

Changing Tribal Economy in Karbi Anglong: A Socio-Economic Analysis

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Abstract

The Karbi Anglong district of Assam, home primarily to the Karbi tribe along with Dimasa, Tiwa, Kuki, Bodo, and other communities, has historically sustained a subsistence economy rooted in shifting (jhum) cultivation, forest-based livelihoods, and barter exchange through traditional weekly markets (hithi). Over the past few decades, this traditional economic structure has undergone significant transformation under the combined influence of population pressure, shrinking jhum cycles, road connectivity, government policy interventions, market integration, education, and migration. This paper examines the nature and extent of these changes, tracing the shift from subsistence jhum farming toward settled and horticultural agriculture, cash-crop cultivation, wage labour, and diversification into small trade and services. Employing a descriptive and analytical approach based on secondary data drawn from government reports, census statistics, and published research, the study evaluates the socio-economic consequences of this transition, including changes in income patterns, food security, land tenure, gender roles, and ecological sustainability. The findings indicate that while market integration and settled cultivation have improved cash income and reduced physical drudgery for many households, they have also introduced new vulnerabilities such as dependence on volatile markets, erosion of traditional ecological knowledge, and persistent structural poverty, with Karbi Anglong continuing to register one of the highest Human Poverty Index values in Assam. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at achieving a balanced, sustainable, and inclusive economic transition for the tribal population of the district.

Keywords: Karbi Anglong, Tribal Economy, Jhum Cultivation, Socio-Economic Change, Livelihood Transition, Northeast India, Market Integration

1. Introduction

Karbi Anglong, with its administrative headquarters at Diphu, is the largest district of Assam and one of the two hill districts governed under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India through the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC). The name of the district is derived from the Karbi tribe, the dominant indigenous community, combined with the Karbi term "Anglong," meaning hills. The district's rugged topography, extensive forest cover, and rich natural resource base have historically shaped a tribal economy centred on shifting cultivation, minor forest produce collection, animal husbandry, and small-scale artisanal production, supplemented by barter and periodic markets.

The tribal economy of Karbi Anglong, like that of many hill communities across Northeast India, was for centuries organised around communal land ownership, rotational forest farming, and a close,

reciprocal relationship between the community and its natural environment. However, since the mid-twentieth century, and more rapidly in the past two to three decades, this economy has been undergoing a marked transformation. Rising population density, declining jhum cycles, expanding road and market connectivity, the spread of formal education, government-sponsored agricultural and rural development schemes, and increasing exposure to the cash economy have together altered the traditional livelihood base of the Karbi and other tribal communities of the district.

This paper undertakes a socio-economic analysis of these changes. It examines the traditional economic structure of the Karbi tribal society, identifies the principal drivers of transformation, analyses the emerging patterns of livelihood and income generation, and assesses the resultant socio-economic outcomes—both positive and adverse—for the tribal population of the district.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To trace the traditional structure of the tribal economy of Karbi Anglong, with particular reference to jhum (shifting) cultivation and forest-based livelihoods.
- To identify the major factors driving change in the tribal economy of the district.
- To examine the emerging patterns of livelihood diversification, including settled agriculture, cash-crop cultivation, and non-farm employment.
- To assess the socio-economic impact of this transition on income, food security, land relations, and community life.

3. Methodology

The present study is descriptive and analytical in nature and is based primarily on secondary sources of data. Information has been drawn from Census of India reports, district statistical handbooks, publications of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, the Assam Human Development Report, and peer-reviewed research articles on the socio-economic and agrarian conditions of Karbi Anglong. Insights from field-based ethnographic and anthropological studies on Karbi livelihoods have also been incorporated to contextualise the statistical picture with the lived realities of the tribal population. The analytical framework combines a historical review of the traditional economy with a thematic assessment of contemporary change.

4. Geographical and Demographic Profile of Karbi Anglong

Karbi Anglong is situated in central Assam and is characterised by hilly and undulating terrain interspersed with river valleys, covered substantially by tropical forest, including deciduous, semi-evergreen, and bamboo-dominated vegetation. The district was constituted as a Scheduled District during the colonial period following the annexure of the erstwhile Dimasas kingdom territories after 1854, and it has enjoyed autonomous self-governance under the Sixth Schedule since 1952.

The population of the district is multi-ethnic, comprising the Karbi as the principal tribal community alongside the Dimasas, Tiwas, Kukis, Bodos, Nepalis, and various Assamese-speaking groups. The Karbis, a Scheduled Tribe speaking a Tibeto-Burman language, remain predominantly rural and agrarian, with a substantial proportion of households still directly dependent on land and forest-based livelihoods.

5. The Traditional Tribal Economy: Jhum Cultivation and Subsistence Base

The traditional economy of the Karbi tribe has for generations been anchored in jhum, or shifting cultiv-

ation, locally referred to as Inglong Arit. Under this system, forest plots are cleared, cultivated for a limited period, and then left fallow to allow natural regeneration, with cultivation cycling through different plots over time. Historically, this rotational fallow cycle extended to twenty to thirty years, allowing forest soils to recover fully between periods of cultivation.

