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Changing Trends in Dimasa Textiles of Cachar District of Assam

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Abstract: In Dimasaculture, the practice of weaving is as closely related to their lifestyle that it reflects in their folksongs, folklore, and folktales repeatedly. Weaving is an everyday craft of the Dimasa women. Traditionally all the materials and equipment needed for weaving are sourced from their surrounding environment. In recent years, the weaving practice is changing its form very rapidly. Some changes can be seen in the use of yarn, dye, motifs, and patterns, and the process of making. The present study tries to recognise the importance of traditional practice; and the possible long-term effects, that caused by the changes occurred in the practice, particularly in Dimasa culture. The process of weaving was documented by visiting different Dimasa villages in the Cachar district. The information is analysed with the contemporary scenario of the textile sector in both regional, national levels to understand the recent changing trends.

Keywords: Dimasa weaving, traditional practice, culture, changing trends.

Date of Submission: 14-03-2020

Date of Acceptance: 30-03-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

The pattern of evolution of any indigenous wisdom is always interdependent with its social, cultural and ecological surroundings, it can't grow solely. When an indigenous knowledge dies, it may disappear silently, the loss may not leave any mark on the fast-changing world. But it takes away other interlinked knowledge and practices with it. And in this process, we silently lose an identity, a culture, and a sustainable way of living. The Dimasa weaving is a combination of traditional ecological knowledge, traditional knowledge, traditional skills, indigenous technology, aesthetic sense, and self-sufficiency. A practice of many centuries, the process took ages to come to the present shape. The one single practice is linked with many factors of a holistic lifestyle that if one factor is absent from the loop, that will affect the whole process and break the balance.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology for the study is largely based on the ethnographic procedure. The study was conducted by visiting different villages consisting of the majority of Dimasa population in Cachar district, mainly villages from Khaspur and Joypur area was covered. As in Dimasa community weaving is a women-oriented practice, Dimasa women of different age groups were selected as the primary participant for the study. The process of weaving was documented through participant observation in their real-life environment. The participants are interviewed to share their personal life experiences, rituals, myth and stories related to weaving to get a deep understanding of the community and their association with the practice. To understand the weaving process of the near past and compare that process with the present time, the elderly members were interviewed to share memories from their life. The whole data collection process was conducted by taking field notes and journals, interviews (both formal and informal), photographs, audio, and video recordings. To understand the present scenario of market supplies, a study was done by visiting markets of the locality and nearest areas from where the women procure yarns and other weaving materials. The market study was done through formal interviews. Secondary information for the research was collected from books, journals, paper, seminar and conference papers, newspapers, and websites based on Dimasa weaving, textiles in general and issues related to culture.

III. AN OVERVIEW OF DIMASA KACHARI TEXTILES

Dimasa Kacharis are an allied tribe of the *Kachari* or *Bodo Kachari* ethnic group of Assam, one among the most indigenous tribes of North-East India. The Dimasa language is known as 'Grao-Dima' a language that belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese family of languages (Choudhury, 2006, p. 18). According to the 2001 census report, the total population of Grao-Dima speaking people is 110,957 (Census of India, 2001). The tribe is spread across Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglong, Nagaon and Cachar districts of Assam, and a small number of Dimasa people have settled in Nagaland too. The Dimasa Kacharis of Cachar district is known as Barmans.

The term '*Dimasa*' means 'children of the big river', in Dimasa language, '*Di*' means river, '*Ma*' means big and '*Sa*' means children (Guha, 1910, p. 52). The tribe belong to the Indo-Mongoloid racial group, they are strong and stout, with an average height, square-shaped face, projecting cheekbones, and scanty beard and mustache is the common attribute of their physical structure. They are an honest, humble, truthful, straightforward and hardworking tribe. In their social structure, there is no inequality between males and female and they share and keep equal standing in society. As Endle described the society of Kacharis around a hundred years back, 'The relation of the sexes too is on the whole of a very sound and wholesome character, far more so probably than in many countries boasting of a higher civilization. Infant marriage is as yet unknown among them... The young people are as a rule chaste before marriage and true to their marriage vows in after life.' (Endle, 1911, p. 2-3) the statement is relevant till date.

