Chapter II
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE KARBIS (as brief note)

An attempt has been made here to give a short account of the historical background of the Karbi's because without this knowledge the educational development and planning in this district would be superficial.

Assam's maidenly beauties have backoned streams of races and tribes of different ethnic groups from time immemorial, with inducement to settle in her soil, consequently they have brought with them their traditionally high heritage and culture. Its beautiful valley's have long been a meeting place of Aryan, Tibeto-Burman and Austroic people almost since the beginning of Christian Era. The hill-folk Karbi tribe is also a permanent inhabitants of the present Karbi Anglong District of Assam. The radiance of this lotus (Karbi Anglong) navel was never displayed so much before, as it is to-day. It was the physical barricade that shadowed its brilliance and kept it obscure so long.

Before Independence, this district had no separate identity. During the British period the Karbi populated area of the Nagaon district was constituted as the Mikir Hills tract of Nagaon district. And after 1913-14 the Mikir Hills sub-division was formed and according to Assam regulation of 1951, the Joint Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills district was constituted.

1. Assam Frontier Tract Regulation Act of 1884.

2. Tribal Areas Department, Notification No. TAD/R/31/50-151 dated the 17th November 1951, Government of Assam.
Till then the areas of the present Karbi Anglong district were apportioned between Sibsagar, Nagaon and United Khasi-Jayantia Hills and North Cachar Hills districts. The Karbi inhabiting areas of these three districts were united into one Unit and the large body of Karbi people came under one administration. The district itself was created (Under the Tribal Areas Department, Government of Assam) only on 23 June 1952 as an Autonomous district with the name "United Mikir and North Cachar Hills" with two sub-divisions. On 2nd February 1970 the North Cachar Hills portion was later disintegrated from Mikir Hills. Subsequently this old United Hill district was bifurcated and formed into two separate administrative districts, namely, (1) North Cachar Hills, and (2) Mikir Hills district. Mr. C.S. Booth, the then Deputy Commissioner of the Mikir Hills district took initiative to form district and to set up an administration. The event was like the formation of Israel in a miniature scale. Karbi-Anglong, the other day known as "Mikir Hills" district, was christened on 14th October 1976 by a Special Government Order and since then this district is recognised by the name "Karbi Anglong" (Karbi means people and Anglong means Hills). Diphu is the capital of Karbi Anglong district and she has two sub-divisions—(1) Diphu, and (2) Hamren. The Diphu Sub-Division

3. Article No. 244, Para II of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.
6. Tribal Areas Department, Notification No. TAD/R/115/74, dated the 14th October 1976, Government of Assam.
comprises the Eastern part and Hamren the Western part of the district.

Being located in the sub-tropical belt, the district is bounded by 25.30° and 26.41 North latitude and 92.7 and 93.52° East longitude. It covers an area of 10,332 Sq.Km, with a population of 3,79,310. The district is flanked by the great valley of plains in the North, North-East and in the North-West. In the East the River Dhansiri demarcated the boundary of district from that of the Nagaland and Sibsagar district. On the West, lie the Jayantia Hills and the District of Nagaon and on the South lie the North Cachar Hills and the State of Meghalaya.

**CLIMATE:**

Being situated on the Eastern side of the Meghalaya Plateau, the climatic condition and the weather of this hilly district are controlled by three dominating factors, viz., (a) Position on the lee-side of the Meghalaya Plateau, (b) Variable altitude, and (c) the Vegetation cover. Though the effect of the first factor is commonly felt throughout the district, the other two factors being variable, cause local differences in climatic condition. The climate of the district is moderate in winter but in summer high humidity coupled with temperature makes the weather very sultry, hot, inerative and exhaustive. The average annual mean maximum temperature is

25.8°C (80.6°F) and the annual mean minimum temperature 17.20°C (50.37°F) in the district as a whole. The climate of the Hamren Sub-Division, the Western part of Karbi Anglong differs greatly from that of the Diphu Sub-Division. January is the coldest month at higher altitude and hence frost is not uncommon on Singhasana Hill and Khanabaman Parbat. Winter mists at times continue to envelope far long time in the morning. Usually these blanket the interior high lands of the district.

The monsoon begins with intermittent torrential showers. The total annual rainfall ranges between 1155.6 mm and 1424 mm. The average rainfall in the month of May, June, July and August, varies from 185mm to 265mm and these are rainiest period of the district. The Eastern slopes receive comparatively higher rainfall than the Western slopes. This is due to the rain shadow effect of Meghalaya.

Till recently the hill district was highly Malarious and infested by "Kalazar" (Black fever). There are more than 3000 Lepers in this district which is the highest figure in the North East India. Scarcity of drinking water is a great problem because people in general mostly depend on the dwindling supply

9. Barthakur, Dr. M. "Geography of Karbi Anglong" (article) Silver Jubilee Souvenir, District Council, Diphu, 1977 P. 20 (English Section)
10. Ibid, P. 24
11. Ibid, P. 24
of the natural sources, such as river, streams and streamlets etc. The climatic disadvantages find themselves reflected in the physical appearance of the people. Generally their skin is not so fair as that of the neighbouring Angami Nagas and Jayantia tribes who have their rosy cheeks. They have a short growth of their limbs. The facial hair is scantily and thin.

