

Social Structure and Socio-Economic Life of the Deuri Community of Assam

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Abstract: The Deuries, an aboriginal tribe inhabiting in the plains and hills of Assam, are upholding their own language and folk culture and tradition. Anthropologically, this priestly community is affiliated to the great Tibeto-Burman branch of Mongoloid stock of Assam. Socially they fall into four divisions- Dibangia, Bargaya, Tengapania, and Patargaya. Among these four clans, only Dibangias practice their own language. They reside in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts in Assam. Other than the state of Assam, Deuri villages are also found in the Lohit and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The Deuries were accorded a special status in respect of religious proportion throughout the North-Eastern part of India. Their social life is religion centric. They are not idol worshiper but they are worshiper of power. Their supreme deity is Kundimama, the primordial energy. Suje is their most respected and sought after drink. They wear traditional dress in general as well as in social functions. Their traditional attires are weaved by the women folk themselves. It is their specialty to dress up in cotton, muga, eri or pat-silk attires. The men folk put on Ikun- jimaor Suriya-Sula. The language of Deuri tribe is called Deuri language. Economically they are agrarian people.

Keywords: Kundimama, Dibangia, Suje, muga, ikun-jimaor.

I. INTRODUCTION

The state of Assam, one of the seven sisters of North-East India, has been serving as a collision zone of diverse linguistic communities since time immemorial because of its unique geographic location surrounded by difficult mountain range, dense terrain with vibrant rivers and fertile land, climates and landscapes

In this context, the Deuries, an aboriginal tribe inhabiting in the plains and hills of Assam are no exception in the sense that they upheld their own language and socio-cultural rituals, rites and festivals. The Deuries are quite rich in the field of folklore. Folk tales, songs, gnomes, verses, proverbs, adages are popular. Lullabies, devotional songs, Bisu songs, husori, ainam (a hymn sung by women), wedding songs and so on are widely prevalent.

Anthropologically, the Deuries as the priestly community are affiliated to the great Tibeto-Burman branch of Mongoloid stock of Assam. According to W.B. Brown, "It will have been observed that the original seat of the Deuries was in the region beyond Sadiya. It is only about a century ago that they removed thence to their present settlements; and some of them still occasionally visit Sadiya for religious purposes."¹ This fact regarding their original settlement is echoed in their traditional folk songs, Aborbo, Lahariya, etc. a stanza of such a song is cited below:

*Kundilor agarit gudakoi simalu
Tate loi kuruwai bah lo hoyo
Sadiya rajyote sarihal guhani
Taloike namaskar koruna lo hoyo
Kundilot upojil kundilor deori
Mahangot upojil lone ki lohoya
Goi na goi thaki amoni lagile
Joidamot jiraye jau.*

i.e., "O' my friend, my dwelling is in Sadiya, I offer my prayer to the Goddess residing there. When I get tired of walking, I rest in the field of Joidam".²

At present the Deuries reside in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts in Assam. The Deuri villages are generally found in plain areas of the river banks. Other than the state of Assam, the Deuri villages are also found in the Lohit and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. "After migrating from Sadiya, people of three divisions of Deuri tribe started living on their own; at first the Dibangiyas started living at Siram in Lakhimpur district, the Borgayas and Tengapaniyas started living in Panidihing by the side of Borno in Sibsagar district. In course of time, their population increased and they started spreading to other parts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh."

As per the notification of Govt. Of Assam, dated 29th December, 2009, the area within Assam inhabited by the people of Deuri community is divided into 18 territorial constituencies for the purpose of the first election to the General Council of the Deuri Autonomous Council. Under the 18 constituencies, a total of 138 villages have been categorised as Deuri populated area. Total population is 122760. In Lakhimpur District

only, there are 7 territorial constituencies with total population of 53721 all belonging to Dibongiya division. They are an important scheduled tribe (plain) with their own language, religio-centric culture and unified social organisation.

