

Values in Karbi Folk Literature: A Study in the perspective of understanding Indianness form the below

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Every community or society rests on certain values. In a natural environment inclusive of socio-cultural religious aspects of a society values are certain desires and goals, aspirations and standards, norms and codes, morals and disciplines which are considered fundamental to lead the approved way of life by the community concerned. Values, relying on a state beyond the question of being moral or immoral, are considered individual and social, cultural and religious, environmental and material standards used to judge, compare, approve or disapprove things in relative terms as desirable or undesirable, correct or wrong, more correct or less, more meritorious or less, useful or harmful, necessary or not etc. The values remind the folk of his or her own duties, liabilities, responsibilities as individual and as a member of the community for the survival of their culture and heritage, their society and its social system. These values are the causes of the sort of uniformity seen in the behavioral pattern of the members of the folk society of the community, constitute a lofty part of the heritage of the society and are expected to be inculcated in by all the members of the community. But in the present technology based world characterized with moral chaos the values are in crisis and in a state of degeneration. A man is a man not with technological progression but with sustenance of human quality and values. Now every society suffers from such type of people obsessed with money and machine and cut off from the root who are badly in want of human values and hardly feel themselves accountable to community and nature, human and non-human others. In such crucial situation folk literature can play an educative role, inculcate their folk values in the minds of the young generation of the community right from the early parts of their lives and make them proud modern living with their indigenous human values.

The prime objective of this paper is to make a study of the Karbi folk values through their folk literature and to see how these values constructing Karbi national character leave scope for rereading Indianness from the below.

Folklore is a sociological science and the study of folklore throws considerable light on the modes of life and thoughts of the people. Folklore covers everything which is a part of the traditional life of the folk.¹ Folklore of a community is understood from their arts and traditions, beliefs and customs, magic and practices, rituals and festivals etc. The social and spiritual selves of the folks are also the subject matter of folklore. Folklore or folk life of a community is studied in terms of folk literature, material culture, and social folk custom and performing folk arts of the community concerned.² And folk literature has its own components - folk prose narratives, folk songs, proverbs, riddles, charms etc. It covers stories, tales, myths, legends, narrative ballads, different types of songs, rhymes, riddles, proverbs, sayings, charms etc. Karbi folk literature like that of any tribe of North-Eastern India is very rich and varied. It can be broadly divided into five categories³ - a) folk tales b) folk songs c) riddles d) proverbs and sayings and finally e) charms. The folk tales of the Karbis cover their myths, legends, stories, jokes etc. Their folk songs include marriage songs, narrative ballads, spring festival songs, Chomankan songs, HasaKekan songs, love lyrics, children songs, play songs, work songs, religious songs, Sabin Alun etc. Karbi folk literature also abounds in riddles, proverbs, sayings, charms etc. Karbi folk literature expresses life and thought of the folk, reflects their folk mind, explains their behavior and sustains socio-ethical, cultural and environmental values cherished by their folk society.

In Karbi society their folk literature is one of their socio-cultural agencies integrated with values and assigned with the duties of inculcating and developing the desired values in the folk. Karbi folk literature not only reflects their folk mind, their art and tradition, thoughts and beliefs, ideas and ideals, hopes and fears, dreams and realities, aspirations and superstitions, but tells us a good deal about their folk mind, folk life and folk values. Karbi folk literature reflects a coherent Karbi folk society with lofty socio-ethical values which in many respects is in contrast with the present Karbi society striving for values in life showing ample scope for research to be done with a view to reorienting the new generations with their value related heritage toward a life to lead with own culture and identity.

There are Karbi folk songs and tales that present us the Karbi worldview, their folk views on creation of earth and objects of nature, plantation of earth and nature of environment, creation of the first Karbi man, formation of society, role of village chief,

