

Traditions and Changes in the Marriage Practices among the Dimasas – A Sociological Interpretation.

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Abstract: Traditional marriage practices among the Dimasas are unique. The marriage procedures and rituals associated with marriage among the Dimasas of Dima Hasao district differ from the Dimasas living in other parts of the north east India. By traditions, arranged type of marriage called Disingba, involves a number of procedures from Sandi Dangsingbah to Minhabba. All the procedures of Disingba are not strictly maintained for other types of marriage like JukhuGaolem, Haphriba and Khaolaibah. But some core principles of marriage, e.g., tribe endogamy, clan exogamy, the custom of Khlimbah etc. are compulsory in marriage procedure of all types. The bride price called Kalti, which is, now-a-days followed in the name's sake, is common in all types of marriage. But, of late, some changes are observed in the marriage practices of the Dimasas. This paper is an attempt to focus on the traditions and the changes that have been observed among the Dimasas of Dima Hasao district of Assam.

Key Concepts: *Dimasas, Jukhuba or Disingba, Jukhu Gibi, JukhuGaolem, Haphriba, Khaolaibah, Kalti.*

Introduction:

The Dimasas are one of the earliest tribes presently living in the north eastern part 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. At present they live mostly in the districts of Dima Hasao, Karbi-Anglong, Cachar and Hojai of Assam, Dhansiri valley of Nagaland and a small group of them in Meghalay. 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). This Dima Hasao is located in the southern part of Assam, lies between 24° 57" to 25° 43" N latitude and 92° 32" to 93° 28" E longitude which is spread over an area of 4888 sq. km (District Census Handbook-Dima Hasao, 2011)

The Dimasas living in Dima Hasao practice mostly shifting (Jhuming) cultivation while some of them resorted to settled cultivations in the little plains available in the hill district. 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 matriclans 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 SENGPONG and the female clans are called JULU or JADI.

Database and Research Methodology

The researcher has completed a study on the Dimasas in another field of study. The study explored the perception of the Dimasas towards marriage practices where both qualitative and quantitative data were utilized. This paper is based mostly on both participant and non-participant observation and secondary database spread over the literature acknowledged in the reference. Moreover, informal discussions with the source persons and

customary practitioners helped the researcher to explain the traditions and changes in the marriage practices among the Dimasas.

The prominent works from which the secondary sources information utilized in this study includes the works of Dipali G. Danda, BN Bordoloi, S.K. Barpujari, Nalindra Kumar Barman, Dharmeswar Duwarah, Motilal Nunisa, P C Sharma, Zahid Ahmed Tapadarand Gouri Sen. The secondary data from the published research papers and Ph D thesis of the present author is also utilized in this paper.

Research Objective

The present study is aimed to focus on the traditions and changes in the marriage practices among the Dimasas living in Dima Hasao district and to explore the cultural uniqueness of the marriage practices.

Analysis and Discussion

The rituals of Dimasa marriage are somewhat different in the different parts of Assam and Nagaland. The Dimasa people of Dima Hasao are maintaining their age-old tradition and customs of marriage. Off late, some changes have been observed in the different stages of marriage ceremony but the main customs of the marriage ceremony are maintained following the traditions. The Dimasa people of Barak Valley districts follow some of the marriage system of Hindus or the marriage system of the Bengali. A caste Hindu priest is a must in the marriages in the Barak Valley to solemnize the marriage. The marriage is solemnized during night time but marriage never takes place during night in the Dima Hasao District. Some of the procedures of marriage are followed by the Dimasas living other than in Dima Hasao district.

Forms of Marriage:

It is observed that monogamy form of marriage is the prevailing form among the Dimasas. Marriage in Dimasa society is strictly monogamous (Barpuari, 1997: 125). Neither polyandry nor polygyny is generally practised and encouraged by the Dimasas. It may be because of the customs related to female clan complexities. Dimasas believe that marriage is a sacred social institution and it is a tie of not only of one man and one woman but also the tie and relationship of one family with another family, one kinship group with another. Thus, through marriage they establish and create new relations.

Taboo in Dimasa Marriage:

Dimasas are endogamous tribe. Inter-community marriage is not allowed at all which leads to ex-communication. Again, in terms of clan (Sengphong and Jadi) exogamy must be maintained. Intra-clan marriage also leads to ex-communication. Some other taboos concerning marriageability are also practiced among the

Dimasas. Marriages do not take place between boys and girls of SengphongHari which means identical patriclan. For example, Bodo and Bathari are the two patriclans which are SemphongHari. Though names of these patriclans are different but they are taken together and treated as same Semphong. Hence, marriages between Bodo and Bathari never take place. In the same way marriage between Hasnu and Johori is also a taboo. Again, marriage is prohibited between patriclan belonging to the same Khel. Both Bodo and Thaosenclans belong to Gurubari Khel. Khel is a kind of division of patriclans. It is very interesting to note here that it is not necessary that one patriclan may belong to the same Khel. Different patriclans may belong to the same Khel. So, marriages between a boy from Bodo and a girl from Thaosen of Gurubari Khel is prohibited because they perform worshipping to the same deity.

