

# Tradition and Faith of the Tai-Ahoms and Deoris of Assam

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**Abstract:** *Tradition means beliefs, objects or customs performed or believed in the past, originating in it, transmitted through time by being taught by one generation to the next, and are performed or believed in the present. In broader sense, it refers to the forms of artistic heritage of a particular culture or the beliefs or customs instituted and maintained by societies and governments or the beliefs or customs maintained by religious denominations that share history, customs, culture, and, to some extent, body of teachings. Faith is the confidence or trust in those beliefs, objects or customs. The Tai-Ahom and the Deori communities of Assam have their own unique and distinct tradition and faith. Successfully overpowering the powerful challenges of time, modernization and changing perceptions, these communities have succeeded in maintaining their glorious origin, firm religious faith, colourful, vibrant customary traditions like marriage, food, songs, dances, clothes, etc. The present paper is an attempt to trace the tradition and faith of the Tai-Ahom and Deori communities of Assam on the basis of our understanding of the concepts of tradition and faith.*

**Keywords:** Tradition, faith, custom, Tai-Ahom, Deori

## 1. Introduction

The term tradition refers to a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. This term forms an important component of folklore. Traditions persist and evolve for thousands of years. The English word tradition comes from the Latin *traditio* via French, the noun from the verb *tradere* which means to transmit, to hand over, to give for safekeeping. It was originally used in Roman law to refer to the concept of legal transfers and inheritance. For some critics like Anthony Giddens, the modern meaning of tradition evolved during the Enlightenment period, in opposition to modernity and progress.

Like most of the generic terms, the term tradition has plenty of definitions. The concept includes a number of interrelated ideas. The unifying one is that tradition refers to beliefs, objects or customs performed or believed in the past, originating in it, transmitted through time by being taught by one generation to the next, and are performed or believed in the present. Edward Shils in his book *Tradition* (1981) puts forward a definition of tradition that became universally accepted. According to him, tradition is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present.

In broader sense, tradition refers to the forms of artistic heritage of a particular culture or the beliefs or customs instituted and maintained by societies and governments or the beliefs or customs maintained by religious denominations that share history, customs, culture, and, to some extent, body of teachings.

When we talk about faith, we mean the confidence or trust in a person, thing or concept. The term faith is derived from the Latin word *fides* and Old French *feid*. In the context of the religion, faith can be defined as the “belief in a god or in the doctrines or teachings of religion”. Recent approaches have taken the term into broader perspectives. John Lennox, a Professor of Mathematics and philosopher of science at

University of Oxford, has given a new dimension to the term by stating, “Faith is not a leap in the dark; it’s the exact opposite. It’s a commitment based on evidence.”

The Tai-Ahoms and the Deoris are the major ingredient communities among the rich, vibrant and colourful cultural mosaic of Assam. Each community of Assam has its own unique and distinct culture. Most of these communities have carried forward their ancestral traditions and customs with great faith. Successfully overpowering the powerful challenges of time, modernization and changing perceptions, these cultures have succeeded in maintaining their ethnicity. Among them, the cultures of the Tai-Ahoms and Deoris, are eye-catching for its glorious origin, firm religious faith, colourful, vibrant customary traditions like marriage, food, songs, dances, clothes, etc. The present paper is an attempt to trace the tradition and faith of the Tai-Ahom and Deori communities of Assam on the basis of our understanding of the above mentioned concepts of tradition and faith.

The culture of Tai-Ahoms is a very old historically rich and unique one marked for its variety and colour. Notwithstanding the influences of time and environment after originating from China, the Tai-Ahoms have succeeded in maintaining a greater part of their traditional culture. They still continue to worship chief gods which they call ‘Fra’. Their chief gods of worship are ‘Khaokham’, ‘Lengdon’, ‘Ja-Sing-Fa’, ‘Jan- Sai-Hung’. Lang-Kuri’, ‘Nang-Si-Chao’, etc. They still offer their worship in their traditional form.

According to the Traditional theology of the Tai-Ahom community, there is an omnipotent God called Pha-Tu-Ching (Pha: heaven; Tu: a being; Ching: highest, also called Pha-Lai-Bet), who created the universe and other gods. He [supreme ancestor] created the first of the lesser gods, Khun-Theo-Kham and his consort, who laid four golden eggs from which emanated four sons. The fourth son, Ngi-Ngao-Kham stayed back with Pha-Tu-Ching and helped him create the world. The depiction of Ngi-Ngao-Kham (winged lion/dragon) was used as a coat-of-arms by the Tai-Ahom

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kings. Eventually, Lengdon (Ngi-ring-kham) became the lord of the heavens. He sent down his grandsons, Khun-long and Khun-lai, to rule Mong-ri-Mong-ram, a place on earth. Khun-long and Khun-lai brought with them two deities Chum-Pha and Shengmung each respectively, the deities which Sukaphaa received from his grandmother in Mong Mao at the time of his departure. The deities were kept in a special temple named Ho-Phi or Seng-Rwan. The deity Chum-Pha became indispensable during the coronation of the Tai-Ahom king.

The Tai-Ahoms are quite conscious of their way of worshipping. They take a lot of pain and care for offering the right materials of worship. They are very particular about their traditional way of offering. As they do not practice such kind of offering personally in every household, they offer every possible help and support for doing everything collectively in events like 'Me Dam Me Phi'. Literally, 'Me' means worship, 'Dam' means the dead, 'Phi' means God. The Tai-Ahoms worship the dead ancestors as God. According to their belief, after death, a person remains in the state of 'Dam' and only after the relatives of the person worships God, the dead becomes God or 'Phi'. The Tai-Ahoms do not believe in rebirth. According to them, a person becomes God after death and goes to heaven.

In the traditional Tai-Ahom families, Dam puja is celebrated every year. They worship their forefathers with great respect. In these traditional households, the presence of a 'Dam-post' or 'Phi-Lang' post in the kitchen can never be missed. This sacred post is not only a sign of their traditional religion but it also signifies the importance of worshipping gods, goddesses as well as forefathers. The offerings always consist of the best eatables along with rice beer served with great reverence.

An important and significant custom of the Tai-Ahoms in the past was that the dead body was not burnt, but buried. This practice is still continued by some. The place of burial is called 'Maidam' where along with the dead body all the belongings of the deceased person was kept. The maidams at Charaideo, Jorhat and other places of Assam stand as evidence. According to historical evidence, Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha, influenced by Hinduism stopped the burial system and ordered his people to cremate the dead bodies.

The most remarkable traditional customs of the Tai-Ahoms is the marriage ceremony known as 'Cho Klong'. In this system of marriage, one hundred and one earthen lamps are lighted in a beautifully designed circular colourful design which has one hundred and one meeting points. The marriage is conducted by Tai-Ahom priests by chanting Tai hymns.

The Tai-Ahoms have retained some of the food habits of their forefathers. Among them, mention may be made about 'Hurum'(a kind of puffed rice), 'Kumol saul'(rice softened by adding hot-boiled water), 'Leta'(butterfly cocoon), 'Hanj'(rice beer), 'Amlori Parua'(ants) fried with duck's eggs and different dishes of pork, chicken and duck's meat. Tai-Ahoms continue to have boiled dishes like pork boiled with spinach leaves. Bamboo,cane, banana leaves and banana shoot form an important part of Tai-Ahom customs.

The Deori community of Assam is one of the major indigenous communities of Assam. The Deori community belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of Mongoloid stock. So far the name Deori is concerned, in ancient times of the Chutiya kingdom, the Deoris were priests of the Chutiya community, in the temples of the kingdoms. The community has maintained their racial traits, language, religion, folk tales and traditional beliefs through the centuries. The people of Deori tribe are mainly divided into four groups or clans, namely Dibongia, Bor-geeya, Tengaponiya and Patorgoya. According to the Census Report of 1901, the Deoris were originally living in the riverside of Kundil in ancient Sodiya,. This community has firm-faith in God and always prays with great humility and reverence.

Marriage is one of the major social traditions of a society. The customs that are involved in marriage ceremony of Deori community is quite interesting. The wooer or his parents visit bride's family first and seeks her for the groom. The first side has to give various commodities to the other in that day and both side cheerfully enjoy. A holy day is fixed for the marriage ceremony through effective communication. Bridegroom sends various ornaments, clothing and significant others to the bride before the marriage ceremony. This is known as "Chhubi- huta- duba". Later on, the marriage ceremony is performed with great religious attitude by them and people are received with various recopies. Hence the ceremony ends and bride is brought to the house of the groom.

The Deoris observe two major festivals during a year. One of them is "Bohagiyo Bisu", i.e. Bohag Bihu, while the other is "Magiyo Bisu" i.e., Magh Bihu. They have some special rules for the Bihu Festivals. The Bohagiyo Bisu is the most important one and the Deoris observe this festival for a period of seven days with unlimited joy and merry makings. Generally they start it from Wednesday when the "Sangkranti" of "Chot" falls on that day.

