

# ***Kīhals' Worldview Regarding Indus River and the Blind Dolphin: A Case Study of Ghazi Ghat***

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## **Abstract**

*The present study aims at investigating the worldview of a mobile fishing community based at Ghazi Ghat, Dera Ghazi Khan, with special focus on myths about river Indus and the Blind Dolphin. Multiple qualitative research techniques were used to collect data. While analyzing the data attention was paid to compare and contrast the views expressed by the respondents living at the river with (i) those who have recently settled in a colony to become a part of the urban fold (ii) the information provided by the key informants and NGO workers – for they have been years' long witness to the community and have a lot of participant experience (iii) the available data from pre-existing research carried out by anthropologists and sociologists elsewhere. There are three major beliefs about river Indus, which are considered to be lorded by Xwāj Xijjar [Siraiki: "Al-Khidr"]. The phonetic transcriptions given in this article are for the Siraiki language except where mentioned. These beliefs may or may not cohere with one another in the entire complex, but their importance and meaningfulness exceed anything else. The*

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*beliefs about Blind Dolphins are a subject of frequent confusion and not as simple to reconcile.*

### **Introduction**

Before introducing the community, it is important to mention that conducting anthropological research of fishing communities in South Asia, famously called 'Maritime Anthropology', involves two different practices.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, it is taken to be an entirely separate community from mainstream agrarian communities in terms of livelihood, subsistence, production and worldview and on the other it is studied as a part of the whole culture with emphasis on contribution in economy and wealth.<sup>2</sup> The paper favours the former practice and tends to focus the distinction.

The fishermen of Ghazi Ghat are 'an indigenous community' living along the banks of Indus and forming only a part of several other fishing communities littering the Indus like them. They are primarily dependent upon the river for their sustenance. They can be defined as being traditional, non-literate and basic in technology; having distinct cultural traits – thus a wide cultural gulf – from the mainstream (i.e. urban) population; and living in a territory which is confined to the banks of Indus. Thus fishing communities of Indus, being indigenous, must be distinguished from fishing-dependent communities and the commercial fishermen. But this should not mean that they are indigenous like Native Americans when compared with the mainstream population (of European origins) of the American Continent, for they are but one of the several racial and cultural groups of South Asia. 'Fisher Folk' might be a better term.

These historical, cultural, social and geographical factors would suggest that the beliefs represent peculiar socio-cultural milieu no matter how traditional it may be. There are

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1 Maarten Bavinck, *Marine Resource Management: Conflict and Regulation in the Fisheries of the Coromendal Coast* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 87.

2 Radhika Gupta, "Changing Courses: A Comparative Analysis of Ethnographies of Maritime Communities in South Asia," *MAST* 2, No. 2 (2003), 22.

three major beliefs about river Indus: (i) *Xwāj Xijjīr*<sup>3</sup> is its overlord (ii) that its water has special (mostly healing) powers (iii) that it is infested with ‘spirits’ or ‘ghosts’. Beliefs about the blind Indus Dolphin are related to aphrodisiac and anthropomorphism. The changing social conditions and their effects on the belief patterns will also be analyzed.

### Research Methodology

Qualitative anthropological research techniques such as participant observation, key informant interviews and largely informal, in-depth interviews as well as focused group discussions were used to collect the data. Among the sampling techniques, snowball sampling was abundantly used. Simple stratified sampling was also used to classify the population according to age and gender. Other techniques included audio-visual recordings. It is pertinent to mention that the community members were too reserved to express or accept any opinion conflicting with the mainstream populations’ beliefs. In this regard, informal interviews proved very effective to get access to maximum amount of data while maintaining a degree of objectivity. Some NGO workers (Hirrak Foundation) were among the key informants and have been interacting with the fishing community for a long period of time.

### Setting the Scene

The research was conducted primarily at Ghazi Ghat<sup>4</sup>, 10 kilometres away to the East of Dera Ghazi Khan.<sup>5</sup> It is

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3 *Xwāj Xijjīr* is “Al-Khidr” of the Islamic tradition. Although he is never directly named in the Quran, the exegetical tradition ascribes some events to him. Brannon Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis* (London: Routledge, 2002), 10-19. Opinions vary whether he was a *walī* or a *nabī* [Urdu: prophet]. He is believed to have taken the elixir of life. Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari* 14 (Albany: State University of New York, 2002), 5-8. In section 9 of the 18th Surah [Arabic: chapter] he is mentioned as “one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our Own Presence”. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *Al-Qur’an* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000), 18, 65-82.

4 *Ghāt* is a Hindi word referring to a series of steps leading to a body of (sometimes holy) water.

situated in Dera<sup>6</sup> Ghazi Khan, Punjab District. Its geographical coordinates are 30° 6' 2" North, 70° 52' 22" East.<sup>7</sup> *Yāzī Xān* [Siraiki: Ghazi Khan] was the son of a Mirani Baloch chief, Malik Sohrab Dodai, who supposedly settled the old city of Dera Ghazi Khan during the fifteenth century at the bank of river Indus.<sup>8</sup> Its native language is Siraiki, a north-western Indo-Aryan language spanning Southern half of Punjab, and closely related to the Potohari-Hindko-Pahari dialects to its North, Punjabi to the northeast and especially to an island of Khetrani speakers in the Suleiman Mountains to the West and Sindhi to the South.

