



## "Folk Festivals And Traditions Of The Dimasas" - A Study

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### Abstract:

Assam has been inhabited by various ethnic groups since ancient times. There are many ethnic groups in Assam who have their own linguistic and cultural characteristics. These ethnic groups have been trying to keep their folk culture alive despite the harsh environment. The Dimasas are one such ethnic group that has lived in Assam since ancient times. There are many traditional festivals and rituals in Assam and the North East of India. This characteristic is also seen in the festivals celebrated by the Dimasas of Assam. Their society traditionally celebrates festivals and rituals for various purposes such as agricultural abundance, fertility increase, magic rituals etc. These are the cultural heritage and rituals that are discussed in this paper 'Folk Festivals and Traditions of the Dimasas- A Study'

**Key words:** Folk Festivals, Dimasa, Traditions, Assam

### 1.0 Introduction:

Assam has been inhabited by diverse ethnic cohorts since time immemorial, each possessing their own distinct language and cultural idiosyncrasies. The film showcases a multitude of characters representing these ethnic groups, who fervently endeavor to safeguard their folk heritage. However, amidst the pervasive influence of globalization and modernity, folk culture strives to resurface within a refined and civilized society.

Among these ethnic enclaves, the Dimasas have resided in Assam since ancient epochs. The historical tapestry of these tribes is interwoven with myriad festivals, pujas, customs, folklore, religious beliefs, oral literature, and accounts chronicled in works like the Assam Buranji, Satsari Assam Buranji, and Kachari Buranji. It is imperative for the ethnic communities residing in Assam to acquaint themselves with the festivals and rituals of one another. This cultural exchange will foster a stronger bond of harmony and understanding amongst the different groups. Furthermore, delving into the songs, dances, musical instruments, folk beliefs, culinary traditions, attire, and ornaments associated with the festivals and ceremonies of the Dimasa tribe will unveil a novel facet of their culture.

### Dimacha tribe:

The Dimasas, hailing from the Assam-Burmese lineage of the Tibeto-Burmese language family, are among the Mongolian ethnic groups residing in Assam. They can be found dispersed along the rivers Brahmaputra, Irawati, Saluin, Mekong, stretching from the southern regions of China to Assam, Brahmaputra, and Indochina.

### Migration of Dimasa tribe:

Historical accounts pertaining to the Dimacha Kacharis are notably scarce, leaving a dearth of concrete information until the latter part of the eleventh century. In the absence of written records, reliance on oral traditions becomes paramount in piecing together the ancient history of the Dimasas. Prior to the advent of the Ahoms in Assam, the expansive territory along the southern bank of the Brahmaputra River, stretching from the Dikhou River to the Kalang, was under the jurisdiction of the illustrious Kachari kingdom.

According to the esteemed Sir Edward Gate, the Kacharis can be aptly described as the autochthonous or earliest inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley, lending an air of antiquity to their presence in the region.

### Dimasa means:

The term "Dimasa" carries the meaning of being the offspring of a substantial river. Within the Dimasa language, the letter 'D' signifies water, 'Ya' represents large, and 'Cha' denotes child. In essence, the Dimasas are regarded as the descendants of the Great River. Notably, this river is known by various names such as Brahmaputra, Dhansiri, Ganga, or Sagar.

### **1.1 Methodology:**

1.2 The study of ' Folk Festivals and Traditions of the Dimasas - A Study ' employs both descriptive and analytical methodologies.