**POPULATION:**

Since 1881, there had been considerable falling off the Karbi population due to the terrible ravages of the "Kalazar". So, the Census of 1901 showed the figure of this hill folk as 87,046 in the whole province.\(^\text{13}\) According to the 1951 Census, the population of the district was 1,25,797. In the next Census (1961) it was 2,25 lakhs and the Karbis alone shared 41.79% of the total population. And in the estimation of Census report of 1971 the population of the district marked a gradual increase and numbered 3,79,310 (Male-2,02,347, Female-1,76,963) and density was 37 per Square Kilometer.\(^\text{14}\) The position of the growth of population categoriwise (Uptill 1978) in the Karbi Anglong district is shown below.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{13}\) Gohain, B.K. *The Hill Karbis*, P.2

\(^{14}\) Gogoi, Prodip Kumar. *The Economy of Karbi Anglong*, P.64

\(^{15}\) Statistical Abstract, Assam 1978, Table No.1,12, P.22
The total number of Karbi people in the district is 1,72,845. In addition to the Karbi, Dimasa, Bodo, Hmar, Kuki, Lalung, Syam, Garos, Rengma Naga etc tribes reside here and Assamese, Bengalis, Nepalis, Biharis, Rajasthanis etc non-tribe communities also have setup their professional establishment in this district. An index of the population by religion in 1971 Census of this district is inserted below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>3,42,418</td>
<td>90.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>4,929</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>30,298</td>
<td>7.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>1,332</td>
<td>0.35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sikhism</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jainism</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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In the year 1971 the total population of the district was only 3,79,310 of which 10,200 (2.69%) were Urban dwellers and the rest 3,69,110 (97.31%) persons were scattered in 1605 villages. In the Urban Centre at Diphu, the sex parity is extremely low. It is 563 females per 1000 males. This is perhaps due to the fact that majority of the people in services and business do not keep their families with them in the town for want of suitable accommodation and other congenial facilities. The projected population of the district for 1981 has been estimated at 5.25 lakhs. According to the Government Census of 1971 the present inhabitants of this district comprises about 3.79 lakhs. But according to the Non-Government report, the present population of Karbi Anglong District is about 10 lakhs. The high rate of growth is not due to the increased birth rate of the tribal elements, but due mostly to heavy influx of outlanders.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The origin of the tribe is obscure. They have no written history for the lack of script which they never possessed. What is known must be placed together from racial memories, from songs and history, folklore, legend and mythologies, but the light they shed on past movements and events is flickering and uncertain. There are only some short accounts written at times.

18. Census of India 1971, (Assam Part-I A) P.65


* The Census is not yet to be done.
by different inquisitive, investigative and interested writers like Stack, Walker, Charles Lyall, Moor etc. The Karbis with their own rich tribal characteristics, legends, heritage and tradition constitute an important ethnic group of Assam's population and they have been recorded as a Scheduled Tribe in the Constitution of India.  

**ORIGIN OF THE WORDS "MIKIR" AND "KARBI":**

All the tribes have their own individual names to recognise themselves, e.g. the Garos are called "Achick Manday" (Achick implies Hill and Manday - Man, i.e. Hill Man), Luchais are known as Miαs (Mi-man, Zo-Hill) which refer to hill man etc. In this way, the Karbis prefer to be known as "Arleng" (Arleng-man). Whereas Charles Lyall opines that the name "Mikir" was given by the Assamese people and its origin is unknown. Gunaviram Barua advocates that the word "Karbi" is derived from the Sanskrit words "Krabya" (meat) and "Krabad" (meat-eater). The social custom "Thefcarbibi" of the Mikirs are to offer some oblation (rice, dried fish and country liquor etc.) to gods prior to falling on the dishes of food and during worship. In due course, the words "Tha" and "Ki" were abolished and a new word viz. "Karbi" (who believes in "Thakar Kibi system) was introduced.

20. Bhargava, B.P. and Gupta, R.K. (Ed.) - *The Indian Constitution, Sixth Schedule, Articles-224(2) and 2/5(1), P.175*

21. Lyall Charles (Ed) - *The Mikirs*, P.4

22. Barua, Gunabhiram, - *Assam Buranji*, P.17

23. Teron, Longkam, - *Karbi Janagusthi*, P.2
and henceforth, the tribe has been known as "Karbi". A Karbi Prince's name "Mekri" married a Naga Prince. The Nagas could not pronounce the word "Mekri", so they wrongly pronounced it as "Mikir". Henceforth, the name Mikir was applied to the inhabitants of the Mikir Kingdom.  

The Mikir people consider the name "Mikir" as a misnomer and substitute the right name "Karbi" instead of "Mikir". The word "Karbi" applied to the people of this area which is an original and is continuing from time immemorial, which is the most popular word among the inhabitants of the district. In their interpretation the meaning of the word "Mikir" is "Uncivilised", whereas, the word "Karbi" means "Civilised". Although in 1976 the Government of Assam have recognised and accepted the word "Karbi", controversy on the right name is still persisting and research is being carried on this point. As ill-luck would have it, none is competent to offer any realistic theory and acceptable solution to this ticklish problem. 

