



A historical and etymological study of the Dimasa Kacharis of Dima Hasao District, Assam, India

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Abstract

The Dimasa Kacharis happen to occupy a special place in the ethnic composition of the Autonomous Hills Districts of Assam. They are mainly confined to the Dima Hasao District (previously North Cachar Hills District). However, they are also found in small scattered groups in the districts of Karbi Anglong, Nagaon, and Cachar. The Dimasas form a part of the Bodo-group of people which also include the Bodo-Kacharis, the Meches, the Rabhas, and the Koches of Assam. They are said to belong to the Tibeto-Burman group, linguistically speaking. Western-China has been traced out to be the original home of the Tibeto-Burman group of people. The Dimasa Kacharis inhabiting the present Autonomous Hills Districts and the Bodo-Kacharis inhabiting the plains of Assam are believed to belong to this same stock of people although their language and customs differ more in nature than have something in common. Here we are basically concerned with the origin and history of the two terms 'Dimasa' and 'Kachari'.

Keywords : Dimasa, Kachari, Dima Hasao, Bodo-Kachari.

1. Introduction

The Dimasas are a great people with a glorious past since the earliest times. Historically speaking they were a great ruling power in North-East India for about three hundred years. According to J.B. Bhattacharjee (1984), the first Dimasa king ascended the throne in AD 1502 and this glorious Dimasa rule came to an end with the death of the last Dimasa ruler Govind Chandra Narayana in AD 1830. The Dimasa kingdom was large and prosperous. Before the British occupation, North Cachar Hills which had the greatest concentration of the Dimasa people was a part of the Dimasa kingdom which then included the present Karbi Anglong District, a major part of Nagaon district, Dhansiri region of Nagaland and parts of Cachar. The Dimasa rulers had their capitals first at Dimapur, then at Maibang, Khaspur and lastly at Hartikar in Cachar. But the territory held by the Dimasa General Tularam (Tulsi Chandra) continued to be ruled by him till his death in 1851. Even after Tularam's death his son Nakul Ram continued his rule till 1854 and after his death

the British took over the entire territory under Tularam and his son and with this ended the Dimasa rule in the North-East India. The Brahminical Hinduism penetrated the Dimasa court at Maibang and the tribal names of the Dimasa king acquired Sanskritised Hindu names such as Nirbhareja Narayana, Derlabh Narayana etc., the Bengali scholars from Sylhet exercised great influence in the Dimasa king's court and the inscriptions on their coins and other monuments such as victory-gates were either in Sanskrit or Bengali. Translations of Sanskrit books on Ethics, Hindu Philosophy, Codes on Administration and dispensation of justice etc. were translated into the Bengali of Sylhet. Two books were written in the Dimasa language but the Script used was Bengali. In this way the Dimasa rulers allowed themselves to be under great influence of the Brahminical Hinduism and their growing interest in religion, pilgrimages to holy places of India and their neglect of administration, resulted in the gradual weakening of their administrative machinery particularly their revenue

and military strength and as a result their dependence on the East India company which was just waiting to annex the Dimasa kingdom. The death nail of the Dimasa Empire was finally tolled in the year 1830 AD with the murder of the last Dimasa king Govind Chandra Narayan.

1.1 It is worth while to enquire into the origin and the usage of the two terms 'Kachari' and 'Dimasa'. Historians, Linguists, Archaeologists, Phoneticians and other Researchers have given numerous explanations of these two terms. But in the absence of any solid proof or written record much of the discussion on 'Kachari' & 'Dimasa' is still based on legend or the 'Ahom Buranjis', written by the Royal Chroniclers. It cannot be all together relied upon because the Ahoms were the enemies of the Dimasas who destroyed the latter's kingdom in the Dhansiri Valley at Dimapur and drove them away even from Maibang to the next Dimasa capital, Khaspur, in Cachar. Quite naturally the 'Ahom Buranjis' would never present the Dimasa Kacharis in a bright or even impartial colour. The term 'Kachari' is usually used to denote a large number of tribal communities originally belonging to the same stock of people living both in the hills and the plains of Assam. However, till now nobody has been able to say for sure the meaning of the term 'Kachari' on scientific and etymological ground. The people whom we commonly designate are not known by any common name but by their own tribal designations. Most of the explanations vis-a-vis the origin and application of the term 'Kachari' are based on conjecture in the absence of any historical evidence. In their traditional folk-lore and folk-tales also the terms 'Kachari' does not find any place.

