Between Gods and Genders: Rethinking *Deodhani* as a Precolonial Site of Gender Plurality in Assam

Dr Rimjim Boruah
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya,
Nagaon, Assam.
rimjimboruah0280@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper critically examines the ritualistic performance of *Deodhani* in Assam as a rich cultural archive that embodies precolonial understandings of gender plurality and sacred non-normative identities. Often overlooked in dominant gender and historical discourses, the *Deodhani* tradition, where individuals, often assigned female at birth but not exclusively so, embody the goddess through trance and dance, offers a significant departure from rigid colonial binaries of gender. By positioning *Deodhani* within a larger South Asian matrix of ritual-based gender variance, this paper interrogates how indigenous epistemologies once accommodated diverse gendered and spiritual experiences beyond the man-woman binary. Drawing on oral histories, ethnographic accounts, and comparative cultural studies, particularly of the *Jogappas* of Karnataka and the *Aravanis* of Tamil Nadu, this paper maps the broader contours of transgenderism in India. Furthermore, it examines the ways in which colonial ethnography, moral reform movements, and postcolonial nation-building processes contributed to the marginalisation and pathologisation of these traditions. In reclaiming *Deodhani* as a precolonial site of gender fluidity and divine embodiment, this paper not only recovers suppressed histories but also critiques the epistemic violence embedded in modern gender constructions. The paper also advocates for a more inclusive historiographical lens that honours ritual, spirituality, and indigenous gender plurality as legitimate modes of historical knowledge.

Keywords: *Deodhani*, gender plurality, precolonial Assam, ritual performance, *Jogappa*s, *Aravani*s, sacred embodiment, colonial erasure.

INTRODUCTION

In the kaleidoscopic religious landscape of South Asia, gender identity has long existed in forms that defy the rigid binaries imposed by colonial and heteropatriarchal epistemologies. The mythologies, rituals, traditions, and devotional practices of the Indian subcontinent offer a rich archive of embodiments that surpass the normative categories of male and female. However, these indigenous expressions of gender variance have often been rendered invisible, if not outrightly erased, in the historiography of gender and sexuality. This paper seeks to recuperate one such marginalised tradition - *Deodhani*, a ritual performance of Assam, by situating it as a vital site for the historical recognition of gender plurality in precolonial India. Through a critical exploration of *Deodhani* as a performative, spiritual, and cultural practice, this study interrogates the intersections of gender, divinity, and ritual possession, challenging dominant paradigms of gender identity and ritual agency.

The *Deodhani* ritual, central to the veneration of local tutelary deities such as [i]*Kechai-Khaiti* and [ii]*Bhairabi*, involves an intense form of trance dancing wherein individuals are possessed by the goddess and serve as her human conduit. While often cast as a religious performance, *Deodhani,* upon closer examination, reveals a layered matrix of identity and power. Those who perform as *Deodhani*, regardless of their sex, embody and enact the goddess in ways that transform the self, both spiritually and socially. In many oral accounts, biologically male performers adopt feminine personas during possession, not as mimicry but as a divinely sanctioned embodiment. Such moments open up ritual spaces where gender is not merely performed but radically transcended. In this sense, *Deodhani* becomes an indigenous theatre of gender variance, where identity is both fluid and sacralised.

Methodology

This paper uses the framework of 'gender performativity', as articulated by Judith Butler, to analyse how *Deodhani* dancers "do" gender in ways that challenge essentialist and colonial models of subjecthood. According to Butler, "gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance" (Butler 1990). However, in case of *Deodhani,* this stylisation is not only bodily but cosmological, grounded in tantric ritual and indigenous religiosity. The performative gender assumed by the *Deodhani* is not fictive or theatrical in the Western sense; rather, it is ontologically anchored in the body's role as a medium of divine communication. This distinction is critical, for it resists the tendency to map Western queer theory uncritically onto non-Western contexts. As Gayatri Reddy and Serena Nanda observed, "while the theory of performativity has travelled well, its universalist undertone must be interrogated when applied to culturally and religiously embedded practices" (Reddy and Nanda 2017).

