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## Traditional Handloom Practices among the Dimasas in Dima Hasao District of Assam - A Sociological Study

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### Abstract

A study on the traditional handloom practices of the Dimasas were done in four selected villages of Dima Hasao district of Assam. The Dimasas are one of the earliest aboriginal tribes of India belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group of the Indo-Mongoloid race. Handloom (DAOPHANG) is an age old practice among the Dimasas. Three different types of handloom are found to use by the Dimasa women folk to weave the clothes called RITHAP, RIGU, RIKAOA, RIJAMPAL, RIMSAO, RISA, etc. A good numbers of tools made at home are used in the traditional handloom. Homemade cloths play important roles in socio-cultural life of the tribe like, birth, marriage, death, festivals etc. Very few Dimasa household are found without a loom at home. Prospects of industrial production and income generation through handloom are very high as the market values of the products are also high. The main reason behind high price of the products is the unique motif design and the time taken to weave those designs.

**Key Words: Dimasas, Dauphang, Rikhu**

**Handloom** is an old practice among the indigenous communities of the north east India. Traditional looms have been used since time immemorial. Traditionally, loin loom is used for weaving for many centuries. However, due to commercialization of handloom products, some indigenous communities have started using fly shuttle loom and jacquard loom as these are more efficient and relatively takes less time.

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 **DIMANI 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 custom and traditions among the above mentioned groups of the Dimasas.

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 practise 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 Maibang. Whether they practise Jhuming or settle cultivation their villages are permanent. The Dimasas living in Dima Hasao and Karbi-Anglong districts are specified as Hills Tribe by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Amendment) Act, 1976. The Dimasas living in other parts are specified as plain Tribes.

There are prospects of many industrial activities among the Dimasas of Dima Hasao. They can produce timber products, cane and bamboo products, **Judima** products; handloom products, etc on industrial basis and market the same among themselves and the outsiders. But very few people are interested in industrial production and marketing. One of their products that has high potentiality of industrial production and profit making is their handloom product which so far are exclusively done by their women folk.

Handloom (DAOPHANG) is an age old practice among the Dimasas too. Almost all girls in a Dimasa village start to learn weaving at teen age from their mothers or grandmothers. When they acquire some knowledge of practising the loom, they are given a separate loom of their own at their younger age. Therefore, in most of the houses more than one set of looms are observed. However, industrial production for marketing has not gained its ground among the Dimasas.

Very few scientific studies on traditional handloom practice among the Dimasas are done so far. The traditional throw shuttle loom (YAONI DAOPHANG) is mostly found to use by the Dimasa women folk to weave the clothes called RITHAP, RIGU, RIKAOSA, RIJAMPHAI, RIMSAO, RISA, etc. The proper documentation of traditional handloom practice among the Dimasas is the need of the hour in protecting and preserving the cultural practices of tribe for future generations' reference. With this perspective, the main aim of the study is to document the traditional handloom practices, the unique handloom products like RIGU, RIKAOSA, RIJAMPHAI and RIMSAO and unique motif designs therein. In addition, it is hoped that the result of the market survey of this study may attract the young entrepreneurs of the community to undertake production and marketing and it may draw attention of the administrative authorities to frame plans and programmes to help the entrepreneurs of the community.

### **Objectives**

The main objectives of the present study are

- i. To record different types of **Daophang** and the tools associated of the Dimasas.
- ii. To focus the importance of hand woven attires in their socio-cultural life.
- iii. To chalk out the market value of their handloom products and prospects of industrial production for marketing.

### **Methodology**

The present study was carried out in 4 villages of Dima Hasao district namely Semkhor, Wadrenghisa, Dima Hading and Donjenraji. The district is situated approximately between Latitude 24<sup>0</sup>54' and 26<sup>0</sup>42' N and Longitude 92<sup>0</sup>8' and 93<sup>0</sup>53' 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 to November 2021. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed for collecting information from the respondents. Personal interviews were conducted with the weavers in the villages at their door step. The data were collected from informants' expert in handloom from each village. Most of the informants were from 20 -50 years. For getting the market related information, in addition to the data from the informants, cloth stores at Haflong, Maibang and Umrangso towns were also visited. A facebook group named Dimasa Rih Hadaiko is also a source of information on the price of the finished products and fine images of the items of cloths. 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 weavers.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Types of Daophang:**

Three types of Daophang are found to use by the Dimasas in the villages under study.

