



## The Clan System of the Dimasas living in the Dima Hasao of Assam and its role in Family and Marriage

Shri Dadul Borah

Associate Professor & Head, Department of Sociology, Maibang Degree College  
Maibang, Dima Hasao Assam

### Abstract

The Dimasas are one of the earliest aboriginal tribes of India belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group of the Indo-Mongoloid race. A distinctive feature the Dimasa tribe is the existence of double descent system. Every man and woman in the Dimasa tribe bears allegiance to one primary and one secondary clan. A male inherits his primary affiliation of clan from his father and secondary from his mother. A girl inherits her primary affiliation from her mother and secondary from her father. The male clans are called *SENGPHONG* and the female clans are called *JULU/JILIK/JADI*. These SENPHONGS AND JADIS play great role in their social life. The institutions of family, marriage, religion, polity and economy are to some extent regulated by the rules of their peculiar clan system. With a view to bring in light some of roles of their clan system upon their marriage and practices, a study was conducted in four selected villages of Dima Hasao district of Assam.

**Key Words: Dimasas, Sengphong, Jadi, Marriage, Family**

Dima Hasao (Formerly North Cachar Hills) district of Assam is inhabited by some indigenous tribes who maintain their distinct culture, customs and traditions and languages. Besides the majority of the Dimasa population, the other tribes such as, the Zeme Naga, the Kuki, the Hmar, the Karbi, the Khasi (Jaintiya or Syntheng), the Biete, the Hrangkhols, the Khelmas and the Vaipei. Among the tribal population, the *Dimasa* (74,502) are the dominant group with 34.79% of the district's total population of 2,14,102 (which is 48.88% of total ST population of 1,52,416).

### Meaning of the term Dimasa

There are a few controversies and stories regarding the origin of the word *DIMASA*. Also there are some mythical stories to the identity of the *Dimasas*. Without going to the details of all those mythical stories it is accepted here as, "The term *DIMASA* is better interpreted as *DIMANI B'SA – DIMA B'SA- DIMASA*, sons of the great river. *DIMASA* is also interpreted as *DIMANI FISA – DIMA FISA-DIMASA* which is not likely to be proper as the term *FISA* is not in Dimasa vocabulary though the etymology bears the same meaning with that mentioned earlier. The so called controversy over the term *DIMASA* seems to have no basis at all" (Nunisa Motilal, 1993:72).

The Dimasas are classified into five according to their place of inhabitation; such as – *DIJUASA*- ( Dhansiri valley of Nagaland and Karbi Anglong district of Assam ), *DEMBRASA* ( Kolong Kapili valley of Nagaon and Karbi Anglong district of Assam ), *HASAUSA* ( Dima Hasao districts of Assam ), *HAWARSA* or Barmans ( Barak valley of south Assam ) and *SEMSA* ( Semkhor village in the 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 classification of the Dimasa. 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.

The social life of the Dimasas living in Dima Hasao district is distinct in some aspects from the Dimasas living in other parts of the north East India as the Dimasa civilization with all its distinct features developed fully while they had their capital at Maibang in Dima Hasao district of Assam. The Clan system of the Dimasas plays important role in Dimasa Social institution of family and marriage.

### **Objectives**

The main objectives of the present study are

- i. To throw some lights on the **Clan** system of the Dimasas.
- ii. To identify the role of Clan (Sengphong and Jadi) in marriage practices.
- iii. To bring out the role of Clan (Sengphong and Jadi) in the institution of family.

### **Methodology**

The present researcher has been carrying out his research for another field of study in 4 villages of Dima Hasao district namely Semkhor, Wadrenghisa, Dima Hading and Donjenraji to examine whether the process of industrialization has any impact on the traditional institutions of the Dimasas. The district is situated approximately between Latitude  $24^{\circ}54'$  and  $26^{\circ}42'$  N and Longitude  $92^{\circ}8'$  and  $93^{\circ}53'$  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.

For collecting data on the role of Clan in marriage and family a semi-structured questionnaire was designed for collecting information from the respondents. Personal interviews were conducted with the village

elders at their door step. Most of the informants were from 40 -70 years. For collecting secondary information written records like books, journals, magazines and internet sources are utilized which are mentioned in the reference section of this paper. Above all, the 25 years long staying of the researcher among the Dimasas gives the opportunity of frequent observation of the practices related to marriage and family and informal talks with the leaders of socio-religious organizations were the two main source of information for the present paper.

