

# Asian Resonance

## Child Rearing Practices among the Deoris of Assam

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#### Abstract

Child rearing is the process of promoting and supporting the physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood. The rearing of a child or children is especially the care, love and guidance given by the parents. Child rearing is the work of taking care of children until they are matured enough to look after themselves. It may also be defined as the training or upbringing of children by their parents or parent substitutes. The method of child care practices itself starts before, during and soon after the birth of a child into a family. The child rearing practices vary enormously from culture to culture, community to community, from region to region. The Tengapania Deories, one of the indigenous scheduled tribe of Assam, also establishes certain conventional ways of rearing a child. Among the Deories, the birth of a child is always a happy event in their community. The period of pregnancy is not considered as polluted or unclean. However, there are certain beliefs which restrict an expected mother and her husband from doing certain types of activities, as for example killing of animals, fishing and crossing the rivers. As the Deori women are very hard working in most cases they considered child birth as normal affair. Yet in recent times most of them has moved to the hospitals for delivery. The birth of a child, among the Deoris is not marked by any huge ceremonies, in fact there are number of rituals which is being observed. Feeding practices among the Deoris reveal that the mothers do not have any fixed time to nurse the baby. They fed the children mostly whenever they cry and feel hungry. Again it can be said that among the Deoris there is no fixed age limit for weaning. Toilet training is an important aspect of child socialization. The Deoris also instruct or teach their children certain rules and symbols of when and how to release their bowel and bladder. No special stress is laid either on feeding, toilet training and formal training. The children learn the activities of their culture gradually in the process of their upbringing and thus become the member of broader Tengapania Deori community with a specific role to perform. In recent times due to the impact of modernization as well as disintegration of the joint family lots of changes have taken place amidst the child rearing practices of the aforesaid community. In this present endeavour a humble attempt has been made to know about the continuity and change of indigenous method of child rearing practices among the Tengapania Deoris of Assam.

**Keywords:** Child Rearing, Tengapania Deori, Mongoloid, Balia Baba, dheki thura, bengchola, gopinis, suje, ba tola chungu, titbhekuri

#### Introduction

Child rearing is considered as one of the important and integral aspects of each and every culture in cross cultural perspective. It may be considered to include the overall care, socialization and training of the growing child in a particular culture. Child rearing is the process of promoting and supporting the physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood. It is usually done by the biological parents of the child in questions, although governments and society take a role as well. The orphaned and abandoned children receive parental care from non-parent blood relations. Others may be adopted, raised by foster care or be placed in an orphanage. Child-rearing practices can also be defined as the transmission of culture, beliefs, tradition and customs from parents to the offspring's. The rearing of a child or children is especially the care, love and guidance given by a parent. Child rearing is the work of taking cares of children until they are matured enough to look after them. It may also be defined as the training or upbringing of children by their parents or parent substitutes.

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Children are more than the object of their parents' attention and love; they are also a subject of biological and social necessity. The human species perpetuates itself through children; cultural, religious and national groups transmit their values and traditions through children; family's individuals pass on their genetic and social heritage through children. The ultimate value of children is the continuity of humanity (Arnold et. al 1975: 1). Child rearing practices are embedded in the culture and determine, to a large extent, the behaviours and expectations surrounding a child's birth and infancy. They also influence childhood, adolescence and they may these child parents as adults. Methods of child rearing vary enormously from culture to culture, community to community, from region to region. Each cultural group establishes certain conventional ways of rearing a child. The child rearing patterns of a culture are the child rearing norms. The patterns define child rearing in a way that assures the survival, maintenance and development of a group or culture as well as of the child. The type of child rearing practices required at a given point in time depends to a large degree on the child's development age and the health and nutritional risks the child is facing (Engle, 1992). In addition, there are traditional practices also that provide insight into the factors affecting a child's nutritional status. These involve the kinds of foods that are recommended for children, food taboos, and what kind of food is introduced and when. While the mother remains the primary person responsible for the safety, care and feeding of the child, it is during the toddler period that the child moves out from the mother. Over time others in the family and community play an increasingly important role in the care of the child, particularly in terms of socializing and teaching the child through direct instruction and modeling. Socialization or enculturation are in essence a process of conscious and unconscious conditioning, exercised within the limits sanctioned by the given body of customs.

Pregnancy, birth, care of the new born and parturient mother are integral element of each culture and it has an indispensable relation with religious belief system of the society. Elaborate ethnographic study of a particular community regarding the customs, rituals, taboos, medicare facilities, etc., related with pregnancy, birth, care of the new born child and mother were carried out by different scholars like Medhi (1980), Mills (1980), Bordoloi (1984), Bordoloi, Sharma Thakur and Saikia (1987), Playfair (1998), Gurdon (2002), Endle (2007), Zaman (2011), et al., and they also focus on the correlation of religious beliefs and practices regarding birth with social life. The Deoris, one of the scheduled tribe of Assam, has also elaborate religious beliefs, customs, taboo, etc., related to the said events and in this paper an attempt has been made to evaluate the process of pregnancy and birth, customs, beliefs and practices, health care of the mother and child, etc., among the Tengapania Deoris of Chamuguri Deori Village of Sivasagar District, Assam.

