



Contemporary Socio-Economy of Kukis in the Surrounding Hills of Manipur

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Abstract

With their conversion and the subsequent spreading of Christianity, modern education, science and technology, the socio-economic condition of the Kukis has undergone significant changes within the last sixty years. The Kukis in the post-independent period also witnessed the emergence of the middle class whose motive was to make way for political career and to establish themselves in the political scenario of Manipur. Besides, owing to the expansion of the district administrative machinery in the hills structural changes took place. Money based activities replaced traditional community based activities by producing more agro-products to meet the ever-increasing demands. With increased population the jhum cycle also got gradually reduced to three or four years despite knowing all its antecedent evils. Thus, in the post-independent period the traditional agricultural practices continued to dominate their economy. This shows the continued existence of a symbiotic relationship between the tribals and the forest. Slowly the importance of preserving the floral and the faunal environment dawned upon the Kuki intelligentsia and the new middle class.

Keywords: *Kuki, Contemporary, Traditional Polity, Jhumming, Constitutional Provisions.*

Introduction

Contemporary Kuki ethnoses are poised for moving ahead in the search for better amenities of life in sharp contrast to the barbaric and wretched lives they lived in the past. The socio-economic and political changes of the Kukis as a result of their conversion to Christianity, the spread of modern education, science and technology has had tremendous impact and has subsequently changed their attitude and approach in matters related to the art

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of living. In spite of that, the isolation of hundreds of Kuki villages have not changed since the means of transport and communication have not been adequately developed and so the remote corners of the various states in the northeast remain still relatively untouched by the winds of change. Many villages still lie scattered, perched amid thick forests, on hilltops and lowlands, some of which are not easily accessible. The mode of agricultural production is still primitive and is carried on in a simple and traditional way. Cultivable land for paddy is also becoming limited. Increased food production through Jhum and terrace cultivation supported a growing population in many villages. But now food production lags behind the growing population.

Forest Resources and the People

Human labour and the land they tilled for their sustenance constitute the basis of production. In the event of the failure of the crops due to natural disaster like drought, heavy rain or flood, or even ravaged by animals in the jhumming areas, forest products substituted the inflow of food supply and other items of income generating things for a Kuki household. This is so for most people living in the interior parts of the hill. Forest is enough to provide a minimum alternative requirement which includes different kinds of edible mushrooms, edible leaves and fleshes of wild animals that were hunted down. Traditional forestry practices of the tribal people are unique in the sense that despite the introduction of money-economy, the inherent characteristic feature remains the same to most of the people living in remote and far-flung areas. This is proved by the fact that even if they do not have enough land for rice cultivation they can still depend on forest products for basic minimum sustenance of a household. This is the reason why many people went back to the forest after the restoration of peace in the wake of the Kuki-Naga ethnic clash, to establish a small hamlet in the midst of thick forest. Natural forest products continue to be one of the main sources of their livelihood. The dependency of the people on natural resources and their management of forest products can be briefly highlighted further in the context of the changing aspects of Kuki people's socio-economy. The rapid growth of population resulted in the corresponding deforestation and desertification in the post-independence and contemporary era.

Collection of Fuel Wood

In spite of easy availability and access to modern day cooking gas like LPG, till today majority of the people living in the village continued using firewood collected from the forest. Trees are felled and cut into smaller pieces and dried up for domestic and commercial purposes. Charcoal business also becomes a profitable concern. Fuel wood constitutes the main source for cooking and average annual consumption per a Kuki household is about 50-60 quintals in a year.

Timber

Uses of timber by the local villagers are comparatively low while considering the fuel wood consumption and dependency. The need of local populace for repairing and extension of a village house is very minimal. Exposure to imported finished goods like plastic chairs, tables, stools etc. has reduced their dependency on woods and wood-products. However, timber sale in Manipur has become a flourishing business for many families as the best kind

of timber quality is said to have been found in the south eastern part of Manipur bordering Myanmar.

