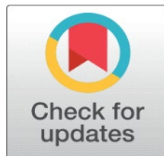
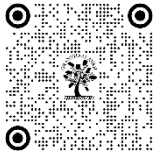


# QUEST FOR SELF-IDENTITY: EXPLORING THE DYNAMICS OF THE DEORI TRIBE OF ASSAM

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## ABSTRACT

Assam, the mother state of Northeast, is the land of tribal communities where more than twenty-three (23) tribal communities have been living from ancient times. Bodo, Karbi, Tiwa, Mising, Deori, Rabha, Dimasa, Hajong etc. are the major tribal communities of Assam. This paper tries to explore the complex process of defining self-identity of the Deori tribe living in Assam, a state of north-east India. The Deori tribe is an indigenous tribal community that have experienced many historical, sociocultural, and political changes during 60-70 years, thus shaping the sense of identity. The approach that draws from sociology, anthropology, and history to find the way involve in the construction, negotiation, and contestation of the Deori identity over time. Through the examination of historical accounts, oral traditions, ceremonial customs, and socio-economic frameworks, the study illuminates the intricate interaction between internal and external elements that have influenced the perception of the self-identity of the Deori tribe. Furthermore, the paper explores the implications of globalisation, modernisation, state policies on the preservation and revival of the cultural identity of Deori tribe. Finally, it delves into the broader discourses on identity formation, indigenous rights, and cultural resilience in contemporary societies. To prepare this paper both historical and explanatory methodologies have been applied by the researchers.

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**Keywords:** Deori, Assam, Self-Identity, Tribal League, Educated Elite Class, Autonomy Movement



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Self-identity is the idea that one possesses about himself/herself as a unique individual. According to identity theory, “the self is reflexive which can take itself as an object and categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classification” (Stets & Burke, 2000: 224). According to Conner and Armitage, “Self-identity may be defined as the salient part of an actor’s self which relates to a particular behaviour. It reflects the extent to which an actor sees him- or herself as fulfilling the criteria for any societal role” (Conner & Armitage, 1998: 1444).

The need for autonomy or ‘self-identity’ is considered a significant issue in post-independent India, especially in northeast India. But the demands are not homogenous in nature of various groups. If a group’s demand is for exclusive homeland, some others want separate state or some groups demand for autonomous council and so and so forth. Such demands of group or ethnic identity have balkanized the region for quite some time. The politicisation of identity and

ethnicity has arisen from ethnic distinction leading to identity politics. The British instigated the foundations of division and secessionism in the region. Their strategy of incremental segregation between tribals and non-tribals, as well as between hills and plains, together with the segregation of tribes via the 'Inner Line Regulation' and the establishment of 'non-regulated', 'backward', and 'excluded' areas, disrupted centuries of historical and cultural continuity and interconnectedness. After independence, the state government of Assam, implemented several tactics and structural modifications to address the desires of its ethnic populations; however, these measures proved inadequate in resolving the issues of ethnic unrest. Francis Fukuyama mentioned, "Research on ethnic movements around the world has shown that individual self-esteem is related to the esteem conferred on the larger group with which one is associated; thus, the political would affect the personal" (Fukuyama, 1985:141-143).

## 2. AREA OF STUDIES

Assam, a northeast Indian state, is home to numerous tribal and non-tribal communities with distinct languages, cultures, traditions, and religious beliefs who significantly contributed to the development of the Assamese nation. However, ethnic conflicts in the region, which have been present since the colonial period, stem from ethnic groups claiming their identity. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, various associations emerged within these communities. The '*mels*' (public gathering) cultivated the emerging 'tribal' mindset, leading to the establishment of the 'Tribal League' as a form of organised tribal politics in 1933. The majority of the tribal people who live in Assam belong to the Sino-Tibetan language family are *Bodo, Mishing, Deori, Karbi, Kachari, Dimasa, Rabha* etc. The colonial rulers used the term 'tribe', 'tribal' etc. throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## 3. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Quest for self-identity within the tribal community is a significant social issue in the global culture today. 'Tribal League', a socio-political organisation, was founded in 1933, aimed to promote the concept of 'self-identity' among the tribal population of Assam. The organisation united various tribes, including *Bodo, Rabha, Tiwa, Deori, and Mising*, demanding distinct identities. So, it is importance to study on the self-identity movement of the Deori people based on their unique linguistic-cultural characteristics. The quest for self-identity within tribal communities remains a significant global issue.

