

# Reinvention of the Identity Markers and Ethnic Consolidation of the Karbis Outside the Two Sixth Scheduled Districts in Assam

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**ABSTRACT:** The Karbis are one of the indigenous communities of Assam living in the administratively recognized Hills and Plains districts of Assam. It belongs to the Indo-Mongoloid stock of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. This paper tries to throw light on how through a historical process due to the use of some specific nomenclatures as 'identity markers', were defined as the 'Karbi-people'. The are now becoming a divided community in both, official papers and in eyes of an outsider. 'Plains Karbi' or 'Hills Karbi', are two such nomenclature that have been emerged out of a perception that Karbis of the officially accepted Plains districts are somewhat different from the Karbis of the two Sixth Scheduled Hills districts in Assam. Field data suggests that attempt to identify members of the Karbi community by using some nomenclatures as 'identity markers' is in diverse ways inappropriate where a geographical tag plays a crucial role in vertical division of the Karbi society. Keeping this in consideration, this paper seeks to explore how in general term some identity markers emerges as catalysts in the process of condensation of the movement of the Karbis living in the administratively accepted Plains districts in Assam.

## INTRODUCTION

The Karbis are one of the indigenous tribal community of Assam living in both administratively recognized Hills and Plains districts of Assam. It belongs to the Indo-Mongoloid stock of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group (Bordoloi and Saikia,<sup>1</sup> 87). It is one of the many communities of North East India significant for its wide dispersal and settlement not only in Assam but also in Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Like many of the indigenous communities of the region the community was marked by utter backwardness when the Britishers left the country. Looking back on the mirror of history one would find that Karbis, irrespective of their dwelling places

started their struggle to get rid of the condition of utter marginality in different fronts since the days of the colonial British rule in India. It was a band of leaders under the pioneering command of late Semsonsingh Ingti who united the Karbis and led a movement demanding constitutional safeguard from the government as a means to end the process of economic as well socio-political exclusion. As part and parcel of this attempt, further, the pioneers of this community enthused the Karbis to dream in terms of a homeland in the post colonial Assam (Teron, 2009)<sup>1</sup>.

After the departure of the Colonial British administrators and in response to the aspirations of the Karbis to get rid of an utter condition of economic and socio-political marginality, the Government of India decided to form an autonomous territory for the

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Karbis of Assam by the end of 1949. Following the 'Bordoloi Sub-Committee's Recommendations'<sup>2</sup> that was appointed by the Government of India, decision was taken to form some Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in certain Hill Districts (except Naga Hills) of the then composite State of Assam in 1952 and thus the Sixth Scheduled 'Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Autonomous Hill District' came into being. Later, North Cachar Hills were separated from it as a separate Hills district under the provision of Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution which was again renamed as Dima Hasao District. But, the formation of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Hill District and the provisions associated with it had failed measurably to bring all the Karbis of Assam under one autonomous administrative area. It subsequently sealed the fate of a considerably large number of Karbis who had been left outside of the then newly created Autonomous District Council. To say more precisely, Autonomous District of Karbi Anglong failed to incorporate the Karbis living in the administratively accepted 'Plains Districts' of Assam in its jurisdiction. While, in addition to the Autonomous District Council the Karbis living in the two Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts had been incorporated in the 'Scheduled Tribe List', the Government of India remained silent about the existence or status of the Karbis who remained outside the already mentioned hills districts. The policy makers of the Government of Assam and India, with their silence regarding the future of the Karbis dispersed in the Plains Districts of Assam indeed helped divide the people of this community into two halves- 'Hills Karbi' in the hills districts of Karbi Anglong, and Dima Hasao and the 'Plains Karbi' of 'Have Nots'. At this juncture a critical inquisitive word emerges 'Why'?

#### ANALYZING 'WHY'?

Attempting to find the explanation for 'why' one would find at hand two pertinent factors as responsible. One, the role of the colonial anthropology and ethnography that defined what a 'Tribe' is, and two, failure of the post colonial Indian policy makers to find out suitable, realistic solution of the problem of 'Fragmented Identity' of many ethnic communities like the Karbi specifically living outside the Scheduled

Hills Districts that had been emerged out of the ambiguous terminology related to 'Tribe' and 'Tribalism' till today. As a product of the colonial anthropology and ethnography, many of such nomenclatures appear as inept to express the identity of a community without attaching a geographic tag to its name.

