

SIGNIFICANCE OF RICE IN CULTURAL TRADITION OF THE KARBIS OF KARBI ANGLONG, ASSAM

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Abstract: Rice is one of the world's important food cereal crop and a main food source for more than a third of the world's population. It is one of the earliest domesticated plant in the context of socio-cultural evolution of human being. Rice is the prime staple food of entire South-East Asia, including India. It is the prime staple food of different ethnic groups and inhabitants of entire Northeast India as well, including the Karbis of Karbi Anglong in Assam. The prime objective of this paper is to examine the traditional method of rice cultivation as well as the cultural significance of rice among of the Karbis. Primary data were collected through empirical field work by using appropriate anthropological methods. The paper has analyzed in detail how rice is intimately associated with the cultural traditions of the Karbis. It has also discussed about the local varieties of cultivated paddy and their indigenous methods of preservation as well. It has been observed that the concerned people utilized a number of natural resources related to their traditional economic organization and food. They apply their traditional knowledge related to the collection and utilization of different natural resources and to prepare their food.

Keywords: Karbi, Assam, Rice, Jhum Cultivation.

INTRODUCTION

Rice is first mentioned in the *Yajur Veda* (1500-800 BC) and then is frequently referred to in the Sanskrit texts. In India there is a saying that grains of rice should be like two brothers, close but not stuck together. Rice is often directly associated with prosperity and fertility; hence there is the custom of throwing rice at newlyweds. In India, rice is always the first food offered to the babies when they start eating solids or to husband by his new bride, to ensure they will have children (Dogara and Jumare, 2014). One of the significant rice growing region of India is the Northeastern region, comprised with the seven sister states and primarily the basin of Brahmaputra river as well as in Barak valley region of Assam. Bose (1953) has discussed the 'structure of a cultural trait' with reference to rice. He has shown how a number of elements and traits gather around rice. The trait of rice is connected with material culture, social structure, socio-religious rites and magico-religious performances. In another study, Bose (1956) discussed in detail about the distribution of socio-cultural traits, in different natural regions of India. In this regard, for the understanding of Indian unity in diversity, Bose conducted his study in 311 districts and collected data on material cultural traits, with a special focus on paddy cultivation, plough and husking implements. Further, Bose (1971) studied in detail the process of shifting hill cultivation across India. He had specially mentioned about the practices of

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shifting hill cultivation of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills, along with their variability of crop productions. Suzanne Hanchett (1988) has studied the symbolic structure built around the Hindu family festivals 'metaphorised' through coloured rice. She conducted her fieldwork in two Karnataka villages and revealed the florid universe of festivals in which five kinds of rice are used. These included boiled rice, *pangal*, *puliyogare*, yoghurt rice and *kadamba* (alternatively *citranna*).

PRESENT STUDY—OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

Karbi Anglong District is situated in the central part of Assam. It consists mostly of undulating and hilly terrain with numerous rivers and streams and is situated between 25°33'N to 26°35'N Latitude and 92°10'E to 93°50'E Longitude. The district with dense tropical forest covered hills and flat plains. The population of the district is predominantly tribal and the Karbi is the principal tribe of the region. It has the total geographical area of 10,434 sq. kms. The district can be broadly divided into two physiographic units viz. hills and plains. About 85 percent of the district is covered by the hills. As per the State Forest Report, 1999, of Forest Survey of India, Dehradun, 6044 sq. km of the district is dense forest, while 2776 sq. km is under open forest cover. The important forest types found in Karbi Anglong district are Moist Semi-evergreen forests, Moist Mixed Deciduous forests, Riverrain Type, Miscellaneous type with scattered pure or mixed patches of bamboos (Das, 2010).

The Karbis generally known as the Mikirs constitute one of the important tribes of Assam. The origin and exact route of their migration to the present habitat is quite obscure. They are scattered over different districts of Assam and Khasi hills of Meghalaya. Notwithstanding, they are mostly concentrated in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. They called themselves as '*Arleng*' which means slanting place near a hill and thus denotes the people living in the slopes of the hills. Though many scholars used the term '*Arleng*' equivalent to the word man, actually the '*Manit*' or '*Munit*' is the proper term used by the Karbis to denote a person. In fact, the word '*Arleng*' is confined to the man of Karbi tribe only (Lyall, 1997). Ethnically they belong to Mongoloid group and linguistically they belong to Tibeto Burman group (Teron, 2011).

Traditionally the Karbi is a hill tribe but they are scattered over plain areas also. The Karbi culture has been imbibed with many elements of the culture of Assamese, Caste Hindus and Khasis. The culture of the Karbi are prominent for trades like depending on Jhumming, central place of bamboo in material culture, indispensable role of rice beer in socio-economic and religious life and for their rich folklores including a local version of the Hindu epic Ramayana, known as *Sabin Alun* among them (Medhi, 1988).

The livelihood of the Karbis has a deep co-relation with surrounding environment, specially to the forest from multidimensional perspective. However, due to alarming growth of habitation and several other factors, 6844 hectares of

land became degraded, which had reduced their scope of accessibility to the natural resources. For the sustenance of their livelihood, prevention of environmental degradation is earnestly required. In this regard the folk culture of the Karbis can be applied for environmental sustainability and security of livelihood (Teron, 2011). Material culture of the Karbis are significantly related to their surrounding nature and natural resources (Bhattacharjee, 2015). Even in their traditional healing methods also, a number of natural objects are used as sacred material objects (Bhattacharjee, 2015; Bhattacharjee, 2015 and Bhattacharjee, 2016). Among the Karbis, rice is immensely important in their preparation of traditional country liquor (Bhattacharjee, 2013). Meanwhile, without rice a number of their animistic rituals cannot be conducted (Bhattacharjee, 2016).

However, the studies related to their rice production through jhum cultivation system by following a sequential procedure through their ethnic calendar, as done by the Karbis are not being conducted. The importances of rice in their Animistic rituals, magico religious healing and symbolic object are yet to be studied in details. Further, the myths related to the history or origin of rice cultivation and folklore related to rice cultivation are yet to be studied. The local varieties of rice as cultivated by them and their indigenous method of preservation related to it are yet to get conducted. Keeping in view of this research gap, the present study has been conducted.

Objectives of the study

The present study has the following objectives-

1. To know about the myth of origin of rice cultivation among the Kabis.
2. To describe the method of rice cultivation through jhum practices.
3. To know in detail about their ethnic calendar and co-related sequential procedure of rice cultivation.
4. To discuss in detail that, how rice is used in their Animistic rituals, magico-religious healing and in oath, ordeal as a symbolic object.
5. To collect data on their traditional varieties of paddy and their method of preservation.

Methodology

Karbi Anglong is one of the two hill districts of Assam. Geographically, Karbi Anglong comes under rain shadow zones of Assam. Out of the total cultivable land of the district, only 10 percent are under settled cultivation. Meanwhile, there is no irrigation facility in the district to support settled cultivation. 90 percent of the cultivable land and cultivation works are based on traditional jhum practices, by them. Locally they use to call it as *Rit-Ke-Nong*. Related to the study, field works were conducted in the Hamren Sub division of West Karbi Anglong. The study was

done in the selected villages of Chinthong and Amri Block of Hamren. In these two blocks, highest concentration of jhum cultivation can be noticed. The said villages were selected because all the Karbi families of the concerned villages were totally associated with jhum cultivation, at least through three generations and even more. It can be represented through the following table:

TABLE-1: THE KARBI POPULATION IN THE STUDIED VILLAGES

Sub Division	Block	Village name	Village code**	Total Karbi family studied++	Male++	Female++	Total++
Hamren	Amri	Pumakunchi	02042300	101	406	397	803
Hamren	Amri	Phutsari	02044100	125	503	498	1001
Hamren	Chinthong	Umat	02091700	192	704	699	1403
Hamren	Chinthong	Langsomepi	02090200	206	783	759	1542
TOTAL				624	2396	2353	4749

Source: (**Record as per the office of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council) and (++) Field study, 2014-2018)

The studied villages were some of the earliest settlements of the Karbis where only the Karbi families were selected. In this regard, the study was done on total 624 Karbi families, with a total population of 4749. Among them there were 2396 (50.45%) male and 2353(49.55%) female, with a sex ratio of 982. All of them were directly associated with the jhum cultivation. Preliminary Census Schedule was applied to know about their demographic details. Interviews were taken to about the detail procedure of jhum cultivation, its ethnic calendar. Different local varieties of rice cultivation and its ethnic methods of preservation. Further, data were collected to know about the cultural significance of rice cultivation among the Karbis.

Secondary data have been collected from books, journals, office records etc. Primary data have been gathered from the study villages through observation, interview, case study and genealogical methods. Informal discussions also helped the authors to collect, analyze and interpret data.

PIVOTAL PLACE OF RICE IN THE CULTURE OF THE KARBIS

Origin of Rice cultivation- *Sokkeplang*

Rice is cultivated by the Karbi people themselves. It is consumed either steamed in a bamboo tubes, pounded and powdered to make rice cakes, as roasted and flattened rice (*sangpher*), as fried powdered rice (*sang-aduk*) and as a rice powder (*him*) which is soaked for an hour and pounded. There is an oral narrative about the origin of rice:

One day two Karbi chiefs namely Teron Rongsopo and Dandivar Sarpo, along

with the Kuki Chin chief named Kuki Chindaipo, went together for fishing in the Kuleng river. In the upstream of the river they saw a paddy plant with glowing seeds. They had not seen such a beautiful plant before. So, they brought some of the seed with them. The seeds were carried by Rongsopo but it was slipped off from his hand and falls into the river and the seeds were swallowed by a fish. Again, one day Chindaipo went for fishing, he caught the fish and from this fish he got the glowing seeds and sowed there in his garden, from which grew beautiful bunches of plant. One day Karbi chief with his grandson on his back was taking a walk in the village and entered to the house of Chindaipo. The baby's attention was suddenly drawn to the glowing bunches in the garden and started to cry; then Chindaipo plucked a bunch and handed it over to Rongsopo to give to the baby. Later on, the Karbi chief also sowed the seed in his own garden, harvested and cooked it. For testing, first he gave it to a dog to eat. The dog survived. Then it was given to a very old lady. Instead of dying, the old lady became stronger. After successful experimentation of the new crop, and knowing that those seeds are eatable all the villagers started to cultivate it. Having found good to eat everyone wanted to eat rice more and more and every one began to say *Ne anchoji*. In Karbi dialect "an" means so much and "ne an" means 'this much'. Later on rice came to be called as "an". There were varieties of rice cultivated by the Karbis, but there were certain rice varieties such as *Kathi*, *Dimro* and *Rrengkum(rongaon)* are considered the earliest ones.

The discovery of rice was narrated into a song called *Poromalun*. The song is sung in the night of completion of harvesting of paddy at the jhum field and after the paddy has been threshed and brought to home. This song was sung accompanied by dance. Bringing of paddy was called as *Sokkeroi*, 'Sok' means 'paddy' and 'Keroi' means 'bringing in'. This bringing of *Porom Alun* was accompanied by dance was called *Hachakakan*.

The Karbis consider rice as the most sacred agricultural product related to any ritual, because it was gifted to the earth by their supreme deity and it was suddenly discovered by their ancestral chiefs. In a traditional Karbi society there are different rituals for propitiation of rice. For the good production of rice, a ritual is performed known as *Menu karkli*. It is performed when the paddy plants started to blooming. It is performed either in the house or on the paddy field. After harvesting a ritual is celebrated known as *Hachakekan*. This ritual involves with the singing the origin of rice, through the mode of narrating. In every harvesting season, each Karbi household performs a ritual called '*Sang Kimi Arnam Kepi*' means 'new rice sanctification ceremony'. Another worship related to rice is *An-kimikecho* which means 'new rice eating'; in this occasion relatives and friends are invited. Their traditional country liquor *Hor-lang* or *Horis* also prepared from rice.

Jhum Cultivation as a Traditional Method of Rice Production

Traditionally the Karbis practice Jhum cultivation (slash and burn) in the hill

areas and produced varieties of crops. Their local term of jhum is Rit-Ke-Nong, but usually they use to say it as jhum. The people who are dwelling in the interior areas covered by the forests perform shifting hill cultivation for their survival with the application of simple technology. The whole operation started at the fall of winter. The herbs, shrubs and trees of the selected areas for jhumming are cut down at the month of February and left to dry for more than a month and set it on fire. It has been observed from the opposite side that was from the bottom of the hill. The burning is done mostly at the late afternoon.

The next phase of Jhum is waiting for rain. During this time the entire half burnt trees and bushes are collected and re-burnt and clean the place for jhumming purpose. The shovels and hoe are used to dress up the field. The seeds of the maize were plants as maize grows quickly at the first start of rain. Paddy seeds are broadcasted along with cotton or sesame. There are three kinds of seeds broadcasted in a place at a time- maize (*thengthe*), paddy (*sok*) and sesame (*nempo*) or cotton (*tula*). At that time sesame and jute is broadcasted in a separate plot and it is not used to get mixed with other crops. The harvesting of crops are done in the month of September to October. The sesame which is broadcasted as the last item thus comes last in the month of December.

i) Ethnic calendar and sequential procedure

The stages of the Jhum cultivation are-*Hawar kelang* (selection of land); *Ritkepan* (cutting of trees, herbs and shrubs for Jhum field); *Meh kekai* (burning the rubbishes); *Sokkarlu* (picking up of unwanted herbs and shrubs from the crops field); *Re karhi* (clearance of half burnt logs and unwanted things); *Rit kenong* (broadcasting of different seeds with dress up the field by digging with spade or hoe); *Sokthekehon* (guarding the crops from the wild animal at night by preparing temporary house on the tree top i.e. *hemtap* or *hemtup*); *Sokkerot* (harvesting the crop).

TABLE-2: PRISTINE JHUM CALENDAR OF THE KARBIS

Sl. No.	Karbi month	English equivalent month	Climatic condition and natural indicator	Activities related to Jhum
1.	<i>Thang-thang</i>	February	Dry	Suitable land in selected and bushes cleared.
2.	<i>There</i>	March	Dry and windy.	Bushes are left to dry. After drying, it is burnt.
3.	<i>Jangmi</i>	April	Moderate climate with very little amount of rainfall.	Left over bushes are cleared and seeds of paddy are sowed, with others.

4.	<i>Aru</i>	May	Mosoon starts.	Rice is cultivated.
5.	<i>Vosik</i>	June	Heavy rainfall with lots of humidity.	Weeds are removed from the cultivated area.
6.	<i>Jakhong</i>	July	Heavy rainfall with lots of humidity.	Seasame can be sowed. Rice and Maize are harvested
7.	<i>Pai-pai</i>	August	Heavy rainfall with lots of humidity.	Rice are collected and stored.
8.	<i>Chiti</i>	September	Amount of rainfall decreases.	Rice are collected and stored.
9.	<i>Phre</i>	October	Monsoon retreats clear sky.	Seasamum(til) are collected.

Source: Field study

ii) Local varieties and traditional methods of preservation

Through Jhum cultivation, which is also locally known as *Rit-Ke-Nong*, the Karbis cultivate certain exclusively local varieties of rice like *Sokvothung*, *Mairen*, *Inglongabara*, *Inglongajoha*. All such varieties are of boiled rice only. In each of such varieties, the process of cultivation and the ethnic calendar is same. The harvesting usually takes place in the month of November to December. They use to pile up the paddy in their courtyard. The Karbis have a phrase, “*Matijong sok buichejong*”, where *Matijong* is the name of December in Karbi, *Sok* means paddy, *Bui* means piling up and *Chejong* means merriment or enthusiasm. After that, they use to perform a traditional dance, called as *Hacha Kaekan*. It is a community festival, where the male youths performed the dance in the courtyard of the house, by circulating the females who are associated with the storage of piled up paddy. The harvested paddy is, stored by the females in bamboo made big baskets named as *Hoton*. At the bottom of the *Hoton*, at first their organically cultivated red chillies are kept, then the rice is filled up upto half of the portion. Again, red chillies are kept and the *Hoton* was totally filled up. In the upper most layer, their organically cultivated turmeric use to be kept, before putting on the perforated lid. Then they use to keep those big baskets in their traditional granary, named as *Sokpuru*. It is basically a stilt house, made up of thatch and bamboo. The windows are built in the northern and eastern corners of it, for plentiful of sunlight and ventilation of air. At the entrance door of the granary, they used to keep an auspicious ritualistic object named as *Hem Angtar*. A small portion of the paddy is kept by them in there, as a symbol to avoid scarcity of food. Again, in the next season, they would take a portion of paddy from it and sow it in the selected portion of land for jhum cultivation, with a faith to get even a better crop production than the previous year.

iii) Technology Applied

The Karbis use simple and small number of tools in their agricultural work. They use *nopak* (big knife) for cutting herbs, shrubs and trees, collect the half-burnt logs with hands and cut it with knife to clear jungles for the preparation of crops field. The seeds of are carried with the *hoton* or *hakso* (a kind of basket) to spread on the soil after loosening it with hoe (*ku*). *Chumleng* is used to dig the soil and to put the seeds at the digging place. They use the *chingjor* (crowbar), *nokekrangso* (sickle) which are used to harvest the crops. The implements used in the jhum cultivation are given in the table-3.

TABLE-3: TOOLS USED IN JHUM CULTIVATION

Name of the Tool	Brief description and usage
<i>Nopak</i>	A big knife for cutting trees, herbs and shrubs
<i>Cho</i>	An axe, to cut the big trees in jhum field.
Ku	A spade, used for digging the soil
Chumleng	A digging stick, used for putting the seeds of crops in holes of earth.
Chingjor	A crowbar, for digging the soil to picked-up the potatoes
<i>Tari nokek:</i>	A knife, clasp knife, used to harvest the crops
Nokekrangso	A sickle, to harvest the crops.
Ingtong	A kind of basket to carry the crops and other material.
Khanga	A kind of bamboo basket to carry the harvest crops and other materials.
Hoton	A bamboo basket, used as a container at the time of broadcasting of the crops.
Hak	A kind of bamboo basket having legs to keep-carry seeds or used as a container at the time of harvesting of sesame.
Phanki	A bamboo stick to carry harvested crops in shoulder.
Jintaak	A bamboo rope to tie up the harvested crops and other materials

iv) Division of Labour

It can be noted that, integral to cultivation of rice through traditional jhum cultural practices, both male and female work together from start to end. Both males and females clear the plot for cultivation by burning the vegetations. Only the males are allowed to set the fire on the trees and bushes, because it is believed by them that the emitted smoke could create undesired problem during pregnancy of women. It is also interpreted that women being a mother could not set fire on the lap of nature or mother earth. After burning the trees and weeds, the males remove the ashes with the digging stick and both the males and females spread the seeds. They equally participate in the folk performances related to agriculture. Harvesting of the crops is done by both of the sexes, whereas the storing is mostly done by the males. It can

be noted that, during menstrual period the females do not do any cultivation work and avoid going to the agricultural field. On the other hand, during the pollution period related to death of the close or primary consanguineal kin members they refrain from agricultural work.

Rice in the Animistic Rituals and Magico-religious healing

The most important ritual which is performed in every Karbi household was *Se-Karkli* (Bhattacharjee, 2020:24). Rice being considered as a symbol of prosperity and higher status among the Karbis is used for the ritual. In *Se-Karkli* after arranging alter with banana leaf and bamboo, rice is placed on the banana leaf. The rice is soaked in a bowl of water and is placed on the banana leaf. Total nine pinches of rice called as *sang kebo*, are placed on alter called as *dovan*. In some of the *Se Karkli* only three pinches of rice are placed on alter, which are dedicated to the deities namely *Hemphu, Rasinja and Mukrang*. The pinch of rice is a mark of an offering to the deities for whom the ritual was being held. It is called as *kethok*. Some portion of the soaked rice is pounded into a powder. The rice powder is mixed with water and the solution is smeared on the *dovan* as a means of honouring the deity. Again, rice is also placed at the bottom of the *dovan* in a place called *Me-thek*, a pinch of rice is also placed there to honour the bamboo which are used during the rituals. There is a belief that bamboo has promised to safeguard the Karbis and would give its life for their well-being and protection when the need is required, thus a pinch of rice is also offered to the bamboo to remind that the bamboo is also not forgotten of their sacrifice.

The Karbis strongly believe that, in a number of cases health disorders and allied misfortunes used to occur due to the malevolent effects of certain evil agencies. To cure the patient, they use to conduct magico-religious healing known as *Sa-Kelang*. A few grains of rice, with appropriate chants, are also placed at the neck of the fowl to be sacrificed for the ritual. It is done to let the fowl know that the killing is done to appease the benevolence and to cure the patient from malevolence; let the sacrifice is to be honoured. Meanwhile, in case of their annual village or territorial level annual ritual known as *Chojun*, the pigs are fed with a few grains of rice. The chants use to pray for the safety, security of the entire village and well-being of all of the concerned dwellers. The concerned magico-religious healers, symbolically use to capture the malevolent effects in to the rice, through his chants and fed it to the fowl or pig. Then it is sacrificed means that the evil effects are redressed permanently. As a result, the affected people would get completely cured or the village, territory can remain protected from any evil effects.

