CHAPTER – VI

DISCUSSION
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Initially while framing the objectives of this study, there was the assumption that the Karbis living in plains are more or less homogeneous. Although this was not accepted as hypotheses, yet the study progressed basing this assumption like a hypothesis. After detailed fieldworks conducted in almost six lower Assam plains villages where Karbis live, the procured data proved that the assumption was not entirely correct.

It took several months’ of work to gather the data for the first objective – i.e. the present social system of the Karbis of plains vis-à-vis Guwahati. Volumes of data were procured and of those, only the features common to the villages have been taken for construction of the tribe’s social system. Great variations have been observed in their day-to-day life from one village to another.

The most common phenomenon about all the plains Karbis, be it of Sarusajai, Morongabari or Lungpung village, is that they all are storytellers and dreamers. They can weave stories within moments. Their explanation of events often is imagined. Like the T'boli tribe of Mindanao and Australian aborigines, story telling is a cultural characteristic of the Karbis. Secondly, their culture
personality marks them off as perhaps the quietest tribe in the North East India and are notably simple and non-aggressive.

They narrate many stories about their presence in the locality – the most common among these stories is the one that related to coming from the east – Garo hills region after being driven away by some tribes having affinity to Garos. Some have again held contradictory views – all the stories start with the phrase “long long ago” while actually they cannot go beyond the great earthquake of 1898 or Kala Azar or 1950s. From the interview with the village elders, and on examination of the land records of 1923-28, (which was updated for next 30 years i.e till 1958-1964), where names of few Karbi families are found, it can be estimated that the Karbis moved in and around the outskirts of the city right from 1930s. Their movement to various locations perhaps began in mid 1930s and they were not stable especially in village Modgharia (not taken under study) and Japroigog village until 1950s. Till that time they moved from one village to another – especially from Madghoria – to Japorigog, or, from Japorigog to Hengerabari or from Narakasur to Gumaria or Morangabari (villages within Sonapur revenue Circle). In the land records of 1928, few Karbi names are found which were recorded between 1934-38 as adhiars in village Japorigog, Hengerabari and Sarusajai while most of these villages were non-cadastral areas at that time. Few relevant records such as khatian register prepared under Assam Adhiars Protection Act could not however be traced out.
6.1: Social Life:

One of the basic objectives of this study was to find out the nature of the present social system of the Karbis of the plains. This was discussed in detail in Chapter- III. In the absence of any such previous systematic study, this fieldwork had to be undertaken to get the actual version of their social system. In Chapter III, the descriptive account of their social system has been incorporated. Here it has been proposed to analyse the system in association with the externally associated factors.

The social life of the Karbis of plains is not much different from that of their neighbouring Assamese community. But compared to their counterpart in hills, their life style varies greatly almost in every sphere. Although they have somatometric proximity, they differ in somatoscopic characteristics and also in respect of some of their social aspects. The social variations are directly proportional to the distance of the tribe from the hills. The greater the distance, the greater is the differences observed. On that count, Karbis of Guwahati reveal the highest difference. Moreover, because of their urban character, they are in even more difficulties in maintaining all the traditional traits.

While studying the social system of the Karbis of the plains, (Chapter-III) it was found that, their basic social unit is the nuclear family – which is more like the hills. But the tribe in Guwahati had become habituated in living in joint families for quite some time till the recent past. The main reason behind adoption of the joint
family system was the situation based on agro economy amidst shortage of land and manpower. Density of population in the villages was thin and agricultural labourer was in short supply. Even when labour is available, the cost of labour is exorbitant which is almost equivalent to the price of an industrial labour. As such, they were to remain content with the services of household members in the farms and this also helped in keeping the joint family system intact. Since mid 1970s, gradual change in the occupational pattern started taking place and by 1980s majority of the farm fields have been converted to homesteads following the great demand for land in view of the shifting of the capital of Assam from Shillong to Guwahati. It was the time when many young people migrated from agricultural field to paid up jobs. The process of shifting from farm to non-farm activities was almost complete by the year 2000.

The change in traditional occupational pattern led to a drastic change in the family structure. Progression from joint family to nuclear family became inevitable in the face of occupational hazard. Cash wage brought an attitudinal change – with the resultant growth of individualism. Life styles got changed abruptly. The situation has been discussed in details in Chapter-V as to how the family units got changed under the impact of change in the macro structure of the society. Oran’s (1965:78) study of the impact of industrialisation on Santhals of Deobhum Bihar also presents the same picture. The Santhals after the loss of their traditional mode of living due to acquisition of their land for
industrial purposes were forced to sell their labour and migrated to Jamshedpur to work in the TISCO. Selling labour for money is an idea inimical to their traditional norms. Roy (1912) while studying Mundas writes, in Ranchi only one ninth of the land that was reclaimed and cultivated by the tribal was left with them by about 1910. It was because of the shortage of land that Gond, Munda, Oraon and Santhals had migrated to Assam to work as wage labourer in the tea gardens (Pathy, 1984: 36). Sachchidananda (1979: 19) while talking about change among the Mundas writes, “The first wave of industrialisation in Hatia caused great misery to the local villagers. Twenty-five villages inhabited by Munda were adversely affected. They had to face numerous odds and obstacles, cultural cries, economic and social disorganisation. Although compensation was paid to the displaced families, in the absence of training the amount was swindled out from them. Happy families who earlier had lived by agriculture were reduced to destitute. The poor tribals did not have any technical skill and so could not get ready employment in the Heavy Engineering Corporation (HEC) Plant”

India’s tribal history is full of such accounts where tribals have been uprooted from their traditional farmlands without providing them adequate knowledge on adopting alternative pattern of living. In the present case, indeed, the Karbis have become landless due to their own action. But the resultant adverse economic situations faced by them are similar as that of the Mundas of Jamshedpur. As our objective is to analyse the
landlessness as the primary economic factor of structural change in
the traditional family system, there is no further scope for analysis
of this issue here. It has been sufficiently established in the tribal
context that loss of primary occupation led to conversion of joint
families mainly due to economic constraints and costly spaces for
living, Family system therefore tends to become nuclear families in
such situations.

6.2: Change in Macro Structures:

The intention behind inclusion of this objective was to
examine how the macro structures have been changing over time,
the pattern of such changes and how they impact upon the
community under study. While studying this objective, only those
areas have been taken into account, which has affected the basic
structure of the Karbi society.

Among the macro structural changes that are visible in the
city of Guwahati are 1) rapid urbanisation of Guwahati and 2) the
resultant change in political scenario, which we have denoted
following Singh as ‘politicisation’ (1992: 161) or political
innovation (1992: 25). By politicisation it is meant to give political
nature to the city populace or making the city populace aware of or
informed about politics and thereby inducing them to take part in
political activities and discussions.

Urbanisation of Guwahati was rapid since 1970s. The
primary reason for this was the shifting of Capital of Assam from
Shillong to Guwahati. Although the capital was transferred
temporarily, yet it necessitated large-scale improvement of existing infrastructures and created fresh infrastructures. Road communication was improved; wooden bridges were converted gradually to RCC bridges, construction or expansion of school buildings, hospitals, market places were taking place. Roads were widened and streetlights were put up along the main streets. With this, suddenly the ancient Guwahati put up a modern look. Due to the abrupt growth of population, with considerable purchasing power in the hands of everybody, demands for various essential commodities had risen. This necessitated market expansion and along with it also took place the expansion of trade and commerce. Major construction and expansion activities took place centering round Dispur and thus it directly affected the villages under study. Almost all the villages are very close to the capital site and the village unemployed youths took no time to engage themselves in these construction activities. This is one reason of increase in proportion of population working outside the primary sector. It can be simply put in terms of change in occupational pattern of the villages. Here, the urban growth and urbanisation is not just a product of industrialisation but it is not to be denied that it was indeed a factor of social change. Defending this, Ginsberg (1966: 42) writes, “Cities in each period of history have been associated with the modernisation of that society in that period. Every major change in history leading to the more rational use of resources and to increased spatial interaction, has been associated with urbanisation, that is, with the growth of cities and the roles that
cities have played in given societies.” This shift in occupation however has not helped the poverty-ridden masses to improve their economic condition as much as it helped the richer section. The urbanisation pattern and the development trends have benefited a few but was skewed in favour of those who can control the resources allocation and generation, (Kopardekar, 1986: 10). The rich and the new rich quietly amass wealth in the development process through land speculation, black market, tax evasion, etc. (Bose, 1974: 67). In Chapter V, it is seen how land speculation finally affected the villagers extremely eliminating them from the paddy fields.

