

You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul....
As I see my soul reflected in Nature,
As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness, sanity,
beauty,
See the bent head and arms folded over the breast the Female I see.
(Whitman, 97)

Whitman was always a riddle to the world of critics and continues to puzzle them even today with his ideological leanings and his prominently pronounced love that he professes in his poems to man as well as woman. Whitman's advanced stage of thinking which was beyond the apprehension of a 'common' man and the critics at that time can well be surmised by reading the following lines in *Children of Adam* -

Existing I peer and penetrate still,
Content with the present, content with the past,
By my side or back of me Eve following
Or in front, and I following her just the same". (Whitman, 90)

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The Deori Tribe of Assam in India: Some Traditions and Cultural Fiestas

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Introduction:

The Deori Tribe is one of the major ethnic tribes of Assam in India. It belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of Mongoloid stock. They have been able to preserved their Mongolian racial traits, languages, religion and folk tales, beliefs through centuries. It is believed that the people of Deori tribe had migrated from Dibang, Lohit, Kundil valleys and settled in Upper Assam long ago. However, turning the pages of history one can find that the homeland of the Deoris is in the North Eastern states of India or in the east of undivided Assam.

The book 'Mataks and their Kingdom' states that the Deoris had their abode on the bank of the Kundil River that flows through the Sadiya (Chapakhowa) area. Hence, their Kingdom was known as Chutam in the North Eastern region of the Brahmaputra Valley. Again according to 'Siva Purana', the Deoris were living at Chaug-Chu-Kul, Chakati-Chaliya, Laibari, Lataubari, Joidaam, Arem-Kerem and Mamaru-Pichala.

Social Life:

The Deori people are very spiritual in nature. They build a place (in the home) containing an altar for praying. They follow aboriginal faith and worship their Ancestors like– Kundi-Mama, Boliya Baba (pisadema) and Tameshwari (pisasi). They also worship the Hindu deities. They worshiped God by singing hymns and holy songs. On the passage of time, the experienced priests known as Boderi and Bharali started sacrificing animals in their temples. They served as priest in the Sutiya and Ahom Kingdom and hence got the name “Deori”. They like introduce themselves as 'Jimo-Chhayan' (the children of the sun and the moon). They were respected among the tribal communities as priests or worshipers.

The Deori people live in typical “Chang Ghar” (Stilt house). The lower part of the house is used as an enclosed space for the animals. The floor poses some holes in it. They used to pass the unnecessary foodstuff to the animals. A passageway is enclosed to the mid of the house or in a side by which they can separate various rooms for some purposes. They use bamboos, woods, canes, reeds, etc. to build their traditional house.

The fireplace called as 'Dudepati' is attached with the 'Chang'. The Deoris cooks various meals in it and eat, sitting around the fireplace. A platform remains enclosed to the house for cleaning various things. Such a platform is also built (by somebody) at the entrance of the house.

There are some exogamous clans among the Deoris. These are– Sundhariya, Patriya, Dupiya, Marangya, Chariya, Lagasuya, Chitigaya, Mehedaya, Kuliya, Ariya, Kumotaya, Bihiya, Khutiya/Buruk, Machiya, Birromiya, Paporiya, Fagimegera, Senaboriya, Chakuchara, Ekacharul/Busaru, Simocharu, Hizaru, Popharu and Gucharu. It is important to mention here about the deori people is that, though the community is made up of multiple clans; no two clans reside in the same village.

Generally, the head priest and assistant are recruited from the Sundhariya (Boderiyo) and Patriyo clans respectively. The Dupiyao clan has got the duty to light the incense in the temple. The members of Khuttia clan are recruited as treasurers. They can also open the door of the temple and purify the sinners by sprinkling sacred water over the heads.

The members of the Hizaru clan hold the head of the sacrifices animal and clean the clothes of the goddess Tamreswari. The members of Lapharu clan are chosen to keep the records of the expenditure. The members of the Gucharu clan serve as messengers. The Ritual hierarchy is strictly maintained among the clans.

Marriage between the clans of the same division is highly prohibited among the Deoris and only marriage of adult person and monogamy is allowed. The means of acquiring mates are *Machidecha* (negotiations), *Jonengna* (elopement) and *Miloni* or *Hankia* (Love).

There are four types of marriage ceremonies are there among the Deoris. These are Damachi, Sachi, Chorubasi and Dalibiah. This classification is made on the basis of the number of articles given as bride price.

