

The Karen – A Lesser Known Community of the Andaman Islands (India)

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ABSTRACT

The Karen is a lesser-known community residing mainly in even villages of the Mayabunder tehsil of North Andaman. Brought into India from Burma (now Myanmar) for the first time as forest labourers in 1925, the Karen decided to settle down in India itself after its independence as Indian citizens. Today the Karen form a small but important community of the island since they are trying to attain the status of Scheduled Tribe in India, which would entitle them of special privileges and concessions granted to underdeveloped groups of the country.

Residing in India over the years; interaction with other communities such as the Bengali, Ranchi and Malyalee; education and development have brought about certain changes in their original lifestyle. Although the Karen are trying hard to maintain their indigenous identity and homogeneity, the rapid changes occurring are easily observable to the extent that marriages into other communities have started to take place.

The present paper, based on in depth interviews among the Karen of Mayabunder during November-December 2003, thus attempts to document the general socio-cultural profile of the Karen community and changes that have been occurring in their lifestyle.

It is quite possible that in a decade or so from now, the Karen also become a heterogeneous group like other communities of the Andaman Islands who have lost much of their indigenous cultural traits due to excessive intermixing with various other culturally different groups.

Introduction

The Andaman and Nicobar islands are a group of more than 3000 big and small, inhabited and uninhabited islands, lying in the southern part of the Bay of Bengal. Often described as green islands, they are known throughout India as *kalapani* because of their having been a penal settlement under the British rule, a reputation they are fast shedding. Known to the anthropological world for its tribal inhabitants, the islands are home to several other indigenous groups. The current paper presents the ethnographic details of one such group – the Karen.

History of the karen

The Karen are a lesser known migrant community residing mainly in the Mayabunder *tehsil* of North Andaman block, district Andaman, and are believed to have originally been the inhabitants of Mangolia. According to Karen legends the despotic and cruel nature of the Mongolian kings forced the peace loving Karen to move southwards to east Turkistan and China between B.C. 2017-2013. From here they moved to Tibet in B.C. 1864. However, the ill treatment meted out to them by the Chinese king, Ghaw Hsin, forced them once again to migrate in B.C. 1125, and settle in Siam, Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam. From then on they settled in the eastern hilly tracts of Burma, which under the British rule became an integral part of India. In 1924, Dr. H.I. Marshall, the principal of the Karen theological seminary, Insein (Rangoon), on his way back from the U.S. stopped at Port Blair to see his cousin Col. Ferrar, who was the Chief Commissioner of the Andaman and Nicobar islands. It was at this time that Ferrar informed Marshall of the settlement scheme under which the then administration was to provide several benefits to settlers who were to undertake the work of cleaning the forests, felling trees, transporting timber to the mills, and even handling elephants. Marshall took this to be a good opportunity to help the hard working, honest and peace living poor Karen of Burma. Thus on his return to Rangoon, he published this news in the Karen newspaper- *Hsah Tu Gaw*, meaning the “morning star”. After reading this news and visiting the Andaman, Rev. Luyi, a Karen priest, decided that it was an excellent opportunity. In April 1925, the first batch of 13 families, under the leadership of Rev. Luyi, reached the Andaman Island as settlers. In 1926, the second batch of 50 families came and the first Karen village, named Webi was settled. From then onwards the Karen have made the Andaman their permanent home by opting for Indian citizenship after independence. In keeping with the administrative rules the Karen enjoy the status and benefits of ‘Locals’ (an administrative term). Today, the Karen form a small but important community of the Island, since they are fighting to attain the status of a Scheduled Tribe in India (since they are considered a tribe in Myanmar, from where they have migrated) which would help them receive special privileges and concessions, granted to underdeveloped groups of the country.

The karen of andaman

The Karen belong to the mongoloid race, having a below medium stature, broad head and along and moderately broad nose. Blood group studies among the Karen, by Roy (1980), reveals that there is a preponderance of group ‘A’ over ‘B’ and ‘O’. Demographic analysis (Agarwal and Maiti, 2004) reveals that their population at present stands at over 2000, whereas according to the 1951 census it stood at only 384. The average family size is 5.6 and

sex ratio is adverse at 924 female/ 1000 male. Crude birth rate is on the higher side at 26.9 for the year 2002-2003, while crude death rate is relatively low at 3.6. At present the Karen of Andaman are concentrated in 6 villages of Mayabunder *tehsil* namely, Webi, Deopur, Lataw, Lucknow (Burmadera), Karmatang-9 and Karmatang-10 and 2 villages in Diglipur *tehsil* namely, Borang and Chipon.

