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Article

The Deori Community of India: History, Culture, and Contemporary Dynamics

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Abstract

The Deori community represents one of the most ancient indigenous tribal communities of Assam, with a rich cultural heritage spanning over a millennium. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the Deori people, examining their historical origins, social structure, cultural traditions, linguistic heritage, and contemporary challenges. Drawing on ethnographic research, government records, and academic studies, the paper explores how this Sino-Tibetan community has preserved its distinct identity while navigating centuries of political change, from ancient kingdoms to colonial rule to modern democratic governance. The establishment of the Deori Autonomous Council in 2005 marked a significant milestone in the community's political empowerment, though ongoing demands for Sixth Schedule status reflect continuing aspirations for greater autonomy. The article also examines contemporary efforts to document and preserve the Deori language and culture, particularly through recent collaborations with academic institutions such as the reputed universities and IITs, while addressing the challenges of language endangerment, economic development, and cultural preservation in the 21st century.

Keywords: Deori tribe; Assam; indigenous community; cultural preservation; tribal autonomy; Sino-Tibetan languages

1. Introduction

Northeast India harbours extraordinary ethnic diversity, with numerous indigenous communities maintaining distinct cultural identities through centuries of demographic and political changes[1, 2]. Among these, the Deori community of Assam occupies a significant place as one of the region's most ancient tribal groups, with a recorded presence in the Brahmaputra Valley dating back over a thousand years. With an estimated population of approximately 250,000 people across seven districts of Upper Assam, the Deoris have preserved their unique cultural traditions while adapting to modern institutional frameworks[3-5].

The study of the Deori community offers valuable insights into processes of ethnic identity formation, cultural preservation, and indigenous governance in contemporary India. This article synthesises available scholarly and official sources to present a holistic portrait of the Deori people, examining their historical origins, social organisation, economic practices, cultural expressions, and contemporary political aspirations. It also addresses the challenges facing the community in the twenty-first century, particularly concerning language preservation, economic development, and the balance between tradition and modernisation.

2. Historical Origins and Migration

2.1. Ethnolinguistic Background

The Deori tribe belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of Mongoloid stock, with linguistic affiliations to the Bodo-Garo group of Tibeto-Burman languages. Scholars consider the Deuri language the easternmost member of the Boro-Garo group, though it may constitute its own subgroup within this

language family. Physical anthropologists note that Deoris exhibit more pronounced Mongoloid features compared to other tribal communities in the region, which researchers attribute to the community's historical practice of endogamy and resistance to intermarriage with neighbouring groups.

2.2. Etymology and Traditional Occupation

The name "Deori" carries significant meaning regarding the community's traditional social role. The term is derived from the Sanskrit word "Devagrihik", meaning those who tend to deities and perform worship. The name can be parsed as "De" (God), "U" (offering), and "Ri" (manner or system), collectively denoting individuals who know the proper procedures for worship and sacrifice before deities. This etymology reflects the community's historical function as priests and ritual specialists.

Historical records indicate that Deori priests conducted sacrificial ceremonies during the reign of the Ahom kings, who ruled Assam for approximately six centuries from 1228 to 1826 CE. This priestly role placed the Deoris in a position of ritual importance within the broader Assamese social order, while simultaneously maintaining their distinct tribal identity.

2.3. Migration Narratives and Early Settlements

Tracing the migration patterns of the Deori people requires synthesising oral traditions, historical texts, and linguistic evidence. According to traditional narratives and scholarly research, the Deoris migrated from the Dibang, Lohit, and Kundil river valleys before establishing settlements in Upper Assam. The book *Mataks and their Kingdom* places the early Deori habitation on the banks of the Kundil River in the Sadiya region (near present-day Chapakhowa), where their territory was known as Chutam.

References in the Siva Purana mention Deori settlements at various locations, including Chaug-Chu-Kul, Chakati-Chaliya, Laibari, Lataubari, Joidaam, Arem-Kerem, and Mamaru-Pichala. These place names, while difficult to identify on contemporary maps, suggest an ancient and established presence in the northeastern reaches of the Brahmaputra valley.

