

Kuki Chiefs And Higher Education In The Hill Areas Of Manipur

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Abstract: Kukis were one of the major tribes living and dominating in the hill areas of Manipur from pre-colonial period. They were once very powerful rulers in most part of the hill areas of Manipur. Their strength lies in their chieftainship system. However, this system evolved from more democratic system to hereditary despotic power through the centuries and yet survives till today. The Kuki chiefs' influence among their subjects touches not only political and socio-economic aspects of the society but even the learning system from pre-colonial indigenous learning practices such as dormitory system called som to the modern education system of schools and colleges. Even after the Indian independence, these chiefs still exercise their power and influence over their territory and villages. This paper attempts to study the role, influence and attitude of the Kuki chiefs towards education especially higher education among their subjects and their influence over higher education. It is also attempted in this paper to study the influence of higher education over the practice of chieftainship in the Kuki villages.

Keywords: Kukis, Chieftainship, Higher Education, Hill areas, Manipur.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Kukis called their chief *Haosa*. Literally, *hao* means rich and *sa* means already or had, meaning a person who is already rich which refers to Kuki chiefs who already had the riches he inherited from his forgone generations of chiefs, his father, grandfather or great-grand-father. It signifies the hereditary character of Kuki chieftainship system in which the one who become the chief is the one who have already owned a huge amount of riches from his earlier generations such as land and other properties and hence *Haosa*. The chief is customarily assisted by his village council, the members of which are appointed by him in concurrence with the people of the village. For instance, *Semang* (lit. *se* means people, *mang* means outstanding which connotes the most outstanding person among the people in the village hence the Prime Minister). *Pachong* (lit. *pa* means male, *chong* means celebrity which means victor or champion either in the hunting or warfare and hence the head of village defence) was not clearly mention but the fact that security become quite important since their settlement in *Chungkhopi* pointed to the beginning of this institution. *Changloi* (lit. collector of rice, is responsible on the revenue collection of the chief). *Lhangsam* (lit. Informer, responsible for announcing the

decision of the village council to all) is another institution associated with *Haosa*. *Thempu* (lit. wise-man, who look after the role of village priest as well as physician). This institution was apparently initially taken over by Chongthu himself. *Thihpu* (blacksmith) is another important institution associated with *Haosa*, his office goes to the person who has the highest dexterity in black-smithy, appointed by the chief. Written history notes that the institution was initially based on elective system which gradually becomes powerful and transformed into a despotic and hereditary type during the colonial period.

The institution of Kuki chieftainship system based on written sources speaks nothing on its origin but one can clearly see how the institution had rapidly changed from the first time it was recorded. The earliest written account is given by J. Rennel in 1799 in *Asiatick Researches*. His narrative is based on an eyewitness account. Rennel found that the Kuki chief is just a leader of the tribes who had wielded very limited power over his villagers. In case of murder, for instance, the chief or any other persons who bear no relation to the deceased have no concern at all in punishing the murderer. The onus of revenge was fully left to the brother or other heir of the murdered person in which no one had the right to prevent or oppose such persons from killing the murderer(s). In case of thief the case is slightly different. If a man is

detected in the commission of thief or other atrocious offence the chieftain can cause the person who committed such crime to recompense the complainant and reconciles both parties in this amicable way. In such cases, the chief received a customary fine and he would let each party to give a feast of pork or other meat to the people of his respective tribe.

The growing power and despotic inclination of the power of the Kuki chiefs was acknowledge and testified by various colonial writers. However, the colonial writings were of two opinion with regards to the kind of system of chieftainship among the kukis. Colonial writers like Macre (1801, p. 185), McCulloch (1859, p. 75), Robert Brown (reprinted 2001), E.T. Dalton (1873), James Johnstone (1896), John Shakespeare (1912, p. 43) and William Shaw (1929) have recorded the growing power of the Kuki chiefs towards a more dominant and despotic nature. On the other hand, Lt. Steward (1855) had recorded that there were two forms of chiefship practice among the Kukis – Democratic system where the chief was elected and Despotic system where the chieftainship was hereditary. Thus, it was observed that chieftainship system among the Kukis was not entirely despotic and authoritarian from earlier days as some people claimed.

The British recognized the Kuki Chieftainships, and did not interfere with the chiefs' power and functions. Village organization and local authorities were left as they were. But because of the administration's support of the chiefs many misused their power and oppressed the people.

