



## SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSITION OF THE DEORI TRIBE: A CASE STUDY OF DHEMAJI DISTRICT OF ASSAM

*Authors: Humen Chutia \**

### Abstract:

The Deori is one of the plain tribe of Assam who are mostly distributed in both southern and northern bank of Brahmaputra river of Upper Assam. The traditional socio-cultural life of the Deori has been playing a significant role in their society. Culture is not a static identity and keeps changing. The changing environmental development makes internal adaptation necessary for culture. Thus, a lot of changes have also been observed in the Deori society too. Their society is changing not only in the aspects of socio-economic and political areas but also in traditional beliefs and cultural practices. With the above background, an attempt has been made to understand the socio-cultural transition among the Deori Tribe of Dhemaji district of Assam.

**Keywords:** *Deori tribe, Culture practices, Culture transition, Assam.*

### 6.0: INTRODUCTION:

Across the North-East India as well as in Assam, there are many ethnic groups who had migrated during the distant past with their traditional culture and are distributed in different geographical areas of the region. During the long drawn process of migration, distribution and interaction, their socio cultural life is affected to a great extent. The tribes living in the valley areas of Assam has been living with other non-tribal communities since time immemorial and

---

\* Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Subansiri College, Assam,  
[humenchutia03@gmail.com](mailto:humenchutia03@gmail.com).



there has been a great amount of cultural give and take between the tribes and the neighbouring non-tribal communities. The gradual transition has been taking place from traditional to non-traditional or modern culture, as a result of assimilation and acculturation with other ethnic groups. Many Scheduled Tribes in Assam like Bodo, Mishing, Kachari, Tiwa, Rabha, Lalung, Dimasa, *Deori*, etc. are no exception to this rule.

The Deori is one of the prominent plain tribe of Assam and they belong to Indo-Mongoloid group of people. The Indian constitution has regarded the Deori as a Scheduled tribe of Assam. The present inhabitations of the Deoris are spread in different districts of Upper Assam but they are mostly distributed in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia. As per semantics, the word 'Deori' means the offspring of God and Goddess. According to Deori language 'Den' means great or wise and 'O' and 'Ri' denotes male and female respectively. Hence, the meaning of 'Deori' is the great or wise male and female being. On the other hand, the Deori are believed to be priests or worshippers of God and Goddesses. Deori community has their unique culture and traditions. History says that the Deori language was the original language in the Chutiya kingdom before the reign of the Ahoms in Assam.

The Deori are classified into four groups. Each group is known as according to their original habitations- *Dibangiya*, *Tengapaniya*, *Borgoanya* and *Patargayan*. The fourth group *Patargayan* has become extinct and officially not traced yet. Among them only the group *Dibangiyas* can speak their dialect and maintaining their socio-cultural and religious practices in traditional way. The other two groups *Tengapaniya* and *Borgoyan* mysteriously lost their language.

In respect of Deori societies, although the Deori are maintaining the traditional customs, but some changes have been also noticed in their socio-cultural life which is affecting the core of their culture. The spread of modern education, science and technology, etc. has also brought about drastic changes in the religious beliefs and socio-economic life. Therefore, the present study paper attempts to analyse the changing pattern of socio-cultural life among the Deoris of Assam.

### 6.1: OBJECTIVES:

The major objectives of the research are:



- a) To understand the prevailing trend of cultural practices among the Deoris of Dhemaji district.
- b) To analyze the level socio-cultural transformation in different attributes.

## 6.2: METHODOLOGY:

The present study has been carried out from the three typical Deori villages namely-Borbam, Bormuriya and Udaypur of Dhemaji district, Assam. This study paper was based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected by conducting extensive field works through in-depth interview. Required data for the purpose of study is obtained from (i) Household survey schedule and questionnaires, (ii) Personal interviews, (iii) Field visits etc. Here, to collect primary data, two types of schedule were designed and altogether 96 numbers of households were covered. The interview schedule was prepared with questions keeping in mind the objectives of the study. Elderly people were emphasized upon to enquire about the cultural practices, reason for transition, its impact upon the society etc. The data were collected during the June, 2016 to January, 2018 from the three villages i.e. Borbam, Bormuriya and Udaypur of Dhemaji district. The three villages representing three clans or groups (*foids*) i.e. *Dibangiya*, *Borgayan* and *Tengapaniya* to investigate the nature of present socio-cultural life and degree of gradual transition in Deori society. The secondary data were collected from various sources like Publications of *Deori Sahitya Sabha*, Assam, Community block development documents, Published documents, various books, journals, articles etc.