Urbanisation, it can be seen clearly, had exerted tremendous impact on the social structure of the Karbis living in Guwahati forcing them to change first their occupational pattern and then their family structure, which has been discussed elsewhere in detail.

Another observable change in the macro structure is the politicisation of Guwahati. In 1971, the Guwahati Municipal Corporation Act was enacted and under this Act, for the first time the Municipal Corporation for the city was constituted in 1974. The corporation has brought tremendous changes in the nature of political participation of local people. Political participation means the actual involvement of people in politics, i.e. in power, political activity and process, which affects the lives of people. However, the effort to influence the decision-making of government may be
legal or illegal, violent or peaceful, successful or unsuccessful. (Nstein, et al 1975:16) To understand the concept of political participation, it is necessary to classify different types of political participation. Anthony Birch (1993) listed some different types of political participation. The list is reproduced below (Birch, 1993: 67)

The main types of political participation

1. Voting in national elections.

2. Voting in referendums.

3. Canvassing or otherwise campaigning in elections.

4. Active membership of a political party.

5. Active membership of a pressure group.

6. Various forms of civil disobedience, such as refusing to pay taxes or obey conscription order.

7. Taking part in political demonstrations, industrial strikes with political objectives, rent strikes in public housing and similar activities aimed at changing public policy.

8. Membership of Government advisory committee.


10. Client involvement in the implementation of social policies.
11. Various forms of community action such as those concerned with housing or environmental issues of the day.

The list above is a comprehensive list of almost all the political activities. Although, the Constitution of India had brought with it the democratic election process to each of the State assemblies and the Lok Sabha, yet the impact of these elections was negligible on the rural people. Except for the casting of votes, they never had any direct involvement in this political process. They did not have any chance to take part in the decision making process. But the enactment of the Guwahati Municipal Corporation Act was a turning point. The Act established an urban local self Government for the people of Guwahati. The Act has provision for Ward Councillor in all sixty wards. People got the chance to choose their own ward Councillors who may happen to be their close acquaintances. The Ward Councillors are armed with ample power in the matter of development of their local areas. The urban local Government had brought with it exciting political activities for the local people and the local people had participated in each of the elections to the Guwahati Municipal Corporation enthusiastically. The Act provides for one councillor for every population of 7,500. This limit has now been raised to 15,000 subject to a maximum of 60 (Singh, 1999), who shall be elected through universal adult franchise for a five-year term. The Government of Assam is empowered to determine the actual strength of the Guwahati Municipal Corporation from time to time keeping in line with the rise of population. For electing the
Councillors, the entire city of Guwahati was split into areas known as Wards. There should be as many wards as there are Councillors to be elected to the Guwahati Municipal Corporation. There are at present 60 wards of the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (Ref – Map-3). Provisions are made for the representation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The Corporation has been entrusted with the power to construct markets, schools, playgrounds, parks, hospitals or for any other public purpose. In order to improve any area under it, they can make plans. They are the authority to issue trade licenses for setting up factories etc. and also to issue permission to construct buildings within GMC area. Improvement of Public health facilities, and providing facilities for water, lighting roads and drainage, and arrangement of sewerage disposal are the matters that fall under the GMC.

The first ever election to the Corporation was held in the year 1974 and people participated in it enthusiastically. Several tribal political leaders emerged in this election. The tribal leaders like late Latish Chandra Rabha, Kalicharan Basumatary, Pulin Rabha, etc., were the emerging leaders from among the scheduled tribe population of the city. Both Latish Chadra Rabha and Pulin Rabha were elected three times to the Corporation. Late Latish Rabha was also the Deputy Mayor of Guwahati during 1982-1983.
Studies indicate that people are more involved in politics in industrialised, urbanised societies than in the rural, agricultural society having primitive economic system. The principal difference in political participation in traditional and modern societies concerns the scope and intensity of political participation (Nstein et al, 1975:32). In this context, it is worth mentioning that Marxian theory revolves round the fact that the economic factor is solely responsible for changing society as well as political system whether it is high or low depends on the socio-economic condition of a society. (Nstein et al: ibid)

The establishment of Guwahati Municipal Corporation is a significant step towards providing effective participatory governance to the people of Guwahati. It also proved to be an important event in the political history of Guwahati. Never in the history of Guwahati had people so largely participated in a political process. It created political awareness among the people. They not only participate in casting votes but also in electioneering and acquiring membership of political parties. With the administration at the doorstep, they also never hesitated to criticize the ward councillors for their failures. This politicization resulted in a two way change i) it made people alert about the backwardness of their locality and taught people the procedure of approaching local government for development of their area and ii) with the emerging political leaders, it created a class hierarchy.
With the advent of urbanisation, some notable changes have taken place in the urban society of Guwahati. The stereotype lifestyle has been changing with the expansion of road network and communication facilities, development of entertainment centers, establishment of higher educational institutions, etc. Therefore, since the later part of the 20th century, significant changes have taken place in the lives of the people due to many socio-economic and political factors. These changes contributed in creating a new consciousness among them and about their importance in the society. The changing status of the agents of political participation like education, socio-economic development, role of mass media, political experience of family, made a tremendous impact on the people regarding their participation in politics. In the entire process, education has played an important role. Almond and Verba’s (1965: 15) study reveals that education socialises citizens into a democratic political culture. Similarly, the five nations’ study of Verba and Nie (1972) focuses the ‘strong relation’ between education and political participation especially in campaigning activity and communal activity. Education has great potential in keeping people informed, aware and conscious about day to day political and other happenings and as a result people becomes more aware about the political happenings around them which indirectly induces them to take part in politics. Due to this, in modern times different political institutions lay stress on imparting education to the people.
6.3: Change in Social Structure of the Plains Karbis:

In the analysis of the change in structure of a society, it is necessary to focus on how the society in different regional settings maintain or deviate from, first their traditionally established pattern of activities and secondly, in respect of interaction with other castes. The first case would be of a community, which has given up its traditional occupation and disassociated itself from traditional occupational obligations and in the second category of changes would include the process, which threaten to break down the established pattern of relationships between the communities and thereby threaten the continuity of the system (Singh, 1999: 162).

In Chapter V, a detailed analysis has been made as to how the operation of various factors led to change in the traditional occupational structure of the Karbis of Guwahati, which in turn forced the family structure to change. Here a brief discussion will be made on the structural changes that have been observed in respect of occupation and in the institution of family and marriage. Thus, here we are mainly concerned with the first type of Change that Singh (1999) refers.