ABODE OF KARBIS - ORIGINAL: 

It is very difficult to trace out the original dwelling of the Karbis and their migration to the State of Assam as there is no written history. The Karbis, rather disinclined to claim any kingship with tribals of Assam, and so it hangs heavy to group them with other branches of the great Tibeto-Burman stock to which they undoubtedly belong. Few scholars go so far as to

Government of Assam.
point out that this tribe is the outcome of the assimilation of the Tibeto-Burman, Kuki-China and Bodo-Naga group.\textsuperscript{26}

It is inherent that, various opinions are read between the lines to have a clear picture of their original place of exodus, where from they migrated to the "Red river and blue Hills" of Assam. The events narrated by some celebrated historians such as Gunabhiram Barua ("Dimaria in the Kamrup district was the original homestead"),\textsuperscript{27} Kalaguru Late Bishnurava ("This hill-folk lived in the North Eastern Region of the State of Assam"),\textsuperscript{28} Shri S.Borkotoki ("Karbi's original habitation was somewhere in the South East Asia"),\textsuperscript{29} another authority Dr. L. Devi ("Karbi tribe lived in the territory of the Khasi and Jayantia Hills bordering the Kapili river - where still many people of this tribe are traceable"),\textsuperscript{30} Edward Stack ("Karbi, belong to the land of the Khasi's and also to the Eastern portion of the Jayantia Hills"),\textsuperscript{31} Dr. L. Devi remark ("Another hill-folk had their dwellings on the Eastern side of Nagaon and Western side of the Sibsagar districts which was included in the Mikir Hills"),\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Teron, Longkam, \textit{Karbi Janagusthi}. P.3
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Barua, Gunabhiram, \textit{Assam Buranji}. P.17
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Rava, Bishnu, \textit{Asamwa Kristi}( article Published in Bishnu Rava Rachanavali) P.59
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Borkotoki, S.N. \textit{Tribes of Assam}. P.52
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Devi, Dr. L. \textit{Ahom - Tribal - Relation}. P.146
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Lyall Charles (Ed)- \textit{The Mikirs}. P.4
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Devi, Dr. L. \textit{Asam Deshar Buranji}. P.3
\end{itemize}
endeavor to depict the fact of their ancestral migration from Central Asia or South-East Asia and gradual progress towards the ancient Kamrup (Present Assam) via, the North-Eastern Sector of India.

At present the Karbis reside sparsely in all most all the district of Assam, specially in Kamrup, Nagaon, Sibsagar, North-Cachar and Khasi-Jayantia Hills (Meghalaya). A few members of the Karbis lived in the Syhlet district of Bangladesh.

The Karbis have to change their place of residence and villages from time to time depending on their "Ar" -Jhum cultivation. At present however both the Government as well as the District Council have discouraged that practice and laid down rules for the acquisition of land and in order to change the "Bohemianism" nature of the Karbis, the District Council in 1975 took up a composite project and decided to build up ten model villages under the Tribal Sub-Plan in different parts of the district.

**FESTIVALS AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS:**

The Karbi's observe their different worships which may be also turned as implied festivities as proverbially, they donot attach a different significance to the observance of festive occasions. Rongker (annual village merry making festival).

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33. Das, Parag Kumar, "Kalambasar Dumuja, Durabastha Aru Bhabishyat - Karbi Anglong"- article published in Prantik, 4th Year No. 10, 16-30 April, 1985, P. 23.
Chamangkam (a dancing festival associated with the funeral ceremony), Hachakekan (dancing festival in the harvesting period), Cha'jun (a kind of great worship dedicated to God Barithe (Indra), Arleng Karhe (funeral ceremony) etc. followed by animal sacrifice and offering of food and drink to a large extent are observed with proper pomp and grandeur. Among all other ceremonies the funeral is the most important, expensive elaborately held religious ceremony. Unlike others they have also a strong belief guided by impulse and urge leading to the disposal of corpses. In order to attribute to this traditional convention the Karbis have five specific "Tipit" (graveyard) as they have five clans to dispose of their departed soul. In addition to the "Uchepi" (an woman who knows the funeral rites and sings pathetic mournful songs for the dead) occasionally professional mourners are also engaged to mourn the dead as was done in Egypt in myegone days.

The system of funeral ceremony observed by the Karbi's falls in the line with that of the Kuki-Chin group of Tribe and in this respect there is very strong similarity with that of the Khasis, Garos, Mizos and Ranas of the Eastern region.

*In some interior places of Hamren Sub-Division the researcher was told by Dhansing Teron (Village Headman), Kabai Bey (oldman of Hirihiri village) that there are some professional mourners and they are invited by the bereaved family if necessary to mourn the dead.

From time immemorial, the Karbis identify themselves out and out with the Hindu faith and they call themselves "Hanghari.* But with the advent of Christianity in this sector, and with the repeated persuasion and hope given by the Missionaries to uplift the Karbis from their depressed economic condition, some have evinced good faith and consequently embraced Christianity by and large. The Karbis worship their one hundred and fifteen "Arnaitf (gods) and undergo the religious functions in peculiar tribal way - although no idols, shrines or temples are either built or constructed in their honour to fulfil this object. Over and above, there are other gods who obtain their names from the special diseases over which they are supposed to cast their influence by way of presiding deity.

