Ethnic Assertion Among The Deori Community Of Assam

Ritamoni Gogo

Abstract: Ethnic diversity is distinctive feature of Northeast India in general and Assam in particular. Various ethnic groups in the region has started asserting their identity in post Independence period. The failure of the state led policies for the upliftment of tribes brings agony among the tribes leading to such assertions. It is argued that the state led policies have marginalizes the tribes contrary to their expectations. It has resulted in the identity assertion of the tribes in various forms. In such context, this paper attempts to understand the nuances of identity assertion among the Deori community of Assam. Further, it seeks to understand the different phases of identity assertion of Deori Community in Assam.

Key Words: Deori, Identity, Autonomy, Assertion, Assam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic assertion is common phenomena among the various tribes in India in post independence period. Various ethnic groups in Northeast India in general and Assam in particular like the Bodos, the Karbis, the Dimasas, the Misings, the Rabhas etc. have been asserting their ethnic identity for political gain ranging from different state to autonomous region. Such identity assertion is observed among the Deori community of Assam with the broader aim of preservation of their distinct identity manifested through language, culture, tradition etc. Deori is numerically third largest plain tribe of Assam and economically backward that makes is relevant to study their identity assertion movement. In this context, this paper attempts to understand the different aspects of ethnic identity assertion among the Deori community of Assam.

2. WHO ARE THE DEORIS?

Deori is a plain tribal community residing mainly in the state of Assam. They were also denoted as deori-chutia as they were priest of the Chutia Kingdom. Deori means ‘honourable person’ in Chutia language as the word deori consists of DE, O and RE in the Chutia language. The word DE means big, great, honourable or knowledgeable, O and RE means male and female respectively. Bankanta Kakoti (1978) stated that the word deori is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘Devagrihika’. On the other hand, the Hemkosh Assamese Dictionary mentions that the Deoris are the special officers in temple who offers the ‘prasad’ of the gods in temple (Bharali and Deori, 2010). Ethnic consciousness is manifested among the Deoris and they are proud of their own ethnic identity and see themselves as superior to other communities. This helped in the formation of distinctive Deori identity over the years. There are various folktales regarding the Deori community. One such story goes as follows: once the Goddess Mahamaya was floating in the Dibang river as rock. Although various tribal people and non tribal Hindus tried to bring the Goddess Mahamaya out of water, but they failed. The Goddess was finally pulled out of water by four Chutia by performing prayers and they established the Tamreswari Temple with the Goddess. These four people were also assigned job of worshipping the Goddess who finally came to be known as Deoris (Bharali and Deori, 2010). Deori is not a homogenous community. There are four main social divisions of Deoris as Tengaporiya, Dibongiya, Bongoya and Patorgoya (Bharali and Deori, 2010). They are further sub divided into various groups. The place of living and the name of their Gods and Goddesses forms the marker of the names of various sub groups of Deoris. There is a close association of the name of the sub groups with the name of rivers. For example, the Diborgiya, Tengapaniya, Bongoya and Patorgoya are living in the banks of the river Dibang, Tengapani, Borgong and Patsadia or Patansal respectively. Among these groups, the patorgoya group is not found today which might have amalgamated with other groups of the community. Although, the Diborgiya Khel can speak their own language, they use Assamese language and script for intercommunity communication. The total population of Deori is Assam is 41161, out of which 20809 male and 20352 female. They mainly inhabit in the district of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Sonitpur, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar and Jorhat (Bharali and Deori, 2010). The Deoris see themselves as Jimo Chhayan which means that they are the children of sun and moon. Other tribal communities respect the Deoris as the priests or worshipers (Deoram, 2013).