6.3.1: Change in Traditional Occupational Pattern:

There has been a total change in the traditional occupation due to the operation of three main factors – i) implementation of the Urban Land (Ceiling and Regulation) Act 1976 which limits the total vacant land to be held by a family, ii) removal of ban on
transfer of land belonging to tribal people to non-tribal people and iii) shifting of capital from Shillong to Guwahati. The serial operation of these three factors led the land to the monopoly market and the already cash starved farmers started disposing off both their homestead and cultivable lands at lucrative prices. Between 1972 and 2005 more than 190 bighas (62.81 acres) of land were sold out in the villages for non-agricultural purposes. At the time of survey (2005) there were only three families in all the five village segments, who were solely dependent on agriculture. Even these families are also on the verge of conversion to non-farm families.

Urbanisation of Guwahati has provided the upcoming generations to get wage accruing jobs in various establishments in the informal sector. These are mainly unskilled jobs in the business establishments, PCOs, city buses, small sector enterprises, etc. Due to the low level of their educational attainment, they had no other alternative but to accept such type of wage earning jobs. There were very little scope for bargaining the wage due the very competitive wage market; yet very soon they learnt to bargain the wage with the only asset to bargain with which was their previous experience in the job. Thus, gradually they have moved towards a dependent economy of wage earning substituting cultivation. The occupational mobility has also essentially created a class hierarchy depending on the occupational diversification. This has weakened their ethnic bondage and process of \textit{tribalization} has started. This is what exactly Singh (1992) calls disassociation from
6.3.2: Change in Family Structure:

The discussion made in chapter-V reveals how drastically the traditional family structure has undergone changes mainly due to the shift from the traditional occupational pattern. In the hills, the Karbis prefer nuclear families (Bordoloi et al, 1987:57) but in plains, joint family system is still prevalent although gradually being converted to nuclear ones. In Guwahati also, joint family system was prominent till agriculture remained as the primary occupation. Shortage of land and manpower for the paddy fields kept them united. But the urbanization has drastically changed their living pattern and agriculture remained as primary occupation of only three families in the five village segments where this study is made. This conforms to the findings of many other researchers in the field. Ross’s (1961) study among the traditional middle and upper class urban families in Bangalore found that pressure on land and increased opportunities for employment have affected the role relationship within the family. Lewis’s (1958:18) study of Rampur village showed that the landowning castes had the highest proportion (66.6%) of extended families while among the lower castes having no land, nuclear family is predominant. Sarma (1964: 1-17) also commented in his study of two different villages of West Bengal that owner cultivators had a high proportion of joint families than people who had followed non-agricultural
occupations. Although the present study is not on a caste based community, yet the factors operating in the changing process are similar and it appears that these factors work identically in case of both caste and tribe leaving aside the caste hierarchy. One significant aspect observed in case of Guwahati is the tendency to remain 'joint' even after break up of the family jointness. This tendency is manifested both from the part of the family and also from the society.

It was found that the change in the family structure was mainly due to the urban impact promoted by few other external factors such as change in certain statutory provisions pertaining to land, shift of the capital of Assam from Shillong, etc. This urban impact was mainly on the economic front, which resulted in progression from joint families to nuclear families in the study villages. The sharing or pooling of the hard earned resources (money earned as wages) becomes the bone of contention. The earning cash wage is the main reason of this change in attitude. It is the earner's psychology to hold the money back or keep within his/her possession as long as it is possible; while in the joint families, forces are always towards a central pool or equal sharing of the economic burden between the earners (Barua, 2000. 131). Another reason that backed this process of nuclearisation is the change in the daily work schedule. Problem arose when the work schedule of a wage earner was attempted to fit to the work schedule of that of a farmer (i.e. the head of the family, father or the elder brother or paternal uncles). Such re-adjustment was necessitated

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not only between two or three persons, but also between the families of involved brothers. Even if adjustment is somehow made, that remains temporary till the wage earners remain unmarried. Fissive forces come to operate within the family consequent of the individualised earning of cash money from a diversified labour market.

Thus, the findings suggest that the process of structural change in the Karbi society has already been started with the structural change in the family and the resultant family type is favourable to an urban setting. This family type will go a long way in adjusting the community further to the urban set up. This finding confirms Goode’s (1964) observation that family systems throughout the world are generally moving in the direction of conjugal pattern, and notes that lack of fit between the extended family and the industrialisation. Goode preferred the term conjugal to nuclear for he was studying the family system and not the family type.

6.3.3: Marriage and Associated Changes:

Marriage is the only institution where the clans play an important role in the Karbi society – this is true both in hills and in plains. But among the Karbis of Guwahati, and also people living adjacent to Guwahati, the concept of clan exogamy has not remained as rigid as it was earlier. There are incidents of marriages within the clan while the excommunication has been averted by paying the fine fixed by the Mel. The system of adoptive kinship

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has also given a liberal shape to such intra-clan marriages. Such happenings are infrequent and the older people do not like to mention the results. Excommunication thus does not take place these days. This is a significant deviation from the traditionally established norms. This has been justified on many occasions referring to their declining population. In reality population has not declined but migration from villages to other localities for job purposes has resulted in reduction in Karbi population in the villages.

Another important area where significant change has taken place is the age at marriage. The newer generations are getting married at a comparatively late age – both girls and boys. It may be observed from the table below that among the males, not a single one in the age group 15-25 got married within 16-18 years of age. But as we go further up, we find more and more persons got married at this age group i.e. 16-18 years. It starts with age group 25-35, which registered two persons who got married at this age; while in the age group 45-55, it is 8 persons. Similar trend can be observed in respect of females also. The table reveals that the younger the person the greater is the age at marriage. Urbanisation and the resultant occupational mobility and close association with neighbouring community are the main reason for this upward trend in the age at marriage.
Table 6.3.3: A Comparative Analysis showing Age At Marriage and Age Group of Ever-married Persons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current age of the ever married persons</th>
<th>15-25</th>
<th>25-35</th>
<th>35-45</th>
<th>45-55</th>
<th>55-65</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age at Marriage</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The society is also becoming liberal in respect of marriage contract. The involvement of parents in the marriage engagements is gradually in the declining trend. Although, finally the marriage is solemnised socially, performing the necessary formalities, now a days the boys mostly make the choice and sends the parents to the prospective bride. Similarly, the traditional norms of elaborate arrangements for marriage have also been reduced to minimum.
The gift – especially the bride’s cloths from the bride groom i.e. the set of hand woven plain *mekhela* and *chador* has been replaced by either silk of *muga* (*mulberry*) *Mekhela* and *chador* which is costlier but easily available in the market. This dependency on the market is one step forward toward modernisation.

The change brought about in the institution of marriage is indeed significant and it conforms to the Singh’s first category of change, in which the community disassociates from the established traditional pattern. The established pattern although has not yet been replaced by a completely new one yet deviations have been made in some core areas. These changes were in conformity to i) their economic necessities and ii) adjustment process prompted by new situation. Furthermore, it is to be stated that the change has not affected the basic structure of the marriage performance i.e. the ritual part of the marriage still remained basically unaffected. Marriage is still performed by their *Purohits* and Brahmins have not yet got any access to this area.

