

# Taranghem: Decaying Delight of a Changing Legacy



**Debajit Sharma**  
Research Scholar,  
Deptt. of Folklore,  
Gauhati University,  
Assam, India



**Mrinal Medhi**  
Associate Professor (Rtd.)  
Deptt. of Folklore,  
Damdama College,  
Gauhati University,  
Assam, India

## Abstract

The phenomenon of social change is inherent in every society and culture and culture has remained a unique attribute of human reality. This particular reality not only differentiates human societies but also plays a vital role among them when talked about identity. Thus the notion "culture" subsists among all sorts of human groups as a sensitive case marker through ages.

Andre Gunder Frank, an economist associated with dependency theory argued that a form of Globalisation has been in existence since the rise of trade links between Sumer and the Indus Valley Civilization in the third millennium B.C. (Frank, 1998). Even though, Globalization continues through various phases across the globe but the most dominant phase of the process can be seen during the twenty first century. Influential marketization techniques with high volume of financial investment through sophisticated technology start manipulating traditional culture. Religious conversion and modern education system are two notable added causes that exhilarate the atmosphere of uncertainty among North-Eastern tribes of India. Under the same consequences the very identity of these marginalize groups as well as their cultural values were thrown in to the verge of extinction. Traditional culture in the era of globalization is the main interest of this paper. Moreover, the present discussion will also try to observe the Impact of globalization and other cataclysmic sources that are influential on traditional institutions as well as culture of the ethnic groups residing in Assam.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Groups, Ethnic Institution, Change, Globalization and Crisis.

## Introduction

The phenomenon of social change is inherent in every society and culture. Social change transforms social structure and is often used interchangeably with cultural change. "Social change", observes Giddens (2005) "refers to changes that are significant-that is changes which alter the underlying structure of an object or situation over a period of time (42). The outstanding ethno-linguistic mosaic and peculiar geographical location with the vast amalgam of tribal and non-tribal culture, the North-eastern region of India offers a plethora of subjects for researchers. The process of change that is nudging the old order in every culture in the region has stimulated profound academic attention among the socio-cultural researchers.

Various research sources have estimated that there were eleven major linguistic waves of migrations took place to this region at various points of time. From Tibet in the North, through Patalki region of Southeast, and from Burma across the Arakan Yoma in the west are few entry points that are used by various ethnic groups to both the Brahmaputra valley and the Barak Valley. Further, the ancient text, named *Kalika Purana* (9<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> Century AD), refers that the region was predominated by various ethnic groups prior to the migration of the Aryans.

The Karbis, mentioned as the *Mikir*, in the Constitutional Order of the Government of India, constitute one of the major ethnic groups of North-East India, and residing especially in the hills and plains of Assam. It is believed that the name 'Karbi' originated from the word *thakarkibi* meaning, offerings of sacrifices made to God at the beginning of ceremonial or ritualistic practices like worship, marriage ceremony, harvesting of crops and the birth of a child. The word *thakarkibi* in course of time got transformed into 'Karbi' omitting *tha* and *ka* (Das, 1978:73). Another ancient source explains that the term *Mikir* is derived from the

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word *mengkiri* implying carrier of cats as they used to carry cats and later from *mengkiri*, the people came to be known as *Mikirs* (Baruah, 1990:3) Nevertheless, etymological root of the *Mikir* and the Karbi have various interpretations; while the community prefers to call themselves as *Arleng*, which means *man* in general. Racially, the Karbis are believed to have belonged to the Kuki Chin stock of the Indo Mongoloid race, and linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. Like many other Tibeto-Burman language groups, the Karbis migrated from the Tang-Tee-Kiang and the Howangho river area of Western China in one of the waves of migration, and settled down in the Brahmaputra valley. Distinguished linguist, Prof. Matisoff's observations in this regard seems vital:

"The Proto-Sino-Tibetan (PST) homeland seems to have been somewhere on the Himalayan plateau, where the great rivers of East and Southeast Asia (including the Yellow, Yangtze, Mekong, Brahmaputra, Salween and Irrawaddy) have their sources. The time of hypothetical ST unity, when the Proto-Han (=Proto-Chinese) and Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) peoples formed a relatively undifferentiated linguistic community, must have been at least as remote as the Proto-Indo-European period, perhaps around 4000 B.C"

