



DIBONGIYAS



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P. C. Saikia

The Dibongiyas are one of the territorial groups of the Deuri-Chutiyas of Assam. The Deuri-Chutiyas are ethnically affiliated to the great Tibeto-Mongolian tribes of the State. The other groups of the Deuri-Chutiyas are the Bargonyas, the Tengapaniyas and the Patargonyas. The last group has reportedly become almost extinct. These four groups again constitute the Deuri-Chutiya sub-division of the Chutiyas. Formerly they were a priestly section among the Chutiyas. They conducted magico-religious rituals in the royal temples of the Chutiya kingdom. Now they are recognised by the Constitution of India as one of the scheduled tribes of Assam. They sparsely inhabit the districts of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar and Darrang.

The basic kin groups of the Dibongiyas are Eke Gochaya and Mitura Gochaya. The Nujoya relationship plays an important role in the Dibongiya socio-ritual life of these two kin groups, the Eke Gochaya plays the dominant role, while the Mitura Gochaya plays a subordinate role. The Mimo-Hareruba ritual consolidates the solidarity among the members of the genealogically related groups. In Keesing's words, "Kinship has been called the core of the social organisation".

The author who worked on this research project for his Ph. D. degree has studied all important aspects of the religious and social life of this community. It is an excellent anthropological study and should go a long way in furthering research in ethnology in Assam and elsewhere.

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He graduated from Calcutta University in 1956 and qualified for his M.Sc. in 1958 and Ph. D. in 1973, from the University of Gauhati.

The present study was undertaken for his Ph. D. degree from the University of Gauhati. He has contributed a number of papers and articles to several journals of repute, apart from writing a book in Assamese—'Deuri-Chutiya'—which was published by Asom Sahitya Sabha in 1974.

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THE DIBONGIYAS

*Social and Religious Life of
a Priestly Community*

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PABAN CHANDRA SAIKIA

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विवेकानंद नगर, दिल्ली

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301-4510954162
SAI;3

First Published 1976

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Published by
B. R. Publishing Corporation
461, Vivekanand Nagar,
Delhi-110052.

Printed at
Vishal Printers
2/34, Roop Nagar,
Delhi-110007.

PREFACE

This book is a revised version of the thesis entitled "Socio-Ritual Structure of a Dibongiya Village in Assam", for which I was awarded a Ph.D. degree by Gauhati University in October, 1973.

Dr. R. Burling, Professor of Anthropology, Michigan University, U.S.A. and Dr. K.S. Mathur, Head of the Department of Anthropology, Lucknow University, were the examiners of the thesis. Prof. M.C. Goswami, Professor and Head of the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, was the guide. I am really indebted to these renowned anthropologists for considering my thesis a standard work. I offer my deep sense of gratitude to each of them. I am grateful to the villagers of Sissimukh for their help and co-operation during my field investigation work.

My wife, Kumudini, has been an immense source of inspiration and help in my work.

Dibrugarh University,
Dibrugarh.
January, 1976.

P. C. Saikia

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INTRODUCTION

The Dibongiyas as a Territorial Group

The Dibongiyas are one of the territorial groups of the Deuri-Chutiyas of Assam. The Deuri-Chutiyas are ethnically affiliated to the great Tibeto-Mongolian tribes of Assam. The other groups of the Deuri-Chutiyas are the Borgonyas, the Tengapaniyas and the Patargonyas. The last group has reportedly become almost extinct. These four groups, again, constitute the Deuri-Chutiya sub-division of the Chutiyas. Formerly, they were a priestly section among the Chutiyas. They conducted magico-religious rituals in the royal temples of the Chutiya Kingdom. Now, they are recognised by the Constitution of India as one of the scheduled tribes of Assam. They sparsely inhabit the districts of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar and Darrang.

