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THE KUKI–NAGA CONFLICT IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT PUBLICATIONS
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Abstract This brief article critically reviews various recent essays and publications on the Kuki–Naga conflict of the 1990s. The conflict has resulted in uprooting hundreds of villages, with the loss of more than a thousand lives, destruction of valuable properties and internal displacement. While British colonial policies of governance in Northeast India and the rise of ethnic nationalism among Kukis and Nagas in the post-independence period have been identified as major root causes of the Kuki–Naga conflict, the literature remains inconclusive and this article argues that today competing claims and perceived threats regarding land and territory appear to be the major cause of continuing tensions.

Keywords: conflict, ethnicity, identity, India, Kuki, Naga, Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Northeast India

Introduction
The conflict between Kukis and Nagas in North East India has generated a specialist literature which is difficult to assess because of the deeply politicised nature of this research topic. As shown here, openly partisan scholarship obfuscates clear analysis and, worse, increases perceived fears of ‘the other’. More than a dozen essays on the conflict have recently been published in magazines, journals and as book chapters by scholars from both ethnic groups and other concerned persons from different perspectives. In addition to all these, two recent doctoral theses have now been published as books, with further work in preparation, while disagreements over the assessment of such conflicts continue.

Ethnic conflicts and tensions have become a common experience in the post-Cold War period. It is believed that the end of the Cold War brought an end to the stability of the world based on mutual deterrence and the earlier high risk-low stability situation has been replaced by a low risk-low stability situation. The beginning of the 1990s was a turbulent period also for India. The country witnessed increasing terrorism and
insurgency, political instability and economic crisis. While the Khalistan insurgency in Punjab had abated by the end of 1992, there was an increase in the number of violent incidents perpetrated by insurgents in Jammu & Kashmir and North East India. By the turn of the 1990s, India's Northeastern region witnessed a proliferation of ethnic insurgent groups vying for different levels of autonomy, ranging from claims for autonomous district councils to redrawing of state boundaries to create new states. Such demands reflect clashing interests, resulting in much animosity. Apart from the Kuki–Naga conflict (1993–1998), tensions arose between the Bodo–Adivasi (1996), Dimasa–Hmar (2003) and Kuki–Karbi (2003), Dimasa–Karbi (2004), Rabha–Garo (2011) and Bodo–Muslims (2010 and 2012).

The Kuki–Naga conflict of the 1990s is one of the most destructive, widespread and meanwhile the lengthiest conflict scenario in the region. It took a heavy toll of more than a thousand lives, with hundreds of homes and villages of both communities destroyed and more than 100,000 people internally displaced. The conflict extended across three states of the Northeast, Manipur, Nagaland and Assam, although it concentrated mainly on four districts of Manipur, namely Tamenglong, Senapati, Ukhrul and Chandel. Starting in late 1992, the conflict was particularly intense from 1993 to 1994, then slowly abated from 1997 onwards, but continues to simmer.

The article critically evaluates the causes and nature of the Kuki–Naga conflict in the light of various analyses relating to insurgency, ethnicity and ethnic conflicts. The main aim of this brief assessment is to present the major competing strands of arguments that have surfaced in the published literature and especially to provide a succinct review of two recent major publications dealing exclusively with this conflict. It is argued that different perspectives continue to cloud the picture but that by now, perceived threats over personal security, linked to territory, are becoming more prominent.

**Bases of Distinguishing Ethnic Groups**

There are several ways of interpreting the term ‘ethnic’. In a narrower sense, it refers mainly to a ‘racial’ or ‘linguistic’ group, while a broader definition of the term ‘ethnic’, taken from Horowitz (1985: 41–54), presents the argument that all conflicts based on ascriptive group identities such as race, language, religion, tribe, or caste can be called ‘ethnic’. Still more broadly, ‘ethnicity’ relates also to a group’s culture and history. Hence, proponents of broader usage of the term put more emphasis on the ascriptive and cultural core of ethnic conflict, distinguishing it primarily from the largely non-ascriptive and economic core of class conflict (Varshney, 2001: 365, 2002). Other authors, including Foucault, go much wider still and see identity as a fluid product of cultural circumstances. Foucault argued in essence that identity is a shifting, temporary construction, communicated to others in one’s interactions with them, but is not a fixed thing within a person.¹

