

Knowing the origin of the Deoris of Assam in the broader context of Folklore

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Abstract

In the contemporary society we are constantly struggling to go back to our roots and to maintain our ethnic identity. 'Who am I?' is a question that has been scrutinized by us in diverse forms in our lives. How important do we think folklore in defining cultural identity? Culture is the creative expression of a particular society through its symbols, stories, ballads, myths, literature, art, music and for some its institution. An oral composition may be added to or subtracted from at any time and by different people. The date regarding the historical background of the Deoris is largely wanting due to scarcity of relevant ancient documents and other evidences. Regarding the origin and pre-history of the Deori community few legends as well as traditional songs can be considered as these appear to have represented real facts. How does a community foster its bond between people and their folklore and exactly which of its aspects relate to the society at large: the themes, the language, the forms, or the particular tales, songs and proverbs? The forms of folklore are thus regarded as the cores at the hearts of artistic forms. Identity is an outcome, a condition created largely through heritage which may or may not be conveyed through rituals as the vehicle of transmission. The Deori culture is facing danger from the clutches of globalization and striving hard to flourish. Such endangered culture so sprung -up by the nature thousand years past now deserve preservation and propagation by the government itself from being extinct. Thus, this working paper is a humble endeavour to deal with the notions of authenticity, locality, vitality of oral culture and cultural identity of the Deori Community, in the realm of folklore.

Keywords: *Oral Culture, Folklore, Origin, Identity, Deoris.*

Introduction: The word tradition means handing over. Literary tradition consists of the folktale, legend, song, riddle, and proverb or myths etc.ⁱ It is assumed or said that in oral cultures, everything is stored in the heads of the adults, so the one who has seen most and lived longest remains a major source of knowledge. It is a fact that virtually the only store of information lies in human memories means that it is always susceptible for selective forgetting and remembering. There are of course, techniques for preserving special kinds of information. But, unless deliberately directed, memory bends to other interests tending to set aside what does not fit. This feature of oral storage and transmission contributes to the relatively homogenous character of such cultures, in which uncomfortable dissonances tend to be forgotten while memory works with those experiences that link well with others. The Deoris or the Deuris are one of the distinct Tribal Communities of undivided Assam ethnically affiliated to the great Tibeto-Burman group. The meaning of the word Deori is, a person abides by high customary rule and having virtuous life, for worshipping God. The Deoris are one of an important minority communities having significant contribution towards the greater Assamese culture.ⁱⁱ

Aims and objectives:

- An attempt to throw a light on the importance of and oral culture.
- An endeavour to throw a light on the importance of folklore in shaping cultural identity.
- To discern the Deori community from a close proximity.
- To know the origins and historical background of the Deoris.
- To understand the importance of identity as an outcome.

Methodology: Historical and Descriptive methods are used regarding the context of the paper. And secondary data such as books, magazines, journals, articles, newspapers etc., are the essentials used in this working paper.

Vitality of Folklore in framing Cultural identity: A dive into the origin of the Deori community of Assam: In contemporary society we are constantly struggling to go back to our ethnic identities. ‘Who am I?’ is a question that has been questioned by us to ourselves in diverse forms in our lives. As a matter of fact, we are living in such an unpredictable position where we are enforced to rethink, redefine and elucidate our identities to different social institutions. Orality is often considered a symbol of culture and identity. Oral tradition has been preserved through ages. It may take the form of not only the narrative genres like myths, legends, anecdotes, jokes, fairy tales, ballads, epics, proverbs and riddles but also folk painting, folk customs, folk theatres etc. The oral nature of Folklore had become one of its crucial attributes, the touchstone of authenticity and originality. As a distinct mode of communication, folklore exists in any society; it is the sole property of neither peasants nor primitives.ⁱⁱⁱ Folklore is the wealth of the society and maybe treated as a medium through which people speak with their heart in the form of a creation in order to fulfill their needs both artistic, entertainment and functional.^{iv} Folklore plays a part in ethnic identification and ethnically based action too. Folklore can participate in ethnic processes. It may be at the core of ethnic identity, or it may serve as a symbol of that identity.^v

