

Making of Women History and Identity: A Study of Dimasa Women in Assam

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ABSTRACT

Women history is the study of the role that women have played in history. However in our history study of women history is the belief that more traditional recordings of history have minimized or ignored the contribution of women. The main centers of scholarship have been the United States and Britain where second wave feminist historians, influenced by the new approaches promoted by social history led the way. As activists in women liberation discussing and analyzing the oppression and inequality they experience as women, they believed it imperative to learn about the lives of their foremothers and found very little scholarship in print. History was written mainly by men and about man's activities in the public sphere – war, politics, diplomacy and administration. Women are usually excluded and when mentioned are usually portrayed in sex stereotypical roles such as wife, mother, daughter and mistresses.

However more than three decades after the radical activism of the women's movement of the 1970s, we are still standing at a point in psychological discourse where a variety of questions related to women's experience, their identities and notion of agency and politics remain unarticulated. While most of the feminist criticism in India during the period in disciplines like literature, anthropology, history or political science has produced a rich and diverse scholarship being strongly influenced by the post-structuralist and post modern critique. Situating women's identity and women related research were done in India also. J.Gupta, S. Kakar, S.V. Prasad, F.M. Sahu, K. Saradamoni, D. Vasantha are the some scholars that contributed in this field.

Many times we have largely ignored studying traditions on account of this "unknown historicity" and problems of dateability. In the absence of substantive research a powerful domain which could have significant repercussion on studies on gender, remains hidden from history. This paper revolves around some common dominant identifiable Dimasa tribal tradition, which was prevalent in their society. Some of have survived in slightly modified forms while others have disappeared or are in different stages of disintegration. An attempt is made here to study traditions as entry points into exploration of position, role, behavioral pattern and conditions of existence of Dimasa women. The districts that form the canvas of this study include NC Hills, Karbi Anglong and Nagaon district of Assam. This region is highly populated by the Dimasa people.

In Dimasa society the women enjoyed an excellent position. Theoretically is so patriarchal and priestly a tribe man should be in the ascendant; actually women have great freedom and no little authority. She may go about on her own, she generally chooses her own husband, she may dance in public, they may take her weaved clothes to a bazaar and own her open shop, there, she may own property and she may drink in her husband's presence.

OBJECT OF THE PAPER

Dimasa population is 12.44% of the total ST population of Assam where the tribe exists as one of the major tribes of Assam, India.

Secondly, the work also wants to document the social norms of the society related to Dimasa women.

METHODOLOGY

Written document about the tribe is not available. Few political history writing were there in Ahom History. So primary sources are became important for the study.

Extensive field survey and by interviewing with several aged persons and other elderly people related to religious activities and customeay laws of the society. Questionnaires also distributed to some selected villages inhabited by the Dimasa Assam. The Dimasa inhabited areas of karbi Anglong, Barak valley, Dimapur, Dimapur Hasao and some other parts of Assam are covered by the study. Surveys were carried out for two years from February 2022 to April 2024 to collect information about the status of Dimasa women. First hand information were collected from the traditional village prist and villages Head man who use to conduct customary laws of the society.

The following lines help us to understand the role and status of Dimasa women.

In social system of land rights:

The Dimasa people are patriline, patronymic, patricharchal and patrilocal. For them land is inheretied in male line. They have both male clans and female clans. Male clan is called ‘Sengphong’ and female female is called ‘Jadi’ or ‘Julu’. Their law of inheritance is somewhat particular in nature. They have three types of property, namely paternal property, maternal property and common property. The paternal consists of real estates, weapon, cash money and the cattle. The maternal property or the mother’s consists of jewellery, cloths and looms with their accessories used by the mother. The common property consists of the cooking utensils, brass-metal dishes and bowls and other household equipments. According to the customary law of inheritance of the Dimasas, while the paternal property is inherited by the son and the common property is shared by the son and the daughters equally. The daughter can never inherit the paternal property even if there is no son in the family. If a man does not have any sons, at his death his property will be inherited by his nearest male relatives. But the most interesting provision of this customary law of inheritance is that as soon as a man inherits the real estate of a deceased person, he is liable to pay of all the debt’s of the deceased even of the amount of debts is more than the value of the real estate inherited by him.

