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Karbis: Changes in the socio-cultural life

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Abstract: Even though tribal communities are seen as vulnerable to outside influences, their naturally inhabited remote locations can also be seen as keeping them away from mainstream narratives rendering a feeling of indigeneity of their cultures, beliefs, rituals, and norms. Most of the academic literature on tribes focuses on the western concept of indigenous people, which is not a universal understanding of their identity. If one looks at the tribes of the hills and the plains in Assam, the socio-political and cultural changes over the years are evidently visible which has impacted their age-old traditional and aesthetic way of life. This paper is an attempt to understand the tribal identity of one such ethnic community, i.e., the Karbis who are located in the Borbari region of Guwahati city (Kamrup Metro district) and better identified as Karbis of the plains. The paper is based on a qualitative research study conducted amongst the Karbis of this particular region who exists in cohabitation with the Assamese people. It will focus on understanding the various aspects of their culture with reference to their religious life along with certain other features of their community such as dress, food habits, village structure, and the process of transformation since their settlement in this particular area. It will also explore the conceptual analysis of such alterations which presents a discourse of their indigenous identity as well as the process of negotiation with their neighbours over the years.

Keywords: Acculturation, Cultural change, Karbis, Social change, Tribal identity, Tribes of Assam

I. Introduction

Change is a constant process of any society. Social and cultural changes are processes that can be observed in most societies across any geography. Such changes are manifested either in internal or external ways which are influenced by internal or external dynamics of the society in which one lives. Social change refers to a process of alteration or transformation that has occurred within a social structure affecting the existing structure of relationships between individuals and the larger society. The tribes of the hills and the plains in Assam have undergone a lot of socio-political and cultural changes over the years which has impacted the age-old traditional and aesthetic way of their life. This paper is based on a qualitative research study conducted amongst the Karbis of Borbari in Guwahati, who exist in cohabitation with the Assamese people. It will focus on understanding the various aspects of their culture with reference to their religious life along with certain other features of their community such as dress, food habits, village structure, and the process of transformation since their settlement in this particular area. It will also explore the conceptual analysis of such alterations which presents a discourse of their indigenous identity as well as the process of negotiation with their neighbours over the years.

In social science, the concept of social can be understood as the way through which individuals conduct themselves in society on an everyday basis, interacting with people, religion, rituals, customs, family, kinship, etc. To sum it up, it refers to the ways in which the individual conducts himself in his everyday life and identifies himself. Comte (1830), in his theory of social dynamics, proposed that societies progressed through a series of predictable stages based on the development of human knowledge. Spencer (1862) offered a theory of change that was evolutionary, based on population growth and structural differentiation. For him,

institutionalization is a process of growth in size, differentiation, integration, and adaptation. With integration and increased adaptation, a new system is institutionalized and capable of further growth².

Studies on cultural change have been conducted in the field of sociology and anthropology by scholars such as Clifford Geertz, Yogendra Singh, A L Kroeber, Robert Redfield, etc. Social science looks at culture as an element of society that is socially transmitted rather than biologically. Culture is one of the important concepts of the 20th century that focuses on the essential core of traditional ideas and values. Cultural systems may be considered as products of action and conditioning elements for further action. Kroeber and Kluckhohn present a perspective of the American anthropologist and social scientists' representation of what culture was in the 1940s and 50s which is in stark contrast to the definition of the 1920s and 30s when it was primarily understood as 'learned behaviour'. For them, although the term culture is

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² Turner, Jonathan H., Beeghley, Leonard, & Powers, Charles H. (2002). *The emergence of Sociological theory* (5th ed). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thompson Learning, 64

understood with the study of behaviour and behavioural products, it would be wrong to assume its understanding in such a unilateral way. Hence, while one part of the concept defines it as part of culture comprising of rules and standards, another part consists of the justification and rationalization of those norms and standards. Thus,

every culture includes broad general principles of selectivity and ordering ('highest common factors') in terms of which patterns of and for and about behaviour in varied areas of culture content are reducible to parsimonious generalizations.³

Religion has and still is another domain that has been explored by different social scientists like Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, E.B Tylor Clifford Geertz, Karl Marx, Bronislaw Malinowski. As a universal cultural phenomenon, religion is a set of beliefs, symbols, and practices that is based on the idea of a sacred uniting its believers into a socio-religious community. The sacred is contrasted with the profane because it involves feelings of awe. Durkheim defined religion as

a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things i.e., things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them⁴

For the ethnic tribal communities of Assam, their traditional rites and religious customs act as a binding agent which gives them their distinct identity. One of the important characteristics of these communities of the state is their status of belonging to either of the categories of autochthon tribes and non-autochthon tribes. The first category is further sub-divided into tribes of the hills and the tribes of the plain while those belonging to the second category are mostly the migrants from the states of Jharkhand who came to Assam searching for a means of livelihood as plantation labour in the tea estates of the region. Initially, the hill tribes of the North-Eastern region were neither a part of India nor Assam before the colonization of the region by the Britishers although they established some trade relations with the people of the Brahmaputra valley. These tribes maintained their distinct identity and culture which were different from the people of the valley. Some of the major hill tribes comprised of the Mizos, Garos, Nagas, Karbis, and the Dimasa- Kacharis who lived in geographically isolated pockets without any outside interference. According to Hussain (1992), almost all the tribal people are seen as fragments of ancient or primitive Mongolian migrants of this region who established themselves in this land in the remote past. Hence, they should be seen as the original natives of Assam. In the non-tribal region of the Brahmaputra valley, it was the Bodo-Kacharis ethnic group who created the first civilization and culture in the real sense and hence should be considered as the natives of the valley⁵.

