

## Ecological Significance of the Traditional Beliefs and Practices of Dimasa Kachari Tribe

*Kailash Kumar Chatry\**

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The Dimasa Kachari tribe has its own distinctive social setting. This social setting has its own culture, tradition and religious beliefs and practices which are related to the land they inhabit, and nature. The land and nature are the sources of their subsistence economy, culture, history and religious heritages. Without the land and nature these factors have no meaning and value in their lives. Therefore, it is not wrong to say that their religious system is natural religion.

### **The Dimasas**

The Dimasa Kacharis, and other Kachari groups like the Bodo-Kacharis, the Koches, the Rabhas, the Lalungs, the Tipperas, etc., of North-East India refer to the same stock of people. Racially the people of this stock belong to the *Great-Bodo* race, and linguistically they belong to the *Tibeto-Burman* group.<sup>1</sup> The anterior home of these people was in Western-China, near the sources of the Yang-tze-Kiang and the Hwang-ho rivers, from where a large number of them moved, probably in the beginning of the first millennium B.C., down the courses of the Chindwin and the Irrawadi rivers, in Burma, and then, the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, and started settling down in the valleys of these rivers and also in the remote hills adjacent to these valleys.<sup>2</sup>

The present habitation of the Dimasa Kachari tribe is mainly concentrated in the North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong, Cachar and Nowgong districts in Southern Assam. The Dimasas, excepting the ones inhabiting the rural areas of north Cachar Hills district, are mostly Hinduised. The process of Hinduisation of the Dimasas, most probably, began from 1526 A.D., the year in which the capital of Dimasa Kingdom was sifted from Dimapur, in Nagaland, to Maibang, in North Cachar Hills.<sup>3</sup>

### **Traditional Religious Beliefs and Practices**

Though the Dimasas claim to be Hindus, their religious knowledge and rites are much different from those of the Hindu religious system. They have their own age-old religious heritages, that are animistic in nature, transmitted to them by their ancestors orally. Hinduism has not been able to engulf their natural religious rites and practices, inherited from the their

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\* Rev Kailash Kumar Chatry is Lecturer of Religions, Serampore College.

forefathers, even though the Dimasas of all four regions have been feeling the strong undercurrent of Brahmanical Hinduism for more than two centuries. The credit goes to the traditional Dimasas, of rural areas in N.C. Hills, for preserving their invaluable ancient religious heritages. The traditional Dimasas take pride in their age-old religious beliefs and practices.

For the traditional Dimasas religion means living in the spontaneous awareness of, in encounter with, acknowledgement of and obedience to the active reality of the presence of *Madai and madais* (God and spiritual beings). Religious beliefs and practices permeate all aspects of life of the people. The traditional Dimasas do not have written creeds to be recited; instead creeds are contained in their hearts and minds. Therefore, each individual, family, clan and village community is a living creed on religious scripture. In other words, for the traditional Dimasas the “religion” exists within the whole system of their beings.

The traditional religion of the Dimasas is basically a community religion. To be truly human being is to belong to the whole community, including the ancestors and creation, and to do so involves the active participation in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community. Therefore, in the traditional religious system individual life and the community life are inseparable. Further, for the traditional Dimasas, beliefs and practices cannot be separated; they belong to one single whole. For them religion is doing, and without action religion carries no meaning.

The traditional religious system of the Dimasas does not have any founder or reformer as such. In other words their religious beliefs and practices are not centered on a great historical person or persons like modern world religions. Rather their religious system, like other primal religions, is earth or creation centered. Taylor, referring to the Africate traditional religions, said that an essential feature of primal religion is the sense of cosmic oneness.<sup>4</sup> M.M. Thomas wrote that, in the tribal world view there is a sense of spiritual continuity within which all animate beings and inanimate things, spirits, gods, etc., form an unbroken hierarchical unity of spiritual force, and in such process an individual self is just an extended universal self, living and actively participating in all parts of the totality.<sup>5</sup> So also the traditional religious system of Dimasas is a world face to face interaction with the living, the dead and with the whole totality of nature. In the traditional Dimasa worldview one cannot clearly distinguish between the sacred and secular, between religious and non-religious, and between the spiritual and material areas of life. All the cultural components are so neatly interrelated that if one element is disturbed the whole social set up is affected.

### **Observance of Tabu (Taboo)**

The word tabu or taboo is a polynesian term which means “Prohibition” or “forbidden”.<sup>6</sup> It could mean that is disapproved and not permitted because it is against social norm of behaviour. According to Henry Presler, “..taboo indicates those caution established to guard against supernaturally dangerous things, plants, animals or persons, specifically those possessing mana”.<sup>7</sup> Taboo extends to action or behaviour also. Any action or behaviour that violates the community norms brings supernatural retribution. The practice of taboo covers the whole of the activity of the traditional Dimasa society. However, taboo can be compensated by ritual acts.

In the traditional Dimasa Society it is taboo to go near or cut down a certain kind of trees, because it is believed that the spirits live in such trees. If anyone goes near the trees or

cuts them down the spirits are sure to inflict punishment upon the person and upon his/her clan in various ways. It is also prohibited to cultivate the land in which those trees are found. If any one wants to do cultivation in such plot of land, a *hojai* (priest) has to perform a sacrificial ritual at the place, before the land is cultivated, to pacify the guardian spirits of the trees. Thus, the traditional Dimasas pay respect to the trees and plants because they belong to *Madai* (God). This shows that, for the traditionalists, the trees and plants are not simple objects, but are alive and belong to the Supreme Being.

The traditional Dimasas do not cultivate a plot of *Jhum*<sup>8</sup> land for consecutive years. A plot of *Jhum* land is cultivated only for two to three years and, then, left uncultivated for several years. This system of cultivation allows the fertility of the land to rejuvenate. Besides, they do not cultivate such land where there are huge trees, rocks, sources of springs, and ponds. Such prohibition helps the land to preserve water and trees from pollution and destruction.

In the traditional religious system, taboo is also observed in every religious act. The days on which religious acts are performed are religious Holy-days. On such days no work is to be done by the whole community. These are the days of total rest from all sorts of works. On these days not only do human beings take rest, but the whole creation<sup>9</sup> takes rest along with the people. The sacred and Holy-days are the times to worship the *Madai* (God) through the *madais* (spiritual beings), and to rejoice. Such taboo provides opportunities for the people to be more charitable to themselves and others, to the animals and the plants around them, and to their land.

Almost all observances of the traditional Dimasas are in co-operation with the whole creation. These prohibitions are observed with an awareness that affects the whole community. If the observance of these taboos is neglected by the community, then, not only do the human beings suffer but, also, the whole creation is affected. Taboos and ceremonies are, therefore, cultural expressions that the whole creation is interconnected.

### Ritual Acts

In the traditional Dimasa society ritual acts establish a healthy relationship between the humans, Supreme Being and creation. In the ritual act the whole community, spirit beings and creation are involved. So to say, in the ritual act both visible and invisible worlds are brought together in one place, and relationships between them are established. Therefore, ritual builds horizontal and vertical relationships. It builds closer relationship among the members of the community and between humans and creation, which can be called horizontal. It also re-establishes the relationship between the humans, Supreme Being (*Madai*) and creation, which can be termed as vertical relationship.

In the ritual acts the history and primordial time or *illud tempus* are regenerated. The ritual acts are the repetition of what has been decreed in *illo tempore* by the *Madai* (God) through their first ancestors.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in every ritual act the archetype is recreated and re-established. In and through these ritual acts the profane world is made sacred world.

Further, the ritual acts are performed "to recall and renew" the experiences of encounters with the sacred *hierophanies* (self disclosure of the holy) and *kratophanies* (revelations of overwhelming power).<sup>11</sup> The traditional Dimasas, in their day-to-day lives, encounter such reality in nature.

### **Integrity of Nature and Culture**

In the traditional Dimasa worldview, life is understood as an unbroken continuous whole; therefore, it is not divided into classes and sub-classes. In the observation of Nirmal Minz, creation is the fundamental factor of the tribal people's culture. He writes: "... tribals in India without any exception have been dependent on land and forests. Jungles, hills, mountains and plateau have continued to be their habitat since time immemorial, and have provided them with their livelihood.... Rivers and hills, the supernatural powers, and their consciousness of and reaction to them helped them form the tribal attitude to trees, plants, soil, water, sun and air. For all the tribals in India land and forest are God given. Land and forest cannot be owned but only used for the good of all. And, therefore, they cannot be bought and sold from a tribal point of view. Land and forest provide the cultural basis of the tribal people of India."<sup>12</sup>

One cannot talk about Dimasa culture without nature. Nature is source of their religious beliefs and practices, and culture.<sup>13</sup> Everything, that are material objects are not mere objects but factors contributing to their cultural heritage.

The traditional Dimasas depend upon nature for every activity. The land produces a good harvest because it is fertile, and also it gets enough rain. If there is no forest the land cannot retain its fertility, neither there will be enough rain for the plants to grow. The people celebrate agricultural festivals to thank the *Madai* and spirit-beings and to invoke them to bless the whole creation. In every ritual the people need firewood, plantain leaves, rice, fowls, animals and bamboo, which are provided by the nature. If any of the items is lacking a ritual cannot be completed. If the ritual ceremonies are not performed the traditional festivals will have no traditional value. Then, the festivals will simply become social gatherings. It is because of nature the culture is preserved. For the traditional Dimasas, nature is not mechanical system, but includes everything that is qualitative and spiritual.<sup>14</sup>

### **Inseparability of Nature and Religion**

It is impossible to perceive the traditional Dimasas' concept of nature without referring to their religious system. Nature is the fountain head of their religious beliefs and practices. It is their creed and religious scripture. They read the nature to become wise. They can tell what is happening, is supposed to happen, or had happened by studying the nature. They can know the past, present, and future through nature, because it is through nature the *Madai* reveals his will. Without nature the traditional Dimasas are like a vehicle without steering or a plane without compass. Nature is the gift of their *Madai*. The people, even though they do not know the habitation of this *Madai*, experience his continuous presence in their midst through the nature and natural objects. Their folktales remind them about the helpful animals and other creatures that provide them help in times of need; therefore, they are their close neighbours. Hence the traditional Dimasas and their religious system are closely associated to nature and all living and non-living things in it. They are distinguished only in the existential level.

B. Saraswati, on the tribal worldview, said that the best way to perceive the distinction is to think of the functional aspect of interrelatedness of all existing things and beings in the larger context of the cosmic process.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in the worldview of the traditional Dimasas, the creation holds the central place. In their religious system the whole creation is involved,

and no distinction can be made one from another. Without the nature the religious beliefs and practices are like fire in a picture, which burns nothing. The nature reminds them of the presence of *Madai, madais*, ancestors' spirits and other spirit brings in and around them. Therefore, nature, with all things and beings in it, is very crucial for the survival of their religious beliefs and practices.

### Creation Related History and Time

In the traditional Dimasa worldview the concept of history and time constitutes a central quality. It is already mentioned that nature holds a central place in the religious understanding of the people, so also, the people comprehend their history and time in relation to creation. Just to compare unsystematically, the western idea of history and time is understood as linear continuum. This creates a powerful conception of the possibilities of future changes, development and more blissful life or a life with more happiness and luxury. Expectation and hope become the core of life; the fear and the forces of nature are opposed to the idea of progress. The linear concept of history and time made people think that human beings are progressing continuously and entering into higher levels of existence. In the technological society time is like a commodity which can be used, bought and sold. For them whatever is gone is past, and cannot be regenerated. This notion gave rise to individualism. Progress is made at the cost of destruction of nature. Human beings became the slaves of time.<sup>16</sup>

The traditional Dimasas experience time and history in a circular way. In their understanding, time is a composition of different events which have taken place, which are to occur immediately, and those which are supposed to take place sometime after. The religious acts purify the land and the people, and make the people experience "Great Time" or "Age of Gold".<sup>17</sup>

For the traditional Dimasas the whole creation is, in one or another way, religious, because it is wholly involved in their beliefs and practices. The natural objects are not mere objects but have religious significance, because, these objects are related to the people's religious system, so, they are the objects of honour. They remind the people of the power of *Madai* and *madais*, their ancestors and *ab origine*. The natural objects speak in symbolic language to warn the people of the coming danger and misfortune. This is why the people are in constant touch with nature and natural objects to learn what is about to happen. In divination, too, they use the natural objects. Without nature and natural objects the people have no history and time.

The traditional Dimasa's life moves along with the cycle of the earth. The people's understanding is that the year comes and goes in an unending cycle. It is like day and night or waning and waxing of the moon. The *Jhum* felling season is sure to be followed by *jhum* burning and sowing season. Similarly, the festival season is sure to come in the end to give enough time for recreation and rejoicing. The last season of the year is not the end of a year, but it is the beginning of another cycle. The same is the case with the life of the people. When a child is born, he or she is sure to grow old and die and be born again in the family or in a relative's family. This is how the people experience time and history in a circular way. For them past and future are the experienced present.<sup>18</sup>

### Maintenance of Ecological Balance

The traditional Dimasas are very much concerned for the eco-system. If eco-system is disturbed their life and religious system will be in peril. Therefore, they do not destroy forests haphazardly, do not kill animals unnecessarily, do not catch fish out of season, and do not pollute water with human excrement. Land forest, animal, fish and water are gifts of *Madai*, and the people are related to them and through them to *Madai*. They hunt only in season so that animals can breed and grow in number. To catch fish they apply only traditional methods, that also only in a particular season. They do not touch or cut down certain kinds of trees, and do not cultivate those areas where those trees are available. This is how they maintain ecological balance.

### Evaluation and Conclusion

The modern people have the tendency to consider the traditional people as illiterate, uncultured, boor and primitive. But these people have more understanding about the nature than the modern so-called civilised people, because they are in constant touch with it. They know the value of nature in the human life, and that it belongs to the Supreme Being (*Madai*). They know that if nature is disturbed the whole human race will vanish from the earth. For them nature is more important than their individual life. An individual, for them, is nothing in comparison to nature. Therefore, they do not vie for wealth more than what they need or exploit nature to obtain it.

These people have been cultivating land for centuries and centuries without letting it lose its fertility. The modernity is yesterday's child, which has, in a short time, almost destroyed the nature. Wherever it goes it brings destruction in the name of civilization or industrialization. It helps few and brings troubles and sufferings upon many. The traditional people living in the remote villages even today, are unaware of pollution, diseases like aids and cancer, poverty and oppression. They are living in harmony with nature and the creator. Their society is one of the best societies where there is no fighting for land or wealth, no oppression, no class system and no destruction of nature. They worship and honour nature because it gives life to the whole human race. They dance, sing, rejoice and celebrate rituals with nature because it is the source of their everything. Can one call them illiterate, uncultured or primitive just because they do not participate in what is called modern civilization, the monster which goes around destroying the supreme Being's beautiful and life-giving creation ?

### NOTES

1. B.N. Bordoloi, G.C. Sharma Jhakur, and M.C. Saikia, *Tribes of Assam*, Part I. Guwahati: Tribal Research Institute, 1987, p.36
2. *Ibid.*
3. B.N. Bordoloi, *The Dimasa Kacharis of Assam*, Guwahati: Tribal Research Institute, 1984, p.30.
4. John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion*, London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1977 (fifth impression), p.54.
5. M.M. Thomas, "Modernization of Traditional Societies and Struggle for New Cultural Ethos", in *Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, October 1966, p.429.
6. Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984 (Third edition), pp.34-35.
7. H.H. Presler, *Primitive Religion in India*, Madras: CLS, 1971, p.10.

## ECOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRADITIONAL BELIEFS

8. *Jhum* cultivation is a shifting cultivation practiced by the tribals in North-East India.
9. Creation here means the world in which they live. It is a micro as well as macro world for them.
10. Cf. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Trans. By William R. Trask. New York: Bollingan Foundation, 1965 (Second printing), pp.21-22.
11. Evan M. Zuesse, "Ritual" in *the Encyclopaedia of Religion*. Vol.12. Ed. by Mircea Eliade. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987, p.407.
12. Nirmal Minz, "Cultural Identity of Tribals in India," in *Social Action*, Vol.42. January – March, 1993, p.34.
13. The traditional religious system and culture of the Dimasa are interrelated to each other.
14. K.K. Chatry, "Significance of Agricultural Festivals of Dimasa Kacharis in Assam" (Unpublished M.Th. thesis, Senate of Serampore College), pp.115-116.
15. Baidyanath Saraswati, *Tribal Thought and Culture*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1991, pp.17-18.
16. John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1969, p.19.
17. See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, *op.cit.*, p.112
18. K.K. Chatry. *op.cit.*, pp.118-120.