6.4: Components of Culture & Change:

The study of the various components of the culture indicate the direction of change of a society. The study of these components constitutes one of the basic objectives of this study. In the Chapter-III, the cultural components as gathered from the field visit at different villages of Kamrup (Metropolitan), Kamrup and Nagaon district have been presented while the cultural and micro structural changes have been presented in the Chapter V.
Culture is the combination of all the physical and behavioural aspects of a society. The study of the people within a society, how they function, and what they value, gives the students of Anthropology a more thorough understanding of society. Every culture has its own valid and authentic version of society. It is the sum total of the knowledge, attitudes, and habitual behaviour patterns shared and transmitted by members of a society. Culture can be divided into the following components:

- Material Culture
- Social Institutions
- Attitudes Toward the Unknown
- the Arts
- Language

6.4.1: Material Culture

Material culture includes homes, tools, clothes, furniture, etc as used by the tribe. In Chapter III, a detailed discussion has been made about the type of houses generally used by the hill Karbis and the type that has been used by the plains Karbis. Vast differences could be observed in the house types of the Karbis of hills and that of the plains. Among the plains Karbis again, the house type changes as we proceed from rural areas to town areas. In Guwahati, there are also RCC houses in the study villages belonging to the Karbis.
In plains, Karbi villages of Nagaon, Sonitpur, and Kamrup, people occasionally wear their traditional dresses especially in their traditional festivals. Otherwise, the women normally use the Assamese traditional dresses — *mekhela* and *chador*. Even in marriages, *mekhela* and *chadors* are gifted and exchanged. A few people preserve the traditional dresses for wearing during festive and religious occasions. Even that practice is also gradually decaying. The aged Karbi men in Guwahati still wear the dhoti in the form of a *Laguti*. But among the younger generation, males use trousers and shirts, jackets and females use, *salwar, churidar-Kameez, mekehla-chador* and saree. Married women use *mekhela chador* and saree. Thus, in respect of dresses, the Karbis of Guwahati has become fully urbanised. The change is almost similar to that of the neighbouring Assamese people, who use dhoti only during a religious occasion while women strictly use *mekhela-chador*.

Tools and basketry used by the Karbis are listed in the Table- 3.2.7 of Chapter-III. Not all these items are in everyday use in the Karbi households. Some of these tools and utensils could be made quickly when the need arise. Others require a greater investment of time and could be used for many years. The amount of care and time put into making tools, utensils, and clothing depend on their anticipated use in life, and time is too precious to be expended in decorating simple items, which would soon wear out.
The Karbis of Guwahati however are habituated in purchasing items of everyday use from markets like any other people in the town. Today, modern, specially ordered furniture is used in the households. Weaving is practised but women crave for at least two or three sets of silk or Muga clothes which they do not weave. Only a few women weave for their household use while others purchase. Similarly, households having older persons need not worry for the essential baskets made of bamboos as they can prepare one effortlessly within a short span. The young men of the village however have not acquired this skill. As majority of the families are nuclear families headed by such young persons, they purchase such items from markets, which are cheap and easily available. Thus this art of weaving baskets is gradually wearing out in almost all the villages under study. Like their neighbours, they are also becoming market dependent.

6.4.2: Social Institutions:

Within the Social institutions the status of the five sub components namely family, marriage, religion, political, the economy and education, which have been broadly analysed under the heading of micro structural changes in Chapter-V. Further, a discussion on the status of change in the family structure and marriage has been discussed in this chapter in the context of structural change. Hence, here the discussion will confine only to components of religion, political, economy and education.
(a) Religion:

Dumont and Pocock (1959: 74) in their essay “Possession and Priesthood”, wrote, “One does not see how the tribal religion could possibly be considered apart as an “animism” opposed to “Hinduism”. But this does not prevent the tribes to follow their own traditional faith in their own traditional way without engaging a Brahmin functionary. In his later essays, Dumont acknowledged the existence of tribes and wrote “In reality we only find “sections” of tribes which have more or less split from the main body and are transforming themselves into part of another society.” The subsequent discussion, on religion of the Karbis of plains has been made in this perspective.

Religion of the plains Karbis of Guwahati cannot be definitely said to be animistic. They have come a long way from their pure animistic status that the Karbis in the hills are still maintaining. The plains Karbis in the districts of Kamrup, Nagaon and Kamrup (Metropolitan) districts however still perform some of their traditional animistic rituals. Most of these rites and rituals are concerning agriculture and since agriculture still remained as their main sources of living, they perform the traditional rituals with slight deviation here and there. The details of these festivals are recorded in Chapter-III. In Guwahati however, the situation is somewhat different. Disengagement from the primary sector as their occupation coupled with the impact of Hindu religion has brought about a lasting change in the Karbi society of Guwahati.
To begin with, the hill Karbis does not practice the erection of temples (*mandirs*) for their deities or Gods. Among the plains Karbis of Kamrup, Nagaon and Kamrup (metropolitan) districts, a type of tin or thatched shed can be observed in their villages along with an open space which they call “*Than*.” The word ‘*than*’ is an Assamese word denoted to indicate a sacred place. The Karbis of plains also regards this place as sacred one and hold their festivals, rituals and important meetings in this place. In Guwahati, in each village, apart from the *thans*, one can also observe the *siv mandir*, *lakhsmi mandir*, protected places for worshipping *Durga*, etc. These temples are either individually raised or established by few devotees at their own initiatives. The village *Mel* has no direct connection in such initiatives. But the *Mel* members participate in the pujas individually and regularly whenever performed. No social sanction was imposed by the *Mel* for raising these temples in the villages. This indicates, in other words, the approval of the *Mel* to these new ideas. In one special instance in a particular hamlet in Sarusajai, the worship of goddess *Durga* which began under the initiative of a few devotees gradually gained popularity and the belief established among all geared by a series of events where the supernatural power of goddess *Durga* got ingrained and gained acceptance at the community level to the effect that it is now managed and *puja* is performed under the authority of the *Mel* but without the involvement of a *Brahman* and with offerings as made to local Karbi gods. It presents an amalgamated version of Hinduism and animism.
These temple structures do not always resemble the typical Hindu temples. Sometimes it is either a simple room of a house; sometimes a separate thatched or tin roofed house and in certain cases it is typically mandir shaped. Inside the mandir, instead of the images of presiding deities, a printed calendar of the deity may be found. The shiv mandir at Sara sajai has siv lingas and a durga mandir has the stone image of goddess durga. These places are regarded as sacred by all the villagers and while passing through, they show respect to the places in clasped hands like any other Hindus do to their temples or namghars. The most popular pujas are the Saraswati and Viswakarma which they observe in cooperation with neighbouring non-Karbi people and also individually.

The pujas are offered without the mediation of Brahmans. They do it their own way and there is no chanting of mantras as is done in case of Hindu pujas. The Brahmin supremacy has not yet been recognized in their society. Only exception was the last year’s Viswakarma puja at Sorusojai where, an image was bought from the market and puja was offered through a Brahman. The Puja was held within the village and people participated in it.

Srinivas’s Sanskritisation has taken a peculiar shape in the Karbi society. It is clearly the process of sanskritisation minus the claim of upper caste status. They do not consider themselves as caste Hindus rather they are satisfied with their tribal status.
Adoption of Hindu festivals by the Karbis could be attributable to three factors:

i) As agriculture ceased to become the main occupation, most of their rites and rituals which are connected to agriculture have lost relevance.

ii) When any festivals are celebrated in the neighbourhood Karbis are always invited and they become the part and parcel of these community Pujas, etc. Young peoples are attracted to the festival part of these Pujas, and they celebrate it with their non-Karbi friends in the neighbourhood.

iii) Some people got the benefit or blessings of offering Puja to any God or goddess like Shiva etc. and become a disciple.

From this, it follows that the reasons behind Karbis adapting to the Hindu faith could be summarized under two broad heads viz, first, it has been the result of the respect of the Karbis towards neighbouring non-karbi culture which is also the dominant culture of the area that facilitated this process. A close look at the type of relationship that the Karbis maintain with their neighbours shows that it is the relationship of mutual trust between the communities. Both the communities have long been living harmoniously and in close contact with each other and no incident of hostility have ever been recorded. The process of assimilation started long back in several areas of their culture and it is still continuing and often they identify their local gods as Siva. Secondly, it has been the faith on the unknown forces (Hindu Gods, Goddesses & deities, etc.) as a
result of benefits, blessings accrued from it through Puja. Many Karbi families worship Shiva, Manasa for the solution to their problems and in many cases when solutions are found, their belief on the God/Goddess is strengthened and they become the disciple of the deity. Due to the lack of any specific deities in the Karbi religious framework that rules the domain of trade and business, they found their faith on the Lord Ganesha and Goddess Laksmi who are believed as the main force behind flourishing business. Similarly use of machines affirmed their belief in Lord Biswakarma.

