

Failure of Tribal Self-Rule in Karbi Anglong (Assam): The Case of Karbi High School Students in Nagaon

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ABSTRACT

Karbi lower primary and high school students are becoming a common phenomenon in Hindu Assamese inhabitant rural areas in Nagaon subdivision of Nagaon district, Assam. These Karbi students migrate from their native place to these areas for taking primary and secondary education. These young Karbi students become domestic servants at the houses of Hindu Assamese families only to pursue the primary education. This has posed a serious question on the success of tribal self-rule system as Karbi Anglong has been enjoying the provision of the Sixth Schedule autonomy under the Constitution since the provision of tribal autonomy was introduced in 1952. The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), presently comprising East and West Karbi Anglong districts, is considered as one of the strongest autonomous councils as it has jurisdiction over a lot of subjects in comparison to several other such councils in northeast India. Against this backdrop, this paper is an attempt to understand why the Karbi students have been migrating to Nagaon for starting their primary education by becoming domestic servants. The paper argues that the failure of the tribal self-rule in KAAC has led to this situation.

Keywords: Education, Empowerment, Exclusion, Self-Rule, Tribal

INTRODUCTION

For last one-and-a-half decades, Karbi children have been migrating to different places of Nagaon subdivision of Nagaon district inhabited by Hindu Assamese people to start their primary education and later to

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continue high school education. They stay with Hindu Assamese families as domestic aids and start their primary education. These Karbi children have been migrating from the present West Karbi Anglong district. In 2016, Karbi Anglong district, one of the two hill districts of Assam (the other being Dima Hasao), was divided into East and West Karbi Anglong districts. Nagaon district was also divided into Nagaon and Hojai districts in the same year. Nagaon was the neighbouring district of Karbi Anglong District until 2016. The Karbi children migrate mainly to rural areas neighbouring Nagaon town. Till recently, only little Karbi boys were migrating. But now, little Karbi girls have also started to migrate. The number of little Karbi boys and girls, migrating to Nagaon to start their primary education by becoming domestic servants, has been increasing year after year. Surrounding rural areas of Nagaon town like Jamuguri, Bebejia, Nonoi, etc., have become very attractive destinations of these Karbi boys and girls. Now, they have started to stay with the Hindu Assamese families in Nagaon town also.

The migration of little Karbi boys and girls to Nagaon for pursuing primary education has become a regular annual affair. They migrate when they are very young, at the age of five to six. They migrate either with the seniors who have been continuing their study by staying with some family in Nagaon or with their parents. These little boys and girls stay with families as domestic servants. They do not charge any wage or salary for their service. The only condition for their staying and working with the families is that they must be sent to school and must provide facilities for continuing study. These Karbi boys and girls have become free domestic servants for many Hindu Assamese families. These Karbi students, studying in Nagaon as domestic servants, go their home twice in a year, during summer vacation and after the annual examinations. When they return from home in January after the annual examination, they bring with them some other fellow little Karbi boys and girls to keep them with some other families. There is an increasing demand for these Karbi little boys and girls among the Hindu Assamese society as they become free labour at their homes.

This represents a peculiar situation. These Karbi students represent a new category of students who are compelled to leave their family and locality and become domestic servants at a very young age only for pursuing primary education. It is happening at the time when the governments, both at the centre and in Assam, have expressed their commitment to provide universal primary education through Sarba Siksha Abhijan Mission, and

the Right to Education (till the age of 14) has been made a fundamental right. The parents of the Karbi boys and girls have been sending their little children to become domestic servants for pursuing primary education, which signals some compulsions from the part of these parents of the Karbi students. Against this backdrop, this paper tries to understand the background of the migration of the little Karbi boys and girls.