## Results and Discussion

### The Clan System

A distinctive feature the Dimasa tribe is the existence of double descent system. Hence, it is a bi-lineal tribe. "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). Every man and woman in the Dimasa tribe bears allegiance to two clans. A boy and a girl inherit the respective patriclan and matriclan of their father and mother. Again a father and a son belong to the same patriclan but they belong to two different matriclan as the father inherits his secondary affiliation from his maternal grandmother while the son inherits from his own maternal grandmother. But woman's patriclan changes when she is married. After marriage she is given the husband's patriclan through a ceremony called *KHELHABRIBA* or *MADAI KHILIMBA* but her primary affiliation of matriclan remain unchanged. There are forty male and forty-two female clans in Dimasa society. The male clans are called *SENGPHONG* and the female clans are called *JULU/JILIK/JADI*. For official purposes both male and female write the father's clan as surname. But in their socio-religious life both patriclan and matriclan are taken into account. Sengphong and Jadi are first asked of a newly introduced person to another person among the Dimasas.

**Table 1: List of Semphong (Male Clans)**

Sl. No	Name of Clan	Sl. No	Name of Clan
1	Ardao	21	Kemprai
2	Bathari	22	Khersa
3	Bodo	23	Lafthaisa
4	Baderbaiga	24	Langthasa
5	Daulagupu	25	Laobangdisa
6	Daulagajao	26	Longmailai/Girisa
7	Dibragede	27	Maramsa
8	Diphusa	28	Maibangsa
9	Diruasa	29	Nabensa

10	Gorlosa	30	Nunisa
11	Hagjer	31	Naiding
12	Haflongbar	32	Phonglo
13	Hakmaosa	33	Porbosa
14	Haphila	34	Purusa
15	Hasnu	35	Rajiyung
16	Jarambusa	36	Sengyung
17	Jidung	37	Srongpong
18	Johori	38	Thaosen
19	Jorasa	39	Waibra
20	Karigapsa	40	Warisa

**Table 2: List of Julu/ Jaddi (Female clans)**

Sl. No	Name of Clan	Sl. No	Name of Clan
1	Bairengma	22	Miyungma
2	Bairengsama	23	Miyungma Daoga
3	Banglaima Daoga	24	Miyungma Gedeba
4	Banglaima Gedeba	25	Miyungma Khaseba
5	Banglaima khaseba	26	Pakhajima
6	Basranima	27	Panthaobarjilu
7	Buguma	28	Phasaidima Daoga
8	Dishruni	29	Phasaidima Gebeda
9	Diyungma	30	Phasaidima Khaseba
10	Drainsongma khaseba	31	Rajama
11	Drainsongma Gedeba	32	Ranima
12	Drainsongma Daoga	33	Ransaidima
13	Hamlaigimindima	34	Sagaodima
14	Kumbasingma	35	Sagaosen Parain
15	Madaima	36	Saidima Daoga
16	Mairang Praisong	37	Saidima Gebeda

17	Mairangma	38	Saidima Khaseba
18	Mairangma Daoga	39	Saikhudima
19	Mairangma Gedeba	40	Sander Sagaidi
20	Mairangma Khaseba	41	Tharmjikma
21	Mairangma Phasaidi	42	Yamthondiraona

From this existence of a separate clan for women in Dimasa society it can be said that a Dimasa women has got a social status of her own. But, for official purposes she writes the patriclan as surname. There are some restrictions regarding food and costumes attached to the clans. For example, a *Nunisa* and sections of **Jidung, Daulagupu, Khersa, Johori** can't take pork, a *Bodo* and a **Johori** never wear black dress, a *Khersa* and a *Daulagupu* cannot use ornaments of gold etc. Again, traditionally women of different Jadi never share cloths and cosmetics including comb.

#### **Clan and marriage practices of the Dimasas**

Marriage through negotiation is the prevailing practice among the Dimasas. But now-a-days, on many occasions the boys as well as the girls prefer to take care of their own affairs. So marriage through mutual consent and elopement are on the increase. And marriage by 'capture' is also not totally absent. However, in both the cases marriage has to be regularized with some formalities. Otherwise the couple will not have any place in the society as well as in the clan.

Monogamy is the prevailing practice among the Dimasas. Living of more than one women belonging to different clans in a single house and sharing of the things (cloth, cosmetics, etc) among different clans is almost not in practice in Dimasa society. Again accepting a next wife from the same clan is also not possible for certain kinship taboos. Therefore, polygamy is not found in any of the household in the villages under study.

