

Piggery Farming as a means of Protection to Mysterious Wild Birds and Environment in Jatinga, Assam

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ABSTRACT

*A small strip of valley in hilly Dima Hasao district of Assam called Jatinga is known all over the world for its mysterious phenomenon of birds committing suicide during the months from September to November every year when the weather is foggy, misty and cold. While some believe in geophysical reasons, others feel it to be a handy work of taking situational advantage to trap, hunt and kill wild birds for meat. Several organizations tried to bring the practice down through various means. From the animal husbandry side also an effort was made to encourage pig farming among the wild bird chasing villagers so as to bring an end to the phenomenon of wild bird's 'suicide'. It was found that, the birds were trapped or killed mainly for consumption, cleaning habitats and sale. After one year of intensive pig rearing promotion, there was drastic fall in bird chasing. The farmers felt that because of pig rearing they received much needed dividends in as many as nine areas of life and livelihood. Among them however, wild bird protection ($r = 0.373^{**}$, $P < 0.01$) and environmental safeguard ($r = 0.488^{**}$, $P < 0.01$) showed positive and highly significant relationship with pig rearing.*

Key words: Suicide; Foggy; Hunt and kill; Wild birds; Pig farming; Pig rearing;

Jatinga a small strip of valley on a ridge, is located in hilly Dima Hasao District, Assam State in India. It is famous worldwide for the phenomenon of wild birds "committing suicide" here. The myth of the suicides has spread far and wide among common people creating confusion and conflict in everybody's mind. Initially some people thought it to be because of some geo-physical reasons (Choudhury, 2000). The village is inhabited by about 2,500 Khasipnar tribal people and few Dimasa people. All of them are meat loving people and all their traditions and rituals dominate the sacrifice, offerings and consumption of meat.

This queer phenomenon of wild birds coming occurs during the late monsoon seasons especially from mid of September to first part of November. During this season Jatinga is veiled by the fog and the mist. The incident generally occurs when the air is foggy, cloudy and misty. Few drops of rains and complete dark add up to the intensity of the phenomenon. The best time for occurrence of this phenomenon is between

7 p.m to 3 a.m. in the night. During such situations when the wind blows, the birds in this place remain dazed and inactive. The birds are seen messy, confused, shocked and do not try to fly as if they are half dead. Among the hundreds of species of birds which are found to die here are some of the rare species like Pond Heron, Kingfishers, Tiger Bittern, Black Bittern, and Little Egret etc. The phenomenon might occur due to certain conditions such as the birds might be caught in wind and fog and are disoriented. They may get attracted towards light sources of the villagers and try to get some heat. Anything facing against the light probably cannot be noticed and many of them get injured including some die down. Otherwise, they are hunted down by the some people in villages who are not very aesthetic about ecology, environment and conservation. The villagers of Jatinga trap the birds using bamboo poles and catapults. All level headed people in Jatinga and elsewhere, especially the conservationists tried to bring an end to the "valley of death". Villagers sensed about

it, still they were crazy about harvesting such birds for meat. The villagers of Jatinga trap the birds using bamboo poles or catapults. All level headed people in Jatinga and elsewhere, especially the conservationists tried to bring an end to the “valley of death”. As such substitution of such meat by pork was thought as an alternative means of animal protein availability for the villagers and thereby to curb down the bird killing habit so as to protect, conserve and promote the environment and ecology.

METHODOLOGY

The study was undertaken in Jatinga Development Block of Dima Hasao (the erstwhile North Cachar) district of Assam during the month of September to November 2015 as the phenomenon of bird’s suicide takes place in those days. The district extends to 4888 sq. km above 513 meter MSL and coordinates to 25.18 degree N and 93.03 degree E with least population density in the state. From the selected block two villages namely; Jatinga and Boro Haflong were selected where maximum number of “bird suicide” cases were reported (*Choudhury, 2000*). Again from each village a total of 50 farmers were randomly selected from among the ‘bird chasers’ for the present study making the sample size of the 100 (hundred). They were apprised about the ensuing danger which might be caused as an aftermath of the presumably man made phenomenon called the bird’s suicide for about one year and after they were convinced, they were asked to concentrate in pig farming as an alternative. In order to understand the mental change taking place and the reasons of birds killing, an interview schedule was prepared. Pre-testing was done to see the reliability and validity of the interview schedule in Dibarai village in which also birds committing suicide was under report. The worked out

