



Diverse Political Aspiration of Kukis; the sarcastic trend for politics of Identity in Manipur

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Abstract: The consequences of identity politics nowadays become to weaken and disrupt the common movement which is necessary to be built up against the marginalisation and social deprivation in the State of Manipur. It became a basis of separatism therefore government try to pacify those minority ethnic groups by granting autonomy to some extent. Some of those get a separate entity as a state but in this little paradise with a of population of 27 lakhs or little more, would it be a long term solution to create states within this state is the dilemma. It is noted that development of all ethnic groups and minorities is possible if larger interests of the state are served. The demand for greater autonomy may come up more and more and also needs to accommodate it, although further division of existing state into a smaller and smaller one along the ethnic lines will not be a lasting solution. It also leads to micro level of exclusive politics verses inclusive politics in between hill-valley relationship. The Manipuri Meitei are claiming periphery to the Indian Union. In the same vein, the Manipuri Nagas and Manipuri Kukis claim themselves as periphery within periphery.

Key Words: Identity politics, Kuki, Marginalization

Introduction;

The politics of identity or identity politics, is a word that is widely used in the social sciences to describe the deployment of the category of identity as a tool to frame political claims, promote political ideologies, or stimulate and orientate social and political action, usually in a larger context of inequality or injustice and with the aim of asserting group distinctiveness and belonging and gaining power and recognition. Additionally, identity politics refers to tensions and struggles over the right to map and define the contours and fixed "essence" of specific groups. It has become increasingly common since the

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emergence of a wide diversity of social movements in different part of the Globe.

Identity politics are political arguments that focus upon the self-interest and perspectives of self-identified social interest groups and ways in which people's politics may be shaped by aspects of their identity through race, class, religion, sexual orientation or traditional dominance. Though, not all members of any given group are necessarily involved in identity politics. It is based on the politics on group marginalisation fractures the civil polity, and therefore work against creating real opportunities for ending marginalization.

necessary to be built up against the marginalisation and social deprivation. In this era of post modernism, identity politics had weakened the common



movement, may be creating the differences between the people or groups but did not touch the system. Thus post modernism goes with identity including with its multifaceted predicaments. In Manipur these led to witness the ethnic clashed in between the two major ethnic groups from the early part of 90s. This ethnic identity and narrow nationalism based on their consciousness had brought the situation of the state in conundrum with demanding their own homeland. The highway politics as a tool for achieving their demand on some vested interests had kept other communities in hostages.

Kukis is one of the main ethnic groups of Manipur. The word 'Kukis' refers to an indigenous ethnic groups inhabiting in a contiguous region of north-east India, north-west Burma (Myanmar) and Chittagong Hill Tract in Bangladesh. This term appears to be originated in Sylhet, in erstwhile East Bengal. Elly refers to 'the tribe called Kuki' by Bengalis. An attributed meaning of the term is 'hill people'.² In the Encyclopedia Britannica records, it is a name given to a group of tribes inhabiting both sides of mountains dividing Assam and Bengal from Burma, south of the Namtaleik River.³

Again this term was first used as a reference in 1777 AD when this tribesman attacked the British subjects in Chittagong where Warren Hastings was the Governor General of Bengal.⁴ ET Dalton mentions that the Kukis were first known from an article by surgeon Mc Crea in Asiatic Researcher vol.2, on 24th January 1799 who described the Kukis as a 'nation of hunters and warriors'.⁵

Lt.Col. Shakespeare in his book 'Lushai Kuki Clans' classified these group of people as old Kuki consisting of

Aimol, Anal, Chothe, Chiru, Kolhen, Kom, Lamgang, Purum, Vaiphei, and Khochung. The reason for calling it as appeared that they were old settlers and are recorded in Manipur chronicles as early as in the 16th century whereas new Kuki consists of Thadou, Khongsai, Hangsing, Chongloi, Singson, Doungel, Baite, Simte, Paite, Guite, Mizo, Lupheng, Lupho, Gangte, Vaiphei and Zou as they were immigrants of 18th century.⁶

Although this same group of people was known in different name as 'Chin' in Myanmar and Kuki or Mizo in India, Meitei called them as Khongsai. The scattered habitation resulting from their nomadic habit, T.C. Hodson cited a Kuki who told him ". . . we are like the birds of the air, we make our nest here this year, and who knows where we shall build next year".⁷ As a result, the Kukis are found today scattered all over the hill districts of Manipur. Such demographic distribution of tribal ethnic groups of Manipur has been since existence till date.