Dimasa society is an agricultural society; their main livelihood is dependent on farming. In hilly areas they practice *Jhum* cultivation (shifting cultivation); in plain areas, they practice common farming systems. Along with rice they also cultivate maize, castor, cotton, sesame, chilly, pumpkin, gourd, ginger, brinjal, mustard, pineapple and orange, and other seasonal fruits and vegetable. The most important festival Bishu is a post-harvest festival, celebrated on winter harvest season every year. Bishu is the festival of celebrating a successful harvest. They celebrate it with their traditional dances, music and traditional cuisine, including their religious rituals. In this festival, all the Dimasa people wear their traditional costumes. It is a custom of this society to present hand-woven cloths to relatives and friends on the occasion of Bishu and other such occasions and festivals (Bordoloi, 1984, p.92-97). Those clothes are entirely hand-woven by the women of the tribe.

The weaving process begins with the cultivation of cotton and castor plants in their farmland along with other crops. Castor leaf is needed for rearing *eri* cocoon as the eri pupa eats castor leaf. While the eri cocoons get matured, the Dimasa women boil the cocoons with *khari*, a kind of alkali made from banana stem ash; it detangles fibers from the cocoon and helps to spin the fibers. In their leisure times, the elderly women spin the fibers with drop spindles to make eri yarn. Eri yarn ball is found in every Dimasa household, as the yarn has a very important ritualistic value in their society and it is needed in all the important rituals and ceremonies. Though nowadays most of the households are not engaged in this practice, still they collect hand spun eri yarn for ritualistic purposes. The eri yarn is also used for making cloths. The main cloth made out of eri yarn is called *Rihthap*. It is a finely woven shawl like fabric handwoven by Dimasa women.



Figure 1. Eri yarn spinning with spindle.



Figure 2. Eri fiber and yarn with spindle.

Other than eri yarn, the most important yarn for weaving is made from cotton fiber. Cotton is cultivated in the *jhum* fields in the same way as castor is cultivated. Earlier Dimasa women used to perform the ginning of cotton fiber at their homes, and then spin it in the spinning wheel (Hagzer, 1974) to make cotton yarn. They used to make dye out of wild shrubs to colour the cotton yarn. *Zenglong* and *Gisimlai* are two wild shrubs that are used for dyeing red and black colours. The method of dyeing the yarn itself has different stages and requires many supplementary ingredients. It takes around one week to complete the process; it also depends on the climate to make the entire dyeing process successful. Nowadays, cotton yarn is replaced by synthetic yarns and the whole indigenous process of making cotton fiber to yarn and dyeing the yarn has stopped as a variety of colourful synthetic yarns are easily available in the market.

The loom and its parts, and other tools required for weaving are made by different varieties of bamboo and trunk of the betel-nut tree. These parts are made by the women themselves. In Grao-Dima language, they have separate names for each tool used for weaving, and names for every stage of weaving; it shows their close association towards weaving. This rich vocabulary shows the importance and involvement of weaving in Dimasa people's life (Bhattacharjee, 2018). They mainly use throw shuttle frame loom, fly shuttle loom is not much prevalent. It is also because the throw shuttles are convenient to use for the extra weft pattern and motifs they make in the cloth while weaving.



Figure 3. Weaving in throw shuttle loom.

The motifs used in Dimasa textiles can be said in the encyclopedia of their tradition and culture. The motifs are simplified forms of resources that are found in abandon in their surroundings, and every single motif has a name and meaning. By seeing the motifs, one can have an idea of the ecology and natural resources within the territory of Dimasa dwellings. The river plays a very important role in Dimasa culture. The Dimasas consider themselves as 'children of the big river', here the river does not mean a particular river, and they don't

mention any particular river by name. It is a general form of a river that comes repeatedly in their folklore. In their textile motifs as well, a general form of a river comes repeatedly. For example, the motif called 'Dilam' means the 'flow of the river'. This motif is used extensively in their textiles.

