

Language vitality assessment of Deori: An endangered language

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Deori, a Tibeto-Burman language, is an “endangered” language and is described as a language on the verge of its extinction. Recent research on Deori phonetics and phonology has shown loss of distinct pitch realization and identification in the speech of older as well as younger generation speakers. The difference in production and perception of tonal categories among the speakers of the younger age group led to an examination of language vitality of Deori. To substantiate the analyses of inter-generational language change, this study takes into account inter-generational perceptions on language use and its robustness. The findings of this study show that the language status of Deori is not completely bleak, and there is a sense of optimism for the future of the language among speakers irrespective of age. The findings also show that the language suffers from lack of support in the public domain, lack of teachers to teach Deori as a subject in schools, and absence of exposure in new media. If these problems are rectified, then there is hope of survival for Deori, but only with sustained and conscious efforts aimed at revitalizing.

1. Introduction¹ A near ubiquitous situation that has confronted speech communities in the modern world is the presence of two or more languages. In this situation, the most commonly observed response is that speakers use the native language in local settings within the community, and use the dominant or influential language or dialect in such socialization spaces which provide the speakers with economic or educational benefit. The co-existence of languages leads to language contact that triggers language change. A similar situation persists in Deori, a Tibeto-Burman language, which is in a process of language shift because of the close proximity and constant contact with Assamese, an Indic language. It is worthwhile to mention that Assamese and the languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family have co-existed in

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the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. While there are many speculations regarding the antiquity of Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Assam (Moral 1997; 2002), it can be safely assumed that the Bodo-Garo, Kuki-Chin, and Tani groups of the Tibeto-Burman language have been an integral part of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, and hence it is well-known for its diverse linguistic and cultural ethos.

A recent study on the production and perception of lexical tones in Deori among the younger generation speakers (Acharyya & Mahanta 2018) reveals a vast difference in production and identification of segmentally homophonous words compared to the older generation speakers (Mahanta et al. 2017). The degree of variation in production and perception of lexical tones among the younger generation speakers reflects a gradual process of *tonoexodus* that is the casualty of a contact situation with Assamese, a non-tonal language. It is shown that the change of tonal pattern among the younger generation speakers is more strongly affected than those of the older generation speakers. The study also highlights the fact that language undergoing attrition is the outcome of reduced use of the language in significant domains of interaction and that is reflected in its linguistic structure. The stark contrast and differences in tone realization between the younger and the older age groups fueled our interest and led us to evaluate the generational differences in language vitality issues, and explore the association between actual language use and the perception of vitality of the language among speakers of different age groups. This paper mainly focuses on such intergenerational differences to understand the language vitality status of Deori.

Language vitality specifically demonstrates the extent to which languages are used in social settings. People's language choice depends on a constellation of factors such as openness of the community (Lewis 1985), urbanization, industrialization, and modernity (Gal 1979), and people's social characteristics such as age, education, gender, and place of residence (Huang 1988). The socio-economic factors that surround a language play a key role in preserving the language viability. Trudgill (1983) suggests that a community can be in close contact with speakers of another language or a dialect, but a community's high visibility and social status will trigger less contact-induced variation. Thomason (2001) suggests the intensity of contact is a major social factor that mediates language change. Fishman (1997), Grenoble & Whaley (1998), and Sallabank (2010) state that a working definition of an endangered language is a language situation where the native speakers cease to learn their mother tongue in response to an environment where their native language is not advantageous to them anymore. The visibility of an endangered language declines as it is not taught in schools and has no official or national language status. A language attains a high vitality when it is transmitted to the successive generation. While language loss becomes imminent in this situation, this also leads to the incorporation of various linguistic features of the language that the indigenous language is in contact with.

The language endangerment status of Deori as reported by various researchers manifests an inevitably grim state. Brown (1895) in his monograph categorizes Deori as the smallest of the Bodo-Garo languages based on the number of speakers. Brown

reports a total of 4,000 Deori speakers in the entire Deori community and notes that “Deori is phonetically different from other Bodo-Garo languages and a moribund language” (3).² Deori is listed as a “little-known language which appears to be rather deviant” (Burling 2003:177). Jacquesson (2008:28) explains Deori as a “discrete group” residing in the Lakhimpur district, mainly the Dibongiyas who has retained the language so far. Encyclopedia of the World’s Endangered Languages categorizes Deori as a “severely endangered language” (Moseley 2010). UNESCO (2009) has explicitly listed Deori as a “definitely endangered” language. In the words of van Driem (2007), Deoris are mainly settled down in Sivsagar and Lakhimpur districts of Upper Assam, and “one would have to make an effort to localize them” (319).

The unanimity in the literature on the endangered status of Deori also prompted us to delve deeper into the language vitality issues of Deori. This study mainly focuses on language practice within the Dibongiya speech community of Deori, which is the only community who has retained the language in present times.

2. Language Background Deori, also known by its endonym *Jimosaya*³ ‘children of the sun and the moon’ (Jacquesson 2005), is a Tibeto-Burman language (Burling 2003) spoken in the Northeastern States of Assam and Lohit and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Brown (1895) mentioned that the Deoris originally inhabited the region beyond Sadiya. Later they migrated to different areas of the Brahmaputra valley from Sadiya in the 17th, 19th, and 20th centuries due to various natural and socio-political causes (Deori 2009). At present, they are mainly concentrated in Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, and Sonitpur districts of the north bank of the Brahmaputra valley and in Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, and Jorhat districts of the south bank. They preferred the banks of the tributaries of river Brahmaputra as their place of settlement (Deori 2009).

The Deori community is broadly divided into four main territorial groups: the Dibongiya, the Patorgoyan, the Borgoyan, and the Tengaponiya (Goswami 1994; Jacquesson 2005; Deori 2009; Saikia 2013). The Dibongiyas inhabited near the Dibang River, and hence they are called the Dibongiyas. The Patorgoyans settled in a place called Pat-Sadiya in the extreme eastern corner of Assam. The Borgoyans settled near the mighty Brahmaputra or Borluit and the Tengaponiyas near the river Tengapani (Saikia 2013). Presently, the Patorgoyan community has completely disappeared, and it is believed that during migration the Patorgoyans have merged with the other three communities (Saikia 2013). Among these three communities, the Borgoyan and the Tengaponiya community have completely abandoned the Deori language and have adopted the Assamese language in recent years (Goswami 1994). However, it is worth mentioning that in spite of their shift to Assamese, all social functions and religious rituals are practiced by the Borgoyan and the Tengaponiya communities following Deori customs (Deori 2002).

²We suppose it implies that Deori must have emerged from Proto-Bodo-Garo, but it has moved away from Proto-Bodo-Garo in significant ways. Since this is not a topic of investigation, we will not discuss this further.

³However, there is a difference of opinion as Deori (2002) mentions that it is only the Dibongiya community who is referred to as *Jimosaya* ‘children of the sun and the moon’.

The term Deori is attached to the religious or priestly functionaries of various tribal and non-tribal communities of Assam (Kakati 1948; Bose 1967). The Deoris are considered to be “the old priestly caste and they perform the sacrificial ceremonies of the Ahom Kings” (Goswami 1994:9). Even today the Deori community is better known for their religious devotion and maintaining their traditional beliefs and practices (Deori 2002; Deori 2004). Goswami (1994) states that the Deoris follow a certain animistic religious tradition. It has been noted that “the Deoris have adopted Hindu religious practices as a result of constant contact with the Assamese community mainly in the state of Assam, but their original religious practices are a blend of animism and superstitious beliefs” (Deori 2009:4). They self-identify as worshippers of *Kundimama*, whom they consider as the supreme power of nature (Deori 2002). As per animistic beliefs, the chief deities of the Deoris are *Kundimama* or *Gira-Girasi* or *Bura-Buri*, *Pisa-Dema* or *Baliababa*, and *Pisasi Dema* or *Tamreswari* or *Kesaikhati* worshipped by Dibongiya, Tengaponiya, and Borgoyan respectively (Goswami 1994; Deori 2002; Deori 2009).