## 4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In his book, Francis Fukuyama mentioned, "Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition" (2019) delves into the challenges of identity, racial discrimination, and immigration, emphasising the importance of recognition in modern global politics.

G. A. Grierson's "Linguistic Survey of India" (1927) is a distinguished publication that centres on ethnographic investigation. In this study, the author strives to determine the numerous languages that are present in India. The author also addressed the several ethnic languages spoken by the tribal inhabitants of Assam, notably the Deori language.

William Barclay Brown's work, "An Outline Grammar of the Deori Chutiya Language Spoken in Upper Assam" (1895), explores the grammatical correlation between the Chutia and Kachari languages. Brown suggests that "the Deoris' native language, Chutiya, could be considered the autochthonous language of Upper Assam, and their exceptional black arts skills are highly regarded by the Assamese population".

Edward Gait's "A History of Assam" (2018), predominantly centres on the genesis of the Deori people. He states that the Deoris are a significant subgroup of the Chutiyas and have traditionally acted as important priests for the Chutiya ruler. The Ahoms' conquest of the Chutiya kingdom granted the Deoris permission to continue their macabre rituals.

Rev. Sidney Endle's "The Kacharis" (1911) is a significant anthropological study on indigenous tribal societies like the Kachari, Deori, and Bodo. It covers social, family, laws, religion, folklore, superstitions, and language. Endle also highlights "the Deoris as the priestly faction of Chutia society".

## 5. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The primary purpose of this research is to investigate the role of the 'Tribal League' in fostering self-identity, as well as the influence of the educated middle class within the Deori community in organising the Deori people based on their unique lingo-cultural characteristics. Furthermore, we undertake an examination of several social organisations that significantly contributed to the self-identity movement of the Deori tribe at different periods.

## 6. METHODOLOGY

The study has so far used both historical and explanatory methodologies. The researchers obtained primary and secondary data from various sources. The investigators collected primary data through field visits to the Deori communities and discussions with the Deori populace. The researchers obtained secondary data sources from various publications such as books, periodicals, newspapers, and census reports.

## 7. DISCUSSION

### The Deoris: An Ethnographic Note

"Ethnically Deoris are affiliated to the great Tibeto-Burman group and their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic families" (Grierson, 1927: 64). The Deori tribe constitutes a distinct social class of Assam that was traditionally engaged in priestly activities during medieval time. Gait wrote in his book 'A History of Assam', "The Deoris were the priestly section of the Chutia kings of Sadiya who worshipped the Goddess *Kesaikhati*, 'the eater of raw flesh', to whom human sacrifices were offered" (Gait, 1926: 42). Renowned author B. K. Kakoti wrote, "*Deori* is a New Indo-Aryan formation connected with Sanskrit *deva-grhika*." (Kakoti, 1948: 66). According to Rev. Sidney Endle's book *The Kacharis*, "The Deori people were the recognised minister of religion and they were essentially what indeed their tribal names, implies, a Levite or priestly body" (Endle, 1911: 91). Authors like E. T. Dalton, P. Saikia and Hem Baruah assert that "the Deori people represented the priestly branch of Chutia" (Cheita, 2019: 13) and "they have been shown in census table under the head of Chutiya" (Allen, 1902: 127).

"The Deori tribe have four *khels* (group), viz., *Borgoniya* or *Boliamota*, *Patorgoniya* or *Patorhat*, *Tengaponiya* or *Khesakhotia*, and *Buraberi* or *Dibongia* who denote merely the location of each settlement" (Pakyntein, 1964: 17) and each of them has their *deosal* or shrine, where they worship the same goddess under the different names. "The *Bargonia* being *Kesayikhati*; of the *Patorgonia*, *Tameswari Mai*; of the *Tengapania*, *Bolia Hemota*; and of the *Dibongia*, *Buraburi*" (Pakyntein, 1964: 64). Currently Deori people are living in Lakhimpur, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Sonitpur, and Tinsukia district of Assam alongside the territory of Changlang and Lohit of Arunachal Pradesh. According to the census report of 2011, "the total population of the Deori community is 43,750" (Census Report, 2011).

