

**RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AMONG THE DIMASAS IN DIMA HASAO
DISTRICT OF ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THEIR
DAIKHO SYSTEMS AND RITUALS CONCERNING BIRTH, MARRIAGE
AND DEATH**

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Abstract

The Dimasas are one of the earliest aboriginal tribes of India belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group of the Indo-Mongoloid race. Although Dimasas are said to be Hinduised and they too claim themselves as followers of Hinduism, they have their own religious practices of animistic type which are peculiar and not found among any other groups following Hinduism. They believe in one Supreme Being known as MADAI, have their own mythical story regarding the creation of the universe, have twelve number sacred groves having jurisdiction of clan-gods or area-gods known as 'Daikho' and have a religious hierarchal structure from Gisiya to the common people. As agriculture is the traditional occupation, they have worshipping associated with different stages of cropping is also observed. They have also their distinct worshippings at family level, at the village level, at the clan level and at community level. Their religious traditions concerning birth, marriage and death are peculiar. With a view to focusing on some of such aspects of their religious practices, a study was conducted in four selected villages of the Dima Hasao district of Assam.

Keywords

Dimasas, Madai, Daikho, Jonthai.

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Received: 30.07.2022

Approved: 20.09.2022

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Article No.30

RJPSS Apr.-Sept. 2022,

Vol. XLVII No. 2,

pp. 255-272

Similarity Check: 15%

Online available at:

<https://anubooks.com/rjpss-2022-vol-xlvii-no-2/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2022.v47i02.030>

The Dimasas are one of the earliest aboriginal tribes of India. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of the Indo-Mongoloid race. There is a lot of controversy regarding the origin of the word Dimasa. It is better interpreted as **DOMANI B'SA – DIMA B'SA – DIMASA**, 'Sons of the great river' (Nunisa Motilal, 1993:72). Here Di – Water, Ma – Big, and Sa – children are the meanings. The Dimasas today live mostly in the districts of Dima Hasao, Karbi-Anglong, Cachar and Hojai of Assam, Dhansiri valley of Nagaland and a small section of Dimasas are found in Meghalaya also. They are broadly classified into five according to their place of inhabitation. They are DIJUASA – Dhansiri valley of Nagaland and Karbi-Anglong of District of Assam, DEMBRASA – Kalang – Kapili valley of Hojai and Karbi – Anglong districts of Assam, HASAUSA – Dima Hasao, HAWARSA - Barak valley of Assam and SEMSA – Semkhor village in Dima Hasao district of Assam. With the variation in the place of inhabitation, there is a little variation in language, culture, social customs and traditions among the above-mentioned groups of the Dimas.

However, The Dimasas are usually represented by those from the North Cachar Hills (present Dima Hasao) in all spheres as that district is considered as the homeland of the Dimasas (Nunisa, Motilal, 1993:73). They practice mostly shifting (Jhuming) cultivation while some of them resorted to settled cultivations in the little plains available in the hill district like the Mahur valley at Mailing. Whether they practice Jhuming or settle cultivation their villages are permanent. The Dimasas living in Dima Hasao and Karbi-Anglong districts are specified as Hills Tribes by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Amendment) Act, 1976. The Dimasas living in other parts are specified as plain Tribes.

A distinctive feature of the Dimasa tribe is the existence of a double descent system. "In India, double descent is found only among the Toda tribe of Nilgiri Hills and Dimasa tribe of North-East India." (Singh V.P. & Paul N. 2001:5). Both patrilineal and matrilineal descents exist in the Dimasa society. Hence, it is a bi-lineal tribe. A father and a son belong to the same patriclan but they belong to two different matrilineal clans as the father inherits his secondary affiliation from his maternal grandmother while the son inherits from his own maternal grandmother. So is the case between a mother and her daughter. After marriage, a woman has given the husband's patriclan through a ceremony called **KHELHABRIBA** or **MADAI KHILIMBA** but her primary affiliation with American remains unchanged. There are 40 male and 42 female clans in Dimasa society. The male clans are called **SENGPHONG** and the female clans are called **JULU** or **JADI**.