### **1.2 Objectives of the folk culture of the Dimasa tribe of Assam:**

1. The folk culture of the Dimasa tribe endeavors to safeguard and propagate their distinctive cultural heritage, ensuring its perpetuity for forthcoming generations.
2. It serves as a conduit for identity and engenders a profound sense of pride, nurturing a collective consciousness and solidarity within the Dimasa community.
3. The folk dances and melodic compositions of the Dimasa tribe assume a pivotal role in narrative traditions, imparting historical chronicles, myths, and legends, thereby transmitting erudition and sagacity.
4. Traditional craftsmanship and artistic expressions, such as weaving and pottery, function as a livelihood pursuit, bolstering the socio-economic empowerment of the Dimasa populace.
5. The folk culture of the Dimasa tribe fosters the fortification of social bonds, fostering a climate of cooperation and collaboration within the community.
6. It serves as a conduit for intercultural exchange, fostering comprehension and admiration of the Dimasa tribe's customs and practices among other communities.
7. The folk festivals and ceremonial rituals of the Dimasa tribe provide a platform for spiritual and religious manifestations, nurturing a sense of spirituality and veneration.
8. The preservation and promotion of the folk culture of the Dimasa tribe contribute to the overall cultural diversity and heritage of Assam, enriching the state's cultural tapestry.
9. The folk culture of the Dimasa tribe aims to foster a sense of cultural resilience, enabling the community to withstand external influences and maintain their unique traditions.
10. It seeks to promote cultural tourism, attracting visitors from around the world to experience and appreciate the richness and vibrancy of Dimasa folk traditions.
11. The folk culture of the Dimasa tribe serves as a form of cultural diplomacy, providing a platform for intercultural dialogue and understanding between different communities.
12. It plays a crucial role in the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems, including traditional medicine, agricultural practices, and ecological wisdom.
13. The folk culture of the Dimasa tribe is a source of inspiration and creativity, influencing contemporary art, music, and literature in Assam and beyond.
14. It serves as a source of cultural pride and self-esteem, empowering the Dimasa youth to embrace their heritage and contribute to the cultural landscape of Assam.
15. The folk culture of the Dimasa tribe aims to bridge generational gaps, fostering intergenerational learning and transmission of cultural values, ensuring its continuity.
16. It acts as a catalyst for community development, providing opportunities for skill-building, entrepreneurship, and cultural entrepreneurship within the Dimasa community.

### **1.3 Significance of Assam's folk culture:**

1. Assam's folk culture serves as a vital link to the region's history, preserving ancient traditions and customs that have been passed down through generations.
2. The folk arts of Assam provide a platform for self-expression, fostering a sense of identity and pride among its people, and strengthening community bonds.
3. Assam's folk dances and music not only entertain but also serve as a medium for storytelling, conveying moral values, and celebrating the region's cultural diversity.
4. The preservation of traditional handloom and weaving practices not only sustains the livelihoods of artisans but also promotes sustainable and eco-friendly practices.
5. Assam's folk theater, with its dramatic performances and religious themes, plays a significant role in spreading awareness of religious and moral teachings.
6. The folk festivals of Assam, such as Bihu, serve as important cultural markers, bringing communities together and fostering a sense of unity and solidarity.
7. Assam's folk cuisine, with its unique flavors and use of local ingredients, showcases the region's culinary heritage and contributes to its gastronomic tourism.
8. The recognition and promotion of Assam's folk culture on a national and international level contribute to the preservation and appreciation of the region's rich cultural heritage.

### **2.0 Folk Festivals and Traditions of the Dimasas:**

Assam is a land of various ethnic groups. The Dimasas are ethnically Mongolian and linguistically of the Assamese-Burmese branch of the Tibeto-Burmese branch. It is only since the 1961 census that the Dimasas have been classified as a separate tribe. Until recently, the Dimasas were considered to be a sub-branch of the Kachari tribe.

The Dimasas are currently living in Dima Hasao (North Kachar), Kachar, Hailakandi, Nagaon (now Hojai district, Karbi Anglong district, Dhansiri Valley, Dimapur in Nagaland, etc. of Assam.

There are various festivals among the Dimasas. They can be divided and discussed as follows:

- Festivals associated with birth.
- Festivals associated with weddings.
- Festivals and ceremonies related to agriculture.
- Festivals and ceremonies associated with religion.
- Festivals and ceremonies associated with evil and misfortune.

The Dimasas are predominantly agricultural people. They perform pujas to wish for fertility of the soil and prosperity of crops for both jhum cultivation and water cultivation. The festivals celebrated by the Dimasas can also be divided into two main categories -

- a) Seasonal (agricultural) festivals
- b) Reform (biography related) festivals

#### a) Seasonal (agricultural) festivals:

Like most of the ethnic groups of Assam, the Dimasas celebrate various festivals in conjunction with the change of seasons of the year. The Dimasa worship is based on the religious beliefs prevalent in their society. The festivals celebrated by the Dimasas include Brai Shibrai Puja, Madai Khilimba Puja, Gerba etc. -