In Sanskritisation, two basic points needs consideration are i) the culture of the higher castes enjoys great prestige, and ambitious lower castes would like to take it over; 2) while the locally dominant castes, wherever one exist would want its culture to be its exclusive property and not usurped by a low caste (Srinivas, 1998: 88). The case of Karbis of plains under study fulfils the first condition partially (because the ambition part is absent here) but not the second. The Assamese Hindu community living alongside the Karbis had never been such possessive taking into account of their religion and culture. Thus, on the whole, the process has not fulfilled the conditions of sankritisation. There is no doubt they have gradually been adopting the Hindu way of life, but there is no aspiration of gaining caste status attached to it. The process we would rather call cultural liberalization.
There has been a large-scale change in their traditional magico-religious practices too. Divination is a magical procedure by which the cause of a particular event or the future is determined. Divination is accomplished by many different methods. Among the Karbis, the divinations constitute the most primary part of any ritual; but it is gradually losing popularity among the literate Karbis and the new generations; although it is still done along with all the traditional rituals, people have lost faith on the power of divination. They accept divinations as traditional cultural practices but do not believe in its functional strength as they did in earlier days.

Most of the puja\textsc{s} related to agriculture are not performed these days. Only Johong and Deo-xal (Dehal) puja are performed communally and in large scale. They have accepted Deoxal Puja as the symbol of plain Karbi tribe. This puja is similar to the Ronker puja performed by the hill Karbis and thus sometimes it is referred to as Dehal-Rongker Puja. They first perform this puja village-wise and then perform it centrally on a separate date in a certain place on invitation by a certain village. Apart from the ritual part, there is also the cultural part of this puja and of late it is also providing a platform to discuss their political matters relating to the various demands of the Karbis of plains. They invite guests, dignitaries and press and explain to them about the plain Karbis and their political demands.
Attitude towards Ancestral Spirits

One special category of spirit found in the belief system of the Karbis of the plains consists of the souls or ghosts of ancestors. A belief in ancestral spirits is consistent with the widespread conviction that humans have at least two parts—a physical body and some kind of non-physical spirit or soul. The spirit portion is generally believed to be freed from the body by death and continues to exist in some form. Ancestral spirits are often seen as retaining an active interest and even membership in their family and society. Like living people, they are believed to have emotions, feelings, and appetites. They must be treated well to assure their continued good will and assistance to the living.

They consider the ancestral spirits as being an active family member. At Long ae, they erect monuments for the deceased and also keep a place separately for the souls to sit and take rest while passing through the place. The Mudha khuta or the sacred post inside the house also believed to bear the souls of the deceased relatives. They are treated warmly with respect and honor.

(b) Political Institutions

In the traditional Plains Karbi society, the largest political unit is the plains Karbi Tribe. The tribe is divided into several clans with which are constituted the villages. Villages are the smallest political unit. A traditional Karbi village has a well-defined political system, which functions as an independent unit. It has
own set of traditional functionaries who conduct different internal and external affairs of the village. They are also traditional leaders who command respect in the society. The sphere of their authority is well defined. They remain popular and dominant as long as they enjoy the confidence of the villagers.

In each village, there is the institution commonly known as *khel*. Usually all the permanent villagers are the members of the *khel*. But if any villagers are willing to become the member of a *khel* of another village they can do so.

*Burha Bangthai* or simply *Bangthai* is the village head priest. He is the custodian of the religious life as well as morale of the village. His physical presence is indispensable in all-important matters. The other important functionaries are the *Deka Bangthai, Bisar Dhora,* and *Oklengsar*; all these are hereditary positions. Normally the eldest son is preferred if he is competent for the post of *Bangthai*, otherwise, any willing member of the 'family' (immediate clan male members) possessing the qualities are offered the post when the posts fall vacant.

The *khel* meetings are called the *Mels*. *Mels* decide all-important civil and criminal disputes, collects revenues through fees and fines, organises communal festivals and functions. The *Mels* also decide cases of infringement of certain taboos that affect the whole village or the tribe e.g. sexual union between Karbi and...
Non-karbi and any case of incest. The Mel has the right to excommunicate a Karbi for marrying within the clan.

Lots of civil and criminal cases that were decided earlier by the Mels have now become the subject matters of either local revenue laws and of Criminal Procedure Court (Cr P.C.) or Indian Penal Code (IPC) and as such, these invites police action. As a result the functions of Mels have been shrinking gradually. Till the early 70s, Sarusajai and Moina Khurung Mels took up the cases of land disputes and theft. But as their decisions are challenged in the local revenue Court and Police Stations, they stopped taking up such cases. They are also suitably explained by the authority – both revenue and police - not to take up laws in their hands. Today people go to local Circle Officer or to the Deputy Commissioner for redressal of any civil disputes and to the Police Station and then to the Criminal Courts to get redress on any criminal matters. The authority of the Mels has been reduced only to the customary law matters. However, strong Mels still punish the guilty on the minor assault matters. In one such case at Japorigog, when police declared a culprit (a Bangthai beating up his mother) innocent, the Mel had punished him with a social boycott and removed him from the position of Bangthai.

Each Mel has the power to discuss the legal matters especially the customary laws. The Mels can exercise their power to make minor modification to the laws to meet the exigencies of the changing situations e.g. (a) Sraddha is to be observed only on
one day, or on the matter of pig feasting on this occasion, (b) imposing traditional behaviour and customs on the villagers (youth to wear gamocha on funerals and marriages, etc.). Such other changes to customary laws are made now and then. Each Khel has the autonomy to make such modifications. But they dare not change the basic structure of the customary laws such as laws regarding MBD marriage, tribal exogamy, and marriage with non-Hindus etc; according to them these are the indicators of their identity. And as such, even without altering the basic custom at the level of the Mel, the Mels have given decisions on very few occasions that go contrary to the basic customary practice and these decisions are only in the context of the particular cases considered and not meant to be established practice for future actions.

In all the villages under study, Mels were found exercising their complete control over the matters of marriage and festivals. Other functions are gradually declining. Villagers’ attendance in the Mels has also been gradually declining, as people are preoccupied with their jobs outside the village. Today, it requires several days’ notice for holding the Mels while in earlier days, Mels could be held even at few hours notice. Another important aspect is that the incidents of defying Mel’s directions have also been increasing.

The traditional political institution of the Karbis of Guwahati, which were once regarded as the King’s Court, has now fallen from that status. Squeezing of the powers at the behest of the
local revenue court, police station and the existence of local
government (GMC) are the main reasons for this. Bangthai, whose
impression was complete in the village and who was respected as
the king, no longer commands that respect for the simple reasons
that he cannot exercise his authority over any developmental
matters of the village while the Ward Councillors can do so. But
still the institution is continuing and its directions are not easy to
defy. Village people would think twice before defying any order of
the Mel.