The extant literature on Deori (Brown 1895; Brandreth 1878; Grierson 1909; Goswami 1994) associates the language of the Deori community with the Chutiyas, “the original language of Upper Assam” (Brown 1895:5). At present, there is no evidence of closeness of the Deori language to the language spoken by the Chutiya community. Earlier the researchers (Brown 1850; Brandreth 1878; Endle 1883; Brown 1895; Grierson 1909) have classified Deori-Chutiya under the Bodo-Garo group and considered Deori-Chutiya as the original language of the Chutiya community. They have also presented the cognate sets of Chutiya language referring to it as the lexicon of the Deori-Chutiya language. We suppose that the speculation of relatedness is perhaps because the Deoris belong to the priestly section and performed all religious rituals in the Chutiya Kingdom. However, at present, the Deori community has no connection with the Chutiya community. It has been noted that:

Deoris are completely different from the Chutiya community, linguistically and ethnically. There is no commonality in the language of the two communities. There is not a single word in Deori vocabulary which matches with the Chutiya language and vice-versa. No semblance of the traditional societal bond has also been traced between these two communities. (Deori 2002:11)

Similarly, it has also been noted that:

The linguistic features of Deori show that this language was shaped in the northeastern parts of Assam close to the Dibang valley, where there is no record of the Chutiyas being settled in that particular area rather they were spread across Upper Assam. (Jacquesson 2008:30)

Grierson (1909) mentioned that though Deori is sub-grouped under Bodo-Garo, its grammatical form is certainly “archaic” which makes the language distinct from other Bodo-Garo languages. Burling (2003) places Deori in the Bodo-Koch group. His classification of Bodo-Koch group instead of Bodo-Garo is that “Garo is closer

to Bodo than to Koch, which is why I prefer to call the larger group Bodo-Koch (176).” Burling’s classification of Deori as a Bodo-Koch group is shown in Figure 1. Jacquesson (2005) classifies the language as a Bodo-Garo language and describes Deori as a language with rare linguistic features, unlike other Bodo-Garo languages.

Figure 1. Genetic classification of Deori (Burling 2003:175)

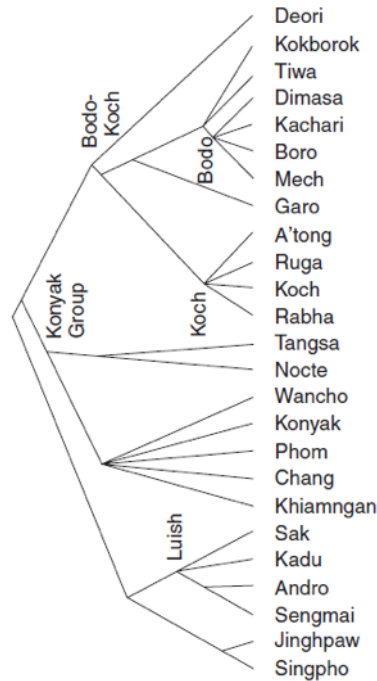
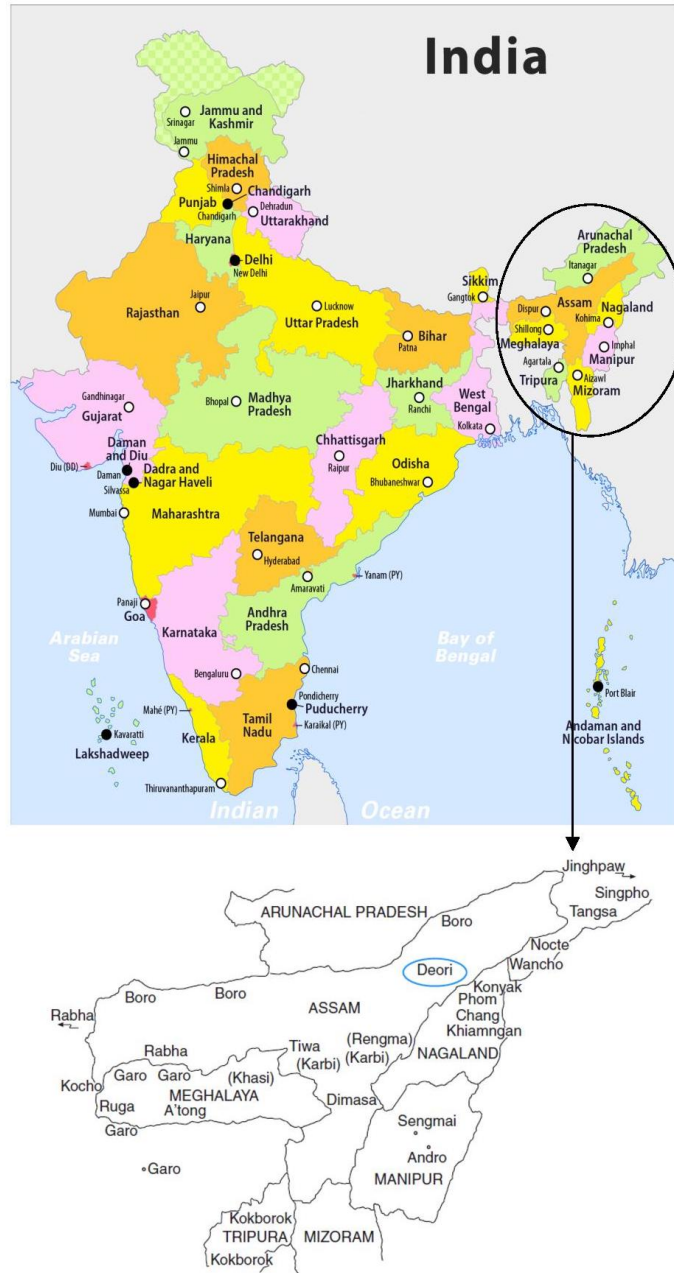


Figure 2 below shows the geographical distribution of Deori. It can be clearly seen in the map that Deoris are mainly concentrated in the eastern parts of Assam and is surrounded by other languages of the Tibeto-Burman group.

Assam is a land of diverse languages incorporating Indo-Aryan, Austroasiatic, Dravidian, and Tibeto-Burman language families. Assamese is the regional language of Assam and is the easternmost language in the Indo-Aryan language family. The 2011 census⁴ estimates a total population of Assam as 31,205,576. As per the census, 1.5 million speakers speak Assamese as their first language, i.e., 48.37% of the total population speaks Assamese and the rest speak other Indo-Aryan languages such as Bengali (28.92%), Hindi (6.73%), Nepali (1.91%), Punjabi (0.39%); Austroasiatic language such as Khasi (0.13%); Dravidian languages such as Malayalam (0.01%), Tamil (0.01%), Telugu (0.08%); and Tibeto-Burman languages such as Bodo (4.54%), Karbi (1.64%), Dimasa (0.42%), Deori (0.08%), Koch (0.04%), etc.

⁴Office of the Registrar General, Government of India. Census of India 2011: India, States and Union Territories. Table C-16. <http://censusindia.gov.in>. (Accessed 25 July 2018).

Figure 2. Map of language distribution of Bodo-Konyak-Jingphaw in North-East India (Burling 2003:176)



3. Methodology For the vitality assessment of the language we decided to gather information from Deori speakers, both directly (using a questionnaire) and indirectly (through observation and interaction with the community members). We chose UNESCO (2003a) vitality assessment tool and UNESCO survey (2003b) questionnaire for the survey. The questions in the questionnaire are discussed under the factors outlined in UNESCO (2003a). The rationale behind choosing the UNESCO vitality assessment tool will be discussed in §4. For the questionnaire survey, we consulted Deori speakers from Naam Deori and Upor Deori villages in Jorhat district and Bor Deori village, Narayanpur in Lakhimpur district. These are Deori villages inhabited by the Dibongiya community and where Deori is spoken in all matters of daily life. For the convenience of the speakers, the questionnaire was translated from English to Assamese as all the speakers are competent Assamese-Deori bilinguals. To examine and assess the vitality of the language we distributed the questionnaire among the Deori speakers. The questionnaire was handed over to all the participants by the authors in person. To make the questionnaire community and culture-specific, some expressions such as “the language” were changed to “Deori” and the “informal domain” in Grade 4 of Question 5 is referred to as “families”. Similarly, in Question 6, Grade 0 was changed from “Not Applicable” to “broadcast media and internet are not available in the reference community”.

