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## Editorial

# Memories that always return

Thongkholal Haokip

Twenty four years ago Naga Lim Guard killed more than a hundred innocent Kuki villagers on 13th September 1993 in Tamenglong district of Manipur. These villagers were fleeing after a 'quit notice' was served to them by the United Naga Council, an apex body of the Naga tribes of Manipur, on 10th September to leave their villages in the Naga dominated areas, in the erstwhile Jampi area, before the 15th of September, otherwise their secure passage to Sadar Hills via Tamei would come to an end. On the 11th of September Joupi villagers performed the last rite of their kidnapped village chief assuming that he had been killed. The church bell rang for the last service, though it was not Sunday. The following day the entire villagers left their village with resounding cries at the last glimpse of their homesteads. Rushing on their way towards their sanctuary before the deadline, they were intercepted by Naga ultras en route Tamei on 13th September. The victims on that day were tied behind, killed with *dao* not sparing women, children or the aged, and their mutilated dead bodies either thrown in the river or buried to conceal. On the same day several others were also killed in Janglenphai and in Gelnel just the previous day. These massacres were the highest number of deaths in a single day in the Kuki-Naga conflict of 1993, which continues to simmer till today. The day is observed annually by the Kukis around the world as *Sahnit-ni* or Black Day.

### **The tangled question of territory**

The communities in the hills of Manipur had coexisted as neighbours through ages, albeit with intermittent inter-village disputes, alliance and counter-alliance, and resolution of such disputes through traditional conflict mitigation methods. This time tested coexistence is under constant threat with the emergence of new nationalism that ultimately came with the identification of independent yet connected groups of people by the British as Kukis and Nagas. The drawing of ethnic boundaries thus transformed inter-village disputes into ethnic conflict. In order to bring about a certain form of governance after the Kuki rebellion of 1917-19 or the Anglo-Kuki war, boundaries came to be drawn in this free hill country around certain identities. With such demarcation ethnic claims and counter-claims became territorial. British inter-

vention thus created identities, culminating in the imagination of territory around such identities. This British policy of, what Mamdani (2012: 27, 45) calls, 'define and rule' is a deliberate strategy to manage subjects by defining and fragmenting them, and using one differentiated group against another. This was, to a large extent, responsible for the emergence of divisive and exclusivist politics in postcolonial period, which the new administration inherited when the coloniser left.

Before the advent of the British rule, village and its boundaries were the limit of identity and territory. The name of village was the identity to all denizens of the village. The village would normally be surrounded by forests and jhum fields. Beyond this lies the hunting ground of the village which also served as undemarcated boundary with the neighbouring villages.<sup>1</sup> Boundary maintenance, whether cultural or territorial, was simple between hill people. However, such territoriality and indigenously maintained relations between different groups of people that centered around the village was broken with the intrusion of modern forms of governance. The attempt by the ubiquitous State to maintain semblance of authority through intervention went against hill politics.

The Kukis and Nagas have mix settlements particularly in the northern hills of Manipur. Their imagined territories in such places are overlapping (Haokip 2016: 182). The Naga integration movement that was started in 1957 at Kohima soon had repercussions in Manipur. To achieve this objective cleansing of the scattered Kuki villages settling in their midst became necessary. This was followed by select killings of Kuki chiefs and uprooting Kuki villages since 1960. The late 1980s saw emergence of Kuki armed groups demanding Kuki homeland to be carved out of Manipur. This was seen as a challenge to the greater Nagalim project and thus unfolding the second wave of the Kuki-Naga conflict in 1993. It cost more than a thousand lives, uprooting more than four hundred villages, and hundred thousand internally displaced.<sup>2</sup>

Since the late 1990s the Kukis have been observing *Sahnit-ni*, a traditional rite or black day, on the fateful day of massacre of Joupi and Janglenphai villagers every year. During this time painful memories of the conflict return to haunt the whole Kuki population. According to Kuki custom, only when the Nagas, particularly the National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Isak-Muivah faction (NSCN-IM), as the aggressor formally apologise for the crimes committed and pay *longman*, a kind of ex gratia for the deaths, and perform *toltheh* or the customary practice of cleansing the house for shedding blood, *Sahnit-ni* observation can be discontinued. The Kuki Inpi Manipur, the apex body of Kuki tribes in the state, is insistent that these traditional rites should be performed first so that peace process between the Kukis and Nagas can be initiated.

### **The way out?**

The idea of an exclusive ethnic homeland has drawn the state's ethnic groups into tensions and bloodbaths for several decades now. To resolve the long drawn simmering conflict in the hills of Manipur sincere effort by both the Kukis and Nagas is needed. Adequate political supports from the state and central governments are also

needed as a part of their efforts to bring lasting peace in the northeastern region. In these deeply divided societies there is an urgent need to rediscover and inculcate the sense of living together as in the past, and also find ways to calm hurt feelings. The focus should be on building social cohesion, not only between social groups but also cohesion between social groups and the state. These should be supplemented by a strong political will to give 'tribal autonomy' its due by devolving adequate power and authority to the appropriate bodies in the hills of Manipur.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For details regarding the traditional forms of village governance see Guite (2014).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed review regarding the Kuki-Naga conflict see Haokip (2013).

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