The image of the Bangthai and his courtiers in respect of
political matters has been gradually under erosion. It is one of the
basic conditions for cultural change in the society as visualised by
Srinivas. But Srinivas’ framework accurately fits the castes while it
does not fit well in the tribal framework. The influential political
elites or the charismatic leaders in the process of sanskritisation
lose their charisma and people hesitate to offer the same respect to
these leaders. Singh (1994) explained how the change in elite
structure of a society could be a good indicator of the direction of
change in the society. He writes “the manner in which the
leadership is chosen, the breadth of the social base from which it is
recruited; the way in which it exercises decision making power; the
extent and nature of its accountability, these and other attributes are
indicators of degree of shared power, shared respect, shared well
being and shared safety in a given society at a given time. The
changes in elite structure therefore might also reveal the essential
nature of social changes taking place in that society. (Singh, 1994:
130). In the present case, however the Bangthai and the other prominent personalities do not constitute either political or charismatic leaders in that sense. But at the same time, it is also a fact that the Bangthai and other prominent persons in the plains Karbi society are gradually losing their traditional authority sanctioned by supernatural beliefs. Their substantive authority is rooted in the area of religion and not politics. They are neither in caste hierarchy nor in class. Economically, they are as poor as that of a common man of the village. He has to cultivate or find out his own source of income. By loss of prominence what is proposed to be suggested here is that the tradition is taking a back seat and people are attracted towards the modern trend in political philosophy—democracy.

(c) Economic Organisation:

Urbanisation has provided the Karbis of Guwahati a completely new economic life unknown to them prior to 1970s. They were agriculturist and production for them meant production of agricultural crops. Labour was either agricultural labourer or day labourer. Hiring of labour was done only in rare cases and when done, wage was usually paid in terms of crops. The change however came abruptly— and the immediate cause was the shifting of the capital of Assam from Shillong to Guwahati (Dispur). In Chapter-V, it has been analysed how the excessive demands for land raised the land prices to sky high limit which led land of the tribal people along with the Karbis to come to market. With the
removal of ban on transfer of tribal land to non-tribal people, both agricultural and homestead lands were sold at lucrative prices. The resultant effect was that:

i) People become landless gradually and

ii) The major share of the amount accrued through sale of land was just spent and only few people invested the money for future earning.

iii) Those who become landless and exhausted the sale proceeds became day labourers.

Thus, the economic life of the Karbis of Guwahati has changed to the extent that an egalitarian society tended to become stratified on the basis of class. Families pursuing primary occupation almost became nil and people shifted to non-farm sector mostly to unskilled informal sector. The freshly growing urban environment provided further scope for employment in this sector. People enjoyed earning wage in cash and working outside the village. Thus, the society faced with the phenomenon of both horizontal and vertical social mobility. The former was the cause and the latter was the consequence. The horizontal social mobility by way of shift from one occupation to another and vertical from one slab of wage rate to another.

**Emergence of class system**

With the change in the occupational pattern and earning of wage in cash, the plains Karbis have become essentially class conscious. The society entered into the era of class hierarchy.
Sorokin’s (1959: 18) proposition that there has scarcely been any society whose strata were absolutely closed, or in which vertical mobility in its three forms – economic, political and occupational – was not present holds good here. He examined both tribal and caste society and concluded that the strata of primitive tribes have been penetrable follows from the fact that, their structures have been far from being quite rigid, and the personal qualities of an individual have played a decisive role in social ascent or descent. This he concluded from his discussion on the most rigid Indian caste society. Apparently vertical social mobility is very weak in the caste system. But even here it has not been absolutely absent. “For the last few decades, we see a the weak current of the vertical mobility has been active in different ways: ‘through enrolling in one of the more distinguished castes’ by those who became wealthy and could obtain a sanction from the Brahmins; through creation of a new caste; through change of occupation; through intercaste marriages; through migration; and so on. Quite recently a considerable role began to be played by education, and by political and religious factors. It is evident, therefore, that, in spite of the fact that the caste-society of India is apparently the most conspicuous example of the most impenetrable and rigidly stratified body, nevertheless, even within it, the weak and slow currents of vertical mobility have been constantly present. If such is the case with the India caste-society, it is clear that in all other social bodies vertical mobility to this or that degree, must obviously be present.” (Sorokin, 1959: 21)
Sorokin's observation appears to be correct in respect of the Plains Karbi society of Guwahati. A community would depend on the circumstance that it faces and would allow alien elements to enter into it until it faces a threat from such elements. In the face of rapid urbanisation and other allied factors that promoted the community to take up jobs outside village, stratification on the basis of class was inevitable. The class system entered taking into account the type of occupation, educational qualification, income earned, and possession of wealth or means of production.

Among the high income earners in the society were the contractors, truck owners and self-employed persons. The illiterate or the partially literate persons who purchased trucks from the money they earned from selling of land became rich within a short span utilising their trucks for cutting hill earth and supplying the same in the construction sites. Cutting of hill land was banned by an executive order of the District Collector and therefore it was a scarce commodity carrying good price on it. With money in hand, these contractors first converted their residence to RCC buildings; purchased cars for their personal use and put their children in expensive educational institutions. Thus, on the whole they adopt a distinctive life style from that of the common men of the village. They offer heavy donations to village festivals and other occasions. They keep good contact with the political leaders and bureaucrats. People approach them for petty jobs and other favours.
Another class that emerged was the followers of political leaders. Their numbers are very few but they have succeeded in making an impact in the villages. There are no political leader as such in the villages under study. But there are lot of agents of local political leaders who behave in the similar manner as their leaders do. They sometimes arrange meetings of their leaders in the village or in nearby areas to demonstrate their power before the villagers. This way they maintain their status. They work as the linkmen or act as the tout in contacting a political leader on behalf of anyone in the village or in the vicinity who wants to meet the leader. Their numbers are rising. They have categories – like i) agents of local ward councillor, defeated contesting candidates, ii) agents of MLA or defeated leader etc, and iii) workers of political parties.

In three of the villages (Japorigog, Narakasur and Hengerabari) under study have professionals like doctors, engineers, draftsmen, and professors. They are very few in number but they command good respect in the villages. They constitute a class by virtue of their jobs. People come to them for getting good advices- learn things and invite in public meetings for giving lecture. They are the most respected persons in the villages. Bangthai and other religious heads also visit them for advice. Sometimes important village matters are also discussed in their places at initial stage.

The emergence of the above classes, has led the religious persons of the village such as the Bangthai and his aides and
notable village seniors into a group. They have been identified as the village moral keeper— and religious class who could help people when everything fails. Especially when money power (business class), political power (agents) and/or knowledge (professionals) powers fail, people approach the Bangthai for religious exercises. Bangthai himself or under his instruction, the Deuri may agree to perform a divination to settle the problem.

The lowest stratum of the society as usual is manned by the working class who are basically wage earners. Grade IV employees of Government, semi government or private offices, day labourers, city bus handyman, PCO assistants, pan shop owners, rickshaw pullers, etc., can be grouped within this category. Evidently this category is identified depending on their income strength. They have intimacy among them. They exchange goods and even cooked items between themselves. Their women visit each other’s residence. Men folks discuss politics in the local pan shops or tea stall. They offer Namaskers when the doctor or the professors pass by. Sometimes a few of them arrange a feast as a get-together. They feel at ease with each other but maintain a distance from others who are either highly educated or high income earners. They borrow money from each other at the end of each month and repays when salary or wage is received. But when a big amount is necessary they first go to the contractors or the truck owners.

The class system as discussed above is incomplete in the sense that the village as a unit does not identify these classes.
When _Mel_ is called, no distance is maintained among the villagers. In the _Mel_, all are treated equally. In earlier days, in the _Mel_ people used to sit anywhere they feel like. But now a days some chairs are arranged where anyone can sit. But it is also a fact that common man used to forgo his seat in favour of a contractor or the professor/doctor, etc. The village households are not arranged according to the above stratification. Therefore, the class difference is not quite prominent. Among the village elders, no such class consciousness could be seen. However, the younger generation has acquired the picture of the class system prevalent outside their villages to which they are habituated and act accordingly.

