

A Study on Folk Traditions of the Deuri Tribe Associated With Birth and Death

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Abstract

Deuris are one of the prominent tribes of North East India. Like many other tribes, the Deuris also observe the rituals of birth and death. These rituals reflect the folk culture of the Deuris. Anthropologically, the Deuris are Mongolian. On the other hand, linguistically, they belong to the Assam-Burmese division of Tibeto-Burmese group. The Deuris primarily inhabit in the districts of Lakhimpur, Darrang, Dhemaji, Kamrup of Assam. This paper presents a comprehensive idea about the folk rituals associated with birth and death observed by the Deuris.

Keywords— The Deuri tribe, birth, death, folk rituals

INTRODUCTION

The Deuris are one of the ancient tribes of North East India. Primarily residing in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, they are anthropologically Mongoloid and linguistically belong to the Assam-Burmese group of Tibeto-Burmese branch of Sino-Tibetan language family (Bora, 540). Mongoloid people originally belonged to the river valleys of Yangtze and Huang-He in North West China. Later they migrated towards South and settled in Myanmar and Brahmaputra valley. It is estimated that the Mongolians entered India from Eastern side about 3500 years ago simultaneously during the time of Aryan Invasion from West. Mongolians from West China migrated in large numbers during 1st millennium BC. The ancestors of Deuris were also among them. After migrating from Mongolia, they stayed for a long time in Tibet. Gradually, they moved to Unan and Myanmar and finally settled in Kundil Nagar, an Eastern city of Assam. (Bordoloi, 29-30). Another source suggests that the Deuris were the priest community of Chutiya tribe. The Chutiya tribe had kingdom in the banks of River Subansiri during the time of Ahom's entry to Assam (13th Century). In mid 14th century, conflict started

between the Ahoms and the Chutiyas. The Ahoms killed, exiled and drove away many Chutiyas to different parts of Assam. However, at the same time, they also appointed some Chutiya communities as officers and established marital relations with them. Such marital connections resulted in some sub-communities i.e. Hindu, Ahom, Borahi and Deuris. Amongst them, Deuris are the most important sub community of the Chutiya tribe. They have preserved the language, religion and tradition without much change as they were before the Ahom's attack (Bhattacharya, 68-69). Also, according to the myth of Deuris, they came from Hingiri Mountains. They settled in Assam's northern corners (Sadiya) and performed holy rituals. Later on, the Chutiyas entered Assam from North-West. Seeing the Deuris performing rituals well, the Chutiya king appointed the Deuris as priest. The Ahoms too kept the trend after subjugating the Chutiyas. Afterwards, Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha released them from royal duty and they started to live independently (Bhattacharya, 78-79). We can summarise that the Deuris are of Mongolian origin. They migrated to the kingdom of Kundil of Soumarpeeth or today's Sadiya. Though there is no written history about

the Deuri's migration to Assam and place of origin, we get the traces from the myths, legends and folksongs (Gogoi 1).

Current place of residence:

At present the Deuris reside the districts of Dhemaji, Darrang, Lakhimpur, Sivasagar, Sonitpur, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Tinisukia and Kamrup of Assam. Moreover, they also reside in the Lohit, Tirap, Sanglang and Itanagar district of Arunachal Pradesh.

Birth related folk rituals and traditions of the Deuris:

Birth is the first event of human life. After marriage, every couple wishes for children to continue the bloodline and as a support for old age. From the day of conception, every community perform some rituals, traditions and beliefs so that the child is born healthy. The Deuris too are no exception. The folk beliefs and traditions related to birth observed by the Deuris can be divided into two categories.

1. From the day of conception to the childbirth:

Suje Logua: The Deuris perform a ritual called '*Suje Logua*' wishing for the wellbeing of the pregnant women and the unborn child. Some neighbouring women are invited and '*Kundimama*' is worshipped. Traditional liquor (rice beer) called '*suje*' is unavoidable in every rituals of Deuris. The neighbouring women give blessings and advices which mentally prepares the pregnant lady for motherhood (Bordoloi, 129).

2. Folk beliefs and traditions during and after childbirth:

In olden days, child birth used to take place at home. An experienced woman or midwife helped in the process. Traditionally, the Deuris made unique provision in their houses for the birth. In the labour room, a rope was suspended from ceiling just above the bed so that the mother could grip. A piece of bamboo was tied in the footrest of the bed, which she pushed with her heels. This method of lying on the back holding the rope and pushing with the heels eases the childbirth process. (Bordoloi,

128). Like many other ancient tribes, the Deuris also used to cut the umbilical cord with a sharp piece of bamboo shaving. A fire was lighted in the room. Thorny branches of jujube tree, fishing net, mustard seed, iron weapons etc. are kept in the door of the room to protect the neonatal and mother from evil spirits. Right after birth, a newborn is made to touch a holy book. (*interview with Deuri, Dwipen*) Now-a-days, most childbirths take place in the hospitals. However, many such traditions are still observed by the Deuris.

