

Strengthening Ethnic Diversity: Empowering Ethnic Heritage of the Deori community of Assam within the Vision of Viksit Bharat

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Abstract: The distinctive customs and strong ethnic heritage of the Deori people have heavily contributed to the ethnic richness of India. Their rites, rituals, oral traditions, and festivals, as well as their socio-cultural norms such as unique dress, village structure, marriage and family system, position of women, food habits, and traditional music and dance, reinforce their ethnic identity. These customs contribute enormously to the transmission of values, ethics, and morals to subsequent generations. The natural environment also mirrors centuries-old traditional wisdom and cultural ownership of the Deoris. By safeguarding and strengthening this heritage, India can retain its cultural diversity while promoting the national vision of a developed and prosperous nation. This paper examines the Deori cultural heritage of Assam and how empowering it will be a source of strength to India's ethnic diversity in realizing Viksit Bharat's vision.

Key words: Deori Community, Ethnic Heritage, Ethnic Diversity, Socio-Cultural Norms, Viksit Bharat

1. Introduction:

India is famously recognized with its vast diversity of multiculturalism with enormous numbers of native ethnic communities contributing to the country's extensive cultural mosaic. The harmony in diversity energizes India's power and characterize its nations' identity. In this cosmopolitan multi-cultural context, the Deoris of Assam, one of the aboriginal tribes of North East India, represent a rich ethnic heritage influenced by its own distinct traditional practices, customs, rituals, language, community life and social organisation. These age-old distinctive traditions personified in their ancient past represent India's pluralistic identity as well as acknowledges the attributes of cultural survival and social solidarity. In the context of Viksit Bharat which has the aim to transform Indian state into a modern, inclusive and developed one by 2047, the conservation vis a vis empowerment of native communities is imperative not only for inclusive development but also for conservation of nation's cultural assets.

Consolidating the ethnic base of India by providing facilitative initiatives such as Deoris of Assam ensures the balanced social, cultural and economic development of the community. By safeguarding their arts-

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culture-customs-traditions, encouraging their language, providing educational-economic opportunities and to perpetuate their indigenous knowledge system, India is able to achieve a more inclusive growth model to reach its destination. These measures also ensure their protection of ethnic identity and make them part of the national development process. This paper, therefore, elucidates how empowering the ethnic heritage of Deoris of assam reinforcing the ethnic diversity throughout India and in order to meet the larger objectives of Viksit Bharat. An also demonstrates how their distinctive heritages can be a key pillar of sustainable development as well as social harmony.

1.2 Objectives:

- ❖ To discover the cultural heritage of the Deori people of Assam as a way of maintaining their ethnic identity.
- ❖ To examine how empowering the ethnic identity of the Deoris of Assam strengthens India's ethnic diversity and aligns with the larger objectives of Viksit Bharat.

1.3 Review and literature:

A brief description of the related literature studied by the researcher are presented below-

Saranan Deori (2002) works on Religious Practices of the Deoris, broadly discussed the historical, social and cultural background of Deori community of Assam. The book highlights the various dimension of Deori ethnic heritage. According to the author, the word 'Deori' means the offsprings of God and Goddess. In the context of Deori language, 'Den' means great, wise; and 'O' and 'Ri' denotes male and female respectively. Hence, the meaning of 'Deori' is the great or wise male or female being. On the otherhand, the Deoris are believed to be priest or worshippers of gods and goddesses. There are four broad divisions amongst the Deori. The division is termed as 'Gayan'(Khel) by the Deoris. These divisions are a. Dibangiya, b. Tengapaniya c. Borgoyan and d. Patorgoyan. Every one of the division is claimed to be derived from a specific river's or location's name.

Ritamoni Gogoi (2020), research paper on Ethnic Assertion Among the Deori Community of Assam, talked about the reasons behind rise of ethnic assertion of Deori community and their desire for protection of their unique identity through tradition, custom, ritual, language. They are strongly put forth their reason for acknowledgment of ethnic heritage, fostering inclusiveness and growth of their community in plural socio-economic context and also to fit themselves in the vision of Viksit Bharat.



Samujjal Saikia et al., (2024) researches investigated the exclusive cultural and linguistic richness of Deori community by justifying the significance for conservation of their ethnic heritage. By empowering the Deori cultural heritage is in accordance with India's vision of Viksit Bharat- promotes the national initiative of inclusive development and enhances India's ethnic diversity.

Amit Agarwal (2024), research stated that empowerment of ethnic cultural identity of Deoris like other North-East Indian tribes is a need. These efforts will not only provide balanced development but also encourage cultural heritage of Indian state along with the ambitious vision of Viksit Bharat@2047.

Satish Dixit and Rajesh Kumar Singh (2022), research on The question of multiculturalism in Assam: Shaping and re-shaping identity, substantiates the rationale for recognition and empowerment of the ethnic heritage of Deori community within the framework of India's multi-cultural context. The research also underscores the requirement of preservation of culture and promotion of identity politics in which can help shape a vision of inclusive and developed India.