A major distinction of Kukis and Nagas could be their difference in terms of certain cultural practices. It certainly is not merely a matter of religion, given that about 80
per cent of both Kukis and Nagas are Baptist Christians. In addition, the presence of linguistic subgroups can be a point of differentiation. Colonial ethnographers and linguists put the Kukis into the Kuki–Chin linguistic subgroup, while the Nagas were placed within the Naga–Bodo and Naga–Kuki subgroups. Creating a dividing line between ‘proper’ Kuki and ‘proper’ Naga tribes as defined by colonial ethnographers, based on their culture and language, could be seen as objective and lucid, but represents merely another imposed construct. The Kukis were divided by some colonial ethnographers into ‘Old’ and ‘New’, a point elaborated further below. They are certainly blessed with customs, culture and linguistic affinity. However, the weakening of primordial loyalties can also be seen when some of the so called Old Kuki tribes shifted allegiance to the Nagas, whether this happened by force or voluntarily. While such groups are labelled as ‘intermediary tribes’ and most of them acknowledge that they culturally belong to the Kukis, this contested example, in particular, shows how fluid and fuzzy and ultimately subjective, ethnic boundaries are in lived reality.

**Essays on the Kuki–Naga Conflict**

The published work on the Kuki–Naga conflict clearly struggles with handling, comprehending and assessing this ethnic fluidity. Apart from early government reports (Brown, 1873), the first published academic work on this subject was the cause and effect analysis of Thomas (1993). Written at the height of the conflict, this essay presents mainly a political content analysis of newspapers and magazines. Thomas (1993: 42) criticises the central Indian government for its lopsided and ad hocist policy towards the Northeastern region. Blaming insurgency as the root cause of Kuki–Naga conflict, coupled with historical, political, economic and social dimensions, Thomas (1993: 45) suggests economic solutions as the only permanent answer to the Kuki–Naga conflict, advising a search for ‘a fresh package of economic proposals to alleviate poverty, unemployment and other related maladies’. He certainly treats counter-insurgency operations and President’s Rule as temporary measures and not as permanent solutions.

Dena (1999) produces a socio-historical analysis and portrays the Kuki–Naga conflict as an elitist conflict over land and the right to self-determination. In the case of the Nagas, this went as far as hoping for complete secession from India, while the Kukis are seeking greater internal autonomy within the framework of the Indian Constitution. Dena (1999) finds the conflict deeply rooted in the colonial legacy, where the usual practice of divide-and-rule policy was fully operative in the consolidation of colonial control over the different tribal groups of Manipur. He blames the Indian government for repeating the colonial game of using Kukis and Nagas against each other. Banerjee and Athparia (2004: 79) provide an outsider perspective with anthropological observations and conclude that the Kuki–Naga ‘ethnic conflict is nothing but fear psychosis of losing identity’.

T.T. Haokip (2005) examines the Kuki–Naga question in the context of issues of identity and ownership of land. Looking at the conflict in a historical perspective, this
study traces the main causes of the conflict to the earlier practice of head-hunting and strategic use by the British of tribal differentiations to serve their own game plan. He opposes suggestions that the key issue for the conflict was the struggle over control of Moreh, a small town at the Indo-Myanmar (Manipur–Sagiang) border, known for smuggling of drugs and giving the insurgent groups protection and some share in the profits. He believes that inter-village rivalries and feuds, so common in many tribal societies, would be found in Kuki–Naga relations, initially without communal overtones and competition over territorial issues.

Agreeing with Haokip’s view, Ningmuanching (2010: 107) observes that communities that had earlier coexisted somewhat peacefully as hill people now emerged as hostile entities that had apparently inherited a history of antagonism. As British intervention transformed inter-village feuds into ethnic conflicts between hill people, these were now regrouped and identified specifically as Nagas and Kukis. Haokip (2005) also points out that the Tangkhuls, a leading Naga group, carried out more raids among themselves than they suffered by the Kukis fighting against them. This argument is also found in the earlier study by Rowney (1882: 168), stating that Nagas ‘have always distinguished themselves as…murderers, and also for being perpetually at feud with each other…from generation to generation’.

