

Chapter III

3.1 The Karbis: An Introduction

Karbis are one of the largest ethnic tribes of the North East scattered in many localities with particular concentration in the Karbi Anglong District of Assam.¹ The tribe possesses rich traditions and culture unique from other tribes of the region which have contributed to the composite and multitudinous beauty of the greater Assamese society. The tribe has a number of theories pertaining to its origin, its migration and settlement. Regarding habitation one such theory tells us that once they lived on the banks of the rivers *Kalang* and *Klopli* (*Kopili* is a corruption of the original *Klopli* in Karbi) and their habitation stretched as far to the entire Kaziranga area.² This and other theories exist but it is noted that the historical account of the tribe is very much fragmented due to lack of written records. Orality had been the chief hallmark of Karbi history and tradition till very recently.

From the anthropological or racial point of view, the Karbis belong to the Mongoloid group. Linguistically, they belong to the Tibeto-Burmese language family and are sub-grouped as 'Mikir' according to the latest classification.³ The tribe is believed to have migrated from western China near the Yang-Tse-Kiang and the Hwang-Ho rivers wherefrom they are believed to have gone down the courses of the Brahmaputra, the Chindwin and Irrawaddy and then entered Burma and finally to India. They entered Assam in one of the waves of migration from Central Asia along with other groups.

Late Dr. Phukan Ch. Phangcho, the first native doctorate of the Karbis, has discussed the probable route of Karbi migration with documentary evidences, including sketch maps, in one of his important publications— “The Karbis of North-East India —The Karbis: A Spatio-Temporal Analysis in Tribal Geography”. In Chapter-III, Page 26, Dr Phangcho observes:

‘It was only after the advent of the Ahoms in 1228 AD that some information pertaining to Karbi migration into Ahom territory and Karbi-Ahom political relations have become known as these were recorded clearly in the Ahom Buranji.’⁴

Again in Page-26, he further observes:

‘It is a popular belief among the Karbis 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 second millennia before Christ.’ He further observes — ‘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.’⁵

They had to pass through various ordeals during the reign of the Kachari kings when they were driven to the hills. Some of them took shelter in the Jaintia Hills under the erstwhile Jaintia kingdom and continued living under the suzerainty.⁶

A section of these Karbi people remained in the Jaintia hills while some others moved towards north east. They crossed the river Barapani, a tributary of Kopili and entered into the Rongkhang ranges. At a place called Soheng, they established their capital.

Some others moved to the Ahom kingdom and had to face difficult times during the Burmese invasion. During Burmese invasion the Karbis were oppressed and subjected to inhuman torture so much so that the Karbis had to take refuge in the deep jungles leaving behind their home and cultivation in the sub-mountain region. Legends have it that the tradition by young Karbi girls of wearing '*Duk*', which literally means 'suffering' (a tattooed black line from the forehead to the chin) so as to make themselves look ugly in a bid to save themselves from the lusty eyes of the Burmese.

Some Karbis migrated to lower Assam and some others crossed the Brahmaputra and settled in its north bank.⁷

However, smaller or larger Karbi settlements exist in the entire North-Eastern region and even in Bangladesh. At present the Karbis have high concentration in the two hill districts of Assam- Karbi Anlong and North Cachar Hills. Jungles have always been their natural habitat, though some of them came to settle down even in plains. The Karbis who live in plains call themselves Amri Karbis.

It is noted that during the British period they did not have a district of their own. The then Mikir Hills were included in Nagaon and Khasi and Jaintia Hill Districts. The areas inhabited by them were called 'partially excluded area'. These provisions operated in the

districts of Nagaon and Sibsagar. Larger Karbi settlements in the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills came fully under the 'Excluded Areas' Provisions.'⁸

The creation of the erstwhile Mikir Hills was mooted by the Constituent Assembly which appointed 'the North Eastern (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub Committee under the Chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi. The committee recommended a special type of administrative machinery for the hill areas of Assam. These recommendations were incorporated in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The areas inhabited by the Karbis were taken from the then Nowgong, United Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Sibsagar districts and added to North Cachar and constituted into United Mikir and North Kachar Hills.'⁹

