The Kukis of Northeast India: Politics and Culture

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Foreword

The Kuki Society today is at the crossroad. From a glorious past, it has become moribund. The down sliding trend is marching at an alarming rate with no end in sight. The disintegration and the chaos in the once compact institutions are almost complete. From a mighty nation with heavy sway, it has now been tossed around by forces both internally and externally. What, then, has now befallen us? The search for truth, as to what ails Kuki society, began. A crop of dedicated youngsters met in Kamptee Cantonment, near Nagpur on April 8, 2010 to take stock of the situation. The first meet was labeled as “The Kuki Society - Road to Resurgence”. It was not a formal platform but a meeting of like-minded youngsters. There was a free-flow sharing of minds on the cause, effects and remedy of a tattered society. The meet resolved to organise more workshops so as to awaken Kuki people on its present plight and find plausible ways to rebuild the society and regain its pristine status.

Subsequently, four more workshops followed. In the second such workshop in Guwahati, Assam on October 19-20, 2011 a formal name for the organisers was floated as Forum for Revival of Kuki Society (FFROKS) and approved by the President of Kuki Inpi, Manipur (KIM) in attendance as one of the delegates. Various burning issues were discussed. The third workshop was held at Kuki Christian Church Campus, Imphal on January 10-11, 2011. The fourth workshop was held in Shillong on July 25-26, 2011. The fifth and final workshop took place in Motbung, Sadar Hills, on January 9-10, 2012. President, KIM declared that the works of FFROKS will be taken over by Kuki Research Forum which has its branches in Shillong, New Delhi and Manipur.

The workshops galvanised enthusiasm among the youngsters. However, due to its short-life, FFROKS was unable to sustain the hard-earned momentum. Nevertheless, during the brief one year of its existence, FFROKS was able to highlight many critical and burning issues to the people. Some of the “ever green” topics in this book are selected for publication by the dynamic Secretary, FFROKS.
I believe this book will inspire many other youngsters to take up the cause, both academically as well as an activist.

Kolkata
May 2012

Kammang Lhouvum,
IDES
Chairman, FFROKS
Preface

This book is primarily the selected papers of the five workshops organised by Forum for Revival of Kuki Society (FFROKS) in Nagpur, Maharashtra and many places of Northeast India including Guwahati, Imphal, Shillong and Mokumb from 2010 to 2012. In addition, I have requested some scholars to write on areas and themes that have remained uncovered by the series of workshops. The objectives of this edited volume are:

- to understand and highlight the traditional system of Kuki politics and administration;
- to trace the genesis and evolution of Kuki autonomy movements in Northeast India, and
- to assess the value of the rich cultural heritage of the Kukis and its changes.

I thank Dr C.J. Thomas, Deputy Director of Indian Council of Social Science Research – North Eastern Regional Centre (ICSSR-NERC), Shillong, for his constant support and financial assistance by ICSSR-NERC for the last workshop. The individual authors will be responsible for the views they have expressed in their respective writings. The editor does not take any responsibility for the views expressed by them. The book consists of case studies, field works and personal experiences as a scholar and leader in various aspects they are dealing with.

As a man of yesteryears Rev. Dr. T. Lunkim describes the traditional system of Kuki administration from his experiences and expounds that love is the foundation of Kuki Inpi. Basing on the framework of an anarchist approach proposed by James C. Scott, Dr. P. Hangsing tries to bring about an alternative approach or interpretation to the statelessness of the Kukis. He argues that the Kukis should not be fitted into the conventional modes of governance but should rather be allowed to get themselves evolved without controlling the outcome.
With a long involvement in the Kuki National Assembly (KNA), the apex body of the Kukis in Karbi Anglong district of Assam, Tongthang Touthang examines the state of Kuki people in the hills of Assam and describes in detail the proposed Kukigam Autonomous Region by KNA. Selkhogin Haokip traces the background, and analyse the genesis and evolution of Kuki autonomy movement in Northeast India as well as in Myanmar. In his article Seilen Haokip examines two pertinent issues associated with the Kuki people. The first relates to the most contentious issue among people speaking the same dialect and were recognised as Thadou by the Constitution of India Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Lists (Modification) Order, 1956 and the imbroglio thereafter. He proposes a "neutral terminology" Khochungte as a panacea to this linguistic flux. Terming the Kuki genocide carried out by NSCN-IM led Nagas of Manipur in the 1990s as the fall out of MNF movement and the MNF government’s "deafening silence" on the subject of a single administrative unit and convinced that contesting identities among the Kuki-Chin group of people in areas not covered by Mizoram and Chin Hills as a source of weakness, he proposes an adoption of identity in relation to specific geographical context; accept Mizo in Mizoram, Chin in Chin Hills and Kuki in the regions not included within the other two (Manipur, Assam and Nagaland in Northeast India, and Sagiang Division in Myanmar), which could be the way out of the quagmire.

Nehkholun Kipgen’s article argues for the formation of Kuki state from the present state of Manipur for the protection of Kukis’ land, literature, culture, language, social life, religion, and also to bring about development. Letminlun Khongsai made a sociological study of the birth of organisations in Manipur and finds that the formation of Kuki Students’ Organisation was made possible with the introduction of formal education in Manipur, which was introduced by the Christian missionaries. He contends that organisations in Manipur are based on ethnic loyalties and interests. Political mobilisation was also done on ethnic lines and the loyalty of the members of the organisation is limited to one’s ethnic organisational boundary.

Paocha Gangte traces the political history of the Kukis and divided them into two phases: the politics of unity and strength and the politics of disunity and fragmentation. Terming the period
after India's independence as lack of unity among the Kuki tribes and the resultant fragmentation of Kuki tribes and also assessing such causes of fragmentation, he implores for the identification of “future shock absorbers” and “social strategies” to find solution. He believes that such “future shock absorbers” and “social strategies” can emerge from “meetings and seminars, publication of papers/ magazines/ websites and inviting ideas and solutions from intellectuals, scholars, officials, writers - young and old, contributors at some intervals with pronounced objectives in sight.”

R. Sanga argues for the protection of Kuki-Chin traditional institutions against the onslaught of the majority community’s policies and projects and backed by the State government. He reiterates that true development would be a distance dream until the Kuki-Chin people achieve political autonomy. Father Peter Haokip shares his dream of a future Kuki society wherein Kuki people live in larger villages with villagers not shifting village constantly; preserve land and its rich flora and fauna, and cultural heritage and mass education of people.

Paokhohao Haokip reinterprets the two traditional institutions of the Kukis, Lom (village labour corps) and Som (dormitory), and calls for the need to ruminate, recapture and reinculcate the values of one's rich cultural heritage. He assesses the impact of Christianity and modern educational institutions on Lom and Som and ecclesiology of Lom and Som and their merits and demerits. He argues that though the institutions of Lom and Som do not exist in the actual sense as they were in the primal Kuki society yet their forms and spirits are incorporated in the modern Christian Church. He pleads for the contextualisation of Christianity and the need to be rooted to one's own culture instead of discarding or ignoring them.

Nemminthang Lhouvum investigates the traditional Thadou-Kuki religious beliefs and practices which include the belief in the existence of Supreme God called Chungmangpa or Chung Pathien and a host of benevolent and malevolent spirits. She narrates the various religious rites and rituals to appease the evil spirits in order to secure good health and wealth. Lalgin Chongloi assesses the impact of Christianity on Thadou-Kuki marriage through a case study of Motbung village in Sadar Hills, Manipur. He found that while the traditional marriage system of the Thadou was simple and did not incur huge expenditure, Christian
marriage has become very expensive. He describes some of the rites and rituals, rules and other practices associated with marriage and concludes that “the Thadou of today practiced a blend of Christian marriage pattern with traditional customs apparent in Christian Church marriage.”

Lamenting that no serious attempt is being made to understand the central themes of Christianity such as incarnation, Christology, ecclesiology, kingdom values, etc. rooted to the Kukis’ cultural heritage, Hemkhochon Chongloi presents the understanding of Christian faith in the framework of Kuki cultural heritage - khankho and its philosophical foundation Indoi symbolism.

I shall feel rewarded if this book comes to any help to students, scholars, researchers and any socially concerned person.

Shillong
July 2012

Dr. Thongkholal Haokip