The Naga Question in Manipur: Outsider's Response to Vashum's Paper: Part I

Kunal Ghosh
Vikas Kumar

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/vikas_kumar/20/
GIRISH MISHRA
Whither Globalisation?

SUBHASH GATADE
Guilty of Gohana

Implications of SC Judgment on S.A.R. Geelani

KUNAL GHOSH and VIKAS KUMAR
The Naga Question in Manipur

RAVI KUMAR
Education, State and Class in India: Towards a Critical Framework of Praxis

SUDHANSHU RANJAN
President’s Rule in States: How to Tackle the Problem at the Centre

FROM N.C.'S WRITINGS
• REFLECTIONS ON OUR TIME
The Naga Question in Manipur
OUTSIDERS’ REPLY TO VASHUM’S PAPER
KUNAL GHOSH and VIKAS KUMAR

This is a reply to R. Vashum’s (2005) paper, ‘Poverty of Knowledge and its Ramifications on Indigenous Peoples: A Native responds to Prejudiced Writings of Outsiders’, in Mainstream (July 9, 2005). He wrote this paper as a criticism mainly of an earlier paper written by us [Ref: Ghosh and Kumar 2005a]. To begin with, we would like to thank R. Vashum for his engaging response. However, his criticism is unduly harsh, resorts to name calling and smacks of intolerance of other views. He repeatedly refers to his son-of-the-soil status and our status as outsiders. We don’t think that such factors make much of a difference as far as research and scholarship are concerned. Interestingly, he resorts to providing a general list of references, which contains many European names! Are they not outsiders? It seems that only Indian authors from North India, like us, are ‘persona non grata’ for Vashum. He sounds almost threatening when he says that the concerned paper of ours ‘has invited the wrath of the indigenous people (the Nagas to be specific)’. How does he know? Has he conducted an opinion survey among the Nagas? We take it as an attempt to shut out a differing opinion by veiled threats. Note the following statement in his article:

…it was the demand of some Kuki militants for a ‘Kuki homeland’ to be created by mainly carving out the Naga areas that actually invited the wrath of the Nagas since the late 1980s. (emphasis ours) [Ref: Vashum 2005, p. 14]

We had mentioned ethnic cleansing of the Kukis by the Nagas, whereas Vashum admits to venting of wrath by the Nagas. He also finds a pretext. The result remains the same. Hundreds of Kukis lost their lives in that period of “wrath” and many had to migrate to other areas. We remind him that ethnic cleansing or venting of wrath—neither is ever justified when innocent civilians are involved. We shall return to the Kukis later. He has not contested the three following central arguments in our paper:

1. The “greater Nagaland” sought by the NSCN (I-M) and its overground supporters is based on a (recently manufactured) contrived Naga identity of the Tangkhuls and a number of other tribes along the Indo-Myanmarese border.

2. Many tribes of both Nagaland and Manipur, who until 50 years ago did not call themselves Naga, are now embracing the Naga identity. Vashum knows if he contests this, he would come face to face with the formidable figure of Verrier Elwin, whom we have quoted in our paper. [Ref: Ghosh and Kumar 2005a] Elwin was an eminent anthropologist, spent a long time in the North-East and was an advisor to the government.

3. The Nagamese language is the only common institution among different tribes of Nagaland.

Instead he cites specific peripheral disagreements, and accuses us of writing with malice and violating the rights of the Nagas, and we fail to see how. He uses the expression “Indo-Naga peace process”. (p. 11) The term ‘Indo-Naga’ here means “between Indians and Nagas”. The implication is obvious—Nagas are not Indians. This betrays his sympathy for Naga separatism. We like to remind Vashum and the readers that Naga soldiers died in the Kargil war fighting for their motherland, India.

Under the section Politics of Language he calls the website ‘Ethnologue: www.ethnologue.com’ a “wrong source”. (p. 11) Here are a few words about Ethnologue.

