

The Dimaraji Movement: A Movement of Ethnic Identity of the Dimasa of North East India

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ABSTRACT

The North – East India is an India in miniature with diverse colourful groups of population belonging to different races and groups with their distinctive society and culture. It gave shelter to streams of human waves carrying with them distinct culture and trends of civilizations. Austro – Asiatic, Negritos, Dravidian, Alpine, Indo- Mongolians Tibeto-Burmese and Aryans have penetrated North East India at different points of time. Assam, a constituent state of North East India is the sentinel of the region and the gateway to the North Eastern States.

Key words : Dimaraji movement, Dimara, Ethnic identity, NE India

INTRODUCTION

Most of the communities of North East India, in the pre-colonial period, were not conscious about their ethnic identities. Their world was confined to their family, clan, kinsmen and the villages. During colonial administration, the communities started developing the concept of ethno tribal identity. Different groups on the basis of ethnicity, region, religion, language, culture, caste, race etc started thinking of improving their social, economic, and political status on the one hand and to retain their traditions and relative prestige on the other. All these issues involve competition, conflict and struggle for political power.

The concept of ethnicity, ethnic group and ethnic identity is a product of the second half of the twentieth century. The concept of

ethnicity appeared for the first time in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* in 1961. B. Pakem mentions ethnicity in the following words:

“... the term ethnicity is also not free from being misunderstood. So far the term tribe was used to denote a group of people with common tradition and culture. But of late the term seems to be value loaded. Besides even within the same tribe we may sometimes encounter certain uncommon traits which may form the basis of an ethnic social organism with its accompanying characteristic ethnicity” (Pakem, 1990).

The phenomenon of assertion of ethnic identity has become a serious challenge to National Integration in India. Many ethnic groups of North East India are also heading for asser-

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tion of ethnic identity and in so doing they are looking back into their past to strengthen their cause. The case of the Dimasa is also not an exception.

METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this paper is to throw some lights on the history of identity movements of the Dimasa of Assam in India. The analysis is based on secondary sources of information, personal observation together with informal talks with the elderly people and the functionaries' of the organizations and associations of the Dimasa.

OBSERVATION

The Dimasa is a community which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group of the Indo-Mongoloid family. They are spread over Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglong, Cachar and Nowgaon district of Assam, Dhansiri valley of Dimapur in Nagaland and a small section of them in Meghalaya. There is a lot of controversy regarding the origin of the word Dimasa. 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). Here **Di** meaning Water, **Ma** meaning Big and **Sa** meaning children in Dimasa Dialect. However, the Dimasa are usually represented by those from the Dima Hasao in all spheres and particularly social life as the district is considered their homeland. The Dimasa living in Dima Hasao and Karbi-Anglong and Nagaland are specified as Schedule Tribe (Hills) and those in Nagaon district and Barak Valley are specified as Schedule Tribe (Plains).

The Dimasa had their own religions practices but the process of Hinduisation started when their capital was at Maibang. However with the acceptance of Hinduism as their religious faith during the reign of King Krish-

nachandra, the general Dimasa people were Hinduised. But, they are still performing some of their religious rites in their own way which are sharply different from that of Varna Hindu people.

The Dimasa, one of the earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley (Gait, 1922) have a long historical past to strengthen their cause for ethnic identity. The authentic historical period of these people started from the eleventh century when their supremacy extended from the Dikhou to the Kallang river embracing the whole tract of surrounding the Dhansiri river. The Dimasas ruled this vast tract with Dimapur as their capital (Mishra P. S. in Pakem, 1991). They shifted their capital to Maibang in North Cachar Hills in mid sixteenth century. The Dimasa kingdom during this period included North Cachar Hills and the greater part of Nagaon district. Finally, the Dimasas shifted their capital to Khaspur in the plains of Cachar district in 1750. It is seen that after shifting royal seat to Khaspur, the conversion to Hinduism followed. Coming under the Brahminical influence, the last Heramba Kings became worshippers of Ranachandi, the Hindu goddess of war. Generally speaking, the Dimasa consider themselves to be Hindu though they have their traditional Gods and Goddesses and even to this day liberal practices of Animism. The Dimasa Society is known for its conservatism and loyalty to its own religion and in their unique way it has so far stubbornly resisted the attempts for conversion to Christianity ever since the days of the British Raj.

