CHAPTER-1

Introduction

1.0. Introduction:

In this introduction, an effort has been made to discuss some aspects of Karbi, Significance of Karbi, Regional division, Area and population, Historical Overview, Language and Dialect, Script and Literature, Society-Culture and Religion.

Karbi is spoken mainly in the Karbi Anglong district and in some areas of present Kamrup, Nagaon and Sonitpur districts of Assam. Other than Assam, it is also spoken in some parts of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh.

Karbi is the name of the language and people living in the hill plateaus and plains of the central part of North-East India, especially in Assam. The Karbi was formerly known as ‘Mikir’. In 1976, the word ‘Mikir’ was replaced officially by the
term ‘Karbi’ in Assam. But the Karbi population is still referred to as ‘Mikir’ in the other state such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Meghalaya. The Karbis prefer to call themselves ‘Arleng’ (human) and ‘Monit’ (man in general).

Ethnically they belong to the Indo-Mongoloid race and linguistically to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages under the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. The speakers of this language are bilingual. Generally, they can speak both Karbi and Assamese. A small number of the Karbi people cannot speak Assamese, but they can understand Assamese. The linguistic situation of Karbi is a peculiar one. They speak in Karbi in their domestic life or within community, while they speak Assamese with non-Karbi people. Assamese has been accepted as the first language by the Karbis for academic purpose. The Karbi language has been introduced very recently in primary schools as an additional subject. A very limited number of books on different subjects have been published in Karbi language. The books are written with the modified Roman Script.

1.1. Significance of Karbi:

Since each group of people has a separate name for self identification, the Mikir people also called themselves ‘Arleng’ or ‘Karbi’ which mean ‘human’ in general. They also call themselves ‘Monit’. But the tribe was popularly known as ‘Mikir’. Dr. Grierson also used the same term. They were called ‘Mikir’ by the non-Karbi people. In the words of B.N. Bordoloi (1987) “Mikir is a name given to the tribe by the Assamese. They also call themselves ‘Arleng’ which means ‘human’ but the tribe has considered this term to be a misnomer. They feel that the term has been used by the non-Karbi after the nature, habits and customs of the people.” There are some legendary stories regarding the origin of the word Karbi.
In ancient times, the Karbi people used to live in sloping areas of the hills called ‘Arleng’ by the tribe and thus they identified themselves as dwellers of sloping areas. Hence, the word confined to a narrow sense as it means a particular man only. According to another legend, the word ‘mengkiri’ is the origin of the word ‘mikir’.

There is a story of folk belief that the tribe offered wine, flesh, dry fish etc. to God in various rituals. At the time of ritual while offering to God they chanted ‘the Karbi’ which may be the origin of the word Karbi.

There is another etymology of the word Karbi that it is developed from ‘me akar be’ where ‘me’ means ‘fire’, ‘akar’ means ‘burning’ and ‘be’ means ‘keeping the fire in burning position’. As far their tradition, they used to keep fire whole time in their house since ancient times. From this tradition, they preferred to identify themselves as ‘me akar be’ and it turn into ‘Karbi’ in later period.

It is difficult to give any documentary evidences on the origin of the word ‘Karbi’ and so the proofs collected from the legends, popular stories or the folk etymologies are the only means to give opinion on it. Thus, depending on these beliefs, it is presumed that the both the terms ‘Mikir’ or ‘Karbi’ was given by the other people of their neighbourhood.

1.2. Regional Division:

From the point of view of habitation, the Karbis are divided into three groups, namely, Chingthong, Rongkhang and Amri or Dumrali. These groups are otherwise known as Chingthong, Nilip Rongkhang and Amri-Marlong. Those who live in the plains are called Amri or Dumrali. Primarily these groups do not differ from each other and they should not be confused with clans. It is purely related to the place
where they are living. For example, Chingthong group live in Diphu sub division, Rongkhang in Hamren sub division while Amri or Dumrali group are found in Kamrup and Morigaon districts of Assam.

1.3. Area and Population:

Karbi Anglong literally means Karbi Hills, lies in the middle of Assam state, sandwiched between the Brahmaputra valley in the North and the Barak valley in the South. Essentially a hill area, its low hills link the Meghalaya state on the western side and the state of Nagaland on the eastern flank.

The dominant tribe is the Karbi who mostly live in the hills being dependent on slash and burn cultivation. The 10,434 Sq. Km area holds a population of 8,13,311 (According to 2011 census) whose decadal growth rate stands at 22.72%, with an average population of 283 persons per village. The density of population is 78 per Sq. Km. In spite of heavy influx from the over populated mainland, the indigenous tribes constitute 55.69% of the total population. Only 11.30% of the population live in the urban areas while the rest live in 2563 villages in the rural areas.

Increasing by 13.26% in the last decade, the total literacy rate in the district today stands at 57.70%. The literacy rate in the urban area is 83.39% and in the rural areas, it is 45.48%. In terms of human resources, the main workers constitute 28.24% of the total population, of which 59.26% are cultivators. The participation rate of female workers is 37.15%. The 1316.6 mm annual rainfall sustains forest, which is 30.06% of the total land area. The net sown area is 11.82% of the total land area of which 71.71% comes under food grains. 7.35% of the total net sown area is irrigated and fertilizer is utilized in as low as 3.03% of the total sown area.
In the Education sector, for 10 Sq Km geographical area, on an average, there are 0.6 Primary Schools, 0.2 Middle Level Schools and 0.2 High Schools which have an average of 4.6, 5.6 and 9.2 number of teachers per school respectively.

