

Ethnographic Profile of the Dimasa Tribe

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Abstract

The Dimasa, one of the oldest tribes in Northeast India, holds a significant place in the region's cultural and historical landscape. This paper presents an ethnographic profile of the Dimasa, exploring their origins, social structure, cultural practices, religious beliefs and rituals. Dimasa have deep rooted connections with nature, particularly water bodies which influence their traditions and rituals. Dimasa have maintained an ecological balance of their natural surroundings. The tribe tries not to kill animals or cut trees without purpose, they strongly believe that the spirits residing in the forest might run away or may bring bad omen to the individual and their family. The paper covers and examines their kinship system, governance structure, marriage customs and occupational practices, highlighting the tribe's resilience in preserving their heritage amidst modernization. By analysis of their ethnographic literature and secondary data, this paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of the Dimasa way of life, emphasizing the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge and cultural diversity.

Keywords: Dimasa tribe, cultural identity, traditional customs, social structure, festivals and rituals, dress and ornaments, kinship system and religious beliefs.

Introduction

Ethnographic fieldwork plays a crucial role in the stream of Anthropology. The method requires the anthropologist to involve themselves completely with the tribe or community they are observing. This way the anthropologist gets a better insight of how

the institutions of that society work. It helps minimize biases and promotes a more authentic understanding of the diverse society. Ethnography can be defined as, 'the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant- observation and resulting in a written account of a people, place or institution' (Simpson & Coleman, 2017).

Among the 29 notified tribes of Assam, the Dimasa are the oldest inhabitants. Assam has been the intersecting point of many ethnic tribes and races making the state full of cultural tapestry. The Dimasa contribute about 3.2% of the tribal community of the state with a total population of 1.5-2 lakhs in north-eastern India. They have their own cultural importance offering to the rich cultural diversity seen in Assam. They are known for their indigenous water management practices and their worship practices involving nature as a major part.

Historical Context

Dimasa are inhabitants of north-eastern India, they are the subgroup of the Kacharis. The natives have always considered themselves as the direct descendants of the Kuru's son Bhim. The connection between Bhim and Dimasa dates back to the time of Mahabharata. Bhim was married to Hidimba during the canvas period and that time Hidimba was a Dimasa queen. Even today, the Dimasa tribe worship her as Herembadi mata. The word Dimasa itself gives an insight to the history as well as the geography of these people. The word DIMASA is broken down into 'di' meaning water, 'ma' meaning big, and 'sa' meaning son, together forming the son of the big (river) water. The term Kacharis is taken from the Sanskrit word "KACHAR" meaning the broadening region.

Brahmaputra, one of the biggest rivers of the northeastern rivers, is well known among the Dimasa. They are the earliest settlers who established their houses near the Brahmaputra valley. The importance of rivers can be seen in their religious practices and beliefs. The habitants worship water bodies like their mother and give equal importance to the cleanliness of these water bodies. The timeline of Dimasa kingdom can be constructed using these water bodies and the related native stories.

There are no specific written records of the initial establishment of the Dimasa kingdom, hence it is not clear where and when exactly their establishment took place. There are certain urban legends which provide some clarity about the foundation of the capital of the Dimasa kingdom. The legend states that there was a Dimasa man named Maink, he had a dream of lord Shiva. Lord Shiva appeared disguised as a 'sanyasi' and

touched manik's wife and said that she will give birth to a 'black cat', Manik is then supposed to bury the black cat in mustard seeds. Once the black cat turns into a golden cat, it shall bring him kingship and glory. The prophecy came true and then Manik established the capital at and around Sadiya. From there on he extended the kingdom towards Dikhow river. The cat is termed as 'Aalu' in the native language and is worshiped till date.

In the eleventh century, Dimasa established a strong and powerful rule in the areas of 'Dhansiri river and Mikir hills' with Dimapur as its capital. Initially Dimapur was known as Hidimbapur. There is a fort in the state of Nagaland which is believed to belong to the Dimasa royals.

There is one more story about the origin of the Dimasa. The story states that the origin of them is taken from the mythical story of Bangla Raja and Arikhidima. The term Bangla means earthquake in the native language. It can be interpreted as the theory of the catalytic big bang as the origin of the Dimasa universe.

