



## A BRIEF STUDY OF BASANTA DAS'S SHORT STORIES

(With Special Reference to 'Aachor', 'Tongi' and 'Aranyar Saa')

**Monikangkana Koch**

Assistant professor, Thong Nokbe College, Dokmoka

Email- [kangkanakoch88@gmail.com](mailto:kangkanakoch88@gmail.com)

### **Abstract:**

Among the various branches of Assamese literature, the short story holds a significant place. Introduced by the literary pioneer Lakshminath Bezbarua, the short story genre entered Assamese literature through the pages of the magazine 'Jonaki'. Since the Jonaki era to the present, Assamese short stories have evolved and flourished in the hands of various authors. Basanta Das is one such prominent contemporary storyteller.

A dedicated advocate of Karbi culture, Basanta Das has made immense contributions to Assamese literature and the Karbi community through his writings. His stories vividly reflect the life, society, and culture of the Karbi people. Particularly, his stories set against the backdrop of Karbi hills present a lively depiction of tribal life, traditional beliefs, customs, superstitions, festivals, and the intimate relationship between Karbi people and nature.

This discussion aims to provide a concise study of Basanta Das's short stories, specifically 'Aachor', 'Tongi', and 'Aranyar Saa'.

**Keywords:** Short story, Karbi tribe, tribal society, tribal culture

### **Introduction:**

Among the literary branches that have gained widespread appreciation among readers in recent times, the short story stands out prominently. A short story typically encapsulates a specific event, situation, or thought that vividly reflects various aspects of social life, human joys and sorrows, conflicts, changes in social values, customs, beliefs, superstitions, festivals, and so on.



The short story exposes the deeper realities of life, touching readers hearts and inspiring profound thought. One of the prominent contemporary storytellers in Assamese literature is Basanta Das. His interest in literature began during his school days, and he entered the field of Assamese storytelling in the 1970s. A silent literary figure dedicated to promoting and preserving Karbi culture. Basanta Das enriched Assamese literature through his short stories. Many of his stories have been published in various newspapers and magazines. His notable works include Laichenes (1970s), 'Karechok' (1970s), 'Jhum' (1970), 'Kafi' (1991), 'Kuntiri' Silver Jubilee edition), 'Tongi' (2007, Edin Puja edition), Madina (2007, Ajir Batori), 'Ki Kahabo Dukh' (2007, Asomiya Pratidin, Puja edition), 'Aachor' (2008, Janambhumi, Puja edition), 'Ahudi' (2010, Asomiya Pratidin Puja edition), 'Aranyar Saa', and 'Choutrish' (2010, Sadin).

Through his stories, Basanta Das presents a realistic portrayal of the Karbi society and culture. Most of his stories are set in the Karbi hills.

#### **Scop and Methodology:**

The scope of this study is confined to the concise analysis of Basanta Das's short stories 'Aachor', 'Tong'i, and 'Aranyar Saa'.

This paper proceeds with the help of both primary and secondary materials. The primary materials include Basanta Das's three short stories-'Aachor', 'Tongi', and 'Aranyar Saa'.

The secondary materials include various essays, articles, and critiques published in books, magazines, and newspapers about Basanta Das's stories.

#### **Objective of the Study:**

Basanta Das, who silently worked for the Karbi society and culture throughout his life, chose the Karbi tribal society and culture as the subject of his short stories because of his profound love for them. The backdrop for most of his short stories is the Karbi hills. This research paper, therefore, aims to discuss Basanta Das's short stories 'Aachor', 'Tongi', and 'Aranyar Saa'.

#### **Result and Discussion:**

Although Basanta Das was not Karbi by birth, he never gave importance to caste or social hierarchy. He believed in equality for all. His deep admiration for Karbi culture during his time in



Jirikindeng led him to become profoundly attracted to it, so much so that he formally adopted the title "Terang." Despite not being Karbi, Basanta Das became a leading figure in the Karbi community's language, literature, society, and culture. As a researcher of Karbi culture, he dedicated his entire life to the promotion and preservation of Karbi traditions, earning numerous accolades in recognition of his work.

Having devoted his life to Assamese literature and Karbi culture, Basanta Das, due to professional obligations, had to travel to remote and interior places in Karbi Anglong such as Jirikindeng, Hamren, Ronghang Rongbong, Dongkamokam, and Kheroni. During that time, these regions were without proper roads, and his journeys to these interior places provided him with unique experiences. These experiences later became the foundation of his stories.

In his stories, Das beautifully portrays the traditions, customs, festivals, attire, food habits, and the simple yet profound lifestyle of the Karbi people. A story based on such rural settings is 'Anchor'. The story's setting is highly realistic and the plot is simple but evokes deep contemplation. It describes an incident that occurs during a journey for a land survey in Charusaa, a village located in the remote region of western Karbi Anglong. Das vividly portrays the lifestyle and struggles of the people living in the area. In the first-person narrative, the storyteller reveals: *"This is not cultural research; I have come here as a field assistant for the Government of Assam's Economic and Statistical Department."* (Basanta das, 2007)

**Anchor:** The village Charusaa, located at the top of the hills of western Karbi Anglong, is a tribal settlement. The lifestyle of the Karbi tribe in the village of Charusaa is reflected in the story. The story captures the environment, society, and people's lifestyle with precision. Through a simple narrative style, Das vividly portrays the straightforward and tradition-bound lives of the Karbi people. Although the story has few characters, each one plays an essential role.

The central female character of the story is Kachang, the daughter of the village headman of Charusaa village. Kachang, represents a traditional Karbi woman, who is simple, Hardworking, responsible, and deeply connected to the soil. Although she harbors resentment against the rigid traditions and superstitions of her society, she carefully follows the customary rules. However, the strict traditional customs seem to bring tragedy into her life.



According to Karbi tradition, killing a tiger is considered a sin. On the other hand, a person who is attacked or killed by a tiger is considered impure. The bodies of such individuals cannot be cremated publicly, it must be buried outside the village boundaries. And the wounded must undergo ritual purification to regain social acceptance. In Aachor, Kachang becomes a victim of this custom.

The story is centred around a prevalent folk belief in Karbi society. Set against the backdrop of rural life, the narrative portrays the tragic circumstances of Kachang, a young woman ostracized by society. Despite the arrival of a sacred day like her wedding, fate cruelly snatches away her happiness. On the day of her wedding, as the groom was taking the bride, a tiger attacked them on the way, leading to the groom's death. Although Kachang narrowly escaped with her life, but according to the folk belief, she was destined to be ostracized from society. Following tradition, Kachang is declared impure. Although she is ritually purified later, she is never able to regain her previous honor and dignity. She spends the rest of her life as an outcast.

Kachang's story reflects the tragic consequences of Karbi society's rigid customs and traditional beliefs. Her life, filled with sorrow and unfulfilled dreams, is summarized in her own words: "*Does the 'Jhumtoli' (fertile land) grow on its own? Only the plow of man can awaken life in the soil of Jhumtoli*". (Basanta das, 2008) Through this line, Kachang expresses her suppressed emotions, shattered dreams, and profound pain. Das's Aachor vividly depicts tribal life in Karbi hills, emphasizing the impact of longstanding traditions and beliefs on individuals' lives. The story critiques societal injustices perpetuated in the name of tradition and calls for a reevaluation of societal values.

Based on certain unique customs and beliefs of Karbi society, the author has crafted the story in a profound and sensitive manner. These very traditions seem to have obstructed Kachang's dreams from becoming a reality. She expressed her anguish and resentment against the constraints of society with the words: "*You all seem to enjoy covering up the fire, don't you?*" (Basanta das, 2008). Through this statement, the pain and defiance she felt towards society's blind beliefs are vividly conveyed. The story serves as a poignant example of how these traditional beliefs and rules



have influenced the lives of the Karbi community, residing amidst the verdant beauty of the hills, and how they can bring waves of sorrow into someone's life.

Another aspect reflected in the story is social life. The traditional Karbi society is beautifully portrayed. Cultural elements such as the tribal Chang ghar (community house), jhum cultivation, tribal folk beliefs, wedding celebrations and other aspects are excellently depicted in the story.

### **Tongi:**

Among Basanta Das's notable short stories, 'Tongi' stands out as a remarkable narrative. Set against the enchanting backdrop of Karbi hills, the story beautifully portrays the intimate relationship between the forest and the people. For the Karbi community, the forest is not merely a source of natural resources but a friend and companion. They believe in a profound spiritual connection with nature, understanding and respecting its significance. This connection is so deep that ancient Karbi people named their clans after trees, birds, and natural elements as a gesture of gratitude and reverence. The story reflects this relationship while highlighting the necessity of coexistence between society and nature.

In Tongi, Basanta Das illustrates the simple lifestyle of the Karbi people and their harmony with the natural world. The story begins with a narrative that vividly describes the bond between the Karbi people and their environment: "*A long time ago, one of our ancestors went into the forest searching for feathers of a Bhimraj (Racket-tailed drongo). While searching, he fell into a pit in the forest. For seven days and nights, he survived without food or water, sustained by the sap of a Gamari tree branch that extended into the pit. It was the Bhimraj bird that helped him escape the pit. Out of gratitude, the ancestor named his clan after the Gamari tree (Gmelina) and the Bhimraj bird (Woajaru).*" (Basanta das, 2007)

Karbi society primarily has five clans: Inghi, Ingti, Terang, Timung, and Teron. Among these, Terang and Timung are associated with birds, while Teron, Inghi, and Ingti are linked to trees. This indicates the existence of totemic beliefs among the Karbis, similar to other indigenous groups. According to tradition, members of a particular clan are forbidden from harming or cutting down the trees or birds associated with their clan. These are believed to have an inherent spiritual connection to the community. However, as time progresses, modernity and changing societal



dynamics have led to a decline in these beliefs. The younger generation, focused on livelihood and material progress, has started disregarding these values.

This generational shift is reflected in the actions of the protagonist's son, who decides to cut down trees in the forest for financial gain, disregarding traditional values. The father, deeply distressed, expresses his sorrow: *"Don't you feel any love for the sacred trees of our clan?"* (Basanta Das, 2007)

The story depicts the conflict between tradition and modernity, generational differences, and the erosion of cultural values. Through Tongi, Basanta Das critiques the younger generation's disconnection from cultural heritage and emphasizes the importance of respecting traditions for preserving the identity of the community. Although the story lacks a linear plot, its strength lies in its depiction of the intimate bond between the Karbi people and nature. The characters Jeng Fangcho', his son, his daughter-in-law, and grandchild—represent different facets of Karbi society. Jeng Fangcho, with his simple attire, traditional practices, and deep respect for nature, embodies the values of the older generation. His son, on the other hand, symbolizes the changes brought by modernity.

The story also reflects the Karbis' historical reliance on the forest for survival. Jeng Fangcho's life serves as a reminder of the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature and the importance of protecting that bond.

In essence, Tongi portrays the harmony between traditional Karbi values and the environment while highlighting the challenges posed by modernization. It serves as a poignant call to balance progress with the preservation of cultural and natural heritage.

#### **Aranyar Saa:**

Another remarkable short story by Basanta Das is Aranyar Saa, set against the backdrop of Karbi society. This story sheds light on the traditional marriage customs, known as 'Adam Asar', which are an integral part of Karbi culture. The story revolves around the traditions, rituals, and ceremonies of this community, which not only preserve their cultural heritage but also ensure societal discipline.



One of the most significant rituals in Karbi marriages is the Hanjeng Kekak (thread-tying tradition), which serves as the foundation of the marriage process. Among the Karbis, daughters of maternal uncles are given the highest priority for marriage proposals. Hence, when a girl is born, her father informs his sisters about it, and the aunt (paternal side) ties a sacred thread around the child's finger as a token of accepting her as their future daughter-in-law. This thread-tying ritual symbolizes a sacred bond and an unspoken agreement between two families. Although the formal marriage ceremony happens when the couple comes of age, the Hanjeng Kekak ritual secures their union from infancy. However, modern Karbi society is gradually losing this tradition.

The story begins with the birth of the central character, Kareng, whose aunt immediately ties a thread around her finger, signifying that she would marry her cousin as per the custom. Over time, Kareng grows into a beautiful, vibrant, nature-loving young woman. One day, while going to she meets Lanki, and their interaction gradually turns into love. Their love story, however, faces an obstacle in the form of rigid traditions. According to the thread-tying custom, Kareng must marry her cousin, as her family had dreamt of her becoming their daughter-in-law. Despite her emotions for Lanki, she is compelled to conform to societal expectations.

The story juxtaposes two contrasting societies within Karbi life:

**1. Traditional Karbi Society:**

- This society is rooted in customs and traditions, living harmoniously with nature.
- Characters like Lanki and Kareng represent simplicity, responsibility, and a deep connection with nature.
- The customs, folklore, and cultural values are vividly portrayed, emphasizing the community's dedication to preserving its heritage.

**2. Modern Karbi Society:**

- This society has adopted modern conveniences and practices, drifting away from traditional values.
- Characters like Kareng's aunt and her husband represent this world, where individual desires take precedence over traditions.



- Kareng's experiences in this modern society highlight its artificial nature. She observes: "*This place too has a sky, but it's a ceiling sky. This place has air, but it's air from an electric fan. This place has forests, fruits, and flowers, but they are plastic.*"

Kareng's life in this society feels restricted, contrasting with her free-spirited days in the hills. She reflects: "*Should the forest people stay in the forest? Even after settling in a home, can one find peace?*" The male protagonist, Lanki, serves as a representation of the Karbi people's traditional livelihood. He collects natural resources like honey and resin from the forests, which he sells in the market for income. Through Lanki, the story illustrates the Karbis' dependence on the forest and their sustainable way of life.

In 'Aranyar Saa', Basanta Das portrays the duality within Karbi society, where tradition and modernity coexist. The story vividly captures the challenges faced by individuals caught between these two worlds.

Through this narrative, Das not only highlights the cultural richness of the Karbis but also critiques the erosion of traditional values due to modern influences. The juxtaposition of Kareng's free life in the hills and her constrained existence in the modern world underscores the struggle to preserve identity while adapting to change.

**Conclusion:**

In the stories Aachor, Tongi, and Aranyar Saa, Basanta Das explores themes of nature, human relationships, generational conflict, the impact of modernity, beliefs, superstitions, festivals, and traditional customs. Through simple yet evocative narratives, these stories vividly depict Karbi life while critiquing societal norms that hinder individual freedom and progress. Through his stories, the author primarily sought to promote, expand, and preserve Karbi society and culture.





**Reference:**

Anglong, K., & Pradesh, A. Karbi people.

Bora, Pabitra (Edited.): Basanta Boibhab, Dihun prakashan, Guwahai,2012

Bormon,Hemanta( Edited) : Doinik jonombhumi,saradiyo sankhya,2008 & 2010

B.Rongphar:Karbi Anglonogor Rajanaitik Itihas-Phu Phu publication Diphu 2005

BHATTACHARYYA, B. K., & Goswami, A. (1989). Assamese Short Story: This Creation. *Indian Literature*, 32(2 (130), 116-127

Das, Prasanta kumar, Sonowal,Harish (Edited): Basarasr golpo, jatra prakash, guwahati,2007

Dhanaraju, V., & Bijeta, R. K. (2024). SYSTEM AND PRACTICES OF THE KARBIS OF ASSAM. *The Routledge Handbook of Tribe and Religions in India: Contemporary Readings on Spirituality, Belief and Identity*, 302.

Dhanaraju, V., & Bijeta, R. K. Traditional Belief System and Practices of the Karbis of Assam: Change and Continuity. In *The Routledge Handbook of Tribe and Religions in India* (pp. 302-318). Routledge India.

Dhanaraju, V., & Bijeta, R. K. Traditional Belief System and Practices of the Karbis of Assam: Change and Continuity. In *The Routledge Handbook of Tribe and Religions in India* (pp. 302-318). Routledge India.

Rongpi, B. (2024). The Folk Culture and Ritual Practices of the Karbi. In *Environmental Intimacies from India's North East* (pp. 103-115). Routledge India.

Zaman, A. (2008). An appraisal to the marriage system of the Karbis of Assam. *Studies of Tribes and Tribals*, 6(2), 93-97.