



# CHANGE AND CONTINUITY: A STUDY ON THE KARBIS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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## Abstract

Change in human society is a universal phenomenon. No society remains the same forever. Change can be slow or rapid. Both external and internal forces play their part in bringing about changes in the society. The present paper seeks to trace the changes that have taken place in the Karbi society of Arunachal Pradesh and further identify the factors responsible for such changes. Resistance to change by any society is also not unusual. Persistence of certain cultural traits in the face of forces of change could be sign of a healthy society. The paper also makes an attempt to bring to light the continuity elements in the socio-cultural life of the Karbis. The study relied on materials collected primarily from personal interviews and secondary resources in the form of books, journals, research papers and census reports. It focuses on the key alterations observed over time in the community's family and inheritance system, clan & marriage, food habit, dress pattern and other social issues.

**Keywords:** Change, Continuity, Culture, Karbis, Religion

## I. Introduction

Human society is always in the process of change. Social and cultural changes take place in every society across the world. Such changes occur over time in the society due to internal or external factors. Sociologists define social change as a transformation of cultures, institutions, and functions. It thus refers to alteration or transformation in human interactions, relationships, behavior patterns and cultural norms. Most of the ethnic groups in Northeast India have witnessed socio-political and cultural changes over the years, thereby diminishing its age-old distinct traditional way of life. This paper seeks to highlight the changes among the Karbis, also known as Mikirs, in Kokila

village of Papum Pare district, Arunachal Pradesh. It makes an attempt to map the extent and nature of change with reference to their family and inheritance system, marriage, clan structure, food habits, dress and religion. It also aims to bring out current socio-political issues faced by the community such as the non-issuance of Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Permanent Residential certificates by the state administration.

Social change has been a major topic of interest for social researchers over the years. Pioneer sociological thinkers – August Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber – all tried to understand the changes manifested in the modern world as a result of industrialization and urbanization. Social change involves some noteworthy alterations in the social structure and cultural patterns over time. Change in cultural patterns or cultural change implies modifications in the accepted mode of life, habit patterns, and the life-style. Social change and cultural change are inter-linked. Cultural change will lead to social change, as all culture stems from society. According to Dawson and Gettys, society is the product of culture. Cultural elements, on the other hand, are socially transmitted rather than biologically. “Culture tends to give direction and momentum to social change and to set limits beyond which social change may not go” (Dawson & Gettys, 1948).

Scholars such as Robert Redfield, Clifford Geertz, A. L. Kroeber, William F. Ogburn etc have made path-breaking contributions in understanding cultural change. In India, the works of scholars like M.N. Srinivas, Y. Singh, A.R. Desai, D.P. Mukherji and I.P. Desai gave contextual clarity in explaining social change. For instance, Srinivas (1966) in his study of the Coorgs of Mysore, described the cultural mobility in the traditional caste structure of the Indian society. His emphasis on westernisation and modernisation has helped in understanding social changes taking place in the Indian society.

Tribes are popularly believed to be close-knit community with distinct cultural homogeneity. The Karbis, known as Mikirs in Arunachal Pradesh, are one of the biggest ethnic groups in the Northeast region of India. With the onset of modernization, urbanization, expansion of education, religious influence and rise in population, significant changes have been witnessed in the Karbi society over time. The emerging Karbi social structure and culture needs to be studied in detail as preservation and promotion of indigenous culture is the need of the hour.

This paper also focuses on underscoring the continuity elements of the Karbi culture amid influences from several forces of change. Continuity refers to those socio-cultural aspects that remain unchanged in a society. The Karbis have managed to maintain their distinct identity and culture despite the outside influence of other cultures. Selective cultural adaptations by the community without forgetting one's cultural heritage also makes it a matter of in-depth study.

## II. The Karbis

The Karbis, known as Mikirs earlier, are one of the major ethnic tribes of Northeast India. The aboriginals, however, prefer to call themselves as ‘Arleng’ which means ‘common people’ (literally ‘man’ in Karbi language). Lyall (1997) stated, “They call themselves Arleng, which means ‘man’ in general”. Great Assamese artist-scholar Bishnu Prasad Rabha referred to them as the ‘Columbus of Assam’, referring to their discovery and settlement in the state. Like most tribes in the region, Karbis belong to Mongoloid race and speak a language which is considered part of the Tibeto-Burman language family.