Nihukachiri is a kind of psychological disorder. Among the Karbis it is believed that whenever a child does things which are unusual in nature, then they are believed to be suffering from *Nihukachiri*. It use to take place between the father of the child

and the maternal uncle of the child. By uttering the chants known as *chihut-chiput*, a rice ball is fed to the patient by the maternal uncle along with the sanctified water called as *Tuman* for five times in case of female and six times in case of male. After feeding, a brass ring is tied up with the sacred thread *hon-kevai* as a necklace to the child, and the cloths which were bought by the maternal uncle is given to the child to wear. It is followed by a feast thereafter. The balls of rice consumed through the hands of the maternal uncle can heal them from such ailment.

Rice is used to be offered to the highest level of divination, called as *Sangtarpikelang*. *Voti Sanglang*. Other types of divination include *Hansosanglang*, *chirsanglang*, *phelangsanglang*, *jintaksanglang* etc. *Sangtarpikelang*, is to be done in the morning. A pinch of rice is being placed on the banana leaf and on the pinch of rice a metal ring is kept and on that ring an egg is kept. The rice is placed as a mark of offering to the deities.

There use to be a ritualistic calendar related to rice cultivation among the Karbis. After the end of a harvesting season and before the onset of the Karbi New Year, in the month of February, they use to perform *Chojun*, in the end of December or first week of January, for a prosperous new year with full of crop cultivation. In the month of May, during the onset of rainy season, in the selected portion of Jhum land along with their homestead, *Than Rongker* is being performed, to get plentiful of rice cultivation. Among the Karbis, certain families are the followers of *Lokhimon*, who use to have vegetarian diet and perform certain rituals on every Thursday. They use to believe that, their female Deity *Lokhi* is the supreme for all of their wealth, peace and prosperity. They have a strong faith that, paddy is brought to the earth by *Lokhi*. On every Thursday, they use to worship *Lokhi* with the auspicious food offerings made up of rice, cultivated by themselves. It can be noted that, a Lokhimon follower, if he is associated jhum, then he usually worships the deity *Lokhi*, in the cultivable land, before the setting of fire on the existing bushes.

Rice in the Rituals related to Rites-de-Passage

In case of child birth, the pinch of rice is used in the rituals called as *Se-Karkli*. This is done for the safety and security of the new born babies and their mothers. After the child birth, the name giving of the child is conducted within three to four months. At first, three pinches of rice called as *sang kebo* were offered to their deities *Hemphu*, *Rasinja* and *Mukrang*. Then on the alter called as *dovan*, in the name of at least three great grandparents, plantain leaves are placed individually. On those leaves, along with the country liquor *Horlang* and most sacred ritual object *Bongkrok*, little bit of cooked rice is placed. It can be noted that, the Karbis is used to cook rice for the soul, till the body is taken out for the cremation. So, they re-invite the ancestral soul through the rice only. The child is used to touch any one of those leaves and that particular name will be considered only.

Rice is also used during the marital rituals among the Karbis. During the main ceremony five, seven or nine handful of rice are used to be taken and exchanged in between the two families of the bride and groom. This is called as *Munsin*. It is a symbol of honour, that the newly married couple may be blessed abundantly.

During the death rituals, rice is cooked with sesame seeds, only one woman, called as *rantini* is allowed to cook it for the deceased people. She is used to cook it for twice in a day for the departed soul, till the dead body stat carried out for cremation. During that time, she is not allowed to cook for anyone. It is believed that even though the person is dead, the soul needs to be fed. Thus, the rice is used to be cooked with sesame seeds.

Rice as a Symbol of Oath and Ordeal

Among the Karbis, traditional political organization and the role of traditional village headman is very significant (Bhattacharjee, 2017:365). Offenses and conflicts are very rare in the Karbi villages. However, sometime certain disputes or quarrel occur. In such cases, the traditional village headman or *Gaon bura* conducts the village court. He places a plantain leaf on the earth and on that leaf the *Gaon buraplace Horlang, Bongkrok* and a few grains of rice. Both the victim and offender are to sit in the opposite directions, by keeping the plantain leaf, just in between them. Both of them have to touch the leaf and must take an oath and ordeal in the name of their supreme deity *Hemphu Mukhrang* that, they will not suppress any fact or would not lie in the entire process of trial. The rice possesses a symbolic value in this process. Rice grains and rice bear *Horlang* symbolizes here the security of food and livelihood of the concerned person and his family members. Thus, any breach of such oath and ordeal, in the presence of rice grain and rice bear, may bring severe misfortune in their livelihood. In the cases of divorce and separation, the husband or his family, has to provide handsome quantity of rice, as prescribed by the village headman to the wife and her family. In case of any physical assault, the offender has to compensate the victim with prescribed amount of rice.

