

Status of Women in the Deuries of Lakhimpur District of Assam and Gender Inequality

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ABSTRACT: *The Deuries, an aboriginal tribe inhabiting in the plains and hills of Assam, are upholding their own language and socio-cultural rituals, rites and festivals and all these have contributed in shaping the composite Assamese culture. Anthropologically, the Deuries as the priestly community are affiliated to the great Tibeto-Burman branch of Mongoloid stock of Assam. The original seat of the Deuries 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. At present the Deuries reside in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts in Assam. The Deuri villages are generally found in plain areas of the river banks. Other than the state of Assam, the Deuri villages are also found in the Lohit and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh.*

In all villages, under the territorial council of DAC (Deuri Autonomous Council), Lakhimpur district is inhabited by the Dibangiya Khel of the Deuri tribe. Since remote past the Dibangiya Khel has been upholding their language and age-old culture and tradition in the face of many ups and downs, particularly during the last two centuries when they had to desert their original habitat. In Lakhimpur district the concentration of Deuri population is more than other districts. More than half of the Deuri population reside in Lakhimpur district in 50 villages under 7 DAC constituency.

The Deuries regard women as the beautiful creature of God, who nurture and give shape to the future of human being. They regard women as the reservoir of love, mercy, etc. and key to the success of men. According to Deuri tradition the nature of women is like water, it takes the shape of the vessel where it is kept. Women and girls have to do all the house hold works including cooking, washing clothes, cleaning of the house, weaving clothes for all the members of the joint family, rearing of domestic animals and birds, preparing suje (wine made from rice) and collection of various ingredients needed to prepare suje. They assist in agricultural works, collect fire woods from forest, bring water from river and in the afternoon, usually go for fishing. The woman folk are somewhat ignorant about their abilities and as such are deprived in society. From religious as well as social point of view all the clans of Deuri community give equal importance to Prakriti (Woman) along with Purush (Man). The chief Deities of the Deuries are Kundimama (Siva-Parvati) or Gira-Girachi (Bura-Buri), Pisa-Dema (Baliababa) and Pisachi (Tamreswari or Kechaikhati). They are worshipped by Dibangiya, Tengapaniya and Borgayan clan of the Deuries respectively. Thus woman folk were made an essential part of their chief Deities (Supreme Power) but in reality the society is conservative in giving women forefront in religious offerings. In this paper we are going to examine the different duties performed by Deuri women on the basis of division of labour as prevailed in Deuri society. We shall also try to explore the status of women in social, educational, economic, political, cultural and religious sphere of society and gender inequality prevailing in the Deuri society.

KEYWORDS: *Kundimama, Gira-Girasi, Purush, Prakriti, Suje.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Deuries are a distinct aboriginal tribal community inhabiting the North Eastern region of India. They have been maintaining distinct social, religious, cultural and traditional practices from time immemorial and all these have contributed in shaping the composite Assamese culture. Anthropologically, the Deuries as the priestly community are affiliated to the great Tibeto-Burman branch of Mongoloid stock of Assam. The original seat of the Deuries 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. At present the Deuries reside in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts in Assam. The Deuri villages are generally found in plain areas of the river banks. Other than the state of Assam, the Deuri villages are also found in the Lohit and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The 2001 census report put the Deuri population as 41,161. Among the nine declared schedule tribes (plain) of Assam, the Deuries are an important scheduled tribe (plain) with their own language, religion, culture and

unified social organization. Socially they fall into four divisions- Dibangia, Bargaya, Tengapania, and Patargaya. Some of their clans live in the river banks. The social life of the Deuries is essentially religion based. Most of the Deuries are bilingual. From religious as well as social point of view all the clans of Deuri community give equal importance to Prakriti (Woman) along with Purush (Man). The chief Deities of the Deuries are Kundimama (Siva-Parvati) or Gira-Girachi (Bura-Buri), Pisa-Dema (Baliababa) and Pisachi (Tamreswari or Kechaikhati). They are worshipped by Dibangiya, Tengapaniya and Borgayan clan of the Deuries respectively. Thus woman folk were made an essential part of their chief Deities (Supreme Power) but in reality the society is conservative in giving women forefront in religious offerings. In this paper we are going to study the different duties performed by Deuri women on the basis of division of labour as prevailed in Deuri society. We shall also try to explore the status of women in social, educational, economic, political, cultural and religious sphere of society and gender inequality prevailing in the Deuri society.

II. METHODOLOGY

Data for the present paper is being collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include field work for observation of folk custom, tradition, household, agricultural and other works involving women. Eminent persons of the community are being contacted and interviewed to know about customs and tradition regarding division of labour among men and women.

Secondary source includes various books, journals and magazines where scholarly writings on Deuries have appeared. For this, library work is conducted in various libraries of the state. Secondary sources consist of a major chunk of data which has become very useful in the proposed study.

As more than fifty percent of Deuri population of Assam resides in Lakhimpur District, present study is carried out within Lakhimpur District.