### Tribal League and Self-Identity Movement of the Deoris

The intricate interaction of historical, economic, political, and social elements is reflected in the socio-cultural progress of the indigenous Deori people who mostly lives in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The Deori language, culture, customs, traditions have not only significantly influenced Assamese society but also raises the need for autonomy to safeguard and preserve it. The rise of the *Bodo* (1987) and the *Karbi* (1986 – 89) movement also inspired the *Mising*, *Deori*, *Rabha*, *Sonowal Kachari*, *Tiwa (Lalung)* communities of Assam for autonomy or identity movements. Article 371 of the Constitution provide for protection of the traditions, customs and land rights of the tribes. Article 244 provides for the governance and administration of scheduled areas through the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. Of these, the Sixth Schedule provides for self-governance of scheduled tribes in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.

During colonial era, many Assamese tribal groups did not happy with the caste Hindus. Andrew Clow (1942 – 46), the then Governor of Assam, perfectly expressed the sentiments of the tribal groups, "The Assamese, both Caste Hindu and Muslim, professed solicitude for the tribes, but neither had troubled to study the question, nor had any real sympathy with the tribes" (Mansergh, 1977: 38). "In order to combat the socio-economic issues facing the tribe, promote elementary education, and eradicate the negative effects of opium from their society, Bhimbar Deori attempted to unite all tribal people under a single political banner" (Bhuyan, 2008: 311–312). With the efforts of Bhimbar Deori, delegates from several tribal groups of Assam assembled at Raha of Nowgaong in 1933 and they established the 'Assam Backward Plains Tribal League' popularly known as 'Tribal League', where Jadav Chandra Khaklari and Bhimbar Deori were chosen to serve as president and secretary. Numerous community organisations such as the '*Kachari Sanmilan*', the '*Koch-*

*Rajbangshi Sanmilan*, the *Chutia Sanmilan*, the *Muttock Sanmilan* established throughout the province due to the sense of deprivation among the backward tribal people. At the beginning, every organisation operated autonomously and confined its activities within the community. However, with the efforts of Bhimber Deori, 'Tribal League' soon became a dynamic and effective organisation of the tribal communities and gradually gained the trust and cooperation of the indigenous tribal populace of Assam. The Tribal League continuously demanded for the enforcement of 'Line system', the joint electorate system with reservation of seats in Assembly and the local bodies. "The Tribal League continued to be against the Saadullah government for the immigration policy which they described as a 'policy of invitation' to undocumented immigrants to pour into Assam from the other states" (Bhuyan, 2008: 313). Criticizing Sir Muhammad Saaddulla's policy on 'Line System' in Assam Legislative Council Debates, 1940 Bhimbar Deori said, "The difficulty is that there is no end of the number of the landless immigrant population. Such landless immigrants are being given lands in the vast areas of different districts of Assam Valley. Their number, instead of dwindling, has been gradually increasing. There could have been such provision of land and the difficulty would have been already settled had the Government taken steps to restrict or rather stop immigration from other provinces" ('Speech of Bhimbar Deori in the Assam Legislative Council Debates', 1940 on General Discussion on Budget).

"From 1933 to 1952, the Tribal League served as a mouthpiece for the indigenous population's socio-economic and political problems" (Chetia, 2019: 13). Initially established as a non-political organisation, the Tribal League subsequently engaged in politics to advocate for the needs of the tribal communities in Assam. As a result of the persistent efforts of the Tribal League, four (04) out of the 108 seats in the Assam Legislative Assembly were reserved for the plain tribes under the Government of India Act of 1935. Moreover, as a result of the continuous demand and efforts of the Tribal League, the Deori community was incorporated into the roster of backward plain tribes of Assam. In the general elections held in February 1937, all the seats reserved for the tribes of the plains were won by league members Rupnath Brahma, Ravichandra Kachari, Karkchandra Doley and Dhirsingh Deori. In 1939 the Governor of Assam nominated Bhimbar Deori as the member of the 'Assam Legislative Council'. The League leaders vociferously opposed the influx of immigrants in Assam.