Assam's ritual landscape, shaped by its syncretic blend of tribal, tantric, and Vedic elements, offers fertile ground for exploring non-normative embodiments. The cult of *Kechai-Khaiti*, for instance, traces its lineage to pre-Aryan, Austroasiatic, and Tibeto-Burman spiritual traditions, in which gender and spiritual power were intimately linked (Sharma 2002). Within this framework, femininity is not a secondary or subordinate identity but a locus of divine potency. *Deodhani* dancers channel this power in ways that not only subvert gender roles but also reorder them. They do not simply imitate women; they become vessels of the goddess herself, blurring the line between human and divine, male and female. This is where the phrase "between gods and genders" finds its resonance not as metaphor, but as a lived, embodied tension.

Histories of gender variance in India have often been dominated by accounts of the 'Hijra' community, whose marginalisation under British colonial law, most notably the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 has become emblematic of the colonial repression of queer identities. Yet, the Northeast region of India, and Assam in particular, offers a markedly different narrative that remains largely unexplored in both academic and popular discourse. As Sanjukta Dasgupta argues, "the multiplicity of transgender expressions in India must be disaggregated regionally and ritually; the domination of North Indian narratives has obscured equally complex practices in the East and Northeast" (Dasgupta 2021). *Deodhani*, as this paper will show, provides a compelling counter-narrative to the monolithic representation of transgender identity in India. It brings forth a model where gender variance is not stigmatised but sanctified.

This sanctification, however, has been systematically disrupted by colonial epistemologies that sought to standardise gender, religion, and subjectivity under the rubric of Western rationality. Colonial administrators and missionaries often viewed ritual possession as a form of lunacy or primitive superstition. Their anthropological records frequently pathologised the *Deodhani* dancers. The imposition of binary gender norms, heteronormative family structures, and caste-patriarchal values contributed to the desacralisation of *Deodhani* practices and their gradual marginalisation in both public memory and religious institutions. As Anjali Arondekar suggests, "colonial sexuality studies produced a politics of illegibility, wherein only certain forms of sexual and gender deviance could be recognised, while others were rendered unintelligible" (Arondekar 2009). *Deodhani* falls into the latter category - legible not as gender variance but as madness, backwardness, or folklore.

Against this backdrop of erasure, this paper seeks to study *Deodhani* as an act of both ritual recovery and scholarly intervention. It argues that *Deodhani* is not merely a folkloric performance but a culturally embedded epistemology of gender that resists Western categories of transgender, transvestism, or drag. It is a spiritual enactment of transformation, one that

confers social and religious authority upon those who embody it. In doing so, *Deodhani* calls into question the temporal and spatial boundaries drawn around queerness, spirituality, and indigeneity.

Methodologically, this study draws from a combination of oral histories, ethnographic fieldwork, temple records, and close readings of Assamese literature and folklore. While archival materials on *Deodhani* are sparse, especially in English-language sources, the oral traditions and embodied practices of local communities offer a wealth of insight. As Lata Mani has argued, "oral traditions must be read not as mere supplement to written archives but as alternative repositories of historical consciousness" (Mani 1998). In that spirit, this paper foregrounds voices that have historically been sidelined in both colonial and nationalist historiography.

By integrating critical theory with regional specificity, this paper aspires to contribute to the larger project of decolonizing gender and religious studies in South Asia. It argues for the need to rethink not only what constitutes gender variance but also where its histories are located. In examining *Deodhani* as a precolonial site of gender plurality, this paper posits a vision of history that is capacious, plural, and accountable to its silences. As Michel Foucault said, attention must be given not only to the "repressive hypothesis" of sexuality but also to the "archives of enunciation" - those fleeting, ephemeral acts that speak, however obliquely, to another way of being (Foucault 1990).

In short, this study insists that the *Deodhani* ritual is not an anomalous curiosity or anthropological relic, but a vibrant articulation of gendered sacredness that complicates the narrative of queer erasure in India's past. By moving between gods and genders, it not only enacts a theology of difference but also gestures toward a politics of recognition - one that honours the plurality of identities that have always existed at the margins of dominant histories.