## 6.3: ANALYSIS AND FINDING OF DATA:

### Distribution of sample villages according to the households

The table 1 represents the three studied Deori villages of the Dhemaji district namely-Borbam, Bormuriya and Udaypur. The Borbam Deori gaon is predominantly a *Dibangiya* Deori village where Bormuriya and Udaypur are the predominantly *Borgayan* and *Tengapaniya* Deoris groups.



**Table 1: Distribution of villages according to the divisions or groups, sample of household**

Name of the Villages	Sample of households	Divisions or Groups	Language Spoken	Traditional worshipping Deity	Distance from the Dhemaji town
Borbam	40	<i>Dibangiya</i>	Derori	<i>Kundimama</i> or <i>Gira-Girachi</i>	23 km
Bormuriya	30	<i>Borgayan</i>	Assamese	<i>Pisachi Demasi</i> or <i>Kechaikhati</i>	28 km
Udaypur	26	<i>Tengapaniya</i>	Assamese	<i>Pisa-Dema</i> or <i>Baliababa</i>	17 km

Source: Field Work

The *Dibongiyas* group use their dialect as mother tongue and the other two groups *Borgoyans* and *Tengaponiyas* use Assamese language as their mother tongue. The traditional chief deity *Kundimama* or *Gira-Girachi* (*Bura-Buri*), worshiped by *Dibangiyas*, while *Pisachi Demasi* or *Kechaikhati* and *Pisa-Dema* or *Baliababa* worshiped by *Borganyas* and *Tengapaniyas* respectively. The present studied villages Borbam, Borburiya and Udaypur are situated 23 km, 28 km and 17 km respectively from the home town Dhemaji.

**Family structure:**

The table 2 shows the predominance of nuclear family among the studied villages. About 80% of the family of Borbam village are nuclear family and remaining 20% of joint family. The Bormuriya village shows highest percentage of nuclear family 83.3% and followed by 16.6% of joint family. But the village Udaypur village share 57.6% of nuclear family and 42.3% of joint family. There is altogether 73.95% of nuclear family and 26.04% is recorded as joint family in the studied Deori villages.

**Table 2: Distribution of Family structure**

Village	Total no. Family	Nuclear Family	%	Joint Family	%
Borbam	40	32	80	8	20
Bormuriya	30	25	83.3	5	16.6
Udaypur	26	14	57.6	12	42.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>73.95%</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>26.04%</b>



Source: Field Work

### House Types:

Table 3 shows the house types according to the village and it reveals that out of the 96 households 47.91% are traditional, 32.20% are modified traditional and 19.79% households are non-traditional respectively. The highest number of traditional house is to be found in Udaypur village which is 61.53 percent and least number of traditional houses is recorded in the Bormuriya village (30%). On the other hand highest number of modified and non-traditional houses as found in Bormuriya village which is 36.6 percent and 33.3 percent. The 52.5 percent of traditional, 32.5 percent of modified traditional and 15 percent of non-traditional house type is also notable of Borbam Deori village.

**Table 3: Distribution of House Types according to the village**

Village	No. of sample households	Traditional		Modified Traditional		Non-Traditional	
		No. of Households	%	No. of Households	%	No. of Households	%
Borbam	40	21	52.5	13	32.5	6	15
Bormuriya	30	9	30	11	36.6	10	33.3
Udaypur	26	16	61.53	7	26.9	3	11.53
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>47.91%</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>32.2%</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>19.79%</b>

Source: Field Work

### Mother tongue of the villagers:

Languages spoken by Deoris as their mother tongue are shown in the table 4 and it is evident that Borbam Deori village is the only village where the villagers use Deori language as their mother tongue which is 95.4 percent. The other two villages namely Bormuriya and Udaypur villagers use Assamese language as their mother tongue.



**Table 4: Languages spoken by Deoris in the sample villages**

Village	Number of respondents	Deori as mother tongue	%	Assamese as mother tongue	%
Borbam	266	254	95.4	12	4.51
Bormuriya	165	0	---	165	100
Udaypur	178	0	---	178	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>609</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>41.70</b>	<b>355</b>	<b>58.29</b>

Source: Field Work

**Marriages with non-Deori Communities**

The Table 5 represent the Marriages with Non-Deori community of the three studied villages. There are altogether 136 numbers of marriages are recorded. Out of these, maximum numbers of elopement marriages with non Deori community are found 18.38 % and the highest percentage is found in Borbam. On the other hand, there are 2.94% of marriages are found as arranged and the highest percentage have been found in Udaypur which is 3.33% respectively.

