

# Children of the Big River

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The Brahmaputra River defines the stories of the origin, emergence, conflicts, and regeneration of the Dimasa community of Assam. Storytelling and mythmaking help them connect with the natural and spiritual worlds around them

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In the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas, the state of Assam lies along the river valleys of the Brahmaputra and Barak. Over aeons, these river valleys defined how humans and animals moved along these landscapes, nurturing their ways of life. Some of the earliest human inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley were the Kacharis, who were subsequently called different names in the various regions they inhabited. In present-day North Cachar Hills, they are the

Dimasas, which translates to “sons of a big river”. The big river referred to is the Brahmaputra (called Dilao in Dimasa), flowing through China, India, and Bangladesh.

“We came from far-off lands, possibly Mongolia, walking, running, and swimming our way and settling in areas of Dimapur and Maibong,” says Gopendra Kemparai of Hajong village in Assam’s Dima Hasao district. The legend goes that the Dimasas inhabited hills north of the Brahmaputra and gradually expanded through central Assam. As early as the 13th century, Dimasa influence extended from the Dikhu to the Kallang rivers, and also included the Dhansiri Valley and the North Cachar Hills. However, by the end of the 15th century, Ahoms (Tai-Ahom is another ethnic group) took over the capital, Dimapur, forcing the Kacharis to retreat further south and establish a new capital at Maibong. Their kingdom survived until the death of Govindacandranarayana, the last Dimasa king, in 1830, and then the East India Company took charge. Dimasas are a Scheduled Tribe of India. They live mainly in Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong districts, “Autonomous Districts” under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution, giving them powers to govern themselves based on their customary rules.

The history of the Dimasas flows along the rivers they inhabited and continue to inhabit. As the rivers meandered, so did the people. Rivers defined their stories of origin, emergence, conflicts, regeneration, and being.





red grove (daikhu) at the confluence of the Diyung and Abong Rivers and an important site for all Dimasa clans. Photo: Shrishtee ai

r Photo: The Brahmaputra River. Photo: Dhritiman Mukherjee

## Samparidisa: A village of trees

After a long, arduous nine-hour journey, I reached Samparidisa village. “There are many stories of forest spirits and connections with birds. You will find lots of them,” said Jayanta Sarma, a senior researcher from Assam working with an NGO called Aaranyak. Our host, Chutendra Langthasa, a school headmaster, welcomed us with a sweet black tea and together, we planned the next few days.

By 4 am the next morning, a red hue was making its way into the sky, birds filled the veranda with song, and the grass was jewelled with dew. After a sip of black tea, we started our forest walk geared up with cameras, binoculars, and food. Over the last few years of travelling to places, I have found slow walks through landscapes the most therapeutic. The slower we are, the more we notice. We noticed birds, butterflies, caterpillars, trees, leaves, plants, and berries, but I was also thinking about what I could not see. I couldn’t see the microbes in the soil that make life possible



and the spirits of the forests that the Dimsas communicate with to protect their landscapes.

“When our ancestors came here, there were so many trees, and so they named the village *sampri* (tree) and *disa* (rivulet),” the headmaster narrated, just like a teacher to a student, while we walked.







1 all Dimasa villages, there is a madaikhu, a protected village-level sacred grove where rituals and ceremonies are performed. (2) The led bay cuckoo is a subspecies of the small cuckoo found on the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. They breed from April to 1st in Northeast India. Photos: Shrishtee Bajpai

Being at the confluence of the Diyang and Abong rivers, Samparidisa is also the custodian of a sacred grove (called daikhu) for all the Dimasa clans. The confluence is called Abongbra, and every year, clans from across the region visit the daikhu, an abode to many forest deities and other spirits. There are four important spirits in the daikhu. Naikho Raja is the most important. He protects jhum (shifting cultivation), crops, children, and livestock. Nubarai, Shivarai and Khampagi are the other three. There is also Damadi, the water spirit, and Lenkai, the spirits of the hills. "This grove has existed since time immemorial," says Gobin Phunglo, a Zonthai, i.e., the highest priest of the clan. The first time I met Gobin Phunglo, I was enchanted by his frequent smile. He looks like a zen master, tending a farm and wandering in the forests with just a cloth wrapped around his waist. Sitting at his home, sipping the ubiquitous black tea, I asked him about the spirits, gods, the good and bad.

