

Being Dimasa: Caught in the Revolving Door of Identities

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Abstract: *Assertions of self-determination by numerically small communities like the Dimasas are layered in many kinds of complexities. They are othered in regions that are themselves othered by the nation-state. The main theme in this paper is that of relationships forged between a community by descent and community by the political association as a form of self-determination.*

Jai Bhim to all,

People would ask me: being a tribal woman from Assam, how are you connected to the Bahujan philosophy and movement? So, I felt that with this talk I'd like to introduce myself and how I felt connected with the Bahujan philosophy and the movement, what I expect from it, how I am working and engaging with it on an everyday basis. I also want to talk about how I was readily accepted into the Bahujan fold, and could associate, learn from and make my small contribution to the Bahujan movement. I would like to share this experience today.

I'll be making my presentation in three parts. Firstly, I would like to talk about my own community, the Dimasa community. Secondly, I want to talk about my introduction to Bahujan philosophy and the movement: what I have gained from it, and learnt from it. Thirdly, I would like to share what I feel about and envisage as the future of this movement, and where I or my community, or even the larger community from our region fit into it. Many might not agree but I really feel we do (fit in). We really have to form this Bahujan unity.



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Now, when we start talking about the history of Assam, we start with the Axoms who entered the Brahmaputra valley in 1228 CE i.e. the 13th century CE. When they moved into Assam from upper Burma, they first encountered this group of people as mentioned in their chronicles— which they call the Axom Buranjis— from a state, which, at that point in time, was the Dimasa state. In fact, they referred to these people in their Buranjis as “Timisa”, considered to be a corruption of the word Dimasa.

The Dimasas, and other tribes of the North-Eastern region, are racially of the Indo-Mongoloid stock, and linguistically speak one of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. Now coming specifically to the Dimasas: at present, we live in the central and southern parts of Assam, as well as in Nagaland, in and around the city/town called Dimapur, which was also the capital, at one point in time— I think in the 13th century CE— of the Dimasa king, and hence it is called Dimapur. Presently, we constitute a population of about 1.2 lakh individuals, as per the last census. This is an approximation that I have reached at from the mother language indicator from the last census, and it may be a little more than this, but not less. Although, we are distributed in different districts of Assam, as well as in Nagaland, besides a small population in Manipur; the largest population of Dimasas is in the Dima Hasao district of Assam. It is a hill district, governed under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, which gives autonomy to the hill tribes in different parts of North-East India, and so we run our own social, political and economic administration. Culturally, Dimasas practice ancestor worship and follow the patriclan as well as the matriclan systems. We have our own clan deities. Clans have their own sacred groves or sacred spaces that are called Daikhos.

I was born in a town called Haflong, which is the headquarters of the Dima Hasao district. It is an old hill station, established under the British regime in the early 1900s when the railway connecting Bengal to Burma was built. With the introduction of railways, the North Cachar hills formed a passage up to Burma. The town is constituted mainly of tribal communities, and some non-tribal ones. Since the foundation of the town was laid by the British colonial regime, we had these Pathans coming in from the North-West Frontier Province to lay down railway lines. The first school that I went to, St. Agnes High School, was established by French sisters in 1918. I still remember that my school had a huge hall and the support structure of the hall was made of these railway tracks that had been put up as pillars, holding up the roof. The sisters would tell us that the Pathans came and helped them build the school, giving these tracks as pillars, and there was a bunker – we used to call it Igloo. It may have been built during the time of the Second World War under the threat of attacks.

We had quite a cosmopolitan culture growing up; we had all these communities, and the Pathans had brought their Hindi with them. Although my region became a part of Assam, while growing up, we did not know a word of Assamese. Our lingua franca back home was this pidgin Hindi that was called the Haflong Hindi. I do not think any Hindi speaker would call it Hindi but we called

it Haflong Hindi, the link language being Hindi that was brought by the Pathans who had come at that point in time, and left afterwards. And then we had all these tribal language words, Bengali words, Nepali words mixed in. That was what we spoke growing up. Later on, specifically in the early 2000s, when a lot of ethnic conflicts started, we became much more aware of our own ethnic and tribal identities. But before that I did not have much of that awareness. It is not that such contestations and conflicts were not there, but growing up as a school kid I did not really feel that I was different from the other kids around, or anything like that. This is an experience of Dimasas only from the hills. We have Dimasas in the Cachar plains and also in the Barak valley. But their experience, again, would be different. There we have Dimasas who were kings at some point in time when we had the capital in Khaspur in Barak valley in Cachar. They converted to Hinduism, especially the royalty. They were brought under the Brahminical fold. Some of them took up Hinduism where they started calling themselves not Dimasas, but Barman Cacharis. They would even wear the janeu (sacred thread). This has led to certain tensions between the hill Dimasas and the plain Dimasas of the Barak valley, though things are perhaps better today with multiple means of communication slowly opening up. We are still following our traditional faith and our own ancestor worship. In the Barak valley, too, they did so, but then there were certain changes.

While talking about my experiences as a Dimasa woman specifically of the hill regions, our engagement with the Assamese caste society of the Brahmaputra valley or the Bengali society of the Barak valley, was quite limited. It was not a constant or necessary engagement with them, especially with regard to caste relations. That's why growing up I did not have much awareness of caste. We had a good number of tribal populations there, and although we had some Bengali population and other Hindu communities, they were smaller in numbers. The Muslim population has always been less; even today it is very less. It was later that Assam government officers would be transferred there. The Bengali community has been there but since they are smaller in number, there hasn't been much of an engagement that would offer us an intricate understanding of caste at the social level. Growing up, I didn't have much awareness about ethnic differences and caste discrimination. But I do remember certain instances. We had this paper in school on Assam history. There is a chapter in Assam history on the Dimasa kingdom. As Dimasas we have our own origin myths and in our origin myths we have the tale of Mother Earth and the Father and how Dimasas originated from them. They are called Arkhidima (mother) and Bangla raja (father).

When the kings converted to Hinduism, the Dimasas started drawing their lineage from Ghatotkach. According to them, Hidimba was married to Bhim, their son was Ghatotkach and we are his descendants. This myth was given in the Assam history books as the history of the Dimasa kings as well as being the lineage of Dimasas. I still remember the version given in the school textbook. Hidimba is supposed to be a *rakshasi* (female demon). It was written that Dimasas are the descendants of Ghatotkach who is the son of *rakshasi* Hidimba and Bhim. We studied that in school and a friend of mine mocked me saying, "you people are the descendants of this *rakshasi*". I was pretty offended by that but I really did not know how to answer her. She wasn't much aware

either, and we had, after all, read all that in school. That is still being taught as history and we are being told that this is our history. And our own origin myths do not feature in the school syllabus. It was something that struck me at that point of time. Over the years, I forgot about it. Soon after that—in 2003 to be precise— ethnic conflict began in the district. Ethnocentric assertions had begun after the Assam Movement and there was a sort of domino effect in the state. Once a community started with the rhetoric of being the ‘sons of the soil’ you’d see different communities doing the same. Especially for Dimasas, the mobilization happened with the demand of an ethnic homeland while stressing on the royal lineage. Going back to that idea of princely and royal lineage, and the idea that we are indigenous, we also started demanding our own homeland in our district. Now the thing is that in our district we have all these different communities and it is under Sixth Schedule [of the Constitution]. So once Dimasas started asking for their homeland other communities too started asserting themselves. It had started in 1990, but in 2003 it blew up into a violent ethnic conflict with mass killings and murders. I still remember I was in school at that time and was about to appear for my matriculation exams. The community with which we were in conflict was the Hmar tribe. They are also another hill tribe and they are in Manipur, Mizoram, Assam and many other states. Some of my very close friends in school were Hmar. We had been sharing homework, tiffin all this while, but after the conflict we became ‘enemies’. There were curfews, and it was quite terrible and some of our young friends got shot in market places. I have also lost family members to the conflict. There was a lot of internal displacement. It was quite harrowing!

We used to have these night-time vigilant groups. Young boys in the colony would gather. I remember my mother telling me that you should also be armed with a bamboo stick or something and if the enemy comes in you should hit them with it. I was a school kid at that time. At that point in time all of us were up in arms against the other community—the Hmar community. Then the state was able to bring things under control, and the community leaders were also able to have some negotiation; somewhere that discussion began, because too many people had died on both sides. I moved to Guwahati for my higher education after passing out from school. Some of my senior friends lost years due to the conflict and they too had to move to Guwahati. I remember moving to Guwahati for my higher education, and there, after many years I met this Hmar friend from school again. I remember having this discussion with her and she telling me that they were so scared that Dimasas would be attacking them. And I told her we were so scared that Hmars would be attacking us. I still remember that realization, the way it dawned on me. We were friends in school, then we became enemies, and after that we met again in another city, and she said something to me which was very similar to my own experience of having lived in that kind of fear. And we realized that we were not even enemies to begin with. Our experiences were actually the same.

Once the ethnic conflicts began, they became a recurring thing. There was always insecurity and so many of us who could move out, did so, and went away to study in Guwahati. Guwahati was

very alienating in the beginning, since we were from hill tribes who did not speak the Assamese language. Culture-wise too, there was a lot of difference. We were under the Sixth Schedule, and it was formed on the basis of that idea of difference itself: hill tribes are different from the people of the plains and hence they will be administered of their own accord. That's why we never learned Assamese. It is not that the politics of the Brahmaputra valley had no impact on the hills. The state capital is in Dispur. But we never had any association with the culture of the Brahmaputra valley. Because of language issues, a lot of us who had moved to Guwahati did badly in exams. We could never really fit in.

I was always interested in engaging with the student politics, even when I joined higher secondary at Cotton College in Guwahati. That place was deeply influenced by caste Hindus. All the symbols around, all the songs that they would sing and everything was like that. We felt alienated. "Joy Ai Axom" ("Hail Mother Assam" in Assamese) doesn't really mean anything to a person from the hills. We have our own movements for an autonomous state. All those university and college anthems did not mean much. It was not as though they tried to connect with the hill communities either. There was no political engagement with the Assamese community as such. I was engaging with my own community people, the Dimasas, who were studying there. We would do our own freshers' and farewell parties. Political and other such engagements were very less. Language was definitely a huge barrier. It was also because our numbers were quite low, and ultimately, it was a different place for us.

Even in my Masters', which I also did at Guwahati University, I saw the workings of different organizations. There was the National Students Union of India (NSUI), and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) that used to be quite popular in Cotton College. But I didn't really see an active students' organization, maybe because I wasn't really around either. Elections would happen on the basis of hostels. As a non-Assamese person that space was never open to me because I did not speak the language, and culturally I was different from them. The activities of other community organizations were also very limited. Our community organization would restrict themselves to the community work. I don't think we were doing very good work or anything.

After that I worked for some time in Guwahati and then moved to Hyderabad Central University. It was a different place altogether. My association with Bahujan Students' Front (BSF) in Hyderabad Central University (HCU) gave me a whole new vision and perspective of life and where I stand, what I do with my life, about whatever skill I have and what I use it for. All those ideas came together because of the association with Bahujan ideology and BSF. I have to give a lot of credit to what I have learnt from Round Table India. I remember attending one of the programs conducted by BSF in which we had a panel of speakers: Professor Kancha Illiah, Prof. K.Y. Ratnam, Sowmya Dechamma and Bhangya Bhukya. For the first time, I heard people talking about an autonomous and united ideology where all our communities could come together. Back home, at one point, it had become very ethnocentric and I always found it quite restrictive. In

Guwahati too, I couldn't connect with what they would call "pan-Assamese". Although they called it "pan-Assamese", I never found my space there. But at HCU I could easily connect, I saw all the programs that were being conducted by different organizations such as the Bahun Students' Front (BSF) and Ambedkar Students Association (ASA). Earlier I thought that my community was marginalized, but I did not understand the nature of our marginalization. There, at HCU, I understood what my people back home have to undergo on a daily basis, at an individual and at a community level, the kind of discrimination. But now, it has given me a much clearer perspective and I have understood where the problem is with the Indian state.

In the North-East we always blame the centre for giving North-Eastern states the 'step-motherly' treatment and that was the understanding of the cause behind the marginality of the region. If you take up any book on Assam, the first thing will be that our region is marginalized and the underlying thing is that the centre is giving us step-motherly treatment. But it doesn't mean anything! What we should have been taught was that Indian state is basically colonialism by the upper castes centred in Delhi following a supremacist Brahminical ideology, colonizing all the other communities along the length and breadth of this country. Had we been told this in school, we could have identified the problems our communities were facing and we could have understood the nature of marginalization that we have been facing. We could have understood who the real oppressors were. Before this, we did not understand. And as a result, we would fight among ourselves; we have had so many fratricidal killings. One of my own uncles was killed by mercenaries from our own community. We are warring with the communities like the Hmars and the Nagas who themselves are in no position to fight against the larger oppressors. We are looking only at the local level. A larger perspective is not even there. That larger perspective of what exactly is wrong with this country and what exactly our communities were facing, I only got a clear understanding of it in my engagement with Ambedkarism and Bahun ideology.

What I have learnt from our discussions on the campus is that I could identify the different problems. By this engagement I could actually identify solutions that could aid my community in fighting against the real oppressors in this country. Otherwise, in the North-East we can't really make head or tail of who the real oppressor is in this country. We end up fighting only amongst ourselves for scraps that are thrown at us by the centre. The North-East is very rich when it comes to natural resources. All of that is being taken away even today. Sometimes people tell us, "*you Tribals, you don't even pay taxes, being in the Sixth Schedule. You people are a burden on the country*". I really want to tell them that okay we may not be paying taxes, but we do not get pensions either. We do not get regular salaries also. We have so many issues with the functioning of the Sixth Schedule at this point of time. But I can guarantee that all the stones that have been taken from mountains and the hills of my region that have been made into cement are the resources that are building the cities in this country: in Guwahati, in Delhi and so on. Yet people will keep blaming us saying, "*you people don't pay taxes in this country, and you are meritless as you have reservations*".

I come from a community which has been dejected. We blame ourselves for all our problems and we are not able to see the larger issues; we think we are a very corrupt people. It could also be because many of us are only now coming into higher education. Other issues such as high segregation and lack of development are there. But I think that if a great change could take place in Uttar Pradesh where a Dalit woman became the chief minister of a Brahminical state, it gives a lot of hope to everyone else who are oppressed by the system.

Sometimes, when I really feel dejected, I just have to take up some of the writings of Babasaheb. I don't even have to go through the entire length and breadth of all the works of Babasaheb. But if you just read some of the quotes, I find that connection where I find this inspiration from all the Bahujan icons each and every day and I really want to give this back to my people back home also. Because, as a community we are at a stage where we are not looking for solutions anymore or maybe we are not adept at finding solutions because the mainstream keeps distracting us. The mainstream will show us icons who are but frauds. People are still worshipping all these nationalist figures who have cheated all our communities all this while.

Like I said, I have gained a lot from the (Bahujan) movement and from its ideologues. And, as I said, many may have problems with it. I remember there was an article in Round Table India by someone from Manipur and someone responded saying they had a problem and that we do not associate with the term Bahujan. I feel that maybe they haven't really had an engagement with the ideology. They are very skeptical of the mainland, and I do not blame them because we haven't really had proper engagement. But I think that is a problem. I feel that we do have a place in this movement and we have to engage with this movement because at the end of the day none of the communities in the region can fight this battle against the oppressive state system centred in Delhi all by themselves. Until and unless we form this larger alliance with the Bahujan communities in the mainland, it is going to be one hell of a task where we are going to be in battle only with our neighboring communities, fellow tribes and other oppressed communities, even oppressed Muslim communities in the region.

Last time I had a discussion with this Muslim friend from Assam and both of us agreed that we are being pitted against one another. Maybe we might make some immediate gains here and there, but other than that it is a lost battle. So, that engagement with Bahujan ideology is very much required and that is my aim, that is what I want to do. Every day, on a small basis, step by step, little by little, I try to engage with my own community first and with others too, on what our ideology means and how it can be used as a larger platform for all the oppressed communities to come together. It has already happened in the mainland. Somewhere, we might be going back to where we are becoming more and more fragmented also, which is again not much of a problem. I think such fragmentation happens but we have to keep the larger goal of unity in mind all the time.

I also feel that I want to engage with many of the communities in the North-East sharing with them that this is the right platform for us and that these are the groups (Bahujans) for us to be having larger alliances and solidarities with. With the Left we have tried and what has happened? Not much has happened. Renewed engagement is required there as well. Some of the communities in the North-East are trying to form alliances with the Hindutva groups. I have seen that people from my own community are being given some positions, and they are also now saying that we are Hindus and all of us are Ram-worshippers of yore. All of that is going on, but what I want to say is that they may have some little space in it but they are self-negating, whereas the Bahujan is not self-negating and that is the most important marker because all our identities are very much important to us.

When I say our identity and culture—which is again different from the caste Hindus—our ethnic identity, that is most important to our people. There is no negation of that. Here we can participate as equals and not by hiding our customs and practices and not by trying to be something that we are not. This provides a space for us where we can participate equally without negating our own selves and identities, and we can also form coalitions and platforms for all the oppressed people, all identities coming together.

Coming to the third part of it: what I have learnt from my own engagement with the (Bahujan) ideology and what I am doing with it now. I am back home now. I came back and I understood that there is a huge lacuna here when it comes to ideology. We have our own ethnic ideologies. Most of the people here are not into the left (ideology) these days, many people are moving towards the right and that is a huge danger here in the North-East. I wouldn't see it as being so much due to the influence of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) as such. Like I said, all through my school I was learning that we are descendants of Ghatotkach or Bhim. We are still being taught that in school, and then we have the mainstream media telling us various things. And all the cultural functions that happen are very Brahminical. At the same time, at the centre we have the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), and here at the state level we have the BJP, at the panchayat level too all officials are now of the BJP. There are so many other factors, and mainly economic reasons, that have pushed a lot of people into joining the right-wing forces here. And we have to counter that. At this point I don't see much hope from the left. At one point, they were very strong, but after that they have been considerably weakened.

The first thing I wanted to do when I returned home was the dissemination of our ideology. I have formed an academic group where I am trying to strengthen our socio-cultural institutions and working on knowledge production. Another thing is, like so many of the tribal communities in the northeast, we are not Hindus. We have our own animistic practices and ancestor worship. But in the census, all of us are counted as Hindus. If you are not Muslim or Christian you are Hindu for them. So many of these communities have been demanding the recognition of our own traditional religions. But the state has been forcing us to take up Hinduism, and now more and more people

will say, “yeah, we are Hindus”. So that kind of counter is very much required. We have to say that we are not this, and this is our religion, and we have to push on that and build on that.

I have also identified some friends who were there in Hyderabad Central University (HCU) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) with different Ambedkarite organizations, and we plan to disseminate information and conduct programs beginning from somewhere. Because people are not very open about caste here. They are afraid to open up about caste. I have seen that scheduled caste communities in Assam, the ones who are from Bihar and other parts such as Punjab and U.P., identify, more or less, as Assamese. They are really not forthcoming about these issues.

After the temple entry movement happened in Mahad in Maharashtra there was a temple entry movement in Assam too. The tribal communities and the scheduled caste communities—they were referred to as depressed classes—had formed a plain tribes association here and had asked for temple entry and entry into all the *satras*. We have *satras* here like there are *mathas* in north India. Before I started doing my own research, I had never come across any of it in the history books. You will never read about any of it in the history of Assam, so we have to do some more archival work for that. Besides that, so many of the tribal assertions have been against Brahminism in the state which have only been understood as tribal and ethnic assertions. But in the beginning, at least in the plains, the main problem was Brahminism, casteism and Brahminical Hinduism.

So, there was a lot of challenge, dissent and movements, but we are not being told about that history in that manner. We are being told about that history, but in some other form. Even now, if you look at the representation in our assemblies and then in all the jobs and everywhere else, historically, it is very clear that the entirety of the state is run by the upper castes. Yet, the anti-caste discourse has generally been lacking in the state. And a few of those who have spoken about it have been sidelined in academia also. There is a need to start that discourse. I want to do my own bit by building institutions at the community level, trying to strengthen networks with like-minded friends. In that sense, in the mainland, institutions are doing it very well like HCU, and maybe, to some extent, JNU. We have all these Ambedkarite organizations who are actually doing a good job in these institutions, and a lot of our people are also studying there, and they have been learning and I think we could have a good team here in the future with all anti-caste forces.

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