

A Study on the Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Deoris

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Abstract: *Deoris are a fascinating minor tribal group of Northeast India, known for their unique way of life and religious practices. Since ancient times, they have strongly believed in sacrificial rituals of religion. After the downfall of the Chutiya Kingdom, this group of people were displaced from their original habitat and started to settle in various places of upper Assam. Today, these groups of people are scattered in various districts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Wherever they settle, they build a temple there as it is the centre for their people where they worship all gods and goddesses. To worship in their temples, they have different Pujari. They performed different rituals in their temples. They worship their gods by singing Hymns. In earlier times when they lived in Kundil Nagar they had four sub - groups of people worshiped at four different Deohals. The Deoris living on the bank of river Dibang worshipped Kundi - Mama, Gira - Girasi, or Bura - Buri, the Borgoyias were at the Tamreswari Temple, and the Tengaponiyas were at the Baliya - Baba temple. Patorgoyias were worshipped at the temple of PatSadiya during the reign of Gaurinath Singha (1780 - 94). Deoris are an essential part of the rich cultural heritage of northeast India, and their way of life and religious beliefs are truly unique.*

Keywords: Deoris, Rituals, Cultural Heritage, Religious beliefs, and Practise

1. Introduction

Deoris were a group of people who referred to themselves as Jimochayan (children of the sun and moon). They were riverine people who lived in chang - Ghars and were mainly an agricultural group. It is said that they were displaced from Sadiya during the downfall of the Chutiya Kingdom, and this group of people was scattered to different places in upper Assam and some districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Due to their connection to agriculture, they preferred to settle near rivers, which were helpful for both agriculture and daily household work. This group of people was subdivided into four clans and named according to their habitat areas. For instance, those Deori people who lived on the banks of River Tengapani were called Tengaponiya, those who lived on the banks of river Dibang were called Dibongiyas, and the people who lived on the banks of river Borno were called Borgoyias. Another group, known as Patorgoyias, went missing or mixed with other tribes of Assam at the time of displacement.

Deoris was one of the priestly clans. They preferred to worship their ancestors, a practice that had prevailed from ancient times. The above - mentioned four groups of people worshipped different Gods and goddesses. According to legends, during the period of the Chutiya Kingdom, they worshipped at four different Deohals. For instance, Tengaponiyas worshipped "Pisadema" or "Baliya - Baba", Borgiyas worshipped "Tamreswari" or "Kesaikhati", and Debongiyas worshipped "Kundi - mama", "Gira - Girasi", or "Bura - Buri". Patorgoyias were worshiped at Patorhal in Sadiya during the reign of Gaurinath Singha¹. They followed the sacrificial rituals of worshipping and had different Deohais or Pujaris perform rituals in their temples. For instance, they had Bordeori, Horudeori, Borbharali, Horubharali, Bora, Baike, Poriyas, etc. The process of selecting their Pujaris was different, and the temple - building process among the Deoris was also different. It is said that whenever they settled somewhere, they built a

temple there because the temple was the centre for worshipping gods and goddesses and different matters.

Temples of Deori:

Deori tribe in Assam is known for its unique and distinctive temple structures. They follow the Nagara style of temple architecture with some local effects, and their temples are fortified by brick walls. Locally, they refer to their temples as "Than Ghar." Three main temples are built in a line: Baliya Baba, Chunodai - Ghar, and Indra - Raja Ghar.

• Baliya - Baba Than:

Baliya Baba Than is considered the main temple in the context of Tengaponiya Deoris and is situated in the middle. This temple is also called Monikut and is where all the main pujas are performed. The temple was built in the Nagara Style of North India with some local effects. The temple's main entrance, the Hewa - kora Ghar, is where devotees worship the god. After Hewa - kora ghar, a rising platform was found where the pujari blessed devotees by singing hymns. An earthen rising platform known as the Haduwa was used to sacrifice fowl including cock, pigeon, duck, and animals such as buffalo and goat. On top of the Hadura, a Chandra tap was found which used to cover it. Moving forward from the platform, there was a door - locked room known as the Manikut. This is where the god resides, and devotees, except pujaris, are not allowed to enter. The Manikut was round, and the upper portion of the temple was dome - shaped with a regular Rekha found with floral design in between the Rekhhas. On top of the temple, an Amalaka was found.

• Chunodai - Ghar:

Chunodai - Ghar, also known as Bumia - Ghar or Sat - Kuwar Ghar, is situated on the right side of the Monikut. The architecture of this temple looks like a Do - Chala house. This temple also has a Hadura, and a Chandra - tap is located on top of it. The temple is worshipped to the Sat - Kuwar God, and sacrifices are performed here.

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• **Indra - Raja Ghar:**

Indra - Raja Ghar is located a little distance from the Monikut and is worshipped to the rain god Indra. This temple is also called Chandai - Ghar. Sacrifice is not performed here, and Hadura is also present. Near this temple, a Bhog Ghar is present where the bhog is prepared for the god by the Burha - Poriyas. In between the Indra - Ghar and Monikut, there is a place for Lohit - Deo (River God), where a white cock is sacrificed. An Ai - Thapana is present at the backside of the Monikut and is worshipped only during Bor - pujas. In the temple campus, there is a rest house for the devotees built opposite the main Monikut.

