

# Rites of Passage: A Study of Deori Community Living In the Dhemaji District of Assam

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## ABSTRACT

Rituals are part of every culture. The life cycle is used as metaphor denoting the passageway of a human being through the successive stages of life from birth to death through childhood, adolescence, adult life and old age. The rituals make and mark transition makes them especially salient for life cycle changes. Life cycle events and transitions such as birth, marriage, and death are most frequently marked with familiar rituals. Many religious and ethnic groups also have rituals to mark young adult development. This study mainly focused on the life cycle rituals of Deori community covering all aspects such as pre-birth, birth, marriage and death. The main purpose of the study was not only to provide the hidden meaning of those rituals followed by the Deori but also the changing pattern of the rituals. This study was based on primarily on the qualitative method of research for which purposive sampling.

**Keywords:** life cycle rituals, Deori, purity and pollution, Sanskritisation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Deori language, 'Den' means great, wise and 'O' and 'RI' male and female respectively. Hence the meaning of Deori is the great or wise male or female being. Regarding the term and meaning of Deori few documents in written form have been found. According to B.K Kakati, the word Deori is an Indo -Aryan formation connected with Sanskrit Deva grhika. Sir Edward Gait wrote that the Doris is the priestly section of the chutiya kings of the Sadiya dynasty who worshipped the goddess Tamreswari (kechaikhaiti). Even the annexation of the Chutiya kingdom by the Ahom king in 1523 A.D the Deori priest continued their worship at these shrines under the Ahom kings. Thus the Deoris were accorded a special status in respect of religious functions and rituals etc throughout Northeast India. There are four broad divisions of the Deoris such as Dibangiya, Tengapaniya, Borgoyan and

Patorgoyan. The division is termed as 'Gayan' Khel by the Deoris. Each of the division is said to be originated from a particular place or river's name. <sup>[1]</sup>

## 2. Rites of passage of the Deoris

The term 'Rites of Passage' was created in the year 1907 or 1908 by a German anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep. Life cycle rites often have meaning for both the individual who is performing the ritual, and also for the community and culture of which the individual is a part. These are the sequence of events between the starts of generation and the start of the next. As soon as an individual is born, he/she goes through many events in life from birth to death. It includes the culture, customs, tradition, marriage, family system and the complete way of his/her life. An individual's key life cycle events – birth, puberty, marriage, and death are important occasions in most societies and cultures worldwide. A Deori man or woman undergoes series of rituals

such as Pre-Birth, Birth, adulthood rituals, Marriage, and death rituals.

**3. Context of the Study:** The study was conducted in the district of Assam. The name "Dhemaji" is believed to be derived from Mishing words "Dhe" means "fly" and "maji" means "creeping". The study is qualitative and requires both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through interview guides, with observation technique and narrative analysis. In this study, the purposive sampling method was used with 6 respondents.

#### **4. Different rituals of Deori:**

##### **I. Prebirth rituals**

The birth of a child, among the Deoris, is not marked by huge ceremonies; in fact, there are several rituals which are being observed. The period of pregnancy is very crucial in the life of every woman. The Dibangiya and Borgoyan Deoris do observe some taboos and restrictions with pregnancy. A woman at that period is restricted from passing by cremation ground, to go under the shade of big trees and passed by a big forest alone, which they believe to be resided by evil spirits. She also doesn't take food during a solar and lunar eclipse and also sleeps straight in bed till the eclipses are over. They believe that in such period severe damage may be caused to the fetus. The parturient mother is also tabooed from killing animals, fishing, knitted, and cutting which may cause a defect in the unborn child. The husband of the parturient mother also has to observe certain restrictions like abstain from harming and killing animals. He also avoids crossing a river, carries a dead body and visits a household where someone has expired. The expected mother is also not allowed to cross the rope through which a cow is tied as the belief that the navel cord may around the neck of the fetus. Giving birth to a child seems to be an easy-going process among the Deoris. Traditionally the delivery is usually carried out in the bedroom of the expected mother. However, sometimes certain obstacles do come at the time of

