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Investigation on the Social Status of Dimasa Women in Karbi Anglong District, Assam, India

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Abstract:

The Dimasas are the unique tribal community, inhabiting in Kachar Haila khandi, Dima-Haso, Nagaon and Karbi Anglong District of Assam. Their excellent ethnic knowledge make them different from other tribes of Assam. Women folk of the Dimasas are much laborious, intelligent and the chief conservator of the traditional knowledge than the men. They are also exploited in their society, but their devotion and sincerity helps the dimasa society to conserve their ethnicity. In this paper effort has been made to focus on Dimasa women of Karbi Anglong District, Assam

Keywords: Dimasa, Mikirs, Julu, Phengchong.

1. Introduction

The Dimasa is a unique tribal community of Assam and the N.E. region. The word 'Dimasa' etymologically comes from Di = water, ma = big, sa = children or 'the children of the great river'. The Dimasas tend to live on the river banks and near streams. The Dimasa villages are therefore typically located on hills with a cluster of 30 to 40 houses and sometimes, though rarely, as much as 400 houses. In Dimasa, such clusters are known as Nohlai and the whole village with its population is known as Raji. Anthropological studies reveal that the Dimasa language resembles those having Tibeto-Chinese origin. It is also believed that this community has stemmed from the Mongols. Though the Tibeto-Chinese stream includes many tribes in it, eg. Bodo, Rava, Tiwa, Tipra, Barman, Mech etc. the Dimasa tribe have gained acceptance by virtue of the anthropological researches as one of the most primitive tribe of N.E. (North East) region.

Sir Edward Gait said, "The Kacharis were perhaps described as the aborigines, or earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley."

The Dimasas presently inhabit the Kachar, Hilakandi, Dima-Hasao, Nagaon and Karbi- Anglong districts of Assam. According to latest census reports the Dimasa population has been found to be 2, 50,000 in Assam. Our constitution has regarded the section of the tribe inhabiting the plains as 'plain tribes' and the rest residing in the hills as 'hill tribes'.

The socio-cultural aspects of the Dimasas are very unique and they are quite conservative regarding their traditions. Though the invasion of modernisation has introduced many tastes off the track of their tradition but a wholesome decline of their tradition has hardly been possible as yet.

Dimasa societies are mainly 'patriarchal' but in many cases 'matrilineal' customs are also followed in them. After marriage the bride takes the surname of her husband but, at the same time, she remains associated to the 'Julu' (a community of women) she belonged to before her marriage. The community of men is known as 'Phengchong'. There are several Julus and Phengchongs in a Dimasa society. And it is a significant system of the society that if the bride and the groom belong to the same maternal Julu they cannot marry. And if they do so, they are outcasted from the society. Apart from these, each Dimasa child has two surnames: one paternal (Phengchong) and the other maternal (Julu), though they preferentially use their paternal surname. Dimasa women are the pioneer in running their home as well as the society. They occupies their own position by their dignity and work culture. No Dimasa family ca exist complete without the women in the family.

2. Study Area

The Karbi-Anglong is an important hill-district of present Assam forming a distinct geographical region. Karbi-Anglong is the homeland of the Karbis (formally called Mikirs), while the Dimasa- Kacharis are the second most important tribe of the region. They are found to scatter in Karbi-Anglong in small groups.

The region is centrally located in the southern part of Assam bounded by the hills of Nagaland and Manipur on the east and by the plateau of Jaintia Hills on the west. On the north there lies the plain of Brahmaputra River and on the south the plain of the upper Barak River. Karbi-Anglong district, is the largest amongst the 27 administrative districts of Assam state in north-eastern India. The district is bounded by Golaghat district on the east, Meghalaya state and a Marigaon district on the west, Nagaon and Golaghat districts on the north and Dima Hasao district and Nagaland state on the south. The district is located between 25°33' - 26°35' north latitudes and 92°10' - 93°50' east longitudes. Diphu town is the administrative headquarter of the district. Karbi-Anglong district occupies an area of 10,434 sq km (4,029 sq mi), comparatively equivalent to the island of Hawaii. (Cited from Wikipedia).

The region is chiefly inhabited by the major tribes such as the Karbis and the Dimasas, other tribes forming major groups are Zeme Nagas, Kukis, Hmars, Tiwas, Bodo Kacharis, Garos and Jaintias. People coming from the plain districts of Assam and other parts of the country generally inhabit in the plain parts of the district and the urban areas.