3. IDENTITY ASSERTION OF DEORIS AND THE ROLE OF MIDDLE CLASS

The social and historical factors have shaped the formation of distinct ethnic identity among the Deori community of Assam. There is close relation among the assertion of ethnic identity and he emergence of middle class among the Deoris. The significant middle class organizations who played an important role in identity assertion among the Deoris are: Assam backward plain Tribal League , Ganantactic Yakhya Mancha of Deori Janagosthi, All Assam Deori Sanmilian(AADS), All Assam Deori student's union (AADSU), Deori Sahitya Sabha(DSS), All Assam Deori Autonomous Demand Committee (AADAC) etc. The formation of Assam Backward Plain Tribal League known as Tribal League on 17th April 1933 at Raha of Nowgong District was an important landmark in the socio-political life as well as history of the tribes in Assam (Sonowal, 2017). Bhimbor Deori was an important leader of the organization who played important role in identity formation of the tribal in general and Deoris in particular. Gopinath Bordoloi see Bhimbor Deori as important agent for the emergence of political consciousness among the tribes. Bhimbor Deori started All Assam Deori Sanmilian as its President in 1936 and worked for the socio-economic and political rights of the community. He worked for creating identity based consciousness among the tribe based on culture, customs
and language etc. On the other hand, organizations like The All Assam Deori Student Union (1959) and Deori Shitya Sabha (DSS) are working for the preservation of language and culture of the Deori community and hence their identity. The All Assam Deori Student Union at is Sadia conference put forward the demand for Three tier autonomy for the Deoris of Assam. The prepared a 12 (twelve) point of character demand which included the demand for separate autonomous region for the community, recognition of the Deori language in the constitution of India etc. They were fighting for getting specific provisions for the socio economic and political benefits of the community. A new phase of the identity movement of the Deoris started with the work of Deori Students’ Union (1989), Deori Autonomy Demand committee (1993) and Deori-Chutiya Sahitya Sabha (1995). One important aspect of this phase is marking of Deori as a part of Chutia and demand for recognition of Deori-Chutiya Language. There was no unanimity in their demand. Their demand was opposed by the All Assam Deori Sanmilan (AADS), All Assam Deori Student Union (AADS) and Deori Sahitya Sabha (DSS) etc. In this context, Deori National Convention (Deori Jatiya Gana Abhibartan) was held under the leadership of All Assam Deori Student Union, All Assam Deori Autonomous Demand Committee, All India Deori Youth & Students Association, Deori Sahitya Sabha, and Deori Mahila Parishad at Kundli Nagar (Narayanpur) on 27th to 29th of April 2003 stated that the name of the Deori language could not be changed into Deori-Chutiya language. They further supported the idea of separate Autonomy of Deoris. The long history of agitation and atrocities of Deoris led to award of autonomous status to them on 4th March 2005 (Sonowal, 2017). The formation of Autonomous Council marks a new phase in identity assertion among the Deoris.

4. ROLE OF DEORI AUTONOMOUS COUNCIL AND IDENTITY ASSERTION MOVEMENT OF DEORIS

Deoris were categorized as backward tribe according to new Reform Act of 1935 despite having a glorious history (Mullan, 1931). In such a situation, the Assam Plain Tribal League was able to create political awareness among the backward communities in the state. Various indigenous Tribal groups started losing confidence on the government as they could not provide special provisions for the safeguard of the tribals. One reason of this was increasing amount of backlog due to non implementation of government schemes. It is observed that 7.1 and 8.99 percent of tribals were appointed in 1960 and 1989 respectively against the allotted quota of 10 percent. Further, the tribals have to suffer due to the town planning and development planning that make them refuge in their own homeland. As a result, thousand of indigenous tribal people inhabited in these areas for centuries become landless. Autonomous Council was allotted to the Deoris due to their struggle for autonomy. The demand of All Assam Deori student union (AADSU) since 1959 significantly contributed to the emergence of Deori Autonomous Council. Deori Autonomous council performed various functions for the development of tribal people. Some important activities performed by the Deori Autonomous Council are given below:

a. Agro Based works

One important area of Deori Autonomous Council is development of agro based areas. These functions include:(a) High yielding paddy seed,(b) Tilling land by tractors,(c) Supply of full’s to plough,(d) Tube Wells (e) Handcart,(f) Tea plants,(g) Orange Plants

b. The Livestock Development:

The livestock Development include training for piggery, poultry farms supply of cows for milk production, fishery development, supply of high quality weaving equipments for the women, weaving centers opening in each village, opening Muga farm and its infrastructure development etc.

c. Emergency Reliefs

As the Deori community is mainly residing near river, they are prone to flood that necessitate the provision of emergence relief for the community. Some important Emergency Relief provisions provided by Deori Autonomous Council are:

(i) Supply of some funds for the flood affected villages i.e. supply of tube well, water filters, food items etc.
(ii) Supply of free health treatment of men along with animals and supply of mosquito nets for the poor etc.
(iii) Supply of Rabi crops in flood affected villages.
(iv) Land development”.

d. Education developmental activities

Deori Autonomous Council is also working for the educational development of the community like:

(i) Free Coaching of student during Summer Vacations.