The Deoris are considered one of four branches of the Chutiya ethnic group and share connections with the Eastern Bodo-Garo peoples. Some scholars theorise that the Bodo peoples, possibly persecuted Mongoloids, migrated through Burma and Tibet into India, eventually settling in the Garo and Cachar Hills before fragmenting into various clans and communities, including the Deoris.

2.4. Historical Periodisation

The historical trajectory of the Deori community can be understood through several broad periods:

Ancient Era (pre-1000 CE): Formation of early settlements in the Dibang Valley and development of a distinctive cultural identity. During this period, the Deoris established their traditional patterns of village organisation, agricultural practices, and religious observances.

Medieval Period (1000-1600 CE): Emergence of organised political structures and intensified cultural exchange with neighbouring communities. This era saw the consolidation of Deori identity and the establishment of their priestly role in relation to emerging regional powers.

Ahom Period (1600-1826 CE): Establishment of diplomatic relations with the Ahom rulers while maintaining cultural distinctiveness. The Deoris served as ritual specialists while preserving their autonomy in internal community matters.

Colonial Era (1826-1947): Navigation of British colonial policies, exposure to modern education, and emergence of community leadership. This period brought new administrative structures and educational opportunities that began transforming traditional social patterns.

Modern Era (1947-present): Integration into independent India's democratic framework, culminating in the formation of the Deori Autonomous Council in 2005, which provided formal institutional recognition of the community's distinct identity and developmental needs.

3. Demographics and Spatial Distribution

3.1. Population and Geographic Spread

The Deori community currently numbers approximately 250,000 individuals, distributed across more than 300 villages in seven districts of Upper Assam: Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, and Tinsukia. This distribution reflects historical migration patterns and the gradual expansion of settlements from original heartlands in the Sadiya region.

While earlier estimates suggested smaller populations, one source citing approximately 53,000 Deoris in India and another reporting 41,161 in Assam, the official portal of the Deori Autonomous Council provides the figure of 3.5 lakh (350,000), which presumably reflects a more comprehensive recent enumeration. The discrepancy may also reflect differences in enumeration methodologies and the inclusion of Deori populations across multiple states.

3.2. Internal Divisions

The Deori community is traditionally divided into four endogamous groups or clans, known as Foid:

Dibangia: The group that settled along the banks of the Dibang River. This division has best preserved the traditional Deori language and customs.

Tengapania: Those who established settlements along the Tengapani River. While culturally Deori, this group shows greater linguistic assimilation with Assamese.

Borgoyan: The group settled near the Borpani (Bargang) River. The name "Borgoyan" (literally "big village") may refer to the relatively large size of their settlements.

Patorgonya: The group living in the Patsadiya area. Notably, contemporary researchers have been unable to trace the continued existence of this division as a distinct group, suggesting that ongoing processes of acculturation and assimilation may have led its members to merge with other communities.

These divisions are traditionally named after specific rivers or geographical features associated with their settlements, reflecting the intimate connection between Deori identity and particular landscapes. Of these four groups, only the Dibongia have robustly retained the Deori language in daily use, while the others have largely shifted to Assamese.

4. Social Structure and Organisation

4.1. Clan System and Kinship

Deori society is traditionally organised into clans or lineages (Khel), with each lineage tracing descent from a common ancestor. These kinship ties form the foundation of social cohesion and mutual support within the community. The society follows patrilineal descent patterns, meaning that lineage and inheritance pass through the male line.

Elders occupy positions of significant authority in Deori society and are revered for their accumulated wisdom and experience. Decision-making processes typically involve consultation with community leaders and elders, reflecting a governance model that combines traditional authority structures with contemporary democratic institutions.

