

# THE TRADITIONAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS, MUSIC AND DANCE OF THE DIMASA

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**Abstract:** Postmodernism has influenced the culture and tradition of the people all over the world with the sophisticated technology like ICT. At this stage of human society, some people belonging to certain small communities have lost their identity due to losing their cultural components like language/dialect, dress and ornaments, music, dance and musical instruments. On the other hand, sophisticated tools of postmodernism have also helped preserving culture of different small ethnic groups through creating digital archive. The Dimasas are also not exception to it. On the one hand, a huge folk are unaware of preserving their traditional musical instruments, music and dance forms; while the few are trying their level best to keep alive their music, musical instruments and the songs. This paper is also a modest attempt to keep a record of the traditional musical instruments, music and the dances of the Dimasas. The analysis is based on both participant and non-participant observation, field visits and secondary sources of information.

**Key Concepts: Dimasas, Khram, Moori, Khram Dubung, Baithai, Baidima.**

## Introduction

In this postmodern age, due to the impact of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) the culture and tradition of different sections of people in India is changing very fast. In North East India also, on the one hand, the culture and tradition of the indigenous people is changing at an alarming pace; and on the other hand the quest for ethnic identity is increasing among the people of different indigenous communities. The Dimasas, one of the earliest tribe of north east India is also not exception to this fact. However, in spite of the onslaught of the Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG), it is observed that the Dimasa are still successful in preserving its traditional cultural components which is sufficient enough to identify it as an important ethnic group of this part of the country.

Among many other components of culture, a community the traditional attire, ornaments, music, musical instruments and dance play pivotal role in identification of an ethnic group. This paper is an attempt to focus on the traditional music, musical instruments, and dance of the Dimasa which are unique enough to the established fact of the ethnic identity of the Dimasas. The analysis is based on personal observation and secondary sources of information.

The Dimasas, one of the earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley (Gait 1926:247) have a long historical past. Dimasa is the name of language as well as of a community. It is one of the major Kachari tribes of Assam and they constitute an important ethnic group in Northeast India. Ethnically, the Dimasa are of mongoloid origin and their language belongs to Tibeto-Burman language family. The term DIMASA is better interpreted as

**DIMANI B'SA – DIMA B'SA – DIMASA, 'Sons of the great river'** (Nunisa Motilal in Bhuyan 1993:72). Therefore, the term Dimasa itself is a compound word (di = water, ma = great and sa = children) which literally meant children of big river. The river may be the mighty Brahmaputra or the Dhansiri on whose bank their civilization developed to the fullest.

The Dimasas today live mostly in the districts of Dima Hasao, Karbi-Anglong, Cachar and Hojai of Assam, Dahansiri valley of Nagaland and a small section of Dimasas are found in Meghalaya also. However, the Dimasas are usually represented by those from Dima Hasao in all spheres and particularly social life as the district is considered the homeland of the Dimasas.

Regarding the migration of Dimasas to Dima Hasao, Tonmoy Bhattacharjee writes, "Up to the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they had a kingdom at Dimapur (now in Nagaland). But the expanding Ahom kingdom soon came into fierce conflict with complacent Dimasas and finally their capital was ravaged by the Ahoms in 1536. They, for a long time, remained as refugees in the wild vastness of central Assam but their "route to security" was in the south to which they laid siege some decades after. Maibang or the valley of plentiful of rice became their capital for some two centuries. But the on rushing Ahoms destroyed the second capital of the Dimasas in 1705. The kingdom was finally shifted further in the vast plains of Cachar in 1745" (1993:60).

Leaving aside the short introduction of the tribe, the author attempts to focus on the traditional dress and ornaments of the Dimasa through which the tribe is retaining its ethnic identity.

### **MUSIC, MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS, AND DANCE**

The music, musical instruments and dance of the Dimasa have their individual appeal. Music and dance are inseparable. When the music of *Khram* and *Moori* is played, it attracts all Dimasa people irrespective of age and sex and they assemble before the musicians to dance or to enjoy it. It is because of the melodious annotations and connotations of the music various aspects of their history and culture.

### **TRADITIONAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS**

*Khram* is a type of elongated drum. It has a long wooden crust measuring about 1.25 meters. It is a barrel cut out of a piece of log from a tree locally known as the Jasim tree. The ends of this barrel are covered with the skins of deer or goat, which are kept in position using cane strip or the skins of deer or goat. The mouth of the right hand side of the *Khram* player is called *Jung-Jung-ba* and the other end, on the left of the drummer is called *Dung-Dung-ba*. For better sound objects like coins, charcoal, hair of black cats and dogs are put inside the barrel of the *Khram*. The different rhythmic patterns played on the *Khram* are known as *Baithai*.

*Moori* is a long (100 cm to 115 cm in length) pipe or a wind instrument consisting of three sections. It is made of a special timber called *Bongkholong* by them. Resembling in outline a brass trumpet without loops, *Moori* is entirely carved out of timber except for its mouth-piece which is made of a piece of thin bamboo tube. It contains six holes on its rear half for producing musical notes by playing with fingers. *Moori* is a blowing instrument and when blowing it produces a subdued but sonorous melody which charges the air with a sense of festivity. Without this instrument function with music can be performed.

The different parts of *Moori* are (i) *Memu* which is a piece of straw and is fitted on the tip of (ii) *Mati* which produces the sound, (iii) *Moorithong* with the six holes to control the tune and (iv) *Mooribar* (horn) which

makes the sound loud. A part called *Kudam* is tightened with *Mati* so that the part called *Mati* do not enters unnecessary deep into the mouth. To tighten the joint between *Mati* and *Moorithong* a bamboo ring is bound around it.

It produces trumpet like sounds and in every dance instead of singing a song this particular sound of music guides and controls the enchanting movements of the dances. The *Mooris* are of two sizes, the small one is called *Moorisa* and the bigger one is *Moorima*.

*Muree Wathisa* is a smaller *Moori* or Trumpet made from a special kind of bamboo tube. It has six fingers keyhole, which are collectively called *Yaothai* and mostly used for training of playing on the *Moori*.

*Khram Dubong*, somewhat like an ancient Jewish harp is made from the reeds of the grass called *dubong* by the Dimasas. The sound is producing by plucking with the fingers as on the Mandolin.

*Suphin*, the flute is made of small and thin bamboo.

### Music

When played simultaneously the two musical instruments *Khram* and *Moori*, the Dimasas call the music *Khram Dubung*. Music is generally played on through the *Moori*. Different songs are played through it. The songs of Bai-Dima, harvesting (*Jaufinbani*), green nature (*Ren-ginba Jaubani*), passion (*Jaubani*), Lullaby (*Nana thilikbani*), love lyrics (*Majangdini Rajabthai*), etc music are played on through the *Moori*. The dance forms and music are inseparably associated with the crop culture, nature and certain social factors of the Dimasa. Expression of emotion, love and bliss are the other bold elements of music and dance. Moreover, the daily struggling lives of the hilly terrain are also expressed through their music and dance.

### Dances (Baithai)

The dance forms of the Dimasa tribe are complex in character. They are strictly dependent on instrumental music. No singing of songs are used except for Dimasa modern dances through playing songs. In traditional dances songs are played on through the *Moori*. *Khram* follows the rhythm of the *Moori* and so also the dancers. Interestingly, there are variations with noticeable microtones for different dance forms. That is why young men used to practise dancing at *Nadrang* during leisure hours whereas the village kids follow the rhythm from an early age.

The Dimasas perform dance for their own pleasures, for honouring respected guest visiting, as a part of their religious ceremonies and very often as a part of the celebration of community festival *Bushu*.

Only the youth of the village, both boys and girls, participate in the dance performed to welcome honoured guests who happen to visit their village for the first time. The motive behind the performance of such a dance is to express their joy at the visit of the honoured guests.

Most of the dances are generally performed at night during the harvesting festival called *Bushu*. It is held, in the winter season, i.e. in the month of January. A big fire is lighted near the dancing ground in accordance with their custom. Almost all the villagers irrespective of sex come to observe the dance performance. The women of the village sit around the dancing ground to witness the performance. Along with the beating of the *Khrams* accompanied by the music of the *Mooris* the youths in their traditional dresses and ornaments begin their dance in a circle, to express their joy and amusement. The participants make pleasant sounds like “hooo hooo hooo --

hohohoh” The visitors are also requested to participate in the dance and the joy of the people knows no bound when the visitors also join the dance. The rhythm of their dance is slow and monotonous.

Among the religious dance of the Dimasas, mention may be made of the dance performed by the *Pathri*, the oracle man. It is believe that he gains heavenly power after dancing continuously for a long period. In order to gain this heavenly power this dance must be accompanied with the music of the *Khram* and *Moori*.

The dance performed in connection with the celebration of festivals like *Rajini Garba*, *Harni Garba* and the *Bushu* are partly religious and partly social.

#### **The various dance forms are:**

By using their traditional musical instruments they present their traditional dances. Some of those dances are *Baidima*, *Risingbani*, *Mogongkhubani*, *Jauphinbani (Rongjaubani)*, *Baisergee*, *Jaubani Renginbani*, *Dainslilaibani*, *Lamahembani Baidima*, *Nasagibrimbani*, *Khro-kuthaibani*, *Baijabah*, *Homijing Lodaibani*, *Dauthu Maikhonbani* and many more.

The most common dance form usually performed by the Dimasa people is ***Baidima*** which is explained in detail in the book *The Dimasa* compiled by P C Sarma as given below.

#### ***Baidima***

It is common and popular form of dance of the Dimasa. Whenever they are blessed with an occasion of merriment, they record their feelings of happiness by performing this dance. Of particular mention is the seasonal festival of Bushu. In fact Bushu is but the Dimasa form of the Assamese form of Bihu which resemble each other in their mode and performance. Deep involvement of traditional customs, rites, rituals and the felling of happiness are the specialities of Baidima.

In this dance- form both the male and the female folk dance in groups. The participants rotate in a circular fashion by folding their hands upward with uniform stepping and clapping at a regular interval. The music of Kharam and Muree renders the needed support to create a sense of involvement in performers.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The Dimasas have very colourful dresses, ornaments and meaningful songs music and dance. They are also having a rich cultural heritage and social ethics. Though they have limited musical instruments, still among the younger generation very few are expert in playing these. Sometimes the music's of the traditional instruments are found to be mixed with the modern music. People of every age perform the dance voluntarily.

In this age of LPG the culture of small communities are at threat. Therefore some measures are to be taken for the preservation of culture of the Dimasa people also. Awareness programme, cultural programme, workshops should be organized from time to time to impart training to the younger generation for keeping alive the cultural heritage. The knowledge of language, culture and tradition of the local tribes may be transmitted to the new generation through developing a curriculum in the primary and upper primary by the government authorities concerned.

As this district's development is vested in the Autonomous council, the North Cachar Hills Autonomous council can play an active role for preservation and development of the rich cultural heritage of the hills tribe of Assam in general and of the Dimasas in particular. The council can take initiative in incorporating

training in the traditional attire of the tribes of the district through handloom and textile department and also in establishing Dance and Music Schools to impart training to the newer generation. The department of Education and Culture can frame policy for this. Moreover, the National organizations of the Dimasas like the Jadikhe Naiso Hosom, Dimasa Lairidim Mel, the newly formed Dimasa Literary Elite Society, All Dimasa Student Union, etc, can also actively work in this respect. If all the agencies and organizations work on a composite programme we may expect of a living cultural heritage of the Dimasa people despite any threat.

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