The villagers prefer indigenous herbs, roots and grasses for treatment of maladies in traditional way as well as with charms in preference to use of Allopathic drugs. Advice and activities of the "Lodepi" (deviner), Sang Kaleng Abang (another deviner of high grade), Deuri (Priest) and the "Thekere" (a man who knows and uses good or bad charms and medicine) are invaluable part of the worship and sacrifice to remove the ailment and evil spirit of the Karbi society. Though even now they evince great faith in divinity to get rid of sickness now gradually the wind is however beginning to change direction, and gradual reliance on the efficacy of modern medicine is a noteworthy factor among this simple rural folk.

*Hanghari - The Karbi who follows the old customs.
The crux of the problem is that although the outlandish element has exerted its force to estrange these very simple and innocent vulgars from their deep rooted tribal faith in worships and in other customary laws, yet the attempt has not been able to fully detract them from their main current of primeval faith. They still pay due honour and respect to the gods adored so long with sublime reverence. They endeavour to pay their homage to different superior heavenly bodies by worshiping Nature basing on mythological, philosophical and historical fictions and legend carried so long through ages, orally from generation to generation.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY:

Although the Karbi system is patriarchal, still great regard is shown towards the fair sex. Though the customs and the laws of the land keep her behind the scene and neither given any property nor any public office like that of the chief, the females occupy the pivotal position in a Karbi society. They are to assist their male counterparts in domestic as well as field work inclusive of the "Jhum" cultivation. They render assistance in cooking food specially which is boiled, smoked and roasted, husking grain in the "Long" (pounding wooden instrument), brewing "Harlang" (rice-beer) by fermenting rice malt which is a common family drink and essential item of daily consumption as well as in all Karbi worships and festival. The Karbis have developed immunity against Malaria chiefly because of taking of "Harlang" and dried fish. The fair sex also stretch their helping hand in agriculture, earth-cutting, marketing etc indoor as well
as in outdoor works. She is an inborn weaver and for this purpose she not only co-operates with her husband in growing cotton plants but also weaves alluring traditional costumes such as "Poho" (Headgear), "Choi" (Jacket or coat) "Rikong" (short 'dhuti'), for man and "Pini" (Petticoat with an ornamental tapestry- "VANKOK"), "Jiso" (breast wrapper), "Ji-so-ke-ik" (black scarf to veil the woman's head) etc. for woman in her "Pithark" (domestic loin riiloom). Most of the colour used are bright (red, black and orange) and women obtain from local jungle plants, wild roots and creepers and dying the yarn in their primitive method. To enhance the beauty the female usually tattos a "Duk" (perpendicular line) with indigo drawn on the middle of the forehead, the nose, upper lip and chin after attaining puberty. Dr. S. Borkotoky says that it was intended to protect young girls from the Burmese invaders.  

In addition to the aforesaid works, she ventures to be the watch dog of her plantation work at night with her husband from her "Ritol" (improvised hut) constructed on raised platform to dispel the wild animals from their depredation of the fields. The Karbi women have independent spirit and do not depend much on their husbands or menfolk for their maintenance. This is mostly because they are industrious. They thus not only augment family income. In short, women contribute a lot of towards the betterment of the economic life of their family and thereby boost the economy of the society. The rural

35. Borkotoky, S. Tribes of Assam. P. 52
male-folk can be termed to some extent as "drawn up". In the main, as somebody likes to say the Karbi male-folk is tied to women's apron-strings.

Both the sexes stand united and participate in worships and festivities and other social gatherings, community and ceremonial dances and sacrifices. Of course sometimes discrimination is made in worships in the case of women. In community feast however the ladies are forbidden to participate along with the males. Due honour is provided to the fair sex in order of social ranks.

In Karbi society women do not inherit property but if the deceased has no sons or brothers then the widow can retain the property by marrying a person of her husband's "Kur" (clan). Widows and divorced wives do not have any difficulty and there are no social laws against in getting remarried. The Karbi marriage practice is called "Adam-Asar". The customary law of the Karbis is that the women are allowed to walk in front of the males - generally husband whenever they go on outing. This praise worthy custom is known as "Kacharbi". The women after marriage do not inherit the husband's title or surname but there is no such taboo in case of their children.

According to the present custom in vogue, the Karbi women march parallelly with men hand in hand in all modern sphere of life. The women are now conscious of their status in the society and do not hesitate to cooperate with their counterparts in education, arts and culture.
"ME" - VILLAGE COUNCIL:

A Karbi society has a village assembly or council ("Me"). The "Me" is composed of all adult male members of the village and presided over by village headman (Sarthe). All important problems of the village concerning the village disputes, inflicting fines, determining shifting and selection of places for cultivation etc. are discussed and decided by the "Sarthe" and "Me". This may be treated as a seat of lynching law.

