



An Analytical Examination of the *Kherai* Puja and *Doudini* (Deudhani) in Boro Society

Dr. Mala Hazarika, Assistant Professor,
Assamese Department, Amguri College, Amguri.
Sivasagar, Assam.

Abstract

The *Kherai* Puja, a cornerstone of Boro religious life, holds profound significance for personal well-being, communal prosperity, and bountiful harvests. This grand ceremony transcends individual and collective gain, deeply entwined with the Boro people's agricultural roots. Despite resource demands, *Kherai* endures, a cherished tradition celebrated with unwavering devotion. However, the origins of "*Kherai*" remain shrouded in mystery. Intriguing theories link it to similar Tripuri and Dimasa rituals, or even propose an evolution from the deity Kharia Borai's name. Yet, these explanations lack conclusive evidence, beckoning further research into related ceremonies to unravel the captivating history of this word and the cultural tapestry it weaves.

Key Words :*Kherai* Puja, Boro people, *Doudini*, *Kharia Borai*, *Oja*, Tripuri "*Ker Puja*," Dimasa "*Khernang*":

Introduction

Kherai Puja, a beacon of hope and desire for generations, holds the highest place among Bodo religious festivals. Its purpose unfolds in two distinct ways. On a personal level, individuals perform *Kherai* Puja for individual well-being. At a communal level, the village unites once or twice a year for this grand puja, seeking prosperity for all. But *Kherai*'s significance extends beyond personal and communal welfare, for the Bodo people, deeply rooted in agriculture, perform this elaborate ceremony before and after cultivation, propitiating deities for bountiful harvests. While *Kherai* Puja demands significant resources, its importance ensures it remains a cherished tradition, celebrated even in the face of economic challenges.

The roots of "*Kherai*," the Bodos' grandest festival, remain shrouded in mystery. Scholars disagree on its origin, offering fascinating, yet inconclusive, explanations. Some draw a link to the Tripuris' "*Ker Puja*," highlighting similarities in rituals. Others suggest a connection to the latent deity Kharia Borai, whose name, they argue, may have morphed into "*Kherai*" over time. Still others point to the sacrificial "Khe" sound produced during the ceremony, suggesting it combined with "rai" (meaning prayer) to form the word. However, these explanations, while intriguing, lack strong evidence and may be products of folk etymology. To truly unravel "*Kherai*'s" origins, a deeper understanding of related ceremonies like the Tipras' "*Ker Puja*" and the Dimasa "*Khernang*" is needed. Only then can we shed light on this captivating word's journey through history and culture. The *Kherai* Puja is of four kinds; (i) Darshan *Kherai*, (ii) Umrao *Kherai* and (iii) Phalo *Kherai* (iv) *NoaoniKherai*, (family *Kherai*).



Importance and Significance of the Study

The research paper titled "An Analytical Examination of the *Kherai* Puja and Deodhani in Boro Society" holds significant importance and sheds light on various aspects of Boro culture and society from a socio-cultural perspective. The paper can contribute to the understanding of Boro Socio-cultural identity by examining how these rituals shape and express the community's values, beliefs, and practices. This can empower individuals and communities to connect with their heritage and strengthen their sense of belonging.

Methodology :

This study employs a comprehensive approach, utilizing both primary and secondary data. Primary data collection involves field surveys, questionnaires, and interviews, offering an on-the-ground perspective of the *Kherai* Puja and the role of the *Doudini* (Deudhani) of the Bodo tribe. Secondary data from articles and books complement the primary findings, providing a holistic understanding of the subject.

Extent of the study:

Changkhati village of Golaghat district and the Padumoni village under the Dibrugarh district of Assam has been taken as sample area to study. Because many people of Boro tribes are living there.

Objectives of the Study

1. Discuss about the Significance of *Kherai* Puja.
2. Discuss about the Origins of *Kherai*
3. Discuss about the Structure and Symbolism of the Altar
4. Discuss about the Role of *Doudini* (Deudhani)
5. Discuss about the Retrieval of *Mainao*

Tribes of Assam:

There are many instructions about Tribal people in the Article 366 (25) of Indian Constitution. In this Article it is clearly noted that Tribal are those, which are included in the list under Article 342 of Indian Constitution.

