside of fishing, primarily due to a lack of access to social networks. With limited education and awareness of opportunities beyond fishing, Mogaveera parents are often unable to guide their children through a competitive and saturated job market, where educational qualifications must be reinforced with social capital and contacts. Most young Mogaveera women from such households end up in clerical positions or as sales assistants in shops, where their monthly salary is limited to ₹4,000 to 5,000/-.

Then there are older Mogaveera women like Jalaja, who belong to the same generation as Sita and Mala, but who want Mogaveera youngsters to return to the caste occupation. For Jalaja, fishing is not only her caste occupation but also a lucrative business. "*Just because more community members are getting educated, it doesn't mean they must abandon fishing. As we have accepted this occupation with pride, we should be able to teach our children to feel the same way*. *Mogaveera parents must stop distancing their children from the jaati kasabu* (caste occupation)." As a successful businesswoman who ran a dry fish and fresh fish business for over 50 years, Jalaja says "*there is a considerable potential to earn anywhere between 25,000-50,000 rupees in a month in fishing if one is skilled*. *Moreover, one has the advantage of running their own business and not needing to work under anyone else. People can decide how and where they want to spend their time.*"

Today, few young, unmarried, Mogaveera women engage in manual labour at the Malpe harbour. In fact, parents discourage this idea from the outset, even though the income is considered good. The reason I was told is that this is a difficult job, one needs to wake up early in the morning, carry heavy baskets on the head, stand for long hours and work under the sun. It is natural that they would want easier lives for their children. They don't mind the fact that the salary maybe less, but their children will get to sit in an office and work without much difficulty, that itself is enough for them. As for the younger educated women, there may also be a sense of discomfort or shame in engaging in these jobs after acquiring a degree. Therefore, despite the lower pay, they prefer office jobs with fixed working hours and a stable monthly income. A similar observation, highlighting the social stigma attached to fisherwomen, was also made by Bhatta and Rao (2003) in their study on Mogaveera women.

The story of struggle and hard labour is a recurring theme in the lives of the older Mogaveera women. Discontinuing school at a young age due to financial difficulties at home, or because they had to step in and provide domestic labour for their families' sustenance, is a trajectory shared by several of them. Holly Hapke and Devan Ayyankeril (2004) define life course as 'patterns of remunerative work engaged in by men and women throughout their life.' Several women are disadvantaged in an economy that is constantly commercialising, since most of the strategies they adopt are a logical extension of their immediate needs and circumstances. Age, gender and finances are among the crucial factors determining the life course of women in fishing households. Gender roles and unpaid domestic labour form an invisible web of interdependency that largely determines the life courses of older women in the community.

Today, the role of Mogaveera mothers in their children's education is crucial. The degree of involvement has varied across time and generations. Serneels and Dercon (2021) found that 'maternal aspirations have a stronger relationship with education outcomes than either maternal or paternal education.' Increasingly, young Mogaveeras are encouraged to stay in school, complete their education, and secure a stable, comfortable office job. Many have grown up watching their grandmothers and mothers toiling away to make ends meet and do not envision a similar future for themselves. There is a sense that the elders of their families and community have suffered enough. A conscious decision has been made to move away from their caste-based occupation. Additionally, Mogaveera fisher parents are keen to distance their children from their caste-based occupation, fishing and more importantly, from others perception of them as a lower caste. While younger Mogaveeras aspire to leave fishing, circumstances such as deaths in the family, poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and lack of social and cultural capital or networks force them back into the trade. College-educated Mogaveera women, in particular, are unwilling to work in fish markets or ports as sorters or head-loaders, as these roles have become markers of shame.

Similarly, research over the past decade has shown the growing importance of education in fishing communities worldwide. Fisher parents in Uruguay and Brazil (Trimble and Johnson, 2013) are concerned that fishing is no longer profitable in their regions, and that their children need to find other ways to earn a living. In Newfoundland and Labrador (Power *et al.,* 2014), fisher parents wanted their children to pursue their education in order to achieve an urban lifestyle and secure a good job, as this is seen as a mark of success. Many young community members referred to working in fish plants and fisheries as "dirty work" (Power *et al.,* 2014). Likewise, fisher parents in Java have realised that their children cannot compete for jobs in other sectors without adequate education and qualifications (Hidayati, 2021). Mogaveera mothers are keen to break the cycle of inheritance associated with this occupation, particularly its manual labour aspects. A major concern expressed by many older women is the lack of parental and family guidance on matters such as education and a life beyond fishing. It is this lack of information and access that the mothers now wish to rectify for their children's sake.

