

# Weaving in indigenous Dimasa community of Assam

Social entrepreneurs can revive the age-old traditional knowledge by using social media and e-marketing platforms



Dimasa weaver Maimu Bathari with her daughter

**Abstract** Assam's Dimasa weavers are one of the oldest indigenous communities of North East India with their rich cultural traditions and aesthetics, but sadly remain hidden from exposure. Dwindling number of young weavers and lack of infrastructure, specifically market access, supply chains and limited government intervention are a major threat to the growth and very existence of the community.

**Author's Profile** Avantika Haflongbar, a Jamia Millia Islamia graduate, worked in the social service sector and lived in Delhi for 12 years before returning to Haflong, where she grew up. In this quiet and beautiful town, she collaborated with her husband Daniel Langthasa to start an NGO called TRYST Network. Her love for traditional textiles led Avantika to start ROOHI, a label that works with local craftswomen to reinvent traditional textiles and motifs.

## Indigenous weaving knowledge and culture of the Dimasas



Dimasas of Samparidisa village in Dima Hasao district of Assam. Photo ©R00HI

The Dimasas are one of the earliest aboriginal tribes of India. Dimasas consider themselves to be the descendants of the Brahmaputra river. The word 'Dimasa' is taken from three words of Dimasa dialect 'di' 'ma' and 'sa', which means 'water', 'big/ great' and 'son' respectively. So the literal meaning is, "the son or descendant of a big river". Dimasa ethnic group is one of the Scheduled Tribes of India and belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people. Dimasas now mostly inhabit the Dima Hasao district in the state of Assam in India. Dima Hasao is one of the two hill districts of Assam enjoying the status of Autonomous District under the provision of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

►► Weaving is an  
age old practice in  
Dimasa society.



Photo ©R00HI

Weaving is an age old practice in Dimasa society. The entire process of weaving was woman-centred in the Dimasa community, but in recent times few men have also started to weave. Expert women weavers are called 'Daokrigdi' and expert male weavers are called 'Daokrigdao'. Most girls in a Dimasa family start at a young age to learn weaving from their mothers or grandmothers by observation. They can weave both complicated patterns for occasional use as well as simple and plain clothes for everyday use. According to tradition, it was essential for a girl to learn weaving before marriage. Incompetence in weaving was regarded as disqualification for prospective marriage proposals. But in modern times this is not the case anymore. It is not merely a custom to observe but a means of independence for females of the community. Weaving is a lifelong association for many. A Dimasa woman will continue weaving until her body is too old to perform such activities. An old Dimasa lady, even when not working at the loom, would be rearing eri silkworms (*S. cinthya ricini*). Most of her activities would be revolving around weaving. But in recent times, the majority of women who take up other jobs do not weave once they start working, except for a few who still weave because of their strong sentiment for this traditional art.

**Hand-woven cotton cloth plays an important role in all the stages of life in a Dimasa community, starting from the birth of a newborn till death.**



'Rihmsao' - Traditional Dimasa shawl - ©R00HI





Photo credit: Sarpola Kemprai.

During the ritual known as 'Nana Dihonba', a ceremony for carrying a newly born child outside the house for the first time, while taking the baby out, the 'hojaijik' (first midwife) carries the baby in a folded 'rihmsao' in case of a baby boy and 'rikhaosa' in case of a baby girl.

It is customary to clothe a male or female dead body in complete traditional attire worn during their wedding and at their funeral.

A deceased male is covered with rihmsao and a female in 'rihjamphaingufu'. Rihmsao is a traditional shawl. It is usually woven in white or yellow colour. It has a particular design on its border.

Rihjamphaingufu is a plain white chest wrapper with a particular design.



Photo credit: Sarpola Kemprai.



## Folklores related to the origin of weaving

It is difficult to trace the origin of traditional loom 'daophang' in the Dimasa community due to lack of written documents and records. The traditional folklores, folk songs, and inscriptions on historical relics have to be the main source of information. But according to the legends and stories from the elderly people, it is believed that the usage of daophang existed at the beginning of the universe, which was completely uninhabited. There was neither sound nor air. It was only filled with water and immense silence. In this midst, two godly beings appeared – a male and a female. The male God was called Bangla Raja (Father of Dimasa Gods and King of Earthquake) and the female Goddess was called Arikhidima (Mother of Dimasa Gods/ Goddess with wings of a fairy). Arikhidima and Bangla Raja later fathered seven sons. But Arikhidima was not happy with her sons because they were very simple and content in their ways despite having divine powers. None of them had the desire to neither explore more nor create newer things to make the world an exciting place. Disappointed with her sons, Arikhidima left for the most suitable place to lay her eggs. At last she found a big, evergreen banyan tree in between the confluence of two rivers, Dilaobra and Sangibra.

