

## CHAPTER-5

# The Kuki Tribes of Meghalaya: A Study of their Socio-Political Problems

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*The post-Cold War period witnessed a spurt in ethnicity and ethnic nationalism. This often leads to ethnic mobilisation and movements, and even to the extent of extremism. The Northeastern states of India were no exception to this wave. The region witnessed increasing ethnicization and the concomitant problems between the ethnic groups. The extreme forms of such ethnicization were ethnic conflicts such as the infamous Kuki-Naga conflict of the 1990s, the Hmar-Dimasa conflict, Bodo-Santhal conflict etc. of the new millennium. Ethnic minorities in Meghalaya too, at different times, faced problems in their relationships. This paper primarily deals with the problems faced by ethnic Kukis in Meghalaya by the turn of the twentieth century.*

### Introduction

The Kukis are ethnic group that spread throughout the Northeastern region of India, Northwest Burma and Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. In Northeast India they are present in all the states except Arunachal Pradesh. This dispersal across international borders is mainly attributed to the British colonial policy. Adam Scott Reid said that 'Kuki' is a Bengali word meaning 'hill people' or 'highlander' (Reid 1893). According to Lt. Colonel Shakespeare the term 'Kuki' has a definite meaning and include Aimol, Chothe, Chiru, Koireng, Kom, Purum, Anal, Lamkang,

Moyon, Monsang, Gangte, Vaiphei, Simte, Paite, Thadou, Hmar, Zou etc. (Shakespeare, 1912). G.A. Grierson stated that the tribes connoted by Kuki are Anals, Aimols, Chirus, Gangte, Hmars, Koms, Lushais, Paites, Purums, Raltes, Suktes, Thadou etc, each able to understand another's dialect (Grierson, 1967). C.A. Soppitt on preface to the account of Kuki tribes in his book *A Sort Account of the Kuki-Lushai Tribes on the North-East Frontier* also asserted that all the tribes grouped under 'Kuki' 'have so much in common, both in language, manners, customs, and system of internal government, as to render it absolutely necessary to take them together' (Soppitt, 1976). He conjured that the official terms 'old' and 'new' Kuki should not be used and the term 'Kuki' itself is too well established to be given up. Recognising the common ethnicity and identity of the Kukis, the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 of the Government of India placed all the Kukis under 'Any Kuki Tribes' in the states of Assam, Tripura, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. While in the state of Manipur they are recognised in their respective tribes.

Due to the various movements for separate administrative units based on ethnicity, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram were carved out of Assam. The creation of these new administrative units deprived the Kukis much of their political interests and reduced them to a minority status. Nevertheless, they have been living cordially with the majority communities. Such is the case of the Kuki tribes in Meghalaya. When Meghalaya was carved out from Assam by the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act 1969, the various Kukis living in the then United Khasi-Jaintia Hills district became indigenous tribes of Meghalaya. Even though a minority, the Kukis in Meghalaya are not negligible in terms of their population. In this paper a brief history of Meghalaya, its social composition and the present status and problems faced by the Kukis in Meghalaya vis-à-vis the various governmental policies affecting the minority Kukis are analysed.

In this paper the primordial approach to ethnicity will be adopted. In the primordialist view, the participant perceives ethnic ties collectively, as an externally given, even coercive, social bond (Geertz, 1967). As Ronald Grigor Sunny observes

'Primordial identity construction cannot be reduced to a mistake, a self-deception, or false consciousness' (Suny, 2001).

### **Brief History of Meghalaya:**

*Meghalaya*, which literally means '*Abode of Clouds*' in Sanskrit, consist of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills. The British rulers annexed the Khasi Hills in 1833, Jaintia Hills in 1835 and Garo Hills in 1872-73. The state is the product of movement for the formation of the Eastern Hill State consisting of all the hill areas and the contiguous areas inhabited by people of the same racial stock in Assam. Due to the assimilative and discriminatory policies pursued by the government of Assam in relation to the minority groups, a section of Khasi and Garo elites started a movement for separate administrative unit. They emphasised their differences from the plains people and blamed Assamese for trying to impose their culture and language and their attempts to dominate the legislature and services (Kumar, 1996).

In 1969, the Indira Gandhi government intended to fulfill the long standing demands of the hill tribes by providing them an autonomous state within the state of Assam covering all the autonomous districts of Assam, i.e., the Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Mikir Hills, North Cachar Hills and Mizo Hills district. However, the tribes in North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills were not enthusiastic about the movement and preferred to remain within Assam. The Mizos wanted to have a separate state and launched their own movement. Thus, the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act of 1969 provided Meghalaya, comprising the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills district and Garo Hills district, a semi-autonomous state which came into effect on April 2, 1970. Subsequently it became a full-fledged state of *India* on January 21, 1972 with the passing of North Eastern Areas (Re-Organisation) Act, 1971.

