

‘THE ONE TAKEN BY GOD...’

—

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INTRODUCTION

Where do I even begin scaling down the legends, tales and realities associated with the *deodini*? She is at once mystifying, fascinating and raw, and also an embodiment of a supreme power trapped in the very domain she seemingly controls, entangled in the blurring imagery of a dying tradition. The feasibility of her fractured presence, fractured by time and faith, is speculation of what her true essence is. The deeper I plunge into the depths to understand her essence, the more I feel like Sisyphus¹ in Greek mythology, rolling up a large boulder along the sharp rise of a hill, to reach the summit and have it roll back down again to where it all began. As my knowledge and comprehension of her essence increases and gets more complicated, I feel the burden of penning down this little piece of history, slowly unravelling the nihilistic side of me, to not do it at all. Yet, here it is, a slightly fractured, slightly raw and perhaps incomprehensible rendezvous between the *deodini* and me!

OF HISTORIES AND ORIGINS

‘Âgùì Boisâgi,
(O! sister wanderer,)
Âng khô dà bàsi!
(Do not spurn me!)’

—Lines from a Boro song

And so, I commence this journey ...

A long time ago, when it was still unfathomable for people to archive their stories in evidentiary documents, according to some scholars, the Boros (Bodos) traversed from the trans-Himalayan region between Tibet and China; according to others from the north-western part of China between the head-waters of the Huang Ho and Yang-Tsze Kiang rivers; while still others refer to them as the autochthons of Brahmaputra Valley. Whatever their origin they are said to be the first inhabitants who appeared in waves in the Brahmaputra Valley between the 2nd millennium BC and the 1st millennium AD.

The Boros occupied the foothills of the Himalayas, the entire Brahmaputra Valley, of what is the largest chunk of the north-eastern part of the present day Indian map as far across most parts of north and East Bengal (up to Bangladesh). According to some historians, some parts of northern Bihar too and are spread out as far as Nepal. Etymologically speaking the name Brahmaputra has its roots in the Boro *balungbuthur* and *burglung* meaning ‘to scratch or dig severely or intensely’. Thus, according to belief, resulting in the formation of such a vast expanse of a water body.

Brahmaputra is a Sanskritised version of *balungbuthur*. The Boros are thus also referred to as ‘the children of the balungbuthur’. The Brahmaputra originates as Yarlung Tsangpo, at the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, or ‘the Roof of the World’; it is known as the biggest river in Tibet and is nestled at the highest altitude across the world. While it is believed to be a Chinese word that means ‘water flowing down a crest’, some scholars believe that the etymological origins of

its nomenclature too have Boro roots. Yarlung is a corrupted version of *burglung* or *urlang* which again means 'to scratch or dig intensely', the latter referring to how pigs dig through the earth with their snouts. According to scholars, Boros have Indo-Mongoloid or Indo-Tibetan origins; this deepens the possibility that the name Yarlung Tsangpo has a Boro origin.

According to many scholars, the etymological origins of many names of towns, cities, rivers and land areas around these regions are proof of the Boros having been the first inhabitants of these regions. Names like Dhubri, Sodiya, Dispur, Dimapur, Lamding, Kamrup, Kamakhya and many others seem to etymologically have Boro roots. Guwahati, for example, is considered the corrupted version of *guwar* (vast)- *ha* (land)- with *doi* (water), meaning a vast land with water. Historians believe that after leaving Dimapur, which was one of the Boro kingdoms, the Boros were told to look for a vast land with water to settle down, hence *guwar-ha-* with *dei*. And that is how they discovered the regions around Guwahati to settle down and named the central location *Guwar-ha-ti*.

The Boros have been referred to as the Kiratas in old Indian scriptures. Some also refer to them as Kacharis. Though there are numerous definitions of Kacharis, the etymological roots of the word also have Boro implications. *Khaas-ha* refers to fertile land, usually at the foothills. Since Boros were the inhabitants of such a land, they came to be referred to as such.

Bathou is the oldest religion among the Boros and perhaps one of the oldest religions known in the world (unfortunately often confused with Hinduism). In the words of one of the *douris* (priests practising the Bathou religion), whom I met, 'In the beginning we were all like the *modais* (goddesses). Then, according to what some people believe, we had a certain fruit which made us conscious of ourselves. Bathou religion is as old as those days when all of this seemingly happened.'

Bathou has its genesis in two Boro words—*ba* and *gathou*. While *ba* represents the number five, *gathou* means deep, intense or profound.

In conjunction, it came to be known as *ba-thou*. The word denotes the significance of the religion. It believes in five philosophies, five ways of life that signify human existence on earth, the five elements that go into the making of the universe and results in the five senses that define us as humans. Scholars undertaking an in-depth research of the religion state that it is perhaps one of the most scientific religions in the world. However, it is lesser known to many.

The concepts of the traditional Bathou religion were handed down by word of mouth. The five elements that the Bathou faith believes in are *ha* (earth), *doi* (water), *bar* (air), *or/san* (fire/sun/light) and *okhrang* (ether). They also believe in the five principles of life which loosely translate as procreation and birth; marriage rites; the principle of rejoicing though not in an uncontrollable measure; praying for the sick while also seeking treatment; and old-age and death rituals.

Soon after associating with other cultures, the influence of Vaishnavism, Brahminism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam either had people converting to these religious philosophies, or they were made to blend in with them over-powered by their doctrines. But people like the Late Fwrlang Babaji (Nepal Chandra Brahma), documented the old traditional Bathou practices among the Boros. Despite his efforts different types of Bathou worship emerged in different places. Among these it is in the traditional form of Bathou, that is, the Bwli/Gudi Bathou, where the presence of the *deodini* is still seen.

In this form of practicing Bathou religion, the *deodini* plays an important role during *kherai* festivities.² (*Kherai* is associated with the worship of Bathou or bathou *sibinai* as it is referred to by the Boros.) *Deodini* is the Boro word for *shaman*.