Fishing communities are locally (throughout the Sindhi-Siraiki area) known as *Kīhals*. Most of their huts are situated on the western bank of the river. Ghazi Ghat is also a recreational spot for visitors. On the southern side of the bridge, which connects Dera Ghazi Khan to the neighboring Muzaffargarh District, the boats are usually stationed to take visitors for ride. Running along most of the bank of Indus are the 'Deras' of the settlers, with whom the *Kīhals* have been in everyday contact for decades. For several years, a *Maōlī Sāeb* [Siraiki: minor cleric] has also been visiting them (together with a band of his students) for the purpose of religious instructions, particularly explaining the distinction between the prescribed and the proscribed way, and sacred and profane. Another outside agency with whom they interact is the *Ṭʰærīkē-dār* [Siraiki: contractor], through mostly his paid workers.

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5 *Online English Encyclopaedia*, 2nd ed, s.v. "DERA," accessed May 4, 2014, <http://www.encyclo.co.uk/define/DERA>.

6 *Dērā* can either be referred to a settlement, an encampment or a farm. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed, s.v. "Ghat," accessed May 10, 2014, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/>.

7 *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed, s.v. "Ghat," accessed May 10, 2014, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/>.

8 Denzil Ibbetson, Edward Maclagan and Horace Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1990), 43.

Apart from Ghazi Ghat, a colony newly established by UN-HABITAT<sup>9</sup> for the *Kīhals* (to bring them into the mainstream) in Jakkhar Imam Shah, a town and Union Council of Dera Ghazi Khan District, was also visited. It is located in 29° 48' 29" North 70° 45' 15" East.

### **An Overview of the Community**

The *Kīhals* are a mobile fishing community living in huts along the banks of Indus. Fishing communities keep moving from place to place as it broadens the niche.<sup>10</sup> They are a part of the Sindhi-Siraiki cultural area having a lot in common with the local peasantry, especially the various ceremonies, rituals, dress code and settlement patterns. Their food consists primarily of fish, bread, rice and vegetables, the latter being bought from the nearest towns. They are mostly uneducated with the exception of a few who are only literate enough to read and write simple Urdu. Attempts (made at least by one NGO) to educate new generation largely failed. Because of the inaccessibility to modern healthcare, they have to resort to local medicines.

The word *Kīhals* is universally used by the outsiders while the *Kīhals* themselves prefer the designation *Muhāṇā* [Siraiki: Mohana (caste)] or *šēx* [Siraiki: Sheikh] with which they are listed in Dera Ghazi Khan's Gazetteer of 1893. The term Sheikh is mostly preferred because of its Islamic connotations. A different identity or caste is more likely to make them acceptable and changing it is a way of survival and social mobility.<sup>11</sup> Gupta, on the other hand, asserts quoting Kalpana Ram that fishing communities in India, historically, have neither been associated to right hand

9 Around a couple of years ago Japan-Pakistan Cooperative Developmental Organization under a project implemented by UN-HABITAT offered to make a colony of small pakkā [Urdu: cemented] houses for them in Jakkhar and nearly two-third of the population re-moved to it. But finding the struggle for living on land too trying some are planning to return to Sindhū, the Indus.

10 Igorde Garine, "The Diet and Nutrition of Human Population," in *Companion Encyclopaedia of Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 232.

11 Myron Weiner, *The Struggle for Equality: Caste in Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 196. Also see Gupta, "Changing Courses", 23.

'agricultural castes' nor with left hand of 'Artisans' but they are attributed an affinity with the latter.<sup>12</sup> The word *Kīhals* – otherwise also referring to 'a dark-skinned' – is usually derived from *Kārih* [Siraiki: a sort of reed] and the suffix *al*, meaning something like a 'reed-doer', especially by the local sages. Whatever the etymology, the fishermen are generally attributed to be one of the impure or 'barbarians' of the coast in South Asia.<sup>13</sup> The *Kīhals* consider themselves a separate *Kaōm* [Urdu: nation, caste] by offering a four-way distinction by putting the Balochi-speaking tribes in the hills, the Siraiki-speaking *Ĵat* [Siraiki: Jat (agrarians)] and *Kammī* [Siraiki: menials] in plains and towns respectively, and finally *Muhāṇē* [Siraiki: Mohana] on the river.

The fishermen of Ghazi Ghat belong to the Shiite fold of Islam but do not observe the basic acts of faith necessary for every Muslim such as *kalmā* [Siraiki: the pronouncement of faith in Allah], *nimāz* [Siraiki: prayer], *rōzā* [Siraiki: fast], *tilāvat* [Siraiki: recitation of the Quran]; even though men ardently take part in *Aṣūrā* [Siraiki: Ashura, 10<sup>th</sup> of the first Islamic month of Muharram] ceremonies of *māṭim* ([Siraiki: chest-beating or self-mutilation]. *Aṣūrā* [Siraiki: Ashura], is a day of mourning in Shi'a sect when they lament all day in religious gatherings for the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali (Urdu: Hussain son of Ali), the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), in the battle of Karbala.<sup>14</sup>

Recently, their economy was based on selling fish and baskets made from Tamarisk at river or in towns and taking the visitors for boat-riding. Before partition, they also used to transport goods from Kalabagh to Sukkur in Sindh. Among the modern amenities, they use cell-phones, radios and audio cassette players. Few live in cemented houses and

12 Gupta, "Changing Courses", 23.

13 Kalpana Ram, *Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Community* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991), 21.

