

## **The Belief system of the Deori Tribe of Assam: a Socio Cultural Study**

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### **Abstract**

The belief system of the tribes plays a very important role in the social life of the people. There are two types belief system that existed in the society i.e. religious and non religious in nature. In fact the social life and the belief system are closely associated. But with the coming of modern age the age old tradition and belief system of the tribes are in great threat. In fact, people are today adopting other religions, other sub sects leaving their own system of religion. The Deori community is one of the major tribal communities of Assam. Deoris are associated with performing religious rituals. They are attached to the religious or priestly functionaries of various tribal as well as non-tribal communities of Assam. In this paper an attempt will be made to explore different religious as well as non religious rituals of the Deoris which are integral part of the Deori belief system.

**Key words:** belief system, significance, revivalism, tradition.

### **Introduction**

The religious belief of the tribal groups of Assam has undergone tremendous changes. Due to the cultural as well as socio political contact with other religions the traditional beliefs of the communities are changing tremendously. Other religions like Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism etc have influenced the tribal religions a lot. Due to globalization, growth of education and modernisation process people finds the rituals and the old traditional religion peculiar and psychologically unappealing. The changes that are come into traditional beliefs have come in as a response or rather adjustment to this fast changing world. Mead and Herskovits explain that when a weak culture comes into contact with a dominant religion then it leads to changes in the lifestyle and the culture of the weak religion. The weak culture also tries to find common elements among the religion and tries to adjust its tradition and culture according to the dominant belief system. Tribal groups witnessed their absorption into Hinduism with some alteration from the ancient period. Such absorptions are accompanied with certain alteration of tribal socio-cultural life relating to food habits, ceremonial observance, etc. During the colonial period, the tribal groups encountered Christian forces.

The cultural change has not only come into the tribes of Assam but also we can find that many changes have come into the Assamese culture due to its constant interaction with the tribal culture. We can exemplify the Aryan culture and its adjustments and changes that it adopted in North East. The Assamese culture is the product of Assimilation of Aryan and Non Aryan civilisation. KL Baruah wrote that the Assamese culture is the result of synthesis of Aryan and Non Aryan civilisation. It has developed out of the co existence of the various tribes and sub tribes living in Assam since ancient times and their mutual exchanges. Aryan by virtue of their advancement in certain aspects of life including the language exercised great influence on the already existing non Aryan culture.

The belief system of the tribes plays a very important role in the social life of the people. There are two types belief system that existed in the society i.e. religious and non religious in nature. In fact the social life and the belief system are closely associated. But with the coming of modern age the age old tradition and belief system of the tribes are in great threat. In fact, people are today adopting other religions, other sub sects leaving their own system of religion.

The Deori community is one of the major tribal communities of Assam. The Deoris prefer to introduce themselves as “Jimsaya”, the meaning of which is partly as – “Ji means water “No” means “Man”, “Cha” means “Sun” and “Ya” means “Moon”. The Deori Community believes that they are born from the moon, the sun and the water. The ‘Deori’ word comes from the Sanskrit word ‘devgrihik’ which means people living in the house of God. In the Chandrakanta Abhidhan the Deori people has been designated as-“the priests of the Chutias, earlier lived in hills, but now live in the plains of Assam.” Edward Gait had also put the Deoris as a sub group of the Chutiyas and wrote: “The religion of the chutiyas was a curious one. They worshipped various forms of Kali with the aid not of Brahmans, but of their tribal priests or Deoris.” So, basically Deoris are associated with performing religious rituals. They are attached to the religious or priestly functionaries of various tribal as well as non-tribal communities of Assam. They served as priests in the Tamreswari, Kundi-Mama, Baliababa and Pator Shal temples in Sadiya. The Deori tribe belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of Mongoloid group. According to many historical studies it is found that the people of Deori tribe had migrated from Dibang, Lohit, Kundil valleys and settled in Upper Assam long ago. The community has maintained their racial traits, language, religion, folktales and traditional beliefs through the centuries. The people of Deori tribe are mainly categorized into four groups namely Dibongia, Bor-geeya, Tengaponiya and Pator-goya.

