Globalization and Linguistic Ethnic Identity among the Deoris of Assam: Crisis, Challenges, and Revitalization Efforts

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Abstract

Globalization has accelerated cultural integration across societies; however, it has simultaneously intensified the vulnerability of small ethnic communities and their languages. Language being a primary marker of ethnic identity, the erosion of indigenous languages often results in an identity crisis. The Deori community of Assam represents one such endangered ethnic group whose linguistic and cultural identity is under threat due to increasing dominance of Assamese and English. This paper examines the impact of globalization on the linguistic ethnic identity of the Deoris, with special reference to the Dibangia group. Using field-based primary data collected from selected Deori villages in Assam, the study analyzes language use patterns, bilingualism and trilingualism, and ongoing conservation initiatives. The findings reveal that although revitalization efforts have begun, the Deori language continues to face serious challenges that demand sustained policy intervention and community participation.

Keywords: *Globalization, Deori Language, Ethnic Identity, Language Endangerment, Linguistic Imperialism*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Globalization has reshaped socio-cultural landscapes by facilitating economic integration, technological advancement, and cross-cultural communication. While dominant languages gain wider acceptance, minority and indigenous languages increasingly face marginalization. Language serves not merely as a means of communication but as a core component of ethnic identity, transmitting cultural knowledge, social practices, and collective memory. In this context, the Deori community of Assam presents a significant case for understanding the relationship between globalization and linguistic ethnic identity.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite constitutional recognition and recent policy initiatives, the Deori language remains endangered. The dominance of Assamese as the state language and English as the language of globalization has resulted in language shift among the Deori community, particularly among younger generations. This shift has weakened intergenerational transmission of the mother tongue, leading to an identity crisis and cultural dilution.

1.3 Scope of the Study

The study focuses on the linguistic dimension of ethnic identity among the Deoris, primarily the Dibangia group. It is geographically limited to selected Deori villages in Lakhimpur and Jorhat districts of Assam. The research examines language use across age groups, educational domains, and social interactions within the context of globalization.

1.4 Need for the Study

There is an urgent need to document and analyze the sociolinguistic condition of endangered indigenous languages like Deori. Such studies are essential for informed language planning, policy formulation, and cultural preservation. Moreover, empirical research contributes to the broader academic discourse on globalization and minority language survival.

2. Review of Literature

1. Grierson (1909): In Linguistic Survey of India, Grierson classified the Deori language under the Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan language family. His work provides the earliest systematic linguistic documentation of Deori and establishes its genetic affiliation, forming a foundational reference for later linguistic and ethnographic studies.

2. Boruah (1996): Boruah examined the linguistic diversity of Assam and highlighted the gradual assimilation of several tribal languages into dominant regional languages. He observed that prolonged contact with Assamese has contributed to language shift among smaller ethnic groups, including the Deoris.

3. Goswami (1994): Goswami offered a descriptive account of the phonological and grammatical structure of the Deori language. His study emphasized the lack of a strong written tradition and warned that limited literary development could accelerate language decline.

4. Baker (1992): Baker analyzed the relationship between language attitudes and language maintenance, arguing that positive community attitudes are essential for linguistic survival. His theoretical framework is relevant in understanding how Deori speakers' perceptions influence language use across generations.

5. Anonby (2006): Anonby discussed language endangerment within the broader framework of globalization and linguistic imperialism. He emphasized that global languages dominate education and administration, marginalizing minority languages—a phenomenon directly applicable to the Deori context.

6. Deori (2009): Deori investigated the migration patterns and cultural transformation of the Deori community in Assam. The study revealed that migration and socio-economic integration have significantly altered traditional language practices, contributing to linguistic erosion.

7. Saikia (2013): Saikia documented the present status of the Deori language under the People's Linguistic Survey of India. The study reported declining speaker numbers and reduced functional domains, identifying Deori as a vulnerable language requiring immediate preservation measures.

8. Deori (2016): In his doctoral study, Deori examined the socio-cultural life of the Deoris and highlighted the weakening of traditional institutions that once sustained language and culture. The study linked cultural transformation with declining language transmission.

9. Acharyya and Acharyya (2019): Using UNESCO's Language Vitality framework, the authors assessed the endangerment level of the Deori language and categorized it as "definitely endangered." Their empirical findings demonstrated a sharp decline in intergenerational transmission, especially among urban youth.