After collecting necessary data these are processed, interpreted and analyzed. The findings are incorporated in this paper.

III. DISCUSSION

i) Status of Women

With the advancement of information and communication system, rapid spread of modern education and empowerment driven by skill development and entrepreneurs women are nowadays marching forward along with men side by side. Since ages women in Deuri community have shared a significant social space as compared to most of their counterparts living in other parts of India. But unfortunately, their commendable participation in and contribution to the social and cultural affairs of the community have not received the deserved recognition. The Deuries regard women as the beautiful creature of God, who nurture and give shape to the future of human being. They regard women as the reservoir of love, mercy, etc. and key to the success of men. According to Deuri tradition, women are like water, it takes the shape of the vessel where it is kept. They also usually say that a poet's creativity is at loss in the absence of a feminine figure. The Deuries believe women are the inspirational figure behind all creative works whether it is poetry, art and craft, drama or literature. They also believe that women body is a pious temple. So they take utmost care to preserve the sanctity of women. Keeping this in view even during bisu, while performing at night both the genders perform separately in different rows. Generally girls are shown respect and males refrain from doing anything unethical in front of them. Girls, on the other hand, express their feelings through bisu songs and dances that take place in the open. If someone does an act of injustice to a woman, justice is served by holding Panchayat. Deuri women consider gravity and sanctity of women life as essential and important and they follow monogamy. One of the noteworthy features of Deuri girl is the love for their hair, generally they do not crop it short rather love to keep it long. The tribe has their characteristic style of dressing. One can easily distinguish between married and unmarried women through their attire. Young Deuri girls wrap a kind of skirt (mekhela) not below knee length. The length of mekhela increases with different stage of age. When a girl attains puberty she wears Baiga, kind of cloth wrapped over the chest. Married girls wrap Jokachhiba enclosing the waist. They wear phuma (blouse) and cover their head with a gamusa called Gatige. A Deuri girl looks beautiful in her adornments like Uchoon (bangles), Gina (ring), Jangfei, Golpota, Maduli, Junbiri, etc. In general, Deuries have four different forms of marriage, Denbiya (Borbiya), Sachibachi (Majubiya), Surubachi or Bakatrupiya (Sarubiya) and Janengna Laharuba (Gandharbabiya). The first three categories of marriage are arranged by the parents of the prospective couple. In the fourth type of marriage, the concerned couples marry by eloping. Borbiya is an expensive affair and it is solemnized with much pomp and gaiety for three days. The duration of Majubiya is two days that is also celebrated with much show. Sarubiya is completed in a single day and the expenses are considerably low compared to the two above mentioned forms of marriages. For completion of the marriage ceremony socio-ritual functions such as Suje Labiruba, Mimo Hareruba, Suje Luguruba, etc. are performed by the Deuri society.

Women and girls have to do all the house hold works including cooking, washing clothes, cleaning of the house, weaving clothes for all the members of the joint family, rearing of domestic animals and birds, preparing

of suje (wine made from rice) and collection of various ingredients needed to prepare suje. They have to collect fire woods from forest, bring water from river and in the afternoon usually go for fishing. Apart from doing household works, women share works on the field and help in generating income along with their male counterparts. Usually the male counterpart including the senior ones too forward helping hands in all domestic works. It has been observed that women folk are ignorant about their abilities and as such remain deprived in society. Lack of education and social awareness is the main reason of lagging behind of the Deuri women in all sphere of society.

ii) Inequality in social sphere

As per census report of 2001, out of the total Deuri population of 41,161, female population is 20,352 against 20,809 male populations. Total literacy rate is 76.2%: male 84.8%, female 67.5%. The status of women in society is not commensurate with the ratio of their number and literacy rate. The chief and elementary reason of gender inequality is social environment. Main source of livelihood of Deuri community is agriculture. They cultivate paddy in summer and in rainy season aahu, bau and Sali. In addition they grow lentils, potato, sugar cane, mustard, etc. The women folk of the family rear fowls, hen, goat, cattle, etc. and utilise the income to procure raw thread for weaving cloth, ornaments, utensils, necessary materials generally required for offering in rituals of religious and social ceremonies to support the family economically. Thus the life of a Deuri woman revolves around agriculture from dawn to dusk. Nowadays the modern society reaps all the benefits of the advancement in science and technology yet the major chunk of the Deuri women folk engage themselves only in household activities. Lack of awareness is the main reason of gender inequality in social sphere. Way back in 1948 some leading women of that era formed "Sodu Akham Deuri Mahila Sanmillan" to spread education among women and to increase awareness against the use of liquor. In every household a Deuri woman has to spend a lot of time to prepare 'Suje'(home-made liquor) and to acquire the ingredients required to prepare 'suje' from forest. But their effort went in vain. Status of Deuri women remains same as before. The women often face diverse nature of socio-cultural and economic problems. These problems range from low level of socio-economic development to prevalence of acute gender inequalities. Among Deuri community women are usually not seen in the fore front in any social activity. Women are barred from participating in many socio-religious functions. Such as i) Women are not allowed inside Midiku (shrine) to participate in worshipping. ii) Women cannot play any significant role in the village Panchayat meeting. iii) They cannot even participate in preparing any kind of dishes in socio-religious ceremonies. iv) They cannot light up the pyre of the deceased parent. v) Women cannot offer Pindo in memory of their forefathers.