However, a male can marry second wife if no child was born out of the first marriage. And one can marry again after the death of the earlier wife/wives. In such cases one male can remarry from any clan except from his mother's clan. In the same way a widow can also remarry any male belonging to any Sengphong except her father's Sengphong. If one wishes to remarry the widow of the deceased elder brother, the same is permitted (levirate). But remarriage of the widow of the younger brother by the elder brother is not permitted. In the same way, the younger sister-in-law can be married (sororate) but not the elder ones.

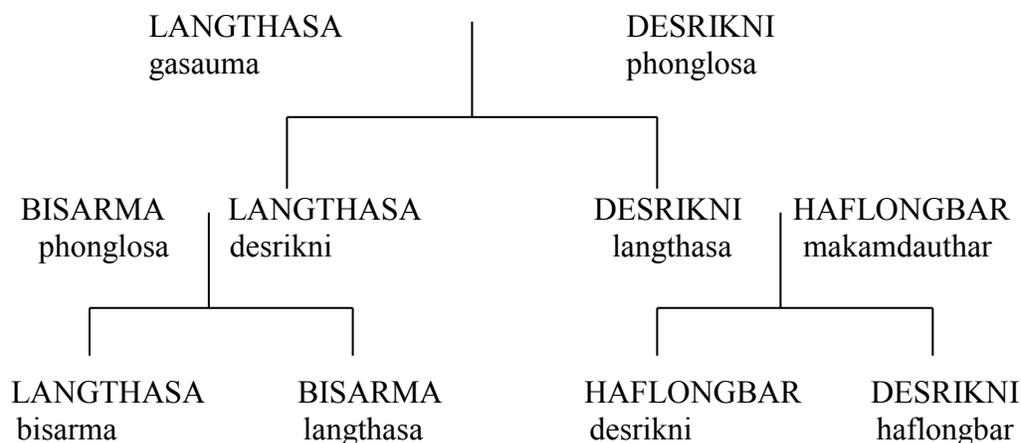
Although child marriage is unknown to the Dimasas, many couples are found to marry at a much younger age in the remote villages like Semkhor. Some boys below the age of 18 and some girls below the age of 15 were found to live a married life in Semkhor village.

Divorce is rare in Dimasa society. No cases of divorces were found in the villages under study. Traditionally divorces are settled in the villages following customary laws passed on from one generation to the other. In settling the divorce cases the village council penalizes the guilty concerned with imposition of fine in the form of money to the village council and the Clan group in the village. If the guilt is from the male he has to pay compensation to the female. Male child belongs to the father and female child belongs to the mother for the existence of male and female clan system among them. The children whose father died or divorced cannot identify themselves by the Sengphong of the step father and the vice versa.

Pre-marital sex relations are a taboo. If it happens accidentally, the village council penalizes the accused with a fine, which must be paid to the society. If the girl becomes pregnant due to the said relation the boy is forced to marry the girl. Otherwise he has to pay a fine to the society and compensation to the girl (in the form of money), that they call **KORAT**. In the same way extra marital sex relations are also taboo in Dimasa society and the guilty concerned are penalized with fine in the form of money to the society.

Like any other tribe in India, the Dimasas are also endogamous tribe i.e. they marry within their own tribe only. They strictly follow tribe endogamy and clan exogamy.

The Clan Exogamy among the Dimasas can be presented as follows: -



(Note: Block capitals signify the primary affiliation and the small letters the secondary affiliation)

\* Source: Danda, D.G. (1984) in 'Tribes of North – East India, Kerotemprel, S. (ed) Calcutta; Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd. P. 420-421.

Clan exogamy and tribe endogamy are strictly followed in the society the violation of which leads to ex-communication from the society. The above extract from Dipali G Danda clearly shows that Dimasa

society permits marriage between a boy and a girl belonging to different patri-clan and matri-clan only. A social convention arising out of this rule is *Hain Daopri*, by means of which cross cousin marriage can be allowed. This is possible because of the fact that the *Sengphong* of the boy is different from the girl. And the *Jadi* of the boy is also not the same *Jadi* as that of the girl's. But such incidence is rare. However, one remarkable thing is that the father of a son prefers a girl of his mother's clan as his son's bride. This help accepting anything from his daughter-in-law and many relieved him of many taboos relating to clan.

There is no system of **dowry** in the Dimasa society. However, the mother of the bride gives her clothes and other household materials generally used by women when the newly married couple starts living in separate establishment. The father of the bride also help in constructing the new home for them.