Among the Dimasas cross-cousin marriage is possible/allowed by principle of clan exogamy between cross-cousin. But the practice of cross-cousin marriage is rare. The cross-cousin marriage is called **Hain Daopri**. In a cross-cousin marriage both the boy and the girl do not belong to same paternal clan or same maternal clan. But parallel- cousin marriage is impossible for clan exogamy rule of Dimasa marriage.

Widow Re-marriage

Among the Dimasas, it is observed that Widow or Widower re-marriage is prevalent. There is no binding that widower/widow cannot remarry. A widower/widow can remarry outside of his/her paternal clan and maternal clan as per the exogamy rules. But procedures for widow re-marriage are different from other marriages. There are some norms to be followed in case of widower/widow remarriage. A younger brother can marry the wife of his elder brother but the elder brother cannot marry the wife of his younger brother. In the same way a younger sister can marry her elder sister's husband but the elder sister cannot marry her younger sister's husband. The kinship between elder brother and the wife of his younger brother or the relationship between elder sister and the husband of her younger sister is called "BOWAI". This relationship is prohibited in the Dimasa social system. This kinship usage is so strict that they cannot touch each other's hand and no article can be exchanged between them. If they are found touching each other or exchanging things between them in the public ceremony, they are penalized through a minimum amount of cash money.

The Procedures of Marriages in the Dimasa Society:

The Dimasa Marriage procedure can be broadly divided into three types namely

1. Jukhuba or Disingba

2. Haphriba

3. Khaolaibah (Elopement):

On the basis of procedures followed, Jukhuba is again divided into two types:

A) Jukhu Gibi

B) JukhuGaolem

A) Jukhu Gibi: Jukhu Gibi marriage procedure is the most prevalent marriage system in the Dimasa Society. The two words mean a true marriage. Jukhu means marriage and Gibi means truth. Hence Jukhu Gibi means a refined and true marriage among the Dimasas. It is a marriage of negotiation. S.K.Barpujari rightly said, "Marriage by negotiation is the actual practice, although consent of both the girl and the boy is taken into consideration." Irrespective of class or strata the Dimasa people follow this procedure of marriage. It is the most recognized and socially accepted type of marriage system among the Dimasa people. When a Dimasaboy or girl thinks marriage the Jukhu Gibi marriage system comes first in the mind of the him/her. Many rituals and norms are followed in this type of marriage system. Marriage proposal is the first step in the marriage ceremony. In the Dimasa marriage procedure marriage proposals are made from the male side.

Steps in the Jukhu Gibi Marriage System

I. Sandi Dangsingba(Marriage Proposal):The marriage proposal which is popularly called **Sandi Dangsingba or Semju Dhangsingba** is the first step in the Jukhu Gibi marriage procedure. Salt weighing about one kg is wrapped in a plantain leaf and tied up with seven thread of bamboo is presented to the father of the girl by the father of the boy or elderly people from male side as a token of marriage proposal. This is the unique way for a marriage proposal. One of the important aspects of the Dimasa marriage proposal is Grao Khandi which is chanted in dialogue between the male side and female, preferably between father of the boy and the father of the girl. But they can hire an expert in the matter each side from their villages or from other villages for the purpose of deliberation of Grao Khandi. Grao Khandi is nothing but exchange of words in a verse form between the male side and the female side. They use harmonious tone to utter the words. Their roles of Grao Khandi in the marriage proposal or in the entire marriage ceremony cannot be ignored. It is through Grao Khandi that Marriage Proposal is made. Marriage proposal is not forwarded in a normal conversation. Poetic words are used to communicate with each other. Example of Grao Khandi during Marriage proposal is like this:

Girl's father: What happened? You do not come often. What brings you here today?

Boy's father: If son grows up it is said that a daughter-in-law is required, if daughter grows up son-in-law is required. If son grows up it is necessary to help the father, if daughter grows up it is necessary to help the mother. I have come to your place to exchange my son with your daughter. I do not know whether the Heaven will make it or not whether Lairidima will write it or not?

Girl's Father: Yeah, it is not that I have not a girl of same age group. She has grown early. But she has not even woven a thin cloth for her mother. She has not brewed sweet rice bear for her father. Neither she knows how to weave nor cook. Better to go other place.

Boys Father: Edge of my long dhoti has been torn into pieces and my long stick has been broken into pieces. That is why I cannot go to other places.

Girls Father: O.K. if that is so then we are brother-in-laws. I do not know whether the Heaven will make it or not whether Lairidima (Saraswati Goddess) will write it or not? If you want to perform marriage like Lord Sibarai, Goddess Gamadi, earmark with a packet of salt.