METHODOLOGY

A field survey was conducted among the Karbi High School students studying at schools located nearby areas of Nagaon town for knowing the causes of their migration from their native places. The survey was conducted during first half of June, 2018. For the field survey, six high schools from the surrounding areas of Nagaon town were selected. The selected schools were: Marikolong High School, Kathiatoli Higher Secondary School, Bebejia Kanak Chandra Sarmah H. S. School, Rangalu High School, Kujidah H. S. School and Bapuji High School. These schools are located at the areas where young Karbi boys and girls mainly concentrate. All these schools are within 10 km from Nagaon town. For the interview, I approached the Principals/Head Masters of the respective schools and requested them to allow me to meet two Karbi students each from classes IX and X. I interviewed all the four students just after the classes were over. I interviewed Karbi students studying in classes IX and X only as they were measured than the students from lower classes.

Total 24 Karbi boys were interviewed from six schools. It should be noted that I could not find a Karbi girl students from among the 24 respondents. The Principals/Head Masters of the selected schools informed that their schools did not have Karbi girl student in Class IX and X. During interviews, I mainly wanted to know under what conditions the little Karbi boys and girls have been migrating to Nagaon for taking primary education, that too by becoming domestic aid at the houses of Hindu Assamese families.

The responses of the young Karbi students (during field survey) have been used as primary data in the present study. For understanding the socioeconomic conditions of Karbi Anglong, the information from the government reports like Census of India, 2011, and Assam Human Development Report (AHDR), 2014, have been extensively used.

MIGRATION OF LITTLE KARBI BOYS AND GIRLS

There is a feeling among the common people in Nagaon district that the parents of the Karbi boys and girls send their children to Nagaon because of the terrorism problem in Karbi Anglong. In 1994, Karbi Anglong experienced the emergence of two Karbi terrorist organisations: Karbi National Volunteer (KNV) and Karbi Peoples' Front (KPF). In 2000, both these terrorist organizations joined hands and formed United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (UPDS). In 2004, another fraction named Karbi Langri North Cachar Liberation Front (KLNLF) emerged from UPDS. All these organizations had started armed struggle for a separate hill state from Assam comprising Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills (now Dima Hasao district). Since the mid 1990s, Karbi Anglong experienced instable law and order situations because of terrorist activities of these organizations. However, now, most of these organizations have left terrorism and joined Karbi mainstream. During the interview, all the respondents have categorically denied that terrorism has any role in their migration from Karbi Anglong to Nagaon for pursuing school education.

From the interviews with the Karbi students, I have broadly identified economic backwardness and lack of educational facilities as the main causes for continuous migration of young Karbi students from their native places to adjacent areas of Nagaon town for pursuing primary education. All the respondents acknowledged that they did not have any idea of the situation as to why they migrated as they were very young when their migration took place. However, now they realize that the economic backwardness of their parents and pathetic educational infrastructure in their native areas were the main causes of their migration.

ECONOMIC BACKWARDNESS

All the respondents I interviewed were from the interior places of West Karbi Anglong district. This migration of young Karbi students is happening from West Karbi Anglong only. It is mainly because West Karbi Anglong has remained socioeconomically backward in comparison to East Karbi Anglong district. West Karbi Anglong is geographically isolated from East Karbi Anglong where the headquarter of KAAC is located in Diphu. East and West Karbi Anglong districts are geographically separated by parts of Nagaon, Hojai and North Cachar districts. Because of this geographical isolation from Diphu, the West Karbi Anglong has not

got sufficient attention from KAAC for its socioeconomic development.

From the interviews with the Karbi students, it becomes clear that absolute poverty among the common Karbi people is the main cause that their children are compelled to leave home at early age for pursuing primary education. These Karbi people are socioeconomically backward and do not have any resource to help their children in studying. The parents of these Karbi high school students are either cultivator or manual worker. Their main cultivation is ginger. However, the ginger cultivators from those remote hill areas do not get proper price of their product because of lack of market. These Karbi marginal cultivators do not have the access to the big markets located away from their areas. On the other hand, those who do not have agricultural land work in others' agriculture or go to nearby small towns for manual works. However, the daily wage of manual workers in those areas is much less in comparison to plains of Nagaon district. This situation has compelled the common Karbi people to live in the margin. And such marginal economic conditions signal that common Karbis cannot bear any cost of their children when they go to the school. During my field survey, I was really shocked to learn from the Karbi students that government schemes like public distribution system and other government social security measures are totally absent in their native places.

