

# Autonomy Movement of the Ethnic Groups in Assam: A Study Based On the Deori Tribe

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## Abstract

Assam is a land of diverse ethnic groups, each with its own language, culture, customs, traditions, and historical background. These ethnic groups sought to preserve their identity through these 'identity symbols'. To maintain a distinct, separate identity, they have used the technique of Autonomy Movement to fulfill their manifold aspirations. Taking the point in mind, the paper tries to highlight the following objectives.

- (i) To describe the historical background of the Deori tribe.
- (ii) To explore the causes for the growth of Autonomy Movement of the Deori.
- (iii) To investigate the linkage in between the identity assertion and autonomy movement.
- (iv) To examine the phases of autonomy movement of the Deoris.

**Keywords:** Identity, Autonomy, Movement, Deori, Ethnicity

## 1. Introduction

Assam has been a meeting ground of diverse ethnic groups of mankind that included the Austric, Mongoloid, Dravidian, and Aryan who entered Assam in different periods of history, carrying diversities in respect of language, culture, customs, traditions, historical background, and so on. Among them, a smaller group of mongoloid origin who later came to be known as Plains Tribes wanted to maintain a separate identity based on their language, culture, customs, traditions, and historical background. It is because they consider these as their 'identity symbol'. That is why they are not prepared to get themselves and merge their culture completely with the national mainstream and intend to maintain their respective identities on the basis of linguistic and cultural traits. Furthermore, such inducement has eventually led this section to the extent of launching an autonomy movement as a measure of protecting their identity. These plains tribes have been pressing either for the creation of a separate Autonomous council or an Autonomous state and inclusion of the same into the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution on the basis of their linguistic-cultural identity.

## 2. Theoretical Analysis

In this context, it is indispensable to explain the term *autonomy*. The term autonomy is derived from the Greek word *Autonomos* which is the combination of two words i.e. *Auto* and *nomos*. *Auto*

means *self* and *nomos* means *customs or law* (<https://Wiktionary>). But the different Social scientist had used the term *autonomy* in different ways in the earlier times. Before the sixties of the last century, the scholars had employed the term *Autonomy* by emphasizing mainly its political aspect, signifying civil or national independence. But during the seventies and eighties of the last centuries, the social scientist started using the term *Autonomy* in denoting the freedom of religious conscience. However, in present times, the term *Autonomy* is used to cover all aspects of human life. According to Political Science Dictionary (T. R Nanda, 1997), Anglo Assamese Dictionary (1994), Oxford English Dictionary (2015) the term *Autonomy* means limited powers to manage internal affairs or the power of self-government. On the other hand, as a movement, the term *Autonomy* has never been defined in any standard Encyclopedia. The only clue which is found is that the *Autonomy* movement has been defined in different ways according to the nature of a particular social or political movement. That is why it has been necessary to discuss the *Social movement*. According to the Encyclopedia of Social Science, *Social movement* is being used to denote a wide variety of collective attempts to bring about a change in certain social institutions or to create an entirely new order. According to M.S.A. Rao, the term *Social Movement* may be characterized by three important features, i.e., collective mobilization, ideology, and orientation to change (Rao, 1979). From that point of view, it can be said that a Social Movement is a way to bring about an existing order and create a new one. A Social movement can be understood in the light of various theoretical frameworks, i.e. Theory of Class approach and the Theory of Relative Deprivation.

(i) The class approach theory was developed by Karl Max and his followers. According to this theory economic exploitation and class domination are the main causes responsible for any kind of social movement or class conflict. It tries to reflect the class antagonism between the exploiter and exploited class or powerful and powerless class.

(ii) Relative deprivation theory: Samuel Stouffer propounded the Relative deprivation theory. This theory tries to relate the feelings of deprivation and how it converts into a movement. According to the theory, feelings of relative deprivation arise when desires are blocked by society which is legitimate in their sense. However, social movements occurred specially in the quest for social change. It includes socio-economic, political and organizational problems when an individual or a group of people compare their condition with others.

In Assam, different types of social movements have already been launched so far. Among these, the *Autonomy* movement is one of the important movements, as a branch of the social movement, and it may also be regarded as an Ethnic movement because different ethnic groups have been using the movement as a political strategy for the fulfillment of their manifold aspirations. Keeping the aforementioned views regarding the *autonomy* movement as a part of social movement, the present study has attempted to examine the *autonomy* movement initiated by the Deoris-one of the plains tribes of Assam.