Boy's Father: If we want to do jhum in the muli bamboo garden we can earmark with a piece of bamboo. If we want to do jhum in tree garden we can earmark with a plant .If we really want to perform the custom of Lord Sibarai and Goddess Gamadi we the human being earmark with a packet of salt. So, I give you a packet of salt as a mark of reservation.(Waibra, Sadananda, 2015)

In this way, as observed in a few cases of marriage proposal, the customary expert Dimasas throw deliberations between the parties for a longer time and finally the proposal is accepted by the parents of the girl and as a mark of reservation for marriage the father of the boy gives the packet of salt to the parents of the girl.

II. **LaothaiLangba Ceremony:**

After the acceptance of marriage proposal by the parents of the girl, the parents and relatives of the boy visit the girl's residence for the second time for the next step of marriage which is called **LaothaiLangba**. Laothai is a dried gourd which is used for storing Judima, a rice bear prepared by the Dimasa people. In the olden days, the ceremony of LaothaiLangba took place in three stages spanning for three years. One laothai in one year, that is, three Laothai in three years. Laothai filled with Judima is brought to the girl's parents to discuss the next procedure of the marriage. According to the old traditions of the Dimasa marriage, the first stage of LaothaiLangba is called Jubarai, second is called Jugrik and the third stage of LaothaiLangba is called Bakho which is the final LaothaiLangba ceremony. The JubaraiLaothai is knotted or wrapped with seven threads made of bamboo and

filled with Judima, the Jurgrik with five threads and the BakhoLaothai is wrapped with three bamboo threads. The date of marriage and the bride price called Kalti is also fixed on the day of BakhoLaothaiLangbawhich is also called Beseng in Dimasa.

Marriage Date Fixation Procedure:

Some noteworthy points are considered while selecting the date of marriage. One important point which is very much necessary to mention here is that all types of marriages in Dimasa society is solemnized before the full moon period which is called by them as **Dain Daokhuba** and never after full moon period which is called **Dain Daokhliaba**. According to their belief, if social functions are conducted before the full moon period they progress and prosper like the moon in an increasing manner. Rising period of moon symbolizes prosperity. In fact, all the functions of living people are solemnized before the full moon period. So, it is necessary that before selecting the date of marriage the position of the moon has to be studied first and the date should be fixed before the full moon. They believe that the **Dain Daokhuba** is symbol of prosperity.

Another important point which is to be considered before the fixation of date of marriage is the birthday of bridegroom. Marriage is solemnized on the day of the birth of the bridegroom but the boy do not move from his house for marriage on the day of his birth or the girl do not move from her father's house after marriage for her journey towards her husband. It is regarded as inauspicious. The marriage ceremony may takes place within two to three months on an auspicious day from the day of the last LaothaiLangba. According to the belief of the Dimasas Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday are considered as auspicious days for marriage ceremony. And the Sunday is never considered for any auspicious occasions. Because, in the long past when human sacrifice in mass worshipping was practiced by the Dimasas which they called BhandaiRiba, it was on Sunday that such worshipping was conducted.

So, any one of these days among Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday is fixed for solemnizing marriage through discussion among the parents and relatives of both the boy and the girl. It is also necessary to consult the Gaon Burah of both the villages before the fixation of the date because in Dimasa village or society in every social function the villagers are involved and that is why it is necessary to see whether any social function coincides with the marriage function. Marriage is a big social function and two marriage ceremonies on a single day cannot take place because the village Headman, the married people, spinsters etc of the village are involved and without them

solemnizing marriage is impossible in the Dimasa Marriage System. In this way a day is selected to the convenience of all concerned.

After the fixation of date of marriage, it is necessary to announce the date for the information the villagers of both the villages which is convened by the Gaon Burahas of the concerned villages. The meeting is known as Basainkhariba. Later on, before two or three days of the marriage ceremony the villagers are invited through the Gaon Burah to attend and participate actively in the marriage.

Kalti or Bride Price System:

Payment of the bride price called Kalti is an important feature of Dimasa marriage. It is paid to honour the metrical of the girl. It is paid by the bridegroom's father to the bride's parents. Kalti is a nominal lump sum amount of money paid to the father of the bride only as a token of respect and regard for bringing up the bride. Even today, the Kalti amount varies from Rs. 315 to 515. Kalti or Bride price is neither fixed considering the quality of the bride nor the economic condition of the bride or bridegroom's family. Also, it does not mean that the bride is purchased through Kalti. Kalti is proposed by the father of the girl ranging from Rs 315 to 515. While fixing the Kalti four points are considered

- i) The Kalti is proposed in odd number.
- ii) The Kalti is settled by decreasing/increasing it with an even number.
- iii) The Kalti amount should be preferably in coins.
- iv) The Kalti amount of the younger daughters should be higher than the elder ones. For example, if the Kalti of the elder daughter was Rs. 405, then the Kalti of the next daughter should be proposed more than Rs.405 and settled on at least Rs 407, and

- v) The Kalti, in most of the cases, is finally settled by the maternal uncle of the bride.

