

## TRADITIONAL BELIEFS AND RITUALS OF THE DIMASA

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A large number of ethnic communities inhabit Northeast India including the Dimasa who belong to the Mongoloid group of people and the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. The Dimasa society is tradition bound and guided by customs and follow their own religious beliefs and practices. They have their own concept of Gods, deities and spirits. They believe that deities and spirits hover around their physical environment that control their life to a great extent. The deities are believed to be generally harmless and benevolent and so are propitiated for the general welfare, whereas the spirits are believed to be malevolent and the cause of human miseries and sufferings. Hence they think that it is necessary to perform systematic rituals to appease the various deities and spirits. They have implicit faith in the rituals that are conducted to ward off punishments and disasters.

The Dimasas also believe in life after death and call the land of the dead *damra* where it is believed that all earthly nature and necessities are retained but everything is just the reverse of the earth. This paper attempts to study some of the traditional beliefs of the Dimasa and also the rituals followed by them besides understanding their concept of life after death.

The state of Assam in the Northeast India is the home to various communities with diverse socio-cultural and religious institutions. It can be considered to be an apt study area for linguists as well as anthropologists for its varied languages, dialects and ethnic groups. Among the many communities, the Dimasas inhabit largely in the areas of Dima Hasao district of Assam. They are also found to be settled in the adjoining districts of Karbi Anglong, Nagaon, Cachar and Karimganj. The Dimasas, who belong to the Mongoloid group and the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family are known for their own language, culture and traditional beliefs and customs.

Traditional customs and rituals have been a force in all the communities of the world since pre-historic period as a medium of expression of inner feelings to appease gods and goddesses on various occasions (Rukbo 2002 : 84). Like many other communities, the Dimasas have a strong belief in the existence of various deities, spirits and ghosts hovering around their physical environment that control their life to a great extent which can be appeased only through different rituals. They trace their ancestral gods to the six sons of a mythical divine bird called *Arikhidima* and the evil spirits born out of the seventh egg are held responsible for all the diseases and sufferings. The Dimasas also have the concept of life after death and believe that in the land of the dead all earthly nature and necessities are retained but everything is just the reverse of the earth. The paper therefore is an attempt to study the belief system of the Dimasa and also seeks to look at the rituals followed by them.

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Traditionally, the Dimasas worship a number of deities which are collectively called *Mdai* and hence when performing any rituals pertaining to the deities they use the term *Mdai Khilimba*, *Mdai Huba* which means praying and offering to god. The deities are believed to be harmless and always benevolent and so are propitiated for the general well being of the people. But both the deities and spirits are held responsible for different diseases. The deities and the spirits of the Dimasa however, do not have any anthropomorphic shape and hence earthen mounds are raised in the absence of any structured shrines during the performance of rituals. Sometimes emblems are placed on the ground like bamboo sticks or miniature shields and spears as an insignia if the war god is worshipped. When a deity is worshipped with the spouses, they are then represented with two mounds, one large and one small earthen mound (Danda: 1978: 129-130).

The spirits on the other hand are believed to be malevolent that inflict sufferings on men if not propitiated properly. So utmost care is adopted in conducting the rituals for the worship of the spirits. Death, diseases and accidents are attributed to the wrath of the spirits and ghosts. When a person falls ill, it is ascribed to the influence of some evil spirit which has to be propitiated for his recovery. It is hence believed that innumerable evil spirits hovering around human beings are the cause of trouble and systematic rituals that are observed are the way to appease them. The most malevolent spirits are collectively called *Sagainjik* which are propitiated with great fear and respect. *Sagainjik* is generally associated with witchcraft and hence women with wicked traits or of wicked nature are referred to as *Sagainjik* (Danda: 1978:130). However, there are no cases on record of the practice of witchcraft or of witch hunting among the Dimasa like the ones that are largely reported from among the Bodos of lower Assam.

The worship of the deities and spirits are observed with a sense of purpose and so the people do not observe any ritual for rituals sake. The Dimasa think that rituals are a necessity as their life is controlled by these numerous deities and spirits. It is their belief that their surroundings like the forests, hills and streams are inhabited by different spirits and hence to coexist with these supernatural beings they have to be appeased by ritualistic offerings. They have implicit faith in the observance of rituals due to its sacredness as a rite is supposed to have the ability to make available definite blessings or ward off definite punishments or disasters. All the rituals can be performed only by the priest whom the Dimasas call *Hojai* or *Jonthai* who is aided by an assistant as a devotee cannot make offerings directly to the deities. The priests alone are regarded to have the knowledge of propitiating the deities and spirits. A particular day has to be fixed taking into consideration the deity or the spirit to be appeased. For example, to worship the female deity *Heremdi* it can be done only on Monday and Friday. On these days she may be appeased for the general welfare of the entire community. However in the event of an extreme emergency arising due to ill-health and diseases, the deity may be worshipped on

Thursday. This seems to indicate that there is some amount of flexibility in the propitiation of the deity.

Another female deity known as *Khandisa* is propitiated when a baby suffers from any sickness. She is regarded as the deity for the welfare of the baby. The rites and rituals for the propitiation of *Khandisa* is carried out in the morning in the forest to restore the lost health and energy of the baby. A few other deities may also be mentioned like *Hagrani*, the forest deity, *Mongrang*, the war god and many more. During the field study it has been observed that in all the rituals, animal sacrifice is a common feature. Goats, chicken are sacrificed according to the needs and requirement of the concerned deity. Any food is first offered to the deity and people attending the rituals are also offered the consecrated food. Hence various deities and malignant spirits are worshipped to protect the people from all kinds of sufferings and misfortunes.

