

# Socio-cultural Beliefs of the Deuki Tradition in Nepal

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## ABSTRACT

*In the course of Human history and civilizations, several social and cultural practices have developed which have their roots in the fulfillment of their wishes or protection from unknown forces. One of the manifestations of such practices is slavery and attempts to appease Gods and Goddesses by making expensive offerings, sometimes even Human beings. Deuki tradition that started in the far western parts of Nepal is believed to have been started by the King Naga Malla in 14th century. In the course of time, the practice started to be followed by the people in the region.*

*The Deuki tradition started to give rise to some social and family problems in the region where the tradition was in practice. There have been attempts to abolish the system by the government by making law and making provision for their resettlement. Even though the practice is a dying tradition, the impact that it created in the society is still in existence. There is a need to fully understand the various consequences and impacts of these socio-cultural phenomena. This study will explore various facets of Deuki tradition, its influence in the society and various measures taken to address the issue and recommend future course of action to mitigate the effects of the tradition in the society and the ways how best issues of Deuki can be managed. Hence, the practice has become like a rigid tradition that the society is not easily able to break away from. A critical and academic look and in-depth study and informed analysis is required to the issue of Deuki tradition.*

**Keywords:** Rehabilitation, Stigma and discrimination, Prostitution, Advocacy, Social justice.

## INTRODUCTION

Deuki is a socio-religious tradition which had been practiced in Nepal since long time ago. In this practice young unmarried girl is offered to the local temple to get good blessing and protection from the god. Different Deuki is offered to different deity / goddess. Especially this practice is seen in different

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districts like; Baitadi, Dadeldhura, Doti at far-western *region* of Nepal.

Once offered a girl as Deuki is not allowed to get marriage neither had social responsibilities for and to them. They are taken as an asset and responsibility of the temple where she had been offered. Parents also do not seem to take any responsibility of her after she had been offered to the temple. The major duty of Deuki is to serve the goddess and temple.

As historical context of Deuki according to an online forum, in 17th century, the Doti state of Nepal faced several problems like natural calamities and epidemics. Some religious priests suggested that if the king of Doti, Nag Malla offered his daughter to the temple of Vageshor Mahadev, the problem would be solved. Then after king Nag Malla offered his daughter to the temple. His daughter spent whole life in the temple. In this way the Deuki system emerged in the society. (Prince, 2019).

The study was based primarily on qualitative methods. The study revealed that Deuki tradition is still practiced, though it is reported to be declined in the recent years. Unlike in the past, with the growing awareness by the joint efforts of government and non-government organizations agencies, practice of Deuki has declined to a great extent but not abolished yet. There was mixed reaction regarding beliefs upon Deuki tradition among the locals.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Deuki is the historical tradition practiced in far-western *region* of Nepal. It is the ancient culture situated in Doti, Baitadi, Dadeldhura etc of far-western *region* of Nepal but due to law against this tradition this tradition is rarely seen. With this changing scenario this article tries to understand about socio-cultural beliefs of the Deuki traditions in Nepal. How Deuki herself understand this system? How does the Devotees in the society take this culture? And how does the belief toward experts theoretically and culturally perceives towards this tradition?

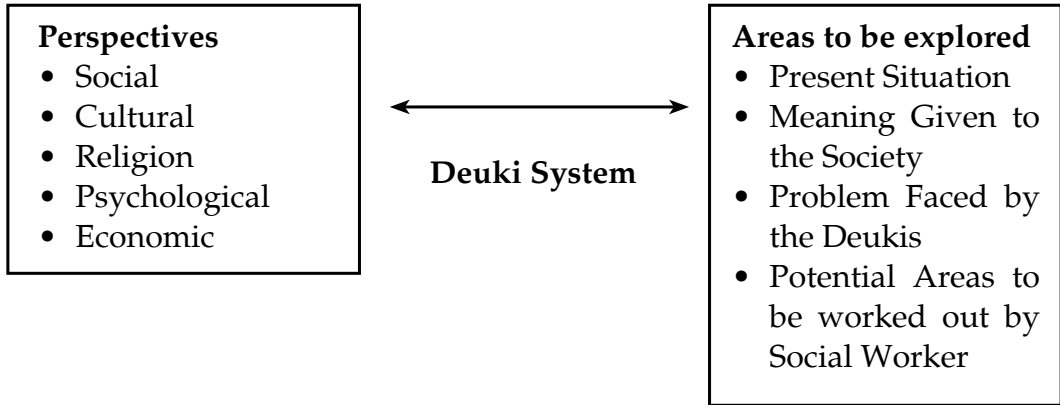
In Mahakali zone of far western *region*, Nepal, Deukis are offered as virgin girls to the deities temples by devotees to fulfill one's wishes from the deity. The present study aims to explore a holistic picture of Deuki system covering various social, cultures, religious, psychological and Economic dimension which move around the Deuki work and life.