The Dimasas have their own religious practices of animistic type where 'its underlying principle' has been characterized to be 'of fear or dread' (Endle,

1911:33). The pristine faith of the Dimasas is based on animism – belief in spirits both benevolent and malevolent, ancestor gods, area gods, gods belonging to male and female clans and evil spirits. Of course, they believe in one Supreme Being known as *MADAI*. But the process of Hinduisation started when their capital was at Mailing. However with the acceptance of Hinduism as their religious faith during the reign of King Krishnachandra, the Dimasa were Hindused. With Hinduisation the Brahmanical influence penetrated into the Dimasa society which followed the kings from Maibang to Khaspur. The Dimasas started identifying some of their traditional deities with some of those from the Bengali Hindu people worships. Dimasa deity *Shivarai* and *Ranachandi* are identified with the *Shiva* and *Kali* of Hindu mythology. However no Hindu god as such, except *Satyanarayana*, is incorporated in the Dimasa culture (Danda, D.: 1978: 125). In spite of their conversion to Hinduism, they are still performing some of their religious rites in their own way which are sharply different from that of mainstream Hindu people. Therefore, their religion is a mixture of indigenous faith and Hinduism. Here, an attempt is made to present some of the key aspects of their indigenous religion.

Objectives

The main objectives of the present study are

- i. To throw some lights on the **Daikho** system of the Dimasas.
- ii. To identify their worshippings related to agriculture.
- iii. To bring out their customs and traditions concerning birth marriage and death.

Methodology

The present study was carried out in 4 villages of Dima Hasao district namely Semkhor, Wadrenghisa, Dima Hading and Donjenraji to examine whether the process of industrialization has any impact on the traditional religious practices of the Dimasas. The district is situated approximately between Latitude 24^o54' and 26^o42' N and Longitude 92^o8' and 93^o53' E covering about 4888 sq. Km. On its east we find the states of Nagaland and Manipur, Cachar district of Assam on the south, Meghalaya state on the west and Hojai and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam on the north.

The study was conducted from July 2019 to August 2021. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed for collecting information from the respondents. Personal interviews were conducted with the **JONTHAI** (priests) and Source persons in the villages at their door step. The data were collected from informants' expert in religious activities from each village. Most of the informants were from 40 -70 years. For collecting secondary information written records like books, journals, magazines

and internet sources are utilized which are mentioned in the reference section of this paper. Above all, the 25 years long staying of the researcher among the Dimasas gives the opportunity of frequent observation of the practices and informal talks with the expert religious practitioners.

Results and Discussion

Dimasa Myths Regarding the Creation of the Universe

Dimasas have their own mythical story regarding the creation of the universe. According to this story, one *Bangla Raja* (God of earthquakes) and his consort *Arikkhidima* lived in a place called *Damra* (heaven). *Arikkhidima*, who had a divine conception faced a great problem in finding out a suitable place to lay her eggs. A golden eagle was sent to search such a place in the confluence of *Dilao* and *Sangi* rivers. There, *Arikkhidima* laid seven eggs out of which, she successfully hatched six benevolent gods - *Shibarai*, *Alu Raja*, *Naikhu Raja*, *Waa Raja*, *Gunyung - Braiyung* and *Hamiadao*. They are called *Madai* in Dimasa. The seventh egg which did not break in the natural course was broken by the youngest among them *Hamiyadao*. On broken, it produced ugly - shaped evil spirits causing widespread chaos. The Dimasas consider themselves to be the descendants of the above - mentioned six gods. The evil spirits which came out of the seventh egg dwell in the hills and rivers and are considered to be responsible for causing diseases, calamities and are to be appropriately worshipped at the time of cultivation or during any disease or when a misfortune befalls men. (Danda, 1978 : 126). These ancestral clan-gods or deities are believed to have their jurisdiction throughout the whole of Dimasa inhabitation. For this reason the concept of 'area-god' came to their belief. These areas are also called sacred groves owing to the plants grown in these areas which have sacred and medicinal properties (Medhi & Borthakur, 2013 : 67).

There are twelve number of such areas or sacred groves, having jurisdiction of clan-gods or area-gods known as '*Daikho*'; therefore, there are twelve '*Daikhoes*' in all. The word *Daikho* has been derived from two Dimasa terms, *Madai* meaning 'God' and *kho* meaning 'place' or 'abode', hence *Daikho* means 'place or abode of the gods. These *Daikhoes* represent the dense vegetation of an area, and in most cases the vegetation formed a sharp boundary with the adjacent degraded forests. From the locations of the *Daikhoes* maintained by the Dimasas at the catchment areas of major rivers or rivulet or at the point of origin of perennial streams, it is evident that the *Daikhoes* provide such important ecosystem services as conserving soil, protecting water sources and catchment areas

and helping to maintain downstream water quality (Medhi and Borthakur, 2013 : 67). The Dimasas believe that gods and goddesses residing in a particular **Daikho** protect the people of that area and control their destiny.