14 *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, 1st ed., S.V. "Ashura" by Richard Martin.

have their own batteries, allowing other community members to use them to charge cell-phones and also watch movies on television.

They have a common custom of early and exchange marriages, preferring endogamy largely; many of these are love marriages. Recently, the practice of hiring a local *Maōlī* (Siraiki: minor cleric) for presiding over the wedding ceremony has taken root. He reads out the *nikāh* [Siraiki: formal marriage contract] and gets the thumb impressions on the *nikāh-nāmā* [Siraiki: marriage certificate]. All *Kīhals* believe that they are related to each other in one way or another<sup>15</sup>, even those who live far away in Sindh province and speak the Sindhi language. Several cases of matrilineal social organization were observed though the opposite is more frequent now. *Talāk* [Siraiki: divorce] is easy to secure, and mostly initiated by the women by performing a classic ritual of throwing stones in a certain fashion, in a certain direction and by uttering certain words; though it is not uncommon for them to go on to take a new spouse. An interesting case was observed that a very old man who had married seven times in his life, but had never kept two wives at a time. However, isolated cases of polygamy do exist.

Discussing sexual matters is not considered a taboo. One of the key (female) informants explained that virginity is not highly regarded like in the mainstream culture.<sup>16</sup> However, sexual prowess of a man is prized, and a husband troubled with premature ejaculation risks suffering a divorce. Most of the girls lose their virginity by the age of 15 (frequently) in pre-marital affairs, and always with the boy who is destined to be their husband. But this practice, at least, in their (*Kīhals* [Siraiki: fishermen caste] current circumstances should not be taken for something that they use as a characteristic for differentiating themselves from the others; on the contrary, this subject was suppressed during

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15 Paul Alexander, *Sri Lankan Fishermen: Rural Capitalism and Peasant Society* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1995), 25.

16 Fouzia Saeed, *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of Red Light Area* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 189.

the discussions. In those rare cases when a girl is not allowed to marry her beloved she becomes possessed by *Jen* [Siraiki: spirits] and a hefty amount of exorcism is needed. *Pardā* [Siraiki: veil] generally does not exist and if it occurs, it is in the simplest form of covering the bosom in an outsider's presence.

Some sort of gender equality seems to exist. It is because a woman can do anything and everything which the man can. She can swim, row the boat, make baskets from *Kāribāri* [Urdu: branches] of *Ṭūlhā* [Siraiki: Tamarisk] and huts using *Kūndr* [Siraiki: papyrus] and *Kānā* [Siraiki: a sort of reed] and above all catch the fish. Fisherwomen's contribution to the domestic economy is widely known.<sup>17</sup>

The community chooses its leader by the unanimity of 'opinion'. A leader, always called *Vad'dā* [Siraiki: elder] clearly contrasting with the *Vad'ērās* [Siraiki: village elders] among the mainstream population, has to settle the disputes of the community members even if his decision may not always be agreed upon. He is also considered a representative who is supposed to mediate between the community and the outside world.

For the last fifty years, the community has been exposed to several nutritional, healths, social and economic problems. Following President Ayub Khan's Green Revolution in the 1960s, more and more land was made available to the people for cash-crop cultivation. As people thronged the banks of Indus the *Kīhals* saw their own space diminishing. Today their '*Deras*' [Punjabi: sitting place] have grown to make them landlords. Consequently, the raw materials including tamarisk, papyrus, reeds, typha, sacharum [Latin: Botanical names] and all other sorts of self-growing vegetation have become scarce.

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17 Sally Cole, *Women of the Praia: Work and Lives in a Portuguese Coastal Community* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1991), 146. Also see Thomas Fraser, *Fishermen of South Thailand: The Malay Villagers* (Salem: Waveland Press Inc., 1984), 20 and Nadel Klein and Donna Davis, *To Work and to Weep: Women in Fishing Economies* (Newfoundland: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1988), 33-35.

Contract/lease system, introduced in 1977 and then modified by the license system in 1980, worsened the situation further. As the water bodies have been auctioned to the contractor, the *Kithals* are not allowed to catch and sell the fish. Applications for the issuance of either a license or sometimes even an identity card have been refused. The low-caste fishermen can be easily exploited and have been kept economically marginal.<sup>18</sup> Any attempt to fish stealthily, if ever discovered by the contractor, stokes up trouble at the hands of the police after the contractor's complaint. Conflict is always expected.<sup>19</sup> As elsewhere mechanized fishing techniques and employed intensively by the commercial fishermen have spelled an ecological disaster.<sup>20</sup> Davis pointed out 'tremendous expansions in the capacity to catch and process marine resources' as one of the reasons for ecological destruction.<sup>21</sup> Use of chemicals like chloroform (and also pesticides) renders the river water undrinkable and poisons the population. Diseases such as diarrhoea, constipation, rashes, skin allergy and asthma have become very common.

Few respondents reported, "the contractor's men kidnap our young, unmarried girls and rape them."<sup>22</sup> To this two key informants testified. Although such a case was not witnessed during the field research, but the Contractors' men were often seen forcibly entering the fishermen's huts, and quarrelling with them. The fear of a girl becoming pregnant in such a situation has pushed down the age for marriage to 11 years. Criminals taking refuge along the banks of the river also harass them. The improved transportation facilities have made contact with outsiders more frequent. These outsiders

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18 Assa Doron, *Caste, Occupation and Politics on the Ganges* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 37.