### **Social Composition:**

Meghalaya is predominantly a tribal state. There are seventeen recognised tribes in the state. The Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos are the dominant and generally recognised indigenous tribes of the state. Apart from the three major tribes there are several tribal

populations settling in the state since its inception. They are the Bodos-Kacharis, Hajongs, Rabhas, Hmars, Syntengs, Mikirs, Any Mizo (Lushai) Tribes, Any Naga Tribes and the Any Kuki Tribes including (i) Biate, Biete, (ii) Changsan, (iii) Chongloi, (iv) Doungel, (v) Gamalhou, (vi) Gangte, (vii) Guite, (viii) Hanneng, (ix) Haokip, Hauptit, (x) Haolai, (xi) Hengna, (xii) Hongsungh, (xiii) Hrangkhwal, Rangkhoh, (xiv) Jongbe, (xv) Khawchung, (xvi) Khawathilang, Khothalong, (xviii) Kholhou, (xix) Kipgen, (xvii) Khelma, (xx) Kuki, (xxi) Lengthang, (xxii) Lhangum, (xxiii) Lhoujen, (xxiv) Lhouvun, (xxv) Lupheng, (xxvi) Mangjel, (xxvii) Misao, (xxviii) Riang, (xxix) Sairhem, (xxx) Selnam, (xxxi) Singson, (xxxii) Sitlhou, (xxxiii) Sukte, (xxxiv) Thado, (xxxv) Thangngeu, (xxxvi) Uibuh, (xxxvii) Vaiphei. The non-tribal communities comprises of Bengalis, Marwaris, Nepalis and small sections of communities from different parts of India.

According to the Census of 2001, the population of Meghalaya is 23,18,822. The tribes, which number 1,992,862 persons, consist of 85.9 percent of the state's population. The remaining 14.1 percent of the population is non-tribal. The Khasis constitute 49.54 percent, followed by the Garos with 30.86 percent. The Kukis in the state constitute 0.5 percent of the total tribal population with 10,085 persons. The composition of the major Scheduled Tribes of Meghalaya as per 2001 census is given below.

Name of the Tribe	Total Population	Proportion to Total ST Population
All Scheduled Tribes	1,992,862	100%
Khasi	1,123,490	56.4
Garos	689,639	34.6
Hajong	31,381	1.6
Rabha	28,153	1.4
Koch	21,381	1.1
Synteng	18,342	0.9
Mikir	11,399	0.6
Any Kuki tribes	10,085	0.5
Any Mizo (Lushai) Tribes	3,526	0.2
Any Naga Tribes	3,138	0.2
Bodo Kachari	2,932	0.1
Hmar	1,146	0.1

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India, 2001.

### NGOs and Governmental Policies:

Since the creation of Meghalaya in 1972, the state had been raven by ethnic conflicts between the indigenous tribals and the non-tribals. After 1993 the relation between the tribal and non-tribal communities in the state improved. However, there emerges periodic estrangement between the tribal communities of the state. The causes of such periodic estrangement range from minor incidents to policies adopted by majority indigenous communities of the state to protect their economic interests, identity and land.

In 2000, the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) launched *Ksangiew* movement which is not a public agitation but an instrument to rejuvenate and awake the Khasi people to strive ahead with hope and expectation of a brighter future. One of the demands of this movement placed before the government was to amend the Meghalaya Land Transfer Act, 1971 in order to prevent tribals from other states to acquire lands in Meghalaya (Malngiang 2002). The government under pressure from student organisations and other NGOs amended clause (A) Section II of the Meghalaya Land Transfer Act, 1971 on April 5, 2001 that enable only the indigenous tribes of the state to buy and sell land.

As per the reports of Meghalaya Legislative Assembly Bulletin, some minor tribal communities like the Rabha, Koches, Boro, Hajongs, Karbis and Lalungs are recognised as normal residents of Meghalaya and are allowed to sell and purchase land among them.<sup>1</sup> The indigenous Kukis living in the state seems to be deprived of such rights along with certain communities like the Nagas and Mizos. The amendment of the Meghalaya Land Transfer Act, 1971 in 1991 provide some relaxation where land is required for a place of worship by a community, burial or cremation grounds and in cases where land is required to promote the interest of the tribals in the field of education.

Concerned with the loopholes in Meghalaya Land Transfer Act 1971 and its amendment in 2001, the ruling Congress-led Meghalaya United Alliance set up a committee in August 2009 under the chairmanship of Bindo Lanong to assess the pros and

cons of the Land Transfer Act and suggest ways to regulate any further alienation of indigenous land. Eight NGOs from the state, including the KSU and the Federation of Khasi Jaintia Garo People (FKJGP) are part of the committee.

### **Problems Faced by the Kuki Tribes:**

The indigenous Kuki tribes in Meghalaya consist of mostly Biates and Vaipheis. They settle mainly in the Jaintia Hills and Shillong. Most of them embraced Christianity, which was brought to them by the Welsh and American Baptist Missions who came along with the British in Northeast India. Despite the fact that they embraced Christianity, they continue to dearly cherish their culture and traditions. Customs on marriage, inheritance, settlement of disputes, etc. are widely practised till today. The indigenous Kukis of Meghalaya, since the creation of the state, do not interact or maintain close relation with their ethnic kins of other parts of the Northeastern region. They continued to maintain their distinct identity and culture though their existence is hardly recognised.