A few important observations on the practice of giving Kalti are:

- i) The tradition of using of coins in Kalti can be attributed to the reason that when the practice started during the days of the Dimasa Kings, the currency was only coins of gold or silver.
- ii) Another fact worth mentioning here is that during those days gathering coins of gold or silver for giving Kalti to the parents of the girl was not so much an easy task for the parents of the boy. Therefore, now-a-days it may be treated as a token of respect shown towards the female clan the bride belongs but in olden days it was a big responsibility for the parents of the boy to arrange a social marriage.

iii) During olden days, the parents of a numbers of girls could become rich with the Kalti money received in the marriage of the girls. Some of the Lullabies practiced to sleep girl child also indicates that the parents of girl expected to be rich through the Kalti money in their marriage.

iv) The important role of the maternal uncle in final negotiation of the amount of Kalti indicates the important role of mother clan (Jadi).

Nohthao and Gathao:

Nohthao and Gathao are the halting places of the bridegroom's party while moving towards bride's home on the previous day or on the day fixed for solemnizing the marriage. There is a difference between Nohthao and Gathao.

Nohthao is used for overnight halting whereas Gathao is used for taking some rest before the marriage or after marriage ceremony by the bridegroom party. Preferably the house of paternal clan member or maternal clan member is selected for Nohthao or Gathao. If there is no clan member in the village concerned any other house decided consulting the parents and the Gaonburha of the village where the marriage ceremony will be solemnized.

Parents of The Bride and The Groom:

Presence of parents of both the bridegroom and bride is a must in Dimasa marriage ceremony. If any parent of both of them is not alive, it should be selected before the marriage. The procedure of the selection of temporary parents of the boy or the girl is the same. A couple from paternal clan is selected as acting parents during the marriage ceremony. And, the couples' relation with the boy or the girl should be equal to his or her parents according to his or her paternal clan relationship. If the acting father belongs to his paternal clan and the acting mother belongs to his maternal clan, it is the best choice. This couple will sit in the Khamren Khamba on the day of marriage and bless the bridegroom. In the entire marriage ceremony, they will act as the father and the mother.

The Role of Khaoyah:

A Khaoyah is a boy who stays with the bridegroom during the entire marriage ceremony. A marriage ceremony and without a Khaoyah cannot be solemnized. He should be younger than the bridegroom and it is obligatory that his parents are alive. Before the marriage a boy is selected for performing the function of Khaoyah. He stays all the time with the bridegroom to take every care while the bridegroom perform Khlimba (the bowing down and seeking blessing) to all the elders assemble from both side at the marriage ceremony. It is he who stands

behind the bridegroom with a Dimasa cloth called Remsao. He covers him from behind with the Remsao during khlimbah so that the people sitting in the opposite row do not see the feet of the bridegroom.

III. Marriage Ceremony:

In the Dimasa marriage ceremony the whole village is involved and the parents invite paternal clan and maternal clan relatives of the village as well as their distant relatives to attend the marriage function. Mostly elderly people in couples are invited to attend the marriage ceremony for the obvious reason of blessing the new couple.

Before two or three days of marriage ceremony a few married couple go to the village of the girl and stay in the Nohthao which was selected earlier. They gather the required items and make arrangements and preparations to welcome the bridegroom party. They even help the girl's parents in the preparation of the marriage if they need. The bridegroom party along with the parents moves to the village of the bride before one day of the marriage and stay in the Nohthao.

The Eve of Marriage:

Some rituals are performed on the night before the marriage function. A pair of married men (Haingrao) visits the girl's house first for giving information that one pair of Haingrao is coming to the parents of the girl to make enquiry about the wellbeing of the bride and this tradition of giving information is called "DAK THANGBAH" and the tradition of making enquiry is popularly called "GILIM –GASA NAIBAH", literary it means to see or inquire the health of the bride or whether everything is all right at her family.

As per the custom the married men duo visit the parents of the bride with one small Laothai to see the wellbeing of the bride and they return back to Nohthao after spending a few minutes there.

After the dinner bridegroom and bride's party gather together in the courtyard of the Nohthao to play a game of strength. Just for fun they play games like bamboo wrestling (Javelin throw) and stone lifting (Shotput throw).

The Day of Marriage:

From the dawn of the day the villagers of the bride get busy in the preparing food to feed the village people and the bridegroom party. Some pigs or goats and chickens are sacrificed for meat purposes. It should be noted here that in every social function some pigs or goats are sacrificed for meat purposes but before eating, meat

curry is offered to their Supreme being, Sibarai and this offering to the God Sibarai is called Midoh Garba. After Midoh Garba only the food can be offered to the people.

KaltiYaopabah (Kalti Giving Ceremony):

Kaltigiving ceremony is called KaltiYaopabah. Two married men wearing in Dhoti and Kurta come to the father of the bride hand over the Kalti to him along with two Laothaisa, one filled with pure rice bear and another filled with mixture of rice bear and water. The Kalti amount is placed on the banana leaves which are nicely arranged in order of number and the total number of leaves should be seven and this is called Hashni. Kalti, is paid in the open courtyard of the bride.