One important premise that the paper tries to explore is that originally although an indigenous community, the presence of the Karbis is not limited to the region of Karbi Anglong as the general perception is, but are to be found in scattered inhabited pockets in different parts of Assam like Guwahati, Nagaon, Golaghat, Sonitpur, Sonapur, Cachar Hills, Sylhet, etc. Due to the provisions granted by the 6th schedule of the Indian Constitution, the Karbis of Karbi Anglong enjoy some autonomy in managing their tribal society while the same has not been extended to those tribes living in the plains as the hill tribals were acknowledged to be entirely separate from the non-tribal people in the plains but the plains tribes were seen as yet another sub-nationality of the Assamese⁶ due to the considerable cultural influence and transformations that have happened over the years.

This paper is an attempt to understand some of the changes that have come about amongst the Karbis living in the plains and how their individuality is understood while living amidst a larger and different community. There have been various studies done on the Karbis residing in Karbi Anglong but nothing exclusive to the field undertaken here. Since the paper highlights the changes and identity of a tribal community, it is important to understand the concept of tribe and its nomenclature.

The terminology of a 'tribe' underwent several changes over a significant period of time from 1917-1931 which implied usage of adjectives like 'aboriginals or depressed classes.' It was in 1941 that these adjectives were dropped and the practice continued with the adoption of the term 'scheduled tribes' or as they are commonly known as 'Adivasi' (Rajak, 2016). The term indigenous is also used to refer to tribes and their original natives in the context of India. The ILO convention of 1989 and the Working Group on Indigenous Population set up by the Human Rights Commission of the UNO provides a conceptual definition of the term indigenous which is based on three features. Firstly, it refers to those people who resided in their original country or region before any outside conquest. Secondly, the external conquest has led to a gradual marginalization due to the colonization of people from outside. Thirdly, they establish their own rules of governing the social, economic, and cultural life rather than the rules of a society or country at large thus, presenting indigenous people as victims of colonization and conquest making it easy to identify them⁷.

Hence, if one has to locate tribes in the context of the above definition as indigenous people, the term Adivasi is used as an Indian equivalent referring to this group of people and the term has been used effectively for a long time to differentiate them from people who are different in terms of language, culture, food, features, social organization, etc.

Ghurye (1963) uses the term 'aborigines' to define tribes with the contention that tribes would be autochthonous to India if not to the exact geographical location⁸

Studies by classical social anthropologists like Malinowski's work on the Trobriand Island, Brown's work on the Andaman Island, Pritchard's work on the Nuer provide stimulating and insightful analysis on tribal studies. According to Beteille (1986), there was a major shift in orientation around the 40s when anthropologists claimed about the distinctiveness of their discipline not only in the study of tribes but

³ Jenks, Chris. (2005). *Culture (2nd edition)*. Routledge: USA, 37

⁴ Durkheim, Emile. (1912). *The Elementary forms of Religious Life*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 60

⁵ Monirul Hussain. (1992). Tribal Question in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27(20/21), 1047

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Sonpimple, Rahul Punaram. (2012). Conceptualizing tribes from different disciplinary and ideological perspectives. *International journal of multidisciplinary management studies*. 2(3), 109

⁸ Ibid, 110

civilization as well. It started with the works of Redfield which mark a watershed entry, although he was preceded by Kroeber. It is the study of civilizations that gave an impetus to anthropologists on the awareness of the importance of history. Tribal studies in India gained momentum during the late British period around the 1930s, where socio-cultural, economic, and political life of the tribes were focal aspects of the study which was intensive and formal. This influenced the study of the topic in Indian anthropology and sociology around the 1950s-70s where there was a significant exchange between both Indian and American anthropologists. Drawing inspiration from the method and works of Malinowski and Brown, Indian scholars such as Ghurye, Dube, Majumdar, Beteille, Desai, etc., came to be seen as some of the well-known names in the field of tribal study in India.

It is interesting to note that for most Indian anthropologists, there is a conscious lack of consistency in the discipline between what they call 'tribes' and what they are obliged to describe as 'tribes' and finding a way through the puzzle, they have referred to them as 'tribes in transition'. Although theoretically it seems rich but lacks a ground practical purpose since tribes in India have always been in a state of transition since the beginning of recorded history⁹. Various theorists have defined the term in different ways. According to Mazumdar,

a tribe is a social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous, with no specialization of functions, ruled by tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognizing social distance with other tribes or castes, without any social obloquy attaching to them, as it does in the caste structure, followed tribal traditions, beliefs, and customs, illiberal of naturalization of ideas from alien sources, above all conscious of homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration¹⁰.