Significance for research of ethnographic profile of this tribe

Dimasa is significant for ethnographic research because it represents a distinct group of people with their own unique culture, customs, beliefs, social structures and practices, allowing researchers to get a better insight of how the people of this society live. This is done by studying its natural environment, providing valuable information of how diverse the society is in itself and as compared to others. Ethnographic profile also helps us study:

1. *Cultural richness*- Dimasa has maintained traditional practices and knowledge systems that may be rapidly changing in contemporary society. As descendants of the ancient Kachari kingdom, they provide insights into early stages of how the cultural practices were built and passed on to the generations.
2. *Holistic perspective* - Studying Dimasa as a tribe allows researchers to examine various institutes, stages and aspects of their life including social organizations, economy, kinship, religion, language and also provides a deeper insight and view of their culture.
3. *Participant observation* - Ethnographic research often relies on participant observation, that is the researcher keeps his biases aside and becomes a part of the various institutions and functions of the tribe to get firsthand insight into the life of natives and their perspectives of the outside world.

4. *Preserving cultural heritage* - This research can preserve the traditions of tribes which are now facing multiple problems due to globalization and urbanization in a written form.
5. *Understanding cultural variation* - This study helps us identify and analyse how cultures of Dimasa have been different from other tribes in the context of their social structures to patterns of kinship and many more.

Aims and Objectives

The main aim of this paper is to provide a compact ethnographic profile of the Dimasa to the readers by exploring their historical background, social organizations, cultural practices and religious beliefs and contemporary challenges faced by the tribe while entering into mainstream society. This paper uses a qualitative research approach to outline the ethnographic profile. The methodology consists of the following components:

1. *Secondary data collection* - The research primarily relied on published literature, historical records, government reports to gather information about the culture, history, language beliefs and other various facets of this tribe.
2. *Ethnographic analysis* - Existing ethnographic accounts were studied to get a better understanding of tribe's social structure, traditions, rituals, language, and a holistic understanding of their way of life.
3. To explore the history of the Dimasa tribe through archival research and available secondary sources.
4. To document the social aspects of the Dimasa tribe. It records the cultural aspect of this tribe, focusing on various elements which include language, folktales, music, dance, traditional attire, lifestyle, artistic expressions. To study the religious beliefs and practices of this tribe.

Area and People

The government of Assam states that, the hill districts of Assam comprise three districts, Dima Haso is one of them. Dima Haso is an administrative district that falls under one of the three autonomous councils set up under the provision of the VI Schedule of the Indian constitution. (government of Assam, Dimahaso district , April 09,2022). The features defining the terrain of Dimahaso district is the Borail range. Due to the presence of this range the district is blessed with a pleasant climate unlike the

rest of hot plains of Assam. On the east the district is bounded by Nagaland and Manipur, in the south by the Barak valley districts, in the west by Meghalaya and in the north by the districts of Hojai and East and West Karbi Anglong. The district has a total land area of 4888 square kilometers and is the third largest district in Assam after Karbi Anglong and Sonitpur as recorded by the government of Assam. The Borail Range and the Shillong plateau in the easterly and westerly zones shape the district's hilly terrain, contributing to its elevation. This elevation brings in a lot of variation in climate ranging from sub tropical monsoon type to temperate alpine type due to the varying altitude of 966 meters or 3188 feet, rendering the climate rather cool summers with temperatures ranging from 20 to 30 degree celsius and pleasant winters with the temperatures ranging from 8 to 25 degree celsius. The government states in their district profile, "The tallest peaks of the Borail Range are located in the district which are *Thumjang* and *Hempeupet* standing at 1866 meters and 1748 meters above mean sea level respectively.". (April 09,2022).

The natives of the Dimasa tribe speak Tibeto-Burman language. It is the oldest language spoken in north east India, particularly in Assam, Nagaland. The language comprises six vowels which occur in all three positions except /ə/ which occurs only medially. There are sixteen consonants in the Dimasa language. It has three voiceless aspirated stops /p^h, t^h, k^h/, are unreleased in syllable final position. Their unaspirated voiced counterparts are released and cannot occur word final position. The language uses Latin script for writing and is introduced in the lower primary education system in Dima Hasao District. The people there also speak Bengali, English and/or Assamese.