The participants were requested to answer the questions by placing a tick in the appropriate box against the options that they think to be the most suitable. A total number of 165 questionnaires were distributed, out of which a total of 100 were properly filled in by speakers from both the places (57 from Naam Deori and Upor Deori village and 43 from Bordeori village). The participants’ age ranged from 15–65 years and all are educated. The analysis of the participants is grouped under two categories: younger generation (15–30 years) and older generation speakers (50–65 years). The study incorporates the responses of the younger generation speakers because it would lead us to a better understanding of the language status among the new generation. The male participants within the age group of 15–30 years are mostly students and some are graduates and looking for job opportunities. Speakers above 50 years belong to the following professions: teacher, social worker, farmer, government service holder, and ex-defense personnel. A small proportion of female participants participated in the survey, and they are all housewives. Generation-wise responses were then averaged across speakers. The responses of the participants are examined both qualitatively and quantitatively. The percentage-wise responses reported in the paper are the quantitative analysis of the participants’ response to the question (that is, if they tick response box 1, or 2, or 3, etc.). Influence of demographic variables such as age, gender, and place of belonging of the participants was taken into consideration while collecting the responses. However, while analyzing the responses, statistical analysis showed a significant influence of age on the responses ($p < 0.05$) but no significant influence of gender ($p > 0.05$) and locality ($p > 0.05$) of the participants on the responses. Hence, except the generational division, the responses of the participants are analyzed together irrespective of the speakers’ gender and their place of origin.

There is a general consensus in the literature that self-reported data can be prejudiced as it often entails the prestige of the language in local and national context (Trudgill 2000; Grenoble 2013; Rosés Labrada 2017). Keeping this fact in mind, we have tried to incorporate both the responses data as well as the facts which have emerged based on our observation. The questionnaire survey was very apt to assess the language vitality survey of Deori and it has helped us to understand the status of the language. We personally witnessed the transmission of Deori to very young children, and this is reflected in the optimism of the majority of the responses.

The participants' responses and the authors' observation are discussed in the subsequent sections below. They facilitate a holistic understanding of the vitality factors of Deori. The combination of both qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data will highlight the dynamics of language shift and maintenance.

4. UNESCO vitality assessment tool There have been many studies on language vitality assessment incorporating different tools to evaluate the vitality score of the language such as Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor (1977), Dixon (1991), Fishman (1991), Kinkade (1991), Crystal (2000), Krauss (2007), Wurm (2007), Lewis & Simons (2010), including the UNESCO's major evaluative factors of language vitality drawn up in 2003a. The UNESCO (2003a) method of language vitality assessment was used as a vitality assessment tool by the 2010 edition of *Atlas of the World's languages in danger* (as cited in Lee & Way 2016). In our vitality assessment of Deori, we adopt the UNESCO method of vitality assessment, and the reason for choosing the nine factors outlined in the UNESCO vitality assessment report for our analysis of Deori is its visibility as the most widely used vitality assessment tool by linguists around the world.⁵ The nine factors outlined in UNESCO emanated from the work of a group of language experts on endangered languages. They proposed that the nine different factors are to be taken into consideration to evaluate the vitality of a particular language. The factors incorporate parameters such as whether the language seems to be declining in recent times, if the new generation speakers are using the language, and if the community members are shifting towards the dominant language or the state language. It also focuses on the prospect of initiation of language revitalization programs undertaken by Government or non-Government organizations. The major evaluative factors of language vitality outlined in UNESCO (2003a) are:

Factor 1: Intergenerational Language Transmission

Factor 2: Absolute Number of Speakers

Factor 3: Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

Factor 4: Trends in Existing Language Domains

Factor 5: Response to New Domains and Media

Factor 6: Materials for Language Education and Literacy

⁵Various arguments in favor of using the UNESCO tool can be found in Grenoble & Whaley (2006) and Rosés Labrada (2017). We will not proceed to analyze the differences in this article.

Factor 7: Official Status and Use: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies

Factor 8: Community Member's Attitudes toward their own language

Factor 9: Amount and Quality of Documentation

These nine factors characterize the overall sociolinguistic situation of a language. Of these nine factors, the first three factors mostly refer to the number of language speakers in the community across generations which would reflect on the viability of the language. Factors 4–7 reflect where and how the language is used. Factor 8 and Factor 9 incorporate the community's attitudes towards the language and the amount and quality of language documentation respectively (UNESCO 2003a:7). Each of the factors has a unique predominance level and its essence is measured in conjunction with one another. However, the first factor of intergenerational language transmission is considered to outnumber all other factors. For a language to sustain its vitality it has to be actively used by the younger generation speakers. All the factors are rated on a five-point scale where zero indicates a worst-case scenario and five indicates the best possible situation. Except for factor 2, "Absolute number of speakers", all other factors are graded in a five-point scale and are then correlated with five levels of endangerment: Safe (5), Unsafe (4), Definitely Endangered (3), Severely Endangered (2), Critically Endangered (1), and Extinct (0).⁶

5. Deori: The present scenario Before plunging into the results of the questionnaire, we will present a qualitative discussion of the predicament of the Deori language and society. The discussion is based on the results of the UNESCO tool as well as our interaction with the community in the past few years. This excursus will throw some light on the current situation and the expectation of the speakers irrespective of the quantitative dimension afforded by the questionnaire.

The recent 2011 census report estimates that out of 43,750 total population of Deori, 32,376 speakers speak the language (ORGI 2011). However, the majority of the participants have expressed that the total population of Deori is more than 200,000. The participants have mentioned that the census reports have failed to incorporate the exact population of the ethnically Deori community residing in Assam.

It was observed that children grow up learning Deori until they enter the education system. Inter-community marriage is common in Deori. If a Dibongiya woman marries outside the community and settles in a non-Dibongiya community, their children acquire Assamese as their first language. On the other hand, if a non-Dibongiya woman marries a Dibongiya man and settles in a Dibongiya village, their children would learn Deori as the first language. The choice of language transmission is determined by the preference of the parent. It is difficult to find a single monolingual Deori parent within the community who can completely avoid speaking in Assamese to their children. The younger generation speakers declared that they use Deori at

⁶However, Question 6 in the UNESCO survey (2003b) questionnaire is graded from 0–4, and we have used it verbatim.

home, but not as extensively as the older generation speakers. However, the older generation speakers have a strong commitment to intergenerational language transmission. There is a general tendency among the speakers to use more Deori with the older generation speakers and more Assamese with the younger generation speakers. From the interaction with community members, it is evident that intergenerational language transmission of Deori is not completely obstructed as the community members understand that intergenerational language transmission is the foundation to preserve the language.

While in the pre-school period, parents foster the essence of Deori in their children by verbally interacting in the language, in the education domain Assamese overpowers Deori. Children mostly go to Assamese medium schools, and wealthier and urban families also send children to English medium schools. Once a child enters the school premises he/she starts using Assamese to communicate with their friends and also does not keep the two languages apart, such that both are used with relative fluency.

In the religious domain, Deori is extensively used. All social ceremonies such as marriages, birth rites, and death rites are practiced traditionally following Deori customs, and religious hymns are sung in the Deori language. The Deori priests conduct all religious services in the Deori language. The community members even compose Deori *Bisu* (the most celebrated festival of the Deoris) songs in the Deori language to mark the occasion. This shows that in the religious domain Deori is extensively used.

The Deori language has entered the new media, though minimally. There have been two movies made in the language, released in the year 1999 and 2006, which have received laurels from the community members. Unfortunately, since the last decade, there has been no initiative taken by the Deori community or from the state's media houses to popularize the language in television media. In the year 2002, a 15-minute weekly program on the radio was broadcast on the education of the Deori language. The primary aim of this program was to create awareness among the Deori speakers on their language, culture, and tradition, but it did not last long and is no longer broadcast. At present, there are no television shows, movies, or radio programs in Deori. It is observed that in social networking websites there are some pages created by the members of the Deori Autonomous Council, but the content is completely bilingual. In 2003, a monthly magazine named *Digezi* was published which in fact popularized the language in print media. However, this initiative too ended after three months of publication.