The high growth of population among the common Karbis has also contributed to create this situation. In 'Population and Women Empowerment Policy of Assam' (PWEPA) 2017, the government of Assam acknowledged that population growth among some communities has remained very high in the state because of underage marriage and polygamy. And underage marriage, because of poverty and illiteracy, has remained very high among the Karbis living in these areas. Because of early age marriage and absence of education and proper health facilities, poor Karbi families have several children. Some families send one or two of their children to nearby school. They do not send their younger children to school as they cannot support them financially. The high school Karbi students I interviewed were either third, fourth or fifth child of their parents. These children, who are not sent to school by their parents for financial constraints, are sent to Nagaon plain. In such a situation, those parents are not at all concerned that their children have become domestic servants at others' home to achieve education. However, it can also not be said that first and second children are never sent to Nagaon for pursuing primary education. I came to know from the respondents that many families send their first and second children too.

LACK OF EDUCATION FACILITIES

West Karbi Anglong district lacks facilities for both primary and secondary education. There are Lower Primary (L.P.) and Middle English (M.E.) schools in rural and remote areas. But there are not sufficient government high schools in these areas. For example, in 30 km from Kulukunchi to Baithalangshu, a small town, there is not a single government high school. As a consequence, many Karbi students from these areas have to leave their education after completing M.E. education. There are several missionary schools in the rural and remote areas of West Karbi Anglong. But the poor Karbi families cannot send their children to these schools by paying high fees.

Although there are L.P. and M.E. schools in rural and remote areas of West Karbi hills, most of these schools do not have sufficient teachers. Many L.P. schools have only one or two teachers for total five classes. Even there are schools without a single teacher. Again, in some cases, teachers from plains do not go to top of the hills where their schools are located. They appoint some local youth to do classes on their behalf and pay a share of their monthly salary. In some occasions, teachers are appointed and regularly paid, but there is no infrastructure to arrange classes. Moreover, most of the teachers of these L.P. and M.E. schools are from different places of Nagaon and Hojai districts. A big section of these teachers frequently remain absent in schools, sometimes for a long period. During the festivals of Hindu Assamese people, many schools remain closed for long time because of the absence of the teachers.

Parents of most of the respondents I interviewed are illiterate. As a consequence, there is no environment for study at their homes. It is also a cause that the Karbi parents, who have realized the importance of education and want their children to get educated, send their children to the families at distant places where there is an environment of studying. The respondents I interviewed are the first generation literates of their respective families. Their parents want to make them educated, but do not have resources for that. That is why they send their little children to Nagaon plain to serve other families as domestic aid so that in return they can take school education.

The education system has remained underdeveloped in West Karbi Anglong as executive members of KAAC and officers of the council never bothered to know how the education system was working in West Karbi Anglong. The Assam government cannot interfere in school education under KAAC and officers under the council do not pay due attention to

know the deficiencies of the primary and secondary education system. Primary, secondary and adult education and college education, including library, museum and archaeology, have remained a subject under KAAC. The Assam government cannot interfere on the subjects over which KAAC has jurisdiction.

The Assam government, in 2017 and 2018, organized ‘Gunotsav’ for improving the standard of primary and secondary education in entire Assam. However, KAAC has not started such a process to find out the solutions to the existing problems in primary and secondary education under its jurisdiction. This shows how KAAC has remained indifferent to the whole issue of primary and secondary education.