Social Context

Dimasa society, if reviewed, is patriarchal but it has some matriarchal figures that can be noticed. Both patrilineal and matrilineal systems co-exist. This society is a bilineal society, a unique feature that is not found in most of the northeastern communities of India. The importance and status in society is equally shared by both males and females. Wives in this community are regarded as 'inseparable companions' and are given equal rights in her new household. Women of this community enjoy respect and freedom in all stages of life from their family, partners and the society at large. Birth of a girl child is celebrated as it would be of a boy child. Dimasa society follows the clan system. There are a total of 82 clans- 40 male clans and 42 female clans. The male clans are known as 'Semphong' and female clans are known as 'Julu'. These clans are said to be created around 1800 AD by the king Krishna Chandra Narayan. They strictly practise monogamy (marriage within the same clan is prohibited). Son

enjoys the riches of his father which includes- real estate, weapons, cash money and cattle. On the other hand, the daughters get the benefits of their mothers, riches which include- ornaments, clothes and handlooms.

Marriage System

Among the inhabitants of this society, the practice of child marriage is not observed. The prevalent practice seen here is marriage by negotiation. The family and kins of the boy's side searches for a suitable bride and proceeds with the procedure. In early ages the ideal age considered for marriage was fifteen to twenty years of age for a girl but with the urbanization and gradual changes in the society this range of age also changed. Now age is no longer a matter and it has extended to twenty-five to thirty years of age. Society favours the month of January, February and March for marriage, especially February. The parents of the boy search for certain things while finding a suitable wife for their son- physical beauty of the girl, social status, matching age etc. The proposal is not accepted at the moment, the families take their time and have a discussion with their relatives and kins. Once the families of both sides agree, further ceremonies are conducted.

The family of the groom sends 'sandiba semba' or 'semjudigarba' to the bride's family. This custom shows the acceptance of the marriage proposal. This custom involves a salt packet wrapped up in plantain leaves which is then bound with seven threads and sent to the bride's family. If the packet is accepted by the bride's family, the second custom takes place, known as 'Lauthai Langba'. This custom involves presentation of homemade rice beer, known as 'Judi' in small bottle gourds, called 'Laouthai' to the elder relatives of the bride. Parties of both sides enjoy a feast and decide the next step to be performed. The third custom is known as 'Laothai Langagini', this custom involves the fixing of date for marriage, keeping the convenience of both families into consideration. These days these practices do not take place in all families but the practice has not vanished completely.

Bride price is a prevalent form of exchange seen in the north eastern communities. Bride price is a form of gift given to the bride which provides the groom the right to marry and have children of the bride. It also serves as a security for the marriage. This practice does not bring the status of a woman lower. Bride price in Dimasa society is termed as "Kalti". The bride price here is entitled to the girl right after the marriage is fixed and is in the form of money. The monetary exchange takes place in the form of coins specifically. It is a custom followed over generations now. It saves the clan system; it is a symbol of accepting the forty sengphongs and forty-two julus.

The denial of giving (by the groom's party) or accepting (by the bride's party) implies non-inclusion of the clans.

There is a ceremony known as 'Mayaofagarba', where 'Bari-Sibrai' is worshipped by sacrificing a duck/cock in the courtyard of the bride. This ensures that the couple and their families are not affected by any disease and keeps the evil spirits away. Further the meat of the sacrificed duck/cock is cooked and served to the guests.

Village Administration

The village system that the natives of Dimasa tribe follow is known as *nolai* in their own language and the whole inhabitants of the village are known as *raji*. The council of the village is known as *hosom* and there is no other council than this for the whole village. *Hosom* is headed by a headman appointed by the government which is known as *Sarkari Gaonburah*. He helps in assisting the administration of the village. The maintenance of law and order of the village is maintained by the traditional elected headman.

Khunang is the headman at the top of village administration holding executive and judiciary powers. The appointment is done on the basis of his educational qualification through the Deputy Commissioner of Hojai district. The traditional *gaonburah* is elected through the means of open selection by the *raji*(villagers). *Sarkari gaonbruah* takes the responsibility of official works.

Sarkari gaonburah - His tenure is up to 60 years of age and should be a politically neutral person. The minimum qualification required for this post is higher secondary passed with good command in Hindi language. His powers and functions are as follows -

1. Solve problems of the *raji* like disputes, crisis etc.
2. The revenue branch is the main concern of the *sarkari gaonburah*. He represents a circle officer and conducts the revenue administration. The responsibility of informing the *raji* of local land development schemes is of *Sarkari Gaonburah*.
3. He also plays a major role in the events of birth and death. The birth and death certificates are issued by the *gaonburah*. If the birth takes place at home, then the parents are required to issue the birth certificate from the registration office.