It is due to their extreme dependency on nature that the Dimasa traditional belief is found to be mainly built around the natural phenomena. Thus the spirit of rivers, jungles are important to them and requires to be propitiated. Such beliefs provide a way to relate and feel a degree of control over an often unpredictable and harsh environment. In a similar way, Geoffrey Samuel, an Anthropologist had noted among the Tibetans, that “their natural environment has traditionally been so dangerous and people’s livelihood so dependent upon environment, it is not surprising that they seek to inhabit it with local deities for whose favour they can appeal.” (Bollinger 2013 : 184). For most of the tribes living in deep hilly areas, surrounded by thick forests, wild life and rivers could exercise little control over the workings of nature and hence their faith are the results of the circumstances.

## II

As in other societies, among the Dimasas too, death is accepted as an event of gloom and mourning for the members of the family and relations and also considered to be unholy and so purification rites are followed. But they have a strong belief in life after death and so think that the deceased go to *damra* the land of the dead where they retain all earthly needs and longings. They believe that everything in *damra* is just the reverse of everything on earth and also believe in the existence of the soul which they call *bese* and that after the death of a person it transforms into spirit called *shimung*. The rituals that are carried out following the death of a person are found to be meticulous. The funeral and the post funeral rituals are observed with great reverence. Soon after a person dies a cock is sacrificed and an egg broken on the side of the head as it is believed that the cock will show the right path to the other world and the egg symbolizing rebirth. Cremation is the accepted form of disposal of the dead. Before taking the body to the cremation ground, it is given a ceremonial bath inside the house and placed on a bier made of bamboo. Relatives sit besides the deceased and mourn but it is the female mourners in

particular who weep and mourn uttering the most sorrowful words filled with lamentation (Sarma, 2006 : 122)). When the dead body is being carried to the cremation ground ,a woman continuously throws paddy on the way while another unwinds a roll of cotton thread which is symbolic of bridging the separation between the dead and the living. On reaching the cremation ground, the dead body is placed on the neatly arranged funeral pyre and then the fire is lit (Bordoloi, 1984 : 59) .However, all the women folk leave the ground as soon as the fire is set and under no circumstances they are to turn back. All the garments used by the deceased are also consigned to flames. A few people wait till the body is burnt to ashes and collect a piece of charred bone to be preserved in a temporary shelter. The people attending the funeral rites on their return take a purification bath and holy water called *Dithar* prepared by dipping gold, silver ,copper and Tulsi leaves is sprinkled on them before they enter the house. As death in the family is considered unholy, the floors and household articles are also cleaned(Bordoloi: 1984 : 60).

The ritual of offering food to the spirit of the dead begins the next day after cremation. As found out during the field study, these rituals are entirely performed by women. The food for the offerings is also prepared only by the elderly women separately. As the Dimasas believe that the other world is just the reverse of everything on earth, they also think that the dead take food with the left hand and move backwards. It is believed that it is only after the final offering of food during the post funeral ceremony that the relationship between the living members of the family is severed completely. On the ninth day of mourning, the pall-bearers and all those who attended the funeral rites are invited to a small ceremony to feast on the rice-beer. It is also on this day that the date of the post funeral ceremony (*Shraddha*) called *Maimutharba* is fixed .The word *Maimu* means paddy and *tharba* refers to purification (Bordoloi: 1984: 60). Hence the *Maimutharba* ceremony is held at a suitable time depending on the economic condition of the family ,which is a clear reflection of the agrarian character of the society.

As the Dimasas have the concept of life after death, they believe in rebirth. In the idea of rebirth, it is depending on the earthly deeds of the person concerned that he or she is destined to a better or worse life in the next birth .It is believed that in order to be reborn in the human form in the next birth, a man has to perform all his duties properly which means as a member of the society he must follow the path of honesty and truthfulness and the established rules and norms of the society. If he violates the norms, it is believed that he would be deprived of the chance of rebirth in the human species (Danda: 1978: 131) .This belief perhaps persisted in the society so that a person during one's lifetime would continue to follow good deeds lead a virtuous life and refrain from committing any vices.

The people believe that the soul does not decay with the death of a person and that it maintains its continuity through the process of birth and rebirth and hence the soul is immortal. As already mentioned they believe that the relationship between

the spirit of the dead and its living relation is cut off completely only after the post-funeral rites. It is then eligible for rebirth. It is usually the medicine-man who is given the task of finding out the previous birth of a person. When a child shows some peculiar traits in his character and makes demands for certain things, the parents consider it to be the spirit of the previous birth which is responsible for the present condition. After necessary requirements of the rituals, the medicine man figures out and announces that the child has been reborn as his grandfather or grandmother or some other relation. During such occasions the uncles and aunts of the child shower him with gifts with the belief that henceforth the child would be pacified and cease to exhibit his peculiar traits. The medicine-man continues with his job of identifying the spirit reborn while enhancing the belief of the people in rebirth.

Hence, in conclusion it can be said that, rituals are not merely a personal affair but it is essential to any system of religious belief and worship. Beliefs and rituals link the individuals in a given social matrix on the basis of shared belief and also tends to give an element of continuity to the social institutions. The shared belief system helps the community to formulate a sense of distinct social and cultural identity (Showren: 2007: 152). The traditional belief system and the rituals bring together the people and hold control on their minds in times of crisis and further the bonding of the community. With the changing times, changes are perceptible but it has not been able to destroy their culture and tradition.

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