
Indigenous Kuki Historical Background in Indo-Myanmar/Burma with Special References to Manipur**- TS Letkhosei Haokip –**

Research Scholar

OPJS University, Rajasthan

Abstract:

Kukis opposition to British aggression and interference in their territory began in 1777, during the time of Warren Hastings, Governor General of India. 'In 1845, 1847-1848, 1849-1850, and 1850-1851 there were raids culminating in what is called the Great Kuki Invasion of 1860s.' In the twentieth-century, Kuki featured in both the World War theatres. The period of WWI marked a momentous Kuki offensive against the British, which was recorded as 'Kuki rising 1917-1919'. This event is also referred to as 'Anglo-Kuki War, 1917-1919'. Shakespeare, Palit's released book, '*The Assam Rifles*' term it as 'Kuki Rebellion, 1917-1919'. The consecutive 3 years war between the mighty British and ethnic Kukis came to an end in the last part of 1919.

Introduction:

The Kukis were a fiercely independent people, never in history ruled by any other authority than their noble Chieftains, who also reigned over the entire hills in Manipur, parts of Nagaland, parts of Assam, Tripura, Chittagong Hills Tract of Bangladesh and Saggaing Division of Burma prior to the advent of the British. Ethnic Kukis are separated by the three international boundaries of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Encyclopedia Britannica records, 'Kuki, a name given to a group of tribes inhabiting both sides of the mountains dividing Assam and Bengal from Burma, south of the Nantaleik River and over 6,000 square miles of rugged hills surrounding the present day Manipur valley and extending to the Somra Tract and Thauungdut State in Burma/Myanmar. Ethnic Kukis are known by different names as Chin/Kuki in Myanmar/Burma, Mizo in Mizoram state and as Kuki in northeastern India. Ethnic Kukis are found inhabiting Saggaing division and 'Kangmangphai' (Kale/Kabow valley) of Burma and Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura states in India. They are also found in the Chittagong hill tracts and Sylhet district of Bangladesh. The Kukis are indigenous people of '*Zalen-gam*' meaning in brief, 'Land of Freedom'.

Keywords:

Indigenous, Khul/cave, Zalengam/Kuki Territory, ethnic, mongoloid-Jewish, revolt, freedom.

Origin: Kuki people are Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid-Jewish ethnic minority community, separated by the three international boundaries of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. It is believed that the Kukis emerged out from a cave called 'Khul' somewhere in central China. Some believed the so stated cave to be the present 'Great Wall of China' built by Qin Shi Huangdi during the 17th century.

About 25 years back (1987) my elderly paternal grand uncle told me, '*his father who had learnt from his father and great grand-fathers down the generations*' that '*Those ancestors emerging from the cave include Chongthu/Songthu, Vangalpa, Khupngam and some clansmen, leaving behind Songja, Noimangpa and other clansmen of the group*'. *Pi Nemneh, wife of Songja, cursed Chongthu and party, for leaving them at doom in the 'Khul'*. The names of villages of the time were *Noimang, Kholaichal, Khopalva, Khothip, Khomang, Khokanglai and Khokisupi*'. [Lengkhothang, 1987].

Kuki-Jewish (Mannaseh) Origin Theory:

One acceptable theory propounded by Dr Milui Lenthang Khuplam, stated that the Kukis are one of the ten lost tribes of the Jews. [Milui Lenthang Khuplam: 2005]. In this connection in 1999,

Hillel Halkin, a well-known author and journalist, and for many years the Israel correspondent for the 'New York Times' presented Dr. Khuplam a scroll of confirmation that states the Kuki people as descendants of Manasseh as one of the twelve tribes of Israel. [Halkin, Hillel, 2002: 256–361].

In the year 2001, Lars Goran Svensson of Sweden and 'Sister Angel', his assistant, met with Dr Khuplam. They had come to Manipur for a third time to seek out the lost tribes of Israel in order to bring them back to the 'Promised Land'. In the year 2006-07, 300 Kuki families were taken on batches to Isreal. Kuki migration to Isreal continued till date. At present, Kuki population in Isreal reached 9,000-10,000.

It may also be stated that the DNA test confirmed that the Kukis or 'Manmasis' are truly one of the ten lost tribes of Israel. The traditional religious rituals and ceremonies of ethnic Kuki people, all resembled that of the Jews. Now, it is believed that the so called cave or 'Khul' of central China might have been the present 'Great Wall of China'. Some writers and philosophers of the view that the so called 'Khul' is located some 40 miles away from 'Kailas/Kailash Mountain' in Tibet, [Thangkholet Kipgen, 2014: 68(iv)]. In spite of the above confirmation, there is so far no valid proof that whether Manasseh and Manmasi are the same or co-incidental.

Course of Migration:

According to history, the Manmasi (Manasseh) people with other tribes of Israel were exiled to Assyria in 722 BC. Babylon conquered Assyria in 607 BC. Syria was later conquered by Persia in 457 BC. Alexander the Great of Greece conquered Persia in 331 BC, [(www.moshiach.com/tribes/ns/2.html)]. It was during this period that the Manmasi people were deported from Persia to Afghanistan and other places. Throughout this entire period, their 'Savun Lekhajol' or Torah scroll was with them under the possession of 'Thempu' [priest(s)] and 'Lamkai Pipu' [elder(s)].

From Afghanistan their migration continued eastward till reaching Tibetan-Chinese border. Some of the tribesmen remained back at the Bay of Bengal. From there the adventurous groups continued to wander following the course of Wei River, and reached central China. They settled there at about 231 BC, [(www.moshiach.com/tribes/ns/2.html)].

However, as time passed, the Chinese influences and assimilation started gradually. In early 17th century, the Chinese became cruel to them and started enslaving them. Some of them escaped and lived in caves (Khul) in the mountainous region. It was during this period that they lost their script (*animal skinned-scroll*). Some section of those escaping, wandered around through the jungle southward through Thailand and Burma. Another section of this escaping group continued to wander up to the present day India. The whereabouts of those entrapped remnant Manmasi people in China was not known anymore.

The left behind groups continued to live in caves in savage for about two generations. The section of the escaping group wandered along a river (believed to be Chindwin river) until they reached Mandalay. From there they reached Chin Hills mountainous area. In the 18th century a section of them migrated to the present day northeastern India. By the time this group reached the present day Manipur and Mizoram, their kindreds have had already settled there a century ago, a section of those were known as 'Khongsai or Khongjai'. They maintained their tradition all this long period, however, after the arrival of American Missionaries, they started to abandon their cultures and traditions.

It was only during the middle part of the 17th century that they were for the first time called and known as 'Kuki'. Prior to 17th century, they called themselves as 'Manmasi'. Later they were classified as old Kuki and new Kuki on the basis of their arrival.

Kuki Governance:

The Kuki traditional governance is based on *Haosa Vaipohna* (Chieftainship). The government is a bicameral or two-tiered system such as (i) *Upa Innpi* or *Bulpite Vaihopna* (Upper House) and; (ii) *Haosa Innpi* or *Haosa Vaihopna* (Lower House). *Semang-Pachong* (council of ministers and auxiliary

members) assist the chief in the day-to-day administration. *Chaangloi* (Assistant), *Lhangsam* (Region/Village Crier), *Thiempu* (High Priest and Judge), *Lawm Upa* (Minister of Cultural & Youth Affairs), *Thihpu* (Village Blacksmith) formed the essential elements of a Kuki governance.

Kuki Custom and Culture:

The Legendary tales of Kuki heroes and heroines, such as of *Galngam*, *Khupting* and *Ngambom*, *Pujil* and *Langchal*, *Benglam*, *Jonhling*, and *Nanglhun* have regaled many generations. These folklores have been passed down through the oral tradition. Customary rites, such as *Sa-Ai*, *Chang-Ai*, *Chon le Han*, *Hun*, *Kut*, *Semang* are observed. Zale'n-gam is also blessed with exquisite flora and fauna. Teak and bamboo forests cover vast tracts of the land. The mithun and the hornbill are the traditional Icon (national animal and bird) of ethnic Kukis.

Indigenous Kukis:

The Kukis are referred as one of the earliest people known to have lived in prehistory India by historians like Majumdar and Bhattasali, [RC Majumdar & Bhattasali, 1930: 6-7] preceding 'the Dravidians' who now live in South India.' The Aryans, who drove the Dravidians towards the south, arrived in the Indian sub-continent around BC 1500, [R Thapar, 1966: 29]. In the traditional literature of the Meiteis of Manipur, 'The Pooyas' two Kuki Chiefs named *Kuki Ahongba* and *Kuki Achouba* were allies to the first historically recorded king of the Meithis (Meiteis), Nongba Lairen Pakhangba, in his mobilisation for the throne in 33 AD, [NP Rakung: 1994]. The Royal Chronicles of the Meitei Kings "Cheitharol Kumaba" records that *Meidungu Taathingmang*, a Kuki, became king in the year 186 Sakabda (AD 264).

During the second century (AD 90-168), Claudius Ptolemy, the geographer, identified the Kukis with Tiladai, who are associated with Tilabharas, and placed them 'to the north of Maiandros, which is about the Garo Hills and Sylhet, [GR. Gereni, 1909: 53]. Stevenson's reference to Kuki in relation to Ptolemy's 'The Geography' also bears critical significance to its period of existence, [EL Stevenson, (ed) (1932), (1932), 1991: xii]. The Rajmala or Annals of Tripura refers to Shiva having fallen in love with a Kuki woman around AD 1512, [ET Dalton, 1872: 110].