They are

1. **Yaoni Daophang:** It is the traditional wooden throw shuttle loom. Most of the Dimasa women are found to weave clothes in this Daophang. It is a wooden frame and movable from one place to another.
2. **Kholni Daophang:** It is also made of wooden frame and movable too. The only difference with the first one is that both throw and fly shuttle can be used in this Daophang. And it is a bit bigger than the first type.
3. **Waani Daophang:** It is the traditional loom made of bamboo frame. It is fixed at the earthen surface and hence cannot be moved.

### **Different Components / Tools of a Daophang**

1. **Khunding Gedeba & Khunding Khasiba:** These two are instruments for winding the yarns. The first one is bigger in size and the later is a smaller one. **Khunding** has three parts namely *Deobogrong*, *Gonsa* and *Khunding Buthong*.

2. **Gedeba Khunthukri:** It is the bobbin which is used for warping the yarn.

3. **Halai:** Halai is the warping instrument. There are two kinds of Halai. One is traditional and the other is modern board or frame.

4. **Rashi:** It is the reed. Two kinds of Rashi are **Serni Rashi** (Iron reed) and **Wani Rashi** (Bamboo reed)

5. **Midichu:** It is the hook to pull out the yarns through the reed one by one. The traditional one of this was made of the quills of porcupine and the modern one is made of brass or iron or plastic.

6. **Nehphontho:** It is a bamboo tube used as a tool for preparing the heddle.

7. **Neh:** The heddle which separates the two layers of the yarn.

8. **Gong Phong:** Bamboo sticks used for extra weft.

9. **Rih Song Gong:** The warping bamboo stick used at the starting of stretching the yarn with the help of **Halai**.

10. **Khojong:** Khojong is the comb used for combing the yarn.

**11. Burun:** Burun are the beams for the yarns and the cloths. The yarn beam is called **Khun Burun** and the cloth beam is called **Rih Burun** or **Rithan**.

**12. Khaisengba:** It is the instrument used as dent.

**13. Neh Gakhlaiba:** It is the treadle set worked by the foot for imparting a motion on the heddle.

**14. Neh Khakuba:** Head roller used to move the heddles up and down with the help of the treadle set.

**15. Soogur:** The stretcher which opens up the cloth side to the accurate size of the yarn in the reed.

**16. Thori:** The traditional shuttle made of bamboo.

**17. Makhu:** The throw shuttle or the fly shuttle made of wood with iron at both end used in fly shuttle looms.

**18. Khunthukri:** The pirn made of wood onto which weft thread is wound for using within shuttle. They are of two kinds **Gedeba Khunthukri** (big one) and **Khasiba Khunthukri** (small one)

**19. Gonthai:** Traditional instrument for preparing motifs. The present generation use graph papers for the purpose.

**20. Gonsai:** Small sticks of bamboo used to put at the side of the yarn to repeat the motifs.

**21. Nehphong:** Big sticks used to warping the heddle.

**22. Samphor:** Pick up sticks used while doing and repeating the motifs.

**23. Zenter Charkha:** The machine for winding the pirn and bobbin.

**24. Takri:** The spindle for preparing yarn from cotton or **Eri** silk.

**Different actions of weaving in Dimasa language**

1. Bobbin winding – Daophang Chengmani Khuntukri Gedeba.
2. Pirn winding – Thukriba
3. Warping – Boniyahonha Daophang Chengba Khondauthu Khonba
4. Denting – Khunkhe Rashiha Khaisingba
5. Beaming – Daophang Panda
6. Combing – Bathap Jiayaba
7. Warping into Beam – Burunha Rih Khuntonba
8. Drafting – Neh Khonba
9. Weaving – Daoba
10. Motif making – Rikhu Daoba

Learning of weaving is essential for a Dimasa woman for socio-cultural reason. In the traditional Dimasa society weaving and preparing JOO (rice beer) were, in most cases, considered essential pre qualification for marriage proposal of a girl. A woman expert in weaving is called DAOKHRIDI.

Handloom woven clothes play important roles in the socio-religious sanctity associated with birth, marriage and death. A Dimasa female feels pride wearing traditional attire woven in her own loom while she dances during BUSUDIMA (The annual harvesting festival of the Dimasas) and in attending marriage ceremonies.