So the women do not have the land right in the society. Again the rising value of the land has made the male dominated society more greedy for land and they are supporting the customary law very much. In fact while the movement for land rights for women is gaining an increasing recognition, it is being resisted by the male agnates on the ground that the land belongs to the lineage, which reclaim it therefore the transfer of interest to women will undermine the very foundation of the social order of the tribe.

Bride Wealth:

Scholars differ on the relationship between bride price and positioning of women even Pritchard for instance, says – payment for bride which constitutes a sale is now recognized to be a gross distortion of facts¹”.

It is believe that bride wealth is not just an economic transaction, but involves a whole gamut of kingship relations. If not only established relations between two families which continue throughout the life time, but also provides, security for a women. Others believe that since the payment of bride wealth speaks of a better position of women, the corresponding shifts from bridge wealth to dowry is considered as a mark of the changing position of women from high to law².

Many social anthropologists however view bride price as a derogatory institution as it tantamount to buying a women” According to them the custom of payment of bride price found in most tribal societies is an affirmation

¹ Enans Pritchard “Position of women in primitive societies and in our own” in “the position of women in primitive societies and other essay” in Social Anthrology (New York), 1965, p.42

² P.K. Mishra “From Bride Price to Dowry” in K.S. Sing ed. Economics of the tribes and this transformation, (New Delhi 1982) p. 104.

of male dominance both at symbolic and empirical levels. In the tribal society of Dimasa, in order to honour the matri clan of the tribe the bridegroom's father has to pay 'Kalti' or bride price to the bride's parent.

The Karbis one of the major tribal community of Assam and they constitute an important ethnic group is North East India. Unlike the Dimasa they did not have the custom of bride price. Kukis of Thado tribes also did not bear such type of custom but on the other hand the Bodo Kachari has the bride price custom like the Dimasas. These bride price is fixed on the basis of the economic condition and as well as the beauty of the bride. The practice is still continued but with a fixed price of Rs. 51/- only as a token of their tradition.

This tradition of the Dimasa people may be a way to show their respect to the bride's parents but in this custom it definitely involves a transaction between two men or group of men involving exchange of women or as a gift from one patrilineal clan to other women from the conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it³.

Again according to Dimasa's a girl is considered an economic asset and as such parting with this asset some compensation shall have to be said. The bride's parents or guardians demand 'Kalti' at an exorbitant rate⁴.

However, considering girl as an economic asset or in order to honour the matriclan of the tribe the bride price or the 'kalti' is practiced in the society. The increasing contacts with the caste Hindu societies or due to social changes among the tribes over the years however, have led to the disappearance of the custom from among the tribes. Regarding the Dimasa this system of bride price is still prevalent in both rural as well as urban areas.

Divorce, Remarriage and Widows:

Both the divorce and remarriage is not seen in the Dimasa society. The relationship between husband and wife is very close. Divorce therefore is very rare in the society. However divorce is allowed and widow remarriage is permissible. A younger brother can marry the widow of the elder brother but the elder brothers can never marry the widow of his younger brothers. Similarly a man can marry the younger sister of his wife but not elder one.

But in practical remarriage is not seen in the society focusing cases of polygamy is prevalent. In this case sometime the first wife used to live with the husband and some time the first wife because independent of her own without any formal divorce system and without any land right of her husband.

As far as the position of widow is concerned, the lot of a Dimasa widow is far better than that of her caste counterparts. However the widows are not allowed to welcome the newly married couple. If bride or bridegroom's mother died in that case uncle and aunt used to perform all the rituals of the marriage. Widows used to wear less colored rajamphain(Dimasa traditional dress).Facing a widow in the morning is believed as a bad sign.

