

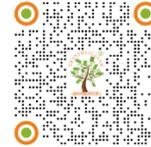
Original Article

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF THE KARBIS IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH: ISSUES AND INSIGHTS

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### ABSTRACT

Tribal communities are facing multiple challenges including economic marginalization, poverty, alienation from resources, unemployment, lack of access to education and healthcare services, infrastructural constraints and cultural identity crisis. Understanding the socio-economic condition of these aboriginal communities is crucial to ensure their overall well-being. This study assesses the socio-economic hurdles faced by the Karbi people in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, with specific focus on the occupational pattern, income, livelihood strategies and cultural identity issues. The study employs mixed methods approach to identify the key socio-economic indicators and stresses the need for targeted interventions to address these issues. The study contributes to the broader academic discourse on the protection of indigenous rights, preservation of cultural heritage and inclusive approach towards development. The findings of the study also hold significance as it will aid in shaping future policies and programmes targeted towards uplifting the marginalized indigenous communities.

**Keywords:** Arunachal Pradesh, Challenges, Development, Karbis, Socio-Economic, Tribe

### INTRODUCTION

Tribal communities across the world including the Northeastern region of India are facing various socio-economic challenges. These challenges have affected their quality of life, efforts to preserve their distinctive culture and overall economic well-being. The ongoing process of modernization and globalization has only compounded their difficulties. Once, these indigenous communities depended on available forest resources, preferred to stay isolated from others and patterned their community life around their natural surroundings. The Karbis (formerly known as Mikirs), spread out in different parts of Northeastern India, are also facing multi-faceted social and economic challenges. The Karbis, settled in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, have also been facing marginalization despite several development programmes initiated by the government. Shrinking forest resources, fragmentation of agricultural land, land alienation, high level of poverty, unemployment, low income, lack of employment opportunities, inadequate infrastructure and connectivity, lack of political influence are among diverse issues confronting the community.

Hence, a fair picture of the current socio-economic condition of the Karbi community is crucial in addressing the challenges and pave pathway for sustainable development. This study will examine the current socio-economic issues, particularly the income, employment, livelihood strategies and identity issues of the Karbi people. It will provide valuable insights to the policy makers and administrators about the community's current predicament. The quantitative and qualitative data collected in the course of the research work is a first-of-its-kind related to the community, considering very limited research being conducted on the subject. The

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## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Karbis, who prefer to call themselves 'Arleng', are a major hill tribe of Assam. According to Edward Stack (1908), the Karbis formerly known as 'Mikir' belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group, and racially are believed to be part of Mongoloid group. Over the years, due to different reasons, the Karbi people who were largely concentrated in Karbi Anglong district of Assam scattered to different parts of Assam. Currently, a small group of Karbi people are also found in the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.

Like all other indigenous communities in the region, the Karbis have also witnessed tremendous socio-cultural changes due to globalization and modernization. Several studies have highlighted this cultural transition and resistance of the community, focusing on their unique traditions, rituals, religious beliefs, arts & crafts, kinship system, gender roles, livelihood patterns and economic practices. However, most of the works highlighting the changing socio-cultural dimensions of the Karbi society have been largely centred on the Karbis in Assam. [Bhattacharjee \(2021\)](#) gives detailed account of social structure, organization and other traditional aspects including religious beliefs, practices and rituals. [Saikia \(1968\)](#) too documented the social institutions of the Karbi society, while also bringing to the fore the community's socio-economic conditions. These findings, particularly those depicting the economic condition of the community in general, have become outdated. Moreover, the forces of change have also become diversified, with the passage of time.

[Teron \(2008\)](#) and [Sharma \(2014\)](#) also highlighted various aspects of Karbi society while analyzing the factors that brought about social changes. The studies conducted by [Sarma \(2021\)](#) focused on alterations seen in the dress, food habits, village structure and other community roles and responsibilities. [Chonzik and Killingpi \(2014\)](#) studied the changes that pervaded into the Karbi society and persistence of certain socio-cultural traits in the face of the forces of change. [Ronghangpi \(2023\)](#) highlighted the economic activities of the Karbi community such as agriculture, traditional craft, weaving, while emphasizing the principles of sustainability and sustenance. [Pereira et al. \(2017\)](#) explores the changes that have occurred in the Karbi community because of modernisation in social, economic, religious, educational, administrative and other fields. [Dowarah \(2017\)](#) also documented the socio-cultural life of the Karbis in Assam, focusing on their traditional practices, economy and other socio-political organization.

Therefore, it can be inferred that a proper study assessing the current socio-economic challenges and opportunities have not been conducted on the small Karbi population in Arunachal Pradesh. With number of development programmes being implemented for the development of tribal communities across the country, it is also crucial to understand the current social and economic challenges, so that the growth is inclusive and sustainable.