The word *shaman*, is believed to come from *saman*, a Siberian *tungus* word. Its origin is still disputed, and some even believe that it might have come from the Chinese word *sha-men*. According to Laderman (1993), it refers to someone who is excited, moved or raised. The word is used for describing any member associated with ancient religious practices, believed to have in him/her an ability to

communicate with the gods in their divine realm and provide answers for healing a variety of illnesses, misfortunes and personal/social dilemmas when she or he goes into a trance.

The only difference that I observed in this explanation is that as far as the *deodinis* are concerned, they do not simply communicate with god or unseen forces, but they become the embodiment of god and speak her/his words. Also, a *deodini* is always a woman. Thus, instead of using the more common word *shaman* I refer to her as she has always been referred to among the Boros, as *deodini*.

IN A *DEODINI*'S HOME

We entered the home of one of the *deodinis*³ carefully lining up our shoes against the wall of the hutment on the verandah where chairs had been put for us to sit and converse with her. Before we sat, we dutifully lined up at the well, washed our feet, put water in our mouths, gargled and spat it out, took some water in our hands and put it on our heads. I was later told that this is just a ritual now, but must have started off for health reasons so people didn't walk in with dirty feet in their homes.

Boro homes were earlier made with mud, bamboo and straw and had thatched roofs. Today most are concrete structures with tin-corrugated roofs. Some still retain the old huts either as they were or by replacing the thatched roofs with tin-corrugation. All the rooms of the house are not built as one large structure. Different hutments are spread around with a *sekla* (courtyard) at the centre. The parents usually occupy the home facing the north, and the children can shift there only after the parents have passed away. The altar for Bathou worship is built in the north-east corner of the courtyard.⁴

Most of the homes have a granary to keep the grains harvested in their fields. A hut with a *dingki*⁵ is also a common sight. *Dingkis* are logs with a pestle attached to them meant for husking paddy. Traditionally, the architectural set-up of Boro homes included a pond, where they

reared their own fish. Meals in Boro homes are usually fresh produce from the fields and kitchen gardens, fish from their own ponds and meat from their own farm-bred animals. Agriculturists as they were in the past, almost all homes had acres of land to plough and grow their own food.

Cowsheds and pigsties are usually at a distance from residential homes as are the chicken coops. Usually a country bred dog or two and a few cats hang around the courtyard or sleep on the verandah. They are not always allowed to enter the inner precincts of the house. Unlike pets in cities they are not bought but just stray in and are welcomed by the owners.

Over time, migration to towns and cities, urbanisation, socio-political movements and the hushed down ill-effects of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) rearing its ugly head around their homes were some reasons why some Boros moved away from this traditional set-up. All of this resulted in a change in lifestyle, homes and culinary pursuits. Some households have tried retaining the old aspects.

We noticed that this *deodini*'s home still reflected scenes of rustic bonhomie between flora and fauna which is distinct to a Boro household as we sat down to listen to her story.

ON BECOMING A *DEODINI*

She was a young woman, with young children, when she realised that her being a *deodini* was fated. It happened gradually, and in the beginning she and her family were unaware of it. She suddenly started seeing weird dreams regularly. One of the first dreams she had was that she had been taken into deep waters at night and left there completely immersed in a sitting position for the whole night. But no water seemed to pass through her mouth or ears nor hurt her eyes. Every night when she went to sleep, the dream recurred, and the incomprehensibility of it all plagued her. Some nights later, she saw another dream.

This time around she felt strong winds lift her up, suspending her mid-air, defying gravity. She was neither taken far above the atmosphere into the heavens, nor way down beneath the land and water deep enough to the centre of the earth. She was just somewhere right at the centre between the skies and the earth, seemingly balancing on nothing and yet not falling. A sense of weightlessness almost like buoyancy kept her afloat in some incomprehensible, invisible space; she could neither reach up nor grab on to anything on the earth held by gravity. In that quasi-dream-like state of being, she could neither raise nor lower herself. This same dream recurred night after night till many nights had gone by.

Meanwhile in the real world, every other household in the vicinity seemed to be living tranquil lives, going about their daily chores, nothing eventfully negative happening to their homes and families, but misfortune seemed to have beckoned itself to her home. She lost her in-laws one after the other. Everyday someone in the household got a fever that wouldn't subside. No doctor, hospital or medical test had a clear explanation of what was causing this fever. A million prayers were not enough to ward off this misfortune. Perhaps some evil spirits were hovering around their home causing such ill-fate. But who was to know then?

Finally, as a last resort the *janagurus* (wise men) and *kobirajs* (like the *janagurus*, they too accompany the *deodinis* during *kherai* worship) were consulted; this must have included some *deodinis* too because she recalls calling, 'the one who had been taken by god', a statement that many used, to refer to a *deodini*:

They said that some ill-will or envy perhaps existed among someone around us and entertaining them with food and drinks would soften that ill will. We did not know who could be so envious of us. So we made it a point to welcome all the people around us, entertaining them with food and drinks. But alas, to no avail. All this continued for quite some time. My father-in-law had died in the meanwhile, and sometime later we finished building our house. But our agricultural produce, all the *goi* and *phathai*

[betel nut and leaf] trees we had died away. And the vegetation, have you seen what happens when you pour boiling hot water on leaves? They wilt away immediately. That's what happened to our vegetation. It just wilted away, and we were left with nothing.

Continuing the narrative, she said,

Once we entered our new home, there was an *oja* [a village physician, also associated with *kherai* rituals] who was jealous of us because we had not invited him into our new abode. Thus, we presumed that his envy had made my father-in-law's spirit possess me.

Suddenly I was unable to utter a single syllable; I couldn't eat, nor take a sip of water. I was in deep meditative suffering of some sort. This lasted for a week. People started pouring in to see me and dole out whatever useful advice they had. Young girls came and asked me, 'what happened *abo* [elder sister]?' People started suggesting that perhaps a *janaguru* had to be called.

A *janaguru* is another term used to refer to an *oja*, and is considered more applicable these days, since *oja* has negative connotations and is sometimes used to refer to a quack who usually poses as a village physician. The *janaguru* on the other hand is usually considered to be an educated wise man.

Finally, they decided to call a *janaguru*. Apparently, her father-in-law's spirit had possessed her and had entangled her with the *sana rada biphang* (the roots of a chickpea plant), the *janaguru* said. Despite being asked, the spirit was silent and did not identify itself, the *janaguru* added. He asked the spirit to untie her. The untying of the roots of the chickpea plant signified that whatever dead entity had possessed her being would be freed. The spirit untied her, and she became herself again.