Sahlins sees tribes as a segmental organization comprising of an unspecialized multi-family group and he describes it as 'congeries of equal kin group blocs'¹¹. For Bailey, tribes and caste exists in a continuum, where the caste system is seen as a hierarchical structure while a tribal society is seen as egalitarian and segmentary. But in contemporary India, both these categories merge with one another into a different system whereby they are influenced by the community around them, especially the neighbourhood community of the Hindus. Due to the early influence between both the community of the tribes and the Hindu society, there have been significant instances of mutual participation and revitalization throughout various regions of the country.

Taking the above into context, we shall now discuss the field study in question.

II. The Karbis

The Karbis are a tribal community of Assam popularly known as *mikirs*. But the aboriginals of the community preferred to call themselves *arleng* which means a Mikir man. The Karbis who reside in the plains of Assam are known as *dumrali* or plain Karbis. They are known to have a high sense of reverence and pride towards their aspect of inherent masculinity. The word Karbi stands for a sense of brotherhood.

According to Edward Stack (1908), the Mikirs belong undoubtedly to the great Tibeto-Burman stock; while Gemini Paul (1956), stated 'though originally of Austric origin. probably of the latest migration, they are now overwhelmingly a mixture of the Austric and Bodos with the latter as the predominant strain. Sir George Grierson (1904-1928) classed them as intermediate between the Bodo and Western Nagas on linguistic grounds¹².

The etymological significance of the word Karbi is derived from the word *thakarkabi* which means the offering of sacrifices at the starting of worship of God, marriage ceremony, the birth of a child, or harvesting of crops, known as *Thakar Kibi*. The word eventually transformed into Karbi omitting the words '*tha*' and '*ki*'¹³.

Racially, the Karbis are Mongoloids and linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. Originally the people who belong to the Tibeto-Burman group were mostly based in Western China near the Howang-Ho and Yang-Tee-Kiang rivers and from here they travelled through the course of Brahmaputra, the Chindwin and Irrawaddy finally entering India and Burma. In one of the waves of migration, the Karbis entered Assam from Central Asia along with the others (Das, 2011). However, due to the lack of proper and written documents, it is difficult to trace the exact history of the early settlement of this tribal group in Assam. And what remained as sources of information regarding their chronological events of settlement, eventually flowed amongst the people through folklore and popular stories.

The folklore of the Karbis traces their past habitation from the banks of the Kalang and Kopili rivers and the entire area of Kaziranga in Assam. The reign of the Kachari kings drove them towards the hills. While some of them moved towards the Jaintia Hills and lived under the reign of the Jaintia kings, the others moved towards the Rongkhang ranges (which is now in Karbi Anglong) and established their capital at a place named Socheng. Those who continued to live under the Jaintia domination suffered severe harassment which compelled them to move towards the north into the Ahom territory. However, the Karbis who migrated to the Ahom kingdom had to face Burmese invasion eventually, who invaded the region during this time and carried out inhumane oppression on the people. To save themselves, they further took refuge into the deep jungles and high hills and young girls started to wear a black line from the forehead to the chin known as *duk* to make themselves look ugly and save themselves from the greedy eyes of the Burmese invaders. During this time, while some of them migrated towards lower Assam,

⁹ Beteille, A. (1986). The concept of tribe with special reference to India. *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes De Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv Für Soziologie*, 27(2), 299

¹⁰ Rajak, Jyoti. (2016). Nutritional and Socio-Economic Status of Saharia Tribes in Madhya Pradesh. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. 6(1), 80

¹¹ Beteille, A. (1986). The concept of tribe with special reference to India. *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes De Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv Für Soziologie*, 27(2), 300

¹² Paul, A. K & Sharma, P.D. (1961). *CENSUS OF INDIA. Monograph series: Mikirs of Assam*. Vol I. Part V- B, 1

¹³ Ibid

others crossed the Brahmaputra and settled in the north bank now known as Karbi Anglong, where they established themselves as a distinct indigenous group¹⁴. It is important to note that after Karbi Anglong, the highest number of Karbis reside in the Kamrup district of Assam.

Primary sources reveal that the Karbis of Borbari region trace back their origin to the 18th century. It is believed that initially, the place was home to the Garos. However unable to cope up with the harsh surroundings and the geographical terrain, they vacated the land which was eventually occupied by the Karbis. Initially, the terrain was surrounded by vast tracts of green pastures and orange gardens which was used by the ethnic settlers to regard the woods as their own and to defend it against neighbouring communities. Their pastoral lifestyle made them a self-sufficient community which initially started with 12(twelve) households. As development and cultural changes started influencing the Karbi community, their sources of livelihood were no longer restricted to agriculture and education also became a lived experience along with employment in both the private and the public sector jobs in the state. Their earliest contact with the Assamese people made the Karbis feel in awe at the lifestyle of their neighbours and also a realisation to liberate themselves from their state of isolation and ignorance. They sold their agricultural lands to the Assamese people to improve their standard of living who started settling around the region and kept growing, becoming a majority community in the area. The early situation between the Karbis and Assamese people of this region is in sharp contrast to the current picture. The earlier survival instinct has now led way to progress and co-habitation. When the Assamese neighbours first settled in this area and started to live, they kept a considerable distance from the Karbis. A belief that persisted amongst them was that the Karbis are a savage and barbarous group of people living in the hills, who were better off on their own. One distinctive feature of the Karbis was the display of eccentric behaviour which was manifested by them through brutal killings, making them even more unpleasant to their Assamese counterparts. The situation however is quite different now. The earlier perception has been done away with and their unconventional behaviour has changed to a sense of reasoning where issues get settled through talks and negotiations. This paper will highlight the impact and acceptance of this group throughout their journey of settlement till the present times.