As per Indian Constitution some Tribes of Assam are—

A. Hill Tribes :

1. Sakma 2. Dimasa 3. Garo 4. Hajong 5. Mhar 6. Khasi 7. Jayantia 8. Sinteng 9. Nar 10. War 11. Bhoi 12. Lingnam 13. Kuki 14. Lakher 15. Man (Tai) 16. Naga 17. Karbi 18. Mizo 19. Pawai 20. Lalung (in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao district) etc.

B. Plain Tribes



1. Barmans of Cachar
 2. Bodo (Bodo Kachari)
 3. Deuri
 4. Hojai
 5. Sonowal Kachari
 6. Lalung (Tiwa)
 7. Mech
 8. Mising
 9. Rabha
 10. Dimasa
 11. Hajang
 12. Singpho
 13. Thengal Kachari
 14. Khamti
 15. Garo etc.
- (source : cencus report 2011)

Bodo Tribe

The Boro-Kacharis are one of the oldest ethnic groups in the North East of India and are known as the Plain tribes of Assam. They belong to the large Mongolian clan and as a linguistic community belong to the Tibetan sub-branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Therefore, the Boro or Boro-Kacharis in Assam and Eastern India are considered to be of the Sino-Tibetan Mongolian group.

These Bodo or Boros are called by different names in different states of India. They are known as Boro, Borokchari, Kachari, Mech, Sonwal Kachari, etc. in different parts of Assam. Similarly, one of the major branches of the Tibetan language family is called Bodo or Boro branch. The languages of this group are Boro, Dimacha, Tipra, or Kakbark, Garo, Rabha, Tiwa, Deuri, Chutia, Koch, etc. ¹ In this regard, it can be said that the people currently known as the Boro tribe in Assam are a branch of the larger Boro Kachari ethnic group.

According to Pramod Chandra Bhattacharya, the Indo-Mangalod or Indo-Tibetan people have been in close contact with other ethnic groups living in Assam and other parts of India: Boro, Dimacha, Garo, Miri, Rava, The Lalung [Tiwa], Deuri, Tipra, Naga, Mizo, Meitei etc. belong to the Indian Mangaloid or Indian Tibetan species Cultural integration occurred as Negroid, Australoid, Mediterranean [Dravidian-speaking] and Nardic (Aryan-speaking) species interacted and influenced the Mongoloids during prehistoric and historical times. ² The Boro Kacharis belong to the Mongoloid species.

The roots of "Kherai"

The Bodos' grandest festival, remain shrouded in mystery. Scholars disagree on its origin, offering fascinating, yet inconclusive, explanations. Some draw a link to the Tripuris' "Ker Puja," highlighting similarities in rituals. Others suggest a connection to the latent deity Kharia Borai, whose name, they argue, may have morphed into "Kherai" over time. Still others point to the sacrificial "Khe" sound produced during the ceremony, suggesting it combined with "rai" (meaning prayer) to form the word. However, these explanations, while intriguing, lack strong evidence and may be products of folk etymology. To truly unravel "Kherai's" origins, a deeper understanding of related ceremonies like the Tipras' "Ker Puja" and the Dimasa "Khernang" is needed. ³ Only then can we shed light on this captivating word's journey through history and culture.

Materials essential for the Kherai Puja:

In order to perform *Kherai* puja some essential materials must be collected by the villagers and without which no *Kherai* puja can be performed. The Materials are, (1) one Sijou tree, (*Euphorbia splendens*), (2) one *thulsansi* plant, (holy basil), (3) three pieces of the bijuli bamboo, (4) the dust of rice, (5) eighteen pairs of kush or khungkhla plant (a kind of



sacred plant), (6) Makhna or lakhna trees (eighteen pairs); (7) four pieces of jati bamboo, (8) nine pieces of dubri plants (a kind of sacred grass); (9) a ring of gold; (10) Plaintain leaves; (11) Banana fruits; (12) Areca nuts; (13) betel leaves; (14) Sindur (vermilion); (15) Dhub sticks (aromatic stick); (16) Dhuna (a kind of resin); (17) Guphur aowa khundung (white rayon); (18) mustard oil; (19) earthen lamps (jewari); (20) rice (mairong); (21) rice-beer (jau); (22) a pair of lotha or ghati (a small water vessel made of brass); (23) one cup, made of brass or metal (khuroi); (24) some quantity of cotton (khun); (25) one stick of cane; (26) a piece of gamari kham- phlai (a low tool made of gamari wood), etc."

