

Misrepresenting the past

Given the fragile ethnic relations among groups with conflicting experiences, history must be written carefully

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On 16 October 2019, the Government of Manipur declared 17 October as a “restricted holiday” for Kukis in the state to commemorate the valour and sacrifice of their forefathers, who fought a resistance war against a colonial empire to defend their ancestral land and freedom. The state government also generously donated a plot of land in Imphal where in a memorial park would be constructed to remember and honour the heroes of this subaltern uprising a century ago.

With the end of the three years centennial commemoration of the “Anglo-Kuki War” from 1917 to 1919 on 17 October 2019 at C Aisan village in Saikul Subdivision of Kangpokpi district, many rumblings have surfaced from the neighbouring tribes on how this resistance war should be looked at and remembered. From a diatribe to regard it merely as a “rebellion”, from the lens of the colonial rulers, and to even questions about the very existence of such an uprising, despite being a very well-documented incident in the history of the colonial North-east frontier of India.

In recent weeks, smaller hill communities in Manipur claimed that their forefathers were the victims of this war and demanded that, “to bridge the divide in Manipur, the effects of a long cycle of violence should be accepted” today. They particularly pointed out, for instance, how 250 Kabuis in the North Western hills, now in Tamenglong district, were killed by the Kuki rebel leaders. Indeed, colonial sources provide evidence of the occurrence of such violent incidents, but not with the number of deaths.

The attempts to present incidences from such a gory past have

deliberately ignored the circumstances leading to such incidents. They are one-sided views without asking why it had happened.

During the colonial rule in India, the state looked upon the tribes in the North-eastern frontier largely as “headhunters”, “savage”, “uncivilised” and “uncouth”. Those views were the so-called civilisational slant that the colonial administrators carry as a baggage. However, recent research works on the past reveal the circumstances behind each incident. Indeed many colonial accounts show that the killings were not completely unsavoury and that they were committed not due to unthinking hate towards others of different cultural traits, but there was a compelling reason behind almost all such actions.

Selective historical representation

When the Kukis decided to wage a war against the British colonial empire for their attempt to forcibly recruit labour corps for France during World War I; they toured the neighbouring hills and asked the tribes to join them in their struggle to liberate themselves from the shackles of foreign rule.

One such was Tintong of Laijang, a rebel leader who went to the Naga Hills and requested the Angamis to join them in the war. His absence was taken as an opportunity by the rival Kabui villagers. Robert Reid, the Governor of British Assam from 1937-41, in his notes on *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam From 1933-1941*, mentions about this incident during the Kuki uprising, “A Kabui village, to pay off an ancient grudge, raided a small Kuki hamlet and massacred its inhabitants. The overlord of the hamlet, one of the rebel leaders, collected his forces and destroyed 20



Kabui villages, taking 76 heads”.

This incident is interpreted as “inter-ethnic conflict” when identity consciousness was yet to take place among the tribal people. On the contrary colonial records as well as oral sources point out that conflicts were rather inter-village, and raids were frequently conducted by rival villages. In such circumstances many Kabui villages were friendly to the Kukis and they not only lived together in close proximity but also defended together during the time of raids. Such villages exist till today — Kaimai Kabui and Kaimai Kuki in Tamenglong district on the Imphal-Silchar National Highway of Manipur.

In the records of the political department of the Assam State Archive, a letter by Cosgrave, Political Agent of Manipur to Webster on 12 October 1918, reported that Akhui and Awang Khil Kabui villagers attacked a Kuki village called Natjang. All villagers were killed except one man. In revenge, the Kukis of Ukha and Henglep burnt down four villages — Lukhambi (Kabui), Langkhong (Kabui, Kuki and Kom), Maibum (Kuki) and Faileh (Kuki). It indicates the true nature of war, “You’re either with us or against us” and does not involve ethnicity.

Further research on the uprising shows how neighbouring tribes were used by the British against the Kukis in suppressing them, thereby leading to growing tensions. Historian Lal Dena

pointed out, “On return from the war (as labour corps during World War I), the Tangkhul Nagas were again enlisted in the coolie sections of the Kuki punitive measures, which were unleashed for the sole purpose of suppressing the Kuki uprising.” Due to such assistance to the colonial government, tensions within the Baptist churches grew, which underpins the succinct comment by Frederick S Downs, a church historian of India, that “(at) the beginning of the Christian movement converts from both groups worked closely with each other, but following the Kuki Rebellion during which many Nagas assisted the government in its operations against the Kukis, tension within the Baptist church increased.”

As against allegations such as “colonial implantation” or “ethnic enmity”, just after the Kuki uprising, John Henry Hutton in his ethnographic account of the Angami Nagas in 1921 writes, “The Kacha Naga villages had begun to call in Kukis to defend them against raiders from Khonoma, which maintained a fluctuating suzerainty over the Kacha Naga villages”.

Such a contribution of the Kukis in maintaining peace in the past is hardly remembered today. Instead, the descendants of such people were served “quit notice” in early September 1993. While fleeing before the deadline during the height of the Kuki-Naga conflict, more than a hun-

dred of them were mercilessly killed en route to Sadar Hills on 13 September near Tamei.

The bane of selectivity

EH Carr said that the “historian is necessarily selective”, to which David Wishart added, “historical representation is selective and subjective because facts are selected from the evidence with questions already in mind”. Calling for intellectual honesty among historians Christopher Blake asked “Can history be objective?” Ruling out the presence of “standards of appraisal” for historical writings he said, “if history cannot be objective as long as it is necessary to select facts, or possible to state them ambiguously or by different locutions, then it never will be”.

The selectivity and subjectivity that “permeate the writing of historical narratives” is a challenge when the subject is tensely contested. To ignore glaringly present historical facts in a widely read colonial literature till today just to push one point of subjective argument may defeat the very purpose itself. Given the fragile ethnic relations among groups with conflicting pasts, history must be written carefully to not fan enmity through selective and deliberate omission, such as the case discussed here.

Taking accounts that suit one’s intention while overlooking others, which could have led to different observations, is a common practice even among scholars and remains a problem in North-east India. Such ethnic biases are often reproduced in academic works. Desperately trying to find fault with others and selectively quoting what most suits one’s intentions and thus engaging in tiresome ethnic scholasticism, is very common in the North-east today, which is a problem as well as a challenge to many.

Recent work on the “Anglo-Kuki War” from 1917-1919 attempts to avoid “selective omission” and even asks what is perceived to be uncomfortable questions on gender, ethnicity and ethnic relations.

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