

BIRTH AND DEATH RELATED RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND RITUALS OF DEORI COMMUNITY OF ASSAM

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Abstract: *The Deori is one of the plain tribe of Assam who are mostly distributed in both southern and northern bank of Brahmaputra river of Upper Assam. The traditional socio-cultural life of the Deori has been playing a significant role in their society. Like the other tribal communities of Assam they have their own customs and religious belief which are mostly associated with their agricultural and life cycle. The propitiation of God and Goddess, traditional religious beliefs and rituals relating with birth and death by sacrificing of animals are some of the important part of the Deori community of Assam. With the above background, an attempt has been made to understand the birth and death related beliefs and rituals of the Deori community of Dhemaji district of Assam.*

Key Words: *Deori tribe, religious beliefs of birth and death, rites and rituals, changing trends.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Deori is one of the prominent plain tribe of Assam and they belong to Indo-Mongoloid group of people. The Indian constitution has regarded the Deori as a Scheduled tribe of Assam. The present inhabitants of the Deoris are spread in different districts of Upper Assam but they are mostly distributed in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia. As per semantics the word 'Deori' means the off springs of God and Goddess. According to Deori language 'Den' means great or wise and 'O' and 'Ri' denotes male and female respectively. Hence, the meaning of 'Deori' is the great or wise male and female being. On the other hand, the Deori are believed to be priests or worshippers of God and Goddesses. Deori community has their unique culture and traditions. History says that the Deori language was the original language in the Chutiya kingdom before the reign of the Ahoms in Assam.

The Deori are classified into four groups. Each group is known as according to their original habitations- *Dibangiya, Tengapaniya, Borgoyana and Patargayan*. The fourth group *Patargayan* has become extinct and officially not traced yet. Among them only the group *Dibangiya*s can speak their dialect and maintaining their socio-cultural and religious practices in traditional way. The other two groups *Tengapaniya* and *Borgoyan* mysteriously lost their language.

In respect of Deori societies, although the Deori are maintaining the traditional customs, but some changes have been also noticed in their socio-cultural life which is affecting the core of their culture. The spread of modern education, science and technology, etc. has also brought lots of changes in the religious beliefs and socio-economic life. Therefore, the present study paper attempts to analyse the changing pattern of religious beliefs and practices of the birth and death rites and rituals of the Deoris of Assam.

2. OBJECTIVES:

- To study the religious beliefs relating with birth and death rites and rituals of the Deori community.
- To understand the prevailing trends of beliefs and practices of the Deoris.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS:

The present study has been carried out from three typical Deori villages namely- Borbam, Bormuriya and Udaypur of Dhemaji district, Assam. This study paper was based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected by conducting extensive field works through in-depth interview. Required data for the purpose of study is obtained from (i) Household survey schedule and questionnaires, (ii) Personal interviews, (iii) Field visits etc. Here, to collect primary data, two types of schedule were designed and altogether 96 numbers of households were covered. The interview schedule was prepared with questions keeping in mind the objectives of the study. Elderly people were emphasized upon to enquire about the religious beliefs and practices, reason for the converted the religious beliefs, its impact upon the society etc. The data were collected during the October, 2016 to January, 2018 from the three villages i.e. Borbam, Bormuriya and Udaypur of Dhemaji district. The three villages representing three clans or groups (*foids*) i.e. *Dibangiya, Borgoyan* and *Tengapaniya* to investigate the nature of present traditional religious beliefs status and degree of gradual beliefs converting from their tradition to another. The secondary data were collected from various sources like Publications of Community block development documents, Published documents, various books, journals, articles etc.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Beliefs related to Birth Rites: The Deoris have some traditional rites to perform like few other orthodox societies regarding birth of a new born baby. The birth and death rites are generally occasioned by the imposition of ‘*Chuwa*’ (polluted). Among the Deori societies birth pollution is regarded more important than death pollution.

