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Cultural Attitude of Karbi People of North East India: An Investigation

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Abstract

North East India, a cradle of civilization, has a long, rich and unique history of multi-ethnic cultural composition. Topography of this region is a helping factor of the emergence of beautiful ethnic cultural affinity. The word culture is very comprehensive which includes Politics belief, language, social mores, norms, standards etc. A social group of population acquires these complexions through ages. Positive cultural attitude perpetuates them. The process of modernization has influenced every aspect of the mankind. This study is planned to investigate the attitude of Karbi people in relation to their cultural activities. It is basically based on primary data. The Karbi people of Assam (Karbhis) are of the people of the greater Mongoloid (Mongolian) tribe who have been living in North East Region since pre-historic Stone Age (A political history of Karbi Anglong). Not at long distance, Karbise were popularly known as "Mikirs" for they dwelt in Mikir Hills of Assam. With the origin of Karbi Anglong, covering Mikir Hills, as an administrative district in 1951 AD, Mikirs are come to known as "Karbi" (derived from the Tiboto-Barnes word "Me Akar Kibi" meaning keeping of spark of the fire in the fire place of a house for the purpose). Presently karbise are of the major ethnic group in N.E India. Besides Karbi Anglong district, they are found in Dima Hasao, Kamrup and Sunitpur District of Assam. Ways of Majority of the Karbis are Hindu and they can be said Sakta worshiper but their offering pujas are different.

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Introduction

North East India covers states-Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. The hill state Sikkim has recently been incorporated with North East India. North East India covers about seven percent of landmass i.e. about an area of 255000sq.km of India. Three sides of this region is surrounded by international territories like Bhutan, Tibet-China, Myanmar and Bangladesh on north, south and east. The Brahmaputra valley of Assam is the most expansive and fertile plains areas of North East India. North East India is the homeland of a large number of ethnic groups of different racial stocks. They are of different languages and socio-cultural traditions who came to this part of India from different directions in long past. It has been inhabited by different groups of Mongoloid people who came from north and east at different periods. A large number of tribal groups living in north east India are descendents of those who migrated here centuries ago from countries like-Mongolia, Tibet, China, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. Therefore, this region can be better called a 'Mongoloid India' and it is a part

of south East Asia. Many groups who migrated and settled in different parts of northeast India have social intercourse among themselves for various reasons. Each of them had unique religious and cultural values which contributed to build up of different attitudes and life styles of the tribal people in the north east region. Migrations, invasions, topography, socio-cultural interactions, cooperation are the helping factors of the presence of unique multi-ethnic cultural composition in northeast India. The streams of the Australoid also came to this region. The diverse Mongoloid groups in course of time settled down in different habitats and ecological settings of north eastern region crystallized into distinct entities which are referred to as tribes today (Bhagabati, 1988:1-2;192:1-2). The north eastern has rich ethnic diversities due to the migration of people from different directions. The north eastern region of India can be named as tribal zone as there are 145 tribal communities of which 78 are large each with a population of more than five thousand. Tribal community's constitute around 12 percent of the total tribal population of India and about 26 percent of the

total population of North East India. They are not concentrated at a particular district or state of this region. Some of the major tribes of this region are Bodos, Khasis, Khyntiams, Pnars, Garos, Mizos, Karbis, Mishings, Konyak, Ao, Sema, Angami, Tangkul, Kabui, Thado, Hmar, Galong, Nishi, Wancho, Adi, Dimasa Kacharis, Rabhas, Kuki, Tiwas etc.

Karbi People and their Cultural Activities

The Karbis are an important ethnic group in the hill areas of Assam. Racially, the Karbis belong to the Mongoloid group and linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burma group. The original home of the various people speaking Tibeto-Burma languages was in western China near the Yang-Tse-Kiang and the Howang-ho-rivers and from these places they came down the courses of Brahmaputra, the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy and entered India and Burma. The Karbis are the principal tribal community in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. This district is divided into 11 Development Blocks. Besides Karbi Anglong district they are found to dwell in Dima Hasao, Kamrup, Marigaon, Nagaon, Golaghat, Karimganj, Lakhimpur, Sunitpur districts of Assam. The Karbi inhabited areas also include Balijan circle of Papumpare District in Arunachal Pradesh, Jaintia Hills, Ri Bhei and East Khasi Hills Districts in Meghalaya and Dimapur District in Nagaland. Apart from Assam, the Karbis are also recognised as Scheduled Tribes in Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland. With a population of around 406,000 as per 2001 census, the Karbis constitute the third largest tribal community in Assam after the Bodos and the Mishings. Cultural aspects of tribal community are of importance to note. A number of tribal communities professing different religious faiths and speaking different languages and dialects are present in Assam. The state has a large number of tribes with their variety in tradition, culture, dresses and exotic way of life. Most of the tribes have their own practices of languages, some of their traditions are so unique and lively that these cause wonder to others.

Karbi cultural activities are the identities of the Karbis. The Karbis have a colourful culture and their way of life is very simple. Their folk-tales and folk-lore are the source of the evolution of Karbi culture. About 85% Karbi people still practice their traditional belief system which is Animistic called 'Hemphu Mukrang'. The practitioners of traditional worship believe in reincarnation and honour the ancestors. They mainly speak their native language i.e. the Karbi language. The Karbis are a patrilineal society. There are five major classes or Kur among Karbis and each Kur is again subdivided into many sub-classes. These clans are exogamous in other words, marriages between members of the same clan are not allowed as they consider brothers and sisters among themselves. Marriages do not change surname of their bride and groom. Arranged marriages are rarely seen in modern Karbi society. The children of the couple would inherit the surname of their father. The cultural activities of Karbis include Chojun, Peng Karkli, Thoi Asor, Rit Asor, Botor Kekur are performed around the year and some of them at specific time of the year. Rongker is a festival celebrated as thanksgiving to God and asking their assurance to protect them from any evil harm that they may happen to the whole village. Botor Kekur is related to agricultural activities. The Chomangkan or thi-karhi is a ceremony performed by a family for the peace and safe passage of the soul of family members who died recently or long ago and never to celebrate them again. The Karbis have a unique culture of producing traditional dresses through

textiles which are produced with the help of the 'traditional backstrap looms.' There are gender and age specific clothing with culturally coded motifs which give a distinct appearance and meaning to the young men and women, married couple and older male and female folks who wear them. Some of the male dresses are- Choi Hongthor, Choi' ik, Pe- Seleng, Rikong, Poho, Chepan, Jambili, Vojaru ani etc. Females have a variety of clothing such as Pini Kamplok, Jiso, Pekok, Vamkok, Pe- Seleng, Piniku, Piba, Mulajin and Jamborong etc.

Rice is their principal food. Most of them are non-vegetarian. Traditionally prepared wine is liked by them. It is essential commodity for their traditional festivals. Offering liquor to guests is a matter of honour. Tradition indicated that the Karbis used to shift from village to village in search of fertile soil, leaving their homes and hearths exhausting a particular area by the process of Jhum cultivation, or otherwise known as shifting cultivation, a process involving clearing jungle and burning the dried debris on which cultivation is done. In the process the cultivators had to shift often as and when fertile soil is exhausted in a particular area (Das, 2001:8).