The Karbis settled in Arunachal Pradesh have to still identify themselves as ‘Mikirs’, even though the term is considered derogatory by the tribe in general. The origin of the name ‘Mikir’ given to the community is unknown, but it has been used by other communities in the region (Stack & Lyall, 1908). In 1976, the word ‘Mikir’ was formally replaced by ‘Karbi’ and the then Mikir Hills district in Assam was rechristened as Karbi Anglong district.

with effect from the 14th October 1976 vide Govt. Notification NoTAD/R/115/74/47 Dtd. 14-10-1976. Vast majority of Karbi population are still concentrated in Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) area of Assam. Some Karbi localities are also found in Kamrup, Sonitpur, Biwanath, Sibsagar, Nagaon, Morigan and Dima Hasao districts of Assam, besides those in parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Nagaland.

### III. Objectives

1. To highlight the changes in the Karbi society of Arunachal Pradesh and identify the factors leading to such changes.
2. To find out the continuity of certain socio-cultural traits of the Karbis settled in Arunachal Pradesh, despite the influences of several forces of change.
3. To know about the current issues and challenges faced by the Karbis with regard to their ethnic identity.

### IV. Methodology

The present study is based on information collected primarily from personal interviews and observation. Interviews and observation are one of the most commonly used methods for data collection in a qualitative research. As the study required in-depth understanding of both the past and present socio-cultural phenomena, it was felt that personal interviews with the community leaders and senior citizens as a method of data collection would be appropriate. The researcher conducted unstructured interviews on the subject matter with ten respondents, mostly intellectual and elderly citizens of the village, chosen through the method of purposive sampling. Secondary sources were collected from books, journals, news papers, research papers, published thesis, dissertations and census reports.

### V. Field of Study

Kokila village is located in Balijan sub-division of Papum Pare district in Arunachal Pradesh, India. It is situated 60km away from district headquarter, Yupia. As per village records, total 85 families reside in the village presently. According to 2011 Census of India, the village has population of 523 of which 269 are males while 254 are females. Kokila village is one of the largest settlements of the Karbi community in the district and the whole of Arunachal Pradesh; the others being Hollongi and Balijan.

### VI. Analysis and Findings

An in-depth study into the socio-cultural life of the Karbis residing in Kokila village has brought to light some essential facts about the community. There is a wide array of work that has been done on the Karbis of the Karbi Anglong district and other areas in Assam. However, there has been no significant research done on the changing socio-cultural life of the Karbis living in Arunachal Pradesh. The findings in this study will help us understand the nature and extent of changes taking place in the Karbi society of Kokila village and further figure out the continuity elements in the community.

Despite geographical distance and administrative separation from the majority of Karbi population, the Karbis residing in Arunachal Pradesh, have managed to maintain their identity over time. There is also a sense of

contentment and pride with regard to their ethnic identity and values. Like other community members in Assam, the Karbis of Kokila, have preserved and protected their culture, language, traditions, rituals and other practices, that makes them part of the greater Karbi culture. The onset of modernization, globalization and spread of education has brought about significant changes in their socio-cultural and religious life.

Since the study targeted to highlight the changes and continuity elements in the Karbi society, the analysis focused on the following features:

### 1. Family and Inheritance

The Karbi family is by and large patriarchal in structure. Modernization and western influence has pervaded into this traditional practice among the Karbis of Kokila village. Joint family system has almost disappeared as nuclear family system gained popularity. Expansion of education, desire for independence of the married couple, increase in income, increasing commercialization of the economy, exposure of Karbi society to outside world and democratic way of making decisions are some of the reasons that could be attributed to bringing about this change. However, the father is still the head of the family. The line of descent is followed through the male line. Inheritance of all immovable properties is also predominantly patrilineal. Property is distributed among man's sons. There is no practice of dowry in the community. However, the bride takes to the groom's house whatever she needs in her new home. The children use the surname of their father.

Family continues to play a very important role in the social structure of the Karbis. The family has not only been the centre of social and economic life but also the primary source of support for the family members. Family bonding and relationship flows from this unit of the social system. The family still performs biological, social, economic, religious, political functions like that of the bygone days. Some obvious changes have been noticed in the nature and style of functioning of the family. For instance, the children are sent to the schools by parents instead of sending them to the agricultural fields.