The following part will examine the historical and cultural context of *Deodhani*, its embodied gender performances, and the colonial interventions that disrupted its epistemic power. In doing so, they aim to recover not just a ritual, but a worldview - one that locates gender not in biology or modern identity politics, but in spirit, community, and the sacred rhythm of dance.

DISCUSSION

***Deodhani* as an embodied ritual of gender plurality in precolonial Assam.**

The ritual of *Deodhani*, deeply embedded in the religious-cultural fabric of Assam, presents a rich tableau through which to interrogate indigenous gender ideologies and embodied spiritualities that predate colonial epistemologies. Rooted in tantric and tribal devotional traditions, the *Deodhani* ritual, characterised by trance, possession, dance, and divine invocation, operates as a sacred performance that not only connects the human body to the divine but also reconfigures normative constructs of gender. In this section, I explore the ritual as an enactment of gender plurality, one that suspends fixed identity and reclaims liminal embodiments as sites of sacred authority.

To understand *Deodhani* as a precolonial practice of gender variance, one must first acknowledge the regional cosmology from which it emerges. Assam, situated at the confluence of Indo-Aryan, Austroasiatic, and Tibeto-Burman cultural influences, has historically nurtured a spiritual syncretism where goddess cults, animist practices, and tantric rituals coalesce. Among these, the worship of *Kechai-Khaiti*, a tribal goddess of considerable pre-Vaishnavite antiquity, plays a central role in the *Deodhani* ritual. As folklorist Birendranath Datta notes, *Kechai-Khaiti* is "a fierce yet compassionate deity associated with wild nature, fertility, and shakti" (Datta 2000). The *Deodhani*, usually a woman or a male-bodied individual chosen by divine calling, serves as her earthly medium, entering a state of trance to communicate with the goddess and perform ritual dances at shrines and community festivals.

What makes this practice particularly potent for gender analysis is its transcendence of the body as a mere biological site. In the moment of possession, the *Deodhani* becomes neither man nor woman but a conduit for the feminine divine. This divine possession is not mimetic cross-dressing or theatrical play; it is ontologically transformative. As Michel de Certeau describes in his theory of "possession as discourse," such rituals mark "the moment when the body is both written upon and becomes an enunciating subject" (de Certeau 1984). In *Deodhani*, the body becomes a living text inscribed by divine will and it simultaneously enacts that will through movement and speech, thus collapsing the boundaries between gendered embodiment and spiritual agency.

Numerous oral testimonies and ethnographic accounts reveal that biologically male *Deodhani* dancers often assume feminine expressions during possession, adopting the gestures, attire, and mannerisms traditionally coded for females. Importantly, this performance is not perceived as deviance within the ritual context; instead, it is a mark of divine favour. In an ethnographic interview conducted by Dipali Deka in Kamrup district of Assam, one elderly person recounted: "When the goddess comes, it does not matter who you are. You become Her. She chooses you, and you must surrender" (Deka 2012). This sacred suspension of gender binaries challenges both colonial and modern state-imposed taxonomies of identity. The *Deodhani* is not transgressive in the Western sense but 'transubstantial' - transformed in essence through a culturally sanctioned metaphysics of fluidity.

Situating *Deodhani* within the discourse of gender performativity requires a nuanced and thoughtful approach. Judith Butler's seminal idea that gender is produced through iterative social enactments (Butler 1990) offers a valuable analytical lens; however, the *Deodhani* performance transcends the merely social, encompassing metaphysical and cosmological dimensions as well. In *Deodhani*, gender is not merely performed to signify identity but is enacted as a form of divine labour. The dance is both an offering and a revelation, a ritualised

rupture of the quotidian order that allows for the visibility of otherwise marginalised identities. As Ananya Jahanara Kabir points out in her reading of South Asian dance traditions, "ritual dance often exists at the interstices of religion, gender, and politics, serving as a counter-archive to dominant discourses" (Kabir 2009). *Deodhani* is precisely such a counter-archive - embodying both continuity and resistance.