Haokip (2005) seems to overstress the imposition of Nagaland tax, kidnappings and killings of Kukis in the 1970s and 1980s as responsible for the formation of Kuki militant organisations in order to protect themselves from the Nagas. The formation of militant Kuki organisations must probably be seen more as an effect of rising consciousness among them about the need for political autonomy. The Kuki National Assembly’s General Meeting at Thingkangphai on 19–20 January 1960 passed a resolution to demand a Kuki state and submitted a memorandum to that effect to the Prime Minister of India as early as 24 March 1960. This predates the ethnic clashes of the 1990s by three full decades and hints at the crucial importance of emerging sub-national territorial claims and ambitions.

D. Michael Haokip (2008) assesses the cause of conflict from the perspective of both communities and also explains the respective claims with a counter explanation, mostly drawn through interviews with different personalities. While trying to explore the prospects for peace, the responses of two interviewees reveal the ultimate desires of the two communities. The creation of a Kuki state for the Kukis and the achievement of Southern Nagaland for the Manipur Nagas is what is now claimed as the precursor for peace (Haokip, 2008: 177). Again, the key issue coming out is control over territory and some form or sense of autonomy.

More Disparate Views

Apart from detailed research papers, several stray references about the causes and nature of the Kuki–Naga conflict are found in various analyses related to insurgency, low intensity conflicts, ethnicity and ethnic nationalism. While analysing low intensity
conflicts in India, Chadha (2005: 318) claims that ‘[t]he NSCN-IM and Kuki rivalry was dormant till Muivah decided to take control over the smuggling haven of Moreh on the Indo-Burmese border… Although Moreh is Kuki-dominated, the lucrative spoils of the smuggling trade attracted the NSCN-IM to it’. We saw above that Haokip (2005) would not agree with this assertion. Lahiri (2005: 57) identifies the cause of the Kuki–Naga problem as rooted in the shrewd British policy of governance where they baptised and patronised Nagas. But as stated earlier, today both communities are largely Christian and religious distinctions do not really explain the conflict.

Blaming the British or the missionaries remains fashionable. Vashum (2005 [2000]: 150) also traces the ethnic conflicts between the Nagas and the Kukis since 1992 as the outcome of the seed of Kuki–Naga enmity earlier sown by the British for their colonial and administrative conveniences. Taking a one-sided view, he asserts that the British were said to have planted ‘Kukis’ to help suppress the Naga unrest against the British forces since 1830s. Vashum (2005 [2000]: 150) claims that ‘[t]he aftermath result is the settling of the Kukis in almost every region of the Naga country’, a claim which effectively relegates Kukis to immigrant status. However, Seilen Haokip (2010: 20) debunks this view that the notion of Kuki identity was introduced by the British in the latter half of the nineteenth-century as the most popular and most erroneous theory with regard to Kuki identity and origin.

In contrast, Kabui (2004 [1991]: 24) asserts that ‘some Kuki tribes migrated to the Manipur hills in the pre-historic times along with or after the Meitei advent in the Manipur valley’. Even though written records of the history of Kukis started primarily with the advent of the British, Cheitharol Kumpapa, the court chronicle of the kings of Manipur and the Pooyas, the traditional records of the Meitei people, contain some accounts of Kuki people which date back to 33 AD. This means that Kukis, too, have been living in Manipur and other Northeastern states since prehistoric times.

Vashum (2005 [2000]) does not explore the other side of the story that the tribes in the region, including the Nagas, were used by the British in their efforts to suppress one uprising after another, including the Kuki Rising of 1917–19. Valorising one’s community as indigenous and sacrosanct, while portraying others as profane immigrants is of course a common practice, not only in Northeast India. Dev (2006) notes this phenomenon while analysing the existential dilemmas of the ‘settler Bengali’ communities in Meghalaya, with the result that each ethnic group considers the other as ‘settler’ and as such claims the settled areas as its own heritage site. The resulting contestations, says Dev (2006: 81), breed ‘tense, mistrustful, anxiety-haunted society/ies’ where even cultural spaces often ‘become occupied territory’.

