



A Study on Religion, Religious Specialists, and Place of Worship among the Tengapania Deoris of Assam, India

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ABSTRACT

Religion is one of the strongest binding forces that play a significant role in the socio-cultural life of the people for the maintenance of cohesion and continuation of the society. Rites and rituals are an integral part of every belief system. Places of worship, the sacred performances, and the performer or religious specialist occupy a pivotal place in day to day life of the people of complex as well as simple societies. The Tengapania Deoris are one of the scheduled tribes of Assam, India, who are Hindu by religion but have their parochial belief system. The term Deori itself means priest. Balia baba is their supreme God and the place of worship is known as Balia Baba Than or than ghar. For the sacred performances of than ghar they have their priests who occupy an esteemed place in their socio-religious universe. The Deoris are unique amongst the other ethnic groups of Assam regarding the religious belief system which is continuing amidst the strong influences of mainstream religions. In this present endeavor an attempt has been made to know about the unique religious features of the Deori religion in the rural context of Assam.

Introduction

Religion is the belief in spiritual beings (Tylor, 1889:24). Religion is a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature (Wallace, 1966: 107). It is the origin of rites and rituals, which means the system of faith and worship. Ember and Ember (2019:328) mentioned all societies have possessed beliefs that can be grouped under the term religion that varies from culture to culture. Religion may be termed as any set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices pertaining to supernatural power, whether that power rests in forces, gods, spirits, ghosts, or demons. Haviland (1978:334) said all religions fulfill numerous social and psychological needs. Ritual is religion in action, and a prayer is a common form of ritual. Although the rituals and practices of various religions differ considerably, even those rites that seem most bizarrely exotic can serve the same basic social and psychological functions. Malinowski (2015:89) said the function of religion and its value is that religious faith establishes, fixes, and enhances all valuable mental attitudes, such as reverence for tradition, harmony with environment, courage, and confidence in the struggle with difficulties. Karsten (1905:1) mentioned at all times religion has first of all been to man a practical concern; to put himself in communication with the invisible spiritual beings on whom he feels himself to be dependent, to avert the evils of which they are at first supposed to be the source, to obtain the benefits which they have it in their power to bestow, has always been for him a matter of virtual importance. Radin (1937:3) describe the nature of religion as extremely difficult; it means different things to different people. It consists of two integral parts: the first an easily definable, if not precisely specific feeling; the second certain specific act, customs, beliefs, and conceptions associated with these feelings. Beliefs and customs do not as such contain any religious ingredient but

they consist of that large body of folkloristic elements towards which the individual and the group assume an attitude of passive acceptance.

Rites and rituals are one of the most important institutions of human culture, which related people to each other on special occasions. Rites consist of the observance according to a prescribed manner and certain actions designed to establish liaison between the performing individual and the supernatural power or powers. Beliefs constitute the static part of religion, and rites the dynamic part. The beliefs are put into practice by the performance of rites.

The place of worship plays a significant role in the socio-religious life of a community. It is considered a sacred place where people offer prayer to appease the supernatural for the benefit of the self as well as for the whole community. The place of worship that is composed of a complex or popularly a sacred complex is a collective concept. Vidyarthi (1961:111) mentioned “‘a sacred geography’, a set of ‘sacred performances’ and a corps of ‘sacred specialists’”. These three concepts, conceived collectively, are termed as ‘sacred complex’”. Religious rites and rituals are invariably performed in that place with the intervention of some specialists who act as a mediator between the common mass and the supernatural. Elaborate empirical studies on religious belief, sacred areas, temples, shrine, etc., related to structure, religious specialist, rites and rituals observes, etc., were carried on by scholars like Srinivas (1952), Marriott (1955), Singer (1955), Evans-Pritchard (1956), Redfield (1956), Bose et al. (1958), Vidyarthi (1961), Saraswati (1963), Horton (1964), Turner (1969), Sinha (1970; 1970a), Sinha and Saraswati (1970), Freeman (1971), Furst (1972), McKenna (1976), Chaudhuri (1977), Da Matta (1979), Blasi (1985), Lehmann and Mayers (1985), Morris (1987), Sarma (1999), Medhi (2008), Zaman (2015), Ember and Ember (2019), and others. In the present discussion an attempt has been made to focus on the religious belief, place of worship of the Tengapania Deoris known as Balia Baba Than, different structure of the complex, the religious specialist associated with it, customs and traditions associated with the different religious rites and rituals observed in that sacred place as well as the belief system inherent with it in a rural context of Assam.