Outside the temple campus, there is a house called Akhibotiya Ghar or Bhuj - Ghar, where the devotees cook and eat the sacrificed animals and fowls. In Deoris, it is believed that no eating practice should be done on the temple campus to maintain purity. At the main entrance of the temple, an open house called Bat - Chara Ghar is present, where devotees enter the temple. This is situated on the west of the main temple.

Pujaris:

The selection of pujaris in Deoris is very unique. They select their pujaris based on the Lineage (Vansh) category. However, not every Linage individual is eligible to become a pujari. A specific lineage category is required for the position.

There were different pujaris in each Deori temple, they were:

1) Bordeori:

The position of Bordeori is truly unique and highly revered among all the pujaris of the temple. Only individuals belonging to the Bordeori lineage of every sub - group are eligible for this post. The Bordeori is not just a pujari, but a spiritual leader who holds a special place in the hearts of the people. He performs to worship the god by singing hymns and to blessed people. On special occasions, he performed animal sacrifices and offered to the god. The selection process is rigorous, and once chosen, the Bordeori is bathed by the previous pujari and taught all the mantras rules and regulations of the temple. It is a position of great responsibility and honour, and the Bordeori must be pure and must not have any bad record in society. During every puja in the temple, the Bordeori receive a special tribute. If he decides to resign from the post, he gives a pig to the temple before his retirement, and the meat of that pig is distributed to every household under the jurisdiction of the temple. At the time of retirement, the Bordeori pay a pair of cock to the temple. The Bordeori is a symbol of devotion, purity, and spirituality, and his presence in the temple is a source of great inspiration and reverence for the people.

2) Borbharali:

The position of Borbharali is highly respected in the Deori temples and is considered to be second in rank only to the Bordeori. The selection criteria for the post of Borbharali is also unique, with only individuals belonging to the Phagimugiya and Phaforiya lineage of the Tengaponia clans being eligible for this position. Like the Bordeori, the Borbharali must also be of good character and must not have

any previous bad marks on their record. In the absence of the Bordeori, the Borbharali is responsible for performing all the rituals in the temple, including animal sacrifice. When retiring from the post, the Borbharali must offer a pig to the temple and be given a duck in retirement time. The position of Borbharali is an important one, and the person holding it is considered to be a spiritual leader and a source of inspiration for the people.

3) Horudeori:

The Horudeori is the third highest - ranking pujari in the Deori temple, after the Bordeori and the Borbharali. To be eligible for this position, the individual must belong to the Bikomiya lineage in the Tengaponia clan context. The selection criteria, retirement process, and responsibilities in the temple are the same as for the Bordeori and the Borbharali. The Horudeori is a vital member of the temple community and is considered a spiritual leader and source of guidance for the people. Their role involves performing all the temple rituals, including animal sacrifice, in the absence of the Bordeori and the Borbharali. Similar to the other two pujaris, the Horudeori must also be of good character and must not have any previous bad marks on their record. The position of Horudeori is a position of great honour and responsibility, and the person holding it must maintain the highest standards of devotion, purity, and spirituality.

4) Horubharali:

The position of Horubharali is an important one in the Deori temple, and the person who holds it is considered to be a spiritual leader and a source of inspiration for the people. To be eligible for this position, the individual must belong to the Horu - Buko lineage in the Tengaponia Deori context. The Horubharali is responsible for performing all the temple rituals, including animal sacrifice, in the absence of the Bordeori, Borbharali, and Horudeori. Similar to the other three pujaris, the Horubharali must also be of good character and must not have any previous bad marks on their record. When retiring from the post, the Horubharali must offer a pig to the temple and be given a duck in retirement time. The position of Horubharali is a position of great honour and responsibility, and the person holding it must maintain the highest standards of devotion, purity, and spirituality.

5) Bora:

The post of Bora in the Deori temple is considered to be an important one, as the person holding it serves as an outer helper of the temple. for this post, the individual has to be from the Dangor - Buko lineage in the Tengaponia clan context. The Bora is responsible for collecting all the necessary items required for the temple rituals and events. Additionally, they inform every household under the jurisdiction of the temple about upcoming events and necessary preparations. They may be heard saying, "*Raiz ooo.... . i.... kaile thangharat puja Rakha hoise, gotike Kaile hokoluke thangharole ahibole amontron jonua hol aru kaile haluak hal khoti koribo aru hepinie tat thkoti koribo buli anurudh jonua hol.*" The position of Bora is an essential one in the temple community and plays a crucial role in ensuring that all the *temple events run smoothly.*

6) Baike:

The post of Baike is the same as the bora and also performs

the same thing in the temple. for this post, the person has to belong to the Senaboriya Lineage. The bora and Baike also have to provide a pig to the temple before their retirement and a duck to the temple at the time of their retirement.