According to Singh (1994), the Karen in India are divided into two sub-groups namely the Sgaw and the Pwo, based on language differentiation but no social restrictions or hierarchy among themselves. However, today, the Karen are neither aware of, nor accept any such division. According to them, all the Karen residing in the Andaman belong to the Sgaw group. As far as language is concerned, they speak their own indigenous dialect, Karen, and use the Burmese script. For corresponding with outsiders, they use English and Hindi.

Over the years, since their arrival to the Andaman, the Karen have tried hard to maintain their traditional way of life. However, residing in India over the years; interacting with other communities such as the Ranchi, Tamil, Bengali and Malayalee; growing awareness; and the speedy rate of all-round development and change have brought about certain changes in their original lifestyle. Although even today, the Karen are trying hard to maintain their indigenous identity and homogeneity, the rapid changes occurring are easily observable. The fact that there is hardly any literature available on the Karen of Andaman makes it all the more essential to document the ethnographic details of this lesser known community. The present study based on in-depth interviews and observations among the Karen during November-December 2003, thus attempts to document the general socio-cultural profile of the Karen and the changes arising in their life-style.

Socio-cultural profile of the karen

I.

Marriage among the Karen is a religious sacrament, which is essential for continuity of family and group. Spouse are acquired either by courtship or negotiation, with preference being given to the boy/girl's own choice. Age of marriage for girls is between 16-25 and for boys between 19-30. Serial monogamy is practiced while polygyny and polyandry are strictly prohibited. Cousin marriage was prohibited earlier, and although today this restriction has been lifted to retain group homogeneity (since their population is quite small), cases of cousin marriage are rare. Divorce is not possible and therefore remarriage is possible only after the death of ones spouse. In cases of incompatibility separation takes place, but such cases are few and far between. No marriage payments of any kind are made and thus the concept of dowry and bride wealth are both absent. Endogamy is the prescribed and preferred form of marriage. However over the years, living in close contact with various other communities such as the Tamil, Malayalee, Ranchi, Bengali and Muslims has led to several cases of inter-community marriages. Such marriages are accorded full acceptance by the community only after the non-Karen spouse has been baptized and converts to Christianity. Here it is important to note that only Christian Karen were brought to India under the settlement scheme. Such marriages no doubt, bring changes and novelties in the traditional Karen life, since it is not possible for the non-Karen to totally renounce their earlier lifestyle. Of late, the Karen Youth Organization (a registered NGO) has started advocating and stressing upon community endogamy to

maintain their group identity. In fact several cases were noted where educated girls of well-off families were married to uneducated and poor boys, simply because traditionally endogamy is the prescribed form of marriage. Pre and extra-marital sexual relations are prohibited and strongly condemned. If a case of pre-marital relation comes to light, the boy and girl are immediately married off. Such marriages however do not take place in the church, but in the house of the girl, since the couple is not considered pure. After marriage the couple has to ask forgiveness in the church, and once forgiven, go about normally. If for any reason the two people involved cannot be married and the girl gets pregnant, her name is struck from the church register. After delivery, she has to ask for forgiveness in the church for 7 consecutive Sundays' in front of the entire gathering and promises not to repeat the mistake. Generally, she is forgiven, her name is re-entered in the church register and her child is accepted as a normal member of the community. Today, this lenient attitude is undergoing a change. People openly condemn such acts since it would present a bad picture of the community.

Traditionally, the Karen are a patriarchal, matrilineal and bilateral community. Even today the eldest male member commands maximum authority and is treated with utmost respect. However, patterns of residence and inheritance have undergone a transformation in accordance with time and needs. Earlier, after marriage, men used to stay with their wife's parents, or generally in a separate house nearby, and were given a part of the agricultural land. Today, although the groom customarily lives for 7 days after marriage at his in-laws house, he may later choose to live with his own parents or set up a separate house at another place. This system works quite conveniently for the Karen. Men who have jobs elsewhere, move out with their wife and children to their place of work and do not aspire for a share in their parental property if they are earning enough. If a boy is married to a girl who has no siblings, or whose siblings stay separately, he will naturally go to live with his in-laws, to take care of them and their property. As far as inheritance is concerned, being a bilateral community, both sons and daughters are equal shareholders in their parent's property. However, the more needy child gets a larger share and the youngest child inherits the parental house. To an extent, the place of residence now-a-days is also decided on the basis of the amount of property that a person would be able to inherit. Thus, if a girl belongs to a rich family, but has several siblings among whom the parent's property has to be divided, she would go to stay with her husband who may not be so rich but would have a larger amount in his parents property, since he has less or no siblings among whom the parental property has to be divided. This in turn would make life easier for both the families. According to the Karen this system of inheritance has never created any bad blood among family members since the Karen live a simple life and have very few needs.