In his introductory chapter, Woodthorpe (1980 [1873]: 3) described, probably also not without some bias, the nature of troubled relations that prevailed among the tribes of the British North East frontier, referring to the practice of forever raiding neighbouring villages, plundering them and carrying off their inhabitants. Other historical studies seem to take a different slant. Even though at times the Kukis saved Manipuri kings from Burmese invasions, to salvage themselves from the wrath of the
British, other Manipuris often acted against the Kukis. Gait (1906) reported how a certain Captain Fisher’s first care was to cope with the irruptions of the Kukis. He did this by the expedient of settling along the frontier as many Manipuris as possible. He supplied them with a few firearms, so that they could easily keep off the Kukis, thus protecting not only themselves, but also the less warlike plainsmen behind them and no doubt facilitated British peace of mind, too.

Dena (1988: 39) portrays how the colonial government used the Tangkhul Nagas against the Kukis: ‘On return from the war, the Tangkhul Nagas were again enlisted in the coolie sections of the Kuki punitive measures which were unleashed for the sole purpose of suppressing the Kuki uprising.’ Dena feels ironic about how Christian missions and other official circles tended to look upon the uprising as merely a local war between the Thadou–Kukis and the neighbouring tribes, obviously implying the Nagas.3

One of the consequences of the Tangkhuls’ assistance to the colonial government in suppressing the Kukis was the growing tension within the Baptist churches, which underpins the succinct comment by Downs (1992: 110), a church historian of India, that ‘[at] the beginning of the Christian movement converts from both groups worked closely with each other, but following the Kuki Rebellion during which many Nagas assisted the government in its operations against the Kukis, tension within the Baptist church increased’.

Different arguments are advanced in the literature when in his Special Report to the President of India, dated 5 October 1993, the then Governor of Manipur, V.K. Nayar, blamed the Kuki–Naga conflict as an extension of the NSCN-IM design to increase their domination, fight of control of NH-39 (now NH-2) and Moreh for illegal resources borne out of smuggling of narcotics and contraband trade and to get a major share of the compensation of ₹12.5 crores of the Maphou dam in Thoubal district.

**Some Critical Observations on the Recent Books**

Recently two doctoral theses on the Kuki–Naga conflict have been published as books. Singh (2008: x–xi) identifies the Kuki–Naga conflict as an ‘extension of the conflict due to the claim over a territory as one’s own exclusive homeland by ethnic armies and resistance to it’. He observes that the expansionist design of the Naga ethnic army operated in collaboration with the legislators of Nagaland and they both sought to achieve a Greater Nagaland through constitutional means. While there have been peace and reconciliation efforts by the church leaders of both communities, most of the time, their efforts proved futile and ineffective, as tribal loyalty has a stronger hold than Christian fraternity amongst both warring groups (Singh, 2008: ix). Indirectly pointing a finger at some Naga elements, Singh (2008: 198) says that ‘[d]uring the initial years of the clash, some sections of the groups involved tried to reactivate and resurrect their past traumas at each other’s hand to instigate the crown sentiment’. Indeed, the Kuki–Naga clash of the 1990s, which rocked the whole of Manipur, cannot
be attributed solely to one single factor. Singh (2008: 98) observes thus that it was the result of both historical as well as contemporary factors.

Tohring (2010) opens with a theoretical chapter which deals with approaches of ‘ethnic identity’ and the ethnic identities of the Kukis and Nagas. Tohring (2010: 27) disagrees with writers who regarded Anal as an Old Kuki tribe that joined the Naga identity. She pejoratively terms ‘Old Kuki’ as a misnomer, keeping aside the cultural and linguistic affinities that exist between what the British termed ‘Old Kukis’—the Anal, Aimol, Lamkang, Maring, Monsang, Kom, Chiru and ‘New Kukis’—the Thadou, Paite, Zou, Vaiphei, Hmar, Gangte and Simte. Taking such a view at the outset insinuates that her academic work would be subject to deeply subjective tendencies. Both the Naga historian Kabui (2004 [1991]) and the anthropologist Zehol (1998) treat some groups as ‘intermediary tribes’.