A brief description of the 12 **Daikhoes** or sacred groves of the Dimasas is as follows:

- i) **Aludaikho**: **Aludaikho** is found in two places; one at **Mahurbra** village near **Dihangi** at the confluence of river **Mahur** and **Diyung** and the other one at **Wajaw** village of Maibang area. For the convenience of the people worshipping their own clan gods in nearby **Daikho** might the reason for the maintenance of two similar **Daikhoes** in two different parts of the district same district. The tutelary god of this **Daikho** is **Alurajai** and the clan of the priest is Daulagupu.
- ii) **Longmailaidaikho**: It is located at Moti village of the Mahur area.
- iii) **Longmailumdaikho**: It is located at Dijowahapa village of Mahur area. Hasnu and Nabensa are the clans of the **Jonthaima** and **Barwa** of this **Daikho** respectively.
- iv) **Manjadaikho**: It is located at Mailu village in Langting area. The tutelary god of this **Daikho** is **Gunyang Braiyung** and the clan of the priests are Thaosen and Ardao.
- v) **Damadidikho/Riaodaikho**: It is located in between Sampharidisa and Gaijon/Nogdi Daulagupu village, at the confluence of river Hagong and Diyung, that is, Abungbra. It is the biggest of all the 12 Daikhos. The five clan gods viz., **Naikuraja**, **Nobaraia**, **Waraja**, **Shivarai** and **Kampadi** are worshiped in this **Daikho**. The clan of the priest is Phonglosa.
- vi) **Hamridaikho**: It is located at Palaipa/Daudungkhor village in Thaijuwari area at the confluence of river Langting and Diyung. The clan of the priest of this **Daikho** is Thaosen.
- vii) **Misimdaikho**: It is located at Gerem basti village in Mahur area. The tutelary god of this **Daikho** is **Misimraja** and the clan of the priest is Nabensa.
- viii) **Baiglaidaikho/Baigiadikho**: It is located at a remote village Bongkhai in Khepre area. The clan of the priest of this **Daikho** is Langthasa.
- ix) **Waibradaikho**: It is located at **Hajageder** village of Langting area and is considered as **Daikhongmahi Deng** (means Purest Daikho) among all the Daikhos of the Dimasas. This Daikho has only recently rediscovered by the community after remaining unknown for quite a long time. The clan of the priest of this **Daikho** is Diphusa.

- x) **Mongrangdaikho / Semkhordaikho**: Located at the **Semkhor** village and considered to be the original Daikho of the Semsas. The tutelary god of this **Daikho** is **Mongrang** and the clan of the priest is Phonglosa.
- xi) **Mongrangdaikho**: Located at **Delen Bathari** near **Banjikhalu** or **Natun Disao** village of Maibang area and at the confluence of river Dugu and Delen that is, Dugubra. There is a story of this Daikho. Originally it was the Daikho of the Semsas of Semkhor. The priest out of anger once threw the god leading to lose of a hand of the god. The son-in-law of the priest who was a Bathari found the god lying on the way to his in-law's home. He picked up the god and founded the **Daikho** at Delen Bathari. The Semsas of Semkhor village also comes to attend the yearly worshipping to this **Daikho**. The Semsas dwelling outside the Semkhor village worship their own clan god in this **Daikho**. Because, Semsas coming out to dwell outside Semkhor village are not allowed to attend the worshipping at the **Daikho** at Semkhor village. The clan of the priest of this **Daikho** is Bathari.
- xii) **Ronchandaikho (Bamin)**: During the Kachari reign this Daikho was originally located at Dajdi village in the side of Dhansiri River; but when the capital of the Kachari Kingdom was shifted to Khaspur (now in Cachar District of Assam), a new **Daikho** was demarcated there. However, nowadays, at Khaspur only the monuments are there without any Dimasa priest and all the traditional rites are performed at the **Daikho** located at Dajdi village. The clan of the priest of this **Daikho** is Thaosen.

In Dimasa society an administrative hierarchy has been followed from highest ranked priest to the common people of different clans. For each of the 12 **Daikhoes** there is one priest or **Jonthai** to perform and look after the religious rites of the **Daikho**. The authority of a **Jonthai** is undisputed and he performs his duties as per the instruction of a head priest or **Jonthaima** of all the **Dikhoes**. There is also a principal priest or chief priest, known as **Gisia** (who can be only from Jidung clan), at the top of the hierarchy. The person selected for **Jonthaiship** is appointed by the **Gisia** (in consultation with the priests of the respective **Daikho**) by sprinkling holy water or **Dithar**. The religious hierarchal structure among the Dimasas is as follows:

GISIA (Considered Son of the God) '!' **JONTHAIMA** (Head priest) '!' **BAROWA** (Assistant priest) '!' **JONTHAI** (Sub-clan wise 12 Jonthais) '!' GENERAL VILLAGE PEOPLE.

