



ASSESSING THE DYNAMICS OF THE ETHNIC IDENTITY ASSERTION OF THE KARBIS OUTSIDE THE TWO HILLS DISTRICT (OTHD) OF ASSAM

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Abstract: Ethnicity often serve as a powerful and dynamic identity marker within a state or nation to keep a community united with a sense of belonging and solidarity. The common ancestry, traditions and culture of a community often enable the members of a community for a collective uprising for their rights. The North-east India comprises of a diversity of ethnic communities distinguished by their respective traditions and culture. Among the ethnic tribal communities of Assam, the Karbi community is the second most populated community residing both in the hills and the plain areas of Assam. The Karbi people, primarily residing in the Karbi Anglong district have a significant presence in the plain's districts of Assam as well. However, their cultural nuances, struggles and contributions often escape mainstream recognition, leading to misconceptions and marginalization. The Karbi's living outside the two hills district of Assam (OTHD), despite sharing the same ancestors, origin, cultural heritage, language and socio-economic challenges as their hill-dwelling counterparts, find themselves excluded from the benefits and protections afforded to Scheduled Tribes. This exclusion not only deprives them of political representation but also perpetuates socio-economic disparities, hindering their overall development. A significant portion of this community, residing OTHD, faces a stark reality of the absence of political recognition as a Scheduled Tribe. This paper highlights the identity movement of the Karbis OTHD of Assam and tries to assess its dynamics in achieving their demands.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Identity, Movement, Recognition, Status

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Introduction

India has a significant tribal population and they constitute 8.6 per cent of the total population of India. It has got the second largest tribal concentration in the

world spread across various parts of the country ranging from plains, forests, hilly regions. In India, the term 'Scheduled Tribes' is not clearly mentioned in its constitution but used for the purpose of administering the areas populated by certain sections of people who were historically considered backward and disadvantaged (Ambagudia, 2019). Article 342 of the Constitution grants power to the President to declare any section of community as Scheduled Tribes through a public notification (Singh, 2013). The criterion followed to identify any community as Scheduled Tribes was fixed by Lokur Committee set up in 1965. The criteria are: 'Indication of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the mainstream community and backwardness.' In other words, two distinctive features which define tribals are 'Cultural Distinctiveness' and 'Territorial Possession' (Wahi & Bhatia, 2018). The first notification was issued in 1950 where the framers of Indian constitution were fully aware of the socio-economic backwardness of tribes and the necessity to fully assimilate them into the main body at a greater pace.

The Karbi is one of the major tribal communities of Assam and are predominantly concentrated in the hill districts of Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong. However, a significant population live in the plains districts of Assam, particularly in areas like Kamrup (M), Kamrup (R), Morigaon, Nagaon, Hojai, Sonitpur, Biswanath and scattered across the Brahmaputra valley (Barua, 1992). Historically the Karbis migrated to the plains due to search for fertile agricultural land, seasonal movement and shifting cultivation patterns, again, during the Ahom period due to political conflicts with different kingdoms and in later phase it was due to employment, displacement and other urban opportunities they scattered all other parts of Assam and as a whole they became minorities within larger Assamese society. The assimilation with neighbouring communities resulted in cultural negotiation, economic marginalisation which gradually leads to identity crisis amidst mainstream Assamese society. The Karbis of the hill districts are enjoying political autonomy under the Sixth Schedule however, those living outside the hill districts on the other hand deprived of ST status, lack of recognition and limited political representation. This feeling of deprivation not only mobilise the community it also involved them in identity movement since 1970. Therefore, the main objective of the paper is to explore the ethnic identity movement of the Karbis of OTHD of Assam and to study the factors that led to delay in achieving their demands.

Materials and methods

The study is purely descriptive, analytical and qualitative in nature. To assess the movement the researcher adopted close observation method by doing field visits at various Karbi dominated areas outside the two hill districts (OTHD) of Assam. Data were collected both from the primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected from the interviews which are taken from the community organisational leaders as well as the common masses to get the actual picture of the movement. To choose the respondent purposive random sampling methods were used. Data were also collected from secondary sources like books, journal, articles, newspapers, web portals, periodicals and conference proceedings.

Background

The issue of political recognition holds profound implications for the Karbi's living OTHD districts of Assam. At its core, political recognition is not merely about securing reserved seats or quotas but is a fundamental acknowledgment of their identity and the unique challenges they face (Fraser, 2008). Without this recognition, their voices remain unheard in matters of policy-making and resource allocation, further marginalizing their already disadvantaged position.

Moreover, the absence of political recognition undermines the democratic principles of inclusivity and equality. In a nation celebrated for its diversity, every community deserves fair representation and the right to participate actively in the democratic process. Denying the Karbi's living OTHD, their political rights not only violate these principles but also undermine the integrity of India's democratic framework.