The People

The Deoris are one of the important scheduled tribes of Assam. The word ‘Deori’ is originated from the Sanskrit word Deva Grihika, meaning ‘in charge of the temple or the priest’. Deori (2002:33) mentioned that “the word ‘Deori’ literally means priest. The people who have a better knowledge about Gods and Goddesses and can appease them are known as Deoris”. The original habitats of the Deoris were on the banks of the river Dibong, Tengapani, and Patarsal, which were within the jurisdiction of Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh and Dibrugarh District of Assam. Racially the Deoris are Mongoloid and Mongolian characteristics are still visible among them. Sarmah Thakur (2007: 173-174) has described that the Deoris are one of the four divisions of the Chutiyas like Hindu Chutiya, Ahom Chutiya, Borahi, and Deori. The last division has been able to retain its pristine religious beliefs and practices intact despite socio-cultural and political ups and downs through the decades. Dalton (1872) writes about the Deoris that “An isolated colony on the river Dikrang in Lakhimpur calling themselves Deori Chutiya was found who had a peculiar language which they called Chutiya and they were styled Deoris”. At the present main concentration of the Deoris is found in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, and in the Sadia region of Tinsukia District of Assam. The main occupation of the Deoris is agriculture and is also involved in governmental and non-governmental services, poultry, patty trade, etc.

Based on places of origin, there are four divisions (*kehel*) among the Deoris, and each division is

composed of a number of lineages (*bamsa*). The Deoris, who were believed to reside near the bank of the river Dibang are known as *Dibangia*, those near *Tengapani* and Barpani or Borgang are known as *Tengapania* and *Bargaya* respectively. Again the people who lived in Pat Sadia were named *Patargaya*. The people of Sonapur Deori Gaon where the present study is carried on belong to the *Tengapania* division who have seven sub-divisions or lineages (*tikas*) among themselves. These are- *Machiotika*, *Bikramiyatika*, *Phagimegeratika*, *Khtiotika*, *Sanabariatika*, *Phapariatika* and *Sakusarutika*. The *Tengapania* Deoris are the followers of Sakta cult, the worshipers of Sakti. They still retain their traditional beliefs and practices *Balia baba* is their supreme God who is believed to be the parochial version of Lord Siva or son of Siva. Other than *Balia Baba* they also have other indigenous Gods and goddesses like *Nakonwar* and *Sat-Konwar* who are considered as eldest and youngest son o *Balia Baba*, respectively, *Lohit Devata* also known as *Bhaba Raja* or *Jala-Narayana*, *Burha Deo*, *Indra Devata*, *Ai Deo*, etc.

Objectives

The present research endeavor was designed to study the belief system among the *Tengapania* Deoris living in an interior rural environment of Assam with special references to their traditional Gods and Goddesses, the place of worship, the ritual experts, the division of labour associated with performances of indigenous rituals, and the contemporary changes that incurred due to acculturation with other neighbouring ethnic groups and the impact of modernity that have percolated in their socio-religious universe.