"This was followed by bifurcation of the erstwhile district of United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district into two separate districts under banner as 'Mikir Hills' and North Cachar Hills district in the year 1970. The Mikir Hill district was again rechristened as "Karbi Anglong District" with effect from the 14th October, 1976 vide Government Notification No. TAD/R/115/74/47 Dtd. 14-10-1976. Thus, Karbi Anglong came into being as a full-fledged separate district in the map of Assam with its Head quarter at Diphu. The district enjoys autonomy under the provision of Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. It is the largest district of Assam."¹⁰

The district is situated in the central part of Assam, bounded by Golaghat district in the east, Meghalaya and Morigaon district

in the west, Nagaon and Golaghat district in the north and North Cachar Hills district and Nagaland in the south. The district with dense tropical forest covered hills and flat plains is situated between 25° 33' N to 26°35' N Latitude and 92°10' to 93°50' E Longitudes.¹¹

As per 2011 Census, the district has an area of 10,434 sq.km with a total population of 9,65,280 and having a population density of 93 per sq. kms. Literacy rate is 73.52 % as per the same Census.¹²

The population of the district is predominantly tribal. The major tribal ethnic groups of this district are Karbis, Bodos, Kukis, Dimasas, Hmars, Garos, Rengma Nagas, Tiwas, Man (Tai Speaking). Besides, a large number of non-tribals also live together in this hill region.¹³

There are many rivers and tributaries in this district. Among these, the most important rivers are **Kopili, Amreng, Borpani, Kolioni, Dhansiri, Dikharu, Nambar, Deopani, Jamuna, Patradishsa, Longnit and Doigrung**. The river Kopili in particular, plays a very important role in the socio-cultural life of the Karbis.¹⁴

The Karbi Anglong District has a good coverage of forests with a total forest area of about 4,922.019 sq. km with 14 State Reserved Forests and 17 District Council Reserved Forests.¹⁵

Many find it difficult to say that the district has a mountain at all. The district has a number of hills all across it. A few of them, however, can be categorized as mountain. Among them, the highest is

the Singhason Peak, with a height of about 1360 metres above the sea level.¹⁶

Karbi Anglong is gifted with a good number of natural resources. Nature has given the district in bounty.

Among the mineral resources, mention may be made of the following:

Lime stone: Found in the Dillai and Sainilangso.

China-clay: Found in Upper Deopani and Silonijan area.

Feldspar: Found in Koilajan area.

Coal: Found in Koilajan and Silbheta.¹⁷

The Karbis are basically cultivators. They cultivate rice, fruits, vegetables, etc. through their traditional and still popular mode of cultivation called the *jhum* or shifting cultivation, at least in the hills. Rice is their staple food and locally prepared rice beer taken commonly in most occasions is the most popular drink.

3.2 Ethnography

The Karbis as a distinct tribe of north east has a rich legacy of culture. Their sociology including their habitation, houses, village organization, cultivation, food and dress, customary laws, ethnobotany, the institution of marriage, clan system, festivities, literature, art, etc are unique in themselves. It will be worthwhile to outline brief introductions to various aspects of their corporate life.

Village:

The traditional Karbi settlements are marked by villages. Each village has a village-headman locally called Sarthe or Gaonbura. He is appointed by the authority of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and enjoys a very special prestige in Karbi villages. But the revenue villages have a number of hamlets or hamptoons which may be situated kilometers apart from each other. These hamlets also have Sarthe. It is remarkable that a Karbi village is named after the Sarthe. Population has increased only in the recent decades. Otherwise, Karbi villages are sparsely populated and are very tranquil in nature covered by greenery all through. The forests give the Karbis almost all of their daily necessities. They are almost a self-reliant tribe except for one or two essential goods and the modern day requirements basically by the youngsters.

Like the other hill tribes, the Karbis also are fond of living on the hill tops. They do not generally live in compact areas. Each Karbi household comprises of ample areas. There are two characteristics of Karbi villages-one each in the plains and in the interior areas covered by deep forestry. One is that in the plains where people practise permanent cultivation and where the village headmen are quite strong, the villages are found to be stationery. But in the interior areas of the district where shifting cultivation is practised, shifting of village site is still in practice. The reasons for continuing with such dual practices with local variations are ascribed to economic and social reasons. One reason has been that of the clash of interest

among aspirants to become the Sarthe of a village. This aspiration among a number of contenders make these aspirants change villages on this or that pretext which is generally on the plea of the advantages of jhum cultivation. It needs mention here that the post of the Sarthe, whether of the revenue village or that of the hamlet, is a very prestigious one in the Karbi society. Custom demands that the Sarthe must be honoured first in every socio-religious occasion. Sometimes the village or the hamlet is also named after this Sarthe. Thus, if in a particular Karbi village there are a few aspirants for this post and when one among them discovers that there is no chance getting the post if he stays in the village, he persuades his followers to leave the village. In order to make his dream a reality, goes on to set up a new village in a new location where he becomes the headman.