What makes this counter-archive even more significant is its long-standing resilience against Brahmanical patriarchy. Unlike classical dance forms like *Bharatanatyam* or *Kathak*, which underwent Sanskritisation and patriarchal institutionalisation during the colonial and postcolonial periods, *Deodhani* remains largely outside codified tradition. Its performative ethos is governed not by canonical treatises like the *Natya Shastra* but by oral transmission, community sanction, and spiritual intuition. This anarchic structure allows for greater gender inclusivity and improvisation, resisting the fixities of caste and gender hierarchy. As Meenakshi Thapan argues, "in ritual settings that are less mediated by textual orthodoxy, the potential for alternative gender scripts is significantly higher" (Thapan 2009). Thus, the *Deodhani* dancer - especially those who do not conform to binary gender norms becomes a figure of both ritual authority and social anomaly.

Yet, this potential for fluidity is not without its contradictions. While the ritual grants temporary suspension of normative gender roles, it does not always translate into sustained social mobility or recognition for gender-variant individuals. Once the trance ends and the festival concludes, the *Deodhani* often returns to a world that is deeply stratified and heteronormative. The performative space is liminal and temporal, offering liberation only within its sacred bounds. This raises important questions about the durability of gender plurality within ritual contexts and whether such practices can be mobilised for broader queer and trans political claims. As Arvind Narrain writes, "ritual spaces can validate alternate gender

expressions, but unless these are linked to rights-based discourses, their impact remains circumscribed" (Narrain 2015).

Moreover, colonial ethnography and missionary accounts played a significant role in distorting and suppressing these ritual practices. British administrators such as E.A. Gait and Thomas Oldham often dismissed *Deodhani* as primitive hysteria or pagan excess, noting the "unseemly spectacle of effeminate men dancing in frenzied abandon" (Gait 1906). Such accounts not only pathologised the *Deodhani*'s embodiment but also contributed to the legal and social stigmatisation of gender non-conforming individuals under colonial law. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, although primarily directed at communities like the Hijras in northern India, cast a long shadow over gender-variant practices across the subcontinent. In Assam, the colonial project of standardizing religion and gender through census classifications and missionary reform effectively erased *Deodhani* from official narratives of Assamese identity and culture.

 The effects of this erasure emerge in the liminal space *Deodhani* inhabits within historical discourse and popular remembrance. Most academic work on Assamese ritual culture has focused on the Vaishnavite reform movement, led by figures such as Srimanta Sankardev, which emphasized monotheism, scriptural literacy, and moral discipline - ideals often at odds with the ecstatic, body-centered spirituality of *Deodhani*. As a result, the *Deodhani* tradition was relegated to the periphery of Assamese religious life, preserved only in tribal areas and among lower-caste communities. This cultural marginalisation has also contributed to the gendered erasure of the ritual, as its association with feminine and fluid embodiments has been seen as antithetical to the rationalized masculinity of modern Assamese nationalism.

However, recent scholarship and community-led revitalisation efforts have begun to reclaim the *Deodhani* tradition as a site of heritage and resistance. Performers and activists are increasingly asserting the value of *Deodhani* not only as folklore but as a living, breathing

articulation of gendered spirituality. In this emerging discourse, *Deodhani* is being re-read not simply as a vestige of the past but as a model for rethinking gender in the present. It offers a vernacular cosmology in which the divine feminine is accessible to all bodies; in which gender is not assigned but assumed through ritual encounter; and in which the boundaries between human and divine, and between male and female, are lovingly blurred.

The *Deodhani* ritual offers a powerful framework for rethinking gender outside the confines of the binary. It anchors gender variance not in pathology or modern identity categories but in spirituality, performance, and community tradition. It invites people to ask: What if gender were not something we possess but something that possesses us? What if divinity were the space where all gender categories dissolve, and what remains is simply embodiment in its most ecstatic form?

Through this re-centring of *Deodhani* as a site of gender plurality, the ritual becomes not only an object of scholarly recovery but a beacon for alternative futures - rooted in the sacred, the sensuous, and the subversively plural.