Today in Assam, Deoris are mainly lived in Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Jorhat, Shivsagar, Dibrugarh, and Tinsukia districts. Besides, in Arunachal Pradesh their main inhabiting places are Lohit, Namsai, and Sanglang districts. As per the census report of 2011, the total population of the Deori tribe is 49115, out of which 43750 reside in Assam and the other 5365 in Arunachal Pradesh.

The Deori tribe is said to have preserved and retained their age-old beliefs and rituals well intact. The Dibongiyas, have retained their traditional language, the other two groups have forgotten their language and accepted Assamese as their mother tongue. Though the Deoris are trying their best to preserve their age old traditions but they have adopted various elements of other religions from a very long time in due process of assimilation. In this paper an attempt will be made to explore the traditional belief system of the Deori tribe and its socio cultural significance.

#### **Objectives:**

1. To explore different religious as well as non religious belief system of the Deori tribe of Assam.
2. To study the socio cultural significance of these belief system.

#### **Methodology:**

The present study is mainly exploratory in nature. Mainly secondary sources are used while doing this research. The secondary data is derived from various books, journals and research articles, thesis and unpublished dissertation etc.

#### **Discussion:**

The Deoris belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family of the great Mongolian race. There are four khels or categories of Deoris Dibongiyas, Tengaponiya, Borgoyan and Patorgoyans. These names of the khels have come from the geographical place of residence where they resided. Deoris live on the Bank of Rivers. These names of the khels are also come from the river beside where they reside. The Deori people basically live in Chang Ghar. The traditional house the ‘chang ghar’ of the deori people are made from bamboo and wood. The first room of the house is called “Subasani” which is basically the worship room of the home deity. The Tengaponia and Bargoyan section of Deoris adopted Assamese language while the Dibongiya section has maintained their own dialect.

Beliefs and practices plays very significant role in the socio-cultural life of tribal people. The central belief system of the Deoris is revolves around the perception about the supernatural beings and their action and influence on human society and human beings. The Deoris are the worshippers of Gira-Girachi or kundi mama,

kechaikhathi or tamreswari. They offer animals and birds as sacrifices to their deity. At past, they even used to offer human sacrifices. In every village there is a shrine which the Dibongiyas called as Midiku, while the Tengaponiya and the Borgoyan sections call it 'than or Shal'. In some Deori villages such common place of worship is popularly known as 'Deoshal' or 'Deoghar'.

There Bordeori (Boderi), Sarudeori (Saderi), Borbharali and Sarubharali who performed the religious functions in the village. Among them only Bordeori and Sarudeori are entitled to perform sacrifice and worship and only they can enter the main temple and sing hymns. The Bordeori is the most respected person of the village. Sarudeori and Sarubharali can perform the duties assigned to Bordeori and Borbharali in their absence. Apart from the Chari-Deori, there are some officials like Barik, Bora, Ladani, Telia and Dupia etc. They are in all the religious practices. Barik generally assists the priests during any religious functions. He collects rice-beer from the villagers for the Bisu-Puja or any rituals meant for villagers as a whole. Bora's role is mainly related to management of the temple who supervise in the cleaning and feast. He collects money from the villagers and deposits it with the village priestly council. The Ladani prepares the ritual food. The duty of the Telia is to supply oil and Dupia incenses at the time of ritual held in the temple.

There are many rites and rituals that exist in Deori belief system. These rituals can be divided into three categories - individual level; family level, village level.

#### Birth rites:

Normally from the ancient time deliveries are attended through traditional dais. Now though the scenario is changing drastically as people prefer more hospital delivery. After the umbilical cord falls Husi or bhejoni (purification ceremony) is done. Seven bhakts come to the house and they together purify both the house and the child as it is believed that the child birth has made the house impure. The hanti pani or the Holy water is sprinkled on the baby and the house. Hanti-paani is poured to all the four corners of the chouka (the place for cooking food). The family and the child seeks blessing from the Bhakats and offered betel nut, coins and salt.