It is published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. A renowned linguist, Spolsky (2004), says:

The selection of writing system has been a major activity in the standardisation of languages as a result of missionary activity. The Summer Institute of Linguistics (now renamed SIL International) has been involved in studying and developing literacy for 1320 languages. The principles...involve selecting a script and orthography...

SIL International, which publishes Ethnologue, is a Christian missionary source and “has grown so comprehensive [that] it is a source for academics and governments and the occasional gameshow”. (Erard 2005) When it talks of a particular tribe, it gives the location and number of its villages, the number of speakers of its language, the script or its absence, a popular second language if any, etc. It tries to provide the missionary on the field all over the world with the most accurate data, and this comes in handy for the linguist community. (Spolsky 2004) The web edition of the Ethnologue contains all the content of the print edition. The complete

Dr Kunal Ghosh is a Professor, Department of Aerospace Engineering, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur. Vikas Kumar is an Engineer working at the Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited, Tiruchirappalli.

MAINSTREAM • September 16-22, 2005 13
reference to the book form of web version cited by us in our paper is: Gordon, Raymond C., Jr. (ed.), 2005, Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Fifteenth edition, Dallas, Texas: SIL International. We had given only the website address and perhaps that is not enough to earn the trust of a non-linguist. Vashum disagrees with the linguistic classification given in Ethnologue, but does not say what is the correct one, nor does he give an alternative linguistic reference.

Our Sources

We never claimed to be experts on the North-East. However, we have been sharing our concerns with the wider body of society through Mainstream, which has for decades served as a genuinely accommodative platform for dialogue between varying opinions in India. Though both of us have not been to the land east of Assam, however, we have had many occasions to interact with a large number of North-Eastern people. We also draw upon the general ideas obtained from such interactions. Vashum makes a sweeping assertion that we have been consulting "wrong sources, be it books, articles or otherwise". Page numbers have been provided in the text wherever we have referred to books. This practice has not been followed by Vashum; hence it is difficult to verify some of his references. None of the newspaper items referred to in our articles have been retracted to the best our knowledge. Let it suffice to say that we have referred, among others, to M.V. Sreedhar, S. Arokianathan who are reputed academics from the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, to publications of Naga Students Union of Delhi, the website of the NSCN (I-M) and an ex-CM of Manipur, Radhabinod Koijam. In our articles we have quoted from a large number of sources, for the veracity of which we let the discerning reader be the ultimate judge.

The Language Question

Nowhere had we claimed that Manipuri is the mother tongue of the tribes. But it needs to be pointed out that Manipuri is not foreign to the tribes, as claimed by Vashum. In fact, since long it has been the lingua franca of the landmass that is presently known as the State of Manipur. Even the Tangkhuls use it for interacting with other tribes and Meiteis. [Ref: Gordon 2005 and Arokianathan 1982, p. xi] According to Ethnologue, the Tangkhuls' literacy rate in Manipur in the Bengali script is 70 per cent. Ethnologue is silent about the illiterates, but our information is that even they speak Manipuri. In fact, in our interactions (in Delhi and elsewhere) with the Hills people who were English educated, we found that Manipuri was indeed being used as a link language. He (Vashum) also concedes that in mixed congregations and trading activities Manipuri is used. Are the tribal policemen who attend mixed congregations specially taught Manipuri? We never said, as Vashum contends, that all the tribes read Manipuri Bible. We pointed to the prevalence of this practice in case of some tribes and mentioned the Kabui as an example. Vashum claims (p. 12, col 1, para 2) that the Tarao tribe speaks Tangkhul as a second language. There is no dispute over that. What we had meant and reiterate now is that the Tarao declare Tangkhul as their mother tongue, for fear of getting expelled. (See Ghosh and Kumar 2005a, p. 14, col 1)

