The Karbis are an important tribe in North-east India. They played very little role in politics during the British period. Sir Robert Neil Reid's historic visit to Mohungdijua in 1937 opened a new vista for the Karbis, the hollow of which sustained them adequately afterwards. They were a tribe who were lost in history and thus found it quite hard to recapture their proper place.

Edward Stack in the eighties of the last century made an attempt to open up the tribe to the civilised world, with the assistance of Sardoka Perrin Kay, but the inhospitable geographical conditions soon dissipated his energies and he died after sometime while on voyage to Australia (d.1887).

Sir Bamfylde Fuller's* administration (1902-04) initiated a tribal policy which included a series of monograph writings on the tribes of the North-east. Sir Charles Lyall who officiated as the Chief Commissioner of Assam for a while was given the energetic duty of writing a monograph on the Hikirs (the Karbis at present) Lyall had very little time to investigate into the theme due to his preoccupation in the administration but he produced a unique account of the tribe.

It offers a good reading but it is incomplete for more than one reason. Firstly, the monograph was written under

*Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam.
definite official direction. Its main purpose was to expose the tribe to the administration. Secondly, Lyall had to depend on the borrowed data. Thirdly, the book is pre-dated by more than seventy six years.

Stack and Lyall were the only persons who eminently succeeded to familiarise the tribe to the administration. The usual policy of that time was to know the people as much as it was necessary for the administration. Hence, the method adopted by them was largely statistical. A structured questionnaire was prepared and information was obtained. The information thus collected was woven into monographs. Very little information was given on the economic and political condition of the people. Thus the social aspect of the tribe was not touched.

The Karbis had no definite administrative area of their own before independence. They did not have any opportunity to play any worthwhile political role. The old time 'monographs' were truly an exercise in 'status-quo' with hardly any role to play for the growth of the tribe in social, political and economic fields.

But in the post independent period we have broadened our outlook. We want to have a comprehensive view of each section of the community. Further, research workers are not paid permanent and professionals subject to official restrictions. They are explorers in the intellectual hinterland.
Their approach is methodical and objective.

Prof. Rongbong Terang was quite eloquent when he praised the monograph written by Stack and Lyall and particularly the chapter on the grammar of the language and the affinities they had with other tribes. But he himself wrote a far more effective and extensive grammar in the language co-authored with another Karbi writer Longkam Teran. The latter again wrote good primers for children. Prof. Terang wrote another book, a dictionary (Karbi Lantasam) which is prepared on scientific line. He published his first novel on the Karbi life in the Assamese language. It is a memorable exposition of the whole life of the tribe in a nutshell. If one is willing to know the Karbi life, he must read this book.

Hence the work of Stack and Lyall not fulfil the demands of time and it is necessary now to give more emphasis on the political and economic aspects of the tribe. The Karbis are now exposed to the challenges of time. They are equally in the tares of educational and employment aspirations. The new political contrivance which they got was imposed around an environment of the old-world tradition which sustained them throughout the preceding centuries.

It is an experience which has come as a noble antidote to their problems of initiation in the political experience
in the British days and therefore their new political experience was not wholly abrupt. The Dimasas were truly the rulers up to 1854, the Jaintias had their wide domains, the Ahasis had political autonomy but the Karbis were truly a non-political tribe in the region. Hence the tribe is gearing its potentialities to cope with the changed situation.

The first chapter is devoted to the origin and growth of the tribe. The migration route is traced. The demographic position of the tribe is compared with that of other tribes. There was a controversy on the question of the name by which the tribe is generally known. The old conception on that issue is discounted and a new theory is advanced.

The social system is described in the second chapter. The Karbis are divided into five exogamous kuls or clans. The physical features, dress and ornaments, system of house construction, marriage and death are elaborated in this chapter.

In the third chapter, the political system of the Karbis is described. The stress is given on the three tier system which is persisting in the Karbi political arena. It is also described how the Karbi traditional political system is coping with the demands of the modern political attitudes which is represented by the District Council and its wide network of powers. The growth of political debates is also discussed.

In the fourth chapter, the evolution of political consciousness is traced and the debates on different issues are discussed.
The economic system—traditional and non-traditional is the subject of the fifth chapter. The jhuming system of cultivation is an age old practice which deserves a scrutiny from all sides. If the jhuming means deforestation and low agricultural yields, what is really its alternative? The terrace cultivation and more sophisticated, the wet cultivation are not suitable for a people who are still tradition-bound and motivation-scared. It is very difficult to start a process of initiation among them. They cannot simply abandon the age old practice overnight, not even for the sake of modernity and take to the more economically beneficial types.

The distance between the withdrawal from jhuming and the initiation into the newer types being wide, it means uncertainty and loss of occupation for the people. What is the remedy? Is it the gradual withdrawal of the jhuming and the steady introduction of the newer types or the government aided afforestation and the growth of agriculture is the solution? The large scale denudation of forests due to destruction can only be compensated by well calculated afforestation.

The jhuming is a wide world phenomenon where availability of land was abundant but the increase of population means shortage of agricultural lands. Hence the jhuming with its cycles has its own limitations and it is bound to be at loggerheads with the more economic method of cultivation where land has its own value.
In the sixth chapter, Karbi Anylong's educational progress is reviewed. It is also observed that the emergence of the Karbis as a socio-political community depends on education among the masses. Now the spread of education is the essential ingredient and that it can only break the barrier of social backwardness, it is emphasised in this chapter.

In the seventh chapter, the religion of the Karbis is described in detail. How the primitive religion of the Karbis fit into the conventional definition of the religion, it is a question to reckon with. The march of the world religions into the spheres of the Karbis religious experiences is another question. It is asserted that the religious beliefs are the inertia of social progress which prevents them from enjoying the fruits of progress.

The Karbis preserved for themselves a rich tradition of folktales. These stories give us some insights into the cultural development of the tribe. In every given racial group, this is a very important aspect of social development. It is particularly relevant for a tribe who have had to preserve the whole stock orally. This is discussed in the eighth chapter.

The above points are further enumerated in the last chapter and concluding remarks are made on them. The discussion on the Karbi life cannot be full proof but an attempt has been made to project the different sides of the Karbi life. In the concluding chapters, the factors which go into the pro-
press of any community are discussed and it was found that the Karbis by and large are handicapped due to low use of them.

It is a moot point whether the Karbi society is autocratic or democratic. The time-worn traditional system exhibits its autocratic character but the society was least feudal because land was not a factor. Although the traditional hierarchy exhibits autocratic characteristics, its broader working model was tempered with liberal overtone. A small comparison was attempted between the traditional Khasi and the Karbi political models.

A brief account on the Karbi language was added in the annexure to facilitate some comprehension of the language.

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TANMAY BHATTACHARYEE
Lecturer and Head, Department of Political Science,
Hailong Government College, Hailong

1. *Rongmilir Manhi* (Smile of Rongmili) -
   It was published by the Asom Prakashan Parishad, Gauhati, August 1981.