1.4. Historical Overview of Karbi:

Like many other tribal groups, the Karbis did not have a written language and no written history about their origin, spread and settlement. The researcher, therefore, often had to depend on their folklore, mythological tales and the recent anthropological and linguistic findings for the purpose of locating their ancient habitat and the route of migration into North – East India. It was only after the arrival of the Ahom into Assam in 1228A.D. that some information pertaining to Karbi migration into Ahom territory and Karbi – Ahom political relation were recorded clearly in the Ahom Buronji (Ahom history). During the British period, the officers of the government like B.C. Allen, Edward Stack, Charles Layal and the Baptist Christian Missionaries like Miles Bronson, W. Ward, etc. documented many characteristics of the Karbi after gaining personal contact with them. These records can be treated as authentic materials for writing a Karbi history. Some Indian scholars like K.L. Barua, a mature archaeologist and historian has presented some social and historical account of Karbis based on research. Apart from K.L. Barua, S.K. Chatterjee and P.C. Choudhury also wrote some accounts in relation to the origin and migration of the Karbi people.

Most of the early history of the Karbis has to be based on their folk tales, social beliefs, customs and tradition. Only a small fraction of information has come from the studies of linguistic and social affinities and archaeological finding. The popular belief among the Karbis is that they came to their present abode, especially the district
of Karbi Anglong from the east. This migration must have been during the first and the second millennia before Christ.

According to one of their traditional song, they first learnt the use of hill rice from the Kukis. Edward Stack and Chales Layall have discovered a number of cultural and linguistic affinities of the Karbis with the Kukis, Mizos and Tangkhul who predominantly live in the hills tracts of Indo-Burma border, especially the Chin-Arakan hill and other branches lying within western-Burma, North-eastern hills of Manipur(Ukhrul area) and Mizoram. Strong linguistic affinities are also found with the Meithei language. Stack and Layall also mention that ‘Khyeng’ tribe has such customs as cross-cousin marriage, cremation of the dead, holding feast in honour of the dead, right of inheritance of the son etc. which are quite similar to those of Karbis. Stack and Layall further mentioned some rivers and places of North Cachar Hill, South Nagaland, North Manipur, which bear Karbi names although no Karbis live there now. This is indicative of fact that the Karbis in the course of their early migration from the Burma side live in this area in the past. On the other hand, their linguistic and cultural affinities with the Kukis, Manipuris, Mizos and Tangkhuls confirm that the Karbis had long been associated with these frontier tribes.

Further, Karbi also bears strong Austrics culture in respect of certain practices relating to the dead such as installing monolith (memorial stone), use of prefix ‘ka’ in female personal names, etc., although their culture is basically Tibeto-Burman in origin. Therefore, the other preceding tribes having Austrics and Karen affinities as mentioned by Hutton and Bareh could be the Karbis themselves.

Considering these evidences, it can be said that the route of migration of the Karbis from Burma into the present Karbi Anglong and its neighbourhood was
through northern Manipur, South-Western Nagaland and north- Eastern North Cachar Hills.

It may be further mentioned that there are some monoliths in neighbourhood and north of Maibong, North Cachar Hills, installed perhaps in memory of the dead. U.C. Guha mentioned about the presence of a number of shallow small ponds (without water) around which Karbi boys and girls used to perform their ceremonial dance at the time of ‘chomangkan’, an occasion for showing respect to the deceased with sacrificing animals to them. All these places do not have Karbi settlement now. Dimasa who ruled Maibong and North Cachar Hills for many centuries, do not have the practice of installing monolith or digging pond in memory of the deceased. K. L. Barua, therefore, believes that these monoliths may belong either to the Khasis or to the Karbis. It is to be noted that the Khasis and the Jaintias too do not have such practice of digging ponds in memory of the dead. These findings and evidences, therefore, confirm the fact that the Karbis lived in these places for quite sometimes in the remote past.

Referring to the indigenous tribes of Jaintia Hills, Khasi Hills and Humren sub-division of Karbi Anglong (all contiguous), namely the Sytengs(Jaintia), Khasis and Karbi respectively, K. L. Barua opines, that the Karbi perhaps migrated to North – East India after the Austro- Asiatic Khasis but before other Tibeto-Burman groups. Noted historian B. K. Barua (1969) states “.....the earliest inhabitants of Assam were speakers of the Mon- Khmer family of languages—characterised by Schmidt as the Austrics family of languages. The date when the Austric speakers began to filter into Assam is not known, but it must be several hundred years before Christ.” Great historian and linguist S. K. Chaterji has included all the tribes of Assam including the Bodos, the Nagas, the Kuki-Chins, the Khasis, etc. in the group of Kirata which has
been mentioned in the Mahabharata. Therefore, it would be logically correct that the Kiratas including the Karbi (at least the earliest batch of them if not all) came to settle in ancient Assam before the compilation of the Mahabharata i.e. much before the beginning of the Christ era.

The Karbis are divided into three spatial groups (Amri or Dumrali, Rongkhang, Chingthong). The Amris are originally found to be the western most settlers who now largely occupy the hills of Amri Block, Ri Bhoi area of East Khasi Hills, Low Hills and foot Hills of southern Kamrup (from Guwahati eastward ). The Amris are perhaps the oldest settlers among the whole tribe. They thus came to reach the western most portions in the course of their migration from the east.