Cultural Attitude

Attitude is an inner opinion or feeling. How an individual feels or what he believes is his attitude (Best, 1959). Attitude determines attachment-detachment, affinity-aversion, identification-indifference and liking-disliking of an individual for subjects-objects of his daily life. Attitude is dynamic, it changes with time and experiences. It is not innate but is acquired and formed. Attitudes are made, modelled and modified by the experiences, observations and perceptions of an individual in his life. Culture is an important aspect of human society. In the words of anthropologist E.B. Tylor, culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." It includes material as well as non-material things of organised group of people. In common parlance, culture is often used to refer specifically to the symbolic markers used by ethnic groups to distinguish themselves visibly from each other such as body modification, clothing or jewellery. The term cultural attitude of the present problem denotes the feelings, likings, disliking, contiguity, detachment of Karbis into their age old belief system, knowledge, art, traditions, laws, habits, and similar other cultural activities which are in active mode among Karbi communities. The Karbis do not have their written evidence of their past and ancestors. Karbi folk culture, beliefs, mass habits and behaviours, art, value system, social norms and ideals, customs are the sources to introduce with their developmental stages. Study of cultural attitude is significant as it is directly or indirectly linked for the advancement and expansion of culture.) Positive and logical cultural attitude strengthens and promotes the cultural interrelations, social unity and all round development of the society. A good number of studies have been done on the history of Karbis. The present paper is undertaken keeping in view the following objectives: To investigate the cultural attitude of Karbi people of Langsomepi Development Block in Karbi Anglong district of Assam.

Methodology of the Study

The universe of this study is Karbi Anglong district of Assam. To achieve the objectives of the study, a sample of 50 Karbi people consisting of male, female, youth, adult of town and rural areas has been selected from the Langsomepi Development

Block. In the selection of both study area and sample population simple random and purposive method of research are used. Self-prepared Cultural Attitude Scale (Yes/No) is used to collect the required information for this study.

Discussion

Information gathered in the form of responses by Cultural Attitude Scale (CAS) for this study have been compiled in Table-1 to get findings. CAS consists of ten statements. They help to project the mental feelings of the sample respondents about Karbi culture and its components. The sample respondents' reactions 'Yes', or 'No' are written in percentage.

It is found that 98% of the total sample respondents have positive attitude as they ticked 'yes' against the statement 1 of CAS and only 2% of them ticked 'no' against the same statement. Majority of the sample respondents favour Karbi cultural activities, traditional food habits, dresses, and language. Though, majority of the sample respondents have positive attitude toward Karbi culture but they also want change or advancement of some variables like folk beliefs, food habits and dresses, influence of culture, leadership qualities of Karbi culture. A clear difference between feelings of youth and adult sample people is observed in respect to

Table 1: Percentage of Responses

S. No.	Statements	% age of Responses	
		Yes	No
1	I like Karbi culture because it is developed by our ancestors.	98%	2%
2	Our cultural activities give me immense pleasure and comfort.	70%	30%
3	Karbi traditional food habits and dresses are hygienic.	76%	24%
4	Karbi Animism (religion) or folk belief is not blind belief.	48%	52%
5	The process of modernisation has reduced the popularity of Karbi cultural activities.	60%	40%
6	Karbi is my favourite language.	90%	10%
7	Our culture is not a cause of socio-economic and educational backwardness.	58%	42%
8	We need dynamic cultural leader to advance our culture.	80%	20%
9	Culture is man-made creation so we can change it.	64%	36%
10	Our cultural activities make us active and progressive.	88%	12%

Findings

1. Sample respondents of this study have positive attitude toward Karbi culture.
2. According to the sample respondents' reactions Karbi culture is the source of pleasure, vigour, and progress.
3. Sample respondents feel that Karbi culture requires dynamic and effective leader to protect Karbi culture from some of the evil effects of modernisation.
4. Sample respondents have likings for Karbi traditional food, dresses, and language.
5. Previous studies show that 85% Karbis have faith in Animism or Karbi folk-beliefs but 52% sample respondents of this study seem to have negative attitude toward animism.
6. Responses of this study also confirm that culture is dynamic in nature as 64% of the total respondents reacted in favour of statement- 9 i.e. 'Culture is manmade creation so we can change it'.

Conclusion

The present study leads the researchers to conclude that Karbi culture has unique position in North East India and among the Karbis it is popular culture. The Karbi culture has positive effect upon Karbi people. Further study on cultural attitude of Karbi people is needed.

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