reliability coefficient was 0.93 and content validation was ensured by consulting the experts, social workers and NGO representatives engaging themselves in educating the people for “bird protection” and bringing an end to the phenomenon of “bird suicide”. The authors personally interviewed only those villagers adopting pig farming and were in the action during the previous year. The data received were put to appropriate statistical tests. In accordance with the results obtained, the conclusions were drawn.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For all the villagers, seasonally trapping the bird was a much waited community fun. They put the trapping devices in different dependable parts of the valley on the basis of the prior experience. Maximum of them were from lower strata of the society signified by small time cultivation, wage earning, low social standing and poor educational exposure. As a gradual pressure was building on them to skip bird trapping and they started sensing some alternate means obtaining animal protein was in offing; reluctance in providing response was rampant. However, it could be seen from the Table 1 that the reasons for which the villagers used to follow the helpless birds were many. Primarily it was for consumption of meat of such birds. At the time of data collection it was also revealed that the taste of such bird meat was very strong and good. Such a finding was also expressed by *Hoffmand and Cawthorn (2012)* where they also added up the fun of entire process of hunting to processing and cooking being a fancied activity. From the expression it was clear that they relished eating their meat. That adventure must have been an ideal annual activity for the villagers in Jatinga also. Therefore, primarily they received the birds for meat (*Annonymous, 2015*). That was followed by

Table 1. Distribution of the respondents on the basis understanding of reasons for following disheveled birds (when they did it)

| Respondents | Consumption | Sale | Fun | Unawareness | Keep clean | Family pressure | Traditional forces | Peer pressure |
|-------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Village I | 40 (80.00) | 16 (32.00) | 2 (4.00) | 0 (0.00) | 28 (56.00) | 8 (16.00) | 6 (12.00) | 0 (0.00) |
| Village II | 44 (88.00) | 12 (24.00) | 6 (12.00) | 4 (8.00) | 24 (48.00) | 12 (24.00) | 8 (16.00) | 4 (8.00) |
| Pooled | 84 (84.00) | 28 (28.00) | 26 (26.00) | 4 (4.00) | 52 (52.00) | 20 (20.00) | 14 (14.00) | 4 (4.00) |

Figures in the parenthesis indicate percentage

Table 2. Distribution of the respondents on the basis improved understanding for following disheveled birds after adopting pig rearing

| Respondents | Consumption | Sale | Fun | Unawareness | Keep clean | Family pressure | Traditional forces | Peer pressure |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Village I | 4 (8.00) | 0 (0.00) | 2 (4.00) | 0 (0.00) | 2 (4.00) | 0 (0.00) | 0 (0.00) | 0 (0.00) |
| Village II | 2 (4.00) | 0 (0.00) | 0 (0.00) | 0 (0.00) | 2 (4.00) | 0 (0.00) | 0 (0.00) | 0 (0.00) |
| Pooled | 6 (6.00) | 0 (0.00) | 0 (0.00) | 0 (0.00) | 4 (4.00) | 0 (0.00) | 0 (0.00) | 0 (0.00) |

Figures in the parenthesis indicate percentage

keeping the habitat/environment clean (52.00%). The tribal people in all the hilly areas of the North Eastern Region normally keep a very clean atmosphere. So birds after death if remained nearby, polluted the atmosphere and the villagers were aesthetic about it. Such findings were also endorsed by *Faaborg et. al. (2010)*. Sale of such birds (28.00%) was another area of concern. As the bird chasers were poor and economically weaker and there was a feeling of such bird's meat being tasty; there were customers. So, the villagers must have taken the advantage of the situation and sold the trapped birds to customers. The findings had relevance to the works conducted by *Agrahar and Pal (2005)* and *Clover (2010)*. Fun (26.00%) and pressure from family members (20.00%) were other areas of concern and could be looked together. The findings indicated that an atmosphere of such birds going to the kitchen was looked as a common practice by the villagers and their peers. Further having more catches of such birds was a matter of pride for all under the situation. That excitement in the minds of the bird catching villagers was another motivating factor. Similar reasons were also reported by *Agrahar and Pal (2005)*, *Clover (2010)*, *Falzon (2008)* and *Singh (2002)* in different degrees in various parts of the world.

It could be seen from the Table 2 that there was distinct fall in the frequency of bird chasing by the pig farmers after they were taught pork was a better source of meat and they adopted pig farming. Actually pig rearing was very popular occupation in the whole district including the Jatinga Development Block. In a way it was a traditional activity for the villagers. Only 6.00 per cent of the pig farmers still continued consumption of such bird meat. When asked at the time of data collection, they revealed that such birds came as an offer to them from some old friends and they hesitated to dishonour

the offers. Similarly other 4.00 per cent villagers indulged in bird trap because, the birds got injured and died at their courtyards. All other areas like sale, fun, unawareness, family pressure, traditional values and peer pressure were completely negated by the atmosphere of pig farming among the villagers. This was a positive and very commendable change in the Jatinga Valley. In fact that might have been the reason that the "bird suicide phenomenon" is almost vanished from the place today. A declaration must be added here that many socially concerned individuals and organizations also tried their level best to bring an end to the practice. As such pig rearing must have been another

