

**Conflicts behind the Spectacle:  
The Turbulent History in  
Making of the *Karbi Youth  
Festival* in Assam**

Maharshi Dayanand University  
Research Journal ARTS  
2019, Vol. 18 (1) pp.33-49  
ISSN 0972-706X  
© The Author(s) 2019  
<http://www.mdu.ac.in/Journals/about.html>

**Prafulla Kr Nath**

*Assistant Professor, Tribal Studies Centre, Assam University Diphu Campus, Diphu.*

**Amiya Kumar Das**

*Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Tezpur, University, Assam*

**Parasmoni Dutta**

*Assistant Professor, Department of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University, Assam*

**Abstract**

The Karbi Youth Festival is one of the most visible and important annually held cultural events in Assam. The formation and development of this iconic cultural spectacle of the indigenous community, the Karbi, of Assam are intricately connected to the ethnic identity assertion of the Karbis since the 1970s. This paper delineates the salient historical factors and incidents of the Karbi identity movement in reference to the making of this festival. Drawing on anthropological theorization of ritual by Victor Turner and other later researchers, this paper analyses the Karbi Youth Festival in terms of its instrumental capacity to intervene with the status-quo, by virtue of its liminality as theorized by Turner in the context of rituals, in consolidating a holistic Karbi identity in the emergent socio-political context.

**Keywords:** The Karbis, Assam, Ethnic identity, Cultural festival, Cultural Spectacle

---

**Corresponding author:**

Prafulla Kr Nath, Assistant Professor, Tribal Studies Centre, Assam University Diphu Campus, Diphu.  
Email: [khar1khuwa@gmail.com](mailto:khar1khuwa@gmail.com)

## Introduction

Celebration of any festival by a group or community is primarily a presentation of select artistic expressions of its collective culture, which are widely related to the lifestyle its community life. Along with such cultural expressions, there are multiple nuances or other sociological meanings attached to celebration of festivals. Such nuances may be the expression of collectivity, group ideology etc. Most of the traditional festivals of various communities are directly related to agriculture, life cycle or traditional livelihood of the community. Festivals, in such rhetoric, separate a community from others through the unique performances and cultural codes - enabling the concerned community to manifest its distinct identity within the larger inter-community ecology. It thus defines the group and its collective essence. Festival or such kind of social gatherings connect individuals of different economic and social category and gives the sense of belongingness to the community. It again defines the border of the community in one hand and psychological senses of belonging at individual levels on the other.

In the present-day context, where ethnicity is playing a crucial role in the everyday life of individual(s) and group; and the eventual politics of identity, the study of contemporary festivals gives the scope to comprehend various aspects related to contemporary dynamics of identity politics. In this context, what we are increasingly witnessing is the emergence of ethno-cultural spectacles, with sights and sounds of ethnic traits at extra-ordinary scales, either through self-endeavors of concerned ethnic communities or through direct or indirect patronage from the state or corporate houses. Cultural spectacle can be defined as an "organized event in which a group represents itself both to its own members and to nonmembers" (Bramadat, 2001, p. 3). Such spectacles are termed as festivals where traditional performances, along with various material cultural forms, are displayed for its members as well as for others. This also involves creation of an ethnic market of select ethno-cultural commodities for internal as well as external consumption.

There are several studies done by various scholars on rituals and festivals which help us to understand such events not merely as community funfairs or entertainments but having deeper historical and sociological connotations attached to them. Victor Turner initiated two important concepts viz. liminality and *communitas* to understand the ritual, in his book *The Ritual Process*. For him, liminality and *communitas* arose from his analysis of ritual and its dependence with the structure. He says, "society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of 'more' or 'less'" (Turner, 1991). The *communitas* which he understood as "society as an unstructured or rudimentary structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit

together to the general authority of the ritual elders." (ibid). A society needs to make a balance between the structure and the communitas for its own survival. During the time of ritual, structure of the society is suspended temporarily and communitas is awakened. The liminality or liminal period is the middle stage of rites of passage. One's social hierarchies are re-dissolved in the liminal period where a participant is made to stand at the threshold. Structurally and socially in this period, the identity of the individual is ambiguous. In defining communitas, Turner argues that in structured society people are segmented and are hierarchically arranged. However, during the liminal period, society is an "unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively an undifferentiated comitatus, community or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority" (Turner, 1991, p. 96). Thus, for him, communitas is a spirit of a community where members feel a sense of equality, togetherness and solidarity irrespective of their class or other hierarchies. The term liminal however was used to understand rituals in the pre-modern or in tribal societies by Turner. Later he developed the idea called liminoid to understand the celebrations in modern, complex or in industrial societies. Here, liminoid originates outside the structure of various social, political or economic borders where individuals or groups essentially challenge the larger social structure. Liminoid denotes a quasi-liminal character of cultural performance especially in the complex and modern societies such as theatre, art exhibitions, music concert etc.