Micro field and methodology

For the present discussion, a study was made on a village worshipping place or complex locally known as *than* or the *Balia Baba Than* of Sonapur Deori Gaon, *Philobari* area of *Tinsukia District*, Assam, India. The material contained in the present discussion was collected empirically among the Deoris of the village during the irregular interval of July/August 2019, January/April 2020, January/March 2021 and August-September of 2021. The study village is a homogeneous one, inhabited by the *Tengapania* Deoris only. Information about a traditional belief system, their worshipping Gods/Goddesses, the place of worship, the religious specialist, mode of worship, and rites and rituals observed by the community, were recorded from a total of 30 numbers of individuals who have expert knowledge on pristine customs, traditions, the belief of the Deori community. For this purpose, extensive personal interviews, in-depth discussions, case studies, were carried out with the Deori priests, traditional ritual experts, as well as some of the inhabitants of the household of the village who have integral knowledge to enumerate their pristine belief system. Again, information on influences of impinging factors of other religious belief systems along with awareness of the people for acceptance of the same was gathered from interacting with the local inhabitants both male and female of the village and its different personnel including in-depth interview was taken with the main religious specialists of the village. The data collected from one informant/informants is cross verified with other informant/informants as and when it was necessary.

Results and Discussions

The Traditional Beliefs and Place of Worship

Religion plays an important role in the socio-cultural life of the Deoris of the village. The exact nature of the supernatural differs from person to person and society to society. Ember and Ember (2019: 328) rightly said supernatural as “powers believed to be not human or not subject to the law of nature-varies from society to society”. For some the supernatural may be constituted of ghosts and spirits, for others, it may be an impersonal power that pervades everything in this world, for still others it may be manifested through a pantheon of anthropomorphic Gods and Goddesses, or a single high God, or so

on. The Deoris of Sonapur Deori Gaon worship Balia Baba as their supreme God and *than* is their place of worship. The whole complex of the *than ghar* is composed of three parts- the *Balia Baba Than* stands centrally, towards the left of it stands another structure known as *Indra-ghar* or *Indra Devatar Mandir*, and *Sat Konwar Mandir* towards the right side of the central structure. Inside these three structures, the images of Balia Baba, Indra Devata, and Sat Konwar are installed respectively.

To establish a new *than*, at first the villagers select an isolated plot of about 10-15 *bighas* of land towards the south-eastern direction of the village. Then the plinth of the *than* is established towards the southern direction of the selected land and two posts are erected thereafter acclaiming the name of Balia Baba, offering a pair of betel-nut in a *sarai* (disc on stand) to him. After three to four days the villagers along with the priests revisit the place and dig a hole for erecting the *lai Khuta* (main post) of the *than*. In the hole, the priest put a small quantity of gold, silver, and copper. Then a *sarai* is offered there placing a pair of betel nut and betel vine leaf in it. The priests sprinkled *santi jal* (holy water) on the materials inside the hole uttering *deva-mantra* (spells for appeasing deities). The main post is then erected acclaiming the name of the Balia Baba. The same procedure is followed for erecting the second establishment, i.e., *Indra Ghar*. However, in the hole where the main post of *Sat Konwar Mandir* was erected, there also all the ingredients like the two previous structures are given except the gold. There should be a separate pedestal in between the Balia Baba Than and *Indra Ghar*. In front of all the three structures, there are separate *chora* or *dola-ghar* (gateway shed), where the priests sit to perform rites, and devotees are received. A small *bhog ghar*, the place where sacred food is prepared, is erected near the third structure or *Sat Konwar Mandir*. In front of the *batchora* (a gateway shed) of the central structure, the *mul toran* (main gate) is erected. Towards the south-western direction stands the *asirvad ghar* (the house of blessing), where the priest blessed the devotees, which is constructed.

If a *than* has to be shifted from the existing place to another place the described procedure is followed in case of the establishment of a new structure. After completion of new structures, the priests, *bora*, *barik* and *pariyas* (other three official members of the *than*) along with the villages gathered on a Wednesday and take away the belongings of the old structure to the new by making a *dola* (palanquin) made up of new cloth. The *dola* is carried away towards the new *than* by the *pariyas*. The procession is proceeded with the beating of *dhol* (drum), *tal* (cymbal), burning *dhup* (incense stick) by the villagers. The priests take the lead, uttering spells and sprinkling *santi jal* all through. The *bora* and *barik* proceeded to hold bows and arrows for keeping away the flying birds above their heads so that they do not get polluted due to the excreta of the birds over them. After reaching the place of the new *than* the priest places the belonging in the definite pedestal, reciting spells, performing rites related to the event.