### **Emergence of Educated Middle Class**

"The educated elite class has always made contribution to the growth of contemporary society, literature, culture and education. Higley and Burton opine that the presence of consensually united elites is a basic condition for the emergence of a liberal democracy" (Gulbrandsen, 2012: 148). "Concerning the development of ethnicity Paul R. Brass used the term 'elite' as an influential subgroup within ethnic groups and classes" (Brass, 1991: 14). Lasswell defined, elites as "those who get the most of what there is to get", the latter being defined in turn in relation to "difference, income and safety" (Lasswell, 1958: 13). During the colonial period, the assertion of ethnic identity and the rise of the educated middle class within the Deori tribe gradually mobilised and organised the Deori people around their unique linguistic and cultural characteristics. The 'Assam Backward Plain Tribal League' (popularly known as Tribal League), 'All Assam Deori Sanmilon', 'All Assam Deori Students' Union' and 'Deori Sahitya Sabha' played an important role to uplift the Deori community. During the time of colonial government education and literacy rate of the tribal communities including Deori was not improved like the other non-tribal community of Assam. With the spread of education, a class of educated elites emerged from the Deori community and they realised about the backwardness of their community. In addition to Bhimbar Deori, several educated youths from Deori tribe, especially 'Gopal Chandra Deori', 'Dandhiram Deori', 'Phonindra Deori', 'Jugaswer Deori', and 'Monbhal Deori' played a distinctive role in the growth and development of their community. Under Bhimbar Deori's initiative and direction, the 'All Assam Deori Sanmilan', a socio-cultural organisation was established in 1936 for the comprehensive advancement of the Deori community. The tribal people of Assam considered themselves as the marginalised classes due to the extremist ideologies of the caste Hindus, and they eventually estranged from the predominant Assamese society. To justify and establishment of equal status of the tribals and backward classes of Assam, Bhimbar Deori gave utmost importance on the spread of education in different tribal areas of Assam. Participated in the 'Assam Legislative Council Debate', 1940 Bhimbar Deori said, "the tribal people are the poorest and most backward of all people in Assam. Illiteracy among them is appealing on their number of highly educated persons is very little". He again said that "no sum of money has been earmarked in the budget or separately allotted for our education this year. There are numerous middle English Schools in the tribal and other underdeveloped areas which need Government aid. It is necessary to provide provision for these schools." Opposing the 'Mass Literacy Campaign' introduced by the Congress led coalition government, Bhimbar Deori opined, "The first and foremost duty of the Government now is to see that all venture Lower Primary Schools are taken up by the Boards of the Government. If

this cannot be done, the Mass Literacy Campaign will be meaningless". He again mentioned, "The caste Hindu leaders were trying to deprive the tribes of getting special opportunities provided by the constitution through identifying these tribal communities as Hindus by religion and communities" ('Speech of Bhimbar Deori in the Assam Legislative Council Debates', 1940 on General Discussion on Budget).

### **New turn of Deori Self-Identity Movement**

The Deori self-identity movement received renewed momentum with the formation of the 'All-Assam Deori Students' Union' in 1959 and the foundation of the '*Deori Sahitya Sabha*' in 1965. Moreover, both the organisations are dedicated to the preservation of language, culture, religion, tradition, customs, and identity of the community. In 1982, the 'All-Assam Deori Student Union' demanded three tiers of autonomy for the Deoris of Assam at the Sadiya summit. Additionally, they drafted a 12-point charter demand, which included the need for the community to have its own autonomous territory and for the Indian constitution to recognize the Deori language. The memorandum which was submitted to the Chief Minister, Governor of Assam, and the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi in 1982, covered the different socio-economic and political related issues of the Deori tribe.