division of rank and position, formation of clan, human life and nature, enculturation of the community, Jirsang and community activities, agriculture and work culture, rites and rituals, culture and tradition, status of women, past and present etc. In the “Legend of Creation” it is seen that the gods Hemphu and Mukrang after creating earth and before creating animal and man on earth decided thus “ We must now cause plants to grow on it”.⁴ It is surprising to see that this folk tale of date unknown, beyond the reach of History, talks about the necessity of plants for survival of human community signifying its present day relevance regarding ecological imbalance and environmental degradation. After plantation they created animals and then Bamonpo, the first man ‘arlung’. His son Ram married the girl coming forth from an egg and they led the community. According to ‘KarbiKeplang’, a song on creation of earth and lives on it, the creator after creating the earth created first the hills and mountains, green vegetation, lakes, rivers, tributaries etc. and then birds and animals. Finally the creator through a ‘Timhem’ (workshop) manufactured the first Karbi man.⁵ It also reveals the community’s indigenous ecological wisdom that plantation and water are the basic needs for a life on earth. In an another folk song ‘Musera-Kehir Alun’⁶, sung on the third day of ‘Chomankan’, their cremation ceremony, it is said that with a sense of hesitation the first Karbi man came out of course from the biggest of the eggs laid by the bird ‘wo-pluk-pi’ with a view to rescuing the earth from the utter chaos prevailed in the society. This song reminds the living fellows of the community of their origin, migration from one place to another, pains and sufferings and rights and duties of a man signifying high note of social and historical values. These Karbi songs and tales on creation are reflective of their ethnocentrism, life living with nature and environmental ethics.

The Karbi world of folktale, travelling orally throughout the centuries from generation to generation, is rich and varied with myths, legends and tales. If the Karbi myths are stories of creation and origin of things like bottle guard, chili, song, rice beer, Hemphu and creation of socio-ethical rules etc. ; the Karbi legends are about some historical events, places and persons like Harbamon, Thong Nokbe, Sat Recho, Rongpherpi etc. told to educate people of their own glorious and eventful past and to encourage people to live with their own history; the tales of the community are all about some imaginary episodes, fairy events, magical spells told basically to amuse the youngsters of the community and inculcate in them certain human values. The legend of Rangpherpi⁷ not simply presents the womenfolk of the community with self-respect and dignity, but the community as a whole revolting against marginalization, injustice and humiliation, suffering and exploitation. The Karbi grandmother tells a tale sitting with children at hongfarlat of their changghar(front space of their traditional

bamboo house) about Jangrecho(orphan) and his journey from sufferings to success, village life and its features, birds and animals, supernatural elements and Tenton the clever rogue who goes on cheating other persons. Some of the Karbi folktales like 'Sun And Moon', 'TakunRecho' etc. are meant for understanding the national character of a Karbi man, social codes of conduct in their society, religious rules, traditional knowledge etc. Sir Charles Lyall dealing with Karbi folktales namely 'Story of a Frog', 'Story of an Orphan and His Uncles' and 'Story of Harata Kunwar' is of the view that these Karbi folktales undoubtedly correspond in every respect to the general characteristics of folk literature and contain the same incidents or the same sequences of events or have the same forms what is peculiar to the folktale of all over the world, what is distinctive and characteristic is not the progress of incidents, but the local dressing, the narrator's point of view, the colour of his daily life which he lends to the details of the story.⁸

The world of Karbi folk song, transmitted spontaneously through oral tradition from person to person or from generation to generation, is multidimensional. The Karbis have folk songs for almost every ritual of their folk life which are meant to get the folk involved in the situation concerned and make the occasion lively. Hardly any celebration of wedding, childbirth, any cultural-religious function, any rite and ritual, work or play in a Karbi traditional society is considered complete without singing the folk song meant for the occasion. The songs are spontaneous and lyrical expression of the folk resulting from their accumulated aesthetic sense and socio-cultural responsibilities. These songs reflect their folk society with culture and tradition, knowledge and wisdom, rules and regulations of their socio-religious, political world, rites and rituals, codes of conduct, taboos, their gods and goddesses, faiths and superstitions, their ancient socio-political institutions, their patriarchal society and pains of women, their animism, relation to nature and non-human physical environment. For example the Karbi folk song sung Char Kebat Alun⁹ shows how grandfather Harbamon organized the village and let it to be flourished under the strong leadership of the village chief and advocated for village centered governance for the growth of the village in its all branches. Such a political value may be relevant in the present society of regional inequalities. In a song related to 'Man-Peng Kepnangcheng'¹⁰ it is said that in ancient times the Karbi society was without social ethic suffered from utter chaos. So a couple known as Kaku and Sam Teron introduced to their society different designation, rank and position such as king, village chief, leader of youths, priest etc. and as a result the Karbi society run smoothly. In the song related to grandfather Kashen 'Rukasen Alun'¹¹ it is said

that he following the advice of his wife established the first Karbi village at Nangkula on the bank of river Kapili where everyone lived together in peace.