The Dimasas do not have any kind of idol-worship in their traditional worship system. However, there is an exception in the case of their Hindu

worship system. Since the gods of different **Daikhoes** having different presiding deities have no idols or representative image, at the time of worship they are represented by earthen mounds. A big mound is raised by the priest and it is surrounded by a number of similar mounds which are supposed to be the wives and children of the principle deity (Danda, 1978 : 127). The **Daikho** area usually remains covered with small plants and herbs and it is only before the rituals that it is cleared. There is only a small room nearby the area erected for storing the tools and implements required for the rituals.

The rituals performed at the **Daikho** consist mainly of sacrifices (**Sengba**), i.e., animal sacrifices (**Misengba**), as directed by the medium of the shaman called, **Phatri**, who receives the personal divine message from god, while in a trance. In the earlier times there was practice of human sacrifices (**Bandai Baolaishoba / Bandai Yaogloshengba**), where at least one human was believed to be sacrificed before the deity annually. The human sacrifice was used to perform on a Sunday (**Haithibari**) in a year. Therefore the Dimasas generally do not fix Sunday for any auspicious celebration. However, it had disappeared long back. (The tribes in Himachal Pradesh still practise human sacrifice adopting certain techniques once in five years. This they call **Bonda Festival**. The words **Bandai** and **Bonda** might have some relation. Extensive study is required to reveal the similarities in religious practices among the **Dimasas** and **Himachalis**.) Clan sacrifices performed in each **Daikho** are distinguished as the General all – Dimasa sacrifice (**Muluk jang misengba**) and all – Dimasa sacrifices performed in times of crisis (**Jba-mishi ni misengba**), like epidemic and war. At present, in Dima Hasao district of Assam, they are generally performed every five to seven years, depending on funds, as well as the message from the **Phatri**. This fact stands contrary to what Danda (1978 : 127) had mentioned, that they are held annually. This contrary factor had also been pointed out by Ramirez (2006 : 9).

A fact worth mentioning is that in the worshipping of **DAIKHO** female are prohibited and there is no women priest in Dimasa society. **MIDOGERBA** is the only worshipping (worshipping of Gods **SIBARAI** and **HAMYADAO** before taking food in community feast) which is done only by female folk. Other two family worshipping where male and female participate together are **HAMLAIHUBA** (under Amla tree) and **KHANDE** (under a tree that they call **KHANDE**). Both of these worshipping are performed with an expectation of curing their kids from ailments. The first one is bigger in which a female goat and five hens/ cocks are sacrificed. The second one is smaller and only a hen is sacrificed. In these two, the participation of female is compulsory.

In the worshipping of HEREMDI, GATHAR and HAGRANI MADAI women are not allowed to participate.

Besides the worshipping in the *Daikhoes* for the general welfare of the Dimasa people in general, different clans and different areas the Dimasas follow some traditions and worshippings for particular purposes and occasions. Now some customs, traditions and rituals concerning agriculture, birth, marriage and Death, as observed in the field can be presented as follows:

Traditional Worshipping associated with Agriculture

There are certain ritualistic practices which the Dimasas often follow before the starting of the paddy season, in the mature stage of the crops and before harvesting. Some of the ritualistic practices are:

Maiyaopha Garji :- This ritualistic practices have been done mainly at night before the start of the paddy season, In this practices a black hen is being sacrificed to paddy god for good paddy season.

Mainoh Gor jima :- This ritualistic practices is followed mainly in the growth stage or in the matured stage of the paddy crops, in this practices they used to sacrifice two male cock and two female hen to the paddy god. They believe that after following this the god helps yielding more crops.

Maibar Dain jima :- This ritualistic practices is followed after the paddy rice started flowering before the maturation of crops. Here in this rituals one matured adult cock and one male cock and a female hen is being sacrificed.

Hasong tai jima :- This ritualistic practices have been done before harvest or in the harvest season. In this practices a fully grown adult cock is sacrificed to paddy god.

They had a mere believe that after following these rituals the paddy god named as *Hasong* will bring more granaries to their household.

Traditions and Rituals Concerning Birth

The birth of a baby is an occasion of happiness within a family in every society. It is particularly true in Dimasa society because they keep no difference in male and female baby. The Dimasas have their own conception of pregnancy, procreation and upbringing of children. To them conceiving is the result of unity between sperm and eggs (whom they call male and female seeds). They believe that coitus between the third and the seventh day after menstruation leads to conceiving in case of newly married girls and between the third and the fourteenth day in case of elderly women. A woman is compared with the earth. As the seeds when sown on earth germinate as plants so as the male seeds when sown in the female body germinate in the shape of a new baby.

