

# Assertion Of Deori Identity: Exploring The Role Of The Middle Class

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**Abstract:** *The north-east India, more particularly Assam, the most diverse and populous State in the region, has been witnessing struggles ranging from the demands for various forms of autonomy to separation from the Indian Union. The present paper made an attempt to explore the different phases of identity assertion of Deori community in Assam, who is recognized as plains tribes of Assam. The study reveals that the emerging educated middle class among Deoris has been playing a catalytic role in articulation of Deori identity to raise the voice for autonomy. Taking consideration of the controversial issues, the researcher also proposes to examine the dynamics of the identity assertion of Deoris.*

**Keywords:** *Ethnicity; Autonomy; Middle Class.*

**Abbreviations:** *All Assam Deori Sanmilan (AADS); All Assam Deori Student's Union (AADSU); All Deori Students' Union (ADSU); Deori Sahitya Sabha (DSS); All Assam Deori Autonomous Demand Committee (AADADC); Deori Autonomy Demand Committee (DADC); Deori-Chutiya Sahitya Sabha (DCSS); Deori Mahila Parishad (DMP); Deori Autonomous Council (DAC); Tribal League (TL).*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of political consciousness among various ethnic groups of the north-east India more particularly after the independence of India generated a feelings of assertion for the protection of their identity. The north-east India, with its diverse ethnic communities, has been witnessing struggles ranging from the demands for various forms of autonomy to separation from the Indian Union. Significantly, Assam, the most diverse and populous State in the region faces a number of demands by several ethnic communities in the State for various forms of autonomy. Considering to the importance of the scenario, the paper intends to examine the different stages of identity articulation among the Deoris, who is recognized as plains tribes of Assam. The investigator made an attempt to explore the role of the educated middle class as a catalyst in the process of transformation as well as consolidation of Deori identity.

## II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The key concepts of the study are – 'ethnicity', 'identity' and 'middle class'. At the very beginning, it needs to be mentioned here that although the term 'ethnic' and 'ethnicity' are being frequently used today in political and academic circles, but the concept associated with them does not appear to be either precise or clear. The terms give the impression of meaning different things to different people and in different contexts. E. Hunter & Phillip Whitten Stated that the term refers to 'any group of people within a larger cultural unit who identify themselves as a distinct entity, separate from the rest of that culture.' [1] This distinctiveness may include a separate language (or dialect), traditions and social customs, dress, foods and mode of life, and a circumscribed land base. Most of the sociologists and social scientists used the term 'ethnic' refers to, 'a social group which consciously shares some aspects of a common culture and is defined primarily by descent.' [2] However, like race, ethnicity also involves the element of descent; but while a race is not necessarily culture-

specific, the ethnic group is essentially a culture based entity. Stating his own view, Paul R Brass said that 'any group of people dissimilar from other peoples in terms of objective cultural criteria and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements for a complete division of labor and for reproduction forms an ethnic category.' This phenomenon of ethnicity may be looked from two broad perspective- Primordial and Instrumental. [3] According to Primordial perspective, ethnicity is a 'natural' and 'given' phenomenon and not 'chosen'. The Instrumentalist, on the other hand, considers ethnicity is not given but is socially and politically constructed phenomenon. It is to be pointed out that George de Vos (1975) has defined ethnicity is a sense of ethnic identity as consisting of the 'subjective', 'symbolic or emblematic use' by 'a group of people ..... of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups.' [4] Thus, ethnicity may be viewed as a device as much as a focus for group mobilization by its leadership through the select use of ethnic symbols for socio-cultural and politico-economic purposes. [5] The northeast India is no exceptional to this worldwide trend. In the context of the above notions, that the term 'ethnic' is commonly used in north east India to refer to a group of people with distinct cultural characteristics. For protection of their cultural, political and economic interests, these ethnic groups have been demanding homelands of their owns, ranging from the demand for sovereign independent homeland to the demand for separate Statehood within India, Sixth Schedule status of the Indian Constitution to Autonomy in their quest for self-fulfillment and self-determination.