Another reason behind this practice is brought about by the fear among the Karbis for ghosts and spirits. Sometimes they shift villages to get rid of these ghosts and spirits.

The Karbis also change villages necessitated by the demands of jhum or shifting cultivation. Some Karbis change their village periodically to new jhum sites.

Civil Legal Authority and Its Hierarchy

HI Kathar¹⁸ writes that Karbi father figure Langan Sarkari mooted more elaborate system of village-government. The formation of “Ser-van-kep,” the village organization was completed after this idea of governance of Karbi society which consists of ten dignitaries

who would look after the problems of the village in all matters. These ten dignitaries are:

1. The village head called Rong-asar (Sarthe) who is the head of the village organization. He establishes the village and is therefore called the “Ser Kangthim,” which literally means the undivided authority. He can be crowned or appointed only by the one who has provided him the village land. He can, however, claim himself to be the Rong-asar if he finds a piece of land not claimed by any other man. But in that case he will have to throw a feast publicly.

2. The Riso-Basa, who is the assistant Rong-asar.

3. Phumen-phulok akong

4. Phumen-phulok akibi

5. Hemai akong

6. Hemai akibi

7. Pherangke akong

8. Pherangke akibi

9. Mekar akleng

10. Klengsarpoh, who is mainly the Youth leader.

These village dignitaries enjoy their defined share of prestige in the village organization in all socio-religious rites and festivals. Their duties or function and powers are also clearly defined.

It is remarkable that as a society the Karbis have much lesser feudal system of land distribution. It may be because land had never been a problem with them. The Karbi view of power emanating from land is very significant, and of great wisdom which agrees with worldwide understanding of land.¹⁹

Livelihood:

The main occupation of the Karbis is cultivation. In the recent decades, however, a sizeable number of Karbis have taken up other professions and vocations like business, government and other services, cottage industries, ethnic dress and food making industries, tourism, etc. But agriculture still remains the main occupation among them. The Karbis of the hills invariably practice the jhum cultivation by cleaning the forests of the hills where they cultivate mixed crops including rice, chilies, pumpkin, ginger, orange, pineapple, etc. When land is available they also cultivate in the low lands.

House:

Till very recently most of the Karbis lived in huts. Now- a-days many of them live in concrete houses. Their traditional huts are built on raised bamboo platforms with timber posts. Like many other tribes they have the tradition of this 'Chang-Ghar' or houses with raised platforms, several feet above ground. Their huts are modest in

sizes. The traditional house building materials are thatch, bamboo, cane, timber etc. Their walls are mud-plastered. For roofing once mostly thatch was used which in the recent times been replaced by CI sheets. The walls are mud-plastered. The houses normally have two verandas - one at the front and the other at the rear. The main house is divided into two parts lengthwise. The front part or room with a hearth at the centre is called 'Kam' or guest room. They call their inner chamber 'Kut' which is used as the living room for the family members. A wooden or bamboo ladder is used as an approach to the front veranda. Pigs, cows, hens, duck, etc. are generally kept under the bamboo platform of their huts.

House location

In aspects that the Karbis differ from some other tribes of North East India, their preference not to construct their houses on slopes or hilltops is one. They also do not favour the idea of setting up a village near streams. It is because the Karbis have great fears for ghosts and evil terrestrial spirits. Their folk belief is that diseases and misfortunes are brought about by these evil spirits living in hill tops and streams. Hence, plain surfaces are always preferred for house construction.

House Orientation:

Regarding the Karbi house orientation, Morningkey Phangcho writes:

“... the position of the house is not determined by any fixed spatial orientation, however one usually find dwellings oriented towards the village road or lane, and preferably facing towards the East direction. When houses are to be built on hilly ground, they are oriented so that the front side faces the valley and the rear part faces the upslope of the mountain. In communities settled on rivers bank surfaces are always pre houses usually stand facing the river.”²⁰

Recently their housing pattern and structures have been influenced by the pan Assamese or pan Indian counterparts. The traditional housing pattern has more or less been abandoned by the Karbis. Instead of having raised bamboo platforms, the houses are constructed on grounds. Many of them build pucca houses now-a-days and even lead lavish life-styles.