The Dimasas believe in a number of reasons for childlessness. But, the couple never blames each other. One who fails to beget a child even after marrying for the second time, the male considered is called **GARAIN** meaning dry and the female considered is called **BANJI** meaning barren. Therefore, the dryness in male seeds in male and barrenness in female is the principal cause of childlessness of a couple. Secondly, the disunity of male and female seeds is at the root of childlessness. Thirdly, impotency which is known as **GITHI** (meaning dead sex or desire less) is also considered as one of the reason for childlessness. Fourthly, according to Dimasa astrology, in spite of physical and sexual fitness of both the spouses, if they fail to procreate a baby, they blame the evil stars for not favouring them. Finally, they believe that irregular menstruation also abhors pregnancy or causes miscarriage.

During the early stage of pregnancy, the woman can carry on her normal life and no pre-cautionary measures are adopted. She takes care of the regular routine duty as cooking, fetching water, taking care of children if there be any, weaving, taking care of poultry, piggery etc. However, in the advance stage some pre-natal customs are followed. They include - she does not move outside the village, nor does she go to the forest or visit cremation ground for fear of harming the baby in the womb by the evil spirits. Also she is not allowed to attend any funeral. Fish without scale and meat of tortoise are strictly prohibited to her.

Just before the birth of the baby (that is, when the women starts felling the pain) the husband of the woman has to perform the worship of **NAISODI-NUSODI**, the goddess of child welfare, by sacrificing a hen or an egg which is called **KHARAOBA**. This is done for ensuring safe and easy birth of the baby.

The Dimasa called the birth of a baby **HAGUSUJABA**. **HA** means earth and **GUSUJABA** means polluted. Therefore, where a birth takes place the earth gets polluted. And as the delivery of a baby always takes place inside the house, hence the house gets polluted and it needs to be taken up some sanctifying measures.

At the time of delivery, one experienced mid wife called **HOJAIJIK** helps the women in labour. Another assistant mid wife called **SANGJAODI** or **BARWAJIK** assists **HOJAIJIK**. Where an assistant mid wife is not recruited, an ANUMA or surrogate mother helps the mid wife. Any mother of a suckling baby can become a surrogate mother. It is because the first breast milk is offered to a new born baby by the surrogate mother. If no woman is available to be a surrogate mother, the mid wife does all the works and even offers the first breast milk to the baby provided she has breast milk at that time.

The new born baby is placed on a piece of plantain leaf. The umbilical cord is generally cut by the father of the baby with a razor made from upper cover of a

piece of bamboo. Sometimes it is cut by the mid wife herself. The baby is washed with luke warm water. The mid wife with the help of her assistant buries the placenta under the eaves of the house. The placenta is buried in the right side if the child is a male one and if the child is a female the placenta is buried in the left side. An axe or a **Dao** is always kept under the bed of the baby and the mother. It is believed that this protects the baby and the mother from evil spirits.

After attending all these, the mid wife and her assistant go to the nearby river and take bath in order to sanctify themselves. They also perform worship in the river by breaking an egg for the well being of the new born baby.

The mother and the baby considered polluted till the umbilical cord of the baby gets dry and falls off. During this period the baby and the mother are segregated and she is not allowed to do the normal duties. Nobody is allowed to touch her. In this period the mother of the woman or the mother-in-law or any female relative does household duties and takes care of her.

The father of the baby cannot go out of the village for three days. The village as a whole observes a period of pollution. No **GERBA** (village worship) can take place during this period.

When the umbilical cord of the baby falls off, both the parents have their purificatory bath and the house and the household goods are also cleaned. On the same day the father shaves the head of the baby. In his absence it can be done by any senior male member belonging to father's clan. This ceremonial shaving is compulsory in order to sanctify the born baby. This ceremony is known as **KHANAIGUSUGERBA**. With this the period of pollution ends.

NANADIHONBA (bringing the new born baby outside the four walls for the first time) is done generally on the next day of **KHANAIGUSUGERBA**. However, it is done according to the convenience of the parents of the baby. The mid wife brings the baby outside and shows it to the people who have been invited for the occasion. The guests shower blessings on the baby. A peculiar customs among the Dimasa is that before bringing the baby outside the maternal uncle ceremonially spits on the face of the baby after chewing sesame seeds. In his absence, any male member of the mother's patriclan does it. This spitting is done in order to protect the baby from the evil eyes of the spirits. In the **NANADIHONBA** ceremony the father of the baby sacrifices a cock and a hen and a feast is offered to the guests. The mid wife places puffed rice and the drops of rice beer called **JUDI** on a finger tip into the mouth of the baby.

It is believed that the offering of puffed rice enables the baby to learn to speak quickly and fluently. The feast offered to the invitees in this ceremony includes

rice with curry of meat, fish and vegetables and **JUDI** is a must. In this ceremony the mid wife and the assistant mid wife or the surrogate mother are presented with clothes and in some cases some cash money is also offered in honour of the services rendered so far. With this the rituals concerning sanctifying a new born baby completes.

