

Ethnic Identity and Electoral Politics: The Role of the Plain Karbis in Assam's Political Landscape

Junu Rahang¹ and Rudraman Thapa²

¹Department of Political Science, Dimoria College,
Khetri, Kamrup (Metro), Pin: 782403, Assam

²Department of Political Science
Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Pin: 786004, Assam

Abstract:

Northeast India is home to a diverse range of tribal communities. The issue of tribal ethnic identity is highly complex and has given rise to numerous tribal movements in the region. After India gained independence, the process of nation-building unfolded within the context of vast ethno-cultural and religious diversity. To safeguard the identity, culture, and development of certain tribal communities (Hill Tribes), the central government established local Autonomous Administrations under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and consequently in 1996, Karbi Anglong achieved its autonomy. However, the Karbis residing in the plains of Assam were excluded from this constitutional protection and began to assert their ethnic identity to achieve those privileges given to their hilly counterparts and in pursuit of a role in Assam's political process. Election is one of the important and necessary conditions for a successful democracy. Electoral process is meant to provide the opportunity for popular choice and control over government. In Assam, politics is influenced by many different ethnic groups, each playing a key role in elections. The Karbis of Karbi Anglong district of Assam has been playing a major role in Indian electoral Politics and from grassroot to national politics the tribe came forward to show their interest in participation in politics. This paper highlights on the Plain Karbis, an ethnic group residing outside the Karbi Anglong district of Assam and their unique position within the state's electoral politics. It explores how the Plain Karbis engage with and influence political processes, their representation in electoral systems and the challenges they face in asserting their political voice.

Keywords: Karbis, Ethnic, Identity, Plain areas, Electoral, Politics

Introduction

North East India is the homeland of a large number of ethnic groups belonging to different racial stocks, speaking different languages and having varied socio-cultural traditions. Assam is the most populous state in North East India and as a result of the long-term migratory flow into the state is linguistically and ethnically the most diversified state in India (Goswami, 2012). Tribal identity politics emerged due to apprehension among the smaller ethnic entities to protect their political and socio-cultural identity in the newly formed political structure of India (Prakash, 2001). The apprehension hovering among them over assimilating with larger communities have resulted in ethnic movement and politics of identity came to dominate the larger political context of the region (Baruah & Deka, 2018). The state has been facing a number of movements aiming to achieve a variety of objectives having both ethnic and territorial focus. While some of these issues were partially resolved through the intervention of the Central government, several others remain unresolved (Singh, 2010). The majoritarian policies adopted by the Assam government in India's north-eastern region in the 1960s produced a chain of autonomist movements in which tribal ethnic minorities of Assam sought cultural as well as political autonomy (Das, 2010). The complexities surrounding the question of tribal ethnic identity have led to the emergence of several tribal movements in Northeast India, as indigenous groups sought to preserve their way of life amidst pressures from outside influences. Among them were the Bodos and the Misings, who mobilized for autonomy as a means to obtain cultural recognition, political representation and above all, enhance their powers to control local resources (Saikia, 2011; Pait, 2024). Like other ethnic minorities, the ethnopolitical objectives of these groups seemed to be largely influenced by socio-economic, political, and cultural resentments against the state (Saikia, 2011). One such important political framework aimed at safeguarding the rights of tribal communities in the region was the establishment of local Autonomous Administrations under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. This provision allowed for the creation of autonomous councils in tribal-dominated areas, providing them with greater control over local governance, land rights, and the protection of cultural practices.

The Karbi people, an indigenous ethnic group, inhabit the hilly districts of Karbi Anglong in Assam, as well as the plains of the state. The Karbi community has long struggled with issues surrounding ethnic identity, autonomy and political representation, with their history

shaped by the broader dynamics of regional politics, statehood, and the shifting contours of national identity in post-independence India. For the Karbi community of Assam in particular, questions of identity, autonomy and the protection of cultural heritage became central to their political struggles. In 1996, the Karbi Anglong district achieved a significant milestone with the creation of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, which granted the Karbi people in the hilly areas a degree of political autonomy and recognition under the Sixth Schedule. However, the situation for the Karbis residing in the plains of Assam has been markedly different. Excluded from the constitutional protections granted to their counterparts in the hilly regions, the Karbis residing in plain areas of Assam have faced significant challenges in asserting their political and cultural identity. Unlike their counterparts in Karbi Anglong, the Plain Karbis have been unable to gain the same level of autonomy or recognition, which has led to a sense of marginalization. In response, the Plain Karbi community has increasingly sought to assert its ethnic identity, advocating for equal rights, greater political representation and the benefits of the constitutional provisions that their counterparts enjoy in the hill districts. This demand for recognition has led to a greater focus of Karbis residing outside Karbi Anglong on the political participation, particularly in the electoral processes of Assam, where the Karbis both from the plains and the hills have played an important role in shaping local and state-level politics.