The British annexed Southern part of the Kachari Kingdom, i.e. the plains valley of Barak, to the East India Company's territory on 14th August 1832 by a Proclamation. The hills Division was finally annexed by the British in 1854 on the death of Senapati Tularam the

Dimasa Chieftain who holds sway over that area. Accordingly, in early 1854, the status of Sub-Division under the direction of the Government of Bengal, Lieutenant H.S. Biver immediately resumed the administration of the tract and granted pensions to several members of Senapati's family aggregating to Rs. 1002 (Rupees one thousand and Two only) annually, beside rent-free grants in the village of Mohung Dijua on the understanding that these would be resumed upon the death of the respective holders. Thus the whole of the Heramba Kingdom came under the Government of East India Company and the British Paramountcy in the Cachar became the *fait accompli*". (Bhattacharjee, 1977)

But the British acted very treacherously after the annexation of the territory. They did not tag the Northern (Hills Division) with Southern part but unscrupulously annexed the hilly territory to the Assam district of Nowgong. Between 1832 and 1881 distribution and redistribution of old Dimasa territory took place and in 1881 North Cachar Hills was made a subdivision of Cachar. Subsequently in 1866, the remaining territory had been sliced away and distributed among the neighbouring districts of Nowgong and present Naga Hills. Thus, while the parts of the Diyung valley and the Kopili Valley had been given to the district of Nowgong and large portion was joined with the newly created district of Naga Hills. The rest formed the territory of the North Cachar Hills comprising exclusively the hilly region.

Since the annexation of the Heramba Kingdom by the British administration there gradually followed several changes in the administration. The British Government of India started dividing of the great Heramba Kingdom into divisions, divisions into districts, districts into sub-divisions for their administrative conveniences. The province of Assam was

divided into divisions Surma Valley, Brahmaputra Valley etc. The Cachar and Sylhet district were under the Surma Valley. The Cachar district was divided into three Sub-divisions- Silchar, Hailakandi and Haflong. The North Cachar Hills Sub- Division, was at first created in 1853 with headquarters at Asaloo. But when the Naga Hills district was created in 1866, the North Cachar Hills Sub-division was closed. The territories of Tularam's Country when annexed were cut into several pieces and distributed to the neighbouring districts of Nowgong, Sibsagar and Naga Hills. The North Cachar Hills Sub-division was again created in 1880 with its headquarter at Gunjung and it was later shifted to Haflong in 1898. The Karimganj subdivision of Sylhet district was transferred to the Cachar on the partition of Bengal retaining Sylhet with the present Bangladesh. Thus, the great Heramba Kingdom of Govinda Chandra and Tularam were divided into several districts and sub-divisions. With the distributions of the land, the aboriginal ruling Dimasa people were also divided as the least minority everywhere.

The land settlement procedure of the British Government was very liberal and encouraging for the new comer settlers in Cachar. The Government allotted lands as much as one could occupy at different rates for different terms. Even the practice of offering of waste lands at progressive rates with rent-free terms had also been in vogue in Cachar. The land of Cachar being very fertile and suitable for agriculture also attracted the people. Thus the fertile soil and the liberal land allotment procedure of the Government immediately attracted the landless outsiders of the neighbouring areas in large numbers and settled. The opening of Tea and Rubber plantation industries in Cachar was another cause of influx of outsiders there. The Government also imported thousands of tea

labourers from outside the district and state for plantation purposes. It had, outnumbered the aboriginal Dimasa losing their every rights and benefits like political autonomy, economic development, development of language and culture and heritage, etc. The illiterate and minority Dimasa being unable to adjust themselves with the latest administration and developments which brought fast 'growth of population, towns and civic lifestyles, left their earlier homes and hearths and started settlement in the remote and dense forest areas. The Indian Independence movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the world war etc. also brought several changes and in turn affected the Dimasa politically, Socially, Territorially and Economically.