The Deoris are one of the important scheduled tribe of Assam. The word 'Deori' is originated from the Sanskrit word *deva grhika* meaning in charge of the temple or the priest. Deori (2002 : 33) mentioned that 'the word 'Deori' literally means priest. The persons who has 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 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. Dalton (1872) writes about the Deoris that '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 present main concentration of the Deoris is found in the district of Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Jorhat, Sivasagar, 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 number of lineages (bamgsa). The Deoris who were 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 in Pat Sadia were named as Patargonya. The people of Chamuguri Deori Village where the present study is carried on belongs to Tengapania khel who 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 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 as 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 left of it stands the *Indraghar* and another structure known as *Sat-Konwar mandir* is located towards the right side of 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 other three- these *Soru Deori*, *Bor-Bharali*, *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.

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The relation between a mother and her child cannot be expressed in terms of words. Such a relationship is insurmountable. To become a mother is a sign of pride for every woman. Among the Deoris also pregnancy is considered as a gift of God. The Deori women are very hard working and for them giving birth to a child is mostly a natural process. The womenfolk in a Deori community consider vomiting; loss of appetite and stop of menstruation as the signs of being pregnant. However, in earlier days they even don't visit doctors until the time of delivery or even sometimes after delivery. But in recent times they do visit hospitals for checkups and also consult doctors.

The period of pregnancy is a very crucial period in the life of every woman. The Tengapania Deoris do observed some taboos and restrictions in relation to pregnancy. A woman at that period is restricted from passing by cremation ground, to go under the shade of big trees and passed by a big forest alone, etc., which they believe to be resided by evil spirits. She also doesn't take food during solar and lunar eclipses and also sleeps straight in bed till the eclipses are over. They believe that in such periods severe damage may be caused to the foetus. The parturient mother is also tabooed from killing animals, fishing, knitting, cutting which may cause defect in the unborn child. The husband of the parturient mother also has to observe certain restrictions like abstain from harming and killing animals. He also avoids crossing a river, carry a dead body and visit a household where someone has expired. The expected mother is also not allowed to cross the rope through which a cow is tied as they belief they the navel cord may wrap around the neck of the foetus.

Giving birth to a child seems to be an easy going process among the Deoris. Traditionally the delivery is usually carried out in the bedroom of the expected mother. However, sometimes certain obstacles do come at the time of delivery. The placenta of the mother doesn't come out easily. In such cases, the husband throws *Dheki Thura* (the pestle of the husking level) from one side of the roof to another for easy delivery since they belief that it may reduce the complicity. In certain cases it is also seen that the water through *Bengchola* (a sort of loom fasten to the waist of the weaver) is also given to the parturient mother to drink because they consider *bengchola* as very pure and religiously attached. Sometimes the husband's big toe dipped in water and that water is also provided to the women. Soon after the birth of the child the umbilical cord is detached by the elderly woman who attends the said process. It is usually cut by the experienced lady with the help of a sharp bamboo strip by placing the umbilical cord on a *ba tola chungu* (a bamboo tube used for preparing heald). The use of *ba tola chungu* for the said purpose is justified on the ground that it is clean and hygenic in comparison with other apparatus. It is also considered as a symbolic representation of a female (Zaman: 2011). After the delivery is over, the placenta that comes out from the mother's body is separated from the child by the elderly woman and thereafter it is

buried dip inside the soil in one corner within the compound of the household by the husband by covering it tightly with banana leaf.

Then after the delivery, comes the period of pollution. The pollution period is mainly restricted for the mother and her baby. This period depends upon the falling of the umbilical cord attached to the navel cord and which usually falls in 3 to 7 days. The mother of the baby collects it and kept it inside a cocoon. Later, it is tied around the neck of the baby, with threads of red and black colour with the belief that it will protect the baby from any kind of infectious disease. For quick falling of the navel cord, the water from the wet hair of the mother is being given in the navel cord of the baby. Before the purification ceremony, the mother is restricted to draw water from tubewell and also to enter the kitchen or any other rooms as she is considered as impure. The family members or even members from same clan are not allowed to perform any religious ceremonies.