SOCIOECONOMIC BACKWARDNESS OF COMMON KARBIS

It becomes evident from the above discussion that the out migration of little Karbi boys and girls from their native places for pursuing primary education is the consequence of the socioeconomic backwardness of the Karbi people. The situation can be considered as the failure of the Karbi tribal autonomous council. The KAAC has been enjoying the hill tribal autonomy under sixth schedule of the Constitution since 1952. When the provision of sixth schedule was implemented in 1952, Mikir Hill District and North Cachar Hill District was created as a single autonomous council. In 1976, the North Cachar Hills were carved out as a separate district and Mikir Hills were renamed as Karbi Anglong. In post-Assam movement (1979–1985) period, the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) spearheaded a popular movement for creation of a separate hill state comprising both Karbi Anglong and North Cachar districts. This movement culminated in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in Delhi on April 1, 1995 between the Assam government and the leaders of ADSC in presence of the Union Home minister. On the basis of the MoU, the Assam government transferred altogether 30 subjects/ departments (including the earlier 16 subjects) to the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar autonomous councils. The ASDC used to argue that the two tribal councils did not enjoy financial autonomy and for development projects, they had to remain at the mercy of the Assam government. The 1995 MoU also ensured that the money to be transferred by the state government to the councils was transferred in due time. With the signing of the MoU in 1995, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar (renamed as Dima Hasao) autonomous councils for the hill tribes have become much

more powerful in terms of their executive powers in comparison to their counterparts at different north-eastern states.

Assam hill districts [consisting Karbi Anglong (East and West) and Dima Hasao (previously North Cachar)] have been enjoying tribal self-rule under the sixth schedule of the Constitution since 1952. And, even after enjoying such autonomy for almost 67 years, the hill districts of Assam have largely remained underdeveloped in comparison to other districts of the state. Assam Hills have highest poverty rates among different geospatial diversity categories in the state.

Table 1: Poverty rates in Assam by geospatial diversity categories (%)

<i>Block</i>	<i>Poverty Rate</i>
General	39.5
Multi-diversity	40.8
Border	38.9
Tea Garden	37.6
Hill	44.7
Flood-affected	36.4
Char	42.6
Assam Total	37.0

Source: AHDR, 2014, p. 58.

Table 1 shows how incidence of poverty is highest among the people living in Tribal blocks. The AHDR, 2014, also shows how poverty rate among STs in Karbi Anglong district was much higher than the state average. According to it, in 2013, while poverty rate among STs in Assam was 40.5%, it was 46.5% in Karbi Anglong (p. 206).

Poverty is always a hurdle for capability expansion. The attainment of education can be considered the primary condition for expanding capability. And, poverty can deprive people from attaining education, which ultimately affect in their capability expansion. It has always been observed that the poverty incidence is relatively higher among people with low educational achievements (AHDR 2014, 66). In this situation, it can be said that the high incidence of poverty in the hill districts and among the tribals (mainly Karbis) in Karbi Anglong district negatively effects on the educational scenario in West Karbi Anglong district. The census report of 2011 and AHDR, 2014, clearly show the pathetic educational scenario in Karbi Anglong. As per the 2011 census report, literacy rate in Karbi Anglong is only 69.3% against 72.2% literacy rate for entire Assam.

According to the findings of AHDR, 2014, the percentage of literates (7+ years) in Assam is 82.26%. But this percentage in Karbi Anglong is 77.35%, almost 5% less than the state average (p. 223). Again, percentage of literates (15 + years) in Karbi Anglong is 72.09% against the state average of 78.18% (ibid, 224).

These figures indicate that a big number of children in Karbi Anglong have remained out of school. The AHDR, 2014, shows that in entire Assam, among out of school children, 22.07% never enrolled, 73.06% left after enrolment and 4.63% enrolled but did not go to school (p. 231). Against this, in hill blocks, among out of school children, 22.6% never enrolled, 76.71% left after enrolment (dropouts) and only 0.68% enrolled but did not go to school (ibid, p. 232). And in Karbi Anglong district, 28.18% never enrolled, 70.91% left after enrolment and 0.91% enrolled but did not go to school (ibid, p. 231). In Karbi Anglong, never enrolled percentage is 6% higher than the state average.