The important documentation available in the language is Brown (1895), Goswami (1994), and Jacquesson (2005). Brown (1895) and Goswami (1994) documented the language background of Deori and presented a grammatical description on Deori. Jacquesson (2005) is the first complete grammatical work on the Deori language and it gives a detailed analysis of the language's morpho-syntax. Deori Sahitya Sabha, a literary organization founded in the year 1965, announced the use of Assamese script as their main script for writing. Writings in Deori language using Assamese script include pedagogical texts, prayer books, grammar books, and dictionaries. De-

ori language experts have also published literary materials with the aim of preserving the language. Some research conducted on Deori includes Ph.D dissertations mainly on the geographical analysis of the migration and cultural transformation of Deoris in Assam (Deori 2009), socio-linguistic analysis of the Deori speech community (Saikia 2012), a semantic analysis of Deori (Nath 2010),⁷ and a socio-cultural analysis of the lives of the Deoris (Deori 2015).

There were also research projects taken up by the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore, under the North Eastern Language Development Project on “Development of Deori Language”, in 2004–2006. Furthermore, the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati has also completed a research project on “A phonological and sociolinguistic study of variation in Deori” during the year 2012–2014 funded by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi. The aim of the project was to analyze the phonetic and phonological variation of Deori with the aid of recorded material. As a result of the project, about fourteen hours of recorded elicitation of the Dibongiya community were collected. The full recorded audio has been segmented and annotated and used for the purpose of the study. However, the recorded audio is not archived and is not accessible to the community. The Anundoram Barooah Institute of Language and Culture (ABILAC) in collaboration with Deori Sahitya Sabha have published bilingual and trilingual dictionaries with the aim of preserving the language. As per the 2011 census, the literacy rate of Deori is 83.3%,⁸ highest among the major communities in Assam. However, published materials in the language are inaccessible to the entire Deori community regardless of their efficiency in reading and writing. This can be because of (1) ignorance of the community member about the existence of these materials, and (2) lack of a proper platform where the materials could be easily accessible. It also came to our notice from the interviews that there is a lack of adequate interaction between the Deori language experts and the community members which may contribute to the inaccessibility of the materials to the entire community.

To protect the ethnic identity of the Deori community, some organizations were set up such as All Assam Deori Sanmilan, All Assam Deori Student’s Union, Deori Sahitya Sabha, and All Assam Deori Autonomous Council.⁹ On 4th March 2005, the Government of India signed the Memorandum of Understanding (henceforth, MoU),¹⁰ which is also known as the Deori Accord. As an upshot of the MoU, the Deori Autonomous Council was formed to achieve economic, educational, and linguistic autonomy as well as to safeguard the socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Deoris. The demand for converting the Deori Autonomous Council to Sixth Schedule (Article 244-A) status of the constitution by the All Assam Deori Student’s Union

⁷The dissertation is mainly on the lexico-semantic study of Tiwa and Deori, two endangered languages of the Tibeto-Burman family.

⁸Ministry of Tribal Affairs Statistics Divisions, Government of India. Census of India 2011: Statistical Profile of Schedule Tribes in India. <https://tribal.nic.in/>. (Accessed 25 July 2018).

⁹The main aim of these organizations is to provide maximum possible autonomy for the social, economic, educational, ethnic, and cultural development within the framework of the Constitution of India.

¹⁰The Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the Government of Assam as an emblem of earnest efforts to provide facilities to the ethnic community.

is already underway, and in this regard, they have submitted a memorandum to the present Prime Minister of India in the year 2016.¹¹ The inclusion of the Deori Autonomous Council in the Sixth Schedule would provide the community with some autonomy (recognized by the Government) to maintain their socio-political rights. However, the Government has not yet acquiesced to their demand.

The Deori Sahitya Sabha and the State Council of Education Research and Training (SCERT) of the Assam government have jointly published pedagogical materials and have pleaded with the State Government of Assam and the Central Government of India to introduce Deori as a compulsory subject in the school curriculum. The Deori Sahitya Sabha has also pleaded with the State Government to appoint 150 Deori teachers in schools. However, the reason for choosing a fixed number of 150 teachers to be appointed in schools is not yet known. They have also shown interest in teaching Deori to the children of Tengaponiya and Borgoya clans, who have completely abandoned the language. After prolonged debates and a series of demands, the government of Assam gave Deori the status of a “language” through the office order number A (1) E, 338/99/572 in 2005 and has included the language in the Primary School for 3rd and 4th standard students (ages 8–10 years) as a subject. However, due to lack of teachers, it could not be fully operationalised as a subject in schools. In another development, Dibrugarh University, a state-funded university of Assam, has taken an initiative to introduce a six-month certificate course in Deori in the Centre for Language Studies, established under the university in 2010. The course was initiated in 2016 with an intake capacity of thirty and taught by Deori language experts.¹² The main aim of the course is to transmit the language to young adults to speak the language fluently which would some guarantee vitality to the language. The syllabus structure of the course is designed by the Deori language experts in association with the Deori Sahitya Sabha. The local intellectuals and the community members have expressed their gratitude to the university for initiating such a course. However, they believe that Deori as a compulsory subject in the school curriculum will prove more beneficial to the learners as intervention at an early age would make them far better speakers than introducing it at a much later stage.

The qualitative description highlights that the language does not seem to be completely on the verge of extinction. The discussion highlights that the community members have a positive attitude towards their language and its immediate demise can be prevented by teaching it to young children. A quantitative analysis of the participants’ response is discussed in the following sections which will objectively substantiate the language vitality status of Deori.

6. Language vitality assessment Research participants’ own ideologies and perception play a pivotal role in understanding the language endangerment scenario and the revitalization processes even if they do not comply with some canonical views of lan-

¹¹Memorandum submitted to the Hon’ble Prime Minister, Government of India, Parliament House, New Delhi by All Assam students Union (AASU), on January 19th, 2016.

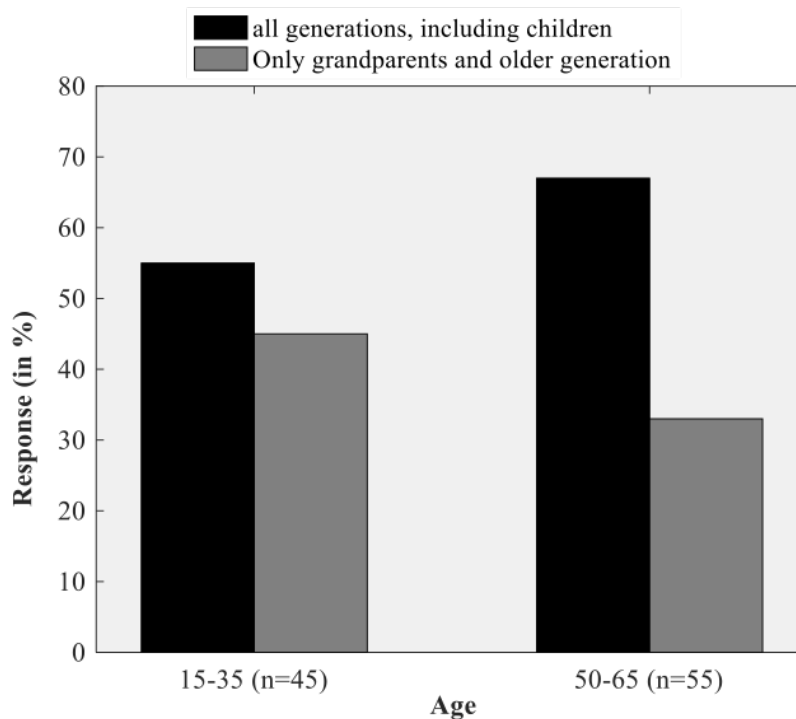
¹²Two Deori language experts are appointed for the post as a faculty by Dibrugarh University.

guage endangerment. In the subsequent sections, we assess the degree of language vitality of Deori and try to highlight the language's overall sociolinguistic situation.

6.1 Factor 1: Intergenerational language transmission Intergenerational language transmission is not only a way to preserve the mother tongue; it also instills a sense of self-identity in the subsequent generations. Fishman (1997) mentions that the most widely used factor to assess language vitality is to evaluate whether the language is passed on to the next generation.

The generational responses were taken into account in order to map the intention of the participants over the notion of intergenerational language transmission. From the responses as shown in Figure 3, it can be assessed that the language is still in use in the two age groups, but in severely restricted domains. In terms of cross-generational language use, all the respondents agree that the language is still used across all generations, but the percentage of acceptance varies according to the age group. 67% of the older generation speakers (50–65 years) are more convinced of the language usage by all the generations, whereas only 55% of the younger generation believes that the language is still used by all the generations. The difference of responses among the participants on the language used by all the generations is 12% which entails the fact that the language transmission is not completely hindered.