This place was described as Utopia, with tall big leaves and branches of the banyan tree, which could not be broken in any storm. The land beneath the tree could hold as many as 1,000 animals; equal number of birds could live over the leaves of the tree. Arikhidima laid seven eggs and flew away. After seven days, all the eggs hatched themselves. From the first egg Lord Sibrai was born. Doo Raja, Wah Raja, Gonyung Raja, Brayung Raja and Hamyadao were born out of the next five eggs respectively. The seventh egg, which got rotten, is believed to have made way for all the evil spirits, sufferings and diseases into this world. Hence, the six Gods, from Sibrai to Hamyadao, are considered to be the ancestors of the Dimasas and also worshipped as their Gods. After living a long time by them these six God brothers went out looking for their Mother. Their first few attempts to search her were in vain but one fine day while returning to their birthplace they found their Mother weaving under the evergreen banyan tree. Among all beliefs, this legend is regarded as the most acceptable theory about the origin of the Dimasas and weaving.



The monolithic hut (stone house) of Maibang erected by Raja Harish Chadra Hasnusa in the 16th century.

photo credit - Mrs Snigdha Hasnu, District Museum, Haflong, Dima Hasao. 2013-2014.

## Folk songs related to weaving

Weaving and spinning are the core essence of a Dimasa community. The significance of weaving is often echoed in a number of Murithai songs (songs which are sung orally and by playing the traditional pipe like instrument called Muri).

1. "Agasi sari ha longphaiba, angjamgthangjaoya,  
Miya horhalongphaiba, angjangthangjaoya,  
Rikahosahoraigilidaophanggalamla" (2 times)

Meaning: "You came to pick me the night before yesterday but I could not go, you came to pick me yesterday too but I could not go, Rikhaosa in the loom, horai gili is yet to complete"

Rikhaosa is a chest wrapper and horai gili is a design to be woven in a rikhaosa.

The song indicates the dedication upon weaving of a cloth.

2. "Ninirihborihgadain, anirihborihgadain,  
Ninirihbohoraimin, anirihbohoraimin,  
phaidiberao, phaidiberaokhunanghakhliha (2 times)  
Ma madaisainribabasain se, phaidibailainang,  
Pa madaisainribabasain se, phaidibailainang"

Meaning: "Your cloth is new, mine too.

Your's cloth is horaimin, mine too horaimin

Come friends, come friends to the village headman's porch.

Mother God has given us this day, let's dance together.

Father God has given us this day, let's dance together."

'Horaimin' is a kind of design woven on the rikhaosa and 'khunang' means the village headman.

The song indicates the joys of wearing new woven clothes and dancing together at the God given day at the village headman's house.



Name of the pattern- Horaimin meaning gwai khaosha, an offering tray for betel leaves and areca nut. This cloth belongs to my mother in law and is thirty years old. This pattern is no longer being woven in modern times.

Photo © ROOHI



The song is from the perspective of a third person and the singer is telling a young Dimasa girl that all the clothes that she is getting to wear is because of her mother who weaves them for her. These type of folk songs are known as 'Murithai'. The song attached has been performed by Maiphal Kemprai.

**Link :**

[www.soundcloud.com/hbsdelhi/baidima-ni-murithai-by-maiphal-kemprai](https://www.soundcloud.com/hbsdelhi/baidima-ni-murithai-by-maiphal-kemprai)



## Weaving devices, techniques and patterns

Every Dimasa household has a daophang in their frontward or the backyard with a roofed area or else they have a separate room especially for keeping the daophang called 'daophangkho' (a room for the loom).



Weaver Minali Kemprai in her traditional wooden throw shuttle loom. © R00HI

### Types of daophang:

Nowadays, only three types of daophang are being used by the Dimasa weavers in the villages as well as in the town area.

#### **Yaoni/ bondo ni daophang (traditional wooden loom/ throw shuttle).**

This type of daophang is used by the majority of the Dimasa weavers. It is made of wood by an expert carpenter. It can be moved from one place to another.