The Karbi inhabitation is spread in several parts of Assam and the North East region of India and they are identified by different names in different places. At present Karbis are mostly found in Karbi Anglong, North Cachar Hills, Golaghat, Sivasagar Nagaon, Morigaon Kamrup, Sonitpur and Lakhimpur districts of Assam; Ri-bhoi district of Meghalaya, Papumpare (Lower Subansiri) district of Arunachal Pradesh; Nagaland; Manipur; and Sylhet district of Bangladesh (Bori, 2012) Dearth of written history and insufficient authentic archaeological evidences make it challenging to trace down chronological events of the Karbis. Here, the folk sources prove to be very significant in studying the early history of the community. Thus, the scholars considerably hinge on the folk-tales and folk-lore of the community. The Karbi folk narrative '*Môsëra Kihir*' that literally means 'recounting the past from memories' is an important genre in this connection. They tell many stories about the migration routes of the Karbis at different point of time.

The Karbis have a rich traditional culture that guides them in their living process. Dormitory institution or *Taranghem* has remained vital in Karbi society, governing their socio-economic, political and religious life. However, gradual changes are intensely pronounced in the socio-cultural and economic life of the people. The traditional life has undergone changes at the onset of urbanization, modernization. Like other areas of Karbi life, there have been distinct changes in the dormitory institution too.

#### Review of Literature

Among the most notable books on the Karbis '*The Mikirs*' (1908) by Lyall and Stack is an authoritative book on the Karbis and it basically touches on the ethnography of the tribe. Truly, the book was brainchild of Edward Stack who

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unfortunately died before the book was published. Lyall edited, arranged and supplemented the book with another knowledgeable Karbi youth named Sardoka. This pioneer book concerning the research on the community established as a hallmark.

A.K. Barua's *The Karbis of the Hills*, published during (1990) is an ethnographical account of the tribe. This particular book also documented cultural aspects of the tribes.

"*Morung System among the Zemi Nagas of N.C. District of Assam.*" is a significant paper in the line of youth dormitory of North-East India. Writer, B.N. Bordoloi really did extensive fieldwork among the community and observed minute influential elements related to this institute. This paper was published in "*Bulletin of the Tribal Research Institute, Assam, Guwahati*, Vol. 1 in the year 1987. Another paper published during 2015 is "*Youth Dormitory in the Life of the Liangmai Naga, India*". Published in *International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies (IJIMS)* and "Institution of Youth Dormitories among Tribes of India" by N.L. Dongre are two other influential articles which is indeed a great source of analysing data. All three works listed are indeed impeccable.

Antony Giddens, "*Sociology*" published by Cambridge: Polity in the year 2006 as 6<sup>th</sup> edition and Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*. Published in the year 1969 by Routledge and Paul Ltd from London are two masterpieces concerning the scientific study of human life, social groups, entire societies and the human world. These two books are indeed momentous work of two great social thinkers that unfolds our own behaviour as social beings in relationship with many other people.

Dilip Kumar Kalita's article, "Janajitiya Paramparat Samabai" *Smitigrantha*, Gaon Panchayat Samabai Samiti, Guwahati Mahkuma Udjapon Samiti, edited by Jugal Das, published in the year 1998 and the book titled '*A Glimpse of Karbi Literature and Culture*', originally written in Assamese by Rongbong Terang and translated into English by Dr. Dilip Kumar Kalita, published by Diphu Sahitya Sabha in 2010 is another most remarkable work on Karbi literature and culture. The book is authoritative on these aspects of the Karbis since it has been written by none other than Padmashree Rong Bong Terang who is a colossal figure in Karbi life, literature and society.

There are two more major works that really helped me a lot while giving shape of the article. The first book is "*Bhaium Karbir Lokaparampara aru Gitma*" published by an authoritative writer Murulidhar Das in the year 2007 and another book named *Dumurali Karbi Loka Sanskriti* by Dayaram Kathar in the year 2015. Both the book put emphasize upon the life of Karbis settled in the plain areas of Assam. Cultural manifestation of the community, history of community institutions and influences of time are well documented in both the books.

#### Objectives of the Study

The basic objective of this paper is to examine how the socio-cultural changes have brought about transformation in the traditional dormitory institution of the Karbis. It aims at an estimation of this

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age-old institution of *Taranghem* or dormitory and also attempt to analyse few major grounds that influence the establishment and verify its relevance in the modern day contexts.

#### Methodology

The paper is primarily based on field experiences and attempts have been made to draw inferences through observation and interviews, conducted in different fields. Secondary data have been gathered from different related books, journals and internet sources. The study has been done among the Karbis of Kamrup District of Assam.

#### Discussion

The term 'dormitory' originated from the Latin word *dormitorium*, suggesting a communal or collective sleeping place. However, this connotation does not sufficiently describe the *Youth* dormitories or bachelor houses in tribal cultures. Closely associated with the youths, this institution has remained a significant component of ethnic culture across the world. They have existed in many forms and in the wide region of the world extending from the Himalaya and the Formosa in the North to Australia and New Zealand in the south; and from the eastern pacific and Marquesas to the west coast of Africa. Thus, this social institution is found among diverse ethnic groups, classified under Dravidians, Indo-Mongols, Malays, Papuans, Polynesians, Australians, and Africans (Daimai and Ranjan, 2015: 84-91).

Whatever title they take on, dormitories have been considered as the life-vein of socio-cultural life of the tribal world. These institutions vary from culture to culture and even in India, there are a lot many types. There are separate community houses for unmarried males and females. In some societies they allow not only unmarried youths but also married men. These traditional bodies play a vital role in coordinating the activities of all the male members of the community and gain particular importance in those warlike societies which depend on the young men for the defence of the village (Dongre, 2). In several tribal cultures, young men and women are sent to communal dormitories at a young age and are made to live there till they early adult life. The young boys and girls are essentially taught the virtues of communal living. Bachelor's dormitories constitute significant component of tribal culture of the North East India, and are found among the Tiwa, Dewri, Chutia, Aou, Naga Mizo, Dimasa, Garo, Karbi, Mishing, and so on. In the absence of formal education system of the modern age, dormitories proved to be the training ground for the young generations. The young minds were trained about the vital things of an adult life, like traditions, societal norms, and code of conduct, cultural traits, spirituality, and methods of earning livelihood. In these institutions the youth is not only made aware of cultural aspects but also of his physiology as an important part of learning (Roy Shibani, "Tribal youth":23) and even sex life. Thus, from an early life the young members are trained in the ideas of solidarity, co-operation and obedience to the community rules, and responsibility towards a successful adult life.

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#### *Taranghem* in the life of the Karbis

It is a fact that there is no clear account of the history of the community. Similarly, there is no evidence of the beginning of their life in structured villages. However, their folk literature offers several data to be depended on. Karbi folk songs like *Rong-Kikim* or *Rongkim-Alun* refer to few stories about the origin of Karbi villages. The Karbi forefather Wongphe Bey started the process. However, it reached its culmination during his great-grandson Rukasen Bey. According to the *Rong-Kikim*, the most influential, foresighted and intelligent Rukasen Bey established their first village at Nongkula and it was a remarkable success story in the history of a fragmented ethnic society. Interestingly, during the process of developing, Rukasen meets another creative and extraordinary character named, Harbamon. Karbis believe that Harbamon was the architect of first Karbi village and this is he, who had developed the concept of *Jirkedam* or the youth dormitory. Karbi folk narratives, also offer the idea that both plain and the hill Karbis had same descendants. Thus, *Taranghem* or the *Jirkedam* share common principles and standards. Both emerged as educational institution for the youths within the community.

Like many other tribal communities of India, Karbis have the dormitory system which lies at the core of traditional life and culture. Here it is to be noted that the Karbis living in the hills and the plains differ in many aspects of socio-cultural life. Bachelor's dormitory of the Karbis existed in different forms among the plains and the hills Karbis. The term *Taranghem* or *dekachang* is prevalent among the plain Karbis, though the hill-Karbis call it *Jirkedam* or *Jirsong*. These institutions reflect a glorious past of a structured institutional system among the community. Through centuries, they have remained the sacred and vital social agents to aid in persisting traditional culture (name). *Jirkedam* was the bachelor's dormitory prevalent among the hill- Karbis which acted as the training house for young members of the community. Trainings were offered in agricultural procedures, traditional values, social activities, code of conducts, traditional art and so on. Generally, it was constructed for a period of three years.

In the plains, *Taranghem* served the functions of youth dormitory by imparting training on various aspects, preparing the younger generation for adult life. Every member was expected to participate in the community work and failure to do so was not tolerated. Boycott by the peers was a common punishment to one, who did not follow the rules of the dormitory. Youth dormitory was an institution where young people were taught about the importance of discipline in one's life. Obedience, discipline and integrity of every individual were the watchwords and the hallmark of *Taranghem*. Youth dormitory was the most effective and important centre for training a youth to become a well-mannered adult who has respect for others, exercises self-control and knows how to control his/her anger. This is very much true that the life of socio-cultural principles entirely depend on the youths of the community. Perhaps Harbamon was clever enough to understand the fact. Curriculum

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of a dormitory that he designed covered social rules and regulations, religious philosophy, agricultural activities, hunting and collecting, fishing or a combination of hunting, administrative process of the community, performances of dances and songs, playing musical instruments and the instructions regarding a disciplined life are all part of the process. The Taranghem continues to perform the most influential role of the village court which is responsible for implementation social rules and regulations. It administers justice through trials on various offences. The Karbis are accustomed to a structured social system and they prefer to maintain the hierarchical order. The Karbis follow such an order for the successful functioning of the organization. The *Bangthai* holds the absolute position in the hierarchical order. The other portfolios of the Taranghem are *Karkun*, *Oklengsar*, *Richo-bangthe*, *Bisarpo*, *Horjak*, *Samari*, *Kithe-khokhrey* and *Ossokhokhrey*.

Keeping in mind the centrality of this institution in traditional life, it is generally constructed near the house of the village head. All the young male members had to spend nights until the completion of the building. For the young boys it is mandatory to be a member of *Taranghem*. If any member fails to attend the *risoamel*, (the meetings of the youths) he has to pay fine mostly in kind than in cash (Murulidhar Das in interview). Women members are not allowed in the *Taranghem*. However, in case of serious offences, they are permitted to enter into it (*Taranghem*). Meetings of this body are held twice a year but in case of emergency, additional assemblies can be held. But, dates may vary from village to village. These meets are also held before important pujas and ceremonies. The first day of the session is reserved for the young members of the community and the whole affair is put under the *Riso Bangthe* (the head of the youth section) and the second day is reserved for the problems of elderly people of the locality.

With the passage of time, these time-honored social institutions are gradually losing their grounds owing to modernization of culture, scientific progress, expansion of modern education and advanced communication system. Reports of scholars, like Haimendorf (1982), Roy Burman (1987), Majumdar (1985), show that these traditional structures have been replaced by modern youth clubs, student unions among many tribes. This phenomenon has been considered mostly as the result of the socio-political developments in the post independent India. Observes Shibani Roy:

The socio-political upheavals in the pan-Indian level and policy for upliftment of tribal have played havoc with these village based organizations which were the nerve centre of the tribal community. Thus caught between the lure of modernity and haste for abandoning all that is indigenous, has left these organizations

shattered, abandoned or transformed (19)

Change is a continuous process that engulfs everything in human life and society. Fresh demands of time have initiated socio-cultural changes in the traditional societies. The traditional dormitories among hill as well the plain Karbis are now in the way of extermination. *Jirkedam* is not in practice today in its old spirit. With the change in the vital issues like production system, means of living, modern ways of communication these institutions have assumed newer forms. In an interview with the researcher, Rongbong Terang observed that dormitory institutions have undergone process of transformation and his generation has not seen the traditional types which used to exist in during the days of his forefathers. The community elders are of the opinion that younger generations are now closer to modern education and western culture that make them drift away from their traditional culture. They significantly differ from their elders in their attitude and approach towards life (Bipul Kathar). *Taranghem* in the plains serves as more of an administrative unit. Though traditional bachelor's dormitory institutions have failed to resist the onslaught of the all-pervading wave of change yet have continued to function in a different manner. The Karbi people of both Karbi Anglong and those living in plains are still maintaining their traditional political institutions though differences persist in both of their systems (Kalita, 1998, 20-21).

## Findings & Conclusion

Change in any society is a natural process of social evolution. Social changes are mainly elicited by the interaction and conflict between old and the new order, mainly brought about by many factors. The changes or weakening of the dormitory system may be accounted for the following apparent reasons:

Christianity penetrated among the North Eastern Tribal societies with the advent of British Colonial Rule in the Region in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The overwhelming influence of the Christian Missionaries exposed the tribal communities to the new religious ideologies and western education. Gradually, they brought about profound changes into the fabric of traditional life and culture. This was perhaps the initial step towards the social transformation of the Karbi society and gradual loss of traditional structures. A large number of people converted themselves into Christianity. In villages like Goriyaghuli, Nakoshi, Lalmati, Latabari, there is a substantial number of converted Karbi people (Rajen Tumung in interview). It was also informed that some of the people of the community have given up their indigenous religion and traditional systems to practise Vaishnavism and religious faiths of Krishnaguru, Joiguru and Brahmakumari (Dhireswar Ranghang). The coexistence of *Taranghem* with Namghar, Church, or different prayer halls of Brahmakumari or Krishnaguru sects in the same village convey the impression about the overwhelming impact of other cultures on traditional culture of the community. As against this picture in some villages the institution of *Taranghem* has been obliterated completely. In the village called Lofer all the Karbi population have

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converted to Christianity and there exists the church as the only prayer hall. Thus *Taranghem* is losing its old glory and influences upon the society.

The plain Karbis living in the close proximity of the dominant Hindu population and other tribes may also be accounted for the weakening or the disappearing of the bachelors' dormitories in Karbi societies. The process of assimilation or acculturation with different groups may have possibly affected in the waning process of traditional social institutions. During the field visit, it was observed that there are many cases of inter-caste marriage and resultant alterations or relaxation of social norms. It is interesting to note that in case of inter-caste marriage; mostly the girls from other communities show interest to adopt the indigenous culture of their husbands but, the Karbi boys seem to be more interested in the wife's culture (Dhireswar Ranghang in interview).

The onslaught of modernization in every sphere of life and society may be recognized as one of the most powerful causes of socio-cultural changes among the Karbis. With the process modernization, came modern education, advanced communication and easy accessibility of knowledge, and all have facilitated in developing new approach towards life. Coming in to contact with the broader world, and the urban life, the youths seem to be disinclined towards their age old culture. Instead of traditional occupations the younger generations are now more interested in government jobs or business outside their villages. The contacts with the appealing city life have made them gradually ignore the delightful legacies that once bound them together.

Most of the younger folks have even forsaken their native language. Karbi language has been replaced by Assamese, English and Hindi. In such cases, the indigenous socio-cultural institutions like the *Taranghem* are bound to experience some changes. The modern education system has rendered great change to this dormitory system since young people don't have to depend entirely on traditional means. Thus, there is an apparent conflict between old and new order which is bound to decay traditional elements to conform to the new demands of the world. In an interview, Bipul Kathar expressed that the younger generations are now exposed to modern culture and differ from their elders. Their culture is facing a major setback since the educated young people are not very interested in their traditional practices. The conflict between old and young in approaches and values is clearly evident. A very significant threat to indigenous culture has been arisen with the advent of the *Amri Karbi* organization among the Karbis. The division among the people has posed a challenge to traditional practises of the community.

The socio-cultural transformation experienced by the Karbis is a common phenomenon occurring to most of the tribal and ethnic communities of the North East India. They have undergone a process of dilemma- the mixed feelings of surrendering their old heritage that seem as passé, and those traditional values and practices that formed the distinctive identity of the community. May be this

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unique dilemma has fostered the dream of preserving the decaying legacy against all odds, and it is surfacing among some of the young people in the community in the attempt to restore the *Taranghem* institutions.

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