Figure 3. Participants' response: intergenerational language transmission



From the analysis, it is evident that Deori is spoken by all generations and the intergenerational language transmission has not ceased completely. For this factor, we would classify Deori in Grade 5 of the UNESCO scale as all generations, including children, speak in Deori, however, the rate of fluency differs according to age.

6.1.1 Overall vitality/endangerment score The participants, irrespective of age, are of the opinion that Deori is not completely endangered, as intergenerational language transmission is seen to be thriving, even though Assamese is used in most communication contexts. The participants believe that although Assamese exists simultaneously with Deori, their pride in the mother tongue will enable them to retain their language. Taking into consideration Factor 1 (Intergenerational Language Transmission) of the UNESCO (2003a) scale as a yardstick to measure a language's sustainability in the indefinite future, we would like to classify Deori in Grade 5 of the UNESCO scale of being safe. Despite the optimism of the speakers, a caveat is necessary. We cannot but acknowledge the reality that perhaps Deori will not be spoken in the indefinite future if some safeguards are not undertaken immediately. Even though the goal of our paper is to assess the vitality of the language, it would be a disservice to the language if this need is not stressed adequately. All Deori speakers are at least bilingual (if not multilingual), and Assamese is moving into all socialization spaces. If Deori survives in the distant future without any intervention (by which we mean the development of materials and means to teach the language), it can be predicted that it will perhaps acquire more features and structures of Assamese.

6.2 Factor 2: Absolute number of speakers Reports regarding the total number of speakers in Deori date back to 1895 when the first comprehensive grammatical description of Deori was published by W.B. Brown. Brown (1895) reports only 4,000 Deori speakers in the entire Deori community. The 1951 census¹³ estimates the total population of Deori as 12,503 and 6,715 as the total number of speakers. The 1961 census¹⁴ estimates a total number of 9,103 speakers out of the total population of 13,876. The 1971¹⁵ census estimates 23,080 as the total Deori population and 14,937 as the total number of speakers. The 1991 census counts a total number of 35,849 Deori population and 17,901 as the total number of speakers. The 2001 census estimates 27,960 speakers out of 41,161 total Deori population. The Deori Autonomous Council, established under the Deori Autonomous Council Act 2005,¹⁶ estimates the Deori population to be 200,000. Jacquesson (2005) lists only

¹³Office of the Registrar General, Government of India. Census of India 1951: General Population Tables, Summary Figures for Districts, Social and Cultural Tables and Land Holdings of Indigenous Persons. *Part IIIA*. <http://censusindia.gov.in>. (Accessed 10 July 2018).

¹⁴Department of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes, Government of Assam. <https://wptbc.assam.gov.in/>. (Accessed 10 July 2018).

¹⁵Information regarding total population and total number of speakers of Deori from 1971–2011: Office of the Registrar General, Government of India. Census of India 2011: Growth of Non-Schedule Languages 1971–2011. *Statement 8*. <http://censusindia.gov.in>. (Accessed 25 July 2018).

¹⁶The Deori Autonomous Council was established under the Assam Act No. XXV of 2005 under the Government of Assam.

10,000–15,000 speakers in the Deori community (Jacquesson's source seems to be hearsay from community members). UNESCO (2009) reports 28,000 Deori speakers, and the recent 2011 census report estimates 32,376 Deori speakers out of the total Deori population of 43,750. The difference in population from 1951–2011 could be explained by increasing awareness among the community members to identify themselves as belonging to the indigenous community. A comparison of the 1951 census with the 2011 census highlights that the population growth rate has been increasing after every decade. Similarly, the absolute number of speakers is also shown to be increasing in the census report (contrary to Jacquesson 2005).¹⁷ The data regarding Deori population and number of speakers are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Total population of Deori

Reports	Total Deori Population	Decadal Growth		Total number of Deori language speakers	Decadal Growth	
		Absolute	Percent (in %)		Absolute	Percent (in %)
Brown (1895)	-	-	-	4000	-	-
1951 (Census)	12,503	-	-	6715	2715	67.87
1961 (Census)	13,876	1373	10.98	9103	2388	35.56
1971 (Census)	23,080	9204	66.33	14,937	5834	64.08
1981	No census	-	-	No census	-	-
1991 (Census)	35,849	12769	55.32	17,901	2964	19.84
2001 (Census)	41,161	5312	14.81	27,960	10059	56.19
Deori Autonomous Council (2005)	200,000	158839	385	-	-	-
Jacquesson (2005)	-	-	-	10,000-15,000	-12960	-46.35
UNESCO (2009)	-	-	-	28,000	13000	86.6
2011 (census)	43,750	2589	6.28	32,376	4376	15.62

The growth rate in the total population is highest in the year 1971 with 66.33% and lowest in 2011 with 6.28%. Similarly, the growth rate in the total number of speakers is highest in the year 2009 as reported by UNESCO with 86.6% and lowest in 2011 with 15.62%. However, the total population reported by Deori Autonomous Council is completely at variance with all other reported data on population, showing an increase of 385% in the population growth of Deori in the year 2005. Unfortunately, the Deori Autonomous Council has withheld information of the total number of Deori speakers, and Jacquesson (2005) and UNESCO (2009) have not included data regarding the total number of population (as these two can be different).

The All Assam Deori Students Union in collaboration with the Department of Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes, Government of Assam, reports a population of Deori of 217,063.¹⁸ These district wise population data are summarized in Table 2 below.

¹⁷Jacquesson (2005) exemplifies a negative growth rate of -46.35% in the total number of speakers.

¹⁸The reported data of the Deori population encompasses the entire Deori population irrespective of their community.

Table 2. District wise population data

Sl No.	District	Places/Revenue Circle	Total Population
1	Lakhimpur	Bihpuria	55,564
		Narayanpur	50,523
		Naubaicha	2,555
		Kadam	16,762
		North Lakhimpur	2,729
		Subansiri	4,603
2	Dhemaji	Dhemaji	40
		Gugamukh	3,617
		Sisibargaon	6,113
		Jonai	2,693
3	Sonitpur	Gohpur	7920
		Helem	23,541
4	Jorhat	West Jorhat	3,805
		Majuli	3,357
5	Dibrugarh	East	1,882
		West	1,852
		Moran	2,342
6	Sibsagar	Demow	12,123
		Sibsagar	119
		Mahmora	1,058
7	Tinsukia	Sadiya	7,105
		Dumduma	1,067
		Margherita	4,550
8	Kamrup	Guwahati	212
		Dispur	1331

The district wise population data includes all the three communities of Deori irrespective of their ability to speak the language. The population distribution in Table 2 shows that the highest concentration of Deori population is in Lakhimpur district. Out of 217,063 of the total Deori population, 132,736 (61%) reside in Lakhimpur district. The lowest number of Deori population, i.e., about 0.71%, is concentrated in Kamrup district. The participants mentioned that the Deoris residing in Kamrup district have completely adopted the Assamese language, and they use a smattering of Deori words and phrases occasionally only when they visit their relatives in their respective villages. We do not have any means to objectively quantify the fluency of these speakers.

6.3 Factor 3: Proportion of speakers within the total population It has been noticed that there is a decadal change of Deori language speakers from the 1951 census to the 2011 census. There is a rise of 11.9% of Deori speakers from 1951 (53.70%)¹⁹ to 1961 (65.60%) out of the total population of the respective year. On the contrary, there is a fall of -0.89% of the total Deori speakers from 1961 (65.60%) to 1971 (64.71%). From 1971 (64.71%) to 1991 (49.93%), within a span of 20 years, there is a steep fall of -14.78% in the total number of Deori speakers within the total population. There is again a high rise of 17.99% in the total number of Deori speakers from 1991 (49.93%) to 2001 (67.92%). From 2001 (67.92%) to 2011 (74%) there is a rise of 6.08% in the total number of Deori speakers within the total population. This highlights the fact that the proportion of speakers within the total population has an alteration of ups and downs after every decade as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Proportion of speakers within the total population from 1951–1971 computed by the authors

Reports	The proportion of speakers (in %) within the total population
1951 (Census)	53.7
1961 (Census)	65.6
1971 (Census)	64.71
1991 (Census)	49.93
2001 (Census)	67.92
2011 (Census)	74

Figure 4 below shows the proportion of Deori speakers based on the 2011 census. The plausible range of Deori speakers is 32,376 and the plausible range of the non-speaker community is 11,374 out of the total population of 43,750, i.e., 74% of the total population are speakers and 26% are non-speakers.