Khamren Khambah (Seating arrangement):

Before the arrival of the bridegroom in the bride's home, the elderly people sit in the open courtyard for blessing the bridegroom. This seating arrangement is called **Khamren Khambah** - Kham meaning to sit and Ren meaning in line so Khamren is to sit in line. The elderly people are seated from both the sides. The seating arrangement is in such way that the father and the elderly people belonging to the paternal clan should sit in the right-hand side of the bridegroom's father and the elderly people from the maternal clan should sit in the left-hand side of the bridegroom's father. In the same way, the father of the bride and her elderly people of paternal sit on the right hand of her father and the mother and her maternal clan relatives sit on the left side. In this seating arrangement the seniority kinship status and nearness of relationship is also maintained with utmost care. From this seating arrangements both the parties can understand the relationship of the people with the bride and the bridegroom. The elderly people of the bridegroom side and the bride side sit facing each other.

Bridegroom's Journey:

After the seating of the elderly people is complete, the journey of the bridegroom for the Nohthao/Gahthao towards the bride's house for solemnization of marriage starts. He wears Dhoti and Sallower with turban in his head, all white in colour. In the journey towards the bride's house, six teen aged boys lead the procession of the bridegroom, three walk in the right-hand side and three left-hand side of the road. Three boys carry three Laothai filled with rice bear, one each on their heads are at the right side and on the left side the other three boys carry three packages of cooked meat, dry fish and dal (or vegetable) which is called Shamlaiju. These three Laothai are the same Laothai which were brought before Laothai Langbah. The procedure of binding or wrapping the Laothai this time is the same as it was done during the Laothai Langbah Ceremony. But this time

these Laothai and Samlaiju are nicely covered with Remsao, a Dimasa cultural cloth and these are kept in a basket called Khamphlu made of bamboo. These six boys are followed by the bridegroom and his party. The bridegroom walks in the middle along with his Khaoyah in his behind and two or three other boys walk along in the two sides of the way with unfolded umbrellas. Finally, the Nagarao-Malarao (spinsters) and Haingarao (young married people) follow the procession.

On the way of the bride's house a barricade made of bamboo is erected which is called Khrong the literal meaning of which is a fence. The bridegroom party must pass by breaking the Khrong. It symbolizes sliding away any kind of troubles that may occur in solemnization of marriage. Another reason of this Khrong is merry making and fun between both the parties. The Haingarao of the village make lots of fun before dismantling the barricade. The Haingarao will not break the Khrong. They need to prove that they have come for the marriage and they are not enemies. The bridegroom party must prove themselves that they are the real ones and they have come for the marriage. The Haingarao of the bridegroom party bring two numbers of Laothaisa (a small Laothai) along with them. One is filled with pure rice bear and another is filled with mixture of rice bear and water. At the first instance they give the Laothaisa filled with the mixture of rice bear and water. If they refuse to give a free passage to the bridegroom, then the Haingarao of the bridegroom hand over another Laothaisa filled with pure rice bear and after the confirmation of the purity ,the bridegroom and the party are allowed to move on.

After reaching in the open courtyard, the boys are asked to bring down the Laothai and Samlaiju. The bride's party makes fun of the situation. They are repeatedly asked to bring down the Laothao and Samlaiju but the boys not willing do that because they were already instructed by the Haingarao of the bridegroom party not to bring down those Laothai and Samlaiju because before that two Laothaisa are already given at the Khrong. After some fun and merry making that the Laothai and Samlaiju are brought down. Meanwhile the bridegroom along with assistants stand near the house and the after Laothai and Samlaiju are brought down, the bridegroom is allowed to enter the open courtyard of the bride's home.

Khlimbah and Bashibah (The ritual of bowing down and Blessing)

Khlimbah and Basibah is the main ritual in the marriage ceremony of the Dimasas. Here the bridegroom bows down to the elders of both the parties. At first, he bows down to his own parents and after that he bows down to the parents of the bride. He then then takes blessing from the headmen of the villages concerned and his wife if they are present at the occasion. After that he bows down one by one to the elderly people of his

paternal clan and then the elderly people of his maternal clan serially as they are seated earlier. In the same way he bows down first to the elderly people of the bride's paternal clan and then the elderly people of the bride's maternal clan serially. In this bowing down the seniority of rank in the clan group is maintained to the maximum extent possible. After taking blessings from the kins of both sides he bows down to the elder members of both the parties sitting at the courtyard. With this Klimbah and Bshibah ritual come to an end.

During the bowing down custom, the Khaoyah stands behind the bridegroom and covers him from his behind with a traditional cloth called Rimsao. It is observed that the most of the elderly people bless them in a very short pronouncement of words of blessings. But, some of the experts bless him with some long verses.

One noteworthy observation is that on the day of marriage ceremony only the bridegroom bows down to the feet of the elderly people but it is not performed by the bride. The bride does it only on the day of Phera which is explained in the description of the Phera.