II. EDUCATION UNDER THE KUKI CHIEFS

The Kuki traditional society revolved around their Chieftainship in all respect of their societal life. This applies also to their learning system. The only well-developed learning institution in the traditional world of the Kukis was their dormitory system called *SOM*. It was the practice of few young men spending the night together as group. The childhood learning at home was carried further in the *SOM*. Although, the practice of a common dormitory for all the young men was discarded already as a war strategy, the essence of the group life and learning was not lose. As such the erstwhile big and common one dormitory practices similar to other neighbouring tribes was split up into a number of smaller dormitory spread across the entire village. It was in the *Som* that young boys grow up to be young men and learning various arts from wooing girls to politics, hunting to warfare etc. all these aspects of learning and grouping institutions were carried out with the foreknowledge of the village chief.

The young occupancies of the *SOM* were train in different skills and groom according to their talent. Many of them were to directly or indirectly assist the chief. Thus, the traditional learning system also revolved around the epicenter of their societal set up – The Chieftainship system.

With the subjugation and subsequent rule of the colonial power in Manipur, came another phase in the history of the Kukis and their learning system. Although the Kukis were scared that they would lose their age-old tradition and their loyalty to it by accepting modern education, they did eventually embrace it. In the beginning, the chiefs send their sons to the schools only to appease the wrath of the colonial

rulers. However, with the passage of time, they came to realized the need for education in their own administration too as they became the link between the government and their subjects in the village.

The hill areas of Manipur was a battleground for the different tribes inhabiting the land. Tribal fight and feuds were common even among the same tribes. Inter-village quarrels and inter-tribe enmity was common. Later, the British rule had created peace among the Kuki people, and therefore the people concentrated their energy on land cultivation, trade and in the later part of the rule, on western education. The introduction of police, administration, and army, schools and medical treatment brought new horizons to the life of the people. The introduction of education through the Christian missionaries allowed a few men to become clerks, policemen and army officer, and these men were to be regarded as a newly created middle class. The Kuki people very soon realized that life with education could be much better than Kuki traditional life, and young people were encouraged to attend schools.

Many British administrators did not however wish to educate the people, resulting in the closure of schools in East Zoram [Kukiland] or in allowing only selected students such as the children of chiefs to go to school. This did not happen in West Kukiland where individual administrators had more understanding of development.

The then political officer like, Captain Brown, G.H. Loch, J. Shakespear, Cole, W.N. Kennedy, W.L. Scott, N.E Parry, A.G McCall A.R.H. Mac Donald and some other encouraged the preservation of Kuki Custom, Culture, judicial and political as well as economic matters of the village, and promote to the people of the Kukis. The matter has become so serious to the Kukis that they even went to the extent of fighting against the mighty British colonialism in 1917-19 which is popularly known in colonial account as "Kuki Rising" or "Kuki Rebellion". Along with other grievances like administrative and educational negligence, the Kukis have to fight against the British in the famous "Kuki Rising 1917-19". Eventually, the Great War broke out in 1917 with the British and lasted till 1919. The war with the Kuki Chiefs was the longest war ever fought by the British colonialists in India. In magnitude, it is second only to the Sepoy Mutiny.

The people are quite ready to run to an officer whenever the chief's decision does not suit them, but this does not mean that the chief rule is unpopular or that their decisions are always corrupt, and while admitting that in many cases the order passed may not be as just as we should like it to be, he also convinced that it is better to uphold the government of the chiefs and to govern through them, rather than to try to govern without them. With this view, he have submitted proposals for educating the sons of the chiefs, and strongly opposed to the formation of many petty hamlets. Every chief has his boundaries now and that should not be subdivide the land further. Where a chief has sons, he may if he likes give them hamlets within his boundaries, but his responsibility for the collection of house-tax and the carrying out of orders should not thereby be diminished."

Shakespeare in one of his notes on 22nd march 1905 commented, "I am convinced that it is better to uphold the government of the chiefs and to govern through them, rather

than to try to govern without them.” He recommended educating the sons of chiefs but opposed to the chiefs power regarding formation of new villages. Shakespeare wrote,

Every chief has his boundaries now and I should not subdivide the land further where a chief has sons, he may if he likes, give them hamlets within his boundaries, but his responsibility for the collecting of house-tax and the carrying out of orders should not thereby be diminished.