Like many other communities, the Deuris also feed the new mother some specific recipes to increase lactation. On the third day of delivery, they give her curry of arum leaves, steam cooked local fishes like climbing, spotted snakeheads, spicy curry of black pepper, small fishes boiled with sweet potato leaves and raw papaya etc. (Bordoloi, 128). The Deuris end the period of ceremonial impurity after seven days of childbirth with a ritual called '*suwa labirua*'.

Suwa Labirua: The ritual of ending ceremonial impurity is similar to the Assamese community. The ritual includes washing clothes, cleaning and mopping the house, utensils etc. These washings are done on the seventh day when the newborn's umbilical cord falls off. On that day they invite some elderly women from family and neighbourhood. The women wear pure white apparels. They give the name of the newborn child. Unlike most Hindu communities, the Deuris do not consult the almanac to choose a name. The *suje* needs to be prepared and served to the elderly ladies sacredly by a woman of the household. The elderly ladies sit on banana leaf. Their food is also served in banana leaf only. The maternal uncle shaves the head of the newborn. The hair is collected and plastered on the house wall with cow dung and mud. This act of shaving the pre-natal hair marks the ending of 'ceremonial impurity' of the household. If the baby is a boy, then he is taken outside to pray the Sun God and given a basket full of rice, betel nut and leaves, silver coin, a bow and arrow to touch. In case of girl child, cotton pods and frankincense

resin is also included in the basket (Bordoloi, 230). Some people also give sword with shield to boys and winnows-sieves etc. to girls to touch (Bora 557). This act symbolises the belief that the newborn will attain skill and wealth in his/her life. Now-a-days because of Aryan influence, some family gives paper-pencils, rice ear, gold and silver, money, soil etc. for the newborn to touch. After ceremonially ending the impure period, the mother with the baby worships the Gods and bows to the elderly ladies. A rooster is killed (sacrificed) and prepared for the feast. The meal with *suje* is served after the worships. The elders pour a drop of *suje* in the baby's mouth and accept/welcome the child to the clan. The household becomes pure and fit for organizing puja or other holy rituals again only after the blessings of these elderly ladies. Until then, the family and their kith and kin observe a ceremonial impurity period and do not take part in any holy religious activities. The Suwa Labirua ceremony is mainly women centric and there is little part for the male members in the rituals.

Death related folk rituals and traditions of the Deuris:

These rituals can also be divided into two categories :

1. Rituals observed before taking the body to the cremation ground :

Though slight variation is seen among the three clans of Deuris, the core beliefs and rituals are the same for all. Unlike some communities, the Deuris do not take the dying person outside home. They let the death happen inside. It is customary to inform everyone as soon as the death. In old days, gunshots were fired to announce the death (interview, Deuri, Dwipen). The neighbours come at once to offer condolences and to help in cremation rituals. Deuris believe that death is the saddest incident for a household. They observe following rituals before taking the body to cremation ground.

a. Duja Labiduwa

b. Kapali Genema

c. Miruchi Laruwa

The Deuris bathe and dress up the body with new clothes. The clothes are dressed inside out and an egg is broken in the forehead. This symbolizes that the person is now lost like a broken egg. This ritual is called Duja Labiduwa. After that a jewellery made of silver pieces is placed at the forehead. This tradition is called Kapali Genema. 9 pieces of silver are used for the kapali of distinguished persons. For a general male, there are 7 pieces and for female there are 5.

The Deuris believe that the deceased person can take away wealth of the household. To prevent this and as a symbol of taking over the wealth from the hand of deceased, a ritual called Miruchi Laruwa is observed. In this ritual, a family member of the deceased person sits beside the body looking away from it. Then he/she places his hand under the deceased person's hand and pours ricegrains on it. The grains slipping through the fingers is collected in a flat basket and preserved near the pillars of kitchen. After completion of all rituals, the grains are counted. Getting more rice is considered good and less rice is considered as bad omen (Bordoloi, 153-154).

For natural deaths in general the Deuris cremate the body; although there is provision for burial for unnatural deaths. "Though normally they cremate, but in case of death by snakebite, suicide, epidemics like cholera-pox, death at young age and pregnancy, it is customary to bury the body. (Koch, 121)". Moreover, if the family wishes so, there is provision of cremating the skeleton after flesh has rotten away. (Bhattacharya, 75).

The Deuris carry the body to cremation ground in a bamboo stretcher keeping legs forward. All members of the family and village take part in the funeral procession. People of the village postpone every activity for that day. Cotton threads are thrown in front of the procession. 2-3 people behind the body play conch, bell etc. throughout the procession. By doing so, they believe the deceased can reside in heaven.