### 3. Methodology

The study is mainly based on the primary and secondary sources of data. The primary sources basically include relevant government reports and documents, pamphlets, memoranda submitted to the Government by various organizations of the Deoris, proceedings of the different meetings and

conferences of the socio-cultural organizations, local dailies. Likewise, field survey is also utilized for the generation of primary sources. The interview with the common masses of the Deori and leaders of the Deoris Autonomous council, knowledgeable persons and concerned Government officials are also included. The relevant data are collected from the Head Office of the Deori Autonomous Council.

Besides, the relevant Books, Journals, Articles, Periodicals are used as secondary sources in this academic exercise. A historic -cum -analytical method is employed to uphold the findings of the study.

#### **4. Brief History of the Deori Community**

Different scholars as well as dictionaries indicate the meaning of the term Deori. According to *Hemkosh* –an Assamese dictionary the word Deori refers to an officer of a temple one who distributes to the people what was offered to an *Idol*. Another Assamese Dictionary *Chandra Kanta Abhidhan* (1933) describes that the Deori is an aboriginal tribe originally resident of the hills but now inhabiting the plains of upper Assam. But scholars like J.K. Borgohain said that the term Deori is the combination of *De* and *Ri* which mean great or strong or superior and name of a tribe respectively (Borgohain, 1989). Prominent writer B. K .Kakoti wrote, *The Deories are a new Indo-Aryan formation connected with Devagihika* (Kakoti, 1987). In this connection authors like E.T Dalton (Dalton, 1978), E.A Gait (Gait, 1926), P.Saikia (Saikia, 1976) and Hem Boruah (Baruah, 1984) make the view that the Deoris were the priestly section of the Chutiyas. Significantly, Chutiya language also highlight that *De* means great, wise and *O* and *R* means respectively male and female. Hence, the meaning of *Deori* is the great or wise male and female. A section of the Deori people also believe that the term *Deori* means a person who distributed the articles among the participants in a religious or a social function. They describe the meaning of De-U-RI like as the first part means *purusa*(man) while the second part means *Prakiti* (nature). So, the *Deori* consider themselves to be the descendents and worshipper of *Prakiti* (nature). Linguistically, the term Deori rooted in the word De + Ari means the *elder priest* and *Ari* is the word evolved from the Pali word. On the other hand, the word *Ario* suggesting its roots in the sages who resided in the Aranya i.e forest, *Dai or De* in all Thai, Myan-merese and the languages of South China suggest that they were either *wise or elder*. They migrated to the northeastern part of India in the distance past from Northeast Asia and settled in Sadiya. During the period of Ahom and the Chutiya regime, they performed all the religious functions on behalf of ruling community. But after the downfall of Ahom kingdom, they started to migrate from Sadiya to South bank of the Brahmaputra River and settled in different parts of Upper Assam. The Deoris are one of the major groups belonging to the Tibeto- Burman family (All Assam Deori Student's Union, 1995). The present population of the Deori is about 2,17,357 which is concentrated in the district of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and Sonitput (All Assam Deori Student's Union, 1995).

Table 1.01

Population of the Deori as per Census report

Sl. No	Year	Deori population
1	1951	12503
2	1961	13876
3	1971	23080
4	1981	No Census
5	1991	35849
6	2001	1,07,968
7	2011	2,17,357

Source: Deori Autonomous Council, North Lakhimpur, Assam

## 5. Discussion

The autonomy movement the Deoris may be traced back to the pre-independence period. During the British rule, like other non-dominant plains tribes, the Deoris also remained backward in all spheres of life. It has happened due to the discriminatory attitude of the ruling class and the dominating mindset of the High Caste Assamese Hindus. Even post colonial Assam Government also treated them as inferior community and deprived them of the administrative facilities. As such, they obviously became backward educationally, socially, economically and even politically. So, they used the technique of autonomy movement for the fulfillment of their manifold aspirations. The following tables highlight the backwardness of the Deori community.

Table : 1.02

Grade wise total representation of Tribals(including Deori) in Government Departments in 1975

Grade I	Grade II	Grade III	Grade IV	Total
44	12	3942	1390	5488

(Statistical Hand Book, Govt. Of Assam 1978, Dispur)

Table : 1.03

Backlog in reserved posts till 1978

Description	Grade I	Grade II	Grade III	Grade IV	Total
Representation due	145	451	6512	2959	10,006
Representation effected	44	112	3942	1390	5,488
Backlog	101	339	2570	1568	4,578

Source: (Statistical Abstract 1978, Govt. of Assam)

Table : 1.04

Category-wise Job opportunities enjoyed in 1978

Caste	Grade I	Grade II	Grade III	Grade IV	Total
SC	56	185	3679	3081	
ST (H)	9	47	1502	588	
ST (P)(including Deori)	44	117	3942	1390	
OBC	171	798	2086	956	
Muslims	168	517	7396	3199	
Others	999	2956	46517	20744	