Vashum wants us to believe that English is the lingua franca in the Hills. Here he implicitly accepts the mutual unintelligibility of tribal languages and lack of existence of a pre-existing tribal link language in the Hills. Even as late as the 1970s, the literacy in the Hills was very low and it is difficult to believe that within 30 years English has become a lingua franca. In fact, in neighbouring Nagaland, Sreedhar (1974) reported that the fluency in English even among the educated was very low, who therefore resorted to Nagamese in mixed gatherings. [p. 40; also see Sreedhar 1985, p. 25 for continued prevalence of Nagamese despite improvement in literacy rates] In the context of Nagaland, Vashum says, with contempt for the uneducated, that the educated Nagas are not interested in Nagamese. That's what we too have said in our article. [Ref: Ghosh and Kumar 2004 Part-II, see also Ghosh and Kumar 2005b] But what do the uneducated think about Nagamese? We have quoted language experts from CIIIL who, based on their extensive fieldwork, concluded that the uneducated cannot do without Nagamese, unlike the educated. Further, we have personally heard Nagas talking to each other in Nagamese in mixed gatherings in Delhi, although all of them were educated. It is because, although they knew English, they were more comfortable in Nagamese, like many educated Indians who are more fluent in Hindi, Bengali or Tamil than in English.

Manipur-Nagaland Mountain Barrier and the Manipur Kingdom

Mount Japso and the associated mountain range in
the north of Manipur are higher than the mountains in the south of Manipur. Further we did not find any reference to Tangkhul-Nagaland interaction (before the twentieth century, that is) in the two collections of folktales that we have referred to. Second hand sources also confirm lack of such an interaction. Further, he does not controvert our claim regarding the feeling inside Nagaloland that Tangkhuls are outsiders. We have personally come across Nagas from Nagaland in Delhi who refused to even entertain the notion that Tangkhuls can be a part of the Nagas! If the mountains to the north did not pose a barrier what explains the lack of interaction? The mountains acted as a kind of ‘watershed’ for the flow of human interaction. The tribes north of the barrier traded and exchanged ideas with the Brahmaputra valley. The tribes south of the barrier did the same with the Manipur valley.

Vashum’s assertion (p. 13, column 2, para 2 of his article) that “earlier Manipur or Kangleipak was confined only to the valley” is not supported by history. The “polito-administrative unit called the Manipur State”, referred to by him, was neither created after independence nor created by the British around 1830. It had been there, being ruled by a king of the valley-based dynasty. The British accepted the situation and the borders of his kingdom. They posted a political resident as in all such principalities, and incorporated Manipur in British India. The British never tolerated any independent authority. Nagaland was part of Assam and ruled over directly by the British. The Manipur Hills were in the Manipur king’s territory and the king was under the British. If the hill territory were outside the king’s authority, then it would be outside the British Empire.

We stand by our earlier position that the Manipuri royals had close relationship with the Tangkhuls. The position on the ground started changing well after independence around 1960s as more and more tribes became Christianised and started declaring affiliation to the Nagas. So geography and fairly long political history are on the side of maintaining the Manipuri State intact, and that does not help Vashum’s cause of Greater Nagaland.

Ethnic Relationship

Contrary to Vashum’s assertion that we are unaware that the British used the Kukis against certain other tribes in the Hills of Manipur (p. 13), we began the section on Kukis with reference to two sources in this regard. (See section ‘The Bloody Conflict’ in Ghosh and Kumar 2005a) However, it would be unwise to make a sweeping statement that Kukis were hand-in-glove with the Britishers. If the British and Kukis were such great friends what explains the anti-British Kuki rebellions as early as 1860, 1861, and during World War I?

The burden of Vashum’s arguments is that Kukis are outsiders, imported by the British from Burma (Myanmar). Hazarika (1995) says that “The Kukis in Nagaland and Manipur migrated hundreds of years ago from their homelands...” [p. 243] Moreover the Tangkhuls are also not the original inhabitants of North Manipur.

