"Älädung lädün̄g
lā neri māndün̄g,
jonpān the’ düngdüng (te’)
lā nerindi māhum,
pirthāk pāngreng klung." [1]

(When my daughter will grow and reach her juvenility, she will weave wonderfully and intricately designed clothes for her brothers).

No civilization can exist without the coexistence of male and female, man and woman, be it of human or other living beings. This indispensability of coexistence can be seen manifested even in the dichotomy or antinomy governing the ‘matters’—the inanimate and abstract objects of the world, such as, light and shadow, day and night, good and evil etc. No act of procreation is possible without their intermingling or interaction, for the absence of the ‘One’ robs the meaning of the ‘Other’, whereas the presence of the ‘One’ lands meaning to the ‘Other’. They endure in togetherness, and perish in isolation. The existence of such duality in the world of beings and non-living is a part of a grand scheme of the Almighty (with whatever name we call it) beyond any empirical justification, scientific or philosophical theorization. Any inclination or urge to alter this grand scheme will create havoc and durable disorder; any contemplation (coercive or fraudulent) of dominating one another will mean transgression of that grand scheme. It is so because both of them are created with biological and elemental idiosyncrasies of their own, remaining incomplete and meaningless in isolation or aberration, their complete identity or fullness being realized only in their fusion or union.

However, the existence of such a dichotomy, the basic and undeniable truth of all the beings and other myriad cosmic creations, had since time immemorial been
recognized and accepted by many a primitive human races of the world, and thus endeavoured to create a congenial social atmosphere and order involving this dichotomy in their prehistoric days. While living in the world without letters the primitive people used to preserve their wonderful experiences of this indecipherable cosmic forces and designs through many interesting tales and stories, which were stored in the mass memory and perpetuated from generation to generation through mouth. Unlike the Khasis and the Garos of Meghalaya; and the Noktes, Syngphos, Ankas, Bangnis, Serdukpens, Wanchos and Maklums of Arunachal Pradesh, the Karbis could not imagine of living without the acceptance of this cosmic force that had taught them to recognize the duality manifested in the cosmic order, rather tried to live peacefully in conformity with that order. Thus, we come across a rich cornucopia of oral narratives in Karbi, folk-tales and folk-songs (comprising myths, legends, wonder-tales and sagacious stories) in which their recognition of and adherence to that cosmic order get vividly manifest. The recognition of this dual force or dichotomy must have induced the Karbis to accept and introduce a social hierarchical order in which men and women are proportionately empowered and enjoy equal amount of freedom and liberty. Theirs is a perfect example of an egalitarian society without the existence of male chauvinism and gender discrimination. The women or the weaker sexes of the Karbis enjoyed respectable status and recognition as portrayed in their oral narratives of the yesteryears, which in reality, was the inevitable outcome of the recognition and acceptance of the duality of the biological and elemental forces– their coexistence and compatibility, awareness and adoration that moulded their folk wisdom and worldview. This concept of worldview is inseparably interwoven into the core of their cultural tradition transmitted through mouths ever since the yesteryears till the modern age almost without discernible modifications. This observation will become conspicuous, if we analyze the oral or folk narratives of the Karbis in keeping with the contexts in question.
Karbi Myths, Legends, Sagas and Women Empowerment:

Like many myth-loving races of the world, the Karbis also believe that the universe was initially created by one omnipotent God, Hemphu (as mighty as Brahma, the Lord, and Zeus in Hindu, Christian, and Greek mythology respectively). In their myth pertaining to the origin of the Karbis and of the universe known as the 'Kārbi Keplāṅg' or 'Munit Keplāṅg', it is believed that all the terrestrial objects and creatures, such as, trees, hills, mountains; rivers and other water bodies; animals, birds, reptiles, pests, insects, and at last human beings by only and one God, Hemphu. However, if we examine the myth closely, it becomes crystal clear that it was the fertile brain and foresight of Rangbeni, who had first proposed the idea, and, after being consented by Hemphu, took active initiatives in precipitating the process of creation. In this pious scheme of enlightenment again there were two goddesses, namely, Rasingja and Sintu, who had been instrumental in inculcating and introducing various moral principles, socio-religious rites and rituals which enabled the Karbis to lead a decent and meaningful life. Rasingja, in particular, had always assisted her brother, i.e., Hemphu in his benevolent and philanthropic agenda and became the first woman to get married as per prescribed Karbi custom; Sintu, on the other hand, provided clothes to the Karbi people who used to lead a nomadic and savage lifestyle.

According to the 'Moserā Kihir', the recital of the origin myth of the Karbis, which presents an egg cosmogony (having parallels in the Balto-Finnic and Estonian 'runo songs', Karelian songs and the Greek myth related to the birth of Helen), the Karbis along with the other tribes are shown to be originated from the eggs laid by a mythical bird, Vo' Plākip[3], which can be construed as a symbol of mother or woman, the progenitor of a race. It is interesting to note that the Karbis inhabiting in the Ri Bhoi district of Meghalaya believe that the came down to this world through...
the help of a ‘ladder’\cite{4}, which offers a novel perspective about the cosmogonic myth of the Karbis.

As the legend has it, ‘Jirkedām’, the youth dormitory or co-operative of the Karbis had first been introduced by a great social thinker and reformer belonging to the community named Ḥār Bāmon. This co-operative used to play the role of the institutionalized seat of learning for worldly wisdom right from slashing and burning of ‘jhum’ fields, farming, gathering of fire-woods, green vegetables like leaves and roots, yams and arums, making of various essential house wares, weaving clothes, singing and dancing, making variety of musical instruments and learning to play upon them, extending helping hands and undertaking various community services and so forth. What is noteworthy is that both adult boys and girls can be members of this ‘jir kedām’ and can bear equal responsibility as bona fide members of this institution. Out of twenty six members of the ‘jir kedām’, only the boy can become the main office-bearers i.e., ‘Klengsārpo’\cite{5} or ‘Klengdun’\cite{6}. The history of the community (oral though), however, furnishes us with at least one exception to this rule, a woman of being placed on the topmost position of the ‘jir kedām’, namely, Larta.

_Ru-Kāsen_ also was as great a social thinker and reformer as Ḥār Bāmon, who had strengthened the socio-cultural bond and progress of the community by encouraging and patronizing the formation of ‘jir kedām’ by following the footprints of his predecessor, Ḥār Bāmon. He is credited to have founded the ever-first Karbi village, Miring Rongsopi, at Nongkula situated on the bank of the river Kopili. However, Ru-Kāsen owed much to his wife, Basapi, for her constructive advice and valuable contribution to his achievement in uniting the Karbi people by founding permanent villages and inculcating various socio-cultural rites and rituals. In fact, it was Basapi, who had first conceived the reformative zeal, philanthropic and progressive ideologies and kept on persuading her husband to plunge into action. Like Miranda in _The Tempest_ by William Shakespeare she appealed her husband
which exalts her to the status of the main soul-force behind her husband’s accomplishments:

“Oh, my godly husband, please be attentive to my plea; please be wise enough to teach our subjects the art of living by establishing permanent and disciplined villages so that they can keep pace with other civilized societies of the world. If it is not done, they will be lagged far behind unlike other races.”

As the legend goes, Rengbonghom was the greatest king of the Karbis. He is still commemorated as Phu Rengbonghom (i.e., Grandfather Rengbonghom) as a due gratitude to his reformative measures and philanthropic agenda in eradicating a good number of rigid socio-cultural rites, taboos and superstitions plaguing the contemporary Karbi society. Some of those evil practices were ‘lāisenem’[8], the taboo regarding the restraint upon cohabitation of two different clans of the community at a particular space. Such rigid customs and taboos stood as main obstacles before the racial integrity of the Karbi people of his time. Rengbonghom realized the ill effect of such a social system, and therefore, he advocated for the urgency of eradicating it so that all the clans belonging to the community could live together in unity, peace and fraternity, which, as a matter of fact, would help them build a united and mighty Karbi race. Rengbonghom could maintain rapport and amicable diplomatic relationships with that of the neighbour Kings of Jaintias and Ahoms[9]. However, the King could achieve success in his reformative visions and diplomatic strategies of maintaining peace, unity and order during his regime not only by dint of his own virtue but because of the constructive counselling offered by his intelligent wife, Kareng, as and when urgency arose. It is said that Rengbonghom could rise to the status of King only by marrying Kareng who had been the princess, i.e., the daughter of King Kadengsiri whom he succeeded, and that the name Rengbonghom was actually agglutinated from the Queen’s name, Kareng
It is pertinently said that ‘there is always a woman behind a successful man’.

*Rongphārpi Rongbe*, as portrayed in the oral narrative, is the most courageous and farsighted of all the Karbi women of her time, which deserves high accolade. The murder of the ‘Pārok’ (Dimasa) soldier committed by her, her consequent determination to abscond from the Rongteplong village after mobilizing the people, and at last founding of new villages, were not propelled by mere vindictive attitude and impulsive decision, but by sheer courage and unmatched foresight. It was, if candidly judged, a strong protest against earthly tyranny and inhuman torture in one hand, and a rare act of patriotism influenced by democratic ideology, and, of course, an indictment against the ‘evil’ trying to subvert the ‘good’. Rongpharpi Rongbe, who had succeeded in defeating the evil by that cruel assassination, should not be regarded as the greatest public leader, national icon and the saviour of the Karbis alone, but also should be respected as a symbol of justice in the world paralyzed by cruelty and injustice.

The mass-suicide at the steep cliffs of Cheleng Āthepāi located on a mind-boggling height from the basin of the Karbi Langpi river committed by the hapless members of the ‘jirsong’ under a cruel and torturous Village-head not only acquaints us with that of the independence of spirit, peerless power of determination, liberal and democratic ideals, and a well-planned protest against tyranny and injustice evinced by the Karbi male youths, but also in equal proportion of the female counterparts. It is further interesting to note that the rope used for that mass-suicide was actually a ‘vāmkok’[10], and so there is a strong room to believe that the leader spearheading the daring misadventure must have been a girl as courageous as Rongphārpi Rongbe.

*Serdihun* (the woman with golden mind) was gifted with unmatched ingenuity and purity of heart. As the legend goes, she was the first to weave the most
intricately designed tapestry among the Karbis and to use it for expressing her love and affection for her suitor, who was also a member of another ‘jirson’.

_Didi_, a true and devoted lover, commits suicide after learning the ongoing betrothal of her lover, _Dichumai_, with his maternal uncle’s daughter as per prevalent vogue. She is portrayed as a girl who is capable of maintaining constancy in love and sacrificing precious life for the sake of her lover and the society as well.

_Dinmir_, the Karbi Helen, survives the sinister design and conspiracy of _Mangbi_ in fulfilling sexual gratification, who having failed, abetted and instigated _Langteroi_, the goldsmith from _Tanti_ village in eloping with her through his necromantic spell. The inhabitants of _Batchen village_ fittingly avenged both the scoundrels for their cowardly nefarious plot. Hurling curses and vituperative abuses at _Mangbi_ for his immoral sensuality and notoriety the Batchen dwellers sang aloud in unison: “Nāngdetle’so’ Kārbi kāli/ pirthed’o’ oso’ Kārbi” after having succeeded in regaining such a beautiful and virtuous woman like _Dinmir_.

_Larta_ (as recounted in the _Lārtā Ālun_) is a virtuous and beautiful girl, who happens to embrace premature death as a conspiracy of her mother’s conspiracy hatched in order to prevent her love for the orphan, _Kronihang_, a member of the same _Jirson_ that _Larta_ belongs to. She is endowed with many imposing qualities: she was the first female youth leader of _jirson_; an expert weaver; founder of villages; owner of dynamic leadership acumen, which compelled the other women to peep through the windows of their houses only to snatch a glimpse of her when she went out leading a huge throng during _Ritnong Chingdi_. It is because of her unmatched administrative dexterity, ingenuity, intelligence and manoeuvring skill she is remembered by the Karbis till today, though with pathetic reminiscence.

_Kāche_, like Virgin Mary, conceived without sin as a consequence of a clandestine affair with _Soineri_, who were members of the same ‘jirson’. After learning a rumour pertaining to her premarital conception being hotly gossiped
about by her friends, she decided to stay away from the *Richo Chojun* festival, which they had so eagerly been preparing for. Being ashamed of the stigma and unable to bear the public calumination, *Kāche* went to the nearby forest on the pretext of collecting firewood, and consequently got transfigured into a ‘Dengrāli’ tree, and a leafy branch of that tree is planted during *Richo Chojun* festival till today as a token of reverence to her deep self-esteem and holiness.

‘*Sābin Ālun*’, the Karbi epic, shows the sense of women empowerment in a prominent manner through the most affable character of Sintā Kungri apart from faithfully highlighting the imagination and worldview of the Karbis characterized by a rural and agrarian atmosphere. The depiction of Sita (Sintā Kungri) as a human child born out of a peahen (Vo’plākpi) instead of a plough as in the Hindu epic exalts the esteem and stature of her character to a great extent. She is seen as a perfect model, if not as an incarnation of the original progenitor of the entire race in the primeval past. However, quite interestingly Sintā Kungri also is depicted as an ordinary Karbi maiden who performs the daily household chores, carries lunch to the ‘jhum’ field for her father. Indeed, she is delineated as an extremely beautiful and extraordinarily stalwart feminine character who could clean jungles in the ‘jhum’ field much faster than other women. Unlike her prototype in the Hindu epic, Sintā Kungri helps her father in farming in addition to other daily household chores, and thus through the portrayal of her character the anonymous folk poet(s) certainly had intended to design her to be an epitome of a perfect Karbi maiden. Interestingly further, Sintā Kungri also weaves clothes as if she is presented as a model or a flawless representation of Ser Dihun, the first Karbi woman to impose beautiful and symbolically meaningful floral designs on clothes. To be more precise, Sintā Kungri is glorified as a storehouse of all the ideal feminine virtues as envisaged by the simple folk poet to suit the hopes and aspirations, dreams and realities, and the typical ethos and atmosphere of the past Karbi society.
The Karbi counterpart of *Surpanasha* in the Hindu epic *Rāmāyanā* is *Thesomāhādi* in *Sābin Alun*. Unlike the Hindu epic, Thesomāhādi too is deified in the Karbi version of the *Rāmāyanā* in which she is shown to be a fairy of the heaven. However, she is employed as a ploy to help Rām (Rāma) in killing Rāvon (Rāvanā) but she came down to this earth only at the behest of Hemphu in the guise of human form to play the role of the sister to Rāvon. Thus, she earns no stigma on her character of being malignant and scheming female archetype, and is spared from other negative and repulsive traits possessed by her Hindu counterpart, which in turns convincingly reflects the love, freedom and respect for women by the Karbis.

*Hāi-imu*, the unfortunate victim of the arbitrary and unbridled whims and fancies of Longdili, the royal desperado as well as the feudal lord of Sochenc, the capital city of the erstwhile Karbi kingdom, was enticingly enthralling yet unbelievably truthful in her love for her husband. After being coercively separated from her beloved husband, *Long Teron*, and married by Longdili, the Karbi Paris, against her will, *Hāi-imu* preferred death to blatant submission. She thus symbolizes feminine fidelity and chastity like Penelope in Greek myth. Consequently, she is believed to have transformed to be the Goddess of rain, love and peace, and is worshipped till today annually at *Niz Rongkhang*, the capital village of *Rongkhang* kingdom.

*Thi-reng Vāng-reng* is the name conferred on *There’ Bey*, the Karbi ‘Lazarus’ who is believed to have undertaken a daring reconnaissance into the underworld[15] and to have come back alive to introduce the Karbi death-rite, Chomāṅgān’. However, it was his ailing wife, *Kave’ Timungpi* who had showed him the way leading to the underworld where Thi-reng Vāng-reng acquired his knowledge from.

‘Lokhi Keplāng’[16] would have us believe that it was ‘Lokhi’, the daughter of *Bārithe*, the Head God of heaven, who like ‘Miranda’ was deeply moved by the
pathos and poverty of the then Karbi society without paddy or rice, and persuaded her father to send her along with her hundred sisters down to earth to provide their basic necessities.

The two daughters of Songsārpo, namely, Bārithe ⁴¹⁷, disguised themselves as a pair of ‘Kongching’ (pied kingfisher) birds and engaged for the holy task of teaching the Karbis the secret art of preparing cakes (thāp) for rice beer and accordingly flew toward the Kuleng River. They discharged faeces on a flat stone, and incidentally the discoverers of the aromatic excrements used later as cakes for homemade rice beer, happened to be the two daughters of Rangmukrang, Kareng and Kading, during one of their routine visits to the bank of the river Mārlē`.

Lāngmingpo Vo’hāṅg¹⁸ and his sister, Rāsingjā, were sent down from heaven to the Karbi society in the guise of human form to inculcate them about proper rites and rituals which were considered indispensable in communicating with the creator, and intending to set example Rāsingjā was married to Lāngmungkrāṅg and introduced ‘Ādām Āsār’⁴¹⁹ for the first time.

It is an invalid woman, Morongpi, who dissuaded Ve’ Longbi and Hār Longbi ²⁰(Sumphong and Sumphi) from avenging the villagers of Ākli Rongsopi for adulterating the upstream all up with arms, and persuaded them to witness and learn the proper rituals associated with ‘Ādām Āsār’ to be solemnized between Lāngmukrāṅg and Rāsingjā. How wise is the old woman who succeeded in transforming the vindictive and bellicose mindset of the two young boys to tradition-bearers:

Mo’ durmi ingtāngri (tā)  
Māhuchi pinching āniti  
Tung-e’ Hār Longbi pen  
Lie’ Ve’ Longbi chi  
Pinching āniti pu  
Nāng porom do’ji. ²¹
Folk Tales and Status of the Karbi Women:

Sängnet in the folk tale, Korhon Jāngreso, is delineated as overwhelmingly beautiful and attractive enough to win over the heart of a powerful prince, and also as a loving sister for whom fraternal love and care are more priceless than palatial riches and luxury. In yet another tale pertaining to the princess of the underworld again a girl (the princess) is shown to be successful in marrying her true lover, an orphan, by spurning the persuasion and conspiracy of the King of Rongklengbong.

Phāksokoinek is yet another Karbi folktale which deals with the vicissitude and miraculous change of fortune of the hero, Phāksokoinek. He was one of the three children of a family and a physically deformed boy with a face resembling that of a pig and hence he is so named. Therefore, he was always neglected, abused and insulted by all the members of the family as being lethargic and useless. Consequently, he became fabulously rich by ‘jhum’ cultivation and was chosen by the princess of the kingdom as husband. The main purport of the tale is undoubtedly didactic and the folk author must have intended to teach a moral edification through the success story of the hero. However, judged from another angle, the character of the heroine (the princess) also is elevated to high esteem. She shines through her ability to recognize the true worth of a man not by external appearance but by intrinsic quality, and knows that “all that glitters is not gold.” The character and personality of the princess in the Phāksokoinek tale could have been modelled as an ideal prototype of a Karbi girl, who is resourceful, bold and beautiful.

Rites of Passage and the Influence of the Karbi Women:

The women folk in the Karbi society dominate the entire lifecycle. Right from the rituals associated with the birth of a child (Klongklo Āthekār) and marriage
(Ādām Āsār) to the funerary (Chomāṅkān or Thikārhi) it is the Karbi women who take the lead.

1) ‘Klongklo Āthekār’:

The ritual meant for purification of the newborn baby is called ‘Klongklo Āthekār’. The name of the very ritual is onomatopoeically derived from the dropping sound the babe produces at the time of delivery on the floor made of chopped bamboo inside the stilted traditional Karbi house. The ritual of Klongklo Āthekār is performed with a view to purifying and protecting the newcomer from any kind of impurity and all kinds of evil ghosts and spirits as well as Satanic forces. The ritualistic chant that is recited in unison by the women gathered for the purpose just after the delivery of the baby:

Kārbi aso’, kārbāk āso,
Hu āso’ kāli, bāng āso’ kāli.
Rāng ong kehāng, jisi lok kehāng,
Jisi pirthē kāhāche, mindār kāhāche. [22]

(O, God! the baby just delivered is a human child, not animal. It has come to this world to establish relation with that of the human beings and to become human in all respect etc.)

2) ‘Ādām Āsār’:

Karbi wedding ceremony, ‘Ādām Āsār’, is actually the result of the system of systems which are arranged and obeyed in orderly phase-wise rituals. The system that enshrines these rituals is known as ‘Piso Pāngri’, which, however, is only the women’s affair. If a family of the groom is desirous of getting a Karbi girl married to a son, then the family has to abide by three-phased rite prescribed by tradition, which demands the groom’s family to approach the bride’s family (house of the maternal uncle) three times taking necessary offerings along with them and the Karbi women alone conduct the entire processes of negotiation. The rituals can be briefly described as under:
(i) ‘Nengpi-Nengso Kāchingki’- The Women’s Negotiation:

The mother of the groom need to go to the house of the would-be bride as a casual guest or visitor along with two or three married women and one bottle of ‘Ārāk’ and she will have to express her desire to have the daughter of the particular house as bride for her son (as her daughter-in-law) during her conversation with the mother on various stray topics. This initial phase of negotiation is called ‘Nengpi-Nengso Kāchingki’.

(ii) ‘Kepātini’- The Word of Confirmation:

The negotiation is further resumed with necessary offerings, such as, ‘horbong’ as in the first phase after getting some positive signals from the mother of the bride during the previous negotiation. During this phase of negotiation a tentative date for the prospective marriage is decided and is called ‘Kepātini’.

(iii) ‘Ājo-Ārni Kephā’- The Fixation of the Date for the Wedding:

During this third and final phase of negotiation the mother of the groom again would go to the bride’s house with requisite offerings and would decide a definite date for the wedding during her negotiation with the mother. This decisive negotiation is called ‘Ārjo-Ārni Kephā’. However, it is worth observing that the Karbi nuptial songs (Thelu Ālun) are mostly sung by the male singers and the offering of admonitions or consolations to the hesitant bride also are usually come from the father and the father-in-law (usually maternal uncle).

3) ‘Chomāngkān’ or ‘Thikārhi’:

a) Kāchārhe- the Karbi dirge:

One of the most important rites of passage in Karbi socio-cultural life, without any demur, is the Kāchārhe or the death-wailing. The wailing or lamentation is intensely pathetic and heart-rending. The tradition of inviting a professional wailer at the event of the death of a person is not uncommon in various
cultures of the world and the Karbis also invite such an expert female crier who wails on behalf of the bereaved family. She is known as the 'Uchepi' or 'Chārhepi' in Karbi who in reality leads the dead back to the place whence he had come or had once belonged to, which by metaphorical implication hints at Heaven, the promised land. The genre of this song of lamentation is known in Karbi as ‘Kāchārhe Ālun’ through which the Uchepi actually retraces the original homeland (metaphorically called as ‘long-lē āchetē’) with the help of memories for as comprehended by the community death is like a ‘return to his/her ancestor’s village’. It takes two or three consecutive hours to complete ‘Kāchārhe Ālun’ and there are a few sub-classes of this genre of song: Lāṅg Pānglu; Ān Kepi; Tovār Kēthān; Rong Kēthān; Kechām Kāṅgthi and so on. This particular sub-genre of the ‘Kāchārhe Ālun’ can be classified as serious, spiritual or metaphysical songs so far as their thematic implications are concerned. The following are some specimens of such ‘Kāchārhe Ālun’:

(i)
Iru chom ārong,
Choki pā’chenglong,
Lo’ti nāngjā pon /
Mukindon āngling lo’ti kephā pon
Borli kebāt jong, iru chom ārong
Ketāṅg chechār dong /[26]

(The soul of the deceased will have to cross a very high hill named Mukindon[27] with great difficulties).

(ii)
Nānginchī hāmpur mā
Ārleng āpok long
Nāngching dākong,
Pipot àduk cho ānāt mā
Chun Chunāok tekāng /[28]
You were born as human being at the cost of strenuous religious performances. Why have you gone to unknown land leaving us alone?

b) ‘Kepā-er Ālun’ of the Chomāṅkān:

Chomāṅkān is both funerary rituals and a festival full of music, song and dance, which reflects the complete profile of the culture of the Karbīs and their worldview, and thus can be considered as the soul of their culture.

“Although the Chomangkan was originally a death-rite, nevertheless it appears as an important festival of the Karbīs. Dances and songs are also an essential part of the Chomangkan. The genre of Kepā-er Alun, i.e., Kepā-er song is sung by the unmarried Karbī boys along with dance during the first three days of the Chomangkan. Kepā-er Alun is full of eroticism and this can rightly be linked up with the fertility rites........Like other rites, the Chomangkan is also based on a myth called Thireng Vangreng or Vang Areng traditionally current among the Karbīs.”[29]

The sub-genre of the ‘Kāĉārhe Ālun’ can be designated as frolicsome youthful songs associated with mundane and secular affairs of life like mutual love and attraction and other tender feelings and emotions. These songs are sung usually by unmarried young boys are replete with erotic implications and hence can pertinently be interlinked with that of the archetypal fertility rites. Although the Karbī boys only participate in singing the ‘Kepā-er Ālun’ yet the maidens are the epicenter of their heart’s restlessness and commotion as well as the centre of attraction. The following stanzas can serve as pertinent examples:

(i) Nono ibi ālāchā kān
    Lāchā kān necheng oilom
    Vāi thekos longle' nāngphān. [30]
(My mind was disappointed having not seen you at the Chomangkan site.)

(ii) Mongvepi nängle' phārokong pen phārche'
Kāŋgthu chībātē';
Lāsi ne' sengve'
Ingjarāji mon-e'
Seng chiber un-e'.[31]

(The Spring has arrived. The completion between Simolu (silk cotton tree) and Modar (Indian coral tree) in respect of blooming thus has begun. Likewise, due to the impact of the spring season my mind becomes incontrollable. O, my dear sweetheart, I am unable to resist my mind.)

Some Examples of Gender Discrimination:

One of the prominent socio-political activists and erudite scholars, Late Samsing Hanse, had been deeply pained to observe the gender discriminations and gross injustices meted out to women in the contemporary Karbi society and hence gave vent to his discontentment:

“If we judge things superficially then we might be convinced that men and women enjoy equal amount of freedom and liberty in Karbi society, but in reality it is not the case. It is true that the women are granted power to survive in the society, but in many cases they are treated with injustice. None has hitherto evolved out suitable remedial measures for bringing solution to this problem...No society in the world can rest secure by entrusting maximum responsibilities upon a particular class (sex). The male-chauvinistic Karbi society has been adopting taciturnity and indifference in this regard. It is so because the men are seen to be enjoying the absolute freedom of roaming irresponsibly by entrusting highest amount of duties and responsibilities upon women. It is really a matter of great regret.”[32]
If, going by his opinion, we examine some details and situations showing the amount of discriminations and injustices made against women in the Karbi society, the following points come to our notice:

1) The women are deprived of their freedom from occupying high positions in the social and administrative hierarchy, no matter how talented and educated they are.

2) No female can become the main office-bearers in a ‘jir kedām’, i.e., Klengsārpo, Klengdun, Sodār Kethe’ etc.

3) The women are not empowered or not encouraged to occupy any position in the tradition-bound political administrative system.

4) In the patriarchal structure of the Karbi society women are deprived of getting due share of their paternal property, nor are they allowed in embarking upon any independent economic venture.

5) In the domain of religious rituals too, both in community and family worships, the Karbi women cannot take part as a priest, the Kāthārburhā being always in the lead in that calling. They are thus deprived of the liberty to worship even their Creator. They are not empowered to worship gods or goddesses individually.

Instances of such discriminatory and unjust treatment toward the Karbi women can be multiplied but before doing it we need to analyze their nature and gravity, and of course, the cultural ethos and background in which they are born and brought up. It is so because when we talk of the primeval phenomenon of the creation of mankind (irrespective of cultural and religious worldviews) we take into account two biologically different sexes—male and female (*Purushā* and *Prakriti*). Ever since the beginning of human civilization, the duties and responsibilities of these two beings have been different and independent in nature in accordance with
the cultural milieu and the worldview of the society concerned. Since men and women are interdependent, a society in the absence of the one or the other will turn destabilized and chaotic. Therefore, the contribution of both men and women towards the progress of a society must be proportionate, which cannot be neglected or left unaddressed.

Like so many communities and races of the vast universe the Karbi community also has a separate society, which is vibrant with typical language, cultural and ethnic identity of their own. The necessity and importance of the role being played by the Karbi women in this traditional social life since time immemorial, therefore, must be observed and analyzed with due attention. In doing so it will be easier for us to bring alive the real picture of the society in the past and the present. If needed be, necessary reformations should be made even by discarding some obstructive customs or by adapting them to suit the present. And in this context the gender discriminations which are supposed to be in vogue must be abolished in keeping with the present cultural scenarios.

The parameters of judging or critiquing the cultural dynamics of a particular community or race must not, however, be imported from alien cultures. Further, the duties and responsibilities either of men or women in any society cannot and should not in all cases be judged with mundane or material logic, for it is not obligatory that they should be mathematically commensurate according to gender or sex. However, the domination of male-chauvinistic attitude and its hegemonic imposition upon the so-called weaker sexes in any culture of the world cannot be overlooked, though the intention behind such a conventional provision or belief-system might not have been misogynistic in the beginning. The women of the Karbi society are found to be tradition-bound and their stoic acceptance of the culture and tradition of the society they belong to can very justifiably be taken as an indication of their happiness and satisfaction with a sense of belongingness. Therefore, the hardships and strenuous burdens should not always be considered as the brunt of injustice and gender
discrimination by the women rather they should feel proud of playing the pivotal role for the progress of the community. In this context, one of the great educationists and social thinkers of the Karbis, P. C. Phangcho makes a pertinent observation:

"Those in the hills living particularly as neighbours of the Khasis and the Jaintias could be said to have influenced by them in respect of language, customs etc. but not in status where a woman becomes the head of the family. Karbis have also never been influenced by the Khasi law of inheritance of property by the daughter. A Karbi woman is found to be indifferent of or to have no desire for raising her status in the traditional framework of the society, particularly administration. Even though there is much advancement in the field of education among them, a large majority of the Karbi women still remain tradition-bound; the process of woman's upliftment to the higher positions in the hierarchy in the true sense is yet to begin."

**The Balance-Sheet of Freedom of Karbi Women:**

If we minutely examine the jurisdiction of the power and functions of the Karbi women in their socio-cultural life vis-à-vis the injustices meted out to them leading consequently to gender discrimination, the balance-sheet of the freedom enjoyed by them comes out conspicuously. In addition to the examples of women empowerment corroborated by the various oral narratives already elucidated above, the Karbi women also enjoy a sufficient amount of empowerment and liberty even in this modern era. A Karbi girl, for example, can dance hand in hand with a boy during Chomāŋkān and Sok Keroi festivals. She can adorn herself with whatever innovative clothes she likes, never is she compelled to get tattooed on the forehead to mar her feminine beauty. The girl's consent is mandatory in case of arranged marriages; she can elope away with her lover without inviting familial or social stigma. A woman might, in some vulnerable moments and compelling circumstances, commit adultery or even Lāisenem (marrying a man belonging to the
same clan) yet they are not looked down upon in the society, provided they perform some rites of purification. The rigidity once associated with the kind of punishment regarding Läisenem has been abolished today. Those erring women as well as the widows can always go for respectful remarriage. Barring few exceptions the area of trade and commerce in Karbi society are monopolized by women. It will be wrong to interpret that the priestly and political affairs the women are discriminated and subverted, because while the women in the hills play the pivotal role in religious activities starting right from birth till death (Klongklo to Chomängkân), and many Karbi women are successfully making their presence felt in the political arena too. No ritual chanting while performing any rites of passage is possible without the invocation to the goddesses and female deities of the Karbis, i.e. the name of pithe’, pimukrāng, pirinjā must precede phute’, pomukrāng, and porinjā etc. Educational qualification or economic status is no criterion for ensuring respect in the social hierarchy, no matter how illiterate are they the wives of the Pinpo, Hābe’ and Särthe etc. enjoy equal respect and share during feasts or festive occasions. A Karbi wife or mother-in-law, according to tradition, must walk ahead of her husband or son-in-law while going off from the house. The restraint imposed upon a Karbi woman’s freedom to talk to anyone has become flexible. Lastly, the highest order of liberty that a Karbi woman enjoys is that she is not bound to change her surname even after marriage, nor is she compelled to apply vermilion on her forehead.

**Gender Equity in the Karbi Worldview:**

Thus, it becomes pretty conspicuous that the Karbi women, both in the time of the yore and in the present day society, enjoy equal status with their men. They enjoy sufficient amount of freedom in social, economic, political and religious spheres, balanced but not absolute. However, that balance or limitation is not imposed or inhibited rather seems to have been devised out of mutual understanding and necessity. That understanding and necessity are born out of their recognition and acceptance of the dichotomy or duality of biological and elemental forces— their
inevitable coexistence, fusion and inter-dependence, and above all their constant formative influence, which is not possible for the ‘One’ to realize its meaning without the ‘Other’. What is of paramount importance in this context is that the restraints, taboos, limitations, injustices, which are construed as gender discrimination or subversion, are part and parcel of the unique cultural identity of the community, a culture that is nurtured and nourished by customs and traditions, not written constitutions. Thus, there is ample scope and necessity in bringing reformations in keeping pace with the demands of the time, though simultaneously it is not advisable that we should espouse for complete abolition of the various paraphernalia of our cultural heritage unscrupulously in the name of novelty. Judged from deeper perspective and logical reasoning, the cultural entity that binds the people together since time immemorial, is buttressed upon gender equity which by nature is typical of their unique worldview characterized by a congenial atmosphere to live for both the sexes. With such a congenial social atmosphere inspiring women at all times to express their inherent talent and potential, perhaps, no Karbi woman in the distant future will experience any gender discrimination in the society. None of them, probably, would feel like Simone de Beauvoir: “One is not born a woman; rather becomes, a woman;...It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an Other.”[34] Let us hope then the male counterparts of the Karbi women should also start relooking at things with more holistic approach so that the mothers—the progenitors of the community as well as the life-force of their culture, never stop consoling their crying infants on their backs or in the cradle with sweet and moving lullabies as quoted below:

“Äładung lädung
lā neri māndung,
jonpān the’ düngdüng (tē’)
lā nerindi māhum,
pirthāk pāngreng klung.”[35]
Notes:

2. ‘Vo’pläkip’ origin myth.
3. Especially ‘Long-le’ Achete’ or ‘Pirthe’ Achete’ concept of the Chinthong version of Karbi origin myth.
4. ‘Ladder’ might symbolically or euphemistically signify the umbilical cord with which the mother and the baby are connected.
5. Chief of the ‘Jirkedäm’.
6. Deputy Chief of the ‘Jirkedäm’.
8. The taboo and severe punishment thereof for intra-clan endogamic marriages, even erotic or seductive flirtation.
9. Mightier Kings both in power and influence than the Mikirs (Karbis).
10. A traditional waist-belt for the Karbi women.
11. The male member of the ‘Jirkedäm’ is called ‘Bāngphu’ and the female ‘Bāngphi’.
12. You are not the only Karbi, but there are so many other Karbis in the world.
13. A collective charity-farming by the youths of a ‘jirsong’ as a part of their schedule of the ‘jirkedäm’.
14. Heaven worship performed by the youths of ‘Jirkedäm’.
15. ‘Chom Ārong’ in Karbi language.
17. Arch God of Heaven.
18. One who came from the water (river) in search of country fowls.
19. The wedding ceremony solemnized between Langmukrang (the son of Rāngmukrāṅ) and Rāsingjā (the sister of God Hemphu) was the first Karbi marriage as per traditional custom.

20. However, the marriage between the son of Hār Longbi and the daughter of Ve’ Longbi was the first ever Karbi traditional wedding ceremony that had been solemnized between two human beings in conformity with the rites and rituals as shown by Hemphu (in the guise of gentle human being, Lāngmingpo) himself.


23. A kind of distilled home-made spirit.

24. Bottles, which are made from bottle gourds, of wine.

25. ‘Ārong Kāchevoi’ in Karbi euphemistic expression.


27. The hill called ‘Mukindon’ is supposed to be located in present Manipur.

28. Sarma, N.C. op cit, p 186. (translation mine)

29. Sarma, N.C. op cit, p 188. (translation mine)

30. Sarma, N.C. op cit, p 189. (translation mine)

31. Sarma, N.C. op cit, p 189. (translation mine)


35. As explained above.

Works Cited:


