

Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Deuri Tribes in Assam (A Case Study of Kachikota Deuri Village of Lakhimpur District in Assam)

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ABSTRACT:

The Deuri community is one of the major tribal communities of Assam and constitute on important ethnic group in North-East India. The Deuri community has preserved a traditional Deuri religion since their ancient period and it has been regarded as a hidden treasure for the sociologists, as well as academic circles. Generally, the Deuri religion in Assam invariably has oral religion like other tribes in North-Eastern states. The theory of beliefs and practices regarding the Deuri religion are not written form. The beliefs are transmitted by word of mouth and are passed on as tradition from generation to generation. Animism is also the common phenomenon among the Deuri tribes like other tribes of North-East India. They believe on existence of numerous benevolent and malevolent deities and spirits in and around their habitat. So, they tried to adjust themselves with environment which surrounded them and free from disease, suffering and misfortune. But, the natural phenomena remained mysterious to them. However, in the village, Deuri people are also gradually experienced about the others religion due to the recent influx of various religious forces. Thus, the study also reflects that how far the Deuri tribes are successful in preserving their age old traditional religious value. So, an attempt has been made in this paper to study about the religious beliefs and practices prevalent among the Deuri tribes of Assam and changing trends of their religion.

Introduction:

Today, the Deuri community is one of the major tribal communities of Assam and constitute on important ethnic group in North-East India. They belong to the Indo-Mongoloid race and the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. The Deuri community is included in the scheduled tribe (plains) as per the constitutional provisions of the country. The tribal population of Assam accounts for 12.4% of the total population in 2011 census, while the Deuri constitutes 1.2% of the total Scheduled tribes' population of the state. Now-a-days, the Deuris are living in a scattered manner in different places of the Brahmaputra valley in the upper Assam. Their major concentration is observed in the north and southern part on the bank of river Brahmaputra in upper Assam. The Deuri community has preserved a traditional Deuri religion since their ancient period and it has been regarded as a hidden treasure for the sociologists, as well as academic circles. Generally, the Deuri religion in Assam invariably has oral religion like other tribes in North-Eastern states. The theory of beliefs and practices regarding the Deuri religion are not written form. The beliefs are transmitted by word of mouth and are passed on as tradition from generation to generation. Sociologists and anthropologists argue that religion is never an abstract set of ideas, values and experiences; developed apart from the total cultural matrix and that many religious beliefs, customs and rituals can only be understood in reference to this matrix. A pioneer in this social interpretation, Emile Durkheim has asserted, "a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that is has over them". Thus, the Gods are nothing more than society in disguise. Religion is referred to as a system of beliefs, practices and values concerned with the 'Sacred'. The

beliefs and practices of each and every society of the world have manifested through celebration of ritual and ceremonies. Animism is also the common phenomenon among the Deuri tribes like other tribes of North-East India. They believe on existence of numerous benevolent and malevolent deities and spirits in and around their habitat. So, they tried to adjust themselves with environment which surrounded them and free from disease, suffering and misfortune. But, the natural phenomena remained mysterious to them. However, problem of maintaining indigenous traditional religion among the Deuri is much ridden with difficulties faced as it is sudden exposure to rapid modernization process. In the village, Deuri people are also gradually experienced about the others religion due to the recent influx of various religious forces. The study also reflects that how far the Deuri tribes are successful in preserving their age old traditional religious value. So, there is a sociological objective to the study about present situation of the religion of Deuris in the village. So, an attempt has been made in this paper to study about the religious beliefs and practices prevalent among the Deuri tribes of Assam and changing trends of their religion.

Methodology:

The study has been mainly based on field work. The most important primary sources have been generated through oral literature by conducting extensive field works. So, the selection of informants for the intensive field work has been examined on the following basis, for indigenous belief system, deities, spirits, ritual and sacrifice. Most of information was taken by interviewing with the elder or knowledgeable persons including village head or 'Gime' and head priests 'Bordeuri'. The data for the study were collected with the help of interview schedule and field observation. Data were collected during the year of 2019 from the Kachikota Deuri village of Bihpuria area of Lakhimpur district in Assam. The scholar also used "participant observation" by joining in the important occasion like social and religious function, community gathering, group discussion and individual interaction.