Source: (Statistical Abstract 1978, Govt. Of Assam)

Table 1.04 shows that the majority of the jobs are occupied by those other than the SC, ST, OBC, and Muslim communities. They have become marginalized in job opportunities. Such kind of declining status inspired the Deoris to inculcate a sense of awareness among their people at large. In due course, the Deori elite, with the growing awareness, would be instrumental in the event of asserting their distinctive identity. In this connection, however, the Deori elite appeared to be interested in intensifying the degree of education among their people and, more or less, because successful. This is evident from the growing literacy rate among the plains tribes, including the Deoris, but not satisfactory. It can be displayed in the following table (2.10)

Table : 1.05

Literacy rate of the plains tribes in the census report, 1961

Sl. No	Name of the Tribe	Total Percentage of Literacy
1	Bodo	19.83%
2	Mising	20.80%
3	Sonowal Kachari	25.12%
4	Rabha	22.29%
5	Deori	33.65%
6	Mech	27.12%
7	Tiwa	20.94%

Source: Population Census Report of India 1961

Table : 1.06

Literacy rate of the plains tribe in the census report, 1971

Sl. No	Name of the Tribe	Total Percentage of Literacy	Male	Female
1	Bodo	20.51	29.73	11.06
2	Mising	18.20	28.54	7.54

3	Sonowal Kachari	27.33	35.36	18.77
4	Rabha	22.24	37.23	12.66
5	Deori	27.72	39.58	15.10
6	Barman of Cachar	30.42	37.97	22.56
7	Mech	30.57	39.56	21.62
8	Hojai	27.72	36.56	19.08
9	Hajong	10.88	17.98	5.03

( Source : Population Census Report of India, 1971)

The literary rate of the Deori has not considerably improved like Mech and Hojai but there has been a slight improvement among the Deoris in education. With the spread of education, the Deori people became increasingly enlightened and realized the backwardness of their community. They could not get meaningful benefit from the British as well as the Upper Caste Assamese Hindu. On the other hand, illegal migration from Bangladesh also created a great threat for the indigenous people like Deori because the illegal migration occupied the tribal land and the Government did not try to prevent it. Therefore, the emerging educated elite of the Deori began to feel that they were being deliberately deprived of administrative jobs and other privileges. This realization of backwardness of the Tribals including the Deori had become a turning point for the future activities of the community which led to the identity consciousness of the Deori. Under such situation, this section of the Deori started mobilizing and organizing their people on the basis of their separate lingo-cultural traits. It happened mainly owing to the emergence of educated middle class/elite class among the Deoris in Assam. The middle class/elite class of the Deoris conceived that without political consciousness they would not be able to assert their rights. So, they intended to grow the political consciousness of their common masses. The political consciousness was, however, infused among the Deori people by the elite class of the Deori. In this context the name of Bhimbar Deori, who was the leading figure of Deori community deserves mention (Deori, 2006). The leaders, like Bhimbar Deori realized that if all the plains tribes remain divided they would never be in a position to exert enough political pressure to convince the government as well as the national parties of their needs and aspirations. Because of such deep-rooted realization, a common platform was formed by the tribal elite under the name and style as *Assam Backward Plains Tribal League* later it known as *Tribal League* on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1933 at Raha of Nowgong district (Deori, 2016). Bhimbor Deori was elected as the first General Secretary and Jadav Ch. Khakhlari as the President of the *Tribal League* respectively. This common platform was an important landmark in the socio-political life as well as history of the plains tribes of Assam. The first phase of the autonomy movement of the Deori was spearheaded by the *Tribal League*. Tribal League was the maiden political organization of the plains tribes as well as the Deori in Assam. This organization had been playing the role of the mouth-piece of socio-economic conditions of the tribal people from 1933 to 1952. In 1933, Tribal League held its first session at Nagaon under the president ship of Jadav Chandra Khokhlari. This session had remained remarkable because it took certain resolutions such as spread of primary education and the eradication of the evils of opium, preservation of line system, provision for separate electorate and reservation of seats in the Assembly etc. Gradually, it tried to create a process of self- representation. The non-political issues of the Tribal League transformed to political issue. However, as a part of Tribal League demands, four seats were reserved for the plains tribes of Assam out of the total seats of 108 of Assam Legislative Assembly (ALA) through the Government of India Act 1935. Significantly, the Deori community was

also included in the list of plains tribes of Assam even during the colonial era. As a result of their political demands, Bhimbora Deori became the member of Upper House. The League leaders strongly roused their voice against the flow of immigrants in Assam. It is because; the immigrants had occupied the tribal land, including the Deoris.