- Brai Shibrai Puja : In Dimasa society, Shiva is the supreme lord and is worshiped everywhere. Shiva is the god of the non-Aryans. The Dimasas call Shiva Shivarai (Shiva+Barai) or 'Shibrai'. The word 'Barai' means mountain. This mountain is the Himalayas. The Dimasas lift mountain-shaped piles of earth (barai) when worshiping Shiva. They believe that worshiping other gods and goddesses without worshiping Shiva will not bring any results.
- Madai Khilimba Puja : The Dimasas celebrate the 'Madai Khilimba' Puja at home within their respective Chengfeng (clan or clan). They perform this puja for the happiness, peace and prosperity of the household. There is no fixed month or day for this puja but it is celebrated by the agricultural Dimasas before the cultivation of Jhum. In Dimasa language, 'Madai Khilimba' means 'Madai' means gods and goddesses and 'Khilimba' means prayer.
- Fatri Gaba : The fatri plays an important role in the religious life of the Dimas. In Dimasa language, 'fatri' means goddess and 'gaba' means tall. In other words, the Dimasas believe that a deo lamba fatri can tell about the past, present and prophesy. The priest must follow many rules and regulations in this rule. The villagers believe that the answers to their questions are the word of God.
- Michemba Puja : The Hachaochaos of the Dimasas hold a large collective puja called 'Michemba'. They hold this puja at intervals of three or five years instead of every year. Michemba Puja is organized by the decision of the social meeting of the Dimasa community. There is no fixed day or month for this puja but the Dimasas usually celebrate it around March or April ie around the month of Fagun or Bahag. However, this Puja is held on Tuesdays, Fridays or Saturdays with donations from the villagers. The Dimasas celebrate this great puja called 'Michemba' under the direction of a fortune teller to get rid of disasters and unrest in the state. In Michemba Puja, the janathai (priest) performs the main task of the puja by chanting mantras. The Dimasas believe that worshiping Heremdi during the Michemba festival brings rain and good Jhum cultivation.
- Maiya'ufa Garba (peace worship): Maia'ufa Garba is a household or family-centered worship of the Dimasas. This puja is celebrated to wish the welfare of the household or family members. The word 'garba' means to worship or to give up. After any household auspicious ceremony of the Dimasas, the Maiya'ufa Garba Puja is held to calm the household. This is also a puja in which Brai Shibrai is praised.
- Krongfangni Gerba : The Dimasas celebrate the 'Krongfangni Gerba' Puja on Monday or Friday nights of the month of Bahag. This is the collective worship of the Dimasas. The villagers celebrate this puja to prevent any misfortune or danger in the coming year. The main altar of this puja is established in an open space outside the village. This puja includes sacrifice. After this Puja, the agricultural Dimasas revive their agricultural activities.
- Gerba Festival: The Dimasa-Kachari people welcome the New Year by celebrating the Gerba festival on Friday or Sunday of Shuklapaksha in the month of Fagun before starting agricultural activities and offering offerings to their main deity Brai Shibra (Shiva) to wish the fields full of crops. The items required for this puja include flour, palm leaves, bamboo, coconut, raw bananas, traditional drink juice, candles, oil, water, eggs, a pair of goats and chickens. Only Pukayes participate in this worship. The village men clear a spot in the middle of the forest and organize a puja. During the puja, the priest dresses in new clothes and blocks the road to the village with bamboo poles. After offering rice, coconut, bean, meat, flour, juice etc. to the east on eight palm leaves, he chants mantras. Then all the people present ate.
- Haza Gerba : In the Dimasa society, like the Krongfangni Gerba Puja, the Haza Gerba Puja is celebrated on the Monday or Friday of the month of Jethmah. This puja is celebrated collectively. The Dimasas offer the 'Haza Gerba' puja to the evil gods to wish that there will be no diseases in their villages and that everyone will live in peace and happiness.
- Mido Garba Puja : In Dimasa society, the god 'Mido' is worshiped and a part of the puja is offered to the god at the beginning of festivals to make the festival successful. The Dimasas worship the god 'Mido' during the Buchu festival. They offer ju, meat, etc. to their ancestors and pray to the god Mido.
- Rajini Garba Puja : In Dimasa, 'Raji' means village. In other words, the puja performed by the village or people is called Rajini Garba Puja. This festival is celebrated by the Dimasas every year before the start of agriculture to wish

for more crops in the fields and to protect all the people of the village from evils and natural disasters. This puja is held during the day.