The "Me" is an excellent democratic set-up. Its socialistic outlook appears to be unparalleled. But the existence of tribal conservatism cannot be denied in such a democratic institution. It is also a potential source of tribal rules and customs of the Karbi tribe. The "Me" is a conventional and traditional institution which does not depend on any written code of law. In matters touching the problems of the local people, the "Me" has the final authority. All undecided disputes at the level of the village council come up to the "Lindok" for final disposal. The village council has only the legislative powers and they have neither any power nor rights to interfere with the customery laws and practices. The village council mainly function as a court relating to cases arising out of village disputes and also administer village finance, land management etc.

"Me" - The word might have been borrowed from the Assamese word "Mel" (a meeting) -- Lyall Charles, The Mikirs, P.22.
SARTHE (Village head man)

KARBI RESIDENTIAL HOUSE
But with the change of time and the progress of society the wings of the village councils have been clipped off and their present activities are mainly confined to cultural and religious activities, but even then, these councils can exercise their powers with regard to the settlement of their problems within the ambit of the four corners of the villages. Normally the Pinpou and Habe of the locality are enthroned as judges of the village council. The unsettled disputes of the "Me" may be referred to the District Council and then to the Assam High Court or to the Supreme Court of India as the may be.

**KARBIS TRADITIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE SETUP AT A GLANCE:**

In order to have a precise discussion on the old and traditional administrative setup and social polity of Karbis, which was perhaps introduced by "Sot Richo" (the first Karbi King) and though later some kings reformed the administration and social structure without sending the original root, it will be advisable to devise the "Rong" (reason) under three captions - (1) Rong or Rongsopi (Capital city) (2) Pinpou Aritol (officer's colony) (3) Jiroi (residence of general "Chakri" (subjects). All these administrative setup were under the "Lyndok" (king, local chief) who had three ministers.

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36. Teron, Longkam - Karbi Janagusthi, P.6

* Sot Richo - Honest king (Sot-honest, Richo - king)

and seventy four office bearers of different categories to conduct the administration. The traditional Karbi rulers can be viewed as follows - (1) Lyndok - the king or the chief ruler, (2) Pinpou - next to the king, (3) Habe - Chief of the particular reason, (4) Sarthe - the village headman. Even now these type of rulers and their traditional administration are visible in some interior areas of the district. It is noteworthy that Karbis proverbially are disinclined to have a change over from the age-old traditional constitution and much rigidity and stricture are adopted in observance of social rules and regulations which are based on democratic principles. However the institution of kingship has waning away and became more or less obsolete. They have now turned into local chiefs. In one sense, a tribal democratic form of Government was in vogue in the Karbi society.

The administrative system of the Karbi people now have been modernised on the basis of Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Since then Karbi Anglong District has an autonomous administrative setup, i.e. District Council. The administrative powers bestowed on the district council of Karbi Anglong are very far reaching and they extends to the realm of land administration, management of forest, irrigation, agriculture, development of town and village councils and their administration of justice, law and order, public health and sanitation, development of primary education etc.
An another political organisation is "Karbi Adarbar" consisting the objectives of (1) consolidation of Karbi area and demand for creation of autonomous district, (2) preservation of culture, (3) economic and educational upliftment etc. This Adarbar is in full control of the district council in Diphu and it generally associates its policies and rules with those of the Ruling Congress Party.

Karbi "Riso Darbar" is the political form for the Karbi Youths and has own relation with the Karbi Adarbar. This Riso Darbar is not revolutionary body but it believes in progress and prosperity of their society.

The Christian could not play any vital rule in the political field though they are most adept in politics and educated persons.

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*Karbi Adarbar - Adarbar generally means the court of the ruler. Khasi system has their Darbars. The Karbis borrow the term "Darbar" from Khasi.

**Karbi Riso Darbar - The Youth's Political Organisation."
The Karbi had no written literature of their own up till the pre-Independence days. But they have their own dialect called "Arleng Alam" in their own diction. Though very little is known about it, an account of this is available in the Linguistic Survey of India. It is no doubt that, other linguistic and socio-cultural groups and sub-groups have made their inroads into the dialect of the Karbis. Their source is from the great family of Indo-Chinese group called Tibeto-Burman colloquial speech, words and Idioms and as such identifies with its language.

The record of 1901 Census gives a vivid picture of this tribe. Accordingly the number of Karbi populace was 87946, and the speakers of this dialect accounted for 82,283. Its against this figure, 1971 Census reveals the number of Karbi speaking people as 1,91,354 (male-98225, female-93129).

In some areas, though the people actually belong to the Karbi community in reality, they do not speak Karbi in toto. Rather in Kamrup, Nagaon and Sibsagar districts, the Karbis prefer to speak Assamese besides their own dialect like other non-Aryan races inhabiting Assam. This dialect differs from village

39. Lyall, Charles (Ed.), The Mikirs, p. 1
The Census report of 1961 attributed strong affinity between Karbi and Bodo dialects. Sir Charles Lyall found it closely resembling Central Kuki-Chin language. Karbi dialect lacks in suitable vocabulary, large stock of words, and also high standard grammar and composition. Even disparity between hills and plains Karbis in respect of their respective dialect is noticeable to a great extent although Mr. G.D. Walker denies such difference, e.g., "We even notice discrepancy in the speeches of Karbis of Jamunamukh of Nagaon district with those of the Kamrup." The language spoken at Lakhimpur, Darrang, Meghalaya, Silchar, Syhlet etc. is the same with the original Karbi.