delivery. The placenta of the mother doesn't come out easily. In such cases, the husband throws *Dheki Thura* (the pestle of the husking level) from one side of the roof to another for easy delivery since they believe that it may reduce the complicity. In certain cases, it is also seen that the water through *Bengchola* (a sort of loom fasten to the waist of the weaver) is also given to the parturient mother to drink because they consider *Bengchola* as very pure. Sometimes the husband's big toe dipped in water and that water is also provided to the women. Soon after the birth of the child, the umbilical cord is detached by the elderly woman who attends the said process. It is usually cut by the experienced lady with the help of a sharp bamboo strip by placing the umbilical cord on a *ba tola chung*a (a bamboo tube used for preparing heddle). The use of *ba tola chung*a for the said purpose is justified on the ground that it is clean and hygienic in comparison with other apparatus. It is considered as a symbolic representation of a female. After the delivery is over, the placenta that comes out from the mother's body is separated from the child by the elderly woman and thereafter it is buried dip inside the soil in one corner within the compound of the household by the husband by covering it tightly with banana leaf.

##### **II. After Birth Rituals**

Then after the delivery, comes the period of pollution. The pollution period is mainly restricted for the mother and her baby. This period depends upon the falling of the umbilical cord attached to the navel cord and which falls in 3 to 7 or more than that. The mother of the baby collects it and kept it inside a cocoon. Later, it is tied around the neck of the baby, with threads of red and black colour with the beliefs that it will protect the baby from any kind of infectious disease. Before the purification ceremony, the mother is restricted to draw water from the tube well and also to enter the kitchen or any other rooms as she is considered as impure. The family members or even members from the same clan are not

allowed to perform any religious ceremonies until the umbilical cord doesn't fall. The concept of purity and pollution of Louis Dumont can be associated here while understanding of rituals in Deori community.

### III. Purification Rituals:

According to the Deoris, the purification ceremony is very simple. Usually, 3 to 5 or sometimes more than 5 *gopinis* (elderly women who had attained menopause) are invited to perform the aforesaid ritualistic purpose. One cock and a hen are sacrificed with the ritual per the baby is a boy and a girl, respectively. Spicy chicken curry is prepared with a stem of arum, black pepper, ginger, etc., along with fish, *kochu jaal* (curry prepared from the arum stem) and *suje* (rice beer). At first, the mother sits with the newborn and she is being served with all food items. In case of the cock or hen the leg portion is being served to the mother. The mother first put the *kochu jaal* and *suje* in the baby's mouth and then she eats the rest. The *gopinis* also sits beside her and take their lunch. And after the lunch, the *Gopinis* take the baby one by one in their lap and sings *Naam* (Deori ritual folk song) and plays with the baby on their lap. After that, the mother again takes a bath and then bow down before the *gopinis* to take their blessings. On the same day before leaving, the *gopinis* also named the new baby.

### IV. Young adulthood Rituals

In all the tribal communities in India and perhaps in all cultures the menstruating women are considered to be impure. Thus, there is 'deliberate seclusion' of the menstruating women from every ritual. The process begins from puberty ritual where the girl is supposed to stay inside the house and follow certain strict rule and restrictions. Only her mother and other relatives can interact with her, men are not allowed to see or talk with her for three or four days. When a girl attains puberty she is not supposed to come out in public for a few days. She is not supposed to eat certain food and also is not supposed to do any household chores. She is

ceremoniously greeted to the outer world where she is considered marriageable age. The ritual which is done to greet her to the outer world called *Xanti-Biya* (celebration of attaining puberty). On that day when greets to the adults and relatives, she has to wear their traditional dress and ornaments and take blessings from *Gopinis* (old age women). And then they feed them with rice, pork, chicken, *suje* (rice beer) and various items.