Due to their minority status in the state the Biates have been constantly hiding their identity. They have close linguistic similarity with the Koms and Chirus. The Biates in Meghalaya are not able to exert their identity openly due to fear of being tormented, subdued and even their properties (both movable and immovable) being seized. And indeed such incidents have occurred a couple of times in the recent past.

The proposal of the government of Meghalaya to delete certain Scheduled Tribes, including the Any Kuki Tribes, from the existing list of Scheduled Tribes in the state of Meghalaya agitated the minds of the indigenous minorities living in the state. The unobtrusiveness of the Kuki tribes in the state along with some other tribes may be the causes of such move of the government of Meghalaya. In this connection the Any Kuki tribes of Meghalaya under the aegis of Kuki Welfare Committee, Shillong submitted a memorandum to the then Chief Minister Donkpor Roy in 2008 and appealed for protection and retention of 'Any Kuki Tribes' in the list of the Scheduled Tribes of Meghalaya.<sup>2</sup> They argued that the Kukis have been living even

before the formation of the then United Khasi and Jaintia Hills in 1951 and at present there are more than twenty Kuki (Biate and Vaiphei) villages in Jaintia Hills alone. They also fervently put forward that many of them have been living in Shillong and other parts of the state as indigenous and permanent residents ever since the creation of Meghalaya, although their existence has not been widely recognised.

On the contrary, the Kuki and Naga NGOs of Manipur, have been doing all rounds to protect the minority Khasi-Pnars (Khasi-Jaintia) living in Manipur from government policies. In the first week of December 2009, tension erupted at Kmaranga Khasi village near Jiribam in Manipur on the proposed eviction of land for setting up Manipur police subsidiary training centre. The KSU (Barak Valley Circle) requested Chief Minister D.D. Lapang for his personal intervention against the eviction notice and claimed that Kamranga Khasi village falls under the jurisdiction of Tousem subdivision in Tamenglong district where the indigenous Khasi people have been settled permanently since 1940s. Whereas the Manipur government maintained that the land occupied by Khasi villagers are 'khash land' which no one own but remain as government land. The *Kuki Inpi Jiri-Tamenglong Zone*, Kuki Students' Organisation and Zeliangrong Students' Union, Tousem supported the claims of the KSU (Barak Valley Circle) and opposed such move of the Manipur government even though Khasi is not a recognised Scheduled Tribes of Manipur.<sup>3</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Meghalaya is a relatively peaceful state compared to some other North-eastern states like Manipur, Nagaland and Assam. Since the new millennium various NGOs of the state intensified their movement to secure employment opportunities and check influx of people from Bangladesh and other parts of India, and increasing land alienation. Of late, the spurt of land purchase by tribals from other states in Shillong has been their main concern. The amendment of the Meghalaya Land Transfer Act, 1971 in April 2001 prevented the tribals from other states to acquire lands in Meghalaya.

The amendment of this act by the Meghalaya government may be justified on the ground of land insecurity. There are vast amount of Scheduled Tribes residing in Shillong and other parts of the state that are not indigenous but their tribe listed among the seventeen recognised tribes of Meghalaya. The government and NGOs need to clearly demarcate and identify the indigenous people of the state and non-indigenous people from other parts of the region even though they may belong to the same tribe. Such action will prevent the abuse of the amended Land Transfer Act. Interference from other state governments and NGOs is uncalled for and would only trigger uneasiness among the majority indigenous communities. It is therefore necessary on the part of the majority communities and the state government to be considerate on the concerns of the minority indigenous communities so that the cordial relations continue to persist with each identity in the state preserved.

Ronald Grigor Sunny maintains that 'in the actual world of group identifications and distinctions, a belief in sharp and relatively fixed distinctions between groups and predictable harmonies and homogeneities within groups gives a person an easy and reliable map of a complex and changing world. This kind of mental map provides a degree of predictability in an insecure world; it allows expectations of comfort with some and danger from others; and it permits different forms of treatment of those one considers like oneself from those who are considered different' (Sunny, 2001). Such proposition needs to be maintained between the various tribes in Meghalaya. And living in a democratic system they require a clearly defined, bounded population and the right to be represented (Rustow, 1970).

The Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM), the political wing of KSU, also expressed concerns over the increasing presence of Scheduled Tribes from other states in Shillong. With the Naga peace talks in the right track and possible solution in 2010, the signing of Suspension of Operations with the various Kuki insurgent groups under the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and the United Peoples' Front (UPF), and the centre's offer of olive branch to all the armed groups in Northeast India, there is a ray of hope for peace in the



troubled states like Manipur and Nagaland. When normalcy is restored in these states, students will have a second thought in leaving the well equipped colleges in their states and when thousands of them remain within their states, it will prevent drain of wealth. This will be one positive step toward economic development in such states and would also address the concerns of KHNAM.

### Notes

1. Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, Re-Assembled Budget Session 2001, Bulletin No. 1, June 29, 2001.
2. Memorandum Submitted to Meghalaya Chief Minister by Kuki Welfare Committee, Shillong in June 2008.
3. For newspaper reports on this issue see *The Telegraph (Northeast)*, November 25, 2009.

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