This group of people lived in this place since time immemorial. But one may argues that they were come to Manipur only in between 16th to 19th century from Chin Hills, Burma to Manipur. Although it is said that the kingdom of Manipur had a larger area in the olden days than the one at present, it covered the portions of Burma into Ningthi River in the east and in the south it was extended beyond Chin Hills up to the sea.⁸ The king of Manipur had been using the Kukis as warriors. It was the Kukis, whom the king of Manipur used that, subdued the Maos of the north. Even today, the people of Mao have the story of their defeat at the hands of the Meitei king who used the Kosameis (Kukis in Mao).⁹



The word 'Naga' though it is given by the outsiders, became a cementing force to the varied tribes despite their extreme heterogeneity and cut throat hegemony but in the case of Kukis it appears to be a division in unity. Linguistically, unlike the Nagas, they can communicate to one another with the least effort in their respective dialects.

For the first time, the Kuki elite organized themselves into the Kuki National Assembly (KNA) in 1946.¹⁰ It was the apex social organization that spearheaded the issues relating to the interest of the Kukis in the early part of independence in India. In its general assembly held at Thingkangphai, then Manipur south district, KNA passed a resolution to create a 'Kuki state' and send a representation to the Prime Minister, Nehru.¹¹ It demands the immediate creation of a Kuki state comprising all the Kuki inhabited areas of Manipur. As an offshoot of the Naga unrest in the Naga Hills and offspring of the Mizo rebellion in Mizo hills, towards the beginning of 1965, the Kukis of Manipur and their cousins, Lushai of Mizo hills held a conference at Churachandpur to discuss about their political future. One group wanted to demand a sovereign state for the Kukis and Lushai of Manipur and Assam known as Mizoram whereas another group wanted Mizoram but as a state within the Indian union. The later outnumbered the former and the members of the conference pulled themselves apart.¹² In January 1966, KNA meet near Imphal and passed a resolution to uphold the unity and territorial integrity of the tribe within Manipur. The Manipur administration had hardly time to consolidate the Kuki loyalties and form them into anti-Naga unrest as earlier done by the colonial authorities. But the

supporters of the independent Mizoram in Manipur, who were sulking after the setback they had suffered in Churachandpur the year before, took heart and joined the Mizo rebels. Thus with a well defined political motives, the Kukis began enhancing their struggle to achieve their asserted interest.

In August 1987 there had emerged Kuki National Organization (KNO) with its constituent Kuki National Army (KNA), while KNA is demanding an autonomous state for the Kukis in Sakaing division of Myanmar. Another section wanted a Kuki homeland in parts of Ukhrul, Senapati, Churachandpur and Imphal valley (including Imphal and Bishnupur) and Kuki inhabited areas of Assam and Nagaland. Again in 18th May 1988, an organization was also formed to perpetuate the political demand of KNA as Kuki National Front (KNF) to pursue creation of a Kuki homeland within the framework of Indian Constitution as initiated by KNA in 1960.¹³ From 1990 onwards their demand for a new polity has been rejuvenated. Thus the demand for the right to self-determination, which means secession from the Indian union or greater internal autonomy, is the main ideological basis of the present conflict. However in the early part of 90s NSCN (IM) had attempted to wipe out the Kukis in the name of ethnic cleansing in 1992, as a part of their struggle for the attainment of sovereign state of Nagaland based on Naga nationalism.

Overlapping territorial claims;

When there are competing demands for the same geographical areas, talking with one group and sidelining the other could engender more problems. The politics of identity of both the Nagas and Kukis is always associated with territory. This directly created the clash between these two warring tribes. The clash



erupted in May 1992, on the border town of Moreh on Kuki refusal to pay the so-called 'Nagaland Tax' demanded by the Nagas. In January 1993, in retaliation of killing Kukis, quit notices were served on the Nagas by Kuki National Army (KNA). Then Nagas also served quit notices on the Kukis chiefs. Thus violence erupted again and again.

Allegation had been made that ethnic clashes between the Nagas and Kukis had been deliberately incited by the authorities. In reality the clashes between these two ethnic groups are due to demand and counter-demand for the expansion of their greater territories inhabited by each groups though some scholars opines that it has its genesis in the colonial period. The Kuki militants are alleged to have received moral support from the government agencies, both of Manipur and Union Government. They were demanding financial assistance, arms and material to fight and finish the NSCN.¹⁴

S.R. Shimray extremely criticized the Naga-Kuki conflict that KNA of Myanmar's direct involvement in collusion with the KNF and Kuki Defence Force (KDF) in this Naga Kuki strike is a naked aggression to India and Manipur in particular. He openly further asked a question stating "Can we allow such mercenaries forces to remain in our land and secede the land of Manipur with them to Myanmar?" He also stated regarding the occupying of land by the Kukis conceiving the idea that their land (land of Naga) occupied by the Kukis, who are coming from Myanmar that "Each and every nation has got the legitimate right to determine its course of life within the prescribed limit of the land. As such, a stray seed fallen in the garden of others cannot be rooted and grow there since the garden had already

been made grown with its proper and legitimate seed long before".¹⁵

On the other hand, Kuki Student Organization (KSO) defended the charges levelled by the Nagas that there is no war between the Kukis and Nagas in Manipur. It is only disharmony germinated by the banned NSCN (IM) who forcibly collected what they egoistically termed as "Nagaland Tax" within the Manipur state from the bonafide citizens, the Kukis who are original citizens of Manipur, especially in the present Ukhrul and Chandel district for the last so many years.¹⁶ Further the organization stated that 'as history reveals the Kukis were owners and rulers of north eastern of the present India including upper Myanmar, prior to the British period. To defend these areas the Kukis did fight against the mighty British Empire for the three continuous years (1917-1919). To deny this fact is to deny Indian freedom struggle. The present day Kukis did not lose heart to safeguard to integrity of these areas. This is made clear when the Kukis sacrificed their lives and all they have instead of paying the NSCN (IM) taxes that lost many lives, villages and other valuable properties'.¹⁷

By refusing to pay the so-called 'Nagaland tax' collected by the NSCN (IM), the Kukis proved themselves as a loyal citizen of Manipur because there could be 'no two parallel governments simultaneously'. It is said that the Kukis are not projected as defenders of the state despite so many evidences. And, when Shelley Chara (an MP candidate for outer Manipur parliamentary constituency) has no problem on NSCN (IM) tax for Nagaland, he could not be counted as protagonist of the NSCN (IM). Results and findings of Shelley Chara 'close



examinations' on the matter is immediately required by the Kukis.¹⁸

Thus, both the Nagas and the Kukis blamed each other having interaction and reaction within these feuds. But both of them have hidden agenda of occupying land in order to make greater Nagaland and Kuki homeland. Here the Meities which constitutes majority of Manipur populace are at the center of the scale because both of them are fighting for alteration of boundary of Manipur which is very small in size. Nevertheless from the side of the Meities, a social worker gives his statement that 'if we Manipuri's (Manipuri's means those people who were inhabited in Manipur. So we may say that Manipuri Naga, Manipuri Kuki and Manipuri Meities) fight among ourselves on the issue of land, linguism, communalism, sectarianism and parochialism. Who will survive? If there is no Manipuri's there will be no Manipur and if Manipur no longer exist there will be no Manipuris. Lakhs of Meitei people have watered to the turmoil situation of Manipur with great tolerance and patience without having enmity among the brothers of different ethnics. It can also be possible because they never dream about forming Meitei land like other ethnic groups in Manipur particularly Naga and Kuki. Meitei seemed to be very happy to live with other fellow ethnic brethren in the valley of Manipur. They do not seem to have any tendencies to take side with either of the groups instead they have tried to build the bridge between them with neutral effect.¹⁹

Changing paradigm;

The politics of identity assumes an undeniable feature in the successful working of democracy. The 'identity bargaining politics' which emerge from

the neo-liberal economic policy with the emergence of globalization are at the centre scale of the state of affairs. The elite emerge from this jargon become difficult to implement the schemes, programmes etc. for the deprived section because they had their vested interests and get political patronage from the elected representative. In this the nexus between politician, bureaucrats and insurgents' outfits are one of undeniable features.

As long as the matter of such patronage is not addressed, there seems that the true spirit of democracy could not be achieved. It further needed to occupy the so called marginalize space, 'citizens space' i.e the space of the groups that have been marginalized by local political process. It would automatically strengthen the working of democratic politics which seems to have an in-built bias against pro-poor policies. Since, there is an zero sum character in each and every redistributive policies, it had to contend that democratic politics is the process of contestation, self-determination and struggle where it were the important yardstick of deepening of democracy.

Regarding the Kuki aspiration, Kuki State Demand Committee (KSDC) had strongly come out against the claims of NSCN-IM, the main stakeholders of the issue and its frontal organization. Even it called an indefinite blockade for a Kuki state prior to the Naga solution. Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM) had also asserted that any settlement reached with the NSCN-IM may affect the interest of other tribal communities, whom are 'equally or more deserving' of such an 'alternative arrangement' and added that accommodation of a particular section could result in denial of justice to the larger society.



It had questioned the historical basis for an 'alternative arrangement' for the Nagas of Manipur. Numerically, Kukis were more to other tribes in the hill areas of Manipur. Even it argued about the gross miscarriage of justice, violation of universal human rights, State sponsored terrorism, the rights of the Kukis of Manipur are mercilessly ignored and the aggressors rewarded with special Constitutional privileges.²⁰ Moreover, Kuki State Demand Committee issued a Map to the general public for its claim as Kuki state or Kukiland or Zalengam. Definitely it turns out to be a counter proposition of the NSCN-IM demand for Nagalim or the areas demarcated for the 'alternative arrangement.' Whole the hill districts were overlapping in their territorial claims except Churachandpur district. Retorting to NSCN-IM claims, KIM said that they were one of the original settlers of the place since time immemorial. It draws from the historical events like Kuki uprising of 1917-1919 as one of the legacies where Kuki people show their resentment against the colonial rule. This historical event clearly indicates that the administration/control of Manipur prior to the British rule had been in the hands of the majority Meiteis (plain areas) and the Kukis (hill areas).'

It further said that this anti-colonial struggle had cemented the relationship of the Kukis across the villages and brought the chiefs closer to each other. The Kuki identity was also widened. With the British Raj coming to an end, the Kukis formed the Kuki National Assembly (KNA) in October 1946, to press forward the cause of the Kukis and demand for a homeland for themselves. However, with the merger of Manipur into the Indian Union in 1949, their demand was subsided.

The statehood demand for the Kukis was made in its first time representation submitted by the Kuki National Assembly (KNA) to Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India in 1960. Again KSDC also submitted a memorandum to the Government of India in this regard back in 2010, he said demanding formation of a separate Kuki state comprising of Churachandpur, Chandel districts, Sadar Hills and adjoining Kuki inhabited areas. KSDC also said that the Kukis, prior to the British colonial incursions into the region, governed themselves under the benign and capable leadership of their chiefs and enjoyed full freedom over their ancestral territory. The Kukis assert their inalienable right of "self-determination" by virtue of their historical consciousness and distinct nationality within a definite territory of their own since time immemorial, it said. Claiming that the Kukis are peace loving people, KSDC said the quest for statehood is also founded on their demand for a rightful identity in the political firmament of the country and added that it is the bounden duty of the Government of India to uphold the right of the Kukis to live as free people in their ancestral homeland, restoration to them their properties and uphold their dignity and inalienable civil and political rights.

It blames the state government for pursuing determined policies and program to annex the ancestral land and infringe their rights. Some of the inapt mechanisms being espoused by the state governments vis-a-vis Kukis are being manifested in the form of:

- (i) Denial of Sadar Hills District;
- (ii) Denial of Tribal Protection under the Sixth Schedule;