Another key concept used in the present study is 'middle class'. The term 'middle class' has had several, sometimes contradictory meanings. In general, the term refers to a class of people intermediate between the classes of higher and social rank or standing; the social, economic, cultural class, having approximately average status, income, education, and the like. British Dictionary defines it as bourgeoisie, a social stratum that is not clearly defined but is positioned between the lower and upper classes. It may be mentioned here that by 1840s, the term 'middle class' was commonly used in some parts of the world to signify the intermediary position between the *proletariat* and the *bourgeoisie*. [6] Within the capitalism, middle class initially referred to the *bourgeoisie* and the *petite bourgeoisie*. Significantly, in the Marxist literature, the term *petite bourgeoisie*, was more familiar than the middle class. *Petite bourgeoisie* stands in between the *bourgeoisie* and the *proletariat*. On the other hand, the spokesman of Non-Marxist has been using the term in the Weberian sense. [7] However, Marxist criticized the term 'middle class', by arguing that the term look at class as an economic position in a society which is based on individual achievement and birth. Although there has existence of difference in between the Marxist and Non-Marxist approaches, but the term (middle class) is commonly used in social science literature to refer to social forces.

### III. WHO ARE THE DEORIS?

The Deori constitute one of the distinct plains tribe communities of Assam. Ethnically they are affiliated to great

Tibeto-Burman group and their language also belongs to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic families. As per semantics the word 'Deori' means the offsprings of God and Goddess. According to the Deori language 'De' means great, wise; and 'O' and 'Ri' denotes male and female respectively. Thus, the meaning of 'Deori' is the great or wise male or female being. [8] So, the Deoris are believed to be priest and worshippers of God and Goddesses.

However, there is absence of any specific of their own history, authentic documents, and writings in academic field of the Deori communities of Assam in which no one can ignore it till present. Researchers like S. Deori, '*Religious Practices of the Deoris*' (2002), J.K. Deori, '*Daya-Dharma*' (2004), believed that the Deoris are regarded as priestly community and worshipper of God- *Kundimama*. According to them, Deoris are independent community and they were living in the Sadiya region prior to the migration of the Chutiyas to those areas. About Deori, E.T. Dalton writes that an isolated colony on the river Dikrong in Lakhimpur calling themselves Deori Chutiya were found who had a peculiar language which they called Chutiya and they were styled Deoris. According to Dr. P.C. Saikia, the word Deori means the persons doing *Worship* or *Puza* i.e. they are the owner to temple of God and Goddess are called as Deori. Deoris have been recorded as the priestly class of the Chutiyas. However, they consider themselves as a separate community which has existed from time immemorial. According to W.B. Brown, the original seat of the Deoris was in the region beyond Sadiya. It is only about a century ago that they removed thence to their present settlement and some of them still occasionally visit Sadiya for religious purposes.

From the above description it can be said that the Deoris are said to have migrated into India in the ancient past by following the routes from North East passes [9] gradually settling in the valleys of the river Brahmaputra in pre-historic period as per legend and folklores of the Deoris. According to name of their territorial inhabitant, Deoris have four khels namely *Dibangiya*, *Tengapaniya*, *Borgonya* and *Patorgonya*. [10] At present excluding the Deoris of Arunachal Pradesh, in Assam, they are settled on different river banks of Upper Assam i.e. Lakhimpur. Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts vis-à-vis continued their traditional customs and traditions.

### IV. EMERGENCE OF MIDDLE CLASS ORGANISATIONS AND DIFFERENT STAGES OF IDENTITY ASSERTION OF DEORIS

It come into views that Assam Backward Plains Tribal League (known as Tribal League), Ganatantic Yakhya Mancha of Deori Janagosthi – All Assam Deori Sanmilan (AADS), All Assam Deori Student's Union (AADSU), Deori Sahitya Sabha (DSS) and All Assam Deori Autonomous Demand Committee (AADADC) etc. were some of the prominent middle class organisations which were instrumental in the assertion of Deori identity in different phases.

The formation of Tribal League on 17<sup>th</sup> of April 1933 at Raha of Nowgong district was an important landmark in the socio-political life as well as history of the tribals in Assam.

At this conference, Bhimbor Deori was elected as a General Secretary of first Assam Backward Plains Tribal League (known as Tribal League (TL)). [11] Significantly, though Bhimbor Deori belongs to the Deori community, he accepted as a universal leader (*Jananeta*) of Assam. [12] In the words of Gopinath Bordoloi, the emergence of tribal consciousness started first in Kokrajhar and this intellectuality for creating/generating such feelings was the brain of Bhimbor Deori in which no one can ignore it. [13] Under his bold initiatives, the 'Ganatantric Yakhya Mancha' of Deori Janagosthi i.e. 'All Assam Deori Sanmilian (AADS)' a social organisation was formed under the leadership of Bhimbar Deori in 1936. [14] Bhimbor Deori was elected as the President and Gopal Ch. Deori Bharali as the General Secretary of AADS. He was assisted by Homeswar Deori, Abi Ch. Deori, Gopal Ch. Deori Bharali, Tankeswar Deori, Badar Ch. Deori Bharali, Durgaram Deori, Meghnath Deori, Manuram Deori, Makhan Lal Deori, Machambar Deori and Moina Deori etc. few other important persons at that time. The demand of these tribal organisations was to accommodate the socio-economic and political rights of the tribals which cannot be undermined. In short, by forming the *Ganatantric Yakhya Mancha of Deori Janagosthi* – All Assam Deori Sanmilian (AADS) a social organisation of Deori community on 1936 Bhimbor Deori started to create a feeling of Identity consciousness based on culture, customs and language etc. among Deoris which developed more collectively as Tribal Identity instead of a separate Deori Identity.