The AHDR, 2014, also records statistics of the reasons for dropping out of school. In entire Assam, among the dropouts, reasons for dropping out were: work at home: 8.88%, need to support earning: 32.09%, failed in exam: 10.68%, cannot afford: 8.96%, and not interested in studies: 31.50%. Against this state average, in Karbi Anglong district, 44.87% drop out in a need to support earnings and 29.49% drop out as they are not interested in studies (p. 233). These statistics mean that economic backwardness has remained the main reason for school dropouts in Karbi Anglong. Those who drop out school in Karbi Anglong in a need to support earning are 12% above than the state average.

**Table 2: Availability of Schooling Facilities
(Primary and Upper Primary)**

	<i>Total No. of habitations</i>	<i>Primary (in percent)</i>			<i>Upper Primary (in percent)</i>		
		<i>Within</i>	<i>Within</i>	<i>Beyond</i>	<i>Within</i>	<i>With- in</i>	<i>Be- yond</i>
		<i>Habita- tion</i>	<i>1 KM</i>	<i>1 KM</i>	<i>Habita- tions</i>	<i>3 KM</i>	<i>3 KM</i>
India	1307519	58.35	31.67	9.98	28.69	56.73	14.58
Assam	71049	48.36	38.15	13.49	19.50	57.45	23.05

Karbi An- glong District	3608	38.25	38.89	22.87	11.14	50.11	38.75
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Source: Cited in AHDR, 2014, p. 236

When we talk about the high number of out of school and school dropouts in respect to a particular region, we must also consider the availability of educational facilities in that region. Table 2 clearly shows the lack of educational facilities in Karbi Anglong. The district has lagged behind than the all India situation and also than the state average of Assam. This indicates that insufficient educational facilities are a major concern in Karbi Anglong district. The insufficient school facilities and negligence towards the school education have affected quality of education in KAAC. This has become evident from the perception about quality of education received by children as recorded by AHDR, 2014. In Assam, all districts average of satisfied with the quality of education is 51.1%. However, it is only 36.3% in Karbi Anglong. This clearly speaks about the condition of quality education in Karbi Anglong.

FAILURE OF KAAC

The above discussion clearly shows how Karbi Anglong has remained poor and KAAC has miserably failed to provide sufficient educational facilities to common Karbi people. The consequence is that little Karbi boys and girls have started to migrate to neighbouring Nagaon district, to become domestic servants at the homes of Hindu Assamese families only for receiving primary education and later for continuing high school education. The whole situation amply proves that the tribal self rule in Karbi Anglong has failed to provide even primary education to the common Karbi people. Karbi Anglong, as has already been mentioned, has been enjoying tribal self-rule under the sixth schedule of the Constitution for last six-and-a-half decades. The tribal self-rule is not only about the preservation of culture and identity of a particular tribe, but also about fast socioeconomic development of the tribal people. But Karbi Anglong has socioeconomically lagged behind than most of the districts of Assam despite the fact that it has been receiving special treatment from both central and the Assam governments. This situation simply indicates that the tribal self-rule has not succeeded considerably in Karbi Anglong.

The experience of the tribal self-rule in Karbi Anglong has not remained encouraging. During last six-and-a-half decades, the self-rule in Karbi Anglong has become a rule of the tribal elites. After independence, an elite class emerged from among tribal groups in Assam. Karbis were also not exception to that. The elite class emerged from the Karbi tribe has started to determine the politics of Karbi Anglong. In this way, in Karbi Anglong, tribal self-rule has become a rule of the tribal elite. These elite Karbi rulers have not given sufficient emphasis on the socioeconomic upliftment of the common Karbi people. Again, a strong middle class, though small in number, has emerged from among the Karbi community also. This middle class has been grabbing the white collar jobs of the district council and has started to control the business and commerce of the district. All the facilities and benefits of development schemes of KAAC are being grabbed by this Karbi middle class.