The Rongkhang section of the Karbis is found to inhabit the entire area covering the half of Hamren sub-division, particularly the Rongkhang plains and its contiguous areas i.e. the southern part of Hojai sub-division lying on the east of the Kopili river. Rongkhang group is also to be found in parts of North Cachar Hills falling within the Kopili valley.

The Karbis of Chingtong Development Block of Hamren and those of Diphu Sub-Division, particularly those in the Lumbajong area including Diphu town itself, are said to be the Chingtongs. What appears from the legends is that this section is very closely connected with Dimapur- Dhansiri valley following their total defeat in the hands of the Ahom force in 1536 A.D.

Accepting to the views of K.L.Barua, B.K. Barua, S.K. Chatterji and U.C. Guha, it can be presumed that the Amri Karbis were the first batch to have arrived in ancient Assam before the compilation of the Mahabharata, the great Hindu epic believed to have been compiled about 1000 B.C. Therefore, the Amri Karbis can be
said to have first appeared in ancient Assam around 1,000 B.C. and possibly left North Cachar much before the next batch the Rongkhangs came to settle there where at later date they came to be ruled by Khasi Syiem (chief) and partly by the Jaintia kings sometime in the past of which no written record has so far been found.

The Karbis of North Cachar are believed to have lived there peacefully for sometime after the fall of Pala Dynasty till the Kachari king of Dimapur subjugated them through their Viceroy. This indicates that the Karbis were in North Cachar at that time of Pala administration that began in about 1,000 A.D. It, further, could be true that the Karbis began their settlement even during the rules of Varman dynasty that preceded the Palas. The above statement further indicates that the Karbis were living in North Cachar Hill until 1150 A.D. the approximate time of beginning of Kachari rule at Dimapur, and that it is due to ill treatment of the Kachari rulers, the Karbis finally moved out from North Cachar. There is a story that one Kachari king (Parok Recho in Karbi), perhaps at Maibong, compelled Karbi women to regularly supply breast milk to his pet tiger cub. Once it so happened that a daring women named Amphu Rongpharpi killed the king’s milk collector (Hakla), who misbehaved and applied force to milk her breast, with an axe. Thereafter Rongpharpi with large number of her followers fled towards Doyangmukh by the Kopili to avoid further Kachari oppression. From that time onward, she is regarded as a heroine and became popular as ‘Rongpharpi Rongbe’. But there is also every possibility that some of them, had already migrated to Rongkhang and Jantia Hills prior to 1150 A.D. and as a result of this migration from North Chachar Hills, the Rongkhang Karbis came into contact with the Jaintias and Khasis.

From the foregoing discussion, it has become evident that the Karbis not only came in contact but also lived with the Khasi, the Synteng, the Varman, the Palas and
the Kacharis during the pre-Ahom period. It is also a fact that before entering into ancient Assam they had lived with the Kukis, the Chins, the Karens, the Angamis, etc. in upper Burma and Naga-Patkai-Manipuri Hills. These tribes or group of people influenced the Karbis socially, culturally and also politically to some degrees.

Ahom first arrived in Assam in 1228 A.D. and ruled it till 17th century and the Karbis came in contact with them. It was perhaps after the defeat of the Kacharis who held sway over middle Assam including present Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills at the hands of Ahoms in 1536 A.D. that Karbis came directly in contact with the Ahom (there are, however, no record).

In the following two such traditions are given which give some clue to know about their migration and settlement in the past:

1. ‘In the days of migration eastward from the Kopili region, Amri stayed behind and Chingtong and Rongkhang waited for him as they moved from stage to stage. At last on arriving at Dhansiri River, Chingthong and Rongkhang resolved to be only two sections in future.’

2. From the Nongpilar there came down a god like man called Chingthong with a group of followers and established a kingdom at Lumbajong.

According to the first tradition both the Rongkhang and the Chingthong Karbis moved eastward from Rongkhang and Kopili valley and the Amris never followed them or moved out. Chingtong and his followers reached Diphu-Lumbajong and finally Dimapur, but Rongkhang and his followers did not seem to have reached that far. Instead, they possibly settled down little beyond the Kopili valley on the east covering most parts of Hojai sub-division.
The second tradition mentioned only the Chingthong migration towards the east.

Both the traditions explain the Chingthong migration eastward from the hills of Rongkhang. Their settlement in Diphu- Lumbajong area and Dimapur- Dhansiri valley to have occurred after the Kacharis deserted Dimapur altogether. Thus this area became depopulated and the Chingthong found it congenial to live perhaps in the middle of the 16th century.

It is not exactly known at what time the Dumuralis began to settle in the plains. According to a tradition prevalent in Panbari, Chenimur, Sonapur and Jagiraod, a group of Karbis came down from the neighbouring hills on the south and established a kingdom under the king name Dumura. Henceforth, these people came to be known as Dummurali or ‘thoi aso’ (or thoi asor- meaning plains dweller) by their counterpart in the hills and ‘Thalua’ by Assamese. Even now their area covering Sonapur, Khetri and Jagiroad lying between east Khasi Hills on the south and Kalang River on the north is called Dimoria.