According to the old tradition of the marriage ceremony the bride is not brought to the courtyard during the whole process of marriage ceremony. Sometimes it so happened that the marriage party of the bridegroom returned to their village without seeing the face of the bride. But now-a-days the tradition of marriage system has been changed and the bride is brought to the courtyard to follow certain modern practices which are indicated in the later part of this paper.

The bridegroom is taken inside of the house after completion of the Khlimbah. He is welcomed in the doorway by his brother-in-law. The brother-in-law welcomes him and takes him inside by saying "Agim" which means brother-in-law. But the bridegroom is not allowed to enter the innermost part of the house where the bride resides. In the meanwhile the parents of the both the boy and the girl sit together and exchange son with daughter and daughter with son. This is called Basa-BisikYaophaba means exchange of son and daughter. The father of the boy says to the father of girl, "From today my son is your son and your daughter is my daughter." After that they discuss and fix the date and time of the return journey of the bridegroom and bride with kins, relatives and the villagers from bride's side to the house of the bridegroom. This return journey is called Phera.

The Custom of Phera:

After staying one night, the boy is taken to the kitchen by the Haingarao of the village of the bride. The bridegroom stays in the bride's house for three nights and returns back to his house on the fourth day. But if the bride's birth date falls on that day, it is not possible to move for Phera. And day of Phera should also be an

auspicious day as it was stated earlier that Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday are considered auspicious for solemnizing the entire marriage ceremony.

The parents of the bride cannot go in the Phera but her close relatives can go along with the bride. A Khaoyah, the assistant of the bride, other boys and girls (Nagrao- Malarao) and Haingarao-Haingajikrao and some elderly people form the relatives and villagers of the bride accompany in the journey of Phera.

After reaching the house of the bridegroom, the first step is to handed over the groom to his parents. This custom of handing over the groom is popularly called 'Yaophabah'. The bride's party hands over the groom saying that nothing happened to the boy and every part of the body is perfectly all right. After this ritual the new couple bows down separately to feet of the parents of the boy and the headman of the village and the relatives of the bridegroom. First the bridegroom bows down alone and the bride along with her Khaoyah bows down. Then the newly wedded couple is taken to the room. After that the bride's party, the villagers and the relatives are fed with meat and little bit of rice beer which is called KhalaiKhambah. During this feast meat, vegetables which are brought by the bride's party are given especially to the elderly people. With this KhalaiKhambah, the ritual of Phera ends.

After spending few days at the house his parents, the newlywedded couple visits the parents of the bride and this visit is named as Pherasa means a small Phera. It is a very small affair. In following this custom, the couple should not go alone. Only a boy or a girl younger to the bridegroom should accompany them. After staying a few days there, they come back to the residence of bridegroom's parents. His father arranges a ritual called Madai khlimba or KhelhaHabribah which is according to Dipali G.Danda is the only religious rite in the marriage ceremony. She rightly remarked, "The only religious rite of marriage is Madai Khlimba which concerns worship of clan god and transfer of girl from her father's patrician to her husband's patriclan. This is true and this is also called KhelhaHabriba which means entry of the girl to her husband's paternal clan." In the Dimasa social system there are 40 paternal clans and there are twelve Daikho in the social system. During the entry of the girl to the husband's patriclan, the girl is given to drink holy water which they call themselves as Dithar. Di means water and thar is shortened form of Gathar which means pure or holy. So Dithar means holy or pure water. After this ritual the bride adopts the clan of her husband.

The Custom of Minhaba

After the Madai Khlimba is over, the newly married couple stays at the house of the groom for few days and returns to the bride's house again for following other 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 starts living in a newly constructed house which is generally constructed either near the bride's house or near the bridegroom's house at their own convenience.

B. Jukhu Gaolem

While in the Jukhu Gibi procedure of marriage it may take two to three years from Sandi Dangsingba to the actual marriage ceremony, in Jukhu Gaolem procedure all the rituals concerning marriage can be completed within three to half a year. Therefore, Jukhu Gaolem marriage procedure is the most common as it does not involve much time and energy. In Jukhu Gaolem, the procedure and rituals are little bit different from Jukhu Gibi. After few weeks of marriage proposal or Sandi Dhangsingba the date for the marriage is fixed and on the same day Kalti is also fixed. The rules for the Kalti fixation are the same as the rules applied in the Jukhu Gibi. On the eve of the marriage the rituals which are observed in the Jukhu Gibi are observed in this type of marriage also.

The important differences in this procedure of marriage includes:

- i) The Khrong is not erected in this type of marriage.
- ii) Three Laothai and three packets of cooked meat, dry fish and vegetables are not used in this type of marriage.
- iii) Payment of Kalti is also done just before the bowing down ceremony. Moreover, the Kalti is paid inside the house and not in the open courtyard.
- iv) The couple is allowed to be taken inside the innermost of the house of the bride.

The procedure of bowing down by the bridegroom to the elders and blessing is same with Jukhu Gibi procedures. The ritual of Phera also remains the same. After spending one night at the bride's house the new couple along with other villagers comes to the house of his parents. The procedures of Khel Habriba are also the same as done in the Jukhu Gibi.