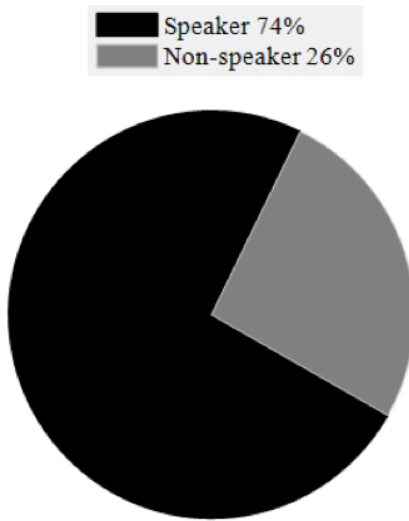
The participants speculated that the reason behind the fluctuating growth rate of speakers within the total population in the census report could be the result of the native speakers being uncertain about their degree of assimilation with the greater Assamese community.²⁰ The younger generation speakers believe that the percentage of Deori speakers ranges from 40–55% of the total population. The estimation of the younger generation speakers is a close approximation of the total percentage of Deori speakers as reported in UNESCO (2009). On the contrary, speakers ranging above 50 years of age consider that more than 70% of the total population communicates in Deori and only 20% are non-speakers. The proportion of speakers highlights the fact that the speakers have not completely abandoned the language, which shows a high level of vitality, contra Brown (1895) and Jacquesson (2005). Based on the recent census data we would classify Deori at Grade 3 of the UNESCO scale which

¹⁹The percentage within parentheses implies the total number of speakers within the total population.

²⁰A steep fall in the proportion of the speaker rate within the total population is observed from the year 1961 to 1991. The reason could be the pressure on the indigenous speakers to report Assamese as their mother tongue because of the Assam Official Language Bill passed in the year 1960 which declared Assamese as the official language in Assam.

implies that a majority of the Deori population communicates in their mother tongue, though in a restricted domain.

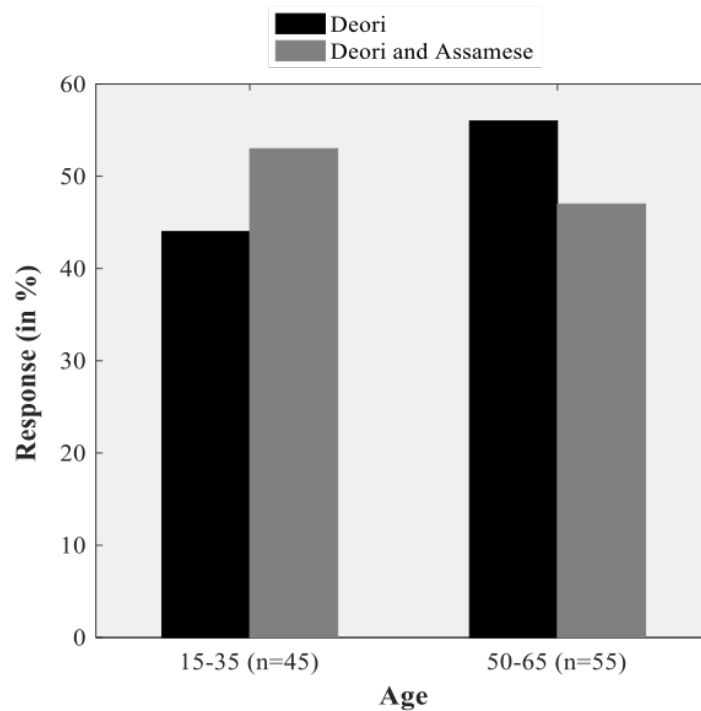
Figure 4. Percentage of Deori speakers and non Deori speakers based on 2011 census



6.4 Factor 4: Trends in existing language domains Language choice has been analyzed from different perspectives by different researchers. The domain of language use determines the participants' domains such as family, religion, school, and marketplace, and both Deori and Assamese are used simultaneously in different settings. Each of these is discussed separately below.

6.4.1 Home As for language use in the home domain, 44% of the younger generation speakers declared that they use Deori with family members, and 56% of them declared that they use both Deori and Assamese with family members. Similarly, 53% of the older generation speakers declared that they use Deori within the family, and 47% of the speakers declared that they use both Deori and Assamese within the family. The percentage wise responses for the language used by both the generations show that frequency of language use increases with the increase in age and this difference is statistically significant (Pearson $r=0.810$, $p=0.000$).

It was observed that a common tendency for older generation speakers to use more Deori and more Assamese with the younger generation speakers. For instance, the younger generation speakers declared that they use more Deori with their grandparents than with their siblings within the family. As for language use with friends and neighbors, both Deori and Assamese are in use by both the generations.

Figure 5. Participants' response: language use in the home domain

6.4.2 Public In a domain setting such as in the marketplace, all the participants irrespective of age mentioned that if the addressee belongs to the Deori community, they use both Deori and Assamese, otherwise they use only Assamese. In public offices, administration, and social sectors, the regional language Assamese is predominantly in use.

6.4.3 Education In the education domain, Assamese is extensively used. Some of the participants who are school teachers mentioned that in the school premises Assamese is preferred for communication as it is the medium of instruction in schools. The participants further stated that such a situation persists because it is convenient to use Assamese as it is comprehensible to all the students around, irrespective of their community.

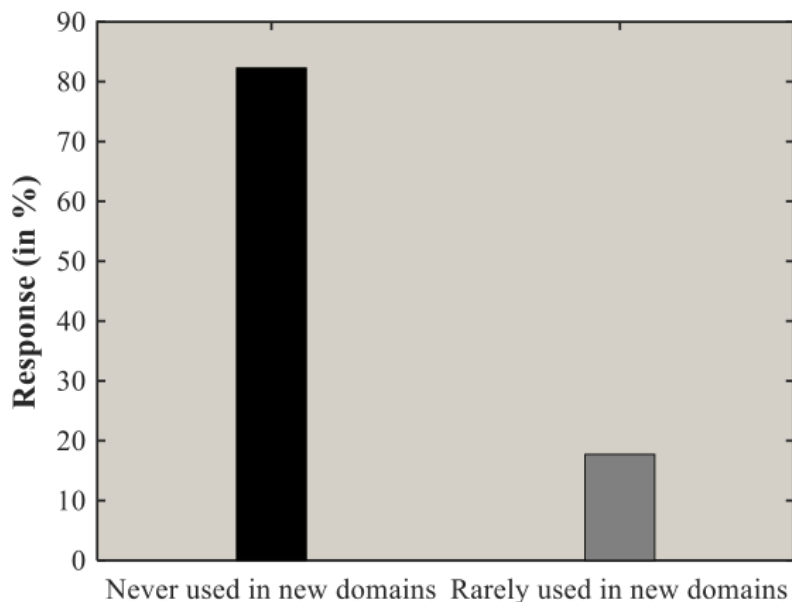
6.4.4 Religion Deori is extensively used in the religious domain and participants irrespective of age mentioned that even members of the Borgoyan and the Tengaponiya community offer prayer and observe rituals in the Deori language. This analysis underlines that in a religious context Deori is given enough prestige, unlike other social settings. It clearly places Deori in a vital position at least in the religious context.

6.4.5 Traditional knowledge In terms of sharing knowledge of traditional cultural expressions and traditional skills and practices, the participants stated that Deori is frequently used for the purpose. The participants further stated that although code-switching and code-mixing with Assamese are frequent among the speakers, they rarely do so where transferring of traditional knowledge is concerned. Hence, we rate the language in Grade 5 of the UNESCO scale which implies that Deori is frequently used for conveying traditional knowledge.²¹

6.4.6 Summary From the analysis (§6.4.1–6.4.5) it is evident that Deori is used in various domains but in a very restricted way. Even within the family, Assamese prevails alongside Deori. As for trends in existing language domains, we would rate the language as being used in Multilingual Parity (4) in the UNESCO scale.