According to a legendary tale, once king Dumura received a golden banana flower as present from the Syiem of Khyrim. Upon learning the news of this valuable present, one person named Titua Rongpi became Jealous. He conspired, and succeeded in killing Dumura, and captured not only the golden banana flower but also Dumura’s throne. King’s younger brother Noongphalang escaped and took refuge in Jamunamukh. Titua was later defeated by Noongphalang in an encounter, but he managed to escape with the valuable to Barpujia near Raha. Noongphalang then recaptured the throne of Dumura, and thence continued his dynastic rule. At Barpujia, Titua again became the chief of Karbis. This was the time when the Vishnavite leader
of Assam, Srimanta Sankardev died. On hearing about his death, there came some Brahmins from Kanauj, to visit the birth place Bardua, and met Titua Rongpi on the way. Titua helped the Brahmins from Kanauj in finding out the way to Bardua by sending some Karbi men with them. Later on these Brahmins converted Titua and some of his people at Barpujia into Vaishnavism, and thus became Koch.

The story indicates that Dumura and Syiem of Khyrim were in friendly terms. Coming of the Brahmins after the death of Srimanta Sankardev and their meeting of Titua also indicate that Karbi settlements already began at Barpujia near Raha sometime in the middle of the 16th century or a little later because Srimanta Sankardev died in 1569 A.D. The story further supports that conversion of Karbi into Hinduism and offering them Koch caste status took place on large scale. It is also said that Srimanata Sankardev engaged one of his Karbi disciples to preach Vaishnavism among the Karbis. He was named Jaihari Ata. This, therefore, gives the clue to believe that Karbis were living in the plains of Raha even during the early sixteen century.

The above story also shows that the kingdom of Dumura was established during the early part of the sixteen century, if not earlier. Further it could be ascertained that the Dumura are no other than the Amris. So also the case with the Karbis of Raha- Barpujia area as they are very close to the Amris. It is, therefore, quite possible that these people too came to be called Dumuralis like other neighbours.

Composition of Sabin Alun (Karbi Ramayana) is an interesting example of influence of Hindu literary tradition on a tribal society. The Karbi version of the story of Ramayana was handed down orally among them for centuries until the Asom
Sahitya Sabha, the literary organization of Assam brought out its first edition in 1986. Commenting on the Karbi Ramayana, Satyendra Narayan Goswami (1982) says that the idea possibly came to the minds of the Karbis from the Assamese Ramayana which was first composed by Madhab Kandali somewhere in the plains of Kalang-Kopili in the district of Nagaon. It is, therefore, quite likely that the popular story of the Assamese Ramayana became popular also among the neighbouring hill people, especially the Karbis, who composed their own Sabin Alun, perhaps in the fifteenth or early part of sixteenth century. If that is accepted to be true, then one can logically say that it must have been composed before the death of Srimanta Sankardev, and that his own convert Jaihari Ata might have told the original story of Ramayana to the Karbis of Kopili valley as well as those of the hills of Rongkhang in Karbi style.

Although the British Government became the principal authority of the entire North-East India following the Treaty of Yandaboo on 24th February, 1862, the British administration in North-East India actually began in November in 1823 when David Scott was appointed as the agent to the Governor General of India. Thus the Karbis first came under the British administration from that time. It is said like other people in Assam that the Karbis too were badly affected by the Burmese invasion between 1824 and 1826.

However, peace soon began to prevail in the country after the treaty of Yandaboo and annexation of Assam by the East India Company, the new Government undertook some reformatory measures in respect of land settlement and the collection of revenue thereof based on the actual measurement of land and the regular assessment of it. Under this reform, a district was divided into mauzas or mahals each of which was looked after by a mauzadar whose duty was to collect land revenue
from all families resident of his mauza and deposit it to the Government annually and Karbis were also part of it.

From the beginning of the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Karbis of Nogaon and its neighbouring hill tracts came to the notice of the Baptist Christian missionaries. Some Karbi children got enrolment in the Mission school, Nogaon prior to 1854. A few years later in 1857, Miles Bronson and William Ward became much interested in the Karbis, and made an extensive exploratory tour of Karbi Hills. Missionaries like R.E. Neighbour, C.F. Tolman, E.P. Scott came one after another to work among the Karbis. In fact, Miles Bronson himself baptised the Karbi named Rong Bong just one month before Scott’s arrival in 1863. Neighbour, the third missionary did some translation works and was able to establish some schools, but he soon fell victim of the unhealthy climate of the area and returned home in 1878. By 1886 there were only 43 Karbi Christians- 41 in Nogaon Church and 2 in Guwahati Church. P.E. Moore and J.M. Carvell came as missionaries for the Karbis in 1891 and 1896 respectively. After executing the works from Krungjeng for sometimes, the centre was shifted to Tika, a place between Hamren and Baithalangso. It is this centre where the first school of education and the composition of primary school books in Karbi at this stage were published from the Baptist Missionary press at Sibsagar.

In 1906, the first Karbi church, the Tika church was established with 27 members. After the church was established, its membership grew steadily. But after Carvell’s death in 1925, the missionary activities from this church became ineffective, and this came to be carried out from Nogaon and Golaghat centres.

As a result of spread of Christianity and education in the early day, a few Karbi families at Tika got the opportunity to move higher along the socio-cultural
ladder. For instance, the parents of Samsonsing Engti, the founder of Karbi Anglong district, at Tika not only got the opportunity to do some translation and composition works in Karbi but also got the help of the missionaries in acquiring higher education for their children. This Samsonsing Engti, by the close of the British regime became inspector of schools, and took the leadership of Karbi Adorbar as its general secretary, an organisation that fought for the creation of a separate district for the Karbis.