Morphologically the word 'Deuri' implies the offspring of God and Goddess. According to Deuri language 'Den' means great or wise; and 'U' and 'Ri' denotes male and female respectively. Hence, the meaning of Deuri is the great or wise male or female being. On the other hand, the Deuries are believed to be Priests or worshippers of gods and goddesses. Though the members of the Deuri tribe are generally known as 'Deuri' amongst the members of the non-Deuri communities, they like to proudly introduce themselves as 'Jimo-chan-ya' amongst themselves. They consider themselves as Suryavanshi. Etymologically, Jimochanya also carries the same meaning- 'Jimo' means the sperm, semen or virile, 'chan' means sun and 'ya' means moon. The 'Jimo' is born from sweet union of 'chan' and 'ya', i.e., "Purush and "Prakriti". Born out of union of 'chan' and 'ya', are known as 'Jimochanya'. The etymological meaning of the Deuri word 'Jimochanya' gives an idea about their supreme creator or ancestor. The significance of the word 'Purush-Prakriti' is also found to be related to their Chief Deity 'Kundimama'. According to the Deuri language, the meaning of the word 'Kundimama' is related to god and goddess or "Purush-Prakriti", where 'Kundi' and 'Mama' denote 'Purush' and 'Prakriti' respectively, known as 'Gira-Girachi' (Bura-Buri) in a derivative form. The rulers of ancient Assam, which was known as Pragjyotisha in the Mahabharata and as Kamrupa in Puranas and Tantras, had great reverence for the Deuries who were assigned priestly duties of traditional sacred propitiation, during their reign, without any hindrance.

Sir Edward Gait wrote that the Deuries are the priestly section of the Chutiya kings of Sadiya Dynasty who worshipped the goddess Tamreswari (Kechaikhathi) and Sri Sri Baliababa at the Copper Temple at Sadiya. As a whole the term 'Deuri' used to designate the recognised minister of religion throughout the Bodo races, and this points out to the fact they are essentially what indeed their tribal name implies; a Levite or priestly body, and one in earlier days possessed of large influence which even yet has not been wholly lost."

The term 'Deuri' till date is attached to the religious or priestly functionaries of various tribal as well as non-tribal communities of the country. As for example, the prevalent term like 'Deuri Bilaniya', generally found in non-tribal societies of Assam. It is also observed that the Deuri priests perform religious functions for their own community and also for non-deuris irrespective of castes. Such kind of inclusionary practice in respect to religious functions, no doubt, place them as priestly community among all communities around them. The traditionalists as well as the archaeologists also acknowledge the Deuries as the "court priests of the Chutiya, Kachari and Ahom Kings."

According to Dr. B.K. Kakati, the word "Deuri is a new Indo-Aryan formation connected with Sanskrit deva-grihika." Moreover, some writers contended that the Deuries are a section of the Chutiya community. But this statement is outrightly disclaimed by the present generation of the Deuri community. The statement of B.N. Bordoloi is worth mentioning here- "Although earlier authorities like E.L. Dalton, W.B. Brown, Sir E.A. Gait, etc., have regarded the Deuries as one of the four branches of the Chutiyas, the other being the Hindu Chutiya, Ahom Chutiya and Borahi Chutiya, the present generation disclaims this. According to the people, they were the priests of the Chutiyas but they were never a part of the Chutiya community."³No similarity in any cultural trait has been noticed between these two communities, no semblance of traditional societal bond has also been traced between these two communities. "It has been objected and stated that if the Deuri language was actually the Chutiya language then why not a single Deuri word is found to be used among the Chutiya society? Hence the present generation of the Deuries asserts the fact that their progenitors were the royal priests of the Chutiya kings; but they were not in any way a part or branch of the Chutiyas."⁴

It is also significant to note that the Ahom kings, on annexation of Chutiya kingdom, dispersed all the Chutiyas to the different parts of Ahom kingdom as a state policy, but the Deuries were allowed to stay in their habitat (Sadiya area) and continue their worship in the shrines there. This clearly indicates that the Ahom rulers did not equate the Deuries with the Chutiyas.

It is clearly visible that the Deuries were accorded a special status in respect of religious proportion throughout the North-Eastern part of India.

II. DISCUSSION

Historical background of the Deuries

From the sources of Ahom Buranjis and Historians like W.B. Brown, H.J. Kellner, E.T. Dalton, Kanaklal Baruah etc., and from the scripts written on Hasi-paat and preserved by some Deuries, a brief account of the history of the Deuries can be written in chronological order till 11th century but beyond that era everything has to be depended on myths, legends, etc.