Research in social sciences is of course often loaded with subjectivity. It usually tries to create the impression that the results of the research have objective character. In this view, scientific results are—or at least should be— independent from the person, the single researcher, who produced the knowledge. According to this perspective, objectivity is what makes the difference between valid scientific knowledge and other outcomes of human endeavours and minds (Breuer, Mruck and Roth, 2002). However, taking into account one fact and overlooking others remain a problem. Yet this is how ethnic politics usually gets reproduced in academic works.

Some of the stories that Tohring (2010) unfolds are fascinating. However, the primary problem that remains is the portraying of less intense beatings and humiliations of Nagas with exaggeration, while disregarding the rape and killings of Kukis in their hundreds (Tohring, 2010: 143). She also made a contradictory claim about the episode between Thawai Kuki and Thawai Tangkhul village where she states that the Thawai Kuki village was given a ‘Quit notice’ by the Thawai Tangkhul village. Th. Muivah, the General Secretary of NSCN-IM, who was in Nagaland for a consultative meeting with the Naga public at the time, condemned the incident and told the Nagas to restrain themselves. As a result, this conflict was pacified (Tohring, 2010: 145, 163). An interview with an eye witness, Lhaichin Haokip, a former resident of Thawai Kuki, about this same incident reveals, however, that armed Naga militants came to Thawai Kuki village and ordered the villagers to leave.4 The militants roamed around the village the whole night and due to fear and intimidation the people left the village and temporarily settled in the nearby Kuki village of Sikibung. After a month the Thawai Tangkhul villagers requested them to settle in the village again; it was not the NSCN-IM that was involved.

In contrast to the claim of Tohring (2010), NSCN-IM again served a ‘quit notice’ to the innocent villagers of Thawai Kuki on 23 November 2004. The Kuki Students’ Organisation, while appealing to the Naga outfit to withdraw its notice immediately to avoid eruption of communal violence, pointed out that threat/quit notice was also being served before by the chairman of the Thawai Tangkhul village, named as R.K. Shangreishui, on 11 March 2004, threatening villagers against using the village land.5

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Newspaper is an important source of information in social sciences about reported events. Nevertheless, there is a tendency of false reporting and therefore such reports need to be taken with due care, as the views and comments relating to a particular event can be biased. For instance, Tohring (2010: 110–11) quoted an overweening and sweeping statement made by Imphal based journalist Paradip Phanjoubam (1993), to the effect that ‘[h]istorically, the Nagas are the original settlers of the hill ranges and are extremely possessive about their land…. The Kukis are less passionate about a land of their own—in fact, the majority does not support the ideas of a Kukiland.’ The question to be raised here is whether Phanjoubam ever conducted any survey among the Kukis to draw the conclusion that the Kukis are ‘less passionate’ about their land or a majority of them are not supporting the idea of Kukiland. This statement seems to be more of a euphemistic edifice. It not only questions the analysis of the reporter, but also of the scholar herself who accepts such statements without further examination. While both A.K. Singh and S.R. Tohring are from Manipur, the epicentre of the conflict, more could have been done through interviews of community leaders and affected people and also by use of memoranda, resolutions and press releases of Kuki and Naga civil society organisations and human rights groups to clarify the evidence.

One of the prominent discourses on Kuki–Naga relations is the traditional rivalry between these two ethnic groups. It is, however, pertinent to raise the question whether there has actually been a traditional Kuki–Naga enmity earlier. Even though Chaube (1999 [1973]: 7) correctly identifies that ‘segregation’ was the initial British policy for the frontiers’, he does not go beyond the cliché of a ‘traditional Kuki–Naga feud’ theory which the British used for political purposes. The question again is, was there even a traditional Kuki–Naga feud before the British?