Bramadat in his study on Folklorama, a festival celebrated in Canada, puts forward the manifold functions of cultural spectacles. Incorporating Turner's classic conceptualization of liminality and Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism, Bramadat classified four specific roles for ethnic cultural spectacles of current times. They are "alternative economy of status", "sites of dialogical self-definition", "public education about ethnic identity" and "ethnic show business" (Bramadat, 2001).

David M Boje (2000) in his article 'Festivalism at Work: Toward Ahimsa in Production and Consumption' has shown the differences between festivals and spectacles (Boje, 2000):

Spectacle	Festival
Work	Play
Work or play timework	Work and play
Imposed patterns of behaviour	Freely constructed behaviour
Dead time	Live time
Religions of consumption	Self
Pseudo desires	Transparent desires
Pseudo needs	Transparent needs
Loss of Self	Self-Management
Colonized spaces	Free spaces
Spectator	Participant/Co-designer
Functionary	Self-Managed
Survival of the Fittest/Riches	Co-evolution and Co-survival

Boje's argument on the spectacle is that the authenticity of spectacle is not real rather "every aspect of spectacle is by designer's choice". He develops the concept called festivalism by which he means that spectacle is present in both market capitalism and state socialism. Apart from these two extremes of "free market capitalism" and "state-bureaucratic" communism there is a third path which he calls as festivalism. He holds, "Festivalism is both post-capitalism and post-communism because there is a resituating of both these violent extremes in favor of non-violence" (ibid).

Boje laid down five assumptions of festivalism: firstly, festivals can create and earn profit without harming the ecology; secondly, global and local stakeholders by expressing their non-violent preferences can balance the corporate monopolies of power through their market behavior. Third, the myopic focus of short-term gain is replaced by understanding of the living whole. Fourth, in festival citizens are catalyst in creating an environment for others to flourish. Fifth, non-violent work, fun, and leisure are possible. In sum, "Festival is defined as the pragmatics of long-term sustainability in a non-violent culture, in balance with the whole planet". From Boje and Bramdat we have seen that cultural spectacles have range of functionalities or roles to be played for the interests of communities in a given historical context.

Drawing on such theoretical nuances, this paper is an enquiry into the Karbi Youth Festival (henceforth KYF), a popular spectacle celebrated in the month of February (15-19) every

year since 1974 by the Karbis. We will look into how the cultural nationalism was a driving force that came through the youth festival among the Karbis and thereby political nationalism was consolidated in Karbi society. Moreover, we will see how the internal contradictions (like class, social status, political ideology etc.) are reduced and resolved through the festival.

The official webpage of the KYF reads,

"Once in the valleys, hills, and plains of the north-eastern geography, there was a place called 'Rongbin' and with the 'Rongbin' the Karbis came the demographic movement in this last tip of south-east Asian cauldron was intense. Small indigenous groups were jostling each other from Vietnam to Burma, this was the period when Hindustan was being articulated from the earlier Bharatvarsh. Small nationalities like the Karbis were becoming part of the fringe in the pantheon of greater Indian historiography. However, in the Indian north-east Karbis didn't have to jostle with. Being the earliest settlers, their existence was in complete consonance with nature, green forests, rivers and Karbis never acted like Columbus! But with the onslaught of 'civilization', every Karbiarlung has become marginalized. Once a Karbirong (village), Kuwehonchi (Guwahati) is now a concrete jungle. Only the names of some dingy and obscure by-lanes betray the wounded past. Once a Karbi habitat, Kajir-arong has become distant and disdainful. Karbis are everywhere, from Manipur, Nagaland, Cachar, Meghalaya to Arunchal. we are not exclusive...rather we've been always inclusive, embracing cultures and people...but only paid back in discrimination, displacement and dispossession! Today, the land that we call ours is encroached upon and there are more strangers than kinsmen where have they all gone?? We are still looking for them, in the hills and plains and valleys!! Welcome to Karbi Anglong.... .."(Karbi Cultural Society, n.d.)

This assertive piece of text gives us the initial framework to look into the Karbi ethnicity in the present times. The ethnicity of a group or the ethnic movement always negate the dominant discourses and creates its own. The text has put Karbis in definite historical and geographical particularities of Northeast India. This narrative can be read as a cultural-semiotic reflection of the on-going negotiation made the Karbis between their political consciousness of the self as distinct "little nationality" in one hand; and, their sense of undeniable belonging to, and participation in, the making of the larger national entity called "Bharatvarsh". As evident, the emphasis is given more on the first part, wherein the past of the Karbis gets glorified through highlighting of select texts, such as, the Karbis being the

first settlers in Assam which ensures their legitimacy as the original and authentic dwellers in the region; and also their well-established harmony with the local ecology of the land, its "forests and rivers".