Brown reports that there are three main sub-divisions of the Chutiyas, viz., 1. the Deuri-Chutiyas, 2. the Hindu-Chutiyas, and 3. the Ahom Chutiyas. The Deuri-Chutiyas are the priestly section of the Chutiyas¹. Endle divides the Chutiyas into four sub-divisions, viz., 1. the Hindu-Chutiyas, 2. the Ahom Chutiyas, 3. the Deuri-Chutiyas—the Levite or priestly clan; and 4. the Barahi Chutiyas—the pig eating clan². Gait also terms them as the priestly section of the tribe³.

The Dibongiyas seem to have preserved the traditional Chutiya socio-ritual organization. The Borgonya and the Tengapaniya groups, have altogether given up their traditional dialect in favour of Assamese. To some extent, it has helped them to come into contact with Assamese culture and society. Again, this contact is responsible for the dissipation of a few traits of the Borgonya and Tengapaniya culture. The Dibongiyas, on the other hand, have, as far as possible, preserved

their traditional socio-ritual organization along with their dialect.

The following forces and factors have been responsible for keeping the Dibongiyas isolated from their cognate group.

1. *Tradition* : "One day Kundimama decided to distribute the major portion of their estate to Pichadema (Baliababa) and a small part to Pichachi (Tamreswari), their son and daughter, respectively. But Pichachi, taking advantage of the dark night disguised herself as Pichadema, cheated her parents and brother and received the sizeable part meant for the elder brother. When Pichadema came to know about the mischievous plot of his younger sister, he wanted to take revenge and killed her. But his parents somehow prevented him from the act of annihilating Pichachi and her devotees, with the result that he had to inherit the Tengapaniya estate from his parents. The parents kept the major part of this kingdom separately with its Dibongiya population. This is the basis of the present-day conflict between the Borgonyas and the Tengapaniyas. The Borgonyas and the Tengapaniyas started to propitiate Pichachi and Pichadema respectively, in two separate territories in Kundil Nagar (Sadiya). This is still a tradition of these two groups. They are debarred from participating in each other's rituals conducted in their village shrines".

Brown and Endle mention the names of three principal gods also, viz., Girachi Gira, Pichadema and Pichachi propitiated by the Dibongiyas, the Tengapaniyas and the Borgonyas, respectively.

2. *Migration* : The original habitats of the Dibongiyas, Tengapaniyas, Borgonyas and the Patargonyas were the secluded, inaccessible places on the banks of the river Dibong, Tengapani *deñ noi* (Barnai), and Patarshal, respectively, which are at present situated in Lohit District of Arunachal and the Sadiya transferred area of Dibrugarh District. Their names originated with their habitats.

The elderly informants say that their forefathers had to migrate from the above mentioned places to escape frequent troubles created by their neighbours, namely, the 'Mishmis and the Abors. One night, they came down through the course of the Brahmaputra with the help of 4 *mar nu*. Unfortunately,

one such *mar nu* carrying the Patargonya group, lost their trace in the middle of the Brahmaputra. In connection with their migration Brown narrates the story that Raja Gaurinath Singha, being unable to protect the Deuris from the Mishmis and other tribes, removed them to Majuli where some of the villages still exist.

The Dibongiya group reached the present-day Siram Deuri Gaon in Majuli, Sibsagar District and settled there. This place was secluded; the other two groups having permanently settled down in two different places on the southern side of the Brahmaputra, (at present known as Rajabari Borgonya Gaon) and Tengapani Gaon in Sibsagar District of Assam. These two groups got better places for settlement than the Dibongi-yas, and easily came into contact with their Assamese neighbours.

Their villages are connected by roads with Sibsagar town, Dimow and Dibrugarh. This was responsible for their contact with the Assamese villages and towns and later on, with the Europeans in the tea estates and the Bengalis. They gave up their mother tongue in favour of Assamese. This is one of the main factors for their advancement. Some Borgonyas and Tengapaniyas have migrated to the North Bank and established villages there after the great earthquake and floods in 1950.

