

Rites de Passage and Disposable of the Corpse: A Study on Death Rites Among the Deoris in a Rural Context of Assam, India

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Death is one of the important crises rites in human society which invariably occur during the lifecycle of an individual. Death means the termination of the life of an individual along with its biological functions. It is one of the indispensable aspects of many traditions and organizations and is an important feature of every culture and civilization in the world. In common parlance death refers to the moment at which life ends and one of the difficult tasks of defining death is to distinguish it from the life of an individual. When a death occurs to an individual, it requires drawing precise conceptual boundaries between life and death. The life of an individual is defined on the basis of consciousness and when consciousness ceases, a person is said to have died. Death has an integral relationship with religion, especially with rites and rituals through which the departed soul is appeased with the intervention of the supernatural. In every society, there are certain customs related to death as well as the disposal of the corpse which reflect the parochial belief system associated with the event. In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine the pattern of disposal of death, integral religious rites, and rituals among the Tengapania Deoris of Assam.

Keywords: Deori, death, religion, disposal, rites, rituals

Introduction

Death is the supreme and final crisis of human life that is believed to be the gateway to the other world in more than the literal sense (Malinowski, 2015, p. 47). Death is considered one of the important rites of passage in human society. Rites of passage are connected with the critical but usually expectable events of the life cycle of an individual like birth, sexual maturity, marriage, death, etc. Arnold Van Gennep (1992) defined the rites of passage that usher individuals through the crucial crisis of their lives, such as birth, puberty, marriage, parenthood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death. Kimball's (1992, p. vii) analysis of ceremonies accompanying an individual's life crisis which van Gennep called *rites de passage* is usually considered to be his unique contribution pointed out that, when the activities associated with such ceremonies were examined in terms of their order and content, it was possible to distinguish three major phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. Considered as a whole, he labeled these the schema of rites de passage... Rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies. Among all the crisis rites death is considered the end phase of the life cycle of an individual and it involves elaborate funeral rites. After the death

of a person, a community generally observes different rituals, and different taboos and customs are followed by the family members of the deceased. Disposal of the human corpse is often defined as the practice of dealing with the dead and practices regarding corpse disposal, are integrally a religious part of every culture and civilization. There are many intangible aspects of culture associated with the death and disposal of corpses, which have intricate relations with the religion of that culture. It is often followed by observance of some customs, rites, and rituals, as well as ceremonies. "Ceremonies may be performed for the dying. The ritual treatment of the dead usually includes far more than the actual funeral ceremony, usually beginning at death and continuing at intervals for many years" (A Committee of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1954, p. 129).

Death and disposal are an integral element of each culture and it has an indispensable relationship with the religious belief system of the society. Death describes a situation where something has ceased; in human society it is life. This is followed by the care of the dead as well as the afterlife and disposal of it upon the onset of death. An elaborate ethnographic study of a particular community regarding the customs, rituals, taboos, etc., related to death and disposal was carried out by different scholars like Tylor (1889), Karstern (1905), Van Gennep (1906; 1992), Lowie (1924), Willis (1939), Evans-Pritchard (1956), Wallace (1966), Medhi (1980), Mills (1980), Bordoloi (1984), Bordoloi, Sharma Thakur, and Saikia (1987), Playfair (1998), Gurdon (2002), Endle (2007), Malinowski (2015), Zaman (2020), et al., and they also focused on the correlation of religious beliefs and practices regarding death with social life. In this paper, an attempt has been made to evaluate the disposal of death as well as integral rites, customs, etc., among the Tengapania Deoris of Sanapur Deori Goan, Philobari, District Tinsukia, Assam.

The People

The Deoris are one of the important scheduled tribes of Assam. The word "Deori" originated from the Sanskrit word *deva grhika* meaning in charge of the temple or the priest. Deori (2002, p. 33) mentioned that "the word 'Deori' literally means priest. The persons 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 Patorsal which was within the jurisdiction of the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh and Dibrugarh district of Assam. Racially the Deoris are Mongoloid and Mongolian characteristics are still visible among them even today. Sarma Thakur (2007, p. 173) 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 in spite of socio-cultural and political ups and downs through the decades. Dalton (1872, p. 2) writes about the Deoris "An isolated colony on the river Dikrang in Lakhimpur calling themselves Deori Chutiya were found who had a peculiar language which they called Chutiya and they were styled Deoris". At a present main concentration of the Deoris is found in the district of Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, and in the Sadia region of Tinsukia district. On the basis of places of origin, there are four divisions (*khel*) among the Deoris, and each division is composed of a number of lineages (*bamgsa*). The Deoris who are believed to reside near the bank of the river Dibang are known as *Dibangia*; those near Tengapani and Borpani or Borgang are known as *Tengapania* and *Borgoya* respectively. Again the people who inhabited Pat Sadia were named *Patargonya*. The people of Sonapur Deori Gaon where the present study is carried out belong to *Tengapania khel* and have seven sub-divisions or