Preparation of the traditional Rice beer

The traditional country liquor of the Karbis is known as *Horlang*. It is an integral part of their every religious performances, rituals and social ceremonies. It is a kind of rice beer, processed by the fermentation of cooked rice, added with locally prepared yeast cake called as *Thap*. The distilling product out of fermented cooked rice is called as *Horlang*. *Thap* is the prime element for it's preparation. It is cultured by using selected floral products, like leaves of *Marthu (Croton joufra)*, bark of *Thamre (Acacia pennala)*, flowers of *Ramne (Amomum conynostachyum)*, which use to contain high percentage of alcohol in nature. *Thap* prepared from *Amomum conynostachyum* seems to be good quality and a good fragrance as well. For the preparation of *Horlang*, the cooked rice is kept for fermentation, added with *Thap*

and then transferred to a container, by adding water into it. It can be noted that, for the preparation of 1 litre of Horlang, 100 gram of rice, 100 gm of *Thap* and around 850 ml of water is required. It is used to be stored for two to three days in summer and three to four days in winter or according to the weather. In this way, they retrieve the matured rice beer. After excluding the limited beer, the remaining rice product (*Bechurang*) is re-added with adequate water and kept it for another 24 hours for fermentation. On the next day it is used for preparation of *Horlang*. In certain cases, *Hor* is prepared by mixing different organic materials like *Phuk-ik* (*Clerodendrum viscosum*), *Hanso* (*Zingiber officinale*), *Ingkian* (*Ricinus communis*), *Sokaphi* (*Cymbopogon citratus*), *Hepisokran* (*Solanum indicum*), *Jangphang* (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), and *Noklang* (Jaggary). which is used to enhance the production of alcohol and used to make it stronger in taste. *Horlang* is used as a symbol of ‘Aman’ (honour) to guest or respect to others, which is well visible during ‘Adam-Asar’ (marriage). Properly made traditional *Horlang* has remarkable medicinal value as well, which can be used to cure the diseases like cholera, dysentery, diarrhoea etc. In such cases, the traditional medicine man, prepares the herbal medicine, in the form of small pieces of cake or in the form of powder. Such medicines are to be taken, after their lunch. Thereafter, it is advised to the concerned patients, to sip a little amount of *Horlang*, because they considered it as very effective to prevent dehydration. It is also used for the preservation of dry fish and meat, by regularly sprinkling a little bit of the said liquid on them.

Folksong Related to the Rice among the Karbis

It can be noted that, before coming into contact with the cultivation of the paddy, the Karbis used to live on wild vegetables and fruits as their staple food. It was mentioned in their song *Rukasen* as follows-

Pirthe kang dukakolang

Kathi vangvaakolang.

Longleankorpachoran

Sining Angkor jhurhan.

Lasipachoranjorlang

The broad meaning of the song goes like this: This was the story of the time when the world was just created and the paddy was yet to come into existence. The Karbis ate spouts of the ground.

It might be the fact that actually they starved in famine. Further, it can be noted that goddess Lakshmi took the permission from lord *Indra* and came down to the earth on a thread to redress the misfortune of the Karbis. Unfortunately, the thread got stuck to a banyan tree, for which she had to stay on that tree. As a result of this, all the creatures taking shelter under that tree started to get plenty of food. One night *Teron Rongsospo* dreamt about this incidence. He told his youngest son to

go along with his servants and to locate goddess *Lakshmi*. As their boat reached to the banyan tree, it sank and all the passengers were drowned, except an orphan boy named as *Ronsing*. He had collected enough paddy seeds from the abode of *Lakshmi*. But in the return journey *Ronsing* lost all the paddy seeds which he brought along with him with utmost care, from the banyan tree which was eaten by a fish.

A rat living by the side of the river found the fish, recovered the seeds from it and planted those on the earth. As a result, that area became just like a paddy field. One day *Teron Rongsopo* went with his youngest daughter to visit his friend, the rat, to find about the facts of the mysterious crop. The youngest daughter of *Teron Rongsopo*, carried the goddess *Lakshmi*, with utmost devotion on her back, following proper rites and rituals from the banks of the *Kuleng river* and entered home. In this way, the goddess *Lakshmi*, in the form of paddy entered into the life of the Karbi people and her worship was initiated by them.

