

Endangered Indigenous Languages of Assam: A Case Study of Deori

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Abstract. India is a country, where, in her lap breathe the happy followers of various religions, caste, communities etc. In accordance to language we find many ethnic languages but some of them lack their own script, which may be one of the factors leading to their language extinction. In the north eastern region of India, Assam is the homeland of different ethnic groups. The state has a large number of tribes, each unique in language. Among the different tribes Deori community is one of them who belong to Tibeto-Burmese origin. They have four sub-caste known as Dibongia, Borgoyan, Tengaponia and Patorgoyan. The language is interacting among the Dibongia only but in rare cases the other three sub-caste used it during religious functions and festival. It is because of sheer dearth of written script varied problem are faced by the Deori in both social and political aspect. Deori is presently facing a serious threat of endangerment due to rapid language shift toward dominant languages such as Assamese and English.

Key words: Deori Community, Deori Language, Endangerment, Language shift.

Objective:

1. A brief historical background of the Deori language.
2. Some of the factors leading to the gradual degradation of the language.
3. The issues of language contact.
4. Awareness initiated among the Deoris to revive the language and to provide remedial suggestion.

Introduction

India is home to remarkable linguistic diversity, with indigenous languages forming the cultural and intellectual foundation of many ethnic communities. Assam, located in the northeastern region of the country, represents one of the most linguistically heterogeneous areas of India, inhabited by numerous indigenous groups speaking languages belonging primarily to the Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan families. However, rapid socio-economic changes, modernization, migration, and the growing dominance of major languages such as Assamese, English, and Hindi have placed many indigenous languages of the region in a vulnerable position. Several of these languages are now classified as endangered, facing a steady decline in intergenerational transmission and functional use.

The Deori language, spoken by the Deori community of Assam, is one such endangered indigenous language. Belonging to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, Deori—locally known as Jimosanya Chu—once played a central role in shaping the cultural, religious, and social life of the community. Over time, however, the language has experienced a sharp reduction in the number of fluent speakers, particularly among younger generations. Factors such as the absence of a traditional script, the dominance of Assamese as the medium of education and administration, increasing bilingualism, urbanization, and shifting language attitudes have significantly contributed to this decline.

This paper examines the endangered status of the Deori language as a representative case of indigenous language loss in Assam. By exploring the historical background of the Deori community, patterns of language use, and sociolinguistic factors influencing language shift, the study highlights the complex relationship between language, identity, and power. Furthermore, it emphasizes the urgent need for systematic documentation, community-driven revitalization efforts, and supportive language policies to safeguard endangered indigenous languages like Deori before they disappear from the linguistic landscape of Assam.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to observe whether the speakers of Deori language have alternate their language by dominant language or not and also to evaluate how certain organizations and individuals have initiated some preventive measures to preserve their language from alarming extinction. To figure out and analyze the exact language situation we took help of the most popular practice for data extract that is “the questionnaire” method. And to know the measures taken by them to maintain their language we also interviewed a group of native speakers along with some individuals who were in the forefront of this revitalization campaign through an open-ended questionnaire.

As Secondary source the data are collected from articles published in various books, Journals, Books, Website etc.

A Brief Historical Background of the Deori Community

The Deori community is one of the ancient indigenous tribes of Assam, primarily inhabiting the upper Brahmaputra valley of Northeast India. Historically, the Deoris are believed to have played a significant role in the early religious, cultural, and administrative life of the region, particularly in and around the Sadiya area, which was an important centre of power in pre-Ahom Assam. Ethnographic and historical sources suggest that the Deoris were closely associated with priestly and temple-related functions, and they were regarded as custodians of traditional religious practices and rituals.

The name “Deori” is often derived from the word Deodhai or Deori, meaning priest or temple guardian, indicating their traditional role in the society. Over time, due to political upheavals, inter-community conflicts, and migration, the Deori population gradually dispersed from their original settlements. This dispersal led to the formation of four major clans—Dibongiya, Tengaponiya, Borgoniya, and Patorgoniya—each named after the rivers along which they settled. Among these, the Patorgoniya clan is believed to have become extinct or assimilated into neighbouring communities.