Karbi leaders submitted a memorandum to the then Governor of Assam at Mohongdijua demanding the creation of a separate hills district for the Karbis as well as other hills tribes of North Cachar in 1937. Big conventions of the Karbis were held one at Kathalguri in 1945 and another at Hawaipur in 1946. The Karbi Darbar was formed in the Hawaipur convention to better organise and intensify the movement among the Karbis. In spite of all these, the hill people of this area failed to get a district for themselves. The main reason was perhaps the fact that the British Government and the India leaders of freedom movement were preparing for the declaration of the country’s freedom leaving aside all local and internal political issues.

After the Country’s freedom, the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district was formed under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution on the 17th November, 1951, vide Government Notification T.A.D./R31/50/204, dated the 3rd November, 1951, covering the Mikir Hills Tract and its contiguous portions from Nagaon district, Sibsagar district and United Khasi and Jaintia Hills districts and Cachar covering a total area of 15,237sq. Km. The district was again separated into two distinct administrative units by making the North Cachar Hills sub-division into a full fledged district on 2nd February, 1970. Since then the Mikir Hills district has been a single
administrative unit, and has come to be called Karbi Anglong instead of Mikir Hills in 1976.

From the middle of twentieth century, leaders of these hills district are launching a movement demanding an autonomous state for the Karbis, the Dimasa and other hills tribes of Assam, comprising Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hill district under the article 244(A) of the Indian constitution. Two political parties for this purpose have been formed, namely Karbi Anglong Autonomous State Demand Committee (KAASDCOM) and Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) in which Karbis are taking more active part than any other tribes from within the district. The Karbi Students’ Association (KSA) is actively supporting and working for ASDC’s movement programmes.

On the other hand the Karbis in plains, too, began their activities for social revivalism through few non-political organisations like Kamrup Karbi Adorbar, Kamrup Karbi Chatra Sanmilan and Karbi Sanskriti Sangha formed during the fifties and the sixties. The main objective of these organisations were to revive and develop their socio-culture heritage particularly of those living in Kamrup, that has been waning due to the influence of other plains people’s culture for centuries. In more recent times, various district level plains Karbi organisations have been formed to better demand for the fulfilment of their local socio-cultural and socio-economic aspirations. It is worthwhile to mention that the organisations demanded before the Assam Government to introduce Karbi language in the curriculum as a subject at primary level in the Karbi majority area of the plains district of Assam, and it has spearheaded drawing overwhelming support of the plains Karbis.
1.5. Karbi Language and its Dialects:

The Karbi language genealogically falls under the great Tibeto-Burman group of languages, the speakers of which are the inhabitants of this vast north-eastern region of the country. The table No.1 and No.2 prepared by Grierson and Goswami will give a clear idea of its relation with the various languages and dialects of this family of languages.

Table No.1. Language Family Prepared by G.A. Grierson
Karbi was included in the linguistic Survey of India by Grierson and Konow in the early 20th century (Grierson 1903), which represents the first attempt at classifying Tibeto-Burman language. Already, at that time, there was a fair amount of information available on the language. On the LSI, it is noted that Karbi ‘has received some attention from the missionaries who worked among them and we have a vocabulary and some short pamphlets written in it and an admirable grammar with selected text from the pen of the Late Charles Lyall’ (Grierson 1903:69). A classificatory problem Grierson and Konow encountered is noted in the next two sentences.
In volume III, part II of survey I have classed Mikir as falling within the Naga-Bodo sub-group. The language has affinities with Bodo, but subsequent investigation has shown that it is much more closely connected with Kuki and that it should be classed as belonging to the Naga-Kuki sub-group, in which it occupies a somewhat independent position.

While the absence of a closer link between Karbi and Bodo-Garo has not been controversial since there are three other group in particular that have been linked to Karbi: Meithei, Naga and Kuki-Chin.

However, the evidence that underlies the grouping of Karbi with Meithei might better be analysed as borrowing. The assumed grouping with Naga is complicated due to the fact that it is not currently clear at all what ‘Naga’ actually is, as there is a long standing confusion of ethnic and linguistic labels surrounding the term ‘Naga’. A possible link to Kuki-Chin currently appears hopeful.

Overall, it has remained difficult to come up with a classification proposal that places Karbi in a closer relationship with one of the geographically neighbouring branches. This is despite early availability of information on Karbi grammar and lexicon, but certainly has to be seen in the context of the lack of information on some of the ‘Kuki-Chin’ and so-called ‘Naga’ languages. What appears quite obvious, however, is that a major factor in obscuring the relationship between Karbi and other Tibeto-Burman languages has been language contact and contact induced changes in Karbi grammar and lexicon. In particular, it has been known since the Linguistic Survey of India that Karbi has been in close contact with the Austro Asiatic Khasi languages to the west in Meghalaya.
The Karbi language shows two principal dialect variations: plain Karbi and Hills Karbi. Karbi living in plains come into close contacts in their daily life with the local non-Karbi population who speak other languages like Assamese, Hindi, Bengali etc. The spoken tongues of these languages have influenced the spoken variety of the Karbi language. This way the Karbi spoken in the plain district shows some differences with that of the hill areas. The minute investigations and extensive field studies among the Karbi people will give some data to trace out some more dialect variations of Karbi language.

1.6. Karbi Script and Literature:

The Karbi is considered very backward community by the plain people. They are not advanced educationally. The Karbi language is a spoken language and it has no script of its own. At present they have accepted the modified Roman script for writing and printing their text book for primary school as well as other literature. The Karbi language has been actually flourishing as a spoken tongue only. But after the independence of India, the tribe has drawn much attention of the popular government of Assam and the language has got some importance. As a result, the language was introduced in the schools of Karbi Anglong as a subject at the primary level. Though they accepted the Roman script for writing their literature, many Karbi scholars are still using Assamese script for writing their literature.