**Table 5: Marriages with Non-Deori communities in %**

Village	Marriages with Non-Deori communities in %						
	Total respondents	Arranged	%	Elopement	%	Total	%
Borbam	58	0	---	11	18.96	11	18.96
Bormuriya	44	1	3.33	5	6.66	6	13.63
Udaypur	34	3	---	9	15.3	12	35.29
<b>Total</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2.94%</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>18.38%</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>21.32%</b>

Source: Field Work

**Health Treatment:**

The table 6 reveals that 96.87% of the households have accepted the modern health care facilities. It is found that only 3.12% is still maintaining traditional health care practice which is 2.5 percent in Borbam and 7.69 percent in Udaypur village respectively.

**Table 6: Health care practices**

Villages	Number of	Use of traditional	%	Use modern health facilities	%
----------	-----------	--------------------	---	------------------------------	---



	households	treatment as p			
Borbam	40	1	2.5	39	97.5
Bormuriya	30	0	0	30	100
Udaypur	26	2	7.69	24	92.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3.12</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>96.87</b>

Source: Field Work

### Religious Perception:

The table 7 shows the followers of traditional and non-traditional religious beliefs which evident that 95.83% of the households follow their traditional religious beliefs and only 4.16% of the households are being non-traditional religious beliefs. The percentage 92.5% and 96.66% are in case of believed in their traditional and 7.5% and 3.33% are found in case of non-traditional in Borbam and Bormuriya village respectively. Udaypur is the only village where 100% of the people have faith in their traditional religious beliefs.

**Table 7: Followers of traditional religious beliefs and non-traditional religious beliefs**

Village covered	Number of households	Followers of traditional religious beliefs	Percentage (%)	Followers of non-traditional religious beliefs	Percentage (%)
Borbam	40	37	92.5	3	7.5
Bormuriya	30	29	96.66	1	3.33
Udaypur	26	26	100	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>95.83%</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4.16%</b>

Source: Field Work

### Cultural Transformation:

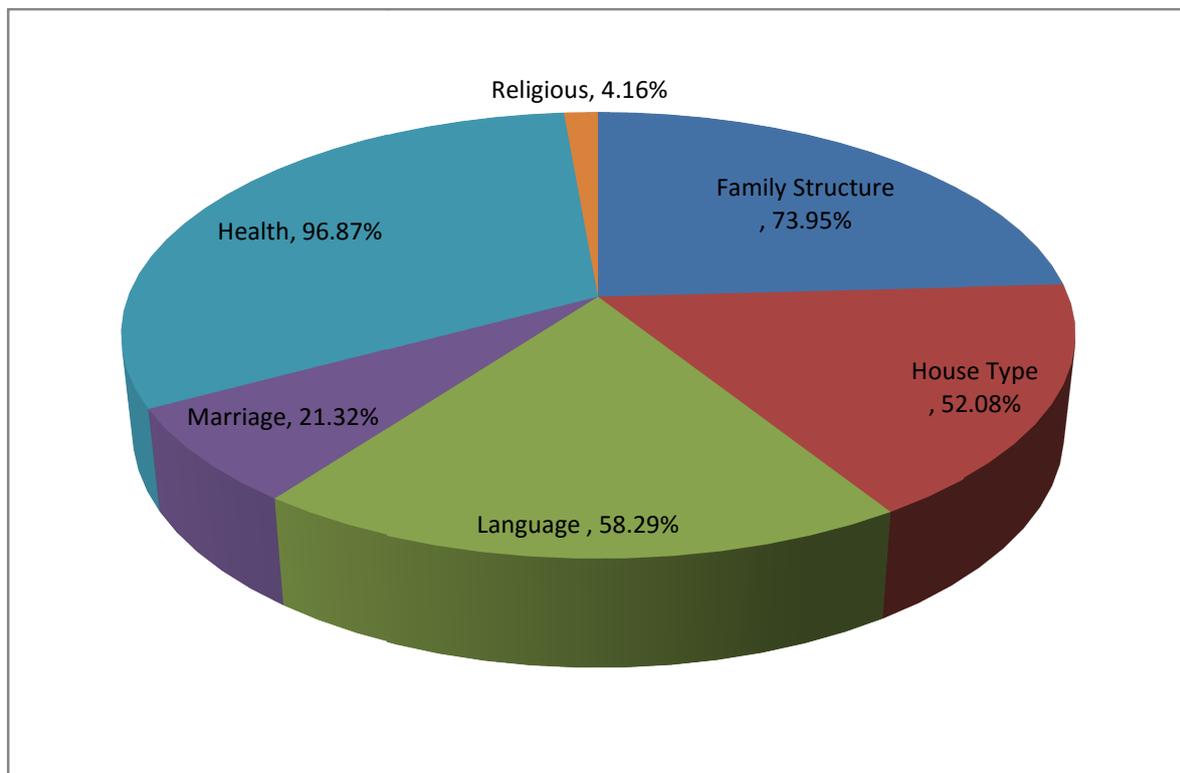
After analysing the primary data it is very clear that lots of changes have been observed in different attributes in their traditional Deori society. The highest degree of transformation is occurred in the health treatment sector with 96.87 percent. Another major change is observed in their traditional family structure which is 73.34 percent. The significant change is also observed in case of their native dialect with 58.29 percent. The considerable changes are 52.08 percent in house type, 51.13% in dress habits, and 17.69 percent is found in occupational

