

**SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE OF THE KARBIS OF ASSAM
: A SOCIOLOGICAL NOTE**

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Introduction:

Karbis are one of the distinctive Hill Scheduled Tribal communities of Assam. The Karbis are found to inhabit mainly in two autonomous hills districts of Assam viz., Karbi Anglong and North Kachar Hills. Earlier they were known as Mikir. Borah (2012:41) states that “Karbis are one of the major and largest hill tribal communities of Assam”.

Concentration of Karbi Population of Assam:

Karbis are found to inhabit mainly in two autonomous hill districts of Assam viz., Karbi Anglong and North Kachar Hills. As per 1991 Census the breakup of the population of the Karbi tribe is not available. According to 1991 census the total population of karbi was 3.16.763. Among the Hills tribes of Assam the Karbis are considered to be the largest hill tribe in numbers.

Migration:

The Original place of habitation of the Karbis like all other tribes who penetrated to the North East India was located near Yangtse-Kiang and Howang-ho rivers of western China. On account of destruction by floods and other natural calamities the Karbis migrated by following like other Mongoloid groups, crossed the river Chindwin and Irrawaddy and entered Burma. Bordoloi (1985, III: 64) states that in Burma the Karbis stayed for sometimes and then they migrated to their present place in Assam before several centuries. Of course, the first settlement of the Karbis was in Hayong a place between Dimapur of Present Nagaland Kapil River Barua, (1976) of Assam. According to Stack and Lyall (RP: 4) the original place of habitation of Karbis was the eastern portion of Khasis and Jaintias hills near Kapili river.

Origin of the Karbis:

In the constitution of India the Karbis are written as Mikirs. They themselves identify as Mikirs also known as “Arling”, which as Bordoloi (1985,III:55) literally means Man. In course of time the fire syllables ‘Mee’ and ‘Aa’ were given up and ‘Karbi’ remained and this way ‘Kar-Bi’ had become ‘Karbi’ in due course of time. Now, we have discussed about the socio-cultural life of the Karbis of Assam under different headings.



Housing pattern:

The House of Mikirs (Karbis) is built on posts and the floor is made of split bamboos fastened with split cane and it is a height of several feet from the ground. The roof of the house is covered with Sun grass (thatch).

At present as Bordoloi (1987:60) observes that a karbi house is neither too big nor too small, the house platforms which is made of split bamboo rests on several timber posts and raised several feet high from the ground. The houses are of thatched roofs and walls are made of split bamboos and these are mud plastered. Length wise, the house is divided into two sections. The front section with a hearth which is generally in the middle of that section is called 'Kam'. It is generally used as a guest room while beyond the first section segregated by bamboo-cum-mud plastered wall is called 'Kut' which is used a living room for the family members. A wooden or sometimes a bamboo ladder is used to reach the raised platform.

These types of houses are now found only in certain places of Hamren sub-division of Karbi Anglong district. Waddell observed long ago, Karbi houses are built on the ground like those found in Assamese villages. Now days modern houses are also gradually built in karbi villages.

Family System:

Family is major social institution of the Karbis. Primarily Karbis are patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal. Father is all in all among them. The family is governed by the head of the family. In earlier days the Karbis followed joint family pattern. Col. Waddell (1975) wrote "married and unmarried children of two or three generations *all live in one house*. But now a day, nuclear families, i.e parents and their children along with unmarried brothers and sisters are found in Karbi Society. Generally, male person get more authority in the family after death his father among the Karbis. The nature of family among the karbis are seen both of joint and nuclear in nature. But joint family is common characteristic of the Karbis.

Clan System:

'Kur' is a Karbi term meaning Clan. There are 5 nos. Clans of the karbis viz., Ingti, Enghee, Terang, Teron and Timung. Das and Hazarika (2013:103) each of these Clans has a number of sub-Clans. For example, the Terang and the Teron have six sub-Clans each and Ingti has four sub Clans. They further believe that the original ancestors of each Clan were brothers to each other (Saikia, 1968:5). Bordoloi et.al (1986:56) observed that among five Clan of Karbis Ingti considered as Priestly Clan in the Karbi Society and it could command a higher status in the past.