After India's independence too there developed several changes in Assam. In 1951, a new district was created in the name of 'United Mikir' and North Cachar Hills. The Mikir Hills District was formed by curving out some territories of land from the district of Nagaon and Sib-sagar. The North Cachar Hills Sub-Division was separated from Cachar and tagging it with Mikir Hills formed into a district. The Naga Hills

district of Assam was separated from Assam and formed into a separate state of Nagaland in 1963. The Dimapur area of Assam, the capital of ancient Heramba Kingdom was also leased out to Nagaland. It was only in 1971 that North Cachar Hills (now known as Dima Hasao) was made a full-fledged district of Assam with its headquarters at Haflong with one autonomous District Council. The Mikir hills later renamed 'Karbi Anglong district. Barring the district of North Cachar Hills, the population of Dimasa people turned out as the least minority in all the remaining district of Cachar, Nowgong, Karimganj, Hailakandi and Karbi Anglong of Assam and Dimapur district of Nagaland. What is the most saddening is that the Dimasa of same language, culture, and religion are classified by different names and scheduled by different names in the census of India. The Dimasa today are known in government records by different names in different districts and states. The following table depicts the nomenclature of the Dimasa group of people in different parts of NE India and their population. (Table-1).

Table 1. Dimasa population in different parts of North East India

Nomenclature in different District/State	Male	Female	Total	Sex Ratio
Dimasa, Dima Hasao, Assam	33,330	31,551	64,881	947
Dimasa, Karbi Anglong, Assam	23,546	22,549	46,095	958
Barmans, Cachar, Assam	5,414	5,494	10,908	1,015
Barmans, Karimganj, Assam	961	877	1,838	913
Tangmi or Rukhini Barmans, Hailakandi As	389	344	733	884
Hojai, Kamrup, Assam	6	3	9	500
Hojai, Marigaon, Assam	67	74	141	1,104
Hojai, Nagaon, Assam	850	865	1,715	1,018
Hojai, Lakhimpur, Assam	9	8	17	889
Kachari, Nagaland.	3,917	3,890	7,807	993
Dimasa, Meghalaya.	311	242	553	778
Total Dimasa population	68,800	65,897	1,34,697	958

Source: Census of India, 2001.

Thus the Dimasa have completely lost the identity and oneness of the community though they belonged to the same language and culture. It has harmed their society in many ways. So, the administrative procedures so reformed and enforced for the protection, growth and peace of the tribal do hardly work at all. The Tribal Belts and Blocks, their Rules and Regulations framed for the protection of tribal interest could never work perfectly. Even the two autonomous districts of Assam with more autonomy powers are seemed to want something more because it could not fully serve the interest of the tribals and their districts. The demand for Autonomous State under the Article 244 (A) & (B) of the Indian Constitution, therefore soon followed.

All these tribes mentioned in the above table actually belong to same community. i.e. Dimasa. Recognition of Dimasa community by different names in different districts and states as mentioned above has further created troubles, misunderstandings, and disintegrations within the Dimasa society. The whole Dimasa community should be recognized by one name viz. Dimasa.

The Dimasa have also another complain that till date the Dimasa people have never been provided with the opportunity to send a member-representative from their community either to the House of State Assembly or to the Parliament from any constituency of the districts of any state other than Dima Hasao to ventilate their problems and grievances for remedies. But the non-tribals who migrated to their ancestral homeland and formed majority in population have been freely enjoying such benefits and all other economic rights and facilities ever since the British rule. The Dima Hasao has now been spared with only one seat in the State Assembly of Assam. No Dimasa people of other districts either of the State of Nagaland or of

Assam has been provided with such opportunities. The re-organization of districts and states has resulted in dividing the Dimasa from their own ancestral homeland. The identity, integrity, language and culture of the Dimasa people are thereby threatened.

Until 1961, the Dimasa were treated as a sub-tribe of the Kachari tribes. In the 1961 census, however, they were classified as a separate tribe. Before the introduction of the District Council, the Dimasa were more or less unaware of the national political situation. At the dawn of independence the world of the average Dimasa was confined to the boundaries of their respective villages. Repeated migrations had already made the community isolated and conservative. The people who were once the ruling power of a large tract of Assam had confined themselves in their shells and the Dimasa living in isolated pockets had severed all contacts with the greater world. But though living in isolation, the Dimasa had a vague sense of pan-Dimasa identity. (Mishra P. S. in Pakem, 1990).