The Religious Specialists

In all societies, there exist individuals, whose job is to guide and supplement the religious practices of others. Such individuals are highly skilled at contacting and influencing supernatural beings and manipulating supernatural forces. Their qualification for this is that they have undergone special training. In addition, they may display certain unique personality traits that particularly suit them for their jobs (Haviland, 1978: 340). All religions have at least part-time religious specialists who performed rituals for others, and some are organized into more complex communal or ecclesiastical religious groups (Wallace, 1966). In societies with the resources to support occupational specialists, the role of guiding religious practices and influencing the supernatural belongs to the priests. He is the socially initiated, ceremonially inducted member of a recognized religious organization with a rank and function that belong to him or her as the tenant of an office held by others before. The source of power is the society and the institution in which the priest functions. Crapo (1993:262) mentioned that priests are a religious practitioner who has been trained to perform rituals for the entire congregation on a full time or regular basis. They

regulate the ritual calendar of the congregations and maintain the traditional forms of the rituals they have learned. Ember and Ember (2019: 341) priests are sometimes distinguished from other people by special clothing or a different hairstyle. The training of a priest can be vigorous and long, including fasting, praying, and physical labour, as well as learning the dogma and the ritual of his religion. Among the Tengapania Deoris of the village have also the religious duties, rites, and rituals are performed by four priests, namely *Bar Deori*, *Saru Deori*, *Bar Bharali*, and *Saru Bharali*, invariably selected from four different lineages. It has been already mentioned that there are seven lineages among the Tengapania Deoris, viz., *Machiotika*, *Bikramiatika*, *Phagimegeratika*, *Khutiotika*, *Phapariatika* and *Sakusarutika*. The *Khutiotika* has two sub-divisions *bar buruk* and *saru buruk*. It should also be mentioned here that the priests among the Deoris are always male person.

The head priest among the Deoris is known as *Bar Deori*, who is considered as a supreme ritual expert. He is a full-time ritual specialist as well as custodian of the *than ghar*. He is invariably selected from *Machiotika* lineage. The post is not hereditary and one can avail it with his interest and efficiency. For the selection of *Bar Deori* the person concern should be healthy, honest, and amiable; the person should not have a physical defect and should possess strong memory, and should not be committed any sin known to the fellow member. He should be free from injuries caused by man and animal, snake bites, pollution caused by excrement left over him by birds like the vulture, etc. After the selection of the *Bar Deori* by the villagers, he has to sacrifice a drake in the name of Balia Baba at the *than ghar*. The *Bar Deori* helps the villagers in marriage rites, household ceremonies, community and household worship, mortuary rites as well as other religious functions observed in the village. The sacrifices of animals and birds related to different rituals are done by the *Bar Deori*. He is also entitled to perform *bar bali* (major religious sacrifice) in the *than ghar* during the time of *Bar Puja* (major ritual).

The second in the hierarchy of priests among the four is *Saru Deori* who is selected by the villagers from among the interested persons from *Bikramiyatika* lineage. He assists the *Bar Deori* in all household and community rituals. He is also entitled to perform all the rituals in *than ghar* in the absence of the *Bar Deori*. The *Saru Deori* is also entrusted to perform sacrifices related to different rituals in the *than* as well as in the villages. Besides *Bar Deori* and *Saru Deori* *Bharali* is selected from *Phagimegeratika* by the people and if there is no suitable person in that lineage, then he may also be selected from *Bar Buruk* sub-division of *Khutiatika* lineage. The main function of *Bar Bharali* is to look after the purposes. He can also discharge the religious duties and responsibilities of *than ghar* in the absence of *Bar Deori* and *Saru Deori*, but for that purpose, he must belong to *Phagimegeratika* lineage. The last in the hierarchy of priests is *Saru Bharali* selected from *Saru Buruk* sub-division of *Khutiatika* lineage. He assists the other three priests in rituals of the *than* and also act as an assistant of *Bar Bharali* for management of the assets of the sacred complex.