iii) Inequality in Educational and Economic Sphere

Before independence women education was very much scanty. Parents were not at all interested in sending their girl child to school. General perception was that it was useless in sending their daughters to school. Learning would infect their minds; they would marry with boy belonging to other casts. Therefore it would be better to engage them in weaving with other womenfolk, learning cooking, rearing domestic animals and fowls, etc. Only in fifties and sixties a few educated families of Upper Assam sent girl children to school. It would be noteworthy here to mention the names of two sisters from Dibrugarh. One is Prof. (Dr.) Hemlata Deuri (Retired HOD, Chemistry, Kanai College, Dibrugarh) and the other is Prof. (Dr.) Kunjalata Deuri (Retired H.O.D. Physics, Delhi College of Engineering). According to the census report of 2001, the women literacy rate was 67.5%. But in reality it only reflected the picture of elementary education. Majority of the girl students finish their education after completion of primary education. As the number of women with higher education is very few, they seldom get employed in Govt. jobs, industry, medical, engineering, etc. The patriarchal cultures of Deuri society consider women as inferior and dependent beings to men and prefer to engage women only in household activity and in agriculture. Although the central government have passed the act of right to education and women have equal right along with men to acquire higher education yet girl drop out after primary education is still very high. This is due to the negligence of women in patriarchal society. According to the census report of 2001, the male literacy rate is 84.8%, but male educational qualification up to secondary level is 25.5%, up to higher secondary level is 9.4% and up to graduate/post graduate level is 4.9%. Negligence towards women folk may be attributed due to lack of higher education among male counterpart. Nowadays central government has initiated skill development and entrepreneurship training programs involving self help groups. Due to lack of infrastructure these programs have failed to empower Deuri women economically. One cannot think of all-round development of Deuri women until achieving economic empowerment of women at the grass root level.

iv) Inequality in Political Sphere

In the political arena, too, the women folk of the Deuri community are lagging behind than their male counterpart. Inevitably this is the outcome of patriarchal culture prevalent in the society. The role of women in

Deuri society is still very insignificant. A Deuri woman cannot play a decisive role in the village council meeting. Although with an exception of Ms. Amrit Prava Deuri, who was the first Deuri women to become the Chief Executive Member of Deuri Autonomous Council formed in 2006. In the political scenario of Assam role of male Deuri is also insignificant. So far only two Deuri people were able to secure berth in the council of ministers of Assam. One of them was the great tribal leader Late Bhimbar Deuri and the other was Late Barga Ram Deuri.

v) Inequality in Cultural Sphere

Deuri women and girls are inclined to their folk dance and folk songs. In cultural sphere Deuri girl and women participate with much vigour in Bisu songs and Bisu dances. Bisu involves a very high level of enjoyment with spiritual perspective. Deuri women and girls are involved and interested in Deuri art and culture. Folk songs and folk dance carries age-old tradition and culture of a tribe. As such, Deuries are rich in their folk dance and folk songs along with musical instruments as an inheritance from their ancestors. Unfortunately in the mainstream no any significant contribution from any particular female individual has been noticed so far.

IV. FINDINGS

The findings of our present study can be summarised as follows-

- i) Women in Deuri community have shared a significant social space. They participate in equal terms with their male counterpart in religious functions and festivals.
- ii) All household activities are carried out under the supervision of the eldest woman of the family.
- iii) They assist the male members in agricultural works. They weave cloths for all the members of the family.
- iv) They generate their own income by rearing domesticated birds and animals. The life of a Deuri woman revolves around household works and agriculture from dawn to dusk.
- v) It is a relief that a lot of women centric social evil practices, such as dowry, sati, female feticide, honor killing, child marriages are non-existent among Deuri community. Lack of awareness is the main reason of gender inequality in social sphere.

V. CONCLUSION

From the preceding discussions it has been seen that the Deuri society regard highly and take utmost care of their women folk but still they are lagging behind in all spheres than their male counterpart. Lack of proper education, individual liberty and self consciousness and superstitions are some of the main reasons. The idea of a developed society cannot be imagined unless and until scientific outlook is instilled in the mind of women of a community. Deuri villages are generally found in remote areas beside river bank. The areas are backward with very poor infrastructure, so women education gets lesser priority from their parents. For a family living below poverty line girl child's education is a far cry. In harvesting season skipping of school is a common feature for a girl child, as she has to assist her parents in agriculture. For parents, marriage is the final solution for a young girl. Finally it can be concluded that to improve the standard of the status of women superstitions must be removed from the mindset of the masses of the community and it should be replaced by scientific and progressive outlook.

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