The jhum system traditionally supported a largely self-sufficient household economy. Paddy remains the staple crop and dietary mainstay, and a wide range of vegetables, tubers, and wild forest produce is cultivated or gathered alongside it for both consumption and local exchange. Even today, a large share of Karbi households depend on paddy-based agriculture for subsistence, with rice forming the staple food across virtually all tribal households and wild vegetables continuing to supplement the daily diet. District-level estimates suggest that a substantial proportion of the population, historically around two-thirds of jhum-practising households, has relied on this traditional system as the principal source of livelihood.

Beyond cultivation, the traditional economy was sustained by community institutions such as the Tarangaham or Jirkedam—traditional youth dormitories that also functioned as centres of collective economic and social organisation—and by periodic weekly or fortnightly markets known locally as hithi. These markets historically operated on principles of barter and indigenous counting systems, enabling the exchange of agricultural surplus, forest produce, and handicrafts among neighbouring villages and communities without dependence on formal currency.

6. Drivers of Change in the Tribal Economy

6.1 Demographic Pressure and Shrinking Jhum Cycles

Population growth and the resulting pressure on cultivable land have substantially reduced the length of the jhum fallow cycle. What was once a rotational cycle of twenty to thirty years has, in many parts of the district, contracted to as little as three to five years. This compression prevents adequate soil and forest regeneration, resulting in declining yields, accelerated soil erosion, and growing ecological stress, and has pushed many cultivators to search for alternative and more intensive forms of land use.

6.2 Government Policy and Institutional Intervention

Since independence, both the Union and State governments, along with the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, have consistently viewed shifting cultivation as ecologically unsustainable and have promoted a shift toward settled agriculture and perennial cash-crop cultivation. Policy measures have included irrigation development, distribution of improved seeds and fertiliser subsidies, promotion of horticulture and plantation crops, and rural infrastructure schemes. The recognition of Karbi Anglong as one of the country's most backward districts has also brought targeted development funding, including support under the Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme, aimed at improving rural livelihoods, education, and healthcare infrastructure.

6.3 Connectivity, Roads, and Market Integration

Improved road connectivity, including the ongoing development of national highway links passing through the district that connect Assam's Brahmaputra Valley toward Nagaland, Manipur, and onward toward Myanmar, has progressively opened Karbi villages to wider markets. Access to nearby towns and mandis has encouraged farmers to shift from subsistence-oriented cultivation toward market-oriented cash crops.

6.4 Education, Migration, and Changing Aspirations

Expanding access to formal education has altered the aspirations of younger generations, many of whom

migrate to towns for schooling and subsequently seek non-farm employment rather than continuing traditional cultivation. Out-migration of youth, including cases of Karbi children moving to Assamese-inhabited areas for schooling, reflects both the pursuit of educational opportunity and the socio-economic constraints of the traditional tribal economy.

6.5 Land Tenure Transition

Jhum land under customary practice has traditionally been held under communal or clan-based tenure rather than individual private ownership. The shift toward settled and horticultural agriculture has been accompanied by an emerging, and at times contested, transition toward individualised land holding, with formal legal title to such land remaining limited for many hill cultivators despite generations of customary use.

7. Emerging Patterns in the Tribal Economy

In response to these drivers, the economic base of Karbi Anglong has diversified considerably beyond traditional jhum cultivation. Former jhum fields and fallows in several parts of the district are increasingly being converted into settled agricultural plots and horticultural plantations, including pineapple, ginger, -turmeric, -tea, -rubber, bamboo, bay leaf, jackfruit, litchi, banana, and plum. Karbi Anglong has notably emerged as the second-highest ginger-producing district in Assam, reflecting the growing importance of horticultural cash crops within the local economy.

Alongside horticulture, small-scale entrepreneurship has begun to develop, including nurseries for cash-crop saplings, value-addition units, and government-supported livelihood initiatives such as sanitary napkin production units and tea-sapling propagation nurseries established under science and technology intervention programmes for the Northeast region. The district's traditional arts and crafts, long recognised across Assam and beyond, also continue to provide a supplementary source of income for artisan households.

Industrial development in the district remains limited, comprising a small number of mining and manufacturing units, including cement-manufacturing operations such as the factory at Bokajan whose output is distributed across the country. Wage labour, government employment, and small trade have also grown in importance as sources of household income, particularly among educated youth and residents located closer to towns such as Diphu, Bokajan, and Hamren.

7.1 Snapshot: Traditional versus Emerging Economic Base

Dimension	Traditional Tribal Economy	Emerging Economic Pattern
Land use	Rotational jhum with long fallow (20–30 yrs)	Settled agriculture; shortened/fragmented fallow (3–5 yrs)
Primary produce	Paddy, tubers, wild vegetables (subsistence)	Ginger, pineapple, tea, rubber, horticulture (cash crops)
Exchange system	Barter at weekly hithi markets	Cash transactions linked to town mandis
Land tenure	Communal / clan-based customary rights	Emerging individualised, semi-formal holdings

Dimension	Traditional Tribal Economy	Emerging Economic Pattern
Non-farm income	Minimal; craft and forest produce	Wage labour, small trade, government schemes, services
Mobility	Largely village-based	Youth migration for education and employment

8. Socio-Economic Impacts of the Transition

8.1 Positive Outcomes

- Increased cash income for households engaged in horticulture and cash-crop cultivation, improving purchasing power and access to consumer goods and services.
- Reduced physical drudgery associated with traditional jhum operations, particularly benefiting women, who have also gained new livelihood avenues through government-supported micro-enterprise schemes.
- Improved market linkages and rural infrastructure, including roads and communication, that have reduced the isolation of remote hill villages.
- Diversification of livelihoods beyond agriculture into trade, services, and government employment, reducing over-dependence on a single, ecologically fragile system.

8.2 Adverse and Emerging Concerns

- Ecological stress from shortened jhum cycles, including soil erosion, declining soil fertility, and loss of forest cover and agro-biodiversity.
- Growing dependence on volatile external markets for both crop sale and, increasingly, food purchase, undermining the food self-sufficiency that characterised the subsistence economy.
- Erosion of traditional ecological knowledge and customary institutions, including the declining relevance of youth dormitories such as the Jirkedam, as modernisation reshapes community life.
- Persistent structural poverty: the district recorded the highest Human Poverty Index value in Assam according to the 2003 Assam Human Development Report, and continues to be officially classified among the country's most backward districts.
- Uneven benefits of the transition, with better-connected and more educated households capturing a disproportionate share of the gains from market integration, while remote and less-resourced households remain largely subsistence-bound.
- Contested and unequal access to land as customary communal tenure gives way to more individualised arrangements, in the absence of comprehensive formal land-titling for many hill cultivators.

9. Key Challenges

Despite the visible diversification of the tribal economy, Karbi Anglong continues to face structural challenges that constrain broad-based socio-economic development. Industrialisation remains minimal, limiting the availability of non-farm employment outside government service and petty trade. Infrastructure, though improving, remains inadequate in the more remote hill blocks, restricting market access for cultivators in interior villages. Health and educational indicators, while improving, continue to lag behind state averages in several tribal-dominated blocks, and the district's classification as a backward region underscores the scale of the developmental gap that remains to be bridged.

Additionally, the absence of secure, formally recognised land rights for many jhum cultivators creates uncertainty that discourages long-term investment in sustainable land management.

10. Government Interventions and Institutional Response

The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, functioning under the Sixth Schedule, has pursued socio-economic development initiatives directed at education, healthcare, rural infrastructure, and livelihood promotion, alongside its core mandate of preserving Karbi cultural heritage and language. At the national and state level, programmes under the Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme, along with agricultural extension, horticultural mission schemes, and rural development programmes, have sought to support the transition from shifting cultivation to settled and horticultural farming through irrigation development, input subsidies, and market-linkage support. Nonetheless, sustained coordination between traditional tribal governance institutions and formal development administration remains essential to ensure that such interventions are both culturally appropriate and effectively implemented at the village level.

11. Suggestions and Policy Recommendations

- Promote sustainable land-use practices that combine settled horticulture with agroforestry models, allowing continued use of traditional ecological knowledge alongside modern cultivation techniques.
- Strengthen formal recognition of customary and community land rights to provide tenure security for jhum cultivators transitioning to settled farming.
- Expand market infrastructure, including cold storage, farm-to-market roads, and processing facilities, to help cultivators of ginger, pineapple, and other horticultural crops capture greater value from their produce.
- Support diversification into agro-based small industry and skill-based non-farm employment, particularly for educated tribal youth, to reduce migration-driven loss of local human capital.
- Integrate traditional institutions, such as village councils and youth dormitories, into local development planning to ensure interventions align with community structures and customary governance.
- Enhance the reach of health, education, and financial inclusion services in remote hill blocks to narrow the developmental gap between accessible and interior areas of the district.
- Encourage gender-inclusive livelihood programmes that build on the emerging role of women in horticulture-based and micro-enterprise activities.

12. Conclusion

The tribal economy of Karbi Anglong is in the midst of a significant and ongoing transition, moving from a subsistence-oriented system built around shifting cultivation, forest resources, and barter exchange toward a more diversified, market-integrated economy characterised by settled agriculture, cash-crop horticulture, and expanding non-farm livelihoods. This transformation, driven by demographic pressure, policy intervention, improved connectivity, and changing aspirations, has brought tangible benefits in terms of cash income, reduced drudgery, and livelihood diversification. At the same time, it has introduced new vulnerabilities, including ecological stress from compressed jhum cycles, growing market dependence, erosion of traditional institutions, and persistent structural poverty that continues to place Karbi Anglong among Assam's most disadvantaged districts. A balanced developmental

strategy—one that secures land rights, strengthens sustainable agricultural practices, builds market and non-farm infrastructure, and works in partnership with traditional tribal institutions—is essential if the ongoing economic transition in Karbi Anglong is to translate into genuine and equitable improvement in the well-being of its tribal population.

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