2. Objective of the study

The present study is conceived with the following objectives :

- To study and explore the meaning of the two terms Dimasa and Kachari.
- To throw light on many of the historical and etymological aspects of the term 'Dimasa Kachari' living in Dima Hasao District.

3. Methodology

The present study has been based on both primary and secondary data sources. The primary

source data of the study has been collected and conducted through well designed questionnaire on some Dimasa scholars and intellectuals residing in Dima Hasao District like S.R.Thaosen, J.K. Thaosen and Nirupama Hagjer. They have also written books, articles on the Dimasa culture and traditions. I had to visit some villages like Dibarai, Diyungmukh, Mahur, Harangajao, and places like Maibang to have a general opinion from the local inhabitants regarding the meaning and the significance of the two terms 'Dimasa' and 'Kachari' The secondary data has been collected from different books, documents, publications, with a view to understanding the etymological and historical aspects of the Dimasa Kacharis and the meaning of the word 'Dimasa' and 'Kachari'

4. Results and discussion

According to E.A. Gait (1926) in his book '*A History of Assam*', the Kacharis are the aborigines or the earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley. He further says that in this valley the Kacharis call themselves 'Bodo' or 'Bodo-Fisa' (Sons of the Bodo), in the North Cachar Hills (now Dima Hasao) 'Dimasa' a corruption of 'Dima-Fisa' (sons of the great river) which was known to the Ahoms as 'Timisa'. According to a legend the origin of the term 'Kachari' comes from the Kachari country situated on the foothills of Nepal between the Bahmaputra and the Koshi river. One of the progenitors of human race settled in this tract known as Khachar which was the place of their early settlement in the course of their north-west movement after they had entered Assam in pre-historic times. Gait argues that the word 'Kachar' or 'Khacher' is derived from a Sanskrit word meaning a bordering region. And the present district of Cachar may have derived its name from that word, or it may have been so called after its principal tribe, the Dimasa Kacharis. A Dimasa scholar N. K. Barman is of the opinion that in the *Mahabharata* the present Assam was known as 'Kachcha' and the geographical definition of 'Kachcha' as expounded in the *Amar Kosa* (a Sanskrit Dictionary) meaning 'a land or region touching or embraced by the sea-gulfs rippled by the rocky hills'. It might even mean a region or a country that remains submerged in water throughout or most part of the year. The people, according to Barman, who lived in this

region were called 'Kachchari' meaning the people of 'Kachcha'. This word ultimately deformed into 'Kachari' or 'Cachari' as spelt by the Britishers. The explanation given by Mr. Barman seems plausible because the 'Kacher' is still used in U.P., Bihar, and Central India to denote the catchments areas on both sides of the river which are annually affected by the flood water and which remain submerged under water for most part of the year. 'Kochar' is contrasted with the upper regions where no floods occur and the cultivation of two crops is done in a year, whereas in 'Kacher' regions the farmers can cultivate only the 'rabi' crop after the flood water recedes in the October-November months. The land revenue of the Kacher regions is much less than that of the 'Bangar' (Upper regions not affected by floodwaters) region. R. M. Nath (1978) however contradicts Barman's opinion saying that the term referred to in the *Mahabharata* 'Kacha' applies to the inhabitants of 'Khacha' who had their capital towards Gorakhpur (U.P.) and hence does not apply to ancient Assam more so to the Kacharis. J. D. Anderson in his introduction to S.A. Endels' book *The Kacharis* (1962) wants to identify the term 'Kachari' with the 'Koch' or with the 'Koss'. According to Anderson the term 'Kachari' is the corruption of 'Koss-Ari'. He is of the opinion that the name Kachari is given by the Hindus in subsequent periods to identify the people of the Indo-Mongoloid group who are also known as the 'Kiratas'. B. N. Bordoloi (1984) refutes the view of Anderson and says that the term Kachari is never pronounced as 'Koss-Ari' and 'Koches' never call themselves Kachari although they belong to the same Bodo group. L. A. Waddell (1900) in his book, *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley* says that the term Kachari suggests a native of Kachar, but it does not seem to be a plausible explanation because Cachar was never the Chief Headquarters of the tribe in historical times. The Kacharis are found chiefly in the Brahmaputra Valley, the districts of Kamrupa, Darrang, Nagaon and Dima Hasao. C. A. Soppitt (1885) in his book, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of North Cachar Hills* says that the 'Dimasazao' (Dimasas) after shifting from Maibang owing to the Ahom invasion settled themselves in the Cachar plains and they were called Kacharis by their neighbours and outsiders. But B. N. Bordoloi refutes this view saying that other