lineages (*tikas*) among themselves. These are *Machiotika*, *Bikarmiyatika*, *Phagimegeratika*, *Khutiotika*, *Senabariatika*, *Phapariatika*, and *Sakusarutika*.

The Tengapania Deoris are Hindu by religion, more specifically the follower of the Sakta cult, the worshipper of *Sakti*. They still retain their traditional religious belief system 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 *Na-Konwar* and *Sat-Konwar* who are considered the eldest and youngest son of *Balia Baba*, *Lohit Devata* also known as *Bhaba Raja* or *Jala-Narayana*, and goddesses like *Durga Mai*, *Ai deo*, etc. *Than Ghar* is their worshipping place which consists of three parts—the *Balia Baba* than is centrally located, towards the left of it stands the *Indra-ghar*, and another structure known as *Sat-Konwar mandir* is located towards the right side of the central structure. Among the Tengapania Deoris, the religious rituals are performed by four priests—chief among them is known as *Bar Deori* who is invariably selected from *Machiotika* lineage. He is assisted by the other three—these *Soru Deori*, *Bor-Bharali*, and *Saru-Bharali* who belongs to *Bikarmiatika*, *Phagimageratika*, and *Khutiotika* respectively. Apart from these four, there are *Bora*, *Barik*, and three *Parias*, who also assist the priest in the performance of religious duties.

Objectives

The present research endeavor was designed to study the belief system in relation to the death of an individual among the Tengapania Deoris living in an interior rural environment of Assam with special references to their traditional belief concerning death, the care of the corpse, the ritual experts, the disposable of the corpse, customs, and performances of indigenous rituals observed in relation with the death, and the contemporary changes in their socio-religious universe of the Deoris of the study area.

Micro Field and Methodology

For the present discussion, a study was made on the death and disposal of the Deoris 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 regarding death, their worshipping Gods/Goddesses, the religious specialist, pristine customs, rites, and rituals observed in relation to the deceased as well as disposal of the same by the community, were recorded from a total of 30 numbers of individuals who have expert knowledge on pristine customs, traditions, the belief regarding death and disposal of the Deori community. For this purpose, extensive personal interviews, in-depth discussions, and 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 regarding the event in particular. 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 interviews was taken with the main religious specialists of the village. The data collected from one informant or informants are cross verified with other informant/informants as and when it was necessary.

Results and Discussions

Religion plays an important role in the social structure of the Deoris of Sonapur Deori Gaon. They observe elaborate rituals for birth, initiation, puberty, marriage, death, harvest, etc., which bind and control the society with the intervention of the sacred. Frazer (1870) in his noteworthy book *Golden Bough* says that religion is meant as a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to the man who is believed to bind and control the course of nature and of human life. Thus defined, religion consists of two elements, a theoretical and a practical, namely a belief in a power higher than man, and an attempt to propitiate or please them. Tylor (1889, p. 24) said religion is the belief in spiritual beings. Wallace (1966, p. 107) mentioned religion as a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilized supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature. Karsten (1935) stated that primitive rituals must be essentially an expression of man's instinct of self-preservation, in other words, of his desire to make existence as tolerable as possible. The relationship between man and the supernatural powers, which he tries to influence by his invocations, prayers, and offerings, is not originally an ethical relation. Various practices and beliefs serve a variety of psychological and social functions of religion in society. The people of the said village also observe elaborate customs, rites, and rituals for the death of an individual as well as for the salvation of the disposed corpse.