III. Field of study

The field of the study is located in 28.4 km N/NW (approx.) Guwahati, covering Latitude of +26° 9' 23.46" and Longitude +91° 48' 50.67" (26.156517, 91.814075). It falls under the Dispur Constituency. It is half a kilometer uphill walk from the main market of Borbari, where one reaches a temple of Lord Shiva after which the Karbi background starts. According to one of the Anganwadi censuses of 2011, there are approximately around 98-100 households with a population of about 250 males and 325 females¹⁵. The roads are well-built for easy movement of vehicles, which is in considerable contrast to the early days of the community when there were no proper roads and one had to walk miles to buy necessary amenities since there was no market nearby. The area was then surrounded by hills and covered with dense thick forest with sparse to no movement of vehicles.

IV. Sample of study

The study was conducted in January 2015 for 10 days where a sample of 10 joint households was identified for the study. The two age groups that have been studied were first, within the age group of 30-45 years, and secondly, within the age group of 60 years and above who were selected through the method of snowball sampling.

Age group	Number of respondents
30-45	15
60 years and above	5

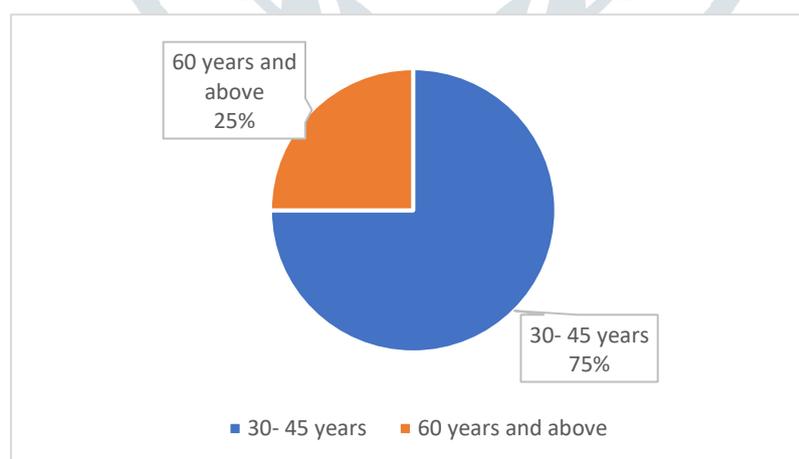


Fig 1.1: Diagram representing the number of respondents

¹⁴ <https://karbianglong.gov.in/information-services/tirbes-and-culture> accessed on 16-07-2021, time 16:30 hours

¹⁵ As shared by one of the respondents

The male and female respondents are as below:

Age group	Number of respondents
Male	13
Female	7

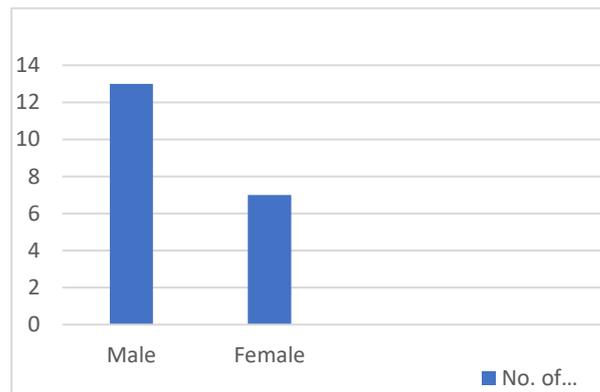


Figure 1.2: Diagram representing male and female respondents

V. Analysis and findings

A closer examination into the life of the Karbis residing in Borbari brought into light some essential facts about their life and culture. Since the aim of this study is to bring attention to the life of the Karbis of Borbari who are understood as the Karbis of the plains has not been explored in-depth in academic literature. There is a wide array of work that has been done on the Karbi hill tribes but due to the misconstrued notion of the Karbis of the plain as being a part of the Assamese community, which questions their ethnic identity the focus on them is rarely observed. These Karbis, like other tribes, have some traditional institutions which have been continuing since their existence. While some of the institutions are socio-political, some are religious. Some of these institutions have proven to be outdated in the modern context but continue to be part of their indigenous heritage. The analysis has focused on the following features:

1. Religion

Religion is a part of a universal cultural feature of any society. The Karbis are followers of Hinduism but do not have an anthropomorphic representation of their gods. They are ardent believers of the Hindu Lord Shiva, and their ceremonies are mostly concentrated on offerings and prayers to Shiva. It has been mentioned the Karbis have a different version of the Ramayana called *Sabin Alun*, but the most interesting part of this epic is that it is unwritten and has been handed down from one generation to another orally. However, it is of utmost importance to note that this is a version of the Karbis living in Karbi Anglong, and the Karbis of Borbari do not share any association with the folklore. The most important religious festival of the Karbis of Borbari and for the Karbis living in the plains, in general, is Dehal Karsidom (commonly known to them as Deo-Khal puja), which commences on the first Tuesday in the month of Fagun (usually around the end of February and beginning of March), according to the Assamese calendar.