Bishnu Prasad Rabha, a doyen of Assamese culture and nationalism, called the Karbis as the Columbus of Assam; in the sense that Karbis were the first settlers of Assam. He, in one of his Assamese articles, wrote, "...the Mikirs [an earlier exonym to refer to the Karbis] were the aborigines in Assam. They were the first one to explore the hills, caves, rivers, plains and the forests of Assam. They are the Columbus, the discoverer of Assam....."(Barua & Das, 2008, p. 934). Rabha has been all appreciative towards the "brave" Karbis, in his own narration of the history of human migration and settlement in Assam. He unambiguously acknowledged that "Assamese nation is ever-grateful to the Mikirs" (ibid) for establishing the human lifeworld in Assam. The reference to Columbus in the narrative construction of the Karbis has something to do with highly politicized reading of Rabha's article in later times. Historians look Columbus as the champion of the European colonization for obvious reasons, who initiated the most horrible history of ethnic cleansing in the American continent. In the similar sense, the reference made by the Karbishere to Columbus can be read as a more eloquent betrayal by those who arrived later in the region but became dominant enough to marginalize the Karbis. The claims that places of Kaziranga and Guwahati were once parts of the Karbi territory are also corroborated in various Karbioral narratives. (Nath, 2015).

From the narrativized descriptions to the festival sites, various metaphorical symbols are used which can be read as the expression of the Karbi politicized ethnicity. In 2017, at the centre of the KYF site, a sculpture was installed. In that sculpture, human figures in the Karbi traditional dresses are shown to be around a big tree. A text was also written on it which goes as "unity is our strength". This can be interpreted as a cultural attempt to consolidate over internal political divisions among the Karbis, which have presumably affected their rights to get an Autonomous state.

### **Karbi Anglong District - a brief history**

In 1873, the British Government introduced the system of Inner Line Permit in select areas of Assam, especially in the hills of the North-east India. With the Frontier Regulation Act of 1884, the present Karbi Anglong which was known as The Mikir Hills tract, was made a part of the administrative district of Nowgong. Till then, there was no administrative boundary of the erstwhile Mikir Hills or present-day Karbi Anglong. Later in 1893, a part of the tract was put under the Sivasagar district. The Mikir Hills got converted to the partially excluded areas in 1935. Because of the twin annexation of the Mikir Hills to Nowgong and Sivasagar districts, it suffered most as it was nobody's child in terms of

development (Chaube, 1999, p. 47).

With this backdrop, what was felt necessary after the independence of the country, was to undo the twin annexation of the land of the Karbis to two different districts of Nowgong and Sibsagar; and to carve out a single separate district of the Karbis, for their development. This immediate solution was pushed forward by the then Karbi elites. The Karbi A Dorbar, the first socio-political organization of the tribe, was formed and was soon to become the collective voice of the Karbi community. On 18 May of 1947, the Dorbar submitted a memorandum to the Bordoloi Committee<sup>1</sup>, demanding a separate district for the Karbis. They asked for consolidation of the Mikir areas, protection of their traditional customs and extension of franchise (ibid: 47). On the recommendation of the Bordoloi Committee (which was accepted with modifications), the Constitution of India adopted the Provision of Sixth Schedule for the hill population of then Assam. The United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district came into existence vide Government notification dated 17.11.1951 no. TAD/R/31/50/ as the largest district of Assam carving an area of 4421.12 square kilometres from then Nagaon district, and 4382.28 square kilometres from Sibsagar district. The Autonomous District Council was formed on 23 June 1952. In the year 1970, the United Mikir Hills District was again bifurcated and two districts under the name and style of Mikir Hills and North Cachar districts were created. On 14 October 1976, the Mikir Hills District was renamed as the Karbi Anglong, vide Government notification

Year	Event
1838	Parts of Mikir Hills (present day Karbi Anglong) comes under the control of the British
1854	Other parts under present Dima Hasao are amalgamated into the district
1880	Colonial British government enacts Frontier Tracts Act. Mikir Hills is classified as a frontier tract
1919	District falls under the jurisdiction of the Backward Tracts Act
1936	District falls under the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas Act
1946	Dimasa and Karbi leaders of the district ask for functional autonomy. The demand is duly noted by the Indian National Congress
1951	United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district is created as per provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India
1970	Bifurcation of North Cachar and Mikir Hills
1976	Mikir Hills re-christened as Karbi Anglong

(Barbora, 2008)

<sup>1</sup> During the time of Indian independence, with the recommendation of Cabinet Mission, the constituent Assembly formed a committee named as Fundamental Rights of the Minority and Tribals and Excluded Area. Sardar Ballav Bhai Patel was the chairman of this committee. It set the sub-committee for North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribals and Excluded Area, taking Gopinath Bordoloi as the chairman of the sub-committee. This sub-committee was popularly known as Bordoloi Committee.