The Deori community from a close proximity: The North Eastern region of India indeed presents a glorious diversity which is followed by myriads of distinct aboriginal tribal communities inhabiting the region. The Indian Constitution has regarded the Deoris as a Scheduled Tribe of Assam. The present inhabitations of the Deoris are spread in Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Majuli Districts of Assam. Other than the state of Assam, the Deori villages are also found in Lohit and Tirap Districts of Arunachal Pradesh.^{vi} As per semantics the word *Deori* means the offsprings of God and Goddess. According to the Deori language *deu* means great, wise; and *o* and *ri* denotes male and female respectively. On the other hand, the Deoris are believed to be priests or worshippers of Gods and Goddesses. Though the members of the Deori tribe are generally known as ‘Deori’ amongst the members of the non-Deori communities, they like to proudly introduce themselves as *jimo-chan-ya* amongst themselves.^{vii} The etymological meaning of the Deori word *jimochanya* is- *jimo* means the sperm, semen or virile, *chan* means sun and *ya* means moon. The *jimo* is born from the sweet union of *chan* and *ya*, i.e., *purush and prakriti*. The significance of the word *purush-prakriti* is also found to be related to their chief deity *kundimama*. According to the Deori language, the word *kundimama* means *kundi- purush* or *gira* which is lord shiva and *mama- prakriti* or *girachi* which is goddess parvati, (*bura-buri*) in a derivative form.^{viii} The Deoris were the levite or priestly class and functioned as the priests of the Chutiyas of Assam, who established their kingdom at Sadiya. It has been observed that the original seat of the Deoris was in the region beyond Sadiya. It is only about a century ago that they removed thence to their present settlements; and some of them still occasionally visit Sadiya for religious purposes.^{ix}

Further the pre-history indicates that the Deoris are said to have come to India in the dim and distant past from North East Asia, i.e., from Chinese and Mongolian Territories. They settled in the valleys of the river Brahmaputra; the Champo, Lacha, Siddhakshetri, Swati, Bidarva or Banzul, Kundil, Changchukul, Laibari, Laphabari, Sadiya etc. It is also significant to note that the Ahom kingdom dispersed all the Chutiyas to the different parts of Ahom kingdom as a state policy, but the Deoris were allowed to stay in their habitat (Sadiya area) and continue their worship in the shrines there. This clearly indicates that the Ahom rulers did not equate the Deoris with the Chutiyas. There are four broad divisions amongst the Deoris. These divisions are- a) Dibangiya, b) Tengapaniya, c) Borgonya, d) Patorgonyas. Each of the division is said to be originated from a particular river's or place's name. The Patorgonya group is not traceable at present and it is presumed that the members of this group might have been amalgamated with the other existing groups of the Deoris or with the other communities. The Deoris have a common place of worship, amongst the Dibangiyas is known as *midiku* while the Tengapaniya and the Borgonya sections call it *than* or *shal*. In some Deori villages such common place of worship is popularly known as *deoshal* or *deoghar*. According to the Deori language- *midi* denotes God and *ku* denotes abode of the Gods and Goddesses. ^x

Discerning the historical background of the Deoris through the lens of lores and legends:

Due to scarcity of relevant ancient documents and other evidences the date regarding the historical background of the Deoris is largely wanting.^{xi} Regarding the origin and pre-history of the Deori community few legends as well as traditional songs can be considered as these appear to have represented real facts. There is a myth regarding the beginning of the world a local belief which is present in the Deori society till date. At the beginning of the world there was just water everywhere, nothing but only and only water. God at that time lived up in heaven. He felt like creating animal life in the world and in order to find if any piece of land had emerged anywhere in the world, he sent down two birds the peacock and the timtim (wagtail). The birds came down and then could notice a little land to their view. They were enlightened in finding a piece of land. But, as the peacock was hungry in their journey from heaven to the earth, it started to eat the shapely pebbles lying scattered on the ground. The wagtail straight away returned and reported to God that a piece of land had appeared in the world amidst water. The peacock remained entangled in the worldly charms, but it remained devoted to God. But the latter bird missed the other bird as they both got separated. When God decided to come down to earth and finally thought of creation of man and other animals, the peacock then begged for forgiveness as it was guilty of it's deeds of not returning back obeying God's words. God was moved by the repentance and cordial prayers of the peacock. And out of affection and also for the reason that the peacock happened to be the first resident on the earth, He put on the bird's plumes as his headgear thus, its from then there are the three plumes found on peacock's head. On the other hand, because the timtim the other bird had been loyal to Him, this bird maintained the words and abide by the rules of Almighty, thus, had an access to both heaven and earth. Both the birds stayed together and gave birth to the younger ones, and got the boon of travelling to earth in the dry seasons and roam joyfully. But, there is another belief to this story that, before the birds there was the spider who prayed to the God to be sent to the earth in search of land. As it was not sent, God as a consolation gave him three boons. In accordance with the boons thread comes out of the spider's mouth; the second boon enables the spider to fly up or down even without wings for the purpose of hanging or fixing his web; the third boon enables the spider to lay golden and silver coloured eggs and to procure its food without any efforts. More than this, God instructed the spider to descend to the earth and Himself followed the spider by clinging to the thread which the spider spins out, whenever needed. Traces can also be found in the narrative

or description of *Rukmini-harana* of *Dvapara yug* (age) regarding the origin of the Deoris. When collated well with the events of the saga of *rukmini-harana* then one can hardly deny the Deoris being called as the progeny of king *Bhishmaka*, since *Deori* was the grandchild of king *Bhishmaka*. The saga of *rukmini-harana* can be found in chapters 47-51 and 59-60 of the *Bhishmaka parva* of *Hari* dynasty. The legend follows as ‘...nothing is known about the *Bhishmaka* kingdom after the saga of *Rukmini-harana*’. Legends says this, that after this event, *Rukmabir*, the eldest son of *Bhishmaka*, out of humiliation and ignominy left the kingdom forever and settled in *Bhujkat*. *Rukmabir*’s five sons also followed suit swearing not to return back to the kingdom forever. Due to the going away of his sons and five grandsons king *Bhishmaka* decided to handover the reign of his kingdom of *Kundil* to his youngest grandson *Deori*. Thus, the *Deori* kings thereafter ruled mightily for many years till the third invasion of *Assam* by the *Burmese* when the last king of the *Deoris* *Bhadiya raja* who inspite of putting up a brave front before the invaders had to embrace death.^{xii} The *Deoris* were said to be the first worshippers in *Assam* of the *Kamakhya* and *Sadiya* piths. According to one tradition probably the outcome of *Hindu* imaginativeness- they claim to be descendents of *Kshetriyas* who fled into *Assam* for refuge from the subversive arm of *Parashuram*; the battle axe ram.^{xiii} The pre-historical legends as well as historical accounts, by and large, have made certain contributions which make one assume the *Deoris* as the tribal priest of the ancient *North-East India*, the *Deoris* are the first *Aryans* who intruded *Assam* through the *North-Eastern* point of *India*, the name *Kundil* province came into existence from the *Deori* supreme god *Kundilmama*, where, one who for the first time rendered the *abarbo geet*^{xiv} while worshipping that very sage, was *kundilmuni*. The historical temples and the ruins of *Kundil* nagar at *Sadiya* unmistakably give support to the presumption that the *Deoris* were the chief priests and their worshipping deities were the same deities of king *Bhishmaka*. According to a mythological account, once the *Mahamaya Tamreshwari Mai* was floating on the *Dibang* River in the shape of a stone through, Her spiritual power for the sake of all people of the world. Seeing that the king *Bhishmaka*, called all the people of the *henduvan* and ordered them to rescue the *Devi-idol* of *Mahmaya* and install it at a certain place. But, they failed to do so. Then, the king invited the especially learned and wise persons from various places and requested them to rescue the idol to her respective place that to be treated as holy one. But all efforts had gone in vain. Having no other means, at last, the king ordered to make an announcement for all by beating drum that one could rescue the idol, would be the priest of the king and also could worship the famous *bura-buri*, *boliyababa*, *patarshal* and *tamreshwari* temples. The announcement gathered many people from the various castes, but none could rescue the idol. At last, four numbers of *Deoris* with pious mind and clean body began praying the mother. Their collective prayer touched the heart of the *Devi-mother* and she automatically became weightless through her spiritual power. Then these four persons easily rescued the *Devi-idol* and placed at the concerned holy place. Thenceforth, these four persons were designated and recognized as the priestly class, later on, their offsprings used to worship at the famous four temples located at *Sadiya*. The said four persons had been designated as *chari-deori* who was conferred with the status of honourable and respectable chief priests of the famous temples of *Sadiya* region.^{xv} The ancient saying indicated that the *Deoris* were in *Mongolia* and later on they settled at *jaimal-jaidham*, before settling at *Sadiya*. Some group of writers contended that the *Deoris* had settled in *Yunnan Pradesh* of *China*. In *husori-geet*^{xvi} it is found- *sadiyat upajil sadiyar deori*.^{xvii} In another traditional song it is found that the *Deoris* came down from heaven:

Ai charisali name oi ahile
Sunare jakhala kati

Mikachi anile mejangi anile
Anile kaupt bandhi
Raika jabaka mamira pasala
Aiye charisali gokhani deo
Aremat erilu keremat dhorilu
Jaidhamat patilu than.

In addition, to that, some traditional songs, viz., *hurai rangooli*^{xviii}, *abarbo* and *lahariya*^{xix} etc., which are still prominent amongst the Deoris, extended much scope to ascertain their historical background, such songs sung on the occasion of the *bisu*^{xx} festivals of the Deoris give a clear indications of their original homeland beyond Sadiya and also of their historical aspects relating to religious practices. Supporting the assumption of the Deoris as the Aryan group it is said, 'the Deoris are a section of Aryan, who entered India through North-East pocket. That section of Aryan had established the Kundil Rajya with name and fame at Sadiya region during the period of Mahabharata'.^{xxi} Taking into consideration the factors like the Deoris earlier settlements at Sadiya region, the worshippers of kundimama having related to kundilmuni or koundilya gotra, attachment of a section of Deoris to the name of *airiyo*^{xxii} and priestly practices in the royal temples, the Deoris may certainly be presumed to be the Aryan group.

Conclusion: The concept of folklore emerged and it connotes tradition, ancient customs and surviving festivals, old ditties and dateless ballads, archaic myths, legends and fables, and timeless tales, and proverbs. A question often arises that how does a community foster its bond between people and their folklore? It is hence assumed that the folklore of the world, abounds with symbols, themes, and metaphors that pertain to the beginning of human civilization and could shed light on the dark corners of history which no other document could illuminate. The forms of folklore are thus regarded as the cores at the hearts of artistic forms. There is a legend amongst the Deori society that Sankardeva visited Sadiya two times. He knew the Deoris as the royal priests and worshippers of shakti, i.e., power. Though Shankardeva did not visit Sadiya as a preacher, some of the *Gosain-Mahantas*^{xxiii} tried to preach Vaishnavism amongst the Deoris but in vain. At last, a pact was made between the Deori-priests and Gosain-Mahantas in which the Deoris had to mention the name of *gosain ghar*^{xxiv} while worshipping their traditional gods-goddesses in household rites-rituals only, and had to offer a coin to the *gosain ghar* also in addition to their usual offer of copper coins to *deoshal*^{xxv} or village shrine. In return the *gosain-mahantas* also had to pray their God in the morning as well as evening daily for well being of the Deoris.^{xxvi} Identity is an outcome, a condition created largely through heritage which may or may not be conveyed through rituals as the vehicle of transmission.^{xxvii} As a whole the term Deori used to designate the recognized priest of religion throughout the races, and this point out to the fact they are essentially what indeed their tribal name implies; a Levite or priestly body. From the short outline it is apparent that the Deoris held an esteem position and be accorded a special status in respect of religious functions and rituals etc. all throughout the North-Eastern part of India.^{xxviii} Despite tremendous challenges the Deoris have been able to maintain their age-old traditions, religious beliefs and practices intact amidst various socio-political trials and tribulations through the centuries. From the above historical observation it is found that the Deoris are completely independent race in the great human society. They possess all sort of required factors like language, religion, culture etc., to become an independent race since time immemorial past. The Deori culture is facing danger from the clutches of globalization and striving hard to flourish. Such endangered culture so sprung -up by the nature thousand years past now deserve preservation and propagation by the government itself from being extinct.^{xxix} Thus,