10. Khaund (2023): Khaund analyzed Assamese and indigenous languages of Assam, including Deori, within a sociolinguistic framework. The study emphasized how dominant regional languages and globalization together intensify identity crises among smaller ethnic communities.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the sociolinguistic realities of the Deori community in the context of globalization. The descriptive approach is used to document patterns of language use, bilingualism, and trilingualism among the Deori speakers, while the analytical approach enables interpretation of the relationship between language shift and ethnic identity. This mixed approach is suitable for understanding both the empirical linguistic situation and its broader socio-cultural implications.

3.2 Data Sources

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data, ensuring empirical validity and theoretical grounding.

Primary Data:

Primary data were collected through field surveys, structured questionnaires, and personal interviews conducted among members of the Deori community belonging mainly to the Dibangia group. Fieldwork was carried out in selected Deori villages located in Lakhimpur and Jorhat districts of Assam. The surveyed villages include:

- Bor Deori Gaon, under Narayanpur Revenue Circle, approximately 3 km from Narayanpur centre, East Lakhimpur

- Kinapathar No. 2 Deori Gaon, under Narayanpur Revenue Circle, about 2.5 km from Narayanpur centre, North Lakhimpur

- Kundal Nagar, under Narayanpur Revenue Circle, near Narayanpur centre, Lakhimpur
- Nam Deori Gaon and Upor Deori Gaon, located in North Jorhat, approximately 7 km from Jorhat town

Respondents were selected from different age groups to examine variations in language use and proficiency across generations.

Secondary Data:

Secondary data were collected from Census of India reports, published books, peer-reviewed research articles, doctoral theses, government documents, and reports of linguistic organizations. These sources were used to contextualize the primary findings and to support analysis related to language endangerment, ethnic identity, and globalization.

3.3 Sampling

The study follows a purposive sampling method to select respondents from the Deori community, with specific emphasis on the Dibangia group, as this group continues to retain the Deori language in everyday use. Sampling was carried out in the selected Deori villages of Lakhimpur and Jorhat districts of Assam.

Respondents were drawn from different age groups, including children, young adults, middle-aged adults, and elderly speakers, to capture generational variations in language use, proficiency, and attitudes. This age-wise distribution enabled an assessment of intergenerational language transmission and the extent of language shift influenced by globalization, education, and socio-economic factors.

Both male and female participants were included to ensure balanced representation. The selection of respondents was guided by their linguistic competence, willingness to participate, and active membership within the community, ensuring the reliability of the data collected.

3.4 Tools and Techniques

Data collection and analysis were conducted using a combination of quantitative and qualitative tools and techniques.

Structured questionnaires were employed to gather quantitative data on language use patterns, bilingualism and trilingualism, domains of language use (home, education, workplace, and social interaction), and language preference across age groups. Personal interviews were conducted to obtain qualitative insights into speakers' attitudes towards the Deori language, perceptions of ethnic identity, and awareness of language endangerment.

Observation techniques were used during field visits to understand natural language use in everyday social settings. The collected quantitative data were analyzed using the percentage method, and the results were

presented in tabular and graphical forms where necessary. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and observations were thematically analyzed to support and interpret the quantitative findings.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Impact of Globalization on the Deori Language

Empirical data from the field survey clearly indicate that globalization has led to a significant reduction in the functional domains of the Deori language. According to the 2011 Census of India, the total Deori population in Assam stands at 41,161, concentrated mainly in Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, and Jorhat districts. Despite this demographic presence, Deori is increasingly confined to home and intra-community communication.