Historical Defense of Kuki Territory, 1777-1944:

The Encyclopedia Britannica records, 'Kuki, a name given to a group of tribes inhabiting both sides of the mountains dividing Assam and Bengal from Burma, south of the Nantaleik River, [EB Elly, (1962), Vol 13: 511]. Kuki opposition to British aggression and interference in Kuki territory began in 1777, [BC Chakravorty, 1964: 53], during the time of Warren Hastings, Governor General of India. 'In 1845, 1847-1848, 1849-1850, and 1850-1851 there were raids culminating in what is called the Great Kuki Invasion of 1860s, [EB Elly, (1893) 1978: 8]. In the twentieth-century, Kuki featured in both the World War theatres. The period of WWI marked a momentous Kuki offensive against the British, which was recorded as 'Kuki rising 1917-1919' [LW Col. Shakespeare: 1929]. This event is also referred to as 'Anglo-Kuki War, 1917-1919'. Shakespeare, Palit and the recently released book, 'The Assam Rifles' term it as 'Kuki Rebellion, 1917-1919' [Guardians of the Northeast, (1835-2002) 2003: 19-20]. The 'Kuki rising, 1917-1919', which is the most formidable with which Assam has been faced for at least a generation, over some 6,000 square miles of rugged hills surrounding the Manipur valley and extending to the Somra Tract and the Thaingdut State in Burma, [Burma and Assam Frontier, NO. 8856 P. dated the 27 September 1920].

Sir HDU Kerry, General Officer Commanding, Burma Division wrote; '*I therefore decided to put an end to the Kuki revolt by force of arms, break the Kuki spirit, disarm the Kukis, exact reparation and pave the way for an effective administration of their country*' [Burma and Assam Frontier (CONFIDENTIAL), File No. 4895 (Diary No. 69190) No. 1762-K.P.M., Maymyo, June 1919]. The Military awards given to the British officers and soldiers were: 1 CIE, 1 OBE, 14 IDsMs, 1 King's Police Medal, innumerable Mentions-in-Despatches and Jangi Inams' [Guardians of the North East,2003: 20].

British colonial officials had long accepted that the separation of the Kuki people into Burma, India and Bangladesh is an artificial solution, [Michael Fredholm, 1993: 180]. The above assumption is true and implies that they belonged to the same ancestor sharing common custom and culture. However, the study of Kuki people cannot be completed without including the two entities such as Chin and Mizo on account of their close affinity of custom and culture. In addition, a legendary story or myth that exists to explain why the Chin-Kuki-Mizo people broke into different speaking people is recorded by 'Carey and Tuck' (1974: 146), [Bertram Sausmarez Carey and Henry Newman Tuck, (1974) 2010: 146].

Merger of Manipur into Indian Union:

In 1949, the Meitei Maharaja or Ningthou (Chief) was asked to sign the Merger Agreement to include Manipur within the Indian Union by Sardar Vallabhai Patel, the then Home Minister. The Kuki chiefs opposed this move because of apprehensions that it would entail ceding Kuki territory to India, which was administered by the British along with Meitei people's territory, comprising the valley historically called Manipur. In opposition to the merger agreement and to lend support to the Meitei Ningthou, who was initially reluctant to sign the merger agreement, over 250 Kuki warriors were deployed at the palace gate by the Kuki chiefs. However, the Ningthou yielded to the pressures of a fiercely demonstrating group of Meiteis and signed the merger of Manipur at Shillong on 15 October 1949, [S.M.A.W Chisti, 2005:149].

Conclusion:

Ethnic Kukis are indigenous minority community of northeast India and particularly that of the state of Manipur who administered the hills since before India attained independence from British colonialism. They are brave warriors and the only who fought the British, in whose empire the 'sun was said never to set' for consecutive 3 years from 1917-1919. 11 Kuki chiefs of present day Manipur in India and another 11 Kuki Chiefs from present Myanmar Burma, signed by R.E Holland, Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and political Department, dated Delhi, the 8th December 1919 in conformity to the orders of the Governor General in Council and the provisions of Regulation III of 1818 were sent to Andaman & Nicobar Island cellular jail for 3-4 years imprisonment. The Kukis also joined the Indian National Army (INA) under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose for the liberation of India from foreign yoke. This minority community separated into 3 international boundaries by the British as punishment for insulting them by fighting against them ought to be compensated by the government of India (GoI) in the form of separate autonomy to safeguard their tradition, custom and culture and renovate their economy and propagate their political status.

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