INTRODUCTION

For a long time there was not much academic enquiry about the tribal people in the northeastern region of India and Manipur except the work of foreign administrators and missionaries. In recent times, there has been an indication of serious academic interest about the Kukis in particular and the tribal multitude in general in this region. This had opened a new vista of knowledge to the students of social science who are intellectually handicapped due to the long period of academic inactivity and indolence.

Today’s Manipur is a miniature world with so many languages, dialects, ethnic tribal communities, and cultural trends. In this regard the history of Kukis is one of importance in as far as the annals of Manipur is concerned. The Kukis are scattered over a vast region both in the northeastern part of India and the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma). They occupy a wide range of territorial units of various state administrations in India and across international boundaries. A large chunk of Kuki population settled distinctively in the south of Manipur. The real picture is that the Kukis or the ‘Kuki-Chin’ are almost omnipresent in the hill areas of Manipur. The Meitei Hindus and Muslims inhabit the centrally located valley of Manipur, and in the surrounding hill districts the tribal ethnic community evenly is divided into Nagas and Kukis.

Prior to the coming of the British on the soil of Manipur in 1891 the Kukis enjoyed political autonomy in their respective hill areas. The multifarious problems of the internal administration of the village were solely in the hands of their chiefs who had strong bond of unity with the Meitei kings with mutual respect for each other. They pulled on through thick and thin, helping each other in times of external aggressions. The Kukis were in fact serving as the frontier guides of what has been called the ‘golden land’ of Manipur during the British period.
The Kukis reacted unprecedentedly, in response to the political, socio-cultural, economic grievances and forced labour recruitment policy of the British Indian government in 1917. Their anti-British adventures resulted in the tremendous loss of human lives and properties, which subsequently brought many significant changes in Manipur. Their deep sense of ideological commitment against British imperialism was also proved in their fight against the British during the World War II by joining the Indian National Army (INA) and Japanese soldier. In both these wars, the Kukis were fighting for the protection of their independence and assertion of their birthright so that they might live peacefully.

The Kukis proved themselves as powerful and independent people. They were gallant and martial lot who challenged the invincible power of the British in a world of warfare. The unique polity of the Kukis could be seen when their heroism and chivalry revealed a sense of unity and loyalty to their socio-political leaders during and after the colonial period. It was a polity based on chieftainship, which had continued to evolve through the ages. Despite changes of all sorts the relevancy is not ruled out till today. They are temperamentally freedom-loving people fighting gallantly for liberty without submission to alien authority unless forcibly subjugated. To the Kukis their chiefs are supreme and so they are identified with the sources of authority and security. This is what we have discussed in this thesis.

The chiefs controlled the political and economic life of the Kukis. Affected by the winds of change the Kukis are now at the critical crossroad of traditionalism and modernity. Our study makes clear on how the political and economic life were the two most important factors through the long course of their history. Therefore, the ethnic Kukis are a force to be reckoned with in the political and socio-economic life of Manipur as a whole.
OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Our study concentrates on the various aspects of political and economic life of the Kukis intensively, in historical perspective. The study also incorporates the contemporary events, which have a direct bearing on their socio-economic and political life. The objectives of the study are to mainly focus on the following points:

i) Understanding the origin, evolution, dynamics and development of political institution, and to focus on the bases of power;

ii) The role of traditional political leaders in maintaining social harmony, peaceful co-existence and its responsibility in maintaining cultural unity in the traditional past;

iii) Long term change of chieftainship in the process of its existence as a political organization, which will require outlining the various strategies by which the chieftains tried to extend and maintain control over his subjects;

iv) To make historical analysis of the triangular relationship amongst the Meitei-Naga-Kuki through the ages;

v) To make an in depth study and critical analysis of anti-British movement – the Anglo-Kuki war and the INA and the Kukis;

vi) To state the reasons that traditional political organisation helped in protecting the age-old customary laws and prevented against the onslaught of modern judicial systems;

vii) To make an in depth study of the economic system of the Kukis in the traditional past and its changing dimensions;

ix) To investigate into the fact that the traditional chieftainship is one of the main cause of economic backwardness; and
x) To find out the current general outlook or view about the economic backwardness by seeking opinion from knowledgeable persons like social workers, politician, intelligentsia, etc. and to suggest for reformation conducive to overall development of the tribesmen.

SCOPE

The scope of the study in this thesis covers the Political and Economic History of the Kukis from pre-colonial to post-Independent period in historical perspective. It is also inclusive of the contemporary events, which has a direct bearing on the political and economic life of the Kukis. The study is limited to the state of what is now known as Manipur. It deals with the political and economic context within which the changes took place among them during this period and how they reacted to these changes. A general outline of their socio-cultural life is also discussed to have better understanding. The main content of the thesis deals with political and economic history with specific relationship to chieftainship as both the subjects were like two sides of the same coin throughout the history of the Kukis. There is, of course, in studying the Kuki history, all aspects of their political, social, economic, and religious life of the people is closely intertwined. It may be noted that political and economic reasons were always behind the cause of their migration or even within the context of their relationship with the British. The study is based more on historical rather than anthropological approach.

REVIEW OF BOOKS

Almost exclusively westerners produced the earliest historical and anthropological works, such as, C.A. Soppit’s *A short Account of the Kuki-Lushai Tribes on the North-East Frontier* (1893), the Deputy commissioner of the Hill Tracts – T.H. Lewin: *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers Therein* (1869), and by the same author – *Wild races of South-Eastern India* (1870). These books provide substantial information about the Chin-Kuki-Mizos.
Another type of writing comes from the military officers some of whom had given detailed accounts of their military operations. It serves as an important source of information as by and large they have a bearing on the subject of this thesis. This include L.W. Shakespear’s *History of the Assam Rifles* (1929), A.S. Reid’s *Chin-Lushai Land: Including a Description of various Expedition into the Chin-Lushai Hills and the Final Annexation of the country, with Maps and Illustrations* (1893).

Besides, there were also British administrators whose written works have provided us unprecedented historical and anthropological insights about the people viz. Bertram S. Carey and H.N. Tuck’s *The Chin Hills: A History of the people, British dealings with them, their Customs and Manners, and Gazetteer of their Country*, Vol. I 1896, (reprinted 1976), and John Shakespear’s *The Lushei Kuki Clans*, Part I and Part II 1912. These books were of immense value to researchers and scholars, for which the Tribal Research Institute of Mizoram reprinted a number of these books to make it available to them. Sir James Johnstone’s *Manipur and the Naga Hills* provided us the authentic facts of historical events connected with Manipur and Naga Hills with substantial information about their relationship with the Kukis as well.

Another monumental work by G.A Grierson’s in his *Linguistic Survey of India, III. 3* (1904) has given some anthropological analysis of the people at the time when Kukis were brought under the British colonial administration. William Shaw’s *Notes on the Thadou Kukis, With and introduction by J. H. Hutton* (1929) has become the most controversial book among the Kukis. In this book the various sub-clans and tribes of Kukis like *Changsan, Lhangum, Lenthang, Lunkim, Kom Gangte, Waiphei(Vaiphei), Kholhang, Chiru* and those of inferior lineage, who were not the descendants of *Thadou* (a personal name of an ancestor) were wrongly clubbed together or included under the wings of *Thadou*. This being the reason, clans like *Lunkim, Changsan* and others who are senior than *Thadou* in terms of genealogy or lineal
descent could not accept it. Nevertheless, the book has made a very great contribution to our understanding of the historical and anthropological studies and provides valuable insights of the traditional Thadou-Kuki culture and society. It may be noted that earlier there was no work in English on the Thadous history and culture.

Another writing concerning the Government’s dealing of the Kukis with the subsequent establishment of colonial administration is found in the book of Alexander Mackenzie’s The North-East Frontier of India (1884), in which reports of several British administrators and military officials about the Kukis, such as, Major McCulloch, Capt. Butler (1873), Col. Lister, J. Ware Edgar (1871), etc. were incorporated in the books. Sir Robert Reid’s History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883-1941 (1983) and D.K Palit’s The Sentinel of the North-East, The Assam Rifles (1984), has provided substantial facts about the Kukis of Unadministered Tracts and the Anglo-Kuki war of 1917-19.

A group of Indian writers and their works like, T.C. Das’s The Purum – An Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur (1945), and more recent works of Tarun Goswami’s Kuki Life and Lore (1985) and A.K. Ray’s Authority and Legitimacy – A study on the Thadou-Kukis of Manipur (1990) has provided us with historical and anthropological insights of the people concerned.

Today a number of books have been written by the Kuki-Chin-Mizos themselves. Mention may be made of interesting written works done by scholars from Manipur are T.S. Gangte: The Kukis of Manipur – A Historical Analysis (1993), H. Kamkhenthang: The Paite tribe of India and Burma (1988), Lal Dena’s Christian Mission and Colonialism (1988), M. D. Dungel’s unpublished M. Phil. Dertation – Sociological Study of the Customary Laws of the Kukis, North Eastern Hill University - NEHU (1992), T. Neihial’s History of the Zomis, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis - Manipur University (1993) and several others. Their study makes important contribution to the understanding of different aspects of the socio-cultural life afresh.
These books contain deeper anthropological insights and the socio-cultural changes as a result of the impact of western culture through the activities of governmental administrative machineries and the Christian missions. Besides, writers like P.C. Misao’s *History and Custom of the Thadou-Kuki*, Imphal, and Khaikhotinhang Kipgen’s *The Thadou Kukis – A brief account of History and Culture* (1982) helped us to understand better about the history and culture of the Kukis right from their migration. The socio-cultural study made by the above scholars contains more of authentic facts, as they understand better than outsiders. In addition to this F.S. Downs’ *The Mighty Works of God* (1971) could not concentrate much about the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Manipur among the Kukis as his books cover the mission work in the entire North East India.