(d) Education

More than a century ago, Emile Durkheim rejected the idea that education could be the force to transform society and resolve social ills. Instead, Durkheim concluded that education “can be reformed only if society itself is reformed.” He argued that education “is only the image and reflection of society. It imitates and reproduces the latter...it does not create it” (Durkheim, 1897/1953: 372-373). We have come a long way from Durkheim’s days and today we talk of universal education and on its role also as an external force of change. Education today is not confined to any society – it is simply not the reflection of that society – it contains many other elements, which may not be common to that particular society. That is why today everybody believes that education has strong bearing in transforming a society. Modern
education fosters liberal values such as equality, freedom and scientific temper. It cultivates awareness against inequality, social deprivation and all sorts of discrimination. Education thus empowers people to demolish the closed system of stratification and opens it up for social transformation. It prepares younger people for occupying different positions according to education and skills. It is because of the specific economic needs of different countries that they have different educational priorities. For Malinowski (1947: 28), it is life-long, for we must learn new ways of thought and action with every major change in our lives. Functionalist Weinberg (1971: 11) has viewed the educational system as offering opportunities for mobility for individuals. “Education is helpful in solving poverty and creates social mobility”. (Weinberg, 1971).

In this study, we have seen how the ignorant economic exercises (selling out of agricultural land) of the villagers have ruined their prevailing economy and how due to their low literacy status, they were unable to engage themselves in profitable commercial venture or employment. Evidently, the village education is still at its infancy. Villagers have come a long way in their mental make up concerning education; but education level is still not at par with the neighbouring communities. Today, of course they understand the value of education. They do not hesitate to send their daughters to schools. But it was not so always. The concept of formal education as an essential carrier of social development was very new to them. In the table below the
educational level of the persons above 35 years of age has been shown. The findings show that literacy level was very poor and majority had left education at elementary level. These are the persons who received education during 1970s. But the situation has improved with the passage of time. Educational level has been gradually improving.

Table: 6.4.2: Age Groupwise Educational Level of the villager

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Age Group</th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>High School level</th>
<th>Higher Secondary</th>
<th>BA/BSc level</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Total population in the age Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>00-06</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-15</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>(89.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>77</td>
<td>(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>(82.57)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>109</td>
<td>(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-35</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>(76.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>343</td>
<td>(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 &amp; above</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>(39.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>1139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Younger generations are having adequate educational level as per their age group. 89.61 percent of the 7-15 age group are found studying and some of them are studying up to high school level. While of the 35 and above age group, only 39.24 percent found to have gone to school and that too educational level is very low. This proves that they have become conscious about the necessity of education. Education has brought in them cultural
consciousness. This has been a result of their integration with the urban system.

Identity Crisis:

The Karbis of plains are known as one of the most peace loving and simple indigenous tribe of Assam. Today, the educated section of this tribe feel left out in the process of development. They feel deprived of from various concessions made available to the other equally placed tribes and the attitude of the Government for not declaring them as the Scheduled Tribe till today. Their status has been announced as the hill tribe living in plains and accordingly they are deprived of various concessions available to other tribes. This feeling of deprivation is growing gradually. This deprivation is compared to their counterpart – the Hill Karbis and the other plains scheduled tribes. The Rabhas have their own autonomous council and so also the Bodos, Tiwas, Mishing and Deuris and they all are declared Scheduled Tribes either of hills or plains enjoying various socio economic concessions and benefits by virtue of their Scheduled Tribe status. But despite belonging to the same stock of population the Karbis of plains are not given this status.

Obviously, it is understandable that existing policy towards the plains Karbis is not in conformity with the tribal policy of the Government. The denial of the Scheduled Tribe status which has been accounted to the problems that they are reeling under, has led
The issue of special status to the plain Karbis has so far found no taker in the concerned circle or even the policy makers. Common people share their sentiments silently. The situation is gradually aggravating, no doubt. In order to reaffirm their distinctiveness, they have strengthened the base of *Bhaiyam Karbi Adorbar, Karbi Bangthai, Axom*. They have also adopted a separate symbol for them called *Nungpe-aarhi*, different from that of the Hill Karbi’s *Jambili Aathon*. All these speak about the growing discontentment among the plain Karbis and the manifestation of a parallel trend toward a separate identity assertion.

(e) The Arts:

The Karbis of plains have their own traditional art forms. Their songs and dance centers round their festivals. Among the instruments used are traditional drums, pipes, etc. The celebration of *Johong Puja* comes to an end with the songs and dances by men folk in the evening. As the *puja* is celebrated on the day of *Manuh Bihu*, the drums and the pipes are used continually for next few days. Their Bihu songs and dances are similar like Assamese but have different tunes. Similarly, in Bihu dances also, steps and
rhythms are different. Karbis do not have any separate dance forms or distinguished forms of songs. These are mainly folk songs and talks of their day-to-day cultural activities like agriculture, weaving, pet animals, etc.

As most of the songs are related to various stages of agricultural activities, these are rarely in circulation today among the Karbis of Guwahati. The young generations do not know their traditional songs. These being oral no written records are available. Old generations who know these songs sometimes recall them in groups during leisure hours. Otherwise there is no platform for singing these songs. An enthusiastic cultural group of Guwahati has recently brought out a compact disk of modern Karbi songs under the title "Miro Badi". The songs are a mixture of modern and folk tunes. They have attempted to use both hill Karbi and plains Karbi language in the title.

(I) Language

The Karbis of Guwahati have been using Assamese as their main language since long past. They sparingly use their language. The everyday contact with Assamese people made it possible to use Assamese frequently as it was the majority’s language. This is what Trudgill (1983) defined as the non-natural process of change in the sense that they take place mainly as a result of language contact. He writes, “varieties whose speakers have frequent contact
with speakers of other varieties will change more than varieties whose speakers have infrequent external contact.” (1983: 102-103).

Today many among the young Karbis of plains do not know their dialect. The actual form of their language is yet to be determined. Most of the words are similar to that of the hill Karbis but innumerable Assamese words have also penetrated into their language in modified form. Many of the foreign words used by the Karbis are simply the corrupt forms of Assamese words. In some cases one or two letters have been dropped or replaced or pronounced differently. For example, Sunday = Rabi ami, Monday = som ami and so on. They have not yet prepared an all-acceptable grammar. A grammar has been prepared by one Shri Biren Keleng under the title “Bhoiyam Karbi Byakoron” (2003). This however has not been accepted by the Karbis of Plains. Many are of the view that this has not reflected the actual character of the Plains Karbi language. This is reflective of a process of identity formulation and assertion.

Case study:

The situation of the plains Karbis is almost similar to that of the situation faced by the Arvinites in Greece. The Arvanites resides in the villages in the immediate vicinity of Athens. They are Albanian who came over to the area as early as in eleventh century. They speak Albanian rather than Greek. These Greek Albanians had long retained a clearly separate ethnic identity, apparently but gradually this identity has been eroded. Today they refer to themselves not as Albanian but as Arvanites and call the language they
speak not Albanian but Arvantika. They are also very concerned to explain to outsiders that they are not only Arvanites but Greeks as well. The current generations of the Arvantika speakers are fluent in Greek and for the most part assimilated to Greek Culture. (ibid: 130). [On Dialect, Peter Trudgill, Basil Blackwell Publisher’s Lid, Oxford]

Karbis have become conscious about their language after their attempt to establish their identity. Earlier they spontaneously used Assamese, but now a few Karbi youths are endeavouring to bring their language in mass usage. A movement although in small magnitude is also going on. This is indeed a good attempt and needs conscious effort from all concerned. To reconstruct a language, which has long been not used for, everyday purposes need careful handling by experts.

The language status of the plains Karbis of Guwahati, as on today, could be said to be an assimilated language – but not bilingual. The use of Assamese in lieu of their own language could be said to be an example of sanskritisation.