Family is considered of utmost importance and children are reared from the very beginning to obey and respect their elders, and help in all family matters. Nuclear families are most common and preferred, although extended and joint families are not uncommon. All family members contribute in household duties and work as a single unit. Women share an equal status with men and are never discriminated against. Both men and women partake equally in all household and economic activities. In fact, women even plough the fields if the need arises, a task which was earlier strictly

prohibited for them. Thus, women are treated as near equals in every sphere, be it social, economic, educational, religious or political. All decisions at the family level are taken in consultation with the women of the house. Even widows and barren women are treated with equal respect and no restrictions what so ever laid on them. Cases of adoption are rare in the community, since the Karen do not like to give their children for adoption. Among the Karen, kinship terms are mainly classificatory and these very terms are used by one and all, in general, except for a few cases where non-Karen terms are being used. Such examples are restricted to mixed families or places where as a result of greater interaction with non-Karen, children have started using the terms 'papa' and 'mummy' for their parents. Avoidance does not exist between relatives of any category though joking relations exist between most relatives of the same generation. In fact, the Karen are a very close-knit community, with importance being given to all kith and kin apart from family members. Thus, at times of joys and sorrows the entire community comes together to support each other.

With people of other communities, such as the Ranchi, Tamil etc., who live in the same or near-by villages, they share a bitter sweet relation, trying to be friendly yet formal, so as to avoid any clash of interest or altercations. Despite this, fights do occur, but none so serious that it cannot be solved by the intervention of one's community members. An increased number of inter-community marriages has further caused a disliking among some Karen, for these people, since they consider too much interaction with them as a threat to their group identity and culture. On the other hand, at least four cases were noted where Karen families had adopted orphaned Ranchi babies despite having children of their own. Such people feel that for survival and development they must interact and cooperate with other community members. Today, in general, they have adopted a very friendly and helpful attitude towards outsiders and strangers, unlike earlier when they were very shy and preferred interacting only among themselves.

II.

As stated earlier, the Karen are Christians of the Baptist mission. Being staunch Christians they try to follow the preaching's of the bible in totality. There are three local churches situated here – Mulla Church at Webi, Lugyi Church at Webi and Hindi Baptist Church at Lucknow. Every Karen is the member of one of these churches and has to pay an annual membership fee of Rs.200/- per family. The church is visited on Sundays and festivals by all. Sermons are given in Karen dialect and the Bible is also available in the same language. The Pastor is the highest religious authority and is greatly respected in the community. Women are allowed to give sermons but cannot become a Pastor. Being Christians, all Karen myths relate to the Bible. Earlier, it is informed, that they used to follow a lunar calendar and time was calculated on the basis of the movement of the Sun and stars. Today, not a single Karen has knowledge of these calculations. Strangely, although against the tenets of Christianity, the Karen were found to believe in the concept of rebirth (many however, do not accept the fact at first instance). According to the Karen, souls that do not unite with God after death may be reborn and are recognized by their resemblance to a dead person, similar birthmarks, or on the child's recollecting past instances. An indigenous cure is administered to rid a child of his/her past memories – the child is

fed food in an upturned dish or plate. Although the Karen do not accept the existence of magic, witchcraft and sorcery in their community, it was accepted with reluctance that they believe in evil spirits and many a times get charms and talismans made to ward off evil spirits. Again, there are a very few taboos and superstitions followed by the Karen since they believe it to be against the principles of Christianity. Among them, the months of March and April are considered inauspicious and therefore marriages and other important tasks such as construction of houses etc. are not done in these months. Pregnant women are not allowed to consume papaya, bitter gourd, prawns and other bitter fruits, as these are considered fatal for the child. Similarly, for a year after childbirth a woman is not allowed to consume deer meat. A pregnant woman's husband is not allowed to thatch the roof of his house and touch a corpse until the child is born. This may also be considered a milder form of couvad. The main Karen festivals are Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Christmas, New Year, *Kanyo Nithawto* or Karen New Year (which is based on the Burmese calendar) and *Taasibloo*, which is a post harvest ritual held as a thanksgiving for the good produce. On these occasions, the Karen get together to offer prayers in the church after which a community feast is held. This is followed by games and celebration on all the said occasions except Good Friday and Easter. Feasts are also held on the Karen Jubilee, which is celebrated to commemorate the arrival of the Karen to the Andaman after every 25 years, and on at least 3 consecutive birthdays of a child, apart from all life cycle rituals.