4. He also looks after the election held at the government level. He provides protection to the duty officers. The duty of protecting the ballot box and safe transfer to the designated office is designated for him.
5. He also plays a major role in oath and ordeals, unites the society for mutual understanding and binding each other in the village.

Traditional Gaonburah - He is under the control of *sarkari gaonburah*. There is only one elected local for this post. He has executive powers (giving guidance in respect of celebration of community festivals in the village) and judiciary power (trial of cases, maintenance of laws, and order in the village). The election of *gaonburah* (khunang) is done by the elders of the village in a formal meeting. Hence the traditional village council setup consists of four officials-

1. Khunang - is the traditional headman of the village.
2. Barika - is the informer to the villagers.
3. Kharao - are the council members (10-12) and they attend village meetings and programmes.
4. Raji- are the subject or villagers. In case of any disputes and problems, they give their opinions to the traditional gaonburah.

His powers and functions are as follows-

1. In case of marriage outside one's tribe, the presence of traditional gaonburah is mandatory. If he denies the permission then the marriage is considered illegal.
2. On the birth of a child the traditional gaonburah should be informed.
3. Outsiders visiting the village should inform him for the purpose of their visit.
4. The gaonburah is summoned in case of robbery or any other crime. The accused offers five tamulpaan, banana and 100/- rupees as mark of fine or *rahi* in the native language.
5. He also solves disputes at the local level.

The impact of globalisation can be seen in the administration system. Due to globalization the system has integrated into mainstream society. They have had to navigate between their traditional administration and Indian governance system. The traditional system is diluted due to the external political influences and bureaucratic

intervention. Policies are now designed to address the specific needs of the local population while also ensuring their integration into the fast-paced urbanization process. The political awareness has increased due to serious exposure to global media and education.

Religious Beliefs and Rituals

As stated earlier in the paper, Dimasa trace their origin to a mystical bird, Arikhidima. The union of Arikhidima and Bangla Raja resulted in the laying of seven eggs at the confluence of two rivers. The six eggs hatched without any effort and from them six gods came - Shibrai, Alu Raja, Naikhu Raja, Waa Raja, Gunyung-Braiung, and Hamiadao. These are considered as benevolent gods. Shibrai is the eldest of all and the most significant local deity. They are considered to be present in all Daikhos - places reserved for a higher omnipresence being in the sacred forest area (Prithibi Prathibha Gogoi, The Newsletter 94 Spring 2023). The last egg hatched after the application of external forces. Monovalent spirits emerged from this. The benevolent and malevolent deities are both considered for protection and wellbeing by making offerings to them. The Dimasa strongly believe that the forests, hills and streams have both malicious and benevolent spirits. Before entering a forest, fishing, clearing a forest etc, the natives perform a mandatory ritual which involves the sacrifice of animals to seek permission from the spirits. The rituals related to forest mostly involve the sacrifice of a small fowl to appease the forest's deities and spirits. Dimasa have always believed that different kinds of spirits reside in the forest, some may cause you to lose the track and get lost in the forest and some may create the illusion of being prey.(Prithibi Prathibha Gogoi, The Newsletter 94 Spring 2023). Rivers and streams are also given equal importance as forests. Natives believe that any disturbance to the spirits result in bringing bad omen to the concerned individual. One of these spirits is Dakinsa, residing in clean streams. Polluting or defiling the area might drive the spirit away, hence the stream water must be clean and running. The spirits and natives share a reciprocal relationship of responsibility of keeping the water bodies clean and in return the spirits protect them maintaining ecological balance.

Water is very significant to the Dimasa in their socio- cultural life. Community members state that there are three things that the Dimasa can't live without - the river, banana and bamboo. These things are extremely crucial in most of their rituals and even in daily tasks. Dikhou, Dibru, Dirang and Dihing are the rivers found in Assam with the Dimasa tribe settled around them. They believe that once an individual dies the soul leaves the physical body and proceeds to go to the *dembra*, the place of the dead.

After that these souls take rebirth and visit the living world. It is a common belief among the natives which associate life and death as a cyclic phenomenon and the river separates the living world from the dead.