Singh (2008: 27) observes that ‘[r]ivalries were not totally absent in the traditional relationship of the Kukis and the Nagas’. Indeed, during the colonial period conflicts existed between some villages and tensions also arose due to the rejection to join hands in fighting British rule. Gangte (2011: 65) writes: ‘In fact there had been more of rivalries amongst the Tangkhuls themselves than with the Kukis; and the same is true of the Kabuis’. Notably, T.T. Haokip (2005: 142) also observes that ‘[i]t has been recorded with exaggeration that the Kukis and Nagas are traditional enemies.’

What is perhaps most intriguing about the analysis in Tohring (2010) is how this reproduces certain ethnic politics in academic work. Perhaps what will bewilder readers most is that Tohring repeatedly tries to find fault with the Kukis and quotes mostly what suits her intentions, thus engaging in the most tiresome Naga scholasticism. Regarding the Nagas as the oldest inhabitants of the hill areas of Manipur, Nagaland and its adjacent hill areas and the Kuki tribes as late arrival seems to be based on some selected colonial records (Tohring, 2010: 56).
Concluding Remarks

The Kuki–Naga conflict as the lengthiest and most destructive ethnic conflict in the North Eastern region of India has led to many publications focusing on ethnicity and identity. Some work has also been produced on other dimensions of the conflict, such as the consequences of internal displacement, livelihood and health of the displaced people. Nehkhomang Haokip was awarded a doctoral degree by the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong in 2012 for his thesis titled Internal Displacement: A Study of the Kukis and Nagas in the Hills of Manipur. This studies the conflict-induced displacement of the Kukis and Nagas in the hills of Manipur, its consequences, the response of the government and non-governmental agencies. Ruth Nengneilhing submitted her doctoral research at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi in 2012. Her study, on Livelihood and Health in the Context of Ethnic Conflict, also focuses on the Kuki–Naga conflict. Various pieces of action research were also done by the Indo-Global Social Service Society and the North Eastern Research Centre on the traditional conflict mitigation methods with special focus on the Kuki–Naga conflict.

Although both Singh (2008) and Tohring (2010) engage in some sort of respective ethnic scholasticism, they also explore plausible ways for peaceful co-existence between these two ethnic groups. Due to their dealings with an inherently subjective matter, a mea culpa is expected to be performed by both authors in the preface of the book or at least on the jackets, but this is not done by either of these authors. Nonetheless, the books largely encapsulate most of the pertinent issues and incidents which have occurred from 1992 to 2003. To have a clear and in-depth understanding of the Kuki–Naga conflict, however, one needs to go through the above reviewed essays and books, aware of the respective authors’ biases.

The Kuki–Naga conflict clearly needs to be understood in the wider context of historical settings during British colonial rule and the peopling of India’s North Eastern regions. In the post-independence period, competing demands for an exclusive ethnic homeland by both the Kukis and Nagas have clearly become one of the main causes of the ongoing conflict. Whatever the precise reasons for such claims may be, this troublesome scenario suggests the urgent need, identified in other recent studies on ‘ethnic’ conflict, to pay more attention to ‘increased exploration of perceived threat hypotheses’ (Bauman and Leech, 2012: 2,210). Such perceived threats easily generate further feelings of insecurity and ‘otherness’ and thus would create more ‘ethnic’ tensions. How to calm those hurt feelings and perceived threats remains elusive in the current scenario. Here, too, the management of diversity is a key issue. Academics have a significant responsibility to engage in responsible scholarship, rather than getting caught up in partisanship.
Notes

1. For a detailed discussion on the views of Foucault on identity see http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-iden.htm (last accessed 19 July 2011).
2. For more details on this, see Kipgen (2013) in the present issue of this journal.
4. Mrs Lhaichin Haokip, a widow, now lives in Khokon village, Saikul Subdivision of Sadar Hills, Manipur, with her three sons. She was married to one (L) Doukam Haokip of Thawai Kuki village in the late 1980s. The data is derived from a conversation with her on 7 January 2011, at Khokon village, about what happened on the ground.

References


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