At the same time, her mother who had come to see her was out by the groves collecting firewood. She was going to prepare food for all the guests, *janagurus* and *kobirajs*, who were there to see her daughter. Suddenly her daughter's deceased father-in-law appeared in front

of her. Frightened out of her wits, she ran back home and fainted. Coincidentally that's when her daughter was cured. She asked her mother what had happened. She informed her that there was a spirit lurking somewhere in the groves. The *kobiraj* present there said that in that case the spirit was seeking an offering of food and drinks and must be appeased. Though having deceased, it was perhaps unable to pass on to the other world because of some insatiated yearning and was hence envious of those still inhabiting their earthly bodies. So they prepared a huge feast for him with lots of delicacies, everything that they could possibly include, rice, curries, *jou* (fermented rice drink), meat and a pair of pigeons. And that's how they bade their last adieu to her deceased father-in-law's spirit.

Interestingly, peace was restored in their home.

But her journey of becoming a *deodini* was still incomplete. Though free from dead spirits, she started having the dreams again. Once again, in her dreams she seemed to be possessed and could feel her body being shaken. She had been taken by 'the evil winds', 'the bad mother'. 'You know the one with the long tongue?' she asked. Suddenly at night there would be a loud noise on the roof. When they went out to ask who had hit the roof, no one answered. In her dream, however, she saw 'the mother with the long tongue' come to her and say, 'Oh children, it is I; one of the *kobirajs* tied me in your home and left me. Untie me. Feed me. Give me drinks. Prepare a space for me and then send me away, only then shall I leave you.' She called an old *kobiraj* and did as she was told in her dreams. Far out in the field, she prepared a space for her. They even sacrificed a goat for her and sent her away in peace. Then in her dreams, the good deities appeared. They told her, 'We will take you in our hands and make you a *deodini*. You have suffered enough. External forces have haunted you so far. Even the dead did not spare you. And because all this has happened, our child, you will be a *deodini*. The poisoned, the ailing, the ones in pain and suffering can come to you and find solace. You will be the talebearer of our rituals and traditions and narrate them to the world.' And so in the words of the *deodini*, 'They took me to be their own.'

Yet, there was one more bridge to cross. Her husband⁶ lamented her decision to become a *deodini*. They had just started their family. The elders were all gone. The children were still young. He did not wish to have her dabble in such matters. The *modais* (goddesses) visited him in his dreams and insisted that he shed off his reluctance to see his wife as a *deodini*. The more they insisted, the more he persisted. Strangely enough in the real world, he found his wife lost deep in the woods, sometimes amidst the orange and lime tree groves. Even among thorny bushes she was completely unhurt. Sometimes he found her atop the roof of their house or on a tall tree. He could not understand how she had managed to find her way up there, and she could never recall how she had done it and still cannot do so. There seemed to be an unconscious force at play, making her do all these things. A decision had to be taken. The community was called as witness to his decision.

He relented and said that there was no way he could stop her from becoming a *deodini*. He mentioned that his children were so young. His parents were gone. He had no siblings. Besides he was always frightened of ‘the ones taken by the god’. But now he realised that he had no choice but to let her have her way. The real reason he told us that triggered this decision was that in his dreams the *modais* had come and said that if he still persisted in her not becoming a *deodini*, they would drive her mad. His love and fear of losing her to madness was what made him change his mind.

And thus, her journey as a *deodini* began. People afflicted by uncertainty, sorrow, pain, suffering and people on whom doctors and medicines had no effect came to her to invoke her shamanistic presence and find some solace in what Bathou had to say through her. Not that she could just assume the role of a *deodini* when she wanted. There was a ritual involved—*kherai* worship. Tales associated with Bathou faith had to be narrated. The *kham* (big drum), *sifung* (long flute), *serja* (violin) and *jotha* (cymbal) had to be played. And if all of these were done correctly, then she would slowly start getting into a trance, and the *deodini* in her would be awakened.

'And thus', she said with a smile, 'what could I do, having been pushed around by the forces beyond my power? And since god had taken me, I became a *deodini*. Years passed, we brought up our children well. I even have grandchildren now.' As she said that, we could see a sparkle in her eyes and the warm glow of pride in her husband's expressions.

THE NYGIRI

After another morning we hastened to Raniguli. Hastily shifting conveyances, negotiating our way through a very well maintained gravelled road with the beautiful, sun-kissed paddy fields spread as far along the sides of the road as our eyes could wander, and a number of phone calls to my guide⁷ in this village whose precisely meticulous instructions were not found wanting got us to Raniguli.

According to the legends associated with the village, once there was a queen who was shot with a bullet, and she came and breathed her last in this village. Hence, the name Raniguli, *rani* meaning queen and *guli* meaning bullet.

Another Boro village, another *deodini*, and this time we found one lost in her trance.

Later, we sat in a shed like space with a thatched roof, a space probably used for entertaining guests and believers who approached her for help. Seating herself on a *khamflai* (a short wooden structure meant for sitting), skilfully peeling a betel nut,⁸ she recited the lines:

Bathou *handang bandaba*
Sijou *handang gorangba*
Boro-ni Dao *handang phongba*
Asar, *bisar manba*,
Boro ni *kham siphung hundung, gudungba*
Bena *sastra lekhayana Boro ni manba rokomni dongo*.

Loosely translated it means:

The Bathou altar is set in place with five knots
The sijou plant has five edges
When you talk of Boro philosophies, they are of five kinds
The customs, traditions, judgements and trials have five principles
Boro musical instruments like the kham (drum) and flute have five holes
The scriptures and what has been taught to us are of five kinds

She was explaining to us the significance of the number five in the Bathou religion.