According to a mythological account, once the Mahamaya Tamreswari Mai was floating on the Dibang river in the shape of a stone through Her spiritual power for the sake of all people of the world. Seeing that, King Bhismaka called all the people of the Henduvan and ordered them to rescue the 'Devi-Idol' of Mahamaya and instal it at a certain place. But they failed to do so. Then the king invited the especially learned and wise

person from various places and requested them to rescue the 'Idol' to Her respective place that to be treated as holy one. But all efforts had gone in vain. Having no other means, at last, the king ordered to make an announcement for all by beating drum that one who could rescue the idol, would be the priest of the king and also could worship the famous Bura-Buri, Baliababa, Patarshal, Tamreswari Temples. On hearing the announcement many people from various castes gathered to try their luck, but none could rescue the idol. At last, four numbers of Deuri with pious mind and clean body began praying the Mother. Their collective prayer touched the heart of the Devi-mother and she automatically became weightless through her spiritual power. Then these four persons easily rescued the Devi-idol and placed at the concerned holy place. Thenceforth, the four persons were designated and recognised as the priestly class, later on their offsprings used to worship at the famous four temples located at Sadiya. The said four persons had been designated as 'Chari-deuri' who were conferred with the status of honourable and respectable chief priests of the famous temples of Sadiya region.⁵ In the puranas the Kamakhya and Sadiya Pithas had been mentioned. According to the Puranas the chaste woman's (Sati, wife of Shiva) head fell at Sadiya. The Bishnu Purana states that she abandoned her body by getting angry at her father, Daksha. According to the Tantras, the limbs of Sati fell in fiftyone pieces when scattered by her husband, Shiva. The places where her limbs fell, temples arose known as Pithas or sacred places. Since then these Pithas have been places of worship. The Deuries were said to be the first worshippers in Assam of the Kamakhya and Sadiya Pithas.

Further, the pre-history indicates that the Deuries have come to India in the dim and distant past from North-East Asia, i.e., from Chinese and Mongolian Territories. They settled in the valleys of the river Brahmaputra; the Champo, Lacha, Siddhakshetri, Swati, Bidarva or Banzul, Kundil, Changchukul, Laibari, Laphabari, Sadiya, etc.

Yet another legend goes like this, "Bhismaka had two children, a son and a daughter, named Rukma and Rukmini. Having heard of valour and endowments of Krishna, Rukmini fell in love with him; Krishna, on the other hand, having heard of her beauty, was anxious to marry her. But her father had arranged to give her to another prince named Sisu Pal. Arrangements were made in the kingdom of Kundil (Sadiya). Rukmini secretly sent the news to Krishna in the hands of a messenger, named Vednidhi. On the previous day of the wedding, Rukmini went to worship in the shrines of Sadiya, suddenly Krishna appeared and carried her off in his chariot. He was pursued by the crowd of princess who had come to attend the wedding of Sisu Pal, but he defeated them and married Rukmini after reaching Dwarka."⁶This is known as episode of 'Rukmini-Harana' of 'Dwapar-Yug'. In this regard, comment by Sir Edward Gait is worth mentioning; Gait remarks, "Bhismaka's capital was called Kundina, a name which still survives in the Kundil river at Sadiya; and the ruins of an extensive fort, about twenty-four miles north of that town, between the gorges of the Dikrang and Dibong rivers, are said to be the remains of his capital."⁷

The Sadiya Frontier Gazetteer also mentioned that the Deuries are the old priestly caste and attendants on the gods. Their original home was on the banks of the Kundil river.

From the brief outlook of the pre-historical legends as well as historical accounts, the Deuries, by and large, have made certain contributions which make one assume them as the Tribal Brahmin or Tribal Priest of the ancient North-East India.

Social Structure

The social life of the Deuries is essentially religion-centric. Originally, the Deuries were a single Levite tribe. They used to worship in the shrine of Kundimama. The dieties of elder son Pisa-Dema and elder daughter Pisachi-Dema also adorned the same shrine (Deoshal). During those days the population of Deuries was scanty and they used to live together in the hilly areas of Laibai, Laphabai and Chandangiri.