TAD/R/115/74/47 Dtd. 14.10.1976.

### **Historicizing the KYF as counter-hegemonic move**

The political turmoil began in Karbi Anglong centering to the Script Movement which started in 1973. Before that, in time-to-time the issue to form an Autonomous state comprising the two hills districts of Assam viz. Karbi Anglong and N.C.Hills (presently Dima Hasao) was also raised and protests were carried out. However, the Script movement had an important contribution as mentioned by some of the individuals who were active in organizing the Karbi Youth Festival initially. The Karbi language does not have a script of its own. Earlier Assamese script was used to write the Karbi language.

In 1972, the Gauhati University came up with a notification that the medium of instruction and examination under its colleges would be in Assamese language. Assam is a state where numbers of ethnic communities are found having their own language and culture. The communities use Assamese language as language of communication and also learnt Assamese in schools and colleges spontaneously. Before the notification the medium of instruction was English. Moreover, other communities of Assam such as Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Mishing, Deuri used to write their respective language in Assamese script. With the hegemonic approach of the chauvinist Assamese nationalism, the other communities started revolting against the move and also started demanding switching to Roman script from Assamese script to write their respective language. In Karbi Anglong too similar demand was raised.

On 31st May, 1973 in a meeting held at Diphu (the District Headquarter of Karbi Anglong), it anonymously decided to adopt Roman Script for writing Karbi language. Jaysing Dolui, the then Chief Executive Member of the Mikir Hills Autonomous District Council presided over the meeting. The meeting resolved that "the Roman Scripts shall be adopted for writing the Karbi national literature and henceforth all Karbi text books to be used as Karbi vernacular subject in the L.P. Schools level should be written in Roman Script." (Rongpher, 2005, p. 73). The meeting also resolved for formation of a committee called Script Implementation Committee to create pressure against the authority. Bronson Engti was the President and Roy Enghi was the General Secretary of the SIC.

The 'SIC' through separate resolutions sent appeals to the council to adopt a resolution in the Council Session and the Karbi Lammet Amei (Karbi literary Society) for adoption of Roman Script. But there was a difference of opinion between some groups of Karbi leaders.

The Script Implementation Committee used to convene public meetings rallies in different parts of the district to increase public support for the Roman script. In one such rally on 29



December 1973, several students were injured in atrocious retaliation by the state police, with the arrest of several important leaders.

In a procession that took place on 28th December 1973, the police arrested some leaders of the movement. In one interview of Roy Enghi<sup>2</sup>, he narrated that they could feel the aggression of the dominant groups towards the minority tribal people. At the same time, they felt that the Karbis are also forgetting their own culture and heritage. As a result, they thought of a cultural revivalism through involving the youths of the community. The continuous aggression of the bigger nationalities and hegemonic approach of the state compelled the leaders to rethink that if necessary steps are not taken, the Karbis would lose their culture and identity. As such, they planned for an organized festival where youths can be actively engaged, and the culture can be preserved and propagated. The idea of youth festival thus germinated among the leaders and once they came out from the jail they planned for a program in the name and style of Karbi Youth Festival and by collecting some funds in Diphu for the first time in 1974.

D.S. Teron writes, "The immediate reasons for holding the KYF was the chauvinistic attitude of the Assamese intellectuals and political leaders, for which the Karbi youths became angry." He further says that "the KYF did not get any patronage from the Autonomous District Council and at the same time the middle class of Diphu town looked down upon the KYF. As the festival was meant for the illiterate village folks, the modern middle class of the town had to ignore it" (Teron, 1999, p. 30). Though, age was no bar to participate but it was named as youth festival. Day by day it became popular and everyone wanted to get involved in the festival with pomp and gaily. Initially participation was very limited where in the first year hardly 300 people participated. The participants joined in the banner of a club from their respective places. The clubs namely, Waisong, Kheroni, Khonbamon, Karbi club, Rengbonghom club of Dokmoka were the one who defied all the taboos of the society regarding performance of various cultural items outside the context and participated in the first Karbi Youth Festival in 1974. After the success in the first year, for next two years the festival was organized at Diphu and later in various parts of the district it was organized till 1993. After 3 years in 1977, Karbi Cultural Society was formed which took the sole responsibility to organize the festival. The number of participating clubs also increased year by year. It became a prestige to be a part of the festival for individual and groups and hence new clubs were formed in every year (Tokbi, 1999, p. 66).