Rituals and Women:

There are certain norms and taboos which apply mostly to the womenfolk and are significant in determining their participation in rituals. The taboos among the various tribes in Assam are very much similar with only a few differences. The prohibition on ploughing is universal. But there are regional variations with regards to touching a plough. Among Dimasa, women must not touch a plough under any circumstances. Among the Karbis and Boros there is no taboo against women touching a plough but generally did not touch and work with it.

May be on the assumption, for certain acts men are more fit than women. Dimasa people are very religious and they worship this tradition god and goddess. There were some rituals that women cannot be a part of that. Like 'Kerba' or the worship of village area God. Women were not allowed to enter in temple of the chief priest of the area or 'Jonthai' again the women are not allowed to partake of the sacrificial meat offered to the area spirit and debarred from witnessing the sacrifice.

³ Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Encomy of Sex" in Rayna Paites ed. towards an Anthropology of women (New York, 1975) o. 174.

⁴ Bordoloi B.N. "the Dimasa Kacharis of Assam: A Monograph. Tribal research Institute of Assam, Guwahati, 1984, p. 53.

The taboos thus played an important role in gendering social relation. Though instruments of prohibition and social deprivation, the taboos are exemplify a systematic negation of certain natural rights. Further by disallowing women from doing certain things, they seek to perpetuate a culture of dependence while the taboo regime on the one hand by prescribing an exclusive domain for men, establishing a hegemonistic space for them, by denial and exclusion of women from the same, on the other hand, institutionalized their subordination ritualization of the taboos shelves permanently. In the ritual sphere when taboos are violated, women are regarded as ‘evil influence’. If one look at the nature of taboos they to establish a certain behavioural pattern for women. Even if perpetual subservience is not aimed, these taboos definitely portray a certain ‘social character’ for women and are important tolls of discrimination. The taboos became a question of social legitimacy.

The Inequality and controls:

For many scholars sexuality is key to men’s domination over women. There is no separation between the concepts of gender and sexuality, male and female do not exist outside of the eroticization of dominance and subordination.

To Catherine Mackinnon “Sexuality then is a forms of power. Gender as socially constructed embodies is not the reverse. Women and men are divided by gender made into the sexes, as we know them, as we know them, by social requirements of heterosexuality which institutionalize male sexual dominance and female sexual submission of this is true sexuality is the linchpin of gender quality⁵”.

Though in the traditional society too gender control over another. In the Dimasa society men’s control over women sexuality is almost total. Throughout her life a woman is attached to men, as a child, she is linked to her father, as a wife to her husband, as a widow to her husband’s family, her father of her sons and as sister to her brother. Again if an unmarried girl commit offence, her father is fined or outcasted for his property has gone astray. In acquiring a husband a girl became a child producing house keeper. She bears children for her husband and manager his household. Further if a women commits an offence against the law of communal life it is always the husband or father or brother who has to pay the penalty which in all case is a fine.

In the Dimasa society girl’s child is welcome by the parents but important is given to male issues. Folktales called ‘Dishrudi’ tells about a king who order his queen before going to his hunting expedition to kill her new born if it is girl.

Men again can have in Dimasa society more than one wife and on the other hand widows of the society are not encouraged to remarry. Extra marital sexual relation on the part of a woman are consider a violation of her husband’s right, extra marital relation on the part of man on the other hand are taken seriously.

Inequality or biasness again can be seen in the inter caste marriage in the society. Dimasa people did not allow inter-caste marriage. However if it happened the daughter in law from the other caste can be purified and brought in the society giving her a new clan, whereas when a Dimasa girl married to other caste then she has to left the society. She became outcaste by a panchayat meeting and even cannot touch her parent’s dead body. She cannot involve in her brother’s and sister’s marriage ceremony too.

Traditional village headman is at the top of the village administration named as ‘Khunang’. He has both executive and judiciary powers. He is assisted by another seven assistants. Here again women membership is not permitted. Women’s problems were thus not discussed and judged too.