sections of the Kacharis living in the Brahmaputra Valley are also designated as 'Kachari'. Due to the dearth of Chronicle data one cannot say for sure how old the term 'Kachari' is. But it appears that historians became familiar with the word Kachari only after the Ahom Buranjis were translated into other languages by Prof. S. K. Bhuyan (1951). Prof. J. B. Bhattacharjee writes that there is no record to suggest that the Dimasas or any other section of the Bodos of Assam were at any time known as the Kacharis before they ruled Cachar. As regards the use of the term Dimasa for this break away group of the Bodos the Ahom Chronicles call them 'Timisa' which is undoubtedly a corruption of 'Dimasa'. That means even when the Dimasas were ruling in the Dhansiri Valley they were known by their present title 'Dimasa'.

4.1 According to R. N. Mosahari (1986) a popular saying is still current among the Bodo folks in the plains of Assam which runs as follows :

'Pra aris, Korosaris
Jong Pari lari lari' p. 19

The meaning of which is 'we are a sea race, we are first people here and have been continuously here, 'the saying refers to two terms 'Korosari' and 'Pra-ari', Mosahary suggests that in remote areas the Bodos called themselves 'Pra-Aris' and 'Koro Saris'. The term Par Aris means the people who dwell on the sea coast or river valley while the term 'Korosari' suggests that the elder ones are the original inhabitants of the river valley which obviously refers to the Brahmaputra valley. The term 'Korosari' must have eventually been corrupted into 'Kosari' or 'Kachari'.

4.2 The word "Kachari" has been found in different names in Assam such as Bodo-Kachari, Sonowal Kachari, Mech Kachari, Barman Kachari, Thangla Kachri, Dimasa Kachari etc. Dimasa Kacharis are also found in Nagaon, Karbi Anglong and Tezpur Districts of Assam. The Barmans living in Cachar are also Dimasa. By whatever names these people are called – Bodo, Sonowal, Mech, Dimasa etc, they are the same people originating from the same ethnic root. Scholars believe that they belong to the Bodo Group of people of the Tibeto-Chinese speech family of the Indo-Mongoloids. Now-a-days the Dimasas are known as 'Hill Kachari' and the Bodos as 'Plain Kachari'.

4.3 These people today, however, form distinct tribe by themselves with distinct language and culture of their own and this may have been due to the absence of closer contacts in their day-to-day life over the decades. Dimasas in particular disclaim any connection with their kinsmen in the plains (Bodos) in the context of society, culture and ethnicity, but there is no scope to identify them as people of separate racial background. According to S. R. Thaoson a prominent Dimasa Scholar, there are similarities in language and culture of the people living in different parts of Assam like the Bodo, Mech, Rabha, Tiwa, Garo and also Meches of Northern Bengal and Tripuris and Riangs of Tripura. Brian Hodgson was the first to apply the generic term Bodo to a group of Tibeto-Burmese Clan of the Tibeto-Chinese speech family including the Bodos of the plains of Assam, Dimasas in the hills, Goros, Rabha, Tiwas, Chutias, Hojais, Tipperas, Meches, Morans, (Mataks) and other allied tribes. The term Bodos according to G.A.Grierson (1967), is to be pronounced as 'Bada' or 'Bara' but is locally pronounced in the plains of Assam as 'Bodos' or 'Boros'. The term 'Bodo' means 'great people' and these people in the plains take pride in saying 'Boro hari', 'Geder hary' meaning 'Bodo race a great race'. As regards the origin of Bodos, historians are more or less unanimous that the tribes discussed above are not the aborigines of North Eastern India. They came from the Central Tibet and North Western parts of China. Historians have not discussed the causes of such a large scale migration of people from their original home, ie Central Tibet and North-Western China. It may be stated in this context that the region referred to here falls between the head waters of two great rivers of China. Hwang Ho and Yang-Tse-Kiang. The students of Geography are aware of the dangers Hwang Ho River used to cause prior to the construction of dams to check its erratic nature of changing its course and thereby destroying villages and towns in large scale. The people living in that part of the country had to face serious problems due to this. Even in the book of Pearl S. Buck, refugees in large numbers migrate from Northern China to the Southern China to take shelter. It can be imagined that in the distant past the inhabitants of Central Tibet and North western China must have decided to seek for themselves a safer