Till a few years ago, Karbis of the plains called their annual festival Dehal which involves offering puja to Tamlong Sarpo Sarpe (two main deities of the Karbis who are identified as Shiva and Parvati in Hinduism). The Karbis of the hills, however, called it Rongker. However, it is no more Dehal for the Karbis living in the plains nor Rongker for the Karbis living in the hills. Rather it has become Dehal-Rongker, as a result of a political movement that has gained momentum in the community. Re-christening the festival has not changed the rituals, which have come together from both the original festivals. The customs and rituals are the same and Dehal-Rongker has become a common festival for both of them¹⁶.

This festival is celebrated for the welfare of the people residing in the village, for their common good, to ward off any kind of disease or illness and unite the people of their society. The festival is based on the belief of warding the spirit of *satan* or evil (*deo*) so that there is no disorder in the community. The festival majorly focuses on the supremacy of the male members of the society and women are confined to traditional roles in terms of their participation. The traditional beliefs about women as polluted due to their biological nature of menstruation, pregnancy confines their role outside the temple premises and for the preparation of festival food. Every male member of each household of the community is required to undergo a purification ceremony one week before the festival. This process is known as *Abangpangthir* or *Ghorsikona*. Their representation of the god or deity is a finely crafted straight wooden structure that looks like bamboo and is known as *nungpepo* or *dehal khuta*. The festival is conducted during the month of Fagun between February 15- March 15 every year for 3 days. Ritual sacrifices are an important part of the festival which is performed by their priest known as *Kathar*. The village headman of the Karbis is known as *Bangthe* who has a major role to play on the second day of the festival when all the offerings and the important items of the festival are carried from the house of the *Bangthe* to the Dehal temple which is their community temple where the main rituals take place.

¹⁶ <https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/a-festival-of-karbi-unity/cid/454177> accessed 18-07-2021, time 12:35 hours

All the items of the festival are laid down in front of the nongpepo of the temple and after offering prayers and incantations for the welfare of the village by the Kathar, fowl sacrifice is done. The meat of the sacrifice is cooked by the women of the community which is then consumed in the feast. This is followed by a whole night of dancing and rhythmic movements which connote celebration. It is important to note that the preparations for this festival start a month in advance among the people as it is one of the most important festivals which reflects their socio-cultural and religious lives. Contributions to the puja are received from different Karbi villages and officials are deputed after a thorough meeting for its smooth conduct. Notably, participation of every male and a female member from every household is compulsory in Dehal Karsidom, otherwise, a fine is levied on that particular family whose members do not adhere to present themselves. In case of any unavoidable circumstances, prior notice is sent to the Bangthe who usually considers it on the premise that the particular family will offer a full-time service in the next Dehal Karsidom. Apart from this, they also have two other important festivals each symbolizing a certain meaning for the welfare of the community.

Over the years, certain changes have come about in their religious life which does not confine them to the celebration of their ethnic festivals only, but also other Hindu festivals such as Holi, Diwali, Durga Puja, etc. Another change that has been observed due to the process of inter-community marriage is relaxation on women to allow them entry into the temple premises of their respective households during festivals. Although the Karbis do not observe the worship of a deity, they participate in idol worships during common Assamese festivals like Durga puja, Saraswati Puja, Lakshmi Puja, etc.

This is a significant development in terms of embracing the Assamese culture as celebration or participation in such festivals was strictly forbidden in the early time, which amounted to either severe punishment and at times expulsion from the village. One of the prominent reasons behind this belief is that the Karbis are considered to be descendants of the demon i.e., *Asura*, and in every Hindu mythology the *asura* is defeated by a God, which is represented by the different idols in Hindu religious tradition. This led to a sense of resentment towards those who participated in any kind of idol worship. But now, as the cultural contact with the Assamese people flowed over the years, this has become an acceptable phenomenon, especially among the Karbi youth.

2. Dress

The Karbis have their distinctive traditional attire which is artistically designed and woven at their family looms. There are separate dresses for men and women. The men use an intricately designed shirt called *Sulsang* and the lower part of the body is wrapped with a *dhoti*. They use a cloth around the neck like a gamucha called *topola*. The Karbi women and girls generally use, a piece of cloth tied around the waist like a Mekhela known as *Panik*. A blouse known as *Sula* is worn underneath. A piece of traditional cloth is used by them to cover the upper part of their body like a dupatta which is called a *topola*. A very highly artistic waistband called *ringkok* is also used by every woman and girl. The dress of the Karbis living in the hills and the plains vary in their names and the style of wearing it. During any festival or ceremony, the male member wears a headband where the string is made from bamboo and leaves of tulusi, and *mirpulpul* are tied to it. The wearing of their dress in any kind of ritualistic ceremony, wedding, or any kind of community function is very important, else it is considered to imply disrespect towards the community.