Karbi Clans:

One of the most important hallmarks of the Karbi society is that their society is sharply divided into 5 major clans which they call ‘Kurs’. These Kurs are-Terang, Teron, Enghee, Ingti and Timung. These 5 Kurs are further divided into other sub-clans. Enghee and Timung have 30(thirty) sub-clans each, Terang have 15(fifteen) sub-clans, Teron have 9(nine) sub-clans and Ingti has only 6(six) sub-clans. Marriages inside the same clan can never take place in the Karbi society since the people consider the children of the same clan as brothers and sisters. Violation of this customary law is taken seriously and it leads to social castigation of the couple. The division of this clan system is so rigid in Karbi society that even the areas for

cremation ground called *Tipit* or *Thiri* is kept demarcated for each clan. Among these clans, the Ingti clan enjoy a higher social status since are the priestly class.

Marriage institution:

In matters of marriage, Karbi society is exogamous. Marriage inside their own clan is forbidden. As a rule, they are monogamous. However, there is no social bar to polygamy though such cases are very rare. Till recently, cross-cousin marriage was a much sought after one among the old generation of Karbis. Now-a-days the modern and young generation does not prefer cross-cousin marriage. One very praiseworthy facet of the marriage institution of the tribe is that they do not have the system of bride price.

Another notable aspect of the Karbi tribe is that they are patriarchal in family structure. Keeping in tune with this patriarchal structure, after marriage the wife continues to use the surname of her father, even as the children of the new couple take the title of their father.

The institution of marriage in Karbi society is regarded a very inseparable part and is considered very sacred. They perform the process of marriage in a long and elaborate manner. Discussions between the two families of the bride and the groom take place long before. Generally, there take place several rounds of discussions between the two families where other relatives and villagers also take part. The marriage proposal is invariably placed through songs.

Horlang or country beer in bottle guard pots is an indispensable aspect of a Karbi marriage.

Marriage Circle Rules:

As Morningkeey Phanco²¹ puts it, the Karbi marriage system can be analysed through a rule of circle. This circle is:

TERANG> INGTI> TIMUNG> ENGHEE> TERON >TERANG

As per this rule of marriage circle, a Terang and all its sub-clan should by custom marry an Ingti girl. A Teron should marry a Terang girl. A Timung should marry an Enghee Girl and An Ingti should marry a Timung Girl.

The rule of the above circle is religiously adhered to by the Karbis. They have been doing so for long. Their tradition necessitates them to follow and observe this circle.

It is to be noted that to call a marriage legally valid as per custom, till very recently, it had to be performed according to the defined rule of this marriage circle.

Any deviation from this rule of marriage circle was seriously taken by the Karbi society.

But now-a-days, rules among the Karbis, mostly the young educated ones, have changed. Deviation from these prescribed rules is very common now. Like in many other areas of their corporate life, the rules of marriage too have undergone changes. Cross-cousin

marriage, for example, is not preferred now. In fact the modern generation of Karbi youths detests the idea.²²

Even after all these changes in the new age of Karbi young boys and girls, one traditional prohibition is still religiously adhered to by the Karbi society as a whole. That is the prohibition of marriage within the same clan. As stated earlier, any deviation from this social prescription is considered seriously and it leads to ex-communication and social boycott of the deviant couple from the society.

Marriage or *Adam asar* is such an indispensable part and necessity of Karbi life that if a man dies without marrying, all formalities of marriage must be completed before cremation.²³

Festivals:

Among the festivals observed by the Karbis, mention may be made of the Chojun Puja or Swarak Puja, Rongker, Chokk-eroi, Hacha-Kekan, Chomangkan, etc. While the former four festivals are socio-religious in nature and the latter is a social one.

Chojun puja is performed to propitiate the deities and spirits so that the family may prosper and is free from diseases, etc. It is also called Swarak Puja. The family that wishes to perform the Puja selects a spot in the close vicinity of the house of the family. The deities worshipped during Puja are- Shar, Barithe, Arnam and Arni. True to the dual spirit of worshipping demons and deities in Karbi society and their folk religion, the Devil Hii-i and other smaller Gods

are also worshipped during this Puja. As is the general rule, they also worship Hemphu, the greatest God according to Karbi folk religious belief.