According to the Deoris, the purification ceremony is very simple. Usually 3 to 5 *gopinis* (elderly women who had attained menopause) are invited to perform the aforesaid ritualistic purpose. One cock and a hen are sacrificed in relation with the ritual in accordance with the baby is a boy and a girl, respectively. Spicy chicken curry is prepared with stem of arum, black pepper, ginger, etc., along with fish, *kochu jaal* (curry prepared from the arum stem) and *suje* (rice beer). At first the mother sits with the new born and she is being served with all the food items. In case of the cock/hen the leg portion is being served to the mother. The mother first put the *kochu jaal* and *suje* in the baby's mouth and then she eats the rest. The *gopinis* also sits beside her and take their lunch. After the lunch, the mother again takes bath and then bow down before the *gopinis* to take their blessings. On the same day before leaving, the *gopinis* also named the new born baby.

Traditionally the Deoris inhabit near the bank of the river and their mainstay is agriculture. They considered the water bodies as well as the agricultural field as the abode of malevolent spirits. So to appease them, the father and the mother takes the baby near a stream, bridge etc. when the baby first comes out of the house and they bring a pair of betel nut along with some amount of cotton in a *sarai* (disc on stand) (Zaman; 2011). Thereafter they bow down, show great reverence to both the supernatural being in a place near the bank of the river.

Breastfeeding is one of the pristine practices, recommended for feeding practices of the child soon after the birth of the same. Breastfeeding confers short-term and long-term benefits on both child and mother, including helping to protect children against a variety of acute and chronic disorders such as diarrhoea, pneumonia, etc. Breast feeding is glorified and often associated with feelings of love, sacrifice and strength. Among Deoris, breast feeding is a common practice. But there is generally no scheduled time for feeding. Most of the mothers were of the opinion that they fed their child whenever they cry and feels hungry. However, in the initial days they feed

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their baby in every 2 to 3 hours. Sometimes in order to increase the breast milk they consume black pepper, garlic, raw turmeric mixed with rice beer once in a day.

Lullaby plays a very important part in child rearing practices in every society. A baby in every society is lulled by their initial family members and especially the mother in order to get a comfort sleep. It is also present in the Deori society. As the Deori women are very hard working both at home and in the field so they usually don't get enough time to sing lullaby for their baby. At that time they leave their babies in charge of tender-aged girls and aged female members of the family. Some of the lullabies common among the Deoris are as follows:

Meaning: Siyaliye nahibi rati,  
Ture kaan kati logame bati  
Jackel! don't come at night,  
I will cut your ears and make lamps  
Aamare maina su le  
Barite bogori ru le  
Barite bogori pokibo khoribo  
Aamar maina butoli khabo

Meaning: My baby has slept  
The plum has been sown at kitchen garden  
The plum will ripe and fall  
My baby will pick them up and eat.

Weaning refers to the transition from breast feeding to adult diet. Weaning practices refer especially to the manner in which the infant is weaned from the mother's breast. Weaning plays an important role in the formation of personality of the child. The process of weaning among the Deoris starts at about 6 to 9 months. Weaning implies an introduction to solid food. Most of the Deoris reported that in their case, weaning depends upon the birth of the younger one or pregnancy of the mother. When the mother becomes pregnant again, their milk becomes watery and the babies don't like it and stops taking it. However in case of the younger one of the family, the mother usually apply bitter substance i.e. *Titbhekuri* (*Coptis tita*) in the nipples so that the baby if sucks gets certain other taste. *Neempatt* (leaf of *Medica margoet*) is sometimes dabbed in the mother's breast for weaning purposes. Constant crying, loss of appetite, biting the mother and thumb sucking are some of the reaction of weaning among the Deori babies.

The first three years of a child's life is very important for his teeth. Certain beliefs in respect of eruption of tooth do exist in all cultural groups. However, among the Deoris, it is found that in most of the cases the mothers are unaware of such belief. But only a few elderly women could explain that if the tooth first erupts in the upper jaw, then the child may become very intelligent and expert in climbing. Whereas eruption of tooth in the lower jaw is considered as normal. Some of them believe, that for a boy, eruption of tooth of upper jaw and for a girl, eruption of tooth in the lower jaw is good. The diet of the mother during pregnancy is important for the baby's teeth.

Toilet training is a very important aspect of child rearing. There is no specific ways of such training among the Deoris. Bed wetting is a natural process for which every child is been scolded. In initial days, the child is not forced for such habits and they do whenever they want to release their tension. The babies are trained by their parents to associate toilet training with a sound the parent makes. When the baby hears the sound, it comes to know it is the time to urinate or have a bowel movement. In most of the cases, the mothers answered that they could recognize the facial expression of their child when they want to urinate or defecate. It was found that the mother takes the baby out and holding it under her two arms uttering "shi shi" indicates the infant to pass urine. There are also mothers who reported that occasionally or quite often, their children release their bowel and bladder on the whole of the bamboo floor on the platform-type house (*chang ghar*). They also used to utter certain sounds from their mouth which the child on hearing does the function. However, many children by the age of three to four years developed full control of their urination and bowel movements.