The community had failed to give proper representation in the state and national level in earlier days and the recent delimitation and formation of new constituency Dimoria brought the greatest setback to the identity of the whole community. Dimoria is one of the Karbi dominated area under Kamrup Metro district of Assam but due to non-recognition of ST status to the Karbi's OTHD the constituency was made reserved for scheduled caste (SC) since the second largest population is SC category after the Karbis in the region. The Karbi's living in OTHD of Assam is considered as general category people when it comes to political recognition. Many Karbi organizations OTHD are demanding 'ST' (Scheduled Tribe) status and had submitted various memorandums to the

government since a long time. In 2016, there was a bill introduced in Parliament to grant ST status to Karbis OTHD, but it is still pending (Sharma, & Khan, 2018).

Lack of ST status

The biggest structural challenge is the absence of ST status which leads to disadvantages in education, jobs, political representation and welfare schemes. As their hill counterparts receive constitutional protections, the Karbis OTHD experience a sense of exclusion within their own ethnic group. The Karbis living OTHD constitute a culturally distinct and politically under-represented group within the greater Assamese society.

Cultural Erosion

Their minority status produces a layered set of challenges like threat to language and cultural erosion where the Assamese and Bengali cultures play a dominant role over the Karbi language and culture (Das, 2025). Younger generations increasingly adopt Assamese for schooling, communication and work. Many traditional practices are removed due to cultural assimilation which creates identity dilution and weakens the inter-generational cultural transmission (Bihari, 2023).

Land alienation

Land alienation and insecure land rights is also one of the challenges that the Karbis of OTHD are facing since continuous migration of non-tribal populations creates pressure on land. Loss of traditional land weakens both their economic base and cultural autonomy. Since 2012, the Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) is planning to develop satellite townships by extending the jurisdiction of the metropolitan area. Again, the BJP government decided to expand Guwahati city till Jagiroad-Raha in the East and till Baihata, Palashbari in the North-West direction. It is believed that the expansion of the city might promote the withdrawal of the tribal belt from the tribal dominated areas of Dimoria Development block and consequently, the protected areas will be open to migratory farms and industries.

Socio-economic backwardness

Apart from all the issues the community is facing socio-economic backwardness compared to others. Political marginalisation, migration and urban pressures

became more alarming for the entire Karbi community residing OTHD areas of Assam (Sharma, 2020). Their situation is marked by structural disadvantages and a continuing struggle for recognition within the broader Assamese society.

Findings

Unorganised structure

Usually, the success in an identity struggle or movement depends on the organisational structure, strategies and clarity in their demand's alliances with neighbouring communities and political negotiation capacity (Diani & Bison, 2004). For the Karbis OTHD of Assam's the challenge is even greater because they are a minority within a larger Assamese society and they lack an organisational structure as well as a territorially concentrated homeland like Karbi Anglong. Usually, a proper structure strengthens an organisation which gradually helps in pressurising the government by placing their clear and concrete demands. Again, the unified organizational platform provides the community to raise their demands in a systematic and legitimate demands. Successful movements in the Northeast like Bodo, Naga and Mizo had unified bodies (Hazarika, 2021). The Bodo movement is one of the most successful ethnic movements in Assam, leading to the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003 and later the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in 2020. However, in case of the Karbi's OTHD there is a mushroom growth of organisations amongst the community which not only diverted the masses but is also delaying their movement. Demand for 'Amri Longri', Autonomous Councils, Schedule Tribe status to the tribe as Hills and sometimes as Plains, seems vague in demands which distracts support. However, clear demands from any ethnic community can make negotiations easier with the government (Gogoi, 2018).

Lack of ethnic cohesion

Bodos have a long history of cultural unity through religion (Bathou), traditional dress, Bodo language (Boro), dance and festivals (Bwisagu) (Bhattacharjee, & Boro, 2017). Cultural associations like the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (1952) revived Bodo language and literature and strong ethnic consciousness became the base for mobilization. Likewise, there was a high degree of ethnic cohesion reflected in Naga identity assertion and despite of multiple tribes (Ao, Angami, Sema, Lotha, Tangkhul, etc.), the idea of being "Naga" became a powerful pan-tribal

ethnic identity (Nag, 2013). Such kind of strong ethnic consciousness and cultural revivalism amongst the Karbis of OTHD is missing in their identity movement. Different identity as *Amri Karbi*, *Bhaiyam Karbi* and Karbi in general is affecting the ethnic solidarity amongst themselves. Further, different identity, ideology with different demands is weakening their movement internally.

The educated middle class drives every successful movement like Assam Movement, ABSU movement, Naga national movement. Likewise, the role of the middle class and educated youth is very important in mobilising the masses through their various activities in giving proper direction to the movement, preserving the culture and traditions, submitting memorandums and negotiating with the government.

The student organisation has been playing a vital role in most of the ethnic movements in India. It acts basically as the backbone of those ethnic identity movements which helped in maintaining unity across villages and districts. Even in Bodo movement there was strong leadership and clear charter of demands raised by students' organisations ABSU (Mochahary et al., 2025). Leaders like Upendranath Brahma and others gave well-defined political goals (statehood, autonomy and recognition), systematic organisation and moral legitimacy to the movement. Student's group within the Karbis OTHD namely Karbi students Union (KSU), Amri Karbi Students Union (AKSU), All Karbi Students Association (AKSA) were also involved in raising the demand for the Karbi's OTHD. Each organisation raised their demands separately and started their agitation in their own way.