Preparation of the *Kherai* Puja

Unlike many, the Bodos don't worship in fixed temples or shrines. Instead, they create a sacred space when needed, an altar for their gods and goddesses. This long altar, divided into three parts, stretches south to north, often built in a grazing field.

The first part honors the formless *Obanglaoree* (the God.), symbolized by a cloth hung aloft. The middle part represents Bathou, marked by a planted Siju tree encircled by a five-pronged bamboo fence, signifying religious and spiritual principles. An earthen lamp, sacred offerings, and water-filled pot with holy basil adorn this section. Creation and truth are symbolized by an egg and a stone placed before Bathou.

Rows of sacred *Khangkhla* plants lead from the middle to the northern end, where *Mainao*, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, resides. This final section embodies the beauty and bounty of Mother Earth. Two holy figures, a *dauri* and a *Doudini* (Deudhani), guided by the *Oja* (medicine man), act as custodians of the puja, performing its rites under a fragrant veil of burning dhub sticks, dhuna, and sandalwood. The ceremony unfolds for three days and nights, though in ancient times, it lasted seven.

Significance of the Altar of the *Kherai* Puja

The *Kherai* Puja altar, stretching lengthwise, embodies a profound symbolism. It's envisioned as a sacred path, bridging the earthly realm with the celestial one, a two-way conduit connecting humans to the divine. This philosophy emphasizes the inherent connection between the Creator in the heavens and the earthly beings. Further deepening the symbolism, a cotton yarn tied to a verdant bamboo post represents the eternal principle of creation, woven into the very fabric of existence. Thus, the meticulous preparation of the *Kherai* Puja altar transcends mere ritual, becoming a testament to its profound philosophical significance.

Role of *Doudini* (Deudhani) during the *Kherai* Puja:

Kherai's three-day-three-night spectacle revolves around propitiating Bathou Borai and other deities through *Doudini* (Deudhani)'s mesmerizing *Kherai* dances. Two drum (Kham) beaters, two players of the bamboo flutes (Siphung) and two players of Jotha (cymbals) are essential to help the *Doudini* (Deudhani) perform the *Kherai* puja. As the central figure, *Doudini* (Deudhani), aided by the *Oja*, *githal*, or *gidal* and a team of musicians, leads the ritual. Her journey starts with "*Alongikhangnai*," where she's charmed by



the *Oja'smantras*. This trance-like state evolves into divine embodiment, allowing her to channel gods' voices and stories. As she circles the Bathou, sprinkling holy water and dancing to the rhythmic beats of drums, flutes, and cymbals, devotees may join her enthralling circle.

Doudini (Deudhani)'s dances, eighteen in all, mirror the divine. She undergoes a three-stage transformation: shifting moods, merging with deities, and then embodying their distinct natures. Wielding a traditional sword and shield, she becomes a living testament to Bodo valor. After the finale, she prophesies, revealing fortunes, predicting harvests, and guiding villagers towards safety and prosperity. The major Role of *Doudini* (Deudhani) during the *Kherai Puja* are as follows :

During the *Kherai Puja Doudini* (Deudhani) demonstrates different dances to propitiate the gods and goddesses.

The *Doudini* is the key dancer during the *Kherai puja*.The following are the dances of *Doudini* (Deudhani), relating to different gods. Bathou gidingnai, Chotrali, Khapri Chipnai, Khoijama Phonai, Gandhoula bannai, Chagalaw banai, Muphur gelenai, Nao bonai, Khamao Barkhonai, Dao thoi longnai, Mashakhaori moshanai, Maoji mengbrang gelenai etc. The following musical instruments and weapons are essential during the *Kherai puja* without which no *Kherai puja* can be performed.