Field data collected from five Deori villages in Lakhimpur and Jorhat districts show that Assamese is uniformly used in public interaction, education, and administration, while English dominates higher education, employment, and digital communication. As a result, Deori has lost its functional relevance in institutional and public domains. This domain shrinkage reflects a classic pattern of globalization-induced language shift, where dominant regional and global languages replace indigenous languages in formal spheres. The endangered status of the language is further confirmed by UNESCO, which has classified Deori as a "definitely endangered language", indicating a decline in active intergenerational transmission. The data thus demonstrate that globalization has indirectly accelerated linguistic marginalization by privileging Assamese and English over Deori.
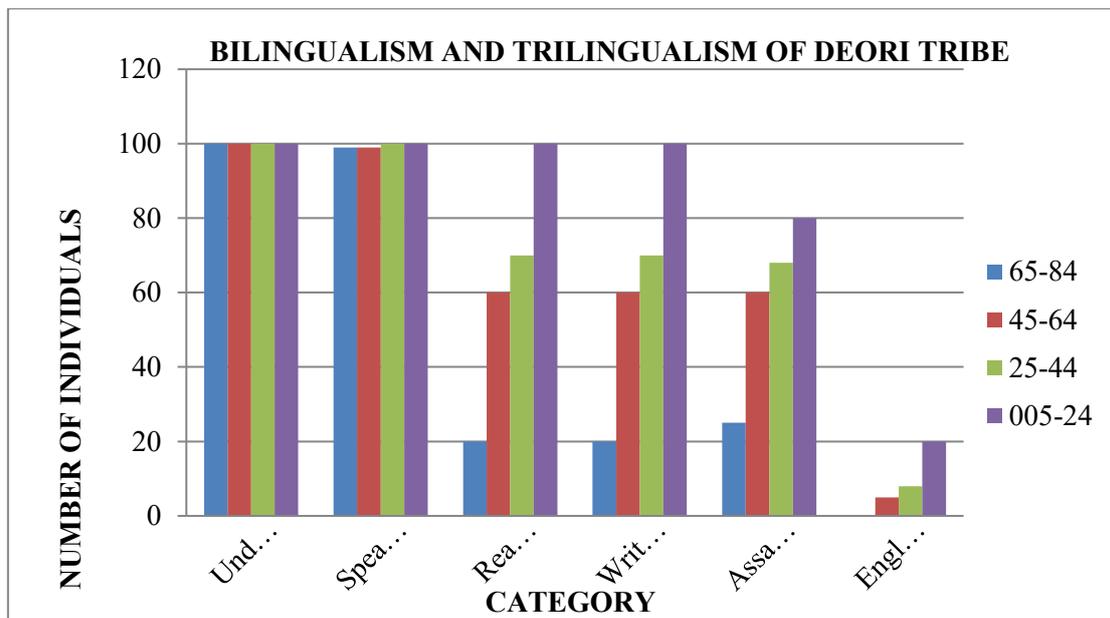
4.2 Bilingualism and Trilingualism among the Deoris

The field survey reveals a high degree of bilingualism and emerging trilingualism among the Deori community. Almost all respondents reported using Deori and Assamese, while a substantial proportion—particularly among students and young adults—also reported functional proficiency in English.

Quantitative analysis of questionnaire responses across age groups shows that:

Older age groups predominantly use Deori and Assamese (bilingualism).

Younger age groups exhibit increasing trilingualism (Deori–Assamese–English) due to English-medium education and exposure to global media.

Figure 1: Bilingualism and Trilingualism of Deori Tribe

Figure 1: (Bilingualism and Trilingualism of the Deori Tribe) clearly demonstrates that trilingualism increases sharply in younger cohorts, while exclusive use of Deori declines. Although multilingualism enhances educational and economic mobility, the data indicate that it simultaneously reduces the frequency and functional load of the mother tongue, pushing Deori toward symbolic rather than practical usage.

4.3 Linguistic Identity and Community Attitudes

Data obtained from personal interviews reveal a clear generational divide in language attitudes and proficiency. Elderly and middle-aged respondents consistently reported regular use of Deori at home, during cultural rituals, and in community gatherings. In contrast, a significant proportion of younger respondents demonstrated limited speaking proficiency and reported preference for Assamese or English in daily communication.

This attitudinal shift is closely linked to education and socio-economic aspirations. Younger speakers associate Assamese and English with social mobility, modernity, and institutional success, whereas Deori is often perceived as restricted to informal contexts. The data thus confirm that declining language use among younger generations directly undermines ethnic identity continuity, as language remains a primary marker of Deori cultural identity.

4.4 Challenges and Revitalization Initiatives

Despite these challenges, data also point toward institutional and community-led revitalization efforts. The Government of Assam officially recognized Deori as a language in 2005 and introduced it as a subject in

primary education (Classes III and IV). However, field observations and interviews reveal that implementation remains weak due to an acute shortage of trained teachers.

The Deori Sahitya Sabha, in collaboration with the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), has developed textbooks, grammar books, and dictionaries in Deori using the Assamese script. Furthermore, Dibrugarh University introduced a six-month certificate course in Deori in 2016 with an intake capacity of 30 students, aimed at strengthening adult language transmission.

While these initiatives indicate growing awareness and institutional support, field data suggest that without adequate teacher recruitment, curriculum continuity, and community-level reinforcement, revitalization efforts may remain limited in impact.