Role of Armed Groups

In the ethnic movements in northeast India, both political and armed strategy were adopted which helped them in negotiation with the government in power. The Bodo movement combined both political mobilisation and armed struggle through ABSU and civil groups, armed struggle through NDFB factions. While ABSU kept mass public support intact, armed groups created bargaining pressure (Daimary & Saikia, 2024). Till date no armed group has emerged within the Karbi community of OTHD of Assam. Even the Naga armed movement (NNC, NSCN) developed disciplined cadres, strong networks and organised military wings. Armed resistance gave the Nagas bargaining power and forced the Indian state to negotiate at the highest levels. Due to the intensity of mobilization and insurgency, the government considered the

Bodo issue a priority. Therefore, Centre and Assam government were willing to create autonomous councils, provide territorial protection, offer funds and administrative power. This political accommodation might contribute significantly to the identity movement's successes.

Role of State

The role of the state towards the ethnic identity movement of the Karbis of OTHD of Assam is seen quite complicated. The government in power were often seen accommodating their demands to some extent by providing two Development Councils and one Welfare Council to the community. To carry out socio-economic developments of the community the 'Amri Karbi Development Council' was formed in 2010 and the 'Assam Plain Karbi Development Council' was formed in 2021. Subsequently, after a series of demands, protests by the community, the 'Welfare Council' in 2026 was formed by the government. But at the same time, the government was observed in taking so much of time to fulfil the long-standing demands of the Karbis OTHD.

Discussion

The ethnic identity movement of the Karbis OTHD of Assam has its multifaceted dimensions. From 1970 to till date the community has attempted to resolve their problems but however, gradually it took a new shape that has been creating more complexities. The whole community is divided into two large sections as *Amri* and *Adarbaria*. Both the sections are trying to resolve their issues in their own direction which not only distracts the government but also allows the government in taking advantage of the circumstances. The segregated community is therefore unable to set an organised structure to get fulfilled their demands. Grassroots mobilization with strategic advocacy efforts can put pressure on the authorities to address this long-standing injustice (Michener, 2020). But the division within the community left the common masses in dilemma where the leaders and their leadership failed to unite and mobilise them towards their goal. There are various other marginalized communities like Bodo, Tiwa who struggled for similar issues in a systematic manner and with united force and they were able to get their due recognition. Considering those movements as their roadmap and strengthening solidarity networks, the collective force works on policy reforms and political recognition (Almeida, 2019).

The primary demand of Karbis OTHD is re-scheduling or constitutional reforms to incorporate them in Schedule Tribe order of 1950 which is considered as one of the ways to provide ST status for the community (Das, 2011). Therefore, the government officials and the civil servants who are engaged in various departments from the community can act as channels with relevant government departments and officials responsible for tribal affairs. The combined efforts targeting lawmakers at the state and national levels and in collaboration with sympathetic politicians to introduce bills or amendments is to let them recognize the present need of the Karbi's OTHD of Assam.

The ethnic cohesion is one of the important aspects in a successful identity movement (Heere et al. 2016). Both 'Amri' and 'Adarbar' can proceed with joint campaigns, build coalition and mutual support to increase their collective bargaining power (Conway, 2025). The leadership should utilize international human rights mechanisms, such as treaty bodies and special rapporteurs, to raise awareness about their rights violations and pressure the Indian government to take corrective action. International human rights organizations, diplomatic missions and United Nations bodies should also be approached to highlight the situation of the Karbi's OTHD and seek support for their cause on the global stage might be fruitful (Kumar, 2025).

The state was seen playing a lesser responsible role while it displayed sympathetic attitude towards the identity movement on one hand, while on the other hand it resisted the movements with commitments that took much longer time for its implementation. In most of the governments that were in power an ethnic movement is taken as an election propaganda and it ends with gaining power. Often the government in power is seen taking the interim measures to satisfy the masses and ignores the long-term demands.

Conclusion

The Karbis OTHD of Assam for a long time is deprived of the constitutional benefits availed by the Karbis residing in the two hill districts of Assam. This deprivation especially in the political arena had affected the community in a broader sense. Several efforts had been put forth by various organizations within the community either singly or in a united forum to persuade the government in power to grant their demands. However, the efforts of the organizations of the community have not been successful enough. In conclusion, it can be said that the identity movement of the Karbis OTHD is delayed due

to territorial dispersion, demographic smallness, lack of government support, weak organisational networks, lack of ST status, cultural assimilation, socio-economic constraints, absence of institutional platforms and internal division within organizations of the Karbis OTHD and the low political incentives for the state to address their demands. These structural disadvantages contrast sharply with the strong territorial and organisational base of Karbi Anglong leading to a slow and fragmented identity mobilisation of the Karbis OTHD. In the future course of action, it can be hoped that through a proper discussion and strategy as well as by a collective and qualitative effort within the community organisations may enable the Karbis OTHD in achieving their long-standing demands.

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