



The Traditional Dresses and Ornaments of the Dimasas

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Abstract: Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG) have influenced the culture and tradition of the people all over the world. These processes have their impact on the traditional dresses and ornaments of the indigenous tribes of the north east India also. The Dimasas are also not exception to it. In daily general life, the Dimasas have adopted the modern dresses like all other Indian people. However, in socio-cultural occasions, the traditional dresses and ornaments are compulsory in Dimasa society. This paper is an analysis of the traditional dresses and ornaments of the Dimasas. The analysis is based on personal observation, field visits and secondary sources of information.

Key Concepts: Dimasas, Dresses, Ornaments.

Introduction

In this age of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG) the culture and tradition of different sections of people in India is changing very fast. In North East India also, on the one hand, the culture and tradition of the indigenous people is changing at an alarming pace; and on the other hand, the quest for ethnic identity is increasing among the people of different indigenous communities. The Dimasas, one of the earliest tribes of north east India is also not exception. However, in spite of the onslaught of the LPG, it is observed that the Dimasas are still successful in preserving its traditional cultural components which is sufficient enough to identify it as an important ethnic group of this part of the country.

Among many other components of culture of a community the traditional attire, ornaments, music, musical instruments and dance play pivotal role in identification of an ethnic group. This paper is an attempt to focus on the traditional dresses and ornaments of the Dimasas which are unique enough to the established fact of the ethnic identity of the Dimasa. The analysis is based on personal observation and secondary sources of information.

The Dimasas, one of the earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley (Gait 1926:247) have a long historical past. Dimasa is the name of language as well as of a community. It is one of the major Kachari tribes of Assam and they constitute an important ethnic group in Northeast India. Ethnically, the Dimasa are of mongoloid origin and their language belongs to Tibeto-Burman language family. The term DIMASA is better interpreted as **DIMANI B'SA – DIMA B'SA – DIMASA**, 'Sons of the great river' (Nunisa Motilal in Bhuyan 1993:72). Therefore, the term Dimasa itself is a compound word (di = water, ma = great and sa = children) which

literally meant children of big river. The river may be the mighty Brahmaputra or the Dhansiri on whose bank their civilization developed to the fullest.

The Dimasas today live mostly in the districts of Dima Hasao, Karbi-Anglong, Cachar and Hojai of Assam, Dahansiri valley of Nagaland and a small section of Dimasas are found in Meghalaya also. However, the Dimasas are usually represented by those from Dima Hasao in all spheres and particularly social life as the district is considered the homeland of the Dimasas.

Regarding the migration of Dimasas to Dima Hasao, Tonmoy Bhattacharjee writes, “Up to the middle of the 16th century, they had a kingdom at Dimapur (now in Nagaland). But the expanding Ahom kingdom soon came into fierce conflict with complacent Dimasas and finally their capital was ravaged by the Ahoms in 1536. They, for a long time, remained as refugees in the wild vastness of central Assam but their “route to security” was in the south to which they laid siege some decades after. Maibang or the valley of plentiful of rice became their capital for some two centuries. But the on rushing Ahoms destroyed the second capital of the Dimasas in 1705. The kingdom was finally shifted further in the vast plains of Cachar in 1745” (1993:60).

Leaving aside the short introduction of the tribe, the author attempts to focus on the traditional dress and ornaments of the Dimasas through which the tribe is retaining its ethnic identity.

Traditional Dresses and Ornaments (Gainsari-Phinsari)

The Dimasas are very rich in their traditional dresses and ornaments. Their traditional dresses and ornaments are very much designable and attractive too. The Dimasa women are a unique example in the craft of weaving. They are expert in designing ornaments too. It is they who prepare the dresses and the ornaments. They weave mostly the cotton clothes.

The dresses

Dimasas are people with versatility in weaving and textile to have a distinct position in the socio-cultural world. The dresses of males are very simple while the females’ dresses are very much decorative and attractive.

The Females wear

1. RIJAMPHAIN: White Colour cloth called Rijamphain is used to cover the upper part of the body which is tied under the arm and is drawn tight over the breast to the knees.