6.5: Changing Role of Women

The status of a person or a group of persons is closely associated with the roles performed by the person or the group of persons in the society. Roles are, in reality the major determiners of social status. Because roles constitute the norms and behaviour pattern expected of a given status, which is nothing else than the socially defined position of an individual. With the change in mode
of production in a society the role of different actors of the society is bound to change leading to a change in its status. Women all over the world have been engaged in productive labour both within and outside the household, which may vary from culture to culture. The economic activities that a woman does and where she does them often reflects the existing culture as well as ‘the way that women are perceived and the way that they perceive themselves’ (Alsop 1993:369).

In the Karbi society, members of a family or household have their well-defined duty based in part on their age and their position in the family and in part on their sex. The sex role differentiation also clearly exists in the society under study. In traditional societies when men work in the field women manage the house, care for the household animals and sometimes market the surplus products like poultry and vegetables. Apart from these activities, they also labour hard in the paddy fields and any other activities whatever is entrusted on them. These activities are performed as an extension of their household functions. The current scenario of the villages under study presents a bleak economic picture where most of the families are low income earning and therefore almost all members of the families struggle for their survival. Even when they have small piece of land they need to have additional non-farm sources of income to protect themselves against bad crops, emergencies, etc. This is how traditional families employ a variety of strategies to promote the well being of the family unit. Supplemental works in domestic industry is frequently found to be restored by mothers.
Extreme poverty necessitates an expansion of woman’s economic roles. Class position may also influence the attitudes towards women’s activities as well as the activities deemed proper for women. Many of the women and girls are working in various capacities at Government, semi government and private establishments. They are generally literate women in the middle income earning families. Women going out for work in establishments outside the village are a common scene. But women from the poor households are involved in various economic activities in the informal unorganised sector. They are usually illiterate and aged women. These activities while providing greater mobility and freedom for these women are also exposing them to greater risk owing to the nature of the economic activities to which they are engaged in.

6.5.1: Women’s Role in Supplementing Family Income:

The poor households in order to cope with the unfriendly financial situation attempt to diversify the family income sources. The poor Karbi women in order to meet household expenses get involved in petty trading such as brewing of rice beer, sale product from kitchen gardens and minor forest products etc. The study reveals that poorer the households the greater its dependence on women’s work for survival. Intra-household co-operations between men, women and children are a critical mechanism for coping with
poverty (Agarwal, 1992). However the women cooperate within the family from a weaker bargaining position compared to men, as normally they do not own any land or other resources and has limited access to employment due to the prevailing low literacy rate. Women’s access to land or other resources depends on links with male household head, commonly the husband. While the role of men and women in bearing the burden of the coping mechanisms are different, in the case of the Karbis, women bear the major workload.

Weaving –

Almost all the old households in the villages own a weaving loom and Karbi elderly women are expert weavers. In the earlier days women mostly weave for household use and weaving was carried out during the dry season when the agricultural season is over. The women learn the skill from their mothers or their sisters. While they normally weave for personal use during the festive season in April, they often get orders to weave various items of garment from the women of neighbouring villages. The customers are usually friends, acquaintance or relatives of these women. As there is a demand for these clothes networks develop and are availed. The women are provided with the thread and usually weave on a shared basis with the understanding that the woven product will be equally divided between the weaver and customer. Cash transaction generally is not done. So if ten pieces of garments are woven, each gets a share of five pieces. This shared arrangement works well for the Karbi women, as they could not
afford to buy the thread to weave. They also get an equal share of the end product in lieu of their weaving, which they keep for personal use or sell for cash to friends and relatives. Weaving is time intensive; however most of the women carry out these activities together with childcare activity.

Today very few young women regularly weave – and many of the young women do not know weaving at all. Therefore numbers of women earning primarily from weaving is very few i.e only ten; of which only one woman (woman headed household) is pursing it as primary occupation and all others engaged in it as subsidiary sources of earning.

**Sale of forest and animal products**

The sale of minor forest and animal products and vegetables from kitchen gardens is another income supplementing activities for the Karbi women of Guwahati. The forest resources serve as an important source of various types of food, herbs, fuel, fodder, and timber for personal use and sale especially for the poor villagers. The Karbi women have detailed reserve of knowledge of the forest products, which can help tide over prolonged shortages. The collection of forest products is usually done by women. Traditionally the collection of forest products such as edible roots, fruits, vegetables, creepers, honey, grass for making broom, barks of medicinal trees, herbs, bamboo shoots etc. was made for domestic consumption. However, with the growing economic crisis
some women have resorted to selling these minor forest products at the nearby Saturday weekly market or at the daily markets in Ganeshguri, Ulubari in Guwahati. The profits from the sale of these minor forest products is very small and seasonal but nevertheless crucial.

People rely heavily on the forest for firewood the sale of which is prohibited under the different provisions of the Indian Forest Act and the Forest Conservation Act. Apart from domestic use, the sale of firewood is a major income generating trade for the people. Due to the restriction imposed on the cutting and open sale of firewood, they have resorted to secret trade. Here again, women play a major part in marketing bundles of firewood collected and logged by the men from the forest.

Most of the women in the village keep poultry like hens and ducks. The women and children are mainly responsible for the care of these animals. These are usually reared for domestic consumption. However, they make a sizeable amount of money by selling eggs and poultry during times of need. The women feel that pig rearing is a profitable business. A few women in the village through their profits made in selling rice beer have bought piglets. They are usually involved in share rearing where all the women who contribute money towards the pigs are responsible for the care of the animal.
Sale of Rice beer

One of the main responses of women to meet the rising cost of living and the declining family income owing to land alienation is the increased pursuit of income generating activities in addition to their child-rearing and housework responsibilities. Rice beer brewing is a means by which the poor Karbi women of Guwahati try to supplement the insufficient income of their husbands. Traditionally, rice beer locally called ‘Harlong’ was brewed by every Karbi household for domestic consumption and for entertaining guests. Offering of rice beer is a pre-requisite in their entire social festivals and religious rites (Bordoloi, Thakur, Saikia 1987, Barua, 1997: 238). Women had the prime responsibility of brewing rice beer for domestic and religious use. This brewing of rice beer further aggravates their economic condition by the fact that a sizeable portion of paddy produced or procured from market is utilised. However, with the existence of a ready market for country liquor and rice beer in the vicinity, which is the most commercial part of the city, the women from landless and small landed household have resorted to selling rice-beer and country liquor as a survival mechanism.

The Karbi women’s informal economic activity of selling rice beer in the city is very precarious and profits are insecure as they often run the risk of being fined and arrested by police. The open trading of rice beer and country liquor is illegal under the different penal provision of the Government’s Liquor Prohibition
Act. However, due to the growing poverty as well as the regular demand for rice beer the women continue this illegal trade behind the eye of the authority, often at the risk of being convicted. This ‘informal’ economic activity of selling rice beer may take place both at home and on the streets of Guwahati.

Traditionally, it is a custom to offer rice beer to guests. But since the selling of rice beer became an important economic activity, the villagers usually buy and sell rice beer from each other. At home the rice beer is sold at the rate of Rs. 8 per bottle and the payment is done immediately. While most of the women sell their product in and around the village itself a few women venture to outside the village in some specified localities in the hope of getting a higher price. Rice beer is a perishable commodity and requires being disposed off quickly. Unlike in the village where they could sell only a few bottles a day these women are able to sell in bulk in the city to middlemen at a higher price and thus make more profit. They sell to the middlemen at the rate of Rs. 12 per bottle thus making an additional profit of Rs. 4 for each bottle compared to selling at home, while the middlemen sells at twice the price i.e. Rs. 24 per bottle.