There is the prevalence of bride price that they call **KALTI**. As soon as the marriage is settled, every Dimasa girl is entitled to *kalti* in the form of rupees. Here rupees must always be in coins and not in paper notes. It is their traditional custom which saves the clan system because, if *Kalti* is not given or not accepted by the bride's party, it implies non-inclusion in the forty *Sengphongs* and forty-two *Jadis*. Therefore acceptance of **Kalti** is justified as a right. The **Kalti** is decided through negotiations of both the parties, depending on the economic conditions of the bridegroom's party. However, one important thing about **Kalti** is that it must be, at least, a little more than that of that given by the preceding boy or girl in both families, if there be any marriage of senior boy/boys or girl/girls in both the families. It is observed in the field that **Kalti** in no case is exceeding Rs 750/- (Rupees seven hundred fifty). However, the coins were of gold and silver when the custom of **Kalti** emerged in Dimasa society in the remote past. Arranging Rs 25/- during those days, was really a difficult task for the parents of the marriageable boy. On the hand the parents with a number of marriageable daughters could have the opportunity to become richer with the **Kalti** received. **Kalti** is fixed through negotiation by both the bride's and the groom's parties. The existence of this bride price stands in opposite to the existence of dowry in most caste Hindu people in India.

After the marriage ceremony is over, the groom's party goes back leaving the groom at bride's home. The newly married couple stays at the house of the bride for a night and goes to groom's house which they call **Ferathangba**. Here they stay for a few days (generallt three days) and returns to the bride's house again for following another 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 lives in a newly constructed house which is generally constructed either near the bride's house or near the bridegroom's house. Here the couple starts their own family life.

### Clan and the family among the Dimasas

The traditional type of family among the Dimasas is nuclear family. It is because of their peculiar rule of residence which restricts the living of two different matrilineal clans under the same roof. Thus after marriage the son is supposed to construct his own house (Danda D. 1977). There are some restrictions in using and sharing or mixing up of cloths, foods, ornaments and cosmetics between two different *JULU*. To avoid these restrictions traditionally they follow nuclear form of family. But it is observed in the field that Dimasa family cannot be strictly called a nuclear family. For a temporary period when the groom of any daughter follows the custom of **MINHABA**, Dimasa family becomes a joint family. And in the villages in the vicinity of towns it is observed that some other members in the family include some persons belonging to husband's or wife's clan. This is for the mutual help of the members of clan.

It has already been mentioned after the *MINHABA* period is over, they construct their new house either near the parents' of the girl or near the parents of the boy at their own convenience. Therefore, a Dimasa family is neither patri-local nor matri-local but it can be termed as **neo-local family**. When all the offspring are married some parents are found to live alone in their house in their old age. And after death of either of the husband or the wife the widow/widower live alone in the house. Of course their offspring look after their daily necessities. If no offspring lives in the village the people belonging to the clan look after the old people. Six and two numbers of such single man household were found in Semkhor and Wdrengdisa village respectively. After the death of both the parents the house is owned either by a son or a daughter through negotiations among the offspring.

As regards inheritance of family property it is observed that mother's properties like ornaments, clothes and looms etc. go to the daughter(s). It is for the rule of their clan system. Father's properties like land, weapons etc. go to the son(s). Both share the utensils and other household properties. However, it is also observed that in many cases a share of landed property is also given to the daughter if it is available with the parents. If no near relatives sustains of the deceased, member(s) of the clan may inherit the property.

In the family life the relationship between the husband and the wife is very close. There is mutual understanding before doing anything. But it should be mentioned that the husband makes the final decision. Women are engaged in pounding paddy, cooking, weaving, fetching fire wood and water, rearing fowls and silk worm called **Eri**, sowing seeds, harvesting crops, preparing the rice beer that they call *JUDI* etc and other household works. The mothers have to rear their children also. Men work in shifting and wet cultivations, construct houses, and look after buffaloes, etc and the community works at the directions of the village council. In general Dimasas live happy family lives.

**Conclusion:**

To conclude, it can be said that **Sengphong** and **Jadi** play significant role in the social life of the Dimasas. The peculiar clan system has laid down some regulation in the institutions of marriage and family of the Dimasas. Those clan regulations are binding and still prevalent in the society and violation of which may lead ex-communication from the community. While the clan exogamy and tribe endogamy is still strictly followed, today's educated Dimasa prefer to choose their life partners by themselves instead of arranged by their parents or guardians. They are no longer strictly following the custom of *Minhaba*. The incidents of mutual love and affection between young boys and girls result in the increase of cases of elopement, particularly in the urban areas. But in such case also they cannot violet the clan and community regulation. To sum up – “Clan system among the Dimasas is an agency of Social Control.”

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