**Table 1: Clothes essential in the sanctity of birth, marriage and death.**

Name of the sanctity	Name of essential	The Method
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	<b>cloth</b>	
<b>Nana Dihonba</b> (The ceremony of carrying the new born baby outside the house for the first time)	<b>RIMSAO if the baby is male and Rikhaosa if the baby is a female</b>	<b>The midwife called HOJAIJIK carries the new born baby outside the house wrapping the baby by the particular cloth.</b>
<b>DISINGBA or wedding</b>	<b>RISA GALAUBA MUDO (DHOTI), RISA RAMAIMUDO (KURTA) and PAGRI (turban) for the bridegroom and RIGU, RIKAOSA and RIJAMPHAI for the bride. RIMSAO.</b>	<b>The cloth called RIMSAO is hanged open by two young boys at the back of the bridegroom when he salutes the elders present so that his feet is not pointed to the elders sitting at his back.</b>
<b>Death</b>	<b>RIMSAO (a specially designed traditional shawl white or yellow in colour) for male and RIJAMPHAIGUPHU (a specially designed plain white chest wrapper) for female.</b>	<b>The body of the deceased is given a holy bath, put on traditional attire worn during their wedding and covered with RIMSAO or RIJAMPHAIGUPHU.</b>

There are also some folk songs (**Murithai**) among the Dimasas signify that weaving is the core essence of a Dimasa woman. These songs are mostly played by the traditional flute called **Moori** with the traditional drum called **Khram**. Of course some sing these orally also. Among many such songs two are presented below to show women's dedication to the loom and joy she feels wearing new clothes.

(1)

Agasi sari ha longphaiba,  
 Angjang thangjaoya,  
 Miya horha longphaiba,  
 Angjang thangjaoya,  
 Rikahosa horaigili daophang Galamla  
 Rikahosa horaigili daophang Galamla

(You came to pick up me the night before yesterday

I could not go,

you came again to pick up me yesterday night

I could not go,

Rikhaosa in the loom, horai gili is yet to complete

Rikhaosa in the loom, horai gili is yet to complete)

The cloth called **Rikhaosa** is a chest wrapper for women and **horaigili** is a motif woven in a **Rikhaosa**. This song rightly indicates the dedication of a young girl upon weaving of her clothes.

(2)

Nini rihbo rihgadain,

Ani rihbo rihgadain,

Nini rihbo horaimin,

Ani rihbo horaimin,

Phaidi berao, phaidi berao

khunang hakhliha.

Ma madai sainriba basain se,

Phaidi bailainang,

Pa madai sainri babasain se,

Phaidi bailainang

(Your cloth is also new,

My cloth is also new.

Your cloth is also same designed,

My cloth is also same designed.

Come friends, come friends

To the village headman's courtyard.

Mother God has given us this day,

Let's dance together.

Father God has given us this day,

Let's dance together."

This song expresses the self satisfaction in wearing newly woven specially designed attire and dancing together at the village headman's courtyard on an auspicious day blessed by God (i.e, their annual harvesting festival day **BUSU**). **Horaimin** is a kind of motif woven on the **Rikhaosa**.

An unfortunate orphan girl (Makthijik) sings:

"Beniba daubudi lubudi phunuriya lailangkha

Mamade angkhe sausikhe  
 Mamani boronphang khamba mithiya thaulangkha  
 Rashiha yaudiba ringya lailangkha  
 Thurisa yausab surnabo mithiya thaulangkha  
 Made angkhe . . .”  
 (Baruah, 1980: 130)

This song expresses the inability of an unfortunate orphan girl for the early death of her mother. She grown up to six hands in height but her mother went away without finding time to teach her the art of spinning and weaving. Mothers loom is remained uncared as she does not know to sit at the loom. Nor does she know how to drive the reed and the shuttle. This sad song shows how important it is to know the art of weaving in Dimasa society and how an orphan girl repents of not knowing the art.

In the Balad of Dishru (Dishruni Rajabthai), the fled away Princess Dishru sings out to the messengers sent by the King to capture her and bring her back to the palace as follows:

“Thikhade bengyarao bengsarao  
 Anchaha jaoyaba burunphang  
 Burunphang bojorjang laburi  
 Sobaha daophang gaihima  
 Anchaha daohaba rashijang  
 Rashijang bojorjang laburi.”  
 (Baruah, 1980: 145-146)

In this Balad Dishru requests the messengers to bring her loom which she used since her childhood. The above extracts from the Balad also shows the binding and love for the loom which was being used by a girl from childhood. She would leave the palace but not the loom.