place where they could settle permanently. Hence this large scale migration from the North of Himalayas towards the south of it through mountain passes or the course of river flowing towards the south. No specific date or time can be given about these migrations. The Central Tibet and the North-western part of China, the original home of the Bodos was called in Tibetan language 'Bodo Country'. In this connection Grierson writes that in the early days the Tibetans call their country 'Bodyut', their language 'Bodkad' and a Tibetan person 'Bodpa'. F. T. Atkinson (1977) refers to 'Bod' country comprising Central Tibet the inhabitants of which were called 'Bodpa', meaning a Tibetan person of a 'Bod' country. John Bowle (1962) refers to Tibetan plateau whose inhabitants are called 'Bodpas' and their country 'Bod' in his book *Man through the Ages*. This view had also been supported by the linguists who classify the languages of the Bodo tribe as Tibeto-Burman Branch of the Tibeto-Chinese speech family of the Indo-Mongoloids. Bodos or the Bodosas must have derived their names from the country of their original habitation i.e. 'Bod land' in Tibet.

4.4 As regards the origin of the term Dimasa different opinions are put forward by the different Scholars. The British writers took considerable interest in the study of the socio-cultural life of the different tribes of Assam. This they did for the purpose of consolidating the British administration in North-East India. Sometimes their observations are misleading as there are no historical records. In absence of written records, the historians have taken help from legends, traditions, folk-tales, folk-lore, etc. It has already been stated that the origin of the word Dimasa is associated with Bodo formation 'Di' 'Ma' and 'Fisa' meaning 'great waters' (river), and 'Children' respectively. The compound word 'Dimasa' therefore means the children of the great river. It is implied that they are permanent settlers of a great river valley. It is however difficult to identify this "great river" whether it is the Brahmaputra, the Dhansiri, the Mahur or the Barak river because it is a fact that the Dimasas lived and established their political authority in these river valleys at different stages. It is no longer a disputed fact that the Kachari people were the original inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley known as 'Kamruli' ie

'Kamrupa' in ancient times and ruled over different states under different names at different times in different parts of the valley. The Dimasas still believe that they once ruled in Kamrupa and their Royal family descended from Naraka and his son Bhagadatta of *Mahabharata* fame. Many people believe that the Dimasas acquired their name, (the sons of a big river) from the Bharmaputra valley where they first settled and ruled. But according to Prof. J.B. Bhattacharjee the word 'Dimasa' may not be associated with any particular river and that they are called by this name because they lived in the river valleys throughout. First they settled in the Brahmaputra valley, began state-building process at Sadia where their kingdom was bounded by the Dikhow and the Dihing rivers. Then in the Dhansiri valley (Dimapur). Next in the Mahur valley (Maibang) and finally in the valley of Barak known as the plains of Cachar with Khaspur as their capital. The continuous process of state building on the river banks and their great love of water might have perhaps led them to be termed as Dimasas. The Dimasa tribe has a special regard for water and rivers. According to S. K. Barpujari (1997), the reverence for water is noticeable when the Dimasas purify themselves by touching 'digathar' or pure water which is made by putting copper and gold in a pot of water. For worshipping their ancestors and spirits and for cremating the dead, they always prefer the bank of a stream. Speaking about the special regard attached to water he states :

".....daily bath is a must for a Dimasa and significantly all the Dimasa capitals were established on the banks of the rivers. The Dimasas claim that all the social laws and rituals were formulated at 'Dilaobra-Sangibra', the confluence of the two rivers Dilao and Sangi. The hymns chanted by Dimasa priests 'Jontai' refer to Dilaobra-Sangibra as the place where they were composed by Dimasa forefathers". p.17.