Marriage System:

Marriage is another important Social institution of Karbis. Marriage is a universal social law for them. The boys marry within the age of 20-25 years and for girls 18-22 years. Monogamy

is the general rule of Karbis. Polygamy is permissible but not considered as ideal or desirable. Younger brothers may marry the widow of his deceased elder brother. But elder brother cannot accept his younger brothers' widow as his wife. In Karbi Society Clan exogamy is strictly followed and its violation leads ex-communication. The children take their fathers Clan name. The rule of marriage of Karbis endogamy and clan exogamy is strictly followed in case of marriage.

There are two types of marriage in the Karbis viz., marriage through negotiation and marriage by selection. Bordoloi states that marriage through negotiation and marriage by selection of life partners are found to be adherent by the Karbis. In case of marriage through negotiation consent of the girl is necessary. Without her consent marriage is not possible. Among the Karbi Society marriage by capture is found to be rare and in case of such marriage formal or negotiation marriage has to be performed after the birth of first progeny. Stack and Lyall, (RP:18) point out that in Karbi society cross cousin marriage is prevalent. Saikia (2009:117) expresses "that there is no bride price and divorce is allowed among the Karbis". Both the husband and the wife can ask for Divorce which is settled by the village council. Widow re-marriage is also prevalent among the Karbis and child marriage is not seen among them.

Religious Beliefs and Practices:

Religion is another major social institution of Karbis. The karbis believe in different God and spirits which they worship for their well being. Their supreme or main religious deity is called 'Arnarn Keth' and 'Hemphu' is another deity who is worshipped by sacrificing cock. Nath (2003:138) mentions that 'Hamphu and Mukrang is male deity of Karbi society and Rasingja is only female deity or Goddess of Karbis'. 'Horland' is another deity who is worshipped for good agricultural harvest.

Economy:

Economy is also major social institution of Karbis. The agriculture is the main stay of the Karbis Borah (2012:44) states that "the karbis who live in the hill places they practice Jhum cultivation. The Karbis who live in plain places they practice permanent cultivation". They always follow a cycle of cultivating different plots at different times and poly cropping pattern is followed in that cultivation. Generally, in Jhum field tapioca, sesamum, papiya and various edible tubers, cotton are cultivated along with hill variety of paddy. In certain plain-cum-hill areas of Karbi Anglong the Karbis practice Jhuming –cum-settled farming in the plain areas they grow paddy. They use different tools in the field of jhum cultivation are dibbling stick, hoe, axe, dao etc. On the other hand in settled farming they used wooden plough, hoe, hook, harrow made of bamboo and spade etc.



Dress Pattern:

Dress is primary or fundamental necessity for all of us. Generally, Karbis prepare their dress by themselves. In earlier days, the male folk used to wear turbans commonly known as 'Poho' on his head. A piece of cloth known as 'Rikong', were wearing by them on the waist. 'Jar-ek', 'Kanmosa', 'Rikong', 'Khanjari' etc. are main garments of Karbis. Apart from 'Poho' and 'Rikong' an artistically designed sleeveless shirt with a length sufficient to cover buttocks are generally worn by aged men of Karbi society.

Borah (2012:47) contended that the female folk use a piece of cloth tied, around the waist which is called 'Pini' or Pinicam flak. The upper portion of the body is covered with a piece of cloth known as 'Jar-ek' or 'Jiso'. The younger generation both male and female folk and boys and girls wear modern dresses. The dresses of younger generation of the boys are coats, sweaters, trousers, long pants various designs of shirts, shoes etc. while the girls wear sarees, mekhela chaddar, suridar a set of garments generally worn by Assamese women and girls jeans pant, shirts, frocks and coloured sandals and sometimes sandal shoes also.