7) Poriyas:

In the Tengaponiya temple, there were three Poriyas at a time who performed to help the Pujaris at the time of puja and also they looked after the temple. they were called as Deka Poriya. These three Poriyas called themselves as 'Horibhagat'. Including these three Poriyas another pair of Poriyas were present they were called as Burha Poriya because they were recruited for the same post for another time after five or more years from the Deka Poriya position. At the time of appointing the Deka Poriyas, they have to give a pair of cock to the temple which should have been red, and at the time of retirement from the temple at have to give another pair of red colour cock to the temple. And the Burha - Poriya pairs were also provided a cock at the time of retirement which is called as "Pua - Jui".

Pujas in Deori Temple:

Deori people have a rich tradition of performing pujas in their temple every month of the year, aimed at promoting the welfare of their community. In total, they perform 28 pujas in a year, which include 12 Mahekiya Pujas, three Bor - pujas, Aa - au Puja, Raj - Bon, Gaon - Rakhiya Puja or Dangoriya Puja, Hokk - Deo or Dangor - Deo ceremonies, and more. These pujas involve the sacrifice of fowl and animals as an offering to the gods.

In April, the temple hosted three Bor Puja celebrations - Bor Puja, Horu Borpuja, and Bihu Urua. After 'Bihu Urua', the 'Raj - Bon' ceremony was observed, but before that, the Temple had to perform the 'Bihu Patdanga' Puja. Following Raj - Bon, the Aa - au Puja was conducted, followed by 'Gaon Rokhiya Puja' or 'Dangoriya Puja'. The village elder women performed 'Deoboriya Hobha' on the bank of the river before the 'Aa - Au Puja'. Following all the pujas mentioned, the 'Hokk - Deo Puja', also known as 'Dangor - Deo', was celebrated. The temple pujaris did not perform this ceremony; it was conducted by the village pujari, who was chosen by the villagers under the temple's jurisdiction.

The temple observes a monthly 'Mahekiya Puja', which requires four fowl (two cocks and two hens). Every 'Borpuja' requires four 'Posai - kiyas', which means Rooster - cock, selected from four houses in every village and presented to the temple. Before entering the temple and beginning to sing hymns, the Pujaris and Poriyas applied sandalwood to their bodies and brought their tools as per the recommended rituals and religion. The Poriyas played the Conch, and the pujaris sang hymns while the bell metal was rung outside the Bora. These rituals were a part of every Borpuja. Bora and Baike were not allowed to enter the Monikut and were not to apply sandalwood to their bodies.

In Borpujas, 'Hanti Jal' (holy water) was not offered. Only 'Mahekiya Pujas' featured the offering of 'Hanti - Jal', which required a pair of cock presented to the temple. People sought 'Hanti - Jal' for their household's welfare, and it was offered only by the pujari. It was believed that the Pujaris begged God for 'Hanti - Jal' and offered it to those

who desired it.

In households, the pujaris also performed 'Hanti - Deo'. People performed 'Hanti Deo' if they had done something wrong, ate cow meat, or if someone in the house had committed a crime. After performing Hanti Deo, they had to pay a fine to the temple based on their crime. To perform, they required nine cocks.

'Sai - Khua' was performed instead of 'Hanti - Deo' if someone had committed a crime or gone against society. It required nine cocks, one white goat, one duck, and a pig. A fine of 151 rupees was payable to the pujaris, and 300 rupees were payable to society. The amount of the fine was increased based on the severity of the crime.

During the 'Hato - Chua Puja' in June and 'Puho Chua' in December, the pujaris and Poriyas watched over the gods' clothing and the goddesses' jewellery. In March, the Pujaris performed the Luhit Puja, which required a white goat, a spotted duck, and a black hen. This puja was conducted to protect the village and its people from river water and prevent landslides on the river banks. The Deoris also performed Vaishnavi Puja.

The temple pujaris required one black goat and one spotted duck to perform the 'Aa - Au Puja'. The 'Gati Punua Puja' was performed in May and required eight cocks and was also conducted by the temple pujari. Deori people have a rich tradition of performing pujas in their temple every month of the year, aimed at promoting the welfare of their community. These pujas involve various rituals and offerings, including the sacrifice of fowl and animals. The Pujaris and Poriyas perform these rituals with great devotion and follow the recommended rituals and religion. These traditions and rituals play an essential role in the Deori community and are passed down from generation to generation.

2. Conclusion

The Deoris are an important part of the rich cultural heritage of Northeast India. Their unique way of life, religious beliefs, and practices are truly fascinating and have been passed down through generations. The sacrificial rituals of worship, the temple - building process, and the selection of Pujaris are all unique to them. The temples they build are a testament to their architectural and artistic skills. The Deoris are an example of a community that has preserved their cultural identity despite facing displacement and other challenges. Further research and documentation of their practices can help in the preservation and promotion of their cultural heritage.

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ⁱ Saikia, 1974, page56