#### Puberty:

The Deoris don't do any ritual during puberty. But those girls who attain puberty are made to wear a small cloth over their chest. This is called pow or baiga pindha. After four to five years of puberty the girls of same age (based on attainment of puberty) had to wear clothes covering chest to knee length. This is called bukut pindha. This is done in a brief ceremony at village level where the women folk assemble. The Elder girls remove the pow of the young girls and made them wear a long cloth covering chest to knee. Unless the girl performs this ceremony she is not entitled to get married.

Among the boys there is no marked physical transition from childhood to adulthood. But the Deori people make a distinction between adolescent and youth by observing a very brief act. On the day of Goru bihu, the first day of Bohag Bihu when the cattle are bathed and worshiped near a river, some adolescent boys are made to wear churia in front of all community gathering. This process is called inku-genema. From that very day a boy is considered to be a youth and can join in many social events.

#### Marriage:

The Deoris have four different forms of marriage, viz., Borbiya, Majubiya, Sarubiya or Bhakatrupia and Gandharbabiya which are generally known to them as Denbiya, Sashiobachi, Bhakatrupia or Sarubachi and Janegna Laharuba respectively.

Bobiya: A tupula is given a year prior to the marriage to be solemnised. Every month a tupula is sent to the bride's house by the groom's parents. The issue of marriage is discussed 20 days before the marriage by the parents of the bride. Just before seven days before the marriage betel-nuts are distributed to the entire village and they are invited to the marriage. There is a ritual of all the young girls of the village coming and staying with the bride. This is called Kanya-rakha (guarding of the bride). There is a special ritual call Jika suwa. In this

ritual a pig is sacrificed on the day of the marriage and the priest sees the liver of the sacrificed pig and predicts the future of the couple. The bride is welcomed to the groom family amidst huge celebrations. Two pots of water are kept on the two sides of the door. A coin is kept on one of the pots which are taken out by the bride: which she ties to her waist and keeps it her for whole life as symbol of luck. The groom and the bride come to the kitchen of the house and seek blessings together and the marriage is solemnized.

Majubiya (Moderate type of marriage) is slightly lesser than the Borbiya with duration of two days. Surubiya (small type) is also a popular type of marriage performance without much fun and merry-making. The bride's father and the relatives come and in the presence of the four Deoris the groom ask for the bride by offering a certain tupula.

The most widely prevalent type of marriage is Gandharbabiya where the boy and the girl elope together and get married. A simple feast called Biya-Lagaruba at bridegroom's residence on the following day of elopement is performed.

#### Death:

As soon as the news of the death reaches the village all the villagers come to the family of myth deceased to provide emotional support. For disposal of the dead body the Deoris observe some specific rules. One of the first tasks to be performed is to dispose the dead body and clean the house. Generally, elderly men and women dying natural death are cremated. The relatives and others offer things like clothes, gamusa etc to the deceased and the elderly of the community offer blessings. A certain grain is offered to the deceased because the Deoris believe that the death will have to cultivate in the other world. The family refrain from cultivating the crop (of which the grain is offered) for about one to four years. This is called Minusi. An elderly person takes a white thread and breaks it into pieces and drops it every interval on the way till the cemetery. It is believed that the deceased can make his safe way through the ropes. The eldest son carries the niyengtu (the wood through which the pile is burned) and walks around the body for seven times before burning it. When the people return home they are purified by sprinkling Hantipaani on their body. On the other hand, deaths in delivery, death of children, un-natural deaths, death from epidemic and suicide the deceased are buried in the cremation ground instead of being cremated. The deceased is offered seven meals as offered and on the seventh day Husi is done which signifies the end of the offering of the meal. Doha is basically done to ensure that the soul of the deceased reaches the other world safely. Everyone in the community is invited and the kriya dhora person takes a Posumari and keeps it in the bosom of the pig and pray for the well being of the deceased. Three days after completion of the Doha Pindo is offered.