On the first day of the festival the Deoris offer a Puja in a "Than". It must be mentioned here that both the Bihu festivals of the Deoris are connected with the agricultural activities and so they are observed rightly before starting the agricultural operations in the fields. The Deoris must sacrifice a goat in the Bihu Puja. It is on this day, the "Suwasani Puja" is duly observed by each and every household, by the headman, for the welfare of the members of the family.

In the midday all the villagers go to the "Than" and gather there for getting sacred water and "Prasads". First they are purified by the sacred water prepared in the "Than" and then the Bor Deori and Deori Bhorali of the Than distributes "Prasads" among them after his due prayers inside the same. The sacrifices of birds and beasts as goats, ducks and fowls are performed duly and after the puja only the male people of the village take part in the feast.

Meanwhile the young, both male and female do not remain idle. The young male and female performed dance and song at "Chhaje Khula" ( A place which are situated either Isolated from the Village or Middle of the Village) at night, this course had begun from Pohila Chot (Middle of March) and end with "Bisu Uruwaba". The common place of

worship among the Borgoyan and Dibangias call it "Midiku". All the sections worship Lord Siva and Parvati as chief deities. The Dibangias call this supreme duty as 'Kundi mama'. 'Kundil' is identified as Lord 'Siva' and 'Mama' as 'Parvati' of Hindu Pantheon. Another name of this chief deity is Gira Girachi. Pasa Dema or Balia Baba and Pisasi Dema or Kesaikhathi, the son and daughter of Gira Girachi are two other important deities of the Deories. They also worship 'Gailurung Kundi' as 'Ganesh' and "Kunwar Kundi" as 'Kartik'. The Puja Parap hernalias include flower, sacrificial dao, piece of chandan wood, copper, argha, bell, canopy, etc. The priestly functionaries including Bor Deori or Baderi, Saru Deori or Saderi, Bor Bharali, Saru Bharali, Kelua, Bora, Barik, and Randhani or Ladani

Besides the major deities, the Deoris have a good number of household deities, they believe that if these deities are worshipped regularly Than peace and plenty will prevail upon the household. Some of the important household deities are – 'Bakanmak', 'Miruchi', 'Kin', 'Dha', 'Chitere', 'Bura Dangaria', 'Mora', 'Chakchik', 'Achira' etc. From the name of household deities like 'Bura Dangaria', Ghururdeo etc. the influence of non Deori Hindus may be traced. Sacrifice of animals and fowls, pigeon's forms an important of the Deori Puja. The presence of Bordeuri or Ba Deori is essential in the Pujas. Rice beer is not offered to the deities but consumption of rice beer after the Puja is not forbidden. Wednesday is the most auspicious day for worship and Pujas are performed either on Wednesday or on Sunday.

The Deoris are essentially non-vegetarians. Rice is their staple and fish or meat, or occasionally both, form part of their normal menu to go with rice. Chicken and Pork are their favourite meat. Along with rice they take boiled green vegetable seasoned with chills and salt. Generally for their meat they rear fowls, pigs, ducks, and goats.

In the Deori communities, clothes are generally colourful, and they have a general liking, especially for wearing on ceremonial and festive occasions, for bright colors, such as different shades of yellow, green, orange, magenta, and black. Most of them use a combination of red and black colors, or of red, black and white for their shawls and scarves.

Bamboos and rattan canes have always been an integral part of Deori life in Assam. They make various kinds of using things of day-to-day life, etc using bamboo. The performing arts of singing and dancing are important aspects of the lives of Deori community. Their rich culture consists of folk songs sung at the time of Bihu, agricultural, fishing, festival and such other occasions, love songs – merry making songs, etc.

Thus, we see that in spite of the uniqueness of the tradition and faith of the Tai-Ahom and Deori communities of Assam, they have remarkable similarities. Both the communities have extreme reverence for their gods and goddesses and still continue to worship them with elaborate rituals. They are quite particular about their traditions and faith related to food and beverage. Both the communities have traditional customs of eating pork, chicken, duck and fish and have the custom of offering and drinking the rice-

beer. The study of the tradition and faith of the Tai-Ahom and Deori communities of Assam has further scope of attaining international significance considering the similarities of the tradition and faith of various communities of Tibet, Burma, Thailand and China. So, the vibrant, colourful and rich tradition and faith of the Tai-Ahom and Deori community needs to be maintained and conserved with due reverence and honour.

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