The Deoris were traditionally dependent on agriculture, fishing, and forest-based livelihoods, maintaining a close relationship with nature. Despite prolonged contact with dominant Assamese society, the community has preserved distinct cultural traits, including festivals such as Bohag Bisu, traditional dress, religious rituals, and rich oral traditions. The Deoris were officially recognized as a Scheduled Tribe under the Indian Constitution, which provided them with legal and social safeguards.

In contemporary times, while modernization and assimilation have altered many aspects of Deori life, the community continues to assert its distinct ethnic identity through cultural organizations, literary activities, and efforts to preserve its language, traditions, and heritage.

The language and people

The Sino-Tibetan language is one of the largest linguistic family of the world which is widely spread in the region of South- East Asia. According to the Linguistic Survey of India, the language belongs to the Assam- Burman Group of the Tibeto - Burman Sub family of the Sino – Tibetan or Tibeto Chinese Family.

The present inhabitations of the Deoris are spread in district of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sivsagar, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Dibrugarh, and Tinsukia of Assam. The villages are generally located in plain areas of the river banks. Other than the state of Assam the villages are also found in Lohit and Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Indian constitution has regarded Deoris as a Scheduled Tribe of Assam. According to the 1961 census their total population was 13,876. Again according to the 1971 census their total population stood at 23,080, of which 11,901 were males and 11,179 were females. Out of the total population 23,080, the speakers of mother tongue stood at 12,190 of which 6284 and 5906 are male and female speakers respectively. The percentage of literacy among the male was 39.58 % which was slightly higher than the overall state percent of 37.10%. As per census of 2001 the total population of Deori community in ASSAM 41,161 (Male 20,809 and Female 20,352) and in ARUNACHAL PRADESH Deori community consists of 5,693 (Male 2,921 and Female 2,772) population. But, it may be mentioned that whether the census figures represents the number of total population and speakers are authentic or not is questionable for which their national organization have frequently raised questions on these issue.

The language of the tribe is known as Derori language which is in Deori tongue “Jimosanya Chu”. The date regarding historical background of the Deoris is largely wanting due to scarcity of relevant ancient documents and other evidences. They are yet to be traced out their own olden script though it was pointed out that their language was one of the ancient languages. According to the Linguistic Survey of India, the language belongs to the Assam-Burman group of the Tibeto-Burman Sub-Family of Sino –Tibetan Family. As per C S Mullan from the report on the census of Deori quoted that “the Deoris are very independent people and are well able to stand up for themselves. Their language is probably original language of upper Assam”. (Linguistic Survey of India, Chapter-X, 1931, P-167) Like the other Tibeto-Burman languages the language has no written form. Later it emerged in partly written form only recently first in 1895 by W.B Brown in his much controversial book “An outline Grammar of the Chutiya Language Spoken in Upper Assam”. After a long standing controversy on the script as well as nomenclature of Deori language the Deori Sahitya Shabha and Govt. of Assam agreed to settle the problem. Meanwhile the Govt. of Assam vide their notification no. A (1) E. 338/99/572 Dt.28.1.2005 has recognized and agreed to introduce the Deori language in the primary stage of education as language subject in class III and class IV w.e.f the academic year 2005. But due to some technical problem it has not being observed to be implementing as a language subject in primary school till date.

The Deoris are divided in to four clans. People living in the banks of rivers Debong, Tengapani and Borgang belong to the Dibongya, tengaponya and Borgonya clan respectively. Those inhabiting the region of “Patorhal” belong to Patorgonya clan. The Patorgonya clan has now extinct or some believed that they might have been intermingled with some other tribes.

Though the Deoris are rich in oral literature or folk literature, such as folk songs, folk tales, myths, legends etc. They failed to preserve them all due to lack of their own script. As a result, with the passage of time they lost a great number of oral literatures. One of the most shocking factor which leads to their lose control over their language is that amongst the four divisions of the community it is only the Dibongyas who seems to have preserve their mother tongue. The other three divisions i.e. Borgonyas, Tengaponiya and Patorganya have altogether given up their language. In this domain Assamese language occupies greater place than their own language among these three divisions. But it is really sad to say that not even the whole of Dibangiya speaks their language.