In due course of time, events turned out in such a way that Picha-Dema and Pisachi-Dema were separated from the Deoshal of Kundimama thereby dividing the single Deuri tribe into four different divisions. The four broad divisions among the Deuries are:

- i) Dibangiya
- ii) Tengapaniya
- iii) Borgaya
- iv) Patorgaya

These divisions are termed as *gayan* or *khel*. Each *khel* is named according to their place of origin.

The Deuries who settled on the bank of river Dibang were named as Dibangiya. They worship *Kundimama (Gira-Girachi)* along with the whole family. the other *khels* that settled on the bank of river Tengapani and Borpani or Borgang were known as Tengapaniya and Borgayan respectively. Tengapaniya *khel* worship *Pisa-Dema* or *Baliyababa* whereas *Pisachi* or *Kechaikhati* is worshipped by the Borgayan *khel*.

a) Clans or Jaku

Each of the above- mentioned division has a number of exogamous clans popularly called as *Bangsha* or *Jaku*. The Dibongias have twelve major clans whereas the Tengapaniyans and the Borgayans have seven and six clans respectively.

i) The Dibangiyas

The Dibangiyas may be regarded as the major division of the Deuri community. The Dibangiyas, on the other hand, as far as possible, preserved their traditional socio-ritual organisations along with their dialect. The major clans or jaku of the Dibangiyas are- (i) Sundariyo, (ii) Patriyo, (iii) Airiyo, (iv) Chariyo, (v) Chitigayo, (vi) Kumotayo, (vii) Chukrangyo, (viii) Dupiyayo, (ix) Murangyo, (x) Teliyayo, (xi) Lagachuyo, (xii) Kalia-Chakuyo.

Role of jaku in the sphere of the marital life of the individuals and in selecting the functionaries of the Priestly council is most significant. Most of the functions of a clan and a moiety overlap; both play nearly identical roles in the marital and ritual lives of Dibangiyas. It may be that the Dibangiya group originally consisted of two principal clans, viz., Sundariyo and Airiyo, which in due course multiplied into Sundariyo, Patriyo, Chariyo, Chitigayo, etc.

Depending upon the followers of clan exogamy system, their marriage is generally regulated by moiety which is an exogamous group of related people. On one hand *Airiyo*, *Kumutayo* and *Chukrangyo* form one moiety and the remaining nine clans form the other moiety. A boy can neither select mates from within his own moiety nor can marry a girl belonging to his patrilineal moiety. That shows a boy can only marry his maternal uncle-aunt's daughter (*momai-peiyo pisachi*). If this social prescription is violated he is punished by the priestly council of the village.

The Deoshal or Midiku of the Dibangiyas has six worship place: *Manikut*, *Chumketeri*, *Jakoruwa ghar*, *Randhoni ghar*, *Tamuli ghar*, *Marong ghar*.

ii) The Tengapaniyas

The Tengapaniya division is again sub-divided into seven clans- (i) Machiotika, (ii) Bikarmiyatika, (iii) Kutiyatika, (iv) Chakucharutika, (v) Pagimegeratika, (vi) Papariyatika and (vii) Chenaboriatika. Marriage can take place among any clans of this division except between Kutiyatika and Chenaboriatika. The shrine has three mandir: *Dharam Bishnu or Indra Bahar*, *Baliya Baba mandir* and *Haduya*, an open place without any walls where sacrifice of animals take place.

iii) The Borgayas

The Borgaya division of the Deuries is also known as *Midiya*. There are few clans of this division. The major among them are- (i) Ikucharu, (ii) Chimucharu, (iii) Hizaru, (iv) Busaru, (v) Luparu and (vi) Gosaru(not traceable at present). This division has no code of restriction related to marriage custom. Marriage can take place between members of any of the clans. The Than of Borgayas has four worship place namely *Manikut*, *Haduwa*, *Bhug-ghar* and *Chara-ghar*.

iv) The Patorgayas

Unfortunately the Patorgayan khel is untraceable till now. It is presumed that the members of this group might have amalgamated with the Borgayan khel as they were originally members of Borgaya khel. There is a saying that the people of this division became the king and Nayaka in olden days when they moved westwards from their original place Sadiya. Some thinkers contend that the people of Patorgaya division might have amalgamated with the Lalungs.

