The Assamese as Reflected in Dimasa Folklore: Excerpts from a Song Jiniba Raji

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Assam is a land of great diversity inhabited by different ethnic communities belonging to different races and linguistic groups. Having migrated at different times, each of these groups is endowed with rich and distinct cultural practices. Over the centuries, a new culture developed in the valley along the Brahmaputra as a result of social interactions amongst these disparate groups. It is this culture that evolved to be ‘Assamese’. Some of the groups blended traits completely with the new culture, whereas others maintained their distinctiveness despite having made sizable contribution to the formation of the Assamese culture, like the Dimasas.

While its antiquity is obscure, its medieval history is relatively known through the various Buranjis (chronicles) maintained by the Ahoms, as the medieval Dimasa kingdom remained a formidable adversary of the Ahom monarchy till its dissolution in 1832. In the later part of rule, the Dimasa monarchy came under the influence of Brahmanism and Vaishnavite cult. It was during this period that substantial literatures were produced by the Dimasas, mostly in Assamese, Bengali and Sanskrit. However, large sections of the community remained pre-literate and possessed a large corpus of oral literature that includes a vast genre of ballads, folksongs, folktales, hymns and riddles amongst others that responded to the political and cultural reality around them. There is a distinct class of songs that speaks of encounter with other neighboring and distant communities. There are different songs narrating the Dimasas’ encounter, both friendly and hostile, with different groups such as Kukis, Nagas, Burmese etc. These songs recount tragic defeat or heroic triumph over such neighbours.

The song under discussion is titled Jiniba Raji, the nearest translation of which would be Our Country/Land. It narrates the misfortune of being dispossessed of land. The song begins by offering obeisance to the Gods and Goddesses worshipped by ‘grandfather and grandmother’ and recollects the affluence of their land in the days gone by, where ‘rice and cotton used to grow all by themselves’. It says, however, that days are changed and they are ‘forced to’ live with the Ahoms as neighbours. The song portrays the Assamese as cunning and expert in scheming. At one point, the song narrates that the Ahoms are asking for land measuring a blade of straw/thatch. It is commonly believed that the Ahoms at the time of their advent requested the Dimasa King to allot land for their settlement. The blade of straw is used to denote the gradual occupation of their ancestral lands by the Ahoms. It exhorts the members of the community not to adopt the ‘Ahom culinary and dress culture’ and uphold their own. The song ends with strong hope that the days of gold and silver would indeed return one day.

There is extensive use of metaphor in the song. The growing of rice and cotton all by themselves, are actually used to narrate the fertility of land. The use of words such as ‘gold-decked swaying hands’ and ‘silver-clad waving hands’ represent the affluence of the people. The use of the phrase ‘forced to be neighbour with the Ahoms’, though implicit, points to the military reverses suffered against the Ahoms and consequent loss of territory. Similarly the use of ‘continue to push boundaries’ is reference to the Ahom expansionism leading to constant military conflict. From the start to the end several references are found to ‘god and goddess of forefathers’ and ‘paternal skill and maternal skill’. Towards the end the song, it is narrated with conviction that the days of gold and silver would return. But the song sets some conditions for the return of the good old days. It calls upon the members of the community not to idle away time. It would return only if their cultural distinctiveness as a community is maintained. If folklore “encompasses various aspects of expressive behavior as dialogue between human groups and their physical and social environment” (Reddy & Durga, 2008, p.3), the song helps in explaining cultural formation and change. It is a reflection of the historical experience that the Dimasa society went through.

But how does the song reflect the community’s perception toward the Assamese as claimed in the title of this essay while it narrates only its political contest with the Ahoms. A small detour shall reveal the answer to this. Dimasa typically uses different ethnonyms for different communities it has come in close contact with, for instance Magam-sa for all the various groups of Nagas, Phana-sa for the Karbis etc. In the song, the term used to refer the Ahoms is ‘Asimsa’.
However, the same name is used by the Dimasas to refer to the Assamese. This terminological dissonance needs a little explanation as both the Ahoms and the Assamese are actually two different categories. The Ahom is an ethnic group that migrated to Assam in the early thirteenth century, whose six hundred years of rule was instrumental in the formation of geographical category called Assam, while the Assamese, usually meant to denote people living in Assam, is rather a complex and politically loaded term. The non-recognition of differences between these two categories of people derives from its folk perception which may be explained in terms various changes the region underwent in the medieval times.

The term *Asimsa* was originally used for the Ahoms. It is to be noted here that most Dimasa words are derivatives. They called the Ahoms so because they were known to have migrated from Siam or Shyam by the Dimasas. The term *Asimsa* is changed version of *Ha-shyam-sa* meaning son of land of shyam. (the suffix *sa* is used by Dimasa to denote any community, i.e. *ha-di-sa*, Bengalis as son of wet paddy field, *gufu-sa*, the white man (son) or European). The Dimasas term of *Asimsa* referring to the Ahoms extended to the other groups living in the land of Ahoms. Interestingly, they share close emotional bond to their agnates living in the land of Ahoms and refrain from designating them as *Asimsa*. Many scholars believe that the term Assam finds origin in this word *ha-shyam-sa* or *Asimsa*.

It would be convenient to draw the conclusion that the type of songs discussed in this essay forms a part of peoples’ memory. Their performances are actually recounting of events in the past which shaped the community’s destiny. Every act of performing this act of retelling is similar to rereading past history, though the act of reading itself cannot be put beyond context. The context of reading is crucial in shaping contemporary public perception over issues and events, especially amongst people ‘without history.’

The Song (translated by the author):

O’ Lord Almighty of my artless grandfather/ I bow to you in the east
O’ Goddess Almighty of my innocent/guileless grandmother/ I bow to you in the west
Lend your ears o’ my elderly folks/ Lend your ears o’ my brothers and sisters
Cotton weaved cloth by itself / In our land rice grew by itself
Gold decked the swaying hands/ Silver clad the waving hands.
These days, we are forced to be Assamese neighbours
These nights, we are forced to be fishermen’s friends

The Assamese continues to push our boundaries/
The fishermen continue to fish our waters
The Assamese is asking for Land/ Measuring the blade of a straw/thatch
The fisherman is asking for water/ Measuring a throttle
The Assamese are foresighted in thoughts/ The fishermen are deft diplomats
Lend your ears o’ my brothers and sisters/ Do not sleep away the hours
Do not idle away the times/ Wake up o’ fellow brothers and sisters
Arose o’ fellow elderly folks

Lest you wake up/ Paternal skill will be lost
Lest you arise/ Maternal skill will be lost
In grand old book thou shall find the paternal skill
Crafted in designs of hand fans belong the maternal skill

Do not learn the way Assamese eat/ Do not learn the way Fisherman dress
Will eat the fathers’ way/ Will dress the mothers’ way
If paternal working skill not abandoned/ Golden days would return
If maternal weaving skill not abandoned/ Silvery nights would return
Again gold shall deck the swaying hands
Once more shall sway silver clad hands
Judi shall flow in torrents/ Khaji shall form hillocks
Fawn shall fickle around six hills/ When gold shall deck the swaying hands
Shall consume fruits of six banyans
Dance till headgear falls/ Sway hands till rikhaosa slips.

Judi—shortened from of Judima, meaning Dimasa traditional rice beer.
Khaji—meat or vegetables served with rice beer or any other form of drink.
Rikhaosa—a piece of cloth worn like stole or chador by women.

References