4.2. Marriage Practices

The Deori community traditionally practices clan endogamy—marriage within the broader Deori community while maintaining exogamy at the lineage level, prohibiting unions between

members of the same clan. This marriage system has historically helped preserve the community's distinct cultural identity and genetic traits.

Marriage involves the payment of a traditional bride price by the groom's family to the bride's family. In cases where a groom cannot afford the required payment, he may work for the bride's family for a specified period as an alternative form of compensation. This system, common among many tribal communities in Northeast India, serves to validate the marriage contract and establish affinal relationships between families.

4.3. Village Organisation and Housing

Traditional Deori villages are typically situated along riverbanks, with houses oriented toward the water. This settlement pattern reflects both practical considerations access to water for drinking, bathing, and transportation and cultural preferences.

Traditional Deori dwellings are constructed primarily from bamboo, thatch, and wood, raised on stilts approximately 122 to 183 centimetres above ground level. This elevated construction protects against flooding during the monsoon season, a significant consideration in the flood-prone Brahmaputra valley. The space beneath the house often shelters domestic animals, including goats, pigs, and poultry.

A distinctive feature of traditional Deori housing is the accommodation of extended families under a single roof. As families grow, houses are expanded to accommodate additional members, sometimes sheltering over one hundred people in a single dwelling. This architectural tradition reflects and reinforces the strong extended family bonds characteristic of Deori society.

In recent years, many Deori families have transitioned toward modern construction materials, though traditional dwellings continue to be maintained alongside newer structures.

5. Economic Life

5.1. Agricultural Practices

Agriculture forms the backbone of the traditional Deori economy. The community primarily cultivates rice, maize, millet, pulses, and vegetables across the fertile alluvial plains of Upper Assam. Rice cultivation holds particular importance, both as a dietary staple and as a cultural touchstone.

Traditional farming methods have historically included shifting cultivation (jhum), involving slash-and-burn techniques in which fields are cleared, burned, cultivated for one to two years, and then left fallow while new areas are cleared. This practice, while ecologically sustainable at low population densities, has been criticised for contributing to deforestation when practised intensively.

However, there is scholarly debate regarding the extent of jhum cultivation among the Deoris. Some sources suggest they are particularly suited to wet-rice cultivation in irrigated fields, implying that settled agriculture may have been as important as, or more important than, shifting cultivation. The agricultural calendar follows seasonal cycles, with activities such as sowing, transplanting, weeding, and harvesting often carried out communally.

5.2. Supplementary Livelihoods

Beyond agriculture, Deori communities engage in various activities that supplement their food sources and provide additional income. Fishing, hunting, and gathering forest products continue to contribute to subsistence. Small-scale animal husbandry particularly poultry, pigs, and goats provides both food and occasional income.

Handicrafts represent an important economic and cultural activity. The Deoris are known for bamboo weaving, basketry, and traditional textiles. These crafts serve both practical purposes within the community and as sources of income through sales in local markets. The renowned Deori Gamusa a traditional cloth with distinctive patterns, weaves, and colours represents a particularly significant craft tradition that contemporary researchers are working to document and preserve.

5.3. Economic Challenges and Transitions

Like many indigenous communities, the Deoris face economic challenges stemming from limited industrial development in their traditional areas, inadequate transportation infrastructure, and small local markets. Youth migration to urban areas in search of employment opportunities presents both opportunities and challenges, potentially eroding traditional knowledge transmission while providing new economic possibilities.

Climate change increasingly affects agricultural livelihoods, with shifting rainfall patterns and extreme weather events disrupting traditional farming cycles. Access to modern healthcare and education remains uneven across Deori villages, contributing to persistent developmental disparities.

6. Cultural Heritage and Expressions

6.1. Festivals and Celebrations

The Deori community maintains a rich calendar of festivals that mark seasonal changes and religious observances. While they participate in broader Bihu celebrations such as Bichu, they maintain distinct Deori traditions in their observance of these festivals.