### 2. Clan and Marriage

The Karbi society is divided into five major clans, known as *Kur*. These are – Ingti/Engti (Lijang), Terang (Hanjang), Teron (Kronjang), Inghi/Enghi (Ejang), and Timung (Tungjang). These clans are further divided into several sub-clans. These clans are exogamous, which means that marriage between the members of the same clan or sub-clan is completely prohibited (Bouchery, 2008). Despite the influence of other communities and modern values, the Karbis in Kokila village are sticking to this practice of marriage handed down through the generations. Cross-cousin marriage is still the preferred form of marriage. Marriage by negotiation is also prevalent in the village. Monogamy is the prevalent practice, and the community leaders and elders discourage polygamy. A notable change observed in the village is the desertion of traditional rituals and ceremonies during engagement and marriage ceremonies. One prime reason for discontinuation of such wedding rituals is the change of religion from the indigenous form of religion practiced by the community to a new belief. All the families in the village have now adopted new faith system called Lokhimon, founded by Lokhon Engti Hensek in Eastern Karbi Anglong on February 4, 1959. Lokhimon religion is a type of reformation and distinguished from the Hindu and Karbi traditional animist religion (Bhattacharjee, 2020).

### 3. Dress, Food and Language

The traditional attire of the Karbis is aesthetically designed which is generally woven at their home looms. There are separate dresses for both men and women. The men use well-designed shirts called *Choi-ang*, *Choi-hongthor akelok*, *Choi-hongthor akeik*. A loincloth called *Poho* is also worn by the Karbi men. The turban like cloth used by men is called *Poho*. The Karbi women including young girls wear dresses such as *Pini*, *Pekok*, *vamkok*, *Pe'seleng*,

*Pe-sarpi, Jiso, Khonjari, etc*(Phangcho, 2001). All are expected to wear the traditional dresses during any public events such as temple worship, wedding or any community programmes. Failing to wear them in such public gatherings would imply disregard towards the community.

Changes in dress pattern have also been observed among the Karbis of Kokila village. The preferences of both men and women have changed from draping traditional costumes to modern dresses. Men often use long pants and shirts, while the girls use salwar, skirts and pants. Except few elderly men and women, most of the Karbi people have opted for westernized dresses even in their day to day life. It is only during the public functions such as temple worship or festivals, people wear the traditional dresses.

Manifold changes have also taken place in the food habits of the Karbis. Traditional dietary habits have been discontinued due to the strict demands of their alternative spirituality other than the indigenous form of religion. For instance, majority of the Karbis who follow traditional religion consume pork. In fact, pork is a favourite dish of many Karbis and it is served during festivals, weddings and other social gatherings to the public. The Karbis in Kokila village, have forsaken the habit of eating pork, as their adopted faith 'Lokhimon' discourages its consumption. The staple food of the community still remains the rice. However, the Karbi kitchen has now become very dependent on market products, instead of the wild vegetables and herbs on which their ancestors survived.

The language spoken by the Karbis in Arunachal Pradesh is also identical with those spoken by the Karbis in Assam. Everyone in village communicate with each other in their traditional dialect. Most of the people including children are multi-lingual, as they can fluently speak Hindi and Assamese too. The community has not only protected their language but is also proud of their identity and language.

#### **4. Agriculture and Livelihood**

Agriculture still remains the major source of livelihood. *Jhum* or shifting cultivation which was practiced earlier is no longer practiced. Rice is the predominant crop of the farmers. They also grow variety of vegetables and fruits in their garden. Latest available agriculture machineries such as tractors and power tillers are used instead of traditionally tilling their land using a pair of bulls. Villagers also rear cows, goats, chickens etc for extra family income. As per the teachings of their Lokhimon religion, pig farming has been abandoned in the village. This is a significant change in the socio-cultural life of the community because for the Karbis in Assam, particularly those who follow the traditional form of religion, rearing pigs, its sacrifice and consumption is widely practiced. Other than agriculture, many villagers now do small businesses like opening groceries, shops etc to earn their livelihood. The educated and skilled Karbis move out to the city to do jobs both in private and government sectors.

#### **5. Religion**

The Karbis are originally animists and have its own belief system. They believe in the immortality of the soul, life after death and re-incarnation. This indigenous belief system is basically composed of the 'ancestor worshipping', worship of 'household deities', 'territorial deities', and the death ritual or 'Karhi'. Practically, it's the 'Hemphu-Mukrang' duo that dominates the Karbi pantheon (Teron, 2011). Thus, those Karbis who still follow the traditional practices are known as the followers of 'Hemphu-Mukrang' for which they prefer to call themselves as 'Hemphu-Mukrang Aso', meaning son of Hemphu and Mukrang (Hanse, 2007).