Hunting and Laying Traps

Hunting and laying traps to ensnare wild animals was not only a favourite pastime but also essential for the protection of crops. However, in the contemporary Kuki society, dependency on meat of wild animals has gone considerably due to various circumstances. This has led to corresponding decline of the culture of killing animals for food. With the practice of settled cultivation, people switch over to domestication of animals which better serves as a good source of income generation. Measures for prohibition of killing wild animals and for the protection of wild life by the concerned authorities of government departments may be still remote to their knowledge but have dawned among the Kuki intelligentsia. Perhaps, this knowledge and changing environment might have led to such a paradigm shift.

Medicinal Plants

Manipur is hot spot bio- rich zone where a lot of medicinal plants are grown like Kollhou (*Adhatoda vasica*), Loubong (*Ageratum conyzoides*), Anphui (*Clerodendron colebrookianum*), Bahlong (*Oroxylum indicum*), Changkongche (*Centella Asiatica*), Kelchangmai (*Melothria perpusilla*) etc. (Singsit, 2011). In spite of the availability of such natural herbs, people's dependency has decreased so much that most of the younger generations have completely forgotten and are not able to identify it anymore. In fact, the death of a knowledgeable aged person in the village means the vanishing of traditional knowledge in treating the sick and medicinal plants as well. Besides, availability of modern hospitals in large numbers and easy accessibility to primary health centres has changed the situation on this front.

Other Natural Gifts and its Utility

Abundant availability of bamboo and cane in the forest meets the basic minimum requirements for every Kuki household. After indigenous ways of processing, the split bamboo and cane pieces were used for making baskets and mats of different types and design, and also reserved for day-to-day requirements. Collection of fodder from the forest is another important duty bound task for those families who reared cows, buffaloes, mithuns and other domestic animals. Vegetables of different kinds have also been collected by village women folk for domestic consumption such as, banana stem, *leucaena glauca* leaves, *parkia* pods, *parkia timorina*, bamboo shoots, curcuma caesia, etc. Fruits and edible mushrooms of different kinds were also collected for domestic consumption and for commercial purposes. Nature is kind enough to provide all kinds of things abundantly needed for their sustenance.

Agriculture System

Agriculture continued to be the mainstay of the tribal people in general and the Kuki people in particular. It remained as the main spring of the Kuki economy as ever before. The political transition of the state from colonial to postcolonial or post- independent did not have much to do with the village tribal economy at large. As cultivation became the prime

economic necessities for most Kuki tribesmen, the role of village blacksmith remained important as the subsidiary needs such as agricultural tools and implements were prepared by him. However, post-colonial and contemporary agricultural practices have undergone certain changes with the corresponding change of outlook and worldview of the people.

Jhumming

Shifting cultivation systems or 'slash-and-burn' systems have a long history among the Kukis too like any other tribal society. Though it is declining it has not disappeared. Despite varied change around this, an age-old farming practice is being continued in some way or the other. Jhumming is now declining gradually as people in many parts of the Kuki areas of northeastern states have been diversifying to more settled forms of agriculture and other livelihoods practices. The Kuki cultivators in the interior parts of hills continue to depend on this form of shifting cultivation not because they are backward or ignorant, but they have no viable choice for alternative livelihoods.

The jhumming culture is still a necessary evil, which has to be addressed to. Jhumming on degraded forestland is highly unproductive. Study has revealed that to this age old practice the Kukis have to find some better economic alternatives. The tribals are now considered as the greatest enemy of the forest. This assumption is wrong because of the government's failure to provide alternatives. It is a 'necessary evil'. Jhumming per se is not bad if its cycle is for about 15 years or more.