Since the last part of the 19th century, the Dimasa people living in the plains have, however, been facing the problem of land alienation in alarming magnitude. Large-scale migration from East Bengal (Erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh), Nepal as well as from the mainland India and their settlement in Dimasa areas has adversely affected the economy of the Dimasa people. The migration of the outsiders has changed not only the demography of the region but also has dislocated socio-economic and political scenario. In addition the non-tribal traders, businessmen and moneylenders grabbed large areas of land of the Dimasa people exploiting their honesty and simplicity.

Under the circumstances stated above, the Dimasa of the North East India has started organizing themselves into a single community and movements for single identity followed. In

order to protect and promote the cultural identity of the community 'Dimasa Jalairaoi Hosom' was formed in 1972. It is a non-political cultural organisation with its headquarters at Haflong. Since its inception it has been demanding the preservation of Dimasa historical monuments and the adoption of Dimasa language at the primary level in N.C. Hills. Dimasa historical monuments of Dimapur and Maibong are in a deplorable condition and the educated Dimasa youths are very agitated on this point (Mishra P. S. in Pakem 1990). In 1978, the District Council gave some new settlements to a few non-tribals which caused resentment among the Dimasa. In its annual general meeting on 24-6-79 'Dimasa Jalairaoi Hosom' passed a resolution urging upon the authority to stop giving undesirable settlement to outsiders.

Dimasa National Organisation was given birth in 1979. The organization in the first resolution in its first general session held on 11. 03. 1979 passed a resolution demanding the preservation of ancient relics and monuments of the Kachari kings lying in various places of Assam and other parts of North Eastern States especially at Dimapur, Maibong and Khaspur. The executive committee of this organization consists of Dimasas belonging to the plains and the hills. Important Dimasa personalities like Sri Nandamohan Barman (President), Sri Brojendra Langthasa (General Secretary) were connected with this organization and this was the first attempt to unite all the Dimasa living in different areas under a common umbrella. Dimasa lawyers like Sri Anil Kumar Barman of Cachar, the then Minister of Assam Sri Sonaram Thaosen of N.C. Hills and the delegates from Nagaland pledged to work for a cultural and social unification of all the Dimasa (Mishra P. S. in Pakem, 1990).

The Dimasa of Cachar District formed 'Nihil Cachar Haidimba Barman Samity' in

December 31, 1945 at Bijoypur, in the present Borkhola Constituency. It is the oldest organization of the Dimasa community, not only in Barak Valley but also among the other Dimasa organizations in Assam. Nihil Cachar Haidimba Barman Samiti, put forward a political demand in 1980 for the reorganization of the Dimasa speaking areas of the North East. This organization believes in the concept of greater Dimasa nationality and opines that the existence of the Dimasa will be in danger unless all the Dimasa are brought under a single administrative unit. Consequently, basing upon geographical facts and historical evidence, the organisation demands that in addition to the then N.C. Hills and the major part of Barak Valley, the southern part of Nagaon district including Howraghat, Jamunamukh, Dabaka, Lanka, Hojai, Namti, Jogijan and the area from Dimapur to Dhansiri should be included in the proposed administrative unit.

With a view to safeguard the greater interest of the Dimasa people, some of the educated Dimasa youths organized themselves to form a students' union in the name and style of Dimasa Students' Union (DSU) in 1952. The DSU was instrumental in overseeing the overall interest of the Dimasa people since its inception, particularly the welfare and safeguard of education, socio-culture and socio-economic situations of the Dimasa people.

The Dimasa Sanskriti Parishad (DSP) was born in the year 1975 in Cachar with a view to reawaken the cultural identity and social and political consciousness of Dimasa people.

All Dimasa Students' Union (ADSU) is a democratic, non-political and social umbrella organization of all students' community belonging to Dimasas. Earlier it was known as All Dimasa Students' Federation which followed a federal pattern but since 8th of January 1991, it was rechristened as All Dimasa Students' Union (ADSU) unifying all the

federal bodies belonging to them in different places like in Nagaland, Nagaon, Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao and Cachar. The ADSU has been demanding for creation of a separate full-fledged state '**Dimaraji**' by incorporating all the territories that were included in the ancient Dimasa Kachari Kingdom so as to enable them to enjoy all constitutional rights and privileges to bring all round developments. The ADSU and the Dimaraji Revival Demand Committee (DRDC) jointly submitted a memorandum to Shri P.V. Narasimha Rao, the then Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, in 1996, demanding a separate homeland for the Dimasa. The ADSU, apart from safeguarding the common interest of the Dimasa community as a whole has launched a democratic political movement on 30 April 2003 staging a demonstration at Jantar Man-tar, New Delhi demanding Dimaraji.