Table 3. Distribution of the respondents on the basis their perception of benefits in the context of reduction of bird chasing through pig rearing

| Areas of improvement | Respondents | | |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Village I | Village II | Pooled |
| Regular family income | 2 (4.00) | 4 (8.00) | 6 (6.00) |
| Health | 4 (8.00) | 2 (4.00) | 6 (6.00) |
| Education of children | 6 (12.00) | 2 (4.00) | 8 (8.00) |
| Guided new generation in right direction | 0 (0.00) | 2 (4.00) | 2 (2.00) |
| Personal hazards avoidance | 0 (0.00) | 2 (4.00) | 2 (2.00) |
| Birds protected | 14 (28.00) | 14 (28.00) | 28 (28.00) |
| Environmental safeguard | 14 (28.00) | 18 (36.00) | 32 (32.00) |
| Self esteem | 6 (12.00) | 4 (8.00) | 10 (10.00) |
| Improved community prestige | 4 (8.00) | 2 (4.00) | 6 (6.00) |

Figures in the parenthesis indicate percentage

contributor to the total count of factors causing decline in the process of bird killing/trap or harvest. The findings received endorsement from the works of Akbay (2006) in Turkey and Imchen (2014) in Nagaland, India.

It was quite satisfying that the villagers resorting pig farming leaving behind bird chasing were happier people than what they used to be before as revealed in Table 3. The best two changes to happen among as many as ten such areas of benefits were environmental safeguard (32.00%) and protecting the birds (28.00%). The other areas of realization were also quite impressive in the ladder of dynamics of change. They were self esteem (10.00%), education of children (8.00%), regular income in the family (6.00%), improved health (6.00%), and improved community prestige (6.00%), reducing personal hazards (2.00%), guiding the new generation in right direction (2.00%). More or less similar findings were also reported by Imchen (2014), Payeng (2011), Shyam (2011) and Talukdar (2012)

The respondents were actually asked to put their responses in three degrees of contribution made by pig rearing namely in “very much”, “much” and “somewhat” degrees. The obtained score in different beneficial areas brought about by pig rearing were put to relational tests. The findings were recorded in the Table 4. It revealed that in all the areas of enquiry pig rearing was able to bring positive dividends. However only in case of bird protection ($r= 0.373^{**}$, $P < 0.01$) and environmental safeguard ($r=0.488^{**}$, $P < 0.01$) there were positive and highly significant positive relationship with pig rearing. More the pig rearing more was the inclination of the villagers for protection of birds and environmental safeguards. Looking into the fact that there were several forces intensively working in Jatinga valley to stop the menace of bird killing in the name of their suicide; this finding at least could establish that pig rearing could be considered as one of the ways of providing meaningful and effective alternatives to the farmers to remain away from all the wild bird related issues. The findings were in the lines of works of Kumar et. al. (2004) and Ravi (2014). Further the perception the farmers grew in relation to pig rearing were of healthy

Table 4. correlational analysis (Coefficient of Correlation) of pig farming with different variables of benefits

| Improvements in Variables | (r) |
|--|---------|
| Regular family income | 0.176 |
| Health | 0.014 |
| Education of children | 0.195 |
| Guided new generation in right direction | 0.099 |
| Personal hazards avoidance | 0.116 |
| Birds protected | 0.373** |
| Environmental safeguard | 0.488** |
| Self esteem | 0.168 |
| Improved community prestige | 0.024 |

*, Significant at 0.05 level of probability,

**, Significant at 0.01 level of probability

and promotional nature, which should be tapped (Singh and Singh, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The mysterious phenomenon of few migratory birds committing suicide during the months from September to November every year in Jatinga Valley of Dima Hasao district in Assam when the weather is foggy, misty and cold was long thought to be a fall out of geophysical reason, which probably was wrong. In fact the villagers trapped, hunted and killed the wild birds for meat. From the animal husbandry side an effort was made to encourage pig farming among the bird chasing villagers to bring an end to the phenomenon of bird's suicide. The villagers were taught continuously to do away with the wild birds and instead resort to pig rearing, which was a tradition practice among the villagers and as an aftermath a study was conducted. It was found that, the birds were trapped or killed or harvested mainly for consumption, cleaning environment and sale. After one year of intensive orientation followed by pig rearing brought drastic fall in wild bird chasing. The farmers felt that because of pig rearing they received positive dividends in as many as nine areas of better life and livelihood. Among the positive dividend paying outcomes, however, bird protection ($r= 0.373^{**}$, $P < 0.01$) and environmental safeguard ($r=0.488^{**}$, $P < 0.01$) showed positive and highly significant relationship with pig rearing.

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