The Tangkhuls believe that they originated out of a stone in a cave in the Shamshok village in Burma and later their ancestors migrated to the northeastern part of India. [Ref: Aronian 1982, p. xi]

In fact, both the Tangkhuls and Kukis, among others, believe that they originally came from Myanmar. It is likely that the Tangkhuls settled in particular localities before the Kukis but to say that the latter were merely colonial implants is unjust. It would be difficult to believe that the British single-handedly pulled such a large group from Burma (Myanmar) and spread them across the whole of the North-East—Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Manipur. That too as early as 1830 when the British had just started the survey of the North-East! The Encyclopedia Britannica makes no mention of such importation of Kukis. The Kukis are, it should be noted, numerical equals of Tangkhuls in the Hills of Manipur. Kukis were in the service of Tripura kingdom as “important frontier officers”. [Ref: Nag 2002, p. 37] There was a Vaphei (Kuki) kingdom centred around Tipaimukh in Cherachandpur district of Manipur on the Mizoram-Manipur border. [Ref: District Gazetteers of India (1998), Vol. II, p. 425]

In this context, we would like to draw attention to the centuries’ long process of general westward migration from South-East Asia and China that drew groups like the Bodos, the Tais (including the powerful Ahoms), Tangkhuls, Kukis etc. to the North-East. Similarly, one needs to take into account the dispersion-effect of a series of Anglo-Burmese wars and Burmese incursions, which advanced as far as Assam, and which, as recorded in history, resulted in mass demographic shifts across the North-East affecting numerous communities.

Vashum points to the presence of certain Kukis in Naga underground organisations to justify his claim that the Kukis have decided to cast their lot with the Nagas. What should one conclude from the fact that Samarendra Singh’s United National Front for Liberation, a valley-based underground outfit,
included Kukis and Kabuis? [Ref: Nag 2002, p. 208] Further it is well-known that the NSCN (I-M) has floated front organisations, amongst others, including the Meiteis. [Ref: Nag 2002, pp. 299 and 303-4] So just because a few members of the Kuki tribe are members of the NSCN (I-M), or any of its sponsored front organisations, one should not conclude that the Kukis as a whole are with the Nagas. Why is Tangkhul language not recognised in Nagaland, whereas Kuki is? Why do we have virtually no Naga-Kuki problem in Nagaland? A Kuki was signatory to the famed memorandum of the Naga Club submitted to the Simon Commission, to which no Tangkhul was party.

Vashum claims that there was a Naga exodus from Imphal due to intimidation and violent attacks during the anti-Greater-Nagaland agitation in 2001. We understand from news reports that the government relocated some Nagas as a precautionary measure and some moved out of their own accord. However, nowhere do we find any report that speaks about any anti-Naga violence; in fact, the absence of such violence is attested by Y.P. Chhibbar of the PUCL. [Ref: Chhibbar 2001] Vashum is concocting facts to create hatred between the Meitei and Hill tribes.

Thadous are a Sub-set of the Kukis

That the term ‘Kuki’ has been used in a number of different ways in official records clearly indicates the prevailing confusion. In Assam, Meghalaya, and Mizoram certain tribes have been given Scheduled Tribes (ST) status as “any Kuki tribes including” and in all these States the tribes listed under the Kuki group include Kukis as one of the tribes also! In Tripura, certain tribes have been given ST status as “Kuki, including the following subtribes” and the list given does not include Kuki as a sub-tribe. In Nagaland they are simply referred to as “Kuki” for the purpose of reservation. In Manipur they are identified by their individual names, as distinct tribes. [Ref: District Gazetteers of India (1998), Vol. 10 and 11; also Puri 2001] We therefore disagree that the term “Kuki” is restricted to Thadous alone. This is an attempt to reduce the greater Kuki community to Thadous alone so as to assimilate the smaller Kuki tribes. That is what happened to Anals, to name one of the many smaller Kuki tribes, who are now being claimed as Nagas. (See Vashum p. 13) So Kuki refers to a tribe, a larger collectivity of historically related tribes, and a linguistic grouping also.