With the changes observed in time, except a very few elder women and men, most of the Karbi people have opted not to make the wearing of their traditional dress a part of their everyday life. It is only when there is some kind of ritual festival that they choose to wear the traditional dress, which is compulsory for the males, but the women are still free to wear anything they like. One change that can be observed here is that instead of wearing their traditional dress, most of the women wear the traditional dress of the Assamese people, which is *mekhala chadar*. In case of any event that follows in the community, the women wear mekhala chadar, while men move around in casual attire, rather than wearing a dhoti and sulsang.

3. Food

The eating pattern of the Karbis forms an important part of their lifestyle. The Karbis are known to restrict their diet to completely boiled food. No spices or oil is to be used while cooking. Their food is usually comprised of ground rice which is made at home and *Khar* (which is a liquid, made out of a banana tree). The tree is burnt and the ashes of the burnt tree are mixed with lukewarm water and sieved. The water which remains after sieving is somewhat black in colour and this product is known as *Khar*. Consumption of fried food in any form is usually avoided. Another important component of their food is their traditional drink known as *Hor*, which is a kind of distilled rice-wine. An intoxicating ingredient known as *thinkur* is mixed with boiled rice and kept overnight for two days during winters and one day during summer. After the preservation time is over the blended drink is strained through a sieve known as *aru* and served. The *Hor* is one of the key items that is a pre-requisite in every function, ceremony, as well as part of their daily routine. Serving *Hor* is a must on every occasion. This locally prepared rice beer is a common drink of the people.

A parallel change can be seen in terms of eating preference. Eating habits have shifted towards enhancing the taste of the food by mixing different kinds of spices. However, the significance and importance of the *hor* remain intact. Any kind of ceremony or ritualistic activity is incomplete without *hor*. In fact, sometimes *hor* is to be given as a penalty, in case of punishment.

4. Village Structure

The settlement pattern of the Karbis is in the form of a village. The village headman known as *Bangthe* is appointed by the members of the village. The *Bangthe* appoints *Risa Bangthe*, who is the leader of the youth. The *Bangthe* usually looks after the everyday affairs of the elderly people of the village while the *Risa Bangthe* does the same for the younger people. Two panchayat meetings are held in a year, for addressing any kind of crisis faced by the people. At least one member from every household in the village is required to be present in the panchayat meeting. A fine is paid usually comprising of meat and *hor* for the elder members of the village in case of absence. The *Bangthe* is responsible for all the events and activities of the village. He appoints a collector known as *Talukdar*, who is responsible for collecting money for community events and present an annual report of the collection and expenses. All the welfare work of the village like renovating the temple, cemetery, building of a new temple are taken into account by the *Bangthe*, who appoints separate members to look after the assigned work, and they in turn report to the *Talukdar*. In case of marriage, the particular family responsible has to inform the entire community one month before the actual wedding, which is usually done in the panchayat meetings in case it coincides or a meeting is called by the *Bangthe* for the people of the village to assemble and the marriage announcement is made. Even though inter-community marriage is accepted among the Karbis, but inter-religious marriage is strictly forbidden, which amounts to expulsion from the village community. Even marrying people within the same clan is considered taboo since children within the same clan are considered to be brothers and sisters, which does not necessarily amount to

expulsion but a heavy penalty is levied as decided by the Bangthe along with subjection to public humiliation. One of the characteristic features of the Karbis is the importance given to the aspect of community assistance. Whenever there is any social or religious event happening in the village, for example, the birth of a child, marriage, death in a family, etc., all the members of the village come together, collect money and render financial assistance to that particular family. This attitude of offering support is quite distinct and valued by the Karbis.

There is no caste hierarchy to be observed in particular, but the hierarchy is based more on terms of status order, which is determined based on their surnames. Although the hierarchy is not very stringent, nevertheless people with a higher status experience a feeling of pride to claim their honorary position. Those with the surname *Ronghang* occupy the highest position in this hierarchy. They are considered to symbolize the lion, who is the king. Those below have the surnames of *Terang*, *Teron*, *Tumung*, *Rongpi*, *Terangpi*, *Bungrung* in the order of their hierarchy. People with the same surname constitute a clan and they are bound to help each other irrespective of whether they know each other well or not.

The Bangthe, as it is seen plays an important role in regulating the social, economic, and religious life of the village. However, he has lost his original footing in the present context. Now, people prefer to go to the law courts instead of referring the disputes to the village Council. However, not all issues are referred to courts. Issues that are religious in nature still hold their importance in the court of the Bangthe. Also, as education is gaining its roots among the Karbis of Borbari, the importance given to the Risa bangthe is weakening. The prime role of the Risabangthe is to form a youth club, gather the young people of the village, and address their problems. The club was originally designed for male members but now includes female members, though they do not occupy any office of significance. Participation in such clubs prepares youth for the future. It is not merely a club but a school. But with the accessibility to education, not many young people join such clubs, as they feel that the knowledge gained in schools and colleges prepares them for a better future. Only a few families who cannot afford higher education send their children to become members of the youth club. In addition to this, many social ceremonies celebrated by Assamese people have found a strong grip among the Karbis. Rituals pertaining to *mundan* ceremony, *menstruation rituals*, even *annaprasanna* (feeding the new-born baby with rice) are common practices among the Karbis of Borbari.