The Traditional Beliefs and Customs

As death approaches, the nearest relatives in any case, sometimes the whole community forgather by the dying man, and dying, the most private act which a man can perform, is transformed into a public, tribal event. As a rule, certain differentiation takes place at once, some of the relatives watching near the corpse, others making preparation for the pending end, and its consequences other again performing perhaps some religious acts at a sacred spot. (Malinowski, 2015, p. 48)

Among the Deoris of the village soon after the death of an individual, the family members inform the neighbours, fellow villagers, as well as near and distant relatives. When the villagers and relatives assemble in the house of the dead, an egg is broken on the forehead of the deceased. It is believed that the egg has a life inside it, which is released when it is broken so the soul of the departed person is also free from that day onwards. Then the corpse is carefully washed by the nearest relatives, the arms and legs straightened out, the head anointed with oil, and the hair reverently combed. The dead person's body is then clothed with new white colour garments. After that the corpse is covered with big white coloured *cheleng chadar*, a big wrapper, generally used by the males. Then they observe another custom which is known as *lakhimi suwa*, i.e., a kind of divination to verify good or evil for a particular household due to the death of a person. A small portion of the *cheleng chadar* which covers the corpse is torn out from one corner by a person who is involved in washing the corpse; five small elongated pieces are made from it. Then a bunch of paddy is brought, and five grains are plucked out from it and tied into the finger encircling the nails, in the case of male the right hand and female the left hand respectively. After some time the paddy grains are taken out and kept on a *kula* (winnowing fan). Then the winnowing fan is covered with a white piece of cloth and kept in a safe place for seven days; nobody should touch it during that period. After seven days, the winnowing fan is taken out. The cloth is removed from it and the condition of paddy grains is checked. If the number has decreased from five, it is considered a bad omen for the family and if the opposite happens then it means the number has increased by one, or if some hairs have come out from the grains, it reflects a good sign and long life of the family and is believed that the

departed soul has blessed the household. Karsten (1905, p. 107) said “although unseen by a human eye, the spirit of the dead man hovers about its old abode or the house where he dwelt while alive, that he continues to take an interest in the property he possessed and the persons to whom he was nearly related in life...in every remarkable event which happens at the time of his death they see any indication of his presence”. During the period of these seven days, one *cheleng chadar* is hung in front of the granary so that goddess Lakhmi may not leave her abode because of their belief system as well as in the Hindu pantheon granaries are considered as Her abode. The whole period is considered a period of mourning and pollution and everyone in the household debarbs themselves from access to the granary. They also observe some customs regarding food, consumption of meat, fish, eggs, curries of an alkaline condiment (*khar*), etc., which are tabooed during these days. Van Gennep (1992: 148) during mourning, social life is suspended for all those affected by it, and the length of the period increases with the closeness of social ties to the deceased.

The Disposable of the Corpse

Funeral rites vary widely among different peoples and further variations depending on the sex, age, and social position of the deceased (Van Gennep, 1992, p. 146). There are two recognized ways of disposal of the corpse among the people of the village—cremation and burial. Cremation of the dead is the rule but in the case of children pregnant women and suicide victims, the corpses are generally buried. The dead body is taken out of the house and placed on a *perangani* (a bier made of split bamboo). If the deceased is an elderly person or the head of the household then the fellow family members and consanguineal kins present bow down before it offers betel nut and betel vine leaf on a *sarai* (disc on a stand). Before the start of the funeral procession, some of the elderly members of the village go to a nearby jungle and choose a dry tree for firewood meant for making the *chita* (pyre). Before cutting down the tree they convey their respect and regard towards the local deity by kneeling down before the tree and cutting it down in the name of the god and making the pieces of wood from it according to the requirement.

The funeral procession starts from the house of the dead with an assembly of people of all ages and both sexes but females generally proceed from behind with small pieces of firewood made of mango tree in their hands for placing on the pyre. The dead body is carried to the cremation ground by four male members of either uterine sons or blood relatives of the deceased. The eldest or youngest son of the deceased lights the pyre and in the procession he is dressed in a white colour *dhoti* (an unsewn cloth worn from the waist) and with a *chadar* (a wrapper), veiling his head and holding burning firewood (*jumuthi*) taken from the deceased home. Cremation initiated by the eldest son is the rule, and in his absence, the youngest is permitted to perform the same. If there is no son in the household then the son of the nearest blood relative of the deceased is allowed to do the funeral rite. One member of the funeral procession takes an *ugha* (a bamboo made bobbin), winding with white colour yarn for the purpose that if they have to pass a river or an irrigation canal on the way, yarn from the bobbin is stretched from bank to bank at the crossing place, either above or below the water. It is believed that with the help of the yarn the soul of the deceased could cross the river or the canal.

