

INFLUENCE OF NATURAL RESOURCES IN SHAPING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF THE KARBI TRIBE IN KARBI ANGLONG DISTRICT

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Abstract: This research paper explores the importance of natural resources, such as forests, land, water, and plants, in the lives of the Karbi tribal people living in Karbi Anglong, Assam. The Karbi tribe is one of the major tribal communities in Northeast India, and they have relied on nature for generations. Their daily lives, work, food habits, and cultural activities are closely connected to the natural environment.

Most Karbi families depend on natural resources for farming, gathering forest products, fishing, building homes, and traditional medicine. These resources are very important and are the main source of income and survival for the Karbi people. This paper explains how this strong connection with nature influences their income, education, housing, food, and overall well-being. The study uses secondary data from books, research articles, government reports, and internet sources to understand how natural resources support the socio-economic life of the Karbi people. It also addresses issues like deforestation, climate change, land loss, and government development projects that impact their traditional way of living.

This paper shows that as natural resources become more limited or restricted, the Karbi tribals face greater challenges in sustaining their livelihoods. The study also emphasizes the urgent need for policies and programs that protect both the environment and the rights of tribal people who depend on it.

Keywords: Karbi tribe, natural resources, socio-economic status, traditional livelihood, Karbi Anglong.

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Introduction

Karbi Anglong is an autonomous hilly district of Assam, covering 10,434 sq. k.m, and it is the home to a predominantly tribal population, among which the Karbi tribe is the largest one. This region is rich in biodiversity, forests, hills, and water bodies and all of these have shaped the socio-economic fabric of the indigenous communities living here. For generations, the Karbis have depended on the natural environment for food, shelter, medicine, and economic activities. Practices such as shifting cultivation (jhum), non-timber forest product (NTFP) collection, bamboo craftsmanship, and traditional herbal medicine are deeply rooted in their everyday lives (Mipun et al., 2019; Singha & Timung, 2015).

Natural resources serve not only as the economic base but also as the foundation of Karbi cultural and social identity. Over 130 forest species are used by the Karbis for multiple purposes, including food, fuel, medicine, and rituals (Bose & Gogoi, 2017). Bamboo, in particular, holds both cultural and economic value. It is used in house-building, making tools for daily life situations and different ceremonies (Academia.edu, 2014). The sale of NTFPs in the markets of Diphu (the headquarters of Karbi Anglong) provides crucial income, especially for women, with products such as Hijung and Arphek forming part of their subsistence economy (Das & Teron, 2020).

However, environmental degradation and deforestation have begun to challenge this balance between the flow of life and the environment. Development of projects, land encroachment, and climate variability are reducing access to forests and agricultural land. According to Tripathi & Das (2020), forest cover in parts of Karbi Anglong has declined significantly due to infrastructure expansion and unregulated logging. These issues have a direct impact on the socio-economic well-being of the Karbis, forcing some families to migrate and others into deeper poverty.

Gadgil and Guha (1992) have emphasised that such traditional ecological knowledge systems need to be recognised in mainstream environmental planning. Unfortunately, policies often ignore indigenous practices, leading to unsustainable interventions. This paper, therefore, seeks to understand how natural resources continue to shape the socio-economic conditions of the Karbi tribe while also exploring the risks they face and proposing strategies for inclusive, sustainable development.

Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the role of natural resources in shaping the socio-economic status of Karbi people.
2. To study the challenges faced by the Karbi community due to forest loss and land changes.

3. To suggest measures that can protect nature and help tribal people to live better lives.

Methodology

This study is based on secondary data. Information was collected from books, research papers, government reports, and websites. After collecting the information, the data was studied and organized to understand the proposed research topic. The method used for the study is qualitative, which means it focuses more on examples, and facts rather than numbers.

Findings and Discussion

The Karbi people depend a lot on natural resources. It is seen in their lifestyle and communications. The above study shows the main findings in the following points.

1. Farming and food security:

Many Karbi families continue to practice traditional jhum cultivation which is a form of shifting agriculture. For this, a small patch of forest is cleared, crops are planted, and after a few harvests, the land is left free to regain its fertility. Common crops include rice, maize, ginger, turmeric, and various seasonal vegetables. However, with increasing population pressure, shrinking land availability, and declining soil fertility, the productivity of jhum farming has decreased significantly. As a result, many families are struggling to meet their basic food needs and earn a stable income from traditional type of agriculture.

2. Dependence on Forest Products:

Forests play a vital role in the daily lives of the Karbi people. Local communities collect a wide variety of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) such as wild fruits, bamboo shoots, medicinal herbs, honey, and firewood. These are either used for household consumption or sold in local markets to generate income. In the economically weaker families, especially for women, these forest resources serve as a crucial source of livelihood and food security. The collection and sale of such products offer seasonal employment and support subsistence living.

3. Multifaceted Use of Bamboo:

Bamboo is an essential natural resource for the Karbi tribe. It is widely used in house construction, fencing, basket-making, agricultural tools, and handicrafts. Beyond its utilitarian value, bamboo also holds cultural significance, being an integral part of traditional festivals, rituals, and ceremonies. However, due to extensive deforestation, bamboo forests are decreasing rapidly. This has not only affected daily life and traditional practices but has also impacted the local economy and craftsmanship that depend on bamboo.

4. Indigenous Health and Medicinal Practices:

Most of the Karbi people possess deep knowledge of the medicinal properties available in their surroundings. More than 40 different species of plants found in nearby forests are used to treat common ailments such as fever, wounds, stomach issues, and respiratory infections. These practices are a vital part of the community's healthcare system, especially in remote areas with limited access to modern medical facilities. However, with ongoing forest degradation, many of these medicinal plants are becoming scarce, threatening both biodiversity and the survival of indigenous healing knowledge.

5. Education and economic status:

The ability of a family to send their children to school is often directly linked to their income from natural resources. Families who earn a decent livelihood through farming, forest products, or traditional crafts are more likely to invest in their children's education. In contrast, households that have lost access to land or forest resources often struggle to cover school fees, uniforms, and books. This economic disparity contributes to high school dropout rates among tribal children, limiting their future opportunities and perpetuating cycles of poverty.

6. Challenges from modern development Projects:

The construction of highways, large buildings, industrial zones, and other infrastructure projects in Karbi Anglong has led to significant land acquisition and deforestation. As a result of these developmental activities, many families are displaced from their ancestral lands and have lost not only their homes but also their means of livelihood. This has forced people to migrate to urban areas in search of jobs, leading to cultural disintegration and increased vulnerability.

7. Cultural Loss and Identity Erosion:

Modern development often leads to the disruption of traditional ways of life, especially when tribal people are displaced from their ancestral lands. Sacred sites, ritual grounds, and village gathering places are frequently destroyed or made inaccessible. As younger generations move to towns or adopt urban lifestyles, traditional customs, languages, dress, festivals, and oral traditions gradually fade. This weakens tribal identity, disconnecting people from their cultural roots and ancestral knowledge. In Karbi society, where oral storytelling, clan rituals, and music are vital, such a loss is deeply felt.

8. Displacement and Forced Migration:

Infrastructure projects such as dams, highways, railways, mining, and industrial corridors often require large tracts of forest and tribal land. Many families are forcibly relocated without proper rehabilitation or compensation. Displacement not only results in the loss of land and shelter but also breaks community networks, leading to psychological trauma and economic insecurity. In many cases, displaced individuals migrate to towns to work as labourers under poor conditions, far removed from their traditional livelihoods.

9. Environmental Degradation and Resource Depletion:

The rapid pace of development has led to extensive deforestation, water pollution, and soil erosion, severely affecting the availability of natural resources on which the Karbis depend. Large-scale construction activities and mining projects degrade the environment, reducing access to clean water, medicinal plants, and fertile land. This threatens both biodiversity and food security, especially for those who still rely on farming, forest products, and local ecosystems.

10. Loss of Traditional Governance and Decision-Making:

The Karbis, like many tribal groups, traditionally follow customary laws and village councils for dispute resolution and local

governance. Modern legal systems and administrative changes imposed by the government often undermine these indigenous institutions, reducing tribal autonomy. This creates confusion and weakens the authority of tribal elders, leading to alienation from the decision-making process regarding land use, forest rights, and community welfare.

11. Impact on Mental and Social Well-Being:

Rapid changes brought about by development can lead to mental stress, social dislocation, and identity confusion, especially among youth. When cultural practices are no longer valued or are replaced by dominant mainstream culture, young people may experience low self-esteem or a sense of inferiority. This can contribute to rising problems such as substance abuse, unemployment, or dropping out of school.

Conclusion and suggestion

Natural resources such as forests, rivers, and land are the foundation of the Karbi tribe's life. These resources are not only used for earning a livelihood but are also deeply connected to their culture, identity, and traditional way of life. However, due to modern development, deforestation, and land pressure, these resources are slowly disappearing. If this continues, it will become difficult for the Karbi people to preserve their traditions and sustain their livelihoods. Therefore, it is important to take meaningful steps to protect their environment and way of life. The government should ensure the proper implementation of the Forest Rights Act to safeguard tribal rights over forest and land. Local people must be consulted before using forest land for large projects. Skill development programs in bamboo craft, sustainable farming, and forest-based livelihoods should be promoted. At the same time, traditional knowledge about medicinal plants and healing practices should be recorded and passed on to the next generation. Schools in tribal areas should teach children about their culture and the importance of protecting nature. Additionally, setting up small local markets will help tribal people to sell their forest products

and earn income. By taking these steps, we can support the Karbi community in maintaining their heritage while sustainably improving their socio-economic conditions.

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