The written Karbi literatures are found in both Assamese and Roman script. The various oral literatures like songs, tales etc. are compiled and written in Assamese script. Karbis are very rich in oral literature which includes folk tales, ballads, idioms, folk songs like love song, natural song, marriage song, children’s song and popular epic song ‘Sabin Alun’ (Karbi Ramayan) and proverbs relating to their life and
society. Through this literature, we get various pictures and information about agriculture, different house hold activities, wedding and other festivals, funeral rites etc. of the society. A few of them are compiled and published in book form with modified Roman script but majority of them are compiled and published in Assamese script. The published literature comprises mainly poems, stories, prayer songs, novels and few journals and magazines with deferent types and style. There are few published novels such as ‘Rongmilir Hahi’, ‘Rangchapi’, ‘Mekri’, Hamchera etc. in Assamese script. They have some poetry books, such as ‘Thai Awo’, ‘Mangwee’, ‘Kumalin’, ‘Lammet’ etc in the Karbi language. It is just a beginning and all are published within a period of last twenty years. It is hoped that in course of time the Karbi literature will flourish in the hand of the young and progressive Karbi writer.

1.7. The Karbi Society and Its Culture:

The Karbi society is one of the oldest societies in India. This group of people has its own origin of history and culture. They are like many other tribal groups of North-Eastern India in many respect, while at the same time, they have their own distinctiveness among others.

The Karbi culture is a part and parcel of the Mongoloid culture. The Karbi people live together peacefully forming a village under the leadership called ‘Kangbura’ (headman). The Karbi people have their customary laws for leading the village community in a peaceful way. The Social structure of the Karbis is primarily patriarchal, and the father is the sole guardian of the family. The Kangbura, Deuri, Klengdun etc. are very important persons in the village or society as they have a specific role to play in the social life of the Karbis.
1.7.1. Karbi Village

The settlement pattern of the Karbi is in the form of a village. Each revenue village has a headman called Kangbura who is appointed by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council Authority. But each revenue village has a number of hamlets situated separately. Each of the hamlets has also a Kangbura. It may also be mentioned here that each Karbi village is named after the Kangbura.

The Karbis, like the other hills tribes, have a tendency to live on the hills tops. But the people generally do not live in compact areas. The villages are not only smaller in size, but scattered too. The village are, however, located on the margin of the other groups, namely the Dimasa Kachari, Lalung (Tiwa), Khasi, Jaintia, Rengma Naga, Kukis, Boro and other non-tribals. In plains portion of the Karbi Anglong District, the Karbi people practise permanent cultivation and village headmen are quite strong. But in the interior areas of the district, they practise shifting cultivation. In order to stop the shifting cultivation, the Karbi Anglong District Council established a number of model villages in the low lying hills slopes where each family was provided with a house, land for permanent cultivation, some cash grants to wave over the period in between cultivation and harvest, and other infrastructural facilities like drinking water, road, school, etc. But this scheme met with an inglorious death in the middle because at the time of formulation as well as implementation stages, the cultural factors involved were not taken into account.

1.7.2. Clan and Marriage System:

Karbi have five principal clans as i. Enghi, ii. Ingti, iii. Teron, iv. Terang and v. Timung. These principal clans are further sub-divided into the following sub clans:

ii. Inti :Ingti, Kathar, Ingti Hensek, Taro, Ingleng and Ingti Kiling.

iii. Teron: Kongkat, Langne, Milik, Ai, Sirang and Trop.

iv. Terang :Terang Dili, Terang Rongcheho, Kro, Bey, Dun Bey and Bey keik.


All clans are exogamous and marriage is possible between persons of different principal clans. Marriage between sub-clans falling under the same principal clan is not allowed. But they can marry any one from any sub-clan belonging to the rest four principal clans. A boy can marry the daughter of his mother’s brother (young or older). This system of marriage is called ‘Nihu’ system for maternal uncle is called ‘Nihu’ or ‘Ong’. Widow marriage is prevalent among the Karbis. A man also can marry the widow of his elder brother, but not that of his younger brother. This system of marriage is called ‘pateng pazu’.

Although polygamy is allowed socially, however, it is of very rare occurrence. There is no bar in marrying a girl from other community or religion, but in such a
case, the girl has to be formally converted into Karbi fold after performing a ritual. She will then be regarded as a daughter of a couple of aged persons- usually the maternal uncle/aunt of the boy, whose daughter he should otherwise have married. This time onward the girl assumes the title of her adopted parents, and she is thus formally accepted by the society as one of its members.

Unlawful union is very rare in the Karbi society. Adultery or seduction after marriage is not known. This is even said to be unknown when the teenagers in the interior places live in dormitories and share the works together in the fields. The teenagers are allowed to choose their life partners from the life in the dormitories itself.

After marriage, the title of the girl does not change to that of her husband while their children take the title of the father. The women of eastern south Kamrup and Marigaon district, however, prefer to write the husband’s title.

