

Politics of Tribe Identity with reference to the Kukis

Ngamkhohao Haokip

This article discusses the problem of tribe identity among the Kukis of Manipur. Kuki in Northeast India is a national group composed of more than 20 sub-groups. These sub-groups speak different dialects of the same language. In 1956, the Government of India recognised each dialect group as separate tribe. One of them is Thadou. Some among the Thadous do not like to be under Thadou tribe although they speak the same dialect and practice the same culture. This article attempts to assess how far politics of tribe identity affects unity and social harmony amongst the Kukis.

Keywords: Tribe, identity, community, clan, dialect, language, politics

Introduction

Among the tribal communities of Northeast India, the term politics denotes systematic organisation of social resources for the development of a given society. Daniele Caramani (2010: 2) stated that “Politics is the human activity of making public and authoritative decisions. First, they are public because they concern the whole of society”. Politics, it follows, also refers the activity of asserting rights and privileges in favour of a particular group within a larger communal identity. In such processes, there are chances of conflict of interest within that group’s politics. The Kukis are trying to organise themselves either as a national group or as a political entity through various processes based on ethnic connection. While doing so, there are challenges in the assertion of the “ethnic” itself due to factors like: what constitute a tribe? Whether language is a constituent character of a tribe? The process of building a political as well as national entity of the Kukis has taken longer process compared to the close linkage they have ethnically. It is thus felt that the internal underlining problem, if any, among the Kukis deserves an academic investigation.

Commonality of a Group

There is one group of people in Northeast India who shared common theory of origin. Their cultural traits also run along the social thread of the entire people. Although they speak different dialects of the same language, they can easily understand and communicate with one another by using their respective dialects without much difficulty. Where

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certain sections find difficult to grasp the dialect of one or more section, another many more sections among the larger group can easily understand it.¹ This group of people are so much interconnected in language that even when understanding is difficult in speaking or hearing, there are hundreds of word commonly use by all of them.

This national group have identical physical structure and appearances; same food habit, and more or less the same culture and customs. Folklores and folktales bind them together without much dissuasion. Traditional festivals, the practice of religion and religious rites of this group of people encompass them all together as a unit whole. Their memories of social and political lives of the ancient past are the same. Most importantly, they identify one another as someone belonging to the same kind. They also express the same social feelings. In spite of calling themselves by different tribal names, almost all of their scholars and writers grouped them under the same family tree, genealogically.² This group of people have autocratic system of village governance. The eldest among brothers or in a clan is the hierarchical head called *Haosa* (Chief). He is the chief of not only his village but also of the entire family and clan. His word is final and binding on his subjects and members of the clan. The subjects or villagers are absolutely subjected to the whims and wills of the chief in every aspect of their life.

From earlier period, this people have been fighting among themselves on inter-family or clan feud. Such behaviour may be attributed to their hegemonic tendency in their social structure. Despite such historical destructive engagements, they have never failed to group themselves and settle in certain particular geographical regions.

Miniaturisation of identity

The British Administrators had known these groups of people as Kuki in their places of settlement in all of the states of Northeast India, except Arunachal Pradesh. They are largely found in Manipur. In Cachar, they have been once divided into two groups, viz. Old Kuki and the New Kuki. Until 1956 the Government of India recognised them as “Any Kuki Tribes”. However, from 1956 onward, they had been bifurcated into several parts by indoctrinating them to their dialect and grouping pattern more than their common identity of pre-1956 status and have recognised them by different tribal names. Since then the political identity “Kuki” began to be disowned by some of the erstwhile Kuki tribes and instead, more than 20 tribal identities have been created, and thus, the case of Kuki community had become what Amartya Sen (2009: xvi) calls “miniaturization” of identity.¹

Kukis living in the state of Nagaland are recognised as “Any Kuki tribes”³ within the fold of Naga nationality, at least politically. They have participated in the political movement of the state as well as in the Nagas’ political movements. It is very surprising that some clans of the Kukis, viz. Haokip and Singson, in the Northeastern part of Nagaland have been politically baptised to accept different identity other than Kuki.⁴

In Assam, the Kukis are known to have been one of the earliest settlers in the Karbi-Anglong region. They are dominant in North Cachar Hills and its adjoining areas. They have once dominated Silchar and its surrounding mountainous regions. In Assam, they retain Kuki as the name of their common identity. However, a stray incident of identity crisis erupted in Assam during late 1990s on the question of Thadou and Kuki. In Tripura, the Tipperahs (Tripura) are Kukis. Many of the Kuki tribes have been converted into

Hindu (Horatia 1982: 179 -187). However, many more continue to use the term Kuki either as their title or as their national identity. Moreover, in Mizoram, they have become Mizo by retaining their clan or sub-clan like Chongthu and Thadou. In all the states of Northeastern India, excluding Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, Kuki is recognised as a tribe with many of its sub-clans and sub-tribes. There are cases of community interest as well as sectional interest overlapping over one another among the Kukis as a community so much so that their identities are under question.

The Problem

Most Kukis living in Nagaland, Assam, Tripura and Mizoram comprise a single dialect group and thus poses no much problem regarding the name of tribe in other Northeastern States. But in Manipur, there are more than 20 different dialect groups. Now, the problem arises whether the people who have once been known as Kuki and who are now identified with various tribal names identify themselves by the name “Kuki” by forging “compulsive” identity in one hand or accept pluralism and federalism of tribe identity for the sake of their community’s identity – Kuki. This paper will attempt to discuss the practicability of retaining the nomenclature “Kuki”, under the notion of singularity of language, custom and culture and by amalgamating other diverging identities, for all of the people who were once called by that name. It will also discuss on how the appellation “Kuki” can be retained by adopting the concept of pluralism and federalism of identity in age of democracy and development.

Clan as Interface for Common Identity

Several clans composed a tribe among the Kuki community. Clan consciousness is paramount among them so much so that their collective identity recedes behind clan’s prominence. The politics of clan is relatively the interest of a particular clan that commands economic as well as political influence upon others. There are political as well as social competitions among the clans within a tribe. Economic interest, interest in electoral politics under democracy, and other social interests precedes the common welfare of the tribe or the whole clans. Any activity within a tribe revolves around the interest of a particular clan, which is well above other clans in terms of influences. The Kukis also go by tradition of “transmissible formation”,⁵ at least theoretically, but in practice, such consideration does not take the form of consensus on any issue. It is because ethnic or clan relationship operates in the field of people’s participation in the democratic process – employment, education, and election. This fact entails, according to Daniele Caramani (2010: 2) that “political decisions are taken or made by individuals or groups within the tribe who acquired that power against other through either peaceful/democratic or violent means”.

There are also problems of tracing the genealogy of some Kuki clans and thus they could not be related or club with other tribes or clans. Since the clannish identity of some group could not be established, assimilating them to any dialect group or tribe became a problem. The only choice available with them is to be exclusively identified with a name appropriate to them. Instead of taking a better appellation or recognising as a distinct tribe other than Kuki, which is a generic name, these clans simply want amalgamation of

all Kuki tribes under a single name of “Any Kuki Tribes”. They also want the Thadou dialect to be called Kuki language thereby eventually creating misnomer of dialect that have become the centre of the present identity crisis among the Kukis.

Historical Journey of Identity

Tribe diversity is the legacy of her long history. Gangmumei Kamei (2007) has also opined that diversity has also become institutionalised in modern states and societies. Many scholars opined that the Kukis came from Burma. Nevertheless, the fact is that the word “Kuki” is not found in any historical records or literatures of the Burmese except when it was brought into the country by the colonial administrators from Manipur. In spite of their commonality, they have been speaking different dialects even in Burma. There, they were identified as Chin with many dialect groups within it. They migrated to different parts of Northeast India, especially in Manipur in different period of history. Hmars, Kom and kindred tribes have already been well settled in 14th century. The Thadous, the Paites and other cognate tribes have landed in Manipur before 19th century (Gangmumei, 2007). They did not use the generic name “Kuki” before the colonial period. As such, the Christian missionaries working in Mizoram had translated the Bible in Lushei - Lushei *Pao*, instead of the same being called Kuki *Pao*/language,⁶ which means that separate identity on the basis of dialect have already been maintained even at the beginning of the British colonialism.

Christian Denomination and Identity

Kunal Ghosh (2011) has rightly pointed out that “There is a consensus among sociologists and anthropologists that religion and language are the two main identity-makers of a community or tribe or a group of people. Therefore, if religion can be tied up with language and linguistics, it would acquire a direct hold on nationality”. After the lapse of the British paramouncy in Manipur, the Kuki community have been initially divided into language convention instead of regional or area association beginning from 1958 (KBC Thuso, 2011: 22). In this year, Kuki Baptist Convention (KBC) was formed by all the clans speaking the same dialect.⁷ However, it was split into different associations due to internal bickering on leadership issue and subsequently Thadou Baptist Association (TBA) and Kuki Christian Council (KCC) came into being. TBA was initially supported by very closely linked clans. The clans under TBA have become the protagonists of Thadou dialect, whereas KCC took the extreme step of conceptualising the dialect of the Thadous as “Kuki language”. In its constitution of 1958, KBC had also stated that the dialect/language to be used should be “Kuki *Pao*” - Kuki language.⁸ However, due to its antagonistic attitude against the previous two groups that later on they took the middle path in the imbroglio and called the dialect in question as “Thadou Kuki”, as per the courts’ judgement.

Even after the court had ruled that the dialect in question should be called “Thadou Kuki”, the KCC unabatedly continues to call the dialect “Kuki *Pao*/language” with an ardent zeal to formulate a separate identity for its members. The protagonists of “Kuki *Pao*” based their position on a resolution adopted on 27 December 1937 at Kangpokpi to the effect that the language be called “Kuki *Pao*”.⁹ However, the meeting in which the

resolution had been passed was attended only by members who speak what is called “Thadou” dialect. Moreover, the meeting was neither representative of all the clans or tribes within the group nor was it concurrence to the people on whom the language or the resolution was supposed to be applied. It was merely presumed that it would be binding and acceptable to other differently speaking cognate tribes. The resolution also naturally entailed that there are other dialects within the Kuki fold. Further, the version into which the Holy Bible was translated by its principal leader has been called “in Kuki” i.e. Kuki language. This makes the council and its leaders stood to the ground in favour of the dialect being called “Kuki language”. On the other hand, the Paites, Hmars, Kom, Gangte, Vaiphei, etc. not only have their own Christian denominations and associations with literatures societies of their own dialects but some of them have also been introduced in university as Major Indian Language (MIL).¹

Political Exigency against Common Identity

It seems that separate tribe identities among the one-time Kuki community will work well even in the future too. Nathan and Moynihan (1975: 3) are of the view that “tribal identity is deeply rooted in human needs or in a new social developments, or in the characteristics of modern states”. The present identities, which each of the tribe hold, are based on the political exigencies. The Kuki communities have passed through autocracy, colonialism and democracy successively. The Manipur Constitutional Act of 1947 had great impact on the Kukis. Article 52 of that constitution says that “There shall be guaranteed to all people, justice, social, economic and political, equality of status and of opportunity, equality before the law, freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship, vocation, association, and union, subject to law and public morality” (Manisana, 2000: 91). The Indian democracy also offers expedencies for upholding the singular tribe identity through its constitutional provisions of equal rights - social, political as well as economic development. Experiences have indicated that the present democratic dispensations have better foothold in the form of the existing tribal identities more than the same for larger communal interest except on exceptional cases. This is so much true that there are a number of clans petitioning the Indian government for separate identity under the constitution. This phenomenon is rightly described by Harold R. Isaacs (1982: 33) thus:

... most decisive are the political conditions in which the group identity is held, the measure of power or powerlessness that is attached to it. How dominant or how dominated is the group to which this individual belongs. ... This is the cardinal question and it is essentially the question of the governing politics, the push and pull of power among the groups who share the scene. Raised high or held low, these are the idols of all our tribes.

In the context of Manipur, major tribes are counting on their capacity and strength in mobilising their own representatives to the state legislative assembly on the basis of their separate tribe identity. Ministerial berth is frequently shared based on tribe affiliation. This is aptly stated by P.T. Hitson Jusho (2004: 102) thus “...the deeply rooted political consciousness among the different ethnic groups has without any ambiguity

encouraged the political leadership of the state to follow on ethnic line in carrying out their programmes and ideologies”.

On 17 December 2002, the Lok Sabha passed a bill by a voice vote to modify the list for 120 communities in 20 states including Manipur thereby seeking to remove anomalies by inclusion of certain tribe or tribal communities, and to remove area restrictions and bifurcates or club certain entries (The Sangai Express, 19 December 2002). As consequent to it, “Any Kuki Tribes” is re-included in the schedule tribe list of the constitution. It was intended to club all the Kuki tribes of Manipur. Contrary to this the Kuki Literature Society who are the protagonists of *Kuki Pao*, had stated earlier that other tribes like Hmars, Vaipheis, Gangtes, Koms, Paites, etc have disown Kuki nomenclature and they are no longer within the fold of the Kuki generic nomenclature. Therefore, Kuki comprises the clans speaking *Kuki Pao* (Thadou *Pao*) only.¹⁰ Such drifting situation is explained by Nathan and Moynihan (1975: 36) thus: “...when members of weaker groups stop submitting to impose identity that group identities become a problem both to the victimizers and victims and, as all our current affairs show, sooner or later erupt into social and political conflict and crisis. This is the point at which basic group identity and political meet”. According to T. Lunkim (2005: 1), Kuki Language is used only by Thadous, Khongsais and Haokips. While trying hard for inclusion of “Any Kuki tribes”, “Kuki *Pao*” group unequivocally stated that it “neither intends to disturb other Kuki clans/tribes applying for recognition nor those already in the list”.¹¹ These have amply supplemented the fact that “Any Kuki Tribes” is neither to club Kuki Tribes which are already recognised nor will it put a stop to seeking more tribe recognitions in contrary to its statement “Other Kuki clans/tribes are not so fortunate since they have been deprived of government facilities after 1956”¹² as the reason for seeking the re-inclusion of “Any Kuki Tribes” in the constitution.

Societal Anomaly

Exclusivity of tribe and conflict occurred despite their ethnic commonality among the Kukis. There are many social organisations/associations in the name of Kuki. Kuki Students’ Organisation (KSO), Kuki Inpi, Manipur (KIM), Kuki Movement for Human Rights (KUMHUR), Kuki Women Union (KWU), Kuki Khanglai Lompi (KKL), and many more. Surprisingly, these organisations are mainly dominated or man by one particular dialect group and while at the same time pretending to speak on behalf of the Kuki national including Hmar, Paite, Gangte, Kom, Chiru, etc.

However, a number of major social trends – convergent, overlapping, and divergent – are forging the re-working of existing societal arrangements. There are enlargement of political boundaries and arenas; the increase in the number of actors and claimants in a political arena; the challenges to the present-day distribution of place and privileges. One such case among the Kukis is their national movements. Nationalist movements have been carried by more than 10 different revolutionary organisations belonging to one-dialect speakers and more than 5 (five) run by other tribes speaking different dialects. They have now consolidated under two main organisations – Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United Peoples’ Front (UPF). They have signed a sort of peace pact or cease-fire-styled Suspension of Operation (SoO).

Secondly, both parties signed in the name of “Kuki”.

The boundary of their tribalism has become dynamic once again depending on the circumstances and specific goal. It means that the differently speaking Kuki tribes have come back together for re-formation of their nationality under Indian federalism. However, assimilation or absorption under singularity of identity will still be a herculean task. Assimilation will not easily happen among them as each group assert its identity, each of them is concern not only with material interests but also with the symbolic emblems like identity.

Experiences in the contemporary history of the Kukis have shown that the illusion of singularity of identity on “one dialect” basis have proved disastrous. Kuki National Assembly founded in 1947 as a social organisation of the Kuki tribes, which later on became a political party, had been widely controlled by the Thadous. Since then every attempt has been made by a section of the Thadous to absorb the minority tribes to consolidate their political supremacy. It brought conspicuously discontent among the smaller Kuki tribes. “Such sense of identity can firmly exclude many people/tribes even as it warmly embraces others” (Amartya, 2009: 2). Therefore, there are opposition to the concept of assimilation and it can be best replaced by the policy of integration (Kamei 2007: viii). Ethnicity has also taken a more friendly relationship under democratic rule. If choice less singularity of language identity is insisted, it will not only diminish the Kuki nationality but also impoverish their power and reach of social and political reasoning and exacts remarkably heavy price as a community.

The Conundrum and Solution

The crux of the problem is on language. To solve the problem by adopting a new nomenclature to replace Thadou tribe will not be the permanent solution, and it is simply not feasible. “Khochung” is one such nomenclature suggested. The word itself is from the Chinese *Chung Kuo* – China, the “central country”(Isaacs 1982: 49). *Khochung* is related to the place where the present Thadou Kuki speakers have dwelled back to the mythological cave where they claimed to have migrated from, which at the same time is recounted to China. It does not appear to be factual that only the Thadou Kuki speakers would have come from *Chung Kuo* but all the Kuki tribes. When asked, Paokai Haokip, former Member of Indian Parliament, as to what the appropriate name for the language we speak is, he told that man possesses language and not place nor any other name, therefore, no better name could be found for the language should it not be Thadou after umpteen meetings and committees.¹³ Secondly, as already discussed above, the divisive tendency heighten among the Kuki when Holy Bible was translated “in Kuki”. Until and unless that mistake is corrected, asserting Kuki *Pao*/language will take the vicious circle and the new nomenclature will be as good as Thadou.

L.B. Sona, the then President of Zomi Council - comprising seven Kuki tribes, unequivocally stated in his speech that they were once Kuki and that they shall be Kuki again the moment the use and saying “Kuki *Pao*”/language in place of all the Kuki dialects is stopped. He wanted that instead of imposing Thadou *Pao* and Thadou *pon* (cloth), as Kuki language and Kuki traditional cloth they should be called Thadou dialect and Thadou cloth otherwise, he said, they have no room in Kuki nomenclature. The

same view was expressed by the head of the Paite tribe, Lamjangpa. In the same meeting, the General Secretary of Thadou Tribe Council, General headquarters, have also made a statement to the effect that Thadou is not a tribe base on genealogical structure but it is a name of tribe for those who speak and use the dialect both for communication and literature; it is a tribe for those people who have common custom, common dance form; and common traditional cloth, etc.¹⁴

The generic Kuki has become both historical as well as contemporary national name. It has gain a concrete ground in political and social arenas. It has become the most viable name for the community concern for asserting common political and social goals. Alfred Cobban (1970: 22) writes: "... that names are more permanent than things. Institutions change, but the terms used to describe them remain the same". Tribe identities among the Kukis have been too established as much as "Kuki" did. The Jews remain Jew despite bearing different identities after their places of settlement. Similarly, the Kukis bear different tribe identities but shall remain Kukis should they recognise their various identities: identities through cloths, culture and custom, and most importantly, their dialects. "It is not so much that a person has to deny one identity to give priority to another, but rather that a person with plural identities has to decide, in case of a conflict, on the relative importance of the different identities for the particular decision in question" (Sen 2009: 29).

Conclusion

Nomenclature problem came up following the negative but inclusive attitude of the pro-"Kuki language" protagonists by trying to impose a dialect called Thadou *Pao*/dialect upon all the Kuki tribes. The proponents of Thadou Tribe and Thadou dialect have positively made themselves very clear regarding Thadou Tribe as tribe which is meant to include all those users of the dialect both in communication and literature. Through the discussion above it is clear that nomenclature does not matter that much, as some scholars and writers believe to be, once dialect problem is solved by the speakers.

The present socio-political structure in the name of Kuki needs a thorough revision to accommodate features of pluralism and federalism. *Upa Inpi*, (the highest traditional social and political hierarchy) of Kuki Inpi, which according to T. Lunkim (2011), is traditionally formed by the Lunkims and the Chongthus clans. Without much explanation of who are the Lunkims and Chongthus, it can be said that should the two be the final authority in the socio-political working of the Kuki nationality, there is very little ray of hope for minority tribes as they or the Kuki community as a whole shall be under the mercy of the *Upas*. So far, very few organisations/associations/societies under the banner of Kuki are collectively formed in consonant with the tribes who are supposed to have participatory rights.

We can now safely conclude by quoting one of the Kuki scholars: "Therefore, exaggerated misconception and subjective presentation of the term 'Kuki' should be avoided as far as practicable from different angles and directions so as not to minimise Kuki concept with clannish feeling and parochial attitude.... public leaders and some church leaders should also be required to be careful in interpreting ..." (Doungel 2011: 284).

Notes

1. For instance, Kom dialect sounds harder to the ears of the Thadous but the same is easier to the Hmars. Surprisingly, Koms and Thadous have familiar traditional cloths.
2. For example, Chawngkunga, C., *The Genealogical Tree of Mizo*, Art & Culture Department, Mizoram, Aizawl, 1996.
3. The approach “Any Kuki Tribes” connotes the presence of divergent identity within the community and its fissiparous tendency in itself.
4. They are forced to use Puchuuri dialect. They speak and read the dialect even in the church.
5. The eldest amongst brothers will be the socio-political head and thus such tradition is under severe questioning by younger generation with power and authority inclination under the presented political system of the land.
6. T. Lunkim, *Kuki Rebellion Chule Hiche Galdou Hujap (1917-1919)*, Imphal, p. 5.
7. Before KBC was formed, there were many regional or area level associations among the same people with no crisis on language.
8. The Kuki Baptist Convention “Constitution”.
9. *Christian Meivah* (A quarterly Journal), Guwahati, p. 10.
10. Kuki Literature Society General Meeting, *Minutes*, Imphal, 14 April 1987.
11. Kuki Tribes Recognition Demand Committee, c/o PO. 52, Imphal -795001, *Open Letter*; 3 August 2002.
12. *Ibid.* (1956 – the year Any Kuki Tribes is deleted).
13. Interview with Paokai Haoki, Ex. Member of Parliament at Saitu on 5 April 2010.
14. Video Footage of Thadou Tribe Council (General Headquarters) General Meeting at Motbung, May 1, 2008.

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