The Deori Priests always act for the welfare of the community and society as a whole. Rigid taboos and restrictions are observed by them in day-to-day life. It is necessary for them to keep themselves neat and clean, to be honest, and sincere, impartial, social, meticulous, and responsible person who is deeply involved in taking care of every work for smooth running and performing different rites and rituals inside and outside the premises of the *than*. They should not eat with the people of other communities; get haircuts from a barber, fishing with nets, carry a dead body in a funeral procession, wearing leather shoes, etc. They also act as custodians of spells that they learned from their forefathers through enculturation.

The Deori priests have conferred the highest esteem in society. They can also take retirement from their responsibility based on bad health or some other grounds. If the person is proved to be unsuitable

for discharge of his duties then that day onwards he is considered to have discarded from the post. For the formal retirement according to one's wish, he has to inform it before the people of the community with a pair of betel-nut and a pair of betel vine leaf in a *sarai*. The elderly members of the village discuss the matter and based on their consent the intended priest can get relief from the post. The retiring priest has to offer a pig and one pitcher full of *suje* (rice beer) along with a pair of betel nuts, a pair of betel vine leaf and money (there is a fixed amount regarding this aspect, it may be nominal like rupees 10/- or 20/- etc.) in a *sarai* in the *than ghar*. Thereafter he begs to be excused and pardoned before the congregation for any kind of misdeeds committed by him during his tenure. This custom is known as *pubani diya*. After that, a small feast is arranged in the *than* premises where pork and *suje* are served. The outgoing priest also must offer a drake in the name of Balia Baba.

The rituals of the *than ghar* are meticulously run by the priests in the Deori society. Other than the priests, there are three more officials to look after the activities of the *than*. They are *Bora*, *Barik* and *Pariay*. The *Bora* and *Barik* are selected from *Khutiatika* and *Senabariatika* respectively. If there is no suitable person in that lineage then they may be selected from any one of the lineages. The selection procedure is the same as that of the priests. The main duties and responsibilities of the *Bora* and *Barik* are to keep the people informed about the religious activities of the *than ghar*, supervise the hygiene and cleanliness of the *than* premises, to arrange objects for rituals like *dhup* (incense sticks), flowers, *chaki* (earthen lamp), mustard oil, basil leaf, etc., to collect contribution for *Bar Puja* from fellow members of the society, etc. These contributions include cock, black gram, spices, sandalwood, betel nut, betel vine leaf, salt, etc. They also look after the smooth running of rituals related to *Bobag* and *Magh Bihu* (two major socio-religious festivals observed by the Deori community) in the *than*. The *Barik* also acts as a messenger of different activities of *than ghar* and informs the public if money and contribution are required for running the rituals of the *than*. The *Bora* and *Barik* also receive and look after the guest during religious occasions. The retirement and removal procedures of both these posts are similar to that of the priest. They are also entitled to offer *pubani* to the people concerned before leaving their duties and responsibilities.