There are also certain rituals which are considered an only male affair. The *Raj Kcbang* among the Deoris is an example of such rituals. The ritual is done for the well being of the entire community, but half the population of the community's women are barred from participating in same. And also if there are any women in the village are having their menstrual cycle then she is supposed to leave the village and go and stay at another village and only return when the ritual is over. These rituals are a complete male affair.

### V. Marriage Rituals

#### (i) Male Selection

Marriage is one of the major social traditions of a society. The customs that involve in the marriage ceremony of Deori community is quite interesting. The wooer or his parents visit the bride's family first and seeks her for the groom. The first side as to give various commodities (like betel nuts, fish and rice beer which is known as *Tupula pelua*) to the other in that day and both side cheerfully enjoy. A day that is fixed for the marriage ceremony should be divine for both the family.

#### (ii) Marriage Rituals

The date of the marriage is fixed by the respective parents and guardians of the bride and groom. On the day of *Damachi* (marriage day), the bridegroom sends betel nuts and *mah Haldi* (Turmeric paste), various ornaments, clothes and significant others things to the bride before the marriage ceremony (this is known as *chhuta-huta-bhuba*). *Mah haldi* that is given has to be applied by the bride in her whole body and can take bath. On the arrival of the

groom and his relatives to the bride's house, a person known as *Deodai* (priest) performs a ritual called *Sujelongduraba* to invoke divine favour for a happy conjugal life for a couple. And after this both the bride and groom offer *Angujuma* (a term of respect) to their parents and others. Later on, the marriage ceremony is performed with great religious attitude by them. On that as their tradition, they sacrifice pigs for the marriage ceremony. To complete and to tie the knot of the marriage of the groom and bride, the head of their priest (they called them *Medhi*) come and give them blessing and pronounce them husband and wife. This is followed by food and drinks being served to the guests. Even the bride has to serve a meal to the priest and adult member of the house. Only in a given time or a day, they can take the bride to the groom's house and there is a belief that if the bride's parents were dead she is not allowed to go on Monday and Wednesday as it will bring them bad luck and harm in their marriage life. *Lakhi Lua* is the ritual where the bride leaves her house to the groom, there she has to stand in the front door of her house and throw some grains for three times, and later on, these grains are kept inside the house. After that, the elder brother or any other male member will carry both the bride and groom in the back and crosses them steps as a ritual. Later on, when the bride reaches the groom's house, they directly go to their *Tamreswari* temple (goddess Parvati) or *Than Ghar* (Temple) to take blessings from the goddess Parvati for their happier married life and a new beginning. They take a bow and bless the *Bhoral Ghar* (hay house) before entering the house to bring them peace and wealth in the future and thus all the family members welcome them with joy. The sister-in-law of the bride will keep betel nuts in *Sarai* (disc stand) and wash the feet of the bride and after that, the grooms enter the house and the bride follows his husband to the inside. And later, inside the house, they keep two pots of water and inside the pots she puts two coins in each pot. The bride has to take the coin and keep

inside her suitcase. They do this ritual to bring happiness and peace in the house. On that day, after all the ceremonies completed the *Pathori* (head priest of the temple) comes to see and tell the bride's family that the groom and bride have reached their home safe and sound. Next day a ceremony known as *Pathuriapohaa* is performed at groom's residence. In this ritual, the groom's family offers betel nuts to the bride's family. After eight days of the marriage groom's family visit the bride's house and prepares eight items of food to feed the groom's family and this ritual known as (*Ghar uthua*).

In the Deori marriage, there are many local marriage songs sing as follows:

*Ram ram tulite talica*

*Ram ram bahiche deuta*

*Ram ram sarai lai maniche*

*Ram ram ekai lakh takare*

*Ram ram duinolakh takare*

*Garu ai ram ram*

(Local folk song is sung during the marriage)

### **Death Rituals**

Death is the ultimate ending of the life of an entity. When a death occurs a series of customs are observed at different stages like before the funeral, after the funeral, etc. All the activities and rituals performed after the death of a person are called death-rites.