In this survey, informants were chosen randomly. From our field study we learned that the aged group of the Community is taking initiative but because of poor health they are passive doer. They regret for neglecting their moral duty towards their community in losing their hold over their language. According the older generation of the Deoris, their forefathers had to migrate from their original home “Sadiya” due to constant feuds with the neighboring population (Viz, The Mishmis, Mann etc). As a result they are forced to leave their kingdom behind in order to save their life. While doing so the whole population was separated.

Factors leading to the gradual degradation of the Language

One of the characteristic of the Mongoloid races is that they have rich oral literature and beautiful language but because of lack of script they fail to keep account of their history and tradition. So Deoris are no exception for it. So they are regarded as learned group in Assamese society yet they

failed to utilize their knowledge in terms of their language. The result of these is that their language is on the verge of extinction.

As the Deoris reside in Assam where the mode of education is Assamese hence they have no option rather than to learn things in Assamese. As they use the Assamese language means for interacting with other non Deoris, including their own clans such as public gathering, various occasions etc. According to Hoffman, “when a community does not maintain its language, but gradually adopts another one, we talk about *language shift* [while] ‘*language maintenance* refers to a situation where members of a community try to keep the language(s) they have always used”. Hoffman also observed that under certain cultural, social and political conditions, a community might opt to change one set of linguistic tools for another. Language shift and maintenance occur in a situation where more than two languages are in contact situation. There are lots of factors to occur this phenomenon. They could be attitude towards the language, language ability, language and identity, socioeconomic and political factors, relationship with a particular group of people etc. Certain other factors can also be attributed for this phenomenon such as societal bilingualism, migration, government’s language policy and planning, schools’ use of another language, urbanization, prestige issue related to the dominant language etc.

One of the prominent attribute of Globalization is migration from Rural to Urban areas. This is also evident in the Deori community where for various purposes like higher study, to earn their livelihood they have to migrate to town and cities. Situation forced them to accept other contact language to meet their own needs.

In the case of married women especially Dibongiya girl when she gets married with the other sub caste of Deori she gradually loses her own language and speaks the language spoken by her in-laws family. Even though she has the capacity to teach other or her own children but because of household works and other external affairs they do not get much time to indulge themselves.

With the development of modern transportation, communication and technology, most of the speakers of Deoris have started feeling that the social mobility and status could be availed only through either English or Assamese, which in the long run lead a huge chunk of speakers shifting towards latter languages. This phenomenon acutely affects the new generation speakers. Moreover, neither their parents encourage and speak in Deori nor they get a chance to use Deori with their peers at the educational institutions.

Here the survey shows that the speakers of the Deori community consider “Jimosanya Chu” or Deori language as their mother tongue and also has been the mother tongue of their parents and grandparents. They also speak Deori language at the home domain. But a few of them who had recently moved to the semi-urban areas revealed that they need to speak in Assamese language to converse with their children. It is because, in the school domains, their children always get to interact with their peers only either through Assamese or English language. While they return home, they rather prefer to converse in Assamese thinking it a superior language which has institutional recognition. And almost majority of well educated informants, residing in the plains and semi-urban areas admitted that although their grandparents and parents’ mother tongue was Deori, they would rather feel Assamese as their mother tongue. The entire Deori society was found to be a classic example of societal bilingual where Assamese is used as L2. Moreover, all the informants were found as multilingual with the ability to produce meaningful utterances in more than one language ranging the number of languages from three to four. The informants who belong to the Dibongiya clan are more competent in Deori than their other remaining clans. The speakers rather than Dibongiya i.e. Borgonya and Tengapanya considered their level of competency is OK but not satisfactory. It’s worth mentioning that half of the informants from this group belonged to the age group of 20-25 years and most of them are college students. The rest of the informants were revitalizing Deori language above 45 years of age and higher educated. Every informant discloses the fact that they have picked up the dominant language i.e. Assamese either at school as a medium of instruction, with friends or in the market places. Moreover, a good number of informants revealed that in the public prayers and funerals the Deori language is still being enchanted.