Just a few minutes ago we had witnessed her in a trance. Her thick hair, left loose, was neatly rolled up into a bun now. Then, she was seated cross-legged on a *khamflai*, rapidly swaying her head from side to side, her hands rhythmically striking her lap, as seemingly the gods spoke through her. The words she uttered had a musical high-pitched note and were almost poetic in diction, replete with rhyme and meter. After the words had been spoken, the advice musically doled out, the ceremony over, out of her state of trance, she arose from her position, calm and elegantly poised with her hands ironing out the creases in her *dokhna* that had folded in places (*dokhna* is a traditional dress worn by Boro women). Before joining us she vanished into the inner quarters of her home for some time. Later we realised that she had gone in to set a pot of water to boil to brew us some tea. Even after a tiring trance, she had enough energy and was conscious about being hospitable.

Now, seated on a *khamflai* again, she was her normal self, entertaining us with *goi* (betel nut), *phathai* (betel leaf), tea and biscuits, explaining her role and her religion in the same musical voice. She had tidied herself, but she was still wearing the yellow *dokhna* and red blouse that she had worn during the trance. Only the white cloth wrapped around her neck then was missing. Even now her choice of words was poetically framed, her language sweet and engaging. Her husband, the *douri*⁹ (priest) was already sitting with us. His voice was less musical than his wife's, but his use of the Boro language too was pure and beautiful.

Relishing the flavour-some, freshly brewed Assam tea, prepared in thick sweet un-adulterated milk from home-bred cows, I could not help but observe that almost all the *deodinis* I had met had the most arresting ways of narrating their tales. Hours spent with them never bored me. Even the rawest of details had a somewhat organically home-spun note of narrative genius.

The *douri* explained his wife's role to us as below:

Sometimes when even medical science fails, people approach us to help cure their ills. It is all a matter of faith. Some believe in it. Some don't. But it doesn't just happen; she cannot get into a trance all the time. Only when people approach her, when the Bathou visits, when the prayer lamps around the altar are lit, a pair of *goi* and *phathai* [betel nut and leaf] are offered, and we bow our heads in reverence, only then, only here at the altar, can she become the embodiment of the deities. Then people can put forward their questions.

He re-emphasised the fact that such a trance did not just happen!

'We do not know if others believe in it or not,' he continued. 'But for those of us who do, interestingly that is how we have survived. She herself was cured through *kherai* worship, and now she cures others. It is not something to be proud of. When not in a trance, she is incapable of helping others.'

We talked to her about the beginning. The dreams, the fever, the shivering, the visits to the doctor, 'even to check her brain', piped in her husband, were all in vain. Then they approached a *janaguru*, who said that the signs seemed like 'the mothers had taken her into their fold'. After prayers were said and the rituals performed, all they could do was wait and watch.

For three years after that, the entire family abstained from having meat. Three years later, in January when the community had the *kherai* worship and the festivities started, she knew that it was time to assume the divine power that had taken her over. She still prefers being a vegetarian and has an aversion for meat. 'But there is no stringent

rule about it,' we were told. The family though has started consuming meat again.

The husband informed us that she was not a '*deodini*', but a '*nygiri*'. I was surprised. It was a revelation for me. In none of my previous encounters had I come across this word. Puzzled I inquired what the difference was. The husband and wife together tried explaining both the concepts. 'It is all a matter of what strengths are gifted to you. It is not about who gets more strength than whom,' they said. It is a matter of kind and not of degree.

A *nygiri* or *bijitgiri* is meant for persons and individual homes. She mainly attends to the sick and a few personal woes that people come seeking her out for. *Deodinis* are the ones who under the spell of the *kham* (big drum), *sifung* (long flute), *serja* (violin) and *jotha* (cymbal) are 'taken by the *aai*, *apha* [mother, father]'. She is meant for *kherai* worship that is held for the community as a whole, an entire village or district. Since there are not many *deodinis*, she may be invited to other villages too. There is a whole ritual involved. The *janaguru*, *kobiraj* and *douri* all have to be present. Prayers have to be said and a pair of *goi* and *phathai* have to be presented as witness (this happens for the *nygiri* too) so that they do not lose themselves forever in the trance.

'A *deodini* is well versed in the stories of mankind right from the very inception of this world,' they said. Once charmed she can narrate them all. She also narrates the story of Bathou and the 18 deities that preside over the Bathou altar. Her true test as a *deodini* is whether or not she can perform the *kherai*, which includes 18 dances meant for the 18 deities. One dance is performed on the edge of a *thungri* (sharp knife-like instrument). If she is able to do so with her feet unhurt and without bleeding she is the chosen one, the *deodini*! If not, her fate as a *deodini* is doomed. Only a true *deodini* can emerge out of such perilous acts unscathed. Once a *deodini*, the art comes to her naturally when in a trance; she is not taught or trained (many of the *deodinis* that I came across, claimed that before becoming *deodinis* dancing did not come to them naturally). A *nygiri* on the other hand, cannot dance, even in a trance.

I was also informed by other sources that a woman not being able to complete her act of transitioning to a *deodini* does not really depend on the woman herself. The *janaguru*, *kobiraj* and *douri* all have an equal stake. If they are impure, like under the influence of alcohol, then the act cannot be completed. Sometimes, however, a *deodini* still does get into a trance and in that state reprimands them for their misbehaviour. If the notes of the music being played are wrong, then too the act is interrupted, and she instructs them how to play, while still in a trance. During a *deodini*'s performance, the musicians do not lead but the *deodini* does through her gestures and movements. They have to keenly follow her and change their notes as she changes her steps.

In her day to day life, a *deodini* goes about her work as a normal person. However, once she is in a trance she is considered a 'divine entity'. She is believed to have become the very epitome of purity and truth. In such a quasi-state of existence, when deep in her reverie, her earthly being metamorphoses into a heavenly creature and even a slight human touch, irrespective of age and gender, can break the spell, and in a split second we can lose the divine entity ensconced in the physical abode of her earthly being. I was told that it is, therefore, impossible to become a *deodini* unless one is chosen. Sometimes some *deodinis* reach far enough in their trance only to be brought back to their real selves without achieving the entire act all the way through. They then cannot assume the role of a *deodini* and go back to their normal lives. They are not shunned. It is considered natural that they are not meant to be *deodinis*.

In fact, according to some scholars only those with the *tulla rassi* (Librans) or *patla rassi* (light state of the soul) become *deodinis*. In other words, it is only people gifted with the sixth sense who can assume a *deodini*'s role. Sometimes a village has a *deodini*, and long after she dies there is no one to assume that role.