- (1) Kham (drum)—one pair (2) Jotha (cymbal)-one pair (3) Siphung (along flute of bamboo): one pair
Weapons
(4) Thungri (sword)-one or one pair and (5) Dahal or dha! (Shield)-one or one pair

Retrieving of *Mainao*, the goddess of crops from the earth (called in Bodo, *Mainao Bokhangnai*):

With *Mainao* retrieved from the earth through *Doudini* (Deudhani)'s symbolic act, the *Kherai Puja* nears its end. Seated before Bathou Borai's altar, the *Doudini* (Deudhani)'s stillness signifies possession by *Mainao*, the goddess of wealth. The Oja, divining her presence, demands a pig sacrifice. As melodious tunes from flute, drum, and cymbal fill the air, the Oja chants propitiatory formulas.

Doudini (Deudhani), now the voice of *Mainao*, questions the worshippers, "Where will you take me? Neglect me, and you'll be shunned. Return as you came." The Oja, pleading on behalf of the community, begs *Mainao* to stay, declaring her their soul and the source of their prosperity.

Touched by their pleas, *Mainao* agrees to dwell with them, but not without conditions. "Care for me," she demands, "and your wealth shall flourish." With this promise, *Doudini* (Deudhani) rises and dances, a joyous celebration erupting among the worshippers.

As the dance reaches a crescendo, *Doudini* (Deudhani) grasps the altar's bamboo posts and falls unconscious. The Oja and community cry out to Bathou Borai, sprinkling holy water



on *Doudini* (Deudhani). Revived, she signals the *Kherai* Puja's culmination, leaving behind a sense of renewed prosperity and divine connection.

Findings and Conclusion

Findings:

1. Significance of *Kherai* Puja: The paper highlights the multifaceted significance of the *Kherai* Puja for the Boro community. It serves as a personal ritual for well-being, a communal celebration for prosperity, and an agricultural ceremony for bountiful harvests.
2. Origins of *Kherai*: The paper explores various theories about the origin of the word "*Kherai*," each with its own fascinating possibilities. However, the true origin remains shrouded in mystery, requiring further research and comparison with related ceremonies.
3. Structure and Symbolism of the Altar: The paper details the meticulous construction and symbolism of the *Kherai* Puja altar. Its three sections represent the divine realm, Bathou, and *Mainao*, symbolizing the connection between humans and the divine.
4. Role of *Doudini* (Deudhani): The paper emphasizes the central role of *Doudini* (Deudhani) as the conduit between the earthly and divine realms. Her dances, trance, and prophecies embody the essence of the *Kherai* Puja, propitiating deities and guiding the community.
5. Retrieval of *Mainao*: The paper describes the symbolic act of retrieving *Mainao*, the goddess of wealth, from the earth. This act signifies the community's dependence on her blessings and their commitment to honoring her.

Conclusion:

"An Analytical Examination of the *Kherai* Puja and Deodhani in Boro Society" provides a valuable insight into a significant cultural and religious practice of the Boro people. The paper sheds light on the multifaceted significance of the *Kherai* Puja, the symbolism of its rituals, and the crucial role of the *Doudini* (Deudhani). By delving into the origins of the festival and the meanings behind its intricate practices, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Boro culture and its connection to the divine.



End Notes

1. Ratneswar Basumatery, “Boro Janajati : Samikhyatmak Adhyayan”, Malina Devi Rabha (chief ed.) Axamar Janajati Aru Sanskriti, p.no. 197
2. Pramod Chandra Bhattacharya, “Bharitiya-Mongoloid Boro Sanskritir Mulkatha”, Padma Patar (ed.) Janajati aru Sanskriti, p.n0. 15-16
3. Dr.K. Brahma,: Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos, p.no. 63

References:

1. Brahma, Dr.K. : Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos, published by Shri Chiranjib Brahma, Gosaingaon, Kokrajhar (Assam), 1989
2. Duarah, Dharmeswar : Assamar Janajatisakalar Utsav Anusthan, Assam Institute of Research for Tribals & Scheduled Castes, Jawaharnagar, Guwahati, 2013
3. Mazumdar, Suryakumar : Boro Sanskritit Drishtipat, Assam Institute of Research for Tribals & Scheduled Castes, Jawaharnagar, Guwahati, 2002
4. Patar , Padma (ed.) Janajati aru Sanskriti,Ringchang Publication, 2013
5. Rabha , Malina Devi (chief ed.) Axamar Janajati Aru Sanskriti, Assam Sahitya Sabha, 2011