#### Bisu/ Bihu:

The Deoris observe the Bihu festival, which they called Bisu which means rejoicing excessively and generally start in their temple. They observe two major Bihus Bohagio Bisu and Maghio Bisu. The Bihu is the most important festival of the Deoris as it is related to their agricultural activities. The most significant feature of Bihu is that a Puja, which they termed as Bisu-Puja. The Bihu festivals are observed before starting the agricultural activities. It is celebrated on the first Wednesday of the Assamese month of Bohag (April). They celebrate it with the bathing of cattle in the river followed by egg fight (dunja-chujubaba) and cock fight (Duchujubaba) etc. Towards noon of the Bisu-Puja day, all villagers irrespective of age and sex gather at the shrine. They are purified by the sacred water prepared by the priests. The Bordeori (chief priests) along with the three priests offer prayer inside the temple. Generally women are not allowed to enter the temple or than. But the Midi-Girachi (Deo-Dhani) can enter into the shrine when she is possessed by a supernatural power and spirit. The Midi-Girachi generally appears during the Bohag-Bisu festival. The Dibongiya Deoris offer 12 cocks and four hens to perform the ritual. At home, the head of the family perform the suvochoni or ghordeo ritual. The Dibongiya families perform ya tema or chubba-labiba at the eve of Bihu festival. Chickens, ducks and goats are slaughtered during this ritual. The people get indulge into Suje (rice beer) and also various pithas are prepared by the household and the community. This festival lasts for about 2 weeks.

In Bohag-Bihu festival, girls and married women are allowed to perform dance and music on the courtyard of the temple. Then the Husori party consist of both male and female visit each household. They first visited the Bordeori's house. The Husori or Bihu party blesses the members of the household for a prosperous day and year.

The Maghio Bihu is observed during the month of Magh (January). During this Bihu a grand feast is arranged on the first Wednesday of Magh in the premises of Morong attached to the temple. Early in the morning of the next day the youth put fire in the Meji.

Metua:

It is done in the middle of the month of Bohag. It is done three times a year and is done to appease the benevolent spirits and gain favours. Many chickens, pigs and goats are sacrificed during the ritual. It is done to seek blessings and to undo the misdeeds. The Deoris also celebrate Kati Metua and Phagunnor Metua so that kundimama protects the Deori community from change of season. Bor Metua is one of the most important rituals of the Deoris. It is celebrated in the Assamese month of Jeth (may June). The doors of all the shrines are opened on the day and it is open to all the communities promise. People come and offer sacrifices during the festival with two purposes: First a sacrifice is made so that a certain wish is fulfilled and secondly the sacrifice is offered after the wish is fulfilled. The rituals begin with various rounds of prayers after which the sacrifices are made. The intestine of each of the sacrificed item is returned back to the family member. The sacrificed items are cooked in the Morong ghar by the Randhoni and other helpers.

Bhakat Makan Ritual:

The Bhakat Makan ritual is held during the month of Aghun (November) for starting consumption of Sali rice. Each family can take Sali rice after performing the ritual at the shrine. The chief priest Bordeori sacrifices chickens and offers their blood and decapitated heads to the deities of shrine. He prays to the deity for the well being of the villagers.

Chak-Chik or Chua Labiruba Ritual:

This is an annual purification ritual of the shrine. The Bordeori sacrifices four chickens and prays to the deities and their associates for the well being of the villagers. Later on, a feast is held in the Morong. This ritual is generally performed during the month of Saun (July).

Makan Chiban Ritual:

Makan Chiban ritual is performed collectively at the shrine, especially by the priestly council in the month of Aghun (November). Firstly, seven fowls are collected from the villagers and are sacrificed later. A community feast is organized at the Morong precincts. It is obligatory to perform this ritual before having the newly harvested rice by all the general people of a village.

Rajkebang or Rajkema (Midi Deruruba) Ritual:

It is one of the most important rituals of the Deori community. It is the only ritual where the Deoris claim that they worship all the 33 crore lords present in the Hindu religion. On the day of the ritual the youth of the village wear banana leaves, headgear made of cane leaves and carry swords made of bamboo sticks and nun around the village. The youth also put colour all over their body. The colour is prepared by mixing the ashes. The youth run all around the villages shouting slogans. It is believed that the youths are possessed by the spirits when they run. Women are not allowed to participate in the ritual. All the members of the village are supposed to fast till the festival is over. The people wear their traditional attire and all the members of the community who stay outside the village return back. The youths are not allowed to enter the village till the ritual is over. They run and bathe in the river in the end of the village and cook food by the riverside and wait there till the ritual gets over. One

thing to be noted is that a youth whose parents (any of the parents) are dead are not allowed to participate in the procession.