5. Identity

The identity question of the Karbis of Borbari is complex. When the Karbis first settled in this particular place they considered themselves to be the aboriginals who discovered the place. Unlike the scenario earlier, the scene is quite different now. All the land that was formerly owned by them is now the land where the Assamese people reside in. The Karbis gradually moved towards the interior parts of the place. Almost three centuries have passed since the Karbis first arrived but they are no longer a majority community of the area. Over the years as things changed the relationship between the Karbis and the Assamese people developed. Even though being a minority group, they feel as having received the warmth and respect of the Assamese people. Their ways of life are different, and they feel that they have never lost their identity as a distinct community in this space. Most of the Karbi men run their businesses and work amongst the Assamese people in the nearby markets. They deal with each other on an everyday basis and the existence of both the communities have a mutual presence and survival. The kind of reverence and affection that they have received has made them feel in line with them or in their terms as 'one amongst them'. Their ways of life have never been interfered with by the Assamese people and they have the liberty to follow their values and customs. Some of the elderly Karbis are even invited to certain meetings held by the Assamese people where their presence matters a lot. In the early days of the existence of both the communities, there was no contact between either group, and a policy of non-interference and isolation was practiced by both the communities towards each other. However, non-interference then was more of a sense of indifference, while non-interference now is more about giving them their own space to practice their own culture and lifestyle. The earlier notion of the Karbis being a barbarous and savage tribe no longer holds.

Another misunderstanding about the identity of the Karbis of Borbari is being termed *Amri Karbi*. It is a common misinterpretation that the Karbis of the plains are known as Amri Karbi. Typically, there are two types of Karbis living in the plains, one of them is the Amri Karbis and the other is known as Dumrali or simply Karbis of the plains who reside in Kamrup and some parts of Morigaon district of Assam¹⁷. However, there is a relationship of hostility between these two factions of the Karbis. During the British rule, the Amri Karbis embraced Christianity and became a separate group. They are even given the status of Scheduled tribes, despite being a Karbi group of the plains while the Dumrali Karbis are not considered so as they are regarded to be a sub nationality of the Assamese. This relationship of hostility still exists between the two groups wherein both the groups are trying to make each other realize and embrace their respective religious identity. The Amris now inhabit a greater part of Ri Bhoi near East Khasi Hills, foothills of Kamrup Metropolitan city as well as in scattered pockets around the city to Mayong.

VI. Conclusion

So far, the study has looked at the various socio-cultural aspects of the life of Karbis and the changes witnessed over the years due to the process of cultural interaction with the Assamese people living in the area. The culture of the Karbis is distinct and discrete. However, the grip of inertia in which this society was found in the past, has now been slackened. The Karbis have now come forward to accept the developmental schemes of different sectors to change their status from being seen as an undeveloped and backward community. At the same time, they are also maintaining their culture which distinguishes them as a separate ethnic group. During the fieldwork, several matters related to changes in their life and culture came up which were manifested. But the fact that remains unanswered is whether their culture and identity will sustain for the next few decades, considering the transition they are going through right now due to external forces? For a community to resist any kind of external forces is difficult and sometimes not possible at all. However, the process is happening transnationally. Some of them have

¹⁷ <https://karbi.wordpress.com/2007/10/04/the-dumrali-karbis/> accessed on 17-07-2021, time 18:00 hours

resisted it successfully, while others are moving along with it. The conclusion of the study focuses on where does the Karbis of this area stand in that sense?

Heterogeneity is one of the key characteristics of Indian society and hence focuses more on differences than similarities. The colonial constructions of the categories of caste and tribes by the Britishers strengthen their classification and listing. For Beteille (1995), this holds more for tribes than castes since the caste system already had a complex and comprehensive literature in place before the British invasion and had always been the focus for both the common man as well as the intelligentsia. However, the same cannot be said in the case of tribes and hence their conceptual understanding and evolution can be described as a 'colonial construct'.

It has been generally held by several post-colonial ethnographers that tribes in India live in close interaction with the larger society and civilization. This relation however has been conceptualized somewhat differently by different scholars.

While Sinha (1958) interprets tribes as a part of 'little tradition', which cannot be understood well unless viewed in relation to the 'great tradition', Beteille (1986) sees it more in terms of a distance from state and civilization in contexts where tribe and civilization co-exist. Although this distinction is maintained, they are not seen as isolated entities but as being in interaction with each other. Thus, tribal societies are seen not as static but as being in a continuous process of change¹⁸.

The Indian tribal population is generally marked by features of poverty and backwardness. Therefore, evolving a social policy for the upliftment of this population became an important concern for India in the post-independence period and the debate between two scholars namely, Ghurye and Elwin finds a strong foothold in this regard.

Elwin (1944) was of the view that tribes should be kept in a state of isolation to protect them from outsiders. He was charged with advocating the policy of isolation which would have prevented tribal groups from enjoying the prosperity that other groups enjoyed although later he no longer advocated this policy and clarified that what he encouraged was meant for a small population of tribes and not in general. Ghurye (1963) however encouraged the policy of assimilation. His view was that tribes were backward Hindus- who are inferior and low because they were segregated from the large mass of the Indian population. So, he considered it best that they should be assimilated with the society at large to be lifted out of their abject poverty and base lifestyle. And this led to the position of the tribes at the lowest position in the tribe-caste-class continuum which is crucial to understand the process of change in the life of the tribes.