One common element between a *deodini* and *nygiri* is that once out of their trance, they have no memory of what had become of them in their divine state. A lot of believers vouched that they had seen

them make true predictions or give the right solutions. Seldom did they falter.

In Raniguli I had one more question—this time for the *douri*. I was in a quandary about his role. The *deodini* or *nygiri* is chosen by the *modais* (goddesses) themselves. What about him? Was he always a *douri*? Or did he become one only after his wife became a *nygiri*? ‘She [the wife] chose me, by invoking the gods and asking their permission. I stay by her side to hold her, to feed her with prayers done by the people, to remember on her behalf what she said or did. To recount all of it to her later, if needed,’ he said.

Later my other sources¹⁰ informed me that this is always the case, a *deodini*’s husband naturally assumes the role of the *douri* by her side. If unmarried, her father or brother take up this role. I was told that one cannot become a *douri* if his wife is not a *deodini*. A *deodini*’s role is assigned first and then she chooses her husband to assist her as a *douri*. If she cannot become a *deodini*, he naturally loses his role as a *douri*. It is not the same with *kobirajs* and *janagurus*. *Kobirajs* normally assist a *deodini* in narrating different tales during the *kherai* performance. *Janagurus* were earlier called *ojas*. Literally translated, a *janaguru* is a ‘wise man’. All three are needed for *kherai* worship.

There is one more element in this encounter between the *nygiri*, the *douri* and me that throws light on the influences that have touched Bathou religion. In my conversation with them, the *nygiri* kept mentioning the names of Hindu gods and goddesses. We told them that as per what we knew, the Bathou religion was different from Hindu religion. Past records show that the Boros never really had idol worship, so they never kept pictures or prayed to them; why then do they refer to them now? They told us, ‘It’s true we don’t worship them. We never did. If we keep their pictures or pray to them, it is because people who approach us believe in them and want us do so on their behalf. Also, even though we have their pictures, if you observe keenly they are kept away from our Bathou altar in another space’. Another *deodini* too gave a similar explanation.

When I finally bade them goodbye, I had a journal full of information and a head full of fascinating tales that the *douri* and *nygiri* had philosophically told me. Stories of creation, interlaced with the idea of the forbidden fruit; how ancient the Boro race is; concepts, traditions and their significance; that we all are taken in as pairs and have thus come into existence and reached this far, and how and when these stories came into being.

SHAMANS, ANCIENT RELIGIONS, BATHOU AND *DEODINI*

Recent research suggests that the existence of shamanic belief systems is extremely ancient and is what defines mankind's earliest religious experiences, making their understanding essential but complex. Ethnographers have suggested that one must not only approach shamanism from a religio-magical point of view but from the philosophical, naturalist and medical perspectives that it offers. The psychiatric methods used are centuries older than the discovery of western psychiatry and have appeared to be effective. According to some researchers, it has been observed that elements of shamanism have been used in other contemporary religions too, for example among the charismatic leaders of Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Hindu religions and in other cults and sects.

Sometimes all ancient religions from all parts of the world tend to be compared, contrasted and then presented as one homogenised concept. For example, the existence of shamanism in different ancient cultures is often referred to in the same vein as opposed to comprehending it as a concept that is contextual to the specific community of people who believe in it. Some also compare Bathou to Shiva and the religion to Hinduism. This reflects a homogenising aspect of religion in all cultures considered to be a part of ancient India. Bathou has been the traditional religion of the Boros. It was

when it came in contact with other cultures, who believed in Shiva, that the idea of Shiva found its way into Boro territory and existence. If as historians and scholars claim, Boros were the first inhabitants of the Balungbuthur (Brahmaputra) Valley, they came in contact with other cultures which did not worship Bathou but Shiva much later. Repeated attempts to downplay the origin of the religion or constantly comparing it with another religion, can be seen as an effect of cultural imperialism. Many scholars, academicians and practitioners who have been involved in documenting the Bathou religion are painstakingly trying to see that it is not confused with Hinduism.

As mentioned before, a *deodini* performs the *kherai*. Some scholars state that etymologically, *kherai* is the confluence of three Boro words, *khe-ra-e*.¹¹ *Khe* comes either from the act of *khopjabnai* meaning 'to shut' (referring to when you close your eyes, kneel down and join your hands in an act of humility and reverence) or *khulumnai* which means 'to worship'; *ra* comes from *raisongnai*, to say or speak, maybe on behalf of another (in other words through your said act of reverence, you have spoken, made an appeal), and *esor* refers to god in Boro language. Interestingly, it is not associated with any gender. Loosely translated *esor* means, who is she/he, that is *e-sor*; *e* meaning she/he and *sor* meaning who. Both are gender-neutral words.

When a *deodini* is in a trance, the *douri* also called *dowsi* is the one who usually passes on important prayers and requests to her. Literally speaking he 'feeds her with the appeal' (*douh-na-hanai*), thus he is called the *douri* or *dowsi*. Since god (*esor*) is unseen, what is 'appealed for is revealed by god through the *deodini*' (*dounahanaikhou dinthinahayi*), and hence she is a *deodini*. She is given information, an appeal is made to her, and she as the embodiment of god presents *esor's* (god's) point of view.

AN ATTEMPT TO UNRAVEL THE SOURCE OF HER IDENTITY AS A WOMAN

*Biswrni jwnwm arw
Angni jwnwmni fungkhaya
Be mwntseaownw nongou na nonga-
.....
Anjrailangyw gusthi penwi,
Angni gwsua gabw jennangnanwi. (Brahma 73)*

These are lines from a poem by Boro poet, Brajendra Kumar Brahma. In Surath Narzary's translation it reads:

I am anxious to know
If we have the same source
In the origin of you and me
When I want to trace it
They turn away with cold sneer
My heart weeps at the defeat.

My meetings with the *deodinis* still left me only midway in unravelling a million truths about their origin and status. Questions that I feel have been left unanswered include: does she feel confined in her status or liberated in her powers? As an apparent conduit of a divine entity where does reality end and performance begin? And the most gnawing of all is the question of her gender.