- Buchu: 'Buchu' is one of the agricultural festivals celebrated by the Dimasas. The joy of harvest is expressed through this festival. There is no fixed date for celebrating Buchu. The festival is usually celebrated between November and March. However, the last day of the festival should be Saturday. The days of Bihu are fixed at the house of the village headman or at the Dekachang. Buchu is held for one, three or seven days. The names of the Buchu formed in this way are Buchu Zidar, Buchu Churem and Buchu Hancheu respectively. The Dimasas celebrate Bihu for one day, the second day for three days and the third day for seven days. This day is considered very sacred.

On the day of Buchuma Bihu, Bai-Shibrai is worshiped with the help of priests. This puja includes chicken eggs, turkeys, lamb, duck and chicken meat; Laopani is essential. After the puja, everyone eats food. There are games, dances, songs and musical competitions on the occasion. In Buchu, the Dimasas make various cakes. The Dimasas celebrate this festival with great pomp.

Hangseumanoba Buchu: Hangcheumanaoba Buchu is the largest and most joyful agricultural folk festival of the national life of the Dimasas. The festival is celebrated among the agricultural Dimasas and is influenced by Naga culture. It has some similarities with the Bhogali Bihu celebrated in Assam. It is celebrated with joy after the harvest. They celebrate this festival on the 27th of January every year for the sake of convenience. They celebrate this festival for two to three days to seven days as much as possible with laughter, tears, hopes and aspirations, worship, agriculture and animal husbandry -Festivals are still traditionally practiced among them.

#### **b) Reform (biography related) festivals:**

The festivals associated with birth, marriage and death of the Dimasas reflect their own social customs.

#### **◆ Festivals associated with birth:**

There are several festivals associated with the birth of children in the Dimasa society. In Dimasa society, the birth of a child is called 'Hagochuzaba'. In Dimasa, 'ha' means soil and 'gochujaba' means to cut. Some husbands of pregnant women offer chickens to the goddess Naichdinchadi, the goddess of the baby, to ensure the success of childbirth.

In Dimasa society, the woman who cares for and assists the mother in childbirth is called 'Hajaijik' (woman who can work as a milkman). His assistant is 'Barbazik'. Hazaizik and Barbajik perform all the duties such as cutting the veins of the newborn, bathing and caring for the maternity. They then wash their feet in rivers, beaches or streams and offer a puja to 'Brai Shibrai' to wish the welfare of the newborn. This puja requires eggplant, akhai, mango yarn, eggs etc.

After the puja, the women are given judi (laopani) and fried eggs after coming to the maternity ward.

- Hatarba or Satharb : In Dimasa, 'ha' means soil and 'tharba' means to purify. The Dimasas call the water baby 'Nana:Gili'. After the pulse is removed, the house is cleaned and sprinkled with holy water of gold, silver, copper and basil leaves. In Dimasa society, Hazaijik and Barbajik examine the pulse of the newborn to determine the auspiciousness of the child. There is no rule that any woman goes to this puja. The priest slaughters the chicken, sprinkles the blood of the sacrifice on palm leaves and throws the chicken into the river.
- Khanaiguchugarba : In Dimasa society, the father or barber shaves the baby's hair. In their society, shaving the hair for the first time is called 'khanaiguchugarba' or 'khanai singba'. In Dimasa, 'khanai' means hair, 'guchu' means chua and 'garba' means to let go or scratch. Similarly, cleansing by performing a ritual is called 'Hatarba' in the Dimasa language.
- Nanang Becheng Jiriba : In Dimasa society, according to traditional rules, rice is given to the child for the first time and the people are fed. They call this 'Nanang Becheng Jiriba'. It is very important as a child's nutrition. Some people have this ceremony only after six to seven months or a year of the newborn. On the day of Jiribar, everyone is served barabhat (maiju), meat, vegetable soup and 'hayu', a soup cooked without garlic and oil with judi.

In Dimasa society, there is no fixed date for celebrating the above ceremonies with the birth of a newborn. These programs are women-centric and mainly participated by women.