For Ghurye, this continuum suggested a movement of the tribals from tradition to modernity, from pantheism to a higher form of religion, from a base and crude way of life to one morally and ethically superior. This was a way of tracing the assimilation-integration stage of the tribals into the national mainstream¹⁹.

However, neither of these two policies could find a strong place in independent India by the nationalist leaders where one can witness a policy of integration being adopted by the constitution rather than of isolation or assimilation albeit with no explicit formulation of the policy (Xaxa, 2008). As we have seen earlier that the tribes were marked off from non-tribes as being primitive and living in isolation from civilization, hence the study of change among them has been a major concern in social anthropological and sociological literature. This change has been studied in relation to three domains of life- economic, political, and socio-cultural with emphasis on contact with the wider social forces represented by either civilization, market, or state structure.

Tribal societies have been by and large characterized as egalitarian societies, especially in relation to the hierarchical character of caste society. However, inequalities based on sex, age, status do exist amongst tribal communities as observed through the case study undertaken here. Furthermore, a hierarchy based on clans, villages, or lineages amongst tribes is not sufficiently highlighted in the literature of tribal communities and the inequalities that exist in their societies are also not so rigid as in non-tribal societies.

While most of the anthropological discourse on tribes has focused primarily on the transformation of tribes to caste, in reality, the changes occurring in their societies are seen more in terms of moving towards becoming a part of civilization by getting assimilated into the Hindu society. However, the change and process of absorption are far from being uniform and identical, and hence a range of common terms such as Sanskritization, Hinduization, Kshatriyization/Rajputization cover the literature of anthropological and sociological studies. Although they appear as different social processes, in empirical reality they overlap and hence the difficulties of the usage of such terms are effectively taken care of by using generic terms such as acculturation, assimilation, and absorption. The most important problem in the conceptual framework is the assumption that a tribe that has adopted the lifestyle of a neighbouring dominant caste can be treated as a caste, regardless of the self-perception of the group in question. Therefore, one important question that arises here is does a process of Sanskritization and Hinduization invariably mean assuming caste status? Do tribes cease to be tribes just because they have undergone Sanskritization or Hinduization? Most scholars used to assume it to be so as it may have been considered to be applicable in the past. However, it no longer holds true for India after independence. More often than not, tribes after Hinduization continues to be part of their social organization and not of castes, bringing in the understanding of the concept of 'acculturation'. Since the process of transformation or acculturation of tribes to caste is attributed to Sanskritization/Hinduization, it is important to understand the meaning of the concept, to begin with. Acculturation is understood as a process whereby a particular culture retains its own cultural identity even after borrowing certain aspects of culture (both material and non-material) from the mainland culture. In this process, both the subordinated and the dominated cultures borrow certain features of their cultural life from each other while at the same time maintaining their individual cultural uniqueness.

Today acculturation for tribes means adopting the ideas, values, and practices of the dominant community rather than being a part of that society by assuming a caste status²⁰.

¹⁸ Xaxa, Virginius. (1999). Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34(24), 1520.

¹⁹ Xaxa, Virginius. (2008). *State, society, and tribes: Issues in post-colonial India*. Pearson Education: New Delhi, 6

²⁰ Virginius Xaxa. (1999). Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34(24): 1521

The question of ethnic nationality is fraught with complications in North-East India in general and Assam in particular. From the above discussion, the study observes a process of acculturation happening among the Karbis of Borbari. Emulating certain features from the mainstream Assamese culture, the Karbis have altered certain features of their socio-cultural life, while at the same time retained their identity in the sense that the changes have come about due to cultural contact but the distinctiveness of their traditional institutions such as religion, dress, village structure, ethnicity, etc., remains intact. The institutions have not eroded and been replaced by new ones. It exists as it had been all these years with certain adjustments. Another important fact to mention is that it is not only the Karbis borrowing from the Assamese. There is a dual process happening. The fabric of the traditional outfits and the traditional drink of the Karbis have become popular among the Assamese people. There is a cultural exchange observed in terms of eating habits between both the Assamese people and the Karbi community. At the same time, they are highly fascinated by the way their religious festivals take place and many Assamese people participate in these festivals and contribute funds whenever the Karbis collect money for any kind of socio-religious activity. There is also an exchange in their language. The Karbis are well-versed with the Assamese language while many people are familiar with the Karbi language. The lifestyle of the Karbi group here is thus observed to be simple yet progressive where the influence of the amalgamation of different communities has been welcomed through equal participation not just in terms of cultural exchanges but also through opportunities in the field of education and jobs.

Moreover, there does not seem to be a process of Sanskritization happening, as the Karbis are not seeking any kind of status or class enhancement. Rather they are inclined towards moving in the direction of upliftment and enlightenment and move forward from their life of oblivion in addition to getting rid of the age-old conventional idea of the 'Karbhis being a barbaric and backward ethnic group'.

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