Soon after arriving at the cremation ground which is located near the Doomdooma River running adjacent to the village, the bier is laid on the ground. A suitable place is selected for preparing the pyre and four wooden posts are erected by four elderly members of the village. Then they imitate communicating with the soul of the dead and tell “him” that the pyre will be his resting abode from that moment onwards. After that two wooden logs are horizontally placed inside the posts and layers of wood are placed above them for making the pyre.

If the deceased belongs to *Khutiotika* or *Senabariatika* lineages, then seven layers of wood are required for the pyre, and for the rest of the lineages, it is made of five layers.

The reason behind this is that people belonging to both these lineages consider themselves brothers and sisters and are descendent of one of their local gods *Lohit Devata* or *Bhaba Raja*, who is a king and so deserves the honour. Then the deceased's sons, relatives, and fellow villagers pass around it in procession in an anticlockwise direction, seven times in the case of *Khatiatika/Senabariatika* and five times for the rest of the lineages. While encircling, they also pass the yarn which they bring in a bobbin around each corner where the four posts are erected, in order to prevent the spirits of other men from interfering with the repose of the deceased. Thereafter the body is placed over the pyre. The head of the corpse is placed in the northern direction, the feet towards the south, and the face upward. A coin is inserted into the mouth of the corpse for the reason that during his journey towards the world of the dead he has to cross a river, for which a small tax is required. They believe that with the help of that coin he can overcome the situation. Then above the body, pieces of wood are placed both by men and women folk with their left hands, and the funeral pile is set on fire by the eldest son on the face, seven times if the deceased belongs to the *Senabariatika/Khatiatika* lineage and five times for the rest of the lineages.

The eldest son or any person who lights the pyre takes some ashes and bone remains (*asthi*) of the disposed of, and ties them in a piece of cloth torn out from one corner of the covering of the dead body. Then he proceeds towards the nearby river and takes a dip seven times and five times for *Khatiotika/Senabariatika* and for the others, respectively. While plunging in river water with *asthi* in hand, one of the members who erect the post for the deceased asks him what he is doing. Then the person in the water replies that he is immersing the *asthi* in the river water so that it can intermingle with the holy water of the river Ganga. This custom is known as *asthi bisarjana*.

The Rites and Rituals Observed

Death in the family of someone is considered unholy and hence some purificatory rituals are always observed by the Deoris. Haviland (1978, pp. 333, 342) said ritual is religion in action, and prayer is a common form of ritual. Religious ritual is the means through which persons relate to the sacred; it is religion in action. Not only is the ritual the means by which the social bonds of a group are reinforced and tensions relieved, but it is also one way that many important events are celebrated and crises, such as death, are made less socially disruptive and less difficult for the individual to bear. So, among them soon after the dead body is taken out of the house towards the cremation ground, the rest of the family members as well as the relatives and co-villagers wash the floor and plinth of the house and sprinkle *santi jal* (holy water) taken from *Than ghar* on all corners of the household to make it pollution-free. The members who return home after attending the funeral ceremony have to purify themselves by observing a ritual. A girl or woman from the village who belongs to a different lineage than that of the deceased sprinkles holy water on them with sweet basil leaves; after that in a bowl she brings a copper coin dipped in mustard oil. All the persons touch the oil with the little finger of the left hand five or seven times according to their lineage. After this observance, the person who lights the pyre sacrifices a red colour cock and its meat is preserved for seven days for giving *pinda* (oblation) to the soul of the deceased. During these days, at dawn, the sacrificed cock meat along with cooked rice and *Suze* (rice beer) is offered as *pinda* to the deceased in the backside of the house near the *mudha khuta* (the main post of the house) just below the kitchen of the household.