6.5 Factor 5: Response to new domains and media As for language use in the new domain, 82.28% of the speakers irrespective of age believe that currently the language is not in use in new media, whereas 17.72% of the speakers believe that the language is used in new media such as internet but in a very restricted context.

Figure 6. Participants' response: language use in new media

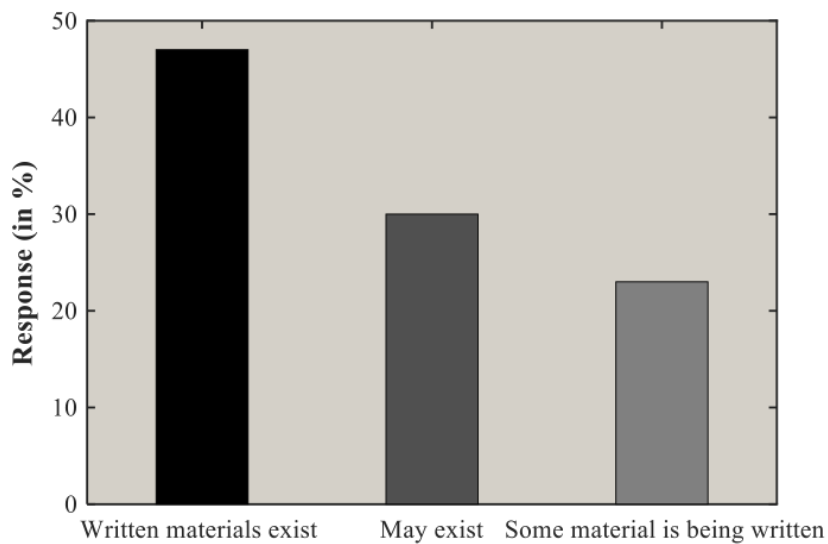


²¹Since we are discussing all the questions of the UNESCO survey (2003b) questionnaire under the nine factors outlined in UNESCO (2003a), the grading of Question 7 which is discussed under Factor 4 is done in §6.4.5 and the overall grading of Factor 4 is done in the following section, i.e., §6.4.6.

The participants showed a positive attitude when asked whether the language should be reintroduced in the new domain such as media and television. They mentioned that introducing the language in new media such as the internet and broadcast media would increase language use in these domains which are frequently accessed by younger generations. However, there is a dearth of enthusiastic producers and directors who would engage in producing movies or television shows in the Deori language (perhaps because of the small numbers of viewers). They also expressed their interest in reintroducing the language in print media and showed interest in republishing magazines and even newspapers in the language. From our interpretation of the results, it is evident that Deori has not gained formal and informal representation in the new media which shows a low level of language vitality for Deori in new domains. Given that the use of the language is restricted in new media, we would classify the language in Grade 1, which is the minimal category of the UNESCO scale.

6.6 Factor 6: Materials for language education and literacy Percentage wise response to the existence of literary materials shows that 47% of the participants, irrespective of age strongly believe that there exist written materials for literacy in Deori. 30% of speakers believe that there might be some writing materials but they are not accessible to the whole of the Deori community. 23% of the speakers also declared that some writing materials exist and may be useful to some selected members of the community who have easy access to those materials.

Figure 7. Participants' response: existence of materials for language education and literacy

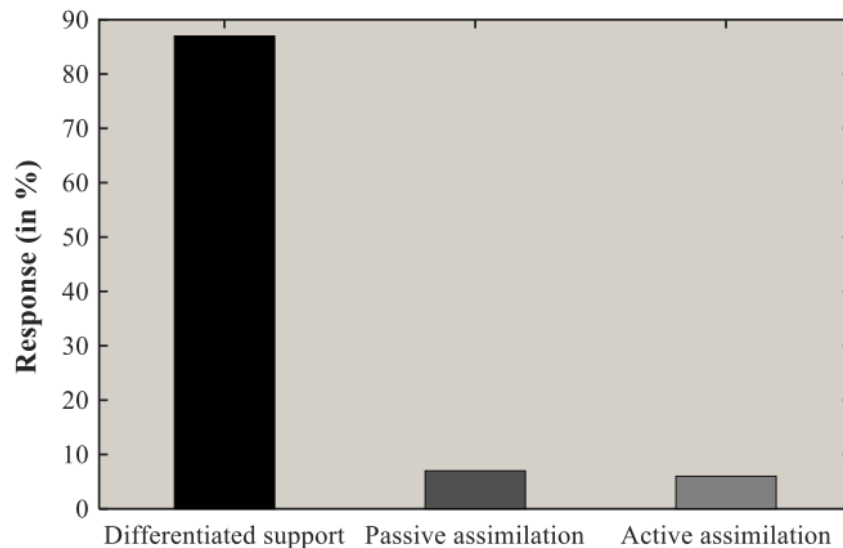


From the responses, it is evident that the available written materials are not accessible to all the community members. Given that there are dictionaries, comprehensive grammar books and pedagogical materials available in the language but remain inaccessible to most of the community members, and therefore we would classify the language in Grade 2 of the UNESCO scale.

6.7 Factor 7: Government and institutional language attitudes Government and institutional language attitudes play a key role in determining the vitality of a language in the long run.

The responses show that around 87% of the participants, irrespective of age believe that the Government has rendered differentiated support in promoting and revitalizing the language. 7% of the participants believe that Government's support towards the language is passive, and 6% of the participants believe that the Government's support towards the language is active.

Figure 8. Participants' response: government and institutional language attitudes



As mentioned in §5, Dibrugarh University with approval from the Government of Assam has initiated a six-month certificate course in Deori. The participants are in full support of this initiative of the institute and the State Government. However, they pleaded with the State Government to appoint teachers to teach Deori as a subject in schools. When the participants were asked whether Deori language experts, the people associated with the Deori Sahitya Sabha, and Deori speakers serving as teachers in schools or colleges are eligible to teach in schools, the participants opined that the Deori language experts are eligible to teach in schools, but their recruitment has to be done by the Government formally. They further stated that although the Government has supported the inclusion of the language in the school curriculum,

they have not taken any formal step in recruiting eligible teachers to teach the subject. The participants constantly mentioned that the support of the Government is indisputable, but there are clear differences in the context where the dominant/official and non-dominant (protected) languages are used. Based on the responses of the speakers we would classify Deori in Grade 4 of the UNESCO scale which highlights differentiated support of the Government organization for the development of the language. As a consequence, the language is not gaining acceptance in most public domains.

6.8 Factor 8: Community members' attitudes towards their languages Community members' attitudes towards the language vary. They may feel a sense of pride in promoting their language or may feel ashamed by it. For revitalization, all community members will have positive attitudes but more often the attitudes will vary among different people. Negative attitudes of a group of people impede its overall vitality.

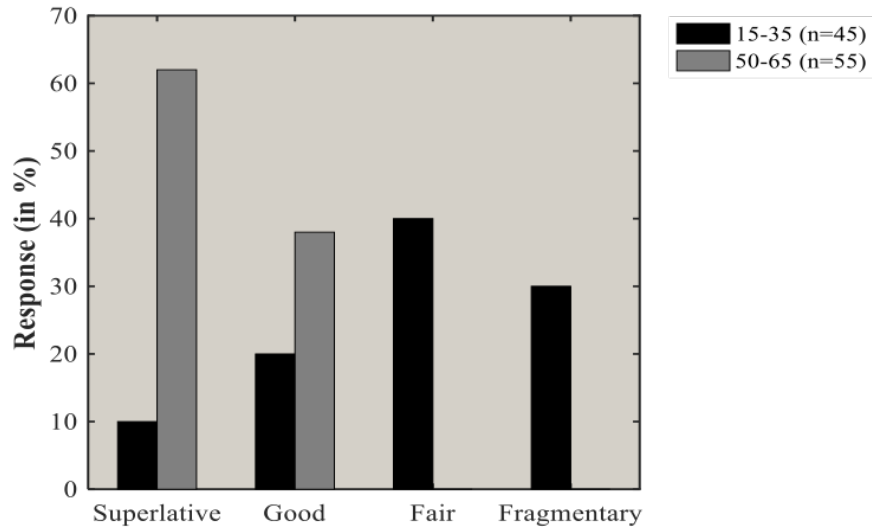
All the respondents irrespective of age have shown a positive inclination towards the development of the language. The respondents expressed their interest in the development of the language and mentioned that they would be happy if the Government gives equal support to the language along with the regional language of Assam. The participants showed interest in implementing the language in the school curriculum. The responses show that the participants are quite optimistic about the chances of their language being maintained in the future. They suggest that to preserve the language for the future generations they should develop a positive attitude towards the use of the language. They also see it as a marker of ethnic identity.