1.7.3. Karbi House Types:

A typical Karbi hut is neither too small nor too big. It is built on bamboo using timber post for super construction. The hut is making in several feet high above the ground. For roofing purpose, thatch is used. The walls made of slit bamboo are mud-plastered. The hut has two verandas, one at the front and the other at the back. The hut is divided into two parts lengthwise. The front part or room is called ‘Kam’ or guest room while the other is called ‘Kut’ used as the living room for the family members. A wooden or bamboo ladder is used in the front of the veranda as to get up in the hut. Cattle are generally kept under the hut.
In recent times, of course, the traditional housing pattern has more or less been abandoned by the Karbis. Instead of having constructed above ground, the house is constructed on ground now. Building materials required for construction of houses, whether traditional or modern, are obtained from the forest.

1.7.4. Birth and Death:

The birth of a child whether male or female is an occasion for joy in the family in the sense that a person died earlier in the family is supposed to be reborn in the same family. In other words, the Karbis believe in rebirth as human beings and not in the form of animals, birds or other creatures. Hence, for a new born child, the name giving ceremony where the maternal uncle of the child takes the leading part is the most important one. The maternal uncle taking a very small quantity of rice beer called ‘Horlang’ in a small container pours it to the mouth of the new born child drop by drop. If the baby is female one, he will utter the names of all the dead females one by one associating a name with each drop. The name that will be associated with last drop will automatically be the name of the female child. Similar procedures of associating each drop of rice beer with the of each dead male in the family are followed in case of name giving ceremony of a male child and the name the name associated with the last drop will be the name of the new born male baby.

Death in the family, on the other hand, is considered to be the tragic incident in the family. For the cremation of the deceased, the Karbis observe some specific rules and regulations and they believe that the non-observance of them might lead the family to great troubles in near future. The dead body is consigned to flames in the cremation ground called ‘Thiri’ when all the relatives of the deceased from far and near could have the last glimpse of the mortal remains of the departed one. Although
they perform the funeral ceremony at the time of the cremation of the deceased, they also perform the death ceremony called Chomangkan at a later date for eternal peace of the deceased. The performance of the death ceremony is a must for the Karbis irrespective of social status and economic position. It is the most elaborate and expensive socio-religious ceremony of the Karbis which continues for four days and four night non-stop.

1.7.5. Religion:

From the point of view of religion, the Karbis can be regarded as animists. Hinduism in its crude form finds manifestation in their worships of god, goddesses and deities. They believe in the immortality of the soul, life hereafter and reincarnation. Arnam Sansar Recho or god Almighty is considered to be the creator of this universe. Among the innumerable deities, some are considered to be benevolent and some malevolent. Even disease is associated with a presiding deity. Hemphu and Mukrang are two benevolent household gods. For the appeasement of the deities, the Karbis observe many religious rituals throughout the year where the sacrifice of pigs and birds and use of rice beer are indispensable. They also believe in witchcraft and black magic. A smaller section of the Karbis has embraced Christianity.

1.7.6. Faith and Belief:

The faith and belief are of the major imbroglios of tribal peoples. The Karbi peoples are also not free from that imbroglio. Many of them believe the enchantment and magical care. When someone of them falls ill or suffers from fever, they believe that some supernatural powers are responsible for it and to get rid of that ill, they take the help of incantation and witchery. In the Karbi language, they call it ‘Maza’ (witch).
Fortune tellers also exist in the Karbi society and they are called ‘Uche’ (male) and ‘Uchepi’ (female) who practise fortune telling where lots of superstition resembles.

These superstitions keep the Karbi people away from development and many people die from ill treatment and wrong diagnosis. But at present, with the development of literacy and emergence of educated class, the belief in superstition among them is somewhat lessening. The increasing awareness of modern science among the Karbi people is seen today.

In the society, the practices of swearing is found prominent one in the trial of guilty persons. In the village or society, if somebody is known as user of black magic, then people gather in a particular place to discuss the issue. As per their traditional custom, they bring the accused person to public notice and he or she is compelled to eat handful of rice (uncook) to extract the truth. As they believed that rice is equivalent to Goddess (Lakshmi), the guilty person cannot say false in fear of being caught by the Goddess. This faiths and beliefs are still prevalent in the Karbi society.

1.7.7. Festival:

Among the festivals observed by the Karbi, the Rongker and Hacha may be well mentioned. While the former is a socio-religious one, the latter is a social one.

Rongker is performed at the beginning of the New Year by propitiating the different gods and goddesses for the well being of the entire village. The deities are worshipped by all the elderly male people of the village so that with their blessings the people of the village could be free from diseases, natural calamities during the year and the families could have a good harvest. The women are not allowed to enter into the worship area.
There is another kind of Rongker performed in a greater scale. This type of Rongker which is performed at the beginning of every five years is called Wophong Rongker. This Wophong Rongker is performed for the well being of all the people of the villages that fall within the jurisdiction of a Mauza. Each revenue village is represented by the village headman and a number of village elders participate in the Wophong Rongker. The Wophong Rongker continues for two days while the Rongker performed for a village is only of one day.

The Karbi perform another festival called Hacha after the harvest. This is rather a merry making festival where community use eating, singing and dancing to the extent of one’s heart content are the most striking feature of this festival.

1.7.8. Dress and Ornaments:

The Karbi have their traditional dresses which are artistically designed. These dresses are woven at their family looms. There are separate dresses for men and women. The aged men use an artistically designed shirt called ‘Soinangpo’ and the shirt used by the young men is called “Soihothor”. The men used a loin cloth called Rikong. But now-a-days at most all the male persons seem to have abandoned the use of ‘Rikong’. Only in the remote interior place Rikong is found to be used specially by married and aged persons. Of course, it is also very rare at present. The use of turban called ‘poho’ also seems to be fast disappearing among the Karbis.