Sita and Saravati speak extensively about the efforts they made to keep their children in school, whether by supplementing the family income through their labour to cover school fees or by limiting the children's involvement in household chores. Now, they want their grandchildren to attend only English-medium schools and not be burdened with domestic chores that could distract from their studies. "*Just because we have been continuing in this line of work like our ancestors does not mean we can dump this on our children too*." A fairly consistent response from mothers, when asked if their children would return to the caste occupation, is negative. While the community has generally progressed beyond poverty, older Mogaveeras are riddled with guilt and regret over the life they might have achieved through a solid education. This unfulfilled *aase,* or dream of uninterrupted education, is projected on to their children and grandchildren. Their ultimate goal is to see their children, especially daughters, working in high-raised glass buildings in comfortable office jobs, with fixed monthly income and regular hours. "*I want my children to be able to choose what they want to do in life. I do not want them to come back to this line of work.*

They don't have what it takes to be in this kasubu (job)*,* or *we have suffered enough; our only hope is that our children have easier and more comfortable lives*" - these were statements I heard often while conversing with the fisherwomen. In fulfilling these wishes, the top priority is sending their children or grandchildren to English-medium schools, regardless of the economic burden incurred. Ideally, they envision a traditional occupation with a modern twist, for example fisheries-related office jobs or administrative roles, for the next generation.

The lived experiences of older Mogaveera women reveal a yearning for social respect-something much of the community believes will remain out of reach if they continue in their caste occupation. Hence, there is a pressing need to educate the younger generation, with the hope that they will have viable alternatives. Vijayakumar (2013) highlights the desire of younger-generation women to differentiate themselves from their mothers and grandmothers. This is also true of the Mogaveeras, though the desire to distinguish generations often originates with the older women. Sita, Mala and several others are vocal about their desire for their children, especially daughters, not to return to *bunder kelasa* (harbour work). More precisely, they consider the younger generation incapable of such physically demanding work. Instead, they want them to secure comfortable office jobs. Besky (2017) discusses *fixity*, which she defines as 'an analytic approach to inheritance that looks through the lens of work, not through that of wealth.' Among the Mogaveeras, whose caste occupation is fishing, parents are divided on whether they ultimately want their children to inherit the traditional occupation.

This ethnographic study of Mogaveera women in Malpe highlights a significant intergenerational shift in aspirations, particularly concerning caste-based occupations and gendered labour. Drawing on narratives across three generations, the findings reveal that older Mogaveera women, despite being proud of their identity as fisherwomen, do not want their daughters to inherit the physical hardship, social stigma and economic uncertainty associated with fishing. Instead, they actively encourage education and aspire for their children, especially daughters, to secure stable, white-collar employment.

Three key themes emerge from the data; First, Mogaveera mothers have played a central role in facilitating this aspirational transition by bearing the economic and domestic burdens of supporting their children's schooling. Second, manual labour in the fishing industry, once considered essential and respectable within the community, is now increasingly viewed as a marker of caste-based marginalisation and shame by the younger generation, especially women. Third, while education is seen as the primary route to upward mobility, structural limitations, such as lack of social capital, job networks and entrenched gender roles, often hinder full occupational transformation.

These findings have broader implications for understanding caste, gender and labour transitions in coastal India. They demonstrate how intergenerational aspirations are shaped not only by economic factors but also by emotional histories, social perceptions and the pursuit of dignity. Policymakers and development practitioners should take seriously the gendered dimensions of occupational mobility and the need for targeted interventions, such as vocational training, career counselling, and women-focused job placement services, that can support such transitions beyond formal schooling. Without structural support, the risk remains that many educated Mogaveera youth, particularly women, will continue to fall back into informal, stigmatised labour despite their qualifications and aspirations.

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