

Book Review

Ngamkhohao Haokip and Michael Lunminthang (eds.). *Kuki Society: Past, Present, Future*. Kuki Research Forum's Publication, New Delhi: Maxford Books, 2011, pp. 395, Rs. 595 (hb) ISBN 978-81-8116-091-1

Reviewed by Letminlun Khongsai

The book under review is the first of its kind undertaken by the Kuki Research Forum since its inception in 2009. It is the outcome of a seminar organised by Kuki Research Forum in collaboration with Kuki Students' Organisation. The book contains a collection of twenty one articles written by Kuki-Chin scholars that deals with a variety of issues pertaining to history, culture, identity, language, religion, literature, politics, agriculture, status of women in the contemporary Kuki society. The volume throws light on the insights of the hitherto unnoticed issues and challenges particularly the socio-political-linguistic issues and the resulting complexities of identity crisis and dynamics of the society.

Kamkhenthang gives a scholastic analysis of the origin and fragmentation of Kuki-Chin identity in a historical perspective. According to him, the term Kuki and Chin were referential terms used to denote those groups of tribes who are linguistically categorised as Kuki-Chin by Grierson as belonging to Tibeto-Burman. The two terms were coined by the colonial authorities to refer to a broad spectrum of tribes who share cultural affinity with regard to customs and traditions. The former is being widely used in India whereas the latter has been widely used in

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Burma. He states that the people in question never identify themselves as Kuki or Chin. Of late, these terms failed to unite and foster a common platform for the Kuki-Chin groups of people.

The dawn of democratic Indian State and the rise of ethnic and political consciousness among the people of Manipur has led to the formation of Kuki National Assembly (KNA) in 1946 dominated by the Thadou speaking groups which has not gone down well with the non-Thadou speakers. The internal dissension within these groups of people has created a fissiparous tendency of divisions leading to estrangement from the Kuki-Chin nomenclature. He asserted that the domination and indifferent attitude of KNA has led to the birth of several splinter groups such as Khulmi National Union, Hmar National Union (HNU), etc. However, he provides an analytical tool in understanding terms like Kuki or Chin. The term Kuki or Chin or Mizo has been accepted by all the tribes when used in connection with linguistic or ethnic classification. However, the same cannot be true in relation to political ideology or identity. In this connection, Lianboi Vaiphei articulates the Kuki-Chin groups' identity crisis in terms of modern nation states theory. She posits that the construction of the concept of nation-states has divided this group of people into different countries and left them alienated with the policies of the successive government in their own homeland.

The history of Kuki-Chin has been highlighted by Letkhojam Haokip in terms of ancient literary sources and inscriptions of India and China. He contends that the term Chin has been used as an ethnic name or nomenclature by foreigners as recorded in the ancient Chinese Chronicles as early as 5th century B.C. He also interestingly brought out references of the word Chin in classical Chinese literature, inscriptions and texts like Chinese Chronicles, Sabha Parva volume of Mahabharata, Nagarjunakonda, Pali texts etc. and compares them with other relevant sources. In a similar vein, Joseph Suantak traces the origin of Kuki-Chin

groups of people to China or Southeast Asia as belonging to one of the biological branch of people known as '*Di Qiang, Ch'iang, Kiang' or Khyang'* etc. These indigenous tribes were classified as Tibeto- Burman by the classical historians and scholars. He substantiates his argument by providing the origin of some of the Kuki words *Pathian* (God), *Nu* (Mother) having affinity with the Chinese kinship terms like *T'ien or Pahsien, Nu Wa*. The comparative analysis of the findings of Indian Genome Variation Project and genetic investigation (DNA) with the local sources gives renewed interest about the origin of these groups of people. Sonthang Haokip gives a documentary evidence of the erstwhile territory occupied by the Kuki-Chin groups of people. His argument is based on the sources provided by the colonial ethnographers, officials and scholars who wrote on the territory and geographical dominance of the Kuki people during those days. He asserted that these territories are fast dwindling owing to internal identity crisis and failing to forge a common nomenclature.

Ethnicity, as one of the important component of the formation of nationality is being the main focus of Lal Dena's article. He states that despite having all the essential features of ethnicity, the process of nationality formation among the Kuki-Chin is slower due to internal divisive forces amongst themselves. Seilen Haokip article is focused on proposing a common nomenclature for the Kuki-Chin groups of people. He attempts an intellectual panacea to the name of language in question among the Thadou speaking population. His proposition of *Khochungte* in lieu of Thadou is a significant attempt to solve the age-old ills of the society. Jangkhongam Doungel too stresses on the need for objective approach in redressing the problem of Kuki identity. For Ngamjahao Kipgen, the true image of identity formation can be achieved in terms of folktales which are a reflection of the past and provides linkage with the present state of affairs. He contends that the Kuki-Chin groups of people

share the same folktales and mythical legends such as '*Galngam*' whose footprints are found in rocks, slabs and sculptures even today. The presence of such artifacts demonstrates the indigeneity of the Kukis in different states of the India's Northeast and elsewhere.