The tribal self-rule in Karbi Anglong, in this way, has become a platform for the Karbi political elites and middle class Karbis to share power in the name of entire Karbi tribe. For such politics of power, the KAAC in recent decades has become a haven for corruption. It has become a platform of the corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and government officials of the district to make money. A section of state government officials and ministers also have nexus with the politicians and bureaucrats of the KAAC in this process of rampant corruption. As a result of this corruption, the money meant for the development of common Karbis has been misused. Even the terrorist organizations, which were very active in the district till 2011, got a share of the money meant for developmental works in the district. In that situation, the money sent for developmental works was shared among politicians, bureaucrats, contractors and terrorist organizations. Such terrorist economy badly affected present West Karbi Anglong district. The geographical isolation of the region from mainland Karbi-Anglong also helped such a terrorist economy to grow.

The elite Karbi rulers, middle class dominated Karbi administration and rampant corruption in KAAC have made the tribal rule in Karbi Anglong, in actual practice, an institution of tribal exploitation by tribal. The sixth schedule under the Constitution was created to safeguard tribal people from the exploitation by non-tribals from the plains. There is no chance of Karbis being exploited by non-Karbis under KAAC. However, it has been noticed that in Karbi Anglong common Karbis have been exploited by the Karbis who have been determining the politics of KAAC. The common Karbi people, who have remained illiterate and excluded

from the process of development, are unaware of such exploitation. They are not socially and politically conscious enough to understand how their ruling class has kept them excluded from the process of development. Actually, the Karbi ruling class has successfully established a cultural content of tribal self-rule as the core of Karbi autonomy, and thereby tactfully ignored the developmental aspect of the tribal self rule. Because of this, the common Karbi people, largely poor and illiterate, have always identified their self-rule only as the protector of their unique culture.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion clearly proves that the KAAC has failed to bring about significant socioeconomic development to the lives of common Karbis during last six-and-a-half decades of its existence. This has posed a question on the whole scheme of tribal self-rule under the sixth schedule of the Constitution.

The present discussion was started with the discussion on the migration of little Krabi boys and girls from West Karbi Anglong to neighbouring Nagaon district for pursuing primary education. It becomes evident from the discussion that economic backwardness of common Karbi people and insufficient educational infrastructure in Karbi Anglong have created the situation. The parents of the young Karbi children are compelled to send their children to become domestic servants at others' house for pursuing primary education, as they do not have economic capability to support their children and do not have sufficient school facilities in their locality even if they want to send their children to schools.

The autonomous councils have their plan and budget. They, most often, have required fund for budget. In such a situation, the failure of KAAC to provide sufficient facilities for primary and secondary education is a negligence from the part of the rulers of KAAC. This negligence signals a politics of exclusion from the part of the Karbi ruling class. This politics of exclusion wants to keep the common Karbis away from social and economic development, in a design to continue dominance over common Karbis. During last six-and-a-half decades, it has been noticed how common Karbis have continuously been exploited by their own rulers. For instance, in Karbi Anglong, non-tribals cannot buy land. However, a few Karbi politicians have become owners of vast lands in Karbi Anglong in a short period of time. This is happening only because common Karbis are selling their land to rich and powerful Karbis. We

must not forget that the scheme of sixth schedule was created also to protect the common tribal from land alienation at the hands of non tribal. But now, under KAAC, common Karbis are losing their land at the hands of rich and powerful Karbis. This is how KAAC is becoming a platform of exploitation on common Karbis by rich and powerful Karbis. Such situation gives an impression that the Karbi ruling class has not given due importance to develop socioeconomic conditions of the common Karbis and thereby compelled the common Karbis to live in the margin. And without doubt, the socioeconomic underdevelopment of common Karbis has established KAAC as a failed experiment of tribal self-rule under the sixth schedule of the Constitution.

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Note

Till 2016, both East and West Karbi Anglong districts were a single district. The findings of Census report, 2011, and Assam Human Development Report, 2014, are for the undivided Karbi Anglong district.

Undertaking

I hereby declare the paper titled ‘Failure of tribal self-rule in Karbi Anglong (Assam): The Case of Karbi High School Students in Nagaon’ is a product of my own research and it conforms to all research ethics. The paper has not been submitted for any other publication.

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