Beliefs related to pregnant women: Among the Deoris, the beliefs are starts from when a woman becomes pregnant. A number of traditional beliefs are prevalent in relation to pregnant woman and new born babies. Parents are following certain rules and customs to ensure the birth of a healthy baby. The husband of a pregnant woman always abstain from any kind of killing, hunting, theft and handing dead body or attending funerals ceremonies etc. He is not allow to entire directly into the bedroom of pregnant woman while returning home from outside into the evening time. Similarly, pregnant women also avoid such kind of acts. She is not allowed to go outside in the evening time, visit a family where death has occurred recently, restriction of sitting in the adjoining areas between house and courtyard. She has to avoid listen any kind of bad news and negative discussion etc.

Birth related Rituals: Generally Deori society regarded seven to ten days after the birth of a child as the polluted period. Such emerging force of impurity extends to their natal *Jaku* (clan) and covers all around the villages without any territorial boundaries. The womenfolk near and dear arrange a *Sarai* containing uncooked rice, egg, areca nut, betel vine leaf, coin, bow and arrow etc. and placed as an offering near the bed of the mother by a woman of the house for the well-being of the new born baby. The household, along with the new born baby and the mother is remains impure till the *Chuwa Libiruba* or *Hudi Libiruba* (purification ritual) is performed.

Chuwa Libiruba Ritual: The date on which the umbilical cord falls off from the baby, is chosen for performing this purification ritual. They believe that the umbilical cord falling off is to be related to the pollution period. In the ritual day, all the clothes and the floor of the house are cleaned and mother comes out from the room and exposes the baby to the sun for its welfare and good health. A number of *Bhakats* (old men and old women) are invited to perform this ritual. They blessing and pray for the well being of the new-born baby and the mother. For performing this ritual, usually a pig or a fowl is sacrificed and cooked, before consuming foods the *Bhakats* twice offer a little lump of cooked food and rice beer at the floor to God and Goddess for the well-being of the new-born baby and the mother. The use of special item ‘*Miduji Jubura*’ cooked with mixture of fish or meat and black pepper is one of the remarkable aspects of this ritual

Religious Beliefs associated with Death: Generally the tribal communities of Assam believed in a life sustaining soul or soul like entity, to which the body of an individual is attached inseparably, and when this entity detached from one’s body, the individual concerned dies. They have same notions, some very clear ones and some others not so clear of life after death, dead persons inhabiting places full of happiness or suffering according to what kind of places in the other world one deserves to life in on the basis of his or her life on earth or hovering around as spirits till their salvation. They also believe in rebirth in different forms including human ones, some of them believing that they are reborn in their own communities. After the initial death rites performed soon after the death of a person, the final death rites are held at different times after the death of a person. Amongst some of the tribal such final death rites are highly expensive affairs being marked by liberal entrainment of all the people present with non vegetable food and drink.

Death in the family normally is considered to be the most tragic incident in the family. For disposal of the dead body the Deoris observe some specific rules and systems and they believe that the non-observance of those rules may lead the family to great trouble in near future. There are two primary ways of disposal of the dead body. Generally, elderly men and women dying in natural death are cremated. On the other hand, the dead bodies of children, pregnant women and epidemic cases are buried. The person dying inside the house hold is not considered as ominous. The treatment of the dead body is observed among the Deori society. Irrespective of dead body is washed with water and adorned with a new white dress *Ikun-Cheleng* or *Igun-Jima*. A ‘*Kopali*’ made of pieces of pure silver is tied to the forehead of the body. A few silver coins are also offered into the mouth of the departed one in order to enable his or her soul to cross the obstacles so as to reach the destination, called ‘*Basipuri*’ with ease. An egg is also broken by the eldest son, on the forehead of the deceased.