The electoral process is an essential mechanism for democratic participation, enabling citizens to express their political preferences and influence governance. In Assam, a state characterized by a diverse mix of ethnic and religious groups, elections are influenced by the unique interests and demands of these different communities. From grassroots to national levels, the Karbi people have increasingly engaged with political processes, striving to secure representation and recognition within the larger political framework of the state. While the hill Karbis have had some success in leveraging their political influence through the autonomous councils, the Plain Karbis have faced more challenges in asserting their place within the electoral system. This paper focuses specifically on the Plain Karbis, an ethnic group residing outside the Karbi Anglong district and examines their unique position within Assam's electoral politics. It explores the ways in which the Plain Karbis engage with and influence political processes, their struggles for greater representation in the electoral system and the challenges they face in their political assertions in a state that has long been marked by ethnic divisions and contestations for power.

Objectives of the study:

The paper aims to study the plain Karbis, an ethnic group residing outside the Karbi Anglong district and their unique position within the state's electoral politics. It will also highlight how the Plain Karbis engage with and influence political processes, their representation in electoral systems and the challenges they face in asserting their political voice.

Methodology:

In the study, both empirical and analytical methods are used to analyze the present status of the tribe. The study is primarily explanatory in nature and qualitative in orientation. Data has been collected both from primary and secondary sources. Collection of the primary data was done through field survey in different parts of Kamrup (Metro) district of Assam. Selected groups of Karbi leaders, family members of expired Karbi leaders, academicians, social activists, politicians and historians are interviewed for collecting the information. The secondary data has been collected from Government Records and other official publications like articles published in different journals, books, reports published by different institutions, news paper reports, seminar papers and other relevant internet sources.

Role of Karbis of plain areas in electoral politics of Assam:

The growth of tribal aspirations in the post-colonial Assamese society has been rooted in historical and colonial construction. The British, for their administrative requirement, divided the north-eastern region. These divisions created ethnic enclaves. Three major categories of discontent, namely ethnic discontent, linguistic discontent, and discontent, which evolved out of the concern over the loss of Assamese identity due to migration, can best be used to understand the postcolonial narrative of Assam (Gogoi and Gogoi, 2022). Every social and political development during the post-colonial period is, in one way or another, a continuation of these discontents (Kandiyoti, 2015). The colonial legacy of divisive politics, the flexibility in Indian federalism and the provisions in the Indian constitution further fuelled the situation (Banerjee, 2020).

The Karbis of Karbi Anglong district of Assam has been playing a major role in Indian electoral Politics and from grassroot to national politics the tribe came forward to show their interest in participation in politics (Choudhury, 2018; Rongfar, 2020). In the provincial assembly election held in 1937 under the Govt. of India Act of 1935, the tribe Karbi got their first representative to the Assembly and Mr. Khorsing Terang was the first Karbi to represent the community continuously for three terms from 1937 to 1952 in the Assembly (Rongfar, 2020). In 1937, Mr. Khorsing contested from Mikir Hills Tract constituency comprising 171

voters. Out of 128 total votes polled he secured 53 votes (Rongfar, 2020). After the formation of Mikir Hills District Council the Karbi's elect him as their first ever Chief Executive Member and other Executive Members in Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council. In the first Bidhan Sabha election of Assam held in 1952 the Karbi's gave their full representation from two constituencies namely Mikir Hills Tract (East) and Mikir Hills Tract (West). However, these two constituencies were extended up to 3 in the year of 1967 and also renamed as Bokajan, Howraghat and Baithalangso (Rongfar, 2020).

The Karbi's entered into Lok Sabha election a bit late i.e. in 1971 (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). After the creation of Meghalaya under North Eastern Areas Reorganization Act of 1971, as an autonomous state the two hills district got allotment of the constituency in the Lok Sabha (Rongfar, 2005, pg-57). It was Mr. Biren Sing Ingti who continuously won the seat from 5th Lok Sabha general election to 9th Lok Sabha general election. He belonged to the Indian National Congress party. In the 10th Lok Sabha general election held in 1991, Mr. Biren Sing Ingti was defeated by Mr. Jayanta Rongpi from the party affiliated to ASDC (Rongfar, 2005). Presently there are 30 representations in Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council, out of which 4 members got nominated from minorities who constitute a considerable proportion of total population (Haokip, 2021). In Vidhan Sabha there are three representatives and one in Lok Sabha and all the seats are reserved for STs (Borthakur, 2023). The Karbis of Karbi Anglong are properly represented in both Centre and State govt politics. They are found active in their participation in politics both as a voter and a representative. But while it comes to the Karbi's plain district of Assam, their participation is not up to the mark. However, though there is less representation in politics by the Karbis of the plain areas, as a voter their participation has a tremendous impact in state and national politics.

Extension of Tiwa autonomous council's constituency: The Tiwa Autonomous Council which was constituted in 13th of April, 1995 as an outcome of Lalung (Tiwa) Accord signed between Govt. of Assam and Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee and its associate organizations (Dewri, 2016). In order to solve the local problems and socio-economic, educational and cultural upliftment of the Lalung community in Tiwa dominated areas, the Tiwa autonomous council was set up covering the areas of Morigaon, Nowgaon and Kamrup districts of Assam with administrative and financial power as per provision (Dewri & Ahmed, 2015).

The Lalung Durbar was the first organization to raise the demand for the Autonomous Hills District for the Lalungs (Tiwa), established in 1967 almost contemporary to the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) which demanded Udayachal on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra (Dewri, 2016). Inspired by the formation of Karbi Anglong and N.C. Hill district councils the Lalung Durbar started to demand the creation of a Lalung hill district comprising certain plain areas of undivided Nagaon district and Ribhoi district of Meghalaya. The demand was carried out by the All Tiwa Students' Union founded in 1989 and its associate organizations like All Tiwa Women Association, Autonomy Demand struggling Forum etc. Some of the leaders of All Assam Tribal Students Union like Ronuj Pegu, Tulsi Bordoloi and Sabyasachi Rabha demanded federal reorganization of Assam by granting autonomy to Mishing's, Tiwas and Rabhas. Simultaneously the Bodo Movement was at its height under the leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma (Deka & Chutia, 2022; Brahma & Shekhawat, 2024).

The AGP govt. did not pay any attention during its tenure, however Hiteswar Saikia took the positive initiative in solving the tribal issues by creating autonomous councils (Das, 2011; Pisharoty, 2019). In 1993, the Bodo Autonomous Council was created and the Tiwa, Rabha and Mishing Autonomous Councils were formed subsequently in 1995 (Sinha, 2007). At the time of its creation the council catered only to Tiwa community people in both core and satellite areas. But in the Tiwa Autonomous Amendment Act 2005, the other scheduled tribes of both core and satellite areas were also included (Das, 2020). In other words, the council was supposed to work for the socio-economic, educational and cultural advancement of all the scheduled tribe communities residing under the area.

As per the provision of 6th schedule, the autonomous council having minimum 36 constituencies can get the power over land rights for the scheduled tribe people (Stuligross, 1999). The area covering Tiwa people constituted only 30 constituencies and in order to fulfill the criteria, the Tiwa autonomous council wanted to expand the area covering Sonapur, Digaru, Ampri, Khetri, Phongari and Dimoria (Ramirez, 2011). The areas are the habitat of mainly the tribe Karbi. This move was vehemently opposed by the Amri Karbi community as the majority inhabitants in these six constituencies are Karbis with only 3% of Tiwa people (Ramirez, 2013). Historically also Dimoria has been ruled by the Karbi Rechos since long and continued till date (Baishya & Debnath 2017). This move was supported by twenty-six tribal and non-tribal groups residing in Dimoria including the Karbi Students Union on the grounds of protecting the land and settlement for the tribals only and the other general caste people

presently residing permanently within this area and to restrict future outside encroachers. The tribes residing in Dimoria area excluding the Amri Karbis have supported the inclusion of the greater Dimoria area within the purview of the Tiwa Autonomous Council to secure their land allotment and settlement and to get the benefits of social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement at the equal front with the Tiwas (Dewri & Ahmed 2015; Dewri, 2016; Goswami, 2021). Interaction with the tribal and non-tribal residents of Dimoria revealed that the people got benefits from the Tiwa autonomous council of Morigaon for educational upliftment in the form of donations to the institutions, cost of the uniforms and weaving materials also provided to the people by the council. Due to strong resentment by the Amri Karbis, the Government was compelled to hold the election of the Council without these constituencies in 2015 (Dash, 2018). The Karbi Adorbar and Karbi Bangthe Asem also did not support the move of including the six constituencies into the Tiwa Autonomous Council of Morigaon (Dewri, 2016).

The Karbis of the hill areas and plain areas of Assam contribute to 11.1% of the Scheduled tribe population in Assam (Mazumder, 2021). A study of the physical aspect of the Karbi land has shown that the Karbi habitations are considerably diverse particularly with respect to physiography and vegetation (Athparia, 2000). This diversity in the geo-physical structure has formed a distinctive ecological background that has greatly influenced the settlement pattern, economy, population as well as socio-political life of the people (Thaparia, 2009). In comparison to the aforesaid two tribes, the Karbis of plain areas of Assam though granted reservations as ST(H) in the economic, education and employment sector similar to the Karbi population of Hill areas, their reservation in the political arena of Assam has not yet been granted in spite of several efforts thereby enlisting the entire Karbi population of plain areas in the General category.

Discussion and Conclusion:

The electoral politics in Assam presently, reflects the emergence of a new trend. The one-party dominant system is giving way to a multi-party system in which political parties of various ethnic groups or smaller cultural communities play significant roles (Baruah & Goswami, 1999). Unlike most other Indian states where regionalism is being articulated in terms of one dominant community, in Assam a number of smaller parties articulating the interests of smaller ethnic communities and religious and linguistic minorities, have also been making their presence felt (Borah & Bhuyan, 2024). However, the Karbi population of plain areas still

considered politically in the general category has not yet been able to give a good performance in the electoral politics in Assam as none of the Karbi community leaders of plain areas of Assam who had contested either a Parliamentary or Assembly elections could win any of these elections. In terms of the Panchayat level elections, the scenario was however different as members of the Karbi community had been successful in several panchayats across Assam.

As per the observations and interactions done from the field visits, there are various reasons which overall weakened the electoral performance of the members of the Karbi community of plain areas of Assam in the eight districts of Assam especially the Parliamentary or Assembly elections. A geographically diversified and fragmented population of Karbis of plain areas of Assam in the eight districts of Assam has weakened the overall bond for a dynamic participation in the electoral system. The population being economically weak forbids the emergence of good leaders for contesting in an election, the overall expenses are much higher. The inability as well as the lack of whole-hearted support of the overall population to accept a leader who desires to contest an election somehow, usually weakened the electoral motive. The unwillingness of the Government to grant political reservation to the Karbis of plain areas of Assam enlists the entire population in the General category thereby limiting an upcoming leader of Karbi community of plain areas to give his election candidature in the General category. A comparatively lesser population than the other General category population, there are usually lesser chances of any leader of the Karbis of plain areas to win an election. The lack of proper support and alliances of the intending leaders of the Karbi community to contest an election with any national and regional political parties has cumulatively weakened the overall dynamic participation of the Karbis of plain areas in the electoral system. The lack of proper motivation and support for a stronger influence and dynamism to contest an election due to lack of any earlier elected leader of Karbis of plain areas through those elections. The weakening of the bond among the Karbis of plain areas across Assam due to gradual urbanization, educational, employment, language, cultural, religious and traditional factors has also contributed to a weaker representation and performance in the electoral system by Karbis of plain areas of Assam. The lack of emergence of dynamic, efficient and hard-working leaders is however another reason for a poor performance in the elections by Karbis of plain areas of Assam. The lack of right consciousness amongst the population of Karbis residing in plain areas about the election process, about the importance of getting an elected Karbi leader to raise their concerns and the non-supportive role of the media in terms of broadcasting the concerns and

issues of the Karbi population has also contributed to a poor role and performance in electoral politics of Karbis of plain areas of Assam.

Political modernisation and democratization in post-colonial socio-political formations systematically strengthened the professionalism of ethnic groups' political activity such as the Bodos, Misings, Rabhas and Tiwas (Gogoi and Gogoi, 2022). In the midst of political modernisation and democratization, ethnic communities of various sizes began to assert their distinctiveness and demand recognition and preservation (Gogoi and Gogoi, 2022). However, the Karbi community of plain areas of Assam did not get the due recognition in terms of grant of ST(H) reservation in the political arena at par with the other tribal communities. As a result, political professionalism and post behavioral social transformation influenced the other tribal community's post- colonial identity constructions (Gogoi and Gogoi, 2022).

The question of ethnic nationality is filled with complications in North-East India in general and Assam in particular. Sarma (2021), observed a process of acculturation happening among Karbis of plain areas of Assam as they had acquired certain features from the mainstream Assamese culture. The Karbis of plain areas though have the distinctiveness of their traditional institutions such as religion, dress, village structure and ethnicity remains intact have altered certain features of their socio-cultural life, while at the same time retained their identity in the sense that the changes have come about due to cultural contact. These changes have however weakened the bond among members of the Karbi community which have affected the community socially, culturally and politically.

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