When a Deori person dies outside the house then the dead body is kept outside in their verandah and if the person dies inside the house then they keep the body inside after that they wrap the body with a new white clean cloth (seleng kapur). To purify the body, they apply *mah-Haldi* (Turmeric Paste) on the whole body of the dead person and then they bathe the corpse. An egg is broken on the forehead of the dead person generally by the eldest son and in if any case the eldest brother is not there the other member of the male folk can do that. They break a coin into pieces according to the age of a person. Such as for a child it's five, seven for women and men, nine for the priest and old aged people

and according to the age those coins should be put it together with a thread together and this ritual is known as *Kapali*. And then they take *Lakhi Lowa* ritual, one family member has to join (lock) on hand with the corpse and put grains between the fingers and pick the grains and keep it on a cloth till the funeral ceremony gets over. The corpse is then wrapped with a bamboo mat and carried in a *Sagi* (the carrier of a dead body) to the cremation ground in a procession by the sons, relatives and co-villagers. After then they prepare *Mutuka* (rice, chicken, vegetables and oil they mixed it and cooked it- they called this *Mutuka* in Deori language) which is made by the other member of the family for the dead person. The pyre has seven layers of woods for man and women, for the priests and old age people it is raised to nine and for a child, the layers of wood laid are five. The person who put fire on the pyre takes a full circle around the pyre according to the age of the dead person, and after then takes the food (*Mutuka*). As a Deori ritual every member of the family has to be present in the cremation and they give blessing to the soul of the dead person to be in a rest in peace and have to put woods into the fire (seven types of woods are used such as mango, sandalwoods etc) with their left hand. After the complete burning of the pyre, the person who puts fire has to take food (*Mutuka*) to the pyre and with the *Kapali* (the pieces of coins) has to take a full circle around the pyre according to the age of the dead person. After that he put water in the pyre and takes one piece of bone with the help of a *Sepena* ((specially made of bamboo to hold the bone from pyre) from the pyre and takes circle and throws one by one coin pieces and betel nuts into the pyre according to the age of the dead person. After taking the bone piece along with betel nuts he has to dip them into the water and dive for seven times. After returning from the cremation ground all the family members have to put oil in their ear and in their spinal cord (which is mixed with *mah Haldi*, oil, and cow dung). They invite the neighbours

for the feast and drinks, on the same day they keep (*naam*) for the dead soul. For the Deori the death ritual gets over in seven days and for those days they remain in fast but offer seven chicken bone pieces to the cremation. After the completion of the seven days, they invite everyone and feed them with pork and *suje* (Rice beer) and offers whatever is needed by the villagers.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Deoris generally do not have any food feeding rituals (*annaprasaan*) to the newborn baby. But due to Sanskritisation,<sup>[2]</sup> now they imitate the rituals from the upper caste of the society. They do not have any rituals related to the pregnant lady but today they perform *Panchamrit* (Baby shower). Where the women are being fed with lots of good foods and offer her gifts. Even today celebrate the puberty which is regarded as taboo in past. In Deoris, they did not have any remarriage rituals but because of modernization now they performed widow remarriage. The food that is served during the marriage has a taste of modernized culture. Earlier in mate selection, the groom has to show his potential while staying at the bride's house for a certain period. After that, the groom is eligible for the bride. Today, this custom is not being found. The discussion marks out the rites and rituals of the Deoris marked by three distinct stages of birth, marriage and death. Different socio-religious functions are associated with these three phases of life of the Deoris. With the influence of the external world and different forces, the traditional way of thinking and perception of the Deori regarding their birth, marriage and death is now changing. Though the Deoris could able to hold their roots so far some attitudinal changes are now taking place in the society of the Deori community.

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**Extra notes:**

1. Deoram Lade Jayant Study of The Mishing and Deori Community of Assam. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities* (Ijrssh) 2013, Vol. No. 2, Issue No. iii, Jul-Sep
2. In the study of Mysore village, M.N. Srinavas finds that every caste is trying to change its ranks in the hierarchy by

giving up its attributes and adopts the practices of upper caste.

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