#### **◆ Festivals associated with marriage:**

- Jukhuba: The Dimasas call the wedding ceremony 'Jukhuba'. In Dimasa society, both parents have clans or clans and the clans are separated according to men and women. In the 'Jukhuba' (marriage) ceremony of the Dimasa society, marriage is arranged through discussions between the parents of both the bride and groom. The Dimasas usually fix the wedding date on Shuklapaksha. The Hachaocha rely on the calendar for wedding dates. They usually do not get married in the months of Chat and Bhad. After their marriage is arranged, the work is done in three stages:

- 1) Chandidangchemba
- 2) Lauthai Lamba
- 3) Lauthai Langagini

There are three types of marriage customs in the Dimasa society:

- 1) Dichimba (social marriage) custom
2. Habriba (kidnapping marriage) custom
3. Jukhugaolem (ceremony only on the wedding day without any pre-wedding formalities) custom.

1) Dichimba (social marriage) custom: Dichimba marriage is the social marriage custom of the Dimasas. All the customs of this marriage are observed according to the customs prevalent in the Dimasa society.

2. Habriba (kidnapping and later marriage) custom: This marriage is also called romantic. The wedding is held in the presence of the village headmen and relatives of both the villages. The groom does not wear a turban on his head at this wedding.

3. Jukhugaolem ( no pre-wedding formalities are performed only on the wedding day ) custom:

In this wedding custom, the rules related to pre-wedding marriage are observed on the wedding day. Such marriages are performed when there is a need to get married quickly within a short period of time. In such weddings, the groom wears the turban on his head in a different way.

#### ◆ Festivals associated with death:

In Dimasa society, cremation is prevalent when a person dies (thiba). The Dimasas of Dimapur district burn children who have grown teeth. It is common in other tribal societies to be taken out of the house before death. However, such rules are not seen in Dimasa society. The deceased is dressed in traditional costumes, headed north or west, laid on a bamboo mat and covered with 'rimchau ramai' (multi-coloured shawl). 4. The Dimasas believe that if a person dies on Saturday or Tuesday, the deceased is unlucky

In Dimasa society, elderly women sit around the deceased and sing a song in memory of their ancestors. Such songs are called 'garachimang' (mourning songs). The meaning of such songs is to wish the souls of the deceased well.<sup>5</sup> The place where the dead are buried by the Dimasas is called 'Mangflang'

The funeral rites of the Dimasas are called 'Maimutharba' In Dimasa, 'mai' means rice, 'mu' means seed and 'tharba' means sanctified. In Dimapur district, the day of 'Maimuthar Ba' (Shraddha) of the deceased is celebrated within one to six months or a year according to the convenience of the family of the deceased. However, the day of the shraddha should be the day of the death of the deceased. The Dimasas organize this ceremony to release the dead from the earthly world. They believe that the souls of the deceased then travel to heaven (Damba).

The 'Maimutharba' (Shraddha) ceremony of the Dimasas of Dimapur district is held for one or two days. The one-day maimutharba is called 'harglai' and the two-day 'harthu' Harglai means overnight and 'Harthu' is a two-day feast in which animals are sacrificed on the first day. The Dimasas sacrifice bulls, goats, pigs, chickens, etc. according to their means. Lunch at Maimutharba is called Khalaimakhamba. The Hawarchas of Kachar and the Dimasas of Hojai and Lanka celebrate Daha on the twelfth day and Maimutharba (Shraddha) on the thirteenth day of the death of a Brahmin and an annual Shraddha after one year.

It is not customary for the Dimasas to invite villagers to their shraddhas. It is customary for at least one person from each household in the village to go to the shraddha ghar. The Dimasas believe in reincarnation. It is believed that the deceased are reborn in the family as children, nephews, sisters, etc.

The 'Maimutharba' ceremony is attended by the elderly men, women, daughters-in-law and daughters-in-law of the Dimasa community. There is no need to wear too many colorful clothes or black clothes. No musical instruments are played and no dances are performed at the funeral.

### 3.0 Conclusion:

This discussion shows that the festivals of the Dimasas living in both the hills and plains of Assam are full of their own characteristics. However, there are some differences among the Dimasas living in different parts of Assam in terms of weddings, shraddhas, festivals, pujas, etc. The Dimasas have some traditional festivals that are not found among other tribes. The festivals of the Dimasas reflect the diversity and uniqueness of the tribe's customs, folk beliefs, musical instruments, costumes and ornaments.

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