19 Gupta, "Changing Courses," 33.

20 Charles Perrings, "Ecology, Economics and Ecological Economics", *Ambio* 24, No.1 (1995), 60.

21 Anthony Davis, "Insidious Rationalities: The Institutionalisation of Small Boat Fishing and the Rise of the Rapacious Fisher", *MAST* 4, No. 1 (1991), 13.

22 Interview with Mohammad Ramzan, conducted by the author in April, 2012.

crowd the banks of Ghazi Ghat on the holidays. The outsider's impressions generally stereotype, the *Kīhals* as being *jāhel* [Siraiki: ignorant], lacking morality, having sexual diseases, holding absurd beliefs and being *bē-γærlt* [Siraiki: lacking honour] subservient to his women.<sup>23</sup> Minor clerics visit to enlighten the fishermen and instruct them fervently in such matters.

The fishermen have to adapt to these changing economic situations by seeking new ways. Apart from limited fishing, basket-making and boat-riding, survival strategies now usually rest with keeping livestock, the men helping the police in pursuit of the criminals, labouring in the city on daily wages; and the women working at the landlords' farms, vending baskets, begging and prostitution, despite the prevalent fear of sexual molestation. As noted by Ram, "the threat of hostile outsider evaluations of female potency as signifying lack of sexual restraint and dishonour to the community has radical implications for the disciplining of the female body within the community".<sup>24</sup> The shift in economic resources has readily disturbed the power equilibrium. The social organization has altered to make man stronger; domestic violence and polygamy, from which the men seemed to have refrained until now, are the emerging phenomena.

### **River Indus: Myths and Superstitions**

Every human being living on the earth faces both usual and unusual events in his life. At times some of these events cannot be explained with the kind of reasoning. So the person feels compelled to invoke explanations which are beyond reasoning faculties. To explain these events man creates myth.<sup>25</sup> As Malinowski puts it, "the result is that there come into existence a special class of mythological stories

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23 Gupta, "Changing Courses," 25.

24 Ram, *Mukkuvar Women*, 78.

25 A myth usually narrates a story that a believer conceives to be of ancient times. It includes supernatural forces, gods, demons, angels, monsters, sacred beings, spirits, ghosts and even animals.

which justify and account for the anomalous state of affairs".<sup>26</sup>

Myths are one of the essential components of the world view. Supernatural beliefs and practices are to be understood as providing acceptable explanation for events which would otherwise be inexplicable and therewith relieving doubts. They are not just a body of beliefs but also provide means of coping with unpredictable events.<sup>27</sup> To the 'rational' man, some beliefs might seem illogical or irrational in nature, but for the actors of the culture who produce them, these are absolutely meaningful. These beliefs give them an outlook, a worldview that makes their life easy, comprehensible and meaningful. Thus, these myths are intelligent in nature: they provide not only a way to explain the nature of the world but also give a form to 'social order' and 'psychological processes'.<sup>28</sup> Myths, then, 'should be understood as a cultural vision of the world'.<sup>29</sup>

The most important of the *Kithals* beliefs is that of *Xwāj Xijjār* [Siraiki: Al-Khidr]. He is considered as a *Valī*. The Arabic word '*walī*' is usually translated as 'saint' and referred to as 'friend of Allah'. The relation with Allah readily endows him with supernatural powers. But, in spite of the relative 'plainness' of this translation *Xwāj Xijjār* (Siraiki: Al-Khidr) appears to be more than just a 'friend of Allah'. It is held that after taking the elixir of life he disappeared here at Indus. His *Kacēr* [Siraiki: court] is situated on an island of about half an acre opposite to Rohri, near Bhakkar (in Sindh), in the middle of the river. They always refer to it as a 'court' even though the other devotees (who are not fishermen) refer to it as a shrine. His court signifies the fact that, unlike other saints and prophets who only have *mazārs* [Siraiki:

26 Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Father in Primitive Psychology and the Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London: Routledge, 2010), 59.

27 John Beattie, *Bunyoro: An African Kingdom (Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology)* (New York City: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1965), 6.

28 Wendy Griffin, "The Embodied Goddess: Feminist Witchcraft and Female Divinity," *Sociology of Religion* 56, no.1 (1995): 39.

29 Griffin, "The Embodied Goddess," 39.

tombstones or shrines], *Xwāj Xijjar* (Siraiki: Al-Khidr) is still alive and will return on the Day of Judgment. One of the slabs of a wall of *Kacēr<sup>h</sup>T* (Siraiki: court) contains an inscription which reads as follows:

“when this sublime shrine was raised,  
which contains the fountain of Khidr,[Prophet Khidr]  
wrote the pleasing line,  
its date is *dargāh 'ālī*.”<sup>30</sup>

The *Kihals* seek aid in all difficulties here on the river; that in spite of proclaiming the Shi'ite version of the Islam where one would normally expect them to call Ali's (RA) (the Prophet's son-in-law) name for help as Shi'ites commonly do.

When asked about consuming water from a source which had become poisoned by the contractor's chemicals, a respondent replied: “let the contractor bring a poison of his choice; he who lords the river is *Xwāj Xijjar* (Siraiki: Al-Khidr); should he wish all the poison would settle down and we might go on to drinking the water from above... for we are in his protection.”<sup>31</sup>

Despite the fact that indigenous communities have a vast knowledge of their ecology, a large number of events are associated with supernatural. It is because unlike land, which has been domesticated through agriculture, the water is still associated with the unpredictable and the untamed.<sup>32</sup> A respondent related how once his uncle was trapped into a whirlpool. He was spun round and round to the bottom of the river. There was no chance of coming out. His brethren threw a rope to help him but in vain. The poor man, praying to *Xwāj Xijjar* (Siraiki: Al-Khidr) for his deliverance, must have been trapped for nearly twenty minutes. He was completely out of breath and hope, before a light appeared and as if a powerful hand brought him up to the surface and

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30 Derryl MacLean, *Religion and Society in Arab Sind* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 1989), 112.