3. *Geographical* : The Brahmaputra becomes the main geographical barrier separating the Dibongi-yas from the Borgonyas and the Tengapaniyas. They could not easily come into contact with one another. The country boat was the only means of crossing the mighty Brahmaputra to meet one another on special occasions like marriages and *Bisu* festivals. This problem of communication between the northern and the southern banks of the Brahmaputra, of Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, and Sibsagar, has, to some extent been removed by the introduction of public boat (launch) services in 1950.

Ethnographic Accounts

From the above discussion, it may be concluded that factors like mythology, migration, and geographical barriers are the main factors that kept Dibongi-yas away from the other cognate groups like the Borgonyas and the Tengapaniyas.

The following ethnographic accounts about the Deuri-Chutiyas have been written by previous authors, some of whom had a first-hand knowledge of the people.

1. *Brown, W.B. : An Outline Grammar of the Deuri-Chutiya Language Spoken in Upper Assam* (1895) : In this book, Brown deals mainly with the grammar of the Chutiya language and compares it with the language of Kacharis of Assam. He says : “the people are generally called Deuris simply; the language is more properly known as Chutiya” (1895 Int. 1). He is also of opinion that “the Chutiya language, indeed, may fairly claim to be the original language of Upper Assam”. (Int. 1)⁴.

He divides the Chutiyas into three main divisions, viz., the Deuri-Chutiyas, the Hindu-Chutiyas and the Ahom-Chutiyas. The Deuri-Chutiyas are again sub-divided into four *khel*s, viz., the Dibongiyas, the Borgonyas, the Tengapaniyas and the Patargonyas.

Brown says : “at a casual view, these temples appear to be perfectly empty; I am told that temporary images are made” (Int. 1). But I have not found any trace of images in the shrine. Again, Brown’s (Int. 1) usage of the term ‘Girachi-Gira’ (Assamese Bura Buri) should actually be termed as ‘Gira-Girachi’ (Bura Buri). ‘Gira Girachi’ is popularly called Kundi-mama in the Dibongiya society.

Brown’s opinion about the Patargonya *Khel*, that they are considered as ‘inferior’ (Int. 2) appears contrary to facts. There is no system of social ranking among the Dibongiyas. He again says “the Deuris have a great reputation among the ordinary Assamese for the black art” (Int. 2). But in fact the black art is quite unknown to the Dibongiyas of the village under study.

According to Brown, the chief gods, viz., Girachi Gira, Pichadema, and Pichachi are worshipped by the Dibongiyas, the Tengapaniyas and the Borgonyas, respectively. He has not mentioned the name of the god of the Patargonyas. They propitiate the deity of the Patarshal.

2. *Endle, R.S. : The Kacharis.* (1911) : Endle divides the Chutiyas into 4 main sub-divisions, viz., the Hindu Chutiyas, and the Ahom Chutiyas, the Deuri-Chutiyas—the Levite or priestly clan and the Barahi Chutiyas—the pig eating clan (p. 91). He

says "in all likelihood, the language of the Deuri-Chutiyas gives us the purest and most archaic form of the Bara speech and there can be little doubt that in earlier times it was the dominant language of Eastern Assam."⁵

3. *Shakespear, L.W. : History of Assam Rifles, (1929) :* Shakespear describes the history of the Assam Rifles posted in different parts of Assam. He says "Hannay found the remains of two shrines, viz., those of Tamar-Mai or the copper temple from the copper roofing and of *Bura-Buri*."

4. *Deuri, Dambarudhar : Deuri-Sanskrit, (1964) :* His book in Assamese is a popular and descriptive one. He describes the cultural life of the Deuri community as a whole. But it lacks in distinct information about the Dibongiyas.

5. *Deuri, Abichandra : Deuri-Sampradai, presidential address reception committee, 15th August 1930. P. 27 :* Deuri says that 'ku' means the shape and 'um' signifies the yolk of an egg. Therefore, 'koum' stands for an egg. Yogucha (Kundi) and Yoguchachi (Mama) were born of this *Koum*. So he is called Kundimama. Kundimama created Pichadire Chire Cha (Sworgodhonda), *Chadhi Chire Chire Cha (Martya Khonda)*, *Koum Chire Chire Cha (Patal Khondal)*, Gira Girachi (Bura Buri), Pichadema (Baliababa), and Pichachidema (Tamreswari). But my findings reveal the fact that the Dibongiya term for Kundimama stands as the following—Kundi signifies Gira and Mamà denotes Girachi.