During 1947-1982, entrance of the All Assam Deori Student's Union (AADSU) in 1959 and Deori Sahitya Sabha (DSS) on 20<sup>th</sup> of January, 1965 triggered a new energy. They played a significant role for increasing the awareness level of the Deoris. This period was marked by the articulation of their demands such as the preservation of their language and culture. On the other hand, the major limitations of the politics of identity during this era were that the middle class leadership were inadequate to mobilise the masses towards the involvement in their efforts as well as hardly made any radical demands for the improvement of the Deoris.

Significantly, the autonomy movement of Deori community acquired political character when the Sadiya Conference of the All Assam Deori Student's Union (AADSU) raised the voice for the Separate Greater Autonomy for Deoris of Assam in the first time on 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1982. [15] Since then, the Deori people has been launching a democratic, peaceful and non violent mass movement in favour of 3 (Three) tiers of satellite Autonomy. A 12 (twelve) point of charter demands was prepared under the leadership of AADSU placing *first*, provision of Separate Autonomy for the Deoris in Assam and *second*, Recognition of Deori Language in the top of its agenda. The memorandum also covered the various socio-economic as well as political related issues and submitted it to the then Chief Minister of Assam, Governor of Assam and Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi in 1982 respectively. The leadership during this phase was assumed by a student organisation, viz., All Assam Deori Student's Union (AADSU). Unlike the earlier phases, this phase saw various agitation activities to draw the attention of the Government and side by side adopted popularistic programme to motivate the common Deoris to their struggle. However, the AADSU

led movements got its setback due to rise of intra conflict among themselves. The significant parallel political development during this period was the articulation of the demand for separate Deori autonomy to the Deori-Chutiya community by the All Deori Students' Union (ADSU) in 1989, Deori Autonomy Demand Committee (DADC) in 1993 and Deori-Chutiya Sahitya Sabha (DCSS) in 1995 created a new epoch in the politics of Deori Autonomy movement. Referring W.B. Brown, E.T. Dalton, H.T. Kellner and Edward Gait's descriptions about the Deoris, they argued Deori is a branch of great Chutiyas. The ADSU, DADC, and DCSS demanded recognition of Deori-Chutiya Language in the Primary Stage and to grant separate Deori autonomy to the Deori-Chutiya community in which the AADS, AADSU and DSS completely rejected this view.

It is to be pointed out that in its anxiety to prevent the movement from being hijacked by the ADSU, DADC, and DCSS, under the leadership of All Assam Deori Student Union (AADSU), All Assam Deori Autonomous Demand Committee (AADADC), All India Deori Youth & Students Association (AIDYSA), Deori Sahitya Sabha (DSS), and Deori Mahila Parishad (DMP) organised the *Deori Jatiya Gana-Abhibartan* (Deori National Convention) at Kundil Nagar (Narayanpur of Lakhimpur District) on 27<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2003. They strongly decided that under no circumstances the name of the Deori language could not be changed into Deori Chutiya vis-à-vis the aspiration for Separate Greater Autonomy for Deoris can be ignored which is absolute. The uniqueness of this *Abhibartan* was the massive participation of different sections of Deori people voluntarily from Sadia to Sonitpur including other parts of Assam.

The Government of Assam, as a part of positive response signed the Memorandum of Understanding (Deori Accord) in between the Government of Assam and the representatives of various Deori organisations on 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2005. [16] As a consequence to the accord, Deori Autonomous Council (DAC) was created under the Deori Autonomous Council Act 2005 in order to full fill economic, educational and linguistic aspirations as well as to safeguard the socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Deoris. The formation of the Deori Autonomous Council (DAC) in 2005 is no doubt a positive development towards the longstanding demand of Deori community people. However, an intense struggle for power and internal squabbling among the Deori leadership for primacy within the DAC did not auger well.