Tracing the genesis of why a *deodini* is always a woman is almost impossible to understand, more so because ancient knowledge that leads up to it is mostly oral. Even a hundred perspectives put together on the tenets of an age-old practice are unfathomable in their ability to re-tell the genesis of a notion, a concept, a ritual and a belief that still exists. While studies will continue to try and unravel this mystery of the *deodini's* identity, especially that of her gender, at the moment we only have the following conclusions.

According to some ethnographers, a lot of ancient cultures and communities practising shamanism had women as the first *shamans*.

In fact, women were the ones engaged in important community functions including religious ceremonies that were later taken over by men, in particular in the 18th and 19th centuries. Some ethnographers even state that many of these communities must have started off as matriarchal ones, with women exhibiting far greater skills in magic and performance than their male counterparts. Some even maintain that in some communities or clans, the first *shaman* must have been a female who passed on her powers to her offspring, a son, and hence in these communities men took over the duties of *shamans*.

A lot of ancient myths in many cultures maintain that powers were given to the female kind. Interestingly, historians and ethnographers studying various cultures have found that women's position was far superior in the ancient past than what it was later. Some studies state that this is true even in Buddhism, Vedism, Hinduism, and Christianity.

There are a few discrepancies in understanding the emergence of a *deodini* among the Boros. One of the first accounts I refer to is Sijjer's *The Bodo of Assam* where he states that his informant (a man named Makoram from Patkijuli), informed him in 1949 that a *deodini* had been selected by the *oja* according to his will, and then he appealed to god to initiate her into action. Sometimes one is chosen before new clay is applied on the *kham* (a drum, one of the musical instruments used during the *kherai* performance). When a *deodini* gets married, and her husband is opposed to the idea of her becoming a *deodini*, he can approach the *oja* for medicines to dispel her shamanic powers. Besides, if a young girl or woman is unable to restrain herself from dancing to the beats of the *kham*, then the villagers appoint her as a *deodini*, and the *oja* chooses her as 'the one'. Similar accounts were handed down to me in the past and even now as I conducted my research, but with one little difference.

As per the accounts of some of the people I met over the years, some tales associated with the *deodinis* started with my being told that when one is unable to hold back under the enchantment of the music and rhythm produced by the musical instruments associated with a *kherai* performance and gets into a trance, then she has assumed

the role of a *deodini*, and in that state she becomes an embodiment of a divine entity. These accounts did not refer to the *oja* appointing her as one. Interestingly, most of the *deodinis* I met during my study alluded to the fact that dreams, visions and some incomprehensible phenomenon affected them which led to their becoming *deodinis*.

In all these accounts, whether documented in black and white or in my personal conversations with scholars, religious practitioners or even the *deodinis* themselves, two distinct facts that remained constant were: one, there has never been any initiation ceremony associated with new *deodinis*; and second, neither have there been any known restrictions or prohibitions imposed on *deodinis*. It was mentioned that while nothing peculiar or spectacular is observed in her adornment or garments, when she has to enact her role as a *deodini*, her *dokhna* is normally new and draped around her in a more comfortable manner.

Some *deodinis* mentioned their aversion to food cooked outside their homes, or to other people entering their kitchen or their sleeping quarters. One even mentioned her inability to consume meat anymore. But not having come across any accounts that allude to such known aversions or restrictions, one can only ponder over these aversions as perhaps a contemporary notion of what 'purity' is meant to be.

Apart from these little discrepancies, from a social perspective of understanding a *deodini's* gender, one might want to study accounts and studies of the socio-cultural significance in Boro society. According to ancient norms and traditions, Boro women were not really looked down upon; their position on the social ladder of identity was as important as that of their male counterparts. They enjoyed freedom and even had a say in important household matters. Studies have shown that while the roles of men and women and their contribution to the home were assigned based on certain assumptions about the roles, Boro society disputed these notions.

Some of these assumptions are basing gender roles on commonly accepted attributes related to physical strength—men usually took up outdoor activities that required more physical strength, leaving women to take care of the home and hearth. Hence, men assumed a

higher status of authority in the household; another assumption is that women's domestic work was less valuable and productive than a man's outdoor activities; in the same vein, it was also assumed that a woman did not contribute to the economic growth of the household; more importantly her ability to procreate and bring new life to earth led to the assumption that she was synonymous with nature while her male counterpart was associated with culture, and culture was considered superior to nature, thus exerting its control over nature.

Contrary to these notions, a study of various societies shows that Boro women were not confined to staying indoors and had access to land, forests, and natural resources and were capable of walking long distances carrying heavy loads. Very often they carried their children up to the age of three or four years on their backs, held in a piece of cloth knotted at the chest, as they went about performing all their chores whether outdoors or indoors.

Boro society was largely self-sufficient with a compact economic structure and social stratifications of class and caste were unheard of. In such an environment, a Boro woman made a significant economic contribution to the household. She was adept at the art of preserving meat, fish, and vegetables and producing *jou* (fermented rice drink). She was also skilful in cloth-weaving and bamboo craft; rearing and cultivating *muga*, *indi/eri*¹² worms for producing silk; knew the art of dyeing with locally available plants and roots; reared livestock; and could fish and work in the fields alongside the male folk. On the market day in the village, she took her produce from the field and her handicrafts to sell in the local *hathai* (market), and Boro men were okay negotiating with her for the goods she had on sale. Her income was considered equally valuable in running the household. In fact, in Boro households female members were the owners of the livestock and granaries. No male members of the household, not even the father, could sell or use any of these possessions without first consulting his wife or daughters who held their custody.

Her knowledge of various herbs was not restricted to simply mastering culinary expertise but in understanding their medicinal

attributes for curing ailments. She either collected these from the forests and groves nearby or her own kitchen garden was resplendent with such miraculous cures. The *oja* (medicine man) often relied on her collection of herbs to administer his medications, often taking credit for her knowledge.

Apart from religion, rituals related to marriage and cultivation had women in the forefront. A woman's identity and persona in ancient Boro society was not an act of privilege or kindness bestowed upon her, it was just seen as the natural order of things, and no one bothered to pause and question it then. Thus, it is but only natural that a woman became the conduit of the divine entity—a *deodini*.