The daikhu is protected, and rules must be followed, or severe punishment will befall the villagers. No trees/grass/fruits can be cut or taken, only Dimasa men can enter the grove (women are not



allowed), no metal can be taken in, and while performing ceremonies, communities fast and eat only vegetarian food after the ceremony. Only pigeons, buffaloes, goats, and chickens can be sacrificed to appease the spirits, but no other animals. These rules have helped people sustain these forests. “Our ancestors and grandfathers told us that if we cut down trees in the daikhu, we would get sick and die, punished by the spirits,” says Khimpo Dibragede, a young girl who accompanied us on the walk. The well-being of forests is closely related to the well-being of the villagers. Nature is as alive as humans are and, in many ways, much wiser and more powerful than humans.



cross Northeast India, village elders or *gaon bhudhas*, like Norendo Langthasa, represent their villages and facilitate village-level decision-making. (2) Weaving is an important practice among the Dimasa community, and nature-inspired motifs are common. Weaving is also a means to self-dependence for women of the community. Photos: Shrishtee Bajpai

“We are dependent on food from the forest. Jhum-forest is very important for getting biomass for our lands; if we don’t have our forest, our agriculture will also stop. We keep a reserve forest called *hagra*,” explained headmaster Chutendra. In the Dimasa language, the forest is called *hagra* or “land that is elderly” and regarded as a wise elder who existed even before the first humans came to these territories. Respect and humility are part of the ethics of many indigenous communities and come through gritty experience, intuitive intelligence, and interdependence with nature. “We don’t ever hunt the great hornbill (*daojin*). When they are breeding, the child and mother remain in the nest and the male fetches food. If we kill the male, then the entire family goes hungry and dies. If we do this, the same will befall us. It is a sin,” says Thandro Daulaguho, a young Dimasa who spends many mornings foraging in his village’s forests. He further adds, “We don’t hunt hoolock gibbons either. They don’t have tails and are humans in another form”. This communitarian ecological understanding of gibbons as apes might not be articulated in modern scientific terms, but it is grounded in everyday experience.





Beautiful waterfall of Bendao Baiglai, in Samparidisa village, is surrounded by a thick bamboo grove on its left and an old-growth forest on its right. Photo: Shrishtee Bajpai

The following morning, we walked to the Madaikhu, the sacred grove, and then to the Bendao Baiglai waterfall, accompanied by a village elder and a young boy. Along the five-hour round trip walk, we were told many legends of the forests and stories of the origins of the Dimasas. There were also moments of pause, looking at rocks with lichen or following bird calls. Numerous birds are found here: orioles, Himalayan bulbuls, oriental white eyes, scarlet minivets, crimson sunbirds, gold-fronted leafbirds, blue-throated barbets, blue-eared barbets, Eurasian tree sparrows, jungle owlets, coppersmith barbets, common kestrels, **racket-tailed drongos**, and many warblers. I adjusted my binoculars and patiently followed them as they appeared and disappeared. In those moments of listening to a singing forest, I felt an absolute silence within me.

We walked through a bamboo grove as we approached the waterfall. Through the thicket, we saw water making its way through the forests and rocks and eventually falling into an endless gorge. The *gaon budha* (village headman), Norendo Langthasa, narrated the story of how the waterfall got its name Bendao Baiglai (*bendao* refers to two sisters and *baiglai* to jump).

Listening to the story, I wondered why storytelling and mythmaking have been part of human existence, especially among indigenous peoples and local communities living close to nature. Perhaps because they help us make sense of our surroundings, make them come alive, help people belong and connect to their ancestors and surroundings. After listening to the local story, I realised the waterfall was not just a picturesque spot but a site of unfolding mystery. It was alive.

About the contributor

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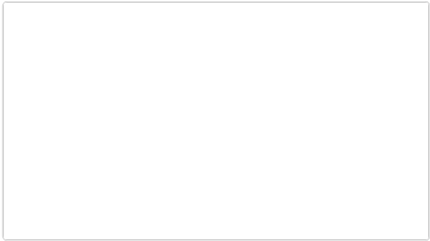
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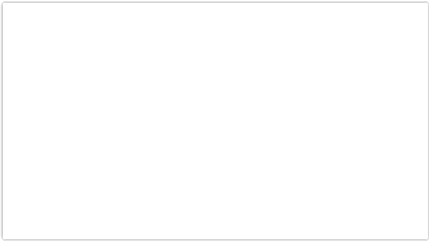
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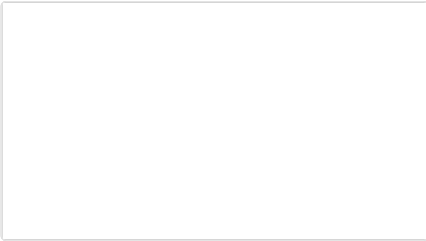
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