Van Gennep (1992, p. 147) mentioned that during mourning, the living mourners and the deceased constitute a special group, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and how soon living individuals leave that group depends on the closeness of their relationship with the dead person. Among the Deoris of the village, after seven days they observe another ritual named *sasori tana*. On that day, the *bhakats* (elderly members of the village) from three different lineages are invited to bless the deceased and his family. Rice is prepared along with pulses, leafy vegetables, and also a fowl is sacrificed. The invited guests are offered the prepared meal along with rice beer. On this day the *Lakhimi suwa* custom is observed, which has already been discussed in the previous paragraphs. The three invited elderly persons (*bhakats*) are allowed to sit in the *Bor kuthali*, a spacious room located just near the *mojihali* (kitchen) of Deori household, where male members of the house sit and eat together. In front of the *bhakats* in three plantain leaves the prepared meal is offered by the daughter-in-law of the household, which is actually meant for the salvation of the soul of the deceased. Then the *bhakats* bless the departed soul by uttering some spells so that the soul may rest in peace. Afterward, the daughter-in-law takes away the offered meal in a plantain leaf with a new broomstick in her left hand which is meant for clearing the place from *Bor kuthali* towards the kitchen. She sweeps and drags the broomstick with the offered meal to the kitchen and throws it down from the pile dwelling just near the *mudha khuta* (main post) of the kitchen by making a hole in it. While throwing the things she utters from her mouth *bare heto khero* which means from that day onwards they bid farewell to the departed soul and the soul should leave the household and enter into the world of the dead. Other than this they have another ritual known as *kaz* or *daha* a ritual which is observed on the seventh to 10th day from the dead. It is a community feast where the fellow villagers including the persons involved in the funeral procession are invited where a pig, fowl, etc., are sacrificed and served it to the invited guests. There is no fixed time for observing the ritual and it depends on the facilities and economic conditions of the family.

The Disposable of the Corpse in Case of Unnatural Death

The above-mentioned customs are observed by the Deoris in the study village in case of normal death. If a person dies in an accident outside the household, they observe another practice for his or her cremation. Here six elderly members belonging to different lineages than the deceased are invited. Three of them enter inside the house of the deceased and three stand outside. There is a belief among them that a person should die inside his or her home. So, for the matter of entering the soul of the dead inside its home, three persons who stand inside soon after taking the corpse in it question the outside three whether the soul of the dead has come inside the house or not. The persons inside the house reply that the soul has entered and it implies the completion of the custom. Thereafter they cremate the dead like the cremation of a normal person. The Deoris of the village also follow the practice of burial of the dead, in case of suicide, pregnant women, and children. They bring the corpse by observing the already mentioned customs to the cremation ground which is located near the bank of the river in the village. After selecting a suitable place they dig a grave in the north-south direction. The corpse is placed inside the grave, a coin is inserted into the mouth, and the head is placed towards the north. Earth is then laid over it, on the top of which the dead man's mat and bier are laid and covered with small branches, leaves, bamboo splits, etc. After returning from the cremation ground they follow the same pristine rules as in the case of the others. Death by suicide is considered inauspicious among them.

Conclusion

The death of a person in primitive society, which is composed of a limited number of individuals, is an event of no mean importance. The nearest relatives and friends are disturbed to the depth of their emotional life. A small community bereft of a member, especially if he is important, is severely mutilated. The whole event breaks the normal course of life and shakes the moral foundation of society (Malinowski, 2015, p. 52). The Tengapania Deoris of Sanapur Deori Gaon have also had elaborate rituals integral to death and its disposal. The socio-economic tradition is immensely guided by their own parochial pristine traditions. When a person dies in their society, the Deoris considered it a mass responsibility for care and disposal of the corpse and observed many pristine customs, rites, and rituals for the wellbeing of the departed soul as well as the community a whole. The whole village observed the period of mourning along with the bereaved family, which impacted the normal course of life for observance of a period of pollution in relation to the departed soul. Death seems like much more than the removal of a member of their society in their socio-religious environment. But at the contemporary time due to the close contact with the caste Hindu population of Assam, many impinging religious factors of the latter have been percolated into the Deori society. The rituals like *Asthi bisarjana*, belief in the holy water of river Ganga, use of leaves of sweet basil, etc., are Hindu concepts, which have been diffused into the Tengapania Deori society from the neighbouring Assamese Hindu society. Sacrifices of goat, chicken, etc., are made in most of the Deori observances, and consumption of country liquor is an integral part of their rituals. They propitiated a good number of traditional deities with a few Hindu gods and goddesses. Though lots of impinging factors like urbanization, westernization as well as advancement in English education have percolated into their socio-religious life, yet the Tengapania Deoris have maintained a lot of traditional elements in their day-to-day life.

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