The status of Kuki women in a historical perspective has been examined by Alfina Haokip and Hoipi Haokip. While the former look at the empowerment of Kuki women as a distant dream as customary practices and beliefs did not give respectable position in the society. She states that *Loungman* or corpse price is an indication of the lower status of women because the said price cannot be claimed in case she is child-barrren. Whereas such practice were done to reciprocate the enduring love between the maternal family and the in-laws even after her death. With the onset of modernising forces, Kuki women began to break age-old shackles and become assertive in the society. Exception of women's predominant importance in customary practices can be seen only in traditional festivals like '*Chang Ai*' ceremony. In the view of Hoipi Haokip, among the modernising forces, it is the Christian Church that looks for women's welfare in some measure by constituting separate department known as 'women society'. However, such societies are not given autonomy and liberty to take independent decisions. What is emerging from these two articles is that Kuki society is yet to understand and accommodate women in the decision making process.

Seikhohao Kipgen article contains some of the illuminating works of Thadou-Kuki literature written in Roman Script by local writers. According to him, the history of Thadou-Kuki literature started with the advent of Christianity and spread of education in 19th century. He highlights some of adverbial phrases and idioms, and argues that Thadou-Kuki has rich maxims and proverbs which has been treasured and orally transmitted through generations. Such kind of informal learning was imparted in the traditional *Som* and *Lom* institutions. He specifically mentioned the literary works and contribution of Ngulhao Thomsong,

S.L. Palal and T. Lunkim as a point in the development of Thadou-Kuki literature. He also highlights some of the inconsistencies of the use of some alphabets like FQRWYZ or JZ and suggests some points for its improvement. In the works of Philip Thanlienmang, the evolution of language among the Kuki-Chin groups of people has been given scholarly articulation with respect to their historical migration and sojourn in various locations. He asserted that all these languages and dialects were originated from a single mother language known as Proto-language in linguistic lexicon and the constant combinations and permutations of such language was a result of constant intra-clan or inter-tribal warfare, thereby resulting into the evolution of new dialects among them.

The significance of religious rites and ceremonies associated with the practice of shifting cultivation has been succinctly addressed in the works of Holngam Haokip. The practice of shifting among the Thadou-Kuki is not only a means of livelihood but it also reflects the rich cultural identity of the Jhumias. The author is cautious of the declining practice of religious rites and ceremonies as a result of the modernising forces like Christianity and argued that cultural change should not be at the cost of identity. Hoineilhing Sitlhou highlights the patterns of conflict resolution mechanism as practiced among the Thadou speaking population. The practice of resolving such disputes or conflicts by the customary court is still relevant among them despite the presence of modern legal system. In fact, customary court or dispute settlement mechanisms still play an important role in restoring peace and order in the society.

Priyadarshani Gangte examines the evolution of chieftainship as embedded in the customary practices of the Kuki people. In as much as it is embedded with the customary practices, it is also closely intertwined with other institutions particularly the kinship. She states that chieftainship is the sources of Kuki customs which is based on kinship structure for the purpose of village administration. She also draws some features of chieftainship parallel with the Social Contract Theory of

Rousseau. However, with the dawn of democratic Indian state the rights and prerogatives like land ownership as enjoyed by the chief on one side, and modern state on the other, has cause complexity in understanding the powers and functions of the chiefs.

In relation to land ownership and traditional political structure, Geroge T. Haokip surveyed the pre-colonial and post-colonial land ownership system among the Kukis of Manipur. He highlights the process of transformation of the land ownership in the light of land regulation Acts and laws introduced by the modern state. He argues that the changes brought about by the introduction of these laws had deprived tribal people of their land rights and has caused conflicts not only with the modern state but also between the chiefs and the villagers.

The issue of violence and conflicts over land, natural resources, and human rights has also been addresses in this volume. Leban Serto advocates the need to constitute community based peace action groups, churches and voluntary organisations to usher in peace and harmony in the India's Northeast. Hoinu Haokip emphasised the need for evolving a strong and proactive civil society groups in Manipur to fight against injustice, violation of human rights, and other forms of crime committed against the disadvantaged and marginalised population. The plantation of landmines in the civilian areas of Chandel district of Manipur by the banned outfit United National Liberation Front (UNLF) is a heinous crime against humanity and represents a stark violation of Ottawa Convention and Geneva Call's Deed of commitment. Thongkhohal Haokip makes an in-depth analysis of the India's Look East policy by highlighting the issues and challenges of this policy in the light of the area being inhabited by different trans-border tribes. He opines that the much hype policy would prove futile unless the issues of fragile inter-ethnic relations are being addressed conscientiously.

The significance of coalition politics as an alternative form of governance in a democratic country like India has been examined by

Paolenthang Khongsai. He argues that in the state of Manipur, the Kuki-Chin groups also had a regional political parties like Khulmi National Union (KNU) and Kuki National Assembly (KNA) since 1946. However, since 1995 the existence of these parties has been only in paper and could not win the support of the people. The paramount importance of regional parties in coalition politics is being given significant attention in the core of his analysis.

In a nutshell, the book gives interesting dimensions of various aspects of the Kuki-Chin groups of people and highlights the hitherto unknown facts and issues emerging in society. However, the title of the book that promises the 'future' state of affairs is hardly seen in the whole volume. It is doubtful whether such kind of attempt is possible in the disciplines of social sciences and, if at all, such mere projection would be reification. A blend of theoretical and empirical case studies relating to the various aspects of pan Kuki-Chin groups of people makes this volume interesting and would be a useful reference book on the subject.