The Joidaam Mechu (Joydam Festival) represents a significant contemporary celebration that brings together community members and has recently attracted attention from academic and governmental institutions. These festivals serve as occasions to reinforce community bonds, transmit cultural knowledge to younger generations, and showcase traditional arts.

6.2. Music and Dance

Vibrant musical traditions and ceremonial dances are essential elements of Deori cultural expression. Traditional performances feature indigenous instruments, including drums and flutes, accompanying songs that preserve historical narratives and social values. These performances occur during festivals, community gatherings, and life-cycle rituals, serving both entertainment and cultural preservation functions.

6.3. Oral Literature and Folk Tales

The Deoris possess an extraordinarily rich oral literature encompassing folk songs, folk tales, proverbs, riddles, and folk epics. This oral tradition preserves centuries of accumulated wisdom, historical memory, and cultural values. Like many indigenous oral traditions, it faces challenges of transmission in an era of rapid social change and media saturation.

A significant effort to document this heritage culminated in the publication of *Dibangar Pora Luituloi: A Collection of Deori Folk Tales*, compiled by Dr. Saranan Deori and supported by the Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes. This collection of twenty-five folk tales addresses diverse themes, including:

- *Creation narratives explaining the origins of life on Earth*
- *Accounts of Deori origins and historical migrations*
- *Narratives of conflicts between the Ahom and Chutiya kingdoms*
- *Etymological legends explaining place names such as Tengapani, Kakdong, and Kakojan*
- *Beliefs related to the construction of the Tameshwari temple*
- *Historical agreements between Gosai Mahantas and Deoris*
- *Traditional accounts of the invention of paddy cultivation*
- *Border conflicts between Deoris and Mishmis*

These narratives provide invaluable insights into Deori worldviews, historical consciousness, and cultural values.

6.4. Traditional Attire and Material Culture

Deori material culture includes distinctive traditional attire, with particular attention to textile traditions. The Deori Gamusa represents a significant cultural artefact, featuring unique patterns, weaves, and colours that distinguish it from similar textiles produced by neighbouring communities. Contemporary preservation efforts include plans to document, preserve, and potentially patent these distinctive designs.

Traditional ornaments, household implements, and agricultural tools similarly reflect Deori aesthetic sensibilities and practical knowledge accumulated over generations. The documentation of these material culture elements forms part of ongoing efforts to preserve Deori heritage.

7. Language and Linguistic Heritage

7.1. Linguistic Classification

The Deori language (also spelt Deuri) belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family and is considered the easternmost member of the Boro-Garo group. Some linguists suggest it may constitute its own subgroup within Boro-Garo, reflecting its distinct historical development. The language shares structural features with related languages while maintaining unique phonological and lexical characteristics.

7.2. Language Endangerment

UNESCO classifies Deori as a "definitely endangered" language, reflecting serious concerns about intergenerational transmission. Of the four traditional Deori divisions, only the Dibongia subgroup has robustly retained the language in daily use. The Tengapania, and Borgoyan groups have largely shifted to Assamese, the regional majority language.

The 2001 census reported approximately 28,000 individuals with some knowledge of Deori, though only a few households actually speak the language regularly. This discrepancy between claimed knowledge and active use typifies language shift situations, where older generations may retain passive competence while failing to transmit the language to children.

7.3. Causes of Language Shift

Language loss typically occurs when speakers stop using their heritage language, often due to perceived economic and social advantages associated with learning a dominant language. In the Deori context, Assamese serves as the language of education, government, media, and inter-group communication, creating strong pressure toward language shift.

Bilingualism is universal among Deori speakers, who invariably command both Assamese and their heritage language. This stable bilingualism can represent a transitional stage toward complete language shift if children are not socialised into active Deori use.

7.4. Preservation Efforts

Recognition of language endangerment has prompted various preservation initiatives. The Deori Autonomous Council prioritises language preservation among its objectives. More recently, IIT Guwahati has formalised collaboration with the Deori community to document and preserve the language, among other cultural elements.