The motifs are categorised into male and female genders. All the attires can be differentiated and identified by its motifs. Male motifs are simple in form and they use fewer colours in it. The female attires are more vibrant and have wide variety of motifs. One very important aspect of Dimasa textile motifs is that they use varieties of colour in their motifs. It shows their expertise in weaving, as, for every different coloured yarn, they have to prepare a separate lifting plan for warps and also have to handle the same number of pin. Weavers with high expertise in weaving only can handle these many varieties of yarn at a time. For example, *Thorishaminis*, a motif commonly used for a male scarf called *RishaRamai*. The motif is a very simple geometrical form but the use of three to four colours in the simple motif makes it more complex in construction and visually very attractive. There are some motifs, which are used only in some particular attire, for example, the chest wrapper for women called *RhijhamphaiBeren* and *RhijhamphaiGufu* have some particular motifs confined only for the two of them. Red, black, maroon, yellow, blue and purple are the traditional colours used by the community. Those colour shades they use to prepare by themselves by using wild shrubs.

Both the male and female attires are handwoven unstitched cloths. A very important and creative distinction of male and female attire is that in male attire, fringes are twisted and in female attire, fringes are untwisted. Even if a *RishaRamai* and a *RikhoshaRamai*, the male and female scarves look alike in terms of colour and very minute differences in their motifs, the fringe makes the difference more distinct.



Figure 4. *Ramai* pattern.

IV. CHANGING TRENDS IN RECENT YEARS

Weaving is blended with the everyday life and rituals of Dimasa people in such a way that their culture cannot be visualised without weaving. It is a symbol of self-dependence, self-esteem and artistic expression for the Dimasa women and cultural identity for the DimasaKachari tribe.

The major change that affected the weaving process is raw material. Synthetic yarns like acrylic, polyester and art silk are predominant in the market. The synthetic yarns are much cheaper; on the other hand, cotton is becoming expensive day by day. The synthetic yarn has a variety of bright colour shades with colourfastness. Some yarns look similar to the silk yarn, are available at low cost, and are durable compared to the indigenous eri and cotton yarn. These are some strong valid reasons for choosing synthetic yarn over the cotton and eri yarn. A ball of eri yarn can be seen in every Dimasa household because of its ritualistic value. Cotton yarn is confined to very few products, those cotton yarns they get from the market. The weaving process has become much easier and more time-saving than it was before. The women now get more free time. But how they are going to utilise this spare time productively is a big question. The advancement of technology has not offered an alternative option to spending their free time as productively as before.

The process of cultivating cotton, spinning the fiber to yarn and dyeing the yarn has become a history. Rearing of eri is now just like a ritual. With that, they lost the indigenous knowledge of growing and transforming a natural fiber into yarn, and dyeing the yarn with natural ingredients. Another threat associated with this practice that we generally ignore is the loss of biodiversity, the slow disappearance of a variety of native cotton (The Hindu, 2016; Scroll, 2018).

The traditional Dimasa textile had a very limited colour plate, those colour shades were prepared by using native wild shrubs. But the traditional colour plate is now totally replaced by the colourful synthetic yarns. The bright colourful synthetic yarns may look very attractive but it is damaging the authentic look and feel of the traditional textile (Bhuyan, 2014).

Besides that, the synthetic yarn has some negative effects on the environment and human health. From manufacturing to its afterlife, the synthetic yarn has a vicious cycle that damages the whole ecosystem. Thus, it is not only affecting the cultural heritage and traditional knowledge of a tribe, biodiversity of a region but causing harm to the entire ecosystem too. This is an eye-opening example of how a small change of raw material can affect the whole cycle of a self-sufficient indigenous practice and ecosystem of a particular region (Laitala, Klepp, & Henry, 2018, p. 2524).

Another noticeable change is the use of look-alike screen printed, fabric painted and embroidered fabric as their traditional textile. The printed and embroidered fabrics are the duplications of traditional motifs. Printing or machine embroidery does not need much time or skill to copy the woven motifs (Bhattacharjee, 2017) but it dilutes the authenticity of craft and the skill. This practice is prominent among the new generation to learn machine embroidery or fabric painting and replicate the traditional motifs with less energy and time. By doing so, unknowingly they are causing harm to their indigenous textiles.

