

“Karbi Oral Narratives on Jir Kedam’s Discontinuation: Special Reference to Amri, West Karbi Anglong”

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Abstract:

Agriculture played a major role in human development since the Neolithic age. It was the step from the nomadic lifestyle to the sedentary civilisation, which in turn changed how our ancestors lived. It brought about changes in cultures, traditions, economy and religion. In the case of the Karbis, who are the largest indigenous tribe in North East India, as is the case with other hill tribes, they practice what is known as shifting cultivation. Jhum cultivation was at the base of their cultural, traditional, religious and economic growth throughout their history. Their daily activities revolved around jhum cultivation, which they also referred to as Jir Kedam.

It’s a very old agricultural practice that the Karbis do, like most other tribal communities in North East India. The Karbis have a special institution related to Jir Kedam, which is termed Jirsong, a youth dormitory. In a Karbi village, the youths organise into groups and take part in Jhum cultivation, which is a must. According to Karbi oral histories, which will be looked at in this research, there are many aetiological stories related to its establishment and function. This study will look at Jir Kedam in the context of Karbi traditions as they play out in the Amri area of West Karbi Anglong in Assam.

I. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture produces most of the world’s food supply. People have practised it for the past 13,000 years. In human history, this span is a brief chapter compared to the nearly 200,000 years our ancestors spent hunting, gathering, and scavenging in the wild. During this brief period, agriculture transformed human societies in different parts of the world and developed into what we witness today.

Agriculture started with the intense experiment of selection and rejection of wild plants’ roots, shoots and seeds through their domestication. This process involved extraction of resources from the environment, like food,

fibre, medicine and other resources from a given area of land. In the Neolithic period, agriculture was mainly practised in river valleys and in areas where irrigation was possible. This practice, under multiple combinations of physical and socio-economic conditions, often gave rise to different types of agricultural systems.

Agricultural practice in India is said to have started in the Indus Valley Civilisation, which helped in its urbanisation. One of the oldest water-regulating structures in the world is the Grand Anicut dam on the Kaveri, which was developed in the 1st-2nd Century CE (Stein, 1998). In the North Eastern region of India, the slash-and-burn form of farming commonly known as ‘Jhum cultivation’ dominates the agricultural landscapes, especially in the hilly regions where inhabitants engage themselves predominantly in this form of agriculture.

The Karbi, who are one of the major indigenous groups in Northeast India, particularly in the state of Assam, have their own distinctive identity, culture, traditional and religious heritage. Racially, the Karbi belong to the Mongoloid group, and linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. They mostly reside in the hill districts of Assam like Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, while some reside in districts like Kamrup, Nagaon, Biswanath, Morigaon. They also inhabit in states like Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh.

Agriculture has been the main occupation of the Karbis, who practice Jhum cultivation since ancient times. In fact, their daily life revolves around agriculture, which influences their society, economy, culture, traditions and religious beliefs. Lyall, in his colonial book “The Mikir”, stated that the Mikir people have always been agriculturists. Their villages, in the hills which are their proper habitat, are set up in clearings in the forest, and are shifted from place to place when the soil has been exhausted by cropping. Here, the term ‘Mikir’ refers to the Karbi who were then addressed as such by the colonial writers and early Assamese historians.

A. Review of Literature:

There exist very few literary works on the history of Jir Kedam. Sir Charles Lyall's work, 'The Mikir' from the memoirs of Mr. Stack's works, is still considered the earliest comprehensive work of Karbi history; yet it mentions only the village youths called 'ri-so-mar' who lived in a Te-rang (deka-chang in Assamese), from where their Jirsong start their Jir Kedam journey to the jhum sites. Longkiswar Phangcho, who is a resident of Langorkhon, a village located nearby where the last event of Jir Kedam took place, describe about Jir kedam last event in his article, published in a magazine, 'Kuleng Alir' during the 25th Amri Zonal Karbi Youth Festival 2017. There are very few works on Jir Kedam available, as no historical studies have been done so far to investigate the Jir Kedam tradition and its discontinuation. This research work will therefore reveal some forgotten history of the last event of Jir Kedam, which is said to have occurred in the distant past.