Dima Halim Daogah (DHD) is an offshoot of the erstwhile Dimasa National Security Force (DNSF), which had surrendered en masse in 1995, except for its self-styled Commander-in-Chief Jewel Garlosa, who subsequently launched the DHD. The emergence of this militant outfit can be ascribed partly to the no-responsive attitude of the government to the constitutional agitation path followed by the Dimasa and partly to the politics of expediency of the dominant class. It's declared objective is to create a separate State of 'Dimaraji' for the Dimasa and the indigenous People, comprising Dima Hasao, Dimasa dominated areas of Barak valley and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam and parts of Dimapur district in Nagaland. On June 24, 2004, Dilip Nunisa, commander-in-chief of the organization and the head of the outfit's armed wing, the Dima National Army, took over the command of DHD by ousting its President Jewel Garlosa on charges of anti-DHD activity. Nunisa, in a press statement, said that Garlosa has already formed a separate outfit on March 31, 2003, named 'The Black Widows', which also has a private army.

A ceasefire agreement was signed between the DHD leadership and the Union Government on January 1, 2003 and the agreement has been periodically extended. On September 23, 2004 a six-member DHD delegation led by 'Chairman' Dilip Nunisa met Union home minister Shivraj Patil in New Delhi and submitted a memorandum demanding a separate homeland for the Dimasa People. However, the tardy progress of the negotiation process has disappointed the DHD leadership, which, Dilip Nunisa termed as "intentional procrastination".

After submission of the memorandum of the D.H.D. on 23.09.2004 to the Hon'ble Home Minister of India, many things happened to the Dimasa people which need to be mentioned. The D.H.D. had entered into a Ceasefire agreement with the Govt. of India on 1.1.2003 and by the time the said memorandum was submitted there had hands full with an ethnic clash with the Hmars which spread over the Dima Hasao and Cachar district continuing for several months and causing extensive destruction of life and property on both sides. Close to its heels, came the infamous split in the D.H.D. leadership. Joel Gorlosa, the founder president/chairman of the organization was replaced by Dilip Nunisa as the chairman of the organization. Gorlosa was lying low for some time but since one year or so, he has emerged with a new outfit and has made his presence felt. About the same there had another ethnic clash with the Karbi in the Karbi Anglong district. The clash continued for several months and many precious lives and huge amount of properties on both sides were lost.

The other faction led by Jewel Garlosa came to be known as DHD (Jowel) and came in national and international news for its violent activities. The DHD (Jowel) has surrendered and sign a ceasefire agreement with the government of India on October 2, 2009.

What is more painful is the fratricidal feud between the two factions of the D.H.D.

which had been going on. Many incidents of killing and counter killing among the cadres of both factions were reported frequently. All endeavours to resolve this intense hostility have ended in failure. This divided house on the other hand, has opened the door wide to a number of other militant outfits of local and outside origin to operate in the Dimasa areas.

However, in the recent Dima Hasao Autonomous Council election, both the factions of DHD participated in the democratic process and contested as independent candidate in a few constituencies and got elected as Member of the Autonomous Council. But as both the factions have not contested in sufficient seats for forming the Executive Body of the council, they are not in a position to make decision for the development of the Dimasa in particular and the Dima Hasao district in general.

CONCLUSION

It can be said that although the assertion of 'Dimaraji' is a post independence entity, it is having a long historical reality. It is the result of growth of consciousness among the Dimasa as to their marginalisation in different parts of the region in the name of administrative divisions and re-divisions at various points of time. This has led to a unique and complicated situation. At present the demand for "Dimaraji" creates a rift not only between the different ethnic groups but also between Dimasa themselves causing uncertainty and tension in the Dimasa populated regions of the North east India. Now, it is the turn of Government to bring about a solution to the demand of "Dimaraji" considering the very history of indigenusness of the Dimasa and the possible tension that may arise among the other indigenus ethnic communities in the region. In doing so the interests of all sections of people must be protected and guaranteed. The policy of inclusive development may be fruitful for the solu-

tion of the problems of the Dimasa viewing the present heterogeneity of the region where "Dimaraji" is projected by the Dimasa.

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