A prominent influence of neighbourhood communities like Assamese and Bengali can be seen in Dimasa culture. One major change in the draping style of Dimasa attire. The Dimasa women have a distinct style of draping their attire with the three main parts of cloths, namely, *Rikhosha Ramai*, a scarf, *Rhijhamphai Gufu*, the chest wrapper, and *Rigu Dima*, the waist wrapper. The *Rigu set* is a contemporary adaptation of Assamese *Mekhla Chadar*. Nowadays, the Dimasa women have adopted this draping style for their everyday use. another visible change is the textile motifs. Each textile motif and pattern have its meaning and folklore, and a particular procedure to use it. Nowadays, the trend of using the Assamese motif and pattern is very noticeable. If this trend continues, motifs of different communities will get mixed and the indigenous textile will lose its individuality.



Figure 5. Traditional draping style of Dimasa costume.

V. SAFEGUARDING THE CULTURAL IDENTITY

The human civilization is a continuous process of changes, and can't remain still for a moment. With the advancement of the education system, technological up-gradation, communication system, and industrialisation the shape of society is changing very fast. In the fast-changing world, we continuously face insecurity and question our identity that has developed with our cultural background through centuries. It is very important to maintain our cultural individualities; respect any other culture without losing our own cultural

identity. The visual and material culture that we see is just the reflection of cultural identity; culture lies on a very deep-rooted value and belief system that we inherited through generations. Any kind of damage to the inherited value system can affect our emotional wellbeing and may eventually harm our self-esteem.

The role of culture in maintaining sustainability and the areas of cultural study is gaining importance day by day. Wide areas of cultural affairs are included in major development policies both nationally and internationally. In his introductory note of The World Decade on Culture and Development, the then Director-General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor, noted,

‘Whenever a country has set itself the target of economic growth without reference to its cultural environment, grave economic and cultural imbalances have resulted and its creative potential has been seriously weakened. Genuine development must be based on the best possible use of the human resources and material wealth of the community. Thus, in the final analysis, the priorities, motivations, and objectives of development must be found in culture...It is also increasingly vital for the industrialized countries, where the headlong race for growth in material wealth is detrimental to the spiritual, ethical and aesthetic aspects of life, and creates much disharmony between man and the natural environment.’ (UNESCO, 1988, p.6)

The individuality of Dimasa textile lies in its process, right from the cultivation of fiber to the finished cloth. For Dimasa textiles, every stage of it has its journey and the result of their traditional knowledge and skill. More than anything, it is a cultural practice, inherited to their value and belief system. Most importantly, the whole system shows us a sustainable way of living. A sudden change by any foreign element will affect their cultural identity. Economist, Joseph E. Stiglitz wrote, ‘Traditional societies have traditional safety nets. Under rapid transformation, these traditional safety nets may not be able to cope with the burdens that are thrust upon, and the safety nets themselves may erode’ (Stiglitz, 2003, p. 17).

VI. CONCLUSION

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan from India while attending the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development in the year 1998 in Stockholm, pointed out the importance of including traditional living arts in the formal education system for transmitting the art form to young people to preserve them in a living form (UNESCO, 1998). She also suggested considering intangible heritage not as a product but as the process of life.

The present Dimasa society is in the process of transition as it is experiencing mass urbanization. It is very natural to experience insecurity and get influenced by other dominating cultures. In this stage it is important to make them realise about the value and worth of their own culture; to create awareness among them about the importance of a sustainable lifestyle and to safeguard cultural diversity. It is a crucial time to build a knowledge system that emphasizes on the importance of intangible cultural heritage and cultural diversity, and how to safeguard it.

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Sources: Primary data collection for the research work was done by visiting villages from khaspur and Joypur area of Cachar district, Assam.

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Gargee Bhattacharjee. "Changing Trends in Dimasa Textiles of Cachar District of Assam" *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(3), 2020, pp. 55-61.