To understand why and how the Colonial Anthropology and Ethnography got involved in the mess of 'Fragmented Ethnic Identities' in the post colonial situation one has to revisit the pages of history. Colonial history of India speaks itself that everything the Colonial Government done or followed was chiefly guided by its own calculation of profit and loss. Formulation of a wise policy for the welfare of natives was of secondary importance for the British colonial administration. Therefore, when the Colonial Administration formulated a policy on 'Tribe' or different native communities it used anthropology, ethnography, history and so on which were designed to serve the interest of colonial exploitation. In that process, the British Colonial Administration found Anthropology and Ethnography more suitable than the History to better know the Indian communities specifically in the newly explored or non-explored areas after the great rebellion of 1857.

Dirks observes that after the great rebellion of 1857, to keep India, the British felt the need to know India better far better than they had, and for that knowledge had to be about the society of India, not just its political economy. Thus colonial ethnology took the place that had once been held by colonial history. The ethnographic state was driven by the belief that India could be ruled using anthropological knowledge to understand and control its subjects, and to represent and legitimate its own mission (Dirks, 2002). As part and parcel of this process, ethnographic research begun in the then composite state of colonial Assam on different native communities where geographic tags like 'Plains' or 'Hills', attire or costume etc. as immediate tools at hand played the role of 'Identity Marker' to identify differences between the communities. At this juncture it may be mentioned that in African context too, following a common phenomenon, European colonial powers often constructed identities of many communities when and where that suited best to the colonial

interests. Mahmud Mamdani has opined that the involvement of colonial ethnographers in projection of some communities indigenous in bounded terms with a specific land and projecting another as settler has contributed bloody genocide in many places like Rwanda in the post-colonial situation (Mamdani, 2001). The same phenomenon may be seen in Assam too.

How the ethnographic studies and constructions in Colonial Assam basically took place for the interests of the British Administration and that was not in mood to give thought about the future consequence from such activities may well be understood by what the political scientist P. S. Datta ('93) remarked in this context

“In traditional Indian literature there appears to be no equivalent for the English term ‘Tribe’. Administrative division of the then people of India between the ‘Tribals’ and ‘non Tribals’ began with the British provision for the ‘Non-Regulated Areas’ in and around 1833 that was followed by the ‘Scheduled District Act, 1874’. People in the ‘Non-Regulated Area’ and then in the Scheduled Districts came to be recognized by the Colonial Administration as ‘Tribes’. Gradually, a number of communities specializing in food gathering or shifting cultivation were also brought under the unit of ‘Tribes’. Census of India, 1891 talked of ‘Forest Tribes’ followed by a more serious attempt by Census of India, 1935 that renamed them as ‘Backward Tribes’ which was further modified after India’s independence and a list of ‘Scheduled Tribes’ was adopted with new entries to the earlier list. As such, ‘Tribe’ in India is an ‘Administrative Political Word’ used to offer social and politico-economic justice to certain marginalized communities. Therefore, it is generally devoid of the classical considerations of sociology, anthropology and economics” (Datta, '93).

Prabhakara in this regard further opines that in the notion of the British administrators, the supposedly ‘Wild Tribes’ lived in those areas what they classified as Excluded, Partially Excluded and Un-administered areas<sup>3</sup>. The colonial government, immediately after the annexation of Assam, preferred to keep these tribes in distant from its directly administered areas. However, outwardly, the colonial administration paternalistically declared that creation of such classified areas was essential to protect the ‘Wild Tribes’ from the advanced business people of India.

In reality, British commercial interests like the powerful planter community whose domains extended to the very edge of the British territory and sometime crossed into the so called Excluded Areas, needed to be protected from the all too real threats of ravaging raids from the so called ‘Wild Tribes’. Thus, the so called location centric specificity unique to Assam where areas, along with specific communities of people inhabiting that area, are notified as scheduled; the people as such, are not thus notified. Likewise, the scheduling of a people has come to be intrinsically linked to the areas they inhabit (Prabhakara, 2010).

Therefore, guided by this above stated Colonial administrative imagination and policies, Indian Government considers in a rigid way that ‘Karbi’ is an area specific community and lives only at the Scheduled Hills Districts in Assam. But the truth is altogether different and people of this community may be found in eight administratively accepted as Plains Districts in Assam. These districts are Kamrup (Metropolitan), Morigaon, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Golaghat and Dhemaji. Again, for the same cause, the Census shows presence of the Karbi and all other officially enlisted ‘Scheduled Hills Tribe’ in the ‘Plains Districts’ as ‘Zero’. Thus, one may find colonial ideas on different ethnic communities still dominate the administrative policies particularly in Assam and in general in India. Using the colonial ethnographic findings and without doing enough field studies to find out present complexities involved with many ethnic communities in Assam, still one may find perceptions to define a ‘Tribal Community’ with specific geographic tag of ‘Plains’ or ‘Hills’ and other criteria on many cases have been unsuitably used in Assam. At this juncture Baruah observes that colonial ethnology defined most native groups in bounded terms, and constructed them as being indigenous to particular habitats only (Baruah, 2010). According to this rhetoric, Karbis, being officially accepted as a Hill Tribe (Scheduled Tribe-Hills in Postcolonial India) are only the residents of Hills Districts. So, this outlook denies the existence of Karbis outside the political boundary of the two Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts. Therefore, when the administration faces the problem of confronting Karbis living outside the two Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts in Assam, the official lexicon uses the term ‘Plains Karbi’ to address

them. At this point it may be observed that in a historical process, the frequent use of such nomenclatures like the 'Plains-Karbi' and the 'Hills Karbi' one way or other appeared as the agents of vertical division of the 'Karbi' society and culture due to its inherent incapacity to mean the community as a single whole. This has led to the Karbis living outside the sixth scheduled areas to demand for being granted the Scheduled Tribe status with the recognition in their present place of habitation.

*Fragmented Karbi identity: The Reality*

Question arises whether in practical sense Karbis living in the Plains Districts have any differences or not with their kith and kin living in the two Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts of Assam. Field data suggests that as the members of Karbi community have been dispersed in eight Plains Districts of Assam, namely – Kamrup (Metropolitan), Morigaon, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Cachar, Golaghat, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji along with two Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts – Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, therefore, one may easily find region based variation in language and in sometime dressing pattern of women. But such variations should not be considered as sign of differences. For example, though both Sonitpur and Kamrup (Metropolitan) are two 'Plains Districts' in strict sense of the term, yet, one would find variations in vocabularies and even in accent along with Dressing pattern of women folk of the Karbis living in these two districts. Even within Morigaon District such variations may be noticed. Likewise in Karbi Anglong also one may find variations in vocabularies, little bit in accent and dressing pattern of women between elsewhere and Karbis of Amri region, a place near Hamren. Here comes history as a rescuer at hand. Historically, on different occasions Karbis had gone through two different sets of migration. The first was when they entered Assam somewhere from the South West Asia through present Nagaland and then reached the present Dima Hasao. Thereafter their confrontation with the Dimasas and then Khasis (Synteng) started and they had to return back and settled down in different places of the present Karbi Anglong district. Some of them entered into the Ahom territory too (Waddell, '86:29). A scholar of the community Dharam Singh Teron (personal

communication) opined that in the process of migration in Assam, a small fraction crossed the Dhansiri and then through a serpentine road and via Lumbding (Lumberjong) reached in large number present Kamrup district. From Kamrup district some of them went to Cachar district. During the turbulent years of Burmese invasion some of them even dispersed to distant places like Dhemaji, Lakhimpur and Sonitpur district. As they settled initially in four main localities under the four chieftains of Rongkhang, Chintong, Dimorua (or Dimoria in present Kamrup district) and Amri (a place in Hamren Sub-Division), with the advancement of time became accustomed with some area specific social traits, language variation and dressing pattern.

Therefore, Karbis originally came from the Rongkhang region of Karbi Anglong though now lives in Nagaon, Morigaon, Sonitpur, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur and Golaghat districts or elsewhere follow same socio-cultural traits and dress code those have been followed once under the chieftainship of Rongkhang Recho (King). As the Karbis of the Dimoua/Dimoria in the present Kamrup (Metropolitan) district lives longest period of time amidst the Caste Hindu Assamese neighbour, therefore, on many counts one may notice influence of the latter on dressing pattern of the 'Dimorua Karbi women' and to some extent in their language. In this context it may be mention that the famous religious and social reformer Sankardeva even succeeded to convert some of the animist Karbis to his Vaishnavite-Hindu religious sect and 'Jayhari Ata' a prominent disciple of Sankardeva was a Karbi of present Morigaon district. Therefore, it may be well understood that little bit of influence in vocabulary or in dressing pattern by the neighboring Caste Hindu Assamese is altogether not unusual or unnatural (Assam Legislative Assembly Debates 1940, 29th February). In the written record both Ahom-chronicles and the Colonial write-ups, one may find repeated references of the Karbis of Dimoria-Kingdom (a place in Kamrup Metropolitan District). As such is the case, one may find variations in vocabulary, accent and dressing pattern of the Karbis living in Kamrup and adjacent some places of Morigaon district with that of many other Plains District. So, if one take into considerations of these stated variations, Karbis living in the Plains Districts are no way can be considered

as homogenous by the strict sense of the term 'Plains Karbi'.

Therefore, it may be said that though one may find linguistic variations amongst the Karbis who lives inside and outside the territory of the Autonomous Districts, in reality, such variations do not justify that this community should be considered as a divided one on rigid geographical line. Rather, one may point that from the view point of economic and socio-political condition of the Karbis living outside the two Sixth Scheduled Hills District is in acute condition of marginalization. As the Karbis in the two Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts enjoy political autonomy along with constitutional safeguards under the provision of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes Act, 1950 (as a Scheduled Tribe), therefore, without those facilities politically and socio-economically Karbis living outside of these districts are really in a disadvantageous position to walk on the road of an all encompassing development.

Anyway, the discussion made above helps one understand the inability of the term 'Plains Karbi' to mean properly that all the Karbis that lives in the Plains Districts of Assam in a homogenous way. It simply helps one understand that such nomenclature with a geographic tag only vertically divide a community. Repeated use of such nomenclatures simply mean there are two sets of Karbi people lives in Assam where one is known as 'Plains Karbi', the other is known as the 'Hills Karbi'.

Thus, by both, the creation of the Sixth Scheduled Autonomous Hills District of Karbi Anglong and the barriers that had been created by the Colonial anthropology through use of many nomenclatures as 'identity markers' like the 'Plains Dwellers (Plains-Karbi)', 'Hill Dwellers (Hills-Karbi)' etc., the Karbis of Assam, for an onlooker, appears as a polarized community.

*Impact of a Fragmented Identity on the Movement against Marginalization*

The use of the above discussed nomenclatures to identify Karbis separately as Hills or Plains dwellers, indeed, produced some far reaching impact on the ongoing process of agitation by the Karbis living outside the Six Scheduled Hills Districts in Assam. As this sort of outward manifestations of difference on

many occasions appears as bulwark on the way of uniting the community members to run a movement in a vigorous way, therefore, by 1992, outside the two Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts of Assam, leadership of the agitating bodies of the Karbis started a process of renaming the observance procedures of some of their cultural and religious festivals. Its aim was to repair the fracture of the 'Karbi Identity' that was product of the Colonial Anthropology through reinvention of some Markers of Identity' that could be used in the course of agitation to demand constitutional safeguard to unite the community members as a solid mass. For example, mention may be made of the celebration of a popular festival 'Dehal Kachirdom' as 'Dehal Rongker Kachirdom'. The colonial ethnographers recorded that these festivals were observed by the Karbis living in the hills of Assam (Stack and Lyall, '97).

In personal correspondences and interviews held with different personalities of the Karbi society, specifically the leadership of the main literary body Karbi Lamet Amei (Karbi Sahitya Sabha – in Assamese) and main agitating students' force, Karbi Students' Union (KSU), the respondents expressed that though Ronker and Dehal both are in some aspects similar, yet cannot be considered as same. But, with the advancement of the agitation, to create a strong sense of emotional unity amongst the Karbis living in eight Plains Districts of Assam, Dehal and Ronker intermingled and emerged as a new fusion form known as the 'Dehal Rongker Kachirdom'. Now, under the aegis of the Karbi Bangthe Asem (KBA), an organization of the Karbi-Bangthes (chiefs), every year in the February month this festival is being celebrated by the Karbis outside the Sixth Scheduled Districts of Assam with pomp and gaiety.

In response to the pressure of the Karbi Students' Union (KSU), the Assam Government, since the year of 1998 declared the 17th day of February as a 'Restricted Holiday' (28th Magh – according to Assamese Calendar) for the government employees of Assam<sup>4</sup>. This acceptance from the government to include the celebration day of the Dehal-Rongker worshipping in the 'State Holiday List' may be considered as a fulfillment of a long standing aspiration of the Karbi leadership outside the Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts for recognition of their culture at administrative level.

It was, indeed, the outcome of ceaseless efforts of a section of the middle class leadership of the Karbis living outside the two Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts in Assam which aimed to popularize the Karbi culture and traits within and outside the community since late 1980s. Karbi senior leaders like Buddheswar Timung of Nagaon and Dhiren Ingti of Kamrup (Metropolitan) informed during their interviews that observance of Dehal as a forceful gala had already served the purpose as expected. According to them, through amalgamation of Dehal with Rongker and emergence of the new form as the Dehal-Ronker now helps to eradicate the virtual differences that had been created by the Colonial Anthropology amongst the Karbis as the Hills and Plains dweller. The Colonial Anthropology tends to justify that Karbis of the Hills are culturally different from those who live in the Plains because the former observe Ronker, while the latter do not. According to the Colonial ethnography and ethnographic write-ups on this community, it was an established idea that the Karbis dwelling in the plains chiefly observe Dehal, while their counterparts in the Hills celebrate Ronker.

Now, in contravention to the projection of 'Karbi' a divided community as 'Plains Karbi' and 'Hills Karbi', through the verification of field data, one may earn the liberty to say otherwise. Field data speaks that one should not try to justify the Karbi as a divided community merely depending on the dwelling areas or variations of language and customs. There may be some variations in language, vocabulary, accent or dressing pattern but those are in no way to be considered as indicators of any sort of differences amongst the Karbis.

For the Karbi leaders, outside the two Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts of Assam, this outwardly seen broken image of 'Karbi-Unity' appeared as highly disturbing to conduct a meaningful movement to eradicate their marginal socio-economic and political condition throughout the length and breadth of their habitat areas. The decision to celebrate both Dehal and Rongker in a fusion form as the 'Dehal-Rongker', popularization of the Domahi Kikan and well organized ethnic festival to promote Karbi food and beverages along with the products of Karbi weavers were the outcome of the conscious attempt of the Karbi leaders who laboriously tried to repair the unjust projection of the Karbi Identity as a

fractured one by the Colonial ethnographers. In this context Khagen Ingti (52), General Secretary of the Karbi Cultural Society (KCS) of Diphu, Karbi Anglong opines:

"[...] Hitherto, though, through divisive nomenclatures Karbi has been projected as a divided community. Yes, there one may find some variations regarding socio-cultural observance of festivals according to region of Karbi habitation. But it is not a real difference. We may live elsewhere in Assam but are solid as a community. So, unified attempt is essential to project us as a unified tribe. It is in my view more essential for our brothers and sisters living outside the two Sixth scheduled Hills Districts' who are in agitation now to get rid of socio-economic marginalization and deprived of due political rights to walk on the path of progress. For that, amalgamation of these two festivals into one and the observance of the same as 'Dehal-Rongker' centrally every year now essential for the creation of a new environment- the environment of togetherness and brotherhood amongst the Karbis outside the two Sixth Scheduled Hills District of Assam."

At present, Dehal Rongker may be regarded as one of the central Cultural Festival or identity markers of the Karbis living outside the Two Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts in Assam. They now project what Karbis are not and that is- specifically, throughout the eight Plains District Karbis are same as their kith and kin that lives in the two Six Scheduled Hills Districts in Assam.

Another attempt to glorify and popularize hitherto simply celebrated cultural festivals with new impetus is the Domahi Kikan. It is now main centrally celebrated Spring Festival of the Karbis outside two Sixth Scheduled Districts in Assam is Domahi-Kikan. Basically, prior to 1990, this festival was confined specifically amongst the Dumurali Karbis in the strategically or geo-politically important middle Assam districts of Kamrup and Morigaon. However, with a conscious effort collective leadership of different Karbi Organizations every year observe it in different places and administratively accepted Plains Districts of Assam. At present, Domahi-Kikan is one of the cultural marker that projects the vibrant and unique culture of the Karbis living in the administratively accepted Plains Districts of Assam. The organizations have already reached a consensus

that they would celebrate the Domahi-Kikan every year in the Saturday and Sunday of the second week that befalls in the Assamese Bohag-Month.

*Promotion of Traditional Food and Beverages*

It is to be mentioned that the Karbi Students' Union (KSU) leadership, in every year takes the lead role in promoting the organization of cultural festival Domahi-Kikan. Since the year of 2009, the organizers of this festival have added another dimension to the process of celebration of this festival. Through the display cum sell of the traditional food items of the Karbi community like 'Hor-Alang and Hor-Arak' (Rice-Beer and the Steamed Rice-Liquor), boiled pork with herbs and rice-dust, bamboo-shoot, roasted rice in bamboo-barrel, grilled pork, chicken and fish etc. with the celebration of the 'Domahi-Kikan'. By that, the organizer in a calculative way popularizes 'Karbi food and beverages' as a cultural identity marker in the outside world. This attempt may be considered as double sided blades of a sword in the process of assertion of ethnicity. One way it presents the notion that with their attire and festivals Karbi is different from the rest of the communities of Assam. On the other hand, the gala presentation of their cultural traditions along with display cum sale of traditional attire and food-beverages help creation of a sense of unity within the members of the community. At present, 'Hor-Alang' – a beverage drink and 'Fao-Dimoru' a mixed curry of pork, Dimoru-leaf, rice-dust and alkali with garlic-ginger pest projects one way popular tasty food-beverages of the Karbi community and on the other way the cultural identity of this community in Assam.

Thus, within the last decade, along with the programs of agitation seeking a Scheduled Tribe Status, Karbi leadership consciously promoted the hitherto lesser known 'Domahi-Kikan' festival as the 'Domahi-Kikan and Traditional Food Festival' in central Assam through grand celebration of the same.

REINVENTION OF IDENTITY MARKERS  
AND ITS IMPACT

*Socio-Cultural Projection as a Unified Community*

Through these festivals, as many non-Karbi respondents opined, along with food and beverages

of this community, another marker of identity- 'Attire' have been now becoming very popular amongst the caste-Hindu Assamese also. Specifically, one may now see the waist-coat of the Karbi-male called 'Solsang' and the 'Poho' or 'Pong-ho' (a piece of cloth that may be used as head gear or neck wrapper during cold) worn by non Karbi males. Likewise, Karbi-female's attire 'Pini-Pekock' also becoming popular amongst the many non-Karbi young girls and women as part of their dresses in wardrobe to wear specifically during their appearance in festive time or even in fashion shows.

From the available field data one may find that projections of culture and identity-markers through observance of festivals in conscious and organized way as a part and parcel of the movement to eradicate socio-economic and political marginalization, indeed, attained what it fundamentally expected to get – unity amongst the Community Members throughout the length and breadth of the Karbi inhabited areas in Assam. It also contributed in raising popularity of the Karbi-attires of both male and female amongst the non-Karbis in Assam.

*Strengthening of the Ethnic Consciousness*

Different informants who have been associated with these festivals either as organizer, participant or visitor since the last few years have expressed during the field study that through this reorganized form of their festivals and celebration, identity of the Karbi community in the Plains Districts of Assam, in last few years, are becoming more gorgeous than ever. At the same time, they admitted, Domahi-Kikan is now capable to attract the print and electronic media along with the viewers of non-Karbi neighboring communities in a very large number.