6. *Deuri Bharali, Biswakanta : Deuri-Path, (1964) :* He illustrates the grammatical structure of the Deuri (Chutiya) language with syntactic examples. He has not described any of the socio-ritual structure of the Dibongiyas in his book.

7. *Battacharjya, P. (Editor) : Asomor Janajati, (1962) :* There are two articles about the Deuri-Chutiyas, written by Goswami, U., and Deuri, G., in the book mentioned above. But no separate anthropological accounts of the Dibongiyas are available in these articles.

8. *Saikia, P.C. : (1) Some Magico-Religious Beliefs of the Deuri-Chutiyas. (Ref. : Journal of the Assam Science Society, Vol. X. 1967. (2) Deuri : Jatir Parichay, (Ref. : Janajati, D. D. T.S., 1972).*

9. Goswami, M.C. and Saikia, P.C. : (1) "Some Rituals of the Deuri-Chutiyas" (Ref. *Journal of the Assam Science Society* Vol. XI, 1968. (2) "Magiyo-Bisu: A Festival of the Deuri-Chutiyas". (Ref. : *The Journal of the University of Gauhati*, Vol XVIII—XIX No. 2, Science, 1967-68. (3) *Bahagiyo-Bisu: A Festival of the Dibongiyas* (in press) Ref : *The Journal of the University of Gauhati*, Vol XX—XXII No. 2—1969, 1970, 1971. Science. We get some valuable information regarding the socio-ritual and socio-cultural life of the Dibongiyas of Assam from these scientific papers.

Purpose of Study

The Dibongiya group of the Deuri-Chutiyas has, more or less, preserved its traditional culture, religion and language. The other groups, viz., the Borgonyas, and the Tengapaniyas, have already forgotten their own tongue and adopted the Assamese language and a few traits of Assamese culture.

The Dibongiyas of Sissimukh Deuri Gaon (27.21 N and 94.37 E), Lakhimpur, District Assam are marked for their traditional way of life. Their socio-cultural life is comparatively tradition-bound as distinct from the cognate groups belonging to the same ethnic stock.

The village is surrounded by the Sissi river in east-west, Domkata Nala in north-west, and Singarijan in north-east. The E and D dykes run from the north-east to the south-western direction as the main source of communication with the villages of Sissimukh and Moridhal, respectively. (See map 1). The total population of the village was 364 (male 180 and female 184) on May 25, 1971. Hira who died in 1974, was the only arts graduate in the village in 1972. There is no forest nearby the village, except a few trees and bamboos in the compounds of the residential houses.

The most important aspect of the Dibongiyas is that their socio-ritual life centres round the *Midiku*. They pay great reverence to their gods and propitiate them by sacrificing goats, ducks, pigeons, chickens, and pigs etc., for the well-being of the villagers, domesticated birds, animals and for the success of the crops.

This peculiar group of people is still little known to the outsiders. It has not so far been a subject of intensive study. An anthropological study of this group may give an insight into the tenacity and the make-up of this sociocultural unit, set against an environment of their own.

The Problem

The most striking feature of the Dibongiyas and their culture is that until now, to a considerable extent, they have preserved their own traditional, and tribal, socio-ritual beliefs, practices and language.

The principal objective of this study is to explore the socio-ritual structure and the network of relations between such rituals and the socio-economic set-up of this priestly community.

The existing problems are : (1) What factors are operative in keeping them isolated from the cognate groups like the Tengapaniyas, the Borgonyas and other neighbouring villages ? (2) Will the Dibongiyas stick to their rigid, traditional, and tribal ways of life as they do now ? (3) Is there any trend of modification with respect to the socio-economic and socio-ritual structure of their way of life ? (4) Is it possible that they will gradually lose their traditional ways of life and be influenced by modern situations, as soon as they come into contact with the highly advanced people—receive higher education, get medical facilities and have enough employment opportunities ?