For such socio-cultural reasons and the essential use of traditional attire very few households were found without a Daophang at the surveyed villages. The following table shows the patterns of possession of Daophang by the households in the four villages.

**Table 1. Patterns of possession of Daophang by the households in the four villages.**

Village Name	Total Households	Number of Households with single man/woman	Total Households with Daophang	Number of Households with 1 nos Daophang	Number of Households with 2 nos Daophang	Number of Households with 3 nos Daophang	Number of Households with No Daophang
Semkhor	86	6	75 (93.7%)	68	5	2	11
Wadrendisa	28	2	24 (92.3%)	14	8	2	4
Dongjenraji	78	Nil	71 (91%)	52	13	6	7

Dima Hading	82	Nil	76 (92.8%)	67	9	Nil	6
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The table shows that more than 90% of Dimasa households have their Daophang at their home. However no male weavers were found in any of the villages. It is a general feature of the urban areas that individual households do not weave at their home. But Dimasas irrespective of their rural/urban setting practise weaving for socio-cultural demands of traditional dresses. The Dongjenraji and Dima Hading villages within industrial township of Umrangso prove this fact.

**Table 2: Possession of traditional throw looms and flying shuttle looms in the villages**

Villages	Only throw shuttle looms	Only flying shuttle looms	Both throw & flying shuttle looms	Total
Semkhor	68 (90.7%)	Nil	7 (9.3%)	75 (100%)
Wadrenghisa	15 (62.5%)	2 (8.3%)	7 (29.2%)	24 (100%)
Dongjenraji	57 (80.3%)	3 (4.2%)	11 (15.5%)	71 (100%)
Dima Hading	62 (81.6%)	5 (6.6%)	9 (11.8%)	76 (100%)

The table shows that the Dimasa weavers have high dependency on traditional throw shuttle loom.

**Table 3: Purpose of weaving clothes**

Villages	Only for Household needs	Only for Selling in the market	Both for household needs & selling in the market	Total
Semkhor	63 (84%)	Nil	12 (16%)	75
Wadrenghisa	9 (37.5%)	Nil	15 (62.5%)	24
Dongjenraji	44 (62%)	Nil	27 (38%)	71
Dima Hading	49 (64.5%)	Nil	27 (35.5%)	76

This table shows that Dimasa women basically weave for household needs. In the traditional village Semkhor 84% of weavers weaves for themselves only. Weaving for earning tendency is found in the Wadrenghisa village. The villages in the industrial township of Umrangso viz Dongjenraji and Dima Hading have also produce clothes for selling in the market. The most significant thing is that no Dimasa household is found to produce only for selling purpose in any of the villages under study.

Some weavers are found to weave in sharing system. Those who do not weave at home supply yarn and weavers weave in fifty-fifty sharing. Of course the supplier has to pay an amount of money for per set of cloth in addition to supplying the yarns on the basis of the motif(s) chosen. A few such weavers are found in Wadrenghisa, Dongjenraji and Dima Hading villages.



No male weaver is recorded in the villages under study. So weaving among the Dimasas is exclusively a business of the women folk. However in constructing the frame for the looms and making the tools the male folk help the women folk.

**Table 3: Table showing items woven in looms, yarn used, material cost & market value of products and Time taken in production**