Social Life

Every society has its endemic folkways through which their social and individual life is maintained. The Deuries, too, have certain social structures to shape their lives. The folklife of Deuries are generally guided by *sang-ghar* (house built on raised platform) and joint family (*jakarua jupa*). A family (*jupa*) comprises of a man, his wife and children, his married and unmarried brothers and sisters, father and mother, grandparents, sometimes an adopted son or daughter, under a single head (*Gira*) of that unit. The Deuries build their house on a raised bamboo platform raised about four to five feet above the ground level. It is oriented in the direction of East to West, main door facing East. Deuries consider East as auspicious direction. That is why their shrine or *Midiku* is situated in the Eastern side of the village. There is a main door to every house. A common corridor runs to the end where kitchen is situated. Each married couple has separate room alongside the corridor. The Demachi kutali (master bedroom) is generally situated in the middle portion of the house. They have their own dudepati (fireplace).. The number of rooms depends upon the number of nuclear family or units in the household. A michon is there in the frontyard where grains, firewood, etc. are put under sun. Sometimes grandmothers sit there and tell stories, fables, etc. to their grandchildren. Separate grannary, cowsheds, etc. are constructed towards the southern part of the house. Pigs, fowls, other domestic animals are reared below the raised platform. *Tat-shal* is also situated under the platform in the front side.

The Gira supervises all the activities of his jupa; agriculture, business, rituals, etc. he is a member of the village council by virtue of his being the head of the family. The malefolk construct houses, plough fields, cut woods, collect paddy, etc. The bachelors of the household assist their elders in all their domestic activities. The women, on the other hand, engage themselves in all household and agricultural activities such as harvesting, husking, thrashing, rearing domestic animals and fowls, weaving clothes, etc. under the guidance of the Girachi. A Dibongiya family lives very disciplined and peaceful life.

Food and Drink

Food habits of Deuries depend on their surrounding vegetation, climate and geographical locations. As their habitat is surrounded by river, woods, lakes, etc. they can procure required food items such as green vegetables, fish, fowls etc. quite conveniently. Nowadays due to population explosion, the natural treasures are depleting. As a result, the tribe started rearing domestic animals, fowls, pig, cattle, etc. and tending to own vegetable garden thereby maintaining their source of food.

The food habit of their folk-life can be divided into various groups, viz., steamed food items, roasted items in fire, boiled items in *Koupat*, steamed in bamboo tube, fried food items, etc. They love to prepare *Maka* (rice), *Dalpuruwa* (a kind of green leafy vegetable), *Duja* (egg), various kinds of potatoes, fish, chicken, etc. by steaming, roasting in fire, etc.

Suje is the most respected and sought after drink among the Deuries. Its preparation takes quite a lot of time. It is prepared by fermenting rice and adding variety of herbs and organic roots. They also relish eating food item such as rice, *pitha*, etc. by steaming in bamboo tubes.

Dress and Ornaments

Deuries have their own characteristic style of dressing. One can easily distinguish between and unmarried through their way of dressing. They wear traditional dress in general as well as in social functions. These traditional attires are weaved by the women folk themselves. It is their speciality to dress up in cotton, muga, eri or pat-silk attires. The men folk put on *Ikun-jimaor Suriya-Sula*. The style of wearing differs between married and unmarried male. They wear *Boma* or turbans or head gear on head and place a *Bosen* (*gamucha* or towel) on the shoulder. They may wear *Ikun* of various colours but during festival or other social functions they use white coloured *Ikun-Jima*. On the other hand, the priestly council always wears dress of pure white colour, i.e., white colour can be considered as a symbol of pride, status and respect

Dressing style varies among the females according to their age. Among their dresses, *Igu* (skirt), *Jokachhiba*, *Gatige*, *Baiga*, *Phuma*, etc., are the main. A young Deuri girl wrap *Igu* not below knee length. The length of mekela increases with different stage of age. When a girl attains puberty she wears *Baiga*, kind of cloth wrapped over the chest. Married girls wrap *Jokachhiba* enclosing the waist. They wear *phuma* (blouse) and cover their head with a *gamusa* called *Gatige*. They put on white coloured attires during festivals.