III. KUKI CHIEFS' CONTRIBUTIONS AND SUPPORT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

After the conversion of the tribals to Christianity, literacy and education became very important in the life of the tribals especially the Kukis. Christianity and modern education has unveiled them of their ignorance and superstitions and narrow perspectives which were confined to their villages. Thus, the importance of education grew in the minds of the Kukis. This way, education among the Kukis took root and many became educated in spite of the dearth of educational facilities.

During the early nineteen sixties, the educated Kukis were overwhelmed by the transformation and development ushered in by the introduction of education. They began to consider what leap of development would be ushered in with the introduction of higher education in their areas. They began to have burdens for taking the level of education further up the ladder. Thus, proposals were made for the establishment of colleges in the hill areas of Manipur. But, this cannot be carried out simply because the ownership of the land belongs to the village chief. Therefore, the local chiefs were approach for a piece of land for the purpose. Thereby, the local chiefs contributed land for the establishment of colleges. However, some generous chiefs freely donated the land allotted for the colleges, which were at the present time a source of differences and contentions among various sections.

In the initial days of the establishment of colleges in the hill areas, the educated elites had to endure some oppositions too. They did not receive much encouragement and support from the people. They were branded as businessmen and opportunists trying to make some money out of the excuse. However, the few educated elites received the backing and support of the village chiefs, they could continue on with their endeavour. The first college in the entire hill areas of Manipur was Churachandpur College established in 1964 in Churachandpur by a Kuki educationist Dr. T.S. Gangte. After this college, many others like Pettigrew College, Presidency College etc. followed.

After having seen the benefits of higher education, the Kuki chiefs started encouraging their village young boys to study and grasp the opportunities offered by higher education in the independent India. Due to the support and encouragement of the chiefs, many parents who had thought of the outside world as evil were able to throw away their wrong notion and send their children to school even outside of their village. Thus, the desire to pursue higher education grew among the Kukis. However, the poor economy of many parents became a hindrance in this regard. It is in certain cases of talented or promising young people that some village chiefs

started helping the education of such students among the Kukis.

IV. IMPACT OF THE INTRODUCTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION ON THE KUKI CHIEFS

Higher education has a deep impact on the mentality of the Kukis, especially the chiefs. The introduction of higher education in the hill areas brought about many educated tribals including the Kukis. These educated persons started holding big government post. They eventually became rich, wealthy and knowledgeable persons like the chiefs. Although, they were not of royal blood, education and modernization has given the royal clothes among their people. So, these educated persons raised as the new middle class in the society. In most matters, the chiefs were consulted in the traditional society. Now, the educated persons were mostly consulted by the common people. This situation has made the chiefs more concern that they might be dethrone or neglected. The positive impact is that the chiefs started encouraging their own children to aspire for higher education.

Higher education also motivate them to look for modernisation or urbanisation of their villages as much as they can. The chiefs with help of the educated persons in the village began to seek the help of the government in many aspects like infrastructure developments. Modern amenities like schools and colleges, safe drinking water system, playground, community hall, club house, church, electricity, roads etc. are the priorities in the development of the villages at present. Thus, higher education has open their eyes to the leap of development and change that could be brought about in their villages.

Higher education also help shape the outlook and attitude of the chiefs so much so that, village administration and power wielding in the villages changes. A more democratic set were introduced in many villages. Although, the chiefs retain the head of the village in principle, the functions of carrying the task of various activities were entrusted to the democratically elected village committees. Various factors interplay to shape this situation but education is one main factor worthy of crediting for the paradigm shift in such cases.

The introduction of higher education has inspired the Kuki chiefs politically and motivated them towards development of their individual and their villages. The knowledge a democratic government and the voices of the people backing them became their source of strength in the independent era. They thus, began to form associations among themselves and neighbouring village chiefs and mobilise awareness of their rights and duties as chief of a village. They became one of the pressure groups to the government using their association as a platform.

V. CONCLUDING REMARK

The traditional world of the Kukis revolved around their chieftainship system. This includes their learning system, the most developed form of which could be observed in their dormitory system. In the modern time too, the chiefs play vital

roles in the development and growth of higher education especially in their jurisdiction areas. Under the favour and protectorate of the chiefs, educational institutions grow and development in the hill areas especially the Kuki dominated areas. However, in spite of the merits of such development, it is high time for the chiefs also to introspect over the quality of education, especially higher education. Few higher education institutions which functions to bridge the knowledge and development gap of the hill areas came under many criticism due to its poor quality both in the academic and infrastructural facilities.

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