A study on the Karbi megalith with special reference to Guwahati city.

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Abstract

The Karbi tribes belong to greater Mongoloid racial stock and by language they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. Probably, the Karbis who were earlier called Mikirs belonged to western China and entered the territory of Assam from Central Asia through migration prior to 13th century A.D. Erection of megalith is a continuous practice among the Karbis living in different hilly and plain areas of the north-eastern region of India including the city of Guwahati in the state of Assam. Guwahati city which is the most populous city in the entire north-east India has a sizable number of Karbi population. This paper makes an attempt to list out the Karbi megalithic ruins in this city and tries to analyse the changes that have taken place in megalithic culture of Karbis living in that place which has around four hundred megalithic ruins spread over at eight different sites.

Keywords: Dispur, Guwahati city, Karbi, Long-A-Ari, Megalith.

1. Introduction

The existence of human society is still a mystery. Absence of definite written records makes it difficult to detect the actual time of emergence of human society and culture. Malinowski said that “every culture grows in response to localized versions of the bio-psychic need of a people and that is to be judged in terms of these and not in terms of any absolute value” (Banerjee, 1994). According to some anthropologist the individual is for the society and however, the former is not for the latter. The individuals are born and brought up by a society and they make their identity through his/her society.

The relationship between human being and society being very close reflects societal requirement of human beings. A society cannot run without it’s own culture. Emile Durkheim define society as, “it is not mere sum total of individuals; the system formed by their association represents a specific reality possessing its own characteristics” (Banerjee, 1994). The cultural traits of a society transmit to other societies by diffusion which finally leads to transformation. A school of anthropologists is of the view that, culture is the sum total of the learned behaviour of human beings which evolves out from the need of adaptation within a given environment. In other ways, culture is both adaptive and a means of adaptation.

1.1 The Karbis at a glance

The Karbi (previously known as the Mikir) is a tribal community living mostly in the undivided Karbi Anglong district of Assam. Besides Karbi Anglong district, the Karbi inhabited areas include Dima Hasao, Kamrup, Marigaon, Nagaon, Golaghat, Karimganj, Lakhimpur and Sonitpur districts of Assam. Bajijan circle of Papumpare district in Arunachal Pradesh, Jaintia Hills, Ri-Bhoi and East Khasi Hills districts in Meghalaya, and Dimapur district in Nagaland also have good numbers of Karbi population.

By physical traits, the Karbis belong to the Mongoloid racial stock. It is reflected in their skin colour which is light yellowish brown, straight hairs, short stature, broad and flat nose. According to some scholars, the Karbi language falls under the Tibeto-Burman family of Indo-Chinese language (Stack & Lyall, 1908).
The Karbis have their traditional dresses which are artistically designed. Traditionally these dresses are woven at their family looms. The aged men use a beautifully designed shirt called Soniangpo and the shirt used by the young men is called Saihothor. The men use a loin cloth called Rikong. The female folk generally uses Pinicamflak or Pini (a piece of cloth tied around the waist). A piece of artistic cloth is used by them to cover the upper part of the body which is locally known as Pekok. An artistic waist band, locally called as Wankok is used by the females and young girls use a special Endi scarf called Dokherso.

Livelhood of the Karbis mainly depends on agriculture by practicing Jhum cultivation which is a slash and burn method. In recent times Jhuming without permission of the village council has been prohibited. Paddy is the principal crop while maize, sugarcane, jute, pineapple, chillies, zinger, turmeric etc. are also important crops for cultivation. The Karbis are strict followers of clan exogamy while monogamy is the prevailing practice. Karbi people consider both entities of God (Arnam) and Demon (Hi-i; pronounced as He-e). Like most of the other hill tribes, the Karbis can be regarded as animistic. They believe in the immortality of the soul and life after death.

1.2 Megalithic culture of the Karbis

In Karbi society, traditionally cremation of a dead person is done by two elaborate systems which are called Saw-daah and Samadhi. Earlier, in case of natural deaths, the body of the dead person was kept for two or three days inside the main ritual house (Hempe) on a boat like platform made of tree trunk (Longhong) and that was placed in front of Nungpee which is the main wooden post of their ritual house (Kathar, 2014). This ritual was done to have a last look at the dead person by his or her friends and relatives. Considering the aspect of decomposition and unhygienic condition of the body after two-three days, they discontinued this system.

Now-a-days, by the Karbis living in hill areas, body after death is carried on a freshly made bamboo platform (Sondol). The Karbis living in urban areas also follow the same process. Before leaving for the cremation, the body is bathed with normal water and covered by a new set of clothes. If a very old person dies due to old age ailment and the body starts decomposing, they simply put basil water on it instead of bathing. After this, the body is placed on Sondol with a new bamboo mat with a face upward and four persons carry the dead body for cremation. Every village has a demarcated area which serves as a cremation ground (Their) and cremate the dead one by putting fire. Traditionally, while carrying dead body to the cremation ground, people play a special drum which is locally known as seng-droop and they march by dancing with the bits of the drum (Kathar, 2014). This custom is not usually followed among the Karbis of urban places.

Erection of megaliths, the standing stone structures, among the Karbis is related to Samadhi function. The site where they place these stones is locally known as Long-A-Ari where Long means Stone, A means to bury, Ari means place (Kathar, 2014). The stone erection function is organized within one month or six months of the death of a person. They usually sacrifice pig, fowls which are given by the maternal uncle’s (Nuhu) family of the expired person. The family members fix up a day for erection of megalith and before one day of the erection ceremony they bring a stone from the nearby hills. The process of collection of the stone from the hills is locally known as Long-a-tana. After collection, the stone is simply kept on the megalithic ground. By the next day morning, the priest (Kathar) comes to the ground with his assistants and starts the ritual. Before taking two stones from the nature, the family has to pay a minimum amount of money (may be even a one-rupee coin) and offer rice beer, one pair of betel-nut and leaf. On the megalith erection day, the priest and the helper first give shower to both the stones with fresh water. Then the priest places one stone vertically and another flat stone horizontally in front of the standing stone. Before placing the horizontal stone, the priest uses three small stones and a piece of long-a-modar plant (scientifically called Erythrina Variegata) along with a piece of long-a-ekhra plant (scientifically called Erianthus ravennace) which are placed with those three stones. Sometimes, this is done at the right side of the standing stone. The supporting three small stones are locally known as Chen Xill.

Karbi people believe that if the branch of modar plant remains alive, it means the soul of the deceased person is blocked in the Heaven. According to Karbi belief, the branch dies when the soul comes back to the earth. And in the unusual cases, if the branch grows they cut it. The Karbi believe in rebirth and therefore they think that the branches of modar and the ekhra plants which are planted along with the stones never grow again when someone dies.

After placing of the stone, the priest dresses the stone with a piece of white cloth. If the person is male,
the stone is dressed up like a man and if female, it is
done like a woman. After that the priest puts some
mustard oil on the flat stone and places a banana leaf
on it and offers betel-nut, betel-leaf, some amount of
rice grain, *dubori bon* (scientifically called Cynodon
Dactylon) etc. After that, he offers two bamboo
glasses where one glass is made full of normal water
while other one is of local wine. The wine glass is
placed on the right side and the water glass is placed
on the left side of the standing stone.

Afterwards, the priest sacrifices a pig reciting
their holy *mantras* (chants) in the name of the deceased
person. After that they sacrifice the fowls and the blood
of those animals has to split on the stones.

After completion of these rituals, the priest
prepares a meal nearby the *Long-A-Ari*
ground for
the deceased person. These customs are also common
among the Karbis living in urban places like Guwahati
city.

1.3 Location of the study area

Guwahati city comes under the Kamrup (Metro)
district situated between 25°46' and 26°49' north latitude
and between 90°48' and 91°50' east longitude in the
state of Assam in India. It is one of the fastest growing
cities in India and the largest city in the entire north-
eastern region of India. It is said to be the gateway to
the South-East Asian countries and its estimated
population stood at around 2.0 million in 2017 while as
per the 2011 census, the population of the city was
around 0.9 million.

2. Objectives

The main objectives of the study are-

- To find out the locations and number of megaliths
  of the Karbis living in Guwahati city
- To study the impact of modernization on keeping
  the heritage of megalithic culture of the Karbis
  living in urban center like Guwahati city.

3. Methodology

An extensive survey was carried out on the
existing and ruins of megaliths spread over eight
different locations in Guwahati city and nearby areas.
Visits were made by all sites wherever megalithic
structures are available. Around four hundred
megaliths have been found which include both ancient
and modern stone structures having noticeable
differences in them. The locations visited in Guwahati
city are Japorigog, Karbi Path (Hatigarh Chariali),
Komar Kuchi, Dholbama, Jyotikuchi, Nalapara and
Lokhra. Rani Xilputa area of Kamrup (Metro) district
was also visited for the purpose. Local Karbi people
were interacted and information collected was
classified and relevant literature was consulted to
prepare the report. Sites visited for the study are:

4. Findings

4.1 Xilputa (Japorigog)

This Karbi village is situated at about 1.5 km away
from the capital of Assam i.e. Dispur which is located
within the Guwahati city. The megalithic practice is
still a living tradition among the Karbi villagers living
there. 80 megaliths of different shape and size from
the site were spotted and some of them are found to
be three hundred to four hundred years old. The largest
one is measured 3.4 m in height and 2.82 m in breadth

4.2 Karbi path (Hatigarh Chariali)

This village is situated about 9 km away from
Dispur and has 30 Karbi households. Presently there
is no existence of common megalithic ground for these
villagers due to increasing population. The villagers now
place the megaliths inside their residential boundaries.
One megalith is measured 0.5 m in height and 0.15 m
in breadth.

4.3 Komarkuchi

This site is situated on the foothills of Jorabat,
which is about 12 km away from Dispur. This village
was formerly known as Garo Ghuli. 70 ancient
megaliths have been found. The period of existence
of these megaliths is not known to the villagers and
those are being observed by them since their childhood.
It is situated on such an area that rain water passes
through the megaliths during rainy seasons. Due to
erosion, many megaliths are displaced from their
original place. The largest one is measured 1.25 m in
height and 0.64 m in breadth.

4.4 Rani Xilputa

This site is located at a distance of about 40 km
away from Dispur. All the megaliths are ancient. Some
of the megaliths are very big in shape and size. The
size of the largest megalith is measured 3.07 m in height
and 1.2 m in breadth. There is no demarcated boundary
in this site. At the time of construction of road, many
megaliths were misplaced and some of those were
found to be broken.

4.5 Dholbama

This site is situated at about 13 km away from
Dispur. The site is a cluster of 40 megaliths. But there is no demarcated boundary of this area. A newly established stone grinding factory has affected the megaliths. The largest one is measured 0.69 m in height and 0.63 m in breadth.

4.6 Jyotikuchi

This site is situated at about 16 km away from Dispur. The site has evidence of burial and old structures of megaliths are not existing at present due to massive earth filling. New megaliths have been placed at the same site. 16 megaliths have been found there. The largest one is measured 0.7 m in height and 0.37 m in breadth.

4.7 Nalapara

This area is situated at about 12 km away from Dispur. 69 megaliths of different shape and size have been found at this site. According to the villagers, some of them are more than two hundred years old. The largest megalith is measured to be 1.16 m in height and 0.57 m in breadth.

4.8 Lokhra

This site is almost 13 km away from Dispur and is full of old and new megaliths. The total number of megaliths found is 120. Both ancient and modern megaliths are present. The largest one is measured 0.67 m in height and 0.37 m in breadth.

Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Raw material</th>
<th>Height of the largest one</th>
<th>Breath of the largest one</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Xilputa (Japorigog)</td>
<td>Stone and concrete</td>
<td>3.40 m</td>
<td>2.82 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Karbi Path (Hatigarh Chariali)</td>
<td>Stone</td>
<td>0.50m</td>
<td>0.15m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Komar Kuchi</td>
<td>Stone</td>
<td>1.25m</td>
<td>0.64m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rani Xilputa</td>
<td>Stone</td>
<td>3.07m</td>
<td>1.2m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dholbama</td>
<td>Stone</td>
<td>0.69m</td>
<td>0.63m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Jyotikuchi</td>
<td>Stone and concrete</td>
<td>0.70m</td>
<td>0.37m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Nalapara</td>
<td>Stone</td>
<td>1.16m</td>
<td>0.57m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lokhra</td>
<td>Stone and concrete</td>
<td>0.67m</td>
<td>0.37m</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Conclusion

It is observed that the raw materials used for the ancient megaliths were only stones. But due to some factors like non-availability of raw materials in particular, now-a-days, the Karbi people residing in urban places like Guwahati construct a concrete platform instead of erecting stones. In some cases, they engrave the name and other information about the deceased person on marble or granite slabs which are used to fix with concrete material respecting those as megaliths. Rapid increase in population has been a major factor and non availability of required demarcated space for Long-A-Ari, the practice of erecting megaliths has seriously suffered. These are the reasons which have caused a lot of changes in these traditional practices of the Karbis living in urban centers. It is also observed that influence of Christianity among Karbis has been profound and thereby influencing their megalithic culture. Moreover, pace of urbanization and urban life style embraced by educated Karbis have also made great impact on continuation of megalithic culture of the tribe. It is also commented by some villagers that the newly convert Karbis especially into Christianity are little concerned about their heritage. It may be suggested that there is a strong need of conservation of the megaliths practiced by a tribe like Karbi considering its heritage from archeological and anthropological points of view. It is pertinent to state that Professor D. K. Medhi of Gauhati University has initiated a process of conservation of these megaliths by conducting three Megalithic Monument centers.
Conservation Days at three different places namely, Tengralangso, Rongali near Tika and Nongjrong near Tapat in Karbi Anglong. These were organized in association with the local communities, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and also the Guwahati Circle of Archaeological Survey of India.

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