Rongker is an important community festival of the Karbis. The notable aspect of this festival is that women are not permitted to enter the arena of worship during this festival. The time of its celebration is in the beginning of the new-year. The Karbi people of a village collectively worship different gods and goddesses for the well-being of the village as a whole. The elderly village people come and worship various deities in order to have their blessings. They seek blessings so that the people of the village may get rid of diseases and wraths of nature during the entire year and so that there is complete well-being for all of the villagers, including that of a good harvest.

Rongker is also performed in a much larger way in another format. This form is called Wofong Rongker. It is performed at the beginning of a cycle of every five years. All villages within a *mouza* which is an administrative block consisting of a number of revenue villages. All such villagers take active part in this festival. Each such village is represented by the village headman and a number of village elders. In the performance of the Wofong Rongker, like Rongker, only the males can take part. Unlike Rongker lasting for only one day, Wofong Rongker continues for two days.

The Karbis celebrate another festival during the harvest reaping time. They call it **Sokk-erroi**. The festival is observed when the paddy field fully ripens. The family members of each Karbi

household cut the paddy and take it to a place specially cleared in the field for harvest gathering and cleaning. Then they beat the paddy to dehusk on the floor of that cleaned spot and collect the paddy. After that they carry the paddy home in large bags. It is during this time that the Karbis celebrate the festival. It is celebrated amidst great rejoice and merriments. There is an atmosphere of great euphoria and merriment among the people and it shows on their faces. All rejoice a lot and the young ones take to dancing.

Sok-erroi literally means the carrying of the paddy from the field. Its pan Assamese counterpart is the Magh Bihu, the harvest reaping festival of the greater Assamese community celebrated in the month of January each year. The Karbis select a leader to lead and conduct the dancing and singing part of the festival. This chosen or selected person is called 'Lunse'. He acts as the director of the troupe of singers and dancers.

Hacha-Kekan, celebrated in the aftermath of the Sokk erroi, is a secular festival in nature and spirit. The festival is associated with the after harvest rejoicings. It is secular in spirit because there is no fear element in it. There is no propitiation of any god or demon. Thus it differs much from Rongker.

Chomangkan is the biggest, most elaborate and most expensive festival of the Karbis. It is a death or funerary ritual and is performed at a later date after the cremation of the diseased, even though they perform it at the time of cremation itself. They perform it for the eternal peace of the deceased. It is an elaborate one and continues for

four days and four nights at a stretch. The notable aspect is that the ceremony does not require any formal invitation to anyone. All are welcome to it. Another remarkable aspect is that apart from the sad undertone, the ceremony is marked by sensual dances and rejoicings. It becomes an occasion of pride for the family. The family members and relatives welcome all with great warmth and honour. The guests come in batches and everyone carries a symbolical rod with five branches and at the end of each branch, there is a wooden bird, which is called in Karbi "Vo-rali". The whole rod is called "Jambili Athan". This is the symbolical representation of the tribe and it is also the symbol of clan unity.²⁴

Karbi Musical Instruments:

Musical instruments are part and parcel of Karbi culture. They hold the view that music and song were the gifts of Rangina, the musical doyen of Karbi culture. They use a few musical instruments to accompany songs and dances. The Karbi artisans use a number of locally available raw materials like wood, bamboo, fibres, etc. to make these musical instruments.

The musical instruments used by the Karbis on various cultural events are:

Cheng:

The chief musical instrument of the Karbis is the Cheng. It is a drum made of the trunk of a local tree called the 'phang'. The mouths of the

hollow drum are covered with hide. To play on it, Karbi musicians use a small piece of cane which they call 'Cheng-be'. The drum is struck with this piece of cane. The Cheng was once used only during Chomangkan but now it is used almost on all cultural occasions.

Cheng-Burup:

It is also a drum like the Cheng, but it is smaller in size. It is also made of the same materials as the Cheng. The difference is that on one side of it has a handle while the other side is covered with hide. In the beginning of their new year when the 'vo kokchur', a small bird sings, the cultivation starts and the Karbi youths go to cultivate on the hills. While they go, they carry this Cheng Burup along with other tools and weapons for cultivation.

Chengso:

It is also an important instrument which resembles the Assamese *Taal*. It is made of either brass or aluminum.