2. Rituals after taking the body for cremation : Following folk traditional elements and rituals are observed from cremation to memorial feast :

- a. Soostuga pu laduba
- b. Mutuka
- c. Tupat Pindo
- d. Submersion of the ashes in Ganga
- e. Pindo Utari
- f. Mim-de-muma
- g. Paas Doha (Bordoloi, 153-162)
- h. Mimo Hareruwa (Koch, 132)

Funeral pyre is prepared at a chosen place in family land or the public crematory. The body is kept near the pyre and people circumambulate the body while placing cotton thread and firewood on the pyre. Distinguished person are circumambulated and given firewood for 9 times, males for 7 times and females for 5 times. After that, using left hand only, everyone place firewood in the pyre for himself and his family. This tradition is called *soos tuga pu laduba*. A rooster is killed and a meal of rice and chicken curry is prepared in the crematorium itself and offered to the deceased. This meal is called *Mutuka* and the act of offering it on the spot is called *Tupat Pindo* (hot offering). Before lighting the pyre, everyone bows down to the corpse and asks for forgiveness for any wrongdoing done during the life. They also forgive the deceased person and pray for his well-being in the afterlife. The elder son or a close relative of the deceased lights the pyre with left hand without looking. Generally females leave the cremation ground after the fire starts. Deuris use sandalwood, pine, mango etc. wood and ghee, mustard etc. in pyre (Bhattacharya 75).

After the corpse is fully burnt, pieces of bones are collected from the pyre. As done earlier, the bones are divided into 9, 7 or 5 parts. One platter of the meal previously cooked in the cremation ground is divided into the same number of bundles. The pieces of bones are kept in each bundle accordingly. The son (or the person who lit the fire) circumambulates the pyre for the same number of times carrying the bundles of the food. Then everyone goes to a nearby pond. There the son offers the food

bundles for the deceased by taking a dip facing East remembering the departed soul. Symbolically, this ritual is called submersion of the remains in River Ganga. Everyone present in the cremation also takes dip in the water. After that they return to the deceased person's home again. There they are sprinkled with holy water and warm themselves in the fire. The process is repeated at their respective homes too. The village neighbours stay with the grieving family for the first three nights and read Holy Scriptures, play games and music etc. to provide emotional support to the family.

The people of the village bring *suje*, rice, vegetables etc. and prepare a feast killing a pig given by the family. From that day onwards, a meal is offered to the deceased person for 5, 7 or 9 days (as done earlier). The family and relatives observe fast for those days. After completion of the days of food offering, the ritual called *Pindo Utari* is held to end the period of ceremonial impurity for the household. In this program, the family arranges a feast of rice and *suje* for neighbours and relatives. A promise is made to the deceased that meals will be offered for him/her on the occasion of Bohag Bihu and Magh Bihu.

The last death related ceremony observed by the Deuris is called *Doha*. Doha can be observed on the very next day of Pindo Utari or can be postponed to weeks or months. It can be organized after many years in memory of multiple people together. For Deuris, Doha is a grand family function where all relatives, neighbours, friends and acquaintances are invited (interview, Deuri, Dwipen). Arrangements for groceries, food, *suje* etc. are started before several days. Traditionally the relatives and neighbours help the family with various items. In this ritual, a pig is killed for the feast by family members clad in pure white clothes. Ducks and roosters are also killed for the community feast. Before the feast, foods and items used by the deceased persons in their lifetime are offered, and everyone prays for his eternal peace. The next day, a treat is given to the people who were actively participating in the preparation of Doha. They also complete

any leftover work on that day. This marks the end of last rite functions. Afterwards, on every Bohag Bihu, Magh Bihu and Na-khowa etc. occasions, food is offered in memory of the deceased. *Suje* prepared in these functions is kept separated and offered alongwith. Offerings are placed in the backyard by remembering the deceased facing West.

Once in a year, the Deuris organize a ritual called *Mimo Hareruwa*. In this ceremony they sacrifice a pig or a rooster along with various items for their ancestors. The flesh and blood of the animal, *suje*, rice, rice flour, puffed rice, wild basil and other herbs, vegetables etc. are offered in the name of ancestors. A morsel of cooked rice and *suje* is also kept separately on the floor. The shaman inspects the heart of the sacrificed pig and tells upcoming good or bad omens for the household and their remedies accordingly (Koch, 132)

Conclusion

All four clans of Deuris perform these rituals with minor differences here and there. Now-a-days, new rules and rituals are being added as a result of cultural assimilation. Culture can never be stagnant; cultural acceptance, cultural harmony and cultural assimilation are the eternal rule of cultural progress. Same holds true in the case of Deuri folk culture too.

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