B. Objectives of the Study:

Keeping in mind the tragic event of the last Jir Kedam, this research work has mainly three goals: Firstly, to learn about Jir Kedam and to find the factors responsible for the last Jir Kedam event and what led to its discontinuation. Secondly, the study also aims to find out if there is any impact on the socio-cultural and religious traditions of the Karbi.

C. Research Methodology:

Historically speaking, most of the indigenous tribes of Northeast India do not have a written form of language, and rely heavily on orality for passing down traditions, customary laws, songs, folklores, myths, legends, stories, sacred charms, etc. from one generation to the next. The Karbi tribe too falls in this same category. For the fulfilment of this research work, sources in the form of oral narratives were collected through interviews with some of the village folks of Langorkhon in Amri Block of West Karbi Anglong using the Oral history research method, without which this work would have remained incomplete.

II. DISCUSSION

Jir Kedam refers to a co-operative farming practised by the Karbi youths traditionally and by all the Karbi informally. The word *Jir Kedam* means 'going to a jhum' or 'Jhumming'. Jir Kedam has been in practice for a long time by the Karbi. In the traditional type of Jhumming, the youths of a village (both adult boys and girls) form a group called *Jirsong* and equally bear the hardship. In a Jirsong, there are twenty-six traditional executive members and a few general members who are

not given any post. A Jirsong is led by a head called *Klengsarpo* and his assistant called *Klengdun*. It is worth mentioning that only males are allowed to hold traditional posts in the Jirsong. The origin of Jir Kedam can be traced back to the reign of one of the regional Karbi kings, *Ru Harbamon Ronghang*. He was a wise king, a social thinker and a reformer who is credited with introducing this co-operative farming among the Karbi. There exist certain traditional rules and customs that the members of the *Jirsong* need to follow during Jir Kedam, like mandatory participation for a minimum period of three years, being forbidden to visit their homes throughout the cultivation period, and keeping practising traditional dances and songs, etc., until the completion of *Jir Kedam*.

As per the folklore collected from the local narrators of Langorkhon village, there exists a village named *Rongmarjong* with about one thousand families; as in most parts of Karbi Longri (kingdom), the practice of Jir Kedam has been a predominant occupation among the Karbi youths of *Amsowai* or *Amchudi* in Amri block. The village was ruled by a *Sarthe* (a village headman) named *Sai Engti*, a member of the *Lijang* clan, one of the five clans of the Karbi. Back in those days, whoever took the lead in building a new village, he was made a *Sarthe*. Likewise, *Sai Engti*, being the founder of *Rongmarjong* village, became a *Sarthe* and ruled the village happily for a certain period. *Jir Kedam* too practised peacefully while abiding by the traditional rules and regulations without any hesitation from the Jirsong. But as time passed and the villagers became rich due to the fertility of the land, *Sai Engti* too became greedy and cruel. He made the Jirsong youths toil for days and nights to get more production. In the process, the *Sarthe* started harassing the members of the Jirsong by imposing strict rules above the normal ones, like chasing or hunting wildlife game until caught, and forcing the bachelors of the Jirsong to remain unmarried until the end of Jir Kedam, etc. Although such harsh punishments are rare, at times, when the village chief or *Sarthe* acts like a regional king, such hardships are common, which is the case with the members of Jirsong of Bormarjong. As such, when the members of the Jirsong could no longer tolerate the harsh treatment given to them by the *Sarthe*, they protested and convened a meeting to discuss what course of action was needed to get rid of all their suffering. A final decision was made, which was to end their lives altogether, as there was no other way to get rid of the cruelties of *Sai Engti*. Phankri, one of the members of the Jirsong, gave an idea of ending their lives at Cheleng Athepai, a rock cliff at the bank of the Karbi Langpi River near Amtereng in West Karbi Anglong district. Thus, all of them took their lives by jumping off

the cliffs of Cheleng Athepai there except Sanghorai, the pherangke (messenger) of the Jirsong, who took the responsibility to inform village folks about the incident. Rushing back to the village, he delivered the news of the tragic incident, and thereafter, he too ended his life, leaving a curse to the Karbi of Amri.