The *Pariyas* are three in number and are selected from three different lineages according to the capacity of work of the persons. The newly selected *Pariyas* are known as *Deka Pariya*. During the time of *Bar Puja* in the month of *Saon* (July-August), the *Bora* informs the people about the new *Pariyas* selected from three different lineages and if people's consent is there then they get appointed to the said portfolio giving farewell to the previous three office-bearers. The official tenure of the *Pariyas* is one year. During the time of appointment of new *Pariyas*, they have to offer a pair of cock and *Kharabi* (a kind of bamboo basket) in the *than*. Thereafter they take bath with *santi jal* (holy water) and take over the charge of new posts from that day onwards. The same procedure is also an obligation for the outgoing *Pariya*. They help the newly appointed *Pariyas* up to two monthly rituals regarding the activities related to *than ghar*. The main duties and responsibilities of the *Pariyas* are to assist the priests all the time at the *than*, to maintain cleanliness inside and outside the *than* premises, to clean the scriptures, utensils as well as other objects inside the *than ghar*, to sweep and clean the floor every day before the rituals begin, to collect all the necessary materials and things like incense, earthen lamp, mustard oil, black gram, milk, molasses, sacrificial objects, etc., for the performance of the rituals, by priests, to hold the sacrificial objects (animal and birds) as well as collect blood in a container made out of *Kaupat* (*Phrynium pubinerve*) meant for special ritualistic purposes, etc. The *Pariyas* also have to observe certain restrictions during the tenure of their office. It is tabooed for them to make commensality with the people of other community, to get a haircut by a barber, to visit a house which is under the period of pollution, etc. The *Pariyas* can take voluntary relief from their duties and responsibilities before the completion of their tenure if he is a physically handicapped person, involved in governmental and non-governmental jobs. In this case, they have to pay a fine of 50/- rupees to the *than* before the selection authority and that day

onwards, they are relieved from their duties. Thereafter they are considered as *Bahirar Paria* and they also must offer a pair of cock and a *sarai* in the *than*.

The Rituals Observed

Rituals may be performed by an adherent of a religion, but all religion has some individuals who specialize in the spiritual power to influence others (Crapo, 1993: 260). Observances of religious rites are integral to a sacred complex. Rituals are the means through which a person can relate to the supernatural. It is the medium of relief of tensions and group solidarity is maintained with the intervention in it. A ritual may consist of a sacrifice whose purpose is to propitiate supernatural power. Ritual practices are often an expression of the belief that supernatural powers can be made to act in certain ways through the use of prescribed formulas. Through prayer, sacrifice, and general ritualistic activities, people appeal to the supernatural world for aid. Turner (1969) has emphasized the role of ritual in helping people achieve a sense of unity and cohesion, and achieved social relation that he calls *communitas*, which is a source of deeply felt bonding and allegiance- a kind of mystery of intimacy between the members of the group. Deflem (1991: 12) mentioned Turner's definition of ritual, as we have seen, included the manipulation of efficacious symbols in ritual performances and the reference that is made in ritual to a belief in supernatural beings or powers. For Turner, there is in ritual an essential element of religious belief. This is demonstrated by the attention he gave to the cultural field in which rituals take place.

The *Tengapania Deoris* of the village also observes various rituals in the *than ghar*. The responsibilities to perform rituals lies in the four priests namely – *Bar Deori*, *Saru Deori*, *Bar Bharali*, and *Saru Bharali*. The three officials, viz., *Bora*, *Barik*, and *Pariya* also assist them in the performances of the rituals. There is also a committee known as *Sonapur Deva Mandir Parichalana Samity* to look after all the activities of the *than ghar*. The Committee comprises of a President, one Vice President, Secretary, Assistant Secretary one each, one treasurer, 11 to 15 members according to requirement and adviser from among ex-President, Priests and elderly persons of the village. The main duties and responsibilities rested on the said committee are to conserve the premises of the *than* take care of its assets, to provide necessary ingredient for *Bar Pujas*, arrangement of drinking water, toilet facilities, to maintain and repair of the gate of the *than*, to receive the guests during the time of rituals, to distribute sacred food in *asirbad ghar* of the *than*, annual repairing of the *than ghar*, etc. The committee is also involved in socio-political affairs of the village like arbitration of disputes related to theft, robbery, adultery, marriage, killing of the sacred animal, etc., due to the great influence of the *than* to the social, political, and religious life of the *Deoris*.