2. RIJAMPHAIN BEREN (RAMAI): Chest wrapper with Stripes of Bright Colours like white, Green, Black, Yellow and red. The uniform designs over this attire gives is a gorgeous look. This piece of cloth is wrapped at the lower part over the Rigoo and is worn only in special occasions like marriage, Dance, Festivals, Felicitating guest in community meetings etc.

3. RIGOO: Wrapper or Lower Garment Worn from Waist to ankle. It can be of various colours woven in cotton. However, the elderly women prefer the Rigoo woven of Endi silk (ERI – a kind of silk from cocoons of Eri worm).

4. RIKHAOSA: A Muffler Either of Yellow or white in colour with red margins decorated with artistic designs are worn above the Chest wrapper. Usually, the young girls at the time of dancing (Baidima) use this cloth. It can also be taken by the males to use as a Muffler around the neck.

5. RIGOO-SET: It is introduced recently due to influence of greater Assamese culture. It is Dimasa Mekhela - Chador, consisting of "Rigoo" (Mekhela – worn from waist to ankle) and Chadar which is same piece of cloth that is wrapped to cover from the upper part of the Rigoo to the chest and passed back across left shoulder. It can be of any colour with woven artistic works.

6. BATHORMAI: Kind of RIGU which has only one particular design. It can be of different colours worn from waist to knees.

Males wear

1. SGAOPHA (Pagri): Dimasa males wear turban in a head called “Pagri” or "Sgaopha". Pagri are white in colour. It is used at the times of marriages or traditional dance. The bridegroom or dancer wears Sgaopha. It has a length of about 20 arm lengths or about 7 yards and in width about a yard.

2. Chola/Kameez: It used to cover the upper part of the body and sow white in colour.

3. GAINTHAO: White Long Dhoti worn from Waist to Ankle. The Sgaopha, Chola and Gainthao are only ceremonial dresses.

4. RISHA: Short dhoti about a meter in breadth, worn from waist to knee and sometimes taken as muffler also. Risha is mostly of green colour but other colours like white, yellow, blue, violet colours are also seen.

5. RIGODO: Narrow Muffler which is generally of yellow or orange colour.

6. RIKHAOSA: Long muffler taken by both men and women, it can be in the colours of white, orange and yellow.

7. RIENDI: Riendi, also called Rithap is a Chaddar or Shawl worn by men usually made from Endi/Eri silk.

8. REMSAO: Shawl only of colour either white or yellow with colourful design embedded in White background. In the interior villages the upper part of the body is convened by this and is worn like a cross belt, the border of which is embroidered in various colours.

9. MAGONG: Shawl of various colours used for carrying food grains and baby on one's back.

10. RISA RIENDI: Risha made of Endi Silk for use as Magong.

In general, now-a-days, most of the dresses mentioned above are generally worn during festive occasions. In day-to-day life it is observed that both male and female use the modern dresses available in the market. Women use clothes like Churidar-Shelowar, Nighty, Rigoo with a top etc. The women engaged in service are seen wearing Rigoo-Set, Churidar-Shelowar, Sharee etc. Frocks, skirts and tops are used for the teen girls. The young girls seem preferring the Jins Pants with shirt/top.

Same is the case with the male folk. Boys generally put shirt and pants instead of Dhoti particularly those who are living near the urban centres. In the villages the elderly men are found to wear Risha with shirts. And the priests or Jonthai, put on the Gainthou or Rimsao and the Sgaopha. These are the common dresses put on by the

priests but they are always worn clean that is which are not used earlier on ordinary occasions and are set apart for only ceremonial purposes.

However, on ceremonial occasions both males and females put on their traditional dresses except in a few cases, especially among the youths who are much influenced by the urban ways of life.

There are some restrictions on the use of certain coloured cloth for certain clans. For example, a section of Bodo clan (Dimasa clans are divided into some sections according to the deities they offer worshipping) cannot use black attire. Again, Johori clan and a section of Hojai clan cannot use red attire.