Bathing is very closely and intimately related to our culture and climate. There are variations seen regarding bathing practices among the Deori children. Some mothers use warm water for their child while some others regard cold water to be useful. Bathing also depends on season. During winter the mothers consider that regular bathing may make their child more prone to diseases. The materials used for bathing also differ from mother to mother. They use oil, soap, turmeric and so forth.

Many Indian women have come from circumstances in which women have limited access to healthcare. Traditionally, there has been discrimination towards women in decision-making; access to resources such as food, education and health care; job opportunities; and in child-bearing and rearing. Among the Deoris, a woman does not face such a negative wave. The health of a Deori woman is taken special care of before, at the time of and even after delivery. Certain beliefs are prevalent among them regarding the food consumed by pregnant women such as they don't take fishes which are not good looking with the belief that their child may look the same. They believe that "hot foods" such as meat, eggs, nuts, herbs and spices should be avoided and instead, take foods that have a cooling effect, such as milk products, fruits and vegetables. But however after delivery, cold foods are believed to produce diarrhea, indigestion and gas and are therefore avoided. During pregnancy, the expected mother is prohibited from taking alkali (*khar*) as they believe it to cause miscarriage and also do not eat jackfruit and egg associated with the belief that it may cause roughness of the skin and baldness of the baby respectively. They further do not intake pineapple, papaya and so on. But there are certain foods which are very much preferred among the Deoris during pregnancy of a woman. They take milk and curd which increases breast milk; leafy vegetables which

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enriches blood quantity and also the growth of hair of the foetus; fruits which are easily digestible and also enrich blood. Few situational diseases are also reported among pregnant Deori women like morning sickness, vomiting, nausea, dizziness.

After delivery, special food is provided to the mother for quick recovery. Over cooked rice with black pepper, garlic, salt, turmeric with or without fish is served to keep the body warm. They further prepare *kochu jaal* (a curry prepared with arum and black pepper) for the mother which is believed to decrease the post delivery difficulties such as body pain and weaknesses. Among the Deoris, a lactating mother usually takes food prepared with less oil and spices so that the baby does not suffer from diseases. However, with the passage of time, breast milk is supplemented with cow's milk mixed with rice powder so that the baby gets sufficient food.

Child rearing among the Tengapania Deoris is considered as a process of pride and joy especially for the mothers. The Deoris are very conscious regarding the health and hygiene of their children and also the mothers. Till recent times the Deoris are bowed towards the traditional ways of rearing a child. However, due to the impact of mother's education, modernization, media and so forth the Deoris now-a-days shifted to some extent towards modern medicare system apart from their traditional belongings. They now became aware of the family planning programmes and started taking certain preventive measures like oral contraceptives from dispensaries. Primary health centres are also established within their villages so that the mothers and their children can go for regular checkups. Apart from general medical checkup the expectant mothers are examined at regular intervals and provided antenatal immunization with doses of Tetanus Toxide (T.T) injection in the said health center. Auxiliary Nurse of Midwife (ANW) is being appointed in the health center to take care of the expected mothers. The nurses do provide the pregnant women various iron, vitamin and calcium tablets as suggested by the doctors. They suggest different tablets for different sickness namely headache, body ache, fever, cough, loose motion as recommended by the doctors. Further in the village one *Asha Karmi* (volunteer employed by the government for the medical benefit of the village) is there, who helps the expectant mother and the child in all the matters related with the health care during and after child birth (Zaman; 2011). In fact of such adaption, the Deoris still follow their traditional techniques of rearing a child along with the modern medicare system. In recent times, various changes are observed beginning from breast feeding to toilet training. Mothers now a day are mostly working women and so breast feeding is shifted to bottle feeding at an early age. As a matter of fact weaning is also practiced quite early due to busy schedule of the mothers. Moreover disintegration of joint family system has a tremendous impact on child rearing practices. In ancient times in the absence of parents, the grandparents took the responsibility of rearing a child along with the help of immediate family

members. But in recent days the children are being placed to different day care homes and crèche because of the shortage of time of the parents and lack of other members in the household for which toilet training is a must. Now a days Anganwadi centres that was started by the Indian government in 1975 as part of Integrated Child Development Services plays a great role specially in rural areas. The centre look after the children of age group ranging from 3 to 6 years, but at present time, as the parents are working outside they started enrolled children from the age group of two to two and half years also. Each centre has a worker and a helper. The worker looks after the task of giving basic preschool education to the village children whereas the helper looks after the other aspects namely toilet training, eating habits and so on. They further need to provide care for them as well as ensure that all children below the age of 6 are immunized or in other words have received vaccinations.

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