The organization renewed its strength as the participating clubs kept on increasing

---

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Roy Enghi, 15 December, 2017 & 1st August, 2018 at his residence. Roy Enghi was the first President of the KYF celebration committee and was instrumental in organizing people for celebration of KYF in the initial phases

every passing year. The 17th Karbi youth festival held at Dokmoka gave out the most joyous success as the number of the participating clubs increased to 74. As a result, the organizers re-organized the pattern of the participants and competition. In the year 1992, the participating clubs were grouped into zones. The KCS was rearranged and KCS Zonal Committees were formed. These zones also organize their own youth festival or mini festival in their respective zones during Durga puja holidays to determine the composition of the zonal teams. The KCS zone is comprised of units, and those units compete in the zonal festival.

Another significant change which occurred in 1994 was that it was decided to hold the KYF in a fixed place rather than to move every year from place to place. The idea was to increase the popularity of the festival to the outside world by developing the site with well-equipped infrastructure. So, a permanent site was developed with almost 350 acres of land in a hilly terrain nearby Diphu Town. Starting with hardly 300 people the festival now welcomes almost 5000 artists as well as visitors more than 5 lakh every year.

### **Karbi Cultural Society (KCS)**

The KYF was first organized and managed by "the Karbi Youth Festival managing Committee" but as it was not a permanent committee. Therefore, after holding the festival for three years at Diphu, a new "Karbi Cultural Society" was formed on 30 January 1977. The earlier committee was demolished in 1985 and hereafter the Karbi Cultural Society was passed on with all the responsibility to organize, determine and redefine the festival and the society was thus noted as the parental body of the Karbi Youth Festival.

Being an apex body of all the participating clubs from all over the places where the Karbis have their habitations, the Karbi Cultural Society took charge of organizing as well as promoting the festival at the global scale. The KCS is an organization working voluntarily irrespective of political affiliations of any individual for the development and preservation of the Karbi Culture. Lunse Timung was the founder president of KCS and Roy Enghi was the General Secretary. The aim and objective of the KCS was to preserve, to enrich and to develop the Karbi culture.

The 1983 KYF gave a new orientation when the KCS introduced a newspaper called *Barika* which focuses on the events of the five-day programmes. In 1986, the KCS stood with the Autonomous State demand movement. That was the year when KANCHASDCOM<sup>3</sup> and Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) were formed. Later on, ASDC emerged as a strong political party in the district. In the year 1989, ASDC

<sup>3</sup> KANCHASDCOM :Karbi Anglong , N. C. Hills Autonomous State Demand Committee, a parallel Organization to ASDC and it led movement separately for Autonomous state.

contested the Autonomous District Council Election and won 22 seats defeating the ruling Congress Party. Bey has mentioned that in the 1990's decade, the Karbi Anglong district witnessed political leaderships from different ideologies - Americanisation, Pan Hinduism at the national level, and Assamisation in the state level (Bey P. , 1999, p. 94). As such, the KCS became one of the important organizations which can work for the development of the Karbis out of such ideologies and differentiations. The major aims of the organization are

1. Protecting Karbi cultural tradition and creating a progressive consciousness among the people about these roots
  2. Creating a framework if the scientific development of Karbi cultural identities
  3. Developing a democratic culture that state opposed to cultural exploitation, communal and ethnic expression and violence, with a view to preserving social harmony and peace.
  4. Forging Cultural homogeneity among Karbi people spread over different region.
- (ibid)

KCS began to grow and became one of the most accepted organizations irrespective of any political and other differentiations prevalent among the Karbis. Similarly, the youth festival is a space where everyone one can join or joins.

#### **Funding for the KYF: A participatory mode**

Initially, to organize the KYF, the fund was generated through contributions from the Karbi peoples. The organizers themselves, who were more active in this festival, contributed mostly for organizing of the KYF. The Local Autonomous Council did not provide any amount for festival during those times. The Karbi individuals contributed within affordable capacities and collections were also made from the government employees. From 1989 onwards, after ASDC came to power, a 'Provision of Fund' began to be offered by the Local Council.

The strength of KYF comes with the popularity of Karbi cultural participation from every nook and corner of the district. Many Karbi youths come and join to work and participate to enrich culture and customs meaningfully. The festival's strength was increasing day by day and year after year and therefore, the KYF had been celebrated in different places each year in the district. With this the Karbis had contributed their strength, energy, money power, skills, knowledge, concepts, labour and knowledge. But after 2000, when the Congress came back to power of the ADC, it stopped offering any fund for the KYF celebration. From 2013-14 onwards, an amount of Rs. 5 lakhwas provided by the council.

In the Election Manifesto of the ASDC in 1989, the Autonomous State Demand

Committee declared that it would preserve the Karbi culture as well as would convert it to a mass culture. A new turn was given in KYF from the year 1983 after coming of left ideology in the KYF (it is discussed in the subsequent paragraphs), it had mobilized people in the name of culture and thus a mass movement was run for political purpose. The cultural movement which was meant for the youths became so popular among the masses that it was no more a festival of the youths rather festival of the entire Karbi community. Bringing in Turner's argument in relation to the KYF about liminal period (which is the middle stage of rites of passage, one's social hierarchies are re-dissolved and participant stand at the threshold), in the KYF also the internal social hierarchies in terms of performance or as audience were negotiated and made to be blurred. They not only enjoy the performance rather they re-visit their past, feel solidarity as a community through their cultural similarity. It also alters the various economic statuses of the performers who share similar kind of arrangements like food and other facilities. Wearing of traditional dresses by both males and females (participants and audiences) in KYF, a sense of ethnic solidarity comes which helps in further ethnicity formation. Finally, enjoying of ethnic food or buying of ethnic items is the part of the practicing ethnicity in day to day life. At the same time cultural spectacles also becomes a site of ethnic show business.

Anderson has articulated that the idea of nation is an 'imagined community' and a cultural artifact. For him, the nation is "an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). He considers nation as imagined as "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion". On the basis of Anderson's conceptualization, when we see Karbi nationalism we find that KYF was instrumental in bringing the Karbis to a similar platform as well as able to create an emotional attachment which is required for nation building. It is interesting to note that after 1980, a progressive section of the youths who believed in left ideology of the CPI(ML) became active members of the Karbi Youth Festival. As the KYF was popular among the masses through cultural nationalism, the party could form its bases in every villages. The KYF had already connected Karbis of various geographical locations irrespective of their economic and social hierarchies. The CPI(ML) gave a political twist of the cultural nationalism towards a political one by adding the idea of Article 244(A) of Indian constitution to the grassroots level. As the KCS had clubs those participated in the KYF from each geographical location, the youth leaders could expand its base to the village level in the same format. In the later period, a mass movement came into existence in Karbi Anglong. The coming of the left ideology in the Karbi Cultural society eventually gave a fillip to the festival. The spontaneous participation of people increased and at the

same time a new cultural revivalism occurred in Karbi society. The progressive nature of the leaderships embraced every section including the non-Karbis of the district under the same umbrella. The Youth Festival became a people's festival of the district. Tokbi refers that until 1982, the youth festival was limited to organize competitions of some traditional folklores of the Karbis. However, from 1982 onwards, some progressive youths as well as some youths believed in left ideology became part of the KCS. These new youths gave a turn of the festival from a reactionary nationalism to a democratic and dynamic cultural movement (Tokbi, 1999, p. 66). When we look at the souvenirs after 1983 till 2000 of the KYF, we find articles written by various non-Karbis associated with left ideology. At the same time in every souvenir political commentary on the movement of ASDC, Article 244 (A) in English, Assamese and Karbi languages are seen.

In a speech at the CPI(ML) Party's 29th anniversary in Guwahati on 22 April 1998, Vinod Mishra said,

"The Karbi movement didn't grow so easily. There is a long history of hard and painstaking work by large number of cadres who organized the rural poor. Many people tend to forget that the movement was organized on the basis of a revolutionary ideology and it united with other democratic movements in the country" (Mishra, 1979).

After the end of the Assam movement, a committee called Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) was formed in 1986 where almost all the leaders belonged to the left ideology. The cultural consciousness of the people and the mass contact those were made by the leaders who later years became part of the ASDC movement was helpful for them to mobilize the people in the name of autonomous state. From 1986-89 mass movement was carried out under the banner of the ASDC in demand of Autonomous state. In 1989, ASDC contested the election of District Council and won 22 seats out of 26 seats. The distinctions between ASDC, CPI(ML), KCS became blurred and literally CPI(ML) controlled them. 350 acres of land was allotted to the KCS to hold the KYF as well as a gate built in the entrance of where KYF held was also named in memory of Vinod Mishra.

On 11 February, 1998 Anil Kr. Baruah, a central Committee Member of the CPI(ML), was killed by suspected United Liberation Front of Assam (an insurgent group), in Dibrugarh. Condemning the killing the 24th KYF souvenir devoted one full page with the title "Comrade Anil Kr. Baruah is death, but fight goes on...". A part of the obituary is quoted below,

".....Com. Anil Kr. Baruah was a TRUE FRIEND of the people of Karbi Anglong and N.C.Hills for he had been very vocal in SUPPORTING THE AUTONOMOUS STATE MOVEMENT right from the beginning

and always" stood with the HILL PEOPLE EVEN IN THE LEAN DAYS OF REFRESSION.

HE UNDERSTOOD THE MINDS AND SENTIMENTS OF THE HILL PEOPLE AND WAS A CLOSE CONFIDENT AND GUIDE OF THE KARBI CULTURAL SOCIETY. THE HILL PEOPLE HAVE LOST A TRUE FRIEND, PHILOSOPHER AND GUIDE. The reception Committee of the 24th KYF'98 Taralangso vehemently condemns the cowardly killing of Com. Baruah and call upon the people of Assam to openly rise up and protest such inhuman and brutal acts"(Bey S. , 1998).

The above text clearly indicates that the distinction between the KCS and the ASDC was quite blurred. The members of ASDC also were members of KCS. The cultural movement went together with the political movement.

### **Split in ASDC**

It is already mentioned above that the left ideology and the nationalist ideology worked together in the ASDC movement. When ASDC came to electoral politics, there was dissent among some members of ASDC regarding the influence of left ideology in ASDC. As such, many members of ASDC demanded in ASDC convention to discuss the issue in 1991. Jayanta Rongpi one of the top leaders of the ASDC movement holds that in that very time the USSR fell, hence it was the time to defend communism from the part of CPI(ML)<sup>4</sup>. During 11-13 April, 1991 at Umpanai of West Karbi Anglong the issue was discussed. Here, some leaders declared their affiliation with CPI(ML) and the convention also resolved that ASDC and CPI(ML) would work together for the cause of the autonomous state. However, a dominant member of ASDC namely Elwin Teron resigned from ASDC, in the same year alleging that CPI(ML) had been trying to convert the other sister organizations of ASDC to organizations of CPI(ML). Later in 1997, some other leaders also resigned from the party. It is widely held that most of the decisions of ASDC were taken in the meetings of CPI(ML) and were implemented later in ASDC. Rongpher (2005) mentions one of the decisions of CPI(ML) to indicate the role of it in the ASDC. In the meeting of the Karbi Anglong CPI(ML) Party Committee held in Guwahati in 1997 it resolved "It is unanimously decided that Com. Dr. Jayanta Rongpi and Com. Holiram Terang will be the next President and General Secretary of ASDC Central Committee" (326). On 25th September, 1997 in a mass convention CPI(ML) Liberation, Hills District Party

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Dr. Jayanta Rongpi on 15th December, 2016

Committee was formed and formally ASDC joined the liberation party. It is to be mentioned here that earlier the CPI(ML) unit of Karbi Anglong was known as Karbi Anglong Party Committee (KAPC) which was renamed as Hills District Party Committee in the convention.

As a reaction to it many leaders submitted resignation and they alleged about mishandling of funds, thrust for power of some leaders, corruption as well as dominance of CPI(ML) over the other party workers. Sharp reactions came specially from the Hamren constituency. In the 1998 general election ASDC decided to contest election under the banner and symbol of CPI(ML). On 2nd July, many leaders in a press meet including Jotson Bey, Chief Executive Member, ADC openly alleged the corruption of some leaders. He was also critical to the role of the central committee of CPI(ML) which overlooked on the allegations of corruption. In such circumstances, on 9th July the Standing Committee meeting of ASDC held where it tried to resolve the issue and proposed a packaged of solution by Dr. Rongpi and Rubul Sarma of CPI(ML). However, Holiram Terang rejected those solutions. In so far, on 20th July in the executive meeting of ASDC, almost 27 leaders of ASDC alleged that some CPI (ML) leaders tried to impose some solutions which were not discussed in the CPI (ML) meeting and hence they boycotted the meeting. Such incident eventually affected the Autonomous Council also. Some leaders and MLAs Holiram Terang, Jagatsing Ingti Samrajit Haflongbar resigned from CPI (ML).

In culmination, twenty-one CPI(ML) members, including Dr. Rongpi, were expelled from the ASDC on 21 August of 2000; and Holiram Terang and Babu Rongpi were entrusted with the charges of Secretary and President of the ASDC respectively. However, on the next day after the expulsion, Jayanta Rongpi's faction convened another meeting of the Standing Committee where Holiram Terang was expelled from the ASDC. Thus, both the sections claimed themselves to be original beholder of the ASDC.

The spilt in party also affected in the celebration of the KYF. 2 years after the celebration of the silver jubilee of Karbi Youth Festival, there occurs a turmoil leading to the split of ASDC as well as the KCS. From the year 2001, the division in the KCS led to the parallel celebration of the youth festival. One faction of KCS i.e the ASDC(U) organized the North East Karbi Youth Festival (NEKYF) at Phong Ari near Sonapur in Kamrup District for 2 year (2002 and 2003) and for 2 years at Karbi Anglong Sports Association Playground, Diphu (2004 and 2005). While the other faction lead by the ASDC(P) and CPI(ML) continued to hold the Karbi Youth Festival at Taralango with the earlier schedule. At the same time Congress also started celebrating ethnic festival in the format of the KFY in

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview with various KCS members

Kaziranga for couple of years<sup>5</sup>. The political turmoil, spilt in the ASDC, failure to get the autonomous state as well as insurgency, ethnic conflict created suspicion among the common masses towards the political leaderships. However, unification also occurred in 2007, and after the hard times KCS nowadays standing tall and could resolve the differences among individuals in the present days. It slowly started coming out from the political interferences or ideologies and concentrated in the cultural aspects of the community. Thus, in the festival days irrespective of any political ideology all the leaders, individuals visit the festival site. In the core committees also, individuals of various political affiliations are active members of the KCS as well as members of the celebration committee of KYF.

### **Conclusion**

The above text is an attempt to capture the salient historical features in the origin and development of present-day's spectacular phenomenon called the Karbi Youth festival. Two things can be said in the conclusion of this account. Firstly, as established in the anthropological understandings that a ritual or a festival temporarily suspends the status-quo within the concerned community for the survival of the communitarian system itself. This situation can be exploited by the members of the community towards the desired collective interests. In the context of the Karbis, the youth festival provided with an effective platform to negotiate their internal problems towards the consolidation of a collective Karbi identity. Secondly, in the context of Assam, the formation and manifestation of identity do take place largely in the cultural and linguistic lines, rather than building upon economic factors. Therefore, primarily language, along with other identifiable cultural traits, play central role in the formation of ethnic and regional identities. It can be mentioned, for example, that in the growth and propagation of Assamese identity, institutions like Asom Sahitya Sabha had been playing a pivotal role. Though this was outwardly an organization pertaining to activities of Assamese written literatures, its mass appeal was stimulated by a proud celebration of Assamese language-based literary and cultural legacies. Since the formation of Karbi identity was largely propelled by its counter-hegemonic impulse towards the dominant Assamese identity, there is scope to believe that events like the Karbi Youth Festival was conceptualized as a counter to institutions like Asom Sahitya Sabha. In addition to the generalized anthropological insights on festivals and rituals, such language-centric and culture-centric particularities in the context of Assam need to be looked at for a fuller understanding of contemporary ethno-cultural spectacles in this region.

### **References**

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.



- Barbora, S. (2008). Autonomous districts and/or ethnic homelands: An ethnographic account of the genesis of political violence in Assam (North-East India) against the normative frame of the Indian Constitution. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 15(2/3), 313-334. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24674995>.
- Barua, S., & Das, J. (Eds.). (2008). *Bishmuprasad Rabha Rachana Samagra*. Tezpur: Rava Rachanawali Prakashan Sangha.
- Bey, P. (1999). Ha-I-Mu: An Opera. In S. Bey (Ed.), *Ruptalin* (pp. 92-99). Diphu: Karbi Youth Festival Silver Jubilee Celebration.
- Bey, S. (Ed.) (1998). *Nongkula* (Souvenir of the 24th Karbi Youth Festival). Taralango.
- Boje, D. (2000, September 7). Festivalism at Work: Toward Ahimsa in Production and Consumption. Retrieved July 15, 2016, from NMSU College of Business: [https://business.nmsu.edu/~dboje/papers/Festivalism\\_at\\_Work.html](https://business.nmsu.edu/~dboje/papers/Festivalism_at_Work.html).
- Bramadat, P. (2001). Shows, Selves and Solidarity: Ethnic Identity and Cultural Spectacles in Canada. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 33(1), 78-98.
- Chaube, H. (1999). *Hill politics in Northeast India*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.
- Karbi Cultural Society. (n.d.). Karbi Youth Festival: A time to come together. Retrieved August 3, 2018, from Karbi Youth Fests' Blog: <https://karbiyouthfest.wordpress.com/2009/09/23/12/>.
- Mishra, V. (1979, December). An appeal to the students and youth of Assam. Retrieved February 18, 2019, from Marxist Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mishra/1979/12/x01.htm>.
- Nath, P. (2015). *Socio historical study of ethnic nationalism in Assam with special reference to the Karbi Ethno-Cultural Expressions*. Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to Tezpur University.
- Rongpher, B. (2005). *Karbi Anglongar Rajnoitik Itihas*. Diphu: PhuPhu Publication.
- Teron, D. (1999, February 16). Ekabingsha Shatkar Duardalit Karbi Sanskriti. *Pratyay*, 11.
- Tokbi, J. (1999, Silver Jubilee Issue). KarbiJuvaMahotsavar Rupali Jayanti Barsha: EtiMulyangkan. In K. Hanse (Ed.) *Lokimo*, pp. 66-68.
- Turner, V. (1991). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.