The Karbis used to worship different deities for a good harvest according to their custom, before beginning the plantation of the crops. The community basis of such worship is known as *Botor Kekur*. It has certain significant aspects like, prayer to the rivers or streams to carry away the chaffs of the paddy, worshipping for the increase of fertility of the soil, expulsion of evil spirits from the jhum field and offering to the weather deity *Hai-I* for good weather congenial for paddy cultivation. After completion of these rituals, they pack the chaffs of paddy in a plantain leaf and put it in the basket (*hakchili*) for carrying paddy saplings. It is generally performed by a person belonging to the IngtiKathar clan. The following song is sung thrice during the rituals and after every song, a handful of chaff are thrown in the water. The song is as follows-

Kathi apek o
Jengarnoinang lo
Chikungnune so
Kathi apek o.
Rai papon pho
Rai hakirrecho
Angdumedungso
Dungmechampi pho
Ra charnam than I non.

The broad meaning of the song is: The chaffs of the paddy were offered to the river. Prawns and darikana fish (*Esomeu danrica*) carried this news to the king of the seas.

Hakir Recho, the king of the sea was treated by the Karbis, as equivalent to the Hindu god Lord Vishnu. The offering of the chaffs of paddy every year was a form of worship of the tutelary goddess of the crops. The Karbis have projected the

eternal form of Vishnu and Lakshmi as the *purusha* (male) and *prakriti* (female).

CONCLUSION

The livelihood of the Karbis passed through different successive stages with the passage of time. Significantly, in every circumstance, their livelihood and culture were nourished in the lap of nature. They redressed their hunger through hunting the wild animals and collecting natural resources. Afterwards they started to utilize the natural fertility for their favour and gradually jhum cultivation and then settled cultivation was developed. Gradually they started the cultivation of rice. However, the district is geographically located in the rain shadow region of Assam. There is no evidence of irrigation in the entire district. Meanwhile, the settled cultivation in Karbi Anglong are primarily performed by Bodos and Bengali Hindus. However, if the rice cultivation only by the Karbis were concerned, then it was found as jhum centric only. One of its prime reason is to continue their traditional occupation and to maintain their unique cultural identity related to it. Through settled cultivation, they used to organically cultivate green vegetables and leafy vegetables only, to a certain extent. More than 90 percent of the cultivated land were under jhum cultivation. They use simple technological implements for jhum cultivation, which were primarily made up of bamboo and wood. Appropriate division of labour can be noticed among them. Some folk performances are there during the period of paddy cultivation. It has reflected the symbolic interpretation of Hindu goddess *Lakshmi* and the concerned people belief her as the saviour of their life from hunger and famine. In the contemporary period, the Karbi females even sell surplus production of rice in the local markets and it plays a vital role in their economic empowerment.

The Karbi culture is intimately associated with the cultivation and use of rice. From birth to death, even after the death, a Karbi people is integrally related to rice. All the rituals of the Karbis are indispensably related to this crop. According to the ethnic calendar of the Karbis, new year starts with the month of February. Prior to the onset of the new year, they use to conduct a series of household and village centric rituals, which are primarily centered with the cultivation of rice, security of food and familial, territorial well-being. Rice in their society is also related to fertility cult. It is pertinent to note here that although traditionally the Karbis are animistic due to their social environment, as they are living surrounded by the Assamese Hindu population, many Assamese Hindu religious traits percolated to their culture. The Animist Karbis at present referred to their deities by the names of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses those have similar features to the Hindu deities. Moreover, most of their pristine rituals and festivals were primarily related to Jhum cultivation because, they had adopted settled cultivation to a late stage only, just around fifty years ago, as informed by them. Therefore, they do not have a traditional ritual integral to settled cultivation, and those they performed are percolated from the Assamese Hindu culture. The first solid food initiated to a baby, to the deceased

soul is invariably rice among them. Rice is not only staple food among them, but they prepare a good number of allied foods from it. Rice beer is part and parcel of the Karbi food.

Rice is the inseparable part of the Karbi culture and spectrum of it is conspicuous in each and every aspect of their unique cultural tradition. The maxims, songs, folktales, taboos, beliefs, rituals and thousands of the elements of the Karbi culture are represented by rice. From time immemorial to the present time the Karbis are dependent on rice for their existence and naturally reflection of rice is prominent in almost all the traits of the Karbi culture.

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