To know the views of the prominent Karbi leaders across the length and breadth in Assam behind this sort of grand celebration of these festivals, interviews had been taken of and personal communications had been made with the leaders (age in bracket) of the different Karbi organisations like Ratneswar Ronghang (36), the president of the main agitating body – Karbi Students' Union (KSU), Bishnu Ronghang (45), president of the Dimoria District Tribal Sangha, who was once president of the Karbi Students' Union (KSU), Mukunda Bey (54), a veteran

leader of the Karbi Community, Sambar Rongpi (72) -the president of the Assam Plains Karbi Adarbar (APKA), Mangal Bey (32), the secretary of the Sonitpur District Karbi Association (SDKA), Budheswar Timung, secretary of the Karbi National Convention (KNC), Sikari Tisso, the executive president of the Karbi literary organisation- Karbi LametAmei (KLA), Nobinson Kro (52) of the Karbi Bangthe Asem (KBA), Nirada Katharpi (48), the president of the women body Karbi Arlos Asem (KAA), Khagen Ingti (52), the general secretary of Karbi Cultural Society (KCS) of Diphu and Dhiren Ingti (48), the central joint secretary of the All Assam Tribal Sangha (AATS) and adviser of the Karbi Students' Union KSU<sup>5</sup>.

These leaders unequivocally opined that the massive and grand celebration of their festivals is helping at present and in the days to come would help promoting their identity or name of the community amongst the people of other communities of Assam and outside. It has, as they have expressed, within a decade, created a solidified sense among the Karbis dispersed in eight administratively accepted Plains Districts in Assam. As they expect, such sentiment would soon become a powerful fuel to push forward their every program of agitation those will help in the days to come in eradication of the present condition of marginalization in the politics, social and economic fields. Thus, one way, as the respondents revealed, this reinvention of cultural festivals as Identity-Markers will create a sense of pride in the mindset of the Karbis of new generation and emotionally attach them with their movement to eradicate position of marginalization in the political, social and economic fields. Without emotional integrity, as the interviewee like Khagen Ingti (52) of Diphu, Karbi Anglong District, stressed, attainment of popular support within the community and strengthening of the movement for the demands like the Scheduled Tribe status or getting regional autonomy is quite impossible.

Already, it has been mentioned that the Karbis living outside the two Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts of Assam became successful to enlist the day of Dehal celebration as a restricted holiday in the Assam Government's approved holiday-list. Mr Dhiren Ingti, present secretary of the Karbi Lamet Amei (Kamrup) in an interview opined that these sorts of activities

are essential to create a strong sense of togetherness amongst the Karbis dispersed in eight Plains Districts of Assam. Such attempts reminds one how during the nursery phase of the Indian National Movement against the colonial rule celebration of the traditional or merely some regional socio-cultural festivals took the shape of a movement and awakened the contemporary Indians to feel the sense of belongingness to their culture and traditions. In this context mention may be made of the contents of a pamphlet issued by the Karbi Bangthe Asem (KBA) in January 2013, regarding the celebration of the Dehal-Rongker-Kachirdom in that year. In that pamphlet the KBA appealed the Karbis to practice their cultural traits in such a way so that they could face the onslaughts of the western and other aggressive culture which is product of the globalization and so called neoliberal economic world order. To exercise such an attempt, as the KBA stressed, Karbis should observe festivals like Dehal-Rongker-Kachirdom aligning their heart and mind into one (KBA, 2013).

History provides ample evidences of such attempt to create unity amongst the population of a struggling community by reinventing its cultural or identity markers throughout the world. It is to be mentioned in this regard that in the late 19th and 20th century colonial India, such attempts emerged out of assertion of local people that had been occurred between the socio-economically and politically marginalized colonized people of India and the British Colonial regime. However, in the post colonial Assam, on the basis of available field data and other secondary sources, it may be seen that with the changing time and space both the form and content of such contradiction have been changed. The contradiction between the colonizers and the colonized has been now becoming the same between the marginalized indigenous communities at one end and the ruling state machinery on the other. One may find that such contradiction often appears as too complex in its manifestation and help creation of conducive atmosphere for creation of intra and intercommunity feuds.