The literature identifies the distinctive cultural identity of the Deori community, but their strong ethnic heritage is not being fully explored in the context of Viksit Bharat. Hence, this research seeks to fill this gap by examining the cultural heritage of the Deori people of Assam and illustrating how the empowerment of their ethnic identity supports India's diversity and facilitates the achievement of Viksit Bharat objectives.

1.4 Methodology:

The study is based on qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data have been collected from the members of the Deori community with the help of personal interview and filed observation. Furthermore, secondary data have been collected through reviewing published books, research papers, journal articles, magazines, souvenirs, newspapers and other printed materials. A descriptive content analysis has been adopted for holistic understanding about the Deori community, their cultural dynamics and role to the national development.

1.5 Dimensions of Deori Ethnic Heritage:

1.5.1 Folklore and Oral Traditions:

Deoris folklore is bucket of myths, legends, songs and rituals in which contributed to the formation of collective identity and these are also historically rich. These old oral traditions have played a pivotal role

in sustaining ethnic identity, transmitting values as well as preserving their historical consciousness particularly during the absence of early written record.

❖ **Festivals of Deoris:**

The major festivals of Deori community are serve not only as cultural anchors but also as communal gatherings that reinforce bonds across generations. The Deoris celebrate two main festivals annually: *Bohag Bihu* (*Bohagiyo Bisu*) and *Magh Bihu* (*Magiyo Bisu*). Each festival begins only after a worship ritual in the **Than** and starts on or after Wednesday. For example, if Assamese Bihu falls on Monday, the Deoris observe it from the following Wednesday. Bohag Bihu occurs on the Sangkranti of Chot (April 14), and Magh Bihu on the Sangkranti of Puh (around January 14). These festivals are closely linked to agricultural cycles. During Bihu, village elders visit homes to bless families, who offer traditional treats like *Suze* and *Khaji*. The Deodhani dance is a vital, cherished part of the celebrations.

❖ **Rites and Rituals (Birth & death):**

All the community rituals are conducted by Deori priests only ensuing freedom to perform their religious practices. Then Ghar are the focal points for worship in their society.

The community observes specific rituals during both birth and death within the family. For instance, when a baby is born, a purification ceremony called *Bhanjanipuha* is performed on an appropriate day, usually about one week after the birth. This important ritual includes naming the baby and shaving the child's head, symbolizing purification and a new beginning.

During a Deori's death, cremation is the usual practice, except for unmarried boys, girls, and pregnant women, for whom burial is observed. A ceremony takes place on the fourth day, while the final purification ceremony can be held anytime during the year. Because it is costly, villagers perform this ritual only when they are financially able.

❖ **Oral Traditions:**

Oral traditions play a vital role in the Deori community, preserving their history, culture, and religious beliefs through storytelling, rituals, folk tales, and songs. Elders and Pujaris transmit spiritual knowledge, traditional healing, customs, and history, strengthening ethnic identity. This knowledge is often passed down orally instead of formal education through initiation rites conducted by Pujaris in sacred places like Thaangarhs and Dewalayas (temples).

1.5.2 Socio-Cultural Practices and Customs:

❖ Dress and Attire:

The Deori community people are maintaining a distinctive traditional attire as well as wearing of jewelry that symbolise their ethnic identity. The Deori men wear the *eku* (*Cloured dhoti*), while the women wear the *egu* (*cloured lungi*).

❖ Deori Village and their family structure:

Deori houses are typically found in natural surroundings. They are built with careful spacing so that the roof of one house does not touch the roof of another. Usually, a Deori village is named after a nearby river, such as Gai Deori Gaon, Sissimukh, or Chiripani. A key characteristic of their daily life is the strong sense of cooperation among the villagers in all aspects.

The Deori community prefers the joint family system over nuclear families. Among the Dibangias, a joint family is called 'Jakarua Jupa.' The father or the eldest male member serves as the head of the family, and after his death, the eldest son assumes this role. A strong spirit of mutual support is evident in all social events within the community, such as births, marriages, deaths, and house construction.

❖ Family and Marriage: Women's Status:

Marriage between clans within the same division is prohibited by social law in the Deori community. Men typically marry between the ages of 20 and 35, while women marry between 18 and 30. After marriage, a woman becomes part of her husband's family, and the children inherit their father's clan name. Divorce is not allowed, but widows and widowers are permitted to remarry. The Deoris practice three distinct forms of marriage: Bor Biya, Maju Biya, and Bhakat Rupiya (also known as Saru Biya).

Women in the Deori community are regarded as equal partners in daily life and hold an important position in society. They actively participate in discussions, decision-making processes, and take on various responsibilities both within the family and the wider community. In addition to these roles, preparing rice beer and weaving are considered significant duties of Deori women.

❖ Food and Drinks:

The staple cereal food of the people is rice. Along with rice, they consume fish, chicken, pork, ducks, goats, and other meats, but beef is strictly avoided. The flesh of certain animals is scrupulously excluded from

their diet. Fish holds a special place as a delicacy in Deori cuisine. Rice beer, known as Suze, is prepared in every household and served to everyone regardless of age or gender. It is considered the most important item for entertaining guests. However, tea or milk is seldom consumed. Elderly people typically drink tea without milk or sugar.