Studies as Deuki system have been conducted focusing on religious aspect (WantaLayima, 1992, Gautam 2049 B. S, Adhikari 2071 B. S., Budha Air 2066 B. S. ) and cultural aspects, Ghimire 2033 B. S., Bista 2065 B. S. and Subedi 2051 B. S. ). A study which provides a holistic view of Deuki system is still need to be carried out. This is the research gap as identified in the context of reviewing of literature available in the area of Deuki system in Nepal. But the attitudes towards *Deuki* as a tradition and *Deuki* as an individual have changed over the course the time. The traditional status of *Deuki* and the growing concerns towards their identity has raised serious concerns. The legal ban on *Deuki Pratha* clearly indicates misinterpretation and misconduct of *Deuki Pratha*. The problems faced by Deukis in course of rehabilitation and its effects at individual and societal level has been considered the research problem. So, the study attempted to fulfill the following objective;

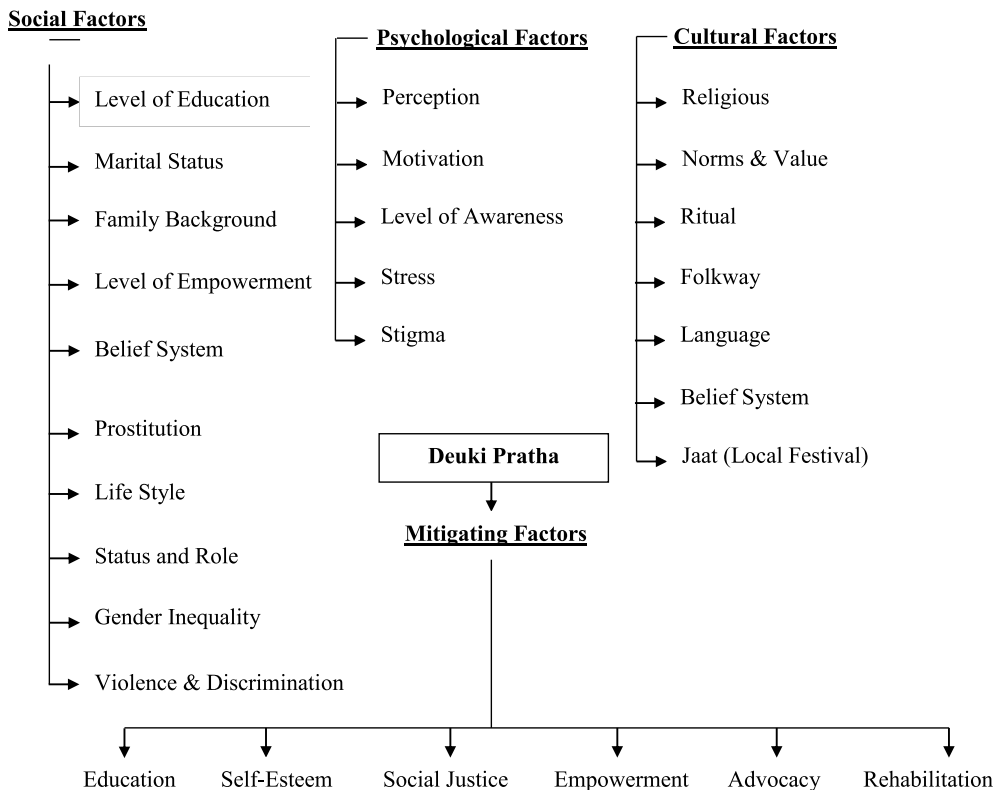
- To explore and analyze the socio-culture beliefs towards Deuki tradition with changing situation in Nepal on the basis of Deuki herself, experts who well studied with this culture and chief Devotees in the society who had advocated this kind of tradition in our society.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Practice of Deuki System is listed with the complex phenomena of the Society and culture of the research consideration. The Deuki system cannot be understood in an isolated form. The root of the practices is deeply limited to its history, culture, society, religion and economy. This demands a holistic analysis of the Deuki system in order to make the research work more valid and reliable in its structure, function and meaning system. Thus Deuki practices are influence by social, cultural and psychological factors here (Figure 1 and 2).