First of all, for the marriage, an auspicious day is fixed. On the day, when the groom and his relatives, friends, etc. reaches bride's house, a person known as *Deodai* performs a ritual called *Sujelongduraba* to summon divine favour for a happy marital life for the couple. Then, both the bride and groom offer *Angujuma* (a kind of respect) to their parents and others. The food and drinks are served to the guests on completion of these rituals.

The guests and the bride, return to the groom's house on that particular day itself. A ceremony known as *Pathuriapohaa* is performed at the groom's residence on the next day and from the third day onwards, the groom and bride began to live as husband and wife. In the Deori community divorce is not permitted. The widows and widowers are allowed to remarry.

Basically, the women do not enjoy any legacy in settlement of disputes. They have no important role in religious and political affairs too. Though they are not allowed to enter the temple, now a day they can perform dances within the temple compound during the time of festivals.

The Deori women work more in comparison to their male counterpart. They do all kind of household works like cooking food, collection of fuel and fodder, grazing cattle, harvesting, carrying drinking water and taking care of the kids. They utilize their leisure time in spinning or weaving. The preparation of rice beer and weaving are the mandatory duties of the women of this community. They are specialist in the department of traditional weaving.

Dress and Ornament

The Deori community has their own century long ornamentation and in present time they are nourishing it, using it with sincere devotion. They use specific adornments in specific occasions. A Deori male uses a loin cloth called *Ikhoon* while they stay at home and the *Ikhoon* usually combines with a shirt or sporting. While going out of their home or village they generally use trousers and shirt. They prefer white cloth and use a necklace (*Konthamoni*) while they take part in traditional social function. The Deori women wrap up a kind of skirt (*Ujaduba Igoon*, which hangs loosely down wrapping tightly the breast) along with a sheet called *Jokachhiba* which is enclosed in the waist. But they sometimes wear *Riha* (a traditional outfit, sheet) and it is called *Tegihra*. Particular to Deori women, they use a towel (*Gamucha*) to cover their head which is known as *Gathiki*. It's a

unique dress code of the Deori women. They love in wrapping various ranges of customary ornament. They wear a ring called *Gema*, use bangles called *Uchoon* in their wrist and wear necklace called as *Igawa*. Some of the ornaments the Deori women use while performing 'Bihu' are— Lee, Kotu, Madoli, Joonbiri, Dugdugi, etc.

The Deori young girl wears a kind of skirt (*Igoon*). It is same like the married females, but there has some differences; they wrap it up within stomach along with Blouse and *Gamocha* (for helping to hide Breast). In the social place where Rituals like Puja, Marriag Ceremony, Bihu, etc. are performed they wrap up the breast with a sheet called *Baika Mariba* along with *Igoon* & Blouse and cover their head with *Gathiki*. They also wear different ornaments like Gema, Lee, Junbiri, Madoli, Dugdugi, etc.

Different Traditions of the Tribe

The Deoris have very rich traditions in their society. They are known for their strong ties to tradition and culture, which can be seen by the comparatively unchanged way of life through the centuries and their unique cultural heritage. Some of the traditions are as follows:

1. Applying the “Laa”

The Deori Women blacken their teeth with the mixture of iron ash and oil paste which is termed as 'Laa' in Deori language. It is performed in order to make them more purified in the occasion of rituals and performances. It is a common believe that the “Sai Gira” (Priest) are allowed to accept the food and drink only from the lady with black teeth.

Although this is a traditional process, it has medicinal advantage to the teeth. It is believed that 'Laa' helps to maintain ones teeth healthy and germs free. It makes the teeth stronger and support to last till the old age.

The present generation hardly loves to believe such kind of tradition. However it highlighted the rich science factor among Deori community at that time. It was also pronounce to be the supplementary beauty of a lady at that time.

2. Tradition Using of *Tel Pani*

Generally '*Tel Pani*' is the mixture of oil, water, *Dhuburi* Grass and Tulsi leafs which is to be kept on two separate bowl (left and right). Left bowl is for the female right bowl is for male. The Deoris bury the dead bodies near the river bank. The persons those who visit the burial place to carry out the last task are welcome by a bit of fire in the courtyard while returning back to home. There is a ritual to be performed by a feast for these persons. After competition of all the rituals, the groups of persons are asked to apply the *Tel Pani* bowl in their stomach, shoulder and both ears.

The objective of the practice is to eradicate any kind of evil soul got attached during the practice and maintains hygiene from dead particles. The bowl of the mixture of *Tel Pani* is to be kept on the gate of the house, so that the men and women may apply it during departure time.