The Karbi women and girls generally use ‘Pini Pekok’ a piece of cloth tied around the waist like a Mekhela. A piece of artistic cloth is used by them to cover the upper part of their body and it is called ‘Jar-ek’ . A very highly artistic waist band called Wanpo is also used by every woman and girl. The ladies use coloured and striped Endi scarf called ‘Khangjari’ during winter. During the performance of
Chomangkan (death ceremony), young girls use a special Endi scarf called ‘Dokherso’. The Karbi women and girls are very fond of traditional dresses and they have been using them even in the face of a strong competition of modern trends.

In the bygone days, a Karbi man used to put on a brass made ear-ring called ‘Narik’, silver bracelet called ‘Prinsoroi’ and heavy silver necklaces called ‘Lekruya’ and ‘Lek-enji’. But now a day, no male person of this community is found to have used them.

The most beautiful ornament put on by aged Karbi woman is ‘Nothepi’ a pair of very big ear-ring made of silver. It is about two and a half inch in length having a diameter of about half inch. This ear-ring is detachable into two parts. The women and girls use silver bracelet called ‘Rup-Aroir’. Besides the necklace made of white beads called ‘Les-loso’, the women are also found to have used a kind of necklace made of silver coins and red beads called ‘Lek-sike’.

1.7.9. Dance and Music:

Dance and music play an important role in the life of the Karbi society. All Karbi youths, both boys and girls know dancing. Various types of dances are performed by the youths during the performance of Chomangkan, the death ceremony and other socio-religious festivals. Hacha Kekan, the dance performed at the harvesting festival is very lively and striking one. Their traditional songs whether folk or religious, are generally sung by experts only who are not only well conversant with their meaning but are also endowed with sweet voices. During the performance of the cremation rites and the performance of the death ceremony, only professional weepers called ‘Uchepi’ is allowed to sing a melancholy song called ‘Sarhe’. They have a
Karbi version of the Ramayana, but the most interesting part of this epic is that it is unwritten and it has been handed down from one generation to another orally.

The Karbi have very limited number of musical instruments. A big drum called ‘Cheng’ is their main musical instrument. It is generally played by a master drummer called ‘Duihudi’. They also used small drums called ‘Chengbruk’. They have two kinds of flutes, the wooden flute is called ‘Muri’ and bamboo flute is called ‘Pangse’. In some of their dances, they use war shield made of rhinoceros skin called ‘Song’ and prototype war sword called ‘Nok’.

1.7.10. Food Habit:

Like the other tribes of Assam, the staple food of the Karbis is rice. Other cereals like Dal are occasionally taken with rice. Vegetable grown in their Jhums, wild roots and tubers and eatable leaves collected from the nearby forests are also taken by them along with rice. Curry prepared with dry fish is their favourite delicacy. Rice is taken twice daily in the morning hours and in the evening. Pork and chicken are also very much fond of them. They catch fish in the nearby rivers, stream and in the marshy land and collectively hunt wild boars and deer in the forests occasionally. Wheat products like Atta, Maida, Suzi etc. are still unfamiliar in the remote areas. Those who have become accustomed to the habit of using these products as Tiffin now-a-days also do not relish them. They rather prefer home grown maize in lieu of the wheat products.

The most favourite beverage of the Karbis is rice-beer which is brewed by every family at home. It is a pre requisite for the celebration of every festival whether social, religious or socio-religious. Similarly, it is also required in the observance of
all religious rites. Guests are also entertained with rice-beer. Distilled liquor is also consumed by them occasionally.

The villagers usually like to take black tea without sugar, and milk is also taken by them occasionally. They generally do not drink milk and even while taking tea, it is not used. But those who are living in the urban, semi-urban and growth centres are in the habit of drinking tea with sugar and milk.

1.8. Organisation of this Work:

The proposed research work is organised into six chapters excluding the Bibliography. The chapters are - Introduction, Review of Literature, Phonology, Morphology, Syntax and Conclusion.

The introduction chapter contains a brief discussion on the Karbi and their language, their historical background and culture, and their literature etc.

The second chapter contains literature review of linguistic study so far as done on the Karbi language. A small number of linguists have studied its grammatical rules and structures of the Karbi. It reviews the grammatical works done so far on Karbi language.

The third chapter contains Phonology where vowels, consonantal phonemes and tones are discussed in details. In this portion, five vowels phonemes and five diphthongs have been shown with their minimal pairs along with occurrences in all the three positions. The consonants are also discussed elaborately with contrasting pairs, distributions in word initially, word medially and word finally and syllabic pattern, consonantal clusters and sequences, geminates and tones. Morphophonemics are also discussed briefly in this section.
The fourth chapter contains a discussion on morphology of the Karbi language. Morphology deals with the structure of words. Our analysis of the morphological structures of Karbi is on nouns, numbers, numerals, verbs, tense and aspects, mood, non-finite verbs, adjectives, adverbs, negations, interrogative, postposition, particles and word formation process.

In the fifth chapter, we discussed the syntax of Karbi. It deals with the study of the sentence structure. Basically, the normal word order of the Karbi is SOV, which means the language is a verb final language. The noun phrase, verb phrase, Adjective phrase and adverb phrases are highlighted in the constituents sections. The clause, types of sentences, negations, and interrogations are also discussed.

The sixth chapter is the last chapter that contains conclusion of the whole thesis in a nutshell. That means the summarization of the whole discussion of the aforesaid analysis. The selected bibliographies are listed after this chapter.

***************