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**



**Figure 2: Conceptual Framework**

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Deuki tradition, which was abolished several decades ago, commonly forced women into prostitution as local lore suggested men would be cleansed of their sins after having sex with a Deuki. In the years since the abolition, many younger Deuki women have been rehabilitated thanks to several local programs. Still, for older Deukis, who live without a home or education and only temple offerings to sustain them, little is being done to help them start a new life.

Until the 1980s, the Deuki tradition was common in Nepal's Far Western *region*. Rich families would buy young girls from poor families or poor families would leave their daughters at temples as an offering to the gods before they reached puberty and were still considered "pure." In turn, they prayed to the gods to protect them from natural calamities and epidemics and grant them various wishes, such as winning a court case. (Yogi, 2012)

Deuki is deprived of many rights like marriage, education, etc. It is believed that sexual relationship with Deuki can lead to religious advantages. So Deukis are physically exploited by priests and worshippers. Though the country code of Nepal 2020 BS has clearly banned prostitution on the basis of any custom and tradition, this system is still alive in the society. Illegal children born from Deuki hardly can get citizenship. Deuki Pratha has been formally eradicated by the government of Nepal. However, there is still sign of this custom in western and far western development *region* of Nepal. (Prince, 2019)

A major socio-economic study on status of women was carried out under the leadership of Lynn Bennett (1981) at the centre for economic development and administration at Tribhuvan University. The research combined qualitative and quantitative data collection in case studies of eight ethnic groups in different parts of Nepal. The study remains successful in assessing the status of women in the rural areas of Nepal. The study was published in 13 volumes by the sponsor, USAID, Nepal.

Another important work done by Lynn Bennett (2002) is 'Dangerous wives and sacred sisters' which provides a detailed picture of social and symbolic role of high caste women in Nepal. This comprehensive study explains the social construction gender among high caste Hindus in the rural areas

of Nepal. The authors interpretation of gender system in the patrifocal society centre around the belief she found expressed in so many ways on so many levels by both men and Women. Bennett's work provides an exceptionally interesting ethnography in the best, anthropologies tradition, while also offering special insights for gender studies and the analysis of systems and kinship networks.

In the Deuki system young girls are dedicated to the temple by the devotees. These girls are known as Deukis and are prohibited from leading normal weeded lives, who started to practice prostitution. Deuki girls began being used for sexual activities and with the shamans, storekeepers, the priest of the temples and other people. By these activities the Deukis were financially supported and Deukis were no longer considered pure and the Deuki system changed into prostitution. Deuki girls used to start prostitution as soon as they reached at puberty. The Deuki clients could be the touchable local people and even non touchable in secret. The local people say the Deuki are un-sprinkled touchable, people do not sprinkle water after touching them. This means the Deuki keep sexual relationship also with untouchables. (Shahi, 2003)

In some aspects the Deukis are different to normal western Nepalese Society. They have children without being married only have a few living children. Also they strongly follow the traditional culture. Deuki are being offered from touchable status among the society. The caste status of the father does not remain after being offered and they become Deuki, a different caste and status. Deuki is an offered girl to the deity temple by devotee people. Deukis are offered virgin girls to the deity by devotee people of the Mahakali zone including the Melauli. The Deuki girls were all from upper castes. In the traditional custom Deuki can't marry but this custom is not still practiced. Child marriage is practiced in Deuki community of Baitadi district; parents are preferring daughter's marriage in the teen age. Assumption of Nepali society, "if daughter's marriage can do before menstruation, we will go to heaven". So that, parents are preferring daughter's marriage in early age and child marriage practice in Nepali society (Kathayat, 2014).

Deuki is an ancient custom practiced in the far western *regions* of Nepal in which a young girl is offered to the local Hindu temple to gain religious merit. Young girls are offered by poor families. Also, an other cause is the

false belief of gaining protection and good favor from God. Deuki have to depend on worshipers' monetary offerings to the temple for their livelihood. Left with insufficient income, no skills or education, and pressure brought on by the conviction that sex with a Deuki can cleanse sins and bring good luck, many Deukis are driven to survival sex, a form of prostitution in which sex is traded for basic necessities such as food or shelter. Though it has been formally abolished by the constitution of Nepal it has not yet been abolished completely (Sadikshya, 2018).