However, the first rice giving ceremony to the baby is observed sometime between the sixth and the twelfth month of the baby. This ceremony is called **NANABESENGJIRIBA**. The mid wife gives the first rice to the baby. The mid wife and her assistant give a name to the baby. The parents can also choose a name for the baby. Any suggestions from others are taken into consideration.

Traditions and Rituals concerning Marriage

Marriage proposal and acceptance: Marriage by negotiation is the prevailing practice among the Dimasa. Generally the boy's side initiates the procedure of selection and of the bride. In Dimasa society there is no system of child marriage. A girl is usually married between fifteen to twenty years of ages. But in urban areas and among the educated youth, now-a-days, the age factor is not a matter and it extends up to twenty five to thirty years of age. But in general the elders in the family and kinsmen think it fit to get married their offspring when they attain their youth. Generally the month of November, January, February and March are preferred for marriage ceremony and especially in the **FAUGUN** of the Dimasa calendar which falls after their harvesting festival **BUSUDIMA**.

The parents and guardians of the boy look for a girl of physical, social and age matching and inform the family of the girl if she is found matching. The parents of the girl well receive them with the arrangements of fooding and lodging at home. But the parents of the girl request the boy's party for time to decide on the matter. Because, it is the custom of the Dimasas to discuss the marriage proposal with the relatives and kinsmen. Even the consent of both the boy and the girl are also taken into account. After arriving at a decision the same is intimated and even if they reject the proposal for whatsoever reason it is intimated with great honesty. In the discussion of the marriage proposal some idiomatic phases and proverbs in a lighter vain are poured freely from both sides.

After the positive settlement of the marriage proposal the groom's party sends **SANDIDANGSEMBA** or **SEMJUDIGERBA** to the bride's party. This custom is the recognition of the marriage proposal. In it, a packet of salt wrapped up in plantain leaves and bounded with seven threads is sent to bride's home. If it is accepted, on a good day **LAOTHAILAMBA**, the second step of marriage proposal is undertaken after a few days. In this custom home made rice beer **JUDI** is presented

in four dried shell of fully ripen bottle gourd called **LAOTHAI** to the elder relatives of the bride. Both party takes a feast and decides on the steps called **LAOTHAILANGBAGINI** where they fix a date for marriage considering the conveniences and inconveniences of both the parties. However, now-a-days the date is fixed on the day of **LAOTHAILANGBA** and in most cases **LAOTHAILANGBAGINI** is not followed. The Dimasas believe that marriage should be solemnized within a month from the day of **LAOTHAILANGBA**.

The Marriage Ceremony

The marriage ceremony takes place at the house of the girl in daytime. An advance party from the boy's side visits the house of the girls to enquire about if everything is all right. This visit is called **GILIMGASANAIBA**. If any inconvenience occurs like serious illness of bride's family or relatives, the date of ceremony is postponed and another date has to be fixed. The bride-groom's party consisting of friends, family members, relatives and some of the village elders headed by the father of the bridegroom leaves for bride's home in the morning on the date of marriage. Before starting journey the father worships all deities by sacrificing an egg, which is called **MAYAOFAGARBA**. This is done with a view to keep away evil spirits and also to ensure safe completion of the marriage.

Again on entering the village of the bride a pig is scarified by the father of the bridegroom. This is called **MIDOGARBA**. This is done with a view to obtain blessing from the benevolence deities for a happy and prosperous life for the newly wedded couple.

YAOPABA, which means giving away the bride to the bridegroom, takes place before noon. Before **YAOPABA** the **KALTI** is given to the bride's parents.

The bride-groom bows down to all elderly persons one by one starting from his parents, bride's parents, village headmen of both villages and so on depending on seniority in age and closeness of relations. At this stage two boys hold a piece of cloth called **RIMSAO** by the back of the bride-groom so that the elder persons present do not see his feet. The elder persons shower blessing pronouncing some long sermons from the core of their heart.

When this bowing down and blessing is over the father of the bride declares that from that day onward his daughter would be the member of the bridegroom's family and the father of the bridegroom about the acceptance of the bride as his daughter-in-law. This is called **YAOPABA**.

However the bride is generally not taken out to the courtyard. But nowadays following other communities, among the educated Dimasas it is observed that she not only sits in the midst of the people but also exchanges garlands with the

bridegroom. In addition to this, although giving vermilion on the forehead of the bride was not the custom of the Dimasa, some educated Dimasa found to follow this custom, which may be called influence of acculturation.