The funeral procession is generally led by the eldest son with a ‘*Yogi-Katai*’, food, rice beer and burning pleated straw. A man spreads raw cotton thread along the road leading to the cremation ground. The feet of the dead body is always placed in the front direction while they carrying the dead body. A dead body is duly honoured by the Deoris and cremation is performed according to the social status of the person. The pyre (*chita*) has seven layers of wood and it raised to nine layer of wood in case of a priest. The traditional custom is erection of pyres for a man and a woman is seven layers and five layers of firewood respectively. It is also observed that when a priest dies, all the musical instruments of the place of worship brought out and played on in the funeral procession and all the people join and

proceed to the cremation ground. The thread of raw cotton and the dead is carried around the pyre (five or seven or nine times) anti-clock-wise and it is placed on pyre without clothes. The eldest son offers cooked food and rice beer to the soul of the dead before cremation. A part of food is also offered to the deities and his associates who are believed to have snatched away the person's soul from the body, and then he requests the deities to take care of the deceased and to accompany it to the ancestral world. People put with the left hand, pieces of wood or bamboo called '*Aamdali*' on the pyre. After that the elder son puts fire in the pyre first. In absence of the eldest son, any male member of the family or even of the same clan can be performs this duty. The man, who first kindles the pyre, generally performs the mortuary rituals after the cremation. Those who attend the cremation take bath in the nearby river and return to the deceased's house directly. All the cremation attendants are to be purified in the courtyard with purified water called *Suchi-Ji* by a woman of the bereaved family. Such purified water is prepared with mustard oil, *Dubari* (a type of grass), *Tulashi*, a copper coin etc. by the head of the family. The participants are entertained to a feast of pork and rice-beer by the host supported by the villagers.

There are some traditional restrictions in respect of disposal of dead bodies depending upon the division of the Deori community in which the death is occurred. If a *Tengapaniya* villager dies in a *Borganyan* village or vice-versa, the guardians of the deceased must purchase a piece of land for disposal of the dead body. Otherwise, they are not allowed to dispose of the body. In such case, the dead body is to be carried to his or her native village territory for disposal purpose. This type of ritual restriction is not prevalent among the *Dibangiya* Deori group but the traditional restriction is still prominent amongst the *Tengapaiyan* and *Borgayan* groups.

The person who takes '*Pindo*', generally the eldest son who puts fire in the pyre first, has to undergo fasting (*Laghun*) for five to nine days. The fasting period is depends upon according to the number of folds in the pyre. The deceased family also abstain from cooking foods during that period. The villagers invite their colleagues to have food with them during the fasting period. No villagers can use their hearth to cook food unless the death body is taken out of their village boundary. It is customary rule for all the villagers not to take any food till the dead body is removed or taken out to the cremation ground. In addition to that, the granaries of the each family of the villager are kept close and a white cloth is spread in front of the door of the granary. They also abstain from performing rituals inside as well as outside the village shrine at least for one week. The villagers also abstain from their agricultural activities during the time of cremation.

Mortuary Rituals:

Doha: The *Doha* is considered as the final mortuary ritual. There is no hard and fast rule among their society for fixing a day to perform this ritual, because it is an expensive affair. So, they perform in an appropriate time especially when they are able to bear the cost of the ritual. A large number of chickens and pigs, huge quantities of rice and rice-beer, areca nuts, betel vine leaves etc. are required to perform this ritual. Generally, they performed *Doha* ritual after one year or more. Wednesday is considered an auspicious day for this ritual but in case of head of the family they performs it on the same death day. Most of the Deori family is preferably performed the *Doha* during the month of *Magh* and *Phagun*. A paddy or courtyard of the host is considered ritually pure and hence such place is selected for performing the ritual.

The elder perform *Suje Lugalurba* ritual to satisfy the mane of the deceased and pray to the departed soul of the deceased. After performing the *Suje Lugalurba* ritual the most important aspects of this ritual is that, the eldest son or his substitute who perform the oblation, kills a pig by a sharp stake of bamboo piercing its heart with the help of few villagers. The '*Chika-Itaba*', a divination is performed with the help of the liver of that pig. The diviner forecast the future events of the host by the divination. He also suggests remedial measure too to overcome the imminent danger revealed through the divination.

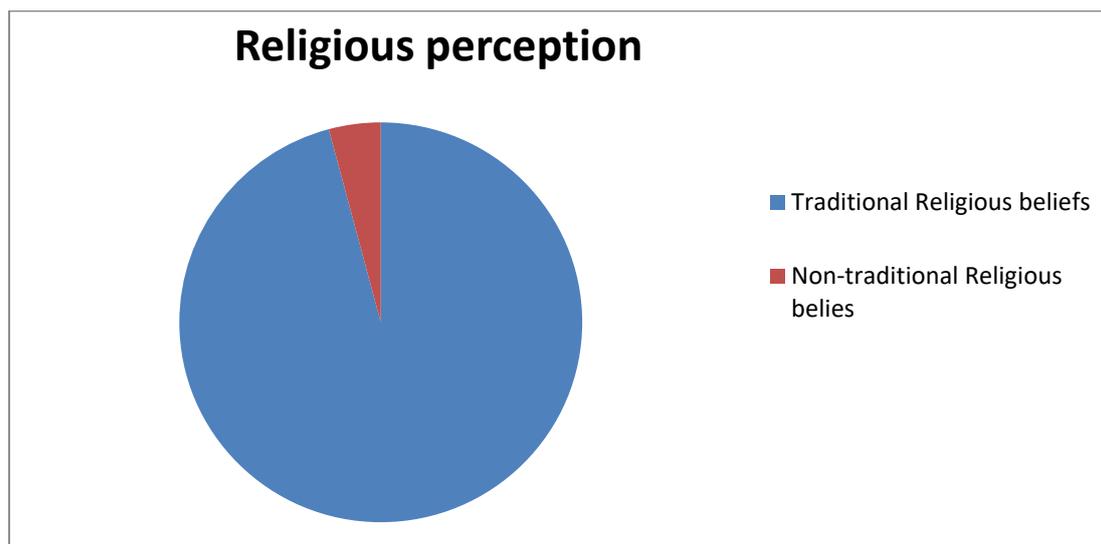
Later on, cooked foods, rice beer, areca nuts and betel vine leaves etc. are offered by the eldest son to the mane of the deceased at the ritual ground and at the backyard of the residence. A few of the foods and rice beer and other articles are also offered to the other manes of the ancestors. A *Deodai* offers pork and rice beer and other articles to the deities. This kind of mortuary ritual is generally completed with a community feast where all categories of villagers irrespective of age and sex from different villages attend.

5. FINDINGS OF THE PREVAILING TRENDS OF PRESENT STUDY:

The table no. 1 shows the followers of traditional and non-traditional religious beliefs households of the three Deori villages namely Borbam, Bormuriya and Udaypur. The table evident that 95.83% of the households follow their traditional religious beliefs and only 4.16% of the households are being non-traditional religious beliefs. The percentage 92.5% and 96.66% are in case of believed in their traditional and 7.5% and 3.33% are found in case of non-traditional in Borbam and Bormuriya village respectively. Udaypur is the only village where 100% of the people have faith in their traditional religious beliefs.

Table No. 1
Followers of traditional religious beliefs and non-traditional religious beliefs

Village covered	Number of households	Followers of traditional religious beliefs	Percentage (%)	Followers of non-traditional religious beliefs	Percentage (%)
Borbam	40	37	92.5	3	7.5
Bormuriya	30	29	96.66	1	3.33
Udaypur	26	26	100	0	0
Total	96	92	95.83%	4	4.16%



6. CONCLUSION:

Traditionally Deori people worshiped *Kundimama* or *Gira-Girachi* by *Dibangiya* group, '*Pisachi Demasi*' or *Baliababa* worshiped by *Borganya* and *Pisa-Dema*' or *Kechaikhati* or *Tamreswari* worshiped by *Tengapaniya* group respectively. In the present study it is found that significant numbers of Deoris households are still maintaining and follow their traditional religious beliefs with the birth and death related rites and rituals. In Udaypur 100 percent, in Bormuriya 96.66 percent and in Borbam 92.5 percent of the households perform traditional religious beliefs and practices. The remaining percent of the households are followers of Vaisnavism trend of Sri Sri Sankardeva, Krishnaguru, Saivism and Lord Shiva under the sphere of Hinduism. It is no doubt that the religious transformation is as a result of acculturation with other societies in the new environment. On the other hand, the highly educated and conscious Deori people seek religious reforms in their traditional Deori religious beliefs owing to its expensive and irrelevant rituals.

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