But with changing cultural and social life styles, a change in dressing style is quite noticeable among the Deuri people of new generation. They are seen wearing shirt, trousers, jeans, t-shirts, churidars, sarees, skirts, frocks, etc. in domestic life. During festivals, they definitely dress up in traditional clothes.

Ornaments are adornments of human bodies. A Deuri girl looks beautiful in her adornments. They have different ornaments meant to be worn on different parts of the body. Though Rings are worn by Deuri male but in general no any other ornaments are worn by them. Ornaments worn by females are like *Uchoon* (bangles), *Gina* (ring), *Jangfei*, *Golpota*, *Maduli*, *Junbiri*, *Hilikhabiri*, *Kotun*, *Batun*, *Kanful*, etc.

Language

The language of Deuri tribe is called Deuri language. Nowadays the language is basically spoken by the Dibangiya division of the tribe. according to linguists, Deuri language belong to Sino-Tibetan language family, Tibeto-Burman being its sub-family; it falls within the Bodo language group of Assam-Burman branch. Linguists further observe that the language resembles, although partially, with the Bodo group of languages like Bodo-Kachari, Garo, Tiwa (Lalung), Dimasa, Rabha, etc.

The source of Deuri vocabulary can be divided into two types. These are:

1. Vocabulary inherited from their fore-fathers.
2. Vocabulary acquired by the tribe as a result of intermixing with other communities throughout the ages.

Further the sources of some Deuri vocabulary cannot be found out easily. The Deuri language has been recognised by the Government of India in the month of January, 2005. Many of the Deuries, particularly of the Tengapaniya and Borgayan divisions instead of Deuri language, show Assamese language as their mother-tongue. Therefore the statistics shown by census reports regarding Deuri-speaking people is could be less than the actual numbers.

Economic Life and Education

The people of the Deuri tribe basically dwell alongside river by forming village. Their main source of livelihood is agriculture. They cultivate paddy in summer and in rainy season's aahu, bau and Sali. In addition they grow lentils, potato, sugar cane, mustard, etc. Traditionally they plan their dwelling compound systematically, its integral agricultural components are betel-nut, various types of bamboo, trees for fire wood, seasonal fruits and vegetables. The woman folk of the family rear fowls, hen, goat, cattle, etc. and utilise the income to procure raw thread for weaving cloth, ornaments, utensils, necessary materials generally required for offering in rituals of religious and social ceremonies to support the family economically. This system till now is prevalent in the villages however, to-day's generation engage themselves in economically productive khariff crops, horticulture crops, tea plantation, government jobs, private jobs and in other business according to their ability and educational qualifications. Nowadays it is not uncommon to see modern agricultural equipments like

power tiller, tractor, pump set etc. in a Deuri village. It may be regarded as a welcome change that many of the Deuri people realise that life is not just survival by eating and clothing; the demand of the time is to be progressive, their society should be made free of superstitious elements and these can be achieved through gaining education only. The Deuri people send their wards to acquire higher education in its all domain. As a result male and female of the tribe have got government jobs in the field of education, engineering, medicine, civil service, etc.

As per census report of 2001, out of the total Deuri population of 41,161, educational qualification above secondary education is 25.5% (6863), above higher secondary, 9.4% (2541), above graduate and post graduate, 4.9% (1320). Total literacy rate: 76.2%, male 84.8%, female, 67.5 % (Taid, 2008, Amar Axom).

III. CONCLUSION

With the advancement in the field of education, science and technology the age-old traditions, culture and socio-ritual celebrations of Deuri tribe, no doubt, is showing some percentage of erosion. Nevertheless many conscious and enlightened citizens of the Dibangiya division as well as the other divisions of the tribe are toiling hard to preserve, restore, revive and safeguard art and culture and overall development of Deuri people in all days to come so that the aesthetic beauty of their religio-centric ancient culture and celebrations remain intact.

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