❖ **Music and Dance:**

Folk music and traditional instruments such as the dhol, pepa, toka, and bahi play an integral role in both festivals and everyday social gatherings. The Deori community performs dances during their festivals and social ceremonies, which strongly express and reinforce their ethnic identity.

1.5.3 Economic Activities:

Agriculture is the primary source of income for the Deori community. Alongside crop cultivation, they also rear domestic animals and grow vegetables, which provide additional livelihood support. Many of their cultural practices are closely linked with economic activities such as traditional crafts, arts, and local markets, reflecting a harmonious integration of culture and livelihood.

1.5.4 Knowledge Systems and Environmental Stewardship:

The ethnic heritage of the Deoris is deeply rooted in their traditional knowledge system, which is intricately connected to the local environment. Their cultural practices foster a strong bond between the community and natural resources, nurturing a profound sense of responsibility towards preserving local ecosystems and promoting sustainable living. The Deori people's ethnobotanical wisdom, sustainable agricultural methods, and riverine lifestyles significantly enrich their cultural heritage. Their traditional knowledge of herbal medicines and sustainable harvesting techniques not only sustains their community but also contributes substantially to India's ecological security and knowledge base.

The Deori community, one of the aboriginal scheduled tribes of Assam, has preserved unique ethnic characteristics since ancient times. They are classified into four clans: Dibangiya, Tengapaniya, Borgoyan, and Patorgoyan. Among these, only the Dibangiyas have retained their original language, while the other clans primarily speak Assamese. The rich ethnic heritage of the Deoris is reflected in their festivals, rites, rituals, and oral traditions.

Their socio-cultural practices—including distinctive dress, village organization, family and marriage systems, the status of women, dietary habits, and traditional music and dance—serve to strengthen their

ethnic identity. These practices help maintain their distinctiveness in a rapidly changing society by connecting present generations to their past, thereby fostering continuity, social cohesion, and interpersonal bonds.

Traditional customs play a crucial role in passing down values, ethics, and morals, emphasizing respect, cooperation, and community responsibility. The Deori people exhibit strong self-reliance and community solidarity, demonstrated in collective support during social events, festivals, rituals, and economic hardships.

Their natural habitat shows evidence of traditional knowledge sovereignty dating back centuries. Deori villages, located in riverine areas, feature houses made from bamboo and cane thatch, open spaces, granaries, and weaving centers. Their ethnobotanical expertise, sustainable farming, and nature-based diet are closely intertwined with the local environment.

Education among the Deoris is traditionally oral, conducted mainly in Thaangarhs and Dewalayas (temples) by Pujaris through the Diksha initiation process. However, there has been paradigm shift with the changing scenario. Women in Deori society have historically enjoyed empowerment and an active role in decision-making, recognized as equal partners in community life. Additionally, the Deori traditional judicial system, rooted in faith and guided by elder councils believed to be inspired by the gods, ensures social harmony and justice.

In short, the Deori community's unique identity is deeply embedded in their folklore, socio-cultural customs, economic activities, and traditional knowledge systems. Protecting and empowering this ethnic heritage is vital to preserving India's rich cultural diversity and advancing the national vision of a developed and inclusive India.

1.6 Empowerment in the Vision of Viksit Bharat:

To empower the ethnic heritage of the Deori community, sustained efforts are required to recognize and safeguard their unique identity such as....

- ❖ Constitutional Protection of Deori ethnic heritage.
- ❖ Preservation of Deori Identity.
- ❖ Comprehensive Documentation of oral histories, folk songs and traditional knowledge ensuring long term preservation.
- ❖ Providing more educational opportunities including ethnic Education.

- ❖ Implementing action-oriented planning to leverage traditional knowledge and practices for innovation.
- ❖ Creating avenues for economic self-sufficiency.
- ❖ Encouraging Women's and Youth participation.
- ❖ Initiatives to transmit traditional and cultural values to the younger generation.
- ❖ Initiatives promoting cultural tourism and cross-cultural exchange.
- ❖ Preservation and research of the Deori community's traditional practices in sustainable resource management, healthcare, and conflict resolution mechanisms.

1.7 Conclusion:

The unique traditions and rich ethnic heritage of the Deori community have significantly contributed to strengthening the ethnic diversity of the Indian state. It is essential to include and empower the ethnic heritage of aboriginal tribal communities like the Deoris to achieve the national goals of a developed India (Viksit Bharat).

Despite their rich cultural attributes, the Deori community faces numerous challenges, such as language erosion, loss of unique cultural practices, and weakening of traditional social structures due to urbanization, migration, and modernization. Furthermore, environmental degradation has led to the loss of endemic skills and food security within the community.

Therefore, active empowerment and the formulation of adequate policies for preserving the Deori ethnic heritage are urgently needed. Such efforts will mutually reinforce cultural empowerment and national development, helping India realize its vision of Viksit Bharat.

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