After Tribal League, under the leadership of Bhimbora Deori, Bipul Deori, Dadhiraam Sing Deori, Kishor Deori As a result, a number of socio-cultural organizations of the Deoris i.e *All Assam Deori Sanmillan* (1935). *All Assam Deori Students' Union* (1959), *Deori Shitya Sabha* (1965). *All Assam Deori Youth and Students' Association* (1992), *All Assam Deori Mahila Samittee*(1992), *All Assam Deori Autonomous Demand Committee*(1994), *Deori Sanskritik Sangh*(1998) and *Deori Pujari Sanmillan*(1998). The core objective of these organizations was to remove their backwardness as well as keep their language and cultures alive and intact, which were moving towards extinction. Consequently, they realized that without political power all all-around development of the community would not be possible. So, they started their autonomy movement more vigorously for the creation of an Autonomous Council. As a part of their movement, they submitted memoranda to both the Central and State Government with their demands, declared Assam bandh, organized mass meeting, distribution of pamphlets, arranged mass rally/ bike rally, hanger strike, etc.

After a prolonged movement for Deori autonomy, the Government appeared to be sympathetic towards the Deori sentiment and decided to concede the aforesaid demand. For this purpose, an agreement was finally reached between the leaders of AADSU, AADADC, AADSS on the one hand and 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 on the other on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2005. This memorandum of settlement (MOS) popularly came to be known as the *Deori Accord*. As per provisions of the Deori Accord, an Autonomous Council was formed in the name and frame of political power. This organization has been working till the date.

## **6. Findings**

The findings of the research are:

1. The Deori people came to Northeast India in the distance past from the Northeast Asia and settled in Sadiya. They lived in Sadiya during the period of Chutiya and the Ahom regime. After, they started to migrate from Sadiya to South bank of the Brahmaputra River and settled in different parts of Upper Assam.
2. At present, Deoris are found in the district of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Tinsukia, Sonitpur and Kamrup. The highest Deori populations are found in the Lakhimpur district. 60% of the total population of their community lives in the district.
3. There are four khels/ foid among the Deoris, i.e, Dibongiya, Tengaponia, Patorgoyan, and Borgoyan. Dhemaji is the only district where all the khels of the Deoris are found living.
4. The Deoris have their own customs, traditions, language, beliefs and culture. They tend to maintain the Deori identity in their own way.
5. During the colonial period, they enjoyed an independent system of government. But they remained backward in every sphere of their life, such as economic, political, educational, and

- social. The colonial ruler treated the Deoris as an inferior section of society. Besides, the British rulers fueled the immigrant problem, which became a great threat to the Deori people.
6. In the post-independence period, the Deori people faced discrimination and were deprived of their rights. Significantly, they also left out of the ambit of the Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution. And the problems like development, unemployment, immigration, reservation in government educational institutions, reservation of government jobs, religious discrimination, and scholarship for the students and land patta for the Deori people remained unsolved.
  7. To solve these problems, they formed several organizations, i.e, the AADSU, AADS, AIYASU, DMS, ASDPS, etc., in a view to mobilizing the people. These organizations held the view that without maintaining a separate, distinct identity, they would not be able to solve their problems.
  8. The leaders of the various organizations of the Deoris conceived their separate identity in terms of political identity. So, they started demanding their due share in power politics. It leads to identity movement with the technique of autonomy for acquiring political power. They indeed sought an Autonomous Council as a political means of their holistic development. They thought that without political power all all-around development of their community would not be possible. It is worth mentioning here that the Deori people also got inspired by other plains tribes to assert their identity, like the Bodos and Misings.
  9. The movement for the creation of an autonomous council had passed through three phases. The first phase was guided by the leaders of the Tribal League, a common political platform for all the plains tribal people, the second phase was spearheaded by the Plains Tribal Council of Assam, another common platform for all the plains tribes and the third phase was led by the leaders of the socio-cultural organizations of the Deori and the elite class of the society.
  10. As a result of the movement, an Accord was signed between the representatives of the Government and the leaders of the Deori organizations. This Accord is known as Deori Accord. As per the provisions of the Accord, an Autonomous Council was formed on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2005.

## **7. Conclusion**

Autonomy movement of the plains tribes including Deoris has become a living phenomenon in the politics of Assam. However, they use to claim their self-identity on the basis of their language, culture, customs, beliefs, traditions and historical background. In other words, they feel that political power is above in all and it can change any situation of the society. That is why, the Deori people started their movement for the fulfillment of their manifold aspirations. It is also mentionable that in a multi-ethnic society like Assam each and every diverse group has their rights to preserve and protect their lingo-cultural traits. Indeed, they have become assertive of their political rights and started pleading for an adequate share of political power to maintain their respective identity.

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