Till the publication of the first Karbi book in Assamese script in 1875 by the Christian Missionary of Sibsagar, the Karbi literature passed through a dark age bereft of their own alphabet. The above publication was succeeded by many other Karbi books specially for school children and periodicals and printed in Roman script. Mr. Hutton and Late Semson Singh were the torch bearers in this herculean task. Karbis have by now, overcome this habitual doldrum and emerged as an advanced tribe by resorting to the practice of more publications of

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49. Terang, Prof. Rong Bong, Karbi Lamtasam, p. 21
492. Lyall, Charles (Ed.), The Mikirs, p. 153
books, magazines and newspapers in Roman script.

The present realm of Karbi literature is indebted to the Aryan group of Assamese and Austro-Asian group of Khasi written books and compositions. The words and thoughts pertaining to Kuki, Kachari, Bodo and Tibet have exerted their influence on this dialect to great extent. "The Karbis had been constantly in touch with superior cultures and these have left their mark in the culture and language of the Karbi people. Words and phrases from many languages have crept into Karbi. Of these the most important area (1) Assamese of the Aryan and (2) Khasi of the Austro-Asian group. Of these words some have undergone changes while others retain their original form. Karbi words are monosyllabic. They retain their monosyllabic quality even after the addition of prefixes and suffixes. Moreover there is no infeetional change in Karbi words. Haplology in Karbi is important and words formed heplologically are numerous."73

The root words of the language whether Nouns, Adjectives, Pronouns, Verbs or Adverbs are generally monosyllabic; gender is not distinguished except for animated objects. The Karbi verb indicates time, past, present, future by means of particles prefixed or suffixed to the root. It does not change for number, gender or person. The characteristic of this language is the phonological peculiarity of the words.

73. Terang, Prof. Rong Bong, Karbi Lamtasam, pp. 28, 29
For example, "Seme" means oath while "chame" means good and cordial relation between the spouses.

Around this time, however, the District Council has recommended the introduction of Karbi language as medium of instruction in the primary stage of education. The Karbi medium of oral and written expression has yet to receive its due publicity although this dialect has its richness of potentialities of a developed language.

**LITERATURE**

Society is reflected in literature. But, unfortunately although this tribe is highly rich in their ancient culture, sculpture, arts and crafts, still they lag behind in respect of these valuable qualities due to lack of written literature. They excel others in colloquial, written (in Roman script), folk tales, and songs, O'So Kebai-Alun (Karbi cradle song), Sarlamthe (proverb), Sabin Alun (Karbi Ramayana), ballads, legendary songs and fiction etc.

Some anonymous poets have composed verses and songs from the celebrated Hindu epic "The Ramayana" (Sabin Alun) in nutshell. Prior to recitation of these songs of Sabin Alun, offerings of worships and sacrifices are imperative and this depicts the Karbi pristine ideals, habits, customs, conventions economic, politics adopted by the society during the "Jhum" cultivation as well as the day-to-day affairs of the society.
The pathetic mournful songs for the dead are called "Karchahe" which also forms a significant part of their oral literature. The ballad and folk songs such as (a) Haimu-Alun (love and separation), (b) Thapa keplang (source of wine production), (c) Lakhi Keplang (songs of Jhum cultivation), (d) Thelu-Alun (wedding songs), (e) Love songs, (f) O'so Kebai Alun (cradle songs), (g) Hemphu Mukrang (prayers to God) etc. decorate their tribal literature. In addition to these, there are other ballads consisting of love stories such as Didimudi, Dengriso, Serhidun, Lirbun etc. It may be surmised that the natural flowers grown at sixes and sevens in the hills and dales and the folk songs composed and sung by the unsophisticated poets and singers are similised resplendently in the same array. Both preserve the aesthetic sense of nature as well as beauty and grow spontaneously in this evergreen valley which never flagged. But as ill luck would have it, due to habitual reluctance for preservation of these most valuable aspects of wonderful beauty, art and the culture are gradually now on its last legs, and thus the splendour is seen to be lost for ever.

Their folk tales are lively and effective as narrative and the themes though probably borrowed from the great treasury of popular story elaborated in Peninsular India, have been appropriated and assimilated to the social condition of the Karbis themselves. The stories or tales of Karbi literature are enough to embellish their literature. These tales and
anecdotes reflect all the spheres of Karbi society, and these may be conveniently compared with those of the Russian literature as both are the sources of social history.  

The Karbi "Salamthe" (proverb) is very interesting as well as fantastic also and in most cases these "Sarlamthe" have similarity with those of the Assamese proverbs.

Their children's literature finally depicted in the inducive cradle songs, nursery-rhymes and lullaby of this tribe is indeed captivating. The oral and written literature of this people reflect the socio-customs, traditions, ideals, weal and woes, instincts and emotion relating to love and affection, their day-to-day activities and experiences of life.

On the whole, the Karbi literature has to handed down from mouth to mouth to generation after generation. It is indispensively necessary to collect these folk literatures stretching throughout the length and breadth in the society to widen and shimmer the Karbi literary works.

Late Semson Singh Ingti, the first Karbi writer wrote two books for school children. At present Srimati Basapi Ingti Katharpi, Sri Bonglong Terang, Sri Langkam Teron, Sri Rong Bong Terang, Sri Jayasing Terang, Sri Kehai Bey, Sri Roy Inghi and Sri Samsing Hanse etc. inquisitive writers make their room in their literary works.

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Goswami, Dijendra Narayan, Karbi Lok Sahityat Dristipat" - Ojaru Ahir, 49th Asam Sahitya Sabha Souvenir, 1982, p. 77
the Karbi literary globe. Many Assamese writers also now have attempted to amplify the Karbi literature by contributing their different articles, stories, novels etc. relating to the Karbi culture. Various types of books, magazines, newspapers, periodicals belonging to Arleng Alam (Karbi language) are now published in Assamese as well as in Roman script. "Lamkido" the monthly hill bulletin had carried out up to date news and information on developmental activities of the district and was distributed up to village level was published in both Assamese and Karbi by the District Information and Public Relation Unit. It seems that now the Karbis have become more conscious about their art and literature for promoting their social upliftment. Their tendency to adopt Roman script instead of the time immemorial practice of Assamese is increasing day by day.

Though the modern Karbis have tried to harness themselves with the cultivation of modern literature both by oral and written means, yet the unsophisticated practice of composition and recitation of folk lores and literature is still in vogue among the illiterate village community. By now, the Diphu Sahitya Sava* has taken keen interest and initiative to unearth the latent folk literature and to bring it to light of the modern world. The folk culture must be encouraged to

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*Diphu Sahitya Sava - A sub-committee of Assam Literature society (Asam Sahitya Sabha). It was held First in 1959, Sri Satra Singh Teron as its President at Diphu Club.
counteract the influence of decadent culture.

**ECONOMIC CONDITION**

Unlike other tribals, the Karbi's tribal economy is basically tied down to agriculture comprising both food and cash crops. Over 90% of the total population live in rural areas and the district is economically impoverished in comparison with other hill districts of the State. Promotion of agriculture, expansion of a network of irrigation system, development of industrial output, extension of electrification, improvement in the sphere of transport and communications, propagation of learning, upkeepment of health, maternity and sanitation, dissemination of banking facilities have posed a serious stumbling block in allround upliftment of these ethnic groups although none can deny the availability of immense potentialities for the uniform economic growth of this region.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the inhabitants of the district in as much as 90% of the tribal populace solely depend on "Jhum" cultivation for their survival. They normally pursue two methods in their crop cultivation - *Jhuming* and terrace (step or bench cultivation). *Jhuming*, to speak the truth is uneconomic due to its shifting nature and low output. Moreover, shifting cultivation is associated with shifting village. After every third or fourth year it is found that the whole village shifts to a new site of Jhum. This nomadic
tendency is the greatest impediment to any permanent developmental work in the agricultural sector of the district. This primitive method utilised by the agriculturists cannot meet the demand of the gradual increasing population, whereas the terrace cultivation is more beneficial. The one-third of the total area is plain cultivable land where the farmers have gradually taken up improved methods of cultivation. The Agriculture Department has distributed seeds and fertilizer at subsidised rates for encouraging the farmers who must be won over to permanent settled cultivation from the wasteful Jhuming. High yielding varieties of paddy, Maize, cotton, mustard seed, sesame, jute, rape seed, potato, sugarcane and wheat are grown in this district. Pineapple, orange and lemon are also extensively cultivated and available in some parts of the district.

The habit of shifting the villages is being discouraged. Owing to ignorance, simplicity and poverty of the Karbi people most of land in Karbi Anglong suitable for cultivation of high yielding crop has been grabbed by the non-tribal moneylenders and small traders either through "Paikas System" or illegal sale inspite of statutory provision prohibiting transfer of land to the non-tribal. The "paikas system" badly affected the agricultural economy of the Karbis. This abolition of the paikas system by enacting the Karbi Anglong district (Land

*"Paikas System" - Paikas is a system under which, the Karbi people lend out their land mostly to non-tribals to cultivate land taking cash amount of money fixing the rate of Rs. 300/- to Rs. 400/- per Bigha for a year.
Reforms Act of 1979) which came into effect from 8.8.79 is a bold step taken by the District Council to improve rural economy in the district.

To augment the agricultural production, adequate lending facilities by the authorised banks are to be made available to the tillers of the soil. It is a laudable venture on the part of the District Council in making endeavours for a changeover of peasants from "Jhuming" to "Terrace" procedure of cultivation. The remarkable feature of the agricultural economy of this district is the elimination of the "Land Lord System".

Prior to independence no effort was made to integrate hill areas economically with the plains region. As a result the hill areas remain isolated practising their traditional method of shifting cultivation having a subsistence economy. The population of this hill district is basically of a rural nature. No existence of any industry or manufacturing and processing units worthy of mention has caused a setback in the stimulating of the process of urbanization. Lack of reliable data pertaining to this hill district makes measurement of income growth difficult. The entire economy is based on agriculture. "According to the 1971 Census the working force constituted of 118,184 persons. Out of this 91,036 were cultivators and 8111 were agricultural labourers. This means
31 p.c. of the total population constitute the working class. This percentage is abnormally low and is a doubtful statement. Usually the entire rural folk participate in various activities for their subsistant living.