31 Interview with Mureed Hussain, conducted by the author in April 2012.

32 Gupta, “Changing Courses,” 27.

when the man regained consciousness his hand was tied to that rope that had been thrown out for him.

The most popularly known miracle of *Xwāj Xijjār* (Siraiki: Al-Khidr) occurs every year when the water level rises. Despite the fact that his court stands lower as compared to the surroundings the water level never rises against the walls of this court even if it might flow over the river's bank. The worst of the floods has failed to make the slightest impact on it. Some also hold that the most experienced boatman cannot make his way through the river to reach that court.

Moses meets *Xwāj Xijjār* (Siraiki: Al-Khidr) to learn 'something of the (higher) truth'. In the beginning of the same section, a junction between the two seas is mentioned which some exegetes consider as the source of the elixir. The *Kithals* believe that the *Valḥṭ Xwāj Xijjār* drank the elixir of life here at Indus.

Therefore, its water is sacred and purified. But this sacred water is found only at the *Sīḥ*<sup>h</sup> [Siraiki: Juncture in river current] as will be seen below. Formerly, his cult was much widespread throughout India as he appears in a number of Islamic and non-Islamic legends.<sup>33</sup> His association to river is visible in a number of tales collected in Punjab by Captain R. C. Temple in the late nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

The Dutch scholar MacLean defines Al-Khidr (the green man) as an enigmatic Quranic figure occurs in the Islamic tradition as the immortal servant of God, patron saint of sailors and travelers, and the guardian of the fountain of life.<sup>35</sup>

Similar myths of 'providing-sustenance' also exist about River Ganges in Hindu mythology. Ganga is a female 'avatar' called 'avatarana', and her revered 'descent' exhibits

33 *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, 1st ed., S.V. "Al-Khidr" by Richard Martin.

34 Ananda Coomaraswamy, *What is Civilisation and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Golgosova Press, 1989), 157-67.

35 MacLean, *Religion and Society in Arab Sind*, 112.

the return of 'life-giving' water for cultivation of many of India's primary resources.<sup>36</sup> Fisher-folks freely tend to associate myths and superstitions with the river or ocean. In Hinduism, Eck states, "The Ganga is worshipped as the embodiment of female energy known as *sakti*, and is also sacred for her mothering capacities."<sup>37</sup>

Coastal communities of Tamil Nadu refer to the sea as '*Kadalamma*' [Hindi: sea mother] and consider it to be same as '*Gangaiyamma*' [Hindi: Ganges mother].<sup>38</sup>

There appears to be a special relationship between the fishermen, *Sindhū* (Siraiki: River Indus) and its overlord. MacLean also cites Wensinck and Dames who (the latter) identifies him as "a river-god or spirit of wells and streams".<sup>39</sup> While showing their familiarity and nativity to the river the fishermen call themselves *Dryā dē vasandē* [Siraiki: river-dwellers] or *Dryā dē bāl* [Siraiki: children of the river]. Before setting out for fish a sacrificial ritual of giving *barāṇā* [Siraiki: offering), in the form of sugar, dough, bread and puddings, is performed. In the words of one respondent, "we give it to *Dryā Bād/ā* (River King) so that *Xwāj Xijjār* would ensure a good catch and keep the spirits away; for he sustains them all."<sup>40</sup> This ritual is also performed while undertaking a voyage for obtaining the raw materials. Malinowski points toward such a superstition associated with the fishing. In lagoon, the fishermen associate myths and superstitions with the body of water where the risk factor is higher and unpredictable. For that they have to perform certain magical rituals which minimize the risk.<sup>41</sup>

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36 Diana L. Eck, *Devi: Goddesses of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 143-44.

37 Diana L. Eck, *Banaras* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 72.

38 Gupta, "Changing Courses," 27.

39 MacLean, *Religion and Society in Arab Sind*, 112.

40 Interview with Jaffar Hussain, conducted by the author in May, 2012.

41 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Illinois: The Free Press, 1948), 30-31.

Even after being absorbed into the mainstream Islam by becoming 'enlightened' with all the acts of faith and performing them regularly the migrants in Jakkhar hold *Xwāj Xijjār* (Siraiki: Al-Khidr) as venerable as their brethren at the river. But the notions of *Xwāj's* (Siraiki: Al-Khidr) 'covenant' and sustenance from the *Vall<sup>h</sup>ī* (Siraiki: Friend of God) did not turn up during the discussions about their new life. *Xwāj Xijjār* (Siraiki: Al-Khidr) is not invoked in the urban social settings.