The above discussion is that tradition custom and rules that placed Dimasa women next to the man. But on the other side of the coin Dimasa society is very rich in their culture i.e. song, dance, material culture, folklore, ballads, lullabies etc. In all these cultural activities women’s active participation is highly a matter of pride.

⁵ Catherine Machinnon “Feminism, Marxism methods and state: A Agenda for Theory” sings, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1982, p. 533.

Weaving:

Weaving is one of the major cottage industries of the Dimasa. It is confined to the woman folk only whereas rest of India weaving is carried out by man only. Spinning as well as weaving are considered as obligatory duties by the Dimasa women and as such every girl is properly trained in the art of spinning and weaving as soon as she comes of age. All women are expert weavers and all domestic requirements of clothes are met from the family looms. They weave clothes simple as well as of very high artistic design. Another interesting feature which can be mentioned here is that the colour they used for dyeing yarns are also prepared by the Dimasa women themselves from the wild herbs.

The design of the textiles is very unique and colourful. As the people are nature lover, the designs are generally from wild flowers and animals. The women express their artistic craftsmanship and their weaving exposed the artistic sensitivity.

Sericulture:

Rearing of Endi silk worm is also another important cottage industry of the Dimasa. Like weaving this industry is also looked after by the women folk only. Dr. Birinchi Kumar Baruah also attributes the widespread use of weaving looms among the tribal people of Assam to the influence of the Austric race. He also says that the practice of weaving has probably come to Assam from China. The Mongoloid people from China – Tibet side entered North Eastern India and Assam in between 1500 BC and 500 AD. It can be assume that these people belonging originally to Mongloid or Sino-Tibetan or Bodo races introduced Silk clothes and sericulture in Assam. Dr. Lila Gogoi narrates a story in a mantra hymn used by silk work rearers. According to this Lord Shiva gave a species of silk worm to Kachari tribe. Based on this it can be said that the art of sericulture and weaving was introduced in Assam by the Kacharis⁶.

Dance, Music, Ballad and Lullabies

Tarun Goswami an eminent musicologist, folklorist and well known vocalist of Hindustani classical music rightly says that the Dimasa have a rich repertoires of ballads, legendary and historical narratives, lullabies and verses of various kind such a benedictory emotive, amorous and magical each of which is set to a distinct and independence 'Birili'⁷.

The dirge or the funeral song of the Dimasa is also another cultural identity. This funeral song is sung only by the women. However the song ballads and lullabies are continued orally only. As we know Dimasa have no written documents before the Ahoms. It is only due to the Ahom Buranji that this tribe came in the pages of History, but all in political character. About the social history only oral tradition that makes us to know about the colourful culture. Due to women contribution to the oral tradition we can understand the cultural vibration of the tribe.

Here the women folk are the carrier of the oral history. Oral history, a maddeningly imprecise term used to refer to formal rehearsed account of the past presented by culturally sanctioned tradition bearers to informal conversations about "the old day" among family members, neighbours or co-workers. It also helps us to provide us new knowledge and perspective in the cultural interpretation. The various ballads, lullabies, songs and dirge of the Dimasas are generally a form of oral tradition. Mouth to mouth these songs and narratives is still in the tradition. From this oral history we can also understand their culture and customs. It also helps us to know about the socio-political and economic condition of the people.

Indigenous technology:

In all the Dimasa rituals and customs rice beer (zu) is very essential. Women use to prepare the Zu. The skin of

⁶ Barthakur Saikia, Studies in North East India: Study on Assamese Textile, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, 2013, p.2

⁷ Barpujari S.K., History of Dimasas, Autonomous Council of NC Hills District, Haflong, 1997, p.154.

a tree called 'Thempra' is collected from the jungle and grind in a traditional way. The grinded powder than mixed with rice powder with little water and make small balls. These balls are kept in the sun to dry. These balls are the medicine for the making of rice beer. This indigenous technology is practice by the Dimasa women very well.