The responses to the question regarding language attitude towards language development are stable across age groups and age is not a statistically significant factor ($p > 0.05$, $p = .692$). Community members are not ashamed of using their language, but they are conscious that the language can be used in restricted contexts only. The older generation speakers mentioned that language use has reduced in various domains but they are still proud of their language. As for the attitude of the community members towards the language, the participants' responses show a considerably high level of language vitality for Deori. Given that the community members value their language and wish to see it promoted, we would give Deori a 4 in the UNESCO scale for Factor 8.

6.8.1 Status of language programs The Deori language experts are running language programs in association with the Deori Sahitya Sabha for the development of the language, though not regularly. They hold meetings at an interval of six months and discuss the prospects of the development of the language. However, from the authors' personal observation, except for the Deori language experts, local community members hardly convene in such gatherings. The participants stated that very often they are not informed of such meetings and activities. The reason for this could be lack of proper dissemination of information. Hence, we rate the language in Grade 2 which implies a basic status of the language programs run, though not regularly and less than 5% of the community members' involvement.

6.9 Factor 9: Amount and quality of documentation As for type and quality of existing language materials, 40% of the younger generation speakers opt to categorize it as “fair” while 30% choose the category of “fragmentary material of documentation” to account for the material available in the language. Among the older generation, 62% of the participants believe that the level of available material of documentation is “superlative” as shown in Figure 9 below.

Figure 9. Participants’ response: amount and quality of documentation



There are numerous videos on traditional Deori Bihu songs and dance which are available on the World Wide Web. However, these videos are not for the purpose of learning the language, and they could be considered cultural artifacts of the Deoris.

The description shows that there is an adequate number of literary texts and materials in the language and audio and video recordings are also available. However, as stated in §5, literary materials are not accessible to the entire community due to the lack of a proper platform. Similarly, the audio recordings are not yet archived and have remained inaccessible to the Deori community, and the videos available online are also their cultural artifacts. Given this background, with regard to the amount and quality of documentation, we would classify Deori in Grade 3, i.e., the fair level of the UNESCO scale.

7. Summary and discussion In this study, we have provided an overview of language vitality of Deori using both qualitative and quantitative data. For Deori speakers, maintaining the language instills in them a sense of legitimate pride and belonging. The participants’ attitude towards the Deori language is positive with respect to the following four categories: language learning, language use, language maintenance, and language documentation. All the participants value the language and believe that the pride in their mother tongue will enable them to retain their language. From

the perspective of this interpretation, it is evident that there is not a lot of intergenerational differentiation in terms of responses to the factors used for the study.

From the analysis, it is apparent that Deori is predominantly used in the religious domain and in the context of sharing traditional knowledge. However, in the public domain and in the domain of education, Assamese overpowers Deori. The restricted use of Deori in certain domains doesn't necessarily make the language susceptible to extinction. In a social scenario surrounded by many languages, predominantly Assamese, the native speakers of Deori cannot completely hold themselves back from using the dominant language. This is a diglossic situation where Assamese is the language of education, business, and government services, and Deori is the language of more domestic and private situations.

Table 4 below shows the scores for the nine factors in the UNESCO scale. It shows that Factors 5, 6, and 7 need attention as it scores low grades on the UNESCO scale. Introducing Deori in new media, a sufficient number of teachers to teach Deori as a subject in schools, and the Government's uninhibited support would result in a sustainable mechanism conducive for the development of the language.

Table 4. Summary of UNESCO factors for Deori

Sl.No	Factor	Values	Label
1	Intergenerational Language Transmission	5	Language is used by all generations, including children.
2	Absolute number of speakers	32,376	2011 census
3	Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population	3	A majority speak the language
4	Trends in Existing Language Domains	4	Multilingual parity
5	Response to New Domains and Media	1	Minimal
6	Materials for Language Education and Literacy	2	Written materials exist but they may be useful for some members of the community
7	Governmental & Institutional Languages and Policies including Official Status and Use	4	Differentiated support
8	Community Members' Attitudes toward their Own Language	4	Most members support language maintenance
9	Amount and Quality of Documentation	3	Fair

The increased contact of Deori with Assamese, the lack of exposure of the language in new media and the inaccessibility of language materials to the entire community makes Deori's existence vulnerable to the predatory power of bigger languages in the long-run. In a modern era, it is undeniable that advanced technology can empower smaller communities to achieve more success in invigorating language use. Language revitalization and maintenance programs through internet technology would be a profitable exercise as has been shown by the First Voices²² web services and tools developed for minority languages in Canada. This has brought about significant changes in the language revitalization map of Canada. Digital technology makes it relatively easier to produce new language materials for minority languages thereby making it possible for these materials to reach out to the entire community. Similarly introducing Deori in new domains and media (such as broadcast media and internet) would help to take Deori into the smallest nooks and crannies of Deori society.

The initiation of a certificate course in Deori in the Centre for Studies in Languages in Dibrugarh University, Assam, shows a high vitality level of the language. However, the participants believe that if the language is taught in schools at the primary level, it would give a good prospect for the revival and development of the language. The Government of Assam has recognized the language and has sanctioned the language to be included in the school curriculum; however, at the moment there is a lack of Deori teachers for which full-fledged implementation of the language as a subject at the school level is hindered. Normally, these activities are promoted by the State government and in the Indian system, education is within the purview of the State government. Here we are stressing the need for more government support for smaller languages than what is currently available. This may be important in a region which has been historically multi-ethnic and linguistically diverse. Hence, proper intervention by the Government in the development of materials and means of teaching Deori as a subject in schools will reduce the sense of Deori being a lesser language (if any) and would induce a sense of eagerness among the children to learn the language. Better involvement of the state government in preserving the language can improve its status from a vulnerable language to a more stable state.

This study mainly highlights that the language situation is not completely bleak as has been reported in the literature. The language is vital in the local context, but it is vulnerable in its socialization spaces. There is a prevailing sense of positivity for the language in the horizon. Based on Jacquesson (2005) and the evidence reported in the project undertaken by the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati on "A phonological and sociolinguistic study of variation in Deori" from the year 2012–2014, it can be stated that Deori still has retained its core lexicon despite being influenced by large-scale borrowing from the Assamese language. It is observed that the speakers who are more inclined towards the maintenance and development of the language are extremely resistant to borrowing. However, as stated in Acharyya & Mahanta (2018), the effect of language contact and its consequences for the linguistic features of the language is inevitable in Deori.

²²<https://www.firstvoices.com/>.

Furthermore, from the authors' point of view there is no denying the fact that Deori speakers are assimilating with the Assamese community. The interactions helped to convince us that the opinions of the community members are in accordance with the results that we obtained from the UNESCO questionnaire. The questionnaire survey helped us to note the optimism in the speakers for the sustainability of the language. Furthermore, the results show that intergenerational language transmission, which is considered as one of the salient factors among all other factors in the UNESCO tool, is not completely disrupted. However, as stated previously, a caveat is essential. If proper measures are not undertaken then the language will not be spoken in the long run. The primarily agriculturist Deori society has been a peaceful community, often blending with the dominant community in Assam rather than pursuing any violent means of identity assertion. The contributions of their rich culture as well as socially enlightened leaders such as Bhimbar Deori (Hazarika 1949) have enriched and diversified the nature of what can be loosely called modern Assam and any more vacillation in helping this community preserve their heritage and language would be a negligence which the Government can ill-afford to continue.

While we are aware that no questionnaire is perfect, it was indeed interesting to note the optimism shown by the speakers. The UNESCO scale definitely does not give us a way out of the predicament of the Deori people's potential loss of their language. What it does is help us to make the clarion call for developing some methods, materials, and means for teaching young children louder. So in the end, we want to say that its long-term demise can be prevented by teaching it to young children. This is the only way Deori will be able to fight off the oncoming linguistic ecological challenge.

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