Regarding ornament it may be said that the male folk used to wear brass made ear-rings which were known as 'Narik', silver bracelets called 'primsoroi' and in the neck heavy necklaces made of silver. The aged women folk of the Karbi Society 'Nothenpi' – a pair of very big ear ring made of silver. They also wear Silver bracelets called 'Rue-Arior'. In addition to the necklace made of white and red beads sometimes combined with silver coins are worn by them and these are called 'Lek-Sihe'.

Food and Drinks:

Rice is the main food of the Karbis. Pulses are occasional additions to their food items. Wild tubers mainly Dioscorea Alata varieties and leafy vegetables growing widely in the forest are also taken along with rice. Fermented and dry fishes, pork and chicken are favorite food item of them. These are especially prepared on the occasions of social and religious functions. They are no-vegetarian community. They hunt animals and birds and catch fish to supplement their regular foods. But now days they are also gradually taken foods prepared out of Maize, Atta, and Maida etc. Rice beer known 'Horlang' in Karbi language is the popular liquid drinks of the Karbis. This is an essential item for religious and social functions.

Socio-Political Organisation:

Social political organization is also an important social institution of Karbi Society. Borah (2012:48) commented that in Karbi society there are three types of traditional institutions viz., Me (village council), 'Ferla' or Jirkedam' (bachelors dormitory) and 'Kerung Amei' (the grain bank). The Karbis call the village councils as 'Me. This council consists of the elderly male members of the village. The village head man is called in Karbi Society 'Sarpo-Sarthe' in

Assamese known as 'Gaon Burah' who presides over the meeting of the council. Any social disputes are settled by the Gaon Burah. Another important function of the council is to distribute Jhum land among the families of the karbi village.

Every Karbi village has bachelors dormitory known as 'Jirson Asong' and it is a popular youth dormitory of Karbi society .It is constructed at central location of the village. Generally unmarried boys of the village who are above 10 years of age are to sleep at the dormitory every night. Borah and Das (2010:103) states that in the Mikir hills also there is a bachelors hall known as 'Risomar Terank' where youth boys sleep in the time. The Risomar is constructed under the supervision of Sarthe. The dormitory has 10 office bearers viz., 'Kleng Serpo', 'Klengdun', 'Suder kethe'(commander), 'Suder So', 'Bari,Lampo', 'Motan Arbui', 'Chenbruk-Are', 'Than Are', 'Than Arbe', 'Me Apai and 'Lang Apai' etc.

Hence for the proper function of the dormitory different workers are appointed for various role performances. The village dormitory generally performs the social service of the village with its collective manpower.

Social Festival:

Like other community social festivals are also observed by the Karbis. 'Rongkar' and 'Hacha' are the two main festivals of the Karbis which they observe during a year.

'Rongkar' is performed for propitiating different Gods and Goddess for keeping the villagers well in a village during the year. In this festival only the elderly male persons can take part. This is performed for good health of men and domestic animals and to avoid natural disaster and good harvest. 'Rongkar' festival is performed after every 5 years at Mauza level which consists of number of villages. The festival continues for 2 days. 'Hacha' festival is observed after harvest by the karbis.This is merry making festival-cum-community feast. Nath (2003:138) states that 'Walketeri' is annual sacred worshipping religious rituals. This ritual is observed in the month of February/march. Another social festival is performed for the ancestral and offered pig, hen. This festival is divided into three type's viz., 'Kan Fla-Fla', 'Langtuk' and 'Haren'.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion about the socio cultural life of the Karbis of Assam it can be commented that they still preserve their traditional social institutions and maintain all the socio-cultural and socio-religious life. Traditionally, socio-culture is one of the societal norms. They preserve all traditional customs from past to the present. But due to indigenous and exogenous changes like education, development of transport and means of communication,



technological innovations some changes in their overall traditional life styles are being noticed among the Karbi communities.

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