1.0. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Position of Dimasa in the Tibeto-Burman Language Family:

The Tibeto-Burman is one of the most important branch of Indo-Chinese group of languages, which genealogically falls under the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese family of languages (Grierson, 1903). But the classification of Tibeto-Burman Languages in the Sino-Tibetan family is still not certain. According to the classification given in his Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. III, Pt. II, Dimasa belongs to the Bodo (Boro) sub-section of the Bodo-Naga section under the Assam Burmese group of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese speech family. But next to Grierson, Robert Shafer (1966-1968) has been attempted to classify the Tibeto-Burman languages pointing out a number of discrepancies in that of the Linguistic Survey of India. As per classification given by Shafer, Dimasa belongs to the western branch of the Barish section under the Baric division of the Sino-Tibetan family. Another classification of Tibeto-Burman languages has been given by Paul Benedict (1972). Benedict includes Dimasa in the Bodo-Garo group of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family. It is clear that the above three proposals for the classification of Tibeto-Burman languages have not been agreed each other. In addition the above, there has been a number of proposals for the subgrouping of Tibeto-Burman Languages put forward by such scholars as Nishida (1986, 1989), and Matisoff (1991). But it seems that the situation has not been much improved. Due to lack of sufficient researches on these languages and dialects, we can not get the proper division or classification of these languages. It is to be noted here that the difference of opinions in respect of the classification of Tibeto-Burman languages can not be ignored. Due to the fact, the position of Dimasa in the Tibeto-Burman language family is difficult to fix. But there is no doubt that Dimasa is one of the Tibeto-Burman languages which has close affinities with languages like, Boro, Lalung, Sonowal, Rabha, Deori, Garo, Tiperah, Koch, etc.
SINO-TIBETAN OR TIBETO-CHINESE SPEECH FAMILY

Sino-Tibetan Proper

- Probably early modification of Sino-Tibetan

Tibeto-Burman

- Siamese-Chinese

- Man

- Karen

Tibetan Himalayan Assam-Burmese

- Dai or Thai

- Chinese or Sinitic

North-Assam

- Aka, Abor (Adi), Miri
- Dafla, Mishmi etc.

Bodo-Naga

Burmese-Kuki-Chin Kachin-Lolo

Bodo (Boro) Naga Kuki-Chin Lolo, Kachin or Singpho

Old Burmese

- Boro (kachari), Dimasa, Mikir
- Garo, Rabha, Lalung, Tripura, etc. etc.

Chart I: Classification of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family (Grierson, 1909-1928)
Chart II: Classification of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family (Robert Shafer, 1966-1968)
Chart III: Classification of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family (Paul Benedict, 1972)
1.2. Name and Identity of the People:

The Dimasas are one of the linguistic groups of the Kachari tribes of Assam and they constitute an important ethnic group in North East India. Ethnically, the Dimasas are Mongoloids, and their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. The word Dimasa literally means, children of the big river (di ‘water’ + ma ‘big’ + sa ‘children’). According to Edward Gait (1967), the Dimasas were called as Timisa by the Ahoms. And in course of time, it changed to Dimasa. Since the Brahmaputra is the biggest river of Assam, the Dimasas are supposed to be ‘the children of the Brahmaputra.’ But according to Sonaram Thaosen (1994), before coming to Dimapur the Dimasa called themselves ‘Bodosa’. They came to be known as ‘Dimasa’ only after arriving at Dimapur. In the view of Thaosen, ‘Dimasa’ refers to the people residing at the bank of the river ‘Dima’. In the Dimasa Language, the river ‘Dhansiri’ is called Dima. He further opines that the Dimasas did use to live by the bank of the river Brahmaputra, but actually they are ‘the children of Dima’, that is, the Dhansiri river. According to another view (Nirupoma Hagjer, 1972), it is a common practice among the Dimasas to introduce themselves by adding sa with the name of their place of origin. This old tradition is prevalent even today. That’s why, the people living in Dimapur would refer themselves as ‘Dimapursa’. In course of time, Dimapursa changed to Dimasa.

1.3. Mythological and Historical Background:

The history and old anecdotes describe that the Dimasas were originally inhabitants of Tibet and migrated from there via, Patkai range to the upper part of Assam and settled there. The Dimasa folktales tell us that they belong to a place where basins of the both rivers Dilao and Sangi meet. From the first half of the thirteenth century the reference of the Dimasas is available in the history of Assam. Prior to the advent of the Ahom, the kachari kings ruled Assam valley for about 600 years with fame and achievements, and their capital was probably at Guwahati. After prolonged vendetta for about the century and a half, they were driven away by the Ahoms to Dimapur. The kachari kings
ruled the territory for some time with the capital at Dimapur. Again, the
Kachari king, being defeated by the Ahom had to leave Dimapur with
his people and established a new capital at Maibong on the bank of the
river Mahur in the North Cachar hills, but they could not stay there for
long. A lethal assault from the king of Jayantia forced the kachari king
to shift his capital from Maibong to Khaspur in plain Cachar. But a large
proportion of the kachari population continued to live in the hill areas of
the North Cachar. Incidentally, Khaspur was the last capital of the
Kachari kings. After the death of the last kachari (Dimasa) king
Govinda Chandra their kingdom was annexed by the East India
Company.

1.4. Cultural and Literary Background:

The Dimasas are patrilineal. The marriage is strictly exogamous
and proposal of marriage comes from boy’s side after the boy chooses his
life partner. Bride price is a common practice among the Dimasas.
Marriage with the other sub sections of Kacharis like Boro, Lalung,
Rabha, Sonowal etc., is not permissible.