A detailed social-anthropological study, especially in the field of the socio-ritual life of the Dibongiyas will throw some light on the way of a tradition-bound folk life yielding to the forces arising out of close contact with a technologically and industrially oriented society. This will also enable us to expose an inter-relationship between ritual and social organisations and between ritual and economic organisations with regard to the Dibongiya society.

Field Method

The socio-cultural phenomena observed among the Dibongiyas are to be seen among other tribal groups also which have

been subjected to similar changes. The degree of change, however, is comparatively slow in the case under the present study. The causes for such an unparalleled phenomena need to be explored and comprehended.

Hira, the first artgraduate of the village, and an assistant teacher of Sissimukh H.E. School introduced me to the elderly persons of the Sissimukh Deuri Gaon on October 2, 1968. They accepted me as one of their co-villagers since my identity as a Hindu Chutiya was acceptable to them. As they are bilingual they speak both Dibongiya or Chutiya and Assamese. I could easily carry on my field investigations among them. I gave up wearing long pants, Hawaii shirts, and began to use their home-woven *Ikun*, and *Gamocho* in order to fit in the local situation. It was very difficult for the outsiders to distinguish me from the Dibongiya. At first I paid a visit from house to house as a guest. At times, I also had to convince a few persons interested in me, that I wanted to know the socio-ritual life of the Dibongiya community. I began with the participant observation method supplemented by intermittent questions to collect my data. Because, "observation is not only one of the most pervasive activities of daily life, but it is also a primary tool of scientific enquiry".⁶ I also verified my data by cross-checking with other sets of informants in and out of the village. I started my field investigation work on October 2, 1968 and came to the end of it on August 16, 1972. During this period, I used to stay as a member in Taibar's residence, which enabled me to collect my data easily. The first capital letters of the name of the informants are maintained throughout the thesis. Furthermore, the incantations and the method of propitiation of the chief deities of the *Midiku* have been preserved intact in the hands of the ethnographer. These could not be published for fear of breaking the strict and solemn contract made between the ethnographer and the persons who delivered it.

The meaning of each Dibongiya (Chutiya) word is given in English in the Appendix.

NAGA POLITY

M. Horam

Foreword by

C. Von Furer Haimendorf

Size : 23 cm ;

pp. 170 ;

Rs. 5) or \$ 10

Foreign writers have sincerely attempted various studies of the multifaceted subject of Naga people and their territory and have succeeded in gathering enough obvious information. But they have found it well nigh impossible to treat at length any one aspect of it. This is not surprising as even today, among the Nagas themselves, no reliable information about the history of their race is available. This is so because there is a dearth of relevant records and, also, the legends, tradition, culture, history and literature are preserved orally.

This work is intended to contribute towards the knowledge of early Naga political institutions which are basically unchanged even today. In order to study Naga polity one has to begin with the study of the family, the village and the customary laws. These factors are very closely associated with the Naga polity.

The author, a Tangkhul Naga himself, has made a comprehensive study of the polity of three Naga tribes—Ao, Angami and Tangkhul. He has also studied some other Naga tribes—Mao, Chakesang, Rangma, Kabui, Lotha, Sema, Konyak, Chang and Sangtam.

While previous studies on Nagas have dealt with the generalities of their life and culture, they have predictably suffered from lack of indigenous touch. The present book is a valuable new document as it has been authored by a son of the soil.

Mashangthei Horam (b. 1939) is currently a Senior Fellow at the Centre of Advanced Study in Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, under the sponsorship of the Indian Council of Social Science Research. A political scientist by training, he is working on 'Politics and Social Change in Nagaland.' The present study was undertaken for his Ph. D. degree from the University of Gauhati. He has taught for 12 years at graduate and post-graduate levels and was for some time Principal of Kohima College, Kohima.

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