Traditional Religion of The Deuris:

The Deuris are divided into four major groups or khel, such as Dibongiyakhel, Tengapaniyakhel, Borgoyakhel and Patorgoyakhel. But, the Patorgoyakhel had already lost their identity and they could not maintain all the works to worship their god or upachya Devata. Traditionally Deuris are followers of Hinduism. They describe themselves as Hindus of the Shiva and Parboti sect and worship Shiva. They call 'Kundi-Mama' for the Shiva and 'Kundi-Girachgi' to Parvati. So, they worship 'Kundi-Mama' as their supreme God. They have believed that 'Kundi-Mama' is creator of whole universe. In the ancient time, Kundi offered a religion to the Deuri people. Therefore, the religion is also known as 'Kudi Dharma'. According to the mythology of the Deuri people, they have believed that the god of 'Kundi-Mama' had one son and one daughter, the elder son or 'Pisadema' is known as 'Baliyababa' and the daughter or 'Pisachi or Kesaikhati' is also known as god of 'Termeswariyai'. Since immemorial time, the god of 'Kundi-Mama or Kundi-Gira' is worshiped by Dibongiyakhel or group, 'Boliyababa' is worshiped by Tengapaniyakhel or group and 'Kesaikhati' or 'Tameswariyai' is worshipped by Borgoyakhel or group. In this study, an attempt has been made to know some of the distinct features beliefs and practices of the Deuri religion of the Dibongiya group in the village. We have already mentioned that the god of 'Kundi-Mama' is worshiped by the Dibongiya Deuri groups. 'Kundi-Mama' is regarded as a chief household deity. They have also believed that the god of 'Kundi-Mama' has supernatural power and he is also regarded as ultimate reality who is at the sometime the creator, preserver and destroyer of this world. Besides, they worship a number of Gods and Goddesses at both family and community levels. At the family level they worship a number of deities like *Yai-middi, Rista, Bhakat-middi, Sa-Yamiddi, and Mora-Harabha* etc. At

the community level there are *Rajkhebang, RaijyaMetuwa, Bishu-Pattibha and Bh-Urabha, Bur-Uttaba* etc. Most of the deities are believed to be associated with influence in different phases of peasants life of the Deuris such as- selection of agricultural lands, construction of houses, preservation and protection of paddy cultivation, new harvesting, reaping and gathering paddy, and protect from various diseases etc. So that, the Deuri people offers 'Metuwa' or sacrifice to goat and fowl to the 'Kundi-Mama' in the shrine through the head priest or Bordeuri for their save, creation and preservation and giving happiness and prosperity to humankind.

Religious festivals of the Deuris:

The Deuri tribe celebrates two major festivals in a year based on the agricultural cycle. One is in January known as 'MagiyoBisu' while the other is celebrated in April known as 'BohagiyoBisu' or 'IbakuBisu'. On the first day of the festival the Bordeuri offers a Puja in their shrine or 'Kundiku'. During 'MagiyoBisu' and 'IbakuBisu', they offer the puja or 'Metuwa' at 'Kundiku' where a goat, hen, pigeon or duck is sacrificed as per their traditional rule. But, sometime, they also offer their puja or 'Metuwa' during the month of July and August as per their religious tradition. During the 'MagiyoBisu' festival all the elders from every household go around the village to bless the younger ones while in return they are greeted with freshly prepared rice beer or 'Chuje'. The youngsters perform folk dances and play traditional musical instruments every evening in an area in the middle of the village.