Accounts documenting scholars' experiences with Boro society provide sufficient proof of the importance that Boro women enjoyed in the general order of things. Sidney Endle's documentation of his encounter with the Boros or Kacharis, much after colonisation in the 1800s is one such work. He says,

With this interesting race the position of the wife and mother is far from being a degraded one. The Kachari husband and householder has neither sympathy with, nor tolerance for, that degrading and demoralising creed, which says that woman 'is but dust, a soul-less toy for a tyrant's lust.' On the contrary, he usually treats his wife with distinct respect, and regards her as an equal and a companion to an extent which can hardly be said to be the rule among many of the Indian peoples. Kachari women, both in early life and as matrons, enjoy a large measure of freedom, a freedom which is very rarely abused for evil purposes. On being spoken to on the wayside, the Kachari woman will generally reply at once with absolute frankness, looking the questioner straight in the face and yet with the most perfect modesty. It has often happened to the writer during the last forty years to enter a Kachari village for preaching purposes, or with a view to opening a school. On asking for the village headman, that personage is usually not slow in making his appearance; and after a few friendly words he will, quite as a matter of course, introduce his wife, and that with no small pride and pleasure. In discharging this social

duty, he will very commonly use much the same language as may be heard among the working classes in England. The phrase most common is 'Be ang-ni burui,' literally "This (is) my old woman.' The words are not used jeeringly at all, but with much real respect and affection; and are obviously so regarded by the speaker's life-partner, whose face and features, somewhat homely in themselves, may often be seen to light up at once with a very pleased and pleasing smile on hearing herself thus referred to by the sharer of her life's joys and sorrows. (Endle 1911)

Often when documenting encounters with people, we like penning down what we personally observe. These observations add another dimension to our understanding of the concepts and people, and can come in handy as references later. S. K. Endle's account is full of such references.

Times changed. External cultures and lifestyle orientations made their way into ancient Boro society. Other religious philosophies like Vaishnavism, Brahmanism, and Hinduism came in and shared notions of gender identities became significant. However, social practices like sati, dowry, child marriage, or the *pardah* system never came to Boro society. Then colonisation happened. It brought with it some positive changes, perhaps even the revival of women's power and importance in society. This was followed by the national movement, and Boro women did not dither from participating in it. But the winds of change had left a dent in Boro society. Administrative changes, economic reforms, and a monetised economy forced Boro women to give up on their traditional social and economic roles to the men folk. The chasm between gender identities in its own little ways came into existence in many spheres and was here to stay.

In my encounter with a *nygiri*, she very poetically mentioned,

Over the course of time we Boros have been beaten, defeated and pushed around by other races. In an attempt to blow out the flames of our beliefs and practices, they have tried pushing in other cultures and doctrines among us. Whenever possible, our words, our language, our symbols of identity, our people—there

has been a deliberately clever attempt to wipe all of them. But we are an ancient race, the first ones to come into being in this region...And history shall prove it thus.

In this cataclysm of original and borrowed identities, in the social game plan of losses and gains, a *deodini's* gender identity remained untouched. She was, had always been, and remained a woman.

THE LEGEND OF JARA, MONGLI AND THE FIRST *DEODINI*

Many legends are associated with the origin of the Boros, one of which talks of a possible assumption of how the first *deodini* came into being as follows.

There once lived a man called Jara (Zara). He had five sons who were brought up well and on coming of age were married. Mongli, the youngest among his daughters-in-law, was married to his youngest son. She was not only beautiful but also adept in all possible skills needed to run the household effectively.

But the family was soon beset by problems, and one day young Mongli fled home at dawn, perhaps fatigued by the situation. With her gone, the granary too soon emptied out (the prosperity of a Boro home is measured by the strength of its granary). Misfortune fell on the household. Jara was already troubled about his daughter-in-law's whereabouts and to add to his worries, his youngest son, Mongli's husband, was struck with such deep grief at the loss of his wife that he seemed to have lost his senses.

Unable to see his son in such a state of grief and worried about his young daughter-in-law, the old man took it upon himself to go and find her. He travelled far and wide, crossed the length and breadth of the village and went to every possible haunt that he presumed she might have gone to. But to his utter dismay, Mongli was nowhere to be found. He did not rest. He did not bother about his appearance and forgot to even have his meals. His son's plight and concern for his lost

daughter-in-law kept him up night and day. Soon his appearance and mannerisms were so shabby and unkempt that people started calling him *phagla* (mad). Although far from having lost his sanity, he was relentlessly searching for his daughter-in-law. (He is *Jara phagla* who when a *deodini* gets into her trance during her *kherai* performances sometimes inhabits her earthly body and speaks through her).

Twelve years passed in the wink of an eye but Mongli was nowhere to be found. His efforts seemed to have all been in vain. Then one day he saw a dream—a vision almost! An old man appeared in his dream and summoned him to pay obeisance to the divine entity by playing the *kham* (big drum), *sifung* (long flute), *serja* (violin) and *jotha* (cymbal).

As soon as Jara woke up he summoned all his sons and had a grand performance worshipping the gods. It happened to be a full moon night. As the haunting melody of the musical instruments played out without a pause, out of the dark appeared a woman who started dancing enchanted by the music that pierced through the silence of the night, as the full moon shone on the gathering below. This woman was none other than Mongli. The music, the worship, the dance, the performance were all a part of the first *kherai* performance; Mongli was the first *deodini*. Old man Jara, who initiated this first *kherai* performance was *Monsingsing/Mwnsinsi Bwrai*, one of the deities worshipped during the *kherai* performance and the old man who had appeared in his dream was *Bathou Bwrai*, the male form of *Bathou*. According to some scholars, *Monsingsing/Mwnsinsi* comes from two Boro words, *mansi/mwnsi*- mankind and *si* meaning soul or from the word *sian* meaning wise. Hence *Monsingsing/Mwnsinsi bwrai* and *bwri* are considered the wise old man and woman and the first humans on earth.