The Ornaments

The Dimasas are very fond of ornaments. Their ornaments are of varied forms and designs which provide their folk art a distinctive style. Most of their ornaments are made of silver. There are also some restrictions on use of particular metal ornaments for certain clans. For example, a section each of Daulagupu, Khersa and Nunisa clans cannot wear ornament made of gold.

Females' Ornaments:

During traditional celebrations it is invariable for the Dimasa women to wear some ornaments. No restriction is there for the widows on wearing ornaments.

POWAL: A necklace made of expensive Coral beads.

JONGSHOMA: Necklace made of micro-beads of any colour with Coral and silver beads in between. It is very precious and rare. In this regard the use of such ornaments is considered special which only a privileged women can afford.

RANGBARSA: A Necklace made of old coins. As old coins are growing rare, the people nowadays are having recourse to modern coins, particularly the twenty-five paisa coins. The Dimasas consider it indispensable for the children in their childhood.

CHANDRAWAL: Necklace made of three silver chains with flowered shaped. It is an integral part of the ornaments of the Dimasa women.

RIMAILIK: A necklace made of Micro-beads. Different coloured Ramailik are made according to the colours of the Rijamphain Beren or Ramai.

LIKJAO: Necklace made of red micro beads.

LIKSHIM: Necklace made of black micro beads.

KHADU: Heavy Silver bangle, used by Dimasa women. Here the Khadu-the term used by the Dimasas to denote bangles carries phonetic similarity to the word Kharu used by the Assamese.

KHAMAOTHAI: Silver/Gold earring. This earring is the Dimasa counterpart of the Assamese ear ornament called "Thuria". Generally, it is made of silver and gold. Khamaothai is not very common and only the elderly women are found to use this ornament.

YAOSHIDAM: finger-Ring

The male Dimasas use only two types of ornaments namely Yaosher (A kind of Khadu for male, the use of which is compulsory in worshipping called *Hamlaihuba* and *Khande*) and Yaosidam.

CONCLUSION

The Dimasas have their own traditional dresses and ornaments. It is found that most of the Dimasa traditional dresses are now being facing the challenges from the influence of the all-India culture and the western society. On the other hand, there is also a considerable decline in traditional weavers who know how to weave the traditional dress or design or patterns

Again, in dresses a large variation is seen in the last 10 – 25 years. At first the Dimasa people used to wear only a fixed type of costumes but with modernization the way of preparing and wearing dress changes a lot. At present the looks of Dimasa dresses are quite modern and fashionable. Some new dresses like muffler, coat, shirt, skirt and frock are also developed with the same materials. But these modern dresses are not allowed to wear during performing any traditional dance.

Due to the shortage of raw materials, some short of Ornaments are in rare uses. Now, because of non-availability of silver and coins, other plastic / glass materials change the looks of the ornaments. Now-a-days the traditional ornaments rarely available in the market.

In this age of LPG the culture of small communities are at threat. Therefore, some measures are to be taken for the preservation of culture of the Dimasa people also. Awareness programme, cultural programme, workshops should be organized from time to time to impart training to the younger generation for keeping alive the cultural heritage. The knowledge of language, culture and tradition of the local tribes may be transmitted to the new generation through developing a curriculum in the primary and upper primary by the government authorities concerned.

As this district's development is vested in the Autonomous council, the North Cachar Hills Autonomous council can play an active role for preservation and development of the rich cultural heritage of the Hills tribes of Assam in general and of the Dimasas in particular. The council can take initiative in incorporating training in the traditional attire of the tribes of the district through handloom and textile department and also in establishing Dance and Music Schools to impart training to the newer generation. The department of Education and Culture can frame policy for this. Moreover, the National organizations of the Dimasa like the Jadikhe Naiso Hosom, Dimasa Lairidim Mel, the newly formed Dimasa Literary Elite Society, All Dimasa Student Union, etc, can also actively work in this respect. If all the agencies and organizations work on a composite programme, we may expect of a living cultural heritage of the Dimasas despite any threats arising out of globalization, liberalization and privatization.

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