pattern respectively. The lowest transformation have been found in their traditional religious beliefs which is 4.16 percent only

**Table 8: Cultural transformation in different attributes**

Family Structure	House Type	Language	Marriage	Health	Religious
73.95%	52.08%	58.29%	21.32%	96.87%	4.16%

Source: Field Work



**Fig: 1.1: Cultural transformation in different attributes**

**Category of cultural Transformation:**

The table 9 represent the cultural transformation with a transformation index. The study shows the transformation in every attributes like- Marriage, Family Structure, Dress, House type, Language, Religion, Occupation, Health etc. The highest change has been observed in health care sector and lowest transformation is seen in religious.

**Table 9: Category of Cultural Transformation**



Transformation Index	Cultural Attributes
Below 20	Religious (4.16%)
20-----40	Marriage (37.34%)
40-----60	House type (52.08%), Language (58.29%)
60-----80	Family Structure (73.95%)
80 above	Health (96.87)

Source: Field Work

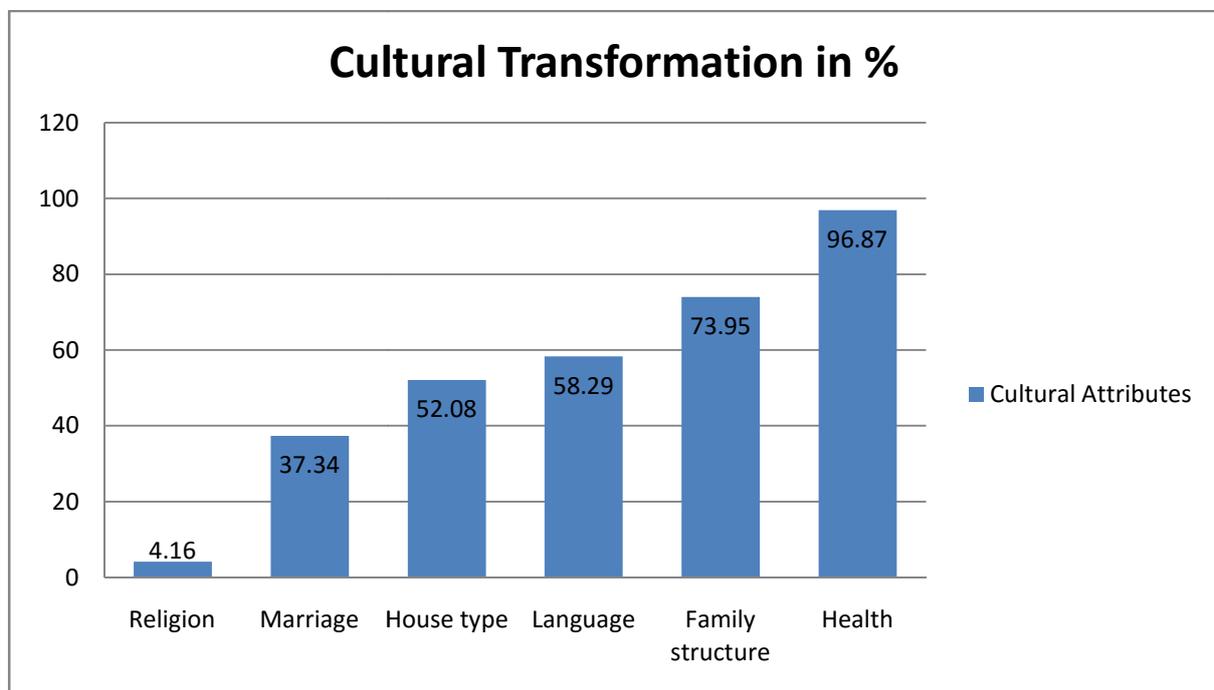


Fig: 1.2: Category of Cultural Transformation

**6.4: DISCUSSION:**

From the above analysing it is evident that lots of changes have been adopted in different attributes of a traditional Deori society. The traditional family structure of Deori societies are predominance of joint family. Generally, in a traditional joint family more than one family living in the same household with a common kitchen. But now days that type of joint families are deceased gradually for different factors. It may be mentioned that nuclear family is not a traditional system of Deori society. Therefore the study reveals that the changes have been occurred in case of family structure where 73.95% of nuclear family and 26.04% is recorded as joint family in the studied Deori villages.



