Chapter – VI

Conclusion
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Our study is concerned with the political and economic history of Kukis in the historical perspective. The sources for the study of this early history since their migration from Khul or Sinlung are very scanty. Thus, there is a problem in fixing the dates of important events in spite of the fact that there were so many historical accounts. There are of course some references to the Kukis or Khongjais in the Royal Chronicle of Manipur – Cheitharol Kumbaba. In this connection the term Hao in fact, in the beginning refers to some tribal people residing in the valley and for that matter the term ‘Kuki’ features prominently in the ancient text of the Meteis/Meiteis such as the Pooyas. The two Kuki chiefs Kuki Ahongba and Kuki Achouba were also mentioned. In the light of the recent findings, this aspect needs further study and investigation seriously.

The Kukis are a composition of various and diverse ethnic communities living in different parts of northeastern states of India, Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh. In spite of the word KUKI being derogatory, the British employed to suit their colonial designs and policy. Different theories and legends have been advanced in connection with their origin. But since these people didn’t maintain any written records or literary tradition, it posed a problem to the researchers. As such one has to depend on verbal and oral traditions extensively.

In as far as their origin and migration is concerned, there was no dispute of the fact that they came from the East. However, the new problem faced by the Kukis today is the Jewish theory of the Manmasi concept of tracing their origin and genealogy to the biblical Jews and that is the West. Some Kukis have claimed that the Kukis are one of the ‘Lost Tribes of Israel’. This conjecture has become one of the most interesting telltales and sensational in as far as their mythical origin is concerned. An element of biblical features contained in their folklores.
folksongs and their priestly traditions tends to suggest that the Chin-Kuki-Mizo people could also be one of them. Consequently, it caught the attention of some Jewish scholars and their Rabbis. There is however, nothing definite till today to establish their claim. Supposedly, even if the claim is true, majority of them are unlikely to shift from their professed faith of Christianity to Judaism in as far as religion is concerned, for they have accepted Jesus Christ – the Lord as their personal saviour. While on the other hand, we know that as per the Jewish tradition and beliefs their saviour as they called the ‘Messiah’, whom they are waiting for, is yet to come.

The Kukis have inhabited the surrounding hills of Manipur since time immemorial. It is believed that the larger group of the ‘New Kukis’ migrated into this land in the middle of the 18th century. It was followed by other waves of migration in the early part of the 19th century. It may be noted that migration itself is imperative in as far as human-ecological system is concerned. Political and economic considerations were always behind such migration. Even among the highly civilized and developed society, migration did exist. But history reveals that the tribal way of migration is different from the migration factor of any industrialized civilization in the sense that among the tribal people the basic structure of the economy remains the same. The Kuki way of migration right from the mythological period had valid economic and later political reasons behind.

The movement of the Kukis from one place to another during the period of their migration necessitated them to combine or join together under a competent leader who would guide his people. Here lies the question of leadership, which always fell on the head of the tribes. It became imperative to effectively encounter any opposition from the enemy tribes. After all, it was a question of political safety and security. Thus, such circumstances compelled the headman to become autocrat, which in turn led to the emergence of autocratic chieftainship organization in due course of time. Later, this traditional Kuki chieftainship became a socio-political institution,
which practically governed their life in all respects. The basis of authority lies not in coercion or force but on respecting the sanctity of kinship descent. The institution of chieftainship serves as the main reason behind their unity and strength and withstood the test of time. The survival of the institution makes the continuity of traditional practices and customs possible.

The tribals had an exclusive and independent political existence of their own. They had never been within an integrated political structure or a unified administrative network. In spite of various successful military expeditions against the hill tribes, the Meitei kings were unable to institutionalize their political domination over the former. While some of the subjugated hill tribes owed allegiance to the Meitei kings and paid tributes, much of the tribal pristine mobility remained unaffected. They lived an independent way of living. It was only after the arrival of the British and the subsequent establishments of their foothold on the soil of Manipur, the Kukis or for that matter the tribals were bought under their political domination.

The Meitei kings failed to bring the powerful and independent Kukis under their control. The political administration of the former was confined wholly in the valley. They were contended with whatever tributes they could extract from the tribal in the form of periodical raids and massacres. So long as the Raja enjoyed tributes, he remained contented. He did not think in terms of conquering the neighbouring tribal people and established their political domination or hegemony by way of annexing their land. The Rajas failed to evolve a long-term policy to deal with the tribal people. They limited their activities to collecting tributes as noted above and sending punitive action against those recalcitrant tribes, and even obtaining military assistance mostly from the war-like Kukis for meeting external aggressions or for certain military expedition beyond his suzerainty or abroad.

Being so widely scattered occupying strategic locations the British found the ferocity of the Kukis as convenient tools to use them as buffer to control the neighbouring tribes and for
framing a buffer policy. The British colonialist also employed the infamous 'divide and rule' policy among the native people and among the Kukis itself so that they remained divided and weak thereby depriving of their chances to unite for a common cause. Thus in studying the nature of relationship between the different tribal groups on the one hand and between the non-tribal Hinduised Meitei and the tribals on the other, we can find a distinct colonial imprint.

Our studies make it clear that the Kukis had helped both the British colonialist and the Rajas of Manipur in many ways. The Kukis were made to settle at the exposed frontier as buffer people to ward off hostile elements, which could potentially, threatened the colonial administration. In this connection, the British used the Thadou-Kukis as instrument of which the Rajas of Manipur could also extend their sphere of influence. Further, our studies also made it clear that had not the Kukis been helpful to the Rajas and without the protection of the British it may not be an exaggeration to say that the course of the history of Manipur and even its existing boundary would have been different.

When the British consolidated their foothold in the valley inhabited by the Meiteis, they brought the administration of the hill areas under their direct control leaving the administration of the valley in the hands of the Raja. However, the prince and the members of the Durbar, being merely stupors, had no final say in the day-to-day administration of the state. Even the question of the representation of hill people was never raised.

With limited knowledge about the tribes, their way of life, culture and mentality, the colonial officials resorted to indirect system of administration. The chiefs had to act as buffer of their people and their British masters. The President of the Durbar, who was an English officer, was in-charge of the hill administration. He knew little or nothing about the attitudes and aspiration of the people. While the mass remained in the background the Kuki chiefs featured prominently in as far as their relationship with the colonial authority was concerned. The British
knew that by establishing direct relationship with the chiefs who wielded much authority, power and influence, the tribal mass could be kept under control. As such the chiefs enjoyed considerable amount of autonomy. The chiefs, however, were kept under constant surveillance and intimidation in the form of reprisals in case they did not conform to the dictates of their British masters.

The colonial authorities were simply contended with the collection of land revenue and taxes. Even when the Meiteis in the valley were relieved of the Lallup and Pothang duties, the hill people were still subjected to forced coolies and Pothang duties. The common masses remained suppressed and deprived of welfare measures, leading to negation of their role as a saviour or mitigator.

The interference of the British into the political, socio-cultural and economic life of the conservative Kukis had antagonized the Kuki chiefs. It led to serious infringement upon their freedom and independence. The Kuki chiefs realized that it was the policy of subjugation in terms of both political and administration, which subsequently drew the Kukis into a war with their colonial masters.

With regard to the Anglo-Kuki war or the so-called ‘Kuki Rebellion’ a limited knowledge of the causes and the whole events of the war and its outcome led the earlier writers fail to appreciate the importance and its significance. Several of them dismissed as a mere ‘skirmish’ or ‘sporadic uprising’. Historical facts proved them wrong. The Kukis fought the British for the protection of their land, freedom and their independence. It was the zenith of their heightened anti-British feeling, that spread across the length and breadth of their land in different areas of their settlement. The Kuki chiefs successfully organized the masses into active participation in the war for their cause. It was never imposed from outside. The war against the British arose absolutely and spontaneously within the people. Therefore, it had the immense potentiality within itself to spearhead for the cause, for which the Kukis dared to face the mighty British in
the world of warfare. It may be noted here that if the horror of death or casualty was the reason for their refusal to be recruited in the Labour Corps during the war, they would have submitted meekly rather than confronting the might of the British Government. The organizational efficiency of the institution of chieftainship was also testified when the Kukis were mobilized for the war.

The Anglo-Kuki war was the final outcome of anti-colonial and anti-imperial feelings, which began to develop following the extension of political power by the British over the people who remained powerful and independent. The Kuki chiefs felt that British rule in Manipur had undermined their authority, power and prestige. Such ideological commitment of the Kuki chiefs was then beyond the comprehension of the other tribal groups. Therefore, instead of extending their sympathy and support to the Kukis they preferred to remain in the good books of the British and lived peacefully under their security and protection. There is however, no doubt that only when things became perceptible, the Kabui Nagas also started a movement against the British, a decade after the Anglo-Kuki war. Incidentally the British conferred the title of Maharaja upon the rajas of Manipur after their complicity with them during the Anglo-Kuki war.

The Kuki leadership possessed strong will power to make the show go on. However, with limited resources of tribal economy and lack of support from the Nagas and the Meiteis, it was impossible to sustain the war for a longer period. Further, with the British forces much more well-organized and better armed in terms of equipments and military weaponry, the defeat of the Kukis was imminent. After the war the Kukis and for that matter the Nagas were brought under intensified and closer administration. The war had a lasting impact. It is very important to note that in spite of their defeat the Kukis did not surrender their land to the British.

This important historical fact sadly remained simply as an event of the past, and nearer to oblivion, which must on no account be allowed to be so. In this regard the approach of the
historians of Manipur towards the Anglo-Kuki war needs to be objectively reformulated or re-assessed if it is considered to be a part and parcel of the history of Manipur. It is not a question of historical mendicancy or a craving for recognition because history is nothing but facts, which needs objective interpretation. Reviewing of the events in its true perspective would add more salt to the importance of the history of Manipur and shape the political future of the State. The event in question being undoubtedly a great watershed in the history of modern Manipur, there is no justification whatsoever in ignoring and brushing aside of such historical facts.

Our studies on the Anglo-Kuki war makes it clear that it was not a war waged against the Nagas as projected by some unfriendly critics. Such misconception or error of judgement may be attributed due to lack of proper understanding of the causes of the war. Apart from all the accumulated grievances, the labour force recruitment suggested by the Raja, which was necessitated by the outbreak of World War I, was the last straw in provoking the Kukis to wage a costly war. The soldiers of British India and British Burma and the Raja, were involved in the entire military operation. It was a ‘fait accompli’. It was the most serious war ever faced by the British in the North-East India. When the civil administration failed to control the situation it was handed over to the army. It was part of the World War I. As the Anglo-Kuki war was in progress it revealed its close linkages with the Bengal Nationalist Movement. It shows that the war was not limited to anti-British struggle only but had wider perspective, which needs further investigation and research.

Subsequently though the Kukis had been suppressed and subjugated yet with the outbreak of World War II, once again the Kukis found an opportunity to fight the British with a renewed vigour and vitality. Unquenched by the thirst for an independent living, they immediately respond to the call of Netaji - Subhas Chandra Bose to fight along with the Japanese forces for liberation of their country. They joined the Indian National Army as the largest number in the North East
India for which no contribution of any sort and sacrifice was too great. It was a great milege of
honour for the Kuki people living today, for the supreme sacrifice made by their forefathers.
Even while many of the Kukis and their chiefs had sacrificed their precious lives, they were still
accounted for the largest number of Tamra Patura recipients in the whole of North East India.
This act of bravery and gallant service testified their loyalty and dedication to their forefather's
land and the future generation. It was a commitment that they had made for their society and
their land.

The strong ideological commitment, deep rooted in the hearts of the Kukis, was that of
freedom from the yoke of foreign rule to assert the right of living independently as human race.
They fought for the protection of their land with sweat and blood, which they held very dear.
Their lands were sacred in their hearts. Such was the great sense of patriotism for which Manipur
and India ought to proud of.

In the resurgent India, the Kukis found themselves living under the different political
and administrative set up of various state government in India and across the international
boundaries. They had been either marginalized or reduced to insignificant minority. The nature
of their dispersion and their scattered settlement was the main reason behind this. As such,
what can be called an exclusive home could not emerge, as they did not live in a compact area.
The Kuki ancestors extended their political domain over wide areas in hills of Manipur, parts of
North East India and Burma, by dint of their ferocity and political acumen but failed in the most
important task of consolidation.

With regard to economy, the traditional economic life of the Kukis is characterized by
primitive form of agricultural practices, cottage industries, handicraft production system and
trade. The availability of the forest resources abundantly contributed for their economic prosperity
and wealth of the people through the ages. The Kuki chief had the power to control over the
economic lives of their people. Commercial interaction between the hills and valley and among the hill people themselves was done through barter system till the introduction of British currency. The native currency was limitedly circulated within the administrative territory of the Raja of Manipur. For centuries together they enjoyed economic self-sufficing existence without any interruption. Later, they were brought within the integrated system of colonial rule following the extension of political power in the hills. Our studies have shown that the Kukis have their own separate system of economy by which agricultural and forest produces were the main resources to sustain their economy, growth and development. They could also produce almost everything they required.

The colonial period had transformed the traditional economy of Manipur as a whole into colonial economy. Under the colonial economy the Kukis had suffered due to misrule and exploitation in different forms. They paid a heavy price for waging war against their colonial masters. Their economy was crippled. But, in spite of that, there were many positive effects. The introduction of British currency and the subsequent increased monetization in the state had led to the growing commercial interaction among the various ethnic groups. As such the period witnessed the growing of markets leading to expansion of trade in administrative centres and sub-centres both in the hills and the valley due to gradual concentration to the people in these areas. Besides, the improved means of transport and communication connecting various administrative centres had changed their life style to some extent. The subsequent replacement of payment in kind by payment in cash gave a death blow to the barter economy. Under the impact of colonial economy, the native people for that matter the Kukis marched from tradition to modernity.

Besides, every aspects of the socio-economic life of the Kukis have been touched by the winds of change brought by the introduction of the new religious faith - Christianity and of
Western education simultaneously. Under these impacts, the traditional practices of sacrifices, dormitory system, the belief in multifarious spirits etc. disappeared. This gave them a new lease of life, which helped them to salvage their economy. Besides, the status and influence of the educated persons in the society had increased by leaps and bounds. This had led to the emergence of the new class of people in the Kuki society. Under the Independent India, the adoption of democratic institution and the subsequent new political opportunities has offered the new elites the chance of acquiring power and prestige, and socio-political leadership as well. However, being deep-rooted in their tradition so much so that despite varied changes around, they still prefer to take refuge in the provisions of the customary laws of the tribe in matters relating to marriage, adultery, incest, murder, theft, etc. This was possible due to the survival of the institution of chieftainship. Thus, chieftainship serves as an effective part of the Government administrative machinery in the hills. And even today, the institution of chieftainship continues to stay as an indispensable and inseparable part of the Government’s decision-making process. In the recent past, several attempts have been made to abolish chieftainship but without success.

In the post independent period the identity of the Kukis was getting fragmented and tribalised while the Naga identity being nationalized. The common identity of the former got dwindled which spelt a direct co-relation to their spirit of nationalism. The Kukis got themselves fragmented into groups of insignificant few hundreds after getting recognition of their own tribes separately. Thus, there is a need to re-inforce emotional and cultural unity even while maintaining their separate distinctive identities. In the final analysis there is historical forces behind to unite Kuki-Chin-Mizos, which is stronger than the super-imposed barriers that keep them apart. As researcher we cannot have the final say but definitely it is the path of peace and progress and amity. We must visualise appreciation of unity in diversity concept. However, many aspects of Kuki syndrome remain yet to be unravelled.
Our research has shown that chieftainship has had a direct bearing on the socio-economic life of the people. It is instrumental in the preservation of customary laws and matters concerning village administration. Though the traditional chieftainship system was well and good at one point of time, its continuation as it was without any basic changes in its structures, is no longer favoured in the present context. Perpetuation of the institution makes the people still posing at the critical cross road of traditionalism and modernity. Thus, the state of things or the past trends suggest that chieftainship needs reformation from within to pave the way conducive to the economic growth and development. Besides, the present demand by the hill people for the extension of the Constitution Sixth Schedule in the hills may also be attributed to economic reasons among others. The state has to rise above the politics of deprivation and consider the demands in right earnest for peace, prosperity and progress of the Kukis.