2. **Habribah:**

Habribah is another type of marriage which can be found among the Dimasas. Actually, Habribah marriage system is followed in case of any of the widow/widower remarriage. The procedure followed in this marriage is limited to a few customs. And expenditure incurred in this type of marriage is also very low. According to the time of solemnization Habribah procedure is of two types, one is solemnized during day time and another type of Hapribah is solemnized during night time. In the earlier days the marriages of widows or widowers were solemnized during night time. But now-a-days Habribah is also solemnized during day time. Some economically poor boys and girls are also found to follow this type of marriage. The rituals involved in this type of marriage are not that rigid. The elderly relatives make the proposal in a very simple way and if the proposal is accepted the date of the marriage and Kalti is fixed. The day of the marriage is fixed in the same way, i.e., during the ascending period of the moon. The amount of Kalti, in this type of marriage is same as in the Jukhuba or Dishingba but the Kalti is paid inside the room. On the day of marriage, the bridegroom pays the Kalti and the bowing down ritual is also done inside the house.

3. **Khaolaibah (Elopement):**

Khaolaibah is a way of acquiring a mate by one's own choice. The practice of Khaolaibah has been in force since long. But it is observed that this procedure of acquiring mate is becoming the mostly practiced procedure in these days among the boys and girls but the elderly in the society does not favour this practice. But the system of arranged or social marriage is still very popular. In fact, Jukhuba or Dishingba is mostly favoured and best type of marriage from the point of view of the elite people among the Dimasas.

Khaoliabah is neither socially permitted/recognized nor it is socially acceptable. Khaolaibah in general is treated as deviation from social norms by most of the Dimasa people. Great concern has been expressed over this matter of increasing Khaolaiba by the Dimasa National Organizations. A boy and girl elope when they are in mutual love. They elope away without the knowledge of the parents. There may be some reasons of elopement or Khaolaibah such as heavy expenditure in the social marriage, the duration of time taken in the arrangement marriage etc. It must be accepted that the procedure of Khaolaibah is very easy.

In the Khaolaibah system the boy and the girl flee away from their village and stay somewhere or stay at the residence of the boy's parents. If they go to other place instead of the boy's father, they come home after staying some days outside. When the boy brings the girl to his home, his father informs the father of the girl about

the incident. Then the girl's guardian or relatives visit the parents of the boy and they discuss over the regularization of the marriage between the two. If the girl's relative is against the marriage, they take back the girl. If both the parents of the boy and the girl have no objection against the marriage, they must go to the headman (Gaonburha) of the girl's village and discuss about the marriage. Both the parents are fined and they must pay the amount of money fixed by the headman and the elders of the village as fine which is called Dai Subha. They are made to pay the fine because their boy and girl eloped away without the knowledge of the headman and the villagers. The boy and the girl have broken the rules of the villages and hence the fine is imposed as the punishment.

Before giving the fine the elders of the village may ask the boy and the girl whether they want to live as husband and wife. If they really want to get married, their parents pay the fine to the headman in front of the elders of the village. The boy and the girl touch the feet of the elders and seek blessings. It is a very simple ceremony. Thereafter, they are recognized as husband and wife. The boy brings the girl to his home. In olden days no other ceremony were conducted for such marriage.

But now-a-days, a ceremony called Bidhai has been prevalent. The boy and girl stay separately in their paternal homes after the fine called Dai Subha is paid. The parents discuss and fix the date of Bidhai ceremony and the Kalti is also fixed. The Kalti is paid on the day of Bidhai.

Celebration of Bidhai is done in a very shortcut manner and this is done only to recognize the marriage socially. On the day of Bidhai the boy along with his parents and other elders and boys and girls go to the girl's residence. The amount of Kalti is paid to the parents of the girl, the boy bows down to his parents, girl's parents, headman and the relatives of the boy and the girl. A grand feast is offered to the groom's party and the invited guests. After staying a night at the girl's home, the boy and the girl come back to the boy's home with a few relatives of the girl. The rituals of Phera may or may not be followed. It is observed that some villages follow the rituals of Phera while some others do not follow.

Divorce Settlement and Divorcee remarriage:

Divorce is termed as Gaolaibain Dimasa language, the meaning of which is to be separated. Divorce is permitted among the Dimasas, but the cases of divorce are very few in the villages observed. Divorce can be obtained if the aggrieved person(s) appeal(s) to the traditional headman called Khunang (Gaonburha). The village headman calls a meeting of the village elders for the discussion on the proposal for dissolution of the marriage.

Both the husband and wife can also appeal jointly for dissolution of their marriage to the Khunang of either her parents' village where she resided before her marriage or the village presently residing. The Khunang, the village headman after consultation with some elderly people of the village fix a date for discussion about the divorce appeal. This particular meeting for divorce is called Gaolaiyahbani Mel Khambah means meeting for divorce. Both the husband and wife along with their parents are also called to attend the Mel for placing their views. Witness, if there be any are also allowed to attend place their opinion.