5. Conclusion (Objective-wise)

5.1 Objective

The study concludes that globalization has played a decisive role in the marginalization of the Deori language by significantly restricting its functional domains. Empirical findings from the field survey reveal that Deori is largely confined to domestic and intra-community communication, while Assamese dominates public, administrative, and educational domains and English governs higher education and employment. This progressive displacement has reduced the social utility of the Deori language, reinforcing its endangered status as identified by UNESCO. Thus, globalization has indirectly intensified language shift by privileging dominant regional and global languages over indigenous ones.

5.2 Objective 2

The findings further establish that widespread bilingualism (Deori–Assamese) and increasing trilingualism (Deori–Assamese–English) have contributed to linguistic shift within the Deori community. Although multilingual competence offers socio-economic advantages, the data demonstrate that such multilingualism functions subtractively rather than additively. Younger speakers increasingly rely on Assamese and English for education, employment, and wider communication, resulting in diminished frequency and proficiency of Deori usage. Consequently, the mother tongue is gradually losing its central role in everyday linguistic practice.

5.3 Objective 3

The erosion of the Deori language has a direct and profound impact on the ethnic identity of the community. The study reveals a clear generational divide in language attitudes and competence, with older generations maintaining active use of Deori, while younger members exhibit declining proficiency and reduced

attachment to the language. Since language constitutes a core marker of ethnic identity, the weakening of intergenerational transmission poses a serious threat to the continuity of Deori cultural identity. Without sustained language use among younger speakers, ethnic identity risks becoming symbolic rather than lived.

5.4 Objective 4

The study also concludes that existing revitalization initiatives demonstrate meaningful potential for the preservation of the Deori language. Government recognition of Deori as a language, its inclusion in primary education, and academic interventions such as certificate courses reflect growing institutional awareness. Community-led efforts by organizations like the Deori Sahitya Sabha have further strengthened language documentation and awareness. However, the effectiveness of these measures remains limited due to challenges such as inadequate teacher availability, inconsistent implementation, and restricted functional expansion of the language. Sustained institutional commitment, community participation, and policy-driven support are therefore essential for long-term language revitalization.

In conclusion, the survival of the Deori language in the era of globalization depends on the integration of policy support, educational reform, and community engagement. While current initiatives offer hope, the data clearly indicate that without systematic reinforcement of mother-tongue use across generations and social domains, linguistic and ethnic identity erosion will continue. Preserving the Deori language is not only crucial for the community itself but also for safeguarding India's broader cultural and linguistic diversity.

Policy-Oriented Conclusion

From a policy perspective, the findings of this study underscore the urgent need for an integrated and sustainable language preservation framework for the Deori community. In alignment with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the principles of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Deori should be institutionalized as a medium and subject of instruction beyond the primary level, supported by systematic teacher training and curriculum development. Government-led initiatives must prioritize the recruitment of qualified Deori language teachers, expansion of language use in local governance and digital platforms, and community-based documentation of oral traditions, rituals, and indigenous knowledge. Strengthening collaboration among state agencies, academic institutions, and community organizations such as the Deori Sahitya Sabha will ensure participatory language revitalization. Such policy interventions are essential not only for safeguarding the linguistic and cultural identity of the Deoris but also for preserving India's pluralistic heritage and indigenous knowledge systems in the face of globalization.

Policy-Oriented Action Plan (Recommendations)

Institutionalization in Education: Introduce Deori as a compulsory subject at the primary level and as an optional subject at secondary and higher-secondary levels, in alignment with NEP 2020 and mother-tongue–based education principles.

Teacher Recruitment and Training: Establish a targeted recruitment policy for Deori language teachers and create certified teacher-training programmes in collaboration with SCERT, universities, and Deori language experts.

Curriculum and Pedagogical Development: Develop age-appropriate, graded textbooks, digital learning materials, and pedagogical tools in Deori, integrating indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and local cultural practices.

Academic and Research Support: Encourage universities and research institutions to introduce diploma, certificate, and postgraduate courses in Deori language and culture, and promote interdisciplinary research under IKS frameworks.

Community-Based Language Revitalization: Support community-led initiatives such as language workshops, storytelling sessions, cultural festivals, and intergenerational language transmission programmes coordinated through local bodies and organizations like the Deori Sahitya Sabha.

Digital and Media Integration: Promote the use of Deori in digital platforms, mobile applications, social media, and community radio to expand functional domains and attract younger speakers.

Documentation and Archiving: Systematically document Deori oral literature, rituals, folklore, and traditional knowledge through audio-visual archives, ensuring long-term preservation and accessibility.

Policy Monitoring and Implementation: Establish a dedicated monitoring mechanism at the state level to assess implementation outcomes, address teacher shortages, and ensure continuity of language revitalization programmes.

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