In the *than ghar* the *Deoris* observe different rituals. Wednesday is considered as most auspicious day among the *Deoris* and most of the rituals are solemnized on Wednesday of the first week of a month. They perform twelve-monthly rituals (*mahokia puja*) in each of the twelve months in a year, three *Bar Pujas* (major rituals) namely *Bahagar Bar Puja*, *Saonar Na'bhatar Puja*, and *Moghar Bar Puja*. Other than these in relation to the *Bar Pujas*, three *Janani Puja* is also there. After completion of each *Bar Puja*, three *Pat Bhanga Pujas* are also solemnized by them. *Asera Puja* or *Aarao Puja* and two purifying rituals namely *Chotar Chuwa Bhanga Puja* and *Pubar Chuwa Bhanga Puja* are also performed by the *Deoris* of the village in the *than ghar*. It should be noted here that no ritual practices are observed by the people during *amabashya* (the day of the conjugation of sun and moon).

Crapo (1993: 257) mentioned spirit possession, the control of a person's behaviour by a spirit that has entered his or her body, is common in all societies where people are expected to be dutiful and compliant rather than independent and assertive. It requires a ritual of exorcism to remove the possessed spirit. In ecclesiastical religion tend to be found in agriculturally based societies, experiences

sometimes instances of spirit possession trances and the ecstatic speaking in tongues by members of the congregation. Among all the rituals observed by the Tengpania Deoris, the *Bobagar Barpuja* occupies the central place. One of the significant events observed during this *puja* is the performance of the *Deodhani*. It is a shamanistic dance performed by both male and the female in the *than* premises. They believe that during that ritual the deities come to visit the people. The deities indicate their presence by entering inside the body and soul of some males or females concerning one's lineage. The deities who appear during this time according to the lineages are *Burba Deo* in *Machiotika* lineage. *Sat Konwar* and *Na Konwar* in *bikramiatika* lineage. *Ai Deo* in *Kbutiotika* lineage, *Lohit Devata* in *Senahariatika* and *Indra Devata* in *Sakusarutika* lineage. Both a male and female may experience possession of a deity. The presence of a deity is principally known by the trembling of the person. The concerned person is taken to the *than* premises with great reverence by the villagers in a procession playing drum and cymbals. Soon after reaching the *than* the person possessed by a deity sits in a low stool (*pira*) specially kept for the *deodhani*. Then in frenzy, he or she starts to interact with the priest and the people. There is a strong belief among the Tengpania Deoris that during that time the person can foretell about the peace and prosperity as well as danger of the community. Thereafter the person starts performing *Deodhani* dance with the tune of drum and cymbals along with the other people and after sometime, the deity leaves the body of the possessor by accepting sacrificed blood of fowl collected in a container made up of *Kaupat* from priests of the *than*. Table 1 shows the different rituals observed by the Deoris of the village.

Conclusion

Religion is one of the factors which guide the life of the Tengpania Deoris, The *than ghar* occupies a central place in their socio-religious life. *Balia Baba* is the high God of this group of people, who is worshipped at the household as well as at the community level. *Than ghar* is the place where they propitiate deities for the peace and wellbeing of the society. The life of the Tengpania Deoris is knitted rigidly with the activities of the *than ghar*. For instance, if a household got polluted, then they have to approach *Balia Baba* and bring water sanctified by the priest to purify the member of that family. All the priests of the *than ghar* are males and traditionally no female is allowed to work as a priest or specialist in the *than ghar*. Except for priests, no one is allowed to perform the religious duties inside the *than ghar*. The females' role is limited to the performance of *Deodhani*, a shamanistic dance, performed in *Bahagar Bar Puja*, during the month of *Bobag*, in the courtyard of the *than ghar*. The Tengpania Deoris believe that during this period the local deities. *Burba Deo*, *Na Konwar*, *Sat Konwar*, *Lohit Devata*, *Ai Deo*, and *Indra Devata*, etc., come to visit the people and as an indication, they enter inside the body and soul of a particular female. She dances in the *than ghar* and in a frenzy, she can foretell about the happenings in near future. Among the Tengpania Deoris, Wednesday is considered as most auspicious day and all the major rituals commemorate Wednesday. It is postponed only if the Wednesday is coinciding with *amavaishya* and then coming Sunday is considered for performing the ritual. The month of *Bobag* is considered the most sacred month where *Bahagar Bar Puja* is observed with great reverence. The main occupation of the community is agriculture and every harvesting activity of the village starts with the appeasing of the parochial deities of the *than*. The *than ghar* also acts as an institute of political affairs with the help of a committee known as *Sonapur Deva Mandir Parichalana Samiti*. This committee intervenes in the dispensation of justice for minor cases like theft, adultery, the killing of sacred animals, etc., and for those purposes, the wrongdoer has to take a bow before *Balia Baba* in the *than ghar*. The sacred complex also acts as a place of celebration and recreation. Major festivals like *Bobag Bihu*, *Magh Bihu* popularly known as *Deori Bihu*, etc., are observed within the premises of the *than* by singing and dancing with pomp and gaiety during the time of *Bihu* which transforms the place into an amphitheater of recreational activity. Though at contemporary times due to the close contact of the caste Hindu population of Assam, many impinging factors of the latter have been percolated into the religious universe of the Tengpania Deoris, yet still socio-religious life of them is guided by