#### **Khol ni daophang (throw and fly shuttle loom).**

This is also made of wood but a little bigger than the bondo ni daophang. It is moveable as well.

#### **Wah ni daophang/ danti/ kanti (traditional bamboo loom).**

## Technique and Patterns : Silk and Cotton Process



Khunthon meaning eri/endi silk © ROOHI

### Silk Process

Eri rearing is an age old tradition of the Dimasa women. Process of rearing eri worms is usually carried out in March-April and September-October, the most suitable seasons for its rearing. The women folk rear 'yungma' (silkworm, eripolu) to produce 'khunthon' (eri/ endi silk) and the cloth produced from this thread is called 'rihendi'. Eri silkworm feeds on castor leaves and kesseru leaves, which are majorly found in Dima Hasao district. Castor leaves are known as 'Radaolai'. It takes one month to complete a cycle of re-rearing, from egg larva to cocoon. At a certain time, the eri moth leaves the cocoon on its own. Eri silk spinning does not involve the killing of the silkworm. Hence, eri silk is known as Ahimsa silk or non-violence silk. Before spinning, the eri cocoons are boiled in 'khari', an alkali mixed with water, for around an hour. The khari used for boiling the eri cocoon is made from the charcoal of the castor stem. It is different from the other khari made from banana-stem ash. After boiling, the cocoons become thin. These are later dried in the sun and kept aside for spinning. The method of reeling is known as 'thakriluba' and the ball of endi/ eri thread is called 'khunthon'. For spinning the khunthon, a special tool known as 'thakri' (spindle) is required. The main fabric traditionally made by eri yarn is a shawl called 'rihthap'.



## Cotton Process

The Dimasa people conserved the khunphang/ cotton plant for weaving. In earlier days, it used to be cultivated in 'jhum' (slash-and-burn) method of farming land along with other crops. Previously, Dimasa women used to do cotton ginning in their homes, then spin it on spinning wheels. But in the recent past, cotton cultivation amongst the Dimasa community is on a decline. The yarn produced from cotton is called 'khundi' and the process of spinning the cotton is known as 'khundi luba'

Dimasas use plants as natural dye to colour their cotton yarns. They carry on the process of dyeing twice a year. They prepare red dye from the root of a wild raw indigo plant known as 'jengklong' and the method of dyeing black colour is prepared from the leaves of wild herbs known as 'gisim balai'. The dyeing process is generally done in winter. Before the yarn is dyed, it has to be kept out in the open at night for about a week. When the yarn becomes completely moist with dew, it is ready for dyeing. But this practice is on the verge of extinction and naturally dyed cotton yarns have been replaced by readymade multi-coloured acrylic yarns.

All the Dimasa designs, known as 'rikhu', before being woven in the fabric, are carried out in the traditional device known as 'gonthai'. We generally use 'wahdu ni gonthai' (gonthai made of thread). This kind of gonthai is made by cutting two hard bamboo sticks, vertically tying it with endi/ eri thread in 37 lines where, different colours of thread are allowed to hang horizontally. The horizontal colours of thread represent different rikhu.



Hamsmaidi Naiding Kemprai, 78-year-old lady from Dibarai village, Haflong. © ROOHI



'GONTHAI' © ROOHI

## Technique and Patterns : Motifs, Pattern and Design



Dimasa girls in their traditional attire 'Rajamphain Beren'

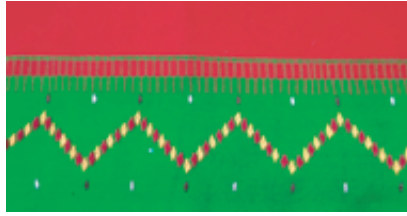
### Design Pattern

The rikhu or designs of the Dimasas look like 3D art, always colourful. Usage of the same colour in the rikhu is not followed. It includes geometrical designs, designs of plants, animals and nature. Each of the Rikhu has its own unique name and identity. One main characteristic of the rikhu is that the male rikhu/ design is completely different from the female rikhu/ design, and females are not allowed to wear anything with the male rikhu/ designs. There are recorded 159 designs/ rikhus with their distinctive names in the Dimasa textiles symbolising layers of soil, small water carrying jar, small oyster, small brinjal flower, tortoise, small crab and so on.