(ii) Financial Assistance to tribal majority schools and colleges and for the meritious students”.

e. Programme of Technical Training and Self employment

Some of the technical training and self employment programme are:

(i)Technical inputs given to 167 unemployed youth to improve traditional occupation

(ii) 27 unemployed youth have been trained in Indian institute of Entrepreneurship.

(iii) To produce phyto-chemical row materials in flood affected silted wetland 30 unemployed youth are trained in NEDFI.

iv) In the area of Handloom and textiles production 25 females has been provided advanced training”.

Although the Deori Autonomous Council (DAC) is working for the overall development of the community but the lack of adequate fund creating hindrance. There is allegation of financial mismanagement against the Council. ‘All Deori shwayatta Swasita Congress Parishad’ President Suman Deori accused the Deori Autonomous Council of corruption and demanded that the council be dissolved immediately. (Deoram,2013) Although, Deori Autonomous Council has taken various steps for the development of Deori people, in actual practice they are still in the initial stage of development. Their journey on the way of development does not end. It is observed that the development of the Deori is closely associated with their identity question. The demand for autonomous council reflects the significance of understanding the question of development and underdevelopment of the Deoris.
5. SIXTH SCHEDULE AND DEORI ETHNIC ASSERTION

The contemporary phase of identity assertion among the Deoris marked by significant transformations. Deoris under the leadership of All Assam Deori Student Union are demanding to convert the present Deori Autonomous council (DAC) to Sixth Scheduled (Article 244-A) status of the constitution of India. At the same time, the All Assam Deori Autonomous Demand Committee (AADSU), All India Deori Youth & Student Association (AIDYSA), Deori Sahitya Sabha (DSS) and Deori Mahila Parishad (DPM) etc. are demanding the recognition of Deori Language in the primary level in order to preserve their unique identity and separate autonomy (Sonowal, 2017). It is argued that recognition of Deori under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution will help in preservation of autonomous status of the Deoris.

6. FACTORS OF IDENTITY FORMATION OF DEORI COMMUNITY

It is observed that the various organization are demanding for separate identity of Deoris. The identity formation of the Deori in Assam is shaped by different socio-political factors. The discriminatory policies of the government and the simultaneous emergence of various middle class organizations played significant role in identity formation of the Deori community. Further, the various socio-economic factors like poor economic condition, land problem, aspiration for identity, self determination, derivate feeling etc. are also creating situation for formation of separate identity among the Deoris of Assam. Some important factors for the formation of separate identity among the Deori are:

a. Concept of Son of Soil
One of the causes of demand for autonomy movement amongst the Deori community was historical factor. The Deoris regarded themselves as ‘Aboriginal Ethnic Group’ known as ‘son of the soil. It helped in articulation of distinctive identity among the Deoris.

b. Economic Underdevelopment
Economic factor is another significant factor for their aspiration of separate identity. It is alleged that the government did not provide sufficient effort for the improvement of their economic activities. They still follow the traditional means for survival like agriculture. It ultimately shape their distinct identity.

c. Reservation Policy
Reservation policy of the government is also a important factor of their autonomy movement including the Deori community. In Assam twenty four tribes and sub-tribes are living, but there are provisions for only ten percent of job reservation for plain tribes including Deoris. The government does not take any active initiative to fulfill the vacancies reserved for them.

b. Displacement and Resettlement
Displacement and resettlement are the two major causes that affected the tribal people including Deori community. The government policy of acquisition of land for construction of dams and roads, location of industries and reservation of forests for national parks, protection of environment etc compel the tribal people to leave their land, which are the chief means of livelihood. (Deori, 2015).

e. Impact of Modernization Process
It is also necessary to understand the impact of modernization on the community. The history shows that Deoris have been able to maintain their old tradition, religion, beliefs and various socio-political traits and tribulation (Deori, 2015). The modernization process impact on their age old tradition without affecting the core idea of their culture. According to them another serious damage caused by modernization process and new innovation is the spread of individualistic idea among the people. The money economy has affected the glorious tradition of cooperation living of them. Now a days most of their educated youth are employed and they neglect to offer voluntary service to individual families, social welfare activities (Deori, 2015).

7. CONCLUSION

The processes of development and modernization brought new nature to the Deori community. The changes noticed in the field of language and literature have significant influence on the Deori identity. They have established their own literary body in the area of literature and various linguistic as well as their introduction in the system of education, mainly to development of their own language. Some important changes are observed in their raditions. Pattern of occupation is also changing among the Deoris. It can be concluded that the identity assertion of the Deori community continues along with the change in the lifestyle.

8. REFERENCES