Here is a phrase from the folklore which was narrated by one of the narrators where it mentions the exact location of the last Jir Kedam:

Putsari arset

Malong kreserkep

Inglong arset set

Ritnong pathanglet

Arniso et et

Kangreng bengcheret

Nihang arep rep

Inghinso vanglep

a putsek

Ritkenong angthek

Malongso arep

Longtarso denlep

The above verse means “In *Putsari hills* with 19 hill slopes, the people practised jhum cultivation. The place where cicadas still sing among bamboo plants, planted by the members of the *Jirsong* in the distant past during their Jir Kedam. The last line mentions a stone structure built by their contemporary villagers as a memorial monument, which is still standing today.

III. RESULTS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

While analysing the oral narratives further, mentions may be found of certain social and religious practices still followed by the Karbi society even today since the last Jir Kedam. These practices were mostly linked to the curses left behind by the *Sanghorai*, the *pherangke* (messenger) of the Jirsong. Some of the major findings during the study are: firstly, no village in Amri has a Sarthe from the Lijang clan, which includes the Engti surname. Secondly, the local inhabitants believe that they may face the same fate as the members of the Jirsong of the last Jir Kedam if such customs are allowed or followed again. To date, no person from the Lijang clan has been appointed as a Sarthe or village chief. Thirdly, youth from the Tungjang clan hold the post of Klengsarpo or the head of the youth's dormitory in Amri Longri. Fourthly, the use of Cheng Burup (a drum tied to the waist) is forbidden in this part of Karbi Anglong. They believe that the use of Cheng Burup may bring bad luck to the youths of the village. Fifthly, Karbis in Amri block do not practice traditional Jir Kedam anymore. However, one can witness

an informal form of Jir Kedam even today in the most unorganised way. There is a stone monument in Jirlong hills standing still. The village youths offer prayers even today to seek blessings from the departed souls of the last Jir Kedam to keep bad omens away. Even to this day, an annual Than Rongker ritual (a Rongker ritual of the Karbi celebrated annually) is performed involving all the village inhabitants of Langorkhon, a village situated on the slope of the Jirlong hills. Sixthly, the appointment of Klengsarpo and Klengdun is still done during Vophong Rongker every five years. Seventhly, one can still witness the patterns of the plot of land divided into 19 hills, which are further divided into a Nong (A nong refers to a plot of land to be cultivated by a single member of the Jirsong during Jir Kedam).

Going through the story narrated in folklore, studying the stone monument built in memory of the departed souls of the Jirsong of the last Jir Kedam, analysing the common social and religious practices that are still followed by the Karbi people and practically analysing the location where the tragic event took place, one can emphasise that the event is indeed historical and not fiction. It also impacted the socio-religious practices of the Karbi society that are still followed to this day; one can establish the historicity of the last Jir Kedam.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Karbi, remarkable in their agricultural practices since a distant past, continued to practice the Jir Kedam most informally. Their way of Jhum cultivation still resembles that from the days of the actual Jir Kedam. Even in the age of technology, where machines do the work of farmers directly or indirectly, the traditional way of farming still fills the landscapes in the remote regions of Karbi Anglong, in contrast to those of urban or modern agricultural activities. In recent times, the location of the tragic event of last Jir Kedam and the place of their mass suicide, Cheleng Athepai, still attracts visitors who wish to get a sense of the hardships in their minds.

There still exist many gaps to be filled in the history of Jir Kedam, its origin, the dates, rules and regulations of Jir Kedam. This research paper is a qualitative work done from the oral narratives made available to the research scholar. Therefore, more research is needed to fill the missing links for the benefit of the Karbi community and historians alike.

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