Terrace Cultivation

In the post-independent period, the Kukis adopted the system of terrace method of wet-rice cultivation in large scale on the slopes of the hills where it is not very steep. Though the initial labour requirement to make the terrace field fit for cultivation was labour-intensive especially in those stony soil areas, it gives them less trouble than jhum cultivation. Although, in some cases, this type of cultivation depended on rainfall, spring and stream water are generally diverted for such purposes. Being hilly areas, the double-cropping system cannot be taken up successfully as is practiced in the valley at many places. Maize continues to be one of the staple foods of the Kukis. It is grown in the field both on dense and degraded forest land covering a large portion of their cultivated area. Besides, a wide range of edible vegetables are grown in their jhum fields.

Different Agricultural Practices

Different systems have been adopted in respect of paddy rice cultivation among the agricultural household family and community of the Kukis. Some of them are:

Lou-san (Share-croppership)

A landless person who works on another person's paddy field (Lou) for share of the produce after harvesting (generally on equal basis). In this system, the tenants have to bear all the risk in the cultivation (San). This kind of sharecropper system is normally taken up for a period of one year or more depending upon the agreement between the landowner and the tenant.

Chang-thoi

It means the system of lending paddy 'Chang' to a person on the condition of paying it back within a specific period normally after harvesting along with interest, that too in the form of paddy called 'Thoi'. For e.g. a person who took 2 tins (kerosene) of paddy from a wealthy owner may reward him with 4 tins of paddy after harvesting.

Phoutamsen

It is a system of lending money on the condition of paying it back in the form of paddy.

Landless Agricultural Labour

The increased pressure of population on land over the several decades resulted in the corresponding increase in the number of landless agricultural-labourers in the Kuki society. Landless labourers have greater dependency on forest and its natural resources. Various other factors can also be attributed to the rise of agricultural landless labourers hitherto unknown in the traditional past of the Kuki society. Two main factors among others are demographic changes and social reason. In the case of the former, the site of jhum land fit for paddy cultivation is now available only in the interior highlands where there is low population density. Increase in landless labourers can be seen among those large chunks of Kuki population, which remain confined to the foothills and the nearby hill ranges surrounding the broad central lowland of Manipur.

Commercialisation of Crops

Important commercial crops like potato, pea, soya bean, ginger, cotton, etc., which are highly recommended for their good taste are today exported outside the State. They are mostly cultivated in the degraded forestland. The tree bean called Yongchak in local Manipuri term is one of the important vegetables of the Kukis, which serves the purposes of both commercial and local consumption. It is planted in almost every Kuki village, as it has become a good source of income generation. The other local products also include lemon, orange, guava, papaya, banana, charcoal, etc. which were marketed at the local trade centres. It may be pointed out that horticulture and cash crop plantation provides an alternative to shifting cultivation. But due to unavailability of capital with the Kuki cultivators they found it difficult to translate their deeds into action even if they were willing to do so. In spite of that, cultivation of horticulture and cash crops were taken up in small scale in some parts of the hills especially in Churachandpur. Due to poor road communications these fruits were mostly exported to Silchar and adjoining areas by boat through the Barak river (Census of India, 1991). Commercialization of agriculture and other products among the Kukis arguably gained momentum in the second half of the 20th century. As the barter system was fading out, the need for money or cash naturally began to be felt. Thus, a Kuki household switched over to the production of agricultural commodities for markets rather than for the sake of meeting the needs of the family.

Transport and Communication

Improved means of road-transport and communication system is very essential for the overall economic development of hilly districts of Manipur. In 1988-89, Churachandpur district had a total length of 625.12 km connecting sub-divisional centres like Henglep, Thanlon, Parbung and Singhat (Census of India, 1991). The National Highway 39 passes through the district of Chandel till it ends at Moreh, a border town of Manipur. A new jeepable road was constructed to connect the remote village of Sita from Tengnoupal. In this district a regular bus service also connects Imphal and Mombi (Lonpi) via Chakpikarong road in 1989-90 (Census of India 1991). Churachandpur – Sugnu Road also connects the two districts in the south of Manipur. A total length of 668.60 km road is maintained in Ukhrul district by the State Government which includes state highways, district roads and inter-village roads (Census of India, 1991). Bus services from Imphal connect all places of importance including Kamjong – Chassad sub-division largely inhabited by the Kukis. In Tamenglong, the National Highway 53, runs from Imphal to Jiribam (Census of India, 1991).