The 'All-Assam Deori Students' Union' hosted its 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference in Majuli, Jorhat district, with the goal of promoting autonomy for the preservation of their culture, customs, language, religion, and other aspects of their identity. 'All India Deori Youth-Students' Association' was formed in 1992 with the aim of organising the Deori youth living in different parts of the country including Arunachal Pradesh. "To preserve their language and culture, a growing number of socio-cultural organisations of Deori tribe, such as '*Deori Mahila Samittee*' (1992), 'All Assam Deori Autonomous Demand Committee' (1994), '*Deori Sanskritik Sangh*' (1998) and '*Deori Pujari Sanmillan*' (1998) were established" (Chetia, 2019: 15). The formation of the 'All Deori Students' Union' (1989), the 'Deori Autonomy Demand Committee' (1993), and the 'Deori-Chutia Sahitya Sabha' (1995) heralded a new milestone in the politics of the Deori autonomy movement as they articulated the demand for distinct Deori autonomy to the Deori-Chutia community. With reference to the work of colonial ethnographers such as 'W. B. Brown', 'E. T. Dalton', 'H. T. Kellner', and 'Edward Gait', "they argued Deori is a branch of great Chutiyas and demanded recognition of Deori-Chutiya Language in the Primary Stage and grant separate Deori autonomy". But, the '*Deori Sanmilan*', 'All Assam Deori Student Union' and '*Deori Sahitya Sabha*' not only opposed but also rejected their demand. At this juncture, under the direction and initiative of the 'All-Assam Deori Student Union', 'All Assam Deori Autonomous Demand Committee', 'All India Deori Youth & Students Association', '*Deori Sahitya Sabha*', '*Deori Mahila Parishad*' organised the '*Deori Jatiya Gana-Abhibartan*' ('Deori National Convention') at Kundil Nagar (Narayanpur of Lakhimpur district) from 27<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> of April, 2003 stated that "the name of the Deori language cannot be altered into Deori-Chutiya language" (Sonowal, 2017: 254). "As part of the movement, they submitted memoranda to the both Central and State Governments with their demands, declared Assam bandh, organised mass meetings, distribution of leaflets, staged bike rallies, hanger strikes and mass rallies" (Cheita, 2019: 15).

"In 2005 the Government of Assam decided to concede the demand of autonomous rule to the Deori people" (Chetia, 2019: 15). "The Government of Assam, as a part of a positive response, signed the 'Deori Accord', or the 'Memorandum of Understanding' between the Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi, the then Plains Tribal Development Minister Sri Bharat Chandra Narah and the Additional Chief Secretary of Assam S. Kabilan of Assam Government and the representatives of 'All Assam Deori Students' Union', 'Deori Autonomous Demand Committee', '*Deori Sahitya Sabha*' on 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2005" (Chetia, 2019: 15). "It is clearly mentioned in the 'Memorandum of Understanding' (Deori Accord) that the State Govt. of Assam shall by suitable legislation, constitute a Council which will be known as 'Deori Autonomous Council' and which shall be the 'Apex Council' consisting of satellite areas of village Council shall be constituted with population of 3000 to 5000" (Deori Autonomous Council Act 2005: 1597). The list of villages verified by the 'Deputy Commissioner' and scrutinized by the 'Assam Institute of Research for Tribes and Scheduled Castes'. After signing of the agreement, the 'Deori Autonomous Council' was established through the 'Deori Autonomous Council Act 2005' to fulfil the Deoris' goals in terms of education, employment, and language alongside to protect their socio-cultural and ethnic identity. Currently, the 'Deori Autonomous Council Secretariat' is located at Bhimbar Nagar, Narayanpur of Lakhimpur District.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

The Deoris share many of the vivid customs, traditions, language, literature, mythology, religion, rituals, and other aspects of Assamese culture with the other plain tribes. The establishment of the 'Deori Autonomous Council' in the name

of distinct identity was made possible by a number of significant circumstances, including historical, constitutional, economic, and employment-related aspects of the government system. Other significant factors included the involvement of several tribal organisations. The Deori people experienced a new natural environment as a result of development and industrialization. They used to assert their identity by using factors such as language, culture, traditions, beliefs, and historical background. Furthermore, a perception of neglect and deprivation has engendered a crisis of identity among the Deoris of the Brahmaputra valley, prompting them to advocate for self-determination to safeguard their identity. However, like the other tribal communities of Assam, the Deori people have their autonomous council which gives them some self-governance and authority to decision-making about their socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and administration of local resources. In order to ensure that traditional rituals and practices are preserved for future generations, the council also plays an important role in promoting and preserving Deori culture, language and history. There are still issues with resource allocation, administrative capacity, and collaboration with local, state, and federal administrations, even though establishment of the 'Deori Autonomous Council' represents a major advancement in meeting the needs of the Deori people. But the 'Deori Autonomous Council' has the potential to become a model for community development and indigenous self-governance in the area, enhancing Assam's overall sociopolitical environment, provided all parties involved continue to support and cooperate with it.

## 9. APPENDICES

**Mel** – The term “*mel*” describes a fair or a gathering of individuals who attend several events together. A *mel* is an Assamese word for a public gathering.

**The Line System** - The Indian colonial government implemented the “Line System”, an idea that was first proposed in 1916. Under this method, pressure led to the drawing of a boundary in the districts, allowing immigrants to settle only in areas designated specifically for their settlements.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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