Colonial erasures and the epistemic violence of gender normativity

The colonial project in India, while primarily understood through the lens of economic exploitation and administrative control, was equally a process of epistemic domination - a reconstitution of knowledge systems, social structures, and subjectivities to conform to the worldview of the coloniser. In Assam, as elsewhere in South Asia, this epistemic violence was acutely felt in the realm of ritual practices and gender identities that did not align with Western categories of sex, sexuality, and rational religion. Among the most affected traditions was *Deodhani*, a ritual of spirit possession and divine embodiment that not only defied binary gender norms but also functioned outside the codified boundaries of Brahmanical orthodoxy. This section critically explores how colonial rule facilitated the systematic erasure and

delegitimisation of *Deodhani* through legal, ethnographic, and religious discourses, thereby imposing a normative gender regime grounded in European binaries such as man and woman, reason and madness, and civilization and primitivity.

The encounter between colonial modernity and indigenous gender practices like *Deodhani* can be best understood as a clash of epistemologies. In *Deodhani*, gender is not a fixed identity but an embodied state of divine transformation - a performance that transcends the biological and the social. The *Deodhani* performer, often assigned female at birth but taking on roles that are gender-transgressive or spiritually hybrid, enacts a cosmology in which gender fluidity is not only accepted but considered sacred. This radical departure from Western notions of stable gender identity was illegible to the colonial mind, which was invested in maintaining clear, binary distinctions between male and female, spiritual and pathological. As Lata Mani aptly states, "Colonialism's violence was not merely material; it was epistemic - it invalidated entire systems of meaning" (Mani 1998).

British ethnographers and administrators, in attempting to catalogue and understand Indian society, systematically reinterpreted indigenous traditions through a Eurocentric lens. Practices such as *Deodhani*, rooted in Tantric cosmology, oral knowledge, and ritual performance, were often dismissed as "superstition," "demonic possession," or "tribal primitivism." This discursive framing effectively rendered these practices unworthy of scholarly inquiry or cultural preservation. As Partha Chatterjee observes, the colonial state sought to transform the "outside" of its administrative apparatus - caste, tribe, gender, and ritual - into categories that were countable, manageable, and ultimately subordinate (Chatterjee 1993). *Deodhani*, with its fluid embodiment and resistance to textual fixity, could not be neatly accommodated within these new classificatory systems.

A significant dimension of this epistemic violence was enacted through the census and legal apparatuses instituted by the colonial state. The first comprehensive census in India (1871) introduced rigid categories of sex, religion, and caste - categories that had never before existed in such bureaucratic terms in Indian society. The recognition of only two genders - male and female erased a wide spectrum of indigenous gender identities, including those embodied by *Deodhani* performers. As Anjali Arondekar argues, the colonial archive functioned as both a repository and a technology of erasure, one that silencing non-normative subjects even as it purported to record them (Arondekar 2009). The ritual subject of *Deodhani*, whose gendered self was tied to spirit possession and divine calling, could not be captured by the reductive binaries imposed by the census and was thus rendered invisible.

Legal interventions further compounded this erasure. While there was no direct colonial law banning *Deodhani*, the broader legal climate criminalized gender nonconformity and ritual deviance. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, though aimed at nomadic and so-called "criminal" communities, introduced a moral panic around bodies and practices deemed non-normative. This included Hijra communities, Sufi mystics, and local ritual performers, who were increasingly subjected to surveillance and moral suspicion. Although the *Deodhani* tradition was not legally prosecuted, the ripple effects of this legal regime created a climate in which any deviation from heteronormative behaviour or Brahmanical orthodoxy was viewed as criminal, insane, or uncivilised. Arvind Narrain has rightly noted that "the colonial state produced a sexuality that was both juridically invisible and socially criminal" (Narrain 2015).

The discourses of medicine and psychiatry, emerging in tandem with legal codes, further pathologised the *Deodhani* performer. Spirit possession, central to *Deodhani*, was increasingly reinterpreted by colonial psychiatrists as hysteria, schizophrenia, or female madness. Female asceticism and divine possession were no longer seen as signs of spiritual prowess but as symptoms of psychological instability. As Elizabeth Lunbeck has shown in the

Western context, psychiatry often operated to discipline and pathologise the female body, reinscribing patriarchal anxieties about women's embodiment - a framework echoed in colonial diagnoses of female ritual performers in India. (Lunbeck 2015). The *Deodhani*'s ecstatic dance, trance, and ambiguous gender presentation were thus recast through a biomedical gase that stripped the performer of agency and sacred legitimacy.