Then comes the belief about *Ṣī<sup>h</sup>* [Siraiki: Juncture in river current]. It is a spot or a sort of juncture between two currents on the river which appears every now and then. The flow of water is fast and distinct from its sides, making the water limpid; while the *Ṣī<sup>h</sup>* [Siraiki: Juncture in river current] itself, lying in the centre, is like frothing foam. It is considered like the heart of river. It is not difficult to identify. Nearly everyone observed that the water of *Ṣī<sup>h</sup>* [Siraiki: Juncture in river current] is a cure for illness. But emphasis was variously put on different sorts of illnesses. Some stressed especially on diseases, while others on *ḍok<sup>h</sup>* [Siraiki: sorrow], *ḍā<sup>h</sup>* [Siraiki: affliction] and *pāp* [Hindi: sin], yet others on *jādū* [Siraiki: magic] and *tavīz* [Urdu: amulet or talisman] and a few of them observed that the particular *Ṣī<sup>h</sup>* [Siraiki: Juncture in river current] has to be identified first by a local *Pīr* [Siraiki: a religious healer], who then correctly prescribes how its water is to be taken.

It has been pointed out that fishing communities are often very superstitious. They always look for supernatural explanations of the events.<sup>42</sup> Belief in *Jen* is a common perception, as it is also an essential tenet of Islam.<sup>43</sup> The *Kithals*, too have strongly invested faith in spirits either consciously or unconsciously. Since spirits are well embedded within the 'rational' and 'enlightened' culture of Islamic society that surrounds them, the fishermen can freely

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42 Ram, *Mukkuvar Women*, 55.

43 *Medieval Islamic Civilization - An Encyclopedia*, 1st ed., S.V. "Jen," by Joseph Meri.

narrate their occurrences without appearing stigmatic to the outsiders. The river, its islands and banks are firmly believed to be infested with all 'sorts of *Jen*'. The Arabic word 'Djinn' is usually translated as 'Spirits'. From their narrations and descriptions these creatures could be anything like ghost, spirit and more particularly 'riverine monsters'.

Although spirits are believed to inhabit the entire world but the fishermen encounter them at Indus. They usually appear behind the trees or amongst shades and are known to have large hairy bodies, large arms, with everything large especially their teeth. The spirits appear to be living a parallel existence on the river. It is forbidden either to stay at these spots or pass by them. And if the fishermen inadvertently venture near them, the spirits warn them from coming any closer and the fishermen immediately retreat. When questioned, how one comes to identify these corners where the spirits dwell? A respondent told that several of their relatives had died around them. With regard to superstitions among fishermen, we see that risk factor plays an important role in deciding where one should or can fish and where he cannot or should not fish.<sup>44</sup>

One night the fishermen landed their boats on a bank. They had neglected to remember that the spirits had already warned them not to come there again. Suddenly, they noticed that a little girl was missing. When the spot was recognized as haunted the boats were immediately repaired to another location. Early in the next morning, a search was commenced. Soon the little girl's body was found lying near the water and her neck most gruesomely broken.

One respondent recalled the story of a wintry night – when the water is usually at its lowest – about a skilled fisherman who dived to catch a fish. His comrades waited and waited but he never came out. The fishermen kept returning to the spot day after day in search of the body and beseeched *Dryā Bād/ā* [Siraiki: River King], by performing a ritual of sacrificing a chicken, to give their kinsman back to

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44 Interview with Muhammad Sarwar, conducted by the author in April, 2012.

them. Finally, they brought the Holy Quran and begged the river for its sake and urged *Xwāj Xijjār* to intercede. It was on the nineteenth day exactly that the body was recovered. A contradiction seems to exist here. If the man had gone missing inside the river and at the end the river was beseeched to return his body why one should conclude that spirits had taken the man? He argued that it was verified by a certain *Pīr* (Tāj Rasūl, who has an extensive following) who visited the site of the accident. If the river did not return their man's dead body that had been whisked away by the spirits, it surely connived with the spirits and acted unjustly to its own children. Or are the spirits independent enough to do this all this on their own?<sup>45</sup>

The following incident brings more light to the *Kīthals*'s beliefs about the spirits. In the course of an evening, some fishermen reached a certain nook for fishing. They caught a fish with relative ease and threw it on the bank of the river. They had just proceeded to catch another one when one man observed how the fish, instead of convulsively pounding itself against the earth, stood against it as if on its tail. There was definitely something unusual about it. Without catching more fish, the fishermen returned with their catch and ate it. Soon strange events started happening; their chickens would go lost, illness would begin to take over anytime and anywhere, it would become difficult to row the boat, sleep would be ruffled after every hour or two. The *Pīr*'s help was sought. He instructed them to give a fish of that same breed and of comparable size for alms to the poor – as if there were someone poorer than these fishermen! Their torment finally ended.<sup>46</sup>

As it was learnt, spirits dwelt at the place whence the fish had been caught. They are permanent residents of the river and are a taboo to be tempered with. It is 'forbidden' either to enter their territory or fish inside it or even to obtain raw materials from any place near it. The river sustains

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45 Interview with Muhammad Sarwar, conducted by the author in June 2012.

