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## The Endurance of Tradition: Exploring the significance of *Jirkedam* in Shaping Socio-Economic Milieu of Karbi Tribe.

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### ABSTRACT

The bachelor's dormitory is an integral part of every tribal society in Northeast India. These traditional institutions play a governing role in the socio-political, economic, and religious aspects of tribal life. They are deeply rooted and have withstood the test of time and various forces of change brought about by modernism, retaining their originality. The *Tarangaham* or *Jirkedam* of the Karbi tribe is one such institution, serving as the nerve center of traditional village life. The *Tarangaham* or *Jirkedam* has remained vital in Karbi society, governing their socio-cultural, economic, political, and religious life. Traditional life has undergone changes with the onset of modernization, including in the dormitory institution. Youth dormitories are consequently disappearing rapidly. However, the core spirit of these institutions persists. *Jirkedam* still stands as a principal traditional socio-cultural institution of great importance. This paper attempts to shed light on the influence of *Jirkedam* in shaping the socio-economic milieu of the Karbi tribe.

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### Introduction:

The youth dormitory is an important institution and a socio-cultural phenomenon in tribal societies and communities across the world. Youth dormitories, also known as 'youth houses,' 'bachelors' halls,' 'youth clubs,' and 'night clubs,' are a sort of community house for young people that facilitates



numerous activities in a tribal group or community. In their socio-cultural and religious lives, these dormitories are extremely important. Many tribes and communities have a youth dormitory system, and the social life of these communities revolves around it. Youth dormitories are important features of tribal groups and communities such as the Naga, Mishing, Tiwa, Karbi, Dimasha, Garo, and Deuri in North East India. The institution, known by many tribes by various names, projects the socio-cultural life of a specific group. It is used to discuss major issues in a tribal village, such as war and hunting expeditions. It is also a place where village conflicts are resolved and young people are taught arts and crafts, as well as a place where young boys and girls might have their first amorous experience.

### **Objectives and Methodology:**

This paper aims at exploring the origin and significance of youth dormitory in Karbi society. It applies historical method, and both primary and secondary sources are used for the present study.

### **Findings:**

Karbis have a traditional dormitory system known as *Tarangham* or *Jirkedam* which lies at the core of traditional life and culture. The dormitories prove to be the training ground for the young generations. In these youth dormitories youths are trained about the important things of an adult life like traditions, societal norms, code of conduct, cultural traits, spirituality and various moods of livelihood. In such kind of institutions, the young minds are not only made aware of cultural traditions but also of his physiology as an important aspect of social behavior. To quote Elwin, "it represents a genuine attempt of the human spirit at a certain stage of development to solve some of the psychological and social problems that even in most advanced nations have not yet adjusted to their satisfaction." Thus, the young members are trained in the ideas of solidarity, co-operation and obedience to the community rules and responsibilities towards a successful adult life.

The Karbi tribe occupies a significant place among the different tribes living in Assam. The Karbi tribe was one of the first to settle in the Brahmaputra valley, migrating from their ancient country in central Asia via Tibet, China, Burma, Manipur, and Nagaland. Their inhabitation is spread over Kamrup, Morigaon, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Golaghat, Lakhimpur and Cachar districts of Assam. Some Karbi villages can also be found in Arunachal Pradesh's Papumpare district, Meghalaya's Ri Bhoi district, Nagaland's Dimapur district, and in Manipur.

The Karbis were formerly known as Mikir. The appellation Mikir was officially replaced by the term Karbi in 1976, following a Constitution Order issued by the Government of India, and the Mikir



Hills District was renamed as Karbi Anglong (now known as Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council) with effect from the 14th October 1976 vide Govt. Notification No. TAD/R/115/74/47 Dated 14-10-1976. (Phangcho, 2001:6) The Karbis prefer to call themselves as *Arleng*. Charles Lyall mentioned that, “The name Mikir is given to the race by the Assamese; its origin is unknown. They call themselves as *Arleng*, which means ‘man’ in general”. (Lyall,1997:4) The Karbis are Indo-Mongoloid in racial classification and Tibeto-Burman in linguistic classification. Charles Lyall wrote: “The Mikirs are one of the most numerous and homogeneous of the many Tibeto-Burman races inhabiting the province of Assam”. (Lyall,1997:2)

### **Origin:**

As there is no clear account of the history of the community, their folk literature offers information regarding their origin. The Karbi folk songs like *Rong-kikim* or *Rongkim-Alum* refer to few stories about the origin of the Karbi village. According to *Rong-kikim*, *Rukasen Bey*, the grandson of Karbi forefather *Wongphe Bey*, established the first village of the Karbis at *Nongkula* which is situated on the bank of Kapili River. Karbis believe that another character *Harabamon* was an architect of first Karbi village who had developed the concept of *Jirkedam* the youth dormitory. Bachelor's dormitory of the Karbis existed in different forms among the plain and hill Karbis. The term *Tarangaham* is prevalent among the plain Karbis and *Jirkedam* was the youth dormitory prevalent among the hill-tribe Karbis, which acted as the training house for youths of the community.

### **Significance of *Jirkedam* in Karbi Society:**

The *Jirkedam* lessons covered social norms and regulations, religious philosophy, agricultural pursuits, hunting and gathering, fishing, or a combination of hunting, community administration, musical instrument playing, dance and song performances, and guidance on leading a disciplined life. Thus, the *Jirkedam* institution serves a multitude of objectives that have been crucial to preserving the peace, unity, and general development of the community. The youth dormitory serves as a vital agent in Karbi society in a number of ways, including maintaining privacy in life, serving as a centre for socialization, training, and understanding in various areas of a tribe's culture, facilitating the selection of mates freely, serving as a community task force, encouraging discipline among youths, providing entertainment, encouraging corporate and cooperative living, and serving as a repository and channel for the transmission of cultural heritage. Some of the major functions of youth dormitories are enumerated elaborately below.



## Socialization and Internalization of Culture

In Karbi society, the youth dormitory ranks second in importance among social institutions for acclimating newly arrived members, after families. The minds of the young are shaped in a way that is consistent with the society they are a part of. Every tribe is unique in the standards and values that they uphold and impart to the next generation. Children in the community are given the chance to participate in primary social experiences through various dorm activities, which helps them internalize the community's beliefs and ethics. It is noted that this institution promotes a number of events, celebrations, and ceremonial performances all year round. In the dormitory, the more seasoned residents always support and watch over the newcomers, helping them to mature and align with the community's values and become true members. The *jirkedam* is a crucial institution in Karbi society that assists in socialization and internalization of Karbi culture. In the bachelor's dormitory, community sentiments are also fostered, which motivates a group task force to prepare for any scenario. G.C. Medhi observes, "Dormitory system is built in mechanism in shifting hill cultivation economy both for coordinating the activities of individuals and other social units as well as perpetuating a smooth functioning of their society. The shifting cultivators have no room in their homes where they can entertain or lodge the guest and unknown visitors. The village dormitory serves all these purposes. The shifting cultivation needs the occasional help of a member of individuals than what an individual family can provide. This situation is overcome by extending an invitation to the work group of the dormitory. An outstanding feature of the village dormitory is to keep the inhabitants of the village united in their thoughts and actions through collective participation at the public rituals through the agency of the youths of the dormitory". (Medhi, 1974:312)

He argues that "The disappearance of the dormitories means, as it has meant when they have disappeared in similar cultures elsewhere, a general weakening of tribal discipline, a decay of recreational arts and increase of sexual promiscuity". (Medhi, 1974:313)

## Centre for Folk Entertainment

The institution of youth dormitory is a center of Karbi tribal culture. The characteristics of a tribal lifestyle are isolation, distant location, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and little contact with other tribes or mainstream groups. An essential source of folk entertainment is the youth dormitory institution. It is evident that this organization supports folk music and dance. In light of this, the youth dormitory is an essential traditional Karbi Society institution for learning music and dance. By fostering their minds, the



youth dormitory plays a crucial role in the lives of the young people in a tribal community. By teaching the young people in the village how to play music and dance, the mental and physical well-being is maintained. G.C. Medhi argues, “Self-expression through dance and songs is at its best in a *Jirkedam*. The dance is the man's earliest attempt to move in an imaginary world of his own creation, none the less it stands in a close relation to the actual world. It expresses their emotion with all the force that dancing allows supplemented by songs for better expression of some myths or to hold intercourse with gods. In dance, music or field work they are the objects of admiration of the opposite sex. This sort of free mixing in many respects conforms to the psychoanalytic ideal of education as for slow development of cultural ideas with sublimation of instincts, expression of sex, obedience by withdrawing affection etc.” (Medhi,1974:313)

### **Bearer of Cultural Heritage**

Each ethnic group has its own distinctive culture and tradition. The age-old culture and traditions of tribal societies make what they are today: unique and distinct from others. Dormitories are the centres of socio-cultural space of a community. Customs, beliefs, values and traditions, which are throbbing reality of a tribal society, are embedded in this institution. Generally, tribal society and their culture is of oral nature. The rich cultural traditions survive through oral transmission. Therefore, the problem of survival and transmission of cultures arises. In this sphere also the dormitories play very important role. The dormitory is a sort of training ground for its members. They learn music, dance and other aspects of their culture. In this learning process, the senior members play more important role by training the new incumbents of the community

The role and importance of the *jirkedam* of Karbi society is rightly acknowledged by G.C. Medhi in his study on the dormitory system of the Karbis of the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. “The influence of the *Jirkedam* is of great importance and significance specially on the life of the Karbi boys. The disciplinary influence of the father is replaced by the discipline of a communal life where the opinions of the members of the Karbi play a great role. He is now responsible to a corporate body of which he is an active and indispensable member. The meaning of cooperation and collective responsibility begins to dawn on him and their horizon expands before him along with the passing of time. Each small boy has a patron. The small boys work for their elders, keep the Karbi clean, wash clothes of their patrons, carry firewood and run errands whenever occasions arise. In case of disobedience and misbehaviour, the elders do not hesitate to inflict corporal punishment... *jirkedam* is the best school for the practical life of the Karbi boys. The *jirkedam* life makes them self-reliant,



disciplined and improves their commonsense. An understanding of mutual rights and duties is the essence of the *jirkedam* life. Besides, their loyalty and a sense of service to a corporate body are fully developed”. (Medhi,1974:313)

### **Traditional Institution of Learning**

Youth dormitories are traditional institutions of learning. In the tribal societies the sole responsibilities of teaching and guiding the youths of a village rests on the senior members of the dormitories. Of course, here is found no written curriculum of courses. It is centre of learning in tradition. In his study on *jirkedam* of the Karbi people, Dharamsing Teron charted out , “The main aims and objectives that lie behind the dormitory organization among the Karbis are: (1) that it is a place where all the boys get training for work, (2) that the boys by living in the dormitory acquire knowledge about the community life of the village and learn how to take part in the social life, thereby developing their personality and leadership, (3) that it is the place where they can enjoy leisure in a group”. (Teron,2008:28)

The role of the institution is imparting training to the youths in a Karbi village. The new inmates of *jirkedam* are indoctrinated in to the community values and norms. Through group projects and collaboration, the institution helps young people develop their leadership skills and overall personality. Without lectures or recorded texts, learning occurs in dormitories. When there is no formal curriculum for courses, traditional values are the most important factor and serve as a foundation for shaping young people. It encompasses every facet of communal life, ranging from the routine everyday life to the spiritual life, personal existence to communal existence, dancing and music, leadership to community protection, and so forth. The overall development of the newly appointed institution officials is given top importance. Making the youths of the village fit for their life in future is the prime goal of the youth dormitories for which the youths are traditionally enrolled. Therefore, the youths are taught and trained on different aspects of life so that they can be transformed in to cultivated assets of the community. Training in *jirkedam* is rigorous. Solidarity, mutual helpfulness and the strict observance of rules are the keynotes of *jirkedam* training; from an early age, children are taught to be useful and law-abiding members of a community, and as office bearers they learn to put the interest of the community before self-interest. They enter the adult life with the consciousness that social conventions must be observed and that every breach of custom is an offence against the solidarity of the tribe.



In Karbi society, “Discipline and tribal etiquettes are taught here and the discipline is maintained by some specially elected officers. The members of *jirkedam* render helps to any village in need, e.g., erecting house, weeding paddy, etc in exchange of nominal remuneration. The money thus received is used for celebrating various festivals” (Teron,2008:45). Children learn lifelong lessons about hard work, discipline, and cleanliness in the *jirkedam*. Above all, adolescents are taught the spirit of service. children are also encouraged to respect themselves, their elders, and to take pride in how they look. These young men and women put in a great deal of effort in their job for the general welfare. They are instantly accessible for work on the roadways or to assist governmental officials. For a very long time, the youth home in the village served as the center for tribal education. The senior duenna in charge of the maidens' hut oversaw the females, while the captain of the dormitory was a powerful figure who watched out for the boys' morals. The compulsory affiliation of all the tribal girls and boys to the village dormitory indirectly put a stop to clandestine intrigues with people of alien castes and creed and tribal endogamy was considered a sacred obligation by the tribal youth.

The institution places a high value on the traditional knowledge imparted here since it helps the young boys and girls feel bonded and cohesive. Members of the *jirkedam* train to be warriors and wrestlers in the gymnasium. Once more, leadership is discussed here. Thus, *jirkedam* serves as both an amusement club and a school for the practical arts. The information that was taught in the dorms was useful. The young people's physical and mental development receive careful consideration. Martial arts and physical activity helped the body generate stronger muscles, and they were enhanced by leadership development, punctuality and discipline education, and community values.

### **Assistance to Community Life**

In tribal society, the individual value is regarded less important than community value. Consequently, it is believed that collectivity and collaboration are reliable ways for a tribal community to find fulfilment in its social existence. In these kinds of cultures, the minds of the youth are shaped in that way so that they can willingly react to the demands of the society on occasion. The residents of the dorms have always been willing to provide the neighbourhood with various forms of support and services. They are essential in planning the village community's numerous social and cultural rituals. Different ceremonial occasions like marriage, harvesting, building of houses, community worship and similar other tasks are organized and managed by the members of the dormitory. The *jirkedam* for the Karbis, according to B. N. Bordoloi, is regarded as “An institution of social work. It performs all sorts of social services for the village in general and families in particular as and when such occasions arise. It, of



course, confines its activities within the jurisdiction of village to which it belongs". (Bordoloi,1987:46) The youths of the *jirkedam* are always ready to help the villagers and if any villager is in need of labourer in the field, one should inform and invite the youths. The youths will render community services for a nominal cost. There was competition among the youths where one always desired to surpass the others in the act of rendering selfless help and cooperation.

### **Management and Planning of Social Life and Activity**

In a tribal society, youth dormitories are a community space for management and planning. Various activities are planned inside the dormitory. The social order and decorum are regulated as per the strategies of management and planning envisioned at the dormitory. Every event requires strategic planning and management. Since young people are an essential component of every occasion, ceremony, ritual, and festival performance in the village, the youth dormitory's operations actually encompass the entire community. Planning and organizing for communal activities such as hunting, fishing, prayer, and festivals takes place within the dormitory. All disputes and conflicts within the village are considered and debated in the dormitory hall, with the aim of reaching a mutually agreeable resolution by the dormitory administration. In certain tribal communities, it is the duty of the dorm residents to act as spies on all facets of communal life. The members need to present report sorting every detail every week before the dormitory officials. If anything found reported which is detrimental to the society, they immediately take measures to solve the problem arising. In Karbi society, the youth dormitory *Jirkedom* through its various officials plays the managerial role for organizing its most vibrant and colourful religious festival *Ronker* and the death ceremony *Chomankan*. They discussed there all the details of plans of how to organize and where to collect funds. The youths of the village enthusiastically repair the building of *jirkedam*. The successful enactment and management of the community festival is largely depended on the activity of the youths of *jirkedam*. at the time of the village annual festival, '*Ranker*', in the month of March-April. The day before the actual festival, the adolescents of the village are called upon to assist the villagers in the observance of the festival. On the day of *Ranker*, the *Sarthe* meets the adolescents for an urgent discussion. After the customary exchange of greetings and gifts (country liquor and betel nuts), the *Sarthe* selects a boy as *Klengsarpo*, the leader of the *Jirkedam*, and the youth party to assist him from that day onward.

The party is highly sought after for the funeral rites and cremation of the deceased. The related ceremony, *Chomangkan*, is the most vibrant of all the Karbi festivities. Teenagers are the ones who perform it the most. The celebration of a marriage or other religious holiday must include dancing and



music in addition to food preparation and rice beer serving. In order to enable the people to collect water from the spring, they must clear the surrounding bush, install bamboo pipelines, create roads, and build bridges. They support specific families with building new homes, tending to the ill, and bringing harvests in from the field.

As G.C. Medhi observes, “At daybreak the two water-carriers are to supply water to officers one by one, beginning with the *Klengsarpo* in the order of rank. Thereafter the two drummers beat the drums in the courtyard. At this special drumming note, all are to line up in single file for going to the fields with necessary tools for work. *Barlon Kethe* stands in front holding his measuring rod straight up, like a flag during march-past followed by the office-bearers in the order of rank with the lowest in front and the highest, *Klengsarpo*, at the back. They start field work in two groups competing with each other for early completion of work. Their field work is mainly related to Jhum cultivation, i.e., clearing up jungle, burning them with fire, tilling the land with hoe, sowing seeds of paddy, castor and cotton and harvesting them later on. They work not only in their own field but also in the fields of each household in the village. Besides agriculture they are engaged in cottage industry, mainly in the production of bamboo baskets, fans, brooms or such other objects of day-to-day use. Girls are engaged in spinning yarn and weaving colourful cloths which they colour by indigenous herbs.” (Medhi,1974:312). Besides agriculture they are engaged in cottage industry, mainly in the production of bamboo baskets, fans, brooms or such other objects of day-to-day use. Girls are engaged in spinning yarn and weaving colourful cloths which they colour by indigenous herbs.

Hunting is one of the major activities of the tribal groups. Hunting necessitated food quest and for some, it is a sporting activity. Hunting activity required careful planning and execution. How many people will participate in hunting programme, who will stay back; what will the time of departure, who will lead the expedition----all these have to be carefully planned and executed in order to attain achievement. The *jirkedam* of the Karbis is the nerve centre for planning and management of the social life. Apart from making strategy for defending the village, planning of raids and attacks, the dormitory boys discuss for organizing the community festivals and rituals in most discipline way. A good management on the affairs of the institution can bring a blissful life of the community. Ceremonial fishing through the method of poisoning, at least once in a year, is a must in a hilly river. They build a stone dam across the river and spread some paste of poisonous herbs in the upper regions of the flowing river. The current being almost blocked by the stone dam and the water being poisoned; it makes possible an easy catch of fish floating on the river. Ceremonial hunting is also organised by the *Risoma*.

**Conclusion:**

The institution of youth dormitory is one of the most important socio-cultural institutions in tribal society. As social organization of the youths, it has several distinctive features and is associated with various activities and functions related to the youths of a village or a clan. This phenomenon exists by different names in different places. It has different theories of origin of the institution. Nevertheless, every tribe or community has its own theory of originating the institution. Across the globe, this institution exists and is found to be playing significant roles in different areas of orientation of youths. The institution has various functions of social vigilance and maintenance of tribal solidarity, management and planning of social life and activity, traditional institution of learning and training, protection from enemies and beasts and assisting community life.

Personality development and culture transmission are perhaps the two most important functions of a school. Karbi adolescents develop sound personality along with the cultural heritage of the race without any of the conflicts and confrontations of the adolescent in a modern advanced society. They develop simplicity, hospitality, discipline, self-reliance, cooperation, art and culture in a simple society of their own. Work experience and community participation are the two salient features of a *Jirkedam*. In the process of acculturation, the *Jirkedam* is replaced by the modern school among the Karbi people. The school fulfills the primary requirements of a modern educational institution, i.e., literacy and arithmetic which are sadly lacking in a *Jirkedam*.

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