## V. AUTONOMY TO SIXTH SCHEDULE: THE NEW FACE OF DEORI STRUGGLE

The present phase of Deori ethnic assertion is marked by the transformation of the nature of their autonomy demands. Under the leadership of All Assam Deori Student's Union (AADSU) another phase of movement started by rechristening their demands to convert the present Deori Autonomous Council (DAC) to Sixth Schedule (Article 244-A) status of the Constitution of India. [17] Along with, these organisations demanded to stipulate criteria and provisions for fair representation of the Deori community in the proposed Upper

House in the State of Assam. In their memorandums, they clearly demanded to provide Constitutional protection by amending the Indian Constitution especially to fulfill economic, educational and linguistic aspiration and preservation of land rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of Deori tribes. Consequently, to speed up the development of their areas, they appealed the Government to grant more fund to present Deori Autonomous Council (DAC).

## VI. TRANSFORMATION OF DEORI IDENTITY AND THE ROLE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

The study reveals some significant trends during the course of the identity assertion of Deoris. The emerging educated middle class has been at least succeeded in articulating their demands in various stages and transforming the Deori Identity into an autonomy movement. The demand for recognition of Deori language and their script were integral to the identity assertion of the Deoris in the first phase, and the middle class elites apparently articulated the Deori ethno-linguistic identity as distinct and unique from the other linguistic identity. The initiatives of the Government of Assam, in connection to their demand for recognition of Deori Language in the Primary Stage of education in Assam vide letter No. EDG.214/85/94, dated 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1989, [18] Dispur became meaningless which the educated Deori elites very notably realised it. As like the other tribal groups, the Deori middle class leadership were not so organised, which were likely to assume a predominant role within such arrangement. However, in the subsequent years, under the banner of the various Deori organisations, the middle class elites emphasized more on separate autonomy for which they announced series of agitation programmes. Apart from the submission of Memorandum and Petition, protestation activities like demonstration, picketing, mass rally including cycle and bike, hunger strike were organised in the different places of the State. The Jail *Bhorau & Bandh* at District level as well as State level (24hours Upper Assam) etc. were continued as a part of protestation. The popularistic slogan like '*Deori Bhasa Shreekriti Diyak*' (Recognition the Deori Language), 'We want Justice', 'We want Deori Autonomy' and 'No Autonomy No Rest' were used as a part of agitation techniques. In short, the emerging middle class played a significant role quest for a homeland of its own for protection of their identity.

## VII. CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

The study explored some ideological controversies among Deoris during the different phases of the identity assertion till present. This situation led to intra conflict and sometimes transformed into violent in nature. It is to be pointed out that referring W.B. Brown, E.T. Dalton, H.T. Kellner and Edward Gait's etc., descriptions about the Deoris, the Deori organizations such as All Deori Students' Union (ADSU), Deori Autonomy Demand Committee (DADC) and Deori-Chutiya Sahitya Sabha (DCSS) argued Deori is the main and most important branch of the Chutiyas [19] who have been

keeping the old traditions and belief inspite of the changes of time and social modes and morals. Along with, the recognition of Deori-Chutiya Language in the Primary Stage and to grant separate Deori autonomy to the Deori-Chutiya community also included their main charter of demands which have been continued since 1989. On the other hand, the All Assam Deori Student Union (AADSU), All Assam Deori Autonomous Demand Committee (AADADC), All India Deori Youth & Students Association (AIDYSA), Deori Sahitya Sabha (DSS), and Deori Mahila Parishad (DMP) etc., disclaims the speculation and opined that they were the priests of the Chutiyas but they were never a part of the Chutiya community. Now they consider themselves as a separate community which has existed from time of immemorial. Consequently, they also demanded the recognition of Deori Language in the primary level which has a unique identity and grant of separate autonomy to the Deori community. These two demands always occupied top of their demand charter. Significantly, this political development created a new anxiety in the politics of Deori Autonomy movement since 1989.

## VIII. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The diverse ethnic groups inhabiting in this State have been pressing either for the creation of separate and autonomous State on the basis of their lingo-cultural identities or for special constitutional safeguards of their respective identities. However, their basic intension is not to disturb the unity of the nation. It is misconstrued and interpreted that these ethnic groups are posing serious threats to the nation by way of voicing their demands. The Indian State also did not view the matter seriously. Consequently, a sense of neglect and deprivation had created a crisis of identity or identity consciousness among the Deori middle class of the valley of Brahmaputra and pushed it to raise the demand for self determination for protection of the Deori identity.

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