Trade and Commerce

In the post-independent period the volumes of trade in this region has increased by leaps and bounds as a result of the improvement of transport and communication. The important centres for trade and commerce for the Kukis and the other tribes in the hills are Singhat, Parbung, Henglep, Churachandpur, Chandel, Pallel, Sugnu, Moreh, etc. in the South and South-East of Manipur. Besides Kangpokpi, Motbung, Senapati, Saikul, Kamjong-Chassad, etc. are the noteworthy trade and commerce centres for the Kukis in the north and north-eastern hills of Manipur. The local population in these centres transact their business and sell away their local and forest products such as honey hide, bamboo, cane, timber etc. Buses and trucks are the chief means of carriage throughout the districts and state highways. In the southwest of Churachandpur district, the Barak Rivers handles a significant portion of goods traffic for village situated along the river. Thus, the increase in the volume of trade as a result of the improved means of transport and communication system was the natural outcome of the policies pursued in the post-independent period. The spread of Christianity, modern education and the establishment of democratic rule and its administration, creation of new job opportunities, extended their world view. The Kukis became a part of the bigger economic system of the State. Their attempt to strive for better civilization, consequently, brought structural changes in their socio-economic life.

Inherent Causes of Economic Backwardness

The Constitution of India provides safeguards for the tribal in order to promote, preserve and protect their identity and culture. In a way it is their constitutional right to govern themselves through traditional forms of governance. But unfortunately the sanctity of this institution has eroded due to unscrupulous politicians, social leaders and the tribal chiefs who often misused the same for their vested interest. Tribal polity has become the source of discontentment, disunity, social vices, hatred, enmity etc. and it ultimately led to economic backwardness and mass impoverishment. Against this backdrop, different facets of tribal backwardness are discussed and analyzed in a holistic way. It may be noted that while majority people living in the valley are politically and economically more powerful and linked to national and international markets, the minority tribes in the hills of Manipur are

still languishing for their survival despite widespread impact of globalization. Following are the factors to substantiate the persistent economic backwardness of the tribal people in general and the Kukis in particular.

Traditional Polity and Absence of Individual Land Ownership

Chieftainship is the traditional practice of almost all the tribes of Manipur irrespective of Kukis and Nagas since time immemorial. It is the main reason behind the preservation and retention of customs and tradition. It is evidently clear that the tribal chief being the sole owner of the land enjoys unlimited power. A villager settles under the mercy of the chief. Chieftainship, the oldest forms of polity, continues till today. The reasons were many and varied. Even after Kuki Rebellion of 1917-1919 and their subsequent control of administration in the hill areas of Manipur, the British authorities recognized and utilized the institution of 'Haosa' as part of their administrative machinery (Gangte, 1998) to serve the interest of the state in general and the tribe in particular. It was done to win over tribal discontentment and any hostility that may arise on account of the abolition of the post chieftainship. However, it is sad but true that except for the chief and few elites, traditional polity becomes one of the most important contributing factors for economic backwardness of the Kukis at large. As such, the institution as of now is highly debated and questioned as it is not compatible with the principles of modern day inclusive/participatory or developmental governance.

The direct result of practice of traditional Kuki chieftainship is the absence of individual ownership of land. This is the most striking situation as the system has left the village common stock without any land which he can claim of his own. The continuance of traditional land use and ownership systems constituted one of the main reasons for the mass economic backwardness. Under this system there is no individual ownership holding rights of land. Though most of the tribal chiefs no longer enjoy the traditional privilege and customary entitlement, however in matters of land ownership he is the sole authority. The chief continues to control the affairs of land and politics, in the Kuki society. It is found that the weak economic base of the Kukis and their fragile nature of its subsistence is due to the existing systems of land use and ownership pattern which needs serious introspection and experimentation with the system of individual holding or ownership of land (Horam, 2000).