Some questions were asked to obtain some basic information such as the language of preference at their home domain, and as a language of thought process etc. Only a minute population of the informants responded that while conversing with their family members such as parents, brother, sister, grandparents they use Deori. But majority of the Deori language speakers switch to Assamese if they need to talk to an educated elder person, even if she or he happens to be a member of their own community. These evidences show how prestige is associated with the language where they got educated in. In their professional life also, most of informants have to use Assamese, English. More than half of the speakers accepted that they express love through Assamese and others through Deori. Again, in the formal discussion of political issues, everyone prefers to use non-Deori languages irrespective of the target audience. In most of the instances they use Assamese language and sometimes Hindi and English too. Out of them a few speakers prefer to use both Assamese and Deori considering the context and participant. Another intriguing revelation is that while confronting sudden danger more than half of the speakers promptly react in Assamese while rests do it in Deori. This is another indicator of losing their language gradually. The next few questions of this section were meant to check their attitude towards their language. When they were asked about the medium of education for their children, given some choices including Deori medium, Most of the parents had preferred their children to be educated in Assamese as well as English language over other languages, Few felt that their children should be taught either in Deori or in English. The rests would send their children either to Assamese or English medium schools. This is an interesting indicator of having obsession for English language. In most of the Deori localities, due to the non availability of other mediums parents are compelled to send their children to the Assamese medium government school. In spite of this scenario, every informant seemed to be interested in imparting knowledge of Deori to the younger generation and make them well conversed in their language. This is a good indicator that somewhere in their mind they are worried about the miserable future of their language; hence, felt to take measures to preserve and sustain their language. When they were asked to given a comparison of their mother tongue with the dominant language that is Assamese, A very few speakers were in the opinion that their language was linguistically richer or at par with Assamese language and Deori has all the linguistic features to stand independently as a standard language, while few numbers felt their language as a sweet language and the rests thought Deori is just a powerless language like many other tribal languages. But at the same time a few speakers regard it as an important language like any other constitutionally recognized language.

Awareness for Revitalization and Pro-activeness and Remedial suggestion.

Although majority of the Deoris speaks Assamese fluently and have incorporated a good many Assamese words in their own vocabulary, still a particular section of them speak their own language and are rather proud of it and of the difficulty of learning it. The Deori language is in present times a developing stage in comparison to the language of other ethnic communities. It is being experienced that the major problem generally faced by the writer of this language for their literary development is lack of appropriate vocabulary for present day usage. Moreover, due to intrusion of new ideas in various fields as well as discipline, coinage of new terms has become imperative in their language.

Here are some of the suggestions which we would like to highlight:

- a. The Deori language of the region may be encouraged to some extending along with the regional or state language. For these purpose L4 (forth language) policy may be adopted by the education department or related authorities.
- b. To publish more books, journals, magazines etc in their own mother tongue to create awareness among the Deori community and try to create space for the readers to give their feedback.
- c. More seminars or workshop may be organized in the line.
- d. Cooperate constructively with all possible quarters to build on-line dictionary, words corpus, learning tool and other linguistic resources.
- e. Construct and maintained website to cater to the above needs.

- f. They have to instigate interest among the young generation mainly to speak their mother tongue and spread brother hood amongst their community.
- g. In their cultural activities they should try to use their own language and in those areas where Deoris are majority their mother tongue should be provide with audiovisual or audio CD's or Cassete in Deori language.
- h. The Government concern may be emphasized to create much archival awareness involving public scholar students and literary organizations among the Deori community and encourage them for efficient management and better scientific preservation of written language and their literature.

Conclusion

The distinct languages of the ethnic societies of North-East India have been extinguishing day by day. Such impact is specially fallen upon the small or minority languages groups. Through assimilation process such small ethnic society are marching towards the greater Assamese culture and language giving up their own language and aged old cultural heritage. Despite of tremendous effort made by the various ethnic groups owing to the greater Assamese culture some of the ethnic groups have remain aloof partly or fully preserving their languages. As it is evident from our above discussion that though many organization have being found like All Assam Deori Sanmilan, All Assam Deori Students Union, Deori Sahitya Sabha etc has emerged but this is not sufficient. They have to work more in order to revitalize their dying language. A language is not endangered by foreign words till that language community is conscious enough to save its language and ready to face all kinds of challenges. Otherwise, we have to lose a page of the history of the human civilization.

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