After the *YAOPABA*, the bridegroom is taken inside the house. The people are entertained with cooked food, which consist of rice, meat, fish, vegetables and rice-beer (*JUDI*). When the reception is over the bridegroom's party bade farewell leaving behind the bridegroom at bride's house. This custom is peculiar to only the Dimasas among the tribes of the North East India. The bridegroom stays a few days at the house of the bride. He is not allowed to meet the bride on the very day of marriage. It is only on the next day that he is allowed to meet the bride. On this day he is taken to the inner chamber of the house entry to which is restricted for outsiders.

Staying a few days at the house of the bride, the bridegroom accompanied by the bride and her near relatives leaves for his house. This custom is called *FIRATHANGBA*. On the way the bride's party worships the deities with a view to imploring of their blessing so that evils spirits may not harm the newly married couple. This is called *MAYAOFAGARBA*. The party is well received and well receipted. Leaving the bride at bridegroom's home, the other members of the party return home.

The newly married couple stays at the house of the groom for few days (generally three days) and returns to the bride's house again for following another customs called *MINHABA*. According to this custom the bridegroom is required to stay in his father-in-law's house for a period of one year. This custom however is losing its grounds as many of the boys of the present generation do not like to follow it. Just in the name of following the custom they stay there for a few days. When the period of *MINHABA* is over, the couple lives in a newly constructed house which is generally constructed either near the bride's house or near the bridegroom's house. Here the couple starts their own family life.

The Traditions and Rituals Concerning Death

Because of the existence of nuclear family structure in the Dimasa society, there is practically no one at all to look after the old people at their residence. During old age their children desert the parents, as they get busy with their own respective families at their residence. Therefore, the old men and the women arrange their own livelihood themselves. However, at the time of need they are helped by the village youth. Sometimes the daughter and the daughter-in-law also help them by cooking and by doing other household works. In general the old people are respected by all.

Although the old people usually live alone, when they fall sick or at death bed, all their children and relatives come to help them. When a person dies, the sons, daughters and other relatives observe mourning and arrange for the funeral. The funeral and the post funeral rituals are observed with great reverence.

A person is allowed to die inside the dwelling house. When death occurs, a cock is sacrificed by a male member of the family near the head of the deceased. It is done because of their believing in their theory that the soul of the cock will accompany the soul to the other world.

The Dimasas cremate the dead body. The crematorium is called **MANGPHANGLANG**. Before taking away the body to the crematorium, it is bathed ceremonially and new clothes are put on. If the dead is a male a turban or **RAKHARI** (a cap made of coloured threads) is put on and if it is a female, hair is combed well. But, under no circumstances red coloured clothes are used for the dead body. After all these, the dead body is ready to bring out of the house.

At this time a few female closed relatives of the deceased sit around the dead body and start weeping by singing a very melancholy song called **GARASIMANG**. The singing continues till the dead body is taken out from the four walls of the house. The relatives, well wishers and the villagers coming to have a last meet with the dead place coins on the forehead of the dead. By this act, they wish that the dead reborn in a rich family.

The dead body is taken out of the house by the leg side of the body first. When the wreck is at the threshold, the body is moved forward and backward by counting numbers (**Se, Gini, Gatham, Biri, Buwa, Do, Sini**). Then it is placed in a bier (**BANGFUNG**) made of split bamboos in the courtyard. The number of the bamboos used in making the bier shows the economic and the social status of the deceased. If the deceased is from a poor family, one bamboo is used for making the bier. And in the funeral ceremony a pig has to be sacrificed and each of the four persons carrying the bier to the crematorium gets a leg of the sacrificial pig. If the deceased is from a rich and high social status family, more than one bamboo is used for making the bier. And in the funeral ceremony two buffaloes have to be sacrificed and the persons carrying the bier to the crematorium get the legs of the sacrificial buffaloes.

Under no circumstances, the dead body is left to be jumped over by a cat. They believe that if it happens so the soul becomes an evil spirit. Therefore, the dead body is properly guarded.

The funeral procession starts from the house of the dead and both men and women can participate in the funeral procession. A **RINO**, made of bamboo frame

and a piece of cloth having a basket like appearance is carried to lead the procession. They believe that after the death the spirit of the dead takes shelter in the **RINO**. While the funeral procession starts and goes on, a woman continuously throws paddy and cotton thread on the way from the house to the crematorium. This is called **MAYOKHRAI**, (i.e. making a bridge between the dead and the living). It is done in the hope of rebirth in the same family.

An advance party gets ready the funeral pyre in the crematorium. They also prepare a temporary shelter for the spirit of the dead. This shelter is known as **JARA**. When the funeral procession arrives there the **RINO** is opened and the spirit is ceremonially transferred to the **JARA**. The left over cotton thread is also kept in the **JARA** and it is preserved till the post funeral ceremony is over.