The study says that the changes of house type have been adopted in the studied villages. A traditional Deori house is pile house (*Chang Ghar*). They build their traditional house generally use by bamboos, woods, canes, reeds etc. The houses are 4-7 feet height from the ground. But nowadays most of the family modified their houses by use of modern materials and also shifted from pile to ground. There are 47.91 percent of traditional, 32.2 percent of modified traditional and 19.79 percent of non-traditional house types which exhibits the changes of their traditional house type.

Historically Deori language was the medium of interaction among the four Deori groups in the past. But at present the *Borgayan* and *Patorgayan* groups use Assamese language as their mother tongue. Only the *Dibangiya Deori* group can speak their traditional dialects and use as their mother tongue. Therefore it is established that the changes is also observed in their language in the present study.

The Deori society preferred endogamy marriages. A traditional Deori society never permitted their members to marry with the other non-Deori communities (exogamy). In those days they didn't even allow other communities entering to their residences. This traditional culture of taboo system has lost its importance due to the cultural assimilation and frequent interactions with other communities. Nowadays the villages are experiencing many inter community marriages which was not even thought of in the olden days.

The most significance changes have been observed in the practices of health care system. Historically Deori people use different wild plants medicines which are locally available in their nearby jungle for treatment of various diseases. Some of the people are also dependant on local quacks called "*Mongoloti's*" for curing all kinds of diseases and sickness. But nowadays those quacks were almost abolished among the Deori society. The present study exhibits that there are 96.87% of the people have accepted modern health care facilities due to the reach of medical facilities provided by the government.

Traditionally Deori people worshiped *Kundimama* or *Gira-Girachi* by *Dibangiya* group, '*Pisachi Demasi*' or *Baliababa* worshiped by *Borganya* and *Pisa-Dema*' or *Kechaikhati* or *Tamreswari* worshiped by *Tengapaniya* group respectively. In the present study it is found that significant numbers of Deoris households are still maintaining and follow their traditional religious beliefs. In Udaypur 100 percent, in Bormuriya 96.66 percent and in Borbam 92.5 percent of the households perform traditional religious beliefs and practices. The remaining percent of the households are followers of Vaisnavism trend of Sri Sri Sankardeva, Krishnaguru, Saivism and Lord Shiva under the sphere of Hinduism. It is no doubt that the



religious transformation is as a result of acculturation with other societies in the new environment. On the other hand, the highly educated and conscious Deori people seek religious reforms in traditional Deori religious beliefs owing to its expensive and irrelevant rituals.

### **6.5: CONCLUSION:**

Despite tremendous challenges the Deori society has been able to maintain their old traditions, socio-cultural beliefs and practices intact amid various socio-political traits and tribulations through the centuries. Although the people have faith on traditional magico-religious cure of the ailments, yet allopathic medicine has penetrated into their villages. They are still maintaining most of their traditional socio-cultural traits intact; at the same time keeping a window open for incorporating modernisation without affecting the core of their own culture. This kind of attitudes principles perhaps brings them to a separate ethnical existence leaving a scope of strengthening the composite Assamese culture.

Nowadays, the Deori society has undergone transformation and changes. The grip of inertia in which this society was found in the past, has now been slackened. They have now come forward to accept the Governmental development schemes of different sectors with a view to changing their own destiny. But at the same time, they are maintaining their culture which distinguishes them as a separate ethnic tribal group.

There is a growing awareness among the younger section to get them educated and employed in Government jobs. But economic backwardness and consequent poverty is writ large on them. The educated youth are realising the unwholesome effect of innumerable festivals with feasts and rice-beer and consequent loss mandatory and they are trying to minimise the expenditure on these festive occasions while at the same time preserving the past heritage.

### **REFERENCES:**

Deori, S. (2002). *Historical Background of the Deoris*. in *Religious Practices of the Deoris*. Guwahati: Bina Library. pp. 15-24.

Deori, S. (2013). *From tradition to Transition: A Glimpse of Deoris in Assam*. Guwahati: Director of Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes.