

Chapter I: Introduction

Introduction

Assam is home to many ethnic tribes and communities. These tribes and communities have their own languages, dialects, folklores, traditions and cultures, unique in their own ways. They have their own geo-demographic characteristics and sometimes unique and praiseworthy economic systems. These tribes and communities add to the beautiful mosaic of composite Assamese society, life and culture of which each citizen of the country can be proud of.

The Karbis are an ethnic tribal group. They are scattered many places across North East India. Their highest concentration is, however, in the Karbi Anglong District of Assam. Previously they were known as the Mikir and this also finds mention in the Constitution Order of the Government of India. After the Bodos and the Mishings they are known to be the third largest tribe in Assam who inhabit basically the hilly areas of Assam, most notably in the Karbi Anglon, Golaghat, Nagaon, Morigaon, North Cachar, Kamrup and the Sonitpur district though they live also in the plains who are known as Amri Karbis. In the Karbi Anglong District, they are the principal community. Looked from a different perspective in ethnicity, political, economic, social and cultural matters, the Karbi Anglong district has a different format of administration as well. Embroiled in turmoil perpetrated by its long period of violence and extremism, the district is home to a number of banned extremist outfits who have been demanding complete independence and even sovereignty from what these extremists call ‘the Indian

state machinery'. Considering its strategic geo-demographic and socio-cultural background and strategic importance, the government of India decided to administer it with an Autonomous Status as per the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India since 17 November, 1951. Since then the district is being administered accordingly and is currently run by Karbi Anglong District Autonomous Council amidst almost continuous bouts of extremist activities and ethnic clashes where hundreds have died over the decades.

Known from various theories and basically from their own oral tradition and folklores, the Karbis are supposed to have migrated from western China near the Yang-Tee-Kiang and the Howang-Ho rivers, like some other Mongoloid tribes of Assam. Linguistically speaking, they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. Historians, linguists and other scholars tell us that the original home of the various people speaking Tibeto-Burman languages was in western China near the Yang-Tee-Kiang and the Howang-Ho rivers. They tell us further that from these places they went down the courses of the Brahmaputra, the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy and entered India and Burma and they entered Assam from Central Asia in one of the waves of migration along with some other tribes.

It is interesting to note that the Karbis have their own stories regarding their origin of migration through various phases to Assam and even their sufferings in the hands of the Burmese and in the hands of the Kachari kings. Their folk lores indicate that long ago they had lived on the banks of the rivers Kalang and Kapili and they even inhabited in the famed Kaziranga National Park. During the rule of the Kachari kings they were driven to the hills. Sections of them entered the Jaintia hills and lived in the Jaintia kingdom. Some of them remained there while some others moved towards North-East. They crossed the river Barapani, a tributary of the Kapili and entered the Rongkhang Ranges where they established their capital

at ‘*Socheng*’. Their folklores also narrate how those sections of the Karbis who migrated to the Ahom kingdom had to face the Burmese invasion and their pathetic condition during that time.

After their migration, the Karbis settled down basically in the hilly areas and mostly concentrated in the erstwhile Mikir Hills, now designated as Karbi Anglong under the administrative control of the KAAC. It is notable also that among the tribes, the Karbis have the most plaintive and sad songs regarding their suffering all through their course of migration and till their final settlement in their present habitats. There are causes and reasons as to why this tribe chose to settle down in the then dense hilly tracts. After their final settlement the tribe has come through various phases of development and assimilation with the greater Assamese society and culture. They have their own charming art, literature and culture which has added to the rich mosaic and fabric of the composite Assamese culture of which every citizen can be proud. The sad thing, however, is that the tribe has been living almost an insular life, more or less cut off from the mainland Assamese society and has suffered from a lack of academic and other interests of the scholars for a long time. The apparent negligence is mostly by the upper caste Hindus for which Christianity has made its way to these hilly areas.¹ It is therefore not surprising that the first few pieces of reliable research works on the Karbis are by European scholars as is the case with Assam, Assamese history, language, literature and culture in general.

1.1 Background to the research

Questions of ethnicity, culture, literature and quest for identity among the tribes and communities have assumed importance in the recent years. A lot of academic debates have taken place in various fora for assessment of the situation

and for finding ways to tackle the surging communal clamour for self-identity basically through literature and culture. There has been an unprecedented growth of discourses on these areas. It is seen that the rise in consciousness in a community or tribe's literature, culture and ethnicity has valid bases. In pluralistic countries like India where the larger communities, languages, culture and literature seek to play the role of a 'Big Brother' on the comparatively smaller ethnic groups desperately trying to establish their own literature, culture and language, these questions have assumed serious proportions. It is a global phenomenon when so many dialects and languages have died untimely death in the face of encroachments perpetrated concertedly by the larger groups, serious discourses are necessary to get to the core of the situations and to find ways to tackle these grave questions. It is also pertinent to discuss why the smaller aboriginals in a particular geo-demographic milieu have grown furious and revolting in these times. To be brief, in the Indian or Assamese context, it is crucial to deliberate and discuss why the tribes and ethnic communities are raising renewed demands for autonomy, separate state, special packages, Sixth Schedule, etc., and why there has been a rising fear psychosis among them of losing their language, literature and culture. It is a well-known fact that what is true about English language and literature posing a threat to the other languages and literature is also true in the Indian or Assam context of Hindi and the Assamese language and literature posing threats to other ethnic groups. It remains another matter of deliberation whether this fear is real or projected. The people of Assam have this taste of *linguistic chauvinism* when the Bengalis termed the Assamese language as merely a derivative form of the language during the later part of the British rule. People across the country are also aware why, after Independence, the Indian states were re-organised on the basis of languages. The sporadic moves of the governments at Delhi to impose Hindi, amidst facades, as the lingua-franca of the entire country are yet another form of

this chauvinism. Among its many manifestations, the tendency of the greater number of Assamese people to admit their children in English medium schools is a notable one. It is also a matter to ponder over whether in this crucial time for the Assamese language when only about 45% of the people living in Assam speak Assamese, the smaller tribes some of whom do not prefer to call themselves Assamese, should be brought under the larger umbrella of Assamese brotherhood or not.

It is against this backdrop that studies on the language, literature, culture and the quest for self-identity of these tribes and communities have assumed significance. Studies might find ways of solution to these conflicts. The language, literature and culture of the smaller groups must grow alongside the bigger ones. Let the bigger cultures and languages have their growth, but it should not be at the cost of the smaller ones. They must co-exist. They must have a synergy. The place and importance of the smaller languages, literature and culture must be acknowledged. They must be accorded due spaces for growth and development. The good and unique of the literature, language and culture of these communities must be focused, propagated and appreciated in due forum. One way is to study, document and propagate through various media. Translation can aid this way. The English speaking and writing academia can play a bigger role here. The teachers across the state in universities and colleges can have a great role in translating literary pieces of these smaller tribes into English or other languages so as to bring about unity and harmony among the tribes.

The Karbis are one among the ethnic tribes who have had a very trying period during the recent decades. Next only to the Bodos and Mishings, they are the third largest tribe in Assam. Extremism, ethnic clashes and clamours for more

autonomy are what define Karbi Anglong today, where majority of the Karbis live. Studies on their literature and culture can be rewarding to find possible solutions to orient the revolting generation to their glorious past, literature and culture. The present and the past can thus be reconstructed through this study. It might also showcase how Karbi literature and culture have all those beautiful good aspects of which any community is proud of. The study and documentation may help other tribes also to locate or relocate their own particular situations regarding ethnicity, literature and culture and allied questions associated with them. Being a person from the close vicinity of Karbi Anglong, the present researcher thinks that the study is a rewarding one for the tribe, the state and for all those who are interested nationally.

Research Question/Hypothesis

The Karbis have a rich storehouse of folklore scattered across many centuries of oral transmission and preservation. Their folklore is inextricably related to their folk life and culture. In fact, folklore and folk-life are complimentary to each other. The elements of Karbi folklore are rich and they have kept alive materials of Karbi history of migration and settlement, folk-life, culture, etc. It has been conjectured that the available research works and literature are not exhaustive about the elements of Karbi folk literature and reflection of Karbi life and culture therein.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

- a) To collect elements of their folk literature and to study them along with their culture,

- b) To highlight their rich literary heritage and to establish the thread of common link with the greater Assamese society,
- c) To analyze how their folk literature reflects their life and culture,
- d) Discover possible solutions to the present crisis of the tribe regarding identity, ethnicity, literature and culture through a study of their literature and culture.

Methodology

The study involved field visits to ten Karbi villages of the Duar Bagori and Duar Saloni Mouzas of KAAC. The field visits were conducted to have first-hand knowledge of the elements of Karbi folk literature and culture. It entailed visiting homes of people, places of festivity, etc., to collect information and photographs, etc. for documentation. But it is unfortunate that the people, mostly from the present generation, are unaware about the folklore. They expressed ignorance even after the names of various genres of folk literature were mentioned. People of these places had to be explained the purpose of the visit, data collection and documentation. Another important limitation was that some elderly people, who knew some aspects or some songs etc., could not explain due to their difficulty of language. Their mode of pronunciation was also an obstacle. Besides, these people who knew some portions, could not recollect the entire song. A few of them expressed ignorance about knowing or the existence or non-existence of the genres of folk literature.

While conducting the study, the basic help was taken from a number of books, journals, websites, blogs and other e-contents.

How the study was done

The study was planned according to two schedules.

The first schedule involved field visits to selected Karbi villages to meet people and interact with them regarding the elements of folk literature and culture, etc. Informants were chosen according to their will and knowledge about the related aspects. They were questioned regarding the present situation of the Karbis and Karbi Anglong. The informants so selected comprised of males and females, elderly and the young. Selected *Uchepis* or *Sarhepis*, *Sarthes*, etc. were also discussed.

The second schedule involved collection and study of secondary materials like books, articles, websites, blogs, religious and social places of public importance, etc. Data was collected from the studies carried out this way. The data so collected was collated, analyzed and reviewed. A description of the aspects gathered this way has been given chapter-wise. After a thorough analysis of the two schedules, conclusions and findings have been documented.

Scope of the Study

The study was concentrated on collecting and studying the various genres of Karbi folk literature, particularly folk songs, folktales, Sabin Alun or the Karbi Ramayana, Ose Kebe Alun or the cradle songs, myths, memories, legends and proverbs. Studies were also conducted on aspects of Karbi culture. The collection of materials on these aspects was confined basically to ten Karbi villages of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council District. Only this district was chosen because most

of the Karbis of Assam live in this district. Other places of Karbi habitation like Morigaon, Karup, NC Hills, Sonitpur, etc., were left out.

Justification for the research topic:

The present researcher is a teacher of English literature in a provincial college of Assam situated in the district of Golaghat, in the closest vicinity of and bordered by Assam's largest district Karbi Anglong. So the choice of pursuing research in a subject relating basically to a tribe of Assam seems strange for many, even though the topic chosen is allied or relevant to the subject of my profession. But most people would want a teacher of English literature to carry out research on any of the areas of English or European or American literature or on other areas directly or indirectly associated with them. In fact, many have openly suggested the researcher to do so when they knew his topic of research. The present research on the Folk Literature of the Karbis is a humble attempt towards studying Karbi literature and culture and to contribute a bit towards the growing but still scanty pool of writing on the Karbis.

Being a person from the close vicinity of the Karbi Hills, the researcher had the privilege of enjoying the beauty of the Karbi hills and of having a close look at the simple life style of the people. Some of the adult Karbi males frequented the places with a burden of bamboo items, red chilies, pine apples, oranges and various hilly vegetables. They used to come to the plains and exchanged these products with those of their other needs. Some of these adult Karbi males used to wear only one piece of cloth called *lengti*, a loin cloth, which is not used now-a-days except a few elderly married people in interior localities. The present researcher could notice that most of the plains people had a deriding and frowning attitude towards them regarding their 'antique ways' including the dress codes. Though Karbi Anglong has never been so peaceful at any point of time ever since the present researcher grew to

adulthood, it was almost a peaceful time lasting for a few years at that time in the 1980s. Over the years the number of such Karbi people dwindled and now-a-days they never come alone to the plains alone except to the organized market places. On the contrary, plains people go to the hills and there are frequent news that the Karbi extremists drive them away, threaten them or even kidnap or kill them. There are sufficient grounds to believe that there are deep rooted reasons or causes for these happenings, even though sporadic. There are things beyond happenings that meet the eyes.

The primary reason, as has been described above, may be ascribed to the fact that Karbis, like many other tribes, have been generally ignored by the mainstream Assamese society. They have only rarely been studied, understood, cared for and accommodated the due spaces by the mainstream Assamese society. Due to their geographical isolation, tribal characteristics, the political turmoil, the issues of ethnicity, identity and clamours for self-governance and the resultant blood-shed, it is always easier to misunderstand them. Coupled with that the long periods of suppression, exploitation and oppression by the successive governments both at Dispur and at Diphu have made some tribal youths revolt against the state machinery. Like many other extremist organizations elsewhere all across Assam, Karbi society too have seen the rise of such outfits like the KPLT. Karbi Anglong where most of the Karbis live, have thus been the hotbed of turmoil of various nature. One way of mitigating or seeking a solution to these problems will be to understand them in proper perspectives. Their history, art, literature, culture, traditional knowledge system, customary laws, ethnobotany, myths and legends, the vast repertoire of oral tradition, the folktales, etc. should be studied and understood so as to understand them. It is also worth studying how they have assimilated into the mainstream Assamese society or the vice versa. It is general

agreement that the tribe has contributed immensely to the composite socio-political, cultural, economic, literary and other art forms of Assam. Considering the hard time Assam has been passing through due to mutual disrespect of each tribe or community for each other, it is time we studied these tribes and communities in all of their corporate life and allied areas so as to foster an atmosphere of understanding, accommodation and mutual respect for each other in order to make Assam peaceful, progressive and vibrant. The studies on the Karbis, their folk literature and culture are steps ahead in this direction. Studies on English literature have taken huge leaps over the centuries and there will never be dearth of scholars to study them. It is hoped that an attempt to study Karbi folk literature and culture will contribute even to a little extent to the growing research works and literature on various aspects of these areas of the tribe.

As Tanmay Bhattacharjee puts it-“The Karbis preserved for themselves a rich tradition of folktales. These stories give us some insights into the cultural development of the tribe. In every racial group, this is a very important aspect of social development. It is particularly relevant to a tribe who has had to preserve the whole stock orally.”²

This rich oral tradition of Karbi folk literature and culture needs serious studies and documentation. Recently more and more young people of the Karbi new generation duly cooperated and guided by the celebrated Karbi literary and cultural stalwarts, have taken to studying and documenting various aspects of Karbi literature and culture, and there has been a growth of scholarly works on these areas. But even after a good number of research works on these, the number is still far from satisfactory. It is more so when we take into consideration the number of such research works particularly in English. The major research works are also very fragmented in the sense that materials on Karbi folk literature and culture are

not available at a place. Besides, the documentation in most cases lack a comprehensive list of major forms of Karbi folk literature, folk tales, memories, myths and metaphors, an in-depth analysis of Karbi folk literature and culture and how they reflect the rich and vibrant life of the tribe, etc.

1.3 Methodology

The methodology of research used has been a descriptive and introductory one collecting data from field studies, interviewing some elderly village people and studying selected books, articles from journals, magazines, e-resources and newspapers. Field studies were taken to ten Karbi villages to meet, interact, interview and to photograph people and events. But it is unfortunate that the people, mostly from the present generation, are unaware about the folklore. They expressed ignorance even after the names of various genres of folk literature were mentioned. People of these places had to be convinced regarding the purpose of the visit, data collection and documentation. Hence, the present study had to be completed mostly from secondary sources by selection and studies of books, articles, web pages, blogs, etc.

The emphasis has been to introduce various aspects of Karbi literary tradition, its folk-tales, culture, and modern Karbi literature. Another focus is on analyzing and highlighting the reflection of Karbi social life in their folk-literature and re-invent their long period of grief and suffering over the times starting with the migration memories. As stated, the area of research has been an introductory and descriptive one where glimpses have been given on the above mentioned aspects of Karbi folk-literature for the state, national and international readers who might be interested in literary, cultural, social and ethnographical descriptions of a distinct tribe. The attempt may be significant in that research on this aspect has

been scanty. Whatever research has been there, the great chunk has been in Assamese.

1.4 Outline of the report

The Thesis on Folk Literature of the Karbis has been divided into the following chapters:

Chapter I: Introduction

Here an introduction has been given about the background to the choice of the topic of research. The thrust has basically been on their folk literature and culture.

Chapter II: Literature Review

In this chapter available literature on the Karbi folk literature and culture has been reviewed. Almost all materials which could be collected and collated have been reviewed and appreciated here. The greater number of available literature on Karbi literature and culture are in Assamese or in Karbi. Only a few works are there in English. Apart from the books and other printed materials, some other sources like blogs, official websites, etc. too have been reviewed which dwell on Karbi art, literature and culture.

Chapter III: The Karbis or Mikirs: An Introduction

In this chapter an introduction has been given to the Karbis, their migration memories, the clans and sub clans, settlements, sociology, political system, their oral history, the folklore, the present turmoil due basically to ethnic clashes, questions of ethnicity, language, religion and identity, etc. A glimpse of their folk life has been provided in this chapter along with the current turmoil.

Chapter IV: Karbi Cultural Tradition vis-à-vis Literary Tradition

In this chapter a description has been given on Karbi traditions pertaining to their various cultural events, markers, festivities and rituals, times of their celebration, basic features of these festivities and rituals etc. An introduction has also been given on the Karbi literary tradition or their folk literature which contain reliable material about their migration, their history, their settlements and their sufferings during various phases of times. Moreover, an introduction has also been provided as to their folktales, the *keplangs* or the stories regarding the origin of various agri products and cultural and food icons.

Chapter V: Folk Literature of the Karbis

In this chapter an overview and a brief analysis has been provided on the folk literature of the Karbis and its various forms. A list has been prepared on the available Karbi folk tales. There is a description on the present trend in Karbi literature and major Karbi literary personalities who have been associated with Karbi literature as it is today.

Chapter VI: Analysis of Karbi life and culture as reflected in their Folk Literature

Literature has always been described as a mirror of society and is also regarded as the life-blood of a community's corporate life. Literature is said to reflect a community's real life and culture. In this chapter a brief description has been given on how Karbi folk literature has reflected the tribe's life and culture over the passages of time. An analysis has been made as to how the Karbi folk literature truthfully preserves the migration memories, the ordeals, the sufferings, the final settlements, the stories of their clans, origin of various prime agri

products, the age old beliefs, the myths, etc. down the ages in the forms of folk tales and songs.

Chapter VII: Summary and Conclusion

Comparatively the shortest, in this chapter the foregoing descriptions and analyses have been summarized and the most notable findings have been listed.

Of these, the first two chapters may be called ‘Review Chapters’ and the latter four as the ‘Empirical Chapters’.

1.5 Conclusion

Karbis have the richest of folk literature according to Homen Borgohain, a celebrated writer and a journalist who made this comment recently at a TV show named ‘Kotha Barta’ in the News Live Satellite Channel. If not the richest, they have surely a vast treasure house of folk literature which is unique in itself. The most remarkable aspect of Karbi folk literature is that most of them have always been oral and in metrical form. Even the story about the origin of songs in Karbi is also in songs. There are songs about songs, stories about stories, all in songs or in metrical form. Besides, Kabi folk literature, especially the Karbi Ramayana or the Sabin Alun, is coloured by the Hindi Ramayana with the incorporation of a number of local tribal elements. Most of the Karbi folk narratives are plaintive in nature highlighting the tribe’s long period of suffering starting from their time of migration down the courses to the places of their present habitat. Hence, Karbis and their literature and culture are worth studying so as to understand and appreciate the tribe. Karbis, their folk literature and culture and studies on them bear importance in the present times basically from three standpoints.

First standpoint, as GM Trevelyan, the celebrated English historian said, ‘disinterested intellectual curiosity is the life blood of real civilization.’ If we, the Assamese people, are to call ourselves a really civilized people, we should have disinterested intellectual curiosity to study and know each of our tribe, their art, literature and culture so as to bring about an atmosphere of mutual understanding, love, respect and friendship among the communities. It is the pressing necessity of the time when there have been so many ethnic clashes and mass blood sheds in Assam which has spread its bad name across the world.

Secondly, a study on them can be rewarding for the entire Assamese society in that getting to know each ethnic tribe of Assam is the need of the times. It should have been so long ago. Karbis, like many other tribes, suffer from a lack of much academic interest. There have been only scanty research works in English about the tribe which is very often misinterpreted in the pan Indian context by ignorant circles taking the cue from the present ethnic clashes and mass blood sheds. It is in this context that Uddipna Goswami has opined:

“The Axamiyā-speaking population of the Brahmaputra valley has often been projected at two extremes – as the big brother of the smaller nationalities and ethnic groups of Assam responsible for their welfare; or as their exploiter, betraying a chauvinistic attitude against them. ... the Karbis have embraced the Axamiyā-speaking people as much as the Axamiyā-speaking people have embraced the Karbis, and neither is bigger or smaller for that. And that is the true nature of Axamiyā or Assamese identity – it is not the sole preserve of one community or linguistic and/or religious group, but is a composite identity shaped by multiple influences. The Karbi language, culture and people have contributed to it just as much as the other neighbouring communities have contributed to Karbi life.”³

She comments further:

'Sadly, however, this is a fact that is often forgotten and the result is conflicts between communities and ethnic clashes. Everywhere in Assam, suspicions and misgivings between communities have given rise to ethnic conflicts and widespread insurgent violence. Everywhere, there is loss of life, property, culture and humanity. Everywhere there seems to be no hope, only an endless river of blood flowing'⁴

Thus, it is against this backdrop that we should take serious studies on their sociology, economy, their political set up, the roots of the present turmoil, their rich heritage, art and culture including of course, their literature so that before we go to know others beyond our borders, we took care to know our own tribal brothers and sisters.

Thirdly, with the passing away of the older generations of the Karbis, most of the oral traditions, memories and myths have also been lost. The present generation of the Karbi youths, even though very respectful to their origin, art, literature and culture, have been cosmopolitan in outlook and many of them are ignorant about their folk literature and culture. Against this backdrop, collection, collation and documentation of the folk literature and culture and their appreciation are very essential. In the present study a humble endeavor has been made to do the same and it is hoped that it will contribute its humble bit towards igniting young aspiring Karbi youths to undertake serious research works hereafter.

For these reasons and above all, for the love of this neighbouring peaceful, laborious tribe, a very humble attempt is being made to explore their folk literature and culture so as to understand them better.

References

1. This view was held by Golapsing Ingti, a Sarthe of Karbi Anglong district near Kohora on 12.12.2012
2. Tanmay Bhattacharjee in the Preface to his Book 'Sociology of the Karbis', p. viii
3. Goswami, Uddipana, Kardom, Karbi Anglong!,
<http://karbiyouthfest.wordpress.com>, 2008, accessed on 20.12.2013
4. *ibid*