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A Study of the Religious Background of the Deori Community in Assam

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Abstract:

Religion plays an important role in the development of the socio-cultural background of a community. Deories are one of the aboriginal tribes of Assam. The Deori tribe belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of Mongoloid stock. The tribe has maintained their Mongolian racial traits, languages, religion and folk tales, beliefs through centuries. The Deori tribe had migrated from Dibang, Lohit, Kundil valleys and settled in Upper Assam centuries ago. The Deoris were not a ruling community of Assam rather they were involved in religious activities under different ruling dynasties of Assam time to time. The Deori people follow indigenous faith. They worship their ancestors; Kundi-Mama, Boliya Baba (pisadema) and Tameshwari (pisasi). They also worship the Hindu deities. Deoris are very religious people. Since antiquity, Deori people worshiped God by singing hymns and holy songs. Later on the experienced priests known as Bordeuri and Bharali started sacrificing animals in their temples. They used to serve as priest in the Sutiya and Ahom kingdom and hence got the name Deori i.e those who worship God. The origin and occupation of the Deori community are interlinked with their religious beliefs. Deoris are one of the major ethnic tribes of Assam with a strong religious background, this characteristic makes them special among all the tribes of this region. The objective of the paper is to focus on the religious background of the Deori community of Assam.

Keywords: Religion, Deori, Chutia, Legend, Deoshal, Kundi-Mama, Keshaikhati.

1. Introduction

The state of Assam, situated on the north east corner of India is populated by various groups of people. Assam is a meeting ground of many races, cultures, languages and religions which have largely moulded a unified cohesive cultural identity known as Assamese culture. Like the other tribes and communities, the Indian constitution has regarded the Deoris as scheduled tribes of Assam. Deoris are aboriginal of Assam and are distinguished from other tribal societies of Assam for their religious characteristics. Deories are of mongoloids origin, with very strong religious character, and are known to be a brave, tradition-loving and cultured people with deep agricultural roots. They have a unique cultural and traditional heritage that is nowadays recognized to be something of a hidden treasure for sociologists. The Deoris are reverine people and history says that the homeland of the Deoris is in the North Eastern states of India or in the east of undivided Assam. The Deori tribe had migrated from Dibang, Lohit, Kundil valleys and settled in Upper Assam centuries ago. At first they settled down nearby Sadiya and at present they are found in Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Sunitpur, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts of Assam. They are also found in the Lohit and Sanglang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. According to the Census Report of 1951, the total populations of Deori people were 12,503 and in 2001 it is found that the total deori revenue village in Assam are 133 and their population are 2,45,000. (C. Sarmah, 2012)

1.1. Objectives

The objective of the present study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the religious background of the Deori community of Assam. The specific objectives of this study are:

- i. To analyze the meaning of the term Deori and the legendary origin of the Deori people.
- ii. To analyze the religious beliefs of the Deoris and the significance of the Deoshals in their life.

1.2. Methodology

The methodology used in preparing this paper is conventional and analytical. The research work is mainly based on secondary data. Important inputs for the study are made available from different research journals, books and web pages.

1.3. Analysis

The Deoris proudly introduce themselves as 'Jimo-Chhayan', meaning 'the children of the sun and the moon'. In fact, the Deoris are respected among the tribal communities as priests or worshipers. As there is lack of scientific study about the indigenous tribes of the State, one cannot find a general acceptable definition of the term Deori or any authentic fact regarding the origin of the Deori community. Deori people believe that they were created by Lord Shiva (Kundi) as his devotees to establish righteousness on earth by

proper adoration of the deities. The real explanation of the term 'Deori' is not given convincingly by the Sociologists, different scholars offer different definition. According to some the word 'Deori' comes from the word Deu meaning great and wise. O and R denotes male and female respectively. Deori thus refers to a great or wise male/female. Again some other define that of the term Deori the word Deo means deity and Ri means the perfect way of worship, thus those who worship God with utmost devotion are called the Deori. Many scholars believe that due to expertise in worship of Hindu God and Goddess in different form, they are called deories. Dambarudhar Deori in his book 'Deori Sanskriti' mentions that the worshipers of supreme power Kundimama are called Deori. Dr. Bani Kanta Kakoti in his book 'The Mother Goddess Kamakshya' mentions that the word Deori originated from the Sanskrit word Deva Grhik. According to P. C Saikia the word Deori means the person worship puza i.e. the owner of the temple of God and Goddess are called Deori. The famous anthropologist Dr. Ravi mentions that Deoris were the Aryans Hindu who entered Assam through the North East corridor of Assam before 13th century. According to historians and archaeologists the best people, those are wise, knowledgeable and working as priestly class are called Deori, they are the worshippers of God-Goddess from ancient time and also performs sacrificial ceremonies. (C. Sarmah, 2012) Though there are so many different definitions of the term Deori but each one denotes some religious connotation. The generally accepted terminology of Deori is that the people who are able to satisfy Deo or Deities with their adoration are called Deoris. (D D Deuri, 1964)

The legendary origin of the Deori community also explains their strong religious background. According to the most popular legend, in the prehistoric period there was a kingdom called Kundil on the north east corner of the ancient Kamrupa Kingdom. In that empire there was a renowned Sakti peeth (shrine) where the ritual of human sacrifice was prevailed. Accordingly, every year one young boy of the kingdom was chosen as the sacrificial offering to the shrine but human sacrifice in that shrine did not mean beheading the human being at the sacrificial alter rather after consecrating the man in all rites and rituals offered him to god and then set him free. As a result of this, year after year the number such young boys dedicated to God increased and all of them settled down at the hills near Kundil, the place called *Laibai* and *Lophabai*. As they were put forwarded to Deo or Deity as sacrifice, these people came to be known as Deora. Later on they got married and started family life and thus gradually increased their population. The people born from the Deoras built the Deora community. They started worshiping their tutelary God Kundimama in a shrine established in their locality and claimed themselves as the adopted sons of Kundimama or Shiva-Parvati. As time went on, Kundil under the Chutia rulers emerged as a strong kingdom in Brahmaputra valley with Sadia as its capital. Unfortunately, the tutelary God of the Chutias got dissatisfied with the Chutia priests and refused to accept offering from them. Then the Chutia king was warned by a divine voice that the God was displeased with the Chutia priests and it would bring threat to the peace and prosperity of the kingdom and to bring back the grace of God the priesthood of Chutia community should be entrusted in the hands of the Deora clan. Immediately after that according to the order of the divine voice or *Deodhvani* Chutia king declared the Deoras as the priestly Class of the Chutia kingdom. Out of the Deora community four priests were selected and they were given necessary guidance regarding the rituals and maintenance of the Chutia DeoShals or Shrines. Since then they used to serve as priests of the Deoshals under Chutia and Ahom rulers respectively and hence got the name Deori. (V B Deori,2011)

From the legendary origin it can be concluded that Deoris are one of the four divisions of Chutia, the Chutia king as the ruler of Kundil annually used to offer one of their young man to God to observe the traditional rites of human sacrifice and these young Chutia people constituted the Deori community and later on they represent the priestly section of the whole Chutia community. Thus the Deori people have a strong religious character and like most of the tribal societies the Deoris conform to both their primeval beliefs and Hinduism. They follow animistic religion. In each village there is a common place for worshiping the God. It is called *Thaan*. Offering of pigs, fowls are made during religious ceremonies. They also believe in certain spirits for their wellbeing. Forecast of the coming year's happenings are done by the concerned spirits through the woman who is beheld by the spirits. This occurs during Bohag Bihu, which is a new year's festival in the month of April, at the Thaan. Due to the impact of Hindus of Assam they have started to perform some Hindu rituals. The Deoris follow their indigenous faith, their tutelary god is Kundi gira or lord Shiva. Since time immemorial they have been worshiping Kundi Gira. At that time various community living in different parts of India worshiped Lord Shiva under different names such as Bathou by the Bodos, Kundigira by the Deuris and Shiva by the Hindus etc. The indigenous faith of the Deori people is Kundi Darma, it is an indispensable part of Hindu or Sanatan Darma. The basic philosophy of Deori religion is that the whole universe is running according to the order of a supreme power which they called Kundi-Mama means Purusha and Prakriti. They worshiped Kundi-Mama as the origin of all creation or source of energy. There is a vast similarity between the philosophy of Hindu religion and the philosophy of Deori religion. Like the four Varnas or classes viz. Brahman, Khatiya, Vaisya and Sudra of Vedic Hinduism, in the Deori community also four posts are created to perform puja in the Deoshals viz. Bordeori, Saru Deori, Bor Bharali and Saru Bharali. Later on the Deori people are divided into four sub-groups. Again the death rituals of the Deoris are similar to the Vaidic tradition, they do not bury the dead bodies rather they burn them on funeral pyre. Though the Deoris were the worshippers of *Sakti* they carried out the religious ceremonies in complete Swatvik method by offering saol(rice), *mah prashad* and *ful tulashi* (fruits and flower, leaves) and there is no historical evidence that they used to worship their deities by offering bloody sacrifices. Instead even today the Deoris perform their rituals in their shrines in two distinct parts and in the first part they offer puja in the Swatvik rites of Hindu Vedic system. This main part of ritual is done inside of the shrine but the second part of the puja is performed outside the shrines where buffalo, duck, pigeon goat etc. are sacrificed. This second phase of worship was supposed to add in the Deori rituals after they were appointed as royal priests of the Chutia Kingdom. Later on under the patronage of the Chutia kings the human sacrifice at the shrine of Kechaikhati was also started. (P D Deuri, 2011, pp-115-124) According to the prevailing religious beliefs of the deuris Kundigira has three wives. The first wife is Mama Buchhare Buyachi the Aryan goddess who is known in Hindu religion as Parvati the daughter of king Dakshsha, the second wife Mama Tini Charanchi is considered as the Dravidian or Non-Aryan goddess who is worshiped by Hindus as Kali and Mama Chunketerichi or Aborchi the daughter of the Abors the Goddess of