their pristine tradition. Although processes of change like urbanization, westernization as well as the advancement of English education have percolated into their society, yet the Tengapania Deoris have maintained lots of traditional elements which is reflected at least during the time of observance of rituals and festivals in the *than* premises.

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Tables

Table 1 - Nature of rituals performed by the *Tengapania Deoris* at *Sonapur Deori Gaon*

Sl. No.	Name of the ritual	Observe in the month	The deity/deities worshipped	Ingredient required	Performed for
1	Mahekia Puja	Wednesday/ Sunday of every first fifteen days of a month	Balia Baba, Sat Konwar, Na Konwar	Tora pat (<i>Alpiniaspp.</i>), tanglati (<i>Cmacrophylla vahl.</i>), basil leaf, betel nut, soaked black gram, wick mustard oil, spices, four cock, etc.	Wellbeing of the village and community
2	Bohagar Barpuja	Bohag (April-May) first Wednesday of the first week of Bohag	Balia Baba, Sat Konwar, Na Konwar, Indra Devata, Lohit Devata Burha Deo, Ai Deo and other gods, goddesses as well as deities	Two to four matured red coloured cocks from each household, two white or black coloured goat from public money, one white colour cock, ripe banana, pitha (cake made from rice flour), soaked black gram, spices, sandalwood, mustard oil, tanglati, basil leaf betel nut, salt, rice, milk, molasses, etc.	To welcome as well as peace and amity in the new year. Bar Bali (major sacrifice) is performed in this ritual.
3	Saonar Na bhatar Puja	Saon (July-August), first Wednesday of the month	-do-	Same as Bahagar Barpuja along with bamboo shoot, seasonal fruits, ginger, rice made up from Ahu dhan	Paying tribute to gods and goddesses for better agricultural yield.
4	Maghar Barpuja	Magh (January-February), First Wednesday of the month	-do-	Same ingredients as the other two Bar Pujas along with Yam	The wellbeing of the village and community
5	Janani Puja	Before 15 days of every Bar Puja	-do-	Same as Mahekia Puja	To invite the deities for each Bar Puja
6	Pat Bhanga Puja	After one week of every Bar Puja	-do-	Same as Mahekia Puja	To give farewell to the invited deities for Bar Puja
7	Chatar Chawa Bhanga Puja	Ahar (June-July)	Ai Basumati (goddess earth)	-do-	Purification purpose of mother earth. There is a belief that the earth attains menstruation during this period
8	Puhar Chawa Bhanga Puja	Puh (December-January)	-do-	-do-	-do-
9	Asera Puja	Not fixed observed any month of the year according to the requirement	-do-	One white colour goat one tea colour drake, banana, pitha (cake made of rice flour), black gram, betel nut, tanglati, basil leaf, milk, molasses.	To get relief from natural calamities, diseases, bad omen related with an accident, damaging of agricultural crops, etc.