46 Interview with Mohammad Shafi, conducted by the author in May, 2012.

spirits just like it sustains the fishermen. Sometimes the spirits go on a rampage, whimsically chasing out the cattle and seizing the chickens at night, tossing the boat about, scaring away the fish during the hunt; but these are usually interpreted as acts avenging any harm. The fishermen might have unknowingly caused the spirits in the first place. Such incidents increase the frequency of ritual offerings. The fishermen's interaction with spirits is, in part, a mirror-image of their interaction with the local landlords, contractors and also the outlaws; it puts a powerless, defenseless fisherman against an all-powerful, unjust and irrational spirit. The fishermen have gradually come to accept and cope with these outside agencies, namely the settlers, contractors and the outlaws just as they have been coping with the spirits. Belief in spirits and these incidents related above were also affirmed by those living in Jakkhar.<sup>47</sup>

There are also multiple cases of 'spirits' possessing individual's bodies and these are ever increasing. They are a direct result of the social and economic hardships. However, perceptions and beliefs of the community are changing; one respondent was skeptical about these incidents and gave a 'reasonable' explanation for, at least, one incident. He told frankly that the *Muhāṇē* [Siraiki: *Mohana*] are illiterate and backward. No matter how long one has lived at the river, one can never know it completely; even in the familiar parts it can become dangerous. As a precautionary measure, children are always bound with a rope inside the boat. Because they neglected to do it so the little girl fell off board and was most likely picked up by some outlaws.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Blind Dolphin**

Animals have a very close relationship with men in mythology. Some myths gave birth to animals which actually never lived on the earth or at least whose traces never found such as Unicorn, Phoenix, Mermaid, and Sphinx etc. Some

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47 Interview with Mohammad Razzaq, conducted by the author in June 2012.

48 Interview with Mohammad Shafi conducted by the author in June, 2012.

of the living animals frequently incorporated into myths are jackal, bat, deer, crow, pheasant, owls and dolphins.<sup>49</sup>

The blind Indus Dolphin, known locally as *Bull<sup>h</sup>eṇ* (Indus Dolphin) (*Bull<sup>h</sup>aṇi* in Sindhi) but mentioned in Urdu literature as *B<sup>h</sup>ūlan*, is a rare mammal. Its population declined drastically in the early 1970s, as a result of several external factors such as poaching, dumping of industrial waste, building of barrages and during last 20 years by the use of modern techniques of commercial fishermen and contractors, etc.<sup>50</sup> A popular myth about *bull<sup>h</sup>eṇ*, but probably no longer functional among the fishermen, is that it was actually a woman. A certain *fakīr* [Siraiki: an itinerant ascetic or wonder-worker] – identified with Mangho Pīr sometimes – once asked this woman for alms but was refused. The *fakīr* cursed this woman and she fell into the river. She struggled to come out of water but could not. The *fakīr*'s curse was so strong that she was confined permanently to water and became one of its creatures. To this day *bull<sup>h</sup>eṇ* jumps to the surface every other minute to try to get out of the river but she cannot. Associated with this is also the idea that *bull<sup>h</sup>eṇ* weeps and repents so often that it has become blind.<sup>51</sup>

To the *Kīhals*' knowledge, or at least what they were prepared to share, 'people' used to hunt the *bull<sup>h</sup>eṇ* for four reasons: its meat was considered a healthy diet, its fat was used by *halvāīs* [Siraiki: confectioners] to make oil, its fat was also applied on the boat to seal the holes and finally the *naft<sup>h</sup>* [Siraiki: beak or snout] of the male was one of the ingredients for making aphrodisiac.

What is interesting, however, is that some *Kīhals* women believe that *bull<sup>h</sup>eṇ* attracts men to have sexual intercourse with it. A key informant, who is an NGO worker and helps the

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49 Gregory Forth, "On Deers and Dolphins: Nage Ideas regarding Animal Transformation," *Oceania* 68, no.4 (1998): 272-76.

50 Gillian Braulik, "Conservation Ecology and Phylogenetic of the Indus River Dolphin (*Platanista Gangetica Minor*)" (PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2012), 48.

51 Interview with Wahid Bakhsh, conducted by the author in May, 2012.

women settle their everyday problems, told that some even charge their husbands with this crime.<sup>52</sup> They did not clearly elaborate whether *ḥullʿeḥ* transforms into a human shape to attract men or does the intercourse take place in the fish-like form but it is held that the men are lured into secluded places mostly during the nights. It is noteworthy that the word *ḥullʿeḥ* is a feminine noun and whenever used it is in the feminine sense unless explicitly mentioned otherwise in any way such as using the phrase *nar dā naffʿ* [Siraiki: snout of the male] while referring to the ingredients for aphrodisiac. A majority rejected the idea of a sexual intercourse with *ḥullʿeḥ* outright. Only a small minority believed that *ḥullʿeḥ* has a lot of 'heat' in it and that a sexual intercourse with it can increase one's 'sexual powers' manifold, but without admitting to have done it or to have been lured by it.<sup>53</sup>

Among the peasantry of Brazilian Amazonia similar beliefs about the Dolphin, called 'Boto', are held. It is believed to transform itself into a handsome, young man and seduce the girls and is considered "the father of all the children of unknown responsibility".<sup>54</sup> A high value placed on the virginity coupled with the honour associated with the family is a significant reason why 'Boto' ends up being the father of these children.<sup>55</sup> It is noticeable that among the *Kithals* where virginity is not highly valued there are no cases of a male Dolphin trying to lure a *Kithals* woman; early marriage too helps to prevent any chance of 'children of unknown responsibility'. However in Amazonia, female Dolphins

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52 Interview with Rizwana Khan, conducted by the author in April, 2012.

53 Interview with Mohammad Ramzan, Mohammad Shafi, Mohabat Ali, conducted by the author during April and May, 2012.

54 Camara Cascudo, *Dicionario de folklore Brasileiro* (Lisboa: Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1972), 181.