Lastly, a very recent publication of a book - *Kuki Uprising in Manipur 1919-1920* (2004) by Dr. S.M.A.W Chisti - Associate Professor of Manipur University, was a good academic exercise with valuable insights about the military operation of the British forces against the Kukis and the latter’s subsequent trial and punishment. His work is mainly based on the archival materials but lacks authenticity if the Kukis’ point of view is taken into consideration.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In view of the ethnic conflicts and identity crisis that are going around, it is necessary to mention that, the method used in this research is based on the assumption that there are three major ethnic communities – the Meiteis, the Nagas and the Kukis or the ‘Kuki-Chins’. The term ‘Kuki’ being in use in this thesis denotes all the people who were earlier known by this name. The basic approach in this thesis is that Kuki is a generic term of national identity and they were in the official records of British, Germany, Japan and India and so also some of the other Governments all over the world. They have fought, suffered and died as Kuki. As such
the term ‘Kuki’ has been used in this thesis for general acceptability of the people concerned though they may have some inborn words to identify themselves.

As all the necessary materials are not found in the books alone attempt has been made to uncover information based on primary sources like, field work, personal interviews, both formal and informal discussions with knowledgeable persons. Stories of past events which comes out from the mouth of the elders constitute no less important as it help the researcher to understand better about the history of the Kukis. Referring to contemporary records such as personal notebooks, private memoranda, folklores, etc. provided materials of great value. Journals, magazines, souvenirs, unpublished books/documents, memorandums, brochures/booklets, dissertations, etc. written both in English and vernaculars which has a little or direct bearing on my research topic were also considered within the sources of my study. As I belong to a Thadou tribe from Manipur, I have the opportunity to interact freely with elders of various communities and was also in a position to utilize all these materials written in various local dialects of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo. The similarities between the custom and culture of my own clan and that of the other cognate clans and tribes was also a great privilege to me as it provided valuable insights.

The field study helps in gaining the information and experiences through personal interviews with those who are well versed in the oral folk traditions. Attempts has been made to verify the assumptions by cross-examining it with the data collected which, is the synthesis of one common unit regarding the origin, migration and settlement.

Besides, another advantage to me was that communication is not a problem among the various Kuki tribes though there are some negligible language barriers. And for the sake of convenience in my study, mostly I used the term belonging to Thadou or ‘Thadou-Kuki’ dialect, as it is one of the largest spoken dialects in Manipur.
I have devoted much time in analyzing the relationship of the Kukis with that of their tribal counterpart - Nagas, the Meitei kings and the British colonialists in order to understand the historical process and its influences, and the colonial imprint, which are evident till today. For this reason I have visited the national and state archives, tribal research institutes and various libraries in the Delhi, Guwahati, Nagaland, Manipur, etc. which provided materials of great value. Source materials were also obtained from the Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl. Besides, I obtained an exhaustive study material about the Anglo-Kuki war from the British archives and libraries especially from London.

Secondary sources which itself is dependent on primary sources are being the major references for quotations, citations, and to derive new interpretation and hypothesis. The findings of others are also brought together in support of my own hypothesis.

THE STRUCTURE/CHAPTER ISATION

As mentioned earlier, the structure of the thesis allots space mainly for the study of political and economic history extensively with specific relationship to their chieftainship vis-à-vis the people. The whole of this thesis is accomplished under six chapters including the Conclusion.

Chapter 1 discussed the general historical background of the Kukis of Manipur that inhabited the surrounding hills of Imphal valley in particular and the nature of their scattered settlement in the northeastern part of Indian states, Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma) in general. It investigates the implication of the early history of the Kukis, beginning from the pre-historic period down through the long course of their immigration unto the time of their settlement in the surrounding hills of Manipur and other states where they lived in isolation for a longtime to develop a distinctive culture.
Chapter II generally describes the distinct culture of the Kukis with special references to the Thadou Kukis and the importance of their institution of chieftainship. Their early contacts with the British in the context of their relationship with the kings of Manipur are also discussed. An understanding of the ‘Thadou-Kuki’ culture and their institution of chieftainship help us to understand all the other Kuki tribes, as their socio cultural practices is more or less the same. Here, using the term ‘Thadou-Kuki’ may create some confusion because all the Thadous are Kukis but not vice-versa. Kuki is a generic name like Naga, which consists of many tribes and clans. As such for a compromise both the term Thadou and Kuki is incorporated and used as ‘Thadou-Kuki’.

Chapter III briefly discussed the Chassad chiefdom and the period of frontier problems. There were various incidents of disturbances, threats, raids and agressions across the border involving political questions and dimensions. This posed a great problem to the state. This Chapter discusses the Chassad Kukis, Lushei-Kukis and the Sukte-Kuki affairs and their relationship with the Rajas. It has also discussed about the Kuki and Naga relationship with critical analysis and the British policy towards the Kukis.

Chapter IV discusses the war waged by the Kukis against the British with explanation of the historical background of the cause. It describes the course of the war, the defeat of the Kukis and its lasting impacts upon the Kukis in particular and Manipur in general. Besides, it discusses the second major anti-British campaign of the Kukis by joining hands with the INA and the Japanese with the outbreak of World War II.

Chapter V discusses the Economic History of the Kukis. It describes their economic condition in three stages i.e., pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial or post-Independent period. This chapter also discusses the identity crisis of the Kukis and its changing phase in the post-independent period.

Chapter VI is the conclusion, which summarizes and makes further analysis of the whole chapters in exhaustive postulates.