Previous study lack issue of rehabilitation of Deuki which is one important research gap. From the careful perusal of literature, reveals that much of the study on Deuki have been descriptive. These studies have focused on religious and cultural aspects of Deuki as tradition and few studies have attempted to explore the attitudes of society towards DeukiPratha and Deuki herself. However, the problems posed by and consequences to individual and society by Deuki Pratha is still scanty. Moreover, the ways to mitigate Deuki Pratha in changing context has been least explored.

## **Methodology**

The study was based on qualitative methods. The study adopted the case study methods that comprised the key informant interview (KII), focus group discussion, observation, interview, folklore analysis were used to ascertain primary data where as secondary data were collected from different published and unpublished literatures. The study was based on multi-stage sampling. The first stage of sampling used to select the study *region* was purely purposive, followed by simple random sampling to select the rural municipality and/or municipality and finally the sample unit; *Deukis* were selected through snowball purposive sampling method. A Total of 12 *Deukis* were sampled. So, 12 Deukis were interviewed under the case study.

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Key Informant Interview (KII)***

KII had been conducted with Deukis and Devotees and Experts related to this tradition.

### **KII with Deuki**

An interview had been conducted on KII checklist with Deuki women who

had been offered to deity long ago. The socio-cultural belief of the Deuki tradition had been distinct on the Women who had been offered to deity.

The girl who had been offered to the deity had deeper faith on it because it has the faith that deity will protect and fulfill the wish of the person. There is the belief that deity has the great power that she was offered. But the girl who has been offered to deity are viewed in society with great disrespect according to the Deuki girl who had been herself offered to deity because they are not allowed to do any work, marriage and taken as a burden to the society. Religious point of view Deuki is treated as a helpless and weak person in the society as respondent answered. Deuki also believed that they are not possessed by their respective deities. Deukis are also not made participated in 'dhamyol' or 'sabaulo'. As the time changed Deukis are invited by the followers of her deity on the occasion of marriage, bratabandha, saptah, nawah, special festivals, house warming etc. They are welcomed by offering donations and honor. Deukis are not expected the gifts as reflect the marital signs like pote, tika, sindur, nabgals, gajal etc. Last rights are respectfully conducted of Deuki by the person who offered Deuki to deity or her relatives and 'Jutho' is caused to relatives and her family members. She is also affected by Juthosutak if her family members dies. During the special Pujas Deukis are offered with money, food grains, ghee, oil, material goods, clothes etc by the management committee of the respective 'mandou' temple. Deukis are also invited in feast organized on the washing/bathing celebration of the deity and her roles are cooking food, washing the dishes and welcoming the chief of the temple.

Majorly the faith rooted in the society and devotion to the deity had attracted or inspires to become Deuki. They are not allowed to marry, always have to be pure and devoted to the god. If they violate the rules according to the respondent it happens to be some bad to her. According to her if she follow the rules and disciplines strictly as Deuki then she beliefs that she lives in peace, good life and her next life will be good. If they violate the norms prescribed for a Deuki then it is the belief that they will be punished by god. On the basis of experience the respondent shared that there are plenty of challenges than opportunities for becoming Deukis. Respondent also shared that there is a wrong belief that Deuki doesn't have to bear any worldly responsibilities, it is regarded that Deukis lead a life of independence, happiness and pleasure and without any obstacles



or troubles. Deukis are not chosen by their own will. Deukis get only basic protection like food, clothes and shelters according to respondent. Respondent also believes that Deuki system is against Human rights. All the Deukis are similar as their cleanliness, devotional worship, donation and discipline and self-control. Deukis are generally illiterate and are unskilled and they don't get any facility from state, social organization or local government. There are generally various socio-cultural issues Deuki had faces like violence, discrimination, evil practices of culture, injustice and abuse. And the solution according to the respondent may be employment, awareness, advocacy etc.

### **KII with Experts**

KII was conducted with different experts related to Deuki traditions who had been working and studying this traditions for the long time. According to these experts the following information and views had been explored related to socio-cultural beliefs of Deuki traditions.