Script Question and Partition of Manipur

The valley has its own fifty-year long separatist movement, which was started by the Left-oriented Manipur nationalists, influenced by the thoughts of Hijam Irabor Singh and Bisheswar Singh. [Ref: Ghosh 2001, pp. 166-169] Soon the separatists became extreme-Left and resorted to terror. Their overground organisations started propagating certain absurd ideas such as the pre-Vaishnava religion was free of any Indian influence. The fact is that the easiest land route to Burma (Myanmar) from India is through the Manipur valley. The Hindu influence can be seen in the popularity of Ramayana in Thailand and Cambodia. The latter has the famous Angkor Wat temple complex, built by King Surya Varman II in the twelfth century. It is obvious that Hindu-Buddhist influences had criss-crossed Manipur valley (for that matter the whole of the North-East) long before the advent of Vaishnavism in the fourteenth century. (Nowadays it is commonly written in the media that before Vaishnavism, it was pure animism in the North-East, without any Hindu-Buddhist radiation from the heartland.) The separatists also propagate that the pre-Vaishnava script of the valley, called Meitei, had nothing to do with India, from which they preach secession. They campaigned for a change of script for the Manipuri language and succeeded in getting a bill passed in the Legislative Assembly, more than a decade ago. Now they are pressing for its implementation (to start with by burning priceless books), and that would break another important link with the Hill tribes. The tribes would press for the Roman script for the lingua franca, and soon Manipuri would be written in two different scripts, Meitei and Roman. Orthography of the language in Roman has to be constructed anew. The whole process would be tremendously disruptive. Eventually the tribes would break completely with the language and there would remain no lingua franca at all and the partition of Manipur would be inevitable. This turn of events was not anticipated by the extreme-Left separatists in the garb of Manipuri nationalists. They should realise that they have played into the hands of the so-called Naga separatists who want to partition Manipur. The valley people should retrace their path if they want to preserve the integrity of Manipur. In the interest of the integrity of India the Central Government should intervene to arrest the process of script change in its track. Conceding “Greater Nagaland” will not be the end of the Naga secessionist
movement. On the contrary, it would reappear with renewed vigour after a ‘respectable’ interregnum. Once Manipur is partitioned, the Meitei separatists will also be reinforced and press for secession from India.

REFERENCES


MUSINGS

Irresolute Resolution

SOM BENGAL

Once again the dialogue on the future of Kashmir has been revived. This time it is not about buses, books and bhai-bhais, but the involvement of as many participants to the question (we dare not say dispute because we do not accept one—"we" meaning of course India, others may) of Kashmir.

The Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, reiterated his faith, which no one challenges, in the peaceful resolution of all issues pertaining to Jammu and Kashmir. And his commitment to ensure a life of peace, self-respect and dignity for the people of the State. The occasion was a long meeting with the moderate section of the separatist Hurriyat Conference. In token of his earnestness the Prime Minister agreed to an astonishing variety of issues raised on this problem by the Hurriyat and even included a commitment to reduce the armed forces if there is cessation of violence and end to infiltration. There was agreement that the dialogue process should be carried forward with all regions and shades of opinion in Kashmir involved.

Much as one would like to feel a sense of glow that something positive has been achieved, what lies ahead? There are other factions of the Hurriyat who are lukewarm to this process; there are implacable elements of the Kashmiris across the border who believe Kashmir’s future lies with Pakistan. There is Pakistan itself which claims that only their sympathisers represent the true voice of the Kashmiris, apart from the Pakistani stake in the State. There are irreconcilable differences among the contenders and contestants. Can the “core” issue ever be dismantled despite the most earnest efforts of the Prime Minister, the people of India, the real and unreal representatives of the Kashmiris? Bleak is the future.

Or shall we say with Omar Khayyam:
“The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on; nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a World of it.”
Perhaps the answer may lie in agreeing to disagree after all.

(Courtesy: Neighbourhood Flash)