The believers of the traditional Karbi religion have no idols, temples or shrines but they do worship the spirits of each particular space, area or territories. As an animist, they believe that their surrounding is filled with many unseen spirits, some friendly and some angry. Animal sacrifice is an essential part of Karbi ritual performances and fowl are mainly preferred for sacrifice, other animals include hen, pigeon, pig, goat, and duck. Apart from animals,

egg, rice, ground rice, the young stem of bamboo, leaves of banana, holy basil, etc. are essential ingredients of a Karbi worships.

The Karbis of Kokila village has embraced Lokhimon religion. It is a religion which has diverted from the traditional religion of the Karbis while also distinguishing itself from the Hindu religion. Lokhimon has its own temple, and nosuch idol or image (Bhattacharjee, 2020). By embracing this religion, the Karbis have abandoned many traditional rituals and customs that were followed in the animist faith. Lokhimon, thus, is accountable for change even in food habits, wedding ceremonies and observance of indigenous festivals in the community.

## 6. Identity issues and problems

The biggest challenge the Karbis living in Arunachal Pradesh is facing today is related to non-recognition of the community as one of the ethnic tribes of the state. Despite ample evidences of large Karbi settlements in various areas of Papum Pare district in the past including in Doimukh, one of the major towns in the district near the Assam border, the state administration has shown hesitancy in issuing credentials recognizing the community's Scheduled Tribe (ST) status and residential proofs (Permanent Residential Certificate or PRC). Over the years, most of the earliest Karbi settlers in different parts of the state have either migrated back to other areas in Assam or have settled in areas where they are found today. The term 'Mikir' used to refer to the community was replaced with 'Karbi' by the Government of India, with effect from 14<sup>th</sup> October, 1976. The then Mikir Hills district in Assam, where most of Karbi population is concentrated, was also rechristened as Karbi Anglong district. The Mikirs in Arunachal Pradesh also began to call themselves as 'Karbhis', which led to reluctance on the part of the state administration in granting ST certificates to the community members, considering the ethnic tribe status in the state was recognised as 'Mikirs' and not 'Karbhis'. Hence, many senior citizens of the community in the state possess ST certificates, but the younger generations do not have one.

Due to non-issuance of ST and residential proof documents, the community members are facing immense problems. The educated youths are unable to apply for jobs and scholarships under ST category. The farmers and businessmen are facing hindrances in availing loans and other schemes of the government. Besides fear of uncertain future, the community members rue lack of development schemes for the village and other Karbi settlements in the state. The community leaders led by Arunachal Pradesh Mikir Welfare Society have submitted numerous representations to the local legislator and district administration, but have been met only with assurances. Consultative meetings and dialogues have also been held with community-based organizations and youth bodies of the Nyishis, the dominant tribe in the district, over the issue. Despite all the promises to return the ST status of the Karbis in Arunachal Pradesh, no significant progress has been made in this regard. The community members still remain hopeful of their identity crisis being resolved in the coming days.

Poor road connectivity to the village, lack of development schemes and fear of displacement over expansion of Donyi Polo Airport, Itanagar in future are other issues confronting the community members.

## VII. Limitations of the Study

Despite sincere attempts being made by the researcher, the study has certain limitations. They are: (i) As the findings are based on the qualitative study conducted on only one village, it cannot be generalized to other Karbi settlements in Arunachal Pradesh (ii) The study does not focus on the quantitative aspects (iii) Total respondents for the interview is less and may not represent all categories of people.

## VIII. Conclusion

The Karbis settled in Arunachal Pradesh have been able to keep much of their traditional culture intact despite being confronted by several forces of change. They have been receptive to new ideas and practices that would

benefit the community and rejected the negative ones. For instance, the community has embraced Lokhimon religion and strictly follows its teachings. The people gave up some of the traditional religious rituals and practices that are part of the Karbi culture which were considered anti-religion or against the well-being of the believers. However, they have not completely closed their eyes to age-old traditions and culture, as they proudly continue to speak in Karbi, wear Karbi dresses and live like Karbis.

By and large, the cultural identity of the Karbis in Arunachal Pradesh may be intact, but the administrative and political issues, the community is facing due to their identity is unfortunate. There is no doubt about the Karbis being one of the most prominent indigenous tribes of the Northeast India. Therefore, the state administration of Arunachal Pradesh should show political will to return the ethnic status enjoyed the community formerly. Culture defines a person's identity. The Karbis in Arunachal Pradesh will lose their distinct cultural identity, if they do not filter the outside influences. Hence, all efforts should also be made to protect and preserve their rich and diverse ethnic culture.

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