Cheng-Kumbang:

Another important musical instrument of the Karbis, this is exclusively made of bamboo. To make this instrument a bamboo is cut around the nodes. The instrument is struck with a stick to play the tune. The instrument is played in accompaniment with occasions of cultivation, specifically during the time of seed sowing and cultivating and when Karbi young boys and girls dance in rhythm.

Pongsi and Muri Tongpo:

This instrument is like a flute. It is also an important musical instrument. From the ways and style of making, it can be divided into two types-Pongsi and Muri Tongpo. The first is made of bamboo and is more sophisticated in that it has nine holes in it. The latter, i.e., Muri Tongpo, is made of wood and is like a pipe. It is however, wider at one end. In sound it resembles the classical Indian musical instrument '*shehnai*'.

Kum Lieng and Kum Denfdong:

'Kum-Lieng' is a one-stringed instrument, slightly resembling a violin. Its body is made from a hollow gourd while the bow is made from bamboo. In order to make the string, the fibre of a tree is twirled.

Made of wood, the 'Kum-Dengdong' is a two-stringed instrument. It is played by striking with the fingers, just like the pan Indian musical instrument '*veena*'.

Krongchui:

Played through the mouth and teeth, it is a small wind instrument made either of bamboo or a piece of steel. Traditionally, during courtship and wooing, young girls play this wind instrument while the boys respond on their flutes or pongsi.²⁵

Traditional Dresses:

The Karbis 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 Choy-nangpo and the shirt used by the young men is called Choy-hongthor. The men use a loin cloth called Rikong or lengti. An elderly person from Bordeka village named Dirin Kramsa near Kuthori in Karbi Anglong district said that people wearing this Rikong is very few and far between now-a-days.²⁶ Most of the male persons have abandoned its use. Only in the remote interior place, Rikong is found to be used specially by married and aged persons.

The Karbi women and girls generally use *Pinicamflak*, 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 *Pe-kok*. A very highly artistic waist band called *Wankok* is also used by every woman and girl. The ladies use coloured and striped *Endi* scarf called *Khongjari* during winter.²⁷

c. Dance and Music:

Dance and music in Karbi society are associated with the common life which originated in pleasures of cultivation and courtship and farewell to the deceased. The Karbi youths perform various types of dances during various occasions and festivities, most notably during Chomangkan. The most lively and enchanting is the dance

performance during Hacha-Kekan which is celebrated during harvesting of crops.

It is notable that the traditional songs of the Kabis, irrespective of whether it is folk or religious, are generally sung by accomplished singers. They are fully conversant with the meaning and are also endowed with sweet voices. Some songs and worships are exclusive for males, while some others are exclusively for females in Karbi society. For example, during the performance of Mosera Kihir and Kecharhe, only a professional weeper called Uchepi, who is invariably a female, is allowed to sing the melancholic song called Sarhe.

d. Ornaments:

The Karbi men and women wear a number of traditional ornaments. There was a time when Karbi men used to put on Narik, a brass made ear-ring; Prinsoroi, a silver bracelet; Lekrooa and Lek-Enji, which are heavy silver necklaces. At present, however, Karbi males are not found to wear any of these ornaments.

The Karbi women wear a few numbers of traditional ornaments. Among the traditional ornaments worn by aged Karbi women, the most notable is called Nothenpi, a pair of big ear-rings. These rings, made of silver, are about two and a half inch in length. It has a diameter of about half an inch.

Rup-Aroir is a bracelet worn by both women and girls. It is also made of silver.

They also use Lech-lo-so, a necklace made of white beads.

The women also use a kind of necklace made of silver coins and red beads called Lek-Chike.

3.3 The Present Turmoil and communal violence

Like the entirety of Northeast of India, the Karbi Anglong district of Assam has been experiencing a large number of conflicts. The Karbi society is passing through a very crucial period of time like the rest of Assam. There is unhappiness, misunderstanding, mutual disrespect, distrust, thirst for bloodshed, intolerant attitude towards other communities and other tribes in the air of Karbi Anglong where majority of the Karbis live. Not a single week passes in a month when there is no bandh call by extremist organization in Karbi Anglong. There are communal conflicts regularly going on in Karbi Anglong. These communal conflicts take savage forms with even one and a half year child being thrown to fire alive. People of Assam still remember the Dimasa-Karbi conflict of 2005, the massacre of a number of Hindi speaking petty businessmen in 2007 and so on. There is regular news of killing, kidnapping, firing, etc., in all parts of the hills district. A study on their life, literature and culture will be an effort to understand the reasons of this violence, ethnic conflicts in particular, and their impact on the life of the people. One of the chief causes, among others, is religious apart from linguistic, cultural, economic,

political and social reasons. There are many who feel that the cultural and linguistic chauvinism of the Assamese people are also responsible for the Karbi tribe moving away from the mainstream Assamese society due to an inherent fear of losing their ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity. But Rong Bong Terang, the ex-President of Asom Sahitya Sabha and the most prolific of Karbi literateurs, feel it differently. In one of his interviews to Pradip Khataniar he said thus to the question put by the interviewer:

***Pradip Khataniar:** Some have opined that the middle-class Assamese with a haughty attitude of chauvinism which has gradually alienated the tribes to move away. What is your opinion on this?*

***Rong Bong Terang:** I do not think of it in this way. I feel that each community prides its own culture. If I had to speak from my own experience, I would say that this tendency to move away is characteristic of tribal societies²⁸*

Whatever may be psyche of the Karbis or irrespective of the way Rong Bong Terang feels, it still remains a fact that there has been a long period of ignorance for the tribe by the mainstream Assamese society. These sporadic incidents have social, political, cultural and economic causes and effects. While communal violence in India has become a defining feature, it has taken barbaric forms in Assam, most particularly in Karbi Anglong and in the BTAD areas.

At present a number of extremist organizations are active in Karbi Anglong. A list is provided here.

Some Ethnic Armed groups active in and operating from Karbi Anglong

1. United People's Democratic Solidarity Group (UPDS) formed on 21st May 1999 by Karbi People's Force (KPF) and Karbi National Volunteers (KNV)
2. Karbi Longri – NC Hills Liberation Front (KLNLFF)
3. Dima Halam Daogah (DHD–J) which is still not amenable to peace talks & (DHD-D) which is having a ceasefire agreement with the Central government.
4. Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA)
5. National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)
6. National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)

As **Tom Mangattuthazhe** very aptly and reasonably summarises, the possible objectives of the onslaught of violence in Karbi Anglong appear to be the following:

1. To divide the people of Karbi Anglong and their brethren in NC Hills.
2. To ensure that tribal aspirations are curbed by keeping them engaged in ethnic clashes. Inculcating the spirit of unhealthy competition among the people and forcing them to excel others thereby pushing them to be aggressive rather than assertive.
3. To ignite distrust and hatred among the tribes on the basis of aggressive chauvinism so that each tribe thinks of its own borders and

territory and is engaged in violence and hatred and would not have time to join the others in any common demand.

4. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people of this tract and all the conflicts have been in the agricultural season in May when agricultural operations begin or in October the harvesting season. That seems to be aimed at disrupting the economy.

5. To disturb the educational aspirations of the people in the area especially for the school and college going students whose examinations are held in October and November. Most conflicts have been during these months.

6. These conflicts also seem to be aimed at capturing the fertile and oil rich land in the Dhansiri area.

7. To encourage antagonism based on religion through false accusations such as forcible conversion, insults, arson, looting, raping and assaults on women.²⁹

The most fascinating feature of India's cultural heritage is unity in diversity. Through the ages intrinsic to the Indian cultural ethos has been utmost respect for and tolerance of all religions. That unity was the strength of India. The composite and synthetic culture emerged, developed and flourished out of this unity in diversity manifested itself in the art, architecture, paintings, music, languages and other forms. The Constitution mandated respect for this composite culture but the communal clashes are a big blow to this tradition. The greatest tragedy of institutionalized religion today is that some leaders hijack

religion for their personal political and economic objectives by misguiding their adherents.

The difficult times the Karbi tribe is passing through at present is a concern for all. One way of salvaging the current situation is through a process of mutual understanding and respect of the tribe which necessitates its study in all aspects of their corporate life. The young Karbi generation is very much conscious and respectful to their tradition and culture. But whatever they do not know should be made known to them through research. They should also be made aware of the rich legacy of their life, literature and culture and should be made to abandon the path of violence whosoever among them are getting attracted to the path. It is possible only through a thorough study and appreciation of the Karbi society, their legacy and their enormous potentialities for development for the tribe, the state and the country.

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