The 'IbakuBisu' is the most important festival which is held over a period of seven days. It must be mentioned here that both the 'Bisu' festivals of the Deuris are connected with the agricultural activities and so they are observed rightly before starting the agricultural operations in the fields. During 'IbakuBisu', the elderly people of the village do visit all the households of the village and shower blessings on the members of the households. In return the members of each household greet them well and entertain them with 'Chuje' or rice beer. Meanwhile, the young, both male and female do not remain idle. The young male and female are also performed dance and song at 'ChhajeKhula' or 'Rangghar'. The traditional musical instruments are used during dance. The traditional dance is also followed by melodious songs which make the situation filled up with un-restricted joy and merry-makings. The Deodhani dance is one of the most important dances performed during this festival. They have a great faith and belief on the day of 'BisuUruwaba' or ending ceremony of 'IbakuBisu'.

Sacrifice or 'Boli-lebha'

The term sacrifice, from Latin 'sacrificium' or 'sacer' means 'holy' and 'facere' means 'to make'. J. Henninger said that 'sacrifice carries the connotation of the religious act in the highest and fullest sense and it can also be understood as the act of sanctifying or consecrating on object'. The Deuris perform a number of ceremonies accompanied by sacrifices of animals and fowl. The first reason for sacrifice is to cure a person's sickness from such as various diseases, which is supposed to be caused by the spirits. Generally, they have believed that evil spirits accept the blood of the animals and fowls in lieu of patient's soul. If a patient starts improving his health condition, it is presumed that the spirit has accepted the offering. The 'Bordeuri' and 'Midi-Girah or Girashi' is explained to perform certain rituals or of sacrifice activities as per nature of patient's sickness or as problems of family members. Sometimes, sacrifice of animal and fowls is done by elder family's persuasion in the shrine. Generally, the goats and fowls are sacrificed by 'Chari-Deuri' in the shrine during the time of 'MagiyoBisu' and 'BahagiyoBisu' for cure of personal problems as well as peace and prosperity of family members, which is popularly known as 'Metuwa' among the Deuris. There are two types of 'Metuwa', one is 'GoruaMetuwa' or

'Metuwa' for all family members of home and another is 'Raijya' or community 'Metuwa' for the all village people. Sometime, the family members are also offered to sacrifice more than one goat for the safety and welfare of the all family members then it is known as 'Bor-Metuwa'. However, the 'Bor-Metuwa' is also popularly known as 'Chari-Ali' among the Deuri community because of four goats and five fowls are offered to sacrifice in the name three gods in the shrine. However, the Deuri people are also performed variety types of religious ritual activities in the home. As per tradition of Deuri religion, all type of religious ritual is also done by the sacrifice of pigs and fowls etc for cure of domestic problems, welfare of family members and satisfaction of their gods and deities. But, the nature of religious ritual is determined the number of sacrifice to pigs and fowls. However, the Pig does not sacrifice inside the shrine, but sacrifice at outside of shrine for some special rituals occasion like *Sai-Labiba* or purified the impure person into a pure one etc.

Priest or 'Midi-Muya'

In the Deuri society, the Deuri priest or 'Midi-Muya' is one who can perform rites and rituals in fixed date and place for various reasons, like illness and save misfortune to the family or clan etc. In normal time, he invokes the blessing of benevolent deities by sacrificing on behalf of the family and people. Thus his role in the society is very crucial for human endurance. He diagnosed disease and pursues the spirits to free the soul of the patient from their captivity. By divination and examination, 'Bordeuri' prescribed the kind of animals and fowl to be sacrifice to appease the captor spirits. So, the 'Midi-Muya' or priest plays an important role in their socio-religious life.

Type and function of Priest

It is observed that, there are two sets or phase of religious priest for conducting the rites and ritual activities in their shrine or 'Midi-ku'. One important set is called "Chari- Deuri", consisting four priests, like 'Bordeuri'; 'Saru-Deuri' or Younger Priest, 'Borborali' and 'SaruBorali'. Among them, only 'Bordeuri' and 'SaruDeuri' are entitled to perform sacrifice and rituals activities and they along enter the main 'Midi-ku' and sing hymns. Generally, such types of hymns are scarcely understood by the common man. Therefore, 'Chari-Deuri' has performed different type of ritual function according to their duties and status in the village shrine. Thus, the traditional function of the priest of Deuri may be discussed under following heads:

Bordeuri: The 'Bordeuri' is the most respected person of the village. Because the Bordeuri is considered as belonging the highest order to perform all type of puja or 'Matuwa' as under his guidance at the village shrine.

Sorudeuri: The 'Sorudeuri' only assists the Bordeuri in rites and rituals activities in at the temple. During the absence of 'Bordeuri', he can perform his works.

Borborali: The 'Borborali', is accompanied with "Bordeuri" and 'Sarudeuri' respectively during the performance of puja.

Soruborali: 'Soru-borali' is also accompanied all the above three priests during the performance of puja at 'Midi-ku' in the village.

The duties and responsibility of 'Chari-Deuri' relate to the settlement of disputes of the villagers. All complains have to be filed before the 'Bordeuri', who is regarded as the chief of the priestly council in the Deuri community. In addition to 'Chari- Deuri', there are another set of officials or associate priests, consisting of 'Bara', 'Barik', 'Ladani', 'Telia' and 'Dupia' etc. All set of officials are also conducted importance duty and responsibility for performance all kind of puja in the shrine.

The 'Barik' announces the important news about the meeting and ritual time, date etc. in the villagers three or five days before. He also collects rice, chujee or rice-beer and fowls or hens etc. from villagers for different ritual activities, such as *Raiyja-metuwa*, *Bishu-patiba* or *UrabaandRajkebang* etc. and assists the priests during the Puja.

The 'Bora' is employed as a special cleaner of the shrine and also supervises the feast of 'Chari-Deuri'. He also collects money from the villagers for temple, various ritual functions and deposited it with village priestly council or hand of 'Don-Borali' or treasurer. The 'Ladani', prepares the ritual food and supplying food items to all priest etc.

The duties of the 'Telia', prepares all important materials for puja and supply mustard oil for 'holita' or lighting in the puja. 'Dupia' is also to supply oil and incenses respectively for the puja at the shrine.

Besides, these two sets of priestly council, these are another important sort of religious functionaries for conducting ritual activities in the village, like 'Deodai'. The 'Deodai' by the virtue of long experienced in religious lore. The set performs the private rites and rituals of the households, but he cannot perform the rituals of the village shrine. Sometimes, he can also help the 'Chani-Deuri' in priestly functions but he can not take active role for puja in the shrine. His selection is not based on hereditary and also not clan-wise. The 'Deodai' takes active role and responsibility for religious worship to offering ritual to deities, when worship is made in household of individuals in the village. The Deuri people have believed from generation to generation that 'Deodai' can perfect examining the liver or 'chika' of sacrificed pig and forecasts coming days for the family. From the ancient time, Deuri people have performed a number of religious worship or ceremonies in the home accompanied by sacrifice of domestic animals birds and like, goat, pig and fowl, duck, pigeon etc. The domestic animal and birds are used for sacrifice according to the nature of worship. The first reason for sacrifice is to cure a person of family from sickness, which is supposed to be caused by the 'Saba-Midis' or evil deities. Secondly, in order to increase production of agriculture and to expect welfare of the members all family as well as society. The Deuris worship the both evil deities and benevolent deities. They believe that if they do not perform these sacrifices, the deities will harm them in different ways, like epidemics, *Bor-ai* or *big fox*, *Soru-ai* or *small fox*, *flood*, *drought*, *hell stone*, etc.

Ancestor Worship

The Deuri people have also believed the spirit and soul of dead from a separate category on worlds. However, they have believed the popular concept of the heaven in above and hell in below the earth. Every individual after death turns into 'Midi' or spirits, who live in the unknown spirit's world. Rituals associated with death depend upon the type and kind of death. Generally, they have buried the dead body with some rituals performance. Therefore, the ancestor worship is also done for the death spirit of dead ancestors may harm the members of family in different ways. The Deuri people are also believed that without the ancestors worship, the spirit of death cannot go to the heaven or 'Hipuri'. Thus, they have performed some important ancestor worship in the village such as *Mora-Leba*, *Doha* or *Mimo-da-Muma* and *Pinda-Leba* etc.

However, Deuri people are lived that spirit of the dead are identified as belonging to two categories on the basis of the nature of death of the deceased persons and on the basis of the services harms rendered by them to the tribe while they were alive. The spirit of those who die of natural causes and render valuable services to their kinsfolk are known as benevolent spirits. The spirit of those who face unnatural deaths and cause trouble to their kinsfolk in various ways are treated as malevolent. The benevolent spirits are worshipped by their kinsfolk through offerings and prayers while malevolent spirits

are exorcised with the help of benevolent spirits. However, the 'Mora-Harebha' is one of the important ancestor worship which is performed by the 'Deodai'. From immemorial time, after generation to generation they had practiced of worshipping their forefathers. The 'Mora-Harebabha' worship is performed for welfare and security of the all members in the family. The Deuri people have believed that the spirit of dead is always observing all human activities from heaven. They can protect and save human life from various unseen misfortunes if they will satisfy from ancestor worship in time to time. So, every family of Deuri community has performed the ancestor worship within two or five years. But, the performance ancestor worship is depended upon the economic position of the family. Thus, ancestor worship is found common in the all Deuri society.

Conclusion:

In fact, religion is very important social indicator which provides a very strong bond of social fabric among the Deuri community. It has a very deep root in their social system and has strong bearing on various other social parameters. In this study village, it is also observed that all the Dibongoya group of Deuris still follows the traditional rituals, beliefs and practices. In the village, since time immemorial, the religious beliefs and practices have become an indispensable part of their life. The Deuris believe that the universe is inhabited by numerous invisible supernatural beings and powers which always influence the daily activities of their people. They have a horde of deities which are malevolent. If one of them actively intervenes in their affairs, they always try to appease the deities through religious practices. So, Deuris are continued to practice some superstitious beliefs without knowing the scientific facts. Hence, in this study, it is seen that all Deuri people in the village have still believed in supernatural power of god of 'Kundi-Mama'. In every year, they have observed their traditional 'Bisu' festivals as per their traditional calendar. During 'Bisu' festival, they have offered 'Metuwa' or sacrifice of goat and fowls to their supreme god of 'Kundi-Mama' at the village shrine through the head priest for their save, creation and preservation and giving happiness and prosperity to humankind. In the village, they have also performed various types of domestic and community ritual activities as per their custom. However, recent influx of various religious forces in the Deuri village area is being threat to the indigenous religion of the Deuris. But, it is a good nature that there is no single person conversion from Deuri religion to other religion in the study village. So, till today, the study reflects that the Deuri tribes are successful preserving their old traditional religious beliefs and practices.

During the field study, it was also observed that young and educated people are gradually not fully supported to believe about all aspect of customary religious superstition, supernatural power of god's and magic etc. due to constant impact of modernization and continuous contacts with other people. Now, modern educated people are gradually becoming liberal, less superstitions and less orthodox. They are now more receptive to new ideas and practice. So, they have not always shown their support regarding believe in worshipping their god before going medical treatment of ill health person because of blessing of supernatural power of god is not always required for getting cured from diseases. Therefore, spread of the modern education and infrastructure has infused ideas in the mind of the Deuris. On the other hand, they have also given their views that the Deuri people are gradually lost some of the original distinct features of religious beliefs and practices of their religion due to religious beliefs are transmitted by word of mouth and are passed on as tradition from generation to generation. So, modern educated Deuri people are also interested to preserve as written form to all traditional religious beliefs and activities of their religion. Thus, it may be arrived at the conclusion that a little trend of change and modification has observed about the belief and practices of Deuri religion among the Deuri tribes in the village.

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