Among the Karen, the main lifecycle rituals are relate to dedication, baptism, engagement, marriage and death. No rituals of any sort are performed during pregnancy or on attainment of puberty. A month after birth, the Karen take their child for dedication to the church. During this ceremony the parents pray and promise to teach their child the path of Christianity. The child is usually named on this day itself. The next important ritual is Baptism, which is generally held after the child completes 11-12 years of age and must necessarily be held before marriage. Baptism, a purification ceremony, means 'rebirth' to the Karen since it is said to rid one of the 'original sin' of their ancestors and gets one closer to God. One offers prayers on this day in the church and is expected to follow the Ten Commandments once baptised. Those who can afford it generally hold a small feast after the ceremony. The next important ritual relates to marriage, proposal of which is initiated by the groom's sides. The elders take a written letter to the prospective bride's house in which the girl is praised in several ways comparing her to flowers and stating how lucky they would be if the girl's parents gave permission for the marriage. Once, consent is given the *thotolo* (engagement) ceremony is performed in which the bride and groom exchange rings, the marriage date is finalised and a feast held for all those present. Since the entire community is invited for the marriage, instead of going to each house personally, the invitation is read out thrice in the church on a Sunday when nearly the entire community is present there. A day before the *tatitapplo* (marriage ceremony), the bride, groom and their parents visit the church where the Pastor explains the importance of marriage and life in a special service. A feast is also organised on the occasion. The *tatitapplo* takes place either at the girl's place or the church and can be performed only after both bride and groom have been baptised. The bride stands to the left of the groom during the ceremony that is officiated by the Pastor, who reads out the sermon in front of the entire gathering, once the couple says they are happy and

want to go ahead with the marriage. After the sermon, the bride and groom exchange *nungwem* or ‘promise rings’ and promise to remain faithful and fulfil all marriage duties. After this the Pastor once again asks them whether they are happy and makes them sign a license, along with two witnesses from each side and the Pastor representing the church. The marriage concludes with the Pastor placing the bride’s right hand in that of the boy and blesses them. After this a reception is organised for the entire community at the girl’s house.

On death, the family members convey the news to the Pastor who rings the sorrow bell at the church the same number of times as the age of the deceased at the time of death. The dead body is bathed, dressed, covered with a new white cloth and kept in the house until the family and community members pay their last respect. A special feast, the *mer tha*, is held this very day for all those gathered. The Pastor reads out relevant passages from the Bible and prays for the departed soul to rest in peace. The corpse is then laid in a wooden coffin and decorated with paper flowers. Some of the deceased’s personal belongings too are placed in the coffin before burial, indicating towards their belief in life after birth. The Karen bury their dead in the compound of their own house since every house is surrounded by fields and they believe that crossing a field with a corpse will render the field barren. A week after the death, another community feast, *tethano* (remembering the dead) is held by the family of the deceased. The Pastor performs a special prayer for the departed soul on behalf of all present. The deceased’s family observes no taboo of any kind during these seven days or after it. However, for until a year after the death, no auspicious event is organised by the family in symbolic mourning for the departed soul. At the end of this period of mourning, another feast is held for close relatives and family members.

III.

The Karen, like all Indian communities, are governed by the statutory three tier panchayat system. Since they came here as immigrants during the British period, the British administrative system was followed up to independence where a capable Karen was elected by the people as their representative. The Chowdhry, locally called *Tajji*, thus acted as a liaison officer between the British administration and the Karen. It was his task to collect revenue, keep a record of births and deaths and solve disputes at the first instance. The *Chengow* (Chowkidar), who was elected in a similar way by the Karen, helped the *Tajji* in his duties. The II World War saw the Japanese invasion on the Island and all that the peace loving Karen could do under such stressful conditions was to take refuge in religion. This period saw an increase in the powers of the Pastor and church. The Pastor overshadowed the position of the *Tajji* till the 50’s, when apart from being the religious head he took on the additional responsibility of solving disputes and guiding the Karen politically. After independence the administrative system remained the same except for the fact that now the *Tajji* became a representative of the Govt. of India. In 1961 the statutory panchayat system was introduced and gradually hold of the Pastor and church in administration decreased. Today, all the Karen villages come under the Rampur Panchayat, which was established in 1995. Karen representation in the area being highest, Pradhan and Up-Pradhan are both Karen. As mentioned earlier, the Karen are largely a peace

loving community who try to avoid any kind of altercation and lead a life based on the preaching's of the Bible. Thus, instances of violence or crime have been very rare. Minor disputes are solved on a personal level through discussions. If these fail, the Pradhan is approached to solve the dispute and if this too fails, police intervention is sought. However, being staunch Christians, the Karen are generally satisfied with their lot and fights hardly arise. In fact, the police themselves informed that no case has been registered by or against any Karen in the last five years, official records of which were checked during data collection.