Dimasa women are expert in weaving. They have a great heritage
of traditional skills in weaving. Dimasa women traditionally wear hand
made dresses like rigu ‘lower garment’ razampain ‘upper garment’
rihendi ‘endi-shawl’ etc. while Dimasa men dress in a western style
cloths for everyday occasions. For special occasions, the men wear the
Pan-Indian dhoti (loincloth) and kurta (a lose thin cotton shirt).

Bushu is the major festival of the Dimasas. It is celebrated once
every year after harvest. There is no fixed date in the Dimasa calendar for
the observance of Bhusu. It is observed some times between November
and March of the following year, depending on the harvest seasons of the
particular locality. During Bushu days the unmarried young men and
women cook their food jointly and eat their food together. It is mainly a
festival of the youth.

Dimasa domesticated buffaloes, goats, picks and fowls which are
mostly meant for domestic consumption. They are fond of taking pork
but they do not take beef. zu ‘rice-beer’ is not use as a daily beverage, but is prepared for special occasions, like marriage ceremony, funerals, harvest festival (Bushu) etc.

Like many other tribes of the North East, the Dimasas also have their traditional way of dancing i.e., folk dance. Dimasa dances are slow in rhythm and movement. At the time of dance the fire is kept ablaze near dancing ground. Usually dance is accompanied with the flute and drums. There are several varieties of Dimasa dance viz., mādaikilimba ‘dance of salutation to God’, namalaiba ‘fish dance’, baimiyung ‘elephant dance’ etc. The group dance is more popular among the Dimasas.

The Dimasas are Hindus, though they have only a faint idea about Hinduism. Originally Dimasa had their own God and Goddess, nowadays they identify some of their traditional deities with the deities of Hindu Pantheon. The Dimasa deities brai shibrai and Ranachandi are identified with the Shiva and Kali of the Hindu mythology.

Generally, the Dimasas cremate their dead bodies. But in case of all kinds of unnatural deaths- death from the injury of a tiger, in case of death by leprosy, black fever and similar other diseases; the Dimasas bury their bodies and no obsequy is performed. Post funeral ceremony is held at a suitable time between the seventh day and a year after the death.

The Dimasas don’t have a writing system or script of their own, and the most of their literature remains oral till date. There have been efforts in the past to adopt a script for Dimasa but they were unable to find a common script acceptable to all the groups. The Dimasas of N.C. Hills and Cachar use the Bengali script; those of Nagaon, Karbi-Anglong and Dhansiri areas use Assamese script; and the Dimasas who had their education through English medium, favour the Roman script for Dimasa. The Dimasa literary society had once result to use the Devanagari script for the Dimasa language spoken in all areas, but the quantum of written literature in the Devanagari script is very small compared to those available in other scripts. But there is a growing realisation to maintain and promote Dimasa language and literature. One such attempt has made with the publication of a quarterly news magazine entitled ‘sainjali’.
published for some time by the Dimasa-Bhasha Prochar Somiti, Cachar (Silchar). This magazine, now dis-continued, contained Dimasa articles, essays, poems, stories etc., in the Bengali script.

1.5. Geographical and Demographical Background:

The speakers of Dimasa are found mainly in the district of North Cachar Hills in Assam. They are also found in small scattered groups in the district of Cachar, Hailakandi, Nagaon and Karbi-Anglong in Assam and in the Dimapur sub-division of the state of Nagaland. The Dimasas of Cachar are known as the Barmans. The other languages spoken in the neighbourhood include a dialect of Bengali known as Sylheti (IA), Manipuri (TB), Assamese (IA), Bhojpuri (IA), Bishnupriya (IA), Karbi (TB) and Rongmei (TB).

According to the 1991 Census of India, the total number of Dimasa speakers in Assam was about 84,654. The number of Dimasa speakers in different districts are as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Number of Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N.C.Hills</td>
<td>49,667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>15,838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hailakandi</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>5,169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karbi-Anglong</td>
<td>13,387</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.6. Status:

Dimasa constituted a scheduled tribe distributed in the districts of Karbi-Anglong, North Cachar Hills, and in the plains of Cachar. Dimasa is the largest linguistic group in the North Cachar Hills comprising more than 50% of the district’s total population as per 1991 Census (Census report is given in 1.5.). But in Cachar, Dimasa is the third linguistic group preceded by Bengali and Manipuri. Dimasa is not used as medium of instruction in schools, colleges and other institutions. But it is used as the medium for broadcast of programmes of the All India Radio, Silchar for 30 minutes out of its total programme of 10 hours daily.
1.7. Scope and Orientation of the Study:

The review and evaluation of the available literature on Dimasa provides an adequate rationale for a detailed study of the typology of synchronic Dimasa. The linguistic works done on Dimasa so far are too scanty and are essentially taxonomic. Most of the works on Dimasa include dictionaries and skeleton grammars of Dimasa. No linguistic study of Dimasa based on the modern knowledge has been attempted till today. Besides making a systematic analysis of the phonological, morphological and syntactic structure of Dimasa on the typological background of the Tibeto-Burman languages, the present study also attempts to examine how far Dimasa confirm into the language universals proposed by J.H. Greenberg.

1.8. Methodology:

The present study is based mainly on the dialect spoken by the Dimasa of the Cachar district in south Assam. The data for the study was collected from several informants of different age groups, occupations, and sexes. The method of approach to the acquisition of data was both direct and indirect. The spoken communication comprising narratives, folktales and conversation was taped for repetition and closer study later on. At times some written materials, comprising of anecdote, stories, essays etc. published in journals were translated into Dimasa with the help of native speakers. The Data collected from one informant was cross checked with other informants of the same area.