Moreover the songs related to Jirsang reflect the community life of the Karbi people through their institution called Jirsang which regulates all the social activities within the community.¹² As it is said in these songs that once Harbamon established Jirsang, the social institution, with the cooperation of the boys and girls. Usually a Jirsang is formed for nine years with nineteen office holders and a few members. One must be a bachelor or spinster to be a member of Jirsang. Of course his or her membership can be dissolved before the end of term as per the decision of its members. Jirsang engages the youths of the village in community activities such as community cultivation, harvest of crops, handy-crafts etc. The activities of Jirsang are performed through Terang, the office of Jirsang, the community house. The concept of Jirsang bears a sublime socio-ethical values of giving birth not to just a sense of work culture among the youths, but engaging them in community oriented socio-economic, cultural and creative activities and thus preparing the new generation to live with own identity for lofty goals of community and for themselves only rather than to be a cheap commodity in the hands of multinational companies of some foreign strong capitalist groups. It may be highly effective in solving unemployment problem of our society.

The folk epics 'Sabin Alun' and 'Ha-i-mu' are the cultural document of the Karbis. On one hand the unending tale of pain and sufferings sustained in the epics is reflective of the psychology of the community, their obsession with sense of hesitation and tragedy, on the other hand the Karbi setting to which the Rama tale is contextualised reflects the socio-cultural, economic and political structure of the community of remote past. In another folk song belonging to 'AdamasarKangthur'¹³ it is said that Har Langbe and Be Langbe resolved to fight against the people of a neighboring village for polluting a river, the source of their drinking water. In this song the grandmother Maranpi advises her grandsons Har Langbe and Be Langbe not to fight but to learn some good rituals of marriage from them. She also tells that war makes no good to the society but good rituals do. The folk song of the date unknown with its stress on problem of drinking water and fight against pollution, cultural assimilation and anti-war campaign is highly relevant in our polluted, violence ridden society.

In the Jahang festival the Karbis respecting their tradition sing and dance with their ancient sword and shield.¹⁴ In this song it is said that all boys and girls should come forward, sing and dance together and maintain old rituals and tradition, otherwise the ancestors would curse them. The Karbis are proud of their ancestors and old rituals and feel great pleasure in singing the glorious story of RengBeng Ham. The respect for old thing and

tradition seen in the folk songs of the Karbis reflect their high ethics and may appear instrumental in making a rootless generation learn what tradition is and how important to live with it for the survival of human community. The folk belief of the Karbis that the fertility of their agricultural land can be revived if boys and girls sing and dance together on those lands is in direct contrast with our self-consuming process of reviving fertility of land by using chemicals and fertilizers. Further their community feasts after collecting grains from the field, their worship of the god of forest and goddess of peace etc. have relevance in our present day context.

Though the Karbi folk society is basically a patriarchal one their women centered social system, their cross cousin marriage system, no dowry system, widow marriage, women's self-dependent nature, the role of Uchepi, girls' singing and dancing with the boys at HasaKekan and Chomankan festival, DomahiKekan etc. clearly indicate a balanced society where womenfolk live asserting their self and identity in healthy harmony with the male folk in a Karbi society. Dr. G.C. Sarmah Thakur says- "the men folk do not think that they are a superior lot and likewise the women folk do not develop a complex that they are neglected. The sexes are not status conscious and there is mutual co-operation between the sexes in each other's activities"¹⁵ A study of their folk tales and songs reveals that a Karbi woman respects dignity of labour and likes to be self-dependant. She is simple but becomes furious when her self-respect is in danger. She does all household duties and also helps the male folk in their works. She prepares harlong, weaves cloths, maintains the family and also remains active in their socio-economical cultural life. The tales and songs portray jolly girls working, singing and dancing ; loving, caring witty daughter-in-law ; devoted wife caring for husband's honour ; kind-hearted, strict, responsible mother; wise old women, social organizer and pacifist and at the same time the cunning, jealous, villainous step mother and betrayer to lover and husband. The tales and songs also talk about the sufferings of women and the victimized girl. No doubt to attend certain functions in a Karbi traditional society is a taboo for Karbi women. The Karbi woman is the Uchepi, the divine singer, on whose soldier Chomankan relies, who through singing guides the soul of the dead back to their ancestors' land. The ballads record the tales of anger and anguish, pain and sufferings of women in a Karbi society.

The Karbi proverbs and riddles reveal thoughts and beliefs, experience and wisdom, codes of conduct and values of their folk life in a rhythmic way of expression. These culture-bound indigenous expressions, used as answers to recurrent problems or as the self-contained unit to show their approved way of life, travelling orally throughout the centuries

from generation to generation have finally become an indispensable part of their written literature. In the present age of technology and urbanisation the new generations of the community are hardly interested in these indigenous expressions ignoring its values to their total identity.