Even today, the Karen economy is subsistence based with agriculture and fishing as the main economic activities. Paddy cultivation is viewed to be the traditional economic activity and agricultural property as the most important economic asset, which is divided equally between the resident sons and son-in-laws. Only one crop is grown per year with sowing taking place at onset of the rains in July/August and harvesting in November/December. Earlier, only *Burma Dhan*, an indigenous variety of rice, was cultivated and that too for personal consumption. Over the years the Karen realized that the excess could be sold for a gain and so new high yield varieties of marketable rice are also being grown. If need arises, the Karen lend their surplus to a needy community member (rather than sell it) who return an equal amount whenever capable. Apart from this, coconut and beetle-nut are grown (though on a small scale) both for sale and personal consumption. Every household also has a kitchen garden where vegetables are grown exclusively for personal consumption. Labour is provided by family members of both the sexes and if need be wage labourers (both Karen and non-Karen) are employed on a fixed payment of Rs. 100/- or 25 kg. of paddy per day. Strangely, despite primarily being an agricultural community, neither do the Karen use chemical fertilizers, nor do they have a developed irrigation system of tube wells and pumping sets. Cow dung is used as manure, while for irrigation they depend mainly on rain and alternatively fetch water from the well or streams. A majority uses the traditional agricultural implements even today, while a few well off one's hire a tractor while sowing and also own mechanized threshers. Distribution of yield is very simple with each resident son/son-in-law receiving the produce harvested from his share of the agricultural land. If any member's share is found to be insufficient, the father gives him a part of his share. Similarly, his heir's provide him each with a part of their harvest when he becomes too old to cultivate is share which is now divided equally among them.

Fishing is a secondary source of food supply and every household is actively involved in it. Fishing parties are organised from time to time on familial basis, wherein men go to the bay or sea in their *dungi* (indigenously constructed boat) for catching various seafoods. Earlier, the Karen used to work as pearl divers for contractors, but the strict ban by the government on collection of pearls from the sea has led to a stoppage on this activity. Due to the ban, the contractors too are not ready to pay the Karen the actual price of the pearls. Thus, pearl diving is no longer a lucrative activity as before. In recent years, a few Karen have taken up fishing as their main occupation and supply large quantities of sea food to local middlemen who in turn supply the same to exporters at the mainland. To a great extend this has been because of the government support and encouragement to fishing and various beneficiary schemes launched in this direction.

Animal husbandry and hunting are the other sources of food supply. A small number of Karen have adopted piggery as a secondary occupation. Other animals are cow, buffalo, goat, hen and duck. Hunting expeditions, like fishing, are organised by family and close relatives who go in the nearby forest to hunt wild boar, wild goat, deer and birds of various kinds. Although, the Forest department has banned hunting deer, the Karen never leave an opportunity to hunt deer on the sly.

Today, even though the Karen maintain much of their subsistence economy, rapid changes are easily observable. Fishing, animal husbandry and hunting are now being adopted as additional sources of income by several Karen. Besides these traditional economic activities, many Karen have started opting for newer jobs in the form of government and private services. In fact, these were found to be the preferred and most desirable occupation among the younger generation and only in absence of such opportunities did they take to traditional ones.

IV.

The Karen try their best to live in harmony with their environment and ecological surroundings. This close relation is clearly reflected in their material culture, much of which are products of natural resources easily available in the vicinity. Every Karen village is well connected to the main metalled road through a network of streets and by-lanes, most of which are unmetalled. The traditional Karen *she* (dwelling place), situated in the middle of sprawling fields, is constructed of wood, bamboo, cane and palm leaves. Family members with help from close relatives construct the house, and if needed Karen labourers are called on a payment. The traditional *she* is a double storied pile dwelling with a thatched roof, suitably made to sustain the heavy rainfall received during rainy season. The ground floor is used to house animals and as a storehouse or granary, while the upper story is used as the living quarters. To reach the residence, wooden stairs, necessarily odd in number, are constructed at one side of the *she*. According to Karen belief, this is essential to ward off any evil cast on the house and its members. Despite the fact that such traditional pile dwellings are most convenient and best suited for the area, several well off Karen have started to build cement houses with tin roofs. A few others prefer the *she* even now, but have started using tin roofs in place of thatch to avoid the trouble of repairing it every six months.

With increasing income and growing financial prowess, the Karen household items too are increasing. Earlier the main household items were wooden beds, a low wooden dinning table, a few wooden/bamboo/cane shelves and cane sofa sets or low stools (crafted by the Karen themselves), a few utensils, baskets, mats and the indigenous wooden rice grinder and prawn/spice pounder. Today, apart from these, many other household items have been added to the Karen material items. In fact, modern gadgets such as the T.V, VCD, dish antenna and phones are commonplace in their houses today.

The commonly used agricultural implements are *hal* and *kaantahal* (single and multiple spoke ploughs respectively), *hansua* (sickle), *poto* (spade) and *kawlley* (cane winnowing plate), all of which are crafted by the Karen themselves. Recent additions are the *sey* (mechanized threshing machine) and the tractor. Several Karen own a *sey* today, but the tractor is hired when needed. The *kwa* is a sturdy axe used to fell trees

and a host of other tasks. For fishing, nets, traps, hooks and harpoons are used. The *pwa* (nets) and *buh* (traps) are woven by the Karen and also sold to those who prefer to buy one instead of weaving it themselves. *Mayeen* (barbed harpoons), *waa* (barbless pointed harpoons), *pwa* (nets) and *takhweh* (hooks) of various sizes are used for fishing in deep water, while the *buh* (trap) is used for shallow water fishing. Furthermore, the *dungi* has been made more efficient by the addition of a motor engine in most cases. For hunting the *dao*, *daalna* and *balaao* (hunting knives in large, middle and small size respectively), the *daala* (spear), *noligua* (wooden catapult) and *nawley* (wooden pellet bow) are used. Besides this the air gun is a new addition to the hunting weapons.

The Karen are adept at bamboo, cane and wood craft. *Chey* (baskets) of various shapes and sizes are ubiquitous in every Karen house. Mats of exceptional patterns and beautifully crafted cane furniture are the other areas where the Karen expertise was noticeable. Amongst woodwork, special mention must be made of the indigenous *khlee* (canoe), *dungi* (boat), and *sekhwo norito* (pounding vessel). All the items mentioned are examples of the Karen craftsmanship and can be considered masterpieces in their own right. The Karen have a few folk tales relating to their origin that are known only to a few elderly people, a few folk songs which are sung on special occasions and a traditional bamboo dance, the *taatka*. Besides this they also are inheritors of a traditional game – *chein*. *Chein* matches are organised on special occasions even today as a source of enjoyment. The *chein* is a medium to large cane ball with holes all around and is played quite similarly to football.

The traditional women's attire is the *ochiyebo* (blouse) and *nee* (wraparound skirt) while men wear the *ochithaaso* (shirt) and *theku* (lungi). While working outdoors, both men and women wear the *khokhu*, a cane and palm leaves hat. The Karen have a traditional ceremonial dress which is worn while performing the *taatka* and on other important occasions. This dress consists of a *seymot* (black blouse with red embroidery) and *keyjohne* (red skirt with white embroidery) for women, and a red *ochi* (top) and blue *theku* for men. Contact with other communities has brought a drastic change in the dressing pattern of the Karen with over 80% members of the younger generation having switched to salwarsuits and shirts and trousers. However, on formal and festive occasions, they prefer to wear their traditional attire to show their respect for, and solidarity to their culture. Similarly, the marriage attire too has been replaced with the western wedding gown for the bride and suit for the groom. The Karen no longer weave clothes, apart from the ceremonial attire, a task that they used to perform themselves earlier. They did not wear any jewellery apart from the *nunngwem* (wedding ring) in earlier times since they believed in living an austere life. Today also, at the most, one finds young girls wearing ear studs/rings and a simple chain only.

Since the Karen are a small close knit community who have always been living by in villages of Karen concentration, inter-village transport was never needed. Before independence some of them frequented Burma by ships that used to ply between the two areas. At present, busses, jeeps, two and three wheelers and inter-island ferries are easily available for inter-island transport, while for going to the mainland ships are available twice every week from Port Blair and once a fortnight from Mayabunder.

Thus, today the Karen are well connected to the entire world by various means of transport and communication.

V.

Every Karen learns to read and write the Karen dialect from their family members in childhood and uses it for all intra-community communication. Of late the Karen have also started educating their children in the English and Hindi languages so that they can interact easily with the non-Karen. Sunday schools are organised by the church to impart religious training among the children through study of the Bible. Formal education was the responsibility of the church before independence and later was taken over by the government. Of the six Karen villages in Mayabunder, three, namely, Webi, Lucknow and Karmatang-10 have aanganwadis, Webi, Lucknow, Karmatang-9 and Karmatang-10 have a Primary school each, while Webi and Lucknow have Senior secondary schools. Apart from this there is a private school situated at Webi and another 2.5 kms. from Lucknow. For higher studies there is a Government Degree Collage situated at Karmatang-9. Surprisingly, despite the proximity of so many schools the Karen show very little inclination towards education. This also seems contradictory given that the Karen have a history that supports education. Daughters of Rev. Luyi were actively involved in educating the Karen ever since their arrival in 1925. In fact, Mercy Luyi was the Headmistress of the Junior Basic School at Webi from 1925 to 1946.

In recent years, all Karen children aged between 8 to 14 have been registered in school due to a government launched scheme of free and compulsory education. Free education, books, uniform and lunch are provided to all children up to the primary level. Free mid day meal is also provided up to middle school, but no incentive thereafter. This is probably one of the reasons why the Karen children dropout after the primary or secondary school. Even at these levels, the attendance is low and irregular. Study reveals that literacy level among them is high at 93.2% and with little effort total literacy can be obtained. However, a closer analysis shows that most of them are either educated to the primary level or have knowledge only of their own dialect which does not help in acquiring a job or in other official work. It has been calculated that 52.2% of the Karen come under this group. 19.5% had passed their middle school, 14.8% had cleared their 10th standard, 4.4% had passed the Senior secondary while only a meager 2.3% were graduates or above. The Karen themselves accept that non-interest and lack of encouragement on part of the parents and financial constraints are the root cause of this educational backwardness. However, they also feel that the low standard of education imparted in government schools, indifferent attitude of the teachers, absence of motivating factors such as well-placed Karen, and the lack of any vocational training centre for the youth are serious pull back factors. Most of the Karen feel that since this kind of education does not help them attain a job, it is wasteful.

The Karen are basically healthy people who suffer mainly from ailments caused due to seasonal changes. The most common ailments relate to diarrhoea, jaundice, malaria, Andaman fever, stomachache, headache, cold and cough. Apart from this, several people complain of body pain and sunstroke as a result of working long hours in the field and sea. The Karen seem to lack the concept of sanitation, since there is no

proper drainage system and no toilets/baths were to be found in the community. Only a few recently constructed cement houses had toilets in it, while a few others had dug out temporary drains, which let wastewater into the kitchen garden or field. Garbage is either burned or disposed in a nearby pit. The Karen, however have a very strong sense of personal hygiene and cleanliness since they bathe and change clothes regularly and keep their houses in a spic and span condition.

There are no medicine men or professional healers among the Karen, but all old persons have a good knowledge of the traditional herbal medicines and its uses. Earlier, every house possessed a *tana-my-chey* (basket containing drier herbs and roots) but today the same cannot be said. Things are changing fast and although the traditional medicines have no side effects and are very effective in curing various disease and ailments, including fractured bones, its use is sadly on the decline. Specially, the younger generation prefers the use of modern allopathic medicines, to the traditional ones, since these provide faster relief and are easily available. A unique feature of this community is the existence of the *lete*, i.e., male midwives. Such men were greatly respected for their skill and knowledge. At present, however, there are hardly any practicing *lete* since the existing ones are getting to old to assist in delivery. Moreover, women today prefer going to the hospital for delivery to avoid last minute complications.

Overall also it was noted that the Karen have adopted a positive attitude towards modern health care facilities provided by the administration. The 50+ age group prefer to try out traditional medicines for minor problems before visiting the medical centres, but the younger lot goes straight to these centres for treatment. Medicines and other medical facilities are provided free of cost at all medical centres. The government has also from time to time been organizing special health camps, e.g., AIDS awareness, family welfare, pulse polio, eye correction etc. Most of the Karen have also been receptive of the family planning measures and support the two-child norm. These are positive indicators that will no doubt lead to the betterment of the entire community.

VI.

The Karen as noted earlier, are striving to acquire the status of Schedule Tribe (ST) in India. It was a decade ago in 1994 that the Karen Youth Organization was established by a group of educated Karen who felt that if they are declared a ST, they could benefit from the special privileges, concessions and reservations granted to underdeveloped groups of the country. Those associated with the organization feel that they have not been able to develop much since the last several years and are educationally, economically and politically backward compared to the rest of the country. This view however, does not stand much ground. When rationalized with, they too agree that most of the Karen are a simple and satisfied lot who prefer a laid back and lazy lifestyle. Those who are well educated, ambitious and hardworking manage to get jobs. Moreover, the well-placed Karen never bother to guide, encourage and make their community members aware of the benefits of better education or the various development programmes run by the government. Under

such circumstances, a kind of elite group seems to have developed among the egalitarian Karen.

Things however seem to be changing fast. Developed means of transport and communication combined with greater interaction with members of various other communities has been helpful in more than one ways. The Karen are no longer a shy community of the 'hidden city' (referring to Webi their first settlement in the Andaman). They are developing a broader and more receptive perspective with a greater level of awareness. Inter community marriages have changed their lifestyle to a great extent. Thus, non-Karen influence can be seen in various walks of Karen life, be it food, clothing or language. The Karen have now accepted that for survival and development they must interact and cooperate with outsiders too. In fact, non-Karen are eagerly invited to the various Karen lifecycle rituals and festivals, which were considered to be a strictly community affair a few decades ago. The traditional family structure is undergoing rapid change in accordance to personal convenience and job opportunities. This however is not affecting inter-personal or community relations. In fact the Karen believe that if one member of the family is well placed the others will also follow.

One area in which no change was seen is that of religious beliefs. Till date the Karen remain staunch Christians as before. The reason being that their religion, apart from acting as a community binding factor, keeps their ambition and expectations under control and prevents them from depression and dejection. The Karen feel that this is essential for peaceful coexistence and therefore conversion of a non-Karen is mandatory before marrying a Karen.

Material culture is the most easily influenced aspect of a culture and also the most obvious one. Changes in this aspect of Karen life relates both to convenience and luxury since many of the material items adopted are essential for a convenient life, while others can be graded as luxuries that are causing status consciousness among the community members. Cemented houses are gradually replacing the beautiful pile dwellings, while cheaply available plastic and aluminum containers and receptacles are replacing the well-crafted wood items and baskets. The traditional Karen attire too is being given up, by many, in favour of the common Indian attire. If this trend continues, it may not be long before a great deal of the external indicators of Karen culture fades out. However, the fact also remains that there are several Karen households where the traditional culture persists, be it in material or non-material aspects.

Introduction of the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) and establishment of a separate panchayat covering all the six Karen villages in 1995 has not only given a boost to Karen leadership but also brought with itself a host of development and welfare schemes being run by the government of India. These schemes cover various aspects such as education, training, health and nutrition, family welfare, housing and economy. Furthermore, it is expected that reservation for women in the PRI will soon

encourage Karen women to come forward and work for the welfare of their community.

In the economic sphere too drastic changes are taking place. With government support, loans are easily available to improve upon the traditional occupations of agriculture and fishing. Various other programmes for improvement of economic conditions and living standard are also being implemented. A few important ones are the Watershed programme to raise the ground water level, training Karen women for self-employment, providing employment opportunities to jobless youth, easy availability of housing loans, free housing facilities to those below poverty level and monthly pension to senior citizens, widows and the physically handicapped. In general the Karen are happy with the various development and welfare schemes that are being run in the area and lately can be seen responding enthusiastically to these. However, they still lament about the shortage of vocational training centres, alternative employment opportunities and some basic facilities such as potable drinking water and electricity.

Another area where great efforts are being made by the government is that of education. There is no doubt that the government is trying its best to increase the education level of the Karen through adult and mass literacy programmes. Though skeptical to a great extent till now, the Karen have started realizing the advantages of better education and support these programmes. However they feel that much needs to be done to improve the quality of teaching and providing technical/vocational training to the youth in absence of which, education would be meaningless. In the field of health care, government efforts seem to be paying off well since modern health facilities have been accepted by a major section of the community. The sad part of this however is that today, when world over it is being accepted that 'green medicines' have great curative qualities and are much more effective in the long run, the traditional knowledge of herbal medicines among the Karen is gradually dying away. Under such conditions it is essential that this rich indigenous knowledge be perpetuated to the next generation or in a few years from now, we may lose it to posterity.

The blind run for development and the rapid changes occurring in the Karen culture sometimes give an impression that in a few years from now the Karen may lose their distinct identity. This however, is just a partial view since acceptance of newer elements by the Karen does not necessarily imply that they are disregarding or neglecting their own culture. In fact, the Karen culture today provides a remarkable blend of tradition and modernity, which is proving most advantageous for them since they can now enjoy the best of both the worlds.

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