They also know the art of dying. The dying of yarns are also prepared by the Dimasa women themselves from the wild herbs. The colourful traditional dress of the Dimasa is due to art of dying. "The traditional attires of a community carry the message of this cultural identity. People with veracity in weaving and textile have a distinct position in the socio-cultural world. In the field of folk creativity this material culture offers us with opportunities to explore the creative genius of the people that forms a part of this ancestral legacy"⁸.

The Dimasa are a unique example in the craft of weaving. The indigenous dresses of this community occupy a high position in the handloom industry of North East India. The blended colour and the conspicuous designs on thus dresses exhibit a bold effort of these weavers which has enriched the treasury of their material culture.

Women in Rituals & Customs:

In every rituals & customs women's presence is must. In every function of the society from birth to death and in all the festive occasion women participation and contribution is appreciable. In the birth and marriage women engaged very much. However Dimasa women performed the dirge in funeral function. When a Dimasa person died, before taking the body to the cremation ground, close female relatives of the deceased sit around the dead body and start weeping which is called 'Karasennag' (dirge). A group of women used to tell the gathering about deceased ones his or her forefather, parents, children and the brief narration about his or her life time. They used to sing while weeping and express their helplessness that they can't bring back to the living world. They also express their sadness through the songs. These kinds of song and tunes is very different with the songs which were used to sing during 'Busu' (Dimasa bihu festivals)

In the 'Karasennag' process the women used to offer rice beer to the deceased one if it is matured or aged one and shared the same with the deceased one as a last drink with the deceased.

The singing of this melancholy song continues till the dead body is taken out from the four walls of the house for the purpose of cremation. In the funeral procession aged women generally take this place at the head of the procession. Women continuously throw paddy and cotton on both sides of the village road from a basket while another draws raw cotton thread along the road leading to the cremation ground. The Dimasa have a strong faith that the deceased will be reborn in his own house or in one of the houses of his close relatives. Throwing the paddy and cotton and drawing of raw cotton thread along the road signifies the fact that the soul of the deceased will recognized the path leading to its village and home and this will enable him to return to the earth in the shape of a new born child.

CONCLUSION

Tradition and customs thus play a very important role in the construction and structuring of gender identities in Dimasa society. In prescribing asymmetric social prescription and norms for men and women, they become instrumental in establishing a discriminatory social set up. In the Dimasa social set up due to patriarchal or patrilineal system or due to control over sex to some taboos, which were in forced by tradition has affected women's access to rights and resources. While on the other hand they give certain uniqueness to the tribal society. They are the backbone of the Dimasa culture. They gave the fine textile which is the traditional identity of the tribe. They are the master of the rituals, customs of all functions from one's birth to death. Again they are preserving the indigenous technology of the Dimasa rice beer making and dying process.

Needless to say the other duties that a women use to do like a home maker and a manager of own house in balancing economy. Dimasa woman is also a good economic earner too. The cloths she weaves, the rice beer she

⁸ The Dimasa: Child of the Big River Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture, Guwahati, 2003, p. 33.

prepared, the cultivation in the jhum field are the source of income which greatly help in running a house. In the recent time women have been at the forefront of many grass root movement such as the Chipko Movement in India and Peace Movement in Ireland but in Indian context tribal women are still to go a long way in the tribal society. Though women are independent than any other caste counterparts but without any authority. They are not the decision maker in the home as well as in the society. Many Laws were introduced many development schemes were experimental but due to some reason the tribal women failed to utilized the same. Many a time the customs and tradition became the taboo for the women. However in urban sectors too Dimasa women are now along with tradition came out in government jobs.

From the above lines we can understand how tradition affects women's access to right and recourse and on the other hand how the women of the society doing a great job in preserving this tradition and culture which is the identity of one's community. As we know no culture no identity. Women are doing responsibility without authority. It is somewhat not balancing the situation. Here the question came to our mind are the Dimasa women status is balanced or need to move to establish their identity? Can we think for a step in reshaping gender identities in the Dimasa society?

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