

The Comparative Study of the Karbis under the Sixth Schedule and the Plain Areas of Assam with Special Reference to the Dimoria Region

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ABSTRACT:

Tribal communities in India, among the oldest socio cultural formations in South Asia, have historically negotiated questions of identity, autonomy, land, and political representation. In Northeast India, these negotiations have been deeply shaped by constitutional safeguards and territorial rights. The Karbis of Assam exemplify this dynamic, as their population is divided between the hill districts under the Sixth Schedule and the plains, particularly Dimoria, which remain outside its protections. This paper undertakes a comparative study of Karbi Anglong and Dimoria, beginning with anthropological and sociological debates on the concept of “tribe,” and then examining constitutional provisions for Scheduled Tribes. It traces the historical origins and migration of the Karbis, critically evaluates the Sixth Schedule, and analyses its implications for Karbi identity and governance. The study demonstrates that while the Sixth Schedule has enabled political autonomy and institutional safeguards for the Karbis of Karbi Anglong, plains Karbis continue to face marginalisation, identity fragmentation, and exclusion from constitutional protections. By juxtaposing these experiences, the paper highlights the uneven citizenship produced within the same ethnic community and underscores the need to rethink tribal autonomy beyond territorial boundaries..

Keywords: Karbi, Sixth Schedule, Dimoria, Tribal Identity, Assam, Autonomous Council, Scheduled Tribes, Plains Tribes, Indigenous Communities

Introduction

The tribal question in India has historically been intertwined with issues of identity, autonomy, land rights, and political representation. Colonial administrators often viewed tribal populations as isolated and “primitive,” requiring special administrative arrangements, while the postcolonial Indian state attempted to

integrate them through constitutional safeguards and affirmative policies (Xaxa 1999; Bêteille 1992). In Eastern India, and particularly in the Northeast, tribal politics evolved differently due to the region’s ethnic diversity, colonial administrative legacies, and strategic geopolitical importance (Baruah 1999; Nag 2002).

Among the numerous tribal communities of Assam, the Karbis represent a distinctive case. They are distributed across both the hill regions under the Sixth Schedule and the plains of Assam. The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), functioning under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, provides a framework of limited autonomy to Karbis living in the hill districts. At the same time, a substantial number of Karbis reside outside the autonomous district, especially in the plains of Assam, such as the Kamrup Metropolitan district and the Dimoria region. These plains Karbis have been excluded from many constitutional safeguards enjoyed by their counterparts in the autonomous areas, despite belonging to the same ethnic community (Rahang and Deka 2026).

This duality has produced significant socio-political and developmental disparities within the same ethnic group. Karbis living in Sixth Schedule areas possess institutional mechanisms for cultural preservation, local governance, and political representation, while those in the plains continue to struggle for recognition and equal protection. The Dimoria region, situated on the outskirts of Guwahati, presents an important case for understanding how tribal communities negotiate identity, land, and modernisation outside constitutionally protected autonomous spaces (Choudhury and Dutta 2025).

Methodology

This paper adopts a comparative framework to analyse the position of the Karbis in Sixth Schedule areas and the plain areas of Assam. It examines the conceptual understanding of tribes, the constitutional position of tribal communities in India, the historical evolution of the Karbis, and the significance of the Sixth Schedule. Finally, it contrasts the realities of the Karbis of Karbi Anglong and Dimoria, drawing on historical analysis, constitutional interpretation, and contemporary political developments. The study relies on secondary sources, including anthropological and political science literature, constitutional debates, and

recent scholarship on Northeast India's tribal politics (Baruah 1999; Datta and Sen 2020; Rahang and Deka 2026).

Understanding the Concept of Tribes: A General Perspective

The concept of "tribe" has long been debated in anthropology, sociology, and political science, with scholars attempting to define it in terms of territory, culture, kinship, language, and economic organisation. The term itself carries colonial and evolutionary assumptions. Derived from the Latin *tribus*, originally denoting Roman administrative and voting units, the word was later applied to notions of "race" and "lineage" in the sixteenth century. By the nineteenth century, anthropologists such as Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Tylor described tribes as primitive societies governed by kinship, while Emile Durkheim conceptualised them as segmentary societies composed of clans or hordes (Morgan 1877; Durkheim 1960). These early definitions reflected Eurocentric evolutionary frameworks that positioned tribal societies as pre-modern and isolated. Colonial administrators reinforced such assumptions by categorising certain populations as "tribal" or "aboriginal" to justify separate governance (Fernandes 2012).

In the Indian context, anthropologists offered divergent perspectives. D.N. Majumdar defined tribes as social groups with common names, territories, dialects, and kinship ties (Majumdar 1944). G.S. Ghurye challenged isolationist views, arguing that tribes were essentially "backward Hindus" integrated into broader Hindu society (Ghurye 1963). Verrier Elwin, in contrast, defended the cultural uniqueness of tribal communities and advocated policies of protection and relative isolation (Elwin 1960). Modern scholarship, however, rejects rigid definitions, emphasising that tribes are historically evolving communities shaped by political, economic, and social transformations. Tribal identity is dynamic, negotiated through interactions with states, markets, and dominant communities (Xaxa 1999; Bêteille 1992).

Despite regional variations, tribal communities generally share certain broad characteristics: strong connections to specific territories, distinct linguistic and cultural practices, collective organisation based on clans or kinship, traditional forms of self-governance, dependence on forests and agriculture, and relative socio-economic marginalisation. Yet, these features are not universal. In Northeast India, tribal societies developed sophisticated systems of customary governance and political institutions long before colonial rule, challenging the notion of tribes as isolated or primitive (Baruah 1999).

In international discourse, the term “indigenous peoples” has increasingly replaced “tribe.” Indigenous communities are recognised as original inhabitants with collective rights over land, culture, and self-determination (Ruggiu 2018). Although India does not officially adopt the term, many tribal communities in the Northeast identify themselves as indigenous. The politics of tribal identity today is therefore not merely cultural but deeply political, involving struggles for autonomy, recognition, representation, and access to resources (Xaxa 1999; Shah 2010).

Tribes in India: Constitutional and Administrative Perspectives

India possesses one of the largest tribal populations in the world. According to the Census of India (2011), Scheduled Tribes constitute approximately 8.6 per cent of the country’s population, concentrated mainly in central India, the Himalayan belt, and the Northeast (Xaxa 1999). The Constitution of India employs the term “Scheduled Tribes” rather than “tribe.” Article 366(25) defines Scheduled Tribes as those communities specified by the President of India under Article 342, though the Constitution itself does not provide a precise definition. Historically, identification has relied on criteria such as “primitive traits,” “distinct culture,” “geographical isolation,” “shyness of contact,” and “socio-economic backwardness.” These criteria, formulated during the colonial and early

postcolonial periods, have been criticised as paternalistic and outdated (Béteille 1992; Xaxa 1999).

The Indian Constitution provides several safeguards for Scheduled Tribes, including reservations in education and employment, political representation in legislatures, protection of land rights, special administrative arrangements, and targeted welfare schemes (Shah 2010). Two provisions are particularly significant: the Fifth Schedule and the Sixth Schedule. The Fifth Schedule applies mainly to tribal areas in mainland India, providing for Tribal Advisory Councils and gubernatorial oversight. The Sixth Schedule, applicable to parts of Northeast India, grants a greater degree of autonomy through Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), which exercise legislative, executive, and judicial powers over land, forests, agriculture, village administration, and customary law (Datta and Sen 2020).

The tribal question in Northeast India differs markedly from mainland India because communities in the region possess strong ethnic identities, territorial consciousness, and historical experiences of semi-autonomous governance. Consequently, demands for autonomy, separate states, and constitutional protections became central to postcolonial politics in the region (Baruah 1999; Nag 2002). Assam presents a particularly complex tribal landscape, containing both plains tribes and hill tribes. Historically, tribes living in the hill districts received greater constitutional safeguards than those in the plains, resulting in long-term socio-political inequalities (Gassah 1998).

The Karbis exemplify this divide. While the Karbis of Karbi Anglong fall under the Sixth Schedule framework and benefit from autonomous governance through the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, Karbis in the plains, such as those in Dimoria, remain excluded from these protections. This administrative distinction has created uneven citizenship within the same ethnic group, reinforcing disparities in political representation,

land rights, and cultural preservation (Rahang and Deka 2026).

Historical Origin and Identity of the Karbis

The Karbis are one of the major indigenous tribal communities of Assam and Northeast India, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family and broadly classified within the Indo-Mongoloid racial group (Bezbaruah 2016). During the colonial period, they were referred to as “Mikirs,” a term externally imposed and now considered inappropriate by the community. Today, the preferred ethnonym is “Karbi,” while the Karbi word *Arleng* signifies “human being” or “man” (Sultana 2019). The origins of the Karbis remain debated among historians and anthropologists. Oral traditions suggest migration from regions around present-day Myanmar and southern China, while linguistic evidence linking the Karbi language to the Tibeto-Burman family supports theories of migration from East or Southeast Asia (Payeng 2024).

Historically, the Karbis are believed to have inhabited the plains along the Kalang and Kopili rivers before being gradually pushed into the hills due to political conflicts and invasions. Accounts indicate that the expansion of the Dimasa kingdom and later transformations in Assam’s polity displaced many Karbi groups into the hill regions (Sultana 2019). Today, the Karbi population is geographically distributed across Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao, Nagaon, Kamrup Metropolitan, Morigaon, Sonitpur, and parts of Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Those living in the plains are often referred to as *Dumrali Karbis* or plains Karbis, who face distinct challenges of assimilation and exclusion from Sixth Schedule protections (Rahang and Deka 2026).

Karbi social organisation is structured around exogamous clans such as Terang, Timung, Engti, Bey, Rongpi, and Teron, which remain central to marriage, rituals, and social identity (Sultana 2019). Traditionally, their economy was based on shifting cultivation (*jhum*), supplemented by forest resources and livestock.

With increasing urbanisation and market penetration, many Karbis have transitioned to settled agriculture, wage labour, and service occupations (Payeng 2024). Religion historically centred on animism and ancestor worship, with rituals connected to nature, spirits, and clan deities, though Hinduism and Christianity have influenced sections of the community over time.

The Karbis possess a rich cultural tradition of folk songs, dances, oral narratives, and festivals such as Rongker, Chomangkan, and Hacha-Kekan, which reinforce collective identity and social solidarity (Sultana 2019). Despite this cultural richness, the community has historically faced socio-economic marginalisation due to colonial administrative policies, migration, land alienation, and uneven development. Plains Karbis, in particular, remain excluded from constitutional safeguards, producing identity fragmentation and political marginalisation (Rahang and Deka 2026).

The Sixth Schedule: Historical Background and Constitutional Significance

The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution is one of the most distinctive arrangements for tribal autonomy in India, designed specifically to address the unique socio-political conditions of tribal communities in Northeast India. Its origins can be traced to colonial administrative practices. Under the Government of India Act of 1935, many tribal areas of Assam were classified as “Excluded Areas” or “Partially Excluded Areas,” administered separately on the assumption that tribal societies possessed distinct customs and institutions requiring special governance (Baruah 1999).

After independence, the Constituent Assembly recognised the need to protect the cultural and political autonomy of tribal communities in the Northeast. The Bordoloi Sub-Committee, headed by Gopinath Bordoloi, recommended special constitutional safeguards for tribal areas, which led to the incorporation of the Sixth Schedule under Articles 244(2) and 275(1) of the Constitution (Nag 2002). The Schedule

provides for Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) and Regional Councils in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, granting them legislative, executive, and judicial powers over areas such as land management, forests, agriculture, village administration, customary law, social practices, and local taxation. These councils can enact laws subject to gubernatorial approval, reflecting a form of asymmetrical federalism aimed at protecting tribal autonomy within the Indian Union (Datta and Sen 2020).

The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) emerged within this framework. Initially, the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district was created in 1951 as an autonomous district under the Sixth Schedule. Later, it was bifurcated, and the Mikir Hills district was renamed Karbi Anglong in 1976 (Phangcho 2010). The Sixth Schedule has often been described as a “mini-constitution” because of the extensive powers granted to ADCs, which include authority over land, forests, and customary practices.

However, the functioning of the Sixth Schedule has generated several debates. Scholars question whether the councils possess adequate financial autonomy, as they remain dependent on state and central transfers (Baruah 1999). Others argue that traditional institutions have been weakened by bureaucratisation, while autonomy has not necessarily reduced ethnic conflict, as insurgency and demands for greater powers persist in many Sixth Schedule areas (Nag 2002). Concerns about corruption and elite capture within councils have also been raised, undermining the effectiveness of governance (Gassah 1998). Finally, the exclusion of tribal communities residing outside autonomous areas—such as the plains Karbis of Dimoria—has produced uneven citizenship, where members of the same ethnic group experience different constitutional realities depending on geography (Xaxa 1999).

Karbis under the Sixth Schedule: The Experience of Karbi Anglong

The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), established under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, represents one of the most significant institutional arrangements for tribal self-governance in Assam. Headquartered in Diphu, the council has played a crucial role in shaping Karbi political identity and regional autonomy by providing political representation, administrative authority, protection of customary practices, greater control over land and resources, and recognition of ethnic identity (Phangcho 2010).

One of the major achievements of the Sixth Schedule has been the political empowerment of the Karbis. The KAAC created opportunities for tribal leadership and participation in governance, strengthening ethnic consciousness and territorial identity. Political mobilisation intensified after independence, with leaders such as Semsonsing Ingti playing a pivotal role in demanding constitutional safeguards and autonomous administration (Singha 2025). Through the council, Karbi leaders have influenced policies on education, culture, and local governance, thereby embedding ethnic identity within constitutional structures (Baruah 1999).

Land remains central to Karbi identity and survival. The Sixth Schedule restricts the transfer of tribal land to non-tribals, helping preserve ownership patterns in Karbi Anglong (Gassah 1998). Forests and customary land systems have also been protected, though rapid urbanisation, illegal encroachment, mining, and commercial exploitation increasingly threaten tribal rights (Bordoloi 1991).

Cultural preservation has also been facilitated by the KAAC. The council has promoted Karbi language, folklore, and festivals, institutionalising cultural continuity. The demand to recognise Karbi as an official language in the autonomous area reflects growing ethnic assertion (Phangcho 2010). Cultural institutions such as the Karbi Youth Festival reinforce identity and pride, ensuring that traditional practices remain vibrant.

Despite these achievements, Karbi Anglong continues to face developmental challenges. Infrastructure deficits, limited industrialisation, unemployment, and health and educational shortcomings persist, while corruption within autonomous institutions has undermined progress. Critics argue that autonomy has remained largely administrative rather than developmental, failing to deliver substantive socio-economic transformation (Nag 2002).

The region has also experienced insurgency and ethnic conflict since the late twentieth century. Militancy by groups such as the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) emerged partly from dissatisfaction with the limits of autonomy and demands for a separate state. The 2021 Karbi Peace Accord, signed between the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and Karbi groups, marked an important step toward conflict resolution, promising enhanced autonomy and developmental support (The Hindu 2021). Nevertheless, tensions over land, migration, and ethnic identity continue to shape politics in Karbi Anglong, underscoring the complex realities of autonomy under the Sixth Schedule.

Karbis in the Plain Areas of Assam: The Case of Dimoria

The plains Karbis of Dimoria represent a neglected segment of Assam's tribal landscape, facing exclusion from Sixth Schedule protections, land alienation, and cultural assimilation, even as they mobilise for recognition and rights. Recent scholarship and reporting highlight their precarious socio-economic position and growing demands for constitutional safeguards (Rahang and Deka 2026; Pratidin Time 2025).

Historically, the Karbis inhabited both plains and hills, but colonial and postcolonial administrative restructuring pushed many toward the hills. Groups that remained in the plains—particularly in Dimoria, Morigaon, and Nagaon—developed distinct patterns of interaction with Assamese and migrant communities. Over time, cultural assimilation,

linguistic adaptation, and economic integration became more pronounced (Singha 2025; Bordoloi 1991). This historical trajectory has contributed to the identity crisis faced by the plains Karbis today.

A central issue is administrative exclusion. The distinction between “hill tribes” and “plain tribes” in Assam has produced unequal access to constitutional safeguards. The creation of autonomous hill districts effectively divided the Karbis into “Hill Karbis” and “Plains Karbis,” with the latter excluded from the protections under the Sixth Schedule (Datta and Sen 2020). This exclusion has resulted in limited political representation, weak institutional support for language and culture, land alienation, reduced access to welfare schemes, and cultural erosion. Recent protests by plains Karbi organisations have demanded full Scheduled Tribe recognition and inclusion within broader tribal safeguards, reflecting growing political consciousness (Pratidin Time 2025).

Dimoria, located in Kamrup Metropolitan district near Guwahati, has experienced rapid urbanisation due to its proximity to the city. Expansion of roads, educational institutions, and commercial settlements has transformed traditional Karbi villages. While urbanisation has created economic opportunities, it has also produced challenges such as loss of traditional land, displacement, commercial encroachment, decline of customary institutions, and ecological degradation (Choudhury and Dutta 2025). Many plains Karbis continue to depend on agriculture and wage labour, with unemployment and insecurity persisting despite improved educational attainment.

Despite these pressures, Dimoria Karbis continue to preserve rituals, festivals, dances, and clan systems as markers of identity. Studies indicate that traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable resource management practices remain embedded in community life (Rahang, Deka, and Thapa 2025). However, cultural preservation lacks institutional support and instead relies on community organisations. Unlike Karbi Anglong, where the Autonomous

Council funds cultural programmes, Dimoria's initiatives are grassroots and under-resourced.

Plains Karbis have increasingly mobilised around issues of recognition and rights. Ethnic organisations and student bodies have demanded inclusion within constitutional safeguards, while community festivals and cultural programmes have become spaces for ethnic assertion. The Scheduling Demand Coordination Committee has even warned of electoral consequences if plains Karbis continue to be denied full ST recognition, underscoring the community's growing political mobilisation (Pratidin Time 2025).

Comparative Analysis: Karbis under the Sixth Schedule and Plains Karbis of Dimoria

A comparative study between the Karbis of Karbi Anglong and the plains Karbis of Dimoria reveals stark differences in governance, identity, development, and cultural preservation. The most significant divergence lies in constitutional protection. Karbis living in Karbi Anglong benefit from the Sixth Schedule through the Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council (KAADC), which provides institutional autonomy, legislative powers, and safeguards over land and customary practices (Phangcho 2010). By contrast, the plains Karbis of Dimoria lack similar autonomous institutions, leaving their political and administrative position weaker and more vulnerable to state-level decisions (Teron 2008).

Political representation further illustrates this divide. The Sixth Schedule has nurtured structured leadership among the Hill Karbis, with most prominent Karbi politicians emerging from autonomous areas (Baruah 1999). Plains Karbis, however, often experience political marginalisation, as their issues receive limited attention within mainstream state politics. This marginalisation is compounded by the absence of institutional platforms for articulating community interests.

Land rights constitute another critical point of difference. In Karbi Anglong, the Sixth

Schedule restricts land transfer to non-tribals, offering imperfect but important safeguards against alienation (Gassah 1998). In Dimoria, however, urban expansion and commercialisation have intensified land alienation, with tribal families losing agricultural plots to the expansion of Guwahati. Studies show that Dimoria's land use has shifted dramatically, with agricultural land declining and built-up areas expanding, underscoring the vulnerability of plains Karbis to displacement (Choudhury and Dutta 2025).

Cultural preservation also diverges sharply. Autonomous institutions in Karbi Anglong actively support cultural continuity through educational policies, language promotion, and festivals such as the Karbi Youth Festival (Phangcho 2010). In Dimoria, cultural preservation depends primarily on community initiatives, often underfunded and sporadic. Assimilation pressures are stronger due to greater interaction with urban and non-tribal populations, leading to changes in dress, food habits, and religious practices (Sarma 2025).

Economic development presents a paradox. Karbi Anglong remains economically underdeveloped despite autonomy, with persistent poverty, unemployment, and infrastructure deficits (Nag 2002). Dimoria, by contrast, benefits from proximity to Guwahati, offering greater access to markets, education, and employment opportunities. Yet, this economic integration has accelerated cultural transformation and land commodification, raising questions about the sustainability of development without safeguards for tribal identity (Rahang, Deka, and Thapa 2025).

Identity politics also differs in orientation. In Karbi Anglong, identity politics is closely tied to territorial autonomy and demands for greater self-governance, often expressed through movements for enhanced powers under the Sixth Schedule. Among the plains Karbis, identity politics revolves around recognition, protection against assimilation, and demands for equal safeguards, including calls to extend

Sixth Schedule provisions to plains areas (Baruah 1999; Xaxa 1999).

Finally, the relationship with the state varies. Karbis within the Sixth Schedule interact with the state through autonomous institutions, which mediate their engagement with broader governance structures. Plains Karbis, however, engage directly with ordinary district administration without autonomous intermediaries, limiting their bargaining power and leaving them more exposed to state policies that may not prioritise tribal concerns.

Taken together, this comparative analysis underscores the uneven constitutional realities faced by the Karbis. While the Sixth Schedule has empowered the Hill Karbis with autonomy and cultural safeguards, the Dimoria Karbis remain excluded, vulnerable to land alienation, assimilation, and political marginalisation. This divergence reflects the structural bias of Indian federalism, where geography determines autonomy and produces unequal citizenship within the same ethnic group.

Critical Evaluation of the Sixth Schedule in Relation to the Karbis

The Sixth Schedule has often been celebrated as an innovative constitutional model of tribal autonomy in India, particularly in the Northeast. In the case of the Karbis, their achievements are undeniable. By constitutionally recognising tribal identity, the Sixth Schedule has prevented complete assimilation into the Assamese mainstream and reinforced ethnic pride and cultural continuity (Xaxa 1999). The establishment of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council (KAADC) institutionalised self-governance, creating a political space where Karbi leaders could legislate on matters of land, culture, and customary law (Phangcho 2010). This framework has also safeguarded clan-based dispute resolution and indigenous rituals, embedding customary practices within constitutional structures (Teron 2008). Moreover, the KAADC has nurtured ethnic political leadership, enabling Karbi elites to

articulate community interests within the Indian Union (Baruah 1999). Perhaps most importantly, restrictions on land transfer to non-tribals have provided relative protection of Karbi territory, preventing the large-scale alienation observed among plains tribes outside the Sixth Schedule (Gassah 1998). These achievements collectively ensured that tribal communities were not fully absorbed into the dominant socio-political order and created space for ethnic assertion.

Yet, despite these gains, the Sixth Schedule's limitations are equally significant. Financial autonomy remains restricted, as autonomous councils are heavily dependent on state and central government funds. This dependence curtails effective self-governance and often delays development projects (Baruah 1999). Elite capture further undermines the democratic promise of autonomy, with politically connected clans and local elites dominating council institutions, thereby limiting the benefits for ordinary Karbi villagers (Phangcho 2010). Administrative overlap between state departments and the KAADC has led to frequent jurisdictional conflicts, particularly in sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure, thereby weakening governance efficiency (Gassah 1998). Moreover, autonomy has not automatically translated into development. Karbi Anglong continues to suffer from poverty, unemployment, and poor infrastructure, with insurgency and underdevelopment persisting despite constitutional safeguards (Nag 2002).

Perhaps the most critical limitation lies in the exclusion of plains tribes. The Dimoria Karbis, for instance, remain outside the Sixth Schedule framework, leaving them vulnerable to land alienation, cultural erosion, and political marginalisation. This exclusion has produced uneven tribal citizenship, in which members of the same ethnic group experience different constitutional realities depending on geography (Xaxa 1999). The paradox is stark: while the Hill Karbis enjoy constitutional protection, their plains counterparts remain exposed,

highlighting the structural bias embedded in the Sixth Schedule's geographical restrictions.

Taken together, the Karbi experience illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the Sixth Schedule. It has empowered hill tribes by safeguarding identity and territory, yet it has entrenched inequalities by excluding plains tribes and failing to deliver substantive development. This duality reflects the colonial legacy of differentiated governance, in which geography determined autonomy, and it continues to shape postcolonial federalism in the Northeast.

Dimoria as a Space of Transition and Transformation

The Dimoria region symbolises the broader transformation of tribal societies in contemporary Assam. Situated on the outskirts of Guwahati, it has become a transitional zone where traditional tribal life intersects with urban modernity. The Karbis of Dimoria today negotiate multiple pressures arising from rapid urbanisation, migration, land commodification, cultural assimilation, and political marginalisation. Geospatial studies demonstrate that built-up areas in Dimoria have expanded significantly in recent decades, while agricultural land has declined, reflecting the encroachment of Guwahati's urban sprawl and the commodification of tribal land for real estate and commercial purposes (Choudhury and Dutta 2025). Migration into the region has further altered demographic balances, contributing to cultural assimilation and weakening the political voice of the Karbis, who are often referred to as *dumrali* or plain Karbis (Sarma 2025).

Yet, alongside these pressures, the community demonstrates resilience through cultural revival and ethnic assertion. Community organisations, youth associations, and cultural bodies have increasingly attempted to preserve Karbi identity through festivals, language promotion, and collective mobilisation. Traditional ecological practices such as *jhum* cultivation and community forest management continue to

inform sustainable resource use, even as urbanisation reshapes livelihoods (Rahang, Deka, and Thapa 2025). The Karbi Youth Festival and similar initiatives in Dimoria serve as platforms for ethnic pride, reinforcing cultural continuity amidst urban encroachment.

The experience of Dimoria also raises broader questions regarding development and indigeneity. Urban expansion in Assam has often occurred at the cost of tribal land and ecological systems, underscoring the need for policy frameworks that integrate urban planning with tribal rights and ecological conservation. Scholars argue that peri-urban tribal regions such as Dimoria require statutory protections, whether through extensions of the Sixth Schedule or land transfer acts, to safeguard indigenous communities from displacement and cultural erosion. Dimoria thus exemplifies the paradox of transition and transformation: a space where tribal identity is simultaneously threatened and reasserted, and where the politics of indigeneity confronts the realities of urban modernity.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the Karbis in Karbi Anglong under the Sixth Schedule and those residing in the plains of Assam, particularly Dimoria, underscores the complex interplay between constitutional autonomy, ethnic identity, and socio-economic transformation. The Karbis, as one of Assam's historically significant tribal communities, embody broader trajectories of migration, settlement, and political evolution in Northeast India. The Sixth Schedule provided the Karbis of Karbi Anglong with institutional autonomy, protection of customary practices, and recognition of ethnic identity, thereby strengthening their political representation and cultural preservation.

Yet this framework has produced uneven outcomes. Plains Karbis, excluded from the protections of the Sixth Schedule, remain vulnerable to land alienation, cultural assimilation, and political marginalisation. The administrative distinction between "hill tribes"

and “plains tribes” has fragmented the community and entrenched disparities in access to rights and safeguards. Dimoria exemplifies the challenges tribal groups face as they negotiate identity and survival in rapidly urbanising spaces without autonomous institutions.

The Karbi experience demonstrates that autonomy cannot be reduced to administrative

arrangements alone. Genuine tribal empowerment requires inclusive policies that extend recognition and protection beyond rigid territorial boundaries, ensuring accountability, financial autonomy, and equitable development. Future tribal policy in Assam must therefore embrace a more holistic approach, one that integrates socio-economic empowerment, cultural protection, and democratic participation for all Karbis, irrespective of geography.

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