3. Theft Rituals

One of the main traditional practices among the Deori Community is to theft. It is performed with different ways in numerous occasions. There is a common believe that if there is drought in the village then making crook of Sakoni (coned bamboo net use to filter Rice Beer) and keep it hidden for sometime causes the rain. The Deori people generally depend on agriculture and on nature. So, they have to perform this kind of traditional practices as the rain is the major

supplements of irrigation and farming.

There also a tradition of theft during the time of Meji (wooden stall) in Bishu night. It is the tradition to steal the domestic animals like goat, duck, pig, hen, vegetable gardens, fire woods and fisheries. As this is a tradition, no one can be blamed for the same. It is the duty and responsibility of the owner to keep their belongings safe and secure of their own.

4. Tradition of Causing of Rain

The Deori people belong to the priest class. They have maintained properly the power and procedure to cause rain in several villages till now. When there is scarcity of water at the time of plough and cultivation, they perform various tasks like marriage of Frog, steal of *Ichegu* (Wooden leader), *Dheki* (man made instrument use to crushed the rice grains) and plough in the courtyard etc.

5. Midi

The Deori tradition experienced various kind of midi's at its different stages of life. Some of them are– Asira, No-Jonia, Mirusi, Borsai, Sai-ya, Metuwa, Dangoria, Mora Hareba, Sai-Sig, Labiba, Hat jonia Risto, Pas jonia Risto, Akois jonia Bhokot, Yoi midi, Ji Liba, Guru Lagaba, Athigu Rakhia, Tree Fosola Chogaba, etc.

6. Egg Crackers

Egg cracking is a type of open competition where all can participate irrespective of age and gender. It is the most joyful event at the time of Bohag Bishu in the month of April. It is called as *Duja Chujuaba*. The history signifies it as an act of supremacy to others.

Festivals

The Deoris follow some special rules for the festivals. They celebrate mainly two major festivals during a year. *Ibaku Bisu* one of the festivals is observed in the month of April. The other festival *Magiyo Bisu* is observed in the month of January. It is important to mention here that both the *Bisu* festivals are connected with the agricultural activities. So they observe the festivals exactly before starting the agricultural operations in the fields.

The *Ibaku (bohagiyo) Bisu* is the most important festival of the Deoris. The festival is observed for a period of seven days with unrestricted joy and merry makings. Basically, they start it from Wednesday when the *Sangkranti* of Chot falls on that day.

The Deoris offer a Puja in their temple on the first day of the festival. The day starts with the ceremonial bathing of the animals in the morning. They sacrifice goat, hen, duck or pigeon in the Temple. The Suwasani Puja is observed by each and every family of the community. The household deity is prayed in the *Suwasani* room by the headman of the house. They pray for the welfare of the members of the family.

All the villagers starting from children to old people, including the women go to the *Than* in the midday. They gather there for getting sacred water and *Prasads*. Accordingly they got purified by the sacred water prepared in the *Than* first and then the Bor Deori and Deori Bhorali of the *Than* distributes *Prasads* among them after completing his prayers there. The rituals of sacrificing of birds and other beasts like goats, ducks and fowl are performed after the puja. The women have no place the feast.

The elderly people of the village do visit all the households of the village and wish their blessings for members of the households. In return, *Suzen* (rice beer) and



Deori Women performing Bishu Dance

Kajii are offered to them.

The male and female of youth category performed dance and song at *Chhaje Khula* (A place which are situated either Isolated from the village or middle of the village) at night. This starts from *Pohila Chot* (Middle of March) and end with *Bisu Uruwaba*.

The Deori people have restrictions in performing the *Husari* Party. They cannot proceed without declaration of Deori Bharali's on first day at *Than*. Generally performance of *Husari* depends on the economy of the village. So, it is not performed every year. However there must not be a gap of more than 2 or 3 years. The performance of *Husari* starts from the second day of the *Bihu*. It starts from the *Than* and then the parties visit households of the village. First of all they visit the house of the Bor Deori. He is the most respected person of the village. The *Husari* party wishes the members of the household a prosperous year and then the party return to the *Than* with different *Bisu* greetings. The *Bisu* dances are performed in each and every household of the village. There is a tradition that, if the singing of the *Husari* songs cannot be completed on Thursday, then it is kept



A kind of traditional ornament used by Deori Women

for the next Thursday.

The Deodhani Dance is a very significant and crucial part of the Bohag Bihu. It is a holy female dance or a god's woman. No man is allowed to go into the *Than* wearing colourful clothes during the time of *Bohagiyo Bisu*.

One of the festivals observed every year in the month of February is Joydam