**Bhakat Midi or Purushiya (Na-Janiya/Ekoish Janiya):**

This ritual can be divided into two types, viz., Na-Janiya (nine persons) and Ekoish-Janiya (21 persons) on the basis of number of Bhakat or Purush (Man) engaged and invited for completion of this ritual. In this ritual 9 (nine) and 21 (twenty one) Bhakat or Purushs are engaged respectively besides the other general invitees. That is why, the ritual is also known as Na-Purushiya or Akoish- Purushiys ritual. They collectively bless the host and appease the deities for well being of the forthcoming days. The most significant aspect of this type of ritual can be performed in any month of the year, even during the month of Puh (December) and Chaitya (March).

**Kalika (Bor) Ritual:**

This ritual is meant for the well being of the domestic buffaloes and cattle. For better health of the domestic animals and for increasing their production the household performs this ritual.

**Minuchi or Miruchi Ritual:**

This ritual is observed for the prosperity and wealth. This ritual is performed inside the Biban (Granary) of the household by the head of the family.

**Risto Ritual:**

This ritual is performed generally in all months of the year. Risto is propitiated with pig or turtle or fowls or fish inside the household for well being of the family members. No special priest or Deodhai is required for this type of ritual. Though three to nine Bhakats are invited to perform the ritual and they give blessing or akhirkad.

**Yan Teruba Ritual:**

This is a kind of household purification ritual. When a household gets temporarily polluted by menacing deeds or the house is polluted by ominous animals, viz., snake, vulture, owl, crow, etc. then for sake of purification the household performs this ritual. This tiny ritual follows each of the important ritual generally.

**Yoi-Nigi-Numa Ritual:**

Yoi-Nigi-Numa or Ai Sabah ritual is performed during the month of Ahin (October). Generally this ritual is performed on the nearby bank of a river. The Bordeori distributes green areca nuts, betel vine leaves, powdered rice; ripe bananas etc. on banana leaves and offer them on a model of kayak specially constructed for the purpose. Later on, the kayak or small boat along with the offerings is carried to the river where they leave that kayak in the current of the river. They believe that the deities of small-pox and other diseases leave the village along with the current of the water sitting on that special kayak.

There are many other rituals that are still performed by the Deoris. The Deoris believe themselves as a superior tribal group who can perform their own rituals without the help of any non-traditional means like Brahmin and priest of other community. They have their own place of worship where they perform their traditional rituals and ceremonies. Their social organizations are centering on the activities in the thaan ghar or the worshipping place.

## **Conclusion:**

Socio cultural contact with other religions like Hinduism, Vaishnavism, and Christianity has brought about some changes in the Deori's belief system. But, the Deoris have acculturated very less and no drastic change was observed among them. The Deoris have not changed the name of the religion but human sacrifice that was

prevalent among the Deoris in the past, which was actually prohibited by the Ahom King Gaurinath Singha, has been replaced by animals and birds.

Most of the ceremonies and festivals of the Deoris are closely linked with their religious beliefs and practices. Their dress code, their world views and their way of life have made them a unique tribe among the other tribal non-tribal group of the state of Assam. Their unique rituals and ceremonies have many socio-cultural significance and survival values. They start their primary festival Bihu in the than ghar and all the aged people to young one of the villages have to be present there for it. This is make them integrated as a tribe and also makes their social festival as significant as religious one. All these all the rituals mentioned above and many other rituals of the Deori society represent the traditional culture and life. They help the Deoris to construct solidity and remained separate from the mainstream Assamese and non-tribal domain. This solidity and integrity of the people have helped the different organizations of the community to mobilize the people for social and political space in the contemporary political domain.

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