This meeting generally tries to remove the misunderstandings between the husband and the wife and the couple is given a chance to sustain their marriage. And if they do not agree to reunite at all the meeting takes a decision on the dissolution of the marriage. Generally, the bride price is returned to the husband after the divorce but if the husband is found guilty the bride price may not be returned or if the husband cannot show any fault of his wife, the husband cannot demand the return of the bride price. In the usual course, if a wife wants to divorce without the fault of her husband, she has to return the bride- price to the husband but if a man wants to divorce without showing any fault of his wife he cannot claim the return of the bride-price (Dhanda,1978: 57).If divorce takes place by mutual consent, the repayment of Kalti is also settled mutually(Barpujari,1997:126).As a general rule of divorce among the Dimasas if the couple has any children, the male offspring are given to the father and the female offspring are given to the mother.

Re-marriage of divorced man or woman is allowed among the Dimasas. Instances of remarriage of divorced woman are also observed among the Dimasas. Remarriage of a divorced woman is allowed by the Dimasas provided the rules of exogamy are maintained. In such marriages, of course, only few rituals are observed. The marriage is performed in presence of the village elders and a simple feast is offered to them. Such type of marriage is called Noh-Japinhah. The marriage of divorced man or woman is solemnized according to the marriage rules of Habribah type of marriage stated earlier.

The Changes in the Marriage System:

Nothing in the universe is escaped from the influence of time. So is the case of the basic institutions of any society also. The traditional procedure of marriage among the Dimasas have also undergone certain changes over time. The changes have occurred due to modern education, urbanization, industrialization, Sanskritization, acculturation etc. However, it is observed that the basics of marriage practices among the Dimasas like community

endogamy, clan exogamy, the practice of Kalti, the taboos or dos and don'ts are not changed. Some of the noteworthy changes in the procedures of marriage among the Dimasas can be outlined as follows.

a) The Dimasa Marriage Procedure as per traditions used to be very lengthy and time consuming. It took more than three years to accomplish a marriage ceremony right from the time Sandi Dhansingba (marriage proposal) up to Dhisingba" (marriage ceremony). But it is observed that now-a-days marriages can take place within two to three months. The process of marriage has been shortened to cope up with the present busy schedule of the individuals. Keeping these points in view the time period from the Sandi Dhansingba up to Dhisingba" has been shortened. In the changed pattern the Sandi Dhansingbah and LaothaiLangbah ceremony can be done at a time or Sandi Dhansingbah at one time and three Laothai can be brought at a time. In the earlier times there used to be three Laothai in three years. But in the present time three Laothai can be taken together and the date of marriage can be fixed on the same day.

b) The urban and educated Dimasas have been influenced by the process of Sanskritization. Therefore, they are found to follow certain practices of the caste-Hindu people, especially the Bengali Hindus. A few new rituals are found to be observed among the modern Dimasas. These rituals are giving vermilion or sindoor on the forehead of the bride, wearing of Mangal Chutra, putting on flower garlands to each other and exchanging of finger rings. A Kunjokho (a well decorated construction) at the courtyard of the bride's home is constructed for performing the above mentioned functions.

c) Bringing out the bride to the courtyard where all the people of both the parties were seated was not in the custom of the Dimasas. But in the present era the bride must be taken out to the courtyard for following the new rituals at the Kunjokho as stated above.

d) In the traditional system of marriage, the bridegroom was not allowed to enter in the innermost of the house and the bridegroom has to stay one night in the main room. But according to the new procedure of marriage the boy is directly taken into the bedroom of the bride.

e) In olden days, the bridegroom used to stay a few days at the house of the bride before the rituals called Phera. But now-a-days, after spending one night at the bride's house the ritual called Phera is observed. But in the earlier days according to the ritual of Phera the bridegroom must return home after spending at least three nights.

f) In the traditional system, the boy had to stay at his in-laws house and work there for the period of at least one year and this period is called Minhabba but today the boy does not stay for such a long period. The time period of Minhabba is not fixed in these days and in some cases, it is observed that the custom of Minhabba is not followed at all.

g) It has been observed that the Khaolaibah form of marriage at an increase among the Dimasas. Many marriages have taken place through elopement and these marriages are given social recognition later in the village. Although elopement case is on the rise, it does not exceeds the usual arranged form of marriage.

h) At the present era instances of widow remarriage or remarriage of a divorced woman has been decreased due to the educational development and self-dependency of women.

To conclude it can be said that this study is a modest attempt to trace the traditional procedure of marriage among the Dimasas of Dima Hasao district of Assam and to find out the changes in the procedures. The study reveals that modern education, urbanization, industrialization, Sanskritization, etc. have some impact on the institution of their marriage certain changes have been noticed. Change is a universal phenomenon and nothing in the universe escaped from change. But changes in the cultural patterns must be carefully monitored for keeping intact the identity and colourful culture in the globe.

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