This is one of the many legends or myths that have survived the test of time in unravelling the origins of *kherai* and *deodini*. With most of its loose ends intact, this almost poetic, folksy narrative, spun around Boro homes and hearths has been sieved and retained to whet our insatiable appetite to pick up the strands of every little tale,

weaving our own interpretation of the mystifying aura that surrounds a *deodini's* identity.

The problem with oral history is that sometimes all that we have are assumptions. With real documentation efforts starting only in the 1800s, a lot of facts must have been lost along the way, though what remained intact was *deodini's* gender.

Unravelling the mystery behind a *deodini's* gender is like looking for a needle in a haystack. There are stories, there are legends, there are histories, and there are a number of scholars painstakingly documenting a *deodini's* 18 dances during a *kherai* performance, the rituals performed, the narrations given. But as believers through the *kheraisali* (the place where the *kherai* performance takes place) and researchers sit in rapt attention documenting the proceedings the whole night through, one can only assume but not fully comprehend why history chose a woman to be a *deodini*. Somewhere in all these years the essence of her origin has been tucked away with our ancestors' bones in some forgotten hamlet. But what rings in my mind are the words of one of the scholars associated with documenting Boro traditions. In an unguarded moment, almost in a state of reverie, he told me, 'Perhaps when *esor* (god) decided to converse with mankind, it was deemed fit to do so only through a woman.'

CONCLUSION

Exploring memory and history in trying to understand concepts, legends and rituals is riddled with complexities, especially if one is resorting to a history that has been handed down by word of mouth. Recent conclusions drawn by scholars, ethnographers, and historians are not enough. Viewing a piece of information as 'the other' is often tainted with one's 'selective perceptions' in attempting to retain or express a discovered knowledge.

An embodied personal connection tips the scales in another direction. It exists in listening to the people present and in their

personal perceptions of oral testimonies and histories. What binds us all with our forefathers is not just the blood rushing through the systolic and diastolic workings of our heart, but a connection that is far deeper than that—one defined by legacy. It is often personal stories recounted in kitchens, courtyards, and marketplaces, especially in rural set-ups unaffected by the chaos of urban cities that adds on a different strand to understanding a concept. This concept has been packaged with layers of history, emotions, ideas, and resistance. But, it is in a sense, the only repository of a past that one can rely on. It is a narrative of those who articulate it in their practice.

The lines of a Boro hymn sung at a funeral, very philosophically starts with the words, *Sanse zungbou thaigan*, meaning, one day we too shall pass away/breathe our last. If we think about it, what then are the legacies that we will leave behind? For the Boros, is it Bathou? *Kherai*? *Deodini*?

But sometimes histories, legacies and rituals are not enough. For many, in the search of the 'I', the 'we' moves to a different dimension. That's what makes history worth studying. That's what the legacy of culture is stamped with. The permanence of transition is inevitable!

The essence of the Bathou religion, *kherai* worship, and *deodini* have all diluted over time. Much has been spoken, enacted, and adhered to in an attempt to understand and perhaps even retain what is believed to be and what all of this actually signifies. But what has been lost in translation and in transition can never be reclaimed again.

Yet, what remains fascinatingly mystifying is a *deodini*'s entity. Perhaps she is only an outward manifestation of dispelling our inner inhibitions? As a performer on the altar of one of the world's oldest religions, she becomes whatever we deem her to be. My rendezvous with her only informs me not to gaze at her as a subdued entity, burdened with the weight of keeping a tradition going. She is not simply the mediator or the *shaman*, she is also a performer, an actor in the act of faith, perhaps even a trickster at times. A charmer none the less! She did not simply rest commanding the home and hearth. She danced her way out first into the courtyard and then into the

open fields. She had men and the rest of the world around her accept with awe and reverence that when *esor* (god) decided to speak, it was through the female kind. As far as memory, history, performance, and oral narratives go, she will be the most charming talebearer for years to come. And this is only the genesis of a long trail of seeking her history.

NOTES

1. Sisyphus is a legendary character in Greek mythology. Also referred to in Homer's *Odyssey*, he was the founder and first king of Corinth and the father of Odysseus. He was punished by Zeus for betraying him, and was made to perform the meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a steep hill to atone for his misdeeds. However before he could reach the top of the hill, the boulder would come rolling down, compelling him to start the action all over again.
2. Pranab Narzary (Assistant Professor, Department of Bodo, Pandu College referred to the author by Rashmi Narzary) in discussion with the author, Guwahati (1 November 2019).
3. Pashori Narzary (*deodini*), in discussion with the author, East Mahendrapur, Kokrajhar district (13 November 2019).
4. S. P. Moshahari (Practitioner of Bathou religion), in discussion with the author, Kokrajhar (11 November 2019).
5. *Dingkis* are logs with a pestle attached to them meant for husking or pounding paddy. Almost built like a pulley, the long piece of log has a pestle attached at one end, and at the other end, one can operate it with one's foot, while holding on to a rope attached from the roof, to be able to balance oneself. There is a vast distance between the two ends of the log. Someone at the other end usually fills in the paddy for husking in a circular hole dug in the ground under the large pestle.
6. Dinen Narzary (*deodini's* husband), in discussion with the author, East Mahendrapur, Kokrajhar district (13 November 2019).
7. The guide mentioned here is Rita Brahma (introduced to the author by Raju Narzary from NERSWN, an NGO in Kokrajhar), who helped the author in the course of her research on *deodinis* in Kokrajhar district.
8. Mamoni Boro (*nygiri*), in discussion with the author, Raniguli (12 November, 2019).

9. Thakur Boro (*douri*, priest performing *kherai*), in discussion with the author, Raniguli (12 November 2019).
10. Raju Narzary (President, Bwli/Gudi Bathou, Chief Organising Centre, Kokrajhar district), in discussion with the author, Kokrajhar (12 November 2019).
11. Kamal Bodosa (Assistant Professor, Kokrajhar Government College), in discussion with the author, Kokrajhar (11 November 2019).
12. *Muga*, *indi/eri* are varieties of silk available in Assam.
13. The author would also like to specifically mention the Udalguri District Gudi Bathou celebration held in Bhairobkunda, Udalguri, BTR on 8 and 9 February 2020, which contributed significantly to my understanding of how the *kherai* performance takes place.

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