For ensuring a peaceful and proper journey of the deceased's soul the families perform extensive and elaborate ceremonies involving shifting of houses near the dead body for the soul to rest. They also place coins on the body of the deceased, which symbolizes that the soul will use these to cross the river and reach the other world. These rites and rituals are communal, as they involve the village, neighbours, and kin groups. Dimasa have a prominent feature, *Khernai*, connecting other ponds in the village and sometimes even to ponds across agricultural fields. This forms a well-structured system of drainage where water is stored and managed for various purposes. *Khernai* is a traditional way of managing water that can be found throughout Assam, however the number of these have been diminishing over the years with the development of economic runway and infrastructure projects. The reason for decline of traditional irrigation methods is the blocking of free flow of waterways. The early Dimasa kept the maintenance of their ecosystem as the main priority. If the ecosystem is disturbed then their life and religious system will be in peril. They try not to kill animals, catch fishes out of the season and do not pollute water with human excrement. They do not touch or cut down certain kinds of trees and do not cultivate those areas where those trees are available.

Busa Dima, more commonly known as Bishu, is the biggest festival of the Dimasa tribe. It is celebrated generally on 27th January every year in order to keep alive their traditional food, culture, sports, and eating new grown autumnal rice. The festival is celebrated at the completion of jhum cultivation and plays an integral part of society. People perform Baidima dance form in their traditional dress with the sound of the Khram (drum) and the rhythm of Muri(fife). Natives also enjoy pork, chicken, fish, rice etc. This festival symbolises the unity and co-existence among the natives.

Occupation

The Dimasas have brilliantly upheld their traditions, distinctive practices in bamboo and cane, craftsmanship, intricate weaving patterns, unique silver jewelry design and the art of brewing rice beer (Dr. Ashique Elahi, The Past and Future of Traditional Clothing and Food of the Dimasa, 2024) The natives believe that bamboo is very essential for their daily life. It is also referred to as "green gold" of the North East (Singh, 2013).

The craft of basket making is exclusively reserved for the males of the community with each household producing baskets according to their needs. Baskets of various shapes and sizes are hand woven; these baskets are also used to transport rice from the fields to the homes. Few specialized tools like the 'Chani', a V-shaped strainer crucial for separating solid particles from rice beer and the 'Yengthi', a spacious bamboo cylinder utilized for filtering suspended solid from larger containers of rice beer. A significant creation in Dimasa culture, the 'Damakho' is a smoking pipe crafted from solid bamboo. All these bamboo artifacts showcase the skilled craftsmanship that has been passed to the generations and maintained with equal efforts and respect. Weaving is also a significant practice and the Dimasas are known for their fine quality, vibrant colour, and exceptional durability. This practice is exclusively reserved for the females of the community and is taught at an early age, mostly by the grandmothers. The young brides weave their own wedding attire. The traditional looms, as 'Dauphang' employ women and engage in the intricate process of weaving, 'Daophang Dauba'. The designs adorning the tribe's textile are mostly inspired by flowers and animals, reflecting the deep connection between nature and tribe. The tribe's women also have proficiency in the art of dyeing, sourcing colour from locally available juices extracted from shrubs and herbs.

In addition to their vibrant traditional outfits, the native adorns themselves with a variety of jewellery, each piece unique and different adding to their colourful appearance. The men of the tribe mostly wear 'yaocher' and 'kharik' whereas women wear a diverse array of jewellery which include 'phowal', a silver necklace, the 'khamaothai', gold earrings, the 'chandrawal' a silver necklace and many more. Each piece of jewellery signifies something and holds equal importance. They are the symbols of traditions, status and identity.

Conclusion

The ethnographic study of the Dimasa tribe reveals a rich cultural heritage deeply intertwined with history, mythology, and nature. Despite the pressures of modernization and globalization, the Dimasa continue to uphold their traditional practices, from intricate social structures to sustainable environmental interactions. Their governance, marriage customs, religious beliefs, and craftsmanship illustrate a society that values both continuity and adaptation. However, challenges such as cultural erosion, administrative shifts, and ecological concerns threaten their traditional way of life. Recognizing and documenting these aspects through ethnographic research is crucial in fostering awareness and promoting cultural preservation. The Dimasa tribe

stands as a testament to the resilience of indigenous communities in maintaining their identity in an ever-changing world.

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