4.5 It is the usual practice of the Dimasa to propitiate the spirits on the river side but only during the day time. Women are not allowed to take part in the worship of these spirits. Dimasas believe that 'Sagaijiks' (witches) practice black magic and such women do a lot of harm by their witchcraft and so are to be avoided as far as practicable, Bordoloi is of the opinion that such women in the Dimasa society are very few and far between.

4.6 S. R. Thaosen (1962) in his book *Dimasa Kachari Asomor Jonjati* (Assamese), states that prior to their advent on the bank of the Dhansiri river and establishing their capital at Dimapur the people were known as 'Bodosa' and thereafter 'Dimasa'. This means that it is the Dhansiri River which is associated with the derivation of the name 'Dimasa'. There is yet another belief regarding the final separation of a section of the 'Bodos' from the main stream of the Bodo tribe, according to which, the Bodos had to fight protracted battles with the Ahoms and were pushed back from the Brahmaputra Valley. The Bodosa king and his people while retreating had to cross a big river. The king and some of his followers had safely crossed the river but most of them while crossing were caught up in the middle of the river and washed away and drowned. The rest of them did not make any venture at all to cross the river. The people who crossed the other side of the river safely were proud of their achievement and proclaimed themselves as 'Conquerors of the Big River' and since then began to call themselves Dimasa and built up their kingdom on the banks of that river with Dimapur as their capital. The river referred to here can unmistakably be identified with the Dhansiri river.

4.7 According to Nirupama Hagjer (1974) the Dimasas had the tradition of introducing themselves as 'Sa' i.e., children of the place of their habitation. 'Dimasa' according to her has been derived from the 'Dimapura' namely the people who inhabited Dimapur, the old capital of the Kacharis on the bank of 'Dima' (Dhansiri). But B. N. Bordoloi does not agree with the view of Mrs. Hagjer that term 'Dimasa' is derived from 'Dimapura'. He argues that if the Dimasas have such a tradition of using 'Sa' before the name of the place where they live we should have words like Maibangsa and Khaspursa. But in reality it is not so. Maibangsa is a clan of the Dimasas and it does not mean all the inhabitants of Maibang. The Dimasas in Cachar are called Barmans which is still more confusing. If we follow N. Hagjer's logic the Barmans should have been called Khaspursa, the sons of Khaspur.

4.8 S. Barkataki (1969) in his *Tribes of Assam* says that the word Dimasa is supposed to have derived from 'Hidimba' (Dimapur being a shortened form of Hidimbapur), a demoness who got

enamored of the second Pandava prince 'Bhima' and through their union a son who was named Gototkacha was born. Gototkacha is a Sanskrit name which literally means 'he who has no hair on his head' This son of Bhim and Hidimba earned great fame for his bravery and heroism in the Battle of Kurukshetra but was finally killed by Karna, by the same weapon which he had kept reserved for his arch rival Arjuna the third Pandava Prince. The origin of this legend is apparently an invention of the Brahmin Pundits made after the formal conversion of the Kachari king to Hinduism in 1798 A.D. N. K. Barman (1992) also in his *Queens of Cachar or Herambo and the History of the Kachchhari* referring to Hidimba myth of the origin of the Dimasas goes to the extent of saying that the inhabitants of the Eastern region were not known to Aryans of Aryavarta. It was only after the exploration of the region by the Pandava brothers that the North-Eastern part of India found a conspicuous place in the Sanskrit literature and particularly in mythology. Meghavarna son of Ghatotkacha and grandson of Bhim and Hidimba ruled this part of Aryavarta and thenceforth this ruling family of the Kachari race assumed the aristocratic distinction of 'Hidimbachha' since the days of antiquity. 'Hidimbachha' in course of time was contorted into Dimbachha, and subsequently to Dimachha (Dimasa).