Mongolian origin who is called Ganga by the Hindus. Thus the principal deity of the Deoris is Kundi-Mama means Shiva and Parvati whom they worship as Prakriti and Purusha. Besides the Deoris worship the offspring's of Kuni Mama. One of their chief gods is Pichdema or Boli Baba who is the son of Kundi Gira from his first wife. The Hindu name of Boli Baba is Bhairav. The Deoris worship Pichachi the daughter of Kali whose Hindu name is Bhairavi. Chang Konwer or Nomal Konwer is the son of Kundigira from his third wife who is called Kartik by the Hindus. (S D Deuri, 2005, pp-37-40).

At the beginning the Deuri people were very few in numbers and they lived as one single unit. They worshiped their three chief deities Kundi-Mama, Boli Baba and Kechaikhathi in the same shrine. Later on nearby the main shrine of Kundi-Mama two separate shrines were established for the son and daughter of Kuni-Mama. Years after for the convenience of performing rituals of worshiping the three shrines, separate priests were selected from the main Deori clan for three shrines. In this way Deori race was divided into three clans or *phaid*s. At the beginning they were known by the name of their respective tutelary deities such as i) Kundi-Mama family ii) Boliababa family iii) kachaikhathi family. In the meantime, the Deori people came down from the hills and settled down as priestly class in the river valley of Kundil and Dibang. As time passed the Deori people of the three sub-groups came to be known by the name of the rivers they lived by. Such as the worshippers of Kundi-Mama Deoshal who live by the bank of Dibong River are called *Dibongia*, the worshipper of Boliababa living by the bank of Tengapani River are *Tengaponia* Deori and the people living by the bank of Bornadi river worshipper of Kechaikhathi are called the *Borgonya* Deori. (V. D Deuri 29-32, 2011) Though the three separate Deori *phaid*s were formed and started to live in three different parts worshiping their respective deities yet the original three shrines were at Sadia. Therefore, the Deori priests of each *phaid* used to visit their respective shrines at Sadia and offered their puja during the time of *Bihu*. (V B Deuri, pp-78-79, 2011) apart from these three Deoshals there was one more shrine known as Pator Shal, the Deori people living at Pat Sadia or central Sadia were called Patorgonya, in the shrine of Patshal it is said that the priests only performed the rituals of inviting the deities of the three Deoshals just before the puja performance of the three main shrines. Later on the importance of this fourth shrine was going down and ultimately this fourth shrine of the Deories was stopped to exist. Though the Deoris possess such an old religious faith of their own yet they never intended to preach their religious beliefs or forced others to accept it. Even today they maintain their religion among themselves. If anybody other than Deori people want to offer puja at the altar of their Deoshals the Deori priests accepted the offerings and have done the rituals on behalf of that person and bless him by chanting hymns, no other priests or Brahmins are allowed to worship in the Deori Deoshals. Except the Deoris no one knows the rites and rituals of the traditional worship of Deoshals. Here lies the significance of the Deori Deoshals. There are examples of the Deori priests of Deoshal that they with the supernatural power could sanctify the sins and can save the greatest sinner. That is why the maintenance these Deoshals were entrusted at the hands of the Deoris by the Chutias and Ahoms though these ruling dynasties had their own priests. (V.B Deuri, pp-92-93)

2. Suggestion and Conclusion

From the above study it can be concluded that the Deori tribe has a strong religious background because of which they have been occupying a respectable position among the other tribes of Assam since ancient time. The Deori shrines are equally regarded as revered religious places in Assam. It is the duty not only of the Deori community but the Assamese community as a whole along with the State government to protect this heritage of ancient Assam. Steps should be taken to turn these Deoshals of the Deoris as religious heritage and all the shrines should be made accessible for people by improving the communication system. There is every scope to make the Deori Deoshals important spots for religious tourism in Assam. Religion is the backbone of Deori society, so it is necessary to preserve this age old religion of the Deoris to keep alive the distinguished features of Deori tribe. But it is also true that their traditional religious beliefs have no scientific base and are to some extent responsible for making the Deori society backward in comparison to the other tribes of Assam. Their religious beliefs force them to stick to some superstitious notions and even in the 21st century they spend lots of money in the performance of various rituals according to Deori traditional faith to overcome their bad luck or troubles. Therefore, it is the need of time that for the all-round development of the Deori community, reform in their religious faith is necessary. Fortunately, among the Deori community a number of progressive thinkers have been emerged who have been trying to conserve their traditional religious faith by eliminating the unscientific elements, so that the Deori society could sustain their entity in the competitive world of 21st century.

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