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| (iii) | Denial of the Eight Schedule; | (i). Empowerment of the people by maximizing self-governance and participatory development through grass-roots planning. Such planning will help to evolve development strategy based on the resources, needs and aspirations of the people. |
| (iv) | Disparity in Development: Neglect of Tribal/Kuki Areas; | (ii). Rural development with a focus on improving agricultural productivity and the creation of non-farm avocations and employment. |
| (v) | Rendering Hill Areas Committee Non-functional; | (iii). Development of sectors with comparative advantage agro-processing industries, modernization and development of sericulture, investment in manufacturing units based on the resources available in the region, harnessing the large hydroelectric power generation potential and focus on developing services such as tourism that will help to accelerate development and create productive employment opportunities. |
| (vi) | Denial of Proportionate Representation; | (iv). Maximising self-governance, introduction of participatory planning, rural development and development of sectors with comparative advantage call for significant augmentation of capacity of the people and institutions both in the government and private sectors. Capacity development will have to address the issue of imparting skills among the people to enhance their productivity, generating a class of entrepreneurs within the region willing to take risks. They will also have to be provided with the necessary support through the creation and development of |
| (vii) | Land Alienation and Annexation of Tribal Land through state administrative mechanisms, which is being taken up by COPTAM (Committee on Protection of Tribal Areas, Manipur); | |
| (viii) | State Government meddles with chieftains' rights to deprive them of their land. | |

The Kuki State Demand Committee firmly believes that a separate state for the Kukis would provide them a political identity and a constitutionally-documented institutional space and protection within the broader territorial boundary of India. In order to guarantee the Constitutional provisions of equality, freedom, liberty and opportunity to the Kuki people as individuals and as a collective, it is imperative that they should govern their own affairs in their traditional lands, as a separate state of the Indian Union.²¹

Conclusion;

Regarding the present volatile situation, the government even put forwarded the six inter-dependent components to meet the challenges viz,



institutions at all levels to undertake planning.

(v). Augmenting infrastructure, including rail, road, inland water and air transportation to facilitate a two-way movement of people and goods within the region and outside, communication networks including broadband and wireless connectivity, and harnessing of the vast power generation potential, all of which will open up markets for produce from the region, attract private investment, create greater employment opportunities and expand choices for people of the region. Making the Look East Policy meaningful for the region by connecting it with Southeast Asian markets. Connectivity of NER with ASEAN would require opening up the sea route through the Chittagong port and the land routes through Myanmar and China. In addition, opening up the land route through Bangladesh could enormously benefit both countries and diplomatic efforts should focus on improving relations with the neighbors.

(vi). Ensuring adequate flow of resources for public investments in infrastructure, implementing a framework for private participation in augmenting infrastructure and creating an enabling environment for the flow of investments to harness the physical resources of the region for the welfare of the people.²²

But if we analyze how far such inter-dependent components did had

expedited, it would be in misnomer. In a representative democracy like ours economic development and social development are mutually reinforcing. Disparities in economic development and social development are also mutually reinforcing. Socially excluded are economically marginalized. Economically marginalized remain socially excluded. Therefore, it becomes two sides of a same Coin and it happens to be an important yardstick for national integration in the processes of nation building.

Sometimes identity politics become a basis of separatism therefore government try to pacify those minority ethnic groups by granting autonomy to some extent. Some of those get a separate entity as a state but in this little paradise with a of population of 27 lakhs or little more, would it be a long term solution to create states within this state is the dilemma. So it is said that from 80s there emerge the issue of identity politics in the state. It brings animosity between different communities who had been residing in this place since time immemorial. The consecutive government does not act in the right time and these further consolidate the old wounds. So therefore it is better to trace back their ancestral relationship and compelled to see how far the crisis of nationalism gives acute anxiety to the people and keep them in the turning point for better or worse.

It is noted that development of all ethnic groups and minorities is possible if larger interests of the state are served. The demand for greater autonomy may come up more and more and also needs to accommodate it, although further division of existing state into a smaller and smaller one along the ethnic lines will not be a lasting solution. It also leads to micro level of exclusive politics verses



inclusive politics in between hill-valley relationship. The Manipuri Meitei are claiming periphery to the Indian Union. In the same vein, the Manipuri Nagas and Manipuri Kukis claim themselves as periphery within periphery. Therefore it would be better to serve their aspiration by granting effective say in the management of their affairs particularly by creating an atmosphere of participant political culture where it will come only when the people come forward to recognise the incentives of it. Otherwise there would be echoes of claiming periphery within periphery again and again.²³

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