Colonial ethnographers such as Edward Gait approached regional practices in Assam through a voyeuristic and exoticizing lens. Their fleeting references to *Deodhani* are marked by brevity and condescension, revealing the limits of colonial understanding and the biases underpinning their ethnographic gase. Gait refers to as "certain women believed to be possessed by local spirits" whose "antics" form part of temple festivals (Gait 1906). There is little attempt to understand the ontological premises of possession or the sociocultural role of the *Deodhani* dancer. The use of terms such as "antics" reduces a complex ritual to mere spectacle, betraying the colonial gase that saw such practices as folkloric oddities rather than meaningful cosmologies.

The missionary enterprise added another layer to the colonial assault on *Deodhani*. Christian missionaries in Assam viewed possession rituals as vestiges of heathenism that needed to be eliminated through conversion and moral reform. Their reports, many of which circulated in missionary periodicals, characterised *Deodhani* as a form of demonic possession, with dancers described as "writhing in unnatural ecstasy, their bodies inhabited by evil spirits" (Bora 2012). These depictions not only demonized the ritual but also feminized it in a derogatory sense, linking the spiritual to the irrational and the feminine to the pathological. The missionary project was thus aligned with the broader colonial agenda of replacing indigenous spiritual authority with the rational, patriarchal order of Christianity and Western medicine.

The epistemic violence of colonialism did not end with the departure of the British. Postcolonial statecraft, though framed in terms of national sovereignty and cultural pride, often reproduced colonial hierarchies of knowledge. In Assam, the modern state's attempts to codify Assamese identity have been marked by a privileging of Vaishnavite traditions, Sanskritised cultural forms, and heteropatriarchal values. Within this framework, *Deodhani* - associated with tribal cosmology, goddess worship, and gender ambiguity - remains marginal. The ritual continues to survive in isolated communities but is often framed as "folk art" or a "tribal remnant," stripped of its radical spiritual and gendered significance.

The nationalist historiography that emerged after independence also contributed to this marginalisation. Mainstream histories of Assam have focused on kings, wars, and Brahmanical reforms, while ritual practices that challenge caste and gender hierarchies have been sidelined. The few academic studies on *Deodhani* tend to approach it either as cultural heritage or anthropological curiosity, rarely engaging with its gender politics. As Nivedita Menon has argued, "The postcolonial state re-institutionalised heteronormativity not as a colonial imposition but as a native tradition to be preserved" (Menon 2012). In this light, *Deodhani*'s continued marginalization reflects not an absence of historical significance but rather an ongoing epistemic refusal to acknowledge non-binary gender expressions as legitimate historical subjects.

Yet, despite centuries of erasure and marginalisation, *Deodhani* persists, as performance, as memory, and increasingly as resistance. Recent research, oral history projects, and feminist interventions are beginning to recover the tradition's gendered significance. These efforts draw on the critical insights of decolonial theory, particularly the idea of 'epistemic disobedience' articulated by Walter Mignolo, which calls for a refusal to think solely within the confines of 'Eurocentric Modernity' (Mignolo 2011). In reclaiming *Deodhani* as a site of gender plurality

and spiritual agency, contemporary scholars are not merely recovering a lost past, they are challenging the epistemic foundations of both colonialism and patriarchy.

Furthermore, queer and trans activists in the region are beginning to look to traditions like *Deodhani* as cultural antecedents for indigenous queer identity. This move represents a shift from Western models of identity politics toward a rooted politics of cultural and historical continuity. As Shohini Ghosh puts it, "To queer the archive is not simply to find alternative sexualities but to interrogate the very structures that rendered them invisible" (Ghosh 2007). *Deodhani,* when read as such an archive, opens up a space for rethinking gender not as a fixed identity but as a ritualized relation - a form of sacred transformation.