These preservation efforts face significant challenges, including the limited domains of language use, the absence of a strong written tradition, and the continuing pressure of Assamese and English as languages of opportunity. However, growing awareness of language loss as a cultural crisis has mobilised community members and allied institutions toward documentation and revitalisation.

8. Religion and Worldview

8.1. Traditional Beliefs

Historically, the Deoris served as priests for the larger Chutiya community, maintaining specialised knowledge of ritual procedures and sacrificial practices. Traditional Deori religion involved the propitiation of various deities through animal sacrifice, with pigs and poultry offered to appease the "Earth Goddess" and other nature spirits.

Deori traditional religion venerates family deities and nature spirits, with particular emphasis on the gods of earth, sky, air, and fire. Unlike traditions centred on community temples, Deori religious practice distinguishes between family deities, worshipped within households, and village deities, propitiated through communal rituals.

8.2. Religious Change

Contemporary Deoris are predominantly Hindu, with smaller minorities following Buddhism or maintaining exclusive adherence to their traditional ethnic religion. The transition to Hinduism represents a gradual process of integration into the broader Assamese religious mainstream while retaining distinctive elements of traditional practice.

Notably, the traditional priestly class has disappeared among the Deoris themselves. Religious rituals are now performed by village elders who continue to be called Deoris, reflecting the persistence of traditional terminology even as the specialised priestly function has attenuated.

8.3. Sacred Sites and Practices

The Deoris maintain certain sacred sites and practices that reflect their distinctive religious heritage. The renovation of Deo haal (temples or places of worship) is part of the Deori Autonomous Council's development initiatives. These sites represent tangible connections to traditional religious practice and community identity.

Folk tales preserved in oral tradition contain numerous references to religious beliefs, including narratives about the construction of the Tameshwari temple and agreements between religious authorities and Deori communities. These stories illuminate the historical relationship between Deori religious practice and broader Assamese traditions.

9. Political Organisation and Autonomy

9.1. Traditional Governance

Traditional Deori society organised itself through village councils that managed community affairs, resolved disputes, and maintained social order. These councils required high moral standards of their members and derived their authority from community consensus rather than from coercive power.

The village council system represented a form of grassroots democracy that maintained social cohesion while allowing communities to manage their internal affairs with minimal external interference. Elders played prominent roles in these councils, their authority deriving from accumulated wisdom and community respect.

9.2. The Deori Autonomous Council

A significant milestone in Deori political empowerment occurred in 2005 with the establishment of the Deori Autonomous Council. This council was created to promote the community's development and provide a formal institutional framework for self-governance in matters relating to culture, education, and economic development.

The council operates under the Government of Assam and works to coordinate development activities across Deori-inhabited areas. Its responsibilities include cultural preservation, educational advancement, infrastructure development, and economic empowerment initiatives.

9.3. Demand for Sixth Schedule Status

Despite the establishment of the Autonomous Council, the Deori community continues to press for inclusion under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Deori Achong Sixth Schedule Demand Committee has repeatedly renewed this demand, arguing that the current council lacks sufficient financial and administrative autonomy without Constitutional backing.

Proponents note that the Deoris are already listed as a Scheduled Tribe and deserve provisions equivalent to those granted to the Bodo, Karbi, and Dimasa councils. Sixth Schedule status would provide stronger protections for land rights, resources, and cultural identity, while granting greater autonomy in governance.

The committee has also noted that four seats of the council remain pending allocation, suggesting that full implementation of existing institutional frameworks remains incomplete. These political aspirations reflect the community's desire for greater control over its developmental trajectory and cultural preservation.

10. Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities

10.1. Cultural Preservation

The Deori community faces significant challenges in preserving its cultural heritage amid rapid social change. Key concerns include:

Language endangerment: With Deori classified as definitely endangered, the transmission of linguistic heritage to younger generations represents an urgent priority.

Documentation gaps: Despite some documentation efforts, much of Deori oral literature, traditional knowledge, and cultural practice remains undocumented and at risk of loss as elders pass away.