Sl No	Item	Yarn used	Cost of Raw material in Rs	Price of the Finished Product in Rs	Time taken in production in days	
					Flying Shuttle Loom	Throw Shuttle Loom
1	<b>RITHAP</b>	Eri Silk	1500 - 2000	6000 - 8000	---	20-25 days
2	<b>RIGU</b>	Eri Silk	1500 - 2000	6000 -8000	---	20-25 days
		Cotton	300	1500 -1800	3-4 days	5-7 days
		Acrylic/Zero ply	250	1500 -2000	3-4 days	5-7 days
		Polyester	300	1600-2000	6-7 days	8-9 days
		Polyester Pat	400	2000-2500	6-7 days	8-9 days
		Bornali Pat	400	2000-2500	6-7 days	8-9 days
3	<b>RIKHAOSA REMAI</b>	Cotton	300	4000-7000	10-15 days	10-15 days
		Acrylic/Zero ply	300	4000-7000	10-15 days	10-15 days
4	<b>RIGU SET (Rigu, Chadar &amp; Blouze)</b>	Cotton	800	8000-15000	20-25 days	25-30 days
		Acrylic/Zero ply	700	7000-14000	20-25 days	25-30 days
		Polyester	700	10000-18000	20-25 days	25-30 days
		Polyester Pat	1000	10000-18000	20-25 days	25-30 days
		Bornali Pat	900	10000-18000	20-25 days	25-30 days
5	<b>RIJAMPHAI BEREN</b>	Cotton	800	6000-14000	40-50 days	40-50 days
		Acrylic/Zero ply	900	6000-14000	40-50 days	40-50 days
6	<b>RIJAMPHAIG UPHU</b>	Cotton	800	2000-3000	4-5 days	6-7 days
		Acrylic/Zero ply	700	2000-3000	4-5 days	6-7 days
7	<b>RIMSAO REMAI</b>	Cotton	1000	9000-12000	21-28 days	21-28 days
8	<b>RIMSAO SADA</b>	Cotton	700	3500-4000	16-20 days	16-20 days
9	<b>RISA REMAI</b>	Cotton	400	4000-6000	15-20 days	15-20 days
		Acrylic/Zero ply	300	4000-6000	15-20 days	15-20 days
10	<b>RISA SADA</b>	Cotton	300	1200-1500	2-3 days	4-5 days

		Acrylic/Zero ply	250	1200-1500	2-3 days	4-5 days
11	<b>RIGU</b>	Cotton	400	2000-2500	---	4-5 days
	<b>BATHORMAI</b>	Acrylic/Zero ply	300	2000-2500	---	4-5 days
12	<b>RIGODO</b>	Cotton	300	2000-2500	---	14-18 days
	<b>REMAI</b>	Acrylic/Zero ply	250	2000-2500	---	14-18 days
13	<b>RIGODO</b>	Cotton	250	500-700	3-4 days	4-5 days
	<b>SADA</b>	Acrylic/Zero ply	200	500-700	3-4 days	4-5 days

The table reveals the following important facts;

- The ranges of price of the products (particularly **Remai** types) are very long. It is because of the number of line of motifs woven in the cloth. Minimum three lines of motifs are woven in Dimasa cloths. Higher the number of lines of motifs higher the price is.
- Cost of raw material is much lower than the cost of the finished product.
- Weaving Eri silk yarn cloths take much time than any other yarns.
- And any cloth with suffix REMAI also take longer time in weaving for the peculiar motif design called REMAI and therefore costly in the market.
- For weaving cloths with more motifs like any REMAI the traditional throw shuttle loom is preferred. And if those are woven in flying shuttle loom there is no difference of time in weaving. The long time taken in weaving those is not in simply weaving but in making the motifs.
- Looking at the price of the products it can be said that there is high prospects of industrial production and marketing of the products. The women expert in weaving can earn a good amount of money to support the family income in addition to fulfilling household needs of attire.

### **Conclusion and Suggestion**

Dimasa Dauphang is intrinsically related to the socio-cultural life of the tribe. For many socio-cultural occasions Dimasa attire is not only essential but mandatory. For this reason it can be said that Dimasa identity will remain alive so long **Dauphang** and **Rikhu** remain alive. From the present observation and data from the field there is no doubt about the longevity of Dauphang and unique Dimasa motifs called Rikhu.

Although Dimasa tribe is being sufficiently populated with weavers at present they are less aware of government schemes and marketing of their products. The administrative authorities like the State Government and the N C Hills Autonomous Council may take up special programme to promote weaving among the young generations for industrial production and marketing. Weavers may be given space in prominent tourist locations of the district for direct selling of their products. Small yarn processing centers need to be established for easy availability in reasonable price of the raw materials.

At this age of globalization people across the world are seen to like using the cultural dresses with unique motifs. To capture that market finishing and Labelling of the Dimasa products by using various finishing techniques and product packaging for better marketing is also a need of the age. Ways to reduce cost and improve design

variations, using technical inputs from design and marketing experts may open new markets of the products at national and international level. Besides, using new technology of E-Portals and tapping of exports markets for Dimasa handlooms products must also be evaluated and promoted for long term survival of this handloom industry which will not only provide employment to the locals but also increase the revenue to the government.

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A facebook group named 'Dimasa Rih Hadaiko'.