The funeral pyre is made of twelve tier of fire wood. The dead body is placed on the pyre pointing the head to the west. Before setting fire to the pyre, rice beer is offered to the spirit at the **JARA**. The relatives of the deceased pray the dead ancestors of the deceased and request them to embrace this deceased in the next world. Two sons of the deceased or in their absence, their representatives with split bamboo torch in hand either side of the dead (but not towards the head or the feet) touch each other's torch and then set fire to the pyre by the both sides. The party waits till the body is burnt in to ashes. A piece of charred bone is collected and kept in the **JARA**. The ashes are washed away and buried or thrown away in the mid stream of the river. After taking a purificatory bath in a near by river or pool the funeral party returns to the villages.

The funeral party while reaches the villages are required to touch holly water called **DITHER** prepared by the village priest. Two boys hold a pot full of **DITHER** at the entrance of the village. Every one touches this holly water and purifies himself.

The house of the deceased is also considered unholy. After the dead body is taken away the floor and the plinths of the house is washed with muddy water. Holly water prepared by dipping gold, silver and copper with basil (**Tulsi**) leaves is then sprinkled over all clothes and household article. Thus the animate and inanimate objects are purified.

On the seventh day a post funeral ceremony called **JUMANGSOU KAINBA** is observed at the house of the deceased. In this ceremony the people who attended funeral at the crematorium are invited and rice beer is offered. Generally on this day the date for the death ceremony called **MAIMUTHARBA** is fixed. **MAIMU** means paddy and **THARBA** means purification. Therefore, **MAIMUTHARBA** means "purifications of paddy". It is believe that paddy gets polluted when a person dies in a

family. A house for the dead is constructed at the crematorium for placing the personal movable properties like clothes, shoes, slippers, books, even cash money etc. on a day after **JUMANGSOU KAINBA**. This is called **MANGKHLONG DANGBA**. On this day also the persons concerned are refreshed with food and drinks.

There is no hard and fast rule concerning the time of observing **MAIMUTHARBA**. It can be observed between the seventh day and a year of the death of the person. It depends upon the convenience of the family concern. However, in case of un-natural death like suicide, death of women at the delivery of child etc. the final funeral ceremony is performed immediately after the cremation. Those who have taken part in the cremation (generally they are the village elders) attend such a ceremony. Two more important rules for performing **MAIMUTHARBA** are: it should be on a day after the full moon day and before the black moon day; and it is never observed on the week day on which the dead body was burnt.

Till the observance of **MAIMUTHARBA** ceremony food offering is to be made to the spirit of the dead by any elderly member of the family. The food is offered at the **JARA**. The relationship between the spirit and the living members of the family ends after the final offering of food, which is called **MAKHAMGARKHAOBA** at the time of annual harvesting festival called **BUSUDIMA**.

On the day of **MAIMUTHARBA**, there are no specific religious rituals except ceremonial offering of food with rice beer to the spirit of the deceased. The people of the village, relatives and guests have to be entertained with a grand feast of food and drinks. They believe that larger the number of people entertained in this ceremony higher the chances for the spirit of the deceased for a more happy and prosperous life in the next birth. After the grand feast, the family members, relatives and the guests go to the crematorium to burn the house (**MANGKHLONG**) which is called **MANGKHLONGSAOBA**. On returning from **MANGKHLONGSAOBA** the aged persons have to touch the **MAIDIKHOGABA** (Water kept in a bamboo tube) with toe of the right leg. This symbolizes that from this day onward the dead and the alive will live in separate world and there is no connection between them. After **MANGKHLONGSAOBA** most of the relatives and guests go away; but some elderly persons comes to the place of observing **MAIMUTHARBA** and take part in the last reception called **KHALAI KHAMBA** where rice beer and meat curry is offered. With this the **MAIMUTHARBA** ceremony ends.

However the traditions concerning Death in the village Semkhor is totally different from the practices discussed above which needs a discussion in broader scope separately. Hence it is excluded in this paper.

Conclusion

With Hinduisation and Brahmanical influence penetrating into the Dimasa society, Dimasas have extended their support to some of the religious practices like organizing Durga Puja, Saraswati Puja, Viswakarma Puja, Shiv Puja, kali Puja, etc. They also attend the temples of Hindu deities and make offerings and salutation. But in their family and community life they strictly follow their traditional religious practices. From getting cured from ailments to high yielding of crops, from individual welfare to community welfare they have number of traditional worshippings exclusively of their own. No impact of industrialization, modernization, urbanization is noticed on their religious practices in the present study. However, the present educated generation are not found interested to learn the practices of the **Jonthais**. If this trend sustains for a few decades there is the probability that the many of the traditional religious practices of the Dimasas will extinct in future.

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