## OBJECTIVES

- 1) To examine the socio-economic status of the Karbis in Arunachal Pradesh with specific focus on income levels, occupational patterns and living standards.
- 2) To identify challenges and barriers to socio-economic development of the Karbi people in the state.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs mixed method approach to examine key indicators that reflect the community's living standards, occupation, livelihood strategies and cultural identity issues. The entire population was selected for the study, and hence household census was employed to get comprehensive and accurate data regarding the socio-economic indicators of the community. Census method was preferred over representative sampling of the population for two main reasons:

- 1) To collect specific information from among wide-range of indicators for an accurate and reliable data on income, occupation and basic living standards.
- 2) Small and manageable population to gather information from all households, assuming the survey conducted on a representative sample would have missed out specific issues of the community.

The primary quantitative data acquired through structured questionnaires has been analysed through descriptive statistics tools. Interview and observation techniques have also been used to gather comprehensive and reliable data on the community's socio-economic condition. The field work was conducted over a 5-month period from January to May 2023. Secondary sources used include books, journals, newspapers and census reports.

## STUDY AREA

The Karbi people permanently residing in Arunachal Pradesh are found only in five villages along the border areas with the neighbouring state of Assam. These five villages are: Kokila, Hollongi Karbi, Balijan Karbi and Lower Tarasso in Balijan circle and Chessa under Banderdewa circle of Papum Pare district.

## RESULTS

The demographic data revealing the population structure, traits and composition is crucial to get an insight into socio-economic status, challenges and opportunities of a community. In this section, the population characteristics of the Karbi people in Arunachal Pradesh will be highlighted in detail to understand the income levels, occupational patterns and living standards of the community.

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**Table 1**

Table 1 Number of Households in Villages		
Sl. No.	Name of village	No. of households
1.	Kokila	85
2.	Hollongi Karbi	46
3.	Balijan Karbi	24
4.	Lower Tarasso	19
5.	Chessa	10
<b>Total</b>		<b>184</b>

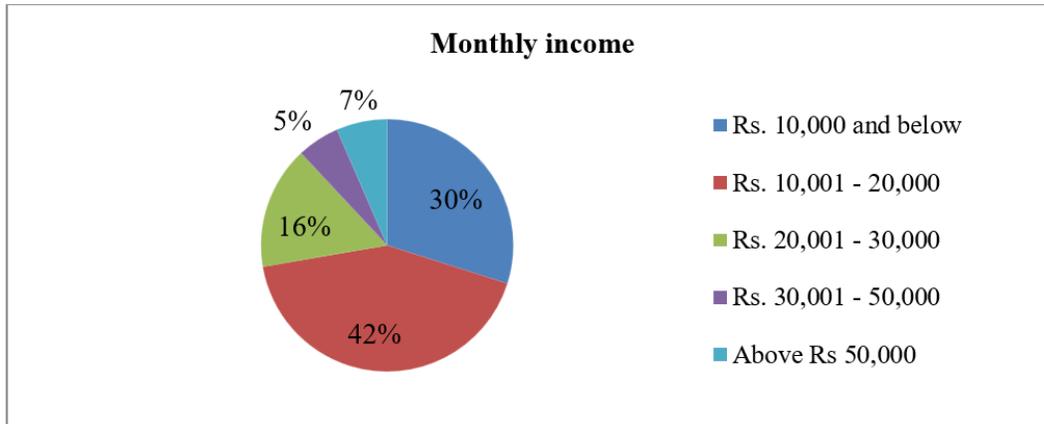
Source: Field work

In order to understand the socio-economic dynamics of a community, knowing the total size of the population and household size is very important. It is from this data set, other social and economic parameters can be assessed. The [Table 1](#) shows that total household size of the Karbis in Arunachal Pradesh is 184. The largest Karbi settlement is Kokila village, with 85 households, followed by Hollongi Karbi and Balijan Karbi with 46 and 24 households respectively. According to the Census of India 2011, 84 households resided in Kokila village, while 33 families resided in Hollongi Karbi village. The village witnessed an increase of 13 households in the last decade. Hence, it can be inferred that the data of the last census would have become outdated as the prime objective of the study is to gauge the current socio-economic condition of the community.

**Table 2**

Table 2 Population Profile Village-Wise					
Village	Male	Female	Children (0-18 years)	Senior citizens (60+ years)	Total
Kokila	254	242	138	35	496
Hollongi Karbi	162	141	94	25	303
Balijan Karbi	75	65	38	6	140
Lower Tarasso	50	62	36	7	112
Chessa	30	25	14	2	55
<b>Total</b>	<b>571</b>	<b>535</b>	<b>320</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>1106</b>

The [Table 2](#) depicts the total number of persons per village, gender distribution, children and senior citizens. According to the household census conducted by the researchers, the total Karbi population in the state is 1106 persons. The gender ratio is also healthy as 571 are males while 535 are females. The proportion of younger population is also good as 320 persons are within 0-18 age category indicating potential for economic growth in future.

**Figure 1****Figure 1 Monthly Household Income from All Sources**

Source: Field Work

Monthly household income is a key indicator of the socio-economic status of a population. It sheds light on the basic living standards, access to essential goods and services, financial potential or distress. The [Figure 1](#) indicates that 30 percent of the Karbi people earn less Rs. 10,000 per month. According to the recent All India Financial Inclusion Survey (NAFIS) 2021-22, the average monthly household income in India is Rs. 12,698. The figure also shows that 12 percent of the households have a monthly income of Rs. 30,000 per month indicating economic disparity between different groups of people in the community.

**Table 3**

House type	Frequency	Percentage
Kutchha (Thatch/Bamboo)	57	31.0
Semi-pucca	56	30.4
Pucca (Concrete)	71	38.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field Work

The type of housing also gives critical insight into the population's socio-economic status. Housing, being a basic need of life, reflects the financial capacity of a family. It also reveals the family's ability to access essential services such as education and healthcare. The [Table 3](#) shows that 31 percent of the Karbi population resides in Kutchha or bamboo-made houses, while 30.4 percent families have semi-pucca houses. Nearly 39 percent of the families living in pucca (concrete) houses suggest that if financial stability exists, people prefer concrete houses over traditional bamboo-made structures.

**Table 4**

Land holding (in acres)	Frequency	Percent (%)
Below 1 acre	55	29.9
1-3 acre	74	40.2
4-5 acre	31	16.8
More than 5 acres	24	13.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field Work

Land holding is another key indicator of the socio-economic status of a community. The ownership and size of land holding becomes all the more important in rural areas, where agriculture is the main source of income. Land is an economic asset and it directly influences the living standards of the people. The Table 4 shows that 29.9 percent of the Karbi households in Arunachal Pradesh own less than 1 acre, while only 13 percent households own more than 5 acres of land. This suggests unequal distribution of land, thereby leading to economic inequality.

The source of income is another important indicator to know socio-economic status in a community. The type of income – whether earned from agricultural or non-agricultural sources – provides crucial insights into the economic stability and diversity. The census conducted by the researcher found that as many as 115 households earned their income primarily from agriculture related activities. The field work also found that people who were formally employed, both government and private sectors, also supplemented their family income from agriculture. Non-agricultural income sources among the Karbi people include unskilled manual labour, small-scale vending, petty businesses, weaving, carpentry, masonry etc. Shrinking forest resources, decreasing soil fertility, fragmentation of land, limited use of modern agricultural equipments and lack of diversification of crops are forcing people to look for alternative livelihood strategies other than farming.

Further, non-inclusion of the Karbi people as one of the Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, has led to significant problems for the community. Due to lack of ST rights, the community now faces trouble in availing loans, scholarships and other government schemes. Loss of land rights due to issues related to ST rights have further alienated the community. These changes in the socio-political landscape have impacted the younger generations significantly leading to cultural identity crisis.

## DISCUSSION

The Karbi people in Arunachal Pradesh have witnessed complex socio-economic transformation due to several external factors like globalization, spread of education, technological advancements and changing political landscapes. The study found that the community's overall growth has been hindered by various factors such as lack of employment opportunities, non-recognition of tribal rights, lack of diversification in income, lack of employment opportunities, shrinking forest resources and absence of development initiatives.

The study found significant income disparity among different households of the community. Without efforts to enhance economic opportunities for all, the families particularly those with lesser income could be caught in the web of poverty and economic stagnation. The study also found unequal distribution of land among families, thereby contributing to economic inequality. Further, the study reemphasized the importance of agriculture as the primary source of income among all tribal communities including the Karbis. There is a need to encourage the people to take up alternative livelihood strategies for an equitable and sustainable growth. Political dialogue should also be initiated to resolve the issue of ST and land rights for the community. Moreover, the study emphasizes the need for immediate intervention by policy makers and administrators to address the socio-economic issues of the community.

## CONCLUSION

Tribal communities are facing multitude of socio-economic challenges. The barriers to the overall development of these communities need to be identified and addressed, without destroying their distinct traditions, culture and heritage. The Karbi people in Arunachal Pradesh are battling economic marginalization, poverty, unemployment, alienation from resources, infrastructural constraints and cultural identity crisis. This study underscored the need for targeted interventions taking into account the principles of inclusivity and sustainability in economic upliftment of the community.

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