The colonial erasure of *Deodhani* was not merely an act of cultural misunderstanding; it was a deliberate attempt to overwrite indigenous cosmologies of gender and spirituality with Eurocentric, binary logics. This erasure operated through law, science, religion, and historiography, and its legacy continues in the exclusions of the postcolonial state. Yet, the survival and rearticulation of *Deodhani* also remind us of the resilience of alternative epistemologies. They call us to move beyond the limits of colonial modernity and recover forms of life, knowledge, and embodiment that were once silenced but never entirely extinguished.

Conclusion: Reclaiming *Deodhani*, Reimagining Gender

The *Deodhani* tradition, far from being an isolated folkloric remnant of Assam's past stands as a rich cultural archive of gender plurality, spiritual embodiment, and ritual agency. As this study has sought to demonstrate, *Deodhani* is not merely a sacred performance but a potent counter-narrative to colonial and postcolonial regimes of gender normativity. In its precolonial manifestation, *Deodhani* encoded within itself a fluid conception of gender – the one where the divine could inhabit the body regardless of assigned sex, and ritual identity

superseded rigid binary classifications. The dancer, becoming vessel to the deity, performed a metaphysics of becoming that unsettled heteronormative logic and offered space for ambiguous, sacred, and hybrid forms of gendered being.

The colonial encounter, however, inaugurated an epistemic rupture. Through administrative classifications, missionary denunciations, psychiatric pathologisation, and ethnographic trivialisation, *Deodhani* was systematically stripped of its spiritual legitimacy and gender complexity. This epistemic violence was not incidental - it was constitutive of the colonial project's desire to reorder indigenous life according to the logics of Western reason, sexual dimorphism, and religious monotheism. Thus, the "Deodhani" once honoured as a bearer of divine force came to be imagined instead as a spectacle of madness, superstition, or backwardness. Even in the postcolonial era, traces of this erasure persist, refracted through the ritual's folklorisation, the ascendancy of Vaishnavite orthodoxy in shaping Assamese identity, and the silence of institutional historiography regarding Deodhani's cultural significance.

However, this erasure is not total. The survival of *Deodhani*, especially among indigenous communities and goddess cults in Assam, signals the resilience of non-normative gender ontologies that predate and outlast colonial impositions. Moreover, the growing scholarly and activist interest in re-reading *Deodhani* through feminist, queer, and decolonial lenses marks a significant epistemological shift. It demonstrates the capacity of marginalised traditions to challenge dominant historical narratives and reclaim space for complex, embodied, and plural forms of subjectivity. In aligning with thinkers like Walter Mignolo and Anjali Arondekar, this paper has foregrounded the need to disobey colonial ways of knowing, to reclaim ritual as a form of knowledge, gender as a mode of becoming, and performance as a site of political agency.

Findings

The findings of this study reaffirm that *Deodhani* was, and remains a radical site of gender performance. It gestures toward a worldview where the divine does not conform to masculine or feminine boundaries but flows across and beyond them, sanctifying fluidity itself. In reviving *Deodhani* as a subject of serious academic inquiry, we are not merely preserving a cultural artefact; we are interrogating the very structures of knowledge that once deemed it unintelligible. This act of recovery, then, is simultaneously an act of resistance against colonial erasure, epistemic violence, and heteronormative historiography. It gestures toward a future in which Indigenous knowledge systems are not merely archived but actively sustained and enacted; where gender diversity is not simply tolerated but affirmatively celebrated; and where the sacred and the subversive converge once more in dynamic and generative alignment.

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[i] *Kechai Khati* is a tribal goddess revered by the Bodo-Kachari and several other indigenous communities of Northeast India. Her name, which translates to "eater of raw flesh," reflects her fierce and formidable nature as a war deity. Historically, her worship was linked to human sacrifice which is a ritual practice that was eventually prohibited. Although she continues to be venerated under different names such as *Ranachandi* and *Ugratara*, certain tribes, notably the

Chutias, still honor her in her primordial form at the ancient *Tamreswari* Temple in Sadiya, Assam.

[ii] Goddess *Bhairavi* is a fierce and compassionate form of the Divine Mother, representing the power of time, transformation, and ultimate liberation. As one of the ten *Mahavidya*s, she embodies both the destructive and purifying aspects of cosmic energy, guiding devotees toward spiritual awakening.