Material culture preservation: Traditional artefacts, textiles, and implements require documentation and preservation to maintain tangible connections to heritage.

Youth engagement: Migration to urban areas and exposure to mainstream media can distance younger community members from traditional cultural practices.

10.2. Economic Development

Economic challenges confronting the community include limited livelihood opportunities in traditional areas, pressure on agricultural land, and the need to balance economic advancement with cultural preservation. Youth migration, while providing individual economic opportunities, potentially undermines community cohesion and cultural transmission.

The Deori Autonomous Council has initiated various economic development programs, including skill development initiatives and support for entrepreneurship. These efforts aim to create sustainable livelihoods that allow community members to remain in their traditional areas while achieving economic security.

10.3. Educational Advancement

Educational indicators for the Deori community show room for improvement. The Deori Autonomous Council has initiated free coaching for civil service aspirants, recognising that educational advancement and representation in government services can benefit community development. Educational initiatives aim to equip community members with skills for success in mainstream institutions while maintaining a connection to cultural heritage.

10.4. Research and Documentation Collaborations

A promising development for Deori cultural preservation is the recent collaboration among some reputed universities, IIT Guwahati, and the Deori community, formalised at the Joidaam Mechu festival in February 2024 and through conferences, symposium and Workshops. Those partnership aims to harness technology and research for:

- *Documentation and preservation of artefacts, indigenous food practices, traditional attire, and musical instruments*
- *Recording and analysing the Deori language and dialects*
- *Documenting traditional knowledge of herbs, medicines, and farming practices*
- *Archiving cultural practices, traditions, symbols, and artefacts*
- *Preserving and potentially patenting the distinctive Deori Gamusa patterns*
- *Exploring natural colouring agents for traditional textiles*

This collaboration represents a significant step toward applying academic research capacity to community-defined preservation goals. The involvement of reputed universities, including IIT Guwahati's Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems, suggests an institutional commitment to treating indigenous knowledge as valuable heritage rather than merely an antiquarian curiosity.

10.5. Infrastructure and Environmental Concerns

Deori communities face infrastructure challenges, including access to healthcare, transportation connectivity, and climate resilience. The flood-prone nature of the Brahmaputra valley creates particular vulnerabilities, with climate change potentially intensifying these challenges.

Discussions among representatives of some reputed universities, IIT Guwahati, and Deori have encompassed potential Institute support for infrastructure development projects and the conservation of vital natural resources. Such collaborations could bring technical expertise to bear on community-identified developmental priorities.

11. Conclusion

The Deori community represents a distinctive thread in the rich tapestry of Assam's indigenous cultures. With roots extending back over a millennium, the Deoris have maintained their ethnic identity, cultural traditions, and social cohesion through profound political and social transformations. Their history encompasses roles as priests to kingdoms, practitioners of sustainable agriculture, bearers of rich oral traditions, and, in the contemporary era, architects of their own political autonomy.

The establishment of the Deori Autonomous Council in 2005 marked official recognition of the community's distinct identity and developmental needs. However, ongoing demands for Sixth Schedule status reflect aspirations for deeper autonomy and stronger protections for land, resources, and cultural heritage. These political movements, combined with cultural preservation initiatives and educational advancement programs, demonstrate the community's active engagement with its future.

The Deori language's endangered status represents perhaps the most urgent challenge to cultural continuity. While the Dibongia subgroup maintains the language, its retreat among other divisions signals potential loss unless revitalisation efforts succeed. Collaborative initiatives with academic institutions offer hope that documentation, preservation, and potentially revitalisation may yet sustain this linguistic heritage.

The Deori story exemplifies broader dynamics affecting indigenous communities worldwide: the tension between preservation and adaptation, the challenges of maintaining distinct identity within nation-states, and the importance of community agency in determining developmental trajectories. As the Deoris navigate the twenty-first century, they do so with ancient roots, living traditions, and active engagement with the institutions and opportunities of the modern world.

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