The Karbi folk religion, which with its own philosophy, values, practices and rituals, chants and charms is as unique and independent, has been suffering from religious colonialism since pre-independence era and now struggling for its indigenous existence. The religion wise census reports since 1961 sustaining colonial ideology of understanding the periphery through centre have been instrumental in ignoring the existence of Karbi folk religion and its transition to dominant religion and replacement of their folk values with modernity. The socio-cultural religious values reflected through their chants and charms are basically community oriented utilitarian ones and sustained or rejected on the basis of its consequences in changing scenario. For instance they have almost rejected erotic folklore as obscene in their modern set-up. It is sorry to see that a few of their household and many of their territorial and agriculture related deities are now struggling for existence in modern Karbi homes and developed areas. It is painful to see a good number of youths of the Karbis, whose ancestors worshipped trees and suffered at the pain of a tree, are now seen being detached from their folk values and instrumental in deforestation of the Karbi hill leading their home to a state of ecological imbalance. The loss of faith in their animistic belief would be detrimental to their indigenous environment and identity of their community and religion. The future of their chants and charms, especially after the death of the present priests and diviners, will be in danger if a few groups of their new generations do not come forward by themselves for acquiring those invaluable properties of a Karbi folk society.

This rapid survey of Karbi folk tales, folk songs and proverbs made with a view to understanding social life and socio-ethical values in Karbi folk society leads to a realization that the Karbi folk society is a rich store house of socio-ethical environmental values which may reorient the new generation not simply to live for their community and humanity but to live with their culture, heritage and identity. Certain values of their folk society such as erotic behavior in funeral ceremony, curing disease through maternal uncle, increasing fertility of land through songs and dance may not be relevant in present day society. Further their obsession with a sense of fear, hesitation and tragedy constitute a part of their character. The folk values of the Karbis such as accountability to the ancestors,

community, humanity and environment are highly relevant in present age of ecological imbalance and degeneration of total environment. Moreover the stress seen on rights and duties of man, organization and development of village, work culture, engagement of boys and girls in socio-economic, cultural and creative activities, cultural assimilation, love and respect for tradition, protest against injustice and exploitation, women's respectful position, longing for peace etc. portray the picture of a coherent Karbi folk society with lofty socio-ethical values. We are living in an age where every individual owns a tendency to go away from his or her root, the Karbi folk literature can save the Karbi society from more degeneration inculcating in the minds of the youngsters of the community a sense not to be mere commodity in the present age of consumerism and reorienting them towards a life to live with their indigenous values, culture and heritage. The outsider can take off their religion but cannot read 'Sabin Alun' ignoring its role in understanding diversity in Indianness. With the repository of their folk values the Karbis may emerge in Indian scenario with a unique contribution to the formation of Indian identity at large instead of remaining at the receiving end of Indian ideology. The plurality and diversity of the Indian self rests with convolution of peripheral resources.

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Glossary:

- Adamasar Kangthur : Folksongs related to marriage ceremony.
- Alun : Karbi folk song.
- Arleng : Karbi man.
- Changghar : A traditional Karbi bamboo house.
- Char Kebat Alun : A karbi folk song celebrating selection and recognition of the village chief.
- Chomankan : Karbi cremation ceremony.
- Domahi Kekan : Agricultural festival.
- Harbamon : The first Karbi social organizer.
- Har Langbe and Be Langbe : Two Karbi legendary brothers who introduced marriage rules and regulations to karbi society.

Hasakekan : Karbi agricultural festival.
 Hemphu : Karbi god.
 Hongfarlot : Front side of a Karbi bamboo house.
 Horlang : Karbi traditional rice-beer.
 Jahang : An agricultural festival.
 Jangrecho : An orphan, a popular character of Karbi folk tales.
 Jirsong : Bachelors' dormitory of the Karbis.
 Keplang : Creation song.
 Man-Peng-Kepnangcheng : A creation song narrating the origin of designation and honour.
 Mukrang : A Karbi god.
 Musera-Kehir : A song narrating the tale of migration sung on cremation ceremony.
 RengBeng Ham : A legendary Karbi king.
 Rongpherpi : A legendary Karbi woman who killed Jayantia soldiers protesting humiliation.
 Rukasen Alun : A folksong narrating the contribution of Grandfather Kashen.
 Sat Recho : A legendary Karbi king.
 TakunRecho : A folk tale.
 Thong Nokbe : A legendary Karbi hero.
 Timhem : Workshop.
 Uchepi : The Karbi woman who sings the lamentation songs in the cremation ceremony.
 Wo-pluk-pi : A kind of bird.