this paper is a humble attempt to deal with the locality and importance of oral culture and identity of the Deori Community, in the broader context of folklore.

Notes and References:

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- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ^{ix} Edward A. Gait; *A History of Assam*; Thacker Spink & Co.; 1906.
- ^x Saranan Deori; *Religious Practices of the Deoris: A Book on the Religion and Society of the Deori Community*; Bina Library; 2002.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ^{xii} J. R. Deori; *Deori Jatir Utpatti*; Jyoti Prakashan; 1979.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 35-36.
- ^{xiv} A traditional, devotional song of the Deoris sung in the villages and accompanied by rhythmic steps. Usually sung in festivals in fond remembrance of their past. See, Saranan Deori; *Religious Practices of the Deoris: A Book on the Religion and Society of the Deori Community*; Bina Library; 2002.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
- ^{xvi} A traditional group song performed with rhythmic dance steps and other musical instruments sung in the time of bisu festival. See; Saranan Deori; *Religious Practices of the Deoris: A Book on the Religion and Society of the Deori Community*; Bina Library; 2002.
- ^{xvii} The Deori people of Sadiya have taken birth in the soil of Sadiya. Sadiya is the original homeland of the Deoris. See; Saranan Deori; *Religious Practices of the Deoris: A Book on the Religion and Society of the Deori Community*; Bina Library; 2002.
- ^{xviii} A kind of traditional group song and dance of the Deoris. See; Saranan Deori; *Religious Practices of the Deoris: A Book on the Religion and Society of the Deori Community*; Bina Library; 2002.
- ^{xix} Another song performed in groups and followed by dance. See; Saranan Deori; *Religious Practices of the Deoris: A Book on the Religion and Society of the Deori Community*; Bina Library; 2002.
- ^{xx} 'Bi' means extreme and 'su' means rejoicing. There are two festivals of the Deoris namely bohagiyo bisu celebrated in the month of bohag (April) and the other is maghiyo bisu celebrated in the month of magh (January). The Deori folks observe the bisu festival. See; Saranan Deori; *Religious Practices of the Deoris: A Book on the Religion and Society of the Deori Community*; Bina Library; 2002.
- ^{xxi} Saranan Deori; *Religious Practices of the Deoris: A Book on the Religion and Society of the Deori Community*; Bina Library; 2002.
- ^{xxii} A clan of the Dibongiya Deoris. See; Saranan Deori; *Religious Practices of the Deoris: A Book on the Religion and Society of the Deori Community*; Bina Library; 2002.
- ^{xxiii} The Hindus, the upper castes of Assamese society. See; Saranan Deori; *Religious Practices of the Deoris: A Book on the Religion and Society of the Deori Community*; Bina Library; 2002.

^{xxiv} Worshipping place of traditional Gods and Goddesses in the House. See; Saranan Deori; *Religious Practices of the Deoris: A Book on the Religion and Society of the Deori Community*; Bina Library; 2002.

^{xxv} The holy shrine of the Deoris. See; Saranan Deori; *Religious Practices of the Deoris: A Book on the Religion and Society of the Deori Community*; Bina Library; 2002.

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