According to the experts Deuki and Paattar tradition are different where Deuki is related with temple but Paattar is not. Deukis are classified on the basis of their seniority. Especially Brahmin and kshyatriya caste group girls are made Deuki. If Deuki has children then generally they are isolated in the society, no body marry with them and don't have proper management of education for them. In the case of attraction there is not any attractive offer for becoming Deuki but parents offer them to temple without being her informed when they are were very young. The major activities Deukis are involved in the religious activities only. There are also typical songs while offering a Deuki like Maagal or Phaag. There is also a system in Deuki tradition where there is a chief Deuki and other junior Deuki have to follow their instructions, give them special honor and regard, offer them presents, to bow on their feet, to speak and behave with them in a disciplined manner. Deukis are supposed to live unmarried life, devoted the life in temple and its related work like cleaning and maintain virginity until death. They are not allowed to marry and also not allowed to leave the temple during special ceremony of deity, festivals etc. Deukis are honored on the basis of religious belief and given the place of Devis.

### **KII with Head of the Devotees (Priest, Dhama, Bhandari, Chief Priests)**

KII had been conducted with the Head of the Devotees like priest, Dhama,

Bhandari, chief priests for understanding the socio-cultural belief of Deuki tradition. The following data or information's were collected through the respondents.

According to the respondent there are specially two types of Deukis. The difference between Deuki and Paattar tradition is, Deuki is from higher caste group traditions whereas Paattar is from lower touchable Dalit group tradition. When a girl is made a Deuki then they are purified with holy water by putting on them. Especially from Brahmin, Thakuri and Kshatriya caste group are made Deukis. According to the head of devotees is any Deuki has children then the perception of society and their behavior towards them changed and isolated. There is no any specific responsibilities assigned to the children of the Deukis. Head of the devotees had high faith and regards on the deities to whom Deukis are offered and they also believe on the powers of such deities to whom deukis are offered. They believe that deities had power to fulfill the wish of the people. They have supernatural power. Devotions and belief are the major source of attraction of becoming a Deuki according to the respondent. Deukis are strictly restricted of marriage. When they violate these norms they are hardly punished. Deuki have to assist and work especially during the pooja of deity or devis. Deukis are specially taken as Devi and honored with it. They also believed that they are protected by their deity. Head of Devotees also believes that if some Humanitarian reforms are made in Deuki tradition like allowing them to marry and live a settled family life, the tradition may not be considered objectionable then that would be very good for them. If any elder daughter of a Deuki refused to become Deuki then it is believed that she will not get the place of goddess or Devi. Still we can see this tradition in Baitadi district of Nepal but not other districts according to the respondent.

## RESULTS

Deuki is the historical tradition practiced in far-western region of Nepal. It is also taken as religious tradition practiced in the society. Deuki is legally banned in Nepal. But still we can see some practices regarding to this tradition. The mixed reaction could be captured in our society related to Deuki tradition. KII with deuki herself, experts and Chief Devotee had given the present reflection on the socio-cultural belief of Deuki tradition in Nepal. The study shows that Deuki women who had been offered to the deity when she was girl were unknowingly been isolated and abused

from the society. The unclear culture and deep rooted culture had made them pay the price of their whole life. The culture of being unmarried and on the name of purity gets women to be not as a part of society and taking different in the society. Unmatured girls are asked to be offered to the deity and violated their rights and unfulfilled wishes. Deuki still express their feelings of pain and isolation when they were Deuki and their remained unfulfilled desired hidden inside them. Only the fear and devotion for their deity had made them struggle for whole life as a Deuki. Experts also took this tradition as not good for woman right. Although it is illegal but still some deep rooted cultural belief had made exceptional practices in the society but the changing structure of the society does not seem to bear such kind of unsuitable practices for the modern, globalized and technical society. As society changes the chief of devotee had also seemed to be accepted the changes and the perception towards this kind of culture and tradition. They feels that if such kind to traditions would also be made modified according to the Humanitarian needs and according to this structural change of the society then it would be more acceptable to the modern present society of Nepal. Although this kind of tradition had made illegal but it took long time to change the psychology of the people in the society.

## CONCLUSION

According to the experts people in the society don't want to continue to this tradition of certain groups and some groups want to be continued for this tradition because they believe that there should be someone to look after their deity, clean the temples, maintain sanitation, conduct Pooja etc. But now days this tradition is legally banned and only some incidents of Deuki tradition could be captured in the society.

Although legally banned by the constitution still some new cases could be heard. Various reasons were attributed for exceptional practice such as fear and devotion for their deity, deep rooted superstition belief system upon God and Goddess, lack of awareness and advocacy etc.

Now people are aware with their rights so they don't want this tradition anymore. Some of the problems related to the historical background and practices of Deuki tradition are the psychological impact, exploitation of the life of the girl and social and Economic isolation in the society. The solutions as per the response are the legal punishment, education and health facility, employment and also use of professional social Worker.

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