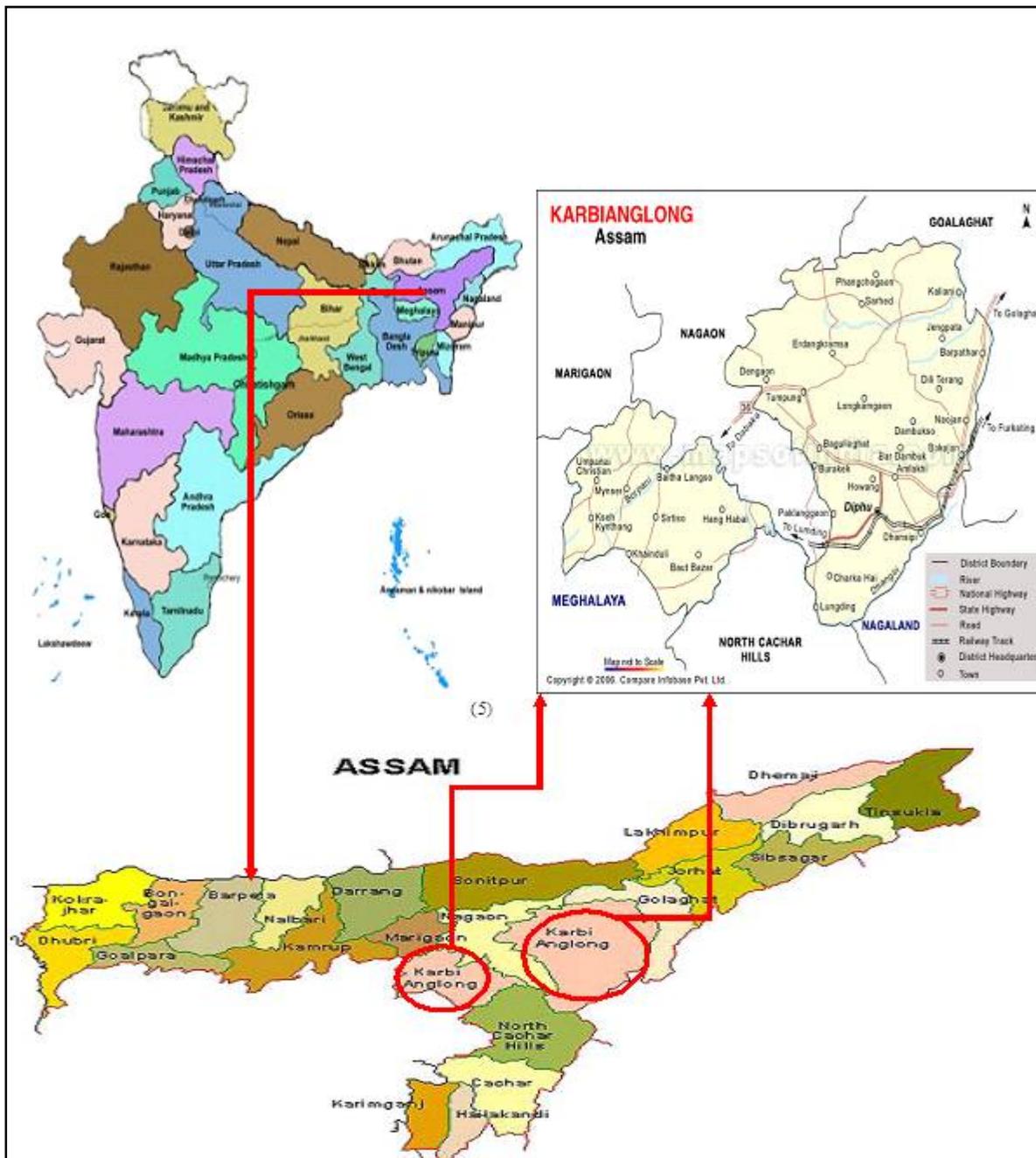


Figure 1: Map: Karbi-Anglong district of Assam

2. Methodology

Documentation of the social status of the Dimasa women and identification of their problems were undertaken within the period of February-March 2015. To begin with, a small pilot survey was conducted on nine villages (Kathalgudi, Dishagishm, Shibnagar, Demalu, Longkhailung, Vetagaon, Adarshagaon and Kherbari of Dhansiri and Dogjupathar of Borlongphar) of the Karbi-Anglong district to get an idea about the present status of the Dimasa women in their society. The survey was conducted after taking prior permission of the village head (Gaonburah/Khunang). From these different villages a sample of 45 women (five women from each village) was taken according to the wish of the Gaonburah and enquired. The women mainly falling in the age-group of 35-50 were considered under the study. The questionnaire included questions involving their names, occupation, educational qualification, health status, health problems (if any), political involvement, family problems, including domestic violence, participation in social functions, economic conditions and number of children. The data collected have been analyzed in the form of bar diagrams and pie diagrams.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Employment Patterns of Dimasa Women

Out of the 45 women selected, 40 are engaged in household works and five are employed in different jobs like teaching in schools, Anganwadi works and self help groups. Figure 2 shows the distribution of Dimasa women on the basis of their occupations.

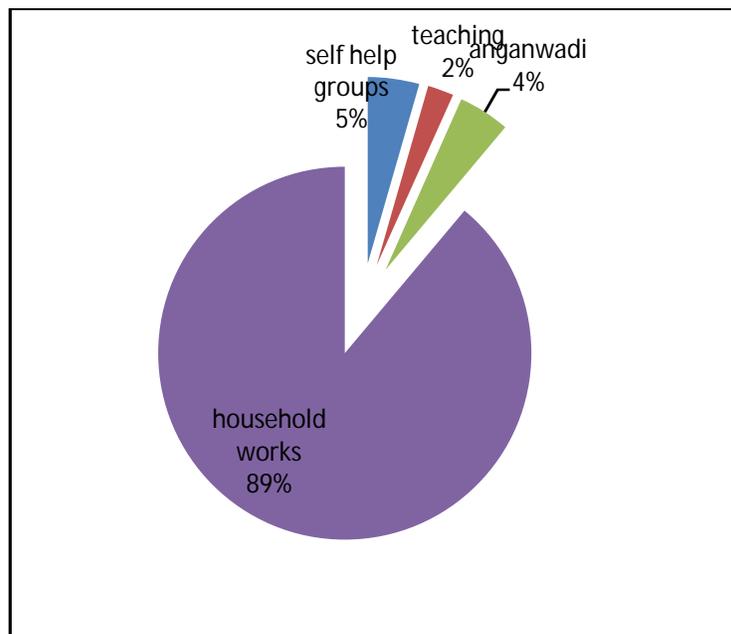


Figure 2: Employment patterns of Dimasa women.

3.2. Educational Qualifications of the Dimasa Women

The five women who are employed have qualifications of matriculation and above. Among the 40 women involved in household works five have got high school education, 30 of them have got lower primary and primary school education and the remaining five have no educational qualification at all. Figure 3 shows the distribution of educational qualification among the enquired Dimasa women.

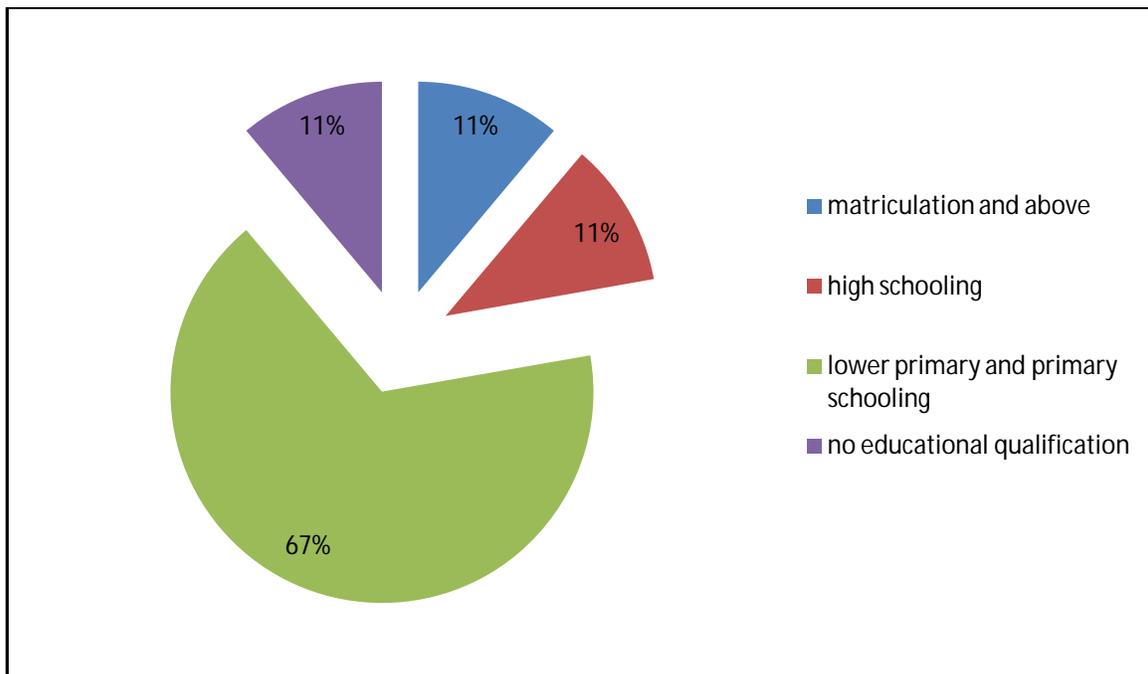


Figure 3: Distribution of educational qualification of Dimasa women

Husbands of five women are employed in government jobs and those of the rest are farmers. Those 40 women who are house oriented are engaged in various small activities that earn them money. About 10 of them are engaged in the domestication of pigs, ducks, hen etc. seven of them rear Eri silkworm and weaving Endi and cotton clothes, 18 of them work in the fields and five are engaged in preparing 'Jumai'(rice bear), which is essential in every social functions related to the Dimasas. Figure 4 shows how the house-hold Dimasa women are engaged in various activities to earn money.

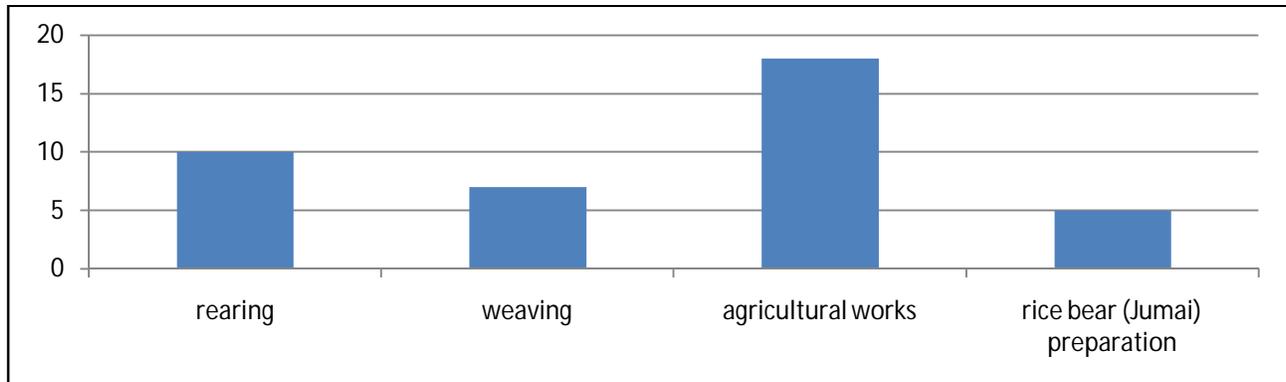


Figure 4: Various Occupations of Housekeeping Dimasa Women

From the above result, it is very much clear that the women of the Dimasa community are very hard-working and take active part in maintaining the family. The male members of the household are comparatively less active than the females. 90% of the males are addicted to alcoholic drinks, which make them lethargic. Dimasa women labour hard from morning to night, for caring the aged members and bringing up their children. Though the case of domestic violence is very less, they have to work hard for the needs of their families. So, they are engaged in different occupations for earning money. The properties of the parents are equally distributed among the children. However, discrimination can be noticed here also. The properties owned by the father, for example, land holdings, buffaloes, agricultural products, which cost more are inherited by the sons, whereas the properties of the mother (the weaving instruments, clothes and ornaments), which cost less, are inherited by the daughters.

In social functions women take an active part. In 'Bishu' (Bihu) the ladies offer meat, wine, beetle leaves and beetle nuts, etc. to the deities first and the men make their offerings. The Dimasas are very fond of dancing in different festivals. Both men and women take part in the dances. But the Bai- mai-jai dance is particular to the Dimasa women. It is a unique dance form indeed the women dressed in rizamphai and rigudance in two rows (or columns) and hold a beautiful spectacle. As ornaments they wear rangparcha, madali, chandrahah (in their necks) and khatudima (in hands).khram (a sort of drum) and muribathicha (a kind of flute) are the instruments played with this dance form. The unique aspect of this dance is that the women hold two metal kahis (dishes) in two hands and perform their dance.

As far as health is concerned, the Dimasa women are healthy and they generally do not suffer from any chronic ailments. This is because of their simple food habits, hard work and simple lifestyle. They, for example, prefer boiled food to fried or roasted food. And whenever they use oil in their food, their first preference is silling (sesame) oil. They also use turmeric in their foods which have huge medicinal and healing properties. During famines the women of the families go to the forests in search of different kinds of famine foods. The famine foods generally include different types of tubers, aram, bark of some plants etc. They know the use of many plants and animals for different purposes of their daily lives. For example, food, medicine etc.

Political involvement of Dimasa women is almost nil. But the judgement of any evil or any unlawful activity of a woman will be done by the aged women of the society.

About 80% Dimasa people of Karbi-Anglong are dependent on agriculture. Different varieties of rice are cultivated in the plain lands but due to erratic rainfall patterns rice production level has declined. The Jhum cultivation (Slash and burn agriculture) serves an economic supplement for the Dimasas. In the hill-slopes, maizu (red variety of rice), slikti (turmeric), manglai (maize), silling (sesame), (mustard), hazing (ginger), different varieties of morsaiberma (chilli), phantao (brinjal), kaklugajao (pumpkin) etc. are the chiefly cultivated crops in Jhum farming. Women take significant roles in clearing the farmlands, sowing the seeds, cutting the harvest and selling them in the market. They are also economically benefitted from the horticultural products like (lemon), (orange), kayamuri (pineapple), goyaphol (papaya), (litchi) and thailik (banana). Apart from these, (fishing), (weaving), (hunting) etc. are equally participated in by domestic men and women. (Cotton-weaving) is a huge domestic industry, which engages almost every Dimasa woman and girl. Dimasa women and girls are deftly expert in this field, and can prepare daily-use apparels, occasional costumes (rigu, rizamphai, rikhaodaretc.), gamcha (towels) and mufflers all by themselves. Endi thread preparation and endi cloth weaving is another important domestic industry among the Dimasas. Each woman knows the rearing system of eri silkworm (Samiacynthiaricini). They also know how to take out the thread and weave endi clothes. They also use the larva and pupa stages of these insects as palatable food items. They sell both the products in the market at high prices. Dimasa women are expert artisans and can manufacture bamboo and cane baskets, mats, hand-fans etc. with acute perfection. They also engage themselves in rearing (buffaloes), (pigs), (ducks), (hens), (goats) and sell their meat and other products in the market for making economic gains.

The issue of 'domestic violence' is rather a rare case in the Dimasa society, but the Dimasa women have to encounter other challenges to meet their own needs as well as those of their families. They have to toil hard to earn the day's meal. The Dimasa men are comparatively less industrious. So the women have to manage every spheres of life, from children to kitchen and from farms to markets.

Most of the Dimasa families comprise of 3-6 children.

4. Conclusion

The percentage of educated people among the Dimasas is small and with the poor economic conditions, it is not quite easy to maintain and especially educate the children properly, and when the chief income holders are women. Mothers being less educated are not able to groom their children properly. Moreover, women are bound by certain compellations that do not allow them to work and earn as efficiently as they could have otherwise, like the children, families, social notions etc. So it is quite difficult to witness development for the Dimasas unless they resolve themselves for it. Men will have to contribute equally in the families' income. Both girls and boys should get fairly equal chances to education. Proper family planning initiatives will surely help them meet the challenge of poverty.

Now-a-days, the Dimasa society is gradually changing. The educated male-members of the household are realizing the problems of the women. They try to engage themselves in different professions. In such families the women are comparatively more protected and the girl-children also get a chance to educate themselves.

The Dimasas have a very rich knowledge of utilizing their naturally available resources in the form of medicines, commercial products, food, aroma and in therapeutic treatments. The women being higher in efficiency and intelligence can utilize their age old knowledge to conserve their resources and heritage as well as to make economic gains out of them. However, it is quite sure that when their traditional knowledge will fuse with the modern education, they will be able to do the same in a more organized, scientific and of course in a more profitable way. Thus educating the Dimasa people and especially the Dimasa women will certainly be a gainful step.

Different government and non-government organizations have taken different initiatives for the development of the Dimasa women and their society. 'Khasmai Federation' (a self-help group), 'Dhansiri Area Multi Animal Husbandry and Farming Society' (an N.G.O), 'Langpi Dehangi Bank', 'Karbi- Anglong Autonomous Council' etc. have undertaken various developmental projects to uplift the economic and social conditions of the Dimasa women. But such organizations are more or less, particularly working on the Dhansiriregion. Expansion of their scope and field of work on other Dimasa-populated regions will help an altogether development of this community.

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