Name of pattern: Bathormai  
(Parrot's beak with one-line motif) © R00HI



Name of Rikhu: Upper Part is Misha Kroshi meaning one headed small animal, Middle part is Ruina Rengin meaning geometric design with two lines up and down motifs and Lower part is Dilam balai taijai representing eight fruits flowing in a river. © R00HI



Name of pattern: Baitha meaning paddle/boat oar. © R00HI



Name of pattern: Sampherma yasong meaning trunk of sampher tree. © R00HI



Name of pattern: Nagurlai represents the design of fish scale. © R00HI



Name of pattern: Gadha ni turisamin bathai meaning old fruit pattern from a bamboo shuttle. © R00HI

**Rihgu:** It is a wrapper, lower garment worn from the waist till the ankle. This is usually plain but can be woven in motifs. It can be of any colour. It may be smaller or bigger according to the age and size of the wearer. Normally, the size of the rihgu is 'muh bri' (four times the distance between the elbow and tip of the fingers of the hand).



Pink color Rihgu. Pattern 7. Name of Rikhu: Phraphrang jengreng meaning Banyan tree with crab and one-line motif. © R00HI



Dimasa girls in traditional Rajampahain Beren with Rihgu and Rikhaosa. © R00HI

**Rih jhamphain:** It is a chest wrapper, outer garment worn from chest to knees along with rihgu.

**Rikhaosa:** It is a shawl or a dupatta that is worn above the chest wrapper. It can also be used by men on occasions like marriage and dance.

**Rihgu rikhaosa (rigu set):** It is modern wear introduced in the recent past resembling a mekhala chador, a two-piece set adorned and popularised by the Assamese women. It is a semi traditional Dimasa wear consisting of two pieces.



Red Rigu Rikhaosa in Bathormai motif meaning parrot's beak with one-line motif. © R00HI



## Urgent need for infrastructure

Emergence of women entrepreneurs in the economy will help in building the economic independence of the weavers, improve the status of women, promote economic development and solve the problem of unemployment. But before that we need to work on the upgradation in skill and technological know-how. Since handloom is an age-old traditional activity in all the villages of our district, each and every targeted beneficiary requires training for skill upgradation, improved looms, design support for product development and proper work shed due to their poor economic condition. At the moment, very few looms supplied by the government actually reach the weavers. Most of the times, the beneficiaries of the loom provided by the government agencies cannot even weave, which results in total administrative failure.

The loom and yarn, when given to the rightful person, will only help keep the art alive. Majority of the weavers are from the villages and very marginalised. Many villages in our district are not connected with roads and have no electricity yet in this age and time. In order to preserve the enduring tradition of Dimasa handloom against the backdrop of globalisation, government bodies and non-government bodies should rigorously equip the weavers with the required loom, yarn and updated skills. Facilitating awareness, training on product development and design development are not visible in the handloom community of the Dimasas. The need for a textile park providing all essential facilities from pre-loom, on-loom to post-loom is also to be considered. Infrastructural support on the part of the government is required. The handloom industry of Assam should help Dimasa textile to be brought under the Geographical Indication (GI) tag.

Moreover, the younger generation have forsaken the art of weaving and have little interest as well. Since many of the children are sent away to towns and cities for higher and better education, the interest or the desire to work in the loom is dwindling. Weaving community in Dimasa society is undergoing a major change. With the passage of time, the practice of making natural dyes is also declining. Of late, a handful of elderly women are practising the art of natural dyes in the district. Weavers prefer to buy coloured yarn from the market, which offers a variety of shades, whereas, natural dye has limited shades. Cotton yarns are now being replaced by acrylic, zero ply and polyester yarns. In the thick of this transitional phase, with marketing and branding skills along with the support of handloom and textile departments of the government, social entrepreneurs from Dima Hasao can revive the age-old traditional knowledge of weaving by using social media and e-marketing platforms. Challenging times are ahead for the weavers of the Dimasa community and technological and infrastructural intervention is the urgent need of the hour that will keep up local practices, giving a much needed boost to the centuries-old traditional art form.

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## Sources

This study was done by visiting Phrapso and Dibarai villages of Haflong town in Dima Hasao district. The methods of weaving were observed and discussed with Maimu Bathari, Kerola Naiding, Elbita Naiding, Baby Phonglo, Maiphal Kemprai, Janata Haflongbar and Minali Kemprai. All of them are expert weavers in the Dimasa community. Information was given by the elderly people of Samparidisa, Gunjung and Phrapso villages of Dima Hasao.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Geographical Indication (GI) is a sign used on products that have a specific geographical origin and possess quality or reputation that are due to that region.

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## References

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