4.8.1 B. N. Bordoloi rightly says that even if the term Dimasa originated from Hidimba, it is difficult to account for while the other numerically stronger sections of the Kacharis living in the Brahmaputra valley call themselves Bodo, Bodos, and Bodofisa instead of accepting the common name Dimasa claiming descent from Hidimba.

4.9 It is an established fact that the Kacharis were the most numerous settlers in the Brahmaputra Valley. The names of various rivers are prefixed by the Bodo or Kachari term 'Di' which means water or river such as Di-hong, Di-bong, Di-karai, Dibru, Di-hing, Di-sang, Di-khow, Di-soi etc. Hence according to modern scholars 'Dimasa' which means Children of the Big River cannot be called as absurd. As pointed out earlier the Dimasas have special regards for 'water' and 'rivers', they believe that life on this planet originated on the bank of rivers. A legend of

the Dimasas says that they are the descendants of God. According to this regard one Bangla Raja and his wife Arikhidima lived at a place called Damra. Arikhidima who had a divine conception was a bit worried about finding the safest place where she could lay her eggs. A Golden Eagle ultimately found the place as desired near the confluence of Dilao and Sangi rivers and there on a banayan tree she laid seven eggs in a nest. At the appropriate time from six eggs came out six divine human beings. Out of the first egg 'Sivarai' was born and from the remaining five came out Aalu Raja, Naiku Raja, Wa Raja, Gunyung Braiyung and Hamia Dao. The seventh egg however did not break and remained in its usual condition. Nobody was ready to break it open for the fear that it might prove ominous. The sixth son of Arikhidima was a bit naughty and he broke this egg. From it came out evil spirits which are responsible for human misery and diseases and they took shelter in the hills and rivers. On the basis of this legend the Dimasa consider Arikhidima to be their ancestress and call them 'Arikhidimasa'.

5. Conclusion

To conclude our discussion on the origin of the two terms 'Kachari' and 'Dimasa' on the basis of what has preceded above the following facts are convincing.

1. That the Dimasa Kacharis descended the plains of Assam from the North, ie, Tibet / China in distant past.
2. That they settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra river and ruled the plains from different places as their capital. Historical documents speak of their first capital at Dimapur on the banks of the Dhansiri river.
3. That after being chased by the Ahoms and being driven out from Dimapur they made their capital at Maibang and from there finally in Khaspur in the plains of Cachar district.
4. That the term 'Dimasa' most reliably originated from 'Di' 'Ma' 'Sa' which means Sons of the Great River, because from experience of living in Dima Hasao since childhood we have found that the Dimasas have a special love for waters and they have chosen to settle on the banks of rivers, big or small. A greater population of the

Dimasa Kacharis in erstwhile North Cachar Hills (Dima Hasao) has settled in and around Maibang on both sides of the river Mahur. The availability of water helps them in wet cultivation of paddy in large quantity and that is why Maibang is called the Granary of Rice.

6. That the term 'Kachari' according to R. N. Mosahary is derived from the term 'Pra Aris', 'Koro Saris'. The term 'Koro Sari' must have eventually been corrupted into Kosari or Kachari.
7. It is also probable that the Dimasas are called Kacharis because from the early days of their settlement they chose the river banks which were submerged by flood waters and such land was called Kachar or Cachar. Even today in UP, Bihar and Central India the catchments area are known as Kachar. Today the term Kachari is also used to mean the other Bodo tribes of the same root such as Mech Kachari, Burman Kachari, Bodo Kachari, Sonowal Kachari, etc.
8. Our visit to Maibang, Mahur, Harangajao, Diyungmukh, Dibarai (villages of Dimasa Hasao District) and our interaction with the village Head-man (Gaon Bura), the common people, and Dimasa intellectuals like S. R. Thaosen, J. K. Thaosen, convince us that the term 'Dimasa' means 'the Sons of the Great River'

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