55 Mark Cravalho, "Shameless Creatures: An Ethnozoology of the Amazon River Dolphin," *Ethnology* 38, No.1 (1999), 52.

too are known to attract men and this appeal is so high that a man who has sex with Dolphin wouldn't stop.<sup>56</sup>

There is no evidence of the *Kithals* women using such aphrodisiac. It could not be due to any constraint of gender role that an incident of the sort was not brought to light in discussions since the respondents were privately prepared to mention the harassment their women suffered at the hands of criminals and settlers, and even prostitution as a means of avoiding starvation.

The beliefs about *ḥullʰeṇ* are shrouded in perplexity: conflicting views are expressed. While bringing up the discussion about Dolphin, respondents became hesitant. However, some old people said, this creature which people call *ḥullʰeṇ* is not actually *ḥullʰeṇ*. Only later it came to be named so. They particularly stressed that this creature is something called *Ḍālfeṇ*! The original *ḥullʰeṇ*, on the other hand, is found far down in Thatta (in Sindh) in *lūṇā* [Siraiki: salty] water and in the sea. One observed, "its upper half of the body, from head to belly, is like a woman's with head, breast, long hair and a waist, while the lower half, downwards from the belly, like a fish's."<sup>57</sup> *Bullʰeṇ* is being identified here with a mermaid but it has been carefully placed out of their own reach (the *Kithals*'s reach) by being removed to Thatta and the sea – the other world. The classical characteristics of *ḥullʰeṇ* have, however, been retained.<sup>58</sup> Another view holds that *ḥullʰeṇ* is actually a *fakīrṇī* [Urdu: feminine form of the word *fakīr*]. It wishes the people well and even prays for the *Muhāṇē*. It cries

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56 Candace Slater, *Dance of the Dolphin: Transformation and Disenchantment in the Amazonian Imagination* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1994), 85.

57 Interview with Wahid Bakhsh, conducted by the author in May, 2012.

58 Interview with Mureed Hussain, conducted by the author in May, 2012.

over its own plight and also the plight of the fishermen and has consequently become blind. If they come across the *ḥullʿeṇ*, they would meet good luck. Jakkhar residents rejected this and preferred the view of *ḥullʿeṇ* being a fish and nothing more. Adding, “it is also said that *ḥullʿeṇ* is a *Muhāṇī* [Urdu: feminine form of the noun *Muhāṇā*] but this is all a lie.”<sup>59</sup> On its blindness they remarked, “since the water is muddy that is why she cannot see; she is originally a creature of the sea.”<sup>60</sup> But among the fishermen of Ghazi Ghat many chose to believe otherwise, perhaps, because the needs of their cultural context correspond to different beliefs. In fact, at Ghazi Ghat some contested the notion of *ḥullʿeṇ*’s being a fish because it does not taste like one. One respondent argued that who used to eat it in former days said that it does not taste like fish. “How come a *Muhāṇā* cannot tell a fish from what is not a fish?” He asked.<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusion

The word *Kīhal* has its own connotations with which come the beliefs mentioned above, implying that only a *Kīhal* could have such incredible beliefs. The word *ṣēx*, while retaining the allusions of a superstitious character, allows the sanction of falling within the sphere of acceptably religious. The two terms should be understood like two different discourses, where each brings its own values and beliefs and changing the discourse is to alter the world view itself. Therefore we find confusion (or, at least, hesitation) of the people within this community to agree with each other about

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59 Interview with Mohammad Razzaq, conducted by the author in March, 2012,

60 Interview with Muhammad Sarwar, conducted by the author in April 2012.

61 Interview with Mureed Hussain, conducted by the author in May, 2012.

several beliefs, rituals and cultural or religious practices. That is to say, the two discourses are becoming intermingled and it would not be an outrageous claim to say that soon the *ṣēx* discourse will outlive the *Kīhal* one.

The *Kīhals* used to have beliefs of Dolphin attracting men by transformation into human form to have sexual intercourse with them may or may not be true: although the case seems to become stronger after adding the ‘testimonies’ of the older folks about the mermaid-like *ḥullʰeṇ*. That the *Kīhals* used to make aphrodisiac from Dolphins is true, but there was no parallel of this sort for women. The notion of men’s sexual intercourse with the Dolphin would originally have stemmed from such practices if this form of zoophilia did not really exist; but the question of the snout of ‘male’ Dolphin would be irresolvable. Perhaps the survival of this belief – *ḥullʰeṇ* attracting men and husband’s faithlessly offering themselves to it in extra-marital activities – among some women is due to a counterbalance that it offers to the sexual-molestation and prostitution in which the fisherwomen have been forced and helps to justify it within the sanctions of the community.

The myth of Dolphin being a *fakīrṇī*, a friend of the fishermen and its presence as a sign of good luck could be of a recent origin which goes aptly with the *ṣēx*. Dolphin was hunted for meeting four important needs. After the Dolphin’s population declined so rapidly and the fishermen observed their own hardships rising all along, they associated themselves with *ḥullʰeṇ* in this persecution and saw each other as fellow-sufferers. This also coupled with the ban on hunting Dolphin and the fishermen’s participation with members of WWF (World Wildlife Fund) for the conservation of Dolphin. It is likely that earlier the Dolphin, being a predator of fish,

was seen as a competitor and as luring the men away with its 'heat' and thus kept in a negative light; like the extraordinary and overpowering 'Boto' in Amazonia. So the Myth could be transforming from an anti-Dolphin to a friendly attitude. But keeping the numerous and often conflicting views in front and the present circumstances of the community, one has to admit that attempts to formulate sweeping conclusions could suffer from what Geertz called 'superficial theory mongering'.