When a contradiction emerges centering the issues like rights and entitlement, then one community may even appear as worthy opposition of the other. That sort of contradictions sometime takes an

antagonistic form and contributes in the creation of chaos, confusion and social anarchy too. Such contradictions, themselves appear in a historical process and those are potent factors capable of creating both intracommunity harmony and disunity. As intracommunity rift or conflicts retards the pace of a movement, therefore, during a movement of an ethnic community, one may find its leaderships' extensive attempt to germinate a feeling of community brotherhood or emotional unity across the length and breadth of their society. That is what one may see in the movement of the Karbis living outside the two Sixth Scheduled Hill Districts in Assam to eradicate their condition of manifold marginalization.

### CONCLUSION

The experience one may have from the attempts of the leadership of the Karbis living outside the two Sixth Scheduled Hill Districts in Assam helps one to understand that renewed importance on its ethnic-unique-ness by glorifying the markers of Karbi identity helps this community to create its own specific position in a multilingual, multi ethnic place like Assam. It helps now to project themselves 'What they are Not' instead of showing 'What actually they Are'. Such projections have been intensified with the advancement of time and may be seen as inversely proportionate to the government's indifferent attitude toward the fulfillment of the aspirations of the marginalized communities. Therefore, on the basis of the understanding of the above discussed details, one may reach the conclusion that projection or glorification of cultural identity markers by the Karbis living outside the two Sixth Scheduled Hill Districts, in a conscious way, in last twenty years are none but the part and parcel of their movement to eradicate their marginalized condition in different fronts.

It may be find that as the duration of the movement increased, a sense of frustration has been engulfed its leadership and compels the latter to find out catalysts that could unite the community members and ensures their relentless support, which is much sought after fuel for every successful mass-movement. Reinvention of their identity markers and promotion of them through cultural festivals in a vigorous way now ensured the Karbi leadership their much needed fuel for the programs of agitation. It helped also to

build up intracommunity unity and draw popular support toward the ongoing movement that wants to eradicate their socio-economic and political marginalization outside the two Sixth Scheduled Hills Districts in Assam. Thus through the process of popularization of the identity markers, Karbis outside the two Sixth Scheduled Hill Districts could consolidate their community for augmenting their movement for sociopolitical recognition within the framework of the Indian Constitution.

### NOTE

1. This write-up was read out by Dharamsingh Teron in the Seminar held on 26 to 28 Feb 09 at Diphu Club, organized by a People's Initiative to commemorate the 61st Death Anniversary of Late Semsonsing Ingti. (The date of birth of late Semsonsing Ingti is 8 February, 1910 and the date of his demise is 28 February 1948).
2. The Bordoloi Sub Committee: In pursuance of paragraph 20 of the Cabinet Mission Statement of May 16, 1946, an Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights of Minorities in Tribal Areas was constituted by the Constituent Assembly in India. One of the sub-committees constituted by the Advisory Committee was the Northeast Frontier Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi. It was popularly known as the 'Bordoloi Sub-Committee'. In acceptance of the recommendations of this Sub-Committee, the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India was adopted. This provided for the Constitution of the Autonomous District Councils in certain Hills Districts of the then composite state of Assam and Mikir Hills was one among them.
3. Indeed, the distinction between the Hills Tribes and the Plains Tribes goes back to the Government of India Act, 1935. Section 311 (1) of the Act, its Schedule VI and its modification under the Government of India (Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas) Order, 1936, were later adopted in all their essentials as the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution with necessary modifications in the nomenclature of the constituent units. These special provisions to ensure a measure of local autonomy were made for areas predominantly inhabited by Tribal people in the Hills of Assam.
4. See the notification of Government of Assam, dated the 2nd January, 1998 at Dispur that was issued by Mr R.N. Choudhury, Under Secretary of the General Administration (A) Department, Assam Secretariate. Through this notification, Dehal Kachirdom had been included in the State Holiday List along with the 'Ethwar Bathou San' and 'Baithow'-Puja for the Bodos and the Sonowal-Kacharis respectively.
5. All these leaders assembled at Sonapur, Kamrup district of Assam on February 22, 2015 to participate in the central celebration of *Domahi Kikon* festival of the Karbis and their views on the celebration was noted by the researcher on that occasion.

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