Nature has bestowed her forest resources unreservedly to the dwellers of this area. Hence uncountable quantum of forest products such as rubber, coffee, blackpeper, Augar, Sal, Bonsum, Sand, Gravels, Boulders, Lac, Resin and multifarious medicinal herbs are freely and abundantly traceable throughout the length and breadth of the district. There is high potentiality of exportation of some of these forest products even outside the State. But the irony of fate, is that this Karbi Anglong district is poor as a Church mouse in production of minerals excepting a little quantity of coal, limestone, mica, iron and sulphur etc. But the silver lining as against the above background, is the natural gift of the profuse quantum of high grade limestone at Dilai Parbat and so Bokajan Cement Factory has been established at Bokajan. Hence it is obvious that, the main sources of revenue of this district is the natural forest products, which the authority is trying to explore to its full advantage.

At present though industrially backward this hill district has vast potentiality to develop the spinning and

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45. Borthakur, Dr. M., "Geography of Karbi Anglong", Silver Jubilee Souvenir, Karbi Anglong District Council, 1977, p. 27 (English Section)
weaving sectors of the village economy. But so long, no concrete measures are taken to enlarge this aspect of economy by a forceful endeavour that cock will not fight here. Total absence of big industries is another feature which has contributed to the tardy progress of the Karbi Anglong district. There are two Khansari (small) sugar mill at Manja and Hawaipur. There is only one hydroelectric power project at Langpi which is under construction. There is no question of any big industrial projects due to lack of power. The answer lies in creation of cottage industries which can produce some lovely homemade articles. Unfortunately the output is very minimal, slow and uneconomic. It is ostensible, that there is no tradition of producing these articles for sale outside tribal areas. It is, however, remarkable ness lay in fact, that of late, the State Industry Department has forged out for setting up of cottage and small industrial units and so like soap and candle making, bee keeping etc. small industries have been established.

Producing their Nok-Jir (a long handled Karbi dao) and various kinds of daily used tools - knives, spears and fishing hooks etc. the village blacksmith's (Hemai) workshops (Timham) enlarge the contribution of small scale industries in the district.

In view of the isolation and segregation of the tiny Karbi villages, there is an insurmountable bottleneck in transport and communication system in this district. The
paucity of banking facilities have stood in the way of progress of the people. Yet in Karbi Anglong district now banking facilities have been extended to provide loan to cultivators and many branches of State Bank of India, United Bank of India, and other Nationalised banks have already been opened in rural areas. Besides a scheduled Bank - Dihangri Langpi has been established with a view to enhance the banking facility to cultivators in both the Hills districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. In order to help the native cultivators with banking facility many branches are setup in the different remote and interior areas of the district. A regular lacunae is noticeable in marketing facility. Poor communications, lack of transport and general poverty of the people are obstacles in the way of flooding the markets with the homemade product. The problem can be solved by speedy road construction, provision of goods carrying vehicles from the fields to the market and a co-operative society which can help the cultivators to dispose of their goods at suitable prices.

As in case of transport and communication so also the case with the medical and health services. No laudable efforts have yet been made to setup a network of dispenseries, hospitals and maternity centres for the welfare of this community. The authority should focus their attention on this inevitable aspect of affairs.

The advancement in the sphere of education is also not encouraging. As education is very closely linked with
welfare and progress of a society, so far expansion and raising of the standard of education in the district much emphasis is needed. Till now, education is making headway at a snail's pace as only 19.17% of the total populace are literate.

Anyway, late the wheel of daily life showing better prospects. Economic theories are about to yield better results. Indeed one can say that some development work has begun. Nearly all the experts who know something of the Karbi economy are of opinion that the development work in the Karbi villages hangs heavy because they are at furflung areas. It is suggested that villages should be brought together, especially the small ones, so that intensive development work can be done. But in most cases, it is hard row to hoe to move the people to new homes due to sentimental reasons.

To bring this innocent but backward community to fall in line with the main current of the region, utmost measures are to be taken to make major breakthrough in their physical, social and economic conditions.

Since Independence although herculian efforts have been made to strengthen their economy, a lot of things are yet to be attended to arrive at the desired goal. A consolidated and comprehensive scheme is to be drawn out by surveying the potentialities and endeavour to find out and execute the raw materials, and allied matters so as to identify and notify the
different problems embracing those under developed people.

While going through the different categories of this chapter of the historical background of the Karbi people, we come to the conclusion that the unsophisticated tribal populace residing in the far-flung parts of the Eastern sector of the State of Assam had a very healthy, glorious and enchanting past covering all the aspects of social, political, economical and administrative backgrounds which they are still endeavouring to maintain except where any improvement put forward either by Governmental action or by development and modifications recommended by the need of the present requirements.

It is now clear, from the foregoing narration that our knowledge about the life and cultures of the prehistoric populations of North East India is still far from complete. The reasons for our backwardness in this important field of knowledge could be traced to the lack of organised archaeological studies and research in all the States of North East India both at the Government as well as University levels.