The Kuki system of land ownership was not desirably effective for boosting economic activity. In this regard, we agree with Kamkhenthang who writes, "They (Kukis) are bound to become poorer unless the traditional economic system is modified to suit the changing situation." (Horam, 2000). The resultant outcome in the long run was poverty in which these signs loomed large as one enters a Kuki village in the hill areas of Manipur. To sum up, with the change of time the mindset of the people has also to change. The age-old system of land ownership in which the tribal chief enjoyed exclusive rights over it, no longer holds good for the people in the present society. Everyone wants to own a piece of land, which they can call as their own.

Absence of Modern Methods of Cultivation and Technology

The absence of modern method and technology has forced the tribals to continue the old ways of cultivation. Land is still ploughed by oxen and buffaloes that too, were sometimes not possible in terrace fields. The terrace cultivation also largely depended upon the mercy of the monsoon. Except few people who use fertilizers the common people do not use fertilizers. No modern and scientific technology is applied in the mode of cultivation for increased production. Thus failure in one cropping season meant tragedy, as there is no other alternative means of subsistence.

Absence of Good and Motorable Roads

Though there is general improvement in the network of roads linking the district and sub-divisional centres, the remote tribal villages cannot be reached by buses and other vehicles. During the rainy season most of the roads and paths are muddy and are also prone to either landslides or mudslides. Therefore, it became very difficult for the remote inhabitants to transport their agricultural products for marketing. The pathetic road condition and the resultant isolation and under-education, make us see poverty looming large in almost every nook and corner of the state.

Destruction of Cottage Industries

Failure to compete with the sophisticated and high qualities of goods produced in the Imphal valley and the inflow of foreign goods, the traditional tribal industries and craft production are dying out. Lack of capital and uneconomical mode of production are the two reasons behind this apart from numerous man-hours needed for the work to be executed. With this new changing environment, all those traditional knowledge and skills have also vanished.

Ethnic Conflict and Socio-Economic Consequences

While the other causes of poverty among the tribal society is inherent in nature, the manifold increase of poverty among the tribals especially the Thadou-Kukis in recent times should also be seen in the context of the changing political scenario in the hills of Manipur. The Kuki society has witnessed the sharp increase in the number of landless labourers and wage earners more so during the early 1990s on account of the Kuki-Naga ethnic clash. The result was that both the community suffered and gained nothing. During the most tremulous period i.e. between 1992 and 1996, more than 300 Kuki villages were allegedly uprooted. Then with over 580 Kukis mostly men becoming the victims, and over 3000 houses burnt since the beginning of the depredation in mid-1992, and over 50,000 people were rendered homeless and displaced (Souvenir, 2002). Till today tens of thousands of Kukis are still stranded and remain un-rehabilitated. Thus, it involves serious socio-economic and political questions which require immediate attention.

Their untold sufferings were further compounded with the failure of the government to rehabilitate and resettled them. In this connection, S. Sinha writes, "Their (Kukis) plight is too pitiable and deserves Government of India's help, protection and care" (Kuki Inpi, 2001). The role of the state government is still more controversial and pitiable. In the context of this grave situation to which the Kukis are being drawn, the Kuki Inpi, organized a rally in Delhi

on 19th January 2001 to highlight their plight and press its demands for constitution of High Powered Commission to assess the extent of loss and damage caused to the Kukis, rehabilitation of displaced Kukis in their respective villages before 2001 Census, compensation of Kuki victims of militant atrocities and satisfactory solution on Kuki problems (Kuki Inpi, 2001). The cry of the Kukis for paternal generosity, however did not receive any proper attention as could be evidenced from the fact that the matter remains unattended till date. Thus, the Kukis faced innumerable hardships of all sorts. Their economy was seriously affected. Therefore, economic instability is finally leading to mass impoverishment of the Kuki society.

Development of Big Villages and Townships

The Kukis who had settled in the interior part of the hills were the most affected in this so-called ethnic cleansing war. With the attack on their villages, and the subsequent gruesome killing and loss of precious lives, Kukis had to vacate their villages. In such a fallen state their life became very threatened. Due to the prevailing fear psychosis and a feeling of insecurity in the hills even smaller villages could not survive. They had to leave, however hard it had been. They sought shelter and protection among their brethren living in big villages, small townships, Grouping Centres etc. In course of time, these big villages and townships began to develop into important centres for trade and commerce. A new kind of urbanism has emerged in the hills.

Thus, significantly the Kukis had begun to prefer living in big villages where there is greater security of life in the event of external threat to life and property, rather than remain scattered in small pockets in the hills as in the past. The Kukis are convinced with this sort of mentality particularly after the outbreak of the Kuki-Naga ethnic tension. Study has shown that the development of such mentality was rather a significant transition in the socio-economic life of the Kukis today. Even after the return of normalcy in those areas where they had settled earlier, many of them, if not all, were reluctant to go back due to their terrible and horrifying experiences to their age old habitations. The new settlers face a new hard-life and difficult situation. To sustain their household economy they took up different occupations of skilled and unskilled-labour not by choice but out of necessity. They took up different types of work such as carpentry, house construction, manual agricultural labour for wages, share-croppership and small business like opening of shops, hotels, etc. Moreover, the flaring up of communal clashes in Churachandpur district way back in 1997, mainly between the Thadou-Kuki speaking and Paite communities further inflicted more sorrow and sufferings. It had drained the economic resources on both sides for which they gained nothing. With the advent of modernization and their contact with the people of advanced communities, their social, economic and political institutions gave a new lease of life under different patterns. They have adopted the value of a new pattern associated with capitalist civilization which replaced the community value (Gori, 1984). The little middle class Kukis are, of course, transformed, dynamic and vibrant, having a bigger role to play in the politics of the hills in particular and the state in general.

Kuki Manual and Skilled Labourers in Cities

Large number of the Kuki population found in Imphal city and other towns are a case in point. The increasing lack of economic opportunities in the hills, commercialization of lifestyles, soaring prices of essential commodities and the widening gap between the rich and the poor, people all over the world have been grabbing every opportunity that comes in their way for earning their livelihood. Coupled with a persistent financial crisis, people displaced by ethnic clashes in Manipur moved to towns and cities in search of food and survival prompting them to adapt to various kinds of labor and physical jobs. Sudden increase of rickshaw pullers in the state's capital, Imphal and its periphery, the increasing numbers of children working in hotels and restaurants in the state capital and other towns are repercussions of these ethnic conflicts. As per the Imphal Municipal Council source, there were some 2000 registered Rickshaw pullers in Imphal area in 1999-2000 however it jumped to over 10,000 in 2005 (Komol Singha, 2013). One main factor responsible for this abnormal increase is due to the influx of displaced people from hill areas to the valley where there are more economic opportunities, security and better means of livelihood.

Conclusion

To sum up in the light of this background, it is imperative on the part of all concerned to explore the ways and means for effective and good governance in the hill areas of Manipur without any further delay. The government also needs strong political will to settle this decade-long socio-economic and political problem without underestimating the tribal sentiment. The tribals in Manipur should be allowed to internally manage their local affairs which includes culture, religion, education, social welfare, economic activities, land and resources from outside interference. At the same time, in Manipur where a large chunk of the Kuki population settled, one should aspire for a composite and developed Manipur by respecting each other's culture, identity and rights in which all communities shall live together on the basis of peaceful co-existence and balanced development